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Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write the Elizabethan play *The Scottish history of James the fourth, slaine at Flodden*?

The evidence for Oxford's authorship of this entirely unhistorical "history" can be summarized under the following headings:

1. The doubtful nature of the attribution of the play to Robert Greene.
2. Oxford as a model for the character "Bohan".
3. The play's source in the *Ecatommiti* and *Arrenopia* of Giambattista Giraldi.

1. The doubtful nature of the attribution of the play to Robert Greene.

Robert Greene died in 1592, without leaving any record of having written *James the Fourth*. On May 14, 1594, the following entries appeared in the Register of the Stationers' Company:

Entred for his copie under thand of master Cawood warden/ a booke intituled/. The famous victories of henrye the ffyft/ conteyninge the honorable battell of Agincourt/ . . .

Entred unto him by the like warrant a booke intituled the Scottishe story of James the ffourthe slayne at Fflodden intermixed with a plesant Comedie presented by Oboron kinge of ffayres . . . (Malone Society v)

There is in these entries no mention of Greene's authorship. Then, in 1598, six years after Greene's death, appeared the first editions of both *James the Fourth* and the *Famous Victories*, the former bearing Greene's name and motto on the title page.

The attribution to Greene on the title page is in itself perhaps somewhat equivocal in that the words "Written by Robert Greene" are used, rather than the words "By Robert Greene". A literal interpretation should perhaps be given to the suggestion of the editors of the Malone Society Reprints that "the manuscript may have been in some manner prepared for press [by Greene] before his death in 1592" (Malone Society, vi). The play bears obvious signs of revision: for example, the same character is sometimes referred to by two different names. Thus, the manuscript used by the printer may have been a revision in Greene's hand, even though the original play was not of his composition.

As the foregoing discussion indicates, the evidence of Greene's authorship rests solely on an attribution made six years after his death. This can hardly be accepted by scholars as conclusive, if only because of the parallel example offered by the apocryphal plays of Shakespeare. Several of the latter are clearly attributed to Shakespeare by name on the title page, but are everywhere rejected by scholars as being of Shakespeare's authorship.

2. Oxford as a model for the character "Bohan".

James the Fourth opens with a comic dialogue between Oberon, the King of Fairies, and Bohan, a Scot. Bohan is strangely attired ("like a ridstall man") and dwells in a tomb. After some preliminary skirmishing, the following dialogue ensues:

Ober. Nay first tell me what thou wast from thy birth, what thou hast past hitherto, why thou dwellest in a Tombe,

& leavest the world? and then I will release thee of these bonds, before not.

Boh. And not before, then needs must needs fal: I was borne a gentleman of the best bloud in all *Scotland*, except the king, when time brought me to age, and death tooke my parents, I became a Courtier, where though ay list not praise my selfe, ay engraved the memory of *Boughon* on the skin-coate of some of them, and reveld with the proudest.

Ober. But why living in such reputation, didst thou leave to be a Courtier?

Boh. Because my pride was vanitie, my expence losse, my reward faire words and large promises, & my hopes spilt, for that after many yeares service, one outran me, and what the deele should I then do there. No no, flattering knaves that can cog and prate fastest, speede best in the Court.

Ober. To what life didst thou then betake thee?

Boh. I then chang'd the Court for the countrey, and the wars for a wife: but I found the craft of swaines more vile, then the knavery of courtiers; the charge of children more heavie then servants, and wives tongues worse then the warres it selfe: and therefore I gave ore that, & went to the Citie to dwell, & there I kept a great house with smal cheer, but all was nere the neere.

Ober. And why?

Boh. Because in seeking friends, I found table guests to eate me, & my meat, my wives gossops to bewray the secrets of my heart, kindred to betray the effect of my life, which when I noted, the court ill, the country worse, and the citie worst of all, in good time my wife died: ay woud she had died twentie winter sooner by the masse, leaving my two sonnes to the world, and shutting my selfe into this Tombe, where if I dye, I am sure to be safe from wilde beasts, but whilest I live, cannot be free from ill companie. Besides, now I am sure gif [sic] all my friends faile me, I s[h]all have a grave of mine owne providing: this is all. Now what art thou?

Apart from the two sons (Oxford had three daughters), the details are a summary of Oxford's life to 1588, when his wife Anne died. The bitter humour also accords well with his probable mood in the years 1589-91 when, his financial resources almost exhausted, he seems to have retreated into a sort of self-imposed exile.

It is also perhaps not without significance that one of Oxford's ancestors had married into the Bohun family. John de Vere (eldest son and heir presumptive of John, Earl of Oxford, who fought at Crecy and Poitiers) married, in 1341, Elizabeth Courtney, whose mother, Margaret Bohun, was a granddaughter of Edward I (Cokayne 225).

Thus, Oxford seems clearly to be the model for the

character Bohan, even apart from the question of Oxford's authorship of the play.

3. The play's source in the *Ecatommiti* and *Arrenopia* of Giambattista Giraldi.

As the editors of the Malone Society Reprint edition of *James the Fourth* point out, the play is completely unhistorical. Its acknowledged source is the third novel of the third day of Giraldi's *Ecatommiti*, a story on which he later based his play *Arrenopia* (vi). Giraldi, known to the Elizabethans as Cinthio, was an Italian novelist, playwright and dramatic theorist who lived 1504-1573 (Wilkins, 251-2).

Giraldi's work was not readily available to the Elizabethans. Orr, in his *Italian Renaissance drama in England before 1625*, highlights the extreme difficulty of accounting for the influence of dramatists such as Giraldi, whose works are not known to have been available in England during this time, in translation or otherwise (1-14). The chief problem lies in identifying an intermediary who could have been responsible for introducing the work of Giraldi and other Italian dramatists into England. This difficulty at once disappears when it is hypothesized that it was Oxford who served as the intermediary between Italian and Elizabethan drama. Oxford travelled to Italy in 1575, could read and speak Italian fluently, and had a marked interest in literature and drama. There is thus no-one more likely to have introduced the source material of *James the Fourth* into England than Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

It can thus be hypothesized that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was the author of *James the Fourth* and the link between Italian and Elizabethan drama.

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