

The Lame Storyteller, Poor and Despised

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This article discusses several items discovered by Professor Alan H. Nelson of the University of California, Berkeley in his ongoing examination and transcription of all documents written by or directly about Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford. I gratefully acknowledge Professor Nelson's permission to use this material.

The article starts by demonstrating that a description of Oxford made in 1581 precisely matches Ben Jonson's well-known description of Shakespeare's runaway wit. It will then be shown that Oxford was lame during the latter part of his life, matching Shakespeare's lameness as mentioned in Sonnets 37 and 89. We will see that orthodox scholars reject a literal meaning of "lame" for a very valid reason, namely, that Shakespeare calls himself "poor, lame, and despised," attributes which do not fit what we know about Shakspere of Stratford. All three qualities, however, fit Oxford.

I: Runaway Wit

The first item of interest is an extract from a libel made against Oxford by Charles Arundel in late January 1581 or soon after, which begins: "A trew declaracion of the Earell of oxfordes detestabl[e] vicees, and vnpure life." Arundel, who went on to become the principal author of the most notorious libel of the Elizabethan Age, *Leicester's Commonwealth*, had been placed under arrest for treasonable activities in December 1580 and was trying to destroy the credibility of his accuser, Oxford. His "Declaration" accuses Oxford of five categories of evil: "impudent, and sencelesse lies," of being "a most notorious drunkerd," "a bowgerer of a boye that is his coke," "detestable practices of hireid murderers," and

ffittlie to shewe, that the worell [i.e., world] never browght forthe suche a villonous Monster, and for a partinge blow to geve him his full payment, I will prove against him, his most horrible and detestable blasphemy in denial of the devinitie of Christ... (all quotations from Charles Arundel provided by Professor Nelson, who cites Public Record Office, SP12/151[45] ff.100-2)

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As Arundel tells it, Oxford's impudent and senseless lies were tall tales concerning his travels in Flanders, France and Italy. Arundel's previous libel cited such untruths as that Oxford maintained that St. Mark's Cathedral at Venice was paved with diamonds and rubies, while the cobblers' wives at Milan were more richly dressed every working day than was Queen Elizabeth at Christmas. But in the libel under consideration, Arundel limits himself to Oxford's Munchausen-like war stories, "as heretofore they have made much sporte to the hereers." Arundel claimed that Oxford said that he so impressed the famous Duke of Alva in Flanders that Alva (who had departed the year before Oxford's visit) placed him in command of all the King of Spain's forces in the Low Countries, where he accomplished such mighty feats that his fame spread to Italy. So, when Oxford traveled to Italy, the Pope gave him an army of 30,000 men to intervene in a civil war in Genoa. Having related these matters, Arundel seems, unconsciously, to drop his guard in wonder, continuing [my emphasis]:

this lie is veye rife w[i]t[h] him and in it he glories greatlie, diverslie hathe he told it, and when he enters into it, he can hardlie owte, which hathe made suche sporte as often have I bin driven to rise from his table laugheinge so hath my L[ord] Charles howard [of Effingham], and the rest, whome I namid before and for the profe of this I take them all as wittnises [the witnesses included Lords Windsor, Compton, Henry Howard, and Thomas Howard, as well as Walter Raleigh.]

Arundel is telling us that Oxford was a marvelously imaginative storyteller, who could tell the same tale over and over to the same audience, convulsing them with laughter every time. But in the passage, "and when he enters into it, he can hardly out," Arundel describes a personal characteristic emphasized by Ben Jonson in his description of Shakespeare. Having remarked that the actors praised Shakespeare as having never blotted a line, Jonson said that Shakespeare should have blotted out a thousand, meaning that he let himself get carried away with his wit, not knowing when to stop. Jonson elaborated:

Hee was (indeed) honest, and of an open, and free nature: had an excellent Phantasie; brave notions, and gentle expressions; wherein hee flow'd with that facility, that sometime it was necessary he should be stop'd: Sufflaminandus erat; [i.e., he needed a brake] as Augustus said of Haterius. His wit was in his owne power; would the rule of it had benee so too. Many times hee fell into those things, could not escape laughter: (Herford & Simpson, 8, 583-4)

So Jonson describes a characteristic of Shakespeare that is identical to what Arundel said of Oxford—that once he turned his wit on, he was unable to turn it off. But we should also note the emphatic nature of Arundel's and Jonson's

The Elizabethan Review

comments, as indicating that the personal quality in question was a most salient feature of the man being described. Arundel is putting forth a carefully organized blast of slander, driven by a desire for revenge, as well as to discredit Oxford's accusations against him. But then, weakening the force of his own slander, he depicts Oxford's storytelling ability as if he is simply unable to get over that aspect of Oxford. Jonson, ironically, commits the same fault he criticizes in Shakespeare, being unable to let go of his idea until he has said it four different ways: "wherein he flowed... Sufflaminandus erat... His wit was in his owne power... Many times hee fell..."

II: Lame

In turning to Professor Nelson's transcriptions of Oxford's letters from 1590 to 1603, we find that Oxford states that he is unable to get about for reasons of bad health or infirmity, in his letters of September 1590 (Fowler, 378), March 1595 (Salisbury, 5, 158), August 1595 (Fowler, 496), September 1597 (Fowler, 524), October 1601 (Fowler, 593), and April 1603 (Fowler, 739). However, he does not specify the nature of his ailment(s). But in a letter to his father-in-law, Lord Burghley, dated 25 March 1595, Oxford writes: "I will attend yowre Lordship as well as a lame man may at yowre house" (extract in Salisbury, 5, 154; this quote from Professor Nelson). On 27 November 1601, Oxford wrote to his brother-in-law, Sir Robert Cecil, closing with, "thus desyring yow to beare w[i]th the weaknes of my lame hand, I take my leaue" (Fowler, 607; this quote from Professor Nelson). In January 1602, he wrote again to Cecil, noting, "thus wythe a lame hand, to wright I take my leue" (Fowler, 653).

Shakespeare's Sonnet 37 contains these lines:

So I, made lame by Fortune's dearest spite, (3)

.....

So then I am not poor, lame, nor despised, (9)

Sonnet 89 returns to this theme: "Speak of my lameness, and I straight will halt" (3).

Recent editors of the Sonnets insist that the obvious conclusion that the poet might literally have been lame cannot possibly be true, but they cannot be bothered to give the modern reader good arguments to support their ideology. W.G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath's 1964 edition begins its notes on Sonnet 37 by sneering at the idea that the lame poet is someone other than the actor from Stratford, and then goes on to explain that the word "lame" can be taken metaphorically. Ingram and Redpath imply that the existence of a figurative meaning excludes the possibility of a literal reading. John Kerrigan's 1986 edition makes the same argument.

Stephen Booth's 1978 edition of the Sonnets is notable for exceeding all others in finding an absurdly large number of mutilple meanings in Shakespeare's

words. As Kerrigan puts it, Booth works on the “principle that any extractable meaning is significant” (65). But when he comes to Sonnets 37 and 89, Booth will allow “lame” to have only one meaning—the poet is apologizing for his poor meter. Booth offers five examples of poets using “lame,” “limping,” or “halting” to indicate bad meter, examples which utterly disprove Booth’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s words. To add a sixth example, John Donne begins the poem “To Mr. T.W.:

“Haste thee harsh verse as fast as thy lame measure/
Will give thee leave.” As with Donne, all five of Booth’s examples apply the modifier “lame/limping/halting” to the poet’s verse, not to the poet himself. In no case does a poet write, “I am lame,” expecting readers to understand the words as an apology for bad meter.

Now, it is true that words can have both literal and figurative meanings as well as special meanings within the conventions of poetry. But Ingram and Redpath, Booth and Kerrigan all fail to give us a valid reason for not taking Shakespeare’s words literally.

Older editors of the Sonnets showed more respect for their readers’ intelligence. Hyder Rollins’ 1944 *New Variorum* edition offers in its notes to Sonnet 37 this quotation from Edmond Malone’s edition of 1790:

If the words are to be understood literally, we must then suppose that... [Shakespeare] was also poor and despised, for neither of which suppositions there is the smallest ground.

Rollins also makes this argument concerning line 9 of Sonnet 37:

Literalists might note that, even if he was lame, Sh. could not have been poore, for he had jewels which ([Sonnets] 48.1-5), during his absences from London, he put in a sort of safe-deposit vault.

Now here is good sense. Malone and Rollins are telling us that the author of Sonnets 37 and 89 does not match what we know of William Shakspeare of Stratford, who became quite well-to-do from a modest beginning, and who could hardly be said to be poor if he owned jewels of value, as indicated in Sonnet 48. But the author of these Sonnets certainly matches what is known of the Earl of Oxford, who was never in real poverty, but who was disgracefully poor for an earl.

III: Poor and Despised

Owing to extravagant habits and unlucky financial speculation, Oxford was forced to sell most of his inherited lands by 1585 (Ward, 353). In 1586, the Queen granted him an annual pension of 1,000 pounds, to continue “until such time as he shall be by Us otherwise provided for to be in some manner relieved” (Ward, 257). After Oxford’s death in 1604, his widow and son received a much smaller pension from King James. She petitioned that the annuity be raised to 500 pounds a year, noting:

The pension of 1,000 pounds was not given by the late Queen to my Lord

for his life and then to determine [i.e., cease], but to continue until the Queen might raise his decay by some better provision. (Salisbury, 16, 258)

Elsewhere in the letter, she referred to her “ruined estate... desolate estate... greate distresse... miserable estate” (copy of original letter from Matus, 261).

About the same time, James was having to fend off a debt-ridden baron who felt that a grant of 1,000 pounds a year was too small. The King commented, “Great Oxford when his [e]state was whole ruined got no more of the late Queen” (Salisbury, 16, 397). Some time after Oxford’s death, Sir George Buck, Master of the Revels, made a note on Oxford’s magnificence, learning and religion, adding that in the promise of his youth, Oxford seemed “much more like to raise... a new earldom, than to decay... waste & lose an old earldom” (Miller, 394).

So, we know that Oxford was poor as well as lame, and we also know that he was despised accordingly. When Queen Elizabeth was dying, the Earl of Lincoln tried to enlist Oxford in some scheme of opposition to King James. Sir John Peyton, Lieutenant of the Tower of London, found out about Lincoln’s activities, but failed to report them. Peyton excused himself for this dereliction by saying that he took the matter seriously until he found out that Lincoln’s alleged accomplice was Oxford, on whom Peyton passed this verdict (my emphasis):

I knewe him to be so weake in boddy, in friends, in habyltye, and all other means to rayse any combustyon in the state, as I never feered any danger to proseyd from so feeble a fowndation. (O’Conor, 107)

Peyton’s words merit a close inspection. He calls Oxford weak in body, a reference to that infirmity cited in Oxford’s letters that led him to describe himself as “lame.” Peyton next notes that Oxford lacked friends, which is a way of saying that he was despised or looked down on (OED). Peyton then says that Oxford lacked “ability... to raise... combustion in the state,” which in the context of potential for raising insurrection, means (OED definition 4 of “ability”): “Pecuniary power; wealth, estate, means.” Or, in other words, Peyton is saying that Oxford was poor.

Shakespeare also frequently laments that he is old in the Sonnets, which would be appropriate coming from Oxford. Shakespeare says that his career has brought him shame and disgrace by virtue of his association with the public stage in Sonnets 110 and 111, and by his literary career in Sonnet 72. Such matters would hardly have brought disgrace to Shakspeare of Stratford. Shakespeare alludes to life at Court in several sonnets, especially 125. He repeatedly castigates the highborn friend to whom the first 126 sonnets are addressed, something not done by poets of humble origins to their patrons back then. Moreover, when the Sonnets appeared in print in 1609, the

publisher's dedication referred to the author as "OVR.EVER.LIVING.POET"—unambiguously meaning that he was dead (see endnote). Oxford died in 1604; Shakspeare in 1616.

In conclusion, when we match Ben Jonson's description of Shakespeare's runaway wit to what we know of the phantom of Stratford-on-Avon, we find nothing to work with. But when we match that description to what Charles Arundel said about the Earl of Oxford, we get a perfect fit. When we match Shakespeare's words in Sonnets 37 and 89 to what we know of the affluent burgher of Stratford, we find such a mismatch that orthodox scholars must take one of two courses: either they twist Shakespeare's meaning into something no sensible reader can accept, or else, as with Malone and Rollins, they tell us that Shakespeare's autobiographical words cannot apply to Shakspeare of Stratford. This latter explanation we can very well accept, especially when we discover that the Earl of Oxford was "poor, lame, and despised." Moreover, the author of the Sonnets indicates that he is old, shamed by his literary and theatrical career, and a courtier of high enough station to sharply criticize his aristocratic friend, while his publisher said that he was dead by 1609.

Both Oxford and the author Shakespeare were superb tellers of imaginative stories, possessed of an extraordinary wit, and they were poor, lame and despised. Further, Oxford matches the author of Shakespeare's Sonnets on a number of other points where the Stratford man does not fit. The odds against such similarity resulting from sheer coincidence are formidably long.

Endnote

In 1926, Colonel B.R. Ward published a list of 23 examples of use of the term "ever-living," compiled from concordances and major dictionaries (Miller, 211-14). All the examples refer to deities, abstractions and dead people. I would like to take this opportunity to provide an update on Colonel Ward's work.

No scholar of the Stratfordian persuasion has found a single example of "ever-living" being applied to a living person, though at least one tried. Professor Donald Foster writes:

In a fairly extensive search, I have not found any instance of ever-living used in a Renaissance text to describe a living mortal, including, even, panegyrics on Queen Elizabeth, where one should most expect to find it—though it does appear sometimes in eulogies for the dead. ("Master W.H., R.I.P.," *PMLA* [Jan. 1987] 102, 1:46)

Miller's version of Ward's list contains an error. The example printed as:

In that he is man, he received life from the Father as the foundation of that everliving Deity. (Hooker, 1593)

Should read:

In that he is man, he received life from the Father as from the fountain

The Elizabethan Review

of that ever living Deity, which is the Person of the Word. (Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, V, lvi, 4, 1593)

In the meantime, I have encountered a few more examples. Henry Brinklow's 1542 *Complaynt of Roderyck Mors* and *The Lamentacyon of a Christen agaynst the Cytye of London* (Early English Text Society, Extra Series, 1874, no. 22) use the term "everlyving God" six times (53, 56, 76, 93, 94, 98). The statute 1 Mary I, St. 2, c. 1 has the phrase, "wee beseeche Thalmightye and ever lyving God" (*The Statutes of the Realm*, IV, 200). The anonymous 1591 *Troublesome Raigne of King John* includes:

Thus hath K. Richards Sonne performde his vowes.

And offered Austrias bloud for sacrifice

Unto his fathers everliving soule. (VI, 1044-46)

Gabriel Harvey's 1592 Sonnet XIII in *Foure Letters and Certaine Sonnets* provides a variant usage of particular interest as showing clearly that "live ever" meant "dead" if applied to a human being. The sonnet appeals to Fame on behalf of ten recently deceased knights (the Bacon in question being Sir Nicholas), beginning:

Live ever valorous renowned Knightes;

Live ever Smith, and Bacon, Peerles men:

Live ever Walsingham, and Hatton wise:

Live ever Mildmayes honorable name.

Ah, that Sir Humphry Gilbert should be dead:

Ah, that Sir Philip Sidney should be dead:

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