

The True Testimony of Barnabe Rich: Countering Another of B.M. Ward's Unfounded Charges

by Robert Prechter

In his 1928 book, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford 1550-1604*, B.M. Ward promoted the Earl of Oxford's cause, but he also set it back. To support his supposition that Oxford produced *A Hundreth sundry Flowres* (1573), Ward wove a tapestry of dubious and manufactured evidence to charge Oxford with nefarious actions against Christopher Hatton and George Gascoigne. Numerous Oxfordians have accepted Ward's thesis and have woven it into Oxford's biography, but it melts away under scrutiny.¹

B.M. Ward's² conjecture led him to perpetrate another injustice when he alleged that Barnabe Rich's description of an effeminate fop in the prefacing address titled "To the noble Souldiers" within *Riche His Farewell to the Militarie Profession* (1581, hereinafter *Farewell*) is a caricature of the Earl of Oxford. His thought process went like this: Because Oxford and Hatton were enemies, and because Barnabe Rich dedicated his *Farewell* to Hatton, Rich's lampoon must have been composed at Hatton's instigation and "directed against Lord Oxford...."³ Ward's speculation is breathtaking in scope:

Hatton, as we know, was no friend of Lord Oxford [there are indications to the contrary], and although he does not appear to have taken part in the Areopagos controversy [which is evidence against Ward's claim], we may be sure that he would lose no chance [yet there are no other examples] of ridiculing the man he secretly detested [*secretly* because of the void of evidence]. Such an opportunity occurred when Lord Oxford fell temporarily from the Queen's high favour in January 1581, and there can be no doubt that Riche's lampoon, so obviously directed at Oxford a month after his disgrace, was instigated [no evidence] by the Vice-Chamberlain.⁴

"As we know," "we may be sure," "no doubt," "so obviously"—one must be utterly convinced to use such language in just two sentences. Ward was emphatic, but was he right? I don't think so. The whole supposition is not only far-fetched, but is also contrary to a mass of evidence.

Rich's Target Is an Army Man

Berating effeminate men was one of Barnabe Rich's staples. He elaborated upon the incident later the same year, in *Don Simonides*. Here are his two descriptions:

It was my fortune, at my last beyng at London, to walke through the Strande towards Westminster, where I mett one came ridyng towards me on a footclothe nagge, apparailled in a Frenche ruffe, a Frenche cloake, a Frenche hose, and in his hande a greate fanne of feathers, bearyng them up (verie womanly) against the side of his face.
— "To the noble Souldiers" prefacing *Farewell* (1581)

The last daie as I passed the Strete, I mett one Signior Andrucio, Captaine of our Castle Sainct Angello, bravely beset upon a horse of force, in steede of Armour... meete for a Soldier, he was aparrelled in Crimsin Velvet, imbrodered with Pearle and Stone, in steede of a Launce, he bare in his hands a Fanne of Feathers.... Alas, I am sorie to make you privie to the antique fashion of our foolishe, and effeminate captaine.

—*The Adventures of Don Simonides* (1581), Piii-Piv

It is important to recognize that Rich is talking to and about soldiers. The description in *Farewell* appears in an address "To the noble Souldiers." In *Don Simonides*, Rich clarifies that his disgust pertains to a "foolishe, and effeminate *captaine*." The object of Rich's scorn was not a nobleman, but one of his own profession, specifically the Italian captain of a castle in Rome.

Rich had penned a similar description of dandies three years earlier in *Allarme to England* (1578):

And in their apparel, they must be verie nice and neat, with their ruffes finely set, a greate bundle of feathers thrust into a cappe... so painted forth in their colours....

Rich continued to deride effeminate men in numerous later pamphlets, such as *Faultes, Faults, And nothing else but Faultes* (1606), where he complains of peacetime's effect on men: "it maketh them become Hermaphrodites; halfe men, halfe harlots... that are not worthie the name of men."

Rich was a soldier to his toes. One of the visions he disrelished all his literary life was that of a mincing man of arms.

The Description Fails to Fit de Vere

An objective assessment demonstrates that Rich's description in *Farewell* cannot pertain to the Earl of Oxford:

1. The description says and implies nothing about a nobleman.
2. Throughout his massive canon of some thirty items, Rich never wrote ill of any member of the nobility. Nor would he have dared do so. His typical targets were professionals, merchants, crooked churchmen and inadequate soldiers. The only man of power about whom he complained was Adam Loftus, the corrupt Archbishop of Dublin.
3. Oxford would never have placed himself atop a "nagge" (defined as "An old, useless horse"⁵) for public view. In 1562 he had paraded proudly with "seven score horse, all in black, through London."⁶ In 1581, the publishing date of *Farewell*, Oxford was still extremely wealthy and a decade away from being the

butt of poverty jokes. Ogburn⁷ tried to claim that only a nobleman would drape his horse in a footcloth (“an ornamental cloth draped over the back of a horse to reach the ground on each side”⁸), but surely a captain from Rome could do it.

4. No one, even among Oxford’s enemies, tagged him with dressing as a Francophile from head to toe. In *Speculum Tuscanismi* (1580), Harvey tagged him with wearing “French Camarick ruffs,” but he did not have him, head to toe, in “a Frenche ruffe, a Frenche cloake, a Frenche hose.” As Harvey’s very title testifies, Oxford’s adopted dress was not French, but Italian. Fittingly, the style of the doublet he wears in the Chiljan portrait “is Italian in origin,”⁹ and under his arm is “a gilded Italianate rapier...”¹⁰
5. Certain bits of French fashion provide no evidence of feminine affectation. Two portraits show Oxford wearing “French cambric ruffs,”¹¹ but so do portraits of other manly courtiers, including Edmund Spenser, Sir Amias Paulet and the Duc d’Anjou.¹² Ironically, the ruffs aren’t even French. “The English referred to them as ‘French ruffs,’ but the French called them ‘the English horror.’”¹³ Ditto wisps of feather. The Chiljan portrait shows Oxford wearing a black velvet cap that Queen Elizabeth had just given him, in 1581. “Portraits of Christopher Hatton and Robert Dudley,” two macho dudes, likewise “depict them as wearing black feathered velvet hats like this, a fashion inspired by the French court...”¹⁴ Sporting such accessories was not akin to peeking coyly from behind a fan of feathers.
6. Oxford never conveyed a simpering attitude in either demeanor or action. On the contrary, in the same year as Rich’s first complaint (1578), Gabriel Harvey publicly said of Oxford (in Latin), “Courage animates thy brow, Mars lives in thy tongue” and “thine eyes flash fire.” Oxford’s actions fit that masculine image. He participated in tournaments, which are not a fop’s arena, and consistently won them. He repeatedly entreated the Queen to give him a military command. No carpet knight has that burning desire.
7. Rich’s complaint in *Farewell* goes on to condemn the converse practice of women adopting men’s apparel. “I... rather thought it had bin some shamelesse woman, that had disguised herself like a man, in our Hose, and our Cloakes: for our Dublettes, Gounes, Cappes, and Hattes thei had got long agoe.” In other words, Rich took a stand against all manner of cross-dressing. His motivation was not to condemn or embarrass one individual, but the righteous upholding of what he saw as proper social mores.
8. Other authors of the day echoed Rich’s language. In “Of manie famous pirats,” appended to *William Long beard* (1593), **Thomas Lodge** pens a nearly identical complaint about the same type of horseman, saying, “when he rides you shall know him *by his fan*; & if he walke abroad, & misse his mistres favor about his neck, arme, or thigh, he hangs the head like ye *soldier* in the field yt is disarmed” (emphases added). He goes on to grumble, “it is monstrous in our opinion to see an old man become *effeminate*” (emphasis added). In *The Anatomie of Abuses*

(1583), **Phillip Stubbes** complains of those who display “*effeminat... Nicenes[s]*.”¹⁵

9. In *Oxford’s Voices*, I make a case that Oxford edited and contributed to six of Rich’s books, including *Farewell*. A champion of traditional sex roles would not likely have welcomed working side by side with the object of his scorn, and Oxford would not have contributed to a book in which he was scorned.
10. It would have been impossible for a lowly soldier to have mocked the Earl of Oxford in print and gotten away with it. When Gabriel Harvey did just that in *Speculum Tuscanismi* in 1580, he had to hide out for weeks in a nobleman’s house to avoid severe punishment. That incident occurred the year before Rich’s description came off the press and would have been fresh in writers’ minds. With respect to drama, Jonathan Bate wrote, “it is absurd to suppose that any Elizabethan play might contain satiric references to any aristocrats of the day.... [T]he author of the portrait would have found himself in prison before he could turn round.”¹⁶ Yet Rich, who lived another thirty-six years after the publication of *Farewell*, suffered no retaliation and published freely right up to the time of his death in 1617.

Rich Extols the Earl of Oxford

Now we come to the final refutation of Ward’s claim. The literary value of Rich’s *A Souldiers Wishe* (1604) is low, but its historical value became inestimable upon discovering that it contains a buried gem. Within a discussion of the subject of “Artes,” Rich takes a break to say this to King James:

But now if the goodnesse of a Prince may promise a gracious consideration to the wel deserving: England is made happy in him, whose name is already consecrated to immortalitie, whose Magnificence equalled with Vertue, is able with Caesar, with one hand to holde the Speare in the rest, and with the other to hold the pen: whose Imperiall seate is no lesse renowned by Mars, then beautified by the Muses.

I could wade farther, but it were better for me to conceive in silence, then not being able to utter, might seeme indiscrete. I will therefore heere stay my selfe....

This is a remarkable passage. In previous books, Rich had freely named high-ranking contemporaries whom he wished to praise, as in *Dialogue, betwene Mercury and an English Souldier* (1574), *Epitaph on William Drury* (1580), *A Martial Conference* (1598) and *A looking[-glass] for... Ireland* (1599). But this time, he omits his subject’s name. Rich’s capitalization of *Vertue* and *Speare* identifies him: *Ver* is Oxford’s family name, and *Speare* implies Shakespeare. That the man holds a *Speare* in one hand and a *pen* in the other fits the Earl of Oxford, who was not only **Shakespeare** but also the primary pen-holding Elizabethan about whom contemporaries, in order not to “seem indiscrete,” were uniformly “not able to utter” publicly a single translucent word, much less could they celebrate his clandestine accomplishments. Rich’s discretion likewise prevents him from saying anything overtly about this “wel

deserving” man of England, a man “whose name is already consecrated to immortalitie.” His words are yet further evidence that Oxford’s role as a covert writer was an open secret.

I believe that the context established in *Oxford’s Voices*—in which Barnabe Rich was one of Oxford’s protégés and co-authors—explains the heartfelt feeling Rich expresses here. Rich loved his literary facilitator right up to the end and admired him as a man of both arms and letters, “no lesse renowned by Mars, then beautified by the Muses.” That pair of mythological links fits not only Oxford’s social image but also Rich’s personal experience, because he and Oxford had served England’s military in Scotland and collaborated, by my estimation, half a dozen times for the press.

The man who Rich declares was “renowned by Mars” could not possibly be the same soldier he described mincing behind a fan of feathers. It is ironic that an ugly quote from Barnabe Rich provided fodder for a false construct, whereas a beautiful quote from Rich reveals his true attitude toward Edward de Vere.

Time for Biographical Revision

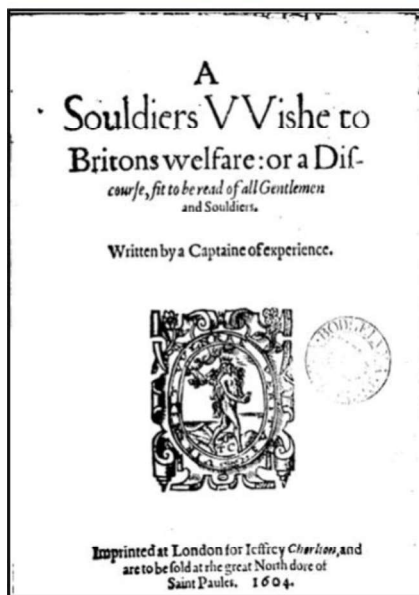
Sadly, Clark,¹⁷ Ogburn¹⁸ and the Ogburns accepted Ward’s fantastical charge, and other Oxfordians have continually

repeated it. As late as September 2021, an Oxfordian asserted that Rich’s “description...of an unnamed English nobleman [sic]...*fits de Vere in every detail*.”¹⁹ As we have seen, it does nothing of the sort.

Speculations based on Ward’s errors have spread like cancer and become part of the tapestry of illusion relating to Oxford’s supposedly suspect nature and character. Alan Nelson, using every brush to paint Oxford in a negative light, quoted the entire Rich passage and gloated, “it may conceivably point at Oxford, *as argued by his apologists*.”²⁰ Score a three-pointer for Nelson. He turned some Oxfordians’ meritless caricature of Oxford against them, and unlike said apologists, he did so with responsibly guarded language.

B.M. Ward’s unfounded derogatory claims about Oxford have made their way into Oxfordian literature. After nearly a century, it’s time to expunge them from his biography.

[This article is excerpted from the George Gascoigne, Barnabe Rich and Those Who Knew chapters of *Oxford’s Voices* (www.oxfordvoices.com).]



References:

- ¹ Robert Prechter, “Hundreth Sundrie Flowres Revisited,” *Brief Chronicles* Vol.2 (2010), 45-77.
- ² B.M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford 1550-1604*. London: John Murray (1928), 193.
- ³ Id. at 192.
- ⁴ Id. at 193.
- ⁵ Wiktionary.
- ⁶ Ward, 15.
- ⁷ Charlton Ogburn, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (2nd ed.). EPM Publications (1992), 642-643.
- ⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary.
- ⁹ Elisabeth Waugaman, “Analyzing the Chiljan Portrait,” *The Oxfordian* Vol. 23, (2021), 321.
- ¹⁰ Id. at 325.
- ¹¹ http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/Nashe/Three_Proper_Witty_Familiar.pdf.
- ¹² Waugaman, 319.
- ¹³ Id. at 318.
- ¹⁴ Id. at 317.
- ¹⁵ *Oxford’s Voices*, moreover, argues that Lodge and Stubbes were allonyms of the Earl of Oxford. If Rich’s quote had described Oxford, Oxford’s Voices (i.e., his allonyms) would not have berated people who fit it.
- ¹⁶ Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare*, as quoted in Rita Lamb, “Does Nashe’s only surviving play contain satire?” <https://sicttasd.tripod.com/theory.html#4>.
- ¹⁷ Eva Turner Clark, *The Man Who Was Shakespeare*. New York: AMS Press (1937), 546-547.
- ¹⁸ Ogburn, 642-643.
- ¹⁹ William Farina, *De Vere as Shakespeare*. McFarland & Co. (2006), 84.
- ²⁰ Alan H. Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*, Liverpool University Press (2003), 228.