

A Yorkshire Tragedy

By Richard Malim

In 1560, Amy Robsart, wife to Robert Dudley, afterwards Earl of Leicester and favourite of the Queen, died after a fall down the stairs at Cumnor. While Leicester was cleared of blame at the subsequent inquest, his absence at the funeral and at the inquest no doubt added fuel to the rumour perpetrated by his enemies that his wife was pushed at his instigation so that the widowed Leicester would be available to marry the Queen. For reasons to do with religion, the Queen's partiality, politics, and Leicester's management of some of his estates during his wardship, the Earl of Oxford was Leicester's inveterate foe. Oxford has been credited with the splendid scurrilous libel (or was it?) entitled, *Leicester's Commonwealth*, detailing the favourite's many sins and character deficiencies. Now consider this extract from *A Yorkshire Tragedy*:

Husband (to maidservant): 'Are you gossiping, prating, sturdy queane ?
 Ile break your clamor with your neck: down staires!
 Tumble, tumble, headlong !' - *throws her down* So!
 The surest waie to charme a woman's tongue
 Is break hir neck: a politician did it.

-Scene V, ll.10-14

"Politician" is a particularly rude word in Shakespeare.

A Yorkshire Tragedy was published in 1608 with "Written by W. Shakspeare" on the title leaf, a year after a play on the same subject was published by Thomas Wilkins. Both were ostensibly followed by a pamphlet detailing a crime of 1605 involving a wife attacked by her husband, a Mrs. Calverly, and the murder of two of their children. The contents of the pamphlet have been closely analysed by Nina Green in the *Edward de Vere Newsletter*, who clearly identifies the inconsistencies in the pamphlet, in particular where it refers to the Calverly murders of 1605, and believes, instead, it borrows from the play.

Personally, I believe the play is as old as the original version of *Arden Of Feversham*, called *Murderous Michael*, which was performed at Court at Shrovetide in 1577-8. Michael was Arden's body servant, and his membership in the conspiracy to murder Arden must have been particularly shocking to the Court. The two professional murderers were George Shakebag and Black Will. The signing off speech of Black Will is well known to Oxfordians, with its links to the Gads Hill incident in *Henry IV Part I* and *The Famous Victories*. The ending speech of George Shakebag reads as below – and I hope I am not being too fanciful in linking *A Yorkshire Tragedy's* use of the word 'charme' to "widow Chambly:"

The widow Chambly, in her husbands dayes,
 I kept; and now he's dead, she is growne so stout
 She will not know her ould companions.
 I came thither, thinking to haue had
 Harbour as I was wont,
 And she was ready to thrust me out at doores;
 But whether she would or no, I got me vp,
 And as she followed me, I spurnd her down the staires,
 And broke her neck, and cut her tapsters throat ...

- Act V, Scene ii lines 1-9

A letter specifically linking the 1577-8 performance of *Murderous Michael* with Oxford is discussed in my book, *Edward de Vere and the Making of Shakespeare* (pg. 87).

How could the writers of these two plays – and I think the young Oxford was author of both – get away with such clear references to Amy Robsart's death unless, like Oxford, he had a high position at court and supporters to enable him to take the obvious risks? Leicester, and in particular his family after his death in 1588, would be desperate for revenge and the suppression of the plays. Perhaps the plays were deliberately omitted from the 1623 folio at the instance of the "incomparable pair" of brothers, the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, Leicester's great-nephews, who were otherwise quite willing to lend their names to its production, perhaps for political anti-Spanish marriage reasons, although Montgomery was also Oxford's son-in-law.

Notes

Quotations from C.F.Tucker Brooke: *The Shakespeare Apocrypha*, Clarendon 1918

J. Bate and E. Rasmussen (ed): *William Shakespeare And others – Collaborative Plays*: Palgrave Macmillan 2013.

Wolfgang Clemen: *English Tragedy Before Shakespeare*, Methuen 1961. For the plays not mentioned by Clemen, see Malim below and the credits given in my book to the Oxfordian researchers in it.

K. Duncan-Jones: *Ungentle Shakespeare*. Arden Shakespeare 2001: p.209-212, commending the favourable opinion of recent editors of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, Cawley and Gaines: Manchester 1988. She does not mention Arden.

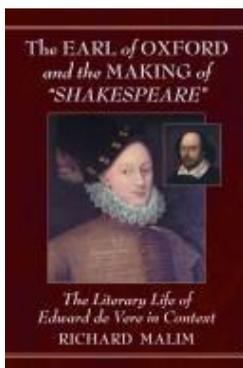
Nina Green: Edward de Vere Newsletter, no.21 – November 1990: This essay has not attracted as much attention as it ought.

L. Hopkins: 'A Yorkshire Tragedy and Middleton's Tragic Aesthetic,' *Early Modern Literature Studies* 8.3 - January 2003. She astutely picks up the similarity of the quotations as regards Leicester (for which I am grateful), but not, of course, the Black Will / George Shakebag and the Arden / Henry IV Part I Gads Hill connotations. Now that would be a slippery slope.

R.C.W. Malim: *The Earl of Oxford and the Making of 'Shakespeare'*, McFarland 2011: Addenda for p.285 n.11 expands some of Nina Green's argument. De Vere Society website (www.deveresociety.co.uk DVS Publications).

C. Skidmore: *Death and the Virgin*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson 2010 - does everything but bring in a verdict of guilty against Leicester for the Amy Robsart murder.

A. Swinburne: *A Study of Shakespeare*, Heinemann 1920: pp 132 – 141.



The identity of Shakespeare, the most important poet and dramatist in the English language, has been debated for centuries. This historical work investigates the role of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, and establishes him as the most likely author of the Shakespeare canon.

Topics include the historical background of English literature from 1530 through 1575, major contemporary transitions in the theatre, and a rich examination of Oxford's life and the events that led to his literary prominence.