

Becoming an Oxfordian: The Phenomenology of Shifting Research Paradigms in Shakespearean Biography¹

By Michael Dudley, University of Winnipeg

1.0 Experiencing a New Shakespeare

A year before she was to publish her 1922 book *The Shakespeare Garden*, American author, journalist and polymath Esther Singleton came across a book that was to change her life. It purported that the author of the plays and poems of Shakespeare was not the businessman from Stratford-Upon-Avon but instead a highly-placed Earl who secretly wrote under the pseudonym Shakespeare. Overwhelmed by this revelation, she re-read the book multiple times before expressing her thoughts on the matter. She wrote,

I cannot explain the effect that this discovery has had upon me. All the plays that I know so well, that I have read and reread since childhood until they have become bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, are now more wonderful. Some things that have been obscure have become as clear as glass; more true in their philosophy; more brilliant in their wit; more sincere in their scholarship; more charming in their tenderness; more subtle in their delicacy; more penetrating in their wisdom; and truer to life...²

The book that had affected her so was the recently-published *Shakespeare Identified in Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* by J. Thomas Looney,³ a groundbreaking work of investigation that would create a movement of Shakespeare enthusiasts calling themselves Oxfordians following in Looney's footsteps.

¹ The author would like to acknowledge *Amita Mukerjee* for her thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of the paper, as well as the cooperation of *Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship* President *Tom Regnier* and website editor *Robert Meyer* in making available as Word documents the essays analysed herein. Thanks as well to the always helpful staff at the InterLibrary Loan office at the University of Winnipeg Library. A longer version of this paper can be found at <http://winnspace.uwinnipeg.ca/handle/10680/1506>

² Singleton 1922.

³ Looney 1920.

With the centenary of *Shakespeare Identified* approaching, it now seems appropriate to consider afresh the impact of Looney's work – not so much on the production of Shakespeare biographies, for those proceed apace as always – rather, we should examine the lived experience of Oxfordians themselves, and consider the intellectual and emotional phenomenon so eloquently described by Singleton.

This essay seeks to gain a phenomenological understanding of the personal discovery of Oxford-as-Shakespeare by mapping the individual pathway from the conventional Stratfordian model to the Oxfordian one, and as a shift in authorship research paradigms. This shall be assessed by undertaking an analysis of recently-published personal essays by self-identified Oxfordians regarding their own journeys of discovery,⁴ according to an existing framework regarding the phenomenology of paradigm shifts⁵ adapted for this purpose.

The essays in question were published on the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship (SOF) website, as part of its ongoing feature “How I Became an Oxfordian” in which members of the SOF are invited to submit 500-word personal essays recounting their own shifts in beliefs. As of this writing, the Fellowship has published more than 50 of these essays, and they provide a rich and remarkable window into the lived experience of those who question the Shakespeare of tradition and have embraced instead an Oxfordian Shakespeare.⁶

The analysis is located theoretically in the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, which concerned not only the hermeneutic study of texts, but the expression of mutable self-identity over time (or *ipse*) through the use of narrative structures.⁷

2.0 Research Paradigms of Shakespearean Authorship and the Phenomenology of Belief

⁴ The author's own essay has been excluded from this analysis. It is available at <https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/michael-dudley-how-i-became-an-oxfordian/>.

⁵ Dudley 1987.

⁶ These essays may be accessed and searched for by authors' names at <https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/category/how-i-became/>

⁷ Ricoeur 1991.

It must be stressed at the outset that Edward de Vere's putative identity as Shakespeare does not constitute a paradigm *per se* any more than does that of William Shakspere of Stratford-Upon-Avon. However, as is the case with any body of knowledge, approaches to studying authorship do involve particular research paradigms: ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological positioning that facilitate the posing and addressing of certain questions not otherwise feasible in their absence.⁸ A comparison between the two broad approaches to the respective candidates (Table 1) does reveal some stark differences in terms of research potentialities.

Table 1: Comparing Authorship Research Paradigms

Examining Shakespearean authorship claims in terms of research paradigms – as opposed to competing cases based on evidence – avoids to some extent

Domains	Oxfordian ¹	Stratfordian ²
Ontology	<i>Works</i> are the result of genius nurtured by privileged upbringing, a superb education, extensive reading and foreign travel; written for aristocratic and royal audiences at the cost of author's own personal wealth.	<i>Works</i> are the result of natural genius and imagination and emerged fully-formed; do not demonstrate a high level of education; written for illiterate masses and for profit.
Epistemology	The works are an essential source of knowledge about the author's life, social class, personality and beliefs.	The works can offer us no knowledge of the author's life, social class, personality or beliefs.
Axiology	Author's identity is an open question and must be pursued as a matter of truth and justice towards the author; traditional model diminishes Shakespeare.	Author's identity is a sacred certainty beyond questioning; doubt is "anti-Shakespearean."
Methodology	Biographers infer and extrapolate based on circumstantial and literary evidence.	Biographers must use their imaginations owing to lack of documentary evidence, layered with literary criticism.

⁸ Creswell 2013, 19-21.

the vitriol that so often characterizes mainstream response to anti-Stratfordian theories.⁹ It is also a much narrower scale of investigation than would be the case of claims for paradigm shifts in a more general Kuhnian sense. Even so, in this we face another epistemological challenge.

While the literature is replete with references to paradigms in general – almost to the point of cliché, especially in the business management field – as well as with hundreds of phenomenological studies regarding a wide range of lived experiences, it is curiously silent on the phenomenology of paradigm shifts.¹⁰ This is somewhat surprising given that Thomas Kuhn in his 1962 classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, recognized the fundamentally experiential and personal nature of the process of paradigm shifts, of “‘scales falling from the eyes’ or of the ‘lightning flash.’” experienced by scientists.¹¹ According to Kuhn, the term *paradigm* refers to “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community.”¹² The current, standard paradigm in a given field he referred to as “normal science” which, while it may meet the needs of the scientific community quite well, will nonetheless limit its ability to understand or even see new phenomenon:

No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomenon; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all. Nor do scientists normally aim to invent new theories, and they are often intolerant of those invented by others. Instead, normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies.¹³

⁹ For example, the late Richmond Crinkly, once director of programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library, once observed that the “viciousness expressed towards anti-Stratfordian[s]...was like some bizarre mutant racism.” Crinkley 1985, 518.

¹⁰ The *Web of Science* database includes 9,656 articles related to some aspect of phenomenology, and over 38,000 concerning paradigms; however, only 14 articles contain both terms and in none of these instances do the articles concern the personal experience of paradigm shifts.

¹¹ Kuhn and Hacking 2012, 122.

¹² Kuhn and Hacking 2012, 175.

¹³ Kuhn and Hacking 2012, 24.

In the case of Shakespeare, the “normal science” is the Stratfordian model, which regards the author as an incomparable, essentially divinely-inspired genius. Still, the use of the term *paradigm* in the humanities should be undertaken advisedly, as Kuhn only intended it to apply to the sciences, yet it has been adopted across the disciplines. John Budd in his comparison of modalities of research between the sciences and the humanities, observes that disciplines in the humanities are essentially non-paradigmatic: being concerned with products of human creativity, there can be few if any “constellations of belief” or rules of observation about them.¹⁴

Shifting such beliefs in sets of facts involves more than an awareness on the part of the individual of their own beliefs: they bear upon one's sense of self and identity, which changes over time. This is a major theme in the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who distinguishes between the permanent structural qualities of an individual (the “what”) that makes one physically unique – or *idem* – and the dynamic internal *ipse* (the “who”).¹⁵ Ricoeur emphasized the particular role of narratives in *ipseity*, as they help us to “make sense out of self-identity in the context of time.”¹⁶ Such narratives, he proposed, are dependent on three layers of what Aristotle referred to as *mimesis*, or the imitation of action: the first, pre-configuration, concerns the individual's past experiences and predispositions for integrating the events of the narrative; the second, configuration, is the manner in which the individual “emplots” the narrative and thus forms an internally logical and intelligible story; while the third level, refiguration demonstrates the integration of the substance of the narrative – containing as it does “fictive” plot devices (e.g., beginning, middle, and end) – with actual lived experience and the individual's sense of self, or *ipseity*.¹⁷

For Ricoeur, the *mimetic* stories we tell about ourselves and the ways in which they are arranged utilizing traditional plot structures are integral to our sense-making about who we are because “the figure of identity that emerges

¹⁴ Budd 1989.

¹⁵ Ricoeur.

¹⁶ Rasmussen 1995, 165.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, McLaughlin and Pellauer 2012.

[through storytelling] offers a new insight into the self” as well as “a transformative understanding of one's self in the world.”¹⁸ More significantly for the purposes of this analysis is the role of narratives in identifying one’s place in a larger story which represents a “deviation from a canonical cultural pattern”¹⁹, or “voices that are excluded from or neglected within dominant political structures and processes”²⁰ – a description which certainly applies to proponents of Oxford’s authorship.

3.0 Research Design

Given the novelty of the present analysis, it is important to model our study on an earlier phenomenological approach to making accessible life-altering shifts in belief systems; yet few such models exist. For her 1987 doctoral dissertation at the University of Victoria, Nancy Dudley²¹ examined the structure involved in broad cultural shifts in consciousness from one world view to another. Her participants had experienced shifts from the mechanistic, linear, dualistic, masculine, individualistic, rational and materialist beliefs born of the Western Enlightenment, towards a relational, gestalt, transcendent, supranatural, feminist belief system -- “an awareness of a universe of pattern and meaning” blending understandings from quantum physics, Jungian notions of the collective unconscious and Native American worldviews.²² Through in-depth interviews with 10 anonymous participants, Dudley identified seven major structures and processes involved in this paradigm shift:

1. **Evolutionary Pattern** [of the shift]:
 - a. Gradual [temporal dimension]: change to the new world view occurs gradually;

¹⁸ Crowley 2003, 2-3.

¹⁹ Bruner 1990, 49-50.

²⁰ Squire 2005, 93.

²¹ The author’s mother.

²² Dudley 1987, 286.

- b. Spiral form [mental/spatial dimension]: one's awareness undergoes a process of "broadening, deepening and expanding."²³
 - c. Directional: once set in motion, the individual recognizes the change is irreversible;
 - d. Purpose: New awareness brings with it calls to action.
2. **Separation:** a disruption of one's reality-structuring pattern, a "frame-break" born of a sense of yearning or dissatisfaction with conventionality.²⁴
 - a. Cultural estrangement: sense of one's alienation from normal expectations or structures.
 - b. Proximity to other cultures: Predisposition to new awareness based on previous exposure to other cultural norms.
 - c. Questioning: responding to cognitive dissonance and psychological tension in response to conventional framework that one no longer finds acceptable;
 - d. Crisis (personal/cultural): severance/separation, metaphorical death/rebirth experience.
3. **Transcendence of ordinary patterns:** In "crossing the bounds of convention"²⁵ one "glimps[es] more possibilities of experiencing reality"²⁶ and gains a "sense of expansiveness."²⁷
4. **Mindful willing participation exploration and surrender:** Active engagement in one's evolution: Gaining "new information, or contents, creates new pathways which allow yet more new information to enter [one's] consciousness, which again opens new structures."²⁸
5. **Validation:** finding support and communion with like-minded others or finding affirmation additional ideas or experiences.

²³ Dudley 1987, 226.

²⁴ Dudley 1987, 234.

²⁵ Dudley 1987, 251.

²⁶ Dudley 1987, 246.

²⁷ Dudley 1987, 249.

²⁸ Dudley 1987, 259.

6. **Integration vs. pull to familiar pattern:** struggle to synthesize new consciousness in face of convention and potential disparagement or rejection by others, especially being called “crazy.” Ultimately integration is an ongoing dynamic subjective and intersubjective process.
7. **Sensibility of a Universe of Pattern and Meaning:** Full awareness of the new paradigm.

Some adjustments to this framework appear necessary at the outset owing to the very different nature of the paradigms to which the respective participants have shifted. In Dudley’s dissertation the phenomenon being investigated related to participants’ Heideggerian sense of *Dasein* (being-in-the-world); the cognitive, affective and conative elements of the structure were not treated separately from the shift itself because the paradigm was fundamentally subjective and relational, and expressed almost entirely in internally-oriented terms such as awareness, intuition, attitude, attention, commitment, perception, sensibility, trust, vision, respect, etc.²⁹ In regards the Oxfordian experience by contrast, the research paradigm comprises an approach to historical and literary interpretation external to the individual and which is seen to elicit cognitive, emotional and conative responses. As such, the analytical framework shall be adjusted to account for these: the elements of the shift in belief and the essence of the belief are treated as distinct elements. The categories and subcategories from Dudley’s 1987 study will also be adjusted slightly. The “purpose” subcategory is moved to join “cognition” and “affect” from the “pattern” category. The “separation” and “questioning” phases in the present study also sufficiently constitute the idea of “crisis” so this heading was seen as superfluous. “Questioning” being such a significant part of the transition to Oxfordian paradigm, it will comprise its own category, rather than a sub-heading under “separation.” In addition, the category of “proximity to other cultures” is being treated in terms of disciplines, i.e., the exposure to other academic domains or professions, while the “gradual shift” is broadened to “temporal dimension” to account for variation in experience. The final element is unique to the original study so is not included here. The analysis will be

²⁹Dudley 1987, 3-4; 286-289.

further augmented with Kolbe's typology of cognitive, affective and conative dimensions:

Table 2: Cognitive, Affective, and Conative Domains³⁰

Cognitive	Affective	Conative
To know	To feel	To act
Thinking	Feeling	Willing
Thought	Emotion	Volition
Epistemology	Esthetics	Ethics
Knowing	Caring	Doing

Overall, the analysis constitutes three distinct components: the pattern of the experience; the elements of the experience; and the essence of the experience. It is expected that the Oxfordian journey will involve new sources of knowledge of – and ways to think about – Shakespeare, which will inspire a range of emotions and lead to new commitments on the part of the essayists.

4.0 Analysis: The Phenomenology of Becoming an Oxfordian

4.1 Pattern of the Experience

4.1.1 Temporal Dimension

Essayists generally experience a gradual journey to Oxford-as-Shakespeare, having only known vaguely that there was a controversy. Often this involves weighing the other candidates (Francis Bacon or Christopher Marlowe). However, once they are exposed to a key text about Oxford, they either experience a rapid acceptance of the argument, or else consider it carefully over an extended period of time before committing to it.

³⁰Kolbe 1990.

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Theresa Lauricella	In my hands [the book " <i>Shakespeare</i> " by <i>Another Name</i> by Mark Anderson] was information I had wished for twenty-three years.
Mary Jane Meeker	[Joseph Sobran's column aroused my curiosity, but it was a couple of years later when I had time to look up [Charlton Ogburn Jr.'s book] <i>The Mysterious William Shakespeare</i> in our branch library... Things moved quickly after that.
Robin Phillips	My fascination with Oxford/Shakespeare was a <i>coup de foudre</i> , a sudden jolt...POW! A spark of driving curiosity got hold of me.
Tom Townsend	After scarcely more than a year, my research took a turn: No more was I on the fence.
Greg Ellis	My journey towards Oxfordianism [took a] tortuous route...my lingering doubt had me toying for some years
Catherine Hatinguais	But it was...overwhelming: there was too much about Elizabethan history that I did not know. <u>So</u> I let Oxford's story lie fallow for a few years: I needed time to adjust to this new world...
Elke Brackmann	I needed time to say good-bye to my old convictions – I had to digest everything slowly.

Table 3: Temporal Pattern

4.1.2 Directional Pattern

Once Oxford-as-Shakespeare has been understood, accepted and integrated with their knowledge of Shakespeare, the essayists have "crossed a threshold" and are convinced. There is no returning to their previous assumptions.

Table 4: Directional Pattern

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Michael Delahoyde	My Oxfordian Shakespeare obsession has ruined my life, which is fine because I didn't like that life anyway, and now I'm ever exhilarated.
Gary Goldstein	Once smitten by the intellectual delights of the authorship question, I have not been able to let go of it for more than a short period of time.
Joella Wedin	But I was a convert; there was no return
Hank Whittemore	I have never looked back.
Justins Borrows	My belief in Oxford's authorship has never been stronger.

4.2 Elements of the Experience

4.2.1 Separation: Estrangement

Owing to a combination of previous life experiences or personality traits, essayists report being alienated from Shakespeare and other Shakespeareans. The texts fail to resonate or do not actually make sense to them.

Table 5: Separation: Estrangement

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Mark Alexander	What I saw among my peers was something anathema to true scholarship.
Patrick J. Amer	I am a contrarian by nature - I don't like being duped
Michael Delahorde	I started to read and panicked: the play made absolutely no sense.
Theresa Lauricella	I failed to understand what I was reading... After I became a theatre professor, I struggled teaching Elizabethan theatre and Shakespeare's contribution.
Jonathan Dixon	Shakespeare wrote them as "poetic exercises on stock themes" to show off to his friends. My response? "If he didn't really care about them, why should I?"

4.2.2 Separation: Proximity to Other Perspectives

Very few of the essayists are from careers traditionally associated with Shakespeare scholarship or biography, i.e., English literature departments. Instead, they represent many diverse backgrounds – often in creative enterprises such as writing or scholarly fields like psychology – which they believe afforded them novel perspectives on the authorship problem.³¹

³¹ Most essayists mention their professions or backgrounds: twenty-one identify with some form of creative profession (writing, acting, art, filmmaking) while ten others are academics. Only one individual is a professor of English literature, being the most common profession Among Shakespeare biographers. Twenty-three persons describe themselves as being retired or semi-retired.

Table 6: Separation: Proximity to Other Perspectives

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Pamela Butler	As a clinical psychologist, I constantly work with people who are reluctant to change their views about themselves learned from childhood.
Robin Phillips	Being a <u>writer</u> I knew that poetic license and filmmaker's-fancy might be at play here, so I felt compelled to delve into this adventuresome 'Oxford' Earl.
Tom Townsend	My career [in advertising] had taught me to question everything and always investigate. It promoted critical thinking.
Richard <u>Waugaman</u>	As a psychoanalyst, I knew Freud was a genius, and that not <u>all</u> of his valid ideas have been readily accepted. It intrigued me that he may have put the Shakespeare scholars to shame if he was right about de Vere writing Shakespeare.
David Van <u>Vieck</u>	Being a playwright/novelist myself and knowing there must be a Why for a (great) writer to write something of profound value.

4.2.3 Questioning: Dissonance

Before discovering Oxford-as-Shakespeare, essayists report being troubled by what they read or were taught about the poet-playwright. The biographies they read felt listless, and the statements made about Shakspeare seemed to have no coherence with the words he was supposed to have written.

Table 7: Questioning: Dissonance

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Thomas Goff	I found Shakespeare biographies—A.L. <u>Rowse's</u> , for instance—dull and faintly disquieting
Margit & Reinhard <u>Greiling</u>	[Prefatory comments in the plays] did little to answer our questions, as did the books we found in libraries.
Jonathan Dixon	He simply doesn't add up. He is not how real creative people are, or real human beings.
John G. Shuck,	Our teacher assured us that making a living was uppermost in Shakespeare's mind too—which conflicted strangely with the issues he wrote about..
Diane Elliott	The <u>Shaksper[e]</u> biography was dead on arrival for me, no resonance with the works

4.2.4 Questioning: Sense of Absence and Longing

This sense of incoherence troubled the essayists because they loved the works so much, or had their own image of who the author must have been, that they longed for more – or more satisfying – information.

Table 8: Questioning: Sense of Absence and Longing

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Mark Alexander	When I read the <u>poems</u> and plays through the lens of William of Stratford, I get much insight and greatness, but only from the plays themselves.
Amanda Hinds	I was taught the standard Stratfordian biography, which left me cold and – inchoately - dissatisfied.
Donald Miller	I majored in English with a focus on Shakespeare and [when] I graduated...in 1965...that nagging feeling I had had in junior high stayed with me – who was this guy?
Richard Waugaman	I recalled how bitterly disappointed I was as a boy who loved reading Shakespeare, to be told we knew so little about his life.
Theresa Lauricella	Shakespeare's biography...was a complete letdown to me.

4.2.5 Transcendence of Ordinary Patterns

Once the essayists have read about Oxford-as-Shakespeare and come to accept him as the author, this completely changes their experience of the plays and poems, and has a deeply rewarding and transcendent effect upon them.

Table 9: Transcendence of Ordinary Patterns

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
David Van Viek	This was like an earthquake in my mind.
Pamela Butler	For the first time, the sonnets were understandable, not just beautiful.
Catherine Hatinguais	The sudden change in perspective was dizzying, scary, but liberating too.
Amanda Hinds	I discovered how infinitely more interesting Shakespeare's plays were (let alone his poems) when you knew who wrote them and could think about why they were written.
Craig Smith	Since knowing the truth, everything has changed and the world is a more just and enlightened one.
Allan R. Shickman	I began to see Shakespeare from an entirely different point of view
Diane Elliott	Seeing the plays and reading the poetry with Oxford's life in mind, it feels like I'm looking at a familiar photograph that's suddenly become three-dimensional.

4.2.6 Willing Participation and Exploration:

The personal discovery of Oxford-as-Shakespeare is no one-off event: essayists are then compelled to read and learn as much as they possibly can.

Table 10: Willing Participation and Exploration

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Butler, Pamela	I went on to read everything I could find.
Delahoyde, Michael	I subsequently hoarded everything I could get my hands on
Hatinguais, Catherine	I started visiting all kinds of authorship websites, like a kid in a candy store.
Phillips, Robin	I devoured every Oxfordian book I could get my hands on, every YouTube discussion I could find.
A. Colin Wright	I got as many of the basic texts as I could.

4.2.7 Validation

However, this desire for more knowledge is not satisfied by mere reading; Oxfordians seek out other Oxfordians in person and online, often personally contacting authors that have had so important an impact on them or joining an Oxfordian society.

Table 11: Validation

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Patrick J. Amer	I found... a small group of Oxfordians in Cleveland, and met some of the early activists in the movement.
Amanda Hinds	I was able to "come out" when I met an Oxfordian friend of my husband earlier this year - he had been a great friend of [<i>Alias Shakespeare</i> author] Joseph Sobran.
Ann M. Zakelj	But the entity that had the greatest impact on me as an Oxfordian is Facebook.
Mary Lee Cooper	Soon we became telephone and postal friends with Mrs. Ruth Lloyd Miller ¹ and her husband, Judge Minos D. Miller. They suggested that I become a member of the Shakespeare Oxford Society...
Craig Smith	I've become friends with [with a number of] leaders of the movement.

4.2.8 Integration vs. Pull to Familiar Pattern:

At various points on their journey, the essayists report navigating the tensions between the force of tradition and the excitement of their new discoveries. Sometimes this was owed to rejecting what they felt was dubious evidence for candidates other than Oxford; others tried to maintain a balanced approach by reading conventional biographies. Some faced ridicule by others pressuring them to set the entire issue aside. The comfort of the Stratford myth itself sometimes proved difficult to leave behind.

Table 12: Integration vs. Pull to Familiar Pattern

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Robert Detobel	Possibly I was benumbed, as many people continue to be today, by the mere sound of the name Shakespeare to undertake some action.
Greg Ellis	I reasoned if the Baconian ciphers were hokum then maybe the SAQ itself was crazy after all.
Tom Townsend	I continued reading books from an orthodox stand-point as well as books an Oxfordian point-of-view
Diane Elliott	[When I talk about Oxford] a few of my friends leave the room or practice their 'how to deal with a conspiracy nutcase' techniques, complete with eye rolls.
Heyward Wilkinson	I [had] formed a myth, on the basis of the elusiveness of our relevant knowledge of him, in which he, like Jesus Christ, was one of the great mystery figures. [After discovering Oxford] My 'mystery figure' went - with a certain nostalgia - out of the window.

4.3 Essence of the Experience

4.3.1 Cognition: Coherence

Where conventional biographers struggle to match the life of the Stratford merchant to the works, Oxfordians discover perfect coherence, in which everything we read in the plays and poems can be seen reflected in the life of Edward de Vere.

Table 13: Cognition: Coherence

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Michael Delahoyde	The play makes little sense unless understood as semi-autobiography.
Jonathan Dixon	There is a very clear personality that shines through Shakespeare -- a philosophical, introspective, complex, wild, witty, melancholy, cynical personality.
Justin Borrow	The pieces of this very difficult puzzle began to come together. It just made sense...Oxford's claim to the authorship is so much more substantial.
Catherine Hatinguais	It all made perfect sense: the accumulation of clues, cryptic allusions, echoes between life and works and multiple "coincidences" was persuasive.
Hank Whittlemore	Oxford held the answer to Shakespeare's creative process. It would mean his exercise of imagination had not been some miraculous act of fantasy disconnected from his life, but, rather, the creative use of his own experience.

4.3.2 Cognition: Sense-making

With firm knowledge of the life behind the work, the plays and poems become more comprehensible, more meaningful, less intimidating for the essayists.

Table 14: Cognition: Sense-making

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Julie Bianchi	The Shakespeare canon, with all its quirky, often unknowable allusions suddenly made more sense to me.
Thomas Drelon	Everything made sense. I felt I knew Hamlet now, and Timon, and Orsino, and Antonio, and Jacques, and the True sense of the Sonnets... These characters were facets of Oxford.
Michael Delahoyde	Now this stuff makes sense.
Allan R. Shickman	[Joseph Sobran's book <i>Alias Shakespeare</i>] greatly expanded my whole view and comprehension of Shakespeare...

4.3.3 Affective: Empathy

Instead of the remote, god-like Shakespeare of myth, the “national poet” and unapproachable secular saint, Oxfordians see a real flesh-and blood man, brilliant but flawed and even unlikable, but nevertheless a human being to whom they can relate, and whose experiences and emotions can be understood.

Table 15: Affective: Empathy

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Julie Bianchi	[The words are] those of a deep, brooding thinker; a person whose privileged life was complicated and problematic; a troubled soul falling backwards over the brink into the darkness.
Michael Delahorde	It's exhilarating knowing that this work emerged out of real experience, real pain, real struggles, anxieties, betrayals, elations -- out of someone's real life -- instead of out of the blue or off the top of a grain-merchant and money-lender's head.
Jonathan Dixon	Oxford felt like Shakespeare to me...The more I learn about Oxford, the more Shakespeare makes sense and feels like a real human being to me.
Steven Sabel	I was introduced to Edward de Vere, and he suddenly became a haunting ghost of my psyche...I felt great empathy for this troubled man whose lifetime of work had been so stripped from him and his name.
A. Colin Wright	Here was a man whose plays and poetry were recognized to be those of the greatest writer in the world but...he had to keep quiet about it. What an agony that must have been
David Van Vleck	The young Oxford's pain, seeing his mother remarry so quickly, had to have simmered all his life, and finally brought forth, as the diving narrative Why, from deep old pain inside, the play Hamlet.

4.3.4 Affective: Emotions

This profound discovery brings with it a range of emotions: exhilaration at the excitement of new meaning, but at the same time anger and resentment that it should have been so difficult to learn, so actively withheld from students.

Table 16: Affective: Emotions

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Amanda Hinds	The more prevalent the silence, the more it rankled.
Mark Alexander	It made me ill.
Pamela Butler	What I found bowled me over
Theresa Lauricella	It was a stunning moment; I believe I cried. I felt again the fervor of scholarship
Randall Sherman	I was electrified by what I read and kept re-reading it,
Richard Waugaman	I was afraid I might drop dead right there in my excitement.

4.3.5 Affective: Identity

While their search may have initially been born from curiosity, for many it becomes life-altering and a major anchor for their identities (*ipseity*).

Table 17: Affective: Identity

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
Earl Showerman	Becoming an Oxfordian has been a life-changing experience for me.
Richard Waugaman	I had not only become an Oxfordian, I had become an Oxfreudian...[it] has profoundly enriched my life during the past 14 years.
Hank Whittemore	This revelation was life-changing.
John Shahan	I became an activist, which not every Oxfordian does.

4.3.6 Conative: Purpose

Becoming an Oxfordian is not merely to hold a belief about the origin of works of literature; it instills one with a renewed sense of purpose, a sense of mission and responsibility to rectify a terrible historical mistake and injustice.

Table 18: Conative: Purpose

Essayist	Exemplary Statements
William Ray	I took up the Oxfordian banner to help discard the fable being offered even now to minds young and old as an ersatz version of History.
Sam Saunders	I began to think of ways I might contribute to the discussion.
John Shahan	I wasn't a Shakespeare scholar and it wasn't clear that I could make any difference. What I did have was a passion for the issue, a sense of its historical importance to humanity, and a sense of commitment...

5.0 Discussion

While there are of course variations in the narratives of the Oxfordian experience, we can draw some generalizable characteristics. The Oxfordian essayists feel alienated from an intellectual and cultural environment characterized by what they feel to be inert knowledge which is maintained and reinforced by a dominant majority. Faced with such a significant discontinuity regarding something they otherwise treasure, they suffer cognitive and emotional dissonance. Eventually some catalyzing event, most often an encounter with a key Oxfordian text helps them gain a critical awareness that they can no longer tolerate the status quo, and so they begin to move away from this Stratfordian model towards the Oxfordian one. Eventually (and sometimes all at once) a threshold point is reached and the previous unsatisfying, dissonant state is irreversibly abandoned as the essayists find a rewarding, transcendent experience with their authentic selves and a community of similarly-motivated individuals. The Shakespeare canon takes on new significance and coherence, and in their renewed enthusiasm for the playwright, the Oxfordian is inspired to discover all they can and to contribute to the cause of promoting De Vere as the author.

Consistent with Ricoeurian narratology, the Oxfordian essays almost universally demonstrate evidence of preconfiguration, in establishing their own personal or professional predispositions that prepared them to the journeys they undertook. Their narratives are also almost exclusively configured, as the authors “emplot” their quests with a beginning, middle and end, including their

sometimes circuitous pathways to discovery, moments of doubt, new relationships and invigorated sense of purpose, thereby presenting a compelling and intelligible story. Finally, the authors refigure their narratives to demonstrate the extent to which they have integrated Oxford-as-Shakespeare into their sense of self, redefining themselves in the process as Oxfordians. Thus have they gained new insight into the selves but also “transform[ed their] understanding of [themselves] in the world.”³² In other words, that Edward de Vere was Shakespeare is far more than “just a theory,” – and certainly not a “conspiracy theory” – but rather a radically transactional and transformative way of connecting the reader to the texts of Shakespeare.

6.0 Conclusion

This hermeneutic analysis of 50 personal essays by confirmed believers in the Shakespearean authorship of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, reveals a powerful, shared phenomenological narrative of past dissonance and disappointment giving rise to discovery, conviction, passion, invigorated scholarship and a new sense of self, purpose and community. This contrasts sharply with the response most uninitiated readers offer when faced with the Shakespeare Authorship Question: “what does it matter who wrote the plays? We have the plays and poems and that's all that matters.” This essay demonstrates that it matters a great deal to many people, so much so that it transforms their experience of Shakespeare, and their sense of self.

What is most significant in this analysis is that the coherence and sense-making afforded by the Oxfordian model unleashes a level of empathy unavailable to the reader wedded to the Stratfordian mythology. In the place of the remote, god-like paragon of “natural genius”, the national poet against whom all must be compared and whom none can approach, the Oxfordian reader comes to know, understand and profoundly empathize with the author. As Oxfordian essayist Lanny Cotler puts it:

Before, I knew little of the Stratford man who had somehow written the Canon. Now, I saw how the tortured soul of a man ripped

³² Crowley 2003, 2-3.

from his mother, and [whom] along the way, authored the Canon...I tried to imagine it, feel it, weigh it against other parts of myself, as a writer. The rush of completing a fabulous speech...or a whole play or long poem...and knowing that someone else was to enjoy the laurels. Of knowing it was you. Your experiences. Who saw it, felt it, and copied it to parchment. The frustration. The anger. The quintessential sadness...

Against this flesh-and-blood individual whose soul becomes acutely accessible in the plays and poems of Shakespeare, the moribund biography of the Man from Stratford can only offer more conjecture – and, inevitably, more unmovable scepticism.

References

- Anderson, M. 2006. *Shakespeare by Another Name: The Life of Edward De Vere, Earl of Oxford, the Man Who Was Shakespeare*. New York: Gotham.
- Berger, P.L., & Luckmann, T. 1967. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- Bruner, J. 1990. *The Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures. Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Budd, J.M. 1989. "Research in the Two Cultures: The Nature of Scholarship in Science and the Humanities." *Collection Management*, 11/3-4, 1-21.
- Creswell, J.W. 2013. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*. 3. Ed. ed. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Crinkley, R.1985. "New Perspectives on the Authorship Question." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 36/4, 515-522.
- Crowley, P. 2003. "Paul Ricoeur: The Concept of Narrative Identity, the Trace of Autobiography." *Paragraph*, 26/3, 1-12.
- Dudley, N.Q. 1987. *The Experience of Changing to a New World View: A Phenomenological Study of the Emergent Paradigm Shift*. Dissertation, University of Victoria.
- Edmondson, P., & Wells, S., eds. 2013. *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt: Evidence, Argument, Controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Greenblatt, S. 2005. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. *Shakespeare*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Kolbe, K. 1990. *The Conative Connection: Uncovering the Link Between Who You are and How You Perform*. Boston: Addison-Wesley Longman.
- Kuhn, T.S. & Hacking, I. 2012. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Fourth edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lancashire, I. 1998. "Paradigms of Authorship." *Shakespeare Studies*, 26, 296-301.
- Looney, J.T. & Miller, R.L. 1975. *Shakespeare Identified in Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford and the Poems of Edward De Vere : Volume 1*. 3rd revised. ed. [Place of publication not identified]: Kennikat Press.
- Ogburn, C. 1992. *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth & the Reality*. 2nd Ed. ed. McLean, Va.: EPM Publications.
- Price, D. 2001. *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography: New Evidence of an Authorship Problem*. Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, No. 94. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Rasmussen, D. 1995. "Rethinking Subjectivity: Narrative Identity and the Self." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 21/5-6, 159-172.
- Ricoeur, P. 1991. "Narrative Identity." *Philosophy Today*, 35/1, 73-81.
- Ricoeur, P., K. McLaughlin, and D. Pellauer. 2012. *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Shapiro, J. 2010. *Contested Will Who Wrote Shakespeare?* New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Singleton, E. (1941/2017). "How I Became an Oxfordian." Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship. <http://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/esther-singleton-how-i-became-an-oxfordian/>.
- Squire, C. 2005. "Reading narratives." *Group Analysis*, 38, no. 1: 91-107.
- Warren, J.A., ed. 2015. *An Index to Oxfordian Publications: Including Oxfordian Books and Selected Articles from Non-Oxfordian Publications*. Third Edition. Somerville, MA: Forever Press.
- Whittemore, H. 2017. *100 Reasons Shakespeare Was the Earl of Oxford*. Somerville, MA: Forever Press.
- Warren, J.A., ed. 2015. *An Index to Oxfordian Publications: Including Oxfordian Books and Selected Articles from Non-Oxfordian Publications*. Third Edition. Somerville, MA: Forever Press.