

# *Did the 17th Earl of Oxford Serve on Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council?*

by Gary Goldstein

For several generations scholars have held that Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, was a member of the Privy Council under Queen Elizabeth I. However, the only evidence provided was a letter from April 1603, written by de Vere to his brother-in-law, Secretary of State Sir Robert Cecil, on the advent of King James of Scotland into England.

In it, de Vere asks Cecil “what course is devised by you of the Council & the rest of the Lords concerning our duties to the King’s Majesty...?” De Vere here refers to two categories of people without indicating which category he belongs to.

However, in 2009 David Roper published *Proving Shakespeare*, in which he points to a Privy Council Letter of April 8, 1603 that is signed by de Vere – but doesn’t provide a reproduction of the document. In the letter, the Council authorizes the Lord Treasurer to hire horses to bring King James from Berwick to London.

We queried the Folger Shakespeare Library, which holds the document, and the image they provided demonstrates that, indeed, Edward de Vere served as a Privy Council member since he signs the letter as E. Oxenforde, with a loop flourish under his signature. (See illustration.)

Clearly, the Queen had become convinced of de Vere’s political acumen and judgment, a transformation from the reputation he had earned as a young

Did the 17th Earl of Oxford Serve on Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council?

man at her Court. According to Gilbert Talbot, in a 13<sup>th</sup> May 1573 letter written to his father:

My Lord of Oxford is lately grown into great credit, for the Queen's Majesty delighteth more in his personage and his dancing and valiantness than any other. **I think [the Earl of] Sussex doth back him all that he can; if it were not for his fickle head, he would pass any of them shortly.** My Lady Burghley unwisely has declared herself, as it were, jealous, which is come to the Queen's ear, whereat she has been not a little offended with her, but now she is reconciled again.  
(my emphasis)

Obviously, de Vere's fickle head had matured to where it had earned him political duties, even involving international relations. A clear case took place in 1595 when the French King Henry IV wrote to de Vere thanking him for his political efforts before the Queen, as attested to by the French Ambassador.

(Translation by Craig Huston)

Letter from the King to the Lord Great Chamberlain of England,

I am having this note brought to you by Lomenie whom I send before the Queen my good sister with respect to the matters which concern the well being of her affairs and of mine, in order to inform you of the satisfaction I feel for the good offices you have performed on my behalf in her presence, which I beg you to continue and believe that I will always consider it a great pleasure to reciprocate in whatever might bring about your personal satisfaction, as I have charged the said Lomenie to tell you, whom I pray you to believe as myself, who prays God to keep you, Lord Great Chamberlain, in his care.

This 5th of October at Paris. [1595]

Signed Henry, and above is written to the Lord Great Chamberlain of England.

How long de Vere served on Elizabeth's Privy Council is a question yet to be answered, as is whether King James renamed de Vere to the Council.

*Privy Council to Thomas Sackville, April 8, 1603. X.d.30 (42)—Folio 1 recto. Letters of the Privy Council. Folger Shakespeare Library. Used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library. Below the letter is an enlargement of the signature of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, "E. Oxenforde".*

[illegible]

*[Handwritten signatures and names:]*  
*J. Thos. Egerton. C. J. Buchart E. Oxenford.*  
*Rt Hon. Lord Suffolk*  
*Richd. A. Bouverie*  
*Lewarre Wm. Sanders*  
*Wm. Norton*

E. Oxenforde.

Did the 17th Earl of Oxford Serve on Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council?

