

SUMMARY: In this letter written from Greenwich to Lord Burghley on 10 May 1583, Sir Walter Raleigh describes his interview with the Queen concerning Oxford's reinstatement to her favour after his two-year period of banishment from court following the birth of his illegitimate son by Anne Vavasour on 21 March 1581. It is not known what motivated Raleigh to intervene on Oxford's behalf. However since Raleigh, like Oxford, was a descendant of Robert de Vere, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Oxford, and his wife Isabel Bolebec, it may be that distant family relationships played a part (see Richardson, Douglas, *Magna Carta Ancestry*, pp.169-71 at <http://books.google.ca/books>). In the letter Raleigh advises Lord Burghley that someone had 'strangely' persuaded the Queen not to reinstate Oxford in her favour until after a public confrontation between Oxford, Lord Henry Howard, Charles Arundel and others. Since Lord Burghley, Sir Christopher Hatton and Raleigh were all working towards Oxford's reinstatement, the only person with sufficient influence to have persuaded the Queen to delay Oxford's reinstatement is Leicester. A public confrontation was to Leicester's political advantage since all the parties concerned – Oxford, Howard, and Arundel - were his enemies. Raleigh further says that he had suggested to the Queen that since she would never prosecute Oxford, even if anything could be found at this late date for which he could be prosecuted, to subject him to the dishonour of a public confrontation would make him appear 'the less fit either for her favour or presence'. The Queen replied that she meant thereby to 'give the Earl warning'. Moreover Raleigh surmised that she was of the view that her own 'grace might seem the more in remitting the revenge or punishment' of Oxford's offences if she reinstated him after a confrontation in which his offences were made publicly known. Since Oxford had already spent time in the Tower and under house arrest and had been banished from court for two years for the offence of having had an illegitimate son by his mistress Anne Vavasour, the fact that the Queen still wished to give Oxford 'warning' seems patently unjust, as does her view that staging a public confrontation between two high-ranking noblemen, neither of whom she had any intention of prosecuting, would make her appear 'gracious' when she reinstated Oxford to her favour afterwards. Ultimately Raleigh's arguments prevailed over Leicester's. The Queen appears to have agreed with Raleigh that Oxford's continued punishment and disgrace were taking a toll on Lord Burghley's health, a fact she had ignored for the previous two years. On 2 June 1583, Roger Manners reported to the Earl of Rutland that 'after some bitter words and speeches, in the end all sins are forgiven and [Oxford] may repair to the court at his pleasure. Master Raleigh was a great mean herein' (see HMC Rutland 1, p.150). Despite his efforts on Oxford's behalf, Raleigh still seemed to fear Oxford's enmity, as evidenced in his metaphor about laying the serpent before the fire. The transcript below is taken from Latham, Agnes and Joyce Youings, eds., *The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999) pp. 14-15.

The evening after the receipt of your Lordship's letter I spake with her Majesty, and ministering some occasion touching the Earl of Oxford, I told her Majesty how grievously your Lordship received her late discomfortable answer. Her Majesty, as your Lordship had written (I know not by whom lately and strangely persuaded), purposed to

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have new repetition between the Lords [sic] Howard, Arundel and others, and the Earl, and said it was a matter not so slightly to be passed over. I answered that, being assured her Majesty would never permit anything to be prosecuted to the Earl's danger, if any such possibly were, and therefore it were to small purpose, after so long absence and so many disgraces, to call his honour and name again in question whereby he might appear the less fit either for her favour or presence. In conclusion, her Majesty confessed that she meant it only thereby to give the Earl warning, and that, as it seemed to me, being acquainted with his offences, her grace might seem the more in remitting the revenge or punishment of the same. I delivered her your Lordship's letter, and what I said farther, how honourable and profitable it were for [+her] Majesty to have regard of your Lordship's health and quiet, I refer to the witness of God and good report of her Highness.

And the more to witness how desirous I am of your Lordship's favour and good opinion, I am content for your sake to lay the serpent before the fire as much as in me lieth, that having recovered strength, myself may be most in danger of his poison and sting. For answer her Majesty would give me no other but that she would satisfy your Lordship, of whom she ever had and would ever have special care and regard.

Thus being unfeignedly willing to deserve your Lordship's good favour, I humbly take my leave. Greenwich, this present Friday.

Your Lordship's most willing to be commanded,  
W. Raleigh

Addressed: To the right honourable my very good lord, the Lord Treasurer of England.

Endorsed in Burghley's hand: xij Maij 1583  
Master Walter Raleigh concerning the Earl of Oxon