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Was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, the "E.K." of Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*? [Part 1 of 7]

Scholars have never satisfactorily identified the mysterious individual -- known only as E.K. -- who collaborated with Spenser on *The Shepherd's Calendar* of 1579 and was the author of a lost commentary on Spenser's *Dreames*. The suggestion that E.K. was Edward Kirke (1553-1613), a Cambridge contemporary of Spenser's, "seems to go nowhere through lack of information" (Oram 6). An alternative suggestion, that E.K. was Spenser's friend, Gabriel Harvey, is incompatible with Harvey's style, which "is more ponderous and a good deal less effective than any of E.K.'s arguments or notes" (Johnson 26). A third theory, that E.K. is a "Spenser persona", is ingeniously supported by the suggestion that the initials E.K. stand for Edmundus Kedemon, a translation of Spenser's name into Greek (Johnson 26; Oram 6; Waldman 21-8). However, "E.K.'s emphases suggest a textual presence distinct from Spenser's (Hamilton 231; McLane 280-5).

The question of E.K.'s identity is often discussed as though no evidence exists apart from the initials themselves and the information about E.K.'s academic and poetic pursuits revealed in the pages of *The Shepherd's Calendar*. However, this assumption ignores Spenser's own references to E.K. in two letters to Gabriel Harvey. The first of these letters was written on October 15 and 16, 1579. Portions of four successive paragraphs are quoted below, illustrating the context in which Spenser's reference to E.K. appears:

Your desire to heare of my late beeing with hir Majestie, muste dye in it selfe. As for the two worthy Gentlemen, Master Sidney and Master Dyer, they have me, I thanke them, in some use of familiarity: of whom, and to whome, what speache passeth for youre credite and estimation, I leave your selfe to conceive . . .

Maister E.K. hartily desireth to be commended unto your Worshippe: of whome what accompte he maketh, your selfe shall hereafter perceive, by hys paynefull and dutifull verses of your selfe.

Thus much was written at Westminster yesternight: but comming this morning, beeyng the sixteenth of October, to Mystresse Kerkes, to have it delivered to the Carrier, I receyved youre letter, sente me the laste weeke: whereby I perceive you otherwhiles continue your old exercise of Versifying in English: whych glorie I had now thought shoulde have bene onely ours heere at London and the Court . . .

I will impart yours [Harvey's verses] to Maister Sidney and Maister Dyer at my nexte going to the Courte (Grosart 7-9).

The clues afforded by this letter are admittedly slender; however, they give rise to important inferences. The first two paragraphs, written "at Westminster yesternight" (i.e., on October 15), group together items of news from court. Spenser mentions his audience with the Queen, his growing intimacy with Sidney and Dyer (who are residing at Court) and E.K.'s greetings to Gabriel Harvey. The third and fourth paragraphs, written on October 16, after Spenser's visit to "Mystresse Kerkes", make it clear that Spenser expects to be at court again in the near future, at which time he promises to show Harvey's verses to Sidney and Dyer. Two important inferences arise from these comments. In the first place, the fact that Spenser conveys commendations from

E.K. to Harvey disposes unequivocally of the theories that E.K. was either Spenser himself, or Gabriel Harvey. Secondly, it can be inferred from Spenser's remarks that it was at court that he met with E.K.

Six months later, in a postscript to a letter written to Harvey from Westminster in April, 1580, Spenser again mentions E.K.:

I take best my *Dreames* shoulde come forth alone, being growen by meanes of the Glosse (running continually in maner of a Paraphrase) full as great as my *Calendar*. Therin be some things excellently, and many things wittily discoursed of E.K., and the pictures so singularly set forth, and purtrayed, as if Michael Angelo were there, he could (I think) nor amende the beste, nor reprehende the worst (Grosart 38; Hamilton 737).

Again, the clues to E.K.'s identity are slender. However, it can safely be inferred from the context of the letter that E.K. exercises considerable influence over the publication of Spenser's works. Spenser tells us that E.K. has prepared a lengthy gloss for the printed edition of the *Dreames*; in addition, it is seemingly E.K. who has arranged for the "pictures", the beauty of which seems to have come as a complete surprise to Spenser.

These two letters of Spenser's leave the reader with the impression that E.K. is a very singular individual. He is someone connected with the court. He is also someone with the knowledge, the leisure, and the financial means to provide glosses and appropriate illustrations for Spenser's published works. He is someone to whose critical judgment Spenser is prepared to yield in certain respects. Finally, and most curiously, he is someone who can only be mentioned -- even in personal letters from Spenser to Gabriel Harvey -- under the mask of the cryptic initials E.K. It is the hypothesis of this series of issues of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter* that this singular individual is Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

Before examining further evidence which supports the identification of Oxford as E.K., however, it is necessary to glance at the role played by E.K. in *The Shepheardes Calender*. In this regard, Johnson makes the interesting analogy that E.K.'s role is like

that of the "sly pilgrim Geoffrey" in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Johnson also suggests that E.K.'s role included the important task of shielding Spenser from the consequences of his use of topical satire:

Spenser's possible reasons for prefacing a serious poem with a comic prologue must remain as mysterious as E.K.'s actual identity, but we can guess at several reasons for the decision. First, E.K.'s jocular tone, pedantry, and carefree handling of Immerito's own metaphors are disarming. It may well be that Spenser felt certain that the eclogues glanced too sharply at the persons and issues of the late 1570's; if so, E.K. -- half clown, half capable exegete -- served to screen the author from political reprisals (Hamilton 231; Johnson 26, 30).

Johnson's comment seems particularly apposite with respect to the February and May eclogues. In the argument to the February eclogue, E.K. cautions that this eclogue is "rather morall and generall, then bent to any secrete or particular purpose" (Oram 39), thus forestalling the temptation to interpret the fable of the Oak and Briar in terms of current religious or political events. Similarly, in the argument to the May eclogue, E.K. states cavalierly that "under the persons of two shepherds, Piers and Palinodie, be represented two formes of pastoures or Ministers, or the protestant and the Catholique", whereas, in fact, the eclogue deals, not with the opposition of Protestant and Catholic views, but with the much more dangerous debate "between reforming and conservative factions of the Anglican church" (Cullen 41-9, 131; Oram 87). Thus, E.K.'s disingenuous interpretation throws dust in the eyes of those of his contemporaries who might be inclined to accuse Spenser of criticizing the church of which his sovereign was the head.

But E.K.'s role in *The Shepheardes Calender* is not limited to the task of protecting Spenser from the consequences of comment on dangerous political or religious issues. As Oram points out, "only about half of [*The Shepheardes Calender*] is poems" (5). In other words, fully half of the materials which make up the *Calender* -- the dedicatory epistle and general argument, the brief argument which prefaces each eclogue, and the extensive gloss which follows it -- are the work of E.K., who skilfully directs this disparate material toward a much more

comprehensive objective, that of launching a new poet.

In the dedicatory epistle, for example, E.K. tries to deflect the adverse criticism which he foresees will result from Spenser's experimental style. He devotes three pages to a defense of Spenser's use of archaic language, granting these ancient words to be "something hard", but justifying their use as an attempt to "garnish and beautifie" the English language. He concludes by likening those who would criticize this linguistic experiment to dogs in the manger "whose currish kind though cannot be kept from barking, yet I conne them thanke that they refrain from biting" (Oram 14-7). E.K.'s fear that Spenser's use of archaic language would be objected to was well-founded: even Philip Sidney, to whom Spenser dedicated the work, criticized this feature in his *Defence of Poesy*:

That same framing of his style to an old rustic language I dare not allow, since neither Theocritus in Greek, Virgil in Latin, nor Sannazaro in Italian did affect it. (Shepherd 133).

To further assist in rendering Spenser intelligible to the reader, E.K. also "thought good to take the paines" upon himself of preparing a gloss to each of the eclogues. According to E.K., these glosses serve both "for the exposition of old wordes and harder phrases" and as a means of drawing attention to Spenser's stylistic techniques ("forsomuch as I knew many excellent and proper devises both in wordes and matter would passe in the speedy course of reading, either as unknowen, or as not marked") (Oram 19). In a further effort to smooth a path for the new poet, E.K. emphasizes that *The Shepheardes Calender* is Spenser's first work, the "maydenhead" of his "Poetrie". In an attractive simile, he points out that poets have traditionally written eclogues "at the first to trye their habilities: and as young birdes, that be newly crept out of the nest, by little first to prove theyr tender wyngs, before they make a greater flight" (Oram 18). Thus, suggests E.K., allowances for Spenser's poetic inexperience are to be made. E.K. also undertakes to explain to the reader the underlying structure of *The Shepheardes Calender*, stating that the twelve eclogues, "every where answer-

ing to the seasons of the twelve monthes", can be divided into "three formes or ranckes", plaintive, recreative and moral (Oram 22-3). As Cullen, Johnson and others have shown, E.K.'s deceptively simple statement affords a key to the unity and design of the entire work (Cullen 120-147; Johnson 37-44). Finally, in a disarming display of erudition, E.K. clears away one remaining obstacle to the Elizabethan reader's appreciation of *The Shepheardes Calender*: Spenser has made January the starting-point of the calendar year (which, for the Elizabethans, began on March 25), and E.K. provides arguments justifying Spenser's unorthodox choice (Oram 23-5).

From the foregoing, it is clear that E.K. was someone who understood exactly what Spenser was attempting to do, and who facilitated the introduction of Spenser's fledgling work by serving as an interpreter between the poet and his readers. This is a task which very few of Spenser's contemporaries were equipped to undertake, and a task which Spenser himself would have entrusted only to someone whose judgment he trusted implicitly. The question then becomes whether that person -- the individual known as E.K. -- was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

The remaining articles in this series will examine evidence in support of the foregoing hypothesis under the following headings:

1. Spenser's dedicatory sonnet to Oxford in *The Faerie Queen*, and Oxford's commendatory poem published under the pseudonym "Ignoto".
2. Spenser's kinship with the family of Sir John Spencer of Althorpe, and Oxford's relationship with the members of that family.
3. Oxford's relationship with Gabriel Harvey.
4. Oxford's relationship with Sir Philip Sidney.
5. The similarity between Oxford's intellectual pursuits, and those of E.K.
6. The similarity between Oxford's prose style, and that of E.K.

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