

Harvey as Dogberry

by Robert R. Prechter, Jr.

Gabriel Harvey penned a complaint about the Earl of Oxford in his Latin poem, “Speculum Tuscanismi,” written in 1579 and published within *Three proper, and wittie, familiar Letters* in 1580. Around the same time, “Gabriel Harvey wrote in 1579 to the poet Spenser, complaining that his friends were (figuratively speaking) thrusting him ‘on the stage to make tryall of his extemporal faculty and to play Wylson’s or Tarleton’s parte.’” (Grosart, ed., *The Works of Gabriel Harvey*. Vol. 1. London: Hasell, Watson and Viney, Ltd., 1884, p.125). These two complaints may be related.

Thomas Nashe charged that Harvey was caricatured in a college play titled *Pedantius*, which was acted in 1581. Various scholars have proposed that Harvey was lampooned on stage in other plays, including Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labor’s Lost*.

Did Shakespeare mock Harvey in another play? While reading Harvey’s *Pierces Supererogation*, I found the following lines over a span of four pages:

“[C]hristen me a dunce, a fool, an idiot, a dolt, a good-cap, an ass [emphasis in the original]... If I be an ass, I have company enough, and if I be an ass, I have favour to be installed in such company.... If I be an ass, what asses were those courteous friends.... I were indeed a notorious insensate ass in case I should... utterly abandon mine own credit.... by the leave of God I will prove myself no ass.”

In Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*, a villain, frustrated over the antics of the constable, Dogberry, shouts, “Away! you are an ass, you are an ass.” Dogberry immediately laments the absence of the Sexton and bellows,

“O that he were here to write me down—an ass! But, masters, remember, that I am an ass.... O, that I had been writ down—an ass.” (IV,ii) He reminds the authorities, “Moreover, sir...this plaintiff here, the offender, did call me ass...and, masters, do not forget to specify, when time and place shall serve, that I am an ass” (V,i) [emphases in original].

The last line, typically shouted, always gets a laugh. In Shakespeare’s day, the laugh might have been much bigger if some audience members understood that Dogberry was parodying Harvey’s repeated protests over having been called an ass.

Dogberry’s exchange with the governor in Act III, Scene v, could well be a caricature of Harvey’s oratorical pretensions and famously tiresome verbosity. At one point Dogberry says, “if I were as tedious as a king, I could find it in my heart to bestow it all of your worship.” The governor replies, “All thy tediousness on me, ah?”

Dogberry also levels a seemingly irrelevant charge that happens to fit the Earl of Oxford. Referring to the villains he advises,

“And also, the watch heard them talk of one Deformed: they say he wears a key in his ear and a lock hanging by it, and borrows money in God’s name, the which he hath used so long and never paid that now men grow hard-hearted and will lend nothing for God’s sake: pray you, examine him upon that point.” (V,i)

Chronic indebtedness by a third party is small matter compared to the charges against the villains, so the line gets a laugh for that reason. But if it also caricatures Harvey’s real-life complaints about the indebted Earl of Oxford—the unnamed “one Deformed”—it may have had a stronger comic effect back in the day.

Upon noting these connections, I thought I had found something new. But it turns out the initial observation is over 100 years old. In the 19th century Harvard scholar James Lowell, writing about Edmund Spenser, made the following comment about Gabriel Harvey in a footnote: “Yet the reiteration of emphasis with which he insists on all the world’s knowing that Nash had called him an ass, probably gave Shakespeare the hint for one of the most comic touches in the character of Dogberry” (J.R. Lowell, “Spenser,” *The North American Review* 120.247 [1875]: 334-394, p. 348fn). His observation seems to have escaped general observation, but it is useful in providing yet another link between Oxford, who was at odds with Harvey, and Shakespeare, who seems to have taken up his cause.

