Editorial

FOR close to three centuries, Shakespeare was ignored by the great English universities. As the respected Shakespeare scholar Frederick Boas tells us, during this time neither Oxford nor Cambridge showed the slightest interest in the man or his work. Says Boas, "for generations the predominant attitude of the University authorities towards Shakespeare and other professional actors and their plays was one of hostility or contempt."*

The old universities are deeply conservative in nature, adhering to traditions that go back to their origins in the Middle Ages. When changes do come they are often more apparent than real, resting on a hidden bedrock of long-forgotten mores and prejudices. Until the nineteenth century, although Plautus and Terence (in Latin) had long been accepted, plays in "the vernacular" (English) were seen as outgrowths of Medieval "May Games," those Saturnalian reversals of the orderly workaday world so deplored by the Puritans. In Shakespeare's time, plays in the vernacular were performed in Cambridge and Oxford at halls in town, not at the universities, and when students were caught attending them, they were punished. In fact, players were routinely paid by the universities to *not perform*, to—as one sixteenth-century paybook entry put it: "depart with their plays without further troubling the university"!

When the great Shakespeare scholar Edmund Malone bequeathed his collection of works by and about Shakespeare to Oxford University in 1821, they paid no attention. No doubt we should be grateful that they didn't sell it "for a song," as the Bodleian sold its single copy of the First Folio as soon as it got a copy of the Third Folio (it hadn't bothered to get a copy of the Second Folio). It was not until 1863 that scholars from one of the universities (Cambridge) began publishing the first university-sanctioned series of his works. It wasn't until 1886 that the great Shakespearean actor Henry Irving was invited by an Oxford professor to speak to a university audience about Shakespeare, though neither he nor any of his fellows had yet been allowed to perform his works on campus.

Why then should we be surprised that it is taking so long for the universities to admit that they've been giving the wrong man credit for the plays? If we feel frustrated, think how writers like Pope and Johnson and actors like Garrick and Kean must have felt by the academic stone wall they faced when confronting the schools with—not just the identity—but the *value* of Shakespeare?

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It was *popular* interest in Shakespeare, initiated by late eighteenth-century writers, actors and impresarios, that finally cracked the academic stone wall. Spurred by the surge of pride in English history and literature that attended the growth of the Empire, the British made an icon of the shadowy figure who, more than any other single individual in their history, created the language they spoke at home and in Parliament, read in the newspapers, heard on the stage and wove into poetry, the language that within another hundred years would spread abroad to become the lingua franca of the world.

They made him an icon, but they still didn't know much about the man himself. There was next to nothing written about him by his contemporaries, no literary letters to or from this most peerless and, according to Ben Jonson, prolific of writers. Nobody in his home town seemed to remember anything about him; no anecdotes about him or his family had been passed down through the generations, none that connected him in any real way with a career in literature and the theater, with plays that, during his lifetime, entertained the Court of England's greatest Queen. The few anecdotes that surfaced tended, if anything, to suggest an illiterate rascal, a hoarder, a skinflint. Nothing that concerned Shakspere of Stratford ever said anything about his writing; even his monument in the local church said nothing about it, while those that dealt with Shakespeare as a writer never said anything about his Stratford origins. Embarrassed, his biographers ignored the anomalies, attributing them to the normal attrition of Time, and began the tradition of inventing a biography for England's great literary artist out of whole cloth, a practice that continues to this day.

In fact, the universities of the nineteenth century were, if anything, relieved that so little was discovered. There was that awkward business of the *Sonnets*, 126 passionate love poems addressed to a youth, possible evidence of "disorderly love." Tch tch. The less said the better. During the most homophobic period in human history (Crompton), the English universities planted a hedge between the works and the biography of Shakespeare which they have steadfastly nurtured ever since.

But leading nineteenth-century poets, playwrights, theater impresarios and psychologists, men and women with real experience of writing, the theater, and the human psyche, refused to accept the Stratford biography. Many of them asked the right questions, but when some began promoting the wrong answer, the authorship question itself suffered. Francis Bacon was a great figure in English literature, and the questions his supporters have asked about his career continue to call for an answer, but Bacon's voice is not the voice of Romeo, Hamlet or Lear. Shared tropes suggest acquaintance, shared sources, perhaps friendship—not necessarily identity. Not until 1920 was the first truly viable candidate revealed, discovered in the pages of an anthology of English poetry by an English schoolmaster with the unfortunate name of Looney. (Pronounced Loney, damnit!) No wonder it was so hard to find Shakespeare. He had been hidden, effectively and on purpose, either by himself or by members of his community who were experts at hiding things. But why?

The man who eventually published his work under the charming pun "Will Shakespeare," shook his spear in the most dynamic arena that was available to him at the time, the public stage, but the question remains, for what causes did he "shake" that "spear"?

It's hard for the modern mind to grasp the power wielded by the Stage in sixteenth-century England. It can only be seen from our point in time in the negative, by the diatribes directed against it by moralists and Puritans and by the frequent, if only moderately effective, constraints laid upon it by the City and the Crown in ordinance after ordinance. (E.K. Chambers devotes an entire section of his four-volume work on the Elizabethan Stage to these "Documents of Control.") The stage was the internet, the CDs and video games of its day. Not until the invention of the radio three and a half centuries later would human communications take a quantum leap like that of the commercial stage in London in the 1580s. It took a hundred years for the printing press to change the culture. It took a mere decade for the commercial stage to move from holidays-only to daily performances, from the courtyards of inns and the halls of the wealthy to half-a-dozen public theaters going all week long—with thousands seated at every performance.

We speak of "the Media" today, by which we mean a combination of newspapers, magazines, television, film, the internet, and still, to some extent, the stage. In Shakespeare's day the commercial stage alone was the Media, the brand new Fourth Estate that was rapidly growing to match in power the ancient Three Estates of government: Executive, Legislative and Judicial. Newspapers did not exist (or, if you will, only in the form of ballads, satirical new lyrics sung to familiar tunes). Pamphlets, the first peeps of what would someday be magazines, were confined to a reading public still in the vast minority. Plays were for anyone who could afford the price of a penny. It didn't take an education to see and to understand a play. Shakespeare wasn't writing for posterity, at least, not at the beginning. He was writing to make things happen. But what things?

THE purposeful disassociation between the works and their creator and our confusion over when the plays were written, rewritten, and how much and by whom they were edited, has left us with only the vaguest idea of what his contemporaries might have seen and heard *as a subtext* when they went to a Shakespeare play on a given occasion. Almost every writer who commented on the Stage during that era spoke of issues "fashioned forth darkly" in plays, poems and pamphlets, "darkly" meaning "covertly." Issues of politics, religion, social commentary and character assassination were cloaked in analogies and metaphors so that they might slip past the censor, the Court-appointed Master of the Revels. To add to our difficulties, it now seems certain that Shakespeare, as he has come down to us in the First Folio (and earlier less authoritative editions) has been heavily edited. A new book by the respected Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare's Co-authors*, gives an orthodox view of these shifts of Shakespearean voice and vocabulary. Thus it seems that the very issues that were the primary reasons for hiding his identity would also have been the most likely targets of those editors whose job it was to make his

texts acceptable to the "grand possessors" and other interested parties during the decades following the author's death. These are problems that the researchers and writers who contribute to THE OXFORDIAN are doing their best to solve.

ONE question that necessarily attends the Shakespeare authorship question asks: was the true author of the Shakespeare canon the only writer to protect his identity by using a stand-in, as (it seems) Oxford used William Shakspere of Stratford? We believe that the answer to this is "no, he was not the only one." In searching for "the real Shakespeare" we have found anomalies in the biographies of other authors of the period that we feel are just too similar to those found in the Stratford biography to be pure coincidence.

These biographies share with Shakespeare's such traits as: no evidence of a university education, or, if there is one, the kind afforded a sizar, one who got his degree by working in the college kitchens. Along with no evidence of a literary background from letters, court or household records, no memorials after death, few or only a single work published, there are often religious troubles such as recusancy, spells of military service or colonizing overseas, reports of misbehavior and malfeasance, long dry spells, peculiar alterations in style, and death simply by virtue of disappearance from the record. Among the writers whose biographies show various of these anomalies are: Richard Edwards, Edmund Spenser, George Peele, John Lyly, George Pettie, Robert Greene, Anthony Munday, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Watson, and John Webster.

Arousing our curiosity even further is the fact that these writers-without-bios are matched by a handful of Court writers-without-works, men (and one woman) who have been remarked upon, both by contemporaries and by modern biographers, for their reputations as writers, yet for whom few or no works have survived. Although Oxford is the leading figure in this respect, as we see in the quote from the 1589 *Arte of Poesie* facing page 1, commented upon by at least two other contemporaries (Webbe and Meres), also important are the young Francis Bacon (who published nothing until he was forty-five), Sir Walter Raleigh, and the mature Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (who published nothing after she was thirty-five). These four have all been noted by their biographers as probable authors of much more than has been attributed to them. In matching them with the sizars, recusants and rascals who were willing or forced to trade their identities for cash or some other consideration, we will uncover the truth about "Shake-spear" and much else about the period that is exciting and new.

ONE of the most important factors in any intellectual study is the creation of a theory that defines the case in language both as broad and as succinct as possible. It takes time to arrive at a statement on which all engaged in the study can agree. There are many false starts at the beginning, and as time progresses, the wording will change as the problems come to be seen from different angles than how they were perceived at

first. The first authorship theory went no further than that the Stratford Shakspere could not have written the plays. This we might call, *pace* Einstein, the *Special Theory of Authorship*. A host of variants did little more than add that they were written by Sir Francis Bacon (or Marlowe, or Derby, etc.) and, finally, by Edward de Vere. But as theories develop, they are often forced to include more phenomena than was at first perceived to be relevant. Thus the ancient theory that the earth was bounded by a giant river was superceded by the theory that the oceans clung to an earth that was round and suspended in space, a theory that surfaced when enough persons had noticed that ships disappeared over the horizon little by little, suggesting that they slipped over a bulge of some sort. When the round earth was eventually accepted as proven by Magellen and others who circumnavigated the globe, it ceased to be a theory and became a fact.

Just so we propose that the authorship theory now be expanded to include the other sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English authors whose biographies show anomalies similar to Shakespeare's. Just as new information from sea captains forced a change in the theory of the earth's shape, so information relating to *all* the authors of this period is transforming the way we should be asking our questions.

Again *pace* Einstein, we offer the following *General Theory of Authorship*:

> Due to social constraints and politics, writers connected with the English Court in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries used a variety of ruses including anonymity, pseudonyms and stand-ins to hide their identities when publishing their own works. They did so in order that they would be able to use the commercial Stage and Press to express themselves, to speak without fear on political and social issues, and to adopt personae that would otherwise be denied them by laws and social mores. Thus the authorship trail in many areas has been purposefully blurred, some more than others depending on the status of the individual and the social/political stakes involved for him/her.

This *General Theory of Authorship* forces certain corollaries on those who pursue the truth through the records and histories of the period:

> Researchers must keep in mind that, although some of the problems they face may arise from the natural obfuscations of Time, others *may be purposeful*. To keep these in context, they must therefore regard with suspicion *all records that could have been susceptible to falsification or destruction*, foremost among them the names and dates on title pages of works of the imagination and the content of their dedications. Suspicious records *must be supported by evidence that could not have been fabricated* before they can be taken at face value.

FOR our sixth issue we offer six articles that we trust will be interest to Oxfordians and all who are interested in early modern literature and drama. The first three focus on the very earliest beginnings of what we see as Oxford's writing career, specifically on three plays, two of them extant only in manuscript. The third we know only from its seventeenth-century First Folio version, but the author gives good evidence to suggest that *Macbeth* was one of Oxford's earliest plays, written in his early twenties, or possibly even—in its very first version—in his mid-teens. As evidence for Oxford's pre-Shakespearean work accumulates, we begin to get a clearer sense of the manner in which his literary voice developed and at what pace. (We are especially enthusiastic about Sarah Smith's discovery of the long poem "Paine of Pleasure," published in full in the 2002 issue.) With this we will be better able at some point to properly date those early Shakespeare plays that are presently dated far too late.

The final three articles deal with the other end of Oxford's career, as his works began their own long literary career without him. This part of the story necessarily dwells on the Pembrokes, the media giants of their day. William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, gained control of the Court stage by degrees, finally achieving near autonomy in 1615 when he was made Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Household, a post he passed along to his brother, Philip, Earl of Montgomery and later also of Pembroke, in 1626. Possibly even more important to the Shakespeare story than the "incomparable paire of brethren" was their mother, Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke. One author finds some very interesting insights into Mary's use of Shakespeare's vocabulary via stylometrics; another gives evidence for her authorship of the John Webster canon; while the third examines the religious/political issues that fueled the Pembrokian drive to acquire control of the Stage and Press, something they used to good effect in publishing the First Folio in 1623. That one of these issues has arisen from its grave to torment today's orthodox Shakespeareans should be a source of glee to us "heretics." Careful readers will note some interesting cross references between articles to various individuals, facts and events—references that add to and corroborate each other.

We are proud of this issue and grateful for the diligent research and insights of the Oxfordian scholars who have made it possible. We trust our readers will feel the same.