

The Shakespeare Authorship Question and Philosophy

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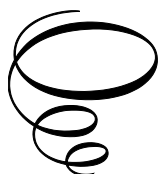
Knowledge, Rhetoric, Identity

By

Michael Quinn Dudley

With a Foreword by Geir Uthaug

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The Shakespeare Authorship Question and Philosophy:
Knowledge, Rhetoric, Identity

By Michael Quinn Dudley

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For Karen and Tiryn

Behold our refutation of the error. It is not based on documents of faith, but on the reasons and statements of the philosophers themselves. If, then anyone there be who, boastfully taking pride in his supposed wisdom, wishes to challenge what we have written...let him reply openly if he dare. He shall find me there confronting him, and not only my negligible self, but many another whose study is truth.

—Thomas Aquinas

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FOREWORD

BY GEIR UTHAUG

This is an important and ground-breaking work. Some books are important due to artistic or literary merits, others by the matter they present and the ways they present them. Michael Dudley is addressing a topic which has become ever more acute in spite of the fact that it has been so suppressed, as it surely has. It is the case known as the Shakespeare authorship question. But whereas most books on the subject are mapping out different routes either for the traditional established candidate, William Shaksper from Stratford, or for various alternative candidates—the most prominent being Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford—this is a book about the case itself. Dudley is not trying to find the person or persons “who did it.” Instead, he is addressing the fundamental issue: how is it possible to establish truth about anything, and how is it possible to uphold a theory presented not as a theory, but as a set of unquestionable facts, when nothing definite can be empirically proved, which is even admitted by the Stratfordians themselves. Dudley finds that what is often considered a fact in this context is in fact a belief, but belief comes in many categories, and among the many aspects which are presented here is the proportion between belief and morality, belief and assumptions, belief and truth, belief and falsehood. In this way, the question of the authorship is widened from a question of who wrote the plays, to a question of how it is possible to acquire knowledge and how can one arrive at the truth, when there are so many obstacles in the way—some of them deliberately used by antagonists—to a reflection of the problem of knowing *per se*. Socrates himself said that “the only thing I know is that I do not know”, which is a far more humble way to approach the truth than claiming to possess it.

Dudley acknowledges the right of academics and researchers to ask questions, and this book is a challenge for those who think that when it comes to this particular question, academic freedom must be curtailed to serve a greater good, which is to uphold a tradition. Dudley asks how far academic freedom has suffered because of this and analyzes the conditions for research in general. Who shall decide which topics are suitable for research and which are not? Who will dictate what is to be printed in

textbooks and what is to be omitted? Who will decide who or what shall be remembered or who or what it is paramount to forget? Who will determine which version will be preferred and have an almost *a priori* validity and which must be silenced or ridiculed?

Dudley makes use of both the general and the particular and frequently switches from the one to the other. He takes the reader through many stages, and he makes use of philosophical metaphors and examples to clarify the problem and then compare it to a certain issue within the contexts of the historic and current debate of the authorship question.

Over the years, so many false and ill-founded allegations and accusations have been made about doubters of Shakespeare that it has become paramount to clear the air. It is not so that the anti-Stratfordians or doubters are illogical, unreasonable or prone to delusional phantasmagoria, as they have so often been presented by the Stratfordians. On the contrary, the majority of them—and certainly the most important ones—have been empirical in their approach and methodical in their reasonings, whereas the Stratfordians (or traditionalist as this study shows), have often laid logic and empiricism aside and substituted rhetoric for knowledge, assumptions for facts, while claiming to possess the truth. It may seem a harsh verdict, but Dudley shows in unambiguous terms that what has been presented as factual truth in the Shakespeare question does not hold up under scrutiny.

This is a devastating verdict on the mainstream effort to defend the mythology and to denounce any attempt at solving it which does not point in the desired direction from an orthodox point of view. Dudley goes to the roots and lays all speculations aside. He analyzes in a radical way the contrary principles upon which Stratfordianism and anti-Stratfordianism are based. While the Stratfordians claim to be the wise and the knowledgeable, guided by the principles of reason and logic, Dudley shows by numerous examples and revealing quotations that the reverse is the case.

This is a philosophic approach to the authorship question, analyzing the ingredients and composites of what the question is all about and how the debate has been conducted. The words and phrases used in the analysis are taken from specialised areas of key academic disciplines like philosophy, psychology and logics. To some readers the terminology is familiar, others will get the terms explained. The advantage of using an established set of academic terminology is that it provides useful and applicable models in which to place the phenomenon of the authorship question as an epistemological or philosophic study, quite apart from the cause itself.

Dudley goes from Hegelian and Kantian perspectives in order to see the workings behind the complexity of the issue and how it may be determined and viewed objectively. Emotional as the theme is to some people, emotions

are here abandoned for logic. In a specific study of conditions for belief, he uses examples from studies in psychology and philosophy to illuminate important aspects related to the authorship controversy, in a way that has probably never been done before. He shows by examples how it has been biased and manipulated by people who profess that they are “in the know” while in fact they don’t know and use ignorance—what the traditionalist E.K Chambers called “nescience”—as a basis for contempt and ridicule of their adversaries. In a specific analysis of ethics of belief, only one out of twelve criteria are seen to be fulfilled by the Stratfordian thesis. Analogies are used like Plato’s famous analogy of the cave, precepts from Hume’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Karl Popper’s demands for theories to be falsifiable. To dismiss these as esoteric or irrelevant to the question is very much beside the point.

The importance of the work is that the Shakespeare question is here placed in a larger context—not only as the question of who was (or were) behind the composition of these important dramas, but what does it signify when viewed from a philosophic perspective? What do we know—not only of the particulars of the life of the man from Stratford or the Earl of Oxford, which are the contesters in this study—but what is it possible to know about anything, and how are we to verify what is and what is not, what happened and what did not? This boils down to the general philosophical questions of what knowledge is, and what knowledge can establish about the real world and how to acquire the knowledge that is needed.

The mainstream scholars have steadfastly held on to the axiom that “Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare”, as if it is a mathematical proof that he did and that all who doubt are victims of delusion. But if one uses the Stratford man’s real name as he himself wrote it, which was *Shakspere*, and opposes this with the name on the title pages, the corrected version must surely be: “Shakspere wrote Shakespeare”, then it becomes less obvious, and must at least be explained in other ways than dodging the issue in order to arrive at preconceived conclusions. How so? one may ask. It then becomes the task of the believer to try to prove, not that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, but that *Shakspere* did. And that demands quite another kind of stance and another set of arguments than what the Stratfordians have used with ease and ostensibly have gotten away with—at least up to now.

Dudley is determined not to let them get off that easily. His scholarship is a deep-dive into the world of philosophical models, references and pure logics to construe a framework with which to analyse the authorship question, not as an isolated phenomenon, but as an example of how truth can be both arrived at and manipulated.

Michael Dudley is concerned about paradigms and paradigm shifts, as explained by Thomas Kuhn. Dudley's book in itself may be seen as a foretaste of such a paradigm shift—or it may even be considered as a small paradigm shift in its own right. It puts things into a perspective which, for far too long, has been ignored. In this book we for once are offered the chance to view the whole issue or phenomenon of the authorship question, not from an historical or ideological viewpoint, but from a purely logical, philosophical and methodical stance, which feels both refreshing and liberating.

It is not a book about the authorship as such, but about the *right to question* the authorship and to explain to the defenders of the proposition that the authorship is so unsure in terms of indisputable facts and sound historic evidence that it is only natural that it *should* be questioned. All the same, the self-proclaimed experts of Shakespeare, mostly professors in English departments, have theoretically at least, refused the doubters this right, thus showing a dismissive and authoritarian attitude to doubt itself, which is not in accordance with academic standards.

To ask questions is, as we know, the first condition in academic studies or indeed in any study aimed at establishing what is sound. If you don't ask questions, how can you get any answers, other than those that tradition, legend and statements from authorities can provide. It is to be hoped that mainstream commentators and academics will read this book without bias and they will see that the arguments are sound, whatever one's personal attitudes may be—what in philosophy is often called the problem of reality.

One of the accusations from mainstream scholars against the sceptics is that they should keep quiet, because they are not scholarly or that their scholarship is of poor quality. This is easy to say when one is in control and can dictate the premises for research which has been going on for far too long. But scholarship is not a question of who possesses the power to control and curtail others. Scholarship is valid if conducted by sincere scholarly methods. Whether it is to be regarded as sound scholarship is not for certain influential groups to decide, it is the nature of the research as such and in what way it may be said to open new perspectives which can broaden our knowledge. When your scholarship is built on surmises, and you actually defend the surmises as scholarship and sound knowledge, then something is clearly not right and needs to be corrected.

In relation to the great stress Stratfordian or mainstream interpreters put on what they consider to be valid scholarship and research and what they think is not, it is rather surprising to find as Dudley demonstrates by examples, that so much of what is considered to be proper research has been based on conjecture rather than empirical evidence (such as factual

documents) which everyone knows is sadly lacking. A lot of what the biographers use is nothing more than wishful thinking, and fabrications which over time have gained momentum as realities. This of course, is nothing new; what *is* new, at least to this writer's knowledge, is the way this inadequacy is presented and exposed systematically in Dudley's book in a verifiable setting. It is not conceivable that this kind of slip-slop scholarship practised by known Shakespeare biographers where so much is left to either chance, belief or "imagination" would have been accepted in almost any other academic field, say in natural science, physics and astronomy.

I will not here venture to explain Dudley's pedagogical methods—his methodology (he does that best himself)—but will rather point out how he uses the instruments at hand to analyse a most complex and still controversial field of study. One gets the impression that he is illuminating the obscurity with a penetrating searchlight of an intellectual and scholarly nature, thus disproving the mainstream allegation against the doubters that they are merely conjuring up stories with no relation to reality. It is high time a book like this comes on the market. It has of course been preceded by other books and studies—including my own 2023 publication *The Battle Over Shakespeare's Identity: The World's Greatest Literary Enigma*—and will no doubt be followed up by new investigations. Nonetheless it marks another crucial turning point in recent unorthodox Shakespearean studies reminding us of the truth in a statement by the novelist Stefan Zweig: Everything disintegrated yearns for clarity, everything obscure, for the light.

Geir Uthaug
Hurdal, Norway, July 2023

ON TERMINOLOGY

Establishing clear and precise terminology is essential for understanding the nature of the Shakespeare authorship debate—which is so profoundly shrouded in (often deliberate) misunderstandings—and for following the arguments presented in this book. As Charles Dickens would put it, these “must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.”¹

Shakespeare is going to be referred to in several different and very distinct ways. References in the text to **Shakespeare** or **William Shakespeare** shall denote the Author of the plays and poems *whoever he was*; while **Shakspere** or **William Shakspere** refer to the historical documented personage who lived from 1564-1616, and who (as far as we can determine from the historical record) was known during his lifetime only as a businessman and property owner; that he was a theatre investor, sometimes actor, or a play broker is also a possible interpretation of the evidence. But there are no contemporary documents from his lifetime that link him to writing. What is key to understanding the following is that he *may or may not be* the same person whom history knows as the Author of the plays and poems, so we need to distinguish between these spellings. There will also be occasion to place the name “Shakespeare” in quotation marks to account for some particular rhetorical purpose to which the name of the Author is being put by partisans in the debate, or as the hyphenated **Shake-Speare** to emphasize its likely origin as a pseudonym. And, as you’ve already seen, I’ll also be referring to an unspecified (and capitalized) *Author* when this is necessary for purposes of clarity or even-handedness.

Partisans for—and opponents of—the leading authorial candidates are referred to below as **Stratfordians**, **post-Stratfordians** and **Oxfordians**. A Stratfordian is one who believes that there is no distinction between the names above, that William Shakespeare the successful and prolific poet and playwright lived between 1564 and 1616 in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he ran successful businesses and owned properties, while also acting in plays and investing in London’s theatres. While skeptics of this tradition are often referred to as *anti-Stratfordians*, I prefer the term **post-Stratfordian**, as it

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: A Ghost Story of Christmas*. (Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group, 2018), 10. ProQuest Ebook Central.

denotes not *opposition* to a particular doctrine but rather the act of transcending it. However, when quoting or summarizing the works of Stratfordian authors who utilize the first term, I retain that usage. The reader will also encounter references to *anti-Shakespeareans* as well as *anti-Shakespeareians*—the latter being the idiosyncratic spelling preferred by Paul Edmondson and Sir Stanley Wells in their extensive writings on the subject.

Some post-Stratfordians are “agnostic” as to the identity of the Author, while others favour alternative candidates, notably Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, Sir Francis Bacon and Christopher Marlowe—respectively known as Oxfordians, Baconians and Marlovians. What follows will focus primarily on only the first group (for reasons that I’ll explain in the Introduction), while, if the issue at hand is of a more general nature, I will employ the broader term post-Stratfordian; but it should be understood that this latter term includes partisans for these (and other) candidates.

The reader should also understand that I employ these group names for purposes of generalizing about perspectives on this complex debate, and to clarify distinctions between *theories*, and not to essentialize about the *people* involved. Post-Stratfordians and Oxfordians represent a wide range of political and social views, so ascribing to them a specific ideology is simply wrong-headed.² This will be a particularly germane concern in Chapter Ten when I analyze the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship’s “How I Became an Oxfordian” essays. But there is also no monolithic “Oxfordian” position on de Vere’s possible authorship of the canon—in fact, there is vigorous debate regarding different theories among his advocates.

One final note: philosophical literature does make use of specialized terminology as well as the occasional word in German, so readers may wish to consult the Glossary at the back of the book for definitions of such terms as needed.

² As, for example, in Matthew Gasda’s essay, “The Right-Wing Crusade Against Shakespeare,” *Compact Magazine*, March 24, 2023, <https://compactmag.com/article/the-right-wing-crusade-against-shakespeare>

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book presents what I believe to be a logically constructed argument to the effect that our knowledge of the Author Shakespeare has been generated in an epistemically blameworthy fashion of historic dimensions, and that the continued use and reinforcement of this “knowledge” in our educational and cultural institutions is the result of motivated reasoning and, therefore, inconsistent with sound scholarship.

Or rather, I should admit that it is a *retroactively*-constructed argument, comprising as it does a combination of previously published articles adapted for this purpose, as well as newly-written chapters, some of which incorporate materials from these (and other) existing works. That I was actually engaged in a decade-long research agenda into the epistemology of the Shakespeare authorship question did not occur to me until relatively recently when, upon examining my existing publications, I realized that, if organized into a particular order, they could be shaped into a coherent book-length treatment. I hope the reader will agree. However, to give some sense of the lack of correspondence between when I wrote these pieces and their presentation here, consider that my first scholarly article on the subject, published in 2014, is adapted here as Chapter Six, while my most recently published paper from 2021 is now Chapter Three.

Chapter Three and then Chapters Six through Ten are adaptations of previously published articles that have been edited as needed to greater or lesser degrees in order to remove unnecessary duplication, and to shape them into chapters, rather than as articles, which must meet different demands. Chapters Six and Ten in particular have been substantially revised from their original form. The Introduction, Chapters One, Two, Four and Five, as well as Chapter Eleven and the Conclusion are all original to this book. However, having the opportunity to both adapt existing writings with new content did give me scope to shift older materials to new purposes: for example, Chapter Two—in introducing the authorship question and the “bad habits” of Stratfordian biographers—integrates a number of passages from several my other works, while a discussion of Thomas Kuhn and paradigms that originally supported the 2014 article on which Chapter Six was based was moved to Chapter Ten, where Kuhn has a much more important presence. For details concerning my record of publications and their integration in the book, please see Appendix 1. The reader is invited

to seek these and other previously published works in their original forms as indicated in the Appendix, or as posted to my university's institutional repository, WinnSpace (<https://winnspace.uwinnipeg.ca/>).

Finally, note that, while my focus is on theory, I will be referring to historical documents; but for the sake of enabling and encouraging further reading on the part of the non-expert, when I do so these are for the most part cited in terms of their presentation or discussion in readily accessible popular books, not in original archival form.

INTRODUCTION

“Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.”
—Frederick Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*

“Why would *anybody* believe it?”

The young woman’s eyes were wide, her mouth hanging open as if in something akin to shock, punctuating the question. She had approached the front of the auditorium as most of her classmates were filing out, so that she could speak directly to the event’s featured speaker, Charles Beauclerk, Earl of Burford,³ whom I had accompanied on his presentation to her high school. During that spring of 1993, Burford was on a North American tour organized through the Shakespeare Oxford Society,⁴ speaking to audiences about the Shakespeare authorship question, and in particular the theory that the true author was his indirect ancestor, Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford. As one of the co-chairs of the programming committee of the Greater Edmonton Library Association, I had convinced the Association to partner with the public school system and the Department of Drama at the University of Alberta to engage the Earl for a public event at the Edmonton Public Library.

I was at that point working for the local library as a newly minted librarian, having just graduated with a master’s degree in library and information studies from the University of Alberta. I was also 7 years out from a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre, specializing in acting—the third year of which had been devoted entirely to the study of Shakespeare in performance, including monologues, 20-minute scenes and stage fighting choreography. Throughout that year, I had had the opportunity to play many of Shakespeare’s most iconic characters, including Edmund, fatally wounded by Edgar in their sword fight in Act V, scene iii of *King Lear*; Juliet calling for the night, “thou sober-suited matron all in black” to bring her her Romeo; Macbeth brooding over how endless tomorrows creep in their “petty pace from day to day”; and Richard of Gloucester seducing

³ Beauclerk would forsake his title over a controversial 1999 Bill reforming the House of Lords to exclude hereditary peers from the body.

⁴ In 2013 the Shakespeare Oxford Society merged with the Shakespeare Fellowship to form the current Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship.

Lady Anne as she mourns her murdered husband in Act I scene ii *Richard III*. The highlight of the year for me—and probably every actor’s dream—was delivering Hamlet’s immortal Act III scene i soliloquy “To be or not to be.” To give the students a broader context for the plays, the final assignment asked us to choose and research a contemporary Elizabethan or Jacobean figure—given my surname I couldn’t resist selecting Sir Robert Dudley, the 1st Earl of Leicester—all of whom would (improbably) meet in an improvised scenario. It had been, in short, an exhilarating year and helped cement my love for Shakespeare that had initially been sparked by watching Sir Derek Jacobi’s *Hamlet* for the BBC in high school, shortly after its release in 1980.

In the years that followed, however, I chose not to pursue a career in theatre but instead followed my wife to Edmonton so she could attend university, and found myself working at Edmonton Public Library as a library assistant. Within a couple of years, I decided to return to graduate school to make librarianship my profession.

Still, my fascination with Shakespeare remained, and I realized that, despite having spent a year concentrating on his work, I had never read a biography of the playwright’s life. Yes, our professors had related a few anecdotes about The Bard—poaching a deer, being asked by Queen Elizabeth to write a play about Falstaff in love—but we hadn’t actually been taught anything substantive about Shakespeare’s life, nor was it mentioned that there might have been any doubt about his identity.

One day at the library, I decided to read a biography of Shakespeare, and the branch where I worked happened to own a copy of a mammoth, nearly 900-page tome called *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* by Charlton Ogburn Jr. Here, I thought, is the biography I should have read years ago! Imagine my surprise to discover a few pages in that it was not, as I had expected, about the life of the famous playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon but instead completely debunked and tore apart every last element of the story I’d been previously taught at school and in university. In the place of what Ogburn had revealed to be a hollow myth, he offered the substantive and compelling vision of a living, breathing and fascinating individual named Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford as the man behind the pseudonym “Shake-Speare.”

I was flabbergasted. Hooked. Absolutely convinced. Obsessed even. But more than that: I felt profoundly let down by my university professors. How could they have spent an entire year instructing us on all matters Shakespeare without once mentioning there was a Shakespeare authorship question?

Once I had graduated from library school and began my profession, I hoped there would be ways to integrate this interest into my work. As it turned out, I volunteered to be co-chair for programming for the Greater Edmonton Library Association just as Charles Burford was making his way around the continent arguing for Oxford's authorship. The Association agreed that he'd be a great fit for our events that year, so I had partnered with the Shakespeare Oxford Society on the arrangements and asked a friend of ours to host the Earl at her home.

That week of the Earl's visit was a busy one: in the days prior to our Association's event at the public library, I had been escorting Charles to a number of other venues in Edmonton, including the University, an interview at a local radio station, and now to this high school. At this point I had seen his talk already, and thoroughly enjoyed his highly engaging public speaking style, excellent grasp of facts and biting humour – especially when he introduced with a flourish the slide of the scrawled, barely legible signatures attributed to the most famous author in the English language declaring, “these...these are the complete works of William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon”—which elicited uproarious laughter from audiences.

Now, with the high school presentation over and all the voluminous evidence against the William Shakespeare of tradition laid out before her by this brilliant speaker, the young woman standing in front of Charles and me seemed bewildered, almost shaken and distraught. “Why would *anybody* believe it?” she asked. Having experienced my own “road to Damascus” moment only a few years previously, I immediately recognized behind her query other deeper, more troubling questions: why had this myth been taught to her by trusted teachers as fact? Why had she never heard this information before? How could all of the institutions she'd relied upon—her schools, her textbooks, her libraries, her teachers and the experts on which they depended—have accepted and perpetuated a story so transparently indefensible on evidentiary grounds?

And in that moment, this student planted the seeds of the questions that have possessed me ever since: *why* is this story so fervently believed? If not on the basis of the incontrovertible nature of the evidence—which could hardly be the case, given the durability of the skepticism against it—then what are the social and cultural forces at work that keep this mythology so deeply embedded in our institutions? And how might this hold, finally, be broken?

To begin to chart a path towards answering these questions, we need to gain a fresh perspective. I suggest we start in the 23rd Century.

Exploring the Shakespeare Planet

One of the charms of the original *Star Trek* series was that it featured a number of episodes in which the crew of the Starship *Enterprise* visited planets whose cultures closely matched those from Earth's history. While surely a cost-saving measure designed to make best use of existing backlot sets despite being set 300 years in the future, it also allowed the series to engage in the kind of provocative social commentary that so motivated the show's creator Gene Roddenberry. Over the course of the series' three-year run between 1966-1969, viewers were taken to a Roman planet ("Bread and Circuses"), a Nazi planet ("Patterns of Force"), a Chicago gangster planet ("A Piece of the Action") and a post-apocalyptic world in which "Yangs" (Yankees) battled endlessly with "Kohms" (communists) ("The Omega Glory").

In the case of the latter two episodes, these parallels to Earth are explained to be the result of the influence of a sacred text around which these societies have—in error—organized themselves: in "A Piece of the Action" it is a mammoth history book entitled *Chicago Mobs of the Twenties* (to which the aliens refer with fervent religiosity as "The Book")⁵ accidentally left behind on the planet Sigma Iotia II by a Federation starship 100 years previously, while for the Yangs of "The Omega Glory" it is the Constitution of the United States of America, their almost unintelligible worship of which is further sealed by the presence of the American flag.

I raise these examples from science fiction so that we may first imagine an analogy: were a starship from some alien federation to visit Earth in the the early 21st Century, they might well see our own planet's civilization as also deriving from a "sacred text" in the form of the *Complete Works* of William Shakespeare. They might even be forgiven for calling our world the "Shakespeare planet."

After all, it is difficult if not impossible to apply sufficient superlatives about—or indeed to even adequately summarize—the impact and influence of Shakespeare on our world's letters, spoken and written languages, arts, music, and popular culture, across every inhabited continent, culture and language. He is, simply put,

the most influential person who ever lived. He shaped our world more than any political or religious leader, more than any explorer or engineer. The gifted playwright who moves audiences to laughter and tears has also moved history...The effects of his words on the world have been out of all

⁵ Interestingly this prop was actually a mocked-up copy of the *Complete Works* of Shakespeare!

proportion, monstrous and sublime, vertiginous in their consequences, far beyond anything he could have predicted...When you become familiar with Shakespeare, you see him everywhere.⁶

Shakespeare's plays have for centuries been translated into hundreds of languages⁷ and influenced diverse interpretations and cultural production in China,⁸ Africa,⁹ Latin America,¹⁰ and other cultures around the globe.¹¹ India merits particular mention: owing to the central role of Shakespeare in British colonial education, Sukanta Chaudhuri states that "[o]utside the Western world, India has the longest and most intense engagement with Shakespeare of any country anywhere."¹²

The playwright's works have inspired over 50 operas and more than 100 ballets, while numerous other notable works of classical music have become fully a part of the repertoire and popular culture. How many millions of married couples have culminated their nuptial ceremonies by walking up the aisle to the strains of Felix Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" from his 1842 incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

William Shakespeare is cited on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) as a writer on nearly 1,800 films, with *Romeo and Juliet* alone inspiring some 50 adaptations.¹³ Quite apart from conventional filmed versions of the plays, there are countless retellings and reinterpretations, such as Disney's screen-to-stage animated phenomenon *The Lion King* and the classic stage-

⁶ Stephen March, *How Shakespeare Changed Everything* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2011): ix-xi.

⁷ A. J. Hoenselaars, ed., *Shakespeare and the Language of Translation* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2012).

⁸ Alexa Alice Joubin, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

⁹ Martin Banham, James Gibbs, and Femi Osofisan, eds., *Shakespeare in & Out of Africa*. African Theatre, 12 (Oxford: James Currey, 2013).

¹⁰ Trevor Boffone, and Carla Della Gatta, *Shakespeare and Latinidad* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

¹¹ Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia, *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008).

¹² See Sukanta Chaudhuri, "Introduction: Shakespeare in India." In *The Shakespearean International Yearbook*, vol. 12: Special Section, Shakespeare in India, eds. Tom Bishop and Alexander C.Y. Huang (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), quoted in Shormishtha Panja and Saraf, Babli Moitra, eds. *Performing Shakespeare in India: Exploring Indianness, Literatures and Cultures* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2016), 4.

¹³ "List of films based on Romeo and Juliet," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified January 9, 2023,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_films_based_on_Romeo_and_Juliet

to-screen musical *West Side Story*. International cinema has also seen many prestigious offerings, such as Akira Kurosawa's 1957 *Throne of Blood* (a retelling of *Macbeth*) and Indian director Vishal Bhardwaj's critically acclaimed "Shakespeare trilogy" of *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*, 2003), *Omkara* (*Othello*, 2006) and *Haider* (*Hamlet*, 2014).

Shakespeare's writings contain the greatest vocabulary—by some measures over 20,000 words—of any author, at least 1,700 words of which were of his own invention, often by changing nouns into verbs, or adding prefixes or suffixes to existing words.¹⁴ The popularity of his works contributed greatly to the standardization of the English language, as Shakespeare was a major source of vocabulary used by Samuel Johnson in his foundational 2-volume 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*.¹⁵ Dozens of the very phrases we use in everyday conversation derive from Shakespeare. In the ingeniously arranged words of English journalist and broadcaster Bernard Levin:

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare 'it's Greek to me', you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance on your Lord and master, laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise—why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it), quoting Shakespeare...

Finally—and to circle back—there is of course, the profound influence of Shakespeare on the cultural juggernaut that is the *Star Trek* franchise itself, from its episode titles derived from the plays ("Conscience of the King," "All Our Yesterdays" and "Dagger of the Mind") to the 1991 film *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, which, in addition to its *Hamlet*-inspired title, features a scene in which a Klingon character declares "You

¹⁴ Hugh Craig, "Shakespeare's Vocabulary: Myth and Reality." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62, no. 1 (2011): 53-74. doi:10.1353/shq.2011.0002.

¹⁵ Gulnar Huseynova, "Shakespeare's Influence on the English Language," *Azerbaijan National Education Academy* (Mohamed Fuzhouli AMEA Institute of Manuscripts, 2021), 32.

have not experienced Shakespeare until you have read him in the original Klingon!”¹⁶ Such is the extent of the beloved series’ devotion to Shakespeare that the Folger Shakespeare Library has in its collection a Klingon translation of *Hamlet*.¹⁷

What is at stake when a civilization endows so much significance to one text, and upon which so much of its cultural production depends? Error concerning that text—once established, undetected and unrecognized—can initiate effects that multiply out of all proportion to that error’s original dimensions. In both of the above-cited *Star Trek* episodes, the cultures in question possess the barest (or actually a corrupted) understanding of the nature of their sacred texts, which then deforms their entire societies: the Iotians’ slavish but superficial imitation of that single localized moment of Earth’s history they’ve only read about (but absent any knowledge of the wider planet itself and its cultures) has meant a century of violent stagnation, while the Yangs don’t even know the true pronunciations or meanings of the words they recite with such reverence.

As for our own “Shakespeare planet,” our hypothetical alien explorers would surely be astonished to learn that its inhabitants have only the dimmest knowledge of the Author of these foundational texts on which so much of their civilization has been based, from every form of artistic expression to their very ability to communicate with one another. Instead, the Great Author’s life, inspirations and motivations are shrouded in myth and mystery, and are, as a consequence, subject to endless and competing speculations. At the same time, the crew would learn that a dissident faction has, for centuries, argued that the texts must have been written by someone else entirely, yet the elite knowledge keepers of the planet have worked to ensure that this minority has been effectively silenced. When they investigate further, the alien scientists discover that all traces of documented connection between the holy texts and the Great Author during his lifetime appear to have vanished, and that almost all the information the inhabitants claim to know of this man was recorded centuries afterwards.

What other conclusion could this alien crew draw from their encounter than that these people might well be fundamentally mistaken and misguided in their devotion to this chimerical Author, and that this error could not help but mislead them in how they interpreted the words they worship so much?

¹⁶ Nicholas Meyer, dir. *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991; Paramount Pictures), 22:45, DVD.

¹⁷ Sarah Hovde, “Shakespeare, in the Original Klingon,” *Folger Shakespeare Library*, September 16, 2016. <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/shakespeare-klingon-star-trek/>

I trust the reader is sensible to the purpose of this conceit and its critique. At its core, I believe the real-world effects of the Shakespeare authorship mystery are not so different from those depicted on *Star Trek*: as was the case for the Yangs, the origins of the texts of Shakespeare appear to have been lost to time, such that we recite them without completely comprehending their meaning; and that, like the Lotians, our knowledge (and worship) of The Book (or at any rate, its author) has remained both static and imitative.

Beyond the Question of Authorship

This book, *The Shakespeare Authorship Question and Philosophy*, is not, strictly speaking, about *who* Shakespeare was or wasn't. I offer no new evidence or arguments against the Stratford tradition or in favour of the Oxfordian claim; and beyond providing a brief overview of the debate in this Introduction—as well as the essentials of the biographical practices applied to these candidates in Chapter Two—I do not engage directly in comparing the cases for Shakspeare and Oxford. Instead, this book is an interdisciplinary examination of *how* our knowledge of the Author (or rather, two presumed authors) has, on the one hand, been constructed, reproduced, sacralized, taught and institutionalized—and, on the other, minimized, rejected, condemned, marginalized and ignored. To do this I propose that we must look beyond the substance of these respective authorship claims themselves and seek a new and external theoretical framework by which these claims may be comprehended, weighed, and assessed.

What sets this book apart from all other books on the Shakespeare authorship question is that, while they are focused on the *truth-indicativeness of the evidence* for various authorial theories (i.e., their credibility),¹⁸ my focus is on the *truth-conduciveness* of the belief- and knowledge-formation practices associated with those theories—in other words, the extent to which such practices *tend* to produce true beliefs rather than false ones. I'm not going to be determining who the “true” Author is, only the extent to which these belief systems (and their adherents) conform to knowledge-gathering norms and therefore offer sufficient *explanatory potential*. This will also involve delving into these models' respective *ideological foundations* and the *rhetorical strategies* employed in their defense. My objective is to provide Shakespeare scholars on both sides of

¹⁸ As well they should. This is in no way to dismiss approaching the debate on an evidentiary basis, only to distinguish my book from previous ones.

this debate—as well as the general public—with a new language with which we can fully understand the nature of the question and its implications for the academy and the broader society, in the hope that we can finally—together—reach an ethically-derived and epistemologically sound determination regarding it.

To undertake this analysis, my focus is specifically on *epistemology* (defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the theory of knowledge and understanding...and the distinction between justified belief and opinion”¹⁹) and *rhetoric* (which the same dictionary defines as “the art of using language effectively so as to persuade or influence others”²⁰), rather than on the substantive documented facts concerning the authorship debate itself. My third area of focus, *identity*, concerns the extent to which this debate is shaped (or, by turns, deformed) by our individual and collective sense of self concerning the authorship debate, i.e., as “Shakespeareans,” “post-Stratfordians,” “Oxfordians,” etc. As such, what follows in the ensuing chapters does not seek to determine who the real Shakespeare was by examining and comparing historical or literary evidence. My scope is strictly theoretical, philosophical and pragmatic: through an exploration of external, interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks concerning knowledge and persuasion, I shall map out the extent to which these competing claims (and, by extension, their adherents and partisans) *meet scholarly expectations related to epistemic norms and robustness*.

In his mammoth 2021 history of the Oxfordian movement *Shakespeare Revolutionized*, independent Shakespeare scholar James Warren presents what he refers to as the twelve “mental revolutions” downstream of J. Thomas Looney’s 1920 book “*Shakespeare*” *Identified* (which first introduced the thesis that Edward de Vere was Shakespeare) that the public was required to undergo in order to accept the Oxfordian thesis and surrender the Stratfordian one. These included fundamental transformations of our understandings of the circumstances of the composition of the plays and poems, the significance of their internal contents, the origins of Shakespeare’s vast knowledge, the extent to which contemporaries borrowed from Shakespeare and not the other way around, and Shakespeare’s place in Elizabethan society.²¹

¹⁹ “epistemology, n.”. *OED Online*. Accessed March 10, 2023, Oxford University Press.

²⁰ “rhetoric, n.1”. *OED Online*. Accessed March 10, 2023. Oxford University Press.

²¹ James Warren, *Shakespeare Revolutionized: The First Hundred Years of J. Thomas Looney’s “Shakespeare Identified”* (Cary, NC: Vertitas Publications, 2021), 110-113.

What I am proposing in this book is to add a thirteenth “mental revolution” to those articulated by Warren: that Oxfordians now need to forward a *metaunderstanding*—an understanding *of* our understanding of the authorship question itself, including the bases and justifications of competing knowledge claims—with a particular focus on the role of institutions in forming, reproducing and asserting these claims. Instead of exploring a proposition like “for centuries there has been doubt about the authorship of the works known as Shakespeare’s”, I am going to encourage a metaunderstanding of the issue by making the following argument:

The institutional and cultural resistance to doubt about the authorship of the works known as Shakespeare’s is rooted in ideologically-motivated truth claims arrived at through unreliable belief-formation and knowledge-generation practices and reinforced through a specific suite of rhetorical strategies and modes of public persuasion.

Ultimately, my principal question is: how is it possible that all of our educational and cultural institutions could have been so fundamentally wrong about something so important, and what could possibly explain their continued defence of—and adherence to—this epistemological error?

An epistemological approach to the authorship question is, on its face, long overdue. The very language used on all sides of the debate is replete with epistemic-laden terminology: Stratfordians claim that Shakespeare’s authorship is *beyond doubt*,²² an assertion challenged by authorship *skeptics* who don’t *believe* in the traditional biography and so *inquire* into the authorship *question* but are not infrequently condemned as “Shakespeare *deniers*” who reject *historical evidence*.²³ It only stands to reason that the matter should always have been evaluated in terms of what constitutes knowledge, and how we acquire it. As Elizabeth Winkler reports in *Shakespeare Was a Woman and Other Heresies*, famed Shakespeare biographer Stephen Greenblatt concedes that the authorship question is “an epistemological question” but that “[t]hese epistemological questions are above my pay grade.”²⁴

The study of epistemology encompasses a number of related but distinct phenomena: belief-formation processes, mental cognition, the structure and

²² *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* was title of a 2013 collection edited by Sir Stanley Wells and Paul Edmondson of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and published by Cambridge University Press.

²³ Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, eds. *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 37.

²⁴ Winkler, *Shakespeare Was a Woman*, 321.