

The Use of State Power In the Effort To Hide Edward de Vere's Authorship Of the Works Attributed to 'William Shake-speare'



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Part 2 of 2

Reason #2: The Political Nature of Oxford's Plays

Although Oxford's plays were designed in part to strengthen support for the Elizabethan regime, there was a problem with them – at least it was a problem for the state. The problem was that the plays were political through and through. They did not merely present passing references to issues currently being addressed by the government, or occasionally ridicule prominent members of the court. Rather, most of these plays were built around issues of great concern to the state and ridiculed prominent personages in the court in almost every act and scene.



They had in many cases been written originally for audiences of courtiers in the know who would immediately understand the allegorical references to matters of state and know just who was being ridiculed. While it might be regarded with great humor within the court to see their queen falling in love with an ass – and everyone knew just who that ass was in real life – it simply wouldn't do to have the general public make the connection between what was presented on the stage and current court life.



Censors had to find a way to reduce the likelihood that the public would connect the events taking place on the stage with developments and individuals inside the court and government. Because the plays were so political through and through, ordinary censorship – cutting out a scene here or a speech there that authorities deemed offensive or inappropriate – would not be effective with Oxford's works. After censors got through removing all the sensitive parts, there would likely not be much of a play left. And there were the additional problems that the author, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was less likely to practice self-censorship, and that he and his theater company had more power than others to resist official censorship.

So, because the plays were more political in nature than the works of other writers, and because ordinary censorship would not work with Oxford's plays as it would work and did work with the productions of other writers, those who controlled state power had to find another way to sanitize the plays if they were to be performed on the public stage.

The way they found to cut the connection between the plays and the court was to break the connection between the plays and the author. By suppressing awareness that Oxford's works presented on the public stage had been written by a nobleman, an inner member of the court, those not in the know would be less likely to perceive that the plays mirrored developments and portrayed individuals from the court. The plays could then be presented as mere entertainment unconnected with real life.

Personal Reasons Specific to the Cecils

It was not just the official censors who would have wanted Oxford's authorship of his plays hidden, but also senior officials in the court and government who had been portrayed in and ridiculed in the plays. It was bad enough that their pride was pricked in

the closed performances in the court, but it must have been intolerable for them to image the common people laughing at characters modeled on themselves. One of the most effective scenes in the movie *Anonymous* was one in which Will Shakspere, on stage, mocks a high official who has a feather in his hat by saying that his brain is lighter than his feather. We saw how that ended, with the official storming out of the theater and the play being closed down.

We can easily image something similar happening in real life. As Janet Clare noted, “censorship beyond the state system was thus provoked. . . . the players had to accommodate not only the official censorship of the Master of the Revels, but arbitrary intervention from influential courtiers who were alert to real or perceived aspersions on their family name.”¹

On this point, Charlton Ogburn concluded that

Oxford would pay dear for his satisfactions. If there was anything on which Elizabeth, Burghley and the other Cecils, Leicester and the other Dudleys, Christopher Hatton, the 3rd Earl of Southampton, and doubtless others who appeared in the plays and poems were agreed upon it was that the author must never, *never* be known for who he was, lest his characters be seen for who they were, if heaven and earth had to be moved to prevent it. And for all we know, the inheritors of their power well into the future would be aware of that necessity and be obedient to it.²

As we have seen, the most powerful of all the officials during Oxford’s lifetime, the two Cecils – had ample power and opportunity to cleanse the historical record of anything they did not want it. William Cecil would surely not have wanted the general public to realize that he was the real life model for Polonius. Robert Cecil’s motivations, would have been, in Stephanie Hopkins Hughes’s estimation, “darker and more personal,” given “Oxford’s portrayal of him as the twisted, evil Richard III. Unable to attack him openly,” she writes, “I believe he [Cecil] set about first to curtail, then when that ended in a stalemate, to remove every trace of his [Oxford’s] power, every connection to the writing establishment and to his authorship of the Shakespeare canon.”³

Reason #3: The Succession

A third reason for the use of state power to hide Oxford’s authorship has to do with the issue of succession. In the last decade of Queen Elizabeth’s reign – since she turned 60 years old in 1593 – no issue was more important or more sensitive than that of who would succeed her.

And yet, this issue – actually the dual issues of her marriage and her succession – were matters on which Elizabeth, throughout her reign, would not tolerate interference by others. She believed that as monarch – as the only person in the kingdom who was responsible to God for the kingdom as a whole – decisions in these matters belonged to her and her alone.

Elizabeth sought throughout her reign to restrict parliament’s role in them, beginning with its first meeting in 1566-67. When



parliament tried to pressure her to resolve the marriage issue by linking it to the annual subsidy to the crown and refusing to consider other business until the succession issue had been resolved, Elizabeth responded angrily by vetoing all discussion of the marriage or succession by parliament, and attacked what she called “the impudent assumption that parliamentarians were more concerned for the future of the kingdom and its people than she herself, divinely anointed to discharge this very duty.” The impasse was resolved only when Elizabeth withdrew her ban on parliamentary discussions of the issues and parliament simultaneously decided not to discuss them.

Elizabeth also sought to ban or limit public discussion of her marriage or succession. We have already seen that John Stubbs had his right hand chopped off for daring to advise the queen on her marriage in his pamphlet “The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf” in 1579. As Camden noted, in response to Stubbs’s pamphlet “Her Majestie burned with choler that there was a book published in print, inveighing sharply against the marriage,” and it was the queen herself who decided on Stubbs’s sentence and who pushed it through the court system in violation of usual procedures, much to the consternation of her advisers.

And into this breach came the Earl of Oxford, seeking to King James advise the queen and others on this most sensitive issue of succession through his plays. Even though public discussion of the issue of the succession was forbidden, Oxford’s later plays – or at least those revised from the early 1590s onwards – seemed to focus almost obsessively on this issue of succession, examining from every angle the question of who is a legitimate ruler and the mechanics of how power is transferred from one monarch to another.

Several Oxfordian researchers have shown that earlier plays that had previously emphasized such themes as obedience to the crown or support for the war with Spain were revised from 1593 onwards to focus much more on the issue of succession. Dan Wright has shown the extent to which this was done as *The Troublesome Reign of King John* was revised to become *King John*, and Ramon Jimenez has shown similar changes as the *True Chronicle of King Leir* became *King Lear*.

Given this obsession in the plays with the issue of succession, it was imperative for reasons of state that Oxford’s authorship of them be kept hidden so that the public would not recognize that the succession issues being dealt with in the plays it was watching related to the current monarch.

PART III: STATE POWER WAS USED TO AIRBRUSH OXFORD FROM THE HISTORICAL RECORD

So far, we have examined how and why those who controlled state power – the Cecils – used it to hide Oxford’s authorship of the works attributed to William Shakespeare and his role in the creation of the public theater in London. But the story doesn’t end there. They also used state power for a second reason – to eliminate Oxford from much of the historical record.

Airbrushed Out of History

Oxford was, in effect, airbrushed from history by Robert Cecil and others who controlled state power – ‘airbrushed’ being the term to describe the removal from older photographs of the political leadership in the Soviet Union and China of those who have fallen out of favor with the current leadership.

Turning to Oxford, we have today far fewer documents related to him than we would expect to have given his position as Lord Great Chamberlain and as a member of the court. It is not just documents about his writing and acting, and his role in providing dramatic entertainment in the court and in creating the public stage that are missing. The paper trail of the non-literary aspects of his life has also largely vanished. Burghley’s files are unaccountably incomplete when it comes to Oxford. They contain nothing related to Oxford’s connection with the expeditionary force in the Low Countries, and the grant of £1,000 a year to Oxford, an extraordinary large amount, is never mentioned.

Oxford was the only major Elizabethan figure not to have had a public funeral. As Hughes noted, “Whatever Oxford’s relationship with Cecil might have been, protocol would have demanded that the premier earl in the kingdom have a public and honored funeral. There is not a single other major figure in the Elizabethan era that did not have a public funeral.”⁴

Oxford’s own files, papers, books, manuscripts and will are missing. With only one exception, not a single letter exists either from or to Oxford, other than letters between him and the Cecils. His letters to Anne Cecil have not survived even though hers to him have. On this point Charlton Ogburn concluded “that every communication he ever made his wife in writing can hardly have vanished without someone’s having exerted himself to that end. But if we were to be prevented from hearing Oxford’s side, care was taken to preserve a record of Anne’s.”⁵ And, “Once again one is reminded of the irretrievable loss we have suffered from the Cecils’ tight control of the records of Elizabeth’s reign, including, it is evident, the decision as to what correspondence of their illustrious in-law’s would be allowed to survive.”⁶ Thus, Ogburn concluded, “in expunging all traces of his [Oxford’s] connection n with the stage . . . [the Cecils] seem almost to have effaced Oxford himself from the record.”⁷

The effort to airbrush Oxford from history was so successful that he vanished almost completely for more than 300 years. Paul Johnson’s book *Elizabeth: a study in intellect and power*, published in 1974, provides an example of the minimal presence that Oxford has had in the historical record.



The “Gang of Four” was airbrushed out of photographs of the Chinese leadership after the end of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s

Major Figures in Elizabethan England			
(number of references to each in Paul Johnson’s <i>Elizabeth: a study in intellect and power</i> (1974))			
Burghley, Sir William Cecil, Baron	125	Charles, Lord Howard of Effingham	16

Walsingham, Sir Francis	75	Henry, Lord Hunsdon	16
Leicester, Robert Dudley, Earl of	71	Gardiner, Stephen, Bishop of Winchester	15
Raleigh, Sir Walter	57	Sidney, Sir Philip	14
Cecil, Sir Robert, Earl of Salisbury	43	Smith, Sir Thomas	14
Hatton, Sir Christopher	43	Shrewsbury, Gilbert Talbot, 6 th Earl of	13
Essex, Robert Devereux, 2 nd Earl of	34	Seymour, Lord Thomas	12
Drake, Sir Francis	28	Southampton, Henry Wriothesley, 3 rd Earl	12
Norfolk, Thomas Howard, 4 th Duke of	24	Hunsdon, Henry Carey, 1 st Lord	11
Bacon, Sir Francis	18	Oxford, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of	7

Figure 2: Major Figures in Elizabethan England: references in Paul Johnson’s Elizabeth (1974)⁸

Its 500 pages contain only seven references to Oxford, fewer even than Dr. John Dee, and far fewer than Burghley, Walsingham and other prominent members of the court and government. All seven references to Oxford are derogatory. Johnson does not mention at all that Oxford was the Great Lord Chamberlain of England or that he was acclaimed as a poet and dramatist.



John Thomas Looney

It is thus not surprising that John Thomas Looney had never heard of Edward de Vere when he began his search for the real author of the works attributed to Shake-speare in the 1910s.

PART IV: WHY STATE POWER WAS USED TO AIRBRUSH OXFORD FROM THE HISTORICAL RECORD

State Power Used to Wipe This Man From the Historical Record – Why?

And so we must ask again, not *how* it was possible to erase Oxford from the historical



Edward de Vere,
17th Earl of Oxford

record, but *why*? What possible reason could there have been for the use of state power to erase from the historical record a man described by his contemporaries as “the most brilliant of the young nobility of Elizabeth’s court” and as “a fellow peerless in England,” and by King James as “Great Oxford”? Surely there must be more behind the extraordinary effort to airbrush Oxford from the historical record than merely hiding his authorship of the works of Shake-speare. After all, the connection between the court and the plays had already been cut by the use of the pseudonym. What could possibly be gained by the additional extraordinary effort needed to eliminate him from the historical record?

H. K. Kennedy-Skipton has given us a clue about why Oxford has been air-brushed out of history by suggesting that it was done for reasons unrelated to the authorship of the plays.

If we accept the life of De Vere and his relation to the times as told in the plays, we may find they form a historical foreground, and will in fact be a criterion of the truth of the background. There can be no doubt that the plays and the life of Edward De Vere conceal facts of vital historical import, compared with which the mystery of the authorship is of minor consequence. How otherwise can one explain the erasure of the name of such an important person from the pages of our history?⁹

Others have commented on the importance of literature as a source for knowledge of historical events, but Kennedy-Skipton's statement, from 1932, is the earliest I have found that relates specifically to Shake-speare. So now we see the possibility that Oxford might have been airbrushed out of the historical record for non-literary reasons, for reasons not related directly to his authorship of the works of Shake-speare. What might those reasons have been?

The Succession Issue Revisited

Part II concluded with a discussion of Oxford's addressing the sensitive issue of the succession to Queen Elizabeth in his plays. We now return to that issue.

Since the 1930s, some Oxfordians have speculated that Oxford was not merely an observer of the succession process, but was directly involved in it either as a son of the queen, a lover of the queen and father of a child by her, or both. The Tudor Heir theories, also known as Prince Tudor Theories, or "P.T.," are the most controversial aspects of the authorship question. They posit not only that the Earl of Southampton and perhaps also Oxford himself were sons of Queen Elizabeth, but also that Oxford's place in history was sacrificed to protect the "Virgin" Queen's reputation and to eliminate any potential challenges to King James's reign by direct descendants of Queen Elizabeth.

Some Oxfordians have concluded that the Tudor Heir theories has been definitively proven to be false, persuaded perhaps by Diana Price's article "Rough Winds Do Shake"¹⁰ from 1993, or Christopher Paul's article "The Prince Tudor Dilemma"¹¹ from 2002. I have examined these and other articles and found their arguments to be less than definitive. In addition, key points in them have been effectively addressed by Bill Boyle, Charles Beauclerk, Hank Whittemore, Dan Wright and others in *A Poet's Rage*, published last year. A more comprehensive re-examination of these theories is needed and they should not be ruled out until



Edward de Vere,
17th Earl of Oxford



that examination has been undertaken.

The Tudor Heir theories are

Queen Elizabeth

of vital importance

because there are no other theories on the horizon weighty enough to explain why those who controlled state power saw fit to use it to

Henry Wriothesley,
3rd Earl of Southampton

conduct the systematic, sustained and determined effort that was needed to eliminate not only the historical record of Oxford's role in the development of the public theater and his authorship of the literary works attributed to William Shake-speare, but also most records pertaining to his place in the court and the government, most records of the other non-literary aspects of his life, and his complete correspondence with anybody other than the Cecils.

Right Up To The Brink

It is interesting to note that Walt Whitman, that most perceptive of readers of Shake-speare's plays, felt in his bones that "It is impossible to grasp the whole cluster of these plays . . . without thinking of them as . . . the result of an essentially controlling plan. What was that plan? Or, rather, what was veil'd behind it? – for to me there was certainly something so veil'd."¹² Whitman's friend William O'Conner also had the impression of the plays having "a lurking sense of being in aid of some ulterior design, probably well enough understood in that age, which perhaps time and criticism will reveal."¹³

Col. B. R. Ward thought that that ulterior design lurking behind Shake-speare's historical plays was their role in influencing public opinion during the Anglo-Spain War. But surely something weightier was needed to explain the plays' obsession with the issue of succession, and the Tudor Heir theories are a weighty enough explanation.

We noted earlier Charlton Ogburn's conclusion that "If there was anything on which Elizabeth, Burghley and the other Cecils, Leicester and the other Dudleys . . . and doubtless others who appeared in the plays and poems were agreed upon it was that the author must never, *never* be known for who he was, lest his characters be seen for who they were, if heaven and earth had to be moved to prevent it."¹⁴ Surely if they felt strongly enough about protecting their family names to destroy evidence of Oxford's literary and theatrical activities, they would not have balked at the additional step of destroying the non-literary records of Oxford's life in order to achieve the far more important goals of protecting Queen Elizabeth's reputation and the surety of King James's reign.

As noted earlier, Stephanie Hopkins Hughes concluded that Robert Cecil "set about . . . to remove every trace of his [Oxford's] power, every connection to the writing establishment and to his authorship of the Shakespeare canon."¹⁵ Once again we are only one step from Cecil's completely eliminating Oxford from the historical record in order to protect his own position by eliminating any potential challengers to the legitimacy of King



James's reign.

And, as noted above, Charlton Ogburn concluded that "in expunging all traces of his [Oxford's] connection with the stage . . . [the Cecils] seem almost to have effaced Oxford himself from the record."¹⁶ I believe that Ogburn got it backwards. Effacing Oxford himself from the record was the primary goal, not an accidental result from an over-zealous effort to expunge Oxford's connection with the stage.

Thus we see many eminent Oxfordians going right to the brink in describing the extraordinary efforts taken to eliminate Oxford from the historical record by the powerful and determined men who controlled state power at the highest levels. But because they were focused only on the lesser issue of the authorship question, they did not recognize that burying the record of Oxford's authorship of Shakespeare's works was only one part of the larger effort to eliminate Oxford completely from the historical record for non-literary reasons.

And in fact, Charlton Ogburn later came to conclude that Southampton was the son of Queen Elizabeth and Oxford because, as he explained, "there is no other scenario of which I have heard that accommodates the facts in the case."¹⁷ As he wrote in a letter to the Editor of *The Elizabethan Review* in 1997, "the need for dissimulation of Oxford's authorship of Shakespeare's works was absolutely imperative." It was," he continued, "not simply a matter of preserving the reputations of the Queen and those around her, which would be recognized in the plays were these attributed to an insider at Court . . . What was at stake in the identity of the poet-dramatist was the succession to the throne of the United Kingdom. For all I know, this may be dynamite even today."¹⁸

Those who controlled state power in the early years of the 17th century surely believed that they faced no effort more deserving of the fullest use of the power they controlled than that of establishing and preserving James on the throne. This article has examined some aspects of the use of state power for that purpose, and reached conclusions about how Oxford became Shakespeare that are in accordance with the more comprehensive accounts provided by Hank Whittemore in *The Monument* and Charles Beauclerk in *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom*.

Summary and Conclusion

To sum up, state power was used for two purposes:

- 1) To hide Oxford's authorship of the works attributed to "William Shakespeare" because . . .
 - The plays had been used for propaganda purposes, i.e., to generate public support for Elizabeth's reign, especially during the Anglo-Spanish War;
 - The plays were political through and through, and to break the connection between them and the court it was necessary to break the connection between the plays and Oxford; and,
 - The plays addressed the ultra-sensitive issue of succession.
- 2) To airbrush Oxford from the historical record because . . .
 - Oxford was bodily involved in the succession issue as described in the Prince Tudor/Tudor Heir theories and thus his existence threatened the

purity of Queen Elizabeth’s reputation and the legitimacy of King James’s reign.

State power was clearly used for these two purposes – and yet to state them in this way does not adequately describe what happened.

It is more accurate to note that the purposes for which state power was used evolved over time. The effort to hide Oxford’s authorship of plays being performed on the public stage as an end in itself became only one part of the larger effort to airbrush him from the historical record. The effort to protect the family name of those portrayed in the plays ultimately became one part of the more determined effort to protect James’s reign from challenges by direct descendants of Queen Elizabeth.

The evolution in the purposes for which state power was used took place over a period of about 20 years. It began in the mid 1580s, around the time that Oxford began receiving the annual annuity of £1,000, and was largely complete by the coronation of King James in 1603, as shown in *Figure 3*.

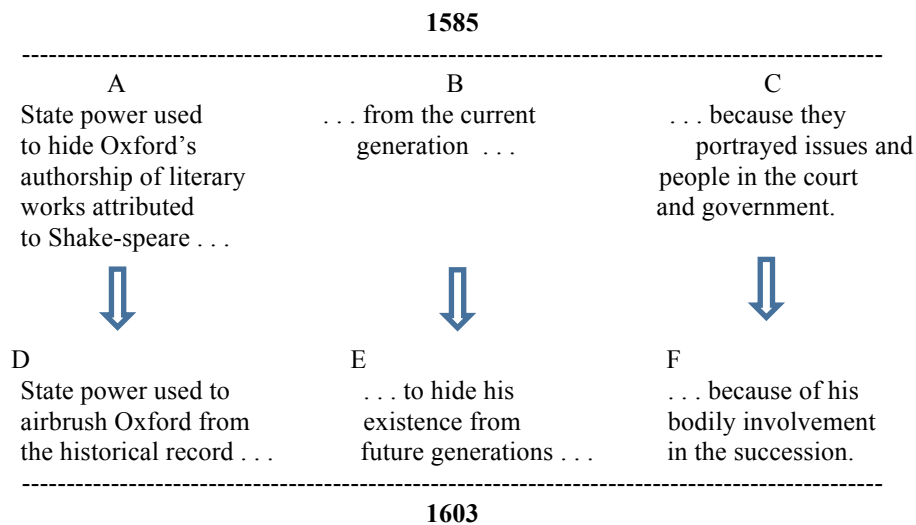


Figure 3: Evolution in the Use of State Power as it Relates to the Authorship of Oxford’s Literary Works

One key moment in that evolution was the spring of 1593, when Oxford first published under the pseudonym William Shake-speare, when Shake-speare’s first published work was dedicated to Southampton, and when Southampton held a particularly prominent place in the court. Another key moment occurred early in 1601 at the time of the Essex Rebellion when Southampton was convicted on the charge of treason. I have not described those two points in time in this paper – nor have I noted the passages in Oxford’s works that tie them to him and to Southampton’s parentage – because those events and references have been so thoroughly addressed elsewhere.¹⁹

It was perhaps only after James was securely on the throne – in the final year of Oxford’s life and in the years immediately following his death – that Cecil, with future generations in mind, sought to carry out the full-scale effort to airbrush Oxford from the historical record that he had begun earlier.

Focusing on the authorship question from the point of view of the use of state power, then, makes it possible to place the effort to hide Oxford’s authorship of the works

of Shake-speare in the proper context. Although that effort began as an end in itself, by the time of Oxford's death hiding his authorship had become just one part of the wider effort to eliminate him from the historical record in order to protect the purity of Queen Elizabeth's reputation and the legitimacy of King James's reign. The use of state power for political reasons, then, played *the* critical role in why today so many people believe that Shake-speare, rather than Oxford, was the author of the plays and poems they love so dearly.

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¹ Clare, Janet, *Art Made Tongue-Tied By Authority* 1990, p. 78.

² Ogburn, Charlton, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, 1992, p. 657.

³ Hopkins Hughes, Stephanie, "The Cecils and History," www.politicworm.com, accessed January 17, 2014.

⁴ Hughes, Stephanie Hopkins, "Oxford's Funeral," www.politicworm.com, accessed February 2014.

⁵ Ogburn, Charlton, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* 1992, p. 649.

⁶ Ogburn, Charlton, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* 1992, p. 735.

⁷ Ogburn, Charlton, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* 1992, p. 203-4.

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¹² Ward, Colonel B. R., "What Lurks Behind Shakespeare's History Plays," *Shakespeare Pictorial*, September, 1929, p. 16.

¹³ Ward, Colonel B. R., "What Lurks Behind Shakespeare's History Plays," *Shakespeare Pictorial*, September, 1929, p. 16.

¹⁴ Ogburn, Charlton, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, 1992, p. 657.

¹⁵ Hopkins Hughes, Stephanie, "The Cecils and History," www.politicworm.com, accessed January 17, 2014.

¹⁶ Ogburn, Charlton, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, 1992, p. 203-04.

¹⁷ Ogburn, Charlton, Letter to the Editor, *The Elizabethan Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 7-9, Spring 1997.

¹⁸ Ogburn, Charlton, Letter to the Editor, *The Elizabethan Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 7-9, Spring 1997.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Hank Whitemore's *The Monument*, and Charles Beauclerk's *Shakespeare's Lost Kingdom*.

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