

# SUCH SHAPING FANTASIES?

## Psychology & the Authorship Debate

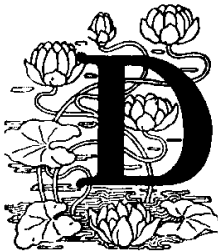
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Then can I grieve at grievances forgone,  
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er  
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,  
Which I new pay as if not paid before.

*Sonnet 30*



DOES psychology have something to contribute to the Shakespeare/Oxford debate? Up to now, it has mainly been used to attack and defend positions on the authorship. Samuel Schoenbaum claims the heretics are driven by “paranoid structures of thought . . . calling for the insights of the psychiatrist” (440). Oxfordians (probably wounded by being ignored, ridiculed or called insane) claim that such responses must be defensive: Stratfordians know how weak their position really is; fearing to expose their vulnerability, they maintain their relative social dominance by avoiding a rational debate. But then some Oxfordians seem to rely on an irrational “us and them” defence. The psychologist Eric Berne called this defence “The OK Corral: we’re all OK, they’re all not OK.” This can lead to missing an engagement with the shades of grey across the debate. For example, there is wide Stratfordian acceptance of collaborative authorship for many of the plays, with theatre viewed as a collaborative art in Shakespeare’s day, even more than it is now (see e.g. Georgio Melchiori 9-17). This raises all sorts of intriguing questions which cross the debate lines. What might Shaksper’s role have been, exactly? Who collaborated with whom, and how?

### Projections

“The OK Corral” is one form of projection, a common psychological defence which often features in the debate. Stratfordians tend to dismiss Oxfordians as motivated by snobbery (Schoenbaum 20). They could argue that this masks an ego-threatening sense of inferiority, which Oxfordians project onto Shaksper, thereby gaining a sense of superiority through identifying with the great Earl of Oxford, crony of the Queen, etc. etc.

However, the orthodox biographies are at least as full of projection, as Schoenbaum so

helpfully shows. It's easy to see why. The many gaps and problems in the orthodox biographical record are awkward but they are also seductive. They leave plenty of room for biographers to fill with their own conjectures. These are fed by the biographers' imagination, which springs from the unconscious and, together with their own unconscious wishes, fears, disowned parts of the self, etc., are projected onto their images of Shakespeare. Schoenbaum provides many vivid examples through the centuries, showing how varied the imagined Shakespeares have been. To the many examples, I would add Irvin Matus: he particularly attacks the elitism of the heretics and extols Shakspeare as a man of the people, one who excels as an outsider from the established powers; the flyleaf proclaims Matus himself as "a proud son of Brooklyn . . . an independent scholar."

### Phantasies and ambivalence

Some psychoanalysts like Norman Holland have decided the heretical impulse is motivated by specific *phantasies*, their term for unconscious fantasies. They apply Sigmund Freud's theories to Freud himself, to explain Freud's enthusiasm for Oxford as Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup> Freud had identified a "family romance" phantasy in which the phantasist believes their actual family is not their real family. He thought this phantasy expressed the wish to recapture very early feelings of parents as exalted beings, before the child developed critical feelings towards them (*Family Romances* 221-5).

Alfred Harbage claims that Mark Twain's rejection of Shakspeare also expresses unconscious ambivalence. On a conscious level, Twain despised the aristocracy. But Harbage sees the aristocratic waifs of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *The Prince and the Pauper* as the sublimation of his own "cloudy sense of having been a prince. . . . He never claimed that he, the boy from Hannibal, was really a king or messiah. Instead he claimed that Shakespeare, the boy from Stratford, was really a lord" (116).

A related phantasy identified by Freud was the rescue of an exalted father figure, "the emperor, king or some other great man" (*Choice* 240). He explained this as expressing ambivalence towards the father and, in boys, as a wish that the son himself were his father and giver of another son like himself to his mother. Freud saw the phantasy as the boy's defiant wish to repay father, and tender wish to repay mother, for the debt he owes them for the

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gift of life. Holland uses this explanation to see Freud and the other heretics as unconsciously motivated by a wish to dethrone an internalised father (the denigrated Shakspere), and to rescue an idealized father (Oxford) from oblivion: the phantasy serves to mask hostility and preserve an omnipotent internalised father.

Does it matter? What Freud called unconscious phantasy probably motivates a great deal of anyone's actions, but it matters if a point of view is so driven by phantasy that it's blind to rational argument and testing.

### Stratfordian biography

Can psychological ideas shed rational light on the authorship? Some attempts have been made to link Shakspere's life events psychologically to Shakespeare's works. Freud himself, in his pre-Oxfordian days, linked Hamlet's repressed Oedipal struggle to the deaths of Shakspere's father and son, albeit tentatively (*Dreams* 368). Rank suggested that the start of Shakspere's poetic career was his move to London, because the move expressed his emancipation from his father. Schoenbaum wryly comments that moving to London was a necessary career step in any case (548). The equations are unconvincing and inconsistent. For instance, according to Schoenbaum, Shakspere's work is filled with rage after the death of his brother, gentler after the death of his mother, then joyful after the death of his son (526-8).

Lacking helpful biographical material, some Stratfordians have devised ingenious and arbitrary methods to deduce the psychology of Shakespeare from his works. One of these was Edward Armstrong, who examined the various figures in the plays and from these found a strange obsessiveness in the writer's personality. Caroline Spurgeon saw the plays as dramatic poems, with the poet's meaning primarily expressed through imagery. She collected and categorised Shakespeare's images, believing that this approach would reveal the unconscious of Shakespeare. Schoenbaum points out that her classification of images is arbitrary; she ignores the fact that playwrights use images for dramatic purposes, and she's over-simplistic in her distinction between conscious and unconscious images (546-7). But one of her findings has been helpful in this light: she concluded that the imagery used by Bacon and Marlowe were clearly different from that used by Shakespeare (Spurgeon 12-42).

Schoenbaum discusses another approach in which Harold Grier McCurdy saw the characters in the plays as expressions of Shakespeare's hierarchy of wish-fulfilling phantasies. The portrait of the playwright which emerged is summarised as:

a bisexual personality, predominantly masculine, aggressive, prone to wide fluctuations of mood, . . . Shakespeare tried to suppress his feminine traits and to justify his existence by vigorous, even ruthless action. The homosexual tendency helps to explain the poet's paranoid suspiciousness, his jealous imagining that

other men have been coming between him and the woman or women he loves. Over the years sensuality and self-indulgence grew more and more repugnant to Shakespeare, but he did not easily accept spiritual emotions, “he could not admit the loving-kindness of Christian charity without feeling threatened with overwhelming weakness.” (549)

None of these methods can be tested. But some Oxfordians might claim that McCurdy’s description unwittingly resembles descriptions of Oxford.

### **Oxfordian biography**

Having decided that “Shakespeare” was the Earl of Oxford, Freud believed Oxford’s biography provided fertile ground for life-works links. For example, Hamlet was Oxford because “Oxford . . . lost a beloved and admired father while he was still a boy and completely repudiated his mother, who contracted a new marriage very soon after her husband’s death” (*Outline* 427n). Lear was also Oxford, because: “the figure of the father who gave all he had to his children must have had for him a special compensatory attraction, since Edward de Vere was the exact opposite, an inadequate father who never did his duty by his children” (Jones 24). I find these comments reductionist; they over-enthusiastically link assumptions about Oxford’s psychology to themes in the plays, even when there’s no corroborative evidence. For example, there exists no record that Oxford “repudiated his mother” at all, never mind “completely.”

I’ve become dubious about looking for detailed clues to Shakespeare’s psychology in the plays. All playwrights deal with conflict, and Shakespeare is supreme in showing the contradictions and deep ambiguities of the human condition. His plays explore these to the point of unsolvable paradox; which is one of the reasons why we can find almost any point of view in Shakespeare and why so many books have asserted his support for this or that view: Calvinist, Catholic, feminist, misogynist, humanist, nihilist, democrat, royalist and many more. It seems impossible to separate personal values from the artistic values of Shakespeare as a playwright. For example, I could link Oxford’s history to the unconscious expressed in the plays in the many examples of children and parents lost and found: *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *The Tempest*. Separation-estrangement-reunion-reconciliation could be seen as holding a particular compensatory satisfaction for Oxford. But it is also a universally-appealing dramatic theme and structure. To claim this as evidence of the authorship seems a weak argument, and open to the charge of picking out what fits and ignoring what doesn’t.

## Loss and Creativity

A more solid line of enquiry in my view is to look at psychological theories on creativity and genius. For example, most schools of psychological theory would agree with Freud that the loss of Oxford's father when Edward was twelve is significant. For Freud it was highly relevant because of the Oedipus complex, which he saw as a universal stage of development and "the nucleus of the neuroses" (*Neuroses* 380). According to psychoanalytic theory, the normal developing child wishes unconsciously to have their opposite-sex parent as their own sexual partner. For boys this makes father a rival, which causes intra-psychic conflict because father is also loved. In healthy development the boy comes to accept he cannot have mother, and must seek his own partner. But, for various reasons, many of us get stuck with unresolved Oedipal conflict. One of the saddest and most devastating of these can happen if mother/ father actually does die and the child's unconscious phantasy of removing the rival happens for real. As well as the loss of a loved parent, the child must live with their dreadful "victory" over that parent and the unconscious dread of the dead parent's revenge.

This is relevant for two reasons. First, according to Freud, the Oedipal conflict occurs between about three and five years of age, but then returns in adolescence when it has to be worked through again. Second, Freud saw art as largely an expression of the artist's unconscious desires and conflicts, a way for the artist to express these via the relative safety of art (e.g. *Delusions and Dreams*). In other words, Oxford's loss of his father in adolescence would have had a profound psychological effect which could well have provided a key motivation for intense artistic creativity.

Even if we reject Freud's Oedipal emphasis, Oxford's adolescent loss of his father is still significant. John Bowlby found that attachment was at least as important as libido in development, and that loss of a significant person had a profound and lasting impact especially on children and adolescents. He claimed that this kind of loss is often too traumatic to process consciously, and leads to chronic unconscious "pathological" mourning.

David Aberbach found evidence that unconscious mourning for childhood loss is often later expressed in art. He shows how a very large number of highly creative writers appear to express unconscious mourning, and links this to early losses which they are known to have experienced. From this he hypothesizes that early loss is one of the sources of creativity. He notes the processes of grief often found in literature: anger, guilt, yearning and searching, depression and despair; the need to shape a new identity without the lost person; and, finally, resolution: the ability to trust attachments again. He feels that the yearning and searching of mourning is a particularly deep source of creativity. And creativity can provide "the investment of life with meaning through the salvaging of truth and beauty from the pain and the waste time" (22).

For those suffering unconscious grief, creativity may hold mental illness at bay. “The act of creation in response to pathological grief may be seen as an attempt to reduce the extent of distortion and exaggeration by making the pathology visible, less frightening and more controllable” (142). Similarly, Anthony Storr views creativity as a sign of health and courage, a protective response to the threat of mental breakdown: “Manic-depressive psychopathology may spur a man to create: but manic-depressive illness stops him from doing so, and the same is true of schizophrenia” (213). This “spur” may explain the compulsion to write which many writers express and Shakespeare’s output suggests.

Robert Rogers assumes the orthodox authorship but sees Shakespeare’s tragedies as an expression and resolution of the writer’s struggle to re-structure a self after traumatic loss, with the titular heroes representing the composite self. He sees some of the characters as internalised subjects (e.g. rebellious Hamlet, wishing his father dead, and loyal Laertes, mourning his father, are both aspects of Hamlet/Shakespeare); others are splits of internal objects (the ghost of Hamlet’s father is an idealized father while Claudius is a denigrated father, and Polonius a controlling father). He sees the tragedies as responses to different kinds of loss and assumes they were triggered by Shakespeare’s losses, particularly of his father and son.

Could Shakespeare have been motivated by unconscious grief? He might possibly have experienced unconscious grief for the death of his eight-year-old sister when he was fifteen, or for some unrecorded loss. But his son died when Shakespeare was thirty-two, his father when he was thirty-seven and his mother when he was forty-four. However tragic and disturbing these losses may have been, there seems no reason to suppose he couldn’t grieve for them consciously. However, Bowlby’s work shows that Oxford’s loss of his father when Edward was twelve was a clear predictor of unconscious grief. Also, what Bowlby called the conditions for mourning were not good. “It’s clearly more devastating still for a child than for an adult should he find himself alone in a strange world, a situation that can all too easily arise should . . . the surviving parent decide . . . he should be cared for elsewhere” (290-1). Having lost his father, Edward immediately moved to London, in effect also losing his mother, his sister and his home.

Certainly the writer of *The Sonnets* has a consuming wish to overcome the power of death by immortalizing his beloved young friend in the sonnets themselves. I would suggest that the young man of *The Sonnets*, whoever he may have been historically, was perhaps also at some level a very strong projection of a lost part of the poet himself, the adolescent who is loved by a living father figure. The loving father role which the poet feels towards the young man could be seen as Oxford’s own internalised lost father. (Oxford unconsciously sees the young man as himself, in need of a father.)

## Studies of genius

Of course many children lose their parents and don't become geniuses, and many geniuses didn't lose a parent as a child. But in "Origins of Genius," Dean Keith Simonton reviews many studies and states that they do confirm a tendency for geniuses to have experienced the death of one or both parents at an early age. Several studies found the incidence rates of early parental losses were noticeably higher than those for the general population (Storr 114-5). Felix Post found that 24% of his sample of world-class highly creative writers had lost a parent before the age of fifteen.

Several important studies address the question: what is the typical personality profile of a creative genius? Simonton has put all his findings together to produce one, with the caveat that no individual genius will fit the profile exactly. Along with having superior intelligence, creative geniuses are open to diverse experiences, display exceptional tolerance of ambiguity, seek out complexity and novelty, and can engage in defocused attention for prolonged periods. They display a wide range of interests that extend beyond their immediate domain of creative activity. They are far more likely to be introverted than extroverted, and they may sometimes appear remote, withdrawn, and perhaps even antisocial. They can exhibit tremendous independence and autonomy, often refusing to conform in conventional norms, at times exhibiting a pronounced rebellious streak. They love what they do, showing uncommon enthusiasm, energy, and commitment, usually appearing to friends as "workaholics." They are persistent in the face of obstacles and disappointments, but at the same time, flexible enough to alter strategies and tactics when repeated failure requires it (87-8).

We have no evidence of Shakspeare's personality to check against this profile, but what little we do know of him does not fit. His penchant for business and money-making are not characteristic of artistic geniuses, nor does his "retirement" in 1604 fit the usual profile of compulsive commitment to their creative work. On the other hand, what we know of Oxford's personality tallies well with the profile. He sought out diverse experiences; his correspondence shows a wide range of interests, fierce independence, a rebellious streak; records describe his energy and persistence. But introverted? Well, maybe, the fiery youthful dancer/sportsman notwithstanding: in 1571 Burghley wrote of the twenty-one-year-old Oxford that "by dealing with him I find . . . that there is much more in him of understanding than any stranger to him would think. And for my part I find that whereof I take comfort in his wit and knowledge grown by good observation."<sup>2</sup> Oxford's near absence from records of contemporary life after the early 1590s could suggest an increasing introversion.

Simonton's review of research also supports a link between genius and a degree of psychopathology, although he notes that the psychopathology levels are not high enough to cause the kind of total mental and emotional deterioration that have ended many a creative

career in suicide or incapacity (99). Post found that his world class creative writers frequently showed disabling personality traits and alcoholism, and he found also that 82% had affective disorders of one kind or another. Problematic relationships and broken marriages were especially frequent with the playwrights, and psychosexual problems seem often to have been an underlying problem. The population norm of 11.9% with bi- and homosexual traits was exceeded by the playwrights with 29%. We have no evidence of Shakspeare's mental state, though there are myths of his drinking and it could be argued that his attitude towards his wife was dismissive. Oxford's biographies, on the other hand, reveal messy sexual relationships and accusations of being homosexual.

Along with psychopathology, eminent creators also possess considerable ego-strength: a strong sense of personal adequacy, initiative and self-discipline. Hans Eysenck found that 90% of highly creative writers showed this combination of psychopathology and ego-strength. In Post's sample the figure was 91%. The records certainly show Oxford as a man with a strong ego, but was he also emotionally unstable? He could be extremely and violently angry on occasion. The most obvious psychopathology he showed was a phenomenal lack of financial restraint, even when compared with his peers. There are hints that other people found him at least a little odd. At twenty-three, he was described by a contemporary as "lately grown into great credit, for the Queen's Majesty delighteth more in his personage and his dancing and valiantness than any other. . . . If it were not for *his fickle head* he would pass any of them shortly."<sup>3</sup> Lines in one of Oxford's early poems suggests he could have been troubled by his own "grief of mind":

What plague is greater than the grief of mind?  
That grief of mind that eats in every vein;  
In every vein that leaves such clots behind;  
Such clots behind as breed such bitter pain;  
So bitter pain that none shall ever find,  
What plague is greater than the grief of mind.<sup>4</sup>

A further predictor of genius identified by Simonton may also be relevant: "although the first-born appears inevitably to come out on top . . . creative writers, for example, are more inclined to be later-born children" (133). Shakspeare was his parents' first surviving child; Oxford was his mother's first but his father's second child.

Another prime predictor of genius is an omnivorous reading of books from childhood (120). This raises the question of where Shakspeare could have read books at a young age. Again, the evidence favours Oxford: while both Shakspeare's parents and his children were illiterate and there is no record of his education, the records show Oxford's privileged educa-



tion and deep involvement with literature (Hughes).

In summary I would say that psychology can contribute significantly to the authorship debate. Looking for psychological evidence in the works is difficult and probably misguided. A more solid argument can be built up by linking what is known of Shakspeare and Oxford with studies of the predictors and characteristics of creative geniuses. This evidence is persuasive, and almost all pointing one way. It can't be the smoking gun to resolve the authorship debate, but taken altogether, and as part of the wider debate, the psychological evidence offers strong support to the Oxfordian claim. \_\_\_\_\_ ©

### Notes

- 1 Freud's Oxfordian views were published in: 1900: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, PFL 4; 1925: *Autobiographical study*, PFL 15; 1930: "Goethe prize speech," PFL 14; 1939: *Moses and Monotheism*, PFL 13; 1940: *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, PFL 15; 1957: Letter in 3rd volume of Jones's biography; 1970: Arnold Zweig letters, in Ernst Freud.
- 2 Letter from Burghley to Rutland, 1571 (qtd. in Ward 2).
- 3 Gilbert Talbot in a letter to Burghley (qtd. in Ogburn 455). Talbot, later tenth Earl of Shrewsbury, was Oxford's junior by two years.
- 4 Miller, 599. [See the in-depth discussion of this poem by Dr. Frank Davis, next, p. 167.]

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