An Oxfordian Triumph

Anonymous sets the cat among the pigeons.

First, it’s a marvelous movie, made with all the skill director Roland Emmerich is famous for, and enriched with great performances by Vanessa Redgrave (Queen Elizabeth I), Rhys Ifans (Edward de Vere) and Sebastian Armesto (Ben Jonson). The story is well told, cutting back and forth between the young de Vere (played by Jamie Campbell Bower) and Princess Elizabeth (Joelly Richardson), and their later years, when they confront the consequences of their youthful passion.

Yes, the plot embraces the “Prince Tudor” hypothesis, by which Henry Wriothesley, third earl of Southampton, is the illegitimate offspring of Oxford and the Queen, but the whole thing is so well handled that this controversial possibility is given credibility and made to do solid dramatic work. It is placed at the heart of the Shakespeare mystery, accounting largely for Oxford’s need to conceal forever his identity as the great dramatic poet. His love for his son trumps his ambitions as a playwright.

It’s important to note too that this theme does not overwhelm or cheapen the story’s main thrust that Shaksper the actor was never Shakespeare, the greatest writer who ever lived. Rafe Spall makes a wonderfully weasel-like opportunist, who seizes a confused moment in the theater to claim credit for Oxford’s work and then ruthlessly blackmails him forever afterwards. He’s an illiterate actor with an eye for the main chance, taking his smarmy bows before the cheering groundlings with sufficient aplomb to make the fraud appear possible. One sees the myth in its creation and understands how a poorly educated provincial nobody succeeded to literature’s chiepest crown by a combination of guile and good luck. One can almost hear the gods laughing.

Hovering behind the scenes is Ben Jonson, a second-rate dramatist to whom Oxford first offers the role of front-man. Like Peter Shaffer’s Salieri, he is the prince of medioc-
For this triumph, Oxfordians will and should take credit. It’s remarkable how a tiny group of just a few hundred largely amateur scholars have managed to shake the great Shakespearean establishment to its foundations.