Unshaken:
The Tudor Rose Theory Revisited

By Charles Boyle

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In 1996 Diane Price published a work in *The Elizabethan Review* called "Rough Winds Do Shake: a fresh look at the Tudor Rose theory." The article was meant to deal a death blow to the long controversial theory that the Shakespeare authorship mystery involves Shakespeare's relationships with the Queen Elizabeth and the 3rd Earl of Southampton, and, further, that the key to the mystery involves the succession to the throne of England, i.e. that Shakespeare in the Sonnets (1609) apparently speaks to the Fair Youth (Southampton) as both his son and as a future King. Is such talk mere rhetoric, or is it grounded in some unknown reality of their lives?

As most Oxfordians know this theory is probably the most controversial aspect of the Oxfordian movement today and it is continually a flash point among Oxfordians who can otherwise manage to agree on most everything else in the movement. Why this is will be a key point in my talk today, for I have come to believe that the emotions surrounding this theory have in themselves become part of the Shakespeare authorship story, and understanding these emotions may help us in understanding that there is, in fact, a very short list of possible theories explaining what the Shakespeare authorship story is all about, and any theory involving family relations (and thus royal rights) within the tight little incestuous world of the Elizabethan ruling class cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Since Price's article was published there has been little published response to it. Betty Sears' 1997 letter to *The Elizabethan Review* was severely edited (Sears later put her response into a pamphlet entitled "The Darling Buds of May"). The *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, in a winter 1997 article entitled "Writing History" [co-authored by William Boyle, Charles Boyle and Charles Burford] responded to the broader issues of evidence and interpretation of evidence that opened Price's article.

This argument as published in the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* in 1997 covered this territory quite well, so I will simply quote it here:

> *The present discussion was sparked principally by the following claim made by Price in her "Rough Winds" article: "...the Tudor Rose theory is one of many conjectural interpretations of the Shakespeare canon, and interpretive evidence does not carry the same weight as documentary evidence."*
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> *Chief among those Phaetonites who have taken exception to this claim are Mark Anderson and Roger Stritmatter, whose work on Oxford's Geneva Bible has involved them in a similar debate with Stratfordians over what constitutes legitimate evidence. It is Price's faith in the infallibility of documentary evidence and its superiority over so-called interpretive evidence that has persuaded Anderson and Stritmatter that her article is based upon a false premise. "Let's not forget," wrote Anderson, "that by these standards the Oxfordian theory loses much, if not all, of its persuasive force. Looney did not solve the authorship problem by means of 'documentary evidence'. He looked at the works and asked what they tell us about the author and the life he lived. And it was that investigation and not an examination of the documentary evidence that led Whitman to conclude that 'one of the wolfish earls or some born descendant and knower might seem to be the true author of these amazing works.'"*
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> *In other words, Looney did something considered unscholarly by Stratfordians: he used the works of Shakespeare as evidence --- evidence which, as "fiction", cannot be considered "documentary." Thus, the father of Oxfordianism himself made strong use of so-called interpretive evidence. Roger Stritmatter followed up on this point by citing a passage from a section entitled "Interpretation in History" from historian Hayden-White's book* The Tropics of Discourse:
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> > *"Theorists of historiography generally agree that all historical narratives contain an irreducible and inexpugnable element of interpretation. The historian has to interpret his materials in order to*

construct the moving pattern of images in which the form of the historical process is to be mirrored. And this is because the historical record is both too full and too sparse. On the one hand, there are always more facts in the record than the historian can possibly include in his narrative representation of a given segment of the historical process. And so the historian must 'interpret' his data by excluding certain facts from his account as irrelevant to his narrative purpose.

"On the other hand, in his efforts to reconstruct 'what happened' in any given period of history, the historian inevitably must include in his narrative an account of some event or complex of events for which the facts that would permit a plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking. And this means that the historian must 'interpret' his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds. A historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative."

In short, what this rather Polonian narrative means is that interpretation is an unavoidable part of the process of writing history. There is really no such thing as interpretive evidence, as all reported facts and opinions have to be interpreted by the historian. Even the "official record" is still only somebody's individual interpretation of what happened at a given time, and is further "distorted" when filtered through the historian's lens.

This point about documentary evidence vs. interpretative evidence should be repeated over and over by anyone engaged in the authorship debate; it is a mainstay of Stratfordian discourse, and Price, in opening her article with this point, thus sets the stage for her marshalling of "factual" evidence which she then can claim trumps all interpretation, whether that interpretation is of history or of literature (i.e. Shakespeare). And yet it just may be that this premise is a fallacy, and it is upon this fallacy that the rest of her death blow to the "Southampton-as-heir" theory is built.

What this 1997 SOS newsletter article did not do is what I would like to take on this afternoon, namely a point by point response to the seven arguments that Price makes in her paper --- arguments which, by the way, all take their cue from the case for "Southampton-as-heir" as argued by Betty Sears in her 1990 book *Shakespeare and the Tudor Rose.* Because of that choice some of what was said by Sears in 1990 and by Price in 1996 has now been superseded by new thinking on the entire subject, and Sears herself is about to publish a revised version of *Tudor Rose* which concedes one of Price's points while continuing to make the case for the Southampton theory as being the most plausible answer to the Shakespeare mystery.

There were several other key points in "Writing History" that we should repeat here before turning our attention to the seven arguments that Price makes:

First, let's remember that this was an era of censorship and missing papers, and under Cecil most historians acknowledge that the censorship was even more pervasive than other times (and of course England was always in some state of war with Spain and/or anxiety about papal plots to assassinate the Queen. Not only did State papers normally disappear, they were sometimes not even recorded. The whole period of 1600-1602 Privy Council records is simply not there. Almost all records that passed through Burghley and his son were purged of anything they cannot like. Much of the correspondence of Oxford, Southampton, Essex, Jonson, Dee was undoubtedly destroyed. The Globe burned to the ground in 1613, taking with it who knows how much contemporaneous history of 16th-17th century theater and it playwrights. For a period of great plays and poetry it's amazing how little in the way of original writing has survived.

Nevertheless certain things still survive. When Elizabeth was 15 she wrote a letter to the Parliament saying she was not pregnant (by Thomas Seymour), even though she had never been asked if she was. Throughout her life rumors of her pregnancies were often extant, and the story of Arthur Dudley, who turned up in Spain in 1587 claiming to be the son of Elizabeth and Leicester is especially significant since he claimed to have been born in 1561, the same year as one of the surviving stories of a possible Elizabeth pregnancy (Kate Ashley said that year that her Majesty looked as if, "she had just come from child-birth"). As for Dudley, those that examined him in Spain gave credence to his story of being a bastard son of Elizabeth, and even cited (in reporting their findings to King Philip) the 1571 Act of Parliament that

made it legal for "any natural issue of the Queen's body" to be in line for succession, changing the previous language which had read "lawful issue."

So, against this background, let us now look at Price's seven points.

1) Elizabeth at Court, spring 1574: The part of Price's paper that has most impressed Southampton-as-heir skeptics involves her analysis of the historical record in spring 1574, the time period when most Southampton-as-heir supporters have theorized the Queen must have had one of the several babies she was rumored to have had.

Burghley's papers showed that on March 16th 1574, "the Queen granted a safe conduct for Monsieur M. Alencon to come into England any time before the 21st of May." The wording showed that "he may make his repair onto her at a convenient time after she has advertised of his arrival," this might have been a problem for Elizabeth but as it happened Catherine de Medici placed Alencon under restraint in Paris. They never visited England this year. What we can never know is whether Burghley and Elizabeth knew all along that Alencon would be delayed, even before they made the invitation.

Also that spring, Francis Talbot wrote from court that the Queen had spoken personally with her on May 10th, and Ambassador Fenelon reported that on April 2 and 24, May 3, 10, 16, 23, and June 8, 13 and 21 he had had a personal audience with Elizabeth. All these facts, says Price, must indicate that Elizabeth could not have been pregnant, for why would she risk asking Alencon to visit, and how could she give audiences to friends and ambassadors?

The first thing to think about is the nature of these interviews. How long were they ... 10 minutes? 15? 20? Were they in a public place or a private setting? Was she sitting through the entire period? Was she sitting before he entered? Was she sitting when he exited? In the 16th century there is ample evidence of any woman's ability to hide pregnancies under French farthing gales, Spanish/French/Italian double bodices and other items, all of which were meant to disguise Ladies' conditions on the Continent. And history also tells us that some women do not show their pregnancies much at all. In recent 20th century history in the US we have all heard stories about high-school students giving birth when none of their friends suspected a thing.

All of these conditions must be considered before we can come to any conclusions about whether or not Elizabeth could have been pregnant in spring 1574 and have kept her pregnancy secret from all but her inner circle. It must be remembered that this inner circle, including the people who changed her and the men like Burghley, Leicester, Walsingham and Oxford, would already know of her "condition" and would obviously never speak of it. So while the number of contacts that Elizabeth apparently had in April, May and June 1574 seems at first glance to be impressive, Price makes no attempt to consider any alternatives to her one scenario of "audience with Queen = Queen can't be pregnant." This is simply interpreting evidence to suit her own purposes, passing strange coming from someone who dismisses "interpretative evidence."

2) Rose imagery. The Tudor rose was used to symbolize the British Crown. Sears assumes that Shakespeare personalized Henry Wriothesley as the Rose of the Sonnets to signify his royal parentage. Price, on the other hand, finds that Henry's great grandfather personal appropriation of the coat of arms of the town of Southampton to explain his family identification with the Tudor Rose. But maybe both ideas are true. This point, of which Price makes much, is really just a non-issue. That the Wriothesley family has its own association with Roses, while posing a possible alternative explanation for the Sonnet's rose imagery in combination with the Fair Youth, in no way negates the well-known Rose imagery associated with Elizabeth. In fact, what we see here is Price doing some interpreting of her own, which in fact underscores the inevitable need to interpret; the Sonnets' rose imagery is, in effect, meaningless without some interpretive context within which to understand it. Sears posits the Queen, Price posits family history. Both one must posit something as found in the factual record, or what is reading for?

3) Oxford's crown signature. Price believes the signature with the Crown with 4 points and the sign below of a horizontal bar (signifying ten) cut with seven little marks adds up to his rank as 17th Earl of Oxford. This is quite possible, but it doesn't mean that it is the whole story. Would the man who created the *Sonnets*, *Hamlet* and *Lear* have made such an elaborate signature to say just one thing, with that thing being, "Hey, I'm the 17th Earl." Could not the whole signature also be a Crown and the seven marks mean also that he is Edward the Seven, King of England? Consider also that towards the end of his life Oxford made some significant changes to his own heraldry, with the quartered coat of arms expanded to include his three daughters, but also (as seen in the reproduction in John Farmers

1599 *First Set of English Madrigals*) with the Blue Boar topping his arms now replaced with a second crown, sitting atop the original coronet, which remains intact as in previous variations of this arms.

I'd like to thank Barbara Burris for alerting me his past summer to some intriguing possibilities inherent in these changes (her observations came about through her own researches into the Ashbourne portrait and the coat of arms in the upper left corner of that painting). Basically, there exists in heraldry two items of interest. First, there is the coronet of rank, by which an Earl could indicate both his Earldom *and* his possible royal aspirations (through blood). Secondly, the combined arms in which both a coronet and another headpiece appear (plus the particular design of the helmet and visor), all come together symbolically to indicate that the arms bearer may be more than just an earl.

These observations are still preliminary, and more research into both Oxford's use of his arms, in comparison with others, is called for. But at the very least one can see that what is seen, at first glance, on the surface is just that ... on the surface. Elizabethan pictures, images and heraldry were meant to be read, to be interpreted.

Finally, we must mention that the last time Oxford used this signature was in a letter to Robert Cecil on the eve of Elizabeth's funeral (April 24/25, 1603), when Elizabeth was --- to the Elizabethan mind --- still "figuratively" alive and still Queen of England (see Roy Strong in *The Cult of Elizabeth*, p. 14) for an interesting observation on this. Strong notes that it is only "when the great officers of state broke their white wands of office and hurled them into the grave" that she was "officially" dead. It was immediately after she is buried that Oxford, for the first time in nearly 35 years, stops signing his name with the crown signature. This is, quite simply, a significant fact. And yet Price, while carrying on about the four points being a coronet, fails to even mention it.

4) The changeling son. Everyone agrees that a child was born in October 1573 to Mary Brown, the Countess of Southampton. However, the entire "Southampton-as-heir" theory revolves around the key question, "Was the child raised as the Third Earl of Southampton?" And this question arises only because of events in the 1590s and 1600s, when Southampton's relationship with Shakespeare raises questions that need to be answered, including his (and Shakespeare's) role in the Essex Rebellion, his being spared death, and his arrest the night Shakespeare died (June 24, 1604). It is important to keep this point in mind: theories about 1573 and 1574 exist only in an attempt to answer questions that arise in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

Here is what Stopes wrote about the birth of Southampton:

> *Thus was the only son (2) of the second Earl of Southampton born…*
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> *It has always been said that he was "the second son," but there is no authority for that. The error must have begun in confusing the second with the first Henry.*

Stopes may have been right. Or she might have been wrong. Perhaps the first son had died while in the care of a wet nurse, to the replaced by the child we know as the Third Earl of Southampton. There is also a child named William for which the Second Earl of Southampton left a legacy in his will: "to my beggar boy, William" a fairly large sum to educate him. We don't know who this boy is.

We do know that there is no official record of the boy's (William's?) birth or baptism, which Stopes found highly curious and unusual.

5) Rowland Whyte's letter. This is a minor point and certainly nobody in Southampton's time used a quote from *Hamlet* to describe him, or at least that we know of.

6) The Peyton Report. Indeed, it is now conceded by many that this report is most likely not about Southampton. Price is right. The one mentioned as being "without friends and with little likelihood to raise combustion in the state" is most likely Oxford himself. But what Price doesn't consider here is taking a stab at her own "interpretation" of this well-documented historical fact. Debunking Sears is sufficient for her purposes, but an all important question is left lingering: What is going on here? Is it not important, considering that in Oxford it is actually Shakespeare who is talking about the old days, when Kings could be deposed one way or the other (hell, read the plays!).

Was this instead part of Oxford's plans to "play ball" with both James and Robert Cecil, with his eye not on placing Southampton on the throne (that gambit was lost forever the day of the Essex Rebellion), but instead to insure that Southampton would be spared, released, and even pardoned (as he was, in fact, just weeks after Elizabeth's death). We must thank Nina Green on the Internet Discussion group Phaeton for raising this interesting possibility, since she first posited that Oxford's meeting with the Earl of Lincoln was not part of a genuine rebellion, but rather a sounding out of Lincoln to uncover possible resistance to James. In this same regard it was also Green who first --- to our knowledge --- posited that Oxford may have been the mysterious "40" in the secret correspondence with James, which arranged a smooth journey for him from Scotland to the throne of England. Perhaps the true story here is that Oxford had to literally sell his soul to Cecil and James in March 1601 to save Southampton's life, and that Oxford then had no choice but to keep playing ball to keep Southampton alive and eventually released from prison. And this is exactly what happened.

Again, much more new research and new thinking is needed in considering such possibilities --- and, of course, interpretation of the facts at hand.

7) June 24, 1604: That the 3rd Earl of Southampton was arrested on the day Oxford died is perhaps the most interesting part of this whole story. It is this one fact that has had a great influence on many Oxfordians grappling with the Southampton theory, since it seems to underscore that the relationship between Oxford/Shakespeare and Southampton was such that it could grab the attention of the King of England and his chief advisor in a nano-second. It was, in fact, this single fact that Charlton Ogburn cited in his 1996 newsletter piece in which he rejected Sobran's homosexual theory and came out of the "royal heir" closet.

This piece of the puzzle can only be understood in terms of having a working theory about the Oxford/Southampton (or we should say, the Shakespeare/Southampton) relationship. If the theory about Oxford as "40" and Oxford (as documented in the Peyton report) helping to insure James's accession, not thwart it, is correct, then it was Oxford who had done everything in his power to bring James to the throne; thus his brother-in-law Robert Cecil would not do anything to harm Southampton.

It was just a year after James' accession that Oxford died --- or so we are told, for there is no funeral, no will, and no record of where is body is. In fact, there was no <u>contemporaneous</u> mention at all in June 1604 that great Oxford had died; it is only in letters and documents from later that year (and later years) that we learn of the date. But there seems to be no doubt that the date of Oxford's death is June 24, 1604. So, this lack of notice is just one more mystery in the great Shakespeare mystery. We should note here (as an aside) that his daughter Elizabeth later spent much time commuting back and forth to the Isle of Wight (between England and Ireland) over the next few years, and there are some Oxfordians who posit that perhaps Oxford didn't die in 1604, but rather went (or was sent) into exile. Was Elizabeth perhaps then visiting Prospero on his island? It's an interesting proposition, but one which we will review no further here.

What is most interesting --- and well documented --- about the day Oxford died is that Southampton *and other surviving members of the Essex Rebellion* were all rounded up and interrogated overnight. There is no record of this event in the British Archives --- we only know of it through letters by the French and Venetian ambassadors. The next day everyone was released. What was discussed during their interrogation on the evening of June 24, 1604 is not known. For those of us who believe that the relationship between Oxford and Southampton was blood, it most likely was a classic "shot across the bow," i.e. that the "powers that be" were making it clear that, though Oxford/Shakespeare was now gone, there would be no trouble from past trouble-makers. If this is what happened, clearly Southampton did his part and re-affirmed his allegiance to James and the new regime.

Price, incredibly, deals with this event in history by saying we can never know for sure what happened that day, or why it happened. This is a perfect example of the failure of her approach to the Shakespeare problem, and to history. No one doubts the fact that these two events both occurred on June 24, 1604 --- the death/disappearance of Oxford, and the arrest of Southampton. But what good is that fact to anyone unless it is interpreted, and incorporated into a larger historical narrative that attempts, however imperfectly, to tell the larger story. But Price, of course, is against interpretation --- in fact, Price cannot even publicly speak out for Oxford as Shakespeare, so she has yet, as far as we know, to even wrap her mind around any larger story that tries to make sense of the Shakespeare mystery. Given that, who is she to deal death blows to a secondary theory within a primary theory, when she has yet to even take on the

primary theory: Oxford as Shakespeare. And so, she feels free to disregard (and thus discard) this incredibly significant fact and not deal with it. For shame!

Conclusion: It can therefore be seen that all of Price's points can still just as easily be interpreted as part of a picture that has Southampton's relationship with Oxford/Shakespeare involving --- for some reason --- their involvement with claims to the throne of England. He is more than just an "acquaintance" of Oxford/Shakespeare. It all depends on how you looked at it.

And as for history and interpretation, I hope I have at least made it clear that Price's efforts are every bit as interpretative as anyone else's. What matters most is exploring the Shakespeare mystery.