

In 1912 a bookseller named Wilfrid M. Voynich acquired a beautifully illustrated handwritten book (manuscript) written on vellum (vellum is a material that was used for writing before the introduction of paper). The “Voynich manuscript,” as it became known, resembles manuscripts written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, it is written in a completely unknown script. To date, no one has been able to decode the script and understand the book’s content. Several theories have been proposed to explain the origin of the Voynich manuscript. One theory is that the manuscript is a genuine work on some scientific or magical subject composed in a complex secret code. Anthony Ascham, a sixteenth-century physician and botanist, has been identified as a possible author, since many plant illustrations in the Voynich manuscript are quite similar to those in Ascham’s book on medicinal plants, *A Little Herbal*, published in 1550. According to some other theories, the manuscript is really a fake and its text has no real meaning. For example, it has been proposed the manuscript was created by Edward Kelley, a sixteenth-century personality who extracted money from nobles across Europe by pretending to have magical powers. Kelley may have created the manuscript as a fake magical book to sell to a wealthy noble. He used a made-up alphabet in a completely random order. It looks like a book of magical secrets, but there is no meaningful underlying text. Another theory is that the manuscript is actually a modern fake created by Wilfrid M. Voynich himself. As an antique book dealer, Voynich certainly had the knowledge of what old manuscripts should look like and could have created a fake one. Perhaps Voynich’s plan was to sell the fake as a mysterious old book if he received an attractive offer.

Now listen to part of a lecture on the topic you just read about. None of the three people mentioned in the reading was probably the author of the Voynich manuscript. According to the first theory, whoever wrote the Voynich manuscript thought they were conveying information so important or so powerful that they used a special code to keep it secret. That doesn’t fit what we know about Anthony Ascham. Ascham was just an ordinary physician and scientist whose books didn’t contain any original ideas. For instance, the *Little Herbal* mentioned in the reading was a description of common plants based on other well-known sources. So, given what we know about Ascham, his books, and the kind of knowledge he had, it seems unlikely he was the author of such an elaborately coded, secret document. Second, although Edward Kelley was notoriously good at tricking people, it seems unlikely that he created the Voynich manuscript as a fake magical book to sell to some rich people. You see, the creator of the Voynich manuscript took a lot of care to make the text look like a real code; but people in the sixteenth century were quite easy to fool, so it was not necessary to make something this complex. If Kelley wanted to create a fake for money, there’s no reason he would’ve put so much work into creating a manuscript like this when a much simpler book would have suited his purpose just as well. Third, we’ve been able to date the manuscript materials using modern methods—both the vellum pages and the ink on the pages. Both the vellum and the ink are at least 400 years old. That rules out Voynich as the author. If Voynich wanted to create a fake, maybe he could use vellum pages taken from some old manuscripts, but where would he get 400-year-old ink? So it seems the manuscript was created centuries before Voynich obtained it.

Summarize the points made in the lecture, being sure to explain how they challenge the specific theories presented in the reading passage.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Famous entertainers and athletes deserve to have more privacy than they have now. Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.