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Was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, the "E.K." of Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*? [Part 2 of 7]

Internal evidence in *The Shepherd's Calendar* makes it clear that Spenser and his collaborator, E.K., enjoyed a friendship based on shared literary interests. If E.K. is Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, any surviving evidence of a friendship between Spenser and Oxford should contain the suggestion that it, too, was based on shared literary interests.

Interestingly, evidence of a friendship of precisely this sort is found in Spenser's dedicatory sonnet to Oxford in the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queen*:

To the right Honourable the Earle of Oxenford, Lord high Chamberlayne of England, &c.

Receive most Noble Lord in gentle gree,
The unripe fruit of an unready wit:
Which by thy countenance doth crave to bee
Defended from foule Envijs poisonous bit.
Which so to doe may thee right well befit,
Sith th' antique glory of thine auncestry
Under a shady vele is therein writ,
And eke thine owne long living memory,
Succeeding them in true nobility:
And also for the love, which thou doest beare
To th' Heliconian ymps and they to thee,
They unto thee, and thou to them most deare:
Deare as thou art unto thy selfe, so love
That loves and honours thee, as doth behove (Greenlaw 191).

Spenser's sonnet to Oxford is one of the original series of ten sonnets -- dedicated to Hatton, Essex, Oxford, Northumberland, Ormond, Howard, Grey, Raleigh, Lady Carew, and the Ladies of the Court -- which appeared in the first edition of *The Faerie*

Queen. (Subsequently, the sonnets to Lady Carew and the Ladies of the Court were dropped, and seven new sonnets added, to make a total of fifteen) (Hamilton 259, 292-3).

Several of these dedicatory sonnets, including those dedicated to Essex, to Lady Carew, and to "the gracious and beautifull Ladies in the Court", are merely exercises in graceful compliment. In others, however, Spenser singles out for praise specific achievements or qualities of the dedicatees. Thus, he draws attention to Lord Howard's victory over the Spanish Armada, and to Sir Christopher Hatton's "counsel" and "policy". Similarly, the sonnets dedicated to the Earl of Ormond and to Arthur, Lord Grey of Wilton, acknowledge their patronage of literature (Greenlaw 190, 193-194). In only two of the original ten sonnets, however, does Spenser refer to the recipients as persons directly connected to literature: Sir Walter Raleigh is "the sommers nightingale" (Greenlaw 196), and the Earl of Oxford bears love to the "Heliconian ymps" and is "most deare" to them.

According to Spenser, Raleigh is better qualified to write in praise of Queen Elizabeth than he; nonetheless, he begs his indulgence for his "rusticke Madrigale" in "faire Cinthias" praise (Greenlaw 196). In his sonnet to Oxford, however, Spenser eschews comparisons as to who can best write in praise of the Queen, and makes three points which establish a direct connection between Oxford and *The Faerie Queen*:

(1) Spenser begins with the statement that he is re-

lying on the Earl's protection for his new work:

Which by thy countenance doth crave to bee
Defended from foule Envies poisonous bit.

(2) Spenser then points out two reasons why it "right well befits" Oxford to countenance and protect *The Faerie Queen*: firstly, the poem memorializes the de Veres and, more particularly, Oxford himself:

Which so to doe may thee right well befit,
Sith th' antique glory of thine auncestry
Under a shady vele is therein writ
And eke thine owne long living memory
Succeeding them in true nobility.

Secondly, it is fitting that Oxford should champion *The Faerie Queen* because of his love for poets ("th' Heliconian ymps"), and theirs for him. Poets are "most deare" to Oxford, and he is "most deare" to them:

And also for the love, which thou doest beare
To th' Heliconian ymps and they to thee,
They unto thee, and thou to them most deare:

(3) In the closing couplet, Spenser states that, as it behoves them to do, poets love and honour Oxford as dearly as Oxford loves himself:

Deare as thou art unto thy selfe, so love
That loves and honours thee, as doth behove.

Thus, the theme of this extraordinary sonnet is Spenser's reliance on Oxford's protection for *The Faerie Queen* because of its memorialization of the de Veres and because of the mutual love and honour which Oxford bears to poets and they to him.

Given the manner in which Spenser has personalized the relationship between Oxford and *The Faerie Queen* in this sonnet, it is not unreasonable to expect that Oxford would have reciprocated by writing a poem in praise of Spenser's brilliant new work. If a poem of this sort has survived, it would seem logical to search for it among the commendatory verses printed in the first edition of *The Faerie Queen*.

Unfortunately, all seven commendatory poems in the

first edition are signed with initials or pseudonyms, making identification of the authors problematic. However, one poem among the seven is signed with a pseudonym (Ignoto) which was first claimed for Oxford over 70 years ago (Miller 548-9).

To looke upon a worke of rare devise
The which a workman setteth out to view,
And not to yield it the deserved prise
That unto such a workmanship is dew,
Doth either prove the judgement to be naught,
Or els doth shew a mind with envy fraught.

To labour to commend a peece of work
Which no man goes about to discommend,
Would raise a jealous doubt that there did lurke,
Some secret doubt, whereto the prayse did tend.
For when men know the goodnes of the wyne,
'Tis needlesse for the hoast to have a sygne.

Thus then to shew my judgement to be such
As can discerne of colours blacke, and white,
As alls to free my minde from envies tuch,
That never gives to any man his right,
I here pronounce this workmanship is such,
As that no pen can set it forth too much.

And thus I hang a garland at the dore,
Not for to shew the goodnes of the ware:
But such hath beene the custome heretofore,
And customes very hardly broken are.
And when your tast shall tell you this is trew,
Then looke you give your hoast his utmost dew.

Ignoto (Greenlaw 189).

Ignoto's verses in praise of Spenser and *The Faerie Queen* are remarkable for their graceful elegance and simplicity, and for the absence of the extravagant praise of Queen Elizabeth which marks a number of the other commendatory verses.

If the Ignoto poem was indeed written by Oxford, then Spenser's dedicatory sonnet and Ignoto's commendatory verses represent an exchange of sincere compliment of a very high order. Spenser claims that he has written of the "antique glory" of the de Veres and of Oxford himself in *The Faerie Queen*, and praises Oxford as one beloved of poets. Oxford, in turn, reciprocates with verses which pay Spenser and *The Faerie Queen* the ultimate compliment:

I here pronounce this workmanship is such
As that no pen can set it forth too much.

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