

THE EARL OF OXFORD CONTRIBUTED TO JOHN GERARDE'S *THE HERBALL* (1587)

By Robert Prechter

The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes (1597), by horticulturist John Gerarde, Lord Burghley's personal gardener, has several interesting features. Primary among them are depictions on the cover of Lord Burghley and Shakespeare/Oxford, as discovered by English botanist Mark Griffiths¹ and elucidated by Alexander Waugh.² The book begins with a dedication to Lord Burghley, two Latin letters of congratulation and a series of laudatory poems, primarily in Latin, most of which are signed by people who clearly existed and who probably composed their pieces. George Baker, who dedicated his *Oleum Magistrale* (1574) to the Earl of Oxford, provides an address in English 'to the Reader.'

There are two poetic contributions in English, one by Thomas Thorney and one by W. Westerman. Thorney's verse has no Shakespearean qualities. Westerman's verse does. The poem is headed, 'In commendation of M. John Gerard for his diligence in simpling, by W. Westerman.' (A simpling is 'an expedition to gather plants.'³) The form of the poem's five stanzas is 'rime royal', which is iambic pentameter rhymed ABABBCC. The poem begins in Shakespeare's grand manner:

Gaze they that list upon the loftie skies,
As rapt with Junoes painted peacocks traine
When in the aire she vaunts hir Argus eies,
And dips hir bowe in partie-colourde raine,
How first she sprede, then wraps it up againe:
Heavens azure curtaine let whose will behold,
Bedashed with aglets and with spangs of gold.

The stanza is full of Shakespearean phrases:

- *Henry VI Part 1* (III.iii.) echoes the second line quoted above: 'Let frantic Talbot triumph for a while/ And like a peacock sweep along his tail;/ We'll pull his plumes and take away his train...'

- *Troilus and Cressida* (I.ii.) echoes the third: ‘purblind Argus, all eyes and no sight.’
- *The Merchant of Venice* (I.iii.) echoes the fourth line in speaking of ‘parti- colour’d lambs.’
- *Cymbeline* (II.ii.) echoes line six in describing a girl’s eyes as ‘white and azure laced/ With blue of heaven’s own tinct.’

Shakespeare mentions Argus thrice and Juno 23 times. There is a clever metaphor combining nature and reading: ‘The fruitfull earth he makes his daily booke,/ And turns such leaves as all his senses knowes.’ The poem ends as follows:

O let the red Rose and the Eglantine
 Vouchsafe their presence in his garland twine:
 Let those faire flowers of our English field,
 Unwitherde long their fragrant odours yeeld.

The line beginning with *O* celebrates the *Rose* (featured in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 1) and *Eglantine*. Shakespeare places the same two flowers together in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (II.i.): ‘Quite over-canopied with ... sweet musk-roses and with eglantine.’ In Shakespeare’s way, the poet adds a ring of patriotism in celebrating ‘our English field’.

W. Westerman, in short, is one of Oxford’s voices.



This article is excerpted from the W. Westerman chapter of *Oxford’s Voices* (www.oxfordvoices.com).

References

1. Griffiths, Mark, ‘The true face of Shakespeare revealed,’ *Country Life*, May 20, 2015.
2. Waugh, Alexander, ‘There’s one obvious reason why this image could only be of Shakespeare,’ *The Spectator*, May 2015, online.
3. Wiktionary.