

“By Nature Fram’d to Wear a Crown”? Decolonizing the Shakespeare Authorship Question

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“What is more contemptible than a civilization that scorns knowledge of itself?”

— John Ralston Saul ¹

 Despite over 160 years of profound doubt expressed about the authorship of the plays and poems of Shakespeare – with indications the name was recognized as a pseudonym in the early 17th century – the mainstream Shakespeare academy has been utterly hostile to any and all such doubts or evidence.² Instead, respected Shakespeare “biographers” have continued to produce hefty works that fancifully flesh out the barest of documentary facts in an attempt to marry the transcendence of the Shakespeare canon with the apparent pragmatism of a thrifty if litigious businessman.³ Their authors having so few records outside of business transactions and lawsuits to go on, these books are replete with imagined biographical details and anchored on the limitless and miraculous ability of the poet-playwright’s “natural genius” to furnish the vast breath of knowledge and erudition evident in the works, an all-purpose explanation that defies contestation. Jonathan Bate, for example, in his *The Genius of Shakespeare*, approvingly reaches the tautological conclusion that “*genius’ was a category invented to account for what was peculiar about Shakespeare*” (italics in the original).⁴ This reverent belief among Shakespeare biographers and critics in comforting traditions regarding Shakespeare’s genius is such that even some otherwise orthodox writers believe that Shakespeare can only take on real “vitality outside of English departments, whose members are more prone than others to present a moribund, ossified version of the ‘Bard of Avon.’”⁵ It is little wonder that the ranks of skeptical anti-Stratfordians have only grown.

Another challenge to conventional Shakespeare scholarship has emerged in the form of postcolonial positionings of Shakespeare's works, which have become increasingly popular since the late 1980s, especially in countries formerly governed by European powers. In confronting Eurocentric assumptions, these readings view the texts and performances of the plays (notably *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*) in terms of contested understandings of race, power, class and gender, thereby shining a new light on historic and contemporary narratives of European cultural dominance and the colonial encounter. Contrary to Harold Bloom's dismissal of such competing readings as being part of a "School of Resentment," postcolonial Shakespeare studies are not intended to unseat "the Bard" so much as gain a new understandings of the Canon in its imperial contexts, and to appropriate the characters and settings of the plays in order to overturn conventional interpretations, and tell the stories of once dominated and suppressed cultures, thereby "decolonizing" Shakespeare.^{6,7} Decolonizing a body of work (or indeed an entire discipline) involves identifying, interrogating and deconstructing central, primary Eurocentric assumptions which have served to privilege certain approaches and their partisans, and disguise or misrepresent the interests and ideas of others. It is a liberating, insurgent form of scholarship, one especially well suited for redressing imbalances of power.

This paper proposes that the project of decolonizing Shakespeare is incomplete and will likely remain so as long as it continues to focus exclusively on postcolonial readings of the texts themselves and on indigenized performances, rather than on examining the identity of their author, and the ways in which the practice of conventional Shakespeare biography has contributed to British imperial culture. Turning a postcolonial lens on contemporary Shakespeare scholarship itself, and specifically on the debate over the authorship of the plays and poems, may aid us in recognizing larger, potent and resistant cultural narratives underlying the mythology of the "Divine Will" of Stratford-Upon-Avon: the powerful legacy of triumphal, imperialist assumptions flowing, unexamined, beneath unshakable devotion to England's "National Poet." As Michael Dobson observes, a fundamental contradiction has underscored the cult of Shakespeare ever since David Garrick's 1769 Stratford Jubilee: that "The Bard" is at once held to be "directly inspired by Nature to voice the universal truths of humanity [yet] must none the less be claimed as specifically and uniquely English."⁸

Postcolonial theory is an especially appropriate and effective tool for challenging long-held beliefs about the core of Western culture. Because it shares interests with other bodies of critical theory concerning race, class, gender, sexuality and economic inequality, postcolonialism "force[s] readers and practitioners to confront ingrained subject positions and open the possibility of alternative, politically engaged historical analyses."⁹ As Brydon writes,

the strengths of postcolonialism derive from its ability to cast the familiar in a fresh light, to encourage cross disciplinary dialogue, and to provoke the rethinking of traditionally accepted disciplinary boundaries.¹⁰

Perhaps in no other field in the humanities is such a “fresh light” needed than on the subject of the authorship of the works of Shakespeare, which, like postcolonialism itself, is often viewed as threatening to entrenched and jealously guarded academic domains.

In this paper I will be considering the historiography of European imperialism and self-aggrandizing notions of Western identity as essential to understanding ways in which the debate over the authorship of the plays and poems of Shakespeare has been framed. Using a postcolonial lens, the key ontological and epistemological assumptions of Shakespeare hagiography are compared to and contrasted with those of historians and supporters of imperialism and colonialism in order to demonstrate the extent to which totalizing and essentialist rhetoric concerning the “natural genius” of both Shakespeare and the West (and the Author’s singular position within it) have proven an impediment to advancing acceptance of – let alone a solution to – the Authorship Question. By interrogating the centrality of Shakespeare to Western identity, we can begin to chart a more reflexive Shakespeare scholarship, particularly concerning authorship.

It must be stated at the outset that it is not my intention to accuse orthodox Shakespeare scholars of actually *being* imperialists, or that, by extension, their epistemological stance on Shakespeare serves to defend colonial oppression or its history. Rather, the purpose is to show that the belief systems underlying the defense of William Shakspere of Stratford as the Author, and those which viewed as natural and inevitable the ascendancy and dominance of “the West” over much of the rest of the world, are both of a kind, arose and matured in the same historical moment and for closely related reasons, are linked ontologically and together participated in contributing to the centuries-long *culture* of imperialism. As Dobson notes, “that Shakespeare was declared to rule world literature at the same time that Britannia was declared to rule the waves may, indeed, be more than a coincidence.”¹¹ Because of this, the cultural narratives and mythologies of both the West and of Shakespeare have become intertwined and difficult to separate, making the proposition of an alternative candidate for authorship literally “unthinkable” to most.

To which a second caveat must be added: This paper is not about conventional conceptions of genius and its role in shaping talent when compared to environment, especially education. The authorship debate has for too long been saddled with tiresome arguments about this issue, centered on the supposed snobbery on the part of skeptics for their alleged disbelief that a commoner could possess the genius to write the Shakespeare plays, and the concomitant defense of the peerless merits of the Stratford Grammar School for supplying all the education necessary to write the canon. The intent here is not to debunk the idea of genius, only the conjoined quasi-religious, nationalistic forms it has taken in the history of Shakespeare biography, and in self-edifying (and, as we shall see, often racist) justifications of Western exceptionalism.

Culture and the Persistence of Belief

Most English professors and the “Shakespeare Establishment” see no authorship problem and therefore reject it as the purview of cranks, or of “snobs” unwilling to concede a commoner could have been the Author. Any and all mention of the problem is not just frowned upon, but generally treated with abject hostility and contempt such that few aspiring English literature scholars who hope to receive tenure will broach it for fear of ridicule. Yet, a truly dispassionate examination of the documentary evidence can yield no such certainty. As Diana Price observes,

If the Shakespeare plays had been published anonymously, *nothing* in William Shaksperer’s documented biographical trails would remotely suggest that he wrote them. Shaksperer of Stratford is not, in fact, a viable authorship candidate, and if he were discovered today as a new contender, his candidacy would not be taken seriously (emphasis in the original).¹²

All things being equal, this highly problematic biographical narrative should have been discarded decades ago and the correct author identified and accepted. However, because Shakespeare is the nearest thing in our culture to a secular religion, it is almost impossible to have a reasonable debate about the evidence concerning the Author’s life. The standard “biographies” in our libraries may demonstrate a deep appreciation for his writings, but are otherwise astonishingly reliant on the imaginations of their authors to create a “life” of the poet-playwright (many of which are mutually exclusive).¹³ Historian William Rubinstein, remarking on this tendency, observed that

all orthodox biographies [of Shakespeare] take liberties with, or actually invent facts about the supposed playwright, such as no historian would allow for a moment in an academically credible biography of an important man or woman of the past.¹⁴

The extent to which defenders of the Stratfordian view refuse to honestly face this lack and instead deny, evade and condemn does seem counter to accepted academic practice, and, indeed irrational; in the words of the late Richmond Crinkley, onetime director of programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library, the vitriol directed at skeptics is “like some bizarre mutant racism.”¹⁵ Richard Waugaman calls it a “psychopathology,” deriving from both a number of conventional human emotions, such as jealousy over Oxfordians’ comparatively substantial candidate in Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford, and anxieties of potential shame should their lifelong views be discredited. More powerful still are the deeply embedded narratives which both govern the intellectual project of conventional Shakespeare studies and provide group cohesion by focusing attention (and projecting inadequacies) onto an external identifiable group – anti-Stratfordians generally and Oxfordians in particular.¹⁶

We should understand at the outset that Shakespearean biography is hardly the only field of scholarship in which such adherence to an increasingly untenable tradition endures, and that belief in those traditions is rarely swayed by evidence or persuasion. As geographer J.M. Blaut observes,

Scholars today are aware, as most were not a few decades ago, that the empirical factual beliefs of history. . . very often gain acceptance for reasons that have little to do with evidence. Scholarly beliefs are embedded in culture, and are shaped by culture. This helps to explain the paradox that [certain] beliefs are so strangely persistent: that old myths continue to be believed in long after the rationale for their acceptance has been forgotten or rejected.¹⁷

These beliefs are more than traditions: They are shaped by paradigms, famously defined by Thomas Kuhn as “the entire constellation of facts, theories and methods” collected and adhered to by practitioners of a given discipline.¹⁸ As is the case for all fields of research, the evidence marshaled by Stratfordians and Oxfordians alike is not merely based on a preferred interpretation of documentary evidence endorsed within the cultural norms of their respective research communities or paradigm; rather, it is a part of the broader culture, nested within it and transacting with it. The nature of those relationships must be recognized to fully understand their paradigm – in the words of the Great Author, to “show their birth, and where they did proceed.”¹⁹

If we are to consider the Stratfordian and Oxfordian views competing paradigms (as is often done in the literature of the latter), then, strictly speaking, we shouldn't expect anything other than obstinate refusal from the orthodox academy. Kuhn, in his classic work on scientific epistemology, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), distinguished between the activities of researchers working within an accepted paradigm (what he called normal science), and those aware of and seeking new explanations for crises in puzzle solving within that normal science. However,

[n]o part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all. Nor do scientists normally aim to invent new theories, and they are often intolerant of those invented by others. Instead, normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies.²⁰

In their effort to advance their challenge to the “normal science” of conventional Shakespeare studies, anti-Stratfordians and partisans of alternative candidates such as Edward de Vere apparently assume or believe that orthodox scholars might be eventually won over by the right combination of evidence. For example, in her book, *Shakespeare Suppressed*, Katherine Chiljan suggests that, if the

questions over the authorship of the works could only be “answered plausibly, [it] would change everyone’s minds.”²¹ This viewpoint, however desirable and optimistic, neglects the reality that paradigm shifts in a discipline are rarely accomplished in so straightforward a manner. Kuhn warns,

Neither side will grant all the non-empirical assumptions that the other needs in order to make its case. . . they are bound to talk through each other. Though each may hope to convert the other to his way of seeing his [sic] science and its problems, neither may hope to prove his [sic] case. The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved through proofs.²²

Kuhn intended his analysis to apply only to the sciences, not the social sciences and certainly not to problems of literary biography, so his model isn’t entirely applicable to the authorship controversy. One could even argue that the entire notion of a scientific paradigm itself is inappropriate to a branch of scholarship that essentially considers its subject to be semi-divine, and about which so much rhetoric echoes the lexicon of faith; this, as we shall see, may also be illuminated by adopting a postcolonial perspective. Nevertheless, Kuhn’s theories do establish the extent to which the nature of institutional culture can contribute to the advancement and entrenchment of knowledge within a given discipline. As Roger Stritmatter argues,

There is, of course, a price to be paid for this [paradigmatic] knowledge: the initiate must solemnly promise not only to forgo dalliance in the field of unauthorized ideas, but to zealously defend, as a matter of honor and sanity, the jurisdiction of the paradigm into which he has been initiated. A reluctance to do so marks him, at best, as an outsider or a misfit: unqualified for employment, tenure, or professional respect.²³

New discoveries, approaches and methods may therefore not simply be applied with an expectation of universal persuasion, for the culture associated with an existing paradigm may be wholly incommensurate with revolutionary ideas. In the case of Shakespeare studies, I suggest that the academic culture in question is inextricably linked to our broader culture and its legacy of imperialism.

The Parallel Genius of “National Poet” and “the West”

The late comparative literature professor and postcolonial theorist Edward Said argued in his 1993 book, *Culture and Imperialism*, that it is impossible to separate the cultural productions of an imperial state (i.e., its literature, art and music) from the imperial culture of that state: and that, by “connect[ing] them. . . with the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconcealedly a part [and not] condemning them or ignoring their participation in what was an unquestioned reality in their societies” we enhance our understanding of them.²⁴ Ania Loomba

and Martin Orkin note, too, in the introduction to their *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, that “it is virtually impossible to seal off any meaningful analysis of English culture or literature from considerations of racial and cultural differences, and from the dynamics of emergent colonialisms.”²⁵

Written during the very birth of the English colonial project, an era characterized by an unprecedented level of foreign military interventionism, Shakespeare’s works not only capture the expansionist Elizabethan world-view, but would themselves be instrumental in spreading English culture throughout England’s colonies.²⁶ As Michael Neill writes,

Shakespeare’s writing was entangled from the beginning with the projects of nation-building, Empire and colonization. . . . Shakespeare was simultaneously invented as the ‘National Bard’ and promoted as a repository of ‘universal’ human values, [and] the canon became an instrument of imperial authority as important as the Bible and the gun.²⁷

The value of Shakespeare to the global spread of English culture was such that even John Hobson, who opposed imperialism on economic grounds, was moved to concede that

Shakespeare [has] done incomparably more for the influence of England in the history of the world than all the statesmen and soldiers who have won victories or annexed new provinces. Macaulay has well said it, “There is an empire exempt from all natural sources of decay — that empire is the imperishable empire of our art and our morals, our literature and our law.”²⁸

The postcolonial turn in Shakespeare studies recognizes and subjects to critical reappraisal this colonial and imperial heritage. At the periphery of these readings is a sense that their author should not escape attention as well: Ngugi wa Thiong’o, in recounting his efforts to Africanize and decolonize the academy in Nairobi, observed that the “universal genius” of Shakespeare, promoted as a “gift” from England to the rest of humanity, only serves to disguise the particulars of non-European societies around the world.²⁹ According to Blaut, the supposed “gift” of European culture to their colonized subjects is an integral component of what he refers to as the “Colonizer’s Model of the World,” a triumphalist lens through which the Eurocentric historian understands the advanced, progressive, innovative and modern European “center” existing “within” history, while the rest of the world – backward, stagnant and traditional – is “outside.” As Blaut describes it, the explanation for Europe’s mastery over the world is seen to be owed

to some intellectual or spiritual factor, something characteristic of the “European mind,” the “European spirit,” “Western Man,” etc. something that leads to creativity, imagination, invention, innovation, rationality, and a sense of honor or ethics: “European values.”³⁰

Correspondingly, he writes, the non-European's stagnation is due to a similarly material cause: an innate "emptiness," a lack of rationality or "proper spiritual values." Thus rendered not merely unsuited to govern themselves, but unredeemably inferior, non-European subjects may then be rationally displaced or eliminated through settler colonialism. With these assumptions in place, writes Blaut, the colonial model explains global progress, modernity and civilization as a matter of diffusion — originating in the West and flowing to the colonial possessions — "gifts" for which the European can then only be partially compensated by the extraction of resources from subject lands. Inherent in this model was its reproduction, in the form of the imperial education of the next generation of colonizers. The curriculum in Britain therefore emphasized this innateness, citing qualities going back to England's Anglo-Saxon roots. According to Heathorn,

History [textbooks] in particular focused and simplified the relationship between the innate characteristics and traits of the Anglo-Saxons, the launching of colonial expansion in the reign of Elizabeth I, and the present-day duties of each English citizen. . . . It was proclaimed that there was something inherent in the Englishman that had led to the English nations' lead in world-imperial affairs.³¹

Similarly, David Gress notes in his *From Plato to NATO* that, judging by standard textbooks about the West, "one gets the distinct impression that everyone in 'The West' was a genius," a narrative which, he stresses, was flawed and "the basic obstacle to understanding Western identity." Gress sees this Grand Narrative as an uncritical "amalgam of intellectual controls" which looks

at the past mainly, if not exclusively, to find the origins of the superior present, [such that] the authors of the Grand Narrative unhistorically ignored those areas of past cultures not compatible with the modern liberal West. The Grand Narrative assumed what it set out to explain: That the West existed, and that it was good.³²

Not only good: miraculous, and to such a degree that its goodness is universal and spiritual rather than constrained by geography. Louis Rougier, in his 1971 book *The Genius of the West*, lauds the accomplishments of Western civilization which, when compared with those of China, Islam and India, are "still the most miraculous accomplishment of the human adventure" such that "wherever the rules of scientific inquiry are followed, wherever freedom of thought and speech are respected, there is the West."³³

Such chauvinistic essentialism is also highly characteristic of Shakespearean hagiography, and has produced a "grand narrative" of its own: His exceptional, "miraculous" genius is innate, a material cause requiring no explanation beyond the grace of "Nature." The origins of the ideology of Shakespeare's "natural genius" may

be seen in John Milton's 1645 poem "L'Allegro," in which he evokes Shakespeare as "Fancy's child...warbling his native wood-notes wild," which would in turn be famously echoed by Garrick's *Ode to Shakespeare* recited at the 1769 Stratford Jubilee:

While sportive Fancy round him flew,
Where Nature led him by the hand,
Instructed him in all she knew
And gave him absolute command!^{34,35}

Such did this notion of Shakespeare's communion with a personified Nature take hold of the British imagination that, by 1826, Henry Mercer Graves would, in his *Essay on the Genius of Shakespeare*, call the poet a "child" of Nature herself:

Whence is it. . .that [the works] of Shakespeare still bear up triumphant and unimpaired? 'Tis because he wrote from the inspiration of *nature herself*; 'tis because she filled his whole soul, and made it her temple to dwell in. She guided every idea, warmed and perfected every description, and fired every effusion and passion. . . . [H]e was Nature's own child - her favourite son - her beloved offspring. . . . Shakespeare was under her own eye - her guidance - her protection. She gave him power unlimited, and sway uncontrolled. . .empowered him to go over the wide globe. . .then soar to her heaven and stay throned there, high and immortal (*italics in the original*).³⁶

Conversely (and demonstrating how Shakespeare biographers have a long history of reaching opposing conclusions about their subject while nonetheless claiming adherence to a common, true faith), Thomas Kenny, writing in 1864, has Shakespeare exercising his own agency to follow Nature via his "imaginative intuition" rather than being directed by her:

Nature herself - wide, free, universal Nature - was the final and abiding object of Shakespeare's imitation. He saw and felt, with the force of a direct intuition, that in the vital reproduction of her forms begins, continues and ends the whole business of the dramatist. . . . He looked at Nature through a direct imaginative intuition, and he was thus enabled to follow her in all her changeful shapes and hues.³⁷

More historical examples would be superfluous. The synthesis of such insubstantial forces as Nature and imagination have become what passes for conventional wisdom in Shakespeare studies down to our own time. Harold Bloom, for example, wrote in his 1994 paean to *The Western Canon* that Shakespeare "has the largeness of nature itself, and through that largeness he senses nature's indifference" while affirming Milton's appraisal of the Bard as "Nature's own artist."³⁸ James Shapiro, meanwhile, chastises skeptics of the traditional attribution in his 2010

book *Contested Will* for their failure to appreciate the all-encompassing power of imagination to account for Shakespeare's accomplishments, an equally miraculous material cause all but synonymous with "nature."³⁹

In simultaneously offering a nominally secular explanation for the apparently inexplicable – as well as a seemingly inexhaustible inspiration for florid prose – the power of an embodied (and often capitalized) "Nature" gave the Shakespeare scholar precisely what was needed in the face of irresolute absence of evidence: a rhetorical tool with which to defeat any possible objection and – not incidentally – bolster a host of chauvinistic and nationalistic claims for cultural supremacy. It also served to disassociate the Author from any real, human connections to his work, a feat perfectly embodied in Garrick's absurd Jubilee at which not an actual line of Shakespeare's writings was uttered, reducing the Author's "achievements to the point of virtual non-existence. . . their actual contents irrelevant, drowned out in the noise of national rejoicing."⁴⁰

Given the supreme utility of such a habit of mind for reinforcing English identity, it was hardly limited to literary matters, but infused the British Imperial project as well, justifying on the basis of "nature" the inevitability and rectitude of British empire. As befitting an imperial culture, reminders of the naturalness of British ascendancy could be had from politicians, newspapers and school textbooks throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, New Zealand Premier Sir George Grey would, at the 1883 Intercolonial Convention held in Sydney, Australia, exhort the island colony to consider that it was "ordained by Nature" to be the future "Queen of the Pacific" the center of its own empire.⁴¹ Philippa Levine, in her history of the British Empire records how a 1902 school textbook claimed that "Englishmen, 'are especially fitted by nature' to be colonists because they are 'persevering, unflinching. . . patriotic. . . [and] love order and justice.'"⁴²

This intellectual tendency was of course not confined to the British, but was copiously in evidence in American thinking as well. American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, in his *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, explicitly justifies colonization with reference to the naturalness of national genius:

In yet another way does the national genius affect the growth of sea power in its broadest sense; and that is in so far as it possesses the capacity for planting healthy colonies. Of colonization, as of all other growths, it is true that it is most healthy when it is most natural. Therefore colonies that spring from the felt wants and natural impulses of a whole people will have the most solid foundations; and their subsequent growth will be surest when they are least trammelled from home, if the people have the genius for independent action.⁴³

As Theologian William David Spencer confirms, "'Natural' became the key word to excuse all imperialism."⁴⁴

We should understand that the writers referred to above inherited the Enlightenment view of Nature not merely as the assemblage of physical forces in the

world around us, but rather implied God as the ultimate efficient cause, His “divine causality. . . manifested in the active powers which were immanent in the fabric of nature.”⁴⁵ An appeal to Nature conferred upon the object an expression of divine will, and therefore beyond contestation — and, conveniently, the conventional tools of historiography.

If nature could so readily promote the implicitly racist ideology of imperialism — premised on the rule of subject races unfit to govern themselves — then it is an exceedingly small cognitive and moral leap to see her approval of even more loathsome forms of domination. Radical Liberal and imperialist booster Charles Dilke saw as inevitable and desirable the eventual replacement of indigenous “inferior” races with white British subjects, arguing that “the gradual extinction of the inferior races is not only a law of nature, but a blessing to mankind.”⁴⁶ In the United States, the “peculiar institution” of black slavery was defended by Charles O’Conor in his 1859 speech (to a mostly approving New York City audience) because it was

not unjust — that it is benign in its influence upon the white man and upon the black man. I maintain that it is ordained by nature; that it is a necessity of both races; that, in climates where the black race can live and prosper, Nature herself enjoins correlative duties on the black man and on the white, which cannot be performed except by the preservation, and. . . the perpetuation of negro Slavery.⁴⁷

More odious still, the rhetorical force of “Nature” permits Ben Klassen, the father of modern white supremacy and the notion of “racial holy war” (RaHoWa), to argue in his 1973 masterpiece of racist bilge, *Nature’s Eternal Religion*, that

Nature looked fondly upon the White Race and lavished special loving care in its growth. Of all the millions of creatures who have inhabited the face of this planet over the eons of time, none has ever quite equaled that of the White Race. Nature endowed her Elite with a greater abundance of intelligence and creativity, of energy and productivity than she endowed unto any other creature, now or in the millenniums past.⁴⁸

The correspondence between these assertions written centuries apart to the benign and eminently wise role of Nature in nurturing, protecting and endowing their respective innovative and creative objects — be it the West, Shakespeare or the white race — is indeed remarkable.

The reader should not mistake the argument: To be clear, this is not a matter of two unrelated phenomena being crudely shackled to one another through a comparison of common, contemporary phrasing with a view to making them seem identical. The point is *not* that a belief in the traditional attribution of the plays and poems to William Shakspeare of Stratford is akin to racism. Rather, we must understand that the invocation of Nature as an explanatory metanarrative was the keystone element in the “colonizer’s model of the world,” of which the semi-divine

Shakespeare was a not insignificant ingredient. The myths of the “Divine William” and the “Miracle of the West” were conjoined at birth, and mutually reinforcing; the supposed superiority of Western culture could find no better evidence than the gifts Nature miraculously bestowed upon William of Stratford.

In being so blessed, both Shakespeare and the Colonizer were effectively removed from historical consciousness. Seeing the quasi-religious grace of natural genius as the origin of and ultimate support for the European-dominated global order of the colonial era – and the corresponding privileged position of the white race – both elevated the colonizer and removed him from scrutiny. Gauri Viswanathan, in the introduction to his *Masks of Conquest*, observed that English colonizers actively used their literature in colonial education systems to portray themselves in terms of their literature, rather than as colonial subjugators, with the effect that “the Englishman’s true essence is defined by the thought he produces, overriding all other aspects of his identity – his personality, actions and behavior. [T]he blurring of the man and his works effectively removed him from history.”⁴⁹ Even the instruments of colonization shared in this blessing. As Armitage argues of Britain’s naval supremacy,

[b]ecause Britain’s maritime destiny seemed compelled by nature, it was by definition beyond historical analysis. . . . A fact so stubborn could hardly be historical; a history so exceptional was inassimilable to other European norms. British naval mastery came to seem as inevitable as the expansion of the British Empire, and each would be subject to the same complacent amnesia.⁵⁰

This fate has also been Shakespeare’s: In his ossified state as the “Bard of Avon” he is both mythical and insubstantial, an icon rather than a living, historical human. Shielded from critical scrutiny by his sacredness and centrality to British patriotism, Shakespeare has been removed from history, beyond conventional historical analysis. His priests in the academy meanwhile – awash in their own “complacent amnesia” – are all too content to leave him there.

Decolonizing Shakespeare Studies

In his 1997 book *Alias Shakespeare*, Joseph Sobran declared that the Shakespeare Authorship Question needed “an overhaul,” citing what he perceived as the “wild fruits” of an undisciplined group of amateurs shut out of the “stabilizing mainstream” of the academy.⁵¹ However, as this analysis suggests, far from participating in and contributing to “mainstream” scholarship, it is orthodox Shakespeare studies which has actually *cordoned itself off* from the “stabilizing mainstream” found in other branches of the humanities and social sciences, because it has isolated its ostensible core – the life of the Author – from the scrutiny afforded by variations of postmodern, critical, postcolonial and other forms of theorizing. As a consequence, Shakespeare studies has been woefully lacking in *reflexivity*, or that critical self-awareness through which its practitioners would be enabled to recognize

and name their own *situatedness* within the “scientific, political and institutional dimensions” (and associated power relations) of their discourses.⁵² The reasons for this may derive from what Husserl referred to as “the crisis of the sciences” which is characterized by a

tension between specialization and critique: between our ability to abstract domains within which we develop propositional knowledge and our inability to reflect on the multiplicity of these domains so far as they interpenetrate and transform the whole sociohistorical environment that phenomenologists call the “lifeworld.”⁵³

As Blaut and Gress demonstrate, our dominant socio-historical lifeworld in the West has been profoundly influenced by self-aggrandizing appeals to the limitless power of Western “genius” and “imagination.” Postcolonial theorists have sought to deconstruct these beliefs, assumptions and justifications to reveal the extent to which such colonial metanarratives disguise the nationalism, religious self-righteousness, privilege and economic rapaciousness – tainted with more than a patina of racism – that underlay the colonial enterprise. Instead, we are guided in searching for structural causes. Far from being the inevitable outcome of a unique, natural “European character” or some other expression of virtuous essentialism, Europe’s ascendancy during and after the “Age of Discovery” is seen as the result of a confluence of environmental, cultural, institutional and technological factors – of the kind explored by Jared Diamond in his *Guns, Germs and Steel* – as well as its ideologically sanitized and brutal conquest of resources and peoples around the world.⁵⁴

A correspondingly honest postcolonial view on the authorship of the Shakespeare Canon would, similarly, lead us to identify evidence of structural causes. Rather than seeing an untutored, blessed vessel of the “gifts of nature,” we recognize an Author steeped in an aristocratic society, his talent nurtured and realized thanks to the best education then available by virtue of his rank, wealth and privilege, his world view that of the highborn, and the printing history of his works redolent with the exercise of political power within a strictly controlled, autocratic, militaristic and paranoid state.⁵⁵ Shakespeare’s works are, in fact, replete with a resolute conviction of the divine right to rule and the naturalness of aristocracy.⁵⁶ These indications clearly place the author within the culture of particular class of Elizabethan society, the structures of which were essential for the acquisition of the knowledge, values and experiences evident in his writings.

Of course, all these things have long been recognized as patently obvious by skeptics and accord perfectly with the life of Edward de Vere, but have been consistently pilloried as “snobbery” by the Shakespeare establishment – which, in the absence of the scholarly rigor afforded by critical and postcolonial theory, they have felt free to do. Once this lens is admitted, however, the accusation appears not just churlish but actually unlearned, wholly ignorant of the legitimacy postcolonial critiques find in every other branch of the humanities and social sciences. It is in such

lapses in reason among otherwise accomplished scholars that we begin to understand the nature of the theoretical lacunae established Shakespeare studies has become, and the extent to which it has “colonized” academia and, more broadly speaking, our culture.

Postcolonial theory also assists us here, in comprehending the exercise of power relations, deconstructing hegemonies and naming the oppression of “subaltern” or dominated groups. Essential to an understanding of subalternity is the notion and meaning of “speaking” in a colonial context: Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak famously observed that subalterns are unable to “speak,” that others speak for them and listen only with “benevolent imperialism,” not actually hearing what the subaltern says.⁵⁷

While Spivak disapproves of marginalized groups within the academy referring to themselves as “subaltern,” indigenous scholar Rauna Kuokkanen argues that even if we do not use the term as such, the problem remains that, for scholars finding themselves outside the accepted discourse in the academy, they cannot fully “speak,” as their episteme is not recognized and as a result it is misrepresented and misunderstood.⁵⁸ For Kuokkanen, the repression and marginalization of scholarship is the result of what Spivak refers to as “sanctioned ignorance,” a culture in which those benefiting from a hegemonic worldview protect their own power and privilege by rejecting and disqualifying the worldviews (or epistemes) of others. Such ignorance occurs at the individual and institutional levels, and assumes both passive and active forms. In the first, there is a refusal to acknowledge, learn and know the epistemes of the marginalized scholar; in the second there is active denial of their scholarship — both of which, she stresses, are mutually reinforcing.

When there is a refusal to know, assumptions of shared and narrowly defined values preclude welcoming competing ways of knowing. The Western episteme being taken as normative, all others are considered only inasmuch as they relate to the West. Outright active denial too can take many forms: exclusion of contested content from curricula, as well as from the means to contribute to scholarship. By ensuring competing worldviews are “left out of the books” the privileged academic establishment maintains its hegemony, while maintaining “privileged innocence” that they bear any responsibility for or complicity in this “epistemic violence.”⁵⁹ The impacts of sanctioned ignorance are profound: In Vandana Shiva’s words, by making such “knowledge invisible by declaring it non-existent or illegitimate, the dominant system also makes alternatives disappear by erasing and destroying the reality which they attempt to represent.”⁶⁰

The applicability of these principles to the Authorship debate should be obvious. Anti-Stratfordians are a marginalized class within the academy, one rebelling against and interrogating an established, dominating order which has sought to silence and misrepresent them by exercising active ignorance of the achievements of its scholars. The Shakespeare establishment deliberately withholds recognition of Oxfordians specifically and anti-Stratfordians in general, and routinely reverts to “straw man” attacks on 19th century authors rather than address more recent discoveries.⁶¹ This condition is recognized by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor as

the *misrecognition* of others. A person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning one in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.⁶²

Hence, it is skeptics who are accused of snobbery, of “ignorance; poor sense of logic; refusal, wilful or otherwise, to accept evidence; folly; the desire for publicity; and even. . . certifiable madness” and it is this popular conception that has for so long dominated the public discourse and perceptions about this issue.⁶³ This blinkered obstinance is explained by Kuokkanen, for whom (and in contrast to the “colonizer’s model”) Indigenous epistemes should be welcomed in the academy as a “gift” with the potential to enrich scholarship and enlarge the scope of Western thought. However, as long as the academy remains defensively invested in excluding such scholarship, acceptance of the gift is impossible.⁶⁴ In this case, even though the episteme of skepticism over the authorship of the plays and poems of Shakespeare – and, in particular, the convincing case for Edward de Vere – is a “gift” that resolves so many formerly irresolvable difficulties and questions about the Canon, it is one that continues to be vigorously rejected, thereby perpetuating one of the most tragic misallocations of intellectual energy in the history of knowledge.

Conclusion

The extent to which the “natural genius” of Shakespeare has been embedded within and reflects the “grand narrative” of the corresponding “natural genius” of the West has cemented Shakespeare’s image in the academy and in our culture. However, in the past half century as colonized peoples liberated themselves from European rule, and as people of color and their allies opposed and protested racist laws and cultural habits, the intellectual, cultural and moral superiority of the West has been challenged by critical and postcolonial theorists, and its self-justifying excesses rendered unacceptable in academic and public discourse.

As a part of this movement within the academy, indigenizing and postcolonial theorizing has been brought to bear on the nature, influence and performance of the Shakespeare Canon.⁶⁵ However, no such attention has been – or, at present, can be – visited upon the life of its author, which, thanks to the extreme uncritical reverence towards the Stratford mythology on the part of the Academy, remains firmly inoculated against postcolonial interpretations, or indeed critical theorizing of any kind. While virtually every field of study in the humanities and social science has seen its respective “postmodern turn” or at least some form of critical gaze, the “Bard of Avon” has been effectively and essentially isolated from genuine scholarly scrutiny. Much like Viswanathan’s imperial British gentleman conflated with the literary heritage he foisted on conquered peoples, Shakespeare has been removed from history.

This concealment was and continues to be effected through the invocation of “natural genius” and imagination, key elements also used to define and rationalize European imperialism. Yet, this analysis demonstrates that an appeal to “natural genius” as an all-inclusive means of justifying cultural superiority – whether it applies to a race, an economic system or an individual – is not just intellectually lazy and vacuous, but fundamentally corrosive and morally dangerous. In explaining everything, “natural genius” not only explains nothing, but, more ominously, can explain and lend moral approbation to *anything*.

As many anti-Stratfordians have pointed out, the traditional attribution has (among numerous other deficiencies) depoliticized the plays, and stripped the Author of any connection to contemporary politics. This has not just robbed Shakespeare studies of some of its richest potential territory in terms of analyzing the plays as sources of political, social and literary commentary, but has rendered invisible the Author’s own place within the expansive, imperial and authoritarian Elizabethan world. This studied ignorance of the canon’s origins has correspondingly limited our ability to fully appreciate the imperial uses to which it was put, and even now both fuels and disguises the obstinate fierceness with which mainstream scholarship defends its dominant metanarrative against the insurgent practices of a marginalized class of scholars.

What we see, then, in the Bard of Avon is the last redoubt of Western exceptionalism, shielded from the scrutiny of those who would seek to deconstruct his “natural genius.” As a consequence, the postcolonial project in Shakespeare studies has been fundamentally undercut and condemned to a wholly unnecessary premature termination, for there is, at its core, a self-imposed mismatch between the otherwise matured critical tools at the disposal of the Shakespeare scholar, and the sanctioned uses to which they may be put.

What is needed to bridge this ontological barrier between contested Shakespeares, then, is not necessarily more evidence – for such has so far proved nothing in the eyes of the orthodox – but rather turning a postcolonial and broadly critical lens on Shakespeare scholarship itself, which has, to this point, exhibited a startling absence of reflexivity. A studied self-examination of the practice and epistemological bases of Shakespearean biography, filtered through postcolonial sensibilities of theory, practice and process would inform a long overdue reassessment of the state of the field including and especially a reckoning with the controversy over authorship, which, despite orthodox dismissal and proscriptions, is only gathering momentum. To do otherwise is to perpetuate a civilization scorning knowledge of itself.

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Endnotes

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