

10. Robin Fox: Oxford's/Shakespeare's Education

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Robin Fox

The essay below, "Shakespeare, Oxford and the Grammar School Question," (*The Oxfordian* 2008), takes on the difficult matters of Shakespeare's education, the nature of Elizabethan grammar schools and how Oxford, assuming he was the playwright, seems to have had first-hand experience of them.

There has been a checkered history of attitudes to William Shakespeare of Stratford's possible education. There is no record of his having attended either school or university. At one extreme, then, those who take Ben Jonson's words from his enigmatic eulogy in the First Folio (1623) literally, have credited the author with "smalle Latine and lesse Greeke." In other words they prefer to think that Shakespeare had no education worth considering, and was an untutored natural genius. In the charming words of Milton's sonnet about him he was "warbling his native woodnotes wild." This fits the picture of the rustic youth leaving his Warwickshire home at about age twenty-two, abandoning his wife and children, and making his way in London in "the university of the world." It fits the democratic image of Shakespeare as just like the rest of us only more so. He was, in this view, better off without an education given the restrictive quality of what was offered: Grammar School being largely a flogging institution concerned to thrash Latin grammar into the heads of unwilling schoolboys, and the universities (Oxford and Cambridge) being little more than vocational schools for clerics, lawyers and physicians. He was lucky, in this view, to have escaped the clutches of the educational system.

The other school of thought sees that according to the poems and plays credited to him, he was clearly a man of considerable learning, especially in the Latin classics. He must have been able to read many of the original sources in French, Italian and even Spanish and Greek, translations not being available at the time. This school has then to account for how the boy from Stratford-on-Avon acquired this mastery. The author of the plays also shows evidence of a detailed knowledge of English history, legal and military matters, the sea and sailing, aristocratic sports and pastimes,

the geography, art, theater and customs of northern Italy, and courtly life in England and France, and even Denmark. These, it is argued, he could have acquired by acute observation during the six "lost years" (1585-91) for which we have no information at all except that William Shackspeare was named in a lawsuit in Stratford. But this theory of learning by osmosis is purely in the realm of speculation, while one fact remains in the realm of distinct possibility: he could have attended the Free Grammar School, "The King's New School," at Stratford-on-Avon.

Those of the "natural genius" school are content to take Jonson at his word and shrug off the poet's education as something that any boy could have got from a few years at Grammar School. The learning, they say, was slight and lightly borne. There was nothing remarkable about it and the Grammar School with all its limitations could have provided it. There the matter can rest. But for others this is not enough. Shakespeare's two long poems, the sonnets, and the plays, show far too intimate an acquaintance with the Latin classical authors at least, and demand that he knew more than just a smattering of grammar. He must have had a quite serious and detailed education to provide this background. All the natural genius in the world cannot supply *knowledge*. That has to be acquired. In particular, to know the works in the original language means that the original must itself have been thoroughly learned. The issue then became: could the Stratford Grammar School have provided at least his knowledge of Latin and the classical authors, particularly Ovid and Virgil? There is a secondary question of whether there is anything in the works that might point directly to the knowledge having been gained specifically at a Grammar School.

This question of whether anything in the works specifically indicates Grammar School experience, becomes a real issue because there is a ready solution to the problem that bypasses the Grammar School altogether. This proposes that the author of the works was not the untutored boy from Stratford at all, but a nobleman who indeed was privately tutored in the way that noblemen were, by the very best teachers; a nobleman who went to the university (or even both of them) then to the Inns of Court to study law, traveled in Italy and France, knew the royal courts intimately, served as a soldier and a sailor, spoke French and Italian, wrote a graceful Latin and French, wrote poetry and plays for his fellow aristocrats at court, and was involved with his own companies of players, and with playwrights and authors of whom he was a patron and employer: a known man of letters and the theater.

As a high aristocrat, however, he would not have been able to publish under his own name plays that were meant for the common playhouses and written for a fee, however small. It is hard for us to understand this now, but in Elizabethan England it was absolutely so. A nobleman would lose caste if seen to be "in trade" – writing for money, for the public stage constituted such. Noblemen could write for the court and the amusement of courtiers, and even for the Inns of Court or the universities: amateur entertainment. But the playhouses were seen as little more than annexes to the brothels and magnets for their trade. A nobleman therefore would have used a pseudonym, or a front man who produced his plays and took the credit. A pamphlet in 1592, regarded as crucial by biographers of the bard, described one "Shake-scene" as an "upstart crow" who beautified himself with others' feathers. This is generally agreed by the biographers to be a reference to William since it quotes a line from *Henry VI*. If it is, it is not complimentary.

I don't want to spell out the whole authorship issue here; it is too well known. I just want to show how the attribution of the authorship to a nobleman with the experience described solves the irritating issue of whether the Grammar School could have done it. In the case of a privately edu-

cated aristocrat it doesn't need to have done it. But then again, that would leave the question of the direct reporting of Grammar School experience in the plays, if there is any, to be explained in turn.

Trashing the Grammar School

The Grammar School issue has been debated in something of an historical vacuum. It is important to understand that the Grammar Schools after 1553 were part of a deliberate attempt to re-make English society as a result of the four influences of Protestantism, Humanism, Nationalism and Gutenberg—the printing press. The reformers—Erasmus, More, Colet, Lyly, Wolsey, Cranmer, Burghley, and the monarchs themselves—sought to create a new kind of Englishman, and the Grammar Schools and the Church of England were their instruments. The commission appointed by Henry VIII to decide on the fate of the loot from the monasteries was significantly called: *The Commission for the Continuance of Schools*. Henry and particularly Edward his son, understood that while the Catholic Church had to be destroyed, the schools it had fostered had to be rebuilt – and completely reformed on Protestant and humanist lines, with a uniform and approved curriculum. This included the Lyly-Colet Latin Grammar, the first schoolbook to be mandated throughout the kingdom.

Supporters of the case for Edward de Vere as author have always taken the view that there is no direct evidence that William of Stratford did go to the Grammar School there (or anywhere) and in this they are right. But they add that if he had gone it would not have given him anything like the education reflected in the works. They thus interestingly align themselves with the native genius school on the issue: no education to speak of. But since they do this to bolster the case of de Vere; they deny that native genius could make up for the deficiencies of the schooling. They thus conclude that the mal-educated or un-educated William cannot have written the plays, and that the combination of education and inspiration lies elsewhere: in the Earl of Oxford.

To this end these Oxfordian critics have consistently trashed both the Stratford school and the Grammar Schools generally. I am sympathetic to the Oxfordian case, believing with Orson Welles that there are otherwise “some awfully funny coincidences,” so I want to ask whether the Oxfordian portrayal of the deficiencies of the schools is warranted, and what is more, whether they really need this put-down of the Grammar Schools to make their case.

It started, as did the Oxfordian movement generally, with the remarkable work of J. T. Looney in his “*Shakespeare Identified*” of 1920. Quoting Halliwell-Phillips he characterizes life in Stratford as one of “dirt and ignorance” and stresses the illiteracy of Shakespeare’s parents. Like subsequent critics he seems particularly shocked by John Shakespeare’s being fined for keeping a dung heap too long in front of his house. But this did not mean Stratford was in any way different from any other active and prosperous wool-town in the English midlands. Dirt and illiteracy were not confined to these. All English towns were dirty and smelly, and few people were literate. The London theater districts were filthy areas with open sewers, no toilet facilities, and were rife with prostitution and robbery. The great playwright-to-be Christopher Marlowe (see David Rigg’s recent biography) grew up as a shoemaker’s son among the leather tanning works in Canterbury. The smell and filth of the tannery surpassed anything the dung heaps of Stratford could produce, but neither this, nor parental illiteracy, prevented Marlowe from gaining a scholarship to the King’s School (the cathedral Grammar School at Canterbury) and going on to Cambridge University.

Looney rightly insists that there is no documentary evidence for William's attendance at the local Free Grammar School. But again he starts the trend of insisting that William's illiterate home would have meant he could not read and write, to do so being a condition of entry to the school. He scorns Halliwell-Phillips idea that "the poet received his first rudiments of education from older boys." But the system could have worked this way: it worked for Marlowe for example, and scholars since have written at length about the system of the "petty school" wherein very young boys (five or six) would be taught their basic alphabet and writing. This was a pretty standard method of teaching the basics in preparation for the upper school, as we shall see.

Charlton Ogburn continues the attacks in his monumental *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984): "The Astonishing Stratford School and the Miracle of 'Genius'" (Chapter 15.) He paints the picture of Stratford as a narrow, tight medieval community, where the town officers were largely illiterate and served unwillingly, including John Shakespeare as Alderman and High Bailiff (mayor.) He paints William's life as one of drudgery in a debtor's home. But during William's young life John was in fact quite prosperous; the debt and disgrace came later and might well have interfered with William's completing school.

Ogburn's main scorn is reserved for the Grammar School itself. This was a typical one-master school, and between 1565 and 1575 there were five masters he notes, and this does not speak well of the school. It can be counter argued that the masters were so good they were rapidly promoted, or that their Catholic sympathies were the issue at a time of Catholic persecutions. The pay of the masters, twenty pounds annually, he has to admit was good in comparison to other schools; Eton masters only got ten pounds. But he claims this appeared better than it was since the master had to pay four pounds to his usher and pay for repairs to the school. He omits that the master got free lodging, and does not elaborate on the paid "usher" or assistant master. (Although the school records are lost, there are plenty of town records with items about the school and the masters.)

We shall look at more of these details later, but in the meantime Ogburn saves his severest blows for the quality of teaching. Despite their decent pay and their M.A. degrees, he insists, the quality of school teaching was abysmal. We do not know this directly for Stratford of course, so he depends on Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570), which portrays the general state of teaching in England. Ascham had never been a country schoolmaster. He was himself schooled by a private tutor and became a tutor to the aristocratic rich, including the princess Elizabeth. He paints a dismal picture of poorly trained masters drilling boys largely by the use of the rod and basically just putting them through the motions. As a picture of the worst schools this was probably justified. But it does not tally with any contemporary picture of the better "established" Grammar Schools.

In any case Ascham's diatribe against punishment was out of date by the time it was published (posthumously) and his principles of reasoned tuition were strongly advocated by the leading and influential educationalists of his day. Ascham's picture of the bad teacher applied largely to the scores of independent teachers who appeared in response to the increasing demand for *some* kind of education. David Cressy, in the best short survey of Tudor-Stuart education, reports that in the 1580s only 27 per cent of the schoolmasters licensed in the diocese of London were university graduates. By the 1630s it has risen to 59 per cent. Thus there were a lot of poorly qualified teachers out there in what were often fly-by-night operations. This makes Stratford all the more

admirable both in its secure foundation and funding and in the high standards required of its teachers.

Ogburn continues to disparage T. W. Baldwin's monumental 1500 page two-volume *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, (1944.) This was an account of the elaborate classical curriculum at the English schools, designed by Erasmus, inspired by Thomas More, and put into practice by Colet at St. Paul's, and Wolsey at Ipswich. But Ogburn's criticism is mostly an expression of simple disbelief. Faced with what was required of a seven-year-old boy (Lily, Aesop, Erasmus, Terence, Plautus, Suetonius, Mantuanus, etc.) he comments: "One wonders if the professor had ever met a seven-year old." Not a seven-year-old Elizabethan schoolboy certainly, but neither had Ogburn. Plenty of boys did go through this system and did end up as fluent Latin speakers and writers; they went on to university and some of them to literary fame like Marlowe and Spenser. Ben Jonson never went to university but his education from Westminster stood him in good stead and he remembered it fondly. Stratford was a small one-master school as were most schools, true, but we have no more reason to assume it was a bad school than we have to know it was a good one. It was probably average.

The trashing continues in Diana Price's otherwise remarkable *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (2001), easily the best account of the authorship difficulties. In her chapter on "Shakespeare's Education" she repeats the Ogburn criticisms without mentioning the dung heap. Interestingly she admits that William might have had some sort of education, and the only reasonable supposition is that he got it in Stratford where it was free and available. He must have had "basic literacy" to have been an actor; he had to learn his lines. If he was the "upstart crow" ("Shakespeare") in the attack by Robert Greene mentioned earlier, then he was guilty of hiring other playwrights to write for him and taking the credit. This must mean he was capable at least of reading the stuff he was going to plagiarize.

His numerous legal and business interests also suggest he could read and write at least minimally. We must not forget he made a great deal of money and retired to Stratford a rich man. Technically he could have done this while illiterate, but it is improbable. People record sending letters to him, but no replies survive. Price accepts the minimal literacy, but denies that the Grammar School could have provided the "Renaissance education" displayed in the plays. She repeats the criticisms of Ascham, along with Peacham and Harbage, concerning the low quality of teaching, but she does not quote Kempe, Brinsley, Hoole and Clarke (quoted by Baldwin) who paint a more positive picture. She thinks the illiteracy and lack of education of William's daughters (his only son Hamnet died) tells against his being educated himself. It tells against his qualities as a father perhaps, but is not conclusive about his education.

In the pro-Oxford compendium from the UK, *Great Oxford* (2004) there are two chapters that continue the trend, and repeat many of the criticisms. In "Shakespeare's Education and the Stratford Grammar School" Phillip Johnson, after again assailing the *presumption* that William attended, takes up the cudgels against the quality of the school. Even if Will had attended, that is, he would not have benefited because the school was in a "rather insignificant midlands town." This, he thinks, renders the pages and pages of comparison in Baldwin with the curricula of the "established" Grammar Schools at Ipswich, St. Paul's, Westminster, Winchester, Merchant Taylors and Eton, unreliable at best. The criticisms Ascham leveled at the country schools, reproduced in Muriel St Clare Byrne's *Elizabethan Life in Town and Country*, are repeated: long

hours, brutality, monotony, discipline etc., that are “unsuited to holding a boy’s natural interest” and so on.

Johnson dismisses the evidence that Shakespeare had contemporaries in Stratford from the same background, including Richard Field the printer in London who published *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and who show evidence of a more than competent education. Baldwin records that the editor and biographer Malone in 1821, wrote at length about the letters of the Quiney family, who were Shakespeare’s in-laws, which showed a high level of Latin competence. There is no record of these people being at the school, Johnson insists, and there is not. But they must have got the education somewhere, and as the sons of Stratford burghers there was not much else open to them. It is a reasonable inference that they went to the local Free Grammar School.

I thoroughly agree with these critics that we are not allowed to assert William’s or anyone else’s attendance as a known fact, given the absence of records for the period. But surely we are allowed reasonable inferences? They are what the case for Oxford is built on after all. Johnson’s final blow to the Grammar School cause is the case for William Smith, another Stratford contemporary who went on to Oxford. This has been taken as proof of the excellence of the local schooling, except, Johnson points out, that Smith went to Winchester College before going to Oxford. True, but he would not have been accepted into the upper forms at Winchester unless he had been competent in the work of the lower forms to start with. There was no way a beginner could have made up the ground. I think Smith speaks well for Stratford.

How well the small schools succeeded was of course heavily dependent on the quality of the master and his ushers. There must have been brutal and lazy masters then as now, but there were also obviously dedicated and careful ones, as the results prove. But we can know this much: if the records from Stratford could be retrieved, they would show much the same syllabus and methods as the small, one-master Grammar Schools at Wimborne, Cuckfield, Saffron Walden, Seven Oaks, Peterborough, Tiverton and others, whose records do survive and which are consciously modeled on Eton, Winchester, St. Paul’s and Ipswich. Erasmus ruled; the Renaissance triumphed; Protestantism was established.

The Stratford Grammar School

In the meantime, what do we know of the Stratford school and its masters? It was founded early in the century by the Guild of the Holy Cross at Stratford-on-Avon. Since it was a Catholic institution, Henry VIII dissolved it along with the monasteries and chantries. It was essentially bought back from Edward VI by the burghers of Stratford and re-founded in 1553. Hence “The King’s New School.” This meant that the men of John Shakespeare’s generation were mostly illiterate because between 1536 and 1553 they had no school. But this did not mean that they did not want their sons to be educated as their move to re-purchase and endow the school shows. Baldwin gives in some detail the dealings between town and gown. The upshot is that from its re-foundation the school had masters and ushers (some of whom became masters) of obviously good quality. They were all clergymen with master’s degrees, some of whom received preferment and even multiple livings while still teaching.

If William had gone to the school it would have been between 1571 and 1579. There is something of a mystery about the existence of a petty school for the teaching of letters. The records seem to



Stratford Grammar School (re-founded 1553)

The original schoolroom was on the ground floor. The upper Chamber, shown above, was the town council meeting room

imply that the usher would start the boys on grammar at seven, assuming them to be able to read and write. They were “obliged to get their necessary preliminary training in English outside of the grammar school.” The critics have not failed to point out that this could not have been from illiterate parents. But even the sons of literate burghers were not educated by their parents; they would have gone to a petty school.

Although Baldwin wrote a whole, and again learned book, on *Shakespeare’s Petty School* (1943), this was largely inferential. He took the description of petty schools of the time and made the leap to first of all the existence of one at Stratford, and second to the assumption that William went there. There is evidence of a petty-school teacher after 1600 (Thomas Parker) who had been there “for some time” and so Baldwin extrapolates backwards. Unlike the town-run Grammar School, the petty school would have been private and held in a private home, so there would have been no official records. This was so everywhere else, so it can be inferred to have been true of Stratford. Once again we must use reasonable inference. The Grammar School was there and was successful. It required its entrants to be competent in English before entrance; therefore they must have been; therefore there must have been a petty school. The appeal can again be made to the plays where the author seems to show evidence of having learned his writing from an ABC – probably a “horn book,” and the Catechism (probably the Calvinist version of Alexander Nowell) that were used in the petty schools.

The teachers at the Grammar School continue to impress. At the turn of the century there was Richard Fox (no known relation) who became Bishop of Winchester and founded Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and William Smyth who founded Brasenose College at the same university. There was a hiatus of course after the dissolution of the Guild School sometime between 1536

and the re-foundation in 1553. Just before William's time there was the master John Brownsword who became a well-known Latin poet. During William's possible years there, there were two masters, Simon Hunt and Thomas Jenkins. Hunt, an M.A. from Oxford, converted to Catholicism and left in 1575 to become a Jesuit. Stratford did not have good luck with the Catholic connection. A future master, John Cottam was ousted because of his Catholic sympathies, his brother being executed for involvement with the Campion plot in 1582.

Jenkins who succeeded Hunt and would have been teaching the upper forms had William been in them, was a Welshman, educated probably at Merchant Taylors, and definitely an M.A. and Senior Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford, renowned for its fostering of Greek. That he was Welsh has given rise to a lot of commentary on his being the model for Sir Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. For now let us note in summary that the records show that Stratford had well-qualified masters supported by ushers of good quality, and sent boys on to the universities and the professions. We have no reason to suppose it was not a good school of its kind, as we have no direct evidence William ever went there.

Grammar Schools in the Plays

This leaves the issue of the portrayal of the schoolmaster in the plays, with Sir Hugh Evans as the most prominent. How could the author have painted such accurate pictures without direct knowledge of the Grammar School scene? But first there are some little-quoted specific references to the schools themselves that demand attention, and were briefly mentioned by Foster Watson in *The Old Grammar Schools* (1916). This is from *Henry VIII*, Act IV, Scene 2, where Griffith is replying to Queen Katherine, who has been rejoicing in the fall of her arch enemy Cardinal Wolsey. Griffith asks her to reconsider and praises Wolsey in general:

ever witness for him
 Ipswich and Oxford! One of which fell with him,
 Unwilling to outlive the good that did it;
 The other, though unfinished, yet so famous,
 So excellent in art, and yet so rising,
 That Christendom shall ever speak his virtue.

This is a direct reference to Cardinal Wolsey's founding of Ipswich School and Christ's Church College (originally Cardinal's College), Oxford. The original school buildings burned down, but the school, in Wolsey's home town, and the Oxford college, both flourished. Here Wolsey is promised immortality for his educational efforts, including the founding of a Grammar School, and one that was a model for others and was crucial to the surge forward in Tudor education.

What are we to make of this reference? It could be William reflecting on his good fortune to have been a beneficiary of Wolsey's legacy in promoting Grammar Schools; but William never went to Oxford. So it could equally be de Vere reflecting on his own connection both as the Earl of Oxford and a graduate of the university—although I suspect his degree there was *honoris causa*. Still, the reference to Wolsey and his Oxford college and Grammar School is remarkable, showing that the author, whoever he was, understood the importance of Wolsey's educational efforts and singled them out for praise.

Henry VIII is one of those odd plays that appear to have more than one hand in them, so it could have been neither of the candidates. (See Brian Vickers on co-authorship.) Some of the play is

attributed to John Fletcher, including this scene, largely on the basis of the feminine endings of the lines. But some scholars have seen the scene as basically by Shakespeare with “interpolations” by Fletcher. Fletcher might have inserted the lines, but it is hard to see why. He was the son of a Bishop, and he went to Cambridge when he was eleven. We do not know about his earlier schooling, but why would he have singled out “Ipswich and Oxford” as redeeming virtues in Wolsey? Fletcher has no known connection with de Vere (he was thirty years younger), but then he has no documented connection with Shakespeare either during his lifetime. Writing for the King’s Men he could have made additions to the unfinished work of either. Whomever the candidate, the fragment remains intriguing in selecting out the founding of a Grammar School as a virtue to persuade the queen. Griffith was successful in any case, and Katherine changed her mind about Wolsey.



Ipswich School

Founded in 1528 by Cardinal Wolsey, the original buildings burned down. These are from the 19th century.

Another direct and opposite reference is found in *2 Henry VI*, IV.vii. The rebel Jack Cade is speaking to one of the nobles, Lord Say:

Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school; and, whereas, before, our forefathers had no other books but the score and the tally, thou hast caused printing to be used, and contrary to the King, his crown and his dignity, thou hast built a paper mill. It will be proved to

thy face that thou hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun and a verb, and such abominable words as no Christian can endure to hear.

We are here in the early fifteenth century when literacy for the lower orders was suspect to the authorities who were trying to put down the Lollards and other levelers. Printing and literacy for the masses, and especially the use of “grammar” were an abomination.

But the speech is put into the mouth of the upstart rebel, Jack Cade, who represents the worst kind of lower-class chauvinist. In scene 3 he rails against Lord Say:

I tell you that Lord Say hath gelded the commonwealth, and made it an eunuch: and more than that, he can speak French; and therefore he is traitor.

In scene vii Lord Say defends himself, in verse as opposed the prose of the rebels:

Large gifts have I bestow'd on learned clerks,
Because my book preffer'd me to the King,
And seeming ignorance is the curse of God,
Knowledge the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.

Say has founded Grammar Schools, probably in chantries (with their learned clerks), because his learning has gained him promotion from the king, and he therefore recognizes knowledge as the road to salvation on earth as it is in heaven. Henry VI for all his weakness, promoted education, and is of course revered as the founder of Eton. Say follows his monarch's example, but it does him no good with the Yahoo Cade and his yes-man Dick:

Dick: What say you of Kent?

Say: Nothing but this; 'tis “bona terra, mala gens.”

Cade: Away with him! Away with him! He speaks Latin.

And Say is murdered. With *Henry VI* there are also doubts about the complete authorship (at least about part one, not perhaps part two) but there is a consistency here. Wolsey and Say are held up as moral examples for founding Grammar Schools. It is something worth picking out as a particular virtue in these men, Wolsey's Ipswich in particular. The most we can say here is that he thought it worthy of note and regarded it as a virtue. The aristocrats were for it, the ignorant rabble were against it; the author was with the nobility on this yet again.

Oxford's Grammar School

Here is the point to introduce the outstanding fact that, like Say and Wolsey, Oxford's grandfather, the fifteenth earl, was instrumental in founding a Grammar School. In 1520, eight years before Wolsey founded Ipswich in Suffolk, the Rev. Christopher Swallow started a Free Grammar School for thirty boys at Earls Colne, nearby in Essex. As its name suggests the town was named for the Earls of Oxford and was originally part of the Oxford estates. Swallow made an agreement that the Earls of Oxford would be perpetual guardians of the school, an agreement that lasted until the last earl, Aubrey de Vere, in 1673, when it was handed over to the Cressener family, a gentleman, a lawyer and a grocer. In 1682 it passed to the sole care of “John Cressener, grocer.” The tradesmen triumphed.

Alan Nelson in his biography thinks that Edward de Vere, during his tenure as guardian, interfered too much in the running of the school, to its detriment. He appointed as schoolmaster William Adams of St. John's College Cambridge, who proved dishonest and incompetent and was ousted by a commission of inquiry. Oxford promptly overruled the commission and re-appointed Adams, again with disastrous results. It all sounds very Oxford. He wanted his own way, and Adams was from a Cambridge college where the Earl had been registered as opposed to the alternative, John Stockbridge, who was from Hart Hall, a mere non-collegiate hostel. But despite many vicissitudes, including a period as an agricultural college, the school at Earls Colne survived and expanded until it too was abolished as a Grammar School and incorporated into a "comprehensive school" in 1975. Whether or not Oxford was a sensible steward of the school is for our purposes less important than that he *was* a steward and *was* involved in its governance.



Earls Colne Grammar School, 1520

These buildings are from the 19th century

The author's direct concern in two history plays with the founding of Grammar Schools, and his defense of them and respect for their founders, begins to make great sense. Oxford's grandfather, a contemporary of Wolsey at the court of Henry VIII, was a co-founder of such a school, a mere twenty-five miles, as the crow flies, from Wolsey's Ipswich. Oxford was himself concerned, however injudiciously, with the affairs of Earls Colne Grammar School, and would have been very aware of the educational activities of the Cardinal a short distance from his home. William Shakespeare of Stratford, with all his fortune, neither in his retirement nor in his will made any benefactions to, or took any recorded interest in, his local school, to which he is presumed to have owed so much.

Schoolmasters in the Plays

We cannot avoid the famous scene with Sir Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives*, even though it has been quoted to death by now. It is regarded as conclusive evidence that Shakespeare, as the author, went to the Grammar School, since he seems to recollect his experience directly. The scene is odd since it has all the appearance of being inserted for its own sake. It has no relation to the plot whatsoever. In this it is like the equally curious scene of the German visitors and the mysterious duke (IV.iii). But this is a sprawling peculiar play altogether. No one seems to doubt it is part of the canon, but it is more of a knockabout farce than a Shakespearean comedy

In it Mistress Page has brought her son William (seen by some as a hint that the pupil is indeed Shakespeare himself) for a Latin lesson with Sir Hugh Evans, the Welsh parson. Sir Hugh is not specified as a teacher, just a parson. In attendance is Mistress Quickly, who provides the comic commentary through her complete misunderstanding of the Latin words. Mistress Page asks Sir Hugh to “aske him some questions in his Accidence” that is, his basic Latin grammar. The reference throughout the scene is to William Lyly’s own abbreviation of his authorized work published as *A Shorte Introduction of Grammar* in 1534 (there were numerous editions after that.) (Act 4, Scene 1):

Evans. William, how many Numbers is in Nownes?

Will. Two.

Quickly. Truly I thought there had bin one number more, because they say “Od’s-Nownes.”

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV.i.22-4

She is referring to a popular oath—*Swounds!*—God’s wounds. William was in fact right; the two numbers are singular and plural. They proceed with more examples straight from Lily.

Evans. Peace your tatlings. What is *Faire* William?

Will. *Pulcher.*

Quickly. Polecats? There are fairer things than polecats, sure.

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV.i.25-7

That, while being one of the bard’s worst puns, must have got a laugh, but from whom? The groundlings (the “nut cracking groundlings”) standing up in the pit would not have known it. And how many grammar-school educated playgoers were there in the tiers and boxes? We don’t know. If the play were written, as tradition has it, to please the Queen, how many Grammar School boys would there have been at court to see it? (See Richard Whalen on the contentious issue of Shakespeare’s audience.) The lesson continues:

Evans. You are a very simplicity o’man: I pray you peace. What is *Lapis* William?

Will. A stone.

Evans. And what is “a stone” William?

Will. A pebble.

Evans. No; it is *Lapis*; I pray you remember in your praine.

—*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV.i.28-32

Remember Evans is Welsh, hence *o'man* = woman, *praine* = brain. What William failed to do here was to turn the English back into Latin as required by the system. He gets the point and goes on:

Will. Lapis

Evans: That is good William: what is he William that do's lend Articles.

Will. Articles are borrowed of the pronoun; and be thus declined. *Singulariter nominativo hic, haec, hoc.*

Again William is right with his declension of *hic*, “this,” but Evans proceeds to mangle the pronunciation.

Evans. Nominativo hig, hag, hog: pray you marke: *genitivo huius:* Well: what is your *Accusativo* case?

Will. Accusativo hinc.

Evans: I pray you have your remembrance childe: *Accusativo hing, hang, hog.*

Quickly: Hang-hog is latten for Bacon, I warrant you.

Evans. Leave your prabbles o'man. What is the *Focative* case William?

Will. O, vocativo, O.

Evans. Remember William, *Focativo* is *caret.*

Quickly: And that's a good roote.

Evans' mispronunciation is a set up so that Quickly can make the joke about *hang-hog* being Bacon, which is capitalized in the original. Baconians have made much of this “clue.” When Evans tells William, correctly, that there is no vocative of *hic* (it is *caret*, missing—exactly as in the Lyly text), Quickly hears this as “carrot”—which is a good roote both as a vegetable and as slang for penis. Evans' *Focative* is probably meant as yet another bawdy word play.

Apart from getting the accusative wrong (it should have been *huc, hanc, hoc*), William doesn't do too badly, and Sir Hugh comes off as a typical pompous schoolmaster-type. Mistress Quickly ends the show with a mishearing that would have got a laugh even from the groundlings:

Evans: What is your *Genitive case plural* William?

Will. Genitive case?

Evans: Aye

Will. Genitive: *horum, harum, horum.*

Quickly. Vengeance of Ginnys case; fie on her; never name her childe if she be a whore.

Evans: For shame o'man.

Quickly: You do ill to teach the child such words: he teaches him to hick and to hack; which they do fast enough for themselves, and to call whorum; fie upon you.

“Ginny's (Ginyes) case” probably meant her genitals in the city slang. “Hic” and “hac” were like enough too slang words for sexual activity, and *horum* was all too obvious. But William got the genitive plural right. He fails in the next passage (which I will not reproduce here) to get his pronouns right (*qui, quae, quod*) and is threatened with a beating. He is about half right; he gets by with a C. Evans on the other hand is a caricature of the boring pedagogue. . What are we to make of this? Is it a memory of Grammar School? Is it a memory of the Welshman Jenkins?

William Farina raises an interesting possibility in that Oxford's associate, employee, and possibly collaborator, the playwright and novelist John Lyly, is thought to have written *Endimion*, the play

which was the basis for the scene with the “fairies” that ends *Merry Wives*. Oxford and Lyly were very close; the Lyly novel *Euphues His England*, which defined the “euphuistic” style and is acknowledged to have deeply influenced the plays, was dedicated to Oxford. Lyly and Oxford together obtained the lease of the Blackfriars Theater in the 1580s. During this time, when Lily was his secretary, Oxford sponsored children’s acting companies—“Oxford’s Boys”—who were managed by one Henry Evans, of course a Welshman. In the bizarre final scene of *Merry Wives*, Sir Hugh Evans “manages” the children and townsfolk as they, disguised as fairies, “administer pinching punishment” to the wayward Sir John Falstaff. Here is a direct reference to an actual H. Evans who seems to fit the bill in many respects.

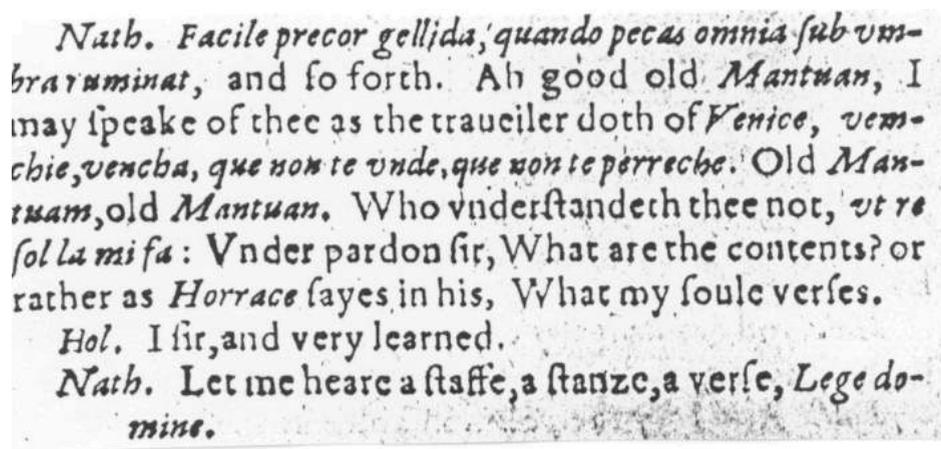
If we look to Arrigo Boito’s libretto for Verdi’s *Falstaff* we see that he produced a fast-paced, coherent, lyrical and funny script out of the rambling *Merry Wives*, with additions from *Henry IV*. And one way he did this was to leave out Sir Hugh Evans entirely—Latin lesson and all! It is no loss. The plot benefits from the omission. This raises the question of what Evans was doing there in the first place. He does nothing to move the plot; he even obfuscates it. Is it possible that he was just a caricature of a person well known to the crowd, with his Welsh accent and its confusion of voiced and unvoiced consonants (which Londoners think hugely funny), his pomposity, his pedantry, and his “management” of child players? Oxford could have put his associate in, not for the plot but just as a crowd pleaser; he was in there just for the laughs. Hence the Latin lesson – to show his pompous pedantry and to feed salacious laugh lines to Mistress Quickly. If the play was indeed originally written for the court, could this scene have been inserted for the common-theatre version? This interpretation at least gives the part a *raison d’être* it does not otherwise have.

But the Hugh Evans of the play is also an avatar of “the pedant,” who was in part a schoolmaster but also perhaps a creature derived from elsewhere than the Grammar School. Shakespeare (the author) seems to have coined the very term “pedant” from the Italian *pedantaggine* (according to the *OED*.) The prototype of this character is Holofernes in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*. He is stated explicitly to be “The Pedant or schoolmaster.” Baldwin cites him more than any other character in the plays, for the obvious reason that he is the most given to quotations, words and tropes that reflect classical learning, and thus, for Baldwin, reflect the author’s Grammar School education. But while Holofernes lectures everyone in his pedantic style, he does not give lessons as Sir Hugh did. A favorite exchange of those who see the Grammar School writ large in Holofernes is in IV,ii:

Holofernes: *Facile precor gelida peccas omnia sub umbra Ruminat* and so forth. Ah, good old Mantuan! I may speak of thee as the traveller doth of Venice; *Venetia, Venetia, Chi non ti vede non ti pretia*. Old Mantuan, old Mantuan! Who understandeth thee not, [loves thee not.]
(He sings) Ut, re, sol, la, mi, fa. *(To Nathaniel)* Under pardon, sir, what are the contents? Or rather, as Horace says in his—*(Looking at the letter)* What my soul, verses?
Nathaniel: Ay sir, and very learned.
Holofernes: Let me hear a staff, a stanza, a verse, *Lege, domine*.

The pedant does a garbled misquote from Mantuan. It could mean something like “I pray you are easily doing everything wrong in the cool shade.” *Ruminant*— “it ruminates,” is left hanging. Some commentators have mistaken this for a reference to Virgil, who was also from Mantua, but it is definitely from Mantuanus (Johannes Baptista Spagnola) whose *Eclogues* (1498) were part of

the standard Grammar School curriculum. This was the first poem in the book so every grammar-school boy would know it.



First Folio, 1623: Holofernes Speech on Mantuan

The printer reversed Holofernes and Nathaniel.

But the Holofernes line makes a kind of weird sense and would have raised a laugh from any ex-schoolboys (or others tutored in Mantuan) in the audience. Most editors since Rowe and Pope have “corrected” the line, including the editor (Dr. Mustard) of the *Eclogues* when quoting it, thinking the copier or printer made an error, and many errors were indeed made: the Folio printer confused Holofernes and Nathaniel for example. But it seems obvious that the author meant it to be a joke, like the schoolboy howler: “All Gauls are divided into three parts.” The Folger editors agree that this and other Latin mis-quotations were intended as jokes.

Similarly, the Italian of the popular proverb is garbled in the Folio. (“Vemchie, vencha, que non te unde, que non te perreche.”) I have given the “corrected” version here, but I wonder if the author again did not mean it to be a clear signal for the pedant’s pseudo-learning. If so, for what audience was the joke intended, one that knew Italian? Holofernes continues by citing an authority, Horace, for nothing in particular, then does his signature redundant iteration “a staff, a stanza, a verse” and tells Nathaniel, in Latin, to read the letter. His character is summed up in this passage. But it is not really the character of a schoolmaster as such; he is not at all like Sir Hugh Evans for example. It is closer to the character of the pedant or doctor found in the Italian improvisatory theater of the *Commedia dell’Arte*: Il Dottore.

The influence of the *Commedia* on the comedies is well established. An excellent summary of the evidence is contained in Kevin Gilvary’s chapter in *Great Oxford*. The author must have had a first hand acquaintance with the form since it was indeed improvised from standard plots – plots that re-appear all the time in the comedies. It is more plausible, say Oxfordians, that the author was someone who saw these masked farces in Italy, since it would be hard to get the point from second-hand descriptions. Il Dottore, or Doctor Gratiano, is one of the old men of the *Commedia* who are lusty and foolish and thwart the path of true love of the young lovers, Arquino and Colombine.

Il Dottore is repetitious, talks largely malapropic nonsense with a battery of phony learning misquotes authorities and mangles his Latin. The author of *Love's Labor's Lost* may well have used the figure to satirize the self-important English educationalists of his day—although no one has been able to pin down a culprit. (Richard Mulcaster is suggested.) For our purposes it is enough to note that he does not seem to be a representative English schoolmaster at all, even though his knowledge of the classics would overlap.

ECLOGA I, FAUSTUS.

DE HONESTO AMORE ET FELICI EIUS EXITU.

FORTUNATUS. FAUSTUS.

*For. Fauste, precor, gelida quando pecus omne sub umbra
ruminat, antiquos paulum recitemus amores.
ne, si forte sopor nos occupet. ulla ferarum
quae modo per segetes tacite insidiantur adultas
saeviat in pecudes; melior vigilantia somno.*

Mantuanus: Eclogues, 1498

The correct line is *Fauste, precor gelida quando pecus omne sub umbra Ruminat.* "Faustus, I pray, once all the herd is ruminating in the cool shade," etc.

A couple of other "schoolmasters" crop up in the plays, but they are walk-on parts. Do these portraits, and the obvious wide knowledge of the classics in the plays—demonstrated at length by Baldwin to have been obtainable from a Grammar School education, tell us definitely that the author was a Grammar School alumnus?

Oxford and the Education of Royalty

Paradoxically, Baldwin may give us a clue to the opposite conclusion. In the midst of detailing the Grammar School curricula, he inserts four chapters on "The Education of Royalty." These deal with the tutoring of the Princess Mary, Prince Edward (two chapters) and the Princess Elizabeth. There are massive records on all three, especially the young Edward. The whole point of these chapters is to show that *these royals were put through exactly the same paces as any grammar-school boy, with the same curriculum, in the same order, using the same texts and on the same principles.* Let me quote Baldwin's opening words on Prince Edward (Chapter X):

The schoolmasters of King Henry's younger children, Elizabeth and Edward, agree essentially with Sir Thomas Elyot in their points of view. They, too, were ultra-pious men; but they adapted more fully the grammar school curriculum and methods to attain their ends. For Richard Cox, who was in charge of the rudiments of Prince Edward's education, was that master of Eton who transcribed the curriculum of about 1530. It was, therefore, only natural that he should retain the Eton mould when he began to shape

a scheme of education for Prince Edward. The grammar school curriculum had proved itself so effective that its wind was now tempered to the shorn lambs of royalty.

He goes on to detail a group of like-minded educationalists from St. John's College, Cambridge, which, like its counterpart at Oxford, was devoted to Greek (and where Oxford was briefly registered). These men gathered around John Cheke, the first tutor to Prince Edward. They included Roger Ascham, whom we have already encountered and who later became tutor to Elizabeth, William Grindal, Ascham's student who became her first teacher, and the guiding spirit of the group, Cheke's brother-in-law, William Cecil, who, as Lord Burghley became her chief minister. Oxfordians do not need to be reminded that Burghley was also the guardian and father-in-law of Edward de Vere, and responsible for his education. That William Adams was from this college must have carried weight in Oxford's decision to appoint him as schoolmaster at Earls Colne.

To go through Edward VI's schooling from his ABC and Catechism, through his Latin exercises to his eventual mastery of Greek, French, Italian and Spanish, would cause doubters in the capacity of Elizabethan schoolboys to wince at the impossible pressure of it. But Baldwin has the details and we have even the little prince's exercises and letters to check on his progress. And the point is that *he followed the grammar-school curriculum to the letter* only more so, since he was, as Elizabeth was later, the sole pupil with his tutor's sole attention. He started, like everyone else, with the Lyly-Colet Latin Grammar, now the only official one. A copy of it on vellum was presented to him, and we have it with his signatures. In other words, he would have been drilled through his *horum, harum, horum* like any Grammar School boy, by his masters Cheke and Cox, whom Edward, writing about himself in the third person, calls "two learned men, who sought to bring him up in learning of (1) toungues, (2) of the scriptures, (3) of philosophie, and (4) all liberal sciences."

Baldwin reckons that by 1547 Edward "completed the work of lower grammar school like any commoner, and in the expected time." He would, like William Page, have "spent his first quarter... memorizing his accidence" before starting on his Cato and his Aesop. The point here then is that the education of royalty and nobility was not simply modeled on the Grammar School, it was for at least the foundational years the same in all its details. Edward de Vere after his father's death was under the guardianship of the very William Cecil who was at the heart of the group of St. John's men who formed the education of Prince Edward. Cox, the prince's first tutor, had drawn up the Eton curriculum, which he then followed. Can it be doubted that Oxford's education then followed the same pattern? He was raised in the household first of Sir Thomas Smith; he transferred to Cecil's house in 1562. Smith was a remarkable man of learning and diplomacy, and, among other things, was Provost of Eton. (See Stephanie Hughes on Oxford's education.) Between Smith and Cecil then, Oxford would have received no less an education than did Prince Edward, and no less on the Grammar School model—particularly that of Eton.

This would mean that Oxford too would have been drilled in his accidence, and from the authorized grammar of William Lyly. We have already met the Lylys, but let us recapitulate the Lyly connection. (The details can be found in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.) William Lyly was first High Master of St. Paul's School, the colleague and collaborator of John Colet, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, the founder of the school, along with Erasmus. He was a leading humanist in the movement to liberalize the curriculum of the Grammar Schools, and a friend of Sir Thomas More. He died in 1522. His son George Lyly, who died in 1559, was an historian and cartogra-

pher, and is known for having made the first accurate printed map of Britain. His grandson, John Lyly (1554-1606) is the playwright and novelist we have already encountered who worked for Oxford between 1580 and 1588. He and Oxford advanced the cause of Euphuism and this influence is writ large on the comedies. There is no direct record of John's schooling. With his lineage he should have gone to St. Paul's, but he was brought up in Canterbury and may have gone to the King's School like Marlowe. Thus this close companion of, and collaborator with Oxford, was the grandson of the writer of the official "accidence" quoted in such detail in the plays.

This is all germane to the argument that the author of *Merry Wives* must have been to a Grammar School, and was reproducing his experience in the Latin lesson, along with his recollections of Jenkins. This ain't, as the song says, necessarily so.

First: we have seen that Oxford, in the households of Smith and Cecil, would have been drilled in the same manner as a Grammar School boy, from the same texts.

Second: he was a close friend and collaborator of the grandson of the official Latin text's author, himself a product of the Grammar School system, as was Oxford's other employee, playwright and poet Antony Munday. Oxford surrounded himself with a bohemian circle of grammar-school men like Lyly and Munday in his house "Fisher's Folly" during the 1580s: they could surely have compared experiences.

Third: the figure of Holofernes is not modeled on a Grammar School teacher, but is more likely derived from the *Commedia dell'Arte*, which had to be experienced in Italy. The author could have been poking fun at any pedantic private teachers for that matter: perhaps Oxford's learned uncle, Arthur Golding, the translator of Ovid, or his tutor Laurence Nowell the founder of Anglo-Saxon studies.

Fourth: the figure of Sir Hugh Evans could as likely be based on Oxford's employee Henry Evans as on Stratford's Thomas Jenkins.

Fifth: the Earls of Oxford were guardians of a local free Grammar School, and Oxford was familiar with its ways and its schoolmasters, and concerned, however clumsily, with the running of it.

As to the vast learning displayed in the plays that Baldwin lays out in his two volumes, while this might have been available from the best of the larger schools, it was even more available from the kind of private tuition that was given the little Prince Edward, and his young nobleman namesake, Edward de Vere. Even Baldwin finds it hard to imagine an advanced knowledge of Greek, Italian, French and Spanish being available at Stratford. The fact that we find numerous references in the plays to texts that were taught in the Grammar Schools, as Baldwin indefatigably does, does not tell us that the knowledge was gained there, any more than from the private instruction given to noblemen that mirrored it line for line.

We know that Oxford was a precocious student. By the age of thirteen Nowell figured he had no more to teach him. He wrote an elegant Latin, and letters in French, and he spoke both French and Italian, could read Spanish, and bought books in foreign languages. We do not need to claim that the author of the plays must have been to a Grammar School. On the other hand, neither do Oxfordians need to trash the Stratford school, and Grammar Schools in general, to make their

case. If William Shakespeare did go to school in Stratford, he could have got for himself a good education, depending on the time he spent there. The extent of this will perhaps always be a mystery.

But whatever he got from Stratford, it is not sufficient to explain the plays and poems, which contain a breadth of knowledge and experience, and an attitude, that go way beyond small-town Warwickshire. This includes the crucial knowledge of as-then un-translated sources in all the languages that we know Oxford knew, and that were unavailable at Stratford. Also, the author's reading went way beyond what any Grammar School could have provided or afforded. Libraries were very expensive and you could not carry them around with you while changing lodgings. The author must have had access to large private libraries like those of Smith and Cecil, or even his own.

A Grammar School education is then not a sufficient explanation of the author's knowledge and ability. After all, thousands of English boys went to Grammar Schools, yet very few of them became famous and immortal writers. But they did become literate and active citizens. These schools were part of a remarkable phenomenon that was the revolution in education, and the part played by the state in it, during the great transformation of the Tudor-Stuart period. Lawrence Stone shows how in 1500 only four percent of English males could read and write but by 1600 this was thirty percent! This had happened in a span of less than fifty years, since most schools were founded or re-founded after 1553 as we have seen.

These schoolboys helped to make the new England, and hence the modern world. They lifted English society from its feudal and medieval condition as part of a conscious plan by the Humanist and Protestant reformers to create a new order of things. These remarkable schools were the confluence of the twin forces of the Reformation and the Renaissance that produced the new bourgeoisie, and these new model citizens and their descendants unseated two kings and were the formative influence on the growth of capitalism and democracy as we know it. Let us not forget that those remarkably literate and determined men on the Mayflower were all Grammar School boys.

Note on Sources

On the history of the Grammar Schools and Tudor education, there is a long list, but I have relied mainly on Watson, Cressy, Brown, and Baldwin. All the basic historical material on Earls Colne, including the Essex Record Office documents (# 3201756, # 32300700, # 32800466) on which I have drawn here, can be found in the Earls Colne Database at www.alanmacfarlane.com/FILES/earlscolne.html. Oxford's education is dealt with in the works mentioned, but Anderson is the most recent. Nelson's biography of Oxford is the most complete, if unsympathetic, account. See also Stephanie Hopkins Hughes on Oxford's childhood, Smith etc. The picture of Grantham Grammar School is from Foster Watson.