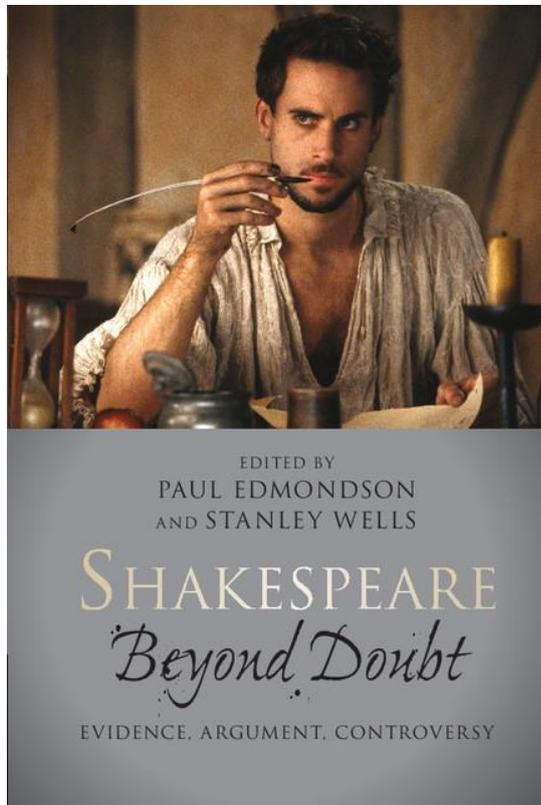


Shakespeare Beyond Doubt

Review by Richard Malim, Secretary of the De Vere Society



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“Paul Edmondson in the website booklet Shakespeare Bites Back plaintively inquires: why it is so many lawyers have become involved on the doubters’ side? The answer is obvious: no lawyer would ever consider the evidence for William of Stratford and think he wrote the works.”

Stanley Wells: “None of the allusions to Shakespeare between 1616 and 1642 explicitly and incontrovertibly identifies him with Stratford-upon-Avon.”

“David Kathman offers possible allusions to Stratford – even though the town is never mentioned in the plays.”

“In this book the Birthplace Trust simply confirms its own beliefs, whims or prejudices if you like, but does not address evidence and arguments put forward by others.”

The failure to consult on their opponents’ case is the besetting weakness of the whole book: the Stratfordian experts seem to think that their case is the final judgment, when all in fact they are doing is setting one side of the argument. They draw up their own battlelines and then declare victory, without really engaging the enemy. Oxfordian criticism generally sets out both the ‘orthodox’ and the Oxfordian cases, and presents a balanced picture.

Dr Paul Edmondson and Professor Stanley Wells have edited a collection of essays to answer those who doubt the ‘orthodox’ attribution of the plays to William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon. These doubters are usually called ‘anti-Stratfordians’.

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We are anti-Startfordians because we doubt the traditional adcription of the works.

From the outset, however, they mislabel such doubters as ‘anti-Shakespearians’, suggesting to the unwary that such doubters despise the works. We do not. We are all pro-Shakespearians because we love

and admire the works. The question is: who is meant by “Shakespeare”? Or, what was the name of the author? Oxfordians believe that Shakspeare and Stratford-upon-Avon had almost nothing to do with the works; that the real author was a more substantial and important figure in the history of world literature; that to fit the comparatively lesser man into the narrow compass of Stratford, they have to exaggerate the likely quality of the education there and play down the high scholarship exhibited in the works themselves.

Paul Edmondson concludes by claiming authority. He asserts: “There is the loaded assumption that even though one may lack [in the opinion of the “knowledgeable and expert authority”] the necessary knowledge and expertise, it is always acceptable to challenge or contradict a knowledgeable and expert authority. It is not.” Edmondson might read Kundera: “The difference between the university graduate and the autodidact lies not so much in the extent of knowledge as the extent of vitality and self-confidence.”¹ Equally he might remember Schoenbaum’s Rule 7: “Intuitions, convictions and subjective judgments generally, carry no weight of evidence. This is no matter how learned, respected or confident the authority.”² Likewise ‘orthodox’ Professor Ellis’s view that because an academic is a great expert on Elizabethan literature, he is not given the right to have his biographical conclusions treated as incontrovertible.³

But Edmondson in the website booklet *Shakespeare Bites Back* plaintively inquires: why it is so many lawyers have become involved on the doubters’ side.

Similarly Professor Kate McLuskie of the Shakespeare Institute, Birmingham University, criticises the use by anti-Stratfordians of the term “Reasonable Doubt” in The Declaration, because she says “it presents doubt as the legitimising source of scepticism without establishing the terms or the nature of the evidence through which that doubt might be resolved.” But Edmondson in the website booklet *Shakespeare Bites Back* plaintively inquires why it is so many lawyers have become involved on the doubters’ side: it is because they are experts on evidence, which has in the past been a matter of

distress to Shapiro. There is no contribution from any lawyers or any historians in the book. They rely solely on literary experts’ opinions.

Furthermore, their contributions might be far more valuable if they had shown familiarity with anti-Stratfordian arguments or had sought to refute them line by line. It is of course much easier for them to tell us what we believe than actually to ask us or read our literature.⁴ To be fair to these experts, they might have seen the film *Anonymous*, whose failure was greeted with much relief by many Oxfordians. Unfortunately the film’s publicists like the promoters of *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* did not see fit to consult the De Vere Society before conducting a public ‘debate’ (even Edmondson uses the inverted commas!) in June 2011, let alone invite us to speak.

Six contentions against Oxfordians

1. The dating of the plays. “The approximate order in which Shakespeare’s plays were written and their dates of first performance (spanning the period 1590-1614) have now been securely established...” writes Professor Macdonald P. Jackson, unconscious of the contradiction in terms. The good professor has clearly not consulted Kevin Gilvary’s *The Dating of Shakespeare’s Plays* (2010) which summarises not only the evidence but also all the arguments both for the Professor’s contentions and against.⁵

We cannot tell what revisions any one play went through before it appeared in print with the fixed text(s) we have now.

Without a review of the evidence against, there should be no certainty in the Professor’s judgement.

2. Evidence of Stylometrics. ‘Stylometrics’ receives criticism even in ‘orthodox’ circles. A fundamental fallacy is that the bulk of each play was written as a one-off at one time in a particular year.

The internal evidence is totally against that idea. Discounting the Oxford autobiographical references (only a few are considered in the book: the majority along with all the topical ones pass without comment or refutation), we can see from the topical and other references that *Love’s Labours Lost* was written soon after the negotiations for the Peace of Nevers 1579 and the visit of the Muscovy delegation 1583.⁶ Any reference to those events would be a waste of effort

on the stage at any much later time. Like some of the other plays we can see parts were substantially written at later dates, with later topicalities inserted. The puzzled critic confesses that the last act of this play, “for instance, seems more mature than the first act.”⁷ We cannot tell what revisions any one play went through before it appeared in print with the fixed text(s) we have now. The point is admitted by Professors Mardock and Rasmussen (page 114).

3. Collaboration. Because we date the first drafts of the plays before the earlier suggested collaborators began to write, we suggest that these writers were in fact following Oxford, and not the other way round as the ‘orthodox’ argue. For the later period towards the end of the writer’s career the later alleged collaborations seem merely to be the working-up or modernisation of fragments left behind at Oxford’s death. The most obvious is the continuity disaster in *Two Noble Kinsmen* where the absence of a guiding hand causes Fletcher to make a clear mistake,⁸ evidencing the non-availability of that guiding hand. Oxfordians suggest that it would have been beneath his own conception of himself to require the services of a collaborator.

4. Hands-on stage presence. Here Oxfordians accept in spades the basic premise that the writer would have to be an expert in the mechanics of stage production as well as on hand for any rewritings for extensions of time both dramatic effect and for costume changes, and to take advantage of the skills (or cover the deficiencies) of particular actors.

Professor Jackson quotes an early specimen of Oxford’s poetry and compares it with a passage from *Hamlet* written up to 35 years later.

A particularly valuable essay is that by Professors Mardock and Rasmussen on the topic; they go on to say that an aristocratic playwright could not hide behind an illiterate player, “as Oxford is imagined by his supporters to have done”. The Oxfordian reply to this contention can be found on our website and in my recently published book.⁹

5. Oxford’s poetry. It is frequently stated that Oxford’s acknowledged poetry is not good enough: in part this is the case, as Oxford’s own poetry begins with verses made when he was probably no more than thirteen years of age. Professor Jackson quotes

an early specimen and compares it with a passage from *Hamlet* written anything up to 35 years later. Only some of Oxford’s early poetry was written in fourteeners and this meter does is used by Shakespeare (e.g. *Midsummer Night’s Dream*; *Cymbeline*). It may sound very different when put to music. Jackson should note that the translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* by Arthur Golding, widely accepted as a major source of Shakespeare’s works, uses fourteeners. Golding of course was Oxford’s maternal uncle and dedicated the translation to William Cecil, Oxford’s guardian while living at Cecil House with . . . Edward de Vere, earl of Oxford.

[Christopher Dams adds: Fourteeners do indeed sound better when put to music. Many hymns are in fact 14ers, spread over two lines, eg: “O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come / Be Thou our help while troubles last and our eternal home. “Further examples include ‘Amazing Grace’ and the carol: “While shepherds watched.” The tunes are listed as 8,6,8,6 in hymnals.

[Jan Cole writes: I think that ‘fourteeners’ (a line of seven feet) began as an attempt to copy this meter from classical Greek and Latin, and it was used in narrative verse in the later Middle Ages and in Tudor times. Oxford and Golding would have known it best from the poetry of Henry Howard, Oxford’s uncle, the ill-fated earl Surrey e.g. “In winter’s just return, when Boreas gan his reign, And every tree unclothed fast, as nature taught them plain, . . .”

[Fourteeners were usually written in rhyming couplets, and the natural ‘fall’ of the rhythm led to the 8,6,8,6 syllabic of the common ballad, which was then written out as a four line stanza, rhyming usually a,b,c,b, e.g. “I fear thee, ancient Mariner! I fear thy skinny hand!”

[Much of Oxford’s poetry is in fact iambic pentameter and rather good, e.g. “If women could be fair and yet not fond . . .” or “Were I a king I could command content . . .” and “The labouring man that tills the fertile soil . . .” The last was prefaced to *Cardanus Comfort* 1573. Was there any other poet writing so well in the mid-1570s?]

If Oxfordian sources had been consulted, the Professor would have had an entirely adequate reply.

6. Impossible Conspiracy. The suggestion that it would need an impossible conspiracy to keep from becoming knowledge that Oxford was the dramatist. All the people who needed to know knew, and no

doubt many other people did as well, but the social climate was such that it was in no one's interest to draw attention to it. Oxfordian sources show the breaches in that paradigm. A similar contemporary example is the concealment of the adultery of the national hero Philip Sidney with Lady Rich.¹⁰ Modern silences cover President Kennedy's sexual indiscretions, the famous conductor's secret family in Paris while his wife was dying publicly of multiple sclerosis in England, and the Queen's cousin's spouse on the public stage in concert halls.

The failure to consult on their opponents' case is the besetting weakness of the whole book: the professors seem to think that their case is the final judgment, when all in fact they are doing is setting one side of the argument. They draw up their own battlelines and then declare victory, without really engaging the enemy. Oxfordian literature generally sets out both the 'orthodox' and the Oxfordian cases, and presents a balanced picture.

Stanley Wells: "None of the allusions to Shakespeare between 1616 and 1642 explicitly and incontrovertibly identifies him with Stratford-upon-Avon."

Part I of the book is entitled 'Sceptics'. Only Chapter 4 by Alan Nelson the palaeographer will be of direct concern to Oxfordians, as we would agree with many points concerning other claimants. Alan Nelson has still not answered the criticism and corrections by Peter Moore, Nina Green, Noemi Magri regarding his own biography of Oxford.¹¹

Part II is entitled "Shakespeare as Author". Chapter 6 is by Professor Wells himself, "Allusions to Shakespeare to 1642". There is a mass of references to 1616, and then we are told, "none explicitly and incontrovertibly identifies him with Stratford-upon-Avon." He should put the statement at the end of his Chapter, because apart from the odd references to Avon, and to a dead author's tomb – some obviously metaphorical – there is nothing of the slightest consequence once the Oxfordian case is applied to many of these allusions. There is no discussion on the essential phrase "the first heir of my Invention" in the dedication to *Venus and Adonis*. Professor Wells omits the last sentence of the Manningham Diary entry: "Shakespeare's name was

William" which shows that the diarist had to remind himself of the great playwright's forename for an event which had taken place "upon a time" [i.e. sometime ago] and probably about a man who in 1602 was no longer seen in London. Similarly, Stanley Wells finds "somewhat obscure in its allusiveness" the poem (by John Davies of Hereford in *Scourge of Folly*, 1610) which begins:

To our English Terence, Mr. Will. Shakespeare

Some say (good Will), which I, in sport, do sing
Hadst thou not played some kingly parts in sport
Thou hadst been a companion for a king.....

This poem is crystal clear to Oxfordians. The name 'Terence' was a pseudonym and well known in Elizabethan times as such.¹³ It might have been helpful if Wells had discussed the Oxfordian contention that Jonson's play *Every Man Out of His Humour* contains a full review by caricature of the less appealing characteristics of William Shakspeare (and complete inappropriateness of any suggestion of him as a writer).

Kathman offers possible allusions to Stratford – even though the town is never mentioned in the plays.

Professor Jowett, a promoter of the collaboration theory, would have us accept that the six signatures "Shakspe" (or whatever) preceded by four signifying "William" are "finally compelling" that the same writer wrote Hand D, the parts of *Sir Thomas More* appropriated to Shakespeare. It is notable that Jane Cox (*Shakespeare in the Public Records*, HMSO, 1985) doubts the signatures were even by the same hand.

"Shakespeare and Warwickshire" is contributed by David Kathman, followed by Professor Chillington Rutter on "Shakespeare and School". They accept that there is no evidence that Shaksper went to the Stratford Grammar School, but claim he received an excellent education there, which would make it a marked exception to the general run of Elizabethan education c.1580 as evidenced by Mulcaster in his *Elementarie*.¹⁴ In the period, no pupil made it directly from the school to University.

Furthermore there is a bizarre scene in *Merry Wives of Windsor* (4.1) in which William Page, the boy,

is asked to decline the Latin pronoun *hic* – well within the ambit of a second year schoolboy: yet *qui* defeats him. The scene bears no relation to the plot and is apparently included to show the culturally incompetent Shakspeare. Moreover, they offer no reason why Shakspeare the most complete scholar of his generation would bring up two daughters as virtual illiterates.

For her part, Professor Rutter in seeking to persuade us to deny the extent of the author's scholarship misquotes Beaumont's letter, omitting the italicised word: "And from all learning keep these lines as clear As Shakespeare's *best* are,..." Kathman offers possible allusions to Stratford – although the town is never mentioned in the plays. I imagine that he may well be right geographically, and my suggestion is that Oxford negated the conclusion that Shaksper had anything to do with the plays by the denigratory context of those references, and including Autolycus in *A Winter's Tale*, shown picking the pocket of the Clown for local colour. Shakspeare's friends as listed by Kathman add nothing to the claim of his authorship, save that he suggests that the aristocratic Thomas Russell was an intimate: he was named as overseer in the Will, a piece of typical social climbing by Shaksper, again proving nothing. The use of alleged Warwickshire words again proves nothing for the Autolycus reason above, especially when set against the much greater use of Essex words and constructions in the plays.¹⁵

Part III is entitled "A Cultural Phenomenon: Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare?" and leads off with Professor McLuskie's "Authorship and Conspiracy in Shakespeare's Life" where she suggests that 'conspiracy theory' is an essential for a certain type of reader to interact with the plays. As far as those Oxfordians who have rejected *Anonymous* are concerned this is an odd assertion. For us, there is no conspiracy theory or any need for one. Stuart Hampton-Reeves writes that The Declaration of Reasonable Doubt "normalises and legitimises the authorship question" [which would appear to mean that the 'orthodox' case is not *Beyond Doubt*]. Furthermore, Hampton-Reeves accepts that the sceptics are not raving lunatics as often portrayed: "The anti-Shakespeareans I have corresponded with in the course of writing this chapter have been friendly, witty and brave, since they know that what

I have been writing is essentially a critique which is unlikely to put them in a good light."

However, Hampton-Reeves writes no word of analysis or attempted refutation; it is clear he has never read a word of our criticism, because he writes "until the Declaration is able to supplement its list of names with real, documentary evidence [does he mean to the same or to a better cultural level than that for William Shaksper?], the Declaration's second purpose, to legitimize the academic study of the authorship issue, will remain unfulfilled."

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The great gap in the book is the failure to dissect the analyses of those modern writers who reject William Shaksper as the author. This omission gives anti-Stratfordians a field day, just as any serious attempt to deal with the numerous topical, autobiographical (oddly there are no entries in the index for the Sonnets¹⁶) and other references in the plays to Oxford and his known expertise in many fields fortifies us in our conviction. This conviction is not a matter of blind faith as some essayists think, it is a construct of arguments on evidence and logic, and reasonable deductions from them. The 'orthodox' do not examine, let alone grasp, the evidence that only Oxford had the sufficient education, access to books, life experiences and leisure (all denied to Shaksper).

Dr. Edmondson writes: "One likes to think that if there were any actual evidence that Shakespeare did not write the plays and poems attributed to him, then it would be Shakespearian scholars themselves who would discover and propagate it in their quest to know as much as possible about him [presumably he means the actual writer]. No that would be undeniable and truly astounding". Indeed! The evidence is available already. In this book the Birthplace Trust simply confirms its own beliefs, whims or prejudices if you like, but does not address evidence and arguments put forward by others.

Richard Malim, Bristol. July 2013

1. Milan Kundera: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Faber & Faber 1984) p.55.
2. S. Schoenbaum: *Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship* (North Western U. P. 1966) p.178.
3. David Ellis: *The Truth About William Shakespeare* (Edinburgh U.P. 2012).
4. “Oxfordians must therefore challenge the conventional dating of these plays to the period 1604/5-1613/4 and claim that, having all been written by 1604, they were posthumously released year by year.” (Jackson at p.103) There is no evidence that the plays post 1604 were “released year by year.” Most references to plays occur in the Revels Accounts for 1604-05, 1611-12 and 1612-13.
5. Kevin Gilvary, ed. *Dating Shakespeare’s Plays*. Parapress 2010. See www.deveresociety.co.uk for details.
6. The essays do not deal with Dover Wilson’s assertion: “to credit [*Love’s Labours Lost* to Shaksper] is to invite one either to believe in miracles or to disbelieve in ‘the man from Stratford’” *The Essential Shakespeare*. Cambridge U.P. 1934 pp.41-2.
7. John Wain: *The Living World of Shakespeare* (Macmillan 1978) p.30.
8. Fletcher’s continuity error in *Two Noble Kinsmen* 2.1 is followed by a contradiction in 2.2, which Shapiro (*Contested Will* - Faber & Faber 2010 pp.294-5) bizarrely claims as evidence of direct collaboration!
9. www.deveresociety.co.uk. Richard Malim. *The Earl of Oxford and the Making of “Shakespeare”: The Literary Life of Edward de Vere in Context* (McFarland 2012).
10. See Peter Moore: *The Lame Storyteller, Poor and Despised* (Laugwitz 2009) “The Stella Cover-up” pp.312-21; Nina Green’s website www.oxford-shakespeare.com ; Noemi’s Magri’s essays in *Great Oxford* (Parapress 2004) are also available on the website. Richard Roe’s *Shakespeare’s Guide to Italy* (Harper Perennial 2012).
11. Alan Nelson. *Monstrous Adversary* (Liverpool U.P. 2003). Even the title indicates that it is not a balanced account of Oxford.
12. Peter Moore’s review of Nelson is at pp.288-311 of *The Lame Storyteller. Jekyll and Hyde*.
13. Terence: P. Terentius Afer, the Latin comic playwright, was believed in Elizabethan times to be the front man for a noble Roman playwright: perhaps that is why the title for ‘Shakespeare’ is selected as a comparison. See for authorities *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1911 pp.639-641.
14. Richard Mulcaster. *The first part of the elementarie which entreateth chiefe of the right writing of our English tung*. 1582, p.262.
15. Gary Goldstein. “Shakespeare’s Native ‘Tongue’” www.deveresociety.co.uk Archives, November 2009.
16. We would like any ‘orthodox’ interpretation of Sonnet 69, ll.13,14 (if addressed to Southampton): “But why thy odour matcheth not thy show. / The solve is this, - that thou dost common grow.” - nice evidence to “discover and propagate”.