

Edward de Vere: This is Your Life

By Kevin Gilvary

The text of an address given at the headquarters of the Chartered Insurance Institute, London, which hosted the Summer 2004 DVS meeting, the principal objective of which was to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of the Earl of Oxford.

We meet in this place today to honour a man whose honour has, we believe, been misplaced. For four centuries ago, less than four miles from this very hall, died the man whom we regard as the greatest literary genius the world has known, a man who ended his life almost in poverty, possibly in despair, and certainly without the recognition his genius deserves.

Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford, was truly a Renaissance man. Highly cultured, widely travelled and very generous, he not only attained the heights at Elizabeth's dazzling court and but also plumbed the depths of disgrace and destitution and on 24 June 1604 he died in Hackney.

You were born on 12 April, 1550 in Essex and named after Edward VI, the boy king. Your father, John de Vere, the sixteenth earl, officiated as Lord Great Chamberlain at the coronations of both Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth. Your father's sister, Frances, was the widow of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. This earl was the poet, who introduced blank verse into English in his translation of Virgil's Aeneid. He was also the first to use the sonnet form (abab cdcd efef gg) later associated with the name of Shakespeare. Your Aunt Frances, Lady Surrey, was reckoned a poet in her own right. As she lived until 1577 (I have read that she re-married), I wonder if she had a literary influence on her nephew, Edward.

Your father the sixteenth earl patronised a troupe of actors and in 1561, when you were eleven, Queen Elizabeth was entertained at Castle Hedingham with four days of masques, feasting and entertainment. When your father John dies in 1562, you become (like Bertram in All's Well) a ward of the Crown, under the tutelage of William Cecil, (later Lord Burghley). Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester is granted custody of your lands and you maintain a rivalry bordering on hatred for a long time.

Scholarly tutors were attached to you from a young age, including Bartholomew Clarke and Sir Thomas Smith, a great classical scholar and later ambassador to France. Another tutor was Lawrence Nowell, Dean of Lichfield. Later as a royal ward in the Cecil household, your personal curriculum included dancing, French, Latin, Greek,

cosmography, penmanship, shooting, exercise and prayer. This would make you a man of learning and a model courtier but hardly prepared you to run the estates which you inherited: 77 estates in total, including 45 in Essex and five in Suffolk. You live in Oxford House or Vere House in London.

Your education continues at Cambridge, at two colleges, Queens and St John's, and you are awarded your BA at Cambridge in 1564 and an MA from, Oxford in 1566. The following year you enroll at Gray's Inn; "the students of the Inns of Court learned to sing, dance and play instrumental music; and these accomplishments found expression in the masques and revels for which the societies formerly distinguished themselves, especially the Inner Temple and Grays Inn. The plays and masques were sometimes repeated elsewhere, especially before the sovereign at court." At Gray's Inn, in this year George Gascoigne produces his translation of I Suppositi, an influential text on A Comedy of Errors and Taming of the Shrew. Gascoigne's poems later appear alongside yours in the 1573 anthology A Hundred Sundrie Flowers.

Your time as a minor at Cecil House is closely mirrored in Hamlet: like the Prince, you take part in revels; your guardian, soon-to be your father in law, closely resembles, Polonius as Burghley; his daughter Anne is closely attached to you like Ophelia; Thomas Cecil resembles Laertes; your cousins, Horace and Francis, the fighting Veres recall Horatio and Francisco.

In 1569, you arrange the purchase of a Geneva Bible, still in existence today and with over 1000 verses marked, many of them echoed in the works of Shakespeare.

You come of age in 1571 and win the Battle of the Tilts. That year you propose to Anne at Hampton Court Palace and you are married in December.

You are frequently associated with dramatic entertainments. In 1572, you help stage a spectacular Siege of Warwick Castle. Years later, in January 1581, you play the part of the Knight of the Tree of the Sun and there was an 'oration spoken at the Triumph at Whitehall before her Majesty by the page to the right noble Earle of Oxford.'

Like Bertram in *All's Well* and Posthumus in *Cymbeline*, in 1574 you yearn for foreign travel and slip off to the Netherlands. You are recalled by the Queen and attend her on her Progress in Bristol.

In 1575, you are given license to travel and you begin at the court of the French King, Henry III, before travelling through Germany, meeting the scholar Sturmius, and on to Italy where you spend a year. You visit Venice and Verona, Padua and Genoa, Florence and Palermo, in fact virtually all of the places where Shakespeare's 14 of Italian plays are set.

Upon your return, you are known as the Italian earl and are greeted with fulsome, even excessive, praise by Gabriel Harvey – who closely resembles Holophernes in *Love's Labours Lost*. Harvey says in Latin that your face quatit tela, 'shakes weapons', which could read 'shakes spears'. During this time you are separated from your wife, whom you accuse of infidelity, like Othello, Leontes in *Winter's Tale* and Posthumus in *Cymbeline*. This you later regret.

You patronise a wide range of writers and translators, especially Anthony Munday and John Lyly, whose high blown affected Euphuistic style becomes very fashionable.

In 1576 you try to invest in a voyage led by Martin Frobisher. The expedition is a failure and you owe £3,000 to a man called Lok (cf *Merchant of Venice*).

In February 1580, you acquire a new house, Fisher's Folly, outside Bishopsgate and close to the newly established Fortune and Curtain Theatres and not far from the Boars Head Inn at Eastcheap. Coincidentally, in April 1580, you take over a set of (adult) players, who perform before the Queen and court, at the Inns of Court, at public houses in and around London. They are known as Lord Oxford's players, and they also tour southern England including your native East Anglia during the 1580s. They even visit a small provincial town in Warwickshire in 1584 when a young man called William was 20. Your players are still performing outside London at the Boar's Head Inn (cf *Henry V*) as late as 1602. In addition to an adult company, you run a troupe of boy actors, who present a play entitled *History of Agamemnon and Ulysses* before the Queen and Court at Greenwich. You even have a group of musicians.

Imprisonment

In December 1580, you confess to Catholicism before the Queen. Just like Bolingbroke (in *Riuchard II*), you have to denounce your former friends and rely on royal mercy. Then like Claudio

in *Measure for Measure* you are imprisoned in March 1581, after your mistress falls pregnant. Anne Vavasour a lady with dark features, gives birth to your natural son Edward Vere. On your release, you are involved in a vendetta with Thomas Knyvet, an uncle of your mistress. You are wounded in one of the street fights which continue for a year (cf. *Romeo and Juliet*). Eventually the Queen intervenes and commands you to live with your wife before you return to court.

So in December 1581, you resume intimate relations with your wife, Anne, initially by means of a bed trick (as in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*) and you accept Elizabeth as your child. In 1582, the Queen sends your brother in law, Lord Willoughby, who lives nearby in Suffolk at Otley Hall, as an ambassador to Denmark and he returns full of news on the Danish Court (cf *Hamlet*).

Annuity

In 1586, you serve as a commissioner for the trial of Mary Queen of Scots. In this year, the Queen awarded you £1000 a year for life to support your status as an earl, but such generosity from the Queen is uncharacteristic; she must have expected something in return. This is when many believe you take up the quill in defence of the monarch and the realm. After the Defeat of the Spanish Armada, you bear the sword of state at the Victory Procession. That year your wife Anne dies and is buried in a magnificent tomb at Westminster Abbey.

Following in your footsteps as a ward at Cecil House is Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. You are likely to have known him since your own daughters lived in the same house; Elizabeth was slightly younger than Southampton. Years later a print called "The Two Henrys" depicted Henry Wriothesley and Henry de Vere, 18th earl of Oxford, side by side on rearing chargers.

Dynastic possibilities sprang to the mind of your father-in-law, Burghley who tries to marry off Elizabeth your daughter to Southampton. In this year Shakespeare made a veiled call for the 19 year old earl to marry in, *Venus and Adonis*, the first work to be published under the name "Shake-Speare".

After marrying Elizabeth Trentham, you transfer your ancestral home, Castle Hedingham, to Burghley for the support of your daughters (cf. *King Lear*). In 1594 the *Edward Bonaventure*, in which you had an interest, was wrecked in Bermuda. A detailed account, like many other shipwrecks at the time, is published (cf. *The Tempest*). You move to King's Place in the then fashionable village of Hackney in 1596, close to the Curtain Theatre.

In 1594, the plays later known as Shakespeare begin to be published, at first anonymously, then from 1598 under the name Shake – Spear. Among the works to appear in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599 under the name Shakespeare is a sonnet (later appearing as sonnet 138) which begins:

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her though I know she lies

Later we read:

Although I know my years be past their best

Many believe that this refers to you, now aged 48, rather than a Johannes factotum aged 34.

In January 1595, your daughter Elizabeth, marries William Stanley, the 6th Earl of Derby, another literary aristocrat, for which almost certainly *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written. Four years later, your second daughter Bridget, after a brief understanding with Philip Herbert, marries John Lord Norris, later Earl of Berkshire and your youngest, Susan, is to wed William Herbert, earl of Montgomery in December 1604. So your two younger daughters have close associations with the

Incomparable Brethren to whom the First Folio was eventually dedicated in 1623.

The last few years of your life is passed in domestic tranquillity in Hackney. You return to Westminster as the senior peer at the trial of Earls of Essex and Southampton for treason in 1601.

In 1602, your cousin Bartholomew Gosnold visits the New World naming Martha's vineyard (taken by some to be the real setting for *The Tempest*). At the Queen's death in 1603, as an earl you subscribe the proclamation of James I. You quickly receive a renewal of your annual pension and you are appointed to the King's Great Council. As lord Great Chamberlain, you bear the Sword of State at the King's coronation in 1603.

Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, Viscount Bulbeck, Lord Great Chamberlain of England, died at Hackney on 24 June 1604 and was buried at St Augustine's Church, Hackney. In 1613, his wife Elizabeth left a request in her will to be buried alongside him at St Augustine's.

But in about 1624, his cousin, Perceval Golding claimed that "he lieth at Westminster."