

# Man of the Theatre: Reasons 1 and 2 Why Shake-speare was Oxford

**By Hank Whittemore**

*To celebrate the publication of Hank Whittemore's new book, '100 Reasons Shake-speare was the Earl of Oxford,' the De Vere Society Newsletter begins its serialisation of extracts with his Reason No 1. The full '100 Reasons' are available from Amazon!*

## Reason 1 – The Patron-Playwright



Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, began his theatrical life as a child. His father, John de Vere, the sixteenth earl, sponsored an acting company known as Oxford's Men. Edward spent much of his boyhood in the 1550s at the home of his tutor, the great Cambridge scholar Thomas Smith, but his family residence was Castle Hedingham in Essex. Oxford's Men came there to put on plays during the Christmas season and at other times. Young Oxford would have mingled with the players, watching them rehearse and learning their craft.

Queen Elizabeth and her court visited Hedingham for five days in August 1561, when Edward was eleven, and Oxford's Men contributed to the royal entertainment. The boy had a close-up view of her responses and witnessed the power of the stage to gain her attention, stir her emotions and even affect her policies. Court members also watched her reactions, to see how to please the queen and avoid offending her.

These early experiences set young Edward on the very course he took; eventually, he brought his own players and plays to perform for the queen.

When John de Vere died in 1562, under feudal law Edward became a ward of the Crown. He went to London in the custody of the queen's chief minister, William Cecil, the future Lord Burghley. The year before, Elizabeth had appointed Richard Edwards as Master of the Chapel Royal. The privilege of entertaining Her Majesty with plays was



mostly that of the Choir Boys of the Chapel Royal, but it also belonged to the separate child acting companies of Paul's, Westminster and Windsor. Much later, the *Arte of English Poesie* of 1589 would record Oxford and Edwards as fellow playwrights, citing "the Earl of Oxford and Master Edwards of Her Majesty's Chapel" as deserving of "the highest praise" for "Comedy and Enterlude."

De Vere joined Elizabeth on her 1564 progress to Cambridge, where she attended performances of *Aulularia* by Plautus, *Dido* by Edward Haliwell and *Ezechia* by Nicholas Udall. That fall *Damon and Pythias*, credited to Edwards, was performed at court. At Oxford in 1566, the queen attended *Palaemon and Argyte*, a 'lost' play also credited to Edwards and thought to be a source for *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, attributed to Shakespeare. Theatrical events were part of his world and the productions were usually connected to the queen, who clearly loved plays and had an insatiable demand for them. To communicate with Her Majesty, there was no better means than the stage.

In 1567 Oxford was admitted to Gray's Inn, where George Gascoigne was studying for the bar and writing plays acted by the Gentlemen of the Inn. One of these works was *The Supposes*, translated from the Italian of Ariosto and said to be the first 'prose play' in English (and a source for *The Taming of the Shrew*); another was *Jocasta*, from Euripides, the first adaptation of a Greek play to the English stage.

In Italy during 1575-76, Oxford became familiar with the *Commedia dell'arte*, a theatrical form begun in that century and responsible for the advent of improvised performances with masked 'types' based on sketches or scenarios. The *Commedia* troupes, which included female actors, would greatly influence the Shakespearean plays. Meanwhile the first successful public playhouse in England, the Theatre, opened soon after Oxford's return in 1576.

By 1579 Oxford was employing John Lyly, Anthony Munday and many others (some were members of the writing group later called the University Wits, who are also identified as influencing Shakespeare). The Earl of Warwick's actors moved to Oxford's service, with Lyly as manager, and the amalgamated company performed at court in January 1580. In April two of Oxford's actors were temporarily jailed for "frays committed upon certain Gentlemen of the Inns of Court" at the Theatre.

Oxford was now financing an adult acting company, a boy's acting company and a troupe of musicians. In 1583 he saved the private Blackfriars playhouse by purchasing the sublease and transferring it to Lyly, so the choirboys could continue rehearsing there before performing at court. Sir William More recovered possession of the property in 1584, however, shutting down Blackfriars as a playhouse. Oxford had sold

forty-seven pieces of land between 1576 and 1584, thirteen of them in 1580; by 1583 his household had been reduced to four servants.

Sussex died in June 1583. A new company, the Queen's Men, was quickly formed by Francis Walsingham, head of England's growing network of paid spies and informants who made up England's first full-fledged secret service. Actors were valuable informants and plays served as powerful vehicles for propaganda, as war with Spain was looming. The Queen's Company was formed with twelve of the best actors from all companies, including Oxford's; the evidence points to Lyly, whom Oxford still employed, serving as its stage manager and acting coach.

Beneath the surface of these facts is an enormous, largely unseen theatrical life. An "aerial view" of Oxford's connections to the stage reveals one major thoroughfare running through the landscape—an unbroken line connecting the life spans of the three major acting companies, linked one to another in three successive stages of development:

The Lord Chamberlain's Men (1573-1583)

The Queen's Men (1583-1593)

The Lord Chamberlain's Men (1594-1603)

This perspective on the history requires taking an aerial view to see the larger picture of de Vere as the major force behind the three great acting companies of the Elizabethan reign. All three are linked in history to produce the renaissance of English literature and drama in the 1570s and 1580s, followed by the Shakespeare works in the

1590s.



*The Curtain Theatre (centre, with flag flying)—from "a view of the Cittie of London from the North", c. 1600.*

Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlain's Men (with actor Richard Burbage and comedian William Kemp), put on some of the most dangerously political plays of the reign, yet it never got in trouble with officialdom. Obviously, it was receiving protection from on high. In the 1590s the government was moving rapidly to take control of the theater, limiting the playing companies in London to two, restricting the number of playhouses used for

drama to two, and exercising increasingly heavy censorship that led, for example, to the Bishops' Bonfire of books in 1599.



Remarrying in 1591, Oxford and his new countess (Elizabeth Trentham) moved to the village of Stoke Newington, just north of Shoreditch—the center of the London theater scene, where the Curtain playhouse would become the premier venue of Shakespeare’s Company prior to the 1599 construction of the Globe.

De Vere emerged briefly from his retirement to serve as highest ranking earl on the tribunal at the one-day trial of Essex and Southampton on 19 February 1601 for their leading roles in the so-called Essex Rebellion. He had no choice but to join the other twenty-four peers in finding both earls guilty of high treason and condemning them to death. Essex was beheaded six days later; but Southampton, the ‘fair youth’ of the Shakespeare sonnets, unofficially had his sentence reduced to life in prison. Two years later, in April 1603, King James granted him his freedom with a royal pardon. Meanwhile the adult acting troupe under Oxford’s own name, which was mainly a touring group, had merged with Worcester’s Company in 1602. Even the aging Queen Elizabeth became involved in this new, expanded company, ordering the Lord Mayor of London to allow them to play at their favorite Boar’s Head tavern.

Now, as the Elizabethan reign draws to its close, the same William Kemp is acting in the company patronized by the earls of Worcester and Oxford. All along, just beneath the surface or standing in the wings, we find the figure of Edward de Vere, a man of the theater throughout his life.

## Reason 2 – The Allowed Fool

*“Give a man a mask, and he will tell you the truth.” – Oscar Wilde*



The Shakespeare plays are populated by many truth-tellers wearing the masks of fools or jesters. Fools had existed from ancient history all the way up to the contemporary jesters of European royal courts in the Elizabethan age. In our own time, Jon Stewart (recently retired from *The Daily Show* in the U.S.) may be the closest analogue, with the job of running spears of truth through the guts of our politicians, making them squirm while the rest of us howl with laughter—a function even the most powerful officials must allow, however grudgingly. What many of Shakespeare’s fools have in common is their ability, within the dangerous setting of the court, to speak truth to power. Touchstone in *As You*

*Like It* and Feste in *Twelfth Night* are the best-known court

jesters or Fools who have that authorization. (King Lear's nameless fool is "all-licensed," as Goneril puts it.)

In *A Poet's Rage*, collected and edited by William Boyle, a chapter on the Shakespearean Fools, written twenty years ago by Charles Boyle, remains just as important to Oxfordian case as it was back then. Discussing Troilus and Hamlet as characters, Charles Boyle emphasizes that Shakespeare's world revolved around the royal court and that his audacious political satire was made possible only by the clever use of thinly disguised allegory. Oxford enjoyed the protection of "a great patron" (Queen Elizabeth) and was "the most amazing court jester who lived;" perhaps, he adds, there is no character called 'The Fool' in the play featuring Prince Hamlet, his most autobiographical portrait, precisely because Hamlet himself is the Fool.

The Prince of Denmark is an expert at using allegory, the accepted Elizabethan literary device for commenting on the current political scene. He warns Polonius, chief counselor to King Claudius and Queen Gertrude, that the players "are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (2.2)—i.e., the actors and their "harmless" plays are actually pointing to prominent and powerful persons and important issues of the day.

A famous example of Elizabeth's recognition that plays often reflected contemporary matters occurred in 1601, several months after the performance by Shakespeare's company of *Richard II*, including a scene showing the deposition of Richard. The hastily scheduled performance helped trigger the failed Essex rebellion against Robert Cecil and other counselors the following day. Recalling the staging of that play, the queen reportedly blurted out to her antiquary: "I am Richard the Second, know ye not that!?"

Traditional scholars, believing the author to be the Stratford fellow, have been forced to shy away from seeing Polonius as a satirical portrait of William Cecil Lord Burghley. The reason, of course, is that for William of Stratford to satirize Elizabeth's powerful chief minister in any way—not to mention in such a bold, ruthless manner—would have been suicidal. He would have lost more than his writing hand.

Equally, that same author was being protected by the monarch herself—as expressed by none other than Polonius, who urges Gertrude to severely reprove her son the prince: "Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with, and that your Grace hath screened and stood between much heat and him" (3.4).

Elizabeth demanded such entertainment. She enabled Oxford to function as her “allowed fool,” as Olivia calls Feste the clown in *Twelfth Night*. Telling Malvolio to shake off Feste’s barbs, she reminds him that the jester uses his biting wit because she allows him to do so: “There is no slander in an allowed fool, though he do nothing but rail” (1.5). Olivia has given Feste permission to slander others; because her command is law, it follows that Feste’s slander cannot be slanderous.

Hamlet, the character who speaks with the playwright’s most authorial voice describes himself as the court fool—a role that de Vere is known to have played, from his high-step dancing for the queen, to his early signed poetry, to his reputation as “best for comedy” for the court stage, to his playing of the lute and his singing for Elizabeth, and so on, not to mention the many escapades for which he would otherwise have been punished (e.g., planning in 1571 to rescue the Duke of Norfolk from the Tower; racing off to the Continent in 1574 without authorization; twice refusing the queen’s command in 1579 to dance for the French delegates who had come to England to negotiate the marriage alliance of Elizabeth and the Duke of Alençon.) In *As You Like It*, Jaques speaks of himself as a fool and comes close to how Oxford would describe himself:

I must have liberty  
 Withal, as large a charter as the wind,  
 To blow on whom I please, for so fools have...  
 Invest me in my motley, give me leave  
 To speak my mind, and I will through and through  
 Cleanse the foul body of th’infected world,  
 If they will patiently receive my medicine. (2.7)