

Appeasing the Lunatic Fringe of the Oxfordian Movement

By Gary Goldstein

After listening to the news conference in spring 2010 from Germany that Roland Emmerich's movie *Anonymous* would use the Prince Tudor theory as the rationale behind the Shakespeare authorship issue, members of the Shakespeare Fellowship Board understood the need to address the issue formally. The nine members agreed to consider publishing a statement sometime next year in advance of the movie's worldwide release in October 2011. I then initiated the process by forwarding a draft statement in April to the Board for consideration, which led, in turn, to a teleconference for discussion among Board members.

The debate was heated and based on a division of Trustees among three points of view – 1) we needed to separate the Oxfordian movement from the PT theory given that the reaction to unfounded accusations of degeneracy against Queen Elizabethan I and William Shakespeare would enrage scholars, theater professionals and the general public. Of equal weight, despite 75 years of time in which to gather evidence to make their case, PT theory advocates have been effectively refuted by scholars in publications such as the *Elizabethan Review*, *The Oxfordian* and *Brief Chronicles*; 2) PT advocates who insisted the Board had no right to make a statement criticizing any theory in accordance with the Fellowship's original charter, and 3) agnostic Board members who had no knowledge of the PT case but voted to maintain neutrality regarding any authorship theory.

The anti-PT Board members reiterated to opposing members the enormous downside to associating PT in any way with the Oxfordian movement – accusing two global icons such as Queen Elizabeth I and William Shakespeare with double incest with no supporting historical documentation would likely create a significant assault on all Oxfordian scholarship, rendering it both ridiculous and contemptuous. Hence, the viability of all Oxfordian organizations were at risk if Oxfordian organizations did not take a position on the intellectual credibility of PT.

The debate continued via email for almost two months, with the two attorneys on the Board working together to prepare a statement that incorporated half-a-dozen revisions to the original draft. It was

finally presented to the Board in June. Unfortunately, only 5 members –the minimum necessary for approval - voted for passage, with others either voting against or abstaining in protest. The statement appeared on the websites of the Shakespeare Fellowship, De Vere Society and the German Oxfordian Society. The full text appears below:

THE SHAKESPEARE FELLOWSHIP'S STATEMENT ON THE FILM 'ANONYMOUS'

"The Shakespeare Fellowship commends Roland Emmerich for directing the film, *Anonymous*, but stresses that this production's "Prince Tudor" narratives are not essential to the theory that the Earl of Oxford was the writer "Shakespeare."

"The Shakespeare Fellowship resoundingly supports the proposition that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the true genius behind the works of William Shakespeare, and congratulates Roland Emmerich on his movie, *Anonymous*, the first major feature film to deal with this fascinating subject. We hope the film will encourage people to explore the authorship question and decide for themselves whether William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon was the true author of the great plays and poems traditionally ascribed to him.

"The Shakespeare Fellowship notes that Mr. Emmerich characterizes his film as a work of fiction. He makes no claim that all of the events depicted in the film are true. He is fully aware that two elements of his story – that Oxford was the son of Queen Elizabeth, and that Oxford and Elizabeth had a child who was raised as the 3rd Earl of Southampton – are not endorsed by historians, most Oxford biographers, or the majority of those who hold that the Earl of Oxford was "Shakespeare". These hypotheses – often referred to as "Prince Tudor" or "Royal Bastard" theories – are also not essential to the view that Oxford was the true author of the works.

"The controversial "Prince Tudor" theories have existed for decades, but supporting historical evidence is lacking. The Shakespeare Fellowship respects the right of "Prince Tudor" advocates to make their arguments based on historical documents and other forms of evidence that reflect respected methods of scholarship. However, there are many contemporary documents – letters, wills, and various governmental records – which confirm that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the son of the

16th Earl and his Countess, Margery Golding, and that Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, was the son of the 2nd Earl and his Countess, Mary Browne.

“The fundamental case for the 17th Earl of Oxford as the true author of the Shakespeare canon is rapidly gaining support. Nothing about that case requires a narrative involving royal bastardy. Nor is such a theory needed to understand the works, or the author’s need for anonymity. To learn more about the authorship question and the case for Oxford, visit the Shakespeare Fellowship and Brief Chronicles websites.”

The postings generated a concerted reaction from a handful of PT advocates privately and also on the Concordia University listserv moderated by Prof. Daniel Wright. The SF president, Earl Showerman, MD, (and the Board) was accused by a literal handful of individuals with censorship, betrayal of the Fellowship’s founding charter, “cannibalizing our best scholars” (ie, PT advocates) and personal invective. PT members on the SF Board echoed the accusations to the full Board repeatedly – even after Dr. Showerman acquiesced to the minority’s demand to reconsider the motion, adding that he would introduce a motion to withdraw the entire statement until the Board could view the movie in its entirety to ascertain its content. At that point, the Board could reconsider issuing a statement concerning the movie and PT.

The motion was reconsidered on July 14th via teleconference, and 8 of its 9 members voted to withdraw the June statement in its entirety. Indeed, the president was so certain of the outcome that days before the Board convened, he emailed the editors of the DVS Newsletter and German website to be prepared to remove the statement after the Board’s vote. I was the only Board member who did not approve the motion – and resigned from the Board in protest at the Board’s appeasement of the minority PT faction, which is represented by a very small number of members in the Fellowship. By this measure (of representation) alone, the Board betrayed its membership; by abdicating its intellectual responsibility to the larger Oxfordian movement, the Board was unable to protect the movement’s scholarly reputation.

Lynne Kositsky, member of the Fellowship’s Nominating Committee, has resigned her position. Moreover, Dr. Showerman has now informed the Board that he will resign at the end of his current

term in 2012. Regardless, the likelihood of the Fellowship issuing a statement critical of PT in the autumn is nil, as the PT faction and allies control the SF Board. To paraphrase Roger Parisious's prophetic question from 1998: "Is the Shakespeare Fellowship to become a scholarly society with a lunatic fringe or a lunatic core with a scholarly fringe?" With the behavior of the Shakespeare Fellowship Board of Trustees, that has been answered in full. The leadership of the Oxfordian movement now rests with European Oxfordians in England and Germany.

Gary Goldstein is currently managing editor of Brief Chronicles (2009 – present), available online at www.briefchronicles.com. He was a trustee of the Shakespeare Fellowship from 2009-2011, and former editor of The Elizabethan Review from 1993-2001 (see www.elizabethanreview.com).