

Shakespearean Authorship Trust



William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby

Dates:

1561 - 1642

Background:

Aristocratic (his mother Margaret Clifford was a great niece of Henry VIII), educated at Oxford, and Gray's Inn. From 1582-87 he toured the Continent, and was resident in Rome. He is believed to have visited the Court of Czar Ivan the Terrible in the company of Dr. John Dee, and may have joined the 1586-87 Davis expedition to the waters of Greenland. In 1600 he returned to Rome for the Centennial Jubilee. He and his wife spent most of their lives in the Catholic north, overseeing their vast estates. When his wife died in 1627, Derby turned over his Earldom to his son James Stanley, dedicating himself to building and literary pursuits.

Famous for:

Derby travelled widely, and his years abroad were not without incident. In Madrid, for instance, he allegedly killed a man in a duel over a woman and had to escape to France disguised as a priest. He was friendly with both the Earls of Southampton and Rutland, and almost joined them on Essex's expedition to Ireland in 1599. He was represented by Francis Bacon in his protracted legal battle with his sister-in-law, Lady Strange. His marriage to Elizabeth Vere, daughter of the 17th Earl of Oxford in January 1594/5, is claimed by many to have been the court wedding for which Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written. His wife's affair with the Earl of Essex in 1597 caused Derby considerable torment and almost led to the breakdown of his marriage. Though he was the hereditary "Lord of Man" (also called Viking "King of Man"), it was his wife who was famous for her *de facto* governorship of the island, where her reforms proved unpopular. Derby, his wife, and sisters-in-law were among the courtiers listed as taking roles on the stage in court masques written by Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones.

The Case:

Derby's chief claim to literary fame is a 1599 spy's report in which he was said to have been "penning comedies for the common players," though no works of his survive under his name. Several letters written by Derby and his wife from the Earl of Oxford's residence and vice versa in the late 1590s suggest that Derby was working closely with his father-in-law on literary projects (they were both patrons of acting companies). Derby's brother's troupe, "Lord Strange's Men", had been the most prominent acting company at court and on tour in the early 1590s, teaming with the Lord Admiral's Men, but in 1594 on his brother's death, the Derby-Strange troupe seems to have collapsed, and most of its actors were reincorporated as "the Lord Chamberlain's Men". His own acting company, "Derby's Men", was prominent at court in the late 1590s up to about 1620. Some Shakespeare plays (e.g. *Loves Labours Lost* and *Measure for Measure*) contain allusions to events that Derby might have witnessed on his travels.

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