ARTS & LIFE

Christopher Marlowe Credited As Shakespeare's Co-Author On Henry VI Plays

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Heard on All Things Considered

True authorship of Shakespeare has been debated for centuries. Now, the New Oxford Shakespeare edition will list Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe as co-author on the three Henry VI plays, part one, two and three. NPR's Robert Siegel talks with Florida State University professor Gary Taylor, one of the general editors of the new volume.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

It's a big day for Christopher Marlowe, who unfortunately cannot enjoy it, having been dead since 1593. The Elizabethan playwright will get credit from Oxford University Press as co-author of three histories, "Henry VI, Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3." Until now, those plays have been credited solely to William Shakespeare. Joining us to explain this decision is Gary Taylor, who's one of the general editors of "The New Oxford Shakespeare" and a professor of English at Florida State University.

Welcome to the program.

GARY TAYLOR: I'm delighted to be here.

SIEGEL: And first I want to clarify what you and your colleagues are not saying. You're not saying that Christopher Marlowe, as some of his admirers might contend, was the real author of Shakespeare's plays and poems. Shakespeare was a fraud. Do I have that right?

TAYLOR: You're absolutely right. Shakespeare was not a fraud. Marlowe did not write all of Shakespeare's works. He did something, instead, that was perfectly normal in the Elizabethan theatre, which is he collaborated with another playwright, in this case Shakespeare.

SIEGEL: What led "The New Oxford Shakespeare" team to declare "Henry VI, Parts 1, 2 and 3" worthy of a shared byline?

TAYLOR: Well, people have suspected that Marlowe had something to do with these three plays since the 1790s. But we haven't had a way that we could test it. And fortunately, Shakespeare has now entered the epoch of big data.

It is now possible for us to compare the text of a play by Shakespeare, or really any play in the period, against all the surviving plays and to see whether these parts of plays that have long been suspected as being maybe not by Shakespeare are by Shakespeare after all or by somebody else.

SIEGEL: So you find textual similarities between Marlowe's acknowledged plays and these histories - not enough to say Marlowe wrote them but enough to say he was a co-author of them?

TAYLOR: Yes, because what matters here is the pattern of similarities. You have a scene which has a completely different linguistic profile than the rest of the play. They had a scenario that set out the plot of the play. And then they could divide it up between different writers.

SIEGEL: Can you give us an example of something that if it turns up in a disputed part of a play, points you in the direction of a particular playwright?

TAYLOR: For one example, the word glory is not all that unusual in plays of the period. And the verb droopeth, you know, it occurs in a number of different writers. But if you put those two words together right next to each other, glory droopeth, that occurs in one of these disputed passages in "Henry VI, Part 1." The only other place it occurs in all the plays of the period is in a play by Marlowe.

Now, just those two words by themselves would not be enough. But when you find a number of unusual combinations of this kind all clustered together in one place, then the simplest explanation for that is that there's two different writers here.

SIEGEL: One tweet about this announcement said, Shakespeare gets the last laugh. Marlowe now gets to share the blame for the "Henry VI" plays. These aren't the finest works attributed to William Shakespeare.

TAYLOR: Well, the "Henry VI" plays are written early in his career. Actually, I think that this evidence makes these plays more interesting. They were helping to create the whole genre of a history play. It was a way of talking about vernacular politics and about civil war. The whole idea for this kind of play with a serious analysis of politics comes out of the collaboration between these two very different but very gifted writers.

SIEGEL: Professor Taylor, thank you very much for talking with us today.

TAYLOR: Thank you for listening.

SIEGEL: It's Gary Taylor, one of the general editors of "The New Oxford Shakespeare" and a professor of English at Florida State University.

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