

Introduction

The Oxfordian Mind

This special issue of *The Oxfordian* has a three-fold purpose. First, it serves as an historical anthology of some of the best essays and book chapters dealing with the difficult and contentious matter of Who Wrote Shakespeare? The intended audience includes conventional Shakespeare scholars, college students, and curious literary amateurs—anyone who has ever wondered whether there is validity to what seems at first blush a ridiculous proposition. That Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare is as surely established, one might say, as that *Huckleberry Finn* was written by Mark Twain.

A second audience is made up of so-called non- or anti-Stratfordians. The community is larger than one might expect and includes agnostics, Baconians, Marlovians, Derbyites, Florians, Sackvilleans and indeed a host of others, perhaps 50 or more, whose very plenitude muddies an otherwise reasonably clear pond. What's agreed is that William Shaksper or Shakspere of Stratford-Upon-Avon, as he mostly spelled his name, could never have authored the dramas and poetry attributed to him, given the village's educational and cultural limitations. But after that it's a free-for-all, with some individuals and sects—the religious analogy comes easily in the world of Bardolatry—reserving their most spiteful hisses for their intellectual allies rather than the common foe.

The third group comprises Oxfordians, who will now have at hand a convenient collection of classics, together with the most up-to-date work supporting Looney's inspired hypothesis. Entries published before 1920, the year of Looney's study, are obviously not by Oxfordians, though they have earned honorary inclusion because of the indispensable way they prepared the ground or supplied critical insights. Also reprinted are one or two overlooked gems, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's introduction to Delia Bacon's *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* (No. 3), and some new work, especially Alexander Waugh's examination of "the sweet swan of Avon" (No. 11), Roger Stritmatter's analysis of De Vere's bible (No. 9), and Robin Fox on Shakespeare's, that is Oxford's, grammar-school education (No. 10).

Bardolatry

The analogy with religion is unfortunately apt, especially among Stratfordians, the established interest. Nor will they brook dissent, as Rev. Paul Edmundson, a senior Shakespeare cleric and real-life Anglican priest, makes clear in his editorial contribution to their recent appeal to faith and authority, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* (2013). The title itself is revealing. Shakespeare's plays and poems are treated as quasi-sacred texts with extensive commentary and exegesis subject to revision as the occasion serves. He has become more collaborative of late, explaining the extraordinary range of his knowledge and other authorship difficulties.¹ However, the point once made is set aside and the high-level exegesis continues unhindered.

The modern Bardic cult enjoys a holy city complete with birthplace, relics and a spurious narrative offered straight-face as the truth. The fact that it's all made up is unimportant: everything's

¹ Bate and Rasmussen (eds): *William Shakespeare and Others: Collaborative Plays* (Palgrave 2013)

part of the religion and the magic stone must be touched or at least viewed. Fame and money have bought magnificent theatrical cathedrals, with regional chapels and festivals. Worshippers from all over the world make regular *hajj* to these big and little Meccas, usually during the summers.

But “if you want to argue with me,” said the atheist Voltaire, “you must define your terms.” Shakespeare’s priests and their acolytes are usually called Stratfordians because they hold that the traditional creation myth is true, despite the lack of particulars. Indeed, they go so far as to insist that Shakespeare is not to be understood without an appreciation of his birthplace, a proposition non-Stratfordians are ready to concede. Among the frustratingly ignored data are the extensive records of his business dealings in the town, grain hoarding and tax collecting (but avoiding his own), enclosing public lands, and even like Shylock lending money at usurious rates then ruthlessly pursuing his debtors in the courts. All this can be easily verified in the documents lovingly preserved in the Stratford Records Office, the undeniable real-life behaviors of someone completely at odds with the broad humanity of the man who could write

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop’d and window’d raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just

.—*King Lear* III. iv. 28–36

None of this fazes the hard-core fundamentalists who don’t want to be confused by the facts. They will assure you that the 13-year old Shaksper perforce dropped out of the Stratford Grammar school, presumably at the top of his class, with the equivalent education of a first-year modern college student. Yes, his command of Greek and Latin was that of a 21st-century Harvard sophomore: thus the young William Shaksper of Stratford village, population 1,500, ca. 1576.² We might add that remarkably enough his teachers observed nothing unusual about this, failed to recognize his world-class intellect and were unimpressed by his writing ability.

In fact nobody in Stratford remembered anything about the boy apart from the fact that he wanted to marry Anne Whately but got Anne Hathaway pregnant and so had to marry her. They had twins a few months later. Unsurprisingly, he ran off to London as soon as he could and when he died left her nothing in his will apart from his second-best bed, snigger. For some reason no one recalled that he’d been a popular poet and playwright in London who had actually performed before the queen, several times. Instead they made him a monument, as one of the town’s wealthiest men, holding a sack of grain.

The inflated claims for Stratford’s grammar school reflect the impact of Oxfordian research demonstrating beyond contention that the playwright was a highly educated man with an extraordinary knowledge of the Greek and Latin classics, and just about everything else. Jonson’s

² Carol Chillington Rutter, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, p. 134.

famous remark that he had small Latin and less Greek is unaccountably misleading. They try to explain his actual classical learning by speculating—for there is nothing in the record—that he may have spent some time in the army and/or navy, or worked as a law clerk, or perhaps as a “schoolmaster in the country.” Books and sailors interviewed in local taverns provided all the local details needed for his Italian plays, though why he chose to set so many in a country he had never visited is simply one of the mysteries of genius. Thus everything is satisfactorily accounted for.

Outside this tight, academic church, almost literally beyond the pale, are the anti- or non-Stratfordians, literary agnostics (and in some cases atheists) whose view is that someone other than the grain dealer from Stratford must be responsible. Such apostasy is severely punished, often by pay cuts or non-promotions/appointments or, in serious cases, actual expulsion from the groves of academe. Dissenters are held in the same hostile regard as Darwinians by religious fundamentalists.

A History of Doubt

As we have noted, questions about Shaksper’s authorship of the plays and poems existed from the first. Greene’s famous *Groatsworth of Witte* (1592) appears to accuse him of plagiarism, and Jonson’s celebrated 1623 dedication to the Folio is capable of more than one reading and some corrections of fact (see No. 11, below). Following the closure of the theaters in 1642 and the Great Fire of London 24 years later, which very likely destroyed valuable records, including perhaps forever-lost plays like *Cardenio* or *Loves Labours Won*, awareness and interest in his work faded. Both were famously revived in September 1769 by the actor David Garrick, who organized the first Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford, laying the foundation for his modern reputation.

The momentum was caught in 1778 when the scholar Edmund Malone, friend of Johnson, Boswell and Sir Joshua Reynolds, who painted his portrait in the English National Gallery, produced *An Attempt to Ascertain the Order in Which the Plays Attributed to Shakspeare Were Written*. Note the phrase, “the plays attributed to Shakespeare,” suggesting that the great man entertained some doubts about some of them himself. What’s wrong with *An Attempt to Ascertain the Order in Which the Plays of Shakspeare Were Written*? Malone’s influential study, which is still cited, included the poet’s first biography by drawing on the Works themselves. *An Attempt* was so successful and yet so full of evidentiary and logical holes that, as education and literacy spread, others began taking a fresh and skeptical look at the data. The results were so unsettling that the exercise is literally forbidden by today’s fundamentalists—we are not allowed to infer anything about Shakespeare from his works.³ He is unique among authors in this regard, cultural and personal contextualizing being a standard procedure among modern literary critics.

By the mid-19th century authorship skepticism was prominently on the table, especially in America. Nathaniel Hawthorne (No. 3) wrote a vigorous introduction to Delia Bacon’s pioneering *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded* (1857), and Walt Whitman opined that the Works were probably composed by one of the “wolfish earls” around Elizabeth—a prescient insight. Sir George Greenwood, in *The Shakespeare Problem Restated* (1908) and Mark Twain (No. 4), with his magnificent and irresistible *Is Shakespeare Dead?* (1909), summed up the growing uncertainty. These agnostic classics bear reading even today.

³ James Shapiro: *Contested Will : Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (Simon & Schuster, 2010) p. 261ff.

The field was ready for a conqueror, and he appeared in the unlikely form of a vaguely eccentric schoolmaster with a funny name, John Thomas Looney. As a Shakespeare teacher he had gradually become convinced, along with Twain and others, that the standard model could not possibly be correct. There were too many anomalies and gaps and far too much willing suspension of disbelief on the part of those who adopted it.

Looney took a significant new step. He set the Shaksper hypothesis aside and instead asked himself who the author would need to be, as it were, to qualify as “Shakespeare.” If we look objectively at his Works, what do they tell us about him? That he was intelligent and poetically gifted?—of course, overwhelmingly so. Educated? For sure, and not ordinarily. He knew everything, and indeed more than he should, including heliocentrism, Marxist political economy, the circulation of the blood, Freudian slips, the Oedipus complex, Repetition Compulsion, and more.

Looney noted that none of these things was taught at the Stratford Grammar School. The playwright must therefore have been a mighty autodidact with access to a huge library or libraries, made repeatedly available to him some time after his arrival in London. But in late 16th-century England these were found only in the private collections of the high and mighty and there are no records, as there surely ought to be, of a common player being given the run of some great lord’s library over many years. The plays reveal that their author could read Latin and Greek fluently, spoke Italian, polite and demotic French, and also some Spanish. His historical research was extensive and thorough beyond any of his contemporaries—it has been described as “academic.” He knew the topography and architecture of northern Italy better than many of today’s Stratfordian scholars, was acquainted with war, the army and the navy (including shipwrecks), understood tournaments, chivalric challenges, and aristocratic sports and pastimes such as bowls, falconry and real (royal) tennis. This is not a game you learn by conversation. It is played literally in the “court” of a great house. One of the ways you score is by hitting the ball through an upper window. He knew how queens and kings and earls spoke to one another in public and, more revealingly, in private. He understood the way court politics and conspiracies went, and what were the subtle limits of familiar address between master, mistress and servant. He knew what a nurse might say to her princess and how her charge might respond. Above all, he was highly trained in the law.

Looney began looking around among Elizabethans for the individual these qualities implied. He even profiled him, like a modern-day detective. His “Shakespeare” had to be, among other things, a recognized poet and dramatist, and an obviously intelligent, educated and widely traveled man whose abilities were recognized by his peers. He moved easily in aristocratic circles, loved literature and especially the drama. He was Lancastrian in his politics, a wavering Catholic by religion and ambiguous about women, by which Looney meant, but could not say in 1920, that he was bi- or homosexual. Looney finally found his man in the seventeenth earl and published his results triumphantly in *‘Shakespeare’ Identified* (No. 5).

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Like modern Darwinians, Looney’s successors take his work only as a starting point. While all accept his broad hypothesis as correct, there is disagreement about many details. In the past century the theory has been modified and qualified, corrected and supplemented. There are minor schools, such as the so-called Prince Tudorites, who think (incorrectly, in our view) that Oxford and Elizabeth I were incestuous lovers and Henry Wriothesley their doubly incestuous issue. Un-

fortunately this was the melodramatic plot-line adopted in the movie *Anonymous*, which has done so much damage to the Oxfordian cause. It made for good theater but completely discredited the movement in the eyes of the curious: *Shakespeare in Love* comes across as more real.

In many ways Oxfordians are the last of the gentlemen scholars and ladies who graced the Victorian moment. Halliwell-Phillips was their prototype, the inspired amateur independently following his/her interests where they led and often coming up with extraordinary discoveries. Most Oxfordians are amateurs of this sort, self-taught literary scholars and critics, drawn largely from the professions—lawyers, doctors, sociologists, historians, physicists.

This has had plus and minus effects, since minds from other disciplines can be both untrained in literary theory, yet rigorously educated in their own profession's ways of thinking. While overlooking some things, they recognize anomalies, absences and implications beyond the abilities of most English professors, speaking as an English professor, with interesting results. One example, is A.J. Pointon's *The Man who was Never Shakespeare* (Parapress 2011), among the most neatly argued recent studies. The author is an engineer and physicist. Another is Robin Fox's *Shakespeare's Education* (Laugwitz Verlag, 2012). Fox is a prominent sociologist/anthropologist. (See No. 11).

Simply because they are literary amateurs, Oxfordians often take the research road less traveled, and make remarkable discoveries. A good example is Katherine Chiljan, whose *Shakespeare Suppressed* (2011) introduces readers to a variety of obscure and even forgotten texts capable of illuminating the general question and many of its particulars. Diana Price's *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (Greenwood Press 2001, 2012) is perhaps the outstanding case of new and careful research with dramatic implications for authorship studies. Though she is not an Oxfordian, Price's work *in ipso* supports the hypothesis, demanding answers from the world of orthodox scholarship that it has yet to receive.

Oxfordianism's positives include its welcome capacity to force conventional scholars to re-examine their assumptions. Among them, as we've seen, is the matter of Shakespeare's education, his professionalism in legal matters and his detailed knowledge of Italy and all things Italian. There is now no gainsaying—though it continues to be gainsaid—that the author of *Othello* and the *Merchant* knew Venice at first hand. See Mark Anderson's *'Shakespeare' by Another Name* (Gotham Books 2005). As for his now-acknowledged education, modern students forget that for most of his post-Garrick career Shakespeare had small Latin, etc., and merely warbled his native woodnotes wild.

Another contested area forcefully revised by research outside the academies—for certain areas are literally no-go for ambitious young professors—is the dating and ordering of the plays and poems, still dominated by Malone. The question arose initially because Oxford died in 1604, thus seemingly disqualifying himself as the author of works written afterwards. But were they, and do we have correct dates for the rest? Current research suggests otherwise—*Hamlet*, for example, may have been written as early as 1589, shaking up the accepted chronology. Two outstanding Oxfordian books dealing with the question are Kevin Gilvary's *Dating Shakespeare's Plays* (Parapress 2010), and Roger Stritmatter's and Lynne Kositsky's *On the Date, Sources and Design of Shakespeare's The Tempest* (McFarland 2013). Both make it clear that Malone's 216-year-old account needs to be seriously revisited.

For all Oxfordianism's successes, there remain some stubbornly unresolved questions. The biggest is the matter of the author's pseudonym and the successful concealment of his identity for over 300 yeears. In two words, why and how? The "shame of print," which supposedly discouraged men of rank from writing for money, seems especially weak. One can hardly doubt that if the queen were delighted by one of his anonymous plays, her courtier and perhaps former lover Oxford might whisper the truth into her ear. Meres knew all about Oxford as a playwright.

One answer uncovered by Oxfordian research is that De Vere was indeed recognized by some as an unjustly overlooked genius. For example, George Puttenham remarked in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589)—

in Her Majesty's time...have sprung up another crew of Courtly makers, Noblemen and Gentlemen of Her Majesty's own servants, who have written excellently well as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest, of which number is first that noble gentleman Edward Earl of Oxford.

—and Henry Peacham directly suggested in *Minerva Britannia* (1612) that De Vere had been a playwright of hidden identity. In 1622 he added in *The Compleat Gentleman*:

In the time of our late Queene Elizabeth, which was truly a golden age (for such a world of refined wits, and excellent spirits it produced, whose like are hardly to be hoped for, in any succeeding age) above others, who honoured Poesie with their pennes and practice (to omit her Majestie, who had a singular gift herein) were Edward Earle of Oxford, the Lord Buckhurst, Henry Lord Paget; our Phoenix, the noble Sir Philip Sidney, M. Edward Dyer, M. Edmund Spencer, M. Samuel Daniel, with sundry others: whom (together with those admirable wits, yet living, and so well knowne) not out of Envie, but to avoid tediousnesse I overpasse. Thus much of Poetrie.

This is highly suggestive, though in our view the question has not yet been satisfactorily resolved, and remains one of the growth areas in Oxfordian research.⁴ There is no substitute for scholarship. De Vere's case can only be made and won in the academies and according to their rules, lopsided and discouraging though they are. This means hard, consistent work, checking and re-checking the facts, documenting sources, paying attention to the laws of logic and evidence and taking principled stands when necessary. Arguments from authority—the Stratfordian way—are useless. The need is to reach out to serious Shakespeare scholars, convince them that there are difficulties worth examining and prizes, including one of the greatest, to be won.

This special issue of *The Oxfordian* is part of that outreach.

⁴ The SOF maintains a Research Grant Program supporting Oxfordian-related research. Applicants should contact John Hamill at hamillx@pacbell.net.