

Short Book Reviews

Hamlet, an Oxfordian Critical Edition

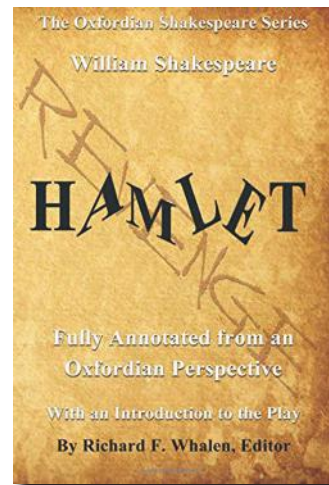
Reviewed by Gary Goldstein

Hamlet, an Oxfordian Critical Edition. Editor: Richard Whalen, Breezeway Books, 2018, (Paperback, 342 pages, \$14.99, Kindle \$5.99)

Richard Whalen's critical edition of *Hamlet*, assisted by Professor Emeritus of English Jack Shuttleworth (Brigadier, ret., USAF), attempts to provide dramaturgs, directors and actors with an Oxfordian perspective of the greatest of Shakespeare's plays, with extensive annotations efficiently conveyed by the editor. Two examples will illustrate:

Falling out at tennis (II.i.59).

Quarreling about tennis, a sport of the aristocracy. Oxford confronted Sir Philip Sidney in September 1579 at the royal tennis court in Queen Elizabeth's palace, Whitehall, and they quarreled over who had priority to use the court. The dispute, which included insults, later went all the way to the queen, who noted that the Earl of Oxford outranked Sidney. Standard editions of *Hamlet* make no reference to Polonius' unusual reference to court tennis and the



quarrel, which a court audience might be expected to recognize and appreciate, but not something Shakspeare would have known about.

But look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading. (II.ii.168).

No doubt a book, which traditional scholarship has long suggested is meant to be *Cardanus Comforte* (1573), which had a strong influence on *Hamlet's* author. What they never say is that it was dedicated to Oxford, who contributed a prefatory letter to the translator and a poem to the reader, and who commissioned publication of the book.

The most compelling contribution in this edition is the essay by Whalen on “Hamlet’s Sources and Influences,” in particular the evidence that Oxford was the likely (teenage) author of the play, *Horestes*, published in 1567 by one John Pickeryng and performed at Elizabeth’s Court that same year. Moreover, Whalen demonstrates that the dramatic arc that connects *Horestes* with the plays *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* does so in a way that reveals Shakespeare’s evolutionary development as an artist.

In addition to the essay on Hamlet’s sources, Whalen summarizes the published research of astrophysicist Peter Usher of Penn State University regarding the many references to astronomy in the play. Finally, the edition includes an Introduction to the play along with a select and annotated Bibliography.

In his annotations, Whalen sometimes fails to include available evidence that would clinch his argument. For example, in II.ii.3 (see page 112), Whalen writes that, “In three letters to Burghley, he [Oxford] protested against Burghley’s use of informers.” Yet Whalen fails to quote from even one letter to prove his assertion. Similarly, he refers to the introduction in 1576 by scientist Thomas Digges of the concept of infinite space but does not quote the original text itself to show how Shakespeare adapted Digges’ idea in his play. He also tends to generalize in his descriptions, such as writing that Robert Cecil was Elizabeth’s “chief minister” instead of being a member of her Privy Council and Secretary of State since 1597.

Hopefully, an academic or commercial theater will decide to utilize this edition in order to recreate Shakespeare’s original vision of what is the greatest tragedy in the English language.

This is the fourth annotated edition of the major tragedies under Whalen’s editorial direction, the previous three being *Macbeth* (Whalen) and *Othello* (play editor Ren Draya) and *Anthony and Cleopatra* (play editor Michael Delahoyde). Plans call for critical editions of *The Tempest*, *Henry the Fifth* and *Love’s Labor’s Lost*.

Hamlet's Elsinore Revisited (2nd edition)

Reviewed by Gary Goldstein

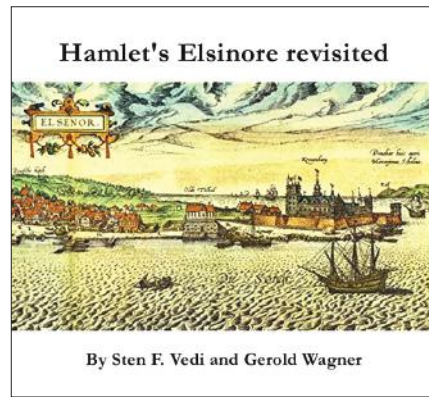
Hamlet's Elsinore Revisited (2nd edition). By Sten F. Vedi and Gerold Wagner. Verlag Langwitz, 2018 (Kindle \$4.00, 160 pages).

The latest book about *Hamlet* offers new information about the likely contemporary model for Polonius besides the Elizabethan politician, William Cecil, and thus adds to our knowledge about Shakespeare's technique of using multiple sources to create his dramatic characters.

As for the play itself, the authors state upfront that, "There appear to be two messages in *Hamlet*, first to show what would have become of a gifted prince who was the heir to the throne, second that also a prince or young aristocrat should be allowed to perform on a public stage without being ostracized for it."

The value of the book is their discovery linking the character Polonius in *Hamlet* and an actual gentleman of Poland named Henrik Ramel (1550-1610), Chief Secretary of the German Chancellery with Frederick II of Denmark, first revealed in Lord Willoughby's report to the Queen from his Embassy to Denmark in 1582 (*A Brief Narration of My Lord Willoughby's Embassy into Denmark 1582 Written by His Own Hand*). Lord Willoughby, of course, was Peregrine Bertie, brother-in-law of Edward de Vere. Thus, the Earl of Oxford likely had access to the details of this diplomatic mission and of the major figures at the Danish Court, including the minister in charge of foreign affairs for the Danish king.

Indeed, Sir Thomas Bodley in 1584, as emissary to the Danish Court, would later write that, "Ramelius was a man of good understanding, learned and



well affected.” In 1586 the Danish king would send Ramel to England as head of a diplomatic mission, and he is described in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* as “A gentleman ... of goodly personage, somewhat corpulent and of sanguine complexion: very eloquent likewise and learned...” More to the point, Ramel was known as “Polonius” and thus gave Oxford the opportunity to point to a character outside English nobility in case anyone should take offense at the satire of William Cecil, his father-in-law and the Lord Great Treasurer.

The book also offers a rich visual portfolio of color maps and engravings of contemporary Denmark and Kronberg Castle, thus immersing readers into the environment of the Elizabethan era in a multiplicity of ways.

Shakespeare Identified— Centennial Anniversary Edition

Reviewed by Warren Hope

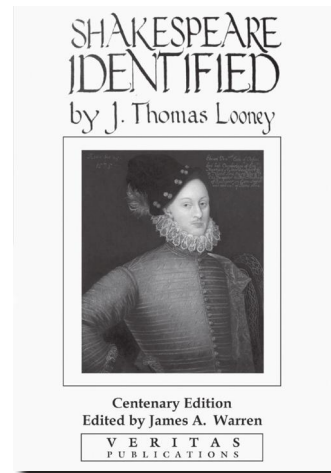
Shakespeare Identified—Centennial Anniversary Edition.

*By J. Thomas Looney, Editor: James Warren, Veritas Publications, 2019,
(Paperback, 516 pages, \$23.00).*

No matter what view of the subject one takes, it is clear that Looney's book revolutionized the study of Shakespeare. He actually set out to determine and show just what is meant by the adjective "Shakespearean." As a result, he has shown that the outlook of the poet and playwright comes from the top of the society and culture of his time, that he was an innovator and influence on others rather than a plagiarist and patcher of the work of others, and he has established that the writer is marked by an epigrammatic style. What this result should have caused is a reevaluation and rewriting of the history of the literature of the English Renaissance.

People who read this book with an open mind—whether they are convinced by Looney's luminous argument or not—will never be able to think of Shakespeare in the same way again. Now that Looney's work is reaching its hundredth anniversary, it is high time for his book to circulate widely and finally reach a mass of open-minded readers.

James Warren has made this a beautiful, thoughtful edition and deserves a great deal of credit. This particular edition has been reset in new typography for enhanced legibility, has added footnotes, references and a Bibliography, plus an editor's Introduction. A superb addition to the library of theater professionals and Shakespeare aficionados. If the Oxford theory is unfamiliar to you, take Hamlet's advice and "as a stranger give it welcome."



Shakespearian Fantasias

Reviewed by Warren Hope

Shakespearian Fantasias: Adventures in the Fourth Dimension. By Esther Singleton, Veritas Publications, 2019, (Paperback, 280 pages, \$14.00).

Esther Singleton's *Shakespearian Fantasias* reminds us that, as recently as the first half of the last century, literature was an integral part of life rather than an esoteric specialty kept alive by an academic support system. She was able to make her way in the world as a writer—a journalist and an author of books who was capable of the highest degree of scholarship while remaining readable and relatively popular. What motivated her seems to be a love of Shakespeare's works—reportedly she could recite whole sections of the plays and sonnets at will.

Her lifelong devotion to Shakespeare took a twist about 1924 when she became one of the first Americans to become convinced by J. Thomas Looney's arguments in his *Shakespeare Identified* (1920) that Edward de Vere, the seventeenth earl of Oxford, was the true author behind the pen name William Shakespeare. Singleton's way of absorbing this change was to realize how it increased her appreciation for and understanding of Shakespeare's work.

It was that realization and the gratitude it caused in her that appears as the impulse behind this book. She retells in clear and charming prose excerpts from some of the plays but works into her retellings not only facts of the Earl of Oxford's life but also poems by Oxford. The result is not an argument or an attempt to persuade, but rather a literary demonstration that Oxford's life fits Shakespeare's work the way a hand fits a glove. Anyone interested in Shakespeare is indebted to editor James Warren for making this pleasant and attractive book available once again after its initial private publication in 1928.

