

Shakespeare's "Idle Hours" in Historical Context

by Robert Detobel

Hartmann von Aue (c. 1160-70 to 1210 -20) was a German author who published poetry in the last decade of the 12th and the first decade of the 13th century, his romances being written in the Middle High German of the time. Nothing is known about Hartmann besides what he reports in his romances. In the preface to *Der Arme Heinrich* (*Poor Henry*, c. 1190), he provides some information about himself:

Ein ritter sô gelêret was
daz er an den buochen lass
waz er dar an geschriben vant:
der was Hartman enant,
dienstman was er zOuwe

The literal English translation omits the rhyme:

A knight so learned was,
that he read in books,
what he therein found written.
He was called Hartmann,
Serving man at Aue

This information looks rather trivial but is not. To begin with, a knight who could read and write—who was literate—was the exception in



Hartmann von Aue, idealized Miniature in the Codex Manesse, fol. 184v, around 1300 (Wikimedia commons)

the 12th century, when the majority of the aristocracy was illiterate and even hostile to learning. A "dienstman" was a serving man, the equivalent of a vassal who was a knight, and a member of the lower nobility.

Hartmann von Aue states in the preface to another of his romances, *Ywain* (c. 1200):

Ein rîter, der gelêret was
unde ez an den buochen las,
swenner sîne stunde
niht baz bewenden kunde,
daz er ouch tihtennes pflac

A knight who learned was,
And from the books did read,
When he had no better use for his hours,
also wrote poems.

And so, in poetic meter, Hartman von Aue reveals that knights as a class wrote poems when "he had no better use for his hours"—during their idle hours.

The serving man, like the vassal, was committed to the service of a lord and was engaged under oath "to prefer the obligations promised to the lord before any other activities" (Bloch 207). In exchange, the lord offered the vassal protection and the possession of lands. Activities that were not an essential part of these services were restricted to leisure time. Reading and writing literature were such non-essential activities. Everything beyond military duty was considered derogatory to the special role of the warrior class. By emphasizing that he wrote poetry during his leisure hours, Hartmann von Aue tells us writing poetry was not his normal business, confirming that he was a member of the aristocracy. Only weapons counted, and neither writing nor learning played a role in the life of a knight. Learning was the primary function of another social class: the clergy.

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According to the English diplomat and writer, Richard Pace (c. 1482-1536): “It becomes the sons of gentlemen...to blow the horn nicely, to hunt skillfully, and elegantly to carry and train a hawk... Rather my son should hang, than be learned” (preface).

Why this glimpse into the Middle Ages? Does it offer insight into the works of Shakespeare? I think it does. In 1965 Peter Laslett published the book, *The World We Have Lost*. The tenor of his work is that modern generations have developed theories about the past that on closer scrutiny have proven to be wrong. Accordingly, present interpretations are often misguided by what might be called “reverse anachronisms”—projections of our own preconceived modern worldviews into a remote past.

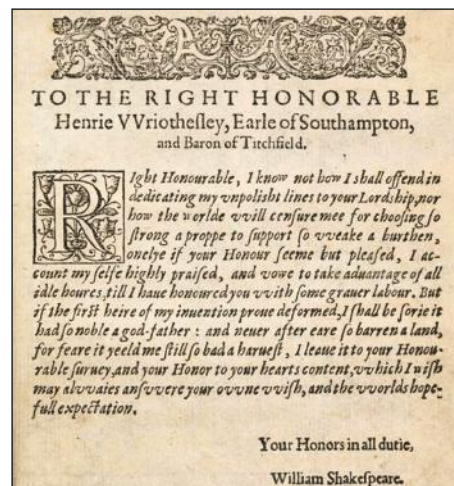
A look back into the Middle Ages—400 years before the time of Shakespeare—may therefore offer knowledge about how the behavior of an aristocrat in 1600 should be correctly interpreted. Thus, we are trying not to look back into the past, but to start from an even earlier period and look into the then-future.

One key factor should be emphasized: the transformation of the feudal system of the Middle Ages in Western Europe into the courtly system of the 16th century still left many rules for the aristocracy unchanged. For example, a sovereign still left parts of his country, including its residents, to his military followers for their material supply. Thus, the relationship of the monarch to members of the warrior class who were pledged to him remained the same.

Hartman von Aue wrote poems during his “idle hours.” So, four centuries later, did Sir Philip Sidney, according to the dedication of the *Arcadia* to his sister, the Countess of Pembroke: “Here now have you...this idle work of mine” (Sidney 3). As did William Shakespeare, according to the dedication of *Venus and Adonis* to the Earl of Southampton:

I account myself highly praised,
and vow to take advantage of all
idle hours, till I have honoured
you with some graver labour
(Oxford Shakespeare, 173).

Von Aue telling his readers that he wrote poetry “when he had no better use for his hours” sounds eerily familiar to Shakespeare’s message to Southampton in the dedication to *Venus and Adonis*: that he will “take advantage of all of idle hours, till I have honoured you with some graver labour.” Are



these writers, whether intentionally or not, giving their audience details about their social status and the social norms shaping their behaviors?

Shakespeare's contemporary Gabriel Harvey (1552-1631) evidently thought so. A professor of rhetoric at Cambridge University, he highlighted the phrase in his pamphlet *Pierce's Supererogation*, which appeared the same year as *Venus and Adonis*: "I write only at idle hours that I dedicate to *Idle Hours*."

In his essay, "The Stella Cover-Up," Peter R. Moore describes this situation with remarkable accuracy:

If "William Shakespeare" was, as many of us believe, the 17th Earl of Oxford, one implication seems inescapable: Oxford's contemporaries—courtiers, writers, and theatre people—must have maintained a remarkable conspiracy of silence. We can go further. The silence must have been maintained well into the next generation, long after Oxford was dead. At first glance, this seems implausible. Moreover, orthodox Stratfordians scoff at the idea of so extensive a cover-up (312).

Answering this problem means understanding what being a member of the aristocracy in the 16th and 17th centuries entailed. It means understanding the genuinely inherent risk in modern times of falling victim to reverse anachronisms when trying to understand social and political issues in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The 16th century Italian Count Annibale di Romei designated himself as "gentil'umo"—"gentleman." In *The Arte of English Poesie*, published in 1589, George Puttenham refers to the Earl of Oxford as "that noble gentleman" (61). Many people may regard that as a contradiction in terms, accustomed as they are to understanding such terms as *knight* and *gentleman* exclusively as designations of bare social stratification. Although this is not inaccurate, it is wrong in many cases.

The class of people that the English courtier and writer Henry Peacham had in mind when he published *The Complete Gentleman* (1622) were those of noble birth. Both terms could and did also refer to a certain lifestyle and were not compatible with the formal nomenclatures. A gentleman in the socio-cultural sense was not the same as a titled gentleman in the formal social hierarchy. Those who adhere to the traditional authorship theory might maintain that William of Stratford reached the status of a gentleman and that all is applicable to him. That is a misunderstanding. A great danger lies therein, in that modern readers, confronted with the oscillating meaning of terms derived from eras long past, will adopt to just one definition. It will then appear that referring to an earl as a knight or gentleman is extremely deprecatory, while in fact it might be complimentary.

Since the time of Hartmann von Aue, the image of the “ideal knight” from the chivalrous literature had undergone a transformation. Probably the strongest stimulus came from the Italian Count Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), who published *The Book of the Courtier* in Venice in 1528 after serving as a member of the Duke of Urbino’s court. The “ideal knight” was replaced by Castiglione’s “ideal courtier.” Castiglione had much less to say about arms than about letters, although he still adhered to the opinion that arms mattered more than letters.

So I wish our courtier to be well built, with finely proportioned members, and I would have him demonstrate strength and lightness and suppleness and be good at all the physical exercises befitting a warrior (61).



Title page from “The Book of the Courtier” by Count Baldassare Castiglione

And though he should strive for perfection in the “sciences”—that is, in all kinds of arts: literature, music, painting and learning in general—he should always maintain that these are secondary activities.

To make no mistake at all, the courtier should, on the contrary, when he knows the praises he receives are deserved, not assent to them too openly nor let them pass without some protest. Rather he should tend to disclaim them modestly, always giving the impression that arms are, as indeed they should be, his chief profession, and that all his other fine accomplishments serve merely as adornments... (91-2)

Finally, Castiglione insists that this perfection should not be pursued as an end in itself:

For...the end of the perfect courtier...is, to win for himself the mind and favour of the prince he serves that he can and always will tell him the truth about all he needs to know, without fear or risk of displeasing him (284).

This new aristocrat—the courtier—is no longer the uncivilized 9th-century warrior, nor the 12th–13th-century serving man and knight, Hartmann von Aue, although some continuity is recognizable. The loyalty is no longer due to an overlord but to *the* overlord—the prince or monarch. The courtier’s prime function is still the military function, at least nominally, but to this is

added the service of the commonwealth (Hexter 14ff). It is revealing that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, wrote an Introduction in Latin to the Latin translation of *The Courtier* in 1572, for it signals the earl's acceptance of the book's principles of the new courtier.

In 1531, just three years after initial publication of *The Book of the Courtier*, Sir Thomas Elyot (1490 -1546) published his *Book of the Governor*. Elyot drew mainly on Cicero's *De officiis* (*On Duties*).

"Governor" here means "political leader," namely he who should participate in the government of the realm. Like Castiglione's courtier, Elyot's governor should be learned and skilful in several arts. However, he qualifies his counsel by insisting that skills such as painting, music and playing games should be reserved to leisure hours and never practiced before the eyes of the vulgar.

Another who only took to literary production in his "idle hours" was the French aristocrat, dramatist, and poet, Georges de Scudéry (1601-1667). In 1629, he published his play *Ligdamon et Lidias* and wrote in the preface:

...thinking to be but a soldier I found myself a poet...poetry is only a delightful pastime to me, not a serious occupation; if I am rhyming, then it is because I do not know what else to do and the only purpose of this kind of work is my private contentment; and far from being mercenary, the printer and the actors can witness to the fact that I sold them nothing, which at any rate they cannot pay for (Magendie, 60-1).

Scudéry's statement has the value of an affirmation of his social rank, a statement also hidden in Heminges and Condell's preface dedication of the First Folio to the Earls of Montgomery and Pembroke: "We have...done an office...without ambition either of selfe-profit, or fame" (*Complete Works* xxiv).

Ultimately, the disowning of one's works is a form of *sprezzatura*. *Sprezzatura* originally meant just that. "Sprezzatura was not, literally speaking, a new word at all, but rather a new sense given to an old word, the basic meaning of which was 'setting no price on'" (Burke, 31).

Sprezzatura was described by Baldassare Castiglione as an ability to make even strenuous acts seem easy and effortless. In *The Book of the Courtier*, he describes *sprezzatura* as an essential characteristic of a perfect courtier and always recommends that one should use a certain kind of nonchalance which conceals art and testifies that what one does apparently comes effortlessly, almost without thinking about it.

The concept of *sprezzatura* describes key aspects of aristocrats' code of conduct. Above all, writing activities were only allowed during idle hours. But idle hours were not the only condition; there was a more important one: the stigma of print. Undoubtedly a stigma of print existed as late as the mid-16th century. It functioned for purely literary works, but not for religious works or generally for works considered to possess an educational value.

A contemporary of Shakespeare's, John Selden (1584-1654), addressed the issue:

'Tis ridiculous for a Lord to print verses, 'tis well enough to make them to please himself but to make them publick is foolish. If a man in a private Chamber twirles his Band string, or playes with a Rushe to please himselfe, 'tis well enough, but if hee should goe into Fleet streete & sett upon a stall & twirle his bandstring or play with a Rush, then all the boyes in the streete would laugh att him (96).

The solution was anonymity, and pseudonyms were therefore respected. Pseudonyms were also used to escape the dangers of censorship. In the Elizabethan era, for example, attorney John Stubbs and playwright Ben Jonson were severely punished for their public texts, the former having his right hand cut off for publishing *The Gaping Gulf*, the latter being jailed for the play *The Isle of Dogs*. Both were commoners. On the other hand, the literary works of the noblemen Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, Thomas Vaux, Edward Dyer, Philip Sidney, Fulke Greville and Walter Raleigh were printed only after their deaths. In the same vein, the noble contributors to the courtly lyric anthologies *Tottel's Miscellany*, 1557, *The Paradyse of daynty devises*, 1576, *Phoenix Nest*, 1593, and *England's Helicon*, 1600, published anonymously or signed their poems with their initials.

Indeed, given that anonymity or use of a pseudonym frequently implied the author's aim to be recognized as behaving like a gentleman, unveiling the author's name could constitute an offence by denying him that status. It should be stressed that a gentleman in the sociocultural sense, referring to a certain lifestyle, was not the same as a titled gentleman in the formal social hierarchy.

Accordingly, the rules of the social game in courtly societies operated as a built-in barrier against identifying noblemen-authors by their names. The concept of the social taboo is much more appropriate—the social taboo of not naming in print something to which a certain person did not overtly commit himself. Social taboos do not need a powerful executive to implement; rather, they are self-executing by members of the caste.

One vital difference between society in the 16th and 17th centuries and society in our own time concerns the economic ethos. This vital difference is admirably described by Norbert Elias, a noted German sociologist, and merits citation:

In societies in which the status-consumption ethos predominates, the mere preservation of the existing social position of the family depends on the ability to make the cost of maintaining one's household and one's expenditure match one's social rank. Anyone who cannot maintain an appearance befitting his rank loses the respect of his society. In the incessant race for status and prestige he falls behind his rivals and runs the risk of being both ruined and eliminated from the social life of his status group (66-7).

This is a correlation that may be difficult to apprehend in our own time—social prestige and status depended *not* on accumulating wealth, but on spending it.

We find this confirmed by the noted English diplomat and scholar, Sir Thomas Smith (1513-1577), in his *De Republica Anglorum*,

...and in Englande no man is created barron, excepte he may dispend of yearly revenue, one thousand poundes or one thousand markes at the least (21).

In England a man was considered a member of the peerage, the "nobilitas maior" in Sir Thomas Smith's words, if he could spend at least £1,000 per year. In June 1586, the Earl of Oxford received a grant of £1,000. There were extremely few peers who received such a huge annuity. According to Lawrence Stone:

The only substantial grants were the £1,000 a year given to the Lords President of the Councils of the North and Wales to augment their grossly inadequate official salaries and to cover the cost of maintaining a suitable establishment, and the £1,000 a year for the Earl of Oxford.... (419).

However, Lawrence Stone overlooked one other substantial grant and only one: that to William Shakespeare. According to Vicar John Ward of Stratford, he had heard "that...Mr. Shakespeare...supplied the stage with 2 plays every year, and for that had an allowance so large that he spent at the rate of a 1,000*l.* a year" (entry in his diary—c. 1662) (Chambers 2, 249).

Chambers comments on Ward's entries in his diary: "There is no reason to reject this report"; nonetheless, he classifies John Ward's entries under "The Shakespeare Mythos." He gives no reason for doing so, but the reason is not

difficult to see: the incredible spending at a rate of £1,000 a year. However, if the Earl of Oxford is Shakespeare, then this is no mythos but a documented reality. The first half of Ward's entry reads:

Mr. Shakespeare was a natural wit, without any art at all; he frequented the plays all his younger time, but in his elder days lived at Stratford (Chambers 2, 249).

This certainly refers to William Shakspere of Stratford-on-Avon. Is the information on the spending of the £1,000 unreliable? We should not reject it too hastily on overly formal grounds. Somehow, Ward must have heard something about the true author. Even if it was only a rumor, it is still highly significant that in addition to information about Oxford/Shakespeare appears information on the literary front, William Shakspere. We do not know from whom Ward had heard that Shakespeare wrote two plays a year, for which he received an allowance allowing him to spend at the rate of £1,000 a year. The hypothesis that I favor is that we have to deal with information that circulated verbally only. In short, the official "suppression" or "eradication" of Oxford's biography was restricted to the written word and was not completely successful in the oral domain.

We may think of this annuity as a trade-off. Could it be that Oxford was given the opportunity to spend in accordance with his rank, while on the other hand the Queen could require that he not associate his name with any activity incompatible with this rank, the writing of plays partly destined for the public theatre? Could it be that these two aspects are not mutually exclusive and are only two sides of the same coin? Anyway, it would have been a bargain, conceived as a pact between the Queen and Oxford. In his letter of 25 June 1586 to Burghley, one day before the grant became official, Oxford wrote:

...for being now almost at a point to taste that good which her Majesty shall determine, yet am I as one that hath long besieged a fort and not able to compass the end or reap the fruit of his travail, being forced to levy his siege for want of munition (ff 49-50).

Mark Anderson wrote in *Shakespeare by Another Name*: "However, the bargain was a Faustian one. . . ." (xxxii). It was Faustian in the sense that it was final and irreversible—it could never be undone, not even after his death. The Earls of Montgomery and Pembroke and their families would never be able to call the author by his true name because the social taboo would not allow it. It would be a betrayal of one of their class and thus a betrayal of their class itself.

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