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# £1000 and the Beginning of England's National Theatre

**By I.C.Q**

*This article is an expansion of the closing talk at the April 2016 AGM and its brief recap in the previous newsletter.*

The sum of a thousand pounds is the most often cited sum in the Shakespeare canon. The word “thousand” itself appears 340 times; so obviously it is not always to do with money, though some of the other words it is paired with, such as ‘ways’ and ‘chances.’ When it does have to do with money, the monetary denomination sometimes changes, often having to do with the setting of the play. But there are also curious instances where that denomination changes within the play; for instance, in the *Henry IVs*, where there are five instances of “thousand pound” mentions, mostly by Falstaff; the portly rogue also switches to “a thousand marks.” In all, there are 12 mentions of a “thousand pounds,” which are spread across seven plays. Add to this other currencies, such as marks, ducats, crowns, and pieces, and the “thousand” monetary mention (sans exchange rates) swells to 27, with six more plays.

## Money Matters

The amount increases from there, and in various monetary denominations (with only a sole mention of ‘pounds’, in *Cymbeline*), from two thousand all the way to a hundred thousand, for example in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Richard II*. While it is one thing for scholars and the ‘Authorship Curious’ to read about this preponderance of budgetary bombast, hearing it in performance is another matter – and recall that in the 16th century the vernacular associated with theatre was that one was ‘going to hear a play.’ Certain lines in particular carry a seductive implication: “Sirrah, do I owe you a thousand pound?” “A thousand pounds by the year: thus runs the bill.” “A thousand pound to furnish me forth?” “Bid her send me presently a thousand pounds.” “A thousand pound a year, annual support.” What would stand out starkly in hearing it voiced by an actor, once you are aware of the significance of the sum, is that it is an invoice.

## Why an Invoice?

Most Oxfordians are aware that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, received payment of one thousand pounds from Queen Elizabeth in 1586. This was to be an annual stipend for the extent of his life, and the fact that it was renewed by King James after her death, cements the assertion that it was for services rendered as a playwright. Others argue, however, that it was simply a restorative measure for his place in the peerage – a high-

ranking earl of his stature required a certain financial foundation to retain his status. But, like so many polarised arguments, there is no reason why both cannot be true.

In fact, it is more a question of timing. Many Oxfordians often unwittingly fall into the Stratfordian timeline of composition, so much so that some have turned to other candidates that more easily comply with the dating scheme – a timeline that reputable orthodox scholar E.K. Chambers noted as speculative, at best. However, recent research by Oxfordians, such as that in *Dating Shakespeare's Plays*, as well as Richard Malim's *The Earl of Oxford and the Making of Shakespeare*, illustrate why much earlier composition dates must be entertained. Equally, there are clear historical markers indicating why Oxford, as the presumed original playwright, would feel compelled to insert intermittent reminders to Queen Elizabeth in the plays about the sum that would be eventually remunerated to him in 1586. (Incidentally, the term 'remuneration' itself is used 11 times in *Love's Labour's Lost* to great comic effect, but a particular line worth noting is: "there is remuneration; for the best ward of mine ...")

## State-Subsidized Theatre

In *The Shakespearean Stage*, orthodox scholar Andrew Gurr [via *Wikipedia*] asserted that there was "a specific political motive behind the formation of the [Queen's Men]. Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford were using their companies of players to compete for attention and prestige at each year's Christmas festivities at Court; Elizabeth and her councillors apparently judged the competition, and the noblemen's egos, to be getting out of hand ..." In response, she established her own company of players, though that wouldn't necessarily hamstring the writer/producers. Authors Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean state, in *The Queen's Men and Their Plays*: "The Queen's Men were a deliberately political company in origin, and their repertory appears to have followed the path no doubt pointed out for them by Sir Francis Walsingham." No doubt. The Secretary of State starting a theatre company in 1583? But even a state-sponsored troupe needs material to perform. Why not turn to the best of the writer/producers who prompted the formation of the company? And of course state- sponsored material would require ... remuneration.

Oxford complained in letter after letter, such as this one to Robert Cecil in 1601 (Fowler, *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford's Letters*. P.558) that: "...for as the time is it were not reason. But if it shall please her Majesty in regard of my youth, time & fortune spent in her Court, adding thereto her Majesty's favours and promises which drew me on without any mistrust the more to presume in mine own expenses, to confer " One might infer, or rephrase: In his youth, he used his own money to fund her project, relying on her promise of (re)payment.

Given the Queen's reputation for being notoriously tight with money, the assumption that Oxford's annuity in 1586 was a pre-payment is ahistorical. (Aside: Scholars have claimed that Queen Elizabeth disliked Philip Sidney because she wouldn't appoint him to an important post, while others reason that this was because she knew he couldn't afford it. The record is replete with noblemen fell deeply into debt in her service, Walter Devereux and Philip's father, Henry Sidney, among them.) But while Oxford repeatedly complained of insufficient recompense, other writers chafed that he was getting paid at all.

### Reason for Rhyme

Perhaps the most telling reaction to the £1000 payment comes courtesy of the aforementioned Edmund Spenser, although it is apocryphal. Legend has it that Spenser expected a £100 payment from Queen Elizabeth for his epic poem *The Faerie Queene*. First, an expectation of this kind suggests there would be a precedent for state-sponsorship. When his recompense is not forthcoming, he is said to have sent her the poesy:

I was promis'd on a time,  
To have a reason for my rhyme:  
But from that time unto this season,  
I had neither rhyme or reason.

The resolve is that the little quatrain so charmed the Queen that she straightway instructed her Treasurer, Lord Burghley, to pay the poet the delinquent sum. While it's sweet unto itself, the fact that the poem echoes rhyming couplets from two of Shakespeare's plays, *Comedy of Errors* and *As You Like It*, is not an accident. The story is – much like the broadsheet ballads of the day that embedded kernels of truth and aspects of history into memorable, distilled ditties – a way of preserving the spirit, if not the letter, of the truth. If the story were true on its surface, Spenser quoting from a writer who was paid for his work further underscores the repetition in the plays of the very sum Oxford begins to receive in 1586. Almost a smoking gun, as it were. Or at least a more definitive start-date scenario for England's National Theatre.

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### Addendum:

A table of the monetary sums mentioned in the canon, the plays where they appear, the denominations and progressions, etc., could prove a fruitful avenue of investigation. Also: a table of sorts of all the writers who make mention of the thousand pound payment or allude to it in some way would equally help.