

# *A Companion for a King: "Shakespeare...THOU HADST BIN [An Earl]"*

by Matt Hutchinson

The epigram "To Our English Terence" by John Davies of Hereford is well known in Shakespeare studies. Less well known is the transparent reference to the most famous legal tract of the time contained within (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Portrait of John Davies of Hereford. Fontispiece to *The Writing Schoolemaster* 2nd ed. (1636), distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license (Wikimedia).

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The epigram reads:

*To our English Terence Mr. Will:  
Shake-speare.*  
Some say (good Will) which I, in sport do sing,  
Had'st thou not plaid some Kingly parts in sport,  
Thou hadst bin a companion for a King;  
And, beene a King among the meaner sort.  
Some others raile: raile as they thinke fit,  
Thou hast no rayling, but, a rainging Wit.  
And honesty thou sow'st, which they do reape;  
So, to increase their Stocke which they do keepe.

Terence was known as a playwright in Ancient Rome (c. 195/185–159? CE) but also labeled a front for aristocratic writers in other works available in Elizabethan England (Price 62). Comparing Shakespeare to Terence can therefore be seen as ambiguous: both a complimentary and negative interpretation is possible.

The line “a companion for a king” is usually taken by traditional scholars to mean that Shakspeare was a member of the acting troupe, The King's Men. However, it could also mean that he was a member of the King's court (Detobel, 2011).

Yet to anyone conversant with contemporary English Law, “a companion for a King” would have been recognized as an obvious and specific allusion to an Earl, as the term was written into English law in the 13th Century. Cleric and jurist Henry de Bracton (c. 1210–c. 1268), wrote:

#### THE KING'S COMPANIONS

Various persons are established under the king, namely, earls, who take the name ‘comites’ from ‘comitatus’.

Henry de Bracton, *De Legibus Et Consuetudinibus Angliae* [On the Laws and Customs of England] 1235 (De Bracton, II, 32).

As historian Andrew Spencer notes,

The sentiment expressed in *Bracton* that the earls were, by their very names, the king's natural companions was a commonplace in thirteenth and fourteenth-century political discourse. The author of the *Vita Edwardi Decundi* described the nobility as ‘the king's chief member, without which the king cannot attempt to accomplish anything of

importance'. The *Mirror of Justices*, dated to Edward I's reign, further elaborated on the meaning of comes as 'companion': 'it was agreed as law that the king should have companions...these companions are now called counts, from the Latin *comites*' (Spencer 36–37). (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Earls' royal process to Parliament at Westminster, 4 February 1512. Source: 17th century copy in British Library (Add. MS 22306) of *Parliament Procession Roll of 1512*, Library of Trinity College, Cambridge, distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license (Wikimedia).

Further, historian Marc Morris writes,

Bracton had more to say on the subject of earls. They are called *comites* (the plural of *comes*), he said, because they are the king's companions. Etymologically speaking, he was quite right: originally *comes* had simply meant 'companion'; it was first used as an official title in the fourth century for the courtiers of the Roman emperors. Having reasserted this idea, Bracton expanded on it: the king's associates helped him to govern the people, he said, and the swords with which they were girded signified the defence of the kingdom. (Morris 54)

The Germanic "Earl" soon replaced the anglicized "Count" due to the latter's closeness to the vulgar word for "vagina," although no feminine counterpart of "Countess" was ever adopted.



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The line “Thou hadst bin a companion for a King” can therefore be read as “Thou hadst bin (an Earl)” (Figure 3).



Figure 3. *Elizabeth I, Procession Portrait*, including numerous Earls. Painting by George Vertue (1684-1756), distributed under a CC-BY 2.0 license (Wikimedia).

The Shakespearean Authorship Trust lists two Earls among its candidates, Edward De Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, and William Stanley, 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby. Both cases are not mutually exclusive—Derby became Oxford’s son-in-law in 1595 and was soon reported to be “busy penning plays for the common players” (Daugherty, Location 117). However, Richard Broome in 1638 makes an interesting comment in his play *The Antipodes*:

I tell thee, These lads can act the Emperors lives all over,  
And Shakespeares Chronicled histories, to boot,  
And were that Caesar, or that English Earle,  
That lov’d a Play and Player so well now living,  
I would not be out-vyed [outdone] in my delights.

Derby was still alive at the time the play was published. Oxford had died in 1604 and was referred to as “our English Caesar” as early as 1580 by Anthony Munday.

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