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WHO CARES WHO WROTE "SHAKESPEARE"?*

PETER JASZI**

Obviously, a great many people, on both (or all) sides of the "authorship question," and they care a lot. The real question is why. Proponents of various authorship claimants compete in their protestations of admiration for the plays and poems in controversy. But if these works are in fact so universally and inexhaustibly fertile of significance, why should any admirer of them waste precious time, which might better be devoted to the study of the texts themselves, arguing about an ultimately irresolvable historical puzzle? And why is so much of the discussion conducted at such a relatively high pitch of emotion? In this essay I will argue that the answer is related to the way in which, over many generations, professional Shakespeareans have employed techniques of interpretation which anticipate "modernist" literary criticism.

* © 1988 Peter Jaszi—the article, that is, not the title, which is more or less stolen from Edmund Wilson's slash at the mystery genre, *Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?*, in *CLASSICS AND COMMERCIALS* 257 (Vintage ed. 1962) [hereinafter *CLASSICS AND COMMERCIALS*].

** Here must be acknowledged the various heavy debts which the writer owes in connection with the proceedings to which this little article forms a *coda*: most obviously to David Lloyd Kreeger, the project's "onlie begetter," and Fred Anderson, who first broached it to James Boyle and myself; to Bryan Bachner and Linda Crawford, for extraordinary efforts in the fields of research and typing, respectively (and respectfully); to the Justices, for a morning I certainly will never forget; to Sheryl Gilbert, Ned, and Sabrina, for support and forbearance; and to James, for his intellectual generosity and (only occasionally manic) good humor throughout. Beyond (or behind) these debts there are others, to the people who taught me (one way or another) the little I know about Shakespearean drama. Among these I count the late Dan Seltzer, and—most particularly—my friend Tim Mayer, who died this Spring. Tim's theater was a brilliant fusion of the practical with the intellectual; as a director, he gave intensely specific (and above all visual) form to his profound understandings of the plays he staged. I miss Tim very much. I like to think he would have enjoyed this piece, and for whatever it may be worth, it's dedicated to him.

Finally, I should disclose an indebtedness of another sort—to Professor Marjorie Garber, whose *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers*, in *CANNIBALS, WITCHES AND DIVORCE: ESTRANGING THE RENAISSANCE* 122 (M. Garber ed. 1987) (an expanded version of which essay is included in her 1988 book of the same name, published this year by Methuen) is the best thing anyone ever has written about the *significance* of the "authorship question." What follows was written after re-reading that essay, and after hearing Professor Garber speak on "What's New in Shakespeare Studies," at a recent program of the Harvard Club of Washington (where the writer had the privilege of introducing her)—and it shows!

Much has been said and written about the motives of the various factions of "anti-Stratfordians." But since my role in last Fall's debate was that of counsel for claims of the Earl of Oxford, I am not going to enter here into speculation about the motives of those who were, in a very real sense, my clients. Instead, I want to dwell briefly on what it is about anti-Stratfordian claims that stimulates such defensive, and sometimes seemingly immoderate, reactions on the part of the "professional" Shakespearean community. For when Dr. James McManaway of the Folger Library wrote baldly that "[t]here is no problem of authorship for those who have read Elizabethan drama in a setting of Elizabethan literature and history,"¹ he was not only articulating a professional article of faith; he also was attempting (unsuccessfully in the event) to foreclose a whole area of discussion. Similarly, the heightened tone of the statement in which the learned and normally decorous Professors Gwynn Evans and Harry Levin not so long ago characterized the arguments for the authorship claims of Edward de Vere, as a "tangled tissue of misinformation, garbled quotations, strained explications, *non sequiturs*, wild surmise, fantasy, and fallacy,"² suggests an attempt to deal a final crushing blow to a truly dangerous heresy.

It's interesting to note, moreover, that these extreme responses to anti-Stratfordian claims are not confined to the academic world. They also are characteristic of another group of "professional Shakespeareans"—men and women of the theater. Thus, the distinguished modern interpreter of Shakespearean roles, Ian McKellen, recently was quoted for the opinion that:

Some people, intellectual snobs perhaps, like to think that the philosopher Francis Bacon wrote the plays. Then there are the social snobs who like to think that the Earl of Oxford wrote the plays. And no doubt somewhere there's a keen viewer of *Masterpiece Theatre* who thinks that Alistair Cooke wrote the plays.³

Again, the very acidity of McKellen's sarcasm leads inevitably to the question: What exactly is at stake here?

I think it may be possible to get at one answer by considering another interesting—and seemingly unrelated—intellectual phenomenon connected with the "authorship problem": the tendency of the dedicated Stratfordian to remake the image of the man from

1. J. McMANAWAY, *THE AUTHORSHIP OF SHAKESPEARE* 49 (4th printing 1972).

2. Levin & Evans, *Shakespeare as Shakespeare*, in H. LEVIN, *SHAKESPEARE AND THE REVOLUTION OF THE TIMES* 315, 323 (1976) (commenting on Charlton Ogburn's *The Man Who Shakespeare Was Not (and Who He Was)*, which recently had appeared in *Harvard Magazine*, Feb. 6, 1975).

3. Reed, "Some ado about who was, or was not, Shakespeare," *SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE*, Sept. 1987, at 155-56.

Stratford in his or her own image. It is a tendency somewhat more pronounced in Stratfordians of the amateur, rather than the professional variety, but at least among the former it is sometimes very pronounced indeed. In my Brief, some of these highly personal visions of Shakespeare are described: there are gardener Shakespeares, postulant Shakespeares, lawyer Shakespeares, doctor Shakespeares, soldier Shakespeares, and (especially it seems) sailor Shakespeares.⁴

To some extent, of course, these various "versions" of the man Shakespeare are simply the byproducts of the Stratfordians' continuing attempts to show how Will the glover's son turned player could have possessed all the information and attitudes manifested by the author of the works for which he conventionally is given credit. But I think these different Shakespeares represent something more (or at least something else) as well. These versions of the man, after all, are responses to the Shakespearean plays and poems, which provide practically the only basis for speculation about the character of their author: They exemplify the natural tendency of readers to "receive" the literary works they encounter.⁵

This is a tendency of which contemporary literary theorists have made a great deal. As Terry Eagleton has noted, one question for modernist criticism has been the extent to which "the work exercises a degree of determinacy over readers' responses to it," and for many critics the answer has been "little if any!" For these "reception theorists,"

[A work of literature] is just all the assorted accounts of [it] that have been or will be given. The true writer is the reader . . . the readers have now overthrown the bosses and installed themselves in power. . . . [C]riticism is no more than an account of the reader's developing response to the succession of words on the page. What the text "does" to us, however, is actually a matter of what we do to it, a question of interpretation; the object of critical attention is the structure of the reader's experience, not any 'ob-

4. See Appellant's Brief, in re "William Shakespeare" at notes 80-83. My favorite is still Duff Cooper's "reconstruction" of young Will Shakespeare's military career during the English campaigns in the low countries; Cooper was confident that Shakespeare had risen to sergeant's rank: after all, "a man of his intelligence was not likely to remain for long a private soldier." D. COOPER, SERGEANT SHAKESPEARE 55 (1949). For further evidence of the tendency of Shakespeareans to see what they expect in the figure of Shakespeare, see generally, Professor Samuel Schoenbaum's indispensable and endlessly entertaining SHAKESPEARE'S LIVES (1970).

5. Admittingly an exploration of a text for the purpose of triangulating the character of its author is a fairly specialized—and fairly limited—sort of "reading." But it is likely to produce results as personal to the particular reader undertaking it as would a "reading" which aimed at discovering the "theme" or "meaning" of the text in itself.

jective' structure to be found in the work itself.⁶

Like all revolutions, this "readers' uprising" has proved both exhilarating and unsettling to those caught up in it. And it should be stressed that all this represents a fairly new development in critical theory. In many areas of literary study its effects have yet to be fully felt.

But among professional Shakespeareans, whose callings involve them in the exploration of the meaning of the works which make up the Shakespearean canon, all this is pretty old hat. Academics and theatrical Shakespeareans alike long have exercised a latitude of "interpretation" which have been (and in many circles would still be) regarded as insupportable had the object of their interpretative attentions been some other body of literary works.

In the theatre, the actors (and directors and designers) join the audience in a complex double "reading" of the work being performed. The contemporary stage teems, of course, with modern-dress *Hamlets* and productions of *Troilus and Cressida* set amidst the American Civil War, to say nothing of the sorts of transpositions of Shakespearean material exemplified by *West Side Story*. It is noteworthy, however, that this effort to present audiences with relevant, immediately recognizable productions of Shakespeare's plays is nothing new. Nor is the tendency of theatrical productions to "construct" new versions of the plays evident only in stagings which boldly declare their novelty. One writer recently has analyzed various outwardly conventional turn-of-the-century British productions of *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, and has found in them "the main linking theme that Rome was perceived (by British audiences of the day) as the direct analogue to imperial Britain."⁷ Earlier still, from the Seventeenth Century through the middle of the Nineteenth, Shakespeare's plays typically were performed with generous additions, deletions, and revisions, intended to suit audience tastes and expectations. Although we may think of Nahum Tate's *King Lear* (for example) as a travesty, it was not so viewed while it held the stage, and it seems fair to assume that it was not so

6. T. EAGLETON, *LITERARY THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION* 85 (1983). This revolution of the reader is sometimes described as entailing the "death of the author." See generally Foucault, *What is an Author?*, in *TEXTUAL STRATEGIES* 141 (J.V. Harari ed. 1979).

7. Berry, *The Imperial Theme*, in *SHAKESPEARE AND THE VICTORIAN STAGE* 153, 154 (R. Foulkes ed. 1986). In the same volume, at page 164, there is a fascinating account of the career of James Sheridan Knowles, who was widely described in the 1830's and 1840's as the "modern Shakespeare"—an identification that says a good deal more about the early Victorians than it does about Knowles (or for that matter, Shakespeare). Murray, *James Sheridan Knowles: The Victorian Shakespeare?* in *SHAKESPEARE AND THE VICTORIAN STAGE* 164 (R. Foulkes ed. 1986).

intended.⁸

Indeed, it seems likely that in Shakespeare's own time, the plays performed by this company at the Globe and elsewhere were "received" in significantly different ways by different playgoers in the audience—in a very real sense, the working-class "understanders" in theater's open yard did not experience the same production of *Macbeth* as the aristocrat watching from the "lord's rooms" on the balcony over the state or the city merchant in the galleries.⁹

Moving from stage to page, there again is plentiful evidence of the interpretive license with which the works conventionally attributed to Shakespeare long have been treated. Contemporary readings of the plays present an almost dizzying choice of approaches—indeed, the only interpretive possibility they exclude is the possibility that any one approach to reading a given play is somehow transcendently correct.¹⁰

But again, what is important to note is that the approaches to Shakespeare taken by contemporary writers are not fundamentally different from those of the generations of critics who preceded them. Long before modernist critics began offering up contempo-

8. Tate's *Lear* featured, among other things, a happy ending in which Cordelia was married off to Edgar. It was the dominant performance text for almost 160 years, and was supplanted only in 1838, when William McCready's "restoration" of the tragedy was performed at Covent Garden. See generally W. SHAKESPEARE, *A NEW VARIORUM EDITION OF KING LEAR* 467-78 (H.H. Furness ed., Dover reprint 1963).

9. For the diversity of the Elizabethan audience, see Andrew Gurr's extraordinary new study, *PLAYGOING IN SHAKESPEARE'S LONDON* (1987). For an example of how the works of some of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have "played" differently to different members of the audience, see J.W. SAUNDERS, *THE PROFESSION OF ENGLISH LETTERS* (1964).

Webster and Tourner, and other horror writers, designed plays which, again, had different levels of appeal. They deal with a distorted society, taking to extremes the hypothesis that ambitious dogs are reasonable to eat dogs, and that the hindmost gets what he deserves when he is caught by the Devil At one level this was what the man-in-the-street Londoner imagined contemporary Italy [where the plays were set] to be; at another, this was the kind of world, in his moments of despair, which the courtier imagined England to be.

J.W. SAUNDERS, *supra*, at 78.

10. Exemplifying the exhilarating "openness" of contemporary Shakespeare scholarship are two recent studies, T. EAGLETON, *WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE* (1986) (exploring Shakespeare's utopian vision of an "organic unity of body and language") and T. HAWKES, *THAT SHAKESPEARIAN RAG: ESSAYS ON A CRITICAL PROCESS* (1986), the opening lines of which display the concern with thematic contradiction which the author shares with many other modern Shakespeare critics, along with the intensely personal quality of much modern criticism:

I am eating fish and chips in Stratford-upon-Avon A major concern of this essay lies in the encounter of Nature and Culture. Stratford, both a natural and cultural centre of England, seems to offer a particularly fruitful location in this respect. Here a river (Nature) joins a canal (Culture) in a setting where one kind of Englishness (the Royal Shakespeare Theater) confronts another (a fish-and-chips shop) in the sale of quintessential English goods. Here, certainly, one Stratford appears to engage with its opposite. My capacity to ingest both fails to ally a sense of broad and potent distinctions.

Id. at 1.

rary, ahistorical interpretations of standard authors from Chaucer to Henry James, Shakespeareans were hard at work, generation after generation, remaking Shakespeare. And I don't mean just Jan Kott¹¹ and Maynard Mack.¹² What Edmund Wilson wrote about J. Dover Wilson (no relation) in 1943 could have been (and in effect was) said of any number of academic Shakespeareans, before and since:

[He] belongs to the . . . group of critics . . . who have themselves a touch of the creative artist whose virtue is that they seem to wake the text to a new dynamic life by force of their own imaginations and whose fault is that they sometimes read into it new dramas of their own invention.¹³

Thus, around the turn of the Twentieth Century, A.C. Bradley presented Shakespeare in the guise of a preternaturally perceptive Victorian psychologist,¹⁴ while a century and one-half earlier Samuel Johnson had described a bard who sounds a lot like—well—Samuel Johnson.¹⁵

All these "personal" readings of Shakespeare have some explanatory power, but none can lay ultimate claim to "correctness." What recently has emerged as the central dilemma of "modernist" criticism, then, has long been a more or less acknowledged problem in Shakespeare studies: What constitutes responsible critical practice when, by definition, no particular interpretation of a text can be authoritative?¹⁶

What made the "premature modernism" of theatrical and literary Shakespeareans possible, of course, is the fact that (for a variety of

11. See generally J. KOTT, *SHAKESPEARE OUR CONTEMPORARY* (1964).

12. See generally M. MACK, *KING LEAR IN OUR TIME* (1956).

13. Wilson, J. *Dover Wilson on Falstaff*, in *CLASSICS AND COMMERCIALS*, *supra* *, at 161, 163. Not that only inspired critics have tended to remake Shakespeare in their own image—even the most pedestrian have been willing to try their hand. See, e.g., H.J. BRIDGES, *OUR FELLOW SHAKESPEARE: HOW EVERYMAN MAY ENJOY HIS WORKS* (1916) (by the earnest author of *CRITICISMS OF LIFE AND THE RELIGION OF EXPERIENCE*, with chapters such as "*The Merchant of Venice: The Tragedy of Race-Prejudice*," and "*Macbeth: The Working of the Inward Judge*").

14. See generally K. COOKE, *A.C. BRADLEY AND HIS INFLUENCE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SHAKESPEARE CRITICISM* (1972). But all fashions pass: "L.C. Knights in his essay 'How man children had Lady Macbeth?' (1933), represented a new generation of critics in his mockery of Bradley's 'detective interest' in plot and emphasis on 'character' as a detachable object of study" *THE OXFORD COMPANION TO ENGLISH LITERATURE* 125 (M. Drabble ed. 1985).

15. See, e.g., *SAMUEL JOHNSON ON SHAKESPEARE* 25 (W.K. Wimsatt, Jr. ed. 1960): "Shakespeare is, above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life."

16. One approach to the solution of this dilemma is that taken by Stanley Fish in *IS THERE A TEXT IN THIS CLASS?* (1980), where the task of the critic is described as that of attempting to build "interpretive communities" of readers sharing common strategies of reading—and the "quality of a critic's work is at least implicitly linked to the degree of his or her success in this enterprise. Fish's approach, in turn, has been faulted for offering only an illusion of escape from the modernist dilemma. See, e.g., J. CULLER, *ON DECONSTRUCTION* 64-71 (1982).

reasons) Shakespeare can be so readily de- and re-contextualized. So the assertions of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, himself a practiced hand at the art of Shakespearean reinterpretation, to the effect that Shakespeare is "least of all poets colored in any particulars by the spirit and customs of his age," and that "there is nothing common to Shakespeare and to other writers of his day—not even the language they employed,"¹⁷ are not simple nonsense, although they come close. Despite their extravagance, these statements arise from and refer to the "open" quality which generations of Shakespeareans have discovered in the texts which make up the canon.

And how convenient it has been, over these centuries of continuous interpretation and reinterpretation, that so little—indeed, literally nothing of any importance—is known about William Shakespeare of Stratford himself. Nothing is more potentially embarrassing to a critic than an author, as we were forcefully reminded by the scene in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* where two characters engage in an elegant and elaborate exegesis of the deeper significance of a passage from Marshall McLuhan—only to be interrupted by the writer himself, who denied it all.¹⁸ If enough (or too much) is known about his or her career and attitudes, even a dead author can cramp a critic's style.¹⁹

The informational void surrounding the historical Shakespeare, then, has encouraged generations of professional Shakespeareans to "take liberties" (quite literally) with the texts. No wonder that these same Shakespeareans have resisted involvement in the "authorship question," and have sought to dismiss it as being somehow beneath serious attention. No one likes to lose freedom, having once gained it—a truism that applies as much to freedom of interpretation as to other varieties. Nor do the anti-Stratfordians help matters by arguing that the reascription of the plays and poems to an individual

17. II COLERIDGE'S SHAKESPEARE CRITICISM 125 (T.M. Raysor ed. 1930), *quoted in* M.M. BADAWI, COLERIDGE: CRITIC OF SHAKESPEARE 192 (1973).

18. And think of the problems that Robert Frost made for academic commentators, when he insisted (for example) that this much-explicated poem *Neither Out For Nor In Deep* was just a "rhymy little thing" and "a joke on microscope and telescope." See S. BURNISHAW, ROBERT FROST HIMSELF 285 (1986).

19. The satirical epitome of this problem is to be found in Jorge Luis Borges' story, *Pierre Menard, Author Don Quixote*, in FICCIONES 45 (A. Kerrigan ed. 1962), which purports to describe how a minor French Symbolist poet of the early 20th century came to reproduce (without direct imitation) portions of the text of the 17th-century Spanish classic. Borges notes how, in Menard's hands, passages which had been banal and predictable in Cervantes' semantically identical version take on astonishing new meaning; he also draws a forceful contrast between the two authors' styles: "The archaic style of Menard—in the last analysis, a foreigner—suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his precursor, who handles easily the ordinary Spanish of his day." *Id.* at 53 (where we also are reminded that "[t]here is no intellectual exercise which is not ultimately useless").

better known to history than Will Shakespeare would aid in the better understanding of those texts.²⁰

I suspect that neither the unearthing of manuscripts of the plays in the Earl of Oxford's hand, nor the disinterment of Will Shakespeare's diaries, containing his candid observations on life and art, would be an event entirely welcome among Shakespeareans, even today. Nor is either the sort of happening which the rest of us should crave. Modern criticism has probably gone far enough in establishing the sovereignty of the readers so that new historical discoveries are unlikely to change the course of the traditions of Shakespearean interpretation. But it is hard to be sure. And if the cost of more knowledge would be a loss in the richness and variousness of those traditions, perhaps it is knowledge we are better off without.

20. See generally C. OGBURN, *THE MYSTERIOUS WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: THE MYTH AND THE REALITY* (1984), in which a wide range of the works conventionally attributed to Shakespeare are read with an Oxfordian gloss. One of Ogburn's principal methods in seeking to *demonstrate* the plausibility of claims for Edward de Vere's authorship is to show how well the works can be fitted into the interpretive grid supplied by the known facts of Oxford's career; to a professional Shakespearean, of course, this approach to reading is likely to appear limiting and even reductionistic.