Demonography 101:
A Review of Alan Nelson's
Monstrous Adversary

Professor Alan H. Nelson of University of California, Berkeley has produced *Monstrous Adversary, The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* [Liverpool, England: Liverpool UP, 2003], which offers a mass of new documentary information on his subject. Nelson deserves thanks and praise for this research, as well as for his openness in sharing his archival discoveries on his website, socrates.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson/authorsh.html.

In six of his chapters (29, 45, 46, and 75-7) Nelson analyzes Oxford's poetry, literary patronage, and sponsorship of acting companies. The contents of these chapters should remind readers that Nelson hails from the English Department of one of America's leading universities. When analyzing metrical conventions, the niceties of dedications, or the history of theatrical troupes, he shows the sure touch of an expert in his field. I do not imply that readers must accede to Nelson's every judgment on these matters, though I find little to disagree with, but readers should recognize an obvious professional. Unfortunately, Nelson cannot do history.

Monstrous Adversary is a documentary biography composed of extensive quotations from contemporary letters, memoranda, legal records, and the like, stitched together with Nelson's comments. Nelson asks in his Introduction that we let «the documentary evidence speak for itself» (5). His request fails for two reasons. First, documentary evidence rarely makes sense without the appropriate context, which includes not only historical background information on the religious, legal, social, or cultural practices of a much earlier era,[1] but also personal information, such as establishing who struck the first blow in a fight, or whether a witness was truthful in other matters.[2] As I will show, Nelson totally botches the context of event after event. Secondly, Nelson, who with some justice refers to Oxford's first biographer, B. M. Ward, as a hagiographer (250), pushes much further in the opposite direction, so much so, that his study of Oxford may well be dubbed demonography.

The 17th Earl of Oxford was anything but a model nobleman of his time. He threw away his family fortune, he failed to develop the career expected of an earl by shouldering his share of local and national responsibilities, and he fathered a child out of wedlock. Quite possibly he also drank too much as a young man. On the other hand, he excelled in his generosity, he earned praise for his writings, and he retained the favor of his famously headstrong and moralistic Queen. These facts have long been known. What does Nelson add to them? Quite a lot of detail and color: Nelson's persistence and skill as a document sleuth flesh out both major and minor events of Oxford's story. Unfortunately, Nelson the analyst relates to Nelson the researcher as Hyde relates to Jekyll—moreover, Nelson's obsessive denigration of Oxford carries him from error into fantasy.

I. A Nelson Sampler

In support of my criticism, I will begin by discussing Nelson's treatment of five episodes of Oxford's life. I will then discuss Oxford's most significant scandal, the accusations between him and his sometime friends, Lord Henry Howard and Charles Arundel, before proceeding to the peculiarities of Nelson's writing style. Finally, I will discuss some of the positive aspects of Oxford's story that can be extracted from Nelson's work.

My first example offers a very simple case of Nelson's historiographic ineptitude. His Chapter 13, «Necromancy,» begins with quotations from Oxford's friends-turned-accusers in 1580-1, Howard and Arundel, to the effect that Oxford copulated with a female spirit, saw the ghosts of his mother and stepfather, and often conjured up Satan for conversations. Nelson then explains in detail where, when, and, above all, how Oxford carried out these ungodly deeds. Unfortunately, Nelson neglects to inform his readers that Howard and Arundel listed these items among the outrageous lies regularly told by Oxford.[3] In other words, although neither Howard nor Arundel expected their contemporaries to believe that Oxford actually committed such acts, they failed to anticipate the stunning gullibility of Nelson.

We can find out why Oxford told these horrendous falsehoods by turning to some of the documentary evidence found on Nelson's website, though omitted from the biography. After relating yet another of Oxford's tall tales—about peacefully ending a civil war in Genoa—Charles Arundel continued: «this lie is very rife with him and in it he glories greatly; diversely hath he told it, and when he enters into it, he can hardly out, which hath made such sport as often have I been driven to rise from his table laughing, so hath my Lord Charles Howard [the admiral who defeated the

Spanish Armada] and the rest».[4] Not only does this remarkable testimony reveal a side of Oxford's character that Nelson studiously ignores, it also indicates the unbalanced nature of Oxford's foes, who thought they could damn him as a liar by describing his brilliance as a raconteur.

After concealing the unbalanced nature of Oxford's enemies, Nelson attributes insanity to one of Oxford's friends. Nathaniel Baxter accompanied Oxford on his trip to Italy in 1575-6, which he described in a 1606 poem to Oxford's daughter, the Countess of Montgomery (138-9). Baxter's poem includes this seemingly cryptic stanza: «Never omitting what might pastime bring,/Italian sports, and Syren's Melodie:/Hopping Helena with her warbling sting,/Infested th'Albanian dignitie,/ Like as they poysoned all Italie.» Without the slightest hint that another interpretation might exist, Nelson informs us that «Albania» means England, while «Hopping Helena» indicates a prostitute whose «warbling sting» is venereal disease. Thus, according to Nelson, Baxter publicly «reveals» that the Countess of Montgomery's father caught syphilis in Venice.

Another interpretation emerges by assuming that «Albania» means the nation of that name, and that Baxter's «poysoned» means poisoned. Such an interpretation agrees with Venetian lore on four noble Albanian brothers who poisoned each other in Venice, especially given that John Florio's Italian dictionary defines «eleno,» the Italian masculine form of the name «Helena,» as deadly nightshade or belladonna, while Florio elsewhere translates the Italian «bella donna» as «Helen.» I lack the space to work through two rival interpretations, particularly when a far greater threat hangs over Nelson's reading.[5] Baxter's verse was published in his popular work, *Sir Philip Sidney's ‹Ourania,›* along with commendatory poems to other aristocrats. The next stanza in Baxter's poem informs the Countess that her father promptly hurried home to England in order to beget her upon her «everlasting faire» mother (actually the Countess was conceived ten years later). If we accept Nelson's interpretation, then we must conclude that Baxter and his publisher had literally taken leave of their senses by publicly proclaiming that the recently deceased Earl of Oxford carried a disgraceful and loathsome disease, which he presumably passed on to his first and second wives and their three children: the Countess of Montgomery, the future Lady Norris, and the eighteenth Earl of Oxford. The *Dictionary of National Biography* notes that Baxter's commendatory poems in *Ourania* were «evidently written with a view to some pecuniary reward.» On the contrary, according to Nelson, those poems were evidently written with a view to ostracism—if not specifically intended to provoke savage reprisals.

Oxford's departure from the Netherlands campaign for unknown reasons in October 1585 provides the next example of Nelson's slipshod methods (296-8). English support for the Dutch rebels fighting for independence from Spain became urgent as the Spanish gained ground that summer, and several thousand troops were raised and dispatched pell-mell in August, with the size and organization of the army still undetermined. This advance force was led by Sir John Norris (mis-identified by Nelson as his brother Henry Norris), with Oxford apparently commanding the cavalry contingent. Meanwhile, fierce political maneuvering over the top command positions continued at Court, with the Earl of Leicester being selected, unselected, then re-selected as commander-in-chief in September and October. Leicester naturally wanted his own choices, such as his nephew Sir Philip Sidney, for subordinate commands, but he yielded one position to pressure from Oxford's father-in-law, Lord Treasurer Burghley, on behalf of his son, Sir Thomas Cecil.[6] On October 21, Oxford returned to England. Leicester's commission as commander was signed on October 22, and he arrived in December with his twenty-year-old step-son the Earl of Essex, who received command of the cavalry.

Although no one knows exactly why Oxford returned, we find something of an explanation in a letter printed by Nelson: Oxford had «letters of my Lord Treasurer's to him wherein he wrote of her Majesty's grant of the commanding of horsemen» (298). Nelson mistakenly refers to these letters as Oxford's «commission from Burghley» (299), but the Lord Treasurer had no authority to award military commissions. These were granted by the Queen in letters patent stamped with the privy seal, and no such commission exists for Oxford. Apparently the Queen sent Oxford without a commission, and then he lost out in the jockeying for position at Court. He may have returned because he had been superceded or simply to lobby on his own behalf—no one knows. Nelson, however, pretends otherwise: «As of mid-October, Oxford's loyalties were put to the test. Would he cooperate with Leicester and Sidney to advance the Queen's interests in the Low Countries? He would not.» As far as Nelson is concerned, Oxford simply «quit his post in a fit of pique.» Thus, evidentiary complexity and uncertainty dissolve before Nelson's inability to distinguish between private letters and the Queen's commission.

My fourth example of Nelson's strange ways with evidence deals with the Spanish Armada, which reached England on July 19, 1588, fought its way to Calais only to be expelled by fire-ships in the night of July 28-9, followed by a day of battle, and finally turned north for its homeward voyage on July 30.[7] Oxford played a small part in these great events. He was with the Earl of Leicester's army at Tilbury near the mouth of the Thames, then sailed out to the fleet, returning

to Tilbury on July 27. On August 1, Leicester, still expecting to give battle at Tilbury, wrote that Oxford disliked the Queen's proposal that he take command of the north Essex port of Harwich, a potential Spanish landing place, and so he went to Court to protest. According to Leicester, Oxford objected to being ordered away from the anticipated combat. And that is the last we know until Oxford took a conspicuous role, suitable to his rank, alongside the Queen at the November victory celebration. Nelson records these details (316-8), concluding that Oxford should have been severely punished for disobeying Leicester's order. This judgment fails on several grounds. First, Leicester says nothing about giving Oxford an order, rather than informing him of the Queen's intention; Leicester certainly says nothing about Oxford disobeying an order. Next, Nelson has no business assuming that Oxford did not end up at Harwich anyway, as the Queen may have overruled his protest. In the course of his researches in England, which included the Essex Record Office (xvii-xviii), Nelson could easily have tried to discover who did command at Harwich in early August, but he did not bother. Finally, Oxford's place beside the Queen at the victory celebration seems to dispel any imputation of disgrace, particularly given Elizabeth's notoriously strong opinions and sharp tongue.

My fifth example concerns reports that Oxford plotted against the succession of King James while Queen Elizabeth lay dying in March 1603 (409-18). A few days before the Queen's death the Earl of Lincoln informed Sir John Peyton, commander of the Tower of London, that Oxford proposed that they support Lincoln's nephew, Lord Hastings, as heir to the throne rather than James of Scotland; both Lincoln and Peyton subsequently reported this information to the authorities. Nelson supplies the following essential information to help us sort out this issue. Lincoln was an «erratic and violent» man; it was his close kinsman, not Oxford's, who was being pushed for the crown; and Lincoln, not Oxford, had discussed the matter with the French Embassy, which opposed James. Peyton wrote of Lincoln that, «his fashion is to condemn the world if thereby he might excuse himself.» After the proclamation of James as King of England, and the arrival in London of his advance man, Lord Kinloss, Peyton told Lincoln to inform Kinloss. Peyton later explained that he did not tell Kinloss himself, out of fear that Lincoln would deny his conversations with Peyton.

Nelson urges Oxford as the instigator of this sedition, but the foregoing details, as well as others that I have omitted, allow sensible readers to identify Lincoln as the probable culprit. My principal objection to Nelson's treatment of this episode lies in these words: «Lincoln and Peyton agreed on one point: the most active opponent of James among English noblemen at the time of the Queen's death had been Oxford» (411). Peyton agreed to no such thing; he simply reported what Lincoln told him while making clear his mistrust of Lincoln. Readers unfamiliar with this affair have no real way of spotting Nelson's dereliction. Otherwise, I will note three more objections. First, Nelson insinuates, as he says nothing at all about any other nobles opposing James, much less that Oxford—or Lincoln—was «the most active.» Next, Nelson displays hopeless naivety in using denigration of Oxford as his main criterion for source reliability. Finally, Nelson seems incapable of fitting together pieces of historical evidence into a coherent whole, preferring simply to snatch up any item that he can twist against Oxford.

The foregoing examples display Nelson's methods and limitations. The next is similar but on a much larger scale.

II. The Howard-Arundel Affair

We now come to the scandal of Oxford's life, the mutual accusations between him and his former friends, Henry Howard, Charles Arundel, and Francis Southwell. After his return from Italy in 1576, Oxford became a Catholic, until Christmas 1580, when he denounced his three co-religionists for subversion. Howard and Arundel—but not Southwell—replied by accusing Oxford of a non-stop crime spree. Nelson utterly ignores the historical context of this affair, which may be summarized as follows.[8] During the 1560s, Queen Elizabeth temporized with the Papacy and other Catholic powers, while generally turning a blind eye to the practice of Catholicism in England. That policy ended with the 1570 papal decree that Elizabeth had no right to the throne and that her subjects owed her no allegiance, followed by the infiltration into England of hundreds of English priests fresh from continental seminaries. The Queen and her Councilors watched with alarm as Catholicism grew in the later 1570s, and then the dreaded Jesuit order arrived in England in June 1580. The government's ultimate fear, which actually went back to the late 1530s, was invasion by a French, Spanish, or Imperial army, supported by a rebellion of English Catholics. The periodic Catholic-Protestant warfare in Europe and around the world of the early and mid-sixteenth century turned continual in 1567 and stayed that way until 1648.

These facts, of which Nelson seems unaware, would have occupied the mental foreground of the Queen and her ministers as they evaluated Oxford's charges of subversive or treasonous activities against Howard and Arundel, as well as their countercharges of criminal conduct and personal misbehavior against Oxford. The simplest way to

evaluate the government's reaction to the various accusations is to note that Howard, Arundel, and Southwell were placed in confinement, while Oxford remained at liberty—until he was locked up from late March through June 1581 for fathering a child by one of the Queen's maids of honor. Subsequently, as discussed above, Oxford was twice chosen for military commands against Spain, while Henry Howard spent most of the remainder of Elizabeth's reign in obscurity.[9] Charles Arundel fled England for France in fall 1583 in the wake of the Throckmorton plot, which sought to combine a French invasion of England with a domestic Catholic rebellion. Once in France, Arundel helped author the book later called *Leicester's Commonwealth*, a massive slander aimed at the Queen's favorite, the Earl of Leicester, which Elizabeth Jenkins summarizes as follows:

> This pungent, racy piece of journalism gives a sensational picture of Leicester as a master criminal, with his tribe of poisoners, bawds and abortionists, his Italian ointments and aphrodisiacs, the bottle at his bed's head worth £10 the pint, «his good fortune in seeing them dead who, for any cause, he would not have to live,» the list of his victims beginning with his wife and ending with the Earl of Sussex.[10]

That one of Oxford's two accusers turned into a professional slanderer does not seem relevant to Nelson, who buries his sole mention of *Leicester's Commonwealth* in a footnote, which gives no explanation of this notorious libel beyond mislabeling it a «satire.»[11]

I turn now to the charges made by Charles Arundel against Oxford, specifically: seven counts of atheism; sixteen counts of lying; thirteen counts of setting one person to kill another or setting two men against each other; approximately eight counts of attempted murder; several counts of sodomy and bestiality; continual drunkenness; six counts of bearing grudges against Arundel, Howard, and Southwell; and sixteen counts of undutifulness to the Queen.[12] Henry Howard's charges bear enough similarity in organization and wording to Arundel's for Nelson to recognize that the two men were obviously collaborating (259). It is hardly possible now to determine whether Oxford actually did say, «that the cobblers' wives of Milan are more richly dressed every working day than the Queen on Christmas Day,» or whether he did «break into my Lord of Worcester's house with an intent to murther him and all his men,» as Arundel affirmed. We may, however, look at how several contemporaries responded.

Francis Southwell's hand appears only once in the numerous documents of accusation, but that one instance is highly significant. Howard smuggled an abbreviated set of his charges against Oxford to Southwell, with these instructions: «Add to this what particulars soever you have declared of him and they shall be justified. Here is nothing in this paper but may be avowed without danger as hath been determined.» South-well replied with several annotations and an addendum.[13] Howard's document lists four items under the heading «Atheism,» thirteen under «Dangerous practices,» and four under «Buggery.» Southwell writes the Latin word «Audivi,» that is, «I heard [it],» next to two of the blasphemy items, then adds two more remarks by Oxford: that Solomon was blessed with 300 concubines, and that the Bible was written to keep men in obedience. In the dangerous practices category, Southwell ignored five charges of attempted murder, while placing his «Audivi» against three instances of Oxford's railing about the Queen, English Catholics, and the late Duke of Norfolk. Southwell added in the margin that Oxford «promised to sack London, and give me [Alderman] Day['s] house.» Under buggery, Southwell ignored two specific charges, while posting a denial against a third, along with his «Audivi» regarding hearsay of Oxford's tendencies.

Thus far, Southwell indicates that Oxford talked big, but nothing else. Now, however, we come to the addendum, in which Southwell makes clear his enmity toward Oxford. He discusses at some length charges related to prophecies, presumably subversive. Then he takes up dangerous matters:

> I cannot particularly charge my Lord [Oxford] with pedication [pederasty], but with open lewdness of his own speeches, neither with Tom Cooke, nor Powers, nor any else.
>
> I pray, my good Lord [Howard], in any matter of treason he [Oxford] may justly be charged withal let us have care of misprision [concealment]. By my intelligence I hear the Queen's Majesty hath clearly forgiven him, and therefore let us wisely and safely disable him.
>
> I hear by you [that] Mr. Charles [Arundel] is my dear friend. In faith, my Lord, it is not best, for if the Earl could get one man to aver anything, we were utterly overthrown.

Thus, in his secret communication with Henry Howard, Southwell specifically states that he cannot accuse Oxford of homosexual acts, but only with having a foul mouth. Further, he warns that he and Howard will be implicated in any accusations of treason they might make against Oxford; I should add that the extent to which Catholic activities in the 1570s might be held treasonous in 1581 would have depended heavily on their context and implications, as well as on

the authorities' attitude toward the accused. Finally, Southwell clearly indicates that Arundel faced the greatest danger of prosecution, probably for treason, of any of the four.

However Southwell also says, in the middle quotation above, that he and Howard should «disable» Oxford, for an explanation of which we must turn to the heading of Arundel's principal document of charges against Oxford.

> The strength of this monster's evidence against my Lord Henry [Howard], Mr. Southwell, and myself weakened and taken down by the sufficient proof of the man's insufficiency to bear witness against any man of reputation. For these respects [the accusations that follow] no less warranted by laws of honor and of arms than by the civil laws and the laws of our own country. [my emphases]

Although no lawyer, Arundel advances a legal argument based on three current statutes that required two witnesses for proof of treason, with one statute calling specifically for «two lawful and sufficient witnesses.»[14] The first two groups of charges after Arundel's heading are atheism and lying. Thus, rather than defending against Oxford's focused charges of sedition or treason, Arundel countercharges with the aim of preventing Oxford from bearing witness. Arundel's delusion about eliminating Oxford's testimony crops up later in three letters, which contrast his own seven to eight months of confinement to the freedom of Oxford, «a person convicted of great beastliness.»[15] Arundel failed to grasp that Oxford had been convicted of nothing; to put it another way, Arundel, like Nelson, confuses accusation with proof. Meanwhile, Southwell—also aware of the two witness rule—warns Howard that Oxford plus one further witness will destroy them. Southwell apparently uses «disable» in the sense of *OED* definition 2, «to incapacitate legally ... to hinder or restrain (any person...) from performing acts ... which would otherwise be open to them,» such as bearing witness. One wishes for more testimony from Francis Southwell.

One witness remains on the topic of Oxford's alleged homosexuality, Orazio Coquo, a Venetian singing boy who came with him from Italy, remained for eleven months in Oxford's house, and then returned home. Henry Howard wrote that «touching buggery» Coquo «com-plained how horribly my Lord [Oxford] had abused him,» while Arundel added that Coquo «made it [buggery] the quarrel of his departure» (140-1).[16] Thanks to Nelson's impressive research we are able to read the interview of Coquo by the Venetian Inquisition that followed his extended trip to heretic England (155-7). That Coquo said nothing about homosexuality proves little, as he might have preferred to avoid that topic, while the Inquisition's interest centered on threats to his religion. Nevertheless, Coquo himself brought up his reason for leaving England, which was that a Milanese merchant in London advised him that his Catholicism would be endangered if he remained longer. Otherwise, Coquo associated freely with other Italian musicians in London, performed before and spoke to the Queen (who tried to convert him), attended mass at the French and Portuguese Embassies, and reported Oxford as offering religious freedom to those in his household. In short, where Howard and Arundel can be checked against Coquo, their testimony turns out to be false.

On the other hand, how did the Queen react to Howard and Arundel's accusations that Oxford tried to murder her favorite, the Earl of Leicester; her Principal Secretary, Sir Francis Walsingham; her Vice Chamberlain and favorite, Sir Christopher Hatton; Lord Worcester and all his household; Lord Windsor and all his household; as well as a string of other prominent courtiers, including Sir Walter Ralegh and Philip Sidney; not to mention the accusations of buggery, atheism, sedition, disrespect to her own person, etc.? Although, as noted above, the Queen swiftly and sharply punished Oxford's fornication with a maid of honor in the spring of 1581, she refused to take action on the basis of Howard and Arundel's charges. Her predecessors and successors were certainly capable of punishing crimes committed by peers against lesser folk. Her father hanged Lord Dacre for felony murder and beheaded Lord Hungerford for sodomy and soothsaying, while her sister hanged Lord Stourton for murder. James I hanged Lord Sanquhar for murder, and allowed his favorites, the Earl and Countess of Somerset, to be convicted of murder by poisoning, although he punished them with lengthy imprisonment rather than death, while Charles I beheaded the Earl of Castlehaven for sodomy.

Elizabeth did not ignore Oxford's misdeeds, although the surviving records fail to clarify the extent to which her disfavor was caused by his dalliance with the maid of honor and his subsequent feud with her kinsmen, or by the accusations of Howard and Arundel. Oxford was forbidden from the Queen's presence from spring 1581 until May 1583, then restored to favor.[17] His rehabilitation was presumably enhanced by Throckmorton's arrest that October, along with Arundel's flight to France, the expulsion of the Spanish ambassador, and the reincarceration for a year and a half of the ambassador's hired informant, Lord Henry Howard. Oxford's fall and rise may also be seen in his standing with the Knights of the Garter and in his military record. Although Oxford received numerous votes in the

annual elections for membership in the Order of the Garter from 1571 to 1580, he secured not a single vote in the elections of 1581-4. Clearly, the combination of the Howard-Arundel affair, the illegitimate child and subsequent feuding, and the Queen's disfavor all caused a heavy drop in his prestige. Yet just as clearly, his respectable showings in the next three elections, 1585, 1587, and 1588, mark his rehabilitation. Apparently the six peers who voted for Oxford in these elections placed little trust in the Howard-Arundel smear.[18] Meanwhile, Oxford received offers of military commands in 1585 and 1588, while Howard's 1587 request to serve against Spain was rejected.[19]

I have tried in the preceding paragraphs to present the principal evidence on the credibility of the accusations against Oxford in 1580-1. To say that Nelson offers nothing equivalent actually understates the case. Nelson obliterates the whole issue of credibility by spreading most of the accusations across his earlier chapters, with titles like «Necromancy,» «Atheist,» «Sodomite,» and «Prophet.»[20] Nelson's Chapter 48, «Tables Turned,» discusses the charges as a whole in barely one page,[21] including: «We have already considered both the form and substance of most of these charges» (259). This statement is perfectly true, as long as we realize that Nelson's «substance» simply means «content.» The question of credibility never arises in Nelson's text. The critical testimony of Francis Southwell does not appear, even in a footnote.[22] The disagreement between Orazio Coquo's statement to the Inquisition and what Howard and Arundel said about him goes unnoticed.[23] Arundel's connection to the Throckmorton plot is ignored, while his later profession as a manufacturer of defamation against Leicester is hidden in an uninformative footnote. Henry Howard's life of machinations, especially his role as a paid agent of Spain in the early 1580s, and as accomplice to his great niece, the murderous Countess of Somerset, go unmentioned. Although Howard died the year before the Countess's sensational trial, the obscenity of his letters, which were read in court, stunned contemporary observers, a point of particular relevance to our evaluation of the obscenities Howard charged against Oxford.[24] Moreover, Queen Elizabeth, in Nelson's telling, comes across as a spineless ninny, quite at variance with the portrait painted by her many biographers.

Nelson maintains his evasiveness in his recitation of the charges made by Oxford and Thomas Norton against Howard and Arundel (254-8),[25] which have nothing to do with bizarre personal behavior, but everything to do with Catholic invasion and rebellion. Nelson's verdict is that Oxford was guilty of betrayal, hypocrisy, petty-mindedness, and a lack of mental control (258). Only readers sensitized to Nelson's ways will notice his failure to say that Oxford's charges were false—and herein lies a mystery. It could be that even Nelson recognizes the fatuity of denying that Henry Howard and Charles Arundel were Catholic conspirators—or it could simply be an oversight? The latter possibility, that is, lack of authorial control, draws support from the final sentence of Chapter 47, which accuses Oxford of «cramming his paper with ... hatred and resentment of the whole Howard clan» (258). Oxford's two page paper makes no mention of the Howard family, but only names Henry Howard, along with one neutral reference to his brother. Despite Nelson's frenzy concerning Oxford's alleged hatred of his Howard cousins (249 and 251), Charles, Lord Admiral Howard of Effingham, voted for Oxford in the Garter elections from 1585 to 1588.

No responsible historian would ignore the political and religious context of Oxford's quarrel with Howard and Arundel. No real historian would fail to compare Howard and Arundel's accusations against Oxford to their subsequent conduct: Howard's record as a paid agent of Spain, and Arundel's pack of lies in *Leicester's Commonwealth*. Finally, no historian would both suppress and misrepresent the critical evidence of Francis Southwell. Nelson falls short on all counts.

III. Nelson's Style

I now turn from specific events to Nelson's style, in particular his penchant for suppression of evidence, insinuation, and «cheap shot.» Before offering examples, I will expand the quotation from his Introduction that I placed at the start of this article: «I beg the open-minded reader to join me in holding the mature Oxford responsible for his own life, letting the documentary evidence speak for itself» (5). As we shall see, Nelson is unwilling to let the evidence speak freely to the reader, presumably because he will not get the outcome he desires. The examples that follow could easily be multiplied tenfold. Incidentally, identifying the quirks of Nelson's style offers a peculiar charm to readers who succeed in overcoming the notion that *Monstrous Adversary* should be regarded as a genuine work of biography or history.

Thomas Fowle, the Cambridge M.A. who had been Oxford's tutor in 1558, was among a group of Puritan clergymen that committed a disorderly protest in Norwich Cathedral in 1570, and Fowle later participated in the lawful

suppression of Catholicism and promotion of Puritanism. Nelson informs us that this background «suggests that [Oxford] was tutored during his formative years by a religious fanatic of violent temper» (25). The sight of a professor from Berkeley, of all places, growing hysterical over a protest demonstration is truly amus-ing. Then, of course, Nelson's target is not Fowle, but Oxford, as Nelson adumbrates his ominous future. I would also like to single out Nelson's weaselly verb, «suggests,» apparently designed to deflect criticism, as in: «I only suggested ...»

In June 1563, Lawrence Nowell wrote that his instruction of Oxford, then age thirteen, «cannot be much longer required.» Nelson comments: «Perhaps Oxford had surpassed Nowell's capacity to instruct him. More likely—since nothing indicates that Oxford was an enthusiastic student, and much indicates that he was not—Nowell found the youth intractable» (39). Here Nelson at least allows for both good and bad possibilities, although he provides no support for the opinion he places inside the hyphens. But later in the book Nelson returns to this episode: «Lawrence Nowell ... declare[d] the 17th Earl incapable of further instruction» (437). So much for the pretence of objectivity.

Oxford experienced illness for a few months in 1569-70, then headed north to join the Earl of Sussex's punitive raid into Scotland. From Oxford's medical expenses, plus the fact that a few of his later book dedications came from apothecaries, Nelson opines that, «we may infer that Oxford was chronically sickly, hypochondriacal, or both» (51). Once again Nelson qualifies his childish logic with a weaselly verb, «may infer»—after all, he may infer whatever he likes—but the plural subject, «we,» means that Nelson refuses even to accept responsibility for the inference.

The concluding paragraph of Nelson's chapter on Oxford's marriage in December 1571 opens thus: «It is difficult to believe that the happiness of the couple was complete» (77). The supporting evidence is the fact that Oxford's bride was a virgin, along with Nelson's opinion that Oxford was a «buck,» although Nelson offers no evidence that the buck was not also a virgin. Note that Nelson's unmeasurable requirement for happiness is absolute, not merely that happiness might be very great or almost complete. Note also the passive voice, which prevents us from knowing who finds it difficult to believe that this unmeasurable absolute requirement was met. In short, Nelson's verdict is meaningless.

In 1572, Oxford gained possession of his inheritance, drawing Nelson to remark: «On May 30 the license Oxford had anticipated for most of his conscious life was finally issued» (83). No weasel verb here! Nelson forthrightly presents opinion as fact, but, alas, we are not informed whether the alleged fact is based on tangible evidence or on mind reading.

Nelson's Chapter 21 consists of miscellaneous items from January to June 1573. He concludes with the observation that Oxford's wife, age seventeen and a half years, had yet to become pregnant after two and a half years of marriage. Nelson insinuates: «To the extent that Oxford had been sexually active since December 1571, it was evidently with partners other than his young, pretty, and lawful wife» (107). Again the passive voice, along with an insinuation of adultery without a scrap of supporting evidence.

Speaking of the «sodomitical multiple sins ... laid against Oxford,» Nelson avers that we have «active witnesses in the figures of Henry Howard, Charles Arundel, and Francis Southwell (before he got cold feet)» (214). Nelson's words clearly imply that Southwell said something implicating Oxford in sodomy, but then got scared. In fact, Southwell's only comment was, as given in the previous section: «I cannot particularly charge my Lord [Oxford] with pedication,» etc. In this instance, Nelson not only suppresses evidence, he misrepresents the suppressed denial as an affirmation.

Oxford's first wife died of a fever on June 5, 1588 and was buried at Westminster Abbey on June 25. Nelson quotes an account of her funeral which lists two groups of participants in the ritual: mourners and carriers of banners. Nelson then cites the observation of Lord Burghley's biographer, Conyers Read: «It is not recorded that her husband was among those present» (309). Thus Nelson would have us conclude that Oxford deserted his wife in death. The trouble with this conclusion, which probably explains why Nelson hides behind Read's authority, is that neither Lord Burghley nor his two sons are recorded among those present, and so it seems that the Countess of Oxford was also deserted by her father and brothers. Actually, all of them may have been there, but not in the two recorded categories of mourners or banner carriers.[26] Their absence, on the other hand, might be explained by the fact that the Spanish Armada sailed from Lisbon for England in May, although, unknown to the English, it was regrouping in Corunna on the date of the funeral.

In September 1595, Oxford received a letter of thanks from King Henry IV of France for assisting in some unknown business with Queen Elizabeth. Nelson's conclusion on this episode: «Similar letters sent on the same day to Burghley

and the Lord Admiral [Howard of Effingham], and an even longer letter to [the Earl of] Essex, suggest that Oxford's letter had no personal significance» (349). A minimally competent historian would have noted that Oxford's association in the eyes of the King of France with the three most powerful and prestigious noblemen in England indicates that Oxford remained a figure of some consequence.

IV. Reading Nelson Against the Grain

Despite Nelson's efforts to portray Oxford's life as a half century of unbroken shame and disgrace, some positive aspects may be gleaned by readers who know where to look—and who possess the requisite background knowledge. To begin with, save for the period 1581-3, Oxford remained in favor with his hard-to-please sovereign Queen Elizabeth until her death. Moreover, her perception of his ability and loyalty caused her to choose him for military commands against Spain in 1585 and 1588.

Nelson meticulously records the fairly impressive vote totals that Oxford received for the prestigious Order of the Garter during 1569-80 and 1585-8.[27] Nelson predictably invents an unpleasant explanation for Oxford's failure to gain any votes thereafter until 1604. Regarding his presumption that Oxford refused the Harwich command in 1588, Nelson imagines that: «the Queen did not forget the truth: while she lived, Oxford never received another vote for the Order of the Garter» (319). Aside from the lack of any evidence supporting this assertion, Nelson supposes Elizabeth as a moral coward who was unable to forbid Oxford from taking a prominent place in her victory celebration, but who chose instead to secretly blackball him with regard to the Knights of the Garter. Rather out of character for Elizabeth Tudor, especially as Nelson knows that she regularly ignored the vote totals and picked whomever she preferred for the Garter, while her deep disfavor for the Earl of Southampton did not prevent him from garnering a goodly number of Garter votes in 1599 and 1600.[28] More can be profitably said on this topic.

Perhaps Oxford did not go to Harwich in 1588. Military history is full of soldiers, including some famous ones like U. S. General George Patton, who used any method to get to the battle zone and avoid the rear echelon. The superiors of such men may well have regarded them as infernal nuisances, but no one calls them shirkers—except Nelson. Yet Nelson's contextual ignorance spills over into areas of his supposed competence. In 1589, the year after Oxford's supposed disgrace, Edmund Spenser wrote dedicatory sonnets to fourteen men, one of whom was Oxford, for the first edition of *Faerie Queene*. Nelson prints the sonnet to Oxford (383) but misses the context. The other thirteen men were Hatton, Burghley, Northumberland, Cumberland, Essex, Ormond, Howard of Effingham, Hunsdon, Grey of Wilton, Buckhurst, Walsingham, Sir John Norris, and Ralegh. Aside from Grey and Norris, to whom Spenser had personal connections, the other eleven were the top movers and shakers at Elizabeth's Court.[29] Like the supposedly deluded Henry IV of France, Spenser somehow managed to insert Oxford into this roll call of the mighty.

Oxford maintained relations, both friendly and unfriendly, with Sir Walter Ralegh over a period of twenty-five years, but Nelson bungles their last known connection. After Essex's rebellion and execution in February 1601, Ralegh rose to the peak of his power and influence with the Queen, thereby eliciting from Oxford a witticism about upstarts, which was recorded by Francis Bacon and Sir Robert Naunton. Nelson reports these facts, but somehow twists them into a tale of Oxford gloating over Ralegh's downfall (397), which actually took place in 1603, and about which Oxford is not known to have expressed any opinion. Ralegh's destruction, incidentally, was engineered by the viperous Lord Henry Howard, who poisoned the mind of King James against Ralegh, naming him, among other things, «the greatest Lucifer that hath lived in our age,» in a series of letters from 1601-03.[30]

I will end this section by mentioning several of Oxford's friends. During his separation from his first wife, 1576-81, Oxford formed a double connection to Catherine Bertie, dowager Duchess of Suffolk, whom Nelson mistakenly calls a Countess (172-3, 176-7). In summer 1577, Oxford's sister and the Duchess's son decided to marry, but Oxford objected to the match, reportedly threatening death to his sister's fiancée, while the Duchess objected to Oxford's religion, unbridled tongue, and general demeanor. Nelson misses the obvious problem, which is that Oxford had become, or was soon to become, a Catholic, while the Duchess was a staunch Puritan who had fled England during Queen Mary's reign. However, by December the Duchess said to Oxford's sister that, «now I wish to your brother as much good as to my own son.» Meanwhile, the Duchess tried to arrange a seemingly accidental meeting between Oxford and his infant daughter as a prelude to repairing his marriage. Otherwise, the wedding of Oxford's sister to the Duchess's son proceeded, and Oxford became the friend of his new brother-in-law.[31]

The poems in Nathaniel Baxter's 1606 *Ourania* include three eulogistic stanzas on Oxford (430-1), which merit examination as an acquaintance's reflection on Oxford's life. Baxter's first stanza essentially hails Oxford's prowess in tournaments which occurred in the 1570s and 80s. The first three lines of the second stanza allow that Oxford wasted his fortune, while lauding him as learned, just, affable, and plain (presumably meaning honest or candid; *OED*, adjective, iv). The next four lines refer to the Howard-Arundel affair, denying that Oxford plotted against the Queen, but only that he put his trust in men who proved unjust. The third stanza returns to Oxford's learning, which displayed his honor as fruits prove the goodness of a tree. Baxter earns credit for his candor and courage, first by admitting that Oxford was a wastrel, secondly by defending Oxford in the Howard-Arundel matter, as Henry Howard had by then become Earl of Northampton, a privy councilor, and a confidant of King James. Otherwise, Baxter gives us four positive adjectives, perhaps appropriate tokens of a life that fell short of its promise.

Nelson spends a considerable number of words trying to portray Oxford as a sex fiend, although, prior to the appearance of Nelson's book, Oxford was known to have strayed only once in his life: his affair with the maid of honor in 1580-1. Nelson manages to double the count: a lighthearted letter from an English knight in Venice in 1587 reveals an old liaison between Oxford and the knight's neighbor, one Virginia Padoana, whom Nelson identified as a courtesan or high class prostitute (138-9). I also award him credit for printing the courtesan's reaction, as recorded by the knight, to a man she knew eleven years earlier: «Virginia Padoana ... honoreth all our nation for my Lord of Oxford's sake.» Not a bad compliment.

V. Conclusion

There is a maddening disparity between Nelson the diligent research assistant and Nelson the puerile demonizer. An objective scholar could have transformed Nelson's materials on Oxford's turbulent and messy life into an illuminating study of Elizabeth's Court. Instead, readers of *Monstrous Adversary* end up asking who went further off the rails: Oxford or Nelson? Yet Nelson's approach—his belief that historical texts can be made to say whatever he wants them to say—did not arise from a void.

I noted at the start of this essay that Nelson cannot do history, but after all, he is a literature professor, not a historian. Nelson's treatment of historical texts is, in a surreal sense, a product of his academic discipline. Frederick Crews, one of Nelson's colleagues at the Berkeley English Department, lampooned the wackier tendencies in modern literary criticism in his two bestsellers, *The Pooh Perplex* (1963) and *Postmodern Pooh* (2001). Each book describes an imaginary conference where a group of academic critics analyzes the Winnie-the-Pooh stories, with each critic following his or her own specialty: Freudianism, Marxism, new historicism, post-colonialism, and so on. The critics regard Pooh as belonging to them individually, to be supplied with authorial intention, context, and meaning to suit each critic's tastes. In other words, the critic owns the text. One of Crews's characters, a cyberporn expert, justifies his approach to his colleagues: «If you want to make something else out of it, be my guest—just so you don't call your idea the point of the poem. The same rule applies to *Winnie-the-Pooh*, which is so easy to jam your own thoughts into that you can do it on autopilot after a while ... The sky's the limit if you cheat a little by leaving out whatever doesn't fit your theory.»[32]
There, in a nutshell, is *Monstrous Adversary*: the application to historical documents of such fashionable lit-crit inanities as «the author is dead» and «all reading is misreading.» Nelson wrenches his documents from their backgrounds, which he then replaces with his own commentary to support his thesis that Oxford was a monster. Nelson no more acknowledges an obligation to the normal rules of historical scholarship than a deconstructionist recognizes rules of literary scholarship. Just as the post-structuralist believes that texts are infinitely malleable, so Nelson feels entitled to recreate the past to suit his fancies.

Endnotes

1 As a distinguished historian recently explained: «Common sense is prone to assert that ‹the facts speak for themselves›. Historians know that this is just what they don't do. Facts ... have to be scrutinized against a background, a setting, in a context.» Richard Fletcher, *Bloodfeud: Murder and Revenge in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2003), 6.

2 Nelson's introductory remark on his documents adds that he, «felt duty-bound to point out their significance for an accurate estimation of Oxford's character.» As it turns out, this does not mean establishing the documents' contexts, but only asserting their implications.

3 See documents 3.1[3] and 4.2[2] on Nelson's website socrates.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson/authorsh.html

4 This passage is in Nelson's document 4.3[1.2], which he mentions on p. 206 as «(LIB-1/2).» I have modernized this and subsequent quotations.

5 See my Response to Alan Nelson's «Oxford in Venice: New Light on an Old Question» on page 275-281 of this book.

6 Conyers Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth* (New York, 1960), 322-4. See also Elizabeth Jenkins, *Elizabeth and Leicester* (New York, 1961), 303-6.
7 Nelson and I both give the Old Style (O.S.) dates used in Elizabethan England, while the Spanish and most modern books use the New Style (N.S.) introduced in 1582, which adds ten days, e.g., July 19 O.S. is July 29 N.S.
8 See Anne Somerset, *Elizabeth I* (New York, 1991), 385-94.
9 Howard was readmitted to Elizabeth's presence around 1597; see Linda Levy Peck, *Northampton: Patronage and Policy at the Court of James I* (London, 1982), 15.
10 Elizabeth Jenkins, *Elizabeth the Great* (New York, 1958), 257.
11 Reference to «satire,» p. 275. On p. 472, Chapter 51, note 3, Nelson attempts to overturn the judgment of the modern editor of *Leicester's Commonwealth*, D. C. Peck, on Arundel's authorial involvement, without offering the least justification for his bare opinion.
12 See Nelson's website documents 4.2 by Arundel and 3.1, 3.2, and 3.6 by Howard.
13 Nelson's documents 3.6.1 and 3.6.2.
14 *Statutes of the Realm*, 1 Edward VI, c. 12, §22; 5&6 Edward VI, c. 11, §9; 1&2 Philip & Mary, c. 10, §11, my emphasis. See my «Hamlet and the Two Witness Rule,» on page 33-43 of this book.
15 Nelson's documents 2.3.3, 5.7, and 5.8. On the treason statutes and witnesses, see Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Oxford, 1765-9), 3.363-70; 4.350-2.
16 See also Nelson's documents 3.6.1[3] by Howard and 4.2[6.4] by Arundel.
17 Nelson understates the period of Oxford's disfavor by having the Queen award him a tournament prize in November 1581 (177-8); the tournament was actually in 1584. See Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth* (Berkeley, 1977), 134; and Jenkins, *Elizabeth the Great*, 258.
18 See my article, «The Earl of Oxford and the Order of the Garter,» on page 263-274 of this book.
19 *Dictionary of National Biography*, Howard, Henry, Earl of Northampton.
20 Chaps. 13, 40-2. See also pp. 140-1, 166-7, Chaps. 31, 35, 37-9, and 44.
21 Chap. 48 is slightly over two pages long, but half of it consists of quotations; the half written by Nelson is a little over one page.
22 The suppression of Southwell's evidence is on pp. 204, 214, and 259. Actually Nelson does cite Southwell's refusal to charge Oxford with pederasty, but changes the verb from Southwell's «can not» to «will not» (214).
23 Compare pp. 140-1, 213, and 215 to pp. 155-7.
24 See Peck, *Northampton*, 11 and 220, n. 17, on Howard as a Spanish spy; and 38-40 and 225, nn. 70-2, on his role in the poisoning of Sir Thomas Overbury. I should add that while Howard clearly arranged for the false imprisonment of Overbury, he may not have been involved in the actual murder.
25 See also documents 2.1.1, 2.1.3, 2.1.4, and 2.2.1 on Nelson's website.
26 Sir Philip Sidney's funeral procession is detailed in a book of 32 plates showing 320 men, while indicating an actual total of 484. Seven men, including Sidney's two brothers, are designated as «mourners,» while nine men carry flags. Sidney's widow and sister are omitted, probably because the women waited for the procession at the cathedral. Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney, Courtier Poet* (New Haven, 1991), 308-39.
27 See Nelson's Index under «Garter.»
28 «The Earl of Oxford and the Order of the Garter,» on page 263-274 of this book.
29 *Faerie Queene* was printed in 1590, but was registered for publication in Dec. 1589. Spenser had been Grey's secretary in Ireland, while Norris was governor of Munster, the province where Spenser lived. Of the thirteen men, all were or became Knights of the Garter, save Ralegh, Walsingham, and Norris. Fourteen of England's eighteen earls (as of Dec. 1589; Leicester, incidentally, died in 1588) did not get dedicatory sonnets.
30 Peck, *Northampton*, 19-21.
31 See Nelson's Index entries for Bertie, Peregrine, and Vere, Mary.
32 Frederick Crews, *Postmodern Pooh* (New York, 2001), 137.