

Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford: Touchstone to the ELR

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The solution to the Authorship Question has not been easy; were it so we would have had an answer long ago. For one thing, so much is missing from the record that it's been impossible to treat the issue as an ordinary problem in historiography. The gaps between mainstream socio/political history and literary history, particularly as the latter relates to the birth of the London stage and press, are simply too many and too broad to base a functional narrative on ordinary methods of fact accumulation. Beyond the obvious, that these two immensely important institutions did get born somehow and at almost exactly the same time, what facts exist are simply not sufficient to provide us with a believable picture of how it happened and who was involved.

In such a case a different approach is necessary: first, pull back to a level where there's enough light to see where we're going, then fill in the gaps with educated guesswork until the scenario begins to make sense. The result has been, not just an answer to who wrote the Shakespeare canon, but a new theory of the English Literary Renaissance: who actually created it and why it's taken us so long to piece it together.

It's been difficult to nail the Shakespeare Authorship Question primarily because it has turned out to be much broader and deeper than just the identity of one writer, however important. This expanded theory requires a rather complicated book, with sufficient explanations of how the gaping gulfs where records are missing occurred in the first place, and sufficient citations that readers feel secure in following where conjecture has to take the place of proof. Since it may be some time before such a book becomes a reality, a condensed version of the result seems in order as a sort of map or outline. Questions about the process may be answered through my blog: www.politicworm.com.

So Who Wrote Shakespeare?

At almost exactly the midpoint of the sixteenth century, the author of the Shakespeare canon was born into a dysfunctional family of ancient aristocrats in north-west Essex.¹ Four years later, due to the unstable political conditions surrounding the transfer of power from the revolutionary government under Edward VI to the reactionary government of his sister, Mary Tudor, those concerned about the safety of the heir to the great Oxford earldom arranged for him to be transferred to the care of the nation's leading statesmen and Greek scholar, Sir Thomas Smith.

At the time that four-year-old Edward de Vere came to him to live and study, Smith was living at Ankerwycke, a renovated priory located on the northern bank of the Thames, a couple of hours by horse from Windsor Castle to the northwest

and a stone's throw from today's Heathrow airport. Smith and his recently married second wife had no children, nor is there evidence of any other child raised in their household, which suggests that he had a solitary childhood in terms of relationships with children his own age and of his rank.

Like other children who lack companions, he found them in the adventures he read about in books in Smith's library,² many appearing later in plays by Shakespeare. It's also likely that he filled the empty niche with relationships with Smith's servants and the animals and birds that inhabited Smith's gardens, the fields and wetlands that surrounded them, and the still great Forest of Windsor that lay just across the river to the northwest. As Carolyn Spurgeon has demonstrated, these too made their way into Shakespeare by way of vivid imagery.

During the five years of "Bloody Mary's" Catholic reign, Smith and the other Reformation activists from Edward's reign who stayed in England kept quietly to themselves. Though it's very possible that along with Smith and his wife, little Ned attended holiday festivities at nearby Windsor Castle, where he would have seen plays and concerts and spent time with his parents and other members of the noble family into which he was born, it's unlikely that, except for five months at Cambridge in his ninth year, he spent much time away from Ankerwycke. This was the period when Smith's former colleagues, among them John Cheke of Cambridge and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, were being arrested, tortured, imprisoned and executed by order of Queen Mary's husband, Philip of Spain.

1558-59: Queens' College Cambridge

With the death of Mary in 1558, the eight-year-old de Vere was shuffled off to his tutor's alma mater, Queens' College Cambridge, so Smith could help his friend and former student William Cecil prepare for Princess Elizabeth's coronation. When it became clear to Smith that he would not be getting the appointment to the Privy Council that he expected, he returned to his newly renovated estate, Hill Hall in Essex, to which de Vere returned as well. Two years later, when the death of his father placed him within the control of the Crown, the twelve-year-old came to live with Cecil, now the Queen's Master Secretary, at his mansion in London's West End. There he studied ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry and law under Lawrence Nowell, and the arts of the courtier under various masters of dancing, music, fencing, horsemanship and French pronunciation.

As a member of the Cecil household, de Vere formed a brotherly relationship with their six-year-old daughter Anne and came to know their relatives, the Bacons, who lived up the road at York House: Anne Bacon, Mildred Cecil's younger sister, her husband Sir Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper and Cecil's colleague on the Privy Council, and their small sons, toddlers Anthony and Francis, who (with their mother as instructor) could already babble charmingly in Latin. Later the following year Mildred Cecil's only surviving son, Robert, was born and, shortly after that, Oxford's first close friend, Edward Manners, Earl of Rutland, joined the

household as the second ward of the Crown to fall under Cecil's guiding hand. The teenaged noblemen made friends with students from the nearby Inns of Court who congregated at Cecil House, most of them their seniors by six to ten years. Chosen by Cecil and his friend Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, for their willingness to translate important Reformation texts into English, these young men provided the teenaged Oxford with his first audience.

1566: Christ Church Oxford

Although the evidence is exceedingly slim, it's possible that from 1564 to 1566, under the name "Richard Vere," the 14-16-year old Oxford studied at Christ Church Oxford under the care of Canon Thomas Bernard (Hartman xii), during which time he wrote and directed the play *Palamon and Arcite* for the 1566 commencement (later revised by John Fletcher as *The Two Noble Kinsmen*).³ He may have done the same two years earlier for the 1564 commencement at Cambridge, writing and directing the (extremely juvenile) *Damon and Pythias*. If so, like *Palamon and Arcite*, it reflected his feelings about Rutland. Both plays were attributed to Richard Edwards, master of the Children of the Queen's Chapel.

In 1565 Oxford published the first four books of the translation of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses* attributed to his uncle Arthur Golding; then an anthology of tales translated by himself and possibly some of his friends at Cecil House from numerous ancient and continental authors (most of them found in Smith's library) titled *Painter's Palace of Pleasure*; then a collection of poems (*Eclogues*) by his friend Barnabe Googe.⁴

During the winter holidays of 1566-67, Cecil enrolled Oxford at the leading London law college, Gray's Inn, shortly after two plays for the West End community were performed there at Christmas: one a translation of the comedy *I Suppositi* by Ariosto, the other *Jocaste*, a loose translation of a Sophocles tragedy, later published as by Cecil's henchman, George Gascoigne. Both are reflected later in plays by Shakespeare.

1567: Court and Literary Patronage

By seventeen, Oxford was living and traveling with the Royal Court and involved with the production of Court entertainments. Like many underage peers at that time, he felt compelled to borrow from money-lenders to maintain his image as a courtier and patron of writers, musicians and companions. These last included his cousin Henry Howard, who introduced him to Catholicism. Though drawn by the rich tradition of Catholic art and architecture that was so missing from the Reformation culture that had surrounded him since childhood, the belief system he had absorbed from Smith—a mixture of Erasmus, Luther, and the ancient Greek cynics—would remain unchanged. Among those he employed were several of his father's former retainers that Cecil had taken into his own service, among

them the son of one John Lyly (Green: TNA PROB 11/46, ff. 174v-176). It's very possible that he sponsored actors from his father's old company as well.

As he approached and then passed his twenty-first birthday, Oxford continued his publishing ventures, putting in print Bartholomew Clerke's Latin translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier*, and his friend Tom Bedingfield's *Cardanus Com-forte*, a translation from Latin of Gerolamo Cardano's popular *de Consolatione*. In 1574 he published another first, an anthology of original poetry titled *One Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, most of it his own plus some by his friends, along with the plays he had produced at Gray's Inn, and a tale in prose, "The Adventures of Master FI," the first of the sort of pastoral novelle he would later publish as by Robert Greene, the name of one of his Essex copyholders (Green: PRO SP12/176, ff. 134-8). This last was too revealing of Court gossip, so the book was revised and republished with names changed the following year while he was away on the Continent.

1571-75: Marriage and Italy

At twenty-one, yielding to tradition and fiscal necessity, he married his guardian's daughter, fifteen-year-old Anne Cecil, who got caught right away in the ideological and class tensions between her husband and her parents. Three years later he was finally allowed to take the traditional finale to a peer's education, a tour of European capitals, and he set off for Italy, visiting in turn places in France and Italy later portrayed in Shakespeare (Roe). While away, issues arose around his indebtedness to money-lenders and those members of his family to whom his father had bequeathed large annuities. He staved these off by demanding that Cecil, who still had charge of his estates, sell enough to pay his debts, something that the tight-fisted Cecil stalled on doing so that the interest continued to mount.

It was as much out of fury at this situation as at the rumors that Anne had been unfaithful that Oxford broke off with his wife and the whole Cecil family upon his return from Italy. This meant that she and their daughter continued to suffer for years from ugly rumors that the child was the product of her mother's illicit affair, a tragic ploy that would haunt Oxford for the rest of his life and that would form the plot or subplot of at least six of the Shakespeare plays: *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Alls Well that Ends Well*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*.

1576: Birth of the London Stage

In the weeks following Oxford's return, the first two successful year-round commercial theaters in England sprang to life. First to be built was the big public theater created by James Burbage for Hunsdon's Men in the Liberty of Norton Folgate in Shoreditch, a short distance north on the Bishopsgate Road leading out of Central London. In time for rehearsals for the winter holidays that year, the second opened its doors. This was the small private stage created as a rehearsal space for the Children of the Queen's Chapel in the old Revels building in the Liberty of

Blackfriars. The first served the public of the East End, the other the posh community of peers and educated parliamentarians of the West End. Evidence connects him with both theaters, and all but one of the anonymous plays performed at Court that winter by both the adult companies and the boys suggest his authorship.⁵

By 1580 Oxford was living at Fisher's Folly, a manor just outside the City Wall, halfway between the City theater inns and Burbage's public stage. That Christmas he felt compelled to reveal to the Queen and leading members of the Court the fact that he'd found himself drawn by his cousin Henry Howard into a conspiracy that posed a threat to the Reformation government and probably also the Queen's life. He was forgiven, but Howard and his cohort went to prison, where they launched a series of scurrilous counter charges that have damaged Oxford's reputation with historians ever since. Having escaped the immediate consequences of this, he then proceeded to get caught in a sexual liaison with one of the Queen's Maids of Honor, which sent him to the Tower for two months (March through May), and from there to house arrest.

Banished from Court indefinitely, he turned his skills towards writing more personally satisfying plays for the adult companies to perform at the little Blackfriars theater school for his favorite audience, the West End community.⁶ This did not go well with the upscale residents of Blackfriars, and soon the teachers who ran the school and their patrons, himself included, found themselves threatened with the loss of the precious little stage that was giving them access to the influential Westminster audience. Although the choristers' school apparently merged in 1584 with the one at Paul's Cathedral, the stage itself may have continued to function on a less public basis for another six years,⁷ making it possible for Burbage's adult company to perform early versions of plays like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* for the West End community, some that (for fairly obvious reasons) they could not have performed before the Queen, at least, not in the versions that come down to us.

When Smith died in 1577, his colleague and close friend, Sir Francis Walsingham, took over as Secretary of State; then, with the death of Lord Chamberlain Sussex in 1583, he took over as patron of the Court stage, which—through Oxford's activities and those of his patrons, actors and musicians—was in the process of developing into the London commercial stage.

Walsingham, who lived just around the corner from Fisher's Folly, and who was under pressure to prepare for all-out war with Spain, saw in Oxford's household of secretaries and musicians the potential for a sort of *sub rosa* propaganda office.⁸ Funding it at first from his own pocket, then persuading the Queen to kick in, he had Oxford providing the newly-formed Royal touring company, the Queen's Men, with plays to perform in the shires, plays that dramatized for the provincial English some notable moments in their history (McMillin). This, it was hoped, would raise national pride to a level that those who still clung to Catholi-

cism would, when the Spanish attacked, choose their nation over their faith. Out of this came early versions of *Henry V*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, and the three Henry VI plays, plus most or all of the plays now assigned to Robert Greene and most of the so-called Shakespeare Apocrypha (those plays obviously written by him but too early for the Stratford dating scheme).

1580s: Francis Bacon and the Birth of the Periodical Press

During his banishment, Oxford took a step towards providing the reading public with some of the tales he had written in the 1560s and '70s to amuse the Court, but it wasn't until he was back at Court in 1583 that he followed through, publishing the pamphlet *Mamillia* as by his copyholder, Robert Greene. Its almost immediate popularity spurred him to publish others, and soon, probably to his surprise, he found himself with an enthusiastic and rapidly growing reading audience. Through the dedications to these early romances he found a convenient way to acknowledge Court figures that he thought deserved recognition, or who could reward the bearer of a complimentary copy with a sizable tip.

In 1578, 18-year-old Francis Bacon had arrived back in England for his father's funeral. Unable to return to Paris for lack of funds (unfortunately for Francis, his father had died before providing him with a living), and with nothing more important to engage his voracious intellectual energies, Bacon hooked up with Oxford, falling quickly into the role of Puck to his Oberon, Ariel to his Prospero.

His Lordship returned the favor by connecting the talented youth with printers who published his poems, anonymously at first, then, with Sir Walter Raleigh's help, as by Edmund Spenser. With the real Spenser far off in the wilds of southern Ireland, and with Sir Walter willing to see to it that he got a stipend for the use of his name, Bacon was encouraged to publish for the public some of the writings he'd been distributing to the Court community via manuscript, among them such divergent works as *The Faerie Queene*, written to entertain the Queen and her ladies, and *Mother Hubbard's Cupboard*, a satire in the vein he'd soon be spiling as Thomas Nashe.

Lacking a paying Court position, Bacon was forced to provide for himself by working as a high level private secretary to Court figures in need of politically sensitive, well-written letters and official documents in both English and Latin. First among his patrons was Secretary of State Walsingham, who, when Oxford refused to write for the Court during his banishment, urged Francis to step in with plays for the boys in a style that came as close as he could manage to the euphuism that the Queen had come to expect and that were directed and staged by Oxford's secretary John Lyly. By the end of the decade there were eight of these, which, like Oxford's Euphues novels, were published under Lyly's name.

1587-88: Marlowe and Martin Rock the Boat

In 1584, 20-year-old Cambridge student Christopher Marlowe began spending time at Fisher's Folly in sessions with Oxford and Bacon aimed at preparing the talented young poet to provide plays for the Queen's Men. These sessions took place for a few weeks each year until his graduation from Cambridge in 1587, at which point, rather than follow up on his mandate to write for the Queen's Men, Marlowe absconded with the fledgling actor Edward Alleyn and the scribe Thomas Kyd to set up at Philip Henslowe's new theater on Bankside where they entertained members of their own class with the dangerously anti-establishment Tamburlaine. Razzed by Oxford (Greene) and Bacon (Nashe) in Greene's *Perimedes and Menaphon*, Marlowe responded by adding a nose-thumbing prologue that referred to the Queen's Men as "jigging mother-wits."

The following year the world of pamphlet-publishing was rocked by the publication of the anonymous "Martin Mar-prelate" anti-clerical satires. The bishops were furious, but the pontifications they published in response only made them look ridiculous. In desperation they enlisted the Folly boys to mount a counterattack. Oxford's lacked fire (probably because he found Martin hilarious), but Bacon, who had been struggling for years to find a genuine voice of his own, saw the light! Adapting Martin's slangy rant to his own purpose, Francis fought fire with fire, lashing out with delirious abandon in defense of his old master from Cambridge days, John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury.⁹

Martin was ultimately silenced by Cecil's hounds, but not until helping Bacon unleash the voice he'd been seeking for so long. In 1589, availing himself of the name of a former sizar from Pembroke College whom he knew from his days at Cambridge, he dropped the awkward pseudo-euphuism of *An Anatomy of Absurdity* to frolic in a long preface to Greene's latest pamphlet, *Menaphon*, in which he took another swipe or two at Tamburlaine. From then on until 1596, when he finally got the kind of respectable Court job that held promise of real advancement, Francis published one work of comic genius after another. Like Greene (in French, *vert*) or Shakespeare, although Nashe was the name of a real person, it was also a pun on his gnashing new style.

1593: Marlowe's Quietus, Sidney's Sonnets, Shakespeare's Name

As the 1580s wore on, the impending threat of attack by Spain brought a level of power to Secretary of State Walsingham that did not sit well with Lord Burghley, who by the Armada showdown had begun to see that brilliant strategist as more of a rival than the humble adjunct who had begun years before as his protégé. With Walsingham's death in early 1590 came the opportunity Burghley had been waiting for. Taking the public side of the Secretary's office on himself, he quietly passed along Walsingham's secret agencies to his son, 27-year-old Robert Cecil.¹⁰

Eager to show the Court in general and his fun-loving cousins in particular that he was a force to be reckoned with, early in 1592 Robert Cecil unleashed a

sting whereby Marlowe could be jailed under suspicion of coining, to be followed no doubt by the usual kangaroo tribunal and execution (Nicholl). That failed, but a new opportunity arose a few months later with the first signs that another siege of the plague was on its way. Centuries of experience had taught the English that after a brief summer appearance the disease would hit with full force the following spring, thus giving Cecil time to create a second and this time flawless sting. Without the slightest hitch or official complaint, Marlowe was caught, trapped, and either executed or transported overseas, the recently hanged body of Martinist printer John Penry possibly providing a substitute for his corpse (Hoffman).

That Oxford had been warned of this in advance seems clear from how, at the first warning of the plague in the summer of 1592, he rid himself of his Robert Greene persona, including in Greene's "deathbed" pamphlet, *Groatsworth of Wit*, a warning to Marlowe that his "atheism" was going to get him in trouble.¹¹ Certainly Bacon was frightened by Marlowe's fate, as is evident from the fact that the book that he had ready to publish, the larky Jack Wilton, was set aside as he rushed into print the lachrymose and most unNashelike *Christ's Teares over Jerusalem*. Months later, having recovered his nerve, he published his masterpiece of English satire, *Piers (Purse) Penniless*, in which he descants with stunning wit on his irksome impecuniosity and the human devils that swarm in poverty's wake.¹²

Following his daughter's death in 1588, Burghley had taken steps to shut down Oxford's operation by allowing his debts to the Court of Wards to be called in, forcing him to rid himself of anything that could be confiscated by the Crown or his other creditors. With Fisher's Folly gone and bankruptcy hanging over him, his Lordship found himself unable to continue to raise cash through credit (as per the story of the grasshopper and the ant in *Groatsworth*); a most unusual situation for a peer of his status. Unable to support his retainers, it seems that at one point he fell so low that he had to turn to one of them for handouts (Nelson 328-9).

Feeling deserted and at a loss, when a young nobleman offered financial support for his new play (*Romeo and Juliet* is dated to this period), Oxford felt a gratitude that blossomed into love. Now in his forties, his wife dead and with no heir to carry on his ancient name, his oldest and dearest friend dead and gone, remorseful over his treatment of his wife and ashamed of his affair with his patron's mistress, Oxford's grateful heart found solace in company with the dashing young peer. In 1590, in hopes of seeing his beloved young patron wed to his daughter, he composed seventeen sonnets for the youth's seventeenth birthday, had them fair-copied (or did so himself in his best italic hand) on vellum and bound in velvet.

The youth's response sent him into raptures of sonnetteering. Using the sonnet form popularized by his uncle, the Poet Earl of Surrey, in verse after verse a strong new voice began to appear. Chasing the wayward youth, chasing this powerful and flexible new voice, he continued to pour his heart into meter, rhyme, and the sonnet form. As always in times of trouble, poetry was his tonic, his escape.

Enter Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke

November 1588 had seen the arrival on the London scene of twenty-seven-year-old Mary Sidney, Philip's younger sister. Ending her two-year period of mourning for her brother, Mary arrived at the Armada victory celebration in full Countess regalia. Having produced the requisite heirs for her husband, the Earl of Pembroke, and without her older brother or their uncle, the Earl of Leicester (who had died in 1588) around to keep her in her place, Mary was determined to live the rest of her life as she pleased, something few women could manage at that time.

Quickly involving herself in writing (anonymously) for the stage, probably for Henslowe, whose theater was a short ferry ride from the Pembroke City residence, she was outraged in 1591 when Francis, determined to get the English Literary Renaissance moving no matter who it flummoxed, published her brother's sonnet cycle, *Astrophil and Stella*, without asking her permission. She quickly saw to it that the book was recalled, edited Philip's poems to suit her notions of what would pass for respectable, and had it republished (minus the Oxford sonnet that had graced the first edition)—the first time in the Elizabethan era that a courtier poet of Philip's standing was published under his own name within a generation of his death. Most important to the ELR (the English Literary Renaissance), it forced Oxford to publish, and in so doing, to surpass everything he'd done up to then.

1591-93: *Astrophil and Stella*, *Venus and Adonis*

The appearance of Sidney's wryly sweet and witty sonnets in quarto created an instant sensation with a reading public that, due to Greene (Oxford) and Nashe (Bacon), had grown by then to sizable proportions. Adored since his death in 1585 as England's martyred Christian warrior, now Sidney was seen by this new audience as the greatest English poet since Chaucer. Peeved at how he'd been blind-sided, first by Francis, then by Mary and—most tormenting!—upstaged again by Sidney, this time from beyond the grave—Oxford, bent on taking back the only crown he gave a damn about, outdid himself. By the end of the Elizabethan era it was clear that *Venus and Adonis* was far and away the most popular work published during that period.

How interesting that it was just at this moment, when his world was under the most serious attack yet, that Oxford found the voice that would eventually spread the English culture to the ends of the earth. The change is evident in his letters, those from the 1590s on showing a much higher level of richness and control (Green>documents> letters).

Bacon responded to Prospero's crisis by publishing mournful ditties: as Nashe to "Slumbering Euphues in his Melancholy Cell at Silexedra" and as Spenser to "Our pleasant Willy" who is "dead of late." He also moved to take on some of Oxford's responsibilities, opening his door to what remained of the disbanded University Wits, continuing their underground secretarial service out of his rooms

at Gray's Inn.¹³ Mary stepped up by creating a new theater company so that his plays could continue to get produced and his actors find paying work.

But with the death of Marlowe in 1593, followed months later by the suspicious death of his young patron, the fifth Earl of Derby, word spread throughout London's theater and publishing world that the good times were over. The University Wits began to disappear; Thomas Watson "died" at the same time as Robert Greene; Thomas Lodge went to France to study medicine; George Peele went to work for the Mayor; and Lyly, whose name graced the immensely popular *Euphues* novels, fell silent, publishing nothing until his death eighteen years later.

Yet, however low Oxford fell, it seems someone or something always came along to rescue him. The Queen arranged a second marriage to an heiress, Elizabeth Trentham, whose brothers were equipped to secure his finances while she arranged for the purchase of a manor in the northern suburbs suitable for a person of his (and now her) rank. And within another year his old friend Lord Hunsdon, vice-Chamberlain under Sussex and Walsingham, stepped in to launch another Crown company.

The Lord Chamberlain's Men

By the spring of 1594, Privy Council patron Hunsdon and his son-in-law, Lord Admiral Charles Howard, were deep in plans to create, not just one but two new companies out of what was left of Marlowe and Derby's old one with the addition of James Burbage's gifted son, the actor Richard Burbage. This new company would have the advantage of Oxford's playbook and the northern theaters, while the one patronized by Howard would have some of his lesser plays, Henslowe's theater on Bankside, and the popular Edward Alleyn as lead actor. Oxford would be free once again to write for the influential gentlemen of the Inns of Court in Westminster, who would soon be entertained in style at the grand new theater planned by Burbage and Hunsdon for the old Parliament Chamber at Blackfriars.

But alas, this was not to be, for Robert Cecil hated Oxford and the Stage he had created, and in July of 1596, while his arch-rival the Earl of Essex was out of the country, Cecil was finally advanced by the Queen to a level of power where he could strike at will without fear of consequence.

The Play's the Thing!

Having acquired the wide-ranging powers of the Secretary of State, Cecil was not about to allow his brother-in-law's acting company access to the West End audience, not when one of the Queen's rare parliaments was on the verge of congregating the most influential men in England. As the winter holiday season approached and Burbage prepared the Company's new theater to entertain them with an updated version of *Merchant of Venice*, Cecil saw to it that the Privy Council got a petition signed by the residents of the Liberty of Blackfriars demanding that their theater not be allowed to open. This, plus the death in July

of their patron Hunsdon (two weeks after Cecil became Secretary of State), plus the death of Burbage six months later, saw the Lord Chamberlain's Men left (quite literally) out in the bitter winter cold.

With the help of Ben Jonson and Mary's company, Francis had fought back in July of 1597 with a play produced at the new Swan Theater on Bankside. The play itself is no longer extant (of course), but Cecil's response suggests that it dealt roughly with him, his recent appointment as Secretary of State having tipped the balance of power on the Council so heavily towards his family that many members of the Court community who might otherwise have shrugged became alarmed. Concerned for his reputation with the Parliament due to convene in October, Cecil retaliated by closing all the theaters in London, sending all the actors, including the Lord Chamberlain's Men, out to scavenge as best they could in the provinces.

That was it! Their patron and manager dead, both their theaters closed, their playwright bankrupt, the Company struck back with the only weapon left to them—a play! Arriving back in London sometime in September, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, probably with Bacon's help, published a revised version of *Richard III* in which comparisons between the wicked protagonist and Robert Cecil were so obvious that, as history records, his reputation was permanently damaged (Aune, Hotine, Croft). It was his portrayal as Richard III that launched Richard Burbage's reputation as a great actor.

It seems that Cecil was stuck. Any further moves made openly against the popular Company would only confirm their comparison of him to the wicked and ambitious Plantagenet. Blasted by this devastating portrait that sunk more deeply into the public psyche every time a new edition of the play was published,¹⁴ the play may have had a good deal to do with the path Cecil took once Essex and his followers were eliminated and the Queen was gone. Forced to shrug off Richard III as a foolish toy that didn't concern him, he had to be satisfied with a stalemate that while it kept the Blackfriars theater off limits to the Company until Oxford's death, allowed the devastating portrait to be published again and again in quarto, every time the evil little Earl of Salisbury got another title, enclosed more common lands, or destroyed another former ally.

1598: The Cover-up is Launched

The uproar caused by the publication and production of *Richard III* in 1597 intensified the demand by the scribbling rascality of the West End to know the author's identity, which in turn forced the Lord Chamberlain's Men to put a name on the second edition which they published almost immediately. No better option having appeared,¹⁵ they used the same name that Oxford had used four years earlier when he published *Venus and Adonis*, which he had gotten through the man who printed it, Richard Field. That this cost the Lord Chamberlain's Men, or their patrons, a tidy sum seems clear from the fact that it was at this time that Field's formerly

impecunious neighbor with the punnable name was suddenly able to afford one of the biggest houses in his hometown and to purchase the family crest that his dad had tried and failed to get twenty years earlier.

1604: Oxford Escapes to the Forest

The troubles launched by the Cecils' takeover of Walsingham's office, plus the suspicious deaths of so many of his literary and theatrical colleagues, plus perhaps his own weakening health, caused Oxford to consider seriously how he might escape from a Court that was becoming ever more unrewarding and emotionally toxic. Fifteen-ninety three had found him once again petitioning the Queen to return to him his inherited rights to the stewardship of the Forest of Waltham and the keepership of Havering Palace. Doubtless aware of her favorite playwright's urge to escape, Elizabeth kept stalling. Finally, following her death in 1603, Mary's sons, now the third Earl of Pembroke and his younger brother, the Earl of Montgomery, persuaded the new King to grant the old Poet his request. Soon after receiving word of the King's grant, Oxford invited his friends and patrons to a private Midsummer's Eve celebration to be held in the Forest the night of June 23rd.¹⁶

The following day, June 24 1604, word went out that the Earl of Oxford was dead. With no reason to disbelieve it, Cecil had his agents arrest the Earl of Southampton on the usual charge of involvement in plots to kill the King, keeping him in confinement just long enough to search his rooms for Oxford's papers (surely by this time safely in Pembroke's keeping). Cecil soon learned that Oxford wasn't really dead, but by then there was nothing he could do but go along with a fabrication that was countenanced by the King.

Not long after, when it came out that Oxford's youngest daughter Susan was affianced to Pembroke's brother, Cecil, as Susan's guardian, resisted, but again was overridden by the King who liked nothing better than a wedding that promised to bring opposing factions together.¹⁷ Oxford spent the rest of 1604 revising eight of his plays for the wedding that took place that Christmas, four of them attributed by a Court scribe to "Shaxberd."

1609: The Song is Ended, but the Melody Lingers on

Oxford continued to live for another four years, polishing and revising his favorites for his company, now known as the King's Men, among them *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. That he was dead by 1609 seems evident from the works published that year, among them *Pericles* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, this last produced by Bacon, whose fascination with anagrams suggests he was the creator of the strangely-worded dedication in which the name of Shakespeare's Fair Youth, Henry Wriothesley, (Earl of Southampton) is spelled out through a particular arrangement of the printer's type (Rollett). Paid

for and authorized by the Earl of Pembroke—William Herbert was honored in the tradition of such publications by being named as dedicatee: “Mr. W.H.”

With the author no longer around to provide new plays, the Company, now known as the King’s Men, turned some of his early pastorals over to Mary Sidney and John Fletcher to revise for Jacobean audiences, weary of the cynical violence of the plays being produced then and nostalgic for the “innocent” days of Elizabeth’s youth. An uneasy alliance was formed among those who agreed that it was important to publish his collected works in a format that would guarantee their survival. That this took a long time is understandable considering how controversial were some of the plays during Oxford’s lifetime, the concerns of his daughters who had their Cecil relatives to consider, friends of Oxford’s who may have held the best originals and who needed coaxing or payment, and booksellers who held the rights to some of the plays.

By the time the book was finally published fourteen years later, the models for Shakespeare’s worst villains, Henry Howard and Robert Cecil, were both dead as was his proxy, William of Stratford. William’s wife, on the other hand, was alive until two months before the book was available for purchase, suggesting that the Pembrokes may have been waiting until there was no longer any concern that, with her husband gone, Anne Hathaway might not have been so careful of their secret as her husband had been. It must have been at about this same time that the monument to John Shakspeare in Trinity Church acquired the plaque explaining—in the kind of convoluted verse that was Ben Jonson’s forte—that the subject was known for his wit.

However, neither this nor Jonson’s equally evasive wording in his dedicatory *Ode* to the 1623 Folio succeeded in quashing the authorship inquiry. It seems that the same concerns that dictated Jonson’s *Ode* continued to dictate the front material in both the 1633 and 1640 editions of his works, in which poets reiterated his claim that room had *not* been made for Shakespeare in Poet’s Corner! The replacement of the bust of William’s father by a more writerly figure during which the woolsack was transformed into a pillow and a pen (Whalen) suggests that the paternal bust had continued to foster questioning. Thus was initiated the series of renovations that has led to the present figure with, as Mark Twain put it, a face like “a bladder.”

Within the fairly small community of art-lovers and aristocrats to which Oxford and his patrons belonged, his authorship must have been a closely held secret for two or three generations. Then, as those who knew the truth died, and their friends and children died, certainty faded to rumor until the nineteenth century, when a passion for delving into primary causes (Darwin, Marx, Freud) swept the culture at the same time that a renewed interest in his works turned Shakespeare into a cultural icon.

Yet, if we follow the chain of connections over the years from poet to poet and patron to patron, it seems possible, even likely, that the writers, patrons, and

theatrical entrepreneurs who were responsible for erecting the statue in Poet's Corner in 1741 knew the truth. But this was more than a century before the upsurge of interest in Shakespeare turned his authorship into something that would interest more than a handful of poets and their patrons.

Nineteenth Century to the Present

With Oxford almost totally lost to history, enthusiasts turned first to Francis, whose writing skills, interests and education qualified him in some of the more important ways. If the first anti-Stratfordians were wrong that Bacon was Shakespeare, their efforts to prove that he was launched the true beginning of Authorship Studies, as they did prove, at least to the intelligent and fair-minded, how impossible it was that William of Stratford, with no education, no presence at Court, no legal training and no means of traveling to Italy, could have written the works of the great Shakespeare. Among other achievements they located the missing Shakespeare juvenilia in the works of Robert Greene, Thomas Watson and others, and made the connection between Bacon and the works of Spenser and Thomas Nashe. Yet still the central factor, the Earl of Oxford, continued to elude them.

This was finally supplied in the years following World War I when a British schoolteacher realized that someone so hidden from history must have been almost as hidden during his own time. By creating a list of eighteen characteristics that the Bard reveals about himself, by cleverly seeking for him in poetry anthologies, and by sticking to it until he finally managed to get his theory published, J.T. Looney gave us the Earl of Oxford. But so thoroughly had the Cecils stripped the record of anything connecting Oxford with the English Literary Renaissance,¹⁸ that he still gets no credit for the birth of the London commercial stage and press, essentially the British Fourth Estate.

Thus arrived the situation as it remains today. Because historians of the sort who control online information for sites like Wikipedia continue to depend solely on what records the Cecils chose to leave to posterity, they continue to see Oxford as the kind of *louche* ne'er-do-well the Cecils detested and did their best to destroy. This continues to stick us with William, or Bacon, or Marlowe, or Mary, or (most recently) Edmund Campion, or almost anyone but the man who actually wrote the Shakespeare canon.

But refusing to deal with the facts about Oxford is not really the root cause of our problem, which is the utter refusal on the part of the English to see the British Crown during the latter years of Elizabeth's reign as anything but the coldly calculating Stalinist regime that it became once the Cecils took complete control of the records. Until the historians are willing to accept this as a reality, we'll continue to get nowhere with Oxford, for they will simply continue to ask why on earth should he, or Bacon, or Mary, any of the other writers, wish to hide their identities?

Notes

¹ There should be no more argument about this. Oxford has far and away the best credentials in every respect, and more continue to get added every year. The real Authorship Question now is: why is it taking the Shakespeare establishment so long to get on board? But that question has a history almost as long as the Authorship Question itself!

² See an alphabetized list of these books online at <http://politicworm.files.wordpress.com/2009/10/hughes-sir-thomas-smiths-1566-library-list1.pdf> (or by typing Smith's Library into google).

³ This is conjecture, as are most attributions of these early works. The play itself is no longer extant, but when it was finally published, long after it was revised by Fletcher in the second decade of the seventeenth century, the attribution was shared with Shakespeare, and word studies have agreed that at least parts of it are authentic.

⁴ Also conjectures, but based on a good deal of secondary evidence.

⁵ 1576-77: "Tooley" ("Cicero"), by the Ld Admiral's Men; Smith owned the major works by Cicero (in Latin); "Error" (Comedy of Errors) by Paul's Boys; based on a play by Plautus; Smith had Plautus in his library; "Mutius Scaevola" (A hero from Roman history) by the combined Children's companies; Smith's library was filled with Roman histories; "Cynocephali" ("Dog-headed Men": legendary monsters described in a book by St. Augustine; Smith had his complete works); "Solitarie Knight" (Timon of Athens) by the Ld Admiral's Men, based on Plutarch, owned by Smith in Greek and French; and "Titus and Gissipus" (from Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Elyot; source for Two Gentlemen of Verona) by Paul's Boys (Chambers 93); Smith owned Boccaccio (in Italian).

⁶ Again, conjecture; again, based on a good deal of convincing secondary evidence found in the history of surrounding events and the plots of these plays.

⁷ Despite the lack of documentation, that the Blackfriars stage continued is based on the fact that its patron, Lord Hunsdon, continued to hold its leases until 1590 (Smith 156); that as the Queen's Lord Chamberlain he was one of the most senior and influential members of the Privy Council; and finally that no other theater arose during that six-year period to take over the function of engaging the West End audience. □

⁸ Again, conjecture; etc.; see www.politicworm.com.

⁹ Oxford published several things as by "Pasquil Cavaliero"; Bacon published *Pappe* with a Hatchet and *An Almond for a Parrat* as by "Cuthbert Curry-knave." □

¹⁰ Although historians follow the red herring that Burghley dismissed Walsingham's spies or that they signed on with Essex, what facts there are suggest otherwise. □

¹¹ Marlowe had violated one of the major rubrics adhered to by Elizabethan playwrights, all characters who commit the sin of rebellion against authority (the "Lord's anointed") must come to a bad end. That Tamburlaine not only succeeded in overthrowing the emperor, but lived on to die more or less peacefully in a sequel, was, at least to the Crown, evidence of criminal "atheism."

¹² Although his Victorian biographers tend to ignore it, it seems that Bacon spent time in jail for debt, however briefly.

¹³ In a 1595 note to his brother, Francis wrote: "I have here an idle pen or two... thinking to have got some money this term, I pray send me somewhat else for them to write... (Lambeth Palace MS 650.28).

¹⁴ An unusual number of editions of *Richard III* was published in quarto, eight altogether, five while Cecil was still alive.

¹⁵ Although the Lord Chamberlain's Men had signed on William of Stratford during the holiday season of 1594-95 (PRO Exchequer), they continued to publish the plays anonymously until the uproar over Richard III finally forced them to put his name on the second edition, and on further editions of some of the other plays that until that point had all been published anonymously.

¹⁶ Another conjecture, again based on proxy data.

¹⁷ Despite, or perhaps because of, the death of their leader, the Essex faction was still strong at James's Court, strong and angry and in the mood for revenge. As a representative of that group, Montgomery's marriage to a Cecil was seen as an effort to ease tensions.

¹⁸ By the time Robert Cecil died in 1612, he and his father had accumulated at Hatfield House most of the documentation that historians would need over the coming centuries to write the history of the Elizabethan and early Jacobean eras. (Apparently it never strikes the historians as odd that there was nothing touching on the creation of the British Media, the Stage or the Press.) Further, their offices as Secretaries of State gave them the privilege of access to any set of official records they chose to examine, and unlimited control over what got saved for posterity. Little more than a few personal letters managed to escape their sweep, plus the communications by the various continental ambassadors with their friends and superiors in their home countries. They still own all the Essex papers, acquired following the execution of the third Earl. No such situation could occur today, given our unlimited means of reproduction and storage of documents.

Works Cited

Understanding that the fundamentals of this theory have been provided by pioneer authorship scholars J.T. Looney, Bernard Ward, George Greenwood, Edward Harman, Alfred Dodd, Ruth Miller, Charleton Ogburn, A.D. Wraight, Charles Nicholl, and Margaret Hannay plus hundreds of works by orthodox historians of the period, the following citations are for only the most controversial points in this overview. Support for the more radical assumptions can be found on my blog: www.politicworm.com.

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