

The Poems of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, and the Shakespeare Question

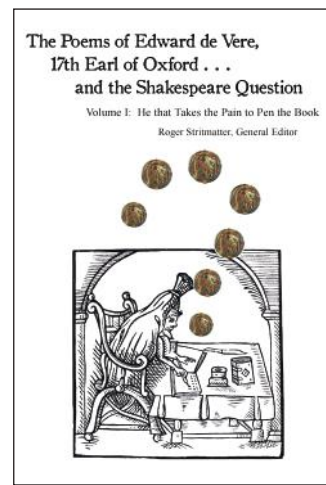
Reviewed by William Boyle

The Poems of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford...and the Shakespeare Question: Volume I: He that Takes the Pain to Pen the Book.

Ed. Roger Stritmatter PhD. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2019, 226 pages (paperback \$11.99).

The *Poems of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford and the Shakespeare Question* is a book that is overdue. While J. T. Looney published an edition (*The Poems of Edward de Vere*, 1921) one year after “*Shakespeare*” Identified, there have been just three more editions in the past one hundred years, by Professor Steven May (1980), Katherine Chiljan (1998) and Kurt Kreiler (2013), all of which contained different sets of poems since the primary problem in collecting the poems of Edward de Vere is deciding which Elizabethan poems are actually his.

Thus, the decision of the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship to sponsor this new collection under the general editorship of Professor Roger Stritmatter is an important one, and Volume 1—*He That Takes the Pain to Pen the Book*—does not disappoint. On page 3 of the introduction the editors (Stritmatter and Bryan Wildenthal, listed as the Special Editor for Volume I) write, “In Volume 1 are twenty-one ‘canonical’ poems published or extant in MS copies attributed to the 17th Earl of Oxford. The attribution of sixteen of these poems has generally been accepted for many decades...” It is further noted that such attributions date back to the 19th century with Hannah (1870) and Grossart (1872), both of whose positive commentaries are important since Oxford had not yet been identified as Shakespeare.



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The provenance of the twenty-one poems all date from Oxford's early years (through the 1570s), over which there is broad agreement that they are Oxford's and, thus, represent Shakespeare's juvenilia. The volume also includes two original essays. The first is the introductory "Oxford's Poems and the Authorship Question," and "A Methodological Afterward," both co-written by Dr. Stritmatter and Bryan Wildenthal and focusing on establishing the poems' connections to Oxford and their correspondences to the Shakespeare canon. In addition, two other previously published essays on Oxford's poems (Gary Goldstein's Spring 2017 *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* article, "Assessing the Linguistic Evidence for Oxford" and Robert Prechter's 2012 *The Oxfordian* essay, "Verse Parallels between Oxford and Shakespeare") are included. Moreover, there is an extensive bibliography of standard works employing primary and secondary sources, and several appendices of related poems and literary problems.

It should be noted that Volume II, scheduled for publication in late 2019, will include a broad selection of poems that represent Oxford's mature efforts, some of which are still in dispute. The editors write: "Vol. II reproduces 85 English and two Latin poems (with translations) written by de Vere, that were either published anonymously or under one of several pseudonyms or were mistakenly identified as the work of his contemporaries" (5). Volume II was not yet published when this review was written, but the introduction does refer to it several times, which causes some confusion about points being made, or at least the desire to go look something up, but then realize it is not yet available.

At the heart of Volume I (see 27–154) are the twenty-one early poems. Each is presented in a separate chapter with extended notes on sources, attributions, parallels to Shakespeare's plays and poems, and, finally, notes on where else they have been discussed by other scholars or editors, such as Professor Steven May in his landmark 1980 study ("The Poems of Edward De Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford and of Robert Devereux, Second Earl

William Boyle, a retired librarian, graduated from Lake Forest College (BA, English) and SUNY-Albany (MA, Library Science). In the 1990s he founded and managed websites on the authorship question, including the *Shakespeare Oxford Society Home Page* in 1995, and *The Ever Reader* in 1996. He then served as editor of the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* from 1996–2001 and *Shakespeare Matters* from 2001–2005. In 2006 he founded the *New England Shakespeare Oxford Library* (www.shakespeareoxfordlibrary.org), which manages the *Shakespeare Online Authorship Resources (SOAR)* catalog-database of Shakespeare authorship materials and publishes authorship-related books through its *Forever Press imprint*.

of Essex” in *Studies in Philology*, 77:5, 1980). Each poem is presented with a numeric designation, from E.O. 1 to E.O. 21, to assist readers in identification and for ease of reference.

Volume I, by itself, functions as a reference work that assembles a number of loose editorial threads that were left unresolved by scholars over the past century. In all, it brings together in one place materials spanning a century of scholarship, and for that alone is invaluable.

The poem analyses cover ground both familiar and new. There is the “haggard hawk” metaphor that Looney discovered in 1920 in E.O. 9 (“The Trickling Tears That Fall Along My Cheeks”) and E.O. 20 (“If Woman Could be Fair and Yet Not Fond”) as a significant statement about female character. Also, the “damask rose” imagery (in E.O.14, “These Beauties Make Me Die,” and E.O. 17, “Sitting Alone Upon My Thoughts”) and its relation to the War of the Roses, the seeming and not seeming in E.O. 5, “I am not as I seem to be,” a number of significant parallels in E.O. 1 (“The Labouring Man that Tills the Fertile Soil,” from *Cardanus Comforte*) related to work and sacrifice, the famous and elegant statement that “My Mind to me a Kingdom Is” (E.O. 18, with thanks to Steven May, who attributed this poem to Oxford in his 1980 study).

Anyone who has been following the Oxfordian case will be familiar with a number of these poems and their parallels, plus the surrounding arguments, and will find them fascinating. Newcomers could well be surprised at the wealth of detail and wonder how there can be any doubt about the relationship between Oxford and Shakespeare, or any doubt about Oxford’s skill as a poet, duly noted in the 19th century, but dismissed in the 20th once he was publicly identified as Shakespeare.

At the same time, the four essays contain much commentary, some controversy, and some news. As noted, there are two essays republished (Goldstein, 2017, and Prechter, 2012), and two new essays by co-editors Stritmatter and Wildenthal. All cover much of the history of the poems’ role in the authorship debate, and Oxford’s role in the development of Elizabethan poetry.

In addition, Prof. Stritmatter was interviewed in the podcast *Don’t Quill the Messenger* (June 5, 2019) about the book and made several important statements about the scope and purpose of the whole enterprise, which I think should be incorporated into subsequent editions of this book. The most notable of these are: “This book was written to disprove the claim...that there is absolutely nothing in the Earl of Oxford’s poetry that connects him to Shakespeare...This is a patent falsehood. We can argue about how much is enough...about what do these patterns really mean...[that they may result from] a ‘shared speech community.’ But the argument that you cannot make, without becoming a fool, is that there is no connection here” (26:20).

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This is a blunt yet accurate statement. However, if we turn to Goldstein's 2017 article we find the redoubtable Steven May (who has commented on Oxford's poems for almost 40 years, with his 1980 monograph, his 1991 book, *Elizabethan Courtier Poets*, and his 2004 *Tennessee Law Review* article, always denying any connections between Oxford and Shakespeare) now stating, in a March 2017 communication with Goldstein, that if there are any parallels between Oxford and Shakespeare, we must consider that Oxford's "poems were in print and were therefore available for Shakespeare to plagiarize" (160). This illustrates, in a nutshell, the problem with debating the authorship with orthodox experts: there is always a new answer to preserve the status quo, no matter how absurd.

Meanwhile, the editors' introductory essay explores some of the larger issues and evidence raised by Oxford's poems, evidence that drives a Steven May to such extremes as above. Much evidence is presented that illustrates Oxford's role in the development of Elizabethan lyric poetry, in terms of both style—his use of anaphora, anadiplosis, antithesis, hendiadys—and in the unique uses of words, contrasts, repetition, etc. There is also much made of vocabulary analysis using the EEBO (Early English Books Online) database to find out how often certain words and phrases were used throughout the Elizabethan era. A number of examples are given along with several charts. But after publication, authorship critics complained that the editors had used a truncated version of EEBO; thus, all the numbers presented were inaccurate. In the *Don't Quill the Messenger* podcast this problem was acknowledged, and it was announced that a second edition of the book is scheduled, with new numbers and revised text. Stritmatter remarked, "the number of problems in searching EEBO is pretty significant" (19:14).

However, the EEBO material, all presented upfront in this introductory essay, was more a distraction than a revelation. It is in the latter part of this essay that the most compelling evidence is introduced, especially with the section on a 1953 study by Albert Feuillerat (*Composition of Shakespeare's Plays*) in which the author states that his list of eight foundational elements "will enable us to define what properly characterizes Shakespeare's poetic style (page 17 in *Poems*, citing page 59 in Feuillerat). Interestingly, Stritmatter in *Don't Quill the Messenger*, notes the importance of Feuillerat, and wonders why no one has mentioned him in any of the reviews he had seen to date (17:20). All eight of Feuillerat's criteria for Shakespearean style are present in Oxford's poems, which represents a critical piece of authorship evidence. Hopefully, in a revised edition, Feuillerat will be given more prominence.

That brings me to the one shortcoming of this edition: the entire issue of biography and autobiography in this book is secondary to its discussion of authorship, and in the details of forensic analysis of linguistics and literary

sources. This makes sense, up to a point. But the authorship debate is very much about the relationship of the author to what he writes, and therefore biography matters in determining literary identity. While biography/autobiography is not ignored in this study, it is skewed and selectively invoked. In the *Quill* interview Stritmatter states:

the ethos of the Shakespearean sonnet is a tendency towards autobiography and self-disclosure...[in a voice of realism]...which convey the impression of sometimes being a direct translation of the author's own experience through the poem on paper. (10:20) ...the language [in the poems] is one step closer to autobiography than it is in the plays. (11:00)

However, the number of instances of biography or autobiography in Oxford's early poems are presented only in passing. Given the prevalence in authorship studies that connect Oxford's life with the Shakespeare canon, especially the *Sonnets*, it would seem that once one has linked his early poems to Shakespeare—and much of the evidence in this book does just that—there remains the vital matter of determining the story that Oxford's poems are telling. May in his 1980 study makes a remarkable statement: "The absence of personal feeling in these works is, of course, characteristic of much Elizabethan love poetry, and must be understood in terms of Oxford's poetic intentions, which were more structural and rhetorical than sentimental (1980, 13)." Such thoughts well suit an academic seeking to minimize Oxford's case for authorship, but scholarly analysis needs to delve much deeper.

In the *Quill* interview (37:00+) Stritmatter mentions the significance of Oxford's 1575–1576 trip to Italy and the subsequent separation from his first wife, Anne Cecil, remarking that *Rape of Lucrece* and *Cymbeline* are examples of "Oxford coping with this." There is a reference in *Poems* (180) to several poems of a "daringly autobiographical character" that will appear in Volume II. However, one thing apparent in Volume I is a section (see 180–181) where reference is made to the "stigma of print" theory of why Oxford chose anonymity in his lifetime, and why that anonymity continued after he passed. Ruth Loyd Miller is quoted from her 1975 edition of Looney (1: 559) that Oxford's use of his real name in publishing the English translation of *Cardanus Comforte* was a "daring departure from Elizabethan social norms" that earned him attacks as being "phantasticall, light headed, and what next?"

The editors then state that such views "undoubtedly account for a large portion of the angst expressed in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, where the speaker in several (71–76, 102) admits his shameful transgression of Elizabethan societal norms regarding aristocratic publishing and—much worse—slumming in the public theatres."

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That is one interpretation, but not the only one. If we are to venture into this territory at all, then it must be all the way and as thoroughly presented as the pros and cons of which poems are actually Oxford's, and which lines and words do or do not align with Shakespeare's lines and words. So, then, where is Queen Elizabeth? Based on Volume I, she is absent, and one would have no clue that she and Oxford even knew each other. Consider that the one acknowledged Oxford poem that is also a Shakespearean-style sonnet ("Love Thy Choice" in Looney [1921], "Who Taught Thee First To Sigh" [E.O. 15] in *Poems*) is discussed by Ogburn (*TMWS* 512–513) and Whittemore (*100 Reasons* 54) as certainly about Elizabeth, along with what that tells us. Such discussions merit some place in any consideration of Oxford's early poems.

In a final irony regarding Oxford's early poetry and biography, Stritmatter remarks in the *Quill* interview (38:30) that "we still don't know everything that de Vere was writing when he was younger...." But in June 2019 attention was called (on the Facebook discussion group "ShakesVere") to an article by Robert Prechter ("Oxford's Final Love Letters to Queen Elizabeth") in the spring 2015 *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* about poems he had found in an obscure publication (*A Gorgeous Gallery, of gallant inventions*, 1578), three of which would clearly appear to be the young Edward de Vere writing to none other than Queen Elizabeth (called "Elizera" by the anonymous poet) about the relationship which they had. No one took much notice of this article at the time, but Stritmatter posted on "ShakesVere" (June 27, 2019) that these poems "definitely belong in Volume II" along with the later and disputed poems. When it appears, I hope there will be some discussion of what else of Oxford's youthful poetry was either to or about Elizabeth.

The story of Oxford's youthful poetry is far from over, and there is much yet to learn and debate. Kudos to the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship in sponsoring the publication of *The Poems of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford... and the Shakespeare Question*, and to co-editors Roger Stritmatter and Bryan Wildenthal for their work in bringing out Volume I.