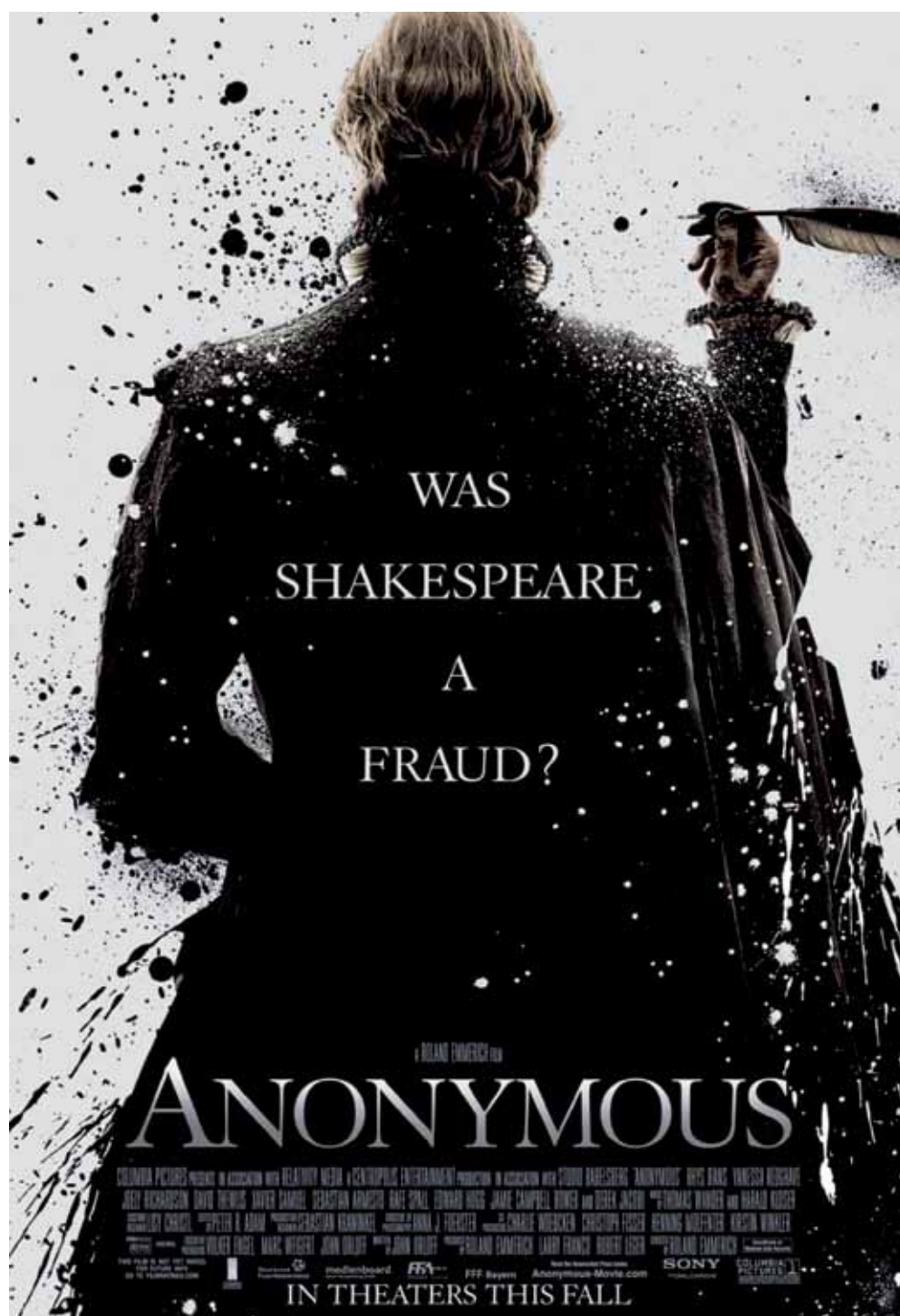


Enter the Tudor Prince

Trevor Fisher



Shakespeare's identity is an issue historians normally avoid – with 77 alternatives to Shakespeare now listed on Wikipedia,¹ it has become a black hole in literary studies. Denial of the orthodox (Stratfordian) view* that William Shakespeare was the Bard dates back a century and a half, but has escalated in the last thirty years.

There is alas no consensus on an Alternative Author. A marked lack of evidence has not stopped an increasingly random search for candidates, with the consequence that the history of late Tudor and early Stuart England is being rewritten to suit the search. Much activity in seeking for alternatives uses conspiracy theories rather than factual research, challenging not just the history of the period but the use of factual evidence.

There are many legitimate historical controversies in the period, of which the authorship of the Shakespeare canon is certainly one. There is little hard evidence to explain Shakespeare's life and times, but even less to substantiate the alternatives. Providing supporting material to back up potential alternative authors tends to draw in other unresolved mysteries, especially in Elizabethan history. There has long been speculation whether Elizabeth had an affair with Thomas Seymour, Lord Admiral, in 1547. Her relationship with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was notoriously controversial in the early years of her reign. But current theorising goes beyond relationships to pregnancies and concealed babies.

Moreover, allegations developed in the recent past of an affair with Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, leading to a baby in 1574, derive specifically from the search for an alternative Shakespeare. Oxford becomes Shakespeare, his son by Elizabeth deemed the Fair Youth of the sonnets, and secrecy about the child is said to explain why there is no evidence connecting Oxford with the canon. A conspiracy theory has been

Title page of the First Folio, 1623.
Copper engraving of Shakespeare by
Martin Droeshout.

developed which provides the basis for a Hollywood blockbuster, *Anonymous*, due in the autumn.

The increasing popularity of conspiracy theories has not up to now been an issue for historians. But the Tudors and Stuarts are becoming fair game for the entertainment industry. There is an urgent need for the historical community to recognise that established methods of deductive research and the norms of evidence underpinning historical study are under threat. The Prince Tudor theory is important in its own right in the context of attempts to revise Elizabethan and early Stuart history. It has even greater significance as the entertainment industry sees history as little more than a source of sensational plots.

The Prince Tudor theory focuses on Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, currently the front runner in the alternative Shakespeare stakes. He is the real character claimed to be the *Anonymous* writer of Shakespeare's works in the forthcoming film, which features the Prince Tudor Theory. In his recent study of Denial theories, James Shapiro² touched on the Prince Tudor (PT) theory in discussing Oxford supporters (Oxfordians) but thought it marginal to the Oxford case. However, this was before the film was announced. Like the Da Vinci Code, *Anonymous* could catapult a fringe theory to prominence.

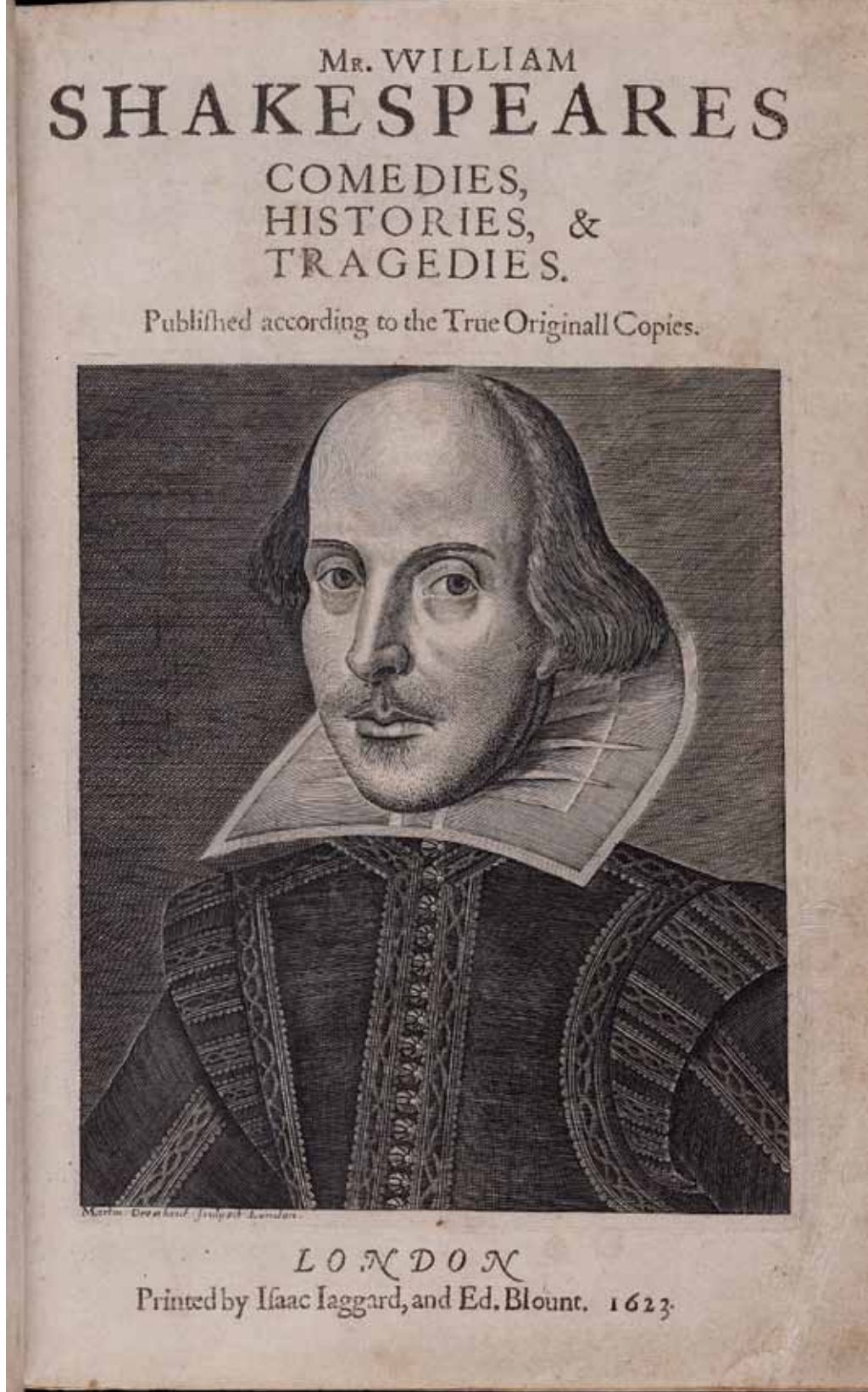
An Oxfordian writer sympathetic to the Prince Tudor Theory, Paul Altrocchi, described the theory as:

...simply that Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton, was the son of Queen Elizabeth I and Edward de Vere and therefore was rightful heir to the Tudor throne. The designation 'Prince Tudor' conveys the concept more clearly than 'Tudor Rose'.³

Thus the theory goes beyond the question of who wrote the Shakespeare canon. It poses a threat to key elements of Tudor and Stuart history, notably the long established belief that Elizabeth was the Virgin Queen. Many Oxfordians reject the theory.

From Denial to Revisionism

Shakespeare Denial did not originally require major revisions to Tudor history. Initially it simply refused to accept that a son of a glover from a provincial town could be the greatest poet in the English language. He had insufficient education

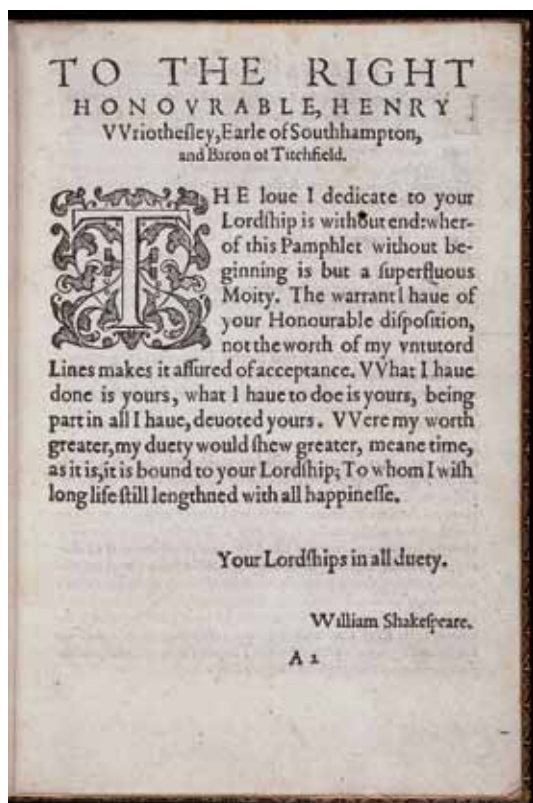


to be The Author. But the denial camp rapidly hit major historiographical problems. There was no agreement on who the alternative author might be. And, more problematic, why such total secrecy?

A key question for Deniers became why and how The Author concealed his (or possibly her) identity. As s/he wrote over three dozen plays, two long narrative poems and the sonnets, why use the identity of a well known theatrical player to conceal the fact? This problem vexed the first Denial camp, the supporters of Sir Francis Bacon. To

solve the problem they settled on class prejudice. They argued that drama was a low status activity that no upper class person could engage in without loss of face.

It is certainly true that there is a cultural chasm between theatre and poetry. Writing poems has been an acceptable activity for the upper classes for centuries, as the careers of Lord Byron and the Earl of Rochester testify. But theatre, with its requirements to keep the populace entertained and paying at the box office, meant that the upper classes avoided the stage. Baconians and



(left) Dedication page from first edition of *The Rape of Lucrece*, 1594 by William Shakespeare, with dedication to Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton (right) Eight poems by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford were published in *The Paradise of Dainty Deuises* (1576)

the actors must have known that Shakespeare was not writing the work they were performing.

Then there are the printers, and the officials of the Stationers Register, which had to license all publications. They must have been in on the coverup too since in Elizabethan literature (a small world where everyone knew everyone else) an alternative author had to be known. To conceal the authorship of A N Other needed a massive and expensive conspiracy. The name Shakespeare was popular and the work sold well. Many people had to be induced to suppress the knowledge that Will the Actor did not write the plays, and to keep the Real Identity from the public who attended the theatre and bought the printed work. In a poor society where church and state were integrated, only the government had the resources to sustain such a cover up.

Why Prince Tudor?

When J T Looney in 1920 launched his theory that Oxford was the author,⁴ he stuck strictly to the Baconian loss of face rationale, arguing he had deliberately concealed his identity. Looney found, however, that he could not control his followers and by the 1930s he was struggling to stop state conspiracy becoming the justification of the concealment of Oxford's authorship. In fact, given the weakness of the loss of face theory, the emergence of the Prince Tudor theory was almost inevitable. Arguing A N Other used Shakespeare's name, and concealed his Authorship by manipulating the London drama scene logically pointed to a major reason of state to account for concealing Authorship. As the Prince Tudor theorist Hank Whittemore commented on the Tudor Rose version of the conspiracy:

If the traditional tale of Shakespeare has been a myth, then some legend of at least equal potency must have been lurking behind it all along. This legend is that of Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen... when the Queen died on March 24th 1603, bringing her Tudor Rose dynasty to its end, in fact she did have a royal son who deserved to inherit the throne.⁵

'Tudor Rose' and 'Tudor Prince' reference three versions of this legend, one citing Bacon, and two citing Oxford. The underpinning of all three is the principle set out by Elizabeth Sears, from the Oxford camp, that:

some Oxfordians, when asked why these works were hidden behind the pseudonym 'William Shakespeare'.... respond 'It was beneath his dignity as a nobleman to publish under his own name'. That simply does not make sense. official silencing is something that needs an explanation, not a platitude.⁶

Conspiracy theories are not, however, confined to the Oxford camp. The phrase 'Prince Tudor' was initially coined – as 'Prince of Tudor' – by a Baconian, Alfred Dodd. Arguing Bacon was the supreme genius of the English Renaissance, he came to believe that he was 'the son of Queen Elizabeth by a morganatic marriage with the Earl of Leicester.'⁷ Dodd developed the long standing rumour that Elizabeth had a sexual relationship with Robert Dudley, a legitimate historical controversy with much detailed literature.⁸

Dodd's theory was adapted by the Oxfordian Percy Allen who in 1933 endorsed Looney's identification of Oxford as the Bard, arguing that public disgrace was the reason for de Vere opting for anonymity. He commented:

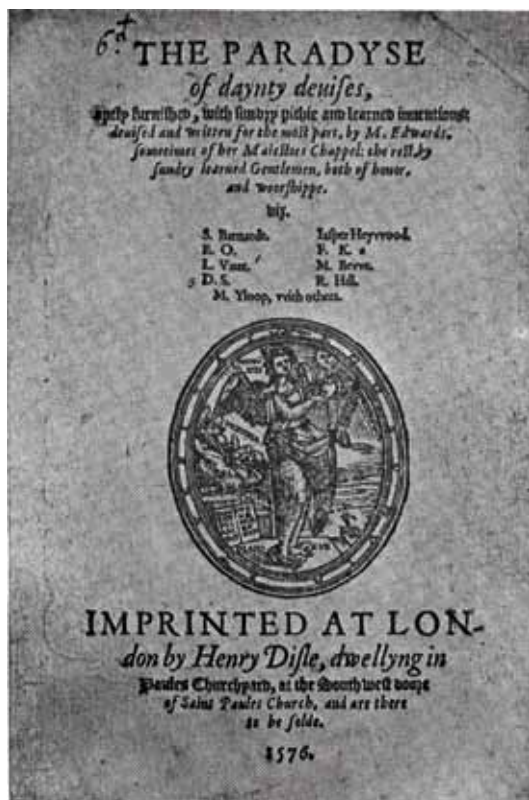
It is an axiomatic part of our case that the author of the plays wrote them secretly, was secretly paid for writing them, and destroyed, or concealed direct evidence of his authorship.⁹

This was orthodox. However, Allen went further, alleging that the rationale lay deeper, and that:

the business... was mortally dangerous, and because of its intimate connection... with certain sexual intimacies that seem to have taken place – with a child born in consequence – about the year 1574, between Elizabeth and Lord Oxford.¹⁰

Oxfordians for and against Prince Tudor

Oxfordians divided sharply on this, Looney and his followers aware that this involved re-writing Tudor history and that the evidence was weak. However, the logic of a state conspiracy was compelling. In 1952 Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn the elder published a study of Oxford as Bard which included a birth in 1574.¹¹ They argued the child was fostered



Oxfordians alike hold that the upper classes were never players and never went beyond court masques.

But a loss of face is hardly critical, and could be covered by an invented name – real anonymity, like Homer. Shakespeare was not just a pen name. It was the name of a real person. Was he bought off? Were writers like Ben Johnson bribed.... or suborned? And

with the Second Earl of Southampton and his wife, being brought up secretly as Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, thus forcing Oxford into anonymity and the writing poems to his unacknowledged son, the Fair Young Man of the sonnets.

This split Oxfordians and even the Ogburn's son, Charlton Ogburn the younger, resisted it in his 1984 book *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, describing the theory but concluding his assessment with the words 'I take no position on it.'¹² Though the Younger Ogburn was reticent, the Prince Tudor theory gained adherents though Looney's mainstream followers continued to reject it.

The Tudor Rose Theory

In 1990 the dissident Oxfordian Elizabeth Sears produced her take on the concept that Henry Wriothesley was child to Elizabeth and Oxford, published as *Shakespeare and the Tudor Rose*. Despite the title, this is the Prince Tudor theory. She argued that Wriothesley was the Royal heir and Oxford had to suppress this knowledge, hiding clues to this in sonnets. For example, she argued sonnet 124 pointed to a hidden message. However, she misread the phrase 'fortunes bastard' as referring to a baby, concluding: 'if Southampton had been openly hailed as heir to the throne, "Fortune" (Elizabeth) might have charged Oxford with treason and had him executed for adultery just as Henry VIII did with Elizabeth's mother Anne Boleyn',¹³ a remarkable statement which combines misreading of the sonnets with the misreading of English law.

Adultery has never been illegal in English law save when within a Royal marriage, considered to be treason against the King. Oxford's alleged adultery was to betray his wife, and such adultery has never been illegal. Moreover, while Sears accepts a baby would have been illegitimate, she does not recognise he had no legal standing. Without marriage a child could never be a Prince or inherit the throne, and Elizabeth never married.

The Oxford camp remained split, and in 1996 the mainstream Oxfordian, Diana Price, delivered an extensive critique.¹⁴ She focussed on the 'seemingly insurmountable problem'¹⁵ of a Royal birth in June 1574. Her analysis tellingly focussed on the letters of the French ambassador, in the period of diplomatic crisis following the death of the French king Charles IX. Apart from showing that the Queen was visible and politically active at a time of the alleged birth, Price showed that diplomacy threw doubt on the pregnancy theory. The Queen invited

her French suitor, duc D'Alençon, to visit her at a time when she would have been in the late stages of pregnancy – a potentially disastrous move had she attempted it.

But the Price critique was overshadowed by a response by Charlton Ogburn the Younger. The younger Ogburn revealed he had now accepted the Prince Tudor theory. Ogburn wrote that it was 'a proposition I resisted for years for obvious reasons and have come to accept because I felt I have no choice. No other scenario of which I have heard accommodates the facts of the case.'¹⁶ Yet no new facts had come to light. On the contrary, Price had produced detailed evidence against it. Ogburn appears to have decided that without a major conspiracy, the case for Oxford being Shakespeare could not stand. And only a child born to the Queen could explain a state imposed conspiracy of silence.

Queen Elizabeth I

© National Portrait Gallery, London



Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford

Private collection; on loan to the National Portrait Gallery, London

The Super Prince Tudor Theory

By the turn of the century the Prince Tudor/Tudor Rose theory was embedded in Oxfordian culture while remaining disputed. It then shot off in a new and sensational direction.

In 2001 the Oxfordian Paul Streitz published a book which alleged that Oxford was, as the title stated, 'the son of Elizabeth 1'.¹⁷ Streitz put together a picture of the Late Tudor Court which resembled that of the Borgias – the title of chapter 2, setting the scene, described its theme as 'Sex, Murder, Incest and the Tudors', indicating that this is no simple revision of late Tudor history. Streitz merges contemporary rumour – with very little evidence – that Elizabeth had children by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester – with the long standing issue of whether Elizabeth had a sexual relationship with Thomas Seymour in 1547 – and the Prince Tudor claim of a birth in 1574.

The relationships with Seymour and Dudley are legitimate historical questions. There was sufficient suspicion of Seymour's behaviour to require contemporary investigations which were inconclusive but helped send him to the block. Nor are rumours of sexual relations with Dudley easy to dismiss, though no historian has ever found solid evidence, and certainly not of births. Rumours are not evidence.

Streitz, however, took unsupported rumours against Elizabeth as established fact, reporting she had six children – noting in a list given in the appendix as four by Dudley, one by Seymour and one by Oxford, together with the foster mothers.¹⁸ Streitz moreover, claimed Oxford was not the child of the de Vere family, as had been accepted by all previous writers, but that he was the child of Seymour and Elizabeth, born in 1548. The accepted date of Oxford's birth is 1550. Moreover he claimed that as Queen she committed incest by having an affair with the 23 year old Oxford – her son – in 1573 which led to the child in June 1574 fostered as Henry Wriothesley. Streitz believed the Earl of Southampton was under duress after involvement in the Ridolfi plot.

This was extreme by any standards. A year after the book emerged, the mainstream Oxfordian writer Christopher Paul criticised it at length.¹⁹ Paul was particularly exercised that Streitz was 'portraying Oxford as a bastard who incests his own mother'.²⁰ He dissected the claim that a 1548 birth led to the de Vere's fostering the child knowing him to be the child of Elizabeth and they were then also forced by the Protector to foster Mary Seymour, the child of Katherine Parr and

Seymour, now an orphan. While the relationship of the 16th Earl of Oxford with the Protector Somerset is curious, Paul found no justification for thinking Edward was not son of the de Vere's, nor that they fostered Mary Seymour.

Paul addressed the legal debate about the succession. The Prince Tudor theory is weak because any child of Elizabeth would be illegitimate. However, the 1571 Treason Act curiously reverses the law of primogeniture to make an illegitimate child of Elizabeth an heir to the throne – a unique change in the law but one which was never used and which Paul cannot see being designed to accommodate de Vere. Henry Wriothesley was of course not born till three years later. He dealt effectively with the view that the 2nd Countess of Oxford was only a foster mother, providing evidence of a close emotional relationship with Henry Wriothesley, which would rule against her acting as surrogate.

He concluded by arguing: 'We find sufficient evidence that it was the repressive politics of the period, Oxford's rank and standing, and the concerns of the family that their reputations would be damaged if the world knew who wrote the plays, that explains why he chose to publish under a pseudonym'.²¹ If Paul hoped by this to restore the mainstream Oxford position, he was mistaken. As the younger Ogburn had already shown, serious doubts exist over whether concerns over rank, status and reputation can justify a conspiracy to conceal authorship of the Shakespearian corpus. Literature was not sufficiently important and a major state issue is the only plausible reason to suppress the authorship of literary work.

This factor must operate for all the burgeoning list of candidates to be Shakespeare. For Marlowe, for example, involvement with the secret service is cited as a reason for his disappearance in 1593. Nothing rivals sex, however, as an argument for a state conspiracy. How ever weak the evidence for it, the idea that babies from an allegedly virgin Queen were produced and concealed has become a juggernaut. Late Tudor and Early Stuart history is facing fundamental challenges.

How the forthcoming film *Anonymous* will affect the debate remains to be seen. It is clear that a Hollywood blockbuster will provide publicity for most extreme theory yet generated from Authorship studies. If orthodox supporters of William of Stratford find the prospect unpleasant, they may take some comfort from the fact that many of their most bitter opponents in the Oxford camp will find

the portrayal of the Prince Tudor theory on the big screen just as unpalatable.

*NOTE. Oxford's supporters call themselves Oxfordians and refer to those who believe that William of Stratford was The Author as Stratfordians. These terms will be used here, without prejudice.

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- ¹¹ Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn, *This Star of England*, Coward-McCann Inc, New York 1952.
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- ¹³ *Shakespeare and the Tudor Rose*, op cit p80. Sears gives 'fortune' a capital letter as if it was a name, which it does not have in the original.
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- ²⁰ op cit p53.
- ²¹ op cit p66.

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