The Shakespeare Conspiracy
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In this lesson, students explore the distinctions between conspiracies and conspiracy theories, discuss the troubling issue of conspiracy theories in our own culture, and analyze the controversy surrounding the authorship of the plays we ascribe to William Shakespeare. Students take a stand on the Shakespeare conspiracy theory, synthesizing their opinion and reasoning with evidence from several sources. In the process, students engage in multiple literacies – reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing – as they enter the conversation about the authorship of the plays of William Shakespeare.

Day 1: Explore the Topic
To assess students' background knowledge of conspiracy theories, to generate interest in the topic, and to stimulate new thinking, we begin with the Question Focus Technique (QFT) developed by Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, authors of *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions*. For a brief but helpful outline of the QFT, see http://hepg.org/hel/article/507#home

Before displaying the **QFocus**, a political cartoon by Zachery Kanin published in *The New Yorker*, explain to students that they will observe a graphic text closely for five minutes and in small groups produce questions about the text. Do *not* preface the QFocus with any explanatory comments about the topic of conspiracy theories or the theories surrounding the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. Simply display the QFocus rules:

Produce Your Questions

Four essential rules for producing your own questions:

- Ask as many questions as you can.
- Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer the questions.
- Write down every question exactly as it is stated.
- Change any statement into a question.

Discuss the potential difficulties of these rules in advance. Though it may seem unnecessary, this brief discussion prepares students to participate in something they don't do often enough, ask questions in school!

Students break into small groups of 3-4 and assign a group scribe. Students closely observe the cartoon and produce questions for about 5 minutes. As students generate questions, circulate and enforce the rules.

The next step in the QFT (Question Focus Technique) process is for students to categorize and improve their questions. If students are familiar with the levels and types of questions, this can be done relatively quickly. Click here for a **QFocus Guide**.

The third step is for students to prioritize their questions. Wrap up the QFocus activity with a whole group share of students' most important questions.

Define Key Terms
Project these terms. What do students know or think they know about…

CONSPIRACY

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Distribute **Source A** and read each definition aloud, highlighting and discussing difficult words.

Conspiracies: Brainstorm for Examples
Encourage students to share what they know or think they know about conspiracies in popular culture and in history. Watergate is one example of a criminal conspiracy in modern American history. Students in the Shakespeare class will probably know something about the conspirators in *Julius Caesar*.

Conspiracy Theories: Brainstorm for Examples
Project and discuss these and other examples of conspiracy theories in recent history and popular culture:

The Holocaust
Roswell, 1947
JFK's assassination 1963
The moon landing 1969
Princess Dianna's death 1997
September 11, 2001
President Obama's birthplace
Aurora movie theater massacre, 2012
Sandy Hook school massacre, 2012

Recent articles about conspiracy theories and so-called "truthers" abound in the media. If students have Internet access, they can search for information about these and other conspiracy theories in popular culture before engaging in a . If not, share an article for students to read independently or in small groups. This is a link to a recent article in the *LA Times*, "Conspiracy theorists harassing, impersonating Aurora victims" by Matt Pearce:

http://www.latimes.com/news/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-aurora-victims-conspiracy-20130207,0,5313001.story

Synthesize
Based on their understanding of the political cartoon, the three definitions, and any supplementary articles, challenge students to distinguish between actual conspiracies and conspiracy theories.

Day 2: Analyze and Evaluate Media Sources
Review and extend yesterday's lesson by projecting these three terms:

CONSPIRACIES

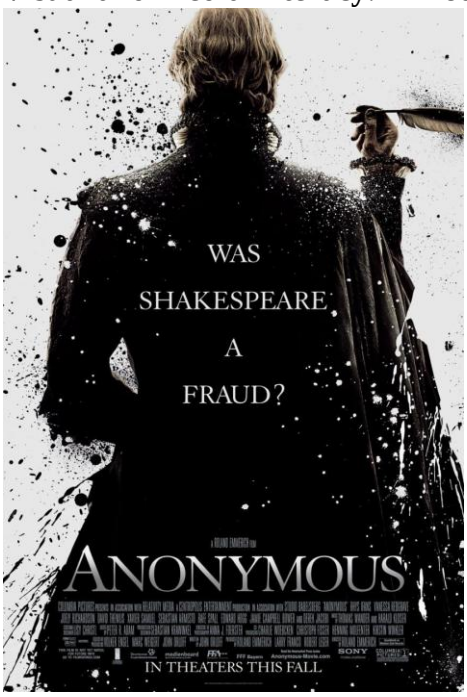
CONSPIRACY THEORIES

LITERARY CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Can students name any literary conspiracy theories?

Display the focus question:
Did William Shakespeare write the plays of William Shakespeare?

Visual and Media Literacy: **Annotate Media Images**



Students will work in pairs or groups of three. Project and distribute to each group copies of **Source B**, the film poster for Roland Emmerich's 2011 film, *Anonymous.*

Distribute sticky notes and the **Annotating Media Images** guide, adapted from *Seeing and Believing: How to Teach Media Literacy* by Ellen Kreuger and Mary T. Christel. In small groups, students view closely this media composition. If time is short, assign groups to specialize in one of the elements: Framing, Placement, Subject Arrangement, or Lighting and Color. Then groups can jigsaw, sharing their observations.

Follow with a whole group discussion of the poster, focusing first on the elements of composition and second, on the implied answer to the question posed in the poster, which constitutes the poster's argument or claim. Focusing on the five elements of visual composition will generate a much richer discussion of the poster's claim.

Media Literacy: View a Film Trailer
Chapter 2 of *Reading Shakespeare Film First* outlines the process of applying what students are learning about media images to the near-manic medium of film. Because of their brevity and their artistic and commercial complexity, film trailers are an ideal place to begin the study of visual and audio compositions. The trailer for the 2011 production of *Anonymous* is our **Source C**. The trailer can be viewed at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GE4HLbJfOUc

First Viewing: The first viewing should be prefaced with simple instructions. Since every narrative develops a problem, tell students to jot down what they think the conflicts in this film trailer are, and to name the conflicts using abstract nouns. Since conspiracies seek to hide the truth and conspiracy theories seek to distort it, you might begin with the word TRUTH and ask students to think of other broad, abstract nouns we might use in an English classroom to name major conflicts and themes in literature.

Second Viewing: After the first viewing and the class discussion it generates, students need to make the abstract concrete. Distribute the **Trailer Viewing Guide** and encourage students to take notes on the details that help to answer the question, "How are the conflicts established using images, sounds, and dialogue?"

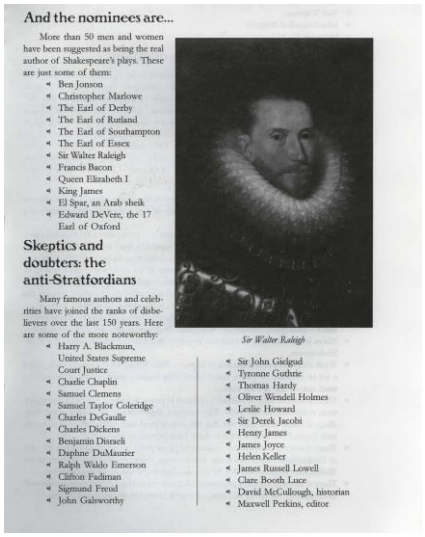
Third Viewing: At this point, students will be ready to chunk the trailer into a beginning, middle, and end, guided by the markers on the viewing guide.

Synthesize

Based on their understanding of the film poster and film trailer for *Anonymous*, challenge students to summarize in writing director Roland Emmerich's theory about the authorship of the plays we ascribe to William Shakespeare. What reasons does he offer for his theory? What evidence does he provide to support his theory?

Students can work independently, in pairs, or in groups.

Day 3: Analyze and Evaluate Texts in Academia and the News Media



And the nominees are...

More than 50 men and women have been suggested as being the real author of Shakespeare's plays. These are just some of them:

- Ben Jonson
- Christopher Marlowe
- The Earl of Derby
- The Earl of Rutland
- The Earl of Southampton
- The Earl of Essex
- Sir Walter Raleigh
- Francis Bacon
- Queen Elizabeth I
- King James
- El Spar, an Arab sheik
- Edward DeVere, the 17 Earl of Oxford

Skeptics and doubters: the anti-Stratfordians

Many famous authors and celebrities have joined the ranks of disbelievers over the last 150 years. Here are some of the more noteworthy:

- Harry A. Blackmun, United States Supreme Court Justice
- Charlie Chaplin
- Samuel Clemens
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- Charles DeGaulle
- Charles Dickens
- Benjamin Disraeli
- Daphne DuMaurier
- Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Clifton Fadiman
- Sigmund Freud
- John Galsworthy
- Sir John Gielgud
- Tyronne Guthrie
- Thomas Hardy
- Oliver Wendell Holmes
- Leslie Howard
- Sir Derek Jacobi
- Henry James
- James Joyce
- Helen Keller
- James Russell Lowell
- Clare Booth Luce
- David McCullough, historian
- Maxwell Perkins, editor

Sir Walter Raleigh

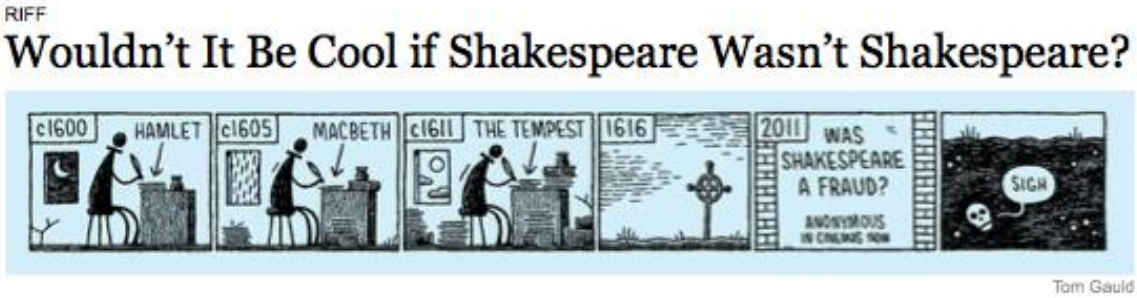
Introduce some of the skeptics and doubters of William Shakespeare as the author of the plays by distributing **Source D**, a partial list of people who, over time, have been nominated as the real author, and the celebrities who have supported their nomination.

Although Source D offers no evidence or reasoning that supports the claim of the anti-Stratfordians, encourage students to comment on the impact of this list on their own thinking. In what ways does this list of accomplished leaders, authors, and celebrities shape their attitude toward the conspiracy theory?

A thoughtful and carefully documented introduction to the historical debate about the authorship of the plays is found in Chapter 1 of *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, written by Russ McDonald. Distribute **Source E** and assign students to read it independently or in small reading groups.

To demonstrate their understanding of McDonald's analysis of the conspiracy theory, challenge students to complete the first paragraph of a **Graff Template**, then compare

their summaries with their peers. Ask students to discuss how they would complete the second paragraph of the Graff template.



Finally, distribute **Source F**, scholar Stephen Marche's October 21, 2011 editorial published in the *New York Times*, "Wouldn't It Be Cool if Shakespeare Wasn't Shakespeare?"

Though most students are fluent speakers and listeners of vocal tone, their reading is often tone-deaf. Even if students are assigned to read Marche's column for homework, begin by reading the first paragraph aloud and modeling the close reading process by annotating the text for clues that convey the author's attitude toward the Shakespeare conspiracy theory: the diction and cultural allusions in paragraph one and throughout the text ring with mockery and disdain!

Assign students to complete the reading of this column independently, in pairs, or in small reading groups. To guide their comprehension of the rhetorical elements of Marche's argument, assign students to complete a **SOAPSTone** graphic organizer.

Day 4: Compose a Synthesis Essay or Report
Distribute the **Shakespeare Conspiracy Synthesis Question** and allow 60-75 minutes for students to complete the composition.

If students are writing the synthesis composition in multiple drafts, share the **Synthesis Question Rubric** to be used as a self- or peer-assessment guide.

Day 5: Enter the Conversation
Finally, challenge students with similar arguments to literally enter the conversation about the authorship of the plays of William Shakespeare by synthesizing their individual compositions into a single recorded composition. **Listen here** to Revere High School students Alma, Brian, Karim, and Maria take their stand on the Shakespeare conspiracy theory.