

Shakespeare's Pole

Oxford, Burghley, Coryat and Polonius

By Alexander Waugh

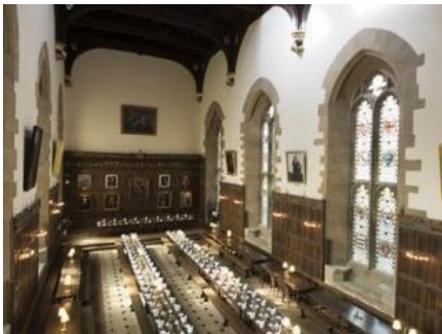
In 1611 the travel writer, Thomas Coryat, published his famous memoir *Coryat's Crudities*, adding to it in memory of his late father (poet, scholar and rural vicar, George Coryat), an appendix of poems entitled *Posthuma Fragmenta Poematum Georgii Coryati* (*Posthumous poetical fragments of George Coryat*), in which, after several pages of poetical orations to Queen Elizabeth and Lord Pembroke (mainly in Latin), there appears a poem of 14 lines in praise of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford:

*Clare Comes, generis summum decoramen aviti,
 Insuper Angliaci magna Columna soli.
 Da veniam tenui modulanti carmina plectro,
 Quod nequit optatis verba referre sonis.
 Te tua nobilitas commendat & inchyta virtus,
 Fortiaque eximii corporis acta tui.
 Nil opis externae quaeris, nec carmin (quamvis
 Carmen amet quisquis carmine digna gerit)
 Huc tamen adveniens cum Principe nobilis hospes
 Carminibus nobis excipiendus eris.
 Tum quia Musarum tanto capiaris amore,
 Auribus his modulis occinit una tuis.
 Tu velut besterna cepisti carmina nocte,
 Hac quoque sic capias carmina nostra die.*

[‘Brilliant earl, highest adornment of an ancient clan and, above all, great pillar of our English realm, forgive the thin strain of these verses, which are unable to invoke the noblest sounding words. Your fame commends you as do your celebrated virtues and the mighty deeds of your exceptional person. You seek neither external wealth nor praise in poetry (yet he who loves poetry is he whose deeds are worthy of a poem); however, Noble Guest, arriving here with the Queen, you shall be praised with our verses, and since you attract so great a love of the Muses, one chirps in your ears with these lines. As you accepted poems last night, so shall you receive ours on this day, too.]

The poem reveals little of interest about Oxford except for his apparent self-effacement: he does not “seek external wealth or praise in poetry.” Having arrived “here” as a “Noble Guest...with the Queen,” Oxford accepted verses in his honour on two consecutive days. This information provides useful clues to the place and date of the occasion, for George Coryat was a Fellow at New College Oxford, living there between 1562 and 1566.¹ When Queen Elizabeth visited the city between 31 August

and 6 September 1566, her entourage included the 16-year-old Earl of Oxford, Sir William Cecil (Chancellor of Cambridge University and Master of Wards, who was charged with Oxford's education and upbringing), and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (Chancellor of Oxford University). All three were to receive honorary degrees (Master of Arts) on 6 September.² During the afternoon of 2 September, some of the visitors repaired to New College where George Coryat is known to have delivered two orations.



In the 1611 edition of *Fragmenta*, Coryat's poem addressed "to the most illustrious Earl of

Oxford" is followed by another, of similar length and similar measure, printed under the heading: "A poem by the same author to the most distinguished Chancellors of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and William Cecil, Lord Burghley, read out in the Assembly Hall of New College Oxford, concerning astronomy."³ The deviser of this 1611 heading (assuredly Coryat's son), seems to have forgotten that Cecil was not elevated to the peerage as Baron Burghley until 1571. In 1566 he was still plain 'Sir William Cecil,' but that is of little import, for we may be certain that it pertains to 1566. Coryat had moved from Oxford before Burghley was ennobled, and as Sir John Pechel records in his 18th century history of the University: "The next morning [2 Sept 1566] the ambassador, with several English nobles, desiring to hear the public and ordinary lectures, went to the schools [...] Thence they repaired to New College, and with them the earl of Leicester and secretary Cecil: They were received by G. Coriat, and W. Reynolds, bachelors of arts, in two orations from each; the first of which had in return great praises and a handsome present in gold."⁴ Coryat's panegyric to Leicester and Cecil reads as follows:

*Sydera qui lustrat, qui spherica corpora cernit,
 In Spbaera geminos cernit is esse Polos.
 Arcticus est alter, Polus est antarcticus alter,
 Hoc splendente Polo non micat ille Polus.
 Nos tamen hic geminos luere videmus in urbe
 Hac nostra claros stelligerosque Polos.
 En micat Oxonij Polus inchyus Oxoniensis,
 Dudleius nostri duxque decusque Poli.
 Lucet & hac nostra Polus in urbe Cecillus,
 Ut videas geminos iam simul esse Polos.*



*Ille Polus noster studiorum stellifer Atlas,
 Hic Cantabrigij lucida stella Poli.
 Quod simul hanc nostram iuncti venistis ad urbem,
 Quod simul unus honor iunxit utrosque Polos.
 Accipite haec simili simul o pietate Patroni,
 Vivite foelices atque valete Poli.*

[‘Whoever studies the heavenly bodies, and whoever discerns the spherical bodies, sees that in the globe there are two Poles. One is the Arctic, the other the Antarctic Pole; when one shines the other does not. We too can see two eminent and star-bearing Poles shining in this city of ours. Behold, the famed Pole of Oxford, the Oxonian Dudley, the leader and glory of our Pole, shines out. And Cecil too, another Pole, also shines in our city, so that you may see both Poles together. Our Pole is the star-bearing Atlas of studies, while the other is the bright star of the Pole of Cambridge. You came together to our city, the same honour has joined both Poles together. Accept these verses together (and at the same time) by the piety of our Patron [St Frithuswith]. May you live long in joy and health, o Poles.]

The evidence of these verses – proving that Cecil and Leicester were together at New College, Oxford, and were both joined by the ‘same honour’ (i.e. both received MAs) and were addressed by George Coryat – puts beyond doubt that the occasion was the same as that recorded by Pechel in his account of the events of 2 September 1566; and since Coryat also read his verses to Oxford during this same 1566 royal visit to that city, it may be safely assumed that the young earl was among the “several English nobles” who attended Coryat’s reading of both orations in the Assembly Hall at New College on that day.

Coryat’s verses to Leicester and Cecil are unusual, for the word ‘pole’ (*polus*) appears (capitalized) no fewer than 13 times in 16 lines. Both chancellors are compared to the axis poles of the Earth and both Chancellors are directly addressed as “Pole.” This would seem inordinately frivolous, but Coryat was a learned man of sophisticated wit. He appears to be punning ‘pole’ (axis pole) with the family name, Pole, thus obliquely comparing Cecil and Leicester – respective Chancellors of Cambridge and Oxford Universities, and the two most trusted supporters and confidants of Queen Elizabeth – with the late Reginald Pole (1550-1558), the great English prelate who preceded Cecil and Leicester as Chancellor of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and who was, in his time, the most trusted supporter and confidant of Elizabeth’s predecessor, Queen Mary. Thus Coryat, by ingeniously punning ‘Pole’ and ‘pole,’ subtly amplifies his flattery of Cecil and Leicester and their important relation to the English Crown. Is Shakespeare doing something similar by naming the Lord Chamberlain ‘Polonius’ in his play *Hamlet*?

In 1869 George Russell French identified Shakespeare's Ophelia as a portrait of Oxford's first wife, Anne Cecil, and Polonius (her father) as a portrait of Oxford's father-in-law, Lord Burghley. These associations have been repeated and amplified by many scholars since.⁵ In the first quarto of *Hamlet*, Polonius is called 'Corambis' (meaning 'double-hearted'), teasing Burghley's armorial motto, *cor unum, via una* ("One heart, one way"). Polonius, like Burghley, is senior statesman and adviser to the Queen. Like Burghley, Polonius also sends servants to spy upon his son, and like Burghley, who gave 10 pastoral 'precepts' to his son to memorize before travelling abroad, Polonius gives his son 10 pastoral 'precepts' to memorize before travelling abroad. Polonius's precepts and his behavior in the play echo (both in tone and content) Burghley's precepts and behavior in real life. Hamlet calls Polonius a "fishmonger," and Burghley was noted for his zealous attempts to pass a fish-bill through Parliament that would make fish-eating compulsory on Sundays and Wednesdays throughout the land. Polonius's avoidance of argument by agreement (e.g. "very like a whale") mirrors Burghley's technique of diplomacy, etc.

These associations prompted E.K. Chambers in 1930 to ask: "Can Polonius have resembled some nickname for Burghley?"⁶ If Corambis was too revealing of Burghley's identity, and the playwright had been asked to change it, might he have done so by retaining a less obviously decipherable allusion to the Lord Treasurer under a different name? "Polonius," when attached to a name, means "Pole" (i.e. a Polish person), as in the names Frixius Polonius, Martianus Polonius, Polonius Moscovita, etc. Thus, in calling the character based upon Burghley "Polonius" ("Pole"), Shakespeare, by means of a simple pun, appears to acknowledge Coryat's unpublished oration in which Burghley was repeatedly called a 'pole.' As Oxford was present in the Assembly Hall of New College at that very moment, and since Coryat was rewarded in gold for his verses, it is likely that both Burghley and Oxford were presented with fair copies of Coryat's verses to take away with them.

There is another reason why the teenage Oxford would have found Coryat's calling Burghley and Leicester "poles" irresistibly memorable and amusing. Baluk- Ulewiczowa (2016) explains that Polish diplomats resented being called 'Poles' by the English, preferring them to use the word 'Polonians.'⁷ The reason being that 'pole' bore a crude double-meaning in English. Gordon Williams in his comprehensive and scholarly three volume *Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, cites Middleton, Ford, Fletcher, Gifford and other contemporaries all using 'pole' to mean a 'penis.'⁸ Thus, the scholarly and refined Coryat, in referring to



Burghley and Leicester as ‘poles’ was effectively – if inadvertently – calling them ‘dicks’ or ‘pricks.’

An internet search for sites combining ‘Polus’ and ‘Burghley’ directs the enquirer to an extended harrumph by Stratfordian, Terry Ross, entitled ‘Oxfordian Myths: Was Burghley Called “Polus”?’ Ross criticizes several Oxfordian scholars for having claimed that Burghley was “nicknamed Polus,” according to Gabriel Harvey’s *Gratulationes Valdinenses* (1578). He has a point, for there are only two iterations of the word ‘polus’ in a Latin epigram to Burghley by Pietro Bizarro (from Book 3 of *Gratulationes*), only one of which (by a strained *double entendre*) may refer to Burghley as a “pole,” and there is a difference between being named or nicknamed “Pole” and being called a “pole.” However, Coryat’s 1566 poem, of which he appears to be ignorant, renders Ross’s argument redundant, for Coryat gives unassailable proof that Burghley was indeed called a “pole,” and notably for Oxfordians, was declaimed as such right in front of the young Oxford during an exclusive and memorable event at which Oxford was himself addressed by the same poet as the “brilliant Earl.” So was Polonius called a “Pole” because of this?

(With thanks to Jan Cole for her generous help in researching this article.)

-
- ¹ In 1567 George Coryat left Oxford to lead the life of obscure rural vicar, first at Hilmarton in Wiltshire (1567-70), briefly at Donnington, and finally serving the last 37 years of his life as rector of Odcombe in Somerset (1570-1607); source ODNB.
- ² Two lists of recipients of MA’s on this day are given in Alan H Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary*, Liverpool (2003), p. 45 & p. 449, n. 18.
- ³ Originally in Latin: ‘Eiusdem Carmina ad illustrissimos Oxoniensis & Cantabrigiensis Academiae Cancellarios D. *Robertum Dudleium* Comitem Leicestrensem & D. *Gulielmum Cecilium* Dominum Burghleium, pronunciata in magna Aula Novi Collegij Oxoniensis, Astrononice.’
- ⁴ Sir John Pechel, *The History of the University of Oxford from the Death of William The Conqueror to the Demise of Queen Elizabeth*, Oxford (1773), p. 226.
- ⁵ For the striking resemblances of Shakespeare’s Polonius to Oxford’s father-in-law, Lord Burghley, see George Russell French, *Shakespeareana Genealogica* (1869), 301-306; Israel Gollancz, (ed), *Hamlet in Iceland*, Northern Library, London (1898); Eddi Jolly, ‘Dating the Plays: Hamlet’, *Great Oxford* (ed R. Malim), Parapress Tunbridge Wells (2004), pp. 173-74; Gerald William Phillips, *Lord Burghley in Shakespeare*, Butterworth, London (1936) etc.
- ⁶ E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare – Facts and Problems* (1930), Vol 1, p.418.
- ⁷ Teresa Baluk-Ulewiczowa ‘The Bad Quarto of *Hamlet* and the Polish Connection’, *Shakespeare in Europe History and Memory* (eds Marta Gibinska & Agnieszka Romanowska), Cracow, Jagiellonian University Press (2016), pp 35-44.
- ⁸ Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, Vol 2, Athlone Press, London, (1994), p. 1069

