

SUMMARY: The speech below, likely written by Oxford himself, was spoken by his page at a tournament at Whitehall on 22 January 1581 in which Oxford took part as the Knight of the Tree of the Sun. The music which preceded the speech may also have been written by Oxford, who was known for his musical ability. The challengers in the tournament were Oxford's second cousin, Philip Howard (d.1595), Earl of Arundel, and Sir William Drury (1550-1590). The tournament prize was won by Oxford, who led a group of 16 defenders which included Philip Sidney and Oxford's nephew, Frederick (d.1585), 4th Lord Windsor. The speech given by Oxford's page was published in 1592 with a translation of the *Axiochus*. The title-page of the 1592 editions reads: 'Axiochus, a most excellent dialogue written in Greek by Plato the philosopher concerning the shortness and uncertainty of this life, with the contrary ends of the good and wicked. Translated out of Greek by Edw. Spenser. Hereto is annexed a sweet speech or oration spoken at the triumph at Whitehall before her Majesty by the page to the right noble Earl of Oxenford. At London, printed for Cuthbert Burby, and are to be sold at the middle shop in the Poultry under St. Mildred's Church. Anno 1592'. Burby had become free of the Stationers' on 13 January 1592, and had entered his first book on the Stationer's Register on 28 April 1592. The *Axiochus* was entered to him only three days later, on 1 May 1592 ('Cutberd Burbee. Entred for his Copie vnder the hande of master Watkins Axiochus of Plato . . . vjd'). However Burby printed few if any of the books which bear his name on their title-pages, and according to David Kathman, the *Axiochus* was printed by John Danter and John Charlwood. The unique copy of the original edition of 1592 is in the collection of the Pforzheimer Library at the University of Texas. According to Padelford, Spenser based his translation on the Latin text of a 1968 Latin-Greek edition by Rayanus Welsdalius, and the work was an early undertaking, likely preceding *The Shepherd's Calendar* (see Padelford, Frederick Morgan, *The Axiochus of Plato Translated by Edmund Spenser*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1934, pp. 17, 29). That a translation by Spenser which likely predated *The Shepherd's Calendar* was published in conjunction with a speech by Oxford's page dating from a tournament in early 1581 raises questions about how these two works came to be printed together in 1592. Padelford speculates that 'The Earl of Oxford himself, the patron of poets, whom Spenser had praised in one of the sonnets to noblemen annexed to the *Faerie Queene* "for the love which thou dost beare To th' Heliconian ymps," may have supplied the copy, which would perhaps explain the inclusion under the same cover, of the *Axiochus* and an address to the Queen by Oxford's page' (p.9). The unsigned dedication to the wealthy London merchant and alderman, Benedict Barnham (1559-1598), raises additional questions since the writer of the dedication speaks of his 'familiarity' with Barnham in 'your younger years', and says that he and Barnham were 'scholars together', yet there is no known connection between Barnham and either Spenser or Burby.

A SPEECH SPOKEN AT THE TRIUMPH BEFORE THE QUEEN'S MOST
EXCELLENT MAJESTY BY THE PAGE TO THE RIGHT NOBLE CHAMPION,
THE EARL OF OXFENFORD

By the tilt stood a stately tent of orange tawny taffeta curiously embroidered with silver, & pendants on the pinnacles very sightly to behold. From forth this tent came the noble Earl of Oxenford in rich gilt armour, and sat down under a great high bay-tree, the whole stock, branches, and leaves whereof were all gilded over, that nothing but gold could be discerned. By the tree stood twelve tilting staves, all which likewise were gilded clean over. After a solemn sound of most sweet music he mounted on his courser, very richly caparisoned, when his page, ascending the stairs where her Highness stood in the window, delivered to her by speech this oration following.

This knight (most fair and fortunate Princess) living of a long time in a grove where, every graft being green, he thought every root to be precious, found at the last as great diversity of troubles as of trees: the oak to be so stubborn that nothing could cause it to bend; the reed so shaking that every blast made it to bow; the juniper sweet, but too low for succour; the cypress fair, but without fruit; the walnut-tree to be as unwholesome to lie under as the bud of the fig-tree unpleasant to taste; the tree that bore the best fruit to be fullest of caterpillars, and all to be infected with worms; the ash for ravens to breed, the elm to build, the elder to be full of pith & no perfection, and all trees that were not fertile to be fit for fuel, and they that were fruitful but for the time to please the fancy. Which trying, he forsook the wood and lived awhile in the plain champian, where how he was tormented it were too long to tell, but let this suffice, that he was troubled when every mote fell in his eye in the day and every ant disquieted him in the night, where if the wind blew he had nothing to shield him but head and shoulders, if the sun blazed he could find the shadow of nothing but himself, when seeing himself so destitute of help, he became desperate of hope.

Thus wandering a weary way, he espied at the last a tree so beautiful that his eyes were dazzled with the brightness, which as he was going unto he met by good fortune a pilgrim or hermit, he knew not well, who being apparelled as though he were to travel into all countries, but so aged as though he were to live continually in a cave. Of this old sire he demanded what tree it was, who taking this knight by the hand began in these words both to utter the name and nature of the tree.

This tree, fair knight, is called the tree of the sun, whose nature is always to stand alone, not suffering a companion, being itself without comparison, of which kind there are no more in the earth than suns in the element. The world can hold but one phoenix, one Alexander, one sun-tree; in top, contrary to all trees, it is strongest, & so stately to behold that the more other shrubs shrink for duty, the higher it exalteth itself in majesty.

For as the clear beams of the sun cause all the stars to lose their light, so the brightness of this golden tree eclipseth the commendation of all other plants. The leaves of pure gold, the bark no worse, the buds pearls, the body chrysocola, the sap nectar, the root so noble as it springeth from two turquoises, both so perfect as neither can stain the other, each contending once for superiority, and now both constrained to be equals. Vesta's bird sitteth in the midst, whereat Cupid is ever drawing but dares not shoot, being amazed at that princely and perfect majesty.

The shadows hath as strange properties as contrarieties, cooling those that be hot with a temperate calm and heating those that be cold with a moderate warmth, not unlike that sun whereof it taketh the name, which melteth wax and hardeneth clay, or pure fire, which causeth the gold to shine and the straw to smother, or sweet perfumes, which feedeth the bee and killeth the beetle.

No poison cometh near it, or any vermin that hath a sting. Whoso goeth about to lop it lanceth himself, and the sun will not shine on that creature that casteth a false eye on that tree; no wind can so much as wag a leaf; it springeth in spite of Autumnus and continueth all the year as it were Ver.

If, sir knight, you demand what fruit it beareth, I answer, such as the elder it is, the younger it seemeth, always ripe, yet ever green. Virtue, sir knight, more nourishing to honest thoughts than the beauty delightful to amorous eyes, where the graces are as thick in virtue as the grapes are on the vine.

This fruit fatteth, but never feeds, wherewith this tree is so loaden as you cannot touch that place which virtue hath not tempered. If you enquire whether any grafts may be gotten, it were as much as to crave slips of the sun, or a mould to cast a new moon. To conclude, such a tree it is as he that hath longest known it can sooner marvel at it than describe it, for the further he wadeth in the praise, the shorter he cometh of the perfection.

This old man having ended, seeming to want words to express such worthiness, he went to his home and the knight to his sun-tree, where kissing the ground with humility, the princely tree seemed with [] to bid him welcome. But the more he gazed on the beauty, the less able he was to endure the brightness, like unto those that looking with a steadfast eye to behold the sun bring a dark dazzling over their sight.

At the last, resting under the shadow, he felt such content as nothing could be more comfortable. The days he spent in virtuous delights, the night slipped away in golden dreams; he was never annoyed with venomous enemies, nor disquieted with idle cogitations.

Insomuch that, finding all felicity in that shade and all security in that sun, he made a solemn vow to incorporate his heart into that tree and engraft his thoughts upon those virtues, swearing that as there is but one sun to shine over it, one root to give life unto it, one top to maintain majesty, so there should be but one knight either to live or die for the defence thereof.

Whereupon he swore himself only to be the knight of the tree of the sun, whose life should end before his loyalty.

Thus cloyed with content he fell into a sweet slumber, whose smiling countenance showed him void of all care. But his eyes were scarce closed when he seemed to see

diggers undermining the tree behind him, that the tree, suspecting the knight to give the diggers aid, might have punished him in her prison(?), but failing of their pretence, and seeing every blow they struck to light upon their own brains, they threatened him by violence whom they could not match in virtue.

But he clasping the tree as the only anchor of his trust, they could not so much as move him from his cause whom they determined to martyr without colour. Whereupon they made a challenge to win the tree by right, and to make it good by arms. At which saying the knight, being glad to have his truth tried with his valour, for joy awaked.

And now (most virtuous and excellent Princess) seeing such tumults towards for his tree, such an honourable presence to judge, such worthy knights to joust, I cannot tell whether his perplexity or his pleasure be the greater. But this he will avouch at all assays, himself to be the most loyal knight of the sun-tree, which whoso gainsayeth, he is here pressed either to make him recant it before he run, or repent it after, offering rather to die upon the points of a thousand lances than to yield a jot in constant loyalty.

FINIS

The speech being ended, with great honour he ran, and valiantly brake all the twelve staves. And after the finishing of the sports, both the rich bay-tree and the beautiful tent were by the standers-by torn and rent in more pieces than can be numbered.

Title-page of original 1592 edition: Axiochus, a most excellent dialogue written in Greek by Plato the philosopher concerning the shortness and uncertainty of this life, with the contrary ends of the good and wicked. Translated out of Greek by Edw. Spenser. Hereto is annexed a sweet speech or oration spoken at the triumph at Whitehall before her Majesty by the page to the right noble Earl of Oxenford. At London, printed for Cuthbert Burby, and are to be sold at the middle shop in the Poultry under St. Mildred's Church. Anno 1592.