

## The Parallel Lives of Shakespeare and Beethoven: A Shakespeare authorship study

by Geoffrey Eyre

*Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford was born 12 April 1550 and died 24 June 1604 aged 54 years*

*Ludwig van Beethoven was born 16 December 1770 and died 26 March 1827 aged 56 years*

Asked to name the greatest literary genius of all time, or the greatest musical genius of all time, few would disagree with Shakespeare and Beethoven as the most likely choices. The frequency with which their works continue to be performed, and the immense quantity of scholarly and critical literature that has aggregated around them, would support this widely held opinion.



This essay proceeds under the assumption that William Shakespeare was the name used by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as his publishing pseudonym and seeks to show the parallels in their lives. Highly educated and widely travelled, he was a generous patron of the arts and with other courtiers helped to provide entertainments for Queen Elizabeth and her court. Although separated at birth by two hundred and twenty years, living in different countries, speaking a different first language, and mastering different art forms, this short essay will attempt to demonstrate that Oxford, as the writer of Shakespeare, and Beethoven, as a composer of classical music, led parallel lives.

Both were born ‘over the shop.’ Oxford’s grandfather, the 15th earl, had maintained a company of touring players known as Lord Oxford’s Men, a tradition continued by his father the 16th earl, who employed a writer in residence. This was John Bale, whose best known dramatic work was on the subject of King John. Oxford took over this company by 1580, and also supported a troupe of singers and musicians known as Lord Oxford’s Boys. Beethoven was preceded by his father and grandfather as professional musicians at the court of the Prince-Electors of Cologne, in Bonn. His grandfather, also named Ludwig van Beethoven, was the Kapellmeister from 1761.

In all great lives, there is an element of fortune and in the case of Oxford and Beethoven it was their early relocation to capital cities. Oxford was twelve years old when his father died at Hedingham Castle in rural Essex and he was immediately summoned to London by Queen Elizabeth and entered into the Court of Wards as an underage nobleman. There he boarded with the queen's first minister Sir William Cecil<sup>1</sup> at Cecil House in the Strand, the centre of England's political, intellectual and cultural activities. Also, resident at Cecil House were Oxford's maternal uncle Arthur Golding, the translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Raphael Holinshed, the historian. His tuition under Cecil's wardship consisted of hard training in Latin and French, the fine arts, dancing and music. He entered Gray's Inn as a law student in 1567 and as a young courtier provided in-house theatrical entertainments for the Queen. His continental travels in 1575-76 provided him with abundant source material for the many plays set in or around the Mediterranean and the Adriatic. A member of his entourage was a young singer named Orazio Cuoco who testified that the Earl was proficient in Italian.<sup>2</sup>

As a child musician, Beethoven's talent was recognised by the Prince Elector with generous early patronage. His first composition was published at the age of twelve, a set of piano variations. In 1792 the Prince paid for Beethoven to travel from Bonn to Vienna to receive tuition from Joseph Haydn. While he was there, the French army invaded his Rhineland home, forcing the Prince and his court to flee from Bonn. Beethoven was thus able to stay on in Vienna, the music capital of Europe, the one city where his talent could be fully developed and appreciated. His talents as a virtuoso pianist and sought-after composer earned him the patronage and friendship of many wealthy noblemen and their families. The Emperor of Austria's younger brother, the Archduke Rudolph, enlisted as a pupil and remained a generous and loyal friend. As a composer, he corresponded with non-German speaking patrons and publishers in French, signing himself as Louis van Beethoven. In a letter dated 18 December 1802, he urged his publishers Breitkopf and Härtel in Leipzig to issue his compositions in other countries. He writes, 'We poor Germans must express ourselves in all languages.' (Letter No 67).



So far so successful; but for both men this was as good as it got. Oxford married his guardian's fifteen-year-old daughter Anne Cecil, but the marriage was unhappy. He refused to accept the paternity of his first child, Elizabeth, born in 1575 while he was on his continental travels. This discourtesy to his wife was deeply upsetting to her father William Cecil, now ennobled as Baron Burghley. To make enemies of the

powerful Cecil family, as well as the Queen (who had attended Anne's wedding), ensured that Oxford was never again in favour at court. Another cause of enmity between Oxford and the Cecils was the trial and execution of his cousin Thomas Howard the Duke of Norfolk, forced through by Burghley. The Duke was a Catholic, suspected of plotting to marry the exiled Mary Queen of Scots and make a bid for the English throne. Oxford's failure to obtain clemency for his cousin soured his relations with the Protestant enforcers, Burghley and Walsingham, and he was never again fully trusted by them, or by the Queen.

To make matters worse, Oxford fathered a child with one of Queen Elizabeth's attendants, Anne Vavasour for which he was imprisoned in the Tower for fourteen weeks before being released under house-arrest and banned from court. His wife, who bore him four children, died at the age of thirty-one. After his golden start as a wealthy and talented young nobleman, he entered his fourth decade as a disgraced and increasingly hard-up palace outsider.

Beethoven's early years as a young man in Vienna are not well documented but at the age of twenty-seven or eight he suffered an illness, the nature of which is unknown. Although he recovered his immune system was weakened, leaving him vulnerable to infections for the rest of his life. Most alarmingly for a musician was his loss of hearing, which became progressively worse as he aged. As he began his fourth decade Beethoven's eccentricity of dress, slovenly habits and irascible behaviour became increasingly unacceptable to his peers. In letters of this period he is distrustful of the world in general, living in constant fear of being swindled. No woman could be found to marry him, and he quarrelled incessantly with his servants, his neighbours, landlords, doctors and publishers. His small circle of friends were mostly German expatriates like himself, including his two younger brothers Carl and Johann, with whom he also quarrelled. Deafness brought an end to his bright start as a concert pianist and salon favourite, requiring him, from financial necessity, to divert adopt the lonely and reclusive life of a full-time composer.

Both men had a history of violent behaviour. At the age of seventeen Oxford killed one of Sir William Cecil's servants with a sword thrust. The servant, said to be drunk, was adjudged to have committed suicide by running on to the point of Oxford's sword. In his thirtieth year, Oxford quarrelled with the soldier-poet Philip Sidney over rights to a tennis court, but the Queen intervened to prevent them from duelling. Three years later, he was badly wounded in a duel with Sir Thomas Knyvet, courtier and uncle of his mistress Anne Vavasour. Their rival family factions clashed several times in street brawls resulting in fatalities on both sides, as in *Romeo and Juliet*. Beethoven's biographer, the Harvard educated lawyer Alexander Wheelock Thayer (1817-1897),

records several instances of the composer's violent reactions when provoked. These included throwing a dish in a waiter's face, slapping a waitress who flirted with him, smashing the bust of a patron who had offended him, fighting with his brother Carl over a mislaid manuscript and abusing people verbally and in correspondence.

Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night* begins with the words, 'If music be the food of love, play on.' The plays contain around a hundred song lyrics with numerous references to indicate that their author had a detailed knowledge of music.<sup>3</sup> The composer William Byrd was supported financially by Oxford and leased one of his residences in Essex. Byrd composed a *Battle Suite* of forty-two keyboard pieces, the second in the sequence being *The Earl of Oxford's March*, subtitled *The March before the Battle*. Beethoven was so delighted when the French army was defeated at the Battle of Vittoria in 1813 that he composed one of his few pieces of music intended for a popular audience, the *Battle Symphony*, Opus 91. This was also known as *Wellingtons Sieg*, ('Wellington's Victory'), and was performed many times in celebration of Napoleon's downfall and eventual death.

Both men had strained relations with France and the French. Oxford sided with the court faction opposed to Queen Elizabeth planned marriage to the Duke of Alençon, heir to the French throne. When invited by the Lord Steward to dance before the Duke at a state banquet in August 1579, Oxford twice refused and left the room rather than comply.<sup>4</sup> In 1806, while Beethoven was staying at the castle home of Prince Karl Lichnowski in Silesia, he was asked to play for some French officers newly arrived. He refused. The Prince insisted; but Beethoven refused again. They quarrelled violently and Beethoven left the castle and returned to Vienna. His lifelong hatred of tyranny (reflected in his political-prisoner opera *Fidelio*) caused him, at first, to identify with the ideals of the French Revolution, but felt betrayed by the course that France had taken under Napoleon.

Beethoven changed his lodgings many times during his thirty-five years in Vienna. In the summer months, he took rooms in the country, or in spa towns, with the result that his manuscripts were mislaid in the constant packing and unpacking. Neither methodical nor business-like, his manuscripts often lacked titles and dates, and the opus numbers do not always follow the chronology. Music scholars are still trying to sort them into chronological order. From the evidence of his surviving musical sketch books, he revised his major compositions meticulously before publication, and over considerable lengths of time.

Not one page of Shakespeare manuscript has survived, either for the plays or the poetry. Attempts at dating and sequencing the plays have defeated many generations of

scholars. No date of first writing can be given for any of the plays. Dates of first performance or first publication exist for some of the plays but none can be stated with certainty. Such evidence as there is points to extensive revision having been made to the texts prior to publication of the *First Folio* in 1623.

Both men were granted annuities. Oxford spent much of his adult life plagued by debt. Although mostly of his own making, through financial mismanagement and extravagant generosity to scholars and religion, many of Oxford's money troubles originated with livery debts incurred through his nine years of enforced wardship as an underage nobleman. At the age of thirty-seven, his bankruptcy was avoided by a grant of a thousand pounds a year annuity from Queen Elizabeth. To have squandered his large inheritance in less than twenty years and ended up dependent on an annuity could offer an explanation for some of the embittered dialogue exchanges in the plays classed as Tragedies. The downfall of great men whose lives ended in failure is a recurrent Shakespearean theme.

Beethoven also spent much of his adult life plagued by debt and at the age of thirty-eight had to be rescued from his financial difficulties by an annuity of four thousand florins. This was arranged by the Archduke Rudolph who contributed 1,500 florins, and two other noblemen, Prince Ferdinand Kinsky with 700 florins, and Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkovitz with 1,800 florins. Devaluation of the Austrian currency during the war against Napoleon quickly reduced the value of this annuity. To pay off his more pressing debts, Beethoven had to write many small-scale works. In his later correspondence, and in the recollections of friends after his death, he grieved over his inability to compose more expansive works, operas in particular, because of his financial constraints.

Beethoven received a letter dated 29 December 1825 from his old student friend in Bonn, Franz Wegeler, long established as a physician in Koblenz. This letter urged him to refute the allegation published in music journals and elsewhere, including the encyclopedia *Konversations-Lexicon*, that he was the natural son of King Frederick the Great of Prussia. This story first surfaced in 1810 and spread to England and France. Wegeler had been sufficiently well acquainted with the Beethoven family in Bonn to know that the story was without foundation. Beethoven did not reply until a year later (Letter 1542). He admitted knowing about the rumours but did not deny them to Wegeler, nor did he ever publicly disassociate himself from the myth of royal parentage. A curious parallel arises with Oxford, who, it has latterly been suggested, was the illegitimate son of Queen Elizabeth by Thomas Seymour. Known as the 'Prince Tudor Theory' this fantastical theory, originally devised for Francios Bacon, is not accepted by many Oxfordians today.

Both men had questions asked about their dates of birth. Oxford's elder half-sister Lady Katherine Vere, married to Lord Edward Windsor, challenged his right of inheritance to the earldom of Oxford, maintaining that his mother Margery Golding had not been married to their father the 16th Earl. A rebuttal document originating from the office of Sir William Cecil disposed of the suit and Oxford kept his title. The document gave him and his full sister, Mary Vere, the same age, thus perpetuating Prince Tudor mythology. Until the end of his life Beethoven insisted that he was born in December 1772 and not December 1770. A baby boy born to his parents in 1769 had died after six days. This child was also named Ludwig (Ludwig Maria) and could have been the source of confusion over dates. Even when Beethoven was confronted with copies of his birth certificate, confirming it as 16 December 1770, he vehemently maintained otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

Brotherly love, or the lack of it, applies to both men. Oxford tried unsuccessfully to prevent his sister Lady Mary Vere from marrying Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby d'Eresby. Beethoven tried unsuccessfully to prevent his younger brother Johann van Beethoven from marrying his mistress, Therese Obermayer.

Both suffered from depression throughout their lives. Oxford's first long illness and retreat came at the age of nineteen, and lasted for six months. This followed the demise of his mother and although they were not close her death may have affected him. In letters to his brother-in-law Robert Cecil, he made no secret of his dejected state of mind, describing himself as in '... the deep abyss and bottom of despair.' Beethoven's first recorded depressive illness came at the age of seventeen and also followed the death of his mother. At the age of thirty-one, his physician Dr Johann Schmidt recommended a retreat to the asylum at Heiligenstadt to help him come to terms with his permanent hearing loss. He stayed there for six months. In August 1817, he wrote to his friend, the cellist Nikolaus Zmeskall: 'As for me, I often despair and would like to die, for I can foresee no end to all my afflictions. God have mercy upon me, I consider myself as good as lost.' (Letter 805).

In addition to depression and dementia, madness and suicidal despair haunt the great Shakespeare Tragedies. The play *King Lear* is a harrowing study of an elderly man in severe mental distress, and would serve as an example. The wide-ranging medical knowledge documentable in the Shakespeare plays has been the subject of several books. One of the first, published in 1860, *The Medical Knowledge of Shakespeare*, was written by Sir John Bucknill. He was the founder of *The British Journal of Psychiatry* which is still published monthly. He writes in his introduction:

That abnormal states of mind were a favourite study of Shakespeare would be evident from the number of characters to which he has attributed them. On no other subject has he written with such mighty power.

From his thirties until his death at the age of fifty-four, Oxford suffered poor health. In his later letters, he referred several times to his physical impairment, more specifically to his being lame. The cause of this disability is not known but a likely explanation is the sword-fight injury he sustained in the brawls with Sir Thomas Knyvett and his followers in 1582. The Shakespeare *Sonnets* are written as first person narrations and in Numbers 37, 66 and 89, the writer refers to himself as lame. In a letter to Robert Cecil dated 25 April 1603 he mentions ‘mine infirmity,’ but which of his medical conditions he was referring cannot be established. A play on words from his name in Latin published in 1603 suggests that he may have been deaf: *Edouardus Veierus aure surdus video* (‘deaf in my ear, I see’)<sup>8</sup>.

Like Oxford, Beethoven, also from his thirties until his death at the age of fifty-six, suffered with poor health. In 1801 he wrote to the doctor Franz Wegeler that he was ‘constantly afflicted with diarrhoea’ and worried by the debility it caused him. (Letter 51). As the persistent diarrhoea alternated with constipation it is thought that he suffered from ‘irritable bowel syndrome’, or more seriously, ulcerative colitis. Severe headaches and chronic bronchitis also brought Beethoven low. In his last few years, he was ill more often than not but still managed to compose music of the highest quality, including the Ninth Symphony, the Missa Solemnis, the last five string quartets and the Diabelli piano variations.

Were they homosexual? Accusations of pederasty levelled against Oxford by his enemies were never pursued through the courts. He was twice married, had a mistress, enjoyed the favours of courtesan in Venice and fathered seven known children. Two American researchers Richard Sterba and his wife Edith,<sup>7</sup> both psychiatrists, came to the conclusion that Beethoven was a repressed homosexual, citing as examples his obsessive love for his nephew Karl and his open affection for the many young male musicians who gathered around him, attracted by his forceful character. (Sterba pp. 219-222). Beethoven’s daily compulsion to compose music lasted until his final hours, he would allow nothing and no one to distract him from this all-consuming purpose, an explanation perhaps why he seems never to have formed a sexual relationship with anyone, either man or woman.

The representations of both men were boosted by promotional events over which they had no control. In 1769 the actor and impresario David Garrick brought his theatre company to Stratford-upon-Avon for a ‘Jubilee’ to celebrate the 200th

anniversary of William Shakspere's birth in 1564. The event was washed out by incessant rain and restaged at London's Drury Lane Theatre. These activities revived the fortunes of the plays but paradoxically intensified curiosity about the author of whom almost nothing was known. The Congress of Vienna was instrumental in introducing Beethoven's music to an international audience. It was convened so that the foreign ministers and ambassadors of the countries opposed to Napoleon could work out a peace plan for Europe. The Congress sat from September 1814 until June 1815, which allowed sufficient time for the many attending officials and diplomats to share in the Viennese love of music. Beethoven's heavyweight contributions may not have been entirely to the taste of the home audience but visitors from elsewhere, Britain in particular, were mightily impressed and concertgoers in London and St Petersburg were soon hearing and appreciating his latest compositions.

Neither of the two great men left much worldly wealth when they died. Edward de Vere became increasingly reclusive in the last decade of his life and from the surviving letters of this period it is evident that he was infirm, depressed and unhappy. His death at his home, King's Place, in Hackney in 1604 appears to have been sudden. He had been publishing his plays since 1594, fifteen of them at a steady rate, but after his death publication was halted. He died on 24th June but was not buried until 6th July which makes plague as the cause of death unlikely as plague victims were quickly interred. No known grave, tomb or funerary monument exists for the earl, or for his second wife, Elizabeth (*née* Trentham), who survived him by eight years. The absence of any memorial for such a high-ranking nobleman remains yet one more puzzling and unresolved component of the Shakespeare authorship mystery.

Few people had access to Beethoven in his last reclusive years. He handicapped and embarrassed by his deafness. In his last months, as a bedridden invalid were wretched. He died in the knowledge that little of his late period music was liked, understood, or regularly performed. He had been eclipsed by Rossini whose lively and tuneful operas were more to the taste of the Viennese. His grave in the Währing cemetery in Vienna fell into disrepair and he had to be reinterred in 1863. In 1882 his body was moved again, this time to the Central cemetery. His adopted city of Vienna, where his most famous music was composed, did not honour him with a statue until 1880, fifty-three years after his death.

This short study has endeavoured to draw together some of the ways in which Beethoven the deaf composer, and Oxford as the author of Shakespeare, maximised their talent through a lifetime of consistent effort. In common with others of extraordinary genius both suffered from a personality disorder that made human relationships difficult. This made their lives more of a struggle than they would have

been otherwise, and both suffered adversity and rejection. They were undeniably eccentric, frequently misunderstood, on occasions violent. Both ended their lives in sickness, unhappy and short of money. If suffering is the midwife of genius than both qualified in heaped measure.

That Beethoven was deaf and could only hear his music played imperfectly, if at all, remains a misfortune beyond sorrow. If Oxford was Shakespeare then the denial of authorship is equally a cause for lamentation. Great men pay a heavy price for their greatness. None more so than Ludwig van Beethoven and Edward de Vere the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford.

**To be, or not to be; that is the question.**

*Hamlet*

**Must it be? It must be!**

*Written over the final movement of Beethoven's last string quartet.  
(Muss es sein? Es muss sein!)*

### Notes

1. Sir William Cecil, 1520-1598 (Baron Burghley from 1571) was the father of Oxford's first wife, Anne Cecil. He was Queen Elizabeth's most influential and trusted advisor. His library at Cecil House held the most extensive collection of books in London at the time. When dispersed in 1678 it contained many of the books now known to have provided source material for Shakespeare's plays.
2. For most of her professional life Dr Noemi Magri (died 2011) taught English at Mantua University. She was an expert on Elizabethan literature and wrote numerous articles in support of Oxford as the author of Shakespeare's works. Her transcription of the Venetian Inquisition proceedings relating to Orazio Cuoco in 1577 provided contemporary evidence of Oxford's presence in Venice, including the testimony that he spoke the Italian language well.
3. The madrigalist John Farmer dedicated two books of compositions to Oxford. In the *First Book of English Madrigals*, 1599, he thanks the earl for his generous patronage and includes the words '... without flattery be it spoken, those that know your Lordship know this, that using this science (music) as a recreation, your Lordship have overgone most of those that make it a profession'.
4. Oxford's refusal to dance at a reception for a French marriage delegation during Queen Elizabeth's 'progress' through Suffolk is recorded in a letter dated 14 August

1578 written by the Spanish Ambassador Bernardino de Mendoza as a report to the King of Spain's secretary.

5. The copy birth certificates were obtained on different occasions by Beethoven's pupil Ferdinand Ries and his student friend the physician Franz Wegeler,

6. Dr Andreas Wawruch (1771-1842). His full report is included in *The Beethoven Encyclopedia* edited by Paul Nettl, pages 40-43.

7. Richard Sterba and his wife Edith Sterba both studied with Sigmund Freud in Vienna.

8. Competing factions for the favour of King James after the death of Queen Elizabeth in March 1603 issued broadsides listing their supporters. The earls of Oxford and Southampton were two of nine lords listed as Protestant heroes, their names in each case rendered into Latin epigrams. The translation referring to Oxford as deaf was made by Dana Sutton, Emeritus Professor of Classics at California University, Irvine. However the phrase may equally be translated 'deaf ear I see' in which 'deaf ear' is a simple pun on 'de Vere.'

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