

"De Vere, or Not de Vere?"

--A review of Paul Streitz's Oxford: Son of Queen Elizabeth I (published by Oxford Institute Press, 2001).

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Once upon a time, long ago, in a land far away, there lived a virgin queen who, virginity notwithstanding, had an illegitimate son-or maybe two, or more!--and she left him in the somewhat questionable care of a wealthy, noble family of bores/boars/boors!--and then this sad, neglected little bastard grew up to be Shakespeare. Wealth and fame aside, he did NOT live happily ever after, but what a snappy dresser!

Despite the seemingly far-fetched premise, Paul Streitz's book, Oxford: Son of Queen Elizabeth I, published by The Oxford Institute of Darien, CT, offers a great deal of historical, textual, and anecdotal evidence to support Mr. Streitz's argument that the 17th Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere, and not the middle-class merchant/farmer from Stratford, is the true William Shakespeare. Those of us trained by traditional English literature professors may be surprised, excited, or merely suspicious of an alternative theory of Shakespearean authorship, but all who read Oxford will be as entranced as I was by the historical ambiance of the work.

Arguing over the identity of the Bard is not a new enterprise, but who could resist an old-fashioned, sexy, murder mystery that also offers incest, fraud, extortion, and betrayal? In the past, we have seen everyone from Francis Bacon to Christopher Marlowe offered up as authors with more of a "legitimate" claim to Shakespeare's fame than, say, a small-town merchant from Avon. However, most of these arguments have been based on "textual evidence" and, frankly, instinctual response rather than hard evidence.

Oxfordians, on the contrary, tend to track down every ounce of potential proof, and even employ technological advances in order to make their case. For example, using X-rays and infrared photography, as well as paint and clothing analysis, Oxfordians find support for the de Vere theory in the Folger Shakespeare Library's much-revered Ashbourne portrait, long presumed a contemporary painting of the Bard. In the book, Mr. Streitz marshals this and other objective evidence for his thesis with all of the philosophical force of a prosecuting attorney.

If Elizabeth WAS the mother of Edward de Vere, she was a mere 13 years old at the birth of this "changeling," the result of the princess's seduction by her stepfather, Thomas Seymour. The historical record and the odd behavior of her stepmother (Henry the VIII's widow, Jane Seymour) seem to offer the possibility that something untoward did occur.

Drawing from a wealth of primary and secondary source material, Mr. Streitz brilliantly entices the reader with his enthusiastic re-creation of Elizabethan England, Tudor custom, and literary mayhem. Moreover, his marvelous understanding of and insight into the plays and sonnets attributed to Shakespeare-as well as those of his contemporaries-enable him to present a convincing and plausible scenario that points to Oxford (de Vere) as the true and only Shakespeare.

Is Shakespeare Shakespeare? Or Marlowe? Bacon? Or Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford? I still do not know that answer. What I do know is that Mr. Streitz and his fellow Oxfordians have intrigued and inspired me with this literary mystery and I await more evidence and additional arguments-from them or from the Stratfordians. My fondness for the traditional interpretations of our English-language genius notwithstanding, I have been thrilled and enchanted by this intellectual manhunt. No fairy tale, this, but absolutely the most marvelous read of the season! (Oxford Institute Press, 325 pages).