

REVIEWS

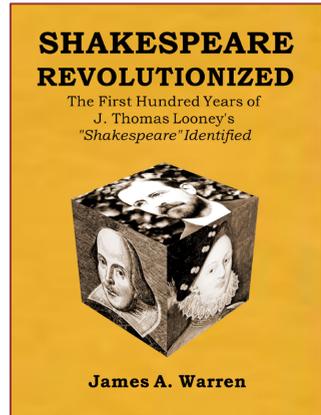
*Shakespeare Revolutionized:
The First Hundred Years of J. Thomas
Looney's "Shakespeare" Identified*
by James A. Warren

Review by Heward Wilkinson

(Page numbers in brackets refer to *Shakespeare Revolutionized*)

James Warren's book about the first hundred years of the Oxfordian movement since J. Thomas Looney's book "*Shakespeare*" Identified: as Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford was published, is a prodigious piece of scholarship, systematic research and detective work producing an amazing invaluable archive that at times leaves us panting for breath, stunned and awestruck.

Warren aptly writes of the post-Looney movement: 'It is now aware of itself as a movement with a history stretching back a full century that must be preserved and is making great strides in doing so.' (532) He also writes (673): 'Oxfordians' goal, then, is *to make themselves history*: first, by making history in the sense of accomplishing something of historical importance and, second, by making themselves part of history, part of the past. Their work will be finished.' [my italics]. Warren himself is central to this growing awareness, and those great strides and this accomplishing. So, writing this massive, extraordinary, and extremely riveting history is not neutral; it is transformative; and it *alters* the identity of the movement. It is *monumental* history, history which creates a new sense of time and being for peoples. So, the author 'dies', is transformed, resurrected in their work, becomes a legend. In the work he has already done and is doing (ix) on the Looney related archives and Oxfordian publications, Jim Warren may in a sense be called a legend.



Far from the post-modern being irrelevant to our tasks, then, Looney's innovation was one of the greatest pieces of deconstruction of modern times, up there with Boswell's *Life of Dr Samuel Johnson* and the work of Warren's cherished Thomas Kuhn,¹ on scientific paradigm shifts. And this work of Warren's points towards the paradigm shift he is searching for, but in a way far more post-modern than he dreams.

It is extremely frustrating that I can do so little more than sketch his massive detailed *and yet always riveting* archival witness. One really needs to read and re-read it, and get right into it, despite the size (784 pages with annexes and index), because there is far too much remotely to summarise; and yet it is the story of pioneering adventure, constantly gripping and riveting reading. The basic overall message is that the Oxfordian/Looney discovery passed two out of three tests of resistance to the new: *Human Resistance* to the new as such; and the *Cognitive Resistance* to mastering a 12-aspect complex thesis. But the third one, the *Institutional Resistance*, is as entrenched as it ever was, except that in the second Oxfordian phase it has proved possible to draw senior Stratfordians out onto the field of battle,² however contemptuously, ignorantly and oppressively – which is a step forward in the larger scheme of things.

The account of the first phase, from 1920 up to approximately 1950 is powerfully and fully presented with powerful and thoroughly spelt out detail. Deep conflicts over the Dynastic Succession Theory (or Prince Tudor Theory), which arose in both phases, are not avoided and Warren expounds all sides clearly and fairly, though he himself definitely believes that something like this is needed to account for the 'why?' and the 'how?' of the perseverance of the cover-up (557–8). After the end of the Second World War, he shows that *a hiatus ensues, for approximately forty years when the movement and its organisations marked time*. Again, I shall return to the 'why?' of this. It is an uncanny moment of near silence about which Warren is intriguingly largely silent (though he intends to write about it, p. ix), like the great silence at the beginning of Act II in the middle of *Siegfried* in the very centre of Wagner's *Ring*, which is worth pondering.

Then everything changed again in the mid-1980s: Enter Charlton Ogburn Junior and his *The Mysterious William Shakespeare!*³ It took, in his great work, the most compelling form of the narrative of all time to do it – and, consequently,

even James Shapiro, by 2010, is forced to concede that the Oxfordian movement is now in far more powerful institutional shape than could have been dreamt of in, say, 1970.⁴ *Shakespeare Revolutionized* is the first book since Charlton Ogburn Junior's, which, because it carries such passion within its extensive, lucid and gripping pages, has fully brought the Looney revolution to life for me, and has given me a sense of the *uncanny* potency of the great author and human being he has resurrected. For it was and is indeed a *resurrection*. But I am left in part frustrated, even so. Why?

Despite Warren's reservations about what is something of a caricature of the post-modern stance and attitude, it is post-modernism which comes nearest to giving an account of the whole legend-hungry situation. But Warren makes it *the major culprit* for the truth-displacement, and evokes it disparagingly thus:

To state it clearly, when the so-called "death of the author" is discussed, the death of literary criticism is necessarily implied. Consideration of works of literature as works of art important in themselves – the approach of literary connoisseurs – has little place in this methodology and has largely ended within academia. Gone is any sense that literature has anything meaningful to say about the deeper aspects of life.

The Humanistic tradition in literary criticism has come close to vanishing from English literature programs and journals ...

In sum, the Humanistic tradition, in place for centuries before Looney identified Edward de Vere as Shakespeare, was supplanted twice. It was first replaced by a method in which an author is seen as an outmoded "construct" to be by-passed in favor of cultural forces which determine the content of literary works. That entire field of literary studies itself was then subsumed under the field of Cultural Studies. The Cultural Studies approach to the study of literature which dominates "Departments of Literature" today is not one in which academic study of the Shakespeare authorship question can easily take place. (592)

Following the Second World War, Oxfordianism became becalmed and almost died, paralysed almost like the *Marie Celeste* becalmed near by the Azores. Meantime, in the thick of a war for survival, British Psychoanalysis nevertheless

had its 'Controversial Discussions' from 1941 to 1945,⁵ and emerged renewed, as did American Psychoanalysis in the same period. The conflicts over Dynastic Succession/Prince Tudor Theory in the Oxfordian movement may have felt ferocious to those engaged in them, but there was nothing as fundamental and cataclysmic as what happened within psychoanalysis. What would Freud have thought had he been able to read Warren's book? The essence of the felt danger of Freud's attitude towards Shakespeare's identification is reflected in the urgent request of his biographer, Ernest Jones,⁶ that while in exile in England he refrain from mentioning Oxford as Shakespeare, for fear of irreparable damage to psychoanalysis in that country.

During the 20th century also, what Boswell did for Johnson was supplemented by what Boswell and Coleridge, by proxy, did for themselves – during the time of the rise, the near demise and the rise again of the Oxfordian movement – at the masterly archival hands of Colonel Isham, the *Boswell Journals*,⁷ Katherine Coburn, the *Coleridge Notebooks*,⁸ and John Livingstone Lowes' *The Road to Zanadu*.⁹ Those journals and notebooks existed, in great profusion, and had been *hidden*, respectively, for roughly 150 and 100 years. Though they were legendary/mythic, and each very flawed and tragic, *they existed*, and there was some clear sense of what they were. Part of the problem with the Oxfordian legacy is, so to speak, *to make it exist*, to take it out of the realm of something that has an element of shadow boxing.

James Warren is indeed such an archival masterly hand and genius, up there with Isham and Coburn, but it is not clear whether the legend he is resurrecting is that of Looney or that of Edward de Vere. And the voice creating the legend is arguably not that of Looney or that of Edward de Vere, but now that of James Warren. As Myth and Legend, James Warren is, in many ways, Enlightenment man in person, seeking the Truth, very much following Looney, in speaking on behalf of a modern 'Positive' or 'Critical' epoch of awareness.

Ogburn writes words that resound like the bell of the Great Gate of Kiev in Mussorgsky (c.f. Warren, p. vii): 'Given the towering place of Shakespeare in our culture, it would be utterly incredible, if we did not know it to be so, that the most fundamental question should arise about him. Who was he?'³

Now, one becomes aware, from Warren's opening pages, of the paradox that his Legend and Myth is – the Truth. With a Capital 'T'. And in this he is paralleling Looney:

In 1920 a bombshell exploded over Shakespeare Studies from which it has yet to recover: a bombshell in the form of J. Thomas Looney's "Shakespeare" Identified – so powerful that even a hundred years later orthodox Shakespeare scholars haven't yet found a credible way of responding to its thesis ...

The bombshell's power came not from its presentation of doubts about authorship by the man from Stratford but from its identification, for the first time, of a credible candidate for authorship. Its power came from the multifaceted range of evidence Looney presented ... (1).

In the light of the Oxfordian recognition, the Stratfordian narrative dwindles and shrivels in our imaginations, like Lewis Carroll's Red Queen, into total – but *total!* – impossibility. But the problem, arguably, then becomes so absurd, so post-modern in its absurdity, that willy-nilly, normal calculations of what is a reasonable expression of Enlightenment-type assumptions go out of the window: 400 years and counting, after all! Is Shakespeare dead? What on earth, as Ogburn implied, is this enigma?

This is the paradoxical situation, *taking Truth itself as the Legend or Myth*. I am not, of course, saying that Warren is not committed to truthfulness as such; indeed, his own intense passion for truth and justice is such that, if anyone can do it, he can. At the same time, he emphasises throughout the book that the Institutional Resistance and power situation of the opposition from Academia remains immunised against recognition of the alternative narrative, which he correctly, I believe, surmises has *partly* led to a corruption of criteria and values in Academia. It is dangerous to look at this too much through the Oxfordian lens. It is not *all* Shakespeare Authorship Institutional pressure. 'English', as Warren knows (9–11), had quarrels of its own. The F. R. Leavis-inspired (Leavis's own doctorate was in History) *Scrutiny* journal and movement,¹⁰ which ran for over 20 years at Cambridge, was fiercely opposed to the Academic Establishment there, but never, so far as I know, questioned the Stratfordian attribution.

Leavis's use of the Coleridgean formula: 'nothing can permanently please, which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise',¹¹ in striking a balance between internal and external textual values, is a model of Humanistic Critical Values in Warren's terms. And Leavis fought a fraught battle with F. C. Bateson, including some of the most masterly 'close reading' ever penned, of Andrew Marvell's *Dialogue Between the Soul and Body* over the splitting off of what came to be called 'Cultural Studies',¹² as Warren rightly notes (591). But though Warren is fierce in his hostility to some versions of post-modernism, such as: "To state it clearly, when the so-called "death of the author" is discussed, the death of literary criticism is necessarily implied.' (592) he does not do justice to this whole discussion; and for me, to significant detriment of the potency of this book for the Oxfordian movement, it is the weakest and most contradictory part of his book. There is a debate here that Warren is not recognising and which, indeed, vitiates his and the Oxfordian case, as I have attempted to point out before.¹³

William Leahy, in "Two Households both alike in Dignity" in the February 2007 *DVS Newsletter* (4–11), is quoted with approval by Warren, with the key passage here I have put in italics:

Most Stratfordians in academia either believe that the man from Stratford was the author or they have not investigated the issue. As Leahy saw, they are not adamantly opposed to consideration of the authorship question; it simply isn't on their radar. Absorbed in work focused "*upon the texts and their contexts rather than on the life of the author*", they "are not fully aware of the problem of tying Shakespeare the man to Shakespeare the texts ... The majority do not concern themselves with the problem of attribution ... They are currently dismissive of the Question, but not necessarily for all time ... (6)." (663)

There are contradictions in this concept of context. Why does Leahy assume that 'the life' or 'the man' is not part of the 'context'? Presumably because this relates to the wider 'context' *purely in the text itself*? But what is 'the pure text itself'? What is the 'wider context' in the case of a text like Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, which refers to the actual Marshalsea prison? Are there two Marshalseas: – a typical post-modern point of course – one fictional and one factual? Is not

Leahy here casually embracing the same dichotomy and cognitive schism Warren has rightly castigated in the context of ‘Cultural Studies’?

If we bog down in such issues and fight, with Anthony Nuttall, a chivalric battle on behalf of a classical concept of biographical-historical mimesis in literature,¹⁴ are we not playing the same game as our opponents? We need to look at the whole thing in a larger context, yet still a relevant one. So, I am wondering whether, Bunyan-like, Warren is turning ‘Truth’ itself into legend in a way, indeed in a post-modern way, although to be sure also a very Oxfordian way, despite himself. Warren attaches great importance (p. 638 *passim*) to the admirably engaging work of the American popular Aristotelian–Thomist philosopher, and Oxfordian, Mortimer J. Adler.¹⁵ Adler says we must return to the beginning and avoid the initial mistake, and Warren summarises him as also communicating the following view about Truth:

The concept was considered under a slightly different name, ‘the unity of truth’, by philosopher Mortimer J. Adler, who observed that “In the history of Western thought there are only two major theories of truth.” One is the Correspondence Theory, which states that there is a reality independent of the mind, and that truth or knowledge exists in the mind when an idea agrees with, conforms or corresponds to, that independent reality. The other is the Coherence Theory, which states that assertions about an external reality must be consistent with one another. (637)

Adler’s work reads – to me as a wizened old Derridean – to be philosophically quite innocent and, whilst in his discussion of philosophical mistakes he avoids the pure emphasis on sense experience of the great Enlightenment thinkers, Locke, Berkeley and Hume; yet, with his emphasis on Correspondence and Coherence, he in no way avoids the assumptions of objectification and objecthood, which cause that emphasis in the first place.

This is a classical concept of Truth, reinforcing my earlier points. The deeper, more tragic, vision of post-Nietzschean post-modernism, compels us, for deep reasons to do with the movements of historicity in our civilisation, to take account also of *pragmatic* conceptions of truth, and of the Greek conception of truth as *unconcealment*, *aletheia*. The coalescence of these is arguably also the conception of truth itself as *enactive*.¹⁶

As the great master of verse which approximates to the condition of music, which was core to Nietzsche's understanding of tragedy,¹⁷ Shakespeare is pre-eminently the great enactive author, and in him, virtually always, he is *doing* what he is *talking about*, in the deepest depths of his writing. If there is to be a solution to the unsolved epistemic puzzle of correspondence and representation, which Adler actually leaves completely untouched, except for a reaffirmation of common sense in a Thomist accent, it has somehow to lie in the recognitions of forms of reflexive awareness which are not merely 'about' something other, but which livingly *are* what they are *about*.

Can the Oxfordian movement become fully real if in some way it does not become part of a true war? Is 'the battle for Truth' enough? Was the refought war over Dynastic Succession/Prince Tudor Theory enough or, despite the war over what Nina Green (discussions on private email list) called 'tabloid theories', was it in reality too parochial to meet our needs?

Warren offers resourceful suggestions regarding how better to confront Stratfordians with their fallacies and engage in discussions. But some of these, whether we like it or not, may be impossible for them to respond to, for a hundred institutional reasons, such as the challenge to sue us for damages for declaring them fraudulent in their Birthplace Trust advertising. Is there no better way to entice the Stratfordian Fox to throw the Oxfordian Boar-Rabbit into the briar patch? Do we not need a long war – and not such a cold one – with Stratford? How could we achieve that?

Most Oxfordian work on the Shakespeare works is by way of exposing historical and biographical allusions, which is all very well, but there is little actual genuine, as Warren would say, Humanistic Literary Criticism. The Stratfordian galleons and the Oxfordian men-of-war sail right past one another. Do we not need to steal some of their clothes? A shallow post-modernism may indeed be relativistic and solipsistic, but its deepest expressions are not, not even in Nietzsche, despite some of the things he says.

We are indebted to James Warren's great and indispensable work for two things in particular: first that Oxfordian writing *needs to wear the mantle of myth and legend as well as Truth* – perhaps despite himself, James Warren's work reminds us

of this. Secondly, he is so emphatic in his repudiation of post-modern stances, that, paradoxically, he gives me the opportunity to bring them into view in a more fitting form than the anaemic and epistemically bankrupt one they take in Anglo academic contexts. I am grateful for that, and, in Herakleitos' word – sometimes translated 'war', and sometimes struggle, conflict, or confrontation (which may be creative) – may the 'polemos' continue!

End notes

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