

Who Wrote George Peele's "Only Extant Letter"?

by Robert Prechter

Oxfordians have long suspected that the Cecils destroyed documents and letters that might have revealed Oxford's clandestine literary and theatrical services to the Crown. There is—as far as I can determine—a single, solitary exception.

On January 17, 1596, George Peele sent to Lord Burghley a newly polished version of his earlier-composed, blank-verse poem *A Tale of Troy*. In a cover letter,¹ Peele says that, because he is too ill to travel, he is having the packet delivered by “this simple messenger, my eldest daughter and necessities servant.”

Orthodoxy has presumed that an actual George Peele wrote the poem and composed the letter. There is no record that Peele had daughters, but Oxford did. If Oxford wrote or dictated Peele's letter, it would have been delivered by Oxford's “eldest daughter,” Elizabeth, and Burghley would have been greeted at the door by his own granddaughter. The conspiracy between Burghley's son-in-law and his granddaughter would have been well crafted for the old man's amusement. Several circumstances fit that proposal.

Peele's salutation is “*Salue, Parens Patriae*,” meaning roughly “Greetings, patriarch of the nation.” But *Parens* may also be translated as *grandfather* (“**parens** (2) -entis c. [a parent]; sometimes [**grandfather**, or ancestor; author, cause, origin]”²), thus making the word a clever choice if delivered by young Elizabeth Vere.

Statements in the letter reflect Oxford's condition at that time. Oxford's letter of August 7, 1595, begins, “I most hartely thanke youre Lordship for youre desyre to knowe of my helthe which is not so good.” Compatibly, Peele's cover letter says he cannot deliver the packet himself due to “Longe sicknes havinge so enfeebléd me.” Peele says that “necessitie” requires him to appoint a courier because he could not travel. Four years later, in June 1599, Oxford explains in a letter to Elizabeth that he must communicate through others because “I could not travell up and downe my selfe.”³ It sounds like the same person.

The circumstances of young Elizabeth Vere and her father's association at the time of Peele's letter are compatible with the proposition that she delivered the packet. On January 26, 1595, Elizabeth married William Stanley, the 6th Earl of Derby. She was lodged with her father and stepmother throughout that month: “soon after the wedding the Earl of Oxford was staying with the newly married couple in Cannon Row,”⁴ where, according to one of the Earl's own letters,⁵ he was again lodging that summer. By early August, Oxford had retired to Hackney,

“comminge hether from Chaninge Roo,” as he writes to Burghley. Oxford's daughter must have accompanied him to Hackney, because in a letter written to Burghley on August 7, 1595, Oxford says, “my daughter hathe put her trust in me, bothe to remember youre Lordship and her husband....” His statement further reveals that Elizabeth's husband had stayed behind with Burghley. The proposed scenario requires—quite neatly—that five months later, after the Christmas holidays, on January 17, 1596, Elizabeth returned to her husband, traveling from Hackney to Cecil House (or Theobalds) bearing her father's letter. How fun it would have been for Elizabeth Vere, then twenty years old, to entertain the household by showing up at grandpa's door with the gift and the accompanying clever note.

Scholars have referred to Peele's missive as “a pathetic begging letter,”⁶ but it is nothing of the sort. The tone is playful. Peele wishes “to present your widsome with this small manuall” as a gift and asks Burghley to “Receive it ... as a schollers duties signification.” There is no request for patronage.

This is a heartwarming story. Is it true?

Oxford's Handwriting Matches Peele's

To whom does the letter's handwriting belong—the actual George Peele or the Earl of Oxford? There is no body of handwriting from an actual George Peele. All we can test is whether the handwriting matches Oxford's.

A book from 1932 titled *Literary Autographs, 1550-1650*⁷ presents handwriting samples from 100 literary personages of the Elizabethan era. It reproduces Peele's letter to Burghley and a scrap from a manuscript, “the only one of Peele's to survive,”⁸ of *Anglorum Ferieae*, which was discovered “in 1909 among the papers in the lodgings of the President of St. John's, Oxford.”⁹ The book also reproduces two letters from the Earl of Oxford about two decades apart. I compared the handwriting in Peele's two items with that in Oxford's two letters. To expand the investigation, I examined copies of all manuscript pages of *Anglorum Ferieae* available on the British Library website.

I have reproduced four items for reference. Figure 1 shows Peele's letter and a scrap from the manuscript of Peele's *Anglorum Ferieae*. Figure 2 shows a full page from the manuscript of *Anglorum Ferieae*. Figures 3 and 4 are Oxford's letters of October 31, 1572, and July 7, 1594, respectively.

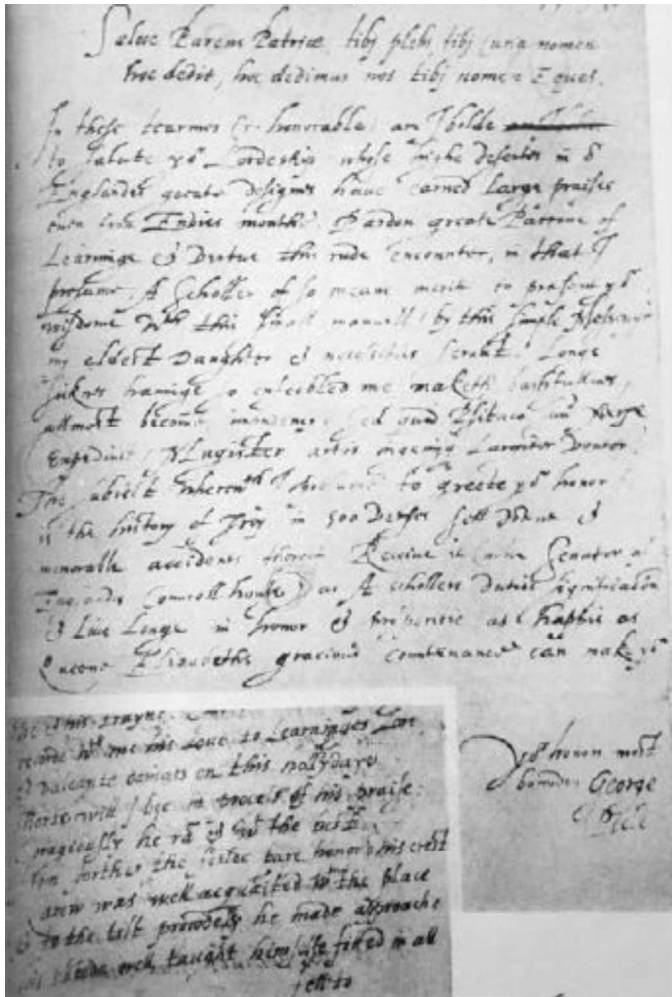


Figure 1: Peele's letter of 1596 with an insert from the manuscript of *Anglorum Ferie*

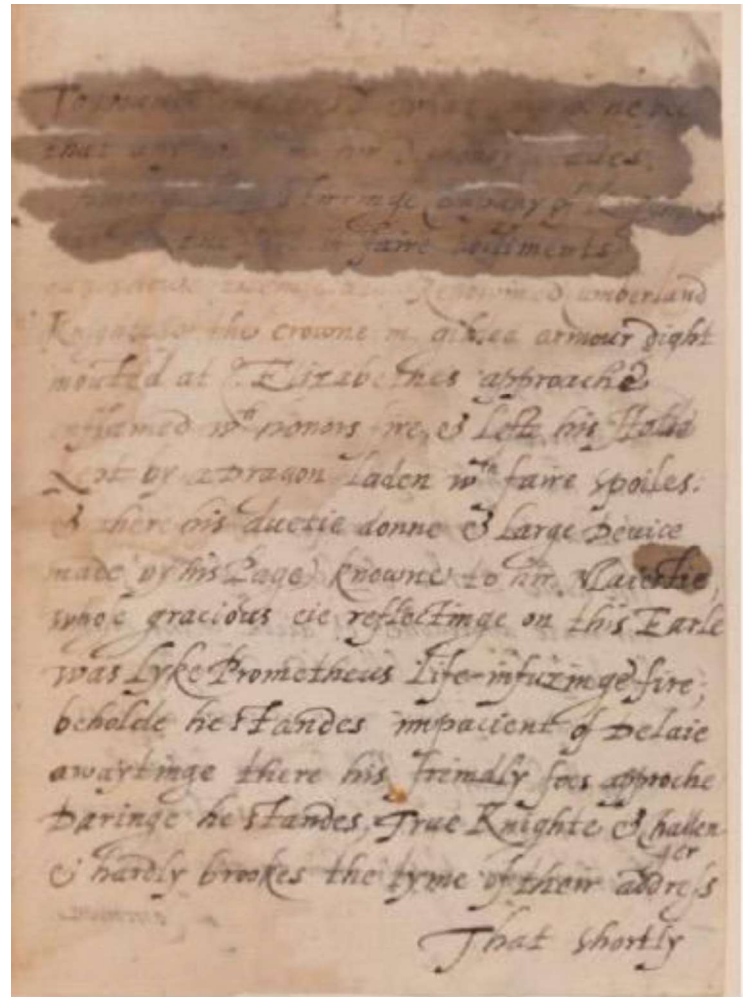


Figure 2: A page from Peele's manuscript of *Anglorum Ferie*

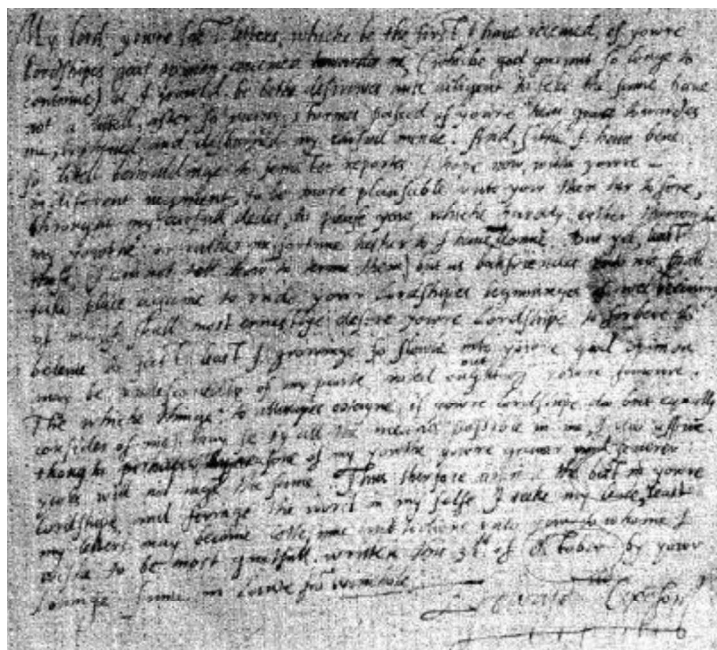


Figure 3: Earl of Oxford's letter dated October 31, 1572

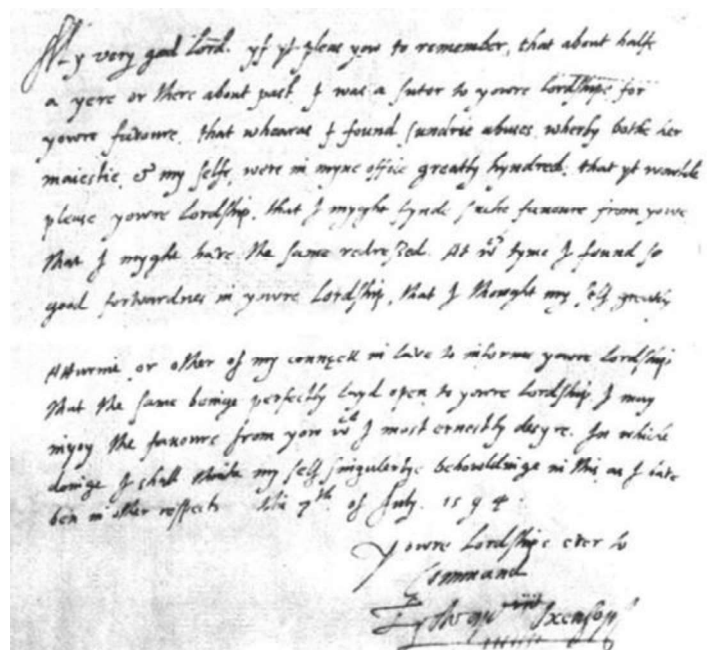


Figure 4: Earl of Oxford's letter dated July 7, 1594

Comparing handwriting is not an easy task. For one thing, handwriting from the same person can be dramatically different at different times in life. Several samples in *Literary Autographs* bear out that fact, because at first glance many letters by the same person appear quite dissimilar. Additionally, many writers of the time cultivated both a formal and an informal writing style, depending upon the purpose of the composition. Even among our samples, the handwriting from Peele's *Anglorum Ferie* is less formal than that in Peele's purported letter, and the overall look of Oxford's two missives, with twenty-two years between them, is somewhat different as well.

Yet these observations restrict the certainty of conclusions only when writing looks *different*. Closely matching instances are another matter. In the case at hand, Oxford seems to have had certain unusual, if not unique, handwriting habits that he maintained throughout his life, such as his distinctive upper-case *E*'s, *L*'s and *T*'s, all three of which are boldly on display in both examples of George Peele's writing.

If there is one letter of the alphabet whose expression Oxford would have specially crafted from a young age, it is the capital letter *E* starting his signature and title: Edward, Earl of Oxford. And what a beautiful construction it is: Elaborate yet masculine, it is nearly unique in the entire book of Elizabethan handwriting. As Oxford does with *Edward*, Peele's letter uses the fancy *E* when citing grand subjects, such as *Elizabeth* and *England*. (Two of Peele's other *E*'s are less stylish.)

Study Figure 5, which shows *E*'s from other notables' handwriting, as displayed throughout *Literary Autographs*. Observe the substantial variety of expression among them and how much they differ from each other.



Figure 5

Now look at Figure 6, which displays five *E*'s: one from Oxford's letter of 1572, one from Oxford's letter of 1594, and three from Peele's letter of 1596. Observe the comparatively elaborate style of Oxford's and Peele's *E*'s as compared to those in Figure 5. In Figure 5, there is only one other like them (row 5, column 2).

See if you can tell which of the *E*'s in Figure 6 are Oxford's and which are Peele's. I can't do it, because for all practical purposes, they are identical.

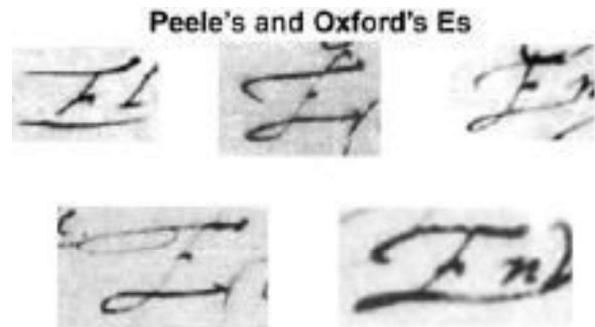


Figure 6

(In case you were wondering, successive *E*'s belong to Peele, Oxford, Peele, Oxford and Peele.)

Most people write a capital *L* with the same style of stroke—either curly or angular—at both the top and bottom. In the writing samples to which I have access, Henry Chettle, Anthony Munday, John Lyly, Ben Jonson, William Stanley, William Cavendish, George Gascoigne, Abraham Fraunce, George Herbert, Edward Hoby and Queen Elizabeth all use the curly form throughout the character, most of them especially at the bottom, and Nicholas Udall renders an *L* that is angular at the top and bottom.

Oxford and Peele, however, form their capital *L*'s identically in an unusual way, with a curly top and angular bottom. Figure 7 shows ten examples, three from Oxford's 1572 letter, two from his 1594 letter, three from Peele's 1596 letter and two from his *Anglorum Ferie* manuscript.

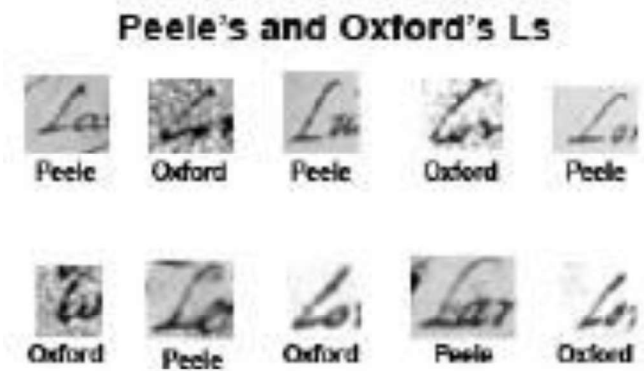


Figure 7

Roger Ascham, Thomas Lodge and Thomas Kyd each produced at least one *L* that looks like Peele's and Oxford's, but they did not do so habitually.

Oxford and Peele also share the unusual quirk of often using a capital *T* in the middle or at the end of a word, especially when that *T* follows an *s*. This quirk is not exclusive to them, as I find examples in Thomas Kyd's, Abraham Fraunce's and George Turberville's handwriting. But none of the other above-mentioned writers' samples exhibit it, nor do those of John Marston or Mary Sidney, nor does any writer seem to make a habit of doing so except Turberville. As Figure 8 shows, the similarity of the *T*'s used by Peele and Oxford is striking.



Figure 8

The three letters ending the word *eldest* in Peele's letter are identical to those ending *crest* in Peele's manuscript. These two words are presented successively in Figure 8. In short, whoever wrote Peele's letter wrote his manuscript as well.

No other writer whose work appears in *Literary Autographs* shares two of those handwriting quirks, much less all three of them. If you look carefully at Peele's and Oxford's writing, you will find that their lower-case *e*'s, *b*'s and *l*'s are also the same. Another shared feature is their rigid adherence to horizontal

linearity, as if their papers had invisible lines to which they were conforming.

The cumulative effect of the similarities in the two sets of writing, especially as opposed to the writing of their contemporaries, indicates that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, handwrote both the manuscript of *Anglorum Ferae* and "Peele's only extant letter."¹⁰

There is one more record of Peele's handwriting. A receipt from the University of Oxford dated May 26, 1583, shows that "George Peele" was paid £20 (an amount equal to \$10,000 in today's money) "in respect of the playes and entertaynemt of the palatine laskie," the Polish count. Biographers have concluded that the payment is a director's or technical director's fee. On the handwritten receipt, within the line, "Received by me George Peele the xxvjth day of May," the name "George Peele" is written in a different hand and at a different slope, indicating that it was inserted (see Figure 9). (It seems the clerk did not know which Voice Oxford planned to credit for the task.

Peele's Signed Receipt, with the Payee's Name Inserted



Figure 9

Figure 10 shows that the signature on Peele's letter in Figure 1 is by the same hand as the inserted "George Peele" and the signature "Geo. Peele" on the receipt shown in Figure 10. All letters are identically rendered except the *l* in the letter's signature, which is nevertheless similar.

Signatures

Receipt 1592

Letter 1596



Figure 10

If Oxford wrote Peele's letter, he also signed for George Peele's expenses relating to William Gager's production of *Dido and Rivaes* in 1583. Is there any connection between Oxford and those plays?

There is. As Clark¹¹ noted of Shakespeare's most autobiographical play, *Hamlet* (II.ii) recalls Gager's production fondly, musing, "The play, I remember, pleased not the million; 'twas caviare to the general.... One speech in it I chiefly loved; 'twas Aeneas' tale to Dido...." The play, as *Hamlet* notes, entertained a general (one from caviar country) but not the general public ("the million"). We can be positive that Will Shaksper did not attend that play, because he was in Stratford-upon-Avon at the time, and no one would have let him into the halls of the university to see it anyway. What we have, then, in *Hamlet*, is Shakespeare reminiscing about a play on the same subject and acted under the same circumstance as Peele's production for Gager.

That Oxford filled in Peele's name and then signed for him severely dampens the possibility that an actual George Peele was present for the event. We are left with no evidence that he was.

Why This Particular Gift?

In 1596, William Warner completed his blank-verse epic of twelve "Bookes" titled *Albions England*, which covers England's history from the time of Noah up to Elizabeth. My book *Oxford's Voices* argues that Oxford is the author. It also conjectures that the first four books of *Albions England*, completed in 1586, might have been the impetus for the Queen's decision to pay Oxford his annual stipend, which started that year.

This article is too short to present my case in that regard, but consider this: The only portion of England's history Warner did not versify is the story of Troy, the city that — according to legend — produced England's founder, Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas. Peele's *A Tale of Troy* conveniently fills in the missing portion, and only the missing portion, of Warner's verse history.

Why would Oxford choose an improved treatment of that particular book as a gift to his father-in-law? Its connection to *Albions England* suggests that it might have been a thank-you for Burghley's negotiations with Queen Elizabeth favoring Oxford's annuity. The gift, as Peele wrote, "signifies a scholar's duty" to his benefactor. His gift says, in essence, "Here is the rest of the verse history that helped you champion me as Elizabeth's poet."

Musings

This article notes that George Peele left no body of correspondence. I think the reason is that, although a George Peele may have existed, George Peele the author did not. He was a persona of the Earl of Oxford.

The reason I investigated Peele's handwriting is that I knew what I was looking for. Peele's orthodox

biography is highly suspect, and his purported literary achievements fit into the continuum of Oxford's Voices.

This discovery is important because it establishes with hard evidence that in real life the Earl of Oxford played roles as literary personas. Shakespeare was one of them. George Peele was another.

On September 6, 1596, Oxford was again staying with the Derbys. "[He] wrote from Canon Row ... to Cecil"¹² as follows: "The wrightinge which I have ys in the contrye [Hackney], for I hadd suche care thereof as I carried yt with me in a lyttell deske" Did Oxford compose Peele's letter on that desk? Did he revise *Hamlet* on it?

Peele's letter is unique in exposing the fact that Oxford operated under others' names. Why, then, does the letter still exist? Burghley must have cherished this clever correspondence with its impish method of delivery and figured that no one would ever link it to Oxford. If so, he miscalculated.

[Robert Prechter is Executive Director of the Socionomics Institute, a social-causality research organization, and President of Elliott Wave International, a financial forecasting firm. He has written numerous articles for Oxfordian publications. This article is excerpted from the George Peele chapter in his most recent work, *Oxford's Voices* (oxfordvoices.com), in which he argues that Edward de Vere wrote under many other names during his literary career. See *Newsletter*, Fall 2021, p. 21.]

Endnotes:

- ¹ For the full text, see Ashley, Leonard R.N., *George Peele*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., New York (1970), 37-38.
- ² University of Notre Dame, *Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid*, <https://archives.nd.edu/latgramm.html>
- ³ Earl of Oxford, letter to Queen Elizabeth, June 1599, as quoted in Nelson, *Cecil Papers 71/26 (bifolium, 287mm x 195mm, folded unevenly)*, *Oxford to Elizabeth; June 1599*, <http://www.leadbetter.cc/nelson/TINLETTTS/990600B.html>.
- ⁴ Anderson, Verily, *The DeVeres of Castle Hedingham*, Terence Dalton, Ltd., Lavenham, Suffolk (1993), 227.
- ⁵ Ogburn, Charlton, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, EPM Publications, McLean, VA (1984), 741.
- ⁶ Ashley, p. 80.
- ⁷ Greg, W.W. (ed.), *English Literary Autographs: 1550-1650*, Oxford UP (1932).
- ⁸ Horne, David H. (ed.), *The Life and Minor Works of George Peele*, Yale UP (1952), 178.
- ⁹ Id. at 165.
- ¹⁰ Ashley, p. 38.
- ¹¹ Clark, Eva Turner, *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays* (1931), 3rd ed., Kennikat Press, New York (1974), 154.
- ¹² Nelson, Alan H., *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*, Liverpool UP (2003), 359.

