

Verò Nihil Verius—Nothing Truer than What?

by Ramon Jiménez

“Nothing Truer than Truth” is the commonly used translation of *Verò Nihil Verius*, the Latin motto of Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford. This has never made much sense to me. I can understand how something can be truer than something else. But, how can something be, or not be, truer than truth?

A grammatical equivalent is “Nothing Stronger than Strength.” What sense does that make? Another is “Nothing Greener than Green.” I would call these phrases “linguistic fallacies” or “declarative circularities.” Furthermore, the phrase “Nothing Truer than Truth” says nothing about Edward de Vere, who adopted *Verò Nihil Verius* as his motto. But if the phrase were translated as “Nothing Truer than Vere,” it would not only be an accurate rendition, but also a forceful and logical motto that contains a pair of genuine compliments to de Vere.

Latin is a condensed and highly inflected language, in which word order is less important than in English. *Verò* is the Latin for “truth,” and in the ablative of comparison *verò* means “than truth.” *Verò* is also a play or a pun on the name “Vere.” Thus, the first word “*Verò*” is a bilingual pun that can be translated as “than Vere.” The Latin adjective *verus-vera-verum* means simply “true” in the basic or positive degree. But in the comparative degree, it means “more true,” or “truer,” and the forms are *verior-verior-verius*. So, a word-for-word translation produces “Than Truth, Nothing Truer” or, as a motto for the de Veres, “Than Vere, Nothing Truer.” Put into standard English, this reads “Nothing Truer than Vere,” a logical and grammatical assertion that is a clever pun on the Latin and a succinct compliment to the Veres.

That Oxford himself considered “Nothing Truer than Truth” to be nonsense is made clear in a passage from *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, in which Boyet reads a letter that the pompous Don Armado has written to Jaquenetta:

By heaven, that thou art fair, is most infallible;
true, that thou art beauteous; truth itself, that
thou art lovely. More fairer than fair, beautiful
than beauteous, truer than truth itself, have
commiseration on thy heroical vassal!

IV.i.60-64

The letter continues for another twenty lines in the same extravagant and artificial style. Don Armado’s inflated language is one of the satirical targets in the play. John T. Looney explains Oxford’s use of the phrase “truer than truth” as a “mode of exaggerating” and of satirizing Euphuism.¹

As we know, Oxford was passionate about, if not obsessed with, the idea of truth, and used “true” hundreds of times in his plays and sonnets, in at least nine different meanings. He also used it to form some twenty compound adjectives, from “true-anointed” to “true-sweet.” But he never used “truer than truth,” except in this single facetious instance.

Several scholars have searched for the origin of Oxford’s motto, but have found no record of it before the 1570s.² One of the first references to it appeared in what is commonly called *Gratulationes Valdinenses*, a group of four encomiums in Latin to four prominent Elizabethans,

including Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Oxford, that Gabriel Harvey wrote in 1578. In Book IV, Harvey includes two dialogues in which the participants banter with each other about Oxford, using half a dozen Latin permutations of his name, and of “truth,” such as *verine*, *veri*, *verius*, *verum*, etc. Harvey introduces the first dialogue as “*Dialogvs in Effigiem Nobilissimi Comit̃s Oxoniensis; illiusq̃ue; elegantissimum Symbolum Verò nil verius.*” In his translation of *Gratulationes Valdinenses*, Thomas Hugh Jamison rendered these lines as “A dialogue on the picture of the most noble Earl of Oxford and on his most elegant motto Naught verier than Vere.” The last phrase is a simple rearrangement of “Nothing Truer than Vere.”³

In 1944, Charles Wisner Barrell wrote that “experts in the College of Heralds read it [*Verò Nihil Verius*] as “no greater verity than in Vere.”⁴ In his 2003 article on the Vere name, Robert Prechter renders the motto as “None Truer than Vere.”⁵

These translations confirm that those familiar with the context of the motto—that it was associated with Edward de Vere—agree that “Nothing Truer than Vere” is not only an accurate translation, but a clever pun that expresses two things that we know were important to him—his personal truthfulness in all its meanings, and his loyalty and commitment to his Queen and country.

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