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## SHORT STORY: STEPHEN JOYCE

### SHAKESPEARE'S SECRET

It seems ridiculous now, how I hugged Shakespeare's secret to my breast for all those long and fervid years. In my naiveté, I assumed I somehow 'owned' it, that I had bought it with a leap of imagination and toiling years of patient scholarship. Had I truly listened to the Bard's silence I would have known better, but then it takes a lifetime of folly for any generation to recognise the wisdom enclosed in our ancestors' archaic diction and disused poetic meters, and above all in the seemingly inexplicable moments of quiescence, when like a good teacher they remain frustratingly mute and wait for the impatient pupil to come to his own understanding.

No doubt you have already begun piecing together an image of me. You will have noticed the references to "patient scholarship," "poetic meters," and "a good teacher" and correctly concluded that I am a lecturer in English literature. You see how easy it is to observe the stamp of an author's personality in his writing? The rest is mere detail; I studied English at the University of Chichester in the 1960s, achieving grades sufficient to allow me to move steadily up to Masters and PhD level without my work ever inspiring even moderate encouragement from the aloof faculty. I specialised in the increasingly unfashionable method of biographical criticism and graduated *cum laude* in 1969, a year after the famous (and rather pompous) French literary critic Roland Barthes had declared "The Death of the Author" in

literary studies. I was fortunate enough, however, to join the faculty at the new Wolverhampton Polytechnic in 1970 and through steady application and the polytechnic's inability to attract the best and brightest I gradually secured my position.

That is the outer form of my life, which indicates nothing of the fire that burned through it. Outwardly I lived a conservative life of tweed jackets lightly dusted in chalk during an era of lurid clothing and shameless promiscuity; inwardly I was consumed with the knowledge of Shakespeare's secret, which had been granted to me one wintry Thursday evening in a quiet corner of the university library in Chichester. My dissertation was on reconstructing Christopher Marlowe's career as a spy for the Crown through references within his literary works; as part of my research I was reading through the letters of Robert Cecil, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Salisbury and Secretary of State from 1590 to his death in 1612. Cecil was a spymaster and had been involved in foiling the Gunpowder Plot, among other things, so I was reading his correspondence to gain some insight into the world of Elizabethan intrigue when I ran across the following sentence in a letter from 1598:

The Habsburgs wille not interfere, for they be hard press'd by the malignant and turban'd Turks. (*Collected Letters*, Volume III, 145)

I remember smiling with the pleasure a knowledgeable recognition always brings, hearing at once the echo of Othello's lines:

In Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and turban'd Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduced the state. (V, ii)

Cecil was obviously a fan of the theatre, I surmised, making note of a new potential connection between him and Marlowe. But something nagged at the back of my mind, causing me to lose focus repeatedly. I kept flipping back through the book and re-reading the passage from Cecil's letter. After an hour I felt the pressure of excess concentration building in my head, like a pot boiling over, and I stood up to go outside. That's when the seething confusion

suddenly resolved itself in an idea of mind-numbing clarity and import: Cecil couldn't have borrowed those words from Shakespeare in 1598 because *Othello* had its first public performance in 1604.

I went outside and fumbled in my pockets for a cigarette. A light rain was falling and had chased all the students inside. That suited me. I needed to be alone. Over and over the idea pounded through my head, the plain and simple words ringing out an unmistakable truth. *Cecil couldn't have borrowed from Shakespeare because Cecil had written the phrase first.* "The malignant and turban'd Turk," I whispered, tasting the peculiar conjunction of a spiritual and physical adjective. Such patterns had never been part of common speech; that two separate writers could have independently written the same unusual phrase within the space of six years seemed most unlikely. I tried to act calmly, to behave with the patience and methodical scepticism of a serious scholar, but my hands shook and I knew I had been given a glimpse of a wondrous truth, as if we all lived in a world overhung with clouds that one day had parted briefly to show me, and me alone, the stars.

I knew I would need time and access to the right materials. I finished my dissertation on Marlowe, although I had lost any enthusiasm for my subject, and then sought a job with any third-level institute, which would allow me the time and resources to pursue my goal. Years passed while I assembled the evidence. I didn't even notice the Queen's Silver Jubilee; some years later the Falklands War irritatingly clogged the airwaves; I listened in impatient contempt to my colleagues' vitriolic rants about the latest trivial actions of Margaret Thatcher. I taught uninspired courses on Elizabethan England and published a few mediocre articles to satisfy the "active research" requirements. And with everything I read I became more convinced of the big lie and the astonishing truth concealed within it.

It had always struck me as ridiculous that people attributed the glories of Shakespeare to the son of a wool merchant in Stratford-upon-Avon. Had the sheep taught him classical history? Had he learned the art of versification in iambic pentameter from toothless peasants gathered around a well? There was no record of him ever receiving any education; he couldn't even spell his own name consistently, nor write in anything other than a scrawling, illegible hand. From whom did he learn about the ways of palace intrigue? From the yokels in his town of a mere 1,500 people or from the actors in a profession stigmatised by those of noble birth? Nothing in

his modest background or in what is known of his life in London suggests he was anything other than a member of the petit-bourgeoisie, who retired once he had saved enough money and became a cantankerous old man quick to bring lawsuits against those who committed minor trespasses against his property.

The great humanist, the supreme poet of human nature.

Then there were the works themselves. In Marlowe's works we see immediately his egotism, his rash and fiery personality. Tamburlaine and Doctor Faustus are his reflections, while beside the central, dominating figures in his plays the others are mere stock characters, drawn with little insight or interest. But which of Shakespeare's characters is William Shakespeare? Julius Caesar as the conspirators approach, Hamlet when he hesitates with sword in hand, Macbeth with bloody hands after killing the king? He seems to be both everyone and no one; he is Shylock and the hater of Jews, true Cordelia and venomous Lady Macbeth, Juliet on the balcony and Romeo beneath. The author of the plays must have played many parts in life; he must have been a man of learning, who travelled widely and knew the manners of court and the mob and the secret pathways of the human heart. He was not born and raised in a small English town that specialised in sheep slaughtering.

Most inexplicable of all, however, is that William Shakespeare supposedly 'retired' and wrote nothing for the last five years of his life. Is this not monstrous, that Shakespeare walked the earth for five whole years at the peak of his powers with all his poetic gifts and understanding and he wrote...nothing? More than that, he did not oversee the publication of his complete works or even of selected plays. He simply abandoned them, as if they were so much cheap furniture in his London abode, while he returned to a life in the country. And this supposedly from the man who wrote in Sonnet 55:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments

Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme.

Are we supposed to believe that he simply abandoned his work to time and chance, that he had no understanding of its immortal power? It is inconceivable, unless we accept the obvious

conclusion, that the ill-educated theatre manager William Shakespeare (1564-1616) of Stratford-upon-Avon did not write the majestic plays of Shakespeare.

I was not the first, of course, to reach this conclusion. Emerson questioned the disjunction between the man's character and his works: "He was a jovial actor and manager. I can not marry this fact to his verse." Delia Bacon argued in print as early as 1845 that the multifaceted genius of the plays could not have been achieved by the commoner William Shakespeare and suggested they were written by a committee of the finest minds of the Elizabethan era. I agreed with the first contention but found the second dubious – aside from the King James Bible, has any great work of literature ever been written by committee? Over the decades various aristocratic names have been promoted as the true Shakespeare: Lord Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere (17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford), William Stanley (6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby). I agreed wholly with the anti-Stratfordians that an aristocrat had written the plays and used William Shakespeare as a proxy in order to avoid scandal and opprobrium; I could see the temptation to favour the claims of suave aristocrats who at least *looked* the part, with their fashionable clothing and beards and general air of sophistication, unlike Shakespeare, with his ridiculous egg-shaped head and great balding dome. My only disagreement was that the anti-Stratfordians were focusing on the wrong men.

As well as the history of the Shakespeare question, I studied the major works of the three most important contemporary Shakespearean scholars: Prof. Abel Cohen's *The Life of Shakespeare*, widely hailed as the definitive biography of the "great man"; Prof. Simon Royce-Hetherington's much praised rebuttal of the claims that Bacon, de Vere, or Stanley wrote the plays in *The Pretenders to the Throne*; and Prof. Cynthia St. John's magisterial *The Elizabethan Mind*, a study of the belief systems and cultural values of Shakespeare's time in relation to the plays. All three now enjoyed tenured faculty positions at Harvard, Cambridge, and Oxford respectively. As I worked at my chipboard desk in the grim industrial surroundings of the polytechnic, I sometimes foolishly imagined all four of us, the world's leading Shakespearean scholars, enjoying Earl Grey tea from fine china cups while we sat in the senior common room of a great university discussing the finer points of Hamlet's great soliloquies. Had I, perhaps, understood the logic of my own arguments better, I would have understood how impossible such fantasies were and avoided the delusions that later tormented me.

I spent a year reading nothing but Shakespeare until I knew his plays and sonnets intimately. Then I pored over everything that had been written by Robert Cecil. I initially approached his texts with a fierce, concentrated intensity; after twenty pages, I almost laughed for how ludicrously easy the task was. Shakespeare's words jumped out everywhere, like a small pond overflowing with wriggling fish, shooting silver gleams where their scales struck the sun. Writing as an observer of the ambush on the Spanish Armada at Gravelines in 1588, Cecil wrote: "Their Shippes, fretted with golden Fire" (*Collected Letters*, Vol. I, 189), anticipating Hamlet by over a decade: "This Majesticall Roofe, fretted with golden fire" (II, ii). As newly appointed Secretary of State in 1590, Cecil sent a missive to his many agents, urging them to give their all for "this blessed Plot, this Earth, this Realm, this England" (*Collected Letters*, Vol II, 14), words which would be repeated five years later in *Richard II* (II, i). In a private letter to his wife, Cecil spoke of meeting the vainglorious braggart Sir Walter Raleigh, whose mismanagement destroyed the new colony of Virginia in the Americas, and commented wryly: "O brave new World, that has such People in't" (*Collected Letters*, Vol II, 58). I noted down hundreds of such examples, found traces of real-life events that mirrored the plots of the plays, noted down examples of Cecil's different roles as spymaster, politician, courtier, even rumoured lover of Queen Elizabeth, his foreign adventures, his education at Cambridge, his patronage of the arts. Every piece of evidence I uncovered pointed to the truth, that Cecil was Shakespeare.

This evidence would have been enough to make my name, but I pushed further. The book I intended to write would not simply establish the true identity of Shakespeare but also reinterpret his whole oeuvre from the perspective of Cecil's life, the forbidden love with Elizabeth that inspired *Romeo and Juliet*, the rumoured assassination of his father, Lord Burghley, in 1598 that brought on the agonised doubts of Hamlet, the dark thoughts of a coup d'état against the inexperienced King James that drove *Macbeth*. The life and the plays were to be seamlessly interwoven. Importantly, my new theory explained Shakespeare's final incomprehensible silence; Cecil had died in 1612 after a long illness, and thus William Shakespeare had ceased to 'write' and returned to his home in the countryside.

There is something intoxicating about being the sole possessor of a mystery's key. I barely felt a thing for the outer details of my existence. I wore increasingly outdated clothes and developed a reputation for absent-mindedness, hardly noticing the mockery of students and the

condescension of colleagues. I avoided parties and other social gatherings. I rarely cooked more than the simplest meals. I never took foreign holidays or joined any local clubs. The further I went in my research, the more my eccentricities were exaggerated by paranoia. I began to hoard my notebooks jealously, like Fafner did the Rheingold and the ring. I began checking random books out of the library lest anyone discern the pattern in my reading. Ten years, fifteen, and the horror that someone might publish first increasingly woke me up at night in a cold sweat. The stress gave me an ulcer, which I publicly put down to bad diet and which everyone else put down to the fact that I was neither a good teacher nor respected researcher. But gradually I pieced the chapters together, reworking the pattern as I created the overall design, painstakingly rewriting each paragraph, each page, searching for the right words and order of ideas. I felt little surges of triumph when I finished a difficult chapter to my satisfaction, or discovered an elegant solution to the problem of conveying multiple ideas simultaneously. Then, one day, I remember leaning back in my old wooden chair in my study in sheer blissful contentment, with a neat stack of crisp white paper in front of me bearing the title *Shakespeare's Secret*. It was accomplished.

I sent the manuscript to a publisher, who excitedly rang me a few days later to say they were hugely impressed and were awaiting reports from the peer reviewers. Two months later, the peer reviewers gave it a glowing evaluation and the book was launched to a fanfare of publicity. Such was the interest that it even stormed the popular bestseller lists. The *New York Review of Books* declared it one of the finest works of literary scholarship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The *Journal of Shakespeare Studies* devoted not one but two whole editions to the ramifications of my book, featuring essays and transcripts of round table discussions by the world's leading Shakespearean scholars. I found myself in a slightly bewildered but elated daze on talk shows, doing radio interviews, and being photographed at work as part of a series of interviews with the press. I was somewhat disappointed to notice how unimpressive I appeared in these pictures, with my unflattering comb over and ill-fitting clothes, sitting in an office devoid of personal memorabilia. However, there was no denying the storm of interest my work had created, culminating in the night I received the prestigious Royal Academy Book Award for Non-Fiction. As I modestly acknowledged the standing ovation, waving with the shy uncertainty of a suddenly famous middle-aged academic to the array of flashing cameras, I recognised that moment as the reward for all the lonely hours spent in library corners poring through old texts and patiently editing the many forgotten drafts I had since consigned to the fireplace.

It was about a year later when the rumours began.

Perhaps someone of a more philosophical disposition would have understood that it was inevitable. Certainly a more socially adept person would have noticed that something was wrong sooner. He might have observed how colleagues evaded eye contact; I put it down to the habitual awkwardness I seemed to create in a room, which had only increased since I became famous. Or he might have understood that the way articles in academic journals increasingly dropped personal references to me when discussing my work was a slight, but I put it down to the traditional academic preference for an impersonal, objective manner of writing. He may have pondered why I was not invited to speak at a major conference on Shakespeare and Cecil, when I was simply glad to avoid another public engagement. When I look back at that time, I see many of the signs I missed then, and how from a broader perspective I should have realised where my own arguments would lead. However, I was flush with triumph and celebrity and thus it came as a complete shock one Sunday morning to open the Times Literary Supplement and find the following headline:

“Who really wrote *Shakespeare’s Secret*?”

I jumped to my feet and stopped dead, utterly stunned, for some reason thinking back to that moment in the library all those years ago. My hands trembled as I lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. I paced the floor for a minute or two, then snatched up the paper and began reading. My heart beat erratically; I felt short of breath.

“With all due respect to Dr. Hyde,” said the anonymous article disrespectfully, “does anyone seriously believe that a lecturer from Wolverhampton Polytechnic wrote the most revolutionary book in the history of Shakespeare criticism? A man who never got higher than a B-minus as a student and only graduated *cum laude* from the University of Chichester with an unpublished (and frankly risible) dissertation on Christopher Marlowe as an Elizabethan James Bond? Could *Shakespeare’s Secret*, a work of humane sympathy, far-reaching knowledge and vivid imagination, have been written by a man who seems to have no close friends, few interests, and (prior to the publication of this book) little reputation or respect within the profession?”



I squeezed my eyes tightly shut and waited for the room to stop spinning. I felt like I was going to be ill. With sinking horror I read the inevitable conclusion: “Is it not more likely that this is the work of a prestigious Shakespearean scholar who feared to be associated with a book which would undoubtedly destroy much of the research done by his or her closest friends and colleagues? And that this professor then chose an obscure polytechnic lecturer for an amanuensis, thus in true scholarly fashion making truth publicly available while eschewing personal glory?”

There was a knock at the door. Dazed, I stumbled over to it, bumping into chairs and walls as if I were drunk. I opened the door to a woman in a sharp business suit and a scruffy man with a large camera. The woman asked me about the allegations. I stammered vague and meaningless responses. Later I realised she sensed my utter disorientation and dispensed with any introductions or formalities that would have allowed me to steady myself. I claimed I didn’t know what she was talking about, then realised I was still clutching my copy of the TLS. I dropped it hastily and kicked it out of sight. The camera whirred and clicked repeatedly like some predatory insect.

The next day there was a full page on the story, dominated by a shot of me looking pale and sweaty, with eyes bulging like pigeon eggs in a pinched face haunted by fear. The caption read simply: “Dr. Hyde answering questions about his authorship of *Shakespeare’s Secret*.” Some smaller photos showed me kicking my copy of the TLS. The words of the article only emphasised my guilty behaviour, but the pictures were enough.

Then came the deluge of articles speculating about the identity of “Mr. Jekyll” and the search narrowed pretty rapidly to three names: Profs. Cohen, Royce-Hetherington, and St. John. Newspapers gave short bios of all three listing their impressive resumes, fellowships, publications, career posts, and personal interests. On top of each column was a photo: the darkly handsome Semitic features of Abel Cohen, brown eyes alive with intelligence and passion; the tall, angular figure of Simon Royce-Hetherington, a fit-looking grey-haired eminence in his early sixties; and the smartly dressed, vivacious Cynthia St. John, every inch the modern professional woman. There was also a fourth column for me, with my unimpressive resume, meagre publications, absence of notable career achievements, and a photograph showing a painfully thin,

balding, dull-eyed man who somehow looked older and wearier than the other three, even though I was actually the youngest.

All three, of course, came out and said that while they were honoured to be associated in any way with *Shakespeare's Secret*, they really couldn't claim any credit for it, and while they didn't know me personally, they were sure I was an honest man who would never take credit where it wasn't due. The faint praise for me and firm but oddly evasive denials of authorship were rapidly understood to mean the searchers were on the right track. I snapped when a student told me the bookies were taking bets on who the real author was, and I was considered the long shot. I wrote an impassioned letter to the TLS accusing it of libel and arguing that it was impossible for the other three to have written the book. Cohen had devoted eight years to writing the definitive biography of Shakespeare; would he have done that if he believed Shakespeare hadn't written the plays? Royce-Hetherington had defended Shakespeare vigorously and attacked the anti-Stratfordians in *The Pretenders to the Throne*. Why would he do that if he were intending to publish *Shakespeare's Secret*? And Cynthia St. John had used references to Shakespeare's life and milieu repeatedly in her study of Elizabethan culture; wouldn't it undermine her previous work if she then denied William Shakespeare had written the plays she used as one of her primary sources?

The letter prompted so many responses that the whole next issue was turned over to discussing the questions it raised. With incredible rapidity, the supporters of the "anti-Wolverhampton" position divided themselves into three major factions. Those who supported Cohen wrote fiery polemical essays explaining that Cohen must have either seen or glimpsed the truth towards the end of his research on Shakespeare, which explained why he had published many articles on Shakespeare during the course of his work and absolutely nothing on him afterwards. Moreover, they claimed the arguments against Cohen were based on an elitist desire to keep Shakespeare a wholly Anglo-Saxon institution, given the lingering anti-Semitism in European academia, which could be seen in its frequent criticisms of Israel. This was why Cohen had published the work secretly, using the little-known Dr. Hyde as an intermediary, for an attack on the very roots of English cultural beliefs in Shakespeare by a prominent Jewish intellectual may have led to an increase in anti-Semitic posturing.

The supporters of Royce-Hetherington made a fine distinction between what I claimed he had done in *The Pretenders to the Throne* and what he had actually written. He had not established that Shakespeare was the author of the plays; instead he had proven that they were not written by Bacon, Derby, or Oxford. His book thus paved the way for his magnum opus, *Shakespeare's Secret*, which finally revealed the true identity of Shakespeare. However, as the scion of one of Britain's oldest families and a well-known champion of preserving the monuments and cultural heritage of England, publishing the work under his own name would have placed him in the uncomfortable position of ripping up the foundations of the Shakespeare legend, and so he had used the obscure Dr. Hyde as a proxy.

The faction promoting the claims of Prof. St. John argued that the identity of Shakespeare had been essentially irrelevant to her study of Elizabethan culture; however, in the course of her research she must undoubtedly have come across groundbreaking evidence showing that Cecil, rather than the obscure theatre manager William Shakespeare, was the true author of the plays. Yet, she had published it using a male surrogate because British society continued to devalue the intellectual contributions of women, even those brilliant enough to become full professors at Oxford in their early forties, and so her work would never have achieved the acclaim it deserved if it were known the author was female. The fact that she was ranked as the least likely candidate to have written the text, aside from the discredited Dr. Hyde, simply demonstrated once again the pervasive gender discrimination in Britain's supposedly meritocratic society.

They never even published my rather weak rebuttal, or my offer to make my research notes public. The discussion had moved on to richer, more savoury courses. The claims of anti-Semitism in European academia ignited a passionate and often vitriolic debate. Cohen stayed publicly aloof from it, claiming that as an intellectual and man of letters he tried to remain independent of partisan quarrels, although the epigrammatic precision and scathing wit of many articles penned by known friends and colleagues of Cohen left little doubt as to their real author.

With his name dominating the debate, Cohen was seen as the most likely candidate until the British tabloids turned up a shocking new piece of evidence: Simon Royce-Hetherington and Cynthia St. John had had a torrid affair years before that both had ended for the sake of their respective marriages and careers, though sources close to both said it had left them emotionally devastated. Perceptive commentators were quick to note the poignant and often lyrical style of

the chapter devoted to Robert Cecil's secret relationship with Queen Elizabeth, especially the following passage:

Like Atlas, those who know a great and terrible passion hope it may give them the strength to hold the malignant and immense globe above their heads; but inevitably the weight of the world pushes down, and we can only imagine with what doomed despair Cecil wrote these lines from *Romeo and Juliet* after he and his beloved Elizabeth had put the affairs of State ahead of those of the heart: "A greater power than we can contradict hath thwarted our intents" (*Shakespeare's Secret*, 138).

Who could not now see the choice of those lines that Cecil wrote to his Queen through his proxy William Shakespeare as reflecting the anguished love of two career professionals torn from each other by the mundane and materialistic world? A new possibility now jumped to the fore, that Simon Royce-Hetherington and Cynthia St. John, England's two leading Shakespeare scholars at its greatest universities, had co-written the work between them but published it through an obscure academic at Wolverhampton Polytechnic to hide the truth of their great and unhappy love from prying eyes.

The debate continues, but I knew my part in it was done when I found a copy in my local bookshop of Prof. Jane Hathaway's *The Secret of Shakespeare's Secret*, which begins with the lines: "Although the book is still nominally published in his name, there is a general consensus among scholars and the general public alike that Dr. Richard Hyde of Wolverhampton Polytechnic did not write *Shakespeare's Secret*." I didn't read any further, so I'm afraid I can't say who the real author was.

The book that bears my name now sits on the shelf next to my dog-eared copy of the collected works of Shakespeare. At least once a day I take it down and run my thumb through the pages and marvel at the madness that possessed me for all those years. It is amazing the tricks time and memory can play, how vividly I think I remember the years spent at my desk making notes or correcting drafts. Was Shakespeare, too, in the quiet of his Stratford home, ever seized

by the notion that he had written the plays? Did he falsely imagine himself to have dashed off those immortal lines in between rehearsals? Maybe the public impression that he had done so secretly convinced him that he was, indeed, the author of *King Lear* and *The Tempest*. Sometimes I dream he saw further, that he saw truths withheld even from Robert Cecil. The author of the plays could be anyone because no man really exists; any man can be all men. William Shakespeare was Christopher Marlowe, was Edward de Vere, was Francis Bacon, was William Stanley, was Robert Cecil, was Dr. Richard Hyde of Wolverhampton Polytechnic, was even William Shakespeare. All men are every man. No man is any man. I am, and am not, the foolish man on the back cover of *Shakespeare's Secret* peering fraudulently out at the sceptical world.

In any event, I now feel detached from the whole affair. I spend my days exploring my new love for gardening and working on a private monograph about the ghost-written works of Samuel Johnson.