

The Shakespeare Authorship Question and Philosophy

Knowledge, Rhetoric, Identity

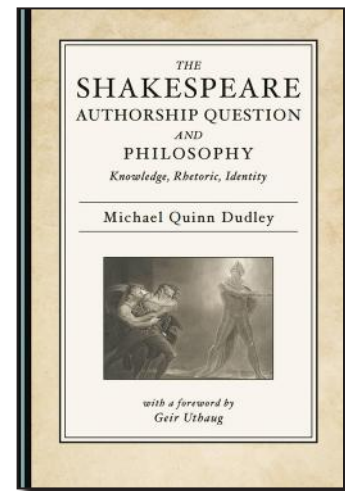
Reviewed by Phoebe Nir

The Shakespeare Authorship Question and Philosophy. By Michael Dudley. Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2023, 334 pages (hardcover \$124).

If you needed further convincing that Stratfordians are intellectually dishonest, Michael Dudley has provided an elegant inventory of their failures in *The Shakespeare Authorship Question and Philosophy: Knowledge, Rhetoric, Identity*, published by the increasingly Oxfordianism-curious Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Puzzled by the religious fervor of the orthodox Shakespeareans, and their mandarins' seeming imperviousness to rational arguments, Dudley has undertaken a philosophical investigation of bardolatry, journeying through such varied thinkers as Hegel, Foucault, Barthes, and Chomsky to arrive at an overarching epistemological framework for understanding why belief in William Shakspeare of Stratford has proven so durable.

Towards this end, Dudley offers a wealth of analytical tools and rubrics to pinpoint precisely where the machine starts to break down. Each chapter is built around a different *analysand* through which we might logically evaluate the authorship debate. Examples include "Stratfordian Epistemology and the Ethics of Belief," "Theories of Truth and the Authorship Debate," and "By Nature Fram'd to Wear a Crown? The Ideological Basis of Shakespeare's 'Natural Genius.'"



Dudley's book is heady but peppered with witty asides, and explications of the Contextomy fallacy or totalitarian rhetoric are helpfully interspersed with thought experiments involving *Star Trek* and beautiful literary quotes. My favorite comes from Jennifer Michael Hecht's *Doubt: A History*—"The grace of Shakespeare is that there is always another side to things; there is always doubt."

In one of the most impactful chapters, Dudley analyzes 50 personal essays from the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship's "How I Became An Oxfordian" series, mapping the phenomenology of the Stratfordian-to-Oxfordian paradigm shift. Dudley models his research approach for this chapter after the work of his mother, Dr. Nancy Dudley, for her 1987 doctoral dissertation on Kuhnian paradigm shifts after intense religious experiences, and in my opinion, this generational collaboration yields the book its richest insight—that escaping the Platonic "cave" of Stratfordian orthodoxy for the "real world" of Oxfordianism in many ways parallels a life-changing encounter with the divine.

Dudley credibly posits that undergoing the Oxfordian paradigm shift can increase an individual's capacity for empathy, just as a numinous experience might. For evidence, he points to Charlton Ogburn Jr.'s moving recitation of Macbeth's "tomorrow and tomorrow" monologue in PBS's 1989 *Frontline* documentary. Ogburn is brought nearly to weeping as he contemplates Edward de Vere's despair. Dudley notes that "this pattern contrasts dramatically with the Stratfordian tendency for self-projection... in which biographers so often choose to see themselves in the author; Oxfordians—while still possessed by awe and admiration of his greatness as an artist—are nonetheless capable of connecting emotionally with Shakespeare *as a fellow human being*, rather than imposing themselves onto the author in an attempt to—somehow—inject him with some measure of humanity, which has never really worked" (219).

Dudley sets up his book by recalling a young woman who couldn't understand how *anybody* could believe in the myth of Stratford. The fact is, of course, that decades later, the vast majority of people still "believe" in the Bard of Avon, and our sense-making institutions by and large still consider Oxfordianism to be a conspiracy theory. Dudley sets out to explain how this can be the case through philosophy, and he succeeds on his own terms.

Phoebe Nir, a 2010 Presidential Scholar of the Arts in Writing, holds a BA in Theater from Brown University and a Masters in Drama Therapy from New York University. She makes educational videos about the Shakespeare Authorship Question on YouTube and TikTok as @phoebe_devere, and has begun shooting a documentary film about how Oxfordianism is covered in the media.

However, the truth is that the young woman's question might be better addressed through study of evolutionary biology or political science; consulting the writings of Richard Dawkins or Nicolo Machiavelli might have yielded more satisfying, if more cynical, results than consulting those of Aristotle and Kant. Dudley's epistemological explanations are fascinating, but I could not help to think that the lion's share of our current dilemma comes from the simple fact that people are taught about the Stratford myth from a young age, and our scholarly caste would rather persist in sunk cost fallacies than admit that they have been spouting misinformation for their entire careers.

Chapter One invokes Upton Sinclair's famous quote, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it," which struck me as more to the point than Chapter Two's assertion that Edward de Vere is too obvious a fit for "Shake-speare" to be a satisfying authorship candidate for scholars. Dudley writes at length about Hegel's concept of *aufheben*, which holds that having tension between two concepts allows one to perform a type of "sorcery" or "alchemy" in creating an entirely new Second Reality in which the disparate notions can be held together.

"There is, then, a dialectical relationship between the Author and the individual William Shakspere. It might be said that, metaphorically speaking, Stratfordians have been engaging in the alchemical process of turning the 'base metal' that is Shakspere into the 'gold' of Shakespeare" (52).

Dudley's point is interesting, but to me is undercut by the Stratfordians' incessant invocation of their much-vaunted *prima facie* case, which holds that we should determine "Shake-speare's" identity exclusively on the basis of existing documentary evidence, with no imagination or funny business.

Dudley draws his argument out even further, suggesting that orthodox Shakespeareans are involved in "a form of initiation, in which enduring the arduousness of navigating the 'blind alleyways that promise illumination but do not deliver' is not an impediment to understanding, but a Hermetic-like ritual necessary to gain knowledge of their 'God'" (57). Frankly, I think this gives priggish and literal-minded Stratfordians too much credit by a half; in my own experience, discovering the existence of the close-knit and semi-clandestine Oxfordian community bears a much greater resemblance to a Hermetic-like initiation, not to mention Alexander Waugh's extensive research on Edward de Vere's relationship to that very subject.

Dudley has done beautiful work in mapping out how to build a truth-conducive academic framework. In my opinion, his system may offer less long-term utility in understanding the Stratfordians than it will in ensuring that the Oxfordian academic community avoids falling into the epistemic

potholes that he has so lovingly plotted. Oxfordianism sadly has a long institutional history of schisms and excommunications; the Prince Tudor Theory remains as hotly contested today as it was in the 1940s, and now, as then, there are many who would rather quell its discussion than risk bad optics. The Oxfordian community is likewise struggling to maintain collegiality around such controversial subjects as Oxford's sexuality, and Robert Prechter's proposal that Oxford may have published under numerous pseudonyms besides "William Shakespeare."

Dudley's work makes one thing crystal clear: it is impossible to produce high-quality research in an academic community that has corrupted its standards. Perhaps it would behoove Oxfordian scholars to regularly review Dudley's metrics in order to ensure that our own practices remain truth-conducive and epistemically sound. The sad reality is that the Stratfordian catastrophe is not so unusual; hostility and closed-mindedness are the most common human responses to confrontation with the unknown, and the pursuit of objective truth is by comparison exceedingly rare. While the orthodox continue to dominate prestigious institutions, their grotesquerie can serve us as a model of what not to do.