

Southwell¹ and Oxford

By *Richard Malim*

Robert Southwell, born to a Norfolk family of gentry in about 1560 and Edward de Vere 17th Earl of Oxford, born in Essex in 1550, were related, as Southwell was a direct descendant of Oxford's grandfather, John 15th Earl of Oxford, and thus a first cousin by remove. This essay seeks to determine what, if any, was their relationship and how, if at all, their paths may have crossed.

Southwell² was a senior Jesuit priest intent on the reconversion of England back to a Catholic country owing spiritual obedience to the Pope. After a life of holiness and courage, he was arrested, tortured over a long period, tried and sentenced to death on 18 February 1594/5 by hanging, drawing and quartering – the penalty for a traitor, which is how being a Catholic priest was viewed. The execution took place on 21 November. Southwell was also responsible for a quantity of religious literature and poems. His work is not aligned to the styles popular in the last ten years of his life, no doubt because of his missionary lifestyle; it smacks more of the 1570s and early 1580s. C.S. Lewis, who was an admirer, wrote that “Southwell’s work is too small and too varied for greatness: but it is very choice, very winning and highly original.”³

During a lull in his missionary work, and while he was not on the run, he put together a volume of his poetical works⁴, the second edition of which was published in 1595/6 and contained a slightly longer version of the dedicatory poem ‘The Authour to the Reader,’ beginning “Dear eye...” and ending with these lines:

Still finest wits are ’stilling *Venus*’s rose, /distilling
 In paynim toys the sweetest veins are spent, /pagan
 To Christian works few have their talents lent.

License my single pen to seek a phere /companion
 You heavenly sparks of wit show native light;
 Cloud not with misty loves your orient clear
 Sweet flights you shoot, learn once to level right.
 Favour my wish, well-wishing works no ill
 I move the suit, the grant rests in *your will*.” [my italics]



Many have commented how these lines seem to be a plea to the author of *Venus and Adonis* to be a companion of Southwell's in the production of 'Christian works,' and this might be borne out by the Dedicatory letter also included in the second and all subsequent editions, "The Author to his Loving Cosin." In the 1616 edition, this is expanded and becomes "To my worthy good cousin, Master W.S.," and signed off (unlike the earlier editions, which are devoid of any such signature), "Your loving cousin R.S." The earlier editors and printers might well have balked at putting words which might more readily identify the dedicatee and the condemned traitor-poet.

The knowledgeable reader of 1616 would realise, helped by the 'Venus' reference above, that 'William Shakespeare' the poet of *Venus and Adonis* was 'Will,' the intended addressee inferred from the dedicatory poem above.

The letter has one main point, namely that poetry is to be in the service of God and not of the devil:

But the devil, as he affecteth deitie and seeketh to have all the complements of divine honour applied to his service, so hath he among the rest possessed also most Poets with his idle fansies. For in lieu of solempne and devout matter, to which in duety they owe their abilities, they now busie themselves in expressing such passions as only serve for testimonies to what unworthy affections they have wedded their wills.

This seems to be the politest way it was possible for Southwell to express his repugnance of the passions displayed by dramatic poetry, exemplified above by Shakespeare's tragedies. And if that were not connecting inference enough, Southwell tells his cousin that if he does not like the poems ("a blame-worthy present"), "you cannot be faultlesse that did importune me to commit it and therefore you must beare part" of that blame for them, which appears to mean that the cousin either directly or indirectly (by turning to devil-inspired works – perhaps such as *Venus and Adonis* – is to some extent responsible). The final sentence, in lighter and more intimate tone, reads, "In the meane time, with many good wishes, I send you these few ditties: adde you the tunes, and let the Meane, I pray you, be still a part in all your musicke." These references would seem to confirm that the 1616 version is a true copy of the original manuscript, unless the Jesuits are accused of a highly sophisticated – and utterly pointless – forgery.⁵

So where do these scraps of evidence take the authorship controversy? William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon (1564-1616) cannot be the addressee. Over in Warwickshire as a member of a staunch Protestant family, he was no ‘cousin’ – however widely the term was then applied – to the Norfolk Southwells, although a connection via two or three marriages is made with the Catholic Warwickshire Ardens, in a frantic effort to connect them with Shakspeare’s mother, without any prospect of substantiation.⁶ The Veres, on the other hand, were closer both geographically and in blood. The printers of the various editions up to 1604 might feel constrained to save embarrassment, and worse to Oxford, not to draw any further link between the executed traitor-poet and the Earl, but with Oxford dead in 1604, by 1616 the problem disappears, and W.S. can be put into the heading of the dedicatory letter.

Fortunately for us, the last week in the life of Southwell is well covered by contemporary documents.⁷ An account in Spanish, and based, as far as Southwell’s life is concerned, on translations of papers received from England, was published in 1599 in Madrid by Diego de Yepes.⁸ It contains the only account of an incident that occurred on the night before his execution:

There came to him in his prison an English Nobleman of high rank (un señor de titulo de Inglaterra), who besought him earnestly (a very lame translation of “le pidio con una severissima conjuración”), as he was now to quit this life, to tell him whether that was true which he had been charged with, namely he had come to detach the subjects from their obedience to the Queen. He replied that he never had that intention, nor plan to make or procure any evil towards the Queen or any other person in the Kingdom and that his intention had always been to procure the salvation of as many as he could: for that purpose he had come to England to help them with the services of his calling, teach them the truth of the Faith and administer the Holy Sacraments of the Catholic Church ... The nobleman (“cavallero”) was shocked/astounded/horrified (“espárado” in the original, rendered as “espantado”) with such an answer, and went and told the Queen, who said she lamented his death.

I cannot see that Southwell would have had any opportunity of passing on this account or writing it up himself, and even if he had, he was not the sort of man who would have lent his name to a fake story. The account must have come from the other participant, the nobleman. So the question is, who could it have been?

The nobility of England in the mid-1590s⁹ was quite a small coterie consisting of one old Marquess, 18 Earls, two Viscounts and 37 Barons, of whom three were women and one was a child. All as far as can be ascertained were supporters of the regime, although some hardly make it on to the radar of history and can be treated as regime supporting non-entities. Some were known to be Catholics, like Northumberland (E), Montague (V), Bindon (V) and Effingham (B), with only Vaux (B) as an obvious public recusant. The coterie round the Earl of Essex would seem to be too young and featherbrained to be the person for who we are looking.

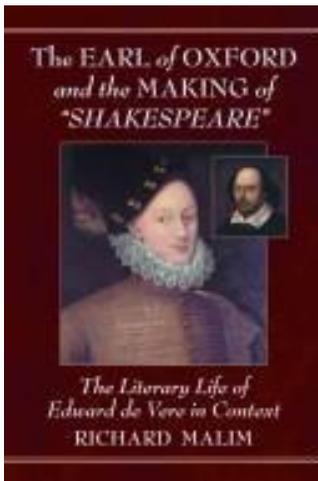
There is one exception to that generality: Baron Mountjoy was a friend and supporter of Essex and had turned himself into a competent soldier, illustrated by his subsequent career in Ireland, where he cleared up the mess left by Essex, and by 1603 finally put down the Irish rebellion. He attended the execution of Southwell at Tyburn¹⁰, and although no other noble is named or stated to be present, it is likely that there was quite a party of young Essex-type nobility at the scene. After Southwell had addressed those present and prayed for them, the hangman put the rope round his neck in such a way that the knot that should have been under one ear, slid to the back of Southwell's neck. Having hanged Southwell, the executioner was about to cut him down in preparation for drawing and quartering, when Mountjoy interrupted and caused him to pull sharply on Southwell's legs, breaking his neck and killing him, an act described by one witness as one of unusual courtesy and humanity.

Commentators seem therefore to think that Mountjoy is the most likely nobleman to have been Southwell's last visitor. Mountjoy was, however, only thirty-three years old at the time, and the first reference to the noble visitor is that he questioned Southwell, who was perhaps two years older, "con una severissima conjuración," which seems more likely the behaviour of a somewhat older man. Oxford was forty-four years old at that time; he had spent part of his life as an actor,¹¹ and as a young man, had eviscerated Bruno at their meeting in *La Cena de le Ceneri*.¹² Thus, it sounds as though the nobleman had come not to comfort Southwell but to cross-examine him, which accounts for the shock and surprise that Southwell's answer caused. As far as we are told, the pair were alone together. It is extremely unlikely that Southwell would have either faked the encounter or had any opportunity to record it. The most likely scenario is that the nobleman himself was the recorder, both of the encounter and of the subsequent conversation with the Queen. He would be able to see that his account would reach those who would be able to have it published.

Thus, Oxfordians can have some confidence that the man to whom Southwell addressed his book of poems and his noble visitor were the same: Oxford.

Notes

1. Southwell was canonised by the Pope in 1970
2. Southwell's career is covered in two books ; Christopher Devlin: *The Life Of Robert Southwell: Poet and Martyr* : Longman Green & Co., London1956 ; and Pierre Janelle: *Robert Southwell The Writer*: Paul P. Appel, Mamaroneck, N.Y. 1971
3. Lewis *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century excluding Drama* p.546
4. Grosart: *The Complete Poems of Robert Southwell*; 1872 - see Google. Grosart, a Scots Presbyterian minister, does not include the 1616 headline and signature to the 1616 edition which he might fear to have been too much of a link between "Shakespeare" and a Catholic martyr
5. Devlin p.355n.5
6. Devlin p.264 provides a family tree!
7. Devlin pp.358-9 provides a full list and throughout identifies his sources
8. Yepes: *Historia Particular de la Persecucion de Inglaterra*: Madrid 1599. While Janelle pp.86-7 supplies some extracts of the Spanish version (not always accurately) the full version is now on Google. The extracts are translated in Devlin and followed by Janelle and referred to in the main text above. One suspects there must have been an earlier Protestant (Grosart-esque?) translation version. Kerstin Tegloff Delgado offers "shocked" for "espárado" below.
9. My listing owes a good deal to *Wikipedia's* contributor
10. Mountjoy's career – *Wikipedia*. His presence at the execution and the execution generally – authorities listed in Devlin p.359
11. Oxford as actor: Malim: *Oxford the Actor in Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* – Vol. 193 pp.112ff: Gale Cengage Learning 2011 - from *Great Oxford* 212ff (Parapress, Tunbridge Wells 2004)
12. Malim: *Torquatus: the Man with the Twisted Necklace*. De Vere Society Newsletter January 2015 p.4ff



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