

**The Oxfordian edition of *OTHELLO*
edited by Prof. Ren Dreyer
and Richard F. Whalen**

**Published by Llumina Press, Tamarac,
Florida USA; paperback 309 pages.**

Review by Christopher Dams

This edition, one of a series of Oxfordian editions produced in America which so far includes nine other plays, takes as its starting-point the proposition that Edward de Vere was the dramatist, and it examines the play in the context of his life as ward-of-court, courtier, poet, dramatist and leading aristocrat in the Elizabethan court.

It includes a Preface, and an Overview with sections on Oxford's Life, his Stage and Audience, Composition and Publication, and the Dramatist's Identity. There is also a list of further reading.

The Introduction to *Othello* itself includes a number of references or influences perceptible in the text which point towards Oxford as the author. To take a few examples among many:

The preoccupation with reputation shared by Othello, Cassio, Brabantio and to some extent Iago, reflects the same concern shown in Oxford's early poems: 'The shock of shame and infamy...the loss of my good name.' This is closely linked to the forces of jealousy and shame which dominate the play and drive the characters' actions.

Brabantio is arguably a caricature of Burghley (*c.f.* Polonius) and his hostility to Othello as his son-in-law hints at the stormy relationship between Oxford and his father-in-law.

The strong influence of *commedia dell'arte* is apparent in the play but it was virtually unknown in England after the 1570s, when William of Stratford was supposedly at school. By contrast, it was a major part of Italian life and enjoyed by all ranks in society when Oxford was travelling there. As a result of this influence the comedy in *Othello* is an integral and significant part of the play and not set apart as 'comic relief'. Act I.1.11 66 on is an example.

Most of the major characters can be related to *commedia* stock characters: Othello/Capitano, Iago/Zanni, Brabantio/Pantalone, Cassio/Pedrolino. Desdemona and Emilia also conform to *commedia* stock parts.

There are signs of Oxford's possible covert involvement in the political and diplomatic relations of England with the Ottoman Empire.

Iago and Rodrigo, the arch-villain and his dupe, are both Spanish, not Italian, perhaps reflecting Elizabeth's preoccupation with Spain as her arch-enemy, of which Oxford was well aware.

The Notes are very full and conveniently laid out on the page opposite the text to which they refer. They include, as well as the usual clarification of obscure (to modern readers) words and usages, many references which can be understood to indicate Oxford's authorship.

'I am not what I am'. (Iago I.1.165) echoes Oxford's early poem 'I am not as I seem to be' and even its reversal 'I am what I am' in his letter to Burghley of 1584; it is also echoed in Iago's 'He's that he is' (IV.2.1 242).

Brabantio's '...hear her speak. /If she confess that she was half the wooer./ Destruction on my head....' (I.3.11 174-176) echoes the common London gossip in 1571 that Anne Cecil threw herself, or was thrown, at Oxford.

Othello's descent into jealous rage echoes, very painfully, Oxford's rejection of Anne on his return to England from his Continental travels.

'Your son-in-law is far more fair than black' (Duke to Brabantio I.3.1 286) is noted as a pun on Vere/fair which reinforces the Brabantio/Burghley parallel, and his relationship to Oxford.

'I'll sell all my land'. (Rodrigo I.1.1 358) is seen as an obvious reference to Oxford's method of raising cash to fund his travels.

The handkerchief which figures so largely in III.3 and later, is noted as a parallel to Oxford's gift of scented gloves to the Queen on his return from Italy. Handkerchiefs were luxury items used only in high society.

There are three Appendices contributed by the editors, one each on Military knowledge exhibited in the play (though Oxford's military experience is perhaps overstated), on the knowledge of Music, which was certainly a significant part of Oxford's life, and on the unique features of Famagusta harbour and its fortifications, which he had opportunity to study at first hand (II.1.). This last appendix also points out references to Oxford's possible travels in the Mediterranean during May to September 1575 when his whereabouts are undocumented.

There is also a Bibliography which includes orthodox Shakespearean studies amongst a preponderance of Oxfordian materials.

In the section on 'Dating the Play', the conclusion is that it was first composed in the late 1570s (*A Moor's Masque* performed at Court in March 1579 with Oxford in one of the roles), revised during the '80s and completed by 1593 (Henslowe's mention

of *The Mawe* performed in 1593/4). This compares with 1584-1604, the conclusion in the chapter on *Othello* (by Noemi Magri) in *Dating Shakespeare's Plays*.

This edition does not overtly put the Oxfordian case: rather, and more subtly, it proceeds from a very strong hypothesis that Oxford was the author, to demonstrate the effect that this has on our view of the play. The echoes in Oxford's life of the play's dominating themes of Reputation, Shame and Jealousy are brought out well, and demonstrate how much the acknowledgment of a credible author with a substantial well-documented life story can add to appreciation of the play and its impact on an audience. I would recommend it as the standard edition for any committed Oxfordian, for those who are interested but unconvinced, and perhaps more especially for teachers who want to add an extra dimension to their pupils' study of *Othello*.

C.H.D.



SHAKESPEARE: THE CONCEALED POET

by Robert Detobel

Review by Jan Scheffer and Elke Brackmann

Robert Detobel has definitely achieved mastery in the art of making documents speak. Reading is not as easy a skill as it seems: Detobel indeed teaches us to read anew.

In the introduction he promises thoroughly to examine key documents and place them in their right historical context, something previous scholars have failed to do, doubtless with disastrous results – his unbiased approach to the task, however, is outstanding.

The book is in three parts. A proper reading of the 'lifeless' documents results in his demonstrating that de Vere is Shakespeare.

The dedication to the Herbert brothers and the epistle 'To the Great Variety of Readers' in the First Folio are analyzed first. Robert goes to great lengths to stress a difference most readers might simply overlook. The author was dead and the author could not edit his own works. However, the two statements are not correlated. Minute as the difference might appear at first glance, equally wide-reaching are the consequences for the author-

ship debate. For the epistle tells us that the author was prevented by death from the right to 'oversee' his work, whereas the dedication states that he had no chance 'to execute' his own writings, adding that this was 'common with some'.

Both terms are borrowed from testamentary terminology. The overseer was appointed by the testator to watch the executor; he controlled the carrying-out of the will from the background. This is what Shakespeare was doing as an overseer between 1598 and 1604. In 1604 he was deprived of that right. But even between 1598 and 1604 the author Shakespeare did not publicly assume the role of author, that is, he wrote neither dedications nor epistles to the readers, nor were the works accompanied by encomia. It was not death that deprived him of the right to 'execute'. The fate of not being in a position to 'execute' his own works, was the fate of the aristocratic writer. And so the apposition 'common with some' becomes clear. To execute their own works was common for 'commoners' but not for aristocrats. Thus these two very small bits of information suffice to set free this truth: Shakespeare was an aristocrat or courtier who died in 1604. It is hardly surprising that no noteworthy attempt has been undertaken by orthodox scholars to elucidate the meaning of the prefaces.

The other two chapters of the first part proceed with a close reading of the registers of the Stationers' Company between 1595 and 1623. It is Detobel's merit to have shown for the first time what scholars had been unable to explain up to now: what does the entry about Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* on 22 July 1598 mean?

This is a memorandum to the successive wardens (they were yearly elected anew) of the company that no other stationer could claim the printing of one issue even when the person who held the copy, James Roberts, was waiting a very long time before publishing the play — which, indeed, is what Roberts was doing. But this prohibition could take effect on only one condition: the author had to express his veto. From which it follows that the Lord Chamberlain, making the publication conditional upon his permission or licence, was the author. Who is this Lord Chamberlain? In 1598 there were only two candidates: Lord Hunsdon, Chamberlain of Her Majesty's House, as was his full title, or the Earl of Oxford, Lord Great (or High) Chamberlain of England. Hunsdon is of course an unlikely candidate.

The second part mainly deals with the letter in Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* and Chettle's