

Who Was Edward de Vere?

Although the date and circumstances of his birth are in some dispute amongst scholars, the official historical record tells us that in April of 1550, Edward de Vere, Viscount Bolebec and heir to the ancient earldom of Oxford, was born at his family's ancestral home of Castle Hedingham in the county of Essex. He became the son and heir of John de Vere, the 16th earl of Oxford, a patron of the polemical dramatist John Bale and the patron of a major acting company (Oxford's Men). John de Vere's wife, Margery, the Countess of Oxford, was no less distinguished than her husband in her connection to the literary world, for she was the sister of Arthur Golding, the famous scholar and translator of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Arthur Golding, as all Shakespeare scholars acknowledge, was a primary influence on the writer who, after many years of anonymous performance and publication of his works, eventually identified himself in two poems to the earl of Southampton as "William Shakespeare."

The maternal uncle of Edward de Vere was not the only leading influence on the writer the world would come to know as Shake-speare. The paternal uncle of Edward de Vere, Henry Howard, the 5th earl of Surrey, was the originator of the sonnet form that today is known as "Shakespearean" because of its association with the sonnet form popularized by the writer who, a generation after the death of Edward de Vere's uncle, called himself Shakespeare.

Following the death of his father in 1562, Edward de Vere, now the 17th earl of Oxford, became a royal ward and was sent to live with and study under the Queen's Private Secretary (and later Lord Treasurer of England), William Cecil. Under Cecil's tutelage and guidance, the new earl of Oxford became one of the best-educated subjects in the realm. He was privileged to study with the best minds of the English Renaissance, including such learned men as Laurence Nowell, the Dean of Litchfield; Bartholomew Clarke; Thomas Fowle and Sir Thomas Smith. He enjoyed access to Cecil's library, one of Europe's most remarkable and extensive collections of books and manuscripts. At Cecil House, or, as Joel Hurstfield of University College, London, has put it—"the best school for statesmen in Elizabethan England, perhaps in all Europe"—Edward de Vere received an education incomparable among his peers, exactly the kind one would expect of the writer who was destined to become Shakespeare: England's greatest wordsmith—a writer whose achievements are dense in their allusions to and reliance upon works of classical antiquity, many of which had not been translated into English in Shakespeare's day.

In August 1564 and September 1566, Edward received degrees from both Cambridge University (B.A.) and Oxford University (M.A.), and in February 1567 he was sent by Cecil to study law at Gray's Inn, one of the celebrated Inns of Court that, in addition to serving as a distinguished college of law, provided a site for many theatrical performances, including plays by William Shakespeare. (The Inns of Court probably provided Shakespeare with more than a setting for his plays, however, as Shakespeare's ability to artfully and densely integrate examples of English case law, Continental civil law and the arcana of the world of legal scholarship into his plays and poems has prompted even the late orthodox scholar, Eric Sams, to concede that whoever Shakespeare was, "he surely studied law.")

In 1571, Edward de Vere took a step that ensured the Elizabethan State's retention and intensification of its more than passing interest in him when he was betrothed (with apparent reluctance) to the fourteen year-old daughter of William Cecil. As Master of the Court of Wards who - by his arrangement of this marital bond between Oxford and his daughter in order to ennoble his family - William Cecil was duly elevated to the peerage as the first baron Burghley, and Edward de Vere became the son-in-law of the most powerful man in England. In ensuing years, after a difficult marriage and prior to an all-too-early death, Anne bore Oxford three daughters who survived to adulthood: Elizabeth—whose legitimacy, however, Oxford bitterly disputed—as well as Bridget and Susan. *All three of Oxford's daughters*, very interestingly, either married or were proposed for marriage to the three men (the *only* three men) to whom the poems and plays of Shakespeare were dedicated—the earls of Southampton, Montgomery and Pembroke).

Marriage, however, did not domesticate young Oxford. As a young man, he had become notorious for getting himself in trouble and provoking the indignation of his powerful father-in-law; as a youth, for example, de Vere had bandied at sword-point with, and killed, another man—Thomas Brinknell—although the jury that tried Oxford brought in a verdict acquitting him of any responsibility for the young man's death. In 1573, some of the young earl's companions (with Oxford reputedly in their company) waylaid travelers on the road from Gravesend to Rochester—an episode uncannily similar to the scene in Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth, Part One* where Falstaff and his companions assault the King's receivers. Amazingly (or perhaps not so amazingly), the Shakespearean account includes detail of this assault that corresponds to the circumstances involving Oxford's men down to the author's placement of Falstaff and his bandits on the very road where Oxford's men confronted the troupe ambushed in 1573. Oxford also was implicated in an abortive effort to free Thomas Howard, the Duke of Norfolk, from the Tower where Norfolk was awaiting execution for participating in the Ridolfi plot against the Queen. Oxford scandalously accused his wife of infidelity during one of his European sojourns, although he himself returned to England after an extended stay in Europe with a Venetian choirboy, Orazio Cuoco, in tow—an event that later led enemies of the earl to accuse him of pederasty, although no credible evidence was ever produced to support the accusations.

In addition to his intellect and robust, often troublesome nature, Edward also developed a singular martial prowess, excelling in contests within the lists, contests restricted (along with sports such as falconry) almost exclusively to the nobility (detailed accounts and descriptions of which sports, moreover, that provide much of the narrative content, imagery, vocabulary and metaphor of the Shakespeare poems and plays). Moreover, Oxford conceived theatrical entertainment for the Queen at Whitehall, and he acquired the lease to the Blackfriars Theatre. He was a patron of many writers and several distinguished acting companies. He became one of the leading recipients of literary dedications and verses by writers such as John Lyly and Edmund Spenser and was himself widely regarded as one of England's most excellent writers—acclaimed so even in his youth. However, by the time he was an adult, George Puttenham, in *The Arte of English Poesie*, confirmed not only that many writers at the Elizabethan Court were concealing themselves as writers (a custom of the age) but revealed that Oxford, in particular, amongst those courtiers, was masking his identity as a writer:

And in her Majesty's time that now is are sprung up another crew of Courtly makers [poets], noblemen and gentlemen of her Majesty's own servants, who have written excellently well as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest, of which number is first that noble gentleman, Edward earl of Oxford.

Oxford journeyed extensively on the Continent. He traveled throughout France. In Italy, he visited almost all of the Italian locations, including Sicily, that later would provide the settings for Shakespeare's Italian plays. He made a home for himself in Venice. His ship was attacked by pirates (who "dealt with [him] like thieves of mercy"[*Hamlet* IV.vi.20-21]) on his return voyage to England. A few years later, Oxford's brother-in-law, Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby, on embassy from Queen Elizabeth to the Danish court at Elsinore, reported upon his return to England that during the banqueting at Elsinore, "a whole volley of all the great shot of the castle discharged"; the account is remarkably similar to the declaration of Shakespeare's King Claudius who pledges, "No jocund health that Denmark drinks today, / But that the great cannon to the clouds shall tell" (I.ii.125-26).

In 1581, Queen Elizabeth, having discovered Oxford's extra-marital flirtation with a Gentlewoman of the Queen's Bedchamber, briefly confined Edward de Vere to the Tower, along with his mistress, Anne Vavasour, and their child. Shortly after Oxford's release from imprisonment, Thomas Knyvet, a Groom of the Privy Chamber and an unforgiving uncle of Anne Vavasour, injured Oxford in a swordfight that followed a series of street brawls and affrays between Oxford's men and Knyvet's men—clashes of striking resemblance to the sometimes violent scuffles later to be depicted by Shakespeare in eruptions between the men of the houses of Montague and Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet*. Oxford was wounded, apparently in the leg, during one of these contretemps with Knyvet, and this injury may account for his oft-bemoaned lameness in later life.

In 1587, the year after the Queen began to grant Oxford a £1000 annuity, evidence suggests that Thomas Kyd may have joined Oxford's household. Kyd was a young man, some years Oxford's junior, who today is credited with writing *The Spanish Tragedy* and frequently is alleged to have composed an early version of *Hamlet* (sometimes referred to as the *Ur-Hamlet*), as well as *The Taming of a Shrew* (a predecessor work to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*) and parts of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Interestingly, none of the plays that today are attributed to Kyd were, in his lifetime, ever published under his own name, nor was he in his own lifetime regarded as a dramatist.

In 1588, Oxford's wife, Anne, died. Oxford remarried a few years later, wedding Elizabeth Trentham. She bore him a son and heir, Henry, who, as the 18th earl of Oxford, in the 1620s, became a leading nobleman in a bold, anti-Spanish quadrumvirate — Protestant opponents of the Crown's plan to wed the Prince of Wales to the Infanta of Spain. This opposition (organized, perhaps not coincidentally, at the same time as the First Folio was being prepared for publication) was composed of Henry de Vere and *the very same noblemen* to whom both Shakespeare's poems and First Folio of Shakespeare's plays had and would be dedicated: the 3rd earl of Southampton, the 4th earl of Pembroke, and the 1st earl of Montgomery.

In 1598, after many years of anonymous performance and publication of such Shakespearean plays as *Richard the Second*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the first quarto of a play to bear the name of William Shakespeare was published. In that same year, two months after the death of William Cecil, Francis Meres registered *Palladis Tamia* for publication in which "Shakespeare," for the first time in any publication, was identified as a playwright, and Edward de Vere was acclaimed "[t]he best for comedy amongst us."

The 17th earl of Oxford reportedly died in 1604, early in the reign of King James I. Where he was buried we have no certain record, although his cousin, Percival Golding, wrote that his body eventually was interred at Westminster. If Golding is correct, and if Edward de Vere was the nobleman poet-playwright who called himself William Shakespeare, it is truly fitting that he—the greatest writer who ever lived—rests in the hallowed ground of England's national church amongst the immortals of English letters.

Professor Daniel Wright, Ph.D.
Director, The Shakespeare Authorship Research Centre

