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Did Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, write the verses for Lady Derby's entertainment? [Part 3 of 4]

It is difficult to ascertain the precise nature of Lady Derby's entertainment from the verses themselves. John Payne Collier originally suggested that they were written for a lottery. He noticed a payment by Sir Thomas Egerton in connection with Queen Elizabeth's visit to Harefield:

6 Aug. 1602. Rewarde to Master Lyllyes man which brought the Lottery-boxe to Harefield, per Mr. Andr. Leigh (58).

Collier conjectured that the verses for Lady Derby's entertainment were prepared for a similar lottery:

[I]t seems to have been a species of lottery, and possibly the very one the box for which, we have seen, was brought to Harefield 'by Master Lyllye's man' in August, 1602'. From the MS we may collect that hearts were hung as fruit upon an artificial tree, each lady of the company gathering one, and finding a poetical motto within, or upon it, applicable to the individual. In his remarks upon amusements of this kind, Flecknoe says that 'all the wit and art is to contrive the lots as may best fit the qualities of every one,' and such was no doubt the object of Shakespeare in this instance (63).

Knowles, on the other hand, suggests that the verses were prepared for Marston's Entertainment at Ashby:

The 'Entertainment at Ashby' was probably performed in July or August 1607 during the Dowager Countess's summer progress, and may celebrate the formal betrothal of Grey Brydges, 5th Baron Chandos, and Anne Stanley, daughter of the Dowager Countess and her first husband, Ferdinando Stanley, 5th Earl of Derby.

The verses, on the first leaf of a bifolium gummed, or perhaps sealed, into the back of the Dowager Countess's presentation copy [of the Entertainment at Ashby] accompany a gift-giving, perhaps from an accepted suitor to his mistress (472).

The verses themselves offer evidence for both these views. The seven separate references to "harts", as well as the lines "goulden fruit from fruitles tree", "fruit that is to earlie gotten" and "Drawe where youe list, for in this tree/ Your fortune can not bettered bee", lend support to Collier's theory that the verses were attached to hearts placed on an artificial tree. Similarly, the fact that many of the verses mention love ("none his trewe Love shall excell"; "youe are his ioye, yours he procures"; "Yf your Love give but hallf his heart"; "Yf your Loves hart doe prove untrue"; "In Love assuredlie ys hee"; "I feare thou loust not mee"; "Then blest ys such a weddinge daye"), supports Knowles' theory that the verses celebrate a betrothal.

However, although Knowles may be right in suggesting that the occasion for which the verses were written was the celebration of a betrothal, his hypothesis that they were prepared for the Ashby entertainment seems doubtful, particularly if the Ashby entertainment took place, as Knowles contends, in July or August 1607. The presence of Lady Compton's name makes it clear that the verses were written prior to 1604, because in 1604 Lady Compton married Lord Buckhurst, and thereafter would have been styled Lady Buckhurst, not Lady Compton.

One of the most striking things about the verses is

their personal quality. Seemingly, a heart and a jewel were presented to each of the ladies, along with verses tailored to reflect, deftly and delicately, the romantic attachment (or lack of it) of each of them. Where the lady had been married for many years (or widowed or remarried), the romantic message is appropriately muted; in the case of the younger women, specific suitors are hinted at; finally, in the case of the youngest members of the group, love is referred to in theoretical terms, or not at all.

If the verses are as personal as this reading suggests, Oxford could well have been their author. He was related to the Earl of Huntingdon through their common ancestor Sir Leonard Hastings (and would, in fact, have been George Hastings' brother-in-law had his marriage contract with Mary or Elizabeth Hastings been carried out). As well, he was related to Lady Stanhope through his second wife, Elizabeth Trentham, and to Lady Derby through his daughter, Elizabeth, as well as to the Pakingtons through his first wife, Anne Cecil. In fact, if family connections were the only criterion, it is difficult to imagine anyone more likely to have written personal verses for Lady Derby's entertainment than Edward de Vere.

Works Cited

- Collier, John Payne. *New particulars regarding the works of Shakespeare*. London: Thomas Rodd, 1836.
- Knowles, James. "WS MS". *The Times Literary Supplement* (1988), April 29-May 5, 472, 485.

RELATIONSHIP OF EDWARD DE VERE TO GUESTS AT LADY DERBY'S ENTERTAINMENT

