



# EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER No. 44

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## Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write the verses for Lady Derby's entertainment? [Part 4 of 4]

At some time in the early 1600's, perhaps in 1607, John Marston wrote a masque to mark the occasion of the visit of Alice Spencer, Lady Derby, to her daughter's home at Ashby (*The noble lord and lady Huntingdon's entertainment of their right noble mother Alice, Countess dowager of Derby, the first night of her honour's arrival at the house of Ashby*) (Knowles 472).

Both Knowles and Levi are of the view that the verses to Lady Derby and her guests pasted into the back of a presentation copy of the Ashby entertainment were written specifically for the Ashby entertainment itself. Levi has also contended that Shakespeare was the author of the verses in question, and that he came to write them through his association with Marston.

However, this hypothesis appears to be flawed in several respects. As I.A Shapiro has suggested, it is quite possible that the verses were originally a single loose sheet which was pasted into the Ashby entertainment presentation copy, not in Marston's day, but in the nineteenth century (*TLS*, 529). Prior to the nineteenth century, the sheet containing the verses may have been an entirely separate document. Moreover, as was pointed out in issues #42-3 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*, the presence of Lady Compton's name indicates that the verses for Lady Derby and her guests had to have been written before 1604, when Lady Compton married Lord

Buckhurst. If the Ashby entertainment took place in 1607, as Knowles has suggested, it took place at a time when Lady Compton would have been styled Lady Buckhurst. It seems beyond dispute that verses in which she is styled Lady Compton cannot have been part of the Ashby entertainment.

Once Marston's Ashby entertainment, and the verses to Lady Derby and her guests, are seen as separate documents belonging to separate occasions, there appears to be no basis for Levi's hypothesis that Shakespeare wrote the verses because of his association with Marston. And, in any event, Marston was more closely connected to others who might have been involved with Lady Derby's various entertainments than he was to Shakespeare.

The playwright John Marston (1575?-1634) was descended from the Shropshire branch of an old Lincolnshire family. He traced his descent from one John Marston, who had four sons, Sir John, Richard, Thomas and Henry. Thomas Marston, who fought at Agincourt, was the ancestor of the playwright's branch of the family, while another son, Richard Marston, was the ancestor of Ursula Marston, mother of the translator Arthur Golding and step-mother of Margery Golding, mother of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (*DNB*, 1141; Golding 14-5, 227; Grazebrook 349-53). These family connections suggest the possibility that Marston might originally have been introduced to Lady Derby and her circle by Oxford.

The issue of the authorship of the verses for Lady Derby and her guests can, however, probably be re-

solved apart from any considerations involving John Marston. The most likely hypothesis with respect to their authorship is that the verses were written by William Skipwith since they bear the initials "W. Sk." (and not "W. Sh.", as has been claimed by both Collier and Levi) (Knowles 485; *TLS*, 529, 647).

Ward, B.M. *The seventeenth Earl of Oxford 1550-1604 from contemporary documents*. London: John Murray, 1928.

However, should it turn out that Skipwith was not the author, it is remotely possible that the verses were written by Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. In the first place, Edward de Vere was recognized by his contemporaries as a poet (Ward 255). Secondly, he was related -- through his first wife Anne Cecil; his second wife, Elizabeth Trentham; and his daughter, Elizabeth de Vere -- to a number of the ladies present at Lady Derby's entertainment. If the verses were written to mark a family celebration, Edward de Vere might well have been prevailed upon to write them. Thirdly, as has been noted, the manuscript verses were found "gummed" or "sealed" into the back of Lady Derby's presentation copy of Marston's Entertainment at Ashby (Knowles 472, 485), and, as mentioned above, John Marston was a distant family connection of Oxford's.

To summarize, the verses for Lady Derby's entertainment relate to members of a family circle to which Edward de Vere was closely linked. That Edward de Vere might have written the verses as a gesture of courtesy to assist the Derby and Hastings families in marking some special celebratory occasion is a possibility. However, it seems far more likely that the verses were, in fact, written by William Skipwith.

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