

SUMMARY: The letter below was written on 15 December 1577 from Willoughby House in London by Katherine (1519-1580), Duchess of Suffolk, to Lord Burghley. Several documents indicate that in July 1577 the prospective marriage between Oxford's sister, Lady Mary Vere (d.1624) and the Duchess' son, Peregrine Bertie (1555-1601), later Lord Willoughby d'Eresby, was strongly disapproved of by Oxford, by Peregrine Bertie's parents, and apparently by the Queen herself. A letter written by Peregrine Bertie in July 1577 indicates that he was confined to Willoughby House by his parents (see 8ANC 1-10). He says that he is unwilling to 'lose so much occasion' to write, 'since I know not when to recover it again', and that he is 'locked up so fast as I could scarce get pen and paper to be the present messengers of my poor goodwill'. By 15 December, however, it would appear that all parties approved of the marriage, and that not only were the Duchess and her future daughter-in-law on good terms, but Oxford and the Duchess as well. Mary de Vere and Peregrine Bertie were married sometime after Christmas 1577 (see *HMC Rutland*, i, p. 115), and before 12 March 1578, when the Duchess wrote to Lord Burghley asking that he 'grant her daughter [i.e. daughter-in-law] Mary and her husband a bill of impost for two tuns of wine to be taken at Boston or Hull' (see Cecil Papers 160/119).

The letter indicates that by December 1577 it was known that Oxford had become dissatisfied with life as a courtier, and that he was seeking to buy a house in Watling Street. He was also now open to the possibility of reconciliation with his wife, Anne Cecil, and wanted to see the child, Elizabeth Vere, who had been born on 2 July 1575 while he was on his continental tour, and whom he had not yet seen. After returning to England in April 1576, Oxford had estranged himself from his wife on the ground that the child was not his. It is not known whether the plan proposed by the Duchess and Lady Mary Vere to have Oxford see Elizabeth Vere at Willoughby House was carried out. If it was, it would appear that seeing the child still did not incline Oxford to think that it was his, since he did not reconcile with his wife until December 1581, and then only, it would appear, because the Queen had made it a condition of his release from house arrest earlier that year, after he had been imprisoned by the Queen for the birth of his illegitimate son by Anne Vavasour on 21 March 1581 (see Huntington Library HA13066).

The plan proposed by the Duchess of Suffolk in this letter is strikingly similar to the plan proposed by Paulina in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*:

*If she dares trust me with her little babe,
I'll show it to the king and undertake to be
Her advocate to the loud'st. We do not know
How he may soften at the sight of the child:
The silence often of pure innocence
Persuades when speaking fails.* (II.ii.47-52)

Paulina's plan, however, fails. King Leontes disavows the child:

*This brat is none of mine;
It is the issue of Polixenes.
Hence with it, and together with the dam
Commit them to the fire!*

Paulina stoutly replies:

*It is yours:
And might we lay th' old proverb to your charge,
So like you, 'tis the worse. Behold, my lord,
Although the print be little, the whole matter
And copy of the father -- eye, nose, lip,
The trick of 's frown, the forehead, nay, the valley,
The pretty dimples of his chin and cheek, his smiles,
The very mould and frame of hand, nail, finger.
And thou, good goddess Nature, which hast made it
So like to him that got it, if thou hast
The ordering of the mind too, 'mongst other colours
No yellow in't, lest she suspect, as he does,
Her children not her husband's. (II.iii.93-108)*

The transcript of the letter is taken from Ward, B.M., *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford 1550-1604 From Contemporary Documents* (London: John Murray, 1928) pp. 154-6. The transcript of the postscript is taken from Nelson, Alan, *Monstrous Adversary; The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), p. 177.

My very good Lord, upon Tuesday last, Harry Cook being here, & my daughter entering into talk with him of my Lord of Oxford, of his sister, of my Lady his wife, & the young Lady his daughter, at the last he uttered these speeches, that he thought my Lord would very gladly see the child if he could devise how to see her & not to go to her. My daughter said she thought if it might so like him, my Lady your wife would send the child to him, but to that he answered my Lord would not be acknown of it that he so much desired to see it. So because it was but a young man's words, I took no great hold of it.

On Thursday I went to see my Lady Mary Vere. After other talks she asked me what I would say to it if my Lord her brother would take his wife again. Truly, quoth I, nothing could comfort me more, for now I wish to your brother as much good as to my own son. Indeed, quoth she, he would very fain see the child, & is loth to send for her. Then, quoth I, an you will keep my counsel, we will have some sport with him. I will see if I can get the child hither to me when you shall come hither, & whilst my Lord your brother is with you I will bring in the child as though it were some other child of my friend's, & we shall see how nature will work in him to like it, & tell him it is his own after. Very well, quoth she. So we agreed hereon.

Notwithstanding, I mean not to deal in it otherwise than it shall seem good to your Lordship, & in that sort that may best like you I will do what I can either in that or anything else what may any way lie in me. If it be clear about your house here in London, I think, if it may so please you, it were good that both my Lady of Oxford & the child were there, & so the child might be quickly brought hither at my Lord's being here. I would wish speed that he might be taken in his good mood. I thank God I am at this present in his good favour, for one other besides his sister & Harry Cook told me that my Lord would fain have the child a while in my house with his sister, & no doubt of it, if he be not crossed in this his liking, he will sure have me laid to, & then I trust all things will follow to your desire.

I hear he is about to buy a house here in London about Watling Street, & not to continue a courtier as he hath done. But I pray you keep all these things secret, or else you may undo those that now take pains to bring it to pass, if my Lord's counsel should be bewrayed before he list himself. And above all others, my credit should be lost with him if he should know I dealt in anything without his commission, & therefore, my good Lord, I pray you keep it very secret, & write me two or three words what you would have me to do in it.

And thus with my very hearty commendations I commit your Lordship to God, whom I pray to work all things to your comfort. From Willoughby House, this fifteenth of December,

Your Lordship's very assured friend, K. Suffolk.

After I had sealed my letter, I began to remember what grief it would be to my Lady your wife to part with the child, but let her not fear that, for after he hath seen it, it cannot tarry here and though he would, for here is no apt lodging for her, and I doubt not after the first sight but he will be well enough content to come see her at her own home. But if I may counsel, in no wise let him not be crossed in his desire.