



# Shakespeare Matters

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"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments..."

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## Do Oxford's letters spell Shakespeare?

By K.C. Ligon

*Famously, [Admiral] Nelson put the telescope to his blind eye and declared that he could not see the signal.<sup>1</sup>*

In his introduction to *Monstrous Adversary*, Prof. Alan H. Nelson says that "it has become a matter of urgency to measure the real Oxford against the myth created by partisan apologists." Yet he allows that the "biographer who is not persuaded that Oxford wrote the works of Shakespeare must nevertheless pay tribute to those who are, for it is often his amateur admirers who have discovered new evidence about the man and his milieu." Thus Nelson honors the discoveries while belittling Oxfordian interpretation, labeling it "amateur" and the work of partisan "admirers." He defines his contrasting, professional approach:

My main purpose is to introduce documents from Oxford's life, many of them written in Oxford's own hand. Since documents alone do not make a biography, however, I have felt duty-bound to point out their significance for an accurate estimation of Oxford's character.

It is noteworthy that the documents which form the core of Nelson's book are the sensational Howard and Arundel libels. The men who made those scandalous accusations about Oxford were speaking for their very lives. Nelson's choice to present their testimony as if it were factual, before giving any intimation of its bias, demonstrates what he means by pointing out the "significance" of the documents. That he feels "duty-bound" to construct his  
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## Conference in Carmel

*Fellowship's 2nd annual gathering features plays, papers and a good time for everyone*



*Derran Charlton (l) and William Causey were among those addressing the conference this year. Charlton has been an indefatigable researcher in the UK for years, frequently turning up interesting documents from household archives (he is interviewed by Mark Anderson in this issue—see page 28). Causey has recently organized debates in Washington, DC about the authorship, including the landmark all-day event at the Smithsonian Institution last April.*

The Fellowship's second annual conference this past October was the third time in the last nine years that Oxfordians have met in the colorful, world-famous arts community of Carmel (Calif.), home of Oxfordian Stephen Moorer's Carmel Shakespeare Festival. This year conference goers were treated to productions of *Henry VI, Parts I & II*, and *Taming of the Shrew*. There was also a tour (organized by John Varady) of Carmel's favorite-son poet Robinson Jeffers' home.

One of the highlights of the weekend was the panel discussion

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## "The play's the thing..."

*At the authorship debate in NYC same old question takes center stage: "What is evidence?"*

One of the major events at the Shakespeare Oxford Society conference in New York last October was a debate on Thursday evening (Oct. 23), featuring Oxfordians Hank Whittemore and Robert Brazil vs. Stratfordians Irv Matus and Alan Nelson. *Harpers* magazine editor Lewis Lapham served as moderator.

The focus of the debate was a comparison of each side's candidate to demonstrate which man was most likely the author of the Shakespeare Canon. However, it became apparent that such a format still leads to the key problem in the whole

debate, namely—what is evidence? Nelson commented toward the end of the debate that he understood the format to be limited to "documentary evidence" as the criteria upon which each side would build its case, and by this of course he meant that therefore "literature" (i.e., the plays and poems) would not be in evidence. This led to the inevitable pattern that repeated itself throughout the evening: The Stratfordian side citing over and over the First Folio and the Stratford monument as the key evidence that "fingered" their man as the true

*(Continued on page 12)*

*Spell Shakespeare (cont'd from page 1)*  
 “accurate estimation of Oxford’s character” from such obviously tainted evidence reveals his extraordinary bias against his subject:

If I judge Oxford harshly from the outset, it is because I neither can nor wish to suppress what I have learned along the way.

Here Nelson suggests that his perspective is based upon the truth of the documents, which, insofar as they relate to the libels, is in serious question. Be that as it may, readers will find on Nelson’s page of Editorial Procedures a statement of the critical difference (given in greater detail in the Introduction) between his methodology and that of Oxford’s previous biographer, Bernard M. Ward, author of *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*:

The documents that lie at the heart of this biography are freshly transcribed from original sources. To preserve the flavour of the originals I retain original spellings...

Whether or not Nelson could have composed the first sentence without realizing its irony, he has nonetheless given us his equation: documents in modern spelling (Ward’s) may lie, while those in original spellings (Nelson’s) tell the truth. After touching on particulars of orthography, he continues:

I silently expand abbreviations; incorporate scribal corrections, additions, and interlineations; suppress cancellations; restore missing text; and insert letters, words and comments, as needed for clarity, within square brackets.

Nelson thus admits to a fair amount of textual manipulation, at least as much as he assigns to Ward, but adds this disclaimer:

More pedantically accurate transcriptions of many of the same documents are posted at my website.

This statement is important as there is other information available at Nelson’s website<sup>2</sup> not found in the book, and it is there that his real reason for retaining the original spellings becomes clear: Nelson’s theory is that the Earl of Oxford’s spelling reveals that he couldn’t have been Shakespeare.

Indeed, Nelson’s aim in writing this book seems to have been twofold: One, to establish that Oxford was a scoundrel un-

worthy of being the bard, and two, regardless of the reader’s assessment of the earl as a human being, to prove that Oxford can be dismissed as author of the canon on linguistic grounds alone. Although the few pages devoted to linguistic considerations appear slight when compared to the several hundred focused upon Oxford’s character, the chapter which deals with the earl’s extant letters constitutes Nelson’s best attempt to disqualify Oxford as Shakespeare on the basis of his “idiosyncratic” spelling (including that of words Nelson says Oxford “misheard”) and supposed regional dialect. Nelson is also critical of the earl’s grammar (he doesn’t seem aware that Oxford’s constructions are reflective of Shakespeare’s), lack of punctuation (he doesn’t acknowledge the lightness of punctuation in Shakespeare), and use of legal Latin, though he denigrates Oxford’s classical Latin as well, citing what he describes as Oxford’s failure to resort to Latin roots in spelling. That Oxford would have been experimenting with competing forms in an age of tremendous variation in spelling is a thought which barely rates a murmur of recognition from Nelson, who uses phrases like “distinctly odd, even for the time” to describe examples which depart from “more normative forms.” Here Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable<sup>3</sup> provide an informative context:

The variability of English spelling was an important part of the instability that people felt characterized the English language in the sixteenth century, especially as compared to a language like Latin. To many it seemed that English spelling was chaotic.

Baugh and Cable emphasize, however, that consistencies of spelling “often went with a scholarly temperament,” citing Sir John Cheke’s and Richard Stanyhurst’s individual systems (both at odds with many of their contemporaries), adding that “most writers show a fair degree of consistency within their own practice.”

Here, however, they make a critical distinction:

It was somewhat different with the hastier writing of the more popular playwrights and pamphleteers. It is not always clear how much of their spelling is to be credited to them and how much to the printer. Most printers probably took advantage of the variability of English spelling to ‘justify’ a line, with as little scruple about optional letters as about extra spaces.

At his website, Nelson argues that one would expect that “some of the author’s signature spellings would find their way into the final corpus, even with the personal and ‘house-style’ alterations inserted by professional scribes and compositors,” his implication being that none of Oxford’s spellings found their way into the printed texts of the Shakespearean canon. It is worth noting that the Riverside Shakespeare<sup>4</sup> includes in its basically modernized text a few variant spellings judged to be possibly reflective of contemporary pronunciations, including: ‘sixt’ (sixth), ‘Callice’ (Calais), and ‘embassadors’ (ambassadors), all of which are found in Oxford’s letters. Of course in this era the likelihood of any author’s “signature” spellings surviving in printed form would be based upon how close to or distant from the norm, as perceived by the individual compositor, each was.

### Oxford’s spelling

Nelson states that Oxford’s spelling generally “falls about midway between the untrained and phonetic practices of the poet Thomas Churchyard or the landlady Julian Penn<sup>5</sup> (1592), and the more nearly uniform and ‘modern’ practices of William Cecil, Oxford’s daughters Bridget and Susan, and his second wife, Elizabeth Trentham.” Many chapters later, he gives an example of Churchyard’s spelling but modernizes Mrs. Penn’s<sup>6</sup> with the excuse that its orthography is so unclear that he must “translate” it. Moreover, his coupling of “untrained” and “phonetic” implies that phonetics were or are the province of the “untrained.” The level of this observation is bizarrely shortsighted, because Oxford’s tutor Sir Thomas Smith was the author of *De Recta et emendata linguae Anglicae scriptione Dialogus* (a Dialogue Concerning the Correct and Emended Writing of the English Language, 1568), and because the young earl was also acquainted with John Hart, another outstanding phonetic spelling reformer, thought by E.J. Dobson<sup>7</sup> to be “our chief authority for the pronunciation of his time.” Nelson’s implication that Churchyard and Penn were somehow reflective of stylistic influences while ignoring Smith and Hart in this context renders a cynical meaning to his avowal to point out “the significance” of the documents.

The first endnote to the chapter “Oxford’s Letters” cites Nelson’s website,  
 (Continued on page 16)

*Spell Shakespeare (cont'd from page 15)*  
reinforcing the idea that he is his own authority. Here the extant letters and memoranda may be read in their entirety, along with alphabetized word lists which make it possible for the reader to observe, in utter disbelief, that Nelson actually constructs his theory of “misheard words” from Oxford’s occasional spellings, despite the fact that Oxford frequently spelled most of these words consistent with more normative contemporary forms. His citation of the *I* in ‘realme’ is a particularly egregious example. The website shows that Oxford spelled this word as ‘realme’ no less than 26 times compared with only two instances of the variant ‘reame.’

Furthermore, the *Oxford English Dictionary* states that *I* did not become standard in the word until 1600. Nelson also cites Oxford’s mention of ‘Edward Hubbard/Hubbert’ as ‘Hulbert’ in a letter to Burghley, without clarifying that in Oxford’s letter to the man himself he addressed him as ‘Hubbert.’ Nelson declares that this instance of an extraneous *I*, together with Oxford’s having added an *I* to the name of the estate ‘Wivenhoe’ (Wiuenghole) and his having dropped the *I* twice in ‘realme,’ is a “propensity” which “marks Oxford as particularly defective in his habits of pronunciation.”

Oxford’s letters, however, include vocabulary that demands skillful articulation, and it will be observed that some of these words include complex combinations of *m*, *n* and *l*, for instance: ‘calumniated,’ ‘gentlemen,’ ‘Walmsle,’ and ‘Mydelltone’s.’ Nelson cites Oxford’s single spelling of ‘stannary’ as ‘stammarye,’ as evidence of the earl’s mishearing of *nas m*, ignoring the possibility that the earl might have taken note of the local dialectal form. Indeed, according to the *Riverside Shakespeare*,<sup>8</sup> the bard spelled ‘renowm’ as a variant of ‘renown,’ which the editor believes may have reflected a “distinctive” contemporary pronunciation.

Moreover, the similarity of the orthography of doubled *m* and *n* respectively makes one wonder if ‘stammary’ is actually a penmanship issue. Nevertheless, seizing upon the slight incidence of an excrescent *l* and if true, an errant *m* for *n*, both clearly unusual when compared to Oxford’s otherwise conventional applications of these sounds, Nelson advances his slender claims. It will be seen that his argument that Oxford was not a “fully competent practitioner of his native English” is based upon similarly constituted comparisons.

### Spelling and hearing

Also, while Nelson’s website states that certain items are dialectal, in the book he calls the same items misheard, while some misheard words on the website have been categorized differently in the book. ‘Necescessarye’ (which Oxford spelled seven times according to the standard ‘necessarie’) Nelson concedes was likely due to a moment of “inattention.” He has also changed his mind about ‘importu-

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nate’ for ‘importune.’ Still on the misheard word list at the website, in the book Nelson calls it “odd” even though it is cited by the *O.E.D.* as a variant used in Oxford’s lifetime (1598), and well beyond. Nelson argues that since Oxford used it three times in his letters and Shakespeare never did, Oxford can’t have been Shakespeare. The poem “When I was Fair and Young” (thought by Looney and Dr. Grosart to be Oxford’s)<sup>9</sup> ends with the phrase “importune me no more,” so possibly Oxford used both variations, depending on the nature of the writing.

Nelson points to Oxford’s use of ‘satisfise’ for ‘satisfy’ and ‘subieste’ for ‘suggest,’ stating that Shakespeare only used ‘satisfice’ once and never used ‘subieste,’ omitting Oxford’s usage of ‘satisfie,’ and the fact that ‘subieste’ might have been changed by a compositor to the competing form. ‘Interest,’ according to the *O.E.D.*, was an alteration of the earlier form, ‘interest.’ Oxford uses ‘interested’ once, Shakespeare uses ‘interest’d’ once, yet Nelson cites the word as further evidence that “clearly Oxford’s language is not the language of Shakespeare.”

Nelson cites ‘agers’ (possibly Oxford’s coinage from ‘ag-ere,’ to act, do) for ‘agents,’

despite Oxford’s six usages of the contemporary variant ‘agentes,’ two of ‘agent,’ one of ‘agents,’ and one of ‘agentship.’ Additionally, as Nina Green<sup>10</sup> notes, the *O.E.D.*’s first citation for ‘agentship’ (tentatively, 1616) is 19 years after Oxford’s use of it. Green’s research demonstrates that Oxford used a number of words years before their earliest citations in the *O.E.D.* (three of which are attributed to Shakespeare), also assessing “the significance of the correlation between Oxford’s lexical vocabulary and Shakespeare’s” (Oxford’s letters may be read at her Oxford Authorship website—[www3.telus.net/oxford](http://www3.telus.net/oxford)—in modern spelling). Green states that “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*.”

Nelson’s eye doesn’t see that, however. He cites as misheard ‘lyggates’ for ‘lingots’ (ingots), despite two examples of ‘lyngates,’ which can certainly be taken as a variation, but clearly not as evidence of inability to hear sounds of the word. Oxford’s ‘my thinkes’ for ‘methinks’ was a variant used by John Fletcher in *Mad Lover* (1619),<sup>11</sup> who by Nelson’s reasoning must also have possessed an inferior ear. Oxford spells ‘use’ and its derivatives according to the standard at the time (as ‘vse’) no less than 47 times, yet on the basis of a single instance of ‘yowse,’ a spelling very clearly based upon sound, Nelson foolishly argues that Oxford couldn’t hear the word properly. Similarly, Nelson cites a single instance of ‘churge’ for ‘church,’ failing to take into consideration that this spelling might acknowledge a final voiced consonant in place of the corresponding voiceless one, and omitting that Oxford spelled it more regularly as ‘churche.’ The notion that Oxford may have sometimes favored correlation of sound over etymology generates only contempt from Nelson, who notes that Oxford had no “settled” way of spelling ‘half-penny,’ nor of ‘buy,’ however the *O.E.D.* cites many contemporary variations of both. Nelson’s assertion that Oxford spoke a provincial dialect truly falters: If Oxford were that parochial he wouldn’t display such flamboyant variation.

Indeed, Oxford’s orthography suggests a cosmopolitan personality actively re-

sponding to the changing linguistic environment. Early training with Sir Thomas Smith notwithstanding, his extensive foreign travels also argue against his having rigidly maintained the speech patterns he heard as a child. Nelson's attempt to characterize Oxford's speech as rural East Anglian is perfectly in step with his subjective and misleading assessment of Oxford's spelling. His logic operates entirely within the confines of his biased view, and outside the complex weave of influences competing for recognition as standards in the cosmopolitan capital, standards to which Oxford had been exposed long before he arrived in London at the age of 12. The young earl then spent the remainder of his formative years listening to the vocal patterns of Lord Burghley, the Queen and other well-established Londoners. It is noteworthy that while Elizabeth<sup>12</sup> adopted the popular East Midlands derived *-ar* pronunciation in words like 'person,' which she wrote as 'parson,' Oxford participated only partially in the innovation, often spelling 'merchants' as 'marchantes' but 'servants' and 'service' with *-er*, the form which became standard for all three words later on. This is one of many instances of his fluidity as a writer and, one could reasonably infer, as a speaker.

In his play *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*, George Chapman provides a contemporary portrait of Oxford distinctly at odds with Nelson's postliminary appraisal:

He was beside of spirit passing great,  
Valiant and learn'd, and liberal as the  
sun,  
Spoke and writ sweetly, or of learned  
subjects,  
Or of the discipline of public weals;  
And 'twas the Earl of Oxford.

Indeed, where is the contemporary evidence to support Nelson's fantastic claim that Oxford's dialect would have been regarded as "provincial," comparable to Walter Raleigh's famously broad Devonshire?

How can one credit Nelson's claim that Oxford's Latin was "defective" based upon a few examples of English legal Latin? An expert in that vernacular might be able to ascertain if Oxford chose phonetic renderings in these words and phrases as well, given that the "language" involved was neither Latin nor English. As for Oxford's classical Latin, Nelson ignores the testimony of the scholar Sturmius (whom the

earl met during his travels in 1575), when in a subsequent letter to Burghley, he says:

As I write this I think of the Earl of Oxford, for I believe his lady speaks Latin also.<sup>13</sup>

Nelson also disregards Gabriel Harvey's praise of Oxford's Latin verses and Courtly Epistle in the introduction to Bartholomew Clerke's translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier*.<sup>14</sup> Harvey, speaking in Latin be-

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fore the Queen and Court at Audley End in 1578, lauded Oxford's writings above those of Castiglione himself, observing that in Oxford's travels he had "learned the manners of many men and the arts of foreign countries."<sup>15</sup>

Harvey's testimony and Oxford's Latin Epistle itself are an embarrassment to Nelson: Thus quietly, in an endnote which relates to another matter, he conjectures that Clerke himself "may have" written the epistle. That Clerke would undertake this assignment by presumptuously adopting such an affectionate, self-deprecating tone toward himself on behalf of England's premier earl is unimaginable.

Nevertheless, continuing his attack on Oxford's skills as a Latinist, Nelson states that "only a person ignorant of or indifferent to Latin could spell 'impudent' as 'impodent' or (worse) 'impotent.'" Nelson thus reveals his own ignorance of, or indifference to, the fact that 'impotent' (and the variant 'impodent' found in *Hamlet* Q1<sup>16</sup>) had more than one meaning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Besides being defined as "powerless," the *O.E.D.* says that 'impotent' ('impotently') also meant "without self-restraint, ungovernable, unrestrainedly," citing Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* (1596),

"O sacred hunger of ambitious mindes, And impotent desire of men to raine." It is therefore hardly certain that Oxford meant 'impudent' where he spelled 'impodent' (again, possibly like 'churge,' with a voiced consonant in place of its voiceless counterpart), describing certain servants to Burghley, expressing in a subsequent letter that he scorned "to be offered that injury to think I am so weak of government as to be ruled by servants, or not able to govern myself." He later wrote to the Lord Treasurer that if he hadn't "alredie sufficient knowledge of Carmaden's honestie" that he would have "the more wondered at thys impotent part of his to avoue before her Majestie so manifest & intolerable vntruthes." Here of course Oxford actually spells the word 'impotent.' Might this be another normative spelling of Oxford's, contrasting with a phonetic one that is possibly indicative of "dialect"? Nelson hasn't considered this possibility, and in making his evaluation of Oxford's dialect he doesn't cite any dialectician or linguistic authority for evidentiary support.

### Sound and spelling

To be sure, there is a distinction between accent and dialect (and between sound and spelling) especially with respect to the development of modern English in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Spelling conventions were progressing ahead of pronunciation changes (largely due to the raising of Middle English vowels, known as the Great Vowel Shift), despite the efforts of spelling reformers to resolve spelling with the evolving standard. As C.L. Wrenn<sup>17</sup> says:

Especially between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries English vowels, which had very roughly the sounds of Classical Latin, came to assume their present sounds, some of which are peculiar to our language. This relatively rapid change in the vowel sounds happened to coincide with the increasing and inevitable tendency of the printers, with the popularizing of books in Queen Elizabeth's time, to look for accepted conventions of spelling.

The relationship between sound and spelling had been more straightforward in the previous era. As Baugh and Cable<sup>18</sup> put it:

One of the striking characteristics of Middle English is its great variety in the different parts of England. This variety was not confined to the spoken forms of the  
*(Continued on page 18)*

*Spell Shakespeare (cont'd from page 17)*

language, as it is to a great extent today, but appears equally in the written literature. In the absence of any recognized literary standard before the close of the period, writers naturally wrote in the dialect of that part of the country to which they belonged... In a rough way, however, it is customary to distinguish between four principal dialects of Middle English: Northern, East Midland, West Midland and Southern... London began as a Southern and ended as a Midland dialect. By the fifteenth century there had come to prevail in the East Midlands a fairly uniform dialect, and the language of London agrees in all important respects to it.

So, in looking for clues to Oxford's pronunciation in his spelling, it must be understood that the Great Vowel Shift was still in progress. As an example, Middle English long *-e* (spelled with an 'i') had been pronounced in words of the lexical set **price** (like today's 'caprice'), but was now shifting toward the (**ai**) diphthong we pronounce in today's **price** words. Linguist J.C. Wells<sup>19</sup> says one transitional pronunciation during this period was the (**ei**) diphthong we now pronounce in the lexical set **face**. Interestingly, in an East Midlands text called *The Bestiary*, c. 1250<sup>20</sup> one finds the spelling of 'eiland' for 'island.'

In 1570 in *A Methode or comfortable beginning for all vnlearned*, John Hart's phonetic rendering of 'thy' in The Lord's Prayer is (**thei**).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in outlining his proposed system of spelling according to sound in *An Orthographie*, Hart spelled many words of the **price** set with (**ei**), including 'like' ('leik'), which he says is the pronunciation of the "common man, and many learned," though he makes it clear that he favors the older, more conservative pronunciation in other words of the same set, such as 'title' and 'right.' Thus Hart records one aspect of the Great Vowel Shift as it occurred in the "best and most perfitte" speech of "every reasonable English man." Oxford, who spelled 'like' as 'leke,' habitually chose (only for this word and its compounds) a spelling that seems to have been reflective of this shift.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, neither choice was adopted as the standard spelling, and the pronunciation later stabilized as (**ai**).

However, Oxford did not spell over a hundred other words in the **price** set with an 'e,' such as 'pike' or 'find,' choosing an 'i' or 'y' spelling elsewhere. Thus, this occasional spelling of Oxford's, despite its frequency in commonly used words, cannot be given much weight as an indication of his overall pronunciation of words of

the lexical set **price**, except by Nelson, who cites it as evidence of Oxford's "peculiar" dialect, calling it an "e-for-i substitution," without saying which sounds he means. Use of the term "substitution" is itself injudicious, as the standard sounds weren't fully established. In any case, given Hart's division of the **price** set, it would appear that Oxford pronounced most of those words with the older, conservative vowel. It is also noteworthy that in the preface Oxford wrote to *Cardanus Comforte*<sup>23</sup> the

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***"The fact is that  
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forms of  
the language..."***

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word 'like' appears, not as he habitually wrote it ('leke'), but apparently according to the compositor's preference.

At his website Nelson also cites Oxford's *-wh* spelling in 'hood' (once in 'leklywhodes' and once in 'falswhood') as evidence that he "spoke a dialect recognized by contemporaries as provincial, and even as rustic" (in the book he omits 'rustic' and rescinds his claim that this 'dialect' was recognized by anyone except himself), calling this a "wh-for-h substitution," again without defining the context of the evolving pronunciation. The *O.E.D.*, however, observes that:

Early in the fifteenth century appear spellings with *-wh* of words with initial **-h** followed by an **-o** sound."<sup>24</sup>

They add that "some of these spellings were especially frequent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century." Thus *whood* for 'hood' is used by Hall the Chronicler, Nashe, Harvey, John Davies of Hereford and Sylvester.

Hall spelled 'hood' as 'whode,' as Oxford did in 'leklywhodes,' the single *-o* reflecting the OE root 'hod.' Oxford, however, also used the single *-h* in both words, spelling them as 'leklihode' and 'falshodd'

(once each), which is a clear sign of his awareness of the evolving standard. That Nelson would once again present only one set of examples is an appalling reminder of his shallow interest in "letting the documentary evidence speak for itself."

Nelson also alleges that Oxford's addition of *-t* to 'through,' 'though' and 'enough,' is proof of mishearing and/or defective delivery but these were variants which appeared in literature, at least in one instance, long after Oxford's lifetime. The *O.E.D.* cites the variant 'enought' in *The Man in the Moone* by W.M. (1609), also in Edward Cooke's *A Voyage to the South Seas and Round the World, Perform'd in the Years 1708, 1709, 1710, and 1711 by the Ships Duke and Duchess of Bristol*. Evidently this quirk of Oxford's accent/dialect/mishearing was visited upon Capt. Cooke over a century later. The 'through,' variant was once used as a combination of 'through' and 'out' which led to the modern 'throughout,' again, according to the *O.E.D.*, which cites Chapman's use of it in 1599. Virtually every one of Oxford's variant spellings is either an earlier form or one of the competing variants of the time. Despite Nelson's suggestion otherwise, 'showld,' 'cowld,' and 'wowl'd' are found in *O.E.D.* citations for the 16<sup>th</sup> century. 'Lave' is old form of 'law,' 'thought' for 'though' is an old Scottish form, and out of 46 variants listed by the *O.E.D.* for 'suit,' Oxford used only seven. 'Ought' and 'owte' are earlier forms of 'out,' and Oxford used both, as well as 'out' itself. Nelson cites 'altho(e)' for 'although,' according to his usual pattern, ignoring Oxford's more frequent use of 'althoughe' and 'althowge,' and although Nelson has documented Oxford's deep interest in alchemy, he must have missed in 'thoth' this possibly sly reference to the Egyptian god Thoth, later named Hermes Trismegistus by Neoplatonists and devotees of mysticism and alchemy.<sup>25</sup>

### **Are spelling variations errors?**

The fact is that Oxford's spelling reveals educated awareness of past and present forms of the language, and suggests the same willfulness evidenced in other aspects of his life and personality: He seems to bend the words to serve his own interests, spelling the way that pleases him at any given moment, favoring many antique forms, but at other times taking a flyer on new variations, some of his own creation. However, since Nelson views all

of Oxford's notionate behavior as reprehensible, his disdain for Oxford's distinctive spellings is similar to his contempt for Oxford's extravagance in shoes: All "variations" are "errors." Yet Dennis Freeborn observes that in this era, "The concept of a 'spelling mistake' had not yet been established."<sup>26</sup>

This brings us to Oxford's 'oft' for 'ought,' about which Nelson makes another contumelious pronouncement:

The OED head-note reveals that Oxford's substitution of the labial fricative 'f' for the guttural 'ough' is a positive linguistic error, not just a rural dialect.

First, I can find no such statement in the *O.E.D.* In addition, the style of the sound is more accurately called labio-dental, since its articulation involves both lips and teeth. Second, Nelson provides two *O.E.D.* citations for 'oft' (defined as an obsolete or dialectal form of 'aught' and 'ought'), *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1575) and *Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1576), as well as citing Robert Greene's *Orpharion* (c.1590), so the preposterous implication of his construction is that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Oxford's use of 'oft' as a "positive linguistic error." Furthermore, the guttural (x) sound, spelled -gh, was gradually disappearing in Standard English, though there is still a question as to whether this process was complete in Oxford's time. When it did disappear, of course, wherever it didn't become silent, it was replaced by -f.

However, the poet's rhyme in *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), "When as thine eye hath chose the dame," suggests that the labio-dental fricative -f sound was being pronounced then in a variant of 'naught' with -ft:

Have you not heard it said full oft  
A woman's nay doth stand for nought.

Kokeritz<sup>27</sup> says: "This [variant] may have been current in London at the time, for Hodges' couples 'aught' and 'oft' are pronounced alike, while Chapman rhymes 'wrought': 'aloft,' soft."

More to the point perhaps, Shakespeare uses 'oft' for 'aught' in Sonnet 14:

Or say with princes that it shall go well,  
By oft predict that I in heaven find...

Thus, Oxford's so-called "error" is also Shakespeare's.

Clearly, Professor Nelson is no Profes-

sor Higgins. His citation of "wh-for-h" as a rustic dialect marker applies just as readily to Nashe, Harvey, Hall the Chronicler, John Davies of Hereford and Sylvester as it does to Oxford, as they all spelled 'hood' as 'whood,' and even so, Oxford spelled the word with the single -h with an equal frequency. Moreover, according to Charles Barber,<sup>28</sup> though the pronunciation of (hw) before rounded vowels (as in 'who') was gradually changing to (h), it was still heard in developing Standard English "well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century." Nelson's citation of e-for-i in 'like' is also meaningless out of proper context and specious on two counts: 1) Oxford spells every other word in the lexical set **price** with an *i* or a *y* according to more accepted conventions of his time, well over a hundred words, including those with identical consonant closures, i.e., 'pike.' 2) Neither pronunciation nor spelling had completely stabilized in Oxford's lifetime as the Great Vowel Shift was still in process.

### Conclusion

Nelson has misidentified variant forms as errors, and foolishly proposed that on the basis of occasional spellings that Oxford misheard those words even though he habitually wrote them in more normative contemporary forms. His evaluation of Oxford's dialect therefore proceeds from a suspect methodology. It is certainly not the assessment of a dispassionate professional, more like the cynical calculation of a hostile amateur.

Thus, Nelson's pronouncements about Oxford's language resonate in the same hollow tone as his judgments about Oxford's character. His selectivity in observation of the evidence, together with serious inconsistencies of form and substance (as well as omissions of critical contextual information) all lead the reader to conclude that Nelson is either engaged in deliberate obfuscation to prove a thesis for which there exists no decisive evidence, or that he is so blinded by his bias against Oxford that he truly does not know what he is doing.

Indeed, instead of convincing the reader that "clearly Oxford's language isn't the language of Shakespeare," Nelson has unwittingly provided further evidence that it is.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://mapperleyplains.co.uk/oprus/see.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson>.

<sup>3</sup> *A History of the English Language*, fifth ed.

(London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 208-9.

<sup>4</sup> Blakemore Evans, G. *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 39.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson, Alan H. *Monstrous Adversary*, 328 "Julian (or Julia) Penn."

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, op.cit., 328-9.

<sup>7</sup> *English Pronunciation 1500-1700*, second ed. 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), V. 1, 88. See Nina Green's *Edward de Vere Newsletters*, Oxford Authorship Site, "The Langham Letter/Orthography."

<sup>8</sup> Blakemore Evans, op.cit., 39.

<sup>9</sup> Brazil, Robert at <http://elizabethanauthors.com> "The Poems and Lyrics of Edward de Vere."

<sup>10</sup> *Edward de Vere Newsletters*, Oxford Authorship Site, "Oxford's Vocabulary," 1-3.

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, CD-ROM version 3.00, copyright Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Kokeritz, Helge, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 11.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson, Alan H. op. cit., 176.

<sup>14</sup> Brazil, Robert op.cit "Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford," Letter to Bartholomew Clerke.

<sup>15</sup> Brazil, Robert op.cit. Gabriel Harvey: Address at Audley End.

<sup>16</sup> iB3 recto Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: The First Quarto 1603 (The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA. 1963, Fourth Issue), Act I, sc. 2, "Nephew to olde Norway, who impudent/And bed-rid, scarcely hears of his/Nephews purpose..." The word 'impudent' has been read by some editors as 'impudent', though this hardly reflects the sense of the line, and it appears as 'impotent' in Q2 and Folio.

<sup>17</sup> *The English Language* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1978), 29.

<sup>18</sup> Baugh and Cable, op.cit., 188-90.

<sup>19</sup> *Accents of English 1* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 184.

<sup>20</sup> Baugh and Cable, op.cit., 411.

<sup>21</sup> [http://english.su.se/nlj/k3/web/lect6/gvs\\_evid.htm](http://english.su.se/nlj/k3/web/lect6/gvs_evid.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Freeborn, Dennis *From Old English to Standard English* (Macmillan Press LTD) 291-2, 306.

<sup>23</sup> Brazil, Robert op. cit. Letter to Thomas Bedingfield.

<sup>24</sup> *O.E.D.*, 'wh.'

<sup>25</sup> *O.E.D.*, 'Hermes.'

<sup>26</sup> Freeborn, op.cit., 323.

<sup>27</sup> Kokeritz, op.cit., 307.

<sup>28</sup> *Early Modern English* (Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 127.

*K.C. Ligon, writer, performer and dialect consultant, trained in dialects and speech with Margaret Prendergast McLean and Nora Dunfee, and has taught at the City University of New York, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and the New Actors Workshop. She currently serves on the Faculty of Circle in the Square Theatre School in New York.*