

# Might Edward de Vere Have Suffered from Alcoholism?

By Robert R. Prechter, Jr

Among the symptoms of alcoholism are secretive consumption, an inability to self-diagnose and an unwillingness to admit having the disease, all of which make detection and treatment difficult. Recent literature describes how one may diagnose probable alcoholism by observing a subject's patterns of behavior following the onset of addiction. Did Edward de Vere exhibit behaviors suggesting alcoholism?

My answer draws upon the modern medical understanding of alcoholism—as distinguished from popular but inaccurate perceptions of it—and upon what we know of de Vere's life history, augmented by passages of self-reference in his writings, including those under the Shakespeare pseudonym.

## Intelligence and Achievement

In the last issue of *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, the reviewer of *Shakespeare by Another Name* called Mark Anderson's conclusion that de Vere drank "absurd" because "no drunkard ever achieved what Shakespeare achieved" (Hughes 14). According to at least one expert on alcoholism, the widespread belief behind this statement is not just false, but backward. As Doug Thorburn explains in several books—most recently *Alcoholism Myths and Realities* (2005)—one of the behavioral signs of early and middle-stage alcoholism is a drive for extreme achievement. Thorburn's "Myth #49" is, "She's too successful to be an alcoholic" (*Alcoholism* 62). Not only can most alcoholics function, but many of them, in some ways, perform better than the rest of us. For example, the three greatest hitters in the history of baseball—Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle—were alcoholics. Mozart, who can be compared to de Vere in creative achievement, was a poly-drug addict. An autopsy showed Beethoven's liver to have been ravaged. John Lennon was a raging alcoholic who left behind one of the most beloved catalogs of pop music.

Says Thorburn, "[M]any believe that the average alcoholic has higher innate intelligence than does the typical non-alcoholic. Future studies, however, may show that *developed* intelligence is connected to alcoholism, due to the drive in the early-stage alcoholic to overachieve" (*Alcoholism* 65). De Vere was a genius, and we know that he studied intently, perhaps more so than virtually anyone who has lived. Reports testify that he was the best at tilt, the best dancer at court, and a better musician than most professionals.

More directly to our subject, "certain occupations or professions ... seem to have a greater probability of attracting addicts. [Author] Lucy Barry Robe, psychiatrist Donald Goodwin and other researchers report that "a far higher proportion of famous actors, actresses, and writers are alcoholic-addicts than would be expected by chance" (Thorburn, *Drunks* 124). De Vere was an actor and a writer. Famous actors today are continually entering (and re-entering) rehab. Of writers in particular, Thorburn notes, "Donald Goodwin, M.D., identified five of eight Nobel Prize winning authors from the United States during the twentieth century as alcoholics: William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, Eugene

O'Neill and John Steinbeck" (*Alcoholism* 65), a ratio well out of proportion to the incidence of alcoholism in the general population. Furthermore, writers Edgar Allan Poe, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Stephen King, E.E. Cummings, James Thurber, Dorothy Parker, Jack London, Lillian Hellman, Dorothy Kilgallen, Truman Capote, Jack Kerouac, John Cheever and O. Henry suffered from alcoholism or other drug addiction. Many of these authors composed landmark works, and some were prolific.

The over-achieving alcoholic's performance in his chosen field often maintains until the late stages of the disease, and if one lives only to age 54, its debilitating effects in that regard may not even be apparent. One may certainly wish to argue against de Vere's having alcoholism, but his prodigious achievement in the arts is not good evidence to the contrary.

## Charm and Persuasiveness

Ability can be expressed in any field, but functional alcoholics are especially adroit in social settings. In business, Ted Turner, who has admitted having problems with alcohol, built the biggest news organization in the world from nearly nothing. In politics, our two most recent presidents are alcoholics/addicts: Clinton, who sported W.C. Fields's ruddy nose and reportedly used cocaine, and Bush is an admitted alcoholic, presumably in recovery.

Thorburn's Myth #51 is "He's too charming to be an alcoholic" (*Alcoholism* 66). "[A]ddicts," says Thorburn, "are often the most charming people on the planet" (*Alcoholism* 142). Early-stage alcoholics can be exceptionally attractive to others because they take risks and boldly do and say things that the average person does not, and thereby fascinate people. This is why so many of them become successful actors, musicians, writers and politicians. De Vere charmed the Queen of England (for a while at least), two wives, at least one mistress, and countless readers and theater-goers. His personal charm early in life and its apparent waning later is consistent with alcoholism.

Alcoholics and other drug addicts make popular entertainers and charismatic leaders because of their ability to mesmerize throngs. Thorburn postulates that alcohol facilitates access to the primitive areas of the brain, thus unconsciously putting alcoholics better in touch with people's primal motivations, which they manipulate to their advantage. The charm of some alcoholics and the persuasive ability of others suggest a visceral understanding of human nature that is less available to the rest of us. Shakespeare's celebrated insight into human nature could stem from this source.

## Financial Woes, Domestic Strife, Blame, Obsession

Three major tip-offs to alcoholism are "Pattern of Financial Difficulties," "Serious Problems at Home," and "Blames Others for Problems" (Thorburn, *Drunks* 67). De Vere exhibited all these

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*Alcoholism (cont'd from p. 19)*

symptoms. Although we may blame Burghley and Leicester for the loss of some of de Vere's estates and land holdings, he nevertheless created chronic money problems for himself despite beginning life immensely wealthy. He traveled expensively, gambled heavily on a shipping venture, borrowed huge sums, supported actors and writers, financed theater productions and dissipated a tremendous fortune in less than thirty years. He ended up living on a (well-deserved) stipend from the state and the inheritance of his wealthy second wife. Thorburn's description of the reckless behavior behind the typical alcoholic's money troubles is a small version of the grand style in which de Vere operated:

Consider the egotistical drinker who insists on being the "big man," picking up everyone's tab at the bar, even though it's something he can ill afford. He borrows to the hilt to spend on toys and extravagances, figuring he'll have no problem paying it back with the next big raise, commission or bonus. Such grandiose behavior is, by itself, an excellent clue to addiction, often creating the financial difficulties. (*Drunks* 101)

As for "serious problems at home," de Vere's was hardly a life of domestic bliss. He had difficult relationships with his father-in-law,

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with whom he continually fought; his wife, whom he temporarily abandoned; and relatives of his mistress, whom he battled in the street. His problems extended to non-domestic relationships; he seemed to have a facility for making enemies and was banned from court twice for significant periods.

Thorburn asks, "Does he regularly blame others or 'circumstances' for his problems, or incessantly cry, 'Poor me'?" (*Drunks* 114) In April and May 1575, Lord Burghley made two lists of "Cavillations by the Erie of Oxford Contra Lord Burghley," listing a dozen and half a dozen complaints, respectively, that de Vere had expressed in a meeting. Shakespeare often refers to the impersonal force of "Fortune," as when Romeo cries, "O, I am Fortune's fool!" after killing Tybalt. Shakespeare's sonnets to the Dark Lady are relentlessly bitter and complaining, and everything is her fault. If the complaints are fully justified, as some believe, then they provide no evidence of alcoholism; but if they are hyperbolically blaming and self-pitying, an interpretation that the language fully supports, they do. Alcoholics can also become obsessive, focusing on the negative. The dark, obsessive quality of the Sonnets is one of their primary features.

## Bad Behavior and Enablers

Alcoholics often behave badly. "Terrible behaviors," says Thorburn, "rarely occur in non-alcoholics" (*Alcoholism* 77). He demonstrates that most mass murderers and tyrants (including Stalin, Hitler and Mao) have been addicted to drugs or alcohol or both; shockingly in fact, there may be no exceptions among those whose lives we know intimately enough to make a determination. Experts estimate that 85% to 90% of the U.S. prison population comprises alcoholics and other drug addicts. If we are to believe recent biographers, de Vere exhibited little more than atrocious behavior throughout his life. While we Oxfordians believe many of these claims are overblown if not outright wrong, to the extent that they are true, they point to alcoholism.

An alcoholic in a position of power has many enablers of his bad behavior because their livelihoods depend upon his. Thorburn explains:

*Do not think that because someone holds a high office in private or public life, we would know he's an alcoholic or other drug addict. We would be less likely to know this, since those near him, having more to lose, will do everything possible to protect his secret. (*Drunks* 103; emphases in the original)*

Nelson observes this dynamic in de Vere's life numerous times, commenting, "For Burghley, as always, the fault lay not with Oxford, but with certain other 'lewd Persons'...Even [Sir Thomas] Smith blames 'counsellores & persuaders' rather than Oxford himself (141, 145). Few people cause the violent death of others, but a servant died at the point of de Vere's foil, a death later ruled a suicide. Because he was a nobleman with many enablers, he suffered little consequence. Had he been a commoner, he might have joined the prison population.

Alcoholics often choose professions that "allow for ego-gratification beyond norms," (*Drunks* 131) in which they can exercise inordinate power over other people. The power that Shakespeare exerted over those he wished to humiliate was nearly unparalleled. In his portrayal of Richard III he re-wrote history to his purpose. Alcoholics also tend to "...push buttons,' especially in a mean-spirited way [or] engage in extreme sarcasm [or] belittling others" (*Drunks* 126, 132). Who among us would want to be lampooned as was Malvolio in front of our eyes and those of everyone in town? Shakespeare trashes the Dark Lady as *covetous, cruel, cunning, false, foul, black as hell, and the bay where all men ride*. How many non-alcoholics craft such detailed humiliations of others? On the other hand, some alcoholics, such as Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote and Hunter Thompson, were expert at doing so.

## Trouble Sleeping, Depression, Bipolarity, Emotional Adolescence, Unidentified Illness

Thorburn says, "The alcoholic will almost never blame his drug for tossing and turning all night. Instead, it's his spouse, the dogs howling, the workaday worries, the boss ticking him off all day and the kids annoying him all evening" (*Drunks* 71). Shakespeare refers to sleeplessness in at least three sonnets:

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*Alcoholism (cont'd from p. 20)*

27

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,  
The dear repose for limbs with travel tir'd;  
But then begins a journey in my head,  
To work my mind, when body's work's expir'd:  
For then my thoughts...keep my drooping eyelids wide...  
For thee and for myself no quiet find.

28

How can I, then, return in happy plight,  
That am debarr'd the benefit of rest?  
[Day and night] shake hands to torture me...  
And night doth nightly make grief's strength seem stronger.

61

Is it thy will thy image should keep open  
My heavy eyelids to the weary night?  
...It is my love that keeps mine eye awake;  
Mine own true love that doth my rest defeat,  
To play the watchman ever for thy sake:

Alcoholism can mimic many psychological disorders. According to studies, "[W]hen the tests are repeated after three months of sobriety, 70% to 80% of these problem pathologies disappear" (*Alcoholism* 82). "Alcoholism," says Thorburn, "is often mistaken for Depressive Personality Disorder." Citing "Myth #18," Thorburn says that the causality implied in the statement, "She drinks because she's unhappy," is backward; instead, it should be "she's unhappy because she drinks excessively" (*Alcoholism* 26, 27). De Vere in his poetry and writings as Shakespeare describes "melancholy" as if he knew the feeling first hand. Hamlet, Shakespeare's most autobiographical character, suffers from depression to the point of contemplating suicide. The Sonnets describe the author weeping and wailing in isolation, as in the following two examples about sleeplessness:

29

I all alone beweepe my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries

30

[I] with old woes new wail my dear time's waste;  
Then can I drown an eye...And weep afresh...  
And moan...I grieve...  
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er  
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan

Alcoholism can trigger "intense mood swings" (*Drunks* 131) mimicking bipolar disorder. The Sonnets exhibit intense mood swings. Romeo, another autobiographical character, is depressed one minute and giddy the next. Many Oxfordians see de Vere's personality in *As You Like It* split between the robust Touchstone and the gloomy Jacques. Thorburn estimates that most diagnoses of bipolar disorder are inaccurate because too few psychologists understand the symptoms of alcoholism, and patients almost uni-

formly hide their addictions from therapists. Articles continually miss the connection. A recent one on an ex-Oakland Raider contains this statement: "Barret Robbins suffers from bipolar disorder, which is intensified by his alcohol and drug abuse" (Saraceno 1C). Such diagnoses are common, but alcoholism is likely the cause, not just an adjunct, of the mental state described, as it may have been for de Vere.

Many alcoholics are narcissistic, which includes a "preoccupation with 'fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love'" (*Alcoholism* 87). Some Oxfordian theorists

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believe de Vere saw himself as the rightful King of England. If they are correct, perhaps de Vere's hope was justifiable, but by any measure it is a lofty one. De Vere certainly expressed fantasies of beauty and ideal love. His early works are wonderfully awash in exactly those themes, exemplified also in *Romeo and Juliet*. ("Juliet is the sun!")

Moreover, he carried these ideas of ideal love and beauty into middle age, a persistence that further argues in favor of alcoholism. Though alcoholics can be intellectual giants, they typically remain adolescents emotionally throughout life. "According to those in recovery, the emotional age of the addict is frozen from the first moment of addictive use (usually when very young)" (*Drunks* 297). Thorburn adds that on average, this moment occurs at age 13. John Lennon's alcoholism began at age 11. Oxford was 12 when he published his passionate narrative poem, *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, and he seems to have maintained a vaunted view of love through the years.

A 1595 letter from de Vere to Burghley cited by Sobran refers to "my health, which is not good" (136). Of course, his health problems could have stemmed from anything, but de Vere's illness is never explained, and his complaint is very general. Age 45 is a reasonable time for the physical damages wreaked by alcoholism to become manifest. Alcoholics, moreover, often "die...of their disease or the secondary diseases that alcohol spawned" (*Drunks* 85). While other well-to-do Englishmen of the time lived to ripe ages, Oxford died comparatively young, a fate of many alcoholics.

### Shakespeare Knew the Tavern Intimately

Aside from wine connoisseurs, non-alcoholics rarely praise alcoholic beverages in exalted terms, but there are several Shakespearean references to the positive qualities of drink. Judging from the *Henry IV* plays and *Twelfth Night*, we may also conclude that the

*(cont'd on p. 22)*

*Alcoholism (cont'd from p. 21)*

author was right at home in the company of drunkards. Shakespeare finds drunks amusing; and they are either honorable (Prince Hal), loveable (Sir Toby) or cleverly subversive (Falstaff). He even casts Prince Hal, the obvious de Vere figure in the *Henry IV* plays, as a smart, affable carouser who will rise heroically to the occasion when the time comes for him to reign. I recall no evil drunkards in Shakespeare. Elizabethan England had its share of Puritans and teetotalers, but de Vere was of the opposite mind.

### Contrary Indications

To my mind, the primary contrary indication of alcoholism in de Vere is Shakespeare's positive view of human nature and his utter lack of fundamental negativity. Shakespeare's heroes are noble, strong, smart, merciful, passionate and tender. The literature of alcoholics tends towards misery, cynicism, blame, nihilism and displeasure. Think Sartre or Hunter Thompson for gonzo versions of such an orientation. On the other hand, some alcoholics fit the opposite mold. Thomas Paine was the most widely read political and religious philosopher of his age, and his lines ring with the adroit marriage of passion and reason. De Vere's writing is so noble, so insightful, so passionate, that he stirs us to the zenith of our emotions. But then again, that's what peak-performing alcoholics do best: they win people over and make us love them. Although their personal lives exasperate us, we excuse their behavior because we are infatuated. We love Marilyn. We love Sinatra. We love Lennon. We love Elvis. We love Shakespeare. Non-alcoholics do not generally inspire idolization, but alcoholics do, all the time.

The lives of many alcoholics project a sense of grand tragedy. While we may idolize the famous ones as public figures, we ache for them as well. This is certainly the case with de Vere.

### Not All Tragedy

Why do we love de Vere and nevertheless cringe when considering some of his personality traits and personal foibles? Why do we adore his genius, yet pity his tragic fate? One answer might be that he suffered from alcoholism. If true, it is not entirely a bad thing, at least for us. Without it, he may never have given us the intense delights of Shakespeare. □

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