

JOHN DAVIES OF HEREFORD IDENTIFIES W.S. AS OXFORD IN *MICROCOSMOS*

By Heidi Jansch

An early allusion to Shake-speare can be found in ‘To our English Terence Mr. Will: Shake-speare’ by John Davies of Hereford. This poem is included in *The Scourge of Folly* (1611), a collection of epigrams about contemporary figures and writers.¹ In two other earlier publications, *Microcosmos* (1603) and *Humours Heav’n on Earth with the Civile Wars of Death and Fortune* (1609), Davies alludes to Shake-speare with the letters ‘W S R B’ (variously punctuated) in the marginal notes alongside stanzas within longer poems. In this article, an examination of the original printed version of *Microcosmos* reveals that Davies was aware that the name William Shake-speare was a pseudonym for Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, and that he intended to convey information cryptically about Oxford’s writing and theatrical activities to readers through the placement and content of his text and marginal notes.

Born in 1565, John Davies of Hereford was an Oxford-educated poet and writing-master whose students belonged to the upper echelon of society. In *The Complete Works of John Davies of Hereford*, Alexander Grosart explains:

Our Index of Names will guide to the foremost families of England wherein he had pupils in penmanship, as well ladies as gentlemen. The Pembroke and Derby and Egerton houses were evidently more than mere patrons. In many a Sonnet he addresses parents and children alike in unembarrassed and familiar terms. He was ‘intimate’ with Sir Phillip Sydney ... and as he died in 1586, it would seem that he must somewhat early have won for himself a position in the highest society as an Instructor.(xi)

Davies’ *Microcosmos*, referred to by Alan Nelson as a ‘typically rambling verse essay which distributes praise and blame over a wide range of topics’, has traditionally been accepted as an allusion to Shakespeare because the letters ‘W.S. R B.’ appear in the side notes adjacent to the stanza beginning ‘Players, I love yee ...’. Modern printings exploring this *Players* stanza of *Microcosmos* often adjust the

Microcosmos.

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That for a ^a *Cue* wil tel their *Qualitie*?
 Yet they through thy perswasion (being strong)
 Doe vveene they merit *immortality*,
 Onely because (forsooth) they vse their ^b *Tongue*,
 to speake as they are taught, or right or *wronge*.

If *pride* ascende the *stage* (ô base ascent)
 Al men may see her, for nought comes thereon
 But to be seene, and where *Vice* should be shent,
 Yea, made most odious to ev'ry one,
 In blazing her by demonstration
 Then *pride* that is more then most vicious,
 Should there endure open damnation,
 And so shee doth, for shee's most odious
 In *Men* most bale, that are ambitious.

Players, I loue yee, and your *Qualitie*,
 As ye are *Men*, that pass' time not abus'd:
 And ^c some I loue for ^d *painting*, *poesie*,
 And say fell *Fortune* cannot be excus'd;
 that hath for better *vses* you refus'd:
VVit, *Courage*, *good*, *shape*, *good partes*, and all *good*,
 As long as al these *goods* are no *worse* vs'd,
 And though the *stage* doth staine pure gent'c *bloud*,
 Yet ^e generous yee are in *minde* and *moode*.

Your *Qualitie*, as *faine* as it reproues
 the *VVorld* of *Vice*, and grosse *incongruence*
 Is *goods*; and *good*; the *good* by nature loues,
 As ^f recreating in and outward *sense*;
 And so deserving *praise* and *recompence*:
 But if *pride* (otherwise then morally)
 Be *acted* by you, you doe all incense
 to mortall hate; if *all* hate mortally,
Princes, much more *Players* they vilifie.

^a Reprooves
 wher they are
 wel deserved,
 must bee well
 paid.

^b Meant of
 those that
 haue nothing
 to commend
 them but affe-
 cted acting, &
 offenseu men
 thing.

^c W. S. R. B.
^d Simonides
 saith, that pain-
 ting is a dumb
 Poety, & Poety,
 a speaking
 painting.

^e Roscius was
 said for his ex-
 cellency in his
 quality, to be
 only worthe
 to come on
 the stage, and
 for his hone-
 sty to be more
 worthy the to
 come thereon.

^f Ther is good
 vie of plates &
 pastimes in a
 Cōmō-weale
 for thereby
 those that are
 most vncivill,
 prone to
 mouewar and
 dissention, are
 by these recre-
 ations accusto-
 med to loue
 peace & ease,
 Tac 14. An.
 Ca 6.

But.

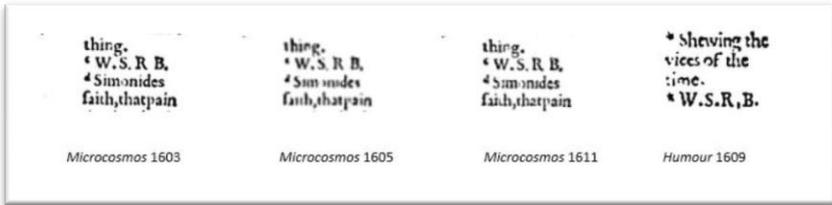
position of the notes to enable readers to quickly reference the correlating side notes, in this case indicated by the letters **c**, **d**, and **e**.²

Others, like Alan Nelson on the *Shakespeare Documented* site, provide only the side note initials adjacent to the appropriate line indicating that the ‘some I love’ refers to William Shake-speare as seen here.³

Players, I loue yee, and your Qualitie,
 As ye are Men, that pass time not abus'd:
 And some I love for painting, poesie, W.S. R.B.
 And say fell Fortune cannot be excus'd,
 That hath for better vses you refus'd:
 Wit, Courage, good shape, good partes, and all good,
 As long as all these goods are no worse vs'd,
 And though the stage doth staine pure gentle bloud,
 Yet generous yee are in minde and moode.

Side notes are correlated by the superscript letters and need not line up with the text they comment upon; they were placed, phrased and sometimes abbreviated to fit into the available space in the margin. The rearrangement of the text as seen on *Shakespeare Documented* as shown above, however, has resulted in researchers’ attention being restricted to this one stanza alone. This has caused readers to miss Davies’ larger message, expressed in his original text arrangement and references included in the marginal notes filling the rest of the page.

Additionally, reprints like Nelson’s indicating that Davies’ side note reads ‘W.S. R.B.’ are inaccurate. Upon close inspection of the original printings it is clear there is no space between the letters W.S. and R B. and there is no period following the R in *Microcosmos* in three separate editions (1603, 1605, and 1611). In his other allusion to W.S. in *Humours Heav’n and The Civile Warres of Death and Fortune*, the mark appearing after the R does not match the other three periods, nor does it appear to be a comma or dash like the type used on the rest of the page. Whether or not this letter and punctuation arrangement is meant to convey a message other than another person’s initials (R B. is usually assumed to indicate Richard Burbage) is a possibility, but the W.S. intending to refer to Shake-speare seems reasonable enough when these side notes are considered alongside Davies’ later ‘English Terrence’ epigram.⁴



In *The Edifying Margins of Renaissance English Books*, William W. E. Slights indicates the many functions of marginal material and states:

While the announced and often achieved effect of the annotating procedure is to simplify, usually by offering an epitome of the text, and sometimes by announcing one of the possible senses of the text as the authorized version, in other cases the annotations provide perspectives on the text that greatly complicate and sometime radically destabilize it (682).

Although Slights does not include it in his list of the common functions⁵ of marginal material, researchers of the Shakespeare Authorship Question are most likely familiar with another function of side notes: conveying esoteric information. Uncovered by Alexander Waugh and summarized by Bryan Wildenthal as: ‘One of the most striking early expressions of authorship doubt – or actual knowledge that “Shakespeare” was a pseudonym for a hidden author – appears in the text and adjoining marginal note of a letter appended to *Polimanteia*, a book published anonymously in 1595 in Cambridge University (144).’ In this text, the name Shak-speare (sic) appears adjacent to the phrase ‘courte-dear-verse’, an anagram of the phrase ‘our de vere, a secret’ which is placed directly under the name ‘Oxford’, the seventeenth word from the end of the page.⁶ Davies seems to have used the text and marginal notes in a way similar to the author of *Polimanteia*; conveying an obscured message about de Vere’s theatrical endeavours that is not visible or understood at first glance.⁷

Marginal Notes a. and b.

On page 215 of *Microcosmos* Davies has filled the margin with notes and may have done this strategically. The notes labelled a. and b. appear to be general observations, but the phrases Davies uses echo lines from *Anthony and Cleopatra*

and *Hamlet*. Note a. reads ‘Reproofs when they are well deserved, must be well paid’ – similar to a line from *Anthony and Cleopatra* spoken by Octavius Caesar: ‘Say not so, Agrippa. If Cleopatra heard you, your **reproof** / Were **well deserved** of rashness.’ (Act II, sc. ii). Note b., ‘Meant of those that have nothing to commend them but affected acting, & offensive mouthing’ brings to mind Hamlet’s instructions to the players (Act III, sc. ii):

‘Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use us all gently.’

These allusions to not upsetting the Queen by talking openly about certain subjects and a prince running a court entertainment lend support to the theory that Davies is referring to Oxford’s surreptitious theatrical activities in this passage.

Marginal Notes c. and d.

Davies’ line in the *Players* stanza including side notes c. and d. reads ‘And^c some I love for^d painting, poesie’. The ‘some I love’ Davies is addressing here were ‘refused’ for ‘better uses’ by ‘fell Fortune’. In “*Eliza Fortuna: reconsidering the ‘Ditchley portrait’ of Elizabeth I*” James R. Jewitt provides several examples of Fortune representing Queen Elizabeth and relates that: ‘Fortune’s rule over human affairs was perceived as analogous to the absolutist female sovereign’s manipulation of the state and people (294)’. In her exploration of this section of *Microcosmos* Katherine Chiljan comments that:

‘Davies believed “Shakespeare” was a pen name – that the great author was not getting his due recognition for his poetry *in his true name*. Fortune “refus’d” them for “better uses”, wrote Davies, without further explanation. The great author wrote he was in “disgrace” with Fortune, and Fortune chided him, spited him and barred him from triumph in sonnets 25, 29, 37, 90 and 111 (257)’.

The ‘Players’ Davies is addressing were refused by Fortune, just as Oxford was refused by Elizabeth for just about any request he made for military service, licenses, or government posts.⁸ Chiljan points out the similarity between this sentiment and that of Davies’ other W.S. allusion in Stanza 76 of *Civile Warres*: ‘Yet some she guerdon’d not, to their desarts’ where Chiljan adds the comment that ‘This statement concurred with others made about Shakespeare, that he could not be openly praised or credited ... (260)’.

An inability to openly praise Shake-speare may be the function of note d., which reads ‘Simonides saith, that painting is a dumb Poesy, & Poesy a speaking painting’. This refers to a quote from *De Gloria Atheniensium* by Plutarch which has been translated as ‘Simonides calls painting silent poetry and poetry painting that speaks’ (Simonides of Ceos). The line has also been translated as ‘Painting is *mute* poetry’ (Lee, 197) and Davies himself expresses it as ‘painting is a *dumb* poesy’. Immediately after the side note cryptically indicating W.S., Davies conveys a need for silence, indicating something on this page is not being stated explicitly because it is secret information.

Marginal Note e.

The next line including a side note reads: ‘Yet ^e generous yee are in *minde* and *moode*’ and refers to note e. reading: ‘Roscius was said for his excellency in his quality, to be the only worthie to come on the stage, and for his honesty to be the more worthy then to come thereon.’ He was:⁹

‘of such celebrity that his name became an honorary epithet for any particularly successful actor. Born into slavery at Solonium, Roscius gained such renown on the stage that the dictator Sulla freed him from bondage and conferred upon him the gold ring, the emblem of equestrian rank. He reportedly was very well paid for his talent.’

Although Will Shakspeare’s family did acquire a coat of arms in the late 1590s, ascending the ranks of society in a way similar to Roscius, and Shakspeare became very wealthy throughout his life, dying a rich man (though this was actually due to him not being generous, but a shrewd businessman). Since this side note is a superscript of the line where Davies speaks of being generous

immediately after ‘pure gent’e (gentle) blood’ it is more likely he is addressing someone who has not recently acquired a higher status, but someone who was born with status; the gentle blood already in his veins. The more Davies’ Roscius reference is examined, a connection to Will Shakspeare becomes even less likely. In the oration Davies is referencing, Cicero defends Roscius in a lawsuit, asking:

‘... Has Roscius cheated his partner? Can this guilt belong to this man? who, in truth, (I say it boldly,) has more honesty than skill, more truth than learning; whom the Roman people think even a better man than he is an actor; who is as worthy of the stage because of his skill, as he is wholly of the senate on account of his moderation.’

Davies notes Roscius’ honesty, an attribute Shakspeare of Stratford was not known for. Ros Barber in *Shakespeare: The Evidence* cites three examples showing Shakspeare was not honest, including his reported tax evasion and examples of his dissembling behaviour (142). Oxford, on the other hand, qualified as ‘honest’ in several senses of the word. Besides its common meaning of ‘the quality of being honest’, ‘honesty’ also has now obsolete meanings which would apply to the Earl. In the 15th and 16th centuries the word also meant ‘Honourable position or status; high rank, nobility; respectability’ and ‘Generosity, liberality; hospitality’. The OED provides an example of this definition from *Timon of Athens*:

*‘A Noble Gentleman ‘tis, if he would not keep so good a house ...
every man has his fault, and honesty is his.’*

W. SHAKESPEARE *Timon of Athens* (1623) III. i. 27 (Honesty).

Oxford had this ‘fault’ himself and was known to be an excessively liberal spender. Mark Anderson in *Shakespeare by Another Name* equates Oxford with Timon, describing the play as ‘de Vere’s precipitous drop from finery to patches’ due to him paying out ‘generous grants to poets and painters’ (184). Gervase Markham also highlighted Oxford’s honesty and generosity in *Honour in his Perfection* when he noted:

‘It were infinite to speake of his infinite expence, the infinite number of his attendants, or the infinite house he kept to feede all people ... that he was vpright and **honest** in all his dealings the few debts he left behinde him to clog his suruiuours, were safe pledges; and that hee was holy and Religious the Chapels and Churches he did frequent, and from whence no occasion could draw him; the almes he gaue (which at this day would not only feede the poore, but the great mans family also) and the bountie which Religion and Learning daily tooke from him, are Trumpets so loude that all ears know them ... he was **Honestus, Pietas, & Magnanimus** (17).’

Marginal Note f.

Davies continues to focus on the nobility of W.S. in the final side note in a line of the next stanza reading ‘*As I recreating in and outward sense.*’ Here Davies provides the comment:

‘Ther is good use of plaies & pastimes in a Como-weale for thereby those that are most uncivill, prone to move war and dissension, are by these recreations accustomed to love peace & ease. Tac. 14 An. Ca 6.’

Although this note doesn’t appear to apply to the *Players* stanza at first glance, Davies is using this note to elaborate on the ‘gentle blood’ comment. The section of Tacitus’ *Annales* Book 14, Chapter 6 to which Davies directs readers describes the staging of plays during the time of Nero Caesar. It does, as Davies states in his side note, include the subject of why ‘there is good use of plays and pastimes in a commonwealth’ but is also notable for the additional information it provides on noblemen appearing on the stage:

VI. Whether it be conuenient to haue often playes to entertaine the people.

... that whatsoever elswhere might corrupt, or was corrupted, was seene in the citie; and the youth vnlike to that it hath bene, through strange manners, wrestling naked, idlenes, and licentious loue, the Prince and the Senate being authors thereof,

who haue not only giuen licence to vices, but also giuen them strength and force. The noblemen of Rome vnder colour of making orations and verses are discredited by stage-playing. What remaineth then but only to vnloath themselues starke naked, and take the caesti in hand, and practise that fight in stead of armes, and exercises of warre? ...

*... That licence pleased many, and yet they **cloaked it with honest termes**. That the ancients likewise did not abhorre the delight of playes and shewes according to their calling at that time, and that stage-players were sent for, from Thuscia. The horse-race was represented by the Thurians: but since Achaia and Asia was possessed by vs, playes haue beene more exactly set foorth. **Neither hath there beene anyone in Rome nobly descended, which by reason of stage-playes hath discredited the stocke from whom he came these two hundred yeeres**, since L. Mummius triumphed, who first set forth that kinde of shew in the citie. (205-206)¹¹*

In this chapter Tacitus is reporting on a situation where noblemen appeared on the stage at the insistence of the ruler. The noblemen felt it was unbecoming of their status, but then an argument is then presented of why noblemen could appear on stage: ‘Neither hath there beene anyone in Rome nobly descended, which by reason of stage-playes hath discredited the stocke from whom he came these two hundred yeeres ...’ Tacitus goes on to cite several other positive aspects of plays and permanent theatres, the source of Davies’ phrase ‘good use of plaies & pastimes’.

The note directing readers to consult Tacitus appears in a line where Davies impressed upon his readers the value of recreating ‘in and outward sense’. Combined with the earlier reference regarding dumbness/silence, Davies seems to be alerting readers that there is more information being given than might be immediately obvious. The *Players* stanza has traditionally been associated with William Shake-speare because of the inclusion of the initials W.S. and this examination of the additional side notes indicates that the subject with these initials was honest, had gentle blood, was refused for certain ‘uses’ and was required to instead appear on the stage at the insistence of the ruler. Oxford is a much better fit for these attributes than Will Shakspeare.

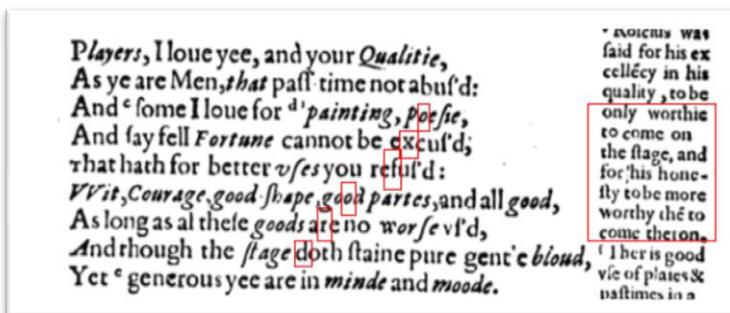
All Notes Considered

Including the marginal notes a. and b. allows the notes following the W.S. reference to naturally be labelled d-e-f, a 15th-century spelling of ‘deaf’. In

L'envoy to *Narcissus* in 1595, Thomas Edwards included the line 'Adon deafly masking through/stately troupes rich conceited' and the anonymous author of *Wits Recreations* would later express a need for secrecy by writing 'Shakespeare, we must be silent in thy praise' (Chiljan 253,198). In conjunction with Davies' use of 'dumb' in note d., an implication of deafness would be another indication that there is information here that cannot be communicated openly, so Davies attempts to spell out his message covertly. In addition to the various indications that Oxford is the W.S. being referred to, Davies has also provided a hidden message similar to the one seen in *Polimanteia*.

In the original arrangement of this page, the *Players* stanza begins on line 15, while 'And e some I love' (with its reference to W.S. R B.) appears in line 17, a marker used elsewhere to associate Shake-speare with the seventeenth Earl.¹¹ Also in line 17, starting with the **o** in the word 'poesie' and ending with the **d** beginning the phrase 'doth staine pure gentle bloud' Oxford's name can be read in a diagonal mesostic, an arrangement similar to an acrostic, but in which a word or phrase appears vertically in the middle letters of a line of text instead of in the initial letters.

The letters composing Oxford's name appear directly adjacent to the section of the side note reading 'only worthie to come on the stage, and for his honesty to be more worthy the(n) to come thereon'.



Since this sentiment would apply to Oxford's documented theatrical performances the arrangement of page 215 in *Microscosmos* indicates Davies was aware of Oxford's performance history and his identity as W.S., the author of the Shake-speare works.

The word ‘dumb’ (which appears in the 17th line from the top in the side notes) serves as an indicator of the silence surrounding de Vere’s writing and theatrical efforts, and the phrase ‘only worthie to come on the stage, and for his honesty to be more worthy the(n) to come thereon’, a sentiment that is applicable to the Earl, is completed in the line 17th from the bottom of the page. Davies concealed Oxford’s name within the text while providing information in such a way that it could (on the surface, at least) appear to refer to William Shakspeare of Stratford while at the same time recognizing Oxford and justifying his life’s work and service to his monarch. Like the quote in Tacitus revealing that ‘*no one nobly descended has ever discredited his lineage because of stage-playing*’, Davies seems to be absolving Oxford of his ‘staine’ since he was providing a service to the Queen by making himself ‘a motley to the view’.

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‘Honesty’ *Oxford English Dictionary* www.oed.com (Accessed 14 June 2020)

c. Honourable position or status; high rank, nobility; respectability. *Obsolete*.

3. Generosity, liberality; hospitality. *Obsolete* (*Scottish* in later use).

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Notes:

¹ See Chiljan, 264.

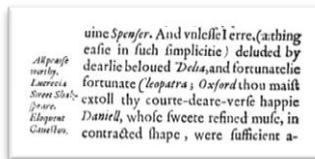
² See Chiljan, 259–260 and Wildenthal, 205.

³ See also E. K. Chambers, 213 and Eva Turner Clark, 75.

⁴ Visit *Shakespeare Documented* for high resolution images <https://shakespearedocumented.folger.edu/>

⁵ Slights includes in his list of functions of marginal material: Amplification, Annotation, Appropriation, Correction, Emphasis, Evaluation, Exhortation, Explication, Justification, Organization, Parody, Pre-emption, Rhetorical gloss, Simplification and Translation, but acknowledges his list is 'not intended to be complete' (686).

⁶ Text arrangement of *Polimanteia* from Waugh, Alexander 'A Secret Revealed: William Covell and His *Polimanteia* (1595)', *De Vere Society Newsletter* 20:3 (Oct 2013).



⁷ See Malim for a summary of Edward de Vere's theatrical performances.

⁸ See Cutting 137 and Nelson 337–338, 344, 355–358, 380. Oxford was given a £1,000 annuity for providing some type of service to the Queen, and it may be that his playwriting was this service. See Cutting, Chapter 7, 'A Sufficient Warrant'.

⁹ Richard Burbage was referred to as Roscius for his acting abilities by William Camden (lending support to him being the 'R B' referred to by Davies). However, in 'William Shakespeare, Our Roscius', Alan Nelson and Paul H. Altrocchi report on an inscription in a 1590 copy of William Camden's *Britannia* referring to William Shakespear as Roscius and document others during this time period who were referred to as Roscius, including Edward Alleyn, Richard Tarleton, Joseph Taylor, and William Ostler (in a epigram by John Davies in *The Scourge of Folly*) showing the Roscius reference could apply to any actor of note, not only Burbage.

¹⁰ This translation of Tacitus' *Annales* was published in London in 1598. In a series of posts on his blog, Ken Feinstein explores the possibility that this edition was translated by the author Shakespeare (who Feinstein believes to be Henry Neville). This would provide an additional correlation between W.S. and the quote from Tacitus coupled by Davies in *Microcosmos*. An Oxfordian examination of this idea may be warranted, especially since the dedication of this work (the one and only from a Richard Grenewey) to the Earl of Essex includes a plea to redeem the author's tarnished reputation. 'If your L. vouchsafe to receiue him (though greatly darkened of that he first was, and verie much dimmed in respect of the Historie alreadie in our toong) into any degree of fauour, I little doubt but others will both looke on him, and the better like and allow him ...' Greneway could simply mean the author Tacitus, but a tarnished reputation was both a known attribute of Oxford and a subject repeatedly relayed by Shake-speare in the sonnets. For Feinstein's theory, see 'Richard Grenewey's Tacitus, Henry Neville, and William Shakespeare Part 1'.

<http://kenfeinstein.blogspot.com/2019/07/richard-greneweys-tacitus-henry-neville.html> (Accessed 14 June 2020)

¹¹ For additional examples of associations of Shakespeare with the number 17, see:

Stritmatter, Roger. 'Leveraging the Shakespeare Allusion Book'. (Accessed 14 June 2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcxXrHKNKWY&t=3206s>

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Waugh, Alexander. 'Francis Meres Knew ...' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fFaGybgFs9M> (Accessed 14 June 2020)

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