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## More Recent Publications in Oxfordian Studies

Helen Heightsman Gordon. *The Secret Love Story in Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Xlibris Corp., 2005. 158p.

*Oxford's Letters: The Letters of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*. CD set. Read by Derek Jacobi. Narr. Joan Walker. London: Absolute Audio, 2006. AA003.

William Farina. *De Vere as Shakespeare: An Oxfordian Reading of the Canon*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2006. 271p.

MICHAEL DELAHOYDE  
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

In the previous issue of the *Rocky Mountain Review*, I discussed three key recent works emerging from the fast-growing conviction that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, wrote what became the “Shake-speare” canon: the collection of articles published as *Great Oxford* (2004); Mark Anderson’s biographical “*Shakespeare*” *By Another Name* (2005); and Hank Whittemore’s colossus on Shakespeare’s sonnets, *The Monument* (2005). Here, a look at three more publications brings us up to date in this obviously active area of Oxfordian studies.

Helen Heightsman Gordon has decades of professional experience in teaching, editing, publishing, and educational administration. She has published five textbooks in addition to other books, journal articles, poetry, and a trademarked word game. I mention this because of the unusual circumstance that the book under scrutiny here is self-published. It should be taken as an excellent sign that I did not make this realization until I had read enough of the work to decide that I wanted to review (and, hence, somewhat publicize) this book. In *The Secret Love Story in Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Gordon intelligently and humanely explicates well over five dozen of the poems, providing the sonnets themselves, thorough and straightforward paraphrases, and concise but never hasty discussions. Sonnets are arranged thematically rather than in their standard 1609 published order, since Gordon believes that they were written at various times and prompted by a variety of circumstances. In this, she aligns herself more closely with traditional interpretations than with Whittemore’s focus on Southampton and in particular his imprisonment for his part in the Essex “Rebellion.” Nevertheless, Gordon makes immediately clear that she, like Whittemore, is convinced by the most popular of the Prince Tudor hypotheses: that Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, was the son of the Earl of Oxford and Queen Elizabeth.

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In introductory chapters, Gordon glances at an intriguing time at the English court during which Elizabeth had grown disenchanted and worse with her long-time favorite, Robert Dudley (the Earl of Leicester), and was captivated instead by the young Earl of Oxford (30). Gordon provides court evidence regarding a period of seclusion for Elizabeth, pinpoints the likely birthdate of the boy, and supplies visual evidence of genealogy in the form of portraits of Wriothesley, Elizabeth, and grandma Anne Boleyn (32-34). Also in these initial chapters, Gordon offers a quick glance at the zeal for ciphers and encryption in Elizabethan times, including supposed codes said to be embedded in the otherwise bizarre dedication of the Sonnets. She easily dismisses the relevance of other “Shake-speare” candidates: Will Shakspeare of Stratford, Bacon, and Marlowe.

Without further ado, we are plunged from Chapter 3 onwards into the Sonnets, initially with attention to the first seventeen, about whose pro-marriage pro-breeding message C.S. Lewis famously asked, “What man in the whole world, except a father or a potential father-in-law, cares whether any other man gets married?” Indeed, these sonnets make sense in no other way than as being from a father to a son. Although Gordon adds to the category Sonnet 33, Sonnet 36, and Sonnet 20, the latter two concerned with the need to conceal the relationship, “It may be numerically symbolic that the first seventeen sonnets were written to a seventeen-year-old by the seventeenth Earl of Oxford” (106). Indeed, for “Shakespeare” to write to Southampton, “thou art all the better part of me” (Sonnet 30), makes little or no sense if Southampton were a patron, as the traditional orthodox view still tries to hold (122).

Gordon is refreshingly honest about our frequent inability to ascertain the particular addressees of certain sonnets, but she does detect the presence of Elizabeth more than even most Oxfordians have, asserting that Elizabeth was the inspiration for the ultra-famous Sonnet 18: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” (47). Gordon’s similar perspective on Sonnet 57—“Being your slave, what should I do but tend / Upon the hours and times of your desire?”—is both convincing and illuminating:

Sonnet 57 has been interpreted as an extended metaphor comparing the speaker’s romantic devotion to the enthrallment of a slave. Yet how much more meaningful it becomes when we assume it was written by Edward De Vere to his actual sovereign, whose double powers of royal rank and romantic love made him hers to command. If writing only to a mistress, the speaker would not need to restrain his jealousy or suppress any critical thoughts. (57)

That many sonnets could express an ambivalence about the woman who was Queen—such as Sonnets 140, 121, and 29—also makes sense, given Oxford’s disappointments over Elizabeth’s characteristic prevarications and deferrals on promises.

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Other rivals for Elizabeth's attentions, as in Sonnet 82 (84f); rival poets such as the purportedly "pedantic" and "smug" George Chapman in Sonnet 78 (83), Walter Raleigh in Sonnets 79, 80, 83, and 86 from the early 1580s (86f), George Gascoigne, Philip Sidney, and others; Oxford's traitorous cousin Henry Howard as the "suborned informer" in Sonnet 125 (104); and Anne Vavasour, with whom Oxford carried on a court affair (62f)—all are reflected in Gordon's reading of the Sonnets. Although Vavasour, because of her extant portrait, is often identified as the "Dark Lady" by Oxfordians, Gordon downplays her importance here, arguing that some sonnets have been taken too literally and that Elizabeth, with her "very dark eyes" (62), is again being addressed. Despite its inclusion in the "Dark Lady" series, for example, "Sonnet 128 might have been written to any charming woman who plays upon the virginals" (65), which of course very prominently includes Elizabeth.

Elements in Gordon's biographical history of Oxford may, on occasion, be called into question. I am uncertain whence she derives this assertion: that Oxford in the 1570s "had been sent to France by Elizabeth, traveling under a pseudonym (Du Vray) to gather information about the duke's [Alençon's] reputation and also to gauge the popular attitude of the French citizenry toward Protestants" (93). That Oxford's June 1604 death was "presumably of the plague" (148) has been revealed as a mistake on the part of an early biographer. But these are incidental matters, and, with the more general experiences of Oxford that Gordon shows to have informed the sonnets, she repeatedly succeeds in illuminating the poems. Thus, Oxford's run-in with Knyvet (Sonnet 139), his subsequent lameness (Sonnet 89), his Cassio-like sensitivity to his "Reputation, reputation, reputation" and despair at his having compromised it (Sonnets 73, 91, 72, et al.), and his mature and somewhat mellowed vicissitudes of joy and sorrow after having been disillusioned by court life, all find their ways into the Sonnets. When in Sonnet 111 Shakespeare writes that "my name receives a brand," Gordon takes this as a reference to the pseudonym disguising Oxford's work (130). So it is a tragic "Secret Story," but Gordon also offers rays of uplifting hope: "I like to think that Sonnet 74 is addressed to all of us who have patiently rooted out the truth from the mounds of compost and confusion, so that we, like Hamlet's Horatio, can restore his wounded name" (149).

The one noticeable misfortune about *The Secret Love Story in Shakespeare's Sonnets* is that the bibliography was omitted from the printing and accompanies the book as a separate document, along with a list of about half a dozen errata. These corrections will be made with the next printing, though, and the bibliography is certainly respectable: Oxfordian sources appear, of course, but so do other biographies, encyclopedia materials, and orthodox scholarship on the Sonnets. Helen

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Vendler's work on the Sonnets needs to be added to the list (as it was obviously consulted and noted in the text), but while Vendler's explications of the Sonnets are more thorough and microscopic, Gordon's here are significantly more engaging and alive. And best, perhaps, is the eloquence with which Gordon conveys her sensitivity to the "Secret Love Story":

However deep the wounds from Elizabeth cut into his soul, she stimulated his creativity. The sense of humor that brought laughter to her court also helped him to keep his perspective and cure his depressions. Armed with a keen sense of the absurd, he could retaliate in good fun against those who tried to discredit him. He flourished under her royal protection; she blossomed under his loyal affection. (149)

For another perspective into Oxford's life—in this instance an auditory experience—a London studio has produced a two-CD set of Sir Derek Jacobi reading many of the surviving letters of Edward de Vere. Jacobi—perhaps most famous for his depiction of the title character in the BBC series *I, Claudius*, but also known for his Hamlet in the 1980 BBC film production, the BBC's Richard II, his King Claudius in Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet*, his Chorus in Branagh's *Henry V*, and his over-the-top second-rate Shakespearean actor on an episode of *Frasier*—seems (notwithstanding that last role) the ideal choice for this production. He has been praised for his "elegant enunciation" and "precise diction" in other reviews of this CD-set; and Jacobi, like Michael York, Jeremy Irons, and other actors before them such as Leslie Howard and Orson Welles, is an Oxfordian. Jacobi strains for a higher register and a breathless eagerness in his reading of the earliest letters, written when Oxford was in his teens and early twenties, but with the remaining dozens, Jacobi delivers a mature, eventually world-weary and dignified, even proud, tone, thoroughly appropriate to the premiere earl of the Elizabethan realm. Other actors supply the voices for other persons included in the documentary record: Oxford's ward and father-in law, William Cecil, Lord Burghley; Oxford's wife, Anne Cecil; Oxford's mistress, Anne Vavasour; Walter Raleigh, Sir Thomas Smith, and others.

The project was produced by Susan Campbell and Malcolm Blackmoor, and the letters were "Compiled and edited" by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes, using primarily William Plumer Fowler's 1986 work, *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford's Letters*. The two CDs together offer more than 80 tracks—over 2½ hours alternating between the letters and contextualizing narration also written by Hughes. Although the auditory experience itself does not overtly promote the Oxfordian case in the Shakespeare authorship controversy—the "name" Shakespeare is never even mentioned—Hughes' narrative, read by Joan Walker with her very "BBC" voice, does supply hints:

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De Vere's letters reveal a facile writer, one who writes as fast as he thinks and who shapes his thought in words so quickly that two or three ways of saying the same thing can become twisted together in a single sentence. This tendency suggests that these letters were written with little forethought or revision.... Since Oxford was obviously one who wrote and expressed himself easily, he must have written a great many of letters to friends, relatives, wives, lovers, retainers, and business associates over his lifetime. [But only 44, almost all to the Cecils, seem to have survived.] It was a cautious age. Letter-writers avoided naming names or otherwise being too specific. Ciphers and private names were frequent.

The CD cover—showing Sir Derek and the Vertue engraving of Shakespeare—and the CD liner notes also, however tentatively, suggest that the real value of the letters is not simply that they demonstrate late 16th-century prose stylistics or, as in one case, “the fine art of begging pardon.” The web site serving as the promotional center for the CD-set—[politicworm.com](http://politicworm.com)—reveals more decisively that the Oxfordian thesis was the motivation for the project.

The biography documented in the letters starts with Oxford at age 12 becoming ward of the crown. At 13 he is writing in stilted French (rendered into English here). Jacobi captures well the “energy and verve” of one of Oxford’s early poems or songs, “Loss of My Good Name.” Some of the 21-year-old de Vere’s Latin, from his introduction to a published translation of Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier*, is also given in English. The producers of the CD-set acknowledge other less obvious emendations:

Frequent or occasional replacements include: *by reason* which we replace with *because*, *unto* with *to*, *want* with *lack*, *advertise* with *inform*, *look for* with *expect*, *suffer* with *allow*, and *motion* with *suggestion*. *But* has been removed where it’s confusing.

Like many educated letter-writers of the period, Oxford was inclined to sprinkle his letters with Latin phrases and aphorisms. These we have either cut or silently translated, as also several Italian phrases acquired during his time in Italy. These add interest to his writing but would probably confuse most English-speaking listeners today.

True enough regarding the Latin, but the other modernizations were probably unnecessary, as listeners would have grown accustomed to the Early Modern touches in the same way that one grows sufficiently familiar with such minor phrasings in Shakespearean language while experiencing a play. Nevertheless, the only feature I can say actually troubles me is the commentary regarding *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*. Noting that Oxford’s “wit made as many enemies as it did friends” at court, the narrative describes a 1574 publication of love poems written to unnamed women, possibly including his wife. The anthology detailed some sexual adventures at an estate. We hear that, “Craftily, he [Oxford] arranged for its publication just weeks

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before he took off for a year-long tour of the continent.” But I have been unable to verify that this is anyone’s understanding of the facts surrounding *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, which was published first in 1573. It is thought by many Oxfordians that de Vere’s enemies heavily edited and republished the work as George Gascoigne’s when Oxford was traveling in 1575, thereby obscuring originally embarrassing material *and* robbing Oxford of any poetic credit.

All else in the biography sketched here and illustrated by the letters is solid: Oxford’s expensive travels on the continent, especially Italy, and his selling of various estates; the probably treacheries of Howard and Yorke; Oxford’s long estrangement from his wife and the accompanying disdainful tone he takes with Burghley; his “loss of status” and the end of his “glory days at court” due to the revelation of his affair with Anne Vavasour, in addition to the Howard/Arundel accusations and counteraccusations; and the duel with Knyvet in which Oxford was seriously wounded.

The second CD takes us from the reconciliation with his wife and with Elizabeth after death of an infant son in the early 1580s; to the early ’90s when “his presence in the record books begins to fade away”; and on through the final decade of his life, filled with petitions for monopolies, properties, and court positions during his second marriage to Elizabeth Trentham, who brought a significant dowry and worked towards the reclamation of some of the Oxford estates to the earldom. The narration points out in particular the mysterious “office” referred to in the mid-’90s—a commission obviously known by Burghley and the Queen but not specified on record.

Having the letters read aloud brings out the chillingly “blithe” tone Oxford takes with Burghley’s son and political successor, Robert Cecil: Oxford’s apparent assumption that they are friends. Glancing references to Oxford’s health complaints or “infirmity” are poignant. And in a letter to Cecil regarding the new king in 1603 and Oxford’s own coronation duties, his brief and wistful but not maudlin look back at Elizabeth is truly melancholic. Oxford’s last letter early in 1604 to King James before his death seems oddly “energetic” about forest abuses and supplies no hint of any decrepitude. A few articles appearing in recent years have focused on the many mysterious features surrounding Oxford’s death, and the narrative here indeed hints that Oxford may have wanted to disappear into that forest. The narration points out, for example, that unofficial documents do not refer to Oxford as deceased until 1608, and that Oxford’s cousin, Percival Golding, is famously on record as mentioning in 1619 that the 17th Earl “lyeth buried at Westminster.”

A lovely touch worth last praise is the final musical track, “Thule, the Period of Cosmography,” an English madrigal which Altschuler and Jansen have identified as a Shake-speare/Oxford piece, though the narration is silent about this relevance.

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Earlier, another Elizabethan musical piece sung by the Fulham and Hammersmith Choral Society and some harpsichord music (approximating the “virginals” so historically appropriate) are woven into the auditory experience of the biography of a man saluted posthumously in a Chapman play as “a spirit passing great...as liberal as the sun.”

Finally and most recently, Bill Farina’s *De Vere as Shakespeare* is a play-by-play (and poem) distillation of the Oxford vs. Stratford authorship debate delivered in what I would consider to be ideal short introductions to a new edition of the works. After an Introduction that summarizes the authorship controversy and its implications and makes clear Farina’s Oxfordian but not dogmatic perspective, his forty chapters consider the plays in their First Folio order, each of the narrative poems, and the *Sonnets*. Each chapter averages about five pages—even *Hamlet* gets only 5½—and so obviously functions as little more than an introduction to its respective work.

Although I have grown too impatient with the maintenance of the construct known as the Shake-speare authorship controversy as an undecided ongoing debate, Farina more strategically and fair-mindedly gives Stratford Will his space. But of course, any tentative connections between the man and the works are overwhelmingly outnumbered by Oxford’s connections to the canon: sources for the works being available to Oxford through Burghley’s library (35, 44), or Sir Thomas Smith’s (41), or as Oxford’s own recorded purchases (90, 136); the influences of Munday and Lyly, both secretaries to de Vere (e.g., 26, 51); Burghley complaining of Oxford’s association with “lewd servants”—actors and writers to whom Oxford served as patron—resembling the situation of Prince Hal (116); the allusions in the plays—“Goliath with a weaver’s beam” (*Merry Wives* V.i.22) and Hamlet’s phrase “full of bread” (III.iii.80)—to verses underlined in Oxford’s Geneva Bible housed currently in the Folger Library (31, 197); and so forth. The importance of Italy in the plays especially strengthens an already compelling case for Oxford given not simply the frequent Italian settings and de Vere’s travels to the relevant cities in 1575-1576 (e.g., 27), but the particulars: for example, “Shakespeare shows a startling familiarity with the notorious Alien Statute of Venice” that dictated estate forfeiture identical to Shylock’s punishment (61). Farina incorporates Noemi Magri’s work on the Italian and especially Mantuan connections such as Portia’s home having been inspired by the Villa Foscari (64). And Italian colloquialisms such as *All’s Wells* “The Florentines and the Senoys are by th’ ears” (I.ii.1) similarly indicate the playwright’s knowledge coming from first-hand experience abroad (79), rather than international flotsam picked up at a London tavern.

Farina is careful, sometimes more tentative than he probably needs to be, with more (auto)biographical connections. He points out that, like Claudio in *Measure for*

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*Measure, de Vere* was imprisoned for an illicit sexual relationship (37), and that “all of Shakespeare’s comedy-romances reflect a father’s concern for a daughter’s marital options” (92). He is willing to note likely reflections in the plays of Anne Cecil, Anne Vavasour, and Queen Elizabeth, and he credits Oxford with the ability for self-parody (53). Although he sees Anne Cecil in the young Juliet, based on her age when she married Oxford (176), being supplemented by some reflections of Anne Vavasour because of the play’s street brawls and their parallels to Oxford’s experiences in the early 1580s (177), Farina may be too limited with some of his connections. In *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, he sees strictly Oxford and Vavasour (162) instead of the multi-layered “palimpsest” effect Mark Anderson has mentioned, which would add Oxford/Elizabeth dynamics to a reading of this play. But perhaps such complexities would have expanded the size of the book unacceptably.

The finest chapters offer multivariant assortments of connections between the work and the man. For instance, “*Coriolanus* is a good example of how a supposedly minor work that has befuddled critics and audiences can shine with clarity once viewed through the Oxfordian lens” (164)—that is, once we recognize the accessibility of Plutarch and the play’s other sources to Oxford (164), the parallel family and behavioral dynamics between Oxford and the title character (165), their shared elitist value system (165-166), the elevated concern with shifting loyalties (166), and the apparent views of education in the humanities (167).

On occasion, Farina is overly conservative or conciliatory in navigating between Oxfordian and Stratfordian perspectives. He notes, for example, the traditional dating of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* to the early 1590s and remarks, “We see no reason to disagree” (25). But most Oxfordians have, and Farina tends to accept too readily the myopic orthodox datings (cf. 217). He takes an interpretive stance, entirely aside from the authorship question, concerning *Henry V*:

Shakespeare’s quintessential warrior-king has suffered at the hands of modern critics and audiences, many of whom, and not without some justification, view him as a grasping, war-mongering, and overgrown juvenile delinquent. If this were not enough, he comes across as a clumsy lover after the fighting is done. On the other hand, King Henry is an effective speech giver, besides being a man of action, and to underrate him for his shortcomings is to give the play a very shallow reading. (125)

I think it is hardly shallow to be reading beneath rah-rah rhetoric regarding the absurdly obscure and arbitrary St. Crispin’s Day to detect the machinations of a machiavellian and soulless war criminal. Fortunately, such moments are rare, and Farina always makes good sense when viewing the works closer to their initial context.

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Regardless of whether the true author of *Antony and Cleopatra* was Will Shakspere or Edward de Vere, one must question the prudence of dramatizing the human frailties of one's own monarch for the public (?) stage, although coming from a senior earl such a thing may have been less an obstacle. (217)

One minor formatting objection: Farina offers header quotations at the starts of chapters, almost always from either Montaigne or Cervantes, but the practice is inconsistent: some chapters have no quotation at all. Even at the very end of the Conclusion chapter comes a Cervantes quotation (240), and it is never made clear why these two authors are featured in this way.

*De Vere as Shakespeare* examines the entire canon with the authorship lens, so no bibliography outside the imagination of Borges could be complete. Farina admirably includes orthodox Shakespearean giants such as Samuel Schoenbaum, E.K. Chambers, Dover Wilson, A.L. Rowse, Geoffrey Bullough, and the material in *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Oxfordians include Diana Price, E.T. Clark, Charlton Ogburn, B.M. Ward, and Richard Whalen, but not the elder Ogburns nor H.H. Holland, which has justifiably troubled another reviewer.

Ultimately, however, Farina's work is a handy guide to consult for speedy familiarization with how the authorship issue is involved with each of the Shakespeare works. And Farina's talent for concision extends to some larger concerns, such as the question of why the Stratfordian myth persists: it is due, he says, to "orthodox academics and other traditionalists who fiercely need a Bard that is a sympathetic voice of the common man and an uplifting role model for aspiring mediocrity everywhere" (240). Obviously, Farina himself can be fierce too. For all his fair-minded consideration of both sides of the authorship controversy throughout the chapters, in the final analysis, he is definitive: after some exposure to the biography of de Vere, "Anyone with a shred of intellectual honesty can only pause, and then either embrace the brave new world of Oxfordian interpretation or scramble hard to refute it" (11). But further, for Farina and other sensible Oxfordians, accepting Edward de Vere as the author of the Shakespeare canon is not the radical heresy that some on both sides of the issue would have it be:

Above all, the Oxfordian theory should be viewed as a potential extension, rather than rejection, of traditional scholarship. All of the great orthodox commentators still maintain their rightful places on our bookshelves. What changes is how we read them. (14-15)

The three resources reviewed here are among the most recent catalysts for this indescribably rewarding change. ✱