

Shakespearean Authorship Trust



William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby

Dates:

1561 - 1642

Background:

William Stanley was the second son of Henry Stanley, fourth Earl of Derby, and his wife, Margaret Clifford, great-granddaughter of Henry VII; Margaret was in line to succeed Queen Elizabeth. Henry Stanley was patron of a troupe of players, and plays were frequently performed at his mansions at Knowsley and Lathom, Lancashire. Being a younger son, William had no expectations and no responsibilities. He was educated at St. John's College, Oxford, at a period when plays were often performed by the students (including at least one: Plautus' *Menaechmi*, which later formed the basis for a Shakespeare play - *The Comedy of Errors*). He attended Gray's Inn before spending the years 1582 to 1587 touring the Continent. For a time he was accompanied by his tutor, Richard Lloyd, author of *The Nine Worthies*, and a plausible prototype for the character of the pedant Holofernes in *Love's Labours Lost*.

On his return he was enrolled at Lincoln's Inn. His carefree life came to an abrupt end in April 1594 when, on the sudden death of his elder brother, he became the sixth Earl of Derby. In January 1595 he married Lady Elizabeth Vere, daughter of the Earl of Oxford. He was appointed Knight of the Garter in 1601, and was one of the six senior KGs available to bear the canopy over James I at his coronation anointing in 1603. In subsequent years he and his wife divided their time between the Court and his Lancashire estates. After his wife's death he made over his estates to their son (1627); two of the three trustees were his brothers-in-law the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery (dedicatees of the First Folio). He then retired to live a modest life in a small house in Chester. He died in 1642 and was buried in the family church at Ormskirk.

Famous for:

Before inheriting the earldom, Stanley travelled widely on the Continent, being desirous of learning as many languages as possible. In 1599 he financed the revival of the Paul's Boys acting troupe, and in subsequent years his own troupe of players (Derby's Men) played frequently before the Court. His marriage in January 1595 to Elizabeth Vere, daughter of the 17th Earl of Oxford, is claimed by many to have been the court wedding for which Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written. His wife's reported infidelity with the Earl of Essex in 1597 caused Derby considerable torment and almost led to the breakdown of his marriage, but they were reconciled and the marriage prospered. He was represented by Francis Bacon in his protracted legal battle with his sister-in-law, the Dowager Countess of Derby, over the estates in Lancashire and elsewhere. The dispute was finally resolved in 1609, and shortly after Derby devolved to his wife the Governorship of the Isle of Man, of which he was hereditary King.

The Case:

Derby's chief claim to literary fame is a 1599 spy's report in which he was said to have been "busied only in penning comedies for the common players," though no works of his survive under his name. Derby's brother's troupe, "Lord Strange's Men", had been one of the most prominent acting companies at court and on tour in the early 1590s, but in 1594 on his brother's death the Strange troupe collapsed, and most of its actors were incorporated into "the Lord Chamberlain's Men" (later "the King's Men"). His own acting company, formed later ("Derby's Men"), was prominent at court in the late 1590s up to about 1620. Some Shakespeare plays (e.g. *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Measure for Measure*) contain allusions to events that Derby might have witnessed on his travels.

Spenser is thought to be referring to Stanley as "Our pleasant Willy", a resting playwright, in *The Tears of the Muses*, 1591. In *England's Mourning Garment* of 1603 Henry Chettle chides Shakespeare for not "shedding one sable tear" on the death of Queen Elizabeth, who had "graced his desert"; this is thought to be a reference to her appointing Derby Knight of the Garter in 1601. The opening line of sonnet 125, "Wer't ought to me I bore the canopy" appears to refer to Derby's

being one of the six senior KGs, four of whom would have borne the canopy over King James during the anointing ceremony at his coronation in 1603. The First Folio of 1623 contains hundreds of emendations to texts published earlier in quarto, and these are thought to have been made by the poet himself. Several striking emendations in the Second Folio of 1632 are also claimed to have been made by the poet. Because of his closeness to inheriting the throne, it was imperative from the beginning to conceal his literary activities, especially as plays and playgoing were regarded as disreputable. Derby was immensely rich and could easily have financed the first two Folios. He died in 1642, and his castle at Lathom was sacked during the Civil War; any papers or manuscripts that might have been stored there were destroyed.

Links

[Shakespeare Authorship Roundtable](#)

[William Shakespeare Identity/Authorship Problem](#)

[The URL of Derby](#)

Books

Under the Mask of William Shakespeare Abel Lefranc, Trans Cecil Cragg, Merlin, 1997

Shakespeare's Vital Secret Richard M Lucas, Rydal Press, 1937

Shakespeare's Identity Arthur Walsh Titherley, Warren and Son, 1952

Shakespeare's Magic Circle Alfred John Evans, Barker, 1956

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