Puzzling Shakesperotics:

A Review-Essay of Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare* (1988)

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We Have Met the Enemy: and He is Us
—Pogo

Published over twenty-five years ago in 1988, Leah Marcus's *Puzzling Shakespeare* remains among the most important books written by an orthodox Shakespearean scholar in response to such radical manifestations of "post-Stratfordian" skepticism as Charlton Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth & the Reality* (1984), a book which undoubtedly inspired the dust jacket iconography of Marcus's book as well as influencing its theoretical orientation to a significant degree. The importance of Marcus's review is only redoubled by the Folger Shakespeare Library's 2016 attempt to defraud the reading public with a road tour that promotes the 1623 First Folio while effectively prohibiting scholarly inquiry—of the sort found in the present volume—into the historical contexts of the Folio's origins (i.e., the Pembroke-Montgomery-Vere nexus or the Spanish Marriage Crisis [see William Boyle, this volume, "Shakespeare's Son on Death Row"]) and semiotics while simultaneously declaring a solution to the problems of Shakespearean biography under the pretense that the folio itself "made" Shakespeare. In anything but the most metaphorical sense—clearly not the one primarily intended in the tour's advance p.r.—this is metaphysical sleight of hand of the most indefensible sort.

Puzzling Shakespeare is a wide-ranging book. In this review I will focus almost exclusively on the part of the book which, to me, is most interesting and most historically important: chapter 1 (1-50), "Localization," which primarily treats Patterson's analysis of the 1623 folio. Parts of this review were previously published

in the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter,* but the review has been revised and updated.

Despite her (in 1988) skepticism towards the post-Stratfordian position, Marcus's book constitutes a seminal contribution to the history of Shakespearean scholarship, whose full implications are only now, in the 21st century, becoming apparent to literary historians. Thus, while many academic books tackle ephemeral subjects, Marcus's analysis of the First Folio materials in the first chapter of her book has become more, not less, significant as the years pass by and orthodoxy continues to fail to grapple in an honest manner with the evidence she presents.

The unacknowledged keyword in Marcus's discourse is "doubt." She bravely sets forth to tame the history of doubt articulated by Ogburn—without, incidentally, acknowledging or drawing the question into focus—in order to draw it within the orbit of the conventional cultural criticism rooted in the Stratfordian paradigm. However, the doubts Marcus inherit from Ogburn have an uncanny knack for stinging her when she's not looking. Consequently, the book is a curious blend of Stratfordian polemic against the "wildly disrupting" antics of the Oxfordians and a sophisticated analysis of the semiotics of the 1623 First Folio, and the concept more generally of "local" reading, one which goes very far towards destroying the premises that Marcus set out to defend.

Stratfordians, as Ogburn argues, "have no case if they do not take the first folio at face value" and "grant it the claim of authenticity" (1984: 222). In Marcus's book, for the first time in many decades, an orthodox critic takes up the theoretical enigma of the First Folio. Although her intentions are orthodox beyond reproach, *Puzzling Shakespeare* is the first book by anyone to begin the job of contextualizing the bizarre semiotics of the folio in a properly historical and comparative light.

Doubts about the folio often begin and end with the obvious – the perversely uncoordinated Droeshout engraving of the alleged author. Indeed, long before Marcus the Droeshout's reputation was already so damaged that a popular joke among the 18th century encyclopediasts, according to former *Boston Globe* staffer Patricia Smith, was that somebody should apply Occam's razor to the bard's hirsute cheeks.

"Damn the original portrait," declared the art historian Gainsborough, "I never saw a stupider face. It is impossible that such a mind and such rare talent should shine with such a face and such a pair of eyes."

Bardographer Ivor Brown compared it unfavorably with the Stratford monument depicting a "'puddin-headed' William who could never have written anything except a note of hand to buy malt." And even Samuel Schoenbaum cannot distract himself long enough to avoid admitting that the "Droeshout's deficiencies are, alas, only too gross" (Ogburn 222-223).

It turns out, as Marcus shows, that within the Renaissance tradition of prefatory materials the engraving looks even more bizarre than it does to the untutored modern reader. In each case, comparison serves rather to enhance than suppress the impression that there is "something fishy" about the First Folio.

Read in conjunction with editor Jonson's accompanying poem, the Droeshout begins to appear like a droll joke on orthodox pretensions to understand the author; compared to Droeshout's other prefatory material, the Folio looks more, not less, bizarre; compared to the typical prefatory materials of the period, it assumes—says Marcus—an "iconoclastic," "Protestant," and "rhetorically turbulent" character.

But it is Marcus's analysis of how the engraving and the Jonson poem function as parts of the folio ensemble which is most provocative from an Oxfordian perspective. Gainsborough and other critics, suggests Marcus, "blame the picture for a broader discomfort arising out of the endlessly circulating interplay among all elements of the title page—the portrait, the words above, the poem" (20).

These elements, furthermore, seem to have been designed to set the Shakespeare Folio apart from other books by deliberately cultivating an atmosphere of discordance and mystery which "sets readers off on a treasure hunt for the author" (19). The engraving itself, wholly lacking in the ornamental features and trimming oval customarily employed in such book designs, affects "a slightly unfinished look… [offering] no particularizing details—only the raw directness of the image, as if to say that in this case no artifice is necessary: 'this is the Man Himself'" (18).

Jonson's poem on the facing page, however, tells another story. The poem "undermines the visual power of the portrait by insisting on it as something constructed and `put' there" (18). The net effect of engraving and poem, argues Marcus, is to set in motion a competition between poem and portrait in which the two elements are "vying for the reader's attention" (19).

Furthermore the poem—in its emphasis on the artificial and unreal nature of the engraving and its explicit warning to "look not on his picture but his book"—is "in the precise sense of the term, iconoclastic" (19), that is to say, it literally attacks the credibility of the portrait it effects to accompany. In Marcus's analysis, then, the Folio frontispiece functions

> like a veil covering the book's contents and preserving it from vulgar eyes: Only those learned enough to "read" the book's visual schematization on the title page had earned the right to enter the text itself. (21)

This "veiling" of the book's text, moreover, has an immediate implication with respect to the enigma of authorship. The juxtaposition of the Droeshout engraving and the Jonson poem, writes Marcus, disorients and disrupts the very perceptions it invokes. The folio

> makes high claims for "The AUTHOR" while simultaneously dispersing authorial identity; so that "Mr. William Shakespeare" becomes almost an abstraction, a generic category, while remaining an unstable composite. Given the rhetorical turbulence of the volume's introductory materials, constructing Shakespeare requires almost a leap of faith, like Jonson's, and depends upon the suppression of a host of particulars that recede into indeterminacy when an attempt is made to pin them down.
> (25)

Marcus's point, if this reader understands her properly, is that the editorial transformation of the author "Shakespeare" into an "abstraction" and a "generic category," is intimately tied to the "veiling" of meaning which the folio seeks to accomplish. It is not just that old "honest Ben"—as Jonson, tongue firmly planted in his cheek, liked to be remembered—preferred his authors on the half-shell. Somehow the meaning of Shakespeare's text, or possibly the range of relevant interpretation, is bound up with the veiling of author's identity. Marcus calls it a "powerful inducement against [the] localization" of meaning—but misses the obvious point that Jonson may be making a plea for a relocalization of meaning veiled by the folio's pretenses.

Marcus does recognize, however, that far from supplying material for a life of Shakespeare, the folio purposefully renders him abstract and generic. Jonson calls Shakespeare a "monument without a tomb;" the Folio, argues Marcus, is paradoxically a book without an author—or rather, as we might see it, a book which feigns to represent an author while at the same time instructing the reader that he is a ruse, a smokescreen, a hoaxing understudy for *somebody* concealed under the grotesque exterior of the Droeshout's hydrocephalic cranium.

So, while attempting to dispel the anxiety the folio will generate in a sophisticated reader, Marcus ends up on the same treadmill as every other Stratfordian apologist. She sets up all the theoretical landmarks for a post-Stratfordian exegesis of the folio's rhetorical function as an "engineered artifact" (to use Ogburn's terminology) in the "imaginative conspiracy" (to use Supreme Court Justice Stevens's terminology). In her more candid moments, Marcus admits to sharing the orthodox nostalgia for endless revisionism which instantiates and motivates the Stratford ideology. The virtue of Stratfordianism, for the Shakespeare Industry, is that it legitimates an endless play of compensatory theorizing. Unlimited by the specter of an authentic authorial presence supplying an "objective correlative" —the thing T.S. Eliot insisted was lacking in orthodox accounts of *Hamlet*— anything goes: anything, at least, which doesn't endanger the sacred assumption of Stratfordian authorship.

"We seem to want to keep a thing called Shakespeare," admits Marcus, "if only to guarantee the authenticity of our own revisionist enterprise" (36). The admission puts a finger on the button of the motives which provoke the intense irrationality of orthodox reactions to new Oxfordian evidence and old (but unread) Oxfordian reasoning: it is not the authenticity of Shakespeare so much as the authenticity of themselves, which is somehow felt to be attacked and undermined by post-Stratfordians. Like many earnest and well-intentioned critics of her generation, Marcus seems to need to believe that she is on the side of the oppressed "discontents" of civilization. Hence her book is in part an apology for, and endorsement of, "local reading"—the kind of reading at which Oxfordians, who at least know in what sector of the universe the author lived, have been all too sophisticated at generating and advancing.

In this respect, *Puzzling Shakespeare* represents a flanking maneuver by a Stratfordian industry preying on the idealism of 1960s generation of "tenured radicals;" the focus on the "topical" is a veil to disguise the psychological plausibility of the Oxfordian case, which now stands, as exemplified in books such as Looney's or Ogburn's (among many others), in such stark and unforgiving contrast to the almost total failure of Stratfordian psychology to make significant contributions to Shakespeare scholarship (because authors inevitably depart from the wrong set of minimal biographical facts and inevitably fail to achieve or even approximate Eliot's "objective correlative").

As the Oxfordians might see it, however, Marcus's rattling the banners of liberation contains an unacknowledged paradox which haunts the rhetoric of *Puzzling Shakespeare*. As Warren Hope (Ph.D., English) would have it in his brilliant *The Shakespeare Controversy: An Analysis of the Claimants to Authorship, and Their Champions and Detractors* (1992, 2009) Marcus is merely defending the entrenched citadel of "professional bureaucrats, servants of the state's cultural apparatus, who inform the people of the currently fashionable brand of truth by asserting it repeatedly, and at great length"(6).

And in the final analysis, it seems that Marcus actually believes—unconsciously at least—Hope's analysis: reading between the lines, it is clear that her position of power-knowledge is situated right at the imaginative cusp of empire.

Caught between the Scylla of a politically incorrect universalism and the Charybdis of the Oxfordian abyss, Marcus's rhetoric deliberates by chasing its own tail until it finally disappears into the babbling vortex of Ben Jonson's "complicity in the humanist enterprise"—a retrojection of contemporary values and needs (above all, the urgent professional need for Stratfordians to believe that Jonson was conspiring "with us" and not "agin us") which is a doubtful substitute for the kind of self-critical appraisal called for by Richmond Crinkley in his 1985 *Shakespeare Quarterly* review of Ogburn's book.

Admittedly, it is only an academic ideal that controversial ideas should be discussed with moderation and tolerance and that orthodox powers are on their honor to offer a fair and accurate representation of alternate theories so that students can exercise their own independent faculties of investigation and argument rather than merely bowing down in awe before the nearest sacred cow with tenure. But the prerequisite to presenting an alternative is knowing what it says.

As Crinkley wrote in his review, Ogburn

> chronicles a sorry record of abuse from the orthodox [Stratfordians], much of it direct at assertions never made, positions never held, opinions never expressed....If the intellectual standards of Shakespeare scholarship quoted in such embarrassing abundance by Ogburn are representative, then it is not just authorship about which we have to be worried. (518-519)

Crinkley, of course, was right. There is a fundamental ethical problem at stake in this conflict, and that ethical problem is aptly suggested in Marcus's reference to Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Marcus is haunted by the specter of father Freud himself: Of all the sins of the Oxfordians, the seduction of Freud is, according to Dr. Marcus, the most unforgivable:

> This fringe movement, which has dogged topical approaches to Shakespeare like a dark shadow, has been more corrosive than we have been willing to admit (it convinced Sigmund Freud, for example), and has had the effect, along with the first folio itself, of casting a faint yet lingering odor of inauthenticity over all Shakespearean historicism. (35)

Perhaps the fall of Freud, when all is said and done, is merely a minor parenthesis in a much more encompassing nightmare vision. As Harold Bloom would have it in his *Western Canon*, Oxfordian Huns and Vandals are poised to sweep through the lacerated gates of civilization, with legions of topical berserkers, anarcho-feminists, epistemologists and sheepdogs in tow.

In the final analysis, the psychology of the Stratfordian ideology is not difficult to diagnose. It is a politics of envy — proceeding from the psychological need to trim Shakespeare down to mortal size, paradoxically, by deifying him, in the words of the late Samuel Schoenbaum, as an "incomprehensible genius."

Perhaps, to our surprise, Stratfordianism is little different, in its essential essentialism, than the original "imaginative conspiracy" of the Tudor Crown to place the real author of the plays in the dark. Just as war is said to be an extension of diplomacy by other means, the Stratfordian ideology is an extension of Tudor policy under another name, an extension inspired by motives that become more and more prosaic, comical, and unconscious as the controversy proceeds towards the inevitable denouement of the lie.

Already the first of the tenured professoriate have started belatedly to follow in father Freud's heretical footsteps, at last beginning to grasp the actual cultural and psychological dynamics of the controversy and to withdraw their intellectual capital from the Stratfordian bureaucracy, leaving orthodox rhetoricians with less and less of a herd to fall back upon for safety when the tough questions begin to be posed.

The retreat is visible on the title pages of leading editions of the collected works starting as early as the 1990s. David Bevington's 1995 fourth edition (1995) of the collected works tosses the Droeshout engraving which adorns the cover of the 3rd (1980) edition, in favor of the Scheemakers statue erected under the patronage of Pope and his friends in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey in 1740. The 1996 Riverside opted for a reprint of the eerily de Vere-like Staunton portrait owned by the Folger.

The real author's own relationship to the Tudor crown, historically and psychologically, was far more complicated and contradictory than an oversimplified Freudian model will allow. He may well have been the most self-censored author in the history of art, and it was his highly conscious wrestling with the moral problems

of knowledge and representation which he transformed into the cultural capital of his work. As Charlton Ogburn suggests in PBS *Frontline*'s "The Shakespeare Mystery," the Bard compensated for the loss of his literal kingdom—the political power and prestige inherited in the de Vere dynasty—by recreating a kingdom of the imagination.

As he says in *Rape of Lucrece*,

Time's Glory is to calm contending kings
To unmask falsehood, and bring truth to light.
(939-940)

Somewhat against the conscious judgment of the author, this book is a highly recommended contribution to that historic project. It can be read and appreciated by any student of the Shakespearean works interested in understanding their historical origins and genesis.