

SUMMARY: The document below is a letter dated 13 September 1594 from William Stanley (bap. 1561, d. 1642), 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby, to Lord Burghley concerning negotiations for a marriage between Derby and Oxford's daughter, Elizabeth Vere (1575–1627). William Stanley had unexpectedly become Earl of Derby when his father, Henry Stanley (1531–1593), 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby, died on 25 September 1593, and in the following year his brother, Ferdinando Stanley (1559?–1594), 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby, died on 16 April 1594 without a male heir.

Although William Stanley became Earl of Derby at his brother's death, he had little in the way of landed income to support the title as the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl had left the Derby lands to his widow, Alice Spencer Stanley, and their three young daughters. According to the *ODNB*, Alice was supported in her effort to retain the Derby lands by her brother-in-law, Sir George Carey (1548-1603), later 2<sup>nd</sup> Baron Hunsdon:

*In a letter of 22 April Sir George Carey conveyed the consoling news to his wife, sister to Ferdinando's widow, that the estate had thus been saved from this 'nidicock'—that is, 'fool' (Glos. RO, MF 1161, letter-book 2). Thus began the 'great lawsuit', a complex and infamous affair, financially draining on Derby (already burdened by the excesses of the two previous Derby earls), which would all but consume him for the next five years and not reach final settlement until 1610, by which time he had finally won or bought back most of the estate.*

William Stanley indicates in the letter below his understanding that Lord Burghley has accepted the financial situation, and has left it up to William Stanley to decide when to proceed with the marriage ceremony, which took place four months later on 26 January 1595 at Greenwich, with Queen Elizabeth in attendance.

In the early 1590s Lord Burghley and Anthony Browne (1528-1592), 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Montagu, who were related by marriage through the Cooke family, arranged a marriage between Elizabeth Vere and Henry Wriothesley (1573-1624), 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare dedicated *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. However when Southampton reached the age of majority in 1594, he refused to marry Elizabeth Vere. See Akrigg, G.P.V., *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 31-2, 35, 39-40. For the relationship between Lord Burghley and the 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Montagu through the Cooke family, see the will of Lord Burghley's father-in-law, Sir Anthony Cooke (1505 – 11 June 1576), TNA PROB 11/59/110. It should be noted that before Southampton refused to marry Elizabeth Vere, *Venus and Adonis* was printed in 1593 by Richard Field at his printing house in the Blackfriars located next door to the house of Lord Burghley's sister-in-law, Elizabeth (nee Cooke) Hoby Russell. See Laoutaris, Chris, *Shakespeare and the Countess*, (London: Fig Tree, 2014), pp. 7, 221, 315.

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My very honourable good Lord, I understand by my servants Ireland and Doughty that according to your Lordship's last speech they have thoroughly acquainted your Lordship with my estate, and that now it pleaseth your Lordship partly to refer the further proceeding to my liking, either now or the next term to be consummated. How grateful the message was unto me I leave to your Lordship's censure, in which cause I pray your Lordship to consider my affection to that honourable Lady. The daunting of my unfriends, the gladding of my well-wishers, and the investing me in this estate whereunto Almighty God hath called me in which by so honourable a patron with my Lady and mistress to both our contentments and your Lordship's comfort God, the worker of all goodness, may send me a son, wherefore I wish your Lordship allowance of a present dispatch. Nevertheless I must and will be wholly directed by your Lordship in this and all other respects, and so humbly take my leave from my house at Cannon Row this 13<sup>th</sup> of September.

Your Lordship's assured friend to command,  
William Derby

Addressed: To the right honourable my very good Lord. the Lord Burghley, Lord Treasurer of England

Endorsed: 13 April 1594, Earl of Derby to my Lord