

# *Necessary Mischief: Exploring the Shakespeare Authorship Question*

Reviewed by Michael Dudley

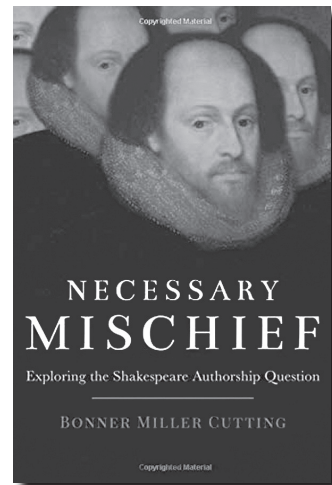
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*Necessary Mischief: Exploring the Shakespeare Authorship Question.*  
By Bonner Miller Cutting. Minos Publishing, 2018, 270 pages, (paperback \$12).

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Read the dust jacket of almost any “biography” of Shakespeare and one quickly realizes that it is a convention—almost to the point of cliché—for such books to claim they will “place the author within the context of his times.” For example, Katherine Duncan-Jones’ *Ungentle Shakespeare* (2001) aims to “replace the image of the lonely genius with one of Shakespeare as deeply involved, even enmired, in the geographical, social and literary context of his time,” while Dennis Kay’s *William Shakespeare: His Life and Times* (1995) “demonstrates that an appreciation of the extraordinary genius of Shakespeare can only be enriched and deepened by an awareness of his life and career in the context of his times.”

More recently, Lois Potter’s *The Life of William Shakespeare: A Critical Biography* (2012) was described as a “wide-ranging exploration of Shakespeare’s life and works focusing on often neglected literary and historical contexts.” A necessary conceit, of course: the paucity of relevant historical records forces the would-be biographer to pad out their word count with descriptions of contemporary London, Elizabethan politics and stagecraft in the place of actual biographical information. That this approach is generally billed as somehow novel is all the more remarkable.



With *Necessary Mischief*, Bonner Miller Cutting puts all such claims to shame by actually placing key biographical aspects of both Oxford and William Shakspeare into their relevant historical contexts, and in so doing masterfully undermines the orthodox mythology. From the Stratfordian's epically disappointing will to contemporary political censorship to the system of wardship to Oxford's \$1,000 Royal annuity, Cutting brilliantly exposes the fatal inadequacies of the traditional case and the disingenuousness of most conventional Shakespeare biography and scholarship.

Cutting is an independent scholar, having published extensively in peer-reviewed journals and presented at numerous conferences and events. Indeed, all of the chapters in *Mischief* were previously printed in *Brief Chronicles*, *The Oxfordian*, *Shakespeare Matters* as well as Shahan's and Waugh's 2013 book, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt?*. Nevertheless, gathering them together in this handsome trade paperback from Minos Publishing rewards the reader not only by showcasing Cutting's meticulous scholarship but demonstrating how incredibly important—when done properly—historical context is to the Shakespeare authorship question, rather than as filler in a work of largely fictive biography.

The book and its constitutive chapters are well-organized. The progression of topics—from the shibboleths of Stratfordianism to the life and legacy of Edward de Vere—is logical and satisfying, given the distinct provenance of each chapter. In the introduction, Cutting offers a narrative of her research journey; and since each chapter was a separate and original work of research, they are methodically constructed with extensive explanatory notes. The book includes two appendices: the complete text of Shakspeare's Last Will and Testament, and the titles of the books displayed in the Appleby Triptych featuring Lady Anne Clifford (the subject of Chapter 8).

Her first chapter, "A Contest of Wills" is a response to James Shapiro's 2010 book, *Contested Will*. Cutting's purpose here isn't so much to rebut Shapiro's arguments as to illustrate the fatuousness of most critical reviews of the book, as well as to reiterate the strength of J.T. Looney's methodology, which Shapiro attempted unsuccessfully to throw into ill repute.

Chapter 2, "Shakespeare's Will Considered too Curiously" is where the strength of Cutting's scholarship truly shines. Where orthodox scholars have tried all kinds of rhetorical sleights-of-hand to dismiss the glaring lacunae in Shakspeare's will, Cutting instead spent months examining approximately 3,000 wills prepared by or for Elizabethan gentlemen. She finds that, had Shakspeare indeed been the highly educated and well-read author of the *Works*, his will would have more likely resembled the ones she found from

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educated men who made explicit provisions for their books as well as the necessary equipment and furniture to support a literate life, i.e., desks and bookshelves.

Chapter 3, “Alas, Poor Anne: The Second-Best Bed in Historical Context” takes on the most notorious aspect of the will, Shakspeare’s apparent disregard for his wife. Again, where orthodox scholars have undermined their intellectual reputation to excuse or even put a positive spin on the passage bestowing Anne his “second best bed,” Cutting examines conventional bequests and the laws of property and dower rights—in an age when women had no rights to any property whatsoever—to demonstrate that William of Stratford made no provisions for his wife to ensure her survival. While this argument does not support claims of authorship per se, it still significantly deflates the standard mythology and clarifies the nature of Shakspeare’s marriage to Anne Hathaway.

Next, Cutting researches one of the more vexing questions in Shakespeare scholarship: how did the author get away with depictions that routinely sent other writers to prison or the torture chamber? In Chapter 4, “Let the Punishment Fit the Crime,” she examines the legal practices of censorship in Elizabethan England, and the extent to which other authors such as Marlowe, Kyd and Nash were accused of heresy or sedition. Shakespeare stands out among his peers for coming under absolutely no scrutiny for his unflattering depiction of court figures on stage, such as the Cecils in *Hamlet* and Sir Philip Sidney in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and for a performance of *Richard II* used to foment public support for the Essex Rebellion—a singular fact that should have long since directed mainstream scholars to identify an alternative author.

Chapter 5, “Evermore in Subjection,” is perhaps the purest expression of Cutting’s approach, in that it does not concern Shakespeare at all but rather presents a fascinating and disturbing history of the feudal and fundamentally corrupt institution of wardship in Tudor England. Under the system, sons of the nobility who were orphaned before their majority became wards of the Monarch, who would not only assume control of the lands and property the son would inherit, but direct the young man’s marriage as well. Through the Court of Wards, a system of profiteering arose in which these wardships would be auctioned off, representing a bizarre state of affairs in which the aristocracy exploited members of its own class. Sir William Cecil became Master of the Court of Wards in 1561, where he would make himself fabulously wealthy for the next thirty-seven years, after which Queen Elizabeth would appoint his son Robert to the post, giving the Cecil family control of the system for half a century. The 12-year old Edward de Vere would, of course, become one of Burghley’s first wards, a fact raised only in the final sentence of the chapter.

Unfortunately, Chapter 6, “What’s Past is Prologue: The Consequences of the 17th Earl of Oxford’s Wardship,” isn’t a very satisfying follow up. Instead of recounting Oxford’s wardship and its impacts throughout his life, it is comprised of two halves that serve distinctly different purposes: the first speculates briefly about how Oxford’s wardship might have motivated him to write the canon, while the second half traces the development and erection of the Westminster church monument in 1741 at the direction of a descendent of his guardian, William Cecil. It is not entirely clear on its own terms how the statue constitutes a consequence of Oxford’s wardship as such. It is in disconnects like this where the book’s origin in reprinting papers from journals becomes something of a shortcoming.

Chapter 7, “A Sufficient Warrant,” examines Oxford’s £1000 annuity, initiated by Queen Elizabeth in 1586 and renewed by King James in 1603 until Oxford’s death the following year. Orthodox critics have tried for decades to dismiss this 18-year grant (worth almost \$18,000,000 in today’s currency) as merely an act of ill-advised generosity towards an extravagant, wasted earl unable to finance his own upkeep so as to maintain appearances. However, Cutting looks at other established ways Queen Elizabeth might have accomplished this (if this indeed had been her goal), and finds there were many, such as assigning him various government offices, land grants or monopolies on trade. Elizabeth did, in fact, allow him to marry the wealthy heiress Elizabeth Trentham, which also should have sufficed. An examination of other contemporary warrants shows that, once more, Oxford was involved in something unique and secret.

Cutting then moves in Chapter 8 from matters more traditionally associated with Oxford’s authorship to consider a painting made nearly half a century after Oxford’s death. In “Lady Anne’s Missing First Folio,” Cutting examines the compelling fact that the *Appleby Triptych* depicting Lady Anne Clifford and family at three stages of her life—and 50 of her favorite books—does not include a copy of the *First Folio*. This is especially odd not just because it would have been a prized volume in any library of the time, but that Clifford was the second wife of Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke—previously married to Oxford’s daughter Susan, who had passed away in 1629—and one of the “incomparable paire of brethren” to whom the *First Folio* was dedicated. Once more, the context of the times holds the likely answer: during the English Civil War (1642-1651) when the painting was composed, the aristocracy were threatened along with the monarchy, and those such as Lady Anne who were knowledgeable about the Shakespeare enterprise knew that the plays were politically problematic, as they depicted the Queen and aristocrats in her Court. Cutting reasons that a political calculus on Lady Anne’s part led her to believe it would be wiser to leave the *First Folio* out of her painting and hope that posterity would forget about its existence.

Chapter 9 also considers the mystery behind another work of art purported to depict Lady Anne Clifford. Yet for Cutting, this is a case of “A Countess Transformed”: that the painting by Van Dyck of the Pembroke family composed in 1740 actually depicts Lady Susan Vere, a supposition also shared by some art historians as well as early antiquarians and art catalogers. Yet, Cutting shows that a shift in opinion took place during the 19th and 20th Centuries, in which the figure is assumed to be Lady Clifford. By comparing other portraits of the respective ladies and in consideration of the ethereal treatment of the figure—who is not attired in contemporary dress consistent with the other sitters—Cutting believes that Lady Susan Vere is here portrayed posthumously. Yet Cutting is not done: as is her method, she then turns to other existing examples of portraiture from the era depicting different sitters from across time—or the phenomenon of chronological incongruity—and finds that it is not uncommon. Finally, she speculates (as have others) that the attempted erasure of Susan Vere from the records was a deliberate act by Pembroke’s descendants, again owing to the politically problematic connections with Oxford/Shakespeare.

In the final chapter, “She Will Not be a Mother,” Cutting tackles the most contentious debate among the current generation of Oxfordians, the “Seymour Prince Tudor theory,” which holds that Oxford was the illegitimate son of a teenaged Elizabeth Tudor and Thomas Seymour, Lord High Admiral of England. An examination of the records convinces her that the young princess (who was out of the public eye for months) could well have become pregnant and delivered a child in 1548, but that dates and circumstances make it highly unlikely that this child would have been Edward de Vere.

The strength of Cutting’s collection—and it is a considerable one—is that it shows the extent to which the Shakespeare authorship question is an historiographic, rather than strictly literary, matter: that the unfathomable persistence of the Stratford mythology is owed to a culture of narrow, circular and self-referential inquiry by literary scholars rather than a genuine engagement with the historical record.

At the same time, the book does suffer somewhat for being a collection rather than a monograph. There is—as would be expected—a not entirely coherent approach to the covered topics, and chapters that would under monographic conditions naturally build upon or refer to previous or related ones don’t do so sufficiently—the two wardship and Lady Clifford chapters being prime examples. More rigorous editing might have worked to integrate these disparate parts together more seamlessly.

The book’s title also bears closer examination, for its meaning is not explicitly stated or referred to anywhere in the text apart from the prefatory pages,

where it is taken from one of Edward de Vere's letters in which he describes the selling of his lands to fund his travels in Italy as "necessary mischief." Our contemporary colloquial sense of *mischief* lends it an almost endearing air even as it describes improper activities. Legally, of course, it denotes far more grave actions leading to harm to person or property. In Shakespeare's works, however, we read of mischief in association with acts of war and violence, something unfortunate and arising from ill intentions: the Earl of Warwick in *1 Henry VI* warns Winchester against further action by pointing out "what mischief and what murder too hath been enacted through [his] enmity" [III, 1]. Most notably, Lady Macbeth summons the "spirits who tend on mortal thoughts" to "take [her] milk for gall" as they "wait on nature's mischief" (I, 5). With this choice of title Cutting seems to be undertaking something darker than her subtitle—"Exploring the Shakespeare Authorship Question"—suggests. Does she think her scholarly interventions constitute an act of violence against the edifice of orthodoxy, something regrettable but necessary?

If so, then we can definitely declare "mischief managed." Cutting's keen scholarship demonstrates that, when we genuinely and critically examine the "context of the times," two corresponding things become patently obvious: the lackluster documented life of William Shakspere is so contrary to what is known of genuine men of letters of the age that it is utterly impossible to mistake it for such; and that the place of Edward de Vere in Elizabethan society and politics was so extraordinary—indeed, unique—that his authorship of the canon becomes the only logical explanation.