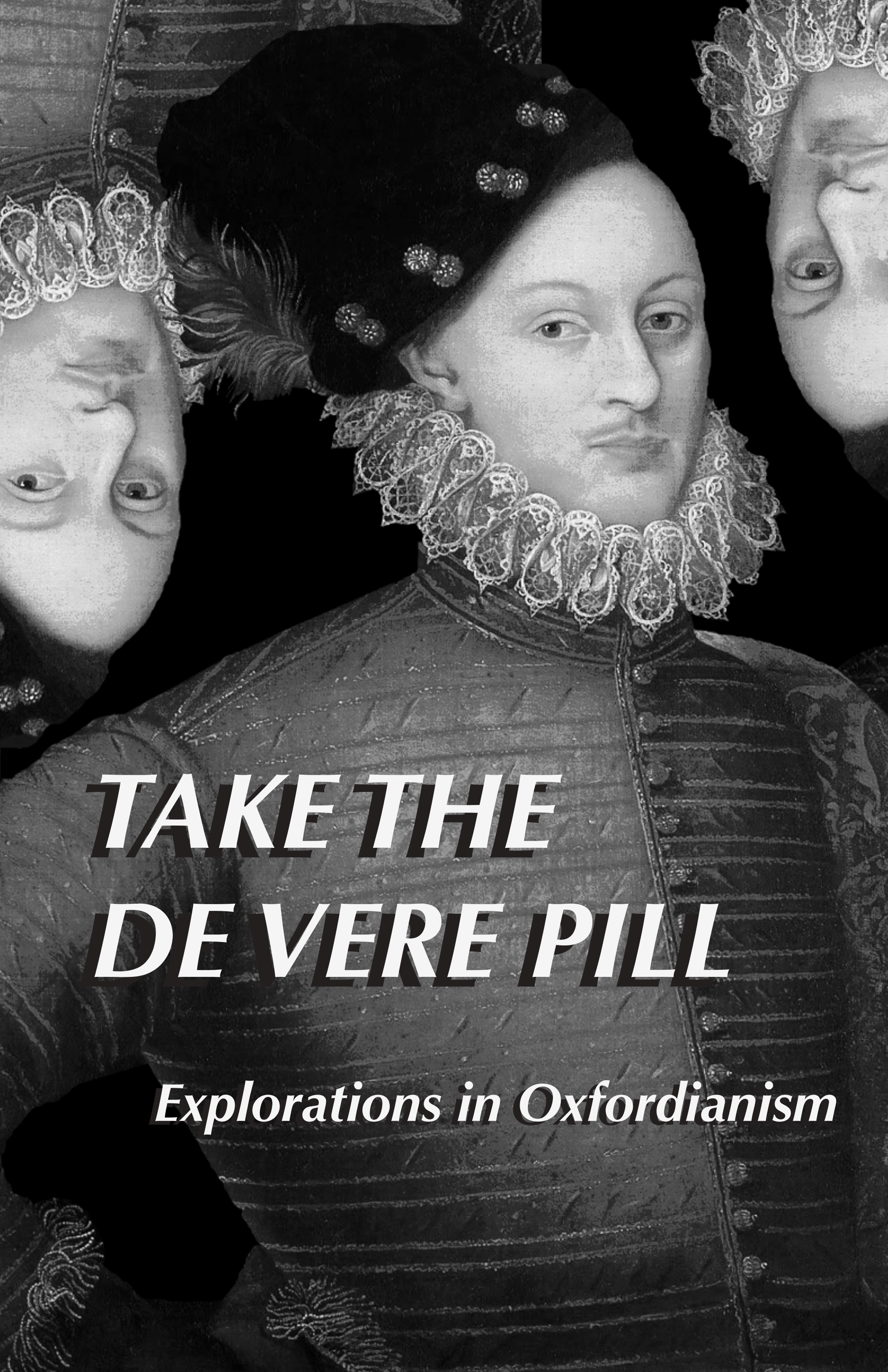
TAKE THE
DE VERE PILL
Explorations in Oxfordianism

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Letter from the Editor

Phoebe Nir

It's the year 1998 and you're watching TV. On a popular late-night sketch comedy show, an actor affecting a heavy southern drawl says, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." A fat male actor enters wearing a blue dress. The studio audience laughs.

Now imagine it's the year 2400, and scholars of the future are attempting to make sense of that comedy sketch. Except they have it misdated to 1985, and they've never heard of Monica Lewinsky.

It is in this lamentable condition that orthodox Shakespeare scholarship has languished for centuries.

Back to 1998—week after week, this popular TV show produces risqué send-ups of America's most powerful public figures, airing counter-narrative dirty laundry for which any other show would be swiftly booted off the airwaves. The show's elusive writer goes by "Jane Shake-speare", but everyone agrees that the name sounds like a pseudonym, and there are rumors amongst the elite that the writer is none other than Chelsea Clinton.

Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford, was one of the Elizabethan era's most celebrated and notorious courtiers. Known to brag that he could write a better bible with six days' warn-

ing, De Vere was paid a hefty £1000 annuity from the Crown's entertainment budget from 1586 until his death, a special allowance from Queen Elizabeth that he earned by producing enormous amounts of pro-Tudor propaganda, using numerous pseudonyms and allonyms (names borrowed from real individuals, frequently his employees or theater colleagues) to sign pamphlets, verse poems, and plays. Praised by his contemporaries as the greatest writer of comedies, De Vere nonetheless left almost no writing under his own name besides some poetic juvenilia. De Vere had fallen into obscurity until the 1920 publication of J. T. Looney's *'Shakespeare' Identified*, which inspired the alternative authorship movement known as Oxfordianism.

Looney found in the Earl of Oxford an author whose educational background, life experiences, and reputation were as harmonious with the content of Shakespeare's plays as Will of Stratford's were ill-fitted. Since 1869, mainstream Stratfordian scholarship had acknowledged that the character of Polonius in Hamlet was clearly based on Queen Elizabeth's chief advisor Lord Burghley; while it seemed odd that a young commoner from a Stratford-Upon-Avon would risk imprisonment to parody a retired government official, Edward de Vere had been Lord Burghley's ward as a child and son-in-law as an adult. And while Stratfordian scholars struggled to explain how a man who never left England could write in five foreign languages and had a local's knowledge of several Italian cities, Edward de Vere had been known as "the Italianate Englishman," and his travels throughout Europe had uncanny overlaps with the settings in Shakespeare's plays, including a 200-line description in *Lucrece* of a mural of the Trojan War that had covered the walls of his guest room at the Palazzo Ducale.

This collection will not provide a comprehensive overview of all the evidence that exists in favor of Edward De Vere's authorship, though we will provide resources for further study at the end. Our purpose rather is to offer varying perspectives on how Oxfordianism can deepen the bliss, and even the mystery, of engaging with Shakespeare.

The question about Oxfordianism that I am asked more than any other is, "Why does it matter who wrote Shakespeare?" Though you will find numerous answers to that question within these pages, mine is as follows: Edward De Vere gives me hope. And in these trying and uncertain times, humanity's best path forward is the one in which we are able to draw inspiration from the greatest poet who ever lived. Just as the Founding Fathers modeled themselves after heroic examples from Plutarch's *Lives*, perhaps we might navigate the unique challenges of the 21st century by harnessing our own creativity, compassion, and genius–qualities that no one has ever embodied more fully than Edward De Vere.

A Point for Edward De Vere

Felicia Londré

People are often surprised by my answer to this question:

"What do you see as the single most compelling evidence to support your contention that the man behind the pen-name William Shake-speare was Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford?"

When I used to try to gauge what students found most convincing in my Shakespeare authorship lecture, the answers would be all over the map. In my quiz following the unit on Elizabethan theatre in my theatre history classes, I would ask the students to supply one reason for choosing either De Vere or Shakspere as the probable author. Most students would answer with a point in favor of De Vere, but they chose many different points: parallels between his life and events in Hamlet, the prevalence of aristocrats among his characters, his travels in Italy, sonnet allusions to the author's lameness, John Rollett's explanation for the First Folio dedication's layout, and so on.

To me, the most compelling evidence is the dating of the plays—but not the traditional dates assigned by Stratfordians. The "orthodox" conjectural chronology scrunches too many plays too closely together to fit the years when Will Shakspere of Stratford could have been productive and the known *terminus ad quem* dates of performance or publication. Nor do the "orthodox" dates allow time for the author's apprentice-

ship and growth as a writer. In Geoffrey Bullough's 8-volume *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, there is no source later than 1604 (the year of Oxford's death) unless it's an English translation of an earlier source.

For example, the orthodox date for *Love's Labour's Lost* is 1593–94. But 1578–79 seems more likely in terms of many topical references in the text. Oxford had recently returned from his year and a half of travels on the continent where he met the French counterparts of characters in the play. Stylistically, *Love's Labour's Lost* exemplifies Euphuism, a literary fad that flourished briefly in courtly circles in 1578—when the Warwickshire dialect-speaking Shakspere was fourteen years old. It makes little sense that fifteen years later Shakspere would pick up long-dead Euphuist mannerisms.

Twelfth Night is another play full of topical references to things that were going on at court in 1580–82 (as opposed to the orthodox 1600–1602 dating). Malvolio is a satire on Oxford's rival, Sir Christopher Hatton, in several specific ways. Hatton's sappy smile, his Puritanism, the "Sheep" or "Mutton" nickname that Queen Elizabeth gave him, and other references recognized at court are used in the play to make Malvolio the butt of the jokes.

The dating of the plays is a vast subject on which many experts have weighed in. For an even-handed compendium, I recommend *Dating Shakespeare's Plays: A Critical Review of the Evidence*, edited by Kevin Gilvary. Another favorite of mine that can be helpful on the dates is *Edward de Vere and the Shakespeare Printers* by Robert Sean Brazil.

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Lingonberry Jam

Jack Mason

The year after I graduated high school I played Gloucester in a summer production of *King Lear*. I understood little of the lines I recited but enjoyed the drama of being tied to a chair and having my eyes gouged out, with lingonberry jam serving as gore. My strongest Shakespeare associations are that last gasp of high school theater youthfulness and the narrative detritus that has trickled down to me through a handful of irreverent cinematic adaptations using the bare bones of Shakespeare as a backdrop justification for stylish images of beautiful men.

I was in tenth grade when I first rented Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* on videotape from Blockbuster. Despite being a fairly popular and well-known success of early independent cinema featuring two of the biggest male stars of the '90s, it was not much talked about before the Criterion Collection renewed interest in it with their lavishly packaged DVD release. Gus Van Sant's early auteur promise in the New Queer Cinema movement seemed far in the past after a succession of empty, decidedly un-queer big budget mainstream projects like *Good Will Hunting* and *Finding Forrester*, so I was quite surprised by just how strange and and unlike anything else *My Own Private Idaho* was.

My Own Private Idaho consists of two stories haphazardly combined, in the manner of William Burroughs's cut-up method: a romanticized, erotic, documentary-style panorama

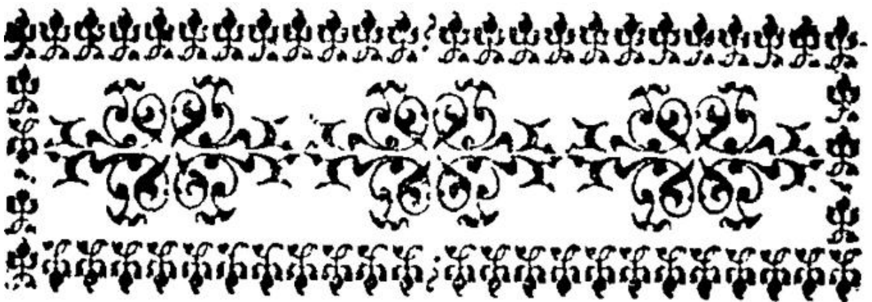
of young male hustlers in Portland during peak grunge—inspired by John Rechy's 1963 gay beat novel *City of Night*—and a loose adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, *Henry IV, Part 2*, and *Henry V*. It is most remembered for its haunting images of River Phoenix, captured at the height of his beauty shortly before his death by drug overdose, and his bold campfire kiss scene with Keanu Reeves. Viewers have more mixed and often overtly negative reactions to the Shakespeare scenes, with their awkwardly integrated modern slang and references and Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I have always loved them and thought that much of the movie's charm lies in its bold and intuitive juxtapositions, which set the stage for Baz Luhrmann's later gaudy, anachronistic spectacle *Romeo + Juliet*.

Romeo + Juliet was a ubiquitous phenomenon with teen girls in the late '90s, who would paper their walls with posters of Leonardo Dicaprio wearing a gun and Claire Danes wearing raver-style angel wings. The Franco Zeffirelli version made Shakespeare edgy and appealing for teens in the late '60s and the Luhrmann version did the same for Gen Xers. As with *My Own Private Idaho*, Shakespeare could be interesting when he acted as a vehicle to deliver striking imagery of male heartthrobs. Luhrmann's use of gaudy Catholic imagery set off a craze for religious candles, sacred hearts, and glowing neon crosses. Would a new adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* even be able to take root with today's irony-poisoned young people, to whom sincere classical depictions of romance represent exploitation and oppression? It remains to be seen.

I was reminded of both of these films this year by Robert Eggers' *The Northman*, which combines John Milius's *Conan the Barbarian* with a skeletal adaptation of Hamlet in a gently reactionary spectacle intended to troll liberal diversity operatives with its all-white cast and conventional gender roles. In the sexless, SSRI-fried post-2010s cinema landscape the barest hint of classical inspiration or acknowledgment of human nature can seem electrifying, and it does here as we're treated to Nicole Kidman as a monstrous Freudian mother

figure and Alexander Skarsgård and Claes Bang fighting naked on a volcano, genitals safely shadowed. Eggers chose to adapt Hamlet to permit a sense of narrative familiarity to ground his more esoteric indulgences, and the result feels more casually vital and literary than most movies have felt in a long time.

Resentment of dead white males of the Western canon is so casually and spitefully ingrained into today's discourse that basic awareness of Shakespeare as something one should at least aspire to understand can't be taken for granted. This is why *The Northman* as a free, experimental spin on Hamlet seems so confident and unusual. The notion of anonymity in the Oxfordian authorship theory is resonant today, when censorship is so extreme that most people feel the need to create alternate identities as self-protection when expressing the mildest emotions or dissenting opinions on public forums. We would benefit from the unification of our forbidden anonymous selves and socially acceptable public personas, caring less about our reputations, and claiming authorship of all sides of our fragmented identities.



A Short History of Names

Katherine Dee

Fixed names—and it follows, identities—don't have the history you might imagine they do. The notion of an individual wed to a single, fixed identity with a fixed name from birth is relatively new. Even the concept of an administrative identity (that is, documentation) is new. In the United States, we can look to the birth of the Social Security Administration, then called the Social Security Board, and in Europe, somewhere between the advent of the printing press in 1440 and the Council of Trent in 1545.

If you could believe it, all it took to change your name, at least in England, was announcing it in a public space. To change your story, all you had to do was change your environment. The world was much bigger then—a single nation could be a universe unto itself. How were identities verified if there was no fixed legal person? No registries to check? Or, even if there was no tradition of identification? Appearance, memory, and word of mouth. We know that John Smith is a tall blond man; we've met him before; his neighbors agree he's a tall blond man. That's it.

There's a certain freedom in this world. *If I could only leave, I could be who I want to be*. Of course, not everyone *could* leave—their environment, their circumstances—but the frontier of identity was there for much longer than we realize

in our digitized 21st century. Think of how vast that frontier remains today, though, and what we're still able to accomplish within the confines of digitization, birth certificates, government identification, and Social Security numbers. Imagine a world without that.

I mentioned that the printing press foreclosed on some of that frontier; that's true. But it also created new avenues for experimentation by broadening the role of the author. The authorial role wasn't only a way to identify yourself but also an opportunity to create a *new* self. (Put another way: imagine you're deciding on a username for a website. Are you announcing yourself, or are you creating a new entity—a 'user'—by naming it?)

In the early days of the printing press, pseudonymity was standard. It was so standard, in fact, that England tried to institute what today we might call a "real name policy" in 1637. Tellingly, it was abolished by 1641. At this time, and for hundreds of years, the printed word wasn't a passport for social capital; it wasn't a magnet for status. It was a social laboratory.

Names were powerful—they were part of the work. It informed how the work was read. You could compartmentalize your identity. You could write a story about a little girl who falls down the rabbit hole and have it be separate from your identity as a mathematician. You could glorify God through song—as was the case with *Amazing Grace*—and not have your own name detract from the work. You could play pranks; you could evade attention or gain more attention; you could play a game. The name of the author was part of the work.

Not every work was pseudonymous, it should go without saying. But the practice occupied a much more prominent place in the Western world than is appreciated—it was never an undisputed fact that just because a text said it was written by someone, it was.

The Oxfordian Adventure

Hank Whittemore

Imagine a member of the government who realizes that the man in charge is a criminal, in fact, a murderer, and that those around him are just sycophants who obey him even though they know better.

Well, that's what goes on for Hamlet, the prince, in Shakespeare's great tragedy at the royal court of Denmark. So, what this tragic character does—and it's the dramatic turning point—is bring in a company of actors and write some new lines for a play that they'll be performing at court – a play to "catch the conscience" of the king by exposing the lies. From then on, because he has publicly revealed the truth, Hamlet knows his life is in danger.

I was in that play in college and loved how the prince used words to expose and make fun of those hypocrites and liars at the court. I understudied the role and for years afterward I walked around reciting Hamlet's soliloquies, those thoughts and feelings expressed when he was alone on stage.

And at one point, I did begin to wonder what kind of a man William Shakespeare must have been. I was writing a play and it occurred to me to find out what I could about Shakespeare's creative process. How was he able to write such great dialogue for nobles and kings and queens? How did he use his imagination with such confidence and power?

I read through several biographies, but there was no such information. Those books talked about the plays and playhouses, the costumes, London, the population, the food, the plague, all of that, but the man himself was missing. He never received a letter—never wrote one, either–and no one ever recorded speaking with him or even seeing him in the street. He was invisible.

Then later I was shocked to learn about a theory that some other guy was using "William Shakespeare" as a pen name! I couldn't believe it. So, I went to the library, and here on the shelves were all these books about the "authorship mystery," but I had never heard of it! I was stunned. I had studied theater and plays and literature in college, but not one professor or director had ever mentioned that the greatest writer of the English language might be unknown.

The most persuasive books argued that the real author was, in fact, a high-ranking nobleman at the royal court of Elizabeth the First: Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, who, like Hamlet, wrote plays to catch the conscience of the monarch and expose the sycophants around her. Oxford and the Queen were very intimate; there is evidence that they may have been lovers. She knew he was a genius and even allowed (and encouraged) him to bring his plays (often his satirical comedies) to court—knowing he'd be stirring up trouble.

It was like *Saturday Night Live* at the palace! And she enjoyed watching her courtiers react to being exposed and lampooned.

Well, that was another shock—a real live Hamlet figure at the English court!

I kept looking deeper into Oxford's world, but there was no answer to *why* he almost literally disappeared from history. According to the surviving documents, he had led one of the most amazing, full lives of that time, or of any time, but in the history books he was virtually missing. Hamlet famously says there's "something rotten in Denmark," but there was also something rotten in the books on Shakespeare.

It turned out that a big part of Oxford's greatness as Shakespeare is that, like other great writers, he drew upon his own life experience and transformed it. The greatness comes from the deepest kind of personal honesty and revelation. And this is especially true in the play of Hamlet, where the author speaks in his most autobiographical-sounding voice, as if sharing his thoughts from the depths of his own mind and heart. At the end, when the prince is dying, it appears the author himself is crying out about his "wounded name" and predicting that "things standing thus unknown shall I leave behind me."

Hamlet begs his dear friend Horatio to "draw thy breath in pain to tell my story." To me, it was Edward de Vere speaking and begging for his own "story" to be told. So, I continued traveling on the path to find his story; and at some point, I narrowed the trail to the personal sonnets, to the 154 numbered verses published five years after the Earl's death in 1604 but quickly suppressed.

The government had full power of censorship, suppression, destruction of books. Out of more than a thousand copies of the Sonnets that were printed, only thirteen remained underground, probably tucked away in the private libraries of aristocrats' estates. These copies remained out of sight for more than a hundred years, more than a full century, until one of them was discovered.

In the Sonnets the Earl of Oxford speaks, like Hamlet, using the personal pronoun "I" to reveal his own thoughts and emotions. And, again like Hamlet, he cries out that his name, his identity, will be erased from history. For example:

"My name be buried where my body is" – Sonnet 72

"I, once gone, to all the world must die" – Sonnet 81

But the Shakespeare name was popular in its own time and certainly that name never died to all the world! Just the opposite! The true author must be speaking about his own name, his real name, and "William Shakespeare" must be his pen name or pseudonym.

Edward de Vere was identified as “Shakespeare” in 1920; now, after more than a century, Oxfordians have uncovered tons of fascinating information about him; but the adventure is far from over. (For one thing, most of the world still believes the myth of the Stratford man.) Now there’s even more need for lovers of the truth to look into the life of that Hamlet-like, elusive, real-life figure at the Elizabethan royal court.

Welcome all to this great Oxfordian adventure!

Macbeth and Hamlet

Edward Fairfax

Hamlet and *Macbeth* form a dyad: both are about two men of uncommon excellence who do and do not want to rule, who are trapped in the yoke of Christianity and paganism. It's the same problem, from opposite perspectives.

Macbeth is as much as attached to glory as Hamlet is detached from what is his own; their disproportionality is captured by the fact that neither of them have children. Neither one of them are properly embedded in their societies. Both dwell in an intermediary place between Christianity and paganism. Norway evokes the uncomplicated heroic world for both. They witness something supernatural element that is seen by others. These catalysts of action are mere representations of their interiority.

But they are not the same play. Macbeth is perfectly obscure to himself: his discourse on the bloody instructions perfectly reveals what will happen, but his reason finds no recipient in his hardened spirit that will yet be troubled by bad conscience. His lack of self-knowledge drives him crazy. He is a soldier, a man of war. His virtue is his bravery. Bravery is the overcoming of fear. He is not unique in Scotland. Siward and Macduff are men of war like him. Unlike them he lacks children, therefore he allows himself to act unlike himself, where they keep true to themselves. Because he lacks

self-knowledge, he forgoes a contest of arms at daylight—victory or death with good conscience like Cawdor—he resorts to subterranean means. He cannot keep by legitimacy what he acquired through intrigue; he is haunted by bad conscience, until he becomes brave Macbeth again when Macduff confronts him at last. Just before, he was at his lowest moment. He included the words tomorrow and yesterday, but did not include the word today. Only men with good consciences can live for today. Christ and Achilles are one in this regard.

Macbeth asks his assassins whether they are so "gospelled" that they will not kill their enemy, to which they answer: "we are men." The "good news" of the ultimate accounting of morality is not manly. This gospel is the "womanly defense" of Lady Macduff, while to be a man is to slaughter those who do you wrong. Macbeth goes on to say men who revenge themselves are of a different natural order than the ones that would turn the other cheek. The ultimate ungospelled hero is Achilles: the climax of the Iliad is him showing compassion to Priam. Macbeth becomes more cruel; Achilles only has the pain of anger, then of grief, but completely untroubled by bad conscience. Macbeth slaughters women and children against his ideals yet cannot confess to the discordance; soldiers win honor by defeating other soldiers, not by killing the defenseless, which Macbeth must do to pursue security in his rule. Achilles did not want a glorious life and a long one, he had contempt for security. But for Macbeth: "To be thus is nothing,/But to be safely thus." That he has no posterity gnaws at him. He does not get a substitute for losing his eternal soul. How would Achilles, for whom there is no common enemy mankind, respond? He might scoff: "Slaves might think like that, not me." And all of this is caused by the parody of "the good news" from the demonic sisters. Good news of salvation is replaced with the demonic good news of kingship without heredity or security.

Macbeth acts so single-mindedly that he destroys what made him, until the moment where he rallies back to his true nature. But Hamlet is so perplexed by bad conscience that

he will act every way except to go right at his purpose. He is unlike Laertes who goes straight to avenge his father, who would cut throats in a church. To kill is not enough justice for Hamlet, he must damn as well. He causes agitation to Claudius by naming the killer in the play-within-the-play to be the king's nephew instead of brother, he announces to everyone that he intends to kill his uncle. Yet he delays, because he is clear to himself, his coherent discourse saps vitality from the purpose he commits himself to because he cannot possess good conscience to act in a world that he knows to be worthless. He will only indirectly massacre the palace. If Hamlet was to be the man his father is, he would be Fortinbras. But Hamlet must value his understanding that sees the paltriness of the world above the excellences he can admire in his father and Fortinbras. Hamlet could not find quarrel in a straw, or in good conscience start a bloodshed for an eggshell. The drive to do justice is no good when you have no attachment to the thing you want to do good by. He dislikes Denmark's customs. He declares himself to be Hamlet the Dane, which means Hamlet the king of Denmark, but his heart is not in it. He does not merely claim honors for himself while despising them as a great-souled man would. Christian perspective also calls the world itself wormwood.

Banquo's ghost is Macbeth's guilt of not behaving like a soldier, which is his breeding. He says: "when the brains were out, the man would die…but now they rise again." They rise again, now, because of the good news Christianity brings. He names beasts against which his firm nerves shall never tremble; but not failing his warlike virtue! It is acting unlike a warrior that unmans Macbeth. He is not a mere pagan warrior. He sees the great Romans, who commit suicide rather than live in dishonor, as fools. Macbeth has been gospelled, which reveals this world and its transitory history to be full of vanity.

Macduff is a true soldier like Macbeth, but where Macbeth says damns the one whose courage would fail, Macduff says if Macbeth escapes "Heaven forgive him." That is, if Macbeth manages to prove stronger than Macduff, then his

sins should be forgiven. Macduff only prays to meet Macbeth, he does not pray to overcome him. The contest must be without help from heaven. Macbeth desires a guarantee of total success, while Macduff wants but a test. This is the ideal of the gospelled soldier. The adversary of Macbeth proves to be not Malcolm but Macduff. Macduff was equally valorous in battle near Fife against Cawdor, as Macbeth was in the battle near Forres against Macdonald. Siward is relieved to learn that his son died facing the enemy. Macduff refuses to cry for his wife and children. Rule of bravery without subordination to the whole comes at the price of incoherence for Macbeth. Macbeth erred when he desired ruling before the ideal of soldiering, he betrayed who he was. Siward and Macduff did not hanker after something they were not suited for. They remained valiant and hardy men of war to the end. Had Macbeth self-clarity, he could have answered his wife's appeal to his courage: that being king, or ruling, does not belong solely to courage.

Macbeth chooses ambition over his virtue when ambition and virtue diverge; Hamlet must use his abilities to do justice in service of something he sees as worthless. The king is the fount of justice, and Hamlet "lacks advancement" from prince to king. But to do justice, he must choose what the value of justice is. Were he like Pyrrhus, he would be satisfied to kill Claudius and feel no need for his damnation; were he an uncomplicated Christian, he would pray for Claudius' salvation and say: vengeance is the Lord's. But states can't be governed with only paternosters in hand. Hamlet chooses nothing until Claudius chooses for him. This choice breaks the commandment the Ghost gave to Hamlet; his mother dies without necessity.

His last words are that he be remembered. This detail does not exist in Saxo Grammaticus. It parallels Beowulf. Back then Beowulf only existed in one manuscript copy, owned by Laurence Nowell, the antiquarian and Anglo-Saxon language pioneer. Sir William Cecil was his patron. De Vere, Cecil's ward, was tutored by him.

De Vere Anon

Jo Westerman

Trust the plan. Oxfordians in control.—V

In 1807, Thomas Bowdler published the first edition of *The Family Shakespeare*, a version of the plays in which "those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read in a family." See, for example, Bowdler's version of Othello I.1.121, "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs," which becomes, "Your daughter and the Moor are now together." This is, of course, from whence we get the term "Bowdlerize," the act of expurgating text toward ends of acceptability. Bowdler's name has become synonymous with the little lies we tell children, imbeciles, and anyone else considered too intellectually fragile to deal with the truth. We Bowdlerize when we spare Cinderella's stepsisters from having their eyes gauged out by doves, or allow Ariel her happy ending instead of turning her into sea foam.

How ironic, then, that discovering the Oxfordian case feels just like that moment in early adolescence when one first figures out that Zeus didn't disguise himself as a swan in order to simply "lay down next to" Leda. Bowdler Bowdlerized the Shakespeare corpus, but the Shakespeare corpse—the man who wrote the works—was Bowdlerized before Bowdler.

The Stratfordian narrative we've been fed since childhood is, in many ways, the version that is more "appropriate," even "safer," especially when the preservation of the Anglo-American liberal order is at stake. Maintaining our faith that the

greatest achievements of the English language were written by a commoner, a working-man, *feels* far better than to consider that these courtly and humanist works were in fact written by, well, a courtier and humanist. An elite Shakespeare is, in short, uncomfortable. To modern sensibilities, this theory strikes one as classist and even anti-democratic.

Is it classist, in fact, to acknowledge the realities of class—that an aristocrat well-versed in classical literature and biblical hermeneutics is more likely to be equipped with the knowledge and experience that makes "Shakespeare" than is a (likely illiterate) stage manager? Or is the Stratfordian story yet another version of the great Romantic lie of the modern age, that of the upwardly-mobile bourgeois who bootstraps his way onto the world-historical stage?

Indeed, in the contrasting figure of De Vere we see the very embodiment of elitism: of inherited titles, courtly intrigues, and a body of knowledge plainly inaccessible to those below him. And perhaps the most prominent is De Vere's position in the world of pseudonymity, intelligence, and encryption—in short, the world of *conspiracy*. In fact, insofar as conspiracy is the act of colluding in secret against the interests of another party, all elite activity can, to an extent, be considered conspiracy—particularly if you believe elite interests to be inherently opposed to those outside their circles.

What we see in Shakespeare's works, then, is at once the revelation of the secrets of the elite by a very member of this elite, and an elaborate joke played on both courtiers and commoners alike. In this sense, De Vere-*qua*-Shakespeare's closest living analogue is not a writer, artist, or (God forbid) academic, but the elusive and polarizing figure of Q. The validity of the QAnon conspiracy isn't of interest here, but rather the mythos of Q's identity: that of an anonymized elite-against-elites who encodes his message in language that can only be described as poetic.

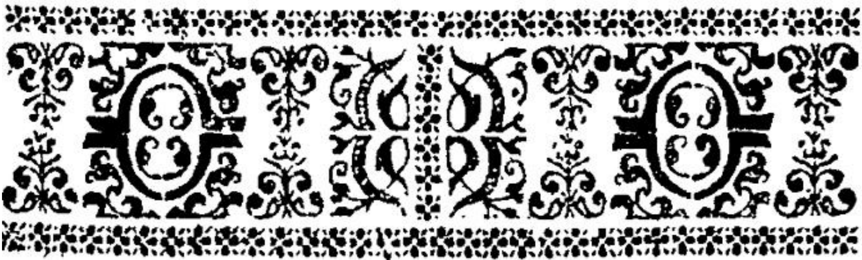
Considering the contentious and polarizing atmosphere surrounding Q and his followers, it's worth remembering that conspiracy in itself is not exclusively aligned on the left or the

right. Right wingers may believe that there's a child sex trafficking ring being run out of a pizza shop in DC, but left wingers believe that the CIA started the crack epidemic (and on this point they happen to be correct). To be a "conspiracy theorist" does not condemn one to a certain set of political views.

But of course conspiracy theorizing *is* a political act, as conspiracies, at their core, are exclusively concerned with questions of power: who wields power, and who merely appears to? What are the stories we tell that reinforce power, and how much are these stories representative of the truth?

Although conspiracy theorizing is non-partisan, in recent years it has become standard to associate this act with those factions of the right we collectively consider to be beyond the pale. In fact, these days it isn't very often one hears the term "conspiracy theorist" not preceded by the qualifier, "right-wing". In the eyes of many, to engage with conspiracies makes one not merely eccentric or nuts, but dangerous and morally suspect.

In Bowdler's corseted time as in ours, ideas of social acceptability and propriety shape the very rules of engagement for cultural and political critique. Even asking a question as seemingly innocuous as "who wrote the works attributed to Shakespeare?" can open one to judgment and condemnation. Such reaction is not to be feared, however; it is merely a sign that we are on the right track.



The Return of the Earl

Curtis Yarvin

Editor's Note: This essay is also accessible (with hyperlinks) on graymirror.substack.com.

Most writers of Oxfordiana (Joe Sobran being a notable exception) are shy about the political and historical implications of the Oxford theory of Shakespeare authorship. Actually—Oxford unlocks the whole political story of the last half-millennium.

Yes. really. But… let's start with a summary.

The Case for Oxford

The positive case for Oxford as the real Shakespeare is too long, and too easy to find. Let me make a narrow case, and mention the one detail that convinced me the most.

It is the Earl of Oxford's poetry, which reads as Shakespeare juvenilia. Oxford is not as good as Shakespeare. He it still ridding himself of awkward, precious embroideries. But by sometime before 1576—in his 20s—he can produce premium content like:

> Is he god of peace or war?
>
> What be his arms? What is his might?
>
> His war is peace, his peace is war;
>
> Each grief of his is but delight;
>
> His bitter ball is sugared bliss.
>
> What be his gifts? How doth he pay?
>
> When is he seen? Or how conceived?
>
> Sweet dreams in sleep, new thoughts in day,
>
> Beholding eyes, in mind received;
>
> A god that rules and yet obeys.

This is not just in the general style of Shakespeare, but has the mastery of rhythmic variation that we see only in Shakespeare. Look at the way he plays with the caesura. In the shower, try singing these stanzas to yourself in the style of the Beastie Boys. You can do this with a lot of Shakespeare. With almost anyone else from the period it would be either prosy or sing-songy. But Shakespeare often just *rocks*.

Now: it is a documented historical fact that the author of these lines lived for at least 28 years after writing them. What did he write in the next three decades? A mystery. As the Britannica, not an Oxfordian source, puts it:

> It has therefore been suggested that the [1000-pound, ie, huge] annuity may have been granted for his services in maintaining a company of actors (Oxford's Men, from 1580) and that the obscurity of his later life is to be explained by his immersion in literary pursuits. He was indeed a notable patron of writers, and numerous books were dedicated to him, including ones by Robert Greene and Anthony Munday. He also employed John Lyly, the author of the novel Euphues, as his secretary for many years and gave the lease of Blackfriars Theatre to him.

The Oxford theory of Shakespeare is that the Shakespeare corpus was written by a brilliant, super-educated poet (the quality and intensity of classical education given to Oxford, one of the highest nobles in the realm, is not available anywhere today), who for the last quarter of the 16th century was "immersed in literary pursuits," yet who has no known literary output for that period.

This is like hearing a bark and assuming that it was produced by a dog. Also, there is a dog around the corner, which is known to bark. I also do a pretty good bark. Maybe I snuck up next to the dog, and barked. Or maybe the dog barked.

How did a rural bumpkin who could barely sign his name write Shakespeare's plays? Also a mystery—see below. These mysteries fit as nicely as the outlines of Africa and South America. (Most people don't know that plate tectonics was a crackpot theory between 1912, when it was invented, and the mid-1960s.)

The Case Against Stratford

More complicated is the negative case for William Shaksper of Stratford (who used many different spellings, but this is a standard disambiguation) as *not* Shakespeare. (Two excellent works from this perspective are Mark Twain and George Greenwood). Once you are looking for someone else, it is easy to find Oxford. But why look?

For readers unfamiliar with the identification of the true author of the Shakespeare corpus by J. Thomas Looney (pronounced "Loaney") in 1920, here is a brief summary. Suppose a corpus of witty, erudite academic novels, set in an unnamed Ivy League English department, is published under the name of an illiterate immigrant from Ghana, who sells sunglasses on a blanket on the street in Morningside Heights.

In this case, it would take an enormous mental density not to suspect a literary hoax. Without *any* other evidence, a hoax is more probable than the official story, because the offi-

cial story is so improbable. The best way to construct a plausible story is to find the simplest, most banal reality that could underlie the documentary facts.

For example, we might hazard a guess that the real author of the academic novels is an English professor, and the miraculous Ghanaian (who really exists) is his lover. Perhaps there is some practical reason to publish under this false name. The professor does not want to be outed as lampooning his colleague; the Ghanaian is eligible for affirmative action; etc.

Doctors say: when you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras. (The principle is specific to the milieu; on the Serengeti, think zebras, not horses.) The zebra is the theory that an unschooled immigrant, with an accent thicker than cream cheese, deconstructed the Columbia English department. The horse is the narrative above. We generally think of "conspiracy theories" as zebras. In some cases, they are horses. By the way, the Elizabethan era is a golden age of literary hoaxes—if it is even a "hoax" when someone tweets under a handle that isn't, like, their *actual* name.

From direct documentary evidence, we have a clear and simple narrative of William Shaksper of Stratford. His signatures are those of a semi-literate man from the lower middle class, to which he belonged. (His daughter Judith signed her name *with a mark*.) Fleeing a bad marriage, he ran away to London, where his rustic dialect was barely comprehensible, he got into the theater business. He found work as a stagehand, then became an actor, then ended up as what we would now call a producer. Liking money, he branched out in his business career and became a dealer in malt and wool.

Hearing that this individual wrote the plays and sonnets is a zebra. It is like hearing a cat bark. Something seems wrong. Therefore, we think again from first principles.

When we read the Shakespeare corpus through a veil of ignorance, seeking Bayesian priors, our first goal is to identify the genre of the work. We quickly identify it as Elizabethan poetry—specifically, Elizabethan court poetry.

For example, a “comp” (as realtors put it) for Shakespeare, at least as a poet, are the sonnets of Sir Philip Sidney—whom Wikipedia describes as “the finest Elizabethan sonneteer after Shakespeare.” Perhaps a similar corpus has a similar author—this would be a horse. At least, we know an illiterate Ghanaian did not write Arcadia.

Here is a good long-form biography of Sidney. Compare it to the documented life of Shaksper. Now compare the sunglasses vendor’s CV to the English professor’s. (Kids: if you’re classy you don’t have a resume, you have a CV.)

The Elizabethans had climbers; Ben Jonson was one. Sidney himself was something of a climber; his lineage was nowhere near as illustrious as Oxford’s. The Elizabethans had climbers—but not invisible or reclusive climbers. J.D. Salinger was not a thing. You did not submit your scripts to the Globe Theater with a stamped, self-addressed envelope. A climber of Shakespearean proportions would leave a smoking trail in the documentary record—as both Sidney and Jonson did.

What is the documentary evidence for the identification of Shakespeare as Shaksper? We find exactly one unambiguous source: the preface to the First Folio, printed under the names of two other actors. London at the turn of the 17th century was not full of barista actors writing screenplays in the attic. Acting was a menial trade. Writing was an aristocratic hobby. Maybe your Mexican landscaper plays polo. What are the odds? Horses, zebras. Maybe Ben Jonson, who wrote the inscription, also wrote the preface. It kind of sounds like him. Suppose this one document is a hoax? This is all we need.

On Hypothetical Inference

What is the evidence *against* Oxford?

Oxford—whose biography is so similar to Sidney’s that they competed for the same woman—died in 1604. Many of the plays are “dated” after 1604—I say “dated” because all Shakespeare dates are a nebulous tissue of hypothetical infer-

ence.

For example, *The Tempest* has a shipwreck. This must refer to a certain famous shipwreck narrative, which happened after 1604. (Looney himself is fooled by this one, and tries to argue *The Tempest* out of the Shakespeare canon. It takes only the slightest familiarity with Oxford's biography to see that Hamlet is the young Oxford, Prospero the old.) Needless to say, the 16th century is full of shipwrecks, etc.

Conclusion: the dates, like most of "Shakespeare's biography," are an inferential tissue of fancy. In Twain's words:

All the rest of his vast history, as furnished by the biographers, is built up, course upon course, of guesses, inferences, theories, conjectures—an Eiffel Tower of artificialities rising sky-high from a very flat and very thin foundation of inconsequential facts.

Without clear facts, we have to infer. We should infer horses, not zebras. This story is missing one detail: how did Oxford come to use Shakespeare's name? How were the two associated?

It *is* a pretty name. Perhaps Shaksper's first London job was not as a stagehand—but an older profession, one often associated with the stage. Oxford, his patron, needed a Twitter handle… and chose one that would be a ribald in-joke to everyone he knew.

And as Shaksper's acting/producing career advanced, the joke only got better. Ascribing the plays to this uncouth, successful bumpkin, who everyone knew and laughed at (he is probably Ben Jonson's Sogliardo), and who had started his career as a rentboy, was utterly hilarious. Unfortunately, the world spent the next four hundred years believing the joke.

Yes, you heard this "rentboy theory of Shakespeare" here first. I admit that I have no evidence for it. I also have no evidence that Shaksper even went to school. But such is the real story, or something like it—I think. I see no more probable narrative. (For a good life of Oxford as Shakespeare, without

the rentboy part, see Mark Anderson.)

But—what does it *mean*?

Oxford, the Reactionary

Most would tell you that it means nothing. Given Conquest's law—"everyone is reactionary on the subjects they understand"—many adopt a craven, but all too human, corollary. After taking a bold stance in their own specialty, they have no stomach for any other fight.

Reactionary enlightenment in one field should cast Bayesian doubt on other fields. Instead, local enlightenment reinforces global ignorance. Logically, the specialist should reason that if his own field, which he knows closely, is corrupt, other fields which he cannot examine in detail may be corrupt as well.

But emotionally, the cost of a *general* dissidence far exceeds the value of extending the inference. The sweet spot is general compliance, local dissidence. So Oxfordians are at great pains to deny any hint of reactionary sympathies. Instead of the Oxford theory being the keystone to the story of the last half-millennium, it is a literary curiosity.

Even for Oxfordians, it remains possible to think of Shakespeare as somehow, like, a *democrat*. (Bear in mind that in the English political lexicon, the word "democracy" was considered utterly cursed, more or less universally, right up to the 19th century.)

In the literary Piltdown that is Shaksper of Stratford, every clue in the corny rustic romance of the country genius is a false lead pointing in the democratic direction. Once we cleanse our brains of this cheese, we notice that democratic themes are virtually absent in Shakespeare.

Strangely absent, in fact—since the idea of all men being created equal is, uh, obvious. Also, uh, Christian. Might the writer of the Shakespeare canon have had an *aversion* to dem-

ocratic thinking?

Strange, for a climber. A climber would seem unlikely to write:

When that the general is not like the hive
To whom the foragers shall all repair,
What honey is expected? Degree being vizarded [hidden],
The unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask.
The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre
Observe degree, priority and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other; whose medicinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,
And posts, like the commandment of a king,
Sans cheque to good and bad: but when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents! what mutiny!
What raging of the sea! shaking of earth!
Commotion in the winds! frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixure! O, when degree is shaked,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,

Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,

Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,

The primogenitive and due of birth,

Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,

But by degree, stand in authentic place?

Take but degree away, untune that string,

And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets

In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters

Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores

And make a sop of all this solid globe:

Strength should be lord of imbecility,

And the rude son should strike his father dead:

Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,

Between whose endless jar justice resides,

Should lose their names, and so should justice too.

Then every thing includes itself in power,

Power into will, will into appetite;

And appetite, an universal wolf,

So doubly seconded with will and power,

Must make perforce an universal prey,

And last eat up himself.

Incredibly based, right? An illiterate immigrant from Ghana *definitely* wrote that. (Also, look at the variation in rhythm—much more complicated than in the Oxfordian rap above, but showing the same *kind* of skill.)

Shakespeare is indeed full of explicitly anti-democratic rhetoric. *Coriolanus* is an anti-democratic play. In *Henry VI*

there is zero sympathy for the peasant rebel, Jack Cade. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare basically *invents* racism. Etc.

Perhaps the most interesting clew in the corpus is a tossed-off line in *Twelfth Night*:

> I had as lief be a Brownist as a politician.

We know what a politician is. It's a democracy thing. Shakespeare didn't like it. You don't either. That's because you're based too.

But what is a Brownist? Wikipedia to the rescue:

> The Brownists were a group of English Dissenters or early Separatists from the Church of England. They were named after Robert Browne, who was born at Tolethorpe Hall in Rutland, England, in the 1550s. A majority of the Separatists aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620 were Brownists, and indeed the Pilgrims were known into the 20th century as the Brownist Emigration.

That's right: *Shakespeare hates America*. That's how reactionary he is.

Shakespeare is *two* people. One is a far-right America-hater, like Putin, Saddam, or George III. (Actually, Elizabeth I makes George III look like Deepak Chopra.) The other is a rentboy. Now, this is what Al Gore meant by "an inconvenient truth."

Ok, sure. But what does it *mean*?

The Meaning of Oxford

The meaning of Oxford is that under Elizabeth, *monarchy works*.

Elizabethan court poetry is Elizabethan poetry. Imagine if Trump was President, and all the best novels and films and poems in the country were produced by *members of the Trump administration*—or at least, the Trump entourage.

Is there a great physicist in the country? Trump will invite him on the Trump plane. Trump will send him Trumpbux. Trump will appoint him to cool gigs and stuff.

In fact, if you are a physicist, in this alternate Trumpworld, you don't measure your career by awards and titles you got from some alphabet-soup agency. Succeeding in physics, or poetry, or painting, is measured in one way: *how close you get to Trump*.

(JFK, of course, had a bit of this energy going on. If you want libs to dig monarchy, after you talk about FDR, talk about the Kennedys.)

And in this imaginary world, this success metric *works*. In a working monarchy, the monarch is the center of everything awesome. All awesome people rise toward the court, which is simply a fancy-dress ritual for the coolest, most important people in the country. "Office and custom, in all line of order."

In our fallen democratic world, we refuse to process this frame. We insist that our kings and queens, if we still have them, be what we made them: ceremonial fops, crowned Kardashians, normal people in abnormal clothing. And when we take the magic of their power away—the prophecy fulfills itself.

In Shakespeare himself—the writer, not the rube—we see a clear awareness of the ripeness of the age, the fragility of Elizabethan excellence. Already in the early 17th century, the Jacobean age is a diminished version of the Elizabethan. There is simply no Jacobean Shakespeare—

And already, the democratic waters begin to swirl beneath the weak, imported king. Elizabeth could control the religious ferments of the 16th century, which had tired the English of civic strife. In the 17th century, the strife returned in a new, more political form, and utterly smashed the delicate, beautiful fishbowl of the Tudor-Stuart court. Anglo-American culture has never fully recovered—and there has never been a talent as great as Shakespeare.

The Puritans—the Brownists—closed the theaters for a whole generation. But paper endures. After the civil wars, these amazing plays still existed and still could be performed. And they were—albeit often butchered to be cornier and pornier.

But after the civil wars, the democratic legendarium had penetrated into the Anglo-American mind. The kitschy romantic idea of a rustic natural genius, "warbling his native woodnotes wild," no longer seemed like the ridiculous joke that Shakespeare's contemporaries would have read it as.

And today the joke is still read as fact… for now.

The Return of the Earl

Many people feel that if they write enough books and essays, if they make enough videos and podcasts, they can carry the day for the lost king of the English language, and restore the Earl to the place of Master Apis Lapis that he deserves forever.

Unfortunately, this is not possible. If it was ever possible, it was possible a hundred years ago. It was not possible a hundred years ago, so it is pretty impossible now.

The market for ideas is what machine-learning nerds call an optimization landscape. Imagine you are in a landscape of rolling hills. Your goal is to find the highest point in the landscape. Solution: wherever you are, walk uphill. At the top of the hill, stop.

But wait: you might be able to go downhill, then uphill again, to get to a higher hill. You might be trapped in what we call a "local maximum."

Optimization systems will often include techniques for agitating the system to leap out of local maxima. But there is always a limit to these techniques.

If Shakespeare was Oxford, everything written about Shakespeare as Stratford is more or less nonsense. An entire

field has to meme itself out of existence. Fields just don't do that—not when there is no one above the field in charge of it. They cannot leap out of the local maximum of their own existence. The leap is too great.

We live in an oligarchy of prestigious institutions that is full of super-smart people. But these institutions cannot change their minds. They cannot leap this far. They operate by process, and there is no process for any such leap.

There is no process for displacing the Stratfordian theory of Shakespeare. There is no process for displacing the amyloid theory of Alzheimer's. There is no process for displacing string theory. There is no process for displacing the guilty-looking bat virus hunters. Or rather, there *is* a process—and that process runs straight through the Stratfordians, amyloidists, string theorists, and bat virologists.

Thomas Carlyle once said of the British Foreign Office that there was no remedy for it but to set a live coal under it. Alas, this was not done. 65 years later, it set up WWI.

The Laser

How can four impossible problems be easier to solve than one?

If all four problems have the same solution, they are the same problem. All the energy being used to solve the individual problems, which are not actually the real problem but just symptoms of it, can be focused on the actual problem upstream.

The problem is not to change the Foreign Office's policy in the Crimea. The problem is to set a live coal (metaphorically speaking) under the Foreign Office. As we broaden the set of downstream symptoms of the actual problem, we broaden the constituency of actors who should be attacking the actual problem—instead of the symptoms.

Attacking the symptoms is a flashlight. Attacking the problem is a laser. In this case, the problem is—the whole regime.

When we picture the level of power that it would take to change all the high-school English textbooks in America to treat Oxfordian authorship as an established fact, we are simply picturing absolute power—or absolute regime change. At this level of power, there is nothing that does *not* change.

An example: regime change in Germany in 1945. There was no trace of National Socialist ideology in the school textbooks by ‘46. The level of power needed to enforce Oxford as Shakespeare is sovereign power—the power of absolute regime change, the power of the Allied occupation government of Germany.

Of course, our regime thinks it is eternal and permanent. So did the Third Reich. So has every other regime since the dawn of time—such is the definition of a regime. Dynasties tend to outlast constitutions; and yet dynasties fall. What Oxford teaches us is that we are not helpless; the problem is perfectly solvable; and history isn’t over.

Melodrama and the Authorship Question

Sibyl Yarvin

In Shakespeare, we see an admiration for human life. A worship of people, of the spirit that makes us human. His best characters are like people you might meet today, vibrant and leaping off the page. Scholars say Shakespeare is universal, and while that is utter nonsense, it's true that he's excellent at constructing personalities and making his characters feel real. He feels the beauty in life and conjures up characters that reflect that, the array of people in the world. This is one of the reasons that over a billion people alive today have at least heard of something he's written. He was wonderful at capturing the distinctions of life and existence. But he was also incredibly extra.

In Shakespeare scholarship, one often runs across the idea of Shakespeare as a sort of saintly figure, preaching to his fellow masses over beers with the merry Ben Jonson at the Mermaid Tavern, swift and jolly, incredibly intelligent yet a normal person just like you, a high schooler who doesn't give a damn yet who is in this English class anyway! This method usually went hand in hand with the style Mark Twain so gracefully referred to using the "brontosaur" metaphor. Now he is perceived in a much more ironic fashion, of course, the sympathetic but flawed father and husband, the struggling writer penning plays to make a few cents, a champion of the proletariat, and all the while being the relatable middle class dad,

nothing really special or unique about him or his personality, his family or anything, because he's just like everyone else. Nothing about this personality is really very interesting, but then again, isn't it ironic that such a boring guy wrote *Romeo and Juliet*?

Never mind the long speeches damning social climbers in the plays, which Shaksper very much was by any account, if you read really any of the sonnets it is perfectly clear that this interpretation is so wrong as to almost be offensive to the idea of wrongness. "The old world is falling around my feet" is a very real theme, as is the undercurrent I label "woe is Shakespeare." Note that Shakespeare was at least in his thirties when he wrote these, if not his forties. A little old to be wallowing in despair. But not for Shakespeare, oh no! Throughout the sonnets, Shakespeare has feelings that are poignant and that we should know about. He's broke and broken, nobody likes him, everybody hates him, nobody but The Fair Youth understands him. People are being mean to him for no reason. Everybody he loves has forsaken him. How dare The Fair Youth abandon him so. "Happy to have thy love, happy to die!" Shakespeare is incredibly melodramatic from start to finish of the sonnets, with lines such as "Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing", "Thy end is truth and beauty's doom and date," "Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all," "No longer mourn for me when I am dead," and "Then hate me when thou wilt, if ever now." If we take Hamlet, to give another example, as a reflection of the author's self, we find another case of Shakespeare's latent emo nature. Is anything really simple for Hamlet? Is he really understood by anyone? He, multiple times, revolts by using his caustic wit, and if not for his ennui, some actual progress might've happened in Denmark. Nobody gets Hamlet. Not even Hamlet really gets Hamlet. Many, oh many a time does he delve into a theatrical "woe is me" soliloquy. He's brilliant, of course. But aren't the brilliant people usually the most sensationalist ones?

In teenagers, these qualities also shine through. The taste for drama, the idealistic view of different lives, the quest for

beauty in the form of words. Every youth dreams of glorious lives, with the subconscious hope that the lives they dream of will one day be theirs. Teenagers naturally seek the poetry in things, the ennui and pure, raw beauty in life, mystical and spiraling like a surge of emotions to the heart, because they long to experience, to feel, to be a part of the world they see as so magical. The sensation of having these high ideals of poetry, delicacy, and beauty, and of idealizing aesthetic decadence, depravity, and vice, then to have those visions of a beautiful life of enlightenment and perfect moods where everything is floating on a wave of dreams, the dream world that teenagers wish they inhabited that will never be real. I am a teenager, so I know that taste for beautiful drama quite intimately. However, it is expected that most people will grow out of these predilections by the age of twenty-five or so. Shakespeare, no matter your beliefs about him, was at least thirty by the time he was writing the sonnets. Thirty. There are even allusions in there that make him out to be forty. If a man could in all sincerity write Sonnet 121 at age forty, what on earth was he like as a teenager?

Even if we look at the reality of Shaksper, not the myth, we don't see anything to indicate any great intelligence or romantic sense. He knocked up a girl eight years his senior when he was eighteen, then left her for London a few years later, leaving her to deal with infant twins and a young daughter. His dealings in London show a good sense for business, but not much else. Finally, he moves back to his hometown and becomes a grain hoarder. Nothing even remotely interesting happens to him in his poorly documented life. The idea of a man like him writing something as magical as Sonnet 73, as despairing as Sonnet 92, as elegant as Sonnet 53, is just preposterous. Never mind his class—every little detail in his measly biography goes against him having any poetic disposition whatsoever. It is a decidedly troubling sign for Strats (as I like to call them) that these two very distinct personalities do not line up. The presentation of the personality is what it is because the actual personality of Shaksper is what it is; which is to say, completely not Shakespearean. This is where the utterly

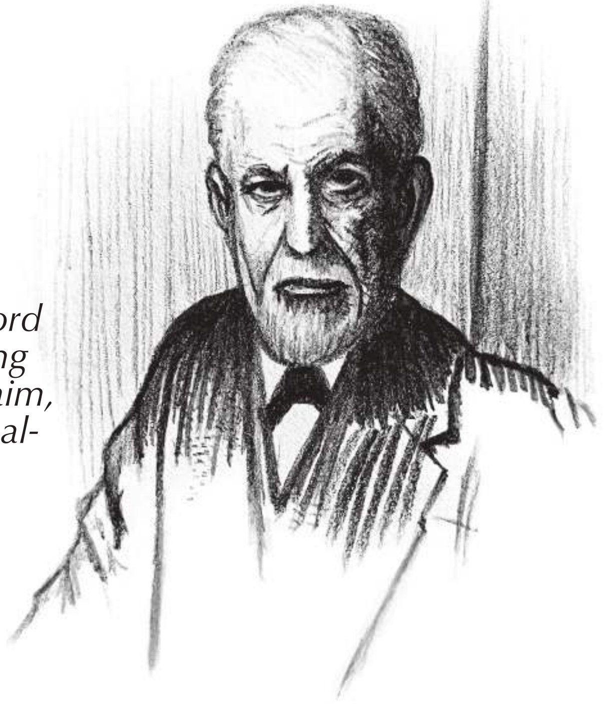
moronic idea that the sonnets are fictional stems from. Dear reader, if you actually have any idea of Elizabethan moral and literary standards, and have actually read the sonnets, then this 'theory' is clearly stupid. Unfortunately, certain scholars' daily prescriptions of bluepills seems to have incited them to hallucination. Yes, Stanley Wells, or Mr. "He's Totally Not An Aristocrat Despite The Massive Textual Evidence Pointing To The Fact That He Is," I'm talking about you.

Enter the young Earl of Oxford. By all accounts, a reckless, overdramatic Catholic? Utterly perfect for the character of Shakespeare. I dare you to read Sonnet 72 and disagree with me. Many people (I shudder to call them scholars, but that is the formal word, yes) have guessed at Shakespeare's Catholic sensibilities to…hilarious results. Shaksper? Living in Italy as a monk? To escape religious persecution as a recusant? Then coming back? Whoever thought that up deserves an A+ for creativity and then some. Oxford also got himself into a number of very bohemian scrapes over the years, like sponsoring multiple acting companies, spending all his money very quickly, running away from England to go party in Italy, and having an affair with a Maid of Honour. He had a quick temper and was prone to sulking, melodramatic conclusions (see: the Anne de Vere saga), and drunkenness. Someone who was a tranquil country bumpkin could not have penned the highly emotional, erudite, and classist works that are Shakespeare's, especially not in the Elizabethan era. It's just utterly obvious. Every little glimpse of Shakespeare that we get throughout the poems and plays shows a completely different man from Shaksper. Instead, they show a highly educated and sensitive nobleman with a Byronic nature and reactionary sensibilities. By all accounts and examples, this was Oxford.

The sonnets are by far the most personal work of Shakespeare's. As in, whether or not they were ever intended for publication is highly debatable. And melodrama is so core to them that even I have to stop occasionally and say, "yeah, right, Shakespeare, like it's really that bad." And when I, little miss "I'm Hamlet, woe is me, how dare you do this to me"

scoff at someone for being too dramatic, you know it's really serious. The only other example I can think of off the top of my head is Morrissey. These are the waters we are wading in. The sonnets are so personal that every word almost screams of Shakespeare himself. Each sonnet is like a mirror held up to his inner emotions, and boy are they turbulent. An incredible amount of the time Shakespeare's emotional maturity is suspiciously like that of a seventeen year old. This penchant for melancholia and sulking is one ingrained into Shakespeare, one that was with him throughout all walks of life. The idea that someone that dramatic was a grain hoarder in Warwickshire is just stupid. Every inch of Shaksper screams of a low level of engagement with the world and absolutely zero romanticism. It's plain wrong, that's what it is. Oxford, on the other hand, is historically attested to have had the mental state that is required to be able to write, say, Sonnet 30 in all earnestness.

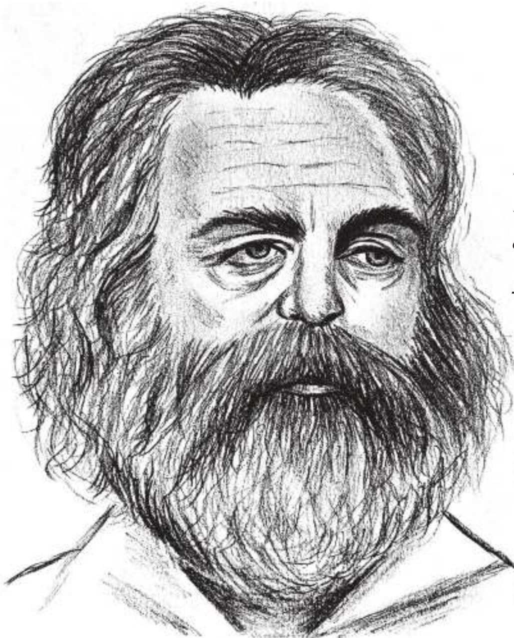
The memeification of Shakespeare as the dad of all dads is not only dumb, it also doesn't add anything to the works of Shakespeare. If anything, it takes away. When we ignore Shakespeare's poetic, dramatic disposition, we ignore a significant part of how he wrote those beautiful plays and poems, and who he was, diminishing the slivers of his personality we can find in his writing, as one can with all authors. Yes, I like the idea of melodramatic bohemian Shakespeare a lot because I am an, let's just say "artistic," fourteen year old girl. But it's also fairly plain to me that this is the case, especially in the sonnets. Shaksper was neither of those two things. Oxford was both. And when you are so bad at your job that you can't even recognize fundamental aspect of the person you are researching, so you must cope with stupid theories, then it is maybe time to get a new one.



The man from Stratford seems to have nothing at all to justify his claim, whereas Oxford has almost everything.

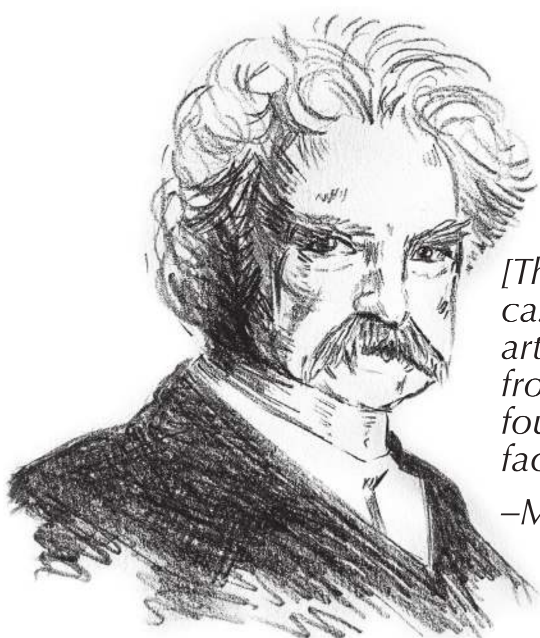
–Sigmund Freud

History's Great Oxfordians



I am firm against Shaksper. I mean the Avon man, the actor.

–Walt Whitman



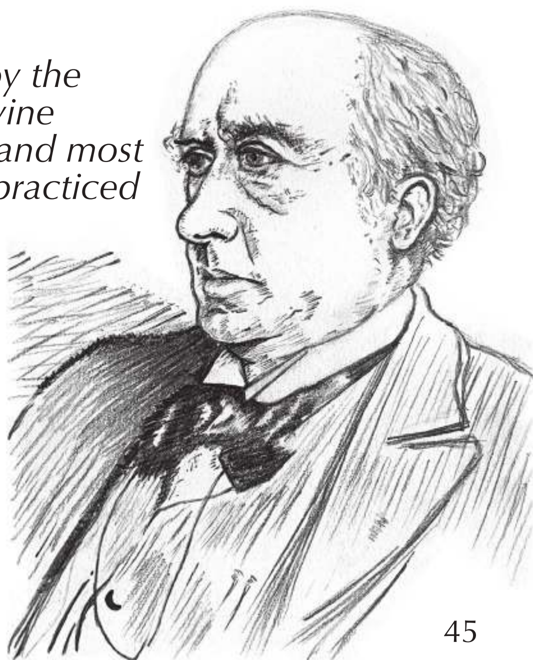
[The Stratfordian authorship case is] an Eiffel Tower of artificialities rising sky-high from a very flat and very thin foundation of inconsequential facts.

–Mark Twain

Illustrations by Irem Sarihan

I am sort of haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world.

–Henry James



Hermetic Shakespeare

Daniel Cowan

Editor's note: this essay is excerpted from a longer piece that can be read in its entirety (with additional notes and citations) at sixdaystheatre.substack.com

Shakespeare's Memory System

Researching the art of memory draws one toward the Renaissance. The first time I came across the idea of "memory palaces" was in a book on memory improvement that caught my eye in a college bookstore. It was focused on mnemonic techniques geared to modern memory competitions, where practitioners test their capacity for memorizing things like decks of shuffled cards or strings of random digits. The book was mostly devoid of historical context for the techniques it taught, though the author mentioned the classical Greek and Roman origins of the art (at least for the Western branch of this tradition.) I had no idea then that the subject could have any connection to the poetics of Shakespeare.

Experimenting with the exercises in the book, it became clear to me that these methods were not primarily a way of improving one's memory, so much as they were a means of translating abstract information into concrete, vivid, kinaesthetic mental images. In some ways it's akin to a code. Once you create imagery which brings to mind the information you

want to recall, you picture these mnemonic tokens throughout a space like a building or a garden, placed at intervals along a path that you can re-trace in your mind. This keeps the images and the information they represent in sequence. The art of memory works well as it harnesses the natural spatial and associative qualities of our faculty of memory, which we use constantly to navigate our daily lives, and employs this capacity in memorizing more rarefied things like concepts, arguments, words and numbers.

After getting a handle on how to use these techniques to remember sequences of words or numbers or playing cards, I was at something of a loss as to how I could use the art of memory in retaining valuable knowledge. I pictured myself storing away things like historical timelines, foreign language vocabularies, philosophical arguments and systems, or even practical knowledge related to the trades I wanted to learn. I figured my best bet would be to research how the art of memory had been used throughout history. I soon discovered Francis Yates's classic 1966 study, *The Art of Memory*.

Yates almost single-handedly revived the study of this mostly forgotten suite of mnemonic techniques, among both academics interested in the western rhetorical tradition and a popular audience of individuals interested in learning these methods for their own purposes. Along with other books of hers such as *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* and *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment,* she likewise sparked a more general resurgence in scholarly and popular interest in what might broadly be called 'hermeticism,' another area of study which had been neglected by historians for centuries.

As is the custom for art of memory texts, Yates begins with the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos, traditionally credited with founding the art. Alexandrian scholars would later classify Simonides as one of the "Nine Melic Poets," a group which included Sappho and Pindar, who were deemed the lyric poets most worthy of study (*melos* is Greek for "song".) Classical poets recited their verses at civic events and gatherings like weddings and funerals, a strong memory was vital to their

craft. Mnemosyne is the mother of the Muses.

Beginning among poets, the art was developed and perfected by rhetoricians and orators. Delivering captivating and persuasive addresses to assemblies of citizens was an essential skill to many in the city-states of Greece and the republic of Rome, and the art of memory was taught as an aide to giving lengthly, seemingly extempore speeches. The oldest Latin guidebook to rhetoric, which includes clear instructions on using memory palaces, was the *Rhetorica ad Herrenium*. This book was until modern times thought to be a work of Cicero's, though its actual author remains unknown. (Cicero did write about the art of memory in his *De Oratore*.)

Yates traces the art into the Christian era, to figures like St. Augustine, whose classical education in the *trivium* (the "three ways" of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric) led him to memorize many long passages of Virgil's *Aeneid* so well that he could recite them forwards and backwards. Christian memory practices tended to introduce a moral dimension to the functional techniques of the classical world. Yates considers Dante's journey with Virgil through the circles of hell in his *Inferno* as a memory palace journey. The vivid images they encounter catalogue the various grades and consequences of sin, informing the moral imagination of the poet's audience. This type of use of the art moved St. Thomas Aquinas to alter the categorization of the art of memory, from being a sub-section of rhetoric to being an aspect of *prudentia*, or prudence.

Prudence may carry stuffy, moralistic, Victorian connotations to the modern ear, but it was once held among the highest virtues in some schools of Stoic and Christian thought. I conceive of prudence as having meant something like "wisdom in action," the ability to apply the virtues of the soul to the shifting circumstances of daily life. Some Renaissance philosophers equated Prudence with the *anima mundi*, the "soul of the world." The art of memory was a means of realizing this quality. Aquinas was himself reputed to be a master of the *ars memoriae*. There are stories of him sitting in his cell in for long sessions of silent contemplation, composing philosophic argu-

ments in his mind. He would later dictate these to a group of secretaries, four monastic brothers who take turns copying out Aquinas's memorized composition as he recited.

As the centuries passed, memory practices grew increasingly diverse and complex. With the advent of the Italian Renaissance, intellectuals began to expand their conceptions of what the art of memory might be used to accomplish. Yates details the work of the Italian philosopher Giulio Camillo (1480–1544), who thought the art might be used to organize all knowledge. Camillo found a patron in King Francis I, who had likewise brought the Italian artists Leonardo da Vinci and Benvenuto Cellini northwards to the French court. Camillo received funds to build a physical model of his memory theatre, which he envisioned as something like an amphitheatre or an auditorium, with the memory practitioner gazing up from the theatre floor into the semicircular rows of seating. The ascending tiers were to be filled with symbolic objects arranged according to a certain design. They would act as memory images allowing the mnemonist to organize and access all his or her learning, and discourse on any subject, fluently and elegantly, a useful ability in a university and at court.

At the zenith of Renaissance art of memory practice was another Italian philosopher, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), born four years after Camillo's death. Bruno, the son of a soldier, had been born in a small town near Naples, to which he travelled as an adolescent to receive an education. Bruno was a brilliant student, and eventually began studying to become a Dominican priest. The Dominican Order focused on producing skilled preachers, and to that purpose they were known for training their novitiates in the art of memory. Bruno was especially gifted at learning, devising and employing mnemonic systems. In his early twenties he was summoned to Rome for an audience with the Pope and a senior Cardinal, to display his mnemonic techniques. He recited the psalms in Hebrew, forwards and backwards, and then from random points throughout the psalms, before providing these pontiffs some instruction in the fine points of his approach to the

memory arts.

Around the same time that Edward de Vere was beginning his Mediterranean tour in 1575, Bruno was forced to flee Naples, escaping interrogation at the hands of the Inquisition, and beginning decades of travel and itinerant teaching throughout Europe. He made his way to France, and his lectures on philosophy and demonstrations of his memory arts system drew the attention of King Henri III, for whose coronation de Vere had been permitted to travel to the continent and attend as an English representative. Bruno was summoned to the French court to discuss his memory system and was offered a salary as patronage. Bruno dedicated his first memory treatise, *On the Shadows of the Ideas*, to Henri. Religious turmoil in France soon convinced Bruno leave the country to travel to England.

The art of memory that Bruno learned, elaborated and refined had come a long way from the simple memory palaces of classical rhetoricians. Bruno's system had been heavily influenced by the mystic and philosopher Ramon Llull, who had lived several centuries earlier in the Kingdom of Majorca on the coast of Spain. Bruno adopted Llull's practice of visualizing wheels of letters, which could be rotated in the mind's eye. The letters stood for concepts, as well as mythological and historical characters in Bruno's system. He would visualize multiple concentric rings of letters, that rotated to form different combinations. These combinations coded for images of these mythological characters engaged in various activities. Just as the rooms of a building can be used to store and organize mnemonic images, these mental pictures of gods, goddesses, heroes and philosophers could be used as memory stations themselves, arising from combinations of the spinning wheels of letters. As they had with so many of the arts, from architecture and painting to poetry and plays, Renaissance artists and intellectuals had radically expanded the traditional scope and purview of the art of memory.

Frances Yates did not herself practice the art of memory, and her book does not offer much in terms of practical instruc-

tion in using these techniques, especially for the complicated systems such as Bruno's. After finishing *The Art of Memory*, I returned to using simple memory palaces, but intended to keep researching the topic in hopes of eventually being able to try some of the more baroque iterations of the art.

It also kindled in me an appreciation for the value of memorization efforts more generally, and none is more time-honoured than memorizing poetry. I'd always felt that the quality of a poem changes and deepens when it's committed to memory. Reading printed verse from a page is like sight-reading sheet music, it doesn't compare to the performance of that piece once it's been learned and internalized, (even if the sheet music is then used as an aide-memoire.)

Around that time, I had heard about John Basinger, an actor who had spent nine years committing the entire text of Milton's *Paradise Lost* to memory, and giving a three day public recitation of the poem in 2001. In imitation, I started memorizing some of *Paradise Lost* myself, writing out stanzas on index cards to take with me to recite on walks. Shakespeare had always been my favourite poet though, and I wondered if I could take on a scaled-back version of this kind of memory project with his works. Shakespeare did not write an epic poem however, as had Milton and Spenser. I wanted was a way to stitch together the best of all the great verses scattered throughout the various speeches and asides in the plays.

The HarperCollins *Essential Shakespeare* seemed tailor-made for the purpose. It was part of a series which enlisted contemporary authors to compile collections from the works of classic poets, and introduce their selections with a critical essay. I had seen *Essential Dickinson* edited by Joyce Carol Oates and *Essential Keats* by the Detroit poet Philip Levine. The Shakespeare collection was, like those, a compact little volume, of just the right dimensions to carry around and memorize from. The verse selections were laid out in an spare, attractive format; speeches and songs from the plays were interspersed with sonnets and selections from the narrative poems, with no editorial notes or identification of where the verses

were drawn from, outside of the appendix. The collection was edited by the British poet Ted Hughes.

The sixty page introductory essay was a revelation. It quickly shifted my view of Shakespeare. In an odd way it seemed to be addressing my personal concerns directly. It begins with an apologia for even attempting such an anthology. Hughes justifies it as providing a way that the poetry can be memorized, and "made part of one's mental furnishings." Many editors over the centuries have been hesitant to do this, cutting the poetry away from its context in the plays. Hughes argues that the poetry gains universality when removed from the specific circumstances of the play. He cites Macbeth's lines, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow... a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," and argues that if these are solely the words of a medieval Scottish regicide

> as he faces the leafy army that will put an end to his spell-bound murderous career... it actually limits the use of the passage for the readers... Obviously, reading the the passage out of context, one is missing the great imaginative experience of the drama – but [...] the speech on it's own is something else, read in less than a minute, learned in less than five, still wonderful, and a pure bonus.

From this simple opening, Hughes launches into a mesmerizing overview of the political, historical and intellectual crucible from which Shakespeare's artistry emerged. (I've since learned that this essay is a compressed version of *Hughes's Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, 1993.) In short, Hughes sees Shakespeare's productions as containing "a great evolving mythos, from which the plays rise in a developing sequence, which is basically a psychic / religious conflict formulated in mythic terms, incorporat[ing] the violently deadlocked forces of the Reformation in England."

One forgotten window into the mindset of this period is, according to Hughes, "the fate of the bizarre philosophy of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism." Frances Yates likewise made a study of this in her *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan*

Age. Hughes describes it as incorporating

> archaic mythic systems and various traditions of spiritual discipline, drawn from Pagan, Asiatic, Islamic, Gnostic, and Hebraic sources, into a giant synthesis centered on a Christ figure, and based on love of the Divine Source, in which Catholic and Protestant antagonisms were reconciled into a greater inclusive unity.

Hughes mentions Giordano Bruno, who lived in England from 1583-86, as a key proponent of this philosophy in England, along with John Dee (both of whom had a profound influence on the the intellectual circle which had formed around the poet, knight, and courtier, Sir Phillip Sidney.) According to Hughes, Bruno's essential contribution was

> to fuse the art of memory with an Occult Neoplatonist vision, eventually producing what was virtually an occult mystery religion. The mnemonic images became the hieroglyphic language of a revelatory view of the material and spiritual creation... the limitless, computer-like power of thought and knowledge that it seemed to offer held a potent fascination for Shakespeare's contemporaries.

I could not believe my eyes when Hughes reached the culmination of his essay. He stated that his close study of the development of Shakespeare's poetic technique had given him the impression that Shakespeare, like Bruno, had refined the classical art of memory to develop his own complex mnemonic system to aid his art. How could Hughes possibly know this?

He begins by noting the English language was undergoing great changes in the Elizabethan era, with a massive influx of newly coined words, derived from the revival of classical scholarship, as well as from the Renaissance blossoming of literature in the foreign vernaculars of regions like Spain, France and Italy. The use of new words and fine phrases was the mark of fashion at court, and the middle and lower classes emulated this passion for innovation in language.

T.S. Eliot argued that Shakespeare did the work of two

poets, at times simplifying and unifying the language, at other times complexifying it and working into it new subtle patterns. Shakespeare's plays demonstrate a "uniquely large vocabulary," employing about twice as many words as are found in Milton's works. Depending on whose count you follow, Shakespeare introduced around two thousand words into the language, only slightly less than Chaucer. (Just behind Shakespeare is his contemporary, John Florio, a language teacher and compiler of dictionaries, and a friend of Bruno's and Ben Jonson's. Florio also used the art of memory to store pithy phrases and proverbs in mind, to draw from in his writing or dazzle within conversation.)

Shakespeare's capacity not only to acquire new words, but also to communicate the sense of these words to a range of audiences who had never heard them before, suggest that he had a specific technique: "Unconsciously or no, he devised a kind of method."

> Shakespeare's love for new words we take for granted, but to assemble and deploy the extraordinary number he did suggests a peculiar diligence of method. One supposes he had some special magnetism, and words just stuck to him, instantly organized and aligned like iron filings in a magnetic field. But he himself remarked that a new word has to be "looked on and learned." If other evidence is valid and he used a Brunoesque mnemonic system, then it is likely—whether or not he actually set it down in the "tables," or notebook, that he mentions here and there—that he fixed each new word not only with its general translation but with an image as well, a hieroglyphic "token."

This pairing of a word's meaning with an visual emblem which encapsulates and reminds one of this meaning is one of the keys to Shakespeare's phenomenal impact on the language. A problem facing a poet and playwright who is introducing a steady stream of neologisms is how to have these be understood by all members of his or her audience.

Formally educated persons would likely be able to use their knowledge of Latin, and less frequently of Greek, to infer the meanings of these coinages, but what of the common person who spoke only English? Hughes repeatedly asserts that Shakespeare showed tremendous interest in forging "a language of the common bond."

The principle technique Shakespeare used to this end was "a characteristic locution in which he balances two nouns or two adjectives on either side of an "and" and directs their combined and contrasted meanings to qualify a third word, always a noun:"

To act her earthy and abhorred commands

A beauty-waning and distressed widow

This dice is a modification of a classical rhetorical figure, the *hendiadys*, or, in English, the "two in one construction" or "the figure of twins." Shakespeare's works are replete with this type of phrase, like the "sound and fury" of the tale told by an idiot, and the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." In the "characteristic locution" that Hughes is referring to, however, Shakespeare very often pairs a word derived from the "high" language, prized at court, usually classically derived, with a one from the "low" language, spoken by commoners, usually derived from old English, Celtic or Norse. Drawing a link between the two words with a comparable meaning but disparate origins not only allowed the groundlings to follow along the sense of a speech while at the same time gratifying language-obsessed courtiers. It served to elevate and expand the capacity of the common language, while also providing a grounding and foundation to aristocratic communication. It renewed the links between the social orders, possibly one of the aims motivating Elizabeth's support of the popular theatre, her "policy of plays" in Thomas Nashe's words.

Hughes thinks this technique was perfected by the time that *All's Well that End's Well* was composed, which he takes to be about the twentieth play in the chronological sequence,

and from there its use continues into all the later works. The line Hughes chooses to examine is from the French King's greetings to young Bertram, reminiscing about Bertram's deceased father:

> *Thus his good melancholy oft began,*
>
> *On the catastrophe and heel of pastime,*
>
> *When it was out...*

Hughes mentions that "the catastrophe and heel of pastime" is an odd phrase. The general meaning here is that the melancholy of Bertram's father would often begin after some pastime activity was finished and done. But why "castastrophe and heel"? In this instance catastrophe is "almost bizarre", unless:

> By regarding the line as a slightly modified "new word" entry in his "tables," where the word is to be mastered and matched with its translation and fixed with its mnemonic image, one sees not only how "catastrophe" is the perfect and even the inspired word for the occasion, but how the whole line now illuminates the play itself – and from several different angles.

"Catastrophe" would be the unfamiliar, "high" word here, a literary term borrowed from classical drama, referring to the sudden shift in plot which brings about the final (usually disastrous) resolution of the play. It carries the connotation of "bringing on the final scene." It's paired here with the common and easily visualized word "heel," in the sense that it's the lowest and final part of the body, the "end" of the body, as the "catastrophe" is where a tragic figure is brought lowest at the end of a play. Heel also connects with catastrophe in that Achilles' heel was the archetypal tragic flaw that brought on the catastrophe of the play in Greek drama.

So, while the line makes familiar a recently introduced, abstract word, and pairs it with a homely word to lend it a vivid, striking image to compare it to, it also serves to com-

ment on the play as a whole. The king is ill and coming to a lamentable, early death, the catastrophe and heel of his life, if he cannot be cured by Helena, a physician's daughter. Bertram, by refusing to marry a worthy commoner like Helena, is throwing away his soul by devoting himself to hedonistic pastimes, and will bring about his own catastrophe. As I read the play with this insight in mind, it illuminated the dynamics of the action and the language. Helena later comments that "death and danger dogs the heels of worth," suggesting there could be a better final scene for Bertram than the catastrophe of pastime. In this play about a sick king and his foolish ward, an alternate reading of the title *All's Well that Ends Well* could be that the whole of society, the "body politic," will be well when the end, the heel, the lowest part is well (in this case, the lower classes but also women generally.) With this play's ailing monarch and its medical motifs, alluding the wounded Fisher King and the Waste Land of Arthurian legend, the connection of the homonyms "heal" and "heel" can't be accidental.

As someone with a longtime interest in both the art of memory and Shakespeare, I wondered if Hughes's interpretation of Shakespeare's artistry (which was entirely Stratfordian) could possibly be true. When I had come to something of a dead end in evaluating Hughes's claims, the Oxfordian case opened many new avenues to research and explore. For instance, there was the Elizabethan pamphleteer, playwright, and proto-novelist Thomas Nashe, whose writings seem closely related to de Vere's. His works are dedicated to figures connected to de Vere, such as the Earl of Southampton and one of de Vere's closest friends, George Carey, Lord Hunsdon, as well as other members of Carey's family. The dedication of Nashe's *Strange News*, published in 1592, the year before *Venus and Adonis*, is almost certainly to de Vere himself. Mark Anderson in *Shakespeare by Another Name* paints de Vere as being a close friend, collaborator, and patron of Nashe's, while Robert Prechter's recent book, *Oxford's Voices*, argues that "Thomas Nashe" was actually one of de Vere's many pen-names. This would make the dedication of *Strange News* a case of de Vere

writing about himself.

Either way, Nashe opens the dedication referring to de Vere as “the most copious carminist of our time” (*carmine* is Latin for “song”.) He ends the dedication with an exhortation to de Vere: “Proceed to cherish thy surpassing carminical art of memory with full cups (as thou dost)...” A carminical art of memory practiced by the most copious carminist of the time sounds like it could be very much like the poetic art of memory that Ted Hughes had intuited in Shakespeare’s use of hendiadys. Either it was important enough to de Vere that Thomas Nashe was told of it and decided to emphasize it here, or de Vere wrote this dedication and decided to emphasize it in this literary portrait of himself.

Prechter’s *Oxford’s Voices* includes suggestions that de Vere might have been writing about aides to memory early in his life, as a precocious adolescent. Prechter argues that over 1560s, de Vere published three short “practical books” under the name William Fulwood: *The Castel of Memorie, The Philosopher’s Game*, and T*he Enimie of Idelnesse*. Reminiscent of the Roman memory palace technique, *The Castel of Memorie* is laid out like a “metaphorical castle” containing guidelines for memorizing information, as many herbal concoctions said to benefit the memory (I’m wondering if there could be a Paracelsian influence here, or of the “empiric” medicine de Vere would soon see practiced by William Cecil’s wife Mildred and their daughter Anne.)

The Philosopher’s Game contains the instructions for a new game, played on a “double chess board.” While the game does not seem to be specifically related to memorization, the fantastically complicated description of it does remind me of the kind of ornate mental construction that a Brunoesque memory system entails. “The game involves letters, numbers, colors and geometrical forms and requires the application of addition, subtraction, division and the figuring of squares, cubes [...] creating pleasing combinations of “Arithmeticall, Geometricall, and Musicall proportion.” (Prechter, p185) *The Enimie of Idelnesse* is a guide to letter writing, and interesting-

ly includes translations from Italian writers like Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Angelo Poliziano, suggesting that de Vere was familiar with the writings of the Florentine Academy members from a young age. Robert Prechter's inquiries into de Vere's early pseudonymous publications reveal a picture of Shakespeare as a Mozart-like prodigy, who developed his craft over decades. Others had suspected as much, arguing that de Vere was also the primary poet behind the 1565 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* by Arthur Golding, de Vere's uncle and tutor. Ezra Pound called the Golding translation "the most beautiful book in the English language."

Three Philosophers: Bruno, Dee and de Vere

An abstract of the omitted argument: Alexander Waugh, John Dee's Sonnet Dedication Encryption, a Map to Shakespeare's Westminster Abbey Grave. The sublime prefaces to Euclid, Cardano, and Castiglione. Thomas Nashe's polemical defense of the good reverend Master Dee. The godfather of Madinia Dee. Dee's fiery trigon in the Confessio Fraternitatis and Henry IV. The entertainments of Prince Laski at Oxford University, including a debate with Bruno's and the revels of de Vere. The tables of memory in Hamlet and Sonnet 122. Berowne, Bruno, and the language of the common bond.

Conclusion

In my life I've come across few intellectual pastimes as fascinating as tracing connections between the lives, art, and thought of the various individuals and schools of the Renaissance. There's a constant alternation between familiarity and surprise, as new lights are shone from obscure and unusual sources on some of the most foundational paintings, essays, music, plays and poetry of our culture. New features are illumined, and new shadows are cast. At times though, as I'm immersed in increasing complex speculative arguments and tenuous connections, tracing lines of influence to and from de Vere, including everything from the ancient Greek sophists and the Knights Templar, to the Rosicrucians, the Royal Acad-

emy and the ascent of the British Empire, it can feel like the edifice collapses, and the figure of de Vere disappears. I lose sight of the chain of factual details by which I had arrived, and wonder how much of this could possibly be true, and how much is fantasy and seeing what I want to see.

For a time I let the edifice stay dissolved, and return to the plays and poems themselves. It strikes me that, if de Vere was the author of the works, he chose for their authorship to be largely obscured. Some have argued that he likely expected to have his works published under his name after his death, but the political situation related to Elizabeth's secession and the coronation of King James I prevented its disclosure. That could well be true, but I wonder if this is the entire story. De Vere seemed to be fascinated by the idea of becoming "nothing," both lamenting and revelling in it. He played with his family motto, Vero Nihil Verius, "nothing truer than truth," and repeatedly worked his signature "ever, never" into his verses. Ever present, and nowhere to be found. From the beginning his works were marked by metamorphoses, the constant shifting of forms, the transmutation of self or essence as it moves through the stages of appearance. What is left in the end? The Fool says to Lear: "... now thou art an O without a figure: I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing."

Whether this obscurity was a necessity forced on him by his rank, or a measure of atonement for the transgressions of his youth, or a holy act of abnegation resolved on in his winter years, we are left with these uncertainties to puzzle over. For myself, I find that as I accept the uncertainty and ambiguity, the picture of Edward de Vere and his works seem to re-emerge, with all the connections he made to his Renaissance contemporaries, to the classical world, to his intellectual descendants, and I can continue researching.

Daniel Cowan lives in Winnipeg, MB, where he has spent most of his career working as a cook and a plumber. He has a blog at ecotechnicinklings.blogspot.com, and can be contacted at: danielalexcowan@hotmail.com.

Hello from the Shakespeare Authorship Fellowship!

Since 1920, with the publication of "Shakespeare Identified As Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford," skeptical and independent thinkers have been focused on de Vere as the true author of the poems and plays published under the pseudonym "William Shakespeare." The Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship is delighted to help support the efforts of an extraordinary community of scholars as they–and we–and you–investigate the fascinating and amazing Earl, for centuries denied his rightful place among the world's greatest artists. While orthodox Stratfordians circle the wagons and recycle tired accusations that we are crackpots or elitists (they never say we're accurate), Oxfordians have produced one breakthrough after another, ushering in a true Renaissance of Shakespeare understanding, and bringing us ever closer to the beating heart of these timeless works.

Through our website (shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org), our YouTube channel ("Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship"), Twitter account (@ShakeOxFellows), Facebook presence, scholarly publications, annual conferences (this year in Ashland, Oregon) and events such as this one, we're reaching into high schools and colleges, into community groups and lifelong learning programs.

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Bob Meyers

President

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Further Resources

Books

Is Shakespeare Dead? by Mark Twain

"Shakespeare" Identified by J. T. Looney

The watershed publication that established the Oxfordian movement

Dating Shakespeare's Plays: A critical review of evidence of the evidence edited by Kevin Gilvary

Professor Londré's recommended source for Oxfordian dating of the plays

Shakespeare by Another Name by Mark Anderson

An excellent biography of De Vere which provides political and personal context for Shakespeare plays

Shakespeare in Court by Alexander Waugh

A short, humorous dramatization of the cases for and against Edward De Vere and Will of Stratford having authored Shakespeare's plays

The Living Record—Shakespeare, Succession, and the Sonnets by Hank Whittemore

A concise introduction to the "Monument" theory, which analyzes the Sonnets as an autobiographical chronical of De Vere's dramatic rise and fall in Queen Elizabeth's court

Oxford's Voices by Robert Prechter

A fascinating deep dive into De Vere's many pseudonyms and allonyms besides "William Shakespeare", including his government propaganda work

My Shakespeare: The Authorship Controversy edited by William Leahy

A collection of essays in favor of different authorship candidates, featuring and excellent essay in favor of De Vere's authorship by Alexander Waugh

YouTube

Alexander Waugh

Waugh's popular channel documents his ongoing research into the Authorship Question, with a particular focus on the influence of hermeticism and cryptography

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Powerful solo show about the hidden stories within the sonnets

Robert Prechter—*Why Did Robert Greene Repent His Former Works?*

A taste of Prechter's research on the many psuedonyms and allonyms of Edward De Vere

Podcasts

"Don't Quill The Messenger" produced by Dragon Wagon Radio

"The Pod's The Thing" produced by the De Vere Society

"'The Play's The Thing' with Phoebe" produced by the Evil Thespian Podcast

TikTok

@phoebe_devere

Vero nihil verius