

Shakespeare Bites Back: A Reply by John Hudson

Today, on 28th October 2011, Stanley Wells and Paul Edmondson of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust responded to the opening of Roland Emmerich's movie *Anonymous* by publishing a 40 page pamphlet. They called it *Shakespeare Bites Back: Not So Anonymous*. There is an old English proverb "Barking Dogs Seldom Bite." This pamphlet shows very clearly that the case for Shakespeare is all bark and no bite. Indeed it seems almost completely toothless.

On one point we are in agreement: that who wrote the plays does matter. As the pamphlet states, to claim that the plays were written by someone who did not in fact write them is "is to deny history, the nature of historical evidence, and also to sever from the works any understanding of the humanity and personality behind them... we want to know as much as possible about the artist responsible for the work." Yet it is precisely in such a distortion of historical evidence that the Trust's representatives are engaged.

The strategy that they adopt in their pamphlet is two-fold. Their first strategy is to put forward biased and misleading evidence in support of their candidate. The writers claim to be objective, yet there is no such thing as total objectivity. Good researchers acknowledge this and declare their biases. Wells and Edmondson do not do so. Instead they express surprise that they are accused of being biased because they support the truth claims of their organization, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. With assets of at least 20 million pounds, this is a significant entity with which they are both affiliated, in the capacities of Chairman and as Head of Learning and Research--- the latter being presumably a paid position. The buildings that the organization operates are Stratford-Upon-Avon's leading tourist attraction. So far from being objective, Wells and Edmondson are engaged in a rather belated public relations exercise, creating propaganda to support their organization's financial interests which are increasingly coming under competitive threat from those advocating alternative candidates for the Authorship.

The writers wonder why so many lawyers and several Supreme Court justices are interested in the Authorship Question. The answer is that it is the job of lawyers is to understand the nature of evidence. Many of them, therefore, are sensitive to the fact

that the case put forward for William Shakespeare's authorship does not satisfy the most basic requirements for valid evidence.

This "evidence" has two main problems. Firstly, Wells and Edmondson detail, correctly and at length, that the name William Shakespeare appears on the quartos and on the First Folio. Yet, unfortunately for their case, that was *not* the original baptismal name of the man from Stratford. His baptismal name, as they know perfectly well, was Gulielmus Shakspere. They need to demonstrate how and why and when he changed his name to William Shakespeare. Furthermore, the appearance of a person's name on the cover of a literary work does not necessarily prove that the work was actually written by that individual. Many works have been published under pseudonyms and allonyms, and they have deceived millions of people. For instance, Wells and Edmondson refer to the "novels of Mark Twain" as literature that was based on biographical life experience. That is correct, except "Mark Twain" was a pseudonym, concealing the author's true name, which was Samuel Clemens. So the appearance on the cover of the name that the Man from Stratford supposedly adopted does not demonstrate in any way that he wrote the Shakespearean works.

Next, as if this is supposed to hold some weight, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust's advocates list a number of contemporaries who believed that the Man from Stratford wrote these works. Unfortunately the belief of contemporaries does not mean they were necessarily *correct* in that belief. Many people in the 16th century believed that the world was flat. It is not. Many contemporaries of Samuel Clemens, and evidently some misguided people today, believe that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was written by Mark Twain. They are not correct either.

Evidently, Wells and Edmondson have made the most basic errors in understanding the nature of historical evidence. To substantiate their case that the Man From Stratford wrote these plays, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust need to document what lawyers call the "chain of custody" between the alleged action of Mr. Shakespeare in composing these works, his giving the play manuscripts to the actors, and their appearance in print.

Such evidence could take many forms. It might be letters from persons who had actually watched Mr. Shakespeare during the process of composition. Or, as an alternative, one might accept data that showed that the collaborator John Fletcher

was actually in the same room at the same time as William Shakespeare was composing his part of the collaborative plays. Unfortunately, no such evidence exists. Rather, as Gordon McMullan remarks in his introduction to the Arden edition of *King Henry VIII*, the proposition that Shakespeare worked on a scene simultaneously with a collaborator is regarded by Shakespeareans as “generally anathema”.

Yet another, less satisfactory, way of establishing a “chain of custody” would be to show that the rare knowledge in the plays—knowledge of the Court, Denmark, feminism, astronomy, Judaism, the Talmud, Italian geography, the town of Bassano, Hebrew, rare plants, music, the Northern dialect to name just a few—is precisely matched in Mr. Shakespeare’s biographical record. The Shakespearean Birthplace Trust representatives do not put forward this evidence either—and for a very good reason. No such evidence exists.

Finally, we turn to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust’s second strategy, which is to dismiss evidence for competing candidates and to suppress inquiry. In responding to those who advocate for other authorship candidates, the Trust’s polemical PR pamphlet instructs their supporters as follows: “Don’t start arguing against an individually named alternative; start by reminding the person putting forward the claim that their

preferred nominee is in no way more valid than any of the others." This represents a denial at the outset—regardless of what evidence might be put forward—that the evidence for any candidate could be superior to that for any other of the 70-odd authorship candidates. This is an extraordinary instruction to deny the validity of evidence. It is, however, compatible with Stanley Wells's suggestion in his article in *The Stage* on 27 September 2007. There he insisted that the "proper reaction" to the plays is to be full of wonder that Shakespeare wrote them, and *not* to ask how he could have done so. In other words, Professor Wells seeks to suppress critical inquiry.

As a graduate of the Shakespeare Institute at the University of Birmingham, of which Dr. Wells used to be the director, I am disappointed by his failure to meet normal scholarly standards of argument. I am equally disappointed that the Institute's incoming director, Dr. Paul Edmondson, has joined him in this biased polemic against free academic inquiry.

John Hudson is Director of the Dark Lady Players, an experimental theater company which advocates that the author of the plays was Amelia Bassano Lanier (1569-1645).