The Strange Response to Winkler's Book on Shakespeare

by Bryan H. Wildenthal (July 20, 2023)

Part 1. *A Strange Panic Attack*

Given its dense and intimidating subject, Elizabeth Winkler's fascinating new book, *Shakespeare Was a Woman and Other Heresies: How Doubting the Bard Became the Biggest Taboo in Literature*, is surprisingly readable. She ventures well beyond the Shakespeare authorship debate. As her subtitle suggests, she explores how and why this author has been treated for so long, by so many, as a mythical cultural icon not to be examined too closely.

She does all this with a lightly humorous touch that makes it easy to overlook her staggering depth of research. I thus agree with Isaac Butler, one of her critical reviewers, that her "prose is smooth, her jokes land," her "research ... is gracefully rendered, and she has a keen eye for the foibles of Shakespeare biographers."

Winkler's book may be the best ever written on the authorship question, which arose during Shakespeare's own time and began taking its modern form almost two centuries ago. This may account for the ferocity of the strange panic attack it has triggered. The academic and media establishments seem to feel increasingly threatened as they frantically defend the cherished traditional story of William Shakespeare, the actor from Stratford-upon-Avon who supposedly became the great poet and playwright.

Winkler's title reflects her entry point to this subject: the feminine perspectives in the works published under the possible pseudonym "Shakespeare," which she discussed in a 2019 article in *The Atlantic*, "Was Shakespeare a Woman?"

The titles of both article and book seem intended as provocative conversation starters. Surely Shakespeare, at least the primary author, was male. See Sonnet 151! Yet it is a deep enigma that the works reveal such insightful empathy for women at a time when they were denied most rights and viewed with patriarchal paranoia and misogyny. Winkler's discussion of all that is very intriguing but takes up barely more than 10% of the book (pp. 10–15, 257–90).

This essay is not another review. Instead, it examines and seeks to gain insights from three especially telling critical reviews, by Isaac Butler, "Shakespeare Was Shakespeare" (*Slate*, May 11), Sir Jonathan Bate, "Was Shakespeare Really a Woman? And Does Taylor Swift Know Him Best?" (*The Telegraph*, May 28), and Emma Smith, "Shakespeare Sceptics Are the New Literary Heroes" (*The Spectator*, June 3).

All three reviews reflect the neurotic anxieties of mainstream academic and media discourse on Shakespeare's identity. They are riddled with puzzling contradictions. They illuminate exactly why Winkler felt compelled to write the book in the first place.

Bate's review is playful and at times quite funny — more naughty than nasty. Smith's critique is more sarcastic. Butler seems the most genuinely rattled. With grandiose overstatement, he charges that Winkler "abuses the liberal public sphere by using the values of liberal discourse ... against it." Really? Butler is the one demanding this entire discourse be shut down. Perhaps he should review Winkler's discussion of psychological projection (pp. 22–28).

Butler ultimately frames his review as a defense of the liberal values of "rational hearing of evidence, open-mindedness, [and] fair-minded skepticism about [supposed] certainties."

In fact, it is Butler, Bate, and Smith who violate every one of those values.

All three exaggerate and mishandle the evidence for the traditional authorship theory while ignoring the best opposing evidence. All three fail to open their minds and indulge in ad hominem attacks instead. All three seem to lack any desire to question their own certainties. They misstate the facts. They exhibit cognitive dissonance of which they seem surrealistically unaware. I will document all these points.

These reviews are all the more troubling and fascinating, and merit this extended response, because the reviewers themselves command such respect. Butler is an acclaimed director and writer on theatre and acting who teaches at the New School in New York City. Bate and Smith are card-carrying members of the *crème de la crème* of Shakespearean academia. Sir Jonathan still holds the title of Professor of English Literature at Oxford University (former provost of Worcester College) — though in an ambitious pivot to another longtime interest, he is now Professor of Environmental Humanities at Arizona State University. Smith is currently Professor of Shakespeare Studies at Oxford (a fellow of Hertford College).

The publishers of these reviews are megaphones of establishment culture. *Slate*, founded three decades ago at the dawn of the internet era, is perhaps America's best left-leaning online news and opinion source. *The Spectator*, founded in 1828, is the oldest surviving weekly magazine on earth; *The Telegraph* is a newspaper founded in 1855; both are right-leaning but sometimes classically liberal. They are two of Britain's most prestigious media outlets. *The Spectator* is not just part of "The Establishment," it is credited with coining that term in its popular modern form.

Part 2. *Ad Hominem Insults*

All three reviews muster a few compliments for Winkler's book. I quoted Butler's at the outset. Bate allows that it's "entertaining." Smith calls it "engaging" (though "wrong-headed") and grants that Winkler is "often witty, landing some good blows."

The ad hominem slurs flow more freely.

Butler smears Winkler with the slander of "trutherism," versions of which appear 15 times in his review. He bluntly labels "dumb" her search for Shakespeare's identity.

His insults are not just rude, they're unoriginal. Ron Rosenbaum called authorship skeptics "stupid birthers" in a 2011 *Slate* article. Such terms compare authorship doubts to frivolous and racist anti-Obama conspiracy theories, among other unsavory things. From "stupid birthers" to "dumb truthers": *Slate*'s defense of Shakespearean orthodoxy hasn't matured much in twelve years.

Butler admits he's fully aware how absurdly disproportionate the "truther" epithet is in this context. He concedes that "doubting Shakespeare's authorship isn't nearly as dangerous as climate change denial, or anti-vax beliefs, or questioning Obama's citizenship."

So why frame his entire essay as if it were? He candidly confesses: "Treat [the book] calmly and even-handedly ... and you risk legitimizing its claims as worth debating." Shutting down this debate, not engaging in it, is Butler's declared priority.

Bate calls Winkler "cruel" (on false grounds, as we will see) and hints that she has "an obsessive turn of mind." Smith notes suspiciously that Winkler "is not obviously aligned with other anti-expert movements" but asserts that "her methods and impulses are similar."

And what "anti-expert movements" does Smith mean, pray tell? She admits near the start of her review that some of her fellow orthodox scholars have attacked the alleged "anti-expert bias" of skeptics by "comparing" their doubts "to conspiracy theories, to anti-vax campaigns or Holocaust denial." She carefully avoids explicitly endorsing such comparisons herself. Indeed, she concedes this "general response of scholarship ... feeds the doubters" by suggesting that "[i]f the professionals are so rattled ... surely there must be something to it after all."

But Smith, after choosing at the outset to put things like Holocaust denial on the table, never says these outrageous ad hominem attacks are wrong — just strategically unwise. I wrote about how tiresome, disgusting, and irrational they are in my 2019 essay "The Snobbery Slander."

When Smith returns four paragraphs later to Winkler's "similar" anti-expert "impulses," she throws in "snobbery" as something "tend[ing] to characterize" the authorship question — but only, again distancing herself, "in [its] earlier iterations."

The ironies are stark. As we will see, it is actually Smith who adopts an "anti-expert" attitude in dismissing the insights on authorship offered by numerous experts in a wide range of fields outside her own narrow academic specialty. And she contemptuously (snobbishly?) dismisses "authorship scepticism ... espoused ... by actors."

Compared to Butler, and especially the freewheeling Bate, Smith is a disciplined academic politician. As a career law professor I know the type well! Butler and Bate are naive enough to say directly what they mean and make the mistake of getting into some details about authorship evidence (they predictably muck it up). Smith is too

clever and strategic to dirty her hands with mere facts. When it comes to the merits of the issue, she limits herself to lofty generalities.

But Smith's obvious annoyance at Winkler eventually boils over. By her seventh paragraph she's comparing the well-documented questions explored by the book to "insubstantial niggl[ing]" like "the glare on the visor that proves the moon landings were staged, or the untraced Fiat Uno at the scene of [Princess] Diana's death."

In her eighth paragraph, Smith drops a bizarre comparison of Winkler dining with skeptic Alexander Waugh to "a chapter of QAnon" — an extremist movement centered on an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory that many political and business leaders form a cannibalistic satanic cabal of child abusers.

What a nice way to describe a lunch!

Bate also can't resist a silly ad hominem jab at Waugh, but his is comparatively harmless and even a bit funny. Oddly enough, as Winkler notes (p. 243), Waugh is a friend of Bate and his wife.

Smith concludes her penultimate paragraph with a harshly personal verdict: Winkler's entire inquiry proceeds "in bad faith." Really? And likening Winkler and Waugh to QAnon is in good faith?

Can't we just skip the name-calling and stick to the facts?

Butler complains that "reviewing [Winkler's] book [is] so tricky" he's not even sure how to go about it. Should he "tear it apart" with a "vicious pan"? That's what much of his essay is, so I guess he resolved that dilemma. He concedes his overreaction will give rise to the suspicion that doubters "must be on to something." As noted, he fears "[t]reat[ing] it calmly and even-handedly" would "risk legitimizing its claims as worth debating."

Smith echoes Butler's argument very closely. "Reviewing [the book]," she says, is "a challenge. Too contemptuous and I am simply one of the ... 'priesthood' ... who do not 'take kindly to the denial of [their] god'." Smith, like Butler, concedes such overreaction "feeds the doubters. If the professionals are so rattled by this, surely there must be something to it after all." But, again like Butler, get "[t]oo engaged by the argument, and it has already won by establishing itself as worthy of academic debate."

Is it funny, or just sad, that Butler and Smith so openly and consciously weigh the option of responding to Winkler "calmly and even-handedly" and getting "engaged by [her] argument"? That is, of course, the normal and civilized way to respond to a good-faith argument. But Smith, as noted, gives herself a pass by summarily convicting Winkler of "bad faith." Butler's excuse is that Winkler's study of arcane literary history somehow threatens all of "liberal discourse."

For Smith, like Butler, shutting down the debate (not engaging in it) is the overriding goal. Both brazenly admit to choosing the nasty option — "vicious" in Butler's words, "contemptuous" in Smith's — because they literally fear the debate itself.

Part 3. *Early Doubts: A Pseudonym Hiding in Plain Sight?*

I previously reviewed the similarly unhinged reaction when Winkler first wrote about the authorship question four years ago. It is gratifying that her defiant response was to write the book.

It is crucial to emphasize the well-documented reality — despite robotically repetitive denials by many academics — that authorship questions first arose during Shakespeare's own time. They were present at the creation. Such doubts are not a 19th-century invention. Nor are they outgrowths of our modern "anti-establishment" tendency to "question authority." If they were, why aren't there questions about Ben Jonson, Dante, Chaucer, Molière, or many other writers?

Some say doubters are just snobs who don't think an actor or commoner could be a great writer. This is a lazy and nonsensical cheap shot. We all agree at least two of the three greatest English playwrights of the era, Jonson and Marlowe, were commoners of very modest origins indeed — more so than Shakespeare of Stratford, whose father was high bailiff of his town, the modern-day equivalent of mayor, coroner, and justice of the peace combined.

No one doubts Jonson and Molière were great actor-playwrights. Sam Shepard is a modern example. By the way, Shepard was also a Shakespeare authorship doubter.

This is not about us. It's about Shakespeare and has been all along. These doubts were and remain an authentic, integral, and persistent product of Elizabethan and Jacobean literary culture. They arose when the works were first published. The questions they raised in their time continue to merit our study in our time.

Jonson himself raised Shakespeare authorship doubts before the Stratford man's death in 1616. He raised more in the 1616 folio of his own works, just seven months after the death of his supposed rival. He slyly raised still more in the 1623 First Folio, even as it winkingly launched the traditional attribution.

The summary lead and fourth paragraph of Winkler's *Atlantic* article, as originally published on May 10, 2019, stated that authorship questions and doubts are "almost as old as" the Shakespearean works themselves. On that very same day, by sheer coincidence, I finalized the manuscript of my own book published in June 2019 on the very same subject: *Early Shakespeare Authorship Doubts*.

The only adjustment needed to Winkler's original text is to note that authorship doubts are *at least*, *if not exactly*, "as old as" the first work published under that name (or pseudonym). At least three separate comments on the 1593 poem *Venus and*

Adonis, all raising significant doubts, appeared in two publications that very same year.

And we should take another look at the author's own dedication of *Venus and Adonis*, as Katherine Chiljan has reminded us. It describes that poem as "the first heir of my invention." The word "invention" was often used then to describe a writer's creative faculty. But was this lengthy polished masterpiece really the poet's first work?

Did the author mean simply that *Venus and Adonis* was the first work published using the pseudonym "Shakespeare"? Several definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, citing two Shakespearean plays, support the use of "invention" to also mean a "contrived," "fabricated," or "fictitious" name. Two of those definitions specifically support using "invention" to imply the *debut* of such a contrivance.

Has this all been hiding in plain sight since 1593?

Earlier publications also raise doubts, including a mysterious 1589 reference to *Hamlet*, years before the traditionally credited author could plausibly have written it (about a decade before orthodox scholars think he did). As Chiljan has explored, that's only one of many "too early" references to Shakespearean works.

Dozens of indications of doubt were published in the years before the credited author's death in 1616 — which was greeted by deafening silence that year. These include five separate publications — not least the 1609 Sonnets dedication reference to the "ever-living" (i.e. deceased) poet — implying that the true author died years earlier (which would explain the peculiar silence in 1616). Still more doubts were raised in the decades following 1616. Yet more were expressed during the 1700s, all long before the modern authorship debate began in the 1850s. These early allusions are naturally subject to debatable interpretation. That's the whole point. They raise doubts.

The Atlantic nevertheless surrendered to ill-informed bullying and misguidedly "corrected ... Winkler's piece" on this crucial point about early doubts (as I have discussed). Worse, the insulting "correct[ion]" is noted at the end of a vicious attack on Winkler by Columbia University Professor James Shapiro, the widely hailed Shakespeare expert.

My words are chosen carefully. Shapiro's essay is an ad hominem attack on Winkler herself, not just a criticism of her article. The editors inexplicably gave Shapiro a platform in *The Atlantic* to falsely dismiss (as a "falsehood") Winkler's accurate dating of authorship doubts and to compare Winkler to "fantasists who peddle ... fiction," "conspiracy theorists," "anti-vaxxers," and anti-Obama "birthers."

The editors even allowed Shapiro to include a direct link from *The Atlantic* to a still more unhinged attack by Shapiro's friend Oliver Kamm, a columnist at *The Times* of London. Kamm compares Winkler to Holocaust deniers and for good measure tosses in the old snobbery chestnut.

More recently, in one of Kamm's columns for *The Times* — with the laughably imperious title "We Must Denounce Insidious Theories About Shakespeare" — he recycles the snobbery and Holocaust denial slurs and adds a bizarre comparison to the January 2021 "riot at the U.S. Capitol" to illustrate the potential "costs" of Winkler's "baseless conspiracy theories."

One might think this a parody, but Kamm is deadly serious. He concludes (in case we somehow missed it): "This is no time for genteel dialogue." With unconscious projection better aimed at his own screed, he calls it "calumnious bilge" to question Shakespeare's primary authorship.

Yet Kamm is strangely eager to assert as a fact — it's actually a dubious hypothesis — that Shakespeare relied on mediocre "fellow dramatists" who allegedly "collaborated" with him even "late in his career" at the height of his mastery. I will return to this "co-authorship" issue in exploring the similar cognitive dissonance of the Butler, Bate, and Smith reviews.

The Atlantic editors, in 2019, posted the following substitute for Winkler's recognition of early doubts: "Some contemporaries' comments can be read as complaints that Shakespeare put his name on others' work." That is misleading because there's no evidence the credited author or anyone in his family ever personally claimed that he wrote anything literary at all.

He and his family spelled their name "Shakspere" (or some variant) in most personal records — rarely if ever "Shakespeare" (or hyphenated "Shake-speare") as it very consistently appears in 95% of the published works. Don't take my word for that. It is documented on a website devoted to attacking authorship doubts and praised by Professor Shapiro himself — in the same 2010 book in which Shapiro served up to his readers the double falsehood (contradicting the website) that there's "no pattern" to the spelling of the author's published name and that it was sometimes published as "Shakspere."

Part 4. *A Frontman By Any Other Name?*

The distinguished orthodox biographer Samuel Schoenbaum, sticking strictly to the documentary record, observed that the surname "Shakespeare" (with all its variants) was not especially rare during that time. Apparently about a fifth of all Englishmen used "William" or some variant as a first name back then. With regard to unrelated people sharing the same name, Schoenbaum said such a "coincidence, while curious, need not startle us." A certain "John Shakespeare" (no known relation) was a bit-maker for the horses of King James.

There were three prominent Englishmen of that time named "John Davies," two of them poets easily confused with each other — both of whose writings, by the way, happen to raise early Shakespeare authorship doubts.

Thus, it is entirely plausible that there might not have been any connection at all, originally, between "Shakespeare" as a possible pseudonym already chosen for London publications and some unknown new guy in town named "Shakspere." Within a few years, to be sure, some linkage was clearly drawn by someone.

If the Stratford man was not the author, he eventually became some kind of frontman. But we have no real evidence until the winter of 1594–95, a year and a half after the author's name debuted, that he had joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men or had even arrived in London. As Winkler discusses (pp. 37–41), the traditional argument that Greene's *Groats-Worth of Wit* refers to him in 1592 has largely collapsed.

Butler and Smith concede the use of pseudonyms during Shakespeare's time. It has long been recognized as a golden age of pen names. Yet they never concede the evidence that "Shakespeare" is a prime example.

As Winkler points out (pp. 42–43, 205), even orthodox scholars agree "Shakespeare" (or "W.S.") was indeed used as a pseudonym on "apocryphal" plays and poems they think the Stratford guy had nothing to do with: *Locrine* (1595), much of *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), *Thomas Lord Cromwell* (1602), *The London Prodigal* (1605), *The Puritan* (1607), *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), and *Sir John Oldcastle* (1600, rep. 1619). Authorship doubters merely carry the same idea further.

As Tom Regnier noted, "Shakespeare" sounds like "exactly the kind of vivid and dashing name that would have lent itself to use as a pseudonym. It may have been meant to invoke Athena (Pallas or Minerva), the Greco-Roman goddess of wisdom also viewed during the Renaissance as a patron of the arts, who according to legend came into the world brandishing a spear and is very often depicted that way."

Seven years after the Stratford man's death — met by silence in 1616 — Ben Jonson and whoever else edited the 1623 First Folio offered several ambiguous, cryptic, and oddly phrased comments about the author, stuck in a truly bizarre portrait, and the traditional attribution (whether true or false) developed from there.

In his 2019 attack on Winkler, Shapiro says "fantasists who peddle the fiction that Shakespeare didn't write the plays attributed to him" have not succeeded in "backdat[ing] doubts about his authorship ... because scholars have demonstrated that two and a half centuries passed before this theory was first proposed, in the mid-19th century. That's a fact."

But Winkler's book discusses many facts ignored by Shapiro (and all three reviews discussed here), including (p. 71) a poem published in 1611 by John Davies of Hereford in *The Scourge of Folly*, more or less openly calling Shakespeare a frontman: "our English Terence." Terence is an otherwise obscure Roman playwright, known mainly for more than 2,000 years — discussed as such in major Elizabethan publications — as an alleged frontman for two aristocratic authors.

So here we have a Jacobean writer directly and clearly implying what Shapiro calls a baseless “fiction” unknown at the time: “that Shakespeare didn’t write the plays attributed to him.” The text of this Davies poem is clearly about the actor from Stratford; it says he “played some ... parts” and makes punning references to the King’s Men theatre company. But curiously, nothing in that sardonic text refers to any literary activity by this player (it offers faint praise of any sort). The only literary link is the title, which openly mocks that linkage by drawing the comparison to Terence.

An earlier poem by Davies in *Microcosmos* (1603) suggests some obscure connection between “poesy” and “W.S.” — identified (in part?) as a “player,” perhaps the Stratford man. The 1603 poem is one of a small handful of ambiguous references predating 1623 that draw any arguable links at all between him personally and any literary activity. All those references, including the 1603 poem, raise authorship doubts at the same time. The 1603 poem also suggests an aristocratic author (and sometime player?), curiously commenting that “the *stage* doth stain pure gentle *blood*,” with obscurely implied praise for “W.S.” as “generous” (italics in original).

A third Davies poem, in *Humour’s Heaven on Earth* (1609), again refers obscurely to “W.S.” as a “player” and raises still more doubts. But like the text of the 1611 poem, it does not mention any literary activity. All three poems are discussed in my 2019 book (pp. 202–18, 262–72). Winkler’s book omits the 1603 and 1609 poems.

I do not claim to have fully unraveled them but it seems Davies may refer in a dichotomous way to both a hidden aristocratic author and a “player” with some connected role. The poems permit an inference that his knowledge of the scenario increased over time — or at least he became bolder in writing about it. The third poem, in 1611, is the most clear and compelling expression of doubt.

Bate’s review ignores all three poems, but he briefly discusses them in his book *The Genius of Shakespeare* (2d ed. 2008, p. 71), claiming all three as evidence in *favor* of the traditional authorship theory. That’s arguably fair (in part) for the 1603 poem, though Bate ignores its obscurity and the doubts it also raises. He briskly asserts “no doubt” about what they all mean — so typical for defenses of the traditional theory.

More troubling is that Bate’s book: (1) ignores the doubts raised by the 1609 and 1611 poems; (2) hypes the 1611 poem as “prais[ing]” Shakespeare “as a great playwright” (it does nothing of the sort); (3) hypes Terence as a “revered” playwright “equivalent” to Shakespeare — misleading, since Terence is known to have written only a few comedies, not great tragedies too; and (4) worst of all, verging on deception in a 36-page chapter devoted entirely to the authorship controversy, omits any hint of Terence’s notorious frontman reputation.

The Davies of Hereford poems are part of the larger roster of numerous published allusions during those same decades indicating cryptic wonderment about the identity of the mysterious author using the “Shakespeare” name — or pseudonym, as several writers in addition to Davies strongly implied.

Part 5. *Shaky Evidence*

Winkler's book pursues at length the early doubts about Shakespeare expressed by contemporaries (pp. 37–41, 56–72, 172–75). Yet Bate charges her with "studiously ignor[ing] testimony from Shakespeare's contemporaries."

Smith repeats as a given the false denialism of Shapiro. As Smith phrases it, "no one ever doubted Shakespeare's authorship during his own time."

Butler comments on some of Winkler's evidence for early doubts. He cheerfully concedes her "book is chock-full of this kind of stuff," and that "[i]f you don't pay close attention ... it sounds pretty good, or at least plausible." The problem is that Butler pays very little attention to the stronger evidence Winkler discusses. He completely ignores the Terence reference and many other compelling points, cherry-picking and mishandling the more easily ridiculed "stuff."

Butler's solemn indictment of skeptical arguments is unintentionally funny. He says we begin, insidiously, with a solid premise ("[s]tate some assertions we can all agree with"). So ... it's better to begin with a *weak* premise? We then — horror of horrors! — "[a]sk an escalating series of questions about the consensus view."

Don't scholars and scientists do this all the time? *Shouldn't they?* Does Butler think every "consensus view" is (or should be) carved in stone for all eternity? As a law professor, I can cite cases in my own scholarly field when mistaken "consensus views" have rightly crumbled.

Butler says doubters rely on "shaky evidence" and — shockingly enough — try to show that evidence cited by opponents actually supports their views. The latter is a familiar and perfectly legitimate tactic in any debate.

A case in point: Butler discusses the anonymous "Parnassus" plays. They are important early evidence on the authorship issue. He says they refer to Shakespeare as an actor-playwright. But as Winkler discusses (p. 69; and see my 2019 book, pp. 167–85), such a reference (very sardonic) appears only in a single comic scene of the third Parnassus play, circa 1601. As Butler concedes, the supposed playwright is "mocked mercilessly." Doesn't he wonder why the audience was expected to find it funny?

Orthodox scholars typically dismiss comic scenes in plays from the 1700s that openly express authorship doubts (discussed by Winkler, p. 109), because ... well ... they're comic scenes. Who could take them seriously? But doesn't comedy often reveal ideas circulating more widely and seriously in society?

Butler claims this one Parnassus scene must be taken seriously and literally as proof of authorship. Orthodox scholars are desperate for it to count. Weak as it is, more damaging than helpful to their case, it is the most significant of the two or three items

during the Stratford man's life that even hint ambiguously that he had any kind of literary career.

Butler implies that all three Parnassus comedies pinpoint the author Shakespeare as the Stratfordian actor. But the second play refers to Shakespeare only impersonally as an author's name: no hint he was an actor. One reference in the second play, as Winkler discusses (p. 229), points to Edward de Vere (Earl of Oxford) as the author. The first Parnassus play doesn't refer to Shakespeare at all.

So who's really misusing shaky evidence?

Part 6. *Reasonable Doubts*

Is it reasonable merely to question, debate, and study the identity and nature of the poet-playwright who is arguably the greatest in human history? Butler doesn't think so. He calls it "pernicious," "anti-historical," and "dumb." Smith calls it the "entirely irrational premise" on which Winkler's "book [is] based."

The "Declaration of Reasonable Doubt About the Identity of William Shakespeare," posted online since 2007, takes the cautious and minimal stance that this is indeed a legitimate subject of inquiry. It has been signed by more than 5,000 people to date, among them more than 800 credentialed academics (myself included) and U.S. Supreme Court Justices John Paul Stevens and Sandra Day O'Connor.

Given all the name-calling, let's name some of the thinkers, leaders, and writers who have doubted Shakespeare's identity over the centuries: Sigmund Freud, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Malcolm X, Helen Keller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry and William James, historians like Britain's Hugh Trevor-Roper and America's David McCullough, leading French literary scholar Abel Lefranc, and at least five justices of the U.S. Supreme Court.

This is not to suggest any argument from authority. The point is not that anyone has to agree with this or that luminary. But don't questions raised by such people suggest we too should indulge — in the words of Butler's own paean to "liberal discourse" — some "fair-minded skepticism about [our] own certainties"?

Are modern academics so much more perceptive about literature than Whitman that they feel justified in dismissing his views as beyond the pale of reason? Are they more perceptive about psychology than Freud? Better at weighing evidence than Supreme Court justices? Better historians than Trevor-Roper or McCullough?

The authorship debate is fundamentally historical and requires careful weighing of conflicting evidence. Psychological insights are crucial. It is far from clear that professors of English literature are well-suited to claim any exclusive right to finally adjudicate this question. Few have any training or experience as historians. For more than a century now, they have done a conspicuously poor job of exploring the issue.

Yet Smith's review reeks of disdain for those lacking what she views as the right credentials. She sniffs that "anti-Stratfordians operate almost entirely outside the academy of professional Shakespeare study."

She is wise to insert the "almost" caveat. Felicia Hardison Londré, Curators' Distinguished Professor Emerita of Theatre at the University of Missouri, has written an excellent review of Winkler's book. Professor Londré favors, as I do, the theory that Edward de Vere (Earl of Oxford) played at least a major role in writing the Shakespearean works. And she's not the only authorship doubter among credentialed professional academics in literature and the humanities.

Smith notes dismissively that "authorship scepticism is a position often espoused by lawyers, by academics in other fields, or by actors." So who shows disdain for actors now? As noted earlier, a common orthodox riposte to skeptics is that they just don't think an actor or commoner could be a great writer.

Apparently it doesn't occur to Smith that academics in one field might learn from those in others. Has she never heard of interdisciplinary studies? As a law professor, I can testify to the powerful insights that historians, economists, sociologists, political scientists, and even literary scholars have often brought to the study of law.

Winkler, in a recent interview, refutes the "anti-expert" label falsely applied to her by Smith and others. Winkler observes that "the authorship question is an interdisciplinary subject" and notes the crucial importance of "the expertise of all these different people from different disciplines" who have studied the Shakespearean works, including "historical experts, legal experts and French, Greek and Italian experts, not to mention actors and directors, who have come at the problem in a way that literary experts miss."

Is Smith thus ironically the real "anti-expert" on this subject? Winkler's interview reinforces the point that this is "not actually a subject just for English literary scholars whose training is in literary analysis." She notes they lack "methodological training as historians" and "certainly don't have training in all these other fields that the author [Shakespeare] seems to be knowledgeable about."

As for those much-maligned actors, the stage and screen artists who have expressed authorship doubts include Sir Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Sir John Gielgud, Sir Derek Jacobi, Sir Mark Rylance, Vanessa Redgrave, Michael York, Jeremy Irons, Sam Shepard, Robin Williams, and Keanu Reeves.

Bate, in *The Genius of Shakespeare* (2d ed. 2008, p. 67), offered one of the most puzzling and laughable of his many mistaken claims on this subject, asserting as a "striking fact ... that no major actor has ever been attracted to" authorship doubts "because actors know from the inside that the plays must have been written by an actor." His book, first published in 1997, was reissued in 2008 without correction on this point, despite his new afterword's discussion of modern Shakespearean films (pp. 348–55).

Jacobi, one of the finest Shakespearean actors in history and among the most famous authorship doubters, appears in two films mentioned in Bate's book: Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) and in a starring role as Claudius in Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), in which Gielgud and Williams also appear. Bate also mentions Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), co-starring Reeves. Jacobi, Rylance, and York are Honorary Trustees of the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship, though Rylance remains skeptical of the Oxfordian theory. Jacobi, Rylance, York, and Irons are signatories of the Declaration of Reasonable Doubt.

I guess we must be grateful that Bate's review of Winkler at least partly rectifies this howler. He now graciously concedes that Rylance, founding director of London's new Globe Theatre, is "as great a Shakespearean actor as there has ever been."

Part 7. *Cognitive Dissonance and Conspiracy Theories*

Butler's "anti-historical" charge is especially puzzling. Winkler's book and the authorship debate are all about history. Theories about long-hidden Shakespearean "co-authors" embraced by many orthodox scholars — on very dubious grounds — raise the very same kinds of historical questions.

"Who 'really' wrote" all these works? The quoted words are Butler's, but he rejects the question as irrational. It is the question he demands we "retire." Smith condemns it and the doubts it implies as the "entirely irrational premise" of Winkler's book.

Yet Butler defends scholars, like Smith herself, who explore alleged "co-authors" or "collaborators." Butler castigates Winkler for seeing, as her book puts it (pp. 235–36, 312–13), "cognitive dissonance" in these highly speculative claims by orthodox scholars, even as they "studiously avoi[d] the issue of the central author."

Bate also promotes the idea of "collaborative playwriting," while making two bafflingly false claims about it. First, he says Winkler fails to "address" it. She does so twice (see the pages just cited). Second, Bate says this alleged collaboration is a "stumbling-block" for doubters. That is illogical on its face. The fact that almost all these alleged co-authors remained uncredited for so long implies by analogy that the role of a different primary author might also have remained hidden.

Smith's cognitive dissonance is mind-boggling. She built her academic career, in part, on an argument that the alleged Stratfordian author did *not*, in fact, write all of the works traditionally attributed to him. She published an article in 2012, co-authored with Professor Laurie Maguire, arguing that Thomas Middleton was the uncredited ghostwriter of much of *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Yet this play was originally published only under the name "Shakespeare." It was previously credited exclusively (except by one 20th-century scholar) to the primary author (whoever that was). Most agree it's a rather weird and unlikable work, at least by Shakespearean standards, but it has never been viewed as apocryphal.

The Smith-Maguire argument triggered heated responses from the academic old guard. Yet by 2016, a leading edition of the works published by Oxford University Press embraced their theory. Indeed, the editors of *The New Oxford Shakespeare* claim, based on very shaky stylometric analysis, that up to *one third of the entire Shakespeare canon* was actually co-authored by as many as ten other writers — including Christopher Marlowe, a popular primary authorship candidate among the doubters generally dismissed by orthodox scholars.

The *New Oxford* editors, following the orthodox party line, label doubts about primary authorship "unscholarly." But they do not explain how almost all their claimed co-authors remained hidden and uncredited as such until modern times. Nor have orthodox scholars ever fully identified who wrote all the apocryphal works. Posthumous meddling or completion of drafts left behind by the primary author seem more likely in many cases than active collaboration or co-authorship. But orthodox scholars ignore the former possibility and focus only on the latter.

How was the involvement of almost all these other writers kept secret for so long? What is this, some kind of vast conspiracy theory? Many orthodox scholars have hypocritically deployed the "conspiracy theory" slur to question how an alternative primary author could possibly have been kept secret over the same span of time.

The orthodox argument boils down to this: The name "Shakespeare" on a published work is proof positive beyond any rational doubt that he wrote it — unless they don't think he wrote it, or at least not all of it. Got it?

There are several plausible explanations for secrecy about a hidden primary author, including the aristocratic stigma of print, suppression of family scandal, political sensitivities, and the fact that early modern England was a police state where censorship, arbitrary arrest, torture, and the death penalty were routine. The Shakespearean works are filled with provocative sexual and political content.

Butler, Bate, and Smith generally avoid the "conspiracy theory" epithet in their reviews. Butler and Smith each use the word "conspiracy" only once (glancingly), Bate not at all. Butler does question why, if there were a hidden primary author, it "was never explicitly written down anywhere" during that time. But scholars have never found anything "explicitly written down" naming most of the authors of the apocryphal works either, nor almost all those alleged co-authors.

Butler actually articulates (though not endorsing) the best response: "Shakespeare's real identity" could "have been an open secret everybody knew" — or perhaps, one might suggest, only the small minority of that society with the time, resources, and interest to bother with such literary matters.

The authorship doubts actually expressed and published during Shakespeare's time suggest that whatever secrecy, deception, or conspiracy may have been attempted was

never very successful. The pseudonym may have been a polite public fiction, the truth well-known to a few, suspected by others, and a matter of indifference to most.

There was no need for any conspiracy! (Which is not to suggest they never happen or deserve knee-jerk ridicule.) We have explicit evidence in Ben Jonson's epigram "On Poet-Ape" that playgoers then couldn't care less who wrote what: "The sluggish gaping auditor ... marks not whose 'twas first: and after-times may judge it to be his, as well as ours."

Smith cannot point to even the slightest hint by anyone during Shakespeare's time, nor for centuries after, crediting Middleton as co-author of *All's Well*. What "conspiracy" kept that secret? By contrast, among the dozens of early doubts from that era are several published references hinting at links between Edward de Vere (Earl of Oxford) and the works of Shakespeare.

Smith's case for Middleton rests on evidence internal to the play itself in comparison to other Shakespearean plays and those concededly written by Middleton. The Oxfordian case also rests heavily (but not exclusively) on evidence within the Shakespearean works. *All's Well*, in particular, has long been viewed as having especially strong parallels to Oxford's biography. The character Bertram seems to be modeled on Oxford, as Winkler discusses (pp. 189–90).

Butler's desire to shut down all inquiry into the identity of this author is impossible to reconcile with his praise for scholars "focused on the far richer subject of Shakespeare's work and its relationship to the world in which he lived." I'm really curious: How can we explore that "relationship" in any meaningful way without inquiring into who this author really was and thus the particular social "world in which" he grew up and "lived"?

Pause and think about that a moment. Did Butler think about it? Does it not suggest his baffling degree of cognitive dissonance?

For example, was this author from the world of the commoners, the business gentry, the aristocracy, the church, the military? Those were very different worlds in Elizabethan England. How might that relate to the predominant settings, characters, and perspectives of these plays and poems? Where and how did the author acquire the experience and knowledge reflected in these works with regard to law, medicine, astronomy, seafaring, and many other matters?

Did the actor and businessman from Stratford explore the worlds of Renaissance Italy or France and their art, culture, and geography? Few scholars think he ever traveled outside England. But the works indicate their author did and was fluent in languages, like French and Italian, never taught in the Stratford grammar school.

The traditional timeline doesn't fit the facts. The credited author's death in 1616 was ignored that year outside Stratford, as far as we know from all surviving publications and even private letters and diaries. As we have seen, early references to

Shakespearean works date to when the credited author was far too young to have written them. Multiple references during the dozen years before the credited author died suggest the actual author died years earlier.

Those references, the widely accepted timeline of the Sonnets, and the tempo of play publications all point to the author dying around 1604 — the very year Oxford died. Sir Thomas North also apparently died in 1604. North has emerged as a major new authorship candidate — at the very least a far more important source for the author than anyone previously imagined.

Yes, the Sonnets were *published* in 1609 — with a dedication calling the poet "ever-living" (a term for the deceased). Yes, many plays were first *published* after 1604 — but the vast majority of those were not published until 1623, seven years after the credited author had died as well. Is sauce for the goose not sauce for the gander? It has never been proven that any Shakespearean work was *written* after 1604. As Butler concedes, "we don't know the exact chronology." Most orthodox scholars concede the dates of original composition are subject to reasonable debate and very difficult to pin down.

The Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship notes two more chronological points undermining the traditional timeline:

"The First Folio's letter to readers says the author was 'by death' deprived of the chance 'to have set forth, and overseen his own writings.' That's puzzling for Shakspere of Stratford, who enjoyed years of retirement, but fits perfectly with Oxford's death in 1604 at the height of the publication and performance of many of Shakespeare's greatest plays."

"In late 1604, King James had eight Shakespeare plays produced at court, perhaps a tribute to Oxford. James patronized ... the King's Men. Yet stunningly, when his beloved teenage son Prince Henry died in 1612, causing a paroxysm of national grief, King's Man Shakspere [of Stratford] was ... *coldly silent?* You can sample some of the outpouring of mediocre verse mourning Prince Henry in [*The Courtly Poets From Raleigh to Montrose* (John Hannah ed. 1870)] (pp. 183–85). Ask yourself: Couldn't the author of *The Phoenix and the Turtle* have done a lot better? Then ask: *Why didn't he?* There's a pretty simple and obvious answer: 'Shakespeare' the actual author was dead by then."

The traditional theory offers no convincing answers to any of these questions.

Part 8. *Mishandling Facts*

Butler and Bate push a false narrative about Winkler's interview with Sir Stanley Wells, the acknowledged dean of Shakespearean academia (pp. 145–46, 171–80). Bate castigates Winkler as "cruel" for supposedly "doorstep[ping]" Wells and "chid[ing] him for lapses of memory that would be excusable in someone half his age" (Wells was 91

at the time). Butler also highlights his age and claims Winkler "subjected [him] to [the] third degree."

Balderdash! Wells was not "doorstepped." He agreed in advance to the interview, then cancelled it abruptly, then went ahead with a sparring match in which he brusquely batted aside Winkler's polite and deferential questions. He curtly rejected one with "no comment" like an embarrassed politician, responding to others by "throw[ing] out bits of counter-evidence" (pp. 126, 138, 173–74).

Butler and Bate leave out the fact that Winkler emailed Wells the text of key references and invited him to say "what he made of [them] once he'd had a chance to read them." As Winkler reports (p. 180): "He never responded." They don't mention that Wells had no trouble recalling references he thought supported his views. Contrary to their sly insinuations, Wells had not gone dotty with age. And they ignore Winkler's strikingly gracious defense of his honesty against attacks by some authorship doubters (pp. 179–80).

What really shocked Winkler was that Wells not only recalled the 1594 satire "Willobie His Avisa," he brazenly admitted (p. 173): "I've never studied [it]. I just haven't bothered, frankly."

This astounded Winkler, as it should anyone. This is a crucial text for any scholar in the field, as it contains the very first clear literary reference to Shakespeare. But this sort of thing is tiresomely familiar to experienced authorship doubters.

Most defenders of the traditional view, because of their contempt for the entire debate, have no interest in studying or engaging with the factual details raising such doubts. They seem blissfully ignorant of most of them. They seem to fear anything that might threaten their apparently fragile faith in the orthodox theory.

Winkler perceptively links her defense of Wells's honesty to one of the best parts of her historical study. She explores the 19th-century origins of English literature as an educational discipline in Britain and its former empire — an academic specialty frankly centered from the outset on deifying the traditional Stratfordian Shakespeare (pp. 146–51, 167–72). Her enlightening discussion helps explain why the traditional view so often resembles a quasi-religious cult.

Butler brushes off these valuable historical insights (supported by ample modern scholarship) with yet another cheap shot. He dismisses Winkler as embracing a "conspiracy" about "the study of English itself." He fumes about her comparisons of authorship views to religious beliefs. But this is an undeniable and well-documented cultural and historical reality. As Winkler points out (pp. 136–37), Henry James wrote his classic story "The Birthplace" about it.

In a striking irony, Butler, Bate, and Smith ignore and contradict the concession by Wells that "despite the mass of evidence" available, "there is none [during the credited author's life] that explicitly and incontrovertibly identifies" him as the author of the

Shakespearean works. This moment of admirable scholarly candor appears in Wells's central essay in his co-edited 2013 book, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* (p. 81), the most systematic attempt to refute authorship doubts ever published.

Diana Price has documented — contrary to frequent false orthodox claims — that this paucity of evidence is not even remotely typical for that era. In a survey of 24 other English writers during Shakespeare's time, examining ten categories of evidence of a literary career, Price demonstrates (see her book and website) that all are better documented (usually far better) than the Stratford man, who draws a blank in all ten categories.

Butler, to his credit, devotes the first three paragraphs of his review to a lot of facts. But he fails to prove the traditional theory by any standard, far less beyond reasonable doubt. Like Bate, Smith, and other orthodox advocates, he mainly touts impersonal literary references to the author's name "Shakespeare" — evidence which does nothing to document any personal linkage to the Stratford man.

The opening paragraph of Smith's review claims "ample historical evidence from the period" providing a "mass of documentation" that "connects [the author] William Shakespeare with the [actor] of Stratford-upon-Avon." But she cites not a single factual detail in support.

Smith breaks up this unstated evidence into three categories, only one of which addresses the relevant issue — apparently to make it all sound more impressive. Her first category, published "attribut[ions] ... to William Shakespeare," would include the concededly apocryphal plays and poems. Her second refers to evidence (not in dispute) that the Stratford man was "an actor and [theatre] shareholder." She claims, absurdly, that his authorship can be questioned "[o]nly if you believe that all this evidence is fabricated" — "all this evidence" that she never deigns to reveal.

Butler and Bate venture where Smith fears to tread, actually getting into some factual details. This boomerangs on both. We have already seen Butler's mishandling of the Parnassus plays.

Bate's facts are even less reliable. He claims *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* show the author was "ignorant" of the Venetian canals because they do not recite the word "canal." He also claims the works reveal "detailed technical knowledge of glove-making," the trade of the Stratford man's father, and invokes a scene in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* involving "a cheeky but clever schoolboy" named William.

Winkler, in a letter to *The Telegraph*, points out that the supposed expertise on gloves is laughably exaggerated. She notes by contrast that Bate "ignores" as "too awkward" the author's incomparably deeper and more puzzling "knowledge of the law."

More embarrassing for Bate, Winkler points out that both Venetian plays allude to gondolas: "What does [Bate] think [they] travel upon?" Indeed, *The Merchant of Venice*

says an “amorous” couple “were in a gondola seen together.” The very first scene of *Othello* describes a “gondolier” taking Desdemona to her beloved Moor.

It gets worse. Bate misses *five* references in *Merchant* to the Rialto. The present stone bridge dates from 1591 but a grand wooden bridge was there for more than a century before. One reference (“in the Rialto”) is likely to the adjoining market by that name. But shops lined the bridge since the 1400s, so it and the market on the east bank are hard to distinguish. Four of the five allusions refer to “on” or “upon” the Rialto, suggesting the bridge — over what, does Bate think?

One would not expect to see famous sights mentioned in every literary work set in a given city, unless they happen to advance the plot like the gondolier in *Othello* and perhaps the Rialto in *Merchant*. They might often be thought so obvious as to go without saying. The Shakespearean works demonstrate intimate and seemingly firsthand knowledge of far more obscure details of Italian geography, art, and culture — whose very obscurity makes them so much more telling.

Bate’s clumsily recycled argument was demolished ten years ago by Alexander Waugh in his chapter, “Keeping Shakespeare Out of Italy,” in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial* (2013), in which he laments (p. 82): “Shakespeare’s knowledge of Italy is a fascinating and rewarding subject worthy of serious attention, but one, sadly, with which the modern literary academic is reluctant to engage.”

Just as almost any English writer might learn something about how gloves are made, almost any such writer might make “allusions to the Cotswolds” cited by Bate. But what about that scene in *Merry Wives* where schoolboy William “is given a Latin lesson by a Welsh schoolmaster,” which Bate links to an alleged “master of Welsh descent” at the Stratford grammar school?

Childhood Latin lessons, whether in school or by private tutor, are something any plausible Shakespearean author would have had to endure. We have documentary evidence the young Oxford did, compared to none at all that the Stratford boy even attended grammar school. As for that “Welsh” schoolmaster in Stratford, he was a Londoner whose ancestry is entirely speculative. The distinguished orthodox scholar Samuel Schoenbaum rejected such flimsy alleged parallels as “dangerous.”

Since we all agree the works were published under the name “William Shakespeare” starting in 1593, naming that schoolboy “William” (his surname in the play is “Page”) does not tell us anything more about the actual author’s name, any more than the name on the title page itself or the statement in Sonnet 136 that “my name is Will.”

The argument that the Will Sonnets prove the author’s Stratfordian identity is ludicrous — shockingly so. Yet Bate shamelessly pushes it in his book *The Genius of Shakespeare* (2d ed. 2008, p. 72) and a recent *Times* of London article.

Please, Sir Jonathan! *Surely* you’re having us on?

Any self-reference would obviously, perforce, have to follow the published name lest it create a contradiction (or blow a pseudonym's cover). Is an author more likely to belabor his own actual name with literary wordplay — or a name chosen for literary purposes? The question answers itself, all the more so when sexual punning is involved as in the Will Sonnets.

As Bate concedes more sensibly in *Soul of the Age* (U.S. ed. 2009, p. 356): "The combination of *shake* and phallic *speare*, especially in conjunction with the first name Will, has robust bawdy possibilities." Why Bate's own discussion (pp. 353–59) doesn't suggest to him a pseudonym is quite beyond me (compare my 2019 book, pp. 181–84, 247–51).

The Sonnets, far from revealing the author's true name, repeatedly tell us it is hidden and may forever remain so, "buried where my body is" (Sonnet 72). While the Fair Youth's "name from hence immortal life shall have" — probably understood, then as now, as the famous dedicatee of the best-selling *Venus and Adonis* — the author's name "will be forgotten," and, "once gone, to all the world must die" (Sonnet 81). This would hardly be possible if the published name reveals the author's identity.

As Alexander Waugh notes, even Sonnet 136, as it bawdily bangs on about "Will," resonates with the other sonnets that suggest hidden identity: "[M]y will one.... Among a number one is reckoned none. Then in the number let me pass untold ...."

Does Bate really want to go there with biographical arguments? Orthodox scholars mostly avoid them — for good reason. It is extremely difficult to square the Shakespearean works with the known or reasonably inferred education, travels, life experiences, or surviving personal documents of the alleged Stratfordian author.

By contrast, the works have many compelling links to events and relationships in the life of Edward de Vere (Earl of Oxford). He had the requisite education and spent extensive time in the same Italian cities the works describe most vividly. Oxford's private unpublished letters, marked verses in his personal Bible, and early poetic juvenilia reveal many more parallels. Advocates of the North authorship theory have likewise identified intriguing and often compelling parallels to Sir Thomas North's life and known writings and translations.

Bate has accused his Oxfordian friend Waugh of being overly enamored of aristocrats, even as Bate himself is cheerfully candid about his own emotional and ideological class bias. As Bate gushes in the 2012 documentary *Last Will. & Testament*, "it's terrific that someone from an ordinary background can get to be a great writer." In *The Genius of Shakespeare* (2d ed. 2008, p. 93), Bate says of the authorship debate: "Like so many English questions, it all boils down to class."

Maybe it does for you, Sir Jonathan. Speak for yourself and look in the mirror. Yet again, Winkler's discussion of psychological projection (pp. 22–28) is apropos. What needs to be "retired" is not the authorship question but the false and exceedingly tiresome old canard that it arises only from "snobbery."

I tend to agree with Bate that Vladimir Nabokov's authorship doubts may have been merely "playful." Bate's entire view of the author's identity seems to rest on similarly whimsical and slender reeds. For Bate, the traditional Stratfordian legend seems to be "most satisfactorily proved," as Nabokov suggests, "on the strength of an applejohn and a pale primrose."

This is the author in which, Bate tells us, he "[p]ersonally ... believe[s]." Just don't bother him with the facts.

Part 9. ***Obsessive Details***

Smith's review mocks skeptics as "obsessive" about "detail[s]." Hmm ... we care about facts in ways that she and Bate obviously don't? But it is her own review that seems weirdly obsessed with petty personalized trivia. She seems especially peeved by Winkler's depiction of authorship doubters as more generous and fun to talk to than Stratfordians. That could be because ... well ... maybe we are?

The very title of Smith's review conveys seething resentment, even jealousy, that skeptics might be viewed as "the new literary heroes." Much of her short essay is wasted discussing which authorship camp consists of people who are "uptight," "shifty," "inhospitable," "frigid," or "mean-spirited," as opposed to "brave," "open-minded," "intellectually explorative," and more generous with food and drink.

Smith calls it "oddly specific" that Winkler details how — at the lunch Smith oddly compares to "QAnon"! — Waugh's wife "laid the table with venison, courgettes, omelet, sausages, and salad" (p. 239). Smith claims this promotes Winkler's "stern binary message" humanizing skeptics and deprecating the orthodox. But Smith substitutes her own bland word ("refreshments") for Winkler's equally vivid description of the orthodox (yet curiously noncommittal) Professor Marjorie Garber's lovely spread (p. 331): "mugs of tea" and "a dining table where she had laid out a bowl of strawberries and a plate of madeleines."

Smith knows perfectly well — she is a professor of literature, right? — that such colorful details are a familiar writer's technique. Describing flavorful food is an especially time-honored device to perk up a reader's attention. The only oddity here is that Smith tries to gaslight us into viewing it as part of what Oliver Kamm denounces as the "insidious" skeptical agenda.

Smith may view herself as more a scholarly rebel than a staid pillar of the establishment. How dare Winkler imply otherwise! Does Smith too yearn to be a "literary hero"? As we have seen, Smith (like Winkler) has dabbled in authorship "heresy" — but only within the safely fenced confines of the "co-authorship" question.

Part 10. *Why We Should Care*

Winkler can take comfort in the saying adapted from a 1918 speech by labor activist Nicholas Klein (often misattributed to Mahatma Gandhi): “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, and then you win.” Most authorship doubters have long gritted their teeth at being ignored and ridiculed.

Winkler, in both her 2019 article and now her book, has vaulted directly to the fight stage.

The authorship question, says Butler, “has been asked and answered.” Winkler proves that false on both counts. Those adhering to the orthodox view mostly shun the debate, ignore the facts, and refuse to ask relevant questions. Not surprisingly, they fail to offer credible answers.

We doubters haven’t answered all the questions either. But we’ve made good progress on many. Some of our answers have been mistaken, even misguided. Some questions may forever elude clear solutions. But we have shown they are reasonable questions and we are sincerely trying to solve this mystery.

A more discouraging mystery is why this issue causes so many scholars to behave in such unscholarly ways. What is it about this debate that tips them into such weird extremes of distortion, misinformation, and personal attacks?

Winkler explores both mysteries. She too has not yet solved them, but her book is a magnificent account.

Smith concludes her review with a pretense of indifference: “In the end, the real Shakespeare authorship question is not who, but who cares?”

Whom does she think she’s fooling? As we have seen, this is the same Professor Smith who devoted a lot of time and effort to exploring exactly who co-authored a key Shakespearean play.

Butler, Bate, and Smith obviously care as much as Winkler. So should we all. As Katherine Chiljan aptly puts it: “If the true biography of one of the greatest minds of Western civilization does not matter, then whose does?”