

William Leahy

The Shakespeare Authorship Question – A Suitable Subject for Academia?

This last academic year has been something of a turning point for me. I began the year in the usual way, researching my specialist area of Renaissance processional literature while turning out the odd journal article concerning Shakespeare's history plays. Various deadlines loomed, as they are prone to do and the near future promised continuing success, albeit of a fairly rudimentary kind. Yet, here I stand as the end of the academic year approaches posing what, for me and for most Shakespearean academics, has traditionally been a ridiculous, if not impossible question. The Shakespeare Authorship Question – a suitable subject for Academia? It is understandable, given the nature of the environment in which this paper is being delivered that many would feel that this question I have posed is a merely rhetorical one, which will be answered with a resounding "yes!" However, as an academic, working within an institution and a discourse with certain well-defined constraints, it is important for me, whatever conclusion I reach, to make an appropriately academic case for what I say and for what I shall propose. In the initial section of this paper I wish to trace the events of the past academic year that led me to where I stand today, but I want also, in the subsequent section, to make an academic case for my claim that the Shakespeare Authorship Question is, indeed, a suitable subject for Academia and that, in this context, the Authorship Question's time has come.

In June 2005, I was asked to write a short article for an English fortnightly magazine concerning the latest controversy involving Shakespeare and Authorship. Mark

Rylance of the Globe had made the claim, not new as it turned out that Shakespeare's works had very possibly been written by a team of authors headed by Francis Bacon. In this article, I cited the usual academic objections to such a claim, as well as expressing myself in the typical ironic tone adopted by academics when asked for their opinion on the Question in general. In my defence, it is worth pointing out that I also took the opportunity to ridicule the "fact of Stratford;" its theme-park ambience and the many "half-truths" on which it is built. Writing this article sparked an interest in the subject for me, one that led me to attend a conference at the Globe on the Question a few weeks later. It was here that my attitude began to change, and that I began to understand certain things. Firstly, I began to get a grasp on the fact that the Authorship Question gives rise to a good deal of conflict, a conflict in which the two sides are clearly demarcated. On the one side are, generally, those non-academics who believe that the Authorship Question is, at the very least, a legitimate question. On the other, the academic establishment who will have no truck with the Question and regard it as illegitimate in those terms. Secondly, I began to understand that the Question is not purely one of isolated individuals doing their own, unconnected research. This is a world populated by groups and texts which have shared beliefs and shared interests. Thirdly, I came to realise that it is a global phenomenon which generates vast quantities of both online and paper research. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, I came to realise that this phenomenon has a history stretching back to the lifetime of Shakespeare himself.

Not long after this conference I was asked to write another article, this time for the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*. As I wrote it, I felt that certain things had changed in me, the most noticeable of which was my dropping of an ironic tone when

discussing the Authorship Question. That is not to say that I began to make a case for another author of Shakespeare's work. Rather, I suggested that many of the perceptions of those involved in the Authorship Question, the vast majority of whom were non-academics, needed to be treated with more respect by the academic establishment. I felt this to be the case for two reasons. Firstly, much of the research that has been done and is being carried out as we speak is of the highest quality. It is true that much other research carried out in the name of the Authorship Question is somewhat weak in an academic sense, and that this causes some of the better research to be undermined. However, as stated and without wishing to sound pompous (as an academic), much of the research is of an academic standard. Secondly, I feel that orthodox Shakespeare criticism is, to some extent at least, indebted to the sorts of ideas that the non-academic Authorship researchers have been suggesting for many years. One such important area, one which I concentrated upon in my article is that of Shakespeare and collaboration. One does not have to look too far back to find orthodox Shakespeare criticism stating that very few of the works were written in collaboration. Furthermore, this criticism generally stated that if collaboration did take place in one or two plays, the plays generally were poor and the sections that made them poor were not written by Shakespeare. It is worth saying that many conclusions such as these were based on poor research, of the type that orthodox scholars accuse non-academics of producing. Equally significant, however, is that fact that many of the plays are now considered to have been produced in collaboration, as was normal among playwrights at the time, and are none the worse for it. To my mind, this development within the field of Shakespeare criticism has been one effect of the Authorship Question and the research carried out in its name. This effect is one that remains unacknowledged by the academic establishment, however. It was difficult to

communicate all of these ideas in one short article, but as I said, my ideas on this subject were beginning to crystallise.

As luck would have it, the next step in this process occurred in-house, in my own institution. My newly appointed Head of School was seeking to make a splash within the institution by suggesting many new Masters programmes in English and other subjects in order to increase our postgraduate numbers. As one can imagine, trying to carve out a unique Shakespeare niche for oneself in a London university is difficult. All of the major universities in London run at least one Shakespeare MA, and many of them are very well established and are run by very well known academics. I approached our Head of School with an idea to run a Shakespeare and Authorship MA which would be the first of its kind not just nationally, but in the world. When he heard this, he went for it at once, without, to his credit, making any of the typically ironic comments regarding the nature of the subject. Colleagues generally were more sceptical and one or two were hostile. However, the mere fact that it would be the first of its kind in the world and that it could therefore recruit well won the day. As strange as it sounds, the Shakespeare Authorship Question was seen as a potential “earner.” Since then, the first major administrative hurdle in approving the course has been cleared and the programme will come on-stream in September 2007. As a preface to this, I am running a year 3 module; “Shakespeare: the Return of the Author,” from this September onwards.

In order to formalise my burgeoning interest in the area and seek to broaden the institutional basis for the subject, my next step was to contact a number of academics, actors, journalists and various specialists with a view to setting up a so-called research

network into the Authorship Question. This culminated in a funding bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK which, if successful, will provide £30,000 over 2 years in order to set up seminars and discussions with interested parties and will culminate in a major international conference, the publication of an edited collection of articles and the launch of a paper journal specifically about the Authorship Question. I await the outcome of that bid with excitement and trepidation.

This is where I am now in academic and institutional terms. In theoretical terms, I have some work to do in order to convince my academic colleagues that this is the way to go. For I have set myself the task of bringing the Authorship Question into academia, legitimating its status within the institution and removing the stigma that academics attach to the whole subject. This is not to suggest that all the work carried out by non-academics is not enormously valuable or indeed needs the legitimating approval of academia. On the contrary, it is my desire to enlighten academia, to broaden the horizons of many in the institution, to demonstrate that the Shakespeare Authorship Question is a phenomenon that bears analysis. In short, that the Shakespeare Authorship Question is a legitimate question. What follows is the academic case I shall make.

I stated that the year 3 course I wish to run is entitled “Shakespeare: the Return of the Author.” I have chosen this title for specific reasons, as it strikes me as one which encapsulates a contemporary cultural reality. Many academics and, I am sure, non-academics were surprised at the publication in 2004 of Stephen Greenblatt’s biography of Shakespeare, *Will in the World*. This surprise was based in a perceived about-turn in Greenblatt’s critical practice in the sense that he seemed to legitimate a type of discourse which has traditionally been considered by academia as lacking in

scholarly rigour. Scholars generally agreed that details of Shakespeare's life were sketchy to say the least and that to fill in the gaps to the extent that Greenblatt does is questionable. Greenblatt has not been alone in this, however. 2005 saw the publication of James Shapiro's *1599: A Year In the Life of William Shakespeare*, another text which, to all intents and purposes fills in the one enormous gap that is the known movements and events of Shakespeare's life in this particular year with pure supposition. Shapiro manages to do this by inserting many historically verified occurrences in and around the supposed important events of Shakespeare's day-to-day existence for this one-year. Greenblatt is much more ambitious in that he fills in the gaps for the entire life of Shakespeare (and, indeed, Shakespeare's father, wife, children and a couple of neighbours). However, the important point that needs to be made here is the fact that these academics, among the most renowned of their generation, have turned to this genre at this point in time.

In many senses, Greenblatt and Shapiro are not the first to do this. Richard Wilson's *Secret Shakespeare*, though defined as an academic book—whereas Greenblatt's and Shapiro's are seen to be more of the genre of popular biography—is essentially a certain kind of Shakespeare biography, one which wears its agenda very clearly on its sleeve. However, I feel it is true to say that all Shakespeare criticism is, to some extent or other, a negotiation of the biography—both known and supposed—of Shakespeare. One need merely scan the introductions to various editions of the plays, the Arden series, for example, to see all sorts of references to what Shakespeare must have been thinking, how he must have seen the world, how various events must have affected him and so on. In this sense then, it becomes clear that Greenblatt, Shapiro, Wilson, *et al* are not really doing anything new or radical in terms of their critical

trajectory. What is new is that they are dropping the old pretence of academic objectivity, laying to rest the idea that fact should, at the very least, outweigh supposition in academic treatises, rejecting what has become the conventional, unquestioned belief in the idea of the “Death of the Author.”

This notion of Roland Barthes regarding the author – as a mere conduit of language and therefore unable to control or even greatly affect interpretation of the text – as essentially missing and therefore unimportant became something of an unquestioned tenet of poststructuralist criticism. Literary critics whose views adhered to the general constraints of this kind of criticism, such as New Historicists and Cultural Materialists, found Barthes’ perception to be most enabling in their own work, one of the outcomes being the new attention paid to context that very much defined the practices of these schools. Thus, the notorious essays of the New Historicists which, controversially at the time, linked all sorts of apparently non-related historical events and texts to the actual literary text they were examining, very often a work of Shakespeare’s. The prioritisation of context became a conventional academic practice in this field, and the author was, on the surface at least, relegated to a position of mere scribe. However, a brief review of Greenblatt’s earlier work reveals that, while espousing the “Death of the Author,” he always found a special place for Shakespeare. One need merely reconsider, for example, the implications of Greenblatt’s assertions that Shakespeare’s drama was “a primary expression of Renaissance power” (“Invisible Bullets” 45), or that his plays functioned to “impose normative ethical patterns on the urban masses” (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 254). In these assertions, Greenblatt is providing Shakespeare with agency; stating that, as an author, Shakespeare is attempting to do certain things with his writing and,

furthermore, that he succeeded. In this scenario, the author is not dead; he is very much alive and attempting to manipulate his audience according to his own ideological agenda. Greenblatt's latest work carries this idea to its natural destination. For, with his production of a biography on Shakespeare, Greenblatt merely makes explicit what had been sub-textual in his earlier work. Like the biographies written by Shapiro and Wilson then, Greenblatt's text marks an explicit acknowledgement of the primary place of the writer in academic criticism, and in doing so heralds the "Return of the Author." The repercussions of this for both academic and non-academic work in general, and the Shakespeare Authorship Question in particular are profound.

One of the reasons I believe that the Authorship Question is one that should have academic standing is that it produces its own, well-populated genre. By this, I mean that, since its inception, the Question has given rise to books, journals, collected editions, magazines and, more recently, an enormous electronic body of work that is explicitly about the Question itself. This historical body of work is itself worthy of academic examination as a discrete and vibrant genre which reflects evolving cultural, social and political developments. I feel therefore that academia should, if for no other reason that I suggest, turn its attention to the important textual history of the Authorship Question. It is worth reiterating here that I would go further in terms of genre because, as I stated earlier, all works of criticism concerning Shakespeare are, to a greater or lesser extent, negotiations of the facts of his life. However, returning to the primary genre generated by the Question itself, it is true to say that the dominant element of this genre is that of biography, both of Shakespeare and of other writers. Generally speaking, the facts of the lives of the writers, whether of Shakespeare or any other, are matched to the facts of the plays and poems and conclusions are then

drawn. This is, of course, precisely the methodology of Greenblatt, Shapiro and Wilson. The conclusions may well be different, but the ways in which these conclusions are reached are the same. Whether the texts are by non-academics therefore or by some of the most respected scholars in the world of Shakespeare criticism alive today, the methodologies used are identical. For one school the author has returned and is again knocking on the door of the academic establishment. For the other school, the “non-academic,” the author has never been away. But given the commensurability of methodology, it is apparent that the Shakespeare Authorship Question, as an academic entity, should also be knocking on the door. The practice indulged in by academics themselves suggests that the Authorship Question’s time has come.

The fact that the methodologies and the resultant texts of both the academic establishment and those non-academics working in the field are so similar, brings into stark contrast the basis upon which the Authorship Question remains on the margins of academic acceptability. It is true to say, and we have all experienced it in one form or another, that academics in general have little time for the Authorship Question, regarding it as silly at best and as a time-wasting, meaningless hobby at worst. Time and again it is possible to read of academics who reject the question out of hand, often in a most aggressive and contemptuous manner. It is true to say, and this is another aspect of the subject which fascinates me, that the Authorship Question gives rise to passions – on both sides – that research into almost any other subject singularly fails to do. However, returning to my main point, it is true to say therefore that academics very often reject the Authorship Question despite the fact that many (non-academic) researchers in the field use the same methodology as them and produce research

which is every bit as scholarly as their own. Academic research which suggests, as it has repeatedly, that Shakespeare was a proto-feminist, a proto-Marxist, a monarchist, a catholic or whatever, is no more or less academic than research which believes that Shakespeare did not write certain plays or that someone else did. This suggests that the research undertaken under the rubric of the Authorship Question is rejected by academics not because of its methodology or even its conclusions. It is rejected because it is, simply put, produced by non-academics. It is outside of the discourse, outside of the game. This point is proved by the academic acceptance of Richard Wilson's claim, in *Secret Shakespeare*, that Shakespeare was a catholic, the evidence being one occurrence of the name "Shakeshafte" in the accounts of a noble family who lived nowhere near Stratford. Wilson's thesis is no more convincing, in terms of evidence than thousands of texts produced by non-academics considering the Authorship Question. Indeed, it is more questionable in many ways. But, he is an academic and the game requires that only the official players can play. Supporters are not allowed on the field.

If we continue to concentrate on this point a little longer, we come to realise that, in fact, much academic Shakespearean criticism is, at the very least, highly questionable. Indeed, one need merely revisit Greenblatt's defining and hugely influential work to understand this. Is he really saying, as he seems to be in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, that given the evidence, in plays such as, for example, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare is writing in order to "foster psychic mobility in the service of Elizabethan power" (253). Is he certain, again given the evidence, that in writing plays such as *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare approached "his culture ... as dutiful servant" (253), content to support the reconstitution of State power? As many academics

would say when considering the works generated within the field of the Shakespeare Authorship Question, the evidence does not, it would seem, support the conclusions except, perhaps, in the mind of the critic. That would be fine and we could leave it at that, of course. Except, as we all know, Greenblatt's work and his conclusions have been enormously influential, indeed they very much determined what it was possible to say within academic Shakespearean criticism for a couple of decades at least.

While Greenblatt had his many supporters, there was academic criticism both of his methodology and his conclusions throughout the 1980s and 1990s. However, he was never marginalised or ridiculed by his critics and his conclusions were not dismissed out of hand. Rather, countless academic essays and articles appeared refuting Greenblatt's conclusions using alternative evidence and drawing alternative conclusions. Thus, although Greenblatt's initial conclusions could be said to be both questionable and extraordinary in many ways, they were taken seriously and argued against rationally. It is precisely this that I wish to demand for the Shakespeare Authorship Question. Not that the conclusions drawn by any one scholar practising within its constraints must be accepted or liked. Only that they are not rejected out of hand, due to prejudice rather than rational examination. The conclusions will often be extraordinary and questionable. But if they are, then they should be questioned; they should be given the treatment that Greenblatt's extraordinary conclusions are given.

That Greenblatt's work of the 1980s and 1990s is so different from his latest work, *Will in the World*, does signify, as I have already said, a reorientation of focus in terms of Shakespeare studies in academia. This shift has much to do with the turn away from the kinds of political criticism embodied in the likes of New Historicism

and Cultural Materialism and a turn towards something new. The areas of concern which have dominated Shakespeare studies in academia over the last thirty years or so - Shakespeare and Post colonialism, Shakespeare and Feminism, Shakespeare and Theory and so on – have begun to subside and there is something of a void or, at least, a transitional gap in which various new types of criticism are appearing. Thus, one reads of the “New Textualism” or “Post-New Historicism” and so on. This gap, however, signifies an opportunity for the types of criticism done under the name of the Shakespeare Authorship Question. By this, I do not simply mean the type of research that nominates an alternative author, although that must have its place. I also mean research into areas of Shakespeare and collaboration and into the cultural and political processes that have made Shakespeare what he is today in our societies. So when I see the opportunity for the Authorship Question within academia, I conceptualise that opportunity in the widest sense, as one which could see the entire refiguring of the ways in which Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies are viewed in the twenty-first century.

The task that is being set here is a great one, without doubt. There is a call for academia to review the way it goes about things and to open itself to legitimate questions. It is worth considering the fact that refusing the Shakespeare Authorship Question legitimation within academia is perhaps understandable given what is at stake. Shakespearean scholars have resisted the legitimation of the Question perhaps, because it could undermine the whole edifice of which they are a part. There is, perhaps, an understandable sense of threat on their part. Furthermore, the edifice is not purely academic, but has an economic base which will be enormously difficult to refigure. This is something I have considered before and I wish to quote here an

extended section of the article, which attempted to be humorous, that first expressed my interest in this subject. In it, I wished to outline the resistance that exists to any notion of an alternative to Shakespeare, a resistance embodied in

Stratford-upon-Avon, the chocolate box town in ‘Shakespeare Country’ with shops called *Julius Cheeser*, *Henry the Fitter* and *As You Like Kit*.... This resistance is hardly surprising given the fact that, as is clear from ambling through the streets of Stratford, there is simply too much at stake. For Shakespeare is an industry, a global brand whose name, like that of Nike or Shell, will be protected by those who have an interest in this industry and who simply cannot have their brand maligned or undermined. The same is true of academia. Hundreds of courses are run every year with titles such as ‘Shakespeare’ or ‘Shakespeare and History’ or ‘Shakespeare and Hats’ that to suddenly give in to the idea that Shakespeare was somebody else is simply unthinkable. Imagine the reaction of the publishing companies when faced with all of those books to pulp! There would be mass suicide in universities and publishers the world over and Stratford would become a ghost town of roving wild dogs feeding upon the thousands of dumped boxes of Shakespeare Éclairs, Tempest Toffees and Coriolanus Cough Drops. The many American and Japanese tourists would find somewhere else to go; a Bacon fun park perhaps, or ‘Marlowe’s Marvellous Merrie-world’ (43–44).

The tone is, as I said, ironic, but the point is a serious one. The Shakespeare Authorship Question, in economic terms, threatens the efficacy of the brand and is

therefore resisted. In academic terms, both the practice and the status of many individuals and groups are at stake giving rise to the same resistance. The methodology used and the conclusions reached by those working under the name of the Shakespeare Authorship Question are not the reasons for this resistance, although it is always claimed that they are. The differences between research that is academically sanctioned and work that is not has little to do with the quality of the research and much to do with having the power to judge this research. For those in academia standing in judgment the entire subject of the Shakespeare Authorship Question threatens this power.

Universities are traditionally institutions in which, to use a cliché, “the truth is sought.” While this is indeed a cliché, for most academics it contains the kernel of why they came into academia in the first place. Years spent within the institution, pledging much time and effort to the efficacy of one’s research can cloud this initial desire and deform the reasons for this investment. My desire is for Shakespeare scholars to rediscover this initial spark and to admit to the provisional nature of their own subject. Is one’s area of research so precious that one will deny the possibility of its compromised nature merely to ensure its continuation? I am certain that the vast majority of Shakespeare scholars would answer such a question with a resounding “no!”. The MA I wish to begin in 2007 is the first step in a process which, I hope, will enable both students and academics the sort of self-reflexivity that will enable them to confidently and resoundingly say “no!” and will allow them, when faced with the question, is the Shakespeare Authorship Question a suitable subject for academia? to answer with a resounding “yes!”

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