CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

HAMLET IS, we repeat, intrinsically Edward de Vere. When he stands in an aperture of the medieval palace at Elsinore, looking upon the brilliant world without, while conversing with the opportunists, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (II.2), we see the young aristocrat, a man of pride and profound integrity, who has grown up in just such a fortress—Castle Hedingham—gazing forth into the bright morning of the Renaissance which had inspired him with glorious dreams, but which, through the faithlessness and deceit of men and women, seems to him now "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" . . . "this goodly frame, the earth . . . a sterile promontory."

In Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, two worlds met: the medieval world of scholasticism, romance, chivalry, and a brave new world of awakened energies, of creative forces unleashed, upon the floodtide of which another mode had come into being, while many of the old values were being swept away. Along with this regeneration, which had its inception in Italy, there had arisen a new individualism, an urge in men and in nations to become self-conscious entities; and an inevitable concomitant was egoistic ambition. Parallel with the creative artistic spirit had appeared a practical acquisitive one. While Masaccio and Leonardo were developing a vital art based upon science, Machiavelli was elaborating a system of policy and craft founded upon a cynical pragmatism. These two impulses worked side by side in England, having manifested themselves in some degree during Henry's reign, but growing to full vigor during Elizabeth's.

Steeped in the feudal tradition of chivalry,[1] bred to a love of poetry and music, sensitively responsive to beauty in nature and in man, Edward de Vere was revolted by the obverse side of the picture: he was too romantic to believe that it did, too idealistic to know that it must, exist in a world which can apparently endure only in a state

[1] Walt Whitman declared that "Shakespeare is incarnated, uncompromising feudalism in literature."—*Democratic Vistas*, p. 81.

of tension, with good straining against evil, evil against good, or—to express it more exactly—growth against corruption, corruption limiting growth.

Although the character of Hamlet is clarified when it is seen to be that of de Vere, we shall never be able entirely to pluck out the heart of his mystery. He is a man of another age, at once darker and brighter than ours, an age of sharper contrasts, lustier, more vital; but he has given us a vision of nobility, passion, and integrity which has enhanced our conception of what a man may be. He was tormented by his own imperfections as much as by his frustrated ideals.

> I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, foregone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilential congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form, in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so. (II.2.301-16.)

He was "keen"—as Ophelia had good cause to remark: he did not fail to note Rosencrantz's tolerant smile, the complacency of the Philistine. He was tortured by the success with which evil triumphed over good, in himself and in others. Disillusionment had almost unsettled his reason. And this is why he mistrusted himself in the matter of the Ghost.[2]

Because he says that death is

> The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
> No traveller returns,

we are justified in suspecting that he doubts whether the apparition he has seen is really his father, especially since, although supposed to be at this very time expiating worldly sins, it exhorts him to revenge, one of the worst sins in the category. In his moment of extreme excitement, Hamlet cries:

> I'll *call thee* Hamlet,
> King, Father, royal Dane. . . . (I.4.44-5.)

He is all too ready to believe that it is his father's, his ancestral, spirit, the spirit of Vere—truth—come to plead for vindication, here at court where it has been so treacherously violated; he wishes to have faith,

[2] From Seneca, Oxford had imported the Ghost-device, for his apparition of Andrea in *The Spanish Tragedy*. But here we have a spirit of a different order, more complex and subjective.

but he is haunted by skepticism, while confronting this spirit, and he wavers between the two. Horatio has stated (I.2.229) that "he wore his beaver up"; which means he was unmasked: Vere, or truth, unmasked.

In the beginning, Bernardo says:

> Looks it not *like the king?*
> *Horatio. Most like.* (I.1.43-4.)

And Marcellus (58):

> Is it not *like the king?*

Presently Horatio speaks of the "image," which "even but now appeared to us." (81.) "So like the king," repeats Bernardo (110.) Horatio is apprehensive.

> I'll cross it, though it blast me. Stay, illusion! (127.)
>
> A figure *like your father,*

he tells Hamlet (I.2.199), adding,

> These hands are not *more like.* (212.)

Hamlet resolves that

> If it *assume* my noble father's person,
> I'll speak to it, though hell itself should gape. (243-4.)

When the Ghost appears, the shock is so acute that he calls upon heaven to protect him:

> Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!
> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd . . . (I.4.39-40.)

The well-balanced, temperate Horatio is perturbed, muttering:

> He waxes desperate with imagination. (86.)

But Hamlet will presently assure him that

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (I.5.166-7.)

So great is his relief after the ecstasy caused by his encounter with the Ghost—or with his shattering vision of truth—that Hamlet, back with his friends once more, talks at random, in what the prosaic Horatio calls "wild and whirling words." The strain has been intense, and in relaxing, he goes to the other extreme.

> *Ghost (beneath).* Swear.
> *Hamlet.* Well said, old mole! can'st work i' the earth so fast?
> A worthy pioner! (161-3.)

When he is alone, he muses upon what has happened, reminding himself that

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be the devil: and the devil hath power
> To assume a pleasing shape;—yea, and perhaps
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy—
> As he is very potent with such spirits—
> Abuses me to damn me. (II.2.606-11.)

And he concludes, as Oxford himself had concluded many times before this with regard to Elizabeth, that

> the play's the thing
> Wherein I'll *catch the conscience* of the king.

If the King shows no sign of guilt, then he will believe that

> It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
> And my imaginations are as foul
> As Vulcan's stithy. (III.2.82-4.)

But the test works; the King is confounded; and Hamlet exclaims exultantly:

> O good Horatio! I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound. Didst perceive? . . . Upon the talk of the poisoning? (III.2.289-92.)

After the Gonzago performance, we are left in no doubt that the King is predominantly Leicester. Hamlet's heightened satisfaction expresses itself in a significant rhyme:

> Why, let the *stricken deer* go weep,
> The *hart* ungalled play;
> For some must *watch,* while some must *sleep:*
> So runs the world away. (274-7.)

Here is Leicester as the "deer" (or dear) again, as he appears in *Love's Labour's Lost,* where he is called a "pricket" and a "sorel," and as he is referred to in the song about "dying love," the "buck" to Elizabeth's "doe," where love "tickles still the sore," in *Troilus and Cressida.*

The "stricken deer," declares Hamlet, may "go weep," the "hart" (Elizabeth) "ungalled play." He himself must of necessity "watch" their antics, while others, through indolence or policy, are unobservant, must "sleep." It's the way of the world. If he has ruined himself by excessive frankness in this revealing play—that is, if Oxford has ruined himself by producing *Hamlet,* as he has come near doing with other plays before—and his fortunes "turn Turk" with him, has he not, he demands of Horatio, at least shown sufficient dramatic skill to get "a fellowship in a company of players"?

His spirits are so high that he takes a flight into verse again:

> For thou dost know, O Damon dear,
> This realm dismantled was
> Of *Jove* himself; and now reigns here
> A very, very—*pajock.*
> *Horatio.* You might have rimed.

That is, might have said "ass." But Leicester, though Horatio knew he was an ass, was more widely recognized as a peacock. He dressed with conspicuous elegance, and he strutted about at court. Sussex was the "Jove," combined of course with de Vere himself.

However, Hatton was also a peacock and an ass. And now we are carried back to the first time Elizabeth betrayed Oxford for Hatton, whereupon he had written her one of his bitter youthful poems, describing his despised rival in the same terms Hamlet is presently using.

> For thou hast caught a proper paragon,
> A theefe, a coward, and a *Peacocke* foole:
> An *asse,* a mylksop, and a minion. . . .

When, only a little later, he had lost out temporarily to Leicester, he had written another poem, concerned with the "frailty" of women:

> How oft from *Phoebus* do they fly to *Pan;*

whereas Hamlet says that the Queen's former husband

> was, to this,
> *Hyperion* to a *satyr.* (I.2.139-40.)

Phoebus and Hyperion are other names for Apollo, while both Pan and a satyr have the goat's hoof.

The apparition, the Ghost, is the spirit of truth, the spirit of the noble Veres, which goads Hamlet-Oxford to attack the corruption at court: truth which is *"hic et ubique,"* which, though sometimes forced underground, will, as Lancelet says, "come to light . . . in the end, truth will out." As a dramatic device for putting the protagonist in command of the true situation, the Ghost is inspired.

Here, as we have seen before, the dramatist is telescoping the action; for he is speaking of the first time Elizabeth had betrayed him for Hatton and for Leicester, and he is also referring to Hatton's and Leicester's recent machinations against him, their efforts to keep him away from the Queen and supplant him in her affections and favor. It may be the melancholy state of his mind—"my weakness and my melancholy"—resulting from this that makes him suspect Leicester of having hastened Sussex's death at this crucial time by poison, thus removing from him, Oxford, his greatest friend, virtually his father. And this suspicion would be the devil, in the guise of truth, goading Hamlet-Oxford to revenge. So what does he do? He resolves to present a play dramatizing the event—which is what Oxford himself has been doing at court for more than a dozen years. The Gonzago interlude is the instrument through which Hamlet will expose the rottenness in the state of Denmark, precisely as *Hamlet* is the play by which

Oxford will expose the Queen's accessibility to villainy and lust, and the general rottenness in the court of England.

This, strikingly enough, is the last time the Earl of Oxford portrays Elizabeth as a great figure in the dramas, though he will pay her a lover's tribute in a revision of *Antony and Cleopatra:* this is really a kind of summing up. In the speech of Rosencrantz to the King (III.3.11-23) Edward de Vere once more reminds his Queen of the high duty imposed by sovereignty:

> . . . *The cease of majesty*
> Dies not alone, but, like a gulf doth draw
> What's near with it . . . when it falls,
> Each small annexment, petty consequence,
> Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
> Does the king sigh, but with a general groan.

Hamlet's scene with the Queen in her closet and his words,

> Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge;
> You go not till I set you up a glass
> Where you may see the inmost part of you (III. 4.18-20),

are, as we have said, undoubtedly a partial dramatization of Oxford's scene with Elizabeth when she received him at last, at Theobalds, after having refused for more than two years to recognize him. He had known that, once face to face with her, he could show her the shameless perfidy of her behavior and make her feel the lash of his scorn. But this is also his final scorn for all that she has so wantonly done—

> Such an act
> That blurs the grace and blush of modesty,
> Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose
> From the fair forehead of *an innocent love*
> And sets a blister there; makes *marriage vows*
> As false as dicers' oaths. . . . (III.4.40 *et seq.*)

There is no doubt that Oxford considered himself bound to Elizabeth by "marriage vows."

When Hamlet shows Gertrude the two pictures, of her former husband and the present King, it is Oxford comparing Leicester and Hatton with himself, to whom she is honorably united. He himself had loved her so tenderly that he would not

> beteem the winds of heaven
> Visit her face too roughly;

while, for her part,

> why, she would hang on him
> As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on. (I.2.141-5.)

Now he cries:

> What devil was't
> That thus hath cozen'd you? . . . Nay, but to live
> In the rank sweat of *an enseamed bed,*
> *Stew'd in corruption,* honeying and making love
> Over the nasty sty. (III.4.76-94.)

He is speaking of her promiscuity; as Adonis will say to Venus:

> I hate not love, but your device in love,
> That *lends embracements unto every stranger.* (*st.* 132.)

When Hamlet exclaims (96 *et seq.*),

> A *murderer* and a *villain;*
> A *slave* that is not twentieth part the tithe
> Of your precedent lord,

it is Leicester, the "murderer," Hatton, the "villain," and Ralegh, the "slave," that he means—

> A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
> That from the shelf the precious diadem stole,
> And put it in his pocket. . . .
> A king of shreds and patches.

He has given her the truth, and the Ghost straightway appears, the spirit of truth, looming upon the threshold. But the Queen cannot see it. She really cannot see the truth.

> *Hamlet.* How is it with you, lady?
> *Queen.* Alas! how is't with you?
> . . . . . .
> . . . Whereon do you look?
> *Hamlet.* On him, on him! Look you, how pale he glares!
> His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,
> Would make them capable. Do not look upon me;
> Lest with this piteous action you convert
> My stern effects: then what I have to do
> Will want true colour; tears perchance for blood.
> *Queen.* To whom do you speak this?
> *Hamlet.* Do you see nothing there?
> *Queen.* Nothing at all. . . .
> . . . . . .
> *Hamlet.* . . . Forgive me this my *vertue;*
> For in the fatness of these pursy times
> *Vertue* itself of vice must pardon beg,
> Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good. (114-55.)

We use Oxford's own spelling, for thus we get his essential meaning. The Queen cries:

> O Hamlet! thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

And undoubtedly, at their first interview after more than two years, Elizabeth made some such penitent response to her noble courtier who, maimed in body now and lacerated in mind, dared "speak daggers" to her. For Edward de Vere's *words* were his weapon, which he wielded as valiantly as ever his ancestors had plied the flashing *sword.*

To note a further detailed identification of Hamlet with Lord Oxford we shall run through the play and pick up a few of the striking parallels. But since there is scarcely a line that has not some special significance, we shall be obliged to omit some of them.

Now and then the King speaks in his role of monarch for Elizabeth; signally so when he turns from Laertes to say (I.2.64):

> But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son—
> *Hamlet (aside).* A little more than *kin* and less than *kind.*

Oxford is punning here upon the German noun, *kind,* together with the English adjective. To Elizabeth, because he has been her lover, he is a little more than "kin"—more than "cousin," the term used by the sovereign toward the high nobles of the court—and less than son, or child—taking the German sense—while certainly she had been less than "kind" in her recent treatment of him, and he is feeling none too "kind" toward her.

Elizabeth is not the only one who has given him cause to wail,

> Frailty, thy name is woman! (I.2.146)—

although it had been she who had provoked the lines in his early signed poem,

> But when I see how *frail* these creatures are,
> I muse that men forget themselves so far.

In that same poem, *Woman's Changeableness,* the young Earl, an enthusiastic falconer, had written,

> Unsettled still like *haggards wild* they range,
> These gentle birds that *fly from man to man,*

And it is the falconer's call that Hamlet gives in answer to Horatio's summons (I.5.116):

> Hillo, ho, ho, boy! come, bird, come;

while it is the English sportsman laughing at the French when he remarks to the First Player (II.2.434-5):

> We'll e'en to it like French falconers, fly at any thing we see.

Rosencrantz speaks of the boy actors (II.2.344) as "an aery of children, little eyases"; which are (according to the Oxford Dictionary) young hawks not yet completely trained.

We have previously quoted (Chap. Five) the tribute which was paid to the Earl's horsemanship and are reminded of it now by the King's description of a certain Norman's prowess, for Oxford's ancestors were said to have moved, before the Conquest, into Normandy from Denmark.

> *King.* Two months since
> Here was a gentleman of Normandy:
> I've seen myself, and serv'd against, the French,
> And they can well on horseback; but this gallant
> Had witchcraft in 't, he grew unto his seat,
> And to such wondrous doing brought his horse,
> As he had been incorps'd and demi-natur'd
> With the brave beast; so far he topp'd my thought
> That I, in forgery of shapes and tricks,
> Come short of what he did. (IV.7.80-8.)

Fletcher had written of Lord Oxford:

> . . . he controls his foaming steed with a light rein, and *armed with a long spear* rides to the encounter. Fearlessly he settles himself in the saddle, gracefully bending his body this way and that. Now he circles round; now with spurred heel he rouses his charger. The gallant animal with fiery energy collects himself, and flying quicker than the wind beats the ground with his hoofs, and is again pulled up short as the reins control him.

Here is further evidence that the dramatist had been dipping into old files, where had come across Fletcher's eulogy and embodied it in this play which was so intrinsically his own story.

In *Pandora,* 1584, John Sooothern similarly celebrated "Dever's" (De Vere's) excellence "in the Centaurian art of Thrace," as follows:

> Half-horse, half-man, and with less pain,
> Doth he bring the Courser, indomitable
> To yield to the raynes of his bridle. (p. 5.) [3]

We call attention to these points relative to his zest for falconry and horsemanship, because they are the ones to which the poet alludes as, we may take it, germane to himself, in Sonnet 91, together with "high birth, wealth," which he had also possessed, and "garments though new-fangled ill."

There is more than a jest touching his familiarity with hawks implied in Hamlet's assertion (II.2.383-4),

> I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw.

("Handsaw" was the falconer's name for a heron.) At this time, when he was bedevilled by lack of money, it no doubt tormented Oxford

[3] Cited by Charles Wisner Barrell: *News-Letter* of the Sh. Fellowship, Am. Branch; Feb., 1943.

to think of all he had invested and lost in the expeditions to find a "northwest" passage to China, while Burghley, Leicester, Hatton, and the Queen had reaped riches from their more fortunate ventures.

As we have said before, another early poem, *Labour and Reward,* must have suggested the following lines, inspired partly by his own situation at the time that he had begun writing *Hamlet:*

> *The great man down,* you mark his favourite flies;
> The poor advanc'd makes friends of enemies.
> And hitherto doth love on fortune tend,
> For *who not needs* shall never lack a friend. (III.2.207-10.)

His youthful poem, also written in rhymed couplets, had concluded:

> For he that beats the bush *the bird not gets,*
> But *who sits still* and holdeth fast the nets.

Not only is the general attitude the same, but the rather unusual order of words is identical.

However, there is more to this correspondence than the characteristic attitude and turn of phrase which produced it. This verse in *Hamlet,* no less than other analogies to Oxford's affairs, may have been inserted as a clue. For the youthful poem is the one appended to the prefatory letter to Bedingfield's *"Cardanus' Comforte, published by commaundement of the right honourable the Earle of Oxenforde, Anno Domini 1573."* And it is this work, *Cardanus' Comforte,* which has been taken by eminent scholars [4] to be the book Hamlet is reading when he teases Polonius. (II.2.170 *et seq.*) Hamlet's philosophy, they find, stems in part from this book, including to some extent the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, of which Plato, however, is the original source.

Never does the dramatist Earl of Oxford give a more realistic vignette of his own personality than in Hamlet's speech to the Players. He has greeted them (II.2.426 *et seq.*) with the courtesy of the true aristocrat: his friendliness is easy and spontaneous without descending to familiarity, his graciousness is never patronizing. He is, indeed, the "perfect courtier," as well as a man of judgment, taste, humor, with respect for the rights, the abilities, and the feelings of others. All this appears in his conversation with and instructions to the Players (II.2 and III.2):

> Speak the speech, I pray you, trippingly on the tongue. . . . Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and—as I may say—whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. . . . Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special

[4] Francis Douce: *Illustrations of Shakespeare* (1839); Rev. Joseph Hunter: *New Illustrations of Shakespeare* (1845); and others.

observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. . . . (III.2.1 *et seq.*)

The whole scene provides a vivid glimpse of the Earl—who was "a lord to a lord, a man to a man, stuffed with all honourable virtues"—animatedly training the "little eyases," cultivating in the boorish and vulgar youth of the early Elizabethan stage a sense of dignity, artistry, and pride in their profession. His own speech must have been not only fluent, but precise and colorful, spoken "trippingly on the tongue," and with the niceties of pronunciation Holofernes criticized in Armado's.

As we have already observed, it is no coincidence that Stowe's *Annals* states, concerning the year 1583, that "comedians and stage players of former times were very poor and ignorant . . . but being now grown very skilful and exquisite actors for all matters, they were entertained into the service of diverse great Lords."

Hamlet was written in 1583–84; and this scene in which the Prince trains his actors for the stage is one of the "brief chronicles of the time" which he announces that the players provide.

> And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them. (III.2.39 *et seq.*)

According to Cairncross, these lines were probably directed at Tarleton, the clown of the Queen's men; for two of the passages which appear in Q1 are found in his *Jests,* published in 1611. Tarleton died in 1588; and Cairncross believes that, "if [*Hamlet*] were written before September 1588," they may have been deleted on his death.[5]

In *The Taming of the Shrew,* one of the earliest plays—although at least part of the Induction was a late addition—the lord of a feudal castle addresses a company of strolling players in precisely Hamlet's fashion (*sc.*1,79-89):

> *Lord.* Now, fellows, you are welcome.
> . . . . . .
> Do you intend to stay with me tonight?
> . . . . . .
> This fellow I remember,
> Since once he play'd a farmer's eldest son:
> 'Twas where you woo'd the gentlewoman so well.
> . . . . . .
> . . . thou didst it excellent.

Hamlet greets his players with the same cordiality (II.2.426 *et seq.*):

> You are welcome, masters; welcome, all. I am glad to see thee well: welcome, good friends.

[5] *The Problem of Hamlet;* p. 103.

A casual instance of Oxford's scholarship appears in Hamlet's words to the First Player (II.2.443-4):

> . . . others whose judgments . . . cried in the top of mine.

This is obviously taken—as noted by James Dwyer[6]—from the "queer phrase, *cima di giudicio* (*Purg.* VI.37)" of Dante. Hamlet also says (345) "cry out on the top of question"; and (IV.7.87) "topp'd my thought."

We must resist the temptation to discuss the four soliloquies, than which there is surely no more eloquent expression in the English language, at once intellectual, philosophic, and poetic, of man's baffle-ment in the face of human infirmity and inscrutable destiny. There are many other points which we shall have also to let go by; but we cannot ignore one of the principal horrors that lay at the root of Hamlet's despairing rage. This is the incestuous character of the Queen's second marriage. It is mentioned five times—I.2.156-7; I.5.42; I.5.83; III.3.90; V.2.325—with extreme loathing. Protestants do not consider a man's marriage to his brother's wife incestuous; but Oxford had an excuse for using the term in that Hamlet's father seems to have been a Catholic, although he himself attended school at Wittenberg. In any case, the charge could certainly not have been brought against Lord Oxford's own mother, nor against Elizabeth or Mary Stuart, the only possible prototypes of the Queen.

It is, however, a corrosive torment to Hamlet's mind.

Recalling that in his diatribe against Ophelia's painting, coquetry, and nicknaming of God's creatures, the reference is deliberately mis-applied—to her, that is, instead of the Queen—we are bound to suspect that, for the sake of ambiguity, similar tactics are used here, and that this is another reference to the situation found in *Pericles.* We are evidently intended to make this deduction; indeed, we are given a definite clue in Hamlet's strange remark to Polonius (II.2.184-6):

> Conception is a blessing, but not as your daughter may conceive. *Friend, look to 't.*

This is the only overt statement he permits himself. But more is implied.

To whom does Hamlet first appear after his searing vision of the truth? (The Ghost has, by the way, stressed this point twice.) He goes straight to Ophelia. She reports his distracted behavior to her father in the scene *immediately following* Hamlet's passage with the Ghost. (II.1.75 *et seq.*) So we are to take it that he went at once to her.

[6] *News-Letter* of the Sh. Fellowship, Am. Br.; Aug.-Sept., 1940.

Polonius has just dismissed Reynaldo when Ophelia enters.

> *Ophelia.* Alas! my lord, I have been so affrighted.
> . . . . . .
> My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
> Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac'd;
> No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,
> Ungarter'd, and down-gyved to his ankle;
> Pale as his shirt; his knees knocking each other;
> And *with a look so piteous in purport*
> *As if he had been loosed out of hell*
> *To speak of horrors,* he comes before me.
> . . . . . .
> He took me by the wrist and held me hard,
> Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
> And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
> *He falls to such perusal of my face*
> *As he would draw it.* Long stay'd he so;
> At last, a little shaking of mine arm,
> *And thrice his head thus waving up and down,*
> He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound
> That it did seem to *shatter all his bulk*
> *And end his being.* That done, he lets me go,
> And with his head over his shoulder turn'd,
> He seem'd to find his way without his eyes;
> For out of doors he went without their help,
> *And to the last bended their light on me.*

Polonius declares that "This is the very ecstasy of love." But we are not to be diverted from the truth, which is obviously that Hamlet is leaving Ophelia because of what he has learned about her. He has had a terrible shock. He gazes at her piteously. He holds her off, striving to read the truth in her face. He evidently decides that he must believe the Ghost's revelation, for he waves his head "up and down" three times—not from side to side, but "up and down," affirmatively. Then uttering never a word, he backs away, incredulous, wondering, yet perforced convinced, numb, but now grimly sure.

The inference has always been that Hamlet, in dedicating himself solely to revenge, renounces Ophelia because there can now be no place in his life for her. But that isn't good enough. Hamlet has obviously experienced some shocking revelation about Ophelia herself, something almost beyond his power to believe. And the next time he sees her, he "affronts" her (III.1):

> Ha, ha! are you honest?
> . . . . . .
> Are you fair?

He counsels her to go to a nunnery, and abruptly demands,

> Where's your father? (130.)

When she lies, saying he is at home, Hamlet makes a significant reply (132-3):

> Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool no where but in 's own house.

And he warns her that she shall not "escape calumny," again adjuring her,

> Get thee to a nunnery, go; farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. (138-41.)

In their ensuing meeting (III.2) he is sarcastic and bitter, even lewd.

There is one other point. This concerns Hamlet's revulsion expressed in his first soliloquy regarding the Queen's speedy marriage. Undoubtedly Oxford was alluding to Elizabeth's "frailty," perhaps also to his own mother's brief mourning for his father. Yet he specifies, "But two months dead." And we recall that, if Oxford's first child was born in September 1575, she was conceived just "two months" after he "lay with his wife . . . at Hampton Court." Considering the seriousness of the revelation, the dramatist could scarcely be more explicit than he is.

When Hamlet says (II.2.602 *et seq.*),

> I'll have these players
> Play something like the murder of my father
> Before mine uncle,

he is partly Oxford planning to watch the effect of the Gonzago murder on Leicester, to see if he is guilty of poisoning Sussex; but predominantly he is Oxford intent upon watching the effect on Burghley of *this* play, *Hamlet:*

> I'll observe his looks:
> I'll *tent him to the quick:* if he but blench
> *I know my course.*

He was willing to go to any lengths to learn the truth regarding his terrible suspicion. Edward de Vere's belief in the power of truth never forsook him. From the beginning to the end of his life, he was confident that

> foul deeds will rise,
> Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes. (I.2.256-7.)

It was Polonius, be it remembered, who ordered sharply,

> *Give o'er the play.* (III.2.271.)

There are depths within depths in this magnificent drama. While it is vividly human and immediate, it has the universal scope and profundity of the great Greek tragedies.

We have called attention to the knowledge of law evinced in the gravediggers' scene (V.1.) It may be added that presumably Oxford's current preoccupation with the sale of his property had turned his interest to this subject. For, in October 1584, he was writing Lord Burghley:

> It is not unknown to your Lordship that I have entered into a great number of bonds to such as have purchased lands of me, to discharge them of all incumbrances . . . etc.

In the churchyard, the gravedigger, or First Clown, informs Hamlet that the skull which he has just uncovered is that of Yorick, "the king's jester," and that it has lain in the earth "three-and-twenty years." Hamlet takes it in his hand. Like Benedick, he has a queasy stomach: it makes his gorge rise.

> Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? quite chapfallen? (190-9.)

Will Somers, jester to King Henry VIII, had died in 1560 and consequently, at the time Oxford was writing *Hamlet,* had lain "in the earth twenty-three years." [7] Since Oxford's father, the Sixteenth Earl, had been King Henry's Lord Great Chamberlain from 1540 until the end of his reign in 1547, it is a foregone conclusion that he knew the Court Jester well. Mrs. Clark suggests that, after Henry's death, Will Somers would sometimes have accompanied the Earl's troupe of players to Castle Hedingham and "found there his most fascinated auditor in the small son of the Earl, little Edward, born in 1550. Imagination pictures the funny old man playing horse for the charming child . . . and the child, grown to manhood, remembers regretfully the 'fellow of infinite jest' who had borne him 'on his back a thousand times.'" [8]

Partly for the sake of recording the length of time Yorick's skull has lain in the ground, Oxford casually increases the age of Hamlet, who, at the beginning of the play, was a youth fresh from his studies at Wittenberg. He never loses sight of the topical implications: it is as if he were habitually concerned with informing the reader, or the audience, of the vintage of the several versions of each drama. In the early days, of course, he had used contemporary allusions for the interest and amusement of his audience at court; for this reason also

[7] Holland; p. 78.
[8] *Hidd. All.;* p. 488.

he kept them up to date. Later he saw that they would furnish posterity with a valuable clue. And so they have.

Hamlet becomes preoccupied with death, while fingering this grisly memento.

> To what base uses we may return, Horatio! (V.1.209.)

The thought of physical decay was often present to Oxford, as Sonnets 71 and 81 attest. In our belief, this great poet who, although one of the most distinguished and influential men of his time, was condemned to anonymity, returned during the year before he died to this play, which he regarded as the intimate expression of his life and being; and when Hamlet declares with almost his last breath,

> But I do prophesy the election lights
> On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice (V.2.355-6),

it is the premier Earl of England bestowing his sanction upon James Stuart. In doing this, he yielded something dearer to him even than his great name. But of that later.

Only a man who had felt the immanence of death could have said:

> But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart. (V.2. 212-13.)

There is reason to believe that Oxford made, at this time, certain alterations in *Hamlet* in compliment to James. This was an age in which every advantage had to be won through favor and preferment; and he was in 1603 beholden to James for the freedom of the young Earl of Southampton, to whom he was devoted. So that, since it was possible to interpret the murdered King Hamlet as Darnley, Gertrude as Mary Stuart, and Claudius as Bothwell, a few touches here and there would make of Hamlet a highly flattering, if not very realistic, portrayal of James himself.

One such concession was evidently the Queen's remark that her son is "fat, and scant of breath." (V.2.287.) James was fat. There was certainly no need to say that Hamlet was, although Oxford himself seems to have grown temporarily stout in middle life. Moreover, James had been from early childhood vehemently exhorted to "revenge" his father's death; and this was another analogy. James was also extremely vacillating, though he would upon occasion take sudden action; and he was studious, deeply interested in theology and philosophy. Through the addition of a word here, a phrase there, James would be able to lay the "flattering unction" to his soul that "great Oxford's" greatest character represented himself, James Stuart, and that his mother might, like Gertrude, presumably be innocent of his father's murder. For Gertrude's astonishment when she cries, "As kill a king!" (III.4.30) is apparently genuine.

The Earl must have winced painfully at this final penalty he was forced to pay for his "bewailed guilt." But it is impossible not to believe that he made this last sacrifice willingly. James did free Southampton and restore to him his confiscated estates. So perhaps Oxford was content.

There are moments of grandeur and nobility, of pathos, wit, humor and charm, of despair and supreme tragedy in Hamlet's story, as there were in de Vere's life. Hamlet, with his high code of honor, was proud and rebellious, remorseless in revenge, as de Vere was. But both were reflective, with a capacity for detachment in the midst of passionate feeling, and modesty in the midst of pride. Both knew the intrinsic loneliness of genius.

What simple dignity is voiced in Hamlet's announcement (V.1.264-5):

> . . . this is I,
> Hamlet the Dane.

What unutterable tenderness is implicit in his words to the Ghost (I.5.183):

> Rest, rest, perturbèd spirit.

Since Lord Oxford is obviously telling his own story in this great drama, we are constrained to believe, as we have previously observed, that he regarded the attack made on his ship by pirates in 1576 as having been instigated by someone in a position of authority, taking drastic means to be rid of him. He had certainly escaped with some of his possessions intact, and thus he could have said, with Hamlet,

> They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy, but they knew what they did; I am to do a good turn for them. (IV.6.19-21.)

This has a ring of realism. The Earl of Oxford, not only keen and resourceful, but a powerful man of his time, would have been able to get round hired pirates by making them a better offer than the original one. Or, of course, he may have contrived to change their orders, as Hamlet did.

But here again he has telescoped the action; for in 1585 another attack was made upon a ship of his, with "a letter" from Burghley found on board, a letter written falsely and for crafty effect.[9] It was history repeating itself once more: or rather, perhaps, a pair of knaves practicing their old tricks again. The infuriated Oxford would have decided then and there to retaliate upon the two villains to the full extent of his power. We cannot tell how much of Hamlet's account of the planned attack on his ship was added in 1585 to merge the

[9] An account of this is given in the ensuing chapter.

two plots into one. But the whole incident must have been adroitly recast at that time.

Laertes is a composite character. In 1583–84, he was predominantly Philip Sidney over Thomas Cecil. The King plotting with Laertes for his duel with Hamlet (IV.7.1-161) is Leicester working on his susceptible nephew, Sidney, against Oxford; it is a masterly passage. (*Laertes,* as we have noted, is a perfect anagram for *a Lester;* and the Earl's name was occasionally spelled Lester in contemporary letters.) It may well have been Leicester who had induced young Sidney to provoke Oxford to a challenge as a result of the tennis-court quarrel, to the latter's astonishment. And this, when Elizabeth had decreed that an Earl might not fight a duel with a Gentleman, had evidently led to a duel between Oxford and Leicester himself. (The situation may be deduced from the comic analogy in *Twelfth Night:* the far-fetched provocation to a duel by Aguecheek-Sidney, who has no wish to fight, with Sir Toby saying—IV.1.28—"Hold, sir, or I'll throw your dagger o'er the house!")

> *King* [*to Laertes.*] Now must *your conscience my acquittance seal,*
> And you must put me in your heart for friend,
> Sith . . . he which hath *your noble father* slain
> Pursu'd *my* life.

(Read "honor" for "father" throughout: Leicester would have told Sidney his honor was violated, well aware of the potency of this appeal.)

> *Laertes.* It well appears: but tell me
> Why *you* proceeded not against these feats.
> . . . . . .
> *King.* O! for two special reasons;
> . . . . . .
> . . . *The queen* his mother
> *Lives almost by his looks,* and for myself,—
> . . . . . .
> She's so conjunctive to my life and soul,
> That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
> I could not but by her. The other motive
> Why to a public count I might not go
> Is *the great love the general gender bear him;*
> Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,
> Would, like the spring that turneth wood to stone,
> Convert his gyves to graces: so that *my arrows,*
> Too slightly timber'd for so loud a wind,
> Would have reverted to my bow again,
> And not where I had aim'd them.
> *Laertes.* And so have I a noble father lost;
> . . . . . .
> . . . But my revenge will come.

He rises to the bait. The King pricks him on:

Revenge should have no bounds. (127.)

Leicester knew not only that the Queen was devoted to Oxford but also that he risked retribution at the hands of the people if he should murder the Earl. The King has reminded himself of such a fact in his soliloquy (IV.3.1-11) regarding the danger to him of Hamlet's proximity; for Hamlet knew too much about the King, as Oxford did about Leicester:

> How dangerous is it that this man goes loose!
> Yet must not we put the strong law upon him:
> *He's lov'd of the distracted multitude,*
> Who like not in their judgment but their eyes;
> And where 'tis so, *the offender's scourge* is weigh'd,
> But never the offence.

If Leicester had entertained the idea of poisoning one of the foils in a duel with Oxford, he would doubtless have made the same assumption concerning him that the King does about Hamlet (IV.7.133-5):

> . . . he, being remiss,
> Most generous and free from all contriving,
> Will not peruse the foils.

When Hamlet so movingly inquires of Laertes (V.1.296-7),

> What is the reason that you use me thus?
> I lov'd you ever,

it is his friend and young companion, Philip Sidney, whom the Earl addresses. Leicester has reminded Sidney that Oxford has ridiculed him in the plays; but Oxford would have replied to this that he had mocked himself as Armado quite as much as he had teased Sidney as Boyet, had caricatured himself as extravagantly as Feste and Parolles, etc., as he had Sidney as Aguecheek. Sidney would have known all this, but Leicester could have worked upon him.

The King's remark at the close of the scene in the cemetery (V.1.304) seems curious:

This grave shall have a living monument.

Or rather, it would seem curious if taken at its face-value. What he means is that *this play* will be its deathless monument, in the same way that the Sonnets will be to the Fair Youth:

> And thou *in this* shalt find thy monument,
> When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent. (107.)

Osric must be, at least partially, Christopher Hatton, who had been called "a frippery gentleman"; although the mischievous Oxford is

glancing also at the Sidney type of courtier, "monsieur the nice." Whether or not the name was first suggested by that of the historic Eric Rosencrantz, Osric has the dominant letters of Hatton's first name: Cris-O. Hatton was certainly "well-heeled," as we say nowadays; like Osric, he had "much land, and fertile" (V.2.87), and he was unpopular at court. He must have been an affected creature. He looks so in his portrait by Ketel, in which the painter has placed a lapdog, as if for a keynote or symbol, as he put a globe in Frobisher's, and Yorick's skull in the Ashbourne portrait of Shakespeare. (Infra-red photography has shown this portrait to have been signed by Ketel.)

Hamlet's apology to Laertes in the presence of the court, just before the duel, is deeply stirring, the expression of a noble nature. While it was probably addressed to Philip Sidney and Thomas Cecil, too, in the beginning, it would later, after Sidney's death and finally Burghley's, have been diverted to Thomas and Robert Cecil.

> Give me your pardon, sir; I've done you wrong;
> But pardon 't, as you are a gentleman.
> This presence knows,
> And you must needs have heard, how I am punish'd
> *With sore distraction.* What I have done
> That might your nature, honour and exception
> Roughly awake, I here proclaim was *madness.*
> Was 't Hamlet wrong'd Laertes? *Never Hamlet.*
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And *when he's not himself* does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it then? *His madness.* If 't be so,
> *Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd;*
> His *madness* is poor Hamlet's *enemy.*
> Sir, *in this audience,*
> *Let my disclaiming from a purpos'd evil*
> *Free me so far in your most generous thoughts,*
> *That I have shot mine arrow o'er the house,*
> *And hurt my brother.* (V.2.226-43.)

He apologizes in the "presence" of the "audience" who have seen all his plays and understood their full import. And now we perceive that Hamlet's "madness" is the creative artist's vision of the truth, which induces a kind of ecstasy—*furor poeticus,* the "poet's rage" of Sonnet 17, which transports the artist beyond himself, beyond the bounds of discretion, or even of personal responsibility: into another dimension, it would seem, as Hamlet was in the presence of the Ghost, his vision of the truth.

The poet's genius impelled him ruthlessly to shoot his arrow "o'er the house"—of Cecil, of Dudley, of Tudor, for that matter—aiming ever at the truth. (In *Twelfth Night* it is a "dagger.") To do this was an absolute necessity of his genius, a compulsion of his idealistic,

romantic yet analytical, supremely articulate nature. Certain individuals were hurt, himself among them—"Hamlet is of the faction that is wrong'd"—but his arrows found their mark. And humanity has benefited beyond all reckoning.

In seeking to avenge the truth, the Prince has pulled the world down about his shoulders, has indeed destroyed himself. It will not be known that he was striving to vindicate the truth, that, though he had caused much unhappiness and precipitated tragedy, his purpose had been noble. It is anguish to him—to Hamlet, to Edward de Vere—that, once again, his "good name" will suffer, as indeed it has, through posterity's failure to understand.

Goaded by his genius, betrayed by his own passionate idealism into desecrating the great name which had come to him as a trust, he makes a dying plea to the sturdy, dependable Horatio, who is himself a Vere:

> Had I but time,—as this fell sergeant, death,
> Is strict in his arrest,—O! I could tell you—
> But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;
> Thou livest; *report me and my cause aright*
> *To the unsatisfied.*
> . . . . . .
> O God, Horatio! *what a wounded name,*
> *Things standing thus unknown, shall live 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.
> . . . The rest is silence. (V.2.336-58.)

Horatio accepts the charge.

> And let me speak to the *evermore unknowing world.*
> How these things came about: so shall you hear
> Of *carnal, bloody,* and *unnatural acts,*
> Of *accidental judgments,* casual slaughters,
> Of *deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,*
> And, in the upshot, *purposes mistook,*
> *Fallen on the inventors' heads;* all this can I
> *Truly deliver.* (379-86.)

Is he speaking of Hamlet at the court of Denmark, or of Edward de Vere at the court of Elizabeth? It is impossible to say, for they are one and inseparable.