

Shakespeare's Native Tongue

by Gary Goldstein

Richard Malim has requested that this article be reprinted in our Newsletter for this reason: Stratfordians perennially evoke the use of Warwickshire dialect in Shakespeare's writings as proof that he was a native of that region. Gary Goldstein's refutation of their argument is therefore also worthy of perennial perusal. We are grateful to Gary for permission to reprint it here.

I would like to begin by quoting the first paragraph of Appleton Morgan's book, *A Study in the Warwickshire Dialect*: 'Circumstantial evidence may be explained away by the testimony of other circumstances. Internal evidence may be upset by context. But words are detectives that never fail to detect, and whose reports cannot be bribed, distorted, or gain-said. No man can write in a language he has never heard, or whose written form he has never learned.'

Consider that paragraph and then consider this fact: the plays of William Shakespeare have been studied for 400 years, yet no scholar will state what language the plays were written in.

I'll be bolder: no scholar will admit that the plays were written in standard English. The dialect accepted as the country's standard language was called 'East Midlands' because it was the dialect of the eastern middle counties of England. It had been the language of London and the Court since the 1450s.

In the words of the English linguist Martyn Wakelin, in *English Dialects: an Introduction*: 'Standard English in its written form was an upper-class dialect developed in London in the late 14th century, mainly on the basis of the influential dialect of East Midland immigrants.'

Another English linguist, G.L. Brook, in his *English Dialects*, enlarges on why East Midlands dialect became the standard: 'From the 15th century onwards,' he writes, 'one dialect, that of the East Midlands, began to be regarded as a standard, largely because of the accident that the two universities and the capital of the country were in that area.'

Wakelin believed that the East Midlands dialect also became the standard spoken language of England by the end of the 16th century. He writes: 'The well known precept in George Puttenham's *The Art of English Poesie*, in 1589, in which the poet is advised to "take the usual speech of the Court, and that of London and the shires living about London within sixty miles", is one of a number of definite statements to the effect that educated, upper-class London and southern speech is by this time the model for those who wish their speech to be of the best sort.'

Scholars don't know how it was the actor from Stratford learned to write fluently in a dialect-

different from the one he used in his native Warwickshire. Indeed, no evidence exists that the school at Stratford even taught him to write in standard English.

Appleton Morgan writes: 'William Shakespeare had been, up to his eighteenth year, a resident of Stratford-upon-Avon, a Warwickshire village, where were spoken a dialect and a patois quite as distinguishable from other British dialects [sic] as from the urban English. For this Warwickshire boy to have achieved the plays was one thing, the most miraculous miracle of genius heaven has vouchsafed mankind. To have written the poem *Venus and Adonis*, however inferior to the plays, genius itself would have been inadequate without the absorption of certain arbitrary rules of composition and the learning by rote of the existence of certain arbitrary trammels and limitations of diction, vocabulary and of prosody. But,' continues Morgan, 'there was not much of an academy in Stratford town to purify the berger's patois in Shakespearean times.'

'Even up at the capital, in London, it was very little better than down in Warwickshire. The members of Elizabeth's parliament could not comprehend each other's speech. This was long before there was a standing army in England. But when the soldiers Elizabeth summoned were grouped in camps, they could not understand the word of command unless given by officers from their own particular shire.'

'And with Stratford grammar school, or any other grammar school, in full blast - the youngsters were not taught English as they might be drilled in three or four textbooks prescribed by the Crown. Dr Halliwell-Phillipps and Mr Furnivall have each prepared lists of these textbooks. But among them all there is not one that suggests instruction in the mother tongue. *That* the youngsters were supposed to learn at home, if they learned it at all. And at home, as well as in this grammar school, it is absolutely impossible that the lad Shakespeare acquired or used any other dialect than the Warwickshire he was born to, and that his father, mother and neighbours spoke.'

It may be equally compelling to discover how Shakespeare learned the dialect of Essex, because he used more than one hundred different types of Essex vocabulary and grammar in 27 of the 37 plays that he wrote.

I propose that Shakespeare would have learned how to write in the standard language - of London and the Court - as a matter of survival. But how to explain that Shakespeare used only one or two words of Warwickshire dialect in his plays?

As Professor Ward Elliott wrote in the fall-winter 1989 issue of the *Shakespeare Newsletter*: 'A glance through Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* reveals that only one of the ten Warwickshire words long invoked by Shakespeare scholars - honey-stalks - could possibly be peculiar to Warwickshire. All the other nine were found in other counties.'

Moreover, Appleton Morgan discovered 'a complete absence of Warwickshire dialect in the poem *Venus and Adonis*'.

To become a great writer in a foreign tongue is a feat that has been repeated by others, but to erase one's native tongue is a feat that linguists claim is simply impossible.

Shakespeare did use various dialects in his plays, but to dramatise character traits for effect - to satirise one's origins, education, sense of humour, or social status. And he used these perfectly, as Morgan writes: 'There is no confusion in the dialects in the plays when used as dialects.'

'Indeed,' says Morgan, 'at least once Shakespeare introduces a dialect in a locality where it does not belong, and so calls attention to it and to the contrast between it and the speech of the other characters present. The occasion referred to is when Edgar meets Oswald in the fields near Dover and disguises his speech by using the Somersetshire dialect.'

Oswald: Wherefore, bold peasant, darest thou support a published traitor? Hence: lest that the infection of his fortune take like hold on thee. Let go his arm.

Edgar: Chill not let go, zir; without vurther 'casion.

Oswald: Let go, slave, or thou diest!

Edgar: Good gentleman, go your gait, and let poor volk pass. An chuld ha' bin zwaggered out of my life, 'twould not ha' bin zo long as 'tis by a vortnight. Nay, come not near th' old man; keep out, che vor ye, or ise try whether your costard or my ballow be the harder: chill be plain with you.

Oswald: Out, Dunghill!

Edgar: Chill pick your teeth, zir: come; no matter vor your foins (Lear, IV, vi, 239)

Morgan provides another example of this use of dialect in Act IV, scene iv, of *Henry V*. He states: 'The scrap of an Irish ballad which Pistol mutters in response to the French prisoner who believes that Pistol has captured him on the field of Agincourt, is another

example proving that the bard knew perfectly well what a dialect was, and that the dialect of one section of England was unintelligible to the native of another.'

The belief that native speakers could not be understood by speakers of other dialects helped establish one dialect as the standard of the country. As Wakelin phrases it: 'The use of dialect in literature in the early modern English period to characterise rustic speakers (such as Edgar in *King Lear*) would also seem to be an indication of the growing belief that one type of English was alone superior to others.'

Shakespeare himself gives us evidence of this belief in his play *As You Like It*, Act III, scene ii, lines 334-8;

Orlando: Your accent is something finer than you could purchase in so removed a dwelling.

Rosalind: I have been told so of many. But indeed an old religious uncle of mine taught me to speak, who was in his youth an inland man ...

That Shakespeare felt compelled to write of his uncle's youthful origin when explaining why he spoke a refined English tells us that the Bard understood that one's early life, one's upbringing, formed the way one spoke as an adult. Moreover, the fact that Shakespeare refers to the isolation of the speaker's dwelling tells us that he understood language to be a social achievement, not an academic exercise performed by oneself and a book. Finally, in the short exchange, Shakespeare indicates that the speech could not be achieved in a rustic setting.

On the other hand, Shakespeare used the southern dialect of Essex throughout the plays as a common form of expression and within the context of standard English. Unlike with standard English, Shakespeare would not have learned the Essex dialect, because there was no need - it was just another dialect. To my mind, that Shakespeare never used Essex dialect to dramatise character traits reveals the extent to which he himself was using this dialect on a day-to-day basis. For this reason, I think it instructive to listen to how Shakespeare wrote in the Essex dialect.

I will first give examples of the Essex vocabulary in the plays.

In *Henry IV, Part One*, Prince Hal says to Falstaff: 'How now, blown Jack?' In Essex, blown describes cattle swollen after eating too much food. In the same play, a local trader says of a horse 'the poor jade is wrung out of all cess.' In Essex, cess means utterly changed. Later the trader uses the word chamber-lye: 'Your chamber-lye breeds flies

like a loach,' where chamber-lye means fermented human urine. Prince Hal, in the same play, says of Falstaff that: 'Falstaff sweats to death, and lards the earth as he walks along.' To lard means that Falstaff oozes fat and so sweats on the earth by dripping on it as he walks along.

In *Henry VI, Part Two*, Falstaff greets the Chief Justice thus: 'I am glad to see you abroad. I heard say your Lordship was sick.' In Essex abroad meant out of doors. In the same play hostess Quickly says to the beadle: 'You starved bloodhound. Thou atomy, thou!' In Essex, atomy means skeleton, being an abbreviation of anatomy, and a contemptuous term for an inconsiderate person.

Shakespeare uses the word canker for the wild rose itself although the Essex dialect word means a disease of the fruit tree or rust on metal. In *Much Ado about Nothing* Don John says: 'I had rather be a canker in the hedge than a rose in his grace.'

In *King Lear* the Fool declares: 'Tom's a-cold.' It is simply the Essex way of saying cold. Lear says to Goneril that he has: 'A daughter, who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable.' Comfortable in the sense that she is kind and easy to get on with, or agreeable.

In *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra says: 'The maid that mills and does the meanest chares,' when she would have said chore or job in standard English.

In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia says: 'O, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful in the contempt and anger of his lips!' The word deal means a large amount.

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Ajax says of Ulysses: 'An 'a be proud with me, I'll feeze his pride.' Meaning that Ajax will drive away his pride. Also in the play, Shakespeare has been misprinted, when Pandarus says to Troilus that: 'We'll put you i' the thills!' The word thills should be fills, which means the two short chains attached to the collar of a cart-horse. Or when Pandarus says: 'A whoreson rascally tissick so troubles me.' Tissick refers to a tickling cough. When Thersites talks about: 'A sleeveless errand,' he means a useless errand.

In *As You Like It*, Celia tells Rosalind about her lover that: 'he hath a Rosalind of a better leer than you.' Meaning he has someone who has a better scowl or frown than Rosalind.

In *Hamlet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses the word mouth when he would otherwise use the word faces or grimaces. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Helena tells Hermia: 'Make mouths upon me when I turn my back.' And in *Hamlet*, Hamlet tells Rosenkrantz: 'Is it not very strange, for my uncle is King of Denmark, and those that would make mouths at him while my father lived would pay

fifty marks for his portrait in little?'

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio uses openarse, the name of the meddler pear, in a sexual pun: 'Oh Romeo, that she were, O, that she were an Openarse, and thou a poppering pear!' Later, Paris, upon being told that Juliet is dead, says: 'Have I thought long to see this morning's face and doth it give me such a sight as this?' To think long is to grow weary or impatient. When Romeo says: 'I dreamt a dream tonight,' he means he dreamt a dream last night.

In *Richard III*, Buckingham greets Queen Elizabeth: 'Good time of day unto your Royal Grace.' Time of day was a greeting in passing.

In *Merry Wives of Windsor*, when the Host of the Garter Inn tells Doctor Caius: 'He will clapper-claw thee rightly, bully,' he means he will be beaten thoroughly or soundly.

I have found more than 75 examples of Essex vocabulary in 20 of the plays, of which the preceding are but a small sample. They do, however, give an outline of the extent to which Shakespeare interlaced Essex words into the speech of lower, middle and upper-class characters.

Essex grammar also appears in 18 of the Shakespeare plays. For example, in Essex, the article is used redundantly before words to express quantity. In *As You Like It*, the wrestler Charles says of Duke Senior: 'They say he is already in the Forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him.'

Kind and sort are treated as plurals and as having collective force - these, them, those, kind. In *King Lear*, Cornwall says: 'These kind of knaves I know.'

The use of adjectives as adverbs, especially when two adjectives are coupled, as in *As You Like It* when Rosalind says: 'I am more than common tall.'

Either and neither are used with a plural verb. As in *Cymbeline*, where Guiderus says: 'Pray you, fetch him hither. Thersites' body is as good as Ajax when neither are alive.'

Personal pronouns, he, she, they, are used redundantly, as in *Henry IV, Part One*, when King Henry IV says: 'The skipping king, he ambled up and down with shallow jesters.'

Objectives such as him, her, them are used for their respective nominatives, as in *Cymbeline*, when the second son of Cymbeline says: 'Say, where us shall lay him?'

Conversely, he, she, and we are used for him, her, us, as in *Othello*, when Othello says to Emilia: 'Yes, you have seen Cassio and she together.'

Essex dialect makes no distinctions between the nominative ye and the objective you, as in *Julius Caesar*, when Anthony tells Brutus, 'I do beseech ye, if you bear me hard.'

The relative pronouns, as, that and what are the usual forms for all genders, singular and plural,

as in *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio says: 'Now he will sit under a medlar tree and wish his mistress were that kind of fruit as maids call medlars.'

The auxiliary verb, should, is used with the infinitive as a substitute for the past tense of another verb, in: 'They tell me John should say.' Should say is merely the equivalent of said. Just as in *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Grumio says: 'When the priest should ask if Katherine should be his wife, 'By God's woun', said he, and swore so loud that all amazed, the priest let fall the book.'

An excellent instance of Essex pronunciation in Shakespeare is in *Hamlet*. For emphasis, the auxiliary verb will is pronounced ooll - 'he ooll have it.' Hamlet uses just this pronunciation when he says to Gertrude: 'Zwounds, show me what thoult do. Woo't weep? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself? Woo't drink up eisel?' In this case woo't is a contraction for wilt thou?

For the phrase want for, meaning in need of, the first record is found in Shakespeare in *Timon of Athens*. Lucius says of Timon: 'Fie, no, do not believe it! He cannot want for money.'

The adverb being, meaning since, is used with or without as. In *Henry IV, Part Two*, the Chief Justice tells Falstaff: 'Sir John, you loiter here too long, being you are to take soldiers up in counties as you go.'

The use of like in the sense of as. In *Pericles*, Antiochus says: 'As those wilt live, fly after, and like an arrow shot from a well-experienced archer doth hit the mark his eye doth level at.'

In Essex, negatives are doubled, redoubled and multiplied, as in Shakespeare in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Lance says; 'Nay, that cannot be so neither.' In *King John*, Bastard Falconbridge says: 'This England never did nor never shall, lie at the proud foot of a conqueror.'

In Essex, the preposition 'along of' for 'owing to' is found in *Cymbeline*, when Cymbeline says: 'O, she was naught; and long of her it was that we meet here so strangely.'

All these examples were taken from the *Essex Dialect Dictionary*, printed in 1920 and reprinted in 1923 and 1969. Its author was an Essex native named Edward Gepp, born in 1855, who graduated from Cambridge University with BA and MA degrees in 1878 and 1883. The Dictionary collates all references to Essex dialect contained in the *English Dialect Dictionary*, the *New English Dictionary* and other glossaries and dictionaries dating back to the Elizabethan period.

From the plays and character that I have cited, you can see that every level of society used the Essex Dialect in the Shakespeare plays. I believe this confirms my theory that the Essex Dialect is a thread

that was woven through the Shakespeare canon by a man who used the dialect as a matter of habit.

In conclusion, I propose that the man who wrote the plays of William Shakespeare was not from Warwickshire. He was a man born and raised in the County of Essex.

Copyright 1990 Gary Goldstein.

Originally delivered as a speech at the 1990 annual conference of the SOS in Pasadena, California and originally appearing in print in the Fall 1990 *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*.

Brunel University

MA in Shakespeare Authorship Studies

Application form at <http://www.brunel.ac.uk/223/PG%20Admissions/AR20207.pdf>.

Brunel is at Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH

Tel 01895 274000 Fax 01895 232806

William Shakespeare's

MacBeth

Edited and fully annotated
by Richard F. Whalen
from an Oxfordian perspective

Horatio Editions/Llumina Press
Published September 2007
ISBN: 978-1-59526-834-1

Soft cover 276 pages 6x9 format
Price: \$14.95 (plus shipping)
Available direct from Llumina Press:
Toll-free Credit-Card orders 9a-5p ET:
1-866-229-9244

Or at www.llumina.com/store/macbeth.htm
Or via email to orders@llumina.com

The Oxfordian Shakespeare Series presents the first fully annotated edition informed by the view that the plays were written by the 17th earl of Oxford -