

SUMMARY: The document below is a letter endorsed 19 January 1585 challenging Oxford to a duel written by Anne Vavasour's only brother, Thomas Vavasour (1560-1620) of Skellingthorpe, Lincolnshire.

The letter was written four years after the birth, on 21 March 1581, of Oxford's illegitimate son by Anne Vavasour, and three years after the violent frays in 1582 between Oxford and Anne Vavasour's uncle, Thomas Knyvet (1545/6-1622). Thomas Vavasour's challenge at this late date appears to have been provoked by one or more individuals whom he calls Oxford's 'shadow', 'unworthy instruments', 'forlorn kindred' and 'my abusers'. Nothing further is known either of the identity of the kinsman or kinsmen of Oxford's to whom Vavasour refers, or of the nature of their provocation to Vavasour, if any.

It would appear that Oxford declined to accept Thomas Vavasour's challenge. As had been the case with the challenge to Oxford made in 1579 by Philip Sidney, a mere gentleman like Vavasour was in no position to challenge an earl to a duel. Vavasour refers to this impediment in his letter, urging that Oxford 'use not thy birth for an excuse'. However it seems unlikely that Oxford declined to accept on this ground alone. He had broken off his relationship with Anne Vavasour in the spring of 1581 and had reconciled with his wife at Christmas of that year, and only the year before had been reinstated in the Queen's favour after imprisonment in the Tower and a two-year banishment from court. A duel with Thomas Vavasour under these circumstances would have been pointless. For the will of Thomas Vavasour, see TNA PROB 11/136/511.

For a more detailed discussion of Thomas Vavasour's family background, see TNA SP 12/154/13, ff. 23-4.

If thy body had been as deformed as thy mind is dishonourable, my house had been yet unspotted, and thyself remained with thy cowardice unknown.

I speak this that I fear thou art so much wedded to that shadow of thine that nothing can have force to awake thy base and sleepy sprites. Is not the revenge already taken of thy vildness sufficient, but wilt thou yet use unworthy instruments to provoke my unwitting mind? Or dost thou fear thyself, and therefore has sent thy forlorn kindred, whom as thou hast left nothing to inherit, so thou dost thrust them violently into thy shameful quarrels?

If it be so (as I too much doubt), then stay at home thyself, and send my abusers, but if there be yet left any spark of honour in thee, or jot of regard of thy decayed reputation, use not thy birth for an excuse, for I am a gentleman, but meet me thyself alone, and thy lackey to hold thy horse. For the weapons, I leave them to thy choice, for that I challenge, and the place to be appointed by us both at our meeting, which I think may conveniently be at Newington, or else where thyself shalt send me word by this bearer, by whom I expect an answer.

Thomas Vavasour

Endorsed in Lord Burghley's hand: 19 January 1584, a lewd letter from Vavasour to the Earl of Oxford

Endorsed in another hand: Mr Vavasour, Earl of Oxford, challenge