

Are These Shakespeare's Letters?

What would Shakespeare's letters sound like if he wrote to William Cecil, the Queen's Treasurer and Privy Councilor, also known as Lord Burghley, the model for Polonius in *Hamlet*?

How would a letter from Shakespeare read if he had written to Sir Robert Cecil, the Queen's hunchbacked Secretary of State, source of Shakespeare's portrayal of *King Richard III*?

What of the Queen herself? What language would Shakespeare use if he were to address his monarch in hopes of obtaining the country's monopoly on tin?

There are dozens of such letters by the 17th Earl of Oxford written to Elizabeth I, Lord Burghley, and Sir Robert Cecil from 1563 to 1604, all penned in a fine italic hand. They contain commonplaces that writers of any era tend to employ on a regular basis; and the 17th Earl of Oxford's letters utilize these. But there are dozens of parallels of phrase, syntax and metaphor that are unique to both the individual writer of the letters and the author of the Shakespeare canon.

To gain a better sense of Oxford's writing style, let us begin with a letter written to his father-in-law, Lord Burghley, on September 22, 1572, when Oxford was 22 years of age. Oxford asks that Cecil assist him in procuring a position to serve the government overseas.

My Lord, I received your letters when I rather looked to have seen yourself here than to have heard from you. But sith it is so that your Lordship is otherwise affaired with the business of the commonwealth than to be disposed to recreate yourself and repose ye among

your own, yet we do hope after this, you having had so great a care of the Queen's Majesty's service, you will begin to have some respect of your own health, and take a pleasure to dwell where you have taken pain to build. My wife (whom I thought should have taken her leave of you, if your Lordship had come, till you would have otherwise commanded) is departed unto the country this day. Myself, as fast as I can get me out of town, do follow. Where by her Majesty I might be any way employed, I am content and desirous to do any service whereby I may show myself dutiful to her. Otherwise, if it were not for that respect, I think there is more trouble than credit to be gotten in such governments. If there were any service to be done abroad, I had rather serve there than at home, where yet some honour were to be gotten. If there be any setting forth to sea, to which service I bear most affection, I shall desire your Lordship to give me and get me that favour and credit that I might make one. Which, if there be no such intention, then I shall be most willing to be employed on the sea-coasts, to be in a readiness with my countryman against any invasion. Thus recommending myself to your good Lordship, I commit you to God. From London, this 22nd of September.

By your Lordship's to command.
Edward Oxenford

What is remarkable about these 77 letters and memoranda by Oxford is that all contain ideas, diction, phrasing and vocabulary that mimic the language and psychology of the 37 Shakespeare plays. The number of these »coincidences« are significant – their cumulative power meets the legal standard of proof suitable for confirming literary identity. After a thorough review, I think readers will render a guilty verdict for the letter writer being the author of the Shakespeare canon.

Let us compare Oxford's vocabulary and themes in his private letters, on a line-by-line basis, with the language and ideas to be found in the plays and poems of Shakespeare.

To bury my hopes in the deep abyss and bottom of despair.
(Oxford)

In the dark backward and abysm of time! (*The Tempest*, 1.2)

In the deep bosom of the ocean buried. (*Richard III*, 1.1)

In all kindness and kindred. (Oxford)

A little more than kin, and less than kind. (*Hamlet*, 1.2)

An end according to mine expectation. (Oxford)

Our expectation hath this day an end. (*Henry V*, 3.3)

It is my hap according to the English proverb to starve like the horse, while the grass doth grow. (Oxford)

Ay, sir, but while the grass grows – the proverb is something musty. (*Hamlet*, 3.2)

I serve her Majesty, and I am that I am, and by alliance near to your Lordship, but free. (Oxford)

No, I am that I am, and they that level/ At my abuses reckon up their own. (*Sonnet 121*)

To bring all my hope in her Majesty's gracious words to smoke.
(Oxford)

This helpless smoke of words. (*Lucrece*, 1027)

To bury and insevill your works in the grave of oblivion. (Oxford)

And deeper than oblivion do we bury/ The incensing relics of it.
(*All's Well that Ends Well*, 5.3)

But now time and truth have unmasked all difficulties. (Oxford)
Time's glory is to calm contending kings/To unmask falsehood and
bring truth to light. (*Lucrece*, 939-40)

Having passed the pikes of so many adversaries. (Oxford)
Of bristly pikes that ever threat his foes. (*Venus and Adonis*, 620)

When the serpent lay hid in the herb. (Oxford)
Look like the innocent flower/But be the serpent under it.
(*Macbeth*, 1.5)

Decked with pearls and precious stones. (Oxford)
Not decked with diamonds and Indian stones. (*3 Henry VI*, 3.1)

Finis coronat opus [The end crowns the work]. (Oxford)
The end crowns all. (*Troilus and Cressida*, 4.5)
La fin couronne les oeuvres. (*2 Henry VI*, 5.2)
All's well that ends well. Still, the fine's the crown.
What'er the course, the end is the renown. (*All's Well that Ends
Well*, 4.4)

Will make the end answerable to the rest of your most friendly pro-
ceeding. (Oxford)
If his own life answer the straightness of his proceeding. (*Measure
for Measure*, 3.2)
Were but a feigned friend to our proceedings. (*3 Henry VI*, 4.2)
Of equal friendship and proceeding. (*Henry VIII*, 2.4)

But the world is so cunning as of a shadow they can make a sub-
stance, and of a likelihood a truth. (Oxford)
He takes false shadows for true substances. (*Titus Andronicus*, 3.2)
What is your substance, whereof you are made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend? (*Sonnets*, 53)

For truth is truth though never so old, and time cannot make that false which was once true. (Oxford)

For truth is truth to the end of reckoning. (*Measure for Measure*, 5.1)

Is not the truth the truth? (*1 Henry IV*, 2.4)

A truth's a truth. (*All's Well that End's Well*, 4.5)

The multiple allusions to the truth in the Shakespeare plays may be oblique plays on the motto of the de Vere's, *Vero nihil verius*, »nothing is truer than truth.«

No two writers are likely to overlap this much in their choice of words, even those words which show no special distinction. That Shakespeare and Oxford are both addicted to such adverbs as »earnestly« and »heartily« is one more small sign that they may be the same writer. So is their use – once each – of the rare verb »repugn.«

These correspondences are derived from William Fowler's *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford's Letters* and Joseph Sobran's *Alias Shakespeare*. Yet there is more linguistic evidence to assess.

As Professor Richard Waugaman of Georgetown University has pointed out, Vivian Salmon, in »Some Functions of Shakespearean Word-Formation,« states that Shakespeare shows a proclivity for using neologisms beginning with un- and with dis-. As an example of adding dis- to a verb that began as a noun, she quotes *Richard II*, 3.1.22-23 (1595): »you have fed upon my signories/Dispark'd my parks« – that is, turned his private parks into common land. The OED gives a much earlier instance of disparcked, 1542, but EEBO cites only three uses prior to 1572.

On the other hand, the first recorded use of disparcking is not until 1602. In September, 1572, Oxford wrote to his father-in-law, Lord Burghley: »... as for my timber at Colne Parke; therein, I had

no other meaning save only to make, as it were, a yearly rent, so as I may, without disparking the ground.« That is, he coins the gerund disparking some thirty years before its first recorded use by the admittedly incomplete EEBO database. As it happens, the same 1572 letter includes another still uncommon dis- word: »your Lordship at whose liking or disliking I was to be ruled.« The OED gives the first use of disliking as 1540, and only six authors are listed in EEBO as having employed it before 1572. The first appearance of the phrase »liking or disliking,« according to EEBO, was by William Painter in 1567.

Shakespeare employs the near homophone disliken (to render unlike, disguise) in *The Winter's Tale*. This is the unique usage of disliken noted by both EEBO and the OED.

Oxford's other uses of the dis- prefix in his letters include further uncommon words, such as disburden in 1576 and 1591. On October 31, 1572, he used disburdened in another letter to his father-in-law. EEBO gives only ten instances of prior uses of the word, one of them in *Richard II*, 2.1.231. In the same letter, Oxford uses the unusual word backfriends (false friends) of which the OED cites a first use in 1472; the first instance cited by EEBO is in 1587, supporting the assumption that it was uncommon.

Even the short list of examples provided here offers telling and distinctive subtleties, according to Sobran. »The interchanging of parts of speech, the fondness for the gerund, the exuberant redundancies, his recourse to the figurative, his moral attitudes, the intensifiers, the sheer energetic variety. This isn't the voice of Spenser, or Marlowe or Jonson, or Generic Elizabethan. It is the voice of Shakespeare.«

Given the perspective of time, I think in Oxford's correspondence we find Shakespeare off-stage – a brilliant nobleman at ease,

throwing off words and images that he will later transform into concentrated eloquence.

Together with Oxford's twenty poems, these private letters demonstrate that the expressive thought of the Earl of Oxford offers a singular match with that of the playwright William Shakespeare.

Works Cited

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