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A Question of Authorship

A Short Comedy by

Dan Weatherer

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CHARACTERS

5M

Arthur Miller
William Shakespeare
Sir Francis Bacon
Christopher Marlowe
William Stanley

SETTING

Heaven

SYNOPSIS

Five of history’s greatest playwrights meet to discuss the origins of the work penned in Shakespeare’s name.

William Shakespeare, the finest writer of our time; or collection of writers, for there is some debate as to whether one man can lay claim to the entirety of his works. Tired of the controversy, playwright Arthur Miller assembles those claiming to have penned the works of Shakespeare, so that they may state their case, and the matter will be settled once and for all.

Heaven braces itself for an almighty showdown…
A Question of Authorship
by Dan Weatherer

AT RISE:
Heaven. ARTHUR MILLER, SHAKESPEARE, SIR FRANCIS BACON, CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE and WILLIAM STANLEY, are sitting at a table. MILLER pours himself a glass of whiskey. Everyone else has a full glass. MILLER sits centrally. Stage left is SHAKESPEARE and BACON. To Miller’s right sit STANLEY and MARLOWE.

MILLER
Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedules to see me.

BACON
Not at all kind sir, the pleasure I can assureth thee is all mineth.

SHAKESPEARE
You can knock that off for a start, Bacon. Mr Miller isn’t here for the tourist spiel.

MARLOWE
(Scoffs)
Idiot.

MARLOWE takes a large sip of whiskey.

STANLEY
(To SHAKESPEARE)
There’s no need to be rude, William.

SHAKESPEARE
(Mocking on the “WILL”)
Oh, do shut up Will.

MILLER
Now gentlemen, please. Let us at least try to be civil. There is much to discuss and . . .

MARLOWE
(To MILLER)
I’ll take another dram.
A Question of Authorship by Dan Weatherer

MARLOWE shoves his empty glass towards MILLER.

MILLER

True enough to form, Christopher.

MILLER pours MARLOWE a measure of whiskey and passes it back via STANLEY.

MILLER

Less talking, more pouring.

BACON

(To MILLER)

Forgive me. May I ask as to why you requested our presence?

MARLOWE downs his whiskey, slams his glass onto the table and gestures for the remainder of the bottle. MILLER ignores him.

MILLER

Hear, hear!

MILLER takes a sip from his whiskey and places it on the table.

MARLOWE reaches for the bottle and pours himself another whiskey.

MARLOWE

Of course. Let’s get right to it. It’s a question that I have often pondered and I know it troubles a fair number of people down there . . .

MARLOWE raises his glass.

MILLER

Cheers! (Downs the whiskey)

SHAKESPEARE

(Groans)

Oh, not this again!
MILLER produces a handful of books from beneath his chair. He places one on the table.

MILLER

It’s simple, really. I wish to know who wrote this?

SHAKESPEARE, MARLOWE, BACON and STANLEY look at the book.

ALL EXCEPT MILLER

I did!

MILLER

You all wrote Romeo and Juliet?

ALL EXCEPT MILLER

No. I did!

MILLER places another book on the table.

MILLER

How about Hamlet?

ALL EXCEPT MILLER

I did!

MILLER places the third book on the table.

MILLER

And Othello?

ALL EXCEPT MILLER

I did!

STANLEY

Actually sorry, I didn’t write that one. My mistake. But I did write Twelfth Night so there’s that. . .

BACON stands in anger.
BACON
Liar! *(To MILLER)* Stanley never penned a play worthy of note in his life! *(To STANLEY)* Thou art a flesh-monger, a fool and a coward!

SHAKESPEARE
*(To BACON)*
Nice. Measure for Measure. You really must have written it to quote it so eloquently?

MARLOWE
Sit down Bacon, before you hurt yourself.

*BACON sits.*

STANLEY
*(Hurt)*
Not true. I thought Macbeth was worthy of note.

*BACON stands.*

BACON
*(Enraged)*
Liar! Thou art as loathsome as a toad!

SHAKESPEARE
*(To BACON)*
Oh, following up with a bit of Troilus and Cressida now. Well, that’s me sold. How about you sit down and let the rest of us get a word in? As for you. . . *(Turning to STANLEY)* Signing yourself as W.S was never going to fool anyone. I mean honestly now, that has to be the weakest claim in the history of anything!

*BACON sits.*

STANLEY
But I. . .

MILLER
*(Interrupting)*
Now gentlemen, please. We could quarrel and bicker until the end of days but that really isn’t going to get us anywhere now is it?

MARLOWE
Get rid of him I say. *(Points to STANLEY)* That one, I mean. Willie wannabe.

*BACON stands.*
BACON

(Forceful)

Indeed.

BACON sits.

SHAKESPEARE

Agreed.

MILLER

(To STANLEY)

In the interest of moving the argument along, it seems that your claim as author to the works of Shakespeare is rejected. I must say it was always a flimsy argument at best. I’m surprised it survived as long as it did! Wouldn’t you agree?

STANLEY

(Sulking)

Well. . . we do have the same initials. You cannot dispute that?

SHAKESPEARE

Yes, you and several hundred thousand others.

STANLEY finishes his drink.

STANLEY

That many, huh? (Stands) I’ve got to go anyway. I have a first draft that needs my attention. It’s a tragedy based on. . .

MARLOWE

(Interrupting/Dismissive)

Yes, yes. Good luck with that.

STANLEY looks to the group.

STANLEY

I’ll see you. . .

SHAKESPEARE

(Interrupting)

So long, Will!

STANLEY

Yeah. Bye.

Exit STANLEY. BACON stands.
BACON

(To MARLOWE)
You may follow him, Marlowe. You are nothing but a drunk and a rakehell. I know not how you came to be the leading playwright of the day, such was the filth that you peddled!

MARLOWE
Rakehell? He’s at it again! Have you spoken to anybody in the last hundred years?

BACON
Of course, I have! It’s just that old habits die hard and you are a scheming rakehell. I can think of no other word that describes you better.

MARLOWE stands.

MARLOWE
I’ll not stand for this. (Looks down at feet) Though remarkably, I am still able. (To SHAKESPEARE and BACON) I bested you in life, that’ll do for me.

MARLOWE snatches up the bottle of whiskey.

MARLOWE, Continued

(To MILLER)
Nice meeting you, Art. Excellent work on The Crucible. (To SHAKESPEARE and BACON) Ladies.

Exit MARLOWE. MILLER and SHAKESPEARE look at BACON. BACON sits.

MILLER
Well, that leaves the two most likely candidates?

BACON
As it ought.

SHAKESPEARE snorts in derision.

BACON, Continued

What of it, man?

SHAKESPEARE
Look, it’s like this. You have ridden my coat tails for centuries now. Don’t you think it’s time to admit the truth?
Indeed. *(To SHAKESPEARE)* So you concede that I penned the works in your name so that I might comment on the social policies of our day without fear of reprisal?

SHAKESPEARE
No, far from it. Though I will admit that you are a fraud and a coward.

*BACON stands.*

*BACON*

*(Enraged)*
Outrageous! You are the son of an illiterate wool trader! You had little in the way of education! Ha! You were a failure of an actor at best! Nobody mourned your death. Nobody sang praise of your genius. You died penniless and unknown. I shall wager that you are not able to pen your own name!

**This is Not the End of the Play**

**Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes**