

Looney's Lost Labours

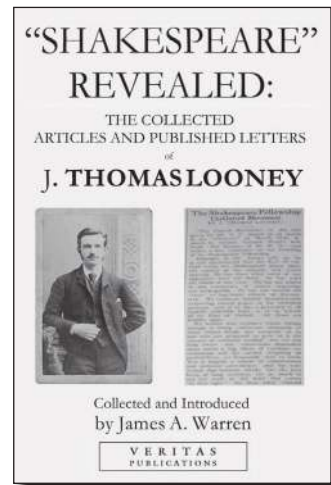
Reviewed by Michael Delahoyde

“Shakespeare” Revealed: The Collected Articles and Published Letters of J. Thomas Looney. Ed. James A. Warren. Veritas Publications, 2019. 312 pages. (Paperback \$20.00).

J. Thomas Looney (1870-1944), the English schoolteacher who first identified Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, as the true poet-playwright behind the pen-name “Shakespeare,” wrote, “I was well aware...that I was exposing myself to as severe an ordeal as any writer has been called upon to face” (17). We near the hundredth anniversary of this statement and of its referent: Looney’s magnum opus, *“Shakespeare” Identified* (1920), and his *The Poems of Edward de Vere* published soon afterwards. Reading so much more now from Looney is always engaging, somewhat enraging, and ultimately inspirational.

The founder of Oxfordianism seemed to have largely retreated from the fray after publishing his game-changing work. Until recently, we knew of only eleven subsequent pieces written by Looney concerning the Shakespeare Authorship Question, and therefore inherited an impression that he was a shy man who had quickly, perhaps even sheepishly, withdrawn from the controversy.

With more of the meticulous, tireless industriousness that has given us perpetually updated editions of the *Index to Oxfordian Publications* and a centenary edition of Looney’s *“Shakespeare” Identified*—unredacted, and with



savvy editorial choices that amend obsolete practices in spacing, punctuation, and font in order to increase readability—James A. Warren has tracked down, rediscovered, and retrieved more than forty additional lost writings by Looney and restored some articles of his that Warren came to realize had been too freely edited or cut in previous publication form (57). Warren's archival sleuthing has now shown that with letters to the editors of various publications and in articles concerning his continued research into Oxford, Looney was actually diligent in assuring that his work was not misrepresented and distorted by detractors. Warren has restored not only lost documents to the record but also a significant degree of dignity to one maligned, like the Earl of Oxford and many of us all: one whom Warren has come to revere, so to speak, as “mild-mannered on the outside, perhaps, but with a spine of steel inside” (iv). I would say the same of James Warren himself, whose type of dynamism was long ago characterized by Looney in appreciating those involved in intense historical research:

Painstaking workers, official and unofficial students, have toiled in regions of dust and mould, to pierce mists of imaginative traditions, and to come face to face with the realities of the past in its contemporary documents and formal records. The contents of long neglected archives, in obsolete writing undecipherable to the ordinary reader, have been microscopically examined, summarized, indexed, and placed within reach of the more general student; and this material has furnished tests that have given the *coup de grace* to more than one cherished illusion (279).

Clearly inspirational—especially to this reviewer in terms of archival success. One hopes that Warren enjoyed the realization that his enterprise was not dissimilar to Looney's own in discovering the fuller biographical picture of their respective subjects. This work is illuminating as to the history of the authorship debate, and Looney's own words are also inspirational. However, any open-minded reader will also be dismayed at what these letters show us: that nearly one hundred years later, the debate seems to have progressed not a step. That is, the very same assortment of orthodox arguments, dismissals, and tactics used today were already faced and addressed by the stalwart Looney.

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For example, it becomes clear that mockery of his name, from which Professor Jonathan Bate could not refrain in last year's debate with Alexander Waugh, has perpetuated itself from the start. Admirably, Looney brushes off such idiocy with eloquent dignity, acknowledging that one reviewer had not been too harsh, "Excepting a silly thrust at my hapless patronym" (150). Effective British Jeeves-speak, what?

Not just the "attitude of somewhat supercilious mockery towards all 'heretics'" (181), Looney also faced immediate dismissal by critics who did not even read his book. He defends his detection that one detractor "hurled intolerant denunciations 'at my work' without having read it" (21) since "It will be noticed that he even takes me to task...for saying something contrary to what I had repeated with an almost wearisome reiteration" (23) (that is, the dating of the sonnets). "If Mr. Robertson had even taken the trouble to read the whole of the sentence from which he quotes he could not have so misrepresented me.... The public may accept this as a fair specimen of Mr. Robertson's knowledge of the contents of my work" (47). Indulge this reviewer to point out that the first and nastiest commentator on my critical edition of *Anthony and Cleopatra* on Amazon.com accused me of even getting "Antony's" name wrong, indicating that he hadn't even read the *cover* of the book, where one of several explanations for that choice can be found. I suppose it is a bitter comfort to find that we suffer the same irresponsible contentiousness as did Looney.

He found his ideas dismissed out of hand on the grounds that they were recapitulations of Baconian arguments, so he specified how some of his arguments were as anti-Baconian as they were anti-Stratfordian (33). He took to task critics delivering cowardly cheap shots and employing cheesy tactics. When he received a rejection to a letter he had written to correct glaring errors in a review ridiculing a book by the early Oxfordian, Colonel Ward, Looney wittily wrote, "A familiar couplet assures to a certain class of combatant the privilege of 'fighting another day'; and therefore the editor of *The Church Times* has apparently qualified for future frays" (176). Like many of us, he encountered "the kind of argumentation one associates with political maneuvering rather than a serious quest for the truth on great issues and it makes one suspect that [the attacker] is not very easy in his own mind about the case" (271). And Looney is generous of spirit yet adamant in viewing the matter from the opposing side: "To admit now that the Shakespeare problem is a reality would convict their class of incompetency, and entail personal retractions to which average human nature is unequal" (181).

So, cascade all the familiar suspect objections: for example, the Stratfordian insistence that some Shakespeare works are written after Oxford's death. Looney asserts, as do many of us, *ad nauseam*, that dates of first recorded performances are not dates of composition (180); that "so clearly does the year 1604 mark a crisis in matters Shakespearean that several authorities give

this as the date of the Stratford actor's retirement to Stratford" (43). That early retirement is untenable for a creative artist at the height of his career: absurd in the case for Shakspeare and worse for Bacon and Derby who lived so much longer than de Vere (236; cf. 19).

Looney long ago tried to drive home the point that while spelling was indeed flexible at the time, pronunciation always distinguished the short "a" sound (minus the middle "e") in the Stratford family's records: "Shaxper or Shag-sper" (290), but not "Shakespeare."

Looney long ago addressed the criticism that de Vere's poetry is too inferior to that of Shakespeare (35ff) with all the counter-arguments that we are still offering, including the poetic and thematic resemblances specifically of Oxford to Shakespeare, especially in the E.O. poem "Loss of His Good Name" (46).

Looney extends material covered in *"Shakespeare" Identified* with additional connections between Oxford's life and the Shakespeare plays, including the rivalry with Philip Sidney captured in *Merry Wives* (122ff), "the revolting crisis" in *All's Well* (the bed-trick played on Bertram) matching Oxford's experience (66-69), the Christo Vary implications in the anonymous *The Taming of a Shrew* (253ff), and the revised *The Taming of the Shrew* parallels (262). Looney notes orthodox admissions such as that Shakespeare "utterly missed what a knowledge of the middle classes would have given him" (172). On *Hamlet*, having "long been suspected of being the author's work of special self-revelation" (62), Looney finds that one nineteenth-century orthodox critic identified "Polonius, Laertes, and Ophelia [with] Lord Burghley, Robert Cecil, and Anne Cecil (Lady Oxford)" (147) but inconceivably missed the Earl as the star at the center of this constellation of characters. The autobiographical case for the Shakespeare works and especially *Hamlet* has been so strong that for a while the desperate Stratfordian defense was that maybe Oxford furnished William of Stratford with biographical material for the plays (61). Though this be madness, yet there is desperation in't.

Alternately attacked with the assertion that parallelisms between the author and Shakespearean characters might be made for anyone, Looney avers, "It has been impossible to do anything of the kind for either William Shakespeare or Francis Bacon" (46; cf. 49-50). He does not let unfounded dismissals slide by. He eloquently writes that, "Truly great dramatic literature can only come from the pens of writers who are accustomed to look closely into their own souls and make free use of their secret experiences; and it may be doubted whether a single line of living literature ever came from pure imagination or mere dramatic pose" (274). Then he puts out calls for further research on a variety of topics (15, 53, 226) infinitely more engaging from the Oxfordian perspective than any "musty mortgage deeds, property conveyances, dubious signatures, or malt and money dealings" (77).

Looney faced the attempted *ad hominem* dismissals by critics disparaging his academic background, just as most Oxfordians do today: ironic, since *we* are also typically called snobs by these elitists. But Looney calmly explains, “Beginning the researches, not with the academic dry-as-dust intimacy with Shakespeare, but with the kind of knowledge possessed by an admiring reader, whose chief interests lie elsewhere, I found that all the facts of Oxford’s life fell naturally and spontaneously into their place in relation to the outstanding personae of the plays” (49). If we point to authorship doubters “who have shown a familiarity with Elizabethan literature, we shall be told that none are ‘men of letters.’ If we point to men of letters who have adopted heretical views on Shakespeare we shall be told that they knew nothing of Elizabethan literature” (181).

For one accused of not being an adequate scholar of the Elizabethan age (48), Looney brings forth more informed realism than the fantasy land surmised into history by the Stratfordians. The literary context for “the greatest English poet in the making” (77), Looney realizes, situates Oxford within the court poetry milieu and connects him with his poet uncle Henry Howard (87) and with the inferior Sidney and Lyly (93ff). Looney contrasts Bacon and Shakespeare as “such polar temperamental differences” that not even a “literary partnership” (169) would have been viable. He addresses Greene’s notorious mention of “Shakescene,” which even if referring to Shakspeare only shows contempt (180). Looney already recognized that Ben Jonson was “the strongest plank in the Stratfordian platform” (42) and deconstructs Jonson’s posthumous testimony (180): “Was the comradeship a reality or a much belated pretense?” (247); did he cooperate with Shakspeare, or was he scheming with those concealing the true author (288)? Jonson, shows Looney, said “too much to avoid the implication of warm friendship, too little to justify it” (251).

Looney long ago addressed the mysterious 1609 publication of the *Sonnets* (197), and dismantled the myth about the First Folio: for example, no publishers could get hold of manuscripts, but two actors could (198)? All in all, while asserting that “Circumstantial evidence cannot accumulate forever without at some point issuing in proof” (62; cf. 228), Looney provided the mountain of it that should have been more than adequate to have changed literary history’s verdict.

As to the perennial assertion trotted out when the Stratfordians have lost on every other point of debate, one recently voiced by David Tennant on television that it doesn’t matter who wrote the plays, Looney already countered years ago: “Doubtless ‘The play’s the thing’; but these, I am convinced, will never be fully understood apart from the personality of the man who has left a permanent record and monument of himself in the great ‘Shakespeare’ dramas” (11). Looney captured what I believe is the experience all Oxfordians have had: “We are convinced that once the readers of ‘Shakespeare’ have

the career and personality of the Earl of Oxford in their minds, they will find our great masterpieces pulsating with a new and living interest" (75).

His most ingenious and effective expression of the Oxfordian perspective is the way Looney synthesizes the problematic, simultaneous phenomena in literary history: Oxford, the "‘best for comedy’...is the only dramatist mentioned by any of these authorities no trace of whose plays can be found. The two outstanding mysteries of Elizabethan drama are, in fact, the Oxford mystery and the Shakespeare mystery; and these, as we see, fit into and explain one another" (200-201; cf. 89). Looney continued crafting this powerful expression of his thesis, "convinced that all, and more than all, the facts necessary for the solution of the Shakespeare problem, both on its negative and its positive side, are already known" (210). Soon he grew eloquent in his concision: "Oxford is a first-class poet, nearly the whole of whose poems are missing; ‘Shakespeare’s poems are first-class verses whose author is missing’" (221). "What, then, are the probabilities that Oxford is the missing author of the ‘Shakespeare’ plays; that the ‘Shakespeare’ plays are Oxford’s ‘lost’ dramas; that the two outstanding mysteries of Elizabethan drama have a common solution?" (218).

As I indicate, it is to me both outrageous and discouraging that Looney alone did not accomplish what so many of us are still striving for, and yet, he maintained hope and conveys it in re-encouraging words: "The future,...I am confident, is ours. Only let us have the matter properly examined by men who are more anxious for truth than for the defense of their own over-confident past dogmatism" (51-52; cf. 100).

We can also close with one more iteration of what I consider Looney’s best summation, and his final words of encouragement:

we possess a set of invaluable dramas, a literature in itself, quite divorced from its producer: plays without their author.... [Meanwhile,] there lived and labored strenuously, if somewhat secretly,...one of the greatest dramatic geniuses known amongst men, divorced for centuries afterwards from his writings: an author without his plays.

[R]esearch workers...can therefore set themselves no more honorable task than to draw him from his obscurity and reunite him with his creations in the mind and affections of mankind (294-295).

We soon-to-be centennials can persist, energized by these and many other until-now lost words of J. Thomas Looney, rediscovered and brought before us by James Warren.