

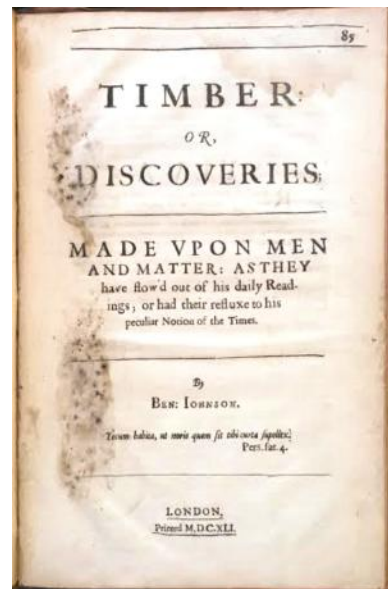
# *Is Ben Jonson's De Shakespeare Nostrati A Portrayal of Edward de Vere?*

by Andrew Crider

Ben Jonson's *De Shakespeare Nostrati* is usually regarded as a brief remembrance of William Shakspeare of Stratford. Yet the person described by Jonson corresponds poorly with what we know from other sources of the life and character of William of Stratford. On the other hand, Jonson's remembrance is fully consistent with the colorful biography of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. Jonson described Shakespeare as an open, creative individual whose writing and conduct suffered from a lack of self-discipline. We have no evidence that either openness or poor self-discipline characterized Mr. Shakspeare, but both qualities are major themes in de Vere's biography.

## Jonson's Portrayal

*Nostrati* was probably composed in the early 1630s and subsequently published posthumously in *Timber, or Discoveries* (1641). The notebook is devoted largely to Jonson's translations and accompanying commentary from classical authors. The translations are largely unattributed and interwoven with Jonson's own elaborations on such subjects



as statecraft, oratory, liberal studies, and literary matters (Donaldson 13–15). *Nostrati* is a one paragraph depiction of Shakespeare that appears in a more general discussion about good and poor writing. The paragraph has a three-part structure beginning with (1) a critique of Shakespeare's writing; moving to (2) an apologia in which Jonson assures the reader of his fondness for Shakespeare the man; and ending with (3) a generalization of the initial literary critique to a broader character assessment, as follows:

(1) I remember the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare that in his writing, whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out a line. My answer hath been, Would he have blotted a thousand: which they thought a malevolent speech. I have not told posterity this, but for their ignorance, who choose that circumstance to commend their friend by wherein he most faulted, and to justify mine own candour, (2) for I loved the man and do honour his memory (on this side idolatry) as much as any. He was, indeed, honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fancy, brave notions, and gentle expressions, (3) wherein he flowed with that facility that sometime it was necessary he should be stopped: Sufflaminatus erat, as Augustus said of Haterius. His wit was in his own power: would the rule of it had been so too. Many times he fell into those things, could not escape laughter, as when he said, in the person of Caesar, one speaking to him: Caesar thou dost me wrong he replied: Caesar did never wrong but with just cause, and such like, which were ridiculous. But he redeemed his vices with his virtues. There was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned (Walker 52).

The first segment of *Nostrati* hinges on an indirect reference to a well-known line from the preface to the First Folio of the collected plays (1623). Although the preface appeared over the names of two players, John Heminges and Henry Condell, it is almost certainly the work of Jonson himself (Donaldson 371–74; Price 170–71). The line reads: “His mind and hand went together: and what he thought he uttered with that easiness, that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers.” Now in *Nostrati*, Jonson informs the reader that his comment was not meant to be taken at face value,

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but rather was intended as an ironic criticism of Shakespeare's writing. Thus, Jonson's reply to the players: "Would he have blotted a thousand." Rather than an occasion for praise, the notion of insufficient blotting is used by Jonson to suggest an undisciplined writer whose work wanted editing, as in the self-editing of one's immediate thoughts or the de facto editing of a written draft.

Jonson does not specify which aspects of Shakespeare's work required blotting, but we know he adhered to classical hallmarks of artful writing including simplicity, concision, moderation, and balance (Honigman 96–99; Walker 14). Elsewhere in *Discoveries* he writes: "the learned use ever election (selection) and a mean (moderation), they look back to what they intended at first, and make all an even and proportioned body." But in reading Shakespeare he was likely to find complexity, ostentation, and a fondness for word repetition, alliterative phrasing, punning wordplay, and run-on lines (Smith), few if any of which had a place in Jonson's critical theory and all thereby at risk of blotting. Shakespeare broke too many of Johnson's rules, and Jonson was not pleased.

Jonson's blunt appraisal of Shakespeare's writing is quickly followed by the second segment in which he denies any animosity toward the man himself. On the contrary, he claims to have known and admired Shakespeare, whom he praises as candid, open-minded, liberal, imaginative, creative, and sensitive. These separate characterizations point to a more general psychological trait: they are correlated markers of one pole of the bipolar personality dimension of Openness to Experience, which contrasts a relatively artistic temperament to a relatively pragmatic one (Widiger and Costa). A high degree of Openness is associated with creative endeavors, unconventional thinking, affective sensitivity, and permissive values; a low degree of Openness is associated with pragmatic interests and endeavors, conventional thinking, constricted affect, and traditional values. Openness to Experience incorporates these opposing characteristics into a broad personality trait, as implicitly recognized in Jonson's deft assessment.

The third segment of *Nostrati* is based on an anecdote from Seneca's *Controversiae* regarding the Roman orator Haterius who, once engaged in his topic, was unable to bring it to a conclusion. Just as Augustus remarked that Haterius "needs a brake," so Jonson remarks that "Shakespeare flowed with that facility that sometimes it was necessary that he should be stopped." And just as Seneca's text provides an example of Haterius' eventual fall into foolish remarks, so Jonson recounts Shakespeare's laughable misquote of a line from *Julius Caesar* as a consequence of his rambling verbosity. Jonson thus uses Seneca's anecdote to make a transition from his initial comments on Shakespeare's undisciplined writing to a broader comment on his public behavior, from a literary critique to a more general characterization of the man: "His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been so too."

In sum, Jonson portrays Shakespeare as a man of an “open and free nature” who had difficulty controlling both his written work and his person. But who was this man? Current orthodox opinion aligns him with William Shakspeare of Stratford. On the other hand, skeptics of the orthodox position tend to favor Edward de Vere as the author of the Shakespeare canon. The question can be addressed by examining the biographies of each man to determine which of them most closely mirrors Jonson's two themes of openness and self-discipline.

## Openness to Experience: de Vere vs. Shakspere

The young Oxford excelled at aristocratic pastimes such as fencing, dancing, and jousting and might have become a court favorite save for his open disposition, which he expressed with flamboyant mannerisms, foppish dress, and a general indifference to courtly convention. As a more orthodox contemporary wrote to a friend: “It were a great pity he should not go straight, there be so many good things in him” (Whalen 127). Biographer Mark Anderson makes much the same observation in rather more colorful language: “A year in Italy had transformed de Vere, twenty-six-year-old chronic pain in the ass, into a chronic pain in the ass with an astonishing capacity for court comedy” (125).

But de Vere's unconventionality was matched by his creative flair as a musician, poet and deviser of court entertainments. According to his DNB entry, “...he evidenced a genuine interest in music and wrote verse of much lyric beauty” (Nelson DNB). Similar sentiments were expressed by his contemporaries: both Webbe in *Discourse of English Poetry* (1586) and Puttenham in *Art of Poesy* (1589) ranked de Vere foremost among a number of talented courtier poets. Puttenham further praised the interludes and comedies written by de Vere during his years at court, while Meres (*Palladis Tamia*, 1598) gave him pride of place in a group of writers “best for comedy amongst us.”

In the 1580s, de Vere became closely involved with the London theater and literary world. He was patron of two companies of players, Oxford's Boys centered at Blackfriar's and Oxford's Men, largely a touring company in the provinces. In addition, he was known as a friend, employer, or patron of Edmund Spenser, John Lyly, Anthony Munday, Thomas Nashe, and Robert Greene among leading writers of the day. Little is known of his literary undertakings following his second marriage in 1591, but there can be no doubt of his sustained involvement with poetry, playwriting and the stage. It is quite plausible that de Vere adopted William Shakespeare as a pen name in the early 1590s to shield his aristocratic identity when writing for the general public.

In contrast, we have no evidence of openness or creative accomplishment on the part of William Shakspeare. Although he was a shareholder and possibly

a player in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men), as well as part owner of the Globe theater from 1599, these roles are not evidence for openness, nor do they speak to a literary career. Indeed, we have no record of any written work by William of Stratford, save for six scratchy and inconsistently spelled signatures. Diana Price's biography of Shakspeare includes her telling study of "paper trails" attesting to the literary careers of twenty-four Elizabethan and Jacobean writers, plus Shakspeare (301–05). Price gathered information for each person on ten categories of evidence, such as having been paid to write, having been the author or recipient of commendatory verses or epistles, and receiving notice as a writer at death. With one exception, the number of paper trails ranged from a perfect ten (Ben Jonson) to a low of three (John Webster), with a median of six. The exception? William Shakspeare, who failed to achieve a single paper trail pointing to a literary career.

Shakspeare's last will also disappoints anyone looking for even a hint of artistic sensibility. The document is a dreary, overbearing set of instructions for the distribution of his considerable assets, down to the second-best bed and a silver gilt bowl. Absent is any mention of books, manuscripts, published work, notebooks, or correspondence, nor any reference to musical instruments, paintings, or art of any kind (Cutting 183–84). One searches in vain for signs of an artistic tendency or creative accomplishment in Mr. Shakspeare's biography.

## Self-discipline: de Vere vs. Shakspeare

Although often charming and generous, de Vere could also be brusque, impulsive and tactless (Sobran 133). As a young courtier he attracted comment by curtly refusing the Queen's repeated request to dance before visiting dignitaries and barely avoided a duel with Sir Philip Sidney after imperiously ordering Sidney off a tennis court. De Vere may have had reason to assert his aristocratic prerogatives in court circles, but his manner of doing so did not serve his long-term interests, and it tarnished his reputation.

Jonson portrays Shakespeare as an undisciplined raconteur who often needed to be stopped in case he "fell into those things, could not escape laughter." We have a remarkably similar anecdote regarding de Vere. In 1581 Charles Arundell denounced de Vere as a liar on the grounds that he repeatedly embellished his role in certain military adventures during his stay in Italy. Arundell wrote of one such occurrence:

This lie is very rife with him, and in it he glories greatly. Diversely hath he told it, and when he enters into it, he can hardly out, which hath made such sport as often have I been driven to rise from his table laughing (Anderson 167).

Although Arundell's attempts at defamation came to naught, de Vere was often the agent of his own undoing owing to an apparent indifference to contemplating the possible negative consequences of his actions. A telling example is found in de Vere's lengthy affair with Anne Vavasour, a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, even though liaisons between members of the court and the Queen's female attendants were prohibited. Vavasour became pregnant, but a scandal was avoided when she miscarried in early 1580. By the summer, however, she again conceived, carrying the child she named Edward Vere to term in 1581. The Queen, furious at the deception, sent mother, child, and father to the Tower of London for several weeks. Oxford was in addition banished from court for two years, suffering a grave loss of position, influence, and occupation as a deviser of court entertainments. To cap off his humiliation, Vavasour took up with her jailer, Sir Henry Lee (Anderson 161–65; 172–74).

The self-defeating behavior seen in the Vavasour incident was repeated many times in the course of de Vere's adult life, as seen particularly in his turbulent first marriage, his poorly considered, losing investments in attempts to discover a northwest passage to the Far East, and in an extravagant spending spree to the point of depleting his vast inheritance. This unfortunate history echoes Jonson's portrayal of a man whose gifts were compromised by deficient self-discipline.

William Shakspeare's father was an ambitious man. He married well, became a member of the Stratford governing elite, and petitioned for (but was denied) a gentleman's coat of arms. But John Shakspeare's fortunes began to decline when William was a boy. He defaulted on debts, was cited for illegal trading in wool, and avoided public places for fear of being summoned to court (Feldman 2–3). Son William was also an ambitious man. He pursued a business career to become a wealthy member of the Stratford gentry through judicious investments in his acting company, the Globe theater, real estate in Stratford and London, and income-producing land in the environs of Stratford. He reapplied for, and was granted, the coat of arms denied his father. Indeed, Williams's career can be read as a successful endeavor to reverse his family's disgrace and, at an early age, settle into a comfortable bourgeois existence in Stratford. This life trajectory suggests considerable self-discipline marked by goal setting, deliberate planning, and long-term persistence.

Unlike de Vere, Mr. Shakspeare was also skillful at keeping his money. He often sued for the collection of even small debts and avoided taxes when possible. In 1597 and again in 1598, he defaulted on occasional personal property taxes levied by Parliament. Both defaults were reported to the local sheriff for remedial action, but at some point during this period Shakspeare moved to a different jurisdiction south of the Thames. There is no record that the taxes were ever paid. It is implausible that the two defaults were due

to lack of forethought on the part of Shakspeare, a successful businessman sensitive to financial issues. The infractions appear to have been deliberate and purposeful (Crider 205–06).

Some of Shakspeare's acquaintances found him rather too ambitious. Robert Greene in *Groatsworth of Wit* (1592) warned his fellow writers away from "an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers," implying that Shakspeare was appropriating the work of others for his own purposes without permission or payment (Feldman 98–99). Jonson himself, in the play *Every Man Out Of His Humour* (1600), offered a scathing satire of Shakspeare as a pretentious and obtuse social climber "so enamored of the name of a gentleman that he will have it though he buys it." Shakspeare's character Soligardo enjoys being in the company of witty people but is oblivious to being the butt of their sarcastic humor. When Soligardo proudly shows his associates his newly acquired coat of arms in Act 3, scene 1, complete with a headless boar rampant in the crest, one responds sotto voce... "a swine without a head, without brain, wit, anything, indeed, ramping to gentility." This is not the Shakespeare described in *Nostrati*.

## Final Comments

Jonson gives us two leads for deciphering the person behind the *Nostrati* Shakespeare: He was at once an open personality and a man whose gifts were compromised by poor self-discipline. The ambitious, entrepreneurial, and successful Mr. Shakspeare is an unlikely candidate for either of these characterizations. On the other hand, the biography of Edward de Vere—poet, dramatist, and self-defeating eccentric—offers ample evidence for both. While Mr. Shakspeare is certainly not the focus of Jonson's vignette, it is of course hypothetically possible that Jonson had some other open and undisciplined poet-playwright besides de Vere in mind. If so, that person has yet to be identified.

Jonson's motivation for writing *Nostrati* is a matter of conjecture. One possibility is that he was reminded of Shakespeare on reading or rereading Seneca's anecdote about Haterius, although this would not explain the initial literary critique. Or perhaps Jonson wanted to set the record straight regarding the First Folio nonsense about the absence of blots and Shakespeare's ability to pour forth perfectly phrased lines without effort or amendment. Unsophisticated readers may have taken the



*Ben Jonson (c. 1617), by Abraham Blyenberch, at the National Portrait Gallery, London.*

passage literally, and fellow writers may have been offended by the caricature of their craft. *Nostrati* may be Jonson's revision of the First Folio preface without any admission of having written it.

Or perhaps Jonson, in his private notebook, wished to think through, even resolve, his ambivalence toward Shakespeare. As a critic he strongly objected to aspects of Shakespeare's writing; as the putative editor of the First Folio he could not have been indifferent to the monumental achievement it represented. Jonson's ambivalence is expressed in several yes-but constructions throughout *Nostrati*: "I loved the man—on this side idolatry; he flowed with that facility—necessary he should be stopped; wit was in his own power—would the rule of it had been so too; his vices—his virtues." Jonson attempts a resolution of sorts in the final sentence, borrowed directly from Seneca: "There was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned." The ambivalence does not entirely disappear, but it was as far as Jonson cared to go.

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