

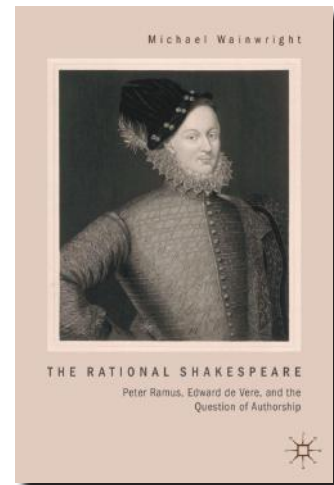
Was Shakespeare a Ramist?

Reviewed by Michael Dudley

The Rational Shakespeare: Peter Ramus, Edward de Vere, and the Question of Authorship. By Michael Wainwright. Palgrave Macmillan 2018 (324 pp.) in hardcover, paperback and Kindle.

The question regarding the authorship of the Works of Shakespeare has for generations been dismissed by most of the intelligentsia as patent nonsense or a conspiracy theory—in short, as highly irrational—with a correspondingly dim view of its proponents’ intelligence and sanity.

It is therefore singularly refreshing and impressive that a scholarly work that acknowledges Edward de Vere as Shakespeare should be entirely premised on an exploration of rationalism, not only in terms of the worldview apparent in the Shakespeare canon, but as a structured argument unto itself. More remarkable still is that such a study should be released by a major academic publisher, Palgrave Macmillan. With *The Rational Shakespeare*, scholar Michael Wainwright presents a carefully crafted intellectual history of the poet-playwright by focusing on the extent to which he and those around him may have been influenced by the ideas of the 16th Century French humanist, Petrus Ramus.



Shakespeare scholarship is, of course, replete with studies concerning the influences of other writers and intellects—both ancient and contemporary—on the canon. Given that nothing whatever is known of the education, intellectual life or reading habits (if any) of the presumed author, William

Shakespeare of Stratford-Upon-Avon, most of these studies must, of necessity, confine themselves to purely intertextual readings, rather than biographical ones.

Most recently, for example, Jonathan Bate in his *How the Classics Made Shakespeare* (2019) finds extensive evidence in the texts that Shakespeare was steeped in the work of Greek and Roman writers such as Plutarch, Terence, Livy, Cicero and of course Ovid, but embellishes his analysis with fanciful imaginings of how the Bard would have encountered them as a boy at Stratford's grammar school. On the other hand—and in sharp contrast—Roger Stritmatter's dissertation on the influence of the Geneva Bible on Edward de Vere (2003) goes exponentially further by not only demonstrating the significant influence of that version of the Bible in Shakespeare's works, but establishing an actual chain of provenance linking a heavily annotated copy of this Bible to its owner, author Edward de Vere.

The Rational Shakespeare falls somewhere between these two: Wainwright sees Ramus' thought reflected (if mostly critiqued) in the plays and in the choices made by their characters, and establishes the philosopher's influence on those who, in turn, would mentor Oxford. What he attempts is, therefore, exceedingly rare in the Shakespeare literature: connecting Shakespeare both textually *and* biographically to another writer. Wainwright places Oxford and his personal influences within a knowable, documented and personally interconnected scholarly milieu, and, in so doing, constructs an intellectual biography of Shakespeare not otherwise possible under the Stratford myth.

Wainwright's basis of analysis is the life, writings and ideas of Petrus Ramus (1515–1572), the iconoclastic humanist philosopher and pedagogue whose school of thought—Ramism—found widespread acceptance in English Universities, as well as on the continent. Infamously slain during the 1572 St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of Huguenots in Paris, Ramus was a leading intellect whose reforms overturned centuries of slavish secular and religious adherence to the rigid rhetoric of Aristotle.

Where Aristotle distinguished between invention and judgment in rhetorical practices, Ramus saw them as inseparable, arguing instead for a dialectic that included both. Along with grammar and rhetoric, dialectic formed for Ramus

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an essential *trivium* for purposes of pedagogy. As a dialectician, however, Ramus was, in Wainwright's words, "self-defeating," for Ramus preferred one-way didacticism aimed at persuasion, rather than a discourse between intellectual equals (149). Ramus also rejected the extraneousness of scholasticism, which required students to learn a great deal of rote knowledge of little practical value, in favor of an emphasis on a return to first principles.

More significant for Wainwright's purposes was Ramus' use of decision tree diagrams to illustrate rational thought processes and strategy—a form of proto-logic from which, he proposes, game theory would eventually derive. As Wainwright explains, modern game theory is a body of concepts originating in the work of mathematician John von Neumann (1903–57) and economist Oskar Morgenstern (1902–1977). These explored problems of coordination between individuals, in which agents face strategic options for dealing with various situations, all the while anticipating others' moves, knowing that opponents are facing the same strategic choices and that all must deal with the outcome of those decisions. Wainwright sees these forces at work in the situations with which many of Shakespeare's characters must contend, and locates in the plays evidence for games such as "two-choice, two-player scenarios, and the social dilemmas of Deadlock, the Prisoner's Dilemma, the Assurance Game (or Stag Hunt), and Chicken" (108–09).

Wainwright (who teaches at Royal Holloway, University of London) has previously used game theory as an analytical framework for the study of literature in several monographs for Palgrave Macmillan, including *Faulkner's Gamble: Chess and Literature* (2011), *Game Theory and Minorities in American Literature* (2016) and *Game Theory and Postwar American Literature* (2016). Here Wainwright doesn't just use game theory to explore the actions of literary characters: rather, he argues that the presence and centrality of Ramist thought—and by extension, game theory—in the Shakespeare canon is central to resolving the authorship question:

[Shakespeare] possessed a natural faculty trained at once in logical procedure and its attendant rhetoric. A critical appreciation of Ramism underpinned that training. Shakespeare follows the Ramist promotion of rationalism but does so reservedly. He explicitly admonishes the inappropriate and the excessive application of Ramism by implicitly charging Ramus with these methodological faults. This censure, which concerns Ramus's fundamental approach to the coordination of human relations, required a profound understanding of Ramism; such a necessity impinges on the question of Shakespearean authorship; this requirement points to the author's educational and personal profiles, and that indication favors the Oxfordian case (288–89).

It is worth noting that Wainwright is something of an iconoclast himself as regards Ramus, who is largely dismissed by most scholars today, citing Ramus' lack of creativity and originality (Sellberg 2006/2016). More specifically, Wainwright's view of the significance of Ramus' influence on Shakespeare is shared by few other scholars, Clara Mazzio being an exception. Part of his agenda in arguing for Shakespeare's debt to Ramus, then, would seem to be to urge a reappraisal of the philosopher.

He explains how Ramism found a particularly receptive audience at Oxford University in the generation before de Vere, where Ramus was required reading for young fellow classmates Thomas Smith and William Cecil, both of whom would go on to "cast long shadows over Edward de Vere" (87). As Oxfordians are aware, Smith would tutor young Oxford starting at age four before his pupil became a ward of the state in Cecil's house when the boy was twelve. Accordingly, argues Wainwright, Oxford would have been thoroughly acquainted with Ramism. What's more, the intellectual milieu in Italy when Oxford travelled there as a young man was also thoroughly Ramist.

Yet, according to Wainwright, Oxford was a skeptical Ramist: as revealed in the Shakespeare works, Oxford largely eschewed Ramus' one-way didacticism for dialectic between engaged, knowing speakers. Still, Wainwright claims that the actions of Shakespeare's characters reveal the extent to which Oxford was familiar with Ramus' theories of decision-making. Given the known connections between Ramus, Smith and Cecil, and the apparent presence in Shakespeare's writings of Ramist thought, Wainwright posits that this intellectual debt makes Oxford's candidacy much more compelling than that of William Shakspere of Stratford.

To develop this argument, *The Rational Shakespeare* is divided into three sections. The first consists of an overview of Ramus' life, his views on logic and the tenets of Ramism before examining his influence on Smith and Cecil. In Chapter 3, "Peter Ramus, Edward de Vere, and the Basis of Logic," Wainwright explores the extent to which Cecil and Smith were familiar with Ramus (Smith actually met him), and thus extended Ramist principles into their writing, pedagogy and supervision of young Oxford. In fact, Smith and Cecil were leading members of Elizabeth's government during Oxford's minority—Smith as Ambassador to France (1562-66) as well as Member of Parliament and even Privy Councilor, while Cecil served as Secretary of State twice: during 1550-53 and 1558-1572. Thus, Oxford would be motivated to read Ramus in Cecil's library to discover how his two powerful guardians thought politically.

Shakspere, by contrast, would have had no such acquaintance, either at home or at grammar school—even if he had attended it. This is particularly the

case as regards Oxford's trained reason (or as Ramus put it, *ratio artificiosa*) when all Shakspeare's partisans can claim for him is his natural reason (*ratio naturalis*).

In Section 2, Wainwright introduces Ramus' logic—specifically decision-tree diagrams as a way of mapping strategic choices—and its connections to modern game theory as set out by Neumann and Morgenstern in their 1944 book, *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour*. Game theory describes how self-interested players and bankers (or rule-setting authorities) in facing dilemmas develop strategies in order to seek utility and remuneration, by dealing with temptations, seeking mutualism, coping with defections, and avoiding punishments. In a clever rhetorical turn, Wainwright uses Chapter 7, “The Banker and His Player,” to demonstrate his methodology by interpreting Oxford's life itself through the lens of game theory, with Cecil as Lord High Treasurer from 1572 to 1598, and practitioner of high politics as Privy Councilor, against whom Oxford as a “player” must devise various risk-taking gambits and stratagems.

Section 3 comprises the core of Wainwright's analysis by demonstrating how Ramist thought—or more accurately, Shakespeare's apparent attitude towards it—may be found in *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Hamlet*, *King John*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *King Henry V*.

Love's Labour's Lost is set at the court of Navarre; Ramus attended the College of Navarre. The courtly “Academe” in the play may therefore be referencing Ramist education. Furthermore, the schoolmaster Holofernes is not just a caricature of the Ramist Cecil, but Wainwright concurs with Mazzio that Holofernes' sterile efforts to logically reinterpret poetry, as well as the main characters' intellectual detachment from their presumed readers, both critique Ramus.

Shakespeare again famously parodies Cecil in *Hamlet* in the form of Polonius, whose pedantic attempts at logic lead an exasperated Queen Gertrude to tell him, “More matter with less art” (II.ii). Yet, it is in the character of Hamlet himself and his quandary that Wainwright sees the fullest expression of Ramism:

The maximal language of a singular mind reaches its high point in English literature with Prince Hamlet, Shakespeare's greatest dialectical pedant, whose inner reasoning suits the decision trees and matrices that game theorists so often employ. Present and future predicaments, coordinative and otherwise, plague the prince. While fostering thoughts of his coordinative relations with King Claudius, on the one hand, and the coordinative relations between King Claudius and Queen Gertrude, on the other, as well as considering the relays between

these interrelated but disconnected relations, the prince considers the question of a decisive solution. He does not discuss this question with an interlocutor. As with Ramist rhetoric at its most withdrawn, no speaker-auditor framework aids invention; instead, the prince's vision emerges from a dialectical monologue (165).

The events in *King John*—which in reality involved Oxford's ancestor Robert de Vere, Third Earl of Oxford—are in Wainwright's interpretation dominated by games of Deadlock and the Prisoner's Dilemma: Players King John and King Philip and their respective statesmen engage in cost-benefit analysis regarding their battle for Angiers, realizing that the machinations of statecraft are under their own rational control, and not God's. With these opposing armies in deadlock, the character of the Citizen acts as powerbroker—or banker—refusing to take sides. The Bastard, meanwhile, tempts the Kings with the Prisoner's Dilemma: confederation between them and defection against Angiers, which would remove the Citizen as powerbroker, until the Citizen proposes a different kind of mutualism: a dynastic marriage between the royal families.

Wainwright next devotes two chapters to *Antony and Cleopatra*, outlining how the social dilemma in the play illustrates an Assurance Game (or Stag Hunt), in which all are mutually joined in the same endeavor and must cooperate to achieve their ends, with the caveat that collective failure can lead to mistrust or even violence. Here Antony and Cleopatra are allied in their quest to wrest control of the Roman Republic from Octavius and Lepidus, but distrust, perceived betrayals and successive defections lead to their downfalls and deaths.

Henry V is the subject of the final two chapters, explaining Henry's challenge to King Charles VI and the Dauphin to reclaim English lands in France as a game of Chicken—again, historical events in which another de Vere ancestor, the Eleventh Earl of Oxford, played a significant role. Over the course of the play, Henry seeks in game theoretic terms both payoff and utility from his campaign, before settling on mutual cooperation in marrying Princess Katherine and unifying their two countries.

Throughout Wainwright draws parallels between these plays and Edward de Vere's personal life and the social, political and strategic contexts in which he was operating, e.g., his relationships with Queen Elizabeth and William Cecil, his marriage to Cecil's daughter Anne, his rivalry with Sir Philip Sidney, and his freedom through the "Policy of Plays," as Thomas Nashe publicly described it, to exercise his art.

As an explicitly Oxfordian text, *The Rational Shakespeare* benefits enormously from Wainwright's reliance on other Oxfordian scholars, including Mark

Alexander, Katherine Chiljan, Tom Regnier, Roger Stritmatter, Hank Whittemore and Richard Waugaman, authors whom most conventional Shakespeare scholars fastidiously eschew, but whose insights add a tremendous degree of verisimilitude here. In this regard, the book is a refreshingly grounded one in a field otherwise traditionally dominated by conjecture.

At the same time—and consistent with most conventional Shakespeare biographers—Wainwright not infrequently resorts to speculation himself, for example musing that “Oxford *must have* brought his well-rounded judgment of Ramism to bear...” (208); or that “Oxford’s education *undoubtedly* provided the Ramist necessity of highly skilled instruction...” (74); that “de Vere *would have* discovered the complex relationship between logic, cognition, and rhetoric that Ramism suggests” (43); or that “wariness *surely* informed Edward de Vere’s attitude toward Ramism” (77); or that “[Ramus] decisions trees *would have* been familiar to the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford” (110) [italics added].

In short, the linkages Wainwright suggest existed between Ramus and Oxford just don’t seem as compelling as those he actually documents between the philosopher and Smith and Cecil. He cannot, for example, show a chain of possession between one of Ramus’ works and Edward de Vere, as does Roger Stritmatter (2003) with the Geneva Bible. The closest he gets in this regard is inferring that, because Ramus and Oxford were both friends with mathematician and astrologer John Dee, Oxford would have been acquainted with Ramism.

As well, Wainwright’s use of game theory diagrams and formulas—as well as his prose style—can be rather impenetrable at times for the non-specialist, as when he states that

The trope of hypallage, as a turning too far, stands alongside metaphors and catachresis in forging improbable links between systematic units of language.... Like the more complex hypallage of hyperbaton, each instance of metonymy resists Ramus’s method, effectively establishing a game of Chicken that pits the polyvalent against the univocal (263).

Wainwright’s erudition is certainly impressive and his use of a game theory lens to analyze Shakespeare’s plays yields some fascinating interpretations as well as insights into Oxford’s life. Yet, owing to several significant discontinuities, *The Rational Shakespeare* fails to entirely convince the reader of its central assertion: that the Oxfordian authorship claim is bolstered by an understanding of Edward de Vere’s knowledge of Ramism.

The first discontinuity is that the evidence for Oxford's acquaintance with Ramism is rather circumstantial when compared to that of either Thomas Smith or William Cecil; while we learn that Burghley possessed Ramus' writings in his library—where Oxford as a ward would likely have encountered them—Wainwright presents no direct evidence that Oxford himself actually read or owned them. Oxford's Ramism is, as a result, more assumed than realized.

The second—as Wainwright acknowledges in the conclusion—is the fact that Ramus “approached but never effectively broached” theories of game strategy which would emerge 300 years later (289). This does beg the question of the extent to which locating in such meticulous detail the descriptive tenets of game theory (players, bankers, defections, etc.) in the plays bears on the authorship question, when Oxford (or Ramus, for that matter) would have had no possible knowledge of them. The third discontinuity emerges from the second, in that the progenitors of game theory themselves, Neumann and Morgenstern, don't so much as mention Ramus in their seminal book, *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* (1944/1953). As a result, the inheritance game theory derived from Ramus seems incommensurately established by Wainwright, given its primacy here.

It therefore seems reasonable to ask: does not the structure of the main argument constitute something of an unwarranted conflation—basing the case for Oxford on the presence of Ramism in the Shakespeare canon, and then presenting as evidence tenets from an entirely different (and only tangentially related) body of thought?

The Rational Shakespeare is an ambitious and challenging book, and it does reward the determined reader with some original insights as well as its excellent integration of both Oxfordian and mainstream scholarship. However, because the book's central logical assertions are insufficiently supported and interconnected, they weaken somewhat its author's own aspirations to rationality.

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