A Matter of Pronunciation
Shakespeare, Oxford and the Petty-School Question

Robin Fox

In "Shakespeare, Oxford and the Grammar School Question" (*The Oxfordian*, 2009), I tackled the issue of the author's supposed direct knowledge of grammar schools as evidenced in the plays. The argument is familiar. If the author were indeed a nobleman how would he have been able to reproduce a grammar-school lesson (as in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for example) or a schoolmaster like Holofernes (in *Love's Labour's Lost*)? Since he would have been privately tutored, he would have had no knowledge of such a lesson or such a master. Therefore, the orthodox argue, it is more likely that these plays were written by Will of Stratford who could have attended the local Free Grammar School at Stratford-on-Avon, although there are no records that he did.

Readers may refer to the original article for my refutation of this argument. In brief, Oxford had intimate connections with the management of the grammar school his grandfather founded, was also intimate with grammar-school boys in his personal and professional life, including the grandson of the author of the approved Latin grammar used in such schools and directly quoted in *Merry Wives*. The Welsh model of Sir Hugh Evans, the Latin-grammar teacher, could have in fact been one of his employees, Henry Evans, and most effectively, that the education of noblemen, including the royal family, followed the grammar-school curriculum exactly. In the case of Holofernes, I agreed with other commentators that he was based much more on Il Dottore in the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* than on an English schoolmaster: something Oxford would have known about directly and Will of Stratford would not. On this latter point, however, there is more to be said.

> ***If the author were indeed a nobleman how would he have been able to reproduce a grammar-school lesson (as in* The Merry Wives of Windsor, *for example) or a schoolmaster like Holofernes (in* Love's Labour's Lost*)?***

My major source for the grammar-school issue is of course T. W. Baldwin's monumental *William Shakspere's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*. In those two volumes he deals at some length with Holofernes, but he also sets him up as the consummate English schoolmaster in his shorter but equally erudite *William Shakspere's Petty School.* (The spelling of the name is his.) His method is the same: he looks to all the information he can find on Petty Schools, then he looks into the plays to see how this is reflected therein. When the reflection is found, and it is, then this is taken to be an insight into William's own school experience.

Of course the whole enterprise is open to the objection that we have no direct evidence that William went either to the Free Grammar school in Stratford, or to a Petty School before that, and this is true. But for Oxfordians it raises the equally interesting question of how such school experience could be directly reflected in the plays if Oxford never had it.

Boys who wished to enter grammar school at age seven were expected to be able to read and write English and to do numbers. Henceforth their education would be in Latin. At some schools the older boys, called "ushers," might teach younger ones their letters, but this was less usual than having the rudiments taught to them (and occasionally some girls) in Petty School (for the *petties*—the little ones). The town records show that such teaching by ushers was expressly forbidden at the Stratford Grammar School, so there must have been a Petty School. There was

one recorded in 1604, and it had been there "for some time."

Much has been made of William's parents being illiterate, but this was not unusual and would not have prevented them from trying to get an education for their son. Even the most literate parents did not teach the rudiments to their children at home. The rich employed tutors and the burgesses sent their children to a Petty School. These were private schools usually held in the home of the master (or sometimes mistress), where for a small fee under-sevens would be schooled in their "ABC and Catechism." Such a teacher was therefore known as an "Abcedarius." Falconbridge in *King John* refers to someone giving answers "like an Absey book" thus using the popular term for the ABC. Falconbridge was thinking of the "Catechism" part where rote answers to the questions were learned and recited. (I still know some by heart from my pre-confirmation days in the Church of England.) In the absence of a Petty School, the local vicar or curate was expected to give children some instruction in reading and writing, mostly the former. Many people could read a little but not write and signed with a mark. John Shakespeare was probably in this category.

Baldwin looks at length at the attempt to regulate such early schooling by the State and the State Church. The central authorities under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth I tried to put a firm Protestant and Anglican grip on the grammar schools. They were equally thorough in using the Petty School system to inculcate the politically and religiously correct values in the youngest of their citizens.

Literacy and Loyalty

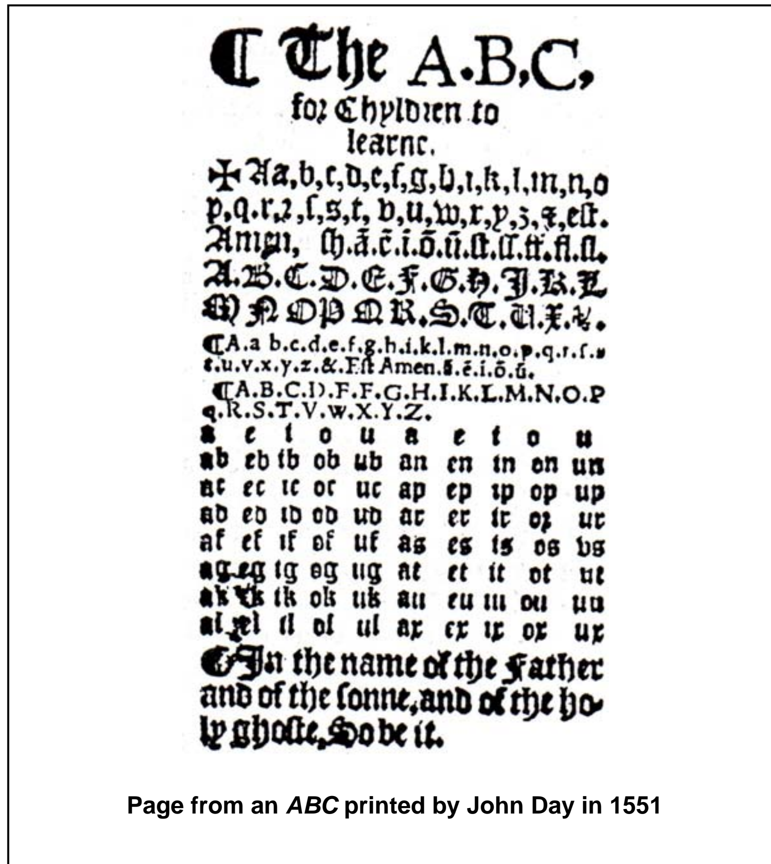
It was not just literacy that was aimed at but a loyal and Anglican literacy. The most convincing part of Baldwin's argument is perhaps this stressing of the author's Anglicanism, even though, as he scrupulously points out, at this time the Church of England was both Roman in its forms and Puritan in its leanings, so evidence of both can be found in the works. (Again, having been raised in the High Church tradition I fully understand this convergence.) But the plays, according to Baldwin, display an author who was at least a conforming Anglican, with a sound knowledge of the basics.

To the end of uniformity then, Petty School texts were as regulated as those of the upper schools. The standard book until 1570 was John Day's 1553 *The ABC with the Catechism*, which included, as well as the questions and answers of the catechism, the Lord's Prayer and a variety of Graces ("before meat," "after dinner," etc.) This is probably what the Stratford petty school would have used in William's time, and Baldwin's detective work shows indeed that most references in the plays are to this, not to the later and subsequently better known ABC and Catechism by Alexander Nowell in 1570. If William had been at school in Stratford, he would have been a year or so too early for Nowell. But before starting on the ABC proper, children learned their letters and numbers from a hornbook. No examples survive but they are often referred to and described—and we shall see such reference in the plays. The page of letters, and usually the Lord's Prayer, was pasted onto a kind of wooden paddle and covered with a sheet of translucent horn. The idea was, according to commentators of the day, to protect it from the destructiveness of young children.

The Plays

So to the matter of the Petty School in the plays. Stray references abound like the one in *King John*, but as with the Grammar School, Baldwin leans heavily on the example of Holofernes, in *Love's Labour's Lost,* as the prototype petty-school master (in his chapter "Shakspere's Abcedarius") and we must follow this out.

Technically what Holofernes runs is indeed a petty school, and part of the fun of his character is that his pretension to learning ridiculously outstrips the demands of his humble calling. Baldwin is caught between acknowledging this and at the same time trying to paint him as the consummate petty-school master. He can't have it both ways. Petty-school teachers were only required to be minimally literate themselves in order to teach letters to youngsters, and were often "men and women of trade as Taylors, Weavers, Shop Keepers, Seamsters, and such other as have under-taken the charge of teaching others." (Quoted by Baldwin from Edmund Coote, *The English Schoolmaster*, 1596.)



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¶ A.B.C.D.E.F.G.H.I.K.L.M.N.O.P
Q.R.S.T.V.W.X.Y.Z.

a	e	i	o	u	a	e	i	o	u
ab	eb	ib	ob	ub	an	en	in	on	un
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¶ In the name of the Father and of the sonne, and of the holy ghoste, So be it.

Page from an *ABC* printed by John Day in 1551

But let us look at one of the most puzzling pieces of dialogue in the play and see where it leads us. Holfernes is in constant dispute with Don Armado, much interrupted by Moth. In V.i.47-54, this exchange occurs:

> *Armado*. [*To Hol.*] Monsieur, are you not lettered?
> *Moth*. Yes, yes; he teaches the hornbook. What is a, b, spelt backward, with the horn on his head?
> *Holofernes*. Ba, pueritia, with a horn added.
> *Moth*. Ba, most silly sheep with a horn. You hear his learning.

Pueritia is "callowness" and is directed of course at Moth. It takes Baldwin half a chapter to sort this one out, but the reference to Holofernes' humble functions as a hornbook teacher is obvious. "A" and "b" are the first two letters of the book, and backwards they spell "ba" hence the sheep. Note that in the page from Day's 1551 *ABC*, the syllabary, which starts after the vowels, begins with "ab". Also, for grammarians of the day, the English vowels formed "oueia" —close to the Spanish pronunciation for "sheep" (*oveja*.) The pun thickens. Baldwin speculates that Moth might have been referring to Holofernes' bachelor's degree: "BA" or "AB," as it was then written.

What Baldwin, despite his erudition, perhaps misses is the usual Shakespearean bawdy with the reference to the "horn." According to Eric Partridge (in *Shakespeare's Bawdy*) this is always a euphemism for the erect penis, as in the modern slang word "horny." (In the plural it always refers to cuckoldry.) Moth would not have missed this chance.

Don Adriano de Armado ("the Braggart") is generally understood to be a caricature of Don Antonio Pérez, although Eva Turner Clark (1931) thought he was Theodore Agrippe D'Aubigny, and others have suggested Phillip Sidney. Pérez was a notorious (vain, pompous and deceitful) multilingual Spaniard at the Elizabethan court. We know he attended the wedding of Oxford's daughter Elizabeth to the Earl of Derby (Hamill, 2009). He may even have inspired the character of Iago. In a crucial passage for Baldwin (V.i.19-29), Holofernes rants on about Armado's absurdities of English pronunciation. The details are important here:

> *Holofernes*: He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument. I abhor such fanatical phantasimes, such insociable and point-devised companions; such rackers of orthography, as to speak dout, fine, when he should say doubt; det, when he should pronounce debt, - d,e,b,t, not d,e,t: he clepeth a calf, cauf; half, hauf: neighbour vocatur nebour; neigh abreviated ne. This is abhominable, - which he would call abbominable: it insinuateth me of insanie: anne intellegis domine? To make frantic, lunatic.

This is vintage Holofernes and gives modern producers headaches. Is he saying that the "b" in debt, and the "l" in calf should be pronounced, likewise the "gh" in neighbour, and if so, how? The same with "abhominable." Should he then be pronouncing words like this throughout the play? Only at the cost of being totally unintelligible. And can he be serious? Well, it transpires he can. He was taking a position on a great intellectual issue of the day: the correct pronunciation of English and the classical languages. For Holofernes ("the Pedant") English should be scrupulously pronounced as spelled. In the grammatical language of the day *Prosodia* should conform to *Orthographia*. But to such luminaries as William Bullokar, Richard Mulcaster and William Kempe, redundant consonants should be ignored, and their advice (and Armado's practice) has prevailed.

Debt, Calf and Half

There has been a suggestion that Holofernes is a caricature of Mulcaster, but if so he is contradicting himself. The suggestion that he might be Sidney makes some sense in that it is hard to understand how a Spaniard, however multilingual, should have had his English pronunciation taken seriously in the first place. We don't know where Sidney stood in the debate.

All things considered, it is obvious that the author of *Love's Labour's Lost* knew of the pronunciation dispute and even of its minor niceties. The examples Holofernes uses, like *debt*, *calf*, *half* and even *abhominable* were standard in the debate. Mulcaster writes the correct pronunciation exactly as does the author: *cauf, det, hauf* etc. Also, Holofernes' use of *fine,*

meaning roughly “abbreviated” comes from the debate on the pronunciation of Latin and Greek. Had he taken the alternative side, according to Baldwin, he would evidently have said *breve.* Will of Stratford might of course have learned about these fine details of the debate at some time and, according to Baldwin, as he entered Petty School in 1569, “some echoes of the conflicting opinions and practice on the point are not unlikely to have reached him there.” Perhaps, but it is hard to imagine a five-year-old who is just about to learn his first letters picking up the minute details of an academic argument among the most learned men in the country. There is, however, more than a strong possibility, there is almost a certainty, that young Oxford did.

Latin and Greek

Central to the debate had been the issue of how to pronounce the classical languages, Latin and Greek (particularly the latter) and how this enabled us to fix on the “correct” pronunciation of English. The system the enlightened wished to follow was, like most things educational at the time, inspired by Erasmus. Two books central to this debate had been John Hart’s *An Orthographie* of 1569, and the *De recta & emendata Linguae Anglicae Scriptione, Dialogus*, written by Sir Thomas Smith in 1568. Oxfordians will immediately be alert to Smith who was of course the immensely learned diplomat, scholar and statesman in whose household Oxford was first tutored from the age of four (1554-62.) Smith’s companion-in-arms in the matter of pronunciation was Sir John Speke of St. John’s College, Cambridge, where Oxford was briefly registered as a boy and where he was again registered when he received an honorary degree in 1564.

The young de Vere was raised in the Cecil household from 1562, after his eight-year sojourn with Smith. Thus the men who were at the center of the debate on pronunciation and spelling surrounded Oxford in his childhood and youth, and were responsible for his education.

St. John’s was of course also the college of William Cecil, later Lord Burghley. Speke’s sister Mary kept a wine shop outside the college, where Cecil used to visit. Cecil eventually married her, thus becoming Speke’s brother-in-law, and later the orphaned Oxford’s guardian and father-in-law. The young de Vere was raised in the Cecil household from 1562, after his eight-year sojourn with Smith. Thus the men who were at the center of the debate on pronunciation and spelling surrounded Oxford in his childhood and youth, and were responsible for his education. He had the run of their libraries and the benefit of their wisdom, (Hughes 2006) and with his love of language, and his talent for languages, he would have been fascinated by the very concerns that inspire the outrage of Holofernes.

Looney thinks Holofernes is based on Gabriel Harvey, a pedantic rhetorician, and that his name is a convoluted anagram of “Hobbinol”—the name Harvey’s friend Edmund Spencer used for him. Giving the schoolmaster the name of a famous and lurid biblical character seems to be just part of the mocking of his pretentions. Then again, Thomas Nashe did (in print) call Harvey “Huff-Nuff” as part of their ongoing battle of words. Although Harvey is not on record as taking a stand on the pronunciation issue, he did try (disastrously) to impose Latin prosodic standards on English verse. He was a relative of Sir Thomas Smith, was a pupil of Mulcaster at Merchant Taylors, and a Cambridge man (Trinity Hall, right next to St. John’s.) He knew, and had an on-off relationship with, all the principals in the debate, including Cecil and the Earl of Oxford. Oxford showered the young Harvey with favors and he returned the compliment with a highly flattering commentary on Oxford’s literary talents. Then he wrote some lampooning verses about the Earl and there was a cooling of relationships, which Looney sees incarnated in Berowne’s

attitude to Holofernes as a Judas: a "kissing traitor" as well as a plodding pedant. So Looney may have a point in choosing Harvey as his model. Harvey was a linguistic pedant with archaic preferences and so was a ripe subject for an Oxford caricature when crossed with *Il Dottore*.

Arthur Golding

It does not end there. Baldwin introduces us in his first chapter to a voice both dramatic and poetic, which spoke out on the issue of uniformity in spelling and pronunciation.

> How shall a man assure true quantitie
> Of time, or tune? Or if he would expresse
> The difference, and the native propertie
> Of brode North speech and Southern smoothedness:
> How might he set it down with cumlinesse,
> Where men in writing doe so fondly dote,
> As nought is done by rule and all by rote?
>
> But were there once a sound Orthographie
> Set out by learning and advised skill,
> (Which certesse might be done full easilie)
> And then confirmed by the Souveraines will,
> (For else would blind and cankered custom still
> His former errors wilfully maintaine
> And bring us to his *Chaos* once again:)

What was needed, according to the writer, was the monarch's authority to impose a national standard to put order into the chaos of spelling. This is part of a long poem that was an introduction to John Baret's *An Alvarie or Quadruple Dictionary* in 1580. The writer was Arthur Golding. Golding was of course the famous translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1565-7) who was Oxford's uncle (his mother's half-brother) and one of the great influences on the young nobleman's life. He was also a good friend of Thomas Smith and might have been instrumental in having Oxford tutored in Smith's household. Here then is Golding weighing in poetically on the great pronunciation-spelling debate, coming down on the side of uniformity, and royally enforced uniformity at that.

Much has been written about the Oxford-Golding connection and I do not need to repeat all of it it here. (See e.g., Ogburn, 1984 ch. 21). It is enough to know that it existed and that the influence of Golding on his nephew (and most possibly student) in the years with Cecil was profound. But one aspect of it is worth noting for our present purposes: the argument that the nephew, not the uncle, wrote the Ovid translation—an idea that probably originated with Ogburn. Let us remember that in dedicating his translation of Trogus Pompeius to his nephew, Golding solemnly adjures him not to "do harm to your native country" by becoming "either a counterfiet Protestant or a perverse papist or a cold and careless neuter." As Mark Anderson (2005) notes, Golding saw his nephew in the end as "a wayward soul" not a serious Calvinist like his uncle. Several scholars (Prechter, 2007) have called attention to the disparity between the Calvinistic, moralistic, serious and deadly literal translations by Golding—which were voluminous, and the levity, raciness, creativity and rollicking style of the amorous and decidedly immoral verses of Ovid, in the translation that Ezra Pound called "one of the most beautiful books in the language."

Even John Frederick Nims (1965), an editor who never doubts that Golding did it, calls it "An odd collaboration, that between the sophisticated darling of a dissolute society, the author of a

scandalous handbook on seduction, and the respectable country gentleman who spent much of his life translating the sermons and commentaries of John Calvin." Sam C. Saunders (2005) painstakingly documents Golding's translation work from 1562 to 1570 and both notes the grim seriousness of it and the time taken to produce it and wonders how Golding could have fit in something as arduous—and as different, as the Ovid. It was physically impossible, he concludes.

Paul H. Altriocci in the boldly titled "Edward de Vere as Translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" (2005) had already concluded that Golding was unlikely to have been the author of the Ovid translation and that it was much more likely that his talented teenage nephew did it—but as a nobleman (and most certainly at Cecil's insistence) declined to put his name on the work, leaving it to his commoner uncle. Golding might have had some role, as in perhaps providing a literal translation for Oxford to work on. His forte after all was determinedly literal translations, while the Ovid rendering adds two-thousand-five-hundred purely invented lines to the original.

Altriocci actually quotes from Golding's poem in Baret—one of the few original pieces of his verse known to us, only to show how pedestrian and literal Golding's stanzas were, and how unlike the Ovid translation —or rather re-creation of Ovid—in English. James Brooks (2005) demonstrated how there could have been two translators because of marked differences in style between books 1-8 and 9-15. (The first five books were published in 1565, the whole thing in 1567.) Prechter notes that Golding's translation work, while he was with Oxford, was entirely in Roman history, and that when Oxford left the uncle swtiched back to his pious translations of Calvin and moralistic Puritan tracts.

The Baret Verses

Could Golding have started the *Metamorphoses* and Oxford taken it over and revised it? We shall never know for certain. The important point for our present purposes is that Golding adds to the list of intellectual luminaries who were part of Oxford's life and education and one of whose major concerns was the pronunciation-spelling debate: *Orthographia* and *Prosodia*. There is no way Oxford could have escaped being caught up in it, and if perhaps he and not Golding wrote the Baret verses, he might even have been involved in it. I think that despite the narrow and technical subject matter, which limits poetical creativity, the Baret verses do show some flare for rhyme and an ability to make that serious subject come alive in verse. "As naught is done by rule and all by rote" and "blind and cankered custom" sound very Shakespearean. The latter is an example of hendiadys, a strong marker of Shakespearean style, as in "abstract and brief chronicles" etc. (Egan, 2009.) Prechter however thinks the totality of the Baret verses are typical Golding doggerel, comparable to the excruciating verse in the introductions to the Ovid volumes, which it seems Golding himself did write, and which is so unlike the precocious, almost boyish exuberance and inventiveness of the translation proper.

Oxford was not on such intimate terms with Golding as late as 1580, so if the Baret verses were actually written then they are unlikely to be his; if written earlier they could well be. But this is all speculation; Oxford's deep connection with the men and the issue is not. That he drew on the details of the pronunciation-spelling dispute in the character of Holofernes makes huge sense: he was poking affectionate fun at his teachers, relatives and acquaintances, and the passion they infused into the minutiae of their intellectual arguments. This fun is intensified by crossing them with the absurdly pedantic character of *Il Dottore* from the *Commedia*. This makes far more sense than any speculations about what Will of Stratford might have picked up at age five in a provincial Petty School from a teacher who was probably only just literate himself.

Even so, the sceptic will say, what about the "hornbook" references, and the references to the *ABC,* which suggest that the author learned his first letters in such a school.? Again, it ain't

necessarily so. As I have argued (Fox, 2009) Baldwin amply demonstrates that the teaching of princes and nobility proceded absolutely along the same lines as Grammar School: the same texts in the same order. But the little princes, princesses and noblemen first had to learn their letters. And where did they learn them? From the prescribed *ABC* and Catechism books that Henry VIII had insisted on in his injunctions as a means of cementing his religious revolution. Little prince Edward in 1543, as Baldwin describes, had his approved Lily-Collet Latin grammar bound together with his equally approved *ABC* and Catechism, all in vellum and now in the British Museum (C. 21. b. 4.) Perhaps the privileged children would not have initially used an actual hornbook; we don't know. There would have been less concern with fragility and expense of replacement. But they used the same "Absey book." Oxford's connection with his local Grammar School and his association all his adult life with former Petty School boys in his bohemian circle, would have been source enough for the hornbook itself, if we need to look for a source. The use of hornbooks was after all common knowledge.

Prince Edward's first tutor was Richard Cox (to whom he wrote affectionate and respectful letters in schoolboy Latin) under the direction of John Cheke and that same group of men from St. John's College, Cambridge (including Roger Ascham and William Grindal) who were to be as determinative of the education of Oxford as they were of the royal children. (Cox, like Smith, had been Provost of Eton, and a designer of the grammar-school curriculum.) These privileged children, as adults, would have seen Moth's joke about the hornbook and the "Ba, most silly sheep" as readily as any petty-school alumnus, and would have been much more alive to Holofernes and his seemingly ridiculous ideas on pronunciation. Oxford in particular, with his connections and teachers who were at the heart of the pronunciation debate, was in a completely privileged position in this regard. The notion then that only someone with a petty-school and grammar-school background could have written at least *Love's Labour's Lost*, can be dismissed. On the direct evidence (to say nothing of the knowledge of the court of Navarre) Edward de Vere is a far better candidate than Will of Stratford could ever be.

Note

The quotes from *Love's Labour's Lost* are directly from Baldwin (1943) who stays close to the Folio and does not edit. I would like to thank Stephanie Hughes, John Shahan, Robert Prechter, Michael Marcus and Frank Davis for their help and comments.

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