

The Politics of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford

by Richard Malim and Robert Detobel

My correspondence with Robert Detobel of Germany includes a draft paper entitled, “Some Conjectures on the Anonymous Author of a Speech Held in Parliament of 1597–8,” which he did not finish before he passed away in autumn 2018. We believe there is a strong case that the author of the speech is Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550–1604).

The speech and its ambience are broadly commented upon by J. E. Neale, the respected historian of Elizabeth’s reign (II, 335–351). In a footnote he indicates that the manuscript does not contain any overt clue to the author’s identity, adding that he is not “inclined to think that he was Robert Cecil” (342). Indeed, at least one technical objection can be raised to Cecil’s authorship from Neale’s own remark in another footnote (349), where he refers to a document filed at Hatfield as MS 56/83 being in the hand of a secretary of Cecil’s (the speech being in a different handwriting). It is likely to have been the brief of a speech Robert Cecil intended to make on the first day of the relevant Parliamentary session—Nov. 5th 1597. However, this argument against Cecil’s authorship is far from being as conclusive as the impassioned tone of the speech, which is difficult to match to Cecil’s character.



Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford

The Historical Background

A long period of more than 20 years of decent harvests in England ended in 1594. In the preceding year, the faction of landowners supporting enclosures had succeeded in having an Act passed that greatly relaxed the procedures, whereby they were able to “enclose” the former common lands on which peasants and small landowners tilled their crops and grazed their own animals, and to take over these lands for the very lucrative sheep and wool trades. The consequence was that widespread rural unemployment and starvation were further exacerbated. The harvest failures beginning in 1594 called into question the general benefit of enclosures, incorporating the general debate as to whether tillage (agriculture, crop-growing) or large-scale pasture (of sheep for wool, in effect, trade) should be the basic source of wealth or social balance of the realm. By 1597 the matter had become urgent, and in the first session of the 1597–8 Parliament, Francis Bacon himself led off the debates with a motion against enclosures.

By 1597 one of the great champions of restoring tillage and turning enclosed pastures back into arable land was Robert Cecil, a member of the Privy Council who had become Secretary of State the previous year. Neale quotes him as exclaiming: “Whosoever doth not maintain the plough, destroys the Kingdom” (343), and this was evidently the view of the Privy Council and government in backing Bacon and his motion. Cecil was led, no doubt, in part by fear that rioting (already in evidence locally by 1596) might grow into *jacqueries* or more widespread peasants’ revolts like the Cade rebellion of 1450 and the



*Sir Robert Cecil (1563–1612),
1st Earl of Salisbury, by John de Critz
the elder*

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Robert Detobel appears in the current issue of *The Oxfordian* with his paper, “*Shakespeare’s Idle Hours in Historical Context*.”

1381 Peasants' Revolt, but also by a concern to maintain the old feudal ideas of hospitality, i.e. "the maintaining of an open house" (Neale 349).

Bacon's motion to the House of Commons on 5 November 1597 initiated the main legislative work of the session, with his motion against enclosures and depopulation of towns and houses of husbandry, and for the maintenance of tillage. At the core of his arguments there is the same assertion as in Cecil's requirement that "the plough" be maintained as the kingdom's main source of wealth. "Enclosures cause depopulation, and that in turn produces idleness [non-productivity], decay of tillage, decrease in charity, charge in maintaining the poor, and finally the impoverishment of the Realm....The eye of experience is a sure eye; but the eye of wisdom is the quick-sighted eye. By experience we daily see that no-one regards as shameful what is profitable to himself; and therefore there is almost no conscience in destroying the savour of our life—bread, I mean" (Neale 338). Thus, the state has to care for the whole, and to take steps to achieve the absence of "idleness," i.e. non-productivity, and this is the battleground. On the one hand, Cecil and Bacon held that idleness was the direct result of enclosures, the opposition made up of the new owners of the former common land. On the other hand, those traders and manufacturers who benefited (backed by an extreme Puritan element not necessarily swayed by mere economic considerations) saw the cause of the current situation as the "horrible abuses of idle and vagrant persons," based upon something sinful in their personal spiritual states which prevented them from being able to make ends meet, as well as the vicious anti-poor legislation.

The House of Commons accepted the Bacon motion and appointed a committee to discuss it, but we have no record of the precise sittings and proceeding of the committee or committees involved. The committee first met on November 14th and adjourned to the next day, presumably for a fuller attendance to what would today be called the floor of the House. The procedures of these committees are not recorded, but one can surmise that the Speaker to whom the speeches were addressed presided over the larger committee. There is a 1589 record of a Committee on a Bill where it appears members of the Lords and Commons debated it together before referring it on (Elton 249). This is the point in 1597 at which Oxford might have personally addressed the Speaker with the anonymous speech on this Bill.

Bacon's motion became a Bill, which was in Committee by November 21st.

The Anonymous Speaker

The manuscript of the anonymous speech is simply endorsed "1597," with some cataloguing references. Oxford could have made it himself to the enlarged Committee on November 15th or sometime after when the enlarged Committee sat on the second reading. As a member of the House of Lords

(though not an elected member of the House of Commons), he could not have made it in the House of Commons, but he could have supplied it as a brief to a member. Another problem might arise as to the identity of that member. However, a mere anonymous brief or even an unused speech would not necessarily be preserved: we have not been able to track down anything similar.

We think Cecil appreciated his brother-in-law's gifts of exposition, presentation and oratory and therefore employed him to write or deliver the speech. He could not possibly, with his father still alive, give any credit to the author—and that might be his own excuse for not doing so. Indeed, association with the debased Earl of Oxford might be politically a bad idea. We note that after Lord Burghley's death in August 1598, Cecil apparently did not stand in the way of publication of Francis Meres's revelatory *Palladis Tamia*, which publicly praised Oxford as the first among 17 playwrights as “the best for comedy amongst us,” or of plays with the previously banned “William Shakespeare” ascription on the quarto title pages.

However, if Oxford did deliver the speech, Cecil might seek to show that Oxford did it without encouragement or employment. Otherwise, the search for an explanation for the anonymity is without any leads at all, save that a clearly written version in Secretary hand is carefully preserved in the Hatfield archives.

The Speech Itself

There is no need to print the entire speech, especially where the technical legal elements in it are obscured by problems of transcription from the manuscript. These passages are passed over and words in square brackets represent our informed speculations of the original meaning. We are also responsible for the punctuation. So it begins:

If it please you, Mr. Speaker: the first motion that sounded in this place in reminder of a lamentation for dispeopling the realm and disinheriting (as it were) the poor of their labour which is their living, by converting tillage into pasturage, seemed to gratify the affections of the honourable Senate, as (carried with general applause) they all condescended not to desire, nor barely to propound, nor simply to prepare but effectually to provide and apply some present remedy.

[This seems to justify the case for stating the speech was not given to the House of Commons by a member. The speaker does seem to be a member as he speaks of “the (rather than “this”) honourable Senate” as a body in which he is concerned, and of its members as “they,” rather than “we.” However, he does talk below of the Speaker exhibiting the Bill to “our second view”: perhaps this indicates a further presentation to an enlarged Committee to which Oxford might have access.]

This sore cannot thereby be affected, but by the suppressing of these enclosures, which spring from a bad root, spread unto worse mischiefs and against the best rules of religion, policy and humanity.

First if we truly survey the security of our country, we find that swelling pride engendered the first motion [on] this kind of enclosure, and deceitful covetousness does too swiftly second it, for when men in taking by their sight a true account of their estates do see them far outcast by others, and so far short of their...desires [corruptly seek to] her Majestie to [resolve] this war of inequality.

[There seems to be some sort of question whereby the enclosure entrepreneurs swapped their land for Crown lands, to which Oxford may be referring.]

Now if they could compass the increase of their own strength in the compassion of others want and could satiate their...appetite, in the affirmation of any Christian law, they might more easily pass over their travails without either murmur of the poor or censure of the wise.

But since their pride cannot be sated but by oppression, and this oppression is such of a kind as drives not only the poor to discomfort, but draws them to decay, leaving their life not only destitute but desperate [i.e. *despairing*] of relief, it is fit that the course of these enclosures should be corrected, and the earth again laid open to the bounty of the wonted [harvest], that the common waste may be seen to flourish and the common people be furnished with the fruit of their husbandry.

In the remembrance of the first [injunction], that ever came to man from the mouth of God, not to [obstruct] the blessing to have the earth fruitful, joined with the cross and correction of labour to have the earth tilled; so as the promise of increase, which is the general desire of us all, and bring several contentment to us all, was but conditional that the earth should proportion the abundance according to man's employment in his duty.

But when the law of property whereby man could say, "That is mine", supplanting the love of our neighbour, supplied it with another three-fold love of money, of pleasure, and of ourselves, then [that love] springing from the love of money scratched all, [and] solely arising from the law of pleasure, swallowed all, and self-love stepping in to back the other, appropriated all so entirely to the self, as it hindered the participation of [benefit] to others for profit and pleasure, as they be divided and made less,...

This makes men, laying aside the yoke of the commandments: “thy abundance and thy...thou shall not keep back, and thy neighbour of the fruit of the ground thou shalt not defraud” [*see Leviticus 19, 13*], this makes [men] to [enfold] the whole commodity of the earth to themselves, that because pastures maintained with less charge and returneth with more gain than doth tillage; therefore [from] gentlemen they will become graziers, factors for the butchers; and because tillage in their own hands yields more private profit than dispersed into the lands of many, from gentlemen they will become ploughmen, grinders of the poor; whereby learning not from the [experience] of Cain, they yet strive to bring the punishment of Cain upon their younger and weaker brethren to make them vagabonds and renegades upon the earth.

And to give yet, Mr. Speaker, the better edge of encouragement to us all we shall [dissuade them from...], and shutting up themselves in these [errors], as it [scars] and blemishes the truth of their religion; so doth it seem as deep a wound to the pretended trust of their [faith]”.

[Then our speaker turns to the solutions open to Solomon, the ancient Athenians and the Romans, and the social benefits of the pre-enclosures economic settlement, not least the peaceful attitude of the tillers, concluding that the husbandman is the least likely to be disaffected against the state.]

Thereby, it being an action of moderate exercising [of] the body, there is none that passes their days with fewer cares, nor run their race with full strength, fitter to do her Majesties [service], upon some small training, than the husbandman. Whereupon Socrates was wont to say that the plough is the seed of soldiers.

Now the benefit of tillage is seen in these two: first that in [the provision and supply and bread] which is the fruit and flower of tillage, are comprehended the necessities of this life; and there was no other judgment given against Jerusalem but only that the staff of bread should be broken; for the Lord well knows that no realm,...populous in itself, can either long have joy in the streets or content in the state, where there grows a cleanness of teeth through scarcity of bread [*see Amos 4, 6*].

Secondly, where other trades have their security and limit wherein they return their profit, [men’s labour is] to profit none such as wear silks, [but that of] the shepherd, none such as deal with mutton [*i.e. wool dealers*]. Husbandry returns her profit even to the Prince, and is without limitation breaking forth as the sun, from whose beams every particular person receives comfort.

Now, if it please you, Mr. Speaker, is neither the commandment given that [destroys] tillage, nor the commodity seen in the use of the tillage can prevail anything with them that [enfold] the earth into their hands, yet if [even] they had but the sight of nature to [repent] themselves or know but the law of numbers to report their brother, they would undertake [still] to swallow all, and that none should be [prosperous] in the field but they.

For all being birds of the same feather,... with him that [hath made] up his trade highest, it is strange that men can be so unnatural as to shake off the poor as if they were not part of the body, and that because we live not in a savage land where wolves can devour sheep, therefore we shall be known to live in a more bountiful land where sheep shall devour men.



Frontispiece to Simonds D'Ewes, 'Journals of All the Parliaments during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth' (1682)

And how can they think long to thrive or flourish in this course, but at length the sight of the poor shall astonish them and the curses of the poor shall overtake them [*here follows a Biblical proverb too mangled in the manuscript for transcription*].

But now if these wrongs should be reversed and all...and curses of the poor should be removed, and a full pacification should be made between the Parish's gentlemen and the...countrymen, it has pleased you, Mr. Speaker, to exhibit this bill to our second view, as a complete remedy. I will not say that it [is] worse than the disease, but this: you may truly say it is too weak for the disease.

[There follows a long legal and technical dissertation on the defects of the Bill and possible improvements to circumvent those who were apparently already geared up to defeat or circumvent it.]

Thus have I in much imperfections shown my desire and affection to this bill. [Would] I had, M. Speaker, the ability to persuade peace that may pass on such easy conditions should never be debated, much less denied.

A law framed out of personal affections of men will never tend to the general good of all, and if...one may put in a caution to save his own pastures it will never prove a law of restraint, but rather of [destruction of] liberty.

The eyes of the poor are on this Parliament, grave and sad for the want they yet suffer. The eyes of the poor do importune much, standing like reeds shaking in every corner of the land. This place is the epitome of the [whole realm].

The trust of the poor committed to us, whose person we do supply, doth challenge our further [responsibility] for their relief. This has been the inscription of many bills. In our forwardness...From single-heartedness, we can now [well effect this Bill on the poor] by leading their hands to the plough and leaving the [result] to God to sit now in judgment over our....And there is now such sound trial of a true heart as to stoop with Zacchaeus to the law of restitution, and therefore as this bill entered at first with a short prayer, "God speed the plough", so now I wish it end with such success as the plough may speed the poor."

Shakespearean Correspondences

As a young poet, Oxford showed his interest in agricultural economy by writing a poem titled, "The Labouring Man That Tills the Fertile Soil," which prefaced the 1573 English translation of *Cardanus Comforte*. In it, Oxford demonstrated his concerns for the farmer or laborer who is dedicated to providing sustenance from the earth, exemplified in the first four lines.

The labouring man that tills the fertile soil,
And reaps the harvest fruit, hath not indeed
The gain, but pain; and if for all his toil
He gets the straw, the lord will have the seed. (Sobran 233)

More to the point are the vocabulary and phrasing in the Parliament speech which share precise linguistic parallels with the language of the Shakespeare canon. It is the sheer volume of these correspondences in a single speech which, to us, is persuasive (several are taken from passages in the speech not reproduced above):

"censure of the wise"—compare with "censure me in your wisdom"—*Julius Caesar* III.ii.16, and "wisest censure"—*Othello*, II.iii.186;

“to make them vagabonds and renegades upon the earth”—compare with “vagabonds, rascals and runaways”—*Richard III*, V.v.46 ;

“thus did the former law-makers overslip...”—see *Rape of Lucrece* 1.1576: “...hath overslipped her thought”;

“Epitome”: in *Coriolanus* (V.ii.67) this word means the miniscule version of him (i.e. Coriolanus’ son);

“Single-heartedness”—compare with “I speak it with a single heart” in *Henry VIII*, V.ii.72 (usually thought to be from the Fletcher addition);

“my desire and affection to this bill”, “the cross and correction of labour;” and “cunning and skilful offenders shall altogether slip the collar...”—note the repeated use of hendiadys, a device which occurs 300 times in Shakespeare’s works (Wright 168);

“dispeopling the realm”; and “disinheriting the poor of their labour”—note the recourse to gerunds, another hallmark of Shakespeare, who shows a proclivity for neologisms beginning with “un-” and with “dis-” (Salmon 79);

“proportion the abundance”—note the use of “proportion” as a verb, an example of Shakespeare’s fondness for interchanging parts of speech;

We view the last four paragraphs as showing the touch of the master, finishing with another Greek apposition, and from them take:

“Forwardness”: five uses in the canon.

Oxford’s Views on Economics

In the effort to identify the author, we have attempted to place the anonymous speech in its historical context and to trace the language used to Shakespeare himself. While this is a compelling line of evidence, our effort fails if we cannot also align the ethos behind the speech. We do have one advantage: the speech has as its base the author’s unvarnished economic and political credo, and so where a passage in the works of Shakespeare matches (or, if from an early reference, tends towards) the mature view of the author, that serves as evidence in favor of Oxford as the author. In contrast, so often the critic faced with a speech which might be construed as Shakespeare’s personal view, for example, of women, has to bear in mind (however many times the same view is repeated) that the view expressed is merely that of the characters in the plays, behind which the author and his true opinion may be sheltering.

We should start with the very early play *2 Henry VI* (Act IV, scene ix), where Sir Alexander Iden is peaceably walking in his garden with five companions:

Lord, who would live turmoil-ed in the Court
And enjoy such quiet walks as these?
This small inheritance my father left me
Contenteth me, and worth a monarchy.
I seek not to wax great by others' wanting
Or gather wealth I care not with what envy;
Sufficeth that I have maintains my state,
And sends the poor well-pleas-ed from my gate.

Cade is on the run after the collapse of his rebellion and, starving, has grubbed a few vegetables. He now kneels up:

"A villain, thou wilt betray me and get a thousand crowns of the king by carrying my head to him," and then insults and challenges Iden.

But Iden answers:

Why, rude companion, whatsoe'er thou be,
I know thee not. Why then should I betray thee?
Is it not enough to break into my garden?

The inference is that, if Cade had not trespassed and spoken poorly of Iden, Iden would have sent him "well pleas-ed from his gate," properly fed and watered. After another exchange, Iden says:

Nay, it shall ne'er be said while England stands
That Alexander Iden, an esquire of Kent,
Took odds to combat a poor, famished man.

However, Cade the proud leader cannot abase himself and so Iden triumphs in the subsequent fight, kills Cade and claims his reward. From this early play, this seems to be the idealistic view of the young Oxford of the landowning class: the squire walks in his garden providing employment, in serious discussion with his friends, and behaving charitably towards beggars at his gate. At the same time, he is ready to repel trespassers and serve the state in the tasks of Law and Order.

The mature Oxford has to reckon that the system has broken down: Iden is not looking forward; he is looking backward towards a never-existed Merry England, perhaps to progress in some Utopian future reduced to an absurdity by the Montaigne-like speeches of Gonzalo in *The Tempest* II.i. The "modern" society of 1590s England has to deal with the consequences of enclosures, and the supporters of that procedure are its resolute defenders. In the draft of a speech, an opponent maintains his Christian credentials which the anonymous speech impugns: "I have...thought it necessary first, by way of

protestation, to declare myself a religious Christian to my God, a true lover of my country, and charitably affected to the poor” (Neale 339).

Oxford feeds into *Henry V* in IV.iii:

O, that we now had here
But one ten thousand of those men in England
That do no work today. 16–18

Hawkes suggests that the reference to “ten thousand” is taken from a contemporary estimate of the unemployed and starving beggar population in the 1570s, but modern scholarship maintains the figure is far too low, and Oxford with his reference to “*one* ten thousand” agrees (92). Hawkes suggests that some became semi-criminal pedlars—tinkers and petty traders like Autolycus in *The Winter’s Tale*. The wage economy was in its infancy, so opportunities for permanent employment were limited, though the rise of part-time employment is noted (Hawkes 99). On behalf of the deprived unemployed, Cade declares class war and the young Oxford, perhaps sympathetic in part, gives him lines of memorable poetry in 2 *Henry VI*. That play, along with *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, depicts the mob as an uncontrollable monster: Cade loses control of it, and it kills the blameless poet Cinna. Indeed, it might be said that Oxford slides the complaints of Cade’s followers in the mid-14th century into those of their landless deprived successors in the 1590s so as to make a contemporary political point in the play.

Oxford recognizes in these plays and *King Lear* the poor’s desperate state and lack of culpability for the situation. Certainly, *Timon of Athens* proclaims a self-evident truth, as when Timon says:

Twinned brothers of one womb,
Whose procreation residence and birth
Scarce is dividant, touch them with several fortunes [*each has his own particular luck*]
The greater scorns the lesser. Not nature,
To whom all sores lay siege, can bear great fortune [*Nature, subjected to corruptions, cannot give birth of itself to great fortune*]
But by contempt of nature.
It is the pasture lards the brother’s sides [*the encloser becomes fat*]
The want that makes him lean.
His sembable, yea, himself, Timon disdains.
Destruction fang mankind. Earth yield me roots. [*he digs*]
Who seeks for better of thee, sauce his palate
With thy most operant poison...”
[*Timon curses those who wish more gain from Earth than roots, i.e. enclosurers*]
IV.iii.3–10, 22–25

Oxford is a long way from being a universal suffrage democrat, but in the speech, the speaker recognizes that the poor, uprooted by enclosures and with insufficient wage-labor jobs available, must have their interests represented, and this was a view which Cecil, Bacon and Elizabeth's Privy Council recognized. But the speaker has to urge, convince, and overcome an opposition rooted in its own godliness. To that end, he cannot simply repeat the language of Timon: his objective must be to put lead in the government's pencil to make certain that the final Act does afford some protection to the poor as well as check the enclosurers, but (astutely) not to preach, or try to induce a better political attitude, which might be considered provocative to the Bill's opponents and inspire them to vote it down.

With that caveat, we can demonstrate sufficient common political attitude between the creator of the play's protagonist Timon and the anonymous speaker. To that add the linguistic parallels and the extrinsic circumstances of the delivery of the speech and its custody. Given all this, we can justify the conclusion that the dramatist and the speaker are the same individual. In logic, the question who else the speaker might be produces nothing to dispute that conclusion.

It is instructive from this direction to look at the late career of William Shakspeare in Stratford, a sometime wool dealer like the Clown in the *Winter's Tale* IV.iii, who became involved with friends in the Coombe family in an enclosure scheme. His role is somewhat ambiguous, as no doubt he was anxious to protect his tithes investment, and equally, Oxford would have thought that attitude somewhat sordid. Honan deals in detail with this episode (386ff). Consider the mental hernia suffered by Hawkes: "He was personally involved in acrimonious struggles over enclosure, and was fined for hoarding corn in time of dearth. In class terms, Shakespeare was an upwardly mobile bourgeois *with a strong ideological loyalty to feudalism*" (36). Also, "*Despite his biographical investment in nascent capitalism,*" (177). He must have been in a class of just himself. The total breakdown in logic of the orthodox expert's attempts to bind Shakspeare's biography to the political attitude displayed in the plays is wonderfully illustrated.

Author's Note

With the gracious permission of the Marquess of Salisbury we have been supplied with a copy of the original English Secretary script from the Hatfield House archives, rendered into print by Jane Greatorex, without whose expertise this effort would not have progressed.

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