

# Damon and Pithias: Shakespeare's First Play

by [David P. Gontar](#) (July 2021)



*Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604)*, attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger

*We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,  
Have with our needles created both one flower  
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,  
Both warbling of one song, both in one key,  
As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds  
Had been incorporate. So we grew together  
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,  
But yet an union in partition,  
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem,  
So with two seeming bodies but one heart,  
Two of the first, like coats of heraldry,  
Due but to one and crowned with one crest.*

–Helena

## The Issue

Who gave us *Damon and Pithias*? Though its straightforward moral idealism suggests a student's hand, custom has it that Richard Edwardes, a choral musician by trade, was its progenitor. To this day the Edwardes legend has never been challenged. When it is, a world of astonishing richness and complexity unfolds before us, reflecting a far more likely authorial candidate: "Shakespeare" in his minority. Resolving

the puzzle of *Damon and Pithias* transcends the authorial crux, providing an illuminating appendix to many of the most significant works of the English Renaissance. All may be expressed in a single encompassing syllogism: (1) *Damon and Pithias* was written, not by cat's paw Richard Edwardes, but by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford; (2) Through close stylistic examination we find that whoever penned *Damon and Pithias* must also have crafted the Shakespearean canon; ergo (3) Oxford wrote "Shakespeare." Thus the Gordian Knot of literature unravels at a single stroke. Let us see what advantages accrue as we explore this pregnant hypothesis.

### **1. Disposing of the Richard Edwardes Fantasy**

A substantial quorum of the works of Shakespeare focuses on the virtues and foibles of friendship. Think of: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Proteus and Valentine), *Romeo and Juliet* (Romeo and Mercutio), *As You Like it* (Rosalind and Celia), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Hermia and Helena & Peter Quince's fraternal mechanicals), *The Merchant of Venice* (Antonio and Bassanio), *The Winter's Tale* (Leontes and Polixenes), *Coriolanus* (Martius and Aufidius), *Love's Labour's Lost* (King of Navarre & Co.; Princess of France & Co.), *Much Ado About Nothing* (Claudio and Benedick), *Twelfth Night* (Sebastian and Antonio, Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek) *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (Arcite and Palamon; Flavinia and Emilia) *The First and Second Parts of Henry IV* (Falstaff and Prince Hal), *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* (Brutus and Cassius), and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (Hamlet and Horatio). *Damon and Pithias*, a much older work bearing a publication date of 1571, features a pair of protagonists so devoted to each other that one, Pithias, is willing to sacrifice his life to a tyrant's wrath when the other, Damon, is absent. On the basis of Edwardes' moniker on the 1571 quarto it is imagined that he, a choirmaster and occasional poetaster, is the responsible party. A typical Edwardes' writing sample cries out to the nayward.

In going to my naked bed as one that would have slept,  
I heard a wife sing to her child, that long before had  
wept;

She sighed sore and sang full sweet, to bring the babe  
to rest,

That would not cease but cried still in sucking at her  
breast.

("All Poetry," Famous Poet, Richard Edwards [sic])

Jottings such as these disappoint when we seek out poetic gifts. Though he is set down as an authority on amity, it's ironic that Edwardes doesn't seem to have had any friends himself. The scenes of *D&P* abound in conflicting *Weltanschauungen* and evince such courtly repartee as one might expect from a Voltaire or Talleyrand. Careful study finds a yawning chasm between script and proposed scribe. Only one steeped in Hellenic ideas and manners could gracefully deploy them in a credible Renaissance stage production. Sadly, the historical Richard Edwardes cannot be shown to have possessed the technical vocabulary and genteel application to do the job. On the contrary. Where are his papers, his *bons mots* and *billets doux*? As might be expected, he passes unmentioned in standard texts treating the 16th century, e.g., A.L. Rowse's *The Elizabethan Renaissance*, 1971