Book Review

***Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy*; Paul Edmondson, Stanley Wells, editors. Cambridge University Press, 2013, 284 pages.**

Reviewed by Tom Regnier

A few preliminary observations on *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy* (hereinafter referred to as *SBD*)*:*

First, the book's central message is that Shakespeare's works are not to be read as having any connection with the author's life. While the relationship between an author's life and his works would seem to be a worthy topic for exploration and discussion, the authors of *SBD* are adamant that it is not debatable. Nevertheless, the book accuses its opponents of dogmatism.

Second, the man from Stratford's authorship is taken as "given" in the book, and the evidence supporting it is mentioned only in passing, with little acknowledgement of the ambiguities inherent in it. Yet *SBD* accuses Shakespeare skeptics of being fanatics.

Third, the authors of *SBD* show little familiarity with the best anti-Stratfordian scholarship, most of which is never mentioned in the book. They focus on the craziest and least impressive anti-Stratfordians (Delia Bacon gets three chapters) and frequently misstate anti-Stratfordian scholarship when they bring it up at all. Meanwhile, *SBD* accuses anti-Stratfordians of ignoring the evidence.

Fourth, *SBD* takes an unbearably condescending attitude toward those who doubt the traditional theory of authorship. It at least admits that some anti-Stratfordians are reasonable people but asserts that reasonable people can hold unreasonable views. Worst of all, the book makes a concerted effort to displace the word "anti-Stratfordian" with "anti-Shakespearian," arguing that if you don't believe in the Stratford theory of authorship, then you don't believe in Shakespeare. And *SBD* accuses its opponents of being bullies.

Fifth, *SBD* is dripping with appeals to authority. Don't question the professionals, who know better. "Open-mindedness" is a sin, at least when it comes to the authorship question. And *SBD* accuses "anti-Shakespearians" of snobbery.

Sixth, *SBD* does not attempt to answer the crucial question of how the Stratford man acquired the tremendous knowledge evident in the plays. *SBD* does not even acknowledge that the question exists. But the book compares anti-Stratfordianism to religious faith.

SBD is a book of propaganda, not scholarship. It is a web of attitudes, not ideas. Its method is to lull the reader into drowsy acceptance, not alert skepticism. It tries to shame the reader into agreeing with it for fear that he will seem odd or eccentric. I hope that every person who has doubts about the traditional authorship theory will read this book very closely and make a list of its many logical and evidentiary fallacies.

Literature as Biography?

Consider the proposition that there was no connection between an author's life and his works, at least in the Elizabethan age. Matt Kubus, echoing James Shapiro, argues in chapter 5 of *SBD* that the problem with reading the works biographically is that

it assumes that there is an "inherent connection" between the author and "the content of his works."

Before the Romantic Era, presumably, writers were more self-effacing, much too modest to write about themselves. They wrote more objectively about life, teaching parables about how to live as a member of society: not how to be a rebel, but how to successfully fit in. But is it really all that simple? Did human nature change all of a sudden during the Romantic Era?

I suspect that even before then, writers were expressing themselves, only not so obviously as the Romantics did. Doesn't the fact that a writer chooses to write a certain story tell us something about him as a person? Maybe the story doesn't follow the facts of his life like a thinly disguised autobiography, but a writer tells a story because it speaks to him in some way. Isn't it conceivable that all literary writing is, deep down, self-revelatory, that authors give themselves away in their writings in ways that they aren't always aware of?

Besides, weren't the seeds of the Romantic Era sown in *Hamlet*? Was there ever a character so aware of his own thoughts, his own struggles? I believe that it is an open question for any author how much and in what ways he reveals himself in his writings. Indeed, it should be a rich area for exploration and discussion. But the Stratfordians have decided to close that door, and the poorer they will all be for it.

The Case for Stratford

Stanley Wells (chapter 7) attempts to bolster the case for the Stratford man by listing every historical reference to "Shakespeare" up to 1642. As Wells admits, however, no reference to "William Shakespeare" before 1623, when the First Folio was published, explicitly identifies the writer with Stratford. All the references to Shakespeare up to that time are references to the written works of "William Shakespeare," whoever that was, but not necessarily to the Stratford man who died in 1616.

Because any evidence linking the works to Stratford is posthumous, Wells argues that we can't refuse to credit posthumous evidence. I agree that we shouldn't refuse *absolutely* to consider posthumous evidence. But while we might place some reliance on it, we are surely justified in giving it less credit than contemporary evidence. In legal terms, I would say that posthumous evidence is admissible, but a jury may be correct in giving it less weight than contemporary evidence. Wells argues that "if we refused to accept posthumous evidence we should have to refuse the evidence that anyone has ever died." This comment is ridiculous. Of course a person cannot report his own death, but evidence does not have to be self-reported.

In looking for evidence of the Stratford man as a writer, the testimony of other people is perfectly admissible. But a report right after an incident is more likely to be reliable than a report issued several years later. In the law of evidence, a statement made at the time of an occurrence is considered more reliable than a statement made long after the event, especially when a motive to fabricate may have arisen between the time of the original incident and the time of the later statement. It is exceedingly odd that no written record clearly links the Stratford man to the works of Shakespeare until seven years after his death, and skeptics are right in seeing that as a weakness in the Stratford theory.

Andrew Hadfield (chapter 6) makes a roundabout attempt to answer Diana Price's thesis that the Stratford man, unlike all other literary men of his day, left no literary paper

trail during his lifetime. While Hadfield never mentions Price, he almost completely concedes her main point by saying, "there are virtually no *literary* remains left behind by Shakespeare outside his published works, and most of the surviving records deal with property and legal disputes" (emphasis added). Hadfield doesn't explain what the "virtually" refers to. He goes on to cloud the issue by pointing out that there are gaps in the historical records of many Elizabethan playwrights: we don't know, for example, specifics about Middleton's religion, Dekker's or Munday's education, or Nashe's date of death. This may be so, but Hadfield evades Price's point that for all of these writers there is contemporary evidence, linked to each man personally, of a *literary* career; for the Stratford man, there is none. This could mean that the evidence is lost, but it could also mean that it never existed. Considering the many anomalies in the existing evidence (none of it linking the Stratford man personally to the plays until seven years after his death), Shakespeare skeptics quite rightfully suggest that something doesn't add up.

In chapter 10, authors Mardock and Rasmussen reveal the astounding discovery that the 31 speaking roles in *Hamlet* can be performed by only 11 actors who play double or triple roles because—get ready for the revelation (sound of trumpets)—certain characters do not appear onstage at the same time! This type of information is so dazzling that James Shapiro even repeats it in his Afterword because it "proves" that Shakespeare had to be a professional man of the theatre. But, realistically, is a playwright who writes a play with 31 characters likely to put them all onstage at the same time? Isn't it possible that an earl who had his own theatre troupe (such as Oxford or Derby) might be aware of some of the practical problems of putting on a play? And the "doubling" revelation certainly does not by itself disqualify Christopher Marlowe as the Bard.

The general reader may be most impressed by MacDonald P. Jackson's discussion of stylometrics (chapter 9), which "proves" by computer analysis of grammatical patterns and word usage that the Stratford man wrote the vast majority of Shakespeare's plays with a little help from other playwrights of his time. Many readers will readily believe anything a computer tells them, but a computer is only as good as the data and programs that go into it. If the program is flawed, the result will be flawed. Stylometrics, while it uses computers, still has its glitches. How do we know? Different stylometrics analyses come out with different answers as to who collaborated with whom on what, as Ramon Jiménez has demonstrated.[1] Several years ago, Donald Foster attributed a poem called "A Funeral Elegy for Master William Peter" to William Shakespeare based on a stylometric computer analysis. Later analyses by Gilles Monsarrat and Brian Vickers showed Foster's attribution to be flawed and that the true author may have been John Ford. Foster admitted his error in 2002.

Besides, the most that stylometric studies show, as Jackson describes them, is that the person who wrote the bulk of the plays sometimes collaborated with others. They cannot prove that that central figure was the Stratford man because there is no known writing unquestionably belonging to the Stratford man to be used as a standard. As Ramon Jiménez has said, stylometric analysis "can never be more than a portion of the

[1] Ramon Jiménez, "Stylometrics: How Reliable is it Really?" in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial*, John Shahan & Alexander Waugh, editors (Tamarac, FL: Llumina, 2013), Appx. B.

evidence needed to [identify the work of an individual author]. External evidence, topical references, and the circumstances and personal experiences of the putative author will remain important factors in any question of authorship." *SBD* urges us not to doubt the Stratford man just because Shakespeare scholars don't always agree among themselves about such matters as who the Bard's collaborators were. Apparently, disagreement is acceptable as long as everyone agrees that the Stratford man was the main author—a premise that *SBD* never questions.

Battling Pygmies, Ignoring Giants

Stratfordians have always been skilled at the sophistic "straw man" technique of restating one's opponent's argument in its weakest form and then demolishing that argument to make plausible-sounding, but inherently flawed, arguments. Here, they raise this ploy to an art form, usually by attacking the weakest spokespersons for their opponents' views. Their preferred target in *SBD* is Delia Bacon, who wrote an unreadable book about the authorship controversy and later went mad. *SBD* has three whole chapters (1, 2, and 15) mainly devoted to Delia Bacon. While no serious authorship skeptic of the past century relies on Delia Bacon's work, the Stratfordians can't get enough of her. They want to paint all doubters with the same brush as Delia Bacon and make the reader think she is a beacon to other anti-Stratfordians. The book even admits, in a condescending way, that Ms. Bacon was right about a few things, except that she was grievously wrong in thinking that Shakespeare didn't write the plays attributed to him.

The condescension gets even worse. Poor Delia, *SBD* laments, she was denied a university education because she was a woman. Then she wrote a book in which she argued that a powerful woman, Queen Elizabeth, suppressed some brilliant men such as Francis Bacon and Sir Walter Raleigh, who then secretly wrote plays about democratic ideals while hiding their identities behind the name "William Shakespeare." Andrew Murphy (chapter 15) sees through Delia Bacon's narrative, however, and reveals that she was really complaining about how she, as a woman, was suppressed. Ms. Bacon merely reversed the genders in her book and made it about a woman suppressing men, rather than men suppressing women! I am not making this up. Murphy really says this. Murphy even claims that you can't understand Shakespeare from his biography but you can understand Shakespeare doubters from theirs. Apparently, anti-Stratfordians are just working out their inner neuroses by doubting Shakespeare, while the Stratford man wrote impersonally, from his imagination—no sweat, no personal involvement necessary.

But do the Stratfordians address any serious anti-Stratfordian scholarship in *SBD*? Diana Price, Tony Pointon, George Greenwood, Joseph Sobran, Ramon Jiménez, Richard Whalen, and Roger Stritmatter, to name just a few, are not mentioned. The Ogburns get a few sentences, but nowhere does *SBD* address the gist of their thesis. Looney also receives several nods along the way, but no one does a serious, thoughtful critique of his method for determining that Oxford was the real Shakespeare.

Charles Nicholl (chapter 3) quotes Looney's contention that the true author of the plays was not "the kind of man we should expect to rise from the lower middle-class population of the towns." Nicholl responds that Looney is wrong because many Elizabethan playwrights sprang from the lower middle-class. But Nicholl takes Looney's comment out of context. What Looney actually said is that Shakespeare's "sympathies, and probably his antecedents, linked him on more closely to the old order than to the

new: not the kind of man we should expect to rise from the lower middle-class population of the towns." Nicholl entirely misses Looney's point: Shakespeare's works evince an aristocratic viewpoint that is inconsistent with a lower middle-class upbringing. Looney was speaking about Shakespeare specifically based on the content of his works, not about playwrights in general. This is typical of the failure of the authors of *SBD* to truly engage with and respond to the writings of anti-Stratfordians.

Nicholl at least does us the service of explaining that spelling found in the published plays may not be the author's spellings, but may be those of compositors, whose spelling choices were often controlled by such factors as lineation and availability of type. Nicholl mentions this as part of an anti-Marlowe argument, but I wish he would explain the principle to Alan Nelson, who argues (not in *SBD*, but elsewhere) that Oxford couldn't be the true author because he used different spellings in his letters than are used in Shakespeare's plays.

Mark Anderson's thoroughly researched, copiously documented biography of the Earl of Oxford receives only a couple of mentions in *SBD*, in one of which Nelson dismisses it by saying, "For Anderson, scarcely an incident in Oxford's life remains unconnected to the Shakespeare canon; and scarcely a detail of the Shakespeare canon remains unconnected to Oxford's life." Actually, that's an accurate description of Anderson's book, which uncovers an astounding number of parallels between Oxford's life and Shakespeare's works. But Nelson just brushes all that aside in one sentence. He doesn't bother to point out any place that Anderson might be wrong.

As for Nelson's chapter on why the Oxford theory is supposedly wrong (chapter 4), I have little to add beyond the response to *SBD* posted on the Shakespeare Fellowship's website. Suffice it to say that Nelson argues that Oxford can't be Shakespeare because he killed a cook, was a spendthrift, was mean to his wife, and lived for a while with an Italian choirboy—obvious disqualifications for being the Bard. But maybe Nelson didn't read other chapters in *SBD* in which his co-authors chastise certain anti-Stratfordians for saying the Stratford man couldn't be the Bard because he was a grain-hoarder and money-lender. If there is one lesson to be learned from *SBD*, it is that biography has nothing to do with it. If a grain-hoarder could have written the plays, then so could a playboy. Nelson also makes the tired, old argument that Oxford couldn't have written *The Tempest* (long ago refuted by Stritmatter and Lynne Kositsky) and tries to argue that the parallels between Oxford's life and *Hamlet* are few and far between.

Matt Kubus (chapter 5) argues that the sheer number of candidates destroys the anti-Stratfordian argument and that, mathematically, every time a new candidate is suggested, the probability decreases that it is the true author. If ever there were a facile argument, this is it. If your name is one of many to be drawn at random from a drum in a lottery, then, yes, the more names in the drum, the less likely it is that your name will be chosen. But the authorship question is not about randomly drawing names from a drum. It is about examining the evidence for specific candidates. One should go about this through the standard scientific method, which Kubus describes as starting with a hypothesis, analyzing the data, and making a logical conclusion based on the facts. Once one actually does that, however, the number of serious candidates dwindles to a precious few.

In line with the *modus operandi* of *SBD*, Kubus examines only bad examples of anti-Stratfordian "research," such as wacky cryptogram theories and some pathetically stupid blogger he finds on the web, and then argues that alternative candidate theories are

all the same. Again, this shows the lack of care and critical attention that the authors of *SBD* have paid to their adversaries.

Indeed, "misdirection," of the kind that a pickpocket uses to take your attention off his hand while he steals your wallet, abounds in this book. It spends an inordinate amount of time on subjects that have nothing to do with serious authorship evidence or scholarship, including one chapter (16) on *fictional* treatments of the authorship question and another chapter (18) on the film *Anonymous*. Again, it's all part of a not-so-subtle attempt to leave the reader with the impression that all anti-Stratfordian writings are fictional and that the scenarios put forth in films and novels are exactly the ones believed by anti-Stratfordians.

Douglas M. Lanier says of *Anonymous* that its "claim to historical authenticity is crucial to its case for Oxford as the true author of Shakespeare's plays." To knowledgeable Oxfordians, who were more adept than anyone else in pointing out historical inaccuracies in the film, this is a howler. Oxfordians saw *Anonymous* as merely a fiction that melded historical fact with fantasy. Yet Lanier would try to pawn off this film as the summit of anti-Stratfordian thinking. With Lanier, as with most of the authors of *SBD*, it is difficult to tell if he has simply never read any serious anti-Stratfordian scholarship or if he is purposely trying to throw the reader off the scent. I suspect that he has never read us. Many Stratfordians are probably wary of reading their adversaries' works for fear of being seduced by the sirens' song.

Kinder, Gentler Stratfordians

Stuart Hampton-Reeves in chapter 17 departs from the recent Stratfordian strategy of labeling all doubters as crackpots or mentally deranged. He appears as kinder, gentler, and less fanatical, admitting that it is no longer possible to dismiss anti-Stratfordians as "ill-informed cranks." He understands that reasonable people can hold unreasonable opinions.

Except that the book doesn't call doubters "anti-Stratfordians." Instead, it calls them "anti-*Shakespearians*." As Edmondson and Wells explain in their introduction, the authors employ that word because "anti-Stratfordian . . . allows the work attributed to Shakespeare to be separated from the social and cultural context of its author." How's that for circular reasoning? We cannot doubt that the Stratford man was Shakespeare because we know that Shakespeare was from Stratford. According to *SBD*, to speak of "anti-Stratfordians" would be wrong because "to deny Shakespeare of Stratford's connection to the work attributed to him is to deny the essence of, in part, what made that work possible."

Got that? Shakespeare just wouldn't have been Shakespeare without Stratford. So, if you're against Stratford, you must be against Shakespeare. Or something like that. I guess this means that clues of a Stratfordian life are all over the plays and that's how we know the man from Stratford wrote them. Not that we read the works biographically, mind you. *SBD* is very clear about that. But, still, the works are full of Stratfordian words and references, as David Kathman argues in chapter 11, apparently oblivious of Michael Egan's devastating rebuttal in 2011 to similar claims by Kathman.[2] Undaunted, Kathman

[2] *Exposing an Industry in Denial* (2011), reprinted in Part II of Shahan, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?*.

says that words like "ballow" and "mobbled" are unique to Warwickshire, despite Egan's having explained that the words were either from other places or were simply misreadings. As Egan pointed out, the Oxford Companion to Shakespeare (of which Stanley Wells is an editor) notes that "It is somewhat strange that Shakespeare did not . . . exploit his Warwickshire accent, since he was happy enough to represent, in phonetic spelling, the non-standard English of French and Welsh speakers, and the national dialects of Scotland and Ireland." Kathman does admit that the alleged presence of Warwickshire words in the plays "doesn't prove anything." At least he's right about something.

Kathman's big point, however, is that Stratford was not a cultural backwater, but had many educated, cultured people. Some of the evidence for this is that many Stratfordians left long lists of book bequests in their wills. Kathman passes over in silence the anomaly that Shakspere mentioned no books in *his* will. Shakspere's friends, such as Richard Quiney, Thomas Greene, and Thomas Russell, all left documentary paper trails showing that they were literate and educated. To Shakspere, however, as Kathman admits, "No specific surviving books can be traced." Right again. It's strange how all the evidence of Shakspere's education vanished while that of his friends didn't.

And by the way, *SBD* hardly ever uses any other spelling than "Shakespeare" to refer to the Stratford man. When it does mention another spelling, such as "Shakspere," it is for the purpose of showing how those bad old "anti-Shakespearians" are always trying to denigrate good old Will by misspelling his name, making it sound as if he was a different person than the one who wrote the plays under the name "Shakespeare." The purpose of this tactic is to make the reader come away thinking that the Stratford man always spelled his name "Shakespeare," the way it was spelled in the plays, when in fact there is no record that the Stratford man *ever* spelled it that way.

Don't Question Authority

The Declaration of Reasonable Doubt is derided in *SBD* as a declaration of faith, and also a declaration of loss of faith—faith in Shakespeare! Hampton-Reeves notes that the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition criticized James Shapiro for not engaging with the Declaration's arguments and then states that he will also disappoint readers by not offering a point-by-point rebuttal. But if these people won't, then who will? *SBD* has it backwards about who is operating on faith. Its authors believe that they are the high priests and we have "lost the faith" by failing to believe their self-evidently correct interpretation of the sacred texts.

Paul Edmondson's closing chapter (19) is particularly repugnant when it questions how anyone can be open-minded "given the positive historical evidence in Shakespeare's favour." He says that "open-mindedness" is merely a rhetorical maneuver and should be allowed only after the evidence for Shakespeare has been disproven, not (as Edmondson says) "merely ignored." "There is, too," says Edmondson, "the loaded assumption that even though one may lack the necessary knowledge and expertise, it is always acceptable to challenge or contradict a knowledgeable and expert authority. It is not." This is probably the least subtle of the many appeals to authority that pervade the book. Edmondson also compares anti-Stratfordians to bullies. Near the end, he says, "One likes to think that if there were any actual evidence that Shakespeare did not write the plays and poems attributed to him, then it would be Shakespeare scholars themselves

who would discover and propagate it in their quest to know as much as possible about him." And may the fox guard the henhouse!

Shakespeare's Knowledge

Finally, *SBD* completely ducks (by never mentioning) the question of how the Stratford man acquired the vast knowledge of law, medicine, Italy, and a great many other subjects that is evident in the plays. In 1942, Paul Clarkson and Clyde Warren noted that: "Books by the score have been written to demonstrate [Shakespeare's] intimate and all pervading knowledge of such diverse subjects as angling, hunting, falconry, and horsemanship; military life, tactics, and equipment; navigation, both of peace and of war; medicine and pharmacy; an almost philological erudition in classical mythology; folklore, and biblical lore; and a sweeping knowledge of natural history, flora as well as fauna . . . agriculture and gardening; music, heraldry, precious stones, and even typography. . . jurisprudence—civil, ecclesiastical, common law, and equity."

Clarkson and Warren listed at least one book or article for every subject and noted that they could have listed many more. That was in 1942. Surely a much longer list could be compiled today with many more subjects—Italy, philosophy, astrology, and Greek drama, for example. The lesson to be learned from all these books about Shakespeare's knowledge in a vast array of subjects is that the author had a thorough and broad-ranging education and experience, which he often called upon to advance his dramatic purposes. The author of Shakespeare's plays very likely had extensive formal education, easy access to books, abundant leisure time to study on his own, and wide experience of the world gained through travel. This makes authorship by a nobleman more likely than that of the Stratford man. *SBD* fails to deal with this question because it simply can't.

One might have thought that, given the chance to put the authorship controversy to rest once and for all, the authors and editors of *SBD* would have laid out their evidence in all its glory, with clear, cogent explanations of its significance and coolly reasoned rebuttals to any arguments questioning its authenticity. That they have chosen instead to assert authority, disparage open-mindedness, and belittle adversaries says a great deal about the mindset and the state of scholarship, as it regards the authorship question, of the Shakespeare establishment.