

Geoffrey Fenton

A Note by Warren Hope

Both J. Thomas Looney and Alan Nelson in their very different treatments of the 17th Earl of Oxford draw attention to Geoffrey Fenton as a translator who dedicated a book to Anne Cecil de Vere, the Countess of Oxford. The book is entitled *Golden Epistles* and consists of translations of letters by Antonio de Guervara and others—letters that are in fact short essays on moral and philosophical subjects. The translator signed the dedication as from his chamber in the Black Friars in February 1575. Looney describes Fenton as one of Burghley’s spies and a linguist. Nelson states that the dedication praises not only the Countess of Oxford’s high moral character and her love of the kind of literature that encourages moral behavior, but also praises her parents and particularly her father. Oxford is in a way conspicuous by his absence from the dedication, perhaps because of his love of the kind of literature Fenton would find frivolous if not worse. But there are other reasons for Oxfordians to take an interest in Fenton.

First, Fenton originally appeared as a translator by producing a book entitled *Certain Tragical Discourses written out of French and Latin*, printed in London in 1567. The book is basically a rendering in English of Belleforest’s French versions of stories by Matteo Bandello that are seen by traditional scholars as the sources for a number of Shakespeare’s plays. Whether Shakespeare read Bandello in the original, in the French of Belleforest, or in Fenton’s English version is of less importance perhaps than that someone in the service of William Cecil was translating these stories when Oxford was seventeen years old and a member of Cecil’s household as his ward.

Second, Fenton translated the *Monophylo* of Estienne Pasquier in 1572 and dedicated it to Lady Hoby, the wife of Thomas Hoby, translator of Castiglione’s *The Courtier*, and a sister-in-law of William Cecil. She later became an opponent of the reconstruction of the Blackfriars Theater because of opposition as a Puritan to plays and players. Fenton appears to have previously dedicated religious works to Lady Hoby and argues in his dedication that *Monophylo*’s philosophical discussion on love is valuable because of its moral outlook, even if it is not overtly religious.

Third, Fenton is also the translator of Francesco Guicciardini's *History of Italy*, one of the books referred to by traditional Shakespearean scholars when they wish to argue Shakespeare did not travel in Italy but rather learned about it through reading. Fenton's translation appeared in 1579 and he dedicated it to Queen Elizabeth. Soon after that publication, in 1580, Burghley made him a secretary to Lord Grey de Wilton, the new Lord Deputy of Ireland. Fenton as a result worked with Edmund Spenser in Ireland. Fenton seems to have discontinued his literary work after achieving this post. He was eventually knighted and spent the rest of his life in Ireland where he died in 1608. His correspondence kept William and Robert Cecil informed on the political situation in Ireland.

Finally, Geoffrey Fenton was also the brother of Edward Fenton, sometimes described as "the navigator," the master of ships that took part in two of Martin Frobisher's voyages in search of a Northwest Passage to China. Thus the brother of the translator played a prominent role in a venture through which Oxford seems to have lost 3000 pounds. It could well be this Fenton, with the same first name as Oxford's, rather than the translator, that gave Shakespeare the name for his alter ego in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the Master Fenton who woos and wins Anne Page as opposed to Slender, the character Looney recognized as based on Sir Philip Sidney, once a competitor with Oxford for the hand of Anne Cecil.



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