

Monstrous Adversary Review

Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* (Liverpool University Press, 2003)

By Thomas A. Pendleton

First, yes, it's *that* Earl of Oxford. But, no, this isn't yet another amateur enthusiast's claim that he wrote Shakespeare's plays. The author, Alan H. Nelson, Emeritus Professor of English at the University of California, Berkley, is a distinguished scholar with a special expertise in Elizabethan documents and handwriting, and, as one would expect, he finds no substance whatever to the Oxfordian hypothesis.

But his book is not a polemic committed to disproving Oxfordian claims. . . . Nelson has rather written an extremely thorough and ferociously well-documented biography of the Earl, which mentions Shakespeare by name only twelve times in 500 pages, and only twice (66, 386-87) comments on matters that would disallow Oxford's candidacy. Nelson's biography traces Oxford's life meticulously, relying almost totally on contemporary documents, many of them previously unprinted and most of them reproduced with their original spelling, syntax, and (frequent lack of) punctuation. There are 77 surviving letters and memoranda written by Oxford, and Nelson seems to have quoted at least generous excerpts of almost all of them. He also seems to have reproduced an equal, if not larger, number of documents written to him or about him. The result is a work so assiduously researched and documented that it is hard to imagine that there ever will be a more authoritative or reliable life of Edward De Vere.

It may well appear somewhat puzzling that Nelson has devoted what was obviously the enormous industry necessary to write this book. Oxford, in Nelson's own words, . . . held no office of consequence, nor performed any notable deed (1), and both briefly here, and at greater length elsewhere, Nelson is much on record as considering the idea that he wrote the works of Shakespeare completely untenable. But Nelson is also persuaded that professionals in Shakespeare studies have an obligation to do more than ignore or offhandedly dismiss the claims made for the Earl: It has become a matter of urgency to measure the real Oxford against the myth created by partisan apologists, and all too often embraced without critical rigour by the popular press even by justices of the United States Supreme Court (1-2).

Presenting the real Oxford, of course, also necessitates drawing inferences from those hundreds of documents, and the inferences about Oxford's character are appalling. He was irresponsible, arrogant, breathtakingly self-centered, often violent, callously cruel to his wife, neglectful of his children, and it seems clear a sexual predator upon teen-aged boys. Although Nelson's inferences are in effect inescapable, I very much doubt that they will be allowed by many Oxfordians. Those who want him to be Shakespeare

surely will want him to be more admirable. I also expect that Nelson has foreseen this resistance. He is not naive in these matters: he has often participated in authorship debates, is thoroughly read in Oxfordian researches, and even maintains friendly relations with a number of De Vere's supporters.

One might also question how Nelson's book will be received by orthodox Shakespeare scholars, whose general lack of interest in the topic had much to do with Nelson's decision to write the biography. Those who have investigated the matter already know that the evidence that Shakespeare of Stratford actually wrote the works attributed to him pre-eminently the will, the Stratford Monument, and the First Folio is somewhere between abundant and overwhelming. They also know that there is no scrap of evidence connecting Oxford to those works, neither in his lifetime nor Shakespeare's nor the later seventeenth century, when the apotheosis of the Bard began and biographical scraps and legends were sought after and/or created. To the best of my knowledge and to invoke a more stringent criterion to the best of Alan Nelson's knowledge, the only contemporary who ever mentioned Oxford and Shakespeare in the same sentence was Francis Meres, who listed them discretely and distinctly in the roster of "the best for Comedy amongst us." As Nelson notes, Meres (for one) knew that Oxford and Shakespeare were not the same man (387).

But even though Nelson's biography is not in the short term likely to convert many who are already committed on one side or the other, it is an immense and indispensable source of information for anyone who wishes to investigate the controversy disinterestedly. For such a reader, the material that Nelson has presented would be totally destructive of the Oxfordian claim. That claim, it should be emphasized, is rooted in conjectures about biography: 1) that we can reliably discern the character of the author from the published works; 2) that the records of Shakespeare's life present a drab, mercenary, unsophisticated provincial of limited education and experience thus, clearly not the marvelous human being whom we intuit behind the works; and 3) that the brilliance and variety of Oxford's life imply just such a fascinating personality as we would expect the creator of *Hamlet* and *Lear* and the rest to be. The methodological shakiness of the first conjecture may be allowed largely to pass without further comment; so, too, may the unhistorical bias of the second. But in view what Nelson tells us about the Earl, it is preposterous to imagine that he fulfills the inferences that might be made about the author of the Shakespeare canon.

It is often supposed that Oxford was highly educated, but Nelson's biography does not support the judgment. The Earl's actual attendance at Queens College, Cambridge, occurred when he was eight and lasted only five months; unsurprisingly he did not attain a B.A. He was awarded an M.A. from Cambridge at the age of fourteen and one from Oxford at the age of sixteen. In both cases, his qualification was that he was part of the Queens entourage when she visited the universities. The degrees were in effect nothing more than souvenirs of the occasion, and were given to sixteen other recipients in the first instance and to at least eleven others in the second. Oxford's private instruction

seems to have ended when he was about thirteen: his tutor, Lawrence Nowell, reported, "I clearly see that my work for the Earl of Oxford cannot be much longer required" (39). Many teachers have said similar things, and usually they have meant that their patience, rather than their knowledge, had been exhausted. And there is little if anything in Oxford's correspondence to indicate a man interested in learning.

Although there is no record of Shakespeare's attendance at the King Edward Grammar School in Stratford or of anyone's attendance during the relevant years it is extremely probable that this is where he was educated. It was just down the street, it was free, and somebody taught him to read and write. Thus, if the curriculum at Stratford was similar to what T.W. Baldwin and others have shown to be usual in Elizabethan England, it is quite likely that William Shakespeare was actually better educated than Edward De Vere.

De Vere's legal learning is also often posited as a kind of sub-set of his education. But what Nelson presents is again only nominal education. Oxford was admitted to Grays Inn at the age of sixteen, but seems never to have resided there nor ever to have purchased any law books. Again, his letters support the impression: he makes frequent errors in legal Latin, and he appears never to have decided how to spell attorney or suit.

It must of course be allowed that Oxford had a documentable knowledge of Italy: he spent about eleven months there in 1575-1576. This would be more than adequate time to learn about the trajet, the common ferry/ Which trades to Venice (*MV*, 3.4.53-54), but one may doubt that it justifies claims for detailed knowledge about the status of Jews or the rights of resident aliens. On the basis of the information that survives, Oxford's major concern seems to have been sexual adventuring, nor is there evidence that he was imaginatively or intellectually charged by sixteenth century Italy. As he writes himself: ". . . allthought I haue sene so mucche as sufficethe me yet wowlde I haue time to profite thereby, . . . I care not euer to see it any more vnles it be to serue my prince or contrie. . . . I thought to haue sene Spaine, but by Italy, I gess the worse" (129). Oxford had done Italy. It is, however, reported that he had brought with him a great collection of beautiful Italian garments, which were taken from him [by pirates], over which his regret is infinite (137).

The case against Shakespeare often portrays him as money-grubbing: accumulating real estate, farming tithes, and hoarding barley malt in a time of grain shortages. Against this we have virtually nothing of a truly personal nature to balance the legal and financial records. The case with Oxford is totally otherwise: we have 77 letters, the major theme of which is I want more money. In his earlier years this meant selling and leasing properties he had inherited to supply cash, usually accompanied by complaints that he had not received enough and not soon enough. Later, when his profligacy had stripped him of most of his possessions, it meant endlessly appealing for properties forfeited to the Crown; for the post of gauger of vessels for beer and ale; for control of the import of oils, fruits, and wool; for securing the preemption for tin (a suit that accounts for a full third of his correspondence); for the governorship of Jersey; and for the presidency of

Wales. At the end of his life, he assiduously claims his hereditary right as Lord Great Chamberlain, to dress King James for his coronation and to bear water to him before and after the ceremony, And that he may take and have all his fees, profits and advantages due to this office as he and his ancestors have been used to do. He compiles a considerable wish list: forty yards of crimson velvet, the bed where the King lay on, the coverlet, curtains, pillows, and hangings of the room, with the King's nightgown, the basins and towels and a tasting cup used in bearing water. By this time, Oxford had a son, whom he claims had inherited the office of Chamberlain to Queen Anne and who, therefore should "haue & take the sayd fees accordingly" (423). Oxford's endless appeals are often accompanied by whining about how badly he has been treated. Although Queen Elizabeth had in 1586 granted him a pension of L1000 a year, and specifically to keep him from destitution, Oxford continually complains that she has illegally refused to acknowledge his right to Waltham Forest (which clearly he would have sold), and more generally, that she had at least intimated, if not promised, that she would reward him more lavishly than she has.

Oxford's letters tell us a good deal more than we would like to know, and probably a good deal more than he meant to communicate. But they, of course, make no mention of his having written three dozen plays, over 150 sonnets, and a couple of long narrative poems. Nor does any of the surviving documents written to him or about him. Some of these are gossipy, some probably libelous, some even admit to an element of imprudence in their frankness. Clearly, what was said about him was not constrained by censorship. By contrast, we have private communications from Gabriel Harvey, Leonard Digges, and Ben Jonson that clearly identify Shakespeare as an author,

Oxford's letters say nothing whatever about poetry and, with the single exception of a request that his acting troupe be well received at Cambridge, nothing about the theater either. More generally, they are lacking in eloquence, imaginative energy, and perhaps even fluency. They are replete with idiosyncratic spellings, but not idiosyncratic spellings that Shakespeare appears to have shared. His poetry amounts to no more than modest attainment, and he is curiously fond of writing in archaic fourteeners and poulters measure. It should be allowed that the surviving poetry is all probably fairly early, and that he is fond of the sixain stanza in which *Venus and Adonis* is written. (This was in fact the first clue that led Thomas J. Looney to his discovery.) But nothing he wrote suggests a talent even remotely approaching Shakespeare's.

Nelson's biography also undermines some of the supposedly most striking similarities between the Earl's life and the narratives of the plays. *Hamlet* is most frequently cited, and indeed Oxford was once captured by pirates, who did not, however, deal with him like thieves of mercy (4.6.20-21). But the fact that Oxford's mother remarried hardly looks significant; most Elizabethan aristocrats of either gender did so if they could. And the very small evidence about his stepfather, Charles Tyrrel, suggests they were on friendly enough terms. Comparably, the character of Horatio is often supposed to be modeled on Oxford's cousin, Horace De Vere, who, however, in Nelson's biography does

not appear to be especially important. The Horatio who was of significance was Oracio Coquo, a sixteen-year-old choir boy whom Oxford brought back from Venice, used as his whore, and treated so abusively that the boy surreptitiously ran off. He was hardly worn in Oxford's "heart's core, aye, in his heart of hearts."

All's Well is also frequently cited as Oxford's own biography dramatized, and, of course, like *Bertram*, Oxford notoriously refused to live with his wife, and rather more successfully than *Bertram*, sought sexual escapades in Italy. The *Bertram* of the play is a sufficiently unpalatable proposition, but *Bertram* as Oxford's self-portrayal is flatly incredible. One would have to suppose Oxford capable of distancing himself critically from his own behavior and ultimately reproving it. *Bertram* does, after all if only twenty odd lines from the end of the play come to appreciate Helena's excellence, and to vow to "love her dearly, ever, ever dearly (5.3.316). But even after their reunion, Oxford continued to abuse his wife, even in her eighth month of pregnancy, because her father, Lord Burghley, had not managed to acquire some attained estates for him. And when she died about a year later, there is no record of Oxford's presence at her funeral.

Oxford's attitudes toward women, to judge from both his life and his poetry, were at least insensitive, if not actually brutal. But what strikes me as most at odds with the attitudes of the plays that some claim he wrote is his seemingly total unconcern with his daughters. Yet the father-daughter relationship, in all its varieties of friction, solace, and mutual affection, is frequent in the comedies, almost omnipresent in the major tragedies, and invariably crucial in the final plays, not excluding *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. But Oxford's three daughters were raised and supported by their grandfather, who also provided their dowries, for which Oxford made no provision. In fact, during the time of estrangement from his wife, Oxford never condescended to meet his eldest daughter, Elizabeth, for at least the first three years of the little girl's life. That he could have imaginatively projected himself into the experience of *Lear* or *Pericles* or *Prospero* or even *Baptista Minola* simply defies belief.

This is merely one striking phase of Oxford's almost unimaginable self-absorption. Shortly after Queen Elizabeth's death, in a letter to Robert Cecil, he looks back on her time with sadness and some affection. Alan Nelson comments, "Oxford's letter is notable as his first expression since his letter to Burleigh in 1572, following the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, of an interest in something beyond his own personal affairs" (419). His egotism is appalling, but more to the point, it is impossible to believe that such a man could be supposed to possess the immense empathetic imagination that is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest appeal. This capacity has often been called negative capability, a phrase coined by John Keats, and although Keats may well have meant something a bit different, the capacity itself is undeniably and ubiquitously manifested throughout the canon. Shakespeare was white, Christian, and male, yet he was able to project himself into the experience of *Othello*, *Shylock*, and a whole host of remarkable women. If there is any scrap of validity in tracing the man in the work, it is more likely that Oxford could fly than that he could have written the works of Shakespeare.

After being in the presence of Edward De Vere for Nelson's 500 pages, one may perhaps be forgiven for noting that, unlike Shakespeare, Oxford left no will and no provision for his children. Unlike Shakespeare, no monument was raised at his grave. Unlike Shakespeare, no friends published his works. And, again unlike Shakespeare, No acquaintance or stranger is known to have mourned Oxford's passing (426).

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