

## QUESTION 48

Why did Henry James doubt Shakespeare's authorship?

Adrian Poole

Henry James told a friend he thought it 'almost as impossible to conceive that Bacon wrote the plays as to conceive that the man from Stratford, as we know the man from Stratford, did.' Almost, but not quite. By the early 1900s a great deal was known about the man from Stratford. The Romantic idea of Shakespeare's transcendent genius had collided with the distinctly Victorian image of a hard-headed businessman. How could the man who wrote Hamlet go on to sue a Stratford neighbour for an unpaid debt? Henry James pretended to be shocked but he was also fascinated. Did Shakespeare harbour some general truth about artists, even the greatest? That they are always divided, their creativity always a mystery? This is why late in his own career James described the author of The Tempest — unforgettably — as 'the monster and magician of a thousand masks'.