

Did Shakespeare Have A Literary Mentor?

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This article reviews an essay by Dr. Sabrina Feldman in *The Oxfordian* 2010, and a concurrent one by myself. Dr Feldman believes that Thomas Sackville was the true author of Shakespeare's plays; as an Oxfordian, I do not. However, I propose that Feldman and I are both essentially correct, the apparent contradictions reconciled by hypothesizing that Sackville was Oxford's literary mentor.

The Literary Mentor

Imagine, if you will, that Shakespeare, that is, Oxford, in his maturity the greatest poet-playwright of his time, had for a "literary mentor," someone who was himself the greatest poet-playwright of his youth.

Wouldn't this make sense, that the author of *The Complete Works* was not a genius child of nature, as Stratfordians propose, but rather the product of a fine education, a privileged range of experiences, and the tutelage of at least one truly gifted literary mentor?

Stratfordians essentially give up on, or ignore, these possibilities. Worse, they invent careers for their provincial lad, such as soldiering, tutoring noble children, law-clerking, etc., to supplement their "natural genius" thesis with hardly-more-plausible "might have beens."

For Oxfordians, convinced that the 17th Earl of Oxford was the sole or primary source of the works of Shakespeare, candidates for his literary mentor include his uncle, Arthur Golding, the gifted Latin translator and crusty Puritan diatribe. But except for some brilliance in his translations of Ovid (perhaps in collaboration with the teenaged Oxford), Golding was not much of a poet-playwright.

Other possible candidates include Oxford's tutor when he was 13, William Webbe, the remarkable translator of Old English law into contemporary English. Yet Webbe travelled abroad after 1567, died about 1571, and in any case was no poet-playwright. In the same way, Oxford's childhood guardian, Sir Thomas Smith, and his teenage guardian and future father-in-law, William Cecil, were among the most powerful and learned men in England, but neither was a poet-playwright. The same objection applies to Oxford's aunt, the Countess of Surrey, who lived to 1577. In short, when we examine those who might have nurtured Oxford's art, other than conjectural professors at Cambridge or Oxford (e.g., Roger Ascham, Bartholomew Clerke, Thomas Hoby,



Thomas Sackville

possibly even Gabriel Harvey), we are hard pressed to discover worthy candidates until his mid-twenties. After 1576, however, Oxford began to accumulate a circle of truly gifted literary men: Lok, Munday, Llyly, Watson, possibly Greene, Nashe, Lodge, and others.

Thomas Sackville

Less well recognized as among them was Thomas Sackville (1536-1608), from the late 1550s to 1567 the finest poet-playwright that England had produced since Chaucer. Despite not allowing any of his new works to be published after 1567, he remained England's greatest poet until Spenser emerged in the early 1580s.

Queen Elizabeth's second cousin, Sackville was knighted and made Baron Buckhurst, in 1567, appointed to the Privy Council in 1586, made Lord Treasurer in 1599, and created Earl of Dorset in 1604. Before beginning his Continental travels in 1554/5, as he was entering The Inner Temple, Sackville joined a coterie of seven poet-courtiers who had been acquaintances of Oxford's poet uncle, the executed Earl of Surrey, among them Lord Thomas Vaux, the elder Sir Thomas Wyatt, and Lord Mowbray.

The group's literary projects included *A Mirrour For Magistrates*, intended to illustrate how "The Great" have all too often fallen greatly. Sackville's *Induction* and the *Lament of the Duke of Buckingham* introduced and set the stage for the whole enterprise by mimicking Dante's *Inferno*. They are a brilliant descent into Hell, the narrator guided in his visit to the dead Princes by "Sorrow," a "Dark Lady" by any standards. That this masterpiece was written by Sackville when young (only 18 to his early 20s), would have been accomplishment enough for any poet. Yet he was also praised in 1561 for a body of now-lost "sonnets," of which the sole surviving example is cast in Shakespearean form.

Sackville was also, with Thomas Norton, the author of *Gorboduc or Ferrex and Porrex* (performed 1561/2 at the Inner Temple and Court and published without authorization in 1565). This historical drama is widely recognized as the original Elizabethan "revenge play," and unanimously considered to have influenced *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. *Gorboduc* portrays the woes of a kingdom divided against itself, hinting that unless Queen Elizabeth chooses wisely in governance and marriage, chaos will ensue.

Sackville was in Venice in 1566, preparing a mission to Vienna to negotiate a royal marriage, when Elizabeth summoned him home because his father, the Lord Treasurer, had died. His missions to Paris and later to the Low Countries made him as well traveled to many Shakespearean play venues as any other Bard candidate, except for Oxford.

Later he would serve in commissions, often with Oxford, trying Norfolk (Oxford's first cousin), Philip Howard, the Earl of Arundel (Oxford's second cousin), Mary Stuart, and Essex. He and Oxford ranked high on the list of those favoring James VI's accession to the English throne in 1603.

In general, Sackville allied himself with the politics of Lord Burghley. Through him he was also most often allied with Oxford's political mentor, the Earl of Sussex, who from 1573-83 was the Lord Chamberlain, responsible for court performances to counter those

of his bitter court rival, the Earl of Leicester. So, although Oxford and Sackville were very private men, they clearly traveled in the same social, political, and literary circles.

Except for the ongoing praise of his youthful literary works, and hints that he continued to write in private (e.g., in Spenser's dedication to Sackville in *The Fairy Queene* (1590) alongside dedications to Oxford and many others), Sackville apparently stopped publishing after his 1567 elevation to the peerage. Only two manuscripts of his private poetry have survived, one a version of his *Buckingham*, and the other the recently discovered *Sacyyle's Olde Age*, tentatively dated to circa 1567-74, which brilliantly explores the human condition of maturing attitudes with increasing age. He also apparently collaborated with Oxford and his circle. And his son Robert seems to have spearheaded a project which included at least one poem by Oxford.

Feldman's Article

Dr. Feldman contributed an excellent article to the 2010 *Oxfordian*, "The Swallow and The Crow: The Case for Sackville as Shakespeare" (119-137). On p134 she mentioned the Earl of Oxford in connection with my trilogy, *The Dark Side Of Shakespeare* (Vol. I, pp. 280-81, <http://home.earthlink.net/~beornshall/index.html>). In my Chapter 6 discussion of Oxford's politics, I listed clues as to who may have been in Oxford's circle, briefly mentioning Sackville. Other than that acknowledgement, Feldman showed no indications of sympathy for the Oxfordian thesis. Instead, she proceeded to develop her proposal that Sackville alone wrote the good works attributed to Shakespeare, Shakspere of Warwickshire having written the bad works (though many of us dispute that Shakspere could write at all!). After that, she made no other mention of Oxford or me.

Feldman did a great service by providing extracts from the Stratfordian literature which have tidbits of Sackville's biography lacking in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB), the *Oxford DNB* (ODNB), and other sources I'd found, such as several biographical books. She was particularly adept at drawing on orthodox literary comparisons which have been made about Sackville's works and those of the Bard. I heartily recommend that all Oxfordians become acquainted with her article, and perhaps with her orthodox sources as well. As I have long argued, both Oxford and Sackville were parts of what I describe as "The Shakespeare Enterprise" (including all those who produced, disseminated, collected, or preserved the Shakespeare canon).

Feldman (124) did her cause much good by noting that

...in 1602 Thomas Campion [in his *Observations in the Art of English Poesie*] praised Sackville's 'public and private' poems which 'so divinely crowned' his fame.

She also noted that Sylvester's 1608 translation of Du Bartas' *The Divine Weeks* had a part dedicated to Sackville's memory, containing a Latin anagram, decoded as: "secretly devoted to the sacred muses/ I conceal out of love for the sacred muses." Sylvester also said that Sackville "hast sung (under a feigned ghost) the tragic falls of our ambitious throng," which seems to extend the 1563 role of "Sorrow" into 1600s contemporary

ambitions. Of course, nearly all anti-Stratfordians believe Shakspere was something like a “feigned ghostwriter.”

Other Shakespeare Connections

Feldman's section entitled “Connections with Shakespeare” showed possible allusions to Sackville's biography or circumstances in the following works: *Richard III*, 1, 2 and 3, *Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, *The Taming of A Shrew*, and *Mucedorus*. She also did a better job than I in linking Sackville to the *Sonnets*. Some of her examples were striking, such as her note that Sackville was in his late 50s “when most of the *Sonnets* were written, old by the standards of the time” (128), apparently implying that he fit the laments of frailty and age in Sonnets 71-74 better than a younger man like Oxford. Also striking was her observation that the grave-diggers scene in *Hamlet* partly parodied a 1561 legal case written in obscure Norman French, which she implied Sackville would have studied at the Inner Temple.

Few of her cited allusions were particularly compelling to support her thesis that Sackville alone (or with Shakspere) was the Bard. And she did exaggerate a bit by adopting a false certainty at times, with many a “would have” or assertion that disguised the fact that she was actually speculating. This shows the danger of trying to write for a dedicated audience (both of us were writing for different anti-Stratfordian groups).

Still, she provided much information and opinion that Oxfordians should be able to use. For example, she noted (124) that Sackville's death in 1608 qualified him for being the “ever-living author” mentioned in the 1609 *Sonnets* dedication, a conclusion an Oxfordian, or even a Marlovian, can embrace.

Perhaps it's unfair to bring this up, since hers was a fairly short article (19 pages), but it should have occurred to her that she defended her thesis with only a few allusions to fewer than half the canon. By contrast, my trilogy (particularly Chapters 4 and 5 of Vol. I, and Appendix B of Vol. II), provides dozens of allusions on behalf of Oxford, many of them at least as compelling as Feldman's, for every Shakespeare play.

Hess Article

In 2009 I posted onto my web page an article written in 2008 to commemorate the 1609 *Sonnets* anniversary. The *De Vere Society Newsletter* published an extract in March 2011 called, “Did Thomas Sackville influence Shake-speare's Sonnets?” (18:1, 21-30). Obviously I had not read Dr. Feldman's article and didn't know of it while writing mine three years earlier. Still, I doubt that she saw my webpage article, and so we independently arrived at many similar conclusions, though by way of vastly different approaches.

Of course we each had much the same biographical information about Sackville. Yet, in nearly all other matters there was no overlap, with my article arguing that a long-term collaboration can be demonstrated to have existed between Sackville and Oxford. Her article proposed that Sackville by himself wrote the best works attributed to “Shake-

speare," and assumed that Shakspere of Stratford wrote the shoddiest works in the canon. We'll pass over the unlikelihood that Dr. Feldman can show that Mr. Shakspere was at all literate (see my webpage articles by Jane Cox and Robert Detobel, each showing that Shakspere was almost certainly illiterate). As I said above, she did a better job than I in showing "verbal parallels" between Sackville's poetry and the *Sonnets*. In particular, I had not yet located a copy of the recently discovered poem *Sacvyle's Olde Age*, whereas she had located it in *Review of English Studies* XL.157 (1989, pp. 1-25), and evaluated it in her pp. 123 & 129.

Our articles agree that of all Elizabethan writers who left extant works, the best match with the Shakespeare poetry was that of Sackville (I can't agree with friends who believe that Oxford's extant "juvenilia" poetry is really comparable to Shakespeare's mature poetry; though Oxford may have written anonymous poems that compare well). Since Sackville's masterpiece, the *Induction*, was written circa 1554/5, when Sackville was but 18 years old, he more clearly demonstrated traits of the "boy-genius" label that Oxfordians like to award to Oxford. And there were many hints that Sackville's poetry was being privately circulated, as Meres in 1598 said of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

Yet, Dr. Feldman appears to have been unaware of Sackville's and Oxford's possible collaboration (or at least cooperation). My article gave three examples:

1. The 1572 *Courtier* translation into Latin by Sackville's secretary, Bartholomew Clerke. The claim in B.M. Ward's Oxford biography that Clerke had known Oxford at Cambridge is speculative, but plausible. On the other hand, Clerke was surely Sackville's secretary, as he said so himself in his dedication of *Courtier* to Sackville. And although Oxfordians are aware of Oxford's Latin dedication to Clerke, they seem unaware that a longer, even finer, Latin dedication to Clerke was made there by Sackville.
2. A 1572 French masterpiece, *Les Printemps d'Yver* ("The Spring of Winter," where "d'Yver" eerily reminds us of "de Vere"), was translated into 1578 *A Courtly Controversy* under the pseudonym "Henry Wooton." The dedication claimed that "Wooton" was "the brother of Lady Anne Dacre of the South." I demonstrated that Lady Anne had but one brother—Sackville! *A Courtly Controversy* was the first work to adopt "Euphuism," a style used by Oxford's circle of "Euphuists," and it is generally acknowledged to have influenced "Shakespeare."
3. A 1593 poetry anthology, *The Phoenix Neste*, edited by "R.S. of the Inner Temple," contained a poem by "E.O." My *DVS News* article showed that, from the *DNB* and *ODNB*, nobody matches the editor's description except for Robert Sackville, Thomas' son and heir. This is strengthened by my earlier article in the 2005 *The Oxfordian*, ("Another Rare Dreame": Is this an 'authentic' Oxford Poem?" *The Oxfordian*, Vol. VIII 2005, 3-16, which augmented my 2003 website Article 1, still posted).

My 2005 article argued that although Oxford had written a short "E.O." poem for 1593 *Phoenix Neste*, he likely also wrote the much longer, and finer poem, *Another Rare*

Dreame, comparable in quality to *Venus and Adonis* (1593). The author of *Dreame* was described only as an “M.A. of both universities,” which fit Oxford and only a few others (e.g., the late Robert Greene and Francis Meres). And *Dreame* was echoed in the short “E.O.” poem.

One other topic which Feldman covered in passing but which my article dealt with in greater depth was “the stigma of print.” Because of their Boleyn blood, this applied to Sackville and his in-laws perhaps more strongly than it did to Oxford, although both noblemen seem ideal examples of the stigma in action. My DVS article went into considerable detail about the apparent punishment of the Marquis of Winchester, Sackville’s mother’s step-nephew, who failed to achieve the Garter Knighthood after publishing *The Lord Marques Idlenes* (1586). Alan Nelson’s biography of Oxford noted that Oxford failed to achieve the Garter too, and I suggested the reason was that Oxford, like the Marquis, had flaunted the stigma. Even the two highest-ranked noblemen in England could be ostracized for allowing their works to be printed during their lifetimes!

Guy of Warwick

Before wrapping up the matters related to Sackville as the Bard, there’s an intriguing reference by Feldman (133-5 n.14) to *Guy, Earl of Warwick* (1661), a play which she claims can be dated to 1589-94. Its author was “B.J.” (possibly Ben Jonson, though he wasn’t active until the late 1590s). In Act V, the clown Philip Sparrow of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire is a “sneak thief who cheerfully abandons his pregnant mistress Parnell to follow Guy on his chivalrous adventures...” Feldman argues this was a lampoon of Shakspere. Still, I fail to understand how her theories about him as a lesser writer really help to anoint Sackville as the one and only “good” Shakespeare. It merely exaggerates what we already know from the Bard himself—many believe that he seems to have ridiculed the Stratfordian Shakspere as “Sly” in the *Inductions to Taming Of The Shrew* and *Taming Of A Shrew* (a “bad” quarto).

What Feldman failed to grasp is that the “Guy of Warwick” myths went back to the 12th century, and various medieval versions of it are intact. In several of them, Guy’s title which he inherited from his father-in-law is “the Earl of Warwick, Oxford, and Buckingham.” The most popular 16th-Century version was by “Samuel Rowlands” (1609) possibly a pseudonym for Anthony Munday. It was dedicated to no less than Philip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery (Oxford’s son-in-law), who in 1608 received the Garter, a fact glorified in the book’s dedication. It was a verse version of the saga, and did not have the “Sparrow” character in it. However, it may be that this version can also be dated far earlier, and if so it may even pre-date the play Feldman refers to. It’s also possible that the “Sparrow” character is a mid-17th century embellishment!

Skipping over why I believe 1608 was an important year for de Vere (see Christopher Paul’s “Monument without a Tomb: The Mystery of Oxford’s Death,” *The Oxfordian*, VII, 2004, 7-68), I believe that the cover page’s lavish illustration, and other illustrations throughout the book, are meant to depict him as the bearded fictional “Guy of Warwick,” who abandoned his worldly life to live the last of his days in solitary prayers in the forest. For one thing, the title page shows Guy holding up a boar’s head mask before his open-

helmeted face, and we know that Oxford's family emblem included a boar. Yet, although there is a killing of a boar in the story, it isn't turned into a mask, because it disappears from the action after forming the pretext for Guy to kill an arrogant Frenchman. For another thing, it shows Guy's horse trotting alongside of a lion. Another Oxford family emblem was a lion rampant, the Bulbek lion. Yet, again, the story offers no particular pretext for a lion. So, I believe the 1609 *Guy* was a tribute to the lately departed Oxford, father-in-law of the dedicatee, Lord Montgomery.

Conclusion

Our two articles (and this review) form a stronger combined statement than separately, favoring both Oxford and Sackville having had a hand in the works of Shakespeare, particularly in the *Sonnets*. But, when it comes to the plays, I think that Dr. Feldman should read my trilogy's Vol. II, Appendix B, which offers a summary of dozens of strong allusions to Oxford's life in each and every canon play, not just the 14 she points to, and not just the few allusions that she cites. Her play allusions could likely fit into "Passive Collaboration," the phrase I coined in my Vol. II, Chapter 5. It was a process of Oxford's friends, relatives, and allies (principally a circle of nobles originally surrounding his political mentor, the Earl of Sussex) enjoying private entertainments of plays, poetry, songs, etc. Those "origination versions" of each work would later get shared (as was said of the *Sonnets*), revised, and added to by other hands, not always by the originator. For example, my Vol. I, Appendix A, translated George Lambin's 1962 *Voyages De Shakespeare En France Et En Italie*, which gives strong arguments for allusions to the life of Oxford's son-in-law, the 6th earl of Derby, in a handful of plays (*All's Well That Ends Well*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest*, plus leaning on Abel Lefranc about *Love's Labor's Lost*). But my endnotes to that translated book show that in most cases those allusions were either good fits for Oxford too, or could be accounted for under the "Passive Collaboration" process, and need not have been "originated" by Derby. Some of the Derby allusions are at least as compelling as were Feldman's for Sackville.

So I continue to argue that "The Shakespeare Enterprise" involved many individuals (e.g., "originators," revisers, collectors, preservers, printers, publishers, sellers). And I'm willing to give Sackville potential credit for having originated by 1561 a core number of the *Sonnets* (perhaps as many as 50), later revised and vastly added to by Oxford, then re-revised by Sackville after Oxford's death. More to the point, I believe that Sackville and his son Robert had a hand in preservation of the *Sonnets*, such that when Sackville died in 1608 and Robert died suddenly in February, 1609, the *Sonnets* became "available" by May 1609 to the pirate stationers Elde, Thorpe, and Wm. Hall (Anthony Munday's "kinsman" and fellow apprentice from the early 1580s, and the best candidate for the "Mr. W.H. ALL." of the *Sonnets* dedication). If so, whatever "order" the *Sonnets* had in 1609 probably owed more to the two Sackvilles, or to the pirates, than to Oxford.