

Sisyphus and the *Globe*: Turning (on) the Media

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In the fall of 2013, I found myself as local host in Toronto of the last joint meeting of the Shakespeare Fellowship and the Shakespeare Oxford Society before these two august institutions saw the wisdom of merging into a new entity called the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship (SOF). I was on the SF Board of Directors at the time of the changeover and I enthusiastically supported the move. The real war to be fought, it seemed to me, was the ongoing one between Oxfordians and Stratfordians, not one between two shades of authorship grey (Oxfordians who do or do not believe in things like the Prince Tudor theory, as one example of the different shades involved).

Indeed, it has been my fervent belief since personally connecting to the authorship issue that dividing authorship warriors into separate armies was certainly not the way to win the larger population to our cause. Nor to win them to the curious notion of the freedom to think independently, to think differently or to think rationally rather than merely thinking faithfully or traditionally. Indeed, watching authorship aficionados try to demolish one another's pet theories seemed to me a really good way to actually shoot all of us in the collective foot, to give aid and comfort as well as a really good laugh to those looking for any reason not to take us seriously. That's why, to my mind, making SF and SOS into one big cuddly SOF was clearly a move in the right direction.

Such divisions are partly what has given people like Stanley Wells his confidence over the years to take on the whole mob of us rather than any single

position. Even reasonable doubters, the easiest of the authorship positions to accept. As his and Paul Edmondson's recent book *Shakespeare Without Doubt* makes clear, their strategy is to mix all authorship positions together and create a sense of confusion in which we the disputants all seem to be shooting in every direction. It also gives him leave to drag out poor old Delia Bacon rather frequently. If she went mad, so must all authorship researchers be mad too.

Surely the time has come to circle the wagons in terms of media and public outreach and make sure that — at the very least — the truth about the man from Stratford becomes known more widely in both universities (where the idea of truth once reigned) and in the larger world of public opinion (molded heavily by the press whose opinions are generally formed by universities, mostly English and Theatre departments).

This is, of course, clearly what our friend John Shahan has been doing for years now with his Shakespeare Authorship Coalition and with its immensely clever Declaration of Reasonable Doubt. It is Shahan's profound belief that if we can all join together at least as "doubters," we might well build a strong public relations foundation for the authorship question.

In moving toward such a clear public relations strategy, let us, of course, recognize differences in what we do and celebrate them. Some of us here really are engaged in very specific academic issues connected to one side or another of the great debate and the ability of these first-class academics to act as our credibility and as our conscience is absolutely crucial to the overall strength of this sometimes arcane work.

I am thinking here of the kind of research that Roger Stritmatter has done on Oxford's Geneva Bible and the kind of work that he and Lynne Kositsky have just published on the re-dating of *The Tempest*. I am thinking of Kevin Gilvary's crucial work on the redating of the canon generally and Bonner Cutting's groundbreaking studies on Elizabethan wills and the visual arts and things like wardship in the Elizabethan era. I am thinking too of Ramon Jiménez's work on the Shakespeare apocrypha and Tom Regnier's identification of Shakespeare's legal knowledge and Earl Showerman's identification of Shakespeare's medical knowledge. And I am thinking especially of Diana Price's brilliant research on Shakespeare's unorthodox biography which even Stanley Wells has praised as first-class research but research that, as he put it so delicately to me, is totally misplaced. There are too many doing such fine work that I have no time to identify them all. But we know them and they know we are deeply appreciative and support their research in this field.

That said, let me add here that it is not to these crucial and essential academic studies that I think I myself can bring any new truths or insights, at least not yet. I am not — and I readily admit — a scholar of the Early Modern period. I am a theatre scholar, a theatre historian and a theatre critic with a fair amount of experience in various forms of journalism and an enormous curiosity about the authorship issue. My own contribution, therefore, will probably come from other areas related to the issue. It seems to me that there are two specific battlefields to be recognized here: one is the ongoing critical and journalistic war we have long

been fighting with hugely closed minds of influential media people who have lots of opinions and very few facts when they write; the other is the territorial war on campuses around the world for the right to discuss this issue as a legitimate area of intellectual inquiry utilizing the notion of academic freedom as our rationale.

Put another way, every time we try to move the authorship boulder a few feet up the mountain of Truth, the ground beneath us is shaken by authority of some sort and the authorship rock we are trying to move falls back yet again and we must start all over. Again and again. Of course we are not really starting all over again each time. We know that. But I am suggesting here that if we are to win this Sisyphus-like struggle at some point and clear the way for legitimate debate, we must understand not only who we are struggling against and understand their strategy of over-complication, insult and bluster. Let there be no doubt here: we *are* Sisyphus in this battle. And despite truth and fairness being on our side, the odds are still surely against us.

Let me share with you here something of my own experience in this regard around that last joint conference in Toronto in 2013. I am speaking here of my rather personal war with the *Globe*. To be more precise, my war *not* with Shakespeare's *Globe* but with Toronto's *Globe*, that is Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, one of Canada's most influential newspapers whose young and exceedingly disrespectful and closed-minded theatre critic, one J. Kelly Nestruck, decided prior to our conference that even though he himself has never done any serious study of the authorship question, even though he is obviously more interested in tweeting his way through the blogosphere than in actually examining new research in this field, and even though his wit far exceeds his grasp in such matters, he decided early on that the authorship question would be an easy target and that I myself — president of the Canadian Theatre Critics Association and a professor of theatre with over forty years of teaching and research experience — should be ridiculed and insulted as much as possible. And what better time to do all this than during the joint conference itself when author-shippers aplenty would actually be around to read his rubbish on a subject he knows only third or fourth hand through second-rate scholars of minimal reputation.

Some background here.

For two of the last three academic years, I have been teaching (rather successfully I daresay) a course on the authorship at York University in Toronto. Called Shakespeare: The Authorship Question and offered as a fourth-year one-semester course, the approach taken by me has been rather wide-open, its goal *not* being to prove one or the other of the many candidates as the real Bard but rather to lead students into the fertile grass of authorship studies generally, to let them find out without pressure from me just how unorthodox the traditional Bard biography really is.

The course limit is twenty-five students and it has quickly filled (with a waiting list) each time I have offered it. In the course, I ask the students not to become Oxfordians but rather to choose from among the many authorship candidates and to argue that case in front of the class. It doesn't matter

whether they themselves believe the case or not. It is an exercise in research and argumentation and they love doing it. I also ask them to end each presentation with a short statement summing up the arguments against that candidacy. For the record, I include all the usual authorship suspects including William of Stratford. In preparation for these debates, we study the sonnets in some depth, *Venus and Adonis*, *Rape of Lucrece* and *Hamlet*. We read the very useful Hope and Holston volume, *The Shakespeare Controversy*, which explains clearly and objectively the history of the argument. In the most recent iteration of the course we read as well both *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* volumes – the Wells-Edmondson version and the Shahan-Waugh version.

Finally, the course looks closely at the Folio. Only after the presentations are made near the end of the course do I show several videos including Lisa Wilson and Laura Wilson Matthias's *Last Will. & Testament*, the German-made *Naked Shakespeare* and, for fun, *Anonymous*.

Because the joint conference was in Toronto, I invited my students to attend all of the public lectures. Most enjoyed the conference immensely and the speakers, I must say, seemed to really enjoy having students around the whole time asking the presenters questions and treating them a bit like rock stars.

Back in the course, on the last day of classes, in lieu of a final exam, I hold an open debate (two or three persons to a team) and then a secret vote to see which authorship candidate scores highest after taking the course. Each is rated using a Yes, Maybe, or No format. You will find it of interest, to note that when asked to say Yes to one of the names, de Vere came in first place with the Group-written theory coming in second, followed by Derby, Marlowe, John Florio, Mary Sidney, William of Stratford and Rutland all finishing rather far behind.

But when I combined the Yes and Maybe categories and re-evaluated the decision, it was actually the Group-written theory that finished a strong first with de Vere and Derby in second and third place; Mary Sidney, Marlowe and Florio coming in a closely bunched fourth, fifth and sixth; and William of Stratford, Rutland and Bacon rounding it out at a much more distant seven, eight and nine.

As with all courses at York, the teaching and content is evaluated by the students. In this case, it included attendance at the conference. Did they feel bullied or blindsided in any way?

One graduate student taking the course wrote: "In my fifteen years of teaching at the high school level, I have come to believe firmly that teaching is a moral act and that a teacher has the responsibility to encourage students to think critically and be able to advocate strongly for whatever developing opinions students may hold. In this spirit, in what I have observed both in classes and in...this conference [this course] has excelled....Interestingly...Prof. Rubin has never shared his own beliefs on the authorship question nor has he ever asked me what mine are, showing ultimate respect for my right as his student to make up my own mind on the subject after allowing me to carefully consider what academic research has revealed and might yet reveal about the subject...."

Another wrote: “The Shakespeare Authorship Conference was by far the greatest experience I have had the opportunity to be a part of in my four years here at York....As a student interested in pursuing the authorship question beyond my undergrad, I thoroughly enjoyed how accepting everyone was and how extensively I had my questions answered. I was very proud to be part of such a wonderful academic conference....”

And another: “the conference added to my critical thinking...I learned about the nature of evidence....the conference demonstrated many references within Shakespeare...For example...medicine, law and science....”

Said another, “This entire conference was one big lesson in Critical Thinking....The whole four days...was [a] reminder....to listen to what you are being told, analyze that...and [see if] you are still satisfied....enlightening, exciting and inspiring....”

And another: “Critical thinking...is about expanding one’s knowledge rather than being right or wrong. Rather than just accepting ideas at face value, we must always ask questions.”

For the record, the joint conference was officially supported by two major Canadian universities — York and the University of Guelph. Actual support amounted to a modest \$2,000 from each, most of which was used to cover the costs of the students who attended so they could get in without charge. A little of the funding also helped subsidize the bus trip to the Stratford Festival to see Antoni Cimolino’s brilliant production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Not only was the production a highlight but so too was the opportunity to have everyone meet with Mr. Cimolino, a professional director brave enough to stand before this group of “doubters” and say that the authorship question had no real impact on his work. I will always be appreciative that Cimolino showed up that day and that simple act of courage made a huge difference in the group’s respect for him.

Also showing up for that meeting was Stratford’s former Literary Manager and now its Director of Communications, David Prosser. David — a colleague and former theatre critic — has also been brave enough to stand up to us author-shippers from time to time and, though he enjoys tweaking us, he has never pulled punches or hidden his feelings. He doesn’t believe we are doing anything that can add to Shakespeare on a stage. He actually attended an earlier authorship conference I organized in Toronto where he got booed for comparing the authorship issue to holocaust denial.

His contribution this time came in the month prior to the 2013 conference when he was sent a complimentary copy of *Brief Chronicles IV*. This started yet another public battle. Prosser wrote to the journal’s editor, Roger Stritmatter:

Dear Dr. Stritmatter,

Please accept my sorely belated thanks for the complimentary copy of *Brief Chronicles*....In return for your kindness, I offer you a morsel of information that seems to have gone unnoticed by even the most perspicacious of

Oxfordians: the fact is that the name "William Shakespeare" is an anagram of "I, his wee pal, mask earl."

Stritmatter was incensed and responded to the SOS and SF urging them to cancel all plans to attend the production at Stratford. "No need," said Roger, "to spend our hard-earned cash on festivals whose communications directors have such a poor grasp of reality." In fairness, it was Stritmatter who quickly pointed out that the letter from Prosser was not written on Festival letterhead but rather on his own private letterhead. Nevertheless, the ShakesVere internet group, among others, was deeply offended. Tom Regnier of the SF suggested that Prosser should not be allowed "to push our buttons." He added that he was concerned that "some Oxfordians will write nasty letters to Prosser on their own which he will then use to demonstrate how 'unreasonable' Oxfordians are."

My favourite response in this e-mail flurry was from one SF member who commented to the Board: "Perhaps we should inform Prosser that his own name is an anagram of 'DR. AVOID PRESS' (not very apt for the communications director). We should also ask him if by any chance he lives on (another anagram of his name) 'ASSDROP DRIVE.'"

I argued in this series of e-mail exchanges that "I don't think the answer is to attack Prosser. I think the answer is to continue to send him strong material. He is the kind of person we ultimately have to convince." A position I continue to take in media matters.

Nothing more was sent nor was the visit to Stratford canceled, but I can tell you that a week before the show, I had a thirty-minute, four-way phone call from the Festival which included Prosser and Cimolino asking me to assure them that no one was planning to demonstrate during the show. They had somehow heard that there would be a protest. I personally assured them that we were all reasonable people and promising them that there would be no protest. On the bus to Stratford I begged everyone to be on good behavior. Tom Regnier added that we were there to talk theatre and see theatre. It was the wrong time and place to mount a protest. It would not help our cause, and he was right.

Because my own experiences to that point with speaking to individuals and small groups in the media was generally positive, I had decided during the summer before the conference that I would use the opportunity to explain to the Toronto theatre media why authorship issues were even in the air. In the belief that most were essentially rational people, I thought that if the issue were presented as something that even orthodox scholars were finally dealing with and if it could all be presented without emotion I felt I could possibly bring a few of them around to at least neutrality and openness.

As President of the Canadian Theatre Critics Association, a mix of journalists and scholars, I thought I would start there. The organization meets over lunch every couple of months and invites people of note to address them on issues of significance. With the conference set to take place in October, I offered to be the speaker for August hoping that if they simply heard the basic reasons why William

of Stratford's case was so dubious, they might actually want to hear the deeper arguments in October.

My offer was accepted. I was invited to speak and pointed out in an editorial in the organization's newsletter that the authorship issue was actually getting hot as a subject and that the conference was part of the heating up. I noted that Stanley Wells had a new book out on the authorship, that Wells was speaking at Stratford during the summer and suggested that the issue probably was not going to go away. All this seemed to me rather neutral and fact-based.

And when that newsletter came out in July, everyone I spoke to seemed to be looking forward to my formal talk. That was when the *Globe and Mail's* young critic decided he had had quite enough of me and it. In a letter to the board of the critics organization (copied to the entire membership) young Kelly Nestruck wrote:

I am very wary of Don Rubin using the CTCA to promote his fringe views on what he calls "the Shakespeare authorship question." I was aware that our otherwise reputable President was a proponent of anti-Stratfordian theories, but that he will subject members to a lecture on them at the [meeting] in September is seriously embarrassing – as was his devotion of so much of this latest ... bulletin to this utter nonsense. I'm not on the Board, but to those of you who are, I hope you'll rein him in. There has been good work done in building up CTCA of late and I'd rather not see it turn into a laughing stock.

Most of the Board was shocked by his response and several members called me. I said I would respond directly (copying the Board). And I wrote, rather cordially I thought given his juvenile and thoroughly disrespectful tone:

You may want to look around on this one. No one's laughing but you. Even the Stratford Birthplace Trust, which has the most to lose in this, has decided to stop laughing and has begun to deal with it all seriously.... Now that the evidence is clear that they may well have been wrong about it, they are trying to dispute what is out there and defend their rather tenuous position. Eventually I think they will give up the fight though probably not for decades. The Stratford birthplace story is too valuable a commodity:

Anyway, I know you are not really urging critics NOT to take positions on things and I am sure you are not urging scholars to shut down honest enquiry and debate. My hope is that you will join us [at the meeting] to understand what the evidence really is. If it still doesn't make a case for you, question it and take a position. Ridicule though is not an intellectually defensible position when evidence is presented honestly and openly.

Nestruck's response was a terse, "I'll be out of town for your talk, but I'll be sure to write about your conference at York...when I get back. Sad to see you dragging down the academic reputation of that fine institution – not to mention your own."

Unshaken by his nonsensical position, I headed into the meeting with the critics even more enthusiastically. My presentation — as all my introductory talks tend to be — was focused on the oddness of the Shakespeare biography. The response was generally positive. As for Kelly, he spent the next few months on a journalistic fellowship in Germany. On his return — two weeks or so before the conference was to begin — he got in touch once again.

“The Oxfordian conference that you are helping to organize is coming up very soon. I’d like to write about it for the *Globe and Mail*. Are you free for an interview sometime this week or next.” Then he added, “Obviously, you know my position on this already and I doubt I’ll budge, but I’ll give you a chance to convince me that this is a worthwhile area of study and discussion.”

A few days later Nestruck wrote to me again saying that he was willing to even do it as a phone interview because his piece on the conference was already scheduled. That certainly surprised me. Had he already written the piece?

I quickly wrote him:

I am still [available] if you are seriously interested in writing about the conference. [But] I am the only one with the final schedule and I haven’t released it yet. What are you really writing about?...It’s important that you understand that the core issue for this conference is serious and needs to be taken seriously to even begin to understand it. Without that groundwork, casual comments become just that. So I ask you again, what are you really writing about?

...I have always insisted that intellectual positions be respected and be understood. That’s the core of disinterested academic research. So I am a bit baffled how you can expect to do anything with integrity on this if you haven’t looked seriously at both sides and heard in a measured way from people who are prepared both to lay out the argument and to field questions from you...I am suggesting to you that there is huge evidence to keep the authorship issue in the public eye. Refusing to allow debate and/or ridiculing some of the serious ideas out there without really understanding them ... has to be deemed suspect in an open society. Do you actually know what the authorship issue is? What its fundamental question is? That’s the discussion I would like us to have....With all due respect, if you just want journalistic grist for your own brand of faith then there’s really not very much need for us to speak. And certainly, if your goal is to attack or ridicule without serious rejoinder, I really want nothing to do with it....I hope you will give me an opportunity to share real authorship [information] and real conference information.If you want to write about the conference, you should come to the conference and listen to some of the papers. We have speakers coming from Germany and the UK and all over the US and more than a dozen people from across Canada.

As for your apparent belief in what “unimpeachable” authority has taught you, I would only caution you to remember that the church taught for 1500 years that the sun moved around the earth. They ridiculed and burned people as heretics for believing otherwise. Five hundred years after, the church had to apologize, had to admit it was wrong. I urge you not to hang back with the apes, with official teaching just because it is official teaching.... Be an independent thinker and make up your own mind when you have heard both sides equally presented.

I wrote that e-mail at 11:43 p.m. Nestruck wrote back to me forty minutes later saying he would meet. He added “I think this Oxfordian conference (note, he keeps referring to it as that rather than an authorship conference) being held in Toronto is interesting news, so obviously I’d prefer to write about it before rather than after.”

Again, I wondered what he really wanted to write about. I had been told by people at my own university that he had already been snooping around (that’s the only way to describe it; he certainly never asked me directly) for information, asking my chair and my dean if they supported such goings on and what it was costing. Both said that they supported academic freedom and the research of a senior faculty member. He was asking the same kinds of questions to University of Guelph people trying to challenge my Oxfordian colleague there, playwright Sky Gilbert. He had even apparently contacted Roger Stritmatter, which certainly shows how naïve Nestruck was. You don’t tangle casually with Stritmatter.

When I finally met with Nestruck six days before the start of the conference, I released all the financial details and speaker’s schedule (including abstracts of each talk) to him. I tried to summarize for him my talk to the Toronto critics of two months earlier. He said he had read up on the issues already and didn’t need to hear it all. In lieu of extended background, I just gave him a copy of my notes for that talk as well as a copy of Diana Price’s unimpeachable charts.

After he left, though, somehow I sensed that I was still going to be in trouble. I held my breath. The article did not appear the next day, nor the next or the next. Instead of the weekend paper, Nestruck held it until the opening day of the conference. It was timed for maximum damage. The story itself was not as terrible as the headline and even the headline was not as bad as the story’s placement: page one. It was being promoted with a huge banner headline on the front page of Canada’s national newspaper. I couldn’t believe it but there it was. In colour no less. All I could hope was that any publicity really was ultimately good publicity. And it turned out to be that. Ultimately.

Page one, top left, featured a large drawing of the Stratford man followed by a huge headline saying “Much Ado About Nothing.” Then came a long subhead slamming us all: “Two Canadian universities are wasting their time and money — and most of all risking their reputations — supporting a conference questioning

Shakespeare's authorship of his plays." It pointed readers to the full article in the Life and Arts section. And the *entire* first page of that section turned out to an even larger representation of the page one drawing, repeating the headline "Much Ado About Nothing" and not so delicately stating "The question of Shakespeare's 'true identity' is a non-issue...so why are two Canadian universities spending time and money debating it?"

When one finally got to the "full story" — again covering almost an entire page — there was yet another photo of Mr. Stratford and the headline "Is he or isn't he: That is the question" with yet another subhead proclaiming: "Canadian university support for Oxfordian conference fires up debate about Shakespeare's identity and institutions' role in free inquiry." At last something positive.

The article began by asking if Edward de Vere could have been the author of Shakespeare's plays and poetry and then followed with Nestruck's own response: "The short answer is: No, there's no evidence whatsoever....[and] academics in English and Theatre departments around the world have taught their students exactly that — even as the so-called Oxfordian theory has been persistently pursued by a mix of cranks and celebrities and even made into a Hollywood movie." Obviously I had not made a dent in his thinking, the clear sign of an ill-trained journalist.

Young Nestruck then went on to attack York and Guelph Universities for putting their names and resources behind the conference, noting that the students attending will hear papers on such topics as de Vere's "purported bisexuality, the question of whether he had two different handwritings, and, in the words of one abstract, the campaign to legitimize the authorship issue by April 23rd 2016."

Nestruck did quote Roger Stritmatter as saying it was important for two universities to support free inquiry into this area. That statement is, however, immediately shot down with Nestruck's view that such free inquiry is "an embarrassment." As support, he quotes a very junior professor from York's English Department as saying, in not-so-good English, "insofar as we are lending credence to a theory that is very dubious — and dubious at best and often not founded on rigorous scholarship — I find it troubling." Another young scholar is quoted as saying more directly "I think it's a real blow to the scholarly credibility of the university." So much for collegiality. But never mind.

Nestruck then goes on to name me — in fact, it is probably Lynne Kositsky, but that is another topic — as the prime culprit for "Edward de Vere's breakthrough into Canadian academia. Pointing out that I was teaching a fourth-year course on the authorship question, he sets me up for the grand fall by saying that, though I have made "several notable contributions to the study of Canadian theatre," Shakespeare...is not his area of expertise."

Finally admitting his own ignorance, Nestruck continued, "Now I'm not an Early Modern scholar," but "the arguments [Rubin] presented to me are the discredited ones that have circulated for decades." He ends his diatribe by noting that

For many years, academics kept a hands-off approach to the Oxfordian argument or other authorship conspiracy theories. But in recent years, certain professors have begun to engage in public debate of the subject as the Internet has spread the Oxfordian thesis wider than ever.

At the same time, in obscure outposts of academe, the ‘authorship question’ has made inroads. Concordia University in Portland, Ore, has a Shakespeare Authorship Research Centre, while Brunel University in London has offered an MA in Shakespeare Authorship Studies. Guelph and York are comparatively big fish.

In his final kick at the can (that is, at me), Nestruck quotes me as saying that ultimately I believe that “apologies will come from those who are hanging back with the apes, those who feel it’s okay to ridicule, those who feel it’s okay to say this is heresy.” To which he adds unnecessarily and exceedingly personally: “I wouldn’t hold your breath, Don.”

Well, as you might imagine, the *Globe* piece (which I copied and made available for everyone at the conference to read) attracted huge attention among the attendees. Many of them wrote letters to the editor over the coming days and weeks and numerous letters appeared, in severely edited form, in the paper. A week is a long run in the newspaper world for a topic to hang on in the letters section and it hung on for a week and longer.

Here is one revealing excerpt:

“I’m prompted to write because of J. Kelly Nestruck’s condescending column today.... sadly, some academics and pundits have such vitriol for those who dare question ‘conventional wisdom’” (Virginia Hart Nelson, Toronto).

The *Globe’s* letters column on Saturday ran excerpts from nine more letters, six of them supporting Nestruck’s position: “So some professors at York...and Guelph feel supporting a conference on Edward de Vere’s authorship of Shakespeare’s plays won’t harm their school’s reputations. I wonder how their colleagues in the geography department would view a request to support a conference exploring the flat-earth theory?”

An English professor from the University of Toronto linked the conference to fake moon landings, CIA plots and UFOs while someone else suggested that Shakespeare’s wife wrote the plays. Another suggested that it was all about class: “Even geniuses can come from poverty.” One positive letter came from a librarian at the University of Winnipeg who said that Nestruck was using “the timeworn but increasingly futile rhetorical trick of dismissing those who doubt...for not being ‘Shakespeare scholars’ while at the same time insinuating that no such scholar would even consider the subject worthy of study in the first place. It is this very prejudice,” he went on, “that has kept...English, theatre and history students and faculty from pursuing, what has been, for more than 150 years, a research problem of great historical interest — it is the subject of hundreds of books — and one that

is yielding ever more convincing results....York and Guelph universities should be congratulated for joining the ranks of academic institutions around the world which are finally throwing off the atrophying shackles of the taboo Mr. Nestruck seeks to reinforce....”

A gentleman in Calgary wrote a second positive letter asking why Nestruck presented no evidence to support the authorship of what this man called rather picturesquely “the country clodhopper.”

My own response — I proposed it as a 500 word guest-column but that was turned down by the *Globe* — appeared on Monday as a heavily edited letter to the editor. About 200 or so of my original 500 words were included. What appeared was the following:

I was disappointed by what I consider a poorly argued attack on York University, the University of Guelph, 100 visiting scholars, and on me for asking the question: could the name “Shakespeare” have been a pseudonym? Our question: could a businessman from rural Stratford who had trouble writing his own name (his parents and children were functionally illiterate) have the vocabulary or knowledge of languages, law and medicine to write the plays? Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, is another candidate with ties to theatre, and who travelled to Italy, where a third of the plays are set, a country the man from Stratford never visited.

The guts of my letter were predictably left out but at least the edited version ended as I wrote it with: a challenge for Nestruck to deal with this issue by debating me publicly.

Additional letters came in subsequently on both sides. The most important was from Bonner Cutting’s husband, Jack, from Texas. He was not at the conference but had read the letters and the *Globe* piece at home. He wrote that Nestruck’s article was an example of “argument from eminence, rather than argument from evidence — a fallacy of logical thinking that is often resorted to by those in positions of power. And make no mistake about it, big media, like academia, is powerful....[E]ven in the face of the fierce embargo that academia has placed on the authorship subject...increasing numbers of people are taking the time to study the historical information and they have the personal courage to speak out on this issue....”

For the record, Kelly Nestruck never had the courtesy or the guts to respond to that challenge though he did say some days later that I had challenged him to a duel (Tweet, 21 October). I’m not sure where that came from.

It was around this time that a local Guelph newspaper decided to also take up the issue and began asking Guelph professors what they thought, English professors of course. One of them said categorically that “the authorship debate has already been settled” and that Guelph’s decision “to support this conference could end up hurting its academic reputation.” He added that he hoped the students attending were approaching it as “a lesson in critical thinking.”

That same article quoted Prof. Daniel Fischlin, a respected traditional

Shakespeare scholar at Guelph, as saying that he was concerned that students attending the conference were only being given “the Oxfordian’s extremely dubious, unsubstantiated by any serious scholarship, and incorrect, points of view.” He added curiously, “But if students get good information and can learn from being exposed to how academic red herrings like this get produced and disseminated...then I’m okay with it.”

And on and on it went. Literally. Throughout the conference, Nestruck had tweeted about papers being presented despite the fact he wasn’t in attendance for any of them. The students in attendance, however, were fast on the twitter uptake and they responded to him throughout. By my count (thanks to a student who sent me the thread) there were over sixty tweets.

Responding to one, a student at the conference wrote: “Come on Kelly. If there is absolutely no doubt that [Stratford] wrote [the plays] then please debate it. You will lose.” The same student later wrote: “Bad journalism. You are flat out lying to your readers.”

That notorious twitterer Roger Stritmatter chimed in with his own tweet to Nestruck: “I’d be happy to debate you also. You’re pretty uninformed, to be polite about it. In another he says, “your article completely lacks ‘honest, fact-based reasoning.’ What a wonderful double standard.” Roger later told the students: “Get used to this sort of evasion....It’s how they play the game. Obfuscate, insult, obfuscate, repeat.”

All somewhat amusing at this distance in time. Not so amusing at that moment. My own first instincts were, of course, anger and disappointment. As time passed, I had opportunities to pursue it in person with Nestruck (one odd opportunity in a men’s room a few weeks later when we found ourselves during an intermission awkwardly standing beside one another) but almost everyone around me suggested that the important points had been made and that I let it go for the moment. Contrary to all my instincts for battle, I agreed to stand back a bit and try to figure out what it all meant. That “time out” is what has led to this paper, this hopefully somewhat measured response to my own experiences pushing the authorship rock up that mountain, pleased with some progress, then frustrated and irritated watching it roll back over me (and us), wanting to make war but knowing that taking on the media directly in this battle— even with a media flyweight like Nestruck — would almost always be a losing proposition. After all, the media has the last word. Or does it?

My deeper question in this instance is how to get all this taken more seriously by both the media and the academic world. We all need to understand what this experience tells us about future moves to not just “turn” the media and the academic world to neutral but to actually “turn on” and excite them about a serious and important area of inquiry. These are crucial questions to answer if we are to move our case forward.

The fact is we did bring the case to the wider public, to the attention of the press and the academic community. We did get terrific space in the media and two universities did sponsor the conference. We have to keep doing that, keep after the

universities to be our partners, keep asking media to look at what we in a serious light. These are, to some extent, public relations questions. So I believe we need to create and have working for us constantly an active public relations team whose job is to position the authorship question as one that the media should see as relating to what I keep calling the greatest literary mystery in history, the theatre's most intriguing mystery. To get the media interested in that. How can they not be interested in that? It baffles me.

Within the academic community, we need to continue to fight for the right to research in this area and to position it as freedom of academic inquiry. We need to get the academic world to lose its reticence to look at new evidence in this issue. Questions about the biography have to be answered by the Stratfordians. The key questions have to be posed again and again within universities. By experts and by our own PR people. One way may be to get the core questions down to two or three — our own catechism — that the other side must answer *with evidence* and not simply with bluster.

What are those key questions? Stanley Wells once told me that he hadn't read Mark Anderson's biography of de Vere because he believed totally that William of Stratford had written the plays. He said that until someone convinces him — with real evidence — that Stratford did not write the plays he would not consider going any further. I suggest we start there.

The evidence against Stratford is mounting. It's the place to start the final push up the mountain. Our problem, of course, is that in trying to do that we are trying to prove a negative: that William of Stratford did *not* write the plays. I am not sure how to turn that into a positive. But turn it we must for all those ignorant and naïve media (like my young friend at the *Globe*) and for our more backward-looking and bull-headed academic colleagues who still don't believe there is an authorship issue.

It's time to act. I believe the issue is ours if we do.