The Riddle of Shakespeare

Jorge Luis Borges

Editor's note: The following is a transcript of a talk Borges gave on April 23, 1976 (Shakespeare's 412th birthday), in the Presidential Ballroom of the Statler-Hilton in Washington, D.C., at the Shakespeare Association of America's annual meeting. It now exists in print in Jorge Luís Borges, _Borges on Shakespeare_, ed. Grace Tiffany, Tempe, AZ: ACMRS Press, 2018, pp. 111-19. The sound quality of the audiocassette on which the speech was recorded is bad, and that fact will account for the occasional lacunae and guesswork in my transcription, which I signal by ellipses and brackets, respectively. The talk largely recapitulates the arguments regarding Shakespeare and authorship Borges had made in more polished form twelve years earlier in his "The Enigma of Shakespeare" and in other writings and conversations. I reproduce the talk here not only because in it Borges introduces several new ideas and observations, and frames some of his long-held thoughts in striking new ways, but because the speech offers a rare opportunity to read Borges' comments in his own English, unmediated by translators.

Ladies and gentlemen, my subject is the riddle of Shakespeare. There are two riddles: the sham riddle and the real riddle. I begin with the first, because the sham riddle may help us to find our way into the heart of the matter of the real riddle. I suppose the sham riddle sprang from the ruins of the real riddle.

We will first take up the sham riddle, and I am speaking of course of that wild theory of Miss Delia Bacon concerning the authorship of Shakespeare. She thought that Shakespeare was a pen name for Francis Bacon . . . , and she gave her reasons, and it happened [when she wrote this] back in 1850 or so, in a book with a foreword by Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had never read the book, and he said so. Now, there's another theory, perhaps more plausible, though of course I don't believe in it, by Luther Hoffman,[1] who found another possible candidate, the great poet Christopher Marlowe.

We now go into the first theory. This theory was [discussed] in my country by one of the finest scholars we have had, the Frenchman Paul Groussac, who gave a few lectures on the subject. When he fell to thinking how that preposterous (I should say) theory came to be, he found a reason, and I shall quote it, but I think there is another reason, of course deeper down than that. Groussac said that Shakespeare had been made by critics -- who are insensitive to literature – into a kind of encyclopedia. It was never thought that Shakespeare would not know all the sciences of the vocabulary that could be found in his works, and so they created a quite unreal Shakespeare, a man full of arts and sciences, who of course would hardly tally with the [man of] "small Latin and less Greek" that Ben Jonson told us about. But the fact – this is more or less what we may suppose – is that Shakespeare was not a reader. Shakespeare did not read. He did not need much reading for his purposes. We know that he had read Chaucer, he read Spenser – he read his contemporaries; and he also knew about Holinshed, about Plutarch, and about our friend Michel de Montaigne. We know that he read those books and also part of the way [into] any [papers] that would come into his hand. And so the Bacon theory that "Shakespeare" was a man of straw, that it was only a pen name for Francis Bacon – and she gave her reasons, you know – that to be writing for the stage was in a sense beneath the dignity of a man like Francis Bacon, and that he might have used "William Shakespeare."

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[1] Borges has a tendency to refer to Calvin Hoffman, the originator of the Marlowe-was-Shakespeare thesis, as "Luther" Hoffman, doubtless because he associates Martin Luther with John Calvin.

Well, I think that all that can be explained away, it can be refuted, in quite a brief span of time. We will take but a single instance . . . . The instance is this. We know that Bacon, in his *Advancement of Learning,* thought of errors as being committed by men because the mind of man is not a plain mirror. The mind of man is, rather, a curved mirror. And so things are not seen as they are, but there are flaws in the image. And then he developed a kind of strange mythology. He called these mistakes, as you know, "idols," and then he defined them thus. First we have the idols of the tribe. Those are common to all mankind. For example, we tend to think of things as being far more regular than they are, far more orderly. Well, the world is perhaps more irregular, not symmetrical. Thus we have the first idols, those idols that [are with us] all the time, the idols of the tribe. Those are common to all men. Then we have the idols of the den, and those are of a stranger species, since every man has his own den and in it his own secret idols, of likes and dislikes, of pet aversions or hatreds. Then we have also the idols of the marketplace, *idola fori*. (The other ones are *idola speci*,[2] of course.) *The idola fori* [concern] those who fall into a too credulous belief in language. After all, Bacon said, words are mere counters, but people think that they stand for real things. We hold onto idols through words. This seems to be happening most of the time. We have also a very strange kind of idols, the *idola teatri,* or idols of the stage. Here, said Bacon, any philosophical system creates a stage with little puppets, and then when we think from inside this system we don't think of reality, but of things within the system. And so we have the *idola teatri.*

Now, anybody who has read Shakespeare knows that that kind of mythology or that kind of metaphor is something that, we say, would hardly belong to Shakespeare. It's not the kind of thought Shakespeare could have had. He was not interested in classifying mistakes.

Well, let us take another example. Bacon – and this, I think, is more to the point – Bacon lived, as we attempt to do, in history. He thought of the ancients as mere children. He thought that we are the ancients, and he thought we were on the threshold of a new age . . . of science. . . . Then, he thought much of science, of the advancement of learning, and he wrote perhaps the first [really fine species] of science fiction ever written, *The New Atlantis.* He also thought that Latin would be a universal language and that English would have [had] its day. He said modern languages may be playing a trick on us, [they] are changing all the time, [but] Latin -- marvelous Latin, as Raleigh had it – is everlasting.

Well, I don't suppose I have to go into anything more to convince you that no two more different men ever existed than Francis Bacon and William Shakespeare. It's impossible to think of one as being the other. [*Laughter from the audience*]

Well, we turn to our other candidate, which, of course, is at first sight a bit more likely than Bacon, since he's a poet, a great poet, and he wrote lines perhaps as fine as any we find in Shakespeare, except that I do not think we can speak of a line being finer than another, for when poetry is given to a man, poetry is given to him entirely, so if a man achieves poetry, that poetry is as fine as any poetry to be found elsewhere. It appears that at some stage or another, at some moment or another, it will be revealed in the stars who have been poets. Perhaps in most cases poets appear as a single dinosaur, but in the case of Shakespeare, the miracle seems to have been happening all the time. [Thus we also have] Christopher Marlowe. His poems were [filled with] metaphor, metaphors that had never been tried, [never been used, such as] the image:

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[2] Idols of the marketplace and idols of the den.

> Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
> And burned the topless towers of Ilium?

We also know that Marlowe, in a sense, created [the use of blank verse] . . . Marlowe was the first man to make it into a living thing. We think of such lines, we think they are not unworthy of Shakespeare. Was this the *face* – not the woman – that launched a thousand ships, and then the *topless* towers of Ilium. Those things cannot be better. Or when he spoke, for example, of "Christ's blood streaming in the firmament,"[3] like a sunset. Those are fine lines also. . . . We remember when Ben Jonson said "Marlowe's mighty line." He was thinking of those verses, of course.

But now we go ahead, to continue with the argument. We know that Christopher Marlowe created only single characters. In his six plays we find gigantic figures. We find Tamburlaine, Faustus, the Jew of Malta, and the others are lesser figures – they hardly stand out, they are mere adjectives. They reinforce the chief giant, Tamburlaine or Faustus, and we of course cannot think of Christopher Marlowe as being able to create the teeming multitudes of Shakespeare. It was quite beyond his scope.

So I suppose we should think, in a way, it is impossible to think that Bacon or Christopher Marlowe or any other candidate is Shakespeare. But perhaps something interesting might be found in the fact that people needed to, that people liked to think of somebody else being the writer of Shakespeare. Mark Twain has written a very entertaining and very mistaken book called *Who Wrote Shakespeare?*[4] He read Delia Bacon's book, he thought that Bacon might have written the words of Shakespeare, because "Shakespeare" was [a pen name for an] impostor. Those things are [interesting].

But I come to the chief point. The point is this. Why did people prefer to think that "Shakespeare" was somebody else's pen name? Why did that strange theory, with different candidates, come to the fore? This I think is the chief point. Nobody that I know ever thought of ascribing the work of Dante . . . to anybody else. Why with Shakespeare? And the reason, I think, will lead us to the real riddle of Shakespeare. We will not solve it, of course. Riddles should be solved; I suppose there is a beauty in the quest. But the fact is that the riddle has a beauty of its own, far beyond our solutions, especially in this case, when I think a solution is impossible. I merely want to point out the riddle.

I've already said that Francis Bacon was, let's say, historically minded. He knew that he was on the threshold of a new age; he knew that we were the ancients and that the ancients were mere children. He thought of science as opening to us the kingdom of man, the *regnum hominis*, and so on. Well, this, in a sense, brings Francis Bacon closer to us. Because we are historically minded. I try not to be. [I believe,] like Schopenhauer, that historical events are like the shapes of clouds – we look at clouds and then we think of those as being mountains or lions or dragons or railroads or bays – but he said that historical facts were as irrelevant or as facile as other things. But we tend to think in historical terms. For example, we take past time, when we carve it into centuries. We think that one century is very different from another. And Bacon thought that way, and so do most of us. We do try to think in terms of eternity, and out of time, but we cannot do that. It's very hard for us. But in the case of Shakespeare, as Gustav Spiller pointed out, in *The Mind of Man,* one of the finest studies of Shakespeare ever written, Shakespeare did not think of history in that way. He made all his characters into Elizabethans. He never thought of the differences. He was sure we would not be concerned about them. I suppose he was right. Man – man everlasting, as Chesterton has it – is essentially the same. But generally, we try not to think in that way. Well, Shakespeare did. Shakespeare had read Plutarch, he read Holinshed, he knew things had happened on such a date or another – but he thought of all those men as being his contemporaries. And so, in a sense, they were, since I think that Shakespeare, in some strange way, was a timeless man.

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[3] This passage and line come from Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1583).

[4] Twain's short work was actually entitled *Is Shakespeare Dead*?

For example, we take a Danish legend retold by Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum.* He took it, but he never read it like facts of things that were happening in Denmark, because he had the two soldiers, Francisco and Barnardo, with Spanish names, and Laertes and Ophelia, Greek names. Yorick perhaps is Scandinavian, and Guildenstern and Rosencrantz maybe are Danish. And Hamlet, of course, is the "Amlothi" of Saxo Grammaticus. But really, Shakespeare did not care about that. He was not trying to convey to us a dream about something that had happened in Denmark in such and such a historical period. No, he was doing something far better than that. He thought, I suppose, not in terms of the fable but in terms of Hamlet. And I suppose when we read *Hamlet*, we do not believe in the story. We do not believe in the plot. But we certainly believe in Hamlet. Hamlet is as real to us as our friends. . . . Like Quixote, Hamlet is real to us though his [adventures] may be unreal.

We also mistake in the case of language. In the case of language: we know that George Moore[5] wrote that Kipling used the whole English language, and that Shakespeare had. What is the difference? Kipling uses, I suppose, the whole English language, if any writer has ever used it; he used it, let's say, at different times for different purposes. But in the case of Shakespeare, we get the same strange impression of eternity. We have words with different atmospheres, different connotations, as you say, being used all the time, side by side. Let us say, he took language whole and he used it for his purposes.

[One] writer who favored the Saxon side of English, for example, William Morris, who wrote in the 1870s a translation of *The Odyssey,* [has], "Tell me, Muse, of the shifty, the man who wandered afar, after the holy burg, Troy-town, he had wasted with war." [You have the Saxon words.] Then you have the very fine translation by Pope, [where Odysseus is] "The man for wisdom's various arts renowned, long exercised in wars, O muse! Resound"; there you have the fine Latin words. But in the case of Shakespeare, it was otherwise. He used both Saxon and Latin words side by side. I suppose the greatest example would be in *Macbeth*, when he speaks of the seas, using Latin words,[6] and then afterwards he says "making the green, one red," using short, sharp Saxon words.

There's another distinction to be made, and this I think is the reason why Shakespeare, when we read him, seems to be slipping away from us, how we can hardly cope with Shakespeare. We feel his strength, we feel his strange beauty, but we are unable to follow his way of thinking. With Dante -- I suppose [as great a poet] as Shakespeare -- while we are not allowed to be Dante, we understand why he wrote everything, we understand his way of thinking. In the case of Shakespeare, this does not happen. Shakespeare seems like a Proteus. He seems to be slipping away from us.

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[5] George Moore (1852-1933), Irish writer and contemporary of Rudyard Kipling.

[6] While "seas" is not a Latinate word, Macbeth's description of them as "multitudinous" is. Borges discusses this passage's dual Latinate/Saxon quality at more length in both his introduction to *Macbeth* and the article "The Enigma of Shakespeare."

One of the reasons, I suppose, of the essential riddle of Shakespeare is that we tend to think of art in terms of classicist or revolutionary, or, as [Guillermo de Torre][7] had it, we tend to think of art in terms of order and adventure, *la orden y la aventura.* We think, for example, let us say, of Pope as being a classicist, of Joyce as being a revolutionary, and so on. But Shakespeare is beyond those definitions. Hugo,[8] one of the finest of Shakespearean critics, who is a poet – I suppose a critic should be a poet -- used Shakespeare for his own purposes. Shakespeare, of course, is far beyond that 1830s discussion of Romanticism and classicism. Hugo used him for that purpose. Well, in the case of Shakespeare we would say that there is no such distinction. If we think of him as a classicist, then of course we find [that he has] romantic traits, though he is not part of the Romantic movement. If he were a romantic, we would have to think he excepted many things. If you say that Shakespeare took a plot, then he had his dream of that plot. He was dreaming it over, then he used it. But he had what Hugo called his *absences dans l'infini*[9] – but, we say, Shakespeare wasn't accountable. That may be one of the reasons for his charm, for his witchcraft. The fight, as is said, that is never removed from us – "I didn't know where to have him."[10]

All these strange things happen in his plays. For example, in one of his plays, we have the *miles gloriosus*, the braggart, the cowardly soldier who is detected – who is exposed – he's been made into a captain, but he is exposed before the other men; he has to give up on being a soldier. All this time he has been a stock figure, as they say, in Latin, the *miles gloriosus*, and then, suddenly, Shakespeare sees him. Shakespeare sees him! And he sees him, let us say, reborn. And then you have this wonderful line, you have, "Captain I'll be no more," and then he goes on to say, "Simply the thing I am shall make me live." The thing I am! The man has been exposed. The man has been ridiculed. He knows that everybody knows that he is a coward – a craven. And yet, "Simply the thing I am shall make me live." And you see he feels something essential within himself. He feels an essential [god] within himself. And when this secondary character in one of Shakespeare's plays says those things – "Simply the thing I am shall make me live" – we go back to the voice of God in the burning bush. We go back to God saying to Moses from the bush, "I Am That I Am." Then we think of Swift wandering over his house in Dublin, mad, and still clinging to that one fact: he was who he was. Muttering to himself, and being overheard by others saying, "I am that I am. I am that I am." This miracle happens in a line in Shakespeare, and then is forgotten by him. This is a Shakespeare who is unconscious of what he is doing. This is a Shakespeare who's doing many things at the same time, doing many things that are not really seen by us. Many things are happening.

So we have the strangest characters in literature, the characters of Shakespeare. Perhaps a word might be found, though of course, no word can be the word, because, after all, words are, as Bacon pointed out, mere coins. [We have to take this] into account. But I suppose this word might help us, not into understanding Shakespeare, since we hardly understand Shakespeare –

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[7] The surname is unclear. However, Guillermo de Torre (1900-71), Borges' brother-in-law and an author in his own right, was associated, as was Borges, with an early twentieth-century Argentine literary movement that both employed and questioned the distinction between "literature of order" and "adventure literature."

[8] Victor Hugo.

[9] His lapses. The phrase (Hugo's) means "absences in the infinite."

[10] Though it's unclear whom Borges is quoting, this line seems an adaptation of one of Falstaff's in *Henry IV, part 2.* Borges' point has to do with the Proteus reference he makes later, and has a shadowy connection to his earlier *Odyssey* references. Shakespeare, like the Proteus whose struggle with Menelaus is recounted in *The Odyssey*, is almost impossible to pin down because he keeps changing shape.

Shakespeare is beyond us. Shakespeare looms over us. Shakespeare is a greater [mystery] than Dante, because somehow, we can know Dante's way of thinking, though we would not be able to do what he has done, no man is able to do that, but, still, we know the way he was thinking. In the case of Shakespeare, we don't.[11]

With that … acceptance, I come to this. I suppose that Shakespeare received all things – I think of the vast hospitality of his mind. I suppose Coleridge and Hazlitt meant the same thing [when] they talked about Shakespeare being a substance that could take any shape it wanted to. I wrote a piece once based on Hazlitt and Coleridge, called "Everything and Nothing," and therein I compared Shakespeare working out his world to God creating the world; neither of them knowing who they were, but [held] to great things.

Shakespeare accepted all the rites, all the ceremonies, all the trifles of contemporary drama; he accepted all the conventions. So he was no revolutionary. Instead, he was beyond that. He accepted, for example, the wholesale slaughter at the end of the tragedies. He accepted the science. He took plots that were foreign to his characters. Bernard Shaw said we should try to think of the characters of Shakespeare themselves, beyond their plots, but Shakespeare accepted them.[12] He knew he would have his way with them. He knew he would illuminate one, and then, in a flash, we would be able to see the character beyond the stock conventions of the plot. He accepted those things. At the same time, he took language -- I said a moment ago that he used both the Saxon and the Latin elements of the English language. But he did far more than that. He was coining new words. He hit on the strangest metaphors, metaphors that cannot be explained. In the case of Hugo, for example, all his metaphors can be explained. They are logical. For example, when Hugo says that a nightmare is *le cheval noir de la nuit,* "the black horse of night," we accept it because we think of the word "nightmare" in English, and black seems to be the right word to explain it. In the case of Shakespeare, I don't suppose you can. We just have to accept it. It has been said that Shakespeare cannot be translated into any other language. But Shakespeare cannot be translated into English, either, since he wrote what Stevenson[13] called "that amazing dialect, the Shakespeare-ese." "What may this mean, / That thou, dead corse, again in complete steel / Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon…?"[14] Think of the phrase "glimpses of the moon." I don't think it can be translated. Perhaps the words can be translated. Certainly Shakespeare cannot be translated. "The glimpses of the moon" means exactly "the glimpses of the moon." It has a value of its own, it is a word of its own.

So he used language with vast freedom. He could mix his metaphors, he could talk of taking arms against a sea of fortune.[15] That does not worry him, he knew he could do it. He could do anything he wanted. He accepted all the conventions, [but] he made the boldest literary experiments. Those things he did he [left behind him. He left London and returned to Stratford. And this Paul Groussac finds more striking than][16] the things that poets have written . . . their despising their own words, their own work. But Shakespeare didn't despise his own work. He wrote his work . . . and he thought no more about it. He who was a master of words never tried to find the words in order to despise, to forget his own work. He simply thought no more about it. I suppose we can never find our way into his mind. I suppose it is witchcraft. Or was it the nature of Shakespeare?

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[11] If Borges uttered the word that would help us with Shakespeare, it wasn't audible.

[12] I.e., the plots.

[13] Robert Louis Stevenson.

[14] *Hamlet* 1.4.51-53.

[15] *Hamlet* 3.1.58.

[16] Here the tape grows increasingly muffled, and for a stretch of about 30 seconds is incoherent. After studying Borges' comments on this theme in his other writings, I have reconstructed a sentence that I think captures the gist of what is omitted.

We may revere John Donne. We may worship Lincoln. But somehow, we understand them. But in the case of Shakespeare, we cannot. He is slipping away almost all the time. He goes from one thing to another. He uses the English language . . . . In the same sentence, he uses words with different connotations. "To sleep, perchance to dream – aye, there's the rub." . . . We recognize the different connotations, as we should . . . For example, "Was it the full proud sail of his great verse / Bound for the prize of all too precious you?"[17] -- those are magnificent lines, and we find them all the time. At the same time, we know that we are missing many things. For of course, Shakespeare is too vast for us.

Perhaps the only conclusion left is this: that perhaps the Shakespeare who is unattainable, the Shakespeare who glimpses beauty, but it cannot be grasped by us, the Shakespeare who is never explained or explained away, this makes for his unique position in literature. He seems to be [read] all the time. We know that in one hundred years or in any number of years, Shakespeare will still exist. But we know that we cannot cope with him. He has been with me all my life. And we know that we would be different without Shakespeare. And we know that ….[18]

Coleridge wrote of Shakespeare, the fact that Shakespeare was one man [was astonishing]. He thought of Shakespeare as a Proteus, and perhaps this is the right approach. [Shakespeare created all species of men,] and he also created a new language full of English words, a foreign language by itself. We know he created many characters, and these characters will of course survive, since they do not belong to fables, they do not belong to a certain period in history. They seem to be, all the time, there.

I suppose our conclusion, our final conclusion, is this. We worship Shakespeare, and we know as little about Shakespeare as we know about God.

Thank you.

[*There followed a standing ovation as Borges was assisted from the podium, according to Marcel Damiani's account.*[19] *The tape cuts off after a full minute of applause, as the ovation continues.]*

Transcribed by Grace Tiffany
Notes by Grace Tiffany

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[17] These, with a slight adjustment, are the opening lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet 86 ("Was it the proud full sail of his great verse"), which concerns a rival poet, possibly Christopher Marlowe (though, as I indicated earlier, Borges thought the poem was about Chapman).

[18] Here the tape grows increasingly muffled, and for a stretch of about 30 seconds is incoherent. After studying Borges' comments on this theme in his writings, I have inserted two sentences that I think capture the gist of what was lost.

[19] Damiani, "Shakespeare and Borges."