

A Brief Case for Oxford

J. T. Looney *Shakespeare Identified* (1920)

In trying to find a match between the works and an author who could have written them, claims have been made for Bacon or Marlowe. However, many more scholars are now persuaded by a considerable body of evidence and a wide range of arguments that Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, was in fact the author known as ‘Shakespeare’.

The Oxfordian Case was first articulated by a British schoolmaster, [John Thomas Looney in *Shakespeare Identified*](#) published in 1920, who profiled the author, as follows:

Main characteristics:

1. A mature man of recognized genius.
2. Apparently eccentric and mysterious.
3. Of intense sensibility — a man apart.
4. Unconventional.
5. Not adequately appreciated.
6. Of pronounced and known literary tastes.
7. An enthusiast in the world of drama.
8. A lyric poet of recognized talent.
9. Of superior education — especially classical — the habitual associate of educated people

Next, Looney adduced some secondary characteristics as follows:

10. A man with Feudal connections.
11. A member of the higher aristocracy.
12. Connected with Lancastrian supporters.
13. An enthusiast for Italy.
14. A follower of sport (including falconry).
15. A lover of music.
16. Loose and improvident in money matters.
17. Doubtful and somewhat conflicting in his attitude to woman.

Looney then consulted the *Dictionary of National Biography* and found that Edward de Vere was a very good fit for all of these characteristics.

A brief review of Oxford’s life reveals close matches with the plays, among them *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear*.

Short life of Edward de Vere (1550-1604)



Arms of Earl of Oxford



William Cecil, Oxford's guardian and later his father-in-law

Edward de Vere was born in 1550. His father, John de Vere, the sixteenth earl, held the title of Lord Great Chamberlain (as Edward did later) and officiated at the coronations of both Mary and Elizabeth. In 1561, when Edward was eleven years old, his father entertained Queen Elizabeth at Castle Hedingham with four days of masques, feasting and entertainment. From a young age, Edward had scholarly tutors, including Sir Thomas Smith and Lawrence Nowell, Dean of Lichfield.

When his father died in 1562, young Edward became a royal ward (like Bertram in *All's Well*) under [the care of William Cecil](#), the Queen's Secretary. Lord Oxford's personal curriculum included study of French, Latin, and Greek. His education included a spell at Queens' College and at St John's College, Cambridge. He later enrolled at Gray's Inn.

His maternal uncle, Arthur Golding, was a visitor at Burghley's house while Edward was still a ward. In 1567 Golding published his translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an extremely influential text throughout the works of Shakespeare. In 1570, Oxford purchased a copy of the Geneva Bible (the [version preferred by 'Shakespeare'](#)). This copy has many marginal annotations of many obscure passages, echoed in the plays.

IS THIS SHAKESPEARE?



Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, 1550 -1604

In 1571, Edward married Anne Cecil, the daughter of his former guardian, who was ennobled at this time as Lord Burghley. The marriage was not a happy one and Edward preferred to travel. In 1575-76, he toured Europe, spending a year in Italy, mainly Venice, the setting for many plays. Oxford was acknowledged in his lifetime as a poet, playwright and a particularly generous, literary patron. The writers and dramatists, John Lyly and Anthony Munday, were at this time under Oxford's patronage and part of his household. In 1586, at a time of national crisis, the Queen awarded Oxford an annual pension of £1000 for no apparent reason. Oxfordians believe that Oxford had become the concealed court playwright, presenting history plays to promote national unity.



William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke

to Oxford's daughters. William, Earl of Pembroke, had once been betrothed to Bridget Vere. Philip, Earl of Montgomery, married Oxford's youngest daughter, Susan in 1604.

Oxford was associated with Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (1573-1624). Southampton was seen as a prospective husband for Oxford's eldest daughter, Elizabeth, in 1593, the year that *Venus and Adonis* was dedicated to Southampton. The younger earl, however, chose another woman and the Lady Elizabeth married the Earl of Derby in 1595. In 1603, James I renewed the annual pension to 'Great Oxford'. A year later, Edward de Vere died at the age of 54.

We do not know who instigated the publication of the First Folio in 1623.

However, the two nobles to whom the First Folio was dedicated had close connections

Oxford as author of *Hamlet*

Hamlet is Shakespeare's longest play, it contains the longest part in any one play, and it also has the most lines of soliloquies. For these reasons, many scholars have followed Freud (a renowned Oxfordian) and viewed Hamlet as "the most autobiographical character" in which the author reveals himself intimately. However, there is little similarity between the situation of Hamlet and the life of the Stratford man.

Sigmund Freud was among those to recognise that the situation and character of Hamlet closely correspond to Oxford's life at the age of 21. Both Hamlet and Edward de Vere were brought up at court, with a distaste for the Queen's lover. Both lack respect for the counsellor; both are involved romantically with the counsellor's daughter; both have a rivalry with the counsellor's son. Both enjoy the company of players and understand their influence over public opinion. Both are good at fencing and both kill a man with a rapier.

There are many further parallels. Polonius's advice to Laertes is almost word for word the same as Burghley's advice to his son, Robert Cecil, which was contained in a private letter. Polonius (named Corambis in Q1) is clearly a caricature of Lord Burghley (motto: *Cor unum via una*) as is accepted by many, especially if Q1 dates to the 1580s. The name was changed to Polonius in 1604 in Q2, as a mark of respect for Burghley who died in 1598. When Hamlet enters reading a book, Polonius asks: "What do you read, my lord?" The book has been identified by scholars as *De Consolatione*, by the Italian Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576). Its English translation, *Cardanus' Comfort*, was published in 1573 at the request of Oxford.

When Hamlet is en route to England, he is taken by pirates but escapes. When returning from Holland in 1576, Oxford lost his possessions when captured by pirates in the Channel. Another parallel occurs when Hamlet states: 'I am but mad north-north-west'. In 1577, Oxford had lost heavily on investments made in the unsuccessful voyage by Frobisher in search of the North-West Passage in 1577. Yet another point of similarity lies in the topicality of *Hamlet* at the time of the trial of Mary Queen of Scots in 1586-7. Parallels between Hamlet's quest for revenge and Elizabeth's dilemma over the execution of an anointed monarch have been explored in detail since the eighteenth century. Oxford was a senior peer on the tribunal which condemned Mary.

Thus it is most likely that Oxford was the author of *Hamlet*, Contemporary allusions to a play about Hamlet in 1589, 1594 and 1596, usually dismissed as to a lost play on the same subject by another author, are probably to an early play by Oxford, (the Q1 text), which he later revised and enlarged into the Q2 version.

Oxford as author of *Twelfth Night*

The conventional account of the Bard's career derives mainly from evidence within the plays and relies on a large number of suppositions, which stretch the imagination. It states that William of Stratford, without any documented access to court or any seat of learning and without travelling in Italy, wrote a series of brilliant comedies about royals and nobles in the period 1590 – 1602. These displayed an exceptional knowledge of court life, foreign literature and Italian customs. For a provincial actor to have written witty, but biting satire on the Queen's private life and her courtiers is beyond belief.

Since all the sources for the play can be dated before 1579, it is much more plausible that *Twelfth Night* was an early play, composed by a marginalised aristocrat in the late 1570s or early 1580s, when there was still interest and hope at Court in the question of the Queen's Marriage. This was also the time when romances were popular: *Delight* (1580) and *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune* (1582) were both performed at court before the Queen.

Twelfth Night was probably intended for performance only to a private aristocratic circle by a private acting company. Lord Oxford's Men were very active from the late 1570s and were prominent at court and in the public playhouses. In 1580, he took over the Earl of Warwick's acting company and Lord Oxford's players were prominent until 1584, when the Queen's Men were formed.

One important character is the clown. Feste is tolerated by Olivia and shows more insight than any other character in the play. The role of an allowed fool seems to mirror Oxford's own position at court extremely closely.

*This fellow is wise enough to play the fool
And to do that well craves a kind of wit:
He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
The quality of persons, and the time,
And like the haggard, check at every feather
That comes before his eye. This is a practice
As full of labour as a wise man's art:
For folly that he wisely shows is fit;
But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit.* (TN 3,1, 61-9)

Twelfth Night would then have been revived at short notice (perhaps renamed) for a court performance on 6 January 1601, with a subsequent performance at the Middle Temple in January 1602. Oxford's background, education and knowledge place him ideally as the author of *Twelfth Night*. William of Stratford's background does not.

Oxford as author of *King Lear*

King Lear is a tragic tale depicting the fall of a great man, forced to divide his ancestral patrimony among three daughters; two of whom are married to powerful noblemen and promise respect; the youngest, who is unmarried, replies honestly and with a misplaced wisdom that enrages the old man. While the older daughters and their husbands divide their fathers' spoils between them, the old man is left to fall into poverty and ruin, regretting his earlier wrath and seeking the forgiveness of his youngest daughter.

Strangely, this is not only the ancient story of Lear, King of England, but also of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who was so deep in debt in 1591 that he signed away his family seat at Castle Hedingham in Essex. He divided his remaining land holding between his elder daughters, Elizabeth and Bridget. These two married William Stanley, sixth Earl of Derby, and Francis Norris, the Earl of Berkshire. His youngest daughter, Susan, continued to live with him, away from the court in relative obscurity until his death in 1604. Soon afterwards, Susan married Philip Herbert, one of the Incomparable Pair of Brethren to whom Shakespeare's First Folio was dedicated in 1623.

The coincidences between the story of King Lear and Edward de Vere are extensive and as the earl's impoverishment was well known, it is very likely that plays such as *The moste famous Chronicle historye of Leire kinge of England and his Three Daughters* (1594) and *King Lear* (in 1606) would have suggested de Vere's ruin. Since it was illegal to portray a living person on stage, writers used fables and symbols for their contemporary allusions. Perhaps after watching *King Leire* or *King Lear*, the court might have been tempted to think that Oxford had been badly treated after all.

The conventional account of Shakespeare's career is highly speculative. It states that Shakespeare (in a sea of depression inconsistent with his material prosperity in Stratford) wrote a series of moving tragedies about neglected royals and nobles in the period 1601 – 1606. He was led to compose *King Lear* after inheriting 30/s from an actor in 1605 (Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life*, 1998) or as a political tract to please the King (Anthony Holden *William Shakespeare*, 1999).

A more convincing explanation is that *King Lear* was originally composed in 1594, when the government was concerned about the royal succession; it was performed for the Queen and Court (perhaps at Greenwich in March 1594) as a farewell to public life by a lord; a revealing self portrait of a tortured noble, embittered at his treatment by relatives; by an earl whose property had been seized by others; a lord whose final concern was for a daughter he had wronged.

FAQs

What is the Shakespeare Authorship Question ?

The Shakespeare Authorship Question (SAQ) raises the issue of who wrote the works traditionally ascribed to ‘Shakespeare’. There are many reasons to doubt, which collectively indicate that there is a serious problem of attribution.

There was a man from Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, called William Shakspeare, to give the customary form of spelling his name. He was baptised on 26 April 1564 and was buried on the 25 April 1616. He bought property in both Stratford and in London and he was a sharer in a theatre company.

However, there is no record for any payment for any play of ‘Shakespeare’, no record of anyone who dealt with Will either as a poet or a playwright in his lifetime. Full-scale biographies of ‘Shakespeare’ only emerged two centuries after Will’s death. These Victorian biographers freely filled in the extensive gaps in line with their view of a national poet with almost divine status. Their myths have been perpetuated ever since.

But surely nobody in Stratford ever doubted that Will wrote the works?

Quite true in that there is no record that anybody in Stratford ever expressed any doubt that Will wrote the great works of ‘Shakespeare’. But there’s a simple reason for that: just as nobody ever expressed any doubts that Elvis Presley was the first man on the moon, nobody ever said that he was. There was no chance to express doubt about a proposition that was never made.

We need to recognise that in his last will and testament William of Stratford never claimed to have written anything. He mentioned no books, whether owned, borrowed or loaned out. He left no money to the wonderful school where he had apparently received the “world-class education” which set him out to super-stardom. He left no money to help promising pupils attend school. He left no journals, no business papers, no letters claiming he was a writer. None of his family ever claimed that he was a poet and playwright. Nor did anybody else from Stratford for almost a century after his death. The reason that there was no expression of doubt is that there was no claim in the first place.

Isn't the Authorship Question a modern invention?

Not at all. It is usually claimed that the first person to express doubts over the attribution of the plays to Will of Stratford was Delia Bacon in the 1850s. Interestingly, she was reacting against the earliest biographies which had just emerged, in which a romanticised life of the Bard was imagined. However, there were many occasions, over the two hundred years between the 1640s and 1850s when doubts were cast. Different modes and discourses were chosen to express these, and, on occasion, provide a cover of deniability. The fact that these doubts surfaced at intervals over a span of two centuries testifies to what we might call an 'underground stream' of doubt. Here are a few examples:

In 1645, *The Great Assizes Holden on Parnassus by Apollo and his Assessors* describes a mock trial of contemporary authors. On the second page, the writer of weekly accounts is identified as 'William Shakespeare'. At the end of the trial, Apollo condemned him to pass back and forward over the river Styx as a go-between, a fixer, a dealer. In 1728, a Captain Goulding wrote *An Essay Against Too Much Reading* to satirise incipient bardolatry and suggest the works were the result of proxy authorship. In 1827 the author of *Tremaine* (Robert Plumer Ward) wrote *De Vere or the Man of Independence*. The title page brings together De Vere, Shakespeare, and Francis Bacon and almost every one of the 26 chapters is headed by a quote from Shakespeare. In 1852, Robert Jamieson posed the question WHO WROTE SHAKSPEARE? in an essay in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*. These examples are explored by Julia Cleave in her article under DVS Research entitled [Early Doubters of Shakespeare's Identity](#).

Much of this has also been described by Charlton Ogburn in *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. The trail leads back into the 17th and even the 16th centuries, with numerous literary allusions to the pseudonymous character of the name 'Shakespeare' and to Oxford's acknowledged status as a writer of pseudonymous comedies and other "rare devices of poetry." In 1610 John Davies refers to Shakespeare as "Our English Terence," alluding to the well-known renaissance belief that Terence was actually the front man for the aristocratic Roman comedian, Scipio.

Don't we know that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare because his name is on the works?

Saying that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare is like saying that Mark Twain wrote the works of Mark Twain or George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss*. It is an empty tautology. The question concerns the identity of the author known as 'Shakespeare' and

by the way, the name of William Shakspere (as the family name appears in Stratford records) is not the same as William Shake-speare which appears on published works.

There are commendations in the First Folio (1623) written by Ben Jonson, but give no personal information about the author. Jonson was probably encouraged to write these at the behest of the publishers Edmund Blount and Isaac Jaggard. Elsewhere, he wrote literary puffs for which he was paid. And the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, who had supported the publication, were his benefactors. So, there's nothing in the commendation to show that Jonson knew the author personally.

Why bother with the author when we have the works?

Credit where credit's due. Firstly, we should recognise and honor the true author of the works and restore a sense of authenticity and truth to the work we study and enjoy under the name 'Shakespeare'.

Then we can note that literary biography provides insight into the meaning and significance of a text. So attaching the wrong author's name and life to the work leads to a host of false assumptions which in turn spawn further misperceptions of the work. Acknowledging Oxford's authorship restores, among other things, the political dimensions of his works which the Stratford story obscures. Like Hamlet himself, Shakespeare conceived drama and its players as being the "abstract and brief chronicles" of the time." No one seriously questions, for example, that John Lyly's *Endymion* (circa. 1584) depends on parallels between characters in play and major figures in the Elizabethan court. An awareness of the parallel between Lyly's main female character Cynthia and the Virgin Queen is a prerequisite to appreciating the play. The great poets of the Elizabethan period such as Edmund Spenser, routinely disguised their more incendiary comments in metaphors or allegories. Such writers published works commenting, often in cleverly oblique ways, on controversial current events which could not be treated more directly under the Tudor court's regime of strict censorship.

Third, acknowledging Oxford's authorship radically transforms our understanding of politics, propaganda and history. After all, if you take Oxford as the author, then a vast contemporary backdrop falls into place, and one apprehends a whole new dimension to the plays: that of political satire. *Hamlet* for instance becomes an intriguing expose of court life under Elizabeth (written by the Hamlet of Elizabeth's Court) which provides us with innumerable valuable insights into the private Court history of the time. The value of this extra dimension for actors and directors is difficult to overestimate. After all, an actor playing Polonius in *Hamlet* can gain enormous

psychological insight into his character by reading up about the historical original, William Cecil, Lord Burghley.

Finally, the topic is of interest from the point of view of intellectual history. Does it matter that for more than two hundred years students have been memorizing a point of view which now seems, to an increasing number of informed scholars, to have been false? It would certainly seem so!

Aren't Authorship sceptics just anti-Shakespeare?

No, we are not anti-Shakespeare. We greatly admire and appreciate the works of 'Shakespeare' and strongly recommend them to others. We are non-Stratfordians in that we believe that it is very unlikely that the works were written by William of Stratford. Of course, if it could readily be proved that he had written the plays and poems that would be an end of the matter. But there is no contemporary record which indicates his status as an author. There is very little evidence even to suggest his involvement – and what little there is casts even more doubt on the claim that he was any kind of author.

Aren't Authorship sceptics just conspiracy theorists?

The term 'conspiracy theorist' seems to be used to denigrate a view before it's been examined. Members of the De Vere Society and other authorship sceptics share a great interest in the works of Shakespeare and a desire to identify and honour the person(s) who wrote them. Much of the material for Ronnie Barker's comedy sketches was attributed to Gerald Wiley and then to Jonathan Cobbold, names used to hide Barker's own contributions. Similarly, authors have used the names Mary Westmancott and Robert Galbraith to conceal their real identities. Thus, the name 'Shakespeare' involves the use of a pseudonym, not a conspiracy.

Aren't authorship sceptics just snobs?

It is often asserted that authorship sceptics are just snobs who can't accept that someone from a modest background can have written the works. The answer to this is simple: no thank you, we are not, just as those who accept *War and Peace*, a great work of literature, are not snobs even though it was written by Count Leo Tolstoy. This line of attack uses the discredited *argumentum ad hominem*, in which opposers seek to ignore the message by denigrating the messenger.

We note that contemporary writers such as Edmund Spenser (1553-1599), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593?) and Ben Jonson (1573-1637) came from modest backgrounds and composed some great works of literature. But in each case, there is considerable contemporary evidence, a 'paper trail,' about their literary activity. In the case of William of Stratford, there are no contemporary records to suggest that he was any kind of author. The authorship question asks not who could have written the plays, but who did. Everything about the Shakespearean canon, as observers like Charlie Chaplin and Mark Twain have noted, suggests an author of an aristocratic background and bias. Almost all the plays portray kings and nobles as their protagonists. One play which doesn't was nevertheless set near a great royal castle and depicts a pageant, where the Queen of the Fairies gives an extensive description of an important royal ceremony. If William of Stratford was writing a play about the gulling of a fat knight, it was more likely to have been called *The Merry Wives of Wilmcote* than the *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Can't everything be explained by genius?

'Shakespeare' was most certainly a genius and authorship sceptics agree that 'Shakespeare' had supreme natural talents. However, in explaining how an artist came to produce outstanding works of art, genius alone is not an explanation. We insist that the talents of a genius have to be recognised and advanced from an early age; that knowledge had to be acquired, that skills had to be developed, that dramatic techniques had to be practised. Michelangelo's talents as a painter and as a sculptor were appreciated at an early age and so he was apprenticed to a master who was working on frescoes at the Sistine Chapel. There Michelangelo studied classical sculpture, a necessary prerequisite for his 'David'. Mozart's genius was recognised at an early age: he began performing publicly by the age of five or six and he was taught intensively. He also studied the works of Handel before he could emulate and surpass them.

In the case of William, there is neither any record of early promise nor any suggestion that he was introduced to a wide range of classical and renaissance literature from an early age. There is no record that he ever attended school – neither in Stratford nor anywhere else, nor that he was ever noticed when he was young. In the case of 'Shakespeare', nobody seemed to notice him until works began to be published under this name from 1593.

If not William of Stratford, then who wrote the plays?

There have been various suggestions as to the true identity of the concealed author: among them Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, Mary Sidney and Henry Neville. We respect all of these researchers and clearly share the common idea that ‘Shakespeare’ was a pseudonym. While a reasonable case can be made for these candidates, we believe that by far the best candidate is Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604).

Oxford’s claim was first made by a schoolteacher John Thomas Looney in 1920 in his book *‘Shakespear’ Identified*. This publication gradually gained support among intellectuals of the time: Sigmund Freud, the actor/director Leslie Howard, and the novelist John Galsworthy. In 1984, Charlton Ogburn published a monumental study, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* which deals with many aspects of the SAQ and Oxford’s claim. Today, Shakespeare lovers are increasingly aware of the authorship question while Oxford’s claim has been made compellingly by Mark Anderson in *Shakespeare By Another Name* (2005).

Was Oxford known as a poet and a playwright?

Early references to Oxford’s literary activities are also abundant and compelling in their effect. In the 1580s, William Webbe (*Discourse of English Poetrie*, 1586) referred to Oxford as deserving the “title of most excellent” among Elizabethan court poets. The anonymous author of *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), in writing of those “noble Gentlemen in the court that have written commendably well and suppressed it aganye, or else suffered it to be publisht without their own names to it”, and then referring later in the same work to those whose writing would be seen as [excellent] “if their doings could be found out and made publicke with the rest, of which number is first that noble Gentleman, Edward Earle of Oxford”, clearly provides significant evidence of Oxford’s status as one of several anonymous and pseudonymous Court writers of the 1580s. A few years later, in 1598, Frances Meres lists Oxford as the “best for Comedy among us” in *Palladis Tamia*. Henry Peacham lists Oxford first among the greatest Elizabethan poets in *The Compleat Gentleman*. This work was published in 1622 when the First Folio of ‘Shakespeare’ was nearly finished. Yet Peacham does not mention Shakespeare at all. For more information, read Peter Dickson’s article at <http://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/oxfords-literary-reputation/>

Why should the author use a pseudonym?

We are not sure as there is no contemporary documentation. We know that many writers use a pen name, although we are not always sure why. Even if they offer an explanation, we cannot be sure that this is the main reason. It is likely that many other writers have used a pseudonym without ever revealing their names.

In the Elizabethan period, poets such as Edmund Spenser published under a false name. The polemical Mar-prelate tracts also concealed the identity of the author. In 1596, Sir John Harington published *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* under the pseudonym of 'Misacmos' as he made unfavourable allusions to the Earl of Leicester.

Many Oxfordians believe that there was no secret about Oxford's authorship of comedies performed at court in the late 1570s and early 1580s. Some plays, perhaps an early version of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, were intended for performance among aristocrats with no intention of showing it to the court since they contained unfavourable satires of Elizabeth. But Elizabeth and her Secretary, Lord Burghley, needed Oxford's dramatic talent to forge a sense of national consciousness through the history plays. Thus during the 1580s, when England was threatened by the Catholic League, led by the Spanish Armada, 'Shakespeare' loyally presented English history on stage in plays such as *The Famous Victories of Henry V* and the anti-Catholic *Troublesome Raigne of King John*. According to this view, the identity of 'Shakespeare' was a state secret, not a conspiracy. De Vere's close relations with powerful persons such as William Cecil, Elizabeth I, and later James I often resulted in an ambiguous portrait of authority. After his death, the pseudonym stuck as it was needed to sell the works in print. Who now would pay to watch a film starring Norma Jean Baker (née Mortenson), or attend a concert by Gordon Sumner, or buy a spy novel by David Cornwell?

What about plays written after Oxford's death in 1604?

Contrary to popular belief, there is no contemporary document to date any play of 'Shakespeare'. Neither records of performance nor of publication indicate when any play was composed (or when or whether it was revised). We can note that by the time of William's death in 1616, 18 plays in the First Folio had yet to be published. On the assumption that William began writing plays when aged 26, a possible chronology has been accepted stretching from 1590 until 1610 or so. However, some Stratfordian scholars believe that he was an 'early starter' and thus date his first plays to 1586 or so. Since there is a wide range of possible dates for the composition (and revision of plays), topical allusions remain conjectural.

The year of Oxford's death in 1604 is an interesting turning point in the publication of quartos of 'Shakespeare'. In the six years preceding, twelve plays appeared in print attributed to 'Shakespeare' and two others appeared for the first time but without attribution (*Romeo & Juliet*, *Henry V*). By contrast, in the following twelve years until the death of William of Stratford, only three new plays appeared in print.

Could Oxford write the plays if he was a misogynist?

Some (but not all) geniuses were less than pleasant people in their private lives. John Lennon wrote the most moving love songs but admitted to being chauvinistic and even physically abusive towards his first wife, Cynthia. Beethoven and Wagner were very difficult to get on with while Picasso had a string of mistresses. Yet their private lives have not been seen as a bar to recognition of their talents. Anyone who claims that a misogynist cannot have written the works of 'Shakespeare' has obviously not read *Othello* or *The Taming of the Shrew* or seen the actions of Bertram in *All's Well*.

The suggestion that Oxford was a misogynist rests on slender evidence. In fact, Oxford was ridiculed for his wife's apparent infidelity. He was abroad in 1575, when his wife, Anne (née Cecil) bore a daughter, the Lady Elizabeth Vere. Rumour spread that Oxford had been cuckolded (a familiar Shakespearean theme). Upon his return to England in 1576, Oxford refused to recognise either his wife or her daughter. Eventually, he was reconciled with his countess by the stratagem of a bed trick (sounds familiar). After Anne died in 1588, he married Elizabeth Trentham. Oxford may not have been the perfect husband, but his treatment of women is no worse than that of many others and does not invalidate his claim as author of the works.

How can I keep in touch with developments in the SAQ?

Three easy steps:

1. Join the De Vere Society;
2. Read the quarterly newsletters;
3. Discuss the SAQ with other members at DVS events.

You can find a wealth of useful material on the website of our sister organisation in North America, the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship:

<http://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org>

Don't forget the Shakespeare Authorship Trust:

<http://www.shakespeareanauthorshiptrust.org.uk>

And sign the Declaration of Reasonable Doubt: doubtaboutwill.org/declaration