

Specialized Knowledge: Why Shake-speare was Oxford

By Hank Whittemore

To celebrate the publication of Hank Whittemore'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 Nos 59 and 61. The full '100 Reasons' are available from Amazon!

Reason #59: Medical Knowledge

In his edition of the Shakespeare sonnets, Stephen Booth reproduces the title page of *The Newe Jewell of Health, wherein is contained the most excellent Secrets of Physic and Philosofy, divided into four Books* by the surgeon George Baker, published in 1576. Booth presents an illustration of the doctor's important book in connection with Sonnet 119, which builds upon metaphors and analogies from alchemy and medicine:

What potions have I drunk of siren tears,
Distilled from limbecks fowl as hell within . . .

'Shakespeare' knew all about the 'distillations' of waters, oils and balms as set forth by Dr. Baker, whose book has been long considered a key source for the Bard's interest in alchemy, as well as the full range of medical knowledge at the time. It happens that Baker, who would become surgeon to Queen Elizabeth, was the personal physician of de Vere and dedicated *The New Jewell of Health* to the earl's wife Anne.

Cecil Baker had dedicated his first book, *Olenum Magistrale* (1574), to de Vere himself, and in 1599 dedicated his *Practice of the New and Old Physic* to the earl, as well. Baker was part of the household of de Vere, whose patronage helped to make it possible for this medical pioneer to write his books in the first place.

This is one example of how 'Shakespeare's' remarkable knowledge of medicine is mirrored by Oxford's own connection to the leading medical experts and advances of his time, not only in England but also on the Continent. Booth uses a full page to illustrate *The Newe Jewell of Health* in connection with Shakespeare's sonnets, but never indicates that Baker dedicated that very book to the wife of the leading candidate to replace the Stratford man, nor does he mention that the doctor dedicated two other books to the earl of Oxford himself!



De Vere was tutored during childhood by Sir Thomas Smith, known for his interest in diseases, alchemy and therapeutic botanicals. Then he had access to Cecil's library with some 200 books on alchemy and medical topics. In his twenties Oxford lived next door to Bedlam Hospital, a source of firsthand knowledge about patients suffering from mental illness.

Oxford's life forms a picture that deepens our perceptions of the great plays and poems. And because of the Oxfordian authorship theory, researchers are continually finding new evidence that 'Shakespeare' was even more brilliant than we have been able to know and appreciate.

Earl Showerman, M.D., points out that the Shakespeare plays contain "over 700 medical references to practically all the diseases and drugs" that were known by the year 1600, along with "knowledge of anatomy, physiology, surgery, obstetrics, public health, aging, forensics, neurology and mental disorders," not to mention "detailed knowledge of syphilis." He quotes from *Shakespeare and Medicine* (1962) by R.R. Simpson, who reports that the poet-dramatist demonstrates "not only an astute knowledge of medical affairs, but also a keen sense of the correct use of that knowledge"—a sign that he was well acquainted with the medical literature of his day.

Davis finds it "remarkable" that Shakespeare refers in three plays to the *pia mater*, the inner lining of the covering of the brain and spinal cord: "Knowledge of this relatively obscure part of anatomy could only mean that Shakespeare had either studied anatomy or read medical literature ... Even more striking to me as a neurosurgeon is his acquaintance with the relationship of the third ventricle with memory," he adds, noting a possible source was Thomas Vicary's *Anatomy of the Body of Man* (1548), which refers to the third ventricle as the "ventricle of memory"—a phrase used in *Love's Labour's Lost*, when the pedant Holofernes states that his various gifts of the mind "are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of the pia mater ..." (4.2).

While the discovery of the circulation of the blood is assigned to William Harvey, who announced it in 1616, 'Shakespeare' was likely aware of it long before then. There are at least "nine significant references to the circulation or flowing of blood in Shakespeare plays," Davis writes.

England was far behind the advances in medical technology taking place on the Continent. Most of the great doctors and teachers were based at the University of Padua, then the center for medical learning; others studied there before

returning to their hometowns to practice medicine. Oxford, touring the cities of Europe during 1575 at age twenty-five, visited Padua at least once, probably twice. “With the background in pharmacology gained from his years with Sir Thomas Smith,” writes Davis, “it seems unlikely that Oxford would have visited Padua without attempting to discover the latest developments in ‘physic.’”

In the previous year, the Renaissance doctor Fabricius had discovered “the valves in veins responsible for keeping the blood flowing in one direction toward the heart,” Davis notes, adding that Fabricius was “the first to bring this important discovery to light.” Even if Oxford had never met Fabricius in person, it is “easy to imagine” that the great teacher’s 1574 discovery of those valves, along with other topics related to the circulation of the blood, “would have been an ongoing staple of conversation among the students and faculty at the time of Oxford’s visit the following year.”

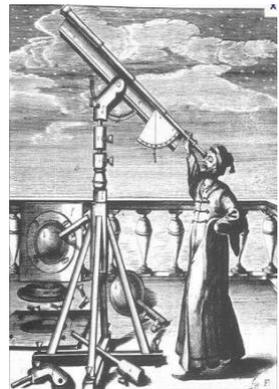
Reason #61: “Methinks I Have Astronomy”

Among our well renowned men,
Dever merits a silver pen
Eternally to write his honour,
And I in a well-polished verse,
Can set up in our universe
A fame to endure for ever...
For who marketh better than he
The seven turning flames of the sky?

The above lines, published in 1584, come from a Frenchman writing under the pen name John Soothern, then living in the household of ‘Dever’ (Edward de Vere) and referring to the “seven turning flames of the sky” to indicate the sun, the moon and the five known planets. According to Soothern, who knew Oxford well, the earl was an expert in the exciting but politically dangerous field of astronomy, which was threatening to overturn the old conception of the cosmos and even upend the old relationships of man to himself, to the world and to God.

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

That was ‘Shakespeare’ starting off his Sonnet 14, but right away he announces that he is not speaking of astrological fortune-telling or superstitions. He is not writing about the making of predictions such as that used by Queen Elizabeth to choose the luckiest and most balmy date of her coronation:



But not to tell of good or evil luck ...
 Of plagues, of dearths, or seasons' quality;
 Or say with Princes if it shall go well.
 By oft predict that I in heaven find ...

On the contrary, by 'astronomy' he was referring to revolutionary science in sixteenth-century England that was being studied in secret, notably by the group (later called the 'School of Night') whose members included Raleigh, Marlowe, Chapman, the mathematician Harriot and de Vere himself. He had studied astronomy from boyhood in the 1550s with his tutor, Smith, and in the 1560s with John Dee. The latter was not only the queen's astrologer, but also a serious mathematician and geographer; because of the book *De Revolutionibus* (1543) by Polish mathematician-astronomer Nicholas Copernicus, these English scholars were well aware that a great change of paradigm was underway. The perception of the universe was in the process of drastic change, but also undergoing upheaval was the social-religious-political order itself, which even Hamlet is reluctant to mention aloud:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
 Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (1.4)

Such free-thinking men were moving from the old Ptolemaic model of the earth at the center of the universe to the revolutionary Copernican model, by which the Sun is at rest (motionless) near the center of the Universe, and the Earth, spinning on its axis once daily, revolves annually around the Sun.

Doubt thou the stars are fire,
 Doubt that the sun doth move,
 Doubt truth to be a liar,
 But never doubt I love –
 The prince in *Hamlet* (2.2)

When Oxford was twenty-three in 1573, the English scientist Thomas Digges published a treatise on a supernova, or exploding star, seen in the sky the year before. In this work, dedicated to Burghley, the earl's father-in-law, Digges includes warm praise for the Copernican hypothesis. Burghley and Walsingham, who made it their business to develop intelligence in defense of the realm, were keenly interested in a new-fangled device called a 'perspective' glass or trunk, which enabled astronomers to see farther into space. In fact, such new devices would help to quickly spot the warships of the Spanish Armada upon their arrival, playing a significant role in England's victory in 1588.

Digges published another key work, *A Perfect Description of the Celestial Orbs*, in 1576, using allegory to simultaneously set forth and disguise his agreement with Copernicus. He also communicated his heretical view that the Sun is just one star among an infinity of stars in an unending universe.

O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space

Hamlet, *Hamlet* (2.2)

In 1582, when Watson dedicated *Hekatompathia* to Oxford, thanking him for his help editing the manuscript and getting it into print, his sequence of 100 consecutively numbered ‘passions’ or sonnets contained the first known description of the Milky Way as a collection of discrete stars rather than a single mass. Watson was preceding Galileo’s published discovery in 1610 by nearly thirty years. The prose header for one of the sonnets (Oxford seems to have written all the headers, and may have even written all the Watson sonnets) refers to “Galaxia” as “a White Way or Milky Circle in the heavens,” but the opening lines of the poem contain this radical description:

Who can recount the virtues of my dear
Or say how far her fame hath taken flight,
That cannot tell how many stars appear
In part of heaven, which Galaxia height,
Or number all the moats in Phoebus' rays,
Or golden sands, whereon Pactolus plays?

Watson *Sonnet 31*, 1582

In the same year Elizabeth sent Oxford’s brother-in-law Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby, on a mission to the Danish court; during that extended visit Willoughby met with Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, who, in 1572, had made precise observations of the inexplicably brilliant star that became known as ‘Tycho’s Supernova’ – a celestial phenomenon which traditionally trained scientists could not explain. The playwright ‘Shakespeare’ would describe it in the night sky over Denmark, however:

Last night of all,
When yon same star that’s westward from the pole
Had made his course to illumine that part of heaven
Where it now burns ...

Bernardo, *Hamlet* (1.1)

‘Tycho’s Supernova’ confirmed what Anderson calls “an emerging scientific understanding of a dynamic universe,” as opposed to the prevailing Ptolemaic system, which posited that all heavenly bodies were unchanging and firmly fixed in place.

In June of 1583 the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno appeared in England and delivered lectures at Oxford, contradicting the university’s continuing dogma that every object in the universe orbited a centrally positioned earth. The free-thinking Bruno preached in favor of the Copernican solar system and also proposed that the Sun was just another star moving in space. Inevitably, the university academics rebuked him.

“Oxford University and Giordano Bruno were celestial bodies in opposition,” Anderson notes. “The university preached the ancient geocentric theories of Aristotle and Ptolemy. Every object in the heavens, it was said, orbited the earth, and the earth occupied the center of the universe.” Bruno advanced the heresies that “the stars, contrary to fixed church doctrine, are free-floating objects in a fluid celestial firmament; that the universe is infinite, leaving no room for a physical heaven or hell; and that elements in the universe (called ‘monads’) contain a divine spark at the root of life itself. Even the dust from which we are made contains this spark.”

If circumstances lead me, I will find
Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed
Within the center.
Polonius, *Hamlet* (2.2)

Oxfordians have made a compelling case that de Vere began to set down the first of many versions of *Hamlet* as early as 1583, creating a fictional world at the Danish court that reflected the real world at the English court, with Hamlet essentially a self-portrait and Claudius representing Elizabeth’s former lover, Leicester, who was thought to be a ‘serial poisoner,’ as well as Her Majesty’s ambitious friend.

He would be launching into *Hamlet* just when discussions of the new ideas about the heavens were accelerating in England. The prince is a student at the University of Wittenberg in Germany, a major center for the Copernican theory; in fact, Giordano Bruno went on to teach at Wittenberg, where he could freely voice his bold ideas. (Later he was imprisoned for seven years before the Roman Inquisition burned him at the stake in 1600 for heresy.) The main storyline of *Hamlet*, of course, is that Claudius has usurped the throne of Denmark, depriving Hamlet of his rightful place. However, according to Peter Usher, Professor Emeritus of Astronomy and Astrophysics at Pennsylvania State University, the play is also “an allegorical description of the competition between two cosmological models.” On one side is the heliocentric universe of Copernicus being taught at Wittenberg and personified by Hamlet; on the other is the old geocentric order, personified by Claudius (named for the ancient astronomer Claudius Ptolemy).

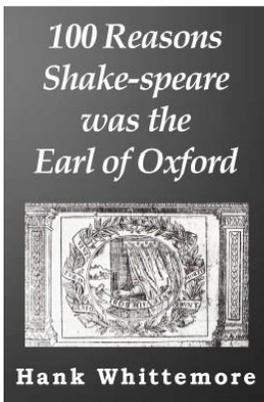
Claudius: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?
Hamlet: Not so, my lord. I am too much in the Sun. (1.2)

Hamlet deserves to be king, the royal sun at the center. According to the new astronomy of Copernicus and the sun-centered universe of Digges, the prince belongs on the throne at the center of the realm. As such, he is dangerous to the stability of the old hierarchy and, therefore, poses a direct threat to Claudius and Gertrude.

Horatio: This bodes some strange eruption to our state. (1.1)

Hamlet: The time is out of joint. O cursed spite
That ever I was born to set it right! (1.5)

Within the cosmological allegory, the play is full of allusions to this struggle between the old and new structures. “The idea of a rotating and revolving earth was counter-intuitive to most people and contrary to established religious and scientific doctrine,” Usher writes. When Claudius and Gertrude express their desire that Hamlet not return to Wittenberg, they do so by saying that such a course is “most *retrograde* to our desire”— an astronomical term for contrary motion, that is, the prince’s motion away from them and toward the Copernican cosmology as taught at Wittenberg – the same place where Martin Luther had initiated the Protestant Reformation that was also disrupting the traditional order in England.



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