

Who was the Model for the Butcher of Ashford in 2 Henry VI?

by Warren Hope

Some of Shakespeare's most famous lines have been torn from their original contexts and then taken on lives of their own, often quoted in completely inappropriate circumstances by people who have neither read the plays nor seen performances of them. One of the most controversial lines of this type is from the fourth act of the second part of *Henry VI* and reads, "The first thing we do let's kill all the lawyers." Dick the Butcher, one of the followers of Jack Cade, the rebel, pronounces the line.

At one point, Cade refers to Dick as "the Butcher of Ashford." Although Ashford is in Kent—some people argue it was Cade's hometown—the description suggests to my ear "the butcher of Stratford," the trade assigned to William Shakspeare by some of his earliest biographers. Is it possible that Shakespeare, that is, Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, used William Shakspeare of Stratford as a model for Dick the Butcher of Ashford in the second part of *Henry VI*?

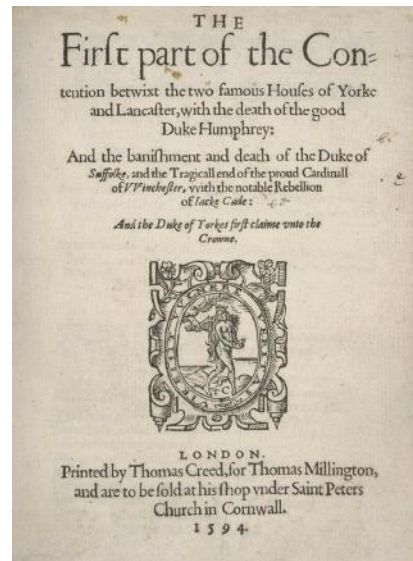
The year 1592 seems to have been a pivotal one in the history of the Elizabethan stage. Henslowe recorded in his diary a number of performances of *Henry VI* at The Rose in the first half of that year, before plague caused the theaters to close in the summer. Most scholars who have considered the issue concur that Henslowe is most likely referring to performances of one or more parts of Shakespeare's *Henry VI*. They also conclude it is likely that the plays were performed by Lord Strange's Men or a combination of

those players with The Admiral's Men. This combined troupe contained not only Henslowe's son-in-law, Edward Alleyn, one of the great tragedians of the age, but also others who were eventually incorporated into the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the company that has become commonly known as Shakespeare's company.

Bronson Feldman has made a case for the likely hypothesis that the Earl of Oxford gave William Shakspeare his start in the theater by attaching the recent arrival from Stratford to Oxford's company of players (Feldman 99). Feldman's case reads in part:

He [Oxford] got the young fellow a place in his company at the Curtain, where Shakespeare's plays are known to have been memorably performed, and tried out his abilities in different functions and roles. Theatrical tradition, reported by Rowe, declares that the "top of his performance" as an actor was in the mummery of Hamlet's Ghost. He was far more successful in the commercial affairs of the theatre, apparently collecting a large stock of play-apparel which he rented or sold at whimsical prices, and doing the same with stage manuscripts. He may have marched with the two hundred proud players, arrayed in silk, whom the spy Maliverny Catlin described in January 1587, parading the streets of London with the livery of Leicester, Oxford, the Lord Admiral, and other magnates.

As time passed, Shakspeare's career advanced. The earliest documentary evidence we have of William Shakspeare in London comes from his attempt to recoup a loan of seven pounds he made to John Clayton in 1592 (Price 3). This loan is one of the earliest signs that Shakspeare engaged in usury and thus supports those anti-Stratfordians who argue that the passages in Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* that have been taken to be an attack on Shakespeare as a playwright are in fact an attack on Shakspeare—as a usurer, play



Warren Hope received his PhD in English Literature from Temple University and has published several books of poetry (*Adam's Thoughts in Winter*, 2001). Currently, he is an adjunct professor of English at Holy Family University in Philadelphia. He is co-author with Kim Holston of *The Shakespeare Controversy* (McFarland, 1992 and 2009) and formerly served as editor of the *Shakespeare Oxford Society Newsletter* from 1981 to 1984. His research has appeared in the journals *The Elizabethan Review* and *The Oxfordian*.

broker, and jack of all profitable trades. It will be remembered that Greene or, as some argue, Henry Chettle, parodied a line from *3 Henry VI* as part of that attack, a fact often used to try to date the composition of the plays.

The success and power of those performances have been attested by no less a contemporary authority than Thomas Nash in his pamphlet, *Pierce Penniless*, published in London in 1592. Nash writes: “How would it have joyed brave Talbot, the terror of the French, to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage and have his bones embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least (at several times) who in the tragedian that represents his person imagine they behold him fresh bleeding.”

This statement by Nash on the power and purpose of the history plays is frequently cited, but scholars tend to neglect the fact that he goes on to defend those plays against people who opposed them: “I will defend it against any collian or club-fisted usurer of them all, there is no immortality can be given a man on earth like unto plays. What talk I to them of immortality, that are the only underminers of honor, and do envy any man that is not sprung up by a base broker like themselves. They care not if all the ancient houses were rooted out....” (Collian was equivalent to “rascal.”)

Nash goes on to say that “club-fisted” usurers of this type consider all art to be nothing but vanity and he associates them with the Protestant and republican seekers for liberty in the Low Countries, a movement never whole-heartedly supported by the Queen and some factions at Court, but often joined by English adventurers and the unemployed of London. In other words, Nash identifies an attitude toward money as the difference between those who support or oppose plays that appeal to patriotism from an aristocratic point of view. He claims those who care for nothing but “filthy lucre” ask what they get from the tributes to deceased nobility that are depicted on the stage. This animosity of the low-born for the high-born that Nash describes, perfectly reflects Shakespeare’s depiction of the motivations of Jack Cade and his followers for whom Dick the Butcher of Ashford is a kind of mouthpiece.

Dick’s arrival on stage with Cade and his followers is announced by the dialogue of two otherwise anonymous Rebels.

Second Rebel: I see them! I see them! There’s Best’s son, the tanner of Wingham—

First Rebel: He shall have the skins of our enemies to make dog’s leather of.

Second Rebel: And Dick the butcher—

First Rebel: Then is sin struck down like an ox, and iniquity’s throat cut like a calf.

(IV.2.23–29)

Who was the Model for the Butcher of Ashford in *2 Henry VI*?

The name of the first man seen, Best, necessarily raises issues associated with the nature of goodness and quality. Editors of the play indicate *dog's leather* was the kind used to make gloves. As a result, this ghastly idea of making gloves out of the skins of enemies is associated with John Shakspeare, Will's father, who is often described as a glover and at times used a sign based on a glover's tool rather than a cross when a signature was required. More to the point, though, John Aubrey, born ten years after the death of Will Shakspeare but an early collector of anecdotes and information about him, in his *Brief Lives* describes Shakspeare this way: "His father was a Butcher, and I have been told heretofore by some of the neighbours, that when he was a boy he exercised his father's trade, but when he kill'd a Calfe he would do it in high style, and made a speech" (Aubrey 115).

Will's memorable way of killing a calf seems to have been the basis for Shakespeare's similes when Dick of Ashford makes his entrance.

The concern about goodness is enforced by the comparisons, that sin is like an ox and iniquity is like a calf. Both ox and calf—these two forms of disgraceful or immoral behavior—are eliminated by Dick's practicing his craft, doing his job. If the calf can be associated with Will Shakspeare, it is no great stretch to associate the Ox with Oxford. The relationship between the two is based on age and potency—an ox is a male calf that has been neutered and grown mature. In 1592, Shakspeare was twenty-eight; Oxford forty-two. Both celebrated birthdays in April. Will Shakspeare cut the throat of the iniquity that led him to flee Stratford while simultaneously striking down the sin that caused Oxford to hide himself behind a mask, a pen name. After all, the elimination of iniquity and sin demands sacrifice.

Aubrey also describes the youthful Will Shakspeare as a "natural witt." This aspect of his character is admirably displayed by Dick the Butcher's running commentary or witty translation of Jack Cade's speech. A few examples.

Cade: We, John Cade, so termed of our supposed father—
Butcher (*To his fellows*): Or rather of stealing a cade of herrings.
(IV.2.33–35)

Cade is engaged in trying to establish a false lineage, giving himself noble ancestors, hence his use of "supposed father." But Dick quickly turns Cade's name into the nickname of a thief. A "cade" is a barrel. The emphasis is on identity and how it can be distorted by the use and interpretation of names. The speech continues:

Cade: My father was a Mortimer—
Butcher (*To his fellows*): He was an honest man and a bricklayer.
Cade: My mother a Plantagenet—
Butcher (*To his fellows*): I knew her well, she was a mid-wife.

Cade: My wife descended of the Lacys—
 Butcher (*To his fellows*): She was indeed a peddler's daughter and sold many laces.
 (IV. 2. 41–47)

Dick's practice of mocking the grandiose claims of his leader for the pleasure of his fellows is at first general but becomes specific when Cade mentions his wife's descent in IV.2.40. One of the traditions about the life of William of Stratford that became exceedingly popular in the nineteenth century was that Will left Stratford because Sir Thomas Lucy of Charlecote Park in Warwickshire sought to punish him for poaching, stealing rabbits or sheep or deer. In response, Will is said to have composed a lampoon, punning on the name Lucy the same way Dick puns on the name Lacy.



Some scholars, such as Georg Gervinus (1863) and Henry Glass (1899), seriously argued the following was the first poem Shakespeare wrote:

A parliament member, a justice of peace,
 At home a poor scarecrow, at London an ass,
 If lousy is Lucy as some folks miscall it
 Then Lucy is lousy whatever befall it.

While we can certainly agree with those scholars (Sir Sidney Lee, 1899) who now argue there is no evidence that this was written by Shakespeare, it could well be an expression of Will Shakspeare's "natural witt"—and it is not hard to imagine it being rattled off in conversation by a character like Dick the Butcher. Lucy was a member of Parliament in 1585 and had been knighted years before by the Earl of Leicester. He was also a magistrate for Warwickshire and a Protestant who harassed local Catholics in the area near Stratford.

The Queen visited Charlecote Park in 1572 and it is likely that Oxford was in her party since he was a senior member of the nobility. He and Fulke Greville staged a mock battle with forts and fireworks to entertain the Queen and the Court at Warwick Castle on the Avon in August of that year (Ward 70-71). In this mock battle, Oxford no doubt stood for the faction at court that gathered around Thomas Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex, which opposed the Queen's potential marriage to her favorite, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, while Fulke Greville, the friend of Philip Sidney, Leicester's nephew, stood for the Leicester faction. Warwick Castle was the seat of Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick, Leicester's brother. Since Leicester knighted Lucy, Lucy would have been seen as a supporter of the Leicester faction in Warwick-

Who was the Model for the Butcher of Ashford in *2 Henry VI*?

shire and in Parliament. Oxford's own Catholic sympathies would have been stirred by Lucy's attacks on local Catholics, including members of the Arden family, relatives of Will Shakspeare.

A final example:

Cade: I am able to endure much—
Butcher (*To his fellows*): No question of that for I have seen him
whipped three market days together.
(IV.2.60–63)

In the late seventeenth century, the Gloucestershire clergyman Richard Davies recorded the following rumor: "Shakespeare was much given to all unluckiness in stealing venison and rabbits, particularly from Sir-----Lucy who oft had him whipped and sometimes imprisoned and at last mad[e] him fly his native country to his great advancement" (Schoenbaum 79). Nicholas Rowe, who is now thought of as Shakespeare's first biographer, used this anecdote and connected it with the Lousy Lucy lampoon. Given this context, it seems likely that the Clerk of Chatham in the above scene from *2 Henry VI* is meant to stand for Sir Thomas Lucy, the Master of Charlecote. The Clerk of Chatham tells Cade and his mob, "Sir, I thank God I have been so well brought up that I can write my name." Cade's followers respond, "He hath confessed—away with him! He is a villain and a traitor." Cade instructs his followers to take the Clerk of Chatham away and "hang him with his pen and inkhorn about his neck" (IV.2.109–112).

It is in the midst of this topsy-turvy world, this populism gone mad, that Cade describes his communist, utopian vision: "there shall be no money. All shall eat and drink on my score, and I will apparel them in all one livery that they may agree like brothers, and worship their lord." This vision could well represent Oxford's wish to see rival troupes of players combine under a single patron and perhaps forecasts the formation of the Lord Chamberlain's players. In any case, it is in response to this statement of Cade's that Dick the Butcher of Ashford makes his modest proposal: "The first thing we do let's kill all the lawyers" (IV.2. 79-81). The Clerk of Chatham is the first symbol of the rule of law to be killed.

This pivotal period in the history of the Elizabethan stage was also a pivotal period in Oxford's life. He remarried in 1591 to the former Elizabeth Trentham and finally produced a male heir in 1592 named Henry who eventually became the 18th Earl of Oxford. He therefore had crucial reasons to wish to protect his reputation. The time must have been ripe for his adoption of a *nom de guerre* and it seems likely that the characterization of Dick the Butcher of Ashford is a dramatic celebration of the link between Shakespeare and Shakspeare. In the year after Henslowe records the performances of Henry VI at The Rose in 1592, the name William Shakespeare appears for the first

time in connection with literature at the bottom of the elegant dedication of *Venus and Adonis* to the Earl of Southampton. Scholars continue to puzzle over that dedication, with its reference to the “first heir of my invention.” Charles Wisner Barrell long ago showed that Thomas Nash in his Epistle Dedicatory to his pamphlet, *Strange News*, published in 1593, addressed the Earl of Oxford as “Gentle Master William,” a prolific writer of lyrics as well as an excessively generous patron (Barrell 49). In 1594, the first quarto of *Henry VI* was listed in the Stationers’ Register and published anonymously. It is now generally considered the kind of text that was generated from the memories of players who had appeared in it. The Lord Chamberlain’s Company was organized that same year.

Works Cited

2 Henry VI. Eds. Orgel and Braumiller. *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, 2nd Revised Edition. Penguin Classics, 2002.

Aubrey, John. *Brief Lives*. London, 1681. Also, *Brief Lives*, Ed. John Buchanan-Brown. Penguin Classics, 2000.

Barrell, Charles Wisner. "New Milestone in Shakespearean Research," *The Shakespeare Fellowship Quarterly*, V (1944), 49-66.

Feldman, Bronson. "The Making of William Shakespeare," *Secrets of Shakespeare: Four Chapters from a Subversive History*. Philadelphia: Lovelore Press, 1972. This essay is to be reprinted in a collection of Feldman's essays by Laugwitz Verlag of Germany.

Henslowe, Philip. *Henslowe's Diary (1591-1609)*. 2nd edition. Ed. R.A. Foakes. Cambridge UP, 2002.

Nash, Thomas. *Pierce Penniless*. London, 1592. <http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/nashe1.html>

Price, Diana. "What's in a Name? Shakespeare, Shake-scene and *the Clayton Loan*," *The Elizabethan Review*, Spring 1996, 3-13. Also, Diana Price, *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*. Greenwood Press, 2001.

Schoenbaum, Samuel. *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*. Oxford UP, 1975.

Ward, B.M. *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. London: John Murray, 1928.

Wikipedia. Sir Thomas Lucy. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Lucy