

**SHAKESPEARE FOOLERY (1623–2023)**  
**A TRAGICAL-COMICAL-HISTORICAL FAMILY DRAMA DIVULGED**  
**IN ‘THE DYER’S HAND’**

**By Joella Werlin**

Foolery, sir, does walk around the orb like the sun, it shines everywhere.  
Feste, *Twelfth Night* (III. i.)

**Introduction**

The October 2022 DVS Newsletter introduced the basis for my current exploration of the mystery behind the publication, in 1623, of the collected plays ascribed to Mr. William Shakespeare. I had hypothesized that Susan Vere, youngest of the three daughters of Edward de Vere 17th Earl of Oxford and Anne Cecil de Vere the Countess of Oxford, was the ‘beating heart’ of what I see as a family-driven endeavor.<sup>1</sup> The search for proof, however, revealed that, in spite many praises of her virtues, any account of her activities, apart from occasional court or social appearances, has been eradicated from contemporary records. The article concluded that ‘Susan’s story has been erased ... because she was the tell-tale daughter of the man who we are not meant to know moved the pen of William Shakespeare.’ Susan is the muted voice of the tragical family drama.

There must be a different approach. The silence around Susan Vere – after December 1604, the Countess of Montgomery, wife of Philip Herbert (one of the two Noble Brethren to whom the Folio is dedicated) – speaks loudly. So do dodges and dissembling in the mischievously comical Folio ‘prequel’, the 11 pages of text preceding the plays and the 900 pages that follow.

My story now shifts to other family players who staged the Shakespeare deception. Casting the spotlight on a second ‘beating heart’ driving the enterprise, I have re-assembled the Folio puzzle. The thought piece that follows is based on several hypotheses which I invite the reader to mull over, to challenge, and/or to help substantiate. The points below call for further development.

- Producing the Folio was ‘a family affair’, not ‘a commercial enterprise’.
- There were family incentives *and* high political incentives for producing the Folio.
- The Folio was financed by family wealth, with likely support from King James.
- There were two ‘beating hearts’ behind the Folio publication: Susan Vere and William Stanley 6th Earl of Derby.
- Robert Cecil’s ‘revenge’ on Edward de Vere influenced crown policy over ‘Shakespeare’ branding.
- Deep bitterness towards Edward de Vere raised opposition among immediate and extended family members towards publishing the plays.
- Expanding state control over theatres was the overall political objective of the Folio publication.
- The eleven pages of text preceding the plays should be read as ‘Foolery’,<sup>2</sup> theatrical comedy, not as literature.
- Ben Jonson was the artistic producer-director of the ‘fore-play’ comedy.
- John Heminges and Henry Condell were major collaborators, representing theatre investors and producers.
- There is evidence in the Shakespeare text, within the Folio, and from anecdotes revealed in biographies and histories, that constraints imposed by crown law, and by descendants of affected noble families, secure the William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon deception now and going forward.

Understanding the family operation behind producing the Folio – the elaborate ruse to deflect any connection with Edward de Vere by making a colossus of the William Shakespeare decoy, and the enduring consequence of the authorial deception – I believe must set our course for 2023 and the foreseeable future. My argument for William Stanley’s heroic role and heavy lifting behind the project is likely to provoke the most controversy. I’ve made deductions from examples of his known friendship with Edward de Vere, his close family ties, and a very few tantalizing textual leads. That’s not much to go on. This is a first pass, inviting deeper inquiry.

Frank Lawler – who has recently retranslated and annotated French scholar Abel Lefranc’s early 20th century work *Behind the Mask of William Shakespeare*,

making the case that William Stanley was Shakespeare – is skeptical about Stanley’s authorial role. But Lawler offers encouragement for a different approach:<sup>3</sup>

I find your hypothesis quite intriguing. If proven, it would certainly fill quite a few holes and solve some mysteries. There is so little documentation that has been discovered so far to directly support it (or even to reject it). I hope that your article will stimulate Oxfordians to pursue new paths of research to uncover more evidence.

Proof, of course, may always elude us, as it has by intention for 400 years. We chase leads as we see them. Could the answer be in ‘the dyer’s hand’? What does that mean? Read on ...



Lovers of Shakespeare need not be reminded that in November of this year, 2023, we will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publication of the collected plays in an over 900–page volume known as the ‘First Folio’. The Folio story that is sure to prevail is some variant of the reverential view that two actor friends of ‘The Author’, Mr. William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, assembled his plays from perfect copies (‘scarce... a blot in his papers’)<sup>4</sup> and arranged to publish them. Absurd as that tale is to many of us, it continues to be defended by literary academics as well as by the profitable Shakespeare entertainment industry.

Oxfordians and other authorship advocates challenge the accepted narrative. Yet guided by *Vero Nihil Verius* as the North Star,<sup>5</sup> no one has been able to present a fully convincing and marketable story. J. Thomas Looney’s 1920 masterwork “*Shakespeare*” *Identified in Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford* lays the foundation for the most persuasive alternative authorship narrative, especially in James A. Warren’s new edition.<sup>6</sup> But the density of Looney’s scholarship that gives it credibility – never mind the author’s ‘funny’ name – has enabled the Shakespeare old guard to ridicule and bury it. It isn’t an easy sell.

An example of a ‘marketable’ Folio story is Oxford University scholar Emma Smith’s *The Making of Shakespeare’s First Folio*.<sup>7</sup> Professor Smith’s concise, ingeniously crafted work is engagingly presented and handsomely published in 179 pages. She avoids the usual Stratford hagiography, although she marks 1613 as the

end of the established author's writing career (p.61). Focusing instead on the enduring appeal of the plays Smith brings to life the character and characters of the period, an understanding of printing and publishing practices, the projected buyers, and the early readers. However, there is one essential problem from my point of view: Professor Smith's underlying premise is wrong!

The bedrock of Smith's story is that the Folio was, in her words, 'a commercial enterprise' (p.3) aimed at 'gallants who gathered in Paul's churchyard to collect news and gossip, to conduct business', and 'to show off'; that 'These human stories intersected in the publication of the First Folio, where men with technical, creative, dramatic and economic expertise met to produce the book' (p.84).

No! I assert, as have others before me, that the making of the Folio was 'A Family Affair',<sup>8</sup> a costly labor of love, sanctioned, I add, by the realm's supreme pater familias King James.<sup>9</sup> However, hindering its conception, the family would have to come to terms with 'official' dictum that the plays could only be issued under the approved name of William Shakespeare and their own constraints grappling with the legacy of scandal, contempt, and grief attached to Edward de Vere (to be argued later in this essay). By the time the Folio was published, concluding a period roughly between 1618 and 1623, this huge opus was politically contentious as well. In a manner of speaking, it emerged hot off the press.

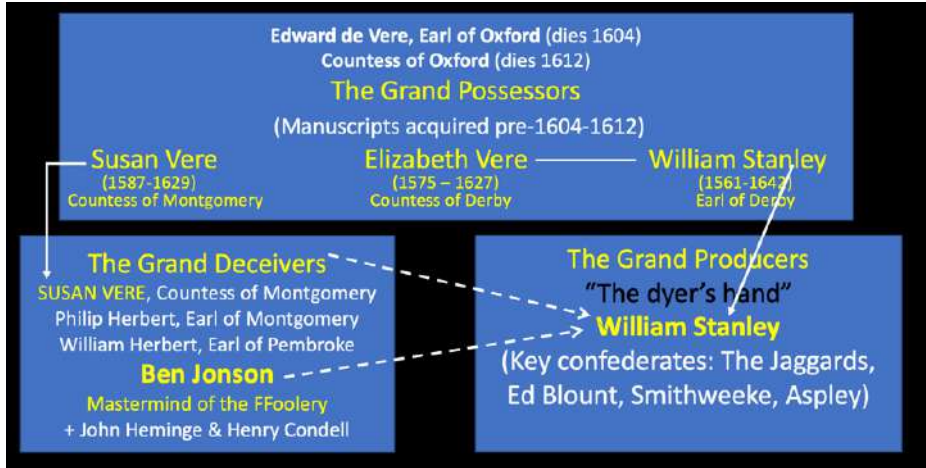
The elaborate enterprise to deflect any connection with Edward de Vere by means of the William Shakespeare decoy has probably lasted longer than they expected; and there is a caveat: the deception is a maze, and this exploration may well lead to new traps.

### **A Family Affair**

The foundational construct of my 'family enterprise' hypothesis is rendered in the graphic below, postulating three distinct stages of development and operations: 'The Grand Possessors' (an expression dating back to the preface of the 1609 quarto of *Troilus and Cressida*),<sup>10</sup> 'The Grand Deceivers' and 'The Grand Producers.' While I imagine that the theatres of the Grand Deceivers and the Grand Producers operated simultaneously, with considerable interaction, their activities were kept separate. Although this scheme may seem too simplistic, the *modus operandi* is

common enough when deception and secrecy are paramount. Call it ‘Folio laundering’.

**Figure 1:**



### The Grand Possessors

The Grand Possessors were the family members who came into early possession of the manuscripts, either directly from Edward de Vere, at least by the declining years of his life, or through his wife, Elizabeth Trentham de Vere, Countess of Oxford, for whom their possession, if known, was a liability.<sup>11</sup> Active possessors after Oxford’s death in 1604 were Elizabeth Vere, Countess of Derby, and her husband William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby; and Susan Vere who married into the wealthy Herbert family in December 1604. (Bridget Vere, wife of the 1st Earl of Berkshire, appears to have been a family outsider;<sup>12</sup> and Henry de Vere, the 18th Earl, was only 11 years old when his father died.)<sup>13</sup> In any case, there were compelling reasons to secure the manuscripts from the grasp of Robert Cecil (1st Earl of Salisbury from 1605), who from his rise to power in Elizabeth’s court until his death sought revenge on his brother-in-law Edward. As Lord Treasurer under King James, he could find ways of making legal claims on Oxford’s properties, including any works destined for publication, and he closely monitored his nieces’

lives, inheritance, and interests. The Dowager Countess Oxford and Robert Cecil both died in 1612, releasing tensions for surviving family members.

The spread of ages among the possessors is significant. William Stanley (b.1561) was 14 years older than his wife, only 11 years younger than Edward, his father-in-law. Mary Sidney Herbert, Susan's mother-in-law, and Stanley were born in the same year, Stanley being slightly older.

Letters and gossip report that the two couples – the Oxfords and the Derbys – were close friends, as does B.M. Ward's chapter on William Stanley.<sup>14</sup> We cannot pin down just when a plan to publish the plays was conceived, but it is reasonable to guess that after Stanley married Elizabeth in 1595, he would have had conversations about the wishes and legacy of his long-time friend, now father-in-law. A man of theatre himself, he had the greatest incentive to see the unreleased manuscripts published and performed, as well as family reasons to preserve them. Elizabeth and Susan had endured their father's rage and despair over his destiny, rawly exposed to their social circles through the unauthorized, posthumous publication of *Shake-speare's Sonnets*, in 1609. But as sensitive, highly literate women – both court favorites, who acted in masques and sensed reflected glow from the popularity of Shakespeare's plays – these two daughters, close but very different, would feel responsibility for their father's legacy. The lifetime silence of Henry de Vere about his father I believe also figures into the Folio story, but from an opposing angle (for further consideration).

Although Stanley and his wife spent time with his father-in-law while he was alive, Stanley preferred to retreat to his great Knowsley estate in Lancashire, where he was known to host acting companies. Records reveal, however, he performed duties for King James at court in London. Having been named Knight of the Garter in 1601 by Queen Elizabeth – an honor accorded to both Herbert brothers by King James – he would have had other ceremonial obligations that brought him to London as well as his visits with his father-in-law.<sup>15</sup> His wife Elizabeth, although a close confidante of Queen Anne and active in her court, served Derby estate interests as Lord of Mann (the Isle of Man) from 1612 until her death in 1627.

## The Grand Deceivers

The Grand Deceivers expand the family circle to include Susan's husband Philip, Earl of Montgomery, and her brother-in-law William, Earl of Pembroke. Both of the 'incomparable paire of brethren', to whom the Folio was dedicated, were highly influential in court politics. William Herbert, named Lord Chamberlain in 1615, carried a portfolio that included authority over the Master of the Revels and public theatre, registering plays and enforcing compliance with royal edicts. Philip Herbert personally was a favorite of King James, part of his close circle of advisors. The king was a collector of art and books and took pride in the architectural and decorative grandeur of his palaces; Philip fostered these interests.

I maintain that Susan Vere was 'the beating heart' of this theatre of operation. After her marriage into the formidable Herbert-Sidney family – linked to Oxford's destiny and misery through their ancestor, the notorious Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester – the Grand Possessors now had a secure operational foothold at Wilton House and their London residences. There is no way to specify when the notion of publishing the plays began to formulate in the minds of the possessors, who had to cope with emotional as well as practical considerations. This huge undertaking would have required years of planning and groundwork.

Oxfordian scholar Roger Stritmatter uncovered incontrovertible evidence that a potential publisher was offering encouragement by 1619, when the firm of Isaac and William Jaggard dedicated a folio-sized volume ARCHAIO-PLOUTOS (meaning 'ancient wealth', a collection of ten books 'of ancient and modern times') to 'The most Noble and Twin-like paire' Philip Herbert and '...his Wife, the Lady Susan ...' The extensive dedication, illuminated by Stritmatter, cannot be simply summarized.<sup>16</sup> But the Jaggards' introductory words to Susan warrant full citation, even without the elegant typefaces: '... To the truly vertuous and Noble Countess his Wife/the Lady Susan, Daughter to the Right Honourable Edward de Vere, Earle of Oxen-/ ford, Viscount Bulbec, Lord Sandford and of Badelesmere: / and Lord High Chamberlaine/ of England, etc.' Stritmatter comments that the 'etc.' invites adding 'other honors' to which the Earl might be entitled. The dedicatory text then envisions an orchard where the noble pair are invited 'to plucke where,

and while you please, and to bestow how, and when you list [please]: because they are all yours...’, suggesting the fruits of Edward de Vere’s labors.

The many tributes to Susan Vere attest to her virtues and the admiration in which she was held. Susan had the demeanor to calm the anxieties of other noble families who had been savaged in the plays or embroiled in her father’s scandals, notably her Cecil relatives and the Essex family circle.<sup>17</sup> Her brother Henry may have proudly borne the Oxford earldom, but his father’s legacy came with no honor to a young man whose mother died in debt and who aspired to an untarnished marriage that would restore Oxford dignity.<sup>18</sup> I find reason to suspect that Henry so vehemently opposed the project, King James had incentive beyond punishment for political interference to cool Henry’s heels in prison until the first copies of the Folio came off the press.<sup>19</sup>

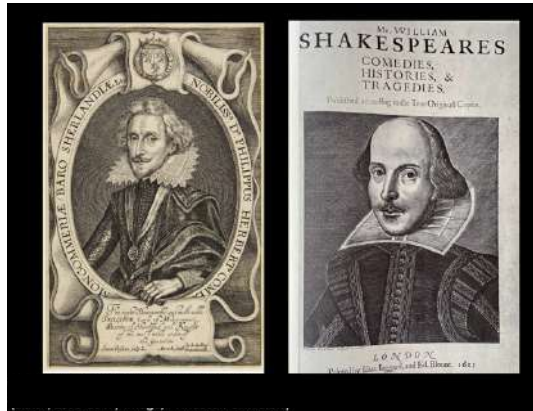
Two other Sidney family members were indirectly associated with the folio enterprise, most prominent, the Dowager Countess of Pembroke Mary Sidney Herbert, mother of William and Philip. She was honored as a writer and patron of writers, notable for translating the Psalms and for publishing the poetry of her revered brother Philip Sidney. She had known Edward for most of her life and was reputed to have promoted ‘Shakespeare.’<sup>20</sup> For Susan, whose mother died when she was only a year old, her mother-in-law would have been a wise counsellor, and Susan, in turn, an endearing daughter-in-law. They shared religious piety in common, not evident for Countess Mary’s two sons. Her death from smallpox, in September 1621, was without doubt a family catastrophe. The traditional year of mourning that followed would have contributed to delaying publication of the plays, first advertised in a catalogue of the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1622.

Mary Sidney’s younger brother, Robert Sidney (1563–1626) has escaped the limelight, yet there are more references to Robert Sidney – Viscount d’Lisle, later Earl of Leicester, and Knight of the Garter – in John Chamberlain’s letters than to any other Sidney.<sup>21</sup> In early adulthood, he held distinguished positions in Elizabeth’s court. King James, upon accession to the throne, elevated him as Baron Sidney of Penshurst and appointed him Lord Chamberlain to Queen Anne, a role in which he served until her death in 1619. As the Queen’s head of household, he was in charge of her many entertainments, including the masques for which her



court was famous. We won't digress to consider Robert Sidney's high standing as a patron of the arts, and especially as a patron of musicians.<sup>22</sup> For present interest, he figures most importantly as the father of Susan's dearest friend Mary Sidney Wroth, author of the mystifying and scandalous book *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* – not about Susan, except as a mythological character, but so named to honor their friendship.<sup>23</sup> Margaret Hannay, biographer of Mary Sidney Wroth, alludes to Susan throughout, without disclosing what family documents revealed about her. She quotes letters from Robert Sidney to his wife, written when he was traveling in service to Queen Anne or King James, which convey family affection for Susan and glimpses of interaction with her uncle Lord Treasurer Robert Cecil.<sup>24</sup> Ben Jonson was a close family friend. Notably, he wrote a 102-line tribute entitled 'To Penshurst', extolling their virtues and the hospitality at their Kent estate, where he lived for a time in 1611. The poem is included as a choice example of Ben Jonson's writing in the principal resource for Renaissance period 'non-dramatic prose and verse', consulted by English majors at American universities in the mid-20th century.<sup>25</sup> Mark the name 'Penshurst', the estate that still belongs to Sidney descendants in our time. In addition to their public archives, it seems the family maintains private correspondence with restricted access that reveals further insights into relationships and prohibited topics. If true, speaking as a family historian, I must argue that is their right. But if our common aspiration is to find sources that can illuminate the greatest mystery of literary history, Sidney descendants wield a heavy blow at the truth.

Everyone in this scheme played a part. We might wonder, for example, who brought on Martin Droeshout to scratch into brass the iconic Shakespeare cartoon? Consider Philip Herbert, noted for his wit as well as his interest in collecting art, a passion he shared with King James. It is reasonable to guess he came up with the idea of a title page that could double as playbill. While choosing an unknown artist in his early 20s might seem inexplicable given the grand pretenses of the Folio, undoubtedly Droeshout showed cleverness for the job. And Philip had to search no further for a model poster child than the ridiculous, disproportioned Simon de Passe engraving of himself.<sup>26</sup>

**Figure 2:**

Philip, Earl of Montgomery, by Simon de Passe (1595-1647)  
Image, Princeton University.<sup>26</sup>

### **The Grand Deception: Trusted non-family members**

One can imagine Ben Jonson with quill in hand as the family plotted their deception. Jonson was the public face of the enterprise, rewarded by his long-time patron William Herbert, Lord Pembroke. In the Folio period, Jonson was at the apex of his fame as poet, creator of masques, comedic playwright, essayist, raconteur. There should be no need to allude to his reputation or experience except that Stratford traditionalists diminish his role in order to elevate Heminges and Condell, magnifying the boast that these fellow actors and shareholders with Shakespeare in the King's Men did the important work of gathering Shakespeare's plays and publishing them from perfect originals. The traditional position suggests that Jonson lent his celebrity only by penning an epigram facing the Droeshout portrait and an introduction, and that was about it.

Some Oxfordians have taken an opposite stand from Stratford traditionalists, asserting that this pair of actors had nothing to do with penning their introductory tribute to the 'Incomparable brethren' or the epistle 'To the great Variety of Readers', that they were simply a set-up for Ben Jonson's wit. I argue to the contrary. Nobody had a more vested interest in the outcome of the Folio project than theatre shareholders and all those they represented. John Heminges (as his

name appears in firm, legible handwriting on legal documents) and Henry Condell were well established investors in popular entertainment, the rapidly developing, competitive, and very risky theatre business. Heminges, the senior and more authoritative of the two men, managed accounts for the Lord Chamberlain's men in 1603, when Shakspeare was a member of the company.

While the overall Folio enterprise may have been cloaked in secrecy, the 18 previously registered plays couldn't simply be swept up and published anew without negotiations. One can imagine the alarm, even fury, at meddling by unknown backers pushing old plays and a slew of new plays (nine comedies, four histories, five tragedies) into the market in an outrageously expensive publication. For whose benefit? To add insult to injury, some actor named 'William Shakespeare' was being given all the attention and credit as the playwright. Whoever remembered a fellow by the name of William Shake-whatever besides old timers from back in the early days of the Lord Chamberlain's Men?

The duo may have played fools on stage, but they weren't fools! Just because there is no record of any literary output doesn't mean that they couldn't write foolery. Actors, given limited access to printed scripts, had to be able to extemporize, to develop characters and action without prompts. We need only look at the dialog between Hamlet and the traveling actors, in Act II, scene ii, to appreciate that William Stanley and Lord Chamberlain Herbert recognized the importance of their trust. As Hamlet says to Polonius, 'let them [the actors] be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.'

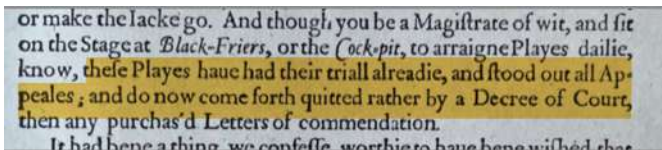
*Hamlet* II. ii. [emphasis added]

'The Epistle Dedicatorie', signed by John Heminge [sic] and Henry Condell, is seemingly modelled on Jonson's epigram 'To the Great Example of Honor and Virtue, the Most Noble William, Earl of Pembroke, Lord Chamberlain, etc. [sic]', from the Jonson folio edition of *The Workes*, published in 1616.<sup>27</sup> Hard to argue with the similarities and other known Jonsonian flourishes. But the Folio dedication is so over the top, such absurd blather, I think it more likely that Heminges and Condell are delivering a parody of Jonson's cryptic appreciation to the Most Noble William. The 'Incomparable Paire of Brethren' also may have

revved up this nonsense, all poking fun at Ben, who was in on the act. The important point to make is that Heminges and Condell were not co-opted. They were collaborators.

The document to ‘The Great Variety of Readers’, credited to John Heminge (in larger type than Henrie [sic] Condell), is yet more telling: These jokesters do not mention the name Shakespeare even once! They refer only to ‘the Author’. This epistle, while hilarious at the start, is purposefully crafted for a targeted segment of readers – the ‘Magistrate[s] of wit’ – who Heminges (the more authoritative of the two men) urgently needed to caution.<sup>28</sup> ‘Decree of Court’ is a key, an alert to producers at Black-Friers and the Cock-pit, theatres by name, that the plays now are no longer theirs to play with. They’ve ‘stood out all Appeales’, which implies that battles over future authority had already been fought and lost.

### Figure 3:



‘To the Great Variety of Readers’, First Folio<sup>28</sup>

Even if Ben Jonson embellished and scripted words credited to Heminge and Condell in the published text, it was in his self-interest to keep arm’s length. Jonson’s ambitions required the trust and good will of the theatrical community. The two signatories were credible advocates for those interests, not Ben Jonson. The seriousness of ‘Decree of Court’ is underscored later in this essay by a different clue in Sonnet 111 of *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. Foolery shines everywhere ...

### Follow the money

It isn’t poetic to say, ‘Money shines everywhere’, but we can be sure that no-fools John Heminges and Henry Condell, and other theatre investors, looked critically at the Folio project with cold financial interest. The Crown had more than a financial stake in taking full control of the plays of William Shakespeare. The Shakespeare brand had pushed the theatres to new popularity and exacerbated ongoing worries about theatres as sites of social protest, criminal activity, and

potential anarchy. Without scholarly authority, I will argue that controlling, potentially strangling the theatres, as modern autocracies do over freedom of the press, was the overarching interest of King James in the family's initiative to publish the plays in a single, definitive volume. The Spanish marriage crisis illustrated crown foresight. Subsequent political crises would provide proof.

The least supportable of all my arguments that the Folio was a family enterprise requires identifying who made decisions about what would be included and what wouldn't, and who could exercise the right to reprint old plays in a folio format or publish new plays that had no known previous ownership. I assert that only a 'Grand Possessor' of the 18 unpublished plays was positioned to take on that role, and that was William Stanley. He would have been aided by William Herbert who, as Lord Chamberlain to King James, exercised legal authority, with heavy hand as needed, on behalf of the Crown. The Herbert brothers and Stanley had great personal wealth to underwrite the project. Stanley had no official court position to defend, and he had high standing and respect, as well as deep personal interest to make the commitment. He also had experience producing plays, working collaboratively with all the 'hands' required for a vast and complicated operation. The Earl of Derby's theatre was separate from that of the 'Grand Deceivers' – the theatre of Ben Jonson – figuratively providing the cover for the staggering, ingenious production.

University of Oxford – Lady Margaret Hall college Career Development Fellow, Ben Higgins has plunged into the unfathomable morass of the publishing enterprise in a recent book issued by Oxford University Press: *Shakespeare's Syndicate: The First Folio, its Publishers, and the Early Modern Book Trade*.<sup>29</sup> Higgins's detailed investigation will stand as an unrivaled contribution to present and future understanding of the complexities of this undertaking. But however exhaustively he sorts out the investment and labor of each of the four named printing/publishing enterprises, he does not show an orchestrator of all the moving pieces. Someone deeply invested in the outcome had to mastermind this superb achievement and have final decision-making authority.

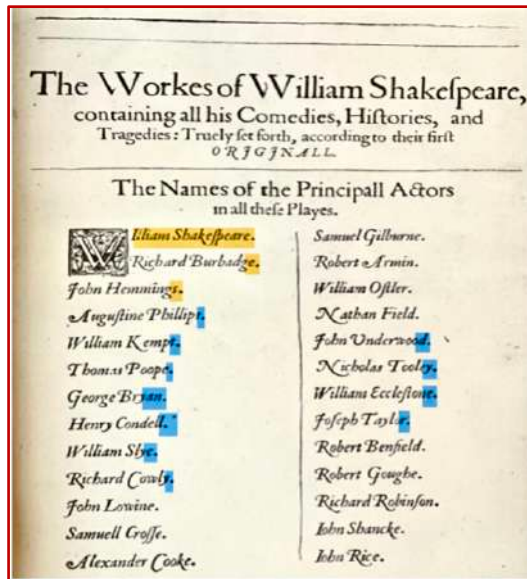
To use modern terminology, I assert that William Stanley was executive producer and managing editor of the Folio corpus, the 890 pages of play scripts.

Even more intriguing, this elusive Earl may well have already had a personal hand in the plays per se, as writer, collaborator, revisionist, dyer?

### William Stanley, ‘The dyer’s hand’

I must thank Peter Dickson, author of *Bardgate*,<sup>30</sup> in which he investigates multiple authorship claims, for leading me to *William Stanley as Shakespeare*, by John Rollett,<sup>31</sup> thence leading me to William Niederkorn’s long article in ‘The Brooklyn Rail’,<sup>32</sup> where he illustrates an acrostic showing how the arrangement of final letters in groups of actors’ names on the Folio page listing of ‘Principall Actors in all these Playes’ are grouped to spell ‘stenley’ and ‘dyer’. Other clever minds have found further encoding.<sup>33</sup> ‘Steanley’ or ‘Stenley’ cannot be accidental, and ‘dyer’ must have meaning for the wits (Jaggard? Heminges? Jonson?) who contrived the layout. The spelling of Stanley is cryptic: Derby, of course, is pronounced Darby.

Figure 4:



Read ‘William Shakespeare es stanley’ and ‘dyer’  
[Letters highlighted by J. Werlin]

The prevailing view seems to be that ‘dyer’ is the name of another writer, Sir Edward Dyer. I hold that dyer does not refer to a proper name but to connotations of the word. By recent coincidence, a friend sent me a book of essays by W. H. Auden, titled *The Dyer’s Hand*.<sup>34</sup> The essays – 527 pages, no index – explore a writer’s craft, adapted to purpose and circumstance. Auden, Oxford professor of poetry and a Shakespeare scholar, discloses his meaning of ‘the dyer’s hand’ only metaphorically. The word dyer in the 17th century could well have conveyed more than obvious description of someone who dyes cloth, a craftsman who adds, blends, or changes color of fabric. An artist with words, ‘dyer’ could be likened to ‘weaver’. Dyer, I believe, is a broad clue to Stanley’s role, emulating the playwright-dyer in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*.

### Sonnet 111

O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,  
 The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,  
 That did not better for my life provide,  
 Than public means which public manners breeds.  
 Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,  
 And almost thence my nature is subdu’d  
 To what it works in, like the dyer’s hand: ... [Underline added]

Sonnet 111 sheds harsh light on Edward de Vere’s low social approval. Allow this interpretation: ‘Fortune did not provide the means for me to live as you or I thought I should, leading to my “harmful deeds” and common “manners”. I was dependent on “public means”; I was paid for writing plays to appeal to common tastes, under a “brand” name (Shakespeare). I became that sort of person, subduing my nature, as “the dyer’s hand” shows the color of that which he works in.’ (An analogy with Lady Macbeth, whose bloodied hands cannot be washed of her guilt.) This sonnet, as others around it, seeks forgiveness from Henry Wroithesley, who I believe now rejects him. In his defense, he decries the circumstances of his life.

### The Tragical Enigma: Horatio and the ‘wounded name’

[M]y poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life? *King Lear*, V. iii.

Why, *marry!* would Susan Vere burdened with her father’s ‘wounded name’, have sanctioned publication of the *Tragedie of King Lear*, showing the King’s irrational

heartlessness towards Cordelia (his ‘poor fool’, who spoke truth to power), his cruel evocation of his two elder daughters (her sisters) and the vengeful bastard son of Lear’s alter-ego Gloucester (possibly her respected half-sibling Edward)? What grief it must have caused her to anticipate yet more popularity for *Hamlet*, given the pitiless mockery of her grandfather William Cecil (Polonius) and the insinuation that her mother Anne (Ophelia) had taken her own life and thus was denied Christian burial? Why include *Timon of Athens*, exposing the crazed dissolution of her father’s mind and soul? After all, *Timon* was unknown until the Folio was published. It need not have seen the light of day.

If the ultimate decider was William Stanley, as I suppose, a further question looms: Why would Oxford’s devoted friend, who was well aware of family sensitivities, release *King Lear* in the brutal version in which it appears in the Folio. After all, none of the versions, including the one first ascribed to William Shakespeare [sic],<sup>35</sup> appeared in print until after Oxford’s death, so why not select or create one with the ‘happy ending’?

It’s my guess that Susan Vere neither read nor saw performances of the autobiographical tragedies, nor any play that exposed family members to ridicule and shame; that she would have had nothing to do with the selection and publication of the plays in the Folio. Imagine the pain, the grief reading her father’s plays would have inflicted on Susan. Drawing on my experience as a personal historian, we don’t claw open old wounds.

Ben Jonson may have represented Susan’s concerns and offered his counsel to her respected brother-in-law, but I imagine that William Stanley had the authority to include, edit, or withhold whatever he saw fit. He emerges as a second ‘beating heart’, animating Hamlet’s Horatio.

Oh God, Horatio, what a wounded name  
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story. (*Hamlet* V. ii.)



This is not the place to examine extensive textual evidence that William Stanley – with or without Oxford’s collaboration – wrote parts of, or revised, problematic plays. But *King Lear* offers a persuasive example. While the language and dramatic plot are quintessentially Shakespeare, a tribute to the king is inserted, incongruously, immediately before Lear takes a knife to his belly. ‘Stanley’s words’ are spoken by the Duke of Albany, husband of Goneril, Lear’s eldest daughter (just as Stanley, Earl of Derby, was husband of Oxford’s eldest daughter, Elizabeth). In final moments of the closing scene of this bitter tragedy Albany, who has remained faithful to the banished king, addresses the assembled ‘Friends of my soule’:

You lords and noble friends, know our intent:  
 What comfort to this great decay [Lear’s suffering] may come  
 Shall be applied. For us, we will resign,  
During the life of this old Majesty  
To him our absolute power... [Underline added]  
 (*Lear*, V. iii.)

Draw out those words – ‘For us, we will resign during the life of this old majesty to him our absolute power’ – and you will appreciate the fearless beating heart that compelled Stanley to do all in his power to save the works of his disgraced father-in-law and beloved friend, the unparalleled soul of the age.

The puzzling placement of *The Tempest* at the forefront of the plays requires more analysis than is relevant here. Some scholars, including Looney, have argued it isn’t a play by Edward de Vere. Stanley may have staged it, but who can doubt that Prospero delivers Oxford’s own valedictory. ‘Our revels now are ended ...’

William Stanley has not left himself to us. He was Horatio. He has left us a *roman à clef* to read and imagine on stage: The Tragical-Comical Tales of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, aka ‘William Shakespeare.’

## Afterword

Was William Stanley ‘William Shakespeare’? For more than a century, serious scholars have proposed that William Stanley was, in fact, the author William Shakespeare.<sup>31,36</sup> For a relevant summary of arguments and references asserting an authorial claim for Stanley, I encourage the reader to review the debate between

Amanda Hinds and Alexander Waugh recapped in the July 2019 issue of the *DVS Newsletter* (Vol. 26, No.3, pp.13–29): ‘Who was “Our English Terrance Will: Shake-Speare”? Could it have been William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby?’ Note that neither one alleges that Derby was Shakespeare, but our Editor thinks it likely that he contributed to the plays and helped in their publication before and after his father-in-law’s death. Others carry on the debate.<sup>37</sup>

The de Vere family story concludes six years after the Folio was published, with the death of Susan, from smallpox, preceded by all her siblings. It appears her final years were very troubled. But her reputation was unblemished, preserved in a eulogy by poet William Browne of Tavistock. Could the closing lines refer to a ‘tome’, to the Folio?

In thy name there is a tomb  
If the world can give it room  
For a Vere and Herbert’s wife  
Outspeaks all tombs, outlives all life.<sup>38</sup>

The ‘House of Oxford’ effectively died with her brother the 18th Earl, in June 1625, of fever suffered during voluntary military service in the Hague, doggedly supporting the greater Protestant cause. John Chamberlain, who had occasionally reported on Henry’s exploits during the previous decade, wrote to Dudley Carleton [London, June 12, 1625]:

My very goode Lord: We heare the ill newes of the Earle of Oxford’s decease, which is the more lamented for that he was the only hope and support of so ancient and noble a house, which is like to go to ruine... But this is the common fate of all worldly honour, to fade and fall.<sup>39</sup>

Fade and fall are common fate, but we haven’t understood why Edward de Vere has not been allowed to live on as our greatest artists do, celebrated and memorialized for all the world to know his name. Why is it that an invented character has been attached to William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon, for a man who couldn’t even write his name to become known as the beloved author ‘William Shakespeare’?

Heminges and Condell led us to an answer, with a warning to their colleagues: ‘The playes come forth quitted by a Decree of Court.’ In Sonnet 111 we find Oxford’s own explanation: ‘Fortune did not better for my life provide than public means’ (i.e. I had to write for a living) and ‘my name receives a brand.’ With the publication of the Folio, plays issued under the brand name ‘William Shakespeare’ became Crown property. While the plays have long been in public domain, judging by current law enacted by Parliament, the Crown continues to enforce its authority over the name ‘William Shakespeare’.<sup>40</sup> An irreverent analogy might be the Disney Corporation’s ownership of ‘Donald Duck’, regulating exactly how Donald can be portrayed. Although everyone recognizes that Donald is a duck, no duck looks or speaks like Donald.

The reach of current law is far outside the family mystery we have been exploring, but we must challenge the intent. I recall a plea some twenty years ago by a British friend: ‘Our empire is dying. Don’t take away our Shakespeare from us.’ Instead, a new tragedy unfolds: ‘Shakespeare’ is dying, suffocated by archaic law and yesteryear’s adversaries to preserve a myth that cannot rationally be sustained.

*Vero nihil verius*



## End Notes

Dates [in brackets] of letters cited from ‘Letters of John Chamberlain’ are shown that way throughout the two-volume work. The editors chose this form for consistency, as Chamberlain formatted the date in different ways from letter to letter.

1. Joella Werlin, ‘Shakespeare Foolery, 1623: The First Folio and the Countess of Montgomery’s Disappearance’, in the *DVS Newsletter* (Vol. 29, No.4, p.18–28, October 2022).
2. Shakespeare Resource Center shows the word ‘fool’ appears in some form 423 times in the Shakespeare canon: <https://www.bardweb.net/content/ac/fools.html>
3. Quotation with permission of Frank Lawler. See Abel Lefranc, *Behind the Mask of William Shakespeare*, translated and annotated by Frank Lawler (Cary, North Carolina: Veritas Publications, 2022), copyright by Frank Lawler.

4. John Heminge and Henrie Condell, ‘To the great Variety of Readers’: ‘...And what he thought, he uttered with such easiness, that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers.’
5. *Vero nihil verius*: nothing truer than truth, as on the Oxford family crest.
6. James A. Warren ed., *Shakespeare Identified* by J. Thomas Looney, *Centenary Edition* (Cary, North Carolina: Veritas, 2019).
7. Emma Smith, *The Making of Shakespeare’s First Folio* (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2015).
8. Ruth Lloyd Miller, *Oxfordian Vistas* (NY-London: Kennikat Press, 1975) Ch. I: ‘The First Folio: A Family Affair’.
9. The question is how early on King James knew about the Folio project, and what level of active support he gave it. He and Queen Anne each nurtured close personal friendships within the ‘possessor’ families, reaching back to the beginning of his reign; and he was a known enthusiast for Shakespeare plays.
10. *Troilus and Cressida*, 1609 quarto, preface: ‘A never writer, to an ever reader’ ... ‘never staled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar’ ... ‘but thanke fortune for the scape it hath made amongst you. Since by the grand possessors’ wills, I believe, you should have prayd for them ...’ [Underline added.]
11. See Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary* (Liverpool University Press, 2003), Ch. 85, ‘The Dowager and Her Heir’, pp.431–42. Selections of correspondence 1609–12 includes a long petition 22 July 1611 from the Dowager Countess Oxford to the Lord Treasurer (Robert Cecil) and Lord Privy Seal (Henry Howard), seeking their intervention to stop evil company and ‘dangerous ways’ of Henry de Vere. Following Oxford’s death, King James (advised by Lord Treasurer Cecil?) had reduced Oxford’s £1000 annuity to £200, which Henry, at age 18, sought to collect directly, unknown to his mother. It is difficult to summarize this chapter in isolation, but the picture emerges that the Countess was beholden to Cecil and the family picture was not a happy one.
12. Norman McClure ed. *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939). De Vere family dynamics can’t be drawn from known family letters, as those that survive rarely allude to any conflicts, other than letters Robert Cecil saved to exhibit Edward de Vere under the harshest light possible. John Chamberlain to Sir Dudley Carleton [November 8, 1608]: ‘The Countess of Darbie [Elizabeth Vere] and the Lady Norris [Bridget

Vere] come to town tomorrow, and bring the Lord Treasurer's daughter with them to be married ... They are to lie at Rutland House but the Lady Norris desires to lodge at the Lady Copes, which shewes (me thinks) that there is no great soundness between the sisters.' (*Letters* Vol. I, p.268). Bridget's marriage was not a happy one, and she did not move in the highest court circles as did her sisters. We can't draw any certain conclusion from her *King Lear* counterpart, but middle daughter Regan and her husband Duke of Cornwall are the most cruelly contemptuous of her father.

13. Henry de Vere (1593–1625), age 11 when his father died, was a year younger than Edward was when the 16th Earl of Oxford died. His mother, however, retained wardship. In an appeal to Robert Cecil, August 1604, to intervene with the King who had reduced the £1,000 annuity to £200, the Dowager used words 'the desolate estate [of] my poore Childe and myself' and 'I look to you [Robert Cecil], to appeal to 'his Maiestie]' to sustain my miserable estate'. See Alan H. Nelson, *op.cit.*, p.427.
14. B.M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550–1604)* (London: John Murray, 1928), pp.315–28. [See review of new edition, ed. James A. Warren, p.41-2.]
15. Re William Stanley: See *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, Vol 1, p.522. [London, April 7, 1614] '[T]he King, Prince and Lordes rode in their robes to the parliament... the Duke of Lenox carried the marshalls rod or staffe, the earle of Shrewsberrie the cap of maintenance, and the earle of Darbie the sword... I write you these pettie particulars that you may know how these new English peeres were placed.' There are no later references to ceremonial roles of Derby in particular, but numerous occasions calling together Knights of the Garter.
16. Roger Stritmatter, "Bestow How, and When you List": The de Veres and the 1623 Shakespeare Folio'. *The 1623 Shakespeare First Folio: A Minority Report*, Special Issue of *Brief Chronicles* (Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship, 2016).
17. Families opposing the Folio project would include descendants of Robert Cecil, Thomas Cecil, extended family of the Earl of Essex, Anne Vavasour, her son Sir Edward Vere, and her Knyvet and Clifford relations; relations of the earls of Arundell and Northumberland, Thomas Howard; and Henry Wroithesley, to name a few. Re: Bridget Vere, see Note 12.
18. See Note 13: Re: Henry de Vere's financial standing after his mother's death: [January 9, 1613] John Chamberlain reported: 'The Countess of Oxford is dead of this new disease [smallpox] and left her sonne toward 1500, land and all her

jewells and stuffe on condition he pay her legacies which rise to 2000: and bestow 500 on a tombe for his father and her.” Oxford’s straitened financial circumstances were destined to show considerable improvement. Chamberlain writes: [April 19, 1623] ‘The earle of Oxford still lies by it [in prison] and so is like to do till either the lord of Buckingham come or send: there is a marriage treading (or rather a contract of a yeare old or more as some say) twixt him and the Lady Diana Cecill with whom he is to have 4000 in monie and 500 in land presently, and 500 land a yeare more after her father’s decease.’ The 18th Earl came out not only considerably better than anticipated, but winning Diana Cecil, a great beauty, reunited the two storied families.

19. For the better part of two years, Henry had been in and out of the Tower of London for political troublemaking, notably, for trying to foil the King’s scheme to marry Prince Charles to the daughter of King Phillip III of Spain. What was behind the timing of his release? The Spanish match had been firmly rebuffed in October 1623. The first sale of the Folio was recorded in December (See Emma Smith, p.160). John Chamberlain reports as follows, p.537 [January 3, 1624] ‘On Tuesday last [December 26, 1623] the earle of Oxford after twentie months’ imprisonment was released out of the Towre. The Lord of Kensington caried the warrant, and conveyed him thence after sixe a clocke at night to the earle of Excesters, where he lodged and on new years day married his daughter the Lady Diana Cecill, with a portion of 30000 [sic!] *viis et modis*: that day after dinner he went to the court and was conducted to his Majesties presence by the Duke of Buckingham, where he found gracious acceptance with goode words and good counsaile.’ (It sounds like a peculiarly jolly occasion for former adversaries.)
20. Mary Sidney is so extraordinary in her own right that neither her married name nor title are needed for further distinction. In her time, she was most beloved for saving and publishing works of her elder brother, poet Philip Sidney. For intriguing speculation on Mary Sidney’s support of theatre and Shakespeare, see Margaret P. Hannay, *Philip’s Phoenix: Mary Sidney Countess of Pembroke* (Oxford University Press: 1990) p.249–50, fn. 65.
21. See *Chamberlain* Index, Vol.II, p.684. While Chamberlain gives attention to Queen Anne primarily in connection with political or personal events, his many references to Robert Sidney relate to political, or social, circumstances.
22. See Leeds Barroll, *Anna of Denmark, Queen of England – A Cultural Biography* (U. Pennsylvania Press: 2001) for cultural interests fostered by Queen Anne.

23. Mary Ellen Lamb, *Mary Wroth: The Countess of Montgomery's Urania (Abridged)* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011).
24. Margaret P. Hannay, *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth* (London & NY: Routledge, 2010). Note that the subject of this book Mary Sidney Wroth – wife of Robert Wroth II; daughter of Robert Sidney and wife Barbara Gamage – is the niece of the famous Mary Sidney, the mother-in-law of Susan Vere Herbert. (Yes, relationships are confusing!)
25. See Hyder E. Rollins, Herschel Baker, *The Renaissance in England: Non-dramatic Prose and Verse* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1954), pp.493–4.
26. Appreciation to filmmaker Robin Philips, who demonstrated the congruency of these two images in an early version of her film ‘*Shakespeare: The Truth Behind the Name*’. <https://www.groundbreakerfilms.com/>
27. Cited in Rollins & Baker, from ‘*Epigrams*’ (1616), p.491.
28. The reader is urged to look at and read the full document ‘To the great Variety of Readers’ as it appears in an original Folio. Throughout the ‘fore-play’, the layout, differing font sizes and styles, different spelling of names, all contribute to the deception.
29. Ben Higgins, *Shakespeare's Syndicate: The First Folio, its Publishers, and the Early Modern Book Trade* (England: Oxford University Press, 2022).
30. Peter Dickson, *Bardgate*. 2 vols. Citations from *Bardgate* have been made available through correspondence with Peter Dickson. I am grateful for his help, his insights, and his references. Volume III of his trilogy is due to appear in 2023. For updated information, see: <https://bardgate.com/f/bardgate-ii-iii>
31. John M. Rollett, *William Stanley as Shakespeare: Evidence of Authorship by the Sixth Earl of Derby* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2015).
32. William S. Niederkorn, ‘Shake-Speare Fission’, *The Brooklyn Rail*, Feb. 2013. <https://brooklynrail.org/2013/02/books/shake-speare-fission>
33. See Marie Travis, ‘Thoughts on Shakespeare’, for many encoding possibilities on the Actors’ page, including ‘William Shakespeare es ste[an]ley’. <https://mariedelgadotravis.com/2022/06/09/2920/>
34. W.H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Vintage, 1989) essays c.1948–1962.
35. See Alistair Everett, *The Tragedie of King Lear*, in *Dating Shakespeare's Plays: A Critical Review of the Evidence*, Kevin Gilvary, editor (England, Tunbridge Wells: Parapress. 2010). Reproduction of the title page to the First Quarto, *The Chronicle*

*History of King Lear*, 1608, by permission of Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, p.399.

36. See new translation of Abel Lefranc, *Behind the Mask of William Shakespeare*, translated and annotated by Frank Lawler, op. cit. (Veritas Publications: 2022).
37. John Raithel. 'The Other W.S., William Stanley, Sixth Earl of Derby' *The Oxfordian* Volume XI 2009: [https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/Oxfordian2009\\_Raithel\\_Stanley.pdf](https://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/Oxfordian2009_Raithel_Stanley.pdf)
38. See Gordon Godwin (ed.), *The Poems of William Browne of Tavistock*, 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner, 1894. Vol.2, p.294–5. Credit to Oxfordian Ron Roffel for the observation that 'tomb' could be read 'tome,' alluding to Susan's role in bringing about the Folio. <https://www.youtube.com/@ronroffel1462>
39. Letters of John Chamberlain, Vol.II, p.622.
40. A part of the answer is embedded in a 14-page Crown document, issued under the short title 'the Shakespeare Birthplace, &c., Trust Act, 1961', published by Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Further citation is not offered here, as nuances and references (including to an Act of Parliament in 1891) are inscrutable for a layman unfamiliar with British law. See the SBT website for further insights or obfuscation. <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/charity-commission-scheme/>



### Editor's note

'The thought piece that follows is based on several hypotheses which I invite the reader to mull over, to challenge, and/or to help substantiate. The points below call for further development.' (p.5 above)

Taking Joella Werlin at her words above, readers are encouraged to attend the Autumn Meeting of the DVS and SAT at The Charterhouse, London on Saturday 14th October 2023 to debate any issues in her two articles, which were the outcome of a DVS research grant. The Editor strongly supports the hypothesis that the First Folio was a 'Family Affair', that William Stanley was a key but often forgotten 'Grand Possessor', 'Deceiver' and even 'Producer' of the plays, and that the roles of Susan de Vere, the 18th Earl of Oxford and Henry Wroithesley in opposing publication under Edward de Vere's name are further points for debate – as are the roles of Heminges and Condell.

