Poe's Use of the Name De Vere in "Lenore"

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DURING THE LAST PART of the year 1842 Poe revised his early poem "A Paean," which has been judged to be "certainly the weakest piece" of his volume of 1831.[1] In its new form, called "Lenore," it has been widely and warmly praised,[2] and Poe himself considered it to be one of his best poems, as in his letter of July 2, 1844, written to Lowell. It was for Lowell's short-lived magazine *The Pioneer* that he had reshaped and then polished the piece, as two letters of December 25 and 27, 1842 show.[3] The new version of "A Paean" was to be published in two periodicals in 1843 before being subjected to further revision—in 1844 and in 1849. Clearly Poe was charmed by the conception of the young heiress, first called Helen and then Lenore, killed in the earlier versions simply by the unkindness of her covetous family and friends, and in 1849 by their "evil eye." The fiancé of Lenore, Guy De Vere, first emerges in 1842. Of the several possibilities for the derivation of his name, a few of which have been briefly suggested by Killis Campbell and Professor Mabbott, one, in a work by Hawthorne, has been overlooked. The reason for treating the matter is the insight furnished into the complex combination of invention and memory which constituted the poetic imagination of Poe. We can also see the larger frame of reference which subsumes the narrative itself and reaches into the ambience of Poe's life.

In both Lowell's journal *The Pioneer* of February 1843 and the Philadelphia *Saturday Museum* of March 4, 1843 (the poem occurring in its biography of Poe), De Vere appears in the first stanza: "And, Guy De Vere, / Hast *thou* no tear? / Weep now or nevermore! / See, on yon drear / And rigid bier, / Low lies thy love Lenore!"[4] De Vere offers his

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[1] Thomas Ollive Mabbott, *Collected Works of . . . Poe, Volume I, Poems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 204. Textual references to this edition will be made under *"Poems."*

[2] For T.W. Higginson's high praise, see *Poems*, p. 330. See also Killis Campbell, *The Poems of . . . Poe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1917), pp. 214-215; Hervey Allen, *Israfel* (New York, 1926; ed. of 1934), p. 642; Margaret Alterton and Hardin Craig, *Edgar Allan Poe: Representative Selections* (New York, 1935; rev. ed. 1962), p. 494; and Joseph W. Krutch, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1926), p. 67.

[3] John Ward Ostrom, *The Letters of . . . Poe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), I, 220 and 222; also, *Poems*, p. 332.

[4] For text and discussion see *Poems*, pp. 330-339. There are two apparent variations in Mabbott's text, to judge by the text of the *Philadelphia Museum* and Harrison's reprint of the poem

grief as far more genuine than that of the heir who sees with eyes streaming with "crocodile dew, / A vacant coronet" and also more genuine than that of the "false friends," who "loved her for her wealth and hated her for her pride." The third stanza emanates from the impartial narrator who cautions the young De Vere: "But rave not thus! / . . . . / For the dear child / That should have been thy bride— / . . . . / that now so lowly lies." De Vere's answer is the fourth and last stanza: "My heart is light— / No dirge will I upraise, / But waft the angel on her flight / With a Paean of old days!" He wishes no note of funeral bell to sadden "her sweet soul" as it floats "Up from the damned earth— / To friends above, from fiends below, / Th'indignant ghost is riven— / From grief and moan / To a gold throne / Beside the King of Heaven!" In passing, I suggest that if Poe knew Shelley's play, *The Cenci*, he might have been thinking of Beatrice's song in Act V, scene iv: "False friend, wilt thou smile or weep, / When my life is laid asleep?" I will not dwell on the strong possibility that Poe conceived of Guy De Vere as a sort of young Hamlet, confronting the corpse of Ophelia, whom he had once accepted as his intended bride, according to Queen Gertrude. The phrases about the "indignant ghost" and the song that will "waft the angel on her flight" suggest both the last words of Hamlet and his ceaseless concern with his father's spirit. Poe dipped more frequently into Hamlet than into any other one work of literature for allusions and phrases.

It is the name of De Vere that needs inquiry. It was the name of the Earls of Oxford, dating from the Conquest to the extinction of the line with the twentieth earl in 1703. It was, therefore, well known throughout history and had the advantage to a writer of being a kind of public property with the glamour of the highest nobility. The praenomen that was characteristically assumed, however, was that of Aubrey, not Guy. Professor Mabbott speaks of the name as a "conventional aristocratic name, implying 'true' " (Poems, p. 338). This is, indeed, no insignificant element for the fiancé who seems to be alone in revealing the "crocodile" nature of the tears of friends and heir. The convenient associations of the name of this extinct family probably suggested it to Tennyson for his poem of 1832, "Lady Clara Vere de Vere," which specifically exploits the pride of the De Vere family. This is, I believe, the first inspiration to Poe for "The Paean" of 1831, although it is dismissed by Professor Mabbott and only tentatively offered by Killis Campbell. Tennyson's poem is told by a lowly "country" lad who disdains "the daughter of a hundred Earls," since she had previously driven "young Laurence" to suicide by her coquetry. Now, through a just fate, Lady Clara is

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in *The Collected Works of. . . Poe* (New York, 1902), VII, 53-54: "de Vere" should be "De Vere" in *The Pioneer*. My thanks are due to the library of the University of North Carolina for a facsimile copy of the *Museum* page. Future textual references to Poe's works will be made under "Harrison."

"sickening of a vague disease" which will carry her off, just as an unspecified cause ("feeble health") in both "A Paean" and "Lenore" will kill Poe's heroine. The rather inexplicable "pride" of Lenore may very well be a relic from the odious Lady Clara, and the phrase "a vacant coronet," in the context of the false and treacherous friends, may come from Tennyson's famous "Kind hearts are more than coronets, / And simple faith than Norman blood." Poe was, as we know and as he admitted, spell-bound by Tennyson's early works.[5] But Poe did not use the name De Vere for the rather indefinite, flaccid hero who speaks in "A Paean" and whose "voice is growing weak" according to the lady's friends.

Tennyson himself may have been influenced in his choice of the family name by the popularity of a silver-fork novel of 1827 by Robert Plumer Ward, entitled *De Vere; or, The Man of Independence.* The London edition bore no author, only the attribution "By the Author of *Tremaine.*" This best seller of England was immediately pirated in this country, appearing in a three-volume edition in Philadelphia (1827) and one in Boston (1831). Poe may well have known at least the title and subtitle of the novel as early as the 1830's when he wrote "The Paean," which did not use the name. His knowledge is suggested in his use of "Tremaine," Ward's title, for "Lady Trevanion of Tremaine" in "Ligeia" (1838). Yet he did not allude to the novel *De Vere* until after the composition of "Lenore"; the occasion arose in the year 1845 when he was reviewing, for the *Broadway Journal* of February 8, the *Poems of Edward Lytton Bulwer*, edited by C. Donald Macleod. Here Poe feels called upon to controvert Robert Plumer Ward's recommendation of the *Poems* cited by Macleod in the preface: "Mr. Ward, (who although he did write De Vere is by no means a fool,) could never have put to paper, in his sober senses, anything half so absurd as the paragraph above quoted. . . ."[6] This statement, slightly altered, appears in one of the "Marginalia" by Poe of 1849 (Harrison, XVI, 157).

In exploring the connection between the novel *De Vere* and "Lenore" one should not overlook a circumstance which frequently brought the title to Poe's attention: *De Vere* was the source of the motto on every volume collecting the six monthly issues of Burton's *Gentleman's Magazine*, for which Poe served as assistant to William E. Burton, May 1839 to June 1840. The slightly adapted excerpt, labeled simply "De Vere," appears under an engraved bust of Benjamin Franklin. Obviously it was intended by Burton, the founder, proprietor, and chief editor, to explain the title and indicate the tone of his magazine. Since the text is not

[5] For a brief discussion of Poe and Tennyson see my *Discoveries in Poe* (Notre Dame, 1970), pp. 211-212 and 291 and "Poe's Pen of Iron" in the *American Transcendental Quarterly II*, (1969), 16-18.

[6] *Broadway Journal*, I, 81. Harrison, XVI, 372, correctly lists the item as Poe's, but fails to include it in his text. Poe improved the punctuation in 1849.

irrelevant to Poe's "Lenore" it should be given:

> By a gentleman, we mean not to draw a line that would be invidious between high and low, rank and subordination, riches and poverty. No. *The distinction is in the mind.* Whoever is open, just, and true; whoever is of a humane and affable demeanor; whoever is honorable in himself, and in his judgment of others, and requires no law but his word to make him fulfil an engagement: —such a man is a *gentleman*;—and such a man may be found among the tillers of the earth as well as in the drawing rooms of the high born and the rich.

This sententious bit of fustian comes from the first volume of the novel and presents Mortimer De Vere's response upon being asked by the villainous Lord Cleveland for his help and advice in the courtship of Lady Constance, whom De Vere loves himself. "In the spirit of a gentleman he resolved to answer" Cleveland's demand. Rather gratuitously, the motto becomes the author's comment.[7] The very worthy and proud De Vere, in Ward's novel, is possessed of every intellectual and moral attribute, so that his restoration of the De Vere family fortune and his winning of Constance's hand at the end are inevitable. Poe is completely correct about the absurdity of Ward's style and the foolishness of the whole work. But this is the very reason that Poe might have avoided rather than deliberately inserted the name of De Vere in his revised version of "A Paean." Moreover, a two-year interval was to lapse before he began to reshape the poem for Lowell's *Pioneer*, time enough to drop it from his memory. An additional publication then presented the name of De Vere to his mind.

In the year 1842, Poe as editor of *Graham's Magazine* published two reviews of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, the first in April and the second in May. Since both reviews show an unusually sedulous reading of the work, it is probable that Poe took heed of Hawthorne's naming one of his characters Lord de Vere, in "The Great Carbuncle. A Mystery of the White Mountains."[8] The tale occurs in the first volume, to which Poe had paid particular attention in that he mentions ten of its 19 items, only one of which he disparages, and this one chances to be "The Rill from the Town Pump," immediately preceding "The Great Carbuncle."[9] In his longer review of May 1842 he adds two more of the tales of volume one to his analysis, which includes the most famous of his

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[7] My text of *De Vere* is that of Carey, Lea, and Carey, Philadelphia, 1827, I, 214. The title page of Burton's magazine is reproduced in *Israfel*, p. 364. Burton altered Ward's text by adding the word "No." and the last part of the excerpt beginning with "as well" and also the italics.

[8] A footnote on Hawthorne as a writer of tales (column 6) in the article on Poe of the March 4, 1843 *Saturday Museum* also clearly implies Poe's close attention to the *Twice-Told Tales*. For Poe's responsibility for this article see my "Poe in the *Boston Notion*," *New England Quarterly*, XLII (December 1969), 585-589.

[9] *Twice-Told Tales* (Boston, 1853), I, 179-199. The arrangement is the same in the 1842 edition. In the April review of Hawthorne, Harrison, XI, 102-104, concerning the best of the stories, Poe wrote, "It is remarkable that all these, with one exception, are from the first volume."

statements on the nature and scope of the short story (Harrison, XI, 104-113). Doubtless Poe noted Hawthorne's use of the name for a proud scion of a noble house; probably he would have disparaged the tale had he mentioned it, for it was one of Hawthorne's more obvious allegories. A group of five "adventurers" plus one "youthful pair" who are recently wedded go in search of a fabled jewel, which strikes one blind and another dead; the lovers, who manage to see the gem, are content with earthly light. Lord de Vere goes back "to his ancestral hall, where he contented himself with a wax-lighted chandelier, and filled, in due course of time, another coffin in the ancestral vault" which showed "the vanity of earthly pomp."[10] The name of this lord was still lingering in Poe's memory when, a few months later, he began to revise "A Paean" for publication. Hawthorne had used it with the same associations that it had in the works of Tennyson and Ward: wealth, nobility, pride, and inflexibility. Poe, more ingeniously, transferred the first three attributes to the girl, including inexplicably the pride, and he retained for the fiancé independence and courage, perhaps derived from the historical De Veres. In view of the anti-democratic sentiments of Poe, the self-considered scion of a prominent Richmond family, we can easily understand the metathesis of names and the ambiguity of roles in the artificial narrative of "Lenore." The truth-speaking "De Vere" may more easily say "avaunt" to the mercenary "false friends" who "wronged" the dead heiress when he himself is fortified by nobility and ease. Whatever the surrogate role of De Vere, the appearance of the name for the hero for the first time in 1843 shows how Poe quarried the materials in the books that he read for small and sometimes large building stones.

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[10] *Twice-Told Tales*, I, 198.