

“Nothing is Truer than Truth” and Shakespeare¹

by Richard Waugaman, M.D.

When we seek objective truths about the world, we turn to science, but when we want truths about human experience in all its complexity, we often turn to great literature. In this essay, I will explore some of Shakespeare’s insights into the vexed topic of truth by examining his play *All’s Well that Ends Well*, after placing it in the context of the real Shakespeare’s approach to human truths.

I define truth in several ways: truth must correspond to external reality in an objective way by using the scientific method, where applicable. At the same time, where factual truth cannot be determined, a belief is true if it is part of a coherent system of belief. In addition, there are subjective truths about each person’s inner world of emotions, memories, and psychological conflicts.

Perhaps realizing the largely subjective nature of truth, Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Importance of Being Earnest* that “truth is rarely pure and never simple.” In the same vein, Emily Dickinson in her poem 1129 advised, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—”. In her succinct admonition, she captured a core aspect of Shakespeare’s sophisticated approach to dramatizing the truth. In her day, there was a vogue for collections of Shakespeare quotations under the premise that they offered straightforward moral advice. Editors of those anthologies mistook Shakespeare as someone who wrote transparently, mistaking superficial appearances for the disguise necessary for an Elizabethan

nobleman to speak truth to power. A lover of Shakespeare’s works (Paraic Finnerty, 2006),² Dickinson knew more about poetry than did those editors. She knew that truth can be so unsettling that our conscious mind wards off unwelcome news. It is tempting to think that her famous advice, “tell it slant,” was indebted to her more accurate understanding of Shakespeare. Other great artists also recognized that truth is central to Shakespeare’s ethos.

Dickinson’s contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, “Whatever you seek in him [Shakespeare] you will surely discover, provided you seek truths” (Hawthorne, 1863). Yet Hawthorne recognized that Shakespeare’s words need to be interpreted, since they have “surface beneath surface, to an immeasurable depth, adapted to the plummet-line of every reader; his works present many faces of truth, each with scope enough to fill a contemplative mind” (quoted in Finnerty, 63). Delia Bacon believed Elizabethan authors used “esoteric” writing—that is, writing between the lines—to escape the pervasive censorship of their day, so their publications would speak to future generations, provided we peer deeply beneath the surface of Elizabethan literature. None of this will come as a surprise to psychoanalytic readers, who spend their workday constantly shifting between the surface and the unconscious depths of their patients’ associations.

Hawthorne helped Delia Bacon publish her 1857 work, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded*, the first book to challenge the traditional Shakespeare authorship theory, replacing it with her hypothesis that a group of authors wrote the works.

Before delving into what Shakespeare has to say about truth, we first need to address the truth about who wrote Shakespeare. This proved to be such a surprisingly controversial topic that Delia Bacon was harassed mercilessly after she rejected the conventional wisdom that is still held by most Shakespeare scholars and lovers of his works. Ironically, Bacon’s theory that a group of writers wrote the Shakespeare canon has recently come into its own, with the 2016 *New Oxford Shakespeare* proposing that a dozen contemporary playwrights collaborated with William Shakspeare of Stratford. The fierce reaction against Delia Bacon in her own time may have been due

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to misogyny and possible homophobia, as conveyed in an 1883 slur that claimed questioning Shakspeare's authorship was "a literary bee in the bonnets of certain ladies of both sexes" (Richard White, quoted in Finnerty, 62; emphasis added). In fact, most Shakespeare authorship skeptics in 19th Century America were women (Finnerty 66).

As Hawthorne noted, much was "done to assail the prejudices of the public, but far too little to gain its sympathy" for her (10). Like Ignaz Semmelweis, an obstetrician who traced maternal deaths from puerperal sepsis to his colleagues not cleansing their hands sufficiently before delivering babies, she enraged the "experts" with her new discoveries and was rewarded with so much verbal abuse that she ended up in a mental hospital. Sometimes, a prophet is not only without honor, but even becomes the victim of slander and ostracism.



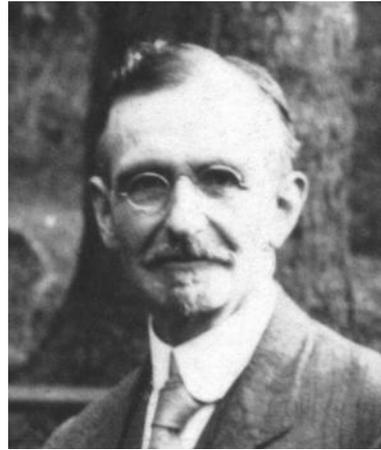
Delia Salter Bacon (1811–1859).

Who Wrote Shakespeare?

The issue of who wrote Shakespeare should be a straightforward question of history, but it has become complicated by our intense idealization of these literary works and of their author. Since the late 1500s, there were numerous hints that many people knew that the actual author was concealing his identity. We might think this unusual since most modern writers want to be credited for what they write. However, that was not true in Shakespeare's era. In fact, many Elizabethan plays were published anonymously. With rare exceptions, the nobility did not publish literary works under their own names during their lifetimes. The courtiers' ideal was called *sprezzatura*, or cultivating the appearance of nonchalance as to one's reputation. Penn State University scholar Marcy North's *The Anonymous Renaissance* is a seminal book about the many complex motives and meanings of all forms of anonymous authorship in the Renaissance. Her broad concept of anonymity also includes the use of a pen name, or pseudonym; as well as the name of an actual person to conceal the true author (a so-called allonym). Moreover, writers who used one pen name tended to use others as well.

Steven May noted that the paucity of literary works signed by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, does not explain his exceptional contemporary reputation as a writer. In 1589, he was called one of the best courtier poets, and, in 1598, one of the best playwrights of comedies. May concluded that

many of his works must have been anonymous, although his authorship of them was known to court insiders. In the early 20th Century, an English schoolmaster named J. Thomas Looney became skeptical of the traditional theory that the questionably educated Stratford merchant William Shakspeare (how he usually spelled his name) wrote the canon. Remarkably, Looney created a sophisticated methodology for validating authorship attribution that has been employed by scholars in other fields (Ostrowski 2020), and that may be more reliable than the highly suspect computer stylometry method, whose very obscurity has led to its being idealized. With his long list of author characteristics based on the author’s literary works, Looney researched biographies of Elizabethan writers, and determined there was an exceptional fit between the authorial “profile” he discerned in the plays and poems, and the biography of the 17th Earl of Oxford (or “Oxford”). For example, it is generally assumed that Shakespeare, as a commoner himself, was primarily sympathetic to other commoners. But Looney found instead a consistent pattern of sympathy with the aristocracy, along with contempt for commoners such as Jack Cade, leader of a peasants’ rebellion in the 15th Century (see *2 Henry VI*).



J. Thomas Looney (1870–1944).

The academic backlash against Looney, Bacon, and other authorship skeptics has been relentless, and it suggests that the traditional theory has a deep psychological appeal, perhaps even an unconsciously religious quality. Ironically, traditional Shakespeare scholars have shown no interest in ascertaining the truth about this matter, as they instead direct their energies toward suppressing the authorship question within academia while slandering the motives of those who challenge their authority as the putative experts in this subject. The growth of the internet, however, has thwarted their efforts to enforce a taboo against the work of independent scholars.

This ferocious attack on academic freedom compels us to ponder what factors can limit our love of truth. Perhaps what we love more than objective truth is the psychic truth of a good narrative, one that reflects what we *wish* were true, such as the beloved narrative of Shakspeare’s ascent from humble beginnings to lasting worldwide fame. And this preference echoes the original meaning of “truth” as “loyalty,” going back to its oldest Germanic etymology. Unfortunately, being true to a false theory means betraying the facts. Unconsciously, traditional Shakespeare scholars engage in groupthink, starting with a premise they refuse to question, then reasoning circularly rather than objectively, and attacking rather than listening to anyone who offers

contradictory evidence. One can sympathize with them in a way, because unless they succeed in branding authorship dissidents as cranks, they will be forced to admit that their contention about who wrote Shakespeare is based more on tradition and authority than on hard evidence. Yes, groupthink exists even in academia, which we often idealize, just as we idealize Shakespeare. We cannot hope to pursue the truth unless we are mindful of the workings of our unconscious resistance to it.

In a letter to Oskar Pfister, encouraging him to continue writing, Freud noted, “the truth often has to be said many times” (October 30, 1923) (Meng and Freud). Freud also wrote, “Of the three powers which may dispute the basic position of science, religion alone is to be taken seriously as an enemy [art and philosophy are the other two]” (*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 160). Freud was the world’s first prominent intellectual to accept Looney’s 1920 theory that Oxford, not Shakspeare of Stratford, wrote Shakespeare’s works. And Freud was attuned to the methodological challenges of investigating the truth in this matter—“Very strict scrutiny is necessary, and one must keep one’s critical faculties alive; one must be ready to meet sharp criticism, and to work against one’s own inclinations” (November 7, 1935 letter to Percy Allen; first published in Waugaman, 2017).

Was Freud’s authority sufficient to persuade psychoanalysts that Oxford may have written Shakespeare? Hardly. This should reassure anyone who worries that analysts are submissive in their attitude toward Freud. No, analysts have been among the last to even give Freud and Looney’s theory a hearing. One respected psychoanalytic society invited me to speak on Shakespeare until someone objected, and the invitation was then revised to indicate I could not address the authorship debate. Another time, a colleague (an expert on Shakespeare’s works) and I had both given presentations at an event. Afterwards, I overheard him reassure an attendee, “It doesn’t make a bit of difference who wrote Shakespeare.” So, the truth doesn’t matter? Devotees of the traditional authorship theory can be at their most anti-intellectual when this issue arises. Contending that it’s only the plays and the poems of Shakespeare that matter violates our understanding of psychic determinism as it illuminates creativity and serves to rationalize a deep discomfort with questioning one’s tenacious attachment to the traditional author.

Truth in Shakespeare

When we search Shakespeare’s works for what he says about truth, we find the seeming tautology, “truth is truth” in one of his first plays, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (IV.i), where he also writes, enigmatically, “truer than truth itself” (IV.i). He repeats “truth is truth” in *King John* (I.i.); in *Measure for Measure* (V.i), he is still more emphatic—“Truth is truth to the end of reckoning.” Historian

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Ramon Jiménez writes that “Oxford was passionate about, if not obsessed with, the idea of truth, and used ‘true’ hundreds of times in his plays and sonnets, in at least nine different meanings. He also used it to form some twenty compound adjectives...” (16).

For example, Shakespeare actually doubts in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* whether truth can be proven through speech and suggests that deeds are more capable of demonstrating it:

Proteus: What, gone without a word?
Ay, so true love should do; it cannot speak.
For truth hath better deeds than words to grace it. (II.ii)

In this he echoes Goethe, who makes Faust respond to the Biblical, “In the beginning was the Word” with the statement, “In the beginning was the deed.”

These quotations bring me back to the related words in my title, “Nothing is truer than truth.” That phrase, also ostensibly redundant, is a rough English translation of Edward de Vere’s Latin motto: “Vero nihil verius.” “Ver” referred to the French town the family originated from, before an ancestor who served under William the Conqueror relocated to England in the 11th Century, where he was rewarded for his military service. “Vere” and “vero” are also the Latin words for “truly,” and Oxford’s motto uses Shakespearean word play with the various meanings of his family name. The motto also implies “no one is more loyal than Vere.”

As in psychoanalysis, we must distinguish between superficial and profound truths in Shakespeare. Arthur Melzer’s book, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*, encourages us to dig deeper in Shakespeare’s texts to find his most controversial truths. Inspired by the work of Leo Strauss, Melzer “aims to re-establish a general recognition of the several reasons for the near-universal prevalence of *esoteric* writing among the major philosophical writers of the West prior to the nineteenth century” (6; emphasis added). That is, some of the most profound thinkers—and Melzer joins Delia Bacon when he includes Shakespeare—were not free to write explicitly about their most controversial ideas but had to disguise the truth under a conventional veneer. Giovanni Boccaccio, in his 1357 *Life of Dante*, said that great poets write on two levels, so that their work “simultaneously challenges the intellect of the wise while it gives comfort to the minds of the simple” (quoted in Melzer, location 460). Think of the contrast between court versus public performances of Oxford’s plays. At court, the audience could decipher the topical allusions when Oxford spoofed powerful courtiers, but these satirical attacks were concealed from the general public due to their lack of knowledge about the court.

In 1605, Shakespeare's contemporary Francis Bacon called esoteric writing "enigmatical," in contrast with "disclosed" (i.e., overt). None other than Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his introduction to Delia Bacon's 1857 book, approvingly quoted her observation that "the great secret of the Elizabethan age [i.e., who wrote Shakespeare]...was buried in the lowest depths of the deep Elizabethan Art...in the inmost recesses of the *esoteric* Elizabethan learning" (Finnerty 9; emphasis added).

In sharp contrast with our idealized fantasy of Merrie Olde England, writers back then were jailed, tortured, and maimed for offending those in power. To cite one example, attorney John Stubbs wrote the pamphlet *The Gaping Gulf*, in which he requested that Queen Elizabeth not marry a French suitor who was Catholic. He was subsequently tried, convicted and condemned to having his right hand cut off.

Curiously, with his *Richard II*, Shakespeare was never punished for staging the deposition of an English monarch. Queen Elizabeth knew exactly what this meant, since she observed, "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?" (Orgel 1). Despite the prominence of concealment in Shakespeare's works, this deposition scene was undisguised.

Holinshed's *Chronicle*, one of Shakespeare's top four historical sources, tells us that Richard III was an able warrior, who simply had one shoulder higher than the other. His skeleton, exhumed from under an English parking lot in 2012, confirms that he had scoliotic, lateral curvature of the spine (Pappas, 2014). What of the severely hunchbacked Richard III ("an envious mountain on my back," *3 Henry VI*, III.ii) who treads the Shakespearean stage? Did he depict the truth about the historical Richard III's body? Of course not. Between the lines, though, it represented a savage attack on the hunchbacked Sir Robert Cecil, who succeeded his father, Lord Burghley, as Queen Elizabeth's principal adviser, first on the Privy Council and then as Secretary of State. Oxford was here using the disguise of an historical character to warn Queen Elizabeth that she should not trust the scheming, dishonest Robert Cecil, who happened to be the brother of Oxford's first wife Anne. Yet the soliloquy that alludes to his hunchback also allows Richard to enlist our empathy for why he feels so cheated and vindictive, because of his disability, which makes him feel that "love forswore me in my mother's womb" (*3 Henry VI*, III.ii). Oxford captures our minds and hearts because he grasps and communicates complex truths with concision.

What are the truths that lie beneath the "esoteric" surface of Shakespeare's works? Here, we must remind ourselves of the profound lesson that Hermann Rorschach taught us: an ambiguous stimulus predictably leads us to "see" things that are actually projections from our unconscious. Unless we realize this, we are at risk of false certainty that what *we* see in Shakespeare's dramatic

and poetic ink blots constitutes their sole meaning. Shakespeare not only holds up a mirror to us in his works, he also holds up Rorschach cards, inviting us to say what we see in them. So, we gaze at our own reflection in Shakespeare’s works, confronting truths about ourselves that often make us uncomfortable. Yet, as Justin Frank has noted, “pursuit of truth is as necessary to the mind as food is to the body, and without it the psyche starves” (2018, 105).

Delia Bacon was probably correct that Shakespeare was writing a powerful yet disguised critique of the corruption of the Elizabethan court. Some of her 19th Century contemporaries, such as Walt Whitman, correctly perceived beneath the mask of the commoner-playwright a profound aristocratic sympathy, and therefore condemned Shakespeare’s works as anti-democratic.

To find consoling truisms in his works is usually to misread him. Professor Helen Vendler of Harvard University observed that when a Shakespeare sonnet ends with a proverbial sounding couplet, it suggests that Shakespeare has despaired of finding a true solution to the problem described in the preceding three quatrains. Another example is the popular Shakespeare quotation, “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers” (*2 Henry VI*, IV.ii). Did Shakespeare truly advocate that or even joke about it? Examining the play shows that he was instead mocking the common rabble during a peasant’s revolt. Conflating details from several past such revolts, he reminds us that overthrowing the established government risks anarchy. Further, like other nobles, Oxford had formal legal training, matriculating at Grey’s Inn when he was 17 years old, leading him to later incorporate into his works a plethora of legal terms and metaphors, always used correctly. We have created some fallacious “truths” about Shakespeare out of our compelling need to identify with him, and to claim him as one of us. Coming to terms with our fundamentally flawed idealization of Shakespeare of Stratford is the first step toward discovering concealed truths about the pseudonymous works of Oxford, and about him as author.

Earlier, I quoted from *Measure for Measure*: “Truth is truth to the end of reckoning.” As Paula Blank insightfully observes, this passage says a great deal about Shakespeare’s attitude toward truth and its measurement. Isabella is speaking after she has been horribly betrayed by the evil Angelo. It is in condemning Angelo that she says “Nay, it is ten times true, for truth is truth/ To the end of reckoning” (V.i.45–46). Blank comments that Shakespeare’s characters “generally maintain a belief in a truth that transcends...the reckonings of men” (39). Blank also explores Shakespeare’s deep and sophisticated interest in law, noting that “The purpose of law, in fact, is to guarantee that a single truth will apply in all determinations of equality...Shakespeare makes continual reference to the oath that Renaissance monarchs took at their coronation, to provide [equal justice], despite their personal allegiances” (174). In *All’s Well that Ends Well*, the buffoonish character Parolles (from

the French for “speech”) lies pathologically and shows that words can be a poor measure of truth. He is called a “linguist,” meaning a persuasive speaker, who is skilled in persuading people of what is untrue.

Freud said that Friedrich Nietzsche knew himself better than any man who ever lived (Waugaman, 1973). It’s true that Nietzsche anticipated Freud’s insights into our capacity for self-deception with his famous aphorism, “I did that, says my Memory. No, I could not have done that, says my Pride. And Memory yields” (Waugaman 1973, 460). However, with due respect to Nietzsche’s brilliant self-awareness, Freud surely knew that it is Shakespeare who deserves that honor, with a seemingly super-human capacity to face unwelcome truths about himself. Hamlet may be Oxford’s most autobiographical character; he is viciously self-critical in his “O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” soliloquy (II.ii).

Paradoxically, fiction is better suited than non-fiction in presenting some of life’s most important truths, perhaps because it can speak at once to both our conscious and unconscious selves, and because it is better designed to grasp and convey complexity. The truth is often multi-layered, far more complex than we can easily describe explicitly. Shakespeare had a genius for communicating with our various conscious and unconscious states, through both explicit language and, perhaps more importantly, by activating networks of affectively charged implicit memories. He knew that language is most saliently a *spoken* language. It wasn’t just that most of his contemporaries were illiterate that led him to write plays. He used theater to communicate some of his most profound insights because hearing spoken language is far more effective than reading a text, so that multiple aspects of our identity and our conflicts become activated in a way that allows for new insights and compromise formations. Because he understands us so well, we trust Shakespeare to help guide us in our search for truth, in all its stubborn complexity.

In one of his most enigmatic poems, “The Phoenix and the Turtle” (Waugaman, 2014) Oxford wrote, as he was grieving the deaths of Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex. Although the conventional date of this poem is 1601, bibliographic evidence leaves open the actual date of publication.³

Truth may seem but cannot be;
Beauty brag but ‘tis not she;
Truth and beauty buried be.

Perhaps Oxford was hinting that the new political realities under King James, with Robert Cecil victorious in a struggle for power, only allowed Oxford to tell the truth in a variety of guises, “buried” between the lines.

J. Earle offers profound insights into truth in Shakespeare’s works in his 1881 essay, “The History of the Word ‘Mind.’” One way he underlined

Shakespeare’s understanding of the complexity of the human mind was by counting the number of different words and phrases that one of Shakespeare’s French translators had to use for “mind”: six major ones, as well as some 20 others, less frequently. Earle concludes that the word “serves on all occasions to express anything whatever that is of the inner sphere of human nature” (319). This reflected a shift away from an earlier era, when Soul was of paramount interest. “[W]e may say that the Soul’s approach was by the way of the Good, and that there had risen up in humanity a fresh demand that the whole province of Thought should be newly explored by way of the *True*” (320; my emphasis). The emphasis of Renaissance humanism on the individual as a central concern required a fresh examination of human capacities and limitations in ascertaining what is true independently of faith.

Sky Gilbert in *Shakespeare Beyond Science* posits that Oxford was medieval in some of his world view, which celebrated the polysemous potential of poetry to communicate complex human truths that are poorly suited to the more strictly denotative language that emerged from an incipient scientific worldview by the early 17th Century. Similarly, Gilbert notes that Shakespeare celebrates paradox, because it helps us get at complex truths that are difficult to capture in words. Gilbert believes that the literary world view was shifting in Shakespeare’s day to one that was strongly influenced by scientific views of objective truth that are less helpful in understanding the truths of our inner lives. To properly explore this concept as it appears in Shakespeare’s oeuvre, I will investigate the Shakespeare comedy *All’s Well That Ends Well* (*AWEW*).

All’s Well That Ends Well

Truth and deception permeate *All’s Well that Ends Well* (*AWEW*). In fact, “truth” is used much more often here than in any other Shakespeare play, exceeded only by how often it occurs in the *Sonnets*. In this play, Bertram has a blind spot for the dishonesty of his companion Parolles. One of the play’s funniest scenes is when other characters deceive Parolles into thinking he has been captured by the enemy. Under threat of torture, he betrays Bertram—he is anything but true in its original meaning of loyal. His exposure as a fraud is a moment of supreme shame, but Parolles’ reaction is remarkable. He undergoes an instantaneous character change, as he drops his false façade and faces the truth about himself:

Yet am I thankful: if my heart were great,
’Twould burst at this...
...simply the thing I am
Shall make me live. Who knows himself a braggart,
Let him fear this, for it will come to pass
That every braggart shall be found an ass. (IV.iii)

Similarly, the entire plot of the comedy turns around the exposure of Bertram as a shallow snob, unable to recognize the value of his new wife Helena, merely because she is inferior to him in social rank. After Helena miraculously cures the King of a fatal illness, he rewards her by allowing her to choose Bertram as her husband. But Bertram objects:

A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain
Rather corrupt me ever! (II.iii)

Somewhat unconvincingly, Bertram's final words in the play are "I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (V.iii).

Helena herself practices deception repeatedly while exposing Bertram's dishonesty. She deceives her estranged husband Bertram into impregnating her through the famous "bed trick" when he assumes he is sleeping with Diana, a Florentine who, in league with Helena, arouses his lust. Helena also deceives most of the characters in the play into thinking she is dead, so that when she reveals herself to be alive at the play's end, it recalls the resurrection of Jesus. Such a parallel with Jesus (and with the Virgin Mary?) was earlier hinted at by her miraculous healing of the King. It leads the awestruck courtier Lafeu to exclaim, "They say miracles are past" (II.iii), as he then rejects rational explanations for such events, speaking instead of "heavenly effect in an earthly actor," and "the very hand of heaven." Since Shakespeare alludes to the Bible constantly, a biblically literate audience might think of Jesus saying "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32) and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6; John's word for truth is ἀλήθεια from λήθη, the root of Lethe, implying that truth is freedom from forgetfulness, or oblivion). Just as "truth" appears more often in *AWEW* than in other Shakespeare plays, that word appears in the Gospel of John far more often than in the rest of the New Testament.

The theme of truth in Shakespeare is linked with his deep interest in all forms of deceit that hide the truth. As a result, literal and figurative masks are common in his works, and the plays often warn the monarch to beware of courtiers who flatter her, since there is usually self-serving duplicity in flattery. The plot of *AWEW* involves multiple instances of lies and deception. Indeed, it is a detailed study in the use of words to evade the truth.

AWEW offers some fascinating insights into truth. Note the implication that song lyrics are one way to reveal the truth, in the first two uses of the word in the play:

Countess Wilt thou ever be a foul-mouthed and calumnious knave?
Fool A prophet I, madam, and I speak the *truth* the next way:
(*he sings*) For I the ballad will repeat

Which men full *true* will find:
Your marriage comes by destiny;
Your cuckoo sings by kind. (I.iii)

In the Elizabethan era, ballads were often written and sung to share news. The cuckoo was so named because of the repetitive mating call of the male. The OED credits Shakespeare with coining “cuckoo-bird,” and also “cuckoo-spell” for his English version of an obscure term of rhetoric (epizeuxis, meaning the immediate repetition of a word or phrase). The fool implies that it is natural sexual instincts (“kind”) that lead the cuckoo to seek a mate.

Freud famously wrote that “no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore” (Dora, *SE* VII: 78) Shakespeare was also fascinated with the way our faces, specifically, can give us away. The Countess asks Helena if she loves Bertram, but then quickly adds, “Therefore tell me *true*/But tell me then ‘tis so, for, look, thy [blushing] cheeks/Confess it th’ one to th’ other, and thine eyes/ See it so grossly shown in their behaviors/That in their kind they speak it” (I.iii; my emphasis).

AWEW has been called “perhaps the most problematic of [Shakespeare’s] so-called ‘problem plays,’” principally because it “lacks unity” (Calderwood 61). Critics have overlooked the role of autobiography in the play, given their false assumption about its real author. The Oxfordian authorship hypothesis clarifies many enigmatic aspects of the plot—especially plot elements Oxford added to the play’s source in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. It is one of Oxford’s confessional plays that appears to make amends for Oxford’s mistreatment of his first wife, Anne Cecil (as do *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*). They had grown up together at Cecil House since Oxford was the ward of Anne’s father, Sir William Cecil—just as Bertram is the ward of the King of France, and Helena is the ward of Bertram’s mother, the Countess of Rousillon. Helena says to the Countess, “Would...that my lord your son were not [equivalent to] my brother” (I.iii.161–62). Just after marrying Helena, Bertram deserts her to leave France to participate in the war between Florence and Siena. Soon after impregnating Anne, Oxford abandoned her for 14 months, spending most of that time traveling in France and Italy. The play’s marriage is unlike other marriages in Shakespeare’s canon in that it is not between social equals, just as Anne was Oxford’s social inferior in class-conscious Elizabethan England.

Moreover, I believe Oxford was bisexual not because three contemporaries formally accused Oxford of “pederasty” in 1581, but because Oxford returned to England from Italy in 1576 with a 16-year-old choir boy—who stayed in Oxford’s home for 11 months before returning to Italy. This receives some possible “slanted” allusions in the play, such as when Bertram’s dishonest servant Parolles twice calls him “sweet heart” (both in III.iii).

This somewhat neglected play was among the 18 plays that were not published until 1623, seven years after the death of the traditional author (and no one ever claims *he* must have written plays after he died, which is one of the standard slanders against the authorship claims of Oxford). No one has successfully explained why half the plays in the First Folio were withheld from publication until such a late date. Since Oxford's son-in-law was one of the dedicatees of the 1623 First Folio, it is likely that his wife—Oxford's daughter Susan—possessed the manuscripts of his unpublished plays. One theory is that the political implications of those 18 plays were too inflammatory for their earlier publication or that they revealed too much about their hidden author.

When was the play written? In her introduction to *AWEW* in the Riverside Shakespeare, Professor Anne Barton believes it was written circa 1602, two years before Oxford's death. It was also a year before Queen Elizabeth's demise, a time when she was deeply depressed. On the other hand, an Oxfordian dating of the play places it much earlier, in 1579, according to Eva Turner Clark (124).

Belatedly confirming Delia Bacon's groundbreaking thesis, scholars now increasingly recognize that Shakespeare wrote primarily for court performance, and only secondarily for the general public (Dutton; Lake). Dutton, for example, writes, "Pleasing the aristocratic, and especially the courtly, audience was always their [the Lord Chamberlain's Men] first concern. Everything else was, by definition, secondary" (Dutton 2016, 16).

This new perspective encourages us to look at his plays for controversial truths he intended for the ears of the Queen and her Privy Council advisors. It is illuminating that the Queen was likely the most salient spectator at court performances of Oxford's plays. As a result, I think he always wrote them with her in mind. She was often compared by poets with the goddess Diana; the character Diana in this play thus may allude to her. The psychoanalyst Marvin Krims has written eloquently, from personal experience, of how therapeutic it can be to watch Shakespeare's plays. I believe Oxford, once one of the Queen's favorite courtiers in the 1570s, knew he could lift her spirits with his theatrical entertainments, performed at court for her (Chiari & Mucciolo, 2019; Dutton, 2016; Streitberger, 2016), especially when he self-deprecatingly satirized his own notorious flaws. He helped the Queen escape her present cares by transporting her back into the 1570s, when Oxford married Anne, then escaped her by living in Italy for a year.

Ramon Jiménez, among other scholars, has documented that Shakespeare's plays were revisions of earlier, anonymous sources that were also written by Oxford. In 1579, a now lost play was staged at court that may have been an earlier version of *AWEW*. It was called *The Rape of the Second Helen*, alluding to Helen of Troy (in *AWEW*, the names Helen and Helena are used

interchangeably for the same character). Bertram resolves never to have sex with Helena, so that he can later have their marriage annulled. The crucial plot element of the bed trick, where Bertram has sex with and impregnates Helena, thinking she is Diana, not only has many sources in folklore and literature, including *Decameron*, but it also has an autobiographical source. The Essex Antiquarian Thomas Wright wrote in 1836 that Anne’s father, Lord Burghley, arranged to have Oxford sleep with Anne, while Oxford believed he was having sex with another woman. The bed trick recurs in three other Shakespeare plays. Since Burghley was mercilessly spoofed as Polonius in *Hamlet*, it seems likely that *Hamlet* was written before Burghley’s 1598 death. Following their deaths, Oxford seemed to make penance toward those he had wronged, and I suspect the addition of the “good old counselor Lafew” (Garber 622) to Boccaccio’s tale served as a fonder, reparative depiction of Burghley in *AWEW*.

Scholars agree that Shakespeare borrowed plot elements for *AWEW* from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. That work, set in 1348 Florence at the height of a devastating plague, has special relevance for our Covid-19 pandemic. Shakespeare’s true connection with Boccaccio is even stronger, since evidence strongly suggests Oxford wrote not only Shakespeare’s works, but also translated the first full English translation of *Decameron*, appearing anonymously in 1620 (Waugaman, 2021). Isaac Jaggard published it in two lavishly illustrated folio volumes, three years before Jaggard also published the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays. Both works were dedicated to Oxford’s son-in-law, the Earl of Montgomery, whose wife Susan likely owned her father’s unpublished manuscript of the Boccaccio translation, as well as those of the 18 plays first published in 1623.

Close reading of the 1620 *Decameron* translation shows many phrases that appear in the works of Shakespeare. For example, “There shall we heare the pretty birds sweetly singing” (loc. 251). This image is unusual for its era, but Shakespeare wrote “where late the sweet birds sang” in Sonnet 73, as well as similar phrases in *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. The Ghost in *Hamlet* tells Hamlet, “I could a tale unfold whose lightest word/Would harrow up thy soul...*And [make] each particular hair to stand on end/Like quills upon the fretful porcupine*” (I.v, my emphasis). That vivid trope for terror is apparently used nowhere else except in this phrase in the English version of *Decameron*: “his hair stood upright like porcupine’s quills” (loc. 7037). The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Shakespeare as the first writer to use “over-plus” to mean excess libido, in Sonnet 135. The 1620 translation uses the phrase in just the same way (loc. 7711).

Marjorie Garber of Harvard makes the intriguing observation that *AWEW* alludes to its own title more often than do Shakespeare’s other plays. She speculates that this suggests “a certain self-consciousness about its identity as

a fiction” (619). Perhaps this was done to disguise from the general public its allusion to so many embarrassing events in Oxford’s life. Garber cites G.K. Hunter’s observation that the play “begin[s] with plans for the education of a *brash* young courtier...and address[es] the question of stepparents” (619; my emphasis). We still have the daily schedule of tutorials that Oxford’s “step-father” (that is, guardian) Burghley assigned for Oxford’s education starting at age 12. And “brash” is an understatement for Oxford’s notoriously impulsive behavior, such as killing an undercook in Cecil House with his rapier at age 17—but cleared by a court of inquiry by declaring that the cook ran himself upon Oxford’s sword. A contemporary wrote that “his perverse sense of humor was a source of grave embarrassment” to Lord Burghley (think Polonius in *Hamlet*) (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry on Oxford). He repeatedly defied the hot-tempered Queen Elizabeth as her most wayward courtier until she eventually banished him from court for two years, from 1581 to 1583.

Garber unwittingly names another autobiographical theme when she notes that there was “a quasi-incestuous relationship” (625) between Bertram and Helena since they grew up in the same household—that of Bertram’s mother, the Countess of Rossillion. When Bertram’s father dies, he succeeds him as Count, and leaves his mother to live at the court of the king as a royal ward. When Oxford was 12, his father died, leaving his son as the 17th Earl of Oxford. Queen Elizabeth then ordered him to leave his mother’s home and become her first royal ward to be raised in the home of Sir William Cecil, Master of the Court of Wards (cf. the “old and loyal lord and counselor” Lafew in *AWEW*).

In *AWEW*, Bertram initially balks at the king’s order to marry Helena, after the king promised to grant her anything she wished for healing his near fatal illness. Bertram arrogantly complains that Helena is far inferior to him in social rank. The king replies, “’Tis only title thou disdain’st in her, the which/I can build up...If thou canst like this creature as a maid,/I can create the rest” (II.iii). Similarly, 15-year-old Anne Cecil’s marriage to the 21-year-old Oxford, like that of Bertram to Helena, was figuratively “quasi-incestuous” (Garber 625). As the daughter of a knight, Anne was far beneath Oxford in social rank. So, Queen Elizabeth elevated Anne’s father to Lord Burghley shortly before Anne married Oxford—a match ordered by Anne’s father. And this detail of the king offering to raise Helena to a higher rank is not in Boccaccio’s story of Bertrand and Gillette (she is named Juliet in Oxford’s 1620 translation). Further, like Helena, Anne was considered a lay healer by contemporaries, a skill she may have learned from her mother, a highly scholarly woman (in *AWEW*, Helena learned to heal from her physician father)—“...the noble Countess of Oxford most charitably...did many great and notable cures upon her poor neighbors” (Potter 1610).

The ninth story of the third day in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* is well known to be the primary literary source for *AWEW*. In the first complete English translation, Oxford emphasizes a parallel with his own life. The Italian version⁴ said “morto il conte e lui nelle mani del re lasciato...” [“once the Count {his father} died, he was left in the hands of the king”]. But Oxford translates this as “Old Count Isnard dying, young Bertrand fell as a *Ward* to the King...” (my emphasis), just as Oxford became the first royal ward in Elizabeth’s new wardship system at age 12, after the death of his father, the 16th Earl [“Conte” in Italian]. Later, the Italian version has the king say to Bertrand, “Beltramo, voi siete omai grande e fornito” (“Beltramo, you are henceforth great and provided”) (238). Once again, Oxford’s English translation introduces a key autobiographical word: “Noble Count, it is not unknown to us, that you are a Gentleman of great honor, and it is our royal pleasure, to discharge your *wardship*” (emphasis added; this is the only instance of “discharge your wardship” in the database *Early English Books Online* loc. 4376). It is likely that Oxford thus drew attention to a pivotal parallel with his life not only because he identified with Bertrand, but because he wished that at least some readers of his translation would recognize this parallel with his life. It would lead readers to understand, further, that Oxford identified with Bertrand’s unwillingness to marry the woman he was ordered to wed.

As I mentioned earlier, I hold that Oxford sometimes used his plays to expiate his guilt toward those he had wronged—following their deaths. One disguised truth in *AWEW* is the playwright’s confession of his culpability in ruining his marriage to Anne with his arrogance about his social superiority to her, along with his abandonment of her when she was pregnant with their first child, then with his pathological jealousy of her. Like Leontes’s wife Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale*, Bertram’s wife Helena appears to be resurrected from the dead at the play’s end. This is probably the playwright’s wishful fantasy and helps explain some of the blatant disconnects from reality in the play, as Anne Barton perceptively notes (Riverside, 536). She comments on several parallels with *Hamlet*, which is probably Oxford’s most autobiographical play (e.g., notes on lines 53, 54, and 61–70 id. at 539).

Like Hamlet, Bertram lost a father who is portrayed as an ideal, a paragon of virtue. Bertram is a supercilious snob, while his father is described as more of an egalitarian. Oxford, after losing his father at age 12, may have idealized him. Bertram becomes the ward of the King of France, as Oxford became the ward of William Cecil. There’s a subtle allusion to Lord Burghley in the mention of one “Corambus” in *AWEW*. Like “Corambis,” the earlier name of Polonius in the first quarto of *Hamlet*, this name satirizes Burghley’s motto “Cor unum, via una” (one heart, one way) in a word that implies “double-hearted,” or duplicitous. Shakespeare often doubles plot elements, for emphasis and to create a more sophisticated complexity. Here, the theme of wardship is doubled, since Helena is herself the ward of Bertram’s mother, the Countess of Rousillon.

Conclusions

Throughout the Shakespeare canon, Oxford/Shakespeare forces us to face the full complexity of truths about a wide variety of people in society and government. Our feelings, our motives, our conflicts, even our very identities are anything but straightforward and simple. I began with a famous quote from Emily Dickinson because it succinctly captures Oxford's awareness that our capacity to face the truth directly is limited. In addition, he knew that escaping Elizabethan censorship required him to be subtle in conveying his more controversial truths. I believe he was compelled to conceal his real identity from the general public since he aired secrets in the plays about high court officials, including William Cecil, the Lord High Treasurer (Polonius in *Hamlet*) and Christopher Hatton, the Lord Chancellor (Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*), among others. Yet Oxford's ultimate goal as an artist was, as described in *The Rape of Lucrece*, "To unmask falsehood, and bring truth to light" (line 991).

It is always surprising when otherwise discerning people who love Shakespeare's works claim that the truth about who wrote them does not matter. Unconsciously, they may be expressing their quasi-religious attitude, with the canon serving as holy scripture, whose human authorship is regarded as irrelevant. Oxford understood our conflicting feelings when searching for the truth about ourselves and about others. His empathy was extraordinary. Occasionally, he overwhelms us with the truth, but mostly he tells it "slant" enough to make it bearable. As Emily Dickinson concluded her poem, whose first line is "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—"

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

Endnotes

1. Reprinted by kind permission of Routledge from Salman Akhtar and Andrew Klaffer, *Truth*.
2. “Shakespeare was the first author she chose to read, and...she regarded him as the only necessary author” (3).
3. As I wrote earlier, “The printing of deliberately false dates of publication is not unheard of in early modern English books. Ilya Gililov, in *The Shakespeare Game: The Mystery of the Great Phoenix*, raises credible doubts about the alleged 1601 date of publication of *Love’s Martyr*. For example, the book was never entered into the Stationers Register, hinting at its subversive content. The alleged Italian poet whom Robert Chester translated in much of the book, Torquato Caeliano, apparently never existed. For that matter, Robert Chester himself has never been conclusively identified...[and] may be a pseudonym.
“Grosart had already noted that the British Library’s copy, dated 1611 on the title page, is an exact reprint of the Folger Library’s copy, dated 1601. There are the same misprints, and the same faulty type in places. Gililov made the further discovery that the paper of both copies even has the same distinctive watermark: a unicorn with crooked back legs. And Gililov found the same features in the Huntington Library’s undated copy.” (Richard Waugaman, “The 1574 *Mirour for Magistrates* is a Possible Source of ‘Feath’red King’ in Shakespeare’s ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle,’” *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 85 [Spring 2014]: 67–72.)
4. The Italian version used is Boccaccio, 1966.

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