

Oxford the Comedian

By *Richard Malim*

Stratfordians have a difficult task to show how Shakspeare became by 1596 a great power in the London theatrical world. Their prima facie case rests on the authorship ascriptions ‘William Shakespeare’ or similar name on some of the title pages of the plays being identified with William Shakspeare. In an attempt to bolster that case, Stratfordians adduce five additional items of evidence, beginning in late 1592 with the references inside Greene’s *Groatsworth of Wit* and Chettle’s *Kind Heart’s Dream*. Not all Stratfordians agree with each other and there is as much confusion in Oxfordian ranks. Does the half word reference to “Shake-” in *Groatsworth* refer to Shakspeare? Most critics omit one or more elements in order to construct themselves a scenario. I know of only one which incorporates all the element references and has not to date been thought worthy of an argued refutation. So, I am deliberately not taking these arguments further here.

The following years 1593 and 1594 saw the publication of *Venus and Adonis* and the *Rape of Lucrece*, with signed Dedications to the Earl of Southampton: some 3000 lines of sophisticated East Midlands/London dialect epic poetry, which is difficult to imagine the Warwickshire man reproducing without once slipping into his native patois. They were printed for the poet by Richard Field, a member of the Stratford Field family for whom there is no friendly home town association with the Shaksperes – quite the reverse. Anyway, by 1596 Field had disposed of his interests in the poems and joined the Countess Russell (aided by Essex and Robert Cecil, then in temporary alliance) clique against Burbage and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (by then including Shakspeare,

so we are told) in Burbage's abortive effort to open an indoor theatre at Blackfriars. Again, I take these arguments no further¹.

The fourth point of evidence which the Stratfordians adduce are the scenes with the topical references to Stratford in *The Taming of the Shrew*. I am not sure how far Stratfordians welcome scrutiny of this genuine contemporary evidence, but it is the only piece of uncontested evidence of Will Shakspeare's actual presence in London as early as 1594.² Henry VI is the only canonical play with as early a print date of 1594, though some might add *The Troublesome Reign of King John* (1591), *Arden of Feversham* (1592) and *True Tragedy of Richard III* (1594).

In 1594 the anonymous play *The Taming of A Shrew* was registered and published and reprinted in 1596: the next version is in the 1623 folio as *The Taming of The Shrew*. The latter play was never registered, which seems to indicate that the powers that were at the Stationers' Registry deemed it already regulation-compliant.

The Induction scenes make it a play within a play, where the drunken tinker Sly is taken from the gutter and transformed into a lord. These scenes reveal his Stratford origins. He is persuaded in his fuddled state that he is the Lord and owner of the treasures (an allegory for the dramatic treasures produced by Oxford) the Lord lays before him. A play is put on for his enjoyment: but when a character is to be sent to goal, Sly vehemently objects claiming that his word should be Law: "Am I not Don Christo Vary?". This scene and the other interruptions are not in the 1623 version, but the final scene in the 1594 version brings Sly back to earth again. Perhaps it was deliberately cut by Jonson as the 1623 *Folio* editor, too direct a reference, as there is no such scene in the 1623 version. This finishes with Sly asleep on the stage or to emphasise that Sly was still left perhaps permanently in possession of the Lord's treasures (the allegory again). Maybe Oxford was lent on to tone it down, or with Shakspeare out of the way (as he certainly was by 1600), it had

2. The Players' Appearance

From *Taming of THE Shrew*:

Lord: Now, fellows, you are welcome.
 1st Player: We thank your honour.
 Lord: This fellow I remember
 Since once he played a farmer's eldest son:-
 'Twas when you woo'd the gentlewoman so well:
 I have forgot your name: But sure that part
 Was aptly fitted and naturally perform'd.
 1st Player: I think 'twas Soto that your honour means.
 Lord: 'Tis very true: thou did it excellent.

Here Shakspeare, as the eldest son of a farmer (a yeoman landowner), is caricatured as being slightly 'higher' class than the actuality and climbing further by wooing (i.e. seducing) the gentlewoman. Oxford pastes on that the part was aptly fitted and naturally performed. Perhaps Shakspeare had been shooting a line to the Company or seeking to show his wife's non-existent relationship with the aristocratic Catholic Warwickshire Ardens. As this is an irrelevancy, even to the irrelevant Induction scenes, an Oxfordian is put on high alert for its meaning to Oxford. Perhaps as portrayed as Soto the drunk, we have at last a piece of evidence for Shakspeare acting, but not one likely to be received with acclaim in 'orthodox' circles.

3. Don Christo VARY

From *Taming of A Shrew*: inside Act 4 Sc 2:

[Bianca wants some characters imprisoned]

Sly: I say we'll have no sending to prison

Lord: My lord, this is but a play; they're but in jest

Sly: I tell thee, Sim, we'll have no sending to prison, that's flat. Why, Sim, am I not Don Christo Vary? Therefore I say they shall not go to prison.

Lord: No more they shall not, my lord; they be run away.

As well as the difference in the names, Shakspere and Shakespeare, 'Orthodox' Shakespeareans have to reconcile the superbly educated author of the contemporary *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece* with the caricature of Sly ("His Honour never saw a play" – Ind. 1, l.92) to keep their show on the road, but the chasm is clearly light years too deep. Anyway, Shakspere's record as an actor (nil) and his probable illiteracy cannot be any recommendation.

Another evidence, and arguably the strongest from the Stratfordian point of view (and therefore the most important we have to counter). relates to a warrant entry in the Privy Council records of a payment of £20 including for a performance allegedly before the Court on 28th December 1594. On this the orthodox Shakespeareans seize with glee as against it is a record of the receipt of this sum by "Will Kempe, Will Shakespeare and Richard Burbage servants to the Lord Chamberlain ... for two several comedies or interludes shewed by them before Her Ma(jesty) upon St. Stephen's and Innocents' Day," (that is, on (December 27th and 28th, 1594), to show the meteoric rise of a certain Will Shakspere up the administration ladder of the Lord Chamberlain's

Men and also of becoming a leading actor of the Company. Unfortunately, it contains dud information, as the Admiral's Men were performing before the Queen at Greenwich on December 28th. The Lord Chamberlain's Men were putting on *The Comedy of Errors* at Gray's Inn on that same day. Equally as it is the only entry mentioning "Will. Shakespeare," it is a somewhat lonely piece of evidence for Will Shakspeare's career as administrator of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Thus, we may readily dispense with Stratfordian claims for the warrant entry. One recipient was named "Will Shakespeare," presumably Oxford, the so-named author of the recently produced *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and we have to consider what is the real purpose of this receipt record.

As background, I touch on one of my basic contentions: that Oxford in 1571/2 committed adultery with the Countess of Southampton, and fathered on her a son who was accepted on the face of it as the 3rd Earl of Southampton on the death of her husband. Oxford wrote the *Sonnets*, or at least the first 126 of them to this young man, beginning with nos. 1 to 17, beseeching the boy to look to marry and carry on the (De Vere) bloodline. Some suggest the Countess herself put Oxford up to writing in this way. The adultery is evidenced in part by Sonnet 3 lines 9 and 10:

Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime;

And also lines 13 and 14 of *Sonnet* 10 pin down the bloodline point:

Make thee another self, for love of me,
That beauty still may live in thine or thee.



The *Sonnets* betray no homosexual interest, as exemplified by Sonnet 20. Sonnet 36 spells out the disaster that would overtake both of them if the relationship became public property, and the oeuvre betrays Oxford's guilt complex, coupled from Sonnet 18 onwards with an obsessive paternalist complex on his part.

The Countess of Southampton married secondly Sir Thomas Heneage, the Treasurer of the Chamber, amongst whose responsibilities was to account for the sums he had drawn to pay the Lord Chamberlain's Men for their Court dramatic productions. On the 17th October 1595 he died. The Queen wrote to his widow pointing out that he should have £1314 15s 4d in hand at his death and that the Countess had since accounted for two sets of vouchers totalling £795 16s 9d, and she required "immediate payment" of the balance of £528 18s 7d. (actually £518. 18s 7d). We can imagine the Countess' reaction at the thought of having to find £20,000 in (conservatively calculated) modern money.

One Oxfordian claim believes that the Countess, in her fear and embarrassment, turned to Oxford as her former admirer for assistance and the record was accordingly 'cooked'; but whether this would have been inside the alleged payments that already had been accounted for by Heneage in his lifetime, or inside the ones the Countess did account for, or subsequently inside the final outstanding sum, cannot be ascertained. Anyway to cover a deficit of over £500, evidence for 25 or more similar bogus entries, i.e. similar to the one referring to "William Shakespeare" for December 27th and 28th 1594, would be required, and there are no others. So, I think this Oxfordian claim cannot stand, save that on the wider question, it may be that Oxford did have some substantial input. The Countess does appear to have had some powerful protection: she suffered no further persecution at the hand of the Queen over the outstanding sum.



To ascertain a more likely scenario for the entry, not involving outright forgery, and see what actually did happen, we can turn to *Gesta Grayorum*, a record of entertainments and social events pertaining to the lawyers at Gray's Inn printed from the original records some 80 years later. and covering the lawyers' revels for the Christmas season 1594-5.

Across the ocean of nearly three hundred and fifty years, it is not always easy to appreciate the humour element in the situation, but of course there are many hilarious episodes and opportunities for actors to put them across. These can be backed by independent evidence. Amid the endless accusations against him by Charles Arundel in 1581 that Oxford was a habitual drunkard, and in that state made numerous allegations of a provocative and highly amusing nature, to wind up his hearers. "The lie is very rife with him, and he glories in it greatly. Diversely hath he told it, and when he enters into it, he can hardly out, which hath made such sport as often I [my emphasis] have been driven to rise from his table laughing."³ In other words, Oxford put on irresistible comic turns for his guests. Then we have Ben Jonson in his *Discoveries* 1630: His wit was in his own power. Many times he fell into those things that could not escape laughter ..."

I believe there is further evidence of Oxford's attitude in *Gesta Grayorum*. There we can see what the Lord Chamberlain's Men did do on Innocents' Day December 28th, 1594. The young lawyers had elected for the Christmas Revels one of their number as ruler entitled the Prince of Purpoole (the name of their Gray's Inn 'State'). An entertainment was laid on for the Ambassador of the Emperor of Templaria (as the Inner Temple twin 'State' was called). Orotund speeches of welcome etc. were pronounced. The Account carries on:



When the Ambassador was placed, as aforesaid, and that there was something to be performed for the Delight of the Beholders, there arose such a disordered Tumult and Crowd upon the Stage, that there was no opportunity to effect that which was intended: There came so great a number of worshipful Personages upon the Stage, that might not be displaced; and Gentlewomen, whose sex did privilege them from Violence, that when the Prince and his Officers had in vain, a good while, expected and endeavoured a Reformation, at length there was no hope of Redress for that present. The Lord Ambassador and his Train thought they were not so kindly entertained, as was before expected, and thereupon would not stay any longer at that time but, in a sort, discontented and displeased. After their Departure the Throngs and Tumults did somewhat cease, although so much of them continued, as was able to disorder and confound any good inventions whatsoever. In regard whereof, as also the Sports intended were especially for the gracing of the Templarians, it was thought good not to offer any thing of Account, saving Dancing and Revelling with Gentlewomen; and after such Sports, A Comedy of Errors (like to Plautus his Menechmus) was played by the Players. So the Night was begun, and was continued to the end, in nothing but Confusion and Errors; whereupon it was ever afterward called The Night of Errors. The whole state of Purpoole was mightily embarrassed and the Prince conducted an “Enquiry to be made of some great Disorders and Abuse lately done and committed within His Highness’s Dominions of Purpoole, especially by Sorceries and Inchantments; and namely, of a great Witchcraft used the Night before, whereby there were great Disorders and Misdemeanours, by Hurly-burlies [a word used by a witch in the third line of Macbeth (does it help to date the play? Is it humour

at my Lord Burghley's expense?)]], Crowds, Errors, Confusions, vain Representations and Shews, to the utter Discredit of our State and Policy.

And so:

The next Night upon this Occasion, we preferred Judgments thick and threefold, which were read publickly by the Clerk of the Crown, all being against a Sorcerer or Conjurer that was supposed to be the Cause of that confused Inconvenience. Therein was contained, How he caused the Stage to be built, and Scaffolds to be reared to the top of the House, to increase Expectation. Also how he had caused divers Ladies and Gentlewomen, and others of good Condition, to be invited to our Sports; also our dearest Friend, the State of Templaria, to be disgraced, and disappointed of their kind Entertainment, deserved and intended. Also he caused Throngs and Tumults, Crowds and Outrages, to disturb our whole Proceedings. And Lastly, that he had foisted a Company of base and common Fellows [the Lord Chamberlain's Men !], to make up Disorders with a Play of Errors and Confusions; and that Night had gained to us Discredit, and it self a Nick-name of Errors. All of which were against the Crown and Dignity of our Sovereign Lord, the Prince of Purpoole.

Everyone concerned was to give evidence:

Upon whose aforesaid Indictments, the Prisoner was arraigned at the Bar, being brought thither by the Lieutenant of the Tower (for at one time the Stocks were graced with that Name;) and the Sherriff impanelled a jury of Twenty four Gentlemen, that were to give their Verdict upon the Evidence given. The Prisoner appealed to the Prince his Excellency for Justice and humbly desired, that it would please His Highness to understand the

Truth of the Matter by his Supplication, which he had ready to be offered to the Master of Requests. The Prince gave leave to the Master of Requests, that he should read the Petition [this form of words I believe covers the actual participation of the Sorcerer]; wherein was a Disclosure of all the Knavery and Juggling of the [‘State’s’] Attorney and Sollicitor, which had brought all this Law-stuff on purpose to blind the Eyes of his Excellency, and all the honourable Court there, going about to make them think, that those things which they all saw and preceived [sic] sensibly to be in very deed done, and actually performed, were nothing else but vain Illusions, Fancies, Dreams and Enchantments, and to be wrought and compassed by Means of a poor harmless Wretch, that never heard of such great Matters in all his life: Whereas the very Fault was in the Negligence of the Prince’s Council, Lords and Officers of State, that had the Rule of the Roast, and by whose Advice the Commonwealth was so soundly mis-governed. To prove these things to be true, he brought divers Instances of great Absurdities committed by the greatest; and made such Allegations, as could not denied. These were done by some that were touched by the Attorney and the Sollicitor, in their former Proceedings, and they used the Prisoners Names for means of Quittance with them in that behalf. But the Prince and the States-men (being pinched on both sides by both Parties) were not a little offended at the great Liberty that they had taken, in censuring so far His Highness’s Government; and thereupon the Prisoner was freed and pardoned, the Attorney, Sollicitor, Master of Requests, and those who were acquainted [sic] with the Draught of the Petition, were all of them commanded to the Tower; so the Lieutenant took charge of them. And this was the End of our Law-sports, concerning the Night of Errors.

To repair the damage done to the standing to Purpoole and its Prince and its relations with Templaria a masque was decorously prepared and performed on the following Friday January 3rd 1594/5 before the Prince, the Templarians and great numbers from the Court including Burghley and Sir Robert Cecil. The most notable absentee/unlisted participant was the Earl of Oxford. Compared to the full-blooded riotousness of the “Night of Errors” and followed by the hilarious trial so picturesquely described, this must have been a desperately po-faced occasion.

So who was the unnamed Sorcerer or Conjuror, the alleged Cause? *Gesta Grayorum* includes a list of all the parts played by the lawyers including The Lord High Admiral played by Richard Cecil, Burghley’s grandson. No one is listed as “the Sorcerer” and yet he must have been able to pull rank to put up the stage and grandstands, invite the Great and Good, be the cause of the “Tumults and Outrages,” and the foisting of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men on the Revels. He had presumably chosen and directed *The Comedy of Errors*. Why was he anonymous when the beginning of the account lists all the people concerned with their roles? The identity of the Sorcerer must have been well-known and yet it had, for the look of the affair, continue to be considered concealed. I believe the Sorcerer to be Oxford, evidenced by the attitude of the author of *Gesta Grayorum* towards him. Why call him a “Sorcerer”? I suggest that his appearance was associated in the minds of those present with that of Prospero in a recent production of *The Tempest*, where most of the action, including the actual tempest, the shipwreck and the banquet are illusions perpetrated by the master-sorcerer Oxford/Prospero: in sum, a parody of *The Tempest* delivered by the author himself, which to have point as to be instantly recognisable by such a large section of the audience.

Then he had consented to appear at the Trial when a lesser character would have been elsewhere. Finally he must have put on such a bravura performance of stand-up comedy (the report of which I have put in italics above) that the Court made a volte-face and imprisoned all his accusers, some of which used “the Prisoners Names for Quittance with them in that behalf,” so the Sorcerer’s name was thought to be sufficient protection in regard to the alleged “Tumults,” etc. If the Court were paralytic with drink on 28th December, it must have been in hysterics of hilarity the following night. The quality of that performance must have been designed to appeal to the lawyers, i.e. by a legally trained mind, like that of Oxford who was himself a student at Grays Inn from 1567. All this must have cost a fortune.

Oxfordians can explain and relate to these events by looking at that Privy Council Record. Perhaps the entry was dolled up to look like a genuine entry with the recipients described as “servants to the Lord Chamberlain” to give it an apparent authenticity; and Heneage (or the Countess) did cause the pay out of £20 to Oxford or make out that they had made such a payment: the lie was that the Gray’s Inn performance was not before the Queen or the Court, half buried by the record for the genuine performance on St Stephen’s Day (27th December). With the receipt recorded as in the name of Oxford’s pseudonym, all officials of lesser rank were protected (as in the “Quittance” above).

Anyway, the Countess was apparently not further troubled, perhaps because she had some support from Oxford. However, there is no record of either a final quittance or of any other such entry-fakery: this I repeat must be fatal to the initial Oxfordian suggestion that Oxford covered for her for the full deficiency, let alone the need for £25 or so further (non-existent) dubious entries in the record.

Somebody had large bills to pay; £20 in 1595 approaches £10,000 in our money. I think Oxford was complicit in at worst a fiddle to keep

everybody sweet. The only characters who might draw the Queen's attention to it were no doubt high-born and powerful, but possessors of far dirtier hands than Oxford's when it comes to the Treasury of the Crown. Can anyone doubt that the "Sorcerer or Conjuror" was Oxford or propose an alternative scenario? Others may think Oxford was parodying his own (or Burbage's role) as Prospero in *The Tempest*:

... I perceive these lords
 At this encounter do so much admire
 That they devour their reason, and scarce think
 Their eyes do offices of truth, these words
 Are natural breath. But howso'er you have
 Been jostled of your senses, know for certain
 That I am Prospero ...

V ll.155 -161

... These our actors
 As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
 Are melted into air, thin air,
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
 Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on, and our little life
 Is rounded with a sleep. Sir, I am vexed.
 Bear with my weakness. My old brain is troubled.
 Be not disturbed with my infirmity.

From IV ll. 148 - 160

As a footnote, it may be that all the disturbances fortified the Countess Russell party aided by the cliques supporting Essex and Robert Cecil (for a very short time in 1596 in alliance) in their arguments to block Burbage from opening his indoor Blackfriars Theatre in that year, and perhaps led to a temporary breach in Oxford's relations with the Lord Chamberlain's Men – evidenced in *Hamlet*.

References:

1. "Deconstructing Groatsworth" *DVS Newsletter* January 2001 p.12. Also, Mark Alexander: <https://sourcetext.com/sorcebook> scroll down to Oxfordian Essays etc, where "On Greene's Groatsworth of Wit" is the last one
2. Anderson: *Shakespeare By Another Name*: p.167
3. For full text, See Google, *Gesta Grayorum* Text.

