

CHAPTER 1.

THE OXFORDIAN SYNTHESIS

The present document, a University dissertation which argues for the relevance of an impressive if unconventional body of evidence, in support of an equally unconventional conclusion, has been completed in an atmosphere which might perhaps be best compared to a bitter trench warfare. On one side is a shrinking population of tenured professors in English and allied disciplines, which not only believes the official story of Shakespeare, retailed most recently in Park Honan's new biography (1999), and before that by a long list of distinguished but ultimately unconvincing scholars from James Orchard Halliwell-Phillips (1882) to Sir Sidney Lee (1898), E.K. Chambers (1930), Marchette Chute (1949), A.L. Rowse (1963, 1973), Samuel Schoenbaum (1975; 1991) or even Gary Taylor (1989) --- but resents any doubts about this premise as an affront to its integrity and professional mission. On the other side is a collection of eccentrics and free thinkers, mostly without PhDs or other paraphernalia attesting to their status as experts, who might best be compared to Falstaff's recruits in *II Henry IV*. These insist, against all official sanction, that an impressive body of evidence supports a contrary conclusion -- namely that "Shakespeare" was a pen name for Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550-1604).

Whether the traditional and now moribund view of Shakespeare can be kept alive through new life-support technologies to survive the first decade of the new millennium remains an unanswered but significant question at this point in intellectual history. For what is not -- yet -- recognized is that there is a third force allied, sometimes without knowing it, to the Oxfordian heretics. A number of prominent academicians, adapting consciously or otherwise to the present

threat to orthodox cognitive equilibrium, have adopted epistemic positions on the early modern cultural history of Europe which are inexorably undermining conventional views of Shakespeare. Cultural historians such as Leah Marcus in her 1993 study documenting the "iconoclastic" character of the 1623 Shakespeare Folio¹, Annabelle Patterson in her theory of the way literary forms contrive to escape censorship by flying low under the radar of the censor (1984)², or Marjorie Garber, whose *Ghostwriting Shakespeare* (1987) became the first work by a representative of Shakespearean orthodoxy to acknowledge the sanity of the heretics and ask what institutional forces were shaping orthodoxy's (sometimes fabulously constricted and deformed) knowledge of its own subject, have each made significant, though underestimated, contributions to the current intellectual ferment. An "Oxfordian synthesis," integrating such current theoretical approaches with new discoveries such as the de Vere Bible, within the discourse already established in books such as J. Thomas Looney's *"Shakespeare" Identified* (1920), Charlton Ogburn Jr.'s *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984), and William Plumer Fowler's *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford's Letters* (1986), although not yet acknowledged by establishment Shakespeare institutions, is already percolating at events such as Concordia University's annual De Vere Studies Conference³. The present document contributes to the project of bringing the synthesis to fruition and implementing a corresponding pedagogy -- in which students are invited to look with fresh interpretative eyes on the ancient but fascinating literary texts of the Shakespearean canon.

A word is in order regarding the subject of literary research and the concept of "evidence" employed in the present document. In their recent study of Ben Jonson's marginal annotations in the *Fairie Queene* (1995), James A. Riddell and Stanley Stewart offer an articulate defense of the relevance of literary research to interpretation and make an articulate plea on behalf of "evidence" as a primary epistemic category. "When should the critic characterize evidence, before or after it has been examined?" ask Riddell and Stewart, who were dismayed to find that, in their own circles, it was standard practice to characterize evidence *before* it had been examined. In response they offered the following commentary:

The impulse to characterize evidence before it has been seen may be rooted in our instincts: fight or flight. Evidence threatens to complicate our impulse to explain the world in familiar terms. Jonson's annotations are of necessity "conventional" because the alternative might lead us to think that some marks are not "conventional," and possibly even original. Such a possibility involves an epistemological enormity. How can such annotations come into being

¹ See Stritmatter (1999d) for an analysis of Marcus's contribution to the "Oxfordian synthesis."

² Stritmatter (1995) considers some of the implications of Patterson's "hermeneutics of censorship" for Shakespeare studies.

³ Established in 1997, the Conference is now entering its fourth season. In 1999 it drew one hundred and twenty participants, four times the number in 1997, many of them with PhDs or Masters Degrees. At the time of this writing the Board of Directors of the Shakespeare Oxford Society includes three tenured English professors, all of them well-published specialists in the English Renaissance and/or Shakespeare.

unless they are "constructed"? And if they are "constructed," they must be "constructed" -- that is, "conventional" -- made up of material recognizably like themselves "by custom" and "according to precedent." In this way "conventionality" as a concept makes evidence barely predictable and boring, and so, irrelevant. The world of "conventionality" goes on as it did before evidence appeared -- that is, "conventionally" -- thus proving that evidence as a concept is bogus and retrograde in that it threatens theory based on "conventionality".

(1995 133-34)

This dismal state of conventionality is something like a state religion in which the sacred texts are written in a foreign tongue, translations are outlawed, and the purpose of reading is to prepare the acolyte for a successful career handing down a fossilized repository of knowledge to passive conformists:

if the literary scholar knows anything about Shakespeare or Spenser or Donne or Jonson, it is only what everyone else has learned from centuries of accumulated scholarship which, now institutionalized, merely requires a quasi-ritualistic handing down of unchanging and unchangeable lore....."Discovery" is not likely because everything is already "known," everything worth saying has already been said, passed down from our knowledgeable predecessors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

(1-2)

The present study of the marginal annotations of the de Vere Bible, although it differs in scope and intent from Riddell and Stewart's study of Jonson's Spenser annotations, has encountered many similar objections in its preliminary phases. Even before being articulated, the evidence has been "characterized," by dedicated partisans of the Shakespearean orthodoxy, as not only unlikely but, in fact, preposterous -- not a discovery but a "false alarm" (*Smithsonian* April 1995).

Reviewing the published responses to preliminary statements made by the present writer, at forums such as the University of Massachusetts English Department Colloquium (March 1993), the Huntington Library (January 1992), The Shakespeare Authorship Roundtable (January 1992) and the Shakespeare Oxford Society (October 1994, 1996 etc.), it is difficult to understand whether critics such as Alan Nelson, Bruce Smith or David Kathman really understand the argument they are attempting to refute. Alan Nelson's self-contradictory statements are particularly puzzling. Writing to the *Smithsonian* magazine in 1995, Nelson approved the annotator's handwriting as de Vere's⁴ but, as for any possible connection between the Bible and Shakespeare, he stated that he did not "believe in it."⁵ When asked the basis for this belief, Nelson did not answer; subsequently, however, in public statements to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other media sources, Nelson reversed his opinion on the issue of the handwriting.

⁴ "I am 99 and 44/100 certain that the annotating hand is de Vere's," declared Nelson in a May 3 1995 communiqué to the on-line Phaeton discussion group.

⁵ Alan Nelson letter May 27, 1995.

David Kathman, writing for his own on-line web page⁶, is convinced that the alleged correspondences between the Bible and Shakespeare are the illusory consequence of "random" operations⁷ but apparently holds no opinion about the handwriting. Bruce Smith (1993), on the other hand, acknowledges a possible connection between the Bible and the Biblical references of "Shakespeare" but believes, for bizarre reasons⁸, that the de Vere Bible was annotated by someone other than de Vere. One begins to wonder just where the high priesthood of Shakespearean orthodoxy intends to draw its line in the sand.

From a historical perspective, such confused responses are perhaps understandable, however regrettable; they represent reflexive manifestations of the "flight or fight" instinct identified by Stewart and Riddell. No disinterested party surveying the history of the dispute briefly surveyed in appendix M of the present document can fail to realize that the Shakespeare heretics, starting at least with Delia Bacon's *Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* (1857), have built a powerful, cumulative and persuasive case for the falsity of the official dogma of Shakespeare. Starting with J. Thomas Looney's path-breaking work of literary detection, a book which persuaded Sigmund Freud and Leslie Howard, among other prominent intellectuals and artistic figures, that negative case has been inexorably transformed into a positive case supporting the attribution of the works to de Vere. This case, however, has been vigorously -- sometimes viciously -- suppressed within institutions of Higher Education. The result is that more than three generations of intellectuals, in America and in other English speaking dominions as well as England, have been educated to scorn an idea which deserves only their thoughtful respect and investigation. As Hope and Holston summarize this circumstance in their recent witty history of the authorship question:

The best trained and most highly respected professional students of Shakespeare in the colleges and universities of England and America contemplated the seemingly seamless argument presented in "*Shakespeare Identified*" and quickly discovered a flaw in it. The book was written by a man with a funny name. They found their arguments against Looney where they had found their arguments in favor of William Shakspere -- on a title page.

(1992 116)

It may safely be predicted that in such a contentiously anti-intellectual atmosphere any flaws in the present argument will be seized upon by eager would-be critics of the Oxford theory and cited *against that theory* rather than, as would be the practice in a rational debate in which there is room for doubt regarding the relation between premises and conclusions on both sides, merely

⁶ bcpl.lib.md.us/~tross/ws/ox5.html, pp. 1-3, 1/11/98 7:45 p.m.

⁷ For details of these and other (reflexive) critiques of the present study, see chapter Nine and appendix B.

⁸ For Smith's reasons, see Smith 1994, page 60. Smith's criticisms are refuted by Anderson and Stritmatter (1996).

attributing such failures to a particular writer. However, when it comes to the authorship question, general conclusions are "refuted" by recourse to the Tweedledum of trivial distractions and the Tweedledee of ideological character assassination.

Under such circumstances it may therefore be appropriate to stipulate that the present writer is what orthodox academicians are habituated to stigmatizing⁹ as a "committed Oxfordian," viz. a student of intellectual history who read and appreciated the intellectual merits and – if such they be – flaws of authorship classics like "*Shakespeare*" *Identified* (1920) and *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984) long before ever laying eyes upon the de Vere Bible. The authors of such works have fought a long and impressive uphill battle against entrenched dogma, and no cultural historian can fail to be impressed by the extent to which they have prevailed, from a purely intellectual point of view, in most of their engagements with orthodox academicians. In summarizing his criticisms of O.J. Campbell's 1940 *Harper's* critique of his work, Looney projected that

those who wish to believe that the Stratford man wrote the plays, and would be much upset if they thought there was strong evidence that Oxford was the dramatist will, no doubt, be able to draw some comfort from the Professor's pleasant and skillful skimming over the surface of things, but he is not likely to make much impression on serious students of the problem.

(1)

Serious students of the case are increasingly impressed by the cumulative character of the positive evidence which writers such as Charles Wisner Barrell, Ruth Loyd Miller, Dorothy Ogburn, and Charlton Ogburn have assembled over the past seventy years since Looney's initial study. By 1989, when *PBS Frontline* aired their *Shakespeare Mystery*, this accumulation had already swayed many informed and independent students of Shakespeare – Leslie Howard, Orson Welles¹⁰, Sigmund Freud, Tyrone Guthrie, Louis J. Halle, and David McCullough to name only a few -- to endorse the Oxford heresy (SOS Web page¹¹). This list of intellectuals and theatrical figures continues to swell in the present, and now includes Michael Hart, Kristine Linklater, Richard Kennedy, Dr. Felicia Hardison Londrè, Dr. David Richardson, Dr. Jack Shuttleworth, Dr. Ren Draya, Dr. Anne Pluto, Michael York, Sir Derek Jacobi, Sir John Gielgud, Clifton Fadiman, Charles Van Doren and Mortimer Adler, as well as Supreme Court Justices John Paul Stevens, Harry Blackmun and Anthony Kennedy.

⁹ See Richmond Crinkley's 1985 exposé of the ethos of Shakespearean institutions such as the Folger Library (SQ 36:515-522).

¹⁰ "I think Oxford wrote Shakespeare. If you don't agree, there are some awful [sic] funny coincidences to explain away." Quoted in *Persona Grata* by Cecil Beaton & Kenneth Tynan. Putnam, New York (1954) 98.

¹¹ WWW.Shakespeare-Oxford.com. See also www.shakespearefellowship.org/Virtual_Classroom.html for further basic resources.

Soon after viewing the *Shakespeare Mystery*, as a result of his own reading and consideration of Mr. Ogburn's book, the *Shakspeare Allusion Books* (Ingleby 1909), and the books of George Greenwood and Sidney Lee, the present writer joined the ranks of these distinguished skeptics of the Shakespeare myth. Indeed, in a 1991 letter to the editor of the *Shakespeare Oxford Society Newsletter*, written before ever laying eyes on the de Vere Bible, I proposed that the case for Oxford's authorship was already, in effect, a *fait accompli*. In support of this contention I quoted Dr. Warren Hope's 1978 statement to Richard Ohmann, the past editor of *College English* magazine, in response to the latter's sanctimonious declaration that the authorship controversy, pending "new evidence," would not be discussed within the hallowed precincts of that publication. There was, replied Hope, "no need for new [Oxfordian] evidence until 'the academy' deals with the evidence which has been gathered over the past sixty years" (SOSN 27:4 12). On grounds as much ethical as intellectual, I believed that Hope's words, written in 1978, were still true in 1991; today it is my conviction that they remain true, and would remain so even without the corroborative evidence documented here¹².

The De Vere Bible is not a "smoking gun." It *does*, however, supply researchers with a revealing look into the devotional practices which sustained the annotator's creative life and bring to bear for the first time a cornucopia of hitherto unnoticed confirmatory evidence supporting the Oxfordian thesis.

The new evidence contained in this document should be evaluated in a comparative context, as one element in a larger circumstantial case, other pieces of which have been assembled through many decades of past research. Readers will do well to consider the principles adumbrated by J. Thomas Looney when he first considered the character of the case for de Vere's authorship in "*Shakespeare*" *Identified*:

The predominating element in what we call circumstantial evidence is that of coincidence. A few circumstances we may treat as simply interesting; a number of coincidences we regard as remarkable; a vast accumulation of extraordinary coincidences we accept as conclusive proof.

(80)

Although Looney went on to predict that "new" – confirmatory -- "data may be unearthed" (405), he also believed, correctly in my view, that his book *in itself* had permanently altered the terms of the authorship debate by sketching a powerful if not conclusive *prima facie* case for Oxford's authorship. This case, however, because it depended upon the reticulation and coordination of independently concurring "extraordinary coincidences," was vulnerable to

¹² [Nor could I feel that anyone who would represent my work on the de Vere Bible in another light than this had done anything other than misrepresent my beliefs and statements.](#)

caricature and misrepresentation by a powerful intellectual elite whose faith in the tautological slogan that “Shakespeare is Shakespeare” is frequently confused with an intellectual argument.

Rebuttal of a circumstantial case requires more than the mere chipping away at one or another element of the case, while leaving every other element unmentioned, out of sight, and therefore presumably out of the jury’s mind. Accordingly, Looney fortified his conclusion against anticipated counterattack by insisting that just as no single element of the case was *in itself* grounds for obtaining a reader’s agreement, no criticism of a single element, however valid it might seem in a microscopic context, could prevail so long as it refused to engage and acknowledge the substantive elements of the case which remained in place even should that element require rejection or modification. Of course, however, this has been precisely the strategy favored by orthodox critics of the “Looney” theory of Oxford’s identity as “Shakespeare.” Thus Looney in his 1940 response to O.J. Campbell’s belated recognition of “*Shakespeare*” *Identified*,¹³ characterized the Professor’s method as

Just like that of counsel for the defense of a criminal faced with a mass of mutually corroborating evidence against his client, and making the best of what he feels to be a weak case. That is, he points to the inconclusiveness of this, that, or the other piece of evidence, viewed by itself, and seeks to divert attention away from the manner in which the different elements in the evidence all fit in with one another.

(*Shakespeare Fellowship Newsletter* 2:1 (Dec. 1940) 1)

If, therefore, the present dissertation should be seen as contributing a number of individually interesting and collectively remarkable “coincidences,” the reader should not forget the significant fact that this structure of coincidences is embedded within a larger “structure of coincidence” – which some might be tempted to term a “paradigm” – which multiplies the force of the conclusions implied herein. Rather than imposing an unwarranted, ahistorical empiricism on this document, the writer accordingly hopes that his readers will consider it an exercise in applied hermeneutics in which “the jurist and theologian meet the student of the humanities,” to quote Gadamer’s apt formulation. Quantitative arguments play a role, but only one role, in the arguments which follow. Furthermore it must be emphasized that this dissertation is hardly the last word on the authorship question: it represents a moment in an evolving and dynamic historical inquiry into the authorship and character of the Shakespearean oeuvre.
