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Compatriots Christopher Marlowe, left, William Shakespeare

#### CRITIC AT LARGE

#### WHOSOMEVER ART THOU, SHAKSPER?

By CHARLES CHAMPLIN, L.A. Times Arts Editor

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It was, so far as I know, an unprecedented gathering. Sitting at two long oak tables on the stage of the Shakespeare Society's half-scale reproduction of the Globe Theatre in West Hollywood were experts on one or another of the principal historical figures who have been advanced as the possible authors of Shakespeare's works.

Francis Bacon and Christopher Marlowe were represented; Queen Elizabeth and Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford; and, of course, the man from Stratford himself.

The authorship of Shakespeare's poems and plays is history's most teasing literary mystery because no manuscript in the author's hand is known to exist, although much earlier documents, like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Magna Carta, have survived the ravages of time.

The mystery deepens because we know less about the man from Stratford (as the Oxfordians and others prefer to call him, acknowledging that there was a man from Stratford, whose name was something like Shaksper but who couldn't make up his mind how he ought to spell it) than we know about Geoffrey Chaucer, who preceded him by a couple of centuries, or about Sappho.

The mystery gets deeper because Stratford paid no mind to its presumably most famous local son until a century or more after his death, when the actor David Garrick came to town and pointed out that a gold mine lay at hand, as it has proved to be for Stratford.

The meeting on a hazy Saturday morning was urged into being by Carole Sue Lipman, a Syracuse University graduate now working in a film sales organization. She had met George Elliott Sweet, a geologist and retired naval officer who has long been intrigued by the mystery and who has built a book-length hypothesis in favor of Queen Elizabeth as the author, using Shaksper the actor as a front for her unqueenly a vocation.

"But," Sweet said at the meeting, "I'm a scientist and, in the absence of anything but circumstantial evidence, I remain open; I'm not 100% sure, and there are many claimants to the throne."

Ms. Lipman had also read two earlier columns I'd done on the controversy, prompted by my meeting with Ruth Miller of Jennings, La., a lawyer and current chairman of the board of regents of the state university. Mrs. Miller and her husband, Minos, a retired appeals court judge, are this country's leading advocates of the case of Edward de Vere, and they have published handsome new editions, with voluminous new notes, of several long out-of-print books bearing on the authorship question, notably J. Thomas Looney's "Shakespeare' Identified," the founding work in favor of de Vere.

Both the tourist trade and academia are horrified at the thought of displacing the man from Stratford, Mrs. Miller says, and the hostility from scholars has been ill-concealed.

She thinks it may well be necessary—and would be easy enough—to go to court and file suit in behalf of a student, say, who is being deprived of his or her right to know that a controversy exists over the authorship of the works.

"It's like the farmer using a 2-by-4 to get the attention of his mule," Mrs. Miller says. "The suit would be" the 2-by-

4, and you would get a climate in which both sides could be heard, and respected. Otherwise we'll never get change."

The Shakespeare traditionalists were represented by host Thad Taylor of the Shakespeare Society. Taylor by his own drive has over the last dozen years converted an empty Quonset warehouse near Santa Monica Boulevard into the charming reduced replica of the Globe, and has staged the whole cycle of Shakespeare plays, including an uncut and indeed augmented "Hamlet" that ran more than five hours.

The idea that somewhere, somehow, a manuscript may exist of one of the works, in an identifiable hand, is as appealing to him as a Stratford loyalist as it is to any of the other searchers at the meeting.

They included Elizabeth Wrigley, who runs the Francis Bacon Library Foundation at Claremont, which has the largest collection extant of Baconiana. Once described in this newspaper as "the mad Baconian," she is not now an advocate of the Baconian authorship but suspects (as others do) that the works may have been done by several hands, under Bacon's editorship.

Louis Ule, an engineer from Rancho Palos Verdes, is a Marlowe biographer who insists that he does not join the hypothesizing sweepstakes but has no doubt that the question of authorship is open. Indeed, he demolishes a major underpinning of the Marlowe case, which is that Marlowe wasn't really killed in a tavern brawl in 1593 but faked his own death to avoid political assassination. Not so, says Ule.

Calvin Hoffman, the principal Marlovian, lives in Florida and couldn't attend the Saturday meeting, but hopes to be here in April for a meeting devoted to the Marlowe cause.

Douglas Kerr, an English-born actor, was introduced to the Marlowe cause by Hoffman's book ("The Murder of the Man Who Was 'Shakespeare' ") and has no doubt that no one not deeply immersed in the theater, as Marlowe was, could have written the plays.

Ib Melchior, the Danish-born son of tenor Lauritz Melchior, was an OSS man during World War II, developed a head for code breaking and tackled the strange Shakespeare epitaph (used early on to "prove" the Baconian authorship). Life magazine underwrote a trip to dig up floor stones in the dungeon of Elsinore Castle, pursuant to a message Melchior felt he had found. He discovered traces of a package that had indeed been buried. What the contents were, he said sadly at the meeting, neither he nor anyone else will ever know. He continues to be fascinated by the question.

David Hanson of Ventura, a former teacher and now an oil and gas financier, is open on the question of authorship, but hopes that there may be clues at the mysterious Oak Island off Nova Scotia, site of a Colonial-era English mining venture in which one claimant may have been involved.

The other guests included Stewart Robb, a Baconian; John and Barbara Crowley (the daughter of a vigorous Oxfordian, Dr. S.C. Gilfilan); Gordon and Josephine Wilde, Oxfordians and friends of the Millers, and Patricia Wentworth of the Ojai Shakespeare Festival.

Ms. Lipman and the group hope to meet monthly, devoting a meeting to each of the claimants and, ultimately, to do a documentary (which could be marvelous) on the mystery. The idea of an extension course at UCLA was shot, somewhat predictably, by a lack of enthusiasm in the English department, she reports.

It is true that it is the work that matters, and that it is the work of a genius—whoever he, or she, was. But if all nature abhors a vacuum, so human nature abhors an unsolved mystery. And until now there are hundreds of intriguing and perplexing questions and clues—and no answer.

I intend to read on.