

In Conversation with Hank Whittemore

100 Reasons Shakespeare was the Earl of Oxford

interviewed by Chris Pannell

Today we are speaking with Hank Whittemore, noted author and well-known advocate of the Shakespeare Authorship Question. Whittemore's latest book is *100 Reasons Shakespeare was the Earl of Oxford* (published in 2016 by Forever Press). This title is available as a print-on-demand book from a variety of booksellers on the Amazon website and on Abebooks.com. We caught up with him on the Internet, where many interviews are conducted.

Editor Welcome to *The Oxfordian*, Hank.

HW Thanks for hosting me in these pages. It's a pleasure to speak about matters that I think all your readers are interested in.

Q1

Because of the scope of your book – *100 Reasons* covers the 54 years of Edward de Vere's life and periods of time before his birth and after his death – can you describe some of the organizational challenges to producing this book, and as well, organizing any book on the Shakespeare Authorship Question?

HW

At first there was no organization whatsoever, because it began as a series of blog posts continuing over the course of three and a half years. I had made an offhand remark that there must be a hundred reasons for concluding Oxford was the true author, so it didn't take long to realize I should try to back that up. As the blog posts went along, I tried not to think too far ahead. I went with whatever came to mind, so there was no overall structure. Even after reaching the 100-reason mark, I wasn't so sure about re-working it all into a book.

Once I started thinking about it, Alex McNeil (Editor of the *SOF Newsletter*) advised me to find some coherent structure for the posts. I put topics like “Lyly” and “Horsemanship” and “Italy” on separate index cards and began moving them around. Some immediately fell into categories – “special knowledge,” for example, indicating Oxford’s experience in the law, medicine, seamanship, gardening and so on, which would account for the knowledge displayed in the Shakespeare works. What really made a book seem possible was when I brought together some topics for an opening chapter about his life in relation to theater. After all, Shakespeare has always been viewed primarily in relation to acting and playwriting.

A structure evolved into sixteen chapters that began to seem chronological. It’s a bit of a paradox. On the one hand, you can jump around all through the book; on the other hand, reading it from start to finish can give you the feel of a biography.

Organizing any book on the authorship question is difficult. Oxfordians have the dilemma of how to deal with the Stratfordian view, which seems to be based on a kind of religious belief. If all your readers believe the world was created literally in six days, do you have to address that issue before getting into the evidence for evolution? If so, to what extent? How much of your book should be devoted to taking apart that false assumption?

Charlton Ogburn Jr. believed that fully the first half of one’s book should take down the Stratfordian view, which is what he did in *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. It was aptly subtitled *The Myth and the Reality*, indicating the two separate sections. That approach is effective, but I have little interest in it. I would have no joy tearing down the myth; my interest lies in discovering whatever is real and in trying to put together the shreds of evidence to create a picture that is larger, and deeper, than any single piece of the puzzle.

Because, you know, that larger and deeper view is the untold story. Our mission is to not only find the individual pieces, but, importantly, to put them all together so we can stand back and follow the story of the most amazing author the world has known. Seeing him whole is, to me, the big challenge. As we head to the second century of the Oxfordian movement, we still have a long way to go. Hell, in our little group even we can’t agree on the basic reason for the erasure of Oxford’s identity as “Shakespeare” from the historical record.

Hank Whittemore is a writer, a former professional actor, journalist, TV writer, and the author of fourteen books, including two books on the Sonnets (*The Monument and Shakespeare’s Son*). Whittemore performs a one-man show, *Shakespeare’s Treason*, co-written with director Ted Story, after which he often holds discussions with audience members. He writes often on authorship issues and maintains a blog at <https://hankwhittemore.com>. Questions for this interview were suggested by Chris Pannell, Wally Hurst, and Don Rubin. Author photo by Jake Janata-Whittemore.

Q2

One of the strengths of *100 Reasons* is the variety of sources you introduce to the reader. Can you tell us a little bit about how you handle source material? For example, Reason 59 *Medical Knowledge* indicates the amazing number of contacts de Vere had with medical scientists of his day, and their books. Were you able to track down, for example, any copy or reprint of a book by George Baker titled *The New Jewell of Health*? The fact that this book, published in 1576, was dedicated to Oxford's first wife Anne Cecil and that Baker was de Vere's personal physician was a great point to make in the context of the authorship question.

HW

Countless Oxfordian researchers have developed these facts, which are often scattered in so many places that we lose track of them. I've spent thirty years looking at them. Just in that area of medical knowledge, for example, we owe much to the labors of Dr. Frank Davis and Earl Showerman – just for starters. I myself have never held a physical copy of Baker's book, but surely others have. In most cases I am simply a reporter, gathering the evidence and trying to present it in an interesting and enlightening way.

Q3

One of my favourite aspects of your book is the number of times you can cite other researchers of Shakespeare who have nothing to do with the authorship question, but who are providing observations and evidence that support an Oxfordian reading. The sections on Seamanship (60), Astronomy (61), and Music (62) are particularly well-prepared. Were there any difficulties for you in assembling this material?

HW

When writing and publishing these as blog posts, I concentrated on each one separately and took all the time I needed. (If I had aimed to create an entire book from the start, it would have been overwhelming and I'd have given up!) It was fun gathering up all the evidence for a single blog post and then figuring out how to present that material. Each time out was a new challenge. Posting each "reason" was like going to bat in a baseball game; after finally getting a hit, I'd head back to the bench for a rest. Then, soon enough, it was time to go back up to the plate again.

Q4

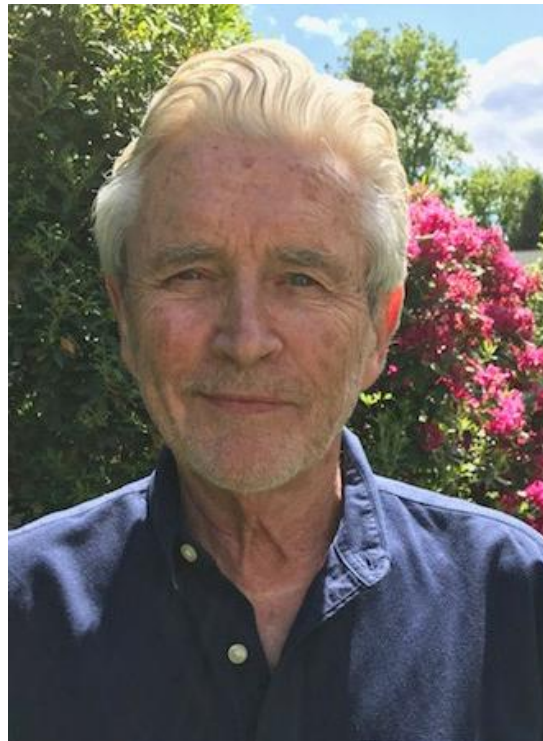
Because it has the feel of a comprehensive study of de Vere and the works of Shake-

speare, your book will inevitably be compared to *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* by Charlton Ogburn and *Shakespeare by Another Name* by Mark Anderson. Can you comment at all on the approach you've taken in your book, in comparison to those by Ogburn and Anderson?

HW

Those two books are great contributions to the movement. Ogburn and Anderson both drew upon the research and writings of many others from "*Shakespeare*" *Identified* (by J. Thomas Looney) in 1920 onward. My book draws upon the same kinds of sources, as well as upon those two books. Both follow the chronological events in the life of Edward de Vere, pausing along the way to bring in aspects of the plays, poems and sonnets that seem to reflect his life.

My book is not intended to be a biography; it's based on those individual "reasons" to conclude that Oxford was the author. Within each reason, I've narrowed and intensified the focus – for example, two are devoted solely to the published dedications that Oxford received – their diversity and their depth of gratitude to him. The difference in this book is that all the dedications to Oxford are brought together in one section.



Q5

Do you believe that Oxfordians can make the case with the general public about de Vere and Shakespeare, that the latter was a pseudonym or allonym for the former, without finding additional strong evidence for Oxford's authorship, such as additional letters or a canonical play in 'manuscript' form? Or, do Oxfordians have enough evidence to make the case, but simply haven't done a good job of organizing it?

HW

This is a great question. My immediate response is that – although we have no

proof – we certainly *do* have evidence, but, in fact, we have failed to agree on the story it tells – not only the who, where and what, but also the why and how. I am basically a reporter and, as well, a storyteller; and to tell any story, I need a protagonist with motives and objectives. Given that de Vere is our protagonist, we need to know not only what he was up to but, also, why and how.

When Looney identified the man behind Shakespeare as the premier earl of Elizabeth's reign, he was simultaneously identifying the story as political. Oxford was part of the government, extremely close to the center of power, and up to a time, even *within* the center. This basic aspect has never been possible for the Stratfordian view, but with Oxford as the author we can begin to understand why he wrote the plays of royal history and was so concerned about the good and bad qualities of a ruler. I think we have basically failed to convey this political context, which, once it's perceived, can make us realize that the "Shakespeare Authorship Question" is not the main story, but, rather, merely one result of that story. It's the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

Beyond that are other failures, in my view. For example, we haven't been able to convey that until the *First Folio* in 1623 the name *Shakespeare* was exclusively that of the poet-dramatist and did not refer to the Stratford man. The name "Shakspere" was distinct and different from "Shakespeare." Whatever the Stratford man was doing in London, and however he may have become involved in the matter in his lifetime, there is no evidence that anyone ever regarded him as a poet or playwright until after the *First Folio* came out. I think we have failed to be clear about this.

Another bedrock of the story is that the printed name *Shakespeare* appeared in 1593 when the true author already had more than forty-three years of life behind him. By then he had lived through most (but not all) of his important experiences; he had been reading and learning and writing since early childhood. Here again, his adoption of this pen name is the tip of the iceberg.

Q6

Do you feel the general public is indifferent to the SAQ? Is there anything Oxfordians can do about this (beyond what various Oxfordian groups are doing already)?

HW

There's no question the public is indifferent. It's extremely difficult to bring about some major shift of perspective, to cause a so-called paradigm shift. People need personal reasons to care; they need strong motivation to learn more about the topic.

I think we have focused on the wrong section of the university or the library. We

have tried to appeal to the English and Drama departments, rather than the History department. Historians have no problem with accepting that writers in repressive societies, operating under strict censorship, have always resorted to allegory and other means of communicating indirectly. This is a fundamental aspect of the Oxfordian story – that the real Shakespeare was using his pen as an underground political weapon. As he himself wrote in Sonnet 66, he had been “tongue-tied by authority” or by his own government. That’s an exciting premise that even speaks to the politics of today, when “speaking truth to power” is so often left to the writers of comedy and satire, or to serious novelists and playwrights, all communicating indirectly.

The key for us, I believe, is to show the world that there is a great untold story here – a story that will amaze and inspire. The trouble, however, is that members of the established Oxfordian groups can’t agree about what that story is. People in these groups are doing tremendous work, and they should be applauded for it, but it appears that the real excitement will have to come from newcomers – students and independent scholars and other outsiders.

When I started getting into this subject in 1987, I was unaware of any organization dedicated to researching the Oxfordian case. A few years later I discovered the Shakespeare Oxford Society and went to my first conference in 1991; but within the first five minutes I discovered there were competing ideas and factions. Even so, in retrospect that was a much more exciting time, when we didn’t try so hard to be respectable. Well, maybe we didn’t know as much as we do now; but we also had yet to become so damned overly cautious. We are fighting a battle for truth, which leaves very little room for respectability. We are, after all, traitors. Of course, when we win (as the saying goes), none will dare to call it treason.

My basic answer is to stop worrying about respectability. You can’t overthrow a beloved article of faith and worship by being respectable. We can’t tear down false idols without causing a bit of trouble. I’m not saying we need to make asses of ourselves, just that we should beware of the attractive lure of being accepted.

It’s important to emphasize that the phenomenon of Shakespeare did not just come from one singular genius. I am not speaking about any “group” theory of authorship for the Shakespeare plays, but, rather, about the fact that there were many playwrights at work during Elizabeth’s reign. In my book there are two chapters relevant to this. One is entitled, “The University Wits,” about those who were allegedly predecessors of Shakespeare working under Oxford’s patronage and guidance – John Lyly, Anthony Munday, Thomas Watson and at least a few dozen more, such as Peele, Greene, Nash, Marlowe. That chapter leads to “Writers in Wartime.” During the 1580s, when England and Spain officially declared war, the English government needed writers to fire up a unified patriotic spirit, which accounts for the history plays these writers turned out by the dozens. Some of these works were by Oxford, who rewrote them into the Shakespearean stage histories in the 1590s.

This, to me, is a crucial aspect of the authorship issue. I once asked our Stratfordian adversary James Shapiro, at a public forum, why his colleagues have always seemed to lack any interest in the contemporary history of what led up to Shakespeare. Why can't they at least acknowledge that Edward de Vere was the patron of virtually every contemporary writer upon whom "Shakespeare" was indebted? His non-answer was that we "know little or nothing about Shakespeare's lost years" prior to the 1590s, which, of course, was not at all what I was asking him about.

We know a lot about the history of the 1580s – the Queen's Men acting company, for example, with two troupes going around the country in preparation for the Spanish Armada that finally arrived in 1588. And it was Oxford who led the great renaissance of English literature and drama during that period, leading up to his adoption of the Shakespeare pen name. He led and worked with many others in a great frenzy of creative work, which begins to explain what otherwise seems impossible to explain.

Try to imagine that we never had any notion about "Shakespeare's" identity. In that case, if we went looking for clues in the form of historical evidence, would we have made our way to Stratford upon Avon? I don't think so. Even if we did happen to go there, what would we have found? Nothing. All the evidence that has managed to survive, and there's plenty of it, would have led researchers and scholars directly or indirectly to Edward de Vere. Soon enough there would have been no mystery, no authorship question, to be solved. Meanwhile, such an icon or legend tends to be far more powerful, or persuasive, than factual evidence.

Q7

The play *Hamlet* and the character of Hamlet are critical pieces of the Oxfordian thesis and your Reasons Five through Fourteen deal with the relationship between Oxford's life and Hamlet's mind and his adventures (such as being captured by pirates). Was there more you could have said? Are you planning a book on that, or could you recommend the best Oxfordian book on the question of *Hamlet*?

HW

I'm not sure there's any single book bringing together all the ways that *Hamlet* appears to be Oxford's most autobiographical play, but one should be written. I acted in a college production and fell in love with the character of the prince. Had that not happened, I might not have cared so deeply about the authorship question. But once I saw the many ways that play reflects Oxford's life and relationships, I was hooked. [Note: At the end of this interview is a list of Whitemore's favourite books on the SAQ and the seventeenth Earl of Oxford.]

Q8

As an actor yourself, do you think that Oxford had a strong personal interest in acting or was he more of a writer first, a director second, and an actor third (in terms of his priorities)? Are you aware of any passages in Ben Jonson's plays that address the Elizabethan philosophy or method of acting, in the same way that Hamlet's speech to the players does? Does Jonson comment at all on the responsibilities of actors?

HW

I know of nothing in the Elizabethan age that's comparable to Hamlet's advice to the players; and I do think we can hear Oxford himself addressing them. He speaks as their patron but also as their playwright and director and, too, as a fellow actor. He was steeped in the theater from childhood; his ideas about the art of the player must have evolved, until he could envision the kind of natural or truthful acting that would develop over the centuries up to our time.

Anyway, you're right – he was writer, director, actor in that order. Do we know of any working actor of that era who simultaneously wrote plays? Were there any professional players who were always rehearsing or performing while also turning out plays for the stage? Burbage and Kempe never wrote plays, or none that I know of. When would they have had the time to write them? That aspect of the Stratfordian myth is impossible – the idea that the author of the Shakespearean works was also a busy professional player.

In any case, there is evidence that Oxford did act on the court stage. And he was definitely a showman. In 1572, he arranged and directed a mock military battle between two "armies" at Warwick Castle, for the benefit of the Queen and her court. In 1581, he starred in his own one-man production of *The Knight of the Tree of the Sunne*, introduced by his boy page – again, for Elizabeth.

Q9

Why does the Shakespeare-author use so many topical/geographical allusions in his Italian plays, things that nobody who hadn't been there would have known, or possibly even cared about?

HW

My initial answer is that including such allusions must have helped him believe in whatever he was writing. Including those allusions may have helped him to write more truthfully. But beyond that, he was bringing these details back to the royal

court and England itself. In terms of the future history to be written, these details should have ensured that “Shakespeare” would be identified as the “Italianized Englishman” (Euphues) that he really was. So far, even with Richard Roe’s *Shakespeare’s Guide to Italy* (2011), that effort has yet to pay off.

Q10

You speak often in public about de Vere and the Shakespeare works. How do you deal with objections from the audience? Do you have any suggestions about how Oxfordians can respectfully address those who remain unconvinced by the idea that there is an authorship question and that de Vere is the most likely candidate to be the true author?

HW

The only way to deal with objections is to be as patient and honest as possible. If we don’t know the answer, we should be willing to say so. Just taking down the Stratfordian myth, for all it’s worth, cannot change hearts and minds. The key is in the true story – the one that the author himself tried to tell us in *Hamlet* and the *Sonnets*, the latter being Oxford’s own version of the prince’s soliloquies. If you think you know that story, right or wrong, tell it to those folks who have come to have their world shaken up or even turned inside-out. That’s what most of them really want or they wouldn’t have come to hear you.

Q11

I particularly enjoyed the more obscure reasons you selected for your book. For example, Reason 96 deals with George Chapman and – as you say – Chapman the younger man, knew de Vere, who was about ten years older, and Chapman was convinced that Hamlet was de Vere’s self-portrait. You say Chapman made every attempt to tell the world he knew the answer to the authorship question. What in your opinion are the lesser-known reasons for de Vere’s authorship?

HW

There are many. One involves the whole matter of chronology – what Looney called “the long foreground” that preceded the 1590s, followed by the pivotal year of 1604, when *Hamlet* Q2 was published soon after Oxford died. Right then the great issuance of Shakespearean plays came to a halt. Aside from a few stray printings of heretofore unpublished plays, fully eighteen remained unknown to readers until the Folio of 1623. This overview of the chronology should be put up on the wall like some big visual chart.

Q12

Reason 91, which you have titled *Dramatic Literature*, emphasizes the insights of the first Oxfordian, John Thomas Looney, who not only made the breakthrough of identifying de Vere, but also speaks of the extensive revisions that had been on-going in these works, throughout de Vere's writing career. Looney also, quite presciently, predicted the need for *a difficult revolution in mental attitude* among we moderns who seek to really understand Shakespeare. You draw our attention to a dozen plays that were printed between 1597 and 1604 when Oxford died, and how we should view that flurry of publications.

HW

Looney was right in viewing those plays as Oxford's attempt to transform earlier work into masterpieces of dramatic literature. How can anyone seriously think the Stratfordian could have turned out a dozen immortal plays within the first decade of his arrival in London? It's an important "reason" for de Vere's authorship that seldom gets communicated to "the yet unknowing world," as Horatio puts it.

Q13

In Reason 94, which you call *The Pivotal Year of 1604*, you report that the name "Shake-speare" only began to appear on play quartos after Burghley's death in 1598, and that seven Shakespeare plays were performed on the occasion of the marriage of Susan de Vere, Oxford's youngest daughter, who is the woman many see as the custodian of her father's literary output (his manuscripts) until the publication of the *First Folio* in 1623. These circumstances in de Vere's later years are quite compelling evidence in the question of how Shakespeare produced so many works in such little time.

HW

Yes, just imagine how short a time that is – from the latter part of 1598 to a few months after June 24, 1604, when Oxford departed – less than six years! But the reality is that those same plays had been written and rewritten at various times over the previous three decades. The final authorized quarto in that period was *Hamlet Q2*, upon which Oxford seems to have kept working until he died. It appears the play was meant not for the stage but, rather, to be read. I think the running time would be five hours, more than twice the couple of hours for most or even all Elizabethan plays. In act five of *Hamlet Q2* there are echoes of the sonnets to be published five years later, in 1609; so my feeling is that those two works continued to occupy Oxford to the end.

Q14

Your book's bibliography indicates the large number of researchers who have been at work on the problem of Oxford's claim to the authorship and the literary voice of Shakespeare. As an aid to readers, can you identify the critical books, those which helped you most, or which in your opinion, are the best at presenting the evidence for Oxford?

HW

For me, it's tough to pick favourites, but I've put together a short list of books I've referred to often, in order of their publication.

"Shakespeare" Identified by John Thomas Looney. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1920

The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford by B.M. Ward. London: J. Murray, 1928

Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare Plays by Eva Turner Clark. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1974, 1931.

This Star of England by Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn. New York: Coward-McCann, 1952.

"Shakespeare" Identified: Vol. II: Oxfordian Vistas, edited by Ruth Loyd Miller. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975.

Hamlet Himself by Bronson Feldman [1914-1982]. iUniverse, 2010.

The Mysterious William Shakespeare by Charlton Ogburn Jr. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1984, 1992.

"Shakespeare" Revealed in Oxford's Letters by William Plumer Fowler. Portsmouth, NH: Peter E. Randall, 1986.

Oxford's Revenge by Elisabeth Sears and Stephanie Caruana. Spear Shaker Press, 1989.

The Marginalia of Edward de Vere's Geneva Bible by Roger Stritmatter. Northampton, MA: Oxenford Press, 2001.

Shakespeare by Another Name by Mark Anderson. New York: Gotham, 2005.

De Vere as Shakespeare by William Farina. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006.

Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom by Charles Beauclerk. New York, Grove Press: 2010

I'll just conclude by saying that each of these books also offers helpful insights into

the relationship of Oxford and the character of Prince Hamlet.

Editor

Thank-you Hank, for sharing your views with us.

