

## THAT 'FAMOUS PERSECUTOR OF PRISCIAN'

### OXFORD, SHAKESPEARE AND THE REPURIFICATION OF ENGLISH

By Alexander Waugh

Stratfordians have long sought to bolster their improbable claims by appeal to three contemporary allusions, each of which appears to indicate that Shakespeare was unlearned. The first is a verse-epistle by 'F.B.' (probably Francis Beaumont) addressed to Ben Jonson sometime after 1606, in which Shakespeare's best lines are described as 'clear of all Learning':

Heere I would let slippe  
 (If I had any in me) schollershippe,  
 And from all Learning keepe these lines as clear  
 as Shakespeares best are, which our heires shall heare  
 Preachers apte to their auditors to show  
 how farr sometimes a mortal man may goe  
 by the dimme light of Nature, tis to me  
 an helpe to write of nothing; and as free,  
 As hee, whose text was god made ...

The second is Ben Jonson's famous passage about 'small *Latine* and lesse *Greeke*' from his encomium 'To the Author' first published in the prefatory pages of the first Shakespeare folio of 1623:

And though thou hadst small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*,  
 From thence to honour thee, I would not seeke  
 For names; but call forth thund'ring *Æschilus*,  
*Enripides*, and *Sophocles* to vs,  
*Paccunius*, *Accius*, him of *Cordoua* dead,  
 To life againe, to heare thy Buskin tread ...

And the third comes from a tribute entitled 'Upon Master William Shakespeare' by Leonard Digges (d.1635), first published posthumously in the *Poems of Wil. Shakespeare Gent.* (1640) – [here using original punctuation]:



Poets are borne not made, when I would prove  
 This truth, the glad remembrance I must love  
 Of never dying *Shakespeare*, who alone,  
 Is argument enough to make that one.  
 First, that he was a Poet none would doubt,  
 That heard th'applause of what he sees set out  
 Imprinted; where thou hast (I will not say)  
 Reader his Workes for to contrive a Play:  
 To him twas none) the patterne of all wit,  
 Art without Art unparaleld as yet.  
 Next Nature onely helpt him, for looke thorow  
 This whole Booke, thou shalt find he doth not borrow,  
 One phrase from Greekes, nor Latines imitate  
 Nor once from vulgar Languages Translate,

Stratfordians traditionally ascribe these remarks to the envy of those poetical rivals whom Shakespeare had surpassed in skill and brilliance without the need for the sort of formal training that they themselves had undergone. Needless to say, this interpretation leaves much to be desired as consideration of the literary-historical background and attention to the detail of what is actually written in these passages reveals that none of the above witnesses considered Shakespeare ill-educated, that all three were acknowledging Shakespeare as a champion of the English vernacular and a principal mover in the battle against pedantic scholasticism; and that all three must have known that the playwright, poet and nobleman, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550–1604) was the chief promoter and figurehead of that movement.

Oxford nursed obsessions with scholarship and pedagogy throughout his life. From years of private tutelage under some of the country's leading educators he emerged as the youngest man of his generation to be honoured by both universities, whereupon he entered Gray's Inn to study law. Indeed, he was so studious he had to be warned in 1569 against being 'too much addicted in that way'.<sup>1</sup> In 1575 he visited Continental Europe with the express purpose of conferring with 'excellent pedagogues' of other nations.<sup>2</sup> He was fluent in Latin, Italian and French and even before his departure abroad at the age of twenty-five had encouraged and supported translations of six books from Latin or Greek into English. Upon his return to England one learned Fellow of Trinity



College, Cambridge noted how ‘even from his tender years’ Oxford had bestowed his ‘time and travail’ for the ‘patronage and defense of learning’.<sup>3</sup> In the 1580s and early 90s he, whom Robert Greene had described as a ‘worthie favorer and fosterer of learning’ to whom ‘all scholars flock’,<sup>4</sup> was occupying the Master’s rooms at the Savoy Hospital in the Strand where, according to Thomas Nashe, this ‘infinite Maecenas to learned men’ kept a ‘colledge, where there bee more rare quallified men, and selected good Schollers than in any Noblemans house that I knowe in England.’<sup>5</sup> Away from London, ‘for the better mayntenance of the free schole’ at Earls Colne in Essex, Oxford authorized three men to ‘place a sufficient Scholemaster there for the teachinge & instructinge of youth in good literature’.<sup>6</sup>

In his dedication to *Strange Newes* (1592) Thomas Nashe described Oxford as a ‘famous persecutor of Priscian’, meaning one who was leading the charge against the prevailing scholasticism, which pedantically ordained that the only way to speak and write proper English (*ars recte loquendi et ars recte scribendi*) was to follow the rigid rules of Latin grammar and rhetoric as laid down by a dry-as-dust pedagogue of the fifth century, Priscianus Caesariensis. Oxford’s aim was to liberate English (especially poetry) from Priscian control by breaking the unholy alliance that had bound it to Classical formulae through centuries of misguided pedagogical tradition, and in this he appears to have been successful. By 1596 Nashe was able to record that Oxford had purchased ‘high fame’ by his pen ‘being first in our language that repurified Poetrie from Arts pedantism, & instructed it to speak courtly’.<sup>7</sup> By this Nashe meant that Oxford had removed the ‘Art’ (i.e. the artifice) of pedantic classicism from English poetry, and thereby repurified it – i.e. returned it to a pristine linguistic state.

Michael Wainwright (2018), a lecturer and Honorary Research Associate at the University of London, cites Oxford, his guardian and father-in-law, Lord Burghley (1520–1598) and his tutor, the linguistic reformer Thomas Smith (1513–1577), as the most prominent English Ramists of the last three decades of Elizabeth’s reign.<sup>8</sup> A ‘Ramist’ is a disciple of the French humanist pedagogue, Petrus Ramus (1515–1572), famed for his campaign against the influence of scholastic Classicism and his championing of the use of vernacular languages. To Ramus, who ostentatiously disagreed with everything that Aristotle had written, the dramatic unities of ‘Time’, ‘Place’ and ‘Action’ (as advanced in



Aristotle's *Poetics*) were an anathema, just as they were to Shakespeare; while to Oxford the overweening influence of Priscian on vernacular languages was an anathema, just as it was to Ramus. Ramus, who had correspondence with Smith and Burghley, was dead by the time their young charge arrived in Paris but Oxford at Strasburg met and greatly impressed his close friend and collaborator, the antischolastic, humanist educator Johan Sturm (1507–1589). Lord Burghley, who, as Oxford's guardian, was uniquely responsible for his upbringing and education, had supported the so-called 'Cambridge doctrine' which rejected the established tradition of bulking-out English prose with Latinate inkhorn words. As Wainwright puts it Burghley's 'encouragements safeguarded languages in Britain from Latinate complications'.<sup>9</sup>

Oxford sought to marginalise the influence of Latin, Greek and foreign vernacular languages by promoting in their stead plain English words, phrases and meters. This necessitated the mining of old poets like Chaucer, Lydgate and Gower for such words as would serve to repurify the language by reconnecting it to its roots and enriching its vocabulary. In 1580 the Cambridge don, Gabriel Harvey, published a 'bolde satyriall libell' on Oxford in which he mocked 'this English poet' for affecting the clothes, habits and mannerisms of Italians, while insisting on using only 'valorous' (i.e. chivalric or courtly) English Medievalisms, jeering: 'Stowte, Lowte, Plaine, Swayne, quoth a Lording'.<sup>10</sup>

When Thomas Nashe wrote of Oxford's love of poetry and hatred of pedantism he pointedly referred to his bold use of a 'wonted *Chaucerisme*' and his determination to repurify English by ensuring that 'Chaucer bee new scourd against the day of battaile, and Terence come but in nowe and then with the snuffe of a sentence' (Dedication to *Strange Newes*, 1592). Oxford's enthusiasm for Chaucer dates at least to 1570 when he acquired a copy of his works from the stationer William Seres, if not before. A long heraldic poem in praise of the Vere family and a Chaucerian lyric 'Truth' (*vere* in old French) are bound into the endpapers of a Medieval manuscript known as the 'Ellesmere' Chaucer (Huntington MS, MS EL26C9) strongly suggesting that this – one of the most magnificent literary artifacts ever to come out of England – originally belonged to the earls of Oxford.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare's indebtedness to Chaucer is well established. No other playwright draws so heavily from the so called 'Father of English literature' as he does.<sup>12</sup>



Nashe's dedication to *Strange Newes* was mischievous, for not only was he vaunting his patron's position as a 'famous' anti-scholastic reformer, but he appears also to have been clueing his readers in to the identity of a mysterious, witty literary critic and anti-scholastic theorist who, twelve years earlier, had contributed glosses, notes and an epistle to Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* under the initials 'E.K.'.

*The Shepheardes Calender*, which was first published in 1579, was effectively a collaboration between Spenser and E.K. that quickly established itself in literary circles as a *cause célèbre*. Oxford's poetical rival, Philip Sidney, objected to its vaunted use of 'an olde rusticke language' while its supporter, Abraham Fraunce, praised its objectives in his *Shepheardes Logicke: conteyning the praecepts of that art put downe by Ramus; examples set out of the Shepheardes Kalender*.<sup>13</sup> By 1591 the book was issued for a fourth time in a new edition by John Harrison and in the following year Gabriel Harvey thanked Abraham Fraunce and a group of poets with connections to Oxford (Spenser, Nashe and Watson) for 'their studious endeouours, commendably employed in enriching, & polishing their natiue Tongue, neuer so furnished, or embellished, as of-late' – to which the author coyly added 'for I dare not name [those noblemen whose contributions to the English language] speake incomparably more than I am able briefly to insinuate' (pp.48–9).<sup>14</sup>

Nashe, who was an intensely literary man, would certainly have known of E.K.'s witty epistle, its censure of pedantic English poets for 'affecting antiquitie' with 'overmuch studie' and its urging them to employ 'such good and natural English words, as have been long time out of use, and almost cleare disinherited' in order to imbue English verse with 'grace and, as one would say, auctoritie'. Nashe would also have known that by praising Oxford as the 'famous persecutor of Priscian', imbued with a 'pleasant wittie humor' who would only 'now and then' allow 'odde shreds of Latine' to adorn 'the snuffe of a sentence' and by citing him as one who commands, with his 'wonted Chaucerisms', the 'bataile' against pedantic scholasticism, that his readers might well suppose the witty and literary Earl of Oxford to be one and the same with the witty and literary E.K. On reading Nashe's words many would surely recall the notable opening words of E.K.'s epistle and its 'wonted Chaucerism': 'Uncouthe, unkiste, sayde the olde famous poete Chaucer'.



The basis of the case for identifying ‘E.K.’ as Oxford has been persuasively set out by Nina Green (1993 and 1998) in a remarkable series of sleuthing essays that minutely examines the network of relations between Oxford, Edmund Spenser, Thomas Smith and Gabriel Harvey, providing evidence that not only links ‘E.K.’ to the court, but classifies him as a literary patron ‘who exercises considerable influence over the publication of Spenser’s works’.<sup>15</sup> To Green’s fulsome case should now be added the corroborative statements of Thomas Nashe, Francis Beaumont and Leonard Digges.

Ben Jonson does not ‘out’ Shakespeare as ‘E.K.’ but nor does his statement about ‘small Latine and lesse Greeke’ impugn the dramatist with ignorance of either language. The simple gist of his remark is that although Shakespeare uses only a small amount of Latin and even less Greek in his plays, he may yet be justifiably (indeed favourably) compared to the great dramatists of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. By this means Jonson, a passionate admirer of the Classics who filled his own works with endless Classical references, placed Shakespeare at the forefront of a literary movement with which he was not wholly in sympathy. Writing of Lucretius, who sought to imbue his Latin works with antique words and phrases in the first century BC, Jonson remarked ‘As some doe *Chaucerismes* with us, which were better expunged and banished.’<sup>16</sup>

Jonson was evidently aware that Shakespeare was the seventeenth Earl of Oxford for elsewhere in this poem he craftily reveals him to have been a nobleman, identified with the number seventeen, who was active as a playwright in the 1580s and early 1590s and died shortly before October 1604.<sup>17</sup> Although Jonson does not allude to E.K. in his passing comment on Shakespeare’s antischolastic aesthetic, he must have known (as Nashe and Harvey knew) that Oxford was the patron and figurehead of this important literary movement, and, as a well-connected, well-informed poet and literary commentator, he must also have known of E.K.’s celebrated call to arms urging poets to eschew Classical and foreign influences in favour of English linguistic purity:

Our Mother tonge, which truely of it self is both ful enough for  
prose & stately enough for verse, hath long time ben counted most  
bare & barren of both. Which default when as some endeouored to  
salue & recure, they patched vp the holes with peces & rags of other



languages, borrowing here of the French, there of the Italian, euery where of the Latine, not vveighing hovv il those tongues accorde vvith themselues, but much vvorse vvith ours: So now they haue made our English tongue, a gallimaufray or hodgepodge of al other speches. (*Shepheardes Calender*, 1579, ii)

Francis Beaumont's verse epistle, which Jonson received many years before writing of Shakespeare's 'small Latine and lesse Greeke', is a little more explicit in its connecting of Shakespeare and E.K. In these lines Beaumont confesses his need to write poetry in plain English that is as free of ostentatious erudition 'as Shakespeare's best are'. This, he warns, may lead to misunderstandings, for while it is true that Shakespeare's best lines (e.g. 'to be or not to be', 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow', etc.) do not vaunt their author's scholarship, 'our heirs' (that is to say 'future generations') might assume from this that he achieved his greatness only 'by the dimme light of Nature' (i.e. without the advantages of learning). Thus Beaumont declares that *future generations* will suppose that Shakespeare was uneducated, not that he himself believes this to be the case. Indeed, had he believed such a thing, he would not have remarked that 'our heirs' will be told of it. The expression 'preachers apte to their auditors' suggests contempt for those who will say only what others wish to hear, regardless of underlying realities.

Beaumont's lines appear to be alluding to a remarkable passage by E.K. that concerns Spenser's pastoral shepherd, the wine-slurping poet and playwright 'Cuddie', who is easily identifiable as Oxford.<sup>18</sup> In the delightfully teasing and typically Elizabethan game of mirrors, which opens the chapter called 'October', E.K. (Oxford as literary critic) explains how Cuddie (Oxford as poet) understands poetry to be 'a worthy and commendable arte; or rather no arte, but a divine gift and heavenly instinct not to be gotten by labour and learning, but adorned with both'. Thus Cuddie's notion of poetry as a 'divine gift and heavenly instinct' (he also calls it a 'celestiall inspiration') which is borne of a determination to wear 'labour and learning' (i.e. 'scholasticism') lightly, chimes precisely with Beaumont's opinion of Shakespeare whose best lines are 'clear from all learning' and whose 'text was god made'. (Incidentally, except by appeal to a suppositious provincial retirement, Beaumont's admission that



Shakespeare's 'text *was* god made' does not lie comfortably with any theory that assumes the Bard died *after* Beaumont's burial on 9 March 1616.)

The connection between E.K. and Shakespeare is made even more obvious by our third witness, Leonard Digges, who describes the great dramatist as an 'argument' (*Shakespeare*, who alone, is argument enough to make that one'), by which he means that Shakespeare is 'argument' supporting the contention that 'Poets are borne not made'. It is surely no coincidence that E.K.'s explanation of Cuddie's aesthetic is entitled 'ARGUMENT' or that Digges' description of Shakespeare's unparalleled 'Art without Art' should so closely mirror Cuddie's 'argument' that poetry is 'an arte; or rather no arte'. When Digges describes Shakespeare as 'the patterne of all wit ... First, that he was a Poet none would doubt / That heard th'aplause of what he sees set out' he is surely alluding to E.K.'s description of Oxford (as poet): 'In Cuddie is set out the perfecte patterne of a Poete' whose 'divine gift' is poured into his 'witte' by 'celestial inspiration'. When Digges proceeds to praise Shakespeare for his refusal to imitate 'Greekes and Latines' or to purloin material by translating it from French and Italian sources ('vulgar languages') he is plainly alluding to the passage of *Shepheardes Calender* already quoted in which E.K. (Oxford as critic) rails against those writers who made 'our English tongue a gallimaufrey or hodgepodge' by 'patching up the holes with pieces and rags from other languages, borrowing here of the French, here of the Italian, everywhere of the Latine; not weighing how ill those tongues accorde with themselves, but much worse with ours' ('The Epistle', iii<sup>r</sup>).

In *Poems by Wil: Shake-speare* (1640) Digges' lines are preceded by verses in which the 'learned' are said to marvel at Shakespeare's work and are followed by John Warren's verses referring to Shakespeare's 'learned poems' in which only those 'with true judgement can discern his Art' (V.24) – precisely what is meant by Digges' phrase 'Art without Art' and by E.K.'s phrase 'an arte, or rather no arte'. Elsewhere in the same book Shakespeare is described as 'the Ages wonder' as her 'chiefest Tutor' whose smooth rhymes, 'did more to reforme than lash the looser times'.<sup>19</sup>

From the foregoing it would appear that the leading role played by the highly educated Earl of Oxford (whether as 'E.K.', 'Gentle Master William'

or as ‘William Shakespeare’) in his battle to eradicate scholastic pedantry and repurify the English tongue, was widely acknowledged by literary men over a period of at least six decades. Four centuries on and the English language may still be said to ‘enjoy the profits of his legacie’.<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

1. Dedication to *Heliodorus: An Aethiopian History*, translated by Thomas Underdowne, London: Fraunces Cauldrocke (1569), reprinted in 1587 edition.
2. On 24 Jan 1575 Queen Elizabeth wrote a letter of introduction to Continental crowned heads of state asking them to ensure that their ‘most excellent pedagogues’ (*‘Excellentas Magistras’*) welcome ‘this most noble earl, our kinsman, whom we commend, not in the usual way, but from the heart, on account of his outstanding intellect and virtue’ (*‘amicitiam et benevolentiam in nobilissimo hoc Comiti consanguineo nostro ornando cui propter praestantes animi virtutis ex animo non vulgariter favemus’*), MS Cambridge University Library; CUL MS Dd.3.20, ff. 98v-99.
3. John Brooke, from the dedication to his translation of Guy de Bres, *The Staff of Christian Faith*. London: John Day (1577).
4. Robert Greene, dedicatory epistle to *Gnydonius; The Card of Fancy*, London: William Ponsonby (1584).
5. Thomas Nashe, *Strange Newes*, London: John Danter (1592), A2<sup>v</sup> & L4<sup>r</sup>. Proof that the anonymized dedicatee of Thomas Nashe’s *Strange Newes* (1592) was Oxford was first provided by C. W. Barrell in his ‘New Milestone in Shakespearean Research: Contemporary Proof that the Earl of Oxford’s Literary Nickname was “Gentle Master William”’, *Shakespeare Fellowship Quarterly*, vol. 4 (Oct. 1940), pp.49–66. I do not use the word ‘proof’ lightly. Barrell’s evidence and subsequent refinements to it have placed the matter beyond all reasonable doubt.
6. Letter of revocation, signed ‘Edward Oxenford’ (3 Dec. 1593); MS photograph in A. D. Merson, *Earls Colne Grammar School, Essex*, Colchester: Benham & Co. (1975), p.20.
7. Thomas Nashe, *Have with you to Saffron Waldon*, London: John Danter (1596), p. M2<sup>v</sup>. Like many of Nashe’s allusions to Oxford, this one does not name him, but internal evidence establishes him as the only courtier famed for his poetry, who was also Nashe’s patron, a knight companion in tilting tournaments with Sidney, and who lost the fortune of his youth. Furthermore, Nashe is referring to a living person of whom Harvey had written condescendingly in his *Gratulationes Valdinenses* (1578), thus Detobel & Brackmann prove, by a process of elimination, that Nashe cannot have been referring to anyone but Oxford; see Robert Detobel & Elke Brackmann ‘Teaching Sonnets and de Vere’s Biography at School’, *Brief Chronicles*, vol. 6 (2016), 108–9.



8. Michael Wainwright, *The Rational Shakespeare: Peter Ramus, Edward de Vere, and the Question of Authorship*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (2008).
9. *Ibid.* p.146.
10. Gabriel Harvey, 'Speculum Tuscanismi', *Three Proper and wittie, familiar Letters*, London: Henry Bynneman (1580).
11. See Ralph Hanna III & A. S. G. Edwards, 'Rothesley, the De Vere Circle and the Ellesmere Chaucer', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1 (1995), pp.11–35, where it is also mentioned that the Earls of Oxford also owned Lydgate's vernacular MS 'The Life of Our Lady' (BL. MS Harl 3862).
12. See, for instance, Ann Thompson, *Shakespeare's Chaucer* (1978), in which Shakespeare's debt to Chaucer is demonstrated with reference to 27 plays and *Lucrece*.
13. British Library MS Add. 34361, fols. 3–28.
14. Gabriel Harvey, 'The Third Letter', *Four Letters and certaine sonnets*, London: Iohn Wolfe (1592).
15. Nina Green's original pieces, which ran through seven consecutive issues of *Edward de Vere Newsletter* (Mar–Sep1993, nos. 49–55), were revised and collated as 'Who was Spenser's 'E.K.'? Was he the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford?', *The Oxfordian*, vol. 1, (Oct 1998), pp.5–26; also online at: <https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/who-was-spencers-ek/>
16. Ben Jonson, posthumously published in 'Explorata or Discoveries', *The Workes of Beniamin Jonson*, London: Richard Meghan (1640), p.119.
17. For Jonson's allusions to Shakespeare as a nobleman playwright of the 1580s and early 1590s identified with the number seventeen and other references to Shakespeare as Oxford in this poem see A. Waugh, 'Sweet Swan of Avon', YouTube presentation (uploaded 2018); for Jonson's allusion to Shakespeare's death shortly before October 1604 see A. Waugh, 'Kepler's Supernova Explodes the Stratfordian Myth!', YouTube presentation (uploaded 2019).
18. For Oxford as 'Cuddie' see Eva Turner Clark, *The Satirical Comedy of Love's Labour's Lost*, New York: Farquhar Payson (1933) and Roger Stritmatter, 'Spenser's "Perfect Pattern of a Poet" and the 17th Earl of Oxford', *Cahiers Elisabéthains*, 77:1 (2010), 9–22. The name 'Cuddie' may have been devised as an allusion to oxen as ruminants chewing their cud. The 'Earle of Oxenforde' was referred to as 'Ox' by Charles Arundel (1582).
19. (Anon.) 'An Elegie on the death of that Famous Writer and Actor, M. William Shakespeare' in *Poems Written by Wil Shake-speare, Gent.*, London: Thomas Cotes (1640), p. L. Since this poem mentions nothing of Shakespeare's acting but does allude to his role as a literary reformer, I interpret 'Actor' here to be a sly hint at one who pleads a case/takes action to affect change, as per *OED* which defines 'the word as a "pleader" or "advocate"' ... one who performs any action or takes part in any affair; a doer'.
20. *ibid.*, line 28.

