

# *The Earl of Oxford's Allegory Portrait*

by Katherine Chiljan

A 16<sup>th</sup> century allegorical painting depicts a young courtier, an aged man standing opposite to him, a skeleton in an open coffin, and Father Time holding an hourglass and sickle. These figures are surrounded by excerpts from the Psalms—the sacred songs in the Old Testament—and three anonymously written verses. The courtier, the aged man, and the skeleton were likely meant as the same person through life's stages. The painting reflects “the Christian message of embracing passing time in hope of salvation,” writes art historian Tarnya Cooper (Cooper 2012, 200). This paper will show that the painting's young courtier is the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, that analysis of the anonymous verses, which have Shakespearean echoes, point to Oxford's authorship, and that the painting's Christian theme aligns with Oxford's biography, his patronage of Biblical studies, and contemporary comments that he was religious. (Note: all quotes are in modern spelling.)

Five versions of the Allegory painting exist; oil on wood panel, they measure approximately 20 x 17 inches, and have varying detail.<sup>1</sup> The artist(s) of these paintings is unknown; they have been dated c. 1575 to c. 1610, and have been given various titles: *Allegory of Youth and Old Age*, *Allegory of Life and Death*, *Memento Mori*, *A Vanitas Morality*, and *Emblematic Tableau of Youth, Old Age and Father Time*. When one of these versions was auctioned in 1983, Sotheby's noted the courtier's resemblance to the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford (Sotheby Parke Bernet 71); when it was auctioned again in 2015, Christie's added that if the courtier was Oxford, a known poet, then he could have authored the picture's anonymous verses (Christie's).

The painting's theme of *memento mori*, to remember that death is inevitable, combined with writing, is found in other Elizabethan paintings. An early example is the 1560 *Judd Memorial* (Dulwich Picture Gallery, South London). Mr. and Mrs. Judd stand on either side of a funerary monument, each with one hand atop a skull, the other pointing at a corpse in the foreground; lines about time and death are inscribed on the painting. Mrs. Judd holds a small book, likely the *Book of Common Prayer*. Another example is *Death and the Maiden*, English School, c. 1570, showing a well-dressed lady who resembles Queen Elizabeth, playing the lute;<sup>2</sup> next to her, an older man, probably representing death, holds a skull behind her head and a mirror with her reflection. The painting, owned by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust (Stratford-upon-Avon), is inscribed "Mors Ultima Linea Rerum Est" ("Death is the thing which is last in line)," a quote from Horace's epistles, according to the Trust's website. Several Elizabethans included skulls in their portraits, Oxford among them, as seen in the Ashbourne portrait (formerly titled *Shakespeare*, now *Sir Hugh Hamersley*, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC).

The Allegory painting's earliest dated version, c. 1575, is at Agecroft Hall in Richmond, Virginia; it was acquired at auction (Sotheby's 1984). Although the figures in the Agecroft (and in the other versions) are cartoonish, the courtier resembles Oxford as a young man, with a fair complexion, scant facial hair and curly red hair, as seen in Oxford's 1575 Welbeck Abbey portrait (on loan, National Portrait Gallery, London). In addition, the Agecroft's courtier has a thin mustache curled up at the ends, also seen in Oxford's portrait in Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder's etching, *Procession of the Knights of the Garter* (British Museum); the etching was completed in 1576, but it depicted the Garter ceremony of 1572 or 1574 (see figure 2 on page 19). Although unnamed in the etching, the young gentleman is described as a nobleman not of the order of the Garter, which applied to Oxford; he carries the Sword of State, which was the privilege of the senior nobleman present at important events. The Marquess of Winchester, however, was above Oxford in rank, but he was in his fifties at that time. Oxford, as Lord Great Chamberlain, "took precedence of all other Earls, and was therefore the next nobleman in point of seniority," wrote an Oxford biographer (Ward 395).

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**Katherine Chiljan** is an independent scholar who earned a BA in History from UCLA and has researched the Shakespeare Authorship issue for decades. She has debated the topic with English professors at the Smithsonian Institution and the Mechanics' Institute in San Francisco and is frequently interviewed about the subject on podcasts. Her book, *Shakespeare Suppressed: The Uncensored Truth About Shakespeare and his Works* (2011/2016) won an award for distinguished scholarship from Concordia University. Currently, she is a member of the Board of Directors of the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition.



Figure 1: English School, c. 1575, Allegory of Life and Death, Agecroft Hall, Richmond, VA (Agecroft Association).

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The Agecroft's courtier wears a luxurious red costume with gold embroidery, a white ruff, wrist ruffs, white hose, green garters with gold fringe, and red shoes. "Red textiles," wrote art historian Karen Hearn, "were both celebratory and a mark of high status" in early English portraiture (Hearn 46). His black hat has a visor with gold decorations and a white feather. Oxford in the Welbeck also wears a colorful garment, white ruff, and a feathered black hat with gold decorations. Although not featured in the Agecroft, two Allegory versions show the courtier with a cape, which Oxford wears in the Welbeck, and in the etching by Gheeraerts. The Agecroft courtier's sword and dagger have golden hilts, and worn diagonally across his chest is a gold chain, tripled, possibly the prize Oxford won in a May 1571 jousting tournament (Clephan 126–27). Gheeraerts's etching also shows Oxford wearing a tripled chain. A notably similar red and gold costume, black hat with gold decorations, and sword is the c. 1575 portrait of the queen's favorite, the Earl of Leicester (National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG 447).

The Agecroft derived from Moyns Park in Essex (Jones 419, note 2), a mansion *about six miles from Hedingham Castle*, Oxford's family seat.<sup>3</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Moyns Park was owned by Sir Thomas Gent, or Geint (c. 1530–93), and had been in his family for centuries. On April 2, 1571, Oxford appointed Gent as steward of his estates, a position he held for over a decade. Educated at Cambridge University and Middle Temple law, Gent was a member of parliament, was knighted in 1585 (Wright I, 633), and was baron of the exchequer (a judge) from 1586 to 1594. A 1589 poem by Thomas Newton praised Gent for religion, virtue, piety, modesty, and truth (Leland 121).<sup>4</sup> Gent apparently admired Oxford, as two of his sons were named Edward; the second Edward's twin was a boy named Vere (Morant II, 354).

### Snapshot of a Performance?

Another aspect of the Allegory painting that accords with Oxford, an acclaimed poet-dramatist, is that it might have recorded a performance (Cooper 2012, 200–01): a stage with wooden floorboards is clearly depicted, the verses appear on fancy framed signs nailed to a stark wall, and Father Time could be a man suspended by wires above (Time was a character in Act 4 of Shakespeare's play, *The Winter's Tale*, and his speech mentions "my wings"). The young courtier and the aged man, his future self, have different faces, suggesting different actors—if merely a moral illustration, then they would have looked more alike. Oxford was known to act: in 1579, he appeared in a "device" (i.e., a masque or play) before Queen Elizabeth (Ward 168).

Kevin Gilvary, who has also researched the Allegory paintings (Gilvary III, 4), views the young courtier as Oxford and the aged man as his father-in-law, Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley. The aged man as Burghley is plausible. In

one Allegory version, the aged man holds an orb (Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery), and in another version, a staff (Brighton and Hove Museums and Art Galleries), both indicative of power or office (he holds a skull in the other versions)—Burghley was the Lord Treasurer of England. The aged man has facial resemblance to Burghley, and wears a long, forked beard, which appears in Burghley's known portraits, especially one dated to the 1560s, in which he holds a staff (National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG 2184). The Psalms, excerpts of which feature in the Allegory painting, were of interest to Burghley: his image appeared in the 1568 Bishop's Bible at the Psalms' opening page. Also, in all versions of the Allegory painting, the aged man holds a small book, most likely the *Book of Common Prayer*, which contained the Psalms.



Figure 2. Detail of the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, in a hand-colored etching by Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder, *Procession of the Knights of the Garter, 1576*, British Museum, London, ©Trustees of the British Museum.

That Burghley appeared on stage is not far-fetched—Shakespeare's character, Polonius, which was modeled after Burghley, said, "I did enact Julius Caesar"

in a university play “and was accounted a good actor” (*Hamlet*, 3.2). Coincidentally, Burghley and “Shakespeare,” it has been proposed, were featured opposite each other on the title page of John Gerard’s *The Herbal or general History of Plants* (1597) (Griffiths), a work dedicated to Burghley.

Oxford and Burghley as the Allegory painting’s gentlemen implies that one of them commissioned it. An early indication of their interest in painters is found in a poetry manuscript authored by Dutch artist Lucas de Heere or D’Heere (1534–84), at Arbury Hall in Nuneaton, Warwickshire. Titled *Tableau Poétique* (“Poetic Painting”) and dated January 8, 1572, the manuscript contains De Heere’s poems, written in French, that were dedicated to a handful of important Englishmen, including Oxford and Burghley (Van Dam 30). In his poem to Oxford, De Heere, an exile living in England from c. 1567 to 1577, wrote that Oxford “provided me with rich and powerful friends and your courteous generosity (how I appreciate the favor of so perfect a lord!)...” (Waugh 24–25).

The Allegory painting’s young courtier as Oxford dates it to the early 1570s, based on Oxford’s 1570 Bible-Psalms purchase, his 1571 tournament prize of a gold chain, and, if Burghley is the aged man, Oxford’s December 1571 marriage to his daughter, Anne Cecil. Coincident to this period, emblem books—pictures with short moralistic commentary—were emerging in England (popular in Europe since 1531). Among the earliest is *A Crystal Glass of Christian Reformation* (1569), by the chaplain Stephen Batman, with illustrations attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder (Hodnett 31). Oxford/Shakespeare was aware of emblems or “moral paintings,” as mentioned in *Timon of Athens* (1.1):

**Painter**

...A thousand moral Paintings I can shew,  
That shall demonstrate these quick blows of Fortunes,  
More pregnantly than words.

Oxford may have owned one of the five Allegory versions: at his residence, King’s Place, in the “little Parlor,” was “A story of the Rich Man and Death,” according to an inventory c. 1609 (Mann 22). Although the inventory was taken after Oxford’s death, his widow, Elizabeth Trentham, was still living there or had just left (Lysons II.1.298). One of Oxford’s biographers connected this “story” with the Allegory painting (Anderson 302). Other religious paintings in the King’s Place inventory: in the “great Parlor” was “a story of Mount Syon in a bible, one other table [painting] with a story of Moses and Aaron,” and in “the Hall” was “a picture of Adam and Eve” (Mann 22).

## Tradition

Another Allegory version, once owned by Mrs. Phillipa Russell,<sup>5</sup> has a tradition attached to it: King James I presented it to the poet Endymion Porter, “on the occasion of the death of Henry, Prince of Wales” (*Catalogue* 148). Porter (1587–1649) was not in royal service when Prince Henry died in November 1612, but in 1619 he was one of King James’s gentlemen of the bedchamber (Barrington De Fonblanque 19–20). That same year, Porter married the niece of the king’s favorite, the Marquis of Buckingham, and by 1621 he was in Prince Charles’s service (Huxley 34–37, 53). Porter, who was raised in Spain, served as the prince’s Spanish interpreter (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, XXI, 114–15) and acquired paintings for him (Barrington De Fonblanque 72); Porter himself had a large art collection. Possibly relevant to this Allegory version is Porter’s close friendship with the dramatist William Davenant (Edmond), who, c. 1624, lived at Oxford’s former residence, King’s Place (later Brooke House), in the service of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke.

Mrs. Russell, who died in 1935, was a direct descendant of Porter through the Viscounts Strangford—her grandfather was Percy Clinton Sydney Smythe (1780–1855), the 6th Viscount. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount (Philip Smythe) had married Endymion Porter’s granddaughter (Mary Porter, daughter of George Porter); their son, Endymion Smythe (1682–1724), became the 3<sup>rd</sup> Viscount (Barrington De Fonblanque 100). In her 1925 memoir, *Fragments of Auld Lang Syne*, Mrs. Russell stated that she possessed some of Endymion Porter’s personal letters (Russell 195–96), and discussed the Strangford’s portrait of Queen Elizabeth I (Russell 154–55), which was the queen’s gift to Sir Philip Sidney for his service in the Netherlands,<sup>6</sup> but, unfortunately, she did not mention the Allegory painting—its provenance and Porter’s royal connections, however, lend credence to the royal gift tradition. Its current whereabouts is unknown but its image appeared in a dissertation (Cooper c. 2002).

## The Painting’s Psalms Excerpts

The Allegory painting displays excerpts from Psalms 39 and 103, which were taken from *The Whole Book of Psalms* (see figure 3 on page 22), a translation by Thomas Sternhold, William Whittingham and John Hopkins, first published in 1549. The 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford owned the 1569 edition, and had it bound with the Geneva Bible’s 1570 edition. The double volume, now at the Folger Shakespeare Library, contains handwritten annotations and marginalia throughout it, almost certainly in Oxford’s hand, many of them corresponding to lines in the Shakespeare canon, as revealed in Roger Stritmatter’s dissertation, *The Marginalia of Edward de Vere’s Geneva Bible* (2001). Twenty

passages were marked in Oxford's *Psalms* copy, noted Dr. Richard Waugaman, and they "are proving to be a treasure trove of hitherto undiscovered Shakespearean source material" (Waugaman 34).

The painting's excerpts of Psalms 39 and 103 were slightly altered (original lines shown in brackets below) and have some Shakespearean parallels. The excerpt of Psalm 39 (verses 6–7) is about man's vanity and life's shortness:

Lord, thou hast appointed out my life, [Lord, thou hast pointed out my life,  
 In length like as a span [In length much like a span]  
 Mine age is nothing unto thee,  
 So vain a thing is Man [So vain is every man.]  
 Man walketh like a shade and doth  
 In vain himself annoy:  
 In getting goods, and cannot tell  
 Who shall the same enjoy.

The English bishop Charles Ellicott (1819–1905) considered the lines "Man walketh like a shade and doth / In vain himself annoy" as an inspiration for a passage in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (Ellicott IV, 143–44):

Out, out, brief candle,  
 Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more. [5.5]

Psalm 39's line, "thou hast pointed," was changed to "thou hast appointed" in the painting; Shakespeare used the latter phrase in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1.1) and *Henry VI, Part 2* (4.7).

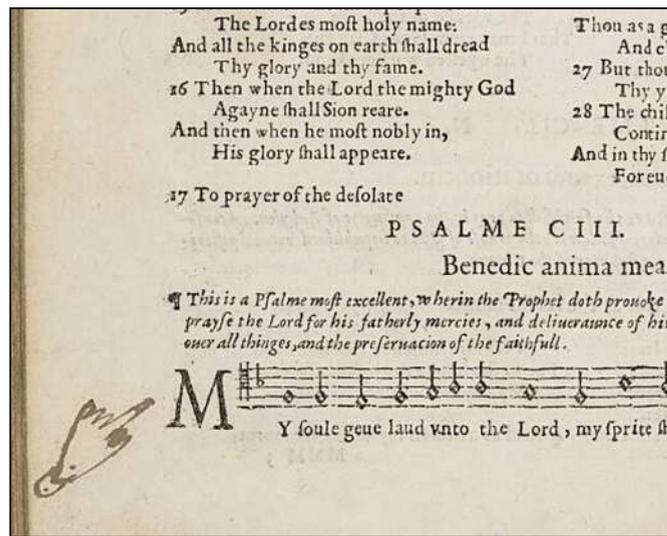


Figure 3: Oxford's copy of *The Whole Book of Psalms*, 1569 edition, detail of manicule pointing at Psalm 103, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

The painting's excerpt from Psalm 103 (verses 14–15) appears on the coffin, stressing man's mortality:

The Lord that made us knoweth our shape  
 Our mold and fashion just:  
 How weak and frail our nature is,  
 And how we be but dust.  
 And how the time of mortal men  
 Is like the withering hay:  
 Or like the flower right fair in field  
 That vadeth full soon away. [That fades full soon away.]

The phrase “flower right fair” applies to the young courtier, who holds a red flower (the same color as his costume), symbolizing the transience of beauty and splendor. The original verse's word, “fades,” was changed to the more unusual “vadeth”; Shakespeare used “vadeth” regarding beauty, and “vaded,” regarding a flower, in the poetry collection, *The Passionate Pilgrim* (nos. 10, 13).

Significantly, Oxford's *Psalms* copy has a hand-drawn manicule pointing at Psalm 103—a “smoking finger”—which, in my opinion, confirms that Oxford is the painting's young courtier, that he added his touch to the Psalm verses, and that he authored the three anonymous ones (see fig. 3). Interestingly, Oxford/Shakespeare's only direct reference to the Psalms was about death, occurring in *Henry IV, Part 2*: “Death (as the Psalmist saith) is certain to all” (3.2); it alluded to Psalm 89, verse 47 (“What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death?”) (Palmer 14).

## The Painting's Anonymous Verses

The painting's first and second anonymous verses comprise a six-line poem:

This mirror meet for all mankind,  
 To view & still to bear in mind  
 And do not miss.  
 For time brings youthful youths to age.  
 And age brings Death our heritage,  
 When God's will is.

Lines 1–2, “This mirror meet for all mankind, /To view & still to bear in mind,” call attention to the painting's message about age, death and God; it also anticipates Prince Hamlet's speech about the “purpose of playing,” which is “to hold...the mirror up to nature” (*Hamlet*, 3.2).

Lines 4–5, “For time brings youthful youths to age, /And age brings Death our heritage,” appeared in a 1603 epitaph (Christie's) that was first printed in

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1618.<sup>7</sup> The unusual phrase “youthful youths” appeared in *A Dialogue between Age and Youth*, which was a 128-line poem in James Yates's 1582 book, *The Castle of Courtesy* (STC 26079). The poem, registered separately in January 1581 without author attribution (Arber II, 387), was possibly related to the Allegory painting, but it lacked notice of religion or time.<sup>8</sup>

The painting's third anonymous verse, in center position, advises “faith in Christ” to save one's soul.

Consider man how time doth pass,  
And likewise know all flesh is grass.  
For time consumes the strongest oak,  
So death at last shall strike the stroke  
Though lusty youth doth beauty bear  
Yet youth to age in time doth wear.  
And age at length a death will bring,  
To Rich, to Poor, Emp'ror, & King.  
Therefore still live as thou shouldst Die,  
Thy Soul to save from jeopardy.  
And as thou wouldst be done unto  
So to thy neighbor always do  
The heavenly joys at length to see  
Let faith in Christ thine Anchor be.

The 14-line verse is original, excepting line 2's “all flesh is grass” and lines 11–12, the “golden rule,” which are found in the New Testament (1 Peter 1:24, Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31).

Line 4, “So death at last shall strike the stroke,” is close to “for death doth strike the stroke,” found in George Turberville's 1567 memorial verse of Sir John Tregonwell (*Epitaphes*, 38 verso); it was the earliest printing of “strike,” “stroke” and “death” in one phrase, according to a search in Early English Books Online (EEBO). Turberville's “literary friends” (Lyne) included Richard Edwards, George Gascoigne and Thomas Twyne, who were all associated with the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford.<sup>9</sup> If Turberville was the borrower, then Oxford's verse would date to the 1560s. Variations of “strike the stroke” occur in four Shakespeare plays.<sup>10</sup>

Line 5, “Though lusty youth doth beauty bear,” is similar to Aaron's comment to young Chiron's blushing in Shakespeare's tragedy *Titus Andronicus*: “there's the privilege your beauty bears” (4.2).

The painting's center verse, with slight alterations, is found in the Laing Manuscript (III. 447, f. 71 verso) at Edinburgh University Library, which is dated c. 1580 to 1610 (Verweij 2016, 147). The verse was credited to “Johne Hay,” but subsequently crossed out. A John Hay was a deputy clerk for Edinburgh's

city council, and served as its messenger to the London royal court from 1602 onward, according to Dr. Sebastiaan Verweij; a “tempting scenario,” writes Verweij, is that Hay saw the Allegory painting while on assignment and transcribed the verse (Verweij 2008, 71–73). This comports with the tradition of Mrs. Russell’s version being in the royal collection before it was gifted to Endymion Porter.

The center verse was not printed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with the exception of eight lines, in bold below, contained in an expanded version of the poem:

Remember mortal **man how time doth pass,**  
**and know likewise, all human flesh is grass:**  
**For time** at length **consumes the strongest oak,**  
**So death at last** must **strike the grievous stroke:**  
**Though lusty youth** do pleasant **beauty bear**  
**Yet youth to age** in tract of **time doth wear.**  
The pleasant flower that bears the freshest hue  
The grass that grows so green in summer tide  
The pinching cold her color doth subdue,  
So that her beauty cannot long abide:  
Even so the state of mortal man depends,  
Whose life to these may well compared be,  
Today the powers above our life defends:  
Tomorrow dead full oftentimes we see.  
**Therefore still live as** though **thou shouldest die,**  
**Thy soul to save from** so great **jeopardy.**  
If mortal man would weigh his state aright,  
And shun the subtle snares of false delight,  
Esteeming them to be so frail and vain,  
As nothing else may sooner bring our pain:  
He would (no doubt) his course direct aright,  
And have those shews no longer in his sight.  
And though our nature be so weak and frail,  
As any one attempt may soon avail,  
No doubt but if with zeal we call for grace,  
We shall eschew such lewd attempts apace.  
The signs and shews that daily do appear,  
In coasts abroad and in our country here,  
May well a warning be unto us all,  
To shun the sin that we be charg’d withal,  
Let us example take of holy writ,  
Whereon each Christian man should ground his wit,  
How God (for sin) in his displeas’d ire,  
Consumed Sodom and Gomorre with fire.

In these our days it may be eke regarded,  
How diverse countries for sin are rewarded.  
Let us therefore by them example take,  
And from our sins at length let us awake,  
Which God of his mercy grant for to be,  
That we in joys everlasting may see  
The heavenly shew of his most glorious face,  
Pronouncing joys to them that call for grace.  
AMEN.

The expanded version opens by noting life's brevity, and ends by exhorting men to avoid sin and read "holy writ" to achieve "joys everlasting..." Line 23, "And though our nature be so weak and frail," echoes Psalm 103's phrase, "How weak and frail our nature is..." The expanded version has phrases also found in Shakespeare (in bold below):

And shun the **subtle snares**<sup>11</sup> of **false delight** (line 18)

— Be it by gins, by **snares**, by **subtlety** (*Henry VI, Part 2*, 3.1)

— false slave to **false delight** (*The Rape of Lucrece*, line 978)

And though our **nature** be so weak and **frail** (line 23)

— She did corrupt **frail nature** with some bribe" (*Henry VI, Part 3*, 3.2)

We shall eschew **such lewd attempts** apace (line 26)

— **such lewd**, such mean, **attempts** (*Henry IV, Part 1*, 3.2)

That we in **joys everlasting** may see /The **heavenly** shew (lines 40–1)

— Gloucester: Were it not good your grace could fly to **heaven**?

Henry VI: The treasury of **everlasting joy**. (*Henry VI, Part 2*, 2.1)

The expanded poem opened the 1577 pamphlet, *A most strange and rare example of the just judgement of God executed upon a lewd and wicked Conjuror* (STC 19593). On January 17, 1577, the alleged "conjurer," Simon Pembroke, came to the Church of St. Mary Overie in London (Southwark) to prove his innocence; when the judge entered, Pembroke "sank down suddenly amongst them stark dead...to the great amaze of all the standers by." Found on his person were "certain devilish and wicked books of conjuration," a black stick, and "other toys, instruments no doubt of his devilish art." The pamphlet's anonymous author called it a "just & sudden execution of god's judgement..." Eight days later, the pamphlet, likely written by a clergyman (based on the line "I say after so many warnings"), was registered for publication. The expanded poem, therefore, was probably circulating earlier. Pembroke's unusual death was observed in at least three 17<sup>th</sup> century books.

The report's publisher, Henry Byneman (or Bennyman, d. 1583), was also responsible for the Oxford-dedicated book, *The History of Peisistratus and Catanea* (c. 1570), by Edmund Elviden, and the anthology, *A Hundreth Sundry Flowers* (1573), which, it is believed, contained Oxford's poems under the signature "Meritum petere, grave" ("To claim merit is difficult") (Google Translate).

## Oxford's Christianity

Facts and contemporary comments touching upon Oxford's Christianity, some of which are presented below, support Oxford's case as the subject of the Allegory painting.

Oxford's ancestors famously built nunneries, priories and churches, and some of them participated in the Crusades (Clark 7). After the death of Oxford's Protestant father, the 12-year-old Edward was raised in Sir William Cecil's Protestant household; after morning lessons, "the common prayers" were to be said, according to his daily schedule (Read 125).

Oxford's volume of the Geneva Bible and *The Whole Book of Psalms*, purchased at age 20, was evidently a prized possession; sumptuously bound, it has maroon velvet covers ornamented with silver buckles and plates etched with Oxford's heraldic symbols and family shield. Oxford studied the books closely, which their numerous underlines and marginalia attest.

In March 1575, Oxford visited, in Strasbourg, Johannes Sturm, alias Sturmius, the renowned German Protestant reformer and educator. In 1549, Sturmius wrote *Nobilitas Literatas*, "the Literate Nobility," which stated that Christianity should be at the center of civil knowledge. Below is one passage from Thomas Brown's 1570 English translation:

needs must it be that civil knowledge be grounded chiefly on the doctrine of Christ and God: and that a Christian man should most trust upon this doctrine, seeing it is ordained for the obtaining of the heavenly society, and doth agree to the heavenly laws and the government of God. (Brown 13)

In his 1576 letter to Sturmius, William Lewin (d. 1598) wrote that Oxford had "a most high opinion" of Sturmius "and had made most honourable mention of" him (Robinson 282–83).

While in Venice, Oxford "used to go to Mass at the Church of the Greeks," noted Orazio Cuoco, a young Venetian church singer (Magri 45–49). In 1576, Oxford brought Cuoco, with his parent's permission, to England; Oxford employed him as a page, and he sang before Queen Elizabeth. Cuoco also said that Oxford was religiously tolerant.

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Oxford converted to Catholicism after his European tour and made a commitment to advance the Catholic faith, according to the French Ambassador in England, Michel de Castelnau, sieur de la Mauvissière; Oxford later renounced this before Queen Elizabeth in December 1580 (Ward 207).

Oxford's motto, "Vero Nihil Verius," was evidently his own invention, as its earliest occurrence was in 1578 (Jiménez 16). It was likely inspired by *Adoro te Devote* (Dwyer 3), a Latin hymn written by Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–74):

Credo quicquid dixit dei filius,  
Nihil veritatis hoc verbo verius. [lines 7–8]

These lines translate as:

I believe whatever God's own Son declared:  
Nothing can be truer than Truth's very Word. (Neale 124)

In 1570, the hymn was published, perhaps for the first time, in the *Missale Romanum*, a book of the Catholic mass and rites, published in Venice (quoted above, signature C6), Rome and Antwerp.

Three translations of works by Jean Calvin, the French Protestant reformer, were dedicated to Oxford between 1571 and 1581: *The Psalms of David and Others* by his uncle, Arthur Golding, Guy de Brès's *The Staff of Christian Faith* by John Brooke, and *Diverse Sermons of Master John Calvin* by Thomas Stocker.<sup>12</sup> In Stocker's dedication, he declared duty to Oxford, not only because he was raised in the 16<sup>th</sup> Earl's house when "very young," but

especially and chiefly because (Sir) you seek by all means possible... to use conference with a certain godly learned man, for the better reforming of yourself and your whole family, to the obedience of the word [i.e., the New Testament].

The "godly learned man" with whom Oxford conferred for self-reformation is unknown. Stocker's letter was dated May 6, 1581, while Oxford was still in the Tower of London for his transgression with Anne Vavasour.

In January 1581, Lord Henry Howard, in his allegations against Oxford, claimed that among Oxford's lies was that he "and Malim, the schoolmaster of Paul's, preached either of them a sermon at Brigstock in Northamptonshire" (Green, Documents, 1581, BL Cotton Titus C.6, ff. 7–8); this was also alleged by Charles Arundel (Green, Documents, 1581, SP 12/151/46, ff. 103–4). William Malim (1533–94) was appointed highmaster of St. Paul's School in December 1573, and held the position until November 8, 1581 (DNB).

Circa 1583–85, Oxford sent a copy of the New Testament to his wife, Anne,<sup>13</sup> in which he inscribed a verse in Latin, translating as:

...pray to the Author of all Truth that  
His Word may teach thee; that His Spirit  
may nourish thy inner life. (Ward 109)

In 1597, Henry Lok's translation of Ecclesiastes (Old Testament) was dedicated to Oxford and others.

Oxford's letters reflected his belief in God. In his 1575 letter to Lord Burghley, Oxford responded to news of his wife's pregnancy:

I thank god it pleased Him to make me a father...for now it hath  
pleased God to give me a son of mine own (as I hope it is) ...

His other surviving letters to Burghley (1563 to 1595) were signed with notice to God, for example:

- Thus committing your lordship to Almighty God
- I commit you to God
- we leave you to the custody of the Almighty God
- I commit you to the hand of the Almighty
- I commit your lordship to the Almighty
- I pray to God to give you health

Oxford may have been the unnamed lord who held "divine prayers" in his home, as mentioned by playwright Thomas Kyd in his letter to Sir John Puckering. The letter was about Kyd's acquaintance with Christopher Marlowe, who had served a nobleman who owned an acting company and employed writers.

My first acquaintance with this Marlowe, rose upon his bearing name to serve my Lord: although his Lordship never knew his service, but in writing for his players, for never could my Lord endure his name or sight, when he had heard of his conditions, nor would indeed the form of divine prayers used duly in his Lordship's house, have quartered with such reprobates. (Boas cviii–cix)

Kyd's letter was written after Marlowe's death on May 30, 1593; Kyd died in 1594.

In his 1619 manuscript, *The History of Richard the Third*, Sir George Buck (1560–1622) wrote that Oxford was "a devout and a magnificent and a very learned and religious nobleman, and so worthy in every way," adding, "[a]nd I speak that which I know, for he [Oxford] vouchsafed me his familiar

acquaintance” (Kincaid 1979, 169–70). Buck also wrote that Oxford had visited him at his Hampton Court lodging, but did not provide a date. In 1588, Buck was Queen Elizabeth’s esquire of the body; in 1603, he was knighted by King James and was appointed a gentleman of the king’s privy chamber; in 1610, he became Master of the Revels (Kincaid 2008).

Gervase Markham, who had served militarily under the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Southampton, wrote that Oxford was “holy and Religious,” “Pietas” (pious), and frequented chapels and churches, in one of Oxford’s earliest printed eulogies:

that he [i.e., Oxford] was upright and honest in all his dealings the few debts he left behind him to clog his survivors, were safe pledges; and that he was holy and Religious the Chapels and Churches he did frequent, and from whence no occasion could draw him; the alms he gave (which at this day would not only feed the poor, but the great man’s family also) and the bounty which Religion and Learning daily took from him, are Trumpets so loud, that all ears know them; so that I conclude, and say of him, as the ever memorable Queen *Elizabeth* said of Sir *Charles Blount*, Lord *Montjoy*, and after Earl of *Devonshire*, that he was *Honestus*, *Pietas*, & *Magnanimus*. (Markham 16–17)

## Sin

The expanded version of the painting’s center verse focuses upon sin, the act against biblical commandments. This accords with the annotations in Oxford’s Geneva Bible, which “display a persistent concern for the origin and nature of sin,” wrote Dr. Roger Stritmatter; forty-five verses concerning sin were underlined, and “sin” was handwritten in the margins seven times, “more often than any other word” (Stritmatter 153). Sin and variations of the word were used in over half of Oxford/Shakespeare’s plays, the most instances occurring in *Measure for Measure*, *King John*, and *Pericles*. Christ, Christian and Christendom were mentioned over 100 times in Shakespeare’s works.

Shakespeare’s sonnets—Oxford’s personal ruminations—also show that sin troubled him. He characterized his physical body as “sinful earth” (Sonnet 146), and viewed as sinful his adulterous relationship with the “Dark Lady”:

she that makes me sin awards me pain [Sonnet 141]

Love is my sin, and thy dear virtue hate,  
Hate of my sin, grounded on sinful loving: [Sonnet 142]

If Oxford was bothered by his sin of adultery, then it follows that he would have been bothered by the sin of homosexuality, which has been proposed as the nature of his involvement with the sonnets’ “Fair Youth,” but this was *not* expressed in them. To the contrary, in Sonnet 144 he called the Fair

Youth his “good” angel, and the Dark Lady, his “bad angel.” Sodomy was considered a crime in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The sonneteer also upbraided the Fair Youth for his sensual sins (Sonnet 35) and wrote that the Fair Youth’s beauty covers them (Sonnet 95). Interestingly, Sonnet 116’s opening lines, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments,” were inspired by the *Book of Common Prayer*’s marriage service: “At which day of Marriage, if any man do allege and declare any impediment, why they may not be coupled together in Matrimony by God’s Law...” (Duncan-Jones 342).

## Conclusions

Based on dating, resemblance, coloring and dress in his other portraits, Oxford surely was the Allegory painting’s young courtier, while in his early twenties. In addition, evidence points to Oxford as the author of the painting’s original verses, which have Shakespearean echoes, and that he lightly edited the painting’s Psalms excerpts. Oxford’s early interest in the Bible’s sacred poetry would have been natural for him, a poet at least since his teenage years. Oxford/Shakespeare would later meld poetry and painting in his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, which evidently drew inspiration from Titian’s painting on the same theme. The Allegory painting’s center verse (and its expanded version, written before January 1577), reflected his Christian belief; and it is a new addition to Oxford’s poetry.

The painting’s theatrical elements could indicate a performance—a play, masque or *tableau vivant*. If so, then it was likely Oxford’s production, and, judging by the existence of five versions, it was popular. Besides the obvious theme of memento mori, the Allegory painting shows Oxford’s self-conscious awareness that his beauty, wealth, and favor with the monarch, which he had when the earliest version was made, were all ephemeral, but belief in Christ and avoidance of sin will lead to salvation and eternal life. Time, however, proved him incapable of avoiding sin, later committing adultery, which consequently affected his favor with the monarch. Despite this, Oxford continued his interest in God, the Bible, and Christianity throughout his life.

Oxford/Shakespeare’s late play, *Henry VIII*, had a religious tone; its theme was great figures suddenly falling at a monarch’s whim. One was Cardinal Wolsey, who enjoyed great favor with King Henry VIII, but lost it after failing to secure the king’s marriage annulment from Queen Catherine. In the view of Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn, Senior, Wolsey’s final speech in the play may have reflected Oxford’s personal feelings about his own life, and of God (Ogburn 1185–86):

...Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition:  
By that sin fell the angels; how can man, then,

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The image of his Maker, hope to win by it?  
Love thyself last: cherish those hearts that hate thee;  
Corruption wins not more than honesty.  
Still in thy right hand carry gentle peace,  
To silence envious tongues. Be just, and fear not:  
Let all the ends thou aim'st at be thy country's,  
Thy God's, and truth's; then if thou fall'st,  
O Cromwell, Thou fall'st a blessed martyr!

...O Cromwell, Cromwell!  
Had I but served my God with half the zeal  
I served my king, he would not in mine age  
Have left me naked to mine enemies.

...Farewell  
The hopes of court! my hopes in heaven do dwell. (3.2)

## Endnotes

1. The five known Allegory paintings: English School, 16<sup>th</sup> century (Sotheby's dated it c. 1590), *Allegory of Youth and Old Age*, Christie's, *Old Master & British Paintings*, South Kensington, 30 April 2015 (sale 10448), lot 434 (the coffin with skeleton was evidently cut off, except for the skull); unknown artist, c. 1590–1610, *Memento Mori (Emblematic tableau of Youth, Old Age and Father Time)*, Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery (NWHCM: 1953.134.2); English School, c. 1580, *Memento Mori*, Brighton and Hove Museums and Art Galleries (FA000101); English School, c. 1575, *Allegory of Life and Death*, Agecroft Hall, Richmond, VA); Mrs. Frank Russell of Aden House, Mintlaw, Aberdeenshire (Cooper, c. 2002).
2. Queen Elizabeth was portrayed playing the lute in a miniature by Nicholas Hilliard, c. 1580 (Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire).
3. This Allegory painting belonged to “Alister Mathews at Moyns Park, Birdbrook, Essex,” according to Malcolm Jones, researching at the Courtauld Institute's Witt Library (London). Mathews (1907–85), an English art and book dealer, lived in Hampshire from 1932 to 1935, and then moved to France, according to the Alister Mathews Archive (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). From the early 1940s until his 1985 death, he lived in Dorset. “Moyns Park,” in the Courtauld's record, therefore, likely referred to the picture's provenance. Jones thought this “a reasonable inference” in private email (January 23, 2023). The Gent family owned Moyns Park until 1879, then sold it to Major General Cecil Robert St. John Ives; after he died in 1896, the house was eventually occupied by his grandson, John Felix Charles Bryce (aka Ivar Bryce), until his death in 1985.
4. Newton's Latin poem (Leland 121):

Ad D. Thomam Gentum, Fisci Reginei Baronem.

Relligio, virtus, pietas, pudor, ac aletheia,

Exulat è terris, mobile vulgus ait.

Fallitur. Eximias nam qui considerat in te

Dotes, quis totus (*Gente* diserte) micas,

Nō tantūm bas, verū reliquas pulchro ordine Nymphas

Conspiciet, quae ornant tēque tuāmque tribum.

Esse tui similes sed paucos *Anglia* deflet,

Hinc dolor, hinc moestis mixta querela sonis.

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The first four lines translate as:

To Sir Thomas Gent, baron of the Queen's Exchequer  
Religion, virtue, piety, modesty, and truth,  
Are banished from earth, the changeable mob avers,  
They are mistaken: for whoso considers  
The excellent endowments which are in thee ... (Wright I, 632)

5. Philippa Russell, née Baillie (1854–1935), married Major General Francis Shirley Russell in 1888; they had five children.
6. Queen Elizabeth's portrait, given to Sir Philip Sidney, came into possession of the Viscounts Strangford when the first viscount married Sidney's niece, Barbara Sidney, who had inherited it. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was given to the owner of Penshurst Place, Kent, which was Sidney's birthplace.
7. The epitaph of Richard Aldworth and his wife, Elizabeth (below), appeared in the third edition of John Stow's *The Survey of London* (1618), which included added material by Oxford's former servant, Anthony Munday.

*My Turtle gone, all joy is gone from me,  
I'll mourn awhile, and after flee:  
For Time brings youthful Youths to Age,  
And Age brings Death, our Heritage.*

They lived married together 44 years.  
Their race is run, and Heaven is won. [733]

8. Another text possibly related to the Allegory painting is *A dialogue betweene youth and olde age wherein is declared the persecutions of Christ's religion, since the fall of Adam* (1584? STC 17300.5) by John Merbecke (d. c. 1585), a Calvinist writer and music composer. The only known copy is bound with Thomas Wimbledon's *A sermon no less fruitful than famous* (1579) in the private London Library; it is undigitized.
9. *Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1576), which was the personal poetry collection of Richard Edwards (d. 1566), contained pieces by the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford; also, Oxford and Edwards were named together as deserving the highest prize for "Comedy and Enterlude" (*Arte of English Poesie*, 1589). Thomas Twyne's *The Breviary of Britain* (1572) was dedicated to Oxford. In 1573, *A Hundredth Sundry Flowers* featured poems by Gascoigne, Oxford (under his presumed signature, "Meritum petere, grave,") and others; Gascoigne later claimed sole authorship.

10. “Before I strike this bloody stroke,” *Anthony & Cleopatra* (4.14); “he that strikes the first stroke,” *Henry V* (2.4); “You all consented unto Salisbury’s death /For none would strike a stroke in his revenge,” *Henry VI, Part 1* (1.5); Strike not a stroke,” *Troilus and Cressida* (5.7).
11. Line 18’s phrase “subtle snares” appeared in the poem, “The lover encouraged by former examples, determineth to make virtue of necessity,” signed “Meritum petere, grave,” Oxford’s presumed signature, in *A Hundredth Sundry Flowers* (1573), 342.
12. Stocker’s translation (STC 4437) was of Calvin’s *Plusieurs sermons de Jehan Calvin touchant la divinité, humanité & nativité de nostre Seigneur Jésus Christ*, first published in 1558.
13. Only a transcription of the original verse survives; it was said to have been written on the front of a New Testament while Oxford was “in transmarinis partibus versatitur” (*Calendar*, XIII, 362), which could mean “occupied in foreign travel” (Ward 108) or “engaged in overseas affairs” (Google Translate). The Latin verse’s excerpt is “Quod magis ut praestes, a veri Authore requiras /Litera te doceat: spiritus intus alat.” In Ward’s full translation of the poem, Oxford also refers to his already-born “Vere daughter” with the expectation of another child, which he hopes is a boy. If Elizabeth Vere was the “Vere daughter,” born in 1575, then the pregnancy alluded to was likely that of their son (unnamed) who died shortly after birth and was buried May 9, 1583. If Oxford was on his September–October 1585 military mission in Flanders (with Col. John Norris), then the pregnancy was likely that of Frances Vere, who later died as a child (buried September 12, 1587). In 1585, however, Oxford had *two* daughters, the second being Bridget (born April 6, 1584). With the poem’s overemphasis on Truth and Vere, it could mean that, in 1585, Oxford still did not accept Elizabeth Vere as his biological daughter.

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