

"Sogliardo" and Greene's Upstart Crow

by Matt Hutchinson

The character Insulso Sogliardo in Ben Jonson's 1599 play *Every Man Out of His Humour* has long been seen by many Shakespeare scholars as being a lampoon of William Shakspeare. Richard Malim writes that *Every Man* "contains the most direct and complete refutation of the pretensions of William Shakespeare as author" (Malim 200). Less recognized is Jonson's association of Sogliardo with a member of the corvid (crow) family (Figure 1).

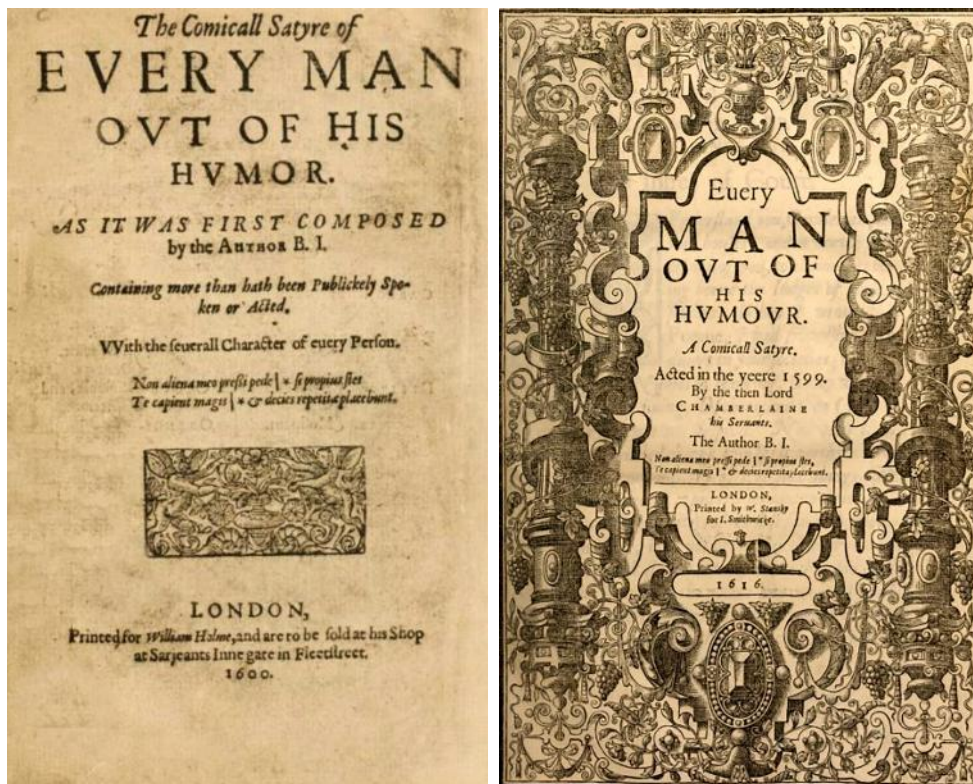


Figure 1. The 1600 quarto & 1616 Folio title pages of *Every Man Out of his Humour*.

The play begins with the Grex., or onstage commentators, entering. Their opening exchange includes

Asper: This may be truly said to be a Humor,
But that a **Rooke in wearing a pied feather**,
The cable hatband, or the three-pild ruffe,
A yard of shoe-tie, or the Switzers knot
On his French garters, should affect a Humour,
O, ’tis more than most ridiculous.

Jonson seems to play on the word rooke here; “a Rooke in wearing a pied feather” would likely evoke an image of the member of the crow family, although it can also mean fool. There is a saying, “a crow in a crowd is a rook and a rook on its own is a crow,” which demonstrates the general rule of thumb that to tell the similar subspecies apart, rooks tend to be more sociable. Yet the saying illustrates the difficulty many have in identifying one from the other.



Figure 2. A rook (left) and a crow (right), images distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license (Wikimedia).

The beginning of Act I, Scene I sees Macilente enter. Addressing the audience, his opening speech includes “To sing: *My mind to me a Kingdom is*.”

Professor Steven May has written an authoritative article on why the attribution of the poem “My Mind to me a Kingdom Is” in the mid-19th Century to Edward Dyer is incorrect, and that its true author was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford (May 386).

Matt Hutchinson is a doctoral candidate in the Humanities at the University of New England. He previously appeared in the 2021 volume of *The Oxfordian* with his monograph, “*The Slippery Slope of Shakspeare’s ‘Signatures’*”.

If there is still any doubt, Jonson also includes the line in his play *The Case is Altered*, printed three times after the publication of the *Sonnets* in 1609 but believed to have been composed around 1597-8 as a precursor to *Every Man Out*. The play opens on a character who is singing snippets from not one but three of Oxford's poems, "The Forsaken Man," "Care and Disappointment" and "My Mind to me a Kingdom Is." The final line is "my mind to me a kingdom is truly." Another character replies, "Truly a very good saying," both seemingly punning on the Oxfordian motto, *Vero Nihil Verius*, or Nothing Truer than Truth.

Returning to *Every Man Out*, Macilente then hides as he observes Sogliardo enter with Carlo Buffone. The Grex., observing the entrance of Sogliardo and Buffone, states:

Cor. Signior, note this Gallant, I pray you.
Mit. What is he?
Cor. **A tame Rook**, you'll take him presently: list.

They are clearly talking about Sogliardo, as they had met and been introduced to Buffone in the preceding prologue. The primary definition of "tame" is a domesticated animal, such as a bird. Sogliardo then takes center stage:

Sog. Nay, look you Carlo: this is my humour now!
 I have Land and Mony, my Friends left me well,
 and I will be a Gentleman whatsoever it cost me.

Sogliardo carries on like this a little more, in lines that seem to mock Shakspere. Macilente, observing Sogliardo with the Grex., bemoans to the audience:

Maci. Why, why should such a prick-ear'd HineHind as
 this, Be rich? ha? a Fool? such a transparent Gull
 That may be seen through? wherefore should he have
 Land, Houses, and Lordships? O, I could eat my Intrails,
 And sink my Soul into the Earth with sorrow.

Is Jonson drawing a link between a character spouting Oxford's poetry and his dismay toward the rise of the character representing Shakspere, just after the name William Shakespeare was attached to the Shakespeare plays for the first time in 1598?

Sogliardo reappears in a scene that alludes to the Shakspere coat of arms, and a "rampant boar," i.e., a boar on its hind legs, such as that found on the Oxford crest, and the line "not without mustard," alluding to Nashe's novel,

Pierce Penniless, the central character of which Mark Anderson has shown to be a conflation of Nashe and Oxford (Anderson 270-71). (Figure 3)

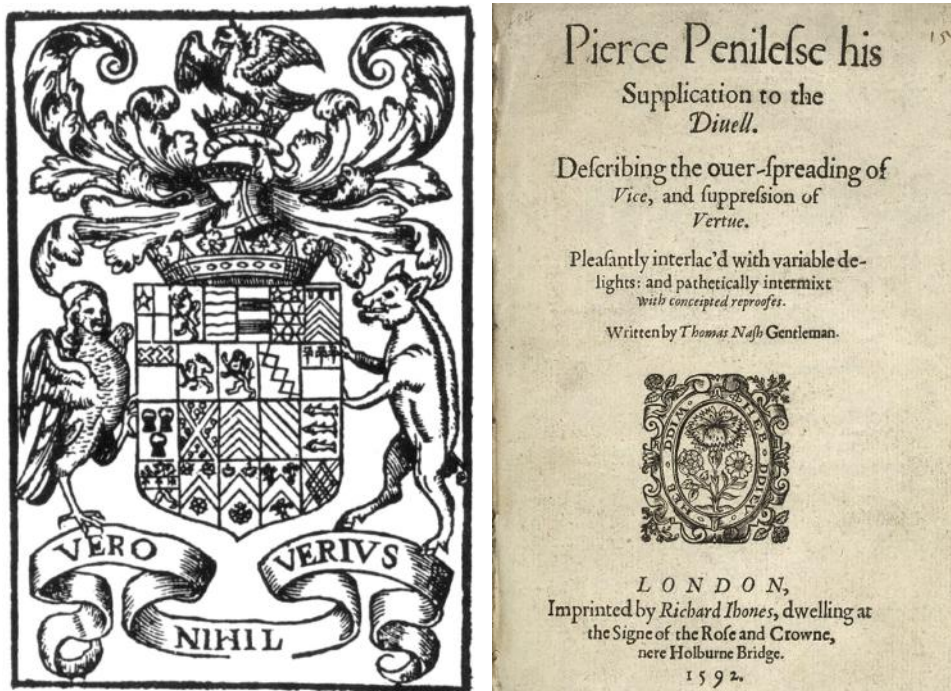


Figure 3. Rampant boar of de Vere arms; title page of Nashe’s *Pierce Penniless*.

The word *rooke* occurs three times in *Every Man Out*—the first saying it will affect a humor, the second linking it with Sogliardo, and the third, spoken by Macilente regarding a relation of Sogliardo: “why yond Fool Should wear a Suit of Sattin? he? that **Rook? That painted Jay**, with such a deal of outside?” (my emphasis).

A jay is another member of the crow family, while the “satin suit” reminds one of a passage from *Return from Parnassus* bemoaning actors in “satin suits” rising above their station. Here, the context of “rook” clearly alludes to the bird of the crow family.

A few months later, the Reverend Samuel Nicholson clearly identifies Shakespeare with the “upstart crow” line in print in his 1600 publication, *Acolastus*

(see figure below). These are just a very small selection of the borrowings from the works of Shakespeare (Figure 4):

SAMUEL NICHOLSON, 1600.	
PARALLEL PASSAGES.	
<i>Acolastus.</i>	<i>Shakespeare.</i>
Or wher's the soules Attorney, when the hart.	the heart's attorney. (<i>Ven. and Ad.</i> l. 335.)
Being once corrupted, takes the worsor part? (p. 12, l. 185.)	But with a pure appeal seeks to the heart Which once corrupted takes the worsor part (<i>Lucrece</i> , l. 293).
O woolvish heart wrapt in a womans hyde (p. 16, l. 265).	O tigers heart wrapt in a woman's hide (3 <i>Henry VI</i> , I. iv).
Thus all askaunce thou holdst me in thine eye (l. 300).	For all askaunce he holds her in his eye (<i>Ven. and Ad.</i> l. 342).
Hence idle words, servants to shallow braines, Unfruitfull sounds, wind-wasting arbitrators,	Out idle words, servants to shallow fools, Unprofitable sounds, weak arbi- trators ! Busy yourselves in skill-contending schools :
Your endles prattle lessens not my paines His suite is cold, that makes you mediators (l. 559).	Debate where leisure serves with dull debaters : To trembling clients be you medi- ators (<i>Lucrece</i> , l. 1016).
Witnes faire heauens she, she, 'tis onely she, That guides this hand to give this wound to me (l. 647).	She utters this : ' He, he, fair lords, 'tis he, That guides this hand to give this wound to me (<i>Lucrece</i> , l. 1721).
A prettie while this prettie creature stoode Before the engin of her thoughts began (l. 853).	A pretty while these pretty creatures stand (<i>Lucrece</i> , l. 1233). Once more the engine of her thoughts began (<i>Ven. and Ad.</i> l. 367).

Figure 4. Courtesy of the Shakspeare Allusion book (1909) 74.

Yet Nicholson does seem to allude to Oxford’s poetry:

I am a King...enriched with Content, My minde to me is as a
walled Towne.

(Nicholson, lines 739–741)

Which seems to evoke two of Oxford’s poems, “If I were a King I would command content” and “My minde to me a Kingdom is.” A “walled towne” seems like a synonym for kingdom and the OED bears this out: kingdom can be defined as “a domain,” which in turn can be defined as “a region contained within certain limits.”

Nicholson’s book is renowned for having the greatest number of Shakespeare “borrowings” in a single work during Shakespeare’s lifetime. Nowhere are the works of Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, or any other proposed author of the “upstart crow” line mentioned. Nicholson is clearly identifying the line with Shakespeare in 1600.

So, within 18 months of the name “Shakespeare” appearing in plays for the first time, an Elizabethan has clearly linked the upstart crow allusion to Shakespeare, and also alluded to Oxford’s poetry, while Ben Jonson, regarded by many as the key witness in the authorship question, has linked Sogliardo with a crow, and Oxford with a character devastated at the crow’s rise.

Works Cited

Anderson, Mark. “*Shakespeare*” by *Another Name: The Life of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, the Man who was Shakespeare*. Gotham Books, 2005.

Ingleby, C.M., Furnival, F.J., Smith, L.T. (eds.) *The Shakespeare Allusion Book: A Collection Of Allusions To Shakespeare From 1591 To 1700, Vol. 1*. Chatto & Windus Duffield & Co., 1909.

Malim, Richard. *The Earl of Oxford and The Making of “Shakespeare.”* McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, London, 2012.

May, S.W. “The Authorship of ‘My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is,’” *The Review of English Studies*, New Series 26: 104 (Nov. 1975) 385-394.

Nicholson, Samuel. *Accolastus*. London, 1600.