



# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 60

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## **Does the lexical vocabulary of Edward de Vere's letters and youthful poems support the hypothesis of his authorship of *The Reign of King Edward III*? [Part 1 of 3]**

In issue #10 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*, it was suggested that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the author of the anonymous play *The Reign of King Edward III*. Three principal indications of Oxford's authorship of the play were cited in support of this hypothesis:

1. The natural interest the events of Edward III's reign would have held for Oxford for at least two reasons: (a) his ancestors' involvement in the battles of Crecy and Poitiers, and (b) the alliance of the houses of de Vere and Plantagenet through the marriage of the 9th Earl of Oxford to the granddaughter of King Edward III.
2. The anonymous author's use of Froissart's *Chronicle* as a source for the play, which is compatible with Oxford's well documented interest in history. Although internal evidence in many plays of the Elizabethan period attests to the author's interest in things historical, Oxford is the only dramatist of the period whose pronounced interest in history is vouched for by independent external sources.
3. The eye-witness account of the battle of the Spanish Armada in Act III of the play, coupled with the historical evidence of Oxford's participation in that battle.

Since the publication of this hypothesis three years

ago, a new vehicle for assessing its validity has become available. With the publication of Oxford's lexical vocabulary (see issues #57-59 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*), it is now possible to compare the Shakespeare rare words found in the text of *The Reign of King Edward III* with the Shakespeare rare words found in Oxford's letters and youthful poems. If Oxford was indeed the author of *Edward III*, his vocabulary should contain a significant number of the Shakespeare rare words found in the play.

In fact, this is the case. In his analysis of the lexical vocabulary of *The Reign of King Edward III*, Eliot Slater found that the play contained a total of 940 Shakespeare "rare words", i.e. words which occur twelve or fewer times in the plays and poems of Shakespeare (222-48). 104 of these "rare words" are also found in Oxford's lexical vocabulary. In other words, Oxford and the author of *Edward III* have in common approximately one-ninth of the rare word vocabulary found in the play.

The total number of Shakespeare rare words (104) common to both *Edward III* and Oxford's poems and letters seems unexceptional until one considers that the number of rare word links between two individual Shakespeare plays does not generally exceed 100. This is shown in a series of tables which Slater drew up as part of his study of the rare word vocabulary of *Edward III*. Each table gives the number of rare word links which a particular Shakespeare play has with each of the other Shakespeare plays. Unfortunately for the purposes of the present discussion, Slater tabulated the total number of links between two plays rather than the more restricted

number of rare words which any two Shakespeare plays have in common. Thus, a rare word found in two Shakespeare plays may be counted more than once in Slater's tables, depending on the number of times the word is repeated in the two plays in question. Even so, only 6% of the totals in Slater's tables exceed 100 (158-196). The fact that the number of Shakespeare rare words mutual to *Edward III* and Oxford's letters and poems exceeds 100 thus assumes considerable significance, and lends support to the hypothesis of Oxford's authorship of *Edward III*.

In considering the authorship of *Edward III*, it is also of interest to compare the difference between the manner in which the total rare word vocabulary of *Edward III* (904 words) is linked to the Shakespeare plays, as opposed to the manner in which the more restricted subset of 104 *Edward III* rare words found in Oxford's letters and poems is linked to the Shakespeare plays.

In his study of the total rare word vocabulary of *Edward III*, Slater found very strong links between *Edward III* and four early Shakespeare plays -- *Richard III* and the three parts of *Henry VI* (110). Not surprisingly, Oxford's youthful poems, largely written in the 1560's, exhibit similar connections, linking strongly with the *Henry VI* trilogy and *The Rape of Lucrece*. In contrast, the rare word vocabulary of Oxford's letters, while retaining a strong link with Part 1 of *Henry VI*, also has links with a later group of plays including *Henry V* and Part 1 of *Henry IV*, a not unexpected result when one reflects that the majority of Oxford's extant letters date from the period 1595-1604.

Another point of comparison in assessing the authorship of *Edward III* is the similarity in mode of thought which underlies the usage of Shakespeare rare words in *Edward III* and in Oxford's letters and poems and, for that matter, in the Shakespeare plays themselves. A case in point is the use of a ship's anchor as an image. In *Edward III*, it is said that the ships "did breake from anchor straight". In Oxford's letter of April 25, 1603 to his brother-in-law, Robert Cecil, the image of the anchor occurs naturally to his mind: "or with anchor to ride till the storm be

overpast". In Shakespeare, too, the image of the anchor occurs in eight separate instances, not the least interesting of which is the line in Part 3 of *Henry VI* in which one of Oxford's ancestors is referred to as an anchor ("is not Oxford here another anchor"). Another pertinent example is the use of the tennis term "bandy". The image is used in an unusual context in *Edward III* ("when feathered foules do bandy on our side"), and is also used seven different times in Shakespeare, in plays as diverse as *Love's Labours Lost* ("well bandied both; a set of wit well played") and *King Lear* ("do you bandy looks with me"). It is known that Oxford played royal tennis, and the game captured his interest to such an extent that he devoted an entire poem to a comparison between tennis and love in which the image of bandying appears ("a bandy ho, the people cry, and so the ball takes flight"). Many similar examples can be found. In issues 61 and 62 of this series of *Newsletters*, the lines in which each of the rare words in question is used in *Edward III*, in Oxford's letters and poems, and in Shakespeare are set out in full to permit the reader to form an opinion as to the similarity in mode of thought which underlies the choice of words and images in each case.

In summary, then, a substantial body of evidence has narrowed the possible candidates for the authorship of *Edward III* to two individuals. Slater's final view was that the anonymous play was written entirely by Shakespeare. The pronounced links which he discovered between the rare word vocabulary of *Edward III* and the rare word vocabularies of *Richard III* and the *Henry VI* trilogy convinced him that *Edward III* was an early Shakespeare play which had been revised at a later stage in the poet's career:

The position we reached earlier . . . must now stand as a final conclusion. The rare-word vocabulary of *Edward III* is, in every respect we have tested, compatible with authorship by Shakespeare - more specifically, the author of the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*. Both part A and part B are regarded as his work, though probably written at different times (132, 135).

Ironically, the most telling evidence for Oxford's authorship of *Edward III* is similarly based on the rare word vocabulary which his letters and poems share

with the Shakespeare plays and with *Edward III*. And, in Oxford's case, the evidence is the stronger for being derived from letters written in his own hand.

### **Works Cited**

Slater, Eliot. *The problem of 'The Reign of King Edward III': A statistical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.