

## SHAKESPEARE'S FIRST PLAY:

Common Aspects of *Damon and Pithias* and the Canon

By

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*-How hard it is to hide the sparks of nature!*

-- Belarius

I.

There is probably no conceit more emblematic of Shakespeare than “All the World’s a Stage.” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.39) So quintessentially Shakespearean is this adage that it is even emblazoned on some editions of his plays and poems, as we find, for example, on the back cover of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (CRW Publishing Limited, 2005). Michael Delahoyde has noted, however, that in the 1571 play *Damon and Pithias*, conventionally attributed to Richard Edwardes, the protagonist Damon utters these words: “Pythagoras said, that the world was like a stage, whereon many play their parts, the lookers-on the sage.” (Sc. 7, 84-85; *Oxfordian*, Vol. 1, XV, 2013) Of equal interest is the fact that collections of the maxims of Pythagoras contain no such observation. (But see Nicholas Udall, *Paraphrase of Erasmus*: “Ye have a parte to play in the stage of the whole world,” cited by Peter Lukacs, *Annotated D&P*.) The idea of instructive spectacle is more reminiscent of the early Stoics, who gathered on Athenian porches to observe the foibles of humanity; hence their name derived from the Greek ‘Stoikos’, meaning porch. The history of

philosophy shows that Pythagoras was a dry figure unlikely to have lauded anything as frivolous as the theater.

Our task is to look into the issue and identify a natural and sensible scenario explaining the presence of this same conceit in both *Damon and Pithias* and *As You Like It*. Grant that the idea of the “world” as a platform of human action predates the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The unique achievement of *Damon and Pithias* is to situate the idea ironically by placing it *on* the English stage. Later the irony is amplified in *As You Like It* as adage is transmuted into verse by setting it in vital, memorable meter. The totality of the evidence will show that neither play was composed by cat’s-paw William of Stratford or by “Master of the Children,” Richard Edwardes, but both by a third party well known to those familiar with the Shakespeare authorship issue.

The context of *Damon and Pithias* and *As You Like It* is classical philosophy, a university subject unavailable to junior glee club directors and ambitious yeomen. Considering the mundane range and subject matter of Elizabethan drama in general, philosophy is rarefied territory indeed. Leading characters Damon and Pithias are acousmatic members of the Pythagorean school of Sicily on a jaunt in Syracuse. Their intense affection for one another exemplifies several maxims of Pythagoras, including (1) “Make friends with those who distinguish themselves by virtue,” (2) “Friends are as companions on a journey who ought to aid each other to persevere in the road to a happier life,” and (3) “Friendship is one soul in two bodies.” The principles of the play are reason and order, fraternity, nobility, and a willingness to do any virtuous thing, including surrendering one’s life, for the well-being of one’s friend. Beyond Stoicism and Pythagoreanism the play also exhibits Hedonism and Cynicism (Diogenes).

The central personae of *Damon and Pithias* are not the eponymous pair of the title but the engaging rogue Aristippus, a wily egoist named after Socrates' pupil Aristippus of Cyrene (530-468 BC), who founded the school of Cyrenaic Hedonism, and the knave Carisophus. The former puts us in mind of Falstaff in *King Henry IV* and Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, frank and appealing figures who in seeking their own advantage manage to do greater good than harm. The action of the play focuses on the rivalry of Aristippus and the parasite Carisophus who falsely accuses Damon to the tyrant Dionysius.

When we turn to *As You Like It*, we see that the bond of Damon and Pithias is rivalled by the mutual affinity of Rosalind and Celia, "coupled and inseparable." (1.3.75), for "never two ladies loved as they do." (1.1.106-107) As a matter of fact, the ancient Pythagoreans broke with tradition by admitting women to their order. (See also, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.2.204-215 and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, 1.3.55.) A number of key ideas form the backdrop to this female pair's narrative, including naturalism, moral idealism, pastoralism, cynicism and fraternity. Referring to the Old Duke and his band of brothers dwelling in the Forest of Ardenne, Charles the Wrestler says,

[H]e is already in the Forest of Ardenne, and a many merry men with him; and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world.

(1.1.109-113)

The spiritual temper of these "young gentlemen" is exemplified by the Old Duke's hospitality to Oliver and his peroration on the blessings of

their forest bivouac, in which we can see the hand of nature reaching out to mistrustful humanity.

Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,  
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet  
Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods  
More free from peril than the envious court?  
Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,  
The seasons' difference, as the icy fang  
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,  
Which when it bites and blows upon my body  
Even till I shrink from cold, I smile and say  
'This is no flattery. These are counsellors  
That feelingly persuade me what I am.'  
Sweet are the uses of adversity  
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

(2.1.1-17)

*As You Like it* exudes a species of idealized naturalism known in criticism as pastoralism. *Damon and Pithias*, on the other hand, reveals its philosophical aspect not implicitly but expressly, through citation of authority, rational exemplification and argument. In their application of philosophy to dramatic situations, these two plays in the history of Elizabethan drama are atypical. Both belong to a select set of metaphysical works, including *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, *Timon of Athens*, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, all renowned reflections of Shakespeare's learning. There is no independent evidence that Richard Edwardes ever took the slightest interest in philosophy. Yet the "band of brothers" motif is common to *D&P*, *As You Like It* and *King Henry V* (4.3.60), not to mention *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Though the publication date of *Damos and Pithias* is 1571, it was performed in the Christmas season of 1564 by the Children of Her Majesty's Chapel in London at the Queen's request. (Beauclerk, 80) It concludes with a dedication to Elizabeth herself. What is less widely appreciated is that earlier that same year, in August, Elizabeth presided over commencement exercises at Cambridge University where several student productions were mounted. It hardly taxes the imagination to realize that, after having relished *Damon and Pithias* in Cambridge that summer, she arranged an encore in London a few months later. In *Encyclopedia Britannica* we read: "[Edwardes] was appointed in 1561 a gentleman of the Chapel royal and master of the children, and entered Lincoln's Inn in 1564, where at Christmas that year he produced a play [not wrote or authored] which was acted by the choirboys." There is no mention of the summer festivities at Cambridge or Elizabeth's prominent participation. We then learn that there was yet another commencement performance on September 3, 1566 at Oxford University of *Palamon and Arcite* where Elizabeth again presided.

Though the script has not survived, we know it served as the basis of Shakespeare's play *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. These descended from *The Knight's Tale* in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which itself was derived from Boccaccio's *Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia*, whose inspiration was the *Thebaid* of Statius. It is useful to note that the 1566 rendering of *Palamon and Arcite* recapitulates the theme of platonic male friendship featured in the 1564 drama *Damon and Pithias*. And these plays both anticipate the same themes in *As You Like It* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*.

It is appropriate at this point to confront an importunant puzzle: How is it that Queen Elizabeth I interrupted her regular progress through grand palaces and estates not once but twice, to preside over commencement ceremonies and Cambridge and Oxford Universities? After all, she was a busy lady accustomed to posh chambers and rooms of state. What twice drew her to musty classrooms instead of tiaras, topiary and crenellated towers? One intriguing possibility is that she may have had a special relation to one of those students. And since it is well known that (1) she had been previously entertained by Edward de Vere's stagecraft circa 1561, that (2) unlike the other students, de Vere would receive not one but two master's degrees from her hand in 1564 and 1566, and that (3) Edward de Vere is presently credited by many as the author of 'Shakespeare's' works, he would certainly be a person of interest. Recall that Elizabeth had conferred the benefit of the Court of Wards on William Cecil; she knew quite well that his first charge was Edward de Vere. But this familiarity with ward and courtier-in-grooming, Oxford, would not explain her willingness to devote days to those academies. Any competent history of Tudor England will make tactfully plain that this young man was none other than Elizabeth's own son by Thomas Seymour, who had imposed himself on her circa 1548. Though a few historians present this fact as a "rumor," it is generally

understood that “rumor” frequently refers events we’d prefer not to acknowledge. Somewhere along the line, then -- and prior to 1564 -- Elizabeth must have drawn young Edward aside and confessed to him (as Lady Falconbridge confesses to Philip in *The Life and Death of King John* (1.1.253-258)) that he was not the son of the 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford *et ux* but of herself and Seymour. Elizabeth is thus best seen as a proud but uneasy parent, excited not only by university pomp, pageantry and drama but also by her brilliant son’s attainments. As he was actually her illegitimate issue the “virgin queen” could hardly single him out for public acclaim, but when the master of ceremonies openly praised her virginity, “Elizabeth was touched . . . and shook her head, bit her lips and fingers, and displayed uncharacteristic embarrassment.” (Weir, 148) And let us not overlook that Elizabeth herself was illegitimate.

Before returning to *Damon and Pithias*, a few often omitted particulars will round out the picture, helping us to fathom England’s preeminent Queen, her conduct and motivations. Elizabeth Tudor was the illegitimate daughter of King Henry VIII. Though sidestepped by authorship partisans, our most impartial historians leave little doubt on this score. The daughter of Henry and Anne Boleyn was born in 1533. According to Harvard professor Marc Shell, Elizabeth’s illegitimacy was a function several factors. First, according to Sir Thomas More, the union of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon was formally unblemished, making their divorce null and void; ergo, Elizabeth was the product of adultery (Shell, 9) Second, Henry and Anne Boleyn were married less than nine months before Elizabeth’s birthday. (Shell, 10) Third, Elizabeth was illegitimate because Henry had had intercourse previously with Anne’s sister Mary, making him Anne’s relative under the doctrine of carnal contagion. Any offspring of the Henry/Anne union were automatically bastards. (Shell, 13) Fourth, Henry had declared that Elizabeth was the daughter of her uncle, Lord Rochford.

Elizabeth was proclaimed a bastard by Act of Parliament, 1536. (Shell, 9) Finally, it has been contended that Anne was Henry's own daughter by the wife of underling Thomas Boleyn, a credible charge indeed, since through the doctrine of "*droit de seigneur*" Henry had – like Mozart's Don Giovanni -- access to all women in his fief, including the ladies of the Boleyn household, and had roamed therein with the greatest ease and facility. Catherine of Aragon had failed to present him with a legitimate male heir. It is suspected that Anne Boleyn, as his issue, signified to Henry his own gender and genotype, and thus he was unconsciously drawn to her as flesh of his very own flesh, more likely as a crypto-male to yield the man child he coveted. That obsessive conviction is why he moved heaven and earth to have her; and when the project failed his anger knew no bounds.

It is not surprising, then, to learn that Elizabeth Tudor was preoccupied with incest. Having been blessed with extraordinary intellectual and linguistic gifts, she was fluent in Latin and Greek, and became a world-class scholar. At age 11, in 1544, while living with Henry's widow, Catherine Paar, Elizabeth made a complete English translation of Marguerite of Navarre's treatise on incest, *Le Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*, in which she freely confessed to sinful (incestuous) urges. Soon thereafter, while dallying with step-father, Lord High Admiral Thomas Seymour, she yielded to his ravishments and in due course privily gave birth to a son, Edward, in 1548. The babe was then deposited by the Lord Protector's secretary William Cecil in the household of John de Vere, 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, where his early childhood was spent, before being transferred on the mysterious death of John in 1562 to the new "Court of Wards," the lucrative benefice conferred on Cecil (thereafter Lord Burghley) by a grateful Elizabeth. Burghley was soon elevated to her chief advisor, a post he held until her death in 1603. It was this youngster, Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of



Oxford, into whose hands Queen Elizabeth I placed Masters degrees at Cambridge in 1564 and Oxford in 1566. At Cambridge the precocious Edward contributed to the festivities by composing a play for Elizabeth, doing the same for her at Oxford in 1566.

The incontrovertible fact of Elizabeth's and Oxford's joint participation in these ceremonies implies more suitable account of the provenance of *Damon and Pithias*: likening the world to a stage was a *coup de theatre* of neither Richard Edwardes nor William of Stratford in his sunset years, but rather of "Shakespeare" in his minority, that is, the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, son of Elizabeth. His genius flowed to him from her, sparked by Thomas Seymour's indomitable will. Additionally, his illegitimacy and tense filial connections with (1) Thomas Seymour, (2) nominal pater John, the 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, (3) Dudley the Earl of Leicester, and (4) William Cecil, Lord Burghley drove the psychic plates from whose collisions the plays of "William Shakespeare" emerged, answering the basal question no one has had the perspicacity to pose, What Made William Write? For great literature never arises in a vacuum. It is the way art responds to interior conflict. In this respect, neither William of Stratford, nor Richard Edwardes, nor the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford regarded as the legitimate son of John the 16<sup>th</sup> Earl, presents the crucial grain of psychic irritation which yields the pearl of poetry.

We thus can now account for the intense interest in philosophy we find in *Damon and Pithias*. For unlike Edwardes and William of Stratford, Oxford was a thinker.

"Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio," urges Marcellus." (1.1.40) Prince Hamlet and Horatio are both students of philosophy at Wittenberg. The ideal of platonic friendship so prominent in *Damon and Pithias* stands at the center of *Hamlet*. In the former, when Damon is arrested on a charge of espionage, the tyrant Dionysius condemns

him to beheading. But he grants the condemned man a leave of absence of two months. Pithias leaps to be his pledge, tendering his own life should Damon not return timely. True friends are those willing to sacrifice, to die for one another, if called for. So does Hamlet regard his friend Horatio.

Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man  
As e'er my conversation coped withal.

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Dost thou hear?  
Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice  
And could of men distinguish, her election  
Hath sealed thee for herself; for thou hast been  
As one in suff'ring all that suffers nothing,  
A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards  
Hath ta'en with equal thanks; and blest are those  
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled  
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger  
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee.

(3.2.52-53; 60-72)

Here we see clearly the principle of friendship as a “one soul, two bodies,” first exemplified in *Damon and Pithias* when Pithias insists that he be put to death in place of his friend Damon.

In fact, Prince Hamlet actually addresses his friend Horatio as “**Damon, dear.**” Yet few notice this compliment, as if it were a mere verbiage. (3.2.269) It is not. In the final scene, when the poison is sweeping away the Prince’s life, his other self, Horatio, attempts to wrest from him the fatal cup to join him in Elysium. With his last ounce of strength Hamlet retrieves it, protecting the one who sought to die with him. Here Shakespeare (Oxford) traces a straight line from his ultimate tragedy to his first.

Examine the text. Here lies the proof. The vocabulary of *Damon and Pithias*, freed from the distractions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, turns out to be a lexical seed bed whose various usages blossom with profuse fecundity in the works of Shakespeare. For example, the Prologue of that old play, printed in 1571, introduces what follows as “tragical comedy,” (Prol. 38) evidently coining a term we’ll see again in the dramatic taxonomy of Polonius. (*Hamlet*, 2.2.400) For the reader’s convenience a cross section of such parallels is provided in the following table.

*Damon and Pithias*

Comparative Lexicon

Damon and Pithias

“Shakespeare”

- a) The world is like a stage (Sc. 7, 84) ..... As You Like It, 2.7.139
- b) Tragical comedy (Prol. 38) .....Hamlet, 2.2.400
- c) Stephano, a servant .....also in The Tempest

- d) By cock (Sc. 1, 56) .....2 King Henry IV, 5.1.1
- e) Tyrant Dionysius .....In Pericles, evil Dioniza, Cleon's wife
- f) Put to silence (Sc. 1, 140) .....Julius Caesar, 1.2.286
- g) Rule the roast (Sc. 4, 12) .....2 King Henry VI, 1.1.106
- h) Sicilia (Sc. 5, 35) .....The Winter's Tale, 1.1.4
- i) Commodity (Sc. 7, 58) .....King John, 2.1.562-599
- j) Serve my turn (Sc. 1, 28) .....Hamlet, 3.3.52
- k) Speak fair (Sc. 1, 20) .....Comedy of Errors, 4.4.153
- l) Noddy (Sc. 1, 41) .....Two Gentlemen V., 1.1.110
- m) Roots (as food) (Sc. 1, 14) .....Timon of Athens, 4.3.23
- n) Varlet (Sc. 1, 126) .....Measure for Measure, 2.1.84
- o) Snatch (Sc. 3, 6) .....King John, 3.1.170)
- p) Coil (= turmoil) (Sc. 4, 11) .....Timon of Athens, 1.2.233
- q) Descant (Sc. 6, 6).....King Richard III, 1.1.27
- r) Contraries (Sc. 7, 41) .....Rape of Lucrece, 1558
- s) Seat (location) (Sc. 8, 10) .....Macbeth, 1.6.1
- t) Vertue, Necessity (Sc. 10, 20) .....Two Gent. Ver., 4.1.60
- u) Hurly, burly (Sc. 10, 131) .....Macbeth, 1.1.3
- v) Caterpillar (political) (Sc. 10, 292) .....King Richard II, 2.3.165
- w) Zany (or Zawne) (Sc. 13, 182) .....12<sup>th</sup> Night, 1.5.85; [LLL](#),  
[5.2.463](#)
- x) Born Under (Astrol.) (Sc. 16, 88-89).....All's Well, 1.1.186
- y) Moan (Sc. 14, 1) ... Midsummer's Night, 5.1.329 & Cymb. 4.2.274
- z) With respect to the shining probosces of two characters, Grim and Bardolph, and the passing comment "You see with your nose," the *Damon and Pithias* editor, Mr. Richard Lukacs, has this to say: "Perhaps Grim's nose is red from a heavy drinking habit, suggesting a lamp in appearance; in **Shakespeare's King Henry IV** (Part I) Falstaff suggests to Bardolph, 'thou bearest the lantern in the poop, but 'tis in the nose of thee. [Emphasis mine]

While there is a degree of disparity of terms, some being more unique than others, it is hard to inspect this entire assemblage and come away without an impression of authorial identity. The presence of manservant Stephano in both D&P and *The Tempest*, the emphasis on the negative value 'commodity', 'noddy', roots, and 'zany' are all provocative signals of a single intellect at work. *Damon and Pithias* is an astonishing laboratory of words whose flashes of wit promise an enlarged comprehension.

Yet still the plaintive whine rises from the unsatisfied: "But what about poor Richard Edwardes? Why couldn't he have done it?" The answer is, the only indication of any part in this story played by Richard Edwardes is his name post mortem on the 1571 title page. There is nothing else. Was the "Master of the Children" and choir director equipped with the vivid imagination and verbal prowess of the world's most outstanding poet, dramatist and student of the human heart? Fortunately, there is no need for speculation, for Mr. Edwardes has left us a few of his own choice lines to judge. Here is one of his typical stanzas from '*Amantium Irae*', courtesy of *Poem Hunter*.

In going to my naked bed as one that would have slept,  
I heard a wife sing to her child, that long before had wept.  
She sighed sore and sang sweet to bring the babe to rest  
That would not cease but cried still in sucking at her breast.  
She was full weary of her watch and grieved with her child.  
She rocked it and rated it so on to her it smiled.  
Then did she sing, Now have I found this proverb true to prove,  
The falling out of faithful friends renewing is of love.

- Richard Edwardes

Compare this aesthetic nightmare with the rich terms drawn from *Damon and Pithias*. The slightest touch of Sprachgefühl reveals its deficiency. No one who composed such wretchedness -and attached his name thereto- could possibly have written the play under analysis. Nor should it be overlooked that Mr. Edwardes died in October of 1566, five full years prior to the publication of *D&P* in 1571. Cui bono? Certainly not Edwardes. Strangely, neither publisher nor bookseller is identified on the title page; parties undisclosed simply had it printed with his name affixed. That's all we know. Instead of admitting a rebuttable presumption in favor of Edwardes' authorship, we are confronted with signs of literary chicanery.

Finally, though it is easy to make much of the moniker 'Richard Edwardes', to presume that it is a reliable reflection of the writer's identity is most likely an instance of anachronism, as recent scholarship suggests. For in sixteenth century England the relationship of the actual writer to his works was much different from what it is in our proprietary age. Professor Janet Clare in her critically important article "Shakespeare and Paradigms of Early Modern Authorship" in *The Journal of Early Modern Studies*, University of Florence Press, (2012) 137-53, shows that 16<sup>th</sup> century writers did not uniformly treat their works as personal property, particularly after they had passed into the hands of acting troupes. In that freewheeling era the handling of plays by publishers and book sellers was often surprisingly capricious and a matter of convenience and profitability. It was "a moment of uncertainty and transition" in that respect according to Professor Clare. Thus in the case of a previously unpublished work performed as entertainment for the Queen in 1564 by either university students or

younger ones, without additional information it cannot be blithely supposed that the actual writer bore the name appearing on the title page, particularly when that individual had been in his grave five years and it was rather an open secret that the composer of the text had been a student and noble of the highest rank.

Most significant of all is that Edward de Vere's dramatic entertainment of Queen Elizabeth actually antedates 1564. Winifred L. Frazer writes: "Edward de Vere entertained the Queen with his troupe of players at his seat in Hedingham Castle **when Edward was 11 years old.**" That would have been in 1560 or 1561. (See, Winifred L. Frazer, "Censorship in the Strange Case of William Shakespeare: A Body for the Canon," *Brief Chronicles*, Vol. I, 2000, p. 9) Thus we know that Edward launched his authorship career at the same age as did Elizabeth: eleven years. It is likely that these enactments at Castle Hedingham took the form of scenes or skits (as in "The Nine Worthies" of *Love's Labour's Lost*) rather than full-blown plays. But what is enlightening for our purposes is that when we come to the Commencement exercises of 1564, young Edward had already served as the Queen's junior dramatist for at least three years. The Frazer citation shows that Edward de Vere was already recognized as Elizabeth's personal playwright by 1560. Why would anyone suppose, then, that his activity would cease upon Elizabeth's awarding him a master's degree four years later? Rather one would expect such a *wunderkind* to seek to outdo himself at every opportunity, *i.e.*, 1564, and 1566. As for Richard Edwardes, in September of 1566 he was a doomed man who would pass away in a few weeks. Did he spend his last hours hastily jotting down the misadventures of Palamon and Arcite? Who, then, would have been the likelier author, expiring mediocrity Edwardes, or the *wunderkind* and natural issue of Queen Elizabeth, Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford who had been a royal playwright for at least five years and

would go on to write *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, starring Pythagorean friends Palamon and Arcite and Emilia and Flavina?

In 1571 Edward de Vere was in his early 20's. His relations with Elizabeth flourished still. "Oxford triumphed with his spear at the great jousting tournament before the Queen in 1571." (Frazer, 12) Given her disinclination to marry, despite his illegitimacy he was now a serious contender for the English crown. Yet his true identity as the Queen's son was a state secret. In that year a delicate Parliament launched the "Treason Act," which criminalized those who would affirm that any particular person might be the Queen's heir or successor except one who was the "natural issue of her body," preserving Oxford's right of inheritance. (See, David P. Gontar, "Stand Up for Bastards: Natural Issue in the 1571 Act of Parliament, 13 Eliz., c1," *New English Review*, March 2016) As their relationship deepened, Edward and his mother fondly recalled his debuts of 1564 and 1566 and it is easy to see it was their wish to have *Damon and Pithias* published. But the theatrical world and the craft of play writing were far beneath the dignity of a prince and Lord Great Chamberlain of England. The problem had a simple resolution: shift attribution to the late choirmaster Richard Edwardes, a factotum who, after all, may have assisted in mounting the first productions. Those who mattered would know the truth. Thus it was that 1571 saw the passage of both the Treason Act, preserving Edward's inheritance, as well as the publication of his first play with its concluding epilogue to Elizabeth, his mother.

A condensed calendar would include the following key dates:

1548: Rape of Elizabeth by Thomas Seymour;

1549: Edward de Vere born;



1560-61: Edward, age 11 or 12, entertains Queen Elizabeth with his troupe of players at Castle Hedingham;

1562: 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford dies; Edward transferred to Cecil House, Court of Wards;

1564, summer: Edward receives Masters degree from Queen Elizabeth at Cambridge and composes *Damon and Pithias* for the occasion; at Christmas 1564 Elizabeth relishes an encore performance of *Damon and Pithias* in London;

1566, September: Edward receives second Masters degree from Queen Elizabeth at Oxford and composes *Palamon and Arcite*, played before the Queen;

1566, October: Richard Edwardes dies;

1571: Parliament passes Treason Act; *Damon and Pithias* published;

1575: Edward de Vere goes on tour of France and Italy, a trip authorized by Queen Elizabeth.

## II.

We may now approach the heart of the matter: the dirges of (1) Pithias, (2) Arviragus & Guiderius, and (3) Thisbe. Pithias laments the doom of Damon, Arviragus and his brother grieve over the body of Fidele, and Thisbe mourns for Pyramus. In his popular but undervalued book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, the late Harold Bloom subjected *Cymbeline* to searching criticism, finding it “very uneven.” (pp. 614-638) Yet for all its assigned faults *Cymbeline* has one redeeming feature which brings its disparate elements together to make a plausible dramatic whole. That is “one of the darkest of

elegies” the farewell of King Cymbeline’s sons to Fidele. (Bloom, 630)  
This “finest of all songs of Shakespeare’s plays” (Bloom, 629) is a meditation on the redemptive aspect of death which, in celebrating Imogen’s release from worldly trials, rescues the action from being a mere house of horrors like *Titus Andronicus*. In celebrating Fidele’s triumph in death Shakespeare illustrates something of life’s ultimate meaning.

### Song in Cymbeline

Fear no more the heat o’ th’ sun,  
Nor the furious winter’s rages,  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages.  
Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o’ th’ great,  
Thou are past the tyrant’s stroke,  
Care no more to clothe and eat,  
To thee the reed is as the oak.  
The scepter, learning, physic, must  
All follow this and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning flash.

Nor th' all-dreaded thunder-stone.

Fear not slander, censure rash.

Thou hast finish'd joy and moan.

All lovers young, all lovers must

Consign to thee, and come to dust.

No exorciser harm thee!

Nor no witchcraft harm thee!

Ghost unlaid forbear thee!

Nothing ill come near thee!

Quiet consummation have,

And renowned be thy grave!

(4.2.259-282)

Here as Bloom suggests is *Cymbeline's* center of gravity around which all else turns. And what seems to have been overlooked is that this most somber of elegies is preceded and nearly eclipsed by its predecessor in *Damon and Pithias*, the majestic song of Pithias uttered on learning the fate of Damon. *Damon and Pithias* is not a flawless piece of theater, but a youthful venture in which picaresque jests and squabbling vie with lofty idealism. Thus, at the beginning and the end of his literary career we see Shakespeare struggling with disparate emotive elements, impelling him to take refuge in the oxymoronic

category of the “tragi-comical” so ridiculed by Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. (5.1.58-60) Needless to say, he succeeded.

### Song of Pithias

#### INTROIT

What way shall I first begin my moan?

What words shall I find apt for my complaint?

Damon, my friend, my joy, my life, is in peril, of force I must now faint.

But, O Music, as in joyful times thy merry notes did borrow,

So now lend me thy yearful tunes to utter my sorrow.

#### SONG

Awake, ye woeful wights,

That long have wept in woe:

Resign to me your plaints and tears

My hapless hap to show.

My woe no tongue can tell,

No pen can well descry:

O, what a death is this to hear,

Damon my friend must die!

The loss of worldly wealth  
    Man's wisdom may restore  
And physic hath provided too  
    A salve for every sore.  
But my true friend once lost  
    No art can well supply:  
Then what a death is this to hear,  
    Damon my friend should die!

My mouth, refuse the food,  
    That should my limbs sustain:  
Let sorrow sink into my breast  
    And ransack every vein:  
You furies, all at once  
    On me your torments try:  
Why should I live, since that I hear  
    Damon my friend should die?

Gripe me, you greedy grief,  
    And present pangs of death;  
You sisters three with cruel hands,  
    With speed now stop my breath.

Shrine me in clay alive,  
Some good man stop mine eye:  
O death, come now, seeing I hear  
Damon my friend must die!  
(Sc. 10, 32-74)

Separated by decades these lamentations perform the identical function using the same key terms. “Joy,” “moan,” “care no more to clothe and eat,” “my mouth refuse the food,” “consign to thee,” “resign to me,” and “physic” add up to an odds-breaking set of matches. And “tyrant’s stroke” in the song of *Cymbeline* looks back to “tyrant” Dionysius whose executioner is ordered to use his sword to decapitate Damon. Near the end of his literary career, Shakespeare (Oxford) hearkened back to his very first play to fashion the farewell in *Cymbeline* so ardently praised by Bloom.

But what about Pithias’ “sister’s three”? Though it is common to think of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as a comic lark with silly finale, our rude mechanicals so ridiculed by just about everyone manage to show the tragedy lurking in mirth.

#### Thisbe’s Song

Asleep, my love?  
What, dead, my dove?  
O, Pyramus, arise.

Speak, speak. Quite dumb?  
Dead, dead? A tomb  
Must cover thy sweet eyes.  
These lily lips,  
This cherry nose,  
These yellow cowslip cheeks  
Are gone, are gone.  
Lovers, make moan.  
His eyes were green as leeks.  
O sisters three,  
Come, come to me.  
With hands as pale as milk,  
Lay them in gore,  
Since you have shore  
With shears his thread of silk.  
Tongue, not a word.  
Come, trusty sword,  
Come, blade, my breast imbrue.  
And farewell friends,  
Thus Thisbe ends,  
Adieu, adieu, adieu.  
(5.1.319-342)

Suddenly in the midst of bumbling comedy the sword of tragedy cuts through the laughter so quickly we almost don't believe our ears. For here is Thisbe echoing the dirge of Pithias, invoking the "Sisters Three" as Pithias did on behalf of his beloved Damon. Shakespeare likes to bring us up short this way, as he does in the comedy *Love's Labour's Lost* when suddenly in the midst the frivolity of 'The Nine Worthies' we learn of the death of the King of France, father of the Princess. (5.2.712) And the term "moan" occurs in all three passages, a remarkable concatenation somehow overlooked for four hundred years.

The Song of Pithias in *Damon and Pithias* is the model and root for the lamentations of Guiderius and Arviragus in *Cymbeline* as well as that of Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As Shakespeare's first play it is their original and inspiration.

In Professor Roger Stritmatter's searching 2018-2019 study of the early verses of Edward de Vere, "*The Poems of Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford and the Shakespeare Question*," as cited in the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, Poem number two has in line 13: "Thus like a woeful wight I wove my web of woe;" and in line 17: "To entertain my thoughts, and there my hap to moan." In Poem three, line 13, we see "Drown me you trickly tears, you wailful wights of woe." Before reaching any conclusion about the connection of the juvenilia of Edward de Vere to the instant play and the works of Shakespeare in general it is essential to consult Professor Stritmatter's findings, which are replete with closely corresponding locutions.

## CONCLUDING ARGUMENT



“It is the mark of an educated individual,” says Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, “to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.” (1094b 27-29) With that proviso in mind we may formulate our judgment with respect to Shakespeare’s oeuvre this way.

1. It is beyond any reasonable doubt that the author of *Damon and Pithias* is Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford.
2. Since a plethora of stylistic markers in *Damon and Pithias* match those in the Shakespeare canon, most notably in the songs of *Pyramus and Thisbe* and *Cymbeline*, there is a preponderance of evidence that Edward de Vere also fashioned the plays and poems of the Shakespeare canon.
3. Edward de Vere’s career as a dramatic writer began as far back as 1561, when he fashioned skits and scenes with his troupe of players for Queen Elizabeth. But we know of no whole play of his prior to *Damon and Pithias*. There is therefore a rebuttable presumption that *Damon and Pithias* is Shakespeare’s First Play.

## REFLECTIONS

It has not been the chief business of this brief excursus to treat the ultimate relations of Oxford and Elizabeth. Interested readers may wish to consult on this larger topic *Shakespeare’s Lost Kingdom* by Charles Beauclerk (Grove Press, 2010). As illegitimate royal son of illegitimate royal mother, the tie uniting them was surely one of the most imposing ever to render two bodies as one psyche. More than anything else the works of Shakespeare reiterate that story. It is amusing to note *en passant* how close even the most conventional of

mainstream historians come to articulating the fundamentals. Take, for example, Mr. Nigel Cawthorne, pleasant author of *Kings and Queens of England* (Metro Books, 2010) who, *mille et tre*, observes:

Despite pressure from her advisors, particularly her Chief secretary, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Elizabeth preserved her independence by developing the cult of the Virgin Queen, although it is unlikely that she remained a virgin. Even before she came to the throne there was a “rumour” [quotes added] that she had been made pregnant by her guardian, the ambitious Thomas Seymour. He was the last husband of Henry VIII’s widow Catherine Paar and many of his visits to Elizabeth [age 13] had been made while his wife was alive. But Catherine died in 1548, which made Thomas’ brother Edward, the Lord Protector, even more convinced that he intended to marry Elizabeth. Seymour was arrested and executed in 1549.

Elizabeth’s name was also linked with that of Lord Robert Dudley, who had been imprisoned in the Tower with her . . . .

Her next suitor was Sir William Pickering. He was followed by Sir Christopher Hatton, a handsome young lawyer from Northampton. Hatton was replaced by Thomas Heneage,

a gentleman of the Queen's Privy Chamber, who was then followed by Edward de Vere, earl of Oxford, who showered her with gifts from his travels. Even Sir Walter Raleigh entered the picture . . . .

In later life Elizabeth fell for the young Robert Devereux, earl of Essex. However, he secretly married the widow of Sir Philip Sidney.

(114-116, emphases added)

In *Damon and Pithias* an aspiring adolescent Oxford reaches out to Elizabeth in the mode of amity, offering her his love, support, and fervid devotion. It was a friendship she was delighted to accept. In the final analysis the Pythagorean trope naively proffered by Oxford was not sufficient to endure indefinitely. It was rather a treasured landmark in their lives. In *Damon and Pithias* Oxford commends the virtues of trust and understanding as opposed to the suspicions exhibited by the tyrant Dionysius. The play can now be perceived as what it was in truth: a sub rosa message from an adoring son hoping to lend his royal mother, the nation's ruler, whatever wisdom and encouragement his art might devise. In 1571, both Elizabeth and Oxford imagined that someday her kingdom would be his, though not a word of that was whispered.

As the brilliant issue of Gloriana, England's gifted monarch who one day would rouse the troops at Tilbury, Edward de Vere was blessed with the opportunity, motive, intelligence and determination to triumph through his poetry, not to rest with *Damon and Pithias* and *Palamon and Arcite*, but to go on to cleanse the foul body of the infected world.

His words would be his motley. It was a grand and lofty design of far too great a scope to be recognized and welcomed by those whom R.S. Stevenson dubs “the wiser youngsters of today.” There is nothing in the 16<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford or his ancestors that would account for such a tsunami of accomplishment. Only greatness begets greatness. Remove Oxford’s descent from multifaceted King Henry VIII and his extraordinary daughter and we would have just another dutiful graduate student receiving diplomas from a prominent guest speaker. *Damon and Pithias* is thus the missing link joining Oxford to the corpus and Shakespeare to ourselves. Authorship theories which advance the case for the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford while failing to take the complete measure of the man can make but a negligible advance beyond William of Stratford. What the Oxfordian movement needs at this hour is not reasonable doubt but the courage of its convictions.

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