

*From the Editor:*

## *Judging the Shakespeare Authorship Debate*

The one book examining the Shakespeare authorship controversy which has reached a wide audience in the Anglosphere countries of Australia, Great Britain and the United States is Elizabeth Winkler's spring release—*Shakespeare Was a Woman and Other Heresies*. In its first week of release on Amazon.com—which lists 32 million books—Winkler's book ranked #578 in sales. In Australia and Great Britain, it reached rankings of 15,000 and 7,000 at the same time. Reviews by Professors Jonathan Bate and Emma Smith of Oxford University eviscerated the author and book, which led to a vigorous defense by Shakespearean actors Sir Derek Jacobi and Sir Mark Rylance in *The Daily Telegraph*.

In my view, *Shakespeare Was a Woman* is a delightful dive into the contentious topic of who wrote Shakespeare, a controversy that has roiled the academic waters for almost 200 years. Winkler does the impossible job of presenting the top arguments for the leading candidates—from Sir Francis Bacon and Mary Sidney to Christopher Marlowe and the Earl of Oxford—but lets readers decide which case is most compelling.

She also mines the academic response to this “paradigm shift” in the humanities, which has generated insults, quarantines and much black comedy. Finally, Winkler educates us about the dangers of intellectual taboos and untruths which, left untreated, easily spread like viruses through a society, making it impossible to sort out lies from the truth. The book is a delight to read since Winkler is a gifted writer who offers readers an insightful take on a literary whodunit that is also an intellectual scandal. Her publisher will widen the circle of readers by bringing out a trade paperback edition next April.

Is the Oxfordian case of authorship compelling enough to convince scholars, theater professionals or the general public that Edward de Vere wrote the Shakespeare canon under a pseudonym? Part of the answer depends on the type of evidence offered in its support. Is it based on direct or circumstantial evidence? Clearly, the Oxfordian hypothesis is based on the latter, though that evidence has been discounted by most academics in the Humanities, who otherwise make definitive judgements on a variety of subjects on the basis of inconclusive evidence.

While direct evidence is generally more compelling than factual circumstantial evidence, the key factor in an inductive case is the number of coincidences or correlations which can be brought to bear on the question. If the sum total of relevant circumstantial evidence is substantial, it becomes persuasive to the scholarly mind. This takes place even in the world of jurisprudence, where criminal convictions are often obtained at court trials based on nothing but circumstantial evidence.

An equally important question is whether the Oxfordian case is coherent. The truth of any theory is partially based on the degree to which it is logically coherent, and no academic in the past 100 years has refuted the Oxfordian hypothesis—even when employing disinformation regarding the historical evidence and issuing *ad hominem* attacks on individual researchers. The latter includes questioning the intellectual integrity of Oxfordian scholars as well as vilifying their political beliefs, such as slandering J. Thomas Looney as a feudal reactionary and Oxfordians in general as conspiracy mongers, Holocaust deniers and right-wing ideologues. However, vilification is not refutation, regardless of the intensity of the vitriol.

In scientific terms, then, can scholars in the Humanities who engage in the authorship debate weigh the available inductive evidence for Oxford to make “an inference to the best explanation?” To my mind the answer is “yes,” but an overwhelming number of professors refuse to engage in the debate, placing the subject in an intellectual quarantine, where it continues to languish.

Some of the most prominent intellectuals and practitioners of interpreting Shakespeare to the public believe so. Two former Justices of the US Supreme Court—John Paul Stevens and Antonin Scalia—told the *Wall Street Journal* in 2009 they think the Earl of Oxford wrote Shakespeare. British Shakespearean actors Michael York and Sir Derek Jacobi think so. The father of psychiatry, Sigmund Freud, thought so, as did the novelist John Galsworthy.

Some elements of the academic community have already incorporated Oxfordian scholarship into the university—the librarians and bibliographers. For example, the World Shakespeare Bibliography, the Modern Language Association Bibliography, the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, and Gale Academic One File all index the contents of *The Oxfordian*.

Equally significant are the efforts of university librarians, hundreds of whom shelve the leading books of Oxfordian research, from “*Shakespeare*” *Identified in Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford*, to *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, to *Alias Shakespeare*, to “*Shakespeare*” *by Another Name* to *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*.

On the other hand, the other two pillars of academic education—the conference and the classroom—remain closed to Oxfordian scholars, and it is here where our mission must focus, for if the authorship remains outside the academy, then general acceptance will never be achieved.

— Gary B. Goldstein

