

Reasons 60 and 81: Why Shake-speare was Oxford

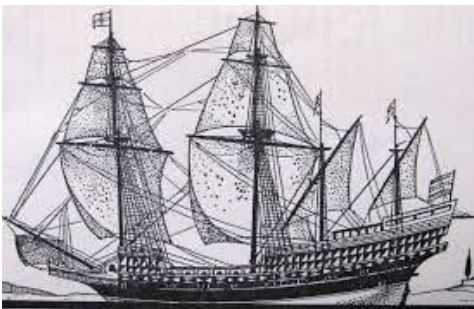
By Hank Whitemore

To celebrate the publication of Hank Whitemore's new book, '100 Reasons Shake-speare was the Earl of Oxford,' the De Vere Society Newsletter continues its serialisation of extracts with his Reasons No 60 and No. 81. The full '100 Reasons' are available from Amazon!

Reason 60: Sea and Seamanship

Lieutenant Commander Alexander Falconer, a naval officer during World War II and a professional sailor steeped in the history of seamanship and navigation, published two books that were largely ignored at the time: *Shakespeare and the Sea* (1964) and *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sea and Naval Terms including Gunnery* (1965). Falconer brings firsthand knowledge and experience to an investigation of Shakespeare's use of seafaring terms and situations involving the sea. He concludes that the poet-dramatist possessed detailed, accurate knowledge of naval matters and was well informed about storms, shipwrecks, pirates, voyages of exploration, and navigation:

The manning and running of royal ships ... duties of officers and seamen ... strategy and



the principles of sea warfare, gunnery, grappling and boarding are all known to him; so, too, are the main types of ship, their build, rigging, masts, sails, anchors and cables. The sea itself in its varied working, tides, waves, currents, storms and calms, never goes out of his work.



Falconer notes that in the opening scene of *The Tempest*, when the ship is wrecked in a storm, Shakespeare took care for details. He “worked out a series of maneuvers” and “made exact use of the professional language of seamanship.”

When the Royal Shakespeare Company presented a “shipwreck trilogy” of Shakespeare plays (*The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Comedy of Errors*), Charles Spencer of *The Telegraph* observed that “although there were books on navigation in Shakespeare’s time, nothing on seamanship was published until later.” Indeed, Falconer believed the Bard’s knowledge in this area could not have come from books alone.

“Most current scholarship fails to note the sophistication of Shakespeare’s maritime imagination,” writes Dan Brayton in *Shakespeare’s Ocean* (2012), noting “the extraordinary degree [in the poems and plays] to which human lives are connected with the sea, or the remarkable specificity of his descriptions of marine phenomena.”

The author’s exact use of naval and maritime language, along with his intimate knowledge of the sea and seamanship, cannot be explained by anything in the documented life of the man from Stratford. It is sheer fantasy to think he might have been a sailor during his “lost” years, and the same goes for supposing he was a schoolteacher or a law clerk. Meanwhile, scholars generally fail to notice the Bard’s experience at sea because they know that the Stratford man never once left dry land. When one assumes it’s impossible for something to exist, it becomes quite easy—even necessary—to ignore it.

“Closed minds automatically blockade new information which conflicts with their own beliefs, preventing highly persuasive evidence from entering their brains for evaluation,” writes Paul Altrocchi, adding, “Oxfordians believe with conviction that Stratfordianism represents a classic example of the common human tendency to stick tenaciously with conventional wisdom, preventing much more logical and coherent newer theories and facts from being given a fair hearing.” When we turn to the life of de Vere, there is no need to “imagine” his experience with the sea and, importantly, there is no longer any reason to ignore the vast knowledge of the sea to be found in the poems and plays.

Oxford was twenty-two in September 1572 when he wrote to Burghley, in reaction to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of Protestants in France, offering to help defend England in any way he could. "If there be any setting forth to sea, to which service I bear most affection," he wrote, "I shall desire your Lordship to give me and get me that favor...." Eventually the earl traveled extensively by ship or boat. He crossed the Channel to France in 1575 and took many trips on canals and other waterways between Italian cities, with Venice as his home base.

In the autumn of 1575 it was reported that Oxford had hurt his knee in a Venetian galley. While returning to England in April 1576, he was captured by pirates in the Channel and nearly killed.

In 1585 he crossed by ship to the Netherlands on a military mission; this time pirates stopped the vessel that was returning his belongings to England and apparently stole everything on board. Earlier, the earl had invested (disastrously) in Martin Frobisher's voyages to discover the Northwest Passage to China, which involved varied and challenging aspects of navigation. He was well acquainted with Dr. John Dee, who was intimately involved in developing Frobisher's navigational routes.

Moreover, Oxford had his own ship, the *Edward Bonaventure*, which he contributed to Captain Edward Fenton's expedition to the Spanish Main in 1582. (The Spanish rebuffed the little fleet, so the earl's investment did not pay off.) Then in June 1588, with the Armada on its way, Oxford prepared to take the *Bonaventure* into battle; although the English defeated the great fleet, it appears his ship became disabled.

In the following year, a poem, apparently by Oxford's secretary Lyly, envisioned the earl standing on the hatch-cover of the *Bonaventure*, literally breathing fire instilled within him by Pallas, the spear-shaker:

De Vere ... like warlike Mars upon the hatches stands.
His tusked Boar 'gan foam for inward ire
While Pallas filled his breast with fire

Shakespeare and the Sea was reviewed in the autumn 1965 edition of the *Shakespearean Authorship Review* by I.L.M. McGeoch, who writes:

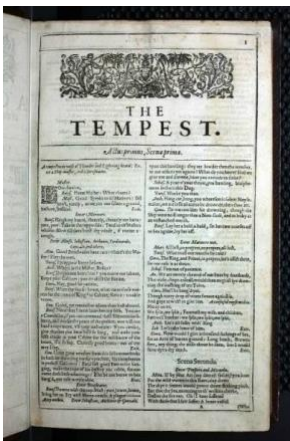
Professor Falconer points out that whereas many educated Elizabethans understood the art of navigation—in those happy days art was science, and science was art—only those who actually served at sea could acquire a profound knowledge of the practice of seamanship and the correct meaning and use of the terms proper to the working of ships. That Shakespeare possessed such a profound knowledge is instanced many times.

As an example of “inspired accuracy of allusion seasoned with wit,” he offers a line from *King John* (4.2): “And like a shifted wind unto a sail, it makes the course of thoughts to fetch about,” and further observes:

Tacking is to bring a ship’s head to lie the other way. True. And “to fetch about” is synonymous with “to tack”; but subtler still is the reference to “course,” which is not only the direction in which a ship is heading, but also the name given to the principal sail on any mast of a square-rigged ship. The essence of tacking, therefore, is to bring the wind onto the other side of the sail, or “course,” and the necessary re-trimming of the sail is assisted by the wind blowing upon it from the side appropriate to the new tack.

“Not knowing that de Vere wrote the great plays of Shakespeare makes it impossible to understand many of the allusions and subtleties within every play,” Dr. Altrocchi writes, adding that this impossibility “deprives the audience of much of a play’s texture.”

Reason 81: *The Tempest*



“It is almost certain that William Shakespeare modeled the character of Prospero in ‘The Tempest’ on the career of John Dee, the Elizabethan magus.”—Britannica Online Encyclopedia

“Queen Elizabeth’s philosopher, the white magician Doctor Dee, is defended in Prospero, the good and learned conjurer, who had managed to transport his valuable library to the island.”—Frances Yates, “The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age”

The mathematician and astrologer Dr. John Dee (1527-1609) was enlisted by Elizabeth Tudor to determine a day and time for her coronation when the stars would be favorable (15 January 1558/59 was the selected date), after which he became a scientific and medical adviser to the queen. A natural philosopher



and student of the occult, his name is also associated with astronomy, alchemy and other forms of “secret” experimentation. He became a celebrated leader of the Elizabethan Renaissance, helping to expand the boundaries of knowledge on all fronts. With degrees from Cambridge and studies under the top cartographers in Europe, Dee led the navigational planning for several English voyages of exploration. Defending against charges of witchcraft and sorcery, he listed many who had helped him, citing in particular “the honorable the Earl of Oxford, his favorable letters, anno 1570,” when twenty-year-old de Vere was about to become the highest-ranking earl at the court of Elizabeth, who would quickly elevate him to the status of royal favorite.

“We may conjecture that it was in 1570 that Oxford studied astrology under Dr. Dee,” Ward writes. “We shall meet these two [Dee and Oxford] again later, working together as ‘adventurers’ or speculators in Martin Frobisher’s attempts to find a North-West Passage to China and the East Indies.” Oxford’s links to Dee, along with his deep interest in all aspects of the astrologer’s work, are yet another piece of evidence pointing to his authorship of the works attributed to Shakespeare.

In 1584 a Frenchman and member of Oxford’s household, John Soowthern, dedicated to the earl a pamphlet of poems entitled *Pandora*. His tribute asserted that Oxford’s knowledge of the “seven turning flames of the sky” (the sun, moon and the visible planets, through astrology) was unrivaled; that his reading of “the antique” (a noun referring to classical and ancient history) was unsurpassed; that he had “greater knowledge” of “the tongues” (languages) than anyone; and that his understanding of “sounds” that help lead students to the love of music was “sooner” (quicker) than anyone else’s:

For who marketh better than he
The seven turning flames of the sky?
Or hath read more of the antique;
Hath greater knowledge of the tongues?
Or understandeth sooner the sounds
Of the learner to love music?

This might as well be a description of the man who wrote *The Tempest*. It’s a description of an extraordinarily knowledgeable man, which fits “Shakespeare”

perfectly; it's no coincidence that scholars have not only seen Prospero as based on Dee, but also viewed Prospero as the dramatist's self-portrait. Once that window opens, however, the evidence leads to Prospero and "Shakespeare" in the person of Edward de Vere.

Oxford's familiarity with "planetary influences" is "probably attributable to acquaintance with Dee," writes Ogburn Jr., "as is likewise the knowledge of astronomy claimed by the poet of *The Sonnets*." In regard to the latter, here are two examples of the poet's easy, personal identification with both astronomy and alchemy:

Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck,
And yet methinks I have Astronomy – Sonnet 14

Or whether shall I say mine eye saith true,
And that your love taught it this Alchemy? – Sonnet 114

Dee got into trouble when his delving into the supernatural led to necromancy, the magic or "black art" practiced by witches or sorcerers who allegedly communicated with the dead by conjuring their spirits. Stratfordian scholar Alan Nelson, in his deliberately negative biography of Oxford, *Monstrous Adversary*, includes an entire chapter titled "Necromancer" detailing charges by the earl's enemies that he had engaged in various conjurations, such as that he had "copulation with a female spirit in Sir George Howard's house at Greenwich."

The irony of Nelson's charge is that it not only serves to portray Oxford as similar to both Dee and Prospero, but aligns him with the authors of what Nelson himself calls "a long string of necromantic stage-plays" starting in the 1570s. One such play was *John a Kent* by Munday, who was Oxford's servant; another was *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* by Greene, who dedicated *Greene's Card of Fancy* in 1584 to Oxford, calling him "a worthy favorer and fosterer of learning" who had "forced many through your excellent virtue to offer the first fruits of their study at the shrine of your Lordship's courtesy."

In 1577 both Oxford and Dee became "adventurers" or financiers of Martin Frobisher's third expedition to find a sea route along the northern coast of America to Cathay (China)—the fabled Northwest Passage. In fact Oxford was the largest single investor, sinking 3,000 pounds, only to lose it all, which may explain Prince Hamlet's

metaphor: “I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw,” i.e., he’s mad only on certain occasions, the way he was when he invested so much in that expedition to the Northwest.

A play before the queen by the Paul’s Boys on 9 December 1577 appears to have been a version of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, in which the character of Lord Cerimon seems to be a blend of Oxford (one who prefers honor and wisdom to his noble rank and wealth) and Dee:

‘Tis known I ever
Have studied phisic, through which secret art
By turning o’er authorities, I have,
Together with my practice, made familiar
To me and to my aid the blest infusions
That dwells in vegetives, in metals, stones... (3.2)

Through an Oxfordian lens, *The Tempest* probably originated in the bleak period between Christmas 1580 and June 1583, when the queen had banished Oxford from court, in effect exiling him (unfairly, just as Prospero, rightful Duke of Milan, suffers in the play). But Oxford would have revised and added scenes over the next two decades, especially near the end of his life in 1604, when the greatest writer of the English language makes his final exit through Prospero, begging us to *forgive* him for his faults, to *pray* for him and to *set him free* from the prison of his coming oblivion: Now my charms are all o’erthrown,

And what strength I have’s mine own...
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands:
Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon’d be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (Epilogue)

