Were the letters and youthful poems of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, written in the lexical vocabulary of Shakespeare? [Part 1 of 3]

Since 1920, it has been suggested that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the real author of the works attributed to William Shakespeare of Stratford on Avon. The case for Oxford's authorship derives its primary support from contemporary records of his activities as a courtier poet and patron of a troupe of players, as well as from the manner in which his life appears to be reflected in specific incidents, relationships and themes in the dramatic and poetic works of Shakespeare.

The purpose of the present article is to draw attention to an additional body of evidence which has a significant bearing on the authorship question. This body of evidence consists of Oxford's letters and youthful poems and, more specifically, of the relationship between the lexical vocabulary of these letters and poems, and the lexical vocabulary of the Shakespeare canon.

Seventy-seven of Oxford's holograph letters and memoranda, almost all of them written in his distinctive italic hand, are still in existence, the fragments of what must have been a voluminous correspondence. Twenty-four of these documents were transcribed some years ago by the late William Plumer Fowler, and printed in his *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford's Letters*. More recently, Alan Nelson has transcribed all seventy-seven documents, and has made them available on his website at http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson/oxlets.html.

An additional prose document which is clearly attributable to Oxford is his introductory epistle to Thomas Bedingfield's translation of *Cardanus' Comfort*. There are also sixteen youthful poems which scholars have accepted as Oxford's, most of them written before Oxford was sixteen years of age (see issue #18 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*). The poems are reprinted in an article by Steven May in Volume 77 of *Studies in Philology*.

At the time of publication of this series of articles in 1993-4, transcripts of only forty-eight of Oxford's letters and memoranda, as well as his introductory epistle to Bedingfield's translation of *Cardanus' Comfort* and his sixteen poems, were available for consideration. In total, the forty-nine prose documents amount to approximately 29,700 words of text, with the sixteen poems adding a further 3,050 words.

To facilitate comparison with the lexical vocabulary of Shakespeare, Oxford's prose and poetry vocabularies have been reduced to two lists of lexical words -- one for Oxford's prose, another for his poetry -- utilizing the method developed by Eliot Slater in his pioneering study, *The Problem of 'The Reign of King Edward III': A Statistical Approach*.

Essentially, Slater followed two simple rules. Firstly, a vocabulary word is entered as a lexical word in the form in which it is found in the twenty-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*. Declined and inflected forms of the word are included under that single entry; thus, for example, the verb forms "answered" and "answers" are included under the lexical word

"answer". Secondly, a word which functions as more than one part of speech is given a separate entry for each part of speech. Thus, "answer", which functions as both a noun and as a verb in Oxford's letters, is given two separate lexical entries, and the verbal substantive "answering" is also given a separate entry. The result of this process is a list of 2316 lexical words found in Oxford's letters and memoranda, as well as an additional list of 942 lexical words found in his sixteen youthful poems.

These two lists of lexical words were then compared with the vocabulary of Shakespeare in Bartlett's *Concordance and* Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon*, with surprising results: only 165 of the 2316 lexical words in Oxford's prose vocabulary, and 24 of the 942 lexical words in the vocabulary of his youthful poems, are not found in Shakespeare. To put it another way, 93% of Oxford's prose vocabulary, and 97.5% of the vocabulary of his sixteen youthful poems, are identical with the vocabulary of Shakespeare.

The significance of these findings can perhaps only be fully appreciated if, at this juncture, a specious objection is disposed of, namely the objection that the vocabulary of any writer, including Oxford, must perforce be a mere subset of Shakespeare's immense vocabulary. The speciousness of this argument is evident when one reflects that the twenty-volume edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains entries for approximately 290,500 lexical words. Shakespeare's lexical vocabulary, estimated variously at anywhere from 17,000 to 29,000 words (Epstein 224; Slater 82), represents only 6-10% of that total. It is thus more than evident that no writer's vocabulary is a mere subset of Shakespeare's vocabulary, but is rather a set which intersects with Shakespeare's vocabulary to a greater or lesser degree. And what the statistics in the foregoing paragraph demonstrate is that the vocabulary of Oxford's letters and poems is a set which intersects to an extraordinary degree with the vocabulary of Shakespeare. Furthermore, in assessing the significance of the correlation between Oxford's lexical vocabulary and Shakespeare's, one should not lose sight of the fact that Oxford's prose vocabulary, for the most part, is derived from business correspondence which

deals with topics not even remotely connected with the subjects of Shakespeare's plays and poems. Yet, astonishingly, Oxford deals with these financial and legal matters in the vocabulary of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

Besides correlating with Shakespeare's lexical vocabulary to a surprising degree, Oxford's lexical vocabulary is also astonishingly rich, a factor which is of key importance in assessing whether or not Oxford could have been the author of the Shakespeare canon. As Elliot Slater has pointed out:

> Richness of vocabulary is a quality of the first importance in a creative work. And the capacity of a writer to express himself in a rich variety of language is a dominant characteristic of his style (113).

To measure richness of vocabulary, Slater developed a statistical technique which makes use of Shakespeare's "rare words". For the purposes of his study of the vocabulary of *Edward III*, Slater defined a Shakespeare "rare word" as one which appears no more than twelve times in the entire Shakespeare canon of over one million words. Since the term "rare word" can be misleading if taken in its usual sense, one must keep in mind that, as defined by Slater, a "rare word" is not necessarily an unusual or archaic word (although it may well be such), but is simply a word which occurs twelve times or less in Shakespeare's plays and poems. It must also be kept in mind that the term "rare word" is a relative one, since words used one to twelve times by Shakespeare actually comprise approximately one-third of his total lexical vocabulary. Eliot Slater's list of "rare words" used from two to ten times in the Shakespeare plays contains almost 6000 words (136-57), while words used only once by Shakespeare in the plays and poems account for, at the very least, a further 2000 words (Slater 84-5). Thus, at least 8000 lexical words in Shakespeare's total vocabulary of some 25,000 lexical words are "rare words". It is therefore clear that "rare words" form a very large part of Shakespeare's vocabulary; at the same time, because these "rare words" are extremely distinctive, they serve to distinguish the vocabulary of Shakespeare from that of other writers. Slater was thus able to demonstate that the extent to which a

writer uses Shakespeare "rare words" is a valid statistical indicator of the degree to which that writer's vocabulary coincides with, or differs from, Shakespeare's.

When Slater's "rare word" test is applied to Oxford's vocabulary, the results are extremely interesting: 639 of the 2316 lexical words in Oxford's prose vocabulary, and 145 of the 942 lexical words in the vocabulary of his youthful poetry, are Shakespeare "rare words". To put it another way, 27% of Oxford's prose vocabulary, and 15% of his poetry vocabulary, are comprised of Shakespeare rare words. The richness of Oxford's poetry vocabulary in Shakespeare "rare words" is especially remarkable since Oxford was no more than sixteen years of age when most of these poems were written. More importantly, however, the foregoing statistics highlight the fact that the mature vocabulary of Oxford's letters contains Shakespeare rare words in roughly the same proportion in which they are found in the Shakespeare plays and poems: 27% percent of Oxford's prose vocabulary consists of Shakespeare rare words, as compared with 32% in the Shakespeare plays and poems.

One further aspect of Oxford's vocabulary is also surprising: like Shakespeare, Oxford was an innovator in the use of language. It seems that Oxford invented two of the words used in his youthful poems (the adjectives "dole" and "pensive-sad"), as well as three of the words used in his letters and memoranda (affaired, disquietance and encroached). There are no entries for these words in the twenty-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*. In addition, Oxford used certain words in his poems, letters and memoranda many years before the dates for which the first usage of these words is recorded in the twenty-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*. Thus, it would seem that it was Oxford who was the first to use the following twenty-two words: aforenamed (1595), agency (1595), agentship (1595), baseminded (1573), bifold (1601), brandle (1601), commit (n.) (1581), countenancing (1595), cozening (ppl.a.) (1576), despairing (ppl.a.) (1566), disfurnished (ppl.a.) (1586), disgraced (ppl.a.) (1576), disparking (1572), imposing (vbl.sb.) (1597),

negotiation (1575), obscurement (1595), ornify (1573), pretending (vbl.sb.) (1590), restoration (1593), secret (v.) (1573), stayless (1566), and underrate (1595).

Interestingly, the individuals credited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with the first usage of these words were, in several instances, connected to Oxford in one way or another. Queen Elizabeth, for example, is credited with the first use of "baseminded"; Oxford's cousin, Lord Henry Howard, with the first use of "brandle"; Sir Francis Drake with the first use of the verb "secret"; and Oxford's friend, Thomas Bedingfield, with the first use of "ornify". The *Oxford English Dictionary's* attribution of the verb "ornify" to Thomas Bedingfield, rather than to Oxford, is particularly ironic, since the word was first used by Oxford in his dedicatory epistle to Bedingfield's translation of *Cardanus Comfort*; it was not until twenty years later that Bedingfield himself used the word in his translation of Machiavelli's *Florentine History*.

Most interesting of all, however, is the *Oxford English Dictionary's* attribution of the first usage of three of the words in the foregoing list (disgraced, bifold, and despairing) to William Shakespeare. Shakespeare is credited with the first use of "disgraced" in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* in 1591, and the first use of "bifold" in 1609 in *Troilus and Cressida*; Oxford used the former in 1576 and the latter in 1601. Shakespeare is also credited with the first use of "despairing" as a participial adjective in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* in 1591, whereas Oxford had used "despairing" prior to 1566 in his poem *If care or skill could conquer vain desire*, written before he was sixteen years of age.

In conclusion, then, the present study demonstrates that Oxford's lexical vocabulary coincides with Shakespeare's to a remarkable degree, and is in every way the equal of Shakespeare's in both its richness and its innovative use of language.

In the next two issues of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*, the lexical vocabulary of forty-nine prose documents (Oxford's letters and memoranda and his

epistle to Bedingfield's *Cardanus' Comfort*), and the vocabulary of his sixteen youthful poems, are reprinted in full for the convenience of the reader.

Works Cited

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