



COMMENTARY

# JSE Special Issue Editor Commentary on Rubinstein (2024)

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I am delighted that Prof. Rubinstein — like many scholars around the world who contacted me after the appearance of *JSE*'s 2023 special issue (37:2) on the Shakespeare Authorship Question — found the issue of sufficient interest to respond in such depth. As that issue argued, the leading candidate by a wide margin is Edward de Vere, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford. Yet the debate goes on. Whether one wants to argue for Christopher Marlowe or Mary Sidney or even Sir Henry Neville [as Prof. Rubinstein (2024, 38, 258-272) did] the claims for all of the candidates remain essentially circumstantial with the Oxfordian circumstances somewhat more equal than most of the others. The bottom line here is important though: even when scholars advocate for other candidates, they all seem to agree that the historical man from Stratford was certainly *not* the true author for the many good reasons argued in the special authorship issue and which Prof. Rubinstein simply adds to in his own essay.

My own response to Prof. Rubinstein's most articulate article is that there is just too much surmise in it for evidentiary comfort, far more surmise than one finds, for example, in the Oxford argument. And even he seems astounded by his final suggestion: that the man from Stratford regularly stopped into the city of Oxford to meet with Neville at the home of his friend Sir Henry Savile. Indeed, Prof. Rubinstein himself writes of this totally unsupported claim that "there is nothing whatever to link Shakespeare and Savile...and there is nothing whatever to link Savile with the London theatre...." So why, one asks, does Rubinstein even suggest so improbable a connection at the conclusion of his essay. *It could have been? It might have been?* As they say in the old canard, if the Queen had alternative plumbing, she would have been King.

That said, some of Prof. Rubinstein's points do need to be answered even in this very-open-to-debate context. Specifically – and roughly in the order presented by the good professor in his essay:

- *The Hand D argument.* This argument suggests that Shakespeare -- whoever he, she, or they were --wrote a portion of the extant play, *Sir Thomas More*. The argument says that of the various handwritings that make up this text, Hand D is the man from Stratford's. Unfortunately, all we have from the Stratford man's entire life are six barely legible and often differently drafted signatures on four different legal documents. Forensic specialists in the handwriting field have concluded more than once that these signatures – possibly made by law clerks -- are not enough to make any sort of comparison with Hand D. Of course, if Hand D turns out to truly be by the author using the pseudonym Shakespeare than maybe Hand D has some value in this context. But at the moment, Hand D in and of itself has no intrinsic value in the authorship debate. A very red herring.



- *Dates of composition.* Prof. Rubinstein says without any proof whatsoever that the plays *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* were written, respectively, in the years 1601, 1602, and 1605. The fact is, no one knows when any of these plays were actually written. All we know is when particular plays were first produced or published. The standard chronology of the plays simply assumes that all were written within the birth and death dates of the Stratford man (1564-1616). Eliminate the Stratford man as author, and the supposed dates of writing quickly fade away. Oxfordians suggest that many of the plays were actually written a decade or two earlier than the standard chronology and were first produced for court performances before the Queen under different titles. It was years later that they appeared in often significantly revised versions in the public theatres.
- *The Sonnets and the words "our ever-living poet."* Most scholars accept the notion that "ever-living" in any dedication suggests clearly that the dedicatee is no longer living. Edward de Vere died in 1604, and the Sonnets, probably dating from more than a decade earlier, were not published until 1609. It makes perfect sense then that such a posthumous publication might well use the term "ever-living" in a dedication to the poet. Neville was still very much alive.
- *The Strachey letter.* This document, published in 1625, is often cited as a source for a reference to "the Bermudas" in *The Tempest*. The reference, however, dates much earlier and connects to a dubious section of London known as "the Bermoothes." If you do not like that reference, others have suggested it is a reference to wormwood used to make absinthe. Connecting the Strachey letter to a dating of *The Tempest* was quite clearly put to rest in 2013 by scholars Roger Stritmatter and Lynne Kositsky in their study of the play, *On the Date, Sources and Design of Shakespeare's The Tempest*.
- *Early authorship doubts.* Prof. Rubinstein suggests that no one ever questioned the Stratford man's authorship or offered up clearly an alternative author until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, questions and hints that the Stratford man was *not* the true author began to appear as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. With respect, Rubinstein needs to read some non-Neville research on the subject, such as Bryan Wildenthal's *Early Shakespeare Authorship Doubts* (2019), and to take note of Prof. Stritmatter and Alexander Waugh's upcoming two-volume set of even more early allusions to the authorship

question. The research on this issue is already strong and getting stronger.

- *Why not Oxford?* The idea that Oxford's early plays were produced with great success at the court and then later published and/or produced in revised versions, often with different titles for the public theatre, is dismissed by Prof. Rubinstein as "improbable." I disagree strongly and suggest that he look at the impressive research by independent scholar Ramon Jimenez about this important subject in *Shakespeare's Apprenticeship* (2018), which clearly makes the argument that these plays are Shakespeare's lost juvenilia. The fact is, early plays such as *Taming of a Shrew* and *King Lear* surely fit the dating for this pro- Oxford argument.

Indeed, much of what Rubinstein argues for Neville (his familiarity with the French Court and Italy) is the same as the arguments for Oxford's candidacy. Only the names are changed to protect the chosen candidate. Need I add here that the Oxford argument has been tested now for more than a century. By comparison, the Neville argument is only about twenty years old, and relatively few authorship doubters have lined up behind it.

- *The handwriting at Audley's End.* Prof. Rubinstein argues that the large collection of books owned by Neville, and which today are at Audley's End, are filled with clear connections to Shakespeare's plays *in Neville's own hand*. In the last year or two, however, Prof. Stritmatter has been studying the same material, and he comes to a much different conclusion. In the Winter 2024 issue of the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* (pp. 6-7), Stritmatter writes:

"Prof. Rubinstein and his late colleague John Casson deserve gratitude for having been responsible for first bringing before the public a revealing look at the wonders of the Audley End volumes. In their 2016 book, *Sir Henry Neville Was Shakespeare: The Evidence*, Rubinstein and Casson showed, beyond any doubt, a pattern of evidence that deserved, and indeed, required, further study.... [However], these annotations are not by Sir Henry Neville...they are by Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.... The formal demonstration of this conclusion is forthcoming...in the *Journal of Forensic Document Examination*. The article first debunks the belief that the annotations are by Neville and then, using the same standards, shows that Oxford was the annotator....

"Beyond this general response to Professor Rubinstein's several arguments by innuendo and imaginative reconstructions of hypothetical scenarios of

book provenance.... Rubinstein's belief that provenance trumps forensic inquiry is mistaken.... Neville outlived Oxford by a dozen years. It is not difficult to see how books from Oxford's collection might have found their way into Neville's collection; being objects of value, they had to go somewhere after his death. It shouldn't require an advanced degree to realize that book collectors own, and some even collect, books annotated by past owners."

Again, sincere thanks to Prof. Rubinstein for continuing the important debate about the Shakespeare Author Question and to *JSE* for publishing it.

## EDITORIAL NOTE: OBITUARY

### William Rubinstein



Shortly after writing the above comments about Prof. Rubinstein's response to the special *JSE* issue on the Shakespeare Authorship Question, news reached me of his sudden death at the age of 77 in Australia, where he lived. I would like to express my genuine condolences to his family and many friends in the Shakespeare authorship community.

Prof. Rubinstein and I never met personally but we certainly knew one another's work and, I believe, we shared mutual respect for one another's positions on various issues even in disagreement. The fact is, who wrote Shakespeare was just one of this historian's many causes.

Born in New York City and educated at Swarthmore College and John Hopkins University, he moved to Australia in the 1970s, where he taught history at the Australian National University in Canberra from 1976–1978, at Deakin University in Victoria from 1978 to 1995, and

from 1995 to 2011 at Aberystwyth University in Wales. He returned to Australia after his Welsh experiences and became an adjunct professor at Monash University in Melbourne from 2013 to 2015.

A Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences and of the Australian Royal Historical Society, he also was an indefatigable supporter of Jewish causes. One of the founders of the Australian Association for Jewish Studies, he served as its president from 1989–1991. From 2002–2004, he served as President of the Jewish Historical Society of England.

Widely published, his many essays on a variety of social and historical subjects, Judaism, and even the Shakespeare authorship question appeared in numerous scholarly publications worldwide. His writings were translated into Finnish, Russian, French, Hebrew, Italian, Chinese, and Japanese. His books on modern Jewish history include *A History of the Jews in the English-Speaking World: Great Britain* (1996) and *The Myth of Rescue* (1997).

An obituary for Prof. Rubinstein in the *Australian Jewish News* on 11 July 2024 noted that "Beyond academia, Rubinstein was a powerful voice in public discourse. A regular contributor to both Jewish and mainstream media, he fearlessly advocated for Jewish causes, courting controversy with his conservative political views. His intellectual curiosity, for Jewish history and culture, made him a uniquely influential figure in Australian Jewish life."

His major work on the Shakespeare authorship question was called *The Truth Will Out*, which was published in 2005 and co-authored by Brenda James. It was in that book that he argued most clearly for Henry Neville as the real author of Shakespeare's works. That said, at his death, Prof. Rubinstein's position was still very much a minority view, even within the authorship community. Suffice it to say here, his passionate advocacy on this subject— as with so many other issues -- will clearly be missed

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