

The Wrong Candidate?

At the end of Peter Farey's *Oxfordians and the 1604 Question* he suggests that they might think it possible they have the wrong candidate. Here are some reasons for deciding that Marlowe would be a better choice for them.

The entire left hand column is taken verbatim from *What's In a Name? Everything, Apparently...* <http://rmmla.wsu.edu/ereview/60.2/articles/stritmatter.asp> by Roger Stritmatter, Coppin State University. References have been deleted but can be found in the original article. Peter Farey responds.

What is the evidence supporting the “Oxfordian” theory? In brief the supporters of the case might put it thus:	How would Marlowe compare on each of these criteria?
<p>De Vere was known to be a talented dramatist, yet no dramas of his survive under his own name. Both the anonymous <i>Arte of English Poesie</i> (1589) and Francis Meres (1598), the latter evidently recalling more than two decades of literary history, refer to him as one of the “best for comedy.”</p>	<p>Marlowe is known to have been England’s finest dramatist before Shakespeare, and the one to whom Shakespeare was indebted more than to any other. So close were their styles when Shakespeare started that early scholars attributed large parts (even the whole) of some of Shakespeare’s early plays to Marlowe, and it has been claimed that Marlowe’s influence remained with Shakespeare throughout his career. See our “Christopher Marlowe” page for quotations from scholars spanning the past 200 years.</p>
<p>De Vere was known to have concealed his work: The <i>Arte of English Poesie</i> explicitly refers to him as one of those “who have written commendably well as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest”, and also includes him by implication as one of “many notable gentlemen in the Court who have written commendably, And suppressed it again, or else suffered it to be published without their own names to it”</p>	<p>Marlovians claim the evidence shows that the most logical reason for the meeting at which Marlowe was allegedly killed was to fake his death, allowing him to escape his otherwise inevitable trial and execution. In such circumstances, it would have been suicidal for him to have written anything using his real name, and extremely risky not to have had a real person presented as the author of anything he did write. Furthermore, since some of the prime movers behind this deception lived well into the 17th century, the secret had to be protected until those involved were all dead and long after any possible interest in the question would have disappeared.</p>
<p>De Vere was a child prodigy in languages and history. Tutored by the greatest Elizabethan Anglo-Saxon scholar, Laurence Nowell, by the lawyer and statesman Sir Thomas Smith (arguably the greatest legal mind of his generation), and probably by his uncle Arthur Golding, the translator of Ovid’s <i>Metamorphoses</i>, a work which “so frequently reappears in Shakespeare’s page, especially by way of subsidiary illustration, as almost to compel the conviction that <i>Shakespeare knew much of Golding’s book by heart</i>” (emphasis supplied).</p>	<p>For a cobbler’s son, as Marlowe was, to achieve the demonstrable pre-eminence he did as a poet/dramatist was quite extraordinary, even taking into account his six and a half years at Cambridge University. That he wrote and had published his own translation of Ovid’s <i>Amores</i> would perhaps indicate a rather greater love of and familiarity with Ovid’s works than merely having an uncle who had translated some of them. Shakespeare’s opinion of Golding’s translation of Ovid’s <i>Pyramus and Thisbe</i> is famous.</p>

<p>His life resembles the experience of Hamlet in so many curious and unprecedented ways that it has been called a rough draft of the play. It is as if the author had two texts, the Belleforest Saxo Grammaticus tradition of the 11th-century Danish Prince, and the story of de Vere's life, in mind as he wrote. To mention just one significant parallel, de Vere was, like the Danish Prince, a prominent patron and aficionado of the theater.</p>	<p>Even if these parallels with Oxford's life were intentional, which is far from certain, it is not necessarily an argument for his being the actual author. The situations and innermost thoughts of fictional characters based upon real people are precisely what dramatists and novelists have been using for their material for almost as long as plays and novels have existed. Presumably de Vere was not the only person who knew of his association with the theatre, for example.</p>
<p>De Vere was an accomplished lyric poet. William Webbe in 1589 refers to him as "the best" of the court poets, and Henry Peacham in 1622 places him first in his list of outstanding literary figures from the Elizabethan era. His extant poetry betrays many affinities to Shakespearean lyric forms.</p>	<p>Marlowe was a far more accomplished lyric poet. His <i>Hero and Leander</i> would be universally acknowledged as superior to anything produced by the "court poets", and scholarly opinion is divided over whether it is or is not better than Shakespeare's <i>Venus and Adonis</i>. That whichever of these two poems came first must have been a model for the other is widely assumed.</p>
<p>De Vere was a prolific correspondent whose extant letters betray numerous verbal, figurative, and philosophical parallels to the plays and poems.</p>	<p>The seven plays known to have been written by Marlowe by the time he was 29 contain more. As A. L. Rowse put it: "William Shakespeare never forgot him: in his penultimate, valedictory play, <i>The Tempest</i>, he is still echoing Marlowe's phrases", or Bakeless: "Shakespeare quotes Marlowe or alludes to his plays repeatedly - practically the whole of Marlowe's work as it is now known."</p>
<p>Trained in law at Gray's Inn, de Vere had the legal training so evident in the works. His extant correspondence, reprinted in modern spelling by Fowler and Chiljan, contains hundreds of legal terms, many found in the Shakespearean canon.</p>	<p>No life would be long enough to encompass the number of occupations in which Shakespeare "must" have trained. Therefore most of the related knowledge would have been acquired in some other way, by a person with a wide range of interests and contacts, and a superb (probably eidetic) memory. Knowledge of the law was just one such area.</p>
<p>The most notorious "Italianate Englishman" of his generation, he traveled extensively through the Italian city-states that provide the locale and ambience of so many of the Shakespearean plays and built a house for himself in Venice.</p>	<p>It would not have been necessary either to be "Italianate" or to have a house in Venice to have a good local knowledge of Italy. The Marlovian theory has Marlowe's exile taking him to Italy where he could have viewed its city states at close quarters in a way that would have probably been as difficult for an English Earl as writing plays for the public apparently was.</p>
<p>The Earl of Southampton, thought by most to be the "fair youth" of the Sonnets, was engaged to de Vere's daughter from 1591 to 1593, during the time the "marriage sonnets" were written.</p>	<p>The so-called "marriage sonnets" are widely believed to have been commissioned by Lord Burghley for the Earl's 17th birthday, when Marlowe (already a famous poet) was certainly known to Burghley, and very probably still employed by him.</p>

<p>William Cecil, Lord Burghley, thought by many to be the historical prototype of the prolix Polonius, was de Vere's foster father and, after 1571, father-in-law.</p>	<p>Marlowe went up to Cambridge at almost exactly the same time as Burghley's son, Robert Cecil. If Polonius was Burghley, then some Marlovians would claim that Reynaldo (the servant sent to spy on Polonius's son while at university) was Marlowe. That there must have been a falling-out with Burghley and a switch of the exiled Marlowe's allegiance from him to Essex in the mid 1590s is very much in accord with the Marlovian evidence.</p>
<p>The "two most noble brethren" to whom the 1623 folio is dedicated were de Vere's son-in-law, Phillip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery, and his brother (who almost married another de Vere daughter) William, Earl of Pembroke.</p>	<p>Is this seriously presented as one of the main arguments supporting the Oxfordian theory? Edward de Vere had been dead for nineteen years when the First Folio was published, and what possible relevance does it have to the authorship anyway?</p>
<p>De Vere was wealthy and powerful, something many modern Shakespearean scholars find intolerable in a bard, but he was also the quintessence of the downwardly mobile aristocrat, one who spent a lifetime losing real property to lawyers and "new men" like his father-in-law William Cecil. Like Hamlet, he had ample cause to rue the "buyer and seller of land" with his "statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries" (<i>Hamlet</i> V.i.)</p>	<p>Stratfordians claim that Shakespeare demonstrates an intimate knowledge of leather-working and types of leather, apparently forgetting that Marlowe's shoemaker father actually became an inspector of leathers for the gild covering the leather-working trades. This is no more relevant to a writer's ability to write about it, however, than is anything which can be learned from an acquaintance or a decent book.</p>
<p>Like Jaques in <i>As You Like It</i>, de Vere may have given up his land to see the lands of other men, but he was rich in his artistic associations. He patronized thirty-seven major works of literature -- including works of Watson, Green, Byrd, Munday, and others -- of philosophy, music, and history. Many of these works have documented connections to the Shakespearean oeuvre. The playwright John Lyly was his secretary and close theatrical associate. Edmund Spenser in a dedicatory sonnet to <i>The Fairie Queene</i> calls him one "most dear" to the muses.</p>	<p>George Peele called Marlowe "the Muses' Darling" too, even though he was thought to be dead at the time, and - as far as we know - had never done a thing for his fellow writers which might purchase such praise.</p>
<p>De Vere's tottering finances were eventually underwritten by a mysterious thousand-pound crown annuity (1586-1604), to which Shakespeare apparently makes frequent if oblique reference: in the <i>Sonnets</i> (111.5), <i>Venus and Adonis</i>, <i>Comedy of Errors</i>, <i>Hamlet</i>, and <i>Henry IV.2</i>. Alas, even this state subsidy does not seem to have saved him, in the long run, from the fate of Timon of Athens.</p>	<p>Mining the plays for biographical information really is a waste of time, since they can be said to provide evidence for virtually anything that one would like them to. Only the <i>Sonnets</i> are likely to contain anything recognizably biographical, and whilst questions of the poet's sexual orientation, disgrace, outcast state, distant travel and atheism may exclude William Shakespeare himself, they hardly differentiate between Marlowe and Oxford. Only things like his expecting to be remembered just as "the coward conquest of a wretch's knife" can do that.</p>