Shakespeare's Son on Death Row

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On July 7th, 1998 researcher Peter Dickson gave his third lecture of the year at the Library of Congress on his theory about the publication of the *First Folio* and the Spanish Marriage Crisis. Since our report about Dickson's work in the last issue of the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* he has uncovered more new documents which lend support to his theory about the *Folio* publication.

The July 7th lecture, held at the Hispanic division of the Library of Congress, was highlighted by Dickson's presentation of a letter he had just received from Spain's royal archives in June. In this letter the Spanish ambassador to London at that time, Count Gondomar (full name, Don Diego Sarmiento de Acuña), wrote back to his home government that the actions that King James took in April 1622 in imprisoning Henry de Vere, the 18th Earl of Oxford, were at the behest of Gondomar himself. Furthermore, in this same letter, Gondomar states that King James had also relieved the 18th Earl of Oxford of his fleet command in the English Channel because of Gondomar's request, and Gondomar goes on to say that he personally would like to see the 18th Earl of Oxford executed.

The clear implication in the letter is that James is doing whatever Gondomar wishes to see done. This in itself is not new information, since Gondomar is already notorious in history as a Machiavellian type who had more than once manipulated the English monarch in the name of Spanish policy objectives. What is new is that the letter clearly reveals that Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford — Shakespeare's son — is now in the sights of a man who can convince King James to do what he wants him to do.

The Gondomar letter itself has only been cited once in earlier historical scholarship about this period, and never (to Dickson's knowledge) has it been reproduced in full as we have done in this issue of the newsletter. In an 1869 book, *Prince Charles and the Spanish Marriage Crisis* by Samuel Rawson Gardiner, the author makes reference to this letter (which he had read while researching in the Royal Spanish archives in Simancas). It was a footnote in Gardiner's book about this letter that led Dickson to request a copy from the archives earlier this year.

As for the "Marriage Crisis," this is a period in English history that seems to have drifted off into obscurity. Dickson believes this is "primarily because the Liberal Nationalist and even anti-Catholic bias of most British historians prior to the middle of this century encouraged them to turn a blind eye to the conduct of King James and his young advisor/protege/lover George Villiers—the Duke of Buckingham—in what was, for them, a disgraceful scheme to achieve a permanent peace with Spain through a marriage alliance."

This alliance was to have been the marriage of James I's son Charles with King Philip IV's sister, and would have thus been the key event in sealing a permanent peace agreement between England and Spain. From about 1613 through 1623 the marriage alliance was a major foreign policy objective of the Spanish. It became a crisis in England because a majority of the English population wanted no part of such a deal—seeing it as a return of the papacy to the Isle—and it was opposed at higher levels of government by a most interesting (to Oxfordians) set of leaders: the 3rd Earl of Southampton, the 18th Earl of Oxford, and the Earl of Pembroke, one of the dedicatees of the *First Folio* and Lord Chamberlain from December 1615 through 1626. The crisis reached hysterical heights when Prince Charles and Buckingham secretly left England in 1623 for eight months to travel to Spain to secure the marriage deal in person.

Incredibly, 120 years passed before the Marriage Crisis received the serious attention of scholars again. Thomas Cogswell of Harvard University wrote about it in *The Blessed Revolution* (1989), but his book is actually about the period immediately following the failure of the marriage proposal, beginning in the fall of 1623 when Buckingham and Prince Charles had returned from Spain empty-handed, and the nation went into a prolonged celebration which included bonfires in the streets throughout London.

Cogswell does not mention the May 16th Gondomar letter in his book, nor does he dwell much on the roles of Southampton and Oxford in the whole affair. And, as Gardiner before him, he pays no attention at all to the parallel event of the *First Folio* publication occurring in 1622-1623, let alone consider that the *Folio* publication and the Marriage Crisis are linked. But this "oversight" is shared by nearly all scholars of the period, and in the authorship debate neither Stratfordians nor anti-Stratfordians have ever made this connection either.

Dickson's new theory addresses this oversight by stating that there clearly is a connection between a *Folio* publication project that *has always been acknowledged* to have been sloppy and flawed, the monumental proportions of the Marriage Crisis, and the involvement of Oxford's friends and family in both the crisis and the *Folio* publication.

Dickson has further stated that, given the historical evidence of this period, the *Folio* publication project can no longer be seen as a purely literary project, and that once one accepts the political dimensions of the project, the Oxfordian theory of the Shakespeare authorship has *by far* the best explanatory powers.

Why the *Folio* in 1623?

In order to fully understand the possible interconnection between the Marriage Crisis and the publication of the *First Folio* one must first ask why was the *Folio* published in 1623? There has never really been any serious question in either Stratfordian or anti-Stratfordian camps about why the *Folio* was published at this particular time. It appears to have just been generally accepted that it was published when it was published because that's apparently how long it took for those involved to get organized, go to the printer and have it done.

It has been considered by some that the strange events of 1619 when a series of quartos known as the "Pavier" quartos appeared might constitute an early attempt at publishing a Shakespeare Folio. These quartos were published by Pavier in association with Jaggard, but the titles involved are a mixed bag of previously published Shakespeare titles and such apocryphal plays as *Sir John Oldcastle* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*. None of the previously unpublished 18 plays that would first appear in the *Folio* four years later were part of this project, which would seem to indicate that the key players in the later *Folio* project (i.e., those who held the text of all the unpublished plays in some form—"the grand possessors"?) were not involved in releasing them to anyone in 1619, even if printers such as Pavier and Jaggard were themselves thinking at this time about collecting whatever they could of Shake-speare's plays.

However, there is one significant fact about the *First Folio* that *all* scholars—Stratfordian and anti-Stratfordian—have always acknowledged, and that is that the *First Folio* was full of errors, to a point of embarrassment as some critics have noted. Why this is so, no one has ever been able to figure out, or even to theorize much about. It is this telling fact, coupled with the scholarship of Charlton Hinman in his 1963 work *The Printing and Proof-reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare*, that provides the linchpin for Dickson's theory. Hinman's work clearly establishes that the Folio printing process *could not have begun* any earlier than February or March, 1622 (and may even have started later in 1622), and in the 35 years since his work was published no one has rebutted this key fact.

We know that work on the *Folio* must have been completed in October to November 1623 since the first copies for sale appeared in bookstores in December 1623. This means that the entire project was completed during virtually the same period of time that Henry de Vere, the 18th Earl of Oxford, was in the Tower (April 1622 to December 1623).

Another intriguing fact about the whole *Folio* project that should also be mentioned here is that Jaggard registered 16 of the previously unpublished 18 plays with the Stationers' Register on November 8th, 1623. This event thus came at the very end of the printing schedule, not the beginning, a most peculiar ordering of priorities.

Compare this, for example, with the Ben Jonson folio project in 1615-1616, for which the printer registered *all the previously unpublished material* as the *first step* in the process, not the last.

Jaggard's trip to the Stationers' also took place just days after a very public reconciliation between Southampton and Buckingham and an agreement for the release of Oxford from the Tower, an agreement which included an arrangement for him to marry Diana Cecil, great granddaughter of Lord Burghley. All these events took place within four weeks of the return of Buckingham and Prince Charles from Spain, empty-handed. The Marriage Crisis was over.

While mainstream scholars from Sidney Lee in 1902 to Irvin Matus in 1994 have all commented on the *First Folio's* clear shortcomings and wondered why more care was not taken with such an ambitious and important project, one of the best quotations we could find that illustrate the significance of this unanswered question about the *Folio* publication comes from none other than Charlton Ogburn, in his *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. At the conclusion of Chapter 13 Ogburn has this to say about the *First Folio* publication:

> A second reason for the textual failings of the *Folio* must be that however long the collection had been planned the actual production was rushed. A much better job could have been done with the materials available. Were the compilers fearful that the longer the work of assembling and printing took the greater the danger would be of provoking a reaction at the highest level of the realm and of a bar to the publication? A guess as to the cause of haste, relying on our present information, can be only a shot in the dark.
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> (*TMWS*, page 239)

The newsletter has been in touch with Ogburn about Dickson's theory and about this paragraph from Chapter 13 of his book. Ogburn commented to us that, "Dickson appears to have taken this shot in the dark, and I am coming to believe that he is correct in his theory about the *Folio* publication and the Marriage Crisis. It would certainly explain a great deal that has, up to now, been unclear."

Ogburn also later commented in a separate conversation with Dickson that, "You have placed the Oxfordian theory at the heart of English history."

Was the 18th Earl in danger?

In addition to Gondomar's May 16th letter, there is another significant historical fact that must be considered here in understanding that Oxford's imprisonment was serious business—the fate of Sir Walter Raleigh in 1618. The historical record is quite clear that Raleigh's execution on Oct. 29th, 1618 was primarily an accommodation with the wishes of the King of Spain and the English-Spanish "peace process" of the time.

And the record is equally clear that Count Gondomar played a key role in

convincing King James that Raleigh *must be* executed for the sake of that peace process. Surviving letters between Gondomar and King Philip IV show the King instructing his ambassador on how to convince James that Raleigh's execution is a political necessity for the good of English-Spanish relations.

It should also be noted here that James's young and upcoming favorite George Villiers—at this moment the Marquis of Buckingham, but soon to be the "Duke of"—supported Raleigh's execution in his new role as James's chief advisor, a fact undoubtedly not lost on the increasingly alarmed opponents of James's policy with Spain.

Thus, when Oxford spoke of James giving "everything temporal to the King of Spain" (as cited in the May 16th letter) he may well have had in mind this earlier sacrificial execution of Sir Walter Raleigh in addition to more recent affronts. And there can be little doubt that Oxford's friends and family also had in mind Raleigh's death, and must have believed that he could just as easily be sacrificed for the sake of English-Spanish relations as had Raleigh.

Since Gondomar's May 16th letter echoes the arguments used in 1618 to engineer Raleigh's execution, there really can be no doubt that Oxford's life was in danger over his politics and over his role in publicly criticizing both King James and Gondomar. And we also now know that he was seen as "the" leader in opposing Spanish Policy vis-à-vis England, and not just by Gondomar.

On 18 April 1623 King James wrote to Buckingham in Spain *(Letters of King James IV & I*, 409), and informed him that the Star Chamber had considered freeing Oxford at that time—since no charges had yet been brought—but the Lord Treasurer, the Earl of Middlesex, interceded and warned the King against freeing Oxford, stating that, "he would provide a ringleader for the mutineers." So, James wrote, "...which advice I followed."

This characterization by Middlesex is quite interesting, since the use of the word "mutineers" implies the absolute authority of the King and his decisions—the captain of the ship of state—even as a majority of his subjects and of the peerage were clearly against the course being set for the nation through the proposed Spanish marriage.

The reference in the final sentence of Gondomar's letter to the "Palatinate" is a reference to James's daughter Elizabeth Stuart (driven by the Hapsburg armies into exile in Holland with her husband, the Elector of the Palatinate) and seen by Protestants in England—the mutineers?—as "The Queen of Hearts," a superior alternative to the increasingly "soft on Catholicism" James, his boy-wonder advisor George Villiers (Duke of Buckingham), and the dark presence of the notorious Count Gondomar—popularly called "The Spanish Machiavelli"—serving as the ambassador/broker between England and Spain.

***Othello* a harbinger?**

The first imprisonment of both the 3rd Earl of Southampton and the 18th Earl of Oxford had occurred in the summer of 1621, shortly following the downfall

of Francis Bacon over bribery in the conduct of his office—with, interestingly, Southampton leading the opposition against Bacon. The 47-year old Southampton and the 28-year old Buckingham nearly came to blows on the floor of Parliament over this matter.

Just months later the Countess of Pembroke died, and within weeks of her death *Othello* (one of the Shakespeare plays that had never been published before) was registered for publication. Dickson believes that the *Folio* publication process probably began in earnest following this first imprisonment, and that the appearance of *Othello* was perhaps a first step in that process.

If Eva Turner Clark is at all correct in her assessment of *Othello* in *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays*, the play dates from the 1580s and alludes to such matters as the politics of a marriage match (Elizabeth and Alençon) and the seemingly endless military efforts of Spain to bring the rest of Europe back to Catholicism, with the battleground then—as again in the early 17th century—the Netherlands. Such allusions would not be lost on an audience with any historical memory of the Elizabethan era.

Concerning *Othello* it is especially interesting to note that Iago's name can be seen as a diminutive (Jago) of "Diego" in Spanish—"Diego" being Gondomar's first name and also being Spanish for "James." James is known to have referred to himself and Gondomar as "the two Diegos."

When Othello sayss of Iago—"demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?" (5.2.300-01)—it is not hard to imagine politically aware readers or audiences in the 1620s thinking of Gondomar ("Diego") and his "ensnaring" hold on their English monarch—the other "Diego"—and thus on England's future.

So, the appearance of *Othello* at this time (even though it was registered with a different printer than Jaggard) could well have been a harbinger of the *Folio* publication soon to come, complete with an implicit message that those involved in getting the *Folio* published *did have in mind* the political crisis of the time and the key players in that crisis.

The *Folio* and politics

Over the past year Dickson has been in regular touch with a small number of Oxfordians around the country about his theory and its implications for the authorship debate. The question that has most often come up in these discussions is "how does publishing the *Folio* have any bearing on saving Oxford?"

That is, of course, a difficult question to answer. It may be that the rush to publish was simply an attempt to preserve the plays, given that the political climate indicated that more than Oxford's life could be lost if the Spanish Marriage became a reality.

In other words, for the Protestant faction in England the stakes in this crisis could be that they feared—with good reason—that the days of Bloody Mary could be returning, and that *many lives* might be lost, along with many books and manuscripts.

Also to be considered here is that the "grand possessors" certainly had their

own strong convictions about the philosophical, political, and artistic accomplishment of these plays and of their author, and in this light their publication at this point in time might be seen as a political statement in opposition to what was undoubtedly perceived by James's opponents as the betrayal of the nation by its own monarch. The publication might also then have been a message to this monarch to "think twice before you execute Shakespeare's son."

The other key question involved here is, of course, why publish the *Folio* under the name "Shakespeare," especially if the purpose—in part, at least—was to save the 18th Earl's life?

This is, again, a difficult question to answer. Dickson believes that, in the heat of this crisis, it was way too late to change, assuming that there ever was a thought or a plan to someday publish under Oxford's name. Publishing now was a bold enough move in itself, but to use Oxford's name would have been somewhat like "rubbing it in" and would most likely have been counterproductive. Undoubtedly James knew who the true author was anyway.

For most Oxfordians, the more familiar answer to the question about sticking with the Stratford man is the matter of what the plays might have to say about the behind-the-scenes politics of the nation-building Elizabethan era, about Gloriana herself, and about the author. Such realities would have been laid open to everyone's scrutiny once the true identity of the author was known—or, if you will, openly acknowledged. From this point of view, the time would never be right, as Oxford himself wrote in the *Sonnets*: "... I, once gone, to all the world must die."

Such considerations as these will certainly occupy the minds of Oxfordian—and all other—scholars for years to come. And, of course, we cannot even begin here to consider such eternally vexing questions as "What was the true religion of the true author?" ...or "Are there political secrets embedded in the Shakespeare canon?" ...or "Had the author by the end of this life transcended all the "mere" political and religious ritual and dogma of the day as he explored his soul and spoke to posterity of his explorations?"

Conclusion

Finally, then, we should conclude by returning to the key question postulated by Dickson's theory: "*Is there,* in fact, a connection between the Marriage Crisis of 1621-1623, the imprisonments of Southampton and Oxford in 1621, and of Oxford again in 1622-1623, and the late-starting and too-soon-finishing *Folio* publication process of 1622-1623?" This is the core of Dickson's new and provocative theory, and, if he is right, neither Shakespeare authorship scholarship nor mainstream Shakespeare scholarship will ever be the same.

We can say, after months of consideration, that Dickson's conclusions are not based simply on unfounded speculation (as a few Oxfordians familiar with his work have already remarked), but have been carefully thought out in light of the existing historical record, and they do seem to indicate some sort of causal relationship among

these key events. The wonder, really, is that no one had seen it before.

Whatever various critics (Stratfordian, Oxfordian, or other) may now say about the pros and cons of this theory, it is probably safe to say that no one will ever again look at this critical period in English history in the same way as before.

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