

Pathway Advanced: William Shakespeare – The author-question (Emmerich 2011, Transkript):

Material

The background: A number of critics (often biographers) have argued that Shakespeare, a simple man from the countryside, cannot have been the author of so many 'big works' of highest quality. There are those who claim that it was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who hid behind Shakespeare as a pseudonym in order to remain undiscovered as an author (because authors usually had a bad social standing). A member of the highest nobility, he looks back on an excellent education and travel experience which seems to provide the necessary background of many plots Shakespeare wrote – unlike Shakespeare himself. The whole dispute has divided critics / biographers into those who follow the arguments of the 'Oxfordians' (who see Edward de Vere as 'true author') and the 'Stratfordians' who trust in Shakespeare's own imagination, admitting that he made frequent use of sources by others.

In a featurette supplementing ¹the film-DVD Anonymous, script-writer John Orloff defends the views of J. Thomas Looney who claimed in a study titled Shakespeare Identified, published in 1920, to have revealed the "true author" hiding behind an actor's name, "William Shakspere".

The true author [of Shakespeare's works] would have to have these qualities: He would have spoken Greek, he would have spoken Latin, he would have spoken French, he would have probably gone to Italy, because so many plays take place in Italy. He probably was a nobleman², because in most of his plays the characters are noblemen, he was probably a lawyer³, because a lot of the law, in fact all of the law in the plays is quite accurate for 16th-century Elizabethan England [...]. And so he [i.e. Looney] took all of these things and he tried to figure out who matched⁴ these qualities, and he discovered that this man was Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, and so he wrote this book, and that was in 1910 [*sic*].

From: Roland Emmerich, dir. *Anonymous*. Beverly, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2011. DVD-Featurette, 03:25-04:10. 140 words

Tasks

Comprehension

1. Sum up, in your own words, Orloff's (and Looney's) view of a 'true' author.
2. *Underline all verb-forms in different colours, dividing into verbs stating hypotheses and those stating facts. Use a third colour for adverbs of probability.

Analysis

3. Explain the rhetorical strategy by which Orloff/Looney arrive at their conclusion that Edward de Vere must have been the "true" author of Shakespeare's works.

Evaluation

4. In the light of your findings, evaluate Orloff's brief statement.

Must do: 1, 3, 4

Can do: 2, as preparation for Assignment No. 3.

¹ supplement = an addition, something extra

² nobleman = aristocrat

³ lawyer = *Rechtsanwalt*

⁴ match = make a pair

Solutions

Textbook: *Pathway Advanced*, pp. 444-445

Fokus Literaturvermittlung: pp. 178-182

Task 1:

Summary

Orloff claims that the true author of Shakespeare's works needed to have a solid education in classical and modern languages, as well as in law, and to have spent some time abroad, preferably in Italy. He should know what it is to live as a nobleman and to be. According to Looney, the man who provided these assets was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. (65 words)

Task 3:

Language analysis

The rhetoric of Orloff's argument shows many more verbs in the subjunctive (5 times "he would have..."), indicating his assumptions and speculations. Likewise, there is a frequent use of adverbs such as "probably" (3 times). He uses the indicative only when he refers to the plays: that many of them are set in Italy, and that they discuss the law. Finally, he draws the conclusion ("And so he took...") after these speculations as if it was a logical operation. Accordingly, Orloff relies on the speculative details he takes over from Looney, who after all only "tried to figure out" who in English Renaissance history might match the qualities needed to become an author of such a social high rank. (119 words)

Task 4:

Evaluation

An uncritical reader finds some strength in the argument. Orloff refers to a published author whose theory he presents in words which indicate its speculative nature. However, although Orloff makes clear that he finds this speculative theory convincing, he still states that Looney made a "discover[y]" (l. 19).

A more critical reader can argue that the switch from subjunctive to indicative mood in the verbs is unconvincing: Generally, a discovery is something based on facts, but in Orloff's case, he cannot reveal many actual facts except for a few of the characteristics of Shakespeare's texts (references to languages, to law, to a noble life style), but relies on Looney's speculations which he retells as the only creditable source. Furthermore, the details that Orloff quotes from Looney are very general – in the English Renaissance, there were numerous people, noblemen and commoners, who had studied languages as well as the law, and who had visited Italy in the course of their *Grand Tour*: a journey through Europe for young men who could afford it, and who perfected their education in Italy. After all, this was the country where the re-discovery of ancient (Classical) texts took its origin, before it expanded all over Europe. Therefore these qualities cannot be accepted as evidence for Oxford to be the author of Shakespeare's works. (219 words)