



A Statistical Approach to the Shakespeare Authorship Question

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For more than 150 years, scholars interested in William Shakespeare have encountered difficulties in connecting him with the widely recognized claimant to his mantle of greatness, namely William Shakspere, the glove maker's son from Stratford-upon-Avon. While there is evidence for a writer—in the form of his writings—enormous difficulties have arisen when attempting to link the writer with Shakspere of Stratford. (The history of these efforts has been thoroughly reviewed by Hope and Holston.)¹ These circumstances have resulted in a number of alternate candidates, but since 1920, when he was first proposed by J. T. Looney,² the prime alternate candidate has become Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. The case for de Vere, as set forth recently by Charlton Ogburn, Jr.,³ has grown in strength since he was first proposed to be the true author of the Shakespeare canon. With this in mind, we wish to offer scientific evidence on behalf of the Oxfordian position through the application of statistics.

Noting the penchant for double and triple meanings in Elizabethan literature, we discovered the following triple meaning in the title of the play, *The Winter's Tale*.⁴

Title of the play (First Folio, 1623):	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>
Title translated into French:	"le Conte d'Hiver"
French homophones:	"le Conte de Vere" or "le Comte de Vere"
Back into English:	"The de Vere Story" or "The Count (Earl) de Vere"

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Thus, by reference to its French translation, *The Winter's Tale* has two alternate meanings: "The de Vere Story" or "The Count (Earl) de Vere," both having obvious connotations with regards to the Oxfordian position.

The hypothesis that the author intended the meanings indicated would require that he have a working knowledge of French. That Edward de Vere was fluent in French is readily verified from a letter written by him in French, at age 13, to his guardian (Ogburn, 441). In addition, the author "William Shakespeare," whether he be Edward de Vere or another person, also demonstrated a colloquial knowledge of French in the plays, for instance, throughout *Henry V* (III. iv; IV. iv; V. ii) as well as in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (I. iv).

With this piece of evidence—as with the preponderance of evidence regarding the Shakespeare authorship question—one is arguing by means of inductive, rather than deductive, logic. That is, when observing an outcome which may have proceeded from one of several causes, one tries to judge which of these possible causes is the most likely one. In this case, the alternate causes may be stated as follows: the triple meaning proceeds from pure chance rather than design *or* the triple meaning was intended by the author. We shall now test the possible connection to Oxford in two ways: with regard to the text of the play, and with regard to the source and history of the play.

Consider the title: *The Winter's Tale*. If there is a strong origin in the play for such a title, one may argue that the alternate meanings noted above are mere coincidences.⁵ The speech of Mamillus (II. i. 27-28) gives the only internal reference to the title. Asked whether he would prefer a merry or a sad tale, young Mamillus responds that "a sad tale's best for winter." As the origin of the title, this appears rather trivial: weak, nondescriptive, and devoid of meaning. Any of the Shakespeare tragedies would fill the description of being a sad play—and this play is not one of his tragedies. Thus the meaning of the title is so nonspecific to this particular play that one cannot find a strong origin in the play for such a title.

Next we note, as have others (Ogburn, 566-70, 675), the strong parallels between the plot of the play and aspects of Edward de Vere's life and immediate family, evidence which suggests that the play is a portrayal of a certain period of his life, compatible with the meanings noted above. First, the wife's faithfulness is brought into question, a recurring theme in the Shakespeare plays. Second, such infidelity brings into question a daughter's legitimacy. Third, there is a prolonged separation between husband and wife. (In the play, the wife is believed to be dead for 16 years.) Fourth, there is the tragic death of a son, whose legitimacy is not questioned. Fifth, husband and wife achieve a reconciliation. Sixth, the daughter, with her legiti-

macy proclaimed to the world, marries a man of high birth.

In the life of Edward de Vere, one notes obvious parallels. First, he separated himself (1576) from his wife after returning from a trip abroad, during the course of which his wife bore a child (1575). Second, the timing of the separation was taken by some to signify that he did not consider the child to be his. Third, he remained separated from his wife for over five years, and fourth, the two were reconciled around Christmas 1581. Fifth, his wife bore him a son (1583) who died shortly after birth and was buried as the Baron Bulbeck, his father's lesser title. Sixth, the child Elizabeth, born in 1575 during de Vere's absence, married William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby (1595). (Note that the sequence of the six events is not identical in the two cases.) Such parallels have, of course, been noted before, but such a close match to the life of de Vere certainly supports the idea that several meanings were intended in the title.

Next, there is the chronology of the changes in title, between its first appearance in the Stationer's Register in 1594 as *A Wynter Nightes Pastime*, and publication of the play in the First Folio of 1623 as *The Winter's Tale*. Neilson and Hill⁶ suggest that a "winter's tale" is one "to drive away the time"; this explanation accords with the play's original title but is not particularly evoked by the final title. Nor is it particularly consonant with the allusion within the play, noted above, that "a sad tale's best for winter." The story itself is not particularly a sad one—it is rightfully classified, because of its gloriously happy ending, with the Shakespeare comedies.

The literary source for the play is a novel, *Pandosto, The Triumph of Time*, published by Robert Greene in 1588. The author and date are interesting because Robert Greene was an associate of the Earl of Oxford, forming a part of Oxford's literary circle,⁷ which included the writers Anthony Munday, John Lyly, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Watson, and Thomas Churchyard (Ogburn, 43-45, 672-677, 723-728). The year 1588 was also the year when de Vere's first wife, Anne (Cecil) de Vere, Countess of Oxford, died.

In 1594, *A Wynter Nightes Pastime* was entered in the Stationer's Register under anonymous authorship. In the following year Oxford's daughter Elizabeth—born at the time of her parents' 1575-1581 separation—married the 6th Earl of Derby (Ogburn, 731). (A strong tradition has it that their wedding celebration, in the court of Queen Elizabeth I, included the premier performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.) Next, the play was staged before King James I in 1611, appearing in the accounts of the Revels at court. However, the entry indicates that it was a revival of the earlier play, now listed with the title *The Winter's Night's Tale* (Ogburn, 386). Completing the chronology, the play first appeared in print in 1623 in the First Folio

under its final title, *The Winter's Tale* (Neilson and Hill, 500-501), the only one of the sequence for which the triple meaning works. Note also that the definite article "the," appearing in this final title, is necessary, rather than the indefinite article "a," for the meanings to work.

If we accept the premise of Oxfordian authorship, the play's origins become highly relevant. The chronology would suggest that the story originated, first, as a tribute to the memory of Oxford's late wife, and second, as an affirmation of their first daughter, coming into marriageable age at this time. In this regard, Ogburn lists Hermione, the wronged wife, as one of the noblest of the Shakespeare heroines, along with Imogen and Desdemona (Ogburn, 567-568). According to Neilson and Hill, "Her serene dignity, which almost raises her above pity, never deserts her" (500-501). Of the long-lost daughter Perdita, they say, "It is hard to speak controlledly. She is exquisite...there can be no doubt of the blood that runs in her veins."

Thus in large part, the play is a tribute to these two noble women. Their nobility is enhanced by the fact that the jealousy of Leontes is patently groundless, as no evidence for that jealousy, nor any type of rationalization for it, is present in the play. Louis Auchincloss states that he needs "no evidence to inflame his jealousy. His fit is totally perverse. He is unable...to find a single courtier who is willing even to pretend to take his side. The enormity of the accusation appalls even the worst toadies. But Leontes clings to it. He wants to believe Hermione guilty, even though, on one level of consciousness, he must know she is innocent."⁸ Neilson and Hill remark that "...the amazement of those intimate with Leontes indicates that nothing remotely like it [the jealousy of Leontes] has ever been seen in him before...The jealousy of Leontes, demanded at almost the beginning of the play, is in the nature of a postulate" (500-501).

One might inquire more closely into the reasons and motivation for the actual separation between Oxford and his wife, but such an inquiry is risky. During their separation (1575-81), Oxford did not accuse his wife of infidelity (Ward, 142), instead citing only a vague and unspecified "misliking" (Ogburn, 556-559). (We shall not investigate further the motivations for that separation, as it lies outside the scope of the present inquiry.) If Oxford is the author of *The Winter's Tale*, however, the fact that the protagonist, Leontes, essentially stands defenseless indicates that Oxford himself considered the matter to be closed.

Another coincidence is the "statue" of Hermione, which figures both in the plot of *The Winter's Tale* and the funeral effigy of Anne, Countess of Oxford, located in Westminster Abbey. In the play, the statue is described as "a piece many years in doing and now newly performed by that rare Italian master, Julio Romano, who...would beguile Nature of her custom, so

perfectly he is her ape" (V. ii. 95-98). Scholars have noted that Romano's fame is as a painter, not a sculptor; consequently, this particular passage has frequently been cited to highlight a blunder by the author of the play.

Talvacchia has resolved this point quite admirably, linking this reference to Romano with the epitaph on his tomb, reported by his biographer Giorgio Vasari, which translates from Latin as: "Jupiter saw sculpted and painted bodies breathe...through the skill of Giulio Romano."⁹ Thus Talvacchia shows that the historical Giulio Romano was associated with the creation of painted statues, while the lifelike appearance of the "statue," resulting from the coloring, becomes an element of the plot in the play.

Talvacchia's interpretation is presented without presumption regarding the identity of the author of *The Winter's Tale*. Nonetheless, Romano's statue, as described in the play, shares a common feature with a statue of its Oxfordian counterpart in real life. The tomb of Edward de Vere's wife, Anne, Countess of Oxford, located in the Chapel of St. Nicholas at Westminster Abbey, includes a funeral effigy of the Countess which is *rendered in color*. In Westminster Abbey, the use of color in funeral effigies is extremely rare; the tomb of the Countess of Oxford, shared with her mother, Lady Burghley, stands out in this regard.

As the final coincidence in this list of coincidences between Oxford and *The Winter's Tale*, consider that the 1588 edition of *Pandosto, The Triumph of Time*, contains the following line, spoken by the Oracle from Apollo, which also appears verbatim in the First Folio printing of the play: "...the king shall *live* without an heir" [emphasis added] (III. ii. 136).¹⁰ *Pandosto* was reprinted in 1592, 1595, 1607, 1614, and thirteen more times in the seventeenth century. In all three editions through 1595, the line appears as shown above; but from 1607 onward, it appears as: "...the king shall *die* without an heir" [emphasis added] (Pafford, xxvii-xxviii). Although Oxford did not live or die without an heir, the interval between 1595 and 1607, in which the word "live" changes to "die," does contain the year 1604, the year of Edward de Vere's death.

To enumerate, the following coincidences and possible connections have been found between the play *The Winter's Tale* and Edward de Vere: triple meanings in the title, 3; plot line, 6; source date and author, 2; *The* instead of *A* in the final title, 1; statue rendered in color, 1; and the change of Apollo's Oracle in *Pandosto*, 1; for a total of 14 coincidences. One can now ask whether these coincidences arose by chance or from a common origin, namely Oxfordian authorship of the play. We believe that the weight of the *number* of coincidences shown between *Winter's Tale* and Edward de Vere greatly weakens the possibility that *all* are due to mere chance, and strengthens the argument that they are connected with Oxfordian authorship.

In statistical reasoning, the former premise—that the coincidences arise from chance—is called the Null Hypothesis, and evidence is weighed in terms of disproving the Null Hypothesis. In other words, the scientific approach consists of postulating at the outset that there is no cause-and-effect relationship between a pair or among a set of observations (the Null Hypothesis). Proving a causal relationship is then equivalent to disproving the Null Hypothesis. If one could individually estimate quantitatively the probability of the Null Hypothesis for each observed coincidence, and if all the observed coincidences are independent, one could then evaluate the probability of the Null Hypothesis in view of *all* the observed coincidences—it would be the product of the individual probabilities. For instance, if there were three coincidences, and each had the probability of 0.30 (30%) of arising from chance, then the probability that *all three* arose from chance would be $0.30 \times 0.30 \times 0.30$, or 0.027. Extending the argument, it is evident that the more independent coincidences that are found, the more remote becomes the probability of the Null Hypothesis. While no such actual individual probabilities are available for *The Winter's Tale* evidence, this example demonstrates how the accumulation of coincidences greatly weakens the case for the Null Hypothesis, while strengthening the case for the alternate hypothesis, that is, Oxfordian authorship.

Since we are working with indirect, circumstantial evidence, whether one considers Oxfordian authorship to have been proven depends upon the judgmental criteria of the questioner. What is sufficient evidence for one person may be insufficient for another. The applicable methodology is that of inductive logic, of inferring causes having observed effects. While one would obviously prefer direct evidence, amenable to deductive logic, this is largely missing in the authorship debate. Nonetheless, a preponderance of indirect evidence may be quite persuasive. Indeed, decisions in law, even in science, have been rendered on the basis of an accumulation of such evidence.

Since Looney first identified Shakespeare with Edward de Vere some 70 years ago, numerous additional pieces of indirect evidence have surfaced supporting the Oxfordian hypothesis. That one such small set of coincidences, such as the set offered here, should be selected as “definitive proof” is inappropriate. Instead, this evidence should be considered as adding to other items of indirect evidence. For instance, the names “Rosenkranz” and “Guildenstern,” coinciding with the names of these characters in *Hamlet*, appear in a document recently discovered in the British Library, listing the guests for a state dinner in Denmark attended and reported upon by the Earl of Oxford’s brother-in-law, Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby d’Eresby.¹¹ The present work is offered to the discussion of the authorship

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question not as constituting a “proof” itself, but of adding to the preponderance of such evidence, which seems to the authors to be overwhelming.



Notes

- ¹ Warren Hope and Kim Holston, *The Shakespeare Controversy* (1992).
- ² J. Thomas Looney, “*Shakespeare*” Identified in *Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford* (1949), 23-63.
- ³ Charlton Ogburn Jr., *The Mysterious William Shakespeare—The Myth and the Reality*, (1992), 3-22.
- ⁴ William P. Fowler, *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford's Letters* (1986), xxii, footnote. While the authors discovered the double meanings of Table I independently, similar double meanings were first noted by Fowler.
- ⁵ The term “coincidence” is used throughout the discussion as “occurring in conjunction with,” whether that conjunction has a causal relationship or not. The term “chance” is used to indicate a coincidence which does *not* proceed from a causal relationship.
- ⁶ William A. Neilson and Charles J. Hill, eds., *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, (1942), 179.
- ⁷ Bernard M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, (London, 1930), 197-8, and Looney, op. cit., 509.
- ⁸ Louis Auchincloss, *Motiveless Malignity* (1969), 133-134; see also Ogburn, op. cit., 568
- ⁹ Bette Talvacchia, “The Rare Italian Master and the Posture of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*,” *The Elizabethan Review* 1 (Spring 1993): 40.
- ¹⁰ J. H. P. Pafford, ed., *The Winter's Tale* (1966), xxvii-xxviii.
- ¹¹ John Mucci, Newsletter of the Shakespeare Oxford Society 29 (Winter 1993): 18.

