

# The Biblical Origin of Edward de Vere's Dedicatory Poem in Cardan's *Comforte*

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We believe that Shakespeare, whose investment in courtly diction was considerable, can be analyzed as a writer who felt, in the course of his production, the ways in which new modes of production and ownership (matched by new manners and style) were arising to endanger his stylistic property, a threatened alienation which he countered by shifting his holdings.

Kenneth Burke in *Attitudes Towards History*



AMONG the many eloquent testimonies to the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford's character as "a magnificent and very learned and religious man," as Revels Master George Buc (1562-1623) remembered him, are the rich variety of books prepared under his patronage or otherwise dedicated to him from 1563/4-1603 (Chiljan). No body of documents deserves closet scrutiny by scholars laboring to recover Oxford's long-suppressed role as a Renaissance cultural figure, or to assess his character and ideals vis-à-vis the values of his or our own times. Clearly, whatever court enemies such as Henry Howard or Charles Arundel (Ward 206-223) proclaimed about him, Oxford was held in highest esteem by cultured contemporaries; sincerely enthusiastic dedications from writers such as Anthony Munday, John Lyly, Thomas Watson, musicians like John Farmer, scholars including Arthur Golding and even Edmund Spenser remain among the important extant documents of the Elizabethan age. As Stephen May declares:

The range of Oxford's patronage is as remarkable as its substance. Among the thirty-three works dedicated to the Earl, six deal with religion and philosophy, two with music, and three with medicine; but the focus of his patronage was literary, for thirteen of the books presented to him were original or translated works of literature. (9)<sup>1</sup>

Among such works, the Thomas Bedingfield translation of *Cardanus Comforte* (1573), to which Oxford prefixed a long prose introduction and dedicatory poem, has long been recognized as a landmark. His patronage of this work is significant in a number of related ways, the first being the connection that it establishes between Oxford and one of the greatest minds of the late Italian Renaissance, physician, philosopher, and mathematician Jerome Cardano (1501-1576). Cardan—as the name is also shortened—was a formidable intellectual figure in

an age of formidable intellects. Foremost among 16th-century philosophers who paved the way for the scientific advances of Galileo and Descartes by shaking off the encrusted authority of Aristotle, Cardan's researches in probability theory, published in the *Practica Arithmetice & Mensurandi singularis* (Milan 1539) and the *Ars Magna* (Nuremburg 1545), are regarded by modern science historians as three centuries in advance of any comparable theory. Indeed, so vital was Cardan's role in stimulating the development of critical thought in the late Renaissance, that *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Vol 7-8 174-79) singles him out as typifying the intellectual accomplishments of the age. Cardan's vision of the life of the mind as a pursuit of pleasure, a means to practical knowledge, and an escape from adversity, became compensation for a personal life of great tragedy.<sup>2</sup> The philosopher/mathematician sought solace in the *vita contemplativa*. He articulated a philosophy of stoic fortitude, most completely expressed in his *Comforte*, a book that assumed a prominent place in the European genre, of which the *Consolatione* of Boethius remains perhaps the most noted exemplum, devoted to the wholeness and healing of the human spirit.

De Vere's sponsorship of Thomas Bedingfield's 1573 translation of *Cardanus Comforte* was, then, a momentous event in the cross-fertilization of the zeitgeist of Italian and classical philosophy in late Tudor England. Among other prominent influences, *Cardanus Comforte* left an indubitable mark on the period's most significant tragedy, *Hamlet*. De Vere's sponsorship of the book therefore forms a critical pivot in the case for his authorship of *Hamlet* and other works published under the name "Shakespeare." As Ruth Miller notes, Cardan's influence on *Hamlet*'s stoicism has been established by four great Shakespeare scholars: Francis Douce, Joseph Hunter, Lily Campbell and Hardin Craig. "It is easy to see that this book of Cardan has long been associated with *Hamlet*," wrote Dr. Campbell. "I should like to believe that *Hamlet* was actually reading it or pretending to read it as he carried on his baiting of Polonius" (334). Craig, writing in the *Huntington Library Bulletin*, gave the first systematic exposition of the dense network of philosophic and semantic indications linking the two texts. Such connections, supposed Craig, were

[M]ore numerous and of a more fundamental character than even Hunter seems to have realized. Indeed, it may be said, without great exaggeration and irrespective of whether or not Shakespeare presented his hero as reading in this particular book just before he spoke his soliloquy (2.2.160-223), that Cardan's *De Consolatione* is pre-eminently "Hamlet's book," since the philosophy of *Hamlet* agrees remarkably with that of Cardan (18).<sup>3</sup>

As Ruth Miller summarizes its significance, the book forms a key exhibit in the case for De Vere's authorship of *Hamlet* and other works published under the name "Shakespeare" (2: 497-507). Such moments of concurrence between Oxfordian and orthodox scholars have

not, alas, inspired appreciation, or even warranted acknowledgement, among Shakespeareans hewing to the Folger view of reality. The reasons, while perhaps obvious to some, may merit particular emphasis at this tumultuous moment in the development of Oxfordian thought and scholarship. That a book of such profound imprint on Shakespeare should have been patronized to the extent that it was by Edward de Vere can only be regarded by orthodox critics as one of those unfortunate accidents that keep happening, almost on cue, to the tradition of the Stratford straw man. Alongside evidence such as Oxford's role in the introduction of Bedingfield's translation of *Cardanus Comforte*, the tautological premises sustaining the Stratford icon start to shake. Accordingly, Oxford's role in introducing *Cardanus Comforte* into English culture is one of those great secrets routinely and conveniently overlooked by English professors dedicated to the Stratfordian world-view.

Thus, Ms. Miller comments, while these orthodox critics have lavished attention on the significant connections between *Hamlet* and *Cardanus Comforte*, they have not demonstrated "the slightest interest in the person who was responsible for introducing this important work to the intelligentsia of Elizabethan England" (Miller 2: 504). Such an oversight is particularly striking, Miller notes, because "the name of the person *commanding* its publication appears on the title pages of both the 1573 and the 1576 editions, a daring departure from the established publishing procedures of the time" (504; emphasis in original).

THE significance of Oxford's patronage of *Cardanus Comforte*, however, is by no means limited to the work's prominence as a Shakespeare source of paramount importance. In addition to announcing his role as the patron *commanding* publication of "Hamlet's book," de Vere also contributed its prose preface, in the characteristically complex "Euphuistic" idioms familiar to readers of his letters (Fowler 19, 86). As early as 1946, Charles Wisner Barrell, writing in *The Shakespeare Fellowship Quarterly*, considered Oxford's preface "a document of considerable importance in the history of English literature.... [it] gives us...the creative credo of the young 'Shakespeare'" (61). In his study of de Vere's known correspondence and published prose, the late William Plumer Fowler analyzed the Shakespearean qualities of the preface in copious and persuasive detail (118-162). Directing attention to the Shakespearean character of phrases such as "wherein I may seem to play the part of the cunning and expert mediciner or Physician," or "you are desirous to bury and ensevill your works in the grave of oblivion," or "in your lifetime I shall erect you such a monument," Fowler concluded that the dedicatory epistle "literally teems with parallelism, both in thought and phraseology, to Shakespeare's works" (162).

Although it has remained less appreciated by students of the authorship question, the importance of the poem de Vere prefixed to Bedingfield's translation, a twenty-five line lyric of five stanzas, rhyming a-b-a-b, in iambic pentameter, has been discussed recently by the

German literary scholar, Walter Klier, who remarks on the poem's "Brechtian" character. The poem, Klier argues, presciently foreshadows the Shakespearean leitmotif of de Vere's later years, that the "fruit of his literary labors would be attributed to another, unworthy to harvest the crop."<sup>4</sup> The poem is here reproduced in original spelling:

*The Earle of Oxenforde  
To the Reader.*

*The labouring man, that tills the fertile soyle,  
And reapes the harvest fruite, hath not in deede  
The gaine but payne, and if for all hys toyle  
He gets the strawe, the Lord wyll have the seede.  
The Manchet<sup>5</sup> fyne falls not unto his share  
On coursest cheat<sup>6</sup> his hungrye stomacke feeds  
The landlord doth, possesse the fynest fare  
He pulles the flowers, the other pluckes but weedes.  
The Mason poore that builds the Lordlye halles  
Dwelles not in them, they are for hye degree  
His cotage is, compact in paper walles  
And not with bricke, or stone as others bee.  
The idle Drone, that labours not at all  
Suckles by the sweete, of honnye from the Bee  
Who worketh most, to their share least doth fall,  
Wyth due desert, reward will never bee.  
The swiftest hare, unto the Mastive slow  
Oft times doth fall, to him as for a praye:  
The Greyhound thereby, both misse his game we know  
For which he made, such speedy hast awaye.  
So hee that takes, the payne to pen the booke  
Reapes not the giftes, of goodlye golden Muse  
But those gayne that, who on the work shal looke  
And from the soure, the sweete by skill doth chuse.  
For he that beates the bush the byrde not gets  
But who sits still, and holdeth fast the nets.*

OPINIONS differ regarding the poetic merits of this remarkable lyric. What cannot be denied, except perhaps by those so concerned with such formulaic matters of style as the regularity of the caesura—a feature which *might* be construed as evidence for the author's habitual familiarity with Virgil and Ovid—as to utterly overlook the poem's content, is how vigorously that content contradicts the impression of Oxford so fastidiously promulgated by prominent Stratfordian apologists busy searching for a magic bullet to slay the heresy. It is indeed difficult to imagine a lyrical imagination of such splendid catholic sympathy issuing from the pen of a twenty-three-year-old scion of one of the richest and most venerable houses of Plantagenet England; but the name prominently prefacing the verses leaves little doubt as to their authorship. Stylistic evidence also supports the public attribution of the poem to de Vere. The concluding couplet, "He that beates the bushe the bird not gets; But who sittes still, and holdeth fast the nets," appears to have been a particularly favorite idiom of de Vere's. The image recurs in his Jan. 11 1596-97 letter to Robert Cecil (*Cecil Papers* 36/7): "Thus I was to have beaten the bushe, whylst other(s) howlding the nett had taken the bwyrd."<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, that de Vere's lyric was inspired by a sequence of verses he found in the apocryphal book of II Esdras, 8:33-38, in his Geneva Bible seems so clear that to deny it would demand the revision of hundreds of far less obvious borrowings in most of the works of the period. Thus:

- 33 O my people, heare my worde: make you ready to the battel, and in the troubles be even as strangers upon earth.
- 34 He that selleth, let him be as he yt sleepeth his way: & he that byeth, as one yt will lose.
- 35 Who so occupieth marchadise, as he that winneth not: and he that buyldeth, as he that shal not dwell therein:
- 36 He yt soweth, as one that shal not reape: he that cutteth the vine, as he that shal not gather the grape:
- 37 They that marry, as they that shal get no children: and they that mary not, so as the widdowes.
- 38 Therefore they that labour, labour in vaine.

(1570 Genevan translation)

Both Oxford's theme, of the alienation of the laborer from the fruits of his or her labor, and some of the specific exempla illustrating it, such as the builder and the vineyard laborer, can be seen in the Esdras verse. Both texts belong to a genre of wisdom literature, a tradition of realist social criticism, conservative in its assumptions about human nature and yet also,

simultaneously, critical of injustice. Neither text holds out any specific promise of Utopian redemption; instead, each articulates a critical vision that can become the inspiration for specific reforms aimed at ameliorating alienation produced by unjust social relations.

**B**UT Oxford's lyric also becomes a window into the soul of its twenty-three-year-old author. Here is a remarkable lyrical testimony to a philosophical realism and a critical class-consciousness centuries in advance of anything else Western Europe was to produce (with the possible exception of St. Thomas Aquinas). The poem illustrates a prescient cognizance in one of the most influential nobleman of the late Tudor period, the scion of an ancient aristocratic house, of the *social injustice* of Renaissance class relations. The thought found in *Il Esdras* was undoubtedly reinforced through the writer's familiarity with Aquinas. Such powers of imaginative sympathy, which would eventually bring forth Shakespeare's most 'universal' drama, that of a foolish old king dispossessed of his kingdom by viciously rational daughters, here act as agents to transfigure the "Brechtian" theme of the farmer alienated from the fruits of his harvest into a meditation on the nature of literary creativity as a productive act. The writer, like the farmer, suffers an alienation from that which is given to his readers as the harvest of his wisdom, a metaphor that can only make sense where the connection between the writer and the reader has been broken, simply because the reader in this case does not know where the wisdom is coming from. The bird that the beater of the bush does not get is feedback, acknowledgment, and recognition. The reader gets the wisdom, but not knowing whence it comes, he can give nothing in return.

Whether we choose to accept the metaphysical and social implications of the analogy, the hermeneutical implications are indeed sophisticated, to say the least. Was he already, at age twenty-three, engaged in literary and cultural labors for which, like a medieval knight whose name "is from the book of honor razed quite" (Sonnet 25), he felt the pang of alienated honor? Certainly the theme was destined to become the tragic leitmotif of his life as one who "took the pain to pen the book" but never reaped the gifts of his own muse. And certainly, de Vere's precocious awareness of the particular brand of literary alienation invoked by an author's investment in writing for which he will receive no public honor would resurface with potent force in the Sonnet writer's confession that he "keeps invention in a noted weed" (76)—i.e., he houses his literary creation within a socially acceptable *nom de plume*—which was destined to haunt his literary corpus as "Shakespeare." Reading his Geneva Bible (STC 4106), de Vere must have been impressed by the extent to which his own personal tragedy, including the eventual elimination of his name from the "book of life" (Rev. 3.5), was inscribed in his own published Bible, a literary orphan of the scribe named Tyndale.

We should not, however, forget the idiomatic historical circumstances in which this unusually gifted young reader found himself in 1573. In his poem, eschatological injustice has

become business-as-usual. The expansion of mercantile capitalism, sweeping aside the manor world that de Vere's ancestors had inhabited as "wolfish earls"—which is to say, as persons not yet modern—was soon to proceed to the triumphant dissolution of medievalism's "great chain of being." First the monasteries, those "bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang," were ransacked by Tudor agents, and then the superstructure of belief, which had clung to their shadowy forms, toppled dead in the dust behind them. The smoke of iconoclastic bonfires rose toward the heavens, while ships freighted with the contents of monastic libraries, the labor of centuries of scribes and archivists, set sail for the Continental publishers loaded with a plentiful and cheap supply of old paper.

Yet the social realities of a class-divided culture, as revealed by de Vere's poem, would return—however abstracted and masked by Tudor apologists—to haunt England in the 19th-century industrial slums, where they would goad two very different geniuses into their own creative frenzies, Charles Dickens and Karl Marx.

Although this "brave new world" of capitalism has been happy to replace the class-conscious aristocracy of the "wolfish earls" with a managerial elite, one dedicated to ignoring the realities so starkly confronted in de Vere's poem, and to expunging all traces of tragic shadow from the just-so story of that petty bourgeois "man of the theatre, Shakespeare," and one that would not hesitate to bolster the great lie on which the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism was based, at least in the English-speaking world: that the greatness of Shakespeare consisted precisely in his artful refusal of the ontology and aesthetics on which the new world order was to ground its being.

HENCE it happens that students of English literature are not made privy to the cautionary, post-Stratfordian note of the great literary critic Kenneth Burke, for whom Shakespeare was "a writer who, in his stylistic inheritance from feudalism, had invested thoroughly in the homeopathic remedy, inducing him to evolve a set of solaces that 'made the best of things' (as in his 'sweet are the uses of adversity' formula, the formula that we consider as the 'essence of the feudal Shakespeare')" (46; emphasis in original). Burke's understanding of Shakespeare invites comparison to Charlton Ogburn's. "How singular it was," writes Ogburn, "that the Renaissance ideal should have been realized most fully in England in a man who could never cease looking back with regret, as A.L. Rowse recognized, upon the feudal past" (476). By 1629, the books of Esdras, along with Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, and other apocryphal books of the Bible, deemed offensive to the emerging Puritan sensibility of work for work's sake (and the Puritan antagonism to theodicy), had been removed from the King James Bible, condemned to the same historical purgatory as Hamlet's father's ghost.

Yet, inscribed in the concluding lines of his poem, prefacing a philosophical treatise on the "uses of adversity," we still read de Vere's prescient character as the great Court Fool and

Holy Prophet of Elizabeth's Tudor Court. At twenty-three, he possessed a mind capable of the profoundest understanding; one not bound by the nutshell of the Elizabethan Court nor the limited social horizons of his own class. He already possessed the "negative capability" for which Keats would later praise Shakespeare, of projecting his imaginative sympathy into worlds in which he never, himself, had dwelt except in his darkest moments, as with Lear on the heath, in the kingdom of the mind he constructed to replace the decaying but still splendid feudal world of his ancestors.

Thus, although written by the descendant of those same "wolfish earls" that Walt Whitman suspected to have been Shakespeare's true ancestors, this poem stands in stark refutation of the modern view of de Vere currently promulgated by some so-called students of his life. In their rush to certify the Tudor myth of Shakespeare with the gilding of modern "scholarship," orthodox historians eagerly vilify him as the spoiled *enfant terrible* of a decadent and corrupt ruling class, condemned to the dustbin of history by Tudor reformers.

These might have taken an instructive note from one such reformer. William Cecil is himself credited with the astonishing remark regarding his prospective son-in-law that "there is much more in him of understanding than any stranger would think" (Ward 68). For historians, Cecil's comment qualifies as richly ironic understatement, testifying to the deep respect Oxford's intellectual and creative powers inspired in even in so curmudgeonly a figure as the wily old fox of Queen Elizabeth's Court; nor should we forget that Cecil's fictional counterpart some years later acknowledges the deep "pregnancy" (2.2.212) of Hamlet's sarcastic wit.

A cornucopia of corroboratory evidence, ignored in the rush to defame de Vere (and Oxfordians, by synecdoche), confirms the impression left by this poem, first published in *Cardanus Comforte*. By 1564, Arthur Golding had already noted in his young protégé that "earnest desire to read, peruse, and communicate with others, as well the histories of ancient times and things done long ago, as also the present state of things in our days, and not without a certain pregnancy of wit and ripeness of understanding" (Chiljan 6). Perhaps that quotation actually contains the literary germ of Polonius's prophetic utterance: "How pregnant sometimes his replies are" (2.2.212). Certainly, if one cares to listen, one can hear that the two speakers are referring to the same person.

READING his 1570 Geneva Bible, de Vere must have been impressed by the manner in which the sadness of his own life, inscribed in the concluding lines of his poem, participated in the "great chain of being" that stretched down into the lives of the poorest of his English compatriots and back into the dim aeons of antiquity, into a realm of mystery lit only by the prophetic words of the ancient poets preserved in the Bible. In the social alienation of the poor, indicted by the prophet Esdras, our author perceived a mirror of his own condition



as an obsolete man of the past, without a social function or a purpose higher than assimilation into the new capitalist order. Like his mad King Lear, he was a great wheel rolling down fortune's hill into the gutter of poverty, disgrace, and unacknowledged disappearance, leaving his corpus to become the prey of Court reptilia like Osric.

"Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following" (II.2.74). These are the explicit instructions of Lear's Fool, sometimes mistaken for Lear's true self. \_\_\_\_\_ ☞

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*Since Roger Stritmatter is a member of the editorial board of THE OXFORDIAN, his biography can be found on page 107 with the rest of the board biographies.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chiljan reprints only 29. She misses Greene's *Gwydonius* (1584). I am not aware of the identity of the three additional works counted by May.

<sup>2</sup> Cardan's life (1501-1576) illustrates the Greek maxim, "Call no man happy until he is dead." The illegitimate son of a famed jurist and mathematician of Milan, Cardan possessed the critical spirit of the disenfranchised. Exiled early on from Milan on charges of heresy, he was later stripped of his professorship at Bologna and prohibited from further teaching or publishing. One of his sons died an untimely death, while the other murdered his adulterous wife, a scandal that gave his enemies the means of, again, banishing him from the University. His suffering in old age was mitigated by a pension from the Pope, but he died with only 20 of his more than 100 manuscript compositions published.

<sup>3</sup> The present writer is inclined to share Dr. Craig's skepticism on this point. Indeed, it seems much more likely that the book Hamlet is actually reading at 2.2.x is the satires of Persius Flaccus—an extremely important source for Shakespeare.

<sup>4</sup> "Deise Verse, deren vorderündiges, für das Zeitalter wenig typisches Thema von einem Rezensenten des *New Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse* als Brechtian bezeichnet wurde, lassen auf den zweiten Blicke jene Obsession erkennen die Shakespeare bis zuletzt plagen sollte: dass die Früchte seiner literarischen Arbeit ein anderer, Unwidver zu ernten drohte, dass der Ruhm, auf den er wie jeder Künstler hoffte, ihm aus Gründen des Standethos verwehert war, jener noblesse oblige, von der *Castigliones Cortegiano* handelt" (Klier 138). According to the editors of the *New Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse*, de Vere's poem is one of the few notable examples from that age of the "Brechtian" theme, also seen on second examination as a perceptible obsession in Shakespeare: that the fruit of his literary labor shall pass to another, unworthy to possess it, and that the glory for which he, as any other artist, hopes has been denied him on the grounds of *infra dignitas*—the same noblesse oblige that *Castiglione's Courter* treats. On this theme of the alienation of the writer's work in Shakespeare please see, for example, sonnets 23, 72-76, etc. Klier treats the theme in detail in his chapter 9: "My Name Be Buried Where My Body Is."

<sup>5</sup> The very finest kind of wheaten bread.

<sup>6</sup> Wheaten bread of the second qualiry, not manchet.

<sup>7</sup> The unusual use of "w" in "howlding" and "bwyrd" is characteristic of de Vere's holograph spellings. Undoubtedly, the more normalized orthography of the prefatory matter to *Cardanus Comforte*, which is representative of de Vere's published work, is that of an amanuensis or compositor following copybook practices, just then beginning to be standardized for the printing industry. For the prolegomena to this problem, see McKerrow 1927, especially pp. 239-263; he concludes: "both a priori probability and such evidence as there is seem to point to the compositor making as a rule little or no consistent attempt to follow the spelling of the MS. before him" (249). Recent events require us to lay particular emphasis on what might otherwise seem to be the obvious inference to be drawn from the past one hundred or more years of Shakespearean bibliography: namely, that we really have not the slightest idea how "Shakespeare"—as distinct from his copyists or compositors—may have spelled many ordinary words.

<sup>8</sup> These verses are not marked in the de Vere copy of STC 2106 annotated by de Vere.

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