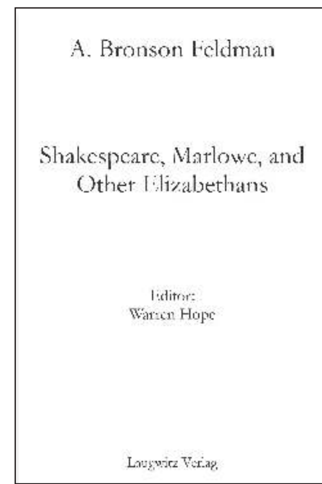
The Concluding Volume of Bronson Feldman's Trilogy on Shakespeare

Reviewed by James A. Warren

Shakespeare, Marlowe and Other Elizabethans. *By A. Bronson Feldman, edited by Warren Hope. Verlag Laugwitz, Germany (2022), 358 pages. (paperback $20)*

Abraham Bronson Feldman (1914–1982) was an important figure during the period between the end of the first wave of the Oxfordian movement in 1948 and the start of the second wave in 1984 with publication of Charlton Ogburn, Jr.'s book, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. Feldman's 1952 article, "Who is Shakespeare? What is He?" (Chapter 1) was the first article to present the Oxfordian idea to readers of Louis Marder's *The Shakespeare Newsletter*. And, psychoanalyst Richard M. Waugaman has reported, Feldman's "The Confessions of William Shakespeare" (Chapter 9), which appeared in the Summer 1953 issue of *American Imago*, was, "a vitally important turning point in the history of psychoanalytic studies of Shakespeare. Appearing 14 years after Freud's death, it was the first time that another psychoanalyst endorsed in the pages of a psychoanalytic journal Freud's position on Shakespeare's identity."[1]



Feldman's key role in the movement over several decades remains relatively unknown because the three books he wrote on Shakespearean authorship remained unpublished at the time of his death in 1982, and his two dozen or more articles weren't collected and republished until very recently. Although his book, *Secrets of Shakespeare: Four Chapters from a Subversive History*, had

circulated in mimeograph in 1972 and was even reviewed in *The Shakespeare Oxford Society Newsletter* by Gordon C. Cyr in 1976,[2] it was never formally published. His book *Hamlet Himself* also circulated in mimeograph, in 1977, but wasn't published until 2010.

Feldman's *Imago* articles and other pieces on Elizabethan subjects published in *The Bard*, the *Shakespeare Fellowship Quarterly*, *Notes and Queries* and other journals have now been collected in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Other Elizabethans*. With this collection, all of Feldman's known shorter pieces (with one exception) are now readily available.[3]

Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Other Elizabethans, like *Early Shakespeare* and *Hamlet Himself*, has seen the light of day only because of the determined work of the late Warren Hope, who edited Feldman's other two books and who steered all three through the publication process.

The story of Feldman's careers as a college instructor (he held a PhD in English Literature with an emphasis on Tudor Drama from the University of Pennsylvania) and as a practicing lay psychoanalyst (he trained under Theodor Reik) and of how the first career was derailed and the second hampered by his Oxfordian activities and publications, has been told elsewhere by Warren Hope and Richard M. Waugaman.[4] They also provided accounts of Feldman's efforts to keep alive in psychoanalytic circles awareness of Freud's belief that Edward de Vere was the principal author of Shakespeare's works despite efforts by several of Freud's most prominent followers to suppress it. This review will therefore focus on other subjects, primarily on how Feldman's research in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Other Elizabethans* document and expand the evidence supporting Edward de Vere's use of the Shakespeare pen name.

Feldman's article, "Shakespeare's Jester: Oxford's Servant" (Chapter 2), demonstrated that Robert Armin, one of the leading comedians of the period, was a servant of the Earl of Oxford at the same time that he was a member of the Lord Chamberlain's Company, thereby establishing yet another link between the earl and Shakespeare. Sir E.K. Chambers, in *The Elizabethan Stage*, had noted that Armin "serves a master at Hackney," but hadn't bothered to determine just who that master might have been. Feldman did investigate and documented that "there was but one literary nobleman dwelling in Hackney" at the time: Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford and Lord Great Chamberlain of England" (12).

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Feldman's chapter titled "Kit Sly and the Unknown Lord" (Chapter 4), focuses on the induction scene in *The Taming of the Shrew*—the scene in which an unnamed nobleman tricks a drunken peasant into believing that he is himself a nobleman who had just awoken from a dream in which he imagined himself to have been a drunken peasant. "Experts on Tudor literature," Feldman observed, "avoid seeking to identify who the unnamed nobleman might have been modeled on, just as surely as they scurry away from examining why "the comedy was cut so as to leave forever in the dark what occurred to the drunken beggar" (34); that is, why the other scenes with interactions between the nobleman and the drunken peasant in an earlier version of the play were omitted when a revised version was printed in the First Folio. Feldman then explained the significance for the issue of Shakespearean authorship "of a nobleman who has chosen to put the pauper in his own place, letting the rogue receive the homage and services owed his lordship" (51).

In one of the most intriguing pieces in the book, "The Making of William Shakespeare" (Chapter 5), Feldman drew on what was then a little-known fact: that a descendant of William Shakspere's sister had, in 1818, stated that "Shakespeare owed his rise in life, and his introduction to the theatre, to his accidentally holding the horse of a gentleman at the door of the theatre, on his first arriving in London. His appearance led to inquiry and subsequent patronage" (44). Here, then, is a third instance cited by Feldman of an unknown master, nobleman or lord mentioned in connection with Shakespeare's plays for whom orthodox scholars appear to have little interest. Feldman, however, drew on allusions to what appear to have been real-life events depicted in *Shrew* and other plays to conjecture that "the unknown gentleman was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, the member of the English nobility most attracted to the theatre, himself a poet and writer of plays, plays which are said to be lost" (64–65). In Feldman's scenario, "The discovery of a sharp-witted and businesslike fellow actually named William Shakespeare must have struck the Earl of Oxford as a gift of the gods, for he needed somebody to represent his interests in the theatre directly, to avoid the vulgar scandal and commercial taint that were sure to afflict any nobleman who took an open part in the vagabonds' game of the stage" (142–143).

In two pieces on *Othello*, "Othello's Obsessions" and "Othello in Reality (Chapters 7 and 8), Feldman first examined the play as a study in jealousy, "with a view to testing the theories of Freudian science on this disease…. Psychoanalysis will hardly find in literature a richer field for its verification than [this] drama" (83)—before turning to the biographical background to the play and offering "a series of facts which, in my judgment, account for the creation of the Moor and give us some insight into the unconscious that generated the play. These facts come entirely from the records of the life of Edward de Vere,…the poet and dramatist who for various reasons, both merry and serious, chose to hide himself behind the mask of 'William Shakespeare' " (100).

The *Othello* articles were among those Feldman published in psychoanalytic journals during the 1950s and 1960s, in which he applied psychoanalytic tools or practices in examining Shakespeare's plays. In *Othello* he found, as had other critics, that "The intensity of Iago's hate for the Moor, which is the real propeller of the play, cannot be accounted for by the mere frustration of his wish for the lieutenant's place" (87). Feldman's psychoanalytic analysis led him to conclude that "the fascination which [Othello] unconsciously exerts for [Iago] is rooted in sex. Indeed, the intensity of his hate for Othello may be described as a fury of outraged love, a love which Iago's cynical, sex-detesting ego dared not confess to itself" (87). Feldman further concluded that Othello, Cassius and Iago all suffered from homosexual desires for each other that they could not admit to themselves, and further, that "The terror of castration… runs through the entire work" (95)… The Freudian exposition of jealousy, its homosexual current, its castration complex and menace to masculinity, its paranoia tendency, is wealthily confirmed by the tragedy of *Othello*" (98).

Feldman recognized that these interpretations, "cannot, of course, be demonstrated by overt testimony. Only psychoanalysis can supply the evidence" (92). Others may find this interpretation persuasive; I see it as a misguided attempt to shoehorn Shakespeare's plays into an inapplicable mould consistent with psychoanalytic theories as they existed in the early 1950s. Feldman applied these same theories to Shakespeare's sonnets in "The Confessions of William Shakespeare" (Chapter 9), with similar results, concluding that "The psychic wound inflicted by" the death of Oxford's infant son in the spring of 1583 "would inevitably excite his castration complex" (139), an idea that seems quite bizarre to me and probably to others not steeped in psychoanalytic theories of Feldman's time.

When Feldman kept in check his tendency to impose psychoanalytic theories on Shakespeare, and instead drew on his deep historical knowledge of the Elizabethan era and applied the skills acquired in his academic training, he unearthed new information and proposed novel interpretations that advanced understanding of the authorship of literary works by Shakespeare and other dramatists during the Elizabethan and Stuart reigns. Already noted is the scenario he delineated for how Oxford and Shakspere may have met that remained in alignment with the facts as they were and are known. In another instance, through ingenious and legitimate reasoning inferred from allusions in the plays and from Greene's *Farewell to Folly*, Feldman established that "Shakespeare's first draft of *Othello* was made not long after October 21, 1585, when [Oxford] left the Low Countries to return to London and idleness and melancholy" (125). And, drawing on topical allusions in *Shrew* and other plays, he determined that William Shakspere came to London in 1585, that the play was written or substantially revised in 1592 (42), and that the final revision of the induction scene was made in 1600 (53). These inferences seem reasonable to me.

In his examination of Christopher Marlowe's life, career, and murder, "The Marlowe Mystery" (Chapter 10), Feldman made the case for Christopher Marlowe as the author of the anonymous *Arden of Feversham*, and in "Thomas Watson, Dramatist (Chapter 13), he presented an argument for Thomas Watson, Marlowe's friend, as the author of *The Spanish Tragedy*, a play traditionally attributed to the scrivener Thomas Kyd. In those articles Feldman cited two contemporary references to an unknown Lord who held great influence and authority in the theatrical world during the final two decades of Queen Elizabeth's reign. After noting Kyd's reference to Marlowe having "entered the service of the unknown Lord," Feldman presented his reasons for concluding that the Lord "fittest for the role of Marlowe's master and Kyd's Lord" was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford (317). Feldman also noted that when Thomas Nashe, in his preface to Greene's *Menaphon*, warned actors to conduct themselves more modestly, he "appears to have in mind a patron or supervisor on whom the Alleyns, perhaps all the actors of England, were dependent for leadership and light as well as the favour of her Majesty,…[who] evidently worked as an invisible emperor of drama, [and who] chose to be unnamed and shadow-sheltered," before concluding that, "There is no aristocrat of the age whom this description fits better than Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, with his annual thousand pounds for secret enterprise" (242). All this brings to five the number of contemporary allusions to an unknown lord connected to Shakespeare's plays, and in each instance, Feldman found that that lord was Edward de Vere.

Given a century of ever-accumulating evidence in support of de Vere's authorship of "Shakespeare's" works, why is it that much of the public continues to believe in Will Shakspere's candidacy? Why is it that most Shakespeare scholars continue to resolutely avoid examining the weaknesses in the evidence of Shakspere's having written the works attributed to him? Feldman sees support for Shakspere arising from the emotionally satisfying nature of the imagined story of the rise of a man from poverty to the heights of great great fame and wealth, a dream shared by many. "What inspires the popular worship," Feldman explained, "is not merely the hero's money; it is the fact of his success, the fact of his rise from virtual rags to riches…. One can almost hear the undertone of envy in their praise" (23).

Feldman understood that the reality of the intimate connection between a writer and his works that psychologists and literary scholars recognize for all writers other than Shakespeare is valid for him as well. Shakespeare could write such powerful tragedies, Feldman reasoned, only because he had experienced deeply felt tragedies in his own life. But much of the public and the scholarly world seemed to say, "Better not to go into all that. It spoils the myth." In his view, "Hidden beneath the carefree air of those who pretend indifference on the question of Shakespeare's personality, under the actual joy which is shown especially by college intellects in the lack of our

knowledge about the dramatist's character and reality, there lies a fear that dispelling this ignorance would mean curtains for the peculiar bliss they get from his plays. They suspect that into the making of each of these masterpieces flowed a stream of suffering from the dramatist's mind which they have no desire to see reflected in their own sufficiently troubled heads" (57).

It gets worse: not only did the playwright's works result from intense personal suffering, but as a nobleman of the highest rank he felt "disgraced and shamed beyond redemption…by the same fruits which eventually obtained for his art the gratitude of humanity everywhere. 'I am sham'd,' he told his beloved, 'by that which I bring forth, And so should you, to love things nothing worth'" (60).

It gets worse still for, as Feldman recognized, "The striking contradiction between the portrait [of the great dramatist and poet] painted by the esthetic analysts and that [of the man motived by commercial interests] etched by the more erudite but less empathetic authors can be resolved if we think of their pictures as descriptions of two different men" (59). Scholars have attempted to unite them, placing on the "robust burgess's head the greatness of Shakespeare" and attempted to attach them through, in Henry James's phrasing, "the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world" (59–60).

The stark choice facing the academic world is that between the status quo on one hand and, on the other, changes to two foundational beliefs. One is the change in the identity of the man who wrote the works, together with the replacement of the pleasing story of one man's rise with the distressing reality of another man's fall. The fall of a wealthy man into poverty and of the most senior earl in Queen Elizabeth's court into shame, and of an unhappy marriage, banishment from court and the other painful events that generated the feelings of suffering so openly depicted in many of the plays. It's a life almost too painful to contemplate, even though it served as the material which enabled Oxford to write his greatest works. Who wouldn't prefer the happy myth of the man who achieved great success almost effortlessly, as exists in the public mind, to the painful real-life tragedy that would be its replacement?

For Feldman, though, "the intellectual comfort of the play-loving public will hardly do for a criterion in matters of justice and mental science. The question of William Shakespeare's identity is one that calls for honesty toward an unknown genius who did the world tremendous recreational good and provided psychology with some of its deepest insights into human nature" (57). That, more than anything else, appears to be the motivating force behind Feldman's willingness to pursue the truth of Shakespearean authorship even

at the cost of the loss of his first academic career and the holding back of his later psychoanalytic career. Did he find the tradeoffs between the pursuit of truth and success in his careers worth it? I believe he did. Further, I believe that the example of Feldman's intellectual integrity—even though the results of his thinking were marred at times by an over dependence on the prevailing psychoanalytic theory of the time—can serve as an inspiration for scholars today seeking to uncover the truth of Shakespeare's true identity. De Vere's authorship will eventually be widely accepted, and Feldman's work to strengthen the evidence in support of it during the most difficult decades of the movement's first century is something for which everyone interested in the question of Shakespearean authorship should be grateful.

Endnotes

1. Richard M. Waugaman, "Review of *Hamlet Himself* by Bronson Feldman," *Shakespeare Matters*, 9:3 (Fall 2010): 7–11, 30.

2. Gordon C. Cyr, "*Secrets of Shakespeare; Four Chapters from a Subversive History*. By Bronson Feldman." *Shakespeare Oxford Society Newsletter*, 12: 4 (Winter 1976): 7–8.

3. The one exception is "Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare," *Psychoanalytic Review*, vol. 53 (1966). Another dozen of Feldman's shorter pieces, although not collected, are available in Oxfordian periodicals.

4. See especially Warren Hope, "Review: Bronson Feldman, Hamlet Himself," *The Bard*, 2: 4 (1980): 133–136; Warren Hope, "Abraham Bronson Feldman (1914–1982)" [obituary], *Shakespeare Oxford Society Newsletter*, 18: 2 (Spring 1982): 1–3; Richard M. Waugaman, "Review of *Hamlet Himself* by Bronson Feldman," *Shakespeare Matters*, 9:3 (Fall 2010): 7–11, 30; and Richard M. Waugaman and Elisabeth P. Waugaman, "Early Shakespeare," *The Oxfordian*, vol. 21 (2019): 267–272.