Did Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford, write Shakespeare’s plays? This issue may be far afield for Marlovians who are not promoters of Marlowe in that role, but the value of Monstrous Adversary outstrips authorship controversies. Alan H. Nelson provides a view from the top of networks of power in early modern English society, and, while he invites that life to be read with the biography of Shakespeare in mind, Marlowe, who courted such networks of power more evidently than Shakespeare, seems to wait just beyond the next page to enter in the company of Anthony Munday, perhaps, or Thomas Watson, men who were servants of the earl but companions of Marlowe in his profession by day and his recreations by night. Though Nelson refers to Marlowe in several contexts, the dramatist does not appear in person in the biography. However, issues that define him in scholarship do (heresy, sodomy, poetical skill), and as a result readers will be absorbed by paradigms in de Vere’s life that provide context for Marlowe’s, even if at some class remove.

Nelson provides a traditional biography in that he begins with the parents of Oxford and ends with the disposition at his death of the earldom, the widow, and the unmarried daughter. The events of Oxford’s life, which began on 12 April 1550 and ended on 24 June 1604, are told through the surviving documents, with modest narrative stitching. Because these documents are voluminous in number and length, Nelson is able to provide an astonishingly full portrait rich with the voices not only of the earl himself but also of his mentor, relatives, allies, adversaries, and disinterested record-keepers. In fact, for students of Marlowe, a fascinating aspect of Monstrous Adversary is how much can be known about an Elizabethan life when records survive. We are so used to piecing together scraps—parish and buttery records here, rumor and dodgy documents there—that it is a shock to see the earl in such lucid detail. For some readers, Nelson may provide more than they want to know. For example, one might question the lengthy analysis of Oxford’s spelling, but when his peculiar habits are combined with the fact of his excellent penmanship, readers familiar with arguments of Shakespeare’s hand behind various printed texts will get the point. Another might quibble that too many limbs are provided on the family trees of everyone encountered, but then (of course) kinship networks were also power networks. Few will object, however, to the sordid details of the 16th earl’s marriage to the 17th’s mother not only because the events make such a good story but also because they are a reminder that unruly courtships were not peculiar to romantically minded glovers’ sons in the provinces.

Of the many aspects of the life of Edward de Vere that invite comparison with scholars’ stories about Marlowe, two are especially salient: rough company and transgressive behavior. Oxford probably should not be answerable for the murder of George Saunders and John Bean by George Brown, even though Brown was Oxford’s servant, because Brown’s motive seems unrelated to Oxford personally (the murder is dramatized in A Warning for Fair Women, 1599), but the same shrugging of responsibility cannot be applied to Oxford’s dealings with Rowland York. York, also one of Oxford’s men, was apparently more buddy than servant, and he had a reputation as a fencer who brandished...
an unguarded foil. Oxford must have copied this technique, for he killed an undercook in
the household of William Cecil, his ward and father-in-law to-be, with a York-style
naked rapier. Oxford was not held accountable. Aided by a jury heavily weighted in
Oxford’s favor, the coroner’s inquest declared the death a suicide, claiming that the
undercook ran upon the point of Oxford’s weapon of his own accord. In another episode
of mayhem, Oxford escaped with impunity from a charge of murder-for-hire in
Middlesex involving York and other ruffians. In still another, all the more unsavory
because it concerned a man of position, Oxford nursed a year-long feud with Thomas
Knyvet that putatively began with Knyvet’s father; by its end, the feud had caused four
men including Oxford and Knyvet to be wounded and three killed.

In addition to this penchant for thuggery, Oxford courted ostracism for mistreating his
wife and indulging in necromancy, sodomy, and heresy. Shortly after his twenty-first
birthday in 1571, Oxford married Anne Cecil, favorite daughter of his ward, William
Cecil. But for over ten years, except for a brief period in the fall of 1574 when his
daughter Elizabeth was conceived, the earl was “a Stranger to his Wiff” (141). He was
not, however, a stranger to sexual activities. He had brought a youth back with him from
his Italian travels; and there were other bedmates, including a boy cook at Hampton
Court and a mistress, Anne Vavasour (unaccountably, Cecil remained his son-in-law’s
apologist). A triumvirate of aristocratic former friends accused Oxford not only of
sodomy but also of atheism and treason in Catholic plots against the queen. The
interesting point here for Marlovians is that the charges were similar enough to those
made against Marlowe himself to suggest that a “template” of charges was being applied
as needed by enemies rather than that actual behavior specific to either man was being
described. There is one crime by Oxford with no Marlovian counterpart: squandering the
family fortune. As Nelson points out, the earl’s father at his death had a list of properties
more than a dozen pages long; after thirty-three years of selling off this legacy, the earl
could list his properties on a single page.

Nelson’s biography of the earl of Oxford is a virtuoso exemplar of the craft. Though its
inclusions in full of the documentary record will test the patience of many readers, it is
scrupulous in distinguishing fact from fiction and painstaking in keeping the reader from
drowning in detail (dates of years in the running titles would have been nice). Nelson has
a complicated story to tell, sometimes spicy and sometimes dull, but his own writing is
fresh, succinct, and witty. He is critical of but not unfair to the earl. The zeal of Oxford
apologists may not be dampened by this biography, but everyone else will be disgusted
by the man and convinced that he lacked the intellect and the sensibility to write much of
anything worth reading.

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