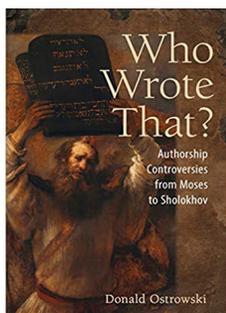




BOOK REVIEW

Who Wrote That? Authorship Controversies from Moses to Sholokhov

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In the world of literary scholarship, few topics have generated as much debate and fascination as the question of authorship. From ancient texts through the early modern period to the present day, numerous literary creations have found themselves embroiled in disputes surrounding their true authors—and, if concealed, the true authors’ reasons for concealment. It is within this rich context of historical inquiries that Donald Ostrowski’s *Who Wrote That?* finds its place, diving into the turbulent waters of authorship controversies—as the book’s subtitle says—“from Moses to Sholokhov.”

It is clearly presumed that the book’s readership already knows from the surname alone that Sholokhov refers to the Soviet writer Mikhail Sholokhov, author of the epic, four-volume novel *Quiet Flows the Don*. (This reviewer, it must be admitted, was not familiar with the 1965 Nobel Prize winner before encountering Ostrowski’s book.) Which is to say that even before reaching the book’s title page, the reader knows there’s already a selection process at work.

One of the book’s obvious strengths lies in its methodical and systematic approach to each of the controversies it explores. Ostrowski employs a balanced tone, steering clear of sweeping claims or exaggerated assertions that could undermine the scholarly value of his work. Instead, he presents a meticulous analysis of historical evidence, almost to a fault, carefully dissecting the arguments put forth by various scholars and proponents of different authorship theories.

Who Wrote That? specifically begins with a discussion of authorship controversies surrounding ancient religious texts, including the Torah/Pentateuch, the Confucian Analects, and the Secret Gospel of Mark. Ostrowski illuminates the complex dynamics behind these debates, acknowledging the historical and cultural factors that contribute to the uncertainties surrounding the authorship of these works. By establishing a foundation rooted in ancient literature, the book lays the groundwork for readers to situate more modern nuances of later controversies.

As the narrative progresses, Ostrowski guides readers through additional disputes, including the medieval French letters of Abelard and Heloise, and the works attributed to Russian Prince Andrei Kurbskii. Each chapter carefully examines the historical, linguistic, and stylistic evidence at hand, shedding light on the complexities surrounding these texts and their authors. Ostrowski’s measured tone allows readers to navigate these controversies—although he does at times descend into such extensive technical detail in a few case studies that can undermine his overall stated drive toward increasing accessibility of authorship studies generally. (For example, in a book devoting 33 pages to the Shakespeare question, see below, Ostrowski devotes half that page-length into an exhaustive he-said-she-said within the scholarly history of the chronicles and letters of the Persian historian Rashid al-Din.) At his best—and the obscurantist al-Din deep dive is more the exception than the rule in this otherwise generally accessible



book—Ostrowski contextualizes notable authorship controversies throughout literary history.

But the elephant in the room is arguably Ostrowski's chapter on the biggest and most notorious authorship question in the English-speaking world—that of the works conventionally attributed to the actor William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. By situating the discussion of the Shakespeare question in the midst of so many other disputed texts, Ostrowski all but invites readers to view the debate surrounding the Bard's works as part of a broader pattern rather than a unique anomaly.

While Ostrowski acknowledges the social stigma attached to the Shakespeare authorship question, he presents a range of theories and arguments that have emerged in Shakespeare authorship studies over the years. By engaging with the historical context of Elizabethan literature, Ostrowski provides readers with a lens through which to view the skepticism surrounding the conventional Stratfordian theory. While not attempting to offer a definitive resolution, *Who Wrote That?* serves as a valuable resource for scholars interested in understanding the extraordinary breadth of the debate.

It is worth noting that Ostrowski intentionally excludes other larger authorship controversies, including that of Homer and the Roman playwright Terence. In acknowledging this limitation, Ostrowski says in his Introduction that he wanted to ensure his text could remain focused and concise. Although arguably, by including Shakespeare among a range of more obscure disputed texts, Ostrowski tips his hand a bit. Perhaps it is the prominence of the Shakespeare debate compared to the obscurity of the others in *Who Wrote That?* but Ostrowski's Shakespeare chapter does feel a bit intentionally downplayed and understated by contrast—like Prince Hal among the common soldiers, offering a little touch of Harry in the night.

In terms of style, *Who Wrote That?* strikes a careful balance between accessibility and scholarly rigor. The book's prose is generally clear, avoiding excessive jargon

and complex sentence structures that can hinder broader comprehension. While the book's intended readership seems to be professional and semi-professional scholars in the humanities, Ostrowski's writing allows a wider scholarly audience to engage with the material and appreciate the meticulous research behind each chapter's authorship question.

In conclusion, Donald Ostrowski's *Who Wrote That?*, stands as a meticulous academic work, deserving recognition for its careful approach and dedication to providing historical context to a range of disputed authorships. By offering a measured analysis of these diverse controversies throughout literary history, Ostrowski successfully contextualizes the debate surrounding Shakespeare's works within a broader framework.

While, at times its arcane remit could limit the breadth of the book's readership, its academic rigor and balanced tone make it an invaluable resource for those interested in exploring the intricacies of authorship disputes across the ages.

ENDNOTE

***Allison Richards** is an independent scholar and long-time Shakespeare authorship researcher who resides in Massachusetts. Note that this name is a pseudonym being used with the express knowledge and permission of the *Journal* in order to protect the author's professional status and wellbeing. At least one peer-reviewed journal (i.e., *Journal of Controversial Ideas*) openly advocates for this practice to combat the culture of fear and self-censorship that manifests in some academic circles, and many professional communities or associations likewise allow pen names for related reasons (see e.g., <https://peterbates.org.uk/home/garden-shed/can-authors-use-a-pseudonym/>). The present author is not unaware of the irony of the present situation. Please direct any correspondence concerning this review to Don Rubin (drubin@yorku.ca).