I think most people in Shakespeare's day, and for at least two centuries afterward, would have been surprised by the notion that his plays were "learned," which would have meant that they displayed considerable classical erudition (and even imitated classical models). In this sense, the most learned plays of his time were closet dramas, and the most learned writer for the public stage was usually considered to be Ben Jonson, who studied under Camden at Westminster School. In fact, Jonson's "learned" art was sometimes contrasted with Shakespeare's "natural" art, as in Milton's "L'Allegro":

> Then to the well-trod stage anon,
> If *Jonsons* learned sock be on,
> Or sweetest *Shakespear* fancies childe,
> Warble his native Wood-notes wilde.

That distinction may no longer be relevant today, but what is relevant is the failure of the Oxfordians, both old and new, to produce any positive evidence for their argument, which would consist of examples of "learning" in the plays that Shakespeare could not have acquired from his Stratford schooling or his reading or his experiences in London and therefore must be credited to Oxford the earl or the university. No such evidence exists. What is even more significant, I believe, is that these Oxfordians ignore the negative evidence, which really does exist and which consists of examples in the plays showing that their author was not so learned after all. I am not speaking here about the many minor anachronisms in dress (ancient Greeks or Romans wearing hats, gloves, scarves, doublets, etc.) that a number of commentators have pointed out, and that may have been the result of simple carelessness, but about a much more serious ignorance of geography and chronology. Thus the author of *The Winter's Tale* believed that Bohemia has a seacoast, and the author of *Hamlet* believed that the way to lead an army from Norway to Poland is by marching through Denmark. Moreover, in the first part of *The Winter's Tale* Leontes consults the Delphic oracle, which was closed down in AD 390, while in the second part, which follows by sixteen years, a courtier refers to Julio Romano, an artist of the Italian Renaissance. And in *Troilus and Cressida* Hector cites Aristotle, who was born many centuries after the end of the Trojan War. Is this the kind of learning that could only be acquired at a university?

Richard Levin
Stony Brook University

To the Editor:

The Forum section of the October *PMLA* includes a letter from Robert F. Fleissner with the following reference to me: "A London Shakespearean, Gil Elliot, in her letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* (25 July 2003), also defended the view that Shakespeare went 'to university,' citing Peter Alexander, the well-known Shakespearean authority from Scotland, to this effect." I would like to point out that I am not a Shakespearean or a scholar of any kind, nor did my letter defend the view that Shakespeare went to university, nor, to complete this review of errors, am I female.

I am male and a writer, and my letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* was meant to suggest that academics like my old professor Peter Alexander, in common with many others through the ages, tend to configure Shakespeare in their own image. I happen to believe that Shakespeare's education at Stratford Grammar—along with the voracious reading to be expected of such a protean mind—was perfectly adequate to feed his genius.

Gil Elliot
London

Reply:

I am aware of the anti-Stratfordian approach endorsing Edward de Vere as Shakespeare, but that connection did not appear germane. I certainly agree that the so-called Oxfordians have no real positive evidence favoring de Vere as the playwright.

The existence of errata in Shakespeare's plays might be explained by Shakespeare's having possibly been only an auditor of some sort at Oxford (although I have been reading again of his father's having been a local "high bailiff" or chief magistrate—in certain towns a son of such a person was supposed to receive free tuition at Oxford). The playwright simply may not have registered all the facts he heard.

Robert F. Fleissner
Central State University (retired)

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