

## Why Oxfordians Should be Post-Modernists

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*Heward Wilkinson*

October 2019 Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship Conference in Hartford, CT



Dear Oxfordian friends and colleagues,

I come not to bury facts, and factual enquiry, but to praise interpretations.

We are all post-modernists now, whether we like it or not. Exploitation of intrinsic, inherent, ambiguity, irreducible *double entendre*, slippage and subversion of frame, in text, is to be found in the commonest and most casual public communications. It is almost a disease.

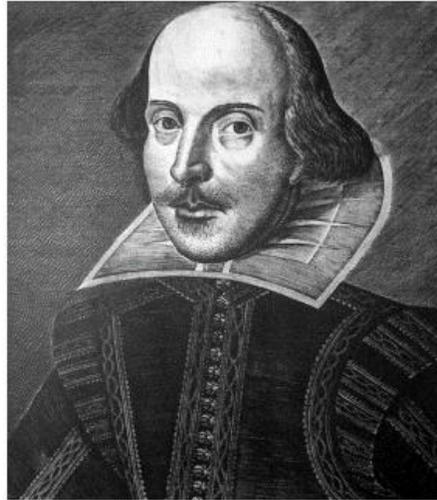


A ridiculous one from just up the road from where I live:



In advertising:

And then of course there is this:



Post-modern? In 1623?



Talk about deconstruction of the author!



Our own Hank Whittemore recently wrote, about the artist Gerhard Richter, a survivor of Nazism, “And - amazingly, this story concludes with a pronouncement of the death of the artist or author, by the East Berlin critic who calls it a triumph of the imagination etc. When, in fact, the truth is quite the opposite -- these paintings come from personal life experience, deeply so, and yet it was to Richter's advantage (and safety) to answer astute questions by saying he is not painting anything or anybody he has known.”

But in Richter's painting of 'Betty', she is hidden from us, - and perhaps from her own narrative?

Jim Warren (2016, p117)

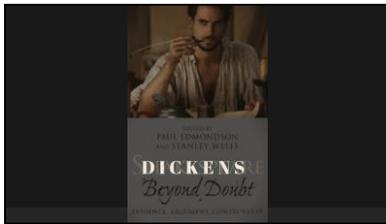
[https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/BC\\_FF\\_2016\\_Full.pdf](https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/BC_FF_2016_Full.pdf)

urges us to develop a new, or revived, methodology, reverting to the separation of Literary Criticism from Cultural Studies, on the basis of the twin concepts of the uniqueness of the work of art, and of the special historical circumstances of its creation.

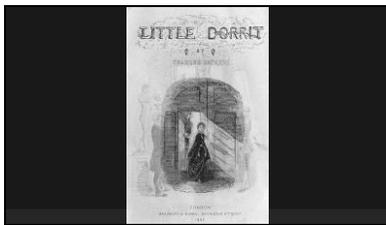
None of this is wrong, but incomplete.



Let's begin with Charles Dickens, - about the known facts of whose life there has been *absolutely* no need to write a book



entitled 'Dickens Beyond Doubt'.



He published in 1857, his great masterpiece, *Little Dorrit*, - there she is, at the door of the Marshalsea Prison.....

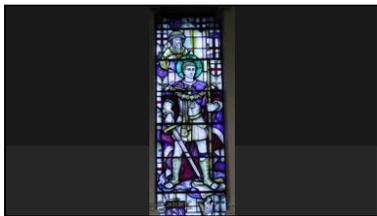


Now, Dickens's father was detained in the Marshalsea Prison, when a debtors' prison, the prison here (where by the way Ben Jonson was imprisoned, two centuries before).

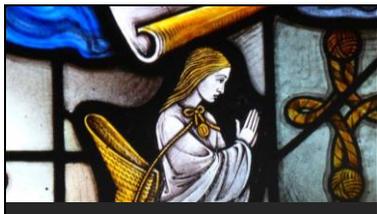
Is Dickens's 'Marshalsea Prison' a piece of fiction? Are there *two* Marshalseas, fact and fiction, in and out of inverted commas, two worlds, two frames?



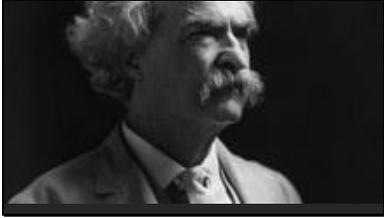
And what about Little Dorrit's and her dependent Maggie's night, sheltering in St George's Church Southwark, next to the Marshalsea, where Little Dorrit was baptised and will later be married? Where Dickens himself had spent his evenings with a working men's discussion group, when his father was in the prison? What about *this* lavish mixing of frames and dimensions?



And what about the poignant stained glass window portrait, by Marion Grant, of Little Dorrit, now part of St George's Southwark, half hidden in miniature, underneath St George the Martyr with his sword and, perhaps symbolising writing, his parchment?



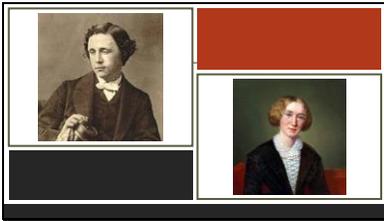
It's *all* part of the identity of Little Dorrit, the identity of the novel '*Little Dorrit*', the identity of the legendary author of the novel, Charles Dickens. We move, utterly effortlessly, back and forth between frames, between fact and fiction, because we see fact through the lens of fiction, as we see fiction through the lens of fact. It is, in a mass of ways, a false antithesis. Freely emphasising, through our scientific, historical, research and hermeneutic procedures, the actualities of factual enquiry and enquiry into the life, we cannot help but develop the legend, and elaborate the text. For this is *human* truth.



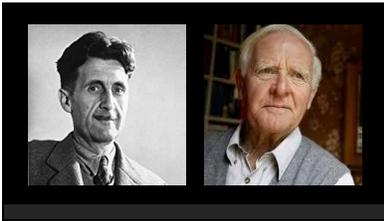
This multidimensionality is illustrated by how *extremely* easily we all adopt, and extremely tenaciously maintain, a pseudonym as the name of an author: Mark Twain,



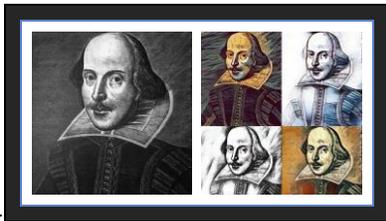
Voltaire and Rousseau



Lewis Carroll, George Eliot



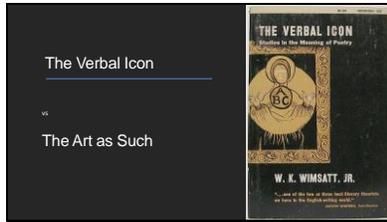
George Orwell, John Le Carre



or William Shakespeare.

A bit naughty to slip Rousseau in there! It slips off the tongue.

But this is far from saying the biography and the name of the actual author is of no use to us.

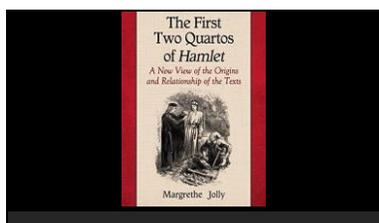


The complete dichotomous abstraction from external authorial intentions of, say, *The Verbal Icon*, *Art for Art's Sake*, or *Significant Form*, applies a tourniquet to the full force of *the art as such*. For the *intentions* are already there, sliding between art and its creation.



As implied, the point is different. The author's creation *subsumes* and integrates the author in a certain way, and takes on, reflexively, life of its own. And so do *we* subsume the author; *our* 'author', in quotes, engulfs *the* author. "Our Hamlet of Europe is watching millions of ghosts" says Paul Valery. And they are watching him! Let's begin to gaze at this particular ghost through a Stratfordian lens.

*Hamlet*, Harold Bloom noted, has, *par excellence*, become mythic, like the Bible and Homer, in the way it haunts, enslaves, creates, transforms, and perplexes, us all. We, the vessels, victims, and vehicles of haunting authorial ghosts, we are written *by* them! Uncanny books and their authors become mythic. They change us and we change them. The concept, or myth, or legend, which we form of an author, influences how we interpret that author. And, however carefully we read it, however true our judgement, a text may still be influenced by what we believe of an author; the relationship is reciprocal. Witness: the Second Quarto of *Hamlet* uncannily inverts and subverts the fierce revenge tragedy straight-handedness of the First Quarto text, into total writing, and has paralysed interpretations ever since.



Uniquely, for Shakespeare, we have *Hamlet* in three very different versions, built on at least two prose versions of the Norse saga. Both we, and the author, step into a different river every time. Our own Eddi (Margrethe) Jolly has decisively weighed in on the issue of the authenticity of the First Quarto.

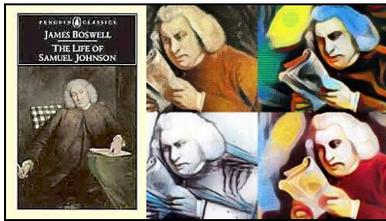
And steadily the Stratfordians themselves, such as Ron Rosenbaum, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Shakespeare-s-Badass-Quarto/235158> are heading towards finding ways to accept this also, pushing the dating back to the 1580s. So, a big writing evolution: *three* successive creative reshapings, transformations! The Second Quarto hauntingly and fascinatingly subverting the more literal transmission of the saga in the First Quarto! The huge stitches or contours of the saga, which carry over as mythic remnants, in the form of macabre earth tremors growling in the basement, uncannily hollow out the almost drawing room tragedy character of it! This produces the interminable cognitive dissonance of the congruent contradictions, causing the uncanniness, which Stephen Booth evokes in *On the Value of 'Hamlet'*.

So, inevitably, Stratfordians too have created their own author, and wow, does it show in the text! as we shall see in a moment. Ripe for deconstruction!

But we Oxfordians willy nilly have also created and are gripped by a legend, an author, a wild and hyperbolic author, Whitman's 'wolfish earl',

<https://www.bartleby.com/229/5005.html>

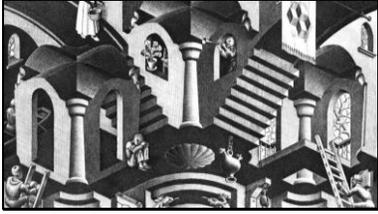
One in some ways, (some!) strangely at odds with the mythos of our meticulous diligent empiricist focus on factual research, which mirrors, so to say, the gentlemanly side of *Hamlet*.



This does not negate the factual research.

Not for nothing did Bernard Shaw accuse Boswell, the first truly modern, iconically realist, biographer, of *creating* Dr Johnson! We realise this does *not* mean that Boswell *invented* his material. But it left him free to magisterially transform the paradigm critic, the veritable summator of the literary eighteenth century enlightenment, into the post-romantic Carlyle legend of the nineteenth, sometimes even by out-manipulating Samuel Johnson in his lifetime, as in the awesome encounter with Johnson's arch opponent John Wilkes.

'The death of the author' or 'the deconstruction of the author' does not entail that the life is irrelevant. But not the sole relevant. We Oxfordians are free and constrained *both* to research in our pertinacious way, *and* to draw on the mythic properties of our author, aware of the wider context. We cannot help it. If ever there was a post-modern trickster writer before post-modernism, it is the author of the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*. Some authors just are more germane to uncanny post-modernisms than others, whether through Byzantine labyrinths, like Borges and Joyce, and the author of *Hamlet*, or deliciously demure concealments, like Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf.



And, if your assumptions do not allow for this, but only of a Stratfordian commonsense view of an author, then, paradoxically, *you* will end up changing the text, creating *another* author.



I was faced with these implications in a startling interchange with Nina Green, some time ago on Phaeton. Nina had put up on her site <http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/> a piece from the Cecil papers, a report (1573) by Burghley's man Bernard Dewhurst on Oxford, spying and reporting on money and property matters, until we come to this: [http://oxford-shakespeare.com/CecilPapers/CP\\_159-110.pdf](http://oxford-shakespeare.com/CecilPapers/CP_159-110.pdf)

“Mr Gent saith my Lord requireth £3000 of your Lordship for his marriage money, and offereth to deliver Combe Neville to your Lordship again. My Lady saith that my Lord in some color [=choler?] seemed not to be pleased that his men in prison for Fante [=Faunt] and Clapton's matter are not delivered. He saith he spoke to your Lordship before his going to Hedingham for them, and they are not yet delivered, and that he will never speak to you for them again, but will prove some other friends for them, *and further that the villains his enemies were favourably heard at the Council board with smiling countenance between my Lord of Leicester and your Lordship.*”

And there suddenly we have the ferocious lightning whiplash, the lordly mythic motif, of a young Hamlet or a young King Lear, actually expressed in the spoken life. I commented on this to Nina Green, and she, in turn, noticed in response that there also we have, in two lines, the text and language that is fused into art sentences in:

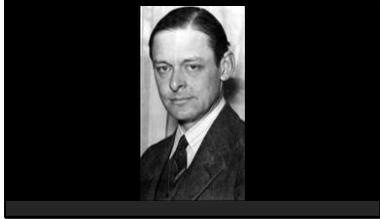
*O villain, villain, smiling damned villain.  
My tables, meet it is I set it down  
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain  
At least, I am sure it may be so in Denmark.*

(One for the gallery there I think!)

Yes, here we have an author of *Hamlet* who has much of Hamlet in him, and yet in whom human retaliatory ferocity is mysteriously transformed into miraculously explosive and deconstructive art. Corambis into Polonius! this art turns nearly all of us into Hamlets, or anti-Hamlets. The author may be *more* or *other* than Hamlet but

cannot be *less*. But who now is Hamlet? Hero or anti-hero, author or anti-author? It is near universally recognised, by Keats or Bradley for instance, that *Hamlet* has *more of the author in it, and him*, than any other character or play.

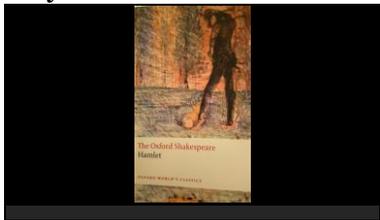
At the same time, no play more iconically transmutes this by subtler, more far reaching, all-enveloping, *art*; the Second Quarto inverts, and subverts, the First. And this, in turn, is how it becomes true, as Hazlitt says, that it is *we* who are Hamlet. Unless you want to follow the Hamlet-esque early TS Eliot in saying *Hamlet* is an artistic failure, does not know what it is doing.



This author of *Hamlet* is no less ferociously lordly, and indulges in enormous compression and ellipticality of language, in his freedom, paradoxicality, multiplicity, and lightning swiftness of mind, which his created character incandescently shares, as Dover Wilson shows.

[http://hewardwilkinson.co.uk/sites/default/files/Background%20Reading%20for%20Playing%20with%20the%20Play%20within%20the%20Play%20in%20Hamlet\\_.PDF](http://hewardwilkinson.co.uk/sites/default/files/Background%20Reading%20for%20Playing%20with%20the%20Play%20within%20the%20Play%20in%20Hamlet_.PDF)

And this brings me to his post-modernity which is, in recent editing, missed by some very well-established Stratfordians indeed!



In their 1987 Oxford Edition of Shakespeare, our friends, Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, extract or pull the fourth, and last, - and the most 'visiting Martian'-ish, - of Hamlet's four fully developed soliloquies, 'how all occasions....', out of the main text (as the First Folio also does, nor is it yet in the First Quarto).

This pivotal, cusp, turning point, speech, - culminantly epitomising the subversive, cognitively dissonant, mercuriality of the Second Quarto, - the most despairingly radical and profound, explicitly reason-subversive, post-modern speech, turning reason against reason, in the whole of *Hamlet*! They dub it simply a 'more expansive version of the ending of 4.4', one which, says the editor GR Hibbard, in the single play version, 'do[es] nothing to advance the action, nor.....reveal anything new about Hamlet and his state of mind.'



I want to lure you in to this stunning speech, with the vital introit. Please note the apparently casually lofty hidden double, or reversed, negatives, traps for the commonsense critic, at: 'Will not debate the question of this straw' and 'Is not to stir without great argument'.

The three *dramatis personae* are Hamlet, the Captain, and Rosencrantz. 'Imposthume' is an internal abscess.

**HAMLET**

Good sir, whose powers are these?

**Captain**

They are of Norway, sir.

**HAMLET**

How purposed, sir, I pray you?

**Captain**

Against some part of Poland.

**HAMLET**

Who commands them, sir?

**Captain**

The nephew to old Norway, Fortinbras.

**HAMLET**

Goes it against the main of Poland, sir,  
Or for some frontier?

**Captain**

Truly to speak, and with no addition,  
We go to gain a little patch of ground  
That hath in it no profit but the name.  
To pay five ducats, five, I would not farm it;  
Nor will it yield to Norway or the Pole  
A ranker rate, should it be sold in fee.

**HAMLET**

Why, then the Polack never will defend it.

**Captain**

Yes, it is already garrison'd.

**HAMLET**

Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats  
Will not debate the question of this straw:  
This is the imposthume of much wealth and peace,  
That inward breaks, and shows no cause without  
Why the man dies. I humbly thank you, sir.

**Captain**

God buy you, sir.

*Exit*

**ROSENCRANTZ**

Wilt please you go, my lord?

**HAMLET**

I'll be with you straight, go a little before.

How all occasions do inform against me,  
And spur my dull revenge! What is a man,  
If his chief good and market of his time  
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.  
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not  
That capability and god-like reason  
To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be  
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on the event,  
A thought which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward, I do not know  
Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do';  
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means  
To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me:  
Witness this army of such mass and charge  
Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
Whose spirit with divine ambition puff'd  
Makes mouths at the invisible event,  
Exposing what is mortal and unsure  
To all that fortune, death and danger dare,  
Even for an egg-shell. Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When honour's at the stake. How stand I then,  
That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,  
Excitements of my reason and my blood,  
And let all sleep? while, to my shame, I see  
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,  
That, for a fantasy and trick of fame,  
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
Which is not tomb enough and continent  
To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,  
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (4.4)

Well, now, unable to touch such a famous passage as 'Is not to stir without great argument', this edition goes on to commit an alternative outrage in the name of commonsense. They change the 'not', the potent abyssal negative, which they totally pass over, in Hamlet's aside with the Captain:

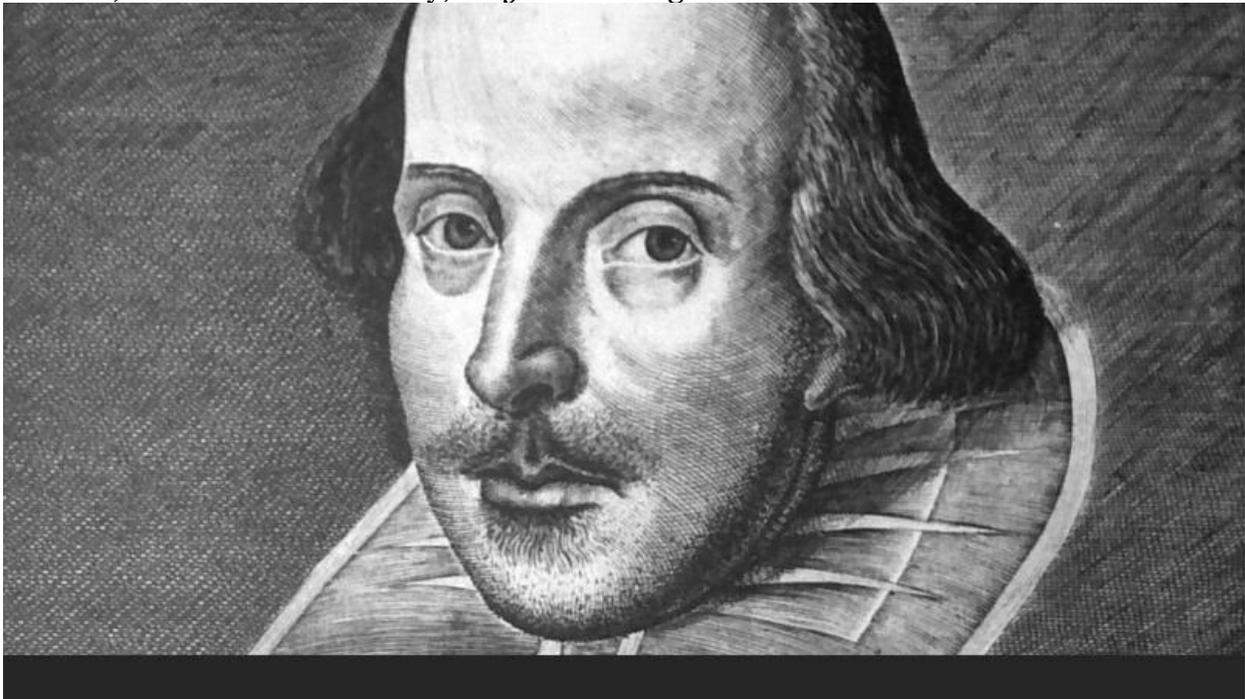
*'Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats  
Will not debate the question of this straw:'*

to the blandest of dullnesses, destroying the metaphor in the process (and Hibbard even, uneasily, attributes those first two lines to the Captain!):

*'Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats  
Will **now** debate the question of this straw'*

Bless them, they think it's simply obvious.

Seemingly a mere eggshell of a post-modern point, but symptom of a bigger one: the deep incapacity of some iconic modern Stratfordians to come remotely near what kind of mind, what kind of creativity, *they* are dealing with.



In so doing, *they create* an author, another author. They think they are just applying commonsense, whereas it is impossible, for them, to *not create* an author, a contradiction of an author more bizarre than anything in *Hamlet*.

But, consequently, for us also!



We, with subtle differences between ourselves, and considerable speculation, are both *finding*, but, in finding, also *creating*, a whole alternative author, an alternative author *scenario*, in Stephanie Hughes' word. There is a world of difference between seamlessly linking life and work, where the link is *not* in dispute, (as, - beyond doubt, - with Dickens), and adducing the life to *prove* a link your

opponents do not accept. That mythically and philosophically *assumes* the exclusive primacy of fact. In a manner, it begs the question, the two are so deeply entangled.

*We* need to confidently connect with modern academia, therefore we should disburthen ourselves of *unnecessary* oppositions and polarities. Without denying the relevance of the life, we have everything to gain by recognising that, here if anywhere, the relationship of life and work is fantastically and irreducibly reflexive and dialectical.

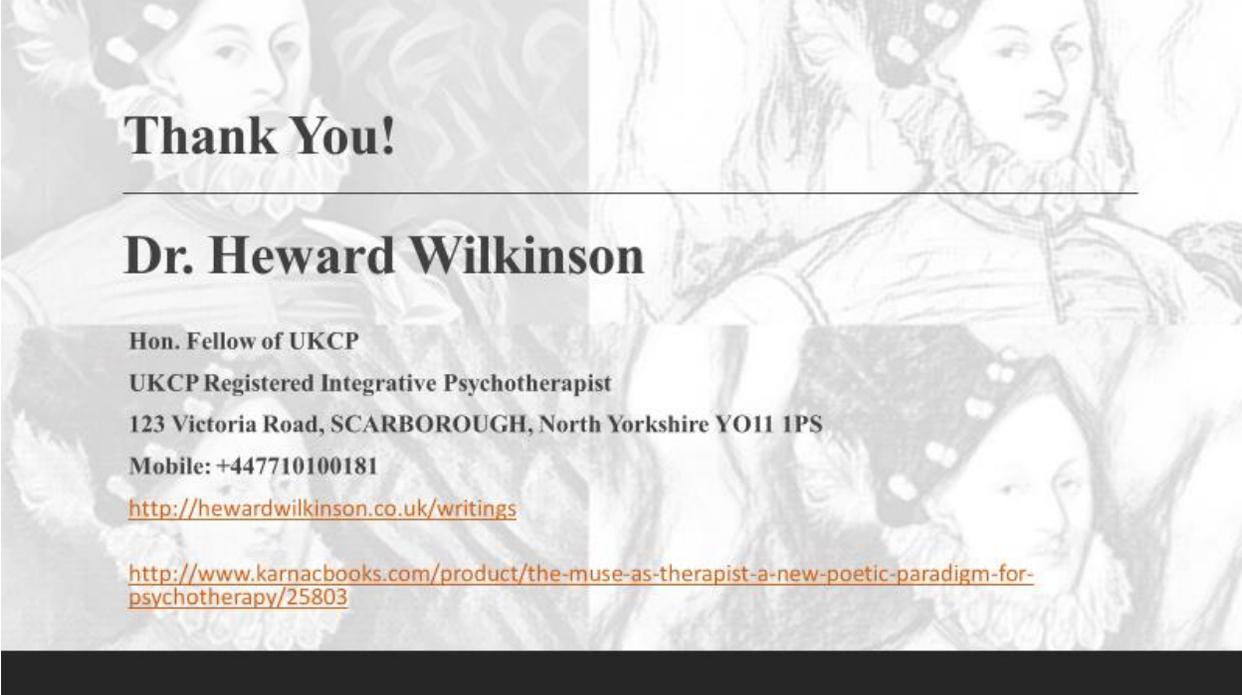
If anyone knew this better than everyone, it is our author, the author of *Hamlet*, in creating the first really post-modern drama, with its unfathomable paradoxes, especially the tantalising intersection of the real and the portrayed, - Hamlet's "to hold, *as 'twere*, the mirror up to nature".

For this is absolutely not an either/or, but the reverse. If some of our Stratfordian friends succumb to this bizarre post-modern forgetting, that is no reason why *we* should shackle *ourselves* by following their hyper- or pseudo- commonsense.

The very possibility of the Authorship Question destabilises the concept of Authorship. It is our opportunity, not our difficulty. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio.....' Our problematic is the very epitome of a post-modern problematic.

'For the snark *was* a boojum, you see.'





**Thank You!**

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