

Authorship Controversies Over the Millennia

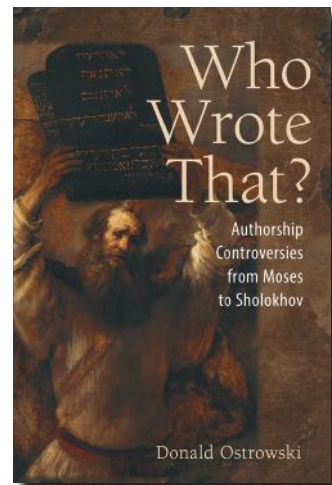
Reviewed by Ramon Jiménez

Who Wrote That? Authorship Controversies from Moses to Sholokhov.
By Donald Ostrowski. Cornell University Press, 2020, 288 pages,
(hardcover \$115, paperback \$24.95 and Kindle \$9.59).

In *Who Wrote That?*, Harvard historian Donald Ostrowski devotes only a single chapter to the Shakespeare authorship question, but this intriguing examination of nine authorship controversies spanning nearly two millennia is bound to introduce the subject to a much wider audience, and to increase its legitimacy as a topic of discussion. The result is a rigorous and fascinating investigation of alleged authors from Moses and Confucius to Abelard and Heloise, Shakespeare and an obscure Bolshevik journalist, among others.

Along the way, Ostrowski discusses the multitude of factors and circumstances, as many as twenty, that come into play in the process of author attribution. These include:

handwriting analysis, computer-assisted stylometrics, profiling of the author, historical context, affects of dating, watermarks and paper, accuracy of detail, development of the author's style, linguistic features, confirmation bias, collaboration and group authorship, gender prejudice, "silo scholarship," the alphabet the author used, supportive documents, forgery, qualifications of the investigator, loss of original manuscripts, author motivation, revision or addition by others.



Most of these we have already encountered in the one hundred years since J. Thomas Looney revealed the true author of the Shakespeare canon in *"Shakespeare" Identified in Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*.

Throughout *Who Wrote That?*, Ostrowski also considers various principles of authorship attribution, such as the claim that the alleged author could not have produced specific details in his work unless he had personally observed them. He supplies a vivid example from his own experience that such claims are not always valid.

The clichés and empty phrases in many authorship arguments are another target of Ostrowski's censure, such as the phrase "defies common sense," which is nothing more than a subjective opinion. Another misleading phrase is "the simplest solution." More often than not, "the simplest solution" is a "logical fallacy known as *ad ignorantiam*—a specific assertion must be true because we don't know that it isn't true." An example of the fallacy of *ad ignorantiam* is the conclusion that "UFOs must be spaceships with extra-terrestrials in them because these unidentified flying objects have not been identified as anything else."

Allotting an entire chapter to each authorship question, Ostrowski includes numerous citations of the various scholars participating in each dispute, and gives a fair hearing to every alleged author, with a detailed account of the arguments for and against each one. Only two authors were alive to defend their work, the rest being long dead when questions arose about them and, in the case of Moses, the questions were not only about his authorship of the Pentateuch, but about his name, and his actual existence. Doubts about his sole authorship of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and of the Christian Old Testament first appeared in the sixth century AD. According to Ostrowski, "By the late nineteenth century, the scholarly consensus began to turn against Moses being the author of any part of it." At about the same time, some scholars began to question whether Moses was a historical person at all, or simply a mythical figure of Hebrew folklore.

His name is a puzzle because it has meanings in both the Hebrew and Egyptian languages that relate to the story in Exodus of the Pharaoh's daughter who plucked him from the Nile. "She named him Moses 'because I drew him

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out [Hebrew: *mashab*] of the water' (Ex. 2:10)." But the name also means "child" in ancient Egyptian, so the writer of *Exodus* may simply have constructed the tale to give the name a Hebrew meaning.

Questions also arose about the alphabet Moses used. The Pentateuch has come to us in Hebrew, but the earliest evidence of Hebrew lettering dates only to the tenth century BC. It would not have reached the Israelites until after they had arrived in Canaan, by which time Moses had died. He may have written his text earlier, in Egyptian demotic, a script that he certainly knew, that may later have been translated into Hebrew, but, as Ostrowski points out, "thus far no one has found any evidence in the text of Egyptian linguistic influence."

Besides the questions relating to the person Moses, there remain serious doubts about his single authorship of the Pentateuch. Several features of the text militate against the theory—duplication of parts of the narrative, internal contradictions, chronological anachronisms, diverse literary styles, and shifts and interruptions in the narrative. "This observation led to the supposition that a large part of the Pentateuch was made up of two equal narratives that had been stitched together—the J (Yahwist) and the E (Elohist) narratives. But J and E did not account for all of the Pentateuch, so a P (Priestly) narrative and a D (Deuteronomy) narrative were also supposed." Some skeptics also doubt the entire story of Moses and the exodus because neither he nor the Jewish exodus from Egypt are specifically cited in ancient Egyptian writings.

This catalogue of doubts and questions has led to the rejection of Mosaic authorship, a conclusion that is now "the standard view in the scholarship." Even so, as late as 1987, conservative historian Paul Johnson wrote that such skepticism has been "carried to the point of fanaticism," a charge all too familiar to Oxfordians.

The authenticity of the so-called *Analects* of Confucius is another controversy that continues to this day. "The oldest copies (albeit incomplete) of the *Analects* are two handwritten versions made on bamboo strips dated to the half century before Christ." These copies and the next-oldest copy were discovered only in the late twentieth century. Modern scholars are in general agreement that a group of random sayings attached in one way or another to Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BC, became a stand-alone text in its own right in the period of the Han dynasty (202 BC–9 AD). The claim that the *Analects* was a record of the actual sayings of Confucius recorded by his disciples was first advanced about the time of Christ, and was not challenged until approximately 800 AD. Proponents and opponents have argued the claim ever since, and as recently as 2017 it was again challenged. Doubters argue that none, or only some, of the *Analects* date from the time of Confucius, and that they are an "accretion text," that is, compiled by various writers at different times during the several hundred years after his death.

Ostrowski concludes that “Although it is possible that the sayings of Confucius were at least in part written down or passed on orally by his disciples and/or disciples of his disciples, we do not have direct evidence to make that assertion with any degree of certainty.”

The ill-fated love story of Heloise and Abelard, which played out over two decades in the early 1100s, was relatively unknown until it appeared in the lengthy poem *Roman de la Rose*, started by Guillaume de Lorris and finished by Jean de Meun in late thirteenth-century France. In his section, de Meun devoted just 72 lines to the story and, at the same time, announced that he had found and translated from Latin into French fifteen letters that the pair had exchanged more than a century earlier. Following the publication of the letters in several European languages in the seventeenth century, the couple came to be revered as the apotheosis of tragic lovers. Villon, Rousseau and Pope all recounted or referred to their story in their works. By the nineteenth century, their gravesite at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris had become a popular tourist attraction. (Mark Twain visited the site in the 1860s, and mentioned them in *The Innocents Abroad*.) But by that time, scholars had begun to question the authenticity of the letters that de Meun claimed he had translated. It transpired that no original manuscripts of the letters existed, only copies prepared more than one hundred years later. Although the prevailing opinion today is that they are genuine, assertions continued to be made as recently as 1988 that they had all been written by Abelard or by various third persons, including Jean de Meun himself.

The authorship controversy involving the eighteenth-century Scottish poet James Macpherson was unusual, if not unique, in that he was alive to defend himself and the positions of the customary disputants were reversed. In the early 1760s, Macpherson published three volumes of poetry that he claimed were his translations of old Gaelic verse by the legendary Scottish bard Ossian. Almost immediately his claims were questioned, and in the ensuing debate skeptics maintained that he had written the poetry himself, while he insisted that he was *not* the author. The works became internationally popular and attracted widespread attention, including that of such well-known figures as Samuel Johnson, David Hume and Horace Walpole, all of whom expressed doubts about Macpherson's claims. Critics found evidence in Macpherson's poetry of the influence of literary works published in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that would not have been available to an early Scottish bard. In addition, Irish scholars accused Macpherson of plagiarism when they noticed similarities between genuine Irish Gaelic works and his Ossian cycle. Macpherson never produced any manuscripts, and within a few decades scholarly opinion turned decidedly against him. Nevertheless, his claims have been defended well into the twenty-first century, and some critics accorded him a measure of literary distinction for producing in his own right

a body of genuine Gaelic poetry. He was buried in the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

The question of the alleged Secret Gospel of Mark has puzzled Biblical scholars since 1973, when an American scholar of Hebrew published an eighteenth-century transcript of a letter written by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215) that he found in a Greek Orthodox monastery near Jerusalem. The transcript, which he photographed, but which has since disappeared, contained fragments of the text of the Greek gospel of Mark that are “different from the canonical Gospel we have.” This ongoing dispute, which is about the authenticity of both the transcript and the letter, involves handwriting analysis, charges of forgery and linguistic anachronisms.

Three of the more obscure authorship disputes in *Who Wrote That?* involve manuscripts as diverse as “the first world history”; the letters allegedly exchanged between Tsar Ivan IV, “the Terrible,” and Prince Andrei Kurbskii; and a lengthy novel about Russia’s Don River region that earned its alleged writer a Nobel Prize in 1965. In each of these cases, Ostrowski supplies us with a thorough historical background that ranges from the thirteenth century Mongol empire of Chinggis Khan to the Soviet Union of the 1930s, when the country was controlled by Joseph Stalin.

All of these controversies—and apparently there are many more—have stimulated vigorous scholarly debates about the evidence, the methods for evaluating it, and the conclusions reached. In every one of them, Ostrowski points out the faulty methodology, circular reasoning and examples of begging the question that litter the arguments on either side. These are especially frequent in the controversy about the Shakespeare canon. In none of them is the issue treated with the disdain and ridicule that permeates the Shakespeare authorship question.

Scholarly articles and letters continue to appear in the leading journals in the relevant fields of study, even in the oldest disputes, but with one exception—the Shakespeare authorship question.

“Shakespeare—An Extensive and Impressive Superstructure of Conjecture”

Oxfordian scholars will take heart in the more than thirty pages that Ostrowski devotes to the Shakespeare authorship question. To begin, he proposes a “thought experiment,” in which we try to identify the author of an anonymous “body of literary work comprising forty plays, several narrative poems, and a collection of sonnets. We do not know who wrote them, but there are two candidates.” He then lists, in less than 500 words, some three

dozen facts about the two candidates under consideration. The facts detail, on the one hand, the multiple connections between a highly educated, playwriting nobleman (Candidate 1) and the works in question. On the other hand, the facts about Candidate 2, a commoner from a provincial village, reveal the total absence of connections between him and any type of writing. Ostrowski then states: “If you are an established scholar in the field of English literature, the probability is you would attribute the body of works to Candidate 2, the provincial of questionable literacy. In contrast, those who question the traditional attribution to Candidate 2 tend to be actors, writers, Supreme Court justices, and amateur scholars. The holding of Candidate 2 as the author seems to be a matter of faith among the adherents, a faith that is based on a similarity in names and reinforced by the academic establishment that has constructed an extensive and impressive superstructure of conjecture.”

A single entry in a catalog of important people, Michael H. Hart’s *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, was the trigger for Ostrowski’s interest in the Shakespeare authorship question. It was Hart’s declaration, in his second edition, that he had changed his mind about the author of the Shakespeare canon that caused Ostrowski to “stop following the crowd on this matter and look at the evidence myself.” The result is a searching investigation of each aspect of the question, in which Ostrowski outlines in impartial language the Stratfordian and Oxfordian positions and the evidence for each. An example is his conclusion about contemporary references to the author of the canon, and to William of Stratford: “All the contemporary testimony we have about Shakespeare as a writer is impersonal—that is, based solely on his plays and poetry. All the contemporary evidence we have about William of Stratford that is personal never mentions him as a poet or playwright.”

Here are his remarks on the important issue of a paper trail: “A paper trail is highly relevant especially for this period in European history.” He calls its absence in the case of Shakespeare “not just extremely odd but even bizarre.” “This absence of contemporary evidence is a correct use of the *argumentum ex silentio*,” another tool in attribution studies. Citing Richard Roe’s research, Ostrowski catalogues in half a page the multiple and convincing details in the Shakespeare plays of places, social customs and contemporary topography in Italy that have proved to be accurate. “The simplest coherent explanation that fits the evidence in regard to the Italian plays is that the author had spent some time in Italy.”

Ostrowski also addresses the issue of autobiographical evidence in the plays and poems, first asserted by Looney, who identified eighteen general and special characteristics of the author. After quoting several scholars, such as

James Shapiro, Helen Vendler, and Marjorie Garber, who dismiss the idea that any such evidence can be gleaned from the Shakespeare canon, and other academics who find it to be essential to understanding it, Ostrowski makes the following statement: “If one cannot use the life of an author as a means to understand their work, then we are eliminating one of the most important scholarly tools at our disposal—namely, historical analysis.” He adds that, “Such profiling on the basis of the written texts is a methodologically legitimate way to proceed....” His message is clear. Any authorship question is a historical question and requires a historical method to answer it.

Dating the plays is an especially thorny issue in that no firm composition date for any Shakespeare play is known with certainty, so any particular proposed dating scheme might automatically exclude an authorial candidate. This is the case with the orthodox dating scheme, proposed by E.K. Chambers in 1930, which starts in 1589 or so and extends to 1613, thus eliminating Oxford as the author.

On this issue, Ostrowski takes the Oxfordian position: “The problem with the traditional chronology is that the dating of particular plays has been done so specifically to fit the life span of William of Stratford. This dating argument, thus, is circular.” He prefers a method using the dating parameters for each play—earliest possible date and latest possible date—such as those in Kevin Gilvary’s *Dating Shakespeare’s Plays* (2009), which he reviewed in *Brief Chronicles* in 2011.

Ostrowski is well-versed on the question of Shakespearean authorship, citing Oxfordian scholars’ research on a range of issues, including the hyphenated name “Shake-speare,” the actual meaning of “sweet swan of Avon,” the annotations in Oxford’s Geneva Bible, the use of the Strachey letter to date *The Tempest*, the breadth of reading displayed by the canon’s author, the absence of Shakespeare sources after 1604, and the identification of people and events in Oxford’s life with those in, for instance, *Hamlet* and *All’s Well That Ends Well*.

In the case of *Hamlet*, Ostrowski lists the differences that Alan Nelson sees between the play’s plot and characters, and the events and people in Oxford’s life, but adds the warning: “Fiction does not have to coincide exactly with the autobiographical reality it seeks to portray.” He then points to the ludicrous attempts by orthodox scholars to connect the name “Hamlet” to residents of Stratford, when the name obviously derives from the play’s source. As for *All’s Well That Ends Well*, to claim that there is no connection between the play and Edward de Vere’s life “would require resorting to extraordinary coincidences as an explanation.”

The presence or absence of Shakespeare's name on play quartos, and their place as part of the accepted canon, is another subject that Ostrowski addresses. Some plays in the First Folio are apparently only included with weak evidence, being relegated by orthodox scholars to collaborations with others. In his table of First Folio plays, it seems that Ostrowski accepts the claims of Brian Vickers, Gary Taylor and others that plays such as *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Timon of Athens* and *Measure for Measure* were partially written by Thomas Middleton, and that the three *Henry VI* plays were collaborations with Christopher Marlowe and an anonymous third playwright. Moreover, in his list of Shakespeare apocrypha he omits *The Taming of a Shrew*, *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third*, *King Leir* and *Thomas of Woodstock*—all of which have been assigned to Shakespeare by revisionist scholars during the last twenty-five years.

Under the heading "Stylometrics," Ostrowski points out a methodological flaw in one study that is almost always present in stylometric analyses by orthodox scholars:

From 1987 to 1990, professors Ward Y. Elliott and Robert J. Valenza conducted a study at Claremont McKenna College in which they looked at fifty-eight "full and partial Shakespeare claimants," as listed by *The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare*. They submitted the verses of the Shakespearean corpus and the writings of thirty-seven of the claimants to stylometric analysis. Their explanation for not analyzing the verses of all fifty-eight is that "[t]he remaining twenty-one claimants have left no known poems or plays to test." They concluded that no similarity exists between the poetry of Shakespeare and that of his contemporaries, so none of them, including Edward de Vere, could have been the author of Shakespeare's corpus. Somewhat significantly, neither they nor the *Encyclopedia* included William of Stratford among the claimants. If they had, he would have been listed as claimant number 59, and he would have fallen into the category of claimants who "have left no known poems or plays to test." Thus, he would have failed the test to being included. By not including William of Stratford as one of their claimants, but then concluding he was the author, they are committing the fallacy of the circular proof (or assuming the conclusion).

The same types of flaws occur in comparisons by orthodox scholars of the punctuation and spelling in Oxford's letters with those in the plays. In the former case, the investigators failed to take into account the changing nature of English punctuation during the Elizabethan period. As regards Alan Nelson's finding that Oxford's spelling was different from that in the

plays, Ostrowski makes the point that Nelson did not “take his analysis to the logical next step, which is to compare the spelling in the plays attributed to Shakespeare with the spelling in the letters of other Elizabethan writers.” Nor did he compare it to the spelling in the letters of William of Stratford, for the obvious reason that not a single letter by William exists.

In short, Ostrowski’s chapter on Shakespeare is all but a legal brief for the Oxfordian argument in that it raises question after question about the methods and conclusions of orthodox Shakespeare scholars, and supplies fact after fact that support Oxford’s authorship of the Shakespeare canon. As an epigraph to his chapter on Shakespeare, Ostrowski quotes from an interview with James Shapiro, one of the least charming Stratfordians. This professor of English at Columbia University said that he would fail any student who raised the question of who wrote Shakespeare. Beyond his even-handed analysis of the controversy, Ostrowski’s wide-ranging book might well motivate some influential scholars, editors or publishers to ask the same question.

