

Dagbladet [Norwegian liberal tabloid newspaper]

NRK is misleading the public [NRK = Norwegian National Broadcasting Corporation] And they have no interest in correcting the fault.

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(English translation by Geir Uthaug)

Caption under the Droeshout; Misguided information. William Shakespeare of Stratford's life and works shows strong connection. Instead of telling about his life, NRK (The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation) imparts a conspiracy theory which claims that his works were written by someone else.

The dividing line between information and disinformation has become uninteresting to NRK. At least when it comes to William Shakespeare and the conspiracy theory attached to his identity. It was four hundred years this week since the most influential of dramatists in history died. At the top of the page where NRK informed about how they were going to mark the jubilee, one found "Shakespeare's secret," a new version of the organist Petter Amundsen's television-series where he claims that the famous plays were not written by William Shakespeare, but was rather a plot by the so-called Rosicrucians, a sort of order of masons headed by the statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon as the main master mind.

Amundsen's theory is that the Folio of Shakespeare's plays are steeped in freemason-codes which makes the edition into a treasure-map which leads to a pond in North America, where the so-called Ark of the Covenant is supposed to be hidden. When journalists are confronted with such a project one would perhaps think it natural to get in touch with experts who are not connected to Amundsen's project to see if this is a plausible theory, but nothing of the kind has happened.

The editor of Minerva (a Conservative ideological periodical, my comment) have examined Amundsen's theories and their improbability.

NRK is exposing a conspiracy theory which has been proved wrong, when they impart the idea that the real author of the plays were Francis Bacon. It is beyond doubt (no doubt whatsoever) that William Shakespeare was the author of these writings which carry his name. This is something the NRK should know — I have informed them of this on NRKs own debate forums, and pointed to the comprehensive documentation on this (I will expose at more length why the scholars are so certain further down the page.) This has not stopped the NRK from broadcasting the series many times in ever more newly developed versions.

When I on an open facebook thread asked who the responsible person was for the decision to send this series as part of the Shakespeare-jubilee, and how the discussions behind this decision has been, the Chief of the NRK (director of the NRK) Thorpr Gjermund Eriksen texted me that he had no opinion in this matter. At length I received a fairly worried answer from Tore Tomter, who is the person who is in charge of documentary film purchases for the NRK.

According to Tomter the problem was that I was unwilling to listen to what Petter Amundsen had to say (To put things straight: I have read Amundsen's book, I have seen the cinematic version and the tv-series.) Tomter claims that this is a new way NRK can "spread knowledge." I pointed out that they postulated something which is not true, but this made no impression. Instead Tomter himself argued that Bacon "was" Shakespeare and ended thus: "The codes are there, but what do they mean?" It turned out that the man who was responsible for the purchase of documentaries for the viewers. was

himself a believer in the conspiracy theory. Suddenly it seemed less strange that those who reasoned that this was not so, did not get a hearing.

NRK is financed by license fees with the purpose of broadcasting quality information. The viewers should be able to place their trust in a process whereby the stories the institution receives has been filtered by a journalistic standard, and has received an unsentimental judgment of the reliability of their sources. In this case it seems that the NRK lacks routines that can function to be a guarantee for quality, and they have demonstrated that someone should execute this task on their behalf does not interest them.

This is not the first time NRK has served the purpose of the conspiracy theorists. When NRK showed Amundsen's series for the first time I received a phone call and was asked to give a comment on Amundsen's theory in an item on the news program covering the series. I said, and spoke truthfully that there is no substance to the theory and that consequently scholars could not take it seriously. This was added to a very long item about NRK's own series, which was presented by Jon Gelius in the following words: "The Shakespeare enigma may have been solved" — even though it is no enigma. It is due to the conspiracy theorists who try to make it look like it is. But thanks to the NRK more than a million Norwegians may get to believe that there exists an uncertainty which is simply is not there. This incident illuminates the problem of mixing news feature with self promotion.

A problem in the media is what is known as "false balance", that is to say one invites two parties with contrary views to debate an issue and portrays them as being of equal merit. Even though one of the parties has a significantly greater claim to facts to show for himself than the other. NRK has on several occasions been criticized for inviting parties to the studio with false balance, for instance when Hans Kristian Gaarder was named "scientist", in a debate against scientist and senior doctor Sveinung Wergeland Sørbye, even though Gaarder's title was self-bestowed and that he had principally been concerned with spreading conspiracy theories, for instance about so-called "chamtrails". In this instance it is not only a question of "false balance", but a systematic promotion of a case made by a conspiracy theoretician and a rejection of or marginalization of the critics of the conspiracy theoretician.

To cover the conspiracy theories related to William Shakespeare is of course all right. They have been around for 150 years and have boasted some great names within their ranks. As is the case with other conspiracy theories the internet has helped to spread them. Recently six hundred academics have signed a Declaration where they claim that it is reason to doubt the identity of William Shakespeare. What was not clear was whether they as academics were well versed in this field. Inside academia one finds a specific industry for criticizing the establishment, who stick to their theories in spite of the fact that solid scholarship and many books does not give their theories the time of day. Of course the media can explore this phenomenon, but what makes it more problematic is that they can't support the ideas of the conspiracy theorists like Tomter is doing.

It is not ok either to produce boxes based on misdirected assertions from conspiracy theoreticians, as the paper KK (Klassekampen) did last week covering an alternative conspiracy theory that the Earl of Oxford wrote the plays of Shakespeare. In the editorial box it says that "the paper trail does not point to Shakespeare being a dramatist". The Truth of the matter is that the few paper trails one has would not have carried such information, but more of this later.

Many media have been fooled here, including Dagbladet, which has also interviewed Petter Amundsen and then written about the "Shakespeare enigma."

NRK's stance is more disconcerting than what comes from the conspiracy theorists themselves. The latter believe in their ideas and will of course try to spread them — and in regard to the media it is in order that everyone are allowed to have a try. I have given up discussing with them directly, because on the occasions I have tried, I will at some point be labeled a "Stratfordian" — that is to say someone

who believes that Shakespeare was Shakespeare, and consequently is not to be taken seriously. Because my point of departure is not unbiased. It is a bit like saying that whoever is not neutral concerning the question whether al —Qaida or the US government was behind the September 11th attacks, cannot be listened to in a debate about the terrorist attacks, and I cannot of course participate in a debate on such terms.

I have met Peter Amundsen, he is a nice chap and clearly an enthusiast. He helped me fix an internet connection at one time when I was about to give a talk on Shakespeare and I am grateful to him for that. But he is practicing a falsification of history and NRK which should have methods not to be duped by things of this sort, is promoting his ideas. When I voice my opinion on this it is on behalf of tv viewers who turn to NRK to get informed, and receives disinformation.

In this connection I would like to know the following: Does NRK stand by the utterance of its chief of purchase who characterized Shakespeare's work by saying that the "codes exist"? Would they have asked a critic to be more open and receptive if the issue had been a world view promoted by adversaries of vaccination or 11th of September conspiracy theoreticians? What routines do they practice to see whether the assertions in the documentaries they buy do in fact add up? What routines do they have to review the transmission schedule when critics tell them that they are spreading false information?

Now to the core of the matter. The reason why scholars do not doubt that Shakespeare was Shakespeare.

There are a number of facts which connects William Shakespeare's life and work.

He was recognized as a writer by everyone he knew in London and referred to with both admiration and envy.

What made his name famous in his own lifetime were not actors who were more connected with theatre companies than with the author, it was the very popular "Venus and Adonis" from 1593 which was written at a time when the plague was harrowing, the theatres were frequently closed and it was difficult to live on one's earnings as a man of the theatre. The poem was published by Richard Field who was also from Shakespeare's home town Stratford upon Avon and a friend of Shakespeare. So he knew the man who had written the poem he published.

After Shakespeare's break-through many of the plays was published under his own name, which was relatively seldom at this time.

There are many dialect words in the works of Shakespeare which originates from Warwickshire where Stratford-on-Avon is situated.

The works show great familiarity with the treatment of leather, glove-making and sheep tending. This was what constituted Shakespeare's father's livelihood and which the son William studied when he grew up.

That Shakespeare was uneducated is one of the accusations from conspiracy theoreticians, this was promoted in the article in NRK and repeated in a cultural news program (Kulturnytt) on the very same day. But Shakespeare went to grammar school in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he was thoroughly schooled in major works from antiquity. Authors who were on the curriculum are clearly sources of inspiration for his own writings. Among other things the pupils would have read The Metamorphoses by Ovid, which retell the myths Shakespeare makes use of in "Titus Andronicus" and "A midsummer night's dream." The university curriculum that other more highly educated authors used are not relevant to Shakespeare.

John Shakespeare, an ambitious man, who for a time functioned as alderman in Stratford-upon Avon, would later get into skirmishes with the law, for many reasons. There are legal documents to show that William accompanied his father to court now and then, In 1592 John Shakespeare was listed with other Stratford citizens who had not attended church, together with three men who were called Bardolph, Fluellen and Court. These rather unusual names were used by Shakespeare in three minor parts in King Henry V.

The parts of the actors in his plays are specifically written for his company, Lord Chamberlain's men, and changed as the members of the company changed. Shakespeare writes more ambitious female parts after young, talented boy actors entered the company. Boys who played female parts in the theatres in the 15th century. His way of portraying the fools change when Robert Armin takes over for Will Kempe as the company's fool. In the first versions of "Much ado about nothing" and "Romeo and Juliet" the name Kempe has been transferred from an original manuscript where the names of the actors had been used instead of the name of the characters and into the printed versions. There are many different renderings of the most famous plays which have survived which differ significantly, which presents problems to modern publishers. This may mean that the company's dramatist — Shakespeare — revised them in accordance with how the audience responded or not.

The company's working routines and way of thinking are frequently used metaphors in Shakespeare's plays.

Many conspiracy theorists argue that neither books nor manuscripts are mentioned in Shakespeare's will. But these are items which would not have appeared in the will itself but in a inventory list which was attached- We know that such an inventory list have existed, which Shakespeare's son-in-law John Hall presented after his death, but this has not survived.

And perhaps most importantly. Shakespeare's plays are marked by sober, descriptions of conditions of power and does not chose sides as to political or ideological questions. That the plays should have been written in order to propagate a political agenda, for instance for the Rosicrucians, does not fit when one considers what the literature is all about.

In other words. The plays show that they have been written by someone who came from the countryside, who had knowledge of farming and knew how things worked, and who is familiar with the dialects from Stratford-upon Avon, at the same time he must have had enough knowledge of the upper classes to have described them so convincingly, for instance by having had noble protectors for his theatre company. They are clearly written by an author who has an intimate knowledge of theatrical life and the Lord Chamberlain's men. They have been written by a person who has knowledge of the grammar school curriculum, but who has no university background — and who could use three names from a list which numbered his father to use them as minor roles for his plays. They are written by a man who was more interested in analyzing and showing human nature than advancing political goals. They are written by a person of William Shakespeare's background and biography, a man everyone in London knew as the author of the plays.

When someone says that it has not been "proved" that Shakespeare write his own plays, it is hard to see what they would consider proof. A letter where Shakespeare writes to his wife and says, Hey, Anne, I am sitting here working on "Romeo and Juliet!?" That is impossible to say. But to scholars it is important to hold on that one knows a lot about this, and that what is known points unambiguously in the direction of the same man.

Something concerning the individual conspiracy theories:

The earl of Oxford died in 1604, twelve years before Shakespeare and before Shakespeare had written many of his most important plays, like Macbeth and King Lear. Adherents of this theory have claimed that the date of these plays have been wrong, and have been written earlier, but science do not consider

these theories particularly trustworthy. The earl left a lot of poems which are more simple and have a different tone to them than William Shakespeare's. and they were never recognized in his lifetime.

The philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon left his own plays with simple and archetypical main characters. These are also in a totally different language from Shakespeare's- It seems unlikely that a man with such a substantial production would have had time to write 37 of the most important plays in literary history, many of them in different versions. The theory that Bacon really was behind was not proposed until in the 19th century by the American Delia Bacon (no relative of Francis) who thought that it was impossible that a man without university education could have written such plays. She called William Shakespeare a "vulgar, illiterate poacher". The theory which today has the form of a revolt against the academic establishment was then promoted by academic snobbery and a conviction that an ordinary country lad could not have had such powers as Shakespeare had.

Among the Shakespeare experts who have examined these arguments of the adherents of these two candidates more closely and repudiated them in greater detail, are Stanley Welles and James Shapiro. Their books about the subject are easy to find.

These are the arguments that Peter Amundsen's documentary completely overlooks. There one is shown cryptographic "evidence" as the most important. That on one page of the Folio one finds the word "ba" vertically and "con" diagonally is presented as a hidden signature, and that Shakespeare's name is misspelled at a certain point in time as "Shaxpere", is considered a code. The truth of the matter is that this period was not the golden age of correct spelling, and there are documents which show many different spellings for both William Shakespeare and his father John. To someone who is knowledgeable concerning the links between Shakespeare and his father it will be difficult to give these arguments any weight.

There are periods of Shakespeare's life surrounded by uncertainty. No-one knows what he did in the years after he had his children, before he showed up in London as actor and dramatist. There are plays which may or not may have been written by him. And there are plays which certainly were written in collaboration with other writers, but where Shakespeare's contribution is difficult to ascertain.

Scholars naturally deplore that he left no letters. But for anyone working with ancient history there will always be large gaps which one would have wished were not there. But one must be careful not to fill those gaps with wishful thinking. At least if one represents the most important media establishment in Norway.