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Mystic Ciphers: Shakespeare and Intelligent Design: A Response to Nancy Glazener

Zachary Lesser

I am delighted to respond to Nancy Glazener's article, which I found fascinating both as a Shakespearean and as a historian of the book and print culture. Oddly, however, given the essay's Shakespearean focus, I feel doubly skeptical of my ability to respond to it precisely because I *am* a Shakespearean. My skepticism derives first from the fact that I am neither an Americanist nor a scholar of Shakespeare's nineteenth-century reception: One of the exciting things about the history of the book is that it tends to cross the boundaries of period and discipline by its very nature, but it does so somewhat modestly, since it depends so crucially on the specific material conditions of textuality in a given period. Second, and more important, I am skeptical because, like most Shakespeareans, particularly those trained after the rise of New Historicism, I have tended rather willfully to ignore the entire subject of the "authorship controversy," hoping it would just go away.

In the past few years, however, I've thought about this issue increasingly as, with their usual "even-handedness" that stages all conflict as a debate between opinions of equal standing, television news programs and popular press articles have taken up the supposed "authorship debate that rages 'round the Bard" (Walker 1).¹ It is the coincidence of the recent resurgence of this "debate" and the dramatic re-emergence of the evolution "debate" that leads me to think about Shakespeare and intelligent design. In a very real (if no doubt less important) way, the "authorship debate" is for academic Shakespeareans what creationism or intelligent design is for

In a very real (if no doubt less important) way, the "authorship debate" is for academic Shakespeareans what creationism or intelligent design is for evolutionary scientists: frustrating and almost impossible to know how to engage.

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evolutionary scientists: frustrating and almost impossible to know how to engage, since the other side is not amenable to the usual disciplinary standards of evidence and argumentation, and since any attempt to make one's case is taken (both by the opposition and by the media) as evidence that there is, in fact, a real and ongoing "debate" over the matter. After all, the brilliance of the intelligent design movement has been to frame the argument precisely as one about the merits of scientific debate; as President Bush says, "both sides [evolution and intelligent design] ought to be properly taught [in public schools] . . . so people can understand what the debate is about" (Baker and Slevin A1). The "anti-Stratfordian" argument is framed in exactly the same way, and so it is hard to know how to enter into this field without always already undermining one's own position.

Yet it is increasingly apparent to me that we do need to engage this movement, and to recognize it as, in Glazener's terms, a *dissenting* position—that is, a "public disagreement with established orthodoxy," one defined dialectically by its very "stake in the institution [it] challenges" and by its being "marked as challenging or dangerous" *by* that institution. How can we respond to those who argue that Francis Bacon (1561–1626), or Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford (1550–1604), or Christopher Marlowe (1564–93), or Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) wrote the plays of Shakespeare? On the one hand, I find myself, as do scientists in the evolution "debate," appealing to the empirical reality of facts and dates (most of the author-candidates were dead before many of Shakespeare's plays were written); to the institutional authority of expertise; to definitional questions about what constitutes real scholarship; and to what we might (perhaps quaintly these days) call "logic" or "reason."² But, then I read the eminent evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins declaring that "it is absolutely safe to say that if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I'd rather not consider that)" (34)—sounding a lot like Richard Grant White, who wrote to *Putnam's* of Delia Bacon: "as the writer was plainly neither a fool nor an ignoramus, she must be insane; not a maniac, but what boys call 'loony'" (181). Obviously that tactic did not work; indeed the internal logic of intelligent design or anti-Stratfordianism ensures that it will fail, since both theories *rely on* their dismissal by the academic establishment for much of their persuasive power.

In any case, every semester that I have taught Shakespeare, at least one student has asked me if Shakespeare really wrote those plays, and my students are generally neither fools, maniacs, nor even what boys apparently call "loony." One anti-Stratfordian

advocate for Marlowe-as-Shakespeare began a recent conference paper with a statement that most nonacademic readers and spectators of the plays would likely endorse: “Someone wrote Shakespeare. All, particularly scholars, should hold it important to know who wrote these great works, as well as just when, why and how they were written” (Baker).³ My students certainly want to know. Have we ceded too much ground on such questions, leaving a vacuum to be filled by Bacon, Marlowe, Oxford, and their compatriots? So I am torn, I think like many Shakespeareans, about how to deal with this controversy which is not one.

What I love about Glazener’s essay is how clearly it shows the deep implication of academic Shakespeare criticism itself in the Shakespeare–Bacon controversy, and in the struggle over the meaning of Shakespeare and of literature that the controversy encoded in the nineteenth century, quite apart from the question of who wrote the plays.⁴ Still today, I think, the Shakespeare industry is less opposed to than implicated in the anti-Shakespeare industry—not merely because Bardolatry was foundational to the creation of Romantic authorship and to our fascination with authors, which anti-Stratfordians exemplify in purest form, but also, and dialectically, because the more recent scholarly orthodoxy of *anti*-Bardolatry, the death of the author, and the circulation of social energy have contributed to the flourishing of anti-Stratfordian theories.⁵

I suspect this is why Glazener’s re-reading of Delia Bacon is so disconcertingly *unheimlich*. In her emphasis on the ways that political debates circulate through the plays; on the “paradoxes and contradictions that riddle royal privilege and monarchical sovereignty”; on collaborative authorship; on the textual effects of the material conditions of writing, publication, and reception, Bacon’s readings of Shakespeare suddenly seem rather embarrassingly close to my own.⁶ And learning of the “close scrutiny and sometimes violent repression of the Elizabethan court,” of the plays as “prison literature,” of the “punning indirection and subtlety” imposed by censorship and yet the “political daring” of the plays, of their being “subversive of the English monarchy” but also shaped by the “forms of direct and indirect state power,” one wonders: If Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare, who wrote Delia Bacon? Was it Jonathan Dollimore? Annabel Patterson? Stephen Greenblatt?

Glazener’s emphasis on the mutually defining relation of Shakespeare studies and its dissenters makes clear that the usual explanation of these conspiracy theories—that they are driven by elitism and class snobbery—is too easy, too simplistic to account for their full social causes and effects. Take the case of Marlowe, probably now second behind the earl of Oxford as the favorite

“real Shakespeare” (Francis Bacon having largely gone the way of all flesh). Unlike Oxford, Marlowe tends to be chosen *not* because he is elite, but precisely the opposite. Disreputable, marginalized, spy and traitor, atheist, queer, Marlowe represents everything opposed to the vision of Shakespeare as the pragmatic man of commerce who could not possibly have written these plays; as the director of a recent film advocating Marlowe’s candidacy says, “He’s the perfect replacement for dull old William.”⁷ And this vision of Shakespeare (one with some claim to truth)—the rising bourgeois, carefully acquiring land and money in Stratford, adding the halfpence to the pence, diligently looking out for his own interests while his fellow Stratfordians were rioting against a local enclosure scheme—this conservative Shakespeare so opposed to this marginal and radical Marlowe is familiar to us from much recent scholarship on both their plays. The Marlowe conspiracy theory, in other words, often relies on an image of Shakespeare and of Marlowe rooted as much in leftist-academic ideology as in rightist-aristocratic ideology. If, as Glazener argues, the professionalization of Shakespearean criticism was founded on the exclusion of people like Delia Bacon, then it is also true that the continuing exclusions of professionalism have in turn fostered new forms of the “authorship controversy,” ones that mirror (both reflect and reverse) many of the forms of professional criticism.

Since I am an interloper in American literature and in *American Literary History*, it seems only fitting to end with Walt Whitman. His poem, “Shakespere–Bacon’s Cipher,” is perhaps the best meditation on the “authorship debate”:

I doubt it not—then more, far more;
 In each old song bequeath’d—in every noble page or text,
 (Different—something unreck’d before—some unsuspected
 author,)
 In every object, mountain, tree, and star—in every birth and
 life,
 As part of each—evol’d from each—meaning, behind the
 ostent,
 A mystic cipher waits infolded. (643)

It is this reaching after hidden, infolded meaning that is ultimately at the heart of today’s anti-Stratfordian desire. It is worth thinking far more carefully than we have about how *that* quest for a “mystic cipher”—so laughable when used to anagrammatize the first letter of each capitalized word in the engraving on Shakespeare’s funeral monument, or to string together every tenth

word of every sixth sonnet in the 1609 edition—is different from the kind of searches for “meanings, behind the ostent,” or from what Fredric Jameson calls the “transformation[s] of a given text into an allegory of its particular master code” (58), that get published every few months in *Shakespeare Quarterly* or *ELH*. I mean this not as a facile rhetorical question that would assume either that there is or that there is not a real difference between these two types of quest, but rather, in the spirit of Glazener’s essay, as an open question for historical investigation, and especially for *book-historical* investigation. Francis Bacon did not write the plays of Shakespeare, and neither did Christopher Marlowe or Edward de Vere, but then William Shakespeare did not quite do so either, at least not alone: He had help from George Wilkins (who probably co-wrote *Pericles* [1608]) and John Fletcher (who co-wrote *The Two Noble Kinsmen* [1613] and *Henry VIII* [1613]); from Richard Burbage and Will Kemp, leading actors in a repertory system that practically demanded active collaboration between playwrights and performers; from early modern stationers like Thomas Walkley (who published *Othello* in 1622) and Nicholas Ling and John Trundell (who published the so-called bad quarto of *Hamlet* in 1603), stationers who, as I have argued, transformed the meanings and the very texts of these plays; and from us, as editors and as critics.⁸

Both anti-Stratfordianism and the old Bardolatry are, after all, literary forms of intelligent design. They seek a solitary creator behind the complex, messy processes of cultural production and canon formation, processes that in fact are neither “designed” nor wholly random or accidental and that transcend any individual. At the same time, academic theories that ignore the authorial activity of people like Shakespeare, Fletcher, or Kemp—or, for that matter, Delia Bacon—will not help us answer those who find evidence of Oxford’s intelligent design hidden like Gnostic shards in *Hamlet* (1601), *As You Like It* (1598), and *Venus and Adonis* (1593). Someone wrote Shakespeare. What the study of print culture (and now “web culture,” where the anti-Stratfordian argument especially proliferates) can help to tell us is exactly who *gets* to write Shakespeare, as well as just when, why, and how he is written.

Notes

1. The quotation comes from Dave Walker, “The Great Bard Debate”; the piece reviews the 2003 broadcast on *Frontline* (PBS) of Michael Rubbo’s documentary *Much Ado About Something* (2001), which made the case that Christopher

Marlowe wrote the plays. Other articles in the popular press abound, including the April 1999 issue of *Harper's*, which staged a debate between “Stratfordians” (academic Shakespeareans) and “anti-Stratfordians,” entitled “The Ghost of Shakespeare.” William S. Niederkorn, an editor in the culture department of the *New York Times*, has developed something of a mini-industry in writing about the controversy from a largely anti-Stratfordian perspective; see, for example, his articles: “A Historic Whodunit: If Shakespeare Didn’t, Who Did?” (*New York Times*, 10 February 2002, late edn: B7); “Where There’s a Will, or Two, or Maybe Quite a Few” (*New York Times*, 16 November 2003, late edn: B5); “To Be or Not to Be . . . Shakespeare” (*New York Times*, 21 August 2004, late edn: B7); “The Shakespeare Code, and Other Fanciful Ideas from the Traditional Camp” (*New York Times*, 30 August 2005, late edn: E3).

2. The best introduction to the “debate” for “the intelligent nonspecialist who does not know what to make of these challenges to Shakespeare’s authorship” is *The Shakespeare Authorship Page: Dedicated to the Proposition that Shakespeare Wrote Shakespeare*, <http://shakespeareauthorship.com>, an extensive website created by David Kathman and Terry Ross, and containing original work by Kathman, Ross, and Tom Reedy, as well as excerpts from and links to other relevant material.

3. The recent proliferation of biographies of Shakespeare written by academics for the general reader testifies to the enduring power of these questions.

4. As an aside, the Romantic counter-tradition, or wish-fulfillment, reading of *Hamlet* as illustrating the conjunction of personal moral autonomy and public legitimation is still alive and well. I once saw an anti-drug propaganda film called *Private Victories* (1988), made for showing in high schools, with a scene in which an English teacher explores the “relevance” of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy to students’ decisions about drugs: “Hamlet is a man with a choice—a choice to seek revenge or not. It conflicts with his personal values. What should he do?” Student: “I think what’s being said is that Hamlet learns ethical values are more important than revenge.” Teacher, strangely enough: “Right.” The scene is remarkable for its ability to get virtually *everything* wrong about the famous soliloquy and the play as a whole: “To be or not to be” is not about whether to revenge; revenge does not conflict with Hamlet’s personal values (although his reluctance to revenge *does* cause him ethical distress); revenge *is* an ethical value for Hamlet; Hamlet never learns not to seek revenge. These misreadings highlight the overriding goal of the scene: to illustrate (at the peril of some contradiction) *both* that there is an objectively correct moral choice *and* that one must make this moral choice completely autonomously.

5. The “death of the author,” of course, refers to Roland Barthes’s famous essay of that name, available in *Image, Music, Text* (1977), trans. Stephen Heath. The “circulation of social energy” is Stephen Greenblatt’s encapsulation of New Historicist practice; see the opening essay in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988).

6. On the paradoxes of monarchical sovereignty, see my essay, “Tragical–Comical–Pastoral–Colonial: Economic Sovereignty, Globalization, and the Form of Tragicomedie,” *ELH* 74.4 (winter, 2007).

7. This is Mark Rubbo, the director of *Much Ado About Something*, who goes on to specify: “He’s a spy, he may have been gay, opinionated, a risk taker and he is also, of course, a great writer” (qtd in Lennon 102).

8. See Zachary Lesser, *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication: Readings in the English Book Trade* (2004).

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