

Becoming an Oxfordian: The Phenomenology of Shifting Research Paradigms in Shakespearean Biography¹

1.0 Experiencing a New Shakespeare

A year before she was to publish her 1922 book *The Shakespeare Garden*, American author, journalist and polymath Esther Singleton came across a book that was to change her life. It purported that the author of the plays and poems of Shakespeare was not the businessman from Stratford-Upon-Avon but instead a highly-placed Earl who secretly wrote under the pseudonym Shake-Speare. Overwhelmed by this revelation, she re-read the book multiple times before expressing her thoughts on the matter. She wrote,

I cannot explain the effect that this discovery has had upon me. All the plays that I know so well, that I have read and reread since childhood until they have become bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, are now more wonderful. Some things that have been obscure have become as clear as glass; more true in their philosophy; more brilliant in their wit; more sincere in their scholarship; more charming in their tenderness; more subtle in their delicacy; more penetrating in their wisdom; and truer to life...²

The book that had affected her so was the recently-published *Shakespeare Identified in Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* by J. Thomas Looney,³ a ground-breaking work of investigation that would create a movement of Shakespeare enthusiasts calling themselves *Oxfordians* following in Looney's footsteps. With the centenary of *Shakespeare Identified* approaching, it now seems appropriate to consider afresh the impact of Looney's work – not so much on the production of Shakespeare biographies, for those proceed apace as always – rather, we should examine the lived experience of Oxfordians themselves, and consider the intellectual and emotional phenomenon so eloquently described by Singleton.

This essay seeks to gain a phenomenological understanding of the personal discovery of Oxford-as-Shakespeare – by which we are referring to the belief in the authorship of Edward de Vere. Accordingly, we are mapping the pathway from the conventional “Stratfordian”⁴ model to the Oxfordian one -- but as a shift in authorship research paradigms. This shall be assessed by undertaking an analysis of recently-published personal essays by self-identified Oxfordians regarding their own journeys of discovery,⁵ according to an existing framework regarding the phenomenology of paradigm shifts⁶ adapted for this purpose.

The essays in question were all published since November 2015 on the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship (SOF) website, as part of its ongoing feature *How I Became an Oxfordian*

¹ The author would like to acknowledge Amita Mukerjee for her thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of the paper, as well as the cooperation of Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship President Tom Regnier and website editor Robert Meyer in making available as Word documents the essays analysed herein.

² Singleton 1922.

³ Looney 1920.

⁴ The term used by skeptics to denote the conventional attribution of the Works to William Shakspere of Stratford-Upon-Avon; the difference in spelling is deliberate. See Price 2001.

⁵ The author's own essay has been excluded from this analysis. It is available at [personal information omitted for purposes of peer review].

⁶ Dudley 1987.

in which members of the SOF are invited to submit 500-word personal essays recounting their own shifts in beliefs. To date, the Fellowship has published more than 50 of these essays, and they provide a rich and remarkable window into the lived experience of those who question the Shakespeare of tradition and have embraced instead an Oxfordian Shakespeare.⁷

The analysis is located theoretically in the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, which concerned not only the hermeneutic study of texts, but the expression of mutable self-identity over time (or *ipse*) through the use of narrative structures, especially those of Aristotelian *mimetic*.⁸ As well, it specifically depends on the intentional hermeneutics of political historian Quentin Skinner, which affirms the desirability and possibility of interpreting authorial intention through an examination of texts.⁹

2.0 Research Paradigms of Shakespearean Authorship

Space and purpose do not permit a full examination of the case against the Shakespeare of tradition or the arguments in favour of Oxford.¹⁰ Suffice it to say that the body of literature concerning the Shakespeare Authorship Question (SAQ) is immense, running into hundreds of books and thousands of articles.¹¹

While most Shakespeare scholars and institutions (such as the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, the Folger Shakespeare Library) have excoriated (but mostly ignored) the Oxfordians, the latter are convinced by J. Thomas Looney's methods, which differed from those of previous anti-Stratfordians¹² in that he had no preconceptions as to the identity of the author. Instead, he read through the canon and compiled a list of characteristics he believed the author must have had – chief among them that he was clearly an eccentric aristocrat close to royalty, fond of Italy and the theatre but of dissipated wealth and lost reputation – and then began a search for extant poetry similar in style to that of “Shakespeare” but published under this person's real name. This quickly led him to Edward de Vere, who wrote brilliant poetry as a young man, travelled extensively in Italy, bringing Italian fashions to court and who patronized theatrical troupes and literary men.¹³

Even so, it must be stressed that Edward de Vere's putative identity as Shakespeare does not constitute a paradigm *per se* any more than does that of William Shakspeare of Stratford-Upon-Avon. However, as is the case with any body of knowledge, approaches to studying authorship do involve particular research paradigms: ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological positioning that facilitate the posing and addressing of certain questions

⁷ These essays may be accessed and searched for my authors' names at <https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/category/how-i-became/>

⁸ Ricoeur 1991.

⁹ Skinner 1972.

¹⁰ Instead see Whittemore 2017.

¹¹ The literature related to Oxford alone is vast. See Warren's *An Index to Oxfordian Publications* (2015) which includes over 9,000 entries.

¹² General term denoting those skeptical of the traditional attribution but without reference to a preferred candidate.

¹³ Notable works include Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (1992) which many credit for the modern resurgence in interest in Oxford, and Mark Anderson's literary biography of Oxford, *Shakespeare by Another Name* (2005).

not otherwise feasible in their absence.¹⁴ A comparison between the two broad approaches to the respective candidates (Table 1) does reveal some stark differences in terms of research potentialities.

Table 1: Comparing Authorship Research Paradigms

Domains	Oxfordian ¹⁵	Stratfordian ¹⁶
Ontology	<i>Works</i> are the result of genius nurtured by privileged upbringing, a superb education, extensive reading and foreign travel; written for aristocratic and royal audiences at the cost of author’s own personal wealth.	<i>Works</i> are the result of natural genius and imagination and emerged fully-formed; do not demonstrate a high level of education; written for illiterate masses and for profit.
Epistemology	The works are an essential source of knowledge about the author’s life, social class, personality and beliefs.	The works can offer us no knowledge of the author’s life, social class, personality or beliefs.
Axiology	Author’s identity is an open question and must be pursued as a matter of truth and justice towards the author; traditional model diminishes Shakespeare.	Author’s identity is a sacred certainty beyond questioning; doubt is «anti-Shakespearean.»
Methodology	Biographers infer and extrapolate based on circumstantial and literary evidence.	Biographers must use their imaginations owing to lack of documentary evidence, layered with literary criticism.

Examining Shakespearean authorship claims in terms of research paradigms – as opposed to competing cases based on evidence – avoids to some extent the vitriol that so often characterizes mainstream response to anti-Stratfordian theories.¹⁷ It is also a much narrower scale of investigation than would be the case of claims for paradigm shifts in a more general Kuhnian sense. Even so, in this we face another epistemological challenge.

3.0 Studying the Phenomenology of Belief

While the literature is replete with references to paradigms in general – almost to the point of cliché, especially in the business management field – as well as with hundreds of phenomenological studies regarding a wide range of lived experiences, it is curiously silent on the phenomenology of paradigm shifts.¹⁸ This is somewhat surprising given that Thomas

¹⁴ Creswell 2013, 19-21.

¹⁵ See Anderson 2005; Ogburn 1992; and Whittemore 2017.

¹⁶ See Shapiro 2010; Greenblatt 2005; Edmondson and Wells 2013.

¹⁷ For example, the late Richmond Crinkly, once director of programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library, once observed that the “viciousness expressed towards anti-Stratfordian[s]...was like some bizarre mutant racism.” Crinkley 1985, 518.

¹⁸ The *Web of Science* database includes 9,656 articles related to some aspect of phenomenology, and over 38,000 concerning paradigms; however, only 14 articles contain both terms and in none of these instances do the articles concern the personal experience of paradigm shifts.

Kuhn in his 1962 classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, recognized the fundamentally experiential and personal nature of the process of paradigm shifts, of «‘scales falling from the eyes’ or of the ‘lightning flash.’» experienced by scientists.¹⁹ According to Kuhn, the term *paradigm* refers to «the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given community.»²⁰ The current, standard paradigm in a given field he referred to as «normal science» which, while it may meet the needs of the scientific community quite well, will nonetheless limit its ability to understand or even see new phenomenon:

No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomenon; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all. Nor do scientists normally aim to invent new theories, and they are often intolerant of those invented by others. Instead, normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies.²¹

In the case of Shakespeare, the «normal science» is the Stratfordian model, which regards the author as an incomparable, essentially divinely-inspired genius. Still, the use of the term *paradigm* in the humanities should be undertaken advisedly, as Kuhn only intended it to apply to the sciences, yet it has been adopted across the disciplines. John Budd in his comparison of modalities of research between the sciences and the humanities, observes that disciplines in the humanities are essentially non-paradigmatic: being concerned with products of human creativity, there can be few if any «constellations of belief» or rules of observation about them.²²

A bridge between such seemingly incompatible worlds as Stratfordian and Oxfordian beliefs may be advanced through the pedagogical notion of threshold concepts, which permit novel ways of viewing and understanding the subject at hand and thereby offering a breakthrough to further study. According to Meyer and Land, threshold concepts are:

Transformative: occasion a significant shift in the perception of a subject, or part thereof [which may] lead to a transformation of personal identity. In such instances transformed perspective is likely to involve an affective component – a shift in values, feeling or attitude; [p]robably irreversible: the change...is unlikely to be forgotten, or will be unlearned only by considerable effort; and Integrative: that it exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness of something potentially troublesome.²³

Meyer and Land premise their work on the 1999 schema of David Perkins, which identified strata of knowledge ranging from the “ritual” or “inert” to “conceptually difficult” or “alien.” For Perkins, ritual and inert knowledge are things such as names and dates that sit «in the mind’s attic, unpacked only when specifically called for by a quiz or a direct prompt but otherwise gathering dust.»²⁴

Here too however there is some potential for controversy. Within the field of phenomenology the conventional view holds that belief states or knowledge of one’s beliefs are non-phenomenological in nature, as opposed to emotional or sensory experiences.²⁵

¹⁹ Kuhn and Hacking 2012, 122.

²⁰ Kuhn and Hacking 2012, 175.

²¹ Kuhn and Hacking 2012, 24.

²² Budd 1989.

²³ Meyer and Land 2003, 7-8.

²⁴ Perkins 1999, 8.

²⁵ Smith n.d.

British philosopher Gareth Evans for example, wrote that «in making a self-ascription of belief, one's eyes are, so to speak, or occasionally literally, directed outward -- upon the world»²⁶ -- in other words, without reference to one's inner life or feelings. In recent years, a contrary view has emerged, in which these are indeed seen as phenomenological, but this is regarded as «notoriously controversial.»²⁷ Klausen calls our beliefs regarding concepts propositional attitudes (PAs) in which our «experiential encounter with either a propositional content or...a state of affairs (is) an experiential encounter which is analogous to an act of visual perception. »²⁸ Furthermore, belief in these «state of affairs» brings with it feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction and «in the case of the psychologically robust PAs, it can be understood in a much more concrete sense: as a distinctive felt quality of satisfaction – a feeling of relief or fulfillment. »²⁹ Valaris goes further: the self-ascription of both occurrent and standing beliefs (or knowledge of belief [KB]), is a distinctly phenomenological process of “standing back” and making the rational, self-conscious and self-aware determination that one holds a given belief about the world.³⁰

Shifting such beliefs in sets of facts (i.e., propositional attitudes) involves more than an awareness on the part of the individual of their own beliefs: they bear upon one's sense of self and identity, which changes over time. This is a major theme in the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who distinguishes between the permanent structural qualities of an individual (the «what») that makes one physically unique – or *idem* – and the dynamic internal *ipse* (the «who»)³¹ Ricoeur emphasized the particular role of narratives in *ipseity*, as they help us to «make sense out of self-identity in the context of time.»³² Such narratives, he proposed, are dependent on three layers of what Aristotle referred to as *mimesis*, or the imitation of action: the first, preconfiguration, concerns the individual's past experiences and predispositions for integrating the events of the narrative; the second, configuration, is the manner in which the individual «emplots» the narrative and thus forms an internally logical and intelligible story; while the third level, refiguration demonstrates the integration of the substance of the narrative – containing as it does «fictive» plot devices (e.g., beginning, middle, and end) – with actual lived experience and the individual's sense of self, or *ipseity*.³³

For Ricoeur, the *mimetic* stories we tell about ourselves and the ways in which they are arranged utilizing traditional plot structures are integral to our sense-making about who we are because «the figure of identity that emerges [through storytelling] offers a new insight into the self” as well as «a transformative understanding of one's self in the world.»³⁴ More significantly for the purposes of this analysis is the role of narratives in identifying one's place in a larger story which represents a «deviation from a canonical cultural pattern»³⁵, or «‘voices that are excluded from or neglected within dominant political structures and processes.»³⁶

²⁶ Evans 1982, 225.

²⁷ Valaris 2014, 7.

²⁸ Klausen 2008, 450.

²⁹ Klausen 2008.

³⁰ Valaris.

³¹ Ricoeur.

³² Rasmussen 1995, 165.

³³ Ricoeur, McLaughlin and Pellauer 2012.

³⁴ Crowley 2003, 2-3.

³⁵ Bruner 1990, 49-50.

³⁶ Squire 2005, 93.

Determining the meanings from such written narratives involves hermeneutic phenomenology, which Ricoeur saw as a form of reflective philosophy requiring distanciation, a form of alienation between the author and reader emphasizing the autonomy of the text – its structure, linguistic and semantic dimensions – and active reconstruction on the part of the reader.³⁷ By design this comes at the expense of intentionality, or the proposition that the reader can know the writer’s intention in creating the text in question. For our purposes however, this is essential: we are, after all, taking at their word the essayists’ accounts of how they came to call themselves Oxfordians, without deconstructing their texts or seeking hidden discourses. Political philosopher Quentin Skinner’s hermeneutic intentionality offers a pathway here, arguing for the feasibility and desirability of understanding an author’s intentions through their texts. He writes,

it seems possible to establish the closest possible connection between a writer's intentions in writing, and the meaning of what he [sic] writes. For it seems that a knowledge of the writer's intentions in writing...is not merely relevant to, but is actually equivalent to, a knowledge of the meaning... to know what a writer meant by particular work is to know what his [sic] primary intentions were.³⁸

Based on the preceding then, we shall be engaged in a phenomenological study of personal narratives of identity-shaping and transformative experiences over time (*ipseity*), based on individuals’ knowledge of their own belief in the propositional attitude of Oxford-as-Shakespeare, utilizing a methodology of hermeneutic intentionality.

4.0 Research Design

Given the complexity of the proposed analysis of the *How I Became an Oxfordian* essays, it is important to model our study on an earlier phenomenological approach to making accessible other life-altering shifts in belief systems. For her 1987 doctoral dissertation at the University of Victoria, Nancy Dudley³⁹ examined the structure involved in broad cultural shifts in consciousness from one world view to another. Her participants had experienced shifts from the mechanistic, linear, dualistic, masculine, individualistic, rational and materialist beliefs born of the Western Enlightenment, towards a relational, gestalt, transcendent, supranatural, feminist belief system -- «an awareness of a universe of pattern and meaning» blending understandings from quantum physics, Jungian notions of the collective unconscious and Native American worldviews.⁴⁰ Through in-depth interviews with 10 anonymous participants, Dudley identified seven major structures and processes involved in this paradigm shift:

1. **Evolutionary Pattern** [of the shift]:
 - a. Gradual [temporal dimension]: change to the new world view occurs gradually;
 - b. Spiral form [mental/spatial dimension]: one’s awareness undergoes a process of «broadening, deepening and expanding.»⁴¹

³⁷ McCord 2000, 9

³⁸ Skinner 1972, 404.

³⁹ [Omitted for purposes of peer review].

⁴⁰ Dudley 1987, 286.

⁴¹ Dudley 1987, 226.

- c. Directional: once set in motion, the individual recognizes the change is irreversible;
 - d. Purpose: New awareness brings with it calls to action.
2. **Separation:** a disruption of one's reality-structuring pattern, a «frame-break» born of a sense of yearning or dissatisfaction with conventionality.⁴²
 - a. Cultural estrangement: sense of one's alienation from normal expectations or structures.
 - b. Proximity to other cultures: Predisposition to new awareness based on previous exposure to other cultural norms.
 - c. Questioning: responding to cognitive dissonance and psychological tension in response to conventional framework that one no longer finds acceptable;
 - d. Crisis (personal/cultural): severance/separation, metaphorical death/rebirth experience.
 3. **Transcendence of ordinary patterns:** In «crossing the bounds of convention»⁴³ one «glimps[es] more possibilities of experiencing reality»⁴⁴ and gains a «sense of expansiveness.»⁴⁵
 4. **Mindful willing participation exploration and surrender:** Active engagement in one's evolution: Gaining «new information, or contents, creates new pathways which allow yet more new information to enter [one's] consciousness, which again opens new structures.»⁴⁶
 5. **Validation:** finding support and communion with like-minded others or finding affirmation additional ideas or experiences.
 6. **Integration vs. pull to familiar pattern:** struggle to synthesize new consciousness in face of convention and potential disparagement or rejection by others, especially being called "crazy." Ultimately integration is an ongoing dynamic subjective and intersubjective process.
 7. **Sensibility of a Universe of Pattern and Meaning:** Full awareness of the new paradigm.

Some adjustments to this framework appear necessary at the outset owing to the very different nature of the paradigms to which the respective participants have shifted. In Dudley's dissertation the phenomenon being investigated related to participants' Heideggerian sense of *Dasein* (being-in-the-world); the cognitive, affective and conative elements of the structure were not treated separately from the shift itself because the paradigm was fundamentally subjective and relational, and expressed almost entirely in internally-oriented terms such as awareness, intuition, attitude, attention, commitment, perception, sensibility, trust, vision, respect, etc.⁴⁷ In regards the Oxfordian experience by

⁴² Dudley 1987, 234.

⁴³ Dudley 1987, 251.

⁴⁴ Dudley 1987, 246.

⁴⁵ Dudley 1987, 249.

⁴⁶ Dudley 1987, 259.

⁴⁷ Dudley 1987, 3-4; 286-289.

contrast, the research paradigm comprises an approach to historical and literary interpretation external to the individual and which is seen to elicit cognitive, emotional and conative responses. As such, the analytical framework shall be adjusted to account for these: the elements of the shift in belief and the essence of the belief are treated as distinct elements. The categories and subcategories from Dudley's 1987 study will also be adjusted slightly. The *purpose* subcategory is moved to join *cognition* and *affect* from the *pattern* category. The *separation* and *questioning* phases in the present study also sufficiently constitute the idea of *crisis* so this heading was seen as superfluous. *Questioning* being such a significant part of the transition to Oxfordian paradigm, it will comprise its own category, rather than a sub-heading under *separation*. In addition, the category of *proximity to other cultures* is being treated in terms of disciplines, i.e., the exposure to other academic domains or professions, while the *gradual shift* is broadened to *temporal dimension* to account for variation in experience. The final element is unique to the original study so is not included here. The analysis will be further augmented with Kolbe's typology of cognitive, affective and conative dimensions:

Table 2: Cognitive, Affective, and Conative Domains⁴⁸

Cognitive	Affective	Conative
To know	To feel	To act
Thinking	Feeling	Willing
Thought	Emotion	Volition
Epistemology	Esthetics	Ethics
Knowing	Caring	Doing

Overall, the analysis of the *How I Became an Oxfordian* essays constitutes three distinct components: the pattern of the experience; the elements of the experience; and the essence of the experience. It is expected that the Oxfordian journey will involve new sources of knowledge of – and ways to think about – Shakespeare, which will inspire a range of emotions and lead to new commitments on the part of the essayists.

5.0 Analysis: The Phenomenology of Becoming an Oxfordian

5.1 Pattern of the Experience

5.1.1 Temporal Dimension

Essayists generally experience a gradual journey to Oxford-as-Shakespeare, having only known vaguely that there was a controversy. Often this involves weighing the other candidates (Francis Bacon or Christopher Marlowe). However, once they are exposed to a key text about Oxford, they either experience a rapid acceptance of the argument, or else consider it carefully over an extended period of time before committing to it.

⁴⁸ Kolbe 1990.

Table 3: Temporal Pattern

Exemplary Statements
In my hands [the book “ <i>Shakespeare</i> ” by <i>Another Name</i> by Mark Anderson] was information I had wished for twenty-three years.
[Joseph] Sobran’s column aroused my curiosity, but it was a couple of years later when I had time to look up [Charlton Ogburn Jr.’s book] <i>The Mysterious William Shakespeare</i> in our branch library... Things moved quickly after that.
My fascination with Oxford/Shakespeare was a <i>coup de foudre</i> , a sudden jolt...POW! A spark of driving curiosity got hold of me.
After scarcely more than a year, my research took a turn: No more was I on the fence.
My journey towards Oxfordianism [took a] tortuous route...my lingering doubt had me toying for some years
But it was...overwhelming: there was too much about Elizabethan history that I did not know. So I let Oxford's story lie fallow for a few years: I needed time to adjust to this new world...
I needed time to say good-bye to my old convictions – I had to digest everything slowly.

5.1.2 Directional Pattern

Once Oxford-as-Shakespeare has been understood, accepted and integrated with their knowledge of Shakespeare, the essayists have crossed a threshold and are convinced. There is no returning to their previous assumptions.

Table 4: Directional Pattern

Exemplary Statements
My Oxfordian Shakespeare obsession has ruined my life, which is fine because I didn’t like that life anyway, and now I’m ever exhilarated.
Once smitten by the intellectual delights of the authorship question, I have not been able to let go of it for more than a short period of time.
But I was a convert; there was no return
I have never looked back.
My belief in Oxford's authorship has never been stronger.

5.2 Elements of the Experience

5.2.1 Separation: Estrangement

Owing to a combination of previous life experiences or personality traits, essayists report being alienated from Shakespeare and other Shakespeareans. The texts fail to resonate or do not actually make sense to them.

Table 5: Separation: Estrangement

Exemplary Statements
What I saw among my peers was something anathema to true scholarship.
I am a contrarian by nature - I don’t like being duped
I started to read and panicked: the play made absolutely no sense.

I failed to understand what I was reading...After I became a theatre professor, I struggled teaching Elizabethan theatre and Shakespeare's contribution.
Shakespeare wrote them as «poetic exercises on stock themes» to show off to his friends. My response? «If he didn't really care about them, why should I?»

5.2.2 Separation: Proximity to Other Perspectives

Very few of the essayists are from careers traditionally associated with Shakespeare scholarship or biography, i.e., English literature departments. Instead, they represent many diverse backgrounds – often in creative enterprises such as writing or scholarly fields like psychology – which they believe afforded them novel perspectives on the authorship problem.⁴⁹

Table 6: Separation: Proximity to Other Perspectives

Exemplary Statements
As a clinical psychologist, I constantly work with people who are reluctant to change their views about themselves learned from childhood.
Being a writer I knew that poetic license and filmmaker's-fancy might be at play here, so I felt compelled to delve into this adventuresome 'Oxenford' Earl.
My career [in advertising] had taught me to question everything and always investigate. It promoted critical thinking.
As a psychoanalyst, I knew Freud was a genius, and that not all of his valid ideas have been readily accepted. It intrigued me that he may have put the Shakespeare scholars to shame if he was right about de Vere writing Shakespeare.
Being a playwright/novelist myself and knowing there must be a Why for a (great) writer to write something of profound value.

5.2.3 Questioning: Dissonance

Before discovering Oxford-as-Shakespeare, essayists report being troubled by what they read or were taught about the poet-playwright. The biographies they read felt listless, and the statements made about Shakespeare seemed to have no coherence with the words he was supposed to have written.

Table 7: Questioning: Dissonance

Exemplary Statements
I found Shakespeare biographies—A.L. Rowse's, for instance—dull and faintly disquieting [Prefatory comments in the plays] did little to answer our questions, as did the books we found in libraries.
He simply doesn't add up. He is not how real creative people are, or real human beings.

⁴⁹ Most essayists mention their professions or backgrounds: twenty-one identify with some form of creative profession (writing, acting, art, filmmaking) while ten others are academics. Only one individual is a professor of English literature, being the most common profession among Shakespeare biographers. Twenty-three persons describe themselves as being retired or semi-retired.

Our teacher assured us that making a living was uppermost in Shakespeare’s mind too— which conflicted strangely with the issues he wrote about...
The Shaksper[e] biography was dead on arrival for me, no resonance with the works

5.2.4 Questioning: Sense of Absence and Longing

This sense of incoherence troubled the essayists because they loved the works so much, or had their own image of who the author must have been, that they longed for more – or more satisfying – information.

Table 8: Questioning: Sense of Absence and Longing

Exemplary Statements
When I read the poems and plays through the lens of William of Stratford, I get much insight and greatness, but only from the plays themselves.
I was taught the standard Stratfordian biography, which left me cold and – inchoately - dissatisfied.
I majored in English with a focus on Shakespeare and [when] I graduated...in 1965...that nagging feeling I had had in junior high stayed with me – who was this guy?
I recalled how bitterly disappointed I was as a boy who loved reading Shakespeare, to be told we knew so little about his life.
Shakespeare’s biography...was a complete letdown to me.

5.2.5 Transcendence of Ordinary Patterns

Once the essayists have read about Oxford-as-Shakespeare and come to accept him as the author, this completely changes their experience of the plays and poems, and has a deeply rewarding and transcendent effect upon them.

Table 9: Transcendence of Ordinary Patterns

Exemplary Statements
When I read the poems and plays through the lens of the Earl of Oxford, the experience is powerful and transformative and true to the experience I have had with other artists.
This was like an earthquake in my mind.
For the first time, the sonnets were understandable, not just beautiful.
The sudden change in perspective was dizzying, scary, but liberating too.
I discovered how infinitely more interesting Shakespeare’s plays were (let alone his poems) when you knew who wrote them and could think about why they were written.
Since knowing the truth, everything has changed and the world is a more just and enlightened one.
I began to see Shakespeare from an entirely different point of view
Seeing the plays and reading the poetry with Oxford’s life in mind, it feels like I’m looking at a familiar photograph that’s suddenly become three-dimensional.

5.2.5 Willing Participation and Exploration:

The personal discovery of Oxford-as-Shakespeare is no one-off event: essayists are then compelled to read and learn as much as they possibly can.

Table 10: Willing Participation and Exploration

Exemplary Statements
I went on to read everything I could find.
I subsequently hoarded everything I could get my hands on
I started visiting all kinds of authorship websites, like a kid in a candy store.
I devoured every Oxfordian book I could get my hands on, every YouTube discussion I could find.
I got as many of the basic texts as I could.

5.2.6 Validation

However, this desire for more knowledge is not satisfied by mere reading; Oxfordians seek out other Oxfordians in person and online, often personally contacting authors that have had so important an impact on them or joining an Oxfordian society.

Table 11: Validation

Exemplary Statements
I found...a small group of Oxfordians in Cleveland, and met some of the early activists in the movement.
I was able to «come out» when I met an Oxfordian friend of my husband earlier this year - he had been a great friend of [<i>Alias Shakespeare</i> author] Joseph Sobran.
But the entity that had the greatest impact on me as an Oxfordian is Facebook.
Soon we became telephone and postal friends with Mrs. Ruth Loyd Miller ⁵⁰ and her husband, Judge Minos D. Miller. They suggested that I become a member of the Shakespeare Oxford Society...
I've become friends with [with a number of] leaders of the movement.

5.2.7 Integration vs. Pull to Familiar Pattern:

At various points on their journey, the essayists report navigating the tensions between the force of tradition and the excitement of their new discoveries. Sometimes this was owed to rejecting what they felt was dubious evidence for candidates other than Oxford; others tried to maintain a balanced approach by reading conventional biographies. Some faced ridicule by others pressuring them to set the entire issue aside. The comfort of the Stratford myth itself sometimes proved difficult to leave behind.

Table 12: Integration vs. Pull to Familiar Pattern

Exemplary Statements
Possibly I was benumbed, as many people continue to be today, by the mere sound of the name Shakespeare to undertake some action.
I reasoned if the Baconian ciphers were hokum then maybe the SAQ itself was crazy after all.

⁵⁰ Editor of the 2-Volume 1975 edition of Looney's *Shakespeare Identified*.

I continued reading books from an orthodox stand-point as well as books an Oxfordian point-of-view
[When I talk about Oxford] a few of my friends leave the room or practice their ‘how to deal with a conspiracy nutcase’ techniques, complete with eye rolls.
I [had] formed a myth, on the basis of the elusiveness of our relevant knowledge of him, in which he, like Jesus Christ, was one of the great mystery figures. [After discovering Oxford] My ‘mystery figure’ went - with a certain nostalgia - out of the window.

5.3 Essence of the Experience

5.3.1 Cognition: Coherence

Where conventional biographers struggle to match the life of the Stratford merchant to the works, Oxfordians discover perfect coherence, in which everything we read in the plays and poems can be seen reflected in the life of Edward de Vere.

Table 13: Cognition: Coherence

Exemplary Statements
The play makes little sense unless understood as semi-autobiography.
There is a very clear personality that shines through Shakespeare -- a philosophical, introspective, complex, wild, witty, melancholy, cynical personality.
The pieces of this very difficult puzzle began to come together. It just made sense...Oxford's claim to the authorship is so much more substantial.
It all made perfect sense: the accumulation of clues, cryptic allusions, echoes between life and works and multiple «coincidences» was persuasive.
Oxford held the answer to Shakespeare's creative process. It would mean his exercise of imagination had not been some miraculous act of fantasy disconnected from his life, but, rather, the creative use of his own experience.

5.3.2 Cognition: Sense-making

With firm knowledge of the life behind the work, the plays and poems become more comprehensible, more meaningful, less intimidating for the essayists.

Table 14: Cognition: Sense-making

Exemplary Statements
The Shakespeare canon, with all its quirky, often unknowable allusions suddenly made more sense to me.
Everything made sense. I felt I knew Hamlet now, and Timon, and Orsino, and Antonio, and Jacques, and the True sense of the Sonnets...These characters were facets of Oxford.
Now this stuff makes sense.
[Joseph Sobran's book <i>Alias Shakespeare</i>] greatly expanded my whole view and comprehension of Shakespeare...

5.3.3 Cognition: Meta-Observations

Gaining this new knowledge of the works and their author also brings with it a recognition of the poverty of conventional scholarship and pedagogy, and its determined refusal to admit that the academy has been wasting hundreds of years and untold millions of life-hours pursuing biographical connections to the wrong man. This also for some helps shed light on other controversies in a post-truth intellectual environment which prevents an honest engagement with contested facts.

Table 15: Cognition: Meta-Observations

Exemplary Statements
What I found was scholarly fraud: how much students believe and take for granted, how much professors spread conjecture as truth, theories as fact, fabrications as dogma.
I was stunned. How come my teachers had never even broached the issue, even in passing? How come my books were silent on the topic?
I myself was utterly convinced, and reflected how embarrassed certain orthodox scholars would be one of these days.
I view the Shakespeare/Oxfordian controversy as a prototype for many other events. Where the assault on truth has taken place, there occurs the same unwillingness to look at evidence and the usual ad hominem attacks.

5.3.4 Affective: Empathy

Instead of the remote, god-like Shakespeare of myth, the national poet and unapproachable secular saint, Oxfordians see a real flesh-and blood man, brilliant but flawed and even unlikable, but nevertheless a human being to whom they can relate, and whose experiences and emotions can be understood.

Table 16: Affective: Empathy

Exemplary Statements
[The words are] those of a deep, brooding thinker; a person whose privileged life was complicated and problematic; a troubled soul falling backwards over the brink into the darkness.
It's exhilarating knowing that this work emerged out of real experience, real pain, real struggles, anxieties, betrayals, elations -- out of someone's real life -- instead of out of the blue or off the top of a grain-merchant and money-lender's head.
Oxford felt like Shakespeare to me...The more I learn about Oxford, the more Shakespeare makes sense and feels like a real human being to me.
I was introduced to Edward de Vere, and he suddenly became a haunting ghost of my psyche...I felt great empathy for this troubled man whose lifetime of work had been so stripped from him and his name.
Here was a man whose plays and poetry were recognized to be those of the greatest writer in the world but...he had to keep quiet about it. What an agony that must have been
The young Oxford's pain, seeing his mother remarry so quickly, had to have simmered all his life, and finally brought forth, as the driving narrative Why, from deep old pain inside, the play Hamlet.

5.3.5 Affective: Emotions

This profound discovery brings with it a range of emotions: exhilaration at the excitement of new meaning, but at the same time anger and resentment that it should have been so difficult to learn, so actively withheld from students.

Table 17: Affective: Emotions

Exemplary Statements
The more prevalent the silence, the more it rankled.
It made me ill.
What I found bowled me over
It was a stunning moment; I believe I cried. I felt again the fervor of scholarship
I was electrified by what I read and kept re-reading it,
I was afraid I might drop dead right there in my excitement.

5.3.6 Affective: Identity

While their search may have initially been born from curiosity, for many it becomes life-altering and a major anchor for their identities (*ipseity*).

Table 18: Affective: Identity

Exemplary Statements
Becoming an Oxfordian has been a life-changing experience for me.
I had not only become an Oxfordian, I had become an Oxfreudian...[it] has profoundly enriched my life during the past 14 years.
This revelation was life-changing.
I became an activist, which not every Oxfordian does.

5.3.7 Conative: Purpose

Becoming an Oxfordian is not merely to hold a belief about the origin of works of literature; it instills one with a renewed sense of purpose, a sense of mission and responsibility to rectify a terrible historical mistake and injustice.

Table 19: Conative: Purpose

Exemplary Statements
I took up the Oxfordian banner to help discard the fable being offered even now to minds young and old as an ersatz version of History.
I began to think of ways I might contribute to the discussion.
I wasn't a Shakespeare scholar and it wasn't clear that I could make any difference. What I did have was a passion for the issue, a sense of its historical importance to humanity, and a sense of commitment...

5.3.8 Conative: Creativity

This mission – to restore the Shakespeare name to the rightful author – is often expressed through creative endeavors: books, plays, films, etc.

Table 20: Conative: Creativity

Exemplary Statements
It is my hope that the presentation of the evidence in my film <i>Nothing is Truer than Truth</i> will inspire others to discover the charismatic, tempestuous, witty, often misunderstood but truly brilliant writer also known as Shakespeare.
I managed to create the play I called <i>The Loss Of My Good Name...</i>
I wrote letters to the local paper; later, an article for the De Vere Society, then for the [Shakespeare Oxford Society]...
I decided to write and produce a one-woman show...
So I have decided to write a book, in French, about Oxford.

6.0 Discussion

While there are of course variations in the narratives of the Oxfordian experience, we can draw some generalizable characteristics. The Oxfordian essayists feel alienated from an intellectual and cultural environment characterized by what they feel to be ritual, inert knowledge which is maintained and reinforced by a dominant majority. Faced with such a significant discontinuity regarding something they otherwise treasure, they suffer cognitive and emotional dissonance. Eventually some catalyzing event, most often an encounter with a key Oxfordian text helps them gain a critical awareness that they can no longer tolerate the status quo, and so they begin to move away from this Stratfordian model towards the Oxfordian one. Eventually (and sometimes all at once) a threshold point is reached and the previous unsatisfying, dissonant state is irreversibly abandoned as the essayists find a rewarding, transcendent experience with their authentic selves and a community of similarly-motivated individuals. The Shakespeare canon takes on new significance and coherence, and in their renewed enthusiasm for the poet-playwright, the Oxfordian is inspired to discover all they can and to contribute to the cause of promoting De Vere as the author, often through creative means.

Based on the bodies of theory reviewed in section 3.0, we can understand the Oxfordian experience in four fundamentally significant ways:

6.1 Knowledge of Belief (KB) in Oxford-as-Shakespeare

Consistent with both Klausen and Valaris⁵¹ we see in this analysis the lived experience of self-ascribed belief (or knowledge of belief [KB]): the act on the part of the Oxfordian essayists of «standing back» and, in a self-aware way, declaring their knowledge of the world and how they arrived at that knowledge. The sense of dissatisfaction on the part of the essayists with the conventional view of Shakespeare is a significant emotional phenomenon, as is the relief and fulfilment experienced upon discovering Oxford. In other words, coming to hold the propositional attitude (PA) of Oxford-as-Shakespeare has a distinct phenomenology.

⁵¹ Klausen 2008; Valaris 2014.

6.2 Oxford-as-Shakespeare as a Threshold Concept

These essays are at their core fundamentally concerned with their authors' experience of crossing thresholds: their disbelief, dissatisfaction or trouble comprehending the works of Shakespeare disappear suddenly when they discover and integrate the knowledge of Oxford-as-Shakespeare. This corresponds powerfully with Meyer's and Land's threshold concept, which they view as

a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view...Such a transformed view or landscape may represent how people 'think' in a particular discipline, or how they perceive, apprehend, or experience particular phenomena within that discipline⁵².

As we have seen, Oxfordians recognize that, as a body of knowledge, the life of the Shakespeare of tradition appears to be entirely ritualized and inert, incapable of transforming or integrating further knowledge in addition to being (given the right circumstances) highly reversible. Knowledge of the Oxfordian model, by contrast, may be conceptually difficult (or troublesome) but is a portal: it brings together in an intuitive, coherent and logical way the works and the life of the man who wrote them. As a result, the threshold concept of Oxford-as-Shakespeare is quite transformative, even to the point of shaping individuals' identities and sense of purpose. It is irreversible.

6.3 The Oxfordian Experience as Ricoeurian Narrative

Consistent with Ricoeurian narratology, the Oxfordian essays almost universally demonstrate evidence of preconfiguration, in establishing their own personal or professional predispositions that prepared them to the journeys they undertook. Their narratives are also almost exclusively configured, as the authors «emplot» their quests with a beginning, middle and end, including their sometimes circuitous pathways to discovery, moments of doubt, new relationships and invigorated sense of purpose, thereby presenting a compelling and intelligible story. Finally, the authors refigure their narratives to demonstrate the extent to which they have integrated Oxford-as-Shakespeare into their sense of self, redefining themselves in the process as Oxfordians. Thus have they gained new insight into the selves but also «transform[ed their] understanding of [themselves] in the world.»⁵³ In other words, that Edward de Vere was Shakespeare is far more than just a theory, – and certainly not a «conspiracy theory» – but rather a radically transactional and transformative way of connecting the reader to the texts of Shakespeare.

6.4 Oxford-as-Shakespeare as a Research Paradigm

While likely not their explicit intention, the authors also demonstrate the extent to which their beliefs conform to the elements of a research paradigm. They are energized by the knowledge of Oxford's privileged life, that the characters and events in the plays and poems may be drawn from a real, documented life and a fascinating place and time in English history; that knowledge of the author may be drawn from the texts, and that it is a matter of simple justice that we seek to do so, contributing to their own sense of mission and purpose as Oxfordians.

⁵² Meyer and Land 2003, 3

⁵³ Crowley 2003, 2-3.

By contrast, the Stratford research paradigm – as evinced in biographies and statements from leading scholars in the field – can offer none of these things.

We can see that for both models of authorship this scheme accurately describes their modes of analysis, and their respective Kuhnian constellations of belief, permitting us to make stark comparisons of the generative potentials of each. While Kuhn may not have recognized this in his metaphor we should understand that constellations are, in fact, an illusion, and granting the Earth a different perspective in the cosmos by even a few light years would cause their patterns to vanish. So too with Shakespeare: While substantial extant records documenting the life of the 17th Earl of Oxford (including his juvenilia) have allowed researchers to make dozens of compelling points of connection between his life and the Shakespeare *Works*, we see here that no such potential actually exists within the Stratford model. The pattern of the Stratford man's authorship is an illusion.

Framing the authorship issue in terms of research paradigms thus makes objectively apparent how epistemologically denuded the conventional biography truly is: outside the realm of the biographer's imagination, it offers no reasonable point of intersection between the texts and the life of the alleged author, and as a consequence understandably fails to engage the reader and student. Further, the Stratfordian model is revealed as almost entirely reactive, focused as it must be on explaining away a host of internal problems, rather than presenting a positive and coherent approach to its field. The Oxfordian research paradigm, in comparison, is premised on a coherent set of understandings of the place of the creative person in society; their respective ability to develop and flourish as a result of their advantages and situatedness within contemporary power relations; and the means by which we can learn about these aspects of the author from their own and others' texts. Shifting to this view often ignites considerable personal excitement in the receptive reader and transforms their understanding of the texts.

7.0 Conclusion

This intentional, hermeneutic analysis of 50 personal essays by confirmed believers in the Shakespearean authorship of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, reveals a powerful, shared phenomenological narrative of past dissonance and disappointment giving rise to discovery, conviction, passion, invigorated scholarship and a new sense of self, purpose and community. This contrasts sharply with the response most uninitiated readers offer when faced with the Shakespeare Authorship Question: «what does it matter who wrote the plays? We have the plays and poems and that's all that matters.» This essay demonstrates that it matters a great deal to many people, so much so that it transforms their experience of Shakespeare, and their sense of self.

What is most significant in this analysis is that the coherence and sense-making afforded by the Oxfordian model unleashes a level of empathy unavailable to the reader wedded to the Stratfordian mythology. In the place of the remote, god-like paragon of «natural genius», the «national poet» against whom all must be compared and whom none can approach, the Oxfordian reader comes to know, understand and profoundly empathize with the author. As Oxfordian essayist Lanny Cotler puts it:

Before, I knew little of the Stratford man who had somehow written the Canon. Now, I saw how the tortured soul of a man ripped from his mother, and [whom] along the way, authored the Canon...I tried to imagine it, feel it, weigh it against other parts of myself, as a writer. The rush of completing a fabulous speech...or a whole play or

long poem...and knowing that someone else was to enjoy the laurels. Of knowing it was you. Your experiences. Who saw it, felt it, and copied it to parchment. The frustration. The anger. The quintessential sadness...

Against this flesh-and-blood individual whose soul becomes acutely accessible in the plays and poems of Shakespeare, the moribund biography of the Man from Stratford can only offer more conjecture – and, inevitably, more unmovable scepticism.

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Their essays may be found at <https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/category/how-i-became/>

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