

# The Case for Oxford

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The Atlantic, October 1991

## *Were the works of Shakespeare really written by the Earl of Oxford?*

*Hamlet* is derived from a story in Francois de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1576), not yet translated into English when Shakespeare adapted it. Shakespeare introduced new characters and greatly enlarged the roles assigned to various characters by Belleforest. One of these magnified characters is Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain to the King of Denmark, who is not even named in the original story. As long ago as 1869 the scholar George Russell French noted the similarities between Queen Elizabeth's principal minister, Lord Burghley, and Polonius in *Hamlet*. French added that Burghley's son and daughter Robert and Anne Cecil seemed to correspond to Laertes and Ophelia.

Taking this scenario one step further, Hamlet himself becomes Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Ophelia was unhappily involved with Hamlet; de Vere, who grew up as a royal ward in the household of Lord Burghley, was unhappily married to Anne Cecil. Oxford believed that his wife had been unfaithful to him while he was away on a European tour and (for a time, at least) seems to have doubted that he was the father of her first child. Hamlet says to Polonius, "Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive."

*Hamlet* has often been thought to be autobiographical. Was Edward de Vere, then, Shakespeare? Confining ourselves just to *Hamlet*, we find more than a few additional parallels:

- Lord Burghley wrote out a set of precepts ("Towards thy superiors be humble yet generous; with thine equals familiar yet respective") strongly reminiscent of the advice Polonius gives to Laertes ("Be thou familiar but by no means vulgar..."). Burghley's precepts, intended for the use of his son Robert, were published in 1618. *Hamlet* first appeared in quarto in 1603. Edmund K. Chambers, one of the leading Shakespeare scholars of the twentieth century, offered the following explanation: "Conceivably Shakespeare knew a pocket manuscript."
- In Act II, Polonius sends Reynaldo to spy on Laertes in Paris, possibly catching him "drinking, fencing, swearing, quarreling", or "falling out at tennis." In real life Burghley's older son, Thomas Cecil, did go to Paris, whence the well-informed Burghley somehow received information, through a secret channel, of Thomas's "inordinate love of ... dice and cards." Oxford, incidentally, did have a real "falling out at tennis" – not a widely practiced sport in those days – with Sir Philip Sidney, the Earl of Leicester's nephew.

- Oxford and Hamlet are similar figures, courtiers and Renaissance men of varied accomplishments; both were scholars, athletes, and poets. Many critics have noted Hamlet's resemblance to Castiglione's beau ideal in *The Courtier*. At the age of twenty-one, Oxford wrote a Latin introduction to a translation of this book. Both Oxford and Hamlet were patrons of play-acting companies.
- In 1573 Oxford contributed a preface to an English translation of *Cardanus Comfort*, a book of consoling advice which the orthodox scholar Hardin Craig called "Hamlet's book." The book includes passages from which Hamlet's soliloquy was surely taken ("What should we account of death to be resembled to anything better than sleep... We are assured not only to sleep, but also to die...").
- Oxford stabbed a servant of Burghley's (possibly another of Burghley's spies). Polonius is stabbed by Hamlet while spying on him.
- Hamlet's trusted friend is Horatio. Oxford's most trusted relative seems to have been Horace Vere, called Horatio in some documents (and so named by the *Dictionary of National Biography*).
- Oxford, like Hamlet, was captured by pirates en route to England; both participated in sea battles.

The parallels between Hamlet and Oxford, ignored by conventional scholarship, were first discovered by J. Thomas Looney (pronounced "LOE-ny," but the harm's been done), an English schoolmaster whose book "*Shakespeare Identified in Edward de Vere*" was published in 1920. If it is ever vindicated – as is still possible – it will far surpass Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of Troy in the annals of amateur scholarship. Among Looney's converts were Sigmund Freud and John Galsworthy, who said that Looney's book was "the best detective story I have ever read." Looney (who refused his publisher's understandable suggestion that he consider using a pseudonym) died in 1944, his theory widely ignored. After the prolonged controversy over the proposition that Francis Bacon was the real author of the Shakespeare canon, the proposal of yet another candidate seemed to be mere desperation. But Looney had found a candidate far more interesting, and plausible, than the Baconians or anyone else ever had.

Oxford's life posed an obvious challenge for Looney and his followers (known as Oxfordians), however. The earl's death preceded the Stratford man's by twelve years. Plays dated after 1604, or references in the plays to topical events in the years 1604-1616 (should any be found), would expose Oxford to anachronism. Conventional dating holds that there are ten such plays (I'm not counting *Two Noble Kinsmen*). And orthodox scholars claim that there is one such topical reference – to the "still-vex'd Bermoothes," in Act I of *The Tempest*. This is believed to refer to a 1609 shipwreck in Bermuda, not heard of in England until 1610.

Leaving *The Tempest* aside for a moment, the nine remaining post-1604 plays are amenable to earlier dating without contradicting any known facts. The date of their composition is quite uncertain, many having appeared for the first time in the

posthumous First Folio (1623). Some are dated late simply to fit the period when the Stratford man (1564-1616) is thought to have been in London. He couldn't have been there much before 1587, and there are already numerous signs of uncomfortably early authorship—a published reference to *Hamlet* in 1589, for example, when the Stratford man was twenty-five years old.

The conventional dating of many of the supposedly post-1604 plays is more a matter of giving breathing space to Stratfordian chronology than of letting the facts speak for themselves. In addition, one or two conventional scholars date *King Lear* before 1604; *Pericles* and *Henry V* were certainly worked on by another hand; and there is nothing in the remainder – *Macbeth*, *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale* – that requires a post-1604 date. I believe that the latest source material undeniably used by Shakespeare is John Florio's 1603 translation of Montaigne's essay "*Of the Cannibals*," which reappears in much the same words in Act II of *The Tempest*. Stratfordians have always insisted that this is a late play, and Oxfordians are happy to agree with them.

Orthodox research into Shakespeare's sources barely conflicts with this analysis. The entire eight volumes of Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* contain only one source that is dated after 1604 and deemed a certain, rather than possible or probable, source. This is William Strachey's account of the 1609 shipwreck in Bermuda. In fact, however, there is nothing in Strachey that is certainly in *The Tempest*, although his description of St. Elmo's fire in the rigging does suggest Ariel's magical powers ("On the topmast, the yards and bowsprit, would I flame distinctly"). Furthermore, there is nothing in *The Tempest* that was not known to Elizabethans. If "Bermoothes" is taken as a reference to Bermuda, Oxfordians point out, not only does Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1598-1600) contain an account of a 1593 shipwreck in Bermuda, but a decade earlier the Earl of Oxford himself had invested in – possibly even owned – the *Edward Bonaventure*, one of the ships involved in that wreck.

Looney, however, did not know this. Uncharacteristically deferring to the authority of Chambers and other conventional scholars on this point, he accepted the conventional date for *The Tempest* (1611). In his final chapter, therefore, Looney argued that the play did not belong in the Shakespeare canon. As it is thought to include some of Shakespeare's best verse, this greatly weakened Looney's case. By the time Hakluyt's references to Bermuda were pointed out, Looney had come to seem discredited. In *Shakespeare and His Betters* (1958), an attack on the anti-Stratfordian heresy, R. C. Churchill claimed that the date of Oxford's death was "decisive" against his candidacy for authorship. In *Shakespeare's Lives* (1970), S. Schoenbaum more cautiously argued that "*The Tempest* presents Looney with his greatest challenge, for topical references and other internal considerations lead him to accept the late date to which the commentators assign it."

In recent years, however, the earl's fortunes have revived somewhat. Charlton Ogburn's huge book *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* was published in 1984, attracting many converts to the cause. In the fall of 1987 David Lloyd Kreeger, a Washington

philanthropist who died last year, organized a moot-court debate on the authorship question at The American University, presided over by three Supreme Court Justices (William Brennan, Harry Blackmun, and John Paul Stevens). They awarded the verdict to the Stratford man, but Oxford benefited mightily from the exposure.

At the end of his opinion Justice Stevens noted that “the Oxfordian case suffers from not having a single, coherent theory of the case.” True, but most Oxfordians (not all, alas) would subscribe to something like the following:

There did exist a man named William Shakspere, of Stratford, but the plays and poems attributed to William Shakespeare were in fact written by Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, the Lord Great Chamberlain and senior earl of England, early a favorite of Queen Elizabeth and usually on good terms with her. (Henceforward I will use “Shakspere” to denote the man from Stratford and “Shakespeare” to denote the author of the plays, whoever he was.) There is abundant evidence, discomfoting to Stratfordians, that many of the existing plays are rewritten versions of earlier plays or, more simply date from a time that would require prodigious effort on the part of the Stratford man. Perhaps as many as a dozen plays were written before the Stratford man reached his thirty-first birthday. Oxfordians believe that Oxford wrote the earlier plays for court performance in the 1580s – when Oxford was in his thirties – and that they were later revised for the public theater. Not until 1598 was the name Shakespeare appended to plays. Before then, all published quartos of plays subsequently attributed to Shakespeare had no name on the title page. In associating himself with and writing for the public theater, Oxford was both slumming and enjoying himself – and taking the opportunity to write figuratively about events and people surrounding the court. As it was not acceptable for noblemen to be associated with public (as opposed to court) theater, Oxford agreed to keep his family’s name out of it. He wrote “not for attribution,” as we now say. Perhaps, as Justice Stevens suggested, the Queen herself so ordered him. Possibly he was content to write pseudonymously without urging.

The Earl of Oxford may have met the Stratford man in London at some point and enlisted him as his “blind,” or front man: Oxfordians disagree among themselves about this key point. A variant of this theory holds that Oxford was already using the name Shakespeare when the Stratford man showed up in London. This is less plausible, but it accommodates a contemporary document in which it is reported that Gabriel Harvey, a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, praised the Earl of Oxford in 1578 (in Latin) with the words “Thine eyes flash fire, thy countenance shakes a spear.” I shall simply assume that Shakspere was in town seeking his fortune and that he and Oxford somehow established a collaborative relationship. Oxford thereupon set Shakspere up as a shareholder in the Chamberlain’s Men, the theater company where Shakspere presumably worked as a factotum and manager.

### **THE INADEQUACY OF THE STRATFORD MAN**

Writing in the mid-1840s Emerson admitted that he could not “marry” Shakspere’s life to Shakespeare’s work: “Other admirable men have led lives in some sort of keeping

with their thought, but this man in wide contrast.” That is the anti-Stratfordian case in a nutshell. There is a great gulf between the life and the work. Ivor Brown inadvertently drew attention to it in his 1949 biography of Shakespeare. “During 1598,” he wrote, the Bard was “managing, acting ... and turning out plays (two or three a year was his pace at this time) and yet keeping an eye on malt and [Stratford] matters.” In 1604 Shakspeare sued the Stratford apothecary for the balance of an account for malt, and for a debt of two shillings. But “it may have been Mrs. Anne Shakespeare who forced this into court,” Brown continued. “Shakespeare himself was then at the top of his performance in [the] tragedy period...” Hmmmmm.

No amount of research has been able to narrow this gulf. In some respects research has widened it. At the time of the Restoration, forty-four years after the Stratford man’s death, knowledge of Shakespeare was so poor that the plays bound together for the library of Charles II and labeled “Shakespeare. Vol. I.” were *Mucedorus*, *Fair Em*, and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, which are not accepted today as Shakespeare’s. Textual scholarship only later clarified the canon, and tremendous archival digging in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries turned up quite a bit of information about Shakspeare’s life. But (if we exclude posthumous testimony) none of it establishes Shakspeare as a playwright. With the rise of critical scholarship, poetic images of the Stratford man, told as fables at second and third hand in the eighteenth century, have mostly been overthrown as unreliable.

S. Schoenbaum, who more than most biographers has eschewed the “perhaps” that links Shakspeare to so much of Elizabethan life, was reduced by his own scrupulosity in his *Documentary Life* (1975) to presenting scraps of paper that show little more than routine transactions—Stratford tithes, Southwark tax records, and documents involving “petty disputes over money matters.” Echoes of the plays are few, faint, and unconvincing.

The Stratfordians have a point when they tell us we know quite a lot about Shakspeare – more than we do about Christopher Marlowe, for example. It’s WHAT we know that causes difficulties, not how little. His father, the constable and glover, could not write; he signed documents with a cross or made his mark. Judith, Shakspeare’s younger daughter, “evidently took after her mother [Anne Hathaway] – she couldn’t write,” A. L. Rowse reported. As for the older daughter, Susanna, Joseph Quincy Adams, a former director of the Folger Library, reproduced her wobbly signature in his *Life of William Shakespeare*, but it does not encourage confidence that she was literate. Married to Dr. John Hall, she lived on into the time of the English Civil War. After Hall’s death a surgeon visited her at Stratford because he wanted to see her husband’s manuscripts (not her father’s). At that time she was unable to recognize her own husband’s handwriting. “Odd,” Schoenbaum wrote. “Did she have learning sufficient only to enable her to sign her name?”

Which brings us to Shakspeare’s six uncontested signatures. They are painfully executed in an uncertain hand, a historical embarrassment. Joseph M. English, Jr., a documents examiner with the forensic-science laboratory at Georgetown University, offered the provisional opinion (he had access only to reproductions) that the signatures were those of a man not familiar with writing his own name, particularly the latter part of it. The

surviving record does not contradict the possibility that Shakspere's level of literacy was no greater than his daughter's. His signatures are appended to legal documents only. There are no known manuscripts or letters by Shakspere. We have one letter that was sent to him (but he is thought not to have received it). It asks for a loan of £30.

Shakspere is not known to have attended Stratford grammar school (the school records have not survived), and no one who did attend it ever claimed to have been his classmate. If he was a pupil, he probably was not one for long, as orthodoxy concedes, because his father ran into financial difficulties. Shakspere married at the age of eighteen and had three children (including twins) before his twenty-first birthday, in 1585. Joseph Quincy Adams guessed that Shakspere spent some time as a schoolmaster. The alternative he described as follows:

“If we are forced to think of him as early snatched from school, working all day in a butcher's shop, growing up in a home devoid of books and of a literary atmosphere, and finally driven from his native town through a wild escapade with village lads, we find it hard to understand how he suddenly blossomed out as one of England's greatest men of letters with every mark of literary culture.”

Several orthodox scholars, including Alfred Harbage, date the composition of *Love's Labour's Lost* to the late 1580s. “What Shakespeare was doing at the age of twenty-four or twenty-five we do not know,” Harbage added. The play contains allusions to the 1578 visit of Marguerite de Valois and Catherine de' Medici to the Court of Henry of Navarre at Nerac, the names of French courtiers remaining unchanged in the play. Somehow the Stratford man found out about all this, embodying it in a parody of court manners and literary fashions. “Unless there was a source-play,” Edmund Chambers wrote, “some English or French traveller must have been an intermediary.”

The play was “a battle in a private war between court factions,” according to the Arden edition of *Love's Labour's Lost*, with many indications that it had been written first “for private performance in court circles,” and then was rewritten and published in quarto in 1598. It's hard to believe that Shakspere started out as a court insider. “To credit that amazing piece of virtuosity to a butcher boy who left school at 13 or even to one whose education was nothing more than what a grammar school and residence in a little provincial borough could provide is to invite one either to believe in miracles or to disbelieve in the man of Stratford,” wrote J. Dover Wilson, the editor of *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*.

In his prefatory poem in the First Folio (1623), Ben Jonson misleadingly told readers that Shakespeare had “small Latin and less Greek.” Jonson also spread the idea that Shakespeare was nature's child, who “wanted art.” This falsely implied that Shakespeare's poetry was the spontaneous, untutored babbling of a provincial. John Milton picked up the refrain, writing in 1632 that the poet “warble[d] his native wood-notes wild.” The well-educated Milton probably didn't realize that Shakespeare's vocabulary was twice his own. Shakespeare's learning, worn so unostentatiously, didn't become apparent until much later. The eighteenth-century editor George Steevens said of a portion of *Titus Andronicus*: “This passage alone would sufficiently convince me

that the play before us was the work of one who was conversant with the Greek tragedies in their original language. We have here a plain allusion to the Ajax of Sophocles, of which no translation was extant in the time of Shakespeare.” Gilbert Highet, of Columbia University, said that “we can be sure” that Shakespeare “had not read Aeschylus.” (He meant that Shakspeare had not.) “Yet what can we say when we find some of Aeschylus’ thoughts appearing in Shakespeare’s plays?”

*The Comedy of Errors* was taken from a play by Plautus before it had been published in English translation. *The Rape of Lucrece* is derived from the *Fasti* of Ovid, of which there appears to have been no English version, according to John Churton Collins, the author of *Studies in Shakespeare* (1904). Collins also found in the plays “portions of Caesar, Sallust, Cicero and Livy.” As for modern languages, Charles T. Prouty, a professor at the University of Missouri, concluded that Shakespeare “read both Italian and French and was familiar with both Bandello and Bellefont.” The dialogue in some scenes of *Henry V* is in French, “grammatically accurate if not idiomatic,” according to Sir Sidney Lee, the influential Shakespeare scholar and the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. As noted above, Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques*, which contains the *Hamlet* story, had not been translated from the French by the time *Hamlet* was written. *Othello* is based on a story in G. Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*, not translated from the Italian by the time of the play’s first performance. Andrew S. Cairncross, who in the 1930s espoused an early-authorship theory of the plays, concluded that Shakespeare’s “knowledge and use” of Italian is “established.” (Oxford wrote in French and Latin and, having spent almost a year in Italy, almost certainly knew Italian.)

Meanwhile, we catch glimpses of Shakspeare in London: In March of 1595, along with William Kempe and Richard Burbage, he was recorded as a payee of the Chamberlain’s Men, for performances before Her Majesty the previous December at Greenwich. In 1596 William Wayte “craves sureties of the peace against Shakspeare” and others “for fear of death.” In 1597 and 1598 the Stratford man was listed as a tax defaulter in Bishopsgate ward. In Stratford he was among the “wicked people” named as stockpiling grain at a time of famine in 1598. A year earlier he bought New Place, the second-largest house in Stratford, for £60, but he “did not live there permanently until his retirement, c. 1610,” wrote F. E. Halliday in *A Shakespeare Companion*, a standard reference work. In London there was no recorded reaction to his death, in 1616 – an extraordinary oversight, considering that the city went into mourning when the actor Richard Burbage died, three years later.

The playwright “spent some years before his death at his native Stratford,” according to his first biographer, Nicholas Rowe, “in ease, retirement, and the conversation of his friends.” Schoenbaum granted him a “final non-literary phase.” How many writers retire in their forties? (Francis Beaumont, who died a month before Shakspeare, was said by Marchette Chute to have “retired” from playwriting in his late twenties, but a recent study argued that he had suffered a stroke.) It seems unlikely that Shakspeare really did retire, however, for in 1613 we find him again back in London – buying property in Blackfriars and mortgaging it the next day. Shakspeare’s will, first prepared in January of 1616, itemizing such minutiae as a silver-gilt bowl, his own clothes, his plate, and his second-best bed (this last to his wife), mentions no books or manuscripts. This was the

will of someone concerned about and attentive to details – but these did not include the disposition of his literary remains. At this point just over half the plays had not been published anywhere.

“Circumstances were uniquely favorable to the retention of any products of his pen had there been any,” Charlton Ogburn wrote.

“His last years were spent in affluent leisure in a fine house he had owned for two decades, and this house remained in the possession of his daughter and then granddaughter while three collected editions of Shakespeare’s plays were published in which their author was hailed as his nation’s triumph. Are we really to imagine that nothing in the form of a letter, a note, a bit of manuscript, would have remained of Shakspeare’s had he been the greatest of writers?”

As far as I know, at no point in Shakspeare’s lifetime was the claim made that he had written anything, nor do we have any evidence that he was ever paid for writing. Shakspeare himself makes no authorial claim in the anecdotes that have come down to us. In his fugitive appearances he is businesslike rather than literary. In the words of Joseph Sobran, the columnist and *National Review* critic at large, he remains throughout “a singularly taciturn fountain of eloquence.”

### THE VIRTUOSITY OF DE VERE

As a young man, de Vere “dazzled the queen and absorbed the attention of her leisure moments,” according to one historian. An uncle of his, Henry Howard, introduced the sonnet form in English; another uncle, Arthur Golding, who was probably also de Vere’s tutor, translated Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, an important Shakespeare source. When Oxford was nineteen, a copy of the Amyot (French) translation of Plutarch’s *Lives* was bought for him; a letter written by him in French at the age of thirteen survives. He “won for himself an honorable place among the early masters of English poetry,” Thomas Macaulay wrote. Of all the courtier poets, Chambers wrote, “the most hopeful” was de Vere, but he “became mute in late life.”

In deference to the taboo against noblemen’s using their own names, only one published poem disclosed Oxford’s authorship. (Others used the initials “E.O.,” and may have been published without his permission.) Steven W. May, of Georgetown College, Kentucky, an expert on Oxford’s poetry has reduced to sixteen the canon of his certain poems. “His latest extant poem was composed no later than 1593,” according to May. This happens to be the year of Shakespeare’s first poem (*Venus and Adonis*). What has survived of Oxford’s poetry does not rival Shakespeare’s, but most of his known poems were written when Oxford was young, probably in his early twenties. According to Ward Elliott, of Claremont McKenna College, in California, who has researched the authorship question with statistical techniques, some of Oxford’s known poems may have been composed when the earl was sixteen or younger.



Oxford's oldest daughter, Elizabeth Vere, was in the early 1590s engaged to marry Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton, to whom *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* were dedicated. Burghley and Oxford tried to persuade the rich youth to marry the girl (Oxford had sold off an uncomfortably large portion of his inheritance by this time), but Southampton declined (and was apparently fined by Burghley for doing so). Shakespeare's sonnets, or most of them, are believed to have been written in the early to mid-1590s, and Southampton's three biographers believe that he was the sonnets' "onlie begetter." The poet, in any event, is feeling his age, speaking of the "wreckful siege of battering days," weeping for "precious friends hid in death's dateless night" and "all those friends which I thought buried," and missing his "lovers gone." In the mid-1590s the Stratford man wasn't thirty years old, yet in Sonnet 73 we read:

**That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.**

Soon after undertaking his quest for the true author of Shakespeare's works, Looney turned to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, where he read:

"Oxford, despite his violent and perverse temper, his eccentric taste in dress, and his reckless waste of his substance, evinced a genuine interest in music, and wrote verses of much lyric beauty. Puttenham and Meres reckon him among 'the best for comedy' in his day; but, although he was a patron of players, no specimens of his dramatic productions survive."

In 1567 Oxford was admitted to Gray's Inn, where he studied law and probably became acquainted with the dramatists and literary figures who frequented the Inns of Court at the time. He took over the Earl of Warwick's acting company in 1580, and in 1583 leased Blackfriars Theatre for his own boys' company of players; he transferred the lease to John Lyly, an early Elizabethan dramatist who was also Oxford's private secretary. "In comedy," R. Warwick Bond wrote in an introduction to Lyly's *Complete Works*, "Lyly is Shakespeare's only model." (But if Oxfordianism triumphs, the relationship between Lyly and Shakespeare will have to be reversed.) "There is little doubt that the Earl himself collaborated in the writing and production of Lyly's Court Comedies," wrote Oxford's biographer, B. M. Ward. In 1593 Gabriel Harvey ambiguously referred to Lyly as "the fiddlestick of Oxford." Oxford was four years older than Lyly.

According to *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, "the earl of Oxford's company of players acted in London between 1584 and 1587." At that time the public theater was considered to be a low-rent and low-life enterprise. Lords and ladies didn't exactly go to opening nights at the Globe. It's suggestive that in 1587 Burghley complained in a letter to Sir Francis Walsingham that Oxford's "lewd friends ... still rule him by flatteries." Sidney Lee wrote that Oxford "squandered some part of his fortune upon men of letters whose bohemian mode of life attracted him." Sir George Buc, a poet and Deputy Master of the Revels, deplored Oxford's "waste" of his earldom but thought

him a “magnificent and a very learned and religious man.” In 1573 three of Oxford’s rude companions staged a mock robbery (or possibly it was intended as a real one) of two men formerly employed by the boisterous young earl, “by the highway from Gravesend to Rochester,” according to a letter of complaint that the victims promptly wrote to Burghley. In *Henry IV, Part I*, Falstaff and three of Prince Hal’s companions hold up some travelers on the highway near Gadshill – which is on the highway between Gravesend and Rochester.

Did Oxford write plays? In 1589 the author of the *Arte of English Poesie* (thought to be George Puttenham) praised Oxford “for Comedy and Enterlude,” and in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) Francis Meres wrote that “the best for Comedy among us be Edward Earl of Oxford.” Admittedly, in the same famous passage Meres also praises “Shakespeare” and lists twelve of his plays. It can be argued, however, that Meres either knew Oxford’s secret and kept it or innocently believed that Oxford and Shakespeare had separate identities. If he knew the secret, he was presumably discouraged from revealing it by the same social system that prevailed upon Oxford to hide his identity.

In Oxford’s case peer pressure to hide his name would have been strong. “Among the nobility or gentry as may be very well seen in many laudable sciences and especially in making poesie,” Puttenham wrote in 1589,

“It is so come to pass that they have no courage to write and if they have are loath to be known of their skill. So as I know very many notable gentlemen in the Court that have written commendably, and suppressed it again, or else suffered it to be published without their own names to it: as if it were a discredit for a gentleman, to seem learned.”

He went on to describe “Noblemen and Gentlemen of Her Majesty’s own servants, who have written excellently well as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest, of which number is first that noble gentleman Edward Earl of Oxford.” In *Shakespeare and His Betters*, R. C. Churchill was so confident that Oxford’s death in 1604 ruled him out as the Bard that he boldly asserted:

“I believe it is as well for the officials of the [Oxfordian] Shakespeare Fellowship that the Earl of Oxford is safely dead, for they would be in some danger of being run through if they insulted the Earl in person by suggesting he had written Shakespeare’s plays. For a courtier brought up on Castiglione, a greater insult could hardly be imagined.”

Which helps explain the use of a pseudonym.

Two characteristics of the Shakespeare canon suggest powerfully that its author was not a small-town burgher but rather a well-traveled nobleman. One is the very attitude. The author displays little sympathy for the class of upwardly mobile strivers of which Shakespeare was a preeminent member. Shakespeare celebrates the faithful servant, but regards commoners as either humorous when seen individually or alarming in mobs. Either way he is remote from them. The concerns of the burgher are not his—hardly what one would expect from the pen of a thrifty countryman new in the big city and rising fast. Shakespeare’s frequent disgust with court life sounds like the revulsion of a man

who knew it too well. His contempt for a climber like Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* suggests a writer who is by birth above social climbing and finds it laughable in his inferiors. (Oxfordians, incidentally, make a strong case that the character of Malvolio is based on Sir Christopher Hatton.) Louis Benezet, a professor at Dartmouth (and an Oxfordian), noted in 1940 that Shakespeare's noblemen "are natural, at ease, convincing."

"They talk the language of their class, both in matter and manner. They are aristocrats to the core. On the other hand in portraying the lower classes Shakespeare is unconvincing. He makes them clods or dolts or clowns, and has them amuse us by their gaucheries. He gives them undignified names: Wart, Bullcalf, Mouldy, Bottom, Dogberry, Snout..."

Walt Whitman noted the same thing. "The comedies," he wrote, "have the unmistakable hue of plays, portraits, made for the divertissement only of the elite of the castle, and from its point of view. The comedies are altogether non-acceptable to America and Democracy."

Whitman was an agnostic anti-Stratfordian; his comments (1888) on the historical plays are remarkable. The histories suggest, he wrote, "explanations that one dare not put into plain statement." But then he added:

"Conceiv'd out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism – personifying in unparallel'd ways the medieval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation) – only one of the 'wolfish earls' so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born descendant and knower, might seem to be the true author of those amazing works..."

We find in Sonnet 91 (and is this the voice of our litigious grain-hoarder from Stratford?):

**Thy love is better than high birth to me, ...**

**Of more delight than hawks or horses be.**

In Sonnet 125 the poet wrote, "Were't aught to me I bore the canopy." We know that Oxford was one of those entitled to bear the canopy over the monarch, and according to Oxford's biographer, a contemporary ballad tells us that in a thanksgiving procession after the defeat of the Armada, "the noble Earl of Oxford then High Chamberlain of England / Rode right before Her Majesty his bonnet in his hand."

The second characteristic of the canon which points away from Shakspeare – and toward Oxford – is the author's apparent knowledge of foreign lands. Shakespeare's "knowledge of Italy was extraordinary," the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote. "An English scholar who lived in Venice has found his visual topographic exactitude in *The Merchant of Venice* incredible in one who had never been there." Edmund Chambers allowed that the playwright "seems to have been remarkably successful in giving a local colouring and atmosphere" to the plays set in Italy. He even "shows familiarity with

some minute points of local topography.” Karl Elze, the nineteenth-century German scholar pointed out that in his description of Venice, Shakespeare “does not confound the Isola de Rialto with the Ponte di Rialto.” As a result, Chambers said, “much research has been devoted to a conjecture that he spent some time in Italy.” But it is implausible that the Stratford man ever went abroad. Travel to the Continent was both dangerous and expensive. When Edward de Vere set off for France in January of 1575, he was accompanied by “two gentlemen, two grooms, one payend, a harbinger, a housekeeper, and a trencherman,” Lord Burghley noted for his records.

Oxford and party stayed six weeks or more in Paris and were introduced to the French King, Henry III. It is possible that at this time Oxford met Henry of Navarre (later Henry IV of France, 1589-1610), whose brother-in-law, the Duke of Alençon, was then being considered as a husband for Queen Elizabeth. Henry of Navarre and Oxford were about the same age, and in many respects Henry seems to have been a man after Oxford’s own heart. We know, in any event, that Oxford later kept in touch with the French ambassador in London; and we know that Shakespeare was familiar with some details of the Navarre court in 1578 (described in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*).

Oxford went to Strasbourg, and thence to Italy, arriving in Padua in May. “For fear of the Inquisition I dare not pass by Milan, the Bishop whereof exerciseth such tyranny,” he wrote to Burghley. From Padua he traveled to Genoa, later returning to Padua. In September he was in Venice. Here he borrowed 500 crowns from one Baptista Nigrone; then in December he received a further remittance through a Pasquino Spinola. In *The Taming of the Shrew* the rich gentleman of Padua whose shrewish daughter Petruchio will tame is called Baptista Minola, and his “crowns” are repeatedly mentioned.

Oxford then traveled to Florence and Siena. He was also reported to have been in Sicily, “a famous man of chivalry,” who challenged all comers to a contest with “all manner of weapons.” In a book published in Naples in 1699 he was described as participating in a mock tournament staged by the *Commedia dell’ Arte*; the account implied that he was a familiar figure at these performances. In 1936 George Lyman Kittredge, of Harvard, pointed out that “the influence of the Italian *commedia dell’ arte* is visible throughout” *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. “Several of the figures correspond to standard figures of the Italian convention...”

By March of 1576 Oxford was back in Paris, having stopped en route at Lyons. A striking echo of Oxford’s life and travels is found in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Here is Looney’s description of the principal character, Bertram. Almost everything that follows also applied to Oxford:

“A young lord of ancient lineage, of which he is himself proud, having lost a father for whom he entertained a strong affection, is brought to court by his mother and left there as a royal ward, to be brought up under royal supervision. As he grows up he asks for military service and to be allowed to travel, but is repeatedly refused or put off. At last he goes away without permission. Before leaving he had been married to a young woman with whom he had been brought up, and who had herself been most active in

bringing about the marriage. Matrimonial troubles, of which the outstanding feature is a refusal of cohabitation, are associated with both his stay abroad and his return home.”

There’s one final point about *All’s Well*. Bertram is brought to Helena’s bed in the mistaken belief that he is visiting his mistress. (Shakespeare employed the same ruse in *Measure for Measure*.) In an 1836 account, *The Histories of Essex*, it was said of the Earl of Oxford: “He forsook his lady’s bed, [but] the father of Lady Anne [Lord Burghley] by stratagem, contrived that her husband should unknowingly sleep with her, believing her to be another woman, and she bore a son to him in consequence of this meeting.”

It’s hard to believe that this really did happen to Oxford (or to anyone else). But it’s suggestive that the story was told of him in particular.

Oxford’s wife died in 1588. Three years later he married Elizabeth Trentham, one of the Queen’s maids of honor. In 1596 they moved into a large house (which she bought) in Hackney, three or four miles from London’s center. About the last decade of his life we have little information. “It is almost impossible to penetrate the obscurity surrounding his life at Hackney,” B.M. Ward wrote (1928). “There can be little doubt that literature, his main interest in life, occupied the greater part of his time.”

Almost alone among Elizabethan poets, Shakespeare wrote no eulogy on the death of the Queen, in 1603. Oxford himself died at Hackney in June of 1604, it is thought of the plague. In 1622, the year before the publication of the Folio, Henry Peacham published a book with a chapter on poetry. Elizabeth’s reign had been a “golden age,” he wrote therein, listing (in order of rank) those who had “honoured poesie with their pens and practice.” First was “Edward Earl of Oxford.” Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney made the list. There was no mention of Shakespeare.

The post-1604 period, potentially so perilous for Oxford, turns out to contain surprises – for Stratfordians. The Bard appears to have continued writing, but with a collaborator. Sidney Lee, a pillar of Stratfordian orthodoxy, believed that Shakespeare “reverted [in 1607] to his earlier habit of collaboration, and with another’s aid composed two dramas – *Timon of Athens* and *Pericles*.” How about the possibility that he had died, leaving unfinished work that was completed by another hand? The first two acts of *Pericles*, it is generally agreed, are not by Shakespeare at all.

From 1594 to 1604 plays by Shakespeare had been published regularly in London in quarto editions. But then publication stopped for some reason until 1608, and the appearance of *Lear*. In 1609 the sonnets were published, with a preface referring to “our ever-living poet.” The phrase strongly suggests that the poet was dead. The title, *Shakespeares Sonnets* (rather than *Sonnets by Shakespeare*), also implies that additions are not to be expected. “The numerous misprints indicate that the poet who took such pains with *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* had no part in supervising the printing of his most important body of non-dramatic verse,” Schoenbaum wrote.

In 1607 a poet named William Barksted said of Shakespeare, “His was worthy merit.” Shakspere had nine years to live.

In 1605 *The London Prodigal* was published in quarto as “By William Shakespeare,” and in 1608 *A Yorkshire Tragedy* was likewise published and attributed. The King’s Men also performed these plays, now known as apocryphal and their authors having been lost to history. The Stratford man was alive, supposedly still turning out plays himself, and certainly suing for malt debts in Stratford. Why did he not object to the attachment of his good name to plays that he did not write? It seems likely that the company, knowing that the real playwright was dead, decided to go on using his name as a drawing card. There had been other apocryphal plays, some appearing in quarto and attributed to “W.S.,” but all the evidence we have suggests it was only after Oxford’s death that the company openly used the name Shakespeare to advertise plays not by the real author.

In 1609 *Troilus and Cressida* was published in quarto, with the last few scenes possibly “by another hand,” according to the New Cambridge editors. The first edition included a strange preface – dropped from a second edition published later that year – with the headline (ignored by Stratfordians) “A never writer to an ever reader. News.” Oxfordians note that “ever” is an anagram of “Vere.”

And I can’t resist citing a similar play on words in these lines, fondly regarded by Oxfordians, from Sonnet 76:

**That every word doth almost tell my name,  
Showing their birth, and where they did proceed.**