

Verse Parallels between Oxford and Shakespeare

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In numerous articles, including three for *The Oxfordian*, E.Y. Elliott and Robert J. Valenza—Professors of American Political Institutions, and Mathematics, respectively, at Claremont McKenna College—have argued that the poetry of Edward de Vere is nothing like that of Shakespeare. Their conclusion is based on computer analyses.

In “The Shakespeare Clinic and the Oxfordians” (*The Oxfordian*, 2010), the authors singled out for mockery one of Oxford’s poems from *A Paradyse of daynty devises* (1576). They contrasted the final stanza with a passage in *Hamlet*, referring to the two sources’ “glaring stylometric mismatches” (2010, 149). They asked and answered: “Is there a stylometric match with each other? Anything but.” (2010, 138.) Elliott and Valenza concluded: “The styles seem to be worlds apart” (2000, 90), and reported that Shakespeare scholars agreed with their position, as “nine out of ten of the top scorers on our Shakespeare Golden Ear test” (2010, 138) apparently found nothing in common with this poem and the verse of Shakespeare. They also posted May’s stark assertion, “nothing in Oxford’s canonical verse in any way hints at an affinity with the poetry of William Shakespeare.” (2004, 242.)

But the collector of the verses in *Paradyse*, Richard Edwards, died in 1566, suggesting that Oxford probably wrote these poems before age sixteen. Among the most effective counters to Elliott and Valenza is that one hardly expects teenage poetry to read like mature verse, especially after years of theatrical experience and feedback.

Stylistic Affinities

Remarkably, however, it turns out that there are stylistic affinities between Oxford’s work and Shakespeare’s. Elliott and Valenza, whose algorithms of course do as they are told, simply overlook what they were not instructed to find. The human mind is different from a computer. It is weaker in some ways and superior in others. Perhaps the computers used in Elliott and Valenza’s stylometric studies are not yet programmed with the kinds of *literary* matches that a human mind can discern. The best poem to illustrate this is precisely the one they feature as their Exhibit A.

The Loss of My Good Name

By Edward de Vere

Framed in the front of forlorn hope, past all recovery
I stayless stand t’abide the shock of shame and infamy;

My life, through lingering long, is lodged in lair of loathsome ways,
 My death delayed to keep from life the harm of hapless days;
 My sprites, my heart, my wit and force in deep distress are drowned;
 The only loss of my good name is of these griefs the ground.

And since my mind, my wit, my head, my voice and tongue are weak
 To utter, move, devise, conceive, sound forth, declare and speak
 Such piercing plaints as answer might, or would, my woeful case,
 Help crave I must, and crave I will, with tears upon my face
 Of all that may in heaven or hell, in earth or air, be found
 To wail with me this loss of mine, as of these griefs the ground.

Help gods, help saints, help sprites and powers that in the heaven do dwell,
 Help ye that are to wail, ay wont, ye howling hounds of hell,
 Help man, help beasts, help birds and worms that on the earth doth toil,
 Help fish, help fowl that flocks and feeds upon the salt-sea soil,
 Help echo that in air doth flee, shrill voices to resound
 To wail this loss of my good name, as of these griefs the ground.

This text above has been edited in minor ways, though none that affects my reading. Apart from the title, which I supply, the *Paradyse* rendition (number 30 in the collection) begins, somewhat mysteriously: “Fraud is the front of Fortune.” Aside from its obscurity, the line itself is missing a beat. My conclusion is that it’s probably a publishing or printing error. The alternate first line, “Framed in the front of forlorn hope,” which fits the poem’s fourteeners, is the one I accept as accurate.

Poems were generally untitled in the 16th century, so scholars usually refer to them by their first lines. Since this one is uncertain, I have opted to call it “The Loss of My Good Name,” after its repeated theme.

Parallels and Connections

Contrary to Elliott and Valenza, there turn out to be a number of connections between Oxford’s youthful poem and lines from Shakespeare. Let’s begin by examining one item from each stanza.

In the first stanza, Oxford uses alliteration in “My life, though lingering long, is lodged in lair of loathsome ways.” Who else alliterates the letter *l* while connecting *life* and *lingering*, as well as *loathsome* with a type of *lair*? Here is Shakespeare in *Cymbeline* (V.v.19): “feed on life and lingering,” and in *Henry VI Part 2* (III.ii,174): “lean-faced Envy in her loathsome cave.”

In the second stanza, Oxford presents a list of verbs: “To utter, move, devise, conceive, sound forth, declare and speak.” Who else does it? Here is Shakespeare in *All’s Well That Ends Well* (II.i.33): “they...do wear...muster true gait, eat, speak, and move.” Observe that two of the verbs are the same.

In the final stanza, the one that Elliott and Valenza most disparage, Oxford writes: “Help gods, help saints, help sprites [spirits] and...ye...hounds of hell.” Compare this with Shakespeare’s *Henry VI Part 1* (V.iii.79):

Now help, ye charming spells and periapts*
And ye choice spirits that admonish me.

Shakespeare also strings together two-syllable clauses in *Richard III*, IV.iv.182: “Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray.” Notice how similar Shakespeare’s line is to Oxford’s language in terms of parallel construction, with commas separating the iambs, each comprising two single-syllable words, two identical across the poems and a third (*sprites/fiends*) also strikingly similar.

These two brief quotes from Shakespeare utilize five of Oxford’s associated words: *Help*, *ye*, *saints*, *spirits* and *hell*, as well as *Earth*, which shows up in his poem two lines later. What may be Shakespeare’s maturest play, *The Tempest*, reprises the idea of calling on various supernatural beings: “Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves,/ And ye that on the sands with printless foot...” (V.i.123).

As Oxford does in line two of stanza three of his poem, Shakespeare addresses these entities once with the word *ye* standing alone and once using *ye* with a noun (*ye* and *ye...hounds* in Oxford’s line, and *Ye elves* and *ye* in Shakespeare’s). In each case the expressions are five poetic feet apart. Cyrus Hoy considered the word *ye* rare enough in Shakespeare that he used its appearance to claim for John Fletcher (erroneously in my view) portions of *King Henry VIII*. Yet Shakespeare uses this less-utilized pronoun in both instances to echo Oxford’s poem—in *Henry VI Part 1* and *The Tempest*—and each time it appears twice, as it does in the second line of Oxford’s third stanza. A reasonable explanation might be that Oxford defaulted to earlier usages when mining previously rendered verbal ideas for new and improved constructions.

What about Oxford’s refrain, “as of these griefs the ground”? Most people attach *ground(s)* to actions or attitudes such as “grounds for divorce,” “grounds for an argument” or “grounds for holding a grudge.” But they rarely use the term in reference to emotions, such as “grounds for joy” or “grounds for sadness.” Perhaps Oxford linked *ground* and *grief* because they alliterate. Regardless, the pairing is unusual. Who else uses it? In Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part 2* (IV.i.27), Westmoreland says he does not see how Mowbray has “any *ground* to build a *grief* on.”

Observe that Shakespeare uses the singular form, as Oxford does. In five other such constructions, Shakespeare uses the plural form, as in “I did proceed on just *grounds*” (*Othello*, V.ii.101). In 146 out of the 166 times that Shakespeare uses the singular *ground*, it means *earth*; twice it is the past tense of *grind* (in *Pericles*

* *Periapts*: amulets used to ward off disease or evil.

and *Romeo and Juliet*); and the remaining 18 times it means *basis*, as in de Vere's poem.

But even then, it mostly refers to actions, conditions or attitudes, as in "The ground of your ill-will" (*Richard III*, I.iii.168). Only twice in the canon does Shakespeare link *ground* with an emotional state other than sadness and unrelated to a grudge, and each occurs only once: in *Cymbeline* (IV.ii.96): "on good ground we fear"; and in *Coriolanus* (II.ii.89): "They hate upon no better a ground." Within this context, it is notable that Shakespeare links *ground(s)* to *grief* or to the synonym *woe* fully four times: "the grounds and motives of her woe" (*A Lover's Complaint*, Stanza 9); "We see the ground whereon these woes do lie;/ But the true ground of all these piteous woes..." (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.88); and in the passage quoted above from *Henry IV Part 2*: "any ground to build a grief on." Oxford and Shakespeare made the same mental connection in referring to a *ground* for misery.

A Youthful Poet

We can go even further. The entire poem holds up well as a work by a youthful poet who retained some of his compositional proclivities into maturity. He expresses the same ideas; he links the same words; and he employs the same rhythms. The following list presents each line from Oxford's poem, in order, followed by similar Shakespearean constructions:

Oxford: Framed in the front of forlorn hope, past all recovery
Shakespeare: For grief that they are past recovery:
 For, were there hope to conquer them again
 —*Henry VI Part 2*, I.i.16-17

Oxford: I stayless stand t' abide the shock of shame and infamy
Shakespeare: My shame and guilt confounds me.
 —*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, V.iv.63

Here in the streets, desperate of shame and state*
 —*Twelfth Night*, V.i.45

Oxford: My life, through lingering long, is lodged in lair of loathsome ways
Shakespeare: Should by the minute feed on life and lingering
 —*Cymbeline* V.v.86

lean-faced Envy in her loathsome cave
 —*Henry VI Part 2*, III.ii.13

Within a loathsome dungeon, there to pine
 —*Henry VI Part 1*, II.v.66

*Shakespeare uses the "shame and..." construction ten times.

let him keep his loathsome cabin

—*Venus and Adonis*, Stanza 105

Oxford: ...shame and infamy...My death delayed...

Shakespeare: Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend

—*Richard III*, IV.iv.59

His days may finish ere that hapless time

—*Henry VI Part 1*, III.i.7

Oxford: My sprites, my heart, my wit and force in deep distress are drowned

Shakespeare: ...Iago doth give up

The execution of his wit, hands, heart

—*Othello*, III.iii.72-3

What heart, head, sword, force, means, but is Lord Timon's?

—*Timon of Athens*, I.ii.97

Oxford: The only loss of my good name

Shakespeare: But he that filches from me my good name...makes me poor indeed.

—*Othello*, III.iii.41-2

Let my good name...be kept unspotted

—*Lucrece*, Stanza 118

Oxford: is of these griefs the ground

Shakespeare: it not appears to me...

That you should have an inch of any ground

To build a grief on

—*Henry IV Part 2*, IV.i.51-3

Oxford: And since my mind, my wit, my head, my voice and tongue are weak

To utter, move, devise, conceive, sound forth, declare and speak

Shakespeare: hey...do wear...muster true gait, eat, speak, and move...

Methinks in thee some blessed spirit doth speak

His powerful sound within an organ weak

—*All's Well That Ends Well*, II.i.38

So many miseries have crazed my voice,

That my woe-wearied tongue is mute and dumb

—*Richard III*, IV.iv.12

It ascends me into the brain;

...which, delivered o'er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth,

Becomes excellent wit.

—*Henry IV Part 2*, IV.iii.192-4

If thou hast any sound, or use of voice,

Speak to me

—*Hamlet*, I.i.167-8

speak all good you can devise of Caesar

—*Julius Caesar*, III.i.98

- More suits you to conceive than I to speak of
 —*As You Like It*, I.ii.69
 could with a ready guess declare,
 Before the Frenchman speak
 —*Henry V*, I.i.71-2
- Oxford:* Such piercing plaints as answer might, or would, my woeful case
Shakespeare: That hearing how our plaints and prayers do pierce
 —*Richard II*, V.iii.56
- the traitor
 Stands in worse case of woe
 —*Cymbeline* II.iv.89-90
- Oxford:* Help crave I must, and crave I will, with tears upon my face
Shakespeare: Hence will I to my ghostly father's cell,
 His help to crave
 —*Romeo and Juliet*, II.ii.29-30
- Poor soul, thy face is much abused with tears
 —*Romeo and Juliet*, IV.i.14
- Oxford:* Of all that may in heaven or hell, in earth or air, be found
Shakespeare: Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air
 —*Hamlet*, I.i.41
- Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell
 —*Hamlet*, I.iv.53
- Thou hast as chiding a nativity
 As fire, air, water, earth, and heaven can make
 —*Pericles*, III.I.22-3
- Am I in earth, in heaven, or in hell?
 —*The Comedy of Errors*, II.ii.101
- Oxford:* Help gods, help saints, help sprites and powers that in the heaven do dwell
 Help ye that are to wail, ay wont, ye howling hounds of hell
Shakespeare: Now help, ye charming spells and periapts;
 And ye choice spirits that admonish me
 —*Henry VI Part I*, V.iii.69-71
- Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray
 —*Richard III*, V.iv.9
- O you powers
 That give heaven countless eyes
 —*Pericles*, I.i.32-3
- Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
 Crouch for employment
 —*Henry V* (Prologue)
- A pair of cursed hell-hounds and their dam!
 —*Titus Andronicus*, Vii.138
- Oxford:* Help man, help beasts, help birds and worms that on the earth doth toil,

- Help fish, help fowl that flocks and feeds upon the salt-sea[§] soil
Shakespeare: What have we here? a man or a fish?
 ...any strange beast there makes a man
 —*The Tempest*, II.ii.67-8
- Courteous destroyers, affable wolves, meek bears,
 You fools of fortune, trencher-friends, time's flies,
 Cap and knee slaves, vapors, and minute-jacks!
 Of man and beast the infinite malady*
 —*Timon of Athens*, III.vi.191-4
- My flocks feed not
 —*The Passionate Pilgrim* (Sonnet 18)
- Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark
 —*Macbeth*, IV.i.56
- Oxford*: Help echo that in air doth flee, shrill voices to resound
- Shakespeare*: shrill echoes from the hollow earth.
 —*The Taming of the Shrew* (Prologue ii)
- shrill-voiced suppliant
 —*Richard II*, V.iii.118
- How sighs resound
 —*The Passionate Pilgrim* (Sonnet 18)
- Oxford*: To wail this loss of my good name
Shakespeare: wise men ne'er sit and wail their loss
 —*Henry VI Part 3*, V.iv.13

Conclusions

What are we to make of claims that “nothing in Oxford’s canonical verse in any way hints at an affinity with the poetry of William Shakespeare”? Are there truly “glaring mismatches” between the two sources? Is there “anything but a match” between them? Are they “worlds apart”? Elliott and Valenza ask, “How could anyone suppose that the two passages were written by the same person?” (2000, 90) Apparently one discerning scholar out of the ten top-scoring “Golden Ear” testees thought so, and good for him.

An ideal study would entail conducting the same type of search using the canons of all other playwrights of the era, and maybe all the poets, too. For now, however, no complete canons are searchable. Individual plays and poems are available, but the task of combing through seems prohibitively tedious.

Nevertheless, as a check against the potential charge that the above parallels are commonplace or data-mined, I decided to conduct a preliminary test. The best foil for the searches conducted above is the canon of Christopher Marlowe, the second-most prolific Elizabethan playwright and one whom some people actually

[§] *Salt-sea* as an adjective is a very rare construction. Shakespeare uses it in *Macbeth*, below.

* Shakespeare makes parallel lists, as Oxford does.

believe *was* Shakespeare. I searched each one of Marlowe's seven plays and his epic poem—*Tamburlaine Part 1*, *Tamburlaine Part 2*, *Dr. Faustus*, *Edward the Second*, *Dido Queen of Carthage* (co-written with Thomas Nashe), *The Massacre at Paris*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Hero and Leander*—for fourteen constructions common to Oxford and Shakespeare that are easy to search: *shame and* [noun]; *life* near *lingering*; [my] *good name*; *grief[s]* near *ground*; *voice* near *tongue*; *plaint[s]* near *pierce*; *case* near *woeful*; *help* near *crave*; *earth or air*; *help* [non-proper noun] as a cry; *feed* near *flocks*; *salt-sea*; *shrill* near *voice*; and *wail* near *loss*.

As it turns out, Marlowe gets positive hits on only two of these constructions. There is one instance of *help/crave*: “crave the help of shepherds,” from *Hero and Leander*; and there are three instances of *shame and*: “shame and duty,” “shame and servitude” and “shame and dishonor,” which are from *Tamburlaine Part 1*, *Tamburlaine Part 2* and *Dr. Faustus*, respectively.

Another possible instance in *Tamburlaine Part 2* is “earth and all this airy region.” However I deem too far from Oxford and Shakespeare's compact “earth or air” to fully qualify.

The paucity of Oxford's paired words in the Marlowe canon is not the only exemplative instance. *Shrill* (12 times in Shakespeare), *wail* (24 times in Shakespeare) and *salt* (51 times in Shakespeare), fit Oxford's use of these words but don't show up at all in Marlowe. In Shakespeare's two main narrative poems, *woe* shows up 28 times, *wail* 3 times and *plaint* once. But there is not a single *plaint*, *woe* or *wail* in the whole of *Hero and Leander*. Nor do Marlowe's characters ever bewail the loss of their “good names.” Even considering that his canon is one-fifth the size of Shakespeare's, this seems a barren result.

Having read all of the plays published during the Elizabethan era, I would predict just as few connections between Oxford's poem and Ben Jonson's or Thomas Heywood's writings. Marlowe, Jonson and Heywood, the next best playwrights of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, employ quite different habits of language. Between the ages 16 and 45, Oxford became more proficient in literary composition, and it shows. But so do his roots.

Works Cited

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