

An Abyss of Alternatives: The Psychodynamics of the Shakespeare Authorship Question

by Heward Wilkinson

§ 1. Awakening the existence of a problem

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.

Gerard Manley Hopkins' heart-rending lines recurred to me as I contemplated how to begin this paper on a subject long close to my heart – the Shakespeare authorship question and its significance. They came to me because, unless someone has at least dipped their toe into this issue, it is almost impossible for it to come alive or even come into consideration at all. There is something about this question, in its relation to our need for certainty, which results in its almost automatic dismissal for anyone for whom it has not become an issue. (That is, we automatically assume anyone who questions the Stratfordian view of the authorship is, for example, a crank.)

So, until I get past this first hurdle, I will not be able to open up the vast implications for poetry and for belief which open up once it *has* come to life. 'Hold them cheap May who ne'er hung there.' Of course, I can hardly do more than dip my own toe in it here!

This automatic dismissal has also been a normal experience for anyone who *does* discover the possibilities of alternatives. For we did not begin as anti-Stratfordians! (And, yes, I know this is sounding something like a typical account of a conversion experience! But, that too is not entirely irrelevant! patience!) For myself, I know that I dismissed the whole question, and did not take seriously the other candidates for the authorship (I only knew of Bacon and Marlowe as possible candidates at that time) until I was in my forties about sixteen years ago.

At this point I must show my hand initially: I now mainly believe, with Sigmund Freud, John Gielgud, and many others, that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, is the primary author of the plays. I say, mainly believe, because it fluctuates, for reasons I shall come to, and which are relevant to this paper, and it fluctuates whenever I am in the act of exploring it! Like Oscar Wilde arguing for Willy Hughes as the fair youth of the sonnets in *The Portrait of Mr WH*, the moment one has articulated ones conviction to oneself, one is no longer quite so convinced! (There are psychoanalytic understandings of these equivocations in belief-certainty, but let us not forget that psychoanalysis is also a belief!) The writing of this paper is itself a microcosm of the dynamic process of enquiry into this whole question. It is not my purpose directly to argue this case for Edward de Vere's authorship here, though I would find it hard not to insinuate anything in its favour at all (- but that, psychodynamically, is simply countertransference data! to be explored not concluded upon!) but rather to consider the implications of their being an authorship question at all. But to do that I must at least establish a prima facie plausibility of there being a problem, so that we can see what happens when our initial belief is shaken in this way.

I stumbled on Charlton Ogburn's 'The Mystery of William Shakespeare' (Ogburn, 1988) in a bookstore in Wakefield in 1989, and began idly, sceptically, dismissively, to read the blurb. I read the following:

Could Shakespeare have been the man from Stratford who died in 1616, years after writing his last play, leaving no books, and exciting no tributes from his fellow writers? A man who could barely write his own name, but had twice the vocabulary of Milton; a man who was never referred to as a writer and seems never to have acted; whose preoccupations were purely financial and who spent most of his uneventful life in a provincial backwater: could this man be Ben Jonson's 'soul of the age'? Dickens, Bismarck, Disraeli, Mark Twain, Charles Chaplin, Walt Whitman, Henry James and Enoch Powell all say no. Sigmund Freud wrote, 'The man of Stratford seems to have nothing at all to justify his claims, whereas Oxford has almost everything.'

An excitement stirred in me and I began to dip into the book. Partisan as Ogburn undoubtedly is, his passion for his vision began to impact me. I began to recall that, even during the QuatroCentenary year of 1964, when I was about to go up to Cambridge to study English, I had written a meditation on Shakespeare in which I invoked him as the great mystery of whom we know nothing, and who therefore has a kind of sacred uncanniness in that, unlike for all other authors, our relation to him opens into the sheer mystery of being, transcendent of ordinary criteria, - in rather the way, I argued then, that Christ does. So I already, then, unprejudiced as it were, without doubting the Stratfordian attribution, assumed we know next to nothing, and sought to rationalise it. For, could that assumption of sheer mystery, with its contingent background in our sheer ignorance, really be sustainable? Was that perhaps a myth with which I had consoled and rationalised myself?

Now I was beginning to encounter, in Ogburn's pages, a man who, instead, had the kind of demonic relation to the works which Byron has to his works, Beethoven to his, and Richard Wagner to his. Operating on the provisional assumption of Edward de Vere's authorship, I began to encounter a man who was, so to say, both very bad and very great, 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know', - as I say, rather as Byron, Wagner, and Beethoven exemplify - a man who, for instance, like Falstaff and Antony and Timon of Athens, was a squanderer on the grand scale; a man who was like Byron an alcoholic, but an alcoholic of genius (a not unknown combination!); a man the dilemmas of whose life would have taken him to the brink of the insanity he understood so well; a man who operated a gross and extreme double standard regarding sexual fidelity, and conduct, yet who also again and again condemned himself in the plays for his intolerable and barbarous treatment of, especially, the woman who was his first wife, Anne Cecil, Lord Burghley's daughter, Burghley, Elizabeth 1st's chief minister, who is, nevertheless, savagely burlesqued (and then killed!) as Polonius in *Hamlet*, in an age wherein authors who transgressed in that kind of way had their hands cut off; Anne, who stood towards him, therefore, in the the same relation that Ophelia stood to Hamlet, for, except that Edward de Vere did marry his Ophelia, he nevertheless treats her with the same kind of semi-irrational savagery with which Hamlet treats Ophelia; a man who was, like Marlowe, but on a much bigger scale, most probably a spy, and possibly a murderer (c.f., Hess, 2002), certainly, like Mercutio and Tybalt, a gang-quarreler; and so on.

In short I was meeting a man who fully, both in his greatness and in his weakness and barbarousness, and in his capacity even nowadays to evoke venom and hostility in such men as the historian A L Rowse, fully lived up to Walt Whitman's amazing description (*November Boughs*, quoted in Ogburn, 1988, p207):

WE all know how much *mythus* there is in the Shakspeare question as it stands to-day. Beneath a few foundations of proved facts are certainly engulf'd far more dim and elusive ones, of deepest importance—tantalizing and half suspected—suggesting explanations

that one dare not put in plain statement. But coming at once to the point, the English historical plays are to me not only the most eminent as dramatic performances (my maturest judgment confirming the impressions of my early years, that the distinctiveness and glory of the Poet reside not in his vaunted dramas of the passions, but those founded on the contests of English dynasties, and the French wars,) but form, as we get it all, the chief in a complexity of puzzles. Conceiv'd out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism—personifying in unparallel'd ways the mediæval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, with its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation)—only one of the “wolfish earls” so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born descendant and knower, might seem to be the true author of those amazing works—works in some respects greater than anything else in recorded literature. (Whitman)

§ 2. The plays forged in the centrality of power questions and conflicts

Now it is the mutation of perspective I experience that I want to write about, together with further mutations which I think open up if one allows this Protean transformation of perspective to sweep over one. The initial cardinal thing to recognise, as Whitman intimates, is that in play after play after play Shakespeare portrays the seismic impact of the passion for power. Of this Enoch Powell, former British Cabinet Minister, commented:

At that time I had been a member of the cabinet and I'd been in politics for twenty years and I had some idea of what it's like in the kitchen. And my astonishment was to discover that these were the best works of somebody who'd been in the kitchen. They're written by someone who has lived the life, who has been part of a life of politics and power, who knows what people feel when they are near to the center of power, near to the heat of the kitchen. It's not something which can be transferred, it's not something on which an author, just an author, can be briefed: "Oh, this is how it happened"; it comes straight out of experience--straight out of personal observation--straight out of personal feeling, that's the difference which comes over you when you read Shakespeare detached from the Stratfordian fantasy. (Frontline: the Shakespeare Mystery, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shakespeare/tapes/shakespearescript.html>)

We get a sense of the difference in question when we compare D H Lawrence's fascinating but flawed novel, *Kangaroo*, in which he envisages, with great vividness, as a kind of thought experiment, a Fascist revolution in Australia, with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or Conrad's *Nostramo*. Lawrence, though he knew senior people close to the centres of power both in Britain and elsewhere, and had almost certainly met people involved in a potential Fascist revolution in Australia (c.f., Maddox, 1996), and although he there grasps, as few dare to, the nettle of the reality of the extreme pleasure men (and sometimes women) get from the act of killing, did not have the stark immediacy of relevant experience that both Dostoevsky and Conrad (and even Orwell, who fought and was wounded in the Spanish Civil War) had, and it shows in a certain vagueness and rhapsodic quality in his portrayal of the political leaders in the book. Stephen Crane, author of the American Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage* is often cited as a counter-instance to the thesis that that one cannot write about what one does not know. Crane certainly sought an intensity of experience which prepared him to write *The Red Badge of Courage*, but that quality of search remains in the writing, very high quality though it is. But we nevertheless must recognise that there may be many ways in which one gains visceral knowledge of certain realities, more than one way to have been 'in the kitchen'.

So I must register, as I go along, the major assumptions I am making; this is one, that there has to be a serious congruence, though not necessarily a one-to-one congruence

(which is where the 'space of indeterminacy' I am considering here comes in) between an author's experience and his writing. But certainly the nearer to reality someone has come in their experience the more it will show in their writing. For instance, we note the sense of reality, surely a childhood memory, in Hamlet's recollection of Yorick the jester:

Clow.....heer's a scull now hath lye[n] you i'th earth twenty three yeeres.

Ham. Whose was it?

Clow. A whorson mad fellowes it was, whose do you [170] think it was?

Ham. Nay I know not.

Clow. A pestilence on him for a madde rogue, a poud a flagon of Renish on my head once; this same skull sir, was sir *Yoricks* skull, the Kings Iester.

Ham. This?

Clow. Een that.

Ham. Alas poore *Yoricke*, I knew him *Horatio*, a fellow of infinite iest, of most excellent fancie, hee hath bore me on his backe a thousand times, and now how [180] abhorred in my imagination it is: my gorge rises at it. Heere hung those lypes that I haue kist I know not howe oft, where be your gibes now? your gamboles, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roare, not one now to mocke your owne grinning, quite chopfalne. Now get you to my Ladies table, & tell her, let her paint an inch thicke, to this fauour she must come, make her laugh at that. (Hamlet, Act V Sc 1)

§ 3. Placed at the heart of the sweep of history and history of consciousness

Now Edward de Vere was in the thick and the heart of the politics of the most conflicted and most tenaciously uncertain reign of Elizabeth 1st. This was the reign which effectively inaugurated the modern British era, both with respect to the moderate parliamentary monarchist, and the moderate Anglican Broad Church settlement, setting in motion the *Via Media* in both respects, which has broadly lasted till today, despite the hiatus of the Civil War of the 17th Century. She also inagurated the British Empire which (whatever we may feel about it) became the dominant force in the world, and, in the form of its successor offshoot, the American Empire, remains so, for the present, and which successively overcame the European hegemonic threats of Spain, France (twice), Germany, and then, in part, Russia. Hand in hand with those political and religious settlements went a burgeoning imperialism of the mind which was most strongly expressed in the work of Francis Bacon (de Vere's wife's, Anne Cecil's, first cousin) and that of Shakespeare, and which eventually led to the British dominance in science, in technology, in the shaping of the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. But it was also the *end* of an era, because, cloaked in the imperialism, lay egalitarian ideals which gradually pushed their way to the surface over the centuries, and which were implicit in Britain's *Via Media*, just as Hermetic Platonism was in the throes of mutating into empiricism.

In the work of Shakespeare we have the first great tragedies for 2000 years, the first since the great Greek tragedians (- unless we count the New Testament Passion narratives, particularly Luke and John). Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Christ, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, to name but a few major names, have come and gone, before the human capability of major tragic art unequivocally revives for a moment. Thereafter it is musicians and novelists who partially and briefly catch the tragic note: Mozart, in the arguably morality comedy, of *Don Giovanni*, Wagner in *The Ring*, Dostoievsky in *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Proust, in aspects of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. No fully direct revival of tragic capacity other than Shakespeare's is to

be found. Heidegger indeed goes further; he says:

There is only *Greek* tragedy and no other beside it. Only the essence of Being as experienced by the Greeks has this primordial character that 'the tragic' becomes a necessity there. (Heidegger, 1992, p90)

If we hold that Shakespearean tragedy, which enacts the predicament of man, and man's relation to Being, at the moment of the breakdown of the Middle Ages' vision of the hierarchy of the macrocosm and the microcosm, constitutes an exception to Heidegger's position, this is, nevertheless, not a claim lightly to be made. Both of the two greatest Greek tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles, were involved both in the wars and the politics of their time (Aeschylus fought in the crucial battles of both Marathon and Salamis), and, furthermore, the status of the drama was not maligned as in early Elizabethan times, but tantamount to a religion (the status Wagner sought to regain for music-drama).

As Nietzsche, as Jaynes (1990, Wilkinson, 1999), conveyed many times, the Greek world was a public world, in a way we can hardly understand, a way somewhat conveyed by Pericles' Oration in Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War*:

The sacrifice which they collectively made was individually repaid to them; for they received again each one for himself a praise which grows not old, and the noblest of all tombs, I speak not of that in which their remains are laid, but of that in which their glory survives, and is proclaimed always and on every fitting occasion both in word and deed. For the whole earth is the tomb of famous men; not only are they commemorated by columns and inscriptions in their own country, but in foreign lands there dwells also an unwritten memorial of them, graven not on stone but in the hearts of men. Make them your examples, and, esteeming courage to be freedom and freedom to be happiness, do not weigh too nicely the perils of war. The unfortunate who has no hope of a change for the better has less reason to throw away his life than the prosperous who, if he survive, is always liable to a change for the worse, and to whom any accidental fall makes the most serious difference. To a man of spirit, cowardice and disaster coming together are far more bitter than death striking him unperceived at a time when he is full of courage and animated by the general hope. (Thucydides)

Something of this very Greek spirit is revived in Shakespeare's Sonnets – and equally in Ben Jonson's (nevertheless, in context, deeply ambiguous) tribute to Shakespeare in the First Folio of 1623:

Thou art a monument without a tomb,
And art alive still, while thy book doth live,
And we have wits to read, and praise to give. (Jonson)

Concealment, cunning, and introspection, were, of necessity, part of the Greek world, but not at the heart of it, in the way which has become central to the tragedian who wrote *Hamlet* (a significant fact in itself for the authorship). D H Lawrence conveys, in his own way, something of the change that had occurred in the 2000 years since the Greek tragedies in *Twilight in Italy*:

But Shakespeare was also the thing itself. Hence his horror, his frenzy, his self-loathing. The King, the Emperor is killed in the soul of man, the old order of life is over, the old tree is dead at the root. So said Shakespeare. It was finally enacted in Cromwell. Charles I took up the old position of kingship by divine right. Like Hamlet's father, he was blameless otherwise. But as representative of the old form of life, which mankind now hated with frenzy, he must be cut down, removed. It was a symbolic act.

The world, our world of Europe, had now really turned, swung round to a new goal, a new idea, the Infinite reached through the omission of Self. God is all that which is Not-Me. I am consummate when my Self, the resistant solid, is reduced and diffused into all that which is Not-Me: my neighbour, my enemy, the great Otherness. (Lawrence, DH, 1997)

Tragedy comes into being at such great moments of transition in civilisation. Greek tragedy comes into being right on the cusp of the transition from Mythos to Logos and the rise of scientific philosophy (c.f., Nietzsche, 1968), a mythic synthesis passing towards logic; Shakespearean tragedy (coupled with the history play sequence) comes into being on the cusp of the breakdown of the Mediaeval Synthesis (on the basis of the hierarchy of being, c.f., Lovejoy, 1965), a logical synthesis passing towards myth, and the collapsing of the Divine Right of Kings, which at the same time made possible the imperial triumph, and the measured movement towards egalitarianism, of the British Middle Way.

To the extent that Mozart, Wagner, and the great novelists, are still tragedians, their work comes into being at the moment of emergence of the last great movement of partial and ambiguous recovery of the Ancient world, Romanticism, again a logical synthesis (the Enlightenment) passing again towards myth (or, in Hegel, indissolubly united with it) – a moment which we are still inhabiting, mostly, to be sure, as Enlightenment interpreters after the event! - something which certainly largely applies to Freud, Jung, Levi-Strauss, Existentialism, and Post-Modernism, and probably even to Nietzsche, proud aspirant to being artist-philosopher, and first tragic philosopher.

My provisional contention, on the basis of this assumption about ‘the tragic moment’, is that the Shakespeare canon had to have been written by someone near the centre of those seismic events, on the cusp of that great change, someone who *knew*, to his very bones, someone who, in Enoch Powell’s words (loc. cit.), was ‘somebody who’d been in the kitchen’, someone who could carry that enormous weight in his being, yet also profoundly needed:

To put an Anticke disposition on (Hamlet, I.v)

Who was that ‘somboddy who’d been in the kitchen’? Of the three major candidates other than William of Stratford, namely Edward de Vere, Francis Bacon, and Marlowe, the first two had very definitely ‘been in the kitchen’, while Marlowe was almost certainly both a heretic, and a spy in the pay of the Elizabeth’s spymaster, Francis Walsingham, whose death (Marlowe’s) may well have been fabricated to release him from the Inquisitorial clutches of Archbishop Whitgift (someone for whom the concept of innocent until proven guilty notoriously did not apply) – someone, then, who lay in the deepest most ambiguous relation to the great centres of power. It is interesting that, for example in the recent Michael Woods BBC programme on Shakespeare (Woods, In Search of Shakespeare <http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare/>), or the film *Shakespeare in Love*, an attempt is being made to give William of Stratford a credible life near to the life of the Elizabethan court (though so far, in my view, on the basis of conjecture only). Here is an implicit recognition of the ‘kitchen’ principle!

As I write, and consider the nuances of this question, recognising a convergence from the Stratfordian position, and a loosening, on my sense of the Oxfordian position, of the principle of congruence in the direction of indeterminacy, I find myself more open to the Stratfordian position, and begin to sense the matter will not hinge on this principle, at any rate in any simple way (this is not to defend the insufferable Burgherish Shakespeare offered by some Stratfordians). This sense of shifting sands I wish to evoke as central to this mystery.

§ 4. The heart-breaking bogging down in the circumstantial detail

For the grand sweep of these principles gives us a background but not yet a foreground. When we come to the foreground we find our wheels are liable to sink deeper and deeper into the gravel! The reason is that the relationship between the big and deep assumptions, the major assumptions, and the minutiae of circumstances, is *not a symmetrical one!* There is no 'smoking gun' as yet in this discussion; for example, we do not have the Shakespeare manuscripts, except - possibly - for a passage of writing (the so-called 'Hand D' passage) on the manuscript copy of *Sir Thomas More*.

So we are left with a huge mass of texts, and disputes as to what they meant and who they referred to. For instance, in Greene's *Groatsworth of Witte bought with a million of repentance*, supposedly written by Robert Greene on his deathbed but published by Henry Chettle, and by several, both at the time and today, claimed to be written by him, in 1592 (and in these characterisations I am already digging myself well into the gravel!), who is it that is being referred to in the following famous passage, and what are the meanings of the many relevant words? (directed to three fellow playwrights):

Base minded men all three of you, if by my miserie you be not warnd: for unto none of you (like mee) sought those burrees to cleave: those Puppets (I meane) that spake from our mouths, those Anticks garnisht in our colours. Is it not strange, that I, to whom they all have beene beholding: is it not like that you, to whome they all have beene beholding, shall (were yee in that case as I am now) bee both at once of them forsaken? Yes trust them not: for there is an up-start Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde* [this is adapted from Shakespeare's *Henry VI part 3*], supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey. O that I might intreate your rare wits to be employed in more profitable courses, and let those apes imitate your past excellence, and never more acquaint them with your admired inventions! I know the best husband of you all will never prove an usurer, and the kindest of them all wil never proove a kinde nurse; yet, whilst you may, seeke you better maisters, for it is pittie men of such rare wits should be subject to the pleasures of such rude groomes. In this I might insert two more, that both have writ against these buckram gentlemen; but let their owne works serve to wnesse against their owne wickednesse, if they persever to maintaine any more such peasants. For other new commers, I leave them to the mercie of these painted monsters, who, I doubt not, will drive the best minded to despise them; for the rest, it skills not though they make a jeast at them. (Greene)

I have included the subsequent sentences to the Shake-scene reference to indicate that there is a wider and more enigmatic context. An articulate Stratfordian, Terry Gray, glosses the passage as follows:

Perhaps the most famous literary snarl ever was penned in 1592 by Robert Greene in his *Groats-worth of Witte*:

for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.

The passage is famous because it clearly refers to William Shakespeare ("Shake-scene") and is the first documentary evidence we have of his rise to prominence in the London theater world, indeed the first direct documentary evidence regarding him at all since the baptism of the twins in 1585.

Greene was a minor Elizabethan playwright (*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*) and pamphleteer, six years Shakespeare's senior, a university educated man (MA from both Oxford and Cambridge) and proud of it, yet known to be a wastrel. He wrote the *Groatsworth of Witte* as a bitter, dying man, and in it attacked his younger rivals Marlowe, Nashe, and Peele as well as Shakespeare. Much has been written about this passage. Its importance is that it verifies several facts about Shakespeare's career as it had developed by 1592:

- He had become successful enough to rankle Greene's jealousy.
- He had become well known among in the London professional theater world.
- He was known as a man of various abilities ("*Johannes fac totem*" or Jack-of-all-trades, as we would say), actor, playwright, play mender ("beautified with our feathers").
- He was well known as a poet ("bombast out a blanke verse").
- His *Henry VI Part 3* had become famous enough to be recognize by one of its famous lines ("O, tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide"). (Gray, 1995)

I cannot give the full response of Oxfordians, only contenting myself with illustrating the *kind* of questions they may raise:

1. Does this actually refer to Shakespeare, or is it just using Shakespearean allusion to refer to someone else?
2. Does 'bombast' here mean 'write' or, rather, 'declaim' (or something in between, drawing on the 'boasting' element of the meaning and so meaning something like 'pass off as', 'padding out', in the way Hamlet remarks to the players: 'and let those that play your clownes speake no more then is set downe for them')?
3. Does 'supposes' carry here its then contemporary common meaning of 'pretend'? Which would enable the passage to actually refer to William of Stratford in the process of accusing him of being an imposter, or introducing him as a 'frontman'?

Here, then, by contrast, is a representative portion of Oxfordian argument (Mark Alexander):

It is reasonable to think that Greene's audience (the three playwrights) would understand the *Tygers hart* allusion to simply characterize the upstart actor as ruthless. There is no compelling reason to believe that the allusion is an attempt to indirectly identify the upstart actor as the author of the passage.

If we accept that the three playwrights *did* in fact know that the allusion was to a play written by Shakespeare, there is also room for interpreting the passage as characterizing the upstart actor as one who was trying to put on the *look* of an accomplished playwright, when in fact he was only a mere player, perhaps one who added his own lines in the worst way, thus destroying the accomplished writing of the playwright. Both Stratfordians and Oxfordians have advanced alternatives to the traditional identification of Shakspeare as the upstart crow. (See "Three Alternatives to Shakspeare" below.) (Alexander)

I hope I have done enough to indicate the quagmires of ambiguity through which they must pass who immerse themselves in these arguments. The uncertainty betrays itself in

the way proponents on all sides take refuge in mutual contempt and denigration, often extreme, and turn these highly uncertain matters into definitive statement, and in the fundamentally adversarial method almost *all*, on all sides, adopt (Ogburn, for instance, is just as guilty as his opponents in this respect, whilst they are certainly no better!), when co-operation alone could optimise the delicately balanced structure of the evidence.

Thus, for instance, concentrating on my own side of the argument, Oxfordians are reluctant to admit that at least *part* of the temptation to find other candidates than William of Stratford (in the above, Alexander, with a degree of caution, goes for Alleyn, Will Kemp, and Ben Jonson as possibles) is due to the fact that, if William of Stratford is indeed named in this passage, then we have someone, in 1592, recognising the fact that an *actor* is indeed being presented as, ostensibly appearing to the world to be, the blatantly extant author of these plays, not as a *mere* actor. They routinely (Ogburn, for instance, *op. cit.*) seek to emphatically dismiss that equation. Why so, if it were not a danger to the Oxfordian case? The safest position might appear to be the one which accepts the attribution, but interprets it as claiming the crow is a fraud. But, unfortunately, one may be claimed to be a fraud who actually is not, but is only slandered as being; if that is not at least *possible*, then why do the Oxfordians spill such reams worth of ink trying to prove he is!?!? Once admit the possibility and the fact becomes plausible and reasonable. Hence the hesitation of the Oxfordians in conceding so much ground.

Some very bold Oxfordians, such as Nina Green (Green, The Oxford Authorship Site), take the bull by the horns and identify this as the first moment of the deliberate creation of the camouflage attribution (to be followed by the Dedications by 'Shakespeare' of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*). So the interpretation of *Groatsworth* shimmers and dissolves before our eyes as we put it under the microscope!

But, on the face of it, either he (William of Stratford) is or he isn't the author; though there is no 'smoking gun', there *could* be; this is not like a philosophical dichotomy, to be resolved by a creative third possibility. The increasingly group or corporate authorship theory might indeed appear to offer this. But for the moment, as with a murder enquiry, though the evidence may be through and through circumstantial, *someone* did it; there is a brute fact, however difficult to reach, at the bottom of the pile of circumstance. The pressure of the either/or requirement is the mitigation of the temptation to deal with this enquiry in an adversarial mode.

The matter is further complicated by the response Henry Chettle made to two of the three playwrights, one of whom Oxfordians claim is their man, in *Kind Heart's Dream*, but this I must refrain from discussing, and I must also turn aside from the rich quarry to be found in the pamphleteers of the 1570s, 1580s and 1590s, which, if – and *only* if (background assumptions again)! - viewed from within an Oxfordian position, affords very rich material, mentioning only for those familiar with the material the names, or pseudonyms, of Thomas Nashe, Gabriel Harvey, Martin Marprelate, Pierce Pennilesse, Edmund Spenser, 'E K', 'Ignoto', Robert Greene, Langham, Pasquill Cavaliero, 'Willoby His Avisas', Sir Philip Sidney, Sir Christopher Hatton, Anne Vavasour, Southampton, Chettle, and a variety of others¹, with umpteen cross-linkages between verified historical events, and events in the Shakespeare plays.

A second example of the uncertainties, much more briefly discussible, can be taken from Ben Jonson's magnificent poem on Shakespeare, including the lines 'Thou wast not for an age but for all time', in the First Folio of 1623. A much quoted passage runs as follows:

For, if I thought my judgment were of years,
I should commit thee, surely, with thy peers.
And tell how far thou didst our Lyly outshine,
Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe`s mighty line.
And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek,
From thence, to honour thee, I would not seek
For names; but call forth thund`ring Aeschylus,
Euripides, and Sophocles to us,
Paccuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead
To life again, to hear thy buskin tread
And shake a stage; or when thy socks were on,
Leave thee alone, for the comparison
Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome
Sent forth; or since did from their ashes come.
Triumph, my Britain! Thou hast one to show
To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.
He was not of an age, but for all time!

The point with this is what is meant by ‘though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek’?
Does it mean, ‘even though you had’, or does it mean, ‘even if (hypothetically) you had
had’, along the lines of Kipling’s: ‘Tho’ I walks with fifty ‘ousemaids outer Chelsea to the
Strand’, from the *Road to Mandalay*, which does not mean he *did* walk with fifty
housemaids, but ‘even if he were to’?

What hinges on this? If William of Stratford were ill-educated, comparatively (small
Latin and less Greek), then that is addressed by Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s friend, on the
first interpretation. On the second there is a deliberate ambiguity and crafty old Ben has
allowed one surface meaning to ride for all those who believe in the Stratfordian story,
whilst slipping in the other for cognoscenti, under cover of a subtlety. Recently there has
been an increasing trend towards claiming that Shakespeare *could* have got a superb
education at the Stratford Grammar School (though there is no record of his attendance),
and as a schoolmaster with the Hoghton family in Lancashire during the ‘lost years’
(Honigmann, 1985), so that then the first interpretation of Ben Jonson becomes redundant.
Masses and masses of argument about the quality of William of Stratford’s education has
been mounted by all sides.

In the end it is probably largely wasted ink; it seems it does not come down to that, and to
what a provincial lad of world-genius could or could not have learnt.

It actually comes down to the following:

1. the difficulty of our knowing next to nothing (apart from court reports about
litigations) about William of Stratford, and that at odds with the ethos of the plays
(which are, again and again, about incautious squanderers, on the large scale, for
the most part, the tight-purses, such as Iago, being the most despised, and
associated with evil values), on the one hand, *versus*
2. the problematic, though not by any means impossible, postulate of a not-fully
explained, but very large scale, conspiracy, if the circumstantial evidence of
innumerable detailed correlations between Edward de Vere’s life and what we find
in the plays is to be, so to say, activated.

§5. Alternative scenarios and Shakespearian method of enquiry

I shall now try to draw the threads together by sketching alternative imaginal senses of 'Shakespeare' which emerge on the various scenarios. I shall not dwell much on the Marlowe and Francis Bacon scenarios, but use the contrast of William of Stratford with Edward de Vere as my main stalking horse. We have already seen the whole issue tremble and begin to slide away under our feet. Something in the very process of the issue corresponds to what Keats wrote about Shakespeare or on the basis of Shakespeare: I had not a dispute but a disquisition, with Dilke on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, *when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrallium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, *or rather obliterates all consideration*. (John Keats Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21 Dec. 1817)

As to the poetical character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a member--that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime, which is a thing per se, and stands alone), it is not itself--it has no self. It is everything, and nothing--it has no character. It enjoys light, and shade. It lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated--it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things, any more than from its taste for the bright one, because they both end in speculation. A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no identity: he is continually in for, and filling, some other body. The sun, the moon, the sea, and men and women who are creatures of impulse, are poetical, and have about them an unchangeable attribute: the poet has none, no identity. He is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a poet, where is the wonder that I should say I would write no more? (John Keats letter to Woodhouse, October 1818)

We are faced with a dilemma. De Vere gives us a saturnine mercurial Shakespeare, a squanderer and an undercover communicator and master of camouflage. William of Stratford, if, as 'the upstart crow', we are faced with his genuine entry as playwright upon the scene, is a pragmatic amoralist of another sort; if I am compelled to see through his lens (even if I am not so compelled regarding the plays, there is still a big story to be written regarding his role as frontman! Which the 'groupists' such as John Michell, 1996, have begun to address), which I now find difficult, then I find a ruthlessly pragmatic young man of genius making his way in the midst of the pamphlet wars of the 80s and 90s, contemporary with the Spanish Armada, with an established theatre (probably mainly underwritten by De Vere as patron – here again there would be a reverse 'second story'), whereas De Vere, with massive but exploiting patronage, in the form of his wardship at the hands of Lord Burghley, but with a cultural education of the highest order, had been finding his identity in the world which emerged in the early years of Elizabeth's reign, when the internal threat was, in a way, much greater (Mary Queen of Scots was still alive), and the Elizabethan world was still to a great extent unformed.

When Keats wrote those comments, with his intuition of genius, the rumblings of the authorship question, though not absolutely non-existent, had not really been felt. Now, however, we have a situation where the Protean shape-changing aspect, which he apprehended as pre-eminently *within* the individual author Shakespeare, has transferred

itself beyond the individual, to the perplexities of the total situation in which the question of the authorship arises. In that sense it is arguably a paradigm and a microcosm of life itself. Our 'negative capability', in the sense Keats indicates in the famous passage quoted above, cannot here be resolved by an abdication from factual enquiry. In this way it is like our cosmological endeavour, rooted in primal ontological insecurities, to find out what sort of universe this is we are in, in an epoch committed to rational and scientifically-informed methods of enquiry.

We are dealing here with a special kind of factual enquiry; it is historical enquiry, which embodies, on the one hand, within it an element of sheer irreversible brute fact. Yet it is also, on the other hand, one which cannot be dissociated from a very diverse and pluralistic imaginative engagement with a multiplicity of possibilities, and subjective intentionalities, in which a too premature attempt to resolve the issue, and to force it to resolution and an adversarial dismissal of opponents' positions, is doomed to sterility, and self-discrediting stances, whether of contempt for the opponent which prevents one learning from them, or excessive evidence-disregarding speculation about ones own side of the enquiry, which brings into disrepute even the valuable elements on ones own side. Such an imaginative engagement will not be one which disregards our tendencies to partisanship and to identification with one position or another, but it will treat them, as I earlier suggested, as raw material in the process, as something to be submitted to the 'negative capability' of our process of enquiry.

The man who wrote Shakespeare and was Shakespeare, embodies within himself the fault lines of the epochal transition which the works reflect, and constitutes the dialectic which makes possible the tragic. As such he represents, on one side, the dogmatic sense of hierarchy of the 'wolfish earls', of which Whitman wrote, and which is embodied most profoundly, perhaps, in Ulysses' speech on 'degree' in *Troilus and Cressida*:

Troy, yet upon his basis, had been down,
And the great Hector's sword had lack'd a master,
But for these instances:
The specialty of rule hath been neglected;
And look how many Grecian tents do stand
Hollow upon this plain, so many hollow factions.
When that the general is not like the hive,
To whom the foragers shall all repair,
What honey is expected? Degree being vizarded,
Th'unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.
The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre,
Observe degree, priority, and place,
Infixture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office, and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthron'd and spher'd
Amidst the other, whose med'cinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,
And posts, like the commandment of a king,
Sans check, to good and bad. But when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents, what mutiny,
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth,
Commotion in the winds! Frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate,

The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture! O, when degree is shak'd,
Which is the ladder of all high designs,
The enterprise is sick! How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenity and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree, stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows! Each thing melts
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe;
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead;
Force should be right; or, rather, right and wrong,
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

But, on the other side, he embodies the mercuriality and Protean-dramatic character of change itself, and which is perhaps most profoundly embodied in Hamlet's way of ascertaining the truth of his situation after his encounter with the Ghost, namely by staging a play within a play, a dramatic forcing of the issue. The slippage away from the heirarchical conception, and fixed notions of identity (including the classical unities in the concept of the drama, which both Johnson and Coleridge recognised were defunct principles), represented in Ulysses's speech, is enacted, in innumerable forms, in play after play, dissolution and transformation of frame being at the heart of the Shakespearian enterprise.

Thus, De Quincey magnificently accounts for the dramatic effect of the knocking at the gate in Macbeth in terms of frame-shift:

In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers, and the murder must be insulated- cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs- locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested- laid asleep- tranced- racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is, that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them. (De Quincey)

This tension and this multiplicity is the background against which our enquiries into the authorship, with their huge flux of factual considerations, yet their inescapable recourse to that very dramatic imagination which, in his invention of the human (Bloom), Shakespeare taught us, has to be undertaken. It is to be hoped that there will gradually ensue a convergence of the dramatic imagination and the gathering in and recognition of ever more relevant circumstantial material.

Shakespeare will have taught us the principles by which we shall find him again.

ⁱ See Mark Alexander's site, especially the section including the writings of Charles Wisner Barrell:

<http://www.sourcetext.com/sourcebook/index.htm>

And the Shakespeare Fellowship, the principle Oxfordian site, but including links to main sites of all the other major candidates including William of Stratford:

<http://www.shakespearefellowship.org/>