

Who Translated “Shakespeare’s Favorite Novel”?

by Robert R. Prechter

Oxfordians have figured out that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, translated *Ovids Metamorphoses* from Latin under the name of his uncle¹, Arthur Golding. The book came out in two portions, the first part issued in 1565 and the second in 1567. It is likely that Oxford undertook a similar project in the 'tween year of 1566 and published it under the name William Adlington.

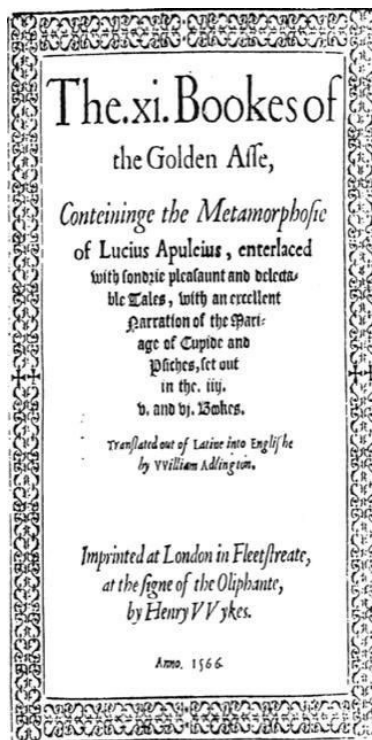
This translation from Latin is titled The. xi. Bookes of the Golden Asse, Conteinige the Metamorphosie of Lucius Apuleius, interlaced with sondrie pleasaunt and delectable Tales, with an excellent Narration of the Mariage of Cupid and Psiches, set out in the. iij. v. and vj. Bookes. As you can see from the title, the book parallels Arthur Golding’s *Ovids Metamorphoses* in presenting a fantasy of physical transformation based on classical mythology. In the preface, the author even says of his book, “there be many whiche would rather Intitle it *Metamorphosis*.”

The standard story is that a student at the University of Oxford issued a strikingly ambitious translation of prose fiction and was never heard from again. What is the probability of such a thing happening? In two similar instances of the 1560s, Oxfordians have suspected that Oxford is the author: Arthur Brooke issued a narrative poem of fiction titled *Romeus and Juliet* (1562) and never repeated the genre, and Arthur Golding issued a poetic translation of fiction titled *Ovids Metamorphoses* and never repeated the genre. No other publication of any kind ever came out under the name William Adlington.

The Dedicatee’s Tight Link to Oxford

The book begins with a dedication “To the Right Honorable, and Mightie Lorde, Thomas, Earle of Sussex, Viscount Fitzwaltre, Lorde of Egremont and of Burnell, Knight of the most noble Order of the Garter, Justice of the Forestes and Chases, from Trente Sowthwarde, and Capitaine of the Gentlemen Pensioners, of the house of the Queene our Sovereigne Lady.” As chronicled by Nelson, Thomas Radcliffe, 3rd Earl of Sussex, was a lifelong ally of Oxford’s at court.

Sussex was the patron of a troupe of players known as the Earl of Sussex’s Men, the first records of whose performances date to 1569. In the spring of 1570, Oxford



served under Sussex’s command in Scotland. On April 2, 1571, as Parliament opened, Queen Elizabeth sat while attended by three lords: “the robe supported by the Earle of Oxenford, the Earle of Sussex kneelinge holdinge the sword on the left hand, and the Earle of Huntington standinge holdinge the hatt of estate...”² On August 12, 1572, Oxford and Sussex were two of the eight lords attending the Queen’s entertainment at Warwick Castle. Thomas is the “Sussex” whom Gilbert Talbot in a 1573 letter named as a supporter of Oxford’s. On January 30, 1574, Oxford named five people as trustees of his estate should he fail to survive his upcoming trip to the continent; the first named is “Thomas Earl of Sussex.” In the summer of 1577, Sussex promised to speak to the Queen on behalf of Oxford’s sister Mary Vere about her pending marriage to Peregrine Bertie.

In the summer of 1580, Sussex sent a personal letter to the Vice-chancellor of the

University of Cambridge urging him (unsuccessfully) to break the rules and allow Oxford’s players to perform plays previously acted before the Queen. A record from July 1581 indicates that Sussex had argued with the Earl of Leicester about Havering House and Park in the Forest of Waltham, the stewardship of which Oxford was pursuing as his ancestral right. Nelson concluded, “perhaps Sussex had taken his part in the argument.”³ The two men were distantly related, too. Thomas’s mother was Elizabeth Howard, a member of the Howard family of Oxford’s cousins and an aunt of Oxford’s uncle, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. Thomas’s first wife, who died young in 1555, was Elizabeth Wriothesley, sister to Henry Wriothesley, 2nd Earl of Southampton, who was father to the 3rd Earl, Shakespeare’s only dedicatee. Sussex has no known link to William Adlington.

Links to Oxford, Golding and Shakespeare

Half a dozen writers of the era testified that Oxford delighted in learning.⁴ In his brief review of “The Life of L. Apuleius,” Adlington expresses appreciation for the original author’s “savery kinde of learninge, whiche delighteth, holdeth, and rejoyseth the Reader mervelously.” Oxford had been trained in oratory. Adlington especially praises “One excellent and copious oration conteinige all the grace and virtue of the art Oratorie.” Adlington credits Apuleius as being what “might woorthily be called [a] Polyhistor, that is to say, one that knoweth much or many things. [H]e learned Poetry, Geometry, Musike, Logicke, and the universall

To the right Honorable, and
 Righte Lozde, Thomas, Earle
 of Suffex, Viscont Fitz-
 walter, Lozde of Ceymout
 and of Burrell, Knight of the
 most noble Order of
 the Garter,
 Justice of the Forestes and Chases,
 from Trente southward, and Capi-
 taine of the Gentlemen Pen-
 sioners, of the house of
 the Queene our So-
 veraigne Lady.



After that I had ta-
 ken upon me (right Hono-
 rable) in manner of that br-
 learned and salty poet che-
 rillus, (who rashly, and br-
 advisedly, wrote a bigge vo-
 lume in verses of the gestes
 and valiant prowesse of A-
 lexander the great) to trans-
 late this present booke, con-
 sideringe the Spetamorphosy of Lucius Apuleius: beyng
 moved therunto by the right pleasant pastime, and de-
 lectable matter therein: I esteemes consulted with my
 selfe, to whome I might best offer so pleasant and swete
 thy a worke, devised by the Autho, it beyng now bar-
 barously and simply framed in our Englishe tongue.
 *

knowledge of Philosophie, and studied not in vaine the nine Muses, that is to say, the nine noble & royall disciplines.” Oxford had been tutored in just such a manner.

The subject of Adlington’s book is right up the alley of a youngster reveling in spirited mythological tales. The dedication is full of references to classical figures, including the poet Cherillus, Alexander the Great, Actaeon, Diana, Tantalus, Atreus, Thiestes, Tereus, Progne, Icarus, Mydas, Bacchus and Phaeton. Adlington advertises “the jestinge and sportfull matter of the booke,” which is in the manner of *Ovids Metamorphoses*.

Adlington offers a moral defense of his subject matter: “although the matter therein seeme very light, and mery, yet the effect thereof tendeth to a good and vertuous morall [whereby] the vertues of men are covertly thereby commended, and their vices discommended and abhored.” Of such morals he provides ten examples. In discussing Adlington’s “moralizing notes,” Carver observed, “Arthur Golding had already addressed similar problems a year before Adlington in his introduction to *The Fyrst Fower Bookes of P. Ouidius Nasos worke, intituled Metamorphosis*.”⁵ In our context, the two authors’ parallel thematic treatments are perfectly natural. Carver then quoted several passages in which “Golding again anticipates Adlington.”⁶ But Golding did not “anticipate” Adlington; in this instance, he *is* Adlington. We can explain the motivation for the moralistic

excuses, too: Oxford was a teenager, and both his uncle and his guardian were Puritans, so he excused his racy translations with claims of moral instruction.

The youth of the writer is reflected in his defense of the material: “the Poetes feigned not their fables in vaine, consideringe that children in time of their first studies, are muche allured thereby to procede to more grave and deepe disciplines, whereas otherwise their mindes would quickly lothe the wise and prudent workes of learned men, wherein such unripe yeeres they take no sparke of delectation at all.” In other words, “I may be reading comic books, but at least I’m reading.” Oxford was sixteen years old at the time.

In “To the Reader,” Adlington expresses the joy he had felt upon reading the original author’s “pleasaunt and delectable jestes...written in suche a franke & flourishing stile, [producing] such exceedinge plentie of myrth, as never (in my judgement) the like hath bene showed by any other.” Clearly, this author knows Latin as if it were his native language. He can even discern degrees of eloquence between texts in Latin and Greek. In “The Life of L. Apuleius,” he calls Apuleius’s “Dialogue of Trismegistus, translated by him out of Greeke into Latine, so fine, that it rather seemeth with more eloquence turned into Latine, then it was before written in Greke.” Shakespeare likewise knew Latin and availed himself of books available only in Greek.⁷ There is documentary evidence that Oxford knew Latin well. Oxford visited German humanist scholar Johannes Sturm, known as Sturmius, in 1575, after which Sturmius wrote to Burghley, “As I write this I think of the Earl of Oxford, for I believe his lady speaks Latin also.”⁸

Adlington casually remarks that he had reviewed versions of the book by “French and Spanish translators.” The Earl of Oxford knew the former language; he wrote a letter in French to William Cecil in 1563 and received one from his nephew Robert Bertie in 1599. Shakespeare seems to have been familiar with the latter language: “it is well known that the main plot of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is based, directly or indirectly, on the episode of Felix and Felismena in the Spanish pastoral romance, *La Diana* (Valencia, 1559?) of Jorge de Montemayor.”⁹

Arthur Golding (but only in *Ovids Metamorphoses*) and Shakespeare are renowned for coining new words, and Apuleius’s capacity for doing so prompts shivers of delight from Adlington: “the Author had written his worke in so darke and highe a stile, in so strange and absurd words, and in such newe invented phrases, as...to show his magnificency of prose.”

Many translators of the day wrote awkward prose, trying to maintain a literal rendering. Adlington is not among them. His prose is complex yet smooth. He describes his method of translation:

I have not so exactly passed thorough the Author, as to pointe every sentence accordinge as it is in Latine, or so absolutely translated every woorde, as it lieth in the prose.... considering the same in our vulgar tongue would have appeared very obscure and darke, & thereby consequently, lothsome to the Reader, but nothing erringe as I trust from the given and naturall meaninge of the author....

This declaration is in keeping with the freewheeling, as opposed to literal, approach employed in Arthur Golding's *Ovids Metamorphoses*.

Adlington crafts an "as...so" comparison, thirteen years before John Lyly's *Euphues* made a habit of it:

But as Lucius Apuleius was chaunged into his humaine shape by a Rose, the compaignions of Ulisses by great intercession, and Nabuchodonoser by the continuall prayers of Daniell, whereby they knewe them selves, and lived after a good & vertuous life: So can we never be restored to the right figure of our selves, except we taste and eate the sweete Rose of reason and virtue, which the rather by mediation of prayer, we may assuredly attaine.

Observe the reference to a Bible story. Walls made a case that Adlington's craft is deeper than one might imagine: "Adlington introduces a number of subtle modifications" to the original work that result in parallels to the Biblical ideas of "Heaven...the Song of Solomon...the body of...Christ [and] the resurrection of the redeemed in Revelation 19:7-9...."¹⁰ It seems that Oxford at this young age was already doing what scholars have recognized in Shakespeare: weaving together seminal influences, including biblical ones, to achieve a multilayered effect.

"Shakespeare's Favorite Novel"

The Bard used Adlington's book as source material. "*The Golden Ass* by Apuleius is often viewed as a leading candidate for Shakespeare's source [for the] *Metamorphosis of a man into an ass*"¹¹ in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Yet the influence extends far further:

As long ago as 1807, Francis Douce discerned a relationship between the witches in *Macbeth* ('grease that's sweaten / From the murderer's gibbet,' iv. i. 65-6) and Pamphile's tendency to cut 'the lumps of flesh from such as were hanged' (AA 3. 17). Douce noted that Adlington's translation was 'a book certainly used by Shakespeare on other occasions'; but it was not until the 1940s that interest was renewed. In a ground-breaking study, D.T. Starnes detected Apuleian influence in one of Shakespeare's poems (*Venus and Adonis*) and eight of his plays....¹²

In *Shakespeare's Favorite Novel: A Study of 'The Golden Asse' as Prime Source*, J. J. M. Tobin confirms and extends Starnes' discoveries, concluding that Shakespeare relied on Apuleius throughout his career, and made 'use of *The Golden Asse* in more than thirty of his works.' Indeed,

the importance to Shakespeare of Apuleius was 'scarcely surpassed by Holinshed, Ovid, and Plutarch.'¹³

In short, "Shakespeare's favorite novel" rivals Shakespeare's favorite poet, Ovid, for influence over the entire canon of Shakespeare.

Carver concluded, "the accumulated evidence of Apuleian presence in the Shakespearian corpus suggests that *The Golden Ass* exerted a profound influence, providing a rich resource of interactive elements which contributed to the proteanism of his own dramatic art."¹⁴ He tried to explain the influence: "It may be merely that Shakespeare's natural genius made him a particularly acute reader of *The Golden Ass*."¹⁵ That is one option. A better option is that Shakespeare wrote Adlington's book, in which case it is perfectly natural that he would have drawn time and again from another of the translations he did as a youngster.

Perfect Timing

Consider how well the timing of this translation fits the Earl of Oxford's activities. "Thomas Radcliffe, 3rd Earl of Sussex, is listed among the nobles who accompanied Elizabeth to Oxford in 1566...."¹⁶ "The queen had arrived at Oxford on August 31 for a six-day royal visit, culminating in the cap-and-gown ceremony on Friday, September 6 [when] de Vere, Cecil, and ten other courtiers and diplomats...receive[d] master's degrees."¹⁷ So, the Earl of Sussex was at the university with the Earl of Oxford from August 31 through September 6, 1566. Just twelve days later, Adlington signs his dedication to Sussex "From Universitie Colledge in Oxforde the. xviii. of September. 1566." That temporal juxtaposition put Anderson on the true author's trail. In an endnote, he wrote, "The coincidence between de Vere's trip to Oxford in early September 1566 and the appearance, in mid-September, of 'Adlington's' translation of Apuleius certainly deserves more research."¹⁸ The discussion here fills in the case for Oxford's authorship of the book.

Based on the foregoing analysis, one might entertain something akin to the following scenario: Oxford had been translating *the Golden Asse* that summer. He brought his work with him to the university, where he lodged in the presence of his closest ally, Sussex. He stayed on for two weeks following the graduation ceremony to complete the project. He penned a dedication to Sussex, headed back home with the manuscript and conveyed it to the printer.

An Unqualified Mr. Adlington

There is no entry for the writer William Adlington in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and nothing of his life is on the record: "Adlington himself has proved to be an elusive figure. Although he signs his dedicatory epistle 'From University Colledge in Oxenford, the xviiij. of September, 1566', he has left no trace in the university

or college archives.”¹⁹

Someone with his name did die, though. “The Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury contain the will of William Adlington or Adlyngton, Gentleman,”²⁰ which is presumably identical to the will “By me Willyam N Adlington” of London, dated April 14, 1571, and posted among the U.K.’s National Archives. The document contains nothing²¹ linking this person, even remotely, to the book. Carver noted, “The will makes no mention of books or literary activity, and there is nothing to tie the testator to the translator beyond the fact that the death date would explain our Adlington’s disappearance from the literary scene.”²² This Mr. Adlington indeed must have been quite young, because he leaves items to the care of his mother, uncle and aunt. There is, however, no indication that “our” Adlington graced the literary “scene” and no explanation for why someone on said scene would have published nothing else during the five years he lived following the publication of the book. All we have is a name on a one-off project and an uncorroborating document.

Based on Oxford’s usual method of using allonyms, it is likely he borrowed Adlington’s name from a real person. The dying Adlington’s young age accommodates the possibility that the man whose will is in the archives is the one who lent his name to Oxford’s project.

Assessment and Influence

Critics have strongly praised Adlington’s skills as a translator. One reviewer exclaimed, “I think the translation better than the original.”²³ Another remarked, “his translation is often better literature than the work of Apuleius, seeing that it is always fresh, direct, and simple.”²⁴ One scholar used words much like those commonly applied to Arthur Golding’s *Metamorphoses*: “His prose is bold and delightful. [He] was one among the host of translators that made the Elizabethan era the ‘golden age of translations.’”²⁵ The translation provided inspiration for the Elizabethan era’s second-best poet, Edmund Spenser, who built a portion of *The Faerie Queene* substantially from the translation issued in Adlington’s name.²⁶

I think we now know what Oxford was doing between 1565 and 1567, the years he issued the two parts of Arthur Golding’s *Ovids Metamorphoses*: He was translating another book about metamorphoses. Both efforts helped make him Shakespeare.

The article is excerpted from the “Early Voices” portion of Oxford’s Voices (oxfordvoices.com).

References

- ¹ Charlton Ogburn, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (EPM Publications, McLean, VA, 1984), p.444; Paul Altrocchi, “Edward de Vere as Translator of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,” *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, Vol.41, No.2, Spring 2005, pp.6-9; Robert Prechter, “A Deeper Look at the Arthur Golding Canon,” *Shakespeare Matters*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Fall 2007, pp. 7-14; Richard Waugaman, “Did Edward de Vere Translate Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*?” *The Oxfordian*, Vol.20, 2018, pp. 14-19.
- ² As quoted in Alan Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary* (Liverpool Press, 2003), 69.
- ³ Id. at 270.
- ⁴ As quoted in the Opening Argument within Robert Prechter, *Oxford’s Voices* (2021).
- ⁵ Robert H.F. Carver, *The Protean Ass—The Metamorphoses of Apuleius from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 324.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Earl Showerman, “Orestes and Hamlet—From Myth to Masterpiece: Part 1,” *The Oxfordian*, Vol.7 (2004), 89-114; and “*Timon of Athens*: Shakespeare’s Sophoclean Trilogy,” *The Oxfordian*, Vol.11 (2009), 207-234.
- ⁸ Sturmius, as quoted in Nelson, 176.
- ⁹ Oscar M. Villarejo, “Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’: Its Spanish Source,” Cambridge University Press, online, March 28, 2007.
- ¹⁰ Kathryn Walls, “The ‘Cupid and Psyche’ Fable of Apuleius and Guyon’s Underworld Adventure in *The Faerie Queene* II.vii.3-vii.8,” *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual*, Vol. XXVI, AMS Press (2011), 49.
- ¹¹ William Farina, *De Vere as Shakespeare* (London: McFarland & Co., 2006), 57.
- ¹² Carver, 429.
- ¹³ Id. at 430.
- ¹⁴ Id. at 444.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ John Nichols’s *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth*, Vol. II (Oxford University Press, 2014), 573n.
- ¹⁷ Mark Anderson, “*Shakespeare*” by Another Name (New York: Gotham Books, 2005), 32.
- ¹⁸ Id. at 440.
- ¹⁹ Carver, 298.
- ²⁰ Id. at 299.
- ²¹ Based on a rendition into type by researcher Geoff Williamson, sent to me by email, August 2 and September 11, 2022.
- ²² Carver, 299.
- ²³ Lathrop, *Translations*, 159-160, as quoted in Carver, 314.
- ²⁴ E.B. Osborn, Introduction, *The Golden Asse of Lucius Apuleius*, reprint of 1639 edition, London, p.xv, as quoted in Carver, 314.
- ²⁵ Wikipedia, William Adlington.
- ²⁶ See the Edmund Spenser chapter of *Oxford’s Voices*.

Play Review: *By My Will* by Douglas Post

Reviewed by Robert Prechter

By My Will, a comedy on the authorship question by award-winning playwright Douglas Post, debuted (after a couple of previews) at the Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern on April 8. The Chicago-based playwright was on hand for a pre-show discussion. Post noted that he was personally involved in casting and rehearsals, which were handled primarily by the Tavern's President and Artistic Director, Jeffrey Watkins. (Their relationship goes back to their educations and early ventures.) Post is hopeful that the play will find other venues.

Though he is a Stratfordian, Watkins is content that the issue be aired, to which end he commissioned the play. He expressed a fear that Post might have slipped too close to the "dark side" of Oxfordianism, but Post publicly professes agnosticism on the subject.

The play opens with Anne Hathaway grousing at Will Shaksper over an inconveniently discovered copy of a will mentioning a certain "second-best bed." Shaksper, exhausted from the exchange, lies down and begins to dream. He finds himself in a room with John Lyly, Thomas Kyd and Kit Marlowe. Queen Elizabeth enters with Aemilia Bassano Lanier. To please the monarch, the playwrights try to act out Act III, Scene ii of *Hamlet*. Much grumbling and bumbling ensues. In the final moment of Act I, a new character enters and announces, "It is I, Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford and the true author of the plays of William Shakespeare!"

Act II brings up the authorship question. De Vere, in a constant state of pique, makes his case for having written the Shakespeare plays. He is continually countered by Shaksper, but several exchanges throw the needle sharply in de Vere's direction. He rattles off a list of his direct connections to the plays: He studied law, he lived in Italy, he spent time at Court, he had access to exceptional

libraries as a youth, his life experiences show up in *Hamlet*, his brother-in-law went to Denmark and met Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Polonius represents his father-in-law, he was acquainted with falconry, gardening, music and so on. In reply, Will can only say that he got his information from "books" and hanging out at the Mermaid Tavern. De Vere gets a robust laugh from the audience when he cries out in a haughty tone, "Oh, *the Mermaid Tavern!* Yes, of course! A veritable *fount of information*. *A towering cathedral of higher counsel!* If only I'd known, I could have saved myself all those tedious years at the two universities I attended!"

Yet Will has his moments. He is not as emotional as de Vere, and he expresses exasperation that this "Oxfraud" is trying to claim his honest, hard work. He declares that his father was an influential man who got him into Kings New School, providing him sufficient education. Oxfordians will recognize that Will's case is given too much credit on such points, yet Stratfordians will have a few reasons to grouse, too. Will neglects to mention, for example, that Ben Jonson listed "William Shakespeare" among the actors of *Sejanus*. One can only fit so much into a 100-minute play.

Along the way, de Vere professes that he contributed to the output of his "Wits," Lyly, Kyd and Marlowe, which I judge to be an enlightened view. Deep into Act II, Lanier steps forth and makes her own claims to having written Shakespeare's plays. The Queen utters the Stratfordian fallback, "Perhaps none of it really matters."

In an interesting twist, it is not Shaksper who wakes from the dream but de Vere, who explains to his wife Elizabeth that he had dreamt that Shaksper dreamt the bulk of the play. As de Vere sits in a melancholy mood, Will Shaksper enters and, after a pause, simply says, "I think it's time we had a chat." It's a poignant ending.

In sum, *By My Will* is a play for agnostics. Even so, I think it leaves Oxfordians more satisfied than their rivals, accurately reflecting the balance of evidence.