

## EUPHUISTIC ELEMENTS IN EDWARD DE VERE'S TRAGEDIES

By Charles Graves

Euphues, a character of the author John Lyly, has been associated with Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, putative author of Shakespeare's works. Also, Lyly worked with and for de Vere at Fisher's Folly; see also 'Band of Brothers' in *The de Vere Society Newsletter*, January 2021.<sup>1</sup> Lyly was de Vere's personal secretary, and they shared a common office on the Strand in London. Some believe that the character Euphues is an appropriate description of de Vere's own personality presented in a Greco-Italian format. And Lyly's Euphues appealed widely to English ladies – as they read, and discussed at social gatherings, the books of that name.<sup>2</sup> Our article in the *The de Vere Society Newsletter*, April 2020,<sup>3</sup> shows some euphuistic elements in Shakespeare's comedies illustrating de Vere's bi-sexuality and that in his euphuistically inspired comedies the women usually succeed in stemming the tide of tragedy. Can we find the same emphasis on women's qualities in Shakespeare's tragedies? In the previous article, we outlined the spirit of Euphues found in Lyly's *Euphues and his England* especially in the statement about English women; 'if I love them, they deserve it, Philautus'. Here Euphues is speaking to his Neapolitan friend Philautus, who accompanied him to England, and who considered women in a more traditional, patriarchal light. The major themes of the tragedies suggest that he is repeating his conviction that men's actions when confronted with certain situations, excluding any help of woman's initiatives, lead to catastrophic results.

Let us try to categorize the major Shakespearian tragedies within this perspective: which male propensities prevail in each tragedy? In *King Lear* it is pride of position; in *Macbeth* it is ambition; in *Othello* it is jealousy; in *Hamlet* it is revenge and duelling; in *Romeo and Juliet* it is feuding. Regarding the role of the female character in these plays there is a particular consistency in their marginalization. In *King Lear*, Cornelia goes without her father's dowry and is sent to France; in *Macbeth* although Lady Macbeth approved of her husband's ambitious goals, the witches of Endor are not believed; in *Othello*, the jealousy of Othello vis-à-vis Desdemona and against Cassius leads to tragic results where both Othello and Iago are denying their wives' opinions. In *Hamlet* the revenge of Hamlet's ghost against King Claudius and that of Hamlet on behalf of his father,

leads to the exclusion of Ophelia and Hamlet's mother Gertrude from any role in the conflict about the succession to the throne; in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's family, the Capulets, wishes to prevent Juliet from marrying someone of their feudal opponents' family, the Montagues and their Romeo, and want her to marry Count Paris, a Capulet. They try to oblige her to accept their solution and Juliet has no way to resist except to accept Friar Laurence's plan and to use sleeping powders to falsify her death.

In none of these tragedies do women play any substantial role in, potentially, avoiding the tragedy. The only 'strong' woman is Lady Macbeth, and her encouragement of her husband to gain power only exacerbates the tragedy caused by his ambition. The same can be said of Lear's two older daughters.

Are there any 'turning points' in these plays where women could have saved the situation? Cornelia's straightforward answer to King Lear, and whether she approved of his 'pride of position' attitude towards his patrimony, alienated her from her father and he tragically excluded her from receiving anything because of it. Only at the very end of the play does she obtain any influence over events to thwart the ambition of her sisters. Meanwhile, her sisters show their true feelings *vis à vis* their father, despising him and thus squandering their own family interests, enticed by the Gloucester Earl's bastard son Edmond. But the tragedy of Lear was that he failed to see the love of his youngest daughter, blinded by his self-importance. Other sub-plots introduced by the author to this Lear myth (found in Holinshed's *Chronicles*) illustrates men's cupidity, shown by Edmund and his manipulation of the Earl of Gloucester and his stepbrother Edgar. Apparently, the Earl's wife had passed away and thus was not part of the picture, but the two 'acceptable daughters' as far as Lear was concerned, Regan and Goneril, were used by Edmund against Gloucester – who lost his eyes as the result.

In *Macbeth* this thane's ambition was an event perhaps hinted at by Holinshed but elaborated by de Vere, some of whose Norman cousins at the time of the *Domesday Book* (1086) were living in Scotland. Macbeth, according to de Vere, was a superstitious Scot, consulting witches to predict his future and his own role in that future. His sources for this were the three witches of Endor<sup>4</sup> and their colleagues. Their mistress, to whom they answered, was *Hecate*, great goddess of the underworld, who was supposed to send – at night – all kinds of demons and

terrible phantoms from the lower world. She taught sorcery and witchcraft and dwelt at places where the roads crossed, on tombs, and near the blood of murdered persons. She herself wandered about with the souls of the dead, and her approach was answered by the whining of wolves and howling of dogs. In Athens, at the close of every month, dishes with food were set out for her at points where roads crossed and the food was consumed by poor people.<sup>5</sup>

One of the main themes in *Macbeth* is the protagonist's consultation with the witches and his misinterpretation of their warnings. Hence, these witches had 'the last word' in the tragedy which claimed the life not only of King Duncan but also the MacDuff's and caused turmoil all over Scotland. If Macbeth had correctly interpreted their prophesies, he might have saved his people from the tragedy. Hecate was '... the only one of the Titans who survived into the Zeus era'<sup>5</sup> and she represented the power of women in various personalities such as Luna (in heaven), Artemis or Diana (on earth) and Persephone (in the 'lower world'). She was the attendant of Persephone (daughter of Zeus and Demeter) and was 'Queen of the Shades' who rules over the souls of the dead. She had been carried off by Hades, and the wanderings of Demeter to find her was a constant element in Greek mythology. Persephone's yearly return to be with her mother represented a kind of resurrection from the dead. Hecate returned, in such a way, to advise the witches of Endor in *Macbeth*. They tried to warn Macbeth what would befall him, but he did not understand that which contradicted his desire for power; nor did he understand a certain classical wisdom represented by several witch-women.

In *Othello*, de Vere appears to re-live his own jealousy concerning the fidelity of his wife Anne Cecil, which appeared while he was in Italy (1575–76). Rowland York, one of his retainers, apparently spread a rumour that Anne's child Elizabeth was fathered by someone other than de Vere, who believed this for a time, separating himself from Anne after his return to England. The name York could have been the origin of the name of Othello's subordinate Iago (sounding similar).

Iago, like Othello, was filled with jealousy vis-à-vis Cassio, a lieutenant to Othello in the Venetian naval hierarchy. Jealousy, particularly male jealousy, permeated Othello's soul regarding Cassio and Desdemona, his wife. Also, female jealousy against the prostitute Bianca was a minor theme in the play. Great affairs of state and Cypriot military victories in this play were subordinated in their

importance to simple jealousy among males, who claimed rights over women (Othello) and concerning military roles (Iago).

Iago was jealous over his position and he pressed his superior Othello to be jealous over his wife's friendship with Cassio. Moreover, Roderigo was jealous that a Moor (an Arab) could wed Desdemona, whereas he, a Venetian, could not. Iago also used these types of jealousy for his own ends, and all these jealousies led to the tragic dénouement when Othello murdered his wife. Othello did not understand what was really happening through the efforts of his subordinate Iago.

As marginalized women, Emilia and Desdemona, as well as Bianca the prostitute, were excluded from the action by Iago and an inflamed Othello. Emilia had no opportunity to advise Desdemona correctly, and male dominance preserved the *status quo* which was needed to give time for Iago to achieve his aims. But Emilia could have saved the situation if her husband's perfidy could have been discovered. This implication remains in the reader's mind as the final acts reveal what had happened 'behind the curtains' of Desdemona's bed. The women could have saved Desdemona if they had been enabled.

As a small footnote to our consideration of *Othello*, it is very possible that the author used the historic person of Otho, a companion of Emperor Nero, to find a name for his Mediterranean hero. Otho lost his wife Poppea Sabina to Nero's lust but was a rather good administrator of Lusitania (Portugal) in the last years of Nero. Otho attached himself to Galba (as Othello did to a Venetian nobleman) but Galba took another person (Lucius Piso) as his heir. Otho conspired against Galba, leading a revolt of soldiers, and had Galba killed. Otho himself committed suicide (as did Othello) after general Vitellus defeated him in battle. Thus, Otho was known as an adventurer who implicated himself in the highest ranks of Roman life but lost his position in the end (as did Othello). The original story behind the play does not give the Moor of Venice a name so, with his knowledge of classical history, de Vere provided an appropriate one for him as 'little Otho'.<sup>6</sup>

*Hamlet* was based on *Amleth*, an old Scandinavian legend, which de Vere did not essentially alter, but to which he could append his personal attitudes and beliefs as the Lord Great Chamberlain and as a 'euphuist'. The marginalization of Ophelia in this play is the most striking feature related to a euphuistic point of view. Ophelia is the woman who could have saved Hamlet from death because

she loved him and had certain means at her disposal at the court of Denmark to help him. But she was also under the rule of her father Polonius who co-opted her in spying upon a deranged Hamlet. She did not have the necessary information (about Hamlet's father) to provide insight into Hamlet's problem. Hamlet also loved her, as he confessed later to Laertes, but he had not had the opportunity to discuss with her the murder of old Hamlet or the appearance of his ghost.

The name Ophelia, which comes from the Greek word for help, this author believes to be a reproduction of that of Opheltes, son of king Lycurgas of Nemea and in whose name the Nemean games were initiated by the Greeks. As a boy, Opheltes had a nurse called Hypsiplye (she was a Lemnian princess). She was occupied guiding the Argive army to a drinking pool in Nemean territory and, meanwhile – at that pool – a serpent writhed around the legs of the unattended boy Opheltes and poisoned him. The Argive army, returning from battle, could do nothing but kill the serpent and bury the boy. This being an ominous sign, the Nemean games were created to avoid such tragic events in the future.<sup>7</sup>

Such was certainly the case of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. She was unattended by the main actors in a political drama concerning the fate of the kingdom of Denmark. She was a helpless victim of the evil roaming about in the corridors of the royal castle, as was Opheltes at the obscure spring during the Argean wars in Nemea.

The naming of Ophelia's brother as Laertes may also have a classical foundation. Laertes was the father of Ulysses, and he often took part in the Calydonian hunt for the boar. Calydonia was a region of Aetolia in Greece, Calydon being the son of Aetoles. Aetolus was the son of Endymion, a youth renowned for his beauty and his perpetual sleeping. As he slept on mount Latmus in Caria, his surprising beauty warmed the cold heart of Selene (the moon) who came down, kissed him and lay by his side.<sup>8</sup> His memory may have inspired the pen of de Vere – who made Hamlet jump into the tomb with Laertes, both of them being together with the dead Ophelia.

Hamlet and Laertes forgave each other before they both died at the end of the play. The person who announced the duel between them was Osric whose name may have been suggested to Edward by the Egyptian deity Osiris, the husband (and brother) of Isis. Osiris was murdered by Typhon who 'cut his body into pieces and threw them into the Nile'. Later, Isis discovered the mangled

remains of her husband and, with the assistance of her son Horus, regained the power which Typhon had usurped.<sup>9</sup>

The rather lengthy conversation of Osric with Hamlet and Laertes about preparations for the duel and the knives to be used, and how Hamlet appeared to despise Osric as a pawn of king Claudius, show the reader that use of such a name predicted the fate of both Hamlet and Laertes during and after the duel.

The reason for the duel was that there had been a fight between the protagonists previously at the grave of Ophelia where Hamlet had leaped into the grave which held Ophelia's coffin and Laertes was already there in the grave. Honour required that Laertes challenge Hamlet to a duel not only over this but also over the suicide of Ophelia (caused by Hamlet according to Laertes) and also the stabbing of his father Polonius. Laertes did not know about the murder of old Hamlet by Claudius and he blamed Hamlet for everything. Hamlet accepted the challenge for a duel and did not tell Laertes about Claudius' treason and usurpation.

Hence, some of the unfortunate tradition about honour and duels is indirectly criticized by the author when he uses Osric (Osiris) as the spokesman of Claudius to organize the deadly duel (whose consequences were not because the knives used were sharp, but because the tips were poisoned by king Claudius). The use of Osric (Osiris) regarding the duel in this play reminds us about the 'body of Osiris being cut into pieces and then thrown into the Nile' – and of the accession of Egyptian deity Typhus to power by usurpation (as was, indeed, the essence of power attained by Claudius).

Thus, duelling and rise to power by usurpation are both placed under a certain judgement in this play. Gertrude, the only female person taking part, dies during the duel because she inadvertently drinks from the cup which her husband Claudius has poisoned (as another of his poisoning tricks). During the course of the play Gertrude is dominated by her new husband, and yet she tries to understand both Ophelia and her son Hamlet, and Hamlet tries to separate her from her usurping husband – but fails. As mentioned above and our previous article,<sup>3</sup> in de Vere's euphuistically inspired comedies, the women usually succeed in stemming the tide of tragedy, but in euphuistically inspired tragedies they always seem to fail. This seems to be a recurring theme in de Vere's plays.

Finally, let us see how *Romeo and Juliet* supports our thesis about de Vere's euphuistic tendencies. We can see that feuding in Verona was certainly against the spirit of euphuism, and de Vere used the feud between Montagues and Capulets as an example. Perhaps in his mind there was some level of feud between the Montague-Brownes (his beloved Henry Wriothesley's mother's family) and the Cecils (his wife Anne's family). Perhaps Romeo represents de Vere's love for Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton – in contrast to Anne's brother Robert Cecil as Count Paris. Robert Cecil was the Queen's envoy in Paris.

Besides this, the name Paris has another implication. Paris was, in Greek classical history, the person who provoked the Trojan War by abducting Helen, wife of Menelaus, and Paris himself was wounded by one of Hercules' arrows in the war. Paris had returned to his abandoned wife Oenone – who refused to heal his wound and left him to die. When she repented of this, she put an end to her own life (cf. the deaths of Romeo and Juliet).<sup>10</sup>

In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, the Count Paris provoked a crisis for the happy married couple, and being wounded by Romeo, died along with the couple at the Capulet tomb (where Juliet, having seen Romeo's dead body, also died, killing herself with Romeo's dagger). Perhaps the life of the historic Paris had moved de Vere to such an extent that he used the Trojan war tragedy and the name Paris to stir the audience in his rendering of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the end both Menelaus' and Oenone's marriages were destroyed by an erotically propelled Paris. Before Paris was born his mother had dreamed that she had brought forth a firebrand, the 'flames of which would spread over a whole city' and this is what happened both to Troy and, in de Vere's play, to the Verona of Montagues and Capulets.

Edward de Vere's literary muse (his love for Henry, Earl of Southampton as described in several *Sonnets*) was perhaps portraying feuding families as symbols of antipathetic aspects in his own sexuality (love for a male, Henry, and love for a 'dark lady', possibly Anne Vavasour with whom he had the bastard child Edward Vere). So, Capulets may represent dark ladies. The main purpose of the play may have been to put two sides of de Vere's sexual personality back together. Even a priest (Friar Laurence) would be required to accomplish this. An echo of such problematic may be seen in an anonymous play of 1600 *The Wisdom of Dr. Dodypoll* – in my opinion written by de Vere. One of the heroes, Albedure, is in love with

Hyanth (reminding the reader of Hyacinth, an object of homosexual love in Greek classics). Albedure runs away from his love for her to the forest but is finally recuperated and marries her. Several names in this play evoke de Vere's ancestors.<sup>11</sup>

How is *Romeo and Juliet* 'euphuistic'? – i.e. showing the ability of women to overcome the foibles of men. Strangely enough, it was the woman and the priest who provided a solution to an eventual explosive feuding catastrophe, namely by means of Friar Laurence's sleeping-powder. It would preserve Juliet from an impending marriage with Count Paris which the Capulets promoted (not aware that she was already married to Romeo). Romeo was excluded from the euphuistic solution concocted by the priest and Juliet because he had killed Tybalt and had been exiled to Mantua. But a purely female euphuistic solution could not prevail because Romeo was promoting a different perspective. Having heard the false news that Juliet had died, he decided to go to her tomb in Verona and poison himself, lying next to her body. This may have represented a credible male approach to the death of one's beloved, but it led to the (unnecessary) death of both the lovers. That Juliet stabbed herself with Romeo's dagger and died within the tomb was not at all premeditated like Romeo's death but arose simply out of instantaneous despair.

The two deaths, of course, brought the lovers together, but not in life. Perhaps de Vere was not blaming Romeo's male convictions but letting fate have the last word – Romeo is innocent by the fact that he did not know that Juliet was, in fact, alive but under the effect of a sleeping powder. But in the context of de Vere's muse, the ending of *Romeo and Juliet* is an attempt to include males in euphuistic philosophy. Men's actions can bring tragedy but can also be euphuistic in the sense that they can respect women. In the end, the euphuistic love of Romeo for Juliet destroyed the very masculine feuding between Montagues and Capulets. Feuding is a matter of honouring one's self and one's tribe; it appears that de Vere was not interested in this primarily male foible.

Of course, one of the extant feuds in England at the end of the 16th century was the one between the Euphuists (John Lyly's followers) and the Romanticists of Sir Philip Sydney. Perhaps *Romeo and Juliet* was also an attempt to heal that feud in which two of de Vere's sons-in-law were implicated (i.e. those related to Anne

Cecil) as against those of the ‘Montague camp’. The latter camp would include Henry Wriothesley, son of a Montague-Browne such as was Lady Southampton. This competition was solved in a way in the 17th century by including all de Vere’s works under the name of an actor-maltster as ‘Shakespeare’s works’ which, of course, marginalized the Montagues and the Euphuists. But much later this led to Thomas Looney’s 1920 attempt to set the record straight.<sup>12</sup>

The descriptions of the tragedies above reveal that the Greek classical tradition fed into the Renaissance concepts of Edward de Vere. But a particular twist was put upon the plays in that they demonstrated the author’s psychology and the conflicts related to his role in courtly society. As a Euphuist, he tried to promote certain ideas which contradicted the prevailing mores of such persons as the Queen’s friend Robert Dudley and the Sidneys. But the origin of such altercations seems to have simply been that he was faithfully expressing a bi-sexual personality in his muse as he explained in his *Sonnets*. Unfortunately, the use of the pseudonym William Shakespeare led to his work being incorrectly attributed.

### End notes

1. ‘Band of Brothers: Edward de Vere and his Literary Circle in the 1580s’ in *The de Vere Society Newsletter*, vol. 28, no. 1 (January 2021)
2. John Lyly, *Euphues the Anatomy of Wit* (1578) and *Euphues his England* (1580). Combined version edited by Edward Arber, London A. Murray & Son (1868), accessible at: <https://archive.org/details/euphuesanatomyw01arbegoog>
3. Charles Graves, ‘Edward de Vere, Euphuism and Bi-Sexuality’ in *The de Vere Society Newsletter*, vol. 27, no. 2 (April 2020).
4. ‘Saul and the Medium at Endor’, New International Version, 1 Samuel 28:3-25.
5. *A Smaller Classical Dictionary*, edited by E.H. Blakeney, MA. London & Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons (1934), p. 245. See <https://archive.org/details/smallerclassica00smit/page/244/mode/2up>
6. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
7. For Opheltes, see rather full discussion by Robert Graves *The Greek Myths*. London: The Folio Society (1996), Vol. II, pp. 350, 407, 427, 429.
8. *A Smaller Classical Dictionary op.cit.*, pp. 206-7; 298.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 371.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 379.
11. Charles Graves, ‘The Author of The Wisdom of Dr. Doddypoll’ in *The De Vere Society Newsletter*, vol. 24, No. 3 (July 2017).
12. J. Thomas Looney, “*Shakespeare*” Identified in *Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*, London: Cecil Palmer (1920).