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Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, known to his contemporaries as "one of the best for comedy", write the Elizabethan comedy entitled *The Puritan; or The Widow of Watling Street*?

Topical references in *The Puritan* point to Oxford as its author, and indicate that the play was probably written in the 1570's. These topical references include the following:

1. Part of the action takes place on Sunday, July 13th.

An important clue to the play's date of composition is found in Act III Scene v when George Pieboard, turning over the pages of an almanac, mentions that the previous Sunday was July 13th. During the years 1560-1606, July 13th fell on a Sunday only seven times — in 1567, 1572, 1578, 1589, 1595, 1600, 1606 (Cheney 84-153). The specific mention by Pieboard of Sunday, July 13th, renders it likely that *The Puritan* was written in one of these years.

2. Pieboard refers in Act III Scene v to Nicholas Saint-Tantlings as "a good knave, worth a hundred Brownists".

This reference is also of some help in dating the play. Robert Browne (c.1550 - c.1630), a relative of Lord Burghley's, was a Puritan preacher in England from 1572 to 1581. By 1581, however, he had become a radical religious separatist. In the summer of 1583, Elizabeth issued a proclamation against the "seditious, schismatical, and erroneous" printed works of Browne and his fellow separatist, Robert Harrison,

and two men who had circulated these writings were hanged (Watts 27-33). Browne himself was arrested in 1585 and excommunicated. His excommunication seems to have been a turning-point. Shortly thereafter, he abandoned his radicalism, was reconciled to the established Church, and spent most of the balance of his life as rector in a Northamptonshire parish.

Although the term "Brownists" continued in use for many years after Browne had ceased to be associated with his followers, the jocular tone of the reference in *The Puritan* seems to accord more with the period prior to 1581, when Browne's radicalism had not yet been termed seditious by the authorities.

3. In Act III Scene iv, the Gentleman claims to have paid Pieboard in "Britain Gold of the last coining".

The only reform of the coinage during Queen Elizabeth's reign took place in 1561, under the direction of William Cecil (Bindoff 199). This reference thus tends to argue for an earlier, rather than a later, date for *The Puritan*, when the memory of the revaluation of the currency might still have been somewhat topical.

4. In Act I Scene ii, it is said that Peter Skirmish is an unemployed soldier as a result of the "cessure of the wars", and that "War sits now, like a Justice of Peace, and does nothing".

These references seem to accord with the historical situation in England from Elizabeth's accession to

the mid-1580's, a relatively peaceful period. In August, 1585, however, Elizabeth took the Dutch under her protection by the Treaty of Nonsuch, and entered into a nineteen-year conflict with the King of Spain (Wernham ix, 559). During this latter period, a reference to "the cessure of the wars", or a statement that "War sits now, like a Justice of Peace, and does nothing" would have been unlikely.

5. The use of archaic language.

Heaven points out that a number of words used in the play were obsolete, or nearly so, by the time of its publication in 1607 (123). The use of words such as "farder" and "nim" thus argues for an earlier, rather than a later, date of composition.

6. The reference to Stow's Chronicle.

In Act IV Scene iii, the Sheriff says that Pieboard's claim to be able to "recover a dead man" is "worthy Stow's Chronicle". Stow published *A Summarie of Englyshe Chronicles* in 1565; it proved popular, and by 1580 had been reprinted many times. Then, in 1580, Stow published another "chronicle" entitled *The Chronicles of England*, so that, from 1580 on, there were two "chronicles" by Stow. The reference in *The Puritan*, however, indicates that there was only one "chronicle" in existence at the time of the writing of the play, thus arguing for a date of composition prior to 1580.

7. The reference to Coome Park in Act IV Scene ii.

This reference associates the play with Oxford through his father-in-law, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who in 1552 was granted a lease for twenty-one years of "the farm of Combe Nevell, alias Combe park, county Surrey, parcel of Somerset's lands" (CSP, 40).

Taken together, this matrix of topical references in the play argues for its having been written by Oxford in the 1570's. If so, it would have been written either in 1572 or 1578, one of the two years in that decade in which July 13th fell on a Sunday.

There are a number of facts which are suggestive of Oxford's authorship of the play. Born in 1550, Oxford was a relatively young man in the 1570's, which is clearly the case, also, with the author of the play, judging by its high-spirited tone. The Earls of Oxford had a house at London Stone, very near the play's Watling Street setting. According to Stow, this house had a 'fair garden belonging thereunto' (201), as does the house in the play. As Lord Burghley's son-in-law, Oxford would have known of Burghley's responsibility for the revaluation of England's coinage in 1561, his lease of Combe Park, and his relationship to Robert Browne. One of Oxford's keenest interests was history, and no-one is more likely than he to have made a passing reference to something being "worthy [of] Stow's Chronicle". It is also worth noting that the gallery of the Gentleman's house in Act III Scene iv is well-furnished with maps, as Oxford's must have been in view of his known interest in voyages of trade and exploration. Oxford was also trained in the law, and the play's legal references to habeus corpus, conveyances, certiorari, and the Act of 33 Henry VIII against conjurers and witches are thus in keeping with the suggestion of his authorship. Finally, the play contains a few terms (quadrangle, battels) which connect the author specifically to Oxford University (Heaven 116-7), where Oxford was awarded an M.A. in 1566.

In conclusion, it would seem that the hypothesis of Oxford's authorship of *The Puritan* merits consideration.

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