

Oxford's Final Love Letters to Queen Elizabeth

by Robert Prechter

Thomas Proctor's compendium of verse titled *A gorgeous Gallery, of gallant Inventions...by divers worthy workemen* (1578)¹ contains ninety-two poems. I count sixteen of them as Oxford's. By far the most important among them are three poems that appear to be Oxford's personal entreaties to Queen Elizabeth, written after what seems to have been—and, in light of these poems, must have been—their affair of approximately 1571 to 1574, as postulated in numerous Oxfordian sources. The poems' titles and first lines are:

- 1) *A loving Epistle, written by Ruphilus a yonge Gentilman, to his best beloved Lady Elriza ("Twice hath my quaking hand")*
- 2) *Narsetus a wofull youth, in his exile writeth to Rosana his beloved mistresse, to assure her of his faithfull constancie, requiring the like of her ("To stay thy musinge minde")*
- 3) *The Lover forsaken, writeth to his Lady a desperate Farwell ("Even hee that whilome was")*

(Numbers below in parentheses refer to these three poems.)

The addressee of these poems is easy to discern. The name *Elriza* is an anagram for *Eliza R*, i.e., Eliza Regina. *Rosana* is another name for Queen Elizabeth, the only woman then living whose symbol was the Tudor Rose.

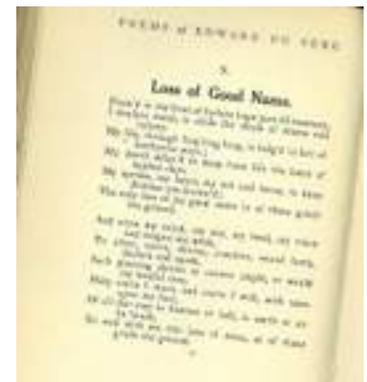
Who is addressing the Queen? One of the most revealing aspects of the three poems is how similar some of their lines are to those in the Earl of Oxford's poem, "The Loss of My Good Name." The final stanza of that poem reads:

Help gods, help saints, help sprites and powers that in the heaven do dwell,
 Help ye that are to wail, ay wont, ye howling hounds of hell,
 Help man, help beasts, help birds and worms that on the earth doth toil,
 Help fish, help fowl that flocks and feeds upon the salt-sea soil,
 Help echo that in air doth flee, shrill voices to resound
 To wail this loss of my good name, as of these griefs the ground.

The three poems from *gorgeous Gallery* resound with Oxford's words, images and parallel constructions:

Help thou Minerva, graunt I pray, some of thy learned skill.
 Help all you Muses nine, my wofull Pen to write: (1)

Let all the furies forth, that pine in Hell with payne,
 Let all their torments come abroad...



Come wilde and savadge beastes, stretch forth your cruell pawes,
Dismember mee, consume my flesh: imbrew your greedy jawes. (3)

And yee my sences all: whose helpe was aye at hand...
Yee sonne, ye moone and starres...Forbeare to show your force a while. (3)

Yet for the worldly shame...
Or for the losse of your good name.... (3)

We may reasonably conclude, then, that these poems are missives from Oxford to Elizabeth.

In keeping with changing authorship—both indicated and hypothesized—within *gorgeous Gallery*, suddenly the versification in the book leaps to a level above that of the surrounding material. The poet begins by expressing his fear and hesitancy:

Twice hath my quaking hand withdrawn this pen away
And twice again it gladly would, before I dare beewray
The secret shrined thoughts, that in my hart do dwell,
That never wight as yet hath wist, nor I desire to tell. (1)

In our proposed context, Oxford would indeed have possessed “secret shrined thoughts,” ones of which no one else was aware (“never wight as yet hath wist”) and which his beloved’s social rank would have barred him from revealing. The poet quickly employs a thoughtful comparison:

But as the smothered cole, doth wast and still consume,
And outwardly doth geve no heate, of burnyng blaze or fume:
So hath my hidden harmes, been harbred in my corpce,
Till faintyng limes and life and all, had welnigh lost his force. (1)

Shakespeare uses *coals* metaphorically fourteen times, including “dying coal” in *Venus and Adonis* (Stz.55) and “dying coals” in *Lucrece* (Stz.197).

The poet next admits, “stand I halfe in doubt,” and hesitates. He finally resolves, “I will lay feare aside” and write. Several lines in the poems link the names *Elriza* and *Rosana* to the Queen by using terms of political power. Consider:

Who yeeldeth all hee hath: as subject to thy will,
If thou command hee doth obey, and all thy heastes fulfill. (1)

I am banisht thus from thee.... (2)

I doo commend to thee: my life and all I have,
Commaund them both as hee best likes; so lose or else to save. (2)

Thou art Queene of women kinde, and all they ought obey.
And all for shame doo blush, when thou doost come in place.... (3)

And every wight on earth: that living breath do draw,
Lo here your queene sent from above, to kepe you all in awe. (2)

One comparison begins with words that imply a throne:

As highest seates wee see: be subject to most winde.... (1)

He says to his poem:

Fall flat to ground before her face: and at her feet doo lie:
Haste not to rise againe [until she] rayse thee with her hand.
...A pardon crave upon thy knee, and pray her to forgeve.... (2)

A LOVING EPISTLE.

WRITTEN BY RUPHILUS, A YONGE GENTILMAN, TO HIS BEST BELOVED
LADY ELRIZA, AS FOLLOWETH.

Twice hath my quaking hand withdrawn this pen away,
And twice againe it gladly would, before I dare beewray
The secret shrined thoughts that in my hart do dwell,
That never wight as yet hath wist, nor I desire to tell.
But as the smothered cole doth wast, and still consume,
And outwardly doth geve no heate of burnyng blaze or fume:
So hath my hidden harmes been harbred in my corpce,
Till faintyng limes and life and all, had welnigh lost his force.
Yet stand I halfe in doubt whiche of these two to choose,
To hide my harmes still to my hart, or els this thraldome loose.
I will lay feare aside, and so my tale beginne:
Who never durst assaile his foe, did never conquest win.
Lo, here my cause of care to thee unfaide I will:
Help thou, Minerva! grant, I pray, some of thy learned skill.
Help, all you Muses nine! my wofull pen to write:
So stuffe my verse with pleasant wordes, as she may have delight
With heedyng eares to reade my greif and great unrest:
Some wordes of plaint may move, perhaps, to pittie my request.
Oft have I heard complaint, how Cupid beares a sway
In brittle youth, and would command, and how they did obey:

Royal suitors had been assailing Queen Elizabeth, as they are Elriza:
 Though Princes sue for grace: and ech one do thee woo
 Mislyke not this my meane estate: wherewith I can nought doo. (1)

And in one line, Oxford seems to identify himself as her subject:

The subject Oxe doth like his yoke: when hee is driven to draw. (1)

The original aphorism shows up in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* (I,i): "In time the savage bull doth bear the yoke."

Many Oxfordians believe that Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* describes Elizabeth's pursuit of Oxford. Echoing an equally unbalanced courtship, the anonymous author of these poems attributes romantic advances firmly to the lady. He speaks of "thy bewailing words" (3), while asserting his own innocence: "Sith first I did you know: I never spake the thing/ That did intend you to beguile" (3). Further fitting Oxford's relative youth, the poet confesses naiveté in allowing his beloved to use him:

Unskilful though I bee, and cannot best discerne,
 Where craft for troth doth preace in place, yet am I not to learne.
 And I did thinke you such: that litle knew of guile,
 But seemings now be plaste for deedes, and please fulwel the while. (2)

The poet's youth, in turn, provides a reason for the lady's reluctance to commit:

Have you thus sone forgot, the doutes and dreads you made,
 Of yongmens love how litle holde, how sone away they fade. (2)

As it happens, a report written in July 1571 to Regent Catherine de' Medici by the French ambassador to England, de la Mothe Fenelon, confirms that Oxford's youth would have doomed a permanent match with Elizabeth. He wrote (in French), "she wanted to tell me freely that, given her age, she would not willingly be led to church to be married to someone who looked as young as the Earl of Oxford and that that could not be without a certain feeling of shame and some regret."²

We may even have evidence to date the start of Oxford and Elizabeth's involvement. At the beginning of the third poem, the poet reveals the length of time he has been enthralled. Speaking of himself in the third person he writes, "thrise three yeeres hath spent & past, reposing all his trust/ In thy bewailing words, that seemed sugar sweet..." (3). Counting back nine years from the publication date of the book gives 1569. By this reckoning, we may conclude that Elizabeth first flirted with Oxford in 1569, when he was nineteen years old. On the other hand, the poet may have taken some temporal license in favor of employing the parallel and alliterative phrase, "thrise three."

The poet refers to "My absence longe" (1), implying that for a time he had left the area. This recollection corresponds with the fact that Oxford had departed for a trip through the continent that had ended just two years before the publication of these poems. Yet he begs his beloved to remember—while using another term fitting her royal prerogative—what drove him away:

But if thou call to minde: when I did part thee fro,
 What was the cause of my exile: and why I did forgo
 The happy life I held, and lost therewith thy sight.... (1)

And I in cares doo flame, to thinke of my exile,
 That I am barred from thy sight. (1)

Some sort of breakup, then, seems to have prompted Oxford to run away, without royal permission, to France in early 1575 and then spend a year on the continent in 1575-76.

Coincident with the time of Oxford's return, the poet's beloved has barred him from her presence. This "exile" confuses him. He hurls a charge of infidelity:

Well mayst thou wayle thy want of troth: & rue thy great unright
 If thou be found to fayle thy vow that thou hast sworne.... (1)

and could you gree thereto?
 Thus to betray your faithful freend, and promis to undo? (3)

Thy fawning flattering wordes, which now full falce I finde...
Yet pardon I do pray: and if my wordes offend.... (3)

He entreats her to explain,

what trespasse have I doone?/ That I am banisht thus from thee... (2)

and wonders if false rumors found her ear while he was gone, thus explaining why she won't see him:

Or if my absence long: to thy disgrace hath wrought mee
Or hindring tales of my back freends: unto such state hath brought mee.
...Yet blame mee not though I doo stand somewhat in feare
The cause is great of my exile, which hardly I do beare. (1)

The poet reminisces about their intimate time together:

And then I call to minde, thy shape and cumly grace,
Thy heavenly hew thy sugred words, thy sweet enticing face
The pleasant passed sportes: that spent the day to end.... (2)

He flatters his beloved by declaring that Venus "Shall yeeld the palme of filed speche, to thee that doth her staine." (2)
Eloquence is one of Elizabeth's well-known traits. He entreats her to answer a heartfelt, personal question: *How are you?*

But oh Rosanna dere: since time of my exile
How hast thou done? and doost thou live: how hast thou spent the while
How standeth health with thee? and art thou glad of chere? (2)

The poet richly describes the anguish of his feelings for his beloved:

O thou Elrisa fayre, the beuty of thine eyes
Hath bred such bale within my brest, and cau'sde such strife to ryse. (1)

Awake, asleape, and at my meales, thou doost torment my brest. (1)

Thus Joyfull thoughtes a while, doth lessen much my payne
But after calme and fayer tides, the stormes do come agayne. (1)

Thy bewty bids mee trust, unto thy promise past,
My absence longe and not to speake: doth make mee doubt as fast. (1)

Despite his hurt, the poet vows eternal loyalty:

But oh Elrisa mine, why doo I stir such war
Within my selfe to thinke of this: and yet thy love so far?
...No length of lingring time: no distance can remooove,
The faith that I have vowed to thee: nor alter once my love. (1)

the greatest care I have,
Is how to wish and will thee good; and most thy honor save. (2)

Though time that trieth all, hath turnde the love you ought,
No changing time could alter mee: or wrest awry my thought. (3)

I doo commend to thee: my life and all I have. (2)

I am all thine, and not my owne. (1)



and begs her to reciprocate:

Bee faythfull sound therefore, bee constant true and just
If thou betray thy loving freend, whom hensforth shall I trust? (2)

But she will not, and perhaps cannot, do so. Befitting our case that the Lord Great Chamberlain is speaking to the Queen of England, the poet understands that their public eminence restrains her and admits they must be discreet, because the world is watching them:

Though Argus jelus eyes: that daily on us tend,
Forbid us meat [meet] and speech also, or message for to send. (2)

But as the third poem's title indicates, the young man by 1578 had finally realized that his quest was futile. He bids his wished lover "a desperate Farewell." In the first poem he had begged her,

Let not thy freend to shipwracke go: sith thou doost hold his helme (1)

yet by the third poem he is resolved to the futility of his hopes:

And I thus tost and turnd: whose life to shipwracke goes.... (3)

The poet proved prescient. Elizabeth ignored Oxford's entreaties, and after her demise the Earl of Oxford wrote to his brother-in-law, Robert Cecil, on April 27, 1603, lamenting,

"In this common shipwrack, mine is above all the rest."³

Shakespeare uses *shipwreck* as a metaphor three times: in *Henry VI Part 1* (V,v): "driven by breath of her renown/ Either to suffer shipwreck or arrive/ Where I may have fruition of her love"; in *Titus Andronicus* (II,i): "This siren, that will charm Rome's Saturnine./ And see his shipwreck and his commonweal's"; and in the positive in *Twelfth Night* (V,i), when Duke Orsino celebrates, "I shall have share in this most happy wrack."

We may be sure that these three poems form a united group, as all of them are linked in terms of theme and language. In addition to the parallels cited above, the term *pistle* meaning *epistle* is in the first two poems; and the image, "hollow lookes, the pale and ledy hew," in the second poem is repeated in the third poem as "pale and lean with hollow lookes." At the outset of the first poem the poet sighs, "Twice hath my quaking hand withdrawn this pen away," in the third poem his hesitancy is augmented: "Thrise hath my pen falne downe: upon this paper pale."

The anonymous poet's writing fits Shakespeare's proclivities. There are parallel constructions, serial questions, metaphors of fishing, birding and sailing, "as...so" comparisons, a mention of Ovid, and effective alliteration, for example: "Then should my sorowes seace, and drowne my deepe dispaire." To shape his entreaties, the poet cites a bevy of classical figures, including Pyramus and Thisby and Troilus and Cressid, whose stories Shakespeare treated in two plays.

The poems are full of Shakespeare's terms and phrases. The line, "A thousand deathes I do desire," echoes Shakespeare in *Henry IV Part 1* (III,ii): "I will die a hundred thousand deaths"; and in *Twelfth Night* (V,i): "To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die." The lines "time too long doth try mee" and "Though time that trieth all" echo in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* (I,i): "as time shall try." Variations of "when time shal serve" appear eight times in six Shakespeare plays as well as in Sonnet 19 of *The Passionate Pilgrim*. The metaphor, "Lament unlustie legges: bee lame for ever more," calls to mind Shakespeare's line, "So I, made lame by fortune's dearest spite" in Sonnet 37. The Bard, moreover, links two of these words in *King Lear* (II,iv): "a man's/ over-lusty at legs," and two others in *Henry VIII* (I,iii): "They have all new legs, and lame ones." The poet worries, "stand I halfe in doubt," but resolves, "I will lay feare aside," and muses, "Who never durst assaile his foe: did never conquest win"; Shakespeare offers the same ideas in similar words: "Our doubts...make us lose the good we oft might win/ By fearing to attempt" (*Measure for Measure*, I,iv) and "To outlook conquest and to win renown" (*King John*, V,ii). The line, "No more then water soft, can stir a steadfast rocke," is the flip side of a theme that Shakespeare employs in *Troilus and Cressida* (III,ii): "When waterdrops have worn the stones of Troy"; in *Othello* (IV,iii): "Her salt tears fell from her, and soften'd the stones"; and four times in *Lucrece*, including the mixed-image line, "Tears harden lust, though marble wear with raining."

What may be interpreted as paired *Ver* self-references appear several times in these poems:

I never will agree to like, or looke on other wight.
Nor never shall my mouth consent to pleasant sound.... (3)

Let never soyle bringe forth, agayn the lusty greene
Nor trees that new despoiled are, with leafe be ever greene. (3)

Beleeve this to bee true: that now too true I prove... (3)

and a possible signature also appears to lie within the final line in each of the first and last poems:

And that my love doo never fleet out of thy secret brest... (1)

A better hap and that hee may, a truer Mystrisse finde. (3)

I think these are Oxford's last love letters to Elizabeth before he gave up on being her lifelong companion. Yet as Oxford's and Shakespeare's activities demonstrate, the anonymous poet stayed true to his promise of devoted service.

¹ Proctor, Thomas, ed., *A gorgeous Gallery, of gallant Inventions...by divers worthy workemen*, London: Richard Jones, 1578.

² Fenelon, De la Mothe, July 1571, report to Catherine de Medici. Quoted in Elizabeth Imlay, "Scoop in the Bibliotheque Nationale," *De Vere Society Newsletter* (July 2006): 25.

³ De Vere, Edward, Earl of Oxford. "Personal Letter to Robert Cecil." April 27, 1603. *Letters and Papers of Edward de Vere 17th earl of Oxford: Personal Letters* (#39). Ed. Nelson, Alan H. <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~ahnelson/PERSONAL/030427.html>.

