

Prolegomena for the Oxfordian Shakespeare _____ ❧



VERY student of Shakespeare's works owes enormous debts to the conventional (and not always so conventional) Stratfordian bibliographers who erected the theoretical scaffolding upon which latter day editors have built their editions—those we all perforce must use, the Cambridge, the Arden, the Riverside, and most recently, the Norton (based on the deliciously and presciently named Oxford Shakespeare). Such great bibliographical scholars as A.W. Pollard in *The Foundations of Shakespeare's Text*, W. W. Greg in his *The Editorial Problem in Shakespeare*, and, of course, the magisterial Ronald B. McKerrow in his 1939 landmark *Prolegomena for the Oxford Shakespeare*, all argued for the necessity of sound and authentic texts, making possible the editions we know today. Unlike texts of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, editions today present reliable texts as close to the inferred authorial texts as human enterprise and predisposition can make them. The texts of the plays or poems are forthrightly presented with substantive variants spelled out, editorial rationale for choices when necessary, and ample explanatory notes to help the reader work through the sometimes difficult or unfamiliar language. Furthermore, editors routinely offer a theory of the history of the play's publication and transmission, from quartos, if they existed, to the Folio, and a rationale for choosing one for their copy-text.

To cite primarily one editor, as I will do here, is, of course, to distort the important work of many earlier and later editors. Many bibliographers, like Charlton Hinman or Fredson Bowers, who engaged in patient, spirited, often argumentative, even polemical discussions in numerous journals over the last five decades—all with the aim of establishing sound texts for the literary critics and readers to use. For all their contributions, we say with Sebastian, "I can no other answer make but thanks and thanks" (TN 3.3.14).

Thus, with genuine gratitude, I would turn now to McKerrow's *Prolegomena*, a Renaissance Greek word affected by academics of various persuasions, meaning "a prefatory introduction" to a learned work. More recently, the word has come to be applied to statements providing a theoretical or editorial basis for the texts which follow. McKerrow, who proposed in the Oxford edition an old-spelling text for the plays, begins:

There can be no edition of the work of a writer of former times which is satisfactory to all readers, though there might, I suppose, be at least half a dozen editions of the works of Shakespeare executed on quite different lines, each of which, to one group of readers, would be the best edition possible. (1)

McKerrow was, perhaps, wiser than he knew, for surely no edition of the works we know as Shakespeare's satisfies an Oxfordian reader, no matter how accurate the text presented. The reasons for that dissatisfaction are not far to seek. The biographical notes for William Shakspeare are painfully pedestrian or entirely fanciful and imagined; the chronology of the plays inevitably is forced into the scant and confining life records of the man from Stratford, despite persuasive arguments—even from Stratfordians—for a much earlier beginning for the writer's work and Oxfordian arguments for developmental revision from the 1570s until the first three years of the seventeenth century. And then there are those explanatory notes that presume to illuminate the action of the various plays. Confined as they are to allusions to the apocryphal poaching episode at Charlecote Park or to equally apocryphal stories of the lost years or to suppositious fancies that Shakspeare had highly placed friends who told him all he needed to know about the court of Navarre, or of Venice, or about the law, soldiering, hawking, or courtly politics, the orthodox notes never touch a real person as author. No—the traditional, orthodox versions don't do at all for an Oxfordian; their notes never fully illuminate the text and their very silence on the authorship question in effect deprives readers of the opportunity to examine facts (and their absence) for themselves. The reasonable conclusion, then, is to do something about these failings.

Acknowledging now the call Stephanie Caruana made eleven years ago in *The Spear-*

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Shaker Review (41), and Stephanie Hughes made three years ago at the Concordia lecture series, we argue that the time has come in this seventy-year history of the Oxfordian movement for the publication of a new critical edition of Shakespeare's Works from an avowed Oxfordian view. This is not, however, to be undertaken lightly. F. P. Wilson in his *Shakespeare and the New Bibliography* cautions:

To no aspect of Elizabethan literature, language, or life can an editor afford to be indifferent and the ideal editor is as once bibliographer and critic, historian and antiquary, palaeographer, philologist, philosopher, and theologian (121).

To that forbidding list, I would add biographer of de Vere and master of the authorship argument. Though daunting, such accomplishments are attainable as we have seen in many of the adroit orthodox editors. They, however, have not needed to deal with an author's life and its reflections in the works (since their author's life is not reflected in any measurable way in the works) and they have avoided entirely the authorship question. So the challenges for an Oxfordian editor are significant, indeed. Nevertheless, assuming we can find the editors we need, we should sketch the requirements for an Oxfordian Shakespeare.

Let us address first some ground rules for this proposed edition, using—for simplicity of argument—the words of McKerrow and Greg where we can, and making clear how an Oxfordian Shakespeare differs from a Stratfordian one. I shall deal first, and briefly, with textual precepts, then the kinds of explanatory notes, and the introductory or front matter.

In his 1942 *The Editorial Problem in Shakespeare*, Greg presents seven rules summarizing and clarifying McKerrow's earlier work (x-lv). In the interests of economy of space, let me even further summarize by saying that the McKerrow-Greg rules for editors seek "to present the text" as if it were "a fair copy, made by the author himself, as he finally intended it" by choosing the copy-text that "appears likely to have departed least in wording, spelling, and punctuation from the author's manuscripts." Greg goes on to offer additional rules for selecting among variants and derivative texts, rules of far more interest to editors and bibliographers than to most readers (x-xii). They are, however, essential for any editor to confront as he or she goes about the painstaking work of preparing a text and especially one that will likely be as controversial as an Oxfordian Shakespeare.

An Oxfordian editor, then, having worked through the textual problems of transmission and copy-text authority, must turn to explanatory notes to guide the reader through unfamiliar vocabulary or allusions lost to the non-specialist. And in this category the profound differences between conventional and Oxfordian editions begin to show—not in the basic text of the play or poem, but in the meanings that emerge from the works. For example, though both editions would gloss words like *an*, *livings*, or *for that* identically as *if*, *possessions*, and *because*, editions would differ profoundly in their response to names or locations or allusions.

An Oxfordian edition of *Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, would point out that de Vere received 500 crowns from Baptista Nigrone remitted through Pasquino Spinola, an occurrence that may account for the name of Katherina's father, Baptista Spinola (Ward 108-9). Or in *Hamlet*, besides the customary identification of Polonius with Burghley, an Oxfordian edition would make clear the familial connections with Oxford, as well as the near certainty of other allusions: for example, that it is likely that the details of the Danish Court's exceptional drinking practices come from the July 1583 embassy of de Vere's brother-in-law, Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby, to the court of Elsinore (234), a brother-in-law with whom he was on close terms. Our edition would note that Horatio and Francisco are surely drawn from his favorite cousins, Horace and Francis Vere, whom at one point he wished to make his heirs. Or an Oxfordian text of the *Sonnets* would note that Sonnet 125's "Were't aught to me I bore the canopy," could easily be alluding to Oxford's position in Queen Elizabeth's triumphal procession into St. Paul's on 24 November 1588 to commemorate the defeat of the Spanish Armada, a procession in which he did indeed bear the canopy, along with the Earl Marshal, George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury (294). Certainly such a fact carries more weight in documenting an allusion than the four yards of cloth awarded to William Shakspeare for King James's procession in 1604, sometime after the sonnets were written.

For an Oxfordian edition to be credible beyond a narrow circle of de Vere adherents, however, such explanatory notes must be tied to verifiable actions, dates, persons, and events, drawing from published or manuscript accounts from the period. Moreover, to help explain characters in the plays by referring to people in de Vere's life does not establish a one-to-one equivalence; Horatio is not Horace Vere nor is Polonius Lord Burghley. They certainly have elements of their sources, but no writer of genius, as de Vere-Shakespeare was, merely copies the original. Instead, the writer transforms the original to suit the needs of the play, exaggerating or diminishing aspects of character or appearance for dramatic purpose. Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* clearly takes its inspiration from Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, but she is transformed in the poem; Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* bears only superficial resemblance to her historic original; Faulkner's Dilsey was not Mammy Caroline; and Shakespeare's Richard III was not identical with the historical Richard III. Hence, to say as some Oxfordian enthusiasts do, that Rosaline is Anne Vavasour or that Gertrude is Elizabeth is too simplistic, diminishing both the creator of the plays as well as the complexity of his characters and the real individuals that inspired them.

These limitations—notes tied to verifiable sources and referring to but not equating characters and their models—would go a long way to free the Oxfordian Shakespeare from the all-too-common (and, be it admitted, often accurate) allegations of insufficient, sloppy scholarship and rampant, amateur speculation about conspiratorial theories to buttress the Oxford case. The limitations would, as well, free our text from the contorted speculation and fan-

ciful creation of many of the orthodox Stratfordian editions. For example, an Oxfordian editor could easily demonstrate a textual source for the shipwreck in *The Tempest*, a source closely tied to Oxford and Southampton, rather than rely on Strachey's irrelevant account of the 1609 wreck in the Bermudas, as a Stratfordian must to make the play fit the supposed Shakespeare chronology (Ogburn 388).

A second result of such limitations is to avoid the allegations of fanciful imaginings, delusional snobbery, or cryptological distortions that have plagued anti-Stratfordian arguments in its 200 year history. All Oxfordians have felt the dismissive scorn of those who know only that a number of candidates have been proposed for the authorship. And we've felt the ignorant ridicule resulting from Delia Bacon's descent into madness or Percy Allen's seances. Bernard Levin in his Presidential Address for the English Association in 1987 offers a representative sample:

In this connection I sometimes feel that the cruelty of providence is inexcusable; three of the more extravagant anti-Stratfordians, respectively an Oxford supporter, a Bacon fan and a Marlowe acolyte, were named Mr. Looney, Mr. Battey and Mr. Silliman. But it is not enough to dismiss even the maddest as of no significance without pausing to wonder why their madness took this particular form especially since it is clear that in many cases the Shakespearean delusion was the only subject on which they were anything but perfectly normal. (5)

Precisely to preclude such charges of "Shakespearean delusion," the Oxfordian Shakespeare must be distinguished by its scrupulous adherence to that which is verifiable as opposed to speculative; the facts of Edward de Vere's life speak loudly and clearly enough to enrich our reading of the plays and to demonstrate his connections to the theatre and Court without recourse to solely speculative theories, however regally attractive, romantic, or satisfying.

The other form of substantive difference between Oxfordian and the outdated Stratford editions would come in the front matter consisting of three kinds: (a) the introduction to each play to provide some history of its origins and productions, (b) a brief summary of Oxford's life, and (c) illustration of ways the play relates to Oxford's life, a feature that no Stratfordian edition can provide for its imagined author. Obviously in the forty or fifty pages allocated to introductory matter for each play, no editor can present the full case of Oxford's authorship, nor do justice to the documented complexity of Oxford's life. What we could do, however, is to summarize the argument along the lines of Ogburn's "Shakespeare's Self Portrait," a fourteen-page, succinctly persuasive treatment of the issues. Besides the presentation of Oxford's life, the key difference here between the old and new editions would be the treatment accorded the question. Conventional texts dismiss any doubts about the possibility that the Stratford man wrote the plays with such unproven assertions as these:

The figure of Shakespeare as a practical man of affairs, although well attested by the evidence, seemed rather too modest to occupy the lofty pedestal reared by the Bardolaters. Hence the strange proliferation of irresponsible theories proposing rival candidates for the authorship of Shakespeare's work, most of them titled and all of them colorful but none of them circumstanced to have done the job—as William Shakespeare indubitably was. (Levin 3)

(Precisely how the Stratford maltster was circumstanced to write so convincingly of Court and politics remains asserted but unproven.)

Or consider this gratuitous dismissal, albeit revealing an unwitting agreement with the Oxfordian view that the Works reflect autobiographical details, by G. Blakemore Evans, in his 1996 edition of the *Sonnets*:

To some extent, of course, all significant art is autobiographical, an unconscious projection of the artist's 'self' that individualises, as with an 'informing hand', the creative act. No critic with a conscience (unlike Baconians, Oxfordians, etc.) would now deny that such a Shakespearean signature is writ large in the *Sonnets*, as it is, of course, in the plays and other poems. (Evans 111)

Of course "the Shakespearean signature is writ large" in the Works! One of the points of an Oxfordian edition is to make that clear. The Oxfordian text, in my view, should directly present the argument for Oxford while acknowledging the sincerely held delusions of the Stratford party. It is not necessary to attack or ridicule; those are techniques practiced with such skill by the threatened conventional Stratfordians to avoid confronting the unthinkable. Instead, perhaps presenting side-by-side comparisons would be effective to illustrate tabularly Ogburn's little piece. Likewise, a cogent explanation of how Oxford's identity as Shakespeare could have been kept discreetly quiet and why it was a necessity seems imperative. Here, citation to Anabel Patterson's *Censorship and Interpretation* would be most persuasive, for she makes clear the prevalence of allusive and indirect writing, both political and literary, in Elizabeth's day, what she calls ". . . the strategies of indirection" (53).

The keynote in the introductory matter, then, would not be merely to illuminate the paucity of evidence for, or the unlikelihood of, the Stratford fellow's authorship, but to make clear how Oxford's life illuminates the plays and how much better that life in all its complexity, contradictions, and opportunities accords with all that we know from the Works. And how, too, Oxford's life fits with what we know of genius of all ages; all of those I know about served some apprenticeship to their art, all developed their craft through time and practice—all, that is, except *der Wunderkind* of orthodoxy, William Shakspeare, who alone sprang full-blown on the London scene with *Venus and Adonis* blazoned suggestively on his chest.

Again, the virtue of such an approach as I see it is credibility; while speculation seems persuasive that Oxford may have been the true translator of the Ovid that we know as his uncle's—given Golding's other translations and his painful, moralistic sobriety—to assert Oxford's responsibility as a proven fact just won't do. To further assert that Oxford wrote everything from *Gammer Gurton's Needle* to the King James Bible without some evidence beyond coincident, stylistic resonance, or opportunity merely leaves the central core of the Oxfordian argument open to sniping ridicule. Such a stricture as we suggest here, of course, does not preclude presenting reasoned arguments, again constrained by verifiable evidence, as Eva Clark Turner does in *Shakespeare's Plays in the Order of their Writing*.

As should be apparent by now, the underlying belief I espouse in this paper is that we are ready to move beyond the carping and whining over the Stratfordian ostriches, those defenders of the academic and economic establishment, who most resemble the church authorities in 1633 when they refused to look through Galileo's telescope for fear their universe was not what it appeared. It is time now for Oxfordians to go on with it, to see the wonders of Shakespeare's creation clearly, to make that creation available to anyone who will look. To establish that brave new world, we must adhere to the most rigorous standards of scholarship, a scholarship derived from de Vere's family motto, a scholarship based on the verity of fact, verity of documents, verity of argument, so that "nothing is truer than the Oxfordian truth."



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