

Edward de Vere and the Psychology of Feudalism

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One of the questions to occur most persistently in my mind during my lecture tour in the United States has been the following: “What were the social, political, and cultural forces which gave birth to the phenomenon we know as Shakespeare?” Whenever I pondered this question, the concept of feudalism raised its somewhat amorphous head. I began to realize that it was a key concept in understanding the psyche of the man behind the pseudonym Shakespeare and what had motivated the composition of his plays and poems. I have therefore chosen my title carefully: not “Edward de Vere and Feudalism,” but “Edward de Vere and the Psychology of Feudalism.” This exonerates me from attempting an historically precise definition of a concept which is notorious for evading just such a definition.

Simply, feudalism was a system of land tenure which directed the whole social, economic and political structure of Europe between the 9th and 15th centuries. It was based on the hierarchical relationship between vassal, lord and monarch. Vassals held land from their seigneur or feudal lord in return for labor services and dues. The lord, in turn, held land from his King in return for homage and military service, thus creating a balance of rights and duties as shared by the King and the various holders of land. The economic unit was the manor.

In its finest manifestation, feudalism involved a strong sense of social responsibility on the part of the feudal lord toward his vassals, which, in turn, inspired a strong sense of community among the members of a particular fiefdom. Such an ethos was generated by the Christian ideals of the strong helping the weak, and the rich helping the poor, and went a long way toward ensuring that men and women did not drop out of society to the extent that they did, for instance, in Elizabeth I’s time, when a whole new class of tramps and vagabonds came into being—as happened again in the 1980s in Great Britain during Mrs. Thatcher’s administration. The lunatic and the lost sheep were treasured within the estate walls as being important in preserving the integrity of the community as a mirror image of the human soul. It could be

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its own little kingdom, undisrupted by the pressures and divisions of the modern capitalist state.

For Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, the old feudal world of his ancestors bestowed upon him a sense of identity and honor, as well as acting as the foundation for his imaginative world. Alberic de Ver, grandfather of the 1st Earl of Oxford, had distinguished himself during the First Crusade in 1098, and was granted the manor of Hedingham in Essex by William the Conqueror. His eldest son, Alberic II, built the vast castle of Hedingham, whose high, imposing keep still stands today. There his descendants, beginning with his son Aubrey de Vere, 1st Earl of Oxford, lived in feudal splendor for centuries, acquiring a local reputation as generous and chivalric lords.

The new meritocratic world being ushered in by Elizabeth and her bureaucratic and administrative nobility was a literalist world in comparison, in which the old chivalric principles of life were giving way to wholly economic considerations. (Indeed, capitalism was transforming all of life's processes—not just economics and politics, but sex and entertainment as well.) Having said this, however, it would be foolish to assert that Oxford actively encouraged a return to the political life of the previous century, since his feudalism was more a matter of sentiment, nostalgia and imagination than of literal politics; a state of mind rather than a political creed. In exploring the theme of Oxford's dynamic relationship with the quickly-changing society of his time, and hence the whole question of what motivated him to write the plays and what the plays themselves actually represent, I shall pay particular attention to those two remarkable social dramas—*Timon of Athens* and *King Lear*.

I

The essentially anti-feudal politics of Kings Henry VII and VIII, spear-headed by their creation of a new government machinery to dismantle the power bases of the old medieval aristocracy, laid the foundations of the society into which Oxford was born in 1550. Henry VII and VIII were themselves, by patrilinear descent, new men: certainly both had felt threatened by the power of the old feudal nobility. Henry VII's fining of the 13th Earl of Oxford to the tune of 15,000 marks in the 1490s for maintaining too many men in the de Vere livery, and Henry VIII's 1547 execution of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (a poet and Oxford's uncle by marriage), for quartering the arms of King Edward the Confessor on his armorial shield, were examples of Tudor wrath whose lessons would not have been lost on Edward de Vere himself. As for Elizabeth's 1572 execution of Oxford's first cousin, Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, suffice it to say that his loathing of the modern politics of expediency became utter.

At any rate, Oxford, by dint of his ancestry and cast of mind, arrived into the world fully dressed to play the role of feudal lord; but there were precious few stage props in the new world of Elizabeth to sustain such a role, and precious

few supporting actors. It was left to his dramatic art to supply these. For I believe that Oxford came to terms with his loss of feudal power by transforming himself from pragmatic ruler into artist (or spiritual teacher), and it is this transition that the Shakespearean plays explore and dramatize, a transition whose catalyst can best be described by the term "identity crisis."

There had been no middle class to speak of in feudal times, nor would one have been in evidence at the Hedingham Castle of Oxford's childhood. When the young Edward was not with his parents and members of the local nobility, he would have been in the company of servants, stable boys, peasants and clowns, and would have taken great delight in the pith and variety of estate life. What is important to understand about the psychology of the man who was Shakespeare is that were he not to see himself as a lord or prince, he would see himself as a peasant, tramp or beggar. Lear himself is, after all, the ultimate down-and-out.

When John de Vere, the 16th Earl, died in 1562, Edward embarked unconsciously upon the role of feudal seigneur when he rode into London from Hedingham accompanied by eighty of his men in livery of Reading tawny and with seven score horses all in black. Perhaps the gesture was deliberate, and the young Earl was seeking to put on record his own sense of kinship with the philosophy of another age. Whatever the case, his sense of himself was soon to be disturbed by his entry into the household of the Machiavellian Sir William Cecil, Elizabeth's Principal Secretary of State, who was determined to ensure that Oxford's powers and instincts were confined within the compass of the modern state. Oxford himself was soon to understand that literature, and the drama in particular, under the aegis of Allegory, were to be his most potent weapons in his struggle to preserve his own political power and integrity.

Apart from books, one of Oxford's passions in his teens was fine clothes, and he spent lavishly on them. Clearly he was extravagant by nature, but his spending, which begins in earnest during the early years of his wardship at Cecil House, seems to be as much a reaction against the bourgeois principles of his guardian as an expression of the aristocratic notion that expenditure was the badge of rank. The list of fantastic clothes he ordered, together with rapiers and daggers, in the late 1560s, reads like a catalogue of stage props.

The concept of wardship was medieval, indeed feudal, in origin, and had been revived by the Tudors after its lapse in the late Middle Ages as a means, pure and simple, of making money. Henry VII resurrected his feudal rights through the searching out of "concealed" wardships, whereby wealthy noblemen who were also minors became the property of the Crown via the Master of the Wards. The wards could not even marry without the express authority of the monarch or, if the wardship had been sold, of their guardian. The master during Oxford's minority was William Cecil, whose manipulation and extor-

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tion of his young wards would have been perceived by Oxford as a grotesque parody of the proper ideals of feudalism.

Lord Oxford had no legal choice but to marry the daughter of his arch antagonist, the man who, by seeming to see the things he did not, triggered Oxford's own obsession with the truth, an obsession given extra significance by his own name and the family motto of "Vero Nihil Verius," or "Nothing Truer Than Truth." As an anonymous observer in *Timon of Athens* remarks: "...I perceive/Men must learn now with pity to dispense,/For policy sits above conscience" (III.ii.87-9). Ironically enough, so artificial and so full of shadows could Court life be, that it became the fiction in Oxford's mind while the theater was the vehicle of truth. The Court suddenly caught sight of itself in the mirror of Oxford's art, a mirror he held obstinately and courageously to its face for over a quarter of a century as the dramatist William Shakespeare.

The early 1570s perhaps mark the zenith of Oxford's position of grace and favor at Elizabeth's Court. She was his lord and he her vassal. At least, that was the ideal he registered in such poems as *Love Thy Choice*. The reality both then and throughout the remainder of his life, however, was probably very different, for there were many forces at work corroding Oxford's sense of his proper feudal relationship to his monarch, not least among which would have been Elizabeth's own personal breaches of faith and trust. Her corruption imposed heavy strains upon his sense of duty and the proper homage he owed his sovereign, for to see corruption in the Queen was to see corruption everywhere, as Sonnet 127 makes clear. (Nor could the Queen herself be exempt from the charge of royal parvenue.) Furthermore, in the feudal system, a man owed his highest allegiance to God, and Oxford would have suffered an acute conflict between, on the one hand, his duty to his fallen Queen (which was to be William Shakespeare) and, on the other, his duty to his God (which was to be himself). It was a conflict between opportunism and truth: an abiding conflict in his artistic life.

II

In this context, it is interesting to look at the opening scene of *King Lear*. Here, where Lear demands of his subject-daughters the homage that is his due as their feudal overlord, we have a grotesque parody of the true feudal rendering of homage. Oxford is mocking new Elizabethan social and political ethics by drawing attention to the literalism of a society in which even love can be computed. Lear implicitly rejects this new world by renouncing his kingship of it, while explicitly embracing it through his rejection of Cordelia's true feudal bond and his acceptance of the phoney ones of Goneril and Regan. Cordelia seems to be playing the role for Lear that Oxford played for his sovereign as her court dramatist, and so, in this scene, can represent truth or Oxford's art. Indeed, Oxford often uses the word "nothing" in the Shakespeare plays to indicate his artistic persona as truth-teller or his position outside society,

beyond rank and office; and in a philosophic sense to indicate spiritual wisdom. It is interesting that this is the word Cordelia uses twice in three lines to register her rejection of the charade that Lear is staging, and to answer his specific question, "...what can you say to draw/A third more opulent than your sisters?"

Goneril and Regan, on the other hand, can represent the forces of authority, which are the forces that make art tongue-tied. Moreover, it is significant that Goneril speaks of her love for Lear as "a love that makes breath poor and speech unable." The whole opening scene is highly theatrical, a grand set piece in which Lear forgets that he is the director and inadvertently becomes one of the actors, getting caught up in the drama of his own anger and self-pity. Lines such as "Peace, Kent! Come not between the Dragon and his wrath" are marvelously extravagant. Indeed, there is something unnervingly synonymous here between life and art, if one remembers the words of John Davies of Hereford to Shakespeare in his 1610 epigram: "Hadst thou not played some Kingly parts in sport,/Thou hadst been a companion for a King..." ("The Scourge of Folly," no. 159, E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. II, p. 214)

Although kingship is something instinctive to Lear, the reader is always made aware that Lear understands that he is essentially playing a role. Behind the portentous decisions of state and the grand ceremonies of regal pomp, Lear clearly sees the ragged and motley apparatus of the theater, where the king is not innately superior to the beggar—he simply plays a different role. Thus, a philosophy begins to emerge from the play, one which says that in human life one must acknowledge the theatricality of existence, otherwise class and the concept of "degree" become divisive. But if one can see class as a fluid concept that works in cycles rather than strata, whereby a man may play a series of different roles over the course of his life without being defined by any one of them, then, with the aid of learning, social strife may be avoided and the power of the individual conscience stimulated. *King Lear*, then, like Shakespeare's other plays, has a strong didactic purpose. By means of the theater, Oxford was teaching society (first his fellow courtiers, and then the populace at large) to look critically at itself and to value spiritual growth over self-advancement.

But how did Oxford come to cast himself in the role of King Lear? In a sense, Lear is the blazing forth of Oxford's repressed feudal instincts. For it seems that many of the old feudal nobility in Elizabeth's time, who like the Earl of Essex and, from the 1580s, Oxford himself, had lost their estates and were thus deprived of the opportunity to play king in their own fiefdom, nevertheless preserved within themselves the strong instinctive desire to play this very role. Moreover, as in the case of Essex, the repression of such a desire, if insupportable, could lead to its sudden violent eruption in rebellion against the monarchy. As John Turner points out in his *Shakespeare: Out of Court*:

The Essex rebellion was the last in a long line of aristocratic rebellions

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that were justified by appeal to the aristocratic code of honor, and its failure, right at the end of Elizabeth's reign, symbolized the final passing of an age. Indeed, Essex's career and downfall might stand as an emblem, as it was maybe an inspiration, of a story that Shakespeare told again and again and that perfectly expresses his paradoxical reading of historical progress.

Lear's instinctive attachment to the old feudal world is manifested not only through his deeply felt social concerns on the heath, but also by means of his one hundred knights, who are his vassal retinue, and who, in their degeneracy and disorderliness may well stand for Lord Oxford's players. They are a symbol of potential political anarchy, but also are indispensable to Lear's sense of his own role and identity in society. Once they are removed from him, his sanity gives way. William Cecil, Lord Burghley's 1572 edict against unlicensed players, which comes under his Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds, betrays his fear of players as essentially lawless and beyond the scope of society. Lear's flight onto the heath is highly symbolic and is itself an act of anarchy by which the King destroys "degree" and associates himself with the insulted and the injured, the trampled and persecuted, just as Timon does, albeit less spectacularly, when he digs for roots outside the city walls of Athens. No longer a ruler, Lear's language becomes that of a creator, and he commands the elements:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!

You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout

Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks! (III.ii.1-3)

III

To return to Oxford's life, the early 1570s were also important as the time when he came of age as a literary patron, and began to gather about him the literary and theatrical characters who would come to represent his own true feudal retinue. It was also a time in which he fully realized the power of art to alter society, and to open up new worlds of perception and self-awareness to the people of England. Two literary events over which he presided at this juncture are of particular significance.

The first occurred in 1571, when Oxford took it upon himself to introduce Bartholomew Clerke's translation from Italian into Latin of Baldassare Castiglione's book, *Il Cortegiano*, or *The Courtier*, which had first been published in Venice in 1528. Clerke had been one of Oxford's tutors at Cambridge, and it's likely that Oxford defrayed the costs of publication. At any rate, he contributed a remarkable Latin preface to the work, a preface described by the Cambridge don, Gabriel Harvey, as "more polished even than the writings of Castiglione himself..."

In his book, Castiglione set out to explore the question of what constitutes the ideal courtier by means of what purport to be actual conversations between the courtiers and ladies of the Court of Duke Guidobaldo of Urbino. By

combining an appreciation of the medieval principles of chivalry with a new awareness of the value of role-playing in society, Castiglione managed to evoke some of the sociological tensions within the Renaissance Court, which Shakespeare was to exploit so forcefully in his works half a century later. Moreover, there can be little doubt that Castiglione's philosophy of "civilization" greatly influenced Shakespeare: nowhere moreso than in his portrayal of Hamlet.

The notion of the Court as theater underpins a great deal of the text of *The Courtier*, and is of course a strong idea in Shakespeare. In his fascinating work, *Courtly Performances: Masking and Festivity in Castiglione's Book of the Courtier*, Wayne Rebhorn argues that Castiglione believed that the aspiring courtier ought to become aware of what masking involves, of the different roles required by different social situations; and should develop an ideal flexibility, a protean quality which enables him to shift from role to role with the lightning speed of a quick-change artist. Through this understanding of role-playing and his mastery of the myriad forms assumed by human activities, Castiglione's ideally flexible courtier can not only achieve social success, but the truest sort of freedom as well.

Thus, in Castiglione's philosophy, we see the seeds of what in Shakespeare's hands becomes a whole new system of society, built upon the ruins of the feudal world, where the idea of class is rendered irrelevant by the individual's ability to play a whole range of roles within society in an attempt to discover his "ideal self." The true Renaissance aristocrat was indeed a protean creature.

The second event took place in 1573, when Thomas Bedingfield's translation into English of Girolamo Cardano's book, *De Consolatione* (or *Cardanus' Comforte*), was published "by commandment of the right honourable the Earl of Oxford." The work had first appeared in its original Latin in Venice in 1542, and had as its central motif the philosophy of human sympathy. Cardano had written it to help himself and others better bear the disappointments and sufferings of their lives, and in it he contends against the vain passions and false persuasions of mankind. Its ideas animate much of Hamlet's philosophy, and it has many important points of contact with *The Courtier*, not least as it treats of the perfectibility of the individual. The book's ethical foundations are feudal in spirit.

Oxford contributed a prefatory letter to the publication—in effect, a declaration of his dedication to artistic pursuits. (This was not a move calculated to endear him to his father-in-law, Lord Burghley, who viewed art as a loose cannon in his carefully constructed political world.) In it, Oxford declares that the reading of Cardano's book "shall comfort the afflicted, confirm the doubtful, encourage the coward, and lift up the base-minded man to achieve to any true sum or grade of virtue, whereto ought only the noble thoughts of

men to be inclined.” In addition to the preface, which he signs off, “From my new country Muses of Wivenhoe,” Oxford contributed a dedicatory poem, in which he is already voicing some of those social concerns that will eventually find their resolution in *King Lear*. Here are the first three stanzas:

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 have the seed.

The manchet fine falls not unto his share;
On coarsest cheat his hungry stomach feeds.
The landlord doth possess the finest fare;
He pulls the flowers, the other plucks but weeds.

The mason poor that builds the lordly halls,
Dwells not in them; they are for high degree;
His cottage is compact in paper walls,
And not with brick or stone as others be. (*The Poems of Edward de Vere*, Ed. J. Thomas Looney, London, 1921, p. 14)

In 1575, Oxford embarked on his tour of the Continent (in particular, Italy), and on his return the following year, brought back ideas for the creation of the English theater, which he forthwith implemented at Court. Soon, Cynthia’s Revels (to borrow a phrase from Jonson) were in full swing, with the prolific Oxford inspired by his desire to entertain and instruct the Queen, to whom alone was due, to quote from his preface to *The Courtier*, “all the praise of all the Muses and all the glory of literature.” Indeed, Oxford’s theatrical service to the Queen was itself a parody of more traditional forms of feudal homage. Since the opportunity for both political and military service was denied him, he had to fight his battles at Court. Such a denial constituted a severe blow to his sense of status and self-esteem, and his sense of frustration was every bit as strong as is Bertram’s (a self-portrait) in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. He, too, is kept at Court:

I shall stay here the forehorse to a smock,
Creaking my shoes on the plain masonry,
Till honour be bought up, and no sword worn
But one to dance with. By heaven, I’ll steal away! (II.i.30-3)

The old military aristocracy had violence bred in the bone, and were accustomed both to serving their monarch in wars overseas, and to feuding at home during “peacetime.” Walt Whitman referred to the “dragon-rancours of the [medieval] barons.” It was not an instinct that Tudor government could simply wish away. The unfailingly perceptive John Turner in his *Shakespeare*:

Out of Court writes:

...the competition of courtly life [in Shakespeare] is experienced as a sublimation at once exhilarating and melancholy of lost, more vital military energies. Melancholy here, as so often in later periods, is a measure both of the degree of a civilization and of its discontents; the civil war of courtly wits belongs to a safe but shrunken world, where manners have been attained at the price of manliness. Nor was this struggle simply a matter of history to Shakespeare.(5)

Oxford himself, of course, could never remain content with “the civil war of courtly wits,” but instead relied on his dramatic art to compensate for the disappointments of his military and political life. It is no coincidence that he chose a military pen name, for it was his way of letting his contemporaries know that he could serve his Queen as well with the pen as with the sword. And with his pen he charted the development of the feudal mind, from the Henry VI plays via Prince Hal and Richard II, right through to King Lear, from the unselfconscious honor of violence bound by high, unshakeable “degree” to the self-questioning theater of kingship with its collapsed and abandoned rights. In his *November Boughs*, Walt Whitman wrote of Shakespeare’s history plays:

Conceiv’d out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism—personifying in unparallel’d ways the mediaeval aristocracy, its towering spirit of ruthless and gigantic caste, its own peculiar air and arrogance (no mere imitation)—only one of the ‘wolfish earls’ so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born descendant or knower, might seem to be the true author of those amazing works... (404)

But Oxford’s turning toward his art compounded his identity crisis, since he now had to confront the tension in his soul between feudal aristocrat and bohemian. In other words, he had to confront his “nothingness:” he is nothing because the artist is outside hierarchy or “degree” in society, and he is nothing because of his enforced anonymity. How apposite then are Yeats’s words in his *Essays and Introductions*:

Shakespeare’s myth, it may be, describes a noble man who was blind from very nobility, and an empty man who thrust him from his place, and saw all that could be seen from very emptiness.(107)

These words wonderfully encapsulate the journey of the feudal soul which Shakespeare describes in his works, as well as being an apt description of the young Oxford versus the old Oxford. For, to my mind, the Shakespearean dramas represent the final stage in the development of the old feudal aristocracy, as epitomized by Edward de Vere. After all, in what direction were they, the old aristocracy, to go if they were not to regress socially, and if they were to hold on to a semblance of power? Into states of classlessness, of course: into fooldom and the world of art; clowning, subversion, anarchy even. In other words, psychologically, they solved the problem of their disintegration of

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power by transforming themselves from rulers into creators. The theater for them was a last great act of both self-affirmation and self-denial. There were many examples of this transformation in the fields of art and science: witness the Earl of Surrey; the Stanley brothers, Earls of Derby; and Henry Percy, the "wizard Earl" of Northumberland, to name but a few.

Seated before the stage at the performance of one of Oxford's plays, Elizabeth would have perceived the theater as demonstrating and celebrating the power of the monarch and the Court to direct and recreate life. The actors were like puppets, and they, the courtiers, pulled the strings. In this context, Oxford's participation in the theater not only as writer and patron, but as actor and director as well, would have been seen as anarchical and subversive. As indeed it was: hence the Shakespeare authorship "problem." But he was subversive in a very healthy way, since his court satires were clearly a curb upon the tyranny of Elizabeth's government. By holding up the mirror to the hypocrites and hypocrisies of modern political life, Oxford was acting as the conscience of his nation and introducing democratic principles into the politics of the time.

Lear excoriates both the political and legal systems of his day, and, ultimately, his insistence is upon common justice and respect for the conscience of the individual. As he says, "A dog's obey'd in office;" a horrifying notion perhaps in real life, but a therapeutic one within the framework of the theater when one considers that festivity (the germ of our modern theater in the Middle Ages and Renaissance) involved, in the words of Professor Rebhorn, "the transformation of society into community; in other words, a temporary suspension of the rules governing ordinary social intercourse: status relationships are altered, or even reversed; social and religious institutions temporarily lose their authority; the political order is travestied..." (16-17) The instrument of Oxford's travesty was the court satire.

The other thing that Oxford brought back from the Continent was new and extravagant clothes, again a peculiarly subversive act if one looks at the mores of the time. In 1533, Henry VIII enacted a broad range of sumptuary legislation: that is, regulations governing the type of clothes and the amount of food which could lawfully be worn and consumed by different classes of people, and Elizabeth herself issued no less than ten proclamations during her reign enjoining the enforcement of the 1533 Act. By bringing back new fashions to the Court from Italy and ostentatiously wearing them, Oxford was, in effect, declaring himself to be a class unto himself. His Italianate dress was a form of fool's motley, which transported him beyond class. Gabriel Harvey was certainly employed by forces at Court (I suspect the Earl of Leicester) to ridicule Oxford's behavior in *The Mirror of Tuscanism*, where he writes of him:

A little Apish flat couched fast to the pate like an oyster,

French Camarick ruffs, deep with a whiteness starched to the purpose.
Every one A per se A, his terms and braveries in print,
Delicate in speech, quaint in array: conceited in all points,
In courtly guiles a passing singular odd man,
For Gallants a brave Mirror, a Primrose of Honour,
A Diamond for nonce, a fellow peerless in England. (Ward, 198)

The whole poem is long, and beneath Harvey's ridicule, it is difficult not to detect someone else's consternation. Anyway, once again, we have Oxford playing a subversive role in society, not only because he has no fixed role within it to anchor him, but also because he is exploring Castiglione's concept of self-knowledge through role-playing.

From 1576 through 1581, freed from the bonds of family life, Oxford set about creating a literary theater of operations for himself in London, bringing new writers within his compass through example, encouragement and patronage—men such as Nashe, Lyly, Greene, Watson, Day, Munday, Churchyard, Brooke, and Hester. This life of his, with his theatrical companies and his dramatist and actor friends, parodied that of the feudal lord with his retinue. Oxford nurtured and protected his men as if they were vassals. This was the final ironic expression of the power and responsibility of the feudal lord, who has forsaken the role of ruler for that of creator. Oxford would have held court at Vere House or the Boar's Head Tavern in Eastcheap or the Blackfriars, always pitting new worlds against the status quo, like some permanent Lord of Misrule.

Then, around 1584 (though it may well have been earlier), Oxford made his most deliberate quasi-feudal statement by purchasing Fisher's Folly, a huge mansion which occupied what is now Devonshire Square in London. It possessed pleasure gardens and bowling alleys and had been so grandly and sumptuously built by the ruined and indebted Jasper Fisher that it had received its name in awestruck mockery. Charles Wisner Barrell, writing in *The Shakespeare Fellowship Quarterly*, asserts that Oxford (himself in the same financial straits as Fisher had been when he built it) acquired the mansion "as headquarters for the school of poets and dramatists who openly acknowledged his patronage and leadership." (vol. 1, no. 2, April 1945, 25b) The interesting point here is that Oxford chose to commit the same act of folly as Fisher. Both were pursuing medieval aristocratic ideals, where the insistence was upon liberality, and where wealth was subservient to status and reputation. As Iago says to Othello in Act II, scene iii, of that play:

Good name in man and woman's dear, my lord;
Is the immediate jewel of our souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash, 'tis something, nothing,
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave of thousands;

But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.

As Lawrence Stone points out in his book, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641*, expenditure was the acid test of rank, and many families during Elizabeth's reign overreached themselves in their efforts to maintain their status. Falling heavily into debt, they eventually sold their patrimony and disappeared. It was a failure to come to terms with the new ethos of Elizabethan society, in which the acquisition rather than the disposal of money now contributed largely to the whole notion of status, and prosperity was perceived as evidence of Divine favor.

IV

As for Oxford himself, his financial recklessness was both an expression of his feudal heritage and a protest against the modern importance attached to the saving of money, a concept as alien to him as it is, indeed, to one of his grimmest self-portraits, *Timon*. Oxford had begun selling his estates while traveling in Italy in order to prolong his stay, but it was on his return from the Continent in 1576 that he began disposing of them in earnest, in order to build and maintain his reputation as the Maecenas of his age. The less "spacious" he became "in the possession of dirt," the more rootedly feudalism pitched its tents in his head and heart. *Timon's* steward confides despairingly to the audience: "His promises fly so beyond his state/That what he speaks is all in debt..." (I.ii.195-6), while *Timon* himself declares: "Let all my land be sold." (II.ii.149)

With reference to *Timon of Athens*, Hardin Craig comments that "Timon's spending was set down as a mark of his nobility in the ancient world and was so understood in the Renaissance. Let us not intrude any bourgeois parsimony into the tale of *Timon of Athens*. It was noble to spend, and Timon was a spender." Referring to the same play in his *The Man Shakespeare and his Tragic Life Story*, Frank Harris, someone who believes that *Timon* is a self-portrait of the author, writes: "Shakespeare probably exaggerated his generosity out of aristocratic pose; but that he was careless of money and freehanded to a fault is, I think, certain from his writings..." (340) My final quotation on this play comes from H.J. Oliver in his preface to the Arden edition of the play. Oliver, because he is looking at the work through traditional spectacles, will not allow himself to accept the simplest and most direct explanation of what the play means. In challenging the notion that in *Timon* Shakespeare depicts the social chaos consequent upon the economic ruin of the nobility, he writes:

The argument is that usury was in Elizabethan eyes a sin; and that in the story of *Timon*, Shakespeare is dramatizing the fall of the feudal nobility who, borrowing to keep up their state, put themselves in the hands of

usurers. Lending without interest, it is alleged, was the very symbol of the older feudal morality, the passing of which Shakespeare was lamenting. I think it should be suggested that the economic history on which such views are based is itself none too sound: Wilson's *Discourse on Usury*, from which so much is quoted, was published in 1572 and deplored an already changing situation, so that Shakespeare's supposed lament of, say, 1608 would hardly have been topical.(xiv-xlv)

Oxfordian scholars, however, date the first recorded performance of what was later to be entitled, *Timon of Athens*, to February 1576-7, when *The History of the Solitary Knight* was shown before the Court at Whitehall, enacted by the Lord Howard's Servants, who were in reality the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Howard was simply acting as deputy at the time. To contend that *Timon* was written after a play like *Hamlet* is surely to suggest that the author diminished in maturity as he grew in years.

Timon's fall is not caused simply by his belief that everyone else shares his own utter disdain for money, but also by a strong element of fatalism in his character, whereby he seems interested in the possibility (dramatic possibility even) of his own despair and ruin. It's almost as if he senses that he is the final and ultimate embodiment of a dying feudalism. There is a desire in him to confront the nothingness that is so powerful a force in *King Lear* and *Richard II*. Indeed, if one reads the verbal and psychological duel between Timon and Apemantus for the high ground of cynicism in Act IV, scene iii, a scene which takes place on wasteland outside the walls of Athens, one soon realizes that Apemantus is accusing Timon of playing a role, of acting out his own despair, a despair whose psychological pendulum moves between the poles of prince and beggar:

"The middle of humanity thou never knewest," he rails, "but the extremity of both ends. When thou wast in thy gilt and thy perfume, they mocked thee for too much curiosity [i.e., delicacy, fastidiousness]; in thy rags thou know'st none, but art despis'd for the contrary." (IV.iii.301-5)

Apemantus does not believe that Timon can truly divorce himself from society, as he, Apemantus, has done. It is the artist in Timon that chooses the role of forsaken man, and there is no doubt that, whatever his great qualities are, there is a strong strain of self-pity in Shakespeare. It is interesting too that Timon, for his part, because of his essential gentleness and humanity, cannot understand the motivation for Apemantus' cynicism and misanthropy. At all events, Timon, like Lear, turns out to be a man with strong histrionic instincts, and he too, having abandoned his role in society, that of wealthy patron, adopts the language of the creator, for instance in Act IV, when he addresses Mother Earth thus:

Ensear thy fertile and conceptious womb;

Let it no more bring out ingrateful man.
Go great with tigers, dragons, wolves and bears;
Teem with new monsters, whom thy upward face
Hath to the marbled mansion all above
Never presented. (IV.iii.189-94)

As Apemantus says, Timon (like Lear) must be either prince or beggar: there is no in between. This is a key psychological crux in Oxford's spirit, and we are put in mind of his challenge verse from the 1570s, which was circulated at Court:

Were I a king I could command content;
Were I obscure unknown would be my cares,
And were I dead no thought should me torment,
Nor words, nor wrongs, nor loves, nor hopes, nor fears;
 A doubtful choice of these things which to crave,
 A kingdom or a cottage or a grave. (*Poems*, 38)

Richard II is another case in point. As Shakespeare portrays him, here is a king who possesses a strong romantic attachment to old notions of chivalric behavior, who loves the theater and spectacle of politics. As is the case with Oxford, feudalism is more an idea than a reality for Richard, and it is John of Gaunt, and not Richard, who in the play is presented as the upholder and defender of feudal England. The historical Richard is reputed to have said that the laws of the realm were in his head, and indeed Shakespeare's Richard behaves in a most highhanded manner toward government. He treats England as his own private estate, which he feels entitled to manage in whatever way he pleases. So while Gaunt can be seen as the responsible face of feudalism, Richard may usefully be perceived as feudalism gone berserk, since he takes it to the extreme limits of its meaning, whereby, because the lords of the realm hold their land in fee from him, he is thus the literal owner of all the land in the realm, free to dispose of it as he thinks fit. It's all part of the drama of playing king; of exploring the limits of one's role.

Because Richard cannot conceive a world in which his vassals do not pay him proper homage as their overlord, he can see only chaos beyond the status quo, where order and "degree" are usurped, and nothingness prevails:

"...Sometimes am I a king,
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am. Then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I king'd again, and by and by
Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be,
Nor I, nor any man that but man is,

Vere

With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eas'd

With being nothing. (V.v.32-41)

He is king, beggar, or nothing and, like Timon, Richard has within him a strong vein of fatalism, at times almost welcoming the opportunity to play different roles as a means of self-exploration. When he is finally landless and in prison, and is, like the Fisher King, emasculated and, somehow, nothing, we remember his words of yesterday, and think his condition almost willed:

Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be... (IV.i.201)

To return to *Timon*, the loyalty of Timon's servants toward him when his fortunes change is feudal in nature because it does not recognize wealth alone as power and status, but responds to a quality of authority beyond mere riches. Timon is their lord, whether rich or poor. As one of his servants remarks in Act IV:

Yet do our hearts wear Timon's livery.

That see I by our faces; we are fellows still,

Serving alike in sorrow... (IV.ii.17-19)

In conjunction with comments from Timon's other servants, this constitutes an appeal for the preservation of "degree." Without degree, or a recognition of the hierarchical nature of society, chaos ensues and human life is turned on its head. The concept of hierarchy (as outlined by Ulysses in Act I, scene iii of *Troilus and Cressida*) was essential to the 16th century nobleman's understanding of aristocracy and its function. Shakespeare's concept of nothing represents a world without order or degree, where only the fool, the lunatic, or the artist can thrive. Timon, like Lear, plumbs this world of nothing, and gains spiritual vision as a result. Very near the end of the play, Timon remarks to his ever-faithful steward:

...My long sickness

Of health and living now begins to mend,

And nothing brings me all things. (IV.i.185-7)

Timon finally achieves a God-like detachment from his own life—a state of nirvana in fact. He even writes his own epitaph, in which he makes what to a Stratfordian are, presumably, two contradictory statements appearing in consecutive lines: "Seek not my name" and "Here lie I, Timon." (V.iv.71-72) Writing his own epitaph was for Oxford (unsurprisingly) something of an obsession.

V

To return to the 1580s, we come across the feud carried on in the streets of London between Oxford's men and those of Thomas Knyvet, also a courtier, following a sword fight between their two masters. The feud began in 1582 and continued on well into the following year. Such prolonged and clannish

altercations between houses, in which men from both sides lost their lives, were rare in Elizabethan times. They belong to an older age, when feudal loyalty counted for more than obedience to public authority, and honor was satisfied by the sword rather than the judiciary. Oxford himself seems to have a reputation among many historians for exceptional violence, and this is a charge that, though impossible to refute utterly, must at least be qualified.

Oxford, like so many of the protagonists of his Shakespeare plays—Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Macbeth, Leontes—was a curious mixture of gentleness and violence. For while he was a highly sensitive book-loving aesthete, he would nevertheless stop at nothing to protect his name and honor, seeking vengeance against those that attempted to blacken his reputation, even if his vengeance would, for the most part, end up being literary rather than actual. He was a “wolfish earl” more in spirit than matter, and his inordinate pride could be balanced by a disarming sense of self-doubt. Perhaps at times Oxford let his self-dramatizing instinct run away with him, and he would become the incarnation of his literary personae. Hamlet, who shares Oxford’s dramatic instincts and is his most realistic self-portrait, says to Ophelia:

I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. (III.i.124-7)

Oxford, like Hamlet, favored unpacking his heart with words, and so usually managed to dissipate any impulses toward violence through his writing. The final stanza of his early poem, “Fain would I sing but fury makes me fret,” nicely conveys this “dissipation” of strong feeling:

My heart shall fail, and hand shall lose his force,
But some device shall pay despite his due;
And fury shall consume my careful course,
Or raze the ground whereon my sorrow grew.
Lo, thus in rage of ruthless mind refus’d,
I rest reveng’d of whom I am abus’d. (*Poems*, 24)

The word “device” was often used to mean a theatrical device or play, and it was through the drama that Oxford, like Hamlet, sought revenge or restitution.

During much of the early 1580s, Oxford had found himself banished from the Court on charges of both adultery and treason, the last of which he vigorously denied. In 1583, his father-in-law, Lord Burghley, reported that the Earl was “ruined and in adversity,” and that his household had been reduced to four servants, one of them being “a kind of tumbling boy.” Once reinstated in the Queen’s favor in June of that year, however, Oxford lost no time in securing the lease to the Blackfriars Theater, which he then passed on to John Lyly, his secretary and the actor-manager of his company, Oxford’s Boys. It was

here that they rehearsed for performance at Court. In assessing the extent of Oxford's household or retinue, Burghley of course failed to mention Oxford's great theatrical retinue, a number of whom worked as the Earl's personal servants, Lyly being a good example.

Burghley gravely disapproved of Oxford's "lewd" followers, as he termed them, yet didn't scruple in his attempts to suborn them for his own purposes. It was on one such occasion in October 1584 that Oxford puts pen to paper to register his objection to such practices in the strongest possible terms. Burghley's lifelong habit of setting spies on friends and enemies alike and suborning other people's servants (a habit he shared with his theatrical double, Polonius), constituted one more violation of Oxford's feudal code of honor. The language of Oxford's resentment in his October 1584 letter is feudal to the core. He will not be a pawn of the new capitalist state. To force his point home, he uses the language of God himself, who addresses Moses in the Book of Exodus with the words, "I am that I am." Here is Oxford's chilling rebuke:

But I pray, my Lord, leave that course, for I mean not to be your ward nor your child. I serve her majesty, and I am that I am, and by alliance near to your lordship, but free, and scorn to be offered that injury to think I am so weak of government as to be ruled by servants, or not able to govern myself. (Fowler, 332)

Oxford's service to "her majesty" was his creation of the English theater, to accomplish which he had, in the popular phrase, squandered his patrimony. No doubt it was to help him continue his work in this field, as well as to ensure that he didn't become destitute, that the Crown granted Oxford a one thousand pound annuity in 1586, which continued for 18 years, the rest of his life. (An important part of his work would have involved preparing his Court dramas for performance in the public theaters.)

However welcome in purely financial terms, the grant would have been a severe slight to Oxford's proud and independent feudal spirit, and his sense of shame is perhaps registered in Sonnet 111, where he writes:

O for my sake do you with fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide,
Than public means which public manners breeds. (1-4)

To be the Queen's feudal vassal was one thing, but to be her hired servant was quite another.

The final indignity comes, however, in December 1591, when Oxford is forced to make over Hedingham Castle, the heart of his feudal world, to Lord Burghley in trust for his three daughters. An indignity, nevertheless, with rich consequences for literature, for it was this dark, dismantling deed that ushered in Oxford's period of deepest anonymity and nothingness, and hence his period

of deepest self-exploration. It buried the feudal lord deep within him, and paved the way for his complete transition to the figure of artist and spiritual teacher. It is perhaps unsurprising that a man who had, in effect, spent his whole life as a ward of Court (in a sort of social limbo) should ally himself in the end with those forces of classlessness, the fool and the artist. Both are jokers in the pack of society, who can communicate effectively with all classes of people, and act as a bridge between them. Both are truth-tellers. Ironically, proven fools, like minors of noble birth (especially if they were wealthy), became the property of the Crown in Elizabeth's England, and could be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

In the final analysis, Oxford coped with the death of feudalism by allowing his life as an artist and patron to mimic that of the feudal lord, and by ensuring that his works gave hope of a new society built on the ideals of feudalism and invigorated not by the power of monarchy, but by the power of conscience.

It is interesting to speculate what course the history of England might have taken had not Oxford appeared, under the banner of Shakespeare, to act as the blazing bridge of consciousness between the medieval and modern worlds.

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