CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

FOR THE LAST TIME Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford, greatest of his long and distinguished line, had told his story. In one of the earliest of his candidly autobiographical plays, *Timon of Athens*, written in 1576 from the depths of his first disillusionment, he had expressed a newly acquired practical wisdom in the speech of a Senator (II.1.20-21):

> . . . I must serve my turn
> Out of mine own.

And in that same year, pressed, like Timon, by his creditors, he had written Burghley, shortly before returning from abroad:

> I have no help but of mine own, and mine is made to serve me and myself. . . .

Some twenty-five years or more had gone by since that time, but he was finding his words prophetic: perhaps in revising *Timon* he was reminded of the bitter lesson he had learned and understood well now, in his final disillusionment and defeat, that this was more than ever the case: that if he did not tell his story to the end, no one would. They were all quite willing—the Queen, his family, and his friends—to have him whose "report was once First with the best of note," fade into oblivion, leaving no trace, quite satisfied to allow him to be buried, as Timon was,

> Upon the beached verge of the salt flood;
> Who once a day with his embossed froth
> The turbulent surge shall cover.

Like Timon in his *milieu* of wealth and culture, so Lord Oxford, in the world of literature and the stage, had "done his reign."

It is marvellous that *King Lear* can compass so much in an integrated whole, that a work can be so diverse in unity as we have seen this to be. Yet the greatest theme it embodies is Lord Oxford's own deathless story, which pulsates at the heart of the drama, keeping it as vital and as poignant today as it was three hundred and fifty years

ago. It is this that provides the magic of which one has an ever-recurring sense, no matter how often the play is read: this and its wisdom and truth.

King Lear was begun, it would seem, immediately after *Macbeth*, in 1589–90, soon after the great celebrations following England's victory over the Spanish Armada, when Hatton, Essex, and other favorites had feted the Queen with pomp and circumstance, while Oxford, who had loved her best of them all, who had spent his youth and his fortune in her service, who had not only created the Elizabethan theatre but enriched and mobilized the English language, who had been loyal through all her mistreatment, was obliged to stand back and take no honorable part. Yet he was the greatest of her train, the noblest in lineage, by rights her consort. For many years he had delighted her mind, provided diversion for visiting dignitaries, entertained and been an ornament to her court, raised England to a high status among cultivated nations. Like a young prince he had come riding into London from his father's feudal castle at the head of seven score horse and in early manhood had returned from the Border wars "with four score gentlemen in a livery of Reading tawny, and chains of gold about their necks, before him"; but now he was as poorly attended as the maliciously deprived Lear. He had spent everything in the service, not of cormorant daughters, but of an absolute monarch who, for all her great qualities, had proved in more than one instance to be a cormorant mistress. He had, in short, given her his kingdom, and she had abandoned him.

As we have said in another connection, it is not of course to be inferred that Goneril represents Elizabeth, Regan Anne Vavasor, and Cordelia partially Anne Cecil and partially the plays, in any literal sense; but symbolically, in their effect upon the Earl's life, these characters may be taken to stand for the influences these three women and the child of his brain and heart, his plays, had exerted. ". . . they told me I was every thing," cries Lear.

The blandishments of the cultured, glamorous, imperious Elizabeth and of the witty, voluptuous Anne Vavasor had certainly caused him to undervalue the simple and less spectacular qualities of his young wife and to repudiate her, whom he had apparently loved when she was away from her father, as Lorenzo had so romantically loved Jessica, taking pains to remove her far from Shylock's domineering eye. With what acrid irony Lord Oxford must now have used the young Lorenzo's phrase, "In such a night," with the sad addition, "To shut me out!" It is repeated, so there can be no mistake: "In such a night as this!" (III.4.17-22):

> . . . O Regan, Goneril!
> Your old kind father, *whose frank heart gave all,—*

O! that way madness lies; let me shun that;
No more of that.

When it is recalled that the murder of Darnley was called a parricide because a husband stood in the same relation to his wife that a father did to his child, this passage becomes clearer. Elizabeth had certainly shut him out: she had literally banished him in 1581. Oxford was not letting her off anything. He drives this point home in Gloucester's words (I.2.121-2):

And the noble and *true*-hearted Kent banished! his offense, *honesty!*
'Tis strange!

He even reminds her that

The gods are just, and of our *pleasant vices*
Make instruments to plague us. (V.3.171-2.)

He was probably the only human being who had ever dared stand up to the Queen. And he voiced his searing bitterness in Edgar's words (V.3.219-21):

Kent, sir, the *banish'd* Kent; who *in disguise*
Follow'd his *enemy king,* and did him *service*
Improper for a slave.

He felt deep shame that he had prostituted himself to her.

The analogy continues. Lear goes from Goneril, whose devotion he had believed in, to Regan, who had also made ardent protestations of love, as Anne Vavasor had done in the *Echo* poem—just as Romeo, years ago, had gone from Rosaline-Elizabeth to Juliet-Anne. Goneril poisoned Regan: Elizabeth imprisoned Anne in the Tower. The young Romeo cries:

O! I am Fortune's fool;

and the old King Earl laments:

I am even
The natural fool of fortune. (IV.6.191-2.)

Both are destroyed.

Later this same Anne, the Dark Lady, seduced the poet's son and treated her former lover abominably. Gloucester's use of the phrase, "worser spirit" (IV.6.219), which is precisely what Oxford called Anne Vavasor in Sonnet 144—and this in connection with Edgar, who stands for the Fair Youth—would seem to be a kind of verbal conditioned reflex on the poet's part.

Goneril and Regan both have a claim upon Edmund, who is the base-born and traitor-aspect of Oxford's son, as Elizabeth and Anne had upon Southampton. The artifice of all these allusions is subtle and masterly. Rash though some of them are, the dramatist is protected by the wealth of his reference: not that he was particularly concerned about safety; he had never lacked courage. Since both Elizabeth and Anne Vavasor were lascivious, who can tell which he means—especially considering the open accusation of lechery against Mary Stuart—when Lear says (IV.6.123 *et seq.*):

The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to 't
With a more riotous appetite. . . .

Moreover, the interdependence and similarities of the various themes and personal references are extraordinary. We shall run through Miss Winstanley's table of parallels between *Lear* and the Darnley murder for their application to the case of Oxford, who had also been a young Earl beloved of a Queen.

(1) Oxford had been "led to" what might be called his "doom" through Elizabeth's "professions of affection."

(2) Oxford had been as "rash and credulous" as Darnley, certainly in placing himself "in the power of those who were false to him"—Henry Howard and Burghley, conspicuously—and in trusting Elizabeth too far and Christopher Hatton at all.

(3) We have spoken of the "parricide" analogy.

(4) We have no information regarding Oxford's expectations after his "marriage" to Elizabeth, or his demands. But it was certainly Elizabeth's "determination to exclude him from power"; and this embraces her refusal to recognize their son, as well as her—or the Council's, with her consent—fiat of anonymity against the man who had recklessly accepted her amorous challenge.

(5) Oxford shared with Darnley "pride and haughtiness and a tendency"—if not to "break into furious rages," at least to "rail," to weep, and to berate.

(6) Whoever else may or may not have accused him, Oxford accused himself often enough of "egregious folly."

(7) While it cannot be said of Elizabeth that she, like Mary, "took away" the Earl's servants, "denying him money . . . and making him . . . an outlaw," nevertheless it was in her service that his fortune had been dissipated—and also, we should add, during the time his property was in Burghley's charge—and she had banished him, while Authority had made him an "outlaw." "Outlaw" is indeed the very word he used when Authority, in the person of the Duke, Silvia-Elizabeth's father, banishes Valentine-Oxford, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona.*

(8) and (9) These points are symbolically true when the case is viewed by an aggrieved lover "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes."

(10) The Earl of Oxford did escape to France in 1574, because

things were unpleasant for him,—perhaps dangerous, since the Second Earl of Southampton also fled, just as Leicester had run away in 1561, the year his son was born to the Queen.

(11) Because practically everything relating to Elizabeth's association with Lord Oxford has been scrupulously deleted from the historical record, there is no way of knowing whether she ever subjected him to "bitter humiliations . . . insulting him for the sake of insults," as Mary did Darnley. We very much doubt that she did, for the Earl had a sharp and fluent tongue and was reckless when aroused; but she frequently insulted Leicester, swearing at him, calling him names, threatening to have his head, and upon occasion berated and reviled Burghley also. It would of course have taken less to humiliate the sensitive Oxford.

(13) Undoubtedly both Elizabeth and Burghley "had the unparalleled impudence to assert" that Oxford "himself in his madness . . . had stripped [himself of] his clothes"—that is to say, of his appurtenances, or of proper recognition.

The statement in Crawford's *Declaration* also applies; for the young Earl of Oxford, whose "frank heart gave all," would never have believed that "she who was his own proper flesh would do him hurt," yet he kept "confidence . . . in *her promise* only," and "would put himself in her hands though she would cut his throat." This is what Kent did too: he stood by Lear, in spite of the irate sovereign's threats against his life.

The previously quoted remark of Lear (IV.6.199) is especially moving when it is remembered that it was the act of becoming a bridegroom to a queen which had destroyed Oxford, just as it had Darnley:

> *I will die bravely as a bridegroom.*

It cannot be denied that the basic correspondence between the two cases is striking. Lord Oxford, revising or adding to the play in the dark days of Southampton's imprisonment, the worst storm his "wracked" life had ever been subjected to, of which Kent says (III.2.48-9),

> . . . man's nature cannot carry
> The affliction nor the fear,

and which caused Lear (IV.7.46-8) to feel that he was bound

> Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
> Do scald like molten lead—

Lord Oxford himself must have felt shattered to his depths. He never recovered from the torture of this terrible ordeal.

In the final fury the Fool—Lear's other self, Elizabeth's Jester—

was extinguished. His master, his graver self, the noble Earl whom he had attended so gaily throughout life, says:

> Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
> That's sorry yet for thee. (III.2.72-3.)

In the end, Lear laments,

> And my poor fool is hang'd. (V.3.306.)

This is to say, he was strangled: all the wit and gaiety wrung out, the high spirits quenched; strangled too in the sense of rendered voiceless.

One aspect of Cordelia which meets this same fate is of course the plays. There was no reason, as far as the action was concerned, to have the Fool and Cordelia *hanged*. But Edmund's agent who hanged Cordelia was also a replica of Henry Howard's agent who was responsible for Othello-Oxford's *smothering* Desdemona-Anne. It is all consistent, and amazingly ingenious.

When Lilian Winstanley discovered the historical allusions upon which the tragedies were founded, she remarked that "The improbable details are thus extenuated and explained." Little did she suspect how fully they were explained!

There is so much that is personal to the Earl of Oxford in this great drama that it could almost be taken line by line and interpreted in terms of his own experience. We must confine ourselves to a few more points.

Oswald, who is Goneril's creature, is clearly Christopher Hatton (the name is similar to Osric), Elizabeth's sycophantic minion, for whom Oxford had felt, from the beginning to the end, unmitigated contempt—as two of the characters who stand for Oxford here feel loathing for Oswald, while the third is barely rescued from his enmity. His impudence infuriates Lear, as Hatton's assumptions had infuriated Oxford:

> *Lear.* This is *a slave,* whose *easy-borrow'd pride*
> Dwells in *the fickle grace of her he follows.*
> Out, varlet, from my sight. (II.4.185-7.)

When Kent spurned him, Oswald was the cause of his being put in the stocks for an excessive period. It has been seen that Hatton was instrumental in prolonging Oxford's banishment, in 1581-83, which had been an especially personal humiliation, just as the stocks are to Kent, and a deprivation of freedom to defend himself. Kent's contempt for Oswald (as expressed in II.2.15 *et seq.*) is Oxford's for Hatton. Furthermore, Kent's subsequent speech (II.2.72 *et seq.*) makes the identification still more complete; for it was Hatton who had endeavored to win Elizabeth away from Lord Oxford in 1573-74, at the very time that there must have been some kind of betrothal between them, not long before the birth of the Fair Youth:

Kent. That such *a slave* as this should wear a sword,
Who wears *no honesty.* Such smiling rogues as these,
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain
Which are too intrinse t' unloose; smooth every passion
That in the natures of their lords rebel;
Bring oil to fire, snow to their colder moods. . . .

At that very time the young Earl had written a poem to the Queen giving vent to frantic resentment against this same man:

For thou hast caught a proper paragon,
A theefe, a coward, and a Peacocke foole:
An Asse, a mylksop, and *a minion,*
Which hath none oyle thy furious flames to coole;
Such one he is, a pheare for thee most fit,
A wandring guest, to please thy *wavering wit.*

It is the same thought, almost the same words. "Wavering wit" has now become "fickle grace," but the "oyle" for fire remains unaltered.

However, there is more still. For Oswald capitalizes upon the downfall of Gloucester—who, in his blindness, represents the Earl of Oxford, careless of his own interests, inexcusably remiss, as poets and idealists are wont to be—and it is in doing this that he is killed. It will be remembered that when Hatton, as Lord Chancellor, strove to wreck Oxford's theatrical company and bankrupt him in 1590, the Queen had suddenly retaliated with such tremendous exactions that, under the shock, Hatton's chronic illness had flared up and he had died, in 1591.

In the play (IV.6.227 *et seq.*) Oswald encounters the blinded Gloucester.

Oswald. A proclaim'd prize! Most happy!
That eyeless head of thine was first fram'd flesh
To raise my fortunes. . . .

Edgar comes to the rescue and, in a fight, kills Oswald.

Edgar. I know thee well: a serviceable villain;
As duteous to the vices of thy mistress
As badness would desire.

The Earl of Oxford has minced no words in telling the truth about the Virgin Queen and her minions.[1]

Two other passages which seem to belong to an early phase of the composition are highly significant, for they give evidence again of Oxford's obsession with Burghley's intrinsic wickedness, or at least his moral recoil from what the Lord Treasurer represented:

[1] It will be recalled that we have Ralegh's word, if corroboration were needed, "that Minions were not so happy as vulgar judgments thought them, being frequently commanded to uncomely and sometimes unnatural imployment"; and we have Dyer's statement that the Queen did "descend very much in her sex as a woman."

Lear. . . . There thou mightst behold the great image of *authority;*
a *dog's* obey'd in office.
Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;
Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind
For which thou whipp'st her. The *usurer* hangs the cozener.
Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw doth pierce it.
. . . . . .
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power
To seal the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes;
And, like a scurvy politician, seem
To see the things thou dost not. Now, now, now, now;
Pull off my boots; harder, harder; so.
Edgar [*Aside*]. O! matter and impertinency mix'd;
Reason in madness!
Lear. If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes;
I knew thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester:
Thou must be patient. (IV.6.158-79.)

This is somehow more piteous because it recalls the mad Ophelia's plaint:

I hope all will be well. *We must be patient:* but I cannot choose but weep. . . .

Hamlet could really sympathize with poor distraught Ophelia at last. Now his prototype, in the guise of the mad Lear, crowns himself with weeds in a nobly pitiful gesture of poetic justice:

With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers . . . (IV.4.1-6.)

His kingship was a mockery.

The other passage shows Oxford still concerned with the dark shadow that brushed Hamlet's mind. We had intended not to refer to this again, but since it comes out of Lear's tortured mind, too, we do so without further comment than to note that it is provoked by the "storm": which means it is one of the "griefs" which had "crazed his wits."

Lear. Let the great gods,
That keep this dreadful pother o'er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
Unwhipp'd of justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand;
Thou perjur'd, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous; caitiff, to pieces shake,
That *under covert and convenient seeming*
Hast practis'd on man's life; close pent-up guilts,
Rive your concealing continents, and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. *I am a man*
More sinn'd against than sinning. (III.2.49-60.)

This was his extenuation. If he had been hard on the prototypes of Polonius and Ophelia, he had had cause. That he allowed these allusions to stand in the final versions of both *Hamlet* and *Lear* seems conclusive.

Kent's reference to "my out-wall" (III.1.45) and Lear's speech,

> . . . O! I have ta'en
> Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp:
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel . . . (III.4.32 *et seq.*),

indicate a late addition, made near the time Sonnet 146 was written. And France's words,

> *Love is not love*
> When it is mingled with regards. . . . (I.1.239-40),

express a sentiment Oxford put into Sonnet 116, written to the Fair Youth in prison, 1601–3.

Regan's reminder that Lear is old—

> . . . O sir! you are old;
> Nature in you stands on the *very verge*
> Of her confine (II.4.145-7)—

is pointedly personal and is connected with the description of Timon's grave, intentionally so, of course.

From the standpoint of Cordelia's identification as the plays, there are several passages which, taken in their full significance, are deeply moving. As Lear had repudiated Cordelia, so had the Earl formally repudiated his plays, made them nameless; yet in the end, they are all that is left to him.

Much is implied in the dialogue between Kent and Cordelia (IV.7.1-11):

> *Cordelia.* O thou good Kent! how shall I *live and work*
> To match thy goodness? My life will be too short,
> And *every measure* fail me.
> *Kent. To be acknowledg'd,* madam, *is o'erpaid.*
> *All my reports go with the modest truth,*
> No more nor clipp'd, but so.
> *Cordelia.* Be better suited:
> These *weeds* are *memories of those worser hours:*
> I prithee, put them off.
> *Kent.* Pardon me, dear madam;
> *Yet to be known shortens my made intent:*
> *My boon I make it that you know me not*
> *Till time and I think meet.*

Here we are given a clear statement by the dramatist himself. All he wishes is "to be acknowledg'd" and his "reports" known for the simple "truth." When Cordelia asks him to throw off his disguise,

since "these weeds" (in which he keeps his "invention," according to Sonnet 76) "are memories of those worser hours" (which he has dramatized), he replies that it is his deliberate purpose to be disguised for a while. He must not be recognized by the plays (this would seem to be a pun on an *idea,* implying *known by means of,* or *through,* the plays) until "time" and his intentions shall reveal his identity. "For truth will come to light." That he knew.

It is significant that Lear recognizes Cordelia, not as his "daughter," but as his "child." [2] He feels infinitely old:

> Pray, do not mock me:
> I am a very foolish fond old man,
> Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
> And to deal plainly,
> I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
> . . . Do not laugh at me;
> For, as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be *my child,* Cordelia.
> *Cordelia.* And so I am, I am. (IV.7.59-70.)

She is glad to be recognized, to be acknowledged. What pathos informs her eager affirmation!

When Edmund orders them to be taken away to be imprisoned, the man who had been a King Earl and lost all is so happy to be left to share a peaceful life with his "child" that he expresses his thankfulness in his loveliest poetry:

> We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
> And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
> And pray, and *sing,* and *tell old tales,* and laugh
> At gilded butterflies. . . .
> . . . . . .
> *And take upon 's the mystery of things,*
> *As if we were God's spies.* . . . (V.3.9 *et seq.*)

He is speaking to his plays. This is what they have done together and might continue to do.

And when Edmund repeats the order, the defeated old man, who knows that he is "every inch a king," speaks with noble eloquence:

> *Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,*
> *The gods themselves throw incense* . . .
> He that *parts us* shall bring a brand from heaven
> And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes;
> The goujeres shall devour them, flesh and fell,
> Ere they shall make us weep. (20-25.)

Now we realize that the Earl is thinking of the plays as an expression of his heart for his Queen: *Cor,* heart; and *Delia,* the Greek

[2] The word which Elizabethan writers often, if not habitually, used to designate their work.

name for Cynthia, the moon-goddess. Thus they are an expression of his essential life, of what it has stood for. (The Queen is the subject of most of his poems also, excepting the Sonnets, and her son is the subject of those.) Lord Oxford felt that there was an epic quality in his and Elizabeth's relationship. He had given her everything: he had written the plays to, and for, her. And then he had sacrificed all he had for her: his name, their son, even his plays. No wonder he could say,

> Upon such sacrifices, my *Cordelia,*
> The gods themselves throw incense.

In the closing lines of the drama, after the noble aspect of the blind Gloucester's son has conquered his baser character, and the end comes to the old King Earl while he sheds bitter tears over his "child," the repeated name-clues emphasize the symbolism. This wistful device seems to intensify the poignancy of Lear's death to an almost unbearable degree. (V.3.258 *et seq.*)

> *Enter Lear, with Cordelia dead in his arms; Edgar, Officer, and Others.*
> *Lear.* Howl, howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones:
> Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
> That heaven's vaults should crack. She's gone *for ever.*
> . . . . . .
> This feather stirs; she lives! *if it be so,*
> *It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows*
> *That ever I have felt.*

(That is, if the plays live—if they have that "chance"—he will be recompensed for all his sufferings.)

> . . . . . .
> A plague upon you, *murderers, traitors all!*
> *I might have sav'd her; now, she's gone for ever.*
> . . . . . .
> I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee.

(Between these lines is injected a tribute to Anne Cecil:

> Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
> What is 't thou sayest? Her voice was ever soft,
> Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.

Anne had had a place in his heart; he has not forgotten her.)

> *Lear.* I have seen the day, with my good *biting falchion.*[3]
> I would have made them skip: I am old now,
> And these same crosses spoil me. Who are you?
> Mine eyes are not o' the best: [4] I'll tell you straight.
> *Kent.* If fortune brag of two she lov'd and hated,
> *One of them we behold.*

[3] Significant word. A falchion is a kind of *sword.*
[4] Cf. the dying Henry IV (2 *H. IV:* IV.4.110):

> And now my sight fails, and my brain is giddy.

(Does not this mean that both Kent and Lear are the one Oxford, one Ver, whom fortune had both loved and hated?)

> . . . I am the *very* man
> . . . . . .
> That, from your first of difference and decay,
> Have follow'd your sad steps.
> *Lear.* You are welcome hither.
> *Kent.* Nor no man else.
> . . . . . .
> *Lear.* And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
> *And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,*
> *Never, never, never, never, never!*
> . . . . . .
> Do you see this? *Look on her lips,*
> *Look there, look there!* (*Dies.*)

Lear is mourning for the Fool, who is his own "shadow," sychronously with the "child" he has lost "for ever," who is the plays. He seems to see life upon her lips. She may yet speak, may live. "Look there, look there!" In this hope, he dies.

Kent's last words are spoken by the Earl of Oxford, still loyal to the recently deceased sovereign he had served under a disguise—under a mask—for so long:

> I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;
> My master calls me, I must not say no.

He did follow his Prince shortly. The Duke of Albany, who was now King James, well knew all that the last lines implied:

> . . . we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.