

J. THOMAS LOONEY FOUNDER OF THE DELUSIONAL OXFORDIAN THEORY

J. Thomas Looney originated the fallacious Oxfordian theory that Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550-1604) was the true author of nearly all the Shakespeare poems and plays in his work “*Shakespeare Identified*” in *Edward de Vere the seventeenth Earl of Oxford* first published in 1920. The whole Oxfordian theory and all subsequent Oxfordian works are based upon and built from this publication right up to the present day. To mark its centenary The De Vere Society devoted the issue of its 2020 quarterly newsletter to whom it described as their ‘founding father’ J. Thomas Looney and his much-vaunted seminal work. The same year The Oxford Shakespeare Fellowship announced a new centenary edition of *Shakespeare Identified* edited by James A. Warren, which, without a trace of irony we are informed, ‘remains the most revolutionary book on Shakespeare ever written.’ Perhaps only Oxfordians could make such a grandiose claim for a book written without any bibliographical apparatus-without footnotes or references, nor a bibliography.

Prior to the publication of *Shakespeare Identified* Baconian scholars and writers had published a very substantial corpus of work which Looney shows little or no evidence of having consulted or read (see the selected bibliography below for 35 Baconian books and hundreds of articles already published by 1920) which contained a mountain of evidence revealing and confirming that Francis Bacon was the secret concealed author of the Shakespeare works. This vast body of writings included primary manuscript documents among them Bacon’s private notebook (c. 1594 to 1596) the source of several hundred resemblances, correspondences and parallels found throughout the Shakespeare works; his own collection of MSS known as the Northumberland Manuscript (c.1596), that originally held his two Shakespeare plays *Richard II* and *Richard III*, on whose cover appears the name Francis Bacon and his pseudonym Shakespeare scribbled all over it; an enormous range of substantial evidence that Bacon, with the assistance of its editor and contributor Ben Jonson who was then living with him at Gorhambury, was responsible for the publication of the 1623 Shakespeare First Folio; and the *Memoriae* (1626) containing 32 Latin verses pointing to Bacon as the greatest poet who ever lived & author of the Shakespeare works.

Yet according to Looney, who devoted less than two pages to the vast mountain of evidence marshalled by the Baconians up to 1920 (and I quote), ‘The decisive answer to the Baconian theory, therefore seems to us, is Henry Wriothesley’ (I have reproduced these two pages below).

Let us then consider what Looney had and had not to say about Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton and Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, whose trial with regard to the issue of the Shakespeare Authorship Controversy ‘assumes quite a thrilling interest’.

1] Looney emphasizes ‘Shakespeare’s’ feelings towards Southampton: ‘The terms in which the dramatist addresses the nobleman who was being tried along with Essex are those of personal endearment’.

What he either does not know or does not tell his readers is Bacon and Southampton had a close relationship with each other from the late 1580s onwards. On 29 February 1588 a young Southampton was admitted to Gray’s Inn the month in which members of the Inn presented *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1588) before Queen Elizabeth at Greenwich.¹ This play written by Bacon ushered in the Shakespearean era and shares language, subject matter and themes with more than half of the Shakespeare canon.² Bacon had been admitted to Gray’s Inn nine years

earlier where he was *de facto* Master of the Revels organising dramatic entertainments, masques and plays, loved by Southampton, who it was said attended the London theatres on an almost daily basis. From the point Southampton went to reside at Gray's Inn with Bacon over time they formed a close intimate relationship that afterwards resulted in Bacon dedicating to Southampton his two Shakespeare poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). Their passionate relationship continued through the 1590s in which the lives of Bacon and Southampton became intertwined with that of Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex. The events leading up to the ill-fated Essex uprising adversely affected the dynamic between them. In the aftermath Essex was executed for treason, however, most likely following the private intervention by Bacon with Queen Elizabeth, Southampton had his death sentence commuted. On the accession of James I Southampton was released from prison. Buried away in Spedding's seven-volume *Letters and Life of Francis Bacon* is a virtually unknown letter from Bacon to Southampton where he pointedly says in direct reference to their previous close relationship 'I may safely be now that which I was truly before':

It may please your Lordship,

I would have been very glad to have presented my humble service to your Lordship by my attendance, if I could have foreseen that it should not have been unpleasing unto you. And therefore, because I would commit no error, I choose to write; assuring your Lordship (how credible soever it may seem to you at first) yet it is as true as a thing that God knoweth, that this great change hath wrought in me no other change towards your Lordship than this, that I may safely be now that which I was truly before. And so craving no other pardon than for troubling you with this letter, I do not now begin, but continue to be

Your Lordships humble and much devoted.³

2] Looney states that 'It was impossible that he [Bacon] could have added the heartlessness of prosecuting one, his love for whom [Southampton] he had already immortalized by his poems.'

It is a well-known historical FACT stated by Bacon himself and stated thereafter by his standard editor and biographer Spedding and modern editors and biographers of Bacon, that as a legal officer of the crown, he was forced to play a part in the prosecution of Essex and Southampton, by Queen Elizabeth, according to some sources, on pain of death.⁴

3] Furthermore Looney continues 'If to this we add that the most of "Shakespeare's" sonnets are supposed to be addressed to the Earl of Southampton, and that these were put into circulation without protest seven years after the trial, at a time when the feeling of Southampton towards Bacon was very bitter, we have as tumbled a moral situation as it is possible to conceive if we suppose that Bacon was "Shakespeare."'

It is a FACT that nobody knows when some, most, or all of the sonnets were written, although some scholars date at least some of them to the late 1580s, when Bacon and Southampton were residing together at Gray's Inn, and even more scholars place a greater number of them to the 1590s, when Bacon was working out of Essex House on the Strand where Southampton was a visitor on an almost daily basis. And as can be seen from the above letter, whatever the Earl of Southampton's feelings were toward Bacon, his feelings toward Southampton were as 'truly before' from his 'humble and much devoted'.

4] Finally, amongst all these misleading, inaccurate and erroneous statements Looney says ‘For the Earl of Southampton was amongst those who sought and ultimately brought about the downfall of Lord Bacon.’

This simplistic characterisation is also misleading and inaccurate. His fall from grace which was one of the greatest political betrayals in English history, was initiated by his great enemy Sir Edward Coke, and in order that King James could save the favourite George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, and so that he could save himself, he sacrificed Bacon who was convicted on trumped up charges by the House of Lords.⁵ What can be said is that Southampton took part in the proceedings against Bacon and repeatedly voted for the heavy sentence imposed on him by the House of Lords, whether through personal conviction or through heavy political pressure, may never be known. In spite of this Bacon wrote a virtually unknown letter to Southampton dated the ‘Last of January, 1623’, (i.e., January 1624), wherein his warmth for his former friend and lover still shone through:

My very good Lord,

It pleased your Lordship when we met last, and did not think, I dare say, that a Parliament would have been so soon, to assure me of your love and favour; and it is true that out of that I have heard and observed of your noble nature I have a great affiance to your Lordship.

...In this matter I hold your Lordship’s favour so essential as if God shall put in into your heart to give me your favour and furtherance, I will apply my industry and other friends to co-operate with your Lordship. Otherwise I shall give over to think of it; and yet ever rest.

Your Lordship’s affectionate and humble servant,

FR. ST. ALBAN.⁶

Bound up with his gross distortion of Bacon’s relationship with Southampton characterised by ignorance, misrepresentation, and omission was a series of statements by Looney about the friendship between Bacon and Essex and the part Bacon played in the Essex trial.

1] ‘The most powerful force at work in seeking to bring about the destruction of the accused was the possessor of the greatest intellect that has appeared in English philosophy: one to whom in modern times has actually been attributed the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays-Francis Bacon.’

2] ‘The conduct of Francis Bacon in respect to the trial of Essex has been discussed *ad nauseam* and is therefore too well known to need describing. Nor is it our business to enter into the ethics of his action. It is wholly incredible, however, that he [Bacon] could have been working secretly hand in glove with the very dramatic company that was implicated in the [Essex] rising, and that one of his plays should have been employed as an instrument in the business. Again, something is known of the nature of Bacon’s previous friendship with the Earl of Essex...’.

It is difficult to know where to start with this series of grossly misleading statements presented in a knowing tone delivered with terms of certainty. So perhaps it be best that we start with the first statement. To state the blindingly obvious: the most powerful force at work in the whole of the Essex affair was of course the absolute monarch Queen Elizabeth, followed by Essex’s enemies of whom there were many, led by Sir Robert Cecil, now head of the rival Cecil faction following the death of his father Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and needless to say Essex himself, who despite the long and repeated advice by Bacon in private and his letters to Essex,

rushed headlong into his ill-fated uprising. And Looney's grotesque and absurd statement that Bacon was the most powerful force seeking the destruction of Essex is thus not only wrong in evidence and fact, as well as confuted by Bacon's own statements in his letters and the *Apology*, but its very suggestion is embarrassingly senseless and imbecilic.

It is not clear to me how Looney writing in 1920 was able to state regarding events that occurred in the 1590s that he was not witness to: it is wholly incredible that Bacon was secretly working with the very acting company that was implicated in the Essex rising and that one of his plays was employed as an instrument in the rebellion. The facts are, whether incredible or otherwise, a performance of *Richard II* (a copy of which was originally part of Bacon's own collection of manuscripts) by the Lord Chamberlain's Men (to whom he supplied numerous Shakespeare plays) was commissioned by Essex and his supporters, with or without Bacon's knowledge or consent, who clearly wrote it with the parallels between the reigns of Richard II and Elizabeth in mind.⁷

Somewhat amusingly Looney states that 'something is known of the nature of Bacon's previous friendship with the Earl of Essex'. This is true. His standard editor and biographer Spedding devoted the larger part of his first two volumes of *The Letters and Life of Francis Bacon* to the overt relationship between Bacon and Essex and later the Baconian Alfred Dodd devoted much of his groundbreaking *Life of Bacon* to his secret concealed relationship with Essex.⁸ Yet what Looney knew of the aforementioned overt or secret nature of Bacon's true friendship need not detain us here any longer.

What he did not know was the dramatic devices written by Bacon for Essex for presentation before Queen Elizabeth on her Anniversary Day 'Of Tribute; or giving what is due' in 1592 and 'Of Love and Self-Love' in 1595,⁹ which were not published until long after Bacon's death, is they share language, subject matter and themes with a whole host of Shakespeare plays, written before this date, and many of those Shakespeare plays written long after.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the *modus operandi* of ignorance, misrepresentation and omissions about Bacon that plagued the first work which originated the ill-conceived and misguided Oxfordian theory has continued to plague all subsequent Oxfordian publications up to the present day. Which without exception, have displayed little or no knowledge of the overwhelming and irrefutable evidence confirming Bacon's authorship of the Shakespeare works, while they wander blindly through the seemingly endless labyrinthine maze of their own deluded minds.

1. G. P. V. Akrigg, *Shakespeare and the Earl of Shakespeare* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1968), p. 31.

2. A. Phoenix, 'Francis Bacon and his First Unacknowledged Shakespeare Play *The Misfortunes of Arthur* and its Extensive Links to his other Shakespeare Works', (2021), pp. 1-136.

3. Spedding, *Letters and Life*, III, pp. 75-76.

4. See *A Declaration of the Practises & Treasons attempted by Robert late Earle of Essex* (London: printed by Robert Barker, Printer to the Queene most excellent Majesty, 1601) and *Sir Francis Bacon His Apologie, In Certaine imputations concerning the late Earle of Essex* (London: printed for Felix Norton, 1604).

5. Spedding, *Letters and Life*, VII, *passim*.

6. *Ibid.*, *Letters and Life*, VII, p. 454.

7. For Bacon, the Earl of Essex and the play *Richard II* see A. Phoenix, *The Bacon-Shakespeare Manuscript (Hitherto known as the Northumberland Manuscript) which originally Contained Copies of his Shakespeare Plays Richard II and Richard III* (2022), pp. 167-99.

8. Spedding, *Letters and Life*, I and II, *passim* and Alfred Dodd, *Francis Bacon's Personal Life-Story* (London: Rider & Company, 1986), *passim*.

9. For these dramatic devices see Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 22-51, 61-68 and Alan Stewart with Harriet Knight, *The Oxford Francis Bacon Early Writings 1584-1596* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 2012), pp. 235-97, 675-722.

10. For their links to his Shakespeare poems and plays see A. Phoenix, *The Bacon-Shakespeare Manuscript (Hitherto known as the Northumberland Manuscript) which originally Contained Copies of his Shakespeare Plays Richard II and Richard III* (2022), pp. 51-61, 73-93.

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“SHAKESPEARE”
IDENTIFIED

IN

EDWARD DE VERE
THE SEVENTEENTH
EARL OF OXFORD

By

J. THOMAS LOONEY

Introduction by William McFee

Afterwords by Charles Wisner Barrell

DUELL, SLOAN and PEARCE • New York

Somerset. It is interesting to note, therefore, that the fortunes of the two men whose conduct was most open to censure in this matter suffered complete collapse in the course of the following reign; the publicity of Raleigh's execution being a fitting punishment for his unseemly intrusion upon the privacy of the execution of Essex. It is necessary to point out these things if we are to have a correct judgment of the men with whom the Earl of Oxford had to deal, and upon the strength of whose relationships with Oxford most of the impressions of him met with in books have evidently been formed.

Whatever opinions may be held about these things, it is clear, from the point of view of the problem of Shakespearean authorship, that the famous trial of the Earl of Essex assumes quite a thrilling interest. Standing before the judges was the only living personality that "Shakespeare" has openly connected with the issue of his works, and towards whom he has publicly expressed affection: Henry Wriothesley. The most powerful force at work in seeking to bring about the destruction of the accused was the possessor of the greatest intellect that has appeared in English philosophy: one to whom in modern times has actually been attributed the authorship of Shakespeare's plays—Francis Bacon. And sitting on the benches amongst the judges was none other, we believe, than the real "Shakespeare" himself, intent on saving, if possible, one of the very men whom Bacon was seeking to destroy. Some artist of the future surely will find here a theme to fire his enthusiasm and furnish scope for his genius and ambition.

Before leaving the question of the rebellion and trial of the Earl of Essex we shall barely draw attention to an aspect of it which affects a theory of Shakespearean authorship that we have not deemed necessary to discuss at any length. The conduct of Francis Bacon in respect to the trial of Essex has been discussed *ad nauseam* and is therefore

Bacon,
Southamp-
ton and
Oxford.

too well known to need describing. Nor is it our business to enter into the ethics of his action. It is wholly incredible, however, that he could have been working secretly as a playwright hand in glove with the very dramatic company that was implicated in the rising, and that one of his plays should have been employed as an instrument in the business. Again, something is known of the nature of Bacon's previous friendship with the Earl of Essex; but, however cordial it may have been, it is quite on a lower plane as compared with "Shakespeare's" feelings towards Southampton. The terms in which the dramatist addresses the nobleman who was being tried along with Essex are those of personal endearment, and we must hope, for the credit of human nature, that to all the treachery implied in the idea of turning upon a friend whose insurrection had been assisted by his own drama and dramatic associates (according to the Baconian theory) it was impossible that he could have added the heartlessness of prosecuting one, his love for whom he had already immortalized by his poems.

Nor should we like to think that the very man whom he had immortalized in this way could in turn have so delighted in wounding him and in seeking his downfall. For the Earl of Southampton was amongst those who sought and ultimately brought about the downfall of Lord Bacon. If to this we add that the most of "Shakespeare's" sonnets are supposed to be addressed to the Earl of Southampton, and that these were put into circulation without protest seven years after the trial, at a time when the feeling of Southampton towards Bacon was very bitter, we have as tumbled a moral situation as it is possible to conceive if we suppose that Bacon was "Shakespeare." The decisive answer to the Baconian theory, therefore, it seems to us, is Henry Wriothesley.

Moreover, Southampton's interest in William Shakespeare and the Shakespearean plays suffered no decline as a