

Analyzing the Chiljan Portrait

by Elisabeth Waugaman

One-third of portraits painted during the Tudor era remain unidentified because they do not offer any identifiers, such as name, crest, text, or identifiable location. Even small details, however, can provide important clues for identification. As Chriswell explains in “How to Read a Renaissance Portrait,” there is an art to understanding a Renaissance portrait.¹ We need to consider the patron, background clues, hidden geometries, the iconography, and carefully observe the clothes worn by the sitter because Elizabethans spoke through allegory and symbolism due to severe government repression, as well as adherence to medieval and Neoplatonic philosophy. Thus, visual details in period portraits are important because they reveal stories.

In *The Elizabethan Image*, Roy Strong emphasizes, “The key to the arts in England is ambiguity”² (17). Elizabethans looked “with eyes that essentially remained medieval,” (17), which means that everything has multiple levels of meaning, as Dante explains in his *Convivio*. Because of the religious and political schisms of the period, Elizabethans looked to the Middle Ages to create “a new secular iconography” consisting of an infinite variety of symbols from the complexity of “coats of arms, emblems, impressa, mottoes, inscriptions, stretching on to include a flower tucked in a ruff” (17). In short, visual details convey meaning on multiple levels.



Figure 1: *Edward de Vere, 1581, Chiljan portrait.*



Figure 2: *Katherine de Vere, Countess of Warwick, 1567.*

Unlike his half-sister's painting, Edward de Vere's portrait (figure 1) provides no instant identification of the sitter—no inscription, name, or coat of arms. Katherine Chiljan, who purchased the painting believing it to be a portrait of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, provides detailed information regarding its provenance. In addition to the striking physical resemblance between Oxford and his half-sister Katherine Vere, Lady Windsor—24 years old when her portrait (figure 2) was executed in 1567—there is the Chiljan painting's history. "The portrait's provenance can be traced to Oxford's granddaughter, Anne Stanley, Countess of Ancram. The estate of her son, the 2nd Earl of Ancram, went to his nephew, the first Marquess of Lothian; Lothian's sister married into the Brodie family, and one of her descendants married in the Sinclair family, later the Lords Thurso, from whom the portrait was purchased." Equally important is the fact that a painting of Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, was also found in the same collection³ The painting is on wood panel and measures 36 5/8 inches by 28 5/8 inches. Unfortunately, Christie's did not perform dendrochronology, ultraviolet, or X-ray studies on the painting prior to its sale, but described it being in the style of "the English school."

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Faces and Hats

In this paper, we shall examine Oxford's portrait in detail—the colors, fabrics, jewelry, rapier, pose, and background—and compare it to other contemporary paintings, including other portraits of Oxford.

Chiljan discovered that the hat which Oxford wears matches the description of a hat Queen Elizabeth gave Oxford in 1581, as described in the logbook of *The Wardrobe of Robes* as “black taffeta,” “embroidered with pearl and gold”⁴ (Chiljan 2). According to Elizabeth's sumptuary laws, only the nobility could wear gold, pearls, and silk from which taffeta is made. Chiljan observes that the 1581 date fits with Christie's dating of the portrait as circa 1580; and that the portrait may have commemorated the Queen's gift, which occurred shortly after Oxford's release from the Tower of London in June 1581 (Nelson 269). Portraits of Christopher Hatton and Robert Dudley depict them wearing black feathered velvet hats like this, a fashion inspired by the French court (Kelly and Schwabe 64–5). King Henry III of France and François, Duke of Alençon, also wear black bejeweled and feathered velvet caps such as this in their portraits.

Two portraits of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, depict him outfitted in fiery orange-red (figure 3A), which mirrors his coat-of-arms, as does his white attire (figure 3B), which symbolizes his emblem of the white bear. In both portraits he wears a hat similar to Oxford's. The colors Dudley wears make him a personification of his heraldry; that is, his noble identity. Indeed, in *Hamlet*, Polonius tells Laertes, “the apparel oft proclaims the man” (*Hamlet*, I.iii.158). Thus, the sitter's apparel will tell us what it “proclaims.” While



Figure 3: (A) Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester (red doublet), circa 1575; (B) Robert Dudley, (white doublet), circa 1564.

examining the Chiljan portrait, it is important to remember the colors have been darkened by old varnish except for the face, which has been cleaned. However, cleaning only the face gives the visage a discordant intensity compared to the rest of the painting.

Although the reproduction available on the internet has an overall orange tint not found in the original painting, Oxford's portrait clearly depicts him with reddish brown hair, which suggests red hair in his earlier years. Red hair often darkens to brown, auburn, or even black with age.⁵ His fair complexion, ruddy cheeks, and auburn hair would have been dramatic above the large expanse of his bright white collar, now dimmed and yellowed by old varnish.

The Iconography of Attire

The richness and detailing of the costume in the Chiljan portrait are astonishing. The sitter wears a large collar, which would be brilliant white without the discoloration of the varnish. His collar, then called a French ruff, is unusual not only for its large size but because it is edged with lace. Ruffs, which began modestly, continued to increase in size, thanks to advancements in the production of starch. They reached their maximum size in the 1580s; Lord Burghley even complained of the fad: "is it not a very lamentable thing that we should bestow that upon starch to the setting forth of vanity and pride which would staunch the hunger of many that starve in the streets for want of bread?"⁶ In 1583, Phillip Stubbs attacked the wearing of these large ruffs in *The Anatomie of Abuses*. Queen Elizabeth eventually regulated the size of ruffs and the length of rapiers, with officers stationed at London's gates to cut ruffs and break rapiers that exceeded the regulations.

A ruff as large as the one Oxford wears required a *supportasse*, that is, a wire frame, and the ruff had to be frequently washed and re-starched (Bowman 31). Relatively few noblemen are depicted wearing these large ruffs—not even Robert Dudley. French ruffs, also called cartwheel ruffs, had 200 or more figure-eight folds extending six inches beyond the neck, with a diameter of 18 inches, including the neck. This required a minimum of eight yards of lace, which cost a small fortune (Bowman 32). Catherine de' Medici even possessed an especially long spoon so she could drink soup without damaging the ruff.⁷ It is with good reason that we do not see more French ruffs in portraits of English noblemen, as they were extremely expensive to buy and maintain. Wearing them with grace and ease was not easily achieved.

Puritans referred to these large ruffs as cartwheel or millstone ruffs because of their size. The English referred to them as "French ruffs," but the French called them "the English horror" (Bowman 33). Imagining de Vere's brilliant white ruff, we can understand why one Frenchman referred to them as "St. John's head on a plate" (Kelly and Schwabe 45). Hence they were

also referred to as “the head on the platter” ruff. As a result, French ruffs required short hair and trimmed facial hair as seen in Oxford’s portrait.

Besides de Vere, who else in the period wore a large French ruff with lace edging? Below, we see that the earliest English portrait depicting a French ruff appears to be of Amias Paulet (figure 4A), the English ambassador to France, painted by Nicholas Hillard in France, according to the 1577–78 dating. Hillard also painted Francis, Duke of Alençon (figure 4B), in miniatures in a large French ruff in 1576 and again in 1582 for Queen Elizabeth’s prayer book; as well as the Queen (1580s, figure 4C). Like Queen Elizabeth, Edmund Spenser (1590s, figure 4D) wears a French ruff tinted blue with indigo to make the face appear whiter, yet another flourish. Oxford appears



Figure 4: (A) Sir Amias Paulet, c. 1578; (B) François Hercule Duc d'Anjou and Alençon; (C) Elizabeth I, c. 1585–90; (D) Edmund Spenser, c. 1590.

among the court's elites with his French ruff at the very start of the craze in England. Considering the dating, Oxford may have introduced it to the English court. Understandably, the French ruff was a relatively short-lived fad and was replaced by smaller ruffs by the 1590s.⁸

After Oxford's French ruff, the viewer's eye is drawn to his doublet (jacket), which is a brilliant white and green underneath the old varnish. Peascod doublets padded with "bombast" (stuffing) were a popular fashion of Spanish origin that mirrored the shape of armor. Mariah Hale, costume designer for the Folger Shakespeare Library, identified the white fabric of the doublet as "a braid called *passementerie*" from the French.⁹ *Passementerie* was an active industry in England at the time. Made by "silk women" who wound fine threads around something sturdier to create a cord, then braided into a decorative trim, it was probably all one piece. "The loops on the edges were both decorative and indicative of the manner of manufacture—i.e., the loops are where the pins were placed to hold the braid still while working. The brocade may have been made of silk mixed with metallic threads, possibly silver metallic trim. The buttons appear to be made by the same silk woman out of the same materials, which was not uncommon."¹⁰ Creating *passementerie* required enormous skill and a long apprenticeship.

The white of Oxford's attire echoes the white mullet (star, figure 5) of his coat of arms, which symbolizes the apparition of a star reflected on Aubrey de Vere's banner at the siege of Antioch during the First Crusade.¹¹ (On 14 June 1098, a star—that is, a meteorite—appeared to fall on the Muslim camp, which was seen as a sign of divine intervention.)

De Vere, whose French origins date back to the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, wears a fabric with French origins and a French name yet made in England—a mirror of his own heritage. The herringbone design of Oxford's *passementerie* is significant because it is an ancient pattern associated with Rome and its brick roads, laid in a herringbone pattern so that they could shift without



becoming unaligned. The design regained popularity during the Renaissance, especially in Italy, which helped make it popular again throughout Europe, not only in architectural design but in attire.¹² The *passementerie* and its herringbone design allude not only to French origins but also to a love of the ancient world.

Under the *passementerie* is a green fabric. Spoken in French, the name “Vere” sounds like “vert,” the French word for green. Hale identified the green fabric as either “figured, cut, or embroidered velvet, which was made of silk at this time and was therefore a very expensive fabric.”¹³ The green fabric, Oxford’s



Figure 6: Oxford’s white-and-green doublet.

nature as symbolized by his name, lies beneath the braid—the outward show—of his identity. From a distance the green velvet appears deceptively simple (figure 6, for full color, see the cover). However, a close look reveals that it has a complex design of dots and lines set at an angle, which creates the illusion of an upward and outward movement, as if the green strips are organic, providing a totally contrasting sensation to the staid parallels of the braid. Viewing the parallel braids and the slantwise velvet thus creates a sensation of dramatic tension.

Close examination of the green velvet strips reveals they are placed at an angle which forms a series of “V’s.” Vespasiano Gonzaga, the founder of Sabbioneta, is portrayed wearing a vest designed with “V” strips exactly like Oxford’s¹⁴—and likewise, Cosimo de’ Medici. The style is Italian in origin. By itself this is a strong indication that the sitter was knowledgeable about Italian style and had input into the design of his costume. From a distance, the viewer would only see parallel bands of white-and-green in the jacket. The doublet would appear deceptively simple: the “V” design, a symbol of de Vere’s identity, is almost totally hidden by the white *passementerie* braid. White, by the way, was also one of the Queen’s colors.

Oxford’s doublet—with its white horizontal stripes and underlying green “V” pattern—is very unusual. Noblemen are portrayed wearing one or the other design, but not both simultaneously. English noblemen’s doublets are

usually depicted with vertical stripes or horizontal stripes, all one color or with more subtle horizontal pairings of beige and white, silver and brown, etc., as we see in portraits of Robert Dudley in horizontal white stripes and Christopher Hatton in horizontal tan and vertical white stripes (figure 7).¹⁵ Oxford's brightly colored stripes, dimmed by the discolored varnish, accompanied by orange tawny sleeves, create vivid color contrasts which are more typical of tournament attire, livery, and Fool's attire.

In *To Clothe a Fool: A Study of the Apparel Appropriate for the European Court Fool 1300–1700*, Virginia Lee Fletcher provides examples of Fools attired with bi-color horizontal lines (Fletcher 24, 64). Brighella, one of the *Commedia dell'Arte* characters, could be identified by his white costume with green stripes, a cap, and sword. Brighella is known for his intelligence, quick temper, scheming, and mistrust of women (figure 8). He is witty, fond of wordplay, and a musician¹⁶—all traits that describe the Earl of Oxford. Moreover, Oxford travelled throughout northern Italy for nine months during 1575–76, where he had the opportunity to experience *Commedia dell'Arte* performances first-hand. It also happens that *Commedia dell'Arte* influences are incorporated throughout Shakespeare's plays, such as *Love's Labor's Lost*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night* and *Merchant of Venice*. In all, ten of Shakespeare's plays are set in Italy.

Brighella has been described as “The Slave of the Master (Mistress) and the Master of the Slaves”—a description suitable to Oxford, who publicly declared himself at a tournament to be the Queen's servant as “the Knight of the Sunne” and was the master (patron) of numerous writers and two theater troupes. Fletcher also includes an illustration



Figure 7: Christopher Hatton, c. 1589.



of an Elizabethan Fool attired with a cap from which a bell dances mid-forehead (79, figure 133), recalling Oxford's mid-forehead lock of hair.

The bottom of Oxford's doublet has a green trim that emphasizes the green bands across his chest and highlights the *V* shape at the base of the doublet. A contrasting trim at the edge of a doublet is unusual. To me, this green trim is suggestive of leaves because leaf imagery is introduced right below it with a repetitive pattern of overlapping lace leaves. These lace leaves appear to extend below Oxford's hand and indicate that they were not merely a border, but decorated his trunk-hose (breeches), thus emphasizing the importance of the leaf design. As Plomer notes in *English Printing Ornaments*, the leaf was "used by "architects...lace workers...and printers...and it became a stock ornament in every printing office" (6). "It was only during the reign of Queen Elizabeth that printing ornaments like this (leafy designs) developed, compared to the paucity of English book ornamentation previously, especially when compared to books printed on the continent" (Plomer 18). Due to the continental influence this ornate style of book ornamentation became highly popular in England in the 1570s and 1580s (Plomer 83). Thus, we see another link in the design of Oxford's clothing to continental and classical influences—here to printing and books, to literature and learning, themes important to "the Knight of the Sunne."

Comparing this photograph of *Laural nobilis* (figure 9) and the leaves at the bottom of Oxford's doublet, one immediately sees that the shape of the lace leaves exactly reflects the shape of the laurel leaves in the photograph. The Greeks and Romans used *Laural nobilis* leaves to make crowns for winners of sports and literary competitions since the tree is an evergreen, it is common in Mediterranean countries, and the leaves dry out but retain their shape and stiffness.¹⁷



In ancient mythology, Daphne is turned into a laurel bay tree so that she can escape Apollo's advances. The laurel/bay tree is, therefore, the perfect mage for the "virgin" Queen Elizabeth. Apollo claimed the tree as his own just as Oxford does as "the Knight of the Sunne"—the sun being a symbol for Apollo. For those who know the story of the laurel, Apollo and Daphne, Oxford is comparing himself here to Apollo. A reference to the laurel tree refers not only to Oxford's literary talents but also to his literary patronage—his employment of John Lyly, Anthony Munday, and Thomas Churchyard—because laurel crowns made from Apollo's tree were awarded to the winners of literary competitions.

Turning to the sleeve worn by the sitter, Hale believes it “could well be silk taffeta, what is now called iridescent taffeta, which used to be called shot taffeta. The slashings on the sleeve would have then been cut and left raw.”¹⁸ Despite the darkened colors, a visual description of the fabric as a “golden color,”¹⁹ suggests that Oxford’s shirt and the color of his feather (described as “citrine”)²⁰ mirror his heraldic color, just as we see in the portraits of Dudley.

The golden-orange color of Oxford’s sleeve and the fabric on the viewer’s left side suggest “the orange-tawny” color associated with the de Vere livery for centuries. John de Vere’s livery colors are described as orange or orange tawny.²¹ “Tawny” derives from the French “tanné,” referring to tanned leather, which takes on a golden hue.²² According to *A Display of Heraldry* (1724), tawny was originally associated with the French (III, 10). Another interesting association of orange-tawny is with the theater: “Orange-Tawny—1522: [is] often worn in plays,” which is not surprising given the Oxford family’s multi-generational patronage of players.²³ Moreover, in one of Oxford’s signed poems, “Forsaken Man,” he associates his livery color of “tawny” with loss and mourning.²⁴ Oxford was thus aware of the broad spectrum of tawny from subdued to bright—a complex color with a broad spectrum—and used it to convey his emotions.

Dorothea Dickerman sees correlations between the Chiljan portrait and “The Knight of the Sunne,” the identity that Oxford assumed for the joust at Whitehall Palace Tiltyard on January 21, 1581. Dickerman notes that the golden orange taffeta of Oxford’s sleeves calls to mind Oxford’s “orange tawny tent;” that the silver trim of his brocade recalls the silver trim on the tent, and that the leaves at the bottom of his doublet mirror the image of “The Knight of the Tree of the Sunne.” Dickerman also notes that the shape of the lace leaves matches the shape of the “*Laural nobilis*.”²⁵ The bay tree is, indeed, *laura nobilis*.

What of the cloak draped around the sitter? According to Hale, the cloak “could be wool or velvet with braided trim possibly gold or silver.”²⁶ By law, velvet could only be worn by the nobility. In terms of political symbolism, the color black was associated with nobility, power, and authority. Portraits of the French Valois kings, Henry II, Francis II, and Charles IX wearing black cloaks with similar trim suggest a French influence in the style of Oxford’s



Figure 10: Savoldo portrait, showing the drape of a cloak similar to Oxford’s.

cloak. Another artistic parallel is “The Portrait of a Knight” (1525, figure 10) by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo, in which we see the knight seated and wrapped in a golden cloth—a symbol of his wealth and power.

Underneath Oxford’s arm, we see a gilded Italianate rapier encrusted with black gemstones, which were thought to protect the wielder of the sword. Typically, rapiers from the period are made of steel, sometimes ornamented with gilt. Oxford’s gilded rapier encrusted with gems is thus highly unusual—a stunningly beautiful piece of art.

What Do the Rings Convey?

Examining the sitter’s hand, we can clearly see that he possesses long fingers. Charles W. Barrell comments on Oxford’s long fingers and his long thumb in the Gheeraerts (white attire) and Ashbourne (black attire, book, and skull) portraits, using their unusual length as one of the criteria for identifying the Ashbourne portrait as the 17th Earl of Oxford (6). In the Chiljan portrait, we see the same elegant hand, long fingers, and thumb highlighted by the stark contrast with the black cape. We also see de Vere is wearing three rings—two on the little finger and one on the middle phalange of the index finger. The two rings on the little finger are possibly gimmel rings, from the Latin *gemellus* (twin). Gimmel rings were popular in the 16th Century and consisted of hoops linked together to form one ring. These rings were “most often associated with love and marriage.”²⁷ Another possibility is that one of the rings is a “guard ring”—a ring usually worn to safeguard a larger ring.

It is also possible that one or both are signet rings. Signet rings were used to seal and authenticate documents (Awais-Dean 225). Chiljan has identified the ring at the bottom of his little finger as a signet ring (Chiljan 1997, 18). The second ring also appears to have a stamped design.

In the Gheeraerts portrait (figure 11), Oxford is depicted again with a ring on the middle phalange. This ring, actually two upon close examination, may be the same double ring portrayed on his little finger in the Chiljan portrait.²⁸ Wearing two rings on the little finger and one on a middle phalange is unusual for an



Figure 11: Edward de Vere, 1590, the Gheeraerts portrait.

Elizabethan nobleman. If we review full-length iconic portraits of Henry VIII, we see that he is wearing two rings on each little finger and one on his index finger—but on both hands. In her coronation portrait, Queen Elizabeth wears what appears to be two rings on both index fingers and one little finger.

Surprisingly, Elizabethan lords were not often depicted wearing rings in their formal portraits, perhaps because the Italian ambassador Sebastian Giustinian observed that Henry VIII covered his fingers with rings, a practice the Italians considered to be in bad taste. This may help explain why Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth, who were both fond of wearing many rings, do not do so in their formal portraits. Henry limits himself to four (two on the thumb and two on the index) on each hand. Except for an early portrait, Queen Elizabeth has one or two, but often not even one. By not wearing rings, Queen Elizabeth is following formal Tudor male rather than female ring-wearing custom. In formal portraits, her noblemen often do not wear any. Occasionally we see a ring on the little finger or a signet ring on the index finger.

A painting of Lord Burghley, Sir Francis Walsingham, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Lord Hunsdon playing cards in an informal setting depicts all of them wearing rings on their index and little fingers.²⁹ In their formal portraits, however, all of them wear either no rings or a single ring on the little finger. In the Gheeraerts portrait, Oxford is once again portrayed wearing a ring on the middle phalange.

Because Oxford has himself portrayed twice with a ring on his middle phalange, the placement must have import. Chiljan observes that Henry VII wore rings on his middle phalange (1997, 18, figure 12). If we go back further in history, we find a portrait of Henry V wearing a ring on the middle phalange.³⁰ There are two portraits of Henry VI wearing a ring on the middle phalange.³¹ Henry VII is portrayed wearing two rings on one finger with one worn on the middle phalange.³² Another portrait shows him, again, wearing a ring on the middle phalange.³³ In these portraits, Henry VII holds a red rose just as, in his later portrait, Oxford holds a wild boar, his heraldic symbol. By wearing a ring on



Figure 12: Henry VII, showing rings on fingers.

his middle phalange like the Lancastrian kings Henry V, Henry VI and Henry VII in a manner not seen in any other Elizabethan lord's portrait, Oxford reveals his family's role in establishing the Tudor lineage to anyone who knew this history. John de Vere, 13th Earl of Oxford, helped secure the throne for Henry VII. To honor that service with a highly symbolic gesture, Henry selected John de Vere to crown him King. The rose which Oxford wears behind his ear also reflects the red Lancastrian rose.

The Lancastrian kings and Henry VIII, as a youth (figure 13), were all depicted wearing rings on the middle phalange, as does Oxford. I have found no other images of Tudor noblemen from this period wearing rings in this manner.



Figure 13: Henry VIII as a youth, c. 1509.

Fabrics and Curtains

A full fabric background behind an Elizabethan nobleman is unusual. Occasionally one finds a curtain in one segment of a portrait or a partially opened curtain in a room. Fabric backgrounds were usually placed behind kings, popes and ministers such as Thomas Cromwell. As Hollander explains, basic backgrounds in portraits were flat with no wrinkles or folds until the 16th Century (Hollander 43).

Hans Holbein the Younger painted luminous green curtains, neatly folded behind his subjects in his portraits of Ambassadors Thomas More, Erasmus, and Sir Henry Guilford. In all these portraits, the curtains hang in resplendent, elegant folds. Green was symbolic of “la langue verte,” “la langue des oiseaux”—“mystical, perfect, divine language,”³⁴ based on sound, puns, and an esoteric wisdom centered on the symbolism of individual letters, which provided multiple levels of meaning depending on one’s knowledge. Hence, “la langue verte” symbolized complete understanding attainable only by a few—the well-educated. Because of the stratified society of the Renaissance, the educated class consisted mostly of the nobility and the wealthy who could afford advanced education as well as the wherewithal to buy books.

Since curtains were not often depicted in the portraits of Tudor noblemen, an examination of when they do appear is of value. In the portrait of Dudley above, commissioned for the Queen's progression in 1575, we see him resplendently dressed in orange-red and gold, colors reserved for the nobility by the Queen's sumptuary laws. He is represented as the apogee of a Tudor aristocrat with his colors, crest, gold chain, Order of the Garter, and rapier. On the right side, we see a green velvet curtain with a gold trim which symbolizes a different aspect of this powerful Earl—his interest in knowledge confirmed by his serving as Chancellor of Oxford University, symbolized by "la langue verte." The gold trim, restricted to nobility, also suggests courtly knowledge. Lord Burghley's 1570 portrait depicts him with a similar green curtain, with a gold trim on the right and a column on the left. Burghley served as Queen Elizabeth's Secretary of State and, later, Lord High Treasurer, hence the green curtain, and her political support, represented by the column. Burghley's name and motto are included to identify him. It is worth noting that Burghley's rapier resembles that of Oxford with its black and gold, though its design is not as light and refined as Oxford's. There is also a portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh and his son with a red curtain pulled back to reveal a red script identifying him.³⁵ Here we have three portraits of noblemen with a partial, curtained background and identities revealed in various ways with crests, mottos, names, and dates.

Examining the Chiljan portrait, the obscure background is quite different from the paintings with curtains discussed above. Even considering portraits of women which frequently contain curtains, the Chiljan portrait stands apart for the obscurity of its background. On the right side the fabric, which appears to be a curtain, is pulled back. One can follow the lighter edge of the curtain at a slight right angle from his shoulder to the top of the painting. However, whatever is beyond the curtain remains a mystery because the space is painted the same dark color as the curtain. The lack of color contrast here is odd because it muddles the viewer's sense of perspective. The curtain appears to be pulled back, but nothing is revealed—not even a sense of depth beyond the curtain. In the other portraits with curtains, Dudley's identity is made clear with his crest, Burghley's with his motto, Raleigh's with the long text at the top of his portrait. In Oxford's portrait there is no crest, and nothing is written in the same space where the curtain appears to be pulled back. Why pull the curtain back to reveal nothing at all—not even a background that can be differentiated from the curtain?

As opposed to the primarily vertical folds of the fabric on the right side of the portrait, the fabric folds on the left side of the painting are very erratic with "V" shaped patterns—a possible mirroring of "V" for "Vere." Kathryn Sharpe notes an Italian influence in the painting of the drapes, which mirrors the cascading, sometimes abstract, drapery of Italian painters like Titian³⁶ as opposed to the neat, realistic folds of English and Dutch artists. There is a

strange shape behind the top half of the left collar and halfway up the left side of Oxford's head. This oddly shaped void suggests a strange opening that has no clear explanation. How was the curtain gathered to create an opening like this? What is its purpose? The dark color mirrors the void on the other side of Oxford where the curtain also appears to be pulled back, only to reveal nothing. Close inspection using a computer shows overpainting with black paint to the left of Oxford's head. Could there have been something pulling the curtain back or was something revealed under the curtain pulled back there? The strange disorder of the fabric background is disconcerting with no discernible explanation.

What function do Tudor curtains serve? They were used for decoration (the beautiful fabrics behind noblemen, ministers, and popes), for warmth by covering cold stone walls, to cover windows for privacy, and in the theater. Hans Holbein the Younger painted Sir Henry Guilford, the Comptroller of the Household, who provided court entertainments for Henry VIII, with a curtain behind him. Likewise, we have a curtain behind the sitter of the Chiljan portrait. Because of Holbein's renown as a master painter for Henry VIII, his paintings were well known at court, and because curtains appear infrequently in male portraits of the time, when they do appear, they bring up associations with other curtained portraits. If we think about curtains in the theater, they are often pulled back when an actor enters or exits the stage. Is that what the curtain in disarray suggests? Facing the painting, one sees the black void on the left highlights de Vere's face—his identity.

A professional conservator with an ultraviolet light could determine if there is overpainting anywhere else in the painting—either in the dark spaces of the drapery or even around the oddly portrayed wisp of hair on the sitter's forehead (Chiljan 1998, 2). A conservator could thus determine if there was overpainting that hides the sitter's identity.

Clearly, the background of the Chiljan portrait is intentionally obscure and unbalanced. Why paint a curtain pulled back, not once but twice, only to reveal nothing? Why are the folds of the left side of the curtain in such disarray as opposed to the long folds on the right, which depict the long, orderly folds one expects to see when a curtain is pulled back? The folds of the left and right sides of the curtain are at odds and create a sense of imbalance, tension, and disorder, which are not impressions Renaissance subjects desired to create in their portraits. On the contrary, portraits of Renaissance noblemen seek to impress with clarity and a sense of control. Why is the background of Oxford's portrait so dark and chaotic? Why does the disordered background contrast so sharply with the serene depiction of the sitter? This disheveled background with two unexplained voids, revealing nothing—not even depth of perspective—appears to be unique in portraits of Elizabethan noblemen.

The asymmetry is reinforced with Oxford's apparel, for he is draped in his black cloak only over his right shoulder, while it is tucked under his left arm—an unnatural placement. Although there are portraits of English lords wearing their cloaks draped over one shoulder, I have not found another in which the cloak is so carefully and unnaturally pulled back across the body, resting on, but not covering, the bejeweled sword—a very carefully orchestrated arrangement. Having the cloak tucked under his left hand required a conscious arrangement that accentuates his cloak—a piece of clothing that covers the identity beneath. As opposed to other English noblemen's portraits which depict them most often as standing straight and proud, Oxford appears to be slouching. Once again, we see Oxford ignoring the standard portrait protocol of the era. So many details in this portrait reveal an individual who defied the norms of his day.

Another question involves the color of the curtain, described as “brown.”³⁷ Old varnish turns green to brown. Using a computer to enlarge the photograph of the portrait reveals many green highlights in the curtain. Seeing the darkened white and green of the doublet, with the green streaked with brown by the varnish, there is no doubt that the background was originally lighter and greener. It is possible the drapery is a nacré velour with green and brown highlights, depending on how the light hits the fabric. What then does the color brown symbolize for an educated Renaissance viewer?

Brown has been associated with the common man since the Roman era, when the word “plebeian” meant “those dressed in brown.” Poor Englishmen were required to wear brown by a 1363 statutory law. Brown is the color of “Everyman” and the earth, from which brown colors were made. Brown was also associated with the Franciscans and the humility they espoused. Unlike so many portraits of noblemen which proudly display their names and coats of arms, Oxford does not reveal his identity except in the most subtle manner, with his red rose, his rings and his attire as “the Knight of the Sunne.” Only those familiar with the intricacies of royal history and court activities would have understood the subtleties of this portrait. The combination of green and brown provides a paradox, with brown as the color of everyman and humility and green as symbolic of secret knowledge and a closed coterie.

Oxford's figure—with the bright white collar, *passementerie*, and lace leaves, the vibrant green bands, the golden orange taffeta of the sleeves and the lining of the cloak—provides a sharp contrast with the green/brown curtain pulled back not once but twice to reveal nothing but darkness. This contrast between light and dark is reminiscent of *chiaroscuro*—yet another visual association to Italy.

Finally, what of the sitter's facial expression? Renaissance portraits are remarkable in that they manage to convey so little emotion. Smiles lack gravitas. Because of political repression during the Counter-Reformation, as well as literary and philosophical traditions, secrecy was a key element of Elizabethan society and culture. In consequence, rarely is there direct eye contact in portraits of the period. Thus, formal Renaissance portraits are enigmatic and this portrait is no exception. Like his peers, the sitter seems to stare past us, existing beyond the common view.

Conclusions

Quite simply, the Chiljan portrait is a remarkable picture from the period, painted in England yet with strong influences from both France and Italy. It reveals a young man dressed in the latest fashion, from his feathered, bejeweled hat to his French ruff, his padded peascod doublet, and his trimmed black cloak. His gilded, bejeweled rapier sets him apart even among the nobility. The fabrics of his clothes tell a complex story for the elite group who could get close enough to see what fabrics the clothes were made of and knew the meaning behind the fabrics. The red rose above his ear and his rings are links to English history, but only for those who know that history intimately.

Likewise, his attire suggests that of “the Knight of the Sunne,” recognizable to those present for that royal tournament in January of 1581. For those unaware of this complex, courtly history, we simply see a handsome young man dressed in the latest fashion, who appears somewhat eccentric for the theatrical placement of a rose behind his ear and the unusual placement of rings on his fingers. His slouched stance sets him apart with nonchalance and even defiance. The most striking anomaly of the painting lies in its background, with the depiction of a curtain pulled back that reveals a dark space on both sides of the sitter. The two halves of the curtain fall in two different ways. This background is at odds with portraits of English noblemen of the period.

Based on the evidence provided here, it is highly likely that this is a portrait of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

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