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Was Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, the "E.K." of Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*? [Part 3 of 7]

Spenser's dedicatory sonnet to Oxford in the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queen* is evidence of a literary connection between the two men, and provides support for the hypothesis that Oxford, as "E.K.", was the author of the critical apparatus for Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*. However, the *Calendar* was published a decade earlier than *The Faerie Queen*, and it is therefore necessary to show that Oxford and Spenser could have been acquainted as early as 1579.

Although the actual circumstances under which the two men first met will probably never be known, a likely point of contact between them in the 1570's was their mutual relationship with the Spencers of Althorpe.

According to a pedigree given in the *Visitation of Warwickshire*, Sir John Spencer of Althorpe (d.1586) came from an ancient family which could trace its lineage to the time of William the Conqueror. Sir John's branch of the family was said to be descended from a younger brother of Hugh le Despenser, Chief Justice of England, grandfather of another Hugh le Despenser (d.1326), the ill-fated favourite of King Edward II (Fetherston 282-5). However, the authenticity of this pedigree has been disputed in modern times by those who claim that, in the earliest years of the sixteenth century, the Spencers were "simple sheep farmers" (Fogle 5).

Whatever may be said of the authenticity of the pedigree, there is no dispute about the fact that Sir John Spencer of Althorpe was a very wealthy man. He left great estates to his sons, and the prestige of the family was considerably enhanced by the marriages of his daughters. This was particularly true of Elizabeth, Anne and Alice, who married into families which numbered themselves among the kindred of Queen Elizabeth -- the Careys, the Stanleys and the Sackvilles.

Elizabeth Spencer (1557-1618) married, in 1574, George Carey (1556?-1603), eldest son of Queen Elizabeth's cousin, Henry Carey, 1st Lord Hunsdon (1526-1596) (Cokayne, v.6., 630). Anne Spencer's first and third marriages connected her with the Stanleys and the Sackvilles: in 1575, Anne married William Stanley, 3rd Lord Monteagle (1529?-1581) (Cokayne, v.9, 116), and in 1592 she took, as her third husband, Robert Sackville, later 1st Earl of Dorset (1561-1609) (Cokayne, v.4, 423). Perhaps "the best match of all" was made by Sir John Spencer's youngest daughter, Alice (1556?-1637), who in 1579 married Ferdinando Stanley, later 5th Earl of Derby (1559?-1594) (Cokayne, v.4, 212; Fogle 9).

These alliances with families related to the Queen introduced the Spencer sisters into an intimate court circle which included among its members Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, himself a relative of the Queen and a courtier from his youth. Years later, Oxford and the Spencers of Althorpe were brought into an even closer connection when Oxford's eldest daughter, Elizabeth, through her marriage in 1595 to William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby (1561-1642),

became the sister-in-law of Alice Spencer. For the purposes of establishing the identity of Oxford as E.K., however, it is sufficient to show that by 1579, when *The Shepheardes Calender* was published, the three Spencer sisters had gained entrée into the uppermost ranks of the Elizabethan nobility and would perforce have been well known to Oxford, and he to them.

The significance of Oxford's acquaintance with the Spencer sisters lies in the fact that the Spencers of Althorpe were related to the poet Edmund Spenser. The specific relationship between the two branches of the family has not been traced; however, Spenser himself seized a number of opportunities to make it abundantly clear in print that the relationship existed (Collier xii-xiv; Fogle 16-8). In his *Complaints*, published in 1591, he dedicated a separate long poem to each of the Spencer sisters: "Muiopotmos, or the Fate of the Butterfly" to Elizabeth Spencer; "Prosopopoia, or Mother Hubberd's Tale" to Anne; and "The Tears of the Muses" to Alice (Oram 268, 334, 412). Spenser also dedicated one of the ten original dedicatory sonnets in *The Faerie Queen* to Elizabeth Spencer, Lady Carey (*DNB*, 973; Hamilton 293). In addition, he sang the praises of all three sisters as "Phyllis, Charillis and sweet Amaryllis" in *Colin Clout's Come Home Again*, published in 1595. In this poem, Spenser makes explicit reference to his relationship to the "sisters three" who are the "honor of the noble familie" of Spencer of Althorpe. He speaks of himself as the "meanest" of that family, and considers it an honour that "unto them I am so nie":

No lesse praisworthie are the sisters three,
The honor of the noble familie:
Of which I meanest boast my selfe to be,
And most that unto them I am so nie.

Spenser then continues with a description of each of the three sisters in which he refers to Anne Spencer's marriage to Robert Sackville, and to the recent death of Alice's husband, Ferdinando Stanley, 5th Earl of Derby:

Phyllis, Charillis, and sweet Amaryllis,
Phyllis the faire, is eldest of the three:
The next to her, is bountifull *Charillis*.

But th' youngest is the highest in degree.
Phyllis the floure of rare perfection,
Faire spreading forth her leaves with fresh delight,
That with their beauties amorous reflexion,
Bereave of sense each rash beholders sight.
But sweet *Charillis* is the Paragone
Of peerlesse price, and ornament of praise,
Admyr'd of all, yet envied of none,
Through the myld temperance of her goodly raies.
Thrise happie do I hold thee noble swaine,
The which art of so rich a spoile possest,
And it embracing deare without disdaine,
Hast sole possession in so chaste a brest;
Of all the shepheards daughters which there bee,
And yet there be the fairest under skie,
Or that elsewhere I ever yet did see,
A fairer Nymph yet never saw mine eie:
She is the pride and primrose of the rest,
Made by the maker selfe to be admired:
And like a goodly beacon high address,
That is with sparks of heavenle beautie fired.
But *Amaryllis*, whether fortunate,
Or else unfortunate may I aread,
That freed is from *Cupids* yoke by fate,
Since which she doth new bands adventure dread.
Shepherd what ever thou has heard to be
In this or that praysd diversly apart,
In her thou maist them all assembled see,
And seald up in the threasure of her hart (Oram 546-7).

Thus, the Spencer sisters, as intimate members of the court circle, formed a link between Oxford and Edmund Spenser. And, although it may not have been this link which originally drew Oxford and Spenser together, the fact of its existence lends plausibility to the hypothesis that it was Oxford, writing under the pseudonym "E.K." who gave Spenser a helping hand in launching *The Shepheardes Calender* in 1579.

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