

Ogburn's own view of the situation—a view that denies that the “upstart Crow” is identified as a writer—that puts the actors “in the lurch.”

Books in Brief

Shakespeare, In Fact
by Irwin Matus. 1994.

Reviewed by Publius, an academic who prefers to remain incognito for reasons of professional safety.

Whatever digressions the author makes in pursuit of his game, Irwin Matus has written *Shakespeare, In Fact* in response to two powerfully challenging and complex books—*“Shakespeare” Identified in the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford* (Looney, 1920) and *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (Ogburn, 1984). Of course, Matus has trained his eyes on B.M. Ward’s 1928 biography of the Earl of Oxford, and perhaps he’s even acquainted himself with William Fowler’s 1986 study of Oxford’s correspondence. What’s disturbing about all Matus’s reading, however, is that what passes before the eye seems to register so dimly in the representation which comes forth from the pen. Matus does not disdain to actually argue with his intellectual opponents; he simply pauses over their strong points with a sneer before moving to another topic on which he finds it easy to make them appear ridiculous.

In so doing, Matus takes enormous liberties with the views of those he actually cites for the purposes of refutation. In fact, his compulsion to construct straw men seems beyond hope of clinical intervention. For instance, Matus makes it appear that Ward claimed that the Earl of Oxford had written plays attributed to John Lyly. As the most sophisticated Oxfordian scholar since J.T. Looney, Ward is someone Matus cannot afford to let escape unscathed from his tirade against Oxfordian scholarship. But in mauling Ward, Matus misreads, and misrepresents, him.

Ward conjectured not that Oxford had authored the Lyly plays, but that they resulted from a “collaborative” relationship (275) between Lyly and his employer during the period 1579-1590—while Lyly was Oxford’s secretary. Ward offers this conjecture—and it is not, contrary to what Matus would have his readers believe, more than an aside from his major thesis—in pursuance of a more definite, important and ultimately decisive conclusion: there is an intimate association, documented in the researches of Albert Fucillerat, Warwick

Bond and E.K. Chambers, between Oxford's Men, John Lyly and the Queen's Men during the 1580s. In 1593 the latter troupe was disbanded and reconfigured under the nominal patronage of Henry and then George Carey, as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. This conclusion has profound, and still relatively unexplored, implications for a stage history which does credit to the Earl of Oxford's vital role as the Hamlet-like patron to Elizabethan theater companies from 1576 until his death in 1604.

Ward's purpose was never the narrow one which Matus falsely attributes to him, of claiming the Lyly plays as part of the Oxford canon. Ward wanted to document the circumstances which would lead any reasonable person to conclude for the likelihood of a literary collaboration between Oxford and his "fiddlestick" (to quote Gabriel Harvey), Lyly. One would think Ward's *quodlibet* would be music to the ears of a critic like Matus, who has been hired to explain away the more or less explicit references by William Webbe (1586), Francis Meres (1598) and the author of *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) to Oxford's reputation as a pseudo-anonymous author of comic drama. If Matus were less obsessed with savaging Ward's well-deserved reputation as one of the most thoughtful Elizabethan scholars in our century, this would have been just the place to position a strategic agreement. He might then have followed Ward in arguing that some of Oxford's reputation as a comic writer resulted from the hypothesized collaboration between employer and secretary, which would seem to exonerate him from the accusation of having written *Troilus and Cressida*, among other works appearing in the Shakespeare quartos and folio.

But this would be a strategic concession which Matus cannot afford to make. To admit Ward's sagacity would be a sin against the revisionist agenda which makes this book such a post-modern monument to Stratfordian babble. Instead of reading Ward through Matus's near-sighted perspective, we might weigh his testimony, like that of others, in historical context. Thomas Nashe, for one, seems to have held a higher estimate of Oxford's comic sensibility that Matus does: often regarded as the greatest satirist of the age, Nashe describes himself as one that "enjoy[s] but a mite of wit in comparison of his [Oxford's] talent" and hypothesizes that if Oxford was to take Harvey "in hand" again "there would more gentle readers dies of a merry mortality engendered in by his eternal jests he would maul thee with, then there have done of his last infection." (Ward, 91)

Such contemporary testimony must be weighed against the revisionist claims of Matus that "it is impossible to imagine Lyly's style owed anything to Oxford, whose style was old-fashioned to begin with..." The declaration fails to inspire confidence in Matus's knowledge of the development of 16th century prose and also suggests a rather diminished lexicon of literary criticism; apparently, calling someone "old fashioned" becomes a convenient euphe-

mism for a style most students would term *euphuistic*. Either Matus is completely ignorant of the subject on which he presumes to enlighten his readers, or he is too much of a shark for contemporary intellectual fashions to know the difference between what is impossible and what is merely probable.

In anatomizing such liberties with conscientious scholarship, we must not lose sight of the larger dynamics of Matus's operating method: why would anyone devote almost three pages of a short chapter on the Earl of Oxford to "refuting" a non-existent and, in any case, irrelevant claim that he was the author of the Lyly corpus? A metaphor will serve. When a magician wants to pull a rabbit out of his hat, he distracts attention with linguistic patter. Good patter follows the structure of a *periphrasis*—the object is to spend so much time rhapsodizing that one is on the threshold of the promised land, that the audience never notices that they are still standing in the same dull room. *Voilà—a rabbit.*

Of course, it would never do to mention that Ogburn and others have argued convincingly that the historical figure Matus pompously proclaims could not possibly have influenced John Lyly is the historical prototype for Euphuus himself. Such a reality might have some bearing if one were to consider that Oxford exercised some influence over the historical style named after that "fictional" character. Matus's purpose is to amuse and distract long enough to pluck the rabbit of his so-called refutation from the well-lined tophat of the Shakespeare Industry without getting any intelligent, troublesome methodological questions from his audience.

All in all, the fantasy of Stratfordian authorship is a little like the smile on the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*: first it has nine lives and then, after using all of them up in various blunders over the past two hundred years, we at last get to appreciate the company of a giant grin that just won't disappear.

Shakespeare: Who Was He?

by Richard Whalen. 1994.

Organized into complementary sections which present the traditional and Oxfordian cases for authorship of the Shakespeare canon, *Shakespeare: Who Was He?* has accomplished the difficult task of impartially selecting the most cogent arguments for each side and delivering these with understatement and accuracy. This well-written book has opened the door onto a much misrepresented age that often leaves academics adrift in uncertainties about... well, who wrote Shakespeare. As an introductory text that lays out the essential evidence for the contending and contentious sides, Whalen's book is a much needed anodyne for those who have been exposed to reams of polemical writings that, regrettably, have mostly misinformed or defamed the living and the dead.