

## Edward de Vere's Amanuensis: The artifacts of Abraham Fleming and the Lost Play of Edward de Vere

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The article is truncated version of a presentation at Brunel University in 2008 originally titled  
*Of Playscripts & Portraiture: The artifacts of Edward de Vere*

Examining the remnants of a writer's life for clues to the text, and insight into the material, is a mainstay of literary scholarship. We do it with John Milton, Lord Byron, Charles Dickens and Jane Austen; we look at their letters, diaries, what they had in their homes, to illuminate the various tributaries that flowed into their work – and these artifacts can speak volumes. In the case of Shakespeare, this is arguably the primary reason why many question him to be the author of the canon – a resentment, perhaps, that he left no detritus for us to pick through. The fact that there is absolutely nothing: no books, manuscripts, letters, diaries, dedications, travel itineraries, shopping lists – *anything*, pointing to him as a man of letters or of the theater has confounded researchers for the last 400+ years.

Whether Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was Shakespeare, he *was* still a writer in his own right, and did leave a significant amount of material for us to explore and examine. What this material tells us about this controversial 16th century figure – nobleman, poet, and yes, playwright – illuminates the contemporary theatrical scene, as well as shedding insight on the Shakespeare works themselves.

There is no need to spend time here elaborating on the evidence we do have: sheaves of letters, dedications written either *by* him or *to* him in connection with literary works, such as Castiglione's *The Courtier* or Cardanus' *Comfort*, both acknowledged sources for the Shakespeare works. In addition, a list of books we have provide a record of his purchasing<sup>1</sup> Chaucer, Plutarch's

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<sup>1</sup> According to William Cecil's records, De Vere's purchases in 1570 alone included two unspecified "Italian books", "a Geneva Bible gilt, a Chaucer, Plutarch's works in French, with other books and papers" as well as Tully (Cicero) and Plato. All of these are integral to the Shakespeare canon.

works in French, two Italian books, the *Geneva Bible* (subsequently annotated by him), etc. – all having numerous sources that discuss this material in depth in regard to its significance within the Shakespeare canon.

But finding a play script – of Oxford’s or Shakespeare’s – would at this point be the equivalent of the Holy Grail.

In 1732, a Leicestershire parson named Francis Peck published *Desiderata Curiosa*, a large volume of curiosities that includes, among other fascinating items, a life of William Cecil/Lord Burghley that was later identified as probably written by his secretary, Michael Hicks, along with an apology of sorts for his actions by Peck.



Francis Peck was the rector of Goadby-Marewood in the County of Leicestershire and a noted and enthusiastic antiquary<sup>2</sup> in his time.

As Rosemary Sweet says in her book, *Antiquaries*, “the Clergy were in many ways the best placed and best prepared of all occupational categories to take up such studies.” And of Peck in particular she says, he “outlined a mode of preceding and an agenda for future antiquaries.” Indeed without the passion for Antiquarianism that increased throughout the 18th century, we simply would not have a lot of the material, and hence, knowledge of history, particularly English history, that we have today.

But most importantly for our purposes: in the *back* of Vol. I of *Desiderata Curiosa*, in Peck’s singular “mode of preceding” he promises an *even better* Vol. II. In fact, he spends eight pages in the back of this unwieldy tome advertising all the “exciting” documents he plans to publish in Volume II. Of course the point is to engage subscribers to pay for the volume in advance.

But the far more salient point about the advertisement? He says: “NOW READY for the Press” – and *this* is the sticking point. The most enticing entry

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<sup>2</sup> An antiquary or antiquarian is someone who collects physical traces of the past – old books, manuscripts, maps, etc., and studies and amasses a chronological history through these artefacts.

in the back-of-book advert is: *A pleasant conceit of Vere Earl of Oxford, discontented at the Rising of a mean Gentleman in the English Court*, circa 1580 MS. *Manu Flemingii*. It looks to be a play manuscript.

In *Shakespeare By Another Name*, Mark Anderson (among others) has posited this title to be an early version of *Twelfth Night*.<sup>3</sup> The year 1580 falls squarely within the timeframe some Oxfordians believe Oxford was producing some of his major work. It was also the year Oxford took over the acting company the Earl of Warwick's Men that became Oxford's Men.<sup>4</sup> What gives rise to excitement is that this play manuscript survived from the mid/late 16th century to the early 18th century. *If* it made it to two centuries down the line, could it have survived *another* two-plus centuries?

There are many reasons why the answer could be *no*, and one very intriguing one as to why it could be *yes*. But one preface: one aspect of this entry's elusiveness is that it does not appear in all editions of Vol. I of *Desiderata Curiosa*. For instance, not in the ones at Cambridge University Library nor Butler Rare Book Library, Columbia University.<sup>5</sup> Why?

Peck self-published these volumes at great personal expense, so there were very few printed. But as the passion for antiquarianism grew, one Thomas Evans reprinted *Desiderata Curiosa* in 1779, but he did so by binding Vol. I and Vol. II together; so he omitted the Advert in the back of Vol. I. Practically speaking, why include the advert for Vol. II if you've got it right there in the same book?

But here's the rub: *Desiderata Curiosa* Vol. II, originally published by Peck in 1735, does not contain *any* of the manuscripts that were promised in the Advert in 1732's Vol. I. So, where are they? A good two-thirds of the manuscript material the Reverend Peck lists as coming in Vol. II are *mss. Flemingii*, meaning they were in the manuscript collection of one Abraham Fleming.

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<sup>3</sup> p. 154

<sup>4</sup> See Nelson, Alan H., *Monstrous Adversary* (Liverpool University Press, 2003); pp. 239-241.

<sup>5</sup> The edition at the British Library is an original 1732 issue and therefore contains the original back-pages advertisement. Without the advert, we would not know about the play script.

## Who was Abraham Fleming?

According to Alan Nelson in his book *Monstrous Adversary*, Abraham Fleming was a servant and/or protégé of Edward de Vere.<sup>6</sup> In brief, he was a proof corrector, indexer, translator, editor,<sup>7</sup> and considered rather a third-rate poet. He is perhaps best known for his translation of *Of Englishhe Dogges*<sup>8</sup> by Dr. John Caius<sup>9</sup> (of *Merry Wives of Windsor* fame). He was also apparently an enthusiastic antiquarian. He also seemed to have functioned as an amanuensis for Oxford; so who better to have a copy of the master's play and squirrel away a draft copy?

Abraham later became a member of the clergy, and quite religious; he had been affrighted by the earthquake of 1580 and began preaching against the theater. He died in 1607 and no will has turned up; but here is what seems to have happened: Abraham had a brother, a vicar in Leicestershire, whom he travelled north from London to visit. Abraham became ill, and died there and his possessions seem to have transferred to the brother, Samuel. So his MSS. collection was floating around that county, perhaps in clerical/antiquarian circles, until it came into the possession of yet another Leicestershire clergyman some 100–120 years later, Francis Peck; it was perfect for Peck's *Desiderata Curiosa* project. One of Samuel's MS is listed in the Vol. I advert.

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<sup>6</sup> Fleming also “dedicated his translation of Niels Hemmingson's The Epistle of...Saint Paul...to the Ephesians (STC 13058[13058+])” to the Countess of Oxford, Anne Cecil de Vere, in 1580; see Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary*, p. 239.

<sup>7</sup> See Clark Stuart, ed., *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan; 2000); Ch. 6.

<sup>8</sup> The Project Gutenberg EBook of *De Canibus Britannicis*, by John Caius; Title: *De Canibus Britannicis/Of Englishhe Dogges*; Translator: Abraham Fleming.  
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27050/27050-h/27050-h.htm>

<sup>9</sup> John Caius was an English physician, who treated Edward VI, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, until his adherence to Romans Catholicism became untenable (1568); he was elected 9 times president of the College of Physicians, and co-founder of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He died in 1573.

## The Holinshed Connection

Around the same time that Abraham Fleming was working as an amanuensis, possibly moonlighting, for De Vere, he was also working for De Vere's uncle, Arthur Golding, under the latter's supervision on the new 1587 version of Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Why is this significant? *The Readers Encyclopedia of Shakespeare* cites Holinshed as the *principal* source for Shakespeare's history plays, always specifying the second edition. If you are working on Holinshed by day and moonlighting as an amanuensis by night, you might, say, slip a page of Holinshed into the history plays you're working on with your other boss (or boss's nephew), just to save time – for example the Salic Law speech – which could go a long way to explain why there are so many direct references to Holinshed in the History Plays. There's an intimate familiarity there. Circumstantial supposition? Absolutely, but worth consideration.

## Meanwhile, back in the 18th century ...

When Vol. II of *Desiderata Curiosa* appears in 1735, Peck puts into the preface a rather dysphonic note: “(as this second Volume does not consist of any one of all those Pieces mentioned at the End of Vol. I & there proposed to make up Vol. II) it may be necessary to inform the Reader, that those papers (tho' postponed at present) are designed to follow, & that with Addition of the like Sort, which, I hope, will make good amends for their Delay.” He goes on to say that the material making up Volume II is pretty good, too, and yet he sounds unenthusiastic (at least to these ears). Volume III never arrives.

He publishes numerous other volumes before his death eight years later, in 1743, including a memoir of Oliver Cromwell and one of John Milton. In both of these, he includes various random antiquarian curiosities in the back pages – but never anything from *ms. Flemingii*.

## So what happened to the play?

Julian Pooley, archivist at the Surrey History Center, has been a longtime chronicler and biographer of the famous antiquarian John Nichols. Nichols, revered in Elizabethan circles for having published *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth* in 1788, was meant to have acquired a lot of Peck's unpublished papers after his death – at least he had been looking for them.

Mr. Pooley, who was aware of my search for *mss. Flemingii*, kindly alerted me to an unpublished manuscript in the Leicestershire Record Office, a biography of John Nichols by Alan Broadfield, from the 1970s. In an offhand line in his entry about Francis Peck, Broadfield states: “There was to have been a third volume, for which Peck had collected materials, but, says Nichols, these came into the hands of a brother who was a glazier in Leicester, where they were ‘ignorantly (whether wantonly or unwittingly) destroyed.’”

### The end of the line for the play?

A glazier is involved with selecting, cutting, installing, replacing, and removing all types of glass including stained glass for churches and the like. Could this brother of Francis Peck have somehow mistakenly used the manuscript material for his business? But the *key* question is this: Had Peck already transcribed the *mss. Flemingii* for publication? Meaning, was his Advert in Vol. I for Vol. II inflated in stating it was: “*Now Ready for the Press?*”

There are two reasons why this is vitally important:

1. IF they had been transcribed (the original manuscripts were presumably in 16th c. secretary hand), that means there were two versions, the originals and the transcriptions. Did the brother destroy one, or both?
2. But there’s another, thornier issue: IF Peck had transcribed it all, that means he would have read ‘*A pleasant conceit of Vere Earl of Oxford, discontented at the Rising of a mean Gentleman in the English Court ...*’

Peck was not ignorant of Shakespeare. He published an analysis of Shakespeare at the end of his Milton book (1740). If the ‘*pleasant conceit...*’ was a close kin to *Twelfth Night*, would he not have had a ‘eureka moment’ and included that in his Shakespeare analysis?

- a. If he was embroidering and had not yet transcribed, *ergo* read the material yet, then he could not have made any connections. (The authorial insertion by Broadfield of “wantonly or unwittingly” is tantalizing.)

b. But *because* Peck is so adamant in the Preface of Vol. II that Vol. III *will indeed* contain the material promised in Vol. I (“(tho’ postponed at present) are designed to follow”) – and frankly Peck doesn’t seem the type, either vocationally nor temperamentally to make false claims or empty promises – that means that *some version* of this material could still be out there somewhere. (This writer’s own assessment is that the transcriptions were so labour-intensive, Peck simply could not face having to repeat the entire herculean effort.)

**Addendum:** IF this 1580 play script were found, would it be a smoking gun?

Given how the orthodoxy seem to handle new evidence, a good bet would be *no*. It would either be assessed as so bad, there’s no way Oxford could have been the author of any of the canon (as they do with his juvenilia); or, if the parallels are clearly drawn, especially as regards Sir Christopher Hatton, for example, they will revert to the plagiarism claim, asserting that Shakespeare heard/saw/stole/copied, or recreated it, so that it would become a sort of *Ur-Twelfth Night*. Thus far, however, not one of the missing *ms. Flemingii* has surfaced – but there is still time.

But it does give us solid evidence of a play script by the Earl of Oxford. And it illuminates the world around the play’s creation: the amanuensis who kept a copy; the fact that Abraham Fleming worked for Oxford’s uncle, Arthur Golding, who was so renowned for the first English translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, called Shakespeare’s favourite book; and the fact that Fleming worked on the 1587 Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, a primary source for the history plays, ’round about the time he was also working for Oxford.

Finally, this investigation gives us important clues as to avenues to pursue in looking for material: Abraham Fleming was a relative nobody, a proofreader if you will, but he collected the manuscripts he worked on, so looking at other amanuenses, secretaries, scribes, assistants and such working under the radar as it were, and not just for De Vere. Chances are, if there was one ‘Abraham Fleming,’ there’s bound to be another.