

CHAPTER 5. OXFORD'S LIFE IN THE PLAYS

To the extent possible within the compass of a few pages, the three preceding chapters have outlined the historical context of our present investigation and brought forward some of the so-called "external" evidence supporting the theory of De Vere's authorship of the Shakespeare Canon -- his superlative education in history, languages and literature, his patronage of such arts as music, literature, philosophy, physics and medicine (in each of which fields he had an uncanny knack for discovering and assisting what was best and most significant), his prominent role as a theatrical patron and writer of drama, and finally his formidable and unforgettable wise-ass wit.

The present chapter will briefly consider some elements of so-called "internal evidence" which support the theory. As is well known, the documented circumstances of de Vere's life are uncannily manifest in many figurative expressions in the plays and poems published under the name "Shakespeare" (Ogburn and Ogburn 1952; Ogburn 1984). As *Washington Post* columnist Don Oldenburg has noted, de Vere's life story reads like a rough draft of *Hamlet*. Let us consider a few of the most impressive examples of this phenomenal linkage between "internal" and "external" evidence¹.

As Looney observed in 1920, the figure of the meddling counselor and "fishmonger" Polonius is a parody of de Vere's real life guardian and father-in-law, Ward's Master William Cecil. This identification was originally made by George Russell French in his *Shakespeareana Genealogica* and has been supported by J.D. Wilson (1948 155; 187) E. K. Chambers (1930 418), Joel Hurtsfield (1958 257) and Christopher Devlin (n.d. 43) among others. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, in his 1992 "Shakespeare Canon of Statutory Construction," concludes that

Polonius is unquestionably a caricature of Burghley. His position as advisor to the King, his physical appearance, his crafty use of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to try to ascertain the cause of Hamlet's antic disposition, and his employment of Reynaldo to spy on his own son, Laertes, while away at school, are all characteristic of Burghley. One who had lived in his house, as de Vere did, and therefore had firsthand knowledge of Burghley's use of a spy to report on the activities of his oldest son, could well be responsible for the scene including Reynaldo--a scene that seems to have no purpose except to illuminate Polonius's--or Burghley's--character. The suspicion that there is an autobiographical element in Hamlet

¹ For a more thorough account of the historical context of the present document, the reader is invited to consult appendix M. Appendix N details some striking elements of the stylistic evidence linking Oxford to the "Shakespeare" canon.

increases when one recognizes the parallel between Hamlet's relationship with the fair Ophelia --the daughter of Polonius -- and the fact that at the age of twenty-one de Vere married Anne Cecil, the daughter of Lord Burghley.
(1992 1371-72)

Another tangible and surprising connection between de Vere's biography and the Shakespearean corpus which will disturb partisans of the official story of Shakespeare is the prominence of the "bed trick" -- the stratagem by which a woman entraps a reluctant male into having sexual relations with her by luring him to an assignation with another woman for whom the protagonist then substitutes herself-- in plays such as *All's Well that End's Well* and *Measure for Measure*². Such a "bed trick" plays a prominent structural role in both Shakespearean comedies. Curiously, more than one historical tradition connects this Shakespearean "literary" motif to the real life of Edward de Vere. It appears that de Vere's unhappy marriage to his classificatory consanguine Anne Cecil, which would have been condemned as incestuous under canon law³, was consummated by means of the same "bed-trick" by which the lowly but lovely Helena snares her man Bertram in Shakespeare's play. Wright's *History of Essex* records that

the father of lady Anne by stratagem contrived that her husband should unknowingly sleep with her, believing her to be another woman, and she bore a son to him in consequence of this meeting

(Vol. I: 517)

just as Helena entraps Bertram by luring him to her bed under the pretense of his assignation with Diana in *All's Well*. As Looney observes, it is irrelevant that this episode of the play is conventionally considered a mere reflex of the theme's occurrence in Boccaccio:

The point which matters is that this extraordinary story should be circulated in reference to the Earl of Oxford; making it quite clear that either Oxford was the actual prototype of Bertram, in which case false as well as true stories of the earl might be worked into the play, or he was supposed to be the prototype and was saddled with the story in consequence....With such possibilities of discovery lying in the play of "All's Well," it is not surprising that having first of all appeared under the title of "Love's Labour's Won," it should have disappeared for a full generation, and then, when the Earl of Oxford had been dead for nearly twenty years, reappeared under a new name.

(1920 234)

Although the full circumstances surrounding the 1576 birth of Elizabeth Vere, alleged by ancient sources to have been the result of a "bed trick" played on de Vere by his wife Anne (apparently with the active collusion of her father William Cecil), will probably never be known, Cecil's memoranda confirm that the birth was fraught with intrigue and conflict (Ward 1928 113-129; Ogburn 1984 555-580). Considering the implications of the birth, it is not difficult to see why. By 1576, de Vere had been married to Anne Cecil for five years without producing any

²–*Measure for Measure* views the trick not from the point of view of the tricked male, but from that of its mastermind, the Duke, who arranges to reconcile Mariana with her alienated fiancée Angelo by the ruse of appointing a rendezvous between Angelo and Isabella but sending Mariana in place of the nun.

³See Smith, C.E. *Papal Enforcement*, who shows that under canon law "adoption has the same effect in precluding marriage as does kinship by marriage" (6).

children. The continuance of the marriage may well have depended upon Anne's pregnancy; without an heir, the marriage could be terminated under existing law at the husband's will. Hence it is not difficult to see grounds for Burghley's alleged role in the affair (Ogburn and Ogburn 1952; Ogburn 1984 574-75); the last thing this master of court intrigue wanted was a *former* ward and son-in-law, whose court amours included the kind of conquests of which Falstaff could boast, running free without a leash.

This circumstance is directly and overtly paralleled in *All's Well*. Helena's entrapment of Bertram in the bed trick answers her husband's flagrant challenge: "when thou canst...show me a child begotten of thy body that I am father to, then call me husband" (3.2.57-60). Logically, of course, the phrase "that I am father to" is superfluous unless, just as with De Vere, the possibility of the bed trick is conjoined with the alternative means of a wife's conception. We may not therefore be surprised to learn that de Vere's own account of his daughter's conception, as reported by Her Majesty's physician Richard Masters in a memorandum of March 7 1575 (N.S.), was that "if [Anne] were with child it was not his" (Ward 114).

So compelling are the connections between Bertram and Oxford, from the wardship and forced marriage to a classificatory sibling, to the bed trick, that even Joel Hurstfield in his study of the Elizabethan court of wards concedes that Bertram may be, "as some critics believe, Shakespeare's version of Burghley's ward" -- namely Oxford (1973 129).

Looney himself, while drawing pointed attention to this surprising coincidence between life and art, admonishes the Shakespearean student to be suspicious of alleged parallelisms which occur in only one play. Looney's sense of wholism demanded a theory for which proof could be demonstrated from multiple, sometimes surprisingly juxtaposed quarters of knowledge; the literary precipitates of the artist's own life would be observable in every play he had written. This was the challenge which Looney bequeathed to students who would follow him, and to a surprising extent these have already made good on the case in such books as Dorothy and Charlton Ogburn Sr.'s *This Star of England* (1952) and Charlton Ogburn's *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984). In every play in the Shakespeare canon, sometimes more and sometimes less plausibly, such scholars have documented an emerging canon of topical knowledge which lights up the interior stage in the Shakespearean drama.

Many readers would naturally want to focus on *Hamlet* as a test case, since that is "Shakespeare's" most famous and presumably, in a certain sense which is paradoxically difficult to define, "autobiographical" work. Can we turn to the mature tragedy *Hamlet* and discover in it the same sort of connection as we did with the early comedy, *All's Well that Ends Well*? If so we have spanned the entire Shakespearean oeuvre, from one pole of a comedy about comically

propitious endings, to the other pole of a play in which purposes are inevitably "purposes mistook," and, "in the upshot fall'n on the inventor's heads" (5.2.395).

The essential plot elements of the play *Hamlet* are just as easily demonstrated in the life of Edward de Vere as they are in Shakespeare's alleged source, the Latin of Saxo Grammaticus. As we have seen, de Vere was a prominent patron of the arts, particularly the theatre, during the 1570s and 1580's; after a time, perhaps due to controversy over his handling of theatrical events, his influence in that department seems to have been eclipsed. Eventually more reliable and predictable state servants such as the successive Lord Chamberlains of her majesty's household, Henry (1524-1596) and George (1547-1603) Hunsdon assumed centralized control over players performing in her majesty's livery. In 1602, however, apparently after some urging on his part and the intercession of the Queen, players in Oxford's livery are finally granted the right to resume their *customary venue* at the Boar's head tavern in Eastcheap (Chambers 1923 IV CXXX) -- the scene, incidentally, of Falstaff and the Prince's swaggering encounters with Mistress Quickly, Doll and Pistol in *II Henry IV* 2.1, 4.

Like *Hamlet*, de Vere was an aristocratic playwright with a political agenda to make use of the theatre for compensatory political purposes when his own ambitions were thwarted by powerful court antagonists -- Claudius or Polonius in the Court of Elsinore in the play, or the Earl of Leicester and Lord Burghley in the English court of the 1570's and 80's. *Hamlet* even enacts a simulacrum of the artist's own pseudonymous authorship when he engagingly asks if the Players from the Court of Gonzago can insert into their Italian script a speech of "a dozen or sixteen lines which I shall set down for you" (2.2.56). It is these lines, presumably, with which *Hamlet* expects to "catch the conscience of the king," but as witnesses to the drama we cannot even identify which lines they are! Evidently *Hamlet* has contrived to insert some of his own lines of verse into the drama, without allowing his authorship of them to be publicly acknowledged -- for if he were known to be the author, his own subtle forensics investigation might be spoiled by an unexpected visit by the King's royal guard, searching to discover the author of such trash. Of all of this Looney, although he chose a more prosaic and conservative idiom in which to express his knowledge, was fully aware. Indeed Looney notes that the "central fact of *Hamlet's* working out a secret purpose under a mask of eccentricity amounting almost to feigned madness" (398) forms an analogue to the real-life circumstances of Edward de Vere as the greatest of the "concealed poets"⁴ in the Court of Elizabeth I:

All the quickness of the senses which marks alike the work of De Vere and Shakespeare manifests itself in the person of *Hamlet*. He misses nothing; and every thing he sees or hears

⁴ The phrase is from the letter of Francis Bacon, March 28 1603, to the poet John Davies (MSS 976 fo. 4 Lambeth Palace), which signs off "desiring you to be good to concealed poets..." (Hope 1993).

opens some new avenue to the "inmost parts" of those about him. A man like this is almost foredoomed to a tragic loneliness; for even such love as he shows towards Ophelia and she towards him cannot blind him to her want of honesty in her dealings. He sees much of which he may not speak. In the play he can express himself in soliloquy or cunningly reveal to the audience what is hidden from the other personages in the drama; but in real life he would become a man of large mental reserves and an enforced secretiveness. (395)

Has any Shakespeare critic, ideology aside, written two hundred more eloquent words about the essential nature of the character Hamlet? I cannot name any.

The entire complex of relations between these two plays and the documented circumstances of de Vere's life forcefully underscores the cogency of Justice John Paul Stevens's "suspicion" of "an autobiographical element" in *Hamlet* (Stevens 1992 1379). How much greater must this "suspicion" appear, in light of present discoveries, when we remember that grounds for the same suspicion are found also in *All's Well that Ends Well* when Helena traps her husband in the bed trick, just as the Countess of Oxford is said to have entrapped de Vere into becoming the father of her first child? Similar analogies between life and art disclose themselves at every corner when the canon is read, particularly in its entirety, from the so-called "Oxfordian" point of view.

