

Still in Denial: *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* versus *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?*

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Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy, Ed. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (Cambridge U.P., 2013)

Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial, Ed. John Shahan and Alexander Waugh (Llumina, 2013)

The Shakespeare Authorship Question started in 1857 with Delia Bacon's *The Philosophy of the Plays of William Shakspeare Unfolded*, though the academic community chose not to respond to the challenge in a serious way until 2010. For a century and more, the professors simply dismissed the idea out of hand and insulted its advocates as amateurs and cranks.

Contested Will

The landscape changed in 2010 with publication of James Shapiro's *Contested Will*, which examined the authorship candidacies of Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe and Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, from an orthodox perspective. To be more precise, Shapiro examined the political positions of the advocates for these candidates. So instead of judging the evidence in support of, for example, Oxford's candidacy, Shapiro examined the political views of J. Thomas Looney, the original Oxfordian. Looney was excoriated at length for finding virtues in the feudal social system, and for being a positivist—a philosophy Shapiro claims he shared with Adolf Hitler. In short, Shapiro employed political correctness rather than literary evidence as his standard.

Perhaps because Shapiro's political gambit seems to have failed with university students, theater professionals and the news media, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (SBT) has now gathered a platoon of academics to attack the main alternative authorship candidates. *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, edited by Stanley Wells and Paul Edmondson (Cambridge U. Press, April 2013) restates the literary and historical case for William Shakspeare of Stratford on Avon. In response, the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition (SAC) has organized an in-depth rebuttal in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?* (Llumina Press, June 2013), edited by John Shahan and Alexander Waugh.

No New Evidence

The salient fact about *SBD* is that it contains no new evidence, and resolutely ignores more recent non-Stratfordian contributions to the debate. Particularly noticeable by their absence is Diana Price's still-unanswered *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (2001), Richard Roe's *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* (2011) and of course Roger Stritmatter's work on De Vere's Geneva Bible. Instead it attacks the candidacies of Bacon, Marlowe, and Oxford, fictional treatments of the authorship and the SAC's Declaration of Reasonable Doubt, then presents again the existing but limited evidence on behalf of William Shakspeare of Stratford. In its concluding section, *SBD* discusses what it considers to be the cultural phenomenon of the SAQ, illustrated in part by the 2011 movie *Anonymous*.

In contrast, *SBD?* contributor and co-editor, Alexander Waugh, covers the evidence for Shakespeare's first-hand knowledge of Italy with an in-depth, well organized and thoroughly referenced essay. Ironically, it took an amateur scholar—a retired attorney—

to investigate something that should have been researched generations ago by academicians: confirm or refute the accuracy of the allusions to Italy in Shakespeare's plays. Using contemporary and modern sources, *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* demonstrates that all the references to Italian language, culture and geography in at least ten plays are or were accurate. Impossible to travel to Milan by water? The city was totally water-locked until the 20th century: the most convenient way to reach it in the 16th century from any part of Italy was by barge through a series of interconnected canals. There never was an Emperor of Milan? The Emperor Charles V



Canals in modern Milan. In the 16th century the city was a bustling port.

traveled to the city-state with his court for a week in 1533, expressly to accept the public oath of fealty by its duke. There never was a Saint Peter's Church in Verona? Of the four St. Pietro churches in the city, only one—and it is still standing—was used as a parish church in the 14th century under Franciscan control: San Pietro Incarnario. Roe identifies the location of the Saggiary in Venice, he explains what Gregory's Well meant to contemporary Italians, and persuasively identifies as Italian the island in *The Tempest*. Profusely illustrated with dozens of maps, illustrations, and photographs, *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* broadens our enjoyment of Shakespeare's plays by delineating for us his dramatic methodology. It proves that he was fluent in Italian and traveled extensively in France and Italy, even though the British passport office claims Shakespeare was never issued a travel permit. Well, perhaps, Shaksper from Stratford was never issued one—someone else writing under the pseudonym William Shakespeare likely traveled through Italy.

But instead of evaluating Roe's research, *SBD* chooses to examine the cultural impact of fictional treatments of the Shakespeare authorship and the movie *Anonymous*. That they focus on evaluating the cultural significance of popular entertainment but ignore compelling new evidence about Shakespeare's knowledge of Italy, as reflected in 25% of the canon, is indicative of academia's continuing denial, refusing to engage their opponents on a scholarly level.



Delia Bacon

A History of Ire

The first object of ire in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* is the woman who began the Shakespeare authorship movement in the mid-19th century. Delia Bacon finally gets her pioneering book reviewed by a professional academic, Graham Holderness of the University of Hertfordshire, and is punished for her patience. Holderness writes:

Her argument that the Stratford Shakespeare was, through lack of education and cultural deficiency, in no way up to the job of writing the plays has been comprehensively refuted by generations of scholars, biographers and critics, and is reaffirmed in this volume. (10-11)

Delia Bacon's suggestion that the plays were not meant as art or entertainment, but as a project in public education in political ethics and civic values, is dismissed by Holderness because the idea is presented as neither history nor literary criticism. No, her book is

a kind of poetry, since it operates by metaphor and simile, by rhythm and phrasing, rather than by logical argument or evidenced demonstration. (14)

In case we don't get the message, Holderness's concluding sentence triply damns *The Philosophy of the Plays of William Shakspeare Unfolded*:

...in reading it as a scholarly treatise, an intellectual argument, a historical narrative, we can only conclude that it remains, in its anguished totality, a scholarship without content, an argument without conclusion, and a history without evidence. (15)

It is *SBD*'s contributors, however, who lack evidence, or at least any evidence that's new. Instead they regurgitate the standard argument, and it is chiefly bibliographical, i.e. that the name William Shakespeare, or William Shake-speare, or W. Shakespeare or W. Shake-speare was printed on the title pages of four poems and two dozen play quartos of Shakespeare's during Shakspeare's lifetime. However, the only evidence connecting the names on the title page to an individual from Stratford on Avon are ambiguous references in the prefatory material in the *First Folio*, published seven years after Shakspeare's demise in 1616. More to the point, there is not a single document from the Elizabethan or Jacobean periods that alludes to Shakspeare as a writer, let alone a writer of plays. There are numerous contemporary documents referring to him as a tax cheat, legal witness, land owner, commodity trader, theater company investor, even an actor, but no document from the period describes the Stratford Shakspeare as a writer or playwright.

Diana Price summarizes the situation with Shakspeare in relation to his colleagues:

The biography of William Shakspeare is deficient. It cites not one personal literary record to prove that he wrote for a living. Moreover, it cites not one personal record to prove that he was capable of writing the works of William Shakespeare. In the genre of Elizabethan and Jacobean literary biography, that deficiency is unique. While Shakspeare left over seventy biographical records, not one of them tells us that his occupation was writing. In contrast, George Peele's meager pile of twenty-some personal biographical records includes at least nine that are literary. John Webster, one of the least documented writers of the day, left behind fewer than a dozen personal biographical records, but seven of them are literary. (*Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*, 296).

I note this because the Trust's literary experts refuse to acknowledge the lack of documentary evidence in their own case by continually stating that Shakspeare was known to his contemporaries as a writer. They don't present a single document that could verify this, however. Instead, they fall back on the *First Folio*—another bibliographical argument—as their ultimate proof of authorship. The so-called testimony of the *First Folio* should therefore be examined.

The First Folio

The connecting links in the chain between the *First Folio* of Shakespeare and William Shakspeare of Stratford are (a) the allusion by Ben Jonson to "Sweet Swan of Avon";



(b) the allusion by Digges to “thy Stratford monument”; (c) the funerary monument in Stratford-upon-Avon; and (d) the conclusion that Heminges, Condell, Jonson, Holland and Digges recognized Shakspeare of Stratford as the author. As Price notes, “The cumulative strength of that chain depends on the strength of each link. Those links are not sound” (196).

It’s true that “Sweet Swan of Avon” is followed three pages later by Digges’ allusion to “thy Stratford monument.” These seem to allude to Stratford-upon-Avon, but as Whalen informs us in “The Ambiguous Ben Jonson,” (*SBD?* 126-135) there were at least five Avon rivers and ten Stratfords in England, including a Stratford-at-Bow in the London suburbs that was located near the public theaters.

Whalen then points out in a companion article, “The Stratford Bust: A Monumental Fraud” (137), that the sketch made by William Dugdale in 1634 of the Stratford Monument shows a dour man with a downturned mustache clutching a large sack of grain in his lap with both hands. Hollar’s engraving of the Stratford monument matches the Dugdale sketch and was published in multiple editions in 1656, 1730 and 1765. This monument, however, was modified twice

in the intervening centuries to show a man writing with a quill pen on a pillow, a radical transformation in depiction—from a dealer in grain to a writer, from a merchant to an artist.

Other relevant evidence undermines the integrity of the *First Folio* in identifying William Shakspeare as the dramatist. One is the absence of his famous coat of arms from the book’s title page and the Droeshout portrait. Another is the absence of tributes from famous writers other than Jonson. Notably absent is John Fletcher, one of Shakespeare’s collaborators, who was still alive in 1623. None of the other three persons who wrote tributes for the *First Folio* was a noted literary person. There is Hugh Holland, Leonard Digges (a translator, brother to Dudley) and a mysterious I.M. who forgoes immortality by hiding his full name. Why such a short and mediocre list for the “soul of the age?”

Parallels

Further, textual analysis of the prefatory letters by Heminges and Condell suggests that Jonson was the likely author, raising serious questions about their claims. In *SBD?* Whalen reminds us that George Steevens, the 18th-century Shakespeare editor, produced 12 pages of examples comparing phrases in the Heminge-Condell letters to writings by Jonson, leading to the reasonable conclusion that Jonson was the true author (131). Since the various alternative authorship candidates also lack documentary proof, their primary line of evidence focuses on parallels in the Shakespeare canon with the presumed author’s biography—evidence which, as non-Stratfordians have long realized, points strongly to an aristocratic author. This entire methodology is misrepresented and then rejected *in toto* by the *SBD* contributors. As Alan Nelson puts it:

A crucial element of the self-styled “authorship debate” is Looney’s post-Romantic (and anti-classical) proposition that all literary composition is quintessentially autobiographical. An author must write what he (or she) knows; and all that an author knows is the experience of his (or her) own life. (46)

But as British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper remarks in his essay, “What’s in a Name?”, “A great dramatist transmutes all his own experience.” Nobel Laureate William Faulkner also noted that writers need three key attributes to achieve artistic success: experience, observation, and imagination. *SBD* theorists blithely omit the first two factors from their description of Shakespeare’s creative process, a desperate attempt to flee from an epistemology which effectively undermines their position. Their insistence on eliminating the author’s experience and observation from his creative process really begs the whole issue in the authorship debate—is it best left for English or History professors to resolve? Obviously, more than literary exegesis is required. The skills of the historian to research and analyze social, economic, and political systems and leaders are needed to bridge the different standards of evidentiary truth.

Contradictions

In their sections devoted to criticizing the candidacies of Bacon, Marlowe and Oxford, the *SBD* writers carry out character assassination in place of presenting or even contesting evidence. Nelson, for example, confuses facts with accusations and treats both as true, even though his conclusions are contradicted by the historical record. A relatively recent biographer of Oxford (*Monstrous Adversary*, U. of Liverpool Press, 2003), Nelson consistently leaves out essential information. Among examples are his allegations that

In complete contradiction to the allegations of homosexuality and sexual deviance, Nelson informs us that over 30 years Oxford had two wives (Ann Cecil and Elizabeth Trentham) by whom he had six children. He also had a mistress (Ann Vavasor) and with her fathered another child. Nelson makes no attempt to reconcile any of these contradictory data.

Oxford was both a homosexual pederast and—even more “monstrous”—a pervert who practiced bestiality. However, the only proofs are the accusations by his political enemies, lords Henry Howard and Charles Arundel, who in 1581 were accused by him of high treason. Nelson conveniently leaves these details out of his narrative, including their ridiculous additional charges that Oxford had fornicated with the devil and planned to murder Sir Philip Sydney, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Walsingham and the Earl of Leicester.

Oxford was never prosecuted on any of these charges, another point Nelson declines to make. Further, in complete contradiction to the allegations of homosexuality and sexual deviance, Nelson informs us, accurately in this case, that over 30 years Oxford had two wives (Ann Cecil and Elizabeth Trentham) by whom he had six children. He also had a mistress (Ann Vavasor) and with her fathered another child. Nelson makes no attempt to reconcile any of these contradictory data. It’s clear that Nelson’s visceral loathing of Oxford has transformed him into a polemicist willing to misuse the historical record so he can repeat libels in the hope they will hinder Oxford’s claim to authorship of the

Shakespeare canon. In fact, despite *SBD*'s high-powered provenance, it ultimately fails to achieve either of its two main goals: to refute the anti-Stratfordian thesis and to strengthen the traditional case for authorship. Indeed, the assembled academics mostly refuse to debate the subject of Shakespeare's authorship in any form. *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* merely represents a high-profile attack on authorship advocates.

Faith

Aside from ignoring evidence and employing character assassination against candidates and their advocates, *SBD*'s experts introduce a new libel that goes beyond the usual "amateur." This is for Stuart Hampton-Reeves of the University of Central Lancashire to claim, and for James Shapiro to repeat in his Afterword:

What Stuart Hampton-Reeves writes about the *Declaration of Reasonable Doubt* holds true of the anti-Stratfordian position in general: "the *Declaration* is not just a declaration of doubt; it is also a declaration of faith..." (240)

Thus, authorship doubters no longer qualify even as amateur scholars, but have been cast into the outer darkness of an obviously discredited religious faith. What is really meant by this of course is that non-Stratfordians believe without evidence. But actually the book produced by the SAC succinctly lays out the hard facts of the matter. Among the contributors are half-a-dozen PhDs, MDs and LLM's from a variety of professions, including academics, actors, scientists, writers, and more. They ably demonstrate the dramatist's in-depth knowledge of their own areas of expertise—law, medicine, contemporary physics, classical learning and Renaissance Italy. In doing so they examine the glaring inadequacies of Shakspeare's six signatures, his will, the oddities in the Droeshout engraving, Ben Jonson's *First Folio* testimony, and the Stratford Monument. Also highlighted is the absence of contemporary literary documentation for Shakspeare, based on the case assembled by Diana Price. Obviously, this literary absence from the documentary record has never been explained by the advocates of the Stratford Shakspeare because it cripples their case. What they do instead is repeatedly refer to documentary proof without providing the documents, as Wells and Edmondson do in dismissing the candidacy for the Earl of Oxford:

Oxford died in 1604, so his adherents have to explain away the evidence relating to the composition of Shakespeare's later plays. (3)

Of course, there is not a single piece of documentary evidence clearly dating the composition of any Shakespeare play. Scholars have put together chronologies based on entries in the Stationers' Register, topical allusions in the published text, and references to public performances. No contemporary document has ever been found proving that Shakspeare wrote the plays of William Shakespeare. It is precisely this absence of documentary evidence that created an authorship issue in the first place.

Warwickshire

The corruption of Stratfordian scholars in *SBD* is further demonstrated by David Kathman in his essay, "Shakespeare and Warwickshire," written as a response to Ramon Jiménez's "Shakspeare in Stratford and London: Ten Witnesses Who Saw Nothing," published prior to its appearance in *SBD*? Jiménez discovered that a considerable number

of artists, historians and private citizens who knew the Stratford Shakspeare signally failed to leave any record connecting him with the dramatist William Shakespeare. Kathman tries to refute this stunning evidence by claiming that educated and successful citizens of Stratford, such as Richard Quiney, Thomas Greene and Thomas Russell, did indeed know Shakspeare. The problem with this is that none of them ever referred to him as a writer or playwright. They simply transacted business with him—Quiney asked for a loan, Greene lived as a tenant in New Place briefly, and Russell handled his will. But all this proves is that Shakspeare was a successful local businessman, a fact other contemporary records already attest to. What's noteworthy, of course, is Kathman's attempt to misconstrue the point of Jiménez's argument. Kathman muddies the historical record in other ways. In the same chapter, he incorrectly states that "Quiney's son eventually married Shakespeare's daughter Judith, and they named their first son, born in 1617, 'Shakespeare'" (125). *SBD*? co-editor John Shahan exposes Kathman's misrepresentation of the historical record with aplomb.

This is incorrect on three counts. First, the Stratford church records show that the son of Thomas Quiney was born in November 1616, not in '1617.' He died in May 1617. Second, the entry in the record of his christening in 1616 shows the name as 'Shaksper.' Third, the entry in the record for his burial in 1617 shows the name as 'Shakspeare.' So regardless of which of the records he was looking at, Kathman misspelled the name! It's hard for us to imagine that Kathman misspelled it 'Shakespeare' purely by accident since he has an article on the spelling debate on his website and is supposedly an expert"(13).

Despite this, and other similar moments in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, co-editor Paul Edmondson has the audacity to describe authorship doubters as dangerous fools. Through its recent efforts, he says, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust has "exposed afresh the absurdity of anti-Shakespearianism, ultimately a dangerous phenomenon which can lead to conspiratorial narratives fueled by denial of historical evidence" (235). Stuart Hampton-Reeves similarly concludes in his article on the *Declaration of Reasonable Doubt*:

Highlighting the number of academics as a strategy has backfired for, far from isolating Shakespeare scholars as high priests of Stratfordian orthodoxy somehow divorced from academic logic and unable to accept a reasonable argument, the list [of signers] reveals how few academics around the world have any truck with these arguments (213).

Lessons


What lessons can we take away from all this? Based on their performance in *SBD*, Stratfordian academics will continue to abuse the opposition with *ad hominem* attacks, while refusing to accept their opponents' research and evidence. *Contested Will* and *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* notwithstanding, the SAQ will continue to be generally taboo at universities worldwide, locked out of journals, classrooms and academic conferences. Yet oddly, the traditional candidate remains a losing proposition, even though he retains the single but potent advantage of intellectual inertia—William Shakspeare of Stratford has been the official author for nearly 400 years, in itself a prophylactic against rational evidence to the contrary. In the end, though, the deciding factor for both sides remains finding sufficient documentary evidence. However, if the author of the canon wished to remain anonymous, then he and his friends did an outstanding job of eliminating any contemporary records that could identify him. The complete absence of letters to or from Shakspeare is but one side of the issue. On the other, there are more than 60 private letters

by the Earl of Oxford to William and Robert Cecil and to Queen Elizabeth dealing with financial, legal and political matters, though nothing related to literary activities. Other than a letter from the French King Henry IV written to Oxford thanking him for taking the French side in a policy debate before Elizabeth and Burghley, not one other letter has been discovered to or from any other individual and Oxford, even though he had 33 books dedicated to him, employed writers such as John Lyly, Anthony Monday and Thomas Churchyard, and was patron of two theater companies, one operating for more than 20 years. Not even a note to court composer William Byrd, to whom Oxford leased a manor, and for whom Byrd composed *Oxford's March* and set an Oxford poem to music. Clearly, once the author behind the name Shakespeare decided to become anonymous by adopting a pseudonym, he himself took a central role in eliminating documents that might uncover his identity. Is this a “conspiracy” by outside forces or a combination of author and authority both acting in concert to prevent the public from discovering that Shakespeare was an aristocrat who examined social and political matters by using plays as his medium? Regardless, it is likely we may all have to decide on Shakespeare’s true identity based on evidence that may always be less than definitive. Four years ago I summarized the essence of the authorship issue for academia in the inaugural issue (2009) of the history journal, *Brief Chronicles*:

The Shakespearean question is more than a real-life whodunit. It is, in fact, the pre-eminent “paradigm shift” issue in the modern humanities curriculum, because it tests the academy’s ability for self-correction on a global scale in response to new evidence generated substantially by amateurs.

On the basis of the evidence contained in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, it is clear that modern scholars have failed to carry out their responsibilities as public intellectuals. We can only hope that as more students became aware of the research in the authorship field, they will have the courage to take on the question with more honesty than displayed in this latest publication from academia.


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The contents of The Elizabethan Review are indexed by three major bibliographies: the *MLA International Bibliography*; the *Bibliography of English Language and Literature* by Cambridge University; and the *World Shakespeare Bibliography* by the Folger Shakespeare Library.

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