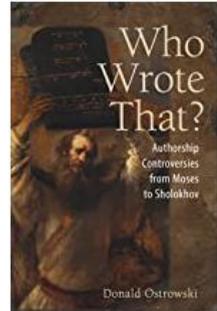


Who Wrote That? Authorship Controversies from Moses to Sholokhov by Donald Ostrowski

Review by Kevin Gilvary

Who Wrote That? is an incisive, critical appraisal of a remarkably wide range of attribution debates. Chapter Six, longest in the book will be of special interest to members of The de Vere Society as it concerns Shakespeare.



It is worth buying this book for this section alone. Altogether, in *Who Wrote That?* the author examines nine authorship controversies, providing an introduction to each particular dispute and demonstrating how to assess historical documents, archival materials and apocryphal stories, as well as internet sources and news. Each chapter finishes with a section entitled ‘The Takeaway’. At the end, there is a short and useful Afterword called ‘Lessons Learned’.

Donald Ostrowski is a lecturer in history at Harvard University, and he is enlightening and encyclopaedic in his treatment of these authorship debates. He does not argue in favour of one side over another but focuses on the principles of attribution. In some cases, he explains why one methodology is to be preferred over another: e.g. in the documentary hypothesis to explain the Pentateuch. He rightly indicates probabilities in determining who wrote what, which may leave some readers uncomfortable without a final resolution.

The breadth of treatments is truly astonishing. The author not only describes, but more importantly he compares the methods used to assert or to deny authorship in a variety of otherwise unrelated cases. These cases concern texts of interest in religion, ethics, literature and history; they include some traditional texts from pre-literate society such as the Pentateuch attributed to Moses, and *The Analects* attributed to Confucius, as well as texts from literate societies: the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, the love letters between Abelard and Heloise, the letters of Rashid al-Din, Prince Andrei Kurbskii, James MacPherson, and Mikhail Sholokov.

Dr. Ostrowski's own stance is that the historical level of reading focuses on what the work 'tells us about the time in which it was written and the attitudes of its author'. He is to be greatly commended for collecting and presenting such a detailed and lucid treatment of a wide range of cases.

In Chapter Six, Ostrowski limits his treatment of alternative claimants to the works of Shakespeare to just Edward de Vere as he 'embodies all the characteristics that other anti-Stratfordians find separately in their respective candidates', including 'knowledge of the court, poetic ability, learning, knowledge of languages other than English' as well as travel in countries where many of the plays are set. He then outlines the methodology of J. T. Looney in "*Shakespeare Identified* (1920), finding that 'profiling on the basis of the written texts is a methodologically legitimate way to proceed' as shown in his chapters on Rashid al-Din, Kurbskii, and Sholokov. He notes that the approach of profiling the author is simply dismissed by Stratfordians, quoting from *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* (by Paul Edmondson and Sir Stanley Wells) and *Contested Will* (by James Shapiro).

Ostrowski then shows how the literary movement known as the New Criticism, which began after the First War, ignored the authors and their intentions by concentrating on works of literature as artefacts. Such an approach of ignoring the author is still evident in the writings of many critics, including his fellow Harvard professor, Marjorie Garber. He notes that another critic, James Shapiro, takes a more extreme view: for Shapiro, Shakespeare's greatest gift is his imagination so therefore to even dare suggest that Shakespeare's works were influenced by any experience, literary or otherwise, diminishes his greatest gift. To further the point, Shapiro once claimed off-handedly that George Orwell did not need farmyard experience to write *Animal Farm*. Ostrowski makes short work of this fallacious argument, noting that Orwell was writing an allegory and that he was very well informed about the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia.¹ Citing William Faulkner and Gary Goldstein, he wittily suggests that perhaps William of Stratford imagined himself to be the Earl of Oxford composing these works.

Drawing on the evidence presented in *Dating Shakespeare's Plays*, Ostrowski details the huge amount of speculation involved in attempting to assign dates or a chronology to the works. He quotes Peter Moore (*The Lame Storyteller*, 2009) to

the effect that no play shows any indisputable reference to an event or derives from a source that dates to after 1603. He finds convincing Alexander Waugh's interpretation of the phrase 'Sweet Swan of Avon' as Oxford at Hampton Court. He notes that nobody praised William of Stratford for his imagination, whereas some did for Oxford. He gives an impressive list of correspondences between Oxford's position at court and Hamlet's. He makes a similar case for *All's Well*, and any attempt to deny such correspondences would 'require resorting to extraordinary coincidences as an explanation'. As in other chapters, Ostrowski's inclinations towards one interpretation are apparent, but he does not over-state the case for Oxford.

Who Wrote That? is well worth studying as the other chapters which review different cases make the comparison of arguments used by attributors in various ways. In the chapter on the authorship of the Pentateuch, he asserts as a basic principle that one should not presume that whatever an author might have written, he or she did so. Another key tenet is that 'establishing the date of a text is crucial for discussing authorship'. Ostrowski warns against 'dating the text to fit the life' (as we know happens with over-zealous proponents of a claimant to the works of Shakespeare).

A few small points of doubt: firstly, Ostrowski suggests that if 'Shakespeare' was a pseudonym, then there was a conspiracy. In terms of meaning, a 'conspiracy' is an agreement among a number of people to commit a crime or to promote evil, e.g. by blowing up Parliament or cheating someone of their rightful inheritance. This reviewer finds it hard to accept that any use of a pseudonym (e.g. 'Mary Westmacott' or 'Robert Galbraith') must include a 'conspiracy' – possibly, but not necessarily. It is true that many Oxfordians claim there was a deliberate attempt to conceal the identity of the author, perhaps against his wishes, citing Burghley and Sir Robert Cecil as likely culprits. Secondly, Ostrowski implies (129) that Oxford travelled to Denmark, whereas the more general opinion is that Oxford knew about the castle at Elsinor (Helsingør) from his brother-in-law: Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby, visited the Castle in June 1582 to invest King Frederick II as a Knight of the Garter (Anderson, *Shakespeare by Another Name*, 190-91). Thirdly, like most of us he uses the term 'anti-Stratfordian', whereas it seems less confrontational if we changed

the term to ‘non-Stratfordian’ (as Ros Barber suggests) or even ‘post-Stratfordian’ (as Alexander Waugh suggests). But these are very minor points indeed.

Overall, *Who Wrote That?* is carefully organised, full of insight, and well referenced. It is reassuring that in other cases a peaceful and courteous discussion can take place over disputed authorship, using arguments based on merit, not personal invective. *Who Wrote That?* should appeal to all those interested in literature, religion and history, and especially to students of the Shakespeare Authorship Question.

Note

¹ While nobody doubts Orwell’s imagination (e.g. in *1984*), Ostrowski might have added that Shapiro’s example of Orwell as someone writing from imagination and not from experience is counter-productive. *Animal Farm* does show specialist incidental details which indicate personal knowledge derived from rural sojourns, including characteristics of different breeds of pig. A review of his life shows that Orwell lived in many rural places, including at or near farming villages such as Southwold (Suffolk, with his mother and sisters), Wallington (Herts, with his wife), and Carlton (County Durham). Moreover, other works of fiction are clearly based on his experiences: *Burmese Days*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *Coming up for Air*. Non-fiction works were carefully researched: *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Homage to Catalonia*. For Shapiro to suggest that a writer such as Orwell depended on imagination solely and did not need experience is clearly absurd.