

***Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom:
The True History of Shakespeare and Elizabeth.***

NY: Grove Press, 2010. 430 pages.

By Charles Beauclerk

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If conditions are just right in the Shakespeare course I teach — if, after my introduction of the authorship controversy the class discussion has turned toward an interest in royal succession issues in the plays, and we find ourselves reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with its chaos generating outward from the fairies' argument over possession of the changeling child — I may inform my students that some Oxfordians subscribe to what is called the Prince Tudor theory. Concerning the notion of Queen Elizabeth's perpetual virginity, I ask, similar to the way Charles Beauclerk puts it, "what if her virginity were just that, an ideal, with no basis in reality: a political front, rather than a biological fact?" (11). I then ask, do we know she never gave birth? After all, Anne Vavasour successfully kept her pregnancy a secret in the court for presumably the full nine months, even without the convenience of being able to duck out of court on progresses into the country. (And check out Gheeraerts' *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, c. 1594, one of the sixteen pages of color plates included in Beauclerk's book). Could there have been an ultimately unacknowledged Tudor prince?

Maintaining an agnostic stance on Prince Tudor (PT), I tell my students that there are three versions or hypotheses: 1) that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the son of Queen Elizabeth, accounting for some of the privilege he enjoyed, the crown signature (87), the Hamlet/Gertrude relationship, etc.; 2) that the Earl of Oxford and Queen Elizabeth were the real parents of the "changeling" Earl of Southampton, which offers explanations for the Sonnets (especially the first seventeen), the motivation behind allegorical elements in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and other works, etc.; and 3) that both propositions 1 and 2 are correct. A few

seconds pass as the students continue taking notes until someone looks up and says, “Wait....” Exactly, I nod. “Ew!”

Due to its Ew! factor, that third version of PT would receive little acknowledgment except for its being championed by Charles Beauclerk, who himself would be dismissed by many if he weren’t so brilliant, so eloquent, and a descendant of the de Veres. After many years as a lecturer and an Oxfordian mover, shaker, and spearer, Beauclerk has published the first book of any sort since Ogburn’s *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* that I was inspired to read through again immediately after finishing it the first time: *Shakespeare’s Lost Kingdom*.

Like many of us, Beauclerk recognizes the Oxfordian paradigm as the only viable explanation for “Shakespeare” and wants to get on with a deeper understanding rather than to cover the same ground yet again — even the same *kind* of ground — to establish the authorship case; thus he relegates to an introductory chapter such matters as the visual absurdities of the Droeshout engraving in the First Folio (xi-xiii), the contextualization of Shakespeare in an “authoritarian age” as one reason “writers resort to allegory as a means of disguising and revealing the truth” (xiii), and other accountings for the secrecy surrounding the authorship: “For those at court, his identity was an open secret, which remained concealed from the public at large, rather like Roosevelt’s polio during the war, which never leaked into the press but was common knowledge among White House staff.... Exposing the author would have meant exposing his satires of them and their queen” (xv). He bluntly restates the truth that “Nothing in the life of William Shaksperre of Stratford illuminates the works he is supposed to have written,” and adds an important implication if the works are attributed to the Stratford man: “Thus the plays themselves are reduced to works of fantasy rather than masterpieces of the imagination” (xvii). The latter assertion has grown in importance since the publication of James Shapiro’s ludicrous stance in *Contested Will* (2010) that reverence for literary make-believe is tragically sacrificed in the “anti-Stratfordian” tendency to find an author’s actual experience imbued in his works; Beauclerk has been addressing this absurdity in his book-tour lectures. After that introductory chapter, Beauclerk will rarely revert to scoring points in the authorship argument itself, except perhaps when the Stratfordian mismatch with the works approaches perfection: e.g., “Despite the upward mobility of Mr. Shaksperre of Stratford, the Shakespearean hero finds himself through loss of status, not the reverse” (14).

In *Shakespeare’s Lost Kingdom*, Beauclerk’s “process is to see the works as a single story” (155), and indeed this coalescence of the canon is a conceptual phenomenon experienced gradually by many if not most Shakespeareans as years of involvement and rereading allow the plays and poems to weave themselves into one larger tapestry. The “single story” that Beauclerk undertakes to read out is the one specified in what seems to have been the working title of the book: *Shakespeare’s Identity Crisis*. Beauclerk articulates a kind of methodology by urging, “if we take the authorship question itself as our portal and see it as an outgrowth of the author’s own identity crisis, we can enter an interpretive space that is both creative and illuminating” (xviii). And indeed, several hundred pages later we will agree with him that “The

whole canon dramatizes his [Oxford's] profound sense of loss and disinheritance, and his search for a deeper source of power" (313).

Beauclerk draws a convincing illustration of the Elizabethan court, the breeding-ground, as it were, for Oxford's evolution into a dramatist. "Duplicity, disguise, illusion, double-dealing — these were the tools for survival at court, a theater in which the monarch and her entourage staged themselves to the world" (191). Such a setting makes good sense of Oxford's evolution from lyric poet to dramatist, a facet of artistic biography largely ignored by Oxfordians and about which Beauclerk has much of value to say, revealing what is ultimately a fuller, high-definition portrait of the artist.

The court of Gloriana was a perpetual theater, the actors and actresses forever 'on' or waiting in the wings, some show or other playing night and day for forty-five years.... Elizabeth had always known how to play the role of queen — for her courtiers, for her people, for Europe, for posterity — moving from one mythic persona to the next with the lightning dexterity of a quick-change artist.

(26-27)

In short, "Statecraft and stagecraft were virtually synonymous at the time" (26). It's a crucial realization towards undoing the disastrous work of the Cecils and of misguided posterity in the form of orthodox Shakespeare studies, for, "The effect of separating Shakespeare and Elizabeth, the poet and the queen, is to divorce the artistic life of Elizabethan England from the political, thus neutralizing Shakespeare in affairs of state — depoliticizing him, in other words" (26).

Even more impressive than the restoration of this political/artistic setting, we get in *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom* a better sense of the mind, or psyche, of de Vere than is possible even from Mark Anderson's encyclopedic matching of biographical materials and aspects of the works in "*Shakespeare*" by *Another Name* (2005). Instead of the literary and experiential sources and details that find their way into the works, Beauclerk emphasizes a coherence in the psychological and creative life of Oxford as (and beyond) "Shakespeare." Although focus remains on the issue of identity, here's a behavioral gem: "Like a firework, he could either light up the sky or go off in your face" (94).

Of course, these praises for Beauclerk's book are destined to be considered a procrastinator's preludes to what many readers know I must confront on-record for the first time: the PT perspective(s). Hesitancies or dreads notwithstanding, I must say that each Prince Tudor component in Beauclerk's reconstruction of "The True History of Shakespeare and Elizabeth" (as the subtitle has it) is disturbingly convincing. Indeed, "Elizabeth's subsequent refusal ever to name an heir becomes more understandable if she had a hidden child of her own, and was in a perpetual quandary over whether or not to shatter her carefully crafted image as the Virgin Queen by revealing him to the world" (39). Elizabeth's family history — "dysfunctional" being gruesomely euphemistic — compounded with several truly

weird episodes in her young life make teenage pregnancy very much a possibility. With the proposition that Oxford was Elizabeth's child born in 1548, Beauclerk makes sense of Shakespeare/Oxford's obsessions with identity, name, cuckoldry, etc. "It also explains the extraordinary silence that surrounds his life, as if his very existence were somehow taboo" (224). The motifs in the works to which Shakespeare returns repeatedly

 speak volumes about his own predicament: usurpation of royal right;
 the fall from grace; loss of power; loss of name; exile; disinheritance;
 banishment; the alienated courtier; the royal bastard; the concealed heir;
 the court fool who tells his truth in jest; the hidden man revealed; the lost
 man found; the poet-prince; the philosopher king.

(156)

It had not registered with me before that "There is no record of Edward's birth in the registers of the time. Instead, we owe the date of his appearance in the world to his future father-in-law, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who made a note of it more than a quarter century later, as if he needed to remind himself of the official truth" (56). Once again, all missing paper trails lead straight to the "self-appointed historiographer" (6).

The unanswered question for me in this first PT thesis is: where is Seymour? If Oxford came to realize he was not biologically a Vere but the bastard son of Elizabeth and Thomas Seymour, shouldn't we be catching shadowy glimpses in the Shakespeare canon of his real father; shouldn't we witness more beheadings, see more Seymour wordplay? (Or is this not who Oxford thought, or was told, his biological father had been?) Nevertheless, the logic of such a scenario — Oxford as an unacknowledged Tudor prince — accounts both for the substance of many plays and the motivation, or need, for Oxford to write them:

 He cast himself as the hero of the histories in the shape of the
 maverick heir to the throne, who devises skits on his royal parent, yet
 metamorphoses into the victor at Agincourt.

(214)

Beauclerk's perspective explains the inner drive that turned Oxford from lyric poet to playwright, the need to see his own understanding of truths made manifest beyond the page.

The Southampton-focused Prince Tudor hypothesis is a more familiar one in Oxfordian studies. That Southampton was a kind of changeling child, the hidden son of Elizabeth and Oxford from the 1570s, when Oxford was the Queen's supreme favorite, makes a great deal of sense as another component of Beauclerk's understanding of the history. I cannot cling to my agnosticism much longer on this, despite my persistent disappointment that Shakespeare himself ended up devoting his art to someone who ultimately accomplished, and amounted to, nothing. But

after learning from the elder Ogburns and the Stratfordian Kristian Smidt to read the plays through the lens of redaction criticism as multi-layered revisions, it becomes difficult not to see them as works originally focused on the young Oxford's issues, later refashioned into works pleading for recognition of Southampton. Like the perspective art that intrigued Shakespeare, Hamlet can seem to represent Oxford from one angle, Southampton from another. So too,

Prince Hal can stand for both Oxford and Southampton, according to which way one turns the lens. Falstaff is the Oxford who has given up hope of the throne for himself in order to raise up his royal son.

(347)

Beauclerk's arguments are particularly illuminating with *Hamlet* and *Lear*, each a play that our instincts tell us is a direct *cri de coeur*.

Of course, the multiplication of Princes Tudor necessitates accepting the historical actuality of incest. Yet the Ew! factor becomes a stumbling block not for Beauclerk's analysis, but potentially for his readers. Our impulse is to grasp for alternative explanations that will de-literalize these implications. I find myself trying to see the first aspect² — Elizabeth as Oxford's mother — as metaphorical rather than biological. Could not the Queen, as a 17-years-older authority figure who (if *Venus and Adonis* is any testimony) was the aggressive wooer in what became a sexual relationship, end up *seeming* like a mother figure from our side of the veil of allegorical literature? Still, Beauclerk's perspective remains tenaciously persuasive.

More crucial to the unity and illumination of the Shakespeare works than the historical and biological facets of Beauclerk's thesis is the mythological key by which he unlocks Oxford's psychology. Rather than the Oedipal complex one might expect, "The myth that pierces to the heart of Shakespeare's relationship with Elizabeth is the tale of Actaeon, the hunter who stumbled upon the virgin goddess Diana bathing nude in a woodland pond" (183). This insight alone is transformative to our reading of Shakespeare. I have studied four plays with students in class since reading *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom*, and I have found in each one partial glimpses of the Actaeon myth where I had not noticed it before. Such a result certifies *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom* as representing the very best kind of scholarship.

Elizabeth's refusal to acknowledge Oxford and/or Southampton generates repeated, not-too-hidden appeals in the Shakespeare works, but Beauclerk digs deeper:

Thus there is no viable path for the succession to follow, no means by which the son might protest or assert his independence. This blocked paternal inheritance forced Shakespeare, like so many of his characters, into the realm of the unconscious, where language resides in its formless state. Here, through a sort of divine dyslexia, he forged for himself a mighty array of brand-new words, which he tipped with chastening fire and shot, Titus-like, into the very citadel of government.

Beauclerk does not subject readers to psychological jargon, nor does he exploit pop psych notions. Nonetheless, one indication that he has gotten the psychology right is the remarkable correspondence between his perspective and independent insights from psychoanalytic criticism. *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom* supplies explanations for what psychoanalytic criticism finds when it puts Shakespeare "on the couch." Beauclerk's book prompted me finally to act on a long-delayed impulse to do some significant reading in the field. Again and again, psychoanalytic critics who are clearly not Oxfordian, but who also seem to have no interest in the biography of Shakspeare to support their findings, reaffirm the centrality of incest and identity issues.

Like the Benezet challenge in which Shakespeare scholars and Oxford scoffers had difficulty distinguishing between lines from Oxford's early "E.O." poems and lines from Shakespeare, so statements made by psychoanalytic critics of Shakespeare are virtually indistinguishable from statements by Beauclerk. Give it a try: which of the following quotations come from Beauclerk's book and which from psychoanalytic criticism?

1. "In the entire canon, the word 'family' occurs only seven times, three of them, ironically, in *Titus Andronicus*."
2. "Shakespeare's greatest lovers, Antony and Cleopatra, are adulterers; and the nearest he gets to a happy married couple are the psychopathic Macbeths."
3. "He [Shakespeare] was also curiously restrained in his depictions of what it is actually like to be the son or daughter of parents or vice versa, i.e., to live within a family structure."
4. "no one can deny that mistaken identity, concealed identity, loss of identity, and enforced anonymity are major themes in the works of this most celebrated poet-dramatist."
5. "We could say that his dilemma and his achievement, as they are seen through contemporary psychoanalysis, are that he represents his identity as the dilemma of identity itself."
6. "*Hamlet* is not so much a full-throated tragedy as an ironic stifling of a hero's identity by structures of rule that no longer have legitimacy."
7. "Macbeth's program of violence ... is designed, like Coriolanus' desperate militarism, to make him author of himself."
8. "he [Shakespeare] has still not fully worked through his oedipal past, or perhaps ... he has sublimated it too well in his art."
9. "the major tragedies show violence erupting from the pull of family ties that are too close, 'more than kin' (*Hamlet* I.ii.65). The whole heroic identity is invested in 'holy cords' (*Lear* II.ii.76) that have an incestuous content, direct or displaced."
10. "One can summarize the development [of the Romance plays] by reference to

different ways of coping with the incest taboo.”

The first four quotations are Beauclerk’s (336, 336, 336, xviii); the rest are the psychoanalytic critics’ (Schwartz xxi, Leverenz 125, Gohlke 176, Kahn 239, Barber 194, Barber 191; for more on incest in Shakespeare, see Fineman, especially 71). Thus, interdisciplinary confirmations indicate that Beauclerk’s “true history,” or Ew! history, is not so far-fetched as we may want to think.

When Beauclerk’s book was published last spring, online conversation almost immediately included complaints about it being “a distinct turn-off,” another of the PT “flighty flings at how things ‘might have been’” — condemnations accompanied with a wish that talented Oxfordians such as Beauclerk would not “waste their time daydreaming about these tawdry theories.” Many Oxfordians feel that we continue to have a difficult enough task just getting traction with the very question of the Shakespeare authorship, and therefore to package the basic Oxfordian thesis along with secret pregnancies, secret deals, and incest will hobble the enterprise fatally. But Jessie Childs, in *Henry VIII’s Last Victim* — a biography of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (Oxford’s poetically influential uncle) — insists that “Although one should always be wary of seeing self-revelation in poetic fiction, some themes are so prevalent and so intense that they surely point to the preoccupations of the poet” (170). Charles Beauclerk’s book is the most successful to date in proposing a nucleus to the Shakespeare phenomenon and accounting for the preoccupations found in the works. “Shakespeare did not wake up one morning and decide to write a play about honor because his last one had been about ambition; like all true writers, he wrote to heal the wounds to his soul, to remake the shattered world in which he found himself” (155-156). That Beauclerk’s process of identification and scholarly discovery involves not merely biography but psychology, mythology, cultural history, and more, ought to guarantee that in reading the superb *Shakespeare’s Lost Kingdom*, one is less likely to utter a squeamish “Ew!” than again and again an appreciative and impressed “Ooo!”

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