

Reconstructing Contexts

Reviewed by Wally Hurst

Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism by Robert D. Hume.
Clarendon Press/Oxford University Press, 1999, 193 pages.

Robert D. Hume, a distinguished author, historian, and professor of English Literature at Penn State University has written a book that should prove vitally important to the Shakespeare Authorship Question. As doubters of the man from Stratford, we must face the fact that the mainstream English Department/Shakespearean establishment will hardly ever agree with our conclusions and will even defend the Stratford candidate with such frenzy they will ignore evidence, logic, reason, and civility in doing so. This book, a veritable scholarly battle plan, will help us topple those defenses sooner.

For serious researchers, those who question the authorship of the Shakespeare works, and those who aspire to learn all they can about the basic principles of historical research in a brand new context – it is virtually indispensable. I believe Oxfordians will be able to win the support of scholars outside the closed-minded ranks of the Shakespeare establishment if we approach the question of authorship using the methods described in this book.

Hume begins his explanation with a definition and history of the concept of historicism, old and new, and then proceeds to the objects of archaeo-historicism. In the process of assembling both texts and contexts, the task “comprises both the reconstruction of context and the interpretation of texts within the context thus assembled.”(26) Hume then points to two specific aims of the method.

The first object is truth. What is also important, however, is:

the necessity of documentation and verifiability. If we are reconstructing a context, we must supply the best hard evidence we can find. And we must footnote with sufficient exactitude that a successor can review what we have done, confident that the same evidence is in play. The successor may confirm our conclusion, or dispute on logical or interpretive grounds, or add new

evidence, or challenge the inclusion of old evidence – but the question is very simply whether the evidence supports the conclusion (28).

The evidence sometimes fails to support anything more than an unsure and speculative conclusion. If the scholar is not committed to the discovery “of what is both true and documentable, “then why bother? (29)

“A fact is not much use unless it answers a question” (33). Much like the recent ballyhooed discovery that Shakspere of Stratford was labelled as a “player,” it is important to remember that facts must serve the historical context – and not the other way around. There really is no question that the Stratford man was attached to a company of players – but to stretch that into a revelation that he must also have been a playwright is to engage in dangerous nonsense, according to Professor Hume.

Hume stresses the importance of applying context to the text, but he notes that “context does not determine meaning” (36). Rather, he determines that there are questions to be asked in order to bring text and context together. Some of his questions (below) would, if answered from a historical perspective, be incredibly useful to the Shakespeare Authorship Question.

- Why did the author write what he or she wrote?
- What audience(s) did the author address?
- What are the interpretive implications of the work’s allusions and implied intellectual context?
- What reactions did the work generate around the time of its original publication or performance?
- How would various members of the original audience (as best we can reconstruct it) have understood the work or reacted to it?
- What do we learn from parallels to and differences from related works at about the same time? (37)

At this early point in the book, Professor Hume relates an exchange between his students and himself when they asked him what did Shakespeare’s audience think of *King Lear*? He explains – superficially – that certainly the audience would have found the division of the kingdom dangerous and ill-advised.

Wally Hurst *is the Director of the Norris Theatre at Louisburg College, where he has instructed courses in Drama, Acting, Public Speaking, Political Science and Business Law. Wally is responsible for the programming and utilization of the intimate Norris Theatre, which hosts student productions, classes, and professional and community productions. He holds a Doctorate in Law (J.D.) and he received his MA in Shakespeare Authorship Studies in 2012 from Brunel University in London. Wally lectures internationally on Shakespeare and the authorship question, and specializes in the evaluation of the evidence surrounding the Shakespeare authorship controversy.*

It is important to note that he begins the paragraph by saying that “(e)vidence is often sparse or non-existent.” In the case of *Lear*, perhaps the context of the author having three daughters might have added to the evidence available for a significant and revolutionary marriage of text and context.

One of his most significant points comes when he addresses the rule of validation:

Archeo-Historicism is based on the premise that any conclusion (contextual or interpretive) is subject to factual and logical challenge. (41)

Hume again refers to Shakespeare – and the authorship question, by stating that if we are to say that Shakespeare’s plays were written by someone else (he uses Sir Francis Bacon in this instance), “then we must be prepared to show that the statement is borne out by such evidence as can currently be found” (41).

Like so many authors concerned with history and evidence, Hume snuggles up closely to the Shakespeare Authorship Question – but does not quite get to the issue which really needs his attention. This important passage begs to be addressed to each defender of the Man from Stratford:

Statements about genesis, context, and reception must be backed up by hard documentation, or they are worthless . . . ‘Seek and ye shall find’ is not one of the happier truths of this business: critics and scholars alike will somehow manage to turn up evidence to ‘support their case’ . . . When the ‘guiding principle is a will to believe’, the concept of verification goes out the window. And if the results are not submitted to a serious process of challenge and validation, they are no more than fairy stories to amuse us. (41-42.)

Researchers can certainly rely on such evidence as is obtainable , but it

must be fully and accurately represented. Hypotheses may be floated with no more than tentative proof, but they are always subject to factual and logical challenge, and they will be modified and replaced as additional evidence and further analysis dictate. Truth must always be the aim, but in practice the extent and nature of evidence force us to acknowledge a spectrum from ‘strong truth’ to ‘weak truth’ to unresolvable doubt (43).

Hume also gives us, perhaps, a hint as to what he may think of the authorship question. He states that “(s)erious scholarship and criticism change our understanding of the subject. Or they try to” (47). In the next section, however, he seems to contradict himself – at least in terms of Early Modern scholarship.

If there is no difficulty in understanding something, then there is no need to proffer a solution. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. I have read many intelli-

gent, erudite, elegantly written books and articles in which I could discover no substantial point: the author did not really appear to be trying to change our understanding of the subject. What was said may well be true, but does it matter? A scholar needs to start by explaining the current state of understanding, and then tell us what is wrong or inadequate about it. What evidence is left out of the account? What is misinterpreted? How can we improve our understanding? (47)

Getting back on track, Professor Hume examines what type of attitude a researcher should bring with regard to prior research and authority. Should we be deferential to tradition? Absolutely not, Hume says. Respect and courtesy are one thing; blind obedience is dangerous and lazy:

If we accept our predecessors' conclusions, what can we change? If we do not ask new questions, then we confine ourselves to crumbs and bickering. I would argue that we need to read prior scholarship in a highly critical and skeptical spirit, granting it provisional acceptance only when it seems to stand up under rigorous challenge. Assuming that something is right because it is famous or standard – or because backtracking and checking up on it would be a great nuisance—is bad methodology. (48)

Moreover, what about the idea strongly held in the orthodoxy that only those who have made a career of Shakespeare – or any other field of study, for that matter – are the only ones who should be allowed to have theories? Hume argues that it is in fact more difficult for these experts to think outside the box.

A thorough grounding in primary and secondary materials cannot be dispensed with, but a corollary result is almost inevitably entrapment in the outlook of one's predecessors. Thus Hume's Paradox: the better trained the historian, the more difficult original thought becomes. Once one has acquired a mindset, changing it becomes very hard indeed. (49)

Because of the demonstrated difficulty of the academy to this “entrapment,” perhaps this is the best argument for involving historians more closely in the authorship debate. Historians will examine the evidence with a “rigorously sceptical attitude toward the facts, questions, logic, and conclusions of even the most respected predecessor.” (49)

Hume mentions Shakespeare over three dozen times and touches on subjects very dear to the hearts of SAQ researchers and scholars. He echoes the distress of so many who see a new Shakespeare biography every year:

How many scholars have dug with fanatic enthusiasm to discover any tiny fragment about Shakespeare? With how much result? What we do not know

about Shakespeare is enough to have generated many books of irresponsible speculation written to fill the vacuum. We can turn to the plays (on the risky supposition that he wrote them all by himself), but what would lead us to imagine that Shakespeare's plays are a faithful mirror of the psyche and opinions of their creator? . . . Scholars are accustomed to concentrate on what they have; good historical practice requires us to be blunt in admitting what we lack (118).

This method is time-consuming and difficult, he acknowledges. There are pitfalls along the way, and one may even have to give up the inquiry, concluding with "a terse summation of circumstances and principles":

- The archaeo-historicist often has to work from very scanty evidence;
- Where the evidence is non-existent or manifestly insufficient, the best thing to do is admit defeat and retreat to other territory;
- Gaps in evidence must be acknowledged, not just worked round;
- The trustworthiness of evidence must always be assessed skeptically; and
- The conclusions drawn from evidence need to be plausible in common sense ways.

Juries are not always right, but there are good reasons for insisting that they be unanimous, or close to unanimous. Archaeo-Historicism is not, God knows, a mathematical discipline, but if you want to draw a conclusion sharply different from one reached by predecessors, you need to ask what justifies the different result. What evidence were they lacking? Where did they go wrong? What prejudice distorted their judgment? How is their analysis faulty? If the difference in conclusions derives from speculation from very limited evidence, then this needs to be explicitly admitted. In all too many instances, the evidence simply does not exist, or you cannot trust what you have got – in which case no good will come of trying to force your way to a conclusion (128-29).

Reconstructing Contexts is not just the theory of archaeo-historicism. Hume uses many examples of his own research and that of others to illustrate the good points and the fallacies of different research methods and practices. He identifies five elements of a scholarly investigation:

1. The investigator
2. The subject to be investigated
3. A method by which the subject will be approached
4. Questions that serve to focus inquiry and analysis
5. Hypotheses developed and tested as answers to the questions (153)

Theory must remain outside the actual investigation itself, and “(n)o legitimate method of inquiry can be allowed to contain the answers to its own questions” (153).

Hume warns specifically that specialization may rightly lead an investigator to predetermine what kinds of subjects he or she will examine – but that it can also lead to opposition to only one “system of explanation.” He rightly points out that “if you commit to a system of explanation you become a fanatic and cease to be an enquirer.” (161). These words, like so many in this book, need to be acknowledged and adhered to by scholars on all sides of the authorship issue.

Reconstructing Contexts is a manual for preferred methods of research in the context of history. It also – in many places – deconstructs many of the principles of the Shakespeare establishment, in spite of the author’s probable adherence to orthodoxy on the issue.

If only the alleged Shakespearean scholars would practice what Professor Hume preaches, we would all be more engaged and energized – not to mention enlightened. This book is a revelation and a guidebook for all serious scholars, especially those involved in the Shakespeare Authorship Question.



