

REVIEWS

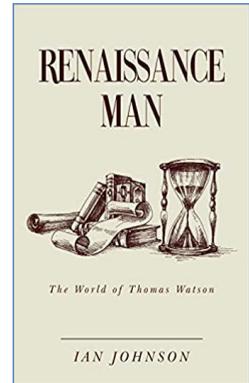
Renaissance Man: The World of Thomas Watson by Ian Johnson

Review by **Kevin Gilvary**

Thomas Watson (1555-1592) was an Elizabethan poet and musician who was a member of the rival literary groups of the Earl of Oxford and Sir Philip Sidney. He was also a close friend of the poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe, and a colleague of the Catholic composer William Byrd. Watson seems to have spent time as government agent, probably an informer for the spy master Sir Francis Walsingham. Watson's rich and interesting life was cut short abruptly by the plague in 1592 when he was aged 37.

The author, Ian Johnson, is to be greatly applauded for drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including much research conducted by Oxfordian scholars. *Renaissance Man* emerges as a detailed and well-rounded biography of an Elizabethan writer of the highest calibre. For Watson deserves to rank alongside Edward de Vere and Sir Philip Sidney as a veritable Renaissance Man. Johnson suggests, quite sensibly, that the rivalry between Oxford and Sidney might not have been so fierce as it has often been described. Watson's role, however, has been overlooked, perhaps due to his premature death or perhaps because of the disreputable company he sometimes kept. Today he is most recognised as a musician friend and colleague of the composer William Byrd. While modern scholars praise his translations of Italian madrigals, in his own day he was famous for a much wider range of activities as a classical scholar, translator, poet, playwright, scientist, traveller, philosopher and cosmologist. His famous book of 100 love poems, *The Hekatompathia or Passionate Centurie of Love*, was published in 1582 and dedicated to Edward de Vere. This collection is widely considered to have influenced Shakespeare's sonnets and *Venus & Adonis*.

Johnson describes the diverse cultural milieu of the Elizabethan Age in a



lucid and interesting manner. For those of us who have focused our attention on literature and the theatre, there were many other exponents of artistic endeavour at the time. Watson seems to have had connections with many of them, and we learn that he studied at Oxford University in his youth.

In the second chapter, Johnson takes us along with Watson in what is known about his seven years of travel in Europe. He demonstrates that while abroad our traveller mixed with English Catholics in France and Germany. He was able to extend his time abroad after he came into some money when his uncle, Thomas Lee died. Watson studied law in Italy and was awarded his degree from the prestigious University of Padua. He returned to northern Europe and shuttled between Paris and the Low Countries, perhaps informing Walsingham about the English Catholics. Eventually, in the late 1570s, he decided to return home: ‘Often my studies were obstructed by wars. Still I fled from camps, save those of Phoebus’, Watson later recorded, reaffirming his interest in the arts.

In chapters three and four, Johnson deals with Watson’s return to England. He probably attended one of the Inns of Court, in common with members of the literati, and quickly established his reputation as a ‘very learned man’. He was well acquainted with the poet and playwright Thomas Lodge, and the pamphleteer and Protestant reformer Barnaby Googe. He was also involved with a number of disreputable people, including a woman who claimed to be the daughter of the late queen. He was known to Walsingham and to Christopher Marlowe. In 1581-82, Watson paid a visit to Paris, perhaps to gather more information on the Catholics. He was acquainted with all those who were later present at Marlowe’s apparent death in Deptford in 1593.

Johnson sensibly brings together an appreciation of Watson’s literary output into a central chapter entitled ‘Poetry, science, wit and wisdom’. Much of Watson’s oeuvre seems to have been lost, most regrettably his drama. For much of the 1580s, Watson was employed as an assistant by Edward de Vere. Watson’s early works were lauded by his friends and colleagues with literary puffs (a promotional activity which became fashionable with Ben Jonson in the Jacobean era). In 1581, Watson published his own Latin translation (more like an adaptation) of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. His own poems circulated in manuscript and at Oxford’s instigation, he had them published with a Greek title Ἐκατομπαθία,

more usually known as *The Hekatompathia*. The range of style, emulation, and learning is ‘truly breath-taking’. We are shown the two versions of Sonnet LXXXI, ‘My Love is Past’, the earliest printed pattern poem in English. Johnson also describes the brief critical introductions to each poem which are known as ‘annotations’ and were written by a third person who refers objectively to the ‘Author’. These annotations give an erudite insight into each poem; in one of six interesting appendices Jonson considers the likelihood that Oxford was the annotator. Johnson also illustrates the wood-cuts used by the printer on the title-page depicting various animals including the caleygreyhound. This animal was an emblem of the earls of Oxford and was later used on the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays. These and many further points of interest in *The Hekatompathia*, often linking Watson to Oxford, and Oxford to Shakespeare, are described in a thoughtful and considered manner.

The following chapter details Watson’s musical co-operation with William Byrd. Watson’s publication in 1590 of *The First Set of Italian Madrigals* involved a loose translation into English, matched to the music ‘after the affection of the note’. Through Byrd, he seems to have consorted with many Catholics during the 1580s, perhaps still acting as an anti-Catholic informant. In 1589, Watson intervened in a brawl between Christopher Bradley and Christopher Marlowe. Acting first as a peace-maker, then in self-defence, Watson killed Bradley with his sword. Watson spent almost six months ill and injured in Newgate Prison before being released. A year or so later, Watson contributed speeches and blank-verse sections for the famous pageant before the Queen in 1591 when she was staying at Elvetham in Hampshire. He may even have written some of the songs. The Queen and some 500 were entertained in ‘magnificent style’.

Watson apparently died of the plague in September 1592. Johnson takes us through the known records and the hints for doubting this. The biography is accompanied by six appendices, copious notes and a detailed bibliography. *Renaissance Man: the World of Thomas Watson* is an important study for all Oxfordians as it gives so much insight into a close associate of Edward de Vere as well as into the artistic life of the court and the capital during the 1580s. Parts of *The Hekatompathia* were transcribed by Barbara Flues and digitised by Robert Brazil. It can be viewed at www.sourcetext.com/hekatompathia/. Edward Arber’s edition of *The Hekatompathia* (1870) can be viewed at www.goo.gl/rmj6xF.