

Editorial

Good Deeds in a Naughty World

The case for and against Oxford or anyone else as the author of the *Collected Works* and several apocryphal plays, has lately been dominated by the stylometricians and their acolytes. Refuting or confirming their attributions often requires the close scrutiny of page after page of numbers and elemental word lists, claimed percentages, unfamiliar statistical rubrics and other bloodless practices not always congenial to the literary mind. Nevertheless, many scholars have risen to the challenge, leading to highly detailed arguments about apparently minor points.

From the outside the process may resemble academic bickering of the pettiest kind. It's made even less attractive by the not-infrequent asides (snide asides) insinuating that those who differ are possessed of limited intelligence or, the even more damning academic charge, culpable ignorance.

The reasons for this trough in the debate are clear and derive in the first instance from a weariness with post-Leavisian "Theory Discourse." The practice began in the early seventies and continues exhaustedly in some quarters even today. Its names are legion: Saussure, Derrida, Lacan, Lukács, Benjamin, etc.—the inventory could be extended, as could a catalogue of its opaque terminology. By the nineties readers had become so fatigued with squabbles over subjective nuance and shades of meaning—Derrida once appended a 30,000-word footnote of associations which ran like a ticker tape across the bottom of his book from its introduction to the end—that the apparent tangibility of numbers was greeted with relief. Here at last floated a straw of certainty in the maelstrom of mere opinion.

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Yet as many have observed, stylometrics is by no means a precise or objective tool. Donald Foster and Brian Vickers, for example, used similar methodologies to arrive at opposite conclusions about the authorship of *A Funeral Elegy*. The same goes

for the many arbitrary criteria other numerical scholars deploy, most notably Ants Oras, who in 1960 published a seminal study, *Pause Patterns in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*. This daunting monograph records in minute detail the type and positioning of punctuations in several hundred plays of the period. Forty tiny-print pages of tables and "adjusted" graphs summarize the results. On their authority more recent scholars have claimed to attribute the unattributed, date the undated, and demonstrate that as dramatic speech grew more natural, pauses moved up the line, eventually spilling over into split or shared iambics (a new form of punctuation).

There's truth in some of it, but a closer examination of *Pause Patterns* and many similarly revived studies of the '30s and '40s, whose conclusions are increasingly proffered as axioms by attributionists like Vickers and MacDonald P. Jackson, reveals highly suspect methodologies and the unreliable conclusions that led to their obscurity in the first place. Exposing these limitations, however, takes time, tedious application and the close analysis of books deservedly long out of print. So the argument is pushed one step further back, often leading to academic impatience and the desire to move on. *Vita brevis!* Stylometrics thus frequently triumphs by inertia.

The only justification for such expenditures of anti-energy on our part, the queriers of these stylomeretricious outcomes, is the importance of the tripod question, who wrote Shakespeare, and what did he write, and when did he write it? We think the answers are important—indeed none more so in contemporary Shakespeare studies. Getting the facts right is not only a matter of simple historical justice. Identifying the plays’ true author(s) inevitably shines a fresh light upon their meanings, general and particular.

A full response—that is, one capable of winning general consent—requires types and categories of evidence beyond word counts. Shakespeare’s acknowledged plays share themes, ideas, characters and verbal parallels, particular ways in which actions are constructed, literary style (the felt presence of the author), ranges and types of knowledge, and more.

Truth v. Truth

Ancient wisdom has always recognized that truth cannot contradict truth. Where it apparently occurs both sides must of course be checked. As Carl Sagan remarked, extraordinary claims must be supported by extraordinary evidence. *The Origin of Species* is a classic instance as, incidentally, are Looney’s and Ogburn’s contributions to the authorship debate.

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Yet precisely unlike the scrupulous foregoing, stylometric detail when checked often reveals itself wanting both in practice and in theory. In a real science, anomalies are especially important. They must be explained and integrated or their containing hypotheses revised—thus Darwin and not Lamarck, Copernicus but not Ptolemy, etc. Anomalies are among the most significant data the non-Stratfordian camp would be wise to insist upon, no matter how frustrating the other side’s gestures of dismissal.

Polite advocacy is no easy task. The attribution to Shakespeare of the clearly heterogeneous play, *The Double Falsehood* (Arden, 2010), for instance, hardly survives scrutiny, yet reasonable objections continue to be swept aside, a euphemism for “ignored.” Similarly, the case against Shapiro’s *Contested Will* (Simon and Schuster, 2010), which every reader knows fails to answer its own question, “Who wrote Shakespeare?” has not prevented the repeated claim that the matter is now closed. Conventional wisdom is thus vindicated by a species of Colbertian “truthiness”—asseverations dubious or even counter-factual are re-affirmed because politically it’s convenient that they be so.

Whatever their quotidian beliefs, commentators of this sort constitute indeed the “tea party” wing of the Shakespeare establishment. They’ll shout you down, refuse to publish letters or other statements, denounce, silence, jeer, disregard and of course invoke tradition. Instead of looking through Galileo’s telescope they seize upon Nelson’s. The continued existence of *The Oxfordian*, an almost unique publication in its willingness to objectively examine all sides, is thus of critical academic and intellectual importance. We predict that ultimately our modest journal, a home for heterodoxy, will be hailed as the small light that continued to shine in the dark, like a good deed in a naughty world.