

Review: The Great Debate: *Who Wrote Shakespeare?*

With Alexander Waugh and Sir Jonathan Bate

Julia Cleave and Kevin Gilvary report:



The Emmanuel Centre, Westminster, Thursday 21 September 2017

It was fitting that the grand Emmanuel Centre in Westminster, with its spacious and imposing nave, was chosen as the venue for a public debate over the authorship of the works of Shakespeare. The speakers received a warm and rousing reception from a full house of 300 people. Chairing the debate, Hermione Eyre, introduced the speakers as great friends who never normally discuss the Authorship Question!

Watch the video of the debate is now on YouTube at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgImgdJ5L6o&sns=fb>

For the first time, a member of the establishment and a defender of the orthodoxy, Sir Jonathan Bate (JB), took to the stage to defend the orthodox position. JB is not only the author of *The Genius of Shakespeare* (1997) and *Soul of the Age* (2008) but is also the Provost of Worcester College and Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford. JB paid tribute to family background of Alexander Waugh (AW), as the son of Auberon and grandson of Evelyn. This was very pleasant until JB characterised the Waugh family as ‘contrarian,’ as if this might explain why AW has doubts as to who wrote Shakespeare.

Both were clearly under pressure, given the constraints of the format. How to present a case in just 15 minutes, with a further 15 minutes for comebacks - little scope for complex or subtle arguments. AW spoke fluently and quickly, without notes, indicating that the subject is so big it requires expansive treatment. He spoke to the original motion: Did a man from Stratford write the plays and poems? He argued that Shakspere (as he called him to avoid confusion) never wrote a single line. AW made clear that putting the case for Oxford was for another occasion and did not attempt to respond to any of JB’s attacks on Oxford.

JB however spoke more to the motion: ‘Who Wrote Shakespeare?’ Beginning with his certainty that William of Stratford was the author and ending with attacks on Oxford.

JB clearly nervous at the start, dismissed some arguments as “coincidences, conspiracies and cryptograms” and, spoke disparagingly, of “Cultists of Oxford” and “Fake news!” He appeared innocent of the knowledge of recent authorship research, just trotting out the familiar old chestnuts. Many non- Stratfordians could have made a better case for Shakspere of Stratford!

- Authorship skeptics are guilty of wishful-thinking – wanting the author to be a glamorous nobleman, like Byron.

This is plain nonsense. There is no correlation between William of Stratford and the plays, in terms of the immense erudition shown in the works and in the choice of subject matter, concerned almost exclusively with royalty and nobility. Who is the snob? The author or the authorship skeptic?

- On Shakespeare's monument in Stratford, it says he was a great writer.

Er, it says no such thing. There is no mention in Stratford, whether in the memorials or in the archives, that William as a great writer.

- He can't have visited Venice as he made no mention of canals.

Er, has JB read the *Merchant of Venice*? The Rialto (the exchange, which was beside the Grand Canal) is mentioned five times, ships are mentioned 25 times. Portia bids Balthasar to bring the garments of a Doctor of Law “unto the tranect, to the common ferry Which trades to Venice,” showing specialised vocabulary regarding Venetian boats. Thus the author assumes a knowledge of canals, just as a journalist might report on a football match without mentioning grass.

- No one for 240 years after his death queried the authorship.

This is like saying that nobody in Memphis ever doubted that Elvis was the first man on the moon. The answer is simple: nobody ever said Elvis was on board Apollo 11. Similarly, as nobody in Stratford ever claimed William was a writer, there was nothing to query. In fact, there were many doubts expressed about the traditional attribution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



Delia Bacon was responding for the vogue of lengthy fictional biographies of William which emerged in the 1840s.

- You can pick up knowledge from conversation.

Indeed so. Your point?

- He knew little of the behaviour in an aristocratic household – viz. Capulet going to the kitchen to give instructions in *Romeo & Juliet*.

It's quite difficult to prove a negative; can he be sure that aristocrats never visited a kitchen? JB seems to be referring to IV.ii. although no location is specified either in Q or in F. Capulet issues orders about the wedding breakfast, concerned that it might not be ready in time. Within the context of the play, it is natural that a noble would speak to servants thus.

- He *didn't* know about Italy, he *knew* about wool-making and leather manufacture! (Citing a dozen references.)

There are many mentions of gloves and other products, items required in everyday use. The author shows no special knowledge either in vocabulary or as to techniques regarding their manufacture.

- No other writer mentioned Warwickshire. The author was always referring to his home county.

In Shakespeare, there are in fact only two allusions to Warwickshire:

- In *1 Henry IV* at IV. ii. 56 when Falstaff is returning from the Battle of Shrewsbury towards London and unexpectedly encounters Hal near Coventry.

- In *3 Henry VI* at IV. viii. 9 where the Earl of Warwick changes his allegiance from Edward to Clarence saying that as he has friends in Warwickshire so he is able muster forces to support Clarence.

Neither of these entail that the author must have come from Warwickshire. Shakespeare mentions Ireland 30 times but nobody ever claims he was Irish.

- Candles at the Blackfriars only lasted about 30 minutes therefore a five-act structure was needed to allow the candles to be replaced. The five-act structure was a Jacobean development.

AW noted that the Blackfriars had been one of a number of indoor theatres well before the King's Men acquired it in 1607. The five-act structure was already in place in the 1590s. In any case, candles came in all sizes and were used during many night time entertainments at the Elizabethan court.

- JB claimed the author used a Warwickshire dialect.

AW noted the recent article by Ros Barber [*Shakespeare and Warwickshire Dialect* in the *Journal of Early Modern Studies* (2016)], which refuted this claim. Of about 20 words so identified, (out of about 33,000 used by Shakespeare), none can be identified as exclusive to Warwickshire.

- Oxford couldn't have written from beyond the grave. Under Elizabeth, Shakespeare wrote about 'England', under James he wrote about 'Britain' in *Lear*, *Macbeth* & *Cymbeline*; after James I's accession as King of England when Britain became a concept.

Nonsense. These plays were based on Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577, 1587) and a play about Lear was performed in 1594. JB would know that if he had read *Dating Shakespeare's Plays*.

- JB set greatest store by stylometrics: entire corpus has been put onto data bases. Much more sophisticated. Valuable tool. Elliot and Valenza ruled out all the alternative authors.

Stylometrics is not an exact science and current stylometric analysis perhaps show a tendency to confirm the experimenter's own biases and assumptions. The Stylometrics Debate Continues Online: Three Articles from *The Oxfordian* Now Posted On The Shakespeare Oxford Society Website.

- He flourished the supposed Stratfordian trump card: Hand D – telling us in detail how the formation of the ‘a’ in the Bellott-Mountjoy signature is unique to the Thomas More MS.

JB did not acknowledge Hand D as a controversial issue, ignoring Diana Price's article ‘Hand D and Shakespeare’s Unorthodox Literary Paper Trail’ *Journal of Early Modern Studies* (2016) and Michael Hays ‘Shakespeare’s Hand Unknown in Sir Thomas More: Thompson, Dawson, and the Futility of the Palaeographic Argument,’ in *Shakespeare Quarterly* (2016), both arguing against the identification.

- JB recommended we all visit the Oxfraud website. “You can only start a counter-argument when you have a credible alternative.”

Worrying. Many people have had their convictions quashed due to the emergence of new evidence; no alternative is necessary to doubt an initial mis-identification. Professor Bate needs to be set a homework assignment – to read Ros Barber’s e-book: *Shakespeare: The Evidence*.

During the question and answer session, Heward Wilkinson observed: Neither speaker has scored a knock-out punch. Are we moving towards an epoch where both parties take each other's arguments seriously, and forgo *ad hominem* attacks?

On entry, members of the audience self-identified as:

For 'Shakespeare' (78) – Don't Know (86) – Someone else (107)

At the end there was a strong show of hands for 'Someone else' - though the result was diplomatically assessed as a draw!

