

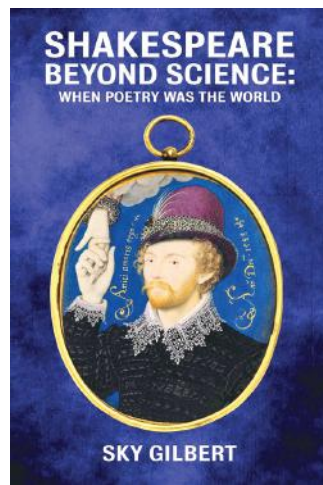
Shakespeare the Post-Structuralist?

Reviewed by Warren Hope

Shakespeare Beyond Science: When Poetry Was the World. By Sky Gilbert. Guernica Editions, 2020, 200 pages (paperback \$17.95)

“We all know art is not truth, it is a lie which makes us realize a truth.”
—Pablo Picasso

Sky Gilbert’s *Shakespeare Beyond Science* is a lively, energetic, and entertaining performance designed to persuade academics to take a different approach to Shakespeare. His starting point seems to be Marshall McLuhan’s doctoral dissertation, “The Classical Trivium,” in which McLuhan apparently argues that the tennis court quarrel between the Earl of Oxford and Sir Philip Sidney primarily reflects a literary antagonism. Oxford is seen as standing for the older Grammarians, students of rhetoric who emphasized the imaginative self-sufficiency of language, while Sidney is pictured as standing for followers of the French philosopher Petrus Ramus, who saw language as reflecting the physical world and thus limited rhetoric in a way that led to the scientific method and a wish for accurate rather than poetic language. More, McLuhan apparently argues that this conflict erupted again in the 1590s through the pamphlet war conducted by Thomas Nashe and Gabriel Harvey, with Nashe aligned with Oxford and Harvey aligned with Sidney. Gilbert argues that this conflict was eventually won by the Ramusians and their allies who opposed the theater, leading to a decline in Shakespeare’s popularity and acceptance.



One result of this approach is that Gilbert does not treat the Shakespeare authorship question in the usual way. He does not make a case for Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as Shakespeare so much as show that Oxford is more likely to be Shakespeare than the man from Stratford is because of his attitude toward language and his world view—an outlook that was already becoming old-fashioned in his own time. In part this position is related by Gilbert to Bardolatry—the worship of Shakespeare as a kind of godling who is very much like everybody else, a conventional figure who is unlike any other great writer in the annals of the human race. Gilbert argues that a highly educated nobleman with Feudal leanings who was charged with committing sodomy by his political enemies and ended in disgrace is much more likely to be Shakespeare than the Stratfordian hounder of debtors and hoarder of grain. For Gilbert, Shakespeare’s identity is secondary to what Shakespeare thought and wrote—but the misidentification of the author can keep us from seeing what he thought and wrote.

Gilbert gives a good deal of weight to Gabriel Harvey’s address to the Earl of Oxford, emphasizing that while Harvey praises Oxford’s poetry he calls on him to throw aside the pen and devote himself to something useful—like war. Gilbert urges that this emphasis on the “useful” is of a piece with the rise in Ramusian thought—the idea that education should be practical and pragmatic, rather than artistic or poetic. As a novelist, poet, and playwright as well as a scholar and professor, Gilbert uses this opportunity to glance aside at the insistence on the vocational aspect of higher education in our own time. No doubt in part this insistence supports the notion in the academy that Shakespearean studies are themselves impractical and irrelevant. The implicit argument is that Shakespearean studies are in need of a new justification and a new approach. Gilbert’s emphasis on rhetoric, on style, is meant to point the way to that new approach.

Johannes Sturm, the educator Oxford visited in Germany in 1575, prepared Greek and Latin editions of the treatises of Hermogenes of Tarsus, a student of oratory who was praised and honored by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Gilbert argues that the work of Hermogenes was for Shakespeare a “godsend.” He even describes Hermogenes as Shakespeare’s “teacher.” One treatise by Hermogenes describes seven types of style, and Gilbert is able to use these to produce a new and thoughtful explication of Hamlet’s famous

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“To be or not to be” speech. While it is certainly possible that the speech could have been written without the author’s knowledge of Hermogenes’ treatise, familiarity with that treatise by a critic certainly sheds new light on the speech. This passage of Gilbert’s text constitutes one example of how he would like to see Shakespearean studies evolve.

Similarly, Gilbert devotes a good deal of space to a discussion of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* because of the play’s concentration on language. While he makes relatively little of the possibility that Gabriel Harvey, Thomas Nashe, and Sir Philip Sidney provide models for characters in the play, he makes much of Shakespeare’s attitude toward language—arguing that the poet at once praises language yet remains skeptical of it. This argument culminates in the view that Shakespeare recognizes poetry as a kind of lying while also recognizing that it is our only way of getting at truth. Gilbert argues that this view deepens over the years so that the praise to some extent subsides and the skepticism becomes more pronounced in *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. If Gilbert’s essay is too brief to provide a thorough discussion of this interesting take on Shakespeare’s plays, it does provide a basis for further study and criticism. Once again, Gilbert’s text provides an example of and a basis for a new approach to Shakespearean studies.

It might be thought that for a short book Gilbert has already covered a great deal of ground, but he goes further by suggesting that we are again at a point of a shifting paradigm. If the rise of the scientific method and the desire for an accurate use of language culminated in the Enlightenment, Einstein’s theory of relativity and modern semiotics serve to undermine those dominant characteristics of the Enlightenment. Gilbert suggests that the post-structuralists, mostly French thinkers who follow Saussure—Roland Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault—have once again freed language from its dependence on “reality” by arguing that language is arbitrary, that is, that there is no rational or necessary relationship between the word and the object, the signifier and the signified. Similarly, if the scientific method is dependent on the study of nature, the real, physical world, by the use of the senses, the validity of that method is diminished if Einstein is right and perceptions vary from perceiver to perceiver. In other words, the certainty that was the basis for the world view of the Enlightenment has been undermined to such an extent in the twentieth century that Shakespeare’s view of language takes on a new relevance. Wordplay, puns, the use of antitheses, doubtful or multiple meanings, imaginings and fantasies, poetry itself can be seen as the sources of fictions—lies—that provide us with the only sense of truth we can know.

Gilbert’s essay can cover so much ground in a short space and in a lively way because it is a rhetorical performance rather than a logical, rational argument. In this way, he makes his form and content one. The enthusiasm and passion

of the author leads the reader to wish to accept the author's assertions and positions. In the end, truth is in a way based on faith rather than on demonstrable facts. Still, it is hard not to wish for a few more qualifications or considerations of history. The essay relies heavily on the Oxfordian theory but never mentions J. Thomas Looney. The essay details the transformation from the early Renaissance in England to the Enlightenment but never mentions the Civil War, the beheading of Charles I, or the Protectorate under Cromwell. The tennis court quarrel between Oxford and Sidney could certainly have reflected a literary antagonism, but it could also have been a matter of precedence, politics, and religion. Gabriel Harvey certainly was associated with Sidney, but is it fair to make Thomas Nashe an antagonist of Sidney when he wrote the Preface to the first (posthumous and pirated) edition of Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, and is described by a recent British scholar, Georgia Brown, as the first Elizabethan critic to recognize the significance of Sidney's work?

Sky Gilbert does an excellent job of throwing academic students of Shakespeare a lifeline, but he does so in a way that relies so heavily on the history of rhetoric and style that it could be strengthened by other academics with other interests. It will be interesting to see if they will grab this lifeline or continue to perform their boring rituals sacred to the cult of Stratford on Avon. In any case, Sky Gilbert's essay should send all lovers of Shakespeare back to the texts with freshly peeled eyes.