

CHAPTER 2



EVERMORE IN SUBJECTION

[1562–1569]

ON THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1562, THE LONDON DIARIST HENRY Machyn recorded that between five and six o'clock in the afternoon, the twelve-year-old earl of Oxford came riding out of Essex "with seven-score horse all in black through London and Cheap and Ludgate and so to Temple Bar." The child's parade was hundreds of feet long as it progressed over the drawbridge and through the arches of London's Aldgate, on the eastern side of the city. With 140 horsemen riding behind the youth bearing the colorless cast of mourning, de Vere took his entrance onto the worldly stage as the boy in black.

As his procession made its way into London, the first sensations that would have struck a child from the country were the swarming noise and the powerful smells. Elizabethan London was a loud and odiferous city, hemmed in by the Thames to the south and a wall in all other directions that was broken every quarter mile by gates—Aldgate, Bishopsgate, Moorgate, Cripplegate, Aldersgate, Newgate, and Ludgate. The scents of a summer's worth of garbage and filth perfumed Aldgate Street as Londoners no doubt paused to observe such an opulent procession of mourning forging its way west. De Vere's train would in a matter of minutes have converged onto Cheapside, a wide thoroughfare and shopping district featuring vendors offering up everything from breads and puddings to live peacocks and apes. The commercial traffic and racket of haggling would have only taken on a more polyglot air as de Vere's parade headed down Paternoster Row near St. Paul's Cathedral. St. Paul's was London's largest church, and its yard was also the site of the city's booksellers, who hawked their literary wares in competition with hellfire preachers, and, often, public executions. Every day the courts were in session, men hung for their crimes—with pronounced traitors suffering the

posthumous indignity of having their bloody heads displayed on pikes at London Bridge.

Down Fleet Street toward Temple Bar, de Vere approached a more affluent section of the city. As the road, which became the Strand, veered closer to the Thames, de Vere would have heard the echoes of the boatmen—the mass transit operators of their day—cry out, “Eastward ho!” and “Westward ho!” And as the river’s path flowed closer to the Strand, the houses got richer. Leicester House, Arundel House, Somerset House: All these mansions abutted the Thames, eliminating any worries of waste disposal and, since they were upstream from London, (somewhat) clean water. De Vere’s dark parade would have ended with a right turn off the Strand near an apartment complex called the Savoy. Situated behind the north side of this prosperous section of the Strand was the earl of Oxford’s destination.

Cecil House, Sir William Cecil’s estate at the edge of Covent Garden, was to be de Vere’s new home. (Pulled down in the late seventeenth century, the former Cecil House grounds are now in the heart of the West End theater district—roughly where the Lyceum Theatre now stands.) As master of the Court of Wards, Cecil was now master of an underage aristocrat whose life and lands would never be wholly returned to him.

Although Cecil would later write of it disparagingly, Cecil House was hardly a property to be ashamed of. The philosopher John Locke, when he lived in the same house a century later, spent the most productive years of his middle age amid the greenery of the estate’s spacious gardens, enjoying the intellectual climate of this prosperous neighborhood. When the twelve-year-old de Vere moved into Cecil House in the autumn of 1562, the grounds and gardens were being expanded.

One late Elizabethan writer spoke of Cecil House as “very fair . . . raised with bricks, proportionately adorned with four turrets placed at the four quarters of the house; within, it is curiously beautified with rare devices and especially the oratory, placed in an angle of the great chamber.” No further clues identify Cecil House’s ornaments, although at the same time Cecil was also ordering busts of twelve Roman emperors, marble pillars, and other classically inspired artifacts and artworks for Burghley, his country estate in Stamford, Lincolnshire.

Gardens and libraries distinguished Cecil House. The master of the household afforded himself some of the finest and most extensive of both. For two decades, Cecil employed the noted horticulturalist John Gerard to design and maintain his numerous gardens at Cecil House and elsewhere. De Vere must have taken solace in Gerard’s company, continuing the botanical education begun under that noteworthy pharmaculturalist Sir Thomas Smith. *Love’s Labor’s Lost* even uses Gerard’s floral imagery from his pamphlet *Herbal: Or General History of Plants* to pinpoint the seasonal emergence of the cuckoo bird—associating the late spring “cuckoo” with the blooming of silver-white lady-smocks.

Then there was the library. The variety of books kept within Cecil House was truly astonishing for those fortunate few who enjoyed access. If the library of Sir Thomas Smith offered a broad-ranging introduction to the great works of Western culture, Cecil's library provided the encyclopedic resources for de Vere's graduate studies. Some 1,700 titles and 250 manuscripts lined the walls of this idyllic scholarly retreat. While the straightlaced Cecil paid little mind to contemporary plays and poetry, Cecil House's stock of classics and tomes from the Continent was something to behold. Scores of Shakespeare's primary sources can be found within its catalog, many of which were in the original Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and Spanish editions.

The physical environment would have been welcoming for an intellectually engaged young prodigy from the hinterlands of Essex.

But less than two months after de Vere arrived at court, the government faced a crisis. In October, Queen Elizabeth was diagnosed with smallpox. The deadly and disfiguring disease had only recently killed the countess of Bedford, so fears were heightened that, like Mary and Edward before her, Elizabeth would die young and childless, leaving behind a country without a clear line of succession. The queen's death would have introduced just the sort of royal discontinuity that civil wars were fought over. Factions had already begun to emerge for at least three rival claimants to the throne.

Lord Robert Dudley was making his own claims as well. In 1562, the usurping holder of many of de Vere's lands also came closest to marrying royalty. The previous January, the political tragedy *Gorboduc* had been staged for the queen as part of a propaganda campaign to promote Dudley as Her Majesty's future husband. Soon thereafter, a majority vote of the prestigious Order of the Garter had endorsed Dudley's marriage bid. And now that Elizabeth was flirting with the Grim Reaper, she wanted to name Dudley the lord protector of England—effectively rendering him executor of the throne in the event of Her Majesty's death.

This moment, with the prospect of Dudley as magistrate two months after Earl John's death, must have burned into de Vere's mind: "That it should come to this!" HAMLET muses in his opening soliloquy. "But two months dead, nay, not so much, not two."

Yet the child enjoyed few idle moments to ponder treacheries of state. Upon arriving at Cecil House, de Vere led a strictly regimented life. His lesson plan at Cecil House was

7:00–7:30	Dancing
7:30–8:00	Breakfast
8:00–9:00	French
9:00–10:00	Latin
10:00–10:30	Writing and drawing

Common prayers and so to dinner

1:00–2:00	Cosmography
2:00–3:00	Latin
3:00–4:00	French
4:00–4:30	Exercises with his pen

On holy days this timetable was to be modified so that the young earl would "read before dinner the Epistle and Gospel in his own tongue and the other tongue [*Greek*] after dinner. All the rest of the day [is] to be spent in riding, shooting, dancing, walking, and other commendable exercises, saving the time for prayer."

Historians who have studied the intellectual climate of Cecil House conclude there was nothing like it in its day. De Vere's new home was, says G.P.V. Akrigg, "the best school for boys to be found in Elizabethan England." Joel Hurstfield calls Cecil House "the best school for statesmen in Elizabethan England, perhaps in all of Europe." J. A. van Dorsten adds, "Cecil House was England's nearest equivalent to a humanist *salon*. . . . As a meeting place for the learned it had no parallel in early Elizabethan England."

And not just in its syllabus did de Vere's education prove worthy of such endorsements. The scholars and tutors who surrounded the young earl combined medieval traditions with the latest trends in Renaissance pedagogy. The superlative talent first hired to supervise de Vere's curriculum at Cecil House, Laurence Nowell, would introduce the child to the riches of the native English culture and language as well as a prized pearl from its literary history.

Nowell—often mistaken for a cousin of the same name who was dean of Lichfield Cathedral—was a cartographer and expert in pre-Norman England. Having learned of Nowell through a scholarly friend, Cecil hired the Saxonist and mapmaker for both his teaching and map-making skills. De Vere's daily afternoon studies in "cosmography" were undoubtedly supervised by Nowell, who was then creating the most detailed map of the British Isles ever drawn.

The map Nowell eventually drew, which today can be found at the British Library, is an impressive piece of Renaissance cartography. It was also the first map of the British landscape drawn from scratch since the fourteenth century. So far as is known, it was never copied or printed. Cecil was so impressed with the document that he filled the blank side of the map with his own copious handwritten notes and is said to have "carried this map always about with him." The map may also have inspired a series of cartographical jokes in *The Comedy of Errors* about maps of England, Ireland, and other nations.

However, cosmography was a more all-encompassing discipline than the name might imply. To the Renaissance imagination, cosmography was about cataloging all of the earth's cultures as well as the entire history of human

civilization. Cosmography was history, sociology, economics, geology, astronomy, linguistics, English, comparative literature, geography, classics, and political science all in one. To the sixteenth-century French scholar François de Belleforest, cosmography meant “catalogs of lawmakers, philosophers, poets, orators, historians, nymphs, muses, sybils; also myths, oracles, rites, idols, marvels, and other prodigies surpassing nature. . . .”

Cosmography was, in essence, a more wide-ranging version of what is called “social studies” today—an omnibus field of learning that relied heavily upon the specializations of the instructor teaching the course. Today, Nowell is widely recognized as a founding father of Anglo-Saxon studies. Nowell would go on to collect and edit Old English ballads and chronicles and compile the first Anglo-Saxon dictionary, the *Vocabularium Saxonicum*. And for at least part of the time Nowell was revolutionizing the field, he had a young intellectual prodigy at his side.

Nowell also had at his disposal perhaps the single most important Anglo-Saxon manuscript of all time. Sometime in 1563, the same year he was tutoring de Vere, Nowell signed his name in a volume of manuscripts containing the only known copy of *Beowulf*. In addition to *Beowulf*, the manuscript volume (the “Nowell Codex”) contains handwritten accounts of such myths, oracles, and prodigies surpassing nature as “The Passion of Saint Christopher,” an alliterative English poem based on the biblical figure Judith and “The Wonders of the East.”

Beowulf was as inaccessible as the crown jewels to anyone outside of Cecil House. With an author whose childhood education would have exposed him to *Beowulf*, the ancient poem’s influence on Shakespeare becomes not inexplicable but rather expected. Scholars have already ferreted out a few initial connections between the *Beowulf* saga and *Hamlet*. One may reasonably expect this trend to continue.

Beowulf and the original Hamlet myth (“Amleth”) are cousins from the same family of Scandinavian folklore. Shakespeare uses both as sources for *Hamlet*. Once HAMLET kills his uncle CLAUDIUS, Shakespeare stops following “Amleth” and starts following *Beowulf*. It is Beowulf who fights the mortal duel with poison and sword; it is Beowulf who turns to his loyal comrade (Wiglaf in *Beowulf*; HORATIO in *Hamlet*) to recite a dying appeal to carry his name and cause forward; and it is *Beowulf* that carries on after its hero’s death to dramatize a succession struggle for the throne brought on by an invading foreign nation.

Laurence Nowell’s time as the young earl of Oxford’s tutor was to be brief. In June 1563, at the completion of roughly one school year, Nowell wrote in Latin to his employer that he wanted to return to full-time research. He notified Cecil that he wished to map all of England and embark on new Anglo-Saxon scholarship. And then, using words whose meaning has long been debated, Nowell said, “I clearly see that my work for the earl of Oxford

cannot be much longer required." Some may read this statement as a testament to de Vere's impossible temperament or Nowell's frustration at teaching a thirteen-year-old child unwilling to learn. However, Sir Thomas Smith expressed nothing but praise and admiration for de Vere as a student. More likely, Nowell meant simply that his student had already mastered more than what the Saxonist could reasonably expect to impart. Pure scholarship beckoned, and Nowell parted ways with his young scribe.

De Vere later memorialized his tutor Laurence as *Romeo and Juliet's* learned FRIAR LAURENCE—a character that conflated Nowell with de Vere's other illustrious teacher, Sir Thomas Smith, who, like the friar, was notoriously adept at concocting tinctures and tonics.



In June of 1563, Sir William Cecil's second wife gave birth to her only surviving son, Robert. De Vere, an illustrious earl who had probably come to be the star of the household, now saw the attention shift from him. Robert Cecil would become one of the great Machiavellian figures in de Vere's life, a sly and complex character with whom his foster brother Edward would share a conflicted relationship until his final days.

Sometime during Robert's infancy, his nurse accidentally dropped him on the floor. The child would be indelibly marred by this accident—growing up stunted with a crookback and a hobbled gait. The hunchback, duplicitous usurper, and sympathetic victim of fate, would become a primal inspiration for Shakespeare's RICHARD III.

Also in June of 1563 de Vere's elder half-sister, Katherine, and her husband, Edward, Lord Windsor, threatened to file a lawsuit against de Vere and his sister Mary. Katherine had accused her half-brother of being a bastard and thus an illegitimate claimant to inherit Earl John's estates and riches. Katherine, it seems, believed that her father was already wed when he married Edward and Mary's mother, Margery.

Although the plaintiffs' allegations do not survive, a legal statement filed in Edward and Mary's defense does. The defendants' uncle Arthur Golding lodged the response on June 28, 1563. The plaintiffs, Golding noted, had petitioned the archbishop of Canterbury—the leading ecclesiastical authority in the land—to produce witnesses to prove that Edward and Mary were legitimate heirs to the de Vere estate.

Golding's defense was successful, but later in de Vere's life, the bastardy lawsuit would once more be unsuccessfully resurrected. Moreover, Queen Elizabeth would at least once call de Vere a bastard. It was rumored that for so besmirching his legitimacy, de Vere said he "would never love her and [would] leave her in the lurch one day." Twice in the Shakespeare canon, anxiety bubbles to the surface for a character being branded a bastard by a

legitimate sibling. In *King Lear*, the bastard EDMUND spends most of the play conniving to disinherit his legitimate half-brother EDGAR from the earldom of GLOUCESTER. “Why bastard? Wherefore base?” asks EDMUND.

When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true
As honest madam’s issue? . . .
Fine word, *legitimate!*
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate. I grow, I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

In *King John*, PHILIP THE BASTARD gallops through his play like a Greek chorus, uttering most memorable speeches and immortal lines along the way. (Shake-speare inflates PHILIP’s role immensely; the historical Philip the Bastard from the actual reign of King John was inconsequential.) At the beginning of *King John*, PHILIP is introduced to court via a disinheritance scheme not unlike the 1563 de Vere case. Into PHILIP THE BASTARD, the plum role in *King John*, de Vere poured his own bastard cauldron of angst, pride, wit, and fortune-snatching vainglory.

These plays came later in life, as the earl looked back on his questioned legitimacy—and on a bastard son he himself would father one day. Closer to the date of the actual lawsuit, de Vere also wrote a juvenile lyric, titled “Loss of Good Name,” that may well have been inspired by his sister’s accusations. The following excerpt sounds a familiar Shake-spearean alarum—albeit in an adolescent voice given to tub-thumping meter and alliterative excess:

Help Gods, help saints, help sprites and powers that in the heav’n do dwell,
Help ye that are aye wont to wail, ye howling hounds of hell;
Help man, help beasts, help birds and worms, that on the earth do toil,
Help fish, help fowl, that flock and feed upon the salt sea soil,
Help echo that in air doth flee, shrill voices to resound,
To wail this loss of my good name, as of these griefs the ground.



In the summer of 1563, after Nowell’s departure, Cecil was in the market for tutors to advance de Vere’s knowledge of French. On August 23, 1563, de Vere wrote a letter to Cecil in fluent French, wherein he diplomatically urged his foster father to mind his own business. The letter reveals a compositional sophistication beyond the author’s thirteen years. As translated into English, de Vere wrote:

MY VERY HONORABLE SIR:

Sir, I have received your letters, full of humanity and courtesy, and strongly resembling your great love and singular affection towards me, like true children duly procreated of such a mother, for whom I find myself from day to day more bound to Your [Lordship]. Your good admonishments for the observance of good order according to your appointed rules, I am resolved (God abiding) to keep with all diligence, as a thing that I may know and consider to tend especially to my own good and profit, using therein the advice and authority of those who are near me, whose discretion I esteem so great (if it suits me to say something to their advantage) that not only will they comport themselves according as a given time requires it, but will as well do what is more, as long as I govern myself as you have ordered and commanded. As to my curriculum, because it requires a long discourse to explain it in detail, and the time is short at the moment, I pray you affectionately to excuse me therefore for the present, assuring you that by the first passerby I shall make it known to you at full length. In the meantime, I pray to God to give you health.

EDWARD OXINFORD

De Vere, who typically wrote out his title using the Old English "Oxenford" (or "Oxinford"), was in August 1563 clearly studying under a rigorous new curriculum. Who de Vere's new tutors were is uncertain. One likely candidate is the legal defender of de Vere's legitimacy, his uncle Arthur Golding. Golding was an extraordinary twenty-seven-year-old scholar employed by Cecil to supervise the day-to-day details of managing those de Vere family estates not held by Dudley. As Golding's modern biographer notes, "It has been assumed that [Golding] acted as tutor to his nephew Edward. No definite record has been found indicating such a connection which, however, would appear reasonable in view of the factor of relationship as well as the fitness of the one and the youth of the other." In addition, Cecil's household had recently acquired a second ward, the fourteen-year-old Edward Manners, third earl of Rutland; Golding's services as a tutor would have been doubly in demand.

If "Orders of the Earl of Oxford's Exercises" offer any guidance, Golding was probably teaching between nine and ten in the mornings and two and three in the afternoons. Latin was Golding's subject, and in 1563 he translated one of the greatest Latin poems ever written, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The poet Ezra Pound once pronounced, with characteristic hyperbole, that Golding's Ovid is "the most beautiful book in the [English] language."

Golding's edition of *The Metamorphoses* is also widely regarded by scholars of all persuasions as the single most influential source for Shakespeare, other than the Bible. The hundreds of interlocking parallels between Ovid

(especially Golding's Ovid) and Shakespeare have been studied and discussed for centuries. As the eminent literary critic Sir Sidney Lee wrote, "The phraseology of Golding's translation so frequently reappears in Shakespeare's page . . . as almost to compel conviction that Shakespeare knew much of Golding's translation by heart."

It is a fascinating and likely connection: The boy who would become Shakespeare was being tutored by the man who translated Shakespeare's favorite nonbiblical work. Shakespeare quotes from every one of *The Metamorphoses's* fifteen books, and there is hardly a single Shakespeare play or poem that does not owe character, language, or plot to Ovidian mythology.

De Vere's personal recollections of his uncle probably stretched back as far as the child could remember. Golding was de Vere's mother's half-brother, an Essex native who spent much of the 1550s and early '60s in and around the neighborhood of Castle Hedingham. Golding was a good friend of Sir Thomas Smith, and it may have been through Golding that Earl John first heard about Smith's talents as a tutor. De Vere hints at his maternal ties to Ovid's translator in *Titus Andronicus*. At a moment when *Titus's* plot calls for a copy of Ovid to be brought onstage, the book is introduced by a school-aged Boy who notes, "'Tis Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. My mother gave it me."

In 1564, Golding dedicated to his nephew his English translation of Justin's *Abridgement of the Histories of Trogus Pompeius*. This condensation of a longer history of the world was the sort of book that would appeal to a young student of cosmography. As Golding wrote,

It is not unknown to others, and I have had experience thereof myself, how earnest a desire Your Honor hath naturally grafted in you to read, peruse, and communicate with others as well the histories of ancient times, and things done long ago, as also of the present estate of things in our days—and that not without a certain pregnancy of wit and ripeness of understanding.

This was the first of twenty-eight books dedicated to de Vere during his lifetime. Already, one discerns a thumbnail sketch resembling what would be expected of a young Shakespeare: a precocious intellect with an avid love for studying history coupled with a talent for mellifluous and witty retellings of that history. The Shakespeare canon resounds with echoes from the Justinian lessons Golding translated. *Henry VI, Part 1*; *Titus Andronicus*; *The Taming of the Shrew*; *Henry V*; and *The Winter's Tale* all cite characters, lessons, and plotlines that derive from *Trogus Pompeius*.

However, Golding's dedication also highlights what would become a significant difference of opinion between the scholar and his nephew. The purpose of history, Golding explained in his dedication, is to adduce "a variety and multitude of examples [that] tend all to one end—that is, the advancement

of virtue and the defacing of vice." Golding held a Puritanical view of both history and contemporary affairs, while de Vere most certainly did not.

De Vere's juvenile poetry (the sixteen to twenty poems published in contemporary anthologies and/or found in Elizabethan manuscript collections that were signed either "Earle of Oxenford" or "EO") is noteworthy for its lack of moralistic or religious proselytizing. Whereas many of de Vere's contemporaries published pious or morally didactic verse—and Golding practically devoted a career to moralistic prose—the teenaged de Vere was already exploring such Shakespearean themes as honor and revenge. These decidedly amoral interests can be seen in the "Loss of My Good Name" stanza quoted above or in another juvenile poem by de Vere that concludes:

My heart shall fail and hand shall lose his force,
But some device shall pay despite his due.
And fury shall consume my careful course,
Or raze the ground whereon my sorrow grew.
Lo, thus in rage of ruthless mind refused,
I rest revenged of whom I am abused.

Within a few years, Golding appears to have regretted that he had ever introduced his nephew to that libertine poet Ovid. In 1571, Golding dedicated a sober translation of John Calvin's commentaries on the Psalms to his nephew. This time, Golding's dedicatory preface takes on a tone that is almost scolding in its moralizing: "I beseech Your Lordship consider how God hath placed you upon a high stage in the eyes of all men," Golding wrote to de Vere. "... But if you should become either a counterfeit Protestant or a perverse papist or a cold and careless neuter (God forbid), the harm could not be expressed which you should do to your native country." To his Puritanical uncle, de Vere was, in the end, a wayward soul. Though Golding would outlive de Vere by two years, their paths diverged after the early 1570s.

Between 1564 and 1569, de Vere's studies go mostly unchronicled. That de Vere was studying during much of this period is likely, given his guardian's interest in education. Cecil believed that the nobility and gentry owed it to their country to study as diligently as possible in their teenaged years, for they would soon be representing England as generals, ambassadors, and functionaries of state. It was a point of pride to Cecil that his wards would become some of the most rigorously trained highborn men in all of Europe.

The years 1563–65 were also rife with plague, when those who could get out of the city did. During some of this period, de Vere was out of London. Perhaps the conceit of *Love's Labor's Lost*, wherein a clique of noble French youth sequester themselves at the KING OF NAVARRE'S country estate to study for three years, is not so far-fetched. It was standard practice for aspiring professionals in their middle teens to pack off to the university, although noble

students typically worked independently of Cambridge or Oxford. Their tutors were often some of the best the university had to offer, as in the case of Sir Thomas Smith. But even if a young aristocrat was affiliated with a university, as de Vere was at Cambridge in 1558, he rarely took a degree. A bachelor's degree was more of a professional certificate, relevant to middle-class life and careers, than it was any mark of prestige for the entitled classes.

One fact about de Vere's activities from this period does survive. From August 5 to 10, 1564, de Vere lodged at St. John's College, Cambridge University. De Vere, his housemate the earl of Rutland, de Vere's cousin the duke of Norfolk, and other prominent men at Elizabeth's court were to receive Master of Arts degrees from the university. Cecil himself, who had been chancellor of the university for the past five years, would also receive an M.A.

The queen was scheduled to participate in these celebrations. However, Elizabeth faced one small problem: She had furiously proclaimed at Ipswich in 1561 that no woman would ever be permitted to stay overnight at an English university or abbey. And yet here Her Majesty was, lodging at Cambridge University for five nights.

Her chroniclers kindly overlook this moment of royal hypocrisy. But Shake-speare does not. *Love's Labor's Lost*, a play in which the primary theme is oath breaking, takes Elizabeth to task for her 1561 proclamation. The sequestered scholars of *Love's Labor's Lost*, who have pledged not to fraternize with women, face a host of problems when the PRINCESS OF FRANCE (a stand-in for Queen Elizabeth) and her train pay a visit. The princess's loyal attendant BOYET (a lighthearted caricature of Cecil) announces the arrival of the royal entourage but is sent back to inform Her Highness that, essentially, no girls are allowed. The scholars, BOYET regretfully notifies the PRINCESS, intend "to lodge you in the field."

The shocked PRINCESS's repartee with her host the KING OF NAVARRE spoofs what Elizabeth *would* have faced had the Cambridge University officials actually held the queen to her 1561 edict. *Love's Labor's Lost's* exchange certainly never happened in reality, but such an exchange also offered up the kind of ribbing that Elizabeth would have enjoyed.

KING Fair Princess, welcome to the court of Navarre.

PRINCESS Fair I give you back again; and welcome I have not yet: the roof of this court is too high to be yours, and welcome to the wide fields too base to be mine.

KING You shall be welcome, madam, to my court.

PRIN. I will be welcome, then: conduct me thither.

KING Hear me, dear lady; I have sworn an oath.

It was the thirty-year-old queen's first visit to a university, and her five-day stay was recorded at length by at least four contemporary chroniclers.

Cecil took great pains to arrange for lavish entertainments and spectacles to delight and stimulate Her Majesty and the court. As the bishop of London wrote in a July 1564 letter to the university officials, Elizabeth's visit would include "all manner of scholastical exercises—*viz.* with sermons both in English and Latin, disputations in all kinds of faculties, and playing of comedies and tragedies."

On the afternoon of Saturday, August 5, the queen and her entourage arrived at Cambridge and retired to their lodgings—Elizabeth at King's College with de Vere, Rutland, and Cecil up the street at Cecil's alma mater, St. John's. The following night, King's College Chapel was converted into a theater with, in the words of one contemporary account, "a great stage containing the breadth of the church from the one side unto the other that the chapels might serve for houses. In length, it ran two of the lower chapels full, with the pillars, on a side." Cecil and the other attendees, presumably including de Vere, entered with guards bearing torches. The guards stood by the stage, providing the only source of illumination for the play. The queen and her attendants then entered and took their seats, with Her Majesty watching the play from a special throne onstage. She was, after all, still the center of attention.

The following day was given over to public debates at St. Mary's Church on such topics as art, the superiority of monarchy to a republic, and the merits of simple over complicated foods. The evening's performance was Edward Haliwell's tragedy *Dido*. A marginally anti-Catholic play followed on Tuesday night, Nicholas Udall's drama about the biblical king Hezekiah and his destruction of idolatry. By the following evening, after another day of disputations and an extemporaneous speech of her own in Latin, Elizabeth was too worn out to enjoy any more entertainments. So she awarded honorary degrees to the fourteen-year-old de Vere and others the next morning and then decamped for the nearby priory of Hinchinbrook.

A troupe of players from the university, however, followed the queen's train. De Vere, who probably departed Cambridge with Elizabeth, would have watched as these presumptuous undergraduates overtook the massive convoy of horses and carts. The players begged Elizabeth to let them perform just one masque. After some pleading, she finally consented.

Perhaps emboldened by the mildly anti-Catholic Hezekiah play two nights before, the student players proceeded to lampoon a group of Catholic bishops who were then being held in prison. The play provoked such an uproar that the queen's chroniclers omit any mention of it. The tale survives only in the correspondence of the Spanish ambassador, who was in the business of reporting courtly scuttlebutt back to his king.

According to the ambassador, the students in the drama "came in dressed as some of the imprisoned bishops. First came the bishop of London carrying

a lamb in his hands as if he were eating it as he walked along, and then others with devices [*props*], one being in the figure of a dog with the Host in his mouth.”

Elizabeth was so outraged at this breach of civility that she stormed out of the performance. (In 1559, she had issued a proclamation outlawing any discussion of religion or politics on the popular—as opposed to courtly—stage.) The queen spared no words. The Spanish ambassador adds that “the men who held the torches, it being night, left them [*the rest of the court*] in the dark, and so ended the thoughtless and scandalous representations.”

De Vere must have marveled at the visceral response a simple skit had produced. These players, ham-fisted though their farce was, had truly caught the conscience of the queen. Such an explosive response to a theatrical performance never happened again in Elizabeth’s court. (Henceforth the queen’s handlers would vet court dramas more carefully.) But once was enough, and *Hamlet* preserves this very moment of royal distemper:

OPHELIA The king rises. . . .
 POLONIUS Give o’er the play.
 KING Give me some light! Away!
 POLONIUS Lights, lights, lights!



In 1565, de Vere and his housemate the earl of Rutland served as pages for a prominent Protestant wedding in London between Ambrose Dudley, earl of Warwick, and Anne Russell, daughter of the stalwart antipapist earl of Bedford. On the morning of Sunday, November 11, 1565, de Vere and Rutland escorted the bride from her guest suite at Westminster Palace to the queen’s receiving room (her “great closet”). There, with the queen and her maids of honor in yellow satin trimmed with green velvet and silver lace, the ceremony began. Robert Dudley, the groom’s purple-satin-bedecked younger brother, who had recently been named earl of Leicester, gave away the bride. According to a chronicle of the event, after the vows and benedictions, the wedding party then repaired to the council chamber to dine “at a long board well set with lords and ladies.” For two days following, the wedding party held jousts and tournaments in honor of the nuptials.

The wedding celebration also featured plays and revels, supervised by Richard Edwards, director of the Children of the Chapel Royal. At the time, Edwards was also compiling a collection of court poetry and songs, and it was probably at this wedding that he met de Vere. Edwards’s *The Paradise of Dainty Devices* would later be published containing eight of de Vere’s youthful poems—signed “E.O.” for Edward Oxford/Oxenford.

On the wedding night, Dudley’s military colleagues celebrated with three

volleys of cannon fire. However, the second volley splintered the cannon's barrel, killing the queen's chief master gunner, Robert Thomas. As one chronicler observed, the evening ended on a note of "great sorrow and lamentation."

In the first week of September 1566, at the end of an excessively hot summer, de Vere, Cecil, and ten other courtiers and diplomats arrived at Oxford University to receive master's degrees. As with the Cambridge diploma presented two years before, de Vere's Oxford M.A. was probably honorary. This degree did carry more academic weight, though, since Oxford had recently tightened its rules to ensure that a recipient's learning equaled or surpassed the requirements of the degree being conferred.

The queen had arrived at Oxford on August 31 for a six-day royal visit, culminating in the cap-and-gown ceremony on Friday, September 6. (Once again, she was violating her own prohibition against women lodging at the universities—and, once again, no one but Shakespeare would ever dare call her on it.) De Vere was awarded his M.A. at the refectory at Christ Church. One of the dons then launched into a Latin oration at the cathedral, which the queen slipped out of—from the heat as well as the exhaustion of attending so many academic disputations.

In all, Elizabeth's visit to Oxford was much like the Cambridge festivities two years before. Naturally, Oxford wanted to outdo its sister university. The university's purses were thus opened to present a festival of drama and debate that outstripped Cambridge's 1564 revels. Richard Edwards, whom de Vere had met at the Dudley–Russell wedding, was tapped to organize and stage the plays at Oxford.

As the English novelist Evelyn Waugh describes Elizabeth's 1566 Progress to Oxford,

The visit lasted for six days. There were some lighter moments: a Latin play in Christ Church Hall, called *Marcus Geminus*, which the queen did not attend (the Spanish ambassador spoke so highly of it that she resolved to lose no more sport thereafter); an English play acted in two parts named *Palamon and Arcite*, at the first night of which the stage collapsed, killing three people and injuring five more; on the second night a pack of hounds was introduced into the quadrangle, which moved the young scholars, confined to the upper storeys, to such excitement that the queen expressed her fear that they would fall out of the windows; there were several elaborate dinners; but for the most part the entertainment was strictly academic; orations, sermons, debates, the presentation of Latin verses translated from the Hebrew, the conferring of honorary degrees.

The original texts of the plays presented at Oxford do not survive. However, several in attendance at the performances recorded plot summaries and

a few excerpts of dialogue. Edwards is conventionally assumed to have been the author of these entertainments.

This assumption, however, needs to be reassessed. The surviving excerpts of *Palamon and Arcite* strongly resemble de Vere's early poetry. Also, Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen* tells the same story with the same characters as *Palamon and Arcite*. The prologue to Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen* suggests it was the author's first dramatic work ("new plays and maidenheads are near akin"), which it almost certainly would have been had it originated in de Vere's pen in 1566.



De Vere's academic load soon shifted from the world of cosmography, languages, philosophy, and physic to the common law. His legal training under Sir Thomas Smith and others would have centered around civil (i.e., Roman) law and perhaps some ecclesiastical law as well. Both of these legal fields were the province of the university and its tutors. But study of the common law, the day-to-day stuff that most citizens came into contact with, took place at the Inns of Court in London. And just as Cecil had definite plans for the tutors to be hired for de Vere, there was no second-guessing which law school de Vere would be attending: Cecil's alma mater, Gray's Inn, where Cecil would also send his own sons and his son-in-law Lord Wentworth. In February 1567, de Vere matriculated at Gray's Inn, around the same time as another young and charming prodigy—the frequent guest at Cecil House, Philip Sidney.

The distance from Cecil House to Gray's Inn was less than a mile, from the hubbub of the Strand to the bucolic northwestern outskirts of the city. Unlike law schools today, the Elizabethan Inns of Court provided both traditional legal training and a courtly finishing school, with revels and theatrical entertainments as part of the curriculum. Some of the finest English poets and playwrights of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had Inns of Court educations—including Francis Beaumont, John Ford, John Marston, Sir John Davies, Thomas Campion, and John Donne. And to that list may now be added the name Shakespeare.

Sometime between January of 1566 and March of 1567, the celebrated dramatist George Gascoigne staged two plays for the students at Gray's Inn: *Jocasta* and *The Supposes*. De Vere was related to Gascoigne by marriage, and the two may also have ridden into London together during de Vere's triumphal entrance onto the city scene in 1562. If de Vere had missed the original performance of Gascoigne's plays, he would have had ready access to the play manuscripts either via the school's archives or the author himself.

Jocasta was familiar stuff for an Inns of Court audience: a serious and stately tragedy with lengthy choruses and diatribes aplenty. However, Gascoigne's *Supposes* was more unusual for its law school audience. *The Supposes*

was a groundbreaking piece of theater—considered today to be the first work in the genre of Elizabethan comedy. It was a play staged on a lavish budget with a vast assortment of costumes and props, drawing from the best of contemporary Italian comedy, featuring a strong female protagonist and a risqué plot. To the young de Vere, *The Supposes* would become every part as inspirational as John Bale's *King Johan* in 1561 or the royal "lights, lights, lights!" fiasco three years later. De Vere would pilfer a subplot from *The Supposes*, and arguably the entire theme of the play, for *The Taming of The Shrew*.

The Supposes and *Jocasta* were almost certainly performed in the Great Hall at Gray's Inn's ancient manor house. Although its inhabitants and their entertainments were illustrious, Gray's Inn was still something of a rowdy school. Both the floor of the Hall and of the chambers were strewn with rushes. And because of their unruliness, students were given silver cups and plates; since the administrators figured that the expense of glass or earthenware, "from constant breaking, [would] exceed the value of silver."

Moreover, it was at Gray's Inn that de Vere would find one of the sources for *Hamlet*—in the case of *Hales v. Petit*.

The judge and Gray's Inn alum Sir James Hales had become a Protestant cause célèbre for continuing to punish Catholics even after Mary Tudor had become queen. Tortured and imprisoned, Hales drowned himself in a stream near Canterbury in 1554. Since his death was a suicide, some of Hales's possessions (including his leases) had been forfeited to the crown. The crown had then turned around and leased one of Hales's forfeited leases to a man named Cyriack Petit. The Hales family, wanting their lease back, argued that they'd inherited Hales's possessions at the moment of his death, before the state deemed it a suicide. Thus Petit had no right to be living on land that the Hales family had already inherited.

The tortured language of both sides in this case reads like a skit from *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. The documented arguments on behalf of the Hales family: "Sir James Hales was dead, and how came he to his death? It may be answered, by drowning. And who drowned him? Sir James Hales. And when did he drown him? In his life-time: So that Sir James Hales being alive caused Sir James to die and the act of the living was the death of a dead man." The documented arguments on behalf of Petit: "The Forfeiture of the Goods and Chattels, real and personal, shall have relation to the Act done in the Party's Life-time, which was the Cause of his Death; and upon this the parts of the Act are to be considered. . . . The Act consists of three Parts. The first is the Imagination, which is a Reflection or a Meditation of the Mind. . . . The second is the Resolution. . . . The third is the Perfection. . . . And this Perfection consists of two Parts, viz, the Beginning and the End."

Such legalistic hairsplitting must have made for entertaining table talk among the Gray's Inn students. As a student from Hales's alma mater, de Vere enjoyed ready access to the *Hales v. Petit* docket. Moreover, the theme of the

case—usurpation of family lands from a rightful heir—would certainly have resonated with the young earl, still disinherited from many of his own ancestral estates. When de Vere later wrote his masterpiece recalling the death of his father, he used *Hales v. Petit* to jab at a legal system that could strip a child of his rightful inheritance. *Hamlet's* GRAVEDIGGERS comically rehash the arguments of *Hales v. Petit* as they muse over OPHELIA's death:

FIRST CLOWN Is she to be buried in Christian burial that willfully seeks her own salvation?

SECOND CLOWN I tell thee she is . . . the crowner hath sat on her and finds it Christian burial.

FIRST How can that be, unless she drowned herself in her own defense?

SECOND Why, 'tis found so.

FIRST It must be *se offendendo*; it cannot be else. For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly it argues an act; and an act hath three branches: it is to act, to do, and to perform: *argal*, she drowned herself wittingly.

SECOND Nay, but hear you, goodman delver—

FIRST Give me leave: Here lies the water; good; here stands the man; good; if the man go to this water and drown himself, it is will he, nill he, he goes; mark you that? But if the water come to him, and drown him, he drowns not himself, *argal*, he that is not guilty of his own death shortens not his own life.

SECOND But is this law?

FIRST Ay, marry, is't; crowner's quest law.

Legal shenanigans of the contorted kind would soon enough be familiar terrain for de Vere. During the summer of 1567, the seventeen-year-old earl for the first time had a run-in with the law. Someone less politically connected could have been charged with murder.

On the evening of July 23, de Vere and a tailor named Edward Baynam were practicing their fencing moves in the backyard behind Cecil House. A third man, Thomas Brincknell, a cook from Cecil House, became involved. Here is what the coroner's inquest found:

Along came Thomas Brincknell, drunk . . . who ran and fell upon the point of the Earl of Oxford's foil (worth twelve pence), which Oxford held in his right hand intending to play (as they call it). In the course of which, with this foil Thomas (Brincknell) gave himself a wound to the front of his thigh four inches deep and one inch wide, of which he died instantly. This, to the exclusion of all other explanations, was the way he died.

Either de Vere was fencing with an unbated sword—unlikely in a practice bout—or his sword broke, a common enough occurrence even in modern fencing. He seems to have pierced Brincknell's femoral artery. The scene would have been gruesome. No Elizabethan doctor could have saved him, and death would have come within minutes.

The body of the cook, lying in a pool of blood, must have drawn the entire staff of Cecil House into the courtyard to witness what horrendous mischief that unruly teen had just caused.

Under a more modern criminal justice system, such a reckless adolescent might expect to face charges of criminal negligence (if he was using an unguarded blade) and wrongful death. He might expect to be tried as a juvenile and face either juvenile prison or a suspended sentence.

However, no such leniency was available in sixteenth-century English courts. From his legal training, de Vere no doubt knew that what he had just done would technically be classified as murder. And a murder conviction carried with it a mandatory death sentence. Since 1547, English courts had begun to outline the lesser crime of manslaughter—drawing the distinction between killing "of malice prepensed" and accidental death "through chance medley." But in the 1570s, manslaughter trials remained dangerous and uncharted waters. A man who killed someone accidentally could still hang.

There was one legal trick, though, that saved defendants caught in binds such as this. For centuries, the only form of voluntary homicide that courts were permitted to forgive was homicide committed *se defendendo*, in self-defense. So accidental killings were sometimes twisted into cases of self-defense. In this kind of trial, an accidental death could technically be written off as the deceased running upon the blade of the defendant's weapon. The defendant, it would be argued, did not so much attack the deceased as the deceased threw himself upon the defendant's sword. This in turn converted the crime into *felo-de-se*—suicide. The deceased was now the criminal. But the deceased was also, conveniently, dead.

The only drawback to this clever bit of contortionism was that the heirs of the deceased would have to contend with the economic and societal stigma of a suicide verdict. The deceased's estate would be forfeit, and he could not be buried in sanctified ground. On the other hand, the *felo-de-se* chicanery prevented a second wrongful death—an unnecessary hanging—from stemming from the first.

Agnes Brincknell, the cook's widow, must have cursed de Vere's very soul. Because of this thoughtless boy, she had lost a husband and had to turn to charity both for herself and her fatherless child. And now, because of some fancy lawyer's shady trickery, her husband's death was going to be ruled a suicide? Was there any justice?

Cecil would later record in his journals that he did all he could to "find

the death of the poor man, whom [de Vere] killed in my house, *se defendendo*—or, as *Hamlet's* gravediggers invert the term, *se offendendo*.

The case of OPHELIA versus the river, as argued by GRAVEDIGGERS one and two, becomes an appellate court hearing for both the Brincknell coroner's inquest and *Hales v. Petit*. As with nearly all his crimes and misdemeanors, de Vere's acknowledgment of his rash and destructive behavior came later in life—in the form of words that are performed today on stages around the world.



On December 2, 1568, de Vere's mother died. She was buried at Earls Colne next to Earl John. Sometime in 1562 or '63, the recent widow had remarried to a man well below her station—a former horse-master for the Dudley family named Charles Tyrell. Even after settling down with her second husband, Countess Margery had remained distant. She politely passed along her greetings to her son in letters addressed to William Cecil, but these were gestures no more loving than what one might expect of casual acquaintances. The only record of de Vere's reciprocal indifference to his mother and stepfather appears years later when he reportedly told his cousin Henry Howard—perhaps jestingly alluding to a play he was then cooking up—that a specter of the couple had paid a visit to the earl one haunted night. “Charles Tyrell appeared to him with a whip after he was dead,” Howard recalled. “And his mother [was] in a sheet [*shroud*] foretelling things to come.” HAMLET's droll banter with his father's GHOST was undoubtedly a familiar psychological defense mechanism for the author.

History does not record if de Vere made the pilgrimage to his mother's funeral. Whether or not he did, de Vere would have wanted to get away from Cecil House, where the fourteen-year-old Philip Sidney was planning to spend the Christmas holidays. That would have been impetus enough. Cecil doted on Sidney—telling the child's father that Philip was one “in whom I take more comfort than I do openly utter . . . and so I do love him as he were mine own.” Where de Vere was abrasive and full of attitude, Sidney was the charming, well-scrubbed young champ who was every girl's father's dream. Sidney and de Vere were as destined to become rivals as the fox and the hound.

Sidney was also ill during the winter of 1568–69, and his visit to de Vere's home may have been the vector that brought sickness into de Vere's life. As the queen would later remark in a letter to Sidney's father, “dispersed in the country” was a “universality of sickness partly by agues, partly by the plague.”

Whatever his malady and however he got it, in 1569 de Vere was sick for months on end. Just at the moment when de Vere most needed nurturing, his mother—detached though she may have been—had died. The deaths of both of his parents at sensitive moments in de Vere's life probably played a substantial role in transforming the precocious child into the driven man of

letters. The list of "eminent creators" in literature who had to learn to parent themselves—whether due to early parental death, such as August Strindberg, or parental lovelessness, such as Honoré de Balzac—is impressive. Eugene O'Neill's morphine-addicted mother was a cold and distant figure to him, and when he had to mother himself through a deadly bout with tuberculosis, it was the turning point that he later said made him a dramatist. Psychological studies of literary genius draw substantial emotional meaning out of this forced truce between superego and id.

Lying in his sickbed, de Vere might well have been shocked into early thoughts of his own mortality. Like George Bernard Shaw, whose bout with tuberculosis spurred a burning desire to marry, de Vere also began, during or soon after his illness, to cast his eyes about for a wife.

The girl nearest to de Vere was the thirteen-year-old Anne Cecil, who had herself suffered a recent brush with death when she came down with smallpox in 1566. Judging from both the historical records and her portraits in Shakespeare, Anne Cecil would have been a willing and likely attendant to the handsome young noble she had known since she was five. At thirteen, she was four years younger than de Vere. But she probably came as close to being a mother substitute for de Vere during his convalescence as did any adult woman in the Cecil household.

However, Anne's father—de Vere's guardian—had already begun to make marriage plans for his daughter. The charming and talented Philip Sidney was being groomed for Anne's hand in marriage as soon as the couple reached the age of consent. Sidney's uncle, Lord Robert Dudley (now earl of Leicester), saw a marriage between his fifteen-year-old nephew and Anne Cecil as an important political alliance. Leicester pressed hard for this nuptial union. However, Leicester needed to conceal the fact that Sidney had lands but little money to woo his bride with. The lengthy marriage contract, now in the Cecil family archives, details Sidney's modest income at the time, the modest financial gain he'd receive upon the death of his father—and the substantial boost in annual income (£325) Sidney would net when his mother passed away. Sidney also stood to gain in excess of another £300 annually if the marriage with Anne went through. On the other side of the bargaining table, the marriage contract stipulates that Anne had a £700 inheritance awaiting her.

The wedding never happened. But this didn't stop de Vere from lampooning the haggling. Substituting the characters ANNE PAGE for Anne Cecil, SLENDER for Sidney, and SLENDER's uncle SHALLOW for Sidney's uncle Leicester, Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* plays out in comic detail precisely as outlined above.

SHALLOW (Leicester) backs his apathetic nephew SLENDER (Sidney) into wooing ANNE PAGE, who, like her prototype, is set to receive a £700 inheritance. But ANNE wants nothing to do with him. SLENDER admits to ANNE that

“Till my mother be dead . . . I live like a poor gentleman born.” Two acts later, ANNE mutters to herself as she’s summoned to speak with SLENDER:

ANNE PAGE [*Aside*] This my father’s choice.
 O, what a world of vile, ill-favor’d faults
 Looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year!

Sidney, so far as can be determined, was indifferent to marriage with Anne. As SLENDER tells ANNE PAGE, “I would little or nothing of you. Your father and my uncle hath made [the] motions.”

De Vere may well have been jealous, especially as he watched Leicester use blood money, extracted in part from de Vere family properties, to win Anne’s hand for Sidney.

At the same time, de Vere also heard the call of military service. The long and valiant line of earls of Oxford had distinguished themselves as leaders on the battlefields of legend. And now the Scottish borderlands were beginning to look like the place where the next generation of great men would be put to the test. Catholic nobles in northern England were rising up against the queen, threatening to spark a revolutionary war.

On November 24, 1569, de Vere wrote to Cecil, Anne’s father, that his health was returning—something that the coming months would prove untrue. His letter to Cecil resounds with the voice of an eager adolescent, seeking his share of fame and glory:

Sir, Although my hap hath been so hard that it hath visited me of late with sickness, yet thanks be to God through the looking to which I have had by your care had over me, I find my health restored. . . .

At this present, desiring you if I have done anything amiss that I have merited your offence, impute [it] to my young years and lack of experience to know my friends. And Having no other means whereby to speak with you myself I am bold to impart my mind in paper, earnestly desiring your h[onor] that at this instant, as heretofore you have given me your good word, to have me see the wars and services in strange and foreign places, sith [*since*] you could not then obtain me license of the Queen’s Majesty. Now you will do me so much honor as that by your purchase of my License I may be called to the service of my prince and country as at this present troublous time a number are. Thus leaving to importune at you with my earnest suit I commit you to the hand of The Almighty. By your assured friend this twenty fourth of November.

EDWARD OXFENFORD