

*To the Reader*

**M**ORE and more it seems that the primary issue for Oxfordians at this juncture is the effort to arrive at a more rational, believable dating scheme for the plays than the one we have inherited. Without a dating rationale solid enough that a majority of Oxfordian scholars can agree to use it, at least as a working model, we remain isolated from each other, without those common denominators that are necessary for constructive discussion. As it turns out, so many of the articles in this edition focus on this as a main or a side theme, that the editorial forum for this edition will be turned over to General Jack Shuttleworth, whose 1997 call for an Oxfordian *prolegomena* (he'll define it for you) puts the case so well. Though unaware that this was shaping up as the theme for this issue, Dick Desper's letter to the editor turned out to be a similar call to action.

Surely we must all be agreed on this exciting proposition, but like the convocation of mice in the Aesop's fable, who among us will step forth to put the bell on the cat, that is, do the actual work? Not that, like the mice, we risk our lives, but certainly the time, effort, and expense are daunting. A dating rationale solid enough for the majority of Oxfordian scholars to accept is a tough proposition, involving many hours of work, much publication, and much discussion. Certainly it is not a job for one or two or three alone, but for many, nor will it happen overnight. Yet if enough of us pitch in and agree to make it a priority, it will happen. With the help of the De Vere Society of England, who have also decided to make a workable dating rationale a communal goal, we will eventually arrive at something we can rely on.

Eddi Jolly outlines the problems involved in dating *Hamlet*, perhaps the most important and exciting of all the plays; her work, as presented here, will surely stand as a secure foundation for further detailed inquiry. As Robert Brazil "unpacks" *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, offering us the harvest of his inquiry into the meanings wrapped up in the puns and characters in this play, his suggestions as to its place in Oxford's life and the background behind its composition show how this kind of merry "deconstruction" can assist with placing the plays in time, for no play ever comes to life without the background of its time and place and the particular audience that calls it forth. However many times it may be revised and edited, it will always bear the signature of the time and purposes of its composing.

In a long and complex article, Ron Hess, with the assistance of two colleagues, has compiled data from several sources to give us a foundation upon which to begin to build a dating scheme for the *entire canon*. Ron's work should serve us well as we struggle to unveil a coherent structure of the time and occasion, not only of their original composition, but of probable later revisions as well.

We are also pleased to offer Jim Fitzgerald's witty article on the relationship between Oxford and the poetry of the French writer, Du Bartas, published originally in three installments in *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*. We feel that Jim has unearthed some important pieces of the puzzle surrounding the posthumous publication of the Shakespeare canon.

Chuck Berney offers compelling scientific proof that the Stratfordians will (eventually) go the way of the dinosaurs, and to top it off, we have an illustrated version of John Rollett's marvelous paper on the Dedication to the *Sonnets*, proving once and for all *by whom and for whom* they were written. In our opinion, anyone who dares to argue this point from now on does so at their own peril. And last but by no means least, Andy Werth speaks with feeling about our need to know as much as we can about the lives and motivations of the great artists whose works have inspired us and enriched our lives. \_\_\_\_\_ 🍷

