

John M. Shahan and Richard F. Whalen Reply:

Professors Ward E.Y. Elliott and Robert J. Valenza say that their findings are “remarkably unscathed, and the counterarguments in tatters.” This will come as a surprise to anyone who has read our previous critiques of their work. If the outcome is so one-sided, why did they find it necessary to write such a long, rambling, unfocused article that doesn’t even address most of the issues we have raised? Why do they bring in historico-literary evidence, and fall back on their “Golden Ear” test, rather than defend their stylometric study purporting to eliminate Oxford as Shakespeare?

Why do they continue to mischaracterize our views, and those of other Oxfordians? And why repeat their phony £1,000 bet that has nothing to do with the issues we have raised? These are smoke screens to hide the fact that their claim to have eliminated Oxford is unwarranted.

At this point we think we’ve made our case against the validity of Elliott and Valenza’s claims quite clear in our preceding articles, “Apples to Oranges in Bard Stylometrics” (TOX 7, 2006), and “Auditing the Stylometricians” (TOX 9, 2009). Much of what they say above repeats their arguments, while ignoring our refutations. Anyone interested in this question should be sure to read them and the rest of this article. We think they show that it’s our critique that is “unscathed,” and their findings that are “in tatters.”

It is unfortunate that their study has had the effect of pre-empting this avenue of research because we believe other stylometric methods would yield different results. We hope, and expect, that other professional stylometricians will eventually come to this realization, and that some of them will be helped by the detailed critique we have provided.

For those of you who have made it through Elliott and Valenza’s 18,000-word response, read this far in our reply, and would now like to gain a more complete understanding of why we have no confidence in their findings and conclusions, read on.

Mischaracterizing Statistics

Elliott and Valenza fail to address the issues we raised in “Auditing” about the proper interpretation of their statistical results (256-60). We observed that Elliott says he has no background in statistics, yet he is the one who actually writes his and Valenza’s articles, with Valenza – the statistician in the Elliott-Valenza duo – almost never the first author (262). We wrote that, “Since the issues we raise deal largely with research design and statistics, we would like to ask him [Valenza] to write a definitive article addressing these issues as first author” (Ibid.). But once again Valenza is named as co-author, and our statistical and design issues remain unaddressed.

For example, we wrote:

Let’s look at one of [Elliott and Valenza’s] typical statements: ‘In terms of quantifiable stylistic attributes, Oxford’s verse and Shakespeare’s verse are light years apart. The odds that either could have written the other’s work are much lower than the odds of getting hit by lightning...’ Most people reading this statement probably assume that (1) it summarizes a broad-based comparison of overall writing styles, (2) it accurately reflects the magnitude of the differences between Oxford’s style and Shakespeare’s, and (3) it gives an indication of the odds that Oxford’s style changed to Shakespeare’s. In fact, none of these three assumptions is correct” (“Auditing,” 256).

We went on to explain in detail why each assumption is incorrect (see points 1-3, 257-8). Elliott and Valenza address none of it, and continue to use similar misleading statements. As another example, we wrote:

[Elliott and Valenza] claim to have calculated, ‘the odds that Oxford could have written’ the Shakespeare canon (2004 title, 323). This is incorrect. They calculated the odds that an early sample of Oxford’s verse is written in the same style as the works in the canon ... The odds that two sets of works are in the same style are not the same as the odds that one person wrote them. Writing styles change over time, and Elliott and Valenza cannot quantify... the odds of change... It isn’t correct to speak of ‘the odds that Oxford could have written,’ when some factors have been omitted. They should speak of odds that their sample tests in the range of the canon, not of odds that Oxford wrote the canon. Any competent statistician would know better than to say such a thing. All they’ve shown is that he didn’t write the canon in his teens and twenties” (“Auditing,” 259).

Mischaracterizing Quality

We also gave examples of Elliott and Valenza mischaracterizing the *quality* of Oxford’s verse (“Auditing,” 250-53). In their response they continue to do so. They ignore five leading experts on Elizabethan poetry whose praise for the quality of Oxford’s verse we quoted, and they cite no experts of their own. Their own expert, Stephen May, as we pointed out, described Oxford as “the premier Elizabethan courtier poet,” and “the chief innovator due to the range of his subject matter and the variety of its execution” (252). Again and again May says how innovative and creative Oxford was relative to his predecessors. Nowhere in *Elizabethan Courtier Poets* does May say anything derogatory about the quality of Oxford’s verse. Elliott and Valenza haven’t backed up their claims about quality any more than they have backed up their claims about statistics.

Out of ten examples of their mischaracterizations that we identified (“Auditing,” 253-56), they responded to just one. In their “Other Car” article (2007), they wrote as follows:

The idea that juvenile work must be sour and clumsy—or, more precisely, the idea that sour, clumsy work must therefore be juvenile—is an old Oxfordian standby, much urged in all the Ogburns’ books (Ogburns, 1952, Ch. 6; Ogburn, 1984, 390-97), and in Joseph Sobran’s book (1997, Appendix 2), no less than in Shahan-Whalen’s article” (146).

We challenged this claim, saying, “We find no such statement in the works of the Ogburns, or Sobran, nor have we made any such statement ourselves. We have raised this issue before, and we hereby challenge Elliott and Valenza to back it up with the specific quotes” (“Auditing,” 254).

They replied with four quotes:

1. Why should we expect a thirteen-year-old to write like a man in his fifties, or to write in a style that would not be in fashion for another thirty years (their 2006 [“Apples”], 119)?
2. This early poem [“Help Fish, Help Fowl”]... gave small hint, unless through its fervor, of the power to come (Ogburn, *This Star of England*, 1952, 12).’
3. [I]t would be surprising if a sonnet a man wrote in his twenties were not markedly inferior to those he wrote in his forties...What the professors are saying is that de Vere had not, in the poems accepted as his, probably all written by the time he was twenty-six, shown the capacity to write Shakespeare’s works. That is a defensible position to take. But it is not one allowed Stratfordians, whose own ‘Shakespeare’ had not by age twenty-six shown the capacity to write verse of any kind...Had de Vere, after writing poetry and prose of such skill and evincing such an attachment to literature as he had by

twenty-six suddenly ceased writing anything at all except letters and written nothing but letters during the latter half of his life, he would be incomprehensible and, as far as I know, unique (Charlton Ogburn, Jr 1984, 390-91).

4. [S]ome critics rank them [Oxford's poems] as brilliant and accomplished, but C.S. Lewis comments: "Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, shows, here and there, a faint talent, but is for the most part undistinguished and verbose." These are, after all, youthful poems. One of them was published in 1573, when Oxford was twenty-three; in another, Oxford refers to himself as a "young man." Nobody knows exactly when any of the others were written; Professor Steven May puts the latest possible date for any of them at 1593, and they were probably written long before that. Some suspect that most of them were written before 1573. Few would call them works of genius. How, then, can they be Shakespeare's? Perhaps because they are early poems (Sobran, 1997, 231).

Elliott and Valenza conclude:

So much for Shahan-Whalen's claim to find no such statement as ours that Oxfordians like to blame the shortcomings of Oxford's surviving poems on his youth. They do. We think it's their strongest defense against evidence like ours, though still not very convincing. It's a mystery to us why they are so insistent on disavowing it and reproving us for referring to it.

Is it any wonder that they didn't include these quotes until we asked for them? It should now be clear that when they say, "The idea that juvenile work must be sour and clumsy—or, more precisely, the idea that sour, clumsy work must therefore be juvenile—is an old Oxfordian standby" (supra), they are deliberately mischaracterizing each of these quotes.

Not satisfied with using these terms themselves as if they were talking about established facts rather than their own subjective opinions, they falsely attribute them to Oxfordians, including us. Note that the quote they give for us doesn't mention quality at all, just style. There's a big difference between saying that Oxford's early verse differs in style, or isn't up to the level of Shakespeare's genius, and agreeing that it is bad, or "sour and clumsy."

Ogburn refers to Oxford "writing poetry and prose of such skill and evincing such an attachment to literature" (Supra). Sobran says that, "Some critics rank [Oxford's poems] as brilliant and accomplished," but he also adds that, "few would call them works of genius" (Supra). This is a far cry from how Elliott and Valenza characterize them.

Then when we object, they mischaracterize both our objection and what they had said. They say, "so much for Shahan-Whalen's claim to find no such statement as ours that Oxfordians like to blame the shortcomings of Oxford's surviving poems on his youth" (supra). No, we do not find any "such statement as theirs," nor have they shown us any. If all they had said was that Oxfordians typically attribute the shortcomings of Oxford's verse *relative to Shakespeare's* to Oxford's youth, we would have had no objection. They suggest we have abandoned this argument, saying, "It's a mystery to us why they are so insistent on disavowing it and reproving us for referring to it" (Supra). They know we haven't disavowed it, and that what we object to is their gross mischaracterization of it.

Again, this is the only one of the many examples of mischaracterization that we listed in "Auditing" to which they chose to respond. If this is the best they could do even after we called it to their attention, it displays a pattern of deliberately misleading argumentation. The alternative that these professors don't understand what they are doing is not credible. The foregoing example is very reminiscent of the following one that they *didn't* address.

We wrote:

Elliott and Valenza have a habit of attributing to others things that they never said. For example, when we demonstrated that Oxford's known songs and poems were written much earlier than they had assumed, we characterized them as 'juvenilia'—a well-known term meaning works created in youth, not a reference to quality. But Elliott and Valenza turned our noun, 'juvenilia,' into the adjective 'juvenile,' meaning immature, childish, infantile, to attack Oxford and then attribute it to us! They say, 'We did not originate the Oxford-as-clumsy-juvenile argument' (146). Nor did we" ('Auditing,' TOX 11, 252-3).

Again, is it credible that they do not know the difference between juvenilia and juvenile? Is it credible to claim that we characterize Oxford's verse as "clumsy" when we've never said that, nor has anyone else we know of except Elliott and Valenza? We don't think so. Keep in mind that these are not aberrations. We have shown that it is a pattern with them. If they are willing to mislead in this way, what does that say about the rest of their work?

Resurrection of the 'Clincher'

Elliott and Valenza start off by comparing six lines of Oxford's early song verse ("Help fish, help foul") to a few lines from Hamlet's death scene. Here's what they say:

Do they sound like the same person? We think not, and so, in a sense, do nine out of ten of the top scorers on our Shakespeare Golden Ear test. Are they a stylometric match with each other? Anything but.

What they don't tell the reader is that *Hamlet* was written in 1601 by their estimate, and Oxford's six lines may very well have been written as much as thirty-eight years earlier, in 1563, when he was 13. Is it reasonable to assume that verses written at such different times, ages, and stages of development should necessarily "sound like the same person" even if they were written by the same person? Can time differences simply be ignored? We don't think so. Not only is the difference in Oxford's age and stage of development enormous, this was a period of rapid change and development for the English language. How could any attuned writer's style have remained unchanged throughout this period?

The reason why some of his early verses don't sound like Shakespeare could easily be because he had not yet *become* Shakespeare. Were the ten "top scorers" on Elliott and Valenza's "Golden Ear test" informed of this issue? They don't say, but we doubt it. They ignored this issue in their earlier study, and so they probably ignored it again.

This isn't the first time we've raised this issue with Elliott and Valenza. In their article, "Oxford by the Numbers" (2004, *Tennessee Law Review*, 323-453), they compared the same lines of Oxford's song verse to play verse in *King Lear* (V.3.122-3). They also referred to the comparison as their "clincher" and concluded, "How could anyone suppose that the two passages were written by the same person?...The styles seem to be worlds apart, with Shakespeare's manifestly more polished and mature." (2004, 393)

Note that they described Shakespeare's verse as being more "mature" than Oxford's. Could it be that the lines in *Lear* sound more "mature" because the author was, in fact, more mature in his 50's than in his teens? Why does the word "mature" exist if we don't expect growth and development over time? In "Apples to Oranges in Bard Stylometrics," we challenged the validity of the comparison (2006, 119), and they did not try to defend it in their subsequent article, "My Other Car is a Shakespeare" (2008).

We are surprised that they would bring it back in the *Hamlet* variation because it is so revealing of how insensitive they are to issues of comparability. Not only do they take Oxford's verses to-

tally out of context, they seem to have no notion that context matters. Even if one assumes that Oxford's verse was written shortly before it appeared in 1576, we are still talking about a difference of twenty-five years, which is not a trivial matter.

In their earlier comparison to *Lear*, Elliott and Valenza said that they “seldom rely on such comparisons because the texts (just like Louis Bénézet's) are seldom selected at random, but more often...to illustrate whatever point the writer is trying to make. Bénézet chose for similarity to Shakespeare; we chose for contrast” (“Oxford by the Numbers,” *Tennessee Law Review*, 2004, 393). So in that article they admit that “Help fish, help foul” is not representative and other verses are more similar to Shakespeare's. This fact should also have been disclosed in their current essay so *TOX* readers would not be misled. Which is more relevant, that one finds some verses that don't sound like Shakespeare, or that one finds others that do? Why do any of his early verses sound like Shakespeare?

The ‘Golden Ear’ Test

Evidently lacking confidence in the definitiveness of their stylometric study alone, Elliott and Valenza report results from an even less rigorous study that they describe as follows:

We asked the 20-odd highest scorers on our Shakespeare Golden Ear test whether they thought the last two stanzas from Oxford's ‘Wing'd With Desire’ (May, 1980 No. 12, 1582, pp 34-35 (not ‘Help, Fish,’ which we believe would have been all too obvious) sounded to them like Shakespeare. These high-scorers, as a group, have been 95% accurate in identifying short passages by Shakespeare. 89% of them said the Oxford passage did not sound like Shakespeare (our 2008, 11).” [Not in their bibliography.]

This gets around none of the issues we raised in connection with their earlier research, and it poses additional problems. They are still comparing a poem that Oxford probably wrote in his twenties—well over a decade before Shakespeare's name first appeared—to mature Shakespeare (“Apples,” 116). Oxford's style could have changed by then. This makes no difference to Elliott and Valenza, but we wonder if their 20 “high scorers” would expect verse written so early to sound just like Shakespeare even if he did write it. We doubt that. It's only relevant that they don't sound alike if one would expect them to.

There is also the issue of whether this short verse passage is any more representative of Oxford's verse than “Help fish, help foul.” In the first place, the sample is too small to be representative of his entire output. Second, Elliott and Valenza have already admitted that “Help fish” was chosen for “contrast” to make a point they were trying to make (*supra*). Why should we assume that the verse was chosen for more benign reasons in this case?

Finally, it's unclear whether the 20 high scorers had “Golden Ears” or golden memories. Were they really recognizing Shakespeare's style, or are they so familiar with the works in the canon that they could tell instantly from memory whether they had heard it before? Does Oxford's verse really sound so different, or did they just not recall having heard it? For all of these reasons, their “Golden Ear” study does nothing to help resolve this issue. All it does is support our view that they have no Golden Eye for methodological flaws.

Documentary Evidence

In their response above, Elliott and Valenza resort to claiming that the documentary evidence points to Shakespeare, not Oxford. We wonder why their multi-year stylometric study was needed if the evidence is so clear. They claim that “[Alan] Nelson and [Stephen] May found plenty of direct evidence associating Shakespeare himself with Shakespeare's poems and plays” but they

mention nothing new, and none of it is incontrovertible. They quote Nelson and May, but much of it isn't even about documentary evidence.

We can debate documentary evidence if they like, but it has little relevance to their study. It's a moot point to try to claim that the documents support the Stratford man, not Oxford. Non-Oxfordian Diana Price found that Shakespeare is the only one of twenty-five alleged writers of the period for whom not one of ten different types of documentary evidence for a literary career was extant (*Unorthodox Biography*, 2001, 302-5). The Stratford man is an extreme outlier in the lack of documentary evidence for his supposed writing career.

Speaking of documents, Elliott and Valenza claim that they "eliminated everyone they tested but Shakespeare". This is misleading. It implies that they tested Shakespeare, but of course they couldn't test "Shakespeare," meaning the Stratford man, because we have no valid sample of anything that he wrote to compare with the works in the canon—no play, no poem, not so much as a letter in his own hand. All we have are six signatures on legal documents, ostensibly his, but possibly by law clerks, each spelled differently and so badly written as to suggest that he was unaccustomed to signing his own name.

Dates and Songs

Elliott and Valenza say their position on whether Oxford's verses are juvenilia and songs is "not all that far" from ours. They admit that, "there is evidence that some of the poems could be songs and juvenilia," but, "it's only some, and not everybody takes it literally or exclusively..." But elsewhere they suggest that it's just Shahan-Whalen's "perceptions" that Oxford "must have" written his poems as a teenager.

No, it is not just our "perceptions." It's documentary evidence that says half are teenage songs. The definitive document is the preface to *The Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1576), as we've pointed out ("Apples," TOX 9, 2006, 114-5) ("Auditing," TOX 11, 2009, 238-9). It's strange that they place such emphasis on documentary evidence, but not in this case. May argues otherwise based on *his* perceptions, but we've explained why his view isn't credible, and our rebuttal has never been addressed ("Apples," TOX 9, 2007, 115).

Elliott and Valenza say "Most of Shakespeare's songs are sweet, sunny, and entertaining, but none of Oxford's", as if a teenager would write like mature Shakespeare.

But apart from that, their characterization of Shakespeare's songs isn't true of all of them. What about those songs Ophelia sings in Act IV of *Hamlet* ("He is dead and gone, lady"); or Desdemona's song of willow in *Othello* ("The poor soul sat sighing ..." IV, iii, 40); or Feste's bitter-sweet song in *Twelfth Night* ("For the rain it raineth every day." V.i.391)? If Shakespeare was "sweet and sunny," but not Oxford, who wrote the great tragedies?

An Error

They found one error of ours. We wrote: "Elliott and Valenza incorrectly assume that all of Oxford's known verse was written between the ages of 22 and 44, i.e., between 1572 and 1594" ("Auditing," 239). What they in fact say is, "his earliest poems at age twenty-two or earlier to his latest, at age forty-four" (2004, 394). So we overlooked "or earlier." The point is that their references to ages 22 and 44 are based on publication dates. We point out that Stephen May, "saw little reason to date any of them later than the 1580s," and "never suggests any was written in the year of publication" ("Auditing," 239). Half of Oxford's verses were written by age 16, and none as late as Elliott and Valenza claim. Oxford's early style could easily have developed gradually over time into Shakespeare's.

Negative Evidence

We wrote that their emphasis on differences rather than similarities “greatly exacerbates the problem of non-comparable inputs, biasing the outcome toward rejection of Oxford,” since “Of course there will be stylistic differences between works written decades apart” (“Auditing,” 234). They didn’t address this problem of a bias toward rejection in “Retro,” focusing instead on problems with similarities. We see this as a major flaw.

Contemporary Praise

We refuted their claim that contemporary praise for the quality and quantity of Oxford’s writing could be ignored because it was “flattery,” just “rumors,” or because many others were praised in a similar fashion. Some praised others in a similar fashion, but not all did. This is an important point, since it indicates that their Oxford verse sample is incomplete. The fact that they did not try to refute this section of “Auditing” (240-3) is very telling.

The Great Leap

Elliott and Valenza ask how Oxford could have made the “Great Leap” to Shakespeare’s output rates, given that only a few youthful verses have come down to us in his name. Our answer: contemporary comments show that he wrote a lot more (“Auditing,” 240-3). He was said to have written comedies, but none exists in his name (Francis Meres, 1598). One court insider even said that he “suppressed” his writings (George Puttenham?, 1589). The possibility cannot be ruled out that these writings are now in the Shakespeare canon.

Comparing Oxford’s output to Shakespeare’s just makes it *look* like the leap is difficult to explain. What’s much harder to explain is how Shakespeare could have made the great leap, starting from nowhere at age 26, with no indication that he had the necessary background. Certainly there’s no sign of the intellectual precocity that is much in evidence for Oxford, and which we normally expect to see in very great geniuses like Mozart and Shakespeare. So how did he do it, and are there any other indications that he had a potential for genius?

Orthodox scholars tend to reduce the question of whether Shakespeare had the background to become a genius to whether he attended the Stratford grammar school. They point out that as the son of a former town official he could attend for free. They assume that he did, and so case closed, as if this were sufficient to account for the genius of Shakespeare. But academic research on genius says otherwise. There should be more, and it just isn’t there.

Dean Keith Simonton, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Psychology at UC Davis, and a leading expert on creativity and genius, describes the characteristics one would expect to find in such a creator in *Origins of Genius, Darwinian Perspectives on Creativity* (1999). The research he summarizes is based on the biographies of other, better-known geniuses (not including Shakespeare because too little is known about him – especially his youth). The main characteristics he found are (1) enriched home environments during childhood, (2) living in diverse locales during childhood, (3) family reversal of fortune – especially loss of one or both parents early in life, (4) self-educated, with unusually broad interests, (5) a tendency to be independent, autonomous, unconventional, rebellious, iconoclastic, (6) later-born children, rather than first-borns or ‘functional’ first-borns, (7) emotionally and psychologically unstable, (8) multicultural and bilingual (*Origins*, Chapters 3 and 4).

Looking over these characteristics, it’s difficult to make a case that the Stratford man fits. He was a functional firstborn, two older siblings having died before he was born. There’s no indication of any enriched home environment. Both of his parents signed with a mark, and the odds are

that there was no book in the house. He evidently lived only in Stratford until at least twenty-one. Yes, his father fell on hard times, but there was no great reversal of family fortune during childhood along the lines of the major ones Simonton describes. Both parents survived into his adulthood. He wasn't multicultural, and nothing shows, or even suggests, that he ever left England. Nothing shows or suggests that he was bilingual. Some just assume he was self-educated, without documentary evidence. Nothing shows that he was particularly unconventional, rebellious, or mentally or emotionally unstable.

Fitting the Profile

Oxford, on the other hand, fits the profile exactly. He was a second-born, with older and younger sisters. He had a very enriched home environment, including a troupe of players. One of his uncles was the translator of the *Aeneid*, and another of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He had outstanding tutors, living in the household of one of them in two different locales. He matriculated at Cambridge University at age eight, but spent only a few months there. He received honorary degrees from Cambridge and Oxford, and then went to law school.

His father died when he was twelve, and he became a royal ward and was sent to London. His legitimacy was challenged, and others managed his earldom until he was twenty-one. By the time he regained control of the Oxford earldom, it was already greatly diminished. These traumatic events were a major reversal of family fortune for the heir to an earldom.

He spent over a year in Europe, mostly Italy, learning Italian and becoming multicultural. He had a broad range of interests, becoming a patron of art, music, literature, and theater. He was fiercely independent and at times rebellious, often in trouble with the authorities. He was described as a volatile personality, and seems to have been emotionally unstable.

Which of these men seems more likely to have made the Great Leap to literary greatness? The man who doesn't fit the profile, and had no apparent preparation to become a genius? Or the one who does fit, and whose writings were highly praised before, during and after? The answer seems clear, but Elliott and Valenza say their writing styles don't match, and this disqualifies him. We say they are juvenilia, and his writing style could have changed.

Is there anything in Oxford's biography that sheds light on how it could have happened? Simonton notes that literary genius is associated with multiculturalism and bilingualism. He quotes historian Arnold Toynbee, who spoke of a "creative minority" who "withdraw and return relative to the majority culture." He also explains that, "Intensive exposure to different languages helps to build the cognitive basis for creativity ..." (*Origins*, 121-2).

Oxford's sixteen months on the Continent, during 1575-6, evidently affected him greatly. After he returned, he was so enamored of all things Italian that he was lampooned for his Italian clothes (Gabriel Harvey, *Works*, 83-6). He broke with his wife after returning, and started hanging around with "lewd friends," probably writers. He was separated from his wife for five years, and it was during this time that Gabriel Harvey addressed the Queen and court, saying about Oxford, "how greatly thou dost excel in letters," and that he had seen "many" of his verses in Latin and English. It now seems likely that all sixteen of his known poems were written before he left for Italy in 1575. So here is a scenario in which he underwent an experience likely to impact his style *after* he wrote all his known works.

In this scenario, not only did he have a decade and a half for his style to evolve, but the development may have been in full swing shortly after his return from the trip in which he became fully bilingual and multicultural for the first time. One clear indication of the magnitude of the impact of his travels is that half of the non-history plays are set in Italy. Why mischaracterize the

idea that writing styles evolve with a “grub-to-butterfly” insect metaphor when we know so much about literary genius, and what we know fits so well?

Elliott and Valenza say the idea that Oxford’s style changed over time is “pulled from a hat,” resting “not on any actual evidence on the record...but on a wholly conjectural and to us wildly improbable scenario” (2004, 394). It is not pulled from a hat. Contemporary praise is “evidence on the record” that he wrote more than the small sample of verse that has come down to us in his name, and that he also wrote comedies. The view that genius develops over time is widely accepted. What’s pulled from a hat is Elliott and Valenza’s claim that stylistic development is “conjectural.” Shakspeare has none of the background characteristics expected in a literary genius; there’s no sample of his writing in his hand; and nobody claims to have seen him write; yet his developmental leap isn’t conjectural?

Shakspeare was still in Stratford with a wife and three children in 1585, at age twenty-one. Nothing shows that he ever wrote anything, or had ever acted in a play, up until that time. How did he manage to become both a great actor and a great writer in such a short time? These are two very different, demanding professions, yet he supposedly did both at once. And the time during which it allegedly happened is a blank referred to as the “lost years.”

Shakespeare was also more than just a great writer; he was both a poet and a playwright. Elliott and Valenza named a dozen poets who wrote polished, publishable poems by age twenty-one (“Other Car,” 147) ignoring the fact that Oxford wrote polished, publishable verses by the age of sixteen, but no poet-playwright who wrote great plays while young. Great dramatists are rare and tend to be older, with wide experience of life and in theater. Even allowing for some synergies among them, how did Shakspeare manage to find time to become a great actor, great poet and great playwright, and all this during his twenties? Oxford, on the other hand, was in his forties when the plays and poems began to appear.

The Age Issue

The age issue is not new. The author sounds older than Shakspeare in several sonnets. Sonnets 1-17, in which the author urges a young nobleman, probably Henry Wriothesley, to marry and reproduce himself, are generally thought to have been written in about 1590. Sonnet 2 begins, “When forty winters shall besiege thy brow.” Oxford turned forty that year, Shakspeare twenty-six. In Sonnet 10 the author scolds the youth as selfish, then says, “Make thee another self, for love of me, / That beauty still may live in thine or thee.” How could the young Shakspeare have gotten away with addressing an earl in such terms? But it makes sense if it was Oxford – Wriothesley’s prospective father-in-law at the time.

In Sonnet 22 the author writes:

My glass shall not persuade me I am old,
So long as youth and thou are of one date;

In Sonnet 37:

As a decrepit father takes delight
To see his active child do deeds of youth,
So I, made lame by fortune’s dearest spite, [Oxford was said to be lame, not Shakspeare]
Take all my comfort of thy worth and truth;

Sonnet 62:

But when my glass shows me myself indeed,
Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity,

Sonnet 73:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

Sonnet 138:

Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,

All of these sonnets support the view that the author was middle-aged, like Oxford, not Shakspeare. For all of these reasons, it is much more likely that Oxford, not Shakspeare, made the leap. The idea that Shakspeare did it in his twenties, with no background, is simply not credible. Oxford has all of the characteristics one would expect, including the time to have done it. The timing of his trip to Italy helps to explain how his style could have changed so much.

Why would he have concealed his identity? We don't now for sure, but it is not unusual for great writers to use pseudonyms—especially during times as turbulent as those were. Oxford's position at court suggests possible political considerations. But in any case, the author himself said that he did not expect his name to be remembered (Sonnet 81), didn't want it to be remembered (Sonnet 72), and that he could immortalize others, not himself (Sonnet 81). He asked that his name “be buried where my body is, / And live no more to shame nor me nor you. / For I am shame'd by that which I bring forth” (Sonnet 72). None of this makes any sense, unless his name wasn't yet associated with his works at the time. He says repeatedly that he is in disgrace, and beyond recovery (Sonnets 29, 37, 112, 121). Is it hard to imagine that such a man would want his name kept separate from his works?

Disparaging Words

In their Table 1 Elliott and Valenza show the frequencies of our use of the words mischaracterize,” “ignore,” “bias,” and an “other” category in our last two critiques of their work, “Apples” and “Auditing.” They found 34 in the former article, and 49 in the latter, but none for themselves. From this they conclude: (1) Shahan-Whalen are “much more fond of these targeted disparagements than we are,” (2) “Auditing” shows a higher rate than “Apples,” suggesting the involvement of “another hand...,” and (3) “Shahan-Whalen [have]... turned up the heat to bridge-burning level, hoping to force us out”.

None of these conclusions is correct. First, we have not used these terms because we are “fond” of them, but, rather, because they accurately describe what we were writing about. It gives us no pleasure to be using such terms. We would gladly just walk away from this argument if we thought it was not important; but we think it is very important, and so we want to provide an accurate description of what is going on for the benefit of our readers. We think that's what we did in both articles. The terms cited are never used gratuitously.

In every instance we give specific, often multiple, examples of what we were referring to. “Au-

“diting” has ten examples (253-6) of mischaracterization of what we wrote in “Apples.” In some of these, what we actually said is the opposite of what Elliott and Valenza claim. We give eight examples of Elliott and Valenza mischaracterizing with statistics (256-60). But rather than address the substance of all these issues (except the one we quote above), they give counts of selected words in a table, taking them out of the context we provided. This is an additional example of the kind of deceptive practice we’ve been talking about.

Second, the higher rate of use of these terms in “Auditing,” is in response to their article, “My Other Car is a Shakespeare.” Their use is warranted. No “other hand” was involved.

Third, if anyone decided to “turn up the heat to bridge-burning level,” it was Elliott and Valenza, with their decision to write “Other Car,” an article full of mischaracterizations. Now they contend that the problem is not their own intellectual dishonesty, but, rather, that we had the bad manners to call them on it. We think we did exactly the right thing. Nobody has a right to engage in intellectually dishonest practices and have it ignored. If they are so aggrieved at this that they now choose to end the dialogue, that’s up to them.

Finally, notice Elliott and Valenza’s repeated use of the epithet “denier” to refer to anti-Stratfordians in “Retro.” (“Shakespeare deniers,” “Shakespeare-denier critics,” “denier literature,” “offbeat denier terms,” “denier groups,” “deniers’ despised country grain dealer,” “denier tracts,” “devout deniers.”) This term isn’t used in their previous articles. How ironic that they start now, in an article in which they say we use disparaging words.

£1,000 Bets

In their essay Elliott and Valenza renew their £1,000 bet that we couldn’t find “an untested play not by Shakespeare that would fit within [their] Shakespeare profiles” even though in “Auditing” we rejected their bet as “phony.” It’s phony because accepting it would entail accepting their methods as valid, when they know we reject their methods. And it’s phony because it has nothing to do with the issues we’ve raised in our critiques.

Of course their methodology will not identify any untested play as being by Shakespeare. Their methodology won’t even identify several plays in the First Folio as Shakespeare’s. All their methodology really does is identify plays written in Shakespeare’s mature style. It can’t determine whether an unknown play in another style could be early Shakespeare. Since their methods are flawed, why should we accept a bet that assumes they are valid?

Yet they say this: “Shahan, Whalen, and TOX editor Michael Egan, have all denounced our bet as “phony,” and offered their own counter-bets reflecting their own priorities. But we can’t help noticing that, after all the bluster, none of them has taken us up on ours, nor has anyone else. Does that tell us something?” Yes, it tells you that their bet is phony, for the reasons given above, which we also gave in “Auditing” and they haven’t refuted. We also think it’s phony of them to expect that anyone would accept a bet they see as phony.

Their bet is a red herring, issued in the form of a taunt, to distract attention from the real issue that has been in dispute. We’ve challenged their claim to have eliminated Oxford. We’ve never claimed to have discovered any misattributed play written by Shakespeare. Their proposed bet has nothing to do with the flaws we have identified in their methods.

In response to their bet, we challenged Elliott and Valenza to prove their claim to have eliminated Oxford to “a panel of neutral experts knowledgeable in quantitative methods and critical analysis, without restrictions on evidence or arguments,” with the burden on them to prove their claim “beyond a reasonable doubt” (“Auditing,” 264).

This they reject, and especially the idea that the burden should be on them to prove their claim

beyond a reasonable doubt. They accuse us of trying to “shift the burden of proof to [them], and make sure it’s heavy” as if the burden should be on us to disprove their claim beyond a reasonable doubt, or, otherwise, Oxford is eliminated. They say it’s “a standard, lawyerly trick... to try to keep their own side’s weaknesses off the agenda and the other side’s on” (Ibid.). Notice that here they admit to weaknesses, and weaknesses sufficient that they wouldn’t want to have the burden of proving their claim. Knowing what we do, we can’t say that we blame them, but it’s a very telling admission.

It is also very odd. It’s standard procedure for the side making a claim to carry the burden of proving it. Elliott and Valenza claim to have eliminated Oxford. We dispute that claim. Why should the burden of proof be on us? Since when does anyone making a claim have a right to have it accepted until proven wrong? It’s always been the other way around as far as we know – in debates, legal proceedings, and science. Why are they asking for an exception in their case? This doesn’t bespeak a high level of confidence in their findings.

In the 1987 moot court hearing before U.S. Supreme Court Justices Blackmun, Brennan and Stevens at American University, Acting Chief Justice Brennan ruled that the burden of proof was on the Oxfordians, since they were challenging a well-established tradition (PBS Frontline, Shakespeare Debates). So Oxfordians had to prove both that Shakspere didn’t write the works and Oxford did – both beyond a reasonable doubt, and in a short timeframe. The burden was heavy, but not unreasonable as a test of an Oxfordian claim.

But now the shoe is on the other foot. Elliott and Valenza claim to have finally resolved this longstanding controversy. They say that they have “settled the Authorship Question conclusively, at least for the claimants they tested, and ruled out all but Shakespeare”. But when we raise serious questions about their methods and challenge them to prove their claim beyond a reasonable doubt before a panel of experts, they accuse us of “lawyerly tricks,” and evidently want to shift the burden to us. Oxfordians bore the burden of proving their authorship claim. Elliott and Valenza should do no less.

They also say that, “If any of these bets are phony, it’s Shahan-Whalen’s and Egan’s, where the decision is subjective and the outcome depends mostly on who gets on the panel and who doesn’t, not ours, where the tests are highly replicable and the computer doesn’t know or care whether or not you’re a believer.” They say their bet is “remarkable, not just in that no one has taken us up, but in that, if anyone did, it would not be hard to tell who won, who lost, and by how much (our 2004, 360-61). Ours is like weighing something. Shahan-Whalen’s and Egan’s are like setting up a beauty contest with full knowledge that the choice of judges will determine the outcome” (Ibid).

This, of course, is nonsense. In the first place, although it’s true that a computer “doesn’t know or care whether or not you’re a believer,” the computer is not what is at issue here. The issue is what goes into the computer, and that is under Elliott and Valenza’s control. Computers do what they are told to do with the programs and data that are fed into them. The validity of what comes out of a computer depends entirely on what went in up front.

Their bet asks us to assume all of their inputs are valid, and passively accept their output. All of our issues are about the inputs to their computer, and their bet ignores all of them.

It is extremely disingenuous for them to claim that their bet is like “weighing something.” A scale is easily calibrated to give accurate readings, but a computer is a different matter. One must assess the inputs, and to do that one needs to know everything about the study. Before accepting their output, we would want a panel of experts to examine their inputs. Having experts examine their inputs seems to be the last thing Elliott and Valenza want. They say their tests are “highly replicable,” and they are—highly replicable, and flawed.

Second, stylometrics is supposed to be scientific, involving measurement and statistics. Science is supposed to involve standards, and standards should be objectively verifiable, not subjective. In challenging Elliott and Valenza to prove their claim to have eliminated Oxford before a panel of experts, we have called for an objective review of whether they have met the standards one normally expects to be met when one makes scientific claims. The panelists chosen should have suitable qualifications and experience to play that role. If so, it would be an objective process, and not a subjective ‘beauty contest’ as they say. If science isn’t about convincing experts of the validity of one’s results, what’s it about?

But we agree that such a panel would be unworkable if they insist on including “leading orthodox authorities such as Steven May or Alan Nelson” on the neutral panel of experts. Neither is neutral, and neither has expertise in any relevant scientific discipline. If these are examples of who they would want, they do not want an independent review. The reason for this should be obvious to anyone who has read “Apples” and “Auditing.”

Summary

Elliott and Valenza’s claim to have “settled the Authorship Question conclusively” is unconvincing because they’ve failed to back up their claim to have eliminated Oxford. Although they are the ones making the claim, they don’t want the burden of proving it. They mischaracterize their statistical results, and then fail to respond when called on it. They compare Oxford’s early verse to mature Shakespeare, ignoring the age difference. They look only at differences, exacerbating the problem of non-contemporaneous inputs. They ignore contemporary comments about the quantity and quality of Oxford’s writing.

They denigrate the quality of Oxford’s early verse, ignoring the views of leading experts. They mislead TOX readers into thinking their personal opinions are based on their study. They mischaracterize the views of Oxfordians by claiming that we say Oxford’s verse is bad—“sour and clumsy”—when we don’t. Only Elliott and Valenza describe it that way. They resort to other evidence that has nothing to do with their original stylometric study. They challenge us to a phony £1,000 bet on a subject unrelated to the question in dispute. In sum, Elliott and Valenza are trying desperately to defend a flawed study, and it shows.

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