

From the Editor: Research Breakthroughs

Significant breakthroughs in research are rare occurrences in any discipline. Usually, the *modus operandi* is for a series of incremental advances that eventually lead to a breakout in conceptual development and seminal discoveries. Put another way, scholarship is often the accumulation of small advantages in particular fields of study, and the Shakespeare Authorship Question is no exception.

For the past hundred years, the Oxfordian hypothesis has been based upon four lines of circumstantial evidence.

- Oxford's contemporaries publicly praised his skill as a poet and a playwright throughout his life, but no play or play list bears his name.
- Oxford's biography is incorporated in the Shakespeare plays in terms of incident, plot and characterization.
- The language of Oxford's early poetry and in his private letters can be found throughout the poems and plays of William Shakespeare.
- Oxford's travels to France and Italy are reflected in a dozen Shakespeare plays in terms of geography, language and culture.

After a cascade of research successes in the first 50 years, fewer discoveries were achieved and restatements of existing scholarship became the norm

for Oxfordian writers. In the past decade, however, four major advances in Oxfordian scholarship have taken place:

1. The discoveries that numerous allusions to Italian topography, language and history in the Shakespeare canon match de Vere's itinerary while traveling in Italy during 1575–76, including his fluency in Italian and his interest in Italian literature.
2. The literary, dramatic, and historical evidence showing that de Vere wrote *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* and four other anonymous dramas early in Elizabeth's reign.
3. The discovery that the First Folio reference to "Sweet Swan of Avon" was deliberately ambiguous since Avon was both the name of a river but also the old name for Hampton Court—where theatrical performances were given for Queen Elizabeth, King James and their courts. It was called "Avon" as a shortening of the Celtic-Roman name "Avondunum," meaning a fortified place (*dunum*) by a river (*avon*), which over time was corrupted by common usage and became known as Hampton.
4. The philological evidence that Edward de Vere was the actual translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Shakespeare's favorite Latin author. This is based on de Vere's combined use of alliteration and hendiadys in his early poetry and his frequent use of double vowels in his private letters, both of which permeate the English translation.

In this issue we publish another major discovery, long suspected but never proven—that all six signatures on legal documents by William Shakspeare of Stratford-on-Avon were actually penned by law clerks.

In 1964 Jane Cox, then head of Renaissance documents at the British National Archives, published an assessment of those signatures. In it, she stated that "Literate men in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries developed personalized signatures much as people do today and it is unthinkable that Shakespeare did not" (Cox 33). In the case of the signatures on Shakspeare's will, Cox notes that "It is obvious at a glance that these signatures, with the exception of the last two [on pages 2 and 3 of the will], are not the signatures of the same man. Almost every letter is formed a different way in each.... Which of the signatures reproduced here is the genuine article is anybody's guess" (Cox 33).

Her analysis, however, was never accepted by professors in academia. For the first time, using modern forensic document standards, we offer an in-depth investigation of paleography and contemporary legal practices in Shakespeare's time that is comprehensive. The major issue, as author Matt Hutchinson emphasizes, has been that almost all Shakespeare scholars have failed to place the signatures in their contemporary environment and examine them in context.

To address these deficiencies once and for all, more than 100 signatures by Shakspeare and his British contemporaries are displayed in Hutchinson's monograph, "The Slippery Slope of Shakespeare's Signatures," for your review and judgment. Obviously, there is another authorship issue related to the integrity of the signatures. "The six signatures," warns Hutchinson, "must be re-evaluated before we can even begin to consider the paleographic argument for the *Sir Thomas More* additions."

With Hutchinson's compelling research, we must finally admit after 400 years that we possess no words in "Shakespeare's" handwriting, unless of course Oxford was Shakespeare.

Another issue of contention in Shakespeare studies has been whether the dedication to *Shakespeare's Sonnets* was designed as a double cryptogram that identifies the true author and dedicatee—Edward de Vere and Henry Wriothesley—or is simply the publisher's baroque rendering of a formal dedication with no involvement from Shakespeare (or anyone else).

The point-counterpoint debate is presented in *The Oxfordian* with two papers by Ramon Jiménez and by John Shahan, published sequentially. On the one hand, Jiménez maintains that the meaning of the dedication has been misinterpreted and that the typography and layout have been over interpreted. Jiménez provides evidence that:

1. the dedication was composed by the publisher, Thomas Thorpe;
2. there is no secret message or code in the dedication, nor any significance in its shape or typography;
3. the dedication is a straightforward, if awkward, expression of good wishes to William Hall, the supplier of the Sonnets' manuscript. In Jiménez's view, a reasonable rewording of it is "On the occasion of this publishing venture, I wish Mr. W. H., the sole provider of the manuscript of these sonnets, all happiness and that eternity promised by our immortal poet."
4. Edward de Vere was not involved with the Dedication in any way.

In counterpoint, Shahan seeks to confirm the initial discovery by Dr. John Rollett in 1997 of two ciphers contained within the dedication text.

Rollett revealed the dedication to *Shakespeare's Sonnets* to be a double cryptogram, the first containing a transposition cipher showing the name Henry Wriothesley (3rd Earl of Southampton), presumably identifying him as "Mr. W. H.," to whom the Sonnets are dedicated. The second is an innocent-letter cipher with a message identifying Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as the author of the *Sonnets*.

Shahan's paper shows that Oxford's authorship is consistent with several other oddities about the *Sonnets* publication. The article accounts for both of the apparent imperfections in Rollett's solutions: (1) the previously unexplained words THE FORTH in the message pointing to de Vere and (2) the separation of the letters "WR" from the rest of Wriothesley's name.

Perhaps most important, the article identifies a previously unappreciated feature of the dedication—the unique lower-case "r" in "Mr."—which proves the dedication was designed as a cryptogram and that the key 6-2-4 encoded into its shape—matching the number of letters in the three parts of the name "Edward de Vere" and producing the hidden message—was no accident. Finally, Shahan's paper corrects errors in Rollett's application of the Friedmans' validation criteria for breaking codes.

We hope the cryptology and math communities will review Shahan's evidence and offer their critical feedback on this discovery in Shakespeare studies.

What is instructive about these two breakthroughs is they were achieved by employing expertise in non-literary disciplines—those of law, history, and paleography regarding Shakspeare's signatures, and of cryptology, statistics, and contemporary typesetting regarding ciphers in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

Our cover is a full color reproduction of a rarely seen portrait of the 17th Earl of Oxford circa 1580–81 that measures 36-5/8 inches by 28-5/8 inches. We wish to bring it to the attention of a wider audience given new information on the portrait that demonstrates to me that the sitter's identity is Edward de Vere.

In this portrait, Oxford is wearing a hat taken from Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe and given to him by her commandment in July 1581: "one hat of the Dutch fashion of black taffeta with band embroidered with chip ['sheepe'] of pearl and gold" (Wardrobe of Robes day book, National Archives). This fits with Christie's dating of the portrait as circa 1580. The portrait may have commemorated the queen's gift, which occurred shortly after Oxford's release from the Tower of London in June 1581.



The portrait's provenance can be traced to Oxford's granddaughter, Anne Stanley, Countess of Ancram: the estate of her son, the 2nd Earl of Ancram, went to his nephew, the first Marquess of Lothian. Lothian's sister married into the Brodie family, and one of her descendants married in the Sinclair family, later the Lords Thurso, from whom the portrait was purchased. Equally important is new information that a portrait of Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, was also found in the same collection.

The late costume historian, Janet Arnold, F.S.A., commented in a private letter that the sitter "could be an Englishman dressed in the French fashion, or a Frenchman. He is certainly a courtier, with a sword containing so many jewels, and such an evident air of fashion"; in 1581, Oxford was lampooned by Barnabe Riche (*Riche His Farewell to Military Profession*) for wearing French clothing. Moreover, a new visual comparison of the portrait with that of Oxford's half-sister, Katherine Vere, Lady Windsor provides further evidence that the sitter is Edward de Vere. She is portrayed here in a 1567 painting by the Master of the Countess of Warwick (as seen in Wikimedia Commons).

The Oxford painting's current owner is Katherine Chiljan, author of *Shakespeare Suppressed* (2016), who purchased it in 1996 from Christie's auction house.



Finally, an official document proving the 17th Earl of Oxford served on Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council was discovered this spring at the Folger Shakespeare Library (see page 77). The April 8, 1603 letter from the Privy Council to the Lord Treasurer instructing him to hire horses to bring King James of Scotland to London is signed by Oxford as E. Oxenforde, with a loop flourish under the signature.

This latest find is a reminder that the Oxfordian case can suffer from too much conjecture and too little collection of documents. To that end, simply finding and publishing previously unknown documents related to de Vere would be a real service to scholars. It goes without saying that of equal importance are commentaries that properly place the documentary evidence in historical context.