

lewd life and pernicious practices, that all may speedily help to amend that is amiss. Amen, say all, with me.

Finis.

De Vere is Shakespeare: Evidence from the biography and wordplay.
by Dennis Baron

Cambridge & New York: Oleander Press, 1997.

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Say what you will about the supporters of the Earl of Oxford as the true Shakespeare, they are certainly industrious people who produce big, fat books. You wouldn't want to drop the Ogburns' *This Star of England* (1270 pp) or *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (800+pp) on your toe. Sobran's recent *Alias Shakespeare* is a substantial tome too. Even a fictive autobiography of Oxford, *The Lost Chronicle of Edward de Vere* by Andrew Field, runs to 260pp in the Penguin edition. It is something of a relief, then, to open Dennis Baron's slim paperback, which takes a mere 130 pages to promote the cause of Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl. And what's more, it promotes him from an unorthodox and striking angle—though striking in not quite the way the author perhaps hoped for.

Despite the sub-title of his book, Baron actually wastes very little time on the biographical and chronological conundrums which have so exercised the Ogburns, Sobran and other defenders. Probably the most critical difficulty with the Oxford attribution, as with any of the Shakespeare claimants, is just why the secret should have been preserved inviolate into Jacobean and Stuart times, decades after the only people with any conceivable reason to keep it were in their graves. The sheer implausibility of this, among a pack of ex-courtiers and garrulous old theatrical folk who surely relished a tasty bit of literary gossip just as much as their counterparts do today, troubles Baron not a whit: the secret, he says airily, "gradually, with each succeeding generation" was simply forgotten.

Baron's case is simply that extensive wordplay in the texts reveals the name of their true author. We are not talking here about ciphers. Once popular among the Baconians, ciphers seem to have gone rather out of fashion since professional cryptographers, using the same codes, managed to extract the

names of unlikely authors, such as Donald Duck, from the Collected Works. No, Baron's case relies on a much simpler kind of wordplay. He argues that Oxford, forbidden by the Elizabethan Establishment from putting his name to the plays, built into the texts puns on the components of his name—chiefly the 'de Vere' part, but also his family motto "Vero Nihil Verius"—in order to assert his authorship to his own and future generations. "He used," says Baron, "every word that he could find that would tell his name". Not a difficult matter, one might think, to pun on a name of four letters, of which two are the most common vowel in English.

But wait; if we are talking about name puns, isn't it one of the very few relatively uncontested facts about the Sonnets that the author puns unambiguously on his first name? And that name isn't "Ned", is it?:

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy will
And will to boot, and will in overplus;

No problem here, says Baron. "Will" is actually a pun on the Latin 'aVERE', to desire. And if you are so hardened a skeptic that that doesn't convince you, then surely you will grant that "probably" Edward de Vere was known "among his literary and theatrical friends" by the nickname "Will". Of course: silly not to have thought of that.

Baron tells us that his quest began when he noticed that "Shakespeare uses the words 'true' and 'truth' very often"; indeed, "far more often than necessary" (whatever that may mean). Clearly the real author was punning each time on the Latin 'vere', 'verus' to assert his identity. But Baron isn't satisfied with that; he decides that the syllable 'vir' (L. 'man') can be pressed into service too, on the grounds that it is pronounced the same as 'Vere'. That captures dozens more words for punning service: 'virgin', 'virago' and 'orchard' (L. 'viridarium')--just think how many scenes are set in an orchard, says Baron confidently. And even that is not enough. Just 'via' will do, apparently; so every mention of 'street', 'road' or 'way' shouts out 'Vere' via 'via'. Then there's 'rain' ('pluvia'), 'inconstant' ('devia'), and dozens, perhaps hundreds, of others.

But why limit oneself to the pun(n)y possibilities of English and Latin alone? James Joyce went further, much further; and, anticipating him, Oxford, who spoke several languages (but do we actually know how many, and which ones?), took the same path—at least, according to Baron. Oxford's procedure was, we are told, was to take "foreign words that were puns on his name and, after translating them into English, [to use] them throughout the plays". Allowing multilingual puns from Spanish, Italian, French and Old English opens up an inexhaustible vein, especially if you take notice, as Baron does, only of the form of the word that contains the magic letters, ignoring the inflected form required by the sentence. There are hundreds of Latin verbs of the '≠ere' conjugation, and quite a few have an infinitive ending in '≠vere'.

Then there's 'blood' from 'vermeil' (O. Fr.), 'fire' from 'vire' (O.E). . . . The possibilities are almost endless as Baron, armed with a swag of foreign dictionaries, goes haring off down the echoing corridors of assonance.

How does all this work out in practice? Well, let's turn to Sonnet VI, where Oxford admonishes the Fair Youth:

Be not self-willed, for thou art much too fair
To be death's conquest and make worms [F. "ver"] thy heir

Since every self-respecting Oxfordian knows that the Fair Youth was Southampton, and Oxford's son by the Queen herself, clearly the fond father is encouraging his son to marry, lest 'vers' (clearly de Vere senior) turns out to be the sole 'heir' the son will leave behind him. What could be plainer? Well, actually, I made that one up. Because, inexplicably, Baron doesn't mention any wordplay on the very obvious French 'ver'. Perhaps he thought the 'Oxford as maggot' pun doesn't quite strike the note he wanted.

In fact, though, my imaginary example is just as good—indeed, it's a lot better— than some of the excruciating puns Baron does insist are present. Because what Baron is asking us to believe is this. Every time the Shakespeare texts mention 'glass' (F. 'verre'); or 'summer' (Sp. 'verano'); every time we hear a 'nothing', a 'nevertheless' or a 'yet' (all forms of L. 'nihil'); every 'shame' (L. 'verecundus'); every 'fast horse' (L. 'veredus'); and, not least of course, every 'never' and every 'every': all of these cunning words, for four hundred years, have been shrieking out the authorship of Oxford without anyone's noticing. Only now is the secret out at last.

But wait, there's more. Wherever any one of the -ver-, -vir- or even v- words is to be found with a nothing/nihil word nearby, Baron calls this conjunction a "motto pun". There are said to be between 26 and 40 of them in every one of the plays, a figure which Baron finds deeply impressive; in fact, it pretty well wraps the argument up, as far as he is concerned.

It doesn't seem to have occurred to Baron that, if his case is good, then to Oxford's already rather sullied reputation we must add the charge of his having been the most boringly egotistical writer who ever lived. For who were these puns intended for? Clearly not for the groundlings, who, simple souls, thought that when Mercutio says of his sexually fatigued friend Romeo that he has come "without his roe" they were only being offered a neat dirty joke. Clearly only an aristocratic audience, one which was already in the know, could be expected to spot the pun that Romeo without his "Ro" leaves "me-O" ["Me Oxford"]. Well, don't groan: it's ingenious, at least. But why should that same audience, or any future audience, need up to two thousand maddeningly repetitive puns on the author's name in a single play (Baron's own figure), and few of them clever and most of them horribly forced? Isn't that rather--how shall I put it?--over-egging the pudding? Baron's only explanation for this is that it was

“a kind of joke” between Oxford and the informed members of his audience. If so, then it was a joke that must have worn very thin after some 50,000 name puns contained in the whole dramatic works (again, Baron’s own figure). In fact, Baron seems to be saying that the plays were actually written around the puns: “every scene in every play, every episode, every twist and turn of the plot was constructed from these hidden puns . . . in fact almost every single sentence was constructed from at least one of these hidden puns”. So let’s get this straight: these plays exist in the precisely the form they do—right down to the structure of their constituent sentences—only because their author was proud enough of them to want to immortalise his name over and over again in them? Isn’t there a rather tight vicious circle in this logic?

Nor does Baron stop there. He is not content to secure only the Shakespeare canon for his man. It would give most pun-hunters pause when they discovered that plays by Marlowe, Lyly and Kyd all contain surprising numbers of Vere-style motto puns. There are said to be thirty in *Doctor Faustus* alone. But not Baron. Do those authors’ plays too have a surprising number of ‘trues’ and ‘verilys’ in them? Well, then, the conclusion is obvious: Oxford in the 1580s was an even busier man than we had thought.

Actually, his pen was busy much earlier than that. For there is incontrovertible evidence, says our author, that Oxford wrote not only *Romeo and Juliet*, but the source poem as well, which ingenuous critics, foolishly beguiled by the abbreviated “Ar. Br.” on the title page, have given to Arthur Brooke. The fact that Brooke’s *Tragicall Historye* appeared when the Earl was twelve years old merely proves he was the most precocious of authors. I’ll spare you the series of tormented puns centred on ‘brook’, ‘oxen’ and ‘ford’ which leads to this inescapable conclusion. . . .

Enough! As Dr Johnson said about the plot of another work from the pen of the Stratford boor, *Cymbeline*, it is useless to criticise “unresisting imbecility”. This little book, tissue of absurdities though it is, raises an interesting question. It’s hard to imagine how any serious, sincere Oxfordian wouldn’t want to put aside *De Vere is Shakespeare* with raised eyebrows and an embarrassed shrug. And yet it comes with an approving introduction from Christopher Dams of the British De Vere Society. Can the Oxford claimants really be quite so desperate as that for new allies?