
Recent Publications in Oxfordian Studies

Great Oxford: Essays on the Life and Work of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, 1550-1604. Ed. Richard Malim. Tunbridge Wells, UK: Parapress Ltd., 2004. 362p.

Mark Anderson. *"Shakespeare" By Another Name*. NY: Gotham Books / Penguin, 2005. 634p.

Hank Whittemore. *The Monument*. Reference Edition. Marshfield Hills, MA: Meadow Geese Press, 2005. 918p. and *The Monument: An Abridged Introduction*, 2005. 92p.

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Once dismissed as a heretical cult, Oxfordian studies currently makes its way towards the mainstream as more and more lovers of Shakespeare recognize the insurmountable problems with the traditional identification of a mostly illiterate, untravelled grain-merchant from Stratford as the author of what many consider the greatest literary works the world has known. Questioning the authorship is not snobbery, as the defenders of orthodoxy are quick to accuse: Will Shakspere of Stratford could certainly have been born a genius. But how does genius manifest itself, especially when one is well-advised to write what one knows?

Each year, a few more scholars attempt, I think almost always sincerely, to take one more crack at trying to match the life with the works, figuring that if we just look at what we've got the right way.... But such projects continue to flop, to the extent that Greenblatt's recent try with his pseudo-biography of Shakspere, *Will in the World* (2004), must rely on the mists of "Let us imagine..." as its biographical bedrock. The problem has long been solved, but academia and the Shakespeare industry are loath to accept the discovery of an early 20th-century English schoolmaster named J. Thomas Looney, preferring to find perpetual hilarity in his surname. Nevertheless, Sigmund Freud, Orson Welles, Leslie Howard, Michael York, Derek Jacobi, Jeremy Irons, a few Supreme Court justices, and growing numbers of academics and aficionados have been thoroughly persuaded that indeed Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the true author of the works published under the pen name William Shake-speare.

Oxfordian studies has long relied on some important out-of-print works, such as the nearly 1300-page *This Star of England* (1952) by Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn, and on very early works republished with widely varying degrees of professionalism: the recently deceased Ruth Loyd Miller brought out newer editions of Looney's

original 1920 volumes of “*Shake-speare*” *Identified* and E. T. Clark’s *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare’s Plays* from 1931, but the foundational biography of Edward de Vere, from 1928, Bernard M. Ward’s *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550-1604) from Contemporary Documents*, has been available only as a slapdash spiral-bound photocopy. Since publication of Oxfordian scholarship these days has been more or less restricted to a few newsletters, such as the Shakespeare Fellowship’s *Shakespeare Matters*, and the Shakespeare-Oxford Society’s annual journal, *The Oxfordian*—still less than a decade old—the recent spate of significant publications serves as a hearty encouragement for a movement still awaiting a long overdue paradigm shift in Shakespeare studies.

The British-based De Vere Society gathered 31 articles for *Great Oxford*. After a noble and sensitive Foreword by Sir Derek Jacobi and a brief “Introduction to the Oxfordian Case” by Eddi Jolly, a section on de Vere’s youth and education consists of seven articles, featuring Eddi Jolly’s and Patrick O’Brien’s tracing of the pertinence of Sir Thomas Smith’s and Lord Burghley’s libraries to the Shakespeare works, versus Will Shaksper’s conjectural grammar school education, the supposed glories of which are debunked by Christopher Dams and Philip Johnson. A sequence of six articles, most by Noemi Magri, concerns Oxford’s travels through Italy and the impact on the plays and poems. These lay out wealths of multidisciplinary influence on the eventual Shakespeare works, such as Titian’s Barberini painting as a source for *Venus and Adonis*. Magri also refutes the accusation that Shakespeare made any geographical errors in the *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Within a set of twelve articles on Oxford’s early literary career, Joseph Sobran reconciles the surviving juvenilia attributed to Oxford with the mature “Shake-speare,” David Roper and Eddi Jolly establish much earlier dates for *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet*, Richard Malim provides evidence of Oxford having acted and therefore acquiring the “hands-on” experience indicated in the works, and Elizabeth Cottle and Christopher Dams advance the groundbreaking work done by Roger Stritmatter for his now-published dissertation on de Vere’s Geneva Bible (housed at the Folger) and Shakespeare’s use of scriptures. In eight articles on Oxford’s later career and death, John M. Rollett tackles the odd dedication of the Sonnets and the indirect evidence Ben Jonson brings to bear on the authorship issue, Philip Johnson examines the Southampton connection (absent in the case of Stratford Will), Michael Llewellyn corrects the notion that Oxford died of plague, and David Roper explains the real “Avon” reference. A section follows on de Vere’s psychology, with all its predictors and characteristic earmarks of creative genius. After Sally Hazelton’s address to dismissals of Freud’s acceptance of Looney’s thesis, and her powerful matching of Oxford with the personality profile of world-class creative writers, I’m not sure the linguistic nature of an article on the

chronology of the works or one on the authorship of the “Will” sonnets belongs in a “Psychology” section. But the collection concludes sturdily with a bolstering piece by Kevin Gilvary refuting “anti-Oxfordians,” called “The ‘Empire’ Strikes Back: How Stratfordians attempt (and fail) to refute Oxfordian claims,” an argumentative arsenal too compact to summarize here, where I’ve already omitted mention of too many other valuable articles in the collection.

Those who accuse Oxfordians of being snobs (one of Gilvary’s successful volleys) will hypocritically want to point out that contributors to *Great Oxford* tend to have MA degrees, or BAs; and what kind of historical and literary scholarship can we expect from a judge, a retired solicitor, an electrical science PhD, and, worst of all, teachers and independent researchers?

The answer is: superb scholarship. The articles in *Great Oxford* demonstrate everything that orthodoxy assumes is lacking in such a rebel field: reliance on primary source documents including letters and references in Early Modern English, French, Latin, Italian, etc.; facile interdisciplinary integration of evidence; specificity regarding historical contexts and publishing history (concerning the quartos, for example); thorough endnotes and bibliographies. I would have preferred consistency and, of course, MLA style in the documentation instead of Works lists called References sometimes and Bibliography other times; but the collection, while not speaking in one homogenized voice, is remarkably consistent in the rigorously specific nature and impressive quality of its articles. And however precisely the pieces explore the Elizabethan cultural contexts or continental aesthetics, oddities at the Stationers’ Register or annotations in de Vere’s Geneva Bible, contributors do not lose sight of why this all matters: so that we better understand and appreciate the plays and poems published under the name Shakespeare.

In their typically successful studies of the connections between the life and works of de Vere, Oxfordians have had to rely primarily on the 1928 biography by Bernard M. Ward—that is until Alan Nelson’s much-bungled 2003 biography, *Monstrous Adversary*. The most frequently cited example of Nelson’s befuddlement is his pompous comment concerning one of his transcriptions: “It is necessary to understand that the letter concerns fish called white-herrings (here hyphenated to enhance comprehensibility)” (432). The original letter actually was referring to a man named Anthony Wytherings. But the irresponsibility matters more as Nelson attempts to slander Oxford at every turn. Therefore, Mark Anderson’s “*Shakespeare*” *By Another Name* is the welcome new seminal biography for Oxfordian studies. Some may immediately object that Anderson, as he acknowledges, takes as a premise de Vere’s responsibility for the Shakespeare canon; but, on the contrary, many of us have grown weary of the limp, diplomatic pretense of indecidability, that the Shakespeare

Authorship remains an open question or even a controversy any longer. Anderson has boldly decided, and does get on with it.

"Shakespeare" By Another Name is a vivid biography with relatively little of the "Let us imagine" nonsense with which Greenblatt lines his recent Shakspeare "biography." Despite the many hundred pages of text, it feels as if we're speeding through de Vere's life—an effect probably not inappropriate to its subject, and one due, paradoxically, to the enormous amount of sheer factual material and specificity: the household and habits of Sir Thomas Smith, who was responsible for young Edward's earliest education; which Laurence Nowell served as a tutor at Cecil House; Oxford's book purchases; English and Italian geography with which de Vere was inevitably familiar; the machinations of other courtiers, ambassadors, and visiting suitors to Queen Elizabeth; accomplishments made in the names of Oxford's literary secretaries; features in the surviving letters and poems of de Vere's rhetorical style, and so on. Through all this encyclopedic material, barely a page goes by without a usually convincing connection to a Shakespeare play or poem. I have doubts about certain areas of interpretation, such as what I consider an exaggerated importance Anderson assigns de Vere's second countess, Elizabeth Trentham, and perhaps his notion of the purpose behind *The Winter's Tale*, for example. But allusions to the Shakespeare works arise organically—something that cannot be accomplished in a biography of any other "Shake-speare" candidate, particularly Stratford Will. That the connections to the works are dispersed throughout the biography instead of treated as centerpieces of distinct chapters (as the elder Ogburns had structured their book) makes sense to the evolution of dramatic texts and in terms of the creative process: as Anderson observes, "Much of Shake-speare is...a palimpsest, popular drama refashioned from works that were originally written for an elite audience in the 1570s and '80s" (124). Thus, with many works, we face several layers from several distinct time periods with different issues gaining ascendancy in the mind of the playwright. For example, the so-called Dark Lady was at one point most certainly Anne Vavasor, Oxford's mistress who fathered his illegitimate son, much to the wrath of Queen Elizabeth who locked them all in the Tower for a while; but the Dark Lady characterization is reassigned in later years, after Vavasor had ceased playing any role in Oxford's life. A villain representing Elizabeth's favorite, Leicester, at an early stage may in revision become a representation of Elizabeth's chief minister and spymaster, Lord Burghley's son Robert Cecil. The implications are distressing for devotees of Occam's Razor but inescapable and logical none the less.

The book's 156 small-font pages of notes—just notes: documentation and references (not including the maps, timelines, appendices, frequently cited sources, index, or mini-dictionary of key personages, all of which are also components of the

book)—demonstrate Anderson’s exhaustive attention to discoveries in Oxfordian studies, particularly from the last decade or so of otherwise unrecorded information presented at conferences. Heck, I’m even cited in there. It would be difficult to determine how much of the work consists of original interpretive insights by Anderson—probably a good bit more than the copious notes would indicate—but as an encyclopedic compendium packaged as a biography, “*Shakespeare*” *By Another Name* is the book for those who, perhaps having been introduced to the field by Richard Whalen’s *Shakespeare: Who Was He?* (1994), are ready to take the deep plunge into Oxfordianism. I suspect the book may even be poised to replace the younger Charlton Ogburn’s *The Mysterious William Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (2nd ed. 1992), which has long served as the central Oxfordian book for most of us in the field today.

As an Oxfordian, sooner or later one must come to terms with the primary rift within Oxfordian studies: Prince Tudor. Many do not subscribe to this notion at all; others feel that we have enough work to do revolutionizing Shakespeare studies without being burdened with and further ridiculed for the additional conspiracy theory. I have tried to remain agnostic for as long as possible. *The Monument* summarizes the historical thesis more fully (xxxv–liii), but, in short, Prince Tudor theory accounts precisely for why there was an intentional obliteration of any records connecting Edward de Vere with the Shakespeare works. That Queen Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, was a virgin is almost certainly untrue—a matter, rather, of regime propaganda. That she may have given birth is the real contention. The main Prince Tudor proposition (there is another, and then variations) is that in the early 1570s, when de Vere enjoyed greatest royal favor, as it were, Elizabeth gave birth to a son of his, subsequently brought up as Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton—the very person to whom Shakespeare’s narrative poems are dedicated and long assumed to be the Fair Young Man of the *Sonnets* in orthodox Shakespeare studies.

Hank Whittemore—author, actor, playwright—has come to view the *Sonnets* “as a true story of political intrigue, passion, betrayal and, ultimately, the end of the Tudor dynasty as recorded in a clandestine diary” (*Abridged* 3), hence the *Sonnets*’ tone of urgency. Whittemore sees *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* as “an elegantly structured monument” (Reference xi) whose centerpiece is the chronological hundred-sonnet sequence (numbers 27 through 126) addressed to Southampton from the point of his arrest on February 8, 1601 for his part in the so-called Essex Rebellion through his inexplicable release from prison by King James immediately after Elizabeth’s death, with the last twenty of these sonnets accounting for the twenty days between Southampton’s release and Elizabeth’s funeral, at which point the royal succession was officially accomplished (201–674). Prior to this central sequence, the first 26

sonnets mark Southampton's 26 birthdays before the rebellion, technically, though the emphasis in the first 17 is on Oxford's hope that Southampton will marry and carry on the Tudor royal line (54-130). Whittemore quotes C.S. Lewis' 1954 observation about the pro-marriage pro-breeding message of these early sonnets: "It is indeed hard to think of any real situation in which it would be natural. . . . What man in the whole world, except a father or a potential father-in-law, cares whether any other man gets married?" (xli). According to Whittemore, Oxford counterbalances this opening group of 26 with another group of 26 after the central 100; sonnets 127 to 152 focus on Elizabeth as the "Dark Lady" and often address her directly regarding their son (675-764). The two final sonnets, 153 and 154, record the Queen and her court's visit to Bath in the summer of 1574, the year of Southampton's birth, and thus function as a deceptively placed prologue (1-51), or a final cap to a pyramidal structure.

Academics are likely to be frustrated with formatting and other lay-out decisions made by Whittemore. References come as footnotes initially, then appear as awkward in-text appendages throughout the body of the work, containing a distracting share of typos. Despite ten appendices (765-808), we get an index only to key words in the sonnets (809-836) and one of originally capitalized or italicized words in the sonnets (837-838). These are followed by a three-and-a-half-page selected works list (839-842) with bibliographically incomplete entries. More generally reader-unfriendly is the stylistic tendency throughout *The Monument* for fragmentation: that is, block paragraphing with a plethora of titled subdivisions for each section of the book. This practice may not be inappropriate for the bulk of *The Monument*—the atomizing of each of the sonnets in sequence—but what should be a sustained discussion such as Prince Tudor theory includes, for example, unneeded subdivisions into "Royal Secrecy," "Censorship," "The Queen's Body," and "Betrothal," all on one page (xxxvii). Although these objections address only superficial concerns, the fragmentation does seem to have detrimental effects beyond the surface of *The Monument*. Lynne Kositsky and Roger Stritmatter in the *Shakespeare Matters* newsletter (4.1) have taken Whittemore to task for what they see as an "adroit selection of certain words and phrases" (11) to force his reading from the sonnets without recontextualizing these phrases to see if the sonnet then still works as a unit and still works in its context. Such a critique is reinforced by the fragmentation; and when similarly Whittemore supplies a lists of terms shared by sonnets and history plays, followed by a master glossary, then a list of words with "dark" associations, "royal" words, and "holy words," how can we help but think in terms of Hamlet's despairing reductionism: "Words, words, words"?

Kositsky and Stritmatter have other piercing objections, mostly regarding the distortions forced on the *Sonnets* by Whittemore's "monument" structure which requires that he "entirely disregard the nature of the marriage sonnets" (10), that he insist on an important break at Sonnet 27 (Southampton's imprisonment) even though "Sonnet 26 begins to develop the theme of the poet's absence" (10), and that he ignore the standard impression that sonnets 71 through 74 are meditations on the poet's imminent death, not the Fair Young Man's. Another objection is that the rules governing the sequence change: why, within the central one-hundred-sonnet block monument, according to Whittemore, are sonnets 27 to 86 composed at a rate on one per day with 87 to 106 spread over the following two years and then 107 to 126 at a day-to-day rate again?

These objections notwithstanding, *The Monument* has won over a number of Oxfordians who were formerly skeptics about the Prince Tudor thesis and many believe Whittemore has correctly decoded *Shakespeare's Sonnets* at long last. Their testimonies are given in Whittemore's recently published booklet condensing *The Monument* to a manageable "Introduction" of 92 pages. The politics of the story Whittemore says the *Sonnets* tell is lamentably convincing, with a final explanation for the poet having been so certain that his name, his identity, would be buried: Elizabeth was old and declining; the machiavellian Robert Cecil capitalized on what looked like a treasonous rebellion such that he secured his position as the power behind the throne beyond the coming succession; "Oxford was forced to glue the mask to his own face; and Southampton, in turn, had to renounce his royal claim" (*Abridged* 51).

Whittemore describes his interpretive solution: "once the stencil of time and circumstance is laid over the collection...the verses can be read as a contemporary record of actual events" (*Abridged* 5). And he does effectively situate the *Sonnets* in a carefully considered timeline. *The Monument* includes transcriptions of historical documents such as Essex Rebellion trial records (263-268) and communications between Robert Cecil and the future King James I (535). Whittemore also situates the story in literary history with inclusions such as Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle* (414-416), read as further Prince Tudor allegory. So *The Monument* is not a solipsistic work, but one that shows connections and brings to our attention echoes between the *Sonnets* and Elizabethan poetry, history, and other Shakespearean works, even going so far as to explain some of these other obscure materials.

Since Shakespeare was more poet than architect or mathematician, compromises to the elegance of the structure of the "monument" do not, for me, close the case. However one gauges the interpretive ravages of decontextualization, it is difficult if not impossible to dismiss Whittemore's thorough illustration of Oxford's poetic method, whether or not one feels comfortable using the term "code." The ways

Oxford weaves into the poetry the family mottoes of Southampton, Elizabeth, and himself suggest that Sonnet 66's reference to "strength by limping sway disabled, / and art made tongue-tied by authority" logically indeed would refer to the hunchbacked Robert Cecil's successful gag order (381). Shakespeare's use of the term "misprision" would be odd for any sonnet but as a reference to the legal charge one notch below treason would indeed be a signal to posterity regarding Southampton's escape from the executioner's block (474-480). Thus Sonnet 104's reference to "three winters" does make sense as indicating February 1601, 1602, and 1603: the winters Southampton spent in prison (xlvii). *The Monument* contains dozens upon dozens of such explanations. Ultimately, Whittemore's reading of the "story" told by the Sonnets is very persuasive. The Monument does not require acceptance of more "if" conjectures than it answers longstanding "why" questions (li-liii).

Charles Dickens said that "Shakespeare's life is a fine mystery and I tremble every day lest something should turn up." Exciting "somethings" are turning up these days, at least in a field that has solved the mystery without lessening the thrill of discovery. Other promising new publications in Oxfordian studies are set to appear in the near future. ✱