

Why I am an Oxfordian

By Kevin Gilvary

Newsletter Editor Kevin Gilvary reviews the opinions of the members of the De Vere Society

Main Doubts about Stratford

Members were keenly aware of the shortcomings in the traditional account of William Shakespeare. These have been explored in detail by Diana Price in Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography. (Waterstone's £40 - if you don't have a copy or can't afford one, order it for your local library). There is a lack of evidence linking William of Stratford to the role of playwright. She lists 10 types of contemporary document which could help identify someone as a poet or a playwright and compares 24 Elizabethan and Jacobean writers. Jonson has all ten and John Webster has only three – the lowest apart from William of Stratford.

Perhaps like Schoenbaum "we should despair of ever bridging the vertiginous expanse between the sublimity of the subject and the mundane inconsequence of the documentary record." (Shakespeare's Lives 767). Writing a biography of Shakespeare is like making bricks without straw.

Main Arguments in favour of De Vere

Most members were struck by the remarkable similarities between the life of De Vere and events portrayed in the plays. As Samuel Schoenbaum remarked: "The Earl can scarcely restrain himself from putting in an appearance everywhere in the canon." (Shakespeare's Lives 600). Virtually, every play raises issues that were crucial in Oxford's life.

These many aspects of the life of Edward de Vere are amply attested in Alan Nelson's Monstrous Adversary. I am not sure whether the title actually refers to the subject or the author as Nelson never misses an opportunity to vilify de Vere; the phrase "character assassination" seems to be an understatement. It is however thorough and well-researched, with transcriptions of a huge range of material; absolutely indispensable for any would-be Oxfordian. But many of the judgements are suspect; as Joe Sobran says: "Nelson sounds like a Puritan preacher disapproving of Falstaff." Order it for yourself. Order it for your local library.

Why not other candidates?

Many members expressed the wish that the De Vere Society as a whole keep on good terms with kindred

anti-Stratfordian groups. In fact, we do send a copy of the DVS newsletter to the Shakespeare Authorship Trust and to the Marlowe Society, which sensibly adopts an agnostic line on the Authorship. We are also polite to other groups at the Shakespeare Authorship Conference at the Globe.

We may believe, indeed most of us do believe, that Oxford as Shakespeare fits best with the existing evidence, but this entails a lower estimation of other candidates. One thorough treatment of these candidates for authorship has been made by John Michell Who Wrote Shakespeare? (Waterstones £10, reduced to £7). If you don't have a copy of Michell, buy it or at least order it for your local library. After an opening chapter which surveys the wonderful learning displayed in the works eg in law and the aristocracy, seamanship and the military, psychology and medicine, knowledge of the Bible and of Italian culture, contemporary and classical literature, plants and flowers, falconry and hunting, Michell then considers various candidates in turn.

The original alternative to Stratford was Sir Francis Bacon, but his case no longer carries conviction. While his extant works show enormous erudition, he did not write poetry and did not have a reputation among contemporaries as a dramatist. A leading Baconian, Peter Dawkins, has just published a study called The Shakespeare Enigma in which he argues that Bacon was the leader of a group of authors. This plausible idea (with Oxford in place of Bacon) has been argued by many Oxfordians including Montagu Douglas and Arthur Challinor, and we should consider it as at least a possibility. Of course many believe that this is already the case with Oxford, Lyly and Munday.

Christopher Marlowe has of course also been advanced. I am now ready to accept that Marlowe did not die at Deptford and travelled on the Continent; but I am still to be convinced that he wrote the plays of Shakespeare. Marlowe's known works include tragedies and a history, but no comedies to anticipate Much Ado or Midsummer Night's Dream. Nor do his works portray human dilemmas nearly to the same depth as Shakespeare's (Faustus apart). They further lack an aristocratic dimension.

There are other possible candidates: William Stanley, 6th earl of Derby cannot be ruled out entirely. Another candidate, Mary Sidney, has been promoted at the Shakespeare Authorship Conference. I have been interested to find out more, but I am not convinced that hers is the best case. Nor should it surprise us if a persuasive argument can be advanced for another candidate. We should pay careful attention to this and pick out the strengths and weaknesses objectively. We are after all concerned to find out who really did write these wonderful works. We are Oxfordians on the strength of a persuasive circumstantial case, but this has not yet been established beyond a reasonable doubt.

Oxford's circumstantial case

Let us begin with Looney Shakespeare Identified (1920) who identified a list of general characteristics displayed by the author:

- recognised genius
- mysterious; reasons for secrecy
- eccentric
- apparent inferiority
- Englishman of literary tastes
- dramatic interests
- lyric poet
- Classical education

Do we still believe these are the characteristics of the Bard? Members agree yes and it would follow that any candidate would have to satisfy these conditions.

The special characteristics argued by Looney were:

- Lancastrian leanings
- sporting tastes
- enthusiasm for Italy
- interest in music
- negligent towards money
- mixed attitude towards women
- feudal & aristocratic outlook
- Catholic sympathies

Again Members agree with Looney: any other candidate for authorship must account for these characteristics. Objectively, Oxford fulfils all of these criteria most closely, with ample confirmation in Nelson's *Monstrous Adversary*. Nelson does not affect or undermine Oxford's claims to authorship.

Far from it, Nelson confirms that Oxford had all the qualities and characteristics, laid down by Looney as essential to any identification of the author.

Weaknesses in the Oxfordian Case

From the questionnaire, society members clearly appreciate that there are some weak areas in the

Oxford case, and many arguments have been advanced against him; these range from the irrelevant, to the damaging, to the fatal arguments against.

Irrelevant Arguments

Does it matter who wrote the plays? We can of course enjoy the plays and see them in varying interpretations on stage. It is also the preferred approach in education. There are two books entitled *Teaching Shakespeare*: the first edited by Richard Adams and published in 1985 does not even mention authorship or Stratford; the second by Rex Gibson and published in 1998 relegates Shakespeare's *Life and Times* to page 212; the author says: the many uncertainties and unknowns about Shakespeare provide excellent opportunities for students speculation and imaginative exploration.

Such an approach is singled out for Shakespeare. If we are to understand how the plays came about and what they originally meant, then we must address Authorship carefully. If it was a courtier with inside knowledge composed the works, we will miss our biggest insight into Elizabethan political history.

Objections to his moral character, as suggested by Alan Nelson at the DVS meeting in January 2004. This arises from the hagiographic tradition in Bardic biographies, which seems to have developed despite the shady dealings in the documentary record of William of Stratford. As William Rubinstein pointed out this is irrelevant: Michelangelo, Mozart and Wagner were all recognised as geniuses but nobody ever thought them to be nice people.

Isn't it snobbery to doubt the Stratford story? No. Members of the Society come from all walks of life and are united by the belief that William of Stratford can not have written the plays.

Oxford's Company are not known to have performed any of Shakespeare's plays. This point can be answered in two ways: firstly very few plays by Oxford's players are known; secondly, if Oxford was seriously trying to promote his own policy and later the government's policy, he would hardly have used his own players. Compare Hamlet.

Potentially damaging arguments

No reason for secrecy. At the outset, in the 1560s and 1570s, Oxford would have been aware of his status as a noble and would not have compromised it by being too publicly associated with plays and the players. Lords were supposed to win honour through sword and shield, not ink and quill.

Later, however, this consideration does not apply. Considering the depths of disgrace (a topic frequently mentioned in the sonnets and not applicable to William of Stratford), a penchant for poetry scarcely

ranks. He had far greater disgrace eg in publicly accusing his wife of infidelity (another favourite theme in Shakespeare), his later remorse (ditto), his admission of Catholicism (when the Queen had been excommunicated), his imprisonment in the Tower for impregnating his mistress or the loss of his extensive patrimony. After all he might have made some money from writing plays (but not much by his own extravagant standards).

From 1580, Oxford must have had another reason for secrecy, sufficiently well guarded to prevent any plays being linked to his name. The reason may well concern why he ran a group of players; many Oxfordians feel that he was using them to promote his policy at court – against the policies being promoted by Leicester through his players. Like Hamlet, Oxford would need to suppress his authorship: the players just happened to put on *The Murder of Gonzago*. It is possible that Oxford was commissioned to write plays for the Queen's Men, who began playing at court and touring the provinces in 1584 to promote government policy. We know that he was granted a huge annuity from 1586 to preserve his status as an earl. But why the Queen should spend so much on a discredited courtier otherwise remains a mystery.

This mystery becomes resolved if we think of Shakespeare's plays as propaganda. Laurence Olivier realised this; Henry V stands out as the clearest example of a propaganda play and would certainly have made a bigger mark in favour of the government in the mid 1580s with the looming threat of Spain than in 1599. *Richard II* was also a propaganda play – suggesting that while superficially attractive, the deposition of a king, even a weak and badly-advised king is unacceptable.

If Oxford did write plays on behalf of the government, then anonymity would have been all important. His playing company continues to tour but no longer plays at court; he himself takes less interest in it. This anonymous support for the Tudor monarchy and the religious settlement was maintained until 1598 when so many questions were being asked about where the plays had come from that the name of a company member was used. It is a theory which explains his earlier anonymity and later pseudonymy.

The quality of Oxford's known poetry. This argument is frequently asserted, but few doubters of Oxford's case have seriously considered the Benezet Test, published in the last DVS newsletter (April 2004), to see if they could actually distinguish Oxford from Shakespeare. I can't. Nelson observes that much of this attempt to assess Oxford's poetry is

shrouded in bias, either for or against, due to the passions of the Authorship Debate. This does not stop Nelson from expressing his own view that Oxford's poetry pales in comparison to Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare. He then quotes W J Courthope, who in 1897 praised his poems for their ingenuity and concinnity.

Nelson also suggests that Oxford's poetic style is very conservative, including four poems in fourteeners, a style that was already passé in Oxford's youth: perhaps Nelson should have said that to Golding who translated all 15 books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into fourteeners when Oxford was 17; or better what about William of Stratford publishing his sonnets in 1609, about 20 years after Spenser and Sidney. Perhaps Charlton Ogburn argued the best answer: these poems were not prepared for publication and represent juvenalia: some of course are very good eg

If women could be fair and yet not fond . . .
Who taught thee first to sigh alas my heart . . .
Were I a king I could command content . . .

Dating the plays One area that needs to be explained is the continued need for secrecy after 1604 and why they would have been published in 1623. This is a potentially fatal argument concerns dates for the plays which the Society's Dating Project is in the early stages of finalisation.

We should be clear that there is NO evidence for the dates of composition of any of the works: no contemporary says that a work is in progress or nearing completion or being revised or market tested, or paid for newly written. The assumed dates were first suggested by Malone over 150 years after the publication of the First Folio, in 1780. The suggestions were made to fit into an assumed working life of 1590 – 1610, according to a neat pattern of one comedy and one history or tragedy every year. Hence, the suggestion that various plays were written after De Vere's death in 1604. One of these is *Coriolanus* – but this is never mentioned before F1.

Topical allusions in the plays are limited to only one. When the Chorus to Act V of *Henry V* mentions the return the General to our Gracious Empress, there is a reference to Essex, then in Ireland. But it could just as easily have been written ten years earlier and refer to another commander such as Mountjoy. So no topical allusions in Shakespeare.

The Sequence of Publication is very odd. The first Shakespeare play to be printed appeared in 1594. In the next ten years, 15 different plays and two long poems were published. In contrast, in the 10 years

after 1604, only three plays (all inferior quartos) were published: *King Lear* in 1608; *Troilus & Cressida* and *Pericles* and the sonnets in 1609. It would seem that whoever was the author, something serious occurred in 1604 which prevented careful publication of these plays and about 20 others which remained in manuscript until 1623. Yet the winter of 1604-5 coincides with the greatest number of Shakespeare plays put on at court at one time. The death of De Vere explains these dates easily.

The *Tempest* & Sources post 1604 A final potentially fatal argument against Oxford concerns the use of a source available only after 1604, then De Vere's Authorship, at least for that work, would be severely undermined. Firstly: almost all sources for Shakespeare's plays in general were available in the 1580's eg the Geneva Bible, Golding's *Metamorphoses*, Plutarch, Hollinshed; secondly Stratfordians have argued that one play in particular *The Tempest* post dates Oxford's death. The main reasons for making it a late, or even his last play, is the recorded performance at court in November 1611 and the identification of the author with Prospero, whose final abjuration of magic is assumed to be Shakespeare's farewell to the stage. Hence mainstream commentators began to look for tempests and shipwrecks about the end of the Stratford man's career ie about 1610.

In 1609, Strachey wrote an account of his shipwreck in the Bermudas and this is seen by many as a source for *The Tempest* and a silver bullet for the Oxfordian Case. Looney attempted to argue that the play was not by Shakespeare. Indeed with it being so short (about 2,000 lines) and with 500 lines in one scene, mainly consisting of a lengthy exposition by Prospero to Miranda, one wonders whether it really is a late play. The main point is: was it essential for the author to know Strachey's letter in order to have written *The Tempest*?

The Oxford editor in 1987, Stephen Orgel, did not believe so and did not claim any specific link –

only general similarity. The editors of the Arden³ edition (1999), Virginia and Alden Vaughan, only mention three possibilities, none of which are absolute or unique: the name Bermuda (in F1, Ariel mentions Bermoothes); another is St Elmo's fire and the third is the use of the word 'glut'. None of these three usages suggest that the author MUST have used Strachey's letter. We should remember that *The Edward Bonaventure*, in which De Vere had an interest, was lost in the New World in 1593. There are some references in *The Tempest* to customs and peoples in the New World, but many of these had already been described in accounts of Drake's circumnavigation of the Globe (published in 1587) and Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana* (1596).

While most commentators link *The Tempest* to the New World, Shakespeare locates it most definitely in the Old World, specifically the Mediterranean with many references to Naples and Tunis. There is a long literary tradition of shipwrecks: Odysseus suffers two; Aeneas is washed up on the coast of Africa (as mentioned in *The Tempest*); St Paul is shipwrecked on the Island of Malta in the Acts of the Apostles.

Furthermore we should ask about the source for the play (after all, the storm merely brings the characters together). The plot is often said to have been the Bard's own creation. Yet in the *Commedia dell'Arte* there are many similar scenarios in Scala (published at Venice, 1611). There is even an exact scenario for the story, called *Arcadia Incantata*, *The Enchanted Arcadia*, found in a manuscript in Naples and published by Fernando Neri in 1913. It is accepted as a source by Gray in 1920, Kathleen Lea in *Italian Popular Comedy* in 1934, and Allardyce Nicholl in 1963. So far from disqualifying Oxford, *The Tempest* can only have been written by someone who had travelled in Italy and witnessed performances of these scenarios. This person we believe to have been Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford.