

Question 49

Does the Earl of Oxford have any connection with the theatre?

Michael Dobson

The Earl of Oxford was involved in the theatre in different capacities, though mainly as a side-effect of his stormy political career. Lending your name to a theatre company, and helping to script entertainments for social functions at court, could be useful ways of attracting attention. In the 1580s he became patron of an acting troupe, Oxford's Men, who seem mainly to have toured the provinces. Oxford's more important contribution to the Elizabethan stage was also made in the 1580s, when he supported John Lyly the playwright by employing him as a secretary. In 1598 Francis Meres reported that Oxford had written comedies himself – in the same list of writers in which he elsewhere praises Shakespeare – but sadly these don't survive. In general Oxford seems to have been busier feuding and fighting, both against the Spanish and against his political rivals at court.