



Our November/December 2011 issue generated more reader response than any other in the past couple of years. Most letters were about the cover article on Shakespeare and a column on teachers unions (the latter appear in *Follow-Up*, page 46), but many other topics stimulated responses as well. We can give only a sample here but thank all who wrote.

—EDITOR

Did Shakespeare Write Shakespeare?

Joe Nickell's article "Did Shakespeare Write 'Shakespeare?'" in the November/December 2011 issue provided a very useful survey of this wiggly corner of pseudo-scholarship. However, as Kendrick Frazier points out in his News and Comment article "The Age of Denialism" in the same issue, no mere display of facts will ever convert the Oxfordians or Baconians into Stratfordians because their reasons for belief are psychological and social, not rational. So just how should the skeptic confront these and other denialists? Frazier

failed to mention one of the most powerful tools in the skeptic's toolbox: parody, a weapon Voltaire and Swift were expert at wielding.

I remember reading a delightful article a number of years ago in which the author, using the tactics of the Baconians, purported to prove that George Bernard Shaw could not have written his plays. The author mirrored the arguments used by the anti-Stratfordians, citing Shaw's deficient formal education and his animosity towards schools and teachers, his humble beginnings, etc. He then applied a ludicrously convoluted decryption algorithm to a Shavian passage. Out popped the message: "This play was written by Winston Churchill."

Jet Foncannon
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Joe Nickell's article on the authorship of "Shakespeare's" plays is up to Nickell's customary high standards of investigation and clear writing. But I think that the fundamental flaw of the anti-Stratfordian claims can be put

more succinctly than he does. It's an elementary logical gaffe; namely, passing off your *conclusion* as a *premise*. This sort of fallacy is starkly seen in something like Mark Twain's assertion that Queen Elizabeth I must have been a man, because no woman could have said and done the things Queen Elizabeth I said and did.

More than that, though, I'd like to recommend to Nickell and his readers *Contested Will*, the wittily titled recent work by James Shapiro. When Shapiro is through setting out the history of the various anti-Stratfordian claims and turns to actual scholarship, the change in the whole atmosphere is stunning. After the wire-drawn "reasoning" of the anti-Stratfordians, it's a blast of fresh air to learn, as scholars know, that playwrights of that period didn't publish anything; they sold a play to a company of players (£5 was the going rate—that at a time when a single costume might cost £10); publication was a further way for the players' company to make some more money. Published plays were often anonymous; it's only by chance that we know that Marlowe wrote *Tamburlaine*, and several of the best published plays of the period are without known authors to this day. A playwright had to know a lot about the players on hand, too: either Marlowe in exile or the 17th Earl of Oxford would have been mad to pen a play like *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which Rosalind's lines come to almost a third of the whole play, unless he knew for a fact that a (boy!) actor was on hand who could creditably handle any such thespian burden.

There is much more; it's a fascinating book, and, in addition to the fact that it's well written, the sanity of real scholarship in such an arena is hard to over-praise.

Andrew L. Sihler
Portland, Oregon

Thank you, Joe Nickell. Hopefully your article will, at last, put to rest all the silly speculation on who wrote the works of Shakespeare.

In his role as theatre director Jonathan Miller was frequently asked if he thought it was actually Shakespeare who wrote the plays, and his stock answer was "It could have been somebody else with the same name."

Jim Cranwell
Whitby, Ontario, Canada

Isaac Asimov commented that Shakespeare made so many mistakes in his astronomy/cosmology (not that he ever used those words) that the plays could not have been written by Francis Bacon, who was an expert on sixteenth-century science. For example, Shakespeare wrote several times that each fixed star had its own sphere.

Most members of the anti-Shakespeare crowd are elitists, such as Enoch Powell, who said that no one who wasn't intimate with royalty could write so well about their relationships. Of course, anyone who has participated in a social organization, service club, or guild knows a lot about naked ambition and greed for power.

Somebody, tongue in cheek, said that Marlowe was not killed in the brawl but was spirited away to save him from a Spanish hit squad, and scholars have ever since listened for the sound of typing coming from an anonymous Elizabethan tomb.

Howard F. Heller, MD
Seattle, Washington

I liked Joe's article on "Did Shakespeare Write 'Shakespeare?'" but I think he missed an opportunity by not reporting about the stylistics analyses that have been made at Amherst College in Massachusetts and other places (see www.umass.edu/newsoffice/storyarchive/articles/39476.php).

Apparently there is at least one poem that was not Shakespeare's but the major plays are his.

Don Bollenbacher
Huntsville, Alabama

I was disappointed in reading Joe Nickell's article. There are schol-

ars and other experts who have doubts concerning Shakespeare's authorship and with good reason. To arbitrarily consign these scholars to a "looking-glass world" is to do them a disservice. I found it interesting that Nickell cites the code experts William and Elizabeth Friedman for their work in repudiating Elizabeth Gallup's attempt at decipherment. However, he fails to mention that the Friedmans also had their doubts about Shakespeare. The fact remains that we may never know for certain if Shakespeare did indeed write Shakespeare. Nickell usually writes unbiased and objective articles so I will give him a pass on this one.

Jim Murray
Simi Valley, California

As a skeptic and staunch supporter of CSI, I have no problem with a critical examination of the "anti-Stratfordian" position on the Shakespeare authorship issue. But Joe Nickell and Editor Kendrick Frazier ("From the Editor," p. 4) offer, instead, little more than sneering ad hominem ridicule (equating all anti-Stratfordians with UFO cranks), while ignoring most relevant facts.

It is extremely implausible, some would say an extraordinary claim requiring extraordinary evidence, to suppose that a middle-class merchant and actor from Stratford, who may or may not have gone to a local grammar school, never traveled outside England, and died with no books to his name, wrote the works we know as those of "Shakespeare" (works pervaded by aristocratic perspectives and sensibilities). Pseudonyms and ghostwriters have been common throughout literary history. It is hardly "bizarre" (as Frazier flippantly suggests) to suppose that a conventionally credited author "didn't actually write the plays and poems attributed to him."

Nickell invokes Occam's Razor, but the simplest explanation is that the author of these works was an aristocrat himself with the resources and opportunity to travel widely, spend many years obtaining a highly sophisticated classical education, and

purchase a large number of books (expensive items in those days) that were obvious and essential sources for the plays. Of course the author was a genius; the question is who is the most plausible genius to have actually written them? Nickell simply ignores the enormous mass of textual and historical evidence linking the works to events and persons in the life of a specific aristocrat, Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford (a poet and patron of the arts praised under his own name by contemporaries for his literary skill). Instead, Nickell wastes time knocking down easy straw men like the long-discredited "Baconian" and "Marlovian" theories.

Nickell accuses anti-Stratfordians of "start[ing] with the answer they want and work[ing] backward to the evidence." He also, contradictorily, complains that it took hundreds of years for critics to develop serious doubts about the conventional view and to zero in on Oxford as the likely author, a conclusion that only emerged after a diligent English schoolmaster, with the easily ridiculed name of J. Thomas Looney (still more *ad hominem* cheap shots!), puzzled over the mass of available evidence and arrived at the Oxfordian hypothesis in 1920. Nickell's accusation is ironic as well as false because he himself seems to start from the premise that the received orthodox view must be true—odd indeed for a professional skeptic.

So who are the real skeptics here? I side with the Oxfordians.

Bryan H. Wildenthal
Professor of Law
Thomas Jefferson School of Law
San Diego, California

Joe Nickell responds:

The letter writers who understand that Shakespeare wrote "Shakespeare" are obviously engaging in critical thinking. Modesty prevents me from commenting on some of their compliments except to offer sincere thanks for them.

I must protest, however, that I did not—by any stretch of the imagination—"arbitrarily" consign the anti-Stratfordians to a looking-glass world. They traveled there on

their own. May I ask anyone who thinks otherwise to please reread my brief history of the silliness. I understand that cranks and conspiracy theorists want to be treated with all the respect due legitimate scholars, but to do so would be to pretend they are what they are not. If any apology is due, however, I will offer one: I'm sorry that they are cranks.

Now, Bryan H. Wildenthal's assertion—that it is "extremely implausible" for a non-aristocrat to have written the works of Shakespeare—is the unfounded foundation upon which the crumbling edifice of anti-Stratfordian pseudo-scholarship is assembled. Wildenthal's attempt to reverse the burden of proof thus falls on his head, and his byplay with Occam's Razor ends up nicking him in the process.

That'd Be Quite a Conspiracy

I read with amusement the article "Civilizations Lost and Found" (September/October and November/December 2011 issues); the documentary *The Lost Civilizations of North America* implied that modern public (Americans') ignorance of the ancient American mound-building societies is a conspiracy of silence. It has been reported for years that the general public in America is quite deprived of common knowledge, such as failure to name the capital of Canada or to locate another state or country on the map, let alone knowledge of Native American ancient culture. So instead of reasons of indifference, disinterest, or apathetic attitude toward anything except people's own immediate environment, it is because of conspiracy! A conspiracy to keep the general public ignorant, which could date back for decades! A vast organization that includes academic, media, school, and civic societies (and government of course) all conspired to keep knowledge from Americans for years! And no one ever blogged/Facebooked/ tweeted about it? Truly shocking!

Mio Sam Lao
Princeton, New Jersey

The Exeter Incident

I read with interest James McGaha and Joe Nickell's in-depth investigation of the legendary Incident at Exeter (November/December 2011). They have come up with a probable solution to at least some of the sightings involved, although it is hard to believe the "KC-97 refueling plane" hypothesis would apply to the string of sightings mentioned. As a former Air Force officer (in charge of UFO Blue Book sightings for an airbase, no less!) I feel that McGaha and Nickell may have overlooked an important aspect of the sightings—no noise. Although no noise was associated with the sightings in the article, when you consider that the KC-97 tanker was one of the largest, most powerful piston-engined aircraft of its day, it's simply not possible that witnesses would not immediately recognize the sound of a plane overhead.

Based on a major upgrade of the famous B-29 bomber, the KC-97 was powered by four huge piston engines and many additionally had two J-47 jet engines tucked under the wings. If the KC-97 tanker aircraft was refueling at the time, it would have been under full power in order to keep up with the all-jet B-47 bomber being refueled. That's a total of four large piston engines and eight jet engines for the two planes—a significant source of aircraft noise that would be detectable from all but high altitudes. If, however, the aircraft were refueling at a low altitude, the noise would easily thunder across the ground below, and the planes would only be in view for a quick pass overhead. Note, however, refueling was almost always done at moderate to high altitudes to cut fuel consumption and for added safety in calmer air. The signal lights on a KC-97 are not ultra-bright flood lights that would night blind the B-47 pilot and the refueling crews.

Also, while the planes would have been at 10,000 feet or more, I doubt they could have presented the terrorizing threat as experienced by the police officer and the teenager. These aspects of the sightings don't seem to add

up, for me at least. It is hard to envision a refueling scenario that might account for the eyewitness descriptions.

So, while the fine details of the KC-97 solution seem to nicely fit the solution hypothesis, I believe the lack of noise and brilliant lights indicate that there may be more work to do on this case. I certainly don't have the knowledge or experience of McGaha or Nickell (both of whom are acknowledged top-notch experts in their fields), but I feel that these two items might be addressed before the case is marked, at long last, "closed."

Ralph McGeehan
Tinton Falls, New Jersey

The article on the Exeter UFO was interesting, but can I ask a question? The article says there was a B-47 refueling from a KC-97. Now the B-47 had six General Electric J-47 engines, and back then that was a loud engine, not like the quiet turbo fans of today. The KC-97L had four Pratt & Whitney R-4360 engines (loud also) plus two J-47s added; the KC-97 needed all that power so it could go fast enough (not slow moving) to keep the B-47 from stalling. The refueling was not at a high altitude, but around 20,000 to 25,000 feet, if that high. So why no comments about any engine noise or lack thereof? One could hear that combination of engine noise at least ten miles away as the planes were up high.

Elias J. Vujovich
Southington, Ohio

Exeter solved? Maybe not.

While it's hard for a ground-based observer to assess an aerial object's size and distance, the pilots of refueling craft must know their altitude very precisely.

Since refueling doesn't occur at tree-top levels, nor is the fuel boom deployed on takeoff and landing, it's probable actively fueling craft would be rather high—say, at least 5,000 feet. Actual altitude is not addressed in the article, yet it's critical to the case.

From the ground, it is difficult to distinguish two adjacent separate point sources of bright light at that distance, much less a forward-and-reverse five-light sequence. The entire craft would appear very much like a single light source.

The fuel boom does not oscillate wildly during deployment—that would be dangerous, and that's what the stabilizing wings are intended to prevent. At a distance of a mile, any controlled wobble in the boom would be unapparent and unlikely to be mistaken for a "falling-leaf" motion.

Nor would an apparently slow-moving mile-high light source, even a very bright one, be likely to scare a witness into a ditch for fear of impending collision.

Jon Hauxwell
Hays, Kansas

Joe Nickell and James McGaha respond:

*The issue of noise is interesting. Allan Hendry, of the Center for UFO Studies, observed that in cases where aircraft are positively identified, "One of the leading causes of surprise is the inability of the reporting witness to hear any noise from the aircraft." Even in cases where advertising planes were identified with absolute confidence, he said, "Witnesses claimed that the planes were silent in 91 percent of the reports I received." (See Hendry's classic *The UFO Handbook*, 1979, pp. 34, 38–39.)*

Such apparent silence is attributable to several factors, including the "weapon-focus effect" (mentioned in our article). As well, the lower-power setting of the B-47's engine (necessary for refueling) would render that plane much quieter than usual. Moreover, sound may be dampened by such factors as temperature, temperature inversions, prevailing air currents, air pressure, absorption properties of the surrounding environment, and other environmental factors. Of significance is the plane's distance from the observer and the low angular altitude—as we propose in this case—which provides more atmosphere for the sounds to pass through and more ground objects to reflect

and absorb sound.

The low angular altitude also very likely helps explain the illusion that the plane was flying close to the ground. This is consistent with a frightened witness reporting that the lights "would go down behind the trees, behind a house and then reappear." In addition, during refueling the KC-97 did not fly level but descended (to gain air speed).

Turning to the other issues, we calculate that the sequencing lights in question would indeed allow for the necessary resolution. As to the oscillation, an inexperienced pilot (as could be expected for a practice exercise) can often have trouble smoothly flying while connected to the boom, among other explanations.

Clearly, the best evidence consists of the red sequencing lights (flashing "one, two, three, four, five, four three, two, one"), as well as their 60-degree incline, and extreme brightness (rendering other features of the UFO indistinguishable from the ground). This, together with the fact that just such a plane can reasonably be placed where the UFO was, should leave little doubt as to its identification as a KC-97 refueling plane. To put this aside on the basis of the speculative issues raised—particularly regarding witnesses' behavior—would represent, we feel, a serious mistake in judgment.

9/11 Military/Industrial Complex

In their thought-provoking commentary "9/11: Perspectives from a Decade Later" (November/December 2011), Clark Chapman and Alan Harris state, "We are disappointed and puzzled that, a decade after the attacks, there has been minimal return to the status quo ante."

Their next sentence would seem to contain the answer they seek: "The Homeland Security infrastructure continues to grow." Put another way, there's gold in them there terrorist-infested hills.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the '90s, I expected our military expenditures to lessen; they rose. "Follow the money" may be the best advice for explaining why things are they way

they are, especially when billions and trillions are involved.

I'm disappointed that we sold our ideals to fear-mongers and security hucksters, and I wish we'd deal with the snake-oil salesmen appropriately for lying to us about what their elixirs will do. But my money's on the big money, until the military-industrial Bastilles get stormed.

Dave Suess
Hermosa Beach, California

The Age of Denialism

I applaud Kendrick Frazier's commentary on "the age of denialism" (SI, November/December 2011) about the resistance to scientific evidence among various denialist movements. Frazier notes that providing people who hold strong beliefs reliable information that undermines those beliefs causes them to cling to their positions even more rigidly, as they are based on causes rather than on evidence. He adds that this bias is an unconscious process in which cognitive dissonance filters out facts contradicting our views. A skeptical position—one of inquiry and doubt—should be an effective antidote to denialism. Yet, as Frazier noted, the term "skeptic" is sometimes usurped by deniers who are hostile to inquiry and have no doubt about the truth of their beliefs, refusing to consider evidence to the contrary.

One example of denialism not mentioned in Frazier's commentary involves the refusal to look at any evidence that some aspects of consciousness might not result entirely from physiological processes. It is far easier to deny the evidence for consciousness than to accept that the materialistic worldview is incomplete. However, the philosophical belief that all mental phenomena can be understood in terms of material particles and fields is incompatible with the data from contemporary physics in regard to the interaction of consciousness with mechanical processes.

Bruce Greyson, MD
Department of Psychiatry

and Neurobehavioral Sciences
University of Virginia

Kendrick Frazier replies: I appreciate your kind remarks about my article about denialism. I'm not sure, however, I share your view that consciousness should be placed in the same category as the other topics commonly subject to denialist arguments, nor that "materialistic" science is still not the best route to eventually understanding it.

UFO to IFO

I thought you might be interested in a UFO sighting that very quickly became an IFO sighting.

The sighting occurred in 1972 while my wife and I were living in a northern suburb of Columbus, Ohio. It was early fall and the weather had just turned cool. The humidity was very low and the sky was transparent. In short, it was a perfect night for stargazing. I had been an amateur astronomer for several years so I set up my six-inch reflector as soon as it got dark.

After several hours of looking through the telescope, I sat back and just looked up at the beautiful night sky. It was at this point that I saw a UFO. It was on a north-to-south path that took it almost over my location. I estimated that it was at a very high altitude and moving with extreme velocity. It was roughly circular in shape and had an overall orange glow. I had a pilot's license and so was familiar with aircraft lighting. This object was not displaying any standard aircraft lighting. I could detect no sound or exhaust. Its most interesting feature was that the orange glow was rhythmically pulsing.

At this point I thought that I had, after a number of years looking up at the night sky, finally seen a UFO. As I was wondering what to do about it, I saw two more UFOs. They were on almost the same path as the first. They were flying with one behind the other. I figured that if three objects had come by, perhaps there might be another one soon.

I didn't have long to wait. I spotted three UFOs on the north-to-south path but slightly off to the side of the previous objects. They were arranged in an arc with the middle object in the lead. I got my binoculars on them and they immediately became IFOs.

What was my IFO?

Well, the IFOs were Canada geese. Almost everything that I thought I knew was wrong. First, they were probably no more than 100 feet overhead and traveling at a sedate goose speed. I should have figured out the orange glow. Our community had recently installed low-sodium vapor street lights. On overcast nights the clouds had an orange glow. The gray geese made a good reflector for the street lights. The pulsing also became apparent. When a goose's wings were either above or below the horizontal, they didn't reflect light to my eye. When they were horizontal the cross sectional area of the goose was much greater and so the reflected light intensity was also greater. The goose was not getting brighter and dimmer. It was getting larger and smaller.

I had assumed that the object was a solid body and so the change in light intensity was seen as a pulsating body. Once I knew what I was looking at, I was able to see the next IFO was changing size as it flew by.

I suppose that the early fall and north-to-south path should have brought to mind migrating waterfowl. Even if it had, I doubt that I would have accepted that solution without seeing it with my own eyes.

Ron Saunders
Montgomery Village,
Maryland

Very instructive. Many UFO sightings are indeed now thought to be due to reflections off flocks of birds, and even swarms of insects.

—EDITOR

The Perpetual Quest

Regarding "The Perpetual Quest" (September/October 2011): years ago, when I worked

for IBM's STD (Storage Technology Division) as test engineer, I thought to make a test and devised a perpetual machine, which I offered to the facility manager as an improvement proposal to save energy.

The "invention" consisted of a chain of empty cans moving between two wheels like a belt saw. One leg of the chain moves through a basin of water, sealed with a hose to prevent the water from leaking.

As soon one can enters the water out of the hose from below, the buoyancy will push it to the surface of the water. At the same time, the next can is drawn into the basin to repeat the cycle.

I added a sketch and a formula. I also recommended a brake to prevent an attached generator from overload and using mercury would increase the power twenty-seven-fold. I didn't tell that the down drag is always larger than the buoyancy.

After three weeks I became nervous because no rejection had arrived. What if a first-level or, worse, second-level manager ordered this machine to be built?

Instead I got a call from a facility engineer asking how I would seal the cans in the hose. I explained to that guy that this proposal was intended as a joke and beseeched him to reject that proposal.

Two weeks later another facility guy called and asked me to explain to him the formula! I told him that the formula contains an error and was able to convince him (I think) that this perpetual mobile won't work.

This was a lesson to me.

Heinz F. Lenk
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Dowsing Belief

As someone who works in the field of underground detection, I can confirm Benjamin Radford's assertion from his Skeptical Inquiree response (September/October 2011) that belief in dowsing is peculiarly persistent, even in official capacities.

My colleagues and I use electromagnetic instruments to de-

tect subsurface utilities and other items of interest in support of future remediation or construction efforts. Once while locating utilities on several gas stations, my coworker and I discovered that the local, publicly funded "One-Call" water-service markouts were sometimes wildly inaccurate. When we offhandedly mentioned this to the gentleman performing the public telephone service markout, he responded by asking, "You know how that guy locates?" He then held his fists up at chest-level and slowly turned them toward each other. The man marking the water service was using good ol' fashioned witching sticks, obviously ineffectively, to detect sensitive utilities in the hopes of avoiding them during excavation operations. Imagine how much damage can be done and expense spent under these circumstances, not to mention the potential loss of life if such procedures are used to "find" natural gas pipelines.

Russ Dobler
Tarrytown, New York

[FEEDBACK]

The letters column is a forum on matters raised in previous issues. **Letters should be no longer than 225 words.** Due to the volume of letters we receive, not all can be published. Send letters as email text (not attachments) to letters@csicop.org. In the subject line, provide your surname and informative identification, e.g.: "Smith Letter on Jones evolution article." Include your name and address at the end of the letter. You may also mail your letter to the editor to 944 Deer Dr. NE, Albuquerque, NM 87122, or fax it to 505-828-2080.



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