

Shakespeare and Mr Looney

by Joan V. Robinson

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In 1920 a schoolmaster named Looney published a book called *'Shakespeare' Identified in Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. This does not sound very promising, and any sensible person would be inclined to dismiss it as some new Baconian nonsense and leave it unread. But Mr Looney's book is no such matter. He does not rely upon codes and anagrams, nor upon doubtful interpretations of the plays. Making use mainly of recognised authorities such as Sir Sidney Lee's *Life of Shakespeare*, he succeeds in building up what any impartial reader must recognise to be at least a plausible case for de Vere.

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alternative to accepting William Shakspeare was to believe that the plays were written by Bacon or by the Man in the Moon, most people preferred to accept William Shakspeare. But when a reasonable alternative is offered the negative evidence begins to have weight.

It has always been surprising that Shakespeare (whoever he was) should have been so little remarked by his contemporaries. I do not wish to maintain that any poet of genius must necessarily have a striking personality, but I cannot help feeling that Shakespeare, of all writers, must have been very noticeable, and yet no one appears ever to have noticed him. This is perhaps merely a personal impression, but there is considerable circumstantial evidence to throw doubt on William Shakspeare's claim. I will quote merely one instance. The scholars have been perplexed by the marked differences in the hand-writing of the six known Shakspeare signatures. Mr Looney suggests that Shakspeare was unable to write, and that when he had to sign a document he called upon whoever was with him to help. The orthodox, on the other hand, maintain that on one occasion he was nervous, on the next he wrote beautifully, and

on a third he was just recovering from a fit.

Having disposed of William Shakspeare with this and numerous other points (each of which separately, of course, can be explained away) Mr Looney set about to find another candidate for the authorship of "Shakespeare"; with engaging simplicity he explains how he happened upon Edward de Vere by a fluke. Then he proceeds to construct his case. I will make no attempt to summarise the evidence, firstly because it is all circumstantial and built up by small touches, so that any condensation of it must make it appear unconvincing; secondly because I do not wish to spoil for anyone the purely detective-story pleasure of reading Mr Looney. I will merely endeavour to describe the final impression.

On the one hand we have the works of Shakespeare attached to the name of a person who, on all the external evidence, appears to have been a nonentity. On the other hand we have a very gifted, fascinating, and somewhat explosive character, claimed by his contemporaries to be the leading poet of the age, of whose work only a handful of early lyrics has survived. On the one hand we have an unknown provincial, arriving in London, it seems, with his pockets stuffed with accomplished and courtly verses ('Venus and Adonis' was published shortly after the date of the first recorded reference to Shakspeare). On the other hand we have the leading poet of the court, the patron of a company of players, known to be a prolific writer, publishing nothing after the age of twenty-six. The double coincidence is certainly

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But to all this there is an obvious answer. Hitherto de Vere has been an almost unknown figure. It is recorded of him that he had a quarrel in a tennis court and called Sir Philip Sidney "Puppy." Successive historians, like sheep fol-

lowing each other through the gap in a hedge, have fastened upon this incident and left the rest of his life unexplored. In this convenient blank, it is natural to argue, Mr Looney has been free to build whatever structure his fancy led him to prefer. Certainly Mr Looney appears to be painstaking and scrupulous, but he is admittedly an amateur at research; it is natural to say that, when a qualified student gets to work on the records, it would be a very strange chance if something does not come to light which will blow Mr Looney's theory sky high.

But now comes Mr B. M. Ward's *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. This is a meticulously impartial work, compiled entirely from contemporary documents, and dabbling in no controversial matters. When much unpublished

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material is brought to light by Mr Ward no single fact emerges that is incompatible with Mr Looney's hypothesis. On the other hand every fresh touch which is added to the portrait of de Vere makes him resemble more closely, in character and in circumstances, the kind of man who might have written "Shakespeare." Moreover it is remarkable that on several occasions where Mr Looney turns out to have made an error (for instance in the identification of Spenser's Willy) the removal of the error actually strengthens his case.

Meanwhile a follower of Mr Looney had pointed out this passage in *The Arte of Poesie* (1589):

In these days poets as well as poesie are become subject to scorn and derision. Whoso is studious in the art, and shows himself excellent in it, they call him phantastical and light-headed. Now of such among the Nobility or Gentry as be very well seen in the making of poesie, it is come to pass that they are loath to be known of their skill. So, many that have written commendably have suppressed it, or suffered it to be published without their names. And in her Majesty's time that now is are sprung up another crew of courtly makers, Noblemen and Gentlemen, who have written excellently well, as it

would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest, of which number is first that noble gentleman, Edward Earle of Oxforde.

If this passage had started Mr Looney on his search the rest of the evidence might have been built round it, but on the contrary it turned up after Mr Looney's case was completed.

Mr Looney was no doubt right to avoid as much as possible the doubtful ground of internal evidence. But internal evidence cannot be neglected, and Dr Rendall, in his study of *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Edward de Vere*, has discovered evidence in plenty. The Sonnets have always presented a dilemma. They are obviously personal, sincere, and written by one equal for another; the attempt to twist them into artificial tributes from a poor poet to a noble patron can only be the result of a complete lack of sensibility. On the other hand to read them against the background of a murky, hand-to-mouth existence in theatres and ale-houses is quite impossible. No sensible reader ever attempts to do so; he reads them on their merits, entirely in a void. Indeed, he may very well protest that this is what he prefers, and that to have to remember Edward de Vere as he reads them would be quite as tiresome as to have to remember William Shakspeare. But Dr Rendall, who has both sensibility and common sense, makes it clear that to recognise de Vere as the author robs the Sonnets of none of their greatness, and adds to them many minor charms.

In all this I have made no attempt to restate the evidence. I merely wish to mention that it exists. The case constructed by Mr Looney and Dr Rendall, has been supported by further research on minor points, and has been

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neatly flanked by some detailed work by Dr Rendall on the handwriting of de Vere, and by some strange stuff about the portraits which, if it can be established, may well prove unanswerable.

Now, if the case is as strong as I am affirming it to be, how does it happen that the

orthodox scholars are content to meet it either by silence or by a few unkind jibes? Why do they not set seriously to work either to explode it or to establish it once and for all?

In the first place, the new theory is extremely disconcerting, the story which it unfolds is excessively queer, and, if it were established, the joke would be far too good. No-one, particularly if he occupies a recognised position, wants to have his ideas so violently upset. Moreover the weight of vested interest, both of capital and

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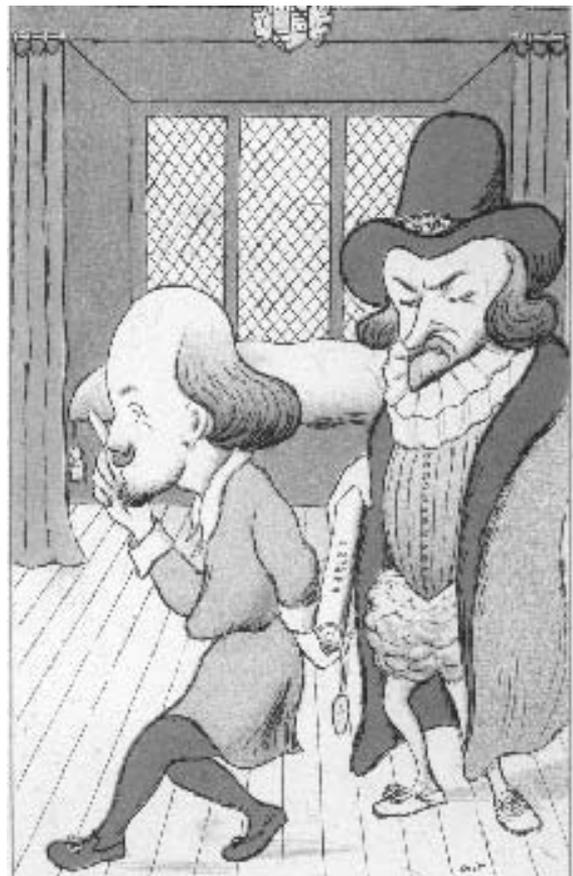
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But secondly, there is some excuse for the scholars who refuse to put their natural scepticism to the test by trying to refute Mr Looney. For Mr Looney, as was to be expected, has been followed by a crowd of outrageous cranks. There are books in favour of de Vere which are full of more-than-Baconian orgies of cryptogram hunting, of fantastic identifications in the plays, and of such nonsensical theories as that the sonnets are addressed to an unknown bastard son of de Vere. To the academic critics they have been a god-send, for it is easy enough to protest that to refute such creatures is merely a waste of time, and, lumping Mr Looney and Dr Rendall along with the rest, the academics dismiss the whole business with a shrug.

My own subject provides instructive examples of the relationship between the academics and the cranks. To begin with the cranks have the right intuitions, but they use the wrong arguments. They are coldly received by the academics, who have been taught how to argue. Then the cranks become embittered and begin to abuse the academics, at the same time strengthening the academic position by piling one absurdity upon another in defence of the crank theories. The academics try to teach the plain man

to sneer at the cranks, but the plain man feels in his bones that there must be something in what the cranks are saying. The whole position is very unsatisfactory to all concerned. Then at last there arises someone who has the training of an academic, the insight of a crank, and the common sense of a plain man; and the whole muddle begins to be cleared up. The cranks, embittered by long oppression, attack him just as though he were orthodox, the academics look at him askance, and the plain man hails him as a prophet. It would be rash to press the analogy too far. But it seems to me that this Shakespeare controversy has reached the second stage, but not the third, and, writing as a plain man in these matters, I appeal to Cambridge once more to come to the rescue.

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**Still from a short animated coloured cartoon called *Shakespeare's Method of Work* by Max Beerbohm, 1904
(Editor's possession)**