



# The Shakespeare OXFORD Newsletter



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"Let me study so, to know the thing I am forbid to know"

Spring 2000

## “Vere-y Interesting”

*Shakespeare’s treatment of the earls of Oxford in the history plays*

By Dr. Daniel L. Wright

No scholar of any merit disputes that Shakespeare imaginatively rewrote English history in his chronicle plays. As Judith Anderson has observed, “Shakespeare’s dramas . . . show an explicit . . . self-conscious concern with the natures and varieties of truth in the portrayal of historical persons in art and in chronicle.” Moreover, most readers of Shakespeare agree with such scholars as Peter Saccio, E. M. W. Tillyard and Lily B. Campbell that Shakespeare’s purpose in manipulating and reconfiguring historical accounts was broadly political.<sup>1</sup> For example, in composing *The Famous History of the Life of Henry the Eighth*, Shakespeare dramatically shortens the life of Queen Katherine and sends her off to her eternal reward years before her death actually occurred. This was no careless compositional error. By so sequencing these events, Shakespeare aimed at quietly conferring added legitimacy<sup>2</sup> to Elizabeth’s otherwise contestable claim to the throne by introducing the suggestion that Katherine of Aragon was dead at the time the  
*(Continued on page 14)*

## Paradigm earthquake strikes Amherst, Mass.

*Oxfordian scholar Roger Stritmatter’s successful Ph.D. defense raises the authorship stakes*



Roger Stritmatter (r) poses with Society Board member Robert Barrett (l) after his successful dissertation defense. Barrett’s students had taken up a collection to fly him from Bremerton (Wash.) to Amherst (Mass.) for the historic authorship event.  
*(Photo Lisa Wilson)*

On Friday, April 21st, in Amherst, Massachusetts one of the more significant events in the history of the authorship debate took place. Ph.D. candidate Roger Stritmatter defended his dissertation on the verse annotations in Edward de Vere’s 1570 Geneva Bible and their correlation with the use of biblical verses by Shakespeare. The defense took place before a committee of five, including the Comparative Literature and English Departments of UMass-Amherst, and visiting professor Dr. Daniel Wright (Concordia University, Portland, Oregon).

At the conclusion of the two-hour defense, the committee briefly adjourned, and then returned with its 5-0 recommendation to accept the dissertation. This positive recommendation capped an eventful nine-year odyssey during which Stritmatter had gone from being just another graduate student on a U.S. college campus to his eventual emergence as something of a “notorious” scholar, well-known in many Stratfordian academic circles around the U.S., even before this year’s historic defense proceedings.

All this is, of course, no surprise to Oxfordians involved in the Shakespeare authorship debate, and especially to those who have been around during recent years waiting to see how the “Stritmatter-Geneva Bible” story would finally play out. And, in truth, it really can’t be said even yet to have “played out,” but these early returns from UMass are most encouraging.

About 75 people were on hand to witness the proceedings (at UMass-Amherst, unlike some universities, these defenses are  
*(Continued on page 8)*

### Inside:

**Special Report: New Oxford Letter Found**  
Page 4

**4th Annual Edward de Vere Studies Conference**  
Page 10

**The End of Stratfordianism**  
Page 12

**Virginia Woolf’s Shakespeare**  
Page 26

*Review of Journals*

## Last print issue of *The Elizabethan Review* published; new editor Pearson's first *De Vere Society Newsletter*

By Richard F. Whalen

*The Elizabethan Review*

Multiple allusions to astronomy in *Hamlet*, more than anyone has heretofore identified, are described in an article by a professor of astronomy in the final printed issue of *The Elizabethan Review* (Spring 1999). The journal, launched in 1993, is now found solely on the Internet.

Peter Usher, professor of astronomy and astrophysics at Pennsylvania State University, does not write as an Oxfordian, but his insights and discoveries suggest that Shakespeare was immensely learned in astronomy and well-informed about the latest developments, especially the Copernican view of the universe. Usher's playwright sounds more like Oxford than the Stratford man.

"Shakespeare defines poetically the new universal order," says Usher. "If the present interpretation has merit, *Hamlet* would manifest an astronomical cosmology that is no less magnificent than its literary and philosophical counterparts."

Usher notes that Shakespeare picks Wittenberg as Hamlet's alma mater, and Wittenberg was the first center of Copernican studies. Hamlet says, "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.ii.243). "Nutshell" reflects the old Ptolemaic view of the earth at the center of a shell of stars. Infinite space, a new and radical idea that resulted from the Copernican revolution, was first propounded, says Usher, by the father of Leonard Digges, the poet of the *First Folio's* preface.

Shakespeare puns on three of the earliest astronomical terms—retrograde, opposition and conjunctive. He picks a new name for the king of the Amleth legend—"Claudius," and Claudius was Ptolemy's first name. As Copernicus's theory "kills" Claudius Ptolemy's, Hamlet, the new Copernican, kills the king Claudius. Usher also suggests new explanations for the "north-

by-northwest" passage, the gravedigger's remarks, Fortinbras's trip to Poland (where Copernicus was buried), and a half dozen others, some of them familiar. The cumulative impact is impressive.

*The Elizabethan Review* also carries a long article by Daphne Pearson, who researched county records on Oxford's lawsuit against Roger Harlackenden over the 1,200 acres and buildings of Colne Priory. Pearson is a doctoral student at the University of Sheffield, England. In another article Richard Lester suggests that instead of a conspiracy to cover up Oxford's authorship of Shakespeare after his death the silence about his identity may have been simply the result of his having "lived a life of irreconcilable differences."

Gary Goldstein of Middle Village, NY, a former trustee of the Shakespeare Oxford Society, launched the review seven years ago as an independent journal on Elizabethan and Shakespearean studies. Many of the articles have been by Oxfordians. The journal will continue to be published on the Internet ([www.elizreview.com](http://www.elizreview.com)); the online *ER* will include both selections from the 1993-1999 print issues and some new articles first published in the online version.

In one selected article presently available on the *ER* site, Goldstein examines evidence for Oxford's authorship in light of U.S. Justice John Paul Stevens's 1992 article "The Shakespeare Canon of Statutory Construction" in the *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*.

*The De Vere Society Newsletter*

The new editor of the *De Vere Society Newsletter* is Daphne Pearson, a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Sheffield. She succeeds Christopher Dams, who is concentrating on the society's play-dating project. Pearson has been studying the effect of wardship on Oxford and his often complex and failing financial situation.

(Continued on page 21)

*Obituary*

## Sir John Gielgud 1904-2000

Sir John Gielgud, who found great merit in the case for the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford as the true author of Shakespeare's works, died at the age of 96 in May.

Gielgud, who acted until the very end of his life, was described as "a quintessential man of the theater" by *The New York Times* in its page-one obituary. Also known as a director, producer and author, he was considered by many to be the greatest classical actor of his time.

He played all the leading roles in Shakespeare's most popular plays, reinterpreting *Hamlet* and *Romeo* many times in his long career. In fact, in the 1930s his *Hamlet* ran in New York City at the same time as Leslie Howard's—an interesting circumstance since both actors eventually came around to seeing Oxford as Shakespeare.

In the 1940s he created and performed *The Ages of Man*, his one-man collage of excerpts from Shakespeare's works. His last major movie role was the lead in *Prospero's Books*.

In 1994 a London newspaper reported that Gielgud had signed Charles Boyle's petition calling for an academic inquiry into the question of Shakespeare's identity. In the same year Gielgud replied to Richard Whalen's request for an introduction to his book, *Shakespeare: Who Was He?* He said that he admired the book, adding, "I confess to being very inclined to side with you and the Oxfordians, but I do not relish the idea of being involved personally in the inevitable discussions and contradictions which will ensue.... A mere actor like myself cannot bring myself to muddle in such controversial matters."

Other leading actors who have voted for Oxford as the author are Sir Derek Jacobi, who has made a documentary film—*The Shakespeare Conspiracy*—on the case for Oxford; Michael York, who has spoken at Oxfordian events; and Keanu Reeves, who told a magazine interviewer that he would like to make a movie of Edward de Vere's story. Mark Rylance, the artistic director of the new Globe theatre in London, is on record as not believing the Stratford man was the playwright. Tyrone Guthrie and Orson Welles have also rejected the Stratford man.

## Whose handwriting? The annotations in Oxford's Geneva Bible

With Roger Stritmatter's Ph.D. dissertation on Edward de Vere's Geneva Bibles soon to be published, the debate has returned to a part of the story that, in fact, has never really gone away—namely, has it been satisfactorily established that the annotations in Oxford's Geneva Bible are from the pen of Edward de Vere?

Last June (1999), in the story on the Shakespeare authorship debate published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Prof. Alan Nelson of UC-Berkeley (a prominent anti-Oxfordian who is writing a biography of Oxford), was quoted as saying that the handwriting in Oxford's Geneva Bible was *not* Edward de Vere's. This is a position that Prof. Nelson has held for the last five years now, but—apparently—it has not always been his position.

Recently Stritmatter brought to our attention the fact that Prof. Nelson had once taken a very different position on this matter, and then sometime in 1995 changed his mind. Since Stritmatter's work—work premised on the acceptance of the annotations as de Vere's—will soon be published, we thought this would be an appropriate time to revisit this issue.

When this matter about Prof. Nelson's changing his mind first came up in 1995, Stritmatter wrote to him for clarification (see his letter in the box this page). However, he never received an answer. To date (i.e. spring/summer 2000) Prof. Nelson has still not gone on the record about the handwriting, particularly how and why has he changed his

October 16, 1995

Professor Alan Nelson  
Department of English  
University of California at Berkeley

Dear Professor Nelson:

At the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Shakespeare Oxford Society in Greensboro, SC, September 30<sup>th</sup> to October 2<sup>nd</sup> I was informed by two reliable informants that in your recent presentation at the Shakespeare Authorship Roundtable you had publicly stated that you no longer believe that the annotations of the Folger de Vere Bible are in de Vere's handwriting. In view of the numerous malicious and misinformed statements which have already been made on this and other subjects related to the evidentiary value of this artifact, you may very well understand why these reports caused me no small concern.

I take the liberty of providing you with prior written signatures, one a posting to the Evermore online authorship [discussion group] dated May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1995, the other your May 27<sup>th</sup> letter to the *Smithsonian* magazine which you kindly cc'd to me, in which you expressed the opposite opinion in no uncertain terms. I draw your attention to the highlighted words in the former document:

I am 99 and 44/100th percent certain that the annotating hand is Oxford's. I am 100 percent sure (if it is possible to be that) that the Bible is Oxford's.

I would be most gratified if you would clarify your reasons for discovering that the odds of this unfortunate coincidence have shifted so profoundly in the twinkling of an eye.

Most sincerely,

Roger Stritmatter

mind, since no paleographical evidence on the matter had ever been published by him—or anyone—questioning the authenticity of the annotations in the Bible.

Recently, the *Newsletter* contacted Prof. Nelson about this, providing a copy of Stritmatter's 1995 letter, and asking him to update us about the handwriting issue and, in particular, about how and why he had apparently changed his mind about the handwriting.

In an exchange of several emails, Prof. Nelson responded that he did not wish to engage in any dialogue—public or private—with Stritmatter on this topic. In his

last email, his exact words to us were, "I refuse to be drawn in any way in respect to Roger Stritmatter, and will not be blackmailed into participation in a public debate with him by your threat to put in print that I had "no comment" [sic].

He further added to this a P.S. that we should quote him "verbatim" should we publish his final answer. And so we have.

We regret that we can report no more than this response from Prof. Nelson. We will, however, provide much more discussion about the handwriting debate in an upcoming *Newsletter*, drawing upon Stritmatter's completed dissertation.

### Conference Update

## Large turnout expected for 24th Annual Conference in Stratford

If early registrations are any indication, this fall's conference in Stratford, Ontario (October 26th to October 29th) could prove to be one of the better attended in recent years, certainly well over 100. Members are encouraged to register sooner rather than later to be assured of *Hamlet* tickets.

The conference will begin Thursday evening (October 26th) with Canadian author Lynne Kositsky reading from her new children's book *A Question of Will*, after which there will be a question and answer session.

Kositsky's book features the author-

ship question—from an Oxfordian point of view—as young protagonist Perin Willoughby travels back in time to the Elizabethan era and encounters the authorship mystery first hand; the book ends with Perin describing his acting experiences in Elizabethan England as "doing de Vere."

Among the papers presently scheduled are Richard Whalen on Leonard Digges (reprising his Portland presentation), Eddi Jolly on Burghley's library (based on her May 2000 *DVS newsletter* article), Frank Davis on Shakespeare's medical knowledge, Derran Charlton on the De Vere

Society's dating project, Charles Boyle on the young Elizabeth's translation of *Mirror of the Sinful Soul*, Paul Streitz on the myth of the Virgin Queen, Ron Hess on "The Dark Side of Shakespeare," and Robert Prechter on the 1609 dedication to the *Sonnets* (supporting and expanding on John Rollett's work). There will also be a panel on staging *Hamlet*, moderated by Dr. Ren Draya.

Registration for the full conference is \$130. Contact Sue Sybersma for further information: (519)393-6409. The conference hotel is the Victorian Inn on the Park: (800)741-2135. Room rates are \$85/night (Canadian).

# The last known letter of Edward de Vere brought to light

By Susan Campbell

This past April, research efforts at the Essex Records Office were rewarded with an important find: three letters from Edward de Vere. The first, a letter of commission dated 13 March 1592, granting Roger Harlakenden and William Lewyn the right to increase the revenue on certain lands and properties in order to raise the standard of the teaching at the “Free Schole at Earles Colne” and provide “a sufficiente and able scholemaster . . .” was in the hand of a scrivener, but was signed by de Vere. The second, dated 13 December 1593, also dictated but signed by de Vere, revoked the previous licence, stating that Harlakenden and Lewyn had failed to keep their promise to “place a sufficient scholemaster there for the teaching and instructing of youth in good literature.”

I was charmed by the opening line: “To all people, to whom this present writing shall come, I, Edward de Vere Earl of Oxenford Lord Great Chamberlain of England Viscount Bulbeck and Lord of Badlesmere and Scales, send greeting.” As one of those to whom “this writing” had come, I felt myself included in the warmth of his “greeting.”

Excited by the discovery, I felt a strong reluctance to return to San Diego, so I changed the ticket and immediately returned to Essex to see what else I could find. Eventually I was presented with an unpromising old folder, which, however, turned out to hold a treasure, a letter written by Edward de Vere himself, in his own hand, addressed to “hys most excellent Magestye, King James 1st” and dated “30 Januarie 1603.” I had come across what I now know to be the last known letter of Oxford’s written by his own hand and, if my modest efforts at research are correct, the only known letter to a monarch. Modern dating puts it at January 1604, a mere five months before his death on the 24th of June.

I held it to the light to check the unusual watermark, and generally stared at and admired it, amazed by its remarkable clarity and immediacy, and the fact that I could read it as effortlessly as a letter from a friend. Marks on the paper show it to have been folded into an envelope shape, leaving the “address” to be seen on the outer side, yet it has suffered very little damage, the right hand edge of the paper having deteriorated slightly, causing the loss of perhaps a half dozen letters.

Unlike many other letters of the period, it is as clear and as easy to read today as it was on the day of writing, even revealing those moments when the pen was freshly dipped in ink, or a new one taken up when the lettering was fading. The graceful Italic script flows easily across the page, the hand of one well used to writing. It rises, almost curves slightly up towards the top right, as do most of his letters. It betrays little weakness or unevenness of pressure, and has no blots. It has the feeling of a letter written once, not composed and then copied.

Only in the flourishes above the signature is betrayed a carelessness not like his usual confident swash. While the letters to his in-laws are written rapidly and are generally barren of flourishes, this formal letter of thanks and more requests to a new monarch obviously required he demonstrate his best penmanship. Though there is no hesitation, he was clearly writing with

*(Continued on page 6)*

**The text of the last letter we now have in de Vere’s own hand, found in the Essex Records Office by Sue Campbell—of London and San Diego—in April 2000:**

Seeing it hath pleased your Majesty of your most gracious inclination to justice and right to restore me to be keeper of your game as well in your forest of Waltham, as also in Havering Park, I can do no less in duty and love t(o) Your Majesty, but employ myself in the execution thereof. And to the end you might the better know in what sort both the forest and the park have be(en)abused, and yet continued, as well in destroying of the deer, as in spoiling of your demesne wood, by such as have patents, and had licences heretofore for felling of timb(er) in the Queens time lately deceased, presuming thereby that they may do what they liste. I was bold to send unto your majesty a man skilfull, learned and experienced in forest causes, who being a dweller and eyewitness thereof might inform you of the truth. And because your Majesty upon a bare information, could not be so well satisfied of every particular as by lawfull testimony and examination of credible witness upon oath, according to your Majesties appointment by commission a course has been taken, in which your Majesty shall be fully satisfied of (the) truth. This commission together with the depositions of the witness I do send to your Majesty by your bearer, who briefly can inform you of the whole contents. Say now, having lawfully proved unto your Majesty that Sir John Graye hath killed and destroyed your deer in Havering park without any warrant for the same his patent is void in law, and therefore I most humbly beseech your Majesty to make him an example for all others that shall in like sort abuse their places and to restore me to the possession thereof, in both which your Majesty shall do but Justice and right to the one and other this 30 January 1603.

Your Majesties  
most  
humble  
subject and  
servant  
E Oxenforde

Scinge yt hath pleased your Magestye of your moste gracious inclination to  
 Justice & ryght to restore me to be keeper of your game as well in your fores  
 of Swaltham, as also in Havering parke. I can doo no lesse in dwtye and love  
 your Magestye, but imploye my selfe in the executione therof. And to the end  
 you myght the better knowe in what sorte bothe the fores<sup>es</sup> & the parke have be  
 abused, and yet continued, as well in distroying of the Dere, as in spoyling of your  
 demesne woodde, by suche as haue patents, & had lycences hertofore for sellinge of Tyme  
 in the Quiens tyme lastye deceasde, praesuminge therby that they may doo what they  
 lyst. I was bowld to sende vnto your Magestye a man skilfull, lerned & experient  
 in foreste causes, who beinge a dweller and eywytnes therof myght informe you of the  
 truthe. And because your M<sup>tye</sup>. vpon a bare information, cowld not be so well  
 satisfysde of every particular, as by lausfull testemoye & examinatione of credible  
 wytnes vpon othe, accordinge to your Magestyes appoyntment, by Commissione  
 a course hath bene taken, In whiche your Magestye shalbe fully satisfysde of  
 truthe. This Commissione together w<sup>th</sup> the depositions of the wytnes I doo sende to  
 your M<sup>tye</sup>. by J<sup>r</sup> beare. whoo brieflye can informe you of the whoole contence. So  
 now, hauinge lausfullye provede vnto your Magestye y<sup>e</sup> Sr John Graye hath killed  
 and destroyed your Dere in Havering parke wythoute any warrante for the same  
 bys patent ys voyde in lawe, & therefore I moste humblye besече your Magestye  
 to make hym an example for all others that shall in leke sort abuse there place, &  
 to restore me to the possessione therof, in bothe whiche your M<sup>tye</sup> shall doo but  
 Justice and ryght to the one & other. this 30 of Januarie 1603.

Your Magestyes

most  
humble

Subiect & ord  
servant.

E. Oxenforde

*de Vere letter (Continued from page 4)*

more concerns for the look of the letter, than in most of the letters we have to date (all to his in-laws). Despite these slight differences, there can be no doubt that this is de Vere's own idiosyncratic handwriting. No one who has seen photocopies of his letters could mistake it for that of anyone else.

The text of the letter reveals it to be the fourth and probably the final letter in a series concerning the Keepership of the Forest of Essex and Havering Park. It witnesses the conclusion of a long and sometimes bitter struggle to reestablish what had been a hereditary title in the family until the twelfth year of the reign of Henry VIII, when the King took it for the term of the life of his grandfather. Attempts to recover it began with the sixteenth Earl more than sixty years before. Edward took up the case at some point (the first extant letter on the subject is dated October 25, 1593) with his appeal twice going to law before the Queen persuaded him to drop it—and in what can only have been a belief that his compliance would eventually be rewarded, he did. When this was still not forthcoming, it went to arbitration before Sir Christopher Hatton, but still Elizabeth refused to allow it.

Letters to his in-laws reveal a great deal about the suit and about his feelings at Elizabeth's intransigence. The first, written to Lord Treasurer Burghley on October 25th 1593 (and reported in William Plumer Fowler's book of 1986, *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford's Letters*) tells of his hopes that the Queen would give him leave to try his title at law, "... But I found that so displeasing unto her, that in place of receiving that ordinary favour which is of course granted to the meanest subject, I was brow beaten and had many bitter speeches given me." After all, the keepership was a major gift in hand with which to spread the "net of her favour," as one scholar puts it, and Elizabeth may have felt that his £1000 annuity, established in 1586, was sufficient.

Oxford, however, persisted. In a second extant letter to Robert Cecil (now Viscount Cranbourne) dated May 7th, 1603, Oxford describes how the suit had twice gone to law with judgement likely to fall in his favour, only to let himself be persuaded by the Queen to "let it fall" on her "assured promises and words of a prince to restore it herself unto me." To Cecil he writes: "I have been thus long dispossessed, but I hope truth is subject to no prescription, for truth

is truth though never so old, and time cannot make that false which was once true, and though this threescore years both my father and myself have been dispossessed thereof, yet hath there been claims made thereto many times within those threescore years, which I take sufficient by law to avoid prescription in this case."

With the accession of James, the tide began to turn in Oxford's favour. On June 19th, 1603, he wrote what was previously believed to be his last letter, again to Robert

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*"His sense of  
flamboyance does  
not seem to have  
deserted him ...  
[with the signature]  
giving the impression  
of a courtly bow."*

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Cecil, referring to his suit for the Keepership and his title to Havering House and Park. In it he expresses a growing optimism and a heartfelt gratitude to Cecil, his "simple hearty thanks" for his help in the matter, the suit "in seeking whereof, I have spent the chiefest time of mine age." We can imagine his feelings when his suit was granted a month later.

In this newly discovered and (to date) final letter of January 1604, he writes directly to the King, in itself something of a departure. According to David Starkey in his recent book *Elizabeth*, Court etiquette dictated that no one must write directly to the monarch, unless instructed to do so, except it be their husband, wife, or another king or queen; messages were to be sent through Lord Burghley or another member of the Privy Council. According to Starkey, James introduced a whole new political style, very different from the Tudors, making it possible for Oxford to put his case in writing directly to the King. (Among Oxford's tin mine let-

ters provided to us by Prof. Alan Nelson is a proposal for the management of the tin monopoly wherein he addresses the Queen directly; however, the lack of a salutation or signature suggests that this was a proposal that was given to someone else to pass on to her—most likely Robert Cecil, his go-between throughout in this matter.)

In his argument that, along with the rights to the forest, the patents also be returned to him and malefactors punished, we see his legal education reflected in the easy and correct use of such legal terms as: "lawful testimony," "examination of credible witness," "appointments by commission," "depositions of the witness," "eye witness," and "patent void in law"; wrapping the whole in a graceful and poetic phrasing while hammering home his point.

This final letter, begun with the courtly elegance found so often in his writing, bears out the growing optimism found in the two previous ones on the subject, but it must have been a bittersweet victory, coming as it did after so many years and so late in life. It would be for a handwriting expert to say what weakness, if any, is betrayed in the uncharacteristically careful penmanship and slightly shaky flourishes. Despite the unusual caution, his sense of flamboyance does not appear to have deserted him, if the signature is anything to go by, as it takes up the whole of the remaining space on the page, giving the impression of a courtly bow, as, feathered hat in hand, this great Peer bends his knee, and lowers his head in respect for his King. Gone—as with the May 7th and June 19th letters to Cecil—are the "crown" above and the underscoring and crossmarks of earlier signatures as he returns to a freer, less encumbered style.

Sadly, Oxford had little time to enjoy his victory, though it must have pleased him to be able to pass along something to his heirs. Five months later, on the 18th of June, 1604, he granted the custody of the forest of Essex to his son-in-law, Lord Norris, and his cousin Sir Francis Vere. Six days later he was dead.

*The letter is reproduced courtesy of  
The Essex Records Office.*

*My thanks to Valerie Nicholson and  
Derran Charlton of the De Vere Society and  
to Stephanie Hughes, Editor of The Oxfordian,  
for their support and encouragement.  
Thanks also to Jennifer Butler, Principal  
Archivist of the Essex Records Office.*

*Research Notes*

## The “upstart Crow” supposes

By Jonathan Dixon

Yes trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes factotum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a cuntry.

This turgid little passage from *Greene’s Groatworth of Wit* is, as Charlton Ogburn points out in *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, the cornerstone—nay, the very foundation—on which the whole Stratford myth is erected. Without it, orthodox scholars would have not a whit of evidence dating from William Shakspeare’s lifetime with which to link that Stratford businessman to a writing career of any sort (59). It’s their ace-in-the-hole. Stratfordians have traditionally paraded this passage as irrefutable proof that by 1592 William Shakspeare of Stratford-on-Avon, after his mysterious lost years, was not only alive and well and living in London, and was not only a successful actor in that teeming metropolis, but was already an established playwright, popular enough to be considered a threat by the leading writers of his day. How could it be read any other way? they demand.

For example, Marchette Chute asserted, “The most important thing about Greene’s attack is that it established the fact that Shakespeare was a successful actor before he became a playwright. This, in turn, explains what he had been doing in the intervening years, since the birth of his twins in Stratford in 1585” (56). E. K. Chambers said, “Greene’s letter in itself is sufficient to show that by September 1592 Shakespeare was both a player and a maker of plays” (57). And Gerald E. Bentley, “The first London reference to Shakespeare appropriately combines his acting and his writing functions, and the context of Greene’s allusion makes it plain that Shakespeare’s success as a playwright was already sufficient to make him a serious rival to the University Wits” (57). And so on ...

And yet, as with so many other documents purporting to support the Stratfordian attribution, this passage, on closer examina-

tion, can just as easily be read as refuting it. I would like to share something I discovered which I have never seen addressed in Oxfordian—or any other—literature, but which, I believe, deals a serious blow to this most sacred of Stratfordian documents, a semantic matter which should be brought up in any future debate in which Stratfordians drag out this old chestnut of “proof.”

Reading the above passage from Greene for the millionth-and-first time, it simply occurred to me to wonder: Why does the crow “suppose” he is well able to bombast out a blank verse? Why “suppose”? It seems rather an odd choice of words, considering “to suppose” usually means “to make an assumption or inference.” Why did the author of the *Groatworth*—whether Greene himself, the printer Henry Chettle, or someone else—not say simply, “believes” or “thinks” or “is of the opinion” or some other such clearer phrase? I began to wonder if there wasn’t perhaps some other archaic use of the verb “to suppose” that the author might actually have intended.

And, sure enough, according to the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*, in 16th century England the word “suppose” also had the now-obsolete meaning “to feign or pretend.” (A modern illustration might be, “Superman supposes he is a mild-mannered reporter named Clark Kent.”)

If you now read Greene’s famous passage once again, substituting “pretends” for “supposes,” you get a very different interpretation from the orthodox, which simply takes it that the player had a high opinion of his own writing ability. The new interpretation leaves it an open question whether the player wrote—or was capable of writing—anything at all. This new reading also makes more sense than the traditional when looked at in the light of Greene’s crow-and-feathers metaphor, an allusion to the Aesop fable in which a crass crow disguises himself with peacock feathers and pretends to be what he is not—what he is in no way equipped to be. The crow does not really become a peacock. He *pretends* to be one.

A second obsolete Elizabethan defini-

tion of “suppose” may also be of relevance here: “to substitute by artifice or fraud,” e.g., “The thief supposed a cheap glass copy for the real diamond.” Although it doesn’t fit grammatically into Greene’s passage, this definition provides further indication that in Shakespeare’s time the word “suppose” had a definite connotation of fraud and deception that it since has lost. In fact, these old definitions are the very basis of George Gascoigne’s play of mistaken identity, *Supposes* (performed at Gray’s Inn in 1566, and first published around 1572). As the Prologue in that play states, in an “argument” filled with wordplay on the word “suppose”:

But, understand, this our Suppose is nothing else but a mistaking or imagination of one thing for another. For you shall see the master supposed for the servant, servant for the master; the freeman for a slave, and the bondslave for a freeman; the stranger for a well-known friend, and the familiar for a stranger. (qtd. in Baskervill et al. 113)

The relevance of all this to the authorship question needs hardly be elaborated upon. In light of the above, it seems likely—or at the very least, undeniably plausible—that even if Greene was referring to Shakspeare of Stratford in his famous passage, what he was really saying was: “There is an uppity player who passes himself off as a playwright and *pretends* he can write plays with the best of you” (This said, perhaps, with the implication that the player was a substitute for someone else?).

All in all, it is proof once again that, when looked at critically, the documentary evidence linking William Shakspeare to the plays of William Shakespeare can often be read as questioning the relationship rather than affirming it.

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*Stritmatter (Continued from page 1)*

open to the public). The format, under the guidance of Defense Committee Chairman William Moebius, was a “European-style” defense, with questions allowed and encouraged from the audience.

Despite personal invitation, prominent Stratfordian scholars from the University of Massachusetts and other institutions boycotted the event. “I was very disappointed that there were no challenges from the audience regarding the red-herring issue of the handwriting in the Bible,” Stritmatter later commented.

“Bruce Smith, David Kathman, and other leading Stratfordians have insisted, on the flimsiest imaginable grounds, that the annotations were made not by Oxford but by an anonymous third party. I was really looking forward to rebutting that silly notion, but none of these critics seem to have had the courage of their convictions. They are completely unwilling to go head to head in a public debate and prefer to operate by innuendo, bad logic and character assassination. They couldn’t be more mistaken about this subject, and—in their heart of hearts—they must know it” (see also a brief note on page 3 about the handwriting issue).

However, in this case Moebius had already decided in advance that only written questions would be allowed, since there was actually some concern about events running out of control. As is the procedure with such defenses, the candidate made an opening presentation before the committee. Stritmatter began with an exciting, eloquent

presentation of not just the annotations in the Bible, but also the underlying hypothesis that made this Ph.D. defense unlike any other. Rather than shy away from the identification of Edward de Vere as Shakespeare, Stritmatter chose to meet the challenge head on. The analysis of the Geneva Bible annotations was, therefore, not presented as a “smoking gun” to de Vere’s authorship, but instead became (as Dr. Daniel Wright would later note in his opening statement) “a map of the author’s mind as his creative art was informed by Scripture.”

Stritmatter’s opening statement outlined the 20th century history of the authorship debate, and the extremely strong case for identifying Edward de Vere as the most likely pseudonymous author of the Shakespeare canon. Among those Oxfordians who had come to attend the defense, there had in fact been some discussion about such a tactic—almost like sports fans talking strategies and players before the big game—with some suggesting that making the authorship debate itself an integral part of the overall dissertation defense might not be such a good idea—in fact that it might well backfire and force some committee members to vote against the dissertation on authorship grounds alone. Others, of course, felt just the opposite, wondering how one could discuss the Bible as Shakespeare’s without grappling with the claim of Edward de Vere’s being Shakespeare.

Stritmatter’s decision to lay his cards on the table, he later told us, was finally based on the simple premise that the best defense

is a strong offense. “Why avoid the intent of this entire endeavour?” he asked. “Namely, to bring to bear a new body of evidence supporting the conclusion, reached eighty years ago on entirely different premises, by John Thomas Looney and subsequently by many other informed and rational readers of ‘Shakespeare’?”

When he had first looked at the Geneva Bible at the Folger Shakespeare Library nine years ago, Stritmatter hypothesized that he was looking at “Shakespeare’s” Bible—just as William Plumer Fowler before him had analyzed Oxford’s letters as the letters of “Shakespeare.” His analysis of the annotations in comparison with existing scholarship on Shakespeare’s use of the Bible supports this proposition (the dissent of such critics as David Kathman on the Internet notwithstanding), Stritmatter stated. Furthermore, the annotations themselves have led to new insights on Shakespeare’s use of the Bible—insights previously not known to Shakespeare scholars.

Several of these insights have been documented by Stritmatter in a series of articles published in the prestigious scholarly journal *Notes and Queries*, published by Oxford University Press during the 1997-2000 period. More await publication for the first time in the dissertation.

Stritmatter’s presentation demonstrated its strength as he moved from the authorship debate itself into his analysis of the Bible—an analysis that made comparisons with both Shakespeare’s known Bible use, and with other English and Continental

### **Professor Daniel Wright’s Preface to his Examination of Roger Stritmatter (Doctoral Dissertation Committee, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, April 21, 2000)**

First of all, I want to commend Roger Stritmatter on his substantive work in this dissertation, an achievement of great intellectual labor that commands the continued attention of scholars. Many of us in the academic world are sometimes inclined to look at dissertations as vehicles of narrow, highly particularized inquiry that, once completed, are to be relegated to overstuffed and dusty shelves or shipped off to academic publishing houses so that similarly specialized—if somewhat shorter—professional publication might ensue.

Not so here.

This dissertation answers important questions for us. But it does not close the field of inquiry into the subject it explores. Unlike many doctoral dissertations, this work invites its read-

ers to continue the investigation—to build on its exciting and revelatory insights—to test them over and over again, to reflect on them, to expound on them. This dissertation is an invitation not to close the book on what some might regard as an arcane study of dubious relevance and pat the author on the head with a commendatory, “Well done, fellow. Now join us in the community of scribblers dedicated to the publication of even more jejune scholarship!”

It is a summons to us to persevere in our investigation of the conclusions and implications of this thesis—to strive for a more perfect understanding of the religious sensibilities of the writer who was Shakespeare and explore the character of his theological imagination at a time of religious and cultural revolution in the Western

world. Roger Stritmatter has given us much more than an index to Shakespeare’s Bible; he has provided for us a map of the author’s mind as his creative art was informed by Scripture.

No small achievement, that. We’ve waited for over four hundred years for someone to push open—even if but an inch—that door of understanding into the heretofore closed-to-us room in which the sources of Shakespeare’s art were kept, and here we have it, via an impressive, scholarly investigation of the most influential text the writer who was Shakespeare utilized in the formation of his dramatic art.

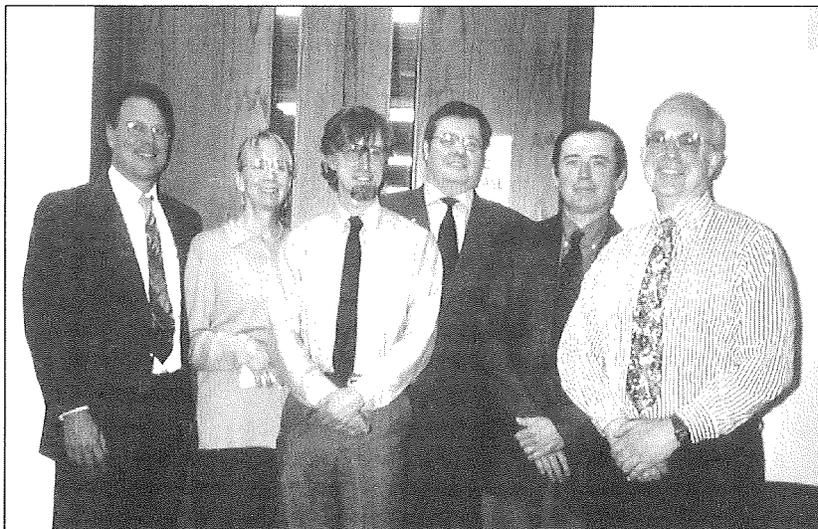
This leads me to my first question of the candidate...

writers. There had been one recent, significant change made in his approach to this project, a change that had evolved from working on this thesis over the years and consulting with his advisors. Whereas his earlier analysis of the Bible annotations had compiled side by side lists of particular verses annotated and whether they also appeared in Shakespeare, the thesis in its final form took the analysis to a new and more enlightening level, namely to a closer look at the subset of about eighty Biblical passages to which Shakespeare makes frequent and repeated reference.

This analysis of the annotations broken down into thematic groups—identified as “image clusters”—are the centerpiece of Stritmatter’s final version of his dissertation. In brief, this analysis has found that annotator’s notes were not random, but in fact kept returning to a handful of themes scattered throughout the Bible, themes that, it turns out, clearly resonate with the Shakespeare canon itself, and even more importantly, with the dynamics of the authorship debate itself. For these clusters reveal an individual concerned not only with such familiar matters as usury, almsgiving, or the anointment of the monarch by God, but also with other, more esoteric matters such as “good works,” and, in particular, “good works” performed in secret, known only to God.

It is this last such insight about the annotator’s concerns that clearly lends strength to the proposition that this Bible—if it is indeed Shakespeare’s—is the Bible of a Shakespeare concerned with doing good works in secret, which is, of course, exactly the underlying premise of the entire authorship debate itself—i.e., that the identity of the true author is secret, and, further, that the true author—like the annotator—was acutely aware of it (as expressed over and over in the *Sonnets*: “And I, once gone, to all the world must die” (81) and “My name be buried where my body is” (72)).

When the committee proceeded with its examination of Stritmatter, it was immediately clear that any pre-defense concerns



Roger Stritmatter (third from left) poses with members of the Dissertation Defense Committee (from left to right): Dr. Edwin Gentzler, Dr. Elizabeth Petroff, Dr. Daniel L. Wright, Committee Chair Dr. William Moebius, and Dr. James Freeman. (Photo Lisa Wilson)

about the authorship issue itself sabotaging the chances for a successful defense were ill-founded. While Dr. Daniel Wright’s opening statement and followup questions did come from someone clearly sympathetic on the authorship issue, the next round of questions from UMass English Professor James Freeman quickly revealed that the committee was not going to even question the viability of the hypothesis of Edward de Vere as Shakespeare, but instead focused its concerns on the pedagogic implications of the authorship question, and, more generally, the implications of the authorship question for academe.

Committee Chair Bill Moebius was the last to speak, and he commented on how much better this final version of the thesis was than the one that had existed just a year earlier, a tribute to the impact of the analysis of the annotator’s notes through the prism of “image clusters.” It took the committee only 15 minutes to reach its unanimous 5-0 vote to accept the dissertation, and history was made.

It should be noted that this vote does not mean that any committee members have now switched sides in the authorship debate; the vote was taken on the dissertation itself. And the committee, through its vote, went on record as supporting the reasonableness of the proposition that Edward de Vere is Shakespeare, and that therefore the scholarship of Roger Stritmatter in examining Edward de Vere’s Bible as if it were Shakespeare’s Bible is also reasonable,

and constitutes a worthy addition to the world of scholarship.

In the months since April 21st, of course, not all other scholars have agreed with this decision, particularly those with a stake in the authorship debate. Most prominent among these is Dr. David Kathman (University of Chicago), co-founder of The Shakespeare Authorship Page on the Internet, an anti-Oxfordian website devoted to the proposition that “Shakespeare Wrote Shakespeare.” The site’s existence is, in fact, a compliment on the strength of the Oxfordian movement.

Dr. Kathman had been in touch with the committee even before April 21st, trying to get an advance copy of the dissertation. Some wondered whether he might show up in Amherst to question the candidate, but—although cordially invited by Professor Moebius—he did not.

Afterwards he did post several times on the Usenet bulletin board **humanities.lit.authors.shakespeare** about Stritmatter. In this forum Dr. Kathman commented that Stritmatter’s Ph.D. was in the Comparative Literature Department [since] “the English Department wants nothing to do with him. I could tell some stories, but I probably shouldn’t go public.” (hlas, 23 May 2000)

Kathman’s Internet colleague Terry Ross was a bit more generous in the same forum, writing that,

I’m not one of Roger’s biggest fans, but I offered him my sincere congratulations on his successful defense. It is no mean feat to earn a doctorate, and Roger can feel justly proud that his determination and perseverance have been rewarded. The University of Massachusetts Amherst is now on record saying that Roger has made a substantial original contribution to research in comparative literature, and I, for one, can hardly wait to read his dissertation (hlas, 24 May 2000).

In the Oxfordian community, of course, it’s been congratulations all around, and we too—like Mr. Ross— anxiously await publication of the dissertation this fall.

—W. Boyle

## 4th Annual Edward de Vere Studies Conference

*Where the papers were illuminating and the debate revealing*

The world's largest Oxfordian conference convened for the fourth consecutive year at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon from April 6-9. Excitement, as always, was high among the 152 registrants who came to hear over twenty presentations, see first-run films, enjoy a debate, and honor two distinguished Oxfordians in the world of scholarship and the arts.

The conference opened on Thursday evening with the American premier of the BBC film, *Shakespeare: Man of the Millennium* and papers by Marilyn Loveless (who is working on an anti-Stratfordian Ph.D. at Griffith University in Australia) and author Richard Whalen, who challenged Stratfordian assumptions about Leonard Digges' Stratford connections. The evening concluded with a performance in authentic Elizabethan costume by Tom and Jean Seehof who entertained the audience with excerpts from the life of Katherine of Suffolk.

Professor Lew Tate of Savannah, Georgia opened the Friday morning session with a paper detailing his approach to teaching the Oxfordian authorship thesis in the college classroom, a pedagogical theme echoed by Capt. Kathleen Binns, an instructor at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado, who addressed the conference on "Duplicity and Compromise: Teaching the Authorship Question at the United States Air Force Academy."

Conference attendees then enjoyed the well-intentioned and captivating (if somewhat factually flawed) film, *The Shakespeare Conspiracy*, introduced by librarian Randall Bush, before receiving the formal welcome to the university by the Dean of Concordia University's College of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Charles Kunert, who encouraged Oxfordians to persevere in their endeavors and never compromise their study and research by adopting anything less than the highest

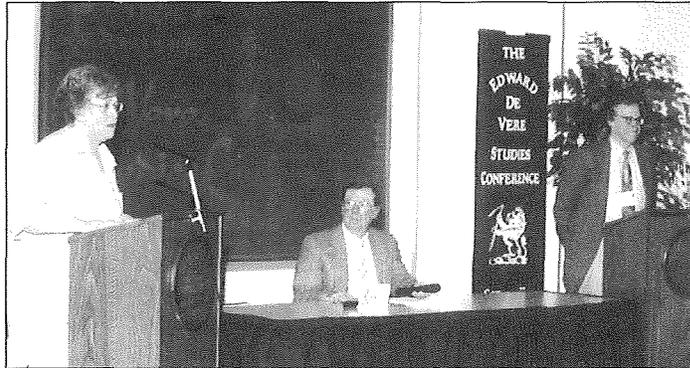
standards of scholarship. Professor Daniel Wright, Director of the Conference, then read letters of greeting to the assembly by such Oxfordian luminaries as Sir Derek Jacobi,

standards that will command the respect and affirmation of scholars everywhere.

Stratfordian Professor Alan Nelson offered a more raw and denunciatory assault on the Oxfordian thesis by suggesting that the breadth and scope of Edward de Vere's education is less established in fact than many Oxfordians believe; he also pleaded a case for the considerable education of William of Stratford, although he acknowledged that little more than the texts of the plays and poems provide proof of this education. Nelson's argument, that presumed what it intended to prove, was vigorously assailed by questioners from the audience, especially Stephanie Hughes, editor of *The Oxfordian*, who recently completed a 200-page thesis at Concordia University on Oxford's tutors and who, on Saturday afternoon, also debated Nelson on the proposition that Oxford was, prima facie, a better candidate for the authorship of the Shakespeare canon than the deer poacher from small-town Stratford.

Conferees were treated to a rousing presentation of the causes for the Oxfordian thesis's growing strength among academicians by one of Oxfordianism's most exciting new scholars, Portland high school English teacher and Concordia University alum, Andrew Werth. His paper, "Now is the Winter of Their Discontent: Why a Threatened Academic Orthodoxy is Beginning to Take the Oxfordian Thesis Seriously," drew loud cheers and applause. Mr. Werth's paper will appear in the Fall 2000 *Oxfordian*.

After lunch, the conference heard Portland physician, Dr. Merilee Karr, deliver a brilliant, insightful Keynote Address on the topic of "Semiotics and the Shakespeare Authorship Question: What Difference Does It Make Who the Author Is?" Dr. Karr's study, which identifies the important consequences of recognizing Edward de Vere as the author of the Shakespeare canon,



*Among the events during the three-day conference was a debate between Oxfordian editor Stephanie Hughes (above, left) and Prof. Alan Nelson of UC-Berkeley, and (below) an entertaining presentation in Elizabethan costumes by Tom and Jane Seehof.*

Michael York and Lewis Lapham, Editor of *Harper's Magazine*.

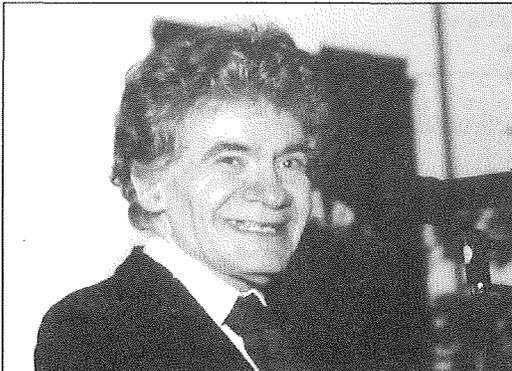
The first of two non-Oxfordian presentations followed the welcoming ceremonies as Professor Frank Gebhard reviewed Sigmund Freud's rationale for accepting Edward de Vere as the author of the Shakespeare canon and critiqued Oxfordian methodology by suggesting that many Oxfordians, like Sigmund Freud, sometimes rely on standards of evidence that are inconsistent with or repudiated by modern scientific methods; a skeptic, but one with an open mind with respect to Oxfordian claims, he urged Oxfordians to strive to demonstrate their convictions by the maintenance of

will also be published in the Fall 2000 *Oxfordian*.

Stephanie Hughes led off Friday afternoon's presentation with a paper that followed up well on Dr. Karr's observations, as she addressed "The Broader Implications of the Oxfordian Thesis." Professor Ren Draya of Carlinville, Illinois, followed Ms. Hughes by examining Shakespeare's legal rhetoric in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Dr. Eric Alt-

schuler closed the day's presentations with an update of his study of Shakespeare's intimate familiarity with scientific discoveries, particularly in the fields of astronomy and medicine. In the evening, Richard Whalen and Dr. Wright spoke on the Oxfordian thesis to a full house at Powell's City of Books, America's largest bookstore, and signed copies of their books for interested persons in attendance.

Saturday morning early risers were treated to a presentation by Dr. Frank Davis on Shakespeare's medical knowledge, and Dr. Davis was followed by Brigadier General and retired Professor, Dr. Jack Shuttleworth, who reviewed the history of Shakespeare portraiture in his presentation, "'Why, This is an Arrant Counterfeit Rascal': Perpetuating Myth with Shakespeare's Portraits." General Shuttleworth was followed by Conference regular Roger Parisious, who looked at the Oxfordian authorship thesis against the late Elizabethan background of concealed authorship in "Dealings in Anonymity, 1593-95." Robert Brazil, of Rye, New York, concluded the day's proceedings with a stirring two-hour presentation of his breakthrough research on the revealing connec-



Among those presenting papers this year were England's Daphne Pearson, now editor of the De Vere Society Newsletter (upper left), Dr. Frank Davis of Savannah, Georgia (upper right), Roger Parisious of Hayesville, Ohio (lower left), and Dr. Merilee Karr of Portland, Oregon (lower right).

tion between the 17th Earl of Oxford and the Shakespeare circle of printers and publishers.

Saturday evening saw awards bestowed at the conference banquet on distinguished Oxfordians for their achievements in advancing public recognition of Edward de Vere as the author of the Shakespeare canon. The conference's annual scholarship award was conferred on Richard Whalen, author of the well-known and regarded *Shakespeare: Who Was He?* The conference's Arts Award was extended to London theatre director, Martin Gilmore, who produces and advertises all of his company's Shakespeare plays as the work of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. Banquet participants also were entertained over dessert and coffee by Elliott Stone, who offered his always-witty and hilarious anecdotes for the diners' enjoyment. Even Alan Nelson was observed laughing during Elliott's presentation—evidence, of a kind, that even some Stratfordians have a sense of humor.

Sunday's session of the conference opened with the newest addition to the Edward de Vere Studies Conference's Advisory Board and Portland university student,

James Riley, who spoke on "The Ridiculous Master of the Horse: Oxford's Early Reputation." Sunday morning also saw British doctoral student and *De Vere Society Newsletter* Editor, Daphne Pearson, enlighten a corner of our historical darkness with her paper on "A Feudal Survival and Its Results: The Effect of Wardship on the 17th Earl of Oxford."

On Sunday afternoon, scholar Richard Paul Roe once again thrilled the conference with his exciting rev-

elations of Shakespeare's extraordinary wealth of international experience and knowledge in "How to Get to Palermo: or, The Exact Knowledge of Mediterranean Navigation and of Sicily's Unique Topography in *The Winter's Tale*." Richard was followed by Professor Daniel Wright, who closely examined the curiosity of the uniformly favorable (and a historical!) treatment of the earls of Oxford in Shakespeare's history plays.

In his paper, Dr. Wright asked, "What interest—political or dramatic—would Will Shakspeare, the Stratford man, have in creatively retouching de Vere family history to tell his epic story of England?" The answer would seem to be none, but if Shakespeare were Edward de Vere, this careful retouching of de Vere family history would make eminent sense. Professor Wright's paper is reprinted in this issue of the newsletter ("Vere-y Interesting," page one).

Finally, Roger Stritmatter closed the conference's proceedings for this year with a presentation that focused on his recently completed research into Edward de Vere's Geneva Bible and its importance as the likely

(Continued on page 31)

*Opinion/Commentary*

## The end of Stratfordianism

*Prof. Alan Nelson's review of Alias Shakespeare a palpable miss*

By Joseph Sobran

My book *Alias Shakespeare* has come under attack from Stratfordian scholars and critics, as one might expect. Most recently it has been the target of a long, captious review by Alan H. Nelson of Berkeley in *The Shakespeare Quarterly* (Fall 1999), that bastion of Shakespearean orthodoxy (published, of course, by the Folger Shakespeare Library).

But while enduring all this pummeling, I have made one important and rather astonishing discovery about the Stratfordians: namely, that they don't exist!

True, they persist in the annoying habit of pretending to exist; they tell themselves, and everyone else, that they exist; they continue to bluster and quibble and quarrel and heap scorn on the heretics; but let us not be fooled. They agree that the evidence points to Oxford.

Appearances perhaps to the contrary, *Alias Shakespeare* has been a tremendous success. Every Stratfordian scholar who has addressed it has admitted the truth of its basic thesis.

It was not to be hoped that the partisans of William of Stratford would surrender as gracefully and gallantly as, say, Lee at Appomattox. After all, they are important people with reputations to uphold. We could hardly pray for such a miracle of humility as an article in *The Shakespeare Quarterly* saying: "The game is up. We so-called 'experts' have been confounded, and a cult of rank amateurs has beaten us at our own game. It's time we admitted that the Stratford man didn't write these plays, and that the Earl of Oxford did."

But in their own very indirect way the orthodox scholars have made their acknowledgments. If you think I exaggerate, dear reader, allow me to explain. We have won!

When *Alias Shakespeare* was published in 1997, I never dreamed that my scholarly opponents would, without exception, implicitly concede my basic argument. But they did, one and all. Not that they are fully conscious of doing so, but we can't have everything, can we?

My central argument concerns the Sonnets. The poet speaking here doesn't sound like the legendary William of Stratford, who

in the 1590s was (we are told) a brilliant young poet-playwright, taking London by storm and becoming one of the wealthiest men in his home town. The poet sounds, instead, like an aging gentleman whose life is in decline, ruined by some unnamed "disgrace with fortune and men's eyes."

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If the poet can be believed, he is "old," "lame," "poor," and "despised," among other things. He knows a lot about the law, using hundreds of legal terms metaphorically. He seems to be bisexual, which may have something to do with his damaged reputation. He hopes that his name will be "buried where my body is" and that he will be "forgotten." As he faces the prospect of death, his only consolation is the love of the handsome young man—the "lovely boy"—to whom the first 126 Sonnets are addressed. The first seventeen Sonnets urge this youth to get married and beget a son "for love of me."

Nothing of this sounds like the legendary William. William of Stratford was young and prosperous in the 1590s. He was never a public figure, let alone a topic of scandal. We have no evidence that he was lame, which would have been a handicap for an actor. He had no training in the law. If he was becoming famous as a poet, taking London by storm and confident that his verse would be immortal, why should he think his name could be "buried" or "forgotten"?

No, this poet is an aging man, at least

middle-aged, with all the despair and regret common to men who feel they have wasted the golden promise of youth. It may seem amazing that the author of *Hamlet*, of all the men who ever lived, should feel this way, but there it is. He says so, over and over again: "disgrace," "shame," "guilt," "blots," "vulgar scandal," and on and on. That is one of the recurrent themes of the Sonnets. No sensitive reader can take these for the poems of a young man. Yet the orthodox scholars have almost entirely missed this dominant note of the Sonnets.

But of course the poet's profile closely matches what we know of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, as of the 1590s. He was in his forties, in ill health. In his letters he once described himself as "lame." He had lived a scandalous life (including various charges of sexual misconduct) and wasted his fortune. He was a lawyer (Gray's Inn and all that) and frequent litigant. If he was writing poetry under a pen name, the poet's wish for obscurity becomes intelligible.

Similarly, the handsome young man resembles Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, on several counts. Even many Stratfordians think the youth was Southampton, who in the 1590s, by an interesting coincidence, was being urged to marry Oxford's daughter Elizabeth. (The case for Oxford, we are assured, rests entirely on "coincidences"—quite an amazing number of them, in fact: far more than William can boast.)

The first salvos against *Alias Shakespeare* came from Paul Cantor of the University of Virginia, writing in *The Weekly Standard*, and Jonathan Bate of the University of Liverpool, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*. Both Cantor and Bate accused me, in nearly identical terms, of making the "naive assumption" that the Sonnets "must be" autobiographical. Both pointed out that most Elizabethan sonnets and indeed most poems are not autobiographical. Yet neither went quite so far as to deny flatly that the *Shakespeare Sonnets* reflect their author's actual life; they merely hinted that it was "naive" to think so.

In fact, I was not "naive" and I didn't "assume" that the Sonnets are autobiographical. Both Cantor and Bate failed—

unconscionably—to mention that I'd devoted several pages to the old question of whether the Sonnets tell us anything about the man who wrote them. This omission served, of course, to mislead their readers about what the book really said. Neither review would have held up with a reader who had already read the book itself.

On the question of the Sonnets, I'd actually quoted the unanswerable argument of A.C. Bradley:

No capable poet, much less a Shakespeare, intending to produce a merely 'dramatic' series of poems, would dream of inventing a story like that of these sonnets, or, even if he did, of treating it as they treat it. The story is very odd and unattractive. Such capacities as it has are but slightly developed. It is left obscure, and some of the poems are unintelligible to us because they contain allusions of which we can make nothing. Now all this is very natural if the story is substantially a real story of Shakespeare himself and of certain other persons; if the Sonnets were written from time to time as the relations of the persons changed, and sometimes in reference to particular incidents; and if they were written for one or more of these persons (far the greater number for only one), and perhaps in a few cases for other friends, - written, that is to say, for people who knew the details of which we are ignorant. But it is all unnatural, well-nigh incredibly unnatural, if, with the most sceptical critics, we regard the Sonnets as a free product of mere imagination.

I'd also quoted others. C.S. Lewis adds that the Sonnets tell "so odd a story that we find a difficulty in regarding it as fiction." Paul Ramsey agrees: "The Sonnets have too much jagged specificity to ignore, too little development and completing of the events to be an invention." Likewise Philip Edwards: "[T]hat there is a solid core of autobiography in the Sonnets, in the events referred to, the relationships described, the emotions expressed, seems to me beyond dispute. It may not be their most important or interesting feature, but it can hardly be argued away."

The only reason some scholars dismiss the disclosures of the Sonnets as "fictional" is that the poet's self-portrait can't be reconciled with what he knows of William of Stratford. If the poet is Oxford, there is no difficulty—especially if the youth is also his prospective son-in-law. The famous "riddle"

of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* is really the riddle of Shakespeare's authorship, and the solution to both is the same.

Neither Cantor nor Bate nor any of my other antagonists (Frank Brownlow, writing in *Chronicles*, Jeffrey Hart of Dartmouth, writing in *National Review*, James Bowman of the *Times Literary Supplement*, writing in *The Washington Times*, and a few others) bothered explaining why William of Stratford should write "fictional" poems whose speaker just happens to resemble Oxford so closely, or why the youth should just happen to resemble Southampton just as closely.

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***"...the existing evidence—  
especially the evidence  
of The Sonnets—  
reveals a poet who  
sounds mighty like the  
Earl of Oxford and  
not at all like  
William of Stratford."***

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None denied the resemblance of the poet and the youth to Oxford and Southampton. Some of them made no mention of the Sonnets at all!

Bowman took a slightly different tack. "Mr. Sobran," he wrote, "attempts to draw autobiographical inferences from literary works in a way that virtually the entire spectrum of professional critics has regarded as impermissible, at least since W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's *The Intentional Fallacy* (1946)."

But the "intentional fallacy" is the fallacy of inferring an intention of the poet that is irrelevant to the poem as a work of art. It doesn't mean that poets never write autobiographically, as witness, for example, the sonnets of Milton and Wordsworth. No literary biographer would dream of ignoring such poems as Milton's sonnet on his blindness.

Following the lead of Cantor and Bate, Bowman, abruptly changing course, further charged me with "two highly dubious assumptions—first that the Sonnets must be autobiographical and second that our lack

of evidence relating to Shakespeare's [that is, William's] life in London means that something like the experiences described in the sonnets did not happen to him." Not a word about my actual argument; just the assertion of my "assumption" that the Sonnets "must be" autobiographical.

But here Bowman introduced a new note to the familiar Stratfordian defense. If it weren't for our "lack of evidence," the poet of the Sonnets might be seen to match William! So much for the "intentional fallacy"—perhaps the Sonnets are autobiographical after all!

Here Bowman tacitly concedes the point at issue: that the evidence we have, as opposed to the evidence we lack, would seem to favor Oxford. No more than the others does Bowman deny that the poet does seem to fit the known facts about Oxford; he merely pleads that if only we knew more about William, the poet might turn out to fit the facts about William just as well! Much virtue in "if."

All these critics seem to have missed the whole point of *Alias Shakespeare*: that the existing evidence—especially the evidence of the Sonnets—reveals a poet who sounds mighty like the Earl of Oxford, and not at all like William of Stratford. That, in a nutshell, is what I was trying to get across.

As for evidence that has never turned up, I take no position, except that I am willing to agree that if evidence favoring William should ever turn up, it would no doubt strengthen the case for William. Which is to say that the case for William reduces to a purely hypothetical tautology. Granted, if we had proof of his authorship, it would prove he was the author. But unfortunately, we don't and he wasn't.

Having given away the game without realizing it, my critics, needless to say, resolutely maintained the usual authoritative tone of utter scorn that anyone should question William's authorship.

Now comes Alan Nelson, who has actually done research on Oxford's life. He charges me with about a dozen minor factual errors, few of which have even the slightest relevance to my argument (Elizabeth Vere's age in 1590, for example). Unfortunately, he cites no sources so that we may judge whether my alleged errors are in fact errors; and Nelson's inability to comprehend what he reads—he repeatedly misstates my argument, for example—doesn't inspire confidence in his scholarship.

*(Continued on page 25)*

*Vere-y Interesting (Cont'd from page 1)*

Princess Elizabeth was born. Of course, we know that Elizabeth was born of Henry VIII's mistress and second wife while Katherine yet lived—but many in Shakespeare's audiences in his own day would not know this—and Shakespeare was not about to tell them.

In *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, Shakespeare tells us that King Richard, at the fatal battle of Bosworth, encountered no fewer than six doubles of Henry, Earl of Richmond, in the field—of which Shakespeare's Richard fantastically claims that he has killed five. The claim, of course, is absurd, without any historical support, and contradicts all contemporary reports of the battle; John Julius Norwich, author of *Shakespeare's Kings*, declares that the account—an example of broad “dramatic license”—is anchored solely in Shakespeare's imagination. So why, if it weren't true, and supported by no authority of any kind, would Shakespeare invent such a scene? What is the effect of Shakespeare's singular inclusion of this seemingly incidental fiction in his account? Can anyone doubt that his purpose in doing so is anything other than subtly to confer royal status on Richmond even before Richmond becomes King by right of conquest—assisting, thereby, on the public stage, in the greater legitimization of yet another claimant to the English throne whose legitimacy (and progeny) otherwise might be suspect?

Why does Shakespeare, in *The Life and Death of King John*, have John, a late twelfth/early thirteenth-century Angevin king, declare himself “supreme head” of the Church—a claim and a title that no English monarch would dare advance until the sixteenth century? Shakespeare has John defiantly address Cardinal Pandulph, the papal envoy, with the bold declaration that “[A]s we, under God, are supreme head, / So under Him that great supremacy, / Where we do reign, we will alone uphold, / Without th' assistance of a mortal hand: / So tell the pope, all reverence set apart / To him and his usurped authority” (III.i.155-60). Can this passage have been constructed for any other reason than to demonstrate, albeit anachronistically, the fundamentally Protestant character of true, sovereign English monarchy that knows obedience to no foreign power—temporal or spiritual?<sup>3</sup>

This is the public business of Shakespeare in the histories: rewriting already revised history in order to reinforce and consolidate the political claims of the Tudor dynasty and its Reformation heritage—an assertion, however, that must be foregone or somehow explained away if one embraces the now-fashionable but baseless claims of some scholars who assert that Shakespeare was a Catholic émigré to Lancashire where he also was known as “Shakeshafte.”

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There are other revisionist features in the Shakespeare histories which orthodox commentators are less able, or altogether unable, to explain. What, for example, are we to make of the way that the earls of Oxford—Edward de Vere's predecessors—are presented in the histories? Stratfordians cannot possibly account for the curiously selective manner in which the histories of the earls of Oxford are recounted in the Shakespeare histories (nor, for that matter, do any of them even try). After all, what interest—political or dramatic—would Will Shakspeare, the Stratford man, have in creatively re-touching de Vere family history to tell his epic story of England? None that I can imagine. However, if the writer of the Shakespeare plays were a de Vere himself, the revelation of a peculiarly personal interest in favorably presenting the history of the earls of Oxford might go far toward making some sense of Shakespeare's otherwise inexplicable determination to illuminate this noble family in a uniformly complimentary light.

Commentators on Shakespeare's first

play of the Lancaster cycle often have expressed wonder at Shakespeare's choice of moment to begin this play. Why should *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* open with the Dukes of Norfolk and Hereford hurling accusations of treason at one another? Wouldn't it seem more likely that Shakespeare the playwright might have elected to dramatize the colorful events that led to these embittered accusations? Perhaps—and if he was the author of the anonymous and unfinished play, *Thomas of Woodstock* (sometimes known as “Richard the Second, Part One”), he may have done—and that possibility, in itself, is the subject of a forthcoming paper from me. But whether Shakespeare wrote or contributed to *Thomas of Woodstock* is not our immediate concern, important as that is to a continuing investigation of the origins of the Shakespeare texts. What interests us for the moment is why the figure of Robert de Vere, the 9th Earl of Oxford, does not figure prominently (or, indeed, at all!) in the account of Richard II's reign in the indisputably Shakespearean play of *Richard the Second*, for to read Froissart's *Chronicles*, you would think that the proper subject of *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* would be not Richard of Bordeaux but Robert de Vere.

Robert de Vere, the 9th Earl of Oxford, I would submit, does not appear in Shakespeare's account of Richard II's reign because, singular in prominence as de Vere was in the Ricardian court, the author had no desire to exhibit him before the public or to remind anyone of Robert de Vere's legacy. If Shakespeare were to have begun his account of Richard's reign any farther back in time than he does in *Richard the Second*, he almost surely would have been required to offer at least some glancing look at this multi-titled earl of Oxford. If Shakespeare was Edward de Vere, however, Robert de Vere may have been the last person in the author's ancient lineage to whom he would have desired any attention be drawn.

By almost all accounts, Robert de Vere, 9th Earl of Oxford, was an infamous figure of odious notoriety and vice who dredged the deepest contempt from the souls of leading Englishmen in his own day. He came to his title in 1372 at the age of ten, five years before the inauguration of young King Richard's reign. At an early age, he became the King's “bosom friend and favorite”; he was “con-

stantly at the King's side as his closest friend and confidant." Verily Anderson suggests that Chaucer—a contemporary of de Vere who would have known him personally—might have described him as an accomplished artist, singer, poet, orator, dancer and writer, but John Julius Norwich dismisses him as but one of many undistinguished Ricardian courtiers, "frivolous, rapacious and empty-headed."

### The 9th Earl of Oxford and Richard II

According to Froissart, the French chronicler, Robert de Vere was an ambitious, self-serving manipulator, even more derelict and disliked than his detested father, the 8th Earl<sup>4</sup> and easily the most hated of all Richard's companions. Yet young King Richard, out of his great love for de Vere, raised him high: he awarded him many estates and commissions; he gave him military command; he awarded him the chamberlainship of England;<sup>5</sup> he granted him the castle and town of Colchester, the castle and wardship of Queensborough, as well as the castle and lordship of Okeham and the hereditary shrievalty of Rutland; among the several offices that Richard conferred upon Robert de Vere were those of Justice of Chester and Justice of North Wales, Constable of England, Marquis of Dublin<sup>6</sup> and Duke of Ireland; he elevated him to the Privy Council and made him a Knight of the Garter. Richard also gave him the right to bear the arms of St. Edmund, King and Martyr. It even was rumored that, so passionate was Richard's affection for de Vere that he intended to have Oxford crowned King of Ireland.

Few persons, however—especially the King's powerful uncles—thought de Vere worthy of any of the dignities showered upon him by the King. Froissart reports that among enemies of Robert de Vere it was said, "This Duke of Ireland twists the King round his finger and does what he likes in England"; and he reports it claimed among men that "King Richard . . . was so blinkered by the Duke of Ireland that even if he said black was white the King did not contradict him." The 9th Earl was derided, reports Froissart, as an instigator of civil disorder, rumored to be an embezzler of funds, and was charged by the King's enemies as the

individual principally responsible for the wars that erupted between the King and his uncles, the Lords Appellant—more responsible, was he, ultimately, for Richard's decline and fall than Richard himself. He was preoccupied, not with matters of state but with self-indulgence and displays of "ostentatious splendor," and as Verily Anderson attests, he, like the King, "thought the creation and contemplation of beautiful palaces, furnishings, clothes and food more



*The notorious 9th Earl Robert (depicted dying from a boar attack in 1392) is even described in the popular 20th century Plantagenet Encyclopedia as Richard II's boyhood friend and close companion, with their close relationship a source of trouble for both of them. Yet he is completely absent from Shakespeare's Richard II.*

exciting than war with France."

Robert de Vere, moreover, according to Froissart, was hated as a wanton who willfully degraded his wife, Philippa—a granddaughter of King Edward III—by his promiscuous adulteries. In addition to the intense resentment of his person that was enkindled by his sexual improprieties among women, Robert de Vere also provoked particular anger and disgust amongst the nobility by what they perceived to be his suspiciously singular "intimacy" with the King. Nigel Saul records that "[s]o close did

the association between the two become that in circles hostile to them it gave rise to allegations of homosexuality," and Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana* is but one among many chronicle accounts of the era that accuse Robert and Richard of "obscene familiarity" with one another.

Neither was this earl of Oxford highly regarded for any martial skill, noble achievements or intellectual prowess. John Julius Norwich chastises de Vere as an effete, corrupt Ricardian courtier who "taught the king effeminate habits, discouraging him from hunting, hawking and other manly sports . . ." John Gardner, in his acclaimed study of the times and personages of Chaucerian England, also derogates Robert de Vere and indicts him as "fatuus"—"a stupid fop whom Richard advanced and coddled as Edward II had advanced and coddled Gaveston." Eventually, as we know, de Vere was driven into exile on the Continent, attainted, and died ignominiously (he was gored to death by a wild pig), although his body later was brought back from France for re-burial with regal honors at Earl's Colne. At the funeral, we are told that King Richard, hysterical with grief, forced open the coffin, wept over the body and played with de Vere's jeweled fingers.

In sum, the judgement of history on the 9th Earl of Oxford is not especially one of unqualified admiration, although almost every historian or commentator on the period acknowledges that he was a depraved and wicked man of unparalleled import in England, Richard's "evil genius," of all Richard's counsellors "easily the worst of the lot," nothing less than the real power behind the throne.<sup>7</sup> And yet Shakespeare makes no mention of him at all.

Even in *Thomas of Woodstock*, a play that incorporates the lifetime of the 9th Earl of Oxford, Robert de Vere makes no appearance at all, and in the only utterance of his name, we learn from the lips of his widow that he is dead (II.iii.10-13). The author of this play, moreover—in what I would suggest is an otherwise unaccountable move unless he were the 17th Earl of Oxford (or someone else inexplicably determined that Robert de Vere neither be seen, heard nor indicted in this play!)—transports Sir Robert Tresilian

*(Continued on page 16)*

*Vere-y Interesting (Continued from page 15)*  
forward in time to become, along with a coterie of other useless fops, the principal agents of the King's corruption during the era when not they, but de Vere, was the King's undisputed favorite. In fact, in *Thomas of Woodstock*, Tresilian is made the plotter against Woodstock's life (a good trick, that, since Tresilian died nine years before Woodstock was killed)—and in Shakespeare's *Richard the Second*, it is implied that Woodstock's murderer is the Duke of Norfolk<sup>8</sup>—although according to the fourteenth-century *Chronicon Anglie*, Woodstock professed antipathy to no one in the realm except Robert de Vere, and Norfolk, though demonized in *Richard the Second*, is not accorded by the chroniclers with anything like the perfidy laid on him by Shakespeare.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, for our consideration of the origins of the text of *Thomas of Woodstock* as an adjunct or predecessor work to *Richard the Second*, we are well reminded that Sir John Bushy, Sir Edward Bagot and Sir Henry Greene, the light-footed minions of the King and the "caterpillars of the commonwealth" in Shakespeare's *Richard the Second* (II.iii.166), were not leading courtiers of the 1380s; the leading courtier of the 1380s, undisputed by all historical accounts, was Robert de Vere. As both Nigel Saul and A. P. Rossiter point out, Bushy, Bagot and Greene came into the King's service much later—after the Duke of Gloucester's death. Yet the author of *Thomas of Woodstock* reverses history and features "Bagot, Bushy, [and] wanton Greene" (III.ii.41) at the core of tumultuous events in the early years in Richard's reign! In Act One of *Woodstock*, the author even identifies Greene as Chancellor of England and Bagot as Privy Seal—titles that, at this time, belonged to Robert de Vere and Michael de la Pole! Even de la Pole makes it into *Thomas of Woodstock* (albeit under the name of Lapoole, Captain of Calais, which de la Pole was, in fact, for some time, but not at the time of Gloucester's murder). Only Robert de Vere, among all the villains—the most prominent and powerful man in England—is nowhere to be seen.

### The next generations of Oxfords

Robert de Vere, 9th Earl of Oxford, died childless and so was succeeded by his fifty-

two-year-old uncle, Aubrey de Vere, for whom Richard was able to lift some of the consequences of the attainder that had been attached to Aubrey's nephew and heirs by the Merciless Parliament. Shortly thereafter, however, Richard was overthrown and imprisoned as a consequence of his cousin's cunning coup d'état, and the 10th Earl of Oxford was punished by the Crown for offering refuge to the deposed King's half brother, the Earl of Huntingdon, when Hun-

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*"In [the third part of]  
Henry the Sixth,  
Shakespeare, in [his]  
very first words about  
an earl of Oxford,  
attributes to the 13th  
Earl a passionate  
speech of pure  
Lancastrian patriotism."*

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tington unsuccessfully attempted to restore his sibling to the throne. Richard was murdered in prison the following year, perhaps as a direct result of the fears of his possible restoration that had been incited by the actions against Henry IV which the 10th Earl of Oxford had supported. Aubrey de Vere also died soon thereafter, a man in royal disfavor, attainted and in official disgrace, marked as a collaborator with rebels against the Crown. Shakespeare makes no mention of him either.

Upon the death of Aubrey de Vere, the earldom of Oxford passed to Richard, Aubrey's teenage son, who, during much of his youth, had been playmate and companion to the new Lancastrian King's son and heir, Prince Hal. The two boys were almost the same age: Richard had been born in 1385, Hal, the future Henry V, in 1387. This 11th Earl didn't live long after he assumed the title, however; he died at the age of thirty-two. Not much is known about him, and he and the twelfth earl are the only earls of Oxford who lived during the years that com-

prise Shakespeare's two tetralogies of English history not to be referenced with even modest entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

A French chronicler tells us that the 11th Earl of Oxford became a rearguard commander under Henry V during the march from Harfleur, but he is contradicted by the English chronicler, William Hall, who contends that Oxford actually was in the middleguard. The French chronicler also reports that Oxford, during the Battle of Agincourt, was a commander in the center and took a French soldier prisoner (We cannot place much confidence in this anonymous account, however, as this same chronicler also reports that, shortly thereafter, Oxford was *killed* in the battle—an error of enormous magnitude and an assertion that, had it been true, certainly would have made its way into the other chronicles, as well as Shakespeare's play of *Henry the Fifth* if only because the loss of English nobility at the siege at Agincourt was so astonishingly light). Oxford, therefore, given his lack of achievement, may not especially have distinguished himself with Henry in France, but, contrary to the French chronicler's account,<sup>10</sup> he certainly did not die there! Instead, Oxford sailed back to England after Agincourt, briefly returned to France to participate in a renewed siege of Harfleur, and thereafter sailed once more home to England where he lived an unremarkable life of apparent quiet for some few weeks or months; he died of what we know not of in 1417, although Verily Anderson plausibly speculates that he may have perished of wounds and exhaustion from the French wars. Of his end, therefore, we know little less than of his life; others, who may have known more—if there was more of note to know—have not told us much, and, if they did, those records have not survived. "The rest is silence." Shakespeare, like so many other chroniclers, also tells us nothing of this short-lived and unremarkable Earl.

### Supporting the Lancastrian cause

Young Richard de Vere left a child, John, as his heir, much as Richard de Vere's boyhood friend, Henry V, some five years thereafter, would leave an infant son to succeed him on the occasion of his death at the age of thirty-five—a death that would bring to

an end one of the more triumphant, if brief, reigns of any English monarch (Indeed, the reign of Henry V was the shortest reign any King of England had enjoyed since the arrival of William of Conqueror).

Richard's son, John de Vere, the 12th Earl of Oxford, became, like so many de Veres before and after him, a dedicated Lancastrian. The King entrusted him with many commissions, and he served Henry VI honorably and well, especially as an emissary for peace in France. In the many years of Henry's reign (Henry reigned for over thirty years with no serious threat to his monarchy being launched by the Yorkists, although abundant challenges to his rule came from other directions),<sup>11</sup> kind and well-liked John de Vere<sup>12</sup> proved himself a friend to the King.

Henry VI, though a goodman, was naïve as a king, a man better fitted by nature for a prie-dieu than a throne; indeed, not entirely out of political motive, Henry VII repeatedly appealed to Rome for his canonization in the sixteenth century. Representative of this conviction that Henry VI was shrewd and politically astute in inverted proportion to his sanctity, Geoffrey Bullough points out that it was "the pious King's belief that his virtues must inspire loyalty." In good men like John de Vere, they did indeed do so, but naked ambition governed more men's hearts. Spurred by the sense of advantage encouraged by the King's weakness as a leader, the Lancastrian cause was put to its severest test in the mid-1550s by a series of Yorkist assaults on the King's authority, and Henry VI's forces, despite heroic resistance, finally were vanquished at the bloody battle of Towton in 1461.

Following the defeat of his army, Henry VI and several of his retinue escaped to the north, but this gentle and unassuming King eventually was captured by men loyal to England's harsh new Yorkist sovereign, Edward IV. Knowledge of the suffering that his kingdom was enduring in the contest for the throne may even have driven Henry mad; when the deposed king was seized, he was discovered wandering, dazed and alone in a forest. Philipa Haigh reports that one chronicle of the day reported that Henry, after enjoying a brief return to the throne in 1471 (from which he was soon again toppled), died disconsolate, from "pure displeasure and melancholy," but there is little reason to believe this sentimental account—one

doubtless of Yorkist invention—despite our awareness of the King's sensitivity to distress. Of course, Shakespeare imputes to Richard, Duke of Gloucester, the murders of both the Henry VI and his son, the Prince of Wales (*Richard III*, I.i.154; I.ii.101), but there is abundant reason to doubt the veracity of that account too. In many respects, the particulars of Henry's end are not all that crucial; however Henry VI perished, the consequences of his death and that of his

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son plunged England into renewed turmoil and drove the Lancastrian cause almost to despair.

The defeat of Henry VI in 1461 had particularly terrible implications for the 12th Earl of Oxford who "never at any point failed to support the Lancastrian King." The old man did not possess the hardy youth that would have made his loyalty to the King demonstrable on the field of battle, and when he and his eldest son, Aubrey, were arrested shortly after Edward IV seized power, he was subjected to the most horrible indignities by the new King. According to the French chronicler, Jean de Waurin, the old earl was transported to Tower Hill, where, before a large crowd, he was stripped naked, tied to a great chair in front of a roaring fire and had his intestines wound out of his body and burnt; he then was castrated and thrown into the fire himself. Historian Desmond Seward suggests, however, that this grisly death was closer to the fate actually suffered by the earl's young son, Aubrey de Vere, and argues that, unlike his son, Earl

John was beheaded, and therefore more quickly dispatched, a point with which Verily Anderson also agrees.

### **The valiant 13th Earl**

In tribute to this terrible sacrifice of their lives, Shakespeare confers on this saintly Earl of Oxford and his son the immortality of his verse. Therefore, just as Shakespeare erased from history all mention of one of the most notorious earls of Oxford, Robert de Vere, so in John de Vere, 12th Earl of Oxford, he elevates a little-known but kindly man of high public spirit to an honored place in the pantheon of Lancastrian heroes. John de Vere, 12th Earl of Oxford, may not have contributed the tiniest fraction of notoriety to English history compared with the legacy of his loathsome ancestor, but for his travails in service to King Henry VI, Shakespeare remembers him in the words of his son, the valiant 13th Earl of Oxford (3 *Henry VI*, III.iii.101-07).

In the third scene of the third act of the third part of *Henry the Sixth*, Shakespeare, in the very first words he ever wrote about an earl of Oxford, attributes to the 13th Earl a passionate speech of pure Lancastrian patriotism in which Oxford catalogues the worthiness of the Lancastrian line before him and denounces Warwick's wicked suggestion that Prince Edward, King Henry's son, has no claim to the throne "[b]ecause [his] father Henry did usurp," (3 *Henry VI* III.iii.79). When the Earl of Oxford speaks for the first time in Shakespeare, he thunders a Lancastrian rebuke that attests to the earls of Oxford's ferocious loyalty to the Lancastrian holders—and predecessors of the Tudors—of the Crown: "Then Warwick disannuls great John of Gaunt" [and we all recall from *Richard the Second* how graciously Shakespeare depicts John of Gaunt, who, in historical fact, was chiefly great as a graceless rogue!] . . . "And after John of Gaunt, Henry the Fourth, / Whose wisdom was a mirror to the wisest; / And after that wise prince, Henry the Fifth, / Who by his prowess conquered all France: / From these our Henry lineally descends" (III.iii.81-87). Warwick then praises Oxford's "smooth discourse" and urges Oxford to renounce his fealty to Henry and support Edward for, in Warwick's [or, more correctly, the  
(Continued on page 18)]

*Vere-y Interesting (Continued from page 17)*  
*author's*] words noble "Oxford . . . did ever [E.ver?]fencetheright" (III.iii.98). Recalling the ignominious deaths of his father and brother, however, Oxford/Shakespeare hurls his defiance of Edward IV at Warwick: "Call him my king by whose injurious doom / My elder brother, the Lord Aubrey Vere, / Was done to death? and more than so, my father, / Even in the downfall of his mellow'd years, / When nature brought him to the door of death? / No, Warwick, no; while life upholds this arm, / This arm upholds the house of Lancaster" (III.iii.101-07).

Upon the deaths of his noble father and brother the 12th Earl's second son, John de Vere, succeeded to the earldom of Oxford after persuading the King and Parliament to reverse the attainder against his family's title.<sup>13</sup> He was thirty-three years old. He was for a short time imprisoned in the Tower on suspicion of treason in 1468, but was released in the spring of 1469; however, he seems to have given evidence during his incarceration that led to the execution of at least two fellow Lancastrians, and perhaps it was the 13th Earl's provision of this testimony that saved his life. Needless to say perhaps, this lapse of virtue does

not appear in Shakespeare's account of the 13th Earl, but his subsequent activity on behalf of Henry VI's restoration to the Crown does. Upon the occasion of the redeption of Henry VI, Warwick in Shakespeare praises John de Vere as "brave Oxford, wondrous well beloved" (*3 Henry VI*, IV.viii.17), and calls him "valiant Oxford" (V.i.1). Oxford's first words, in line 29 of the same scene, as he kisses King Henry's hand are (in an obvious pun on the family motto, *Vero Nihil Verius* ["No truth but truth itself"]): "... thus I seal my truth, and bid adieu." Historian Desmond Seward expresses the full import of the scene: "Henry VI was in no doubt as to whom he owed his restoration. He was grateful not only to Warwick and Clarence but also to Lord Oxford. A royal warrant stated that his return to the throne was 'by the favor and true acquittal of our right entirely and well beloved cousins, duke

of Clarence, earles of Warwick and Oxenford.'"<sup>14</sup>

### See where Oxford comes!

The Lancastrian Redeption was the work of a trinity of Lancastrian loyalists, and Shakespeare does not let us at any time forget who any of the persons of that sacred triune alliance were. When Warwick is about to die in Coventry at the hands of King



### The Battle of Bosworth

*In this detail from a modern painting the banner of the 13th Earl, aligned with Henry Tudor's forces, can be seen on the far left.*

Edward and the Duke of Gloucester in scene one of the fifth act, who arrives in the nick of time to save him? "O cheerful colors!" Warwick cries, "see where Oxford comes!" (I.58). Oxford thunders into the city—with drum and colors, Shakespeare tells us—crying out, "Oxford, Oxford, for Lancaster!" (I.59). "O, welcome, Oxford, for we want thy help," rescued Warwick sighs (I.66). With this change of circumstances, Edward flees to London where he takes King Henry prisoner and prepares for battle with the Lancastrian resurgents at Barnet, just north of London.

Shakespeare's narration of the Battle of Barnet merits particular attention. The fateful Battle of Barnet ended in Lancastrian defeat and paved the way for Edward IV's return to the throne. In Shakespeare's depiction of this event—which comprises the whole of scenes two and three of the fifth act

of *The Third Part of Henry the Sixth*—almost all of the attention is, however, given over to Warwick's death rather than details of the battle.<sup>15</sup> Small wonder, perhaps, for despite their advantage in numbers, the Lancastrian assault on the Yorkist forces failed for one reason, and one reason alone: Lord Oxford, confused by the fog and shifting battle lines that made it difficult to survey the field, accidentally attacked and completely routed his own allied forces. "[T]he

battle soon swung round like a rugby scrum, pivoting at right angles," Seward reports, and Oxford's success in the field came against his own Lancastrian allies, the Earl of Warwick's men. Oxford, upon learning the day was lost, fled the field—first to Scotland and from there to France, "abandon[ing] his own men." But is this what Shakespeare reports? Not at all. Upon Warwick's death, Shakespeare instead has Oxford cry out to his troops, "Away, away, to meet the Queen's great power!" (*3 Henry VI*, V.ii.50).

Richard of Gloucester (the future Richard III) affirms that the Queen and her forces are Oxford's destination: "The Queen is valued thirty thousand strong, / And Somerset, with

Oxford, fled to her," Shakespeare has him say (V.iii.14-15). However, the Queen and her retinue actually were launching their own assault by sea off the coast of Dorset! If Oxford was planning to reach Margaret in Dorset by way of Scotland, he was bent on traversing the world over the poles to get there!

This suggestion by Shakespeare that the 13th Earl was attempting to link up with the Queen's forces to renew an assault on the Yorkists is a total fabrication. But it is essential for Shakespeare to propose it if he is to expunge Oxford of his guilt at Towton and then have his way in describing Oxford's heroism at the next, and for a time, decisive battle in the great English civil wars—the Battle of Tewkesbury.

Scene four of the fifth act of *The Third Part of Henry the Sixth* opens on the plains near Tewkesbury in Gloucestershire some

three weeks following the Battle of Barnet. There Queen Margaret rallies her troops, commanded by Prince Edward, the young Prince of Wales, and leading Lancastrian noblemen of the realm. In words anticipatory of the enlivening succor that will be offered to the defeated King by the Bishop of Carlisle in *Richard the Second*, the Queen addresses her commanders: "Great lords, wise men ne'er sit and wail their loss / But cheerily seek how to redress their harms" (3 *Henry VI*, V.iv.1-2). She invites her army to take heart, despite the recent loss of their dread commander, the Earl of Warwick, at Barnet. "Say Warwick was our anchor; what of that?" she cries. "Why, is not Oxford here another anchor?" (II.13,16) Shakespeare's Oxford then cheers the courage of the Queen and praises the bravery of the prince (II. 50-54); Margaret thanks "sweet Oxford" (I. 58), and Oxford determines the spot at Tewkesbury where Edward and his Yorkist armies will be engaged (I. 66).

All of this commands a hopeful view of the resurgent Lancastrian chances against Edward IV's renewed efforts to thrust King Henry from the throne. The only major problem with its depiction of the Queen, the Prince of Wales, and the whole Lancastrian company taking high courage from the presence and resolve of the Earl of Oxford is that *it's not in any point true*, because—right—Oxford wasn't even there!<sup>16</sup>

Shakespeare, however, is not content merely to have the 13th Earl of Oxford present at Tewkesbury rather than fleeing toward safety in Scotland; naturally, he must excel in his performance as a warrior. And, of course, Shakespeare's fictional Oxford does so. We are told by Shakespeare in *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, for example, that not only did Oxford fight against the Yorkist powers at Tewkesbury but that he personally subdued King Edward IV at Tewkesbury, and, had it not been for the intervention of the King's brother, single-handedly would have rescued England from the tyranny of Richard of Gloucester—the future Richard III.<sup>17</sup>

Shakespeare later has King Edward potentially declare, upon learning of his brother Clarence's death:

Have I a tongue to doom my brother's death,  
And shall that tongue give pardon to a slave?  
My brother kill'd no man, his fault was

thought,  
And yet his punishment was bitter death.  
Who sued to me for him? Who (in my wrath)  
Kneel'd [at] my feet and bid me be advis'd?  
Who spoke of brotherhood? Who spoke of  
love?  
Who told me how the poor soul did forsake  
The mighty Warwick and did fight for me?  
Who told me, on the field at Tewkesbury,  
When Oxford had me down, he rescued me,  
And said, "Dear brother, live, and be a king?"  
(*Richard III*, II.i.103-114)

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***"Is all this coincidence,***

***I ask you? Did***

***Shakespeare, in his***

***reconstruction of English***

***civil conflict in his***

***history plays, grind***

***no political agenda?"***

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Many years afterwards, as we know, the Lancastrian forces—their hopes vested in young Henry Tudor, the Earl of Richmond—will make another assault on a Yorkist king (Richard III)—a definitive one this time—and end forever the Wars of the Roses. When they do so, at Bosworth Field in Leicestershire, they will be led, as the chroniclers tell us, by the 13th Earl of Oxford.<sup>18</sup> And of course, Shakespeare affords us the glory of Oxford's presence and his words as the Battle of Bosworth unfolds (after all, if Shakespeare is going to have an earl of Oxford a hero in fiction, why not also a hero in fact?). In early lines in the fifth scene of Act Four in *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, Sir Christopher Urswick introduces us to the "men of name" who are allied in Richmond's cause, and they include, of course, John de Vere, the 13th Earl of Oxford. On the eve of the battle, Henry Tudor bids Oxford stay with him for conference (V.iii.27-28).

On the following morn, preparations for the final struggle to secure England's Crown

begins. In contrast to Richard the Third's battle cry to his forces, "Conscience is but a word that cowards use / Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe: / Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law! / March on, join bravely, let us to it pell-mell; if not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell" (*Richard III*, V.iii.309-13), Oxford calls upon his soldiers with the words, "Every man's conscience is a thousand men, / To fight against this guilty homicide" (V.ii.17-18).

In saying so, he also echoes the summons to holy war in Henry Tudor's proclamation that he opens by inviting his men to compare the cause for which they fight with the character of the beast upon whom they soon are to do battle:

For what is he they follow? Truly, gentle men,  
A bloody tyrant and a homicide;  
One rais'd in blood, and one in blood established;  
One that made means to come by what he hath,  
And slaughtered those that were his means to help him;  
A base foul stone, made precious by the foil  
Of England's chair, on which he is falsely set;  
One that hath ever been God's enemy.  
(V.iii.245-52)

The fury of war erupts shortly thereafter; Richard is slain, fighting on his feet, and Henry Tudor is exalted, for, with his triumph and the promise of his posterity, peace in England, with God's will, is assured (V.v.19-41).

Is all of this coincidence, I ask you? Did Shakespeare, in his reconstruction of English civil conflict in his history plays, grind no political agenda? Did he "just happen" to confer an unblemished history on every generation of earls of Oxford encompassed by the history plays? Did the shame that he failed to spare others "just happen" to escape settling on generation after generation of earls of Oxford? I don't think so, and I doubt that anyone who examines the evidence can doubt it either.

Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, writes,

Unless [an] author contents himself with simply retelling *The Three Bears* or the story of Oedipus in the precise form in which they exist in popular accounts . . . his very choice

(*Continued on page 20*)

*Vere-y Interesting (Continued from page 19)*

of what he tells will betray him to the reader. He chooses to tell the tale of Odysseus rather than that of Circe and Polyphemus. He chooses to tell the cheerful tale of Monna and Federigo rather than the pathetic account of Monna's husband and son . . . . In short, the author's judgement is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it . . . . We must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear.

Well said! I wonder, therefore, in whom Will, the Stratford man, if he were the writer of these works, disguised himself in these plays, and where it may be that, since "he can never choose to disappear," we are supposed to find him. Why did he choose to tell the stories he did in these plays in the way that he did? Why did he represent all of the earls of Oxford as he did? No wonder scholars, in frustration, have abandoned the search for Stratford Will behind Shakespeare's works. Will, the glover's son from Stratford, is not there. But if Will isn't there, who is? Anyone want to make an intelligent guess?

**Notes**

1) As Lily B. Campbell instructs us, "Shakespeare, like all other writers who used history to teach politics to the present, cut his cloth to fit the pattern, and the approach to the study of his purposes . . . in his altering [of] the historical fact is best made with current political situations in mind."

2) Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, had declared the King's marriage to Queen Katherine null and void in May of 1533, shortly after the King and his mistress, Anne Boleyn, married in a private ceremony, but absent a papal dispensation, strict Latin Rite Christians refused to recognise Cranmer's nullification of the bond between Henry and Katherine and denied the legitimacy of the new marriage (and its issue) while the King's first wife lived.

3) This play, along with *The Famous History of the Life of Henry the Eighth* (which Geoffrey Bullough classifies as "a play of Protestant propaganda"), is indisputably one of the two most uncompromising and self-evident apologies for the Reformation among the Shakespeare histories, or indeed, the canon as a whole.

4) The 8th Earl—Thomas de Vere—apparently was roundly disliked as well. Froissart declares it was said of the 8th Earl of Oxford that

he "never had much of a reputation . . . for honour, wisdom, sound judgement or chivalry."

5) The hereditary title of Lord Great Chamberlain was not yet in use at the end of the fourteenth century, although until that title was formally devised and conferred successively upon several earls of Oxford, the chamberlainship of England was urged by all the earls of Oxford as their hereditary right dating from the reign of Henry I. This they felt obligated to insist, inasmuch as the office occasionally was awarded to someone else; Richard II, for example, following the exile of Robert de Vere, conferred the office on his own half-brother (who eventually was created Earl of Huntington and, later, Duke of Exeter).

6) Richard II's creation of Robert de Vere as Marquis of Dublin was the first conferral of a marquessate in England.

7) How effective Oxford was as this power behind Richard's throne is a matter of some debate. John Gardner contends that Oxford "was too inept to be really dangerous, even though he was undeniably difficult, forever plotting the murder of one great magnate or another"—including John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, although Shakespeare (perhaps not unsurprisingly) tells us that the counsellor who laid this plot against the life of John of Gaunt was Norfolk!—not Oxford (l.i.135-37). That the Lords Appellant considered de Vere to be a traitor of the first order who had attempted to usurp the prestige and power of the King, even in battle, cannot be denied; the articles of treason leveled against Oxford by the Merciless Parliament of 1388 are extraordinarily detailed; they even included the charge that Oxford appropriated the King's personal banner for his own use.

8) Thomas Mowbray, Earl of Nottingham and later Duke of Norfolk, was second only to Oxford in King Richard's affections. Richard, for example, allowed to Oxford and Mowbray, and to no others among his minions, their own chambers, complete with bathhouse, at Langley Palace. If the writer who was Shakespeare, for whatever reason, was interested in attributing the guilt of Robert de Vere to someone else, he could hardly have chosen a more apt and ready scapegoat than Thomas Mowbray.

9) And yet, it must be noted that when Gloucester was murdered, Mowbray could hardly have been ignorant of the event, as it was one of Mowbray's former valets (a certain John Hall) who actually confessed to the killing of Gloucester in Calais—on orders from the King, as Hall claimed. But who can believe that Richard would have imparted such an intention as this—the assassination of his principal adversary—to a mere valet, when Mowbray, at the time of the Duke of Gloucester's murder, was Governor of Calais as well as captain of the castle where

Gloucester was imprisoned?

10) The French chronicler cited by Verily Anderson is unknown. According to Verily Anderson, in a letter of 3 April 2000, "[t]he chronicler referred to was an un-named contributor to a 19th century *Dictionnaire Encyclopedique*, undated, probably published by Larousse, which I came across in a small library [in the Fondation Camargo] in Cassis, France . . . I included it . . . as an example of the all-too-frequent inaccuracies in popular French encyclopaedias."

11) Norwich, in fact, refers to Henry's forty-nine year reign as "perhaps the saddest half-century in English history."

12) The letters of a respected Norfolk family, the Pastons, attest to the worthy reputation of John de Vere among the people of East Anglia who regarded the earl as a benefactor and supporter of their interests. Moreover, as Verily Anderson reports, "Shakespeare dramatized many of the high spots of history which also appear in detail in the Paston letters, written a century before his plays."

13) Seward, however, proposes that such an effort was never made, as John de Vere's father had only been sentenced to death by the Constable's Court—not attainted; as a consequence, no plea for restoration of the earldom of Oxford was needed.

14) Source material for Shakespeare, such as Holinshed's *Chronicles* and the anonymous *Mirror for Magistrates*, vary in their spellings of Oxford. The author of *Mirror for Magistrates* identifies Oxford as "Oxford"; Holinshed sometimes refers to Oxford as "Oxford" but also as "Oxenford." (Such variations of spelling among places and persons are common in these accounts, as usage and spelling were flexible at the time.) Hall's history, for example, refers to Hereford, bisyllabically as "Herfforde" and trisyllabically as "Herefford" and, in the same way, identifies Richmond as both "Richmond" and "Rychemonde" [among other variations]; among other irregularities, Holinshed also refers to Norfolk both as "Northfolke" and "Norfolke" and to Exeter as "Excester"). I suspect that the author of Shakespeare's works preferred to use "Oxford" (as opposed to the Middle English "Oxenford") when referencing the town and its liege lord, principally because it scans better—a judgment confirmed, I believe, by the editors of the Shakespeare's works.

15) As John Julius Norwich recounts Shakespeare's curiously precipitate treatment of this all-important engagement,

The story of Barnet is quickly told. *We hear nothing of the fighting*, nor the fog that shrouded the field and was as much a feature of the battle as the cold had been at Towton, almost exactly ten years before [emphasis mine]. . . . A brief scene iii establishes that

victory [for the Yorkists] has been won, announces the landing of Margaret and her son and prepares us for Tewkesbury (emphasis mine).

16) Contrary to Shakespeare's assertion that Oxford, having lost the Battle of Barnet, sped to the Queen's rescue in Dorset in order to join her forces in a renewed assault on Edward, we know, instead, from Edward Hall and others, that Oxford fled north to Scotland and escaped from there to France. So Hall, for example, records in his *Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of York and Lancaster* that "the duke of Somerset, with John Erle of Oxenford, wer all in poste hast, flying towarde Scotland"—although Hall suggests that Oxford, at least for awhile, may have turned with Somerset, Pembroke and Exeter toward Wales ("feryng the jeopardies, that might chaunce in so long a journey, [they] altered their purpose, and turned into Wales . . . [later] every man fled whether his mynde served him"). Oxford, as he was in Scotland at the time, does not of course appear in Hall's subsequent account of the Battle of Tewkesbury, at which the defeat of the Lancastrians placed the Yorkists firmly on the throne for more than another decade.

17) Shakespeare's view of Richard III is highly suspect, for reasons far too extensive to survey here. Suffice it to say that Richard the Third, in Shakespeare—with consummate artistry but against all reason and evidence, is made into one of the most memorable fiends and villains of all time. For more on the controversy regarding the character and reign of Richard III, begin by reading Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*. (New York: Scribner, 1995); Roxane C. Murphy's *Richard III: The Making of a Legend* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1977); V. B. Lamb's *The Betrayal of Richard III* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton, 1959); William Snyder's edition of Caroline Halsted's 1844 biography of Richard III [*Richard III as Duke of Gloucester and King of England*]; *The Crown and the Tower* (Sealiff,

NY: The Richard III Society, 1981); Audrey Williamson's *The Mystery of the Princes* (Brunswick Road: Sutton, 1978); and *To Prove a Villain: The Case of Richard III, a collection of pertinent documents* (co-edited by former colleagues of mine at Auburn University, Taylor Littleton and Robert R. Rea [New York: Macmillan, 1964]).

18) The assumption that Oxford commanded a large body of men at Bosworth is challenged by S. B. Chrimes who writes that "Henry arrayed his forces so as to provide a slender vanguard, with a small number of archers in front, under the command of John de Vere, earl of Oxford, with a right wing under Gilbert Talbot and a left wing under John Savage."

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#### Whalen (Continued from page 2)

In her editor's note, she says that while she is "not a totally committed Oxfordian" she believes the Stratford man did not write the works of Shakespeare. As an "outsider," Pearson says, she hopes to take an impartial view of articles submitted and ensure that they are as accurate as possible and properly documented.

Her first issue (May 2000) included an excellent article from Eddi Jolly (a lecturer at Barton-Peveril College in Southampton) on the extraordinary extent and quality of William Cecil, Lord Burghley's library.

Jolly estimates that Burghley had more than 2,000 books and manuscripts, consid-

erably more than most other noblemen and men of letters, although it was not the largest collection. All the books would have been available to the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, who was Burghley's ward and lived at Cecil House for most of his teenage years.

Being a ward in Burghley's house was like attending a university, for he hired the leading scholars. Jolly quotes Joel Hurstfield that "at Cecil House in the Strand, there existed the best school for statesmen in Elizabethan England, perhaps in all Europe."

She describes the range of titles listed in a sales catalog dated November 21, 1687, and contrasts the enormous opportunity for Oxford to educate himself with the lack of

evidence that the Stratford man ever had anything to read.

Also reported in the May 2000 issue was the continuing growth of the DVS's membership rolls. In his report to members, Brian Hicks of Cambridge, DVS chair, reported a year-to-year increase of 17 percent to 177 members, including 56 in the United States. Hicks also noted that the Stratfordians now see Oxfordians "as a threat to their supremacy." He urged members to carry the Oxfordian message to others, invite non-members to society meetings, respond to Stratfordian errors in the media, and "present a united view" to the public while debating differing views "within the family."

## Oxfordian News

# Sir Derek Jacobi the featured guest at NY dinner celebrating Oxford; 13th Annual Oxford Day Banquet held in Cambridge

### Massachusetts

The 13th Annual Oxford Day Banquet was held in the Harvard Faculty Club in **Cambridge** on April 21st. Forty-nine Oxfordians and their guests attended.

This year's event was special, since about half of the Banquet attendees had also been present at Roger Stritmatter's dissertation defense, held earlier the same day in Amherst, Mass. This circumstance thus resulted in a virtual caravan of Oxfordians traveling the 100 miles back to Boston through a driving Nor'easter rainstorm that continued throughout the afternoon.

At the Banquet itself, guests were treated to a rousing talk by Dr. Daniel Wright (who had been on the dissertation defense committee), who spoke on Shakespeare's treatment of the earls of Oxford in the history plays (the paper appears in this newsletter issue, page one).

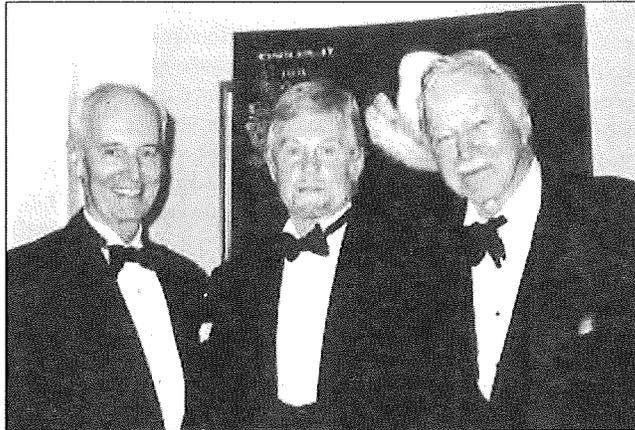
There was also a special gift presented to Roger Stritmatter from his friends in Northampton, where the Eldredges (Joe, Joan and Stephen) had found—and purchased—a rare pencil sketch of Leslie Howard (the English actor who had featured Looney's *Shakespeare Identified* in his 1941 film *Pimpernel Smith*) dressed as Hamlet; Charles Boyle (who has written about Howard's early Oxfordian leanings) made the presentation.

The gift thus commemorated both Roger's accomplishment earlier in the day, and—in effect—all Oxfordian activists throughout the century.

### Michigan

On October 7th and 8th, 2000, the 2nd Shakespearean Research Symposium will be held in **Detroit**, at the Romulus Marriott located at the Detroit Airport (30559 Flynn Rd., Romulus, MI 48174).

The first research symposium, hosted



*At the Oxford Birthday Dinner in New York on May 22nd Society members Keith Jewell of New York City (left) and Leonard Hansen of Englewood, New Jersey (right), pose with Sir Derek Jacobi at the Williams Club.*



*At the 13th Annual Oxford Day Banquet in Cambridge, Mass., on April 21st Tim Holcomb talks shop with Lisa Risley (c) and Anne Pluto (r). Last summer Holcomb had directed the apocryphal—and “possibly” Shakespearean—play Thomas of Woodstock in Northampton, Mass., while earlier this year the Oxford Street Players (co-founded by Risley and Pluto) also produced Woodstock at Lesley College (in Cambridge, Mass.)*

by The Shakespeare Authorship Roundtable in Los Angeles in 1998, had provided a forum for current research relevant to the Shakespeare authorship controversy.

The second symposium—independently produced—again presents speakers who have published in peer-reviewed journals, with the intention of strengthening the

standard of scholarship within the skeptical community of Shakespeare lovers.

The special hotel conference rate is \$69 per night (single) or \$79 (double), plus applicable taxes. To book at this rate, please make your reservation directly with the hotel before Sept. 25th, being sure to specify the Shakespearean Research Symposium. Phone: (800)228-9290 or (734)729-7555.

Among this year's scheduled speakers are: Patrick Buckridge, Associate Professor of Literature at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia; Gerald Downs of Los Angeles; Warren Hope (co-author with Kim Holston of *The Shakespeare Controversy*); C. Wayne Shore of San Antonio, Texas; Roger Nyle Parisious of Hayesville, Ohio; Diana Price (whose book on the authorship problem, *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*, will be published by the Greenwood Press this fall); and Prof. David A. Richardson, Professor of English at Cleveland State University.

Also on hand as luncheon speakers will be Dianne Batch of the Richard III Society, and Bruce Mann, Associate Professor of English at Oakland University.

For information call: Janet Trimbath: (248)650-0832, or send e-mail to: [forevere@home.com](mailto:forevere@home.com)

### New York

A gala dinner at the Williams Club in **New York City** on May 22, 2000 was sponsored by The Friends of The Oxford Library to celebrate the 450th anniversary of the birth of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. The event was organized by former Society trustee Betty Sears and Paul Streitz (of Darien, Connecticut). It afforded not only the opportunity to remember Oxford but also to acknowledge all Oxfordians'

appreciation of Sir Derek's courage in carrying the banner of Oxford's authorship to the world of the theater and beyond.

The invitation to the black-tie affair attracted celebrants from the worlds of business, academia, theater and other entertainment media. Sir Derek, and his guest, actor Richard Clifford, were seated at a table with Sears, former Society trustee Pidge Sexton of St. Louis, Tina Hamilton of Brielle, New Jersey, and Friends' Secretary Lynn Gargil of Lincoln, Massachusetts. During dinner and into the wee hours of the morning there was much animated discussion and crackling exchanges of ideas about Oxford and those who surrounded him at court.

As so often happens at Oxfordian gatherings, authorship topics soon ranged farther afield to include explorations into the actual references in the works to those individuals and events which played such an important role in this monumental period of British history, reaching even beyond Oxford's death when his works appear to have been used to rally political activities just as they had in his lifetime.

Those who had an opportunity to speak with Sir Derek during the evening were impressed by his eagerness to learn more about Oxford, not only in the role of a scholar—which excellence in his craft demands—but also, uniquely, as a Shakespearean actor who has had the opportunity to bring Oxford's words, thoughts and feelings to life on the stage.

Host Paul Streitz graciously acknowledged the contributions of Betty Sears, Pidge Sexton, Roger Stritmatter and Hank Whittemore, with the latter making an exceptionally moving presentation about Oxford on this, his anniversary. It was particularly gratifying to be able to recognize Michael Peer with an award for his recent documentary, *The Shakespeare Conspiracy*, and hear his personal remarks regarding the project.

The focus of the evening was the presentation to Sir Derek Jacobi by Sears. Sir Derek was gracious enough to lead the toast to Sir John Gielgud, who had passed away the night before. Sir Derek then made some special, personal remarks about his journey into the authorship. Especially interesting was his comment that he felt Sir John was a much stronger Oxfordian than most realized but felt constrained by the establishment to

be silent on the subject. He ended his remarks with the acknowledgment of his pride in counting himself an Oxfordian.

Press releases and invitations were sent to over five hundred media and theatrical personalities. Publicity efforts by Paul Streitz and The Friends of The Oxford Library on Oxford's behalf will continue with the distribution of *The Shakespeare Conspiracy* video.

### Ohio

On May 24th dedication ceremonies took place at the Mercantile Library in Cincinnati as Morse Johnson's collection of Shakespeare authorship books were added to the collection. Johnson, a former Society trustee, was also the Society's newsletter editor from 1986-1995.

In presenting the collection, Johnson's widow, Betty Johnson—herself a well-known citizen of Cincinnati—emphasized her belief that the Oxford cause would be well served by an authorship collection available in the midwest. Her remarks were echoed by Albert Pyle, the librarian of the distinguished library.

The collection will be shelved in special mahogany bookcases designed and built by Johnson's long-time friend James Willinghoff, and engraved with "Who Wrote Shakespeare" and the initials of both Johnson and Edward de Vere on the sides.

### Canada

Last June actor Michael York made an appearance in Stratford, Ontario, to sign copies of his new book *A Shakespearean Actor Prepares*. The book is co-authored with actor/director Adrian Brine (of Holland). York has been a Society member since 1996, and—when asked—doesn't hide his Oxfordian persuasions.

He was interviewed for the Stratford *Beacon Herald* by staff writer Audrey Ashley, and on the subject of the authorship question was quoted as follows:

"That's where Adrian and I part company," he said with a smile. "The crabbed, litigious old man who ended up in Stratford (upon Avon) doesn't blend with the glorious Renaissance mind that we find in the plays. The Stratfordians say, 'But he was a genius!' and, of course, he was. But that doesn't account for everything."

In the book his differences with Brine are

### Research Notes

## A French/English pun in *Othello*

A French-English pun on "fitchew," apparently unnoticed until now, informs the crucial handkerchief scene in *Othello*.

The multilingual pun is described in the *The Shakespeare Newsletter* (Spring 1999) by Professor Dominick I. Bongiorno of Kingsborough Community College.

During the scene Bianca enters with the handkerchief that Othello gave Desdemona (IV.1.146). Othello has been overhearing Iago lead Cassio to discuss Bianca the prostitute in a way that leads Othello to think they are talking about Desdemona.

Seeing Bianca, Cassio says, "'Tis such another fitchew! Marry a perfumed one." A fitchew is a polecat, an animal in the weasel family and also a name of contempt for a courtesan or prostitute (*OED*).

In French its homophone is "fichu," which has two meanings. As an adjective it means bad or hateful, which fits nicely with the pejorative fitchew. As a noun, however, its meaning is more significant. A fichu is a kerchief (Harrap's).

So when Bianca, the fitchew, enters with the damning handkerchief, "le fichu," Othello's suspicions are confirmed. He has, as Bongiorno says, "the single combined entity of Bianca and the ocular proof." Powerful drama for those in the audience who knew French.

Professor Bongiorno explains Shakespeare's choice of "fitchew" with its French sound-alike as the result of "the cultural and commercial intercourse between France and England... [that] created a language feast for our author."

Much more likely, of course, is that our author was fluent in French, as was Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. (RFW)

discussed briefly in the Foreword (written by York), in which he acknowledges his own "instinctive feeling" against Stratford and for Oxford, notes (quoting Sobran) that "a thousand pieces fall into place" with Oxford as the author, and concludes with the comment that they had "...agreed to disagree, and, for the purposes of this book I have acquiesced in the accepted Stratfordian biography, or rather, mythology" (36).

## Book Reviews:

**William Shakespeare: A Popular Life** by Garry O'Connor (New York: Applause, 2000)

By Richard F. Whalen

Garry O'Connor sabotages biography in this life of the man he believes to be Shakespeare. He's not the first, of course. Russell Fraser, Marchette Chute and others undermined their ostensibly factual biographies of the Stratford man with fictional conjectures. Stephen Greenblatt even says "let's imagine" as he dreams away in his introduction to the Norton Shakespeare.

Unwittingly, moreover, O'Connor stumbles across testimony for the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford as the true author of Shakespeare's plays when he cites Oxford's Geneva Bible as a source for Shakespeare. He also quotes the actor Derek Jacobi, an avowed Oxfordian, several times with admiration for his insights into Shakespeare's character.

O'Connor is a practiced biographer, having done books on Ralph Richardson, Peggy Ashcroft, Alec Guinness and Sean O'Casey. This is his first biography of a long-dead literary figure, but he knows Shakespeare's works from having acted in the plays and having once directed *Hamlet* at the Royal Shakespeare Company, playing Fortinbras with Jacobi in the title role.

If O'Connor had written a fictionalized biography, such as Robert Nye's *The Late Mr. Shakespeare: A Novel*, it would have posed no problems for the general reader. However, he puts the trappings of scholarship into his "life of Shakespeare" and corrupts biography. The reader, tricked into believing the made-up stories that are embedded in pseudo-scholarship, cannot determine what's fact and what's fiction. It is truly subversive scholarship.

O'Connor makes no apologies. He aims for a "popular, imaginatively told life of Shakespeare." All of us, he says, "hold in our hearts as many clues as to what the playwright was like, if not more, as can be found in history, or in the works themselves." In other words, we can make it all up if we do so in all sincerity, from the heart.

Therefore, he says, he has "dropped the usual tentative approach of scholars," who say he might have, he could have, etc.

On no basis whatsoever, O'Connor reports what people felt. The Stratford man's father, he knowingly writes, "was vigilant for signs of effeminacy in his son....who identified with his father through his "sympathetic, feminized nature." The 18-year-old "felt resentment" at being hooked by an older woman, and "with her second pregnancy the strong emotions he had felt were doubled;" he had "also felt terror." Later "Anne felt" that her husband had forsaken her and her family when he left for London. In retirement he "felt comfortable" in a female household. O'Connor is, of course, just making all this up.

Turning to factual matters, conjecture "from the heart" turns into flat assertion. For example he asserts—on no evidence at all—that his Shakespeare of Stratford was a schoolmaster for a rich family, joined the military and went to war, visited the Earl of Southampton at Titchfield, discussed plots and treason with Southampton in the Tower, got his Italian lore from his alleged friend John Florio, blamed himself for his son Hamnet's death, smoked tobacco, and finally leaves his wife his second-best bed because "Anne had asked for this."

Curiously, O'Connor completely misses the significance of the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford's Geneva Bible at the Folger Shakespeare Library. In the text he says that his Shakespeare—the man from Stratford—had a "profound familiarity" with "his Geneva Bible." Then in his endnotes he says: "The Folger Library has a Geneva Bible originally purchased in 1570. It contains hundred [sic] of marked verses and underlined passages apparently in the original owner's hand, which correspond with Shakespeare's use of the Bible."

He apparently thinks the Folger's Bible belonged to the Stratford man, whereas in fact it was owned by the Earl of Oxford. Roger Stritmatter's doctoral dissertation at UMass-Amherst (see story, page one) demonstrates how the marked passages are actually powerful evidence that Oxford was the true author of Shakespeare's works.

O'Connor is also apparently unaware that Derek Jacobi is now an outspoken Oxfordian, who narrated a documentary film (*The Shakespeare Conspiracy*) about Oxford that was released last year. He quotes Jacobi briefly but admiringly five times on various matters, probably from the time he worked with him on *Hamlet* years ago, before Jacobi became an Oxfordian. (One quote does sound Stratfordian.) O'Connor should have had time to verify Jacobi's allegiance.

He also mentions the recent movie *Shakespeare in Love*, and the 2000 book carries the publisher's one-line note that it was "expanded, revised and updated," presumably from some unspecified earlier edition. All that can be said here is that either O'Connor did not find out about Jacobi's latest views on the authorship question, or he did know, and chose to ignore them and plunge ahead.

On the authorship question O'Connor—as might be expected—is dismissive. Francis Bacon and Christopher Marlowe are quickly dispatched in his quirky notes. He brushes off Oxford in a parenthetical phrase, noting support by Sigmund Freud "in this context...a crank," and then dismisses Oxford for his flatulence and buggery. O'Connor's scorn for Freud is strange given his eagerness to make psychological surmises about everyone's feelings and the Stratford man's dismay over his father's disgrace and his sorrow at his son Hamnet's death supposedly leading him to write *Hamlet*.

Researchers might find handy three tables at the end of O'Connor's book. He says they are "based closely on William Poel's *Prominent Points in the Life and Writings of Shakespeare* (Manchester, 1919). There is a chronological table of "facts and traditions" of the Stratford man's life, including things "unproven" and "unknown." Another table gives "the approximate order of Shakespeare's plays, indicating where they were acted in London (1591-1642)." The third is a table of the plays with a line-count by act, ranked by length and with an analysis of act and scene divisions.

But O'Connor pays scant attention to Poel's "unknowns" and "unprovens." Historical facts be damned, he knows in his heart who Shakespeare was and what he was like.

*Sobran (Continued from page 13)*

But let me pass over the factual quibbles and proceed to the crucial points in Nelson's review. It's amusing, by the way, that a review yielding the essential case for Oxford should have slipped under the radar of the august *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

Countering my argument that the Italian plays reflect Oxford's youthful journey to Italy, Nelson replies that it is "*not impossible* that [William of Stratford] traveled to Italy—*perhaps* in a company of players" (my emphasis). But with "perhaps" and "not impossible," just about any unsupported statement can be made trivially true. Of such qualifiers are Stratfordian biographies composed.

Here, Nelson, without realizing what he is saying, tacitly admits that the positive evidence favors Oxford, of whose Italian voyage there is no "perhaps" or "not impossible." Besides travelling to the same cities Oxford visited in Italy, did William also meet the same two Italians Oxford mentions in his letters—Baptisto Nigrone and Benedic Spinola—whose names are fused in "Baptista Minola" in *The Taming of the Shrew*? And since Oxford met Spinola in Paris, not Italy, did William also visit France? Though it is "not impossible," such reasoning forces us to posit too many coincidences, if not outright miracles.

Nelson avoids the specifics of the Sonnets showing that, as we have seen, the poet is, among other things, "lame." This is really egregious dishonesty, since Nelson himself has published the very letter in which Oxford, writing to Burghley in March 1595, jokes about being "a lame man." In the same way, Nelson fails to mention the charge of "buggering boys" made by Oxford's enemies—an episode he is quite familiar with.

The overwhelming fact about the poet, missed by orthodox critics, is that he faces age and death with shame and guilt at the ruin he has made of his life; his only consolation being, as I say, his "lovely boy." Again, this is not the outlook of a young, successful, prosperous writer from the provinces, taking the big city by storm.

How does Nelson handle the problem the Sonnets pose for William's authorship? By resorting once again to the "not impossible" argument.

"The Sonnets," he writes, "*may* bear a distinct relationship to what *we do not know* (which *must* be vastly more than *what we know*); *nor are they by any means impossible* to reconcile with the little that is known

[about William]" (my emphasis).

Nelson fails to realize that he is conceding my whole case. We can only argue from "what we know," not from "what we do not know." Nelson is indirectly (and no doubt unconsciously) agreeing that "what we know" points to Oxford's authorship, while speculating, with naive confidence, that "what we do not know" "may" favor William's. Thus the case for William rests on non-existent evidence, while the case for

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***"Nelson fails to realize  
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only argue from  
'what we know,'  
not from 'what  
we do not know.'"***

---

Oxford rests on substantiated fact. Q.E.D.

That last sentence demands explanation: "[N]or are [the Sonnets] by any means impossible to reconcile with the little that is known [about William]." Really? How? Was William an aging nobleman and public figure, in disgrace, lame, bisexual, trained in the law, eager to see Southampton marry Elizabeth Vere? What conceivable evidence could turn up to support such an assertion? (Has Nelson ever read the Sonnets?)

Instead of showing how the poet of the Sonnets could possibly match William in so many respects, Nelson offers only the eccentric explanation that William might "feel old" by the age of thirty because he may have been "prematurely balding."

"Prematurely balding"! As "scholarship," which Nelson professes to uphold against "junk scholarship," this is laughable. The poet describes himself as "old" (with "lines and wrinkles"), "lame," "poor," "despised," "guilty," "sinful," "a motley to the view," and many other unflattering things, but "bald" is not one of them.

This is where it gets good. After all, even Francis Bacon—a lawyer, a homosexual, a writer (and occasional poet), a nobleman who fell into disgrace—matches the poet's

profile better than William! If we enter another claimant, the scandalous homosexual Christopher Marlowe, William drops to a distant fourth place in the Authorship Sweepstakes. To such implications do Nelson's concessions lead.

Most orthodox scholars insist that we know so much about William that the case for his authorship is conclusive. Nelson (as usual without realizing it) adopts the same new line as Bowman: that so "little" is known about William that his authorship is "not impossible." The only thing Nelson does assume is impossible is that William is not the author, and, as a good fundamentalist of the orthodox persuasion, he is willing to accept any number of coincidences to sustain that assumption.

It may seem safer to stick with the standard line that the Sonnets are mere "fictions." Like defense attorneys for a guilty client, most orthodox scholars want to declare this powerful evidence about the author inadmissible. But they fail to realize that to call the Sonnets fictions is to abandon them as evidence for William and to surrender them to the candidate who most closely matches the poet's self-portrait: Oxford.

It bears repeating that if we regard the Sonnets as "fictions," we must posit yet another coincidence to save William's claim: that he would create an imaginary speaker with so many points of resemblance to the actual Earl of Oxford. We must further suppose that this imaginary being would lament his imaginary disgrace and urge an imaginary youth, coincidentally similar to the Earl of Southampton, to beget issue—themes without parallel in Elizabethan sonneteering.

As for the chapter in *Alias Shakespeare* which enumerates the many links between Oxford and *Hamlet* (along with other plays), Nelson merely says snidely that it is "mercifully short." Dealing with the facts it presents (the many echoes of Oxford's life and letters in *Hamlet*, for example) would no doubt have forced him to employ those giveaway qualifiers "perhaps" and "not impossible" with unseemly frequency.

He is likewise deaf to the dozens of echoes of the Sonnets in Oxford's 1573 letter to Thomas Bedingfield. So many coincidences, one supposes—but why do they all point toward Oxford? Nelson scornfully quotes my suggestion that the Bedingfield letter constitutes one of the strongest pieces of evidence for Oxford, but he doesn't explain to his readers why I think so.

*(Continued on page 31)*

Opinion/Commentary

## Virginia Woolf's Shakespeare:

*Why Woolf made room for the Stratford lad in A Room of One's Own*

By Andrew Werth

When Virginia Woolf delivered the speeches in 1928 which later became *A Room of One's Own*, she spoke to a population embracing change. Audiences in the United States and England were turning to the radio for news and entertainment. The creations of Henry Ford and Alexander Bell were altering not only the way people traveled and communicated, but the order of their lives.

Poised to deliver a bombshell that would become the cornerstone of feminist criticism, Woolf knew that the literary world was eager for dramatic alterations. Coterie of revolutionary writers were developing manifestoes denouncing ossified literary paradigms, reinventing poetry, and encouraging the poet to trust "the inexhaustible nature of the murmur." Woolf's "Boobmsbury Group" included such innovators and intellectuals as E. M. Forster and Lytton Strachey. Her own novels, most famously *Mrs. Dalloway*, were to employ a technique she called "tunneling," a technique intended to "excavate the dreams and desires" of her characters. The old ways were fading into the dusk as quickly and surely as was the horse-drawn carriage.

Literary women asserted themselves in a society that now questioned the legitimacy of the patriarchy and its statutes (a woman may be creative with a needle, not a pen; a woman must be chaste, should be beautiful, may not be curious). Noting in her essay *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* that "all human relations have shifted," Woolf added that while Victorian readers of Aeschylus' drama *Agamemnon* sympathized with the murdered husband, modern readers would champion Clytemnestra. Activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, writers like Gertrude Stein, and others—for instance, the nurse Margaret Sanger who wrote the advice journal *The Woman Rebel*—encouraged stulti-fied women to question the professed wisdom of their fathers and overturn senseless tradition.

It was for this audience, in this climate,

that Virginia Woolf wrote *A Room of One's Own*. Virtually every paragraph challenges tradition and encourages heterodoxy. Remarkably, though, it reinforces one untenable orthodox myth. This contradiction, from the pen of such a brilliant and revolutionary writer, is worth examining.



Virginia Woolf

*A Room of One's Own* deftly explores reasons for the previous absence of great writing by women, and thoughtfully analyzes the circumstances which produce great writers. The particular interest in this essay to Oxfordians is its famous third chapter. In it, Woolf highlights the Elizabethan era because "It is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet." Her discussion moves naturally to Shakespeare, whom she regards as the model of creative Genius for all ages. She recounts the traditional story of his life, from rabbit poaching to the inevitable unblotted lines. It is the story of a poor, rustic waif who struggles from bumpkin to bard, in his greatest hour "gaining access to the queen." Woolf is obviously well-versed in her contemporary Sidney Lee, and unquestioningly echoes his claims

for the Stratford man.

But as she explains the dust and breath out of which greatness emerges, the reader is bewildered. We are told that "genius like Shakespeare's is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people." Indeed, it is only through "early training that men are able to produce poetry." She expands on this, insisting "the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare's mind ... There must be no obstacle in it, no foreign matter unconsumed." An educated family? Early training? No foreign matter unconsumed? Why, this is not the biography we had read just a few paragraphs earlier. One wonders why, of all figures, she paradigmatically posits the Stratford man's biography when it defies her conditions for literary greatness. One hopes this will develop into clever paradox, but it hardens into contradiction.

Following this puzzling analysis of the creative mind's genesis, Woolf turns to the question, Why did no women write great literature during this time? In explanation, she executes a dazzling feat of imaginative writing (especially for that time, when scholars were only newly in the habit of creating fictional Shakespeares). She wonders, What if Shakespeare had had an equally talented sister? She christens the fictional character Judith, and in a few brief sentences, Woolf proves why she was (and is) considered one of the most talented English writers of her day: when she finishes, one must indeed remind oneself that Shakespeare's sister is mere fiction. Judith Shakespeare, Woolf explains,

...was adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as [her brother] was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic. . . . She picked up a book now and then. . . . But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers.

Judith runs away to London to seek fame and adventure as an actor and playwright, is scorned and shown her place, becomes pregnant, and—"who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?"—commits suicide as release from a life of anguished futility. Woolf's point, of course, is that women did not create fiction because an intransigent patriarchy—reinforced by its subdued women—would not permit it. Any talented Elizabethan girl who asserted herself, Woolf writes, "would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at." Woolf expects her audience to realize that until recently, such attitudes prevailed in England. This explained the paucity of female writers, and consequently of female literary role models, not merely during the sixteenth century, but throughout history.

Note the correspondence between Woolf's methods and those of Stratfordians: in the absence of great works, she seeks to discover more about the lives of women who didn't produce them ("Here I am asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan Age, and I am not sure ... what, in short, they did from eight in the morning until eight at night"), and creates a fictional life to plug the vacuum. Stratfordians, in the baffling presence of great works, seek to know more about him who created them; staring into a void, they too have developed a fictional character to fill it. Woolf at least admits that her phantasm "may be true or it may be false—who can say?" This is more than traditional Shakespeare scholars will admit, allowing their invention to become an institution, admiring the creature while dismissing their hand in its creation. Note the similarities between Woolf's figment Judith and this portrait of Shakespeare by Stratfordian Joseph Papp in his foreword to the Signet *Othello*. Here, young Will has just written *Hamlet* by candlelight, and is forcing his lucubrations into the sleepy hands of actor Richard Burbage:

Shakespeare shakes his friend awake,  
until, bleary-eyed, Burbage sits up in his bed.

"Dammit, Will," he grumbles, "can't

you let an honest man sleep?" But the playwright, his eyes shining and words tumbling out of his mouth, says, "Shut up and listen—tell me what you think of *this!*" He begins to read to the still half-asleep Burbage ... Burbage interrupts, suddenly wide awake, "That's excellent, very good, 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,' yes, I think it will work quite well ..." It must have been an exhilarating moment.

The two Shakespeares—Judith and Will—are both desiderata called into being

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to answer particular exigencies. Though we can trace the manufacture of both, Judith and her dashed hopes are confined to the pages of fiction, while young Will and his supposed dramaturgy we accept as historical fact. Perhaps this reveals less about Will's creators than about his duped inheritors.

Woolf also discusses her desperate search for any information regarding women writers. Vexed by its absence, consider her confessions: she would welcome "dubious gossip" if she could find any; she craves a "mass of information" of any kind that would fill the lacunae and satisfy her throbbing curiosity. Does this differ from Stratfordian reaction to the hollowness of Will Shaksper? We in the western world do not like blank spaces in our histories, and we certainly do not commonly possess what Keats called "negative capability": power to resist the urge to demystify the elusive and the supernatural. Thus, it was with exasperated despair that Coleridge exclaimed, "How absolutely nothing do we know of Shakespeare!" and in the great age of invasive biography that followed him, it was impossible that one of

the greatest subjects would for long remain so distant, so unknown. A mass of information was generated—augmented by the dubious gossip Woolf would have gratefully uncovered for Elizabethan women—and this farrago was assembled for the greatest Elizabethan man.

The persisting question is why, at a time when literary traditions and icons were actively challenged, when intelligent society was learning to examine and discard superstition, when women like Woolf could inquire and speak freely, was she willing to accept the Stratfordian myth without pause? Why was she willing to allow such striking contradictions to cloud her brilliant essay?

Indeed, the question becomes more pressing when we consider Woolf's estimation of Shakespeare's powers. She asserts that the unresolved inner strife that results from external impediments will always mar a writer's work. Thus, those few women who did try to write books that could be distinguished from saccharine pulp or *belles lettres* poured their literary frustrations into their work, often clumsily, and sabotaged their efforts. Woolf uses the writing of Currer Bell, George Eliot, and George Sand—women for whom pseudonyms were less liberating than de-feminizing and humiliating—as examples of this. But the works of great male writers, adds Woolf, have likewise suffered from this. She chooses writers who lived in propinquity to Shakespeare to demonstrate this, and contrasts them with Shakespeare:

For though we say we know nothing about Shakespeare's state of mind, even as we say that, we are saying something about Shakespeare's state of mind. The reason perhaps why we know so little of Shakespeare—compared with Donne or Ben Jonson or Milton—is that his grudges ... are hidden from us. We are not held up by some 'revelation' that reminds us of the writer. All desire to protest ... to make the world a witness of some hardship or grievance was fired out of him and consumed. Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded. If ever a human got his work expressed completely, it was Shakespeare.

Jonson, Donne and Milton were each under great political and financial pressure to produce works that would conform to external guidelines. Donne faced persecu-

*(Continued on page 32)*

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## From the Editor:

### Paradigms Shifting and Shaking

For those Oxfordians who have been involved with the Shakespeare authorship debate for any length of time, the events in Amherst, Massachusetts last April were especially sweet (story, page one).

It is a pity that the stalwarts of the Oxfordian movement—such as founding Societymembers Charlton Ogburn, Francis T. Carmody, William Mason Smith, Archibald H. Cashion and James B. Johnson, Ogburn's parents (Charlton, Sr. and Dorothy), Morse Johnson and all those other earlier SOS members (now departed), plus all the earlier generations of Oxfordians from the days before the SOS—could not have lived to see this day: a successful Ph.D. dissertation defense voted for a scholar whose thesis was based on Edward

de Vere's having been "Shake-speare."

When one considers this landmark event—plus other recent academic events touching on the authorship question, such as Dr. Daniel Wright's Oxfordian conference on a university campus and teacher Robert Barrett's authorship battles with his local secondary school boards—one must realize that the authorship debate has shifted irreversibly into a new era that befits our concurrent movement into a new century and a new millennium.

Dare we think that we who are carrying on the battle today may live to see the day when the emptiness of the Stratford story is finally acknowledged, and the overwhelming circumstantial case for Edward de Vere as the true Shakespeare is finally accepted?

### Edward de Vere's Last Known Letter

Just as this issue of the newsletter was close to going to the printer we were advised of some interesting news from England, by way of Oxfordian researcher Susan Campbell of San Diego, California.

Campbell had been visiting various records offices in England, hoping to find Oxford letters. And in April her efforts were rewarded, with three letters located in the Essex Records Office—two simply signed by Oxford, but one completely in his own hand, and written directly to King James I.

We then had a choice to find room for it in this issue, or wait until later in the year. We decided, finally, that this was too inter-

esting and too important a find to just sit on, and so we are pleased to provide it to our members—and to the world at large—in this issue.

As it turns out, the James letter had apparently been located by another researcher sometime in the 1990s, but that person never saw fit to publish it—or even to tell more than one or two other Oxfordians of its existence.

So while this new Oxford letter cannot be said to have been "discovered" by Campbell, it is certainly her (and our) privilege to be the first to make it available to Oxfordians everywhere in the first year of this new century.

### Newsletter Editorial Board

With this issue of the newsletter (Vol. 36, no. 1) we begin our fifth year of publishing here in Somerville, Massachusetts. Much has happened during this time, from exciting developments in both the major media's and the public's increasing awareness of the authorship issue itself, to the continued growth and influence of our Society in promoting the authorship issue and thus helping in some part to affect the changes that are now taking place.

So, we feel that time had come to reflect some of these changes in the makeup of the newsletter's own editorial board, which has remained pretty much the same since the fall of 1995.

Therefore we are pleased to announce that three new members will be joining the

Editorial Board, effective with this issue: Dr. Daniel L. Wright of Concordia University (Portland, Oregon), presently the Chair of the SOS Board's Publications Committee, Roger Stritmatter of Northampton, Massachusetts, who has just completed his dissertation on Oxford/Shakespeare and the Geneva Bible, and Richard Whalen of Truro, Massachusetts, a regular contributor to these pages.

All three are already familiar to our readers, and bring a wealth of expertise on Shakespeare, the authorship issue and the Elizabethan era to the Board. Their regular participation in producing the newsletter will undoubtedly make it that much better, and afford us the opportunity to provide to our readers even more articles, news, debate and commentary, on a more timely schedule.

## Letters:

To the Editor:

It may interest readers to know that, apropos of my article in the Winter 2000 newsletter ("Ophelia's Difference"), other critics have found ample reason to suspect an incestuous relationship between William Cecil and his daughter Anne that may have resulted in the birth of the child raised as Elizabeth Vere. While I personally do not hold a definite position on this controversial theory—I only keep an open mind toward its possibility—I was nevertheless pleasantly surprised to see a recent Stratfordian work discuss such (I thought) inherently Oxfordian musings.

The following is an excerpt from Patrick M. Murphy's 1997 essay "Wriothesley's Resistance, Wardship Practices and Ovidian Narratives in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*," printed in a collection of writings on the poem published in the same year (*Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*, Philip C. Kolin, ed.; Garland Publishing, NY & London). In his treatise, the author examines the first publication under the Shakespeare byline vis-à-vis the marriage negotiations circa 1593 between the Earl of Southampton and Elizabeth Vere:

Although it is beyond proof, it is not beyond speculation that Oxford may have accused, implied or suspected Anne and her father, William Cecil, of an incestuous liaison that resulted in the birth of Elizabeth. As unlikely as this scenario is, the threat of an accusation of incest could be a powerful weapon. On April 27, 1576, Oxford reserved an unnamed, disruptive power for himself. Writing to Burghley about 'some mislikes'

pertaining to his wife, Oxford said: 'What they are—because some are not to be spoken of or written upon as imperfections—I will not deal withal. Some that otherwise discontented me I will not blaze or publish until it please me.' Perhaps Oxford decided to mention his possible suspicions to someone else, for in Montagu's letter, written to Burghley on Sept. 19, 1590 ... Southampton's grandfather [i.e. Montagu] describes Elizabeth Vere first as Burghley's 'grandchild' and then as his 'child.' There is on the surface nothing improper about this: Elizabeth was Burghley's granddaughter and ward. If Montagu is, however, tactfully suggesting that Southampton's refusal [to marry] is motivated by disparagement, the message would not be lost on the Master of the Wards.

It's important to stress that Murphy reaches the above conclusion without ever considering characters and plot elements in *Hamlet*. The fact that he independently arrived at such a heretical reading of Vere family history—one which I only learned mere hours before penning this letter—would tend to corroborate the reading put forward in "Ophelia's Difference."

Mark K. Anderson  
Northampton, Massachusetts  
20 August 2000

To the Editor:

Kudos to Hank Whittemore for his insightful analysis of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* ("Abstract and Brief Chronicles," Summer 1999 *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*).

Whatever one may think of the so-called "PT theory," I do hope Oxfordians everywhere appreciate this new perspective on

the *Sonnets*. Many of these enigmatic verses—to my mind at least—now ring true with crystal clarity when one considers them to be written by a middle-aged man to his beloved Fair Youth—whatever their relationship may have been—while the Youth sits in prison awaiting execution, and then sits in prison serving life.

Sandy Hochberg  
Berkeley, California  
28 April 1999

To the Editor:

Hank Whittemore's article, "Abstract & Brief Chronicles" (Summer 1999), presents a new and provocative interpretation of the *Sonnets* for scholars to analyze and critique. It is an astounding piece of work, but over the centuries scholars of all persuasions have offered many interpretations of these compelling yet enigmatic poems.

The challenge for Whittemore will be to firm up the historical parallels in a forceful, persuasive format and ground the relations he sees between Elizabeth, Oxford, Essex and Southampton in historical fact. Or at least show that there are no barriers to the relationships to which he finds allusions in the *Sonnets*. This will be no small undertaking, but what other extended set of poems is more deserving of such an effort?

Richard F. Whalen  
Truro, Massachusetts  
15 July 2000

To the Editor:

As a followup to the notice of Tal Wilson's obituary in your last issue (Winter 2000), Concordia University wishes to express its gratitude for the generosity of Mr. Wilson and his family for their bequeathal of Mr. Wilson's enormous personal library to Concordia University.

The many hundreds of texts donated to Concordia by Mr. Wilson and his heirs represent a vast addition of new and rare titles to the library's Oxfordian holdings, and we are pleased that such a valuable gift has been made available to students and other Oxfordian scholars by this devoted scholar's foresight and generosity.

Prof. Nolan Bremer, Head Librarian  
Sylvester Library  
Concordia University  
Portland, Oregon  
25 July 2000

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*Firing Line interview with Charlton Ogburn, Jr. (12/11/84).* William F. Buckley, host; Prof. Maurice Charney (Rutgers) represents the Stratfordian side. 1 hour, VHS. Rarely seen interview with Ogburn upon publication of *TMWS* in 1984. Item SP 27. \$35.00

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*Sobran (continued from page 25)*

Keeping readers in the dark about the contents of *Alias Shakespeare* seems to be a basic strategy of the Stratfordian critics. Nelson is the only one who even bothered with a glancing reference to the Bedingfield letter.

Nor does Nelson address the—extraordinary, one would think—fact that all three of the dedicatees of the Shakespeare works had been Oxford's prospective sons-in-law; Southampton was matched with Elizabeth Vere; Pembroke with Bridget Vere; and Montgomery with Susan Vere (whom in fact he did marry). On the orthodox view, all these startling links with Oxford must be dismissed as more coincidences.

Most important, Nelson makes no attempt to show that either the plays or the Sonnets bear witness to William's authorship. If William were the author, the total absence of links to him in his works would itself be a freakish coincidence. In the authorship debate, it is Oxford's partisans who always appeal to the evidence of those works; the orthodox rely almost entirely on the name on the title pages and the Folio testimony, to which orthodoxy ascribes literal inerrancy.

Nelson makes it unanimous. None of the professed Stratfordians looks for support in either the plays or the Sonnets.

I should add that I've also debated John Tobin, editor of Harvard's prestigious *Riverside Shakespeare*, with the same results. He questioned my scholarship, my character, and everything but my virginity, but didn't bother explaining how William could have written those Sonnets. Neither did several scholars I debated last year in a mock trial at the U.S. Supreme Court. (The jury was evenly divided—a moral triumph for the underdogs.)

I once asked David Kathman, a bright young Shakespeare scholar who claims to be Stratfordian: "Suppose the Shakespeare works had been ascribed to Oxford by the First Folio in 1623, and that his authorship had been accepted for four centuries. What in those works would have led you to break with the herd and challenge Oxford's authorship? And what in those works would have led you to believe that the real author was William of Stratford?"

He had no answer. There is no answer. There are only indignant poses and quibbling diversions and blustering non-sequiturs by embarrassed scholars pretending to be convinced Stratfordians. I don't rule out the possibility that some of them are deluded enough to think they really are Stratfordians.

But by now I know better.

*de Vere Studies Conf (cont't from page 11)*

Biblical source for the writer who was Shakespeare. Roger's studies have since led to the successful defense of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (see story on page one).

The 5th Annual Edward de Vere Studies Conference will convene on the Concordia University campus from April 5th to 8th, 2001. The featured speaker will be Robert Detobel, German editor of the *Neues Shakespeare Journal*, who will be making his American debut at an Oxfordian proceeding.

The Conference's opening night will also feature the Concordia University Theatre Department's premiere of Tim Hill's *The Bubble Reputation*, a play about the William Henry Ireland forgeries.

Registrations are being taken now; registration is only \$110 for the four-day conference (banquet included). To register or to request more information, contact Professor Wright at: [dwright@cu-portland.edu](mailto:dwright@cu-portland.edu), or visit the Edward de Vere Studies Conference website at: <http://www.DeVereStudies.org>

Or write to Dr. Wright at: Concordia University, Dept. of Humanities, 2811 N.E. Holman St., Portland OR 97211-6099.

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If this newsletter has found its way into your hands, and you're not already a member of our Society, why not consider joining us in this intriguing, exciting adventure in search of the true story behind the Shakespeare mystery? While the Shakespeare Oxford Society is certainly committed to the proposition that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, is the true Shakespeare, there is much that remains to be learned about the whole secretive world of Elizabethan politics and about how the Shakespeare authorship ruse came into being, and even more importantly, what it means for us today in the 20th Century as we complete our fourth century of living in a Western World that was created during the Elizabethan era.

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*Werth (Continued from page 27)*

tion because of his early Catholicism and elopement with his aristocratic employer's niece, and it darkened much of his life with uncertainty and discontent. One loses track of how often Jonson was jailed for his writings, and Milton was exiled and nearly executed for his beliefs. Woolf asserts this is evident in their work, and the residue it leaves diminishes even the greatest writing. Yet the Stratford man, who had to overcome low birth, lack of education, unintelligible accent, and poverty; who wrote plays that flirted with religious heresy and caricatured members of Elizabeth's court; who was supposedly at the constant mercy of the censor's pen and the jailor's key; who wrote under his own name and was liable to suffer the same hardships as his fellows; his work, among all others, says Woolf, is "unimpeded." Was she not skeptical of a portrait that so defied common sense and contradicted her own precepts?

She accepts the traditional myth because Stratfordian efforts resonate with her own. Here was a group of admirers and scholars desperate to make corporeal the Bard who left no trace of his poetic self—only dubious signatures and furniture.

Woolf no doubt appreciated their ability to parent and propagate "masses" of information on Shakespeare (the kind of information she vainly sought for female writers), and to create a heroic figure from imagination (which Woolf attempted with Judith, though one less heroic than tragic). In our struggles, we are often sympathetic to those who share our plight, willing to ignore outrageous deficiencies in their arguments. Recall that the most learned men in England gratefully embraced William Ireland's ludicrous Shakespeare forgeries, the great James Boswell even kneeling to worship tearfully at their shrine. Woolf agrees with Stratfordian conclusions not because she is an indifferent scholar, or because authorship doesn't matter to her, but because her sympathies lie with people who, like her, seek answers where there are none, try to solve a literary problem that gnaws at their souls and, finally, effect creative solutions in the face of disappointment.

Remarkable and valuable for its other merits, Woolf's essay demonstrates that even in a climate of iconoclasm and intellectual ferment, the needs and desires of individuals often allows—even forces—great questions to remain unanswered. We are

again in an era of great change. Computers and the Internet have made possible the research, storage, and exchange of ideas and information on a scale unimaginable; the freedom of speech enjoyed by Woolf is inadequate by today's standards; no icons are safe, and their downfall at the hands of logical inquiry and media attention can occur instantly.

The Stratford lad survived Virginia Woolf and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Will he survive the new millennium? Though the world is his stage at the moment, it is possible that in the future he can expect only a room of his own, in a quaint museum of outdated curios, near the horse-drawn carriages.

*Andrew Werth is a graduate of Concordia University (Portland, Oregon). He teaches English at Park Rose High School in Portland.*

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*Paradigm earthquake strikes Amherst, Mass.: pages 1,8-9*

*"Vere-y Interesting": pages 1,14-21*

*Conference update: page 3*

*Edward de Vere's last known letter: pages 4-6*

*The "upstart Crow" supposes: page 7*

*4th Annual Edward de Vere Studies Conference: pages 10-11,31*

*The end of Stratfordianism: pages 12-13,25,31*

*Oxfordian News: pages 22-23*

*Book Reviews: page 24*

*Virginia Woolf's Shakespeare: pages 26-27,32*