

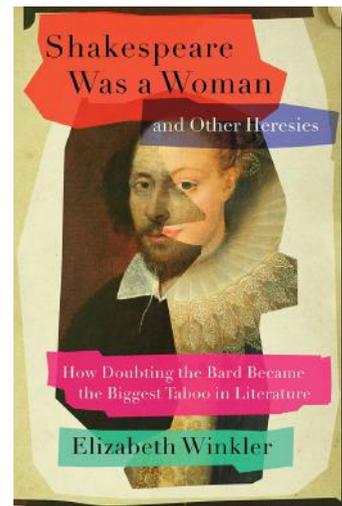
Heresies, Certainties, Conspiracies and Shadows

Reviewed by Ramon Jiménez

Shakespeare Was a Woman and Other Heresies: How Doubting the Bard Became the Biggest Taboo in Literature. By *Elizabeth Winkler*. Simon and Schuster, May 9, 2023, 416 pages (hardcover \$19.79, Kindle \$14.99).

As authorship controversies go, the dispute about the author of the Shakespeare canon is surely the lengthiest and most important literary hoax in more than 400 years. Almost immediately after the first appearance of the name William Shakespeare in 1593, various writers published hints that there was an unknown author behind the name who could not be revealed. Even as the compilers of the First Folio lavished praise on the author 30 years later and printed his portrait, they repeatedly urged readers to ignore it and focus instead on the works themselves.

The whole story—the pseudonym, the cover-up, the candidates and the controversy—is set out in Elizabeth Winkler’s provocative, engaging, and exceptionally well-documented account of the history of the Shakespeare authorship question and the state of the debate today. It is a book that authorship aficionados will relish, and one that is bound to turn newcomers into doubters, if not outright Oxfordians. The book’s original title, “Kissing Shadows,” suggests Winkler’s viewpoint, but one can hardly blame the publisher for substituting a more provocative title.



Troubled by the spirited reactions to her article “Was Shakespeare a Woman?” in the June 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*, Winkler embarked on a scholarly journey to see for herself what prompted the stream of protest and abuse

that filled her inbox. She delved into the vast array of articles, reviews, internet sites and books on all sides of the authorship question, including works by authorship skeptics John T. Looney, Eva Turner Clark, Charlton Ogburn and Diana Price, as well as those by orthodox experts Samuel Schoenbaum, Stanley Wells, Stephen Greenblatt and James Shapiro. She obviously warmed to the subject and never flinched from its knottier questions; in fact, I have not read a more concise analysis and explication of Robert Greene's upstart crow passage in his pamphlet, *Greene's Groats-Worth of Witte*.

Although Winkler was not inclined at first to give much credit to the Oxfordian argument, upon examination she was impressed with what his contemporaries wrote about him and with the fact that his family members, friends and circumstances repeatedly show up in Shakespeare's plays. She notes the concurrence of details and locations of his tour of Italy with incidents, names and places in Shakespeare's 10 plays set in Italy. It seems clear from the section she devotes to the evidence for him that he is probably her preferred candidate for the authorship.

Preparing to visit the Folger Shakespeare Library, Winkler discovered that the man who founded it in 1932, Henry Clay Folger, had been a founding member of the Bacon Society of America, but in 1925 purchased the well-known 1570 edition of the Geneva Bible that belonged to the 17th Earl of Oxford, hinting that he had "become intrigued by the new candidate." At the Folger, she found an unexpected treasure—the correspondence between Professor James Shapiro of Columbia University and the late Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, which took place over several months in 2011 and 2012.

Stevens had been one of the three Supreme Court Justices who presided over a moot court at American University to consider the authorship question that drew enormous public attention in late September 1987. Although he and Justices William Brennan Jr. and Harry Blackmun ruled that the Oxfordians had not proved their case, Stevens and Blackmun later revised their opinions in favor of Oxford. In fact, five years later Justice Stevens, after conducting his own research, published an article in the *University of Pennsylvania*

Ramon Jiménez is the author of two books on Julius Caesar and the Roman Republic, *Caesar Against the Celts* and *Caesar Against Rome*, both book club selections. Having published more than 30 articles and reviews in *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* and *The Oxfordian*, Jiménez's research focus has been to demonstrate that several anonymous plays, none attributed to Shakespeare, were actually the Earl of Oxford's earliest versions of seven canonical plays. He published the evidence for this theory in *Shakespeare's Apprenticeship in 2018* (McFarland). He last appeared in *The Oxfordian* 23 with "To. The. Only. Begetter. Making Sense of the Dedication." Jiménez has a degree in English from UCLA and lives in California.

Law Review asserting that Edward de Vere was the most likely author of the canon. By 2009, he was fully convinced. “I think the evidence that he [William of Stratford] was not the author is beyond a reasonable doubt,” he told the *Wall Street Journal*.

As she leafed through the exchange of letters between Stevens and Shapiro, which Stevens initiated in August 2011, Winkler learned that he was not yet done with the subject. Having read Shapiro’s *Contested Will*, Stevens observed that “you omit comment on the Oxfordian claim.” Shapiro replied by rejecting any possibility of Oxford’s involvement in the canon, and disparaging J. T. Looney as “anti-democratic” and reactionary. Stevens retorted that Looney’s politics were irrelevant and raised the question of the absence of evidence for William Shakspeare, such as the lack of a eulogy or other public comment at the time of his death in 1616.

The exchange moved along for several months, each man replying sharply to the other’s remarks, until Shapiro wrote that he would end it, while expressing his “profound disappointment that someone as intelligent as you can continue to believe...that Shakespeare didn’t write the plays,” and adding the meaningless phrase, “Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare.” Reflecting on Shapiro’s performance, Winkler noted that “he had grown emotional, repeated tired arguments, distorted the evidence, failed to answer Stevens’s questions...and scolded the justice for his unbelief.” In her view, Shapiro had “insisted on certainty,” while Stevens “suggested humility—negative capability,” the ability to dwell in a space of not knowing. Nevertheless, she emailed him, requesting an interview. Within minutes, she received his refusal. Before leaving the Folger, Winkler wandered into the reading room where she spied an 18th century painting of the baby Shakespeare “in a manger-like nativity scene” “attended by Nature and the Passions” that she described as a “bare-faced equation of the Renaissance poet with the son of God.”

After equipping herself with a solid grounding in the subject, Winkler interviewed a dozen Shakespeare scholars in the US and the UK. What she heard would startle any reader, Shakespeare lover or not. She not only documented the worldwide taboo that severely restricts any discussion or publication that questions the authorship of the Shakespeare canon, but also recorded a series of stunning evasions, admissions and misrepresentations by orthodox scholars on both sides of the Atlantic.

Winkler also visited a number of prominent authorship skeptics, the so-called “anti-Stratfordians”—psychiatrist Richard Waugaman, English professors Roger Stritmatter and William Leahy, author and critic Alexander Waugh, Marlovian Ros Barber and Shakespearean actor, director and playwright Mark Rylance. Each of them firmly believed, and offered convincing evidence, that William Shakspeare was no author, but they didn’t agree on who the author might be.

Her longest visit was with Alexander Waugh, Britain's most energetic Oxfordian researcher, and a distant descendant through his maternal grandmother, Laura Herbert, of the 1604 marriage of Susan de Vere and Philip Herbert. Waugh and his wife took her to Wilton House, the 16th century home of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke and sister of Sir Philip Sidney. Mary Sidney's significance in the Elizabethan literary scene is unquestioned: she translated works from French, wrote religious and secular poetry, patronized prominent poets and playwrights and hosted them at her Wiltshire estate. The noticeable feminine sensibility that pervades Shakespeare's plays has led some scholars to see her as the real Shakespeare. Further, her two sons, William and Henry, were the dedicatees and probable financial backers of the First Folio. Winkler mentions an "unverified" letter that Mary Sidney wrote to her son William, who was with King James at Salisbury in late 1603, urging him to bring the King to Wilton, and adding that "We have the man Shakespeare with us." The letter has been lost, but if the anecdote were true, it would strongly imply that she was not the playwright.

Winkler also sought interviews with five of the most prestigious Shakespearean professors, four of whom repeatedly and noisily defend the traditional ascription of the canon to the Stratford businessman. Of the five, one (Jonathan Bate) never replied. Another (Stanley Wells) agreed to an interview, but then canceled when he learned that she was an "anti-Stratfordian." He later changed his mind when she persisted. A third (James Shapiro) refused an interview but exchanged several emails with her. A fourth (Stephen Greenblatt) agreed to a Zoom interview but terminated it after 20 minutes. The fifth (Marjorie Garber) sat for a lengthy interview, but evinced no interest in and evaded any discussion about the author's biography.

Winkler traveled to Stratford-upon-Avon to meet with Stanley Wells and to see the 21st century version of William Shakspeare's presence in the village. (The spelling "Shakspeare," as it appears on legal documents in Stratford, distinguishes it more clearly from the pseudonym, "Shakespeare"). After stopping at the "Birthplace" and "Hall's Croft," both bogus, she passed through the gift shop, where she found everything from Ophelia socks to Shakespeare rubber ducks—"Elizabethan kitsch," she called it.

Her conversation with Stanley Wells, chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and leading defender of the traditional candidate in Great Britain, is extraordinary. Just *when* the first doubts surfaced about the actual man behind the name Shakespeare was an especially contentious issue in the uproar that followed Winkler's 2019 article in *The Atlantic*. She originally wrote that such doubts arose soon after the name first appeared in print, but carping letters from Oliver Kamm of *The London Times* and James Shapiro claimed that she was mistaken—that no doubts arose until the mid-19th century. In an

online article, Kamm associated her with Holocaust deniers (her crime being a denial of Shakespeare) and called for *The Atlantic* to withdraw her essay. Allegations that she suffered from “Shakespeare derangement syndrome” and “neurotic fantasies” appeared in other publications. Quick to concede the alleged error, but ignoring the insults, *The Atlantic* printed a correction that has since proved incorrect.

Winkler asked Wells about the narrative poem *Willobie His Avis*, the first independent mention of the name “William Shake-speare,” although spelled with the medial dash, which was published in 1594, a year after the name first appeared in print in *Venus and Adonis*. He replied that he’d “never studied it. . . . I just haven’t bothered. . . . I’ve looked at it, but I haven’t anything to say about that.” “I was dumfounded,” wrote Winkler. She questioned him about Thomas Vicars’s 1628 reference to “that poet who takes his name from shaking and spear.” “I don’t remember that,” he replied. “Where is this?” A few more questions brought repeated replies of “I don’t know” and “I don’t remember it.” After a while, Winkler gave up. She had been prepared to hear vigorous arguments from Wells about the evidence for the Stratford Shakespeare, but the man who had spent a lifetime immersed in Shakespeare’s works, and who had written several books about the authorship question, professed “total ignorance about basic pieces of Shakespearean history.” It was clear that he didn’t want to talk about it.

Her interview with Stephen Greenblatt, Professor of English at Harvard and author of the best-selling biography *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare*, did not fare much better. Although Greenblatt said that he was “reasonably confident” that Shakespeare authored the canon, he admitted that his research had made him respect the “preposterous fantasy” that someone else was the author. “It’s an epistemological question,” he pronounced, as if the label precluded any serious investigation of the subject. When Winkler asked him if it were only possible to say, “I believe that Shakespeare wrote the works,” he didn’t answer. She wanted to ask him why he hadn’t explained in his biography how Shakespeare obtained his knowledge of the law, or how he was able to describe Italian customs and geography so accurately, but a phone call caused him to end the conversation, and he “slithered out of reach” when she tried to reconnect with him.

Even more elusive was another leading Shakespeare scholar, James Shapiro, the most outspoken and acerbic academic critic of the claims of authorship skeptics. A professor of English at Columbia University, Shapiro published in 2010 an entire book, *Contested Will, Who Wrote Shakespeare?*, about the authorship question. In a letter to *The Atlantic* after her Emilia Bassano essay appeared, he accused her of pursuing conspiracy theories, as if to say that claiming that Shakespeare might have been a woman raised a moral problem, and equated her with Barack Obama birthers and anti-vaxxers.

One of Winkler's most intriguing interviews was with a professor of Renaissance literature at an "Ivy League-type" university who wrote to compliment her on the essay in the *Atlantic*. He suggested that determining the true author was a hopeless task, that everyone should stop trying, and poured scorn on the "endless nonsense" of the biographies. A few months later he wrote again, inviting her to meet in person, but insisted on remaining anonymous. Over lunch, at a restaurant near his campus, she asked him if universities should allow research into the authorship question. "Absolutely, of course. Why not?" he answered, but warned that any academic should have tenure before trying it. She mentioned that she was contemplating such a book. "Write it," he urged her.

Winkler's last interview with an orthodox academic took place in the home of Marjorie Garber, a retired Harvard professor of English, who has written half-a-dozen books on Shakespeare's plays but never a biography. Within minutes, her position on the authorship question turned out to be a variation on Stanley Wells's position—she had "no idea" if there were reasonable doubts about the author; her focus was strictly on the plays themselves. After repeated questions, Winkler concluded that, "She was interested, in short, in everything to do with the plays except who wrote them."

Her brief survey of leading academics yielded a range of responses, from *ad hominem* attacks on "anti-Shakespearians" (Wells's phrase) to repeated passionate assertions that there was no authorship question, only feeble attempts to reply to the evidence she presented. Most startling were the positions of Wells and Garber, who didn't know, hadn't looked into it, or whose focus was somewhere else. There are several English professors who have boldly debunked the Stratfordian Shakespeare, and not a few others who have kept their heretical views to themselves. But Elizabeth Winkler has trained a bright light on what is clearly a shaky conspiracy that promotes and imposes what she calls "fiction masquerading as history." Such a carefully researched and readable account of a complicated subject deserves the widest possible audience.