

# 'Monstrous Adversary' by Alan Nelson

Observations by Kevin Gilvary, Philip Johnson & Eddi Jolly

*"Since 1920, Oxford has been touted by amateur historians and conspiracy theorists as the true author of the poems and plays of William Shakespeare. It has become a matter of urgency to measure the real Oxford against the myth created by his apologists, and uncritically embraced by television documentaries, by playwrights and by the popular press..."*

*Quoted by the publishers on the back cover from the author's introduction (omitting the final "even by justices of the United States Supreme Court")*

This is a detailed, fully referenced monograph, which should be seen as essential for anyone who wants to know more about the life of Edward de Vere or is trying to consider the authorship question fairly. It is chronologically ordered, and has a large number of transcriptions of contemporary documents.

However, Professor Nelson's chosen focus is not why there is an authorship question, nor the circumstances of Oxford's life that led Looney and his successors to suggest Oxford as the author of the Shakespeare canon; instead, he concentrates almost exclusively upon Oxford's character, which he clearly sees as 'monstrous'. Serious questions remain.

Alan Nelson a distinguished professor of English at the prestigious University of California at Berkeley, is one of the few Stratfordians to listen to Oxfordians and this volume (in the Liverpool English Texts and Studies series) shows that he does not sink to dismissive jokes about Looney.

But his deliberate omission of discussion about the reasons giving rise to the Authorship Question is cunning: is it because that would open too many readers' eyes to the discrepancy between the Shaksper of Stratford-upon-Avon and the achievements of the plays? With no historical references to Shaksper's education, no known access to books, no recorded payment for plays, no obvious access to French or Italian languages.

**Q** However, since *Monstrous Adversary* is written partly to refute Looney's and Oxfordians' hypothesis that Oxford wrote the plays, is it apt to infer that Nelson acknowledges the difficulty of reconciling the achievement of the plays with the documentary life of Shaksper?

Nelson does not address some of the peculiar circumstantial evidence which some Oxfordians see as making Oxford a more likely candidate for the authorship than Shaksper. This 'evidence' includes Oxford's capture by pirates (added scene in *Hamlet*), his caper on Gad's Hill, the bed-fellow substitution, his three daughters, etc.

Professor G. Bullough sees as topicality in *Hamlet re Mary, Queen of Scots*, the detailed knowledge of Italy, apparently first hand, the identification of Polonius with Burghley by various historians' eg Rowse, the author's apparent first hand knowledge of Italy – all of which are understandable if Oxford is the author.

Several aspects are played down, such as the letter Oxford wrote in French which is dismissed as probably dictated by his tutor – evidence? Or p 130 'the words may have been Oxford's but they are more likely to have come from such as Golding.' Any achievements Oxford might have had are systematically undermined.

**Q** Does Nelson dismiss as merely coincidental some of this circumstantial evidence which appears to link Oxford and the plays? What is Nelson's view of some of this evidence? Why does he avoid discussing this when the claim is made in the preface and on the back cover?

B M Ward's biography in 1928 had the neutral title: *The seventeenth Earl of Oxford*; his publishers did not permit him to argue specifically that Oxford might have written the plays. Nelson's title begins with *Monstrous* and is clearly derogatory. Early on he rubbishes Oxfordians: 'True believers will of course spin Oxford's reprehensible acts into benevolent gestures' Yet on the same page he admits to judging Oxford 'harshly' (5).

Nelson's bias is also evident in his choice of chapter headings, eg c 59 'No Enemy can envy this match'. Many chapters are calculatedly end-weighted with a pejorative view of Oxford: p 33 'His son, now twelve, would suffer the same fate of inconsequence.' p 47 'Honour, like wealth, came not for what he did, but for who he was' [somewhat ambiguous]; p 67 'Oxford was neither a Latin scholar, nor even a fully competent practitioner of his native English.' Discerning readers can easily skim ends of chapters to see the frequency of this biased end weighting of chapters – hardly an 'open-minded' reader Nelson claims to be (p 5).

Nor is it limited to the ends of chapters – a random opening of the book at p 188 gives a sentence standing on its own beneath a transcript 'It is not known whether Oxford ever settled this debt'. This is indeed a sustained attack on Oxford's character. Moreover, it seems that financial ineptitude and immorality are so emphasised that these are among the primary reasons for disqualifying Oxford from the authorship. Odd, when we see great men like presidents, eg Kennedy, composers eg Beethoven, Wagner, poets eg Byron, Burns, novelists eg Dickens, still achieving greatness despite personal flaws.

**Q** Does Nelson really consider immorality and /or financial ineptitude as a major or even significant reason against his authorship?

Oxford's hand-written spelling is different from the printed works of Shakespeare. There are also differences between Oxford's writings from 1570 – 1600 and the F1 of 1623. eg Oxford often spelt 'like' and its derivatives as 'leke' as indeed Dr Richard Master quoted on p 122. This was a time when spelling could be highly idiosyncratic; contemporaries were suggesting different methods for reform, while printers were searching for standard spelling to maximise their audience and their profits. Caxton had lamented orthographic inconsistencies in 1496. Sir Thomas Smith, Oxford's one time tutor, issued suggestions for an augmented alphabet in 1568. Bullokar made less sweeping suggestions in 1580, Mulcaster in 1582. None gained widespread acceptance. No standard emerges until Dr Johnson's Dictionary in 1755

**Q** How can Nelson be sure that differences between Oxford's handwriting in the 16th century and printers' preferences in the early 17th century argue against Oxford as Shakespeare?

It is difficult to read and transcribe documents of this time and Nelson does make some transcriptions errors himself. On p 434 'travayle' is glossed as 'travel' when it would be 'travail' (a common typographical convention of <y> for <i> word medially). Other errors were acknowledged at the meeting on Jan 17 and on his website.

Dr Roger Stritmatter's investigation of the Geneva Bible stamped with the Earls of Oxford's crest seems to be dismissed with a brief query about whether the annotations were in Oxford's hand.

**Q** Has Nelson examined this bible, in the Folger? Has he an opinion on whether it is Oxford's handwriting? If it were identified as Oxford's handwriting, how would that in Nelson's view affect the authorship question?

Nelson's arguments against Oxford include his different spellings, his bad character, his errors in Latin, the limited number of dedications to him in comparison with some others, his extant poetry which ranges from poor to quite pleasing - though could it have been juvenilia? And doesn't Shakespeare 'nod' sometimes in the plays?

**Q** Would Nelson agree that these are his principal arguments against Oxford? Or what would he put forward as the most compelling evidence against Oxford?

Nelson's book appears to move the argument to specific areas: Oxford's conduct as a husband, his poor attendance at court, his financial ineptitude, his non-standard spellings. Generally, Nelson's points are no more relevant to the Authorship Question than Shaksper's grain dealings.

Nelson's book, however, does raise important issues that Oxfordians must continue to address. The conventional dates for some of the plays comes after Oxford's death; the records do not show Oxford's players performing any of the plays of Shakespeare; why has so little been uncovered to support Oxford as Shakespeare since Looney?

Both the book and the author's willingness to enter into discussion are valuable; but it is part, not the whole, of Oxford's relevance to the Authorship Question. Monstrous Adversary not only ignores the reasons behind the authorship question but also plays down or ignores the circumstantial evidence which gives Oxford the education, access to books, first-hand knowledge of Court, Italy and other life experience missing in Shaksper's life.