

# Six Shakespeares in Search of an Author

Reviewed by Michael Dudley

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My Shakespeare: The Authorship Controversy: Experts Examine the Arguments for Bacon, Neville, Oxford, Marlowe, Mary Sidney, Shakspeare, and Shakespeare. *Edited by William D. Leahy. Brighton, UK, Edward Everett Root, 2017. (hardback \$79.95 US, Kindle \$15.99)*

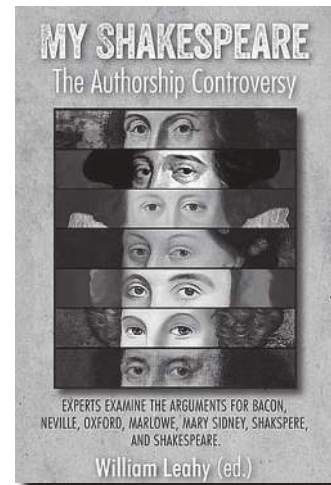
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A common objection levelled against authorship doubters is that the number of candidates claimed for the authorship of the Shakespeare canon makes it highly unlikely any of them could have been the true author. In *My Shakespeare* readers are given the opportunity to decide the matter for themselves by considering five alternative candidates, as well as traditional and novel interpretations of William from Stratford.

This approach has several significant precedents, including *Shakespeare and His Rivals* by George McMichael and Edgar M. Glenn, and *The Shakespeare Claimants* by H.N. Gibson (both published in 1962), as well as *The Shakespeare Controversy* by Warren Hope and Kim Holston (1992/2009). Allowing partisans for each candidate to make their case rather than having it presented and assessed by a singular authorial voice sets *My Shakespeare* apart from these predecessors.

In his introduction, editor William Leahy (who also edited 2010's *Shakespeare and His Authors*) states that each of the candidates in the book are "presented as equal" (ix) in the spirit of determining not that "we are right, but to find out if we are" (xi). Accordingly, open-minded readers will find much of interest here, even if one concedes that certain evidence, assumptions or conventions may have been long ago rejected by Oxfordian researchers.

In the first chapter, Alan Nelson sets the stage by arguing for the Shakespeare of tradition. Author of the modern biography of the Earl of Oxford titled, *Monstrous Adversary* (2003), Nelson presents familiar traditional arguments, taking name spellings and title pages at face value and conflating contemporary



references to Shakespeare with the businessman from Stratford-on-Avon. As is often the case, he includes as evidence the scene in *The Return from Parnassus* in which the characters of Burbage and Kempe refer to Shakespeare as their “fellowe,” despite it being apparent that, in also referring to the “writer Metamorphoses,” they shouldn’t be accepted as reliable witnesses.

Next, independent scholar Diana Price (author of the groundbreaking *Shakespeare’s Unorthodox Biography* [2001]) presents what she openly calls her “Conjectural Narrative,” building on her theory that, while not a writer, Shakespeare did have an active role in the printing and production of the Shakespeare texts in his role as a play-broker. She ably demonstrates the curious distance between the texts and their author—whomever that was—and suggests the intervention of a third party, whom she conjectures was Shakespeare. While she does not present positive evidence for this play-broker role *per se*, she cites claims for “Hand D”—thoroughly debunked by Price elsewhere (2016)—as well as the “two texts” scenario for *King Lear* as dubious and vulnerable to being disproved. While fascinating, it should be pointed out that her chapter is an outlier in this collection as it does not actually make a claim for an authorial candidate.

Starting off the claims for alternative Shakespeares is Alexander Waugh, who previously co-edited with Mark Anderson the book, *Contested Year: Errors, Omissions and Unsupported Statements in James Shapiro’s “The Year of Lear: Shakespeare in 1606.”* His chapter—much like Anderson’s *Shakespeare by Another Name* (2005)—is a Shakespearean reading of Edward de Vere’s life, referring extensively to textual, contemporary or scholarly evidence supporting the theory that the 17th Earl of Oxford was Shakespeare. His eloquent and richly-documented chapter (Waugh cites 137 sources to Nelson’s seven) demonstrates how seamlessly Oxford’s life corresponds to the character, chronology, content and contexts of the Shakespeare canon, and plausibly explains why he wrote in secret: that he was a leading figure in what Thomas Nashe described as the government’s “secret policy of plays,” for which he was paid £1000 for the last eighteen years of his life.

In Chapter 4, the case for Christopher Marlowe is laid out by Ros Barber, author of the acclaimed and award-winning novel *The Marlowe Papers* (2012). She begins by arguing compellingly that Marlowe’s supposed murder in 1593 was a dubiously-executed cover-up related to his work as an intelligence agent, which she says gave him the motive, means and opportunity to fake his own death and take up writing under another name. The timing alone—*Venus and Adonis* appearing less than two weeks following Marlowe’s alleged

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death—is noteworthy. So too is the fact that Marlowe has a corpus of extant plays to which the works of Shakespeare may be compared—the latter offering a great deal of resonance with Marlowe’s writing style, as many scholars have also noted. Her case is bolstered by the editors of *The New Oxford Shakespeare* recently naming him as co-author of all three of the *Henry VI* plays (see the review in *The Oxfordian* 19). More conjectural are her efforts to demonstrate that contemporaries conflated the two authors, that the *Sonnets* should be read as a narrative of exile and that themes of banishment in the plays reflect Marlowe’s supposed post-“death” biography.

Henry Neville is proposed as Shakespeare by independent scholars John Casson and David Ewald, as well as University of Wales professor William D. Rubinstein, co-author of the Nevillian *The Truth Will Out: Unmasking the Real Shakespeare* [2006]). In their view, Neville’s lifespan (1562-1615), being so similar to that of William of Stratford’s, makes him an ideal candidate, as do Neville’s foreign travels, imprisonment with Southampton, legal experience as both a Justice of the Peace and a Member of Parliament, and the numerous extant annotations in his hand on themes found in the canon. Regrettably, it also relies on Stratfordian dating conventions and shibboleths (e.g., Southampton was Shakespeare’s patron), and too often consists of a literary game in which Neville is shown to be somehow related to figures associated with the Shakespeare works, at a sometimes dizzying number of removes.

The superlative literary pedigree of Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke, makes her a strong candidate, according to Robin Williams, co-founder of the International Shakespeare Centre. Aristocrat, accomplished, highly educated and for twenty years the patroness of the influential Wilton Circle (which included Edmund Spenser and Michael Drayton), Mary Sidney saw to the posthumous publication of the writings of her brother Philip, which many critics believe influenced Shakespeare. Alongside Shakespeare and Oxford, she was also named by Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* as among the greatest writers of the age, an extraordinary recognition for a woman in that era. Of particular significance is that the First Folio was dedicated to Sidney’s sons Philip and William, Earls of Montgomery and Pembroke, and possibly orchestrated by them—in Williams’ scenario on behalf of their mother. Disappointingly, Williams only tells the reader about Mary Sidney’s writing but does not provide any examples to demonstrate to what degree her style matches Shakespeare’s.

The classic alternative candidate Francis Bacon is left for last, his claim supported by Barry Clarke, summarizing his doctoral work at Brunel University (supported by the Francis Bacon Society). Rather than repeating the familiar

overall claims for Bacon's authorship that were so popular in the 19th Century, Clarke takes a more limited and empirical focus on Bacon's contributions to only three plays, based on phrase searches in the Early English Books Online (EEBO) database. Lending support to a long-standing Baconian theory, he concludes that *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labour's Lost* contain phrases that bear close similarities to those found in the *Gesta Grayorum*, the account of performances at Gray's Inn during the Christmas revels of 1594-5, and which, while anonymous, is supposed to have been written by Bacon. Similarly, he believes that *The Tempest* recalls passages in pamphlets relating to the Strachey report of the 1609 Virginia Company shipwreck which, again, he claims Bacon had a hand in writing because he was a leading member of the Company. In other words, his case for Bacon rests for the most part on comparisons with texts which *may or may not be composed by his candidate*—in essence, authorship claims supported speciously by other authorship claims.

Finally, Leahy argues for an “amalgamated” Shakespeare comprising many contemporary authors working with or on behalf of the play-broker Shakespeare (his spelling), reasoning that the author is “largely unknown,” “contingent,” and “ungraspable” (209-210). He relies with confidence on the stylistic analysis behind *The New Oxford Shakespeare* in declaring the works of Shakespeare to be a group effort, when more skepticism was probably called for (see TOX review by Dudley, Goldstein & Maycock, 2017). His conclusion that the debate “is irrelevant” because the “author [as an individual] does not exist” (210) is an unfortunate one, not only because he fallaciously conflates biographical fictionality with ontological negation, but that, in the process, he undercuts the contributors to this volume, who have been arguing precisely the opposite. Ultimately, the rhetorical space between such a sentiment and the popular refrain “what does it matter who wrote the plays?” is, for all practical purposes, negligible.

The individual contributions to *My Shakespeare* offer a fine introduction to the debates involving the authorship, yet the Oxfordian reader will recognize much of the evidence on offer as untenable: for example, Clarke, Williams and Casson *et al.* each accept without question that the Strachey account was a source for *The Tempest*, when this has been repeatedly debunked, most recently and definitively by Stritmatter and Kositsky (2013). Claims of other authors' influence on Shakespeare resulting from orthodox dating are similarly dubious and ignore the dozens of “too early” contemporary allusions documented by Katherine Chiljan (2011).

The main problem with the book is that Leahy should have done much more in his role as editor than simply provide the venue. No historiographic context of any kind is offered for the candidates, leaving the uninitiated reader to wonder how, why and when they came to the attention of researchers

and how these theories have since been received. Part of what makes the case for Edward de Vere so compelling is knowing the carefully-conceived methods by which J.T. Looney discovered him; there is no such information to be had here.

Instead, Leahy devotes much more attention to his own twelve-year involvement with the controversy (as he puts it, his “interventions”), as if this was somehow significant to the debate itself, referring to this personal frame of reference no fewer than three times, when an overall introduction to the topic and its background was needed. His chapter is similarly replete with references to “my ideas” “my thoughts” and “my arguments,” as well as his own articles and participation in a 2011 authorship debate, to make observations that are, frankly, common currency among authorship doubters. The result is less *My Shakespeare* and more “Me and Shakespeare.”

While the contributors to *My Shakespeare* are to be commended for their willingness to participate in good faith on such a controversial project, ultimately their efforts—and the reader—would have been better served had their editor directed more attention to the historiography of the debate and less to his role within it.

## *Works Cited*

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