

COMMENTARY

## “Think Again” - Editor-in-Chief’s Epilogue to the SAQ Special Issue

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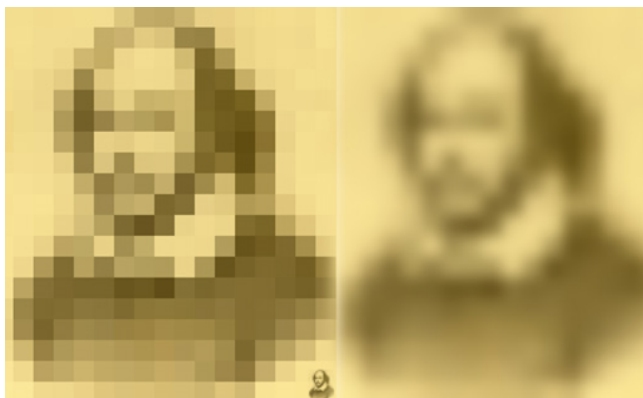
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*JSE*'s editorial team extends its heartfelt thanks to our Guest Editor Don Rubin for his tremendous vision and support with co-creating this Special Issue. Although both *Brief Chronicles: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Authorship Studies* and *The Oxfordian* faithfully publish peer-reviewed research on the Shakespeare Authorship Question (SAQ), the various contributors featured herein agreed to help promote the visibility and further scrutiny of this important controversy to a wider audience of academics. Some members of our affiliated organization, the Society for Scientific Exploration, have likewise published their own SAQ studies (e.g., Sturrock, 2010; Sturrock & Erickson, 2020) to encourage our astute readership to critically examine the historical information and literary outputs associated with this deeply elusive historical figure. These are enormously important endeavors because the SAQ is a sobering case study of the very real and immediate threats to academic freedom (Dudley, 2020). But make no mistake, anyone who assumes that there is consensus among well-informed scholars about the true identity of “Shakespeare” should think again.

*Think again* is a famous idiom that sounds like something our acclaimed English writer could have coined. But it is aptly fitting in this context because it denotes what someone “believes or expects” is not actually true or will not happen (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). And it is standard practice for academics to “think again” about important events. For instance, consider another legendary topic in history and contemporary story-telling—the Knights Templar, aka, the Poor Knights of the Temple of King Solomon. Despite the infamous arrests and charges of heresy against the order, a document known as the Chinon Parchment was found in 2001 in the Vatican’s archives that revealed the Templars were, in fact, exonerated by the Catholic Church in 1312 (cf. Vatican Library, 2007). Although clearing them of heresy, Pope Clement curiously still ordered that the Order be disbanded. The Chinon Parchment had been rediscovered by Barbara Frale (2004), a Vatican historian who worked in the Secret Archives. She apparently stumbled across the document in a box containing other papers, having been lost for centuries after it was incorrectly cataloged.

Modern society has similarly faced history-making “confusions or collusions” that had lasting effects on public policy or mainstream consciousness, such as the Tuskegee medical experiments (Baker et al., 2005), Watergate U.S. Presidency scandal (Morgan, 1996), or the RussiaGate hoax (Marmura, 2020). Sociopolitical machinations can also be innocuous or benevolent. As an example, readers might be interested to learn that the U.S. arguably had its first female president when Edith Wilson surreptitiously made most of the executive decisions after her husband, Woodrow Wilson, suffered a debilitating stroke towards the end of his tenure (Hazelgrove, 2016). Other controversies are currently looming that will undoubtedly further shape the historical record and societal reactions to it, such as questions about the media’s role in censorship (Roberts,





**FIGURE 1.** “The closer you look at the Man from Stratford, the murkier the evidence gets for his assumed literary prowess.” Used with permission: opticalillusion.net ©

2020) or disinformation campaigns with hot-button news (Taibbi, 2023), polemical efforts to recast American history (Oakes, 2021), and the hampering of serious debate about the lab leak theory of COVID-19 (Kopp, 2022). Perhaps it is unrealistically optimistic to hope that such battles between competing historical narratives will always be settled by the robust analysis of existing information and any new evidence, especially with regards to highly controversial or disputed events. This sentiment equally applies to the myriad of issues underpinning the SAQ.

To be sure, historical records do not serve merely to document past thoughts and ideas; sometimes they affect future insights and knowledge by allowing researchers to revisit, reassess, or reject long-held assumptions—as per the aftermath of Chinon Parchment or the Church’s apology for its erroneous claims about Galileo which Rubin (2023) discussed in his Introduction to our Special Issue. This intellectual practice of critical reflection is *not* controversial. Indeed, Krasner (2019) explained that “The ability to revise and update historical narratives—historical revisionism—is necessary, as historians must always review current theories and ensure they are supported by evidence...Historical revisionism allows different (and often subjugated) perspectives to be heard and considered” (p. 15). We, therefore, hope that this Special Issue underscores for historians and other academics the many good scholarly reasons to revisit widely-held assumptions about the identity and motivations of the artist known as “Shakespeare.” Simply put, the historical record matters.

But there are certainly more than just cold, hard facts at stake. Context enhances knowledge and understanding, so Shakespeare’s “identity” transcends a mere forensic question about a lone individual. Particularly, the SAQ might well represent the most dramatic and impactful example of the old and occasional practice of using pseudonyms (or pen names) in literature (e.g., Ezell, 1994; Finn, 2016; Tonra, 2014) — a ploy also adopted by

famous authors like *Samuel Clemens* (“Mark Twain”), *Mary Anne Evans* (“George Eliot”), and *Stephen King* (“Richard Bachman”). Sometimes we are even dealing with “layers” of pen names, as with *Joanne Rowling*, aka “J. K. Rowling” aka “Robert Galbraith.” Many different motivations can underlie alter-ego type behavior (e.g., having a hidden identity, a secondary personality, or a secret life being led in addition to a normal life), which is a fascinating phenomenon worthy itself of study (see, e.g., Houran et al., 2022). Moreover, grasping the background and psychology of the person ultimately confirmed as “Shakespeare” should offer profound insights about the manifestation of genius-level talent and whether artistic or scientific prodigy is wholly biological or open to cultivation (see, e.g., Andreasen, 2006; Limb & Braun, 2008; Lubinski et al., 2014).

Dispassionate evaluation of the available evidence arguably supports both the academic legitimacy and value of the SAQ debate. It is not wild speculation that the conditions or context surrounding the production of “Shakespeare’s” monumental works is more complex or nuanced than suggested by orthodox history. The conjectures of the contributing authors to this Special Issue could be entirely wrong or partially right; there is no shortage of complementary or mutually-exclusive scenarios to consider. And there is also an apparently steady supply of eager and responsible researchers ready to join the SAQ quest. What we lack is a broadly tolerant environment in higher education that financially and morally supports the search for historical evidence to resolve definitively the ambiguities and discrepancies at the heart of the controversy (cf. the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition’s “Declaration of Reasonable Doubt:” <https://doubt-aboutwill.org/declaration>). Still, investigations endure by those who use science and evidence to advance the discussion around this difficult topic despite outright scorn and hostility. Key advancements or breakthroughs with the SAQ might be slow-going but are seemingly inevitable. Just maybe tucked away in some forgotten or overlooked archive, maverick historians or literary scholars with sharp eyes and open minds will discover the Shakespeare-equivalent to the Chinon Parchment and, in that moment, stir all admirers of the “Sweet Swan of Avon” to think again.

*Good night, good night!*

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