

The Psychopathology of Stratfordianism

Richard M. Waugaman

What accounts for the astonishing longevity of belief in the legendary author of Shakespeare's works? "Because we're right," say Stratfordians "and because there's no question whatsoever that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare."

I have no simple answer to the enigma of this orthodoxy. Instead, as a psychoanalyst who has been engaged in authorship research for some ten years, I will describe some of my reflections on this question, making no claim to comprehensiveness. I emphasize some factors, mention others in passing, and inevitably omit others altogether.¹

Soon after I began pursuing the Authorship Question, a widely respected colleague who is known for his intellectual independence, warned me: "Drop it, or you'll jeopardize your reputation!" Although his well-intentioned advice only strengthened my motivation, it made me curious as to why anyone of his caliber would offer such counsel. It is readily apparent that one of the main weapons that Stratfordians use against skeptics is *ad hominem* attacks. People do not enjoy being publicly humiliated, or having their reputations threatened. And all non-Stratfordians have probably experienced first-hand what it is like to be the target of Stratfordian ridicule.

Foundational Group Doctrine

Both individual psychology as well as group dynamics come into play in the perpetuation of orthodoxy. Individuals fear rejection, both personal and professional; they are reluctant to challenge authorities who wield power; and they are often risk-averse. Individuals tend to want approval from their teachers, mentors, friends, colleagues, department chairs and personnel committees, journal editors and peer reviewers, and other leaders in their field.

Orwellian "group think," prevalent in organizations like universities, despite public commitments to intellectual freedom, leads Stratfordians to overlook basic flaws in their evidence, and to exclude anyone who deviates from foundational group doctrine. Groups maintain cohesion, despite contentious differences among ambitious and competitive members, by adhering to a core set of common beliefs, and by projecting fundamental flaws and erroneous methodology onto outsiders. These can then serve as a kind of common enemy bringing an otherwise disparate group together. In this case the enemy is us, as Pogo might say—the unorthodox thinkers, non-Stratfordians.

We have all experienced this attitude so acutely that we sometimes lose sight of the vitriol the orthodox direct at one another. For some vivid examples, see Ron Rosenbaum's *The Shakespeare Wars* which, despite its title, is not about the

Authorship Question. Instead, Rosenbaum carefully documents the acrimony that often divides orthodox Shakespeare scholars from one another. It sometimes appears that among the few things they all agree on is a loathing for authorship heretics. I believe this is another important psychological factor contributing to the bitterness of much anti-Oxfordianism.

My professional training is in psychoanalysis. This background has interacted in several ways with my Shakespeare research. I have also had intensive training in group dynamics, which has been invaluable in understanding the group psychology of Shakespeare orthodoxy. If it were not for my profound respect for the much maligned genius of Sigmund Freud, I might never have taken the Oxfordian authorship theory seriously. After I graduated from my eight years of formal psychoanalytic training, I read through the 23 volumes of Freud's collected works. In a footnote I saw that that he had an ostensibly eccentric idea about who Shakespeare was. I knew Freud also had apparently eccentric ideas about many things, like female psychology. So I wasted no more time on his apparently misguided opinion about Shakespeare's identity.

The Folger Collection

Then, in 2002, I read William Niederkorn's pivotal *New York Times* article, written on the historical occasion of the first Ph.D. in literature in the U.S. being awarded for an Oxfordian dissertation to Roger Stritmatter. The article about his research mentioned Freud as a prominent early Oxfordian. It also summarized Roger's discovery of the smoking gun that helps prove de Vere's identity as Shakespeare: de Vere's Geneva Bible. I soon had the privilege of meeting Roger, and his friendship and scholarly support have been invaluable in my "Oxfreudian" work.

The Niederkorn article interested me to such an extent that I saved it. Some time later, I re-read it. A new detail now struck me: de Vere's Bible was at the Folger Shakespeare Library, near my home. I found the Folger to be surprisingly welcoming, and I have done research with their wonderful collection ever since.

Like all of us, I have been impressed with the intensity, the bitterness, and the irrationality of anti-Oxfordian reactions. A common example is the rhetorical question, "What difference does it make who the author was?" coming from people who clearly care very much indeed! I assume that this double-think—another prescient Orwellian category—reveals one of the unconscious ways in which Stratfordians like these contend with the potential cognitive dissonance of knowing their chosen author has so little to recommend him, and so much that we *do* know about him that is inconsistent with his authorship. That is, I believe anti-Oxfordians have created a sort of intermediate mental space, somewhere in between rationality and the world of the imagination. Such a mental space needs to be constructed in order to provide a plausible home for the man from Stratford. Ponder these words from the standard introduction to the Folger Shakespeare series of the plays and poems—"how this particular man produced the works

[attributed to him] is one of life's *mysteries*." It is usually in a religious context that we are asked to accept "mysteries" on faith, turning away from rational skepticism and a dispassionate examination of the evidence.



Sigmund Freud

"The man from Stratford seems to have nothing at all to justify his claim, whereas Oxford has everything." —*Autobiographical Study* (1927)

Freud Redux

Freud had some ideas that are relevant to the psychology of authorship orthodoxy. He gave more than one definition of the defense mechanism of *Spaltung*, or splitting, that divides inconsistent aspects of the outer and inner worlds. He noted, as one example, that the male fetishist cannot cope with the castration anxiety stirred by the reality of female genitalia, so he simultaneously knows half the human race lacks a penis, while unconsciously clinging to some surrogate for the woman's missing penis, such as her shoes or breasts. Like the child who is rational enough to wonder how in the world Santa Claus can make so many home deliveries on Christmas Eve but nevertheless is not ready to let go of the gratifying belief in Santa, Stratfordians play many mental tricks to get

around the vast number of contradictions in their theory. Like children clapping to keep Tinkerbell alive, they band together to reassure one another that their theory still makes sense.

Freud initially linked the defense mechanism of projection with paranoid psychopathology. But milder versions of projection are universal. I have found

that projection—attributing to someone else what a person cannot face in themselves—is a likely explanation for many attacks on our theory. If we listen carefully as Stratfordians makes their case, we find that they cannot get very far before they turn away from the evidence for Shakespeare of Stratford, and change the subject. *Ad hominem* attacks typically follow—Looney had a funny name, Delia Bacon was mad, etc. The *locus classicus* is Shapiro’s *Contested Will*, which quickly becomes a personal attack on the mental health of those who have doubts about Shakespeare, including Freud, of course.

Projection

A close examination of the usual dismissals of de Vere often reveal evidence of the kinds of projection noted above. Let me offer some further examples. First, recall my eminent colleague warning me I would jeopardize my professional reputation unless I dropped my interest in de Vere. I would surmise that he had some non-altruistic reasons for his warning. Those, like him, who have ridiculed J. Thomas Looney’s theory, know their own reputations will be hurt when it finally wins general acceptance. They deal with anticipating the shame and loss of reputation that will ensue for them by projecting this problem onto us. Projective identification is the related defense of trying to get rid of unwanted feelings not just by attributing them to someone else, but by working to *induce* them in another person. That is, anti-Oxfordians deal with their fear of being shamed for their massive mistakes by trying to get *us* to have those feelings. The goal is to silence us through the threats of being publicly humiliated. In addition, it must be unbearable to them to realize that as we speak out, they are now being proven wrong, and they will have to deal with the consequences of having so cavalierly dismissed a valid theory.

Here are some further examples of what I see as the role of projection in orthodox attacks on Oxfordians. In 2011, I gave a presentation on de Vere’s marked biblical Psalms as a previously unknown literary source for Shakespeare’s works. Afterwards, the editor of a prominent Shakespearean journal who was in the audience said simply “It’s easy to find things that you’re looking for.” That is precisely my point, of course—*Stratfordians* have a blind spot for the circularity of their own thinking, and for the way they ignore inconveniently contradictory evidence. Similarly, when another Stratfordian friend read my work on the echoes in Shakespeare’s work in the psalms marked in de Vere’s copy, he dismissed everything as having no credibility, since it was written by an Oxfordian. However, de Vere’s 14 manicules in his copy of the *Whole Book of Psalms* have no significant connection with the works of Shakespeare, it should be simple for Stratfordians to show that there are far more echoes in the far greater number of psalms that de Vere did *not* annotate.

Literary Evidence

Stratfordians often claim that Oxfordians do not know how to use literary evidence. In reality, of course, it is Stratfordians who have always conflated contemporary references to the pen name with references to the front-man. Their case rests almost entirely on the 1623 *First Folio* of Shakespeare's plays. But in accepting the misleadingly attributed authorship of this volume, they ignore growing documentation of the ubiquity of anonymous and pseudonymous authorship of 16th-century plays (e.g., Marcy North, 2002; Robert Griffin, 2003; John Mullan, 2007; Starner and Traister, 2011). When I have asked some of them about this recent scholarship on Elizabethan anonymity, they brush the question aside in ways that makes me suspect that they have not even read these crucial books.

Further, the orthodox usually conceal from the general reader some of the most significant evidence concerning de Vere's writing career. They rarely inform trusting readers of evidence that is well known to Oxfordians, for example, that de Vere sponsored theatrical troupes most of his adult life, as did his father and grandfather before him; that he wrote poetry from early adolescence; that he was acknowledged by his contemporaries as among the best courtier poets of the Elizabethan era; that he was recognized as the best author of comedies; that he hired as his literary secretaries some of the leading authors of his day, such as Anthony Munday and John Lyly; that documented details of his life story are echoed again and again in Shakespeare's plays; that the story of the Sonnets matches important features of his life circumstances; and that he was known by some contemporaries to have written anonymously. Instead, Stratfordians omit all this, and usually say only that he was upper class and well educated, and that *those* are the only reasons that some falsely believe he wrote Shakespeare's works.

Genuine openness to the evidence requires a willingness to question one's assumptions. An English professor told me that literary scholars have strong emotional attachments to their theories. I believe this contributes to the way that orthodox Shakespeareans demonstrate a fixation to a medieval form of reasoning from the unquestionable premise of accepting the traditional author. Consequently, they continue to follow the sort of Aristotelian deductive reasoning that begins with a dogmatic assertion. They unwittingly announce this flaw in their thinking when they say, "There is no question whatsoever about who wrote the works of Shakespeare."

Stratfordians do not put into practice the Renaissance methodology of inductive reasoning based on an objective assessment of all the evidence. None of us is immune to blind spots for the powerful way assumptions skew perceptions of evidence. C.S. Lewis warned of what he called "the desperate shifts to which a strong mind may be put when [demon]-ridden by a premise which it will never allow itself to reconsider," so that "thought is twisted from the outset by the dangerous certitude" (446).

Another example of projection: while supporters of de Vere are accused of being snobs and elitists, many supporters of Stratford imply that only specialists with the right academic credentials can be trusted to interpret the evidence correctly. When threatened, specialists take refuge behind their credentials, and our supposed lack of them. According to Samuel Schoenbaum, “the Oxfordians are, almost to a man, dilettante scholars” (1991, 444). Eric Sams, in arguing that *Edward III* was written entirely by Shakespeare, criticizes the covert assumptions of his fellow Shakespeare specialists who reject any work from the Shakespeare canon if it does not meet their belief as to Shakespeare’s writing at its best. He claims that the theory of joint authorship of plays such as *Edward III* was invented with no evidence, in order to explain lines of verse that did not meet scholars’ expectations as to the quality of Shakespeare’s writing. Sams added:

The modern professional mind-set still views every variant version of any Shakespeare play, or any unfamiliar style, as the work of anyone but Shakespeare himself ...This preserves the “late-developing” dramatist, free from the least taint of inferiority. But the unanswerable point has been made that these conjectures are just literary inventions emanating from the *élitist* attitudes of 1920s Oxbridge that still dominate orthodox scholarship worldwide (1-2; emphasis added).

Here, the accusation of *élitism* is for a change being directed at the orthodox Shakespeare scholars, by one of their own.

One of the traditionalists’ biggest guns is their claim that the chronology of the composition of the plays unequivocally disproves de Vere’s authorship. But their chronology is based on a crumbling foundational assumption, based on circular reasoning, starting with the 1564-1616 dates of their alleged author. Katherine Chiljan has recently published an excellent discussion of this problem in *Shakespeare Suppressed*.

And what about the frequent accusation that non-Stratfordians are “obsessed” with the authorship question? Notice once again the insinuation that there is something inherently pathological about what might otherwise be called our “passion” for this topic, and our dogged determination to expose the truth, no matter how powerful are the forces working against us. In his book, *The Pleasures of Reading*, Robert Alter observed that many of his fellow professors of literature no longer enjoy reading literature. Is it possible that Stratfordians envy in us the enthusiasm for Shakespeare that they no longer feel themselves? That might help explain their complaint that we are “obsessed.”

I have mentioned the emotional attachment that scholars can have to their theories. In the case of Shakespeare, this frequently seems to extend to a deep psychological identification with the author himself. This would help explain the ferocity with which Stratfordians defend their man from what they regard as attacks on the author. Of course, non-Stratfordians are criticizing a non-theory. Of course we are not personally attacking the man from Stratford. But Stratfordians

are often so deeply identified with Shakespeare of Stratford that they misperceive criticism of their attribution beliefs as an attack on the true author, and—by implication—on themselves.

The Enlightenment

Prominent Shakespeare experts such as Malone, Halliwell-Phillipps, and Chambers were all “amateurs” who worked outside university English departments. Historically, the rise of English literature departments as the home of Shakespeare specialists followed the earliest challenges to the Stratfordian authorship legend. The British historian William Rubinstein states that “University hegemony” over Shakespeare scholarship has solidified only in the last 60 years. This corresponds with the era of the Oxfordian challenge to Stratfordianism. The unfortunate result is that academic Shakespeareans act as though their professional credibility would be destroyed if they proved to be wrong about Shakespeare’s identity. They have generally argued from authority rather than from an impartial examination of the evidence, so they are aware that the authority they claim by fiat would in fact be damaged if they find themselves on the losing side.

Those in authority rely, among other things, on the force of tradition to buttress their power. Not surprisingly, explicit or implicit appeals to tradition are fundamental to the Stratfordian case. As noted, they maintain that the burden of proof is on those who dispute their theory. We still suffer from what seems to be a profound misconception about just what lessons we should learn from the Enlightenment. Evangelical atheists take it to mean that belief in God is not only wrong-headed, but that religion is all bad and, conversely, science is all good. Unconsciously, it is one of our many regressions to a Manichean world-view, with its either/or mindset.

But I believe it would be more accurate to conclude that the Enlightenment proved the corrupting influence of excessive power, authority, and prestige, and in the 18th century, there was no question that the Church exemplified them. Ironically, however, practitioners of the religion of scientism naively project all corruption onto religion, blind to the abundant evidence that the ideals of science are regularly prostituted by those in positions of power; for claims of intellectual authority far beyond the bounds of their scientific expertise; and, frequently, for commercial interests. (As a psychiatrist, I am painfully aware of the corruption of *my* specialty by the immense wealth and unscrupulous greed of the pharmaceutical industry.)

What does the Enlightenment have to do with the authorship question? It illuminates many aspects of the abuse of power on the part of the orthodox. The implicit narrative behind some of their attacks on us follows a script that portrays them as the enlightened champions of rationality, and that casts us as benighted snobs who are stubbornly worshipping a false god. The orthodox also view themselves as bearing a moral responsibility of saving the general public from being led astray by the likes of us. Much as we know that power corrupts, those who are

corrupted by it usually have a blind spot for their own corruption. For example, studies have shown that the more money a physician receives each year from drug companies, the *less* likely that physician is to believe that such payments might sway his or her judgment about which drugs to prescribe and to recommend to other physicians. That is, the greater the corruption, the greater the individual has a blind spot for his or her corruption. Such is the power of cognitive dissonance.

Orthodox scholars, with a near monopoly over Shakespeare scholarship—have made many outrageous *ad hominem* statements about authorship heretics. When I have confronted some about this, they claim “it’s just said in fun,” just as sexists, racists, and other bigots might explain attacks against their targets. By contrast, Stratfordians react indignantly to some of the statements I have made in print about them. Although this seems like an example of simple hypocrisy, personal blind spots can be massive, and in this case they are reinforced by fellow orthodox scholars who share the same double standard about which attacks—by them—are permissible, and which attacks—against them—are out of line. In any event, I would submit that orthodox scholars have not learned the real lesson of the Enlightenment—that the sort of power they enjoy has corrupted their objectivity on authorship.

It is fascinating to see how the 150-year history of insults used by Stratfordians reflects the respective bugaboos of their era. In the 19th century, the great Shakespeare scholar Sidney Lee began the ongoing tradition of *ad hominem* attacks on what he called authorship “heretics.” Here, the religious language is unmistakable, despite the ubiquitous negations among Shakespeare scholars when they disavow their own “bardolatry.” It is difficult to miss the “heretical” elements in the works of Shakespeare. An early reader of the 1609 Sonnets wrote at the end of them, “What a heap of wretched Infidel stuff!”

Stratfordians take Delia Bacon’s psychiatric disorder to be a common accompaniment of authorship heresy. Schoenbaum wrote of “the inherent paranoia of the anti-Stratfordian mentality” (408). His chapter on Freud’s authorship beliefs begins with the following:

In certain recurring features of anti-Stratfordian behavior we may discern a pattern of psychopathology...paranoid structures of thought...hallucinatory phenomena; the descent, in a few cases, into actual madness (440).

I naturally feel bemused when I am labeled *ipso facto* mentally ill because of my authorship opinions, usually by people who have considerably fewer credentials in the mental-health field than I do.

In the early 20th century, Oxfordians were accused of being religious agnostics, revealing an unconscious bardolatry that condemned us for not believing in the God from Stratford. After the notorious communist witch hunt of Senator Joseph McCarthy, it was said that we were similarly alleging a great, hidden conspiracy. A reviewer for one journal wrote of my submitted paper on Shakespeare,

The author is enlisting Freud in the cause of promoting the de Vere myth. He urges us to be “open-minded” on the subject. This is like being open-minded about the idea that the World Trade Towers were attacked by the U.S. government.

Shakespeare’s Life

I now turn to another topic—the orthodox construction of the narrative of Shakespeare’s life, and of the profound disconnection between his life experiences and his literary creations. Unless they invent it, as scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt have profitably done, orthodox Shakespeareans are forced to claim, with James Shapiro, that it is a mistake to expect to find any significant connection between Shakespeare’s life and his works.

Just how far back can we trace this lack of orthodox interest in Shakespeare’s life experiences? An important precursor of this misunderstanding goes all the way back to ancient Greece. Although reconstructing the beliefs of the historical Socrates was no easy matter, in Plato’s dialogue *The Apology* Socrates argues that poets and reciters of poetry show no grasp of the significance of their poems. He deduces that poets must therefore be divinely inspired, contributing little from their own minds (or life experiences) to their poetry. According to Plato, Socrates “decided it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry, but a kind of instinct or inspiration, such as you find in seers and prophets” (p. 8). In the *Ion*, Socrates instances a poet who wrote only one good poem, concluding that this proves

the god would show us...that these lovely poems are not of man or human workmanship, but are divine and from the gods, and that the poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods... to prove this, the deity on purpose sang the loveliest of all lyrics through the most miserable poet (p. 220-21).

Socrates thus anticipates the traditional theory as to how Shakespeare of Stratford became a literary genius. What Socrates called divine inspiration went by the name of “Nature” in the 18th century, and is called “the imagination” in James Shapiro’s *Contested Will*. Consistently, “nature” and “the imagination” are set against life experiences, in a deeply flawed false dichotomy.

Literary scholars—almost uniquely in the case of Shakespeare—have mistakenly downplayed the significance of the artist’s life, because of their mistaken assumptions about Shakespeare’s identity. For example, C.S. Lewis asserts that, when it comes to “the problems of Shakespeare’s life, the literary historian has no concern”; he would not “give a farthing” to know the identity of the Youth or the Dark Lady (503).

The psychoanalyst George Moraitis, in his extensive study of the psychology of the biographer, has concluded that biographers unconsciously construct a “blueprint” before doing their research, and then write using selective data about their subject. I would suggest that this is precisely what has gotten the exploration of Shakespeare’s identity completely off track. The psychoanalyst Ernst Kris re-

currently found in biographies of great artists a characteristic narrative of descent from humble beginnings to enormous success and fame. Since the actual author of the canon was born into one of the most noble families in England and then suffered from severe decline in his fortune and personal reputation, he lends himself much more poorly to such a narrative. Deliberately or not, de Vere chose a front man who has proved much better suited to such a legendary narrative of humble artistic origins. Although there is no indication that the man from Stratford was famous during his lifetime, his economic position rose from modest beginnings to relatively great wealth, and his reputation skyrocketed, beginning 150 years after his death.

Francis Walsingham, who directed the Elizabethan intelligence service, was expert at using covert propaganda to manipulate public opinion in support of the Crown. Around the time that the budget for the Queen's Office of Revels (which controlled the theater) had declined by roughly 1,000 pounds per year, Elizabeth publicly awarded de Vere an annual stipend of that same amount, insisting that no one ask why. One hypothesis is that he was being paid to write the pro-Tudor history plays that have been attributed to Shakespeare. It makes sense that such pro-Tudor propaganda would have more credibility if the general population believed they were written by a fellow commoner, rather than by a court insider.

Envy

Now, I would like to turn to the topic of envy. I would speculate that envy is a powerful but unacknowledged force in Shakespeare scholarship. It was the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and her followers who especially drew attention to the powerful role that envy plays in human psychology. Our feelings of admiration for someone we deeply respect are often mixed with painful feelings of competition and envy that this person is showing up what we worry is our own inferiority. Often, without realizing it, envy leaks out in the form of open or more subtle efforts to diminish the person we admire.

I believe that envy of Shakespeare's extraordinary works is a significant reason for the stubborn refusal of Stratfordians to look at the evidence objectively. And, rather than own up to their conflictual feelings of envy, they once again project this problem onto Oxfordians, in the form of the charge that we are simply snobs who cannot abide the man from Stratford because he was a commoner. I suspect it is instead they who can't abide the fact the author was a nobleman. Their insistence that he must be a commoner is the first of many ways they cope with their envy of his literary accomplishments. But there are plenty of other examples. Shakespeare scholars pounce on alleged errors in Shakespeare's works—for instance, his “embarrassing” (though imaginary) howlers about Bohemia having a coastline; someone going from Verona to Milan by boat; and anachronisms galore, such as the clock in *Julius Caesar*. The first two examples are of course not errors. Furthermore, de Vere wrote history plays as a commentary on contemporary events, a fact that the alleged “anachronisms” helped underscore.

Stratfordians must be deeply conflicted too about their wish for some relevant biographical data about their author. That is, they must suspect by now that nothing that is learned about the man from Stratford will be any more compatible with a literary career than what has emerged thus far. So I suspect their envy toward us for having far more biographical material about our candidate drives some of their intemperate attacks. Of course, it also fuels their double-talk about life-experience having no significant role in the creation of the canon. When they derogate it as a mistaken quest, I suspect they are secretly feeling, in a variation of the Fox-and-Grapes syndrome, “Since we’ll never have it, we’ll just pretend we don’t want it anyway.”

Yet one regularly sees them lapse into their own biographical speculations. Even Schoenbaum, who criticizes this in other Shakespeare biographers, then turns around and does it himself. Shapiro has antagonized many Stratfordians with his recent diatribe against looking for connections between the life and the works. As many have pointed out, there’s at least inconsistency if not hypocrisy in Shapiro’s disavowal of the sort of speculative biography he has engaged in, in his own earlier work.

In a 2010 article in the *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Jacques Lezra announced the impending end of the past paradigm of Shakespeare studies. He may not be an Oxfordian, but I cannot read his comments without pondering the current status of the traditional authorship legend:

It is no secret that the disciplinary identity that “Shakespeare studies” has built for itself is coming under increasing scrutiny and seems destined...to become obsolete... Shakespeare studies” fashions an identity marked by an inside and an outside—an “inside” where certain laws are followed, norms adhered to, credit or discredit heaped upon one or another paradigm...I take this waning of “Shakespeare studies” to be a good thing, so long as it becomes a part, indeed a central part, of what “Shakespeare studies” studies. And it is here that “psychoanalytic exploration” is required...A return to Freud? Yes. For where Freud goes, there will Shakespeare go too.

Every Folger edition of the works of Shakespeare includes the following position on the authorship question:

Perhaps in response to the disreputable Shakespeare of legend [e.g., the deer poacher who died after drinking too much]...some people...have argued that Shakespeare could not have written the plays that bear his name...Unfortunately for their claims, the documents that exist provide evidence for the facts of Shakespeare’s life that tie him inextricably to the body of plays and poems that bear his name...the plays and poems seem clearly to have been produced by [Shakespeare] (*Hamlet*, p. xxxii).

Please note that oxymoronic phrase, “seem clearly.” Such oxymorons litter academic discussions of the authorship question. “Doubtless probably” is another. The following intriguing statement now appears on the Folger’s website:

The Folger has been a major location for research into the authorship question, and welcomes scholars looking for new evidence that sheds light on the plays’ origins. How this particular man—or anyone, for that matter—could have produced such an astounding body of work is one of the great mysteries. If *the current consensus* on the authorship of the plays and poems is ever overturned, it will be because new and extraordinary evidence is discovered. The Folger Shakespeare Library is the most likely place for such an unlikely discovery (emphasis added).³

Schoenbaum was willing to put into print some of the deep hatred and contempt which many Stratfordians feel toward non-Stratfordians. And his language suggests that, for him, this is a religious war. His imagery betrays that this is far more than a question of history. Schoenbaum writes of the “dark power of the anti-Stratfordian obsession” (p. 451) He of course is on the side of light.

Schoenbaum’s comments appear at the end of a 70-page section labeled “Deviations,” while the second chapter in this section is titled “The First Unbelievers.” Muslims were sometimes called “misbelievers” in the early modern era, since Christians at least gave them credit for believing in something. Schoenbaum makes no such concession. This may seem to be a minor point, but it reveals (in my judgment) just how obsessed Schoenbaum and his fellow Stratfordians are with defending their candidate, rather than simply trying to ascertain the truth.

The Role of Narrative

I would now like to explore the role of narrative in the authorship debate. Paradigms consist of narratives, so challenging a dominant paradigm means substituting a new narrative for the familiar one. The human mind betrays an intense need for organizing narratives that influence its thoughts, perceptions, and theories, far more often than we realize. The Dartmouth neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga estimates that 98% of our brain’s activity occurs outside conscious awareness. Yet as George Lakoff observes, we

have inherited a theory of mind dating back... to the Enlightenment... that reason is conscious, literal, logical, unemotional...and functions to serve our interests. This theory of human reason has been shown to be false in every particular, but it persists (3).

Lakoff cites the rags-to-riches story as a paradigmatic simple narrative, with a hero whose early life elicits sympathy, while his or her rise to wealth through hard work brings satisfaction that virtue was suitably rewarded. Notice how well this simple narrative fits the traditional authorship theory. A second characteristic

narrative helps us understand the acrimony of the authorship debate. Lakoff calls it the “rescue narrative,” consisting of a villain who threatens a victim, with a hero coming along to rescue the victim. The hero restores a proper moral balance. I believe this is a powerful force in the motives of those who see authorship skeptics as the villains who threaten Shakespeare, giving them a moral imperative to rescue the bard from his attackers. Lakoff says that “neural binding circuitry” primes our brain to recognize simple but “deep” narratives. Our limbic system, the emotional center of the brain, reacts with pleasure when a rescue narrative goes according to script. Lakoff suggests that we strive to make the cognitive unconscious, with its various deep narratives, as conscious as possible, so we act reflectively, rather than reflexively. This sort of self-awareness is vital for an objective reappraisal of the authorship debate.

Groups attain their cohesiveness through shared values and assumptions. These include deep narratives. As I mentioned earlier, non-Stratfordians inadvertently provide the common outside enemy that helps Stratfordians avoid flying apart from intellectual centrifugal force. Narratives not only organize the way we think about the authorship question. They can also be used to discredit those who question that traditional authorship theory.

Paradigms

Once established, paradigms organize information by selectively emphasizing data that fits with the narrative, and ignoring or devaluing data that contradicts that paradigm. The same goes for the people who are trying to draw attention to the conflicting data—they too are ignored or devalued. The traditional authorship theory has resisted change so stubbornly because its narrative exerts such a powerful grip on both our intellect and on our emotions. It illustrates what the psychologist and political commentator Drew Westen has called a “master narrative.” If we try to dissect it, we will discover several overlapping narratives in it. Their synergistic influence makes this traditional authorship narrative so powerful. One narrative is that of the Shakespeare experts versus the misguided amateurs; it exploits the related narrative of the ostensibly rational experts versus the hopelessly irrational amateurs, who are unable to assess evidence properly. Another is the class narrative of snobs versus the common man. A third is the related narrative of native genius versus the role of nurture, especially educational nurture.

Fourth is a covert religious narrative. This one is particularly ironic if we follow its history. When most Shakespeare scholars had religious faith, authorship skeptics were accused of being religious “agnostics,” as though that slur disqualified their authorship opinion. Now that many Shakespeare scholars seem to be agnostics or atheists themselves, authorship skeptics are still accused of “heresy,” when not being accused of suffering from an irrational faith in their false authorship god (another example of projection).

A pivotal example of the power of narrative in the authorship debate is the one imposed on authorship skeptics by defenders of the traditional author. We are depicted as the villains, motivated by shameful snobbery or deranged conspiracy theories, attacking a beloved cultural icon.

George Moraitis is a psychoanalyst who has studied the psychology of the biographer. He concluded that each biographer approaches his or her research with a pre-existing “blueprint” for their narrative of the life of their subject, and organizes their findings in conformity with that narrative. Otto Rank, another psychoanalyst, wrote *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, in which he showed that we often portray our heroes as coming from humble origins, and later overcoming the disadvantages of their birth by achieving greatness through their innate gifts and hard work.

One simple but powerful narrative that buttresses the traditional authorship theory is that writers sign their works. The greater the work of literature, the more certain it is that any reasonable writer would want to put his or her name to it. What could be more self-evident? Until we come to early modern English literature. Or, for that matter, literature prior to the 20th century, which is really when signed works first began to outnumber anonymous and pseudonymous works of literature. But the vast majority of early modern English plays were published without the actual author’s name. Recent studies of the psychology of pseudonymity reveal a range of overlapping motivations for each act of pseudonymous authorship. In his 2003 book, *The Faces of Anonymity*, Robert J. Griffin observes that,

The motivations for publishing anonymously have varied widely with circumstances, but they have included an aristocratic...reticence, religious self-effacement, anxiety over public exposure, fear of prosecution, hope of an unprejudiced reception, and the desire to deceive (p. 7).

Each of those factors may have played some role in de Vere’s motivation. And no discussion of the psychology of pseudonymous authorship is complete without Oscar Wilde’s observation that “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”

Conclusions

In closing, let me speculate a bit about what can be done about the centuries-old compelling power of the traditional authorship narrative. Contradictory evidence clearly has not worked, given the unconsciously determined, highly emotional foundation of the Stratfordian legend. Instead, we I would suggest that we need alterative narratives. One would be a “justice to remediate previous oppression” narrative, as in the civil rights and feminist movements. This narrative cites the current abuse of power on the part of Stratfordians that actually has ancient roots, beginning when Queen Elizabeth and the Cecils forced de Vere to use a pseudo-

nym. We offer a rescue narrative to resurrect de Vere from centuries of neglect as the true author of the canon. Another might be the freedom of speech and related academic freedom narrative, again confronting the abuse of power of academia, when it enforces a shameful taboo against even discussing the authorship question. A third narrative is borrowed from that of gays in the military. It concerns scholarly journals, which carry out the taboo against questioning Shakespeare's authorship with an unofficial "don't-ask-don't-tell policy" of publishing articles by authorship skeptics only when we censor our authorship position from our publications. Now that the military's "don't-ask-don't-tell" policy has finally been abolished, it is time for scholarly publications to follow suit.

Notes

¹ E.g., Waugaman 2009a and b, 2010a and b, 2011, and in press; see also <http://www.oxfreudian.com>.

² E.g., the Folger edition of *The Taming of the Shrew*, xxxiii, emphasis added.

³ <http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=862>; accessed May 9, 2012.

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