

## CHAPTER 3. THE ALMS HE GAVE

A jest's prosperity lies in the ear of him that hears it,  
Never in the tongue of him that makes it.

--Benedick

When the first edition of William Tyndale's revolutionary translation of the New Testament, published in Cologne and Worms, was smuggled to the shores of England in 1526, its eager readers discovered an imposing enigma on the title page. In direct contravention of royal edict, the Bible was not identified as the work of any known translator. It was, in effect, translated by "nobody." With good reason, Tyndale feared that acknowledgement of his agency as the translator might cost him his life; Henry VIII was still known under his honorary title of "defender of the faith," and the English Bible was still effectively a contraband, outlawed publication. According to English law, no Bible could be published without an identified translator. Only a flesh and blood translator could be racked for misplaced word choices. English Bibles had been the curse of the nation at least since John Wycliffe's (1320-1384) abortive attempt to launch a reformation by means of his own translation during the late reign of Richard II.

Within a year of the publication of his English New Testament, however, Tyndale appears to have reconsidered the advisability of his continued anonymity. Apparently, his association with the satirical pamphleteer William Roye, whose 1525 *Brief Dialogue* portrayed ecclesiastical enemies of the reformation as Judas and Caiaphas plotting the crucifixion of Christ, had led to dangerous speculation that Roye was directly involved with Tyndale's translation; Tyndale apparently wished to disassociate himself from Roye's extremism and also to lay unambiguous claim to his own translation by affixing his name to it<sup>1</sup>. In his 1527 *Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, long before Henry's impending break with Rome and endorsement of an English Bible

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<sup>1</sup> The 1534 edition bore his name for the first time.

could have been foreseen by most observers, Tyndale admits his “authorship” of the translation and explains his reticence for public claim on the basis of scriptural precedent:

The cause why I set my name before this little treatise and have not done it in the New Testament is, that then I followed the counsel of Christ, which exhorteth men (Matt. vi) to do their good deeds secretly, and to be content with the conscience of well-doing and that God seeth us; and patiently to abide the reward of the last day which Christ hath purchased for us; and now would I fain have done likewise, but am compelled otherwise to do.

(Westcott 1872, 1527)

Tyndale’s text is a classic illustration of the principle of the function of the Renaissance figure of *alleguer* (c.f. chapter 10 below): Matt. 6.1-4 is the precedent which motivates and justifies Tyndale's anonymous action. He may have been violating royal decree by not signing his name to his New Testament translation, but Tyndale was loyal to the higher "law of God" inscribed in Matthew’s gospel.

Not until after his divorce from Catherine of Aragon and marriage to Anne Boleyn in 1538 did Henry declare his nation’s independence from Papal law and give formal authorization for the translation of a vernacular Bible. By then, Tyndale's worst fears had materialized. He who prophesied that, as a result of his intellectual labor, a plowboy would one day debate theology with the Pope, was punished for his hubris -- the boast was avenged without delay: on October 1536 he was tied to the stake and burned alive by royal proclamation. The plowboys had been warned.

In this case, however, history seems to have been on the side of the martyrs. Ironically, within less than two years, England was a Protestant country. The greatest of the surviving translators, Miles Coverdale and John Rogers, busied themselves ransacking the treasury of Tyndale’s peerless prose to produce the first authorized English Bible, the Great Bible of 1539.

By the date of Edward de Vere's birth in 1550, England had survived three years of the anarchic reign of Edward VI. The nation had not yet been dragged screaming back into the dark ages under the reign of Mary Tudor (1553-58), known as "bloody Mary" because of the many Protestant martyrs required to effect her ambitious historical revanchism, but the era of peaceful imperialism under the strong-arm monarchy of Henry VIII was clearly over. Mary did her best to resurrect the "bare-ruined choirs" of the Catholic faith from the ashes of her own father’s ransacking of the Monasteries, to let them sing again; but the cost in human lives left a terrible impression in the hearts of honest men and women everywhere who could not equate governance with butchery. Many leading Protestants, among them the learned William Whittingham, fled Mary's reign to welcoming Protestant enclaves such as those in Geneva. Whittingham would spend his years in Geneva as the leading light of the Protestant translation project which produced

the so-called "Geneva Bible," of which the first edition was published in 1560. A copy of the second edition (1568-70) of this book forms the subject matter of this dissertation.

A gigantic transformation in mind and morals, in patterns of land-holding and swamp-draining, in beliefs about trans- and con-substantiation, and above all in the relation between the self and the state, was germinating in England. Literacy, and with it linguistic nationalism, were awakening as if from a long sleep. The authoritative structures which had cemented the Medieval mind and body to the social matrix toppled about the heads of amazed subjects. Gradually the outlines of nation-states coalesced around new forms of production and communications. The full extent of the transformation would not be seen until after the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, after the Civil War, the rise of Puritanism as a political force under Cromwell, the restoration and Glorious Revolution of 1688 -- but the seeds were planted during the chaotic years during which Elizabeth's two half siblings, first the boy-king Edward and then her Spanish half-sister Mary, attempted to seize control of an English state still populated by such "wolfish Earls" as John Dudley, the Earl of Northumberland (1502-53). In the "long duree" the feudal mode of production so characteristic of England still during the 15<sup>th</sup> century was being swept away before what was to become triumphant modern capitalism, the industrial revolution, and the cotton gin.

By all indications, it was not a propitious beginning for a young boy who happened to inherit one of the largest, and most encumbered, estates in England. Hence it is not entirely surprising that fiscal improvidence, the great sin of many young aristocrats, is a standard character flaw conventionally attributed to de Vere. Born into one of the richest and most glorious of English noble families, with a patronym stretching back over seventeen generations to Aubrey de Vere's entitlement by William the Conqueror, he was undoubtedly among the most downwardly mobile of the class of medieval nobility. These, of course, were then entering the "crisis of the aristocracy" chronicled in Stone's classic scholarly treatise, and de Vere was no exception to the rule that those who did not become businessmen were doomed to become anachronisms. According to Stone, de Vere was one who had "run through his own patrimony with riotous living" (194); Sir Sidney Lee records that he "had squandered some part of his fortune upon men of letters whose bohemian mode of life attracted him" (227). It was almost a proverb in the land that disputants in real estate actions against the prodigal Earl could count on obtaining their "Robin Hood's Pennyworth." The crumbs kept trickling in from the remains of ancient estates being dumped onto the Market at ruinous rates to pay for the expense of maintaining a lifestyle of conspicuous patronage which even a court fool could see was anachronistic.

The downward spiral cannot be attributed to Oxford alone. As a rich court ward whose assets may well have been plundered by bureaucratic estate schemers in the historically<sup>2</sup> corrupt Court of Wards, Oxford seems always to have cast a jaundiced eye upon heaps of “strange amassed gold.” His attitudes towards money -- which wavered between improvident generosity and imperious disdain -- were of a distinctively medieval hue, entirely inconsistent with the frugality and acquisitive habits of the emergent bourgeois class of “new men” -- of whom his legal guardian and *bête noire* Burghley was a quintessential representative. In his 1573 preface to Bartholomewe Clerke’s *Cardanus’ Comforte*, Oxford compares the literary labors of the translator to a mass of gold which Clerke threatens to have “murdered in the waste bottoms” of his chests. “What doth it avail a mass of gold to be continually imprisoned in your bags and never to be employed to your use?”

“His tendency to spend lavishly is unmistakable, and his playacting and literary associates would provide an almost unlimited field for the exercise of his generosity,” writes Looney (308), continuing:

His own absorption in these interests must, moreover, have tended to place his financial affairs at the mercy of agents, and throw them into confusion. To this must be added the almost royal state which he seems to have maintained in some respects. For at one point we get a glimpse of his travelling *en famille* with a retinue of twenty-eight servants...the need for ready cash must often have been pressing, and this need he seems to have satisfied by selling estates "at ruinously low rates.”

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This anachronistic and improvident attitude towards financial matters occurs in many refracted variants in Shakespeare, as Looney observed:

Like the man with a “trick of melancholy” in *All’s Well*, he sold many “a goodly manor for a song,” and possibly at the same time developed that contempt for “land buyers” expressed by Hamlet in the grave digging scene. It is interesting to notice that when Iago, who we have supposed, represented Oxford’s receiver, urges upon one of his victims: “put money in thy purse;” he meets immediately with the response, “I will sell my lands.”

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It is not just that Iago urges economizing, and Jacques sells his lands to see those of other men, but that in Shakespeare “almost every reference to money and purses is of the loosest description and, by implication, teach[es] an improvidence that would soon involve any man’s financial affairs in complete chaos” (98).

Modern historians, particularly in the decades since the publication of *"Shakespeare" Identified*, have routinely presumed that the large expenditures of Oxford's household resulted from his own lavish and undisciplined taste for exotic luxuries, rarely even conceding Oxford's

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<sup>2</sup> Many historians credit William Cecil, appointed as Master of the Court in 1562, with effecting far-reaching reforms of the institution. Nevertheless the post of the Mastership remained, as Conyers Read attests (1955 192) “one of the most lucrative offices in the gift of the crown.”

penchant for subsidizing Bohemian “men of letters.” According to the testimony of Tom Nashe, however, in the document *Summer's Last Will and Testament (1596)*, Oxford's patronage of the English theatre and other literary enterprises during the decades of the 1570's and 1580's was the chief cause of his impoverishment. In the play, Oxford is gently satirized in the figure of Ver – Spring -- as a downwardly mobile yet stoic Platonist, patron of children's players and “men of letters.” The play, apparently written for performance before Archbishop Whitgift at Croydon in the fall of 1592 (McKerrow IV: 416-419), while the theatre was still suffering the consequences of a protracted series of restrictions imposed as retaliation for theatrical liberties taken against the Puritans, is Nashe's appeal for Whitgift to restore Anglican patronage and license to the theatrical wits. Demanded by Summer to make “an account and reckoning of his doings,” the prodigal Ver replies:

*What I had, I have spent, on good fellows; in these sports you have seen, which are proper to the Spring<sup>3</sup>, and others of like sort (as giving wenches greene gownes, making garlands for fencers, and tricking up children gay) I have bestowed all my flowery treasure and flowre of my youth.*

(224-231: emphasis supplied)

The image of “Ver” – the prodigal and now bankrupt Maecenas, praised as “Master Apis Lapis” in the epistle dedicatory of Nashe's *Strange News* the same year, one who had squandered more than “some portion” of his patrimony on Bohemian sports “proper to the spring” such as “tricking up children gay” -- seems an unmistakable portrait of Oxford in the year 1592. That he was a prominent theatrical patron of the Elizabethan court who, like “Ver,” spent his money patronizing the theatrical arts there can be absolutely no doubt. During the 1580's he had patronized, at various times, as many as three troops of child actors – the Children of Pauls, the Children of the Chapel, and his own “Oxford's Boys” -- not to mention his adult troop of “Oxford's Men” (Chambers 1923 II: 8-23, 23-49, 99-102). The high point of Oxford's land sales, according to figures compiled by Ruth Loyd Miller (I: 504), came in 1580, the same year<sup>4</sup> in which he apparently began subsidizing his adult troop.

B.M. Ward, Oxford's modern biographer, agrees:

*"What did Oxford spend his money on?" He was instrumental, by means of his brain, his servants, and his purse in providing the Court with dramatic entertainment... Elizabeth, we may be sure, was fully alive to the importance of masques and similar entertainments in promoting the well-being of the Court. A well-organized recreation department was essential to herself and her courtiers as a plentifully supplied supper-table. There can be no doubt that a great part of the winter evening diversions during the early eighties had emanated from Lord Oxford and Lyly....*

(1928 282)

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<sup>3</sup> That is, Ver.

<sup>4</sup> The first year in which a troop performing in Oxford's livery appears in the records; Ward (267) argues that the genesis of the troop was Oxford's taking Warwick's company in this year.

Abundant additional testimony supports the plausibility of such an inference; certainly there can be no doubting Oxford's contemporary reputation as a distinguished and generous Maecenas<sup>5</sup>. Many of the thirty-seven books dedicated to him refer to his reputation for immense generosity as an arts patron. In 1584 Robert Greene, perhaps thinking of Oxford's new Fisher's Folly residence (Ogburn 671-72; 710-11), which he seems to have acquired in that year as a London flophouse for his literary habitués<sup>6</sup>, wrote of him: "Wheresoever Maecenas Lodgeth, thither no doubt scholars will flock. And your honor being a worthy favorer and fosterer of learning, hath forced many through your excellent virtue to offer the first-fruits of their study at the shrine of your lordship's courtesy" (Chiljan 71)<sup>7</sup>. During the previous decade, Oxford had maintained apartments at the Savoy, to which John Lyly and Gabriel Harvey, among others, apparently "flocked" for their lodgings. Now Fisher's Folly, while preposterous from the perspective of a business investment<sup>8</sup>, was attracting the likes of Nashe, Robert Greene, and Thomas Watson, who dedicated his 1581-82 *Hecatompithia* to Oxford.

Another protégé was Angel Day, whose 1586 work, *The English Secretary*, remembers Oxford in the same breath with "the *exceeding bounty* wherewith our Good Lord hath ever wanted to entertain the deserts of all men" (Chiljan 1994 73: emphasis added). John Farmer in his *English Plainsong* over a decade later offers "these madrigals only as remembrances of my service and witness of *your Lordship's liberal hand*, by which I have so long lived, and from your honorable mind that so much have loved all liberal sciences...." (Chiljan 91: emphasis added). Tradition preserved by Isaac D'Israeli (1766-1848) in his chapter on the "Secret History of Edward Vere, The Earl of Oxford" in *Curiosities of Literature* (1833), again confirms Oxford's generosity of spirit in the anecdote about his Secretary Nicholas Hill, the Democritean philosopher with whose work Shakespeare was intimately familiar (Miller 1975 II 486-490). It seems that during a continental sojourn with his Lord, Hill was accosted by a beggar, asking him for a sixpence, or a shilling, for an alms. "What dost thou say if I give thee ten pounds?" Oxford's steward is reported to have said: "Ten pounds!" Replied the astonished man, "that would make a man of me!" Hill is then said to have made the following account in Oxford's

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<sup>5</sup> Gaius Clinias Maecenas -- The patron of Horace, Varius and Virgil. According to the 11<sup>th</sup> *Britannica*, "his patronage was exercised, not from vanity or a mere dilettante love of letters, but with a view to the higher interest of the state. He recognized in the genius of the poets of the time, not only the truest ornament of the court, but a power of reconciling men's minds to the new order of things, and of investing the actual state of affairs with an ideal glory and majesty" (XVII 297).

<sup>6</sup> Oxford kept Fisher's Folly for only four years, selling it to William Cornwallis in December 1588. Perhaps the sprawling estate should have been renamed "Oxford's folly."

<sup>7</sup> From the prefatory epistle to Oxford in *Gwydonius, The Card of Fancy* (1584), by Robert Greene.

<sup>8</sup> The mansion was so named because the original owner/builder Jasper Fisher bankrupted himself trying to complete it.

books: "Item, 10 pounds for making a man." Comments D'Israeli in his conclusion to the story: "Which his Lordship inquiring about for the oddness of the expression, not only allowed, but was pleased with" (D'Israeli 1833 I: 202).

Although his 1591 marriage to Elizabeth Trentham may have started the process of rehabilitating his financial position, de Vere was still apparently insolvent. Within a year, in 1592, he was able to resolve his longstanding "debt" to the Court of Wards. In the same year, however, he lacked the financial resources, or perhaps the presence of mind, to continue footing the bill for his old friend, the elderly poet Thomas Churchyard<sup>9</sup>, when his landlady Mrs. Julia Penn evicted him from her London tenements. Like Falstaff he had become an ornament of London with a tavern bill in his pocket, to whom no Lord Chief Justice would lend a single penny.

Perhaps the most glowing dedication to Oxford's munificence within this own lifetime, however, is that offered by Thomas Nashe in his dedication to *Strange News*, which praises Oxford under the sobriquets "Master Apis Lapis"<sup>10</sup> and "gentle master William":

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... Verily, Verily<sup>11</sup>, all poor scholars acknowledge you as their patron, providitore and supporter, for there cannot a threadbare cloak sooner peep forth but you strait press it to be an outbrother of your bounty.

(Chiljan 83-86) emphasis added)

During the period after Oxford's marriage to Elizabeth Trentham in 1591 and his death in 1604 his life is marked by deepening obscurity. He retired with his Countess to their estate in the London suburb of Hackney and took little role in public affairs. That he remained in financial difficulty is indicated by the few documents pertaining to his activities during this final decade – most of which consist of the so-called "tin mining" memoranda, written for Queen Elizabeth and Lord Burghley, which analyze commercial and fiscal aspects of the Cornish Tin Industry and attempt to secure the writer's monopoly on the commodity. He was never rewarded with the prize. In 1595 his daughter Elizabeth, having previously been betrothed to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Southampton (see chapter twenty-four), married William Stanley, the playwright, member of the blood royal and future 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby. As his biographer B.M. Ward concludes

the anti-climax presented by the last years of Lord Oxford's life is inevitable. It is almost impossible to penetrate the obscurity surrounding his life at Hackney. There can be little doubt that literature, his main interest in life, occupied the greater part of his time. It is probable that he and his son-in-law Lord Derby amused themselves by writing comedies which were performed by their actors. Music, too, must have played an important part in the years of retirement. But his secret has been well kept. Indeed, so completely have the last fifteen years

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<sup>9</sup> Although Churchyard never dedicated a book to Oxford, Stephen May notes (1981 9) that he twice declared his intent of doing so -- in *Churchyard's Chance* (1580, STC 5250) and in the epistle to *Churchyard's Charge* (1580, STC 5240).

<sup>10</sup> See Anderson 1999 for a recent discussion of this sobriquet.

<sup>11</sup> Note the potential or actual "Vere" pun.

of his life been obscured, that one is tempted to wonder whether this is due to chance, or whether it may not have been deliberately designed.

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Most strikingly, the testimonies to Oxford's munificence as a patron of arts and learning do not, however, cease after his death. In Chapman's *Bussy D'ambois*, not published until 1613 but written circa 1604, D'ambois remembers him as one

Of spirit passing great  
Valiant and learned and *liberal as the sun...*

(emphasis added)<sup>12</sup>

*In Honour in his Perfection* – in 1624, just one year after Jaggard's "Shakespeare" folio -- Gervase Markham includes a long eulogy to Oxford, praising his enduring legacy of generosity. It is difficult to believe that the powerful undercurrent of pathos in this passage can be unconnected to the publication.

The alms he gave (which at this day would not only feede the poore, but the great man's family also) and the bountie which religion and Learning daily tooke from him, are Trumpets so loude, that all eares know them.

(STC 17361 p. 17)

There is more to this passage than meets the eye at first glance. Markham's coordinate construction, linking Oxford's alms to the "bountie which religion and learning daily took from him," reminds us of the close association in Renaissance thought between alms and other forms of good works, including contributions to religion and learning such as authoring erudite plays. Like Timon of Athens, Oxford's reputation for prodigal expense was routinely associated with the bounteous "learning" which he bestowed as patron and – one might infer by reading "between the lines" – *author* of the published word.

Indeed, Markham's phrase, "trumpets so loud that all ears know them," invokes the scriptural precedent of Matt. 6.1-4. We began this chapter by remembering this pericope as the literary pretext for William Tyndale's anonymous publication of the Bible. In it, Christ admonishes his disciples to observe the virtue of performing good works in secret: "when thou givest thine almes, thou shalt not make a trumpet to be blown before thee, as the hypocrites do in the Synagogues and the streets" (Genevan 1570) -- the same verse Tyndale used to justify *the anonymous publication* of his New Testament in 1528.

Markham's *alleguer* of Matt. 6.1-4 (see chapter ten) is paradoxical: the marked text speaks not of a trumpet being blown in public recognition of the giver's alms, but of the need for discretion or secrecy in the bestowal of gifts. Have we here a classic instance of the citation of pretext to complicate the reader's otherwise unproblematic reception of the author's meaning?

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<sup>12</sup> Cited from *Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy: An Anthology*, Robert Ornstein and Hazelton Spencer eds. (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1964).

The 1624 date of Markham's book – one year after the publication of the Shakespeare folio – should not be overlooked. Markham's reference to Matt. 6.1-4 signals for an alert reader a momentous covert implication: although "all ears know" the sound of Oxford's good works, they are nevertheless veiled works, done in secret; the name of the author has been concealed even from those who heed the trumpet's voice. Not knowing the genesis of the allusion, or the history of the authorship of the works, "the world is still deceived by ornament" (*Merchant of Venice* 3.2.74).

