

The Methodology of Literary Criticism and the Shakespeare Authorship Question

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Much can be learned about why literary scholars have not accepted Edward de Vere's authorship of the works of William Shakespeare by examining changes in the methodology of literary criticism over the course of the twentieth century.

In 1920, at the time J. Thomas Looney introduced the idea de Vere's authorship, the study of literature was conducted through two complementary methods. One approach sought to explain the significance of works of literature by considering them as works of art important in themselves. Practitioners of this approach, who could be called literary connoisseurs, sought to understand and demonstrate the technical perfection or artistic unity of a work. They helped readers understand the genre, literary devices and rhetorical figures authors used, and expressed judgments about how successfully they used them.

The other approach sought appreciation of works of literature through knowledge of the life and times of their authors. We might call practitioners of this approach literary historians. Their work is of greater relevance for the Shakespeare authorship question because they sought to understand an author's intentions and how he or she was influenced by the political, economic, social and literary currents of the society in which he or she lived. Because most readers lived in societies very different from those of the authors whose works they read, they benefited from the expert knowledge of the author's life and times that literary historians brought to the discussion.

Given what was to come, it is important to emphasize that the two approaches were two sides of one methodological coin because both required close readings of literary works with the goal of teasing out the author's meanings. In that tradition, Professor Jonathan Culler explains,

Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 118

[T]he task was the interpretation of literary works as the achievements of their authors, and the main justification for studying literature was the special value of great works: their complexity, their beauty, their insight, their universality, and their potential benefits to the reader . (Culler 47)

The methodology that encompasses both approaches to the study of literature, often referred to as the humanistic tradition in literary criticism, stretches back to the earliest Western writings about the nature of literature, beginning with Aristotle and Horace, and continuing through Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and Matthew Arnold, and including Henry James just prior to the time that Looney identified Edward de Vere as the pen behind the name William Shakespeare.

Introduction of the idea of de Vere's authorship

At the time Looney introduced the idea of de Vere's authorship, doubts about William Shakspeare's authorship had been growing outside of academia for more than fifty years. "The undermining of that belief," Looney explains, was due "mainly to two movements . . . [arising in] the nineteenth century." The first was the marked interest in practical historical research, which "brought to light the disconcerting fact that the English writer most distinguished by the brilliancy of his powers was, paradoxically, separated from all his fellows by a glaring deficiency of relevant personal records." The second was the development of a scientific study of literature, which "yielded a truer measure of the culture represented by the works." These two developments "produced in many minds a definite conviction that . . . a school of literature of the first rank had been allowed to grow up around a personality having no title whatever to the honour" (Looney, *Hind*, 23-24).

Looney sought to investigate the authorship question guided only by qualities deduced from his reading of Shakespeare's works that he thought the author must have had. In approaching the authorship question in this manner, Looney was acting in the role of an investigator. Because what he was investigating took place in the past, he was in effect conducting the work of a historian. It is appropriate, then, to consider the methodology most appropriate for historians.

"History," writes noted historian David Hackett Fischer, "must begin with questions. Questions for historians are like hypotheses for scientists" (Fischer, xx). In asking an open-ended question and in presenting his results "in the form of a reasoned argument," Looney seems almost to be following the process of "adductive reasoning" that Fischer describes fifty years later as most appropriate for historians.

The logic of historical thought . . . consists neither in inductive reasons from the particular to the general, nor in deductive reasoning from the general to the particular. Instead, it is a process of *adductive* reasoning in the simple sense of adducing answers to specific questions, so that a satisfactory explanatory "fit" is obtained. . . . Always it is articulated in the form of a reasoned argument. (Fischer xv)

Looney's case was built in part on the striking number of similarities between events and people important in the life of Edward de Vere on one hand, and events and characters in Shakespeare's plays on the other. One notable example was the Gad's Hill robbery perpetrated by servants of Edward de Vere in real life and portrayed in *Henry IV, Part 1*. He believed that the large number of such correspondences was one of the most important factors in proving his case. As he explained, "The predominating element in what we call circumstantial evidence is that of coincidences. A few coincidences we may treat as simply interesting; a number of coincidences we regard as remarkable; a vast accumulation of extraordinary coincidences we accept as conclusive proof" (Looney, *Identified* 80).

Once Looney had discovered de Vere authorship, his followers, known as Oxfordians, sought to establish the facts of de Vere's life and of how he had come to write his works. Early researchers such as Eva Turner Clark documented scores of similarities between events depicted in the plays and events in de Vere's life and in Elizabeth's court and government that took place fifteen years too early for the man from Stratford to have been the author. As Looney comments on this point, "It is because the Shakespeare literature embodies work representing all periods of Oxford's lifetime, sometimes in a single play, that efforts to fix a Shakespeare canon on the basis of an author younger than the Earl of Oxford have proved so inconclusive" (Looney, *Hind*, 30).

These doubts penetrated less deeply into the academic/scholarly community than in the wider cultural world though, and authorship by the man from Stratford remained the guiding idea in academia. Given the "facts" already known to academics—that Shakspeare's authorship had been confirmed by the *First Folio* and that the plays had been written for the public stage—scholars' efforts were focused on fleshing out their understanding of the context in which the works had been written, with that context defined by the timeline of Shakspeare's life.

Guided by such a deductive methodology, Stratfordians could not accept authorship by others regardless of the lack of correspondences between Shakspeare and the works and regardless of the number of coincidences uncovered between events in the plays and events in the lives of other purported authors. With correspondences between the life and works ruled out as an acceptable form of evidence by their methodology, Shakespearean scholars felt justified in concluding that insufficient evidence existed to justify academic consideration of the Shakespeare authorship question.

Just how limiting this approach was is shown by the case of Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, who spent decades searching for evidence of ties between William Shakspeare and the Third Earl of Southampton, the dedicatee of Shakespeare's two long poems. Unable to find even a single scrap of evidence to connect the two men, she regarded her search as a failure. With a more open-ended methodology, she might have come to realize that her assumption of Shakspeare's authorship was mistaken.

In addition to their research aimed at establishing connections between William Shakspeare and the works of William Shakespeare, Stratfordians also invented

Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 120

ad hoc explanations for things that otherwise could not be explained in any rational way if the author was born in Stratford in 1564. As one example, when evidence arose that a play with a character named *Hamlet* had existed by the end of the 1580s, far too early to have been written by Shakspeare, they fantasized about the existence of an anonymous play they called *ur-Hamlet* on which Shakespeare had based his play, even though no independent evidence exists that such a play ever existed.

The idea of de Vere's authorship was subjected to unacademic attacks by literary scholars, who often criticized the ideas of Delia Bacon from the 1850s rather than address the most sophisticated evidence in support of de Vere's authorship presented by Charlton Ogburn and others. Opponents also used spurious arguments, such as citing the "fact" that de Vere could not have written many of the plays because they had been written after his death in 1604, while knowing full well that the date of composition has not been established for any of the plays.

Supported by fantasies and *ad hoc* explanations to explain anomalies and by and unacademic attacks on the idea of de Vere's authorship—along with the fact that many scholars remained unaware that de Vere had been proposed as a candidate for authorship—the weight of academic opinion remained opposed to the idea that William Shakespeare was a pseudonym behind which lay the pen of Edward de Vere.

A rare example of someone of prominence remaining open to other possibilities was that of Henry Clay Folger, founder of the Folger Shakespeare Library. He was so intrigued by Esther Singleton's novel *Shakespearian Fantasias* (1930), in which characters from Shakespeare's plays quote poems by Edward de Vere and describe other characters using words that were actually used to describe de Vere, that he purchased a dozen copies and sent them out to major players in the field of Shakespearean research. He also purchased the original manuscript, which is now part of the Folger Library's collection.

More indicative of opinion within the Folger Library and academia is a statement made by Louis B. Wright, who served as Director of the Folger Library from 1948 to 1968. In it, Wright characterized those who doubt authorship by the man from Stratford as

"disciples of cults" that "have all the fervor of religion," pray to "emotion that sweeps aside the intellectual appraisal of facts" chronology and the laws of evidence." They are "fanatic sectarians" who "rail on disbelievers and condemn other cultists as fools and knaves," and "who welcome a new convert to their beliefs with the enthusiasm accorded a repentant sinner at a Holy Rollers' revival," while "a fog of gloom envelops them." They have developed a "neurosis . . . that may account for an unhappy truculence that sometimes makes them unwelcome in polite company." Indeed, "one gets the impression that they would gladly restore the faggot and the stake for infidels from their particular orthodoxy" (Ogburn 154).

Showing just how little has changed within academia since Wright published those comments in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (VQR) in 1959, the VQR selected

Wright's article as one of only four from the 1950s included in *We Write for Our Own Time: Selected Essays from 75 Years of The Virginia Quarterly Review*, published in 2000. Given the viciousness of the characterizations of those doubting authorship by the man from Stratford by Wright and other leading academics, it is not surprising that almost all English professors continue to teach their students that Shakspere wrote Shakespeare's works whether they believe that to be the case or not.

After its rejection, the idea of Edward de Vere as the author of Shakespeare's works remained an underground theory for the next half century. Throughout that time its proponents continued to refine the theory, document how doubtful the evidence supporting authorship by the man from Stratford really was, and further establish the facts of Edward de Vere's life and the tightness of the correspondences between it and events and characters in Shakespeare's works. In 1984, Charlton Ogburn, Jr., pulled together that evidence and published it in his comprehensive and persuasive book *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*.

Although academia remained firm in its beliefs that the man from Stratford wrote Shakespeare's works and that de Vere did not, the publication of Ogburn's book coincided with and probably was largely responsible for a significant increase in public attention to the Shakespeare authorship question. Since the mid 1980s, the number of books, articles and documentaries addressing the authorship question and the idea of de Vere's authorship of Shakespeare's works has steadily increased. Richard Whalen, observing in 2007 the greater attention paid to the authorship question by the media and even academia, writes with some surprise that "the extent of these examples just from the past decade is unprecedented. Nothing like it occurred in academia before the mid-1990s" (Whalen 19-20).

Evolution of the methodology of literary criticism

It would be pleasing to describe how the methodology of literary criticism evolved in ways more favorable to the authorship question since Looney proposed de Vere's authorship in 1920. Unfortunately, since the middle of the twentieth century the humanistic tradition, with its artistic and historical approaches to the study of literature, began to lose favor with the academic and scholarly community.

By the last few decades of the twentieth century, that tradition—one not unfavorable in itself to consideration of the authorship question—was largely replaced by a new methodology that does not value close readings of literary works and in which the intentions of the author are largely irrelevant. The decline of literary studies in academia is not a pleasant story, but it is one that authorship scholars must be familiar with if they are to persuade literary scholars that the authorship question is worthy of academic study.

One of the first developments in the transformation of literary criticism came from within the historical approach—the change in emphasis from seeking to understand those aspects of an author's society that he had consciously and purposely sought to portray in his works to what he unconsciously revealed about it.

Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 122

This is a change in focus from what Lionel Trilling identifies in *The Liberal Imagination* as “the explicit statements that a people makes through its art . . .” (Trilling 205) to that of “the dim mental region of intention” that lies below them, “a culture’s hum and buzz of implication . . . the whole evanescent context in which its explicit statements are made. It is that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value” (Trilling 206-207).

With this change, literary scholars not only had to bring expert knowledge to help readers “reconstruct the original context of production (the circumstances and intentions of the author and the meanings a text might have had for its original readers),” but also to “expose the unexamined assumptions on which a text may rely (political, sexual, philosophical, linguistic)” (Culler 68-69).

In seeking to “expose the unexamined assumptions” of an author, we have reached what W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley called “the intentional fallacy,” in which “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1). Instead, Culler explains, “The meaning of a work is not what the writer had in mind at some moment during composition of the work, or what the writer thinks the work means after it is finished, but rather what he or she succeeded in embodying in the work” (Culler 67). Thus, a fuller examination of works of literature is required, one that examines both the conscious and unconscious results of the author’s efforts.

Another development came from within the artistic approach to the study of literature. After the heyday of the New Criticism, some critics adopted its practice of separating works of literature from their authors, but did so not in order to examine them as works of art as the New Critics did, but to examine their political and social content unencumbered by the intentions of the author—exactly those aspects of the work that the New Critics had sought to get away from by isolating works from their authors and history.

With both approaches focused on the contents of the work of literature rather than the author, there was, some thought, no need to consider the author at all. Why not eliminate consideration of him or her completely in order to focus directly on the contents without distinguishing between its intentional or unintentional origin? With this line of thinking we have reached what Roland Barthes called “the death of the author.”

The approach of examining works of literature in isolation from consideration of their authors is obviously not one favorable to the Shakespeare authorship question, which is intimately bound up with consideration of the life of the author and his reasons for writing his works. Neither of these factors is given much importance in an approach that examines works of literature as though they were immaculately conceived and the result of virgin births.

We have already seen attempts to cut off consideration of the strongest type of support for the idea of de Vere’s authorship—the correspondences between his life and Shakespeare’s works—by denying the validity of circumstantial evidence. We now see another tactic that would have the same effect: that of denying the importance of the author and thus the importance of any linkages between his life

and works.

Oxfordians have speculated among themselves for years about the extent to which the “death of the author” approach to literary theory arose as a response to the mismatch between Shakspere’s life and Shakespeare’s works. It is perhaps not unreasonable to consider the extent to which literary scholars aware of the challenge to authorship by the man from Stratford deliberately overstated “the death of the author” as one way of preserving their belief in his authorship.

There is yet one more significant change to consider: the change from studying works of literature *through* the history of their times, to studying societies and cultures *through* works of literature. In this methodology, literary criticism is no longer an independent field of study, but one that has been largely subsumed as a subfield within the larger field of Cultural Studies.

Rather than being the ends to be studied, literary works have become merely one means through which non-literary subjects are studied. Cultural theorists regard literary works of all types as mere cultural artifacts to be mined for data about the society from which they arose in the same manner that advertising copy or other anonymously-written documents are examined. Considering works of literature as works of art important in themselves—the work of literary connoisseurs—has little place in this methodology, and has largely ended within academia. Gone is any sense that literature has something meaningful to say about the larger aspects of what it means to live as human beings on planet earth. The focus is now on what literary works can tell cultural researchers about specific political, economic, social or sexual practices in the cultures from which they arose.

Let us be clear that when the so-called “death of the author” is discussed, what is also implied is the death of literary criticism itself. The standard anthology in the field, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, declares that

Literary texts, like other artworks, are neither more nor less important than any other cultural artifact or practice. Keeping the emphasis on how cultural meanings are produced, circulated and consumed, the investigator will focus on art or literature insofar as such works connect with broader social factors, not because they possess some intrinsic interest or special aesthetic value (Seaton 20).

The introduction to another widely used text, *Cultural Studies*, specifies that “although there is no prohibition against close textual readings in cultural studies, they are also not required” (Culler 50). Thus, Culler observes, “In theory cultural studies is all-encompassing: Shakespeare and rap music, high culture and low, culture of the past and culture of the present” (Culler 47) are all equally worthy of study. “Freed from the principle that has long governed literary studies—that the main point of interest is the distinctive complexity of individual works—cultural studies could easily become a kind of non-quantitative sociology, treating works as instances or symptoms of something else rather than of interest in themselves, and succumbing to other temptations” (Culler 50-51).

Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 124

Examples of how works of literature can be mined for information about cultural issues unrelated to the intentions of their authors are endless. As one example, Culler notes that

Interpreting *Hamlet* is, among other things, a matter of deciding whether it should be read as talking about, say, the problems of Danish princes, or the dilemmas of men of the Renaissance experiencing changes in the conception of the self, or relations between men and their mothers in general, or the question of how representations (including literary ones) affect the problem of making sense of our experiences. (Culler 33)

In all of these potential “interpretations,” the play is treated as just another cultural artifact, in which what is most special about it—that it was created by a specific human being for a specific purpose or purposes—is intentionally ignored.

Departments of Literature still exist on university campuses today, but often they are in reality Departments of Cultural Studies. As Seaton observes, “in some of the most influential academic centers literary criticism has been replaced by cultural studies” (Seaton 1). The situation is not that cultural studies courses are taught alongside literature courses in those departments. It is not even that cultural studies have influenced the methodology of literary criticism to include new factors in literary criticism. It is, rather, that a takeover has occurred in which there appears to be little room left for the traditional humanistic approach to literary studies. Seaton notes that “From the viewpoint . . . of influential English graduate programs, prestigious academic journals, authoritative anthologies of criticism, and the most prominent academic theorists, the humanistic tradition in literary criticism seems to be invisible” (Seaton 6-7).

As one example, the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* could not find much space in their 2,785-page volume for the giants of traditional humanistic literary criticism in the twentieth century. Lionel Trilling, for instance, is not represented at all, and Edmund Wilson is represented only by one unrepresentative essay, even though the book claims to “present a staggeringly varied collection of the most influential critical statements from the classical era to the present day” (Seaton 20).

To sum up, the humanistic tradition of the study of literature in place at the time Looney identified Edward de Vere as Shakespeare has been replaced by one unreceptive to the authorship question. The methodology of seeking correspondences between events and characters in literary works and events and people in the life of a purported author has little resonance in an environment in which the author is regarded as an outmoded “construct” that is bypassed in favor of cultural forces that determine the content of literary works. And, that the entire field of literary studies has been subsumed under the field of cultural studies, which is itself wracked by methodological flaws that produce works that cannot be considered serious scholarship, is not indicative of an environment in which the academic study of the authorship question can easily take place. Simply put, the authorship question is not one that most literary scholars find attractive in the current environment.

Figure 1 summarizes the changes that have occurred in the methodology of literary study since Looney introduced the idea of Edward de Vere as Shakespeare in 1920s.

	Traditional methodology of literary criticism	New methodology of literary criticism	Cultural studies
Consideration of the literary work	Focus is on the unique artistic aspects of literary works consciously used by the author	Focus is on unintentional aspects of works through techniques such as Stylometrics	Focus is not on the work itself but on mining it to find data supportive of cultural theories
Consideration of the author	Focus is on the author's intentions and on how they arose from the conditions of his life and times	Focus is on what the author reveals unintentionally or unconsciously	Focus is not on the author himself but on the cultural forces that are reflected in the work

Figure 1: Changing methodologies in literary criticism.

The Descent into Theory

As bad as this situation seems for the study of the Shakespeare authorship question, there is one more development that must be noted, one as detrimental as any already described: the corruption of Cultural Studies itself through seemingly widespread unacademic practices.

Because historians are what cultural theorists are when they examine cultural conditions in the past, it might be appropriate for them to follow the guidance for historians from David Hackett Fischer already noted. It would also be appropriate for those studying cultural subjects to adhere to the principals of academic study, as explained by Stanley Fish. Subjects investigated, he advises,

should be studied as the objects of analysis, comparison and historical placement, etc.; the arguments put forward in relation to them should be dissected and assessed *as* arguments and not as preliminaries to action on the part of those doing the assessing. The action one takes (or should take) at the conclusion of an academic discussion is the action of tendering an *academic* verdict as in “that argument makes sense,” “there’s a hole in the reasoning here,” “the author does (or does not) realize her intention,” “in this debate, X has the better of Y,” “the case is still not proven.” These and similar judgments are judgments on craftsmanship and coherence—they respond to questions like “is it well made?” and “does it hang together.”

(Fish 25-26).

The apparent practice within Cultural Studies of studying academic subjects in order to promote non-academic goals does not appear to be due to the failings of individual researchers, but results rather from the methodology of Cultural Studies itself. The field appears to be fragmented into a dozen or more subfields, each defined not only by the general topic to be researched, but also by outcomes that appear to be predetermined by the very nature of the subfield. Publications produced in the subfields all too often have the appearance of relying on data cherry-picked to reach conclusions determined in advance by the premises of the subject being studied.

These subfields also appear to suffer from several other procedural flaws that Fischer warned historians away from. One of them, “The fallacy of declarative questions,”

Consists in confusing an interrogative with a declarative statement. It violates a fundamental rule of empirical question-framing, which requires that a question must have an open end, which will allow a free and honest choice, with minimal bias and maximal flexibility. If a historian goes to his sources with a simple affirmative proposition that “X was the case,” then he is predisposed to prove it. He will probably be able to find “evidence” sufficient to illustrate his expectations, if not actually to sustain them. If, on the other hand, he asks, “Was X or Y the case?” then he has an empirical advantage, at least in some small degree. And if asks “Was X or not-X, Y or not-Y, Z or not-Z . . . the case?” and if he designs X, and Y, and Z in such a way that his own preferences are neutralized . . . then the probability of empirical accuracy is still further enhanced. (Fischer 24)

Another is “the pragmatic fallacy,” in which the mistake is made of selecting “useful facts—immediately and directly useful facts—in the service of a social cause. . . . It consists in the attempt to combine scholarly monographs and social manifestoes in a single operation” (Fischer 82). “A historian,” Fischer notes, “like any other researcher, has a vested interest in answering his own questions. His job is at stake, and his reputation, and most important, his self-respect. If he substitutes a declarative for an interrogative statement, then the result is literally a foregone conclusion. The best will in the world won’t suffice to keep him honest” (Fischer 24-25).

And there are others. One is “The fallacy of the one-dimensional man,” which selects one aspect of the human condition and makes it into the measure of humanity itself. . . . It reduces the complex psychic condition of men merely to their political roles and shrinks all the components of the social calculus to a simple equation of power, ambition, and interest” (Fischer 200). Related to this is “the fallacy of the universal man,” which “falsely assumes that people are intellectually and psychologically the same in all times, places and circumstances. Every unitary solution, without exception, which has ever been proposed as a panacea for the hopes

and misfortunes of mankind, has been fatally flawed by this fundamental fallacy” (Fischer 203).

In indulging in these fallacies, it almost appears as if Cultural Studies itself no longer studies the cultures of various societies or the process of cultural change, but instead hand-picks data from various societies to support theories arising from outside Cultural Studies itself—indeed, from outside academia. If so, the field no longer qualifies as an academic discipline as defined by Stanley Fish. Such a state of affairs, if this analysis is accurate, would show the full depth of the degradation into which literary studies, now a subfield within Cultural Studies, has fallen. Figure 2 shows this progression.

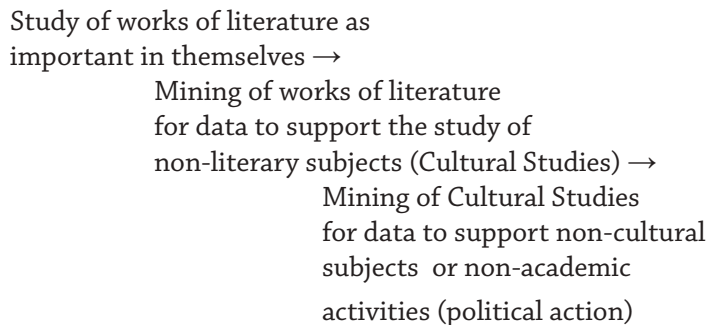


Figure 2: The corruption of Culture Studies.

Without academic standards in place to guide cultural theorists away from those fallacies and inappropriate non-academic goals, it is not surprising that they often developed, in Culler’s phrasing, “dispositions to give particular kinds of answers to the question of what a work is ultimately ‘about’: ‘the class struggle’ (Marxism), ‘Oedipal conflict’ (psychoanalysis), ‘the containment of subversive energies’ (new historicism), ‘the asymmetry of gender relations’ (feminism), ‘the self-deconstructive nature of the text’ (deconstruction), ‘the occlusion of imperialism’ (postcolonial theory), ‘the heterosexual matrix’ (gay and lesbian studies)” (Culler 65). Flawed methodologies lead to flawed practices, as “Marxist theory sees the subject as determined by class position: it either profits from others’ labour or labours for others’ profit. Feminist theory stresses the impact of socially constructed gender roles on making the subject what he or she is. Queer theory has argued that the heterosexual subject is constructed through the repression of the possibility of homosexuality” (Culler 10).

These cultural theories draw heavily on the idea of deconstruction, which at its very core has an agenda that is not objective examination of a subject, but rather, Culler explains,

a critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thought: inside/outside, mind/body, literal/metaphorical, speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, form/meaning. To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction,

Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 128

produced by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dismantle it and reinscribe it – that is, not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning.

(Culler 140)

Deconstruction, by that definition, presupposes the nature of what is to be studied, making an objective, open-ended examination impossible. Cultural theorists could learn much from Samuel Johnson, who recognized long ago the distinction between “argument,” which aims to discover the truth and hence supports the idea of unbiased assessment of cultural factors, and “testimony,” which aims to convince others of a certain point of view and hence describes the agenda-driven cherry-picking of evidence that appears to exist all too often in Cultural Studies.

Nay, Sir, argument is argument. You cannot help paying regard to their arguments, if they are good. If it were testimony, you might disregard it. . . . Testimony is like an arrow shot from a long bow; the force of it depends on the strength of the hand that draws it. Argument is like an arrow shot from a crossbow, which has equal force though shot by a child. (Fischer 282)

An environment in which “testimony” is favored over “argument” is not one in which academic study of the Shakespeare authorship question is likely to occur.

Methodology and the future of the Shakespeare authorship question

It now appears that the most critical factor affecting acceptance or rejection of new theories is that of methodology, that of the process through which academic communities pursue new knowledge and interpret and judge new ideas and data. Several conclusions about the nature of methodology can be cited that account for academia’s continuing rejection of the Shakespeare authorship question.

First, methodologies will differ from field to field because they must be suited to the nature of the objects being examined and the explanations being sought. For historical studies, the appropriate methodology is the “adductive reasoning” explained by historian David H. Fischer that asks open-ended questions and answers them in the form of reasoned argument. For literary criticism, the appropriate methodology is one that recognizes the two distinctive features of works of literature: that they are unique and so deserve careful study in themselves as works of art, and they are produced by specific individuals for specific reasons at specific points in time, which makes awareness of the author’s intentions and the details of his life and times important for understanding them. The Shakespeare authorship question, being a study of the historical aspects of the origin of works of literature, will best be studied through a methodology blending those of history and literary criticism.

Second, focus must remain primarily on substantive accomplishments, not on adherence to any specific methodology. Facts, data and theories must be considered separately from the methodology in place when they were discovered.

Not doing so is a mistake being made by literary scholars who reject findings by Oxfordians. The longer a methodological practice continues substantially unchanged the more firmly the bureaucratic supports for it will have become entrenched and the more difficult it will be to consider new ideas and data resulting from outside the approved methodology. The bureaucratic pressure to regard adherence to methodology as an accomplishment in itself must be resisted if an environment conducive to independent and creative thought is to be preserved.

Third, the right type of data must be selected and it must be judged objectively. Data should not be invented, as in the case of the *ur-Hamlet* example, but must be found. *Ad hoc* explanations are not legitimate explanations. Practitioners of Cultural Studies who cherry-pick data in support of existing theories are engaging in unacademic practices unlikely to lead to accurate findings.

Fourth, circumstantial evidence is a legitimate form of evidence in historical investigations, just as it is in courtrooms. Correspondences between events and characters in literary works ascribed to a pen name and similar events and people in the life of a purported author are legitimate grounds for establishing authorship. What is important is the quality and quantity of the correspondences.

And fifth, investigations must be conducted in an academic manner with the goal of establishing the truth or falsity of the ideas examined. Care must be taken to avoid the fallacies identified by David Hackett Fischer and the politicization of issues as described by Stanley Fish.

A new methodology more appropriate for the study of literature must be created. Any methodology built around the two factors that distinguish literature from natural objects studied by the natural sciences—that each work of literature is a unique work of art and is created by a specific author in a specific time and place for specific reasons—will be appropriate for the Shakespeare authorship question.

Putting together the idea that each field of study requires its own unique methodology and the idea that methodology follows practice, it becomes clear that in order to change the methodology of literary criticism, changes in practice need to occur and be successful so that a new methodology can be formed based on them. And further, changes in what is being studied must occur first so that new practices will evolve that can be studied and incorporated into a new methodology.

But is it possible for a new methodology to be formulated if what is being studied has not changed? At first glance the answer appears to be *no* if what is being studied is works of literature from the past that have not changed. But the answer actually is *yes*. This paradox can be explained by noting that works of literature are not now being studied. What is being studied in cultural programs masquerading as literature programs is cultures, which are studied in part *through* works of literature.

The change to study of works of literature themselves would lead to new practices (or a revival of older ones), and thus to a new methodology incorporating and justifying them. That new methodology would not be exactly the same as the older methodology in the humanistic tradition because of technological advances made in the past half century. It would, however, include the work of literary

Brief Chronicles - first folio special issue (2016) 130

historians and literary connoisseurs noted earlier, and also have room for more quantitative practices such as Stylometrics.

If the healthy study of literature is to occur under a new methodology, it must take place outside the dominion of and domination by Cultural Studies. Cultural studies, in spite of the unacademic practices currently in place, is a legitimate field of study. It is unfortunate that literary studies became combined with it, and the health of both fields requires that they be separated. The two study different things and so require different methodologies, and thus need to be housed in different departments dedicated to maintaining high standards in their respective methodological areas.

Although the subject of how Oxfordians might engage literary scholars to persuade them to accept the authorship question of one worthy of academic study is outside the subject of this paper, some preliminary thoughts can be presented here. First, it should be noted that the methodology of literary criticism has changed before. It is worth Oxfordians' time to examine closely how the New Critics "convinced professors of literature [to establish] literary criticism as an academic discipline" (Seaton 102).

Second, in the effort to separate literary studies from Cultural Studies, it could be the case that the authorship question will be the issue that triggers changes in the broader methodology of literary criticism. The difficulty of the effort to reconcile the life of the man from Stratford and the works of Shakespeare could be the catalyst leading to the return of genuine literature programs in our universities. After all, if it was the case that a significant impetus toward the "death of the author" was the effort to sidestep the lack of correspondences between the life of the man from Stratford and the works of Shakespeare, then it is conceivable that serious academic study of the authorship question could lead to the "resurrection of the author."

And third, a scenario for the implementation of a new methodology and acceptance of the legitimacy of the authorship question might involve the following steps. Initially, a few literary scholars beginning to use the new technique of establishing linkages between the author and the work to supplement the case for their existing belief in Shakspeare's authorship, followed by instances in which they accept data from the new method even when it conflicts with the data from their existing method. Those steps could be followed in turn by more frequent use of the new methods as alternate candidates for authorship are examined, until finally scholars conclude that the authorship question is one of real substance. Once that occurs, the resurrection of the author would almost certainly follow because the existence of an author is necessary for correspondences between the work and an author to take place. And with that step, the new methodology would be largely in place, and the authorship question would be well on the way to being resolved.

Once truly independent literary studies departments are established or re-established, safe havens will exist for the methodology of literary studies. In them, literary scholars will be free to cultivate what one historian describes as "the ability to enter imaginatively into the life of a society remote in time or place, and produce a

plausible explanation of why its inhabitants thought and behaved as they did” (Elliott xi). Applying this ability to the study of literature, scholars will seek to step outside their own personal experiences, to see the world as the author saw it in another time and place and to understand what he or she had to say about it.

A methodology of literary criticism that is able “to make the great works of literature more consequentially available not only to academics but to general readers without any special intellectual equipment beyond the educated good sense of their time” (Seaton 10) as James Seaton phrased it, is one in which the study of the Shakespeare authorship question would finally receive a fair hearing.



🌀 **WORKS CITED** 🌀

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