

SUMMARY: The document below is a letter dated 13 September 1594 from William Stanley (bap. 1561, d. 1642), 6th 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), 4th Earl of Derby, died on 25 September 1593, and in the following year his brother, Ferdinando Stanley (1559?–1594), 5th 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 5th 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 2nd 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.

There had been earlier negotiations for a marriage between Elizabeth Vere and Henry Wriothesley (1573-1624), 3rd Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare dedicated *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. However these negotiations came to an end in 1594 when Southampton reached the age of minority and declined to go through with the marriage.

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 13th 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