

# A New Oxfordian Critical Edition

Reviewed by Michael Delahoyde, PhD

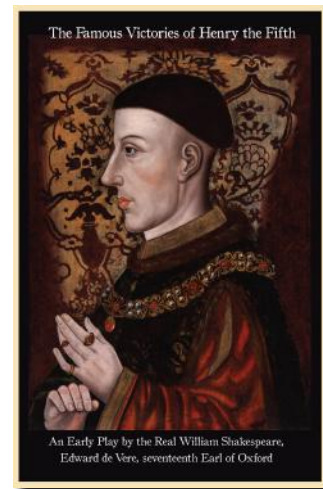
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*The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth. By Ramon Jiménez. Independently published (2022), 184 pages (paperback \$20.00).*

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Ramon Jiménez is the foremost expert on what are often considered by traditional Shakespeare experts the anonymous source-plays for Shakespeare's plagiarisms, or, more politely, improvements, or maybe, thefts-with-benefits. After several articles and conference presentations on these plays, his 2018 book, *Shakespeare's Apprenticeship: Identifying the Real Playwright's Earliest Works* (McFarland), provides a thoroughly solid foundation for identifying Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, as a supremely talented Elizabethan court playwright in his formative years and ultimately as *the* Elizabethan playwright: William Shakespeare.

In addition to *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*—which Oxford revised and expanded into the *Henry IV* plays and *Henry V*—Jiménez has investigated *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third* (a draft of the canonical *Richard III*); *The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England* (revised under the less troublesome or cumbersome title, *King John*); *The Taming of A Shrew* (astoundingly different from the canonical *The Taming of The Shrew*, yet the recognizable source); and *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (becoming *The Tragedy of King Lear* with the available anagram on “Earl”). He notes that other juvenilia such as *Edmund Ironside* and *Edward III* are convincing



suspects, but he chooses to focus on those plays for which we have the rewritten canonical versions. Jiménez is thus providing a three-dimensional picture of the Earl of Oxford's development as a playwright and his actual long-term writing processes.

I imagine that Jiménez' moment of inspiration came with the publication of this triumphal work, when he realized he would have to devote himself to the next stage of his mission in editing the much-needed scholarly editions of these plays. With *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, he has achieved the first.

One particular importance of this edition is that it presents and contextualizes the play that probably launched the young de Vere as a playwright. Even if he had been involved in *Damon and Pythias*—credited to Richard Edwardes as his only surviving play (c. 1564)—or penned now lost works, surely this “anonymous” play, *Famous Victories*, was preserved because it received resounding applause at the royal court and later on the public stage; and we can probably assume that court approval of this example of historical “edutainment” validated him in a way that motivated him to embark on a dramatic career (in both senses).

The play is a knock-about, manic, but patriotic piece of stagecraft betraying the zeal of an adolescent's hero-worship. Those skeptical of the identity of the playwright behind *Famous Victories* and the *Henry* plays will point to the chasm between them in quality: the differences in terms of maturity and sophistication are simply too vast, they will assert. There is also a darkness to the canonical histories that, though sensed, is too often soft-pedaled: the moral questions about the usurpation of the throne from Richard II, the Machiavellian manipulations of Prince Hal, the deaths of Falstaff and Bardolph, Henry V's war crimes, the ignominious end of Pistol as a hardened criminal, and the thorough political sleaziness.

The mature Shakespeare is literally ages away from the playwright responsible for *Famous Victories*. Indeed, any of us who have been oppressed with teaching writing courses are apt to dismiss the possibility that the same writer could ever have invested so much energy into revisions that seem so incredibly superior to their earlier drafts, although the vastness of that chasm can be exaggerated by those who adamantly refuse to consider the possibility that “Shakespeare” wrote drafts and then revised them. But consider what Oxford experienced in those intervening decades, then consider how exposure to and victimization

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by political lies and hypocrisy might darken one's outlook. The perpetually misinterpreted quotation from Ben Jonson about "Shakespeare" never having blotted a line is used to support the semi-religious fantasy that the Bard simply let the ink flow perfectly out of his quill onto a page—or, as captured so gracefully in the re-crafted Stratford monument, onto a pillow—and that he never needed to revise. One of the core problems with the cult of Stratford is the absence of any evidence demonstrating Shakespeare's evolutionary trajectory as a writer. In addition, this edition of *Famous Victories* is valuable because it is foundational in our erecting the cathedral that will be Notre Homme.

With this edition, Jiménez launches what he proposes to be titled The De Vere Shakespeare series, consciously replicating the book size and other formatting features established for the Oxfordian editions that have already been published—these include *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, and soon *The Comedy of Errors*.

Many have grown weary of the expectation that they must introduce, again and again *ad nauseam*, another short-version case against Shakspeare of Stratford and then the case for Oxford as Shakespeare. Somehow, Jiménez found the inspiration to re-till that ground and has generated a thorough and, most impressively, fresh version of the essential material, first for his book *Shakespeare's Apprenticeship* and now adapted for the *Famous Victories* edition. It is currently the definitive critical edition and should be used in all future De Vere Shakespeare collections.

The Introduction to the play itself first contrasts the modern critical consensus about *Famous Victories*, which is dismal, with the contemporary popularity it actually enjoyed as indicated in the publication record. Amid other obligatory introductory components—such as a plot summary, publication history, and dating—comes a detailed examination of the relationship between *Famous Victories* and the *Henry* plays, the thoroughness of which can be confirmed by the 13 pages which comprise the Works Cited. Jiménez examines the parallels in structure (such as the same practice of alternating between main historic scenes and comic ones); the ordering of events; the renaming of essentially the same characters (particularly the evolution of Falstaff); even the skipping of the same historical materials. Although the rare literary critic may acknowledge the influence of *Famous Victories* on the canonical plays, applying the Oxfordian perspective to explain every feature of the revision from the "crude" anonymous play (36) into the canonical *Henry* plays makes this introductory article the definitive Introduction on *Famous Victories*.

Of particular fascination is the appearance and eventual excising of Richard de Vere, 11th Earl of Oxford: in *Famous Victories*, "Oxford has been placed in an entirely unhistorical role created for him by the playwright" (43). It is

more adolescent hero-worship by de Vere, in this case glorifying an ancestor and thus the family name and title, all expunged years later when Oxford was commissioned into pseudonymity in his revisions.

The pagination arrangement of left-side textual notes/right-side text was selected originally by the general editor, Richard Whalen, for Oxfordian editions, and I have heard nothing but praise and appreciation for this layout. Jiménez arranges explanatory notes in close cross-page parallel with the text too. Nevertheless, I would still recommend a few more notes for future editions of these “anonymous” plays. I understand from experience that an editor grows impatient with what seems like redundancy in an edition. But one must also recognize that many readers will skip an introduction and plunge straight into the play. So, when the 11th Earl of Oxford appears (85), or when Gads Hill is first mentioned by name (81), no matter how thoroughly explained in the Introduction, readers need to be hit with the Oxfordian relevance and importance in that moment. It might be valuable to include parallels not just to the *Henry* plays, but to show how Shakespeare wove these stylistic kernels into the Shakespeare canon at large. For example:

Ah, God! I am now much like to a bird  
Which hath escaped out of a cage (*Famous Victories*: 9.1-2).

Compare with *King Lear* (5.3.9):

We two alone will sing like birds i'th' cage.  
When thou dost ask me blessing,

In *Famous Victories*, we have:

Me thought his seat was like the figure of heaven  
And his person like unto a god (*Famous Victories*: 9.26-27):

Anthony is said by Cleopatra and by Enobarbus to look like the god Mars (2.6.118, 2.2.6). Hamlet says his father had:

the front of Jove himself,  
An eye like Mars (3.4.56-57).

Again, in *Famous Victories*:

Sirra, thou knowest...there will be cakes and drink (19.58-59).

Compare with *Twelfth Night*:

Dost thou think because thou  
art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale? (2.3.100-01)

The recognizable moment years later in *Twelfth Night* should be obvious, but worth connecting with a note. Admirably, the notes in this edition do provide a microscopic intimacy with details of language, phrasing, and nuance. Jiménez cites the *Oxford English Dictionary* frequently and carefully references the critical contributions from previous editors of the play.

A personal note on Ramon's proposal of The De Vere Shakespeare. I am delighted that he has confessed to being underway with a critical edition of the next apocryphal Shakespeare source: *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third*. On my end, I will soon have a critical edition of *The Comedy of Errors* ready for publication and have started work on an edition of *The Merchant of Venice*. Still, more Oxfordians need to be involved in the ambitious project of creating The Complete De Vere Shakespeare. I nevertheless want to say that doing this work takes time, focus, and the zeal that you already have if you're reading this review to make a vital, permanent contribution to Oxfordian scholarship. And a little obsessive-compulsive disorder doesn't hurt.

James Warren has recently written that Oxfordianism is a collective of independent researchers rather than a monolith that seeks its own fossilization. "The movement has always been more of a loose collection of individuals working on their own than a coordinated movement. I believe it should remain this way" (*Shakespeare Revolutionized* 530). Therefore, it is sometimes difficult for us to imagine collaborating productively. Some may bristle at the notion that their contribution will be contained in a series that includes other entries that urge Prince Tudor interpretations or doubts that Oxford really passed on June 24, 1604. But do any of us not want to see this project thriving? (The excellent Arden editions, for example, are on their third instantiation.) Ramon Jiménez is launching this project energetically and I think we both hope to enlist an enthusiastic band of editors. As Prince Henry says, "Gog's wounds...." (Actually, everyone in the play keeps saying that part.) "We will go altogether./We are all fellows" (1.92–93)!

