



EDWARD DE VERE NEWSLETTER NO. 1

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Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write the Elizabethan comedy known as *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*?

A number of internal clues in the play point to his authorship.

Unquestionably, the play was written by someone with first-hand knowledge of its locale. References are made to Cambridge University, for example, in a way that suggests that the author was a student there, while the principal action of the play takes place in an area about fifteen miles north of London centered on Waltham, Cheshunt Nunnery, Enfield and Enfield Chase. The author's knowledge of the topography of this area is detailed, as when he refers to the two inns at Waltham, the porch of the church at Enfield, and specific hunting lodges, landmarks and gamekeeper's walks within Enfield Chase, such as "Brian's upper lodge", "Cony ocke", "Potters gate", "Brian's walke", etc.

A striking feature of the play which affords a clue to its date of composition is the host Blague's constant refrain that he "serve[s] the good Duke of Norfolk". This points to the play's having been written before 1572. Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower in October, 1569. In the following year, he was released to house arrest, then recommitted to the Tower. Tried and condemned to death for treason in January, 1572, he was executed in June of that year. Given this chain of events, and Queen Elizabeth's agonized vacillation for five months over the carrying out of the death sentence, it is highly un-

likely that *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* was written after 1572. Moreover, Blague's refrain would have been totally inappropriate to a play written after 1572 for a further reason: there was no Duke of Norfolk after 1572. The title lapsed with the death of Thomas Howard.

Another minor point which supports a date of composition prior to 1572 is the fact that one of the play's central characters bears the surname of Jerningham. In May, 1570, one John Jerningham took part in an insurrection in Norfolk aimed at freeing the Duke of Norfolk from the Tower. For their part in this incident, Jerningham and three others were condemned to death in August, 1570 (Peck 246). Although Jerningham was pardoned in June, 1571, the difficulties in which he found himself from 1570 onward would have made it unwise for an author to have linked the Jerningham name, after that time, with a play openly favouring the Duke of Norfolk.

A further clue to the play's authorship is its overall tone. The play is very much a young man's play, celebrating the themes of true love and male friendship, and filled with youthful high spirits. The three young friends in the play — Henry Clare, Raymond Mouchensey, and Frank Jerningham — appear to be Cambridge students (the Cambridge scholar Peter Fabell is said to be Raymond Mouchensey's tutor). An interesting sidelight, which exemplifies the play's youthful high spirits, is the fact that Scene ii of Act IV of the play is a dramatization of the tale of the miller that stole the nuts and the tailor that stole the sheep, the eighteenth tale in the Elizabethan jest book known as *The Hundred Merry Tales*.

How do these internal clues point to Edward de Vere as the author of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*? Briefly, as follows:

1. Edward de Vere, born in 1550, was a student at Cambridge in the 1560's, receiving a degree from that university in 1564.
2. Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, was his first cousin. Oxford and Norfolk appear to have been good friends. No other playwright of the Elizabethan period would have been as likely to have written a play praising "the good Duke of Norfolk".
3. From the age of twelve, Edward de Vere, as a ward of Queen Elizabeth, lived with William Cecil, Lord Burghley, whose famous mansion of Theobalds was at Cheshunt. Cecil acquired the original manor house in 1563, and in 1570 added to the grounds by purchasing Cheshunt Park, which had presumably formed a part of the property of Cheshunt Nunnery prior to its dissolution in 1539 (Timbs 189). During the years of his association with Lord Burghley, Edward de Vere can be expected to have visited Theobalds frequently and thus to have been intimately familiar with the locale in which the play is set.

4. In his own day, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, was acclaimed, in both the anonymous *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), and in Francis Meres' *Palladis Tamia* (1598), as one of the best writers of comedy:

And in her Maiesties time that now is are sprong up an other crew of Courtly makers Noble men and Gentlemen of her Maiesties owne servauntes, who have written excellently well as it would appeare if their doings could be found out and made publicke with the rest, of which number is first that noble Gentleman Edward Earle of Oxforde . . .

. . . for Tragedie, the Lord of Buckhurst, & Maister Edward Ferrys for such doings as I have sene of theirs do deserve the hiest price: Th'Earle of Oxforde and Maister Edwardes of her Maiesties Chappell for Comedy and Enterlude (Willcock 61, 63).

. . . the best for Comedy amongst us bee, Edward Earle of Oxforde, Doctor Gager of Oxforde, Maister Rowley once a rare Scholler of learned Pembroke Hall in Cambridge, Maister Edwardes one of her Maiesties

Chappell, eloquent and wittie Iohn Lilly, Lodge, Gascoyne, Greene, Shakespeare, Thomas Nash, Thomas Heywood, Anthony Mundaye our best plotter, Chapman, Porter, Wilson, Hathway, and Henry Chettle (Allen 78-9).

It seems not unreasonable to suppose that some of Oxford's comedies have survived, though perhaps not under his name.

Although the foregoing evidence is not conclusive, it suggests that a more thorough investigation of Edward de Vere's possible authorship of *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* could profitably be undertaken.

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Locale of the Play

