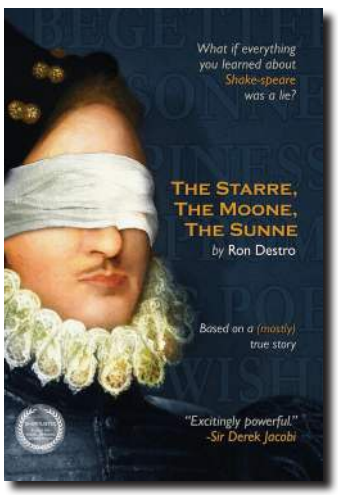
The Starre, the Moone, the Sunne

Reviewed by Richard M. Waugaman

The Starre, the Moone, the Sunne. *By Ron Destro. Australia: Contempo Publishing, August 31, 2023, (paperback, $16.99 or Kindle $14.99).*

What, exactly, was the relationship between the 17th Earl of Oxford and William Shakspere, merchant of Stratford? Would we ever like to know! Until solid evidence answers this perennial question, we have fine imaginative writers such as Ron Destro to slake our thirst to know more. As Destro has said, he hoped to reach a wider audience with his murder mystery than do the nonfiction works of Charlton Ogburn, Mark (Margo) Anderson, Noemi Magri, Richard Whalen, Roger Stritmatter, and others. The many murders in his novel suggest that Oxford's authorship was kept secret because people were killed for disclosing it.



Oxfordian readers will enjoy seeing insider jokes with characters such as "Jack Loney," "Charles Ogburn," "Master Strittmaster," and "Marianna Magri." Names of many other Oxfordian scholars are equally transparent. A hidden name that will slip by most readers, though, is "Sam wanted a maker" (90) alluding to Sam Wanamaker, the actor credited for his tireless efforts to have the Globe theater reconstructed. A notorious Stratfordian friend of mine appears in the novel as "an ill-nurtured dolt by name of Allen of Nilson" (138).

The book's title alludes most directly to a secret message "inked" on the palm of the printer Nathaniel North, which he shows his son Nicholas just before

Nathaniel is beheaded. Deliberately or not, Destro's title also brings to mind the third and fourth verses of one of Oxford's favorite psalms—Psalm 8, in the *Whole Book of Psalms* translation that he favored:

> "And when I see the heav'ns above,
> *The sun, the moon*, and all *the stars*,
> Lord, what is man…"

Oxford's Sonnet 21 deliberately echoes Psalm 8. In turn, Psalm 8 may have influenced St. Francis's famous "Canticle of the Sun" (which itself may have also influenced Sonnet 21): "Laudato sie…spetialmente messor lo frate Sole…per sora Luna e le stelle" ("Praised be…especially Brother Sun…Sister Moon and the stars").

We're all familiar with unreliable narrators, who can make us feel smarter than them. Arthur Taverner, our ostensibly deceased narrator here, is often clueless about the larger picture, just telling us what he knows. It's disarming, and helps the general reader not feel as overwhelmed with unfamiliar Oxfordian facts and theories.

With the *Oxford English Dictionary* as reference, Destro uses only vocabulary that was extant when the novel takes place. He may take this a bit too far—wondering why he uses "hisself" rather than "himself," I looked this up, and was surprised to find that "himself" goes back to Old English. Similarly, although "little" also goes back to Old English, we find it replaced regularly by the less familiar "tittle."

Oxfordian readers will notice many passages that come from Destro's fertile imagination. Lest traditionalists be tempted to pounce on these as untruthful, the cover of the novel plainly acknowledges, below the title, "Based on a (mostly) true story." And his character Eliza Sears repeats, "my tale is true (mostly)" (141). The narrator himself says the number of Oxford's children "[depends] on whose lies you believe" (194). A novel is indeed the best place for many unproven speculations about Oxford's life. Oxford was said to entertain his companions with tall tales. Some of them have become accepted as factual. But we should remind ourselves that professional writers of fiction sometimes make use of their talents to tell fictitious stories about their lives.

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One story that finds its way into Destro's novel involves pirates seizing Oxford's ship as he crossed the Channel after his 14 months on the Continent. Yes, Oxford's account of the details of this alleged event seems to have been believed at court. However, we might recall that, in creating his brand, Julius Caesar told a similarly self-aggrandizing story of his brave encounter with pirates (it was only in the 20th century that historians acknowledged that Caesar was prone to embellishing the facts). Perhaps both stories are true. In Destro's novel, though, it's the Widow Sears who tells of the pirates, and the narrator says of her that "she was happy to inform. Some say happy to *invent*" (172).

The book began as a screenplay some twenty years ago, but it was put in a drawer when it was pre-empted by Roland Emmerich's film *Anonymous*. That gave Destro many more years to read Oxfordian scholarship and to develop his ideas. Like *Anonymous*, Destro's novel takes poetic liberties with chronology. In it, for example, Oxford's mother remarries only one month after his father's death. And Destro has the Queen agree to reopen the theaters, on condition that Oxford support Robert Cecil being named the Queen's principal secretary. He has these latter two events happen the same year Oxford began receiving his £1,000 royal annuity (whereas they actually took place ten years apart). The Queen also demands that Oxford start writing history plays, to "prepare our subjects for the battles to come, the fight against Rome" (195). For Oxfordians, that is a plausible theory to explain why the miserly Queen awarded Oxford his £1,000 pension in 1586. Destro, in his defense, is writing an appealing fictional narrative, not history. And Destro follows other post-Stratfordian works of fiction such as Amy Freed's 2001 play *The Beard of Avon*; Sarah Smith's 2003 novel *Chasing Shakespeare*; and Ros Barber's 2014 novel in verse, *The Marlowe Papers*.

Destro has a fascinating biography. An actor, director, playwright, and teacher, he discovered the Oxfordian theory some 25 years ago from his distinguished voice teacher at Columbia, Kristin Linklater. Destro is intimately familiar with the psychology of actors—"Want to know the true heart of a player? Then watch him *on* the stage and not *off* of it. For that is where he may truly be [himself]" (91). Even though some Shakespeare actors tell Destro that knowing who wrote the plays doesn't matter to them, he maintains that it should matter to the director. Oxfordians often experience new depths of pleasure and understanding in watching a play, knowing it was Oxford's work, and knowing more about what is going on between the lines—just as Oxford's court audiences would have known.

Each reader will react differently to specific elements of the speculative plot, given the lively disagreements among Oxfordians about such matters as whether or not Shakspere was in fact a "player." Personally, I find it plausible that this was an invented detail, to assist in portraying him as a front man,

either before or after his death. After all, there is no record of his acting after 1604, the year of Oxford's death. Some have called on the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship to take an official position on such undecided issues. The late past President of the SOF, Thomas Regnier, wisely counseled us instead to tolerate our differences.

One of the many pleasures offered by this highly readable book is the Oxfordian wordplay throughout. Pirates have "a length o' daggers and a load o' swaggers" (170). Later, Lyly is with Oxford's chapel singers, while nearby, guests in the Queen's garden stretch "from the *lilies* to the lilacs" (188; my emphasis). Soon after this, we read of "the peering at the peers that peeped by" (190). On the next page, Oxford says—with the Euphuistic alliteration on steroids that pervades the book—"Oh, Horatio…the howling hounds of hell do haunt me still." At another point, "many onlookers looked on" (196). There are many other features that made Destro's novel a delight to read. Caroline Spurgeon, in her 1935 *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells us*, wrote, "Shakespeare has clearly a very acute sense of smell, and is peculiarly sensitive to bad smells" (78). Throughout the novel, Oxford detests foul smells. And he pleases the Queen when he presents her with Italian perfumed gloves.

Those who prefer audiobooks have the good fortune of being able to listen to Sir Derek Jacobi narrate it.