

Oxford seen in the plays: Reasons 7 & 91

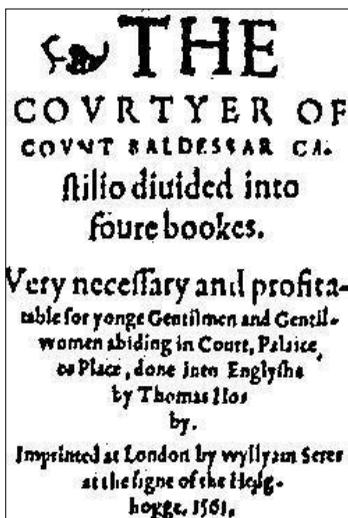
Why Shake-speare was Oxford

By Hank Whittemore

To celebrate the publication of Hank Whittemore's new book, '100 Reasons Shake-speare was the Earl of Oxford,' and his being named as 'Oxfordian of the Year,' the De Vere Society Newsletter continues its serialisation of extracts with his Reasons No 7 and No. 91. The full '100 Reasons' are available from Amazon and Forever Press!

Reason 7 – 'The Courtier'

"O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword, the expectancy and rose of the fair state, the glass of fashion and the mold of form!"— Ophelia, speaking of Prince Hamlet



When Shakespeare created his most self-revealing character through the words and actions of Hamlet, he drew upon his own intimate knowledge and obvious love for Baldesar Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* or *The Book of the Courtier*, one of the great volumes of the High Renaissance. That book portrays a group of real-life thinkers, politicians, soldiers, clerics, diplomats and wits who gather at the Palace of Urbino in 1507 to play a game, over four evenings, trying to piece together a portrait of the most perfect courtier. The topics of their conversations, John Lotherington writes in his introduction to a 2005 edition, range “from chivalry to humanist debates about language, literature, painting and sculpture, to the art of

conversation and the telling of jokes, the role and dignity of women, the delicate job of guiding willful princes, and finally to love and its transcendent form in pure spirit.”

Originally published at Venice in 1528, Castiglione's book attempts "to refashion the medieval ideal of the chivalrous knight and to fuse it with the Renaissance virtues of learning and grace," Oscar Campbell writes, adding that Shakespeare "may have derived the 'merry war' of Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* from a similar battle in *The Courtier*." "Shakespeare may have read Castiglione in Italian," Charles Boyce suggests – an amazing statement if one believes the author was William of Stratford, who, by all reckoning, was unable to read Italian.

First translated into English in 1561 by Thomas Hoby, *The Courtier* exerted a strong influence on the courtly ideals of the reign of Elizabeth. A little more than a decade later, in January 1571/2, having just come of age at twenty-one as a courtier, Oxford "commanded" the publication of a new Latin translation by one of his former tutors, Bartholomew Clerke; to give it the biggest possible sendoff he wrote an eloquent introduction, also in Latin. Oxford had been captivated by literature from his earliest days; studying with the best tutors, he went on to receive honorary degrees at Cambridge and Oxford at ages fourteen and sixteen; before age twenty his personal library included works of Chaucer, Plutarch, Cicero and Plato, the Geneva Bible and more. In 1571 his uncle, Arthur Golding, noted that he knew from personal experience how his nephew had taken a keen interest in "the present estate of things in our days, and that not without a certain pregnancy of wit and ripeness of understanding."

By the following year Oxford was enjoying the highest royal favor at court. The apparent intimacy of his relationship with Queen Elizabeth was the subject of scandalous gossip; in December 1571 he married Anne Cecil, the Ophelia-like daughter of Burghley, the Polonius-like chief minister to the queen. Although he had grown up in the household and custody of his father-in-law, the architect of the Protestant reformation, Oxford leaned away from the Puritan movement in favor of the classical languages and old feudal values of knighthood and chivalry.

In his early twenties, he was the latest descendant of a line of noble earls stretching back 500 years to William the Conqueror; in every way, he became the man whom Walt Whitman would describe as one of the "wolfish earls" who must have written the Shakespeare plays:



Conceived out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism— personifying in unparalleled ways the medieval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation)—only one of the ‘wolfish earls’ so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born descendent and knower, might seem to be the true author of those amazing works—works in some respects greater than anything else in recorded history.

The young earl wrote enthusiastically of Castiglione in his preface:

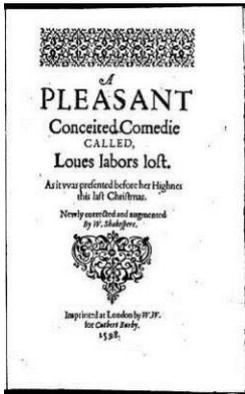
For who has spoken of Princes with greater gravity? Who has discoursed of illustrious women with a more ample dignity? No one has written of military affairs more eloquently, more aptly about horse-racing, and more clearly and admirably about encounters under arms on the field of battle. I will say nothing of the fitness and the excellence with which he has depicted the beauty of chivalry in the noblest persons.

“Without Castiglione we should not have Hamlet,” Drayton Henderson writes. “The ideal of the courtier, scholar, soldier, developed first in Italy, and perfected in the narrative of *Il Cortegiano*, was Castiglione’s gift to the world. Prince Hamlet is the high exemplar of it in our literature. But it is not only Shakespeare’s Hamlet that seems to follow Castiglione -- Shakespeare himself does.”

And that he
 Who casts to write a living line must sweat
 (Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
 Upon the Muse’s anvil: turn the same
 (And himself with it) that he thinks to frame;
 Or for the laurel he may gain a scorn,
 For a good Poet’s made as well as born,
 And such wert thou.

Ben Jonson’s eulogy to Shakespeare, *The Folio*, 1623

Reason 91 – Dramatic Literature



This evidence comprises one of the most important, yet among the least noticed, of the reasons why Oxford is Shakespeare. The plays are masterpieces of dramatic literature – they are works the author has written and rewritten, over long stretches of time, not primarily for play-going audiences, but for carefully attentive readers. Most can be fully appreciated only when, in addition to being seen and heard, they are read and reread.

The standard image is that of a man busily engaged in his acting career, with its nonstop pressures of memorizing, rehearsing and performing,

while also traveling back and forth to Stratford-upon-Avon, lending money, buying property, dealing in grain and litigating over petty debts. Simultaneously he is writing to produce, one after the other, popular plays earning profits at the box office. He keeps meeting new commercial demands, leaving each work to be printed as it had been delivered or performed.

This traditional conception continues to be promoted by established authorities, even in the face of growing challenges based on huge anomalies. For example, one of the very first plays with Shakespeare's name on it was *Love's Labour's Lost*, first printed in 1598. Yet the title page states that it is "*Newly corrected and augmented*," indicating strongly that its author had the time necessary to make such revisions.

Such anomalies should make it obvious that the author was deliberately expanding his plays into more detailed and deeper works of literature, for current and future readers.

It appears that Thomas Looney, while examining Oxford's life, experienced his own 'mental revolution' that changed the way he viewed the writing of the plays. Below are sections of his book that are usually overlooked, but, I believe, deserve to be highlighted – a view of the final dozen years of Oxford's life until his recorded passing in 1604:

One of the greatest obstacles to the acceptance of our theory of the authorship of Shakespeare's plays will be a certain established conception of the mode in which they were produced and issued; a conception which arose of necessity out of the old theory ... [and] demands *a difficult revolution in mental attitude*. [emphasis added]

No less than a dozen plays were printed for the first time between 1597 and 1604, when Oxford died, Looney notes, adding:

If he had done nothing more than write the twelve new plays, even supposing they had been mere ephemeral things intended only for the stage, the achievement would have been extraordinary. When, however, we turn from quantity to the consideration of literary quality, it is difficult to understand how such an accomplishment could ever have been credited.... It is much more reasonable, then, to suppose that what was actually happening ... was the speeding up of the finishing-off process, as though the writer were either acting under a premonition that his end was approaching, or the time had now arrived for giving to the world a literature at which he had been working during the whole of his previous life. Everything suggests the rushing out of supplies from a large accumulated stock ...

The overall idea, Looney concluded, is that the best of the dramas "passed through two distinct phases." They originated as stage plays, doubtless of a high literary quality, which were "subsequently transformed into the supreme literature of the nation." Moreover the idea is "that the man who had the capacity to do this had the intelligence to know exactly what he was doing," and having created this literature he was "not likely to have become so indifferent to its fate as he is represented by the Stratfordian tradition."