

People and Plays at Oxford University, September 1566

By Jan Cole

Queen Elizabeth's visit to the University of Oxford (31 August - 6 September 1566) is probably the most well-documented of all her visits. There are three major contemporary accounts by Miles Windsor (c.1541-1624), John Bereblock (fl.1557-72), and Thomas Twynne (1543-1613), as well as others. Thomas Twynne's son, Brian Twynne (1581-1644), became the university's archivist in the 1630s. He had access to his father's account, which was then used by the Oxford antiquarian Anthony Wood (1632-95), and by John Nichols (1745-1826) for their own published accounts. From the original eye-witness statements, we learn a great deal about that extraordinary week and the events at which the 16-year-old Edward de Vere was present. In addition, a special book was written and presented to Elizabeth as a memorandum of her visit, containing many of the speeches addressed to her, as well as detailed engravings of each of the colleges she visited. The original of this is in the Bodleian Library and has recently been reproduced in book form (Durning, 2006).

The authors of two of the eye-witness accounts are significant in the life of Edward de Vere:

- Miles Windsor was a first cousin of Edward Windsor (1537-75), the husband since c.1555 of de Vere's half-sister, Katherine de Vere. He played the part of Perithous in *Palamon & Arcite* at Oxford in 1566;
- Thomas Twynne became a translator of several works, and in 1573, dedicated his translation of the Welsh historian Humphrey Llywd's book, *The Breviary of Britain*, to Oxford. His father, John Twynne (1505-81), had written about the ancient races of Britain in *De Rebus Albionis ...*, which was published in 1590. A copy of this book was owned by the antiquarian, William Lambarde, who was a pupil of Lawrence Nowell, and who taught at Cecil House in the 1560s. Twynne also continued Thomas Phaer's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* and published it in 1573 (reprinted 1596, 1607, 1620). Since reference is made on the title-page to Phaer's papers in Pembrokeshire, it seems possible that Twynne had connections with Wales, or at least was interested (as many were at this point) in the antiquity of the



British races. He also produced a translation of one of Petrarch's prose works, which he called *Physic Against Fortune* (1579), a work whose content, like *Cardano's Comforte*, has significant bearing on the book-learning of Prince Hamlet in Shakespeare's play;

- His brother, **Lawrence Twynne** (c.1530-99), was the author of *The Pattern of Painful Adventures* (1576, reprinted 1595 and 1607), containing the adventures of Appollonius of Tyre, and a source for Shakespeare's play *Pericles*. It is said that Twynne's version was the one used by the author(s) of *Pericles*, the production of which may have been suggested by the appearance of the third edition of Twynne's book in 1607, or was perhaps printed after the play as a response to it. The Shakespeare editors Stevens, Malone, and Douce erroneously assigned the authorship to Lawrence's brother, Thomas. Thus, it seems very likely that Edward de Vere and Thomas Twynne remained in touch after 1566, and that Twynne was drawn into the academic ambience of Cecil House, becoming a protégé of de Vere and dedicating to him by 1573.

The Oxford University Plays of 1566

Three plays were performed in the hall of Christ Church College. The first was a Latin play called *Marcus Geminus*, referred to as a 'history play' and written by **Tobias Matthew** (1546-1628), who received his MA (along with de Vere and others) on the last day of the Queen's visit, eventually to become Bishop of Durham and later Archbishop of York in 1606. Queen Elizabeth was not present for the performance of *Marcus Geminus*, being 'unwell,' and probably exhausted by the previous two days' events. The play was likely based on Livy's Roman history, with reference perhaps also to Plutarch, and refers to the consul, Marcus Servilius Geminus (consul in 202 BC, d. 175BC). The following is from the French *Wikipedia* entry:



Tobias Matthew

First, he began his brilliant career with the religious function of 'augur', a position he held for many years before being appointed 'aedile curule.' At the peak of his political career, he was in 203 BC, appointed master of the horse (*magister equitum*) by dictator Publius Sulpicius Galba Maximus. This prestigious military post then opened the doors of the Consulate between 203 BC and 202 BC, before his being elected in 202 BC. At the end of his six-month term, he claimed Africa's command post to permanently defeat Hannibal, but

the people consulted, they chose Scipio Africanus. He participated in many campaigns of the Second Punic War against Hannibal and the Macedonian wars. During a speech at the Capitol in Rome in 167 BC, where, in the twilight of his life, he defended Lucius Aemilius Paullus, the winner of the battle of Pydna, he challenged his troops to the honor of a triumph. To convince the troops, he proudly displayed his scars and war wounds, mentioning twenty-three victories against his enemies.

The text of the play no longer exists, but it is thought to have been a tragic-comedy. Certainly the sight of a young actor playing a Roman consul baring his chest to show his war-wounds must have been amusing. Since Geminus started out as ‘master of the horse’ and went on to be a famous general, it is tempting to think that something in the play may have been meant to appeal to the Earl of Leicester.

Palamon & Arcite by [Richard Edwardes](#) (1525-66) was played in two parts on two separate evenings (2 and 4 September). The original text is lost. It may or may not relate to a play of similar title called *Palamon and Arset* mentioned as ‘ne’ (new?) by Henslowe and performed four times at The Rose theatre in September/October 1594. Was this the play that Ben Jonson referred to as “the play, *Palamon*” in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614)? We don’t know. It is equally mysterious as to how the 1566 play is related to *The Two Noble Kinsman* (publ. 1634), reputedly written by John Fletcher and William Shakespeare. The source of Edwardes’ 1566 play was probably Chaucer’s ‘The Knight’s Tale,’ but may also have included Boccaccio’s ‘Teseida,’ from which Chaucer took the story. An important Oxfordian viewpoint is that of Katherine Chiljan in her 1999 essay published in the *Shakespeare-Oxford Newsletter*, to which I refer the reader below.

What is clear is that Edward de Vere and Richard Edwardes knew each other and almost certainly enjoyed a close relationship from 1562 until Edwardes’ death at the end of 1566. As a member of the Chapel Royal since 1557, Edwardes trained the child choristers, who not only sang, but acted at Court and at other events involving the Queen’s public occasions. In 1561 he became the Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal. He was a musician and composer (many of whose songs have survived with music, including three in the so-called *Mulliner* book), a poet, and a dramatist. His play *Damon and Pythias* was performed at Court in 1564 and published in 1571. In 1576, ten of Edwardes’ poems appeared in *The Paradise of Dainty Devices*, in which collection some poems of Edward de Vere’s (E.O.) also appeared. By the time that the author of *The Arte of Poesie* (1589) and Francis Meres in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) came to compile the names of famous English poets and dramatists, those of Oxford and Richard Edwardes

are closely associated as “the best for comedy and interludes.” Because Oxford was placed in royal circles from the age of 12 in order to be educated as a noble courtier, I think it is quite possible that Richard Edwardes (as Master of the Chapel Royal) would have served as his private tutor in music (including lyrics and songs), and that out of this association came Oxford’s own writing of poems, interludes and plays. It is therefore possible, of course, that master and aristocratic pupil worked together on entertainments from 1562 to 1566, the span of an average university course.

The third play was performed on 5 September 1566 and called, in short, *Progne*, written by James Calphill (c.1530-1570), said to be a cousin of Tobias Matthew, who was Archdeacon of Colchester, rector of Bocking in Essex (near Castle Hedingham) and bishop-designate to Worcester at his death. He was an alumnus of Christ Church, Oxford, its canon in 1563, and Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity to the University in 1564. The play may have been based on a 15th century piece of the same name by Gregorio Carraro (d.1468) published in 1558, but the source is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Book 6) and the distressing tale of the rape of Philomel by Tereus and her transformation into a nightingale. Again, the text of the 1566 play is lost. Procne was the wife of King Tereus of Thrace. While the myth has several variations, the general depiction is that Philomela, after being raped and savagely mutilated by her sister’s husband, Tereus, obtains her revenge and is transformed into a nightingale, a migratory passerine bird native to Europe and southwest Asia and noted for its song. Because of the violence associated with the myth, the song of the nightingale is often depicted or interpreted as a sorrowful lament. Coincidentally, in nature, the female nightingale is mute and only the male of the species sings.

The brutal aspects of the rape involving the cutting out of Philomel’s tongue (and other mutilation) famously recurs in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, in which the raped and mutilated Lavinia manages to turn over the pages of a book with her stumps in order to point out what has happened to her by finding the story of Philomena. When asked what the book is, the boy Lucius points out, “’Tis Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; my mother gave it me.”

It is important to remember that none of the original texts of the 1566 plays has survived. All we have is the outline account of the plays as recorded by Miles Windsor and Thomas Twynne. What the plays’ relationship is to later plays by Shakespeare cannot be determined exactly. However, for Oxfordians, it is striking that these three 1566 plays – a Roman history, a play by Richard Edwardes based on Chaucer/Boccaccio, and a play based on Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* tale of Philomel, which

we know the 16-year-old Edward de Vere saw at Oxford University – all recur in some way or another in the Shakespeare canon.

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