

"TILTING UNDER FRIERIES": NARCISSUS (1595) AND THE AFFAIR AT BLACKFRIARS

Ever since the printing of W.E. Buckley's 1882 Roxburghe Club limited edition¹ of Thomas Edwardes' *Cephalus & Procris* and *Narcissus*,² printed from the unique Peterborough copy of the 1595 quarto, the *Narcissus L'envoy* has posed an enigma for literary historians. Although convoluted syntax complicates analysis, the *L'envoy* unambiguously functions as an honorific catalogue of major Elizabethan poets: Spenser, Daniel, and Marlowe are all implicated under their respective sobriquets, as Collyn Clout (v.1), Rosamond (vii.1), and Leander (vii.3).³ The *Shakspeare Allusion Book*⁴ identifies the passage "Adon deafly⁵ masking thro,/stately troupes⁶ rich conceited" (ix.1-2)⁷ as a reference to the 1593 satiric epyllion *Venus and Adonis* and, by synecdoche, to Shakespeare himself, an identification followed by Katherine Duncan Jones among others.⁸ Stanzas immediately following the Adonis passage have, however, puzzled scholars by reference to an unidentified poet-dramatist whose "golden art" and "bewitching pen" should have made him "of our rime/The only object and the star" (x.5-6). Ingleby includes these stanzas in his excerpt but remarks that the poet "has not been identified":⁹

Eke in purple robes distaind,
Amid'st the Center of this clime,
I have heard saie doth remaine,
One whose power floweth far,
That should have been of our rime,
The only obiect and the star.

Well could his bewitching pen,
Done the muses obiects to us,
Although he differs much from men,
Tilting under Frieries,
Yet his golden art might woo us,
To have honored him with baies.

(ix-x)

Roxburghe editor Buckley proposed a solution in 1882 which, curiously, has been ignored by all subsequent commentators including Ingleby: "A conjecture must be hazarded as to the person meant [...] whoever he was, he must have been a person of noble birth [...] and of high natural and acquired mental accomplishments".¹⁰ Later Buckley asserts that "if 'purple robes' may mean a Nobleman's robes, it gives some colour to the conjecture of Professor Dowden that Vere, Earl of Oxford, may have been intended,

as his reputation stood high as a poet, and a patron of poets".¹¹ Charlotte Stopes, writing in 1921, concurs that "in the Envoy from *Narcissus*, Edwardes speaks of a distinguished noble poet who 'differs much from men, Tilting under Frieries,'" but does not identify a likely candidate or mention the Dowden-Buckley theory identifying the poet as de Vere.¹³

New evidence allows definitive identification of the phrase "tilting under Frieries" as reference to a notorious series of Blackfriars street fights (1582-85) involving Oxford's retainers. As is well known, Oxford was patron in 1583-84 of the Blackfriars theatre, located in the precinct of the dissolved Dominican enclave of the same name, on the Thames just east of Bridewell. Blackfriars had been a theatrical enclave for many decades, and the office of the Master of Revels had been located there since 1544.¹⁴ Sometime before 1580, when Lyly dedicated his *Euphues and His England* to him, until possibly as late as 1588,¹⁵ Oxford employed John Lyly as his personal secretary and literary manager, to produce plays at various venues including Blackfriars. Lyly later dramatized Oxford's relationship with the Queen in his most famous drama, *Endymion* (c. 1586).¹⁶

Oxford's connections to the Blackfriars district are well known to theatre historians. In spring 1583 he acquired the sub-lease of the Blackfriars playhouse from Henry Evans and transferred it to his agent Lyly. Muriel Bradbrook surmises that "Lyly was trying to amalgamate the children's troupes under Oxford's patronage" and E. K. Chambers adds that in 1583 "Hunnis, Lyly and Evans were all working together under the Earl's patronage, for a company under Oxford's name was taken to Court by Lyly in the winter of 1583-84, and by Evans in the winter of 1584-85, and it seems pretty clear that in 1583-84 at any rate it was made up of boys from the Chapel and Paul's".¹⁷

While these circumstances supply relevant context, a specific link between Oxford and Blackfriars clinches the Dowden-Buckley hypothesis. By 1576 the former Dominican convent, legally an enclave or "liberty" free from the jurisdiction of London civil authorities, had become not only a prominent theatrical district¹⁸ but also a popular site for feuds and duels, which were strictly prohibited by city authorities in London *per se*. "The liberties", writes Stephen Mullaney, "were organized around emblems of

anomaly and ambivalence. What could not be contained within the strict order of the community, or exceeded its bounds in a symbolic or moral sense, resided here".¹⁹

The most notorious of all Elizabethan feuds at Blackfriars was the 1582-83 contretemps between Oxford's men and the retainers of Henry Howard, Charles Arundel, Thomas Knyvet and Thomas Vavasour; ignited by both personal and religious motives,²⁰ the altercation became the most intense and infamous internecine quarrel of Elizabethan England, large enough in scale to enter into the literary legends of the period. A series of bloody public encounters, the result of a quarrel lasting four years (1581-85), eventuated in several deaths and more wounded. "Comme autrefois à Vérone, les rues de Londres furent emplies par les clameurs querelleuses de ces nouveaux Montagues et Capulets".²¹

It might be objected that the *L'envoy* refers to a figure who does *not* tilt under frieries as ordinary men do, and that since Oxford was involved in the feud, he cannot be the one implied. On the contrary, the *L'envoy* definitely alludes to someone of Oxford's elite status; Edward's distinction between the purple-robed poet and the "mortal men" carefully exonerates the former from any responsibility for the behavior of his feuding retainers. This is a customary and expected stance in dealing in print with a powerful nobleman. Historical accuracy was not a consideration; protocol required Edwardes to distinguish sharply between the aristocrat with the "golden art" and his irresponsible retainers who had involved his name in the feud.

The story of the Blackfriars feud is told in numerous documents preserved in London's PRO. In April 1583 the affair became an international scandal when Signior Jeronimo Rocco, the Blackfriars fencing teacher, became embroiled in the fighting. The French ambassador Castelnau de Mauvissière wrote to Walsingham, complaining that Rocco was "threatened by the people of the earl of Oxford, which puts him in great trouble and despair of ever being able to live securely in this realm".²² Before the affair had come to a close in 1584, when Oxford reunited with his wife, both Knyvet and Oxford were wounded, the latter lamed for life.²³

Understandably, the event left an indelible impression in the popular imagination of the era.²⁴ Like the 1581 marriage negotiations between D'Alençon and Elizabeth, which were still topical in the *Fairie Queene* a decade later²⁵ and remained an object of popular gossip well into the mid-1590s, the affair at Blackfriars was an event that shaped an era and entered into the popular mythology of the age.

Starting with B. M. Ward, archival researchers have progressively reconstructed the feud's outlines,²⁶ but only in 1967 did it become known that at least one of the battles in the Knyvet quarrel took

place in the Blackfriars district.²⁷ More recently the entire series of ten relevant PRO documents has been transcribed by Alan Nelson.²⁸ These include a challenge from Thomas Vavasour to Oxford dated as late as January 19, 1585.²⁹ Further references to the feud are preserved in the Foreign State Papers and other sources, confirming that it was one of the most infamous events of the 1580s, as Albert Feuillerat had already suggested in 1910.

The newly transcribed documents confirm that Oxford's men, in spring 1582, were definitely "tilting under frieries" at Blackfriars. A June 22, 1582 inquiry "into the skirmishes which occurred at Blackfriar's Monday June 18"³⁰ records the testimony of three witnesses, including Gerrard Ashebye, who describes how he returned to the fray "att the black ffryers stayres & their he hard emongst the watermen that there should be a freye between my Lord of Oxford[es men]³¹ & mr Knevit [...] and thereupon he went to Cave[ll]rleyese schole of ffence in the blacke ffreyres & ther finding a staff" proceeded to join the fray. The interrogatory also preserves confirming testimony from two other men, Roger Daobye and William Brooke.

Close reading of the Edwardes's passage confirms the relevance of the Blackfriars episode as an explicating context. The polysemantic connotation of the word "under", in the phrase *tilting under frieries*, furnishes a definite clue to the poem's referent. The most obvious implication of the word in this context would be "with reference to something which covers [...] or conceals" (OED 6, 3487), but another, dispensatory, meaning points directly at the Blackfriars liberty: "denoting subordination or subjection [...] to power or force exercised by some person or persons" (12), with "abstract or other s<subject>s. denoting authority or control, without specification of the person or persons exercising it" (13) and even, critically, "under trust, in a state of supposed safety"³² (19.b). All these latter meanings suggest the special legal prerogatives of the liberty that furnished protection from civil authority and redereed it such a popular jurisdiction for taboo activities such as theatre and duels. If *frieries* does refer to the Blackfriars liberty, and *under* to the outlaw Blackfriars jurisdiction that shielded feuds and duels from city authorities, then the poet must be referring to the most famous of Elizabethan "tilts" at Blackfriars, in which the Earl of Oxford's men faced off against the followers of Thomas Knyvet. Confirming the identification, the poet is said to reside "Amid'st the Center of the clime", i.e. in the Midlands. Ruth Loyd Miller³³ suggests that during the 1590s, Oxford's Bilton House estate on the Avon river in Warwickshire had become his customary retreat from the hectic life of London and the court.

The significance of this finding, identifying Oxford as the poet with the "bewitching pen", who "should

have been" – but cannot be – the "only object and the star" of the chorus of the Elizabethan poets, should not be underestimated. Edwardes evidently labors under an enforced discretion, and the constraint is echoed in other Elizabethan praise of Oxford's literary talent: although identified in 1586 by William Webbe as the best of the court poets,³⁴ and in 1598 by Francis Meres as a writer of superlative comedies,³⁵ in 1589 the anonymous author of the *Arte of English Poesie* writes that he would be counted foremost among the Elizabethan writers only "if his doings could be found out and made public with the rest" (italics added).³⁶ Likewise, Edwardes writes of a poet who "should have been" the greatest star of the poetic firmament but who – whether for reasons of class protocol or political discretion – is not.

This note has documented the relevance of the 1581-85 affair at Blackfriars to the explication of Edwardes's *L'envoy to Narcissus*. Without doubt, the 1582-83 Oxford-Knyvett affair at Blackfriars was the most striking instance of "tilting under Frieries" during the thirty-seven years of Elizabeth's reign that informed the imagery and diction of Edward's enigmatic poem. Before the fray had ended, a literary peer of the realm had been lamed for life, and followers of both factions wounded or killed. The concealed poet of "bewitching pen" and "golden art" – whose men were in 1582 notoriously "tilting under frieries" – is none other than the still controversial Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550-1604).

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NOTES

1. *Cephalus and Procris. Narcissus. By Thomas Edwardes. From the Unique Copy In the Cathedral Library, Peterborough.* Edited by Rev. W. E. Buckley, M.A. With an Appendix from Diverse Sources. Printed for the Roxburghe Club. London: Nichols and Sons, 1882.
2. STC # 7525.
3. Thomas Edwardes, DNB 544.
4. C. M. Ingleby, L. Toulmin Smith, F. J. Furnivall et al., *The Shakspeare Allusion-Book: A Collection of Allusions to Shakspeare From 1591 to 1700*, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1909), vol. 1, 25.
5. OED, "deafely": obscurely to the ear; cognate with "deavely": lonely, silent, solitary.
6. The curious phrase "stately troupes" has received scant attention – are those tropes, troops, or both?
7. All quotes from the *L'envoy* are from Buckley, *Cephalus and Procris...*, 62-63.
8. Katherine Duncan Jones, "Much Ado With Red and White: The Earliest Readers of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*" (1593), *Review of English Studies* XLIV, 176 (1993), 489-93: Edwardes "folds the poem in on itself, making

Shakespeare both creator and subject, poet and critic".

9. Ingleby et al., *The Shakspeare Allusion-Book*, 26.
10. Buckley, *Cephalus and Procris...*, 336.
11. Buckley, *Cephalus and Procris...*, 340.
12. Charlotte Carmichael Stopes, "Thomas Edwardes, Author of 'Cephalus and Procris, Narcissus,'" *Modern Language Review* (xvi:3-4) July-Oct. 1921, 209-23.
13. For a general account of de Vere's life see B. M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550-1604) From Contemporary Documents* (London: John Murray, 1928). J. Thomas Looney in 1920 first argued that de Vere wrote behind the mask of the name and person of William Shakespeare in his "Shakespeare" Identified as Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (London: Cecil Palmer, 1920), a proposition updated in 1984 by Charlton Ogburn Jr. in *Shakespeare: The Myth and the Reality* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1984), and more recently in Mark Anderson's *Shakespeare By Another Name* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005).
14. Irwin Smith, *Shakespeare's Blackfriars Playhouse* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), contains a comprehensive bibliography on the theatrical practices of the Liberty up to 1964.
15. Warwick Bond, *The Complete Works of John Lyly* (Oxford: Clarendon Place, 1902), 4 vols. (vol. 1, 47) believes the association ended as early as 1585, but definite evidence dating its end seems to be missing.
16. See Josephine Waters Bennett, "Oxford and *Endimion*", PMLA, 57 (1942), 354-69. Richard Dutton, in *Mastering the Revels* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1991), summarizes a critical tradition in which Bennett's essay is "considered by many one of the most convincing of topical allegorical interpretations of an Elizabethan play" (56).
17. E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), vol. 2, 101. The effort to amalgamate forces at Blackfriars swiftly ran aground of legal complications. In May 1584 the courts transferred possession of the Lyly-Farrant lease to William More. This promptly ended the activities of the Chapel children under Lyly and Oxford's direction; the theatre only re-opened, under the direction of Henry Evans and Nathaniel Gyles in a playing space remodelled by James Burbage, in 1597.
18. As a liberty the district was protected from citizen protests against theatrical enterprises. For the same reason, of course, Burbage constructed the Theatre in 1576 within the former Benedictine liberty of Holywell in Finsbury Field in Middlesex, outside the city jurisdiction.
19. Stephen Mullaney, "The Place of Shakespeare's Stage in Elizabethan Culture", *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Accessed on October 3, 2006, <http://www.personal.umich.edu/~mullaney/pdf%20files/liberties/pdf3>.
20. Knyvet was the uncle of Anne Vavasour, the court lady who bore Oxford's out-of-wedlock son in 1581. Howard and Arundel, both Catholics, were angered when Oxford informed on them in December 1580 for

plotting against the crown after being invited to join the conspiracy. B. M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford from Contemporary Documents* (London: John Murray, 1928), 206-31, provides a balanced account of the matter. For a complete transcript of the official documents pertaining to the cause, see Nelson, <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson/LIBELS/libel7.html#7.1>.

21. "The streets of London were filled with the quarrelling clamours (*clameurs querelleuses*) of these new Montagues and Capulets": Albert Feuillerat, *John Lyly: Contribution à l'Histoire de la Renaissance en Angleterre* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1910), 126.

22. *Calendar of State Papers, Foreign Series, of the Reign of Elizabeth (January-June 1583 and Addenda. Preserved in the Public Record Office*. Edited by Arthur John Butler and Sophie Crawford Lomas (London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1913), #9: 269.

23. See Cecil papers 31/45, a March 25, 1595 letter from Oxford to Robert Cecil in which he promises to "attend yowre Lordship as well as a lame man may at yowre house".

24. The argument that an event such as the Blackfriars affair, occurring primarily in 1582-83, would have exhausted its topical force by 1595, is misplaced. As is well known, Elizabethan literary memory was a plastic medium; the great events of public life were often remembered long after-the-fact in print. The affair at Blackfriars was one of those great events that impressed itself on the memory of an entire generation. The number of extant documents preserved mentioning the feud testifies to its magnitude in public consciousness.

25. As Marion Taylor reminds us in *Bottom, Thou Art Translated: Political Allegory in A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Amsterdam: Rodopi NV, 1973), Spencer parodied the Alençon marriage negotiations in *The Faerie Queene* (1591), a text not published until more than ten years after the height of scandal: "Alençon and his envoys were so well

known in London that even in 1594-95, when Alençon had been dead for over a decade, they were remembered in the English capital" (207).

26. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford...*, 227-31.

27. Gwynneth Bowen, "Touching the Affray at the Blackfriars", *Shakespearean Authorship Review* (#18: 1967), 1-7.

28. <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson/LIBELS/libel7.html#7.7>. Accessed on October 2, 2006.

29. BL Lansdowne 99[/93] ff. 252-53.

30. PRO SP 12/154/[/11], ff. 20-21.

31. Parentheses Nelson's.

32. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically Volume II P-Z. Oxford University Press, 1971, 3487.

33. Ruth Loyd Miller, ed., *Shakespeare Identified in Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford and The Poems of Edward de Vere*, by J. Thomas Looney, 3rd ed. revised and annotated (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975), 2 vols., vol. 2, 355-69.

34. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford...*, 146.

35. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford...*, 264.

36. *The Arte of English Poesie, Carefully Edited by Edward Arber* (London: 5 Queen Square, Bloomsbury, 1 December 1869), 75. The anonymous author also praises Oxford (77) as one deserving "the hiest price" – along with Richard Edwardes – "for Comedy and Interlude". The book was originally published, with a dedication to Lord Burghley, in or around June 1589 and is conventionally attributed to George Puttenham.