

 **Letters** 

Dear Editor,

I am writing in response to James Warren’s article “The Use of State Power to Hide Edward de Vere’s Authorship of the Works Attributed to ‘William Shake-speare’” (*Brief Chronicles* VI [2015], 59-81).

Warren’s thesis is that “Those who controlled state power used it not only to destroy evidence of the Earl of Oxford’s literary activities, but also to airbrush him from much of the historical record,” and that “the only explanation weighty enough to account for the use of state power for that extraordinary purpose was Oxford’s bodily involvement in the succession issue in some way—as described in the so-called Prince Tudor or Tudor Heir theories — an involvement that could have affected Queen Elizabeth’s reputation and provided a possible challenge to the legitimacy of King James’s reign.”

I find much to agree with in the article, but I cannot agree that the so-called “Prince Tudor” theory is the only possible explanation “weighty enough” to account for the use of State power to destroy the records of Oxford’s authorship, or to “airbrush him from much of the historical record,” as proposed. The article seeks to narrow the possibilities to that one alternative, and in my view it does not succeed. Rather, I think it succeeds only in making itself a classic example of the fallacy of limited alternatives. It doesn’t even succeed in making a case that the Prince Tudor theory is one of the viable alternatives.

Warren offers no direct evidence that state power *was* used to destroy records relating to Oxford, but he makes a strong circumstantial case that someone must have done so, and I am largely in agreement. It should be mentioned, though, that we have no idea how many records we are talking about, whether Oxford himself, or others, avoided putting anything in writing about his activities in the first place, or whether Oxford himself may have participated in, or supported, the destruction of any such evidence. We do know, as Warren points out, that he wrote in the Sonnets that he neither wanted, nor expected, to be remembered. So it doesn’t sound like

something imposed posthumously without his knowledge.

In arguing for the role of state power, Warren refers to “the large number of documents that resulted from Oxford’s authorship of Shake-speare’s works and his role in the creation of the public theater,” but he never establishes that this is necessarily so. Oxford may have been so skilled at concealing his activities that he did not produce many documents. We know he worked through secretaries, such as John Lyly, who ran a company of boy actors for Oxford. There was a norm against noblemen being involved in such activities, so perhaps he gave instructions to others and did not get involved directly. At least one prominent Oxfordian believes that Oxford kept his authorship of the works secret from virtually everyone, and that no state power was involved, but in my view this is extremely unlikely.

My main disagreement is with the claim that the so-called “Prince Tudor” theory is the only possible explanation “weighty enough” to account for the hypothesized use of state power. Warren claims that removing Oxford from the record was necessary to establish and preserve King James I on the throne, but he never explains exactly why. In referring to “Prince Tudor/Tudor Heir theories,” he implies that a secret Royal Bastard would have been eligible to assert a claim to the throne upon Elizabeth’s death. I believe Thomas Regnier’s article “Did Tudor Succession Law Permit Royal Bastards to Inherit the Crown?” (*Brief Chronicles IV*, 2012-13) demonstrates that a Royal Bastard could *not* inherit the throne.

Warren says of Oxford that “his existence threatened the purity of Queen Elizabeth’s reputation and the legitimacy of King James’ reign.” How did the legitimacy of James’s reign depend on Elizabeth’s reputation? Elizabeth had executed James’s mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, and James hated her for it. That is offered as a reason for his favorable treatment of Southampton and others who participated in the Essex Rebellion. If Southampton were a secret Tudor Royal Bastard, it would have been in James’s interest to expose him as such to discredit Elizabeth, thereby enhancing his legitimacy as the King of England.

Monarchs don’t often befriend potential rivals, as James did with Southampton. Rather, they typically have them killed, as the Tudors often did with those whom they perceived as potential threats to their rule. The fact that James befriended Southampton suggests that he did not regard him as a son of Elizabeth. If the objective was “to eliminate any potential challenges to King James’s reign by direct descendants of Queen Elizabeth,” and Southampton was a son of Oxford and Elizabeth, the logical thing to do was to knock off Southampton. Airbrushing Oxford out of the record did not eliminate the potential threat.

Warren gives no criteria for deciding what would be a “weighty enough” reason to warrant the use of state power to purge the record, so his view that only a PT-based explanation will suffice is subjective. In my view it is sufficient that (1) the plays were propaganda, intended to legitimize the Tudor regime and unite the country, (2) theaters and acting companies were part of the state-sponsored spy network, (3) the plays were political and it would have been embarrassing if it became known who wrote them, and (4) the powerful Cecils, in particular, would have wanted to conceal that Oxford had written them both for reasons of state (per 1-3) and because they disliked him and viewed him as an embarrassment.

In addition to the Cecils, Queen Elizabeth also had her own reasons to want to sanitize the records—something Warren never mentions. Elizabeth, not Lord Burghley (as is often claimed), was Oxford's legal guardian, owned his wardship, and exploited his earldom to benefit her favorite, Robert Dudley. Nina Green's article "The Fall of the House of Oxford" (*Brief Chronicles I*, 2009) documents in great detail that the Queen treated Oxford very badly and was chiefly responsible for his financial downfall. As the person most responsible for him, she had good reason to be concerned what the record showed. If she wanted it cleaned up, that would clearly be a "weighty enough" reason for the Cecils to see to it.

And there's something else Warren never mentions. In addition to saying in the Sonnets that he neither wanted, nor expected, his name to be remembered, Oxford said repeatedly that he was in some sort of disgrace, beyond recovery. He never explains exactly why, but his evident disgrace and outcast status is another possible explanation. I do not see that either of the so-called "Prince Tudor" theories would account for it. For that to be the case it would have to be widely known among his peers; but then it is hard to imagine why he would be in disgrace and not Queen Elizabeth. There must be something else.

Both John Hamill and Alexander Waugh have proposed credible explanations, based on the Sonnets, either of which could account for Oxford's outcast state and for the Cecils' wish to purge the records. Either of them seems to me to be "weighty enough," especially in the context of all the other reasons. Either theory strikes me as more plausible than the PT scenario that Warren claims is the only option. Oxfordians should not be railroaded into accepting the so-called "PT Theory" based on nothing more.

One minor point: Warren writes that Oxford "published two lengthy poems in 1593 and 1594 under the name William Shake-speare." No, it was spelled "Shakespeare" beneath the dedications to both *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. If we are going to criticize James Shapiro for incorrectly stating that the name was hyphenated when it first appeared, as we should, then we should get it right ourselves. I'm not a fan of hyphenating the name throughout articles, since it was hyphenated only 45% of the time on the works. Here's an example where the practice results in saying something that's incorrect.

John M. Shahan

Dear Editor,

I am pleased that John Shahan found “much to agree with” in my article, including the idea that state power must have been used to hide Oxford’s authorship of Shakespeare’s works. Our views differ principally over the reasons why state power was used. As he explained, his “main disagreement is with the claim that the so-called ‘Prince Tudor’ theory is the only explanation ‘weighty enough’ to account for the hypothesized use of state power.”

Shahan believes that other explanations for the use of state power are more credible, and cited those proposed by John Hamill and Alexander Waugh. Although Shahan does not state what their ideas are or attempt to establish their validity, it should be noted that their explanations consist primarily of personal reasons for the use of state power. That is, those who controlled it used it to accomplish personal goals such as protecting their reputations.

Like Shahan, I believe that the steps taken to hide Oxford’s authorship began for personal reasons, a point I made in my article. Those holding state power believed that the connection between the literary works and the court had to be cut to assuage the feelings and protect the interests of those portrayed and ridiculed in them, and that the best way to do that was by cutting the connection between the works and Oxford.

Then the Essex Rebellion changed everything.

At the time of the Rebellion, the most pressing political issue was the question of who would succeed the 67-year old Elizabeth. The existence of a blood heir to the queen—the essence of the Prince Tudor theory—posed an enormous threat to James’s ambitions. Southampton, if he was a direct descendant of the queen, would have had priority in succession over all non-direct descendants, including James, who was Elizabeth’s half-nephew.

Southampton’s being sentenced to death for his role in the Rebellion gave Cecil and James the opening they needed to clear the path for James’s succession. Southampton’s life had been saved by someone, and the cornerstone of how that was done could only have been a deal. Although the details of the deal are not known precisely, the logic of the situation leads to the conclusion that Southampton’s life was spared in return for his renouncing any claim to the throne and for Oxford’s agreeing to bury his claim to authorship of “Shakespeare’s” works.

As a result of the deal, state power began to be used for two additional purposes: hiding Oxford’s authorship not just from the current generation but also from future generations, and effacing Oxford himself from much of the historical record. It is at that point that Hamill’s and Waugh’s explanations begin to fall short.

They do not address the change in the purposes for which state power was used. The so-called Prince Tudor theory directly addresses that change, and that is why it is the only explanation I am aware of that is emotionally weighty enough to explain the new uses of state power. This is, perhaps, a subjective judgment—but subjective does not mean arbitrary. In the absence of direct evidence, a subjective weighing of the evidence that does exist, combined with an understanding of the circumstances in which events took place, is the most that can be hoped for.

Shahan tries to counter the significance of Southampton's being a blood descendant of the queen, if that was the case, by citing an article by Thomas Regnier as evidence that a Royal Bastard could not inherit the throne. Regnier's article notes that the 1571 change in the law only provided for allowing "discussion" of the queen's "natural issue," but did not in fact change the laws in place prohibiting a Royal Bastard from inheriting the throne. But laws could be changed to meet the political needs of the moment, a point Regnier recognized when he quoted Boris to the effect that "Succession was 'determined by politics more than law.'" That was indeed the case with Elizabeth Tudor, who became queen even though Parliament had twice declared her a bastard ineligible for succession.

Shahan also appears to misunderstand another important point. He states that James hated Elizabeth for having executed his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, and that "If Southampton were a secret Tudor Royal Bastard, it would have been in James's interest to expose him to discredit Elizabeth." Well, no. Shahan's reasoning is faulty. James' top goal was to become king. Nothing could be allowed to get in the way of the attainment of that goal, not even his desire to exact revenge on Elizabeth by destroying her reputation as the Virgin Queen by outing Southampton as her son. Doing so would have opened up a can of worms with the potential to complicate the succession, and would have upset the deal that had already been brokered.

And there is another point where Shahan's reasoning does not seem quite right. He states that "Monarchs don't often befriend potential rivals, as James did with Southampton. Rather, they typically have them killed . . . The fact that James befriended Southampton suggests that he did not regard him as a son of Elizabeth. If the objective was 'to eliminate any potential challenges to King James' reign by direct descendants of Queen Elizabeth,' and [if] Southampton was a son of Oxford and Elizabeth, [then] the logical thing to do was to knock off Southampton."

Again, no. Shahan doesn't appear to recognize the likelihood that James's immediate goal after becoming king would have been to strengthen the legitimacy of his reign. He could not simply have had Southampton murdered because those of royal blood, if that was the case with Southampton, were not ordinary political rivals. They had to be handled carefully. That is why Elizabeth treated Mary so gingerly and held her for almost twenty years before executing her for treason. And besides, there was no reason to murder Southampton because the deal had already neutralized him. That deal had changed the reality of things for everyone, and everyone had to live with it whether they liked it or not. For James to renege on the deal would immediately have placed him at risk, and he had to know that. It is also significant that Southampton was never allowed to gain any genuine political power during James' reign.

We now come to a particularly important point. Shahan writes “And there’s something else Warren never mentions. In addition to saying in the *Sonnets* that he neither wanted, nor expected, his name to be remembered, Oxford said repeatedly that he was in some sort of disgrace, beyond recovery. He [Oxford] never explains exactly why, but his evident disgrace and outcast status is another possible explanation. I do not see that either of the so-called ‘Prince Tudor’ theories would account for it. For that to be the case it would have to be widely known among his peers; but then it is hard to imagine why he would be in disgrace and not Queen Elizabeth. There must be something else.”

Yes, there was something else causing disgrace and shame: Oxford’s involvement in treason. He was not only probably the father of a man condemned to death for treason, but also probably involved to some degree in events surrounding the Essex Rebellion. Paul Hammer’s *Shakespeare Quarterly* article (“Shakespeare’s Richard II: The Play of 7 February 1601 and the Essex Rising,” Vol. 59/1, Spring 2008) has settled the point about it being Shakespeare’s *Richard II* that was performed on the eve of the Rebellion. It would not have been possible for that play to have been performed at that politically sensitive moment without Oxford’s knowledge and authorization.

It is interesting that Shahan and I both hold the important yet still controversial belief that Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* were not mere literary devices but instead portray the author’s thoughts about important events in his life. It is because of what the *Sonnets* reveal about Southampton’s parentage as explained by Hank Whittemore in *The Monument* that (1) the *Sonnets*’ original sequence apparently was suppressed upon publication, continuing underground until the early eighteenth century; (2) the 1623 Folio failed to include the poems or sonnets or the dedications to Southampton or any mention of this single person whom Oxford had publicly linked to “Shakespeare”; and (3) the 1640 edition by John Benson, who was Ben Jonson’s posthumous publisher, destroyed the original work as a coherent sequence. All this adds to the argument that Southampton is the central figure in the explanation for the expunging of Oxford.

Shahan has, through the work of the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition that he founded, done as much as anyone alive today to increase awareness of the weakness of the evidence supporting Shakspere’s authorship of Shakespeare’s works. But his understanding of the reasons for the use of state power to hide Oxford’s authorship is not quite as fully developed as his understanding of the weakness of the Stratfordian claim.

James A. Warren