

Alice's Adventures in Authorship Land

by David P. Gontar (September 2016)



Consider the following academic argument.

Premise 1:

It didn't require an advanced education to produce the Shakespearean corpus.

Premise 2:

Anyone venturing an opinion about "Shakespeare's" identity must hold a Ph.D. in English literature.

Premise 3:

All Ph.D.'s affirm Premise 1.

Conclusion:

"Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare." [This is a recording.]

Of course all three premises are laughable falsehoods.

In order to reach our tautologous conclusion we must first grant that education is both expendable at the same time that it is essential. That's grand if we've all tumbled down the rabbit hole to banter with the March Hare or Cheshire Cat, but those of us with heads affixed to shoulders may wonder about this specimen of literary logic furnished by our "expert" friends in the Ivory Tower.

Let's try a *Gedankenexperiment*. Imagine that one fine day Stratford Will crawls out from under his haystack and on a whim decides to desert wife and family and trudge the long and dusty road to London. There he finds himself in the midst of the chaos of the Spanish Armada. But don't worry, there's a plan. Though every able-bodied jack and gentleman is gathered at Tilbury to hear the Queen's address to England's stalwart defenders, William, rather like Shadow and Feeble in *King Henry IV*, slips about unnoticed. Instead of joining the band of brothers shielding the realm, William, who has never read a book in his life, or written anything beyond hornbook lessons, is suddenly seized with an inexplicable impulse to compose the history of England in verse, perhaps on the supposition that, as the Spanish are obviously taking over, England is already "history." Finding a quiet nook at the Mermaid Tavern, he curls up, orders a pint, dips his nib and fashions these rustic lines:

As by your high imperial majesty

I had in charge at my depart for France,
As procurator to your excellence,
To marry Princess Margaret for your grace,
So, in the famous ancient city, Tours,
In presence of the Kings of France and Sicil,
The Dukes of Orléans, Calaber, Bretagne, and Alençon,
Seven earls, twelve barons and twenty reverend bishops,
I have performed my task and was espoused,
And humbly now upon my bended knee,
In sight of England and her lordly peers,
Deliver up my title in the queen
To your most gracious hands, that are the substance
Of that great shadow I did represent:
The happiest gift that ever marquis gave,
The fairest queen that ever king received.

(2 *King Henry VI*, I, i, 1-16)

Gosh.

Luckily it didn't require much education to compose these courtly lines which introduce the second part of *King Henry VI*, the massive triptych which allegedly inaugurated "Shakespeare's" career as the world's preeminent poet and dramatist. What need for learning when the muses whisper in our waxy ears? Of course William was acquainted with the Wars of the Roses because during the pandemonium of the Spanish Armada he had earlier cleverly closeted himself in Field's cozy bookshop. There he found copies of Hall and Holinshed from which he swiftly and craftily cribbed. The result was an instant epic so staggeringly panoramic,

erudite and profound that the finest scholars of our time still gasp, struggling to wrap their minds around it. Such is "genius." Who needs grad school when you've got a handful of books and cranium as capacious as the Goodyear blimp? Teachers are mere window dressing.

The situation is quite different for those of us who inhabit the twenty-first century technocracy, where "experts" rule the roost. As someone once said, an expert is someone who knows exactly where he went wrong. It therefore follows as the night the day that no one who hasn't had his brain baptismally washed in the university font is entitled to express any view of the authorship question. How dare they? Though William of Stratford had no need of any particular learning to scrawl his scripts, bursting with insights into law, medicine, foreign languages, poetry, geography and many other subjects, we today must have Ph.D. in hand to merely raise an eyebrow.

Not only shall there be no comments from non-"experts" on the question of authorship, per faculty edict the very topic of Shakespeare's actual identity is unworthy, unleashed out of sheer ignorance or malice by folks so dim witted they don't notice his name on the cover of the *First Folio* of 1623. Henceforth, say our scholarly satraps, the very inquiry into Shakespeare's identity is taboo, and those who pursue it prove nothing but their shabby credentials. Let them be anathema. Of course this ignores that the professors have no problem churning out books and articles on authorship matters as they peer into murky crystal balls to determine whether the "Shakespeare" plays were the work of various "collaborators" or a single preternaturally gifted thespian. In fact "collaboration" has become quite the cottage industry these days in departments of English, where a complete lack of dispositive evidence allows the fancies of Endowed Fellows to run pleasantly amok. Today's trendy novelty is tomorrow's old fashioned embarrassment.

Those who would suppress discussion of Shakespearean identity among the laity are fond of likening doubters of the Stratford fable to those who have had the audacity to challenge the view that the Earth is an oblate spheroid. Authorship chatter is an outrage that tarnishes the intellectual dignity of those who take such topics seriously. It is a blot on our cherished curriculum. Thus, for example, when famous Shakespearean actors (Mark Rylance, Derek Jacobi) address the public in radio broadcasts and openly criticize the Stratfordian mythos, they are excoriated by Ivy Leaguers for engaging in such illicit and demeaning

behavior. Mere actors (who bring Shakespeare to life on stage) are not “experts” and have no business presuming to lend legitimacy to an enterprise as retarded and subversive as the authorship issue. It’s OK to worship “Shakespeare the Actor” but any actor in the 21st century who presumes to share his thoughts about the bard with *hoi polloi* had better cleave to the party line.

This brings us to another brilliant syllogism.

Premise 1:

Only professors of English literature can talk about Shakespeare’s identity.

Premise 2:

But professors of English literature disdain to talk about his identity.

Conclusion:

Shakespeare’s identity is off limits. Period.

Let’s take a look at this reasoning.

It is said that questioning whether William of Stratford wrote the poems and plays is akin to doubting the Earth is “round.” You see, the “roundness” of the Earth is a known “Fact.” Therefore to deny William of Stratford as author is to undermine a known “Fact.” I say, could anything be more obtuse? We’ll none of it.

In the middle ages and early Renaissance it was well established that the Earth stood at the center of the cosmos and celestial bodies including the sun went about it. This was a plain Fact verified by perception and reinforced by tradition. Anyone sufficiently unbecoming to do so was liable to be punished, for Facts are too significant to be meddled with. Despite that risk Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and others did confront that “Fact” and overturned it. The bishops of Galileo’s era refused to look through the telescope he offered them on the sensible grounds that lenses distort our apprehension of things. But the model of the terrestrial-centered cosmos collapsed under the weight of astronomical evidence. The forbidden question prevailed.

Thus was born our current view that “the Earth” is a “planet” revolving around the sun. That new and shiny Fact stands beyond all peradventure. But if inquiry is smothered how can we be sure? Do we now know everything? The word “planet” means “wanderer,” a star which traipses across the night sky in an irregular pattern not in harmony with its kin. But, alas, we do not see the Earth in the sky. By definition it cannot therefore be a heavenly “wanderer.” The Copernican theory, for all its brilliance, creates an uncomfortable tension – some would say contradiction – between our perception of the world around us and its very nature as grasped by thought. After all, the sun still rises and sets. Given the recency of the Copernican revolution it may be wondered whether the human race can successfully adapt to its deliverances and consequences. The jury’s still out on that one, folks. It would be different if cosmology and astrophysics had provided a world picture to take the place of the discarded Ptolemaic *Weltanschuuang*, but none has been promulgated. Instead we find an endless succession of unruly, abstruse theories in mathematical packages, none of which enjoys a determinable consensus. When we stretch our vision to the limits of our physical surroundings we discover that the pre-Copernican cosmos has been set aside with nothing put in its place but furious debate among the “experts,” a debate which they and their journalistic comrades would rather hide from general scrutiny. Thus, while it is deemed crazy to question the heliocentric hypothesis, inside a secluded wing of the Ivory Tower the quarrel rages. Was there a “big bang”? Are there “black holes” in space? Will entropy leave mere emptiness and death? What is this “universe”? Time and space? Will the “universe” endure? Is it all a plasma or weird hologram? Are there sentient creatures up there? If so, why do our biggest radio-telescopes detect no intelligible signals? Why do our sincerest greetings go unheeded? Why does physics not succeed in its quest for Einstein’s Unified Field Theory?

The lesson to be extracted from all this is that when you get to brass tacks there are no “Facts.” (Quick! Look around and see if you can find one.) Rather, at every moment the Question abides with us. That is our nature and our destiny, and no one ever portrayed that nature and destiny with the force and elegance of Shakespeare, whose identity we have the temerity to seek.

The truth is that professors of literature do not proscribe the authorship conversation because it is self-evident that the corpus was composed by William of Stratford. On the contrary, they do so because the meager leavings in the

record cannot support the monumental edifices speculation has raised about "Shakespeare," and no one wants to advertise the incommensurable implications thereof. According to the current myth, he was a celebrated actor in 16th and 17th century England, its greatest poet and dramatist who starred in his own productions. He lived in the limelight, the apple of the public eye. There should be sackfuls of letters to, from and about him, rave reviews of his performances and plays. Allegedly his public appearances outnumbered those of Elizabeth herself. Yet where are the contemporaneous remembrances of this poet/actor? What originary documents (not legends) exist in which meetings with him are enshrined? Logically there should be *thousands* of recollections straining the library shelves. But instead there is complete vacancy, nothing but Ben Jonson's squeamish equivocations. If only William of Stratford boldly paced forth from the pages of his own historical epoch the authorship question would dry up and blow away in a heartbeat. But instead there is bupkis. Those who point to this paradox do so not out of mischief or perversity but because they cannot and will not tolerate the substitution of fable for knowledge.

Why, then, do our Knights of the Ivory Tower choose to ban the authorship debate? Not because it's senseless, but because it carries too much sense, one threatening to those who have invested far too much in their hero, William of Stratford. Out of the academic volcano has belched forth over the last 300 years an avalanche of articles, books, dissertations, television programs, movies, celebrations, conferences, jobs, titles, grants, fellowships, programs and commercial products all featuring the little man from Stratford with his hideous Droeshout mug plastered everywhere. Imagine the angst of those who have made that William their life's work. Think of the hundreds of departmental chairs and foundations, places like the Folger Library, solemn temples raised in honor of William of Stratford. What percent of the English economy rests on our reverence for this conjectured fellow? What happens if it's all wrong? The entire Stratfordian enterprise is on life support and the lights are flickering.

Hence, should we not be suspicious when we find brittle British censorship at work? Under the guise of "political correctness" we find ourselves living in a heavily censored environment with doctrines as rigidly sacrosanct as the tenets of medieval religion keeping us in perpetual check. Who today can freely question the reality of Islamic aggression and terrorism? It is censored. The right of members of the same sex to marry one another? Off limits. The

appropriateness of “globalization” in all its manifestations? Not on the table for discussion. The theory of natural selection? Can’t be rationally discussed in American classrooms (just as in the early 20th century the theory of “evolution” was forbidden in our schools). Despite the First Amendment we in 21st century America seem to have as much intellectual liberty as the serfs in the Dark Ages.

As was lately observed in these pages, the vast majority of college professors are political liberals condemned to present “dead white males” to resentful multicultural classes. It’s hard enough to do that if the “dead white male” in question is a poor lad from the Warwickshire sticks who single-handedly conquers the slippery slopes of Mt. Parnassus. Any lecturer with the gumption to teach those lazy, narcissistic students that Shakespeare was actually an English peer with a colorable claim to the royal throne would be tarred and feathered and thrown off campus. And, truth be told, college professors have actually been fired for suggesting that Shakespeare was a literary nobleman. Sure we have academic freedom. It just comes with a hefty price tag.

As we reflect on Shakespeare’s provenance the real dilemma of the professoriate emerges. For in order to explain *why* the subject is *malum prohibitum* it would be necessary to talk about it. Having decided to muzzle everyone (including themselves) it becomes impossible for the “experts” to explain what the problem is. And that predicament leads to the most unpleasant aspect of all: name calling. Unable and unwilling to descend into rational exchanges, professors and their journalist sidekicks do not hesitate to employ the coarsest of epithets when referring to those who dissent on the authorship question. Such challengers are “snobs,” “lunatics” – or worse. What force have these brickbats? Do they substitute for reason and evidence? Is there a special exception in the rules of rhetorical engagement allowing *soi disant* Shakespeare “experts” to settle accounts by calling those with whom they disagree nasty names? *Ad astra per ad hominem*, my friends?

But what about those conspiracy nuts out there? Aren’t the authorship “fanatics” just another example of “conspiracy nonsense”? Of course, Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar was convinced there was no conspiracy against him. Coriolanus suffered the same fate at the hands of Aufidius and the tribunes. Claudius conspires against Prince Hamlet, Iago against Othello, Winchester against Gloucester, and

Antonio and Sebastian against King Alonso. Shakespeare was thus no skeptic when it came to conspiracy. For those who can remember, the original term of distractive abuse in the U.S. was “extremism.” That was the concept used to discredit Barry Goldwater in 1964, as a result saddling the United States with the slaughterhouse of Vietnam (and its progeny). Much of the opposition to Donald Trump now is of the same variety: the distraught mooing of vast herds of sacred cows. It is urged or implied that the very idea of a “conspiracy” is a mirage. By what other name can we refer to the *sub rosa* alliance of university professors and journalists keeping the authorship question out of the public ken – if not conspiracy?

If ‘to be or not to be’ is our Question, the Question as such remains indistinguishable from what we are. Shakespeare follows Socrates in his fidelity to free inquiry, and though there is a price to be paid in following them on this path, we must do so. Repressive university faculty today play the same role in our intellectual comedy as did the bishops who arrested Galileo.

Now let’s back up a moment. We assumed above that one fine day William of Stratford did set out on the dusty road to London to seek his fortune in the big city. But what evidence is there to support that idea? Did he leave a written account of his journey in the manner of old Ben Franklin? No? Of course when you’re as busy as young Will you don’t have time for memoirs. Trouble is, “William Shakespeare” was a common moniker in Elizabethan England and there were already guys with that name in London (as Mrs. Stopes showed in 1901). So what makes us suppose that Stratford Will actually set forth in the manner alleged? Many troubled by this young yeoman’s unprecedented burst of literary activity on arrival in London contend that he really began his writing career while shearing sheep in Stratford. If so, it was a mighty big secret, for no Stratfordites circa 1588 had any inkling that a poet of inestimable ability dwelt or had dwelt among them. Further, is it likely that William wrote the passage reproduced above from *King Henry VI* without ever having seen a London stage production? Shakespeare himself mocks such outlandish insinuations.

TOUCHSTONE

Wast ever in court, shepherd?

CORIN

No, truly.

TOUCHSTONE

Then thou art damned.

CORIN

Nay, I hope.

TOUCHSTONE

Truly thou art damned, like an ill-roasted egg: all on one side.

CORIN

For not being in court? Your reason.

TOUCHSTONE

Why, if thou never wast in court, thou never saw'st good manners. If thou never saw'st good manners, then thy manners must be wicked, and wickedness is sin, and sin is damnation. Thou art in a parlous state, shepherd.

(As You Like It, III, ii, 24-32)

Though the scene cited above is funny, Shakespeare here makes an important empirical point: creative art rests in large part on experience. The "good manners" of the court to which the jester Touchstone alludes were composed largely of regional Latinisms that had formed after the Norman French imposed their speech on all English noble houses after the Battle of Hastings, 1066 AD. That highly stylized courtly dialect was taken up in ideal form and made the cornerstone by Shakespeare in his poetic art. It goes without saying that no one not exposed from birth to that courtly verbiage could have conferred upon it ideal form, that is, have rendered it the substance of art. That was Shakespeare's unique accomplishment, and it is to that that he alludes in subtle and amusing form in the dialogue of Touchstone and Corin.

Those wishing to reconsider the question of Shakespeare's identity are urged to read and re-read all that appears under his name. Then ask yourself what sort of individual could and would have composed such material. Beyond the incalculable intelligence, talent and genius he must have possessed, and knowledge of the

court, multiple languages and a hundred different fields of human endeavor, there is something else, the missing key ingredient. As a supreme artist, there must have been something inside, gnawing at his soul, that prompted him to write again and again, some inner *agon* that drove him forward. What was it? Those who babble about “Shakespeare” without ever setting themselves to exhume the inner conflict, the personal drama that made him a “free artist of himself” are not doing justice to the subject. And that lets out just about everyone. In that sense there are no Shakespeare “experts” – we are all novices. The long-neglected writings of psychoanalyst Otto Rank demonstrated in the early 20th century that art is an individual’s creative response to inner turmoil, out of which arises magnificent and instructive dramatic poetry. The problem with Stratfordians is that their impoverished biography admits no such conflict within their champion. Nor are the Oxfordians any better. Were Oxfordism a genuine advance on common Stratford fables, its proponents would have by now given us a new reading of the poems and plays disclosing their internal relationship with the anguished heart of the artist. But so far as can be seen, the Oxfordian camp rejects this aesthetic imperative, and thus has not produced a single work of first class literary criticism. What difference does it make on which chest we pin the medal – if we have not comprehension for our pains? It should be axiomatic that those who would penetrate the labyrinth and find the source of Shakespearean wisdom must inevitably burn with the same passion, the same right Promethean fire, that animated Shakespeare himself. By that light may you find him.

WORK OF INTEREST:

Otto Rank, *Will Therapy and Truth and Reality*, Jessie Taft, Tr., Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.

David P. Gontar’s latest book is [*Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*](#), New English Review Press, 2013.

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