

Point 1: Shapiro falsely denies the documented reality of numerous published early “doubts” (and considerable “controversy”) about Shakespeare authorship dating to the author’s own time.

The subtitle of Winkler’s May 10 essay accurately stated (if anything, it cautiously understated) that “controversy” over Shakespeare’s authorship is “almost as old as the works themselves.” Winkler’s original text likewise accurately stated that “doubts” are “almost as old as the writing itself,” referring to whether works attributed to the purported author “Shakespeare” were actually by William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon (1564-1616). Winkler then noted several specific alternative candidates for the authorship, who “continue to have champions.”

The surfacing of “doubts” or “controversy” about authorship long preceded, and is a separate issue from, the promotion of detailed theories about specific alternative claimed authors.

It is Shapiro’s June 8 response, not Winkler’s essay, that introduces confusion (and outright error) on the issue of chronology. Shapiro’s assertion, that it is a “falsehood” to state that “doubts” date to Shakespeare’s own time, is itself a falsehood. Limitations of space preclude a full discussion of the numerous early doubts that have been documented. Following is a survey of three illustrative examples (in chronological order):

1592:

As Winkler’s original essay notes (and tellingly, Shapiro does not even attempt to dispute), a pamphlet published as by Robert Greene mocked an “upstart Crow” dubbed “Shake-scene” (orthodox scholars avow this is Shakespeare of Stratford, and the author), in terms plainly suggesting he was a plagiarist.

Diana Price, a respected independent scholar and authorship skeptic (she does not promote any particular authorship candidate), has provided perhaps the most useful discussion of this episode (2001, rev. 2012, pp. 25-31, 45-56). Despite Oliver Kamm’s childish name-calling, even some orthodox scholars have praised Price’s book as meticulously researched and well-written. But don’t take my word (or Price’s) for this. Unimpeachably orthodox authorities (as are all sources cited here apart from Price) say the same thing. John Jowett’s essay in the 2013 anthology edited by Sir Stanley Wells and Paul Edmondson, conceded (pp. 88-90) that the 1592 pamphlet suggests plagiarism. See also, e.g., Bate (1997, rev. 2008), pp. 15-16; Marino (2011), p. 35.

And please keep in mind, this was 31 years before the Stratfordian theory itself was first published (none too clearly) in the posthumous First Folio of 1623.

1593-95:

Thomas Edwards wrote a poem (published in 1595) suggesting that the author of *Venus and Adonis* (cryptically referred to only as “Adon”) was hidden, “deafly [silently or obscurely] masking through.” E.g., Price, pp. 231-32.

1610-11:

John Davies of Hereford published a poetic epigram to “Will Shake-speare,” describing him in the title as “our English Terence.” Terence was an ancient Roman playwright, a freed African

slave. He has long been known, including in published discussions during Shakespeare's time (such as by essayist Michel de Montaigne), as the very paradigm of a frontman for a hidden author, and specifically as a frontman of low social status concealing an aristocratic author. This view of Terence is now generally thought apocryphal by most scholars, who tend to think he actually did write his attributed works. But the point is that the frontman view, promoted by Cicero in ancient times, was widely held for more than 2,000 years, associated with his name in almost cliché-like fashion. E.g., Price, pp. 60-65.

Given that Shapiro (in other venues), and Oliver Kamm's May 16 essay in *Quillette* (to which Shapiro and *The Atlantic* link), have repeatedly (and falsely) engaged in name-calling of authorship doubters as "denialists," it's only fair to note that the systematic refusal of Shapiro (and some other orthodox scholars), to admit the documented reality of early doubts, amounts itself to the promotion of a denialist myth.

Shapiro, in his 2010 book, p. 20, acknowledges and discusses doubts about Shakespeare's authorship expressed in the 18th century, but argues they should not be taken seriously. This in itself contradicts Shapiro's claim in the article that doubts on the authorship questions did not emerge until the mid-19th century.

Your June 8 editorial "correction" creates still more confusion. The attempt "to clarify the chronology" is understandable, and it is accurate (as far as it goes) to state that detailed "theories" promoting other claimants "emerged in the mid-19th century."

But the revision imposed by this "correction" scrambles the true chronology, placing the new comment about *later* 19th-century "theories" *before* a new statement about what actually came first (in the late 16th century): "Assorted comments by his contemporaries have been interpreted by some as suggesting that the London actor claimed credit for writing that wasn't his." The new weasel words ("have been interpreted by some as suggesting") are hardly necessary, and the revision now strangely censors out any reference to "doubts." The reality is that Shakespeare's contemporaries repeatedly expressed and published *doubts* about who wrote the works.

It is obviously not possible to discuss all the evidence here, but I myself (building on the work of many previous scholars, including orthodox Stratfordians), will discuss it in great depth in my soon-forthcoming book on this very topic. See: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3007393>

My book points out and explores more than 30 separate expressions indicating early doubts predating 1616. One item actually dates to 1589. Several (during 1589-93) actually *predate* the first publication of a work purportedly by "Shakespeare" (*Venus and Adonis* in mid-1593). These early doubts were, as my book puts it, "an authentic, integral, and persistent part of the very time and culture that gave rise to the works of Shakespeare." Of course there is reasonable debate about many of the details and exactly how to "interpret" them. But to deny that there was, at a minimum, substantial "doubt" and "controversy," simply contradicts the historical record.

The true chronology is as follows: (1) early doubts and controversy, with no clear public identity at all for the published authorial name "Shakespeare," c. 1589-1623; (2) Stratfordian theory first proposed in 1623 Folio, though in curiously ambiguous fashion (also suggested in the famously peculiar Stratford Monument; orthodox scholars tend to simply ignore the many oddities of both Folio and Monument); (3) posthumous doubts expressed, c. 1616-45, and continuing through

17th and 18th centuries and into 19th century; (4) modern alternative authorship theories published and discussed from 1850s up to the present day.

To recap Point 1: Winkler's original text was accurate. It did not require any "correction." Shapiro's response, by contrast, is demonstrably false. It *does* require "correction" and at a minimum, cries out for some further published response. Yet you have posted confusing new language, diluting and muddying what Winkler originally wrote, as a "correction" to Winkler.

Point 2: Shapiro greatly exaggerates the thin and debatable evidence (almost entirely posthumous) that an actor from Stratford wrote the works of "Shakespeare."

Shapiro's June 8 response refers vaguely to "the body of evidence confirming" the Stratfordian theory. Yet he never engages Winkler's reminders that virtually none of that evidence dates from Shakespeare of Stratford's lifetime. Instead, Shapiro dismisses as "stale and feeble" Winkler's well-documented points that even the posthumous evidence (what there is of it) is highly debatable and raises many puzzles. He grossly mischaracterizes the skeptical argument as relying mainly on the Stratford man's acting and moneylending career.

Sir Stanley Wells, perhaps the greatest living Shakespearean scholar, and a staunchly orthodox Stratfordian, has conceded, more candidly (2013, p. 81), that "despite the mass of evidence" available from Shakespeare of Stratford's lifetime, ending in 1616, "there is none that explicitly and incontrovertibly identifies [the author 'Shakespeare'] with Stratford-upon-Avon."

In support of his argument, Shapiro states as a fact that Shakespeare of Stratford's "fellow actors" collected and prefaced the "Shakespeare" plays in the First Folio. However, many *orthodox* scholars, for 250 years, have considered it unlikely that Heminges and Condell actually edited the Folio or wrote the prefatory material bearing their names. It was more likely Ben Jonson. See, e.g., Greg (1955), pp. 17-27; Donaldson (2011), pp. 370-74. These *orthodox* doubts go back to George Steevens in 1770. See also Price, pp. 176-81.

Given that we must, therefore, doubt the 1623 Folio's veracity and reliability on the authorship of its own prefatory material, how can we trust it (as Shapiro seems to claim we must) as infallible gospel on the SAQ?

Shapiro states that Shakespeare, "in the heat of composition ... carelessly wr[o]te in his 'speech headings' the names of his fellow actors ... rather than [characters'] names ...." Shapiro says: "Traces of this habit survive in early printed versions." This incorrectly suggests that there are original manuscripts in the author's hand written with these speech headings. But there are no such manuscripts, as Shapiro knows perfectly well. At best, this suggests that speech headings can only have been written by the author in the heat of composition, which is also misleading. Orthodox scholars recognize that early printed plays were compiled in various ways, and a printer working from a theatrical script or promptbook might easily (inadvertently) carry over actors' names. These speech headings do not provide any proof of authorship.

Point 3: Shapiro misleadingly distorts the issue whether women writers hid (and had reason to hide) their authorship during early modern times (and later).

In disparaging Winkler's candidly conjectural discussion of Bassano, and the challenges generally faced by women writers, Shapiro castigates her for "seem[ing] to imply that

Elizabethan women weren't allowed to write and publish plays under their own names." He condescendingly states: "Many of us who teach Elizabethan drama regularly assign [Elizabeth Cary's] *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613)," which he claims "makes clear that there was no stigma attached to a woman writing or publishing a play."

But Cary's play was an extreme rarity, the first ever published in England by a woman. It does not even begin to prove Shapiro's weak and tendentious claim. It is not known ever to have been performed during the early modern era. By the time it was published, the "Elizabethan" era, which began in 1558 and ended with the queen's death in 1603, had been over for ten years. Bassano was 44 by then and had been active in English cultural life for decades, yet her sole published work appeared only in 1611, after almost all (perhaps all) Shakespeare works had been written. Bold as it was, this sole Bassano publication was religious in nature, that being a rare subject area where women were allowed somewhat greater literary leeway.

One may of course point to other rare examples of literary works being published by early modern women. But even wealthy literary noblewomen, with powerful connections, like Mary Sidney Herbert (Countess of Pembroke), did not generally publish under their own names then. Bassano lacked Sidney's advantages of wealth, power, and social position. Sidney generally circulated her works in manuscript, and much of what she actually wrote may well be lost (as with Bassano). Sidney, like Bassano, seems to have been a brilliant writer and thinker in her own right, and both merit much more study. But Sidney's main contemporary publications were her edited and completed versions of her late brother Sir Philip Sidney's translated psalms (another religious work), his "Defence of Poesy," and of course his "Arcadia."

These restrictions on women writers and artists, which most certainly prevailed during early modern times in Europe and elsewhere, persisted for centuries, forcing many women to use male pseudonyms. Two well-known 19th-century examples are "George Sand" (Amantine Dupin) and "George Eliot" (Mary Ann Evans).

For Shapiro to suggest that if Bassano had written plays, she would have had no trouble getting them published (and performed? any playwright might well use subterfuge to achieve that), is bizarre. For him to claim it is "clear that there was no stigma attached to a woman writing" in early modern England is baseless at best. It is not just misleading (very likely false), but truly offensive as well, trivializing centuries of prejudice and misogyny.

## Conclusion

Shapiro's (and *The Atlantic's*) linkages to Oliver Kamm's over-the-top hit-piece are especially troubling. An unfortunate aspect of Shapiro's essay (even more so the May 16 *Quillette* essay by Kamm), is that they broadly dismiss anyone raising any questions about authorship by smearing them in extreme *ad hominem* terms, asserting guilt-by-association, ignoring the relevant issues, and invoking opinions on unrelated issues.

It would take an entirely separate response (longer than this one) to deal adequately with Kamm's toxic brew of falsehoods, misleading statements, and outrageous slanders. Perhaps Shapiro thinks he has kept his own hands clean by decorously avoiding the worst of Kamm's excesses, and merely linking (with obvious approval) to Kamm's attack. (Kamm states that Shapiro is a friend of his.)

But Shapiro himself crudely associates Winkler with Obama birthers and anti-vaxxers. He and Kamm both broadly link her to Trumpian demagogery and the dissemination of “fake news.” Kamm slanders Winkler by associating her with Holocaust deniers.

Shapiro’s response is replete with numbingly repetitive name-calling: “conspiracy theorists,” “fantasists” who “peddle fiction,” “alternate universe,” “fringe movement,” etc. Name-calling, of course, is a well-known resort of those whose rational arguments based on relevant facts are less than convincing.

Kamm, indeed, rehashes the three most tiresome slanders against those who dare to point out and discuss the obvious doubts and questions that exist about Shakespeare authorship. These may be called (1) the Conspiracy Slander, (2) the Snobbery Slander, and (3) the Holocaust Denial Comparison Slander.

Price (pp. 230-33) has cogently discussed and debunked the common dismissal of the SAQ as merely a “conspiracy theory.” But Shapiro eagerly embraces Kamm’s attack on this point, a classic tactic in seeking to discredit an opponent when mere facts and reason do not suffice.

Furthermore, does it need pointing out how utterly outlandish it is to invoke snobbery and (far worse) Holocaust denial (Kamm does both), in connection with a Shakespeare authorship candidate who was a woman of low social rank, of possible “Converso” Jewish background?

While Shapiro does not specifically repeat Kamm’s outrageous Holocaust denial comparison (which is profoundly disrespectful and offensive to Holocaust victims), he generally endorses and links with approval to Kamm’s indictment.

It is disconcerting and troubling that *The Atlantic* not only publishes Shapiro’s own error-ridden *ad hominem* essay, it also provides two direct links to Kamm’s even more extreme screed, which falsely smears *The Atlantic* itself as well as Winkler.

In the end, one is tempted to describe Shapiro’s overall response to Winkler as an example of “mansplaining,” as he arrogantly lectures her to “abando[n] her authorship fantasies and focu[s] her attention instead on those heroines whose words resonate powerfully with her.”

I suspect Winkler is not in need of Shapiro’s guidance about the proper limits of her intellectual inquiries. I trust you and your colleagues will not, ultimately, be taken in by Shapiro’s or Kamm’s tactics. I ask that you consider carefully the factual points raised here.

I would again urge you, at the very least, to rectify the mistaken “correction” of Winkler’s essay. It is not an inherently bad idea to clarify the overall “chronology” regarding early doubts and the later-developed “theories” about alternative candidates. But I would respectfully suggest that instead of posting such revisions as a “correction,” and linking them as such to Shapiro’s response, it would be more appropriate to say something to this effect:

“Upon further consideration, with the benefit of more commentary and additional information, we believe Winkler’s original essay was fundamentally accurate on the issue of early ‘doubts’ or ‘controversy’ regarding Shakespeare authorship. While this subject is complex and surely debatable, expressed doubts (in various forms) do indeed go back to the very time during which the works of Shakespeare were first published. However, it is helpful to clarify the overall

chronology by noting that detailed theories about alternative authorship candidates were not published until the mid-19th century and later. Such clarification was our intention in the update posted on June 8. It may be more appropriate to describe that as an update providing more context and information on the fascinating issues Winkler explored.”

As part of any such revised update, I would urge restoration of Winkler’s original (accurate) text regarding early “doubts” and “controversy” being as old as the works themselves.

I would also (again) urge you to either post some editorial correction of Shapiro’s own false and misleading statements (at least the most troublesome ones, as noted), or agree to the publication of some response (perhaps along the lines of my email and this memorandum).

Sincerely,  
Professor Bryan H. Wildenthal

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(all orthodox Stratfordian scholarly works, apart from Price)

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