

Column
Paradigm Shift

By Mark K. Anderson and Roger Stritmatter

The Potent Testimony of Gabriel Harvey: *Master "Pierce Penniless" and his "Sweetest Venus in print.... armed with the complete harness of the bravest Minerva"*

By the 1580s Edward de Vere had established a formidable reputation for subsidizing writers, scholars and dramatic productions with his inherited fortunes. This outpouring of money began in the 1570s and reached a peak in the next decade, with London productions at the Blackfriars Theatre that introduced the modern five-act play to England.¹ By the end of the decade, however, de Vere's resources were exhausted. He resembled the Shakespearean protagonist Timon of Athens²—a formerly munificent patron who, as he grows ever more destitute, is abandoned by his friends and colleagues.

Orthodox scholars like to trot out this history of de Vere's financial descent as an argument against his authorship of the Shakespeare canon, but, of course, the story of de Vere's life, whether good, bad or ugly, contains numerous unexpected confirmations of the theory. In 1590 occurred a remarkable event, the reverberations of which contain in miniature a logical proof of the theorem identifying de Vere with "William Shakespeare," the author of *Venus and Adonis*.

In 1590, de Vere agreed to pay the rent on a furnished apartment near St. Paul's Cathedral for the elderly poet Thomas Churchyard and the aspiring satirist Thomas Nashe. Churchyard, by now in his late 60s or early 70s, had lived under de Vere's on-again-off-again patronage for several decades,³ served as a mercenary and intelligence agent for de Vere in the Catholic-Protestant wars in the Netherlands. Nashe was just starting his flamboyant career as a satirist, having only a year previously written the preface to Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) which contains the enigmatic reference to the so-called "Ur-Hamlet."

Nashe and Churchyard had no money of their own; they looked to the benevolent Timon to co-sign the rental agreement and

provide ready cash to underwrite their literary ambitions, extending their hands in expectation of the heart-warming clink of gold sovereigns. However, de Vere didn't pay; Nashe and Churchyard quickly learned that they were out in the cold. The only metallic sound they heard was the clang of bells from the church a few doors down, St. Benet's of Paul's Wharf.⁴

When the landlady Julianne Penn came to collect the advance for the first quarter's rent—several thousand dollars in today's money—still no one paid, and her pleas went unheeded.

The transaction is very well preserved in extant documents. Before long, the beleaguered hostess appealed to de Vere himself, complaining of "The great grief and sorrow I have taken for your unkind dealing with me." The letter explains that she considered Churchyard's signature a security against Nashe's reputation. "You know, my Lord, you had anything in my house, whatsoever you or your men would demand, if it were in my house," she adds. "If it had been a thousand times more I would have been glad to pleasure your Lordship withal. Therefore, good my Lord, deal with me in courtesy, for that you and I shall come at that dreadful day and give account of all our doings."⁵

It is a pitiful and earnest plea that de Vere was unable to redress. He was, however, able to do the next best thing: He raised the hostess to immortality. In the second part of the *Henry IV* plays, the landlady Mistress Quickly wants to evict Falstaff because he can't pay the rent. The pathetic tone of her pleas with the authorities seem to imitate Penne's surviving letter (a trick, incidentally, which de Vere frequently and skillfully employed):

I praye, since my exion [i.e. legal suit] is enter'd and my case so openly known to

the world, let [Falstaff] be brought in to his answer. A hundred mark is a long score for a poor lone woman to bear, and I have borne and borne and borne; and have been fubbed off and fubbed off and fubbed off, from this day to that day, that it is a shame to be thought on. There is no honesty in such dealing, unless a woman should be made an ass and a beast to bear every knave's wrong.⁶

In its fictional form, the ending to this interlude is comic. Falstaff smooth-talks his way out of debt and borrows still more money so he can continue to raise hell with his drinking buddies.

Would that de Vere's actual biography had as many mirthful endings. In Churchyard's undated letter to his landlady, presumably written after her pleas had proven futile, we learn that matters had eventually become so desperate that the poet had to seek sanctuary in a local church.⁷

"I never deserved your displeasure and have made Her Majesty understand of my bond touching the Earl of Oxford, and for fear of arresting I lie in the sanctuary," Churchyard writes to his hostess of his desperate circumstances. "For albeit you may favor me, yet I know I am in your danger and am honest and true in all mine actions."⁸

Nashe, for his part, found no sanctuary. He was promptly hauled off to debtor's prison.

This financial fiasco is recounted with obvious relish by a vociferous critic of Nashe's, the Cambridge University pedant Gabriel Harvey, in his 1592 pamphlet, *Four Letters*. The incident, furthermore, gave rise to a nickname for de Vere which turns out to be pregnant with long-delayed implications for the Shakespearean question.

The pamphlet was one salvo in a bitter war of words between Nashe and Harvey—written about extensively by Shakespeare Fellowship founding member Elizabeth

van Dreunen—during the early 1590s. The origin and purposes of the pamphlet war are still obscure, but the most authoritative testimony identifies Edward de Vere, known under the sobriquets “Will Monox,” and “Master Apis Lapis,” as a central player in the dispute. In his collected works of Nashe, the distinguished renaissance scholar Ronald McKerrow acknowledges that the dispute “seems in its origin to be an offshoot of the well-known one between Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford and [his rival] Sir Philip Sidney in 1579...”⁹ a theory which Ms. van Dreunen has developed in some detail, first in her 1985 essay “Edward de Vere and the War of Words” (published under the name Elizabeth Appleton) and more recently in her book (to be reviewed in our next issue), *An Anatomy of the Marprelate Controversy: Retracing Shakespeare’s Identity and that of Martin Marprelate* (Mellen Press, 2001).

The pamphlets, of which *Strange News* is one, are a critical but typically ignored body of evidence in the Shakespeare question. Scholars often avoid these documents because their obscurity can be a challenge. Frequently the debaters seem to be writing in code. They employ multiple nicknames for each other, and for allies or would-be allies on both sides. One of the most prominent sobriquets reserved for de Vere, for reasons that should by now be becoming obvious, is “Pierce Penniless.” Harvey first uses this name for de Vere in his 1592 pamphlet *Four Letters*, in a passage concerning the Julianne Penn episode: “I would think the counter [i.e. prison], Mr. Churchyard, his hostess Penia,¹⁰ and such other sensible lessons might sufficiently have taught [Nashe] that ‘Penniless’ is not lawless and that a poet’s or painter’s license is a poor security to privilege [against] debt or defamation.”¹¹

We might paraphrase the passage as follows: “You, Mr. Nashe, have defamed me. You also owe some serious debt. ‘Penniless’ granted you a poet’s license, but he is not lawless and therefore will not endorse your defamation or pay your outstanding bills.”

Harvey is partly right about this, although Nashe undoubtedly did not want to admit it. If Harvey was often a pedant, Nashe was sometimes a loudmouth. In his re-

sponse in *Strange News*, without acknowledging Harvey, Nashe could not let de Vere’s *faux pas* pass unnoticed. In his dedication to “Gentle Master William” he speaks of de Vere’s gaffe and throws in an extra jab at the expense of his patron’s children. Nashe begins with the fact that Churchyard had to seek asylum from his landlady in a nearby church—an act that would have activated the legal machinery of the London Archdeacon’s court.

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“I would speak in commendation of your hospitality likewise,” Nashe writes, “But that it is chronicled in the Archdeacon’s Court, and the fruits it brought forth (as I guess) are of age to speak for themselves. Why should virtue be smothered by blind circumstance? ... You kept three maids together in your house a long time: A charitable deed and worthy to be registered in red letters.”¹²

In this paragraph Nashe’s wit apparently inflicted a bruise on his patron’s public pride. Both Churchyard and his landlady are in their 60s or 70s, which is why Nashe sarcastically opines that they are “of an age” to speak for themselves. But then Nashe hits one below the belt: By 1592, de Vere’s estates had become so overburdened

that his three daughters from his first marriage had to be raised in the household of their grandfather (de Vere’s father-in-law) the Lord Treasurer of England, William Cecil Lord Burghley. The “charitable deed” was de Vere’s parentage of his own daughters, the “three maids.” Now, however, the deed deserves to be written in account books filled with red ink, i.e. symbolizing de Vere’s bankrupt estate.

After he had calmed down, Nashe probably recognized the error of his ways. In the second and all subsequent printings of *Strange News*, the paragraph is cut, replaced by a generic passage that only hints at the excised controversy. In the revised copy, de Vere the deadbeat financier becomes de Vere the “infinite Maecenas” referring to the Roman politician who was famous as a patron to the poets Horace and Virgil. (Eight years before, Robert Greene had also praised de Vere as a “Maecenas.”)¹³

“Yea, you are such an infinite Maecenas to learned men that there is not that morsel of meat they can carve you but you will eat for their sakes and accept very thankfully,” Nashe writes in the second edition of his dedication. “Think not, though under correction of your boon companionship, I am disposed to be a little pleasant, I condemn you of any immoderation either in eating or drinking, for I know your government and carriage to be every way canonical. Verily, verily,¹⁴ all poor scholars acknowledge you as their patron, provider and supporter, for there cannot a threadbare cloak sooner peep forth but you straight press it to be an outbrother of your bounty.”¹⁵

“Disposed to be a little pleasant” though Nashe may have been, one reads this paragraph and still detects a slight growl in the author’s voice. The fact that he says he was “under the correction” of de Vere’s “boon companionship” suggests both that the earl twisted Nashe’s arm to put in the correction he did and, by extension, that he must have approved of the rest.

In 1592, even though he was thrown in prison for de Vere’s irresponsibility, the young Nashe still seems a little star-struck by the eminent earl. Of course, if your pal turned out to be Shakespeare, you’d be too. “However I write merrily,” Nashe says. “I

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love and admire thy pleasant witty humor, which no care or cross can make unconvertible. Still, be constant to thy content; love poetry; hate pedantism."

"I'll be your daily orator," the satirist continues. "[T]o pray that that pure sanguine complexion of yours may never be famished with pot-luck, that you may taste till your last gasp and live to see the confusion of both your special enemies: Small beer and grammar rules."

But back to "Pierce Penniless." The punchline to Harvey's 1592 identification of de Vere as Pierce Penniless comes a year later in his spring 1593 pamphlet, *Pierce's Supererogation*.

For all his affected prolixity, Harvey could be astonishingly direct at times. While Nashe's preface to *Strange News* refers to de Vere as a "copious Carminist," Harvey's work announces that "Penniless" has been working on a poem about Venus and Adonis. (He also expresses his anxiety at being ribbed in the play *Love's Labor's Lost* and cites a line from Falstaff in *Merry Wives of Windsor*.¹⁶)

Pierce's Supererogation praises the great literary works of his friends Edmund Spenser and the late Sir Philip Sidney. But their works, Harvey continues, began to sprout in the writings of other authors: Greene, Nashe and "M. Pierce Penniless."

Spenser's and Sidney's unrivaled literary works, Harvey states, "were but the violets of March or the primroses of May: Till the one began to sprout in M. Robert Greene the other to blossom in M. Pierce Penniless, as in the rich garden of poor Adonis. Both to grow in perfection in M. Thomas Nashe."¹⁷

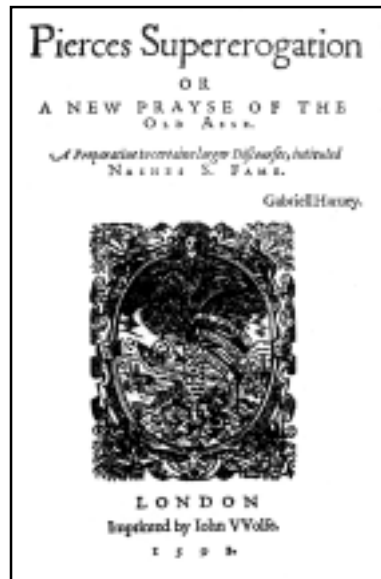
Stop and read that passage again. Harvey speaks of "Pierce Penniless" as being an author of a poetical work drawn from "the rich garden of poor Adonis."

Since Harvey explicitly names Nashe as someone distinct from "Penniless,"¹⁸ the nickname in this instance can only refer to the same man that Harvey meant when he spoke of the Churchyard incident: "Penniless' is not lawless," Harvey wrote of de Vere.

And now, Harvey says that "Penniless" is drawing his inspiration from the "garden of Adonis."

Pierce's Supererogation is subscribed with a specific date—27 April 1593—only two weeks after the registration of *Venus and Adonis*, the text in which the name "Shakespeare" first appears in print. Apparently, the poem was not yet printed. In *Pierce's Supererogation*, however, Harvey is retailing his private knowledge of the not yet quite public "M. Pierce Penniless ... in the rich garden of poor Adonis."

The punchline, however, is yet to come. "Who can conceive small hope of any



Harvey's *Pierces Supererogation* was registered on April 27, 1593.

possible account," Harvey continues, "Or regard of mine own discourses were that fair body of the sweetest Venus in print as it is redoubtably armed with the complete harness [i.e. armaments] of the bravest Minerva."¹⁸

If any confirmation is needed, Harvey here restates that it is indeed Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* about which he writes. It is a work about Venus, "not yet in print." Furthermore, the poem is armed with "the complete harness"—i.e. with the armor and weapons—of the classical goddess Minerva/Athena, the patroness of literature known to Elizabethans as "the spear-shaker."

Unlikely as it may seem, despite several decades of research into the theory of de Vere as Shakespeare, the argument of this essay is new. A summary of the case, posted at the Fellowship's website ([www](http://www.shakespearefellowship.org/News/Gabriel_Harvey).

[shakespearefellowship.org/News/Gabriel_Harvey](http://www.shakespearefellowship.org/News/Gabriel_Harvey)) may help the reader to follow the logic which leads to the inevitable conclusion that Gabriel Harvey in his *Four Letters* testifies that Edward de Vere wrote the poem *Venus and Adonis* under the pen-name "William Shakespeare."

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References:

- 1) In his chapter on the year 1583-84 at the Blackfriars Theater, theater historian Charles William Wallace writes, "Then, under the Earl of Oxford's financial support and patronage, the Blackfriars took a stride. Himself a university man, musician, lyric poet and dramatist, another Henry VIII in the love of such pleasures, he brought to the Blackfriars two kindred university spirits, George Peele and John Lyly... These plays by Lyly and Peele at the Blackfriars mark a new era in the form of the English drama, and the two authors share the honor. They are the first modern five-act plays ever known to have been performed before a public audience in an English theatre." *The Evolution of the English Drama Up To Shakespeare*. George Reimer, Berlin (1912) 181.
- 2) According to conventional scholarship, Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* was written sometime between 1605 and 1609 — several years after de Vere had died. In fact, the claim that many Shakespeare plays were written after de Vere's 1604 death is now often used as a "silver bullet" to kill the whole case for de Vere as Shakespeare. This argument, however, is founded largely upon institutionalized circular logic: Scholars have long assumed Shakespeare to have written Shakespeare and have codified an "accepted" chronology of composition that fits the details of Shakespeare's life. With de Vere as Shakespeare, naturally, the chronology of the plays changes. But the simple fact that the de Vere chronology differs from present scholarly convention does not make it wrong. It just makes the subject verboten within the academy—which, in fact, may be more of an endorsement of the case's persuasiveness than academics realize.
- 3) In the *Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Churchyard, one learns that the poet "was born at Shrewsbury about 1520 and in his youth was attached to the household of the famous Earl of Surrey, whose memory he fondly cherished throughout his long life." Surrey was de Vere's paternal uncle.

- 4) An echo of this real-life event seems to have crept into *Twelfth Night*, in which this unlikely semantic association—between the bells of this quite specific but obscure chapel and the sound of coins doled out to needy fools—appears as the basis for some witty repartee between the fool Feste and his patron, Olivia, who rewards the jester for his verbal agility with a coin. But Feste wants more money. The lady begrudgingly pulls out another gold piece and hands it over. Feste, undaunted, still wants more. The jingle of these coins, he says, sounds like the peal from St. Benet's steeple. Primo, secundo, tertio is a good play," Feste jests. "And the old saying is the third pays for all. The triplex, sir, is a good tripping measure; or the bells of St. Benet, sir, may put you in mind—one, two, three." Unlike his fictional lord, however, de Vere had no gold to hand out. The third did not "pay for all" but left the other two dangling in debt. There were particular reasons, in 1592: his enemy Christopher Hatton had just become Lord Chancellor of England. As Chancellor, Hatton promptly put himself into the business of settling old scores, the first of which was an old vendetta against de Vere. Hatton forced collection on a crippling load of debt to the crown. The debt trickled down to Nashe and Harvey's landlady, Julianne Penn.
- 5) Lansdowne MSS., 68.114. Transcribed by Charles Wisner Barrell. *Shakespeare Fellowship Quarterly* 5:4 (Oct. 1944)59-60.
- 6) *2 Henry IV* 2.1.28-36.
- 7) *ibid.* 60.
- 8) Lansdowne MSS., 68.115. Transcribed by B.M. Ward. *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. John Murray, London (1928) 303.
- 9) McKerrow *Nashe* V:73.
- 10) Harvey is being characteristically precious here in Latinizing Churchyard's landlady's name, Julianne Penn. Nashe replies to this Harveyism by calling his adversary a "whore-son ninyhammer" for "hop[ing] to dash me quite out of request by telling me of the 'counter and my hostess *Penia*'!"
- 11) Harvey. *Four Letters and certaine Sonnets: Especially touching Robert Greene and other parties by him abused*. John Wolfe, London (1592) reprinted in *The Works of Gabriel Harvey, D.C.I.* Alexander B. Grosart, ed. private circulation, 1884 [reprinted by AMS Press, New York (1966)] 1:199.
- 12) McKerrow, 1:255-6.
- 13) "Wherever Maecenas lodgeth, thither no doubt will scholars flock." Robert Greene. *Gwydonius, The Card of Fancy*. William Ponsonby, London (1584).
- 14) A past-time of some advocates for de Vere is to find as many groan-worthy puns on the names "Vere," "Oxford," "Edward" as can be summoned out of the Shake-speare canon and its tributaries. While such zealotry has undoubtedly tainted the waters, there are occasions more often centered around de Vere's family motto (Vero nihil verius/"Nothing truer than truth") than his family name when authorial identity puns serve an artistic or comic or sardonic purpose. In this case, if Nashe doesn't mean to taunt the reader with the obvious lexical connection between "Verily, verily" and Vere, he's being unusually clumsy in his selection of words.
- 15) Nashe ends the paragraph with the line "Three decayed students you kept attending upon you a long time." The identity of the third "scholar" and probably would-be housemate with Nashe and Churchyard has yet to be advanced. Wisner Barrell guesses (*op. cit.*) that the third is either the playwright John Lyly, who was indeed a long-time recipient of de Vere's patronage, or Robert Greene himself.
- 16) In *Pierce's Supererogation*, Harvey speaks of someone staging a comedy that "threatened" him. "Baubles and comedies are perilous fellows to decipher and discourage men (that is the point) with their witty flouts and learned jerks; enough to lash any man out of countenance," Harvey writes in his tract *Pierce's Supererogation*. "... Gentlemen, beware of a chafing pen that sweateth out whole reams of paper and whole theaters of jests." [Harvey *Pierces Supererogation* 2:213 (Grosart ed.)] In fact, the same month Harvey writes this portion of his diatribe (November 1589) a London theatrical troupe appears to have performed Shake-speare's *Love's Labor's Lost*, which was then suppressed for its topical jests and allusions. [F.G. Fleay (*Life and Work of Shakespeare* (1886) 102; reprinted in the Variorum edition of *Love's Labor's Lost*, Horace Howard Furness ed. J.B. Lippincott Co. (1904) 336-7) argues that the Lord Strange's company performed *Love's Labour's Lost* at the Cross-Keys Inn.] The comedy is filled with references to many contemporaries and events in de Vere's life and world. But the one Harvey undoubtedly took offense over is the Shake-speare canon's most Harveyesque character: The witless pedant Holofernes, a figure in whom both orthodox and heterodox scholars have seen an antagonistic likeness drawn of Harvey. [For commentary on the harsh light in which Holofernes is cast, cf. O.J. Campbell *Shakespeare's Satire* (New York 1943) 32-37; Bryan A. Garner "A Note on Holofernes' Pronunciamentos" *American Notes and Queries* 20 (1982) 100-1. While such critics as M.C. Bradbrook ("St. George for Spelling Reform!" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15:3 (Summer 1964) 135, fn. 13) point out inexactitudes in the correlation between Shake-speare's pedant and Harvey, it's also important to note that Harvey, widely recognized and criticized for his pedantry, vented his spleen over far less substantial supposed criticisms than this e.g. Nashe's observation that his father was a rope-maker, etc.] Mocked, barbed and "thrust... upon the stage," Harvey admits to his foreboding over being lampooned by such a towering figure as Shake-speare. Indeed, in describing his consternation Harvey quotes Shake-speare himself: "I feared the brazen shield and the brazen boots of Goliath and that same hideous spear like a weaver's beam," Harvey writes. [*Pierces Supererogation* 282.] In these words, Harvey offers an ironic turn on the original phrase, where a cowardly Falstaff in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* boasts of his infinite courage, saying that he "fear[s] not Goliath with a weaver's beam." [5.1.23-24] The original source of these quotes, in fact, II Samuel 21:19, where King David's meager military might is contrasted to the sophisticated weaponry of his famous opponent Goliath. As it happens, Shake-speare's interest in this obscure detail from Davidian lore is amply noted in Edward de Vere's personal copy of the Bible, where de Vere not only marked the section where the allusion appears, he even underlined the words "weaver's beam." In short, Shake-speare's bombastic braggart Falstaff refers to arcane lore from the Old Testament. Then Harvey steals a line from Falstaff's quote. But, in Harvey's case, the man with the "spear" is not a biblical character but rather a real contemporary figure whom Harvey both fears and mocks. That man is de Vere, i.e. Shake-speare.
- 17) Harvey. *Works*. Alexander Grosart, ed. AMS Press, New York (1966; orig. ed. 1884) 2:50.
- 18) Nashe and Harvey love to bandy about multiple nicknames for everyone. De Vere, is variously referred to as "The Ass," "The Old Ass," "Nashe's St. Fame," "Entelechy," and "Pierce Pennilesse" —among others. To complicate matters, "Pierce Penniless" is also the name of a pamphlet Nashe wrote loosely based on de Vere's troubled finances, and so at various points in Harvey's rhetoric, "Pierce Penniless" clearly refers to Nashe himself. Fortunately, a glance at the larger context within which these "Pierce" allusions are situated often makes it clear when "Pierce" means the author of *Pierce Penniless* and when "Pierce" means the subject—Edward de Vere. In this case, because Nashe is named as someone distinct from "Pierce" this leaves only one choice for the real-life person being referred to.
- 19) Harvey. *Works* 2:324.