Book Review

Joseph Rosenblum, "The Authorship Questions," in *The Definitive Shakespeare Companion*: *Overviews, Documents, and Analysis* (vol. 1), edited by Joseph Rosenblum. Westport, CT: Greenwood (2017), pp. 79-94

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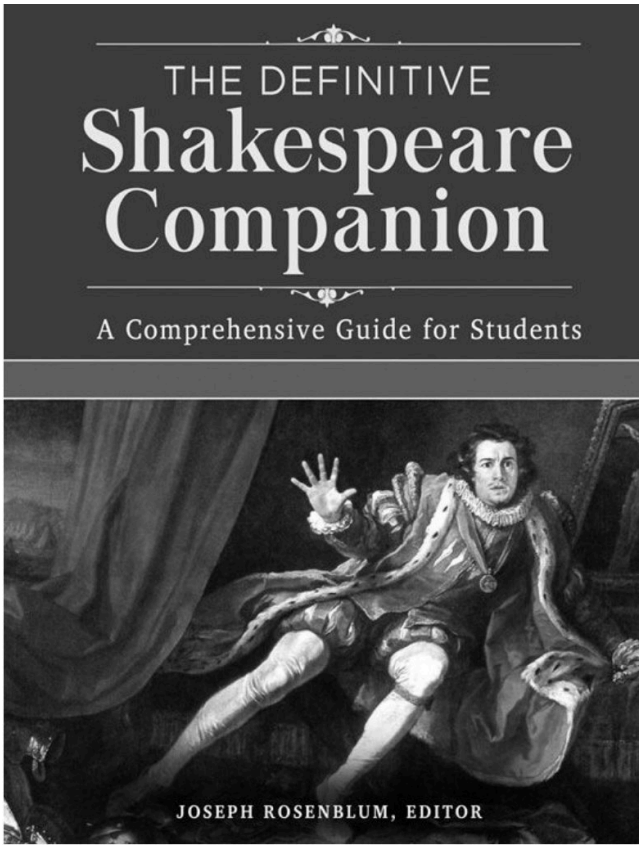

At first glance, the mere presence of a chapter on the Shakespeare Authorship Question within a major reference work from a respected academic and educational publisher would seem to represent remarkable progress. After all, Shakespeare orthodoxy—the academy, publishers, arts journalism—as a rule simply ignores the SAQ, pretending that it doesn't exist and therefore isn't worthy of consideration. Unfortunately, as was demonstrated by 2013's *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* (Edmondson and Wells, eds.), when orthodox scholars do turn their attention to the debate, their efforts are almost always pejorative, poorly researched, and replete with baseless assumptions and misrepresentations.

Such is indeed the case with the mammoth, four-volume *The Definitive Shakespeare Companion* (DSC) from Greenwood Publishing, which touts the set as "an indispensable ready reference" to the author and his works, with detailed essays and historical documents concerning each of the plays. According to the publisher, the *DSC* is intended to "elucidate[] key controversies regarding Shakespeare's literary work through alternate viewpoints that will help promote critical thinking skills." Accordingly, the first volume prominently includes among its key controversies the SAQ, addressing it in the first "Overviews" section in a chapter curiously titled "The Authorship Questions," written by project editor Joseph Rosenblum. However, far from promoting critical thinking about Shakespeare or offering alternative viewpoints, Rosenblum's chapter not only falls back on the familiar Stratfordian suite of misinformation, mischaracterization, omission and ridicule, but racks up an impressive collection of logical fallacies.

A professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Rosenblum is the author and editor of several other Shakespeare reference works, including *Shakespeare: An Annotated Bibliography* (1992), *A Reader's Guide to Shakespeare* (1999) and *A Critical Survey of Shakespeare's Plays* (2015). He also teaches courses on mystery novels at UNCG, which, one would think, might dispose him to recognize a mystery when he sees one, but, alas, such is not the case.

For Rosenblum, there are several authorship questions, only one of which—"was Shakespeare Shakespeare?"—concerns the author's identity. The other two questions addressed in his essay, "was Shakespeare a literary author?" and "what did Shakespeare write?" also very much touch on identity, but Rosenblum appears to be unaware of that fact, as his answers to both unintentionally speak to the internal contradictions of orthodoxy.

Rosenblum actually tips his hand many pages earlier in the (unsigned) "Preface for Users," where he states confidently:

> On one point scholars agree: the William Shakespeare who wrote the plays and poems discussed in this companion was the son of John and Mary Shakespeare, was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, and died there fifty-two years later. Since the nineteenth century, various nonscholars have proposed dozens of alternative authors …. (xiv)

The number of intellectual sleights of hand in a sentence and a half is impressive: (1) "scholars agree," and the only ones who don't are "nonscholars" (argument from authority); (2) suggesting to the reader that the Stratford man, and his parents, all spelled the name as "Shakespeare"; (3) declaring that authorship doubt didn't develop until the 19th century; and (4) implying that, since "dozens" of putative candidates have been put

forth (all by "nonscholars"), they're all equally wrong (i.e., that the case for each is comparably weak). With all that in mind, why would anyone need to read his chapter? Yet, I did, and the preface proved an excellent preview of the rhetoric to come.

Rosenblum opens the chapter with a dismissive reference to the 2011 film *Anonymous* before repeating verbatim from a litany of historic complaints about the Stratford Man, including those in Benjamin Disraeli's 1837 novel *Venetian*, Joseph Hart's *The Romance of Yachting* from 1848 and Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1850 *Representative Men*. As might be expected, Rosenblum devotes an inordinate amount of time and attention to the Baconian theories of the 19th century (refreshingly omitting mention of Delia Bacon's mental illness) before turning to Looney's claims for Edward de Vere and briefly dismissing Raleigh, Derby and Manners.

The bulk of the chapter consists of the standard array of Stratfordian defenses against skepticism: "Hand D", the *Ur-Hamlet*, the Upstart Crow, the chronology of the plays precluding Oxford's authorship, the fact that other authors of the age were unlearned or left behind no manuscripts, claims of Warwickshire dialect in the plays, and the presumed excellence of the Stratford grammar school, replete with an unaccountably detailed description of its supposed curriculum. Et cetera.

Whether through ignorance or design, Rosenblum gives no indication of knowing that all of these arguments have been repeatedly proven by anti-Stratfordian and Oxfordian authors to be erroneous, misleading or based on unfounded assumptions. Yet a quick glance at his bibliography attests that he has read none of the relevant literature produced over the past thirty years: instead, to marshal his entirely predictable arsenal of "facts" for this section Rosenblum cites a mere five sources, all but one of which are Stratfordian rebuttals of the SAQ. Most are summative rather than analytical and two—*Shakespeare and His Betters* by Reginald Churchill (1959), and *The Shakespeare Claimants* by H.N. Gibson (1962)—are horribly dated. The more recent Stratfordian titles he cites are James Shapiro's *Contested Will* (2010) and *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* (Edmondson and Wells 2013), but only *The Shakespeare Controversy* by Warren Hope and Kim Holston (1992, 2009) adopts an Oxfordian viewpoint. Such a dated and one-sided bibliography would scarcely pass muster for a first-year undergraduate paper on the subject. For a work billing itself as "definitive"—and written by the project's managing editor no less—this is lazy scholarship.

It is inexcusable for a major reference work addressing this debate in the supposed interest of offering "alternative viewpoints" and "promoting critical thinking skills" to fail to so much as crack open *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (Ogburn 1984, 1992), *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (Price 2001), *Shakespeare by Another Name* (Anderson 2005), *Shakespeare Suppressed* (Chiljan 2011) and—in the spirit of balance—*Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial* (Shahan & Waugh, eds., 2013).

On the other hand, in its sheer scholarly inadequacy the chapter may, however unintentionally, support the publisher's stated goal of encouraging critical thinking on the part of students, as a careful reading of the author's rhetoric should reveal his overwhelming dependence on logical fallacies, among them:

- ***Ad hominem***: Skeptics are tarred as "anti-Shakespeareans" and the text peppered with sarcastic asides that portray them as fundamentally misguided and ill-intentioned, rather than addressing their arguments.
- **Non-ontological**: Rosenblum asserts that proponents of alternative candidates not only lack positive evidence for their Shakespeares, but that "no evidence *can* exist" [italics mine] (83). It's one thing to argue that the available evidence fails to meet the burden of proof, or is insufficiently compelling. It's even acceptable to argue that no such evidence may ever be found. But it's quite another to declare, with the omniscience usually reserved for deities, the absolute non-existence of something which, all things being equal, could quite reasonably and conceivably exist. Breathtaking in its arrogance, this statement also fails to distinguish between different types of evidence and therefore is demonstrably wrong: the case for Edward de Vere is, of course, incredibly rich in circumstantial evidence, as many researchers have discovered (Whittemore 2016).
- ***Ignoratio elenchi***: Irrelevant arguments are offered that in no way address the objection. For example, he says the expansive knowledge in the canon does not reflect a learned author, but rather one "intimate with the world of the theater" (86). How knowledge of stagecraft could furnish knowledge of the law and Italy—among many, many other subjects—Rosenblum doesn't even try to explain, apart from the old standby, "he got his information from reading and talking to people" (86).
- **Cherry picking**: On the flimsiest and most reductionist grounds, Rosenblum brushes aside Shakespeare's use of classical literature, intimate knowledge of the law, obsession with royal succession and the divine right of kings, and familiarity with aristocratic sports and courtly manners by stating that Shakespeare couldn't have been a highly-educated aristocrat because he employed the pronoun "thou" which, he claims, is older and lower-class, rather than the "you" employed by the Cambridge-educated John Fletcher.
- **Double standard**: Rosenblum goes straight from

dismissing the proposition that any of the canon could have come from lived experience of an aristocrat to asserting himself that "[t]he plays… testify to Shakespeare's Warwickshire connections [and] include references to places and people Shakespeare knew" in Warwickshire (85-86). In other words, the "biographical fallacy" which Rosenblum otherwise mocks serves his purpose when he needs it.

- **"No true Scotsman"**: Rosenblum wraps up with the classic "no Shakespeare scholar questions the authorship of the plays and poems…", ignoring not only the scholars behind *The New Oxford Shakespeare* (Taylor and Egan, eds., 2017), which attributed a substantial portion of the canon to other writers, but also the many scholars represented in the anti-Stratfordian literature he so studiously avoided reading.
- **Contextomy**: In a final, head-shaking flourish on this statement, Rosenblum then opines that, rather than looking for the lived experience of the author in the canon, readers should take the advice in the First Folio's dedication (allegedly penned by John Heminge and Henry Condell): "Reade him therefore; and againe and againe…." On its face, Rosenblum would be seeming to suggest that Heminge and Condell were somehow anticipating by some 340 years Roland Barthes's "death of the author"—that the author's biography and intentions are irrelevant, that all meaning-making derives from the reader alone. Yet, this line is actually immediately followed by, "And if then you doe not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him." With the original context restored, we can clearly see that the emphasis here is not solely on the *reading,* as Rosenblum would have it, but on *him*, the author, and the need to *understand him by reading his work*. In other words, the quote has precisely the opposite meaning from the one Rosenblum intends.

As well, like most Stratfordians—mired as they are in a mass of strange and contradictory evidence that they refuse to acknowledge as such—Rosenblum can't keep track of his own arguments. He tries to debunk claims of aristocracy by arguing that some of the quartos include actors' names rather than those of the characters (the assumption being that the author was a working playwright, not a nobleman), but then in the second section he admits that the quartos might have been built from memorial reconstructions from the actors themselves, indicating the great and mysterious distance between the author and the printed versions, as Price (2018) has demonstrated. As Rosenblum admits, the publishing history of the plays is extremely fraught, yet he also acknowledges that the plays show signs of authorial revision and that Shakespeare wrote his plays to be read as works of literature, as were his poems; none of this seems to strike him as odd and connected, perhaps, to the question of authorial identity.

"The Authorship Questions" chapter in *The Definitive Shakespeare* is yet another wearying example of the orthodox refusal to actually read the relevant and recent scholarship and honestly address the defects of their tradition—defects which can never be erased by superficial efforts such as this. Instead, all scholarly methodological and epistemological conventions that would otherwise obtain in the academy simply do not apply where the authorship of Shakespeare is concerned.

All authorship partisanship aside, this chapter's overwhelmingly fallacious reasoning and woefully inadequate bibliography mark it objectively as weak scholarship; indeed, its dubious and disappointing content might reasonably call into question that of the entire four-volume reference work. Had the publisher actually sought to promote students' critical thinking on this debate, it could have at least insisted that Rosenblum bring in an additional author to offer an opposing perspective. Instead, *The Definitive Shakespeare Companion* must be lamented as a major lost opportunity to introduce students to the issue and actually encourage critical thinking about it, and not only as an unintended opportunity to study unfortunate rhetoric.

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