

Book Review

Der Mann, der Shakespeare erfand
(The Man who Invented Shakespeare)

By Kurt Kreiler

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595 pages. 28 illustrations in color

Reviewed by Walter Klier

For a long time the world has preferred to stare at the Stratford bust with wide-open eyes and create tales that afterwards are christened “biographies.” In this mood Kurt Kreiler begins the foreword of his voluminous commentary on the Shakespearean Question.

The book contains 22 chapters followed by an epilogue containing a brief sketch of the history of the doubters and also the doubters-of-the-doubters, a new species that is coming more and more into vogue. Each chapter is preceded by a “scenic” prelude of 1-3 pages, in some cases a blend of source material and literary narration. These short scenes lend sound and color to the whole: they are printed in italics and thus segregated from the strictly documentary part.

This book has many merits; one is to present, for the first time in German, a host of archival documents, many of them unlikely ever to have been heard of or to have been seen by any German reader – a veritable *tour de force*. One has only to think of the often obscurely oblique language of the pamphlets exchanged in the Gabriel Harvey-Thomas Nashe quarrel, dealt with in chapters 18 and 19, and to which, unfortunately, Oxfordians have so far given far too little consideration. Shakespeare evidently took part in this quarrel, as can be seen from the Armado-Moth sub-plot in *Love’s*

Labour's Lost. In chapter 18 the reader's attention is riveted on the curious fact that the name "Shakespeare" is never mentioned in this essentially literary quarrel, but that it is the Earl of Oxford who occupies the center stage deserted by "William Shakespeare." Other documents for the first time partly translated into German include several anonymous poems that the author ascribes to Edward de Vere, sections of *Willobie His Avis*, contemporary diplomatic correspondence and, not the least, Edward de Vere's letters.

Another subject that has been neglected for too long in Oxfordian research is represented here fairly thoroughly: Oxford's youthful poetry. Some Oxfordians might prefer not to look at it for fear it might "un-shakespearize" their favorite and so offer a broadside to the traditionalist camp. Not so Kurt Kreiler. Some years ago he translated the lyrics contained in *The Adventures of Master F. I.* (the prose was translated by Chris Hirte), the authorship of which he ascribes to Edward de Vere, and other poems in *A Hundreth Sundry Flowers*. Chapter 5 is specially devoted to the subject. Moreover, he has been ploughing through many archival manuscripts in London. Oxford's juvenilia, Kreiler argues, represent the path to Shakespeare and already foreshadow the sedulous stylist that Shakespeare was to become. Indeed, Kreiler thinks there is more Oxfordian material among the anonymous and wrongly ascribed poems from the Elizabethan period. His argument is principally based on stylistical, structural and thematic correspondences, and relies to a negligible degree on single-word concordances. To my mind, some of de Vere's youthful poems come very close in theme and style to individual Shakespeare sonnets. In other cases, pieces of external evidence are added. The early Elizabethan anthology, *Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1576), contains a number of poems signed E. O., but there are many more poems by Oxford hidden among the mass of anonymous writing of the time than Oxfordians have hitherto recognized. Take the song, "When griping griefs the heart would wound," which occurs in *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.v. The song was originally attributed to Richard Edwards, but only in the first edition of that anthology—in all nine subsequent editions it was anonymous. Yet in the Coningsby collection of poems within the Harleian MS. it is signed Ball. A number of other poems, known to be Oxford's, are also signed Ball, one of them, as professor Steven May found out, "My Mind to Me a Kingdom is" (some single phrases of which occur in *3 Henry VI*, III.1). The question whether the pseudonym "Ball" was one chosen by Oxford himself or by the collector Coningsby is, wisely, not speculated about.

Chapter 20 (entitled “His Bewitching Pen,” after Thomas Edwards’ poem on Adon) mainly deals with *Willobie His Avis* (1594). Kreiler holds that Oxford, though not the author, was involved in the publication of this work. It is perhaps no happenstance, he writes, that the initials H.W. for Henry Willobie are the same as for one of the fictitious editors of *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers* and Willobie uses the same posie “Ever or Never” at the end, as “Gascoigne” had done in *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers* (1573). At any rate, there are some similarities in the ways *Flowers* and *Willobie* were published. The counsel given by the old player W.S. is similar in style and content to the poem, “When as thine eye hath chose the dame”, number 18 in *The Passionate Pilgrim* (anonymous in the Coningsby collection).

In Chapter 9 (“Historie of Error”) the author vigorously refutes the idea that Oxford would have been a Crypto-Catholic. As the historian John A. Bossy maintained in his essay, *English Catholics and the French Marriage*, Oxford proposed to King Henri III of France to equip five ships for the war against the Huguenots. In fact, the letter shows that these five ships were intended as support to the Huguenot Prince de Condé. In a letter from the French ambassador Mauvissière, Oxford is reported to have said that he desired to serve Henri III but that, if loyalty to his queen would compel him to fight against the French in case the Duke of Guise would send troops in support of Don John of Austria, he would not hesitate to do so. The author’s thesis, several times stressed throughout the work, is that Oxford, though anything but a religious zealot, was unwaveringly loyal to Elizabeth’s Protestant establishment.

The multitude of untranslated Italian sources that Shakespeare used throughout the canon is stressed (“Shakespeare – l’uomo universale”), and grounded in the authoritative insight of such important early scholars as the now unjustly nearly forgotten Julius Leopold Klein, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius Leopold Klein](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Leopold_Klein), (who was wont to mock the notion Shakespeare had no command of the Italian language), Ernesto Grillo, and Mario Praz.

Chapter 17 (“The Youth and the Dark Lady”) deals with the *Sonnets*. The Fair Youth is identified by Kreiler as the Earl of Southampton – in which many now agree. But who is the Dark Lady? Kreiler’s opinion is that it is Elizabeth Trentham, the Earl of Oxford’s second wife, mainly because of sonnets 41 (“Ay me, but yet thou mightst my seat forbear”), 152 (“In act thy bed-vow broke”) and 134, a sonnet on which Helen Vendler remarks: “Shakespeare’s language for human transactions here, as elsewhere in

the *Sonnets*, is constantly using words like *statute* and *bond*, and *pay* as appropriate terms for a certain sort of human relation.” But this is precisely the sort of relationship that emerges from legal documents and some of Oxford’s letters after his marriage in 1591. The abundance of transactional terms is indeed striking (these also include *mortgaged*, *forfeit*, *surety*, and *usurer*). That Elizabeth Trentham, through her brother Francis, was perhaps more Oxford’s “treasurer” than his “treasure” is, partly at least, borne out by the known facts. In short, Kreiler does not think the marriage was a happy one. He even goes as far as to suspect Henry de Vere might have been the child of Elizabeth Trentham and the Earl of Southampton.

An enormous amount of research has been invested in this fluent, well-written biography, offering a cornucopia of new facts and insights, and it would be a pity if it remained inaccessible to the English-speaking public.