

## Francis Meres and the Earl of Oxford

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“As early as 1598 a shameless name-dropper named Francis Meres began the liturgical chant, claiming that ‘As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latines: so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage.’”<sup>1</sup>

“In truth, Meres was neither a profound nor industrious gatherer of commonplaces; in many respects the *Palladis Tamia* seems to be the work of a hack who had a contracted obligation to fulfill.”<sup>2</sup>

“This chapter uses the simile format to compare classical authors to their contemporary English counterparts, and it constitutes a unique and extremely valuable survey of English literature at the end of the sixteenth century.”<sup>3</sup>

**W**ho was Francis Meres, really? An attentive observer of the London literary scene who recognized Shakespeare’s incommensurable genius and left an “extremely valuable survey” of contemporary English literature?

Or was he a “shameless name-dropper,” the first high-priest of bardolatry, reeling off names of ancient and English authors like names of saints in a litany? And what kind of work is this *Palladis Tamia*, more particularly the “Comparative Discourse” in which Shakespeare is likened to Plautus for comedy and to Seneca for tragedy? The reputable scholar G.E. Bentley puts it in a row of popular commonplace books of the age: “John Cotgrave’s *English Treasury of Wit and Language*, 1655, is a book of quotations much in the tradition of earlier commonplace books like *Politeuphuia*, *Wits Commonwealth*, 1597, *Palladis Tamia*, *Wits Treasury*, 1598, *Wits Theatre of the Little World*, 1599, *Belvedere*, 1600, and *Wits Labyrinth*, 1648. Like the other five, it consists of a large number of quotations from a variety of authors, classified according to subjects — Adversity, Beauty, Chastity, Envy, Heaven, Sin, Women.”<sup>4</sup>

In Bentley’s chronological listing it stands between two other commonplace

books, the first and third part of the series *Wit's Commonwealth*. The first part of *Wit's Commonwealth*, *Politeuphuia*, opens with a section "Of God"; the third part of *Wit's Commonwealth*, *Theatre of the Little World*, opens with a section "Of God"; the second part of *Wit's Commonwealth*, Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia - Wit's Treasury*, opens with a section "Of God." What distinguishes Meres's commonplace book from the other two of the series is the presence of a section on art, mainly literature, in which Meres heaps praise on four contemporary poets: Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, Edmund Spenser and above all William Shakespeare, and simply lists a great number of others, in the overwhelming majority of cases without mentioning more than their bare names.

The heading "A comparative discourse of our English Poets, with the *Greeke, Latine, and Italian Poets*" is misleading. The first paragraph contains no "discourse" at all, only a simple symmetric arrangement of names of ancient and English authors. The second paragraph contains only a short piece of discourse: "As *Homer* is reputed the Prince of Greek Poets; and *Petrarch* of Italian Poets: so *Chaucer* is accounted the God of English Poets." Yet, this morsel is not Meres' own but a quotation from William Webbe's *Discourse of English Poetry*, published in 1585, thirteen years before *Palladis Tamia*: "*Chaucer*, who for that excellent fame which he obtained in his Poetry was always accounted the God of English Poets." Apparently G.E. Bentley did not hold Meres' discourse to be of a sufficiently distinctive quality to set his commonplace book apart from the other ones. Nor did Meres himself claim such a distinction. In his dedication to Thomas Eliot of the Middle Temple he acknowledges in somewhat bombastic similes that his book is the second part of a triad of commonplace books under the generic name *Wit's Commonwealth*:

"And now I have my wished desire. Wherefore I may rejoyce for three things, as *Philip King of Macedonia* rejoiced. He joyed that he had won the Games at *Olympus* by the running of his chariots; that his captain *Parmenio* had overthrown the Dardarians; and that his wife *Olympia* had born him a son, called *Alexander*: So I exceedingly rejoyce, and am glad at my heart, that the first part of *Wit's Commonwealth*, containing sentences, hath like a brave champion gloriously marched and got such renowned fame by swift running, equivalent with *Philip's* chariots, that thrice within one year it hath run through the press. If this second part of mine, called *Wit's Treasury* containing similitudes, being a stalk of the same stem, shall have the like footmanship, and find the same success, then with *Parmenio* I shall be the second in *Philip's* joy. And then *Philip's* joy will eftsoon be full, for his *Alexander*, whom not *Olympia*, but a worthy scholar is conceiving, who will fill the third part of *Wit's Commonwealth* with more glorious examples than great *Alexander* did the world with valiant and heroical exploits."

Though Meres places the gathering of commonplaces above the historical feats of Alexander the Great he did not, in fact, think higher of his task than that of John Bodenham's, the gatherer of the commonplaces for parts 1 and 3 of *Wit's Commonwealth*. In 1904 Gregory Smith qualified Meres' "Comparative Discourse" within *Palladis Tamia* as a "directory of writers" and his method as "absolute scissors and paste."<sup>5</sup> It is not much of an exaggeration.

Don C. Allen probably came closest to the mark when he spoke of one who “had a contracted obligation to fulfill.” Though Meres was without doubt more than a “hack,” his “Comparative Discourse” is no less a compilation than the rest of his book, or than the other two books of the *Wit’s Commonwealth* series are. The above verbatim borrowing from another work is the rule, not the exception. Hardly any textual passage in “Comparative Discourse” is not borrowed from existing works. Meres has therefore occasionally been accused of plagiarism.

What might we expect as we inch along in a jam of fifty-eight paragraphs, all of them shaped according to the same monotonous formula? The first paragraph reads:

As Greece had three Poets of great antiquity *Orpheus, Linus, Musoeus* and Italy, other three auncient Poets, *Livius Andronicus, Ennius, Plautus*: So hath England three auncient Poets, *Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate*.

Few begin differently. They all take the form of an equation with the As-side listing ancient authors (in a few cases an Italian and in even fewer cases a French or Spanish author), and an equal number of English authors listed on the So-side. The message is a simple one: the symmetry asserts that English literature can stand the comparison with ancient literature. Were it not for the symmetric structure, Meres’ “Comparative Discourse” would be an amorphous succession of names. It is still a monotonous one. But:

Sometimes in a heap of mud,  
A piece of gold is shut.

### ***Wit’s Commonwealth: a Publishing Project***

The commonplace book series *Wit’s Commonwealth* presents all the features of a project of one or more publishers. Who could have ordered *Palladis Tamia*, the second part of *Wit’s Commonwealth*? It is reasonable to search Meres’ employers among the publishers of *Wit’s Commonwealth*, the whole of the series. We meet two old acquaintances: the publisher of the first and third part was Nicholas Ling, the printer of both was James Roberts. *Palladis Tamia* was published by Cuthbert Burby and printed by Peter Short. But Cuthbert Burby stood in some partnership relation with Nicholas Ling. In 1607, shortly before his death, he transferred some of his copies to the latter. On the publishing side, then, we have two men who were occasional partners. Cuthbert Burby published the two amended second issues of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (1598) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1599). He also published Meres’ translation of the second book of Luis de Granada’s *A Sinner’s Guide*. Ling and Burby may have been Meres’ employers.

### ***Was Meres a “Plagiarist”?***

In his *Discourse of English Poetry* (1585) William Webbe writes: “And Cicero in his *Tusculane* questions is of that minde, that a Poet cannot expresse verses abundantly...”<sup>6</sup> Meres repeats this phrase *verbatim*, and, likewise, does not scruple to borrow almost literally from other authors, most heavily from Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poesie*. A list is prefixed to his book naming the authors from whom he quotes; among them Philip Sidney and John Harington in the section “Poetry” preceding the two sections “Poets” and “A comparative discourse.” But authors from whom he borrows in these two latter sections are not listed: Webbe, Puttenham, Roger Ascham, and others. Should Meres, therefore, be accused of plagiarism?

Actually, we do not think so. After all, the “Comparative Discourse” was part of his commonplace book. A commonplace book by definition is a collection of citations. Hence, Meres continued to practice what he did in the rest of his book, where he translates quotes ordered according to subjects, though here, in the “Comparative Discourse,” without listing the sources. Given that few of his comments are his own and that not a single work is mentioned for the majority of listed authors, calling Meres a “literary critic,” and his “Comparative Discourse” an “extremely valuable survey of English literature,” seems very wide of the mark indeed.

### ***Meres’ “Expertise”***

Nonetheless, two mentions seem to indicate that Meres was keeping his ear to the literary ground. He knew that Michael Drayton was busy writing his *Poly-Olbion*. “Michael Drayton is now in penning in English verse a Poem called *Poly-olbion* Geographical and Hydrographicall of all the forests, woods, mountaines, fountaines, rivers, lakes, flouds, bathes and springs that be in England.” The work was not published until 1612/13. He also includes Everard Guilpin’s satire *Skialetheia*, registered as late as 15 September 1598, a full week after the registration of *Palladis Tamia*.

But one man would have known better than anyone, even Francis Meres, about Guilpin’s forthcoming satire: Nicholas Ling. It was entered to him and he published it. The printer was again James Roberts. Possibly, the work was still in the process of being printed when Meres’ *Palladis Tamia* was published. Ling must also have known that Drayton was composing his *Poly-Olbion*. Had he not died in 1607 he is likely to have published that work. He published nearly all the works of Drayton before 1607, always with James Roberts as printer. Nicholas Ling thus appears as the driving force behind the whole *Wit’s Commonwealth* project. He signed the dedication and the epistle to the reader of the first part and it is likely that the unsigned dedication and epistle of the third part are also his work.

**Meres' Method**

In paragraph 36 on iambic poets or hexametrists, Meres clearly describes his method: "Among the Greeks I will name but two for Iambics, *Archilochus Parius* and *Hipponax Ephesius*: So amongst us I name but two iambical poets, *Gabriel Harvey*, and *Richard Stanyhurst*, because I have seene no more in this kind."

Don C. Allen<sup>7</sup> was probably the first to discover the main source from which Meres had taken the names of the ancient authors, Ravisius Textor's *Officina*, a then widely used encyclopedia.<sup>8</sup> Textor, of course, lists many more ancient authors of alexandrines (iambic hexameters). But as Meres can only find two English hexametrists, he selects only two from Textor. In the same way he chooses only as many ancient authors of tragedy as he can find English ones (fourteen), the same for comedy (sixteen), and so on.

In one case, however, Meres commits a blunder serious enough to have his scholarship called into question by Allen. "It should be apparent from this account that Meres's statements about Greek and Latin poets were at second hand. However, Meres commits a greater sin than ignorance, since he gives definite evidence on one occasion that he was stupid. In his section on satirists, Meres records among the Latin writers of this sort Lucullus and Lucilius. The latter name falls within the definition, but the former, Lucullus, was at best a historian."<sup>9</sup> The paragraph in question reads [the numbering is ours]:

As 1. *Horace*, 2. *Lucilius*, 3. *Iuvenall*, 4. *Persius* & 5. *Lucullus* are the best for Satire among the Latins: So with us in the same faculty these are chiefe 1. *Piers Plowman*, 2. *Lodge*, 3. *Hall of Imanuel Colledge* in Cambridge, 4. the Authour of *Pigmaliions Image*, and certaine Satyrs, 5. *the Author of Skialetheia*.

The author of *Pygmalion's Image and certain satires*, published in 1598 by E. Mattes and printed by James Roberts, was Kinsayder, the pseudonym of John Marston. Meres knew Kinsayder to be a pseudonym and thus omitted the name. Of course James Roberts and Nicholas Ling must also have known it. Guilpin's *Skialetheia* had been published anonymously by Nicholas Ling and printed by James Roberts. How was Meres "stupid"? The error in the case of Lucullus is Textor's, not Meres', since the tenth paragraph in Textor's list begins: "Lucullus Satyrographus, ex Arunca urbe Italiae." This clearly explains Meres' error and provides a very tangible proof of his use of the *Officina*. However, if this is accepted, how can Lucilius, who is not found in Textor's catalog (but whom Meres places correctly among the Latin satirists), be accounted for? The *Officina* gives the explanation of this and also indicates Meres' method of compiling data.<sup>10</sup> Immediately after the heading "De poetis Graecis et Latinis" Textor refers to Petrus Crinitus, an author of the biographies of ninety-five poets. "These biographies were exceedingly popular in the first half of the century and were used for the *vitae* of most editions of classical authors published at that time. In this small book there is no mention of Lucullus,

but in the same order as that of the *Officina* is noticed: “C. Lucilius Satyrarum scriptor... Ex Arunca urbe Ausoniae fuit.”<sup>11</sup>

Our hypothesis is that Meres was less stupid than tricky. The only difference between Crinitus and Textor is that the former uses the ancient name of Italy: Ausonia. As the name of the author differs only by three letters and the name of the town is identical, this can hardly have been the cause of the error. But Meres was facing a difficulty. In all other cases he could find names in overplus in Textor’s *Officina* to select as many authors in the genre as there were English authors. Here, for satirists, the situation was reversed. Textor mentions only four satirists but there were many more English satirists at hand. Disregarding the printing error in Textor allowed Meres to add one name more. It was not a scholarly procedure, but he could keep to his symmetric structure. Still, the paragraph conspicuously lacks one name. Though separately mentioned, Thomas Nashe, the outstanding satirist of the 1590s, is left out in favour of two newcomers, Marston and Guilpin. This decision seems to have rested more on commercial than scholarly considerations. Guilpin was published by Ling and printed by Roberts, Marston was printed by Roberts.

### ***Infatuated with Numerology***

Meres’ dedication begins with the words “Tria sunt omnia” (“all things come in threes”). Apart from the last sentence, every other line in the euphuistic dedication is a variation on this motto. It returns in his “Comparative Discourse.” In numerology three, and its multiples six and twelve, are perfect numbers. Four poets are given special mention in the “Comparative Discourse”: Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Samuel Daniel, and Michael Drayton. Spenser and Daniel are given three paragraphs, Shakespeare four, Drayton six.

Spenser published his *Fairie Queene* in two parts, books I-III in 1590, books IV-VI in 1596, and each of them is mentioned in a paragraph. The third paragraph is for *The Shepherd’s Calendar*. None of his other publications — the collected poems in *Complaints* (1591), *Daphnida* (1591), *Colin Clouts come home againe* (1595), the sonnet cycle *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* (1595) — is mentioned.

Samuel Daniel is mentioned with three works: *Delia*, *Rosamond* and *Civil Wars*. His tragedy *Cleopatra* (1594) is omitted.

Michael Drayton is mentioned with six works : *The civil wars of Edward the second, and the Barons (Mortimeriados, or the Baron’s Wars)*; *England’s Heroical Epistles*; *Robert of Normandy*; *Matilda*; *Peirs Gaveston*; *Poly-Olbion. Idea* (1593) and *Endimion and Phoebe* (1595) are omitted.

Symmetry and homespun numerology are thus favored over completeness, and this holds true in Shakespeare’s case. Of four paragraphs, two contain general statements without mention of works. One paragraph cites his poems, honoring the “all good things come in threes” principle by mentioning *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and the *Sonnets*, subsuming the rest under “&c.” Twelve plays are mentioned, six comedies and six tragedies.



Balancing and counterbalancing are other quirks exhibited by Meres. Among the comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost* is counterbalanced by *Love's Labour's Won*, a title which, as far as we know, has never been convincingly traced<sup>12</sup> and has triggered much speculation about which play could actually be meant. Though *Much Ado About Nothing* and *All's Well That Ends Well* seem plausible candidates, it cannot be ruled out that the title simply derives from Meres's fondness of antithesis, a figure which looms large in euphuistic style. He practices the same in his paragraphs on tragedy and comedy, mentioning for tragedy first an author of the University of Cambridge, then one of Oxford, following the reverse order in the paragraph on comedy.

### ***Meres's Arithmetic "Errors"***

From the paragraph on satirists we have seen how tenaciously Meres adhered to symmetry. He was even prepared to use a cheap trick, profiting from a printing error to get one ancient satirist, more than he had found in his source, the *Officina* of Ravius Textor, and willing to deny the true standing of the foremost contemporary satirist Thomas Nashe. To control whether Meres always counted correctly seems as sensible as counting sheep to fall asleep. However, one person has not thought it beneath his scientific dignity to do exactly that. In a speech delivered to the De Vere Society in England the late Enoch Powell noted that Meres did not list the same number of ancient and English authors of comedy. There were sixteen ancient and seventeen English authors, Powell pointed out. The paragraph, in other words, was unbalanced! He concluded: "It would be a natural assumption that one name was added without corresponding adjustment of the symmetry. It also happens to be the one place where there is a reference to Edward Earl of Oxford."<sup>13</sup>

Other inferences are possible. Orthodox scholars could argue that this proves "beyond doubt" that Oxford and Shakespeare were two different persons. Oxfordians, however, could argue that the asymmetry is a deliberate imbalance, and that it points to the identity of Oxford as Shakespeare; the asymmetry would thus be illusory, the paragraph *looks* asymmetrical but is not. Powell's observation on the inequality between the number of ancient and English authors is correct, but to test the validity of his interpretation it would be necessary to examine whether the rule of symmetry had been broken in other paragraphs. Suddenly, a dreadfully tedious occupation looked, if not exciting, much less tedious and at any rate, worth the counting. Certainly, if this were the only paragraph where Meres missed his numbers, the supernumerary might be significant.

### ***Results***

Meres always observes some kind of symmetry, which is achieved in three ways:

- 1) The same number of Greek, Latin, and English poets.  
As seen above, in the first paragraph three Greek (*Orpheus, Linus,*

*Musoeus*) and three Latin authors (*Livius Andronicus, Ennius, Plautus*) are set against three English authors (*Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate*).

In the second paragraph we have one Greek (*Homer*) and one Italian (*Petrarch*) against one English (*Chaucer*). Also para. 8: eight Greek and eight Latin against eight English. Para. 12, one Greek (*Theocritus*) and one Latin (*Virgil*) against one English (*Spenser*). To this can be added the rather odd para. 52: "As *Achilles* tortured the dead body of *Hector*, and as *Antonius*, and his *Fulvia* tormented the liveless corps of *Cicero*: So *Gabriel Harvey* hath shewed the same inhumanity to *Greene* that lies full low in his grave."

2) One poet is set off against each of two poets.

In Para. 9, *Xenophon* & *Heliodorus*, both Greek authors, are likened to *Sir Philip Sidney*, in para. 12, *Lucan* to *Daniel* & *Drayton*. The proportion 2:1 counterbalances the proportion 1:2.

3) A difference in the **number of poets** is made up for by **adding works**. Thus, in para. 18, *Drayton* is mentioned with three works:

As *Accius, M. Attilius* and *Milithus* were called Tragoediographi, because they writ Tragedies: So may we truly term *Michael Drayton* Tragoediographus, for his passionate penning the downfals of valiant *Robert of Normandy*, chast *Matilda*, and great *Gaveston*.

Paragraph 38 on pastoral poetry contains another example.

4) In all other paragraphs there is always the same number on the **As-side** (Greek, Latin, Italian, French (1), Spanish (1), and the **So-side** (English).

However, four paragraphs present exceptions to this established pattern. The asymmetry is not balanced out by any devices. In these four cases there is a supernumerary. To restore symmetry we would have to posit the phrase from Shakespeare's sonnet 136: "Among a number one is reckoned none."

These four paragraphs are:

**Paragraph 7:** [numbering is ours]:

As these Neoterickes [1] *Iovianus Pontanus* [2] *Politianus* [3] *Marullus Tarchaniota* [4] the two *Strozæ*, the father and the son, [5] *Palingenius* [6] *Mantuanus* [7] *Philelphus* [8] *Quintianus Stoa* [9] *Germanus Brixius* have obtained renown and good place among the ancient Latin Poets: so also these English men being Latine Poets [1] *Gualter Haddon* [2] *Nicholas Car* [3]



*Gabriel Harvey* [4] *Christopher Ocland* [5] *Thomas Newton* with his *Leyland* [6] *Thomas Watson* [7] *Thomas Campion* [8] *Brunswerd* & [9] *Willey*, have attained good report and honorable advancement in the Latin Empyre.

The two Strozzi are the Latin writing Florentines, Vespasiano Strozzi (1424-1505), the father, and Ercole Strozzi (1473-1508), the son. Is there really asymmetry? The answer is yes, and no. There is **asymmetry of persons** (10: 9), but **symmetry of names**, as only **one name** is given for the **two** Strozzi. One name thus stands for two persons.

**Paragraph 39:**

These and many other *Epigrammatists* the Latin tongue hath [1] *Q. Catulus* [2] *Porcius Licinius* [3] *Quintus Cornificius* [4] *Martial* [5] *Cn. Getulicus*, and [6] wittie sir *Thomas Moore*: so in English we have these, So [1] *Heywood* [2] *Drante* [3] *Kendal* [4] *Bastard* [5] *Davies*.

We have six Latin epigrammatists, including Sir Thomas More, who wrote in Latin, and only five English epigrammatists. There is undeniably asymmetry of names, but the asymmetry of persons is only apparent. The name **Davies** stands for **two contemporaneous epigrammatists**, Sir John Davies (1569-1626) and John Davies of Hereford (ca. 1565-1618). So we have the reverse relation of para. 7, namely *asymmetry of names but symmetry of persons* operated by the same means: one name stands for two persons.

Schematically,

Para. 7 : N, P+1 (on As-side) : N, P (on So-side);  
 Para. 39 : N+1, P (on As-side) : N, P (on So-side).

Counterbalancing requires this to be mirrored on the So-side. What we have to find are two paragraphs of this structure:

Para. X: N, P (on As-side) : N, P+1 (on So-side)  
 Para. Y: N, P (on As-side) : N+1, P (on So-side).

**“Paragraph X” is paragraph 46, on the art of translation:**

As [1] *Terence* for his translations out of *Appolodorus & Menander*, and [2] *Aquila* for his translation out of *Menander*, and [3] *C. Germanicus Augustus* for his out of *Aratus*, and [4] *Ausonius* for his translated *Epigrams* out of *Greeke*, and [5] *Doctor Johnson* for his *Frogge-fight* out of *Homer*, and [6] *Watson* for his *Antigone* out of

*Sophocles*, have good commendations: So these versifiers for their learned translations are of good note among us, [1] *Phaere* for *Virgils Aeneads*, [2] *Golding* for *Ovids Metamorphosis* [3] *Harington* for his *Orlando Furioso* [4] the translators of *Seneca's Tragedies* [5] *Barnabe Googe* for *Palingenius* [6] *Turbervile* for *Ovids Epistles* and *Mantuan* and [7] *Chapman* for his inchoate *Homer*.

The translators of Seneca are given as a nameless entity, as a one-ness. We have an equal number of names but not of persons. A nameless collectivity stands for several persons.

**“Paragraph Y” is 34, on comedy:**

The best Poets for Comedy among the Greeks are these [1] *Menander* [2] *Aristophanes* [3] *Eupolis Atheniensis* [4] *Alexius Terius* [5] *Nicostratus* [6] *Amipsias Atheniensis* [7] *Anaxandrides Rhodius* [8] *Aristonymus* [9] *Archippus Atheniensis* and [10] *Callias Atheniensis* and among the Latines [11] *Plautus* [12] *Terence* [13] *Naeivius* [14] *Sext. Turpilius* [15] *Licinius Imbrex* and [16] *Virgilius Romanus*: so the best for Comedy amongst us bee [1] *Edward Earl of Oxford* [2] *Doctor Gager* of Oxford [3] *Master Rowley*, once a rare Scholler of learned *Pembroke Hall* in Cambridge [4] *Master Edwardes* one of her Majesty's Chapel, [5] eloquent and witty *John Lily* [6] *Lodge* [7] *Gascoigne* [8] *Greene* [9] *Shakespeare* [10] *Thomas Nashe* [11] *Thomas Heywood* [12] *Anthony Munday*, our best plotter [13] *Chapman* [14] *Porter* [15] *Wilson* [16] *Hathway* [17] *Henry Chettle*.

We have  $N + 1$  names. To be balanced as group, it is necessary that  $P$ , the number of persons, should be the same (as in the case of the two epigrammatists *John Davies*). Which means that two names must stand for one and the same person.

Theoretically there are as many possibilities as combinations:  $17!/16!2!$   
 $= 17 \times 16 : 2 = 136$ . It is not necessary to check each of them. An overwhelming preponderance of evidence already adduced in a series of compelling studies suggest the obvious conclusion that the duplicated names are “Shakspeare” and *Edward de Vere*, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, Lord Great Chamberlain of England. Far from contradicting this body of evidence, *Meres'* arithmetical arrangements confirm the hypothesis and show that contemporary insiders like *Meres* not only understood the authorship ruse but found ingenious methods to communicate their knowledge: *Edward*, Earl of Oxford, and *Shakespeare* are one and the same person.

Can this pattern of deviations from symmetry, in itself balanced, be ascribed to mere chance? We do not think this a reasonable assumption, the less so because the square of departures carries a meaning, a contrapuntal composition on the theme, "What's in a name?" In one case the crucial name indicates the relation from father to son; in the second case the name stands for two unrelated namesakes; in the third case, the item causing the asymmetry of person is an anonymous entity; in the fourth case the relationship is pseudonymous.

It seems as if we are encountering an example of the phenomena historians have frequently observed in courtly society: something is concealed, and at the same time revealed. Here de Vere is concealed and at the same time, by a fugue-like textural procedure, revealed as Shakespeare.

Which 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century reader would have seen it? Kent A. Heatt may give us a hint.<sup>14</sup> The work analyzes Edmund Spenser's poem *Epithalamion*. He points out that, as in other works of the Renaissance, the poem follows a symbolic structure. "Understanding of this symbolism requires at least some knowledge of the geography and values of a particular medieval-Renaissance world-view... This method requires that beneath a simple literal surface profound symbolic communication of an integrated continuity should take place covertly...."

Elizabethan readers were better exercised in allegorical, multi-layer reading, especially those persons to whom court rituals were familiar. Ultimately, Meres' list of the "best for Comedy" is not so very different from Spenser's arrangement in the fourth Book of *The Fairie Queene*. Alistair Fowler explains that the eighteen knights symbolize concord.<sup>15</sup> But "concord is repeatedly impaired by significant departures from the pattern." The departure from the pattern consists in the inclusion of a mock knight named Braggadocchio. And he adds:

Although several features of the tournament episode remain obscure, we can at least be sure that it is not intended merely as a portrayal of physical conflict...It is meant rather as a poetic imitation of a *balletic* tournament, of a kind which actually took place in the sixteenth century. Frances Yates' recent account of tournaments at the Valois court has indicated some of the ways in which ideals of political and cosmic order were set forth by means of symbolic arrangements. The symbolism of place and number in Spenser's tournament is in a similar mode.<sup>16</sup>

To understand what "actually took place" in the sixteenth century, we would do well to learn this courtly language again. "Comparative discourse" does not operate quite in the manner of Spenser's tournament, but the device is analogous. The symmetry is broken and at the same time preserved, through the ambivalent use of names.