

**Book Review**

***The Shakespeare Controversy***

**2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**

**By Warren Hope and Kim Holston**

**Jefferson: NC, McFarland, 2009**

**Reviewed by R. Thomas Hunter**

I knew I liked this book from its first words. “For too long” Delia Bacon has been misunderstood and misrepresented, as has her symbolic function for Shakespeare authorship studies: “an unworldly pursuit of truth that produces gifts for a world that is indifferent or hostile to them.” Anyone who has labored in the vineyards of authorship study knows how well that statement expresses their experience.

The second accomplishment of authors Warren Hope and Kim Holston in the early pages of *The Shakespeare Controversy* is to help untangle the web of Bacon’s seminal work, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded*, which first articulated the authorship issue and gave birth to subsequent generations of research, reading, and speculation.

Thus, from the very beginning, the authors of this recently revised history of the Shakespeare authorship controversy provide an engaging and a necessary primer into the history of the controversy and its progress towards the eventual discovery of Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford as the true author of Shakespeare’s works. It is at the same time more complete, more reasonable, and more readable than anything Stratfordian Professor Samuel Schoenbaum, who tended toward hysteria whenever he addressed authorship literature, ever provided in his histories of Shakespeare biography. Indeed, in their introduction the authors remark on how histories

of authorship produced by the traditional camp have all been afflicted with “a dreary sameness...[that] there is no Shakespeare authorship question, really, only a gabble of cranks who think there is. It is as if dwellers on the flat earth decided to write up the evolution of the notion that the world is round” (xi). Like the authors, I am confident that this, too, is a “view that will pass.”

The second edition of *The Shakespeare Controversy* updates the history of the controversy from 1975 to 2009. Significant work has taken place during that time, such as Bronson Feldman’s *Hamlet Himself* (1977), which seems to be currently unavailable, Charlton Ogburn Jr.’s *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984, revised in 1991) and Mark Anderson’s “*Shakespeare*” by *Another Name* (2005), and the work of researchers such as Peter Moore, Nina Green, Christopher Paul, Roger Stritmatter, Richard Whalen and Joseph Sobran, to mention only a few.

The authors also update the Stratfordian side by paying too much attention to Irwin Matus and Alan Nelson, although detailed discussion of the latter is really necessary in order to give some idea of Nelson’s monstrous hatchet job. Whereas Nelson’s contribution to documentation of Oxford’s life had often been gratefully acknowledged by Oxfordians, his 2003 *Monstrous Adversary* now calls into question the very accuracy of all of his work, as has been demonstrated in great detail by Nina Green, K.C. Ligon, Christopher Paul, and Robert Brazil among others, whose contributions to contextualizing Nelson’s animosity towards his subject the authors woefully omit.

Such is also the case with an ostensibly friendly writer such as Daphne Pearson, the accuracy of whose 2005 biography of Oxford, especially its financial detail, has been called into serious question in documented analyses by Nina Green and Christopher Paul. As the book was based on Pearson’s 2000 PhD dissertation, the multiplier effect of misinformation appeared first in Nelson’s book, which apparently relied heavily on Pearson’s conclusions because they so well fit his image of Oxford’s profligacy. Oxfordians have shown not only that Oxford did not have as much money to lose as Nelson, Pearson and others have argued, but that much of it had already been squandered by the Queen and her paramour Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, before Oxford reached his majority and had any control over his inheritance.

The authors cover other important developments such as the 1991 *Atlantic Monthly* debate pitting Tom Bethell against Irwin Matus, the still memorable 1989 *PBS Frontline* special which brought the debate and the name of Oxford to the forefront of this popular television show, and the

1987 moot court verdict for Shakspere by Supreme Court Justices Brennan, Blackmun and Stevens. Sadly, the new edition of *The Shakespeare Controversy* was already at press by April 2009, when the *Wall Street Journal* featured a front page special on Justice Stevens' more recent judgment for Oxford "beyond a reasonable doubt."

The update also gives important attention to Diana Price's agnostic *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*, which the authors place in the tradition of George Greenwood as a significant work of anti-Stratfordian skepticism. There is also homage paid to works proffering new candidates to consider, including Sir Henry Neville (Bill Rubenstein and Brenda James) and Mary Sidney Herbert (Robin Williams).

Two final invaluable features: First, it is most helpful that the authors not only provide the quotes which we have relied on from such forerunners as Twain, Whitman, Freud, Chaplin and many others, but also tell us exactly where to find them. The well annotated eighty-six page bibliography provides a treasure trove of authorship sources with generous and insightful commentary. For one small example, the entry for Stanley Wells' "There's No Doubt It's Will" quotes Wells betraying his ignorance about the use of pen names in Elizabethan times.

One of the few lapses of judgment in this book is the authors' decision to pit Mark Anderson's well-reasoned, detailed biography of Oxford against Bill Bryson's folksy, misinformed biography of the traditional Shakespeare in order to show the state of the debate. The words "the sublime and the ridiculous" come to mind. The risk is that Oxfordians might feel overconfident in the strength of their case and may ask Stratfordians, "Is that all you have to offer?" The problem remains that, for the casual public who do not want anyone to take their Shakespeare from them, Bryson seems to be enough.

The updated section of the revised *The Shakespeare Controversy* brings us full circle to the original work's treatment of Delia Bacon with the news of a new edition of her *Philosophy of Shakespeare's Plays Unfolded*, edited by Elliott Baker and retitled *Shakespeare's Philosophy Unfolded* to reflect the simpler, more coherent unfolding of her argument, the original complexity and obfuscation of which forced even the most willing reader to put down the book before its mission was accomplished.

Even though Bacon's book is treated as an icon of authorship literature, it is important to understand that its point was more to explicate the

meaning of the plays than to identify their aristocratic author. It is enough for her to rail against “that booby” of Stratford as she did in front of Thomas Carlyle in person. “It was then that he began to shriek,” she wrote. “You could have heard him a mile” (8). She was perhaps the first to insist in any detail on the difference between Shakspere the booby and Shakespeare the author. But to her the difference was important more for literary than for biographical reasons. She insisted that the full philosophy of Shakespeare’s work would be missed if we thought of Shakspere as the author. Her erstwhile moral and financial supporter, Nathaniel Hawthorne, was more taken with her analysis of the philosophy of Shakespeare’s plays than with the authorship premise which gave them substance.

Hope and Holston reassure me that my experience with Bacon’s dense, offputting, tangled prose isn’t just me, but they also insist that dogged determination in reading her will repay the investment, that her work may be difficult but is also rewarding. I am still working on the rewarding part. “She must be read in her annoying, illuminating entirety,” they write, even before Elliott Baker’s new edition.

Delia Bacon may not have begun the authorship debate, but it is clear that hers is the first systematic, detailed and developed inquiry into Shakespeare based on the premises that Shakspere didn’t write it and that consequently the works must be appreciated for possibilities much greater than orthodox premises could endow him with. Who Shakespeare was, biographically, becomes the province of the rest of Hope and Holston’s book, which travels through the development of the arguments for Bacon, Marlowe, Rutland, Derby and others, although rather tangentially, before arriving at its preordained destination, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford.

The intrinsic fascination we feel for the proponents of these positions, such as Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, almost overshadow Hope and Holston’s subject, but it is fascinating to see how one thinker influenced another, such as how Whitman inspired William Douglass O’Connor, who almost single-handedly picked up the torch of Delia Bacon from Hawthorne’s faltering hands and handed it off to Whitman. Whitman observed that the term “gentle” as often applied to Shakespeare may have signified “high-blood bearing.” He looked for aristocratic attitude by the author and found it everywhere, in characters, themes, and incidents which “read the aristocratic vanity of the young noblemen and gentlemen...the hero is always of high lineage” (27), leading finally to the famous “wolfish earls” quote in *November*

*Boughs* (1888).

Whitman never committed to Francis Bacon as did O'Connor. Neither did Mark Twain. But Twain produced the long essay, published as a book in 1909, *Is Shakespeare Dead?*, which must be read by any authorship student. There Twain rejects Shakspere based on his personal experience of storytelling on the riverboats, of being an author himself, and even more to the point, of being an author using a pen name. He rejects Shakspere with all of the humor and passion of Mark Twain at his best. Twain may not employ scholarship, but his use of knowledge, experience and just plain common sense is unrivaled by any Stratfordian apologist I have ever read. He could not commit to Francis Bacon as the author, because it had not been proven. But he did contribute one of the most important keys to unlocking the authorship mystery: the author's experience. Even a genius cannot create personal experience out of nothing. Whitman identified Shakespeare's aristocratic attitude. Twain identified the aristocratic experience generating Shakespeare's plays and poems. Alas, the man from Stratford "hadn't any history to record." Twain's greater concern was human folly: "he felt humanity degraded itself, and caused itself severe problems, when it pretended to know what it merely believed" (38). Twain thought the old Shakespeare was good for another 300 years. It is now 100 years later, and the gulf between knowing and believing seems as wide as ever.

Hope and Holston follow the authorship path through Francis Bacon via Mrs. Henry Pott, one of the early practitioners of placing quotes from her candidate next to quotes from Shakespeare and "proving" identity through similarities which often aren't there. The method has been used for Oxford, too. In attempting to produce scientific support for their man, many Baconians turned to Ignatius Donnelly and supposed secret messages from the Bard to future generations via ciphers. The idea had some legitimacy because Elizabethan authors did communicate through secret means as a way to protect themselves. The problem is that Baconian cipher methods ultimately disintegrated into arbitrary formulas contorted to construct messages which often appear themselves to be of dubious significance. Where real cryptography is rule-based, the Baconians, in an unconscious parody of orthodox methods, applied the doctrine to free association, only to discover – surprise – what they set out to find. Suffice it to say that the authorship crowd ultimately had as little patience for ciphers as I do and generally moved on to the more scholarly pursuits of research and documentation.

What is interesting about Donnelly is how the method of his first chapter, “William Shakspeare Did Not Write the Plays,” is precursor to Looney’s method, a point unfortunately left by Hope and Holston to the reader to make for himself: “comparing the characteristics of the author as they have been established by scholars and critics with what has been determined about the life of William Shakspeare.” Looney, of course, became the first in 1920 to make the comparison to the life of Edward de Vere, inspiring critical free thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Leslie Howard in the first generation of Oxfordians.

The authors do find importance in that first chapter of Donnelly’s work in which he “tracks down a single quotation in order to establish the author’s classical learning” which had been dismissed by traditional scholars as erroneous and demonstrates how the scholar’s concept of the author can lead to wrong conclusions: “They feel free to leap to the conclusion that Shakespeare is in error, misunderstood something, or simply made things up because they do not expect him to know any better” (46). Donnelly thus effectively showed what is becoming a mainstay of the Oxfordian position, that traditional scholars attribute the unknown to genius, having no idea how great Shakespeare’s genius really was.

Also, he shows that statements in the First Folio, “primary documents that defenders of the legend invariably point to...are self-contradictory and fraudulent” (50). Hope and Holston conclude that Donnelly’s manic focus on ciphers “set back for years to come the cause he sought to serve.” Donnelly also prefigured another error that has unfortunately become something of an anti-Stratfordian tradition, when he went on to attribute to Bacon prodigious amounts of the literature of the time, including *Don Quixote*. However, “as a result of Donnelly’s work, the faith in the Stratford legend was permanently shaken and a solution to the authorship question was closer than it had ever been before” (56).

The chief virtue of *The Shakespeare Controversy* is to recount the history of anti-Stratfordian, then Oxfordian, scholarship, especially in terms of its quality when compared to the traditional Stratfordian discourse. The authors portray the growing doubt about the incumbent Bard from John Aubrey to David Garrick, Washington Irving, and ultimately Henry James in his short story “The Birthplace.” They portray the reasonable arguments of Sir George Greenwood in the mounting case against Shakspeare and contrast it with the “darkening pall of professionalism” taking over early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

which installed the voice of the authority of tradition and the establishment to take precedence over evidence accumulated by “amateur” challengers. Included is the work of Samuel Butler (early dating of the Sonnets) and Frank Harris (Shakespeare’s aristocratic attitude), examples of groundbreaking work constricted by Stratfordian shackles. Charlie Chaplin was no professional scholar, but his experience taught him that “in the work of the greatest of geniuses humble beginnings will reveal themselves somewhere--but one cannot trace the slightest sign of them in Shakespeare” (82).

Hope and Holston may be forgiven for giving short shrift to the histories of the development of arguments for other candidates, including Marlowe, Rutland, Derby, John Florio, and Robert Burton. Indeed their ultimate purpose in bringing them up at all is that the plethora of candidates allowed the Stratfordians to hoot and jeer in derision at half-baked ideas about Shakespeare’s identity which at the very least lacked focus and coherence.

The arrival of J. Thomas Looney on the scene in 1920 could not have been better timed. Combing the works for characteristics of the author and then casting a net over the Elizabethan age for a candidate who fulfilled those characteristics, he brought a common sense method to the search, resulting for the first time in “a rational account of the origin and composition of Shakespeare’s plays and poems” (105). In *de Vere*, Looney accomplished the “marriage of Shakespeare’s life and verse” which Emerson despaired of ever achieving in 1850 (111). Looney’s Shakespeare is “an originator, rather than an imitator...a thinker of the first order” (111) – in other words, the same author whom careful readers had suspected all along inhabited the literature, despite the critical fantasies of traditional scholars and academics.

Looney was attacked for having a funny name and for being an amateur in the challenging business of Shakespeare scholarship. The subsequent story of the first Shakespeare Fellowship, with researchers like B.R. Ward, H.H. Holland, B.M. Ward, Canon Gerald Rendall, and Charles Wisner Barrell is a story of amateurs and their larger humanistic purpose, motivated by concern for the truth, against professionals like Samuel Schoenbaum and Frank W. Wadsworth, whose ethic perceived Shakespeare in terms of self-interest and the necessity to defend established institutional creeds. The claim of “professionalism” being the refuge of scoundrels, the authors give case histories comparing the sound scholarship of amateurs with the misinformation, misrepresentations and outright errors of the professionals.

In their original introduction, Hope and Holston establish that theirs is an

inversion of the history of the subject as it has been written to date. People who have been denounced as lunatics are seen as truth-seekers. Great writers who have been said to have spoken ironically on this subject are taken at their word. Cranks become respected authorities and respected authorities become mere cranks. A whole host of people who have been torn from their contexts and misrepresented are put back where they belong and permitted to show at least a glimpse of their true colors. (xii)

This inversion of the established order in Shakespeare studies continues to be attested in the second edition of Hope and Holston's erudite, entertaining, and informative study. If you ever despair of the project's fruition – and you will, time and again – reach for this book. But then, if you haven't done so yet, you might do so now.

*The Shakespeare Controversy*, even before being updated, was an invaluable primer on the history of the Shakespearean question. The present update is a must read. A wise man has said that we need to know where we have been to know where we are going. This book supplies a history filled with anecdotes and insights which in turn inspire a certain confidence about what has been experienced and accomplished by Oxfordians. It is good for the soul. The news of Supreme Court Justices Stevens and Scalia in the *Wall Street Journal* of April seventeen, 2009 is enough to start thinking about a third edition. The authors and their publisher might consider that this very helpful resource should be updated more often than every 17 years.

In any event, the authors should be forgiven for their sense of frustration that the authorship controversy hasn't progressed farther than it has in that period of time. In the preface to the new edition, they write, "The controversy seems to be moving less to a clearcut resolution than to a general acceptance of the legitimacy of the scholarly pursuit of the question," and reference the successful Declaration of Reasonable Doubt.

I beg to differ. First, there is the huge increase in circumstantial evidence brought to light over that period of time. Second, given the size and the intransigence of the opposition, Oxfordians have made amazing strides in advancing their case, the recognition of the legitimacy of the issue chief

among them. We have to believe that the headlines announcing Justices Stevens' and Scalia's conclusion in favor of the Earl of Oxford are only symptomatic of the cracks developing in the Stratfordian position. I hope I may be forgiven for the optimistic belief that the third edition of this book will have much to report, and may even be able to announce victory.