

Anonymous

reviewed by Sky Gilbert

Anonymous is a big event for Oxfordians. The good news is that it is a very good movie indeed. But we should not become so caught up in the excitement of seeing a Hollywood “Masterpiece Theatre” style epic that presents an argument in favor of the Oxfordian position, that we ignore what is the most interesting aspect of this film —its reception. Note the context of the film’s release. This says a lot about Hollywood’s commitment to it. *Anonymous* was released on Halloween weekend, along with another costume epic: *Puss ‘N Boots*. When I saw *Anonymous*, the trailer was Spielberg’s *The Adventures’ of Tintin*. Hollywood, always conscious of perception, has been sure to place this film where they think it belongs, just in case it should, by chance, be taken too seriously.

But first, the good news. Although *Anonymous* is most certainly a fiction – and those who oppose its fantasies will likely never stop emphasizing that — it is a very fine fiction indeed. As I watched the film I tried to decide whether *Anonymous* is a worthy piece of entertainment (or even art), in its own right — beyond any Oxfordian prejudices. *Anonymous* certainly compares more than favorably with *Shakespeare in Love*. Both films are intelligent, witty, funny, thrilling, moving and romantic. The author of *Anonymous* (John Orloff) does not have Tom Stoppard’s pedigree — he is perhaps most known for the adapted screenplay of *A Mighty Heart*. Stoppard’s *Shakespeare in Love* is notable for being not only about Shakespeare, but about love. This is the key to its claims to profundity. Great films and plays – including Shakespeare’s work -- are generally thought to be only as deep as they are considered *not* topical. (One Oxfordian dilemma is that if we insist that Shakespeare’s plays touch on Early Modern political or religious issues then our analysis will necessarily be considered less profound than Harold Bloom’s.) The perception of *Anonymous* as issue-based polemic will be encouraged by the prologue and epilogue in which Derek Jacobi speaks beautifully in favor of the Oxfordian cause. But if audience members are capable of seeing past their objections to this polemic, they will soon come to recognize that *Anonymous* is a film about love.

That love, however, is possibly an incestuous one between a queen of England and her son (this incest is suggested by the character Robert Cecil). Even a suggestion of this will be distasteful to many. I, however, find it fascinating to see a lifelong relationship between two such complicated persons so naturalistically portrayed. Through the magnificent performances of Rhys Ifans and Vanessa Redgrave, we are able to imagine what it might be like for a queen and her subject to be involved in a strange romance that lasts – on and off — for so many years. Some Oxfordians will regret that the film puts Charles Beauclerk's Prince Tudor theory from *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom* into the duplicitous Cecil's mouth. Isn't the idea of such a strange relationship simply a bit too much for *anyone* to handle? For some, indeed, it may be.

But I promised to begin by praising the film as film. I honestly don't see how anyone could find fault with *Anonymous*, as entertainment. If critics say that it is badly done it must be because they are offended by it. *Anonymous* is visually sumptuous – this is something we have come to expect from Roland Emmerich (*Independence Day*, *10,000 B.C.*, *The Day After Tomorrow*). On the other hand, we do not usually expect Roland Emmerich to create art.

Art and entertainment are defined by their intents. Those who wish to produce entertainment do so to make money, and those who wish to produce art are moved either intellectually or emotionally (or by some mysterious mixture of both) to create something that will move, edify, teach, and/or inspire us. Entertainers sometimes accidentally make art, and artists sometimes accidentally make entertainment. *Anonymous*, was, I suspect, a labor of love for the actors, the author, and perhaps even the director. But it may have been mostly a moneymaking prospect for the producers. So, somewhat accidentally, I suspect, from a collusion of philistinism and noble motives a film appeared, one that is truly moving.

Anonymous is sumptuous in the sense that the images are gorgeous without being gratuitous, and seem to represent a relevant and coherent image of Elizabethan life. It's refreshing (or perhaps that's not the word) to see characters struggling through the streets of London while balancing on planks laid down to cover human excrement. It's refreshing to see a Queen Elizabeth in closeup who is not only very wrinkled, but has horrifyingly bad teeth. And finally, it's refreshing to see actual boy actors, and the makeup and frills worn by men. All of this seems historically accurate. I'm sure there are details historians will find (other than the obvious Oxfordian ones) that will dismay them. But compared to *Shakespeare in Love*, *Anonymous* has remarkably few glaring anachronisms. Stephen Marche, in a recently published, rambling, sarcastic *New York Times* article pointed out that Marlowe's fatal wound was in the eye (not the throat, as in *Anonymous*). He also mentioned that it would not have been controversial (as the film would have it) for Shakespeare to write a play about a deformed cripple that resembled Robert Cecil, since Richard III had always been portrayed in that way. This kind of quibbling about a fictional film serves no purpose. I ask, respectfully, does it matter? More importantly, the London of *Anonymous* looks like 16th century London might have – both ugly and beautiful, quite simply, gorgeously, hideously, authentic.

Structurally, the film is, in my view, quite flawless. I only looked at my watch once in two hours and ten minutes. It's a great story, and if one is interested at all in Shakespeare, or history (and unhampered by anti-Oxfordian prejudice) one cannot help but be gripped by the mystery that is explained as the film unfolds. Most of the film takes place late in Elizabeth and de Vere's life, but the flashbacks are clearly and logically placed. The final moments give us a *scene a faire* between Elizabeth and Oxford that viewers are sure to anticipate. This scene is an unspooling of earlier paradoxical events, and it is effortless in the way that an old *Perry Mason* murder mystery never was.

The dialog in the film is seamless. It seems real without employing anything resembling Early Modern English (of course we don't know how they talked in 16th century England, or what their accents were, there is only conjecture). The lower class characters are believable without sounding cockney in a *My Fair Lady* sort of way, and the aristocrats speak beautifully without seeming overly florid. The performances are top-notch, but of course it is the peerless Vanessa Redgrave and the fascinating Rhys Ifans who dominate the screen. They are able to convince us they have lived the fantastical, tragic and unlikely lives that the author gives them. Vanessa Redgrave is always luminous, but here she finally has a character that can own the sadness, longing and wisdom that rests behind her eyes. Rhys Ifans' performance will astound those who remember him only as the loutish flatmate in *Notting Hill*. There he gave us a believably hilarious boor; here he gives us the very depths of passion and anger, and delivers lines that are necessarily melodramatic with an earned intensity. All of the supporting characters are also quite brilliant — especially David Thewliss and William Hogg as the villainous Cecils — and all the performances of scenes from Shakespeare's plays within the movie are impeccably acted.

Don't let anyone tell you *Anonymous* isn't a gripping film. But then there is the Oxfordian polemic at the very heart of it. The film will, for a Stratfordian audience (i.e., for most people) serve to underline two generally held misconceptions about the Oxfordian position. This is through no fault of its own. Because the film succeeds in presenting a beautifully shot and perfectly acted version of an Oxfordian thesis, it will necessarily raise two specific issues — ones that will inevitably make a strong argument (for most people) *against* the Oxfordian case. First, there is the notion of conspiracy theories. Almost everything I have read about this film puts it in the context of conspiracy theories, as does Stephen Marche's article. He says: "Shakespeare is finally getting the Oliver Stone/ 'Da Vinci Code' treatment, with a lurid conspiratorial melodrama involving incest in royal bedchambers, a vapidly simplistic version of court intrigue, nifty costumes and historically inaccurate nonsense." Now, I am not a fan of conspiracy theories in general. But I think they are inherently radical, in the best sense of the word, because opposition to them usually comes from members of the right seeking to demonize the left. (The obvious exception are the Tea Partiers who believe that Obama is a communist. But I would argue that recent right-wing American suspicion of the federal government does not fall under the category of suspicion of government in general — just suspicion of

the black president who seems, unaccountably to some – to have wormed his way in there.)

I do not mean to suggest that all Oxfordians are left-wing, merely that they are all demonized in the same way the left has been. Jonathan Kay's recent *Among the Truthers* is a case in point. This book lures the reader with a promise to reveal anecdotal material about conspiracy theorists including Tea Party "Truthers." But the book is not primarily about those who question Obama's birthplace (though it mentions them). Instead it demonizes the left-leaning prejudices of North American academia. *Among the Truthers* makes the triumphant point in its final chapters that postmodernism and poststructuralism are conspiracy-friendly philosophies, encouraging a kind of skepticism that leads beyond reason to superstition and intuition. In other words, left-wing universities teach students that there is no "truth" and this leads them to believe any sort of nonsense – including the notion that 9/11 was planned by the U.S. government. Not coincidentally, *Among the Truthers* also demonizes Oxfordians. Kay says that, for us "conspiracy theories are a tool to eliminate the cognitive dissonance that arises when the course of human events doesn't cooperate with the results demanded by their ideology" (162).

What Stephen Marche, Jonathan Kay – and almost everyone -- are skeptical about, is the idea that government coverups actually do exist, and that governments can be consistently and even inherently evil. (Why shouldn't they be skeptical? The notion is scary.) And an evil government cover-up is what we see so beautifully articulated in *Anonymous*. What *Anonymous* does best is show the necessity of the de Vere conspiracy. It sets up a world of decadent intrigue, marshaled by the deliciously evil William Cecil and his hunchbacked son. It also presents a true and enthralling picture of the desperately guarded aristocratic privilege of Queen Elizabeth and her court. The film makes it all too clear how and why a nobleman in Puritan-heavy Early Modern England might have had little choice but to hide his artistic creations.

But although the idea of a nobleman like de Vere writing in secret makes perfect sense to Oxfordians, it is a notion that will be particularly offensive to Stratfordians, and perhaps to anyone who has blind faith in government (which, I would posit, is many people). Most people never cease laughing at what they consider to be a highly unlikely – nay impossible – prospect of large scale government malignancy, just as Stratfordians continually find it hilarious that it would be possible for a secret as huge as Shakespeare's real identity to be kept quiet for hundreds of years. One of the problems that anarchists, communists and the left has, in general, is that most people are loath to believe that those who hold power – whether it be in business or government or both – in *any* country, are corrupt. As Occupy Wall Street gains momentum, we can see the world beginning to split very much on the lines that split Stratfordians and Oxfordians. It may or may not have been an accident that the title of the film *Anonymous* is also the name for a well-known group of loosely organized computer hackers who have committed themselves to bringing down what they see as the evil mega/corporate/ government complex that rules the world. The relationship between the Oxfordian cause and conspiracy theories will be a big obstacle for us. Resentment will arise because of how clearly and adroitly the

film presents the Oxfordian case. Is it possible, people will say, that governments could keep such a secret from the people? If they do, what would that say about *our* government?

I am a gay man, and for a while I was a columnist for an arts weekly in Toronto. I once inadvertently “outed” a gay politician – Bill Grahame (he has since retired from office – nothing to do with me). It was a mistake – I actually thought he was openly gay; apparently he wasn’t. But even though I proclaimed his sexual preferences in my column, the news item was never picked up by the mainstream press in Canada. The only place you can find any mention of Bill Grahame’s homosexuality is on certain homophobic Catholic websites. (They were outraged by the idea that Canada’s defense minister might have been a homosexual.) So, because I am gay, and I occasionally – sometimes inadvertently – reveal secret truths, I am well aware of how neatly and easily a gentleman’s agreement by those in power makes it possible for a government to conspire and lie. There are gay politicians in Canada and the USA today. But they need not worry – the government and the press know that if they were to open that particular can of worms the government would crumble under the pressure of all the lies and scandal. I don’t think it’s an accident that Roland Emmerich is not only openly gay, but somewhat of a gay rights activist. (This is something rare among Hollywood movie directors.) Gay men are supremely conscious of the kind of secrets that those in power are capable of holding.

On that “gay” note, I only wish that Emmerich had accentuated the feminine aspect of de Vere’s character. Male femininity is a stereotypical trait that is still thought, by most, to signal homosexuality. Yes, Ifans dresses in frilly clothes and brandishes a limp handkerchief. But Alan Nelson, attempting to defame de Vere in *Monstrous Adversary*, makes it clear that de Vere was perceived (at least by those who hated him) as effeminate and possibly a sodomite. He cites a poem by Harvey that suggests “foppishness as Oxford’s most characteristic trait” (226). Unfortunately Rhys Ifans is not – from either a present day or a 16th century viewpoint – playing anything other than a sensitive, thoughtful, heterosexual man. Presenting de Vere as *appearing* to be a homosexual might have been historically accurate in terms of the way people perceived him, and might have been an interesting twist to the character.

But perhaps Emmerich’s homosexuality aided him in other ways. The film is exceptional in its ability to imagine a couple – Elizabeth and de Vere -- who have a long term, long distance relationship that is both sexual, romantic, intertwined with power, and (as it is implied by the scheming Cecil) perhaps incestuous. All this is quite scandalous, but what especially alarms people is the idea that aristocrats who spoke beautifully -- and after all, were ancestors of the *present* Queen of England – did awful things. Several reviews have spoken disdainfully of the film’s besmirching of Queen Elizabeth I. People also don’t like the idea that Shakespeare — whether he was de Vere or the man from Stratford — jumped in and out of bed with lots of women. History is supposed to be picturesque and comforting, and our ancestors are *not* supposed to have been consistently debauched liars.

The good news is that this fine film will satisfy Oxfordians and many others who enjoy a gripping piece of historical fiction. The bad news is that simply because

it is a gripping, and magnificently constructed fiction, it will anger those who hate Oxfordians. Be prepared for the onslaught. (Or it may just be that this fine film will be consigned to the dust heap, and never thought about or discussed by decent people after its initial release. That would be a shame.)

I am a passionate Oxfordian not only because I believe that all the evidence points to de Vere. I also am titillated by the much greater implications of taking an Oxfordian position. Like it or not, being an Oxfordian means that you are on the side of those who believe that it is possible that governments were, and perhaps can still be, consistently, profoundly, and secretly corrupt. It also means that you are willing to look unflinchingly at the notion that people are sometimes bizarre and lecherous, sexual creatures – and yet that they still can contribute enormously to culture and history. Whatever we believe about Oxford, he was not happily married to his wife, nor is it likely that he ever slept in a picturesque Stratford cottage. If Oxfordians can get behind a film like this, one that so clearly crystallizes the extremity of commitment that is necessary for them (despite its relatively minor historical missteps) I think they will be doing themselves, and Edward de Vere, an enormous favor.

Works Cited

- Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2011).
 Stephen Marche, “Wouldn’t It Be Cool if Shakespeare Wasn’t Shakespeare?” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2011, Magazine.
 Alan Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003).