

The Family Background and Youth of Devonshire Restoration Playwright, Lyricist and Wit Thomas D'Urfey (1653-1723)

Abstract

Uncertainty surrounds the family background and childhood of the Devon-born Restoration dramatist Thomas D'Urfey, with almost all accepted information originating from D'Urfey himself. For the first time, this is checked against surviving genealogical sources. It is found that, contrary to the accepted view, D'Urfey's father was from London, *not* Devon. There is circumstantial evidence that D'Urfey's father had family in France, consistent with D'Urfey's assertion of Huguenot ancestry. There is also limited circumstantial evidence that, having been a New Model Army officer likely in Devon, D'Urfey's father fled to Virginia in around in 1662, perhaps leaving D'Urfey in the hands of his late wife's family. In line with biographies of D'Urfey, I find that his putative mother *was* from a gentry family with connections to Huntingdonshire, and that his mother was indeed closely related to the celebrated dramatist Shackerley Marmion. I also find weak circumstantial evidence consistent with the common belief that D'Urfey had legal training.

Key words: Thomas D'Urfey; Restoration; Drama; Marmion; Huguenots; Huntingdonshire.

Introduction

If you've ever sung the nursery rhymes 'Over the Hills and Far Away,' 'Lavenders Green, Lavenders Blue' or 'Old MacDonald Had a Farm,' then you have met the Devon-born Restoration wit, playwright, and lyricist Thomas D'Urfey (1653-1723). Considering the fame and influence of these three children's rhymes alone, one might think that D'Urfey – who was a favourite of Charles II – might be at least as well known as John Gay (1685-1732),

author of *The Beggar's Opera*, an operetta which actually included a number of D'Urfey's songs.¹

Indeed, Exeter-born D'Urfey was a major celebrity in England in his lifetime, with *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* noting that D'Urfey 'wrote a large number of songs, tales, satires, melodramas, farces, and many adaptations,' that he was a 'friend of Charles II and James II, he was still writing in the reign of Queen Anne' and also that D'Urfey 'was one of the most familiar figures of the day, given to singing his own songs in public.'² D'Urfey was notorious for his bawdy, comic songs, filled with innuendo, exemplified in his *Pills to Purge Melancholy*, a collection of a thousand songs and poems, many penned by him, with the related scores, published between 1698 and 1720.³ Marking something of a revival of D'Urfey, the English historical music band The City Waits released an album comprised of a selection of D'Urfey's songs, entitled *Thomas D'Urfey's Pills to Purge Melancholy: Lewd Songs and Low Ballads from the Eighteenth Century*, on 31 December 1993.⁴

D'Urfey's Life and Career

D'Urfey came to attention with his first known play in 1676. This was not popular, but a few months later his second play, *Madam Fickle*, was wildly successful and was watched by Charles II (1630-1685, r. 1660-1685), to whom D'Urfey was then introduced. Thereafter, Charles II began to act as D'Urfey's patron.⁵ D'Urfey was a fascinating character. He stuttered severely, except when he sang, and he dressed with great flamboyance. In 1683, D'Urfey changed his name from 'Durfey' to 'D'Urfey,' claiming to be related to the French aristocratic writer Honore D'Urfe (1567-1625).⁶ He apparently used this supposed connection to claim that he was an armigerous 'gentleman,' something that made him a member of the

gentry. The gentry was a social class of lower nobility comprised of those who were armigerous gentleman farmers, including knights, esquires and plain armigerous gentlemen. However, its borders were unclear and many non-armigers were publically accepted as ‘gentleman’ – a category known as *non-armigerous gentlemen* by historians⁷ - because they could live the supposed lifestyle of a gentleman. Being a gentleman in the eyes of the College of Arms, and thus armigerous, provided one with great social respectability but also with, sometimes expensive, social obligations.⁸ As such, D’Urfey later dropped the apostrophe – insisting he was *not* gentry - to avoid paying a poll tax imposed on all members of the gentry to fund a war against France.⁹ In 1689, a fellow writer criticized D’Urfey’s taste, so D’Urfey challenged him to a duel which took place at Epsom in Surrey. It ended up being bloodless but was immortalized in a ballad.¹⁰ D’Urfey’s dress-sense, stutter and the prominence of his play *Love for Money*, led to the 1691 pamphlet *Wit for Money, Or Poet Stutterer*, which hilariously lampooned D’Urfey.¹¹ He would write savage anti-Whig satires but also alter his politics depending who was able to fund him. Lacking patrons for a while, in 1689, it has been argued that he taught singing at a girls’ boarding school in London.¹²

D’Urfey’s career has been described as ‘a curate’s egg, peppered with both resounding successes and disappointing failures.’¹³ It was these which blackened his reputation and, by the end of his life, his reputation was poor, leading to him being forgotten. As Restoration literature scholar John McVeagh has put it:

‘Thomas Durfey has long been neglected by scholars. In his own day he had a lowly reputation in the world of polite letters - before his death his plays had more or less ceased to be produced; his “serious” poems had died long before that, and even his songs were soon thought of as common property or “folk” songs.’¹⁴

The most detailed biography of D'Urfey, the only book-length treatment of him and his work, was published in the year 2000, written by McVeagh: *Thomas D'Urfey and Restoration Drama: The Work of a Forgotten Writer*.¹⁵

The Mystery of D'Urfey's Background

One of the most intriguing aspects of McVeagh's biography of D'Urfey is what it *doesn't* tell us. D'Urfey is first recorded in 1676, apparently aged 23, due to the production of his first known play. Prior to that, he does not appear in the surviving records at all. He was supposedly born in 1653 in or close to Exeter. However, this was during the Commonwealth Gap,¹⁶ when baptism, marriage and burial records often weren't kept or were most unlikely to have survived if they were kept, so there is no record of this. For the same reason, there is no record of D'Urfey's parents' marriage nor of the baptisms of any brothers and sisters he may have had. Accordingly, all we know about his early life and family is what his friends and acquaintances recalled that D'Urfey told them. McVeagh summarises, based on a rather mocking 1714 essay on D'Urfey by Irish playwright Richard Steele (1672-1729), what D'Urfey, who never married, allowed to be known about his background.¹⁷ He was born in 1653 in or near Exeter and was descended from French Huguenot refugees who came to England in about 1628 from La Rochelle, which had been under siege from Catholic forces. The family settled in Devon and D'Urfey's father, Severinus Durfey, who had supposedly been born in France and had come to England when he was young, married Frances Marmion, who was from a Huntingdonshire gentry family.

McVeagh tells us that 'Beyond these facts information is scarce,' although we might ask whether even this information is factual. McVeagh also tells us that: 'Frances Marmion, Durfey's mother, was said to be connected to the dramatist Shackerley Marmion (1603-1639)

. . . Though Marmion and Durfey did not overlap, Durfey may have read Marmion's work. There are a couple of similarities.' Termed one of the 'Sons of Ben,' Shackerley Marmion was a follower of the dramatist Ben Jonson (1572-1637) who patronised him and whose comic style Shackerley Marmion continued.¹⁸ McVeagh also comments that it was claimed by contemporaries that D'Urfey was destined for the Law – though, avers McVeagh, he may actually have been a scrivener's apprentice – before he emerged as a playwright. Put simply, D'Urfey's background and early life are something of a mystery. All we know is what D'Urfey claimed and this may have been inaccurate or exaggerated, particularly considering D'Urfey's penchant for self-aggrandisement. It seems that nobody has ever looked into the surviving records to test any of these claims about D'Urfey's background. So this is what I propose to do.

Who Was Severinus Durfey?

Far from having settled in Devon, the Durfey family were from London, the city where many Huguenot refugees initially established themselves.¹⁹ Severinus was baptized at St Andrew's, Holborn, on 24 July 1627. He was the son of another Severinus Durfey and his wife Anne, according to the parish register. His siblings, all christened in the same parish, were Francis (bap. 1634) and Edward (bap. 1637). In addition, Elizabeth, daughter of Severinus Durfey, was christened in Barnby Upon Don in South Yorkshire in 1629, while the same man had his son William baptized there in 1632. Considering the rareness of the name, it seems probable that it is the same Severinus Durfey. Certainly, there was an established Huguenot community in South Yorkshire by this time,²⁰ so he may have had business connections there and children were baptized soon after birth at the time.²¹ Then, back at St Andrew's, Holborn,

in 1641, there is the baptism of Philip son of Severinus and Maudlin Durfey. This would imply that Severinus had been widowed, though I can find no record of his wife's burial.

In this regard, it is possible that Severinus was involved with two church organizations: the local Anglican church, in order to maintain sound community relations and aid his business, and his own Huguenot church. Sunday Anglican church attendance was compulsory at the time and recusants were subject to fines.²² Christenings took place after Sunday service,²³ so we can understand how a Huguenot would show up on the baptism records, but not on the marriage and funeral records, especially if he were a foreign businessman, desirous of good community relations. Many Huguenots could justify having their children christened Anglican to themselves due to doctrinal similarities, but they would often employ their own ministers if they could.²⁴ The Huguenots established their own churches with their own Calvinist ministers, though some of these accepted ultimate Anglican authority. If one of these (more Non-Conformist) Huguenot ministers had conducted Severinus' wife's burial, then it would likely not be recorded in the parish records.²⁵ In the 1730s, in Wandsworth, in southwest London, the Huguenots had their own 'burial ground'²⁶ and British Huguenot burial records have been described as 'rare at all times' by leading archivists.²⁷ But, these issues aside, this information appears to mean that it was Thomas D'Urfey's *grandfather* who came to England as a refugee and that he did not do so *after* the siege of La Rochelle, as this only began in September 1627,²⁸ but some time before that. Durfey's father, Severinus Junior, was born in England and specifically in London rather than in Devon.

Consistent with D'Urfey's recollection that he was descended from Huguenots, his father appears to have been a puritan, the Huguenots having been strict Calvinists.²⁹ Severinus was an officer in Cromwell's New Model Army during the English Civil War, attaining at least the rank of captain.³⁰ During the Interregnum, all that we know is that

Severinus was given official permission by the government to go to France on 23 March 1653/4.³¹ Not only would this imply that Severinus had relatives in France but also, possibly, that he was still a part of the Cromwellian military machine, requiring official permission to leave the country. Throughout the Commonwealth Period, up to 1653, Cromwell's standing army maintained garrisons in different parts of England. There was definitely a garrison at Exeter in the early 1650s.³² This may explain why Thomas D'Urfey was, apparently, born in or near Exeter, despite there being scant evidence in the surviving records of anyone with that or a similar surname in Devon around that time. All I can find – using the genealogy database *Family Search* (which includes all of the surviving Devon records; both transcribed and photographs of the original documents) - is one 'Mr Samuel Durvee' who died in Plymouth in 1707 and was marked as being a 'Dutchman.' If Severinus had married D'Urfey's mother around this period then, as already discussed, there would be no record of the marriage, and indeed there is not.

On 5 April 1662, we find a marriage, at St Katherine by the Tower in London, between Severinus Durfey and 'Judith Masservy.' Assuming that this is the same Severinus, it would mean that D'Urfey's mother had died – records remain poor until the 1660s, so her burial may not have been recorded or the record may not have survived - and Severinus had remarried. However, I can find no record of Severinus' burial at all. It may be that he died soon after marrying, with record-keeping still only just recovering at the time. It may even be that he was buried by a Non-Conformist Huguenot minister. However, the church in which Severinus married opens up the possibility of an alternative explanation. St Katharine by the Tower was no normal church or parish. It was a 'Royal Peculiar' that was not under the authority of the local bishop but, rather, under the direct authority of the king. Its 'church' included a hospital and a private prison and the parish itself was a kind of 'liberty' that was substantially beyond the control of the city authorities. Accordingly, it was a magnet for

criminals, foreigners, fugitives, oath-breakers, debtors escaping their creditors, vagabonds and prostitutes.³³ Marriage in such a place, at the time, would imply anything from extreme poverty to, in effect, being ‘on the run.’ Perhaps, as a functionary of the Cromwellian regime in Restoration London, this was Severinus’ predicament. Consistent with this hypothesis, he simply disappears from the records after this marriage. It is possible that he fled to Virginia, which had a significant Puritan population.³⁴ His brother, Francis, appears to have emigrated to Virginia,³⁵ and there was a Severinus Durfey there in the late seventeenth century according to a Durfey family genealogist, though this may have been Francis’ son.³⁶ If this is what happened, and this is highly speculative of course, then the nine year-old Thomas D’Urfey was, presumably, placed with other relatives in England. And if Severinus was simply buried without a surviving record then the same would probably have occurred. This brings us on to what we can discover about Thomas D’Urfey’s mother.

Who Was Frances Marmion?

As with ‘Durfey,’ the relatively unusual nature of the surname ‘Marmion’ makes our quest much easier than it would otherwise be. In 1659, we find the will of Edmund Marmion, a clerk (priest) of Gamlingay in Cambridgeshire.³⁷ Edmund Marmion died in 1660. In his will, he refers to his son ‘George Marmion at London,’ his daughter ‘Frances’ and his other daughter ‘Cicely Marmion.’ It is noteworthy that ‘Frances,’ alone of the three children, is not referred to by her full name. This would imply that she is married and, thus, no longer ‘Frances Marmion.’ This would be congruous with the evidence that she was married to Severinus Durfey. She must have died some time between 1660, when the will was proven, and 1662.

We have already discussed the suggestion that Thomas D'Urfey was from the Huntingdonshire branch of the Marmions and was related to the playwright Shackerley Marmion. I find that they were cousins once removed but that Frances was not from the Huntingdonshire branch. She was from the Northamptonshire branch of the family. According to *Alumni Oxonienses*, Edmund Marmion (1583-1660) was an armiger born in Aynho in Northamptonshire. He ultimately became rector of Eynesbury in Huntingdonshire from 1614 to 1645. He was the son of another Oxford alumnus, barrister Thomas Marmion (c.1535-1583), and the brother of Oxford alumnus Shackerley Marmion (b. 1575). Edmund's brother Shackerley had a son who also went to Oxford, the celebrated dramatist Shackerley Marmion (1602-1639).³⁸ It follows that the rumour of kinship between the dramatist Shackerley Marmion and Thomas D'Urfey is correct. They were first cousins once removed, Shackerley being D'Urfey's mother's cousin. However, they were from the Northamptonshire branch of the family, probably established by barrister Thomas Marmion who was buried at Aynho in 1583. The branch that were Huntingdonshire gentry, at the time, were led by Edmond Marmion of Eynesbury, Gent., who died in 1654.³⁹ I have not been able to establish the relationship between these two families, though the shared use of 'Edmund' and the fact of both branches being connected to the same Huntingdonshire parish would imply that it may be relatively close.

As for the rumour that Thomas D'Urfey was destined for the Law, if the young D'Urfey ended up living with his maternal relatives then this would be perfectly possible. According to *Alumni Oxonienses*, D'Urfey's great uncle, Shackerley Marmion Senior, trained at the Inner Temple but is described as of 'Clifford's Inn.' This was an Inn of Chancery in which people trained to be attorneys (later known as solicitors) and from which attorneys worked.⁴⁰ So, Shackerley Marmion Senior was almost certainly an attorney. George Marmion, Edmund's son, was living in London, having been born to the cadet branch of a

Northamptonshire gentry family, so he may also have been an attorney, explaining his move to the Capital. The Law, including via the Inns of Chancery, was a common career for sons of the gentry in the seventeenth century who needed to amass their own fortune.⁴¹ But, be that as it may, D'Urfey had close family connections to the legal profession via his mother's family. So, if he indeed went to live with that family as a child, it would make sense that he may have undergone some training as a lawyer, such as at an Inn of Chancery. He also had relatively close family connections to a highly celebrated dramatist. It is possible that this helped to stimulate his interest in the subject and may even have assisted him in making the necessary contacts to launch himself as a playwright.

¹ John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera and Polly* (Oxford, 2012), p.181.

² Margaret Drabble, Jenny Stringer and Daniel Hahn, (Eds.), *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, (Oxford, 2013).

³ Thomas D'Urfey, *Pills to Purge Melancholy*, (London, 1720).

⁴ The City Waits, *Thomas D'Urfey's Pills to Purge Melancholy: Lewd Songs and Low Ballads from the Eighteenth Century*, Saydisc, (31st December 1993).

⁵ William Carpenter, (Ed.). *Thomas D'Urfey's The Virtuous Wife: A Critical Edition*, (London, 1987).

⁶ Toru Mitsui, Thomas D'Urfey, in Katherine Williams and Justin Williams, (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, (Cambridge, 2016); Joseph Woodfall Ebsworth, (Ed.), *The Bagford Ballads*, (Hertford, 1878), p.87.

⁷ E.g. David Simpkin, *The English Aristocracy at War: From the Welsh Wars of Edward I to the Battle of Bannockburn*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2008), p.20; Roger Manning, *Hunters and Poachers: A Social and Cultural History of Unlawful Hunting in England, 1485-1640*, (Oxford, 1993), p.11.

⁸ See: M. L. Bush, *The English Aristocracy: A Comparative Synthesis*, (Manchester, 1984), pp.27-28; H. French, and R. Hoyle, *The Character of English Rural Society: Earls Colne, 1550-1750*, (Manchester, 2007), Penelope Corfield, *The Rivals: Landed and Other Gentlemen*. In N. B. Harte and R. Quinault, (Eds.). *Land and Society in Britain, 1700-1914*, (Manchester, 1996).

⁹ Manuel Gomez-Lara, Maria Jose Mora, Paula de Pando, Introduction, in Thomas D'Urfey, *Marriage-Hater Matched*, (Barcelona, 2014). p.16.

¹⁰ Joseph Woodfall Ebsworth, (Ed.), *The Bagford Ballads*, (Hertford, 1878), p.88.

¹¹ Amanda Eubanks Winkler, *Music, Dance, and Drama in Early Modern English Schools*, (Cambridge, 2020), p.33.

¹² Elizabeth Holland, 'Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*: A Strategy for Historically-Informed Role-Allocation in the Twenty-First Century' in *British Postgraduate Musicology*, (2002), 5. <http://britishpostgraduatemusicology.org/bpm5-strategy.html>; Amanda Eubanks Winkler, *Music, Dance, and Drama in Early Modern English Schools*, (Cambridge, 2020), p.33.

¹³ Manuel Gomez-Lara, Maria Jose Mora, Paula de Pando, Introduction, in Thomas D'Urfey, *Marriage-Hater Matched*, (Barcelona, 2014). p.16.

¹⁴ John McVeagh, *Thomas D'Urfey and Restoration Drama: The Work of a Forgotten Writer*, (Aldershot, 2000), blurb.

¹⁵ John McVeagh, *Thomas D'Urfey and Restoration Drama: The Work of a Forgotten Writer*, (Aldershot, 2000). Other biographies, as chapters, articles or introductions to his work, include: Toru Mitsui, 'Thomas D'Urfey,' in Katherine Williams and Justin Williams, (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, (Cambridge, 2016); Manuel Gomez-Lara, Maria Jose Mora, Paula de Pando, 'Introduction,' in Thomas D'Urfey, *Marriage-Hater Matched*, (Barcelona, 2014); Edward Dutton, 'Thomas D'Urfey: Earthy Elitist for an Extravagant Era' in *The Quarterly Review* (July 2014); Jonathan Pritchard, 'D'Urfey, Thomas (1653?-1723), playwright and writer' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004); William Carpenter, (Ed.),

Thomas D'Urfey's *A Virtuous Wife: A Critical Condition*, (London, 1987); Jack Vaughn, *The Comedies By Thomas D'Urfey*, (Teaneck, NJ, 1976); Robert Forsyth, *A Study of the Plays on Thomas D'Urfey*, (Cleveland, OH, 1916); Joseph Woodfall Ebsworth, (Ed.), *The Bagford Ballads*, (Hertford, 1878).

¹⁶ See David Annal, *Birth, Marriage and Death Records: A Guide for Family Historians*, (Barnsley, 2012).

¹⁷ See also: *Harrison's British Classicks: The Idler. Fitzosborne's Letters. Shenstone's Essays. Launcelot Temple's Sketches. The Lover* (London, 1787), pp.79-81.

¹⁸ Joe Lee Davis, *The Sons of Ben: Jonsonian Comedy in Caroline England*, (Wayne State University Press, 1967), pp.30-31.

¹⁹ Bernard Cottret, *The Huguenots in England: Immigration and Settlement, c.1550-1700*, (Trans: Peregrine and Adriana Stevenson), (Cambridge, 1991).

²⁰ Samuel Smiles, *The Huguenots: Their Settlements, Churches, and Industries in England and Ireland*, (Baltimore, MD, 1972), p.365.

²¹ E.A. Wrigley, R.S. Davies, R.S. Schofield and J.E. Oeppen, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution 1580-1837*, (Cambridge, 1997), p.310.

²² Clive Field, *Periodizing Secularization: Religious Allegiance and Attendance in Britain, 1880-1945*, (Oxford, 2019), p.30.

²³ Kenneth Stevenson, *The Mystery of Baptism in the Anglican Tradition*, (Harrisburg, PA, 1998), p.74.

²⁴ Raymond Mentzer and Bertrand Van Ruymbek, *A Companion to the Huguenots*, (Leiden, 2016), p.383.

²⁵ See George Cosmos, *Huguenot Prophecy and Clandestine Worship in the Eighteenth Century: 'The Sacred Theatre of the Cévennes'*, (London, 2018).

²⁶ W. T. M. 'French Heraldry' in *Notes and Queries*, (July 1878), p.34.

²⁷ Jane Cox and Timothy Padfield, *Tracing Your Ancestors in the Public Record Office*, (London, 1984), p.72.

²⁸ Martha Pollak, *Cities at War in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge, 2010), p.130.

²⁹ See: Ann Dunan-Page, *The Religious Culture of the Huguenots, 1660-1750*, (London, 2017).

³⁰ Mark Kishlansky, *The Rise of the New Model Army*, (Cambridge, 1979), p.305; Steven Carpenter, *The English Civil War* (Aldershot, 2007), p.31.

³¹ *Calendar of State Papers, Volume 26*, (London, 1878), p.471.

³² Henry Reece, *The Army in Cromwellian England, 1649-1660*, (Oxford, 2013), p.117.

³³ Catherine Jamison, *The History of the Royal Hospital of St Katharine by the Tower*, (London, 1952).

³⁴ Thomas Scanlan, *Colonial Writing and the New World, 1583-1671: Allegories of Desire*, (Cambridge, 1999), p.93.

³⁵ William Goodwin, *Historical Sketch of Bruton Church, Williamsburg, Virginia*, (1903), p.134.

³⁶ *Nexus: The Bimonthly Newsletter of the New England Historic Genealogical Society*, 1:1, Durfey, (1985), p.23.

³⁷ TNA, PROB 11/302/364.

³⁸ Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses, 1500-1714*, (Oxford, 1891); *Dictionary of National Biography*, Marmion, Shackerley, (London, 1893), p.191.

³⁹ TNA, PROB 11/236/519.

⁴⁰ Anon, 'Inns of Chancery' in *The Legal Observer and Solicitors' Journal* (20th January 1855). Also: Jessica Winston, *Lawyers at Play: Literature, Law, and Politics at the Early Modern Inns of Court, 1558-1581*, (Oxford, 2016), p.xiii.

⁴¹ Patrick Wallis and Cliff Webb, The Education and Training of Gentry Sons in Early-Modern England, *Social History*, 36, 1, (2011).