

THE SEVENTEENTH EARL OF OXFORD AS POET AND PLAYWRIGHT

STEVEN W. MAY*

Part I of this Article demonstrates the failure in methodology of the Oxfordian hypothesis in its core and founding argument as set forth by J. Thomas Looney in 1920. The motifs and stylistic traits that Looney and his followers have claimed through the years to be unique to the verse of both the Earl of Oxford and Shakespeare are in fact commonplaces of Elizabethan poetry employed by many other contemporary writers. The Oxfordians have failed to establish any meaningful connection between Oxford's verse and Shakespeare's. Stripped of this argument, the Earl is no more likely to have written Shakespeare's works than any other Elizabethan poet.

In Part II, I examine the evidence for Oxford's career as a playwright. While Oxford did patronize both boy and adult acting companies, and it seems possible that he wrote one or more lost dramatic entertainments for court performance, there is no evidence that he wrote plays for the professional acting companies. To accept the Oxfordian hypothesis we must believe that the Earl, after publishing both prose and verse under his own name, adopted a manic insistence on anonymity. He then allowed William Shakespeare to take full credit for all his poems and plays and to enjoy the ample rewards of that enterprise while their true author relentlessly petitioned the Crown for more income. We must believe as well that this deception was sustained in absolute and unviolated secrecy during the Earl's lifetime and for over three hundred years after his death.

* Steven W. May is Professor of English at Georgetown College. His edition of *The Poems of Edward De Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford* was originally published in *Studies in Philology* (1980), and reprinted in his *The Elizabethan Courtier Poets* (1991, reprinted 1999). Note that throughout this Article, the spelling and typography of quotations from Renaissance works have been regularized where appropriate.