Will's True Quill

By

Fernando Valdivia

Although skepticism regarding the authorship of Shakespeare's poetry and plays may well have been expressed as soon as William Shakspere (as the family name is spelled in the Holy Trinity Church Register of Stratford-on-Avon) was publicly acknowledged as the illustrious "Bard of Avon," the first writer to voice his suspicion was James Wilmot, a retired London cleric who in the early 1780's settled in Warwickshire and proceeded to gather material for a proposed biography of Shakespeare. When he learned that the most famous inhabitant of those parts may well have been the unschooled son of a local tradesman who left not a shred of evidence that he had ever owned a book or written so much as a letter, Wilmot gave up the project and discarded his notes. He did, however, eventually confide to a member of the Ipswich Philosophic Society that he believed the plays to have been written by someone else who had good reason to conceal his true identity. Wilmot wouldn't reveal whom he suspected was the mystery playwright, but he hinted that it might be Sir Francis Bacon (Lardner 94).

It wasn't until 1888, however, that Ignatius Donnelly, an erudite three-term U.S. Representative from Minnesota, "proved" that Bacon was the real Shakespeare. In his book, The Great Cryptogram, Donnelly claimed to have discovered hidden ciphers in Shakespeare's works revealing Bacon's authorship (Ogburn 134-35). For all his brilliance, however, Bacon was no poet and couldn't possibly have composed the three long rhyming poems, "A Lover's Complaint," "Venus and Adonis," and "The Rape of Lucrece," or the 154 sonnets and 37 blank verse comedies and tragedies. The Stratfordians (as the traditionalists are called) were quite rightly unconvinced and have subsequently rejected similar claims made on behalf of Christopher Marlowe, Anne Whateley, the 3rd Earl of Rutland, the 6th Earl of Derby and even Elizabeth I (Shakespeare FAQ).
Not only was Shakespeare a supreme poet, a close study of his works demonstrates he was also quite knowledgeable about horsemanship, falconry, botany, biology, landscape gardening, astronomy, law, Italian, French, Latin, Greek, "and a host of other subjects uncharacteristic of the knowledge of a commoner without much formal education" (Lardner 96). In 1908, Sir George Greenwood, an English lawyer, outlined the case against the Stratford man in his book, The Shakespeare Problem Restated, but didn't claim to know who actually composed the Bard's great works (Lardner 96). That investigative search was left for another skeptic to conduct.

After years of diligent research during WWI, in 1920 an obscure British schoolmaster named J. Thomas Looney (pronounced Loney) published the most convincing argument yet written on the authorship controversy with his book, Shakespeare Identified in Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Looney's method of discovering the Bard's identity was to examine the works for clues to the author's probable background, education, personality, point of view and tastes, and then to see if he could match a particular man to the list he had compiled. His study led him to infer that in addition to being a confirmed medievalist both socially and politically, Shakespeare was:

1. A mature man of recognized genius.
2. Apparently eccentric and mysterious.
3. Of intense sensibility -- a man apart.
4. Unconventional.
5. Not adequately appreciated.
6. Of pronounced and known literary tastes.
7. An enthusiast in the world of drama.
8. A lyric poet of recognized talent.

Focusing on the history plays, particularly those dealing with the turmoil between the reign of Richard II and the ending of the War of the Roses by the downfall of Richard III, Looney detected a
sympathy on Shakespeare's part with the Lancastrian cause and supposed
the author to be "a member of some family with distinct Lancastrian
leanings" (Looney I: 96). Further examination led him to add nine
more traits to his original criteria:

1. A man with Feudal connections.
2. A member of the higher aristocracy.
3. Connected with Lancastrian supporters.
4. An enthusiast for Italy.
5. A follower of sport (including falconry).
6. A lover of music.
7. Loose and improvident in money matters.
8. Doubtful and somewhat conflicting in his attitude to
   women.
9. Of probable Catholic leanings, but touched with
   skepticism.

Searching for a possible link between a courtly poet and
Shakespeare, Looney discovered a similarity between the ten syllable,
six line stanzas of Edward de Vere's poem "Women" and Shakespeare's
"Venus and Adonis" (107-8). Other poems by de Vere only reinforced
what Looney suspected, that Shakespeare was the pseudonym of the Earl
of Oxford, so he concentrated his efforts on finding further
circumstantial evidence that the Bard of Avon was a peer of the realm
and not the commoner from Stratford.

Robert R. Prechter, Jr., a Member of The Shakespeare Fellowship
and The Shakespeare-Oxford Society, dismisses E.Y. Elliott and Robert
J. Valenza's argument that Edward de Vere's poetry is nothing like
Shakespeare's. Refuting their computer generated "stylometric
matches," Prechter cites several verse parallels between de Vere's
"The Loss of My Good Name" -- composed when he was 16 -- and lines
from Shakespeare's plays (The Oxfordian Volume XIV 148-154). In
contrast, he finds almost none between Marlowe and Shakespeare (154-
155).

Although the Stratfordians maintain that as the son of an
alderman, William Shakspere must have attended the free Stratford Grammar School where he is alleged to have studied Latin, Greek and history, there is no record of his having any sort of formal education; however, even if he had learned to read and write as a prerequisite for admission, the disparity between what young Will might have learned there and the immense frame of reference evident in Shakespeare's work makes it impossible to believe the two were one and the same man.

Shakespeare was undoubtedly one of the best educated men of his century. He was also one of the more cultured as demonstrated by his knowledge of literature, music and art. In language skills he has no equal. Where the average well-educated person uses about 4000 words, Shakespeare's vocabulary is an incredible 17,677, twice the size of Milton's. The Oxford English Dictionary estimates that he introduced about 3000 mostly Latinate words into English (Ogburn 291).

"Thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays are set in royal courts and the world of nobility or otherwise in the highest circles of society. From all we can tell, moreover, Shakespeare fully shared the aristocratic outlook of his chief characters. The populace he seems to have regarded as unfit for any share of government...Lower class characters are almost all introduced by Shakespeare for comic effect and are given scant development as such. Their names bespeak their inferior status in his eyes: Snug, Bottom, Stout, Starveling, Dogberry, Simple, Mouldy, Wart, Feeble, Bullcalf, Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet" (240-41).

When he was twenty-four, Oxford obtained permission from the Queen to visit the Continent. Most of the fifteen months he traveled abroad were spent in Italy, with the result that six of Shakespeare's most popular plays take place there: The Comedy of Errors, Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, Much Ado About Nothing, The Merchant of Venice, and Romeo and Juliet.

But why should a noble of the highest rank and sometime favorite of the Queen conceal his identity as the brilliant author of such
extraordinary plays with a pseudonym? Two reasons might be given. First, it was not considered proper for a member of the nobility to write for the commercial stage; and, secondly, if the general public knew that the plays were written by a high ranking member of the court they would assume that the fictional characters and events on stage were based on an insider's accurate knowledge of what was going on within the ruling circle of Elizabeth's precarious monarchy (Ogburn 189-90).

Because Shakespeare dedicated "Venus and Adonis" in 1593 and "The Rape of Lucrece" in 1594 to Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton, and addressed him intimately in several of the sonnets, the Stratfordians inferred that the Earl was Shakespeare's patron and possibly even his lover. But if Oxford was Shakespeare, then the relationship between the two peers takes on an entirely different significance. Wriothesley was engaged to Oxford's daughter Elizabeth from 1592 to 94, and though the betrothed couple didn't marry, Oxford and Southampton remained friends and shared a mutual interest in the theatre (Looney 177-86). Nevertheless, Joseph Sobran believes some of the sonnets addressed to a young man, whom he assumes was Southamton, imply a homosexual relationship (Sobran 199-201), but Charlton Ogburn, jr., disputes that theory, pointing out that de Vere had reason enough to feel "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," when "I all alone beweep my outcast state." Instead, he speculates that Oxford was writing those sonnets to his son and heir, Henry (Ogburn 4).

As for the "Dark Lady" of the sonnets, again the Stratfordians aren't very convincing. Her identity remained a mystery until in 1973, A.L. Rowse proclaimed he had discovered she was "Emilia Bassano, the promiscuous wife of William Lanier and mistress of Lord Hunsdon" (Tallmer). He even published a book of her poetry (Rowse). But if Shakespeare was de Vere, a more plausible candidate would be Anne Vavasor, a niece of Thomas and Katherine Knyvet who was appointed a Gentlewoman of the Bedchamber in 1580. Her affair with the twenty-nine year old Oxford produced a son, for which the furious
Queen dispatched the illicit lovers to the Tower and kept Oxford there for two and a half months (Ogburn 610-613, 646).

The accurate dating of Shakespeare's plays has yet to be fixed, so those that were published after Oxford's death were most probably improved literary revisions of earlier stage versions. It's interesting to note, however, that Oxford's daughters and their husbands, the Earls of Derby, Montgomery and Berkshire, were connected with the First Folio of 1623 at every stage of production (Miller 1). Those six, with the probable addition of Oxford's son, Henry de Vere, had every reason and the financial resources to gather together and publish Oxford's plays in a single volume to be preserved for posterity (Brewster 196).

On the other hand, "During Shaksper’s entire life not one of his contemporaries ever referred to him as a writer. The only references to Shakespeare were to writings with which the name was connected., and none referred otherwise personally to a writer of that name. Thus neither in the writings themselves nor in their authorship is there anything whatsoever which identified the Stratford man with the author of any of the works, or identifies the two different names, Shaksper and Shakespear with each other" (McMichael 197).

In her book, Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography, Diana Price states that "stripped of conjecture and ancillary information...surrounded by phrases such as "might have," "we have no doubt that," "could have," "it is likely that," "doubtless" this and "doubtless" that," most pages of any standard Shakespeare biography can be reduced to a few pages of actual facts (12). By comparing the recorded facts regarding Shakespere's career as a writer to the "personal and literary records left by [two dozen] Elizabethan and Jacobean writers during their lifetimes," Price convincingly proves that there is no factual evidence that William Shakespere of Stratford was a writer (301). She illustrates the results of her research by appending the following chart to her biography:

Appendix: Chart of Literary Paper Trails

Just as birds can be distinguished from turtles by characteristics peculiar to the species, so writers can be distinguished from doctors, actors, or financiers, by the types of personal records left behind. This chart compares personal and literary records left by Elizabethan
and Jacobean writers during their lifetimes, with at least one record extant for any category checked. Category 10 includes evidence dating up to 12 months following death, to allow for eulogies or reports of death. Documentation follows (301).

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But as it is impossible in a short paper to list all the evidence and coincidences linking de Vere and Shakespeare, if we compare some aspects of his life to the tragedy of Hamlet, the play most scholars agree is the closest we have to Shakespeare's autobiography, it may suffice to persuade an open minded reader that Oxford may very well have been the real Shakespeare.

Edward's father died when the youth was fourteen, and just as Hamlet's mother remarried shortly after her husband's funeral, de Vere's mother also remarried rather hastily. Edward's brother-in-law visited the Danish court at Elsinore, and two cousins, named Horace and Francis, were probably the models for the characters of Horatio and Francisco. As a Royal Ward in the household of Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Edward was as close to the center of power and politics of Queen Elizabeth's court as is Hamlet in that of King Claudius. If Polonius is a satirical portrait of Burghley, then Ophelia must have been drawn from Cecil's daughter, Anne, whom Oxford married at twenty-one. Because the Queen's favorite, Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, was granted most of the 16th Earl's lands when he died, Edward may have patterned the usurping Claudius after Dudley and the easily seduced Gertrude after Elizabeth (Ogburn 434).

Much of Hamlet's suicidal soliloquy (III,i) has been traced to Cardanus Comforte, a book Oxford had translated into English and published in 1573 (Ogburn 526-28), and the Danish Prince's capture by pirates while sailing to England (V,vi) happened to de Vere in 1576 when Dutch pirates set upon his ship in the Channel (556).

Two of Shakespeare's favorite sources are Ovid's Metamorphosis and the Bible. It seems more than a coincidence, therefore, that de Vere's uncle and sometime tutor, Arthur Golding, translated Ovid into English (Ogburn 443), and that the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington D.C., has Oxford's Geneva Bible with his marginal notes and
several verses underlined that are found in Shakespeare's works (Stritmatter).

William Shakspere could scarcely sign his name. While he is alleged to have substantially increased the English vocabulary, his wife and daughters remained ignorant, incapable of reading his exquisite poetry. He made a will in January and then revised it on March 25, 1616. Leaving a certain amount of money and a silver gilt bowl to his daughter Judith, the father bestows all of his property and most of his belongings to his daughter Susanna and his "second best bed with the furniture" to his wife. No mention is made of his shares in the Globe theater and his house in Blackfriars, nor of any books and manuscripts. Shakspere died a month later, and the burial register of Trinity Church in Stratford contains this record: "April 25 Will. Shakspere gent. Even his physician son-in-law, John Hall, who once expressed an admiration for Michael Drayton's poetry, was no more eloquent when he wrote in his diary "my father-in-law died on Thursday."

How odd that when the greatest poet in England died, other than these two brief entries there is no mention of his passing. No tributes or eulogies, no ceremonies or memorials, nothing. All of London evidently didn't know or were indifferent to the demise of their beloved Shakespeare. But six months after Oxford died on June 24th, 1604, "King James honored his memory by having more Shakespeare plays presented at court during the Christmas season than had ever been given in one short period" (Looney 299).

There are several reasons why the Strafordians remain stubbornly opposed to accepting Edward de Vere as Shakespeare. He is not the first candidate to be proclaimed as the real Shakespeare, so it's to be expected that his claim to the title should be met with the same skepticism as were the others. Then there is the professional resistance on the part of the Shakespeare establishment. Too many reputations and tenured positions depend on the years of research devoted to the study of William Shakspere. And then there is his
association with Stratford-on-Avon which is so essential to the 
tourist industry of Warwickshire. But as more and more evidence is 
discovered connecting the 17th Earl of Oxford with persons, places and 
sources that influenced Shakespeare's poetry and plays, it becomes 
increasingly more difficult to deny his acceptance as the greatest 
poet in English and possibly in the world.

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