

Oxford's Metamorphoses

by Hank Whittemore (©1996)

This article was first published in the Fall 1996 *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*.

*Vilia miretur vulgus; mihi flavus Apollo
Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua.*

William **Shakespeare** made his triumphant entrance into history with this Latin epigraph on the title-page of *Venus and Adonis* in 1593, quoting from Ovid's *Amores*, in which the Roman poet of antiquity had described his own experiences with love. **Shakespeare** was striding onto the printed page as an actor, speaking the proud lines of the couplet as though they were his, and thereby introducing himself as the long-awaited English Ovid:

Let the mob admire base things;
may Golden Apollo serve me
full goblets from the Castalian Fount.
(Bullough, *NDSS*, Vol. 1, p. 161)

Publius Ovidius Naso, born in 43 B.C., sent the fresh breath of his love poems through the social life of Rome and became the toast of the town. Ovid revealed himself in his works more frankly than any writer of his culture; none so graphically depicted the intimacies of love. At the height of his poetic vigor, Ovid completed the monumental *Metamorphoses*, in which he linked together all the stories of classical mythology into a single artistic whole. Within fifteen books he depicted the full range of wondrous changes or "metamorphoses" by heroines and heroes from the dawn of creation to Ovid's own time, when in his final book the soul of Julius Caesar is transformed into an eternal star in the heavens. In A.D. 8, Augustus cited the immorality of Ovid's writings and banished him to the far edge of the empire. Here the exiled poet lived in the land of the Goths, amid a barbarous culture, until his death in disgrace a decade later.

But poetry, Ovid had declared, was a way of cheating death. He would rise above oblivion on the wings of his words. Now **Shakespeare** was taking the same position -- "Not marble nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme" --and with the epigraph from the *Amores* on his title-page, he claimed Ovid as his route to the Castalian spring on the side of Mt. Parnassus, sacred to Apollo and the Muses. Here was his source of inspiration, as well as his guarantor of high cultural status and

immortality. He, too, through the virtue of his pen, would conquer disgrace or banishment or even death itself .

The newly arrived English Ovid, his cup brimming over, would infuse his own writings with tales of poetic, sexual and political power. He, too, would explore the psychology of desire and the transformations wrought by extremes of emotion; with Ovid, he would show that just when you think you've found what you most want in life, it destroys you. While also delighting in rhetorical ingenuity, verbal fertility and linguistic play, he would equally value variety and flexibility as fundamental habits of mind. His own contemporaries seemed to recognize the transfer of identity as not only literary but spiritual: "As the soule of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras," Meres wrote, "so the sweete wittie soule of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued **Shakespeare**."

For those who view the new author of *Venus and Adonis* as **Edward de Vere**, Earl of Oxford, it is possible to see him constructing the same kind of Ovidian illusion when he writes as a dramatist; that is, when he brings the magic of metamorphosis on stage. As perhaps the simplest example, the flesh-and-blood actor appears and we think, "Ah, here comes Will Kempe, playing Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." But then Bottom himself becomes an actor, during a play rehearsal within the play, wearing an ass's head (III, i, 106) and now we think, "Ah, here comes Bottom, playing the ass" -- so that the original actor, Will Kempe, seems to vanish. Such is the case with **Edward de Vere** playing William **Shakespeare** who, in turn, embodies Ovid: the original author, himself a consummate actor-illusionist, seems to disappear.

Virtually all of Shakespeare's plays are indebted to Ovid. Four times he refers to the Roman poet by name, five times to the swans singing at death as described in the *Heroides*.

The influence of Ovid was apparent throughout Shakespeare's earliest literary work, both poetic and dramatic. His closest adaptations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* often reflect the phraseology of the popular English version by Arthur Golding issued between 1565 and 1567. (Sidney Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare*)

Ovid, the love of Shakespeare's life among Latin poets, made an overwhelming impression upon him, which he carried with him all his days: subjects, themes, characters and phrases haunted his imagination. The bulk of his classical mythology came from the *Metamorphoses*, which he used in the original as well as in Golding's translation. (A.L. Rowse, *Shakespeare, The Man*)

The quotations above demonstrate how Stratfordian thinking about **Shakespeare** was forced to expand. First he is the poet of "small Latin" (a stubborn misreading of Ben Jonson's words of praise in the *First Folio*) who must have relied upon Golding's version in English; then, some generations later, it is acknowledged (reluctantly) that he also must have absorbed Ovid's masterwork through the Roman poet's actual Latin words. But evidence of his facility in both languages was always readily available: Shakespeare's principal direct source for *Lucrece* -- the *Fasti* of Ovid -- was not published in an English

translation until 1640, so **Shakespeare** had to move from Latin to English with consummate ease; he himself was a translator. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, to cite an example involving his favorite Latin author, he actually demonstrates this ability by having Lucentio "translate" Ovid's *Heroides* for Bianca:

Hic ibat, as I told you before -- *Simois*, I am Lucentio -- *hic est*, son unto Vincentio of Pisa -- *Sigeia tellus*, disguised thus to get your love -- *Hic steterat*, and that Lucentio that comes a-wooing -- *Priami*, is my man Tranio -- *regia*, bearing my port -- *celsa senis*, that we might beguile the old pantaloon. (III, i, 28-37)

J. Thomas Looney used the phrase "long foreground" for Shakespeare's formative years, a period of necessary artistic growth and development which has always been totally missing from Stratfordian biography. Unless he was a god with miraculous powers, the sophisticated English poet who wrote *Venus and Adonis* went through much trial and error, creating a substantial body of apprenticeship work beforehand. By all logic **Shakespeare** must have begun translating Ovid in his earliest years, becoming thoroughly grounded in his old tales. He would have labored over the original texts and "tried on" various English nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, inventing new ones along the way; and in the process he would have acquired his astounding vocabulary of some 25,000 words, more than twice the size of Milton's.

But let us return to Golding.

When John **de Vere**, 16th Earl of Oxford died suddenly and inexplicably in 1562, young **Edward de Vere** became a royal ward of Queen Elizabeth under the guardianship and control of William Cecil, her chief minister. The boy was a child of state and Her Royal Majesty was in every official respect his mother. Living with him at Cecil House was his uncle, Arthur Golding, and it was during this time that the "Golding" translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was being rendered; so the young earl was physically present when the Roman poet's tales of Echo and Narcissus, Venus and Adonis, *et al*, were transformed from their original Latin to English. In retrospect, given Shakespeare's acknowledged debt to Ovid's fifteen-book opus in both versions, the ecstatically feverish literary activity under Cecil's roof becomes supremely significant.

It is remarkable, in light of Arthur Golding's pivotal contribution to the English Renaissance, that traditional academia has never questioned his credentials for translating seduction scenes that he himself would have censored. Golding, after all, was an uptight puritanical scholar acting as one of Cecil's henchmen. There is no evidence that he was ever the young Earl of Oxford's tutor; at most he acted as the boys "receiver" for financial and legal matters. Otherwise, acting for the equally uptight and puritanical Cecil, he attempted to dissuade his nephew from taking any politically incorrect religious and cultural paths. His job, as well as inclination, was to quash Edward's delight in exactly the kind of sensuous, stimulating, witty, erotic qualities that Ovid's works embodied in the first place.

Arthur Golding was far more comfortable translating John Calvin's version of the *Psalms of David*, which he published in 1571 and dedicated to **Edward de Vere**, urging the young earl to accept "true

Religion, true Godliness, true Virtue." Even though Oxford might have "all the sciences, arts, cunning, eloquence and wisdom of the world," Golding warned him, without God's word through Calvin he would "walk[eth] but in darkness." This was probably a last ditch attempt to influence his nephew in the direction of puritanism, writes B.M. Ward, but "such efforts were doomed to disappointment" because "the movement of the time that appealed to Oxford was not the Reformation but the Renaissance." Edward de Vere's uncle would later warn that the earthquake of 1580 was God's punishment for immoral behavior, specifically that of attending plays on Sundays, but by then his madcap nephew was himself producing plays.

It may be all too obvious that Arthur Golding could not, would not and did not translate Ovid's tales of passion, seduction and lovemaking as well as incest by pagan gods and goddesses who were transformed into trees and lions and such. He was in every way incapable of it and, besides, he would have incurred Cecil's wrath for doing so. Golding's most notable task at Cecil House was helping Elizabeth and her Master of Royal Wards to quash a charge in 1563 that Edward de Vere and his sister Mary were bastards. At the heart of that legal challenge was the earlier and apparently sinister involvement of Golding's half-brother and half-sister, Thomas and Margery Golding, who had meddled with the Oxford earldom.

While the English departments might have doubted Golding's role based on his credentials, the History departments might have better explored his background.

This back story began to unfold shortly after the death of Henry VIII in 1547 and the succession of Edward VI, when the boy king's uncle, Edward Seymour, assumed all power as Protector and Duke of Somerset. This brother of the late Queen, Jane Seymour, had staged a palace revolution without firing a shot; and if nine-year-old King Edward did not live to maturity, Somerset would need to block Mary and Elizabeth Tudor from the succession in order to keep his control. In opposition was his brother, Lord Admiral Thomas Seymour, who retaliated by marrying Henry's widow, Catherine Parr, and getting her pregnant. At the same time the Admiral conducted an affair, or a political alliance based on sex, with Elizabeth, who was fourteen and living in the same household. By aligning himself with both Henry's widow and Henry's daughter, Seymour was challenging his brother on behalf of the Tudor dynasty.

Meanwhile, in his quest to keep on amassing power, Somerset went after the Oxford earldom with undisguised greed. He pressed some criminal charge against John de Vere, the details of which have not survived. Working for him was the ambitious young man William Cecil, who moved to quash a marriage between the widowed Oxford and his 10-year-old daughter's governess, a Mrs. Dorothy, with whom the earl had twice proclaimed bans of matrimony. That done, Somerset arranged for his own seven-year-old son to be the eventual bridegroom of John de Vere's daughter. He also attached a "fine" that stripped the earls collateral heirs of nearly all the great Vere possessions in Essex.

Enter, now, a pivotal figure in the person of Thomas Golding, a servant of Somerset who was apparently acting under Cecil's orders. "By November 1547," writes relative Louis Golding in this century, "Parliament granted John de Vere's chantry lands to the Crown. Their liquidation was in every

neighborhood a juicy plum, and in Essex this fell to Thomas Golding, who, in the words of Holman's *History of Halstead*, knew how to improve his interest to get a large share of these lands. John de Vere signed the fine on February 1, 1548, and on the same day he made a new will, which was witnessed by Thomas Golding. That John de Vere was under some sort of observation or control by Thomas Golding is evident."

Then, as Verily Anderson surmises in *The De Veres of Castle Hedingham*, this same Thomas Golding enlisted his own sister, Margery Golding, to be John de Vere's wife. The wedding, which supposedly took place on August 1, 1548, was a total secret --unknown even to Oxford's daughter, Katherine, from his first marriage. Why would John de Vere suddenly wed the sister of a man who, along with Somerset and Cecil, had caused him to suffer such grief and humiliation? The answer can only be that this was a "forced" marriage and that the earl had capitulated.

By now Elizabeth had left the Seymour household after Catherine Parr had caught the princess in her husband's arms. Elizabeth was reported "sick" while remaining in seclusion for some months. In early September 1548, after giving birth to Seymours daughter, Mary, his wife virtually accused him of trying to kill her. Catherine Parr died a few days later, leaving Seymour to resume his courtship of Elizabeth amid growing rumors that they would marry. Not far behind these events was Somerset, who arrested his brother in January 1549. He promptly put Elizabeth and her servants through some frightening interrogations, during which she boldly asked to be summoned to Court to show that she was not pregnant by the admiral. If Elizabeth had already given birth, Somerset had acted too late, so he reluctantly dropped his investigation. A few weeks later in March 1549, undoubtedly as the only way to avoid a recurring threat by Seymour and Elizabeth, Somerset executed his brother.

All during this time, William Cecil had played both sides of the fence. While in Somerset's service he had begun a correspondence with Elizabeth, who would soon hire him as her surveyor of properties. The busy Cecil was now also in contact with Kate Willoughby, Duchess of Suffolk, who had taken in the orphaned daughter of Thomas Seymour and Catherine Parr, although within a few years little Mary Seymour would disappear from history without a trace. During the subsequent reign of Mary Tudor, the Duchess of Suffolk would flee to Europe while John de Vere and his wife, Margery Golding, would hide at Castle Hedingham in Essex.

When Elizabeth succeeded in November 1558, at twenty-five, her first act was to install Cecil as her chief minister. She also elevated John de Vere and Margery Golding to favored status by ordering them to live at Court for at least the first full year of the reign. Their children, Edward and Mary, hereby make their entrance in history.

As there was no record of little Mary Seymour after the age of two, so there was no record of the birth of Mary Vere, who would have been the same age. (Perhaps it is no coincidence that Mary Vere in 1579 would marry Kate Willoughby's son, Peregrine, and that the play performed at their wedding may have been the early version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, whose title character, Kate, seems to be a combined portrait of both Kate Willoughby and Mary Vere.) There is also no record of when or where her brother

was born, except for a suspicious diary entry by Cecil much later, in April 1576 -- a particularly volatile time in this saga -- when he gave Edwards birth date as April 12, 1550. (Hatfield MSS. Cal. XIII, 142) The boy was enrolled at Cambridge within days of Queen Mary's death. Whatever his age, he would have been much younger than any college student in England. There is no record that he lived at the school, but, with John **de Vere** at Court and Margery Golding as a Maid of Honor, the lad would often have been brought into the Queen's presence.

Upon John **de Vere**'s death in 1562, the widowed countess wrote to Cecil dropping any claim to an Oxford inheritance. In fact, Cecil got the wardship while the Queen's lover, Robert Dudley (soon to be Earl of Leicester) gained the administration of **de Vere**'s lands. "I confess that a great trust has been committed to me of those things which, in my Lord's lifetime, were kept most secret from me," Margery Golding wrote to Cecil, as if pledging a vow of silence. (She had been a pawn in men's games.) Her lack of "any message of love or affection" for young **Edward**, observed Ward, seemed to indicate that she "handed the boy over to Cecil as a royal ward without a pang." We might add that **Edward** seemed to dismiss her from his mind as well. There is no evidence, either, that he gave any thought to John **de Vere** --unless we count his riding away from the Oxford funeral with "seven score horse" and making an entrance into London in the (virtually traitorous) manner of a young prince who would be king.

By now, if not before, the widows half-brother Arthur Golding was in Cecil's service. On Cecil's behalf, Golding handled the charge--brought by John **de Vere**'s daughter, Katherine, now in her twenties--that John **de Vere**'s marriage to Margery Golding had never existed. Katherine's husband, Baron Windsor, demanded that both **Edward de Vere** and his sister Mary be forced to prove they weren't bastards; but Arthur Golding, writing for Cecil, declared that the boy and girl (both of whose ages he put at fourteen in June 1563) were now the Queen's property and, therefore, off-limits. The case, at least during Elizabeth's reign, was dropped.

Just as Thomas and Margery Golding had been used to render John **de Vere** powerless, Arthur Golding was employed to help keep **Edward de Vere** in line. So we come full circle to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the role Golding played in its publication. As noted, Elizabeth in 1562 became **Edward de Vere**'s official mother; but its easy to imagine that before then he had been dazzled by the radiant young Queen and deeply motivated to please her. How could a mere boy match the physical presence of Robert Dudley, who was sharing her bed? He could do so most effectively by touching the Queen's love for classical literature through the power of his own words.

Coincidentally enough it was not until the second full year of Elizabeth's reign that Ovid's Latin made its way into English. The first published translation appeared in 1560, within two years of her accession, by an anonymous author who had rendered the Narcissus poem from Book III of the *Metamorphoses*. An elaborate frontispiece, announcing The Fable of Ovid Treating of Narcissus, arranged this title so that its top line, in extra-large typeface, appeared as: THE FABLE OF O

Was this the signature of the boy who would inherit the Oxford earldom? Reveling in the attentions of his Queen, would not **Edward de Vere** have fallen in love with his own image, much as the sixteen-year-

old Narcissus of mythology had done? And if she herself had given him the *Metamorphoses* in Ovid's Latin, what greater gift could he return than an Englished portion, in his own hand, of the tale he most identified with?

Five years later, in 1565, was Arthur Golding enlisted by Cecil to put his name on the young earl's translation of the first four books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*? Surely it was Golding who included the prose dedication to Leicester, in which the morality and civic worth of Ovid's poetry was stressed; and when all fifteen books appeared in 1567, surely it was Golding who added the fuller epistle to Leicester, in which he attempted to reconcile the Roman poet's erotically charged work with the Bible. ("The snares of Mars and Venus shew that tyme will bring to light," Golding moralizes in Book III, "the secret sinnes that folk commit in corners or by nyght.")

Stratfordian scholar Jonathan Bate, in his book *Shakespeare and Ovid*, published in 1993, speculates that Golding's epistle "probably constituted Shakespeare's only sustained direct confrontation with the moralizing tradition -- that is, if he bothered to read it."

Well, I have no doubt that he did bother. Edward de Vere, reading his uncle's impotent attempts to put a puritanical face on Ovid, must have erupted with devilish merriment. And soon after he came of age, while he and Elizabeth were dancing up a storm and raising eyebrows at Court in 1573, it must have amused Oxford as well to see Cecil (now his father-in-law) being forced to "wink[eth]" at these "love matters" as history records. In public, the official son of the Queen was now scandalizing the Court as her lover.

Even before then, I believe, Cecil had already "winked" at Edward de Vere's translation of Ovid's "love matters" by having them published in English under Golding's name:

For a long time past Phoebus Apollo has cultivated thy mind in the arts...Let that Courtly Epistle, more polished even than the writings of Castiglione himself, witness how greatly thou dost excel in letters. I have seen many Latin verses of thine, yea, even more English verses are extant... (Gabriel Harvey, speaking publicly in Latin to the Earl of Oxford, 1578)

Harvey was alluding to his personal knowledge of Edward de Vere's own "long foreground" of labor in both English and Latin. He and Oxford had become friendly rivals in 1566, when the puritanical Harvey was at Cambridge. That was one year after part of the *Metamorphoses*, attributed to Golding, had appeared; it was also while the remaining books were still being translated. A dozen years later, was Harvey hinting that he had seen the work-in-progress? What had he thought of its robust vocabulary and bustling narrative? Had he winced at indecorous words such as queaches, plash, skapes, collup and codd's? Perhaps this was partially why, in the same public address of 1578, Harvey exhorted Oxford to give up poetry:

O thou hero worthy of renown, throw away the insignificant pen! Throw away bloodless

books and writings that serve no useful purpose!

In reply we have Shakespeare's own caricature of Gabriel Harvey in the form of Holofernes, the schoolmaster and pedant of *Love's Labor's Lost*. Viewing the character in this light, we have the hilarious spectacle of Holofernes/Harvey extolling "the elegancy, facility and golden cadence of poesy," directly contradicting Harvey's public lecture to Oxford. And if this satire weren't funny enough, we have him in his next breath effusively (and indecorously) praising the great Roman poet by name:

Holofernes: ...Ovidius Naso was the man, and why, indeed, Naso, but for smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention?...(IV, ii, 123-5)

As a spoof of Harvey this works to its most wonderful effect by recalling his lecture to Oxford while turning it inside out: the lines become Oxford's retort to Harvey through a character representing Harvey himself.

The reference to Ovid also reinforces the dramatists overall identification with him, which becomes even more obvious elsewhere:

I am here with thee and thy goats, as the most capricious poet, honest Ovid, was among the Goths. (*As You Like It*, III, iii, 7-9)

In these words to Audrey, the clown Touchstone puns on the word capricious -- whose Latin root is "caper" or goat -- so that it becomes goat-like. (Again, so much for Shakespeare's "small" Latin.) Both the dramatist and his character demonstrate their ability to equal the "capricious" or whimsical nature of Ovid's wordplay. Touchstone becomes the banished Ovid among those who cannot comprehend him, while the unseen playwright is our English Ovid disguised as the "honest" Court Fool who reveals the truth.

As Touchstone tells William, the country fellow (Shaksper?) who loves Audrey (the plays?):

"For all your writers do consent that *ipse* is he: now, you are not *ipse*, for I am he." (*AYLI*, V, i, 43-4).

Shakespeare becomes even bolder in announcing his presence when he summons the actual source of his play to the stage. In *Cymbeline*, for example, he has a copy of the *Metamorphoses* become Imogen's bedtime book:

...She hath been reading late,
The tale of Tereus; here the leafs turnd down
Where Philomel gave up. (II, ii, 44-6)

And in what is perhaps the most self-consciously literary moment in all **Shakespeare**, the most

significant source of *Titus Andronicus* becomes a tangible prop:

Titus: Lucius, what book is that she tosseth so?

Boy: Grandsire, tis Ovid's Metamorphoses,
My mother gave it me. (IV, i, 41-3)

In this instant, the spell of the play is broken. Through young Lucius, the boy, we are offered a fleeting biographical image of how **Shakespeare** himself obtained his first copy of Ovid's masterwork -- his "mother" gave it to him -- without which he could not have written *Titus* in the first place. At the same time, we are invited to follow him into the pages of the *Metamorphoses*, wherein the tales of two boys (Narcissus and Adonis) are the very sources of *Venus and Adonis*, through which he -- "**Shakespeare**" -- was delivered to the world. The poem itself (as well as its two main characters), having gestated since the 1570s, acted as the literary parent that gave birth to "**Shakespeare**" in 1593 and simultaneously became his first "heir" or literary child.

From the Narcissus tale, under Golding's name: "This Lady bare a sonne whose beautie at his verie birth might justly love have wonne." And from the Venus and Adonis tale, also under Golding's name: "The water nymphes upon the soft sweete hearbes the chyld did lay, and bathde him with his mother's teares."

The Adonis of Ovid is the fruit of incest between Myrrha and her father. She becomes a tree, however, from which he is finally born. In Shakespeare's poem, Adonis is combined with Narcissus while both he and Venus undergo metamorphoses which Bate attempts to unravel in this fascinating if daunting passage:

Where Ovid begins his tale with Adonis as a son issuing from a tree, **Shakespeare** ends his with a flower issuing from Adonis, who thus becomes a father. Shakespeare's Venus acts out an extraordinary family romance. By imaging her lover as a father, she makes herself into the mother and the flower into the fruit of their union. But the logic of the imagery dictates that the flower is her sexual partner as well as her child, for it clearly substitutes for Adonis himself -- she comforts herself with the thought that it is a love-token, which she can continually kiss. The fusion of lover and mother in the context of vegetative imagery makes Venus into Myrrha once again. It is as if, having slept with her father, the girl is now sleeping with her son. (Bate, 54-5)

"Venus the lover," Bate concludes, "is also Venus the mother." Is she the same mother who gave young **Shakespeare** his copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Latin? Is Venus, as Titania (the "imperial votress") of *Midsummer Night's Dream* is universally acknowledged to be, a representation of Queen Elizabeth? To what extent was William **Shakespeare** undergoing a metamorphosis not just into the English Ovid but into the Roman poet's mythological figure of Adonis?

Let us close with some verses possibly from the young **Edward de Vere**, who seems to have identified himself with Adonis while asking similar rhetorical questions about his relationship to the Ovidian

goddess who, in the Golding version, was kissed by Cupid and, "being wounded, thrust away her sonne":

What were his parents? Gods or no?
That living long is yet a child;
A goddess son? Who thinks not so?
A god begot, beguiled;
Venus his mother, Mars his sire...*

(*from "What is Desire?", a poem originally attributed to Oxford by Dr. Grosart in 1872, but disputed as being Oxford's by Prof. Steven May in 1980).