

Question 60

What do you think about Shakespeare's reputation being stolen and passed off as someone else's?

Dan Snow

I was amazed to discover the other day that a distant ancestor of mine was The Earl of Southampton, who was Shakespeare's literary patron.

One of the points that's not often made is that the Shakespeare Authorship Conspiracy Theory is actually a shameless act of intellectual theft.

The whole thing is motivated, I think, by an insidious jealousy, by people who, unfortunately, can't accept and rejoice in another man's talent.

All of the alternative nominees – 77 different people last time I looked (including, one person thinks, my ancestor) – are actually imposters. They themselves can't help being nominated and I'm sure they'd actually be appalled at the thought of having the finger pointed at them.

Starting in the nineteenth century, and I think perhaps the theory can be understood as part of the Victorian quest for points of origin – as unsettling as Darwin's theory of evolution was for scripture. But it's moved on and it's turned nasty.

Intellectual fraud is a serious offence and I'm naming it when I see it.

The fact is all the historical evidence points to William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon – a market-town lad, developed by Elizabethan schooling and the culture at the time – who had enormous talent, and who has enjoyed more success than any other writer who has ever lived.