

# A Historic Whodunit: If Shakespeare Didn't, Who Did?

## Look Here, Upon This Picture

The Ashbourne portrait was long treasured as a contemporary painting of William Shakespeare and was probably considered as such, the Folger Shakespeare Library says, when it was purchased for the Folger in 1931. The Folger restored it in 1979 and says the subject is Hugh Hamersley, later Lord Mayor of London. But some believe it is Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford.

Two lines of research show evidence that date the portrait to about 1580, when de Vere was 30 and Hamersley was 15. In *Scientific American* in 1940, Charles Wisner Barrell said that his X-ray photographs revealed an **artist's monogram**, CK, for Cornelius Ketel, the Dutch portrait painter, who, Barrell said, lived in England from 1573 to 1581.

Barrell's infrared photographs revealed a much larger **neck ruff**. Barbara Burris, in an article in the current issue of *Shakespeare Matters*, the newsletter of an Oxford advocacy group called the Shakespeare Fellowship, argues that the ruff Barrell found was like neck ruffs in portraits of 1579 and 1580.

Ms. Burris dates the **doublet** to the 1570's, and says that **wrist ruffs** like these were replaced by wrist cuffs by 1583.

Before the painting became a subject of controversy, the **book** was fancied to be Shakespeare's personal copy of the *Sonnets*. Barrell said the original depiction of the book binding had been covered over in orange-gold paint and noted that the human skull was a memento mori.

Barrell said the **signet ring** showed an Oxford family symbol, an Oxford family symbol, under the same paint used to disguise the book.

Barrell said that the **inscription** was a later addition done with the same paint used for the book and ring and that the original inscription was so thoroughly scraped out that it made perforations in the canvas.

Barrell said his infrared photographs showed that the subject's **hair line** had been moved up.



## THEATER

# A Historic Whodunit: If Shakespeare Didn't, Who Did?

By WILLIAM S. NIEDERKORN

IT was not the Bard of Stratford-on-Avon. It was Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford.

For Oxfordians, this is the answer to "Who Wrote Shakespeare?"

It is a position long argued, and one that has gathered momentum in recent years. The question, which was the title of a Smithsonian Institution seminar in Washington last month, has divided families, friends and English departments. Do we care about Shakespeare? You bet. Shakespeare has more theater companies and festivals devoted to him every year. But more than being at the top of the theatrical heap, he helped to create the English language.

Most of the academic world has ignored the authorship question for generations, or belittled it as the obsession of idiosyncratic amateur scholars, while building altars in students' minds to the image of the tragedian David Garrick promoted during the 1769 Shakespeare jubilee that created the Stratford tourism business: the man of humble origins who rose to the literary pantheon. The vast majority of academics still subscribe to that belief.

Other theories of authorship involve the philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon, the playwright Christopher Marlowe and various groups of writers. The Bacon theory bogged down in a search for cryptograms in Shakespeare texts that would point to Bacon, while the Marlowe theory and the group-authorship theory share one big problem — their authors' works are quite different from Shakespeare's.

The Oxford theory, by contrast, has never been stronger. In 2000, a Massachusetts scholar successfully defended a dissertation based on the premise that de Vere wrote the Shakespeare canon. Hailed as a Rosetta stone of Oxford theory, the 500-page doctoral thesis discusses, among other things, the history of Oxford's life as reflected in the plays, and correspondences between the works of Shakespeare and verses de Vere marked in his copy of the Geneva Bible.

Most, though not all, Stratfordians are more interested in Shakespeare's works than his biography. The play's the thing. But today in the academic world as a whole, proponents of the historical and biographical approach have reasserted themselves after decades of being overshadowed by the textual analysts.

"Oxford as a likely candidate is taught in more universities and colleges than we can begin to imagine," said Dr. Daniel L. Wright of Concordia University in Portland, Ore. "The theory is being seriously taught in both America and Britain."

Dr. Wright directs the Edward de Vere Studies Conference, a beachhead in academia for the theory that the Earl of Oxford, who was born in 1550 and died in 1604, wrote the works of Shakespeare. Convened annually at Concordia since 1997 — it meets this year from April 11 to 14 — the conference presents papers mainly on the Oxford side of the question, which are sometimes published in *The Oxfordian*, the annual journal of the Shakespeare Oxford Society ([www.shakespeare-oxford.com](http://www.shakespeare-oxford.com)). But the conference accommodates the other side too.

On that other side, briefly, were three Supreme Court justices — John Paul Stevens, Harry A. Blackmun and William J. Brennan Jr. — who lined up with the Stratford proponents in a celebrated 1987 moot-court debate in Washington: *Earl of Oxford v. William Shakespeare*. Justices Blackmun and Stevens subsequently reversed their

A large number of judges and lawyers are Oxfordians, because, as Minos D. Miller Jr., a retired Louisiana judge and longtime Oxford advocate, said, "Lawyers are influenced and convinced by evidence."

One of the most argued points is the dating of the plays. The two sides present their evidence as follows:

Stratfordians date about 10 of Shakespeare's plays after 1604, ruling out Oxford, who died in June of that year, as the author. That dating, Oxfordians respond, is incorrect. "Proof is wholly lacking that any of Shakespeare's plays were written after 1604," Charlton Ogburn writes in his 892-page summation of the Oxford case, "The Mysterious William Shakespeare" (1984), which Oxfordians regard as a landmark work. They also point to "The Complete Pelican Shakespeare" (1969), edited by Alfred Harbage, which gives date ranges for the plays, placing only two unquestionably after 1604, "The Tempest" and "Henry VIII."

In the case of "The Tempest," Stratfordians say it is based on an account by William Strachey of a 1609 shipwreck in

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**The leading suspect is  
Edward de Vere, the Earl  
of Oxford. While most  
scholars are skeptical,  
the case made for him is  
picking up momentum.**

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views and Justice Brennan modified his.

After looking into the debate further, Blackmun wrote, "If I had to rule on the evidence presented, it would be in favor of the Oxfordians."

And Justice Stevens said in a recent telephone interview, "If I had to pick a candidate today, I'd say it definitely was Oxford."

Speaking of Brennan, William F. Causey, a lawyer at Nixon Peabody who directed the "Who Wrote Shakespeare?" seminar for the Smithsonian on Jan. 29, said, "The more he read about it, the more skeptical he became about the Stratfordian position."

## A NEW SHAKESPEARE PLAY

A tale in which de Vere starts writing the canon but Shakespeare takes over. Page 10.

Bermuda; Ogburn says that account was not published until 1625. Among possible sources for the play, he cites a Bermuda shipwreck in 1593 and a 1602 expedition to a Massachusetts island that was sponsored by Henry Wriothesley, the Third Earl of Southampton, traditionally regarded as the "fair youth" to whom most of the Sonnets are rhetorically addressed and to whom Shakespeare dedicated his long poems "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece." In regard to "Henry VIII," Stratfordians point to a 1613 letter in which Sir Henry Wotton, a poet and diplomat, describes a performance of the play that resulted in the burning of the Globe theater. Wotton calls it a new play. Oxfordians say Wotton was mistaken; that three other sources do not call the play new and that scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries dated it to Elizabeth's reign, or before 1603.

Call him de Vere, call him Oxford. Born into the ranks of the nobility, Oxford lost his father when he was 12 and became a ward of William Cecil, the powerful secretary to Queen Elizabeth. His mother's brother was Arthur Golding, whose translation of Ovid's "Metamorphoses" had an undisputed influence on Shakespeare.

Oxford, who had a tarnished reputation for, among other things, killing a pastry cook in Cecil's household, was a poet, playwright and patron of a number of writers of the English Renaissance who dedicated works to him. (He was depicted as a dashing, 25-year-old in the Welbeck portrait.) He traveled in France and Italy and visited cities that Shakespeare used as settings for his plays. Starting in 1586, Queen Elizabeth paid him £1,000 a year (roughly \$400,000 today) for no apparent reason. The grant was renewed by King James and continued until Oxford's death. One of the earliest accounts of Shakespeare, by the Rev. Dr. John Ward in the 1660's, notes that Shakespeare wrote two plays a year "and for that had an allowance so large that he spent at the rate of £1,000 a year." The Oxfordian opinion is that it may be the same £1,000.

Oxford had a close relationship with Southampton; they lived under the same roof, as Southampton was also a ward of Cecil's.

As for the Stratford man, call him Shakspeare, call him Shaks. That was how he spelled his name in two of his six signatures, which is all there is of his handwriting. In the Oxford scheme of things: Shakspeare was a businessman, moneylender and real estate and theater company investor with illiterate parents and illiterate children; he never owned a book; and his education can only be conjectured. How he related to de Vere can only be conjectured as well, but some Oxfordians propose that he was somehow contracted to be the shadow author. It was an open secret, Oxfordians contend, that de Vere was writing the plays.

The anti-Stratford case began about 1785, with Dr. James Wilmot, a clergyman. He suspected that something was rotten in Stratford: he could find no books and no manuscripts owned or written by Shakspeare. By the early 20th century the anti-Stratford case had been thoroughly laid out in the works of Granville George Greenwood, a member of Parliament and lawyer.

**D**E VERE was first proposed as the author of the canon in 1920. J. Thomas Looney (rhymes with Sony), a grammar and high school teacher who had read "The Merchant of Venice" year after year with his students in County Durham in northern England, could not reconcile the traditional image of the Stratford figure with the noble Renaissance man he saw behind the plays.

Looney made a list of characteristics he expected Shakespeare to have, then perused the works of Elizabethan poets for a writer whose style, language and use of poetic form had something in common with Shakespeare's. He found only one: Oxford.

In "Shakespeare Identified" (1920), Looney states that in one category after another Oxford had the characteristics he had projected: classical education, sympathy for the House of Lancaster in the War of the Roses, Roman Catholic leanings, aristocratic point of view, literary tastes, a love-hate attitude toward women, knowledge of Italy, and interests in drama, music and sports.

After reading "'Shakespeare' Identified" Sigmund Freud, who frequently looked to Shakespeare for psychological insights, wrote, "The man from Stratford seems to have nothing to justify his claim, whereas Oxford has almost everything."

For many actors and playgoers, biographical references that connect Oxford to the Shakespeare canon open up a new dimension that is otherwise missing when the plays are thought of as the work of the inscrutable genius of Stratford. Derek Jacobi and Michael York are Oxfordians, as was Orson Welles.

Still, most of the academic establishment remains on the Stratford side, and its position is supported by a formidable cadre of anti-Oxfordians, including Irvin Leigh Matus, an independent scholar and author of "Shakespeare, in Fact" (1994); Prof. Alan H. Nelson (socrates.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson) of the University of California at Berkeley; and David Kathman and Terry Ross, editors of the Shakespeare Authorship Page (shakespeareauthorship.com).

De Vere, they say, was a bad writer and a scoundrel. In the Stratford scheme of things, Shakspeare, depicted in the First Folio engraving by Martin Droeshout, was born in 1564 and died in 1616. He was educated in a grammar school at Stratford; he read books from others' libraries if not his own; and his daughters and his father, an alderman and bailiff, could read if not write. Stratfordians say that Shakespeare became an actor and that the name William Shakespeare on the title pages of the original editions of the

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plays, sonnets and long poems proves that their man is the author. Mr. Matus argues that the playwright used "Shakspeare" in the country and "Shakespeare" in the city.

Not only is historical opinion on their side, but "the overwhelming majority of research funds go to Stratfordians," Dr. Wright said, adding, "Oxfordians don't have the kind of funding to do the research they would like to do."

The Oxford side, however, continues to pile up evidence.

The doctoral dissertation on de Vere's copy of the Geneva Bible was acclaimed by Oxfordians even before it was completed. "We've waited for over 400 years for someone to push open — even if but an inch — that door of understanding into the heretofore closed-to-us room in which the sources of Shakespeare's art were kept, and here we have it," Dr. Wright, of Concordia University, said at the dissertation's defense. Dr. Wright was an outside participant on the five-member committee that approved it at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

But the work's author, Roger A. Stritmatter, who received his Ph.D. in comparative literature in 2000, said no new evidence was needed to prove the Oxford case.

After an uncertain start, Dr. Stritmatter writes in an appendix, he turned to scholarly works on Shakespeare's biblical references and, "one by one, I began to tick off a growing list of verses marked in the de Vere Bible which these scholars had identified as influential on Shakespeare."

He also noted that "158 verses and 10 Psalms marked in the de Vere Bible" had been cited by the writers on the biblical references in Shakespeare, and that "an additional 136 marked verses and notes exhibit — possibly, probably or certainly — a previously undocumented influence."

But more important than the meaning of the numbers, he emphasized, was the way that repeated ideas in Shakespeare's biblical references corresponded to themes that Dr. Stritmatter discerned in de Vere's notes and underlined verses.

Shakespeare's preference for the Geneva translation of the Bible is an accepted fact. De Vere's Bible, which is in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, is identified by his heraldic emblems on the binding. Dr. Stritmatter's dissertation (which he self-published) includes handwriting analysis and an independent forensics report, which concludes that "it is highly probable that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, is the author" of the annotations in it.

More recently, an old controversy has flared again over what is known as the Ashbourne portrait, which the Folger once considered a portrait of Shakespeare.

In 1940, an article in Scientific American by Charles Wisner Barrell, a film specialist, argued that the Ashbourne painting was a portrait of Oxford. Using X-ray and infrared photography, Barrell said he had found many indications that the portrait depicts

Oxford, including Oxford's emblem (a boar's head) on the subject's signet ring and the monogram of the Dutch artist Cornelius Ketel, dating the portrait to around 1580.

Stratfordians were not pleased. The Folger did its own study of the painting and concluded that the sitter was Hugh Hamersley, later the Lord Mayor of London in 1627-28. The library holds that position today, although "the Folger does not take an insti-

tutional stand on any authorship issue," said Dr. Werner Gundersheimer, its director. Speaking for himself, he dismissed the authorship question as a parlor game and a distraction from the plays.

Shakespeare Matters, the newsletter of a new Oxfordian group, the Shakespeare Fellowship ([www.shakespearefellowship.org](http://www.shakespearefellowship.org)), has pushed Barrell's case further. In the current issue, in the second of a series of

articles by Barbara Burris, it offers evidence that the fashions the sitter wears in the painting date to about 1580, when Hamersley would have been 15 and Oxford 30, and when Ketel was working in England.

Ruth Loyd Miller, who with her husband, Judge Miller in Louisiana, has kept Looney's book and other major Oxfordian works in print for decades ([ruthmiller.com](http://ruthmiller.com)), writes in her 1975 book, "'Shake-



*Christopher Marlowe, another suspect in the who-wrote-Shakespeare game.*

speare' Identified: Vol. II," that Barrell found that two other paintings, formerly considered to be portraits of Shakespeare, had also been selectively painted over and that in his opinion his findings proved that both were portraits of the Earl of Oxford.

One tough question for Oxfordians: Why did Oxford hide his authorship? The usual answer is that de Vere used a pseudonym because it was considered beneath the dignity of hereditary noblemen to ascribe their names to publicly performed plays.

But what about after Oxford's death? Richard F. Whalen, who argued the case for Oxford at the Smithsonian seminar, says in his book "Shakespeare: Who Was He?" (1994), "There is no apparent reason why Oxford's authorship of the plays, if he was the author, could not have been recognized with the publication of the First Folio."

Dr. Gail Kern Paster, a former Folger board member and the editor of the Shakespeare Quarterly ([www.folger.edu/sq/menu.asp](http://www.folger.edu/sq/menu.asp)), who argued the Stratford case at the Smithsonian seminar, asked: "Why continue this elaborate literary hoax? Who would need protection at that point?"

Some Oxfordians have suggested reasons: that de Vere was gay; that he was the son of Queen Elizabeth (1533-1603); or that Southampton (1573-1624) was his child by her. There is also some evidence that de Vere may have taken his own life, an act that would have made his legacy highly problematic at a time when severe penalties were exacted against the heirs of suicides.

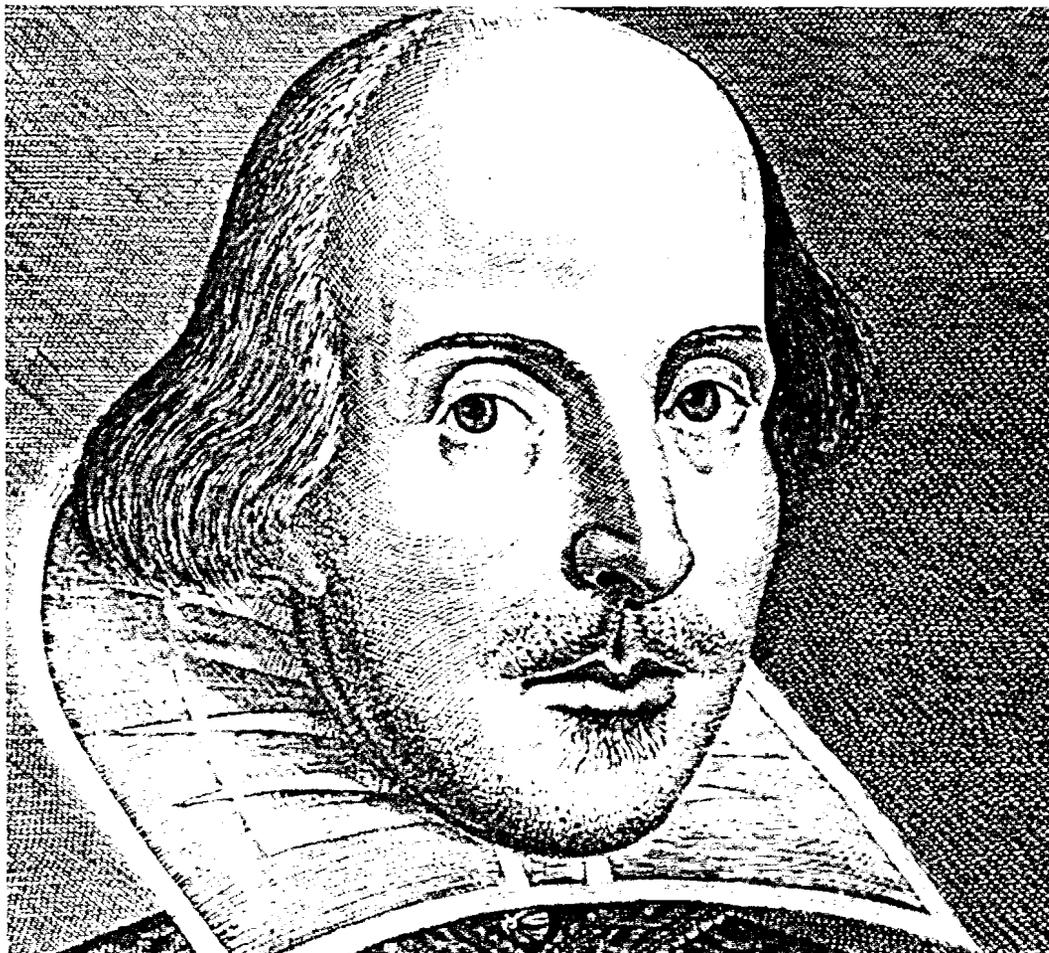
At the Smithsonian seminar, two top trial lawyers, Robert S. Bennett and E. Barrett Prettyman Jr., ably demonstrated the power of cross-examination as they grilled Dr. Paster and Mr. Whalen. In her summation, Dr. Paster appealed to democratic notions of class, saying "we as Americans have no reason" to doubt that a man of humble origins could have written Shakespeare's plays.

In his summation, Mr. Whalen poured out a flood of parallels to Oxford's life from "Hamlet" and "All's Well That Ends Well" until he ran out of time. But truth, as he had noted earlier, is the daughter of time. □



#### **OXFORD**

From the Welbeck portrait, which shows Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, at age 25. The painting is a copy of a lost original that may have been painted in Paris in 1575, Charlton Ogburn writes in "The Mysterious William Shakespeare."



#### **SHAKESPEARE**

The First Folio portrait (1623), shown in mirror image, as it would have looked to Martin Droeshout when he engraved it. Because the work was created seven years after the Stratford Shakespeare died and 19 years after Edward de Vere died, Droeshout, who was born in 1601, worked from either another artist's portrait or his imagination.



Reproduced by permission of Lady Alexandra Cavendish-Bentnick/© 1974 Ruth Lloyd Miller (top); courtesy of Folger Shakespeare Library (bottom)

#### **BOTH?**

*From the three-quarter length Ashbourne portrait, once considered a painting of Shakespeare, as it now appears after a 1979 restoration by the Folger Shakespeare Library. Infrared and X-ray photographs taken in 1940 and a new study about the sitter's clothing indicate that the painting depicts de Vere, Oxfordians say. The Folger says it is Hugh Hamersley, Lord Mayor of London in 1627-28.*

## Was Marlowe Shakespeare? Much Ado, Indeed

**I**NTO the "who was Shakespeare" fray now comes a documentary film, Michael Rubbo's "Much Ado About Something," which opens at Film Forum on Wednesday.

His subject is the Christopher Marlowe side of the Shakespeare authorship question. Mr. Rubbo's starting point is "The Murder of the Man Who Was Shakespeare," a 1955 book by Calvin Hoffman, an American who spent 30 years trying to prove that Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's works.

Hoffman, who died in the late 80's, got permission to open the tomb of Thomas Walsingham, the head of Elizabeth I's secret service, by whom Marlowe was employed. Were any plays there, as Hoffman expected? Nope. The owner of a bookstore says Hoffman left half his fortune, estimated at \$700,000 to \$1 million, to whoever proves the Marlowe case,

The main problem is that historically Marlowe was killed with a dagger thrust in 1593, a little too early. But Marlovians think that it was all an act, staged to save Marlowe's life, and that Marlowe escaped to Italy and sent plays back, with Shakespeare as his agent.

In London, Stratford-upon-Avon and Marlowe's hometown of Canterbury, as well as in Italy and America, Mr. Rubbo, an Australian filmmaker, interviews Marlovians, Stratfordians and anti-Stratfordians. Opinions abound, from the cautious to the extravagant, intercut with scenes from films like Franco Zeffirelli's "Romeo and Juliet" and "Shakespeare in Love."

Mark Rylance, the artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe in London, explains how he went from not caring who the author was to caring very much, and how what he has learned has helped him, as a

director and actor. The film does not say whether he favors a particular candidate. (He favors Oxford.)

Among those in the running, Marlowe, the film says, is the only playwright ("Tamburlaine the Great," "The Jew of Malta," "Dr. Faustus"). Many characters in Shakespeare are thought to be dead and turn out not to be, it says, à la Marlowe. Marlowe's lines are often echoed in Shakespeare, which Hoffman called parallelisms, and Hoffman's book has 30 pages of examples. Mr. Rubbo's own theory is that Marlowe and Shakespeare collaborated, with Marlowe writing the nobles' parts and Shakespeare, "the junior partner," writing the commoners'.

"Much Ado About Something" may seem superficial to experts, but anyone interested in the authorship question and new to it should find the film intriguing.

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