

Oxford's Voices: What Shakespeare Wrote Before He Was Shakespeare

Reviewed by Phoebe Nir

Oxford's Voices: What Shakespeare Wrote Before He Was Shakespeare.
By Robert R. Prechter, Jr., 3,200 pages, 2021 (\$99.00, available only as an
E-book through website server at <https://oxfordsvoices.com>).

As a juvenile, Edward de Vere released an instructional booklet for a board game involving 48 pieces and advanced mathematics.

de Vere had a life-long habit of publishing hoax pamphlets claiming witness to signs of the apocalypse, such as deformed children and monstrous swine.

These insights and more await the reader of *Oxford's Voices*, Robert Prechter's *magnum opus*, filling 3,200 pages and representing the greatest leap forward in Oxfordian scholarship since 'Shakespeare' *Identified*. Twenty-four years ago, Prechter suspected that the years-long gap between Oxford's acknowledged juvenilia and the canonical **Shakespeare** plays was a bit too quiet (for the purpose of clarity, I have put the names of Oxford's various pseudonyms and allonyms proposed by Prechter in **bold**). Prechter's theory was correct. He has properly contextualized an enormous number of heretofore unrecognized publications by Edward de Vere, and boldly remapped the terrain of a brilliant life spent in almost constant literary activity.

Oxfordian scholars have previously theorized that Oxford wrote under different pseudonyms, questioning the true identity of the elusive **Robert Greene**, for example, and the attribution of various history play prototypes. At the end of the day, how many other literary voices does Prechter attribute to the Earl of Oxford? The total is a staggering 152.

I should address the reader's likely skepticism. Though one might suspect a bias towards false positives, Prechter insists that the opposite is true; he was relieved to discover that a publication was not written by Oxford, since crossing it off his interminable list would invariably save him time in conducting research. Also, Prechter acknowledges when he is unsure of one of his conclusions. He posits that *Oxford's Voices* have remained a literary secret for centuries due to de Vere's frequent use of allonyms, attributing his publications to living people that he often knew. One notable example is **John Lyly**, Oxford's secretary under whose name he published the novel *Euphues: the Anatomy of Wit* in 1578. Prechter suggests that the success of *Euphues* and its 1580 follow-up novel, *Euphues and his England*, may have drawn an uncomfortable amount of attention toward Lyly, leading Oxford to publish sequels under the different allonyms of **Barnabe Rich**, **Robert Greene**, and **Thomas Lodge**.

The effects of Prechter's arguments are cumulative, and one comes to trust his thoroughness and general caution as a reliable guide through the material. Which is not to say that he doesn't have some fun. When Prechter observes an inconsistency in the biography of **John Phillips**, an allonym employed occasionally by Oxford for the purpose of publishing elegies and devotional tracts, he delivers a Poirot-style denouement. Though **Phillips** professes himself to be an alumnus of Cambridge in 1578, six years later, he claims to be a student. "It seems he was getting younger," quips Prechter.

Prechter's methodology is similar to Looney's, employing a checklist to establish positive correlations between the works published during Oxford's lifetime and the types of material the *Voices* produced. Dedications to Oxford's friends, the presence of particular spellings, or an introduction apologizing for the poor quality of the author's writing (a practice Oxford endorses as a matter of etiquette in a writing style guide by **William Fulwood**) are all indicators that the text in question is written by a *Voice*. But Prechter's detective work is an art as well as a science. Roger Stritmatter's investigations into the multi-colored marginalia in Oxford's Geneva Bible shed fascinating light on how the man organized his thoughts. Prechter, too, uncovers Oxfordian habits, noticing how Oxford seems to have a vocabulary worksheet, seldom reusing the same word in a work, but often employing as many variations of the same word as he can—e.g., joy, joys, joyed, joying, joyfull, joyfully, and joyous.

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As Looney correctly identified the man behind the plays, Prechter has reframed the entire authorship debate, demonstrating with clarity the evolution of Oxford's writing from boyhood to old age. The **Shakespeare** canon, in Prechter's view, is situated somewhere between a capstone project and a victory lap, the most perfect versions of plots, themes, jokes, and turns of phrase that Oxford had been experimenting with for decades on the stage, as well as through prose, poetry, lyrics, and pamphlets. Take, for example, the journey of *Romeo and Juliet*, the seeds of which were planted when Oxford was a boy of twelve. **Arthur Brooke's** 1562 publication of "*The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, written first in Italian by Bandell, and nowe in English by Ar. Br." contains the intriguing confession that its young author is still a virgin. The narrator admits, "...But Fortune such delight as theirs did never graunt me yet."

Orthodox scholars have wondered why the great William Shakespeare would have been so enamored by a somewhat uneven verse poem from the 1560s that he would need to plagiarize it. The answer, Prechter illustrates in this and so many similar cases, is that the two works were written by the same man, but decades apart. In the interim years between "Romeus" and "Romeo," *Oxford's Voices* tell various tales of star-crossed lovers and warring families, from **Robert Greene's** "Planetomachia" to **John Partidge's** "Lady Pandavola," to four different versions of "Pyramus and Thisbe." Numerous iconic elements of the play get workshopped, refined, and reappropriated on the way. Nearly identical plots motivate works such as **Barnabe Rich's** "Of Fineo and Fiamma" and **Thomas Lodge's** "Forbonius and Prisceria." The notion of Echo repeating a beloved name, such as in Juliet's declaration from Act II, scene ii—"Else I would tear the cave where Echo lies,/ And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine,/ With repetition of Romeo's name"—itself echoes through the *Voices* works; Oxford employs the "Echo Poem" device in his poem, "Ann Vavasor's Echo" as well as in **Thomas Lodge's** "Scillaes Metamorphosis," **William Smith's** "Cloris," and **Barnabe Rich's** "Don Simonides."

Prechter also demonstrates that the real-life authors from whom **William Shakespeare** has been accused of borrowing were actually themselves the borrowers, and the misdating of the plays to William Shakspeare's lifetime has made a general mess of the Shakespeare canon's chronology. Particularly useful is his claim that Oxford contributed passages to Christopher Marlowe's works, an act that has recently befuddled artificial intelligence programs into mistakenly labeling Shakespeare's works as a collaboration between Oxford and Marlowe. To those who insist that Thomas North provided the source texts for Shakespeare, Prechter offers a stern rebuke—Oxford had made his own translation of Plutarch years before.

Prechter, it must be said, does not hold many Elizabethan authors besides Oxford in high esteem. Nonetheless, Prechter's investigative skills uncover fascinating details about nearly every other major writer of the period. He claims that Oxford collaborated on several plays with Ben Jonson, including Jonson's *Every Man in his Humor*, though it appears that not all of Oxford's ideas were to Jonson's liking; after Oxford's death, Jonson republished the play, shifting the setting from Oxford's beloved Italy to Jonson's more familiar London.

One writer whom Prechter suggests has been unfairly overlooked is Gabriel Harvey, who held his own against multiple Oxfordian surrogates. Forbidden to reveal the true identity of the powerful Earl attacking him, Harvey decided to engage Oxford on his own ludicrous terms, sparring with him in a game of "yes, and" worthy of a jester. Prechter's recounting of the Harvey-Nashe pamphlet wars is quite droll and reinforces Stephanie Hopkins Hughes' argument that Harvey's reputation as a humorless scold is deserving of a reassessment.

Some of the works that Prechter disqualifies from being *Voices*' might prove as controversial as the ones that he claims. *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, published anonymously in 1573 but republished in 1575 as *The Posies of George Gascoigne, Esquire*, has long been reputed to be a prank publication of Oxford's mocking Sir Christopher Hatton. Prechter, however, insists that it is by Gascoigne; Prechter refers to this as "the single most extensive Oxmyth." And despite its later censorship, Prechter shows evidence that Gascoigne had intended to please Queen Elizabeth with his book, and had given her notice of its upcoming publication. The same goes for the scandalous *Willobie His Avis*, first published in 1594, which has been interpreted variously to represent a parable of Oxford cuckolding himself, an encounter with William Shakspeare, and evidence of a secret Prince Tudor. Prechter's explanation is far tamer, drawing convincing historical comparisons between the various suitors and top contenders for Queen Elizabeth's hand.

While Prechter avoids many controversial topics, such as Prince Tudor theories, hidden ciphers, faked deaths, sexual-orientation inferences and the interpretation of fiction as contemporary allegory, he also points out several instances in which fictional works are clearly drawn from Oxford's personal experiences. Much Oxfordian ink has been spilled comparing the plot of *Hamlet* to its writer's life; *Oxford's Voices* points to at least two other works that will yield more evidence for those seeking biographical parallels.

Consider this passage from the opening of **Robert Greene's** *Mamillia*:

This Valasco after the decease of his father was a ward of the Duke of Zamorra, who seeing him indued with great wealth and large

possessions, having the disposition of his marriage in his hands, married him to a kinswoman of his named Sylandra, a Gentlewoman neither indewed with wit nor adorned with beautie.

Or this description of the title character from the opening of **John Lyly's** *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*:

This young gallaunt of more witte then wealth, and yet of more wealth then wisdom... thought himself so apt to all thinges that he gave himselfe almost to nothing but practising of those thinges commonly which are indicent to these sharpe wittes, fine phrases, smooth quippes, merry tauntes, jesting without meane, and abusing mirth without measure.

Oxford as portrayed by Prechter comes off a bit straitlaced. A reader needn't subscribe to every aspersion cast by Alan H. Nelson's *Monstrous Adversary* to accept that Oxford possessed an artist's temperament. Gabriel Harvey wrote in his 1593 *Pierce's Supererogation* that:

...all you, that tender the preservation of your good names, were best to please **Pap-hatchet**, and see Euphues betimes: for feare less he be mooved, or some one of his Apes hired, to make a Playe of you; and then is your credit quite-undone for ever and ever; such is the publique reputation of their Playes.

At the same time Prechter is hesitant to ever admit that Oxford had serious feuds with other members of Court, or that he was parodying public officials in his plays. Prechter offers the example of Sho Yano, a child prodigy who earned a doctorate degree in molecular cell genetics and cell biology at age eighteen, as a modern-day comparison to young Oxford. But while Yano is certainly impressive, a reader might be forgiven for failing to see where the successful medical researcher is spiritually akin to a dueling Earl who squandered his fortune on the arts. Yano struck me as rather more similar to the diligent and professionally successful Prechter; perhaps a certain early Oxfordian in Vienna might have called it "projecting."

Prechter's decision to publish his work online behind a \$99.00 paywall has been criticized as inappropriate; yet I find that Prechter's work is a valuable contribution to our knowledge of the man who wrote Shakespeare, and to so much more. His Herculean efforts are certain to act as a catalyst to a wave of new Oxfordian discoveries.

Oxfordians should be critical in their review of Prechter's revolutionary claims, and Prechter demonstrates a willingness to have his theories challenged and debated. He himself acknowledges that due to the breadth of this project,

there are likely some errors that will be corrected in his “Living Book” when other scholars bring them to light. To anyone reading this short review of a 3,200 page compendium, I urge you to read this work yourself. Both portable and searchable, *Oxford's Voices* is as much a digital encyclopedia as a book, and any Oxfordian researcher currently investigating other Elizabethan authors who worked during Oxford's era would be well-served by searching under their name in Prechter's glossary.