

SHAPIRO REVISITED

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Some will have read my review of 'Contested Will' in our last issue, and some more on our website (www.deveresociety.co.uk). I found myself involved with an 'orthodox' website, and with one of its most prominent 'orthodox' polemicists, Tom Reedy, whom I invited to read my review on the website, which he did. He wrote to me:-

'As to your review of Jim's book, you're not a very good writer, you're not a very good reviewer [I have never claimed either commendation], and your thinking is as muddled as your use of English. In other words, it reads like much of the Oxfordian literature I've read, most all of which could be used to illustrate the work of Justin Kruger and David Dunning [who they?].

For example, what are we to make of this passage?

"He [Shapiro] should have learnt from our experiences with the Prince Tudor theorists – ask them for their facts (defective) and their logic (none – why on earth should consign her clandestine baby to the Wriothesley and Montagu families, both rock-ribbed Roman Catholic families and almost certainly politically disaffected?) – and weak theories will be exposed."

Or this one ?

"Our Oxfordian facts (based as so many are on circumstantial evidence) are in themselves quite deficient enough when they become divorced from the logic we apply to them, to attract the attention of a clear-minded researcher, or even devil's advocate."

[Gee, and I thought both sentences were diamond clear!]

I would might [sic] this from a freshman English class, at least early in the semester. Unfortunately this is pretty average* for Oxfordians. Your understanding of Jim's thesis is similarly deficient.'

He then cut me off, before I could ask the vital question, 'In what respect is my understanding of Professor Shapiro's thesis deficient ?'

Fortunately there is an interview with Shapiro on the Folger Library website. In reply to a question as to what he hoped his book might do, he says,

'I hope to reach those whose minds are not yet resolved and provide those who find themselves arguing with sceptics the right counter-arguments. I have one last aim in mind in writing this book and that's discouraging my fellow Shakespeareans from reading the plays autobiographically; unless and until they stop doing so, the controversy will never go away.'

In his own terms, without providing the counterarguments – as my review makes clear – he is right: the controversy will persist. To maintain this completely puritanical stance of throwing overboard 99% of the content of the last fifty years of biographical historical novel writing, the ‘orthodox’ should be attacking the autobiographical element in those items of evidence on which we rely. For example, the argument that the consignment of Bertram to Crown wardship and his subsequent courtship and marriage experiences relate autobiographically to Oxford is so far greeted with silence.

The ‘orthodox’ should comment on the contemporary political references and also on points of literary criticism. To date the ‘orthodox’ website contributors have yet to tell me how the death of Falstaff as recounted in Henry V follows so closely the account of the death of Socrates in Plato’s *Phaedo*, for which there was no translation into Latin or any ‘modern’ language by then made.

My friends would add their own ‘unanswerables’.

Shapiro in the interview concedes that Supreme Court Justice Stevens thinks the circumstantial evidence in favour as Oxford is sufficient to make the case. ‘Shakespearean scholars have a different view of evidence, and hold a comparatively dim view of what Justice Stevens and other think adequate.’ They have ‘a different view’, but we have yet to be told what it is, and how it is superior to that of one of the world’s finest legal experts on the skill of definition. Circumstantial evidence is merely evidence to which logic and judgment has to be applied to arrive at its full value. What is Professor Shapiro’s ‘bright’ superior view, and how does it trump the lawyers’?

The problem is that these people think that their superior qualifications in their field make their views beyond criticism, let alone that of those who might have other respectable academic qualifications – I had to tell Tom Reedy I was translating Homer in class before he was born. They remind me of the Italian Cardinal who confronted by the proofs of the theory of Copernicus is reported to have rejected them on the basis that he, a Cardinal of Holy Church, had read the whole of Aristotle and it contained nothing about the theory.

In conclusion I quote more of my ‘muddled’ sentences from the review:

‘[Shapiro] dare not venture into the minefield of the correspondences between events in Oxford’s life and the references in the works. He cannot use such correspondences for the life of William Shakespeare, and so on the inapplicable principle of what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander he has to leave that vital aspect of the Oxfordian case inviolate.’

So there can be no meeting of minds until anti-Oxfordians take on board the need to confute the autobiographical references and with them the political references which have to be contemporary with the writing of (the relevant versions of) the plays, and finally the ‘unanswerable’ points arising from ‘Shakespeare’s’ use of sources. They cannot expect Oxfordians to drop them without giving the Oxfordians a better reason to do so, than mere ‘orthodox’ expertise.

*Perhaps Moth from Act I scene ii of As You Like It can help (with the word 'average' substituted for 'apt'): -

'How mean you , sir; I pretty, and my saying average? Or I average, and my saying pretty?'