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Did Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, have a youthful love affair which was in some way thwarted?

Two of Oxford's poems, as well as autobiographical material from two plays of the Elizabethan period, indicate that this might well have been the case.

The first of the poems in question ("What cunning can express") was published over the initials "E.O." in *The Phoenix Nest* in 1593, when Oxford was forty-three years of age, and later in 1600 in *England's Helicon* (May 14). However, it was undoubtedly written much earlier than 1593: virtually all of Oxford's signed poems are youthful work, approximately half of them having been written before he was sixteen years of age (see issue #18 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*).

The poem expresses the sentiments of a young man dazzled by the beauty of a young woman with whom he is in love:

What cunning can express
The favour of her face
To whom in this distress
I do appeal for grace?
A thousand Cupids fly
About her gentle eye.

From whence each throws a dart
That kindleth soft sweet fire
Within my sighing heart
Possessed by desire;
No sweeter life I try
Than in her love to die.

The lilies in the field
That glories in his white

For pureness now must yield
And render up his right;
Heaven pictured in her face
Doth promise joy and grace.

Fair Cynthia's silver light
That beats on running streams
Compares not with her white,
Whose hairs are all sunbeams;
Her virtues so do shine
As day unto mine eyne.

With this there is a red
Exceeds the damask rose
Which in her cheeks is spread
Whence every favour grows;
In sky there is no star
That she surmounts not far.

When Phoebus from the bed
Of Thetis doth arise,
The morning blushing red
In fair carnation wise,
He shows it in her face
As queen of every grace.

This pleasant lily white,
This taint of roseate red,
This Cynthia's silver light,
This sweet fair Dea spread,
These sunbeams in my eye,
These beauties make me die (May 35-6).

When one considers the women in Oxford's life -- his first wife, Anne Cecil, his mistress Anne Vavasour, and his second wife Elizabeth Trentham -- it appears unlikely that any of these women is the young beauty of the poem. The available evidence strongly suggests that Oxford was never deeply in love with Anne Cecil. He was, at one time, infatuated with his mistress Anne Vavasour, but her hair was dark, whereas the young woman in the poem is

fair-haired ("Whose hairs are all sunbeams"). Very little is known of Elizabeth Trentham; however, Oxford married her in 1591 (Ogburn 780), when he was forty-one years of age, and the tone of "What cunning can express" suggests that the author is young and impressionable.

There thus appears to have been another woman in Oxford's life with whom, as a young man, he was deeply in love. Why, then, did he not marry her, rather than Anne Cecil?

The answer is that the marriage of the Earl of Oxford, a royal ward, was in the hands of his legal guardian, Queen Elizabeth. He was not able to choose for himself and, although in the end he may have found it politic to marry Anne Cecil, he may have done so only after having been denied the opportunity to marry the woman of his choice.

Another of Oxford's poems, "Sitting alone upon my thought in melancholy mood", offers a measure of support for this hypothesis. This poem or song is found in several manuscripts, one of which has a note in the hand of Sir John Harington (c.1561-1612): "The best verse that ever th'author made" "ffinis qd E. Veer. count d'oxford" (May 79). Several of the manuscripts connect the woman in the poem with Anne Vavasour. However, there is no mention in the poem itself of Anne Vavasour, and the attribution may have been made by persons who knew of Oxford's love affair with Anne in 1580, and who therefore assumed that the verses referred to her. However, the attitude of the young woman in the poem seems quite out of character for Anne Vavasour. In addition, the faults of "Vere" in the poem are put down to his "youth", which would have been incongruous if the poem had been written at the time of Oxford's affair with Anne in 1580, when he was thirty years of age.

The verses read as follows:

Sitting alone upon my thought in melancholy mood,
In sight of sea and at my back an ancient, hoary wood,
I saw a fair young lady come her secret tears to wail,
Clad all in colour of a vow and covered with a veil.
Yet for the day was clear and calm I might discern her face

As one might see a damask rose though hid with crystal glass;
Three times with her soft hand full hard upon her heart she knocks,
And sighed so sore as might have moved some mercy in the rocks;
From sighs and shedding amber tears into sweet song she brake,
And thus the echo answered her to every word she spake.
O heavens, quoth she, who was the first that bred in me this fever?
Vere
Who was the first that gave the wound whose scar I wear forever?
Vere
What tyrant, Cupid, to my harms usurps thy golden quiver?
Vere
What wight first caught this heart and can from bondage it deliver?
Vere
Yet who doth most adore this wight? O hollow caves, tell true;
You
What nymph deserves his liking best, yet doth in sorrow rue?
You
What makes him not regard goodwill with some remorse or ruth?
Youth
What makes him shew besides his birth such pride and such untruth?
Youth
May I his beauty match with love if he my love will try?
Aye
May I requite his birth with faith? Then faithful will I die.
Aye
And I, that knew this lady well, said, Lord, how great a miracle
To hear the echo tell her truth as 'twere Apollo's oracle (May 38-9).

The poem suggests that "Vere" is of much higher birth than the young lady, and that he has betrayed their love ("such untruth"), which could well have been the case if Oxford had made promises which he later broke when he discovered that his marriage was not within his own control.

The story sketched thus far is an interesting parallel to the stories of broken marriage vows in *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, and *Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*. The story told in the latter, in particular, is of considerable significance in this regard. As shown in issue #21 of the *Edward De Vere Newsletter*, the tale of the young man who enters into a marriage contract with the daughter of a country gentleman, which he then breaks in order to marry his guardian's niece, has no factual relationship to the life of Walter Calverley, the putative protagonist of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*. However, the story is told with such detail and conviction that it seems only reasonable to suppose that it has a factual basis in relation to someone. If, as has been suggested, Oxford is the author of *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, and if these plays are autobiographical, the story of the broken marriage contract is the

story of Oxford's own thwarted early love.

One other beautiful and poignant poem dating from this period which may well be of Oxford's authorship should perhaps be mentioned in this connection. Its author is unknown, although Bond tentatively assigns it to John Lyly, secretary to Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. The poem -- a sonnet in Shakespearean form -- appears to be based on the same broken marriage contract theme as *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage, A Yorkshire Tragedy, Two Most Unnaturall and Bloodie Murthers*, and the two afore-mentioned poems by Oxford:

A Gentlewoman that married a young gentleman who after forsook her, whereupon she took her needle, in which she was excellent, and worked upon her sampler thus.

Come give me needle, stitch cloth, silk and chair,
That I may sit and sigh and sew and sing
For perfect colours to describe the air,
A subtle, piercing, changing, constant thing.
No false stitch will I make, my heart is true;
Plain stitch my sampler is, for to complain
How men have tongues of honey, hearts of rue;
True tongues and hearts are one, men makes them twain.
Give me black silk, that sable suits my heart,
And yet some white, though white words do deceive;
No green at all, for youth and I must part,
Purple and blue, fast love and faith to weave.
Maiden no more, sleepless I'll go to bed;
Take all away, the work works in my head (Bond 473).

To return to the original question: Did Oxford have a youthful love affair which was in some way thwarted? The available evidence points to an affirmative answer. Oxford's poem "What cunning can express" indicates that he was, in his youth, deeply in love with a young woman. His poem "Sitting alone upon my thoughts in melancholy mood" suggests that he broke faith with her. If we accept Oxford's authorship of *The Miseries of Enforced Marriage*, the reason for the broken promise becomes clear: his guardian forbade the marriage, and forced him to wed elsewhere. The insensate fury of Lord Faulconbridge, Scarborough's guardian in the play, suggests that the guardian in question was Queen Elizabeth. Queen Elizabeth's rages, and her violent retaliatory actions when any of her courtiers or maids of honour contracted alliances without her knowledge, are well documented, and Lord

Faulconbridge's threats against Scarborough in the play ("Fell me his wood, make havocke, spoyle and wast/ Sir you shall know that you are Ward to me") would not be out of character for Queen Elizabeth. Thus, the evidence suggests that Oxford did have a youthful love affair, and that it was thwarted by his legal guardian, the Queen. Whether, four centuries later, the identity of the young woman in question can still be ascertained remains to be seen.

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