

William Shakespeare: Why Was His True Identity Concealed?

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One danger of contemporary films, plays, and other popular studies on Elizabethan themes is that, if we are not careful, we can see the characters of those times as people like ourselves, except for the fancy dress. It is true that Shakespeare's essential genius lay in his ability to penetrate beyond the fashions of his time to reach the permanent human traits that lie beneath the surface at all ages. Nevertheless, to understand the man himself and certain problems connected with his life and career, one must take into account very real differences of attitude separating the people of his generation from ours. The difference in attitudes to the public stage makes it immediately clear why a man of Shakespeare's genius might really be the alias for another.

In the Bard's own day, the public stage was regarded as a sordid and even disgraceful affair, not one with which anyone having social pretensions would wish to be openly associated. If he were known to be so associated, he could not expect his career in court or society to go unscathed. Social attitudes are not always consistent, and it may be that there was an element of the contradictory in that companies of players were kept by some of the leading men at court. Nevertheless, the distinction between the public stage and the court or private stage is an important one. The names of the Earls of Derby, Leicester, Lord Strange, and the Lord Chamberlain occur as patrons of such companies, although this latter reference was more likely to be the company of the Lord Great Chamberlain, that is, of the Earl of Oxford rather than of Sussex or Lord Hundson, the Lords Chamberlain without the "Great," who showed no literary propensities and had little time for theatrical pursuits. We also note that no company ever carried the name of Lord Burghley or of his son Robert, the first Earl of Salisbury. They may have despised the stage too much even to mention it, although since Queen Elizabeth and James I professed a more direct interest in it, it behooved this all-powerful pair to inhibit any open criticism.

While the Cecils were fully absorbed in their work and politics, the sovereigns

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and their courtiers needed the kind of entertainment sought after by more ordinary mortals. All the same, none would wish to boast a connection with the infant public stage any more than one would boast of visits to the public brothel. The two institutions were associated at this time in the public imagination, and not without reason. Hypocrisy, at least until it is found out, can be a stepping stone to success in any age, and the Elizabethan Age was no exception. Many professed belief and admiration for one thing but did something else when they thought no one was looking. It follows that those who had due regard for their dignity, and especially if they were connected with the Cecils or dependent on them, would be circumspect in declaring any association with the stage, players, or playwrighting. The 17th Earl of Oxford, always aware of his dignity and ancient lineage and intimately connected with the Cecils, would then have been disinclined to involve them by involving himself in a too-open and obvious connection with the common stage.

Since the preliminary point of the poor reputation of the stage and stageplayers is so important, and since this is something which we of the 20th Century find so difficult to appreciate, we should address it fully. Dr. Mary Sullivan has made it clear in her book, *Court Masques of James I*,¹ that the prestigious entertainment events at court were the masques put on in the Christmas season, more particularly at Twelfth Night. International diplomacy was involved on these occasions, and the rivalry between the Ambassadors of France and Spain to secure an invitation to such events makes somewhat bizarre reading for those of our own generation. There was no such rivalry to be present at any *plays* put on in this season. Moreover, if there was any prestige attached to writing for the entertainment world, it belonged not to the writer of plays but to the poets who produced the lyrics for the masques. The greatest of these was undoubtedly Ben Jonson, but even he gained no knighthood for his pains. Indeed, Jonson lived most of his life in relative poverty, so that he was only too glad to accept the commission later to work on the First Folio. (This was far from being the lowest kind of commission he accepted in his lifetime to earn a living.) Royal personages, even King James's queen, might take an active part in the masques; they did no such thing for plays. The prestige of plays compared with masques and the relatively little spent on them in time or money is indicated by the fact that, even though 30 plays were presented at court in the Christmas season of 1603-4, as opposed to only three masques, these three took up most of the attention and available money.

Playwrights were not highly thought of. Indeed, they were so poorly remunerated for their labors that they were frequently content or obliged to spy for the government to earn a few extra crowns. The names of Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kydd, William Alabaster, Anthony Munday, Thomas Church-

yard, and even Ben Jonson, not to exhaust the list, were engaged in this occupation. Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe were not apparently involved in this activity, but that was only because they were considered, with some justice, too tempestuous and untrustworthy in the eyes of government to merit even the limited amount of trust required to pursue the unrespected profession of spy. Any money to be made was not in playwrighting but in running the theaters. This is where Alleyn, Henslowe, and William Shakespeare, the man from Stratford, made their money. But in spite of Alleyn's founding of a celebrated institution at Dulwich, it gained him no knighthood or honor.

Not even the patronage of the Earl of Derby was sufficient to put the new profession above triviality in the eyes of weightier people, who included Sir Robert Cecil. When Lady Derby wrote to him for support of her husband's company of players, she felt it necessary to put her plea in depreciative terms. "If so vain a matter shall not seem troublesome to you, I could desire that your furtherance might be a mean to uphold them; for that my Lord, taking delight in them, it will keep him from more prodigal courses."² In a word, there were even worse occupations than the stage, but perhaps not many!

If neither of the Cecils, key figures of the age, ever condescended to mention the theater, and still less to express appreciation of it, it seems no one else did it for them. I have yet to find any appreciative reference to the stage, even by those of higher social station who were not above enjoying this kind of diversion. Indeed, all the references are in the opposite direction. Anne Jennalie Cook's *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London*³ includes several relevant quotations from contemporary writers. From Edmund Guilpin's "Of Gnatho" we may quote with her:

My lord most court-like lies in bed till noone.
Then, all high stomach riseth to his dinner;
Falls straight to dice before his meat be downe
Or to digest walks to some female sinner.
Perhaps fore-tyred he gets him to a play.
Comes home to supper, and then falls to dice.
There his devotion wakes 'til it be day.
And so to bed where until noone he lies.
This is a lord's life, simple folk will sing.
A lord's life? What, to trot so foul a thing? (87)

Samuel Rowland's Epigram 7 in *The letting of humour's blood in the head vein*, makes "Sir Revel" speak:

Speak, gentlemen, what shall we do today?
Drink some brave health upon a Dutch carouse?
Or shall we to the Globe and see a play?

Or visit Shoreditch for a bawdy-house?

Lets call for cards or dice and have a game.

To sit thus idle is both sin and shame. (ibid 98)

Nor did those directly connected with stage and players have a much better opinion of the thespian art. Thomas Nashe in *Pierce Pennilesse* gives forth:

For whereas the after-noone beeing the idlest time of the day, wherein men that are their owne masters (as gentlemen of the Court, the Innes of Court, and the number of captaines and souldiers about London) do wholly bestow themselves upon pleasure, and that pleasure they divide (how vertuously it skills not) either into gaminge, following of harlots, drinking, or seeing a Playe: is it not then better (since of foure extremes all the world cannot keep them but they will choose one) that they should betake them to the least, which is playes?⁴

As for the players, Anthony Munday, himself a playwright, in *A 2nd and 3rd Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, had this to say:

Since the retaining of these caterpillars, the credite of noblemen hath decayed. They are thought to be covetous by permitting their servants, which cannot live of themselves, and whome for neerenes they will not maintaine, to live at the devotion of almes of other men, passing from countrie to countrie, from one's gentleman's house to another, offering their services, which is a kind of beggarie.⁵

In *The Anatomie of Abuses*, Philip Stubbes dismissed actors as “ydle persons, doing nothing but playing, and loytring, having their lyvings of the sweat of other men's browes, much like unto drones devouring the sweet honie of the poore labouring bees.”⁶ All the same, there was money to be made by this worthless profession, as Samuel Cox complained in a letter of January 15, 1590: “Rich men give more to a player for a song which he shall sing in one hour than to their faithful servants for serving them a whole year.”⁷

So if the Earls of Oxford, Derby, or other noblemen who kept companies of actors took an interest in the stage, they were careful to keep the distinction between this activity as a court pastime, which was tolerable, and their own connection with any public activity connected with the stage—including publishing under their own name—which was not. As B.M. Ward rightly said, “in court social circles the majority would have deemed it a terrible disgrace for a great nobleman to write, produce and publish plays.”⁸

This constitutes the background, then, of the 17th Earl of Oxford's interest in the stage, which was bound to have its effect on the manner of his involvement and the extent to which it was publicly known, in view of his intimate and unavoidable connection with the Cecils and the highest figures in the court circle of his day, including the Queen. Oxford was a man of great

independence of mind and penetrating intelligence, sharpened by the best which the education of his day could provide as a ward of Sir William Cecil. But following his father's interest in theatrical matters from his earliest years, which became total absorption in his later years, Oxford revealed a side of his nature and interests which could never have endeared him to his guardian. From his mature years he kept what William Cecil referred to (in a letter to Francis Walsingham of May 1587) as "lewd friends," meaning the players, writers and other riff-raff who operated outside the city to the north or on the south bank across the river. The theaters existed in the red light districts of London, which had been the custom for several centuries. It was no doubt considered appropriate in contemporary eyes, since the appetite for the one, as we have seen, tended to serve the other.

Oxford's relations with the Cecils show a man who would not be ruled and resented their efforts to keep him in tow. But it was difficult, and indeed impossible, for him to escape their tutelage and the heavy influence of that early training. Throughout his life there existed a peculiar love-hate relationship between the Earl and the Baron, and later the Baron's son. At times Oxford showed a spirit of resentment and rebellion, to be followed by the language of acceptance and apology, with a sense that he had gone too far. More important, he could never break his dependence in one important matter, which also helped to inhibit any connection with the stage he might have wished to express more openly.

Throughout his life, Oxford was financially dependent on the Cecils. Even after his marriage to the heiress Elizabeth Trentham in 1592, he still seems to have been chronically next to insolvency. This meant that he could not act flagrantly in defiance of anything the Cecils required of him. Certainly they would have required of him, if only tacitly, that he would not let his name be coupled publicly with the common stage or players, or even with the known authorship plays, if only for the sake of his noble children and alliances. One could remember what John Davies of Hereford, a friend and admirer of playwrights and poets, found himself forced to admit at the end of his well-known apostrophe included in his *Microcosmos* of 1603.

Players, I love ye and your quality,
As ye are men that pass time not abused.
And some I love for painting, poesy,
And say fell Fortune cannot be excused
That hath for better uses you refused:
Wit, courage, good shape, good parts and all good,
As long as all these goods are no worse used.
And though the stage doth stain pure gentle blood,
Yet generous ye are in mind and mood.

Evidently, Davies had Shakespeare in mind, since against the third line of the manuscript, he put the initials, "R.B.W.S." for Burbage, who was a painter, and Shakespeare, who had the "poesy." But the man from Stratford could hardly be accused of having gentle blood. Indeed, even Raleigh, who came from a family good enough, was still not good enough to meet the requirements of Oxford himself for a courtier. The Cecils would have been even more aware of the fatal tendency of the stage to "stain pure gentle blood." Since they were both only recently established in the higher echelons of gentility (however much Sir William might search for older and deeper roots of some superior descent), they could not afford to countenance in themselves or their relations any factor which might reduce them to a lower level in the esteem of the ruling class—or of the ruled. Nor need we suppose that Oxford was seriously tempted to break loose in this particular direction.

Returning to the prior theme, even if the 17th Earl were inclined by temperament to be any kind of rebel, he would have had to be financially independent to make his rebellion effective. This he never was. It is true that he lacked the Cecilian gift for finance, but he began life especially disadvantaged, and had to endure a good deal of ill-luck. If ill-judgment also entered, it was the kind of ill-judgment that went with the times and was not his alone. His chronic impecuniosity began very early in life with the death of the 16th Earl. Margaret, Dowager Countess of Oxford, wrote to Sir William Cecil on April 30, 1562, to head off the complaints of the Duke of Norfolk and Lord Robert Dudley that she had been reluctant to have the late Earl's will proved. She now knew "the dreadful declaration of my Lord's debts... I had rather leave up the whole doings thereof to my son..." (Ward, 21-2). It was altogether reasonable for her to ask for Cecil's advice about the will since the young Earl was Cecil's ward from 1562 until his majority in 1571.

How much sharp practice for his own benefit did Sir William indulge in during the nine years of his stewardship? In *The Queen's Wards*, Professor Joel Hurtsfield put his readers on the track of many searching questions. Thanks to Cecil's careful manipulation of his opportunities within the law, and the favor of the Queen, the Great Lord Burghley died with no less than 298 estates in his possession. H.G. Wright in his *The Life and Works of Arthur Hall of Grantham*, while writing with admiration for the great man, could not conceal Cecil's selfishness in claiming young Arthur as his ward against the desires and needs of his mother, who was left in difficult circumstances by her husband Francis's death. Indeed, Francis had put in a plea in his will of June 10, 1552, that his wife, Ursula, be allowed to receive the wardship of her son.

But as Wright says, "If Francis Hall's request ever reached the ears of the King [Edward VI] and his counselors, it was allowed to pass unnoticed, for Sir

William Cecil wished to have young Arthur Hall as his own ward. Cecil's estates being so near Grantham, and his influence in the whole district so strong, he had an obvious claim, according to the ideas of the time, to occupy the position of Hall's guardian. It was a lucrative source of income, and hence the eagerness which Cecil displays in his correspondence concerning his ward's possessions... At the inquisition on the lands of Francis Hall in Lincolnshire, Cecil took good care to be represented. The report of his agent shows what pressure could then be brought to bear by a man of influence like Cecil... From the account of the proceedings we gather that everyone present was overawed by the knowledge of Cecil's interest in the matter. The jury was slow to give their verdict and though it was 10 o'clock at night, they asked for another day." In the end they decided in Cecil's favor. "Cecil could therefore rest content for he now had Francis Hall's lands under his control... Nor was Cecil slow to take charge of his new ward, though it cost Ursula Hall many a tear to part with her only son."⁹

There was no mistaking the overlordship of the Master of the Court of Wards, who had literally the whip hand over his charges. They came away with the feeling that even if they had not done badly, they should have done better, and would have but for Cecil's intervention in their affairs. He could dictate later on whom they should marry, unless they could afford an exorbitant fine for their escape, and he could charge enormous fees for his services so that their estates remained at his disposition for a long time after their technical surrender at the ward's coming of age. They even had to pay for the privilege of accepting the wife he chose for them!

All this has a direct bearing on Oxford's case. According to Strype, in 1590, nearly twenty years after his release from wardship, the 17th Earl owed the Court of Wards no less than 22,000 pounds, a crippling sum by any standard. In 1571, according to the Master's right, Edward de Vere was obliged to marry Cecil's daughter, Anne. Certainly, Oxford could not afford to refuse her. The young Earl of Southampton did, but it cost him, according to a reliable contemporary report, a fine of 5,000 pounds.¹⁰ Young Oxford simply did not have the money to refuse—and perhaps only just enough to enable him to accept! Even if he had not been a ward, he would have been under some obligation to follow the dynastic interests of his family, and they might have chosen worse for him. Certainly, they seem to have started out reasonably well.

Lord St. John reported what should have been the happy event in a letter to the Earl of Rutland on July 28, 1571. "The Earl of Oxford hath gotten himself a wife—or at least a wife hath caught him;..." (Ward, 61) Burghley was typically careful to report the same matter to Rutland on August 15th, in terms which suggested not that Oxford had been forced into the match but that he himself had insisted on it to her father with a "purposed determination... For at his own

motion I could not well imagine what to think, considering I never meant to seek it nor hoped for it." But Burghley did not deny being pleased at the prospect and full of affection for the earl. "I do honour him so dearly from my heart as I do my own son, and in any case that may touch him for his honour and weal, I shall think him mine own interest therein." Burghley respected his abilities. "There is much more in him of understanding than any stranger to him would think... I take comfort in his wit and knowledge grown by good observation." (Ward, 62-3) So Oxford became allied to someone who would be no more amused than her father at the prospect of a husband who was widely known to have a connection with public players and the stage.

The marriage took place in Westminster Abbey on December 19, 1571, (Ward, 68) but the wedding feast was scarcely over before the young groom had serious cause of difference with his father-in-law. This concerned the latter's refusal to intervene to save the Duke of Norfolk from execution in connection with the Ridolfi Plot, a scheme undoubtedly engineered by Burghley with the object of removing two prime obstacles to his policies—the Duke of Norfolk and Mary, Queen of Scots. (See my *The Marvelous Chance* and *The Dangerous Queen*.¹¹) Oxford could not know this, but he did know that the Duke deserved better than the execution which the Queen delayed for as long as she could, even against the wishes of Burghley and Walsingham.

Again, we are presented with the important difference between Oxford and Burghley, the difference between the tiger and the fox. Like Norfolk, Oxford had been born to honor and position and had never had to fight for them. His were the instincts of a soldier, which made him a natural friend of the Earl of Sussex, with whom he saw service against those who took part in the Northern Rising and in Scotland in 1569-70. (Ward, 47) Oxford's ideals were the fighting Veres, Sir Francis and Sir Horace, his cousins. He was a quick-tempered and impetuous man who spoke his mind as he knew it at the moment. He could flare up and as quickly subside. There is something of Hamlet as well as Laertes in the same man.

Burghley, on the other hand, preferred to lie like a crocodile in the swamp with the broadest and blandest of smiles for all who saw him, apparently inert but capable of the swift movement, calculated all the while, which could destroy his enemies before they knew whose teeth had seized them. Indeed, Burghley always insisted that, if anyone had been seized, it was by someone else's teeth and never his own. He never admitted to an enemy that he was an enemy, for this would only have put him on his guard.

Typically, on the occasion of Norfolk's misfortune, Oxford's resentment faded fairly quickly and the difference with Cecil soon blew over. But Oxford's natural sympathy for the aristocrat of ancient lineage remained and continued to have its effect at the deeper level on anything which touched his own honor

and esteem. Meanwhile, his close alliance with the Cecil house by marriage meant that the Earl would need to observe the social niceties and conventions which bound him to the most powerful family in the land. For the sake of his wife and children, as well as himself, he would need to pursue his literary and theatrical interests with due discretion.

Nothing could have seemed more auspicious for Oxford's career, including his literary and dramatic career, than his brilliant introduction to the life of court. According to all outward appearances, Oxford seemed the epitome of success. However, beneath the surface glittering in the sun of the Queen's favor, the depths of life at court could hide cold currents of jealousy and rivalry. Elizabeth's Court was essentially a court of the Renaissance. There were distinct groupings, alliances and enmities. Private wars could be virtually to the knife for the royal favor and to put a rival out of action. An ideal maneuver was to put one's rival in a position where he was no longer considered to have a presence unsullied enough to be fit to enter the royal presence. This meant that once someone was forbidden attendance at court, his enemies could pour poison into the sovereign's ear on every occasion, like the mime in *Hamlet*, until he could be considered politically and socially dead. This had happened to the unfortunate Duke of Norfolk, who had been eliminated physically as well as socially on a charge of treason.

The Queen, while not unintelligent, could have her judgment distorted by fear. In this way, she was persuaded by false plots, which she herself did not know to be false, to consent to the death of the Duke of Norfolk, Mary, Queen of Scots, and later, the Earl of Essex. She did not need Shakespeare to tell her that uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. She had herself come close to danger at the end of Wyatt's rebellion during the reign of her half-sister, Mary. Elizabeth understood the system and, like Burghley, had learned how to survive and even prosper in it. Anyone else who wished to survive in it must follow her whims and wishes carefully, even those like Leicester and Burghley, who seemed unassailable. Even someone like Oxford who, despite his ancient lineage and some favor with the Queen, was never really a member of the ruling caste. The scion of a noble line of long standing had to take his competitive place with the parvenus, whether he liked it or not. There was a pecking order and a graded system of likely survival among her courtiers.

The elephant, the lion and the rhinoceros, Leicester, Burghley and Sussex, were the unassailable beasts of the jungle. They were surrounded by the rest, who were vulnerable in varying degrees and had to depend for their survival on staying in the protective shadow of one of the larger animals.

A well-defined rivalry existed between the Earl of Sussex and the Earl of Leicester. Oxford, a powerful newcomer from 1571 thanks to the Queen's

favor and his alliance with Cecil, drew to the side of Sussex, with whom he had campaigned during the rising of the north and in Scotland in 1569-70. The Sydneys, particularly Sir Philip, stood by Leicester, as did Sir Thomas Knyvett. The Queen's principal ploy was to speak fair to them all, making easy promises to smooth ruffled feathers and keep all sides close to her—even if the promises were never actually kept. This was also Sir William Cecil's policy, who avoided letting any man think him his enemy even when he wished him destroyed. In short, there was much "smiling with the teeth" in all directions but little real friendship. Oxford, then, had to go along with his nearest thing to a patron, the Lord Burghley. He was obliged to talk to him in terms of deference, and even at times of an admiration which could hardly have been sincere, if he was to maintain any stable position on the greasy pole of court life. As part of the process, he had to pursue his thespian interests with great discretion, especially as they might cost money, money which would be overseen by Burghley.

There was soon another good reason for not disturbing good relations with Burghley. Oxford's rival at court soon proved to be Christopher Hatton, a parvenu from Northamptonshire, ten years his senior. Hatton had come to London to study for the bar about 1560 but, by 1564, had become one of the Queen's gentlemen pensioners. Shrewd and intelligent, his mind was further sharpened by his legal training. He had the pleasant exterior which could win immediate favor in the young Queen's eyes. Indeed, Sir John Perrot, her half-brother, said that he "danced his way into the queen's favour with a galliard" (Ward, 74). Hatton's character, that of a career adventurer, was cast in the mold of Leicester and Cecil rather than Oxford.

Perhaps it was Oxford's success in the 1571 jousting tournament which first drew Hatton into jealous rivalry with the Earl, who now enjoyed much favor with the Queen, a commodity which Hatton would not be happy to share. Edward Dyer, poet and friend of Philip Sidney, advised Hatton in 1572 about reducing Oxford's influence. There is little doubt that Dyer referred to him in a well-known letter: "use no words of disgrace or reproach towards him to any; that he, being the less provoked, may sleep, thinking all safe, while you do awake and attend to your advantages." (ibid) Hatton followed his advice the following year when he wrote to Her Majesty from the continent to acknowledge some gift or other. "It is a gracious favor most dear and welcome unto me: reserve it to the sheep"—Elizabeth's pet name for Hatton—"he hath no tooth to bite, where the Boar's tusk may both raze and tear."

Whether or not Oxford was aware of Hatton's true attitude toward him at this time, a man of the Earl's acumen would have been aware of the dangerous undercurrents and eddies of court life, and would have realized that he could only survive by alliances, the most obvious being Cecil's. Cecil would have been aware of his predicament and would have had no compunction in exploiting his

need to depend on his favor. Not even Oxford in the early days of his court success could afford to ignore Cecil, since while one might dance one's way into the Queen's favor with a galliard, anyone who crossed her favorite, Cecil, might soon be dancing his way out of it. Behind her coquetry, Elizabeth realized that the success of her state depended on much more than the ability to dance galliards. Cecil had this other ability which he had proved to her satisfaction for some twenty years by 1570. No dancer or entertainer, Cecil was secure in the favor of the Queen, and in a way no other had it, apart perhaps from Leicester.

Whatever Oxford's feelings toward the late Duke of Norfolk, who was executed on June 2, 1572, by October 31, Oxford had accepted the wisdom of mending any broken fences with Cecil in a letter from Wyvenhoe. Once again, the existence of dangerous rivalries in the court meant that he could not afford to weaken his own vulnerable position by playing down too far to the populace in the matter of his dramatic interests. In any case, at this time these were not his chief preoccupation. The real ambition of the young Oxford lay in the direction of military exploits and a career at the fighting front. Yet by the combined efforts of the Queen and Cecil, this was not to be allowed him.

Apparently, Cecil had taken the initiative in reconciling with Oxford after the Norfolk contretemps, who had accepted the olive branch with alacrity. Oxford knew that there had been "sinister reports" but he hoped to be "more plausible" to Cecil than before "which hardly, either through my youth, or rather my misfortune, hither-to I have done." Oxford begs Burghley in the fulsome language of the court and the period not to believe the "backfriends" who have been pouring poison into his ear. "Thus therefore hoping the best in your lordship, and fearing the worst in myself, I take my leave, lest my letters may become loathsome and tedious unto you, to whom I wish to be most grateful."¹² The best way to get his wishes would be by way of flattery and apparent docility, however alien to his character. But the desired result did not come quickly enough.

Inevitably, the mind of a man who could have produced the Shakespeare canon could hardly have been satisfied with the confining atmosphere of court life. True, de Vere could use the forced leisure to pursue his literary interests, which were deep even at this time. His introduction to the translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier* and his prefatory letter and poem in *Cardanus' Comforte* in 1573 give us the first taste of more to come. But his main interests at this time, those of a young and active man eager for adventure and the experience of the larger world, were sufficiently proved when, in 1574, without permission from Queen or Lord Treasurer, Oxford did a sudden dash overseas, going as far as Brussels. He did not stay abroad long, if only because he would have heard the rumor that he was deserting to the Catholic exiles, notably the

Earl of Westmorland, who had left England after the Northern Rising of 1569 and lay under the shadow of high treason. Fortunately, Oxford had Sussex, the Lord Chamberlain, and his father-in-law to smooth over matters with Her Gracious Majesty, who nevertheless felt her grace sorely tried by the incident.

Oxford was back in England with his fingers burnt after less than a fortnight abroad. On July 29, he met Burghley and Countess Oxford in London before proceeding to Gloucester in the hope of making peace with the Queen. In a letter to Walsingham, Burghley described Oxford as “fearful and doubtful in what sort he shall recover her Majesty’s favor because of his offence in departure as he did without license.” So while the young Oxford could be headstrong, he was not foolhardy. He had lost no time in dissociating himself from the rebels who had fled abroad. Significantly, Oxford, who was now in London, felt he needed a new suit of clothes to make himself presentable in court. Equally significantly, Burghley thought he did not. “I would have had him forbear that new charge, considering his former apparel is very sufficient, and he not provided to increase a new charge.” (Ward, 95) So the specter of insolvency stalked so close behind the penurious Earl that he could not even afford a new suit! Only Burghley could prevent him from drowning in a sea of debt. And Burghley would never give much help to a man, even his son-in-law and an Earl, who was known openly to throw money away on “lewd companions” who wrote poetry, plays, and wasted their time and substance on similar foolishness. Even if the Earl did not go so far as to acknowledge himself openly as yet another author of such things, it was bad enough to be encouraging those who did, and to be even remotely associated with them.

Walsingham was now asked to prepare the way back to Her Majesty’s favor. Burghley thought it “sound counsel to be given to her Majesty, that this young nobleman, being of such quality as he is for birth, office, and other notable valours of body and spirit, he may not be discomforted either by any extraordinary delay or by any outward sharp or unkind reproof,” taking into account “his singular loyalty.” Cecil then referred to the reaction to which Oxford might give way, were he not generously received back into royal favor. “I fear the malice of some discontented persons, wherewith the court is overmuch sprinkled, [may] set to draw him to a repentance rather of his dutifulness in thus returning, than to set him in a contentation to continue in his duty” (Ward, 96). In his oblique style of writing, Burghley referred clearly enough to the continuing danger from the Hatton faction. Walsingham was asked “to remember Master Hatton to continue my Lord’s friend, as he hath manifestly been, and as my Lord confesseth to me that he hopeth assuredly so to prove him.” Burghley knew the true situation only too well and was using “courtspeak” to say that Hatton had not been “my Lord’s friend” and was not likely to change his attitude. At all events, Master Secretary Smith would be another to speak

for Oxford, whose tutor he had been. If Oxford needed Burghley, Burghley also needed Oxford, who had every prospect of becoming again the Queen's favorite, and therefore a most useful ally for his own schemes—if he could be persuaded to fall in behind the great man. Moreover, Burghley, too, had “unfriends” in the court and was anxious to maintain every influence favorable to himself.

Oxford was fully restored to favor by August 7 (Ward, 97) and in proof thereof he spent the rest of the summer and autumn with the Queen on progress. This was more for the sake of correctness and a sense of duty than from any spontaneous or new found love of court life. His acceptance of the situation and obedience to the Queen's wishes, even against his own, paid off, and in the new year 1575, Oxford was at last allowed to travel abroad. But still the financial specter stalked in his rear. His list of debts was drawn up and a modification in the entail of his property introduced so that, in the event of his demise, the whole estate would not pass to Mary, his sister, thus leaving the earldom completely impoverished. Oxford left England on January 7 with Paris as his destination.

From what we have seen so far it is evident that, by birth and training, Oxford was fully inserted into the life, forms, and fashions of his class and time. True, his remarkable poem included in Bedingfield's *Cardanus' Comfort*, “published by commaundement of” and not simply by “the right honourable the Earle of Oxenforde” in 1573, shows an understanding of the predicament of the common man.

The labouring man that tills the fertile soil,
And reaps the harvest fruit hath not indeed
The gain, but pain; but if for all his toil
He gets the straw, the lord will get the seed.

And so through four more verses, until he reaches the last and most significant stanza from our viewpoint:

So he that takes the pain to pen the book
Reaps not the gifts of golden goodly muse;
But those gain that, who on the work shall look.
And from the sour the sweet by skill shall choose;
For he that beats the bush the bird not gets,
But who sits still and holdeth fast the nets.¹³

It would be a mistake to suppose that Oxford was a social rebel or unwilling to respect conventions which acknowledged the superiority of his own class and lineage. While he might respect the laboring man in his proper place, he had no time for those of inferior rank who aspired too high. Certainly, the writer of the Shakespeare plays found none of his heroes among the plebians.

Ward writes of his “well-known intolerance even towards upstart courtiers who, though lacking in birth, were nevertheless becoming daily more and more powerful” (Ward, 244). Peck in his *Desiderata Curiosa* says he had it in mind to publish “A pleasant conceit of Vere, Earl of Oxford, discontented at the rising of a mean gentleman in the English Court, circa 1580.” It is highly likely that Oxford had Sir Walter Raleigh in mind, who was the rising favorite at this time (Ward, 244, n.2).

The details of Oxford’s continental travels, however vital for his later development as a playwright, do not have any bearing on our present question. But by the time he returned to England on April 20, 1576, recent events had produced more than an indirect bearing on our subject. His life was now in turmoil and crisis. He had more to think about than his success or reputation as a poet and patron of poets. On July 2, 1575, the Countess of Oxford was delivered of a daughter. Oxford’s first reaction was of satisfaction and delight. Indeed, according to one of Burghley’s typical memoranda drawn up in diary form, the Earl wrote to Burghley on September 24 fully appreciative of the happy event (Fowler, 181-195). It was this letter which conveyed to Cecil the Earl’s small liking of Italy. “For my liking of Italy... I care not to see it any more.” He had thought of going to Spain but “...by Italy I guess the worse” (Fowler, 181). The deep impression made on him by that country is evident from his plays written later, and also by the fact that soon after his return, following the example of his servant, Luke Astlow (if Astlow did not follow his), he became a Catholic. So his letter containing contempt for things Italian could not have been sincere. But he was well aware of Burghley’s suspicion of foreign parts. However, the Earl wanted to travel further, more especially into Germany, so that he needed to say the right thing to win the very necessary approval of his father-in-law for extending the exercise.

Most serious of all, he was short of money and had already been obliged to borrow 500 crowns. So, far from mentioning his leading toward Catholicism, he only referred to Astlow in contemptuous terms as one who had “become one of the Romish Church,” and as having used “lewd speeches against the Queen’s Majesty’s supremacy, legitimation, government and particular life.” It is difficult to believe the Earl was not yet moving in the same direction as far as conversion to Catholicism was concerned. Evidently, it was all another example of courtspeak, which Oxford by this time had mastered as well as any. If premature news of Astlow’s “defection” had already reached the wrong quarter, Oxford was anxious to dissociate himself from it.

By April 4, 1576, while still on the continent, it seems that Oxford received some kind of information intended to convince him that the child recently born to his wife was not his. It is usually assumed that Oxford had merely listened

to malicious gossip from Henry Howard, brother of the executed Duke of Norfolk, and a man Burghley never trusted. It may be that Anne was the victim of malicious gossip, but Dr. Richard Masters reported to the Queen some curious words and deeds from Anne herself. Anne kept the event of the baby's birth secret four or five days from everyone. "Her face was much fallen and thin with little colour." When she was offered congratulations, she expressed sorrow rather than joy, and wondered whether Oxford, if he were present, would "pass upon me and it or not." In short, she had misgivings that it might have been taken for somebody else's child even if in fact it were Oxford's. It is not impossible that in Oxford's absence his lady had been disporting with another, if not others.

Burghley's memorandum mentioned above also showed some preoccupation with trying to make various dates fall out so that Anne's case could appear in the best light. Richard Bayley, admittedly writing some years later to Sir William Stanley on November 19, 1598, reported laconically on the English court, "All other matters go after the old manner. The persecution of catholics continueth. Maids of the court go scarce twenty weeks with child after they are married. Every man hath liberty of conscience to play the knave. Lord Southampton marries Mrs. Barnham whom he hath gotten with child."¹⁴ Oxford himself was to father an illegitimate child on Anne Vavasour in 1581, the consequences of which were to involve him in a duel with the influential Sir Thomas Knyvett, the girl's uncle.

In any case, the Queen supported Oxford, in spite of the best pleas that Cecil could offer in Anne's behalf, and Anne was peremptorily forbidden to come to court throughout the summer (Ward, 123). On the other hand, Anne insisted on her innocence to the end. It may be that she was innocent but in some way found herself in compromising circumstances which could be readily misunderstood. On December 7, 1581, Anne wrote a final and apparently successful appeal to her husband to end their five-year separation. After assuring him that her father wished Oxford well, she admitted, "the practices in Court, I fear, do make seek to make contrary shows." Oxford in a previous letter to one of hers, which broke a long silence, had asked her to avoid the company of Lady Drury. She claimed, "I deal as little with her as any can, and care no more for her than you would have me; but I have been driven sometimes, for avoiding of malice and envy, to do that with both her and others which I would not with my will do." (Ward, 227)

It was probably fairly soon after her letter that Anne and Oxford were reconciled. At all events, it was reported in May 1583 that the Earl had a son who died soon after birth.

The affair of the child in 1576, however, was inextricably woven with

something else. In Oxford's absence, *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers*, first published in 1573 and which contained, it seems certain, some of Oxford's poems, was taken over completely by George Gascoigne, admittedly the principal original contributor.¹⁵ He reissued the book of 1573, with a couple of additions, under the title, *The Posies of George Gascoigne, Esquire*, as if they were all his own. Also in Oxford's absence, Christopher Hatton had managed to persuade the Queen on January 1, 1576 to appoint George Gascoigne Poet Laureate. This broke an important rule. As Ward says, "In the 16th Century, although many courtiers wrote poetry, it was an unwritten law that nothing of theirs should be printed while they were alive." (Ward, 132) Not that Oxford had been blameless in the matter, if the word "blame" is appropriate. He managed to get hold of the original collection of poems which he published to include some of his own, anonymously of course (*ibid*). It is significant that, when he cut Thomas Cecil, Anne and his father-in-law dead on his return to England in 1576 when they went to meet him, he repaired at once to the house of Rowland Yorke and his brother, Edward, in London. Yorke was a friend of Gascoigne and doubtless Oxford had it out with him over the whole affair of the publication. It may well be, as Ward says, that Oxford aspired to become the Poet Laureate of England, the first after John Skelton, and resented being pipped to the post by Gascoigne, especially by a Gascoigne aided by Hatton. (Ward, 141)

The 1580s were difficult years for Oxford. The rift with Burghley and Anne over the birth of his daughter, and perhaps other matters, was slow in healing. However, Oxford had enough trouble on his hands to prevent him from stirring up further hornets' nests in the field of publication in his own name, even of his own poems. After the eventual rapprochement with the Cecils, Ward is right in thinking that "beneath this outward display, it is safe to say that never again were relations quite the same between husband, wife and father-in-law." The temperament and interests of the two men grew ever more apart as the years went by. Burghley, wise in the ways of the world and the court, had little interest in anything apart from politics and money and his family, which included his granddaughters. (One thinks inevitably of Shylock and his daughter and his ducats.) Two important factors kept Oxford and Burghley together—the awareness that they had mutual enemies at court bent on their destruction, and the fact that the Queen was anxious to see the end of the rift.

At all events, Oxford felt the need to establish some kind of financial independence in the the next ten years, but there was no way in which he could shake off Lord Burghley. Since Burghley had it in his power to make life difficult or even impossible for Oxford by his financial maneuverings, and since Cecil had no time or sympathy for Oxford's literary pretensions, Oxford could

not have afforded to alienate Burghley further by any kind of public boast of his increasing literary interests. This would have prompted the Lord Treasurer to even more drastic measures to keep his son-in-law under control. The fuller story of Oxford's writhings on Burghley's hook still needs to be told. As G.W. Philips pointed out, it is significant that, before 1576, Oxford sold only one estate. Between 1576 and 1586 he sold no less than 49. This in spite of the fact that in 1578 the Queen made over to him the manor of Rysing, which had belonged to the attainted 4th Duke of Norfolk (Ward, 149).

Ward was puzzled by the reference in the grant to Oxford's "good, true and faithful service done and given to Us before this time." But this need not have been more than a conventional courtly and legal flourish. Oxford was, after all, the Lord Great Chamberlain, and his dancing attendance on her not always gracious Majesty could have been taken as the service belonging to his office. The Rysing estate was worth 250 pounds per annum, no mean sum at a time when a gentleman of modest means might possess no more than an estate of 30 pounds per annum. But still the sales went on. What was Oxford spending the money on? Admittedly, the miniature army of retainers, liverymen and servants would originally have eaten up a considerable sum but, by the early 1580s, the Earl's household had been reduced to four (Ward, 232). One must take into account the presents given to those who dedicated their published literary efforts to the Earl. Considerable sums were also lost by failed speculation on the various voyages in this period, such as Captain Frobisher's attempts to find a Northwest passage to the Orient. To put it mildly, in financial matters Oxford was unlucky as well as lacking genius.

In 1586, the Earl was saved from the complete wreck of his patrimony by the annuity of 1,000 pounds issued under the Privy Seal on June 26, 1586. There was nothing absolute about the grant, which was only "during our pleasure." It seems that Burghley never mentioned it. It has always been assumed that there is some mystery about it. Perhaps there was. But it is likely enough that it was due to the special intervention of the Queen, who recognized that Oxford, whatever his extravagances, had suffered more than he should have done from the wardship system as operated by the Great Lord Burghley. Apart from the handing over of the manor of Rysing, this seems to have been the only time in her life when the Queen showed Oxford any extraordinary favor apart from fair words. But neither were small favors. Nevertheless, he continued until her death to live in hopes of more. This means that he would have felt bound to go on observing the bounds of propriety and the etiquette of the time, which included not debasing himself and his by being associated even with published poetry, let alone with the more potentially embarrassing plays. Some of these could have been taken as a critique of the

times and the ways of court and politics which he knew so well. Even if there were only allusions to family affairs in these—as in *Hamlet*, where Polonius could be identified with Burghley, and Ophelia with his daughter, Anne—the Queen would not have approved of her favorite servant being upset by an appearance on the public stage for the amusement of the vulgar throng. And where a play like *Richard II* could be taken, even by the Queen, as a reference to herself, with its preoccupation with treason and civil strife, clearly the idea of publishing under the Earl's own name was anathema. For all his discretion and conformity, Oxford's hopes of receiving further sources of income in the reign of Elizabeth were not to be fulfilled. However, he lived in hopes and fed them for himself by continuing his discreet behavior. In any case, between 1586 and his death in 1604, he was obliged to sell only one further estate.¹⁶

It must be admitted that Oxford, at least after 1586 and his generous annuity, which lasted till his death, should not have felt in need of a much larger income—unless he were laying out money on causes altogether unusual for someone not a Privy Councillor or member of the government. By the 1580s, Oxford's original fine company of retainers had shrunk to no more than four. Clearly, 1,000 pounds per year would have covered a larger household expenditure than his present one. Although Burghley was in receipt of 4,000 pounds per annum in his later years, and according to Stow spent 2,000 per annum on Cecil House, this was quite exceptional (Ward, 258). The Earl of Southampton had a net income of 750 pounds per annum while the Earl of Huntington as President of the North had an allowance no greater than Oxford's. (Ward, 259) As Ward suggested, Oxford was no doubt acting as a patron of the arts, and in the role of one who regarded his purse as trash as compared with honor, he responded to demands with a lavishness that may have been undue.

A number of writers acknowledge him as their patron and dedicated their works to him, especially from the late 1570s: John Lyly, Thomas Watson, Angel Day, Thomas Lodge, Gabriel Harvey, Robert Greene, Anthony Munday, and even the musician and madrigalist, John Farmer (Ward, 178-203). There is evidence that Thomas Churchyard was living entirely at his expense (Ward, 301-3). As Ward rightly says, "It is unquestionably in literature, poetry, and the drama that we shall find the key to Lord Oxford's life of retirement from 1589 to 1604" (ibid). After his marriage to Elizabeth Trentham in 1592 and his subsequent retirement to Hackney, he no doubt concentrated his efforts not only on patronizing the work of others but also on writing and polishing his own productions, more particularly his plays. After the marriage of his eldest daughter, Elizabeth, to William Stanley, the brother of Ferdinando, Earl of Derby, on January 26, 1595, Oxford had a closer tie with a man who shared

his interests in the stage and himself wrote plays; though, like Oxford, and for the same reasons, he never published under his own name. As the scion of an ancient and prestigious family, Derby would have shared Oxford's natural disinclination to court the meretricious adulation of the common herd, and maybe their criticism, by publishing his work for all to see. Indeed, Derby's work remains unknown, or at least unidentified. The Shakespeare canon could well present, at least in part, a joint effort of the two Earls.

Mention of Oxford's daughter, Elizabeth, reminds us of a further difficulty and inhibiting circumstance for Oxford and his father-in-law. We know practically nothing about Oxford's relations with his daughters. One might be tempted to see a comparison in this family situation and that of King Lear, especially after Oxford, by a deed dated July 3, 1587, made over the principal family seat of Castle Hedingham to the Queen. The Queen restored it to Oxford on November 18, 1587, but on conditions. It is likely that while the Queen was fully sympathetic to Oxford's literary and dramatic interests, she also saw the practical problem of providing an adequate maintenance for his progeny. Incidentally, it is also likely that the daughters, realizing or suspecting that their father was more interested in his theatrical pursuits than themselves, would not have been overfond of those "lewd friends" of his. At all events, in accordance with the conditions laid down by the Queen, Burghley got the Hedingham estate by fine for himself in September 1591 (Philips, 116; Ward, 306). The property was eventually bought back by Oxford's widow.

After the property came to Burghley's hands, part of the castle was dismantled, probably to reduce expenses of upkeep and also to bring in a certain amount of ready capital. Burghley, then, took a great interest in Oxford's daughters, and if we read the situation through the hardly impartial letters and relics of the great man, a good deal more than Oxford did himself.

But nothing in this story is simple. The Earl was aware that Burghley had been giving it out that he had been lacking in his duties toward his children. Thus, there was a further effort on Oxford's part to make himself financially independent—of the state and of Cecil. Writing to Burghley on May 18, 1591, Oxford asked that his 1,000 pounds annuity be exchanged for a lump sum of 5,000 pounds with which he might buy an estate in Denbigh worth 230 pounds per annum (Fowler, 411-430). Ward simply commented on Oxford's unbusinesslike approach in wanting to exchange so much for relatively so little (Ward, 306). But de Vere's effort must be seen as a protest and one more gesture of frustration with his father-in-law's proceedings. He clearly resented Burghley's assumption of sole responsibility toward the welfare of his own family. As he said, "he would be glad to be sure of something that were mine own." Further, "I would be glad to have an equal care with your Lordship over

my children” (Fowler, 411). It connected with the Hedingham transfer mentioned above. “If I may obtain this reasonable suit of her Majesty, granting me nothing but what she hath done to others and mean persons and nothing but that I shall pay for it, then those lands which are in Essex—as Hedingham, Brets, and the rest whatsoever—which will come to some 500 or 600 pounds by year, upon your Lordship’s friendly help towards my purchases in Denbigh, shall presently be delivered in possession to you for their use.” Evidently, the Essex lands were already under Burghley’s control since even Oxford, with his lack of financial know-how, would hardly have surrendered an estate worth 500 or 600 pounds a year for one worth 230 pounds.

Whether or not the gesture was driven home to Burghley, the latter did not lose his best opportunity for proclaiming to the world how much he had done for the Earl’s family, and how little the Earl himself. Oxford’s fourth daughter, Frances, died in September 1587. She was soon followed by her mother, Anne, who died on June 5, 1588. The tomb erected in Westminster Abbey not long afterward by Burghley bore an inscription relating to Bridget Vere, who was born on April 6, 1584, “hardly more than four years old... yet it was not without tears that she recognized that her mother had been taken away from her and shortly afterwards her grandmother as well. It is not true to say she was left an orphan seeing that her father is living, and a most affectionate grandfather who acts as her painstaking guardian.”¹⁷ Susan Vere, born on May 26, 1587, was recorded as “beginning to recognize her most loving grandfather, who has the care of all these children, so that they may not be deprived of a pious education or of a suitable upbringing” (ibid).

After reading this inscription, if the Earl their father was ever tempted to throw over the traces and desert the family to live openly with his lewd friends on the south bank, it must have been then. A few years before he might have, but by this time he had grown in wisdom, experience and self-restraint.

But it is difficult to disagree with Ward. “As a family man Lord Oxford was hopeless. The ruling passion of his life was poetry, literature, and the drama; and poets, as we know, only too often make dead failures of their domestic lives” (Ward, 331). He might have generalized even further to say that men and women of genius rarely give much of an example of living in their private lives. Burghley, the consummate man of affairs, who managed to keep the Queen’s confidence for a lifetime in spite of occasional misunderstandings, could not take seriously a man who occupied himself for most of the time with childhood toys. Oxford was too proud and intelligent not to resent his attitude. In 1584, Burghley raised his hackles by sending for information from one of Oxford’s servants about one of the Earl’s financial affairs. Oxford’s letter to the baron of October 30 did not mince words: “I mean not to be your ward nor your

child" (Fowler, 332-41).

Over the years, Oxford's relations with Queen Elizabeth, as with the court, was a mixture of love and hate, or at least of love, a cooling off, and with much frustration to follow. It was fully in accord with his own poetic nature that he should share with Edmund Spenser, and indeed with most Elizabethans, the concept of Elizabeth as Gloriana and the Faery Queen. It was probably more than this shrewd and formidable woman deserved.

As far as Oxford was concerned, his attitude toward the Queen derived from romantic chivalry. This blossomed in his first triumph at the tourney and in her presence at court during the early days of his success. It never left him. Nevertheless, there were moments, and moments extending into far lengthier periods, when she caused him considerable exasperation. He wrote to his brother-in-law, Sir Robert Cecil, on April 25/27, 1603, to commiserate on the late Queen's death. After the correct expressions of sorrow, he admitted that he saw himself as "the least regarded, though often comforted, of all her followers." As such, "she hath left me to try my fortune among the alterations of time and chance, either without sail whereby to take advantage of any prosperous gale, or with anchor to ride till the storm be overpast" (Fowler, 739-69).

Not content with his 1,000 pound annuity and the Rysing estate, Oxford had asked the Queen for a monopoly of the sales of oils, wool and fruit. He was unsuccessful, but renewed his suit in 1593. Meanwhile, in 1592, he applied for the title to the Forest of Essex, which had been a hereditary perquisite of his family. This time he was "browbeaten and had many bitter speeches given [him]" (Ward, 311). In the year 1587, in which he dropped from public view, he asked "to be gager of vessels of beer and ale, and viewer of the filling thereof with beer and ale. And to have for the gaging and seeing filled of every barrell, one penny of every kildo and kinnish [sic]... to be paid by the brewer."¹⁸ He does not seem to have gotten it. Perhaps the clue to all this insistence derives again from the ball and chain of debt, which shackled him to the Court of Wards even more than from any generosity which he felt bound to exercise toward needy literary suitors. The next year, 1588, he sold his mansion Fisher's Folly to settle part of his enormous debt to the Court of Wards. By a "heads you win, tails I lose" arrangement typical of the system, Oxford had not only been obliged to pay a fine if he refused the hand of Anne, Burghley's daughter, but also had to pay another for accepting her. The full price was never paid but Burghley, after the death of Anne, and perhaps in a spirit of revenge for all the annoyances he thought he had been caused, instituted proceedings against the Earl in 1589, seizing some of his lands in lieu of payment. This prompted Oxford to attempt the sale in order to keep ultimate possession.

After all this, it was no doubt in a spirit of contriving flattery rather than sincerity that Oxford wrote to Cecil in September 1590, telling him, “in all my causes I find [you] mine honourable good Lord, and to deal more fatherly than friendly with me, for the which I do acknowledge—and ever will—myself in most especial wise bound” (Fowler, 378-9). Did Cecil appreciate the irony of it? Many obscurities remain in Oxford’s financial affairs, however, and in his relations with his father-in-law in matters of money and property, he would not have wished to complicate his situation further by proclaiming openly an association with the public stage, which could only irritate the older man and the Queen as well.

De Vere had to step warily, sprinkling before him the perfume of flattery, since he would have known that many would have recognized in his plays, especially the histories, scarcely veiled allusions to his own time and the excesses thereof.¹⁹ His works, as he and Cecil knew, were *zamisdat*s, searching criticisms of the present in historical guise, passing from hand to hand and presented to the viewer without identification of author, although many at the time must have known well enough who he was and known whom they really meant when they spoke of “Shakespeare.”

From 1587, Oxford as the true Shakespeare lived in a retirement from court and public life to write and polish his plays. This lasted virtually until his death, although he did reappear briefly during the reign of James I, who seemed to fulfill at last many of the strivings of a lifetime. After several claims made in the previous reign, Oxford was granted the bailiwick of the Forest of Essex, and the keepership of Havering House on July 18, 1603. There had been an earlier history of continual frustration. He told Robert Cecil in a letter of May 7, 1603, of his former efforts. “What by the alterations of princes and wardships, I have been kept from my rightful possession.” He had been “advertised with assured promises and words of a prince to restore it herself unto me, [while she] caused me to let fall the suit. But so it was she was not so ready to perform her word, as I was too ready to believe it” (Fowler, 770-1). In August 1603, Oxford’s annuity was renewed and he was appointed to the Privy Council.

After the death of Burghley, his son, Sir Robert Cecil, had assumed the guardianship of Oxford’s daughters as the new Master of the Court of Wards. Oxford therefore treated him with outward respect and due deference in his letters. But he could not really trust him any more than his father. He admitted to him in a letter of 1602, “having relied on her Majesty, another confidence I had in yourself, in whom without offence, let me speak it, I am to cast some doubt” (Ogburn, 756). His doubt was no doubt justified; although one need not put it down to any ulterior motive so much as to a genuine feeling that Oxford had enough money to waste on the pastimes which Burghley had also dismissed as futile. Nor was it desirable to reduce overmuch that debt to the Court of Wards

which guaranteed de Vere's relative subservience and obedience.

In July 1600, Oxford sought Sir Robert's support in getting the Government of Jersey. Not only was Oxford's suit rejected but the Governorship went to Sir Walter Raleigh, which must have rankled deeply. After the Essex Rising, Oxford put in a plea for the confiscated estates of the attainted Sir Charles Danvers. This time the Queen agreed but the transfer was never made, even after a second plea in January 1602. The gift never passed the judges, and it seems certain that Sir Robert Cecil was involved in the non-transaction. On February 2, 1601, Oxford asked Cecil to be a "furtherer" not a "mover" in getting for him the Presidency of Wales (Fowler, 558). The principal secretary, after the manner of his father, answered politely but non-committally. Needless to say, Oxford was not obliged.

However much he may have felt the weight of the yoke, Oxford could not have gone against the wishes of Sir Robert Cecil any more than he could have gone against the wishes of the late Lord Burghley in matters of importance, especially financial. He could not escape a kind of thralldom. Once again, this would have included any breach of the convention that a nobleman should not demean himself by publishing plays under his own name, and certainly not the kind of plays which Oxford could be taken to have written; not only the historical plays but also the comedies, which likewise contained scenes and references to embarrass living contemporaries. These would have been virtually identified if the name of the author had been known. The historical plays could be taken to refer even more clearly to the feuds for place and power among the courtiers and nobles of times ostensibly presented as of long ago.

These plays began to appear attributed to William Shakespeare from 1592, and with his name put to them from 1598, the year of Burghley's death. This was also a year after James Burbage's death, who staged the first Shakespeare plays. By this time, we must suppose, William of Stratford and Edward de Vere knew one another well enough to share the common identity. There was a certain humor in it which would have appealed not only to the pair in question but also to a wider circle of Elizabethans who took great pleasure in riddles, hidden meanings and entertaining obscurities, and who knew this particular secret. As we have seen, it is impossible to believe that the true identity of the writer of the Shakespeare canon could have been concealed from those close to Edward de Vere. The convention of hiding the true name of a writer beyond cryptic initials or obscure phrases, evidenced most typically in *A Hundreth Sundrie Floweers*, was fully understood, and only we who come after, like those who stood outside the charmed circle of the time, remain in ignorance of those darkly indicated identities.

We can hardly doubt that Edward de Vere and William of Stratford came to

know one another well, as de Vere could not have been ignorant of the existence of William, a man who was certainly significant as a shareholder in the Globe Theatre. Nor can we suppose that Oxford would have assumed the name of the other without something like approval or consent. This may well have turned to the actor/shareholder's profit. Authentic documents reveal very clearly William's interest in money, even small sums. He would have made little difficulty over a concession, presumably with no formal contract, but which brought him profit at least in the way of presents. In any case, for a man of William's negligible social stature, an association with a nobleman of Oxford's standing would have been reward in itself. Not that Oxford needed to be overnice in his choice of soubriquet. For one thing, the device on his hereditary Bulbeck crest showed a lion shaking a spear.²⁰ For another, the name "Shakespeare" was not uncommon, especially in Warwickshire, and anyone could adopt a pseudonym without a by-your-leave.

It has been conjectured that William Shakespeare's first experience of the stage occurred when he joined the Earl of Leicester's players when they visited Stratford-on-Avon in 1586 or 1587 (Ward, 323). Membership in these companies was very fluid and it was common for a player to pass from one to another. In this way, Shakespeare may have found his way to Oxford's company. But there is another and perhaps even stronger possibility. According to E.K. Chambers, "players under [Oxford's] name were notified to Walsingham amongst others setting up their bills in London on January 25, 1587" (Chambers, I, 101). In the circumstances, it seems at least as likely that Shakespeare migrated to London, like many other young hopefuls. There he might have found and joined Oxford's company. The company was reported in York the same year, but not before June. This would have given him time to meet and cultivate the Earl of Oxford, their patron, and become one of his "lewd friends." One can see Shakespeare in the role of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*; a fellow who knew how to use his wits and worm himself into the confidence of others; who had abandoned his father's Catholic recusancy as being without profit; a man with an eye always to the main chance and alert to the prospect of making the proverbial "fast buck." Oxford would have been amused by him, and they would have enjoyed the best joke of all in sharing in some sense the same name. Indeed, could it be more than coincidence that while in 1583, Shakespeare had a daughter, Susannah (Ogburn, 26), Oxford's youngest daughter, born on Mary 26, 1587, was christened Susan (Ogburn, 703), not a very common name?

How widely was the real identity of the author of the Shakespeare canon known by 1598, when the plays first began to be published in Shakespeare's name? Francis Meres' comments on both Shakespeare and Oxford are well

known and often quoted, but one wonders if the precise significance of his mode of expression has not been overlooked. He described Oxford as “the best for comedy” but listed none of his plays. After mention of eminent Latin dramatists he declared “Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the English stage,” but this time went on to list several comedies and tragedies. What is the difference between “best” and “most excellent?” Surely there is none. So what was the difference between Oxford and Shakespeare? Could it be that Meres has been telling us all this time that the two men as playwrights were one and the same man? Meres was a cultivated man who knew the value of words. True, he was only the rector of a rather obscure country parish in Rutlandshire, but he had been educated at Pembroke College in Cambridge.²¹ He was “also brother-in-law to John Florio, Southampton’s Italian tutor in 1594. Frances A. Yates has surmised that Florio was placed by William Cecil in Southampton’s household to spy upon him and that while Southampton distrusted Florio, he feared to get rid of him” (Looney, II, 177). Meres, then, had at least one good contact for finding out about what was going on in the literary world, and had come away with information which he would be sufficiently sophisticated to know he could not share with the wider public except in veiled terms. This he did.

Notes

1. Mary Sullivan, *Court Masques of James I* (London, 1913).
2. Sir E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, ii (Oxford, 1923) 127.
3. Anne Jennalie Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare’s London* (1981) 87.
4. R.B. McKerrow, *Complete Works of Thomas Nashe*, i (London, 1910) 212.
5. Quoted in A.J. Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare’s London* (1981) 101.
6. Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583).
7. N.H. Nicolas, *Memoirs of the Life and Times of Sir Christopher Hatton* (London, 1847).
8. Bernard Ward, *The 17th Earl of Oxford* (London, 1928) 280.
9. H.G. Wright, *The Life and Works of Arthur Hall of Grantham* (Manchester, 1919) 25-6.
10. H. Foley, SJ, *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, iv, 49.
11. Francis Edwards, SJ, *The Marvelous Chance* (London, 1968); *The Dangerous Queen* (London, 1964).
12. W.P. Fowler, *Shakespeare Revealed in Oxford’s Letters* (1986) 107-117.

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13. Steven W. May, ed., "The Poems of Edward de Vere," *Studies in Philology* 77:5 (1980) 25.
14. London Public Record Office, SP12/268/ff.221-2.
15. Ruth Loyd Miller, ed., *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers*, 3rd ed. (1975).
16. G.W. Philips, *Lord Burghley in Shakespeare* 116.
17. Charlton Ogburn, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984) 703.
18. British Library, Additional MS 12/497/ff.409r-16v.
19. Eva Turner Clark, *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays*, 2nd ed. (1974).
20. J. Thomas Looney, "*Shakespeare*" *Identified in Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*, 3rd ed., i (1974) 471.
21. J.S. Smart, *Shakespeare, Truth and Tradition*. 134-5.