

A New Interpretation of Francis Beaumont's Verse Letter to Ben Jonson

by Heidi Jannsch

Sometimes titled “Neither to follow fashion...” the verse letter from Francis Beaumont to Ben Jonson mentioning Shakespeare was first published in its entirety in 1930 by E.K. Chambers, but the focus of attention has continued to be on the lines:

...heere I would let slippe
(If I had any in mee) schollershippe,
And from all Learning keepe these lines as <cl>eere
as Shakespeares best are, which our heires shall heare.
Preachers apte to their auditors to showe
how farr sometimes a mortall man may goe
by the dimme light of Nature... (224)

In *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*, Charlton Ogburn provides the orthodox interpretation of these lines; that the letter from Beaumont to Jonson is an exchange where “one of them tells the other of the profound admiration he has for Shakespeare...” Ogburn attempted to correct this misinterpretation by explaining “it is not that Shakespeare shows how far a man without learning can go by the dim light of nature,” instead, the writer “was saying that is something that posterity will hear from preachers” (109). Diana Price also clarifies the intended meaning, summarizing:

...future generations are going to *bear* how much a man may accomplish using only untrained, God-given talent. *Or so F.B. intends to say.* This statement appears to be a deliberate crossing of wires in the Shakespearean commentary, a first allusion to a rumor-mill about the “natural” playwright. (218)

A closer look at these familiar lines and an examination of the poem as a whole reveal several indications that the poem may be a lament about, and attempt to document, this “deliberate crossing of wires” distancing the pen name Shakespeare from its true author, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

Variations and Dating of F.B.'s Verse Letter

Mark Bland, a senior lecturer in the Department of English Literature and Creative Writing at De Monfort University, has published extensively on the bibliographical and textual scholarship of Ben Jonson and the London manuscript and book trade of the early 17th century. In “Francis Beaumont’s Verse Letters to Ben Jonson and ‘The Mermaid Club,’” Bland considers the four known manuscript copies of Beaumont’s verse letter “Neither to follow fashion....” The copies are located at the Huntington Library, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Morgan Library, and the British Library. Bland concludes that the copy at the Huntington Library is closest to Beaumont’s intended verse, while he places the other three copies as more distant, inaccurate versions of the original (156).

The first scholar to publish the entire verse letter was E.K. Chambers, who took the two manuscript versions known to him (those at the Morgan and British Library—the two copies farthest from the original, according to Bland) and combined them into one (figure 1). I respectfully disagree with Bland’s assessment of the Morgan copy as a less accurate version and quote Chambers’ version throughout this paper, with the Huntington and Morgan copy variations noted.

Although attention is usually focused on the lines including the mention of Shakespeare, scholars have attempted to date the original poem by focusing on three elements which appear later in the poem:

- 1) the identity of the person wearing “white and Orrenge tawny” in lines 26–27;
- 2) the time and reason for the person’s misery in line 27; and
- 3) the date of the two plays in line 31 in relation to a proposed sequel.

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<p>224 CONTEMPORARY ALLUSIONS App. B royal gifts, but extravagant and sometimes in debt. No doubt he had many needy followers. On the whole, I think that 1615 is likely to have been the occasion which Beaumont had in mind.]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">To M^r B: J.:</p> <p>Neither to follow fashion nor to shoue my witt against the State, nor that I know any thing now, with which I am with childe till I haue tould, nor hopeinge to bee stilde a good Epist'ler through the towne, with which (5) I might bee famous, nor with any ytch like these, wrote I this Letter but to shoue the Loue I carrie and mee thinkes do owe to you about the number, which (can) best in something which I vse not, be exprest. (10) to write this I inuoke none, but the post of Douer, or some Carriers pist-ling ghost, for if this equall but the stile, which men send Cheese to towne with, and thanks downe agen, tis all I seeke for: heere I would let slippe (15) (If I had any in mee) schollershippe, And from all Learninge keepe these lines as (cl)eere as Shakespeares best are, which our heires shall heare Preachers apte to their auditors to shoue how farr sometimes a mortall man may goe (20) by the dimme light of Nature, tis to mee an helpe to write of nothing; and as free, As hee, whose text was, god made all that is, I meane to speake: what do you thinke of his state, who hath now the last that hee could make (25) in white and Orrenge tawny on his backe at Windsor? is not this mans miserie more then a fallen sharers, that now keepees a doore,</p> <p><small>Title] To Ben Jonson. T. B. A 6 famous] famous A 7 wrote I] write in A 8 do owe] dew A 9 can] blank in H: are A 10 I vse not] vse not to A 12 Douer] Doare A 14 downe agen.] downe A 15 for: heere] for here; A 17 cleere] deere H: deare A 18 which] & A heare] teare A 19 apte] apt A 21 dimme] diuine A 23 whose text] whoe A 24 I meane to speake:] all to (speake) I meane, A 26 tawny] lawny A 27 mans] om. H 28 keepees] keepe A doore:] doore H</small></p>	<p>No. XLIV FRANCIS BEAUMONT 225 hath not his state almost as wretched bene as (h)is, that is ordainde to write the (grinne) (30) after the fawne, and fleere shall bee? as sure some one there is allotted to endure that Cross. there are some, I could wish to knowe to loue, and keepe with, if they woulde not shoue their studdies to me; or I wish to see (35) their workes to laugh at, if they suffer mee not to knowe them: And thus I would Commerse with honest Poets that make scuruie verse. by this time you perceiue you did a misse to leaue your worthier studies to see this, (40) which is more tedious to you, then to walke in a Jews Church, or Bretons Coffon talke. but know I write not these lines to the end to please Ben: Johnson but to please my friend: ffinis: FB:</p> <p><small>30 his] is H, A is] & A write] om A grinne] geinne H: Crime A 31 fleere] feare A 37 thus] yt A 38 verse.] verse H 40 your] the A worthier] wortier H: worthyer A see] vse A 42 Bretons] Britans A 42 talke.] talke H 43 I write] yt I wrote A 44 ffinis: FB:] om A</small></p> <p style="text-align: center;">XLV. EDMUND BOLTON (c. 1616)</p> <p>[From <i>Bodl. Rasal. MS. D 1, f. 14*</i>. This is anonymous, but clearly a draft for the <i>Hypercritica</i> of Bolton (1575?–1633?). The final version (pr. J. E. Spingarn, <i>Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century</i>, i. 82) was also left in MS.; it cannot be earlier than 1616 (cf. Munro, i. 213). It contains no reference to Shakespeare.]</p> <p>The bookes also out of which wee gather the most warrantable English are not many to my Remembrance, of which in regard they require a particuler and curious tract, I forbear to speake at this present. But among the cheife, or rather the cheife are in my opinion these . . . Shakespere, M^r Francis Beaumont and innumerable other writers for the stage and presse tenderly to be vsed in this Argument.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">3162.2 Q</p>
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Figure 1: “Neither to follow fashion...” as compiled by Chambers in William Shakespeare: a Study of Facts and Problems, II, 224–225.

In his commentary, Chambers attempted to date the poem to coincide with a Knights of the Garter ceremony, presuming that the person wearing “white and Orrenge tawny” would have been at Windsor for an installation into the Knights of the Garter. Chambers proposed a composition date of the verse letter as between 1613 and 1616, but he was unable to identify which nobleman might have been wearing “white and Orrenge tawny” at either of the Knights of the Garter installations he investigated (223).

Another basis for dating the poem has been identifying the “miserable man.” Chambers does not consider the “miserable man” that others have since: but the words “misery” in line 27 and “wretched” in line 29 led Finkelpearl in *Court and Country Politics in the Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher* to date the letter to between 1608 and 1609, identifying the unnamed “miserable man” as John Marston. Marston’s play *The Fawne* is one of the plays mentioned in the poem, and Finkelpearl explains that Marston was punished for a satiric play at Blackfriars and then became a priest to avoid further punishment for this transgression. Finkelpearl understands Beaumont’s use of the word “ordained” and the phrase “endure that cross” as references to Marston’s

new position in the church (68–69n31). He concluded that Beaumont was “speaking to Jonson in guarded language about the wretched future of a mutual friend.”

In “The date of F.B.’s verse letter to Ben Jonson,” Peter Moore agreed with Chambers that the man with “white and Orrenge tawny” was a nobleman, but suggested it was Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of Essex, whose livery colors were white and orange. Moore proposed that the poet was commenting on the trial in 1613 where Devereaux “had been required to admit in public that he was impotent with regard to his beautiful, and allegedly willing, young wife in order to obtain the divorce they both desired” (348).

Bland returned to Chambers’ Knight of the Garter installation idea, proposing that the miserable man was Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, who was installed as a Knight of the Garter in May 1606. Bland explains that Cecil would have been miserable because he had upset the king with his overdone pageantry after the Garter installation ceremony. Bland does not explain the “white and Orrenge tawny” reference, nor how these colors relate to Salisbury, but dates the poem to May or June 1606, noting the two plays mentioned (*The Fawne* by John Marston and *The Fleire* by Edward Sharpham) were written and performed between 1604 and 1607. Bland suggests that Beaumont’s comment about a potential sequel to the two plays wouldn’t make sense with Chambers’ dating of the poem to nine years later (165).

Nina Green agrees with Bland’s dating of the letter to 1606 based on the theatrical allusions to the two plays, but disagrees with the identification of Salisbury, reminding readers that the livery colors mentioned are more appropriately identified with Essex. She concludes, “It thus may be that the individual alluded to in Beaumont’s verses had taken service with the young Robert Devereux (1591–1646), 3rd Earl of Essex, who was at court in 1606” (Green, *Beaumont, 1606*).

It is striking that this poem, of interest because of its comment on Shakespeare’s legacy, has undergone repeated attempts at dating based on identifying an unnamed man who is assumed to be a nobleman or playwright. Edward de Vere was both a nobleman and a playwright, whose connection to the name Shakespeare was, it has been argued, lost to history, due to the misleading story shared by “preachers” as foretold by Beaumont in this poem. Examining the entire poem from this perspective reveals several interesting correlations to Edward de Vere and the Shakespeare Authorship ruse. For this exploration, the 44-line poem is considered in three sections:

- Section One - Beaumont’s Denial (lines 1–15): the poet insists that he doesn’t have any important information to share.
- Section Two - Shakespeare’s Misery (lines 15–33): the poet reveals important information pertaining to Shakespeare’s Authorship.

- Section Three - Beaumont's Lament (lines 33–44): the poet laments the concealment of important information.

Section One - Beaumont's Denial (lines 1-15)

To Mr B:J:

Neither to follow fashion nor to showe
 my witt against the State, nor that I knowe
 any thing now, with which I am with childe
 till I haue tould, nor hopeinge to bee stilde
 a good Epist'ler through the towne, with which (5)
 I might bee famous, nor with any ytch
 like these, wrote I this Letter but to showe
 the Loue I carrie and mee thinkes do owe
 to you aboue the number, which <can> best
 in something which I vse not, be exprest. (10)
 to write this I inuoake none, but the post
 of Douer, or some Carriers pist-ling ghost,
 for if this equall but the stile, which men
 send Cheese to towne with, and thankes downe agen,
 tis all I seeke for: heere I would let slippe... (15)

Beaumont begins by giving readers 14 lines of disclaimers stating what he is *not* doing by writing this poem: he is not following trends, not trying to outwit any official edicts, he has nothing new to share, he is not trying to show off his talent or get famous, and he is not even going to bother asking his muse to help him (invoking only a letter carrier), implying what he is writing is just as important as a grocery list. He is trying to make it perfectly clear that there is nothing to see here.

But he seems to change direction and share a completely different message when he writes, “Heere, I would let slippe...” For many, the phrase “let slippe” brings to mind the line “Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war” from *Julius Caesar*, but the OED also gives an example of this phrase from the Bible, noting that it is used in the Epistle to the Hebrews 2:1: “Wherefore we ought to give the most earnest heed to the things which we have heard: lest at any time we should let them slip.” In this context the phrase signals a warning to pay attention, so Beaumont may have used it as an alert that he was now going to tell readers something important. The wording of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds readers to heed “that which we have heard,” so the placement of “let slippe” at the end of the list of disclaimers (one of which, coincidentally, relates Beaumont’s denial of seeking to be a “good Epist’ler”)¹ and so near the words “heare,” “preachers,” and “auditors” may lend support to the argument that the poet is alluding to the message of this chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews.²

Section Two - Shakespeare's Misery (lines 15-33)

...tis all I seeke for: heere I would let slippe (15)
(If I had any in mee) schollershippe,
And from all Learning keepe these lines as <cl>eere
as Shakespeares best are, which our heires shall heare
Preachers apte to their auditors to showe
how farr sometimes a mortall man may goe (20)
by the dimme light of Nature, tis to mee
an helpe to write of nothing; and as free.
As hee, whose text was, god made all that is,
I meane to speake : what do you thinke of his
state, who hath now the last that hee could make (25)
in white and Orrenge tawny on his backe
at Windsor ? is not this mans miserie more
then a fallen sharers, that now keepes a doore,
hath not his state almost as wretched beene
as <h>is, that is ordainde to write the <grinne> (30)
after the fawne, and fleere shall bee ? as sure
some one there is allotted to endure
that Cross...

Where the Morgan, British Library, and Folger Shakespeare Library copies all include a variation of “*Preachers **apt(e)** to their auditors to showe...*” Bland provides the Huntington copy’s wording “*Preachers **cite** to their Auditors to shewe ...*” as the “accurate” wording. He makes passing mention that of the four manuscripts, three include the word “apt(e)” (156), but does not comment on the implication of the word itself. When used as an adjective, “apt(e)” means “fitting, suitable,” but Beaumont uses “apt(e)” as a verb, meaning “to adapt, to make fit” (OED). The use of the word “apt(e)” backs up the authorship doubter’s interpretation of these lines; that the real story of Shakespeare was being adapted or changed to something else and that posterity would be hearing this alternate version of the story.

Authorship skeptics have riddled with what was meant in lines 17–18 by “lines as cleere as Shakespeare’s best are,” but the word “clear” is not actually used in two (possibly three) of the manuscript copies.³ The Morgan copy includes “deere” at the end of line 17 with “cleere” penciled in (figure 2). Scholars have accepted that the word *should* be “clear” because that word makes sense in the context of the sentence. However, if the author was hoping to get readers to pay attention here, intentionally using the wrong word might serve to alert readers that his message was not immediately apparent, and readers would need to pay attention and realize the real message would take more thought to accurately receive.⁴

The use of “deere” was one of the errors that Bland felt made the Morgan copy farther from the original intended by Beaumont. It may have been

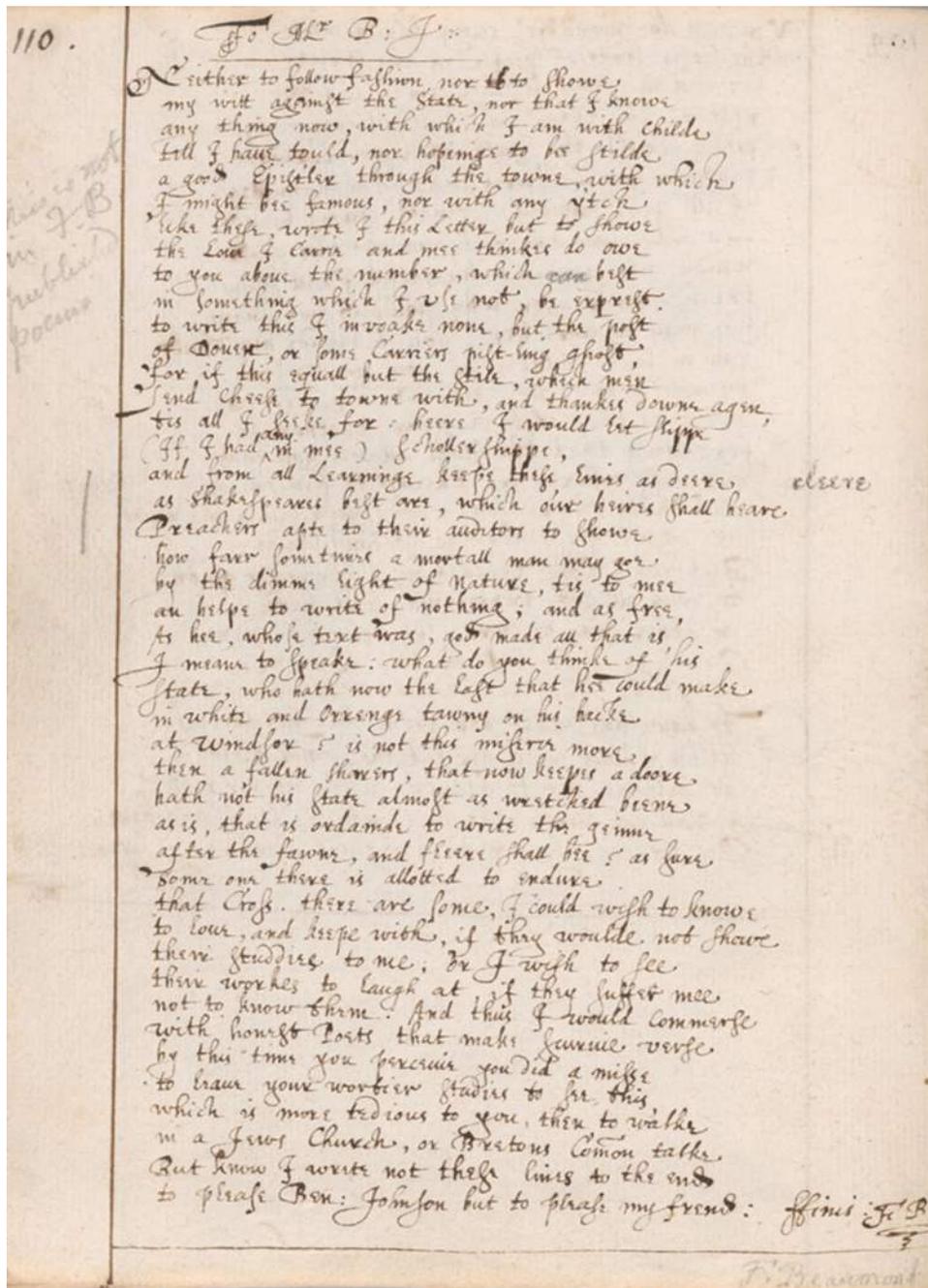


Figure 2: Morgan copy of “Neither to follow fashion...” showing a penciled-in correction of “deere” to “cleere” in line 17, The Morgan Library & Museum, MA 1057.

another warning to pay attention, but even if it were simply miscopied from “clear,” juxtaposing the word (or insinuation of the word) “clear” with “the dimme light of nature” may be important: if the story posterity will hear

celebrates a writer led by “the dimme light of nature” what are readers being told? What was this story being adapted from?

The definition of dim is “the opposite of bright or clear” (OED), so the “dimme light of nature” is the opposite of the “clear, bright light of nature.” Is the phrase meant to imply that Shakespeare’s lines were understood to be by someone associated with the clear, bright light of nature by his contemporaries? Edward de Vere was associated with Phoebus Apollo, God of the Sun, and patron of poets by writers of the age (Waugh, “Christopher Marlowe”). Is Beaumont commenting on the adapting of this clear, bright light (Edward de Vere) into a dim one (William Shakspere)?

Beaumont is distressed by this adapting of the truth, and so he tells readers he is going to comfort himself by writing about nothing. However, if readers received his message that he is not being immediately clear and that we need to pay attention, his writing of “nothing” may be intended to reveal or document some important information.

...tis to mee
an helpe to write of nothing; and as free.
As hee, whose text was, god made all that is,
I meane to speake : what do you thinke of his
state, who hath now the last that hee could make (25)
in white and Orrenge tawny on his backe
at Windsor ? is not this mans miserie more
then a fallen sharers, that now keepes a doore,
hath not his state almost as wretched beene
as <h>is, that is ordainde to write the <grinne> (30)
after the fawne, and fleere shall bee ? as sure
some one there is allotted to endure
that Cross...

Beaumont “means to speak” specifically of the writer “whose text was, god made all that is.” A connection might be drawn between “whose text was, god made all that is” and Edward de Vere’s use of the phrase “I am that I am.” This phrase appears in Exodus 3.14: “And God said unto Moses, ‘I AM THAT I AM’: and he said, thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” De Vere used the phrase “I am that I am” in a personal letter dated October 30, 1584, to his father-in-law William Cecil (Whittemore, “Reason No. 9”) and it appears in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 121.⁵ De Vere being referred to as “hee whose text was, god made all that is” can be further supported by Roger Stritmatter’s examination of the markings in de Vere’s Geneva Bible (Stritmatter, 2001) which reveal de Vere’s familiarity with and contemplation on Biblical verses which correspond to themes found in the Shakespeare works. Alexander Waugh has also explored evidence pertaining to God and de Vere having co-authored the Shakespeare works (Waugh, “Incalculable Genius”).

The phrase “his state” (lines 24–25) may also provide a clue to Beaumont’s unnamed writer. “State” might indicate a state of being of this writer, but “state” can also describe a member of the nobility.⁶ If so, this noble writer “whose text was, god made all that is” is miserable for some reason. In contrast to what previous scholars have proposed about the miserable man wearing white and Orrenge tawny, the wording could be understood to be describing two different people. I propose that the person Beaumont is referring to is not miserable *and* wearing these livery colors, he is miserable because *someone else* (“the last that he could make”) is being associated with these colors. Moore’s attempt to date the poem identified white and Orrenge tawny as Essex’s colors (348), so Beaumont may be asserting that the writer (“whose text was, god made all that is”) is unhappy because someone (being referred to as “the last that he could make”) has the Essex colors “on his backe at Windsor.” If this unnamed writer is Edward de Vere, is there any reason that someone with Essex colors “on his backe” might be a cause, in Beaumont’s opinion, for de Vere’s misery?

If the person being associated with Essex colors was a nobleman, as several scholars concluded when attempting to date the poem, and Shakespeare is mentioned in the poem, might the nobleman in question be Henry Wriosthesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton? Southampton was the only dedicatee of works by Shakespeare (*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*) prior to the proposed time frame of Beaumont’s verse letter: between 1606 (Bland, Green) and 1616 (Chambers).

In “The Overlooked but Critical Significance of the Two Dedications to Southampton” James Warren suggests that Edward de Vere was able to negotiate a bargain for Southampton’s life in exchange for severing his connection to the Shakespeare works. Warren writes:

Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, not only agreed to, but pushed for the permanent substitution of the name William Shakespeare in place of his own because there was something he wanted even more than credit for his literary works: the commutation of the death sentence passed on Henry Wriosthesley, Third Earl of Southampton, who had been convicted of treason in February 1601 for his role in the rebellion organized by Robert Devereux, Second of Earl of Essex. (19)



Figure 3: Henry Wriosthesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, c. 1600, National Portrait Gallery.

If Bland and Green are correct in the dating of the poem (c. 1606), it would have been written not long after Southampton was released from the Tower by King James (1603), and after de Vere died (1604). If de Vere was able to “make” the deal as described by Warren, it could be considered his “last” as it occurred toward the end of his life. He would have successfully saved Southampton from his death sentence for his part in the Essex rebellion, but if Southampton was still being negatively affected by his association with the house of Essex despite de Vere’s efforts, this might be a cause for de Vere’s misery.

Charlotte Stopes provides a source which indicates that Southampton’s earlier association with Essex was, in fact, negatively affecting him at court. She notes that “Southampton was mysteriously and suddenly arrested in June 1604, and as suddenly released, without trial or explanation.”⁷ Stopes then relates Malone’s suggestion that the arrest was due to “the machinations of Cecil (soon after Lord Cranborne) that the king was persuaded to believe that too great an intimacy subsisted between Southampton and his Queen” (282). Stopes suggests that Malone was basing this comment on Anthony Weldon’s *Court and Character of King James* (1651), where he discusses the trial and condemnation of Cobham, Grey, and Raleigh, and then writes:

Now doth the King return to Windsor, when there was an *apparition* of Southampton being a favorite to his majesty, by that privacy and dearness presented to the Court view, but Salisbury, liking not that any of Essex his faction should come into play, made that *apparition* appear as it were *in transitu*, and so vanished, by putting some jealousies into the King’s head...

If Southampton’s ascension to near-favorite status was blocked by Robert Cecil based on his still being connected with “Essex his faction,” this may explain Beaumont’s use of “white and Orrenge tawny on his back at Windsor” as a description of Southampton. Beaumont imagines that Cecil’s continued ability to thwart Southampton’s ascension at court even after de Vere’s negotiations and sacrifice, would be a cause for de Vere’s unhappiness; that he would be as unhappy with this situation as the common writers who have to keep up the charade about Shakespeare being a natural genius after de Vere’s death:

hath not his state almost as wretched beene
as <h>is, that is ordainde to write the <grinne> (30)
after the fawne, and fleere shall bee? as sure
some one there is allotted to endure
that Cross...

Beaumont may also be trying to reveal more of the story through his choice of plays. He mentions two plays with similar plots: Marston's *The Fawne* and Sharpham's *The Fleire*. Bland relates that "one of Beaumont's jokes is that someone will be required to write another sequel to these that will be called *The Grinne*" (156), but an interesting point that has been glossed over in the study of this poem are the plots of these two plays. *The Fawne* and *The Fleire* are both referred to as "disguised duke" or "disguised ruler" plays. Moore insists that the titles of the plays, and not the plots, were the point Beaumont was making, stating: "These last two are court comedies about disguised dukes but the significance of Beaumont's remark lies in their titles. To fawn means to show servile fondness or delight, while a fleer is a mocking look or speech or a deceitful grin of civility" (349).

However, both *The Fawne* and *The Fleire* have been recognized as disguised ruler plays for some time. In *The Disguised Ruler in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, Quarmby states:

the disguised ruler plays that attract the most frequent attention are Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (performance recorded 1604; published 1623), John Marston's *The Malcontent* (published 1604) and *The Fawn* (published 1606), Thomas Middleton's *The Phoenix* (published 1607), and Edward Sharpham's *The Fleer* (published 1607). (3)

The deal Oxford made to remain behind the "dimme light" disguise in exchange for Southampton's life might also be understood by considering the plots of the two plays Beaumont chose to mention. In her examination of *Measure for Measure* and other contemporary disguised duke plays, Rosalind Miles indicates that disguisers fall into two categories: "the self-oriented disguiser who masquerades for his own pleasure or profit...and the disguiser who is motivated by his consideration for others or his concern with their affairs..." She includes as examples of "those who assume a cover because of their loving concern for others" the "distressed fathers of *The London Prodigal* and *The Fleire*" (129).

Similarly, *The Fawne* centers on a father disguising himself for his son's welfare, with Duke Hercules taking on a disguise with the goal of arranging his son's marriage. Beaumont's choice of two plays with concerned, noble fathers disguising themselves to protect or provide for their sons may be an attempt to convey information about de Vere's bargaining away the Shakespeare name to save the younger Earl of Southampton's life.⁸

Section Three - Beaumont's Lament (Lines 33–44)

Beaumont expresses his distress about the loss of the true author's connection to the Shakespeare works, but notes that he is still attempting to share the real story with future generations:

there are some, I could wish to knowe
to loue, and keepe with, if they woulde not showe
their studdies to me; or I wish to see (35)
their workes to laugh at, if they suffer mee
not to knowe them : And thus I would Commerse
with honest Poets that make scuruie verse.

Beaumont appears to hint that the situation was under de Vere's direction when he mentions two disguised duke plays and then writes: "they suffer me not to know them." To "commerse" or communicate the real story without contradicting de Vere's command, Beaumont had to create this poem with veiled information ("scurvie verse") in the form of a letter to the "honest" poet, Ben Jonson.

Beaumont closes with an apology for how unpleasant it must have been for Jonson to have to read the poem in this form, but acknowledges that he was trying to "please my friend," which may be interpreted as trying to document the truth while also adhering to de Vere's wishes to keep his name hidden.

by this time you perceiue you did a misse
to leaue your worthier studies to see this, (40)
which is more tedious to you, then to walke
in a Jews Church, or Bretons Comon talke.
but know I write not these lines to the end
to please Ben : Johnson but to please my frend : ffinis : FB

Beaumont comments that participating in this "commerce" must be more tedious for Jonson than having to "walke in a Jews church" or "Bretons Common talke." Chambers suggests "Bretons Common talke" may be an allusion to *Britton* ascribed to John Breton, a law book that Beaumont, as a lawyer, would have been familiar with (223), but he doesn't offer any comment on "Jews church."

Could the phrase "Jews church" be meant to remind readers of the earlier allusion "let slippe"/ to pay attention found in the Epistle to the Hebrews? If so, its pairing with *Britton* would make sense, because like the Shakespeare works, both *Britton* and the Epistle to the Hebrews have their own authorship issues. A description of the first reveals that: "*Britton* is the earliest summary of the law of England in the French tongue, which purports to have

been written by command of King Edward I. The origin and authorship of the work have been much disputed” (“*Britton* (book)”). Similarly:

The Epistle to the Hebrews of the Christian Bible is one of the New Testament books whose canonicity was disputed. Traditionally, Paul the Apostle was thought to be the author. However, since the third century this has been questioned, and the consensus among most modern scholars is that the author is unknown. (“Authorship”)

Both *Britton* and the Epistle to the Hebrews may also reveal additional information about the “he” “whose text was, god made all that is.” *Britton* was written under command of King Edward I and the work begins with the words “Edward, by the grace of God” (figure 3). In her article, “Lily’s Latin *Grammar* and the Identity of Shakespeare,” Nina Green explores allusions to Lily’s *Grammar* made in the Shakespeare works which direct readers to the line “Edwardus is my proper name” (Green 25–31). Green suggests that the author chose Lily’s *Grammar* because it was well known to his contemporaries, and he could be certain it “would be equally widely available and well known to succeeding generations” (Green, “Oxford as Shakespeare”).

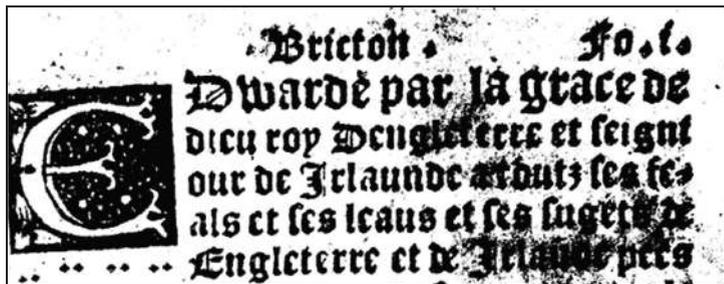


Figure 4:
“Edward, by the
grace of God...”
from the first
page of *Britton*.

Beaumont seems to be employing a similar method with *Britton*—connecting the concealed noble author Edward de Vere to a popular book which opens with the name “Edward.”

The Bible would surely have been even more widely available than *Britton*, and two more possible connections can be made to Edward de Vere’s anonymous authorship by consulting 1 Corinthians and revisiting the Epistle to the Hebrews. De Vere’s use of “I am that I am” has previously been connected to Exodus 3:14, but the phrase also appears in 1 Cor. with wording similar to the opening line of *Britton*. Paul writes: “But by the grace of God, *I am that I am*: and his grace which is in me, was not in vaine: but I laboured more abundantly then they all: yet not I, but the grace of God whiche is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). The sentiment “by the grace of God, I am that I am...” conveyed here echoes the opening line of *Britton* “Edward, by the grace of god...” while also incorporating the phrase used by de Vere in his letter to Cecil and Sonnet 121 (Whittemore, “Reason No. 9”).

The Epistle to the Hebrews begins with an Argument (figure 5) describing anonymous authorship by the “Spirit of God”:

FORasmuche as diuers, bothe of the Greke writers and Latines witnesse, that the writer of this Epistle for iuste causes wolde not haue his name knowen, it were curiositie of our parte to labour muche therein. For seing the Spirit of God is the autor thereof, it diminisheth nothing the autoritie althogh we knowe not with what penne he wrote it.

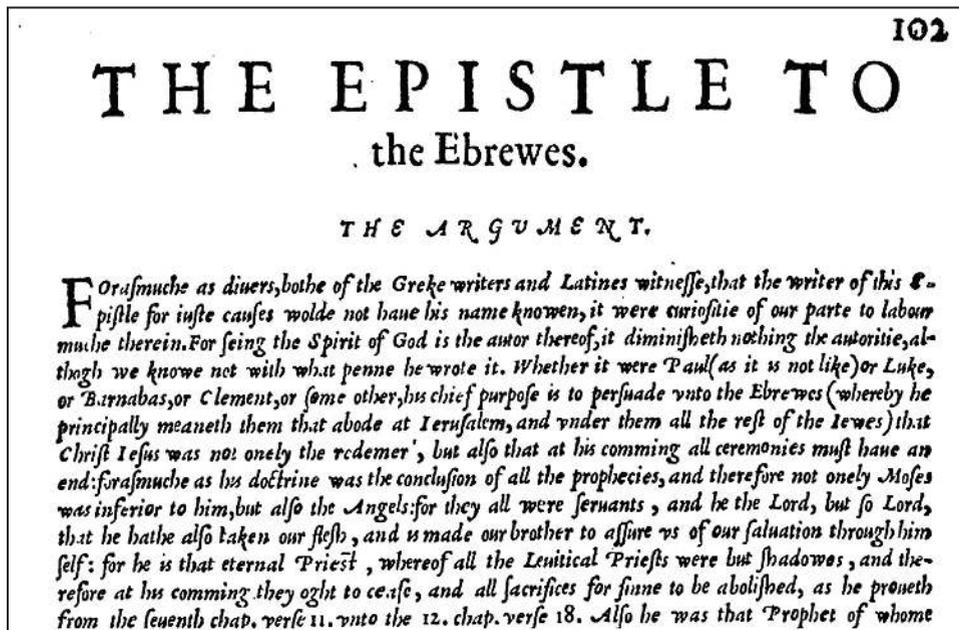


Figure 5: *The Argument preceding the Epistle to the Hebrews including the line “the writer of this Epistle for iuste causes wolde not haue his name knowen.” Geneva Bible, 1560.*

The sentiment “the Spirit of God is the autor thereof...” is similar to the phrasing used by Beaumont in the line “he whose text was, God made all that is...” and reflects the “grace of God” bestowed upon Paul (1 Cor 15:10) and Britton’s Edward. In some editions of the Bible, the Argument appears on the same page¹⁰ that includes the line “Wherefore we ought to give the most earnest heed to the things which we have heard: lest at any time we should let them slip” (Heb. 2).

Considered together, one work with disputed authorship opens with Edward de Vere’s first name, while the Argument preceding the other includes the phrase “that the writer of this Epistle for iuste causes wolde not haue his name knowen,” the same sentiment that Beaumont shared when he lamented that “There are some I could wish to knowe,” but “they suffer me not to knowe them.”

“Neither to follow fashion...” can be understood to be a concerted effort by Beaumont to document the Shakespeare authorship deception and comment on the diplomatic action taken by de Vere to dissociate himself from the works to save Southampton’s life. Beaumont seems to be attempting to share the real story by using the phrase “let slippe” as a warning to pay attention before mentioning Shakespeare, indicating that the story was being changed to celebrate a “dimme light of nature,” commenting on but not naming a nobleman, naming two disguised duke plays, and alluding to two works with disputed authorship, one of which begins with the name Edward and one which notes that the author chose to “not have his name known.” Beaumont’s distress about the loss of de Vere’s connection to his literary works coupled with his determination to obey his wishes resulted in this verse letter whose underlying message needs careful attention for readers to understand that the “dimme light of nature” story is a canard, and the true author behind the Shakespeare name was Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford.

Endnotes

1. The form of the poem as a letter may also lend support to the idea that Beaumont was steering readers toward one of the Biblical epistles.
2. In “A Law Case in Verse: *Venus and Adonis* and the Authorship Question (2004)” Roger Stritmatter explores the use of the word “slips” in *Venus and Adonis*:

Pure lips, sweet seals in my soft lips imprinted,
What bargains may I make, still to be sealing?
To sell myself I can be well contented,
So thou wilt buy, and pay, and use good dealing;
Which purchase if thou make, *for fear of slips*
Set thy seal manual on my wax-red lips.

Stritmatter mentions several definitions for “slips,” including “a piece of counterfeit money,” “a mistake or error” and “a scion or descendant.” He notes that “Venus exhorts a kiss which will ensure secrecy and guarantee against ‘slips’—mistakes of pen or tongue that might inadvertently reveal the intimate secrets of Elizabethan governance” (284). I propose that Beaumont is commenting on one of these secrets in this poem.

3. The word in the Folger copy is blotted; see Poetical miscellany [manuscript], ca. 1640, V.a.96, p 71, available online at luna.folger.edu. The British Library copy can be seen on Shakespeare Documented: <https://shakespearedocumented.folger.edu/resource/document/letter-beaumont-jonson-refers-shakespeare-name>.
4. The similarity between the error word “deere” and “de Vere” may hold some significance, especially since it appears in line 17, and Edward de Vere was the 17th Earl of Oxford. Further research on the Morgan manuscript copy from “The common-place book of Mr. W. H.” may indicate that the copyist (thought to be William Holgate) was aware of the important information he was including when using the words “apte” and “deere” as opposed to “cite” and “clear.” This copy may also have been intentionally left for certain “heires” (authorship doubters) to discover since, as Chambers notes, it was found about 10 miles from Castle Hedingham, at Earl’s Colne Priory, where “for 14 generations, the church was the family mausoleum of the Earls of Oxford” (“Colne Priory”). Holgate’s commonplace book also includes other entries which may be of interest to Shakespeare authorship researchers, including “On his mistress Beauty” (Sonnet 106), “Of playing at Tennis” by Edward deVere, and a version of Basse’s “Renowned Spenser...” which inexplicably includes a question mark between the words “Tragedian”

and “Shakespeare” in line 12 (see *The Holgate Miscellany: an Edition of Pierpont Morgan Library Manuscript*, MA 1057, 333, n.12).

5. From Sonnet 121:

For why should others false adulterate eyes (5)
 Give salutation to my sportive blood?
 Or on my frailties why are frailer spies,
 Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
 No, *I am that I am*, and they that level
 At my abuses reckon up their own... (10)
6. The OED provides a definition of state (†22. a. A person of high rank, status, or importance; a dignitary; a noble, lord, or prince; = *estate n.* 3c. *Obsolete.*)
7. The date of this arrest was June 24, 1604, the same date Edward de Vere is reported to have died.
8. An earlier version of this essay considered “last that he could make” as the making or begetting of a child, which might support the Dynastic Succession Theory, which proposes that Edward de Vere and Elizabeth I were the Earl of Southampton’s parents. The concerned fathers in the two plays mentioned by Beaumont would seem to reinforce this theme, but Southampton wouldn’t have been the “last” son de Vere “could make,” he would have been the first, and supporting this line of thinking would require adding “Tudor” after “last” or rearranging the letters in the third nonexistent play from “geinne” to “eigne,” a law term referring to a firstborn son: the title of the third play appears to read “the Grinne” in the Huntington copy and was assumed to be “Grinne” by Chambers, but the title contains no “r” in the three additional copies, where it is written “the Geinne” (Morgan), the “Ginne” (BL), and “the Gennie” (Folger). However, as Warren concluded, “the idea of Oxford as the deal maker works even without considering the PT theory. Those who doubt that Southampton was a royal prince may still conclude that Oxford renounced literary works in order to break the connection between them and the court, itself a weighty enough matter to warrant that action” (Warren 23).
9. The complete first sentence reads “EDWARD by the grace of God, king of England, lord of Ireland, and duke of Aquitaine, to all his faithful people and subjects of England and Ireland, peace and grace of salvation.”
10. One example of the Epistle to the Hebrews Argument and Heb. 2 on the same page can be seen in the 1600 Geneva Bible (437/465). <https://www.proquest.com/books/bible-that-is-holy-scriptures-contained-old-new/docview/2240908495/se-2>.

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