

## EDWARD DE VERE, EUPHUISM AND BI-SEXUALITY

By Charles Graves

The bi-sexuality of the 17th Earl of Oxford as appears in four of the plays of ‘Shakespeare’ (*Much Ado About Nothing; What You Will (Twelfth Night); As You Like It; Measure for Measure*) is our topic. The subject is to be seen under the rubric ‘Euphuistic literature of the period 1580–1600’. John Lyly’s books *Euphues, the Anatomy of Wit* and *Euphues and his England* were highly appealing to the gentle ladies of the era of Queen Elizabeth I but in the 17th century, with increasing Protestantism, the appeal diminished. Reprints were made in 1636 and in 1632 and Edward Blount the bookseller reprinted six of John Lyly’s plays.

Key passages are found in *Euphues and his England* – in letters between Euphues and his companion Philautus. Philautus apparently does not approve of Euphues’ ‘praising of women’. ‘*If I love them, they deserve it*’ says Philautus. But Euphues says of English ladies:

Thou sayest I eat my own words, in praying women. No, Philautus, I was never either so wicked, or so witless, to recant truths, or mistake colours. But this I say that the ladyes of England as farre excel all other countries in virtue, as Venus does all other woemen in beauty. I flatter not those of whom I hope to reape benefit, neyther yet so prayse them, but that I think them women: there is no sword made of steel but hath iron, no fire made of wood, that hath smoke, no wine made of grapes but hath leese, no woman created of flesh but hath faults, **And if I love them, Philautus, they deserve *it*.**

The two statements appear to be the same but the origin of the thought is different, as seen in a wider context of the epistles between the two friends: Philautus emphasizes the situation where he, the initiator, loves a woman because he considers her worthy of his love. Euphues, on the contrary, says that because of women’s inherent goodness (besides some faults) he loves them. This is a substantial difference and reveals the special feature of Euphuism and the Euphuistic point of view. And this contrast obliged Euphues to leave an apartment shared with Philautus.



In this context let us note that *Euphues and his England* was dedicated to the *Right Honorable my very good Lorde and Maister, Edward de Vere, Earle of Oxenforde, Viscount Bulbeck, Lord of Escales and Badlesmere, and Lord great Chamberlaine of England, . . . John Lyly wishes long lyfe, with increase of Honour.*

As is known, John Lyly became the personal secretary of Edward de Vere, and his books and plays became very popular with the ladies of England. Apparently, following his second book, Euphues' view of women was not to the taste of his companion Philautus of Naples, and the two separated, which indirectly shows, perhaps, a difference of sexual orientation or, at least, differing views on male–female relations.

We shall see in the four plays the reflection of the views of the author on the role of women in society. In plays of 'Shakespeare' (i.e. Edward de Vere) the Euphuistic point of view becomes quite obvious. For each of the plays there are certain comparable and repeating aspects: (1) the frustration of heterosexual events such as a marriage between men and women; (2) an element or person which frustrates this happy end; (3) a bi-sexual element: either a boy–girl personality or several elements in characters exhibiting lack of heterosexuality; (4) a final resolution where one or several heterosexual couples marry; (5) this resolution effected mainly by women but with the help of men.

All these elements seem to be reflections upon Euphues' perspective upon women–men relations.

It is quite obvious from this data that the author of these works may be considered as a Euphuist which, historically-speaking, included Edward de Vere. We may define the Euphuistic view of men–women relations as follows: (1) men should not treat women as 'objects'; (2) women may take considerable initiative in relations with men; (3) women may solve difficult heterosexual and other social and family problems; (4) men may be privately interested in sexual relations with women (as Philautus, the friend of Euphues) but some men may not express this view in the same way (Euphues); (5) bi-sexual persons (i.e. boy–girls) can solve intersexual problems.

The plays, which in our view were penned by Edward de Vere, seem to illustrate that a bi-sexual perspective is the 'muse' behind their writing and playing. Of course, this is enhanced by the fact that 'St. Paul's Boys' and other



such theatrical groups had boys playing the parts of women. The muse we are referring to was that noted in a number of sonnets written by ‘Shakespeare’ vis-à-vis a beloved ‘boy–man’. This ‘muse’ was apparently a Euphuistic muse.

In *Much Ado about Nothing* the main issue is the accusation that Claudio’s fiancé Hero has been unfaithful to him (a rumour started by henchmen of Don John). The main protagonists against this calumny was the semi-misanthrope Beatrice and she was helped by a semi-misogynist called Benedik. The main criticism of certain males in the play (Claudio and Don Pedro) is that they believed the calumny against Hero without any proof. Beatrice led the attack on this weakness in males. Benedik (a ‘Benedictine monk’ type) was not eager to marry his counterpart Beatrice and freely told this to his companions, but he supported Beatrice when she began her campaign against the misguided jealousy of Claudio. In this sense, Benedik was a Euphuist.

The method by which the calumny was unravelled and the action of the calumniator henchmen of Don John brought to light, was facilitated by a priest who convinced Hero’s father and others that everyone should believe she had died as a result of the calumny against her. Claudio, when he learned that his jealousy was at fault, agreed to marry Hero’s cousin (daughter of Don Pedro’s brother Antonio) in repentance. Of course, at the wedding day, he learns that Hero is alive and then he marries her, his original fiancée. Unexpectedly, Beatrice and Benedik marry. These two persons – who have shown no interest in marriage but who shared ‘Euphuistic’ views – do themselves love each other.

The bi-sexual element is veiled here, but the Euphuistic criticism of the limited sexual view of men regarding women is emphasized. Benedik may not be considered as bi-sexual – there are no indications of this in the play except that he is known as a soldier (mainly in the company of men) rather than as a courtier.

In *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* a ‘bi-sexual personality’ leads the actions i.e. Viola. Saved from shipwreck and finding herself in Illyria she finds employment with the Duke Orsino in the dress of a young man. She believes her brother Sebastian has perished in the shipwreck. Duke Orsino is in love with countess Olivia, but Olivia rejects him (supposedly because of respect for her brother who had recently died). But Viola (as Orsino’s servant ‘Cesario’) falls



in love with her employer Duke Orsino, whereas Olivia, receiving Viola–Cesario as a male emissary from Duke Orsino, falls in love with him as a man. So Viola as a woman but dressed as a man, loves a man (i.e. Orsino) and Olivia as a woman loves another woman (i.e. Viola) believing him to be a man. Does this make Orsino a ‘gay’ and Olivia a ‘lesbian’?

Soon Sebastian (saved from shipwreck) appears on the scene and causes general confusion because Olivia thinks he is ‘Cesario’ (the supposed male sent to woo her on behalf of Orsino). The impediments against allowing heterosexuality to have its full sway over the characters is continued up to the end when, finally, Sebastian and Viola–Cesario are together in one scene and everyone understands that they are brother and sister. Viola’s disguise is shed and the two couples (Duke Orsino–Viola) and (Olivia–Sebastian) are married.

What is the author doing in this play? The author manipulates the complications brought by doubts about the true sex of the players. But the barriers to understanding are being caused mainly by the artificial sex-change of Viola. Thus, she is the main producer of events rather than Duke Orsino or her brother Sebastian. They, at the end, follow men’s natural sexual interests. But the manipulator is ‘bi-sexual’, i.e. Viola. At the end, Viola solves the main problem of the play – the fact that Duke Orsino cannot get Olivia’s agreement to marry him. Perhaps Orsino is living under some misunderstanding about relations with women and this is shown when he, in the end, marries his servant Viola–Cesario rather than his favourite, the countess Olivia. Moreover, Olivia makes a mistake thinking Viola is a man when she was actually a woman. Thus, the only coherent character among all of them is Viola, who had ‘changed her sex’ for the practical reason of procuring employment (from Duke Orsino).

The author’s ‘muse’ has produced this play with bi-sexual manipulation, but the result is good, heterosexual, marriages. The atmosphere is ‘Euphuistic’ in that men’s sexuality is frustrated until bi-sexuality leads them to real heterosexuality. Viola leads Olivia to genuine heterosexuality, i.e. Olivia’s newly found heterosexual love for Sebastian, Viola’s saved-from-shipwreck brother. Thus a ‘bi-sexual’ muse has created a very nice play for viewers who mainly prize heterosexuality.



*As You Like It* has a woman manipulator in the person of Ganymede/Rosalind, a girl–man. The daughter of exiled Duke Senior, she goes into exile in the Ardennes area of France in order to save her life from Duke Frederick, the usurper duke. Duke Frederick's daughter also exiles herself in the person of Ganymede's sister 'Aliena'. The issue is whether Ganymede/Rosalind will marry Orlando (who also has been exiled by Duke Frederick because Orlando's older brother Oliver convinced the duke to do it – in order to save the whole family inheritance for himself). But then, even Oliver is exiled because of the Duke's suspicions about his family loyalty in general.

What makes a marriage between Ganymede/Rosalind and Orlando problematic is that the former is in disguise as a young man (Ganymede) and is not the young woman Rosalind whom Orlando fell in love with. He saw her first during a wrestling match he had with Duke Frederick's wrestler Charles.

'Ganymede' was a Greek mythical personality, a boy who was Zeus' cupbearer and who shared his bed – hence the symbol of homosexual love. So Ganymede/Rosalind, a bi-sexual, is the main, but really female, agent in what happens in the Ardennes forest. One of the rural, forest dwellers she meets is a woman called Phoebe whose unhappy suitor is Silvius. Phoebe, instead of accepting Silvius as husband, falls in love with Ganymede/Rosalind, thinking she is a man. But Ganymede wants to marry Orlando and to oblige Phoebe to accept Silvius as husband. Phoebe refuses, still in love with Ganymede.

Oliver (the older brother of Orlando) appears on the scene and informs Ganymede and Aliena that he also has been exiled and that his brother, although wounded in a battle with a lion, is recuperating in the exiled Duke Senior's company. Oliver falls in love with Aliena, Ganymede's companion (daughter of usurper Duke Frederick). Meanwhile, Touchstone, Aliena's father's jester, has accompanied Ganymede and Aliena into exile, and he loves Audrey, a local Ardennes woman and is trying to get her away from farmer William, a local boy.

So, all the potentially heterosexual 'affairs' are taking place in the Ardennes (as happened in the Euphuist Thomas Lodge's earlier play called *Rosalynde*), but none have the possibility of success (which will only happen at the end when Ganymede/Rosalind sheds her disguise). But the story is prolonged because the



main character keeps this disguise (as did Viola in *Twelfth Night*). All the men, therefore, are dependent upon her ‘bi-sexual’ manipulation of events.

When all is brought before the exiled Duke, the frustrated heterosexuality is resolved and, in the meantime, the exiled duke’s brother, the usurper Duke Frederick, has repented of his injustice and given the kingdom back to the exiled Duke Senior. The final act shows *Hymen* (the Greek mythological god of heterosexual marriage) entering upon the scene and this boy player (manager of women’s chastity and marriage) together with Ganymede (a male obscuring, in this particular drama, the woman Rosalind) together solve the problems related to four heterosexual-oriented marriages.

The males in this play were not able to bring about this happy end. The main person to solve both the exile and also a normal heterosexuality was Rosalind disguised as Ganymede. In typical Euphuistic style, Ganymede and Hymen (both bi-sexual-oriented characters) solve heterosexual problems and the following persons are married: Rosalind–Orlando; Aliena–Oliver; Phoebe–Silvius; and Touchstone–Audrey.

The only discordant note is played by Jaques, an ally of the Duke Senior in exile, who dislikes certain aspects of human society (e.g. hunting deer). The wounded deer is typical of Jaques’ view of the world and fully symbolizes a certain Euphuistic element. At the end of John Lyly’s book (*Euphues and his England*), Euphues returns to Greece (his native land) and retreats into a cave called Silixendra in order to meditate. In 1587 Thomas Lodge (author of *Rosalynde*) published the book *Euphues’ Golden Legacy found after his death in his cell at Silixendra*. And based upon Lodge’s book *Rosalynde*, Edward de Vere (as ‘Shakespeare’) had penned *As You Like It*. Here is a history of Euphues through the ‘Euphuist’ Thomas Lodge and through the Euphuist Edward de Vere.

One of the great proofs that Edward de Vere wrote ‘Shakespeare’s’ works is that it was the 17th Earl of Oxford who was known as a ‘Euphuist’ poet, whereas William Shakespeare was not so considered among the poets of the late 16th century.

*Measure for Measure* is one of the most ‘sexually-oriented’ plays of ‘Shakespeare’. Claudio is condemned for execution in Vienna for having got his fiancée Julietta with child before their official marriage. The story plays out



against a background of the government's concern over the expansion of brothels in the city. Each of the male characters is involved, either in using the brothels, or attempting to limit their use: liberal expressions of men's needs, against complications of the authorities' dealing with the issue of sexuality.

In such a situation Edward de Vere's Euphuistic orientation is given a chance to help solve the problems. The character chosen to solve Claudio's serious problem of being executed was his sister Isabel. She is encouraged to contact a ruler called Angelo and to appeal for mercy regarding her brother and to avoid his death. But Angelo is only a temporary ruler, a deputy of Duke Vincentio who has decided to take a holiday from his responsibilities as chief executive of the city – remaining, however, secretly in touch through disguising himself as a friar. Angelo had decided he would not marry his fiancée Mariana and left her because her dowry did not reach him because of a shipwreck of her father. This Angelo become an extreme exponent of sexual regularity and he confirmed the execution of Claudio (in spite of Isabel's plea). When Isabel continued her demand to Angelo, the latter asked for a sexual relation to her as the price of his mercy vis-à-vis her brother.

The Duke (as a friar) tried to solve this problem of Isabel's chastity – she was planning to enter a convent and be a nun. The plan was to substitute Mariana (Angelo's repudiated fiancée) for Isabela in Angelo's bed, thus saving Isabel's chastity and obliging Angelo to marry his onetime fiancée.

The Duke finally returns to Vienna publicly and tells Isabel she is to appear before him with a petition concerning Angelo's proposition about her giving him sexual favours in return for the annulment of the execution of her brother.

Through this petition, Isabella's brother is saved, Angelo is obliged to marry Mariana, the Duke proposes marriage to Isabella, and a well-known gentleman of Vienna, Lucio (who was accustomed to visit the brothels, and got a child by one of the ladies there) was forced to marry the lady. Four heterosexual marriages resulted from the actions of Isabella and the Duke (as friar).

The use of brothels in the city is the main sociological event, and the different elements in the city have their particular views about this. Claudio has begotten a child outside of marriage. His sister looks forward to becoming a nun. Lucio, a gentleman, is a proponent of the use of brothels. The Duke is



unmarried and generally concerned about the morals of his people. Angelo has rejected his fiancée because she did not bring the dowry. Public officials are ambivalent about the brothel-keepers and pimps and are generally tolerant. Thus, a question: what to do about the human sexuality which seems to be ruling the city? A Euphuistic view on this is quite clear: the sexuality is acceptable, but it should be channelled in socially and morally acceptable ways, i.e. in marriage. But two of the main characters, both males, do not follow this. Angelo has repudiated his fiancée and the Duke is not married. The population, as a whole, deviates into various forms: a nunnery for Isabel, a marriage for Claudio, brothels for Lucio.

The 'ideal', however, becomes clear by the end of the story – it is the preservation of women's projects wherever possible: Isabella's chastity, Juliet's marriage with Claudio, Marian's marriage with Angelo. Isabel eventually agrees to marry Duke Vincentio; Lucio is obliged to marry the woman of the brothel who had his child. In general, men's and women's heterosexuality is accepted as norms, yet the more important 'moral of the story' is that women's rights (both inside or outside of marriage) must be respected. The ideal of Euphuus, although perhaps contrary to that of Philautus, his Neapolitan friend, is dominant. Women are not to be considered 'as objects' but as persons with souls and independent concepts.

Cheryl Eagan-Donovan has illustrated the bi-sexuality of Edward de Vere in her film *Nothing is Truer than Truth*, shown to the De Vere Society in London in 2019. And this bi-sexuality of the 17th Earl of Oxford is demonstrated in the major comedies as discussed above. It was often the 'bi-sexuality' of some characters which led other characters to the happy heterosexual endings of the plays. In this respect we may also investigate the 'Shakespeare' tragedies to see the major role of women in these. The tragedies usually occur where men's failures bring about the tragic end (cf. Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, Hamlet).

The above four comic plays seem to be Euphuistic in nature and this is an additional proof that they were written by a colleague of John Lyly, Thomas Lodge, Robert Greene – i.e. by the 17th Earl of Oxford and not William Shakespeare. A presumed bi-sexual person (Edward de Vere) used a 'muse' to create personalities in plays and these 'bi-sexual persons' – through disguises –

develop the plots. Two of the women were disguised as men (Viola and Ganymede), and four of them were avoiding marriage (Beatrice and Benedik – whom friends thought would eventually marry – and the Duke and Isabel), thus the major actors were, in the beginning, not heterosexually presented. The disguises were not meant to discount marriage, but it appears that the author considered that disguise is a normal part of life and he is interested to see how strange actions devolving from the disguises influence ‘the normal state of affairs’. In Edward de Vere’s case his use of such characters has been successful in keeping the hearers’ and viewers’ attention because unusual sexual orientation is a challenge to ‘normal’ heterosexuality.

**In conclusion**, with *Much Ado About Nothing*, sexuality is not so important as it seems. What is more important is how you handle it, e.g. Claudio’s approach was wrong. Beatrice’s approach, although strange, was more helpful than the men’s, and Benedik followed her.

In *Twelfth Night, or As You Will* love relations are very complicated – as seen in the example of Olivia and Duke Orsino: How to resolve this? The bi-sexuality of Viola is the answer. Viola appears as a young man attracting both women (Olivia) and men (Orsino); Sebastian, her brother, helps her in this and finally at least three marriages ensue (including Sir Toby Belch and Maria’s). Malvolio doesn’t marry because his attitude is quite obviously much too self-centred.

In *As You Like It* sexual relationships are important but this can be expressed bi-sexually for a time. Bi-sexuality is an important element in life and recognition of it can solve certain problems, for example, exile.

In *Measure for Measure* the ‘ideal’ of sexual relationships is that the ideals of women must be respected, even in a licentious city of brothels such as was Vienna in the play.

In essence, what was really important for Edward de Vere was romantic ‘love’ as in Dante. Women become an ‘ideal’. Of course, if bi-sexuality is a ‘half-womanish’ phenomenon, the rights of the woman would be very important for a bi-sexual personality.

Several authors both in the 16th century and today, consider that the character ‘Euphues’ was based upon the person of Edward de Vere himself.



Certainly, the life history of Edward coincided with the case of a gentleman who came from Athens (Edward had studied Greek classics at Cambridge) and who went to Naples (cf. Edward's trip to Italy in 1574–5, probably including Naples since Edward was known to have visited Sicily), and which ended in England (cf. *Euphues and his England*). Moreover, Oxford's fellow 'Euphuist', Anthony Munday, corroborates the identification of Oxford with Euphuist in his novel *Zelauto, or the Fountain of Fame* (1580). *Zelauto* was a book formally dedicated to the Earl of Oxford with a title page declaration that the book is 'given for a friendly entertainment to Euphues at his late arrival into England' (thanks to Alexander Waugh for this excerpt from Munday).

Moreover, the 'cell Silexsedra' to which *Euphues* retires at the end of his travels may refer to the de Vere character of the misanthrope *Jaques* (in *As You Like It*). The question is whether the world-renouncing *Euphues*/*Jaques* represented Edward de Vere himself (cf. articles by Alexander Waugh in the *De Vere Society Newsletter* on Edward's connection with a Masonic order).

---