

The Story told by Shakespeare's Sonnets

Stephanie Hopkins Hughes, November 1999

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS are central to the authorship inquiry because they are the sole document still in existence in which the great Poet divulges anything about the great writer's private life. Unfortunately, it was his feelings alone that he divulged—no facts. Generations of readers have remained in the dark about the identity of his subjects. Even his own identity can be surmised only from subtle clues—clues that followers of the Stratford biography have ignored because they lead away from, not toward, the Stratford entrepreneur—known by the people of his home community as “William Shakspere.”¹ But for those who wish to know who actually wrote the *Sonnets*, or perhaps more to the point here, for those who wish to prove who wrote them, it is vital to uncover the identity of the “Fair Youth” to whom or for whom they were penned, the so-called “Dark Lady” and “Rival Poet,” adjuncts to the story, the “Master W.H.” to whom the publication of 1609 was apparently dedicated, the common events touched on in passing, and the reason or reasons why the author wrote them in the first place.

Answers to these questions were pretty much up for grabs for a very long time because the Poet is just as vague about events as he is about identities. Events show forth only through his emotional responses to them, and too dimly to be connected with any certainty to documented events. This has not stopped a great many readers from trying anyway. A bibliography from 1979 gives 1580 titles of books on the *Sonnets* alone.² That was twenty years ago and says nothing of the thousands of articles on the subject published over the years. Probably because they got sick of trying to make sense of an unlettered Warwickshire yeoman as author, it has become the fashion in recent years to refuse to comment on a possible backstory. Many deny that it's possible to know the truth, some that the Youth, the Lady and the Rival Poet were anything more than products of the Poet's imagination. Even so, most commentators will at least admit to some preference for a particular scenario.

Since it's evident to an Oxfordian that these identity problems stem primarily, perhaps totally, from the lack of any records connecting any of the candidates for the central roles in the *Sonnets* with the Warwickshire yeoman's son, we'll simply assume that the poems were a genuine response to real persons and events in the life of the author, and that he hid their identities for the same reason that the authors of most sonnet cycles hid theirs: because he did not want to embarrass them!

Another assumption we'll make is that, apart from the division into two sequences—the first to the Fair Youth, the second to the Dark Lady—the *Sonnets* were published in the order in which they were composed and in which they were meant to be read, and that they were addressed to only the one youth and the one lady. Interpreters who see other scenarios for their composition than a day-by-day

1 Based on the various local spelling variations, most likely pronounced *Shacks'-pair* or *Shax'-peeyair*, from the French *Jacques-Pierre*.

2 Hayashi.

response to events in real life may assume a multitude of youths and ladies, but because the story told by the *Sonnets* is sufficiently coherent in the order in which they were originally published, and because it was far more common in the sixteenth century for a sonnet cycle to be written—and intended to be read—in sequence as “literature” (i.e. “letters”), we can assume, not only that the *Sonnets* were written to or for real persons, but also that they were published (except possibly in one or two instances) in the order in which they were written.³

As described in the two sequences, the relationships between the Poet, the Youth, and the Lady appear to overlap. *Sonnets 40-42* in the sequence to the Youth refer to a woman, seemingly the Poet’s mistress, a young woman who seduces the youth not long after they are introduced, presumably by the Poet himself (alas, poor Pierrot). *Sonnets 133* and *134* in the sequence to the Lady also refer to a triangle (male/male/female), easily seen as the same one. In other words, for some period of time it appears that the Poet was writing in sexually romantic terms to or about both the Youth and the Lady—shocking perhaps, but far from impossible. We can’t be absolutely certain about any of this, but if the simplest and most likely scenario works, that should be the one we adopt—unless, of course, forced by real evidence to do otherwise. So far, despite the plethora of fantasies published over the years by both scholars and pop historians,⁴ no such solid evidence has appeared.

Why so secretive?

As for the ambiguity surrounding the principals and events, surely we can understand why Shake-spear⁵ didn’t make it easy for us. The traditional purpose of a sonnet cycle was to express the most personal and passionate of emotions via the highest possible expression of literary art. If Shake-spear were to follow this tradition, then he would have to keep the object of his passions a secret, wouldn’t he? Given the choice between keeping the tone at a socially acceptable level and keeping the subject a secret, Shakespeare, equally obsessed with Love, Truth, and Art, made the obvious choice. It was, in fact, the standard choice for a sonnet cycle.⁶ Most sonnet cycles were addressed to some “Cynthia” or “Diana” — covers for their real subjects, frequently someone married whose husband and family would have

3 Robert Giroux, author of one of the best books on the *Sonnets*, agrees: “Unless one accepts the order as given, chaos is come again.” (177) A possible exception is *Sonnet 103*, which shows several anomalies.

4 As W.H. Auden says, “Probably more nonsense has been talked and written, more intellectual and emotional energy expended in vain, on the sonnets of Shakespeare than on any other literary work in the world” (88).

5 *Shakespeare* is the name as written, *Shake-spear* the name as heard. The first is plausible as a given name, the second is—undeniably—a pun. Since most theater-goers in the sixteenth century got more information by listening than by reading, most would have recognized it as the kind of pun-name given fictional stage personalities like Doll Tear-sheet or John Fall-staff while readers would recognize it as the kind of joke-name given annoying and all-too-real personalities like Shake-scene the actor/manager or Shake-rags the balladeer.

6 The English sonnet cycle of the 1590s was inspired by similar cycles by earlier Italian poets Petrarch, Tasso, Michelangelo (yes, the great sculptor) and Ariosto, and by the French Ronsard, Desportes, Du Bellay, and La Primaudaye. Although there are variations, most followed the standard format: a series of poems, sequential in time, to or about a greatly desired but unattainable and (usually) unidentified beloved.

been anything but honored had her real name been used.⁷ In addition, what is immediately evident to a reader is that the first 126 poems, many expressing the utmost in passionate love, many suffused with sexual imagery, were written to and/or for a youth in his teens. That the great Shakespeare might have been party to a same-sex love affair, and with a teenager to boot, so shocked the Victorians—all ready and eager to turn him into a secular saint, a sort of literary St. George—that they must have decided that they really didn't care to know any more about his personal life than they had to. They'd be willing to settle for the the dull but seemingly well-behaved William of Stratford.⁸

Although Shakespeare's contemporaries were not quite so easily shocked as the Victorians,⁹ issues surrounding sex are probably the leading reason why the first edition of the *Sonnets* wasn't published until the sonnet craze had been over for more than a decade, why very few copies of it have turned up in libraries and estate sales, and why, when a second edition was finally published in 1640, the masculine pronouns were changed to feminine.¹⁰

7 Although critics have accepted Penelope Devereux as the *Stella* of Philip Sidney's sonnet cycle, there is reason to think that she was enrolled after his death—probably by his sister Mary—as a substitute for the real “Stella,” so that the poems could be published without causing a scandal. Penelope was family. When brother and sister Philip and Mary Sidney's Uncle Leicester, their mother's brother, married Lettice Knollys, Countess of Essex, they acquired a family connection with her daughter Penelope and son Robert. As family, Penelope could be counted on for a favor. By the time Sidney's *Sonnet 37*—the one that identified “Stella”—was published in the second (authorized) edition of 1591, Penelope had nothing left to lose. Her reputation was already tarnished beyond salvation by her openly sexual extramarital relationship with Sir Charles Blount, with whom she lived a happy life in the country, far from an unforgiving Court, giving birth to Blount's children.

8 In 1854, the Victorian critic Henry Hallam wrote: “Notwithstanding the frequent beauties of these sonnets . . . it is impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had never wrote [sic] them. There is a weakness and folly in all excessive and misplaced affection which is not redeemed by the touches of nobler sentiments . . .” (qtd by Butler 156). It is interesting that, in his own “lovely” youth, Hallam had been the object of a similar passion on the part of Alfred Lord Tennyson, England's great poet laureate (1848-1892).

9 It seems the Elizabethans had no term for a permanent sexual bias; the word “homosexual” didn't come into use until the late nineteenth century (Smith 10-12). The general attitude seems to have been that all humans are sinful by nature and as such more or less capable of any kind of sin or crime depending upon the nature of the temptations to which they are subjected by the Devil (12). Since the moral tyranny of the Protestant Reformation had not yet established its dominion over every aspect of English life—deeds alone were crimes, not thoughts or desires.

If anything, same-sex desires were stimulated by a variety of customs. Single men and women of all classes regularly slept with members of their own sex to keep warm in the winter. Boys of all ages, many as young as seven or eight, were routinely sent out to the homes of relatives or political allies to live, work and often sleep in close personal contact with an older male master or one of his servitors. Since emotional intimacy between marriage partners was rare at that time, it was less of a factor in sexual choices than today. In fact, as Lawrence Stone makes clear in his study of the social norms of the period, from birth to death there was little close contact *between* the sexes on all but the lowest rungs of the social ladder (102). Due to the separation of the sexes from infancy on, what intimacy there was was far more likely between members of the same sex. In addition, sex with someone known and trusted was preferable to intercourse with a stranger of either sex, since syphilis with all its horrors had no known cure. Finally, homosexual sex is the oldest method of population control known to humanity.

Parliament made homosexuality a capital offense in 1533 (Crompton 14), but the law was enforced no more than twice during Elizabeth's reign, and that not for homosexual intercourse but for the violent rape of a boy.

10 It wasn't until Malone's unexpurgated edition of 1780 that readers finally had the *Sonnets* (almost) as they were written. Giroux points out that we (posterity) came within an ace of losing them altogether.

NOW, we can see, can't we, that "Shake-spear" was between the proverbial rock and a hard place when it came to publishing the *Sonnets*, for his primary purpose as stated repeatedly from *Sonnet 16* until the end is to render the Youth immortal with his poetry, yet how is he to do that unless he gets it published? And even when published, how can it immortalize one whose name is never mentioned?

Think about this for a minute, please, and try to see the problem in all its complexity, for this is certainly a major factor in the mystification of Shake-spear's identity. Were he to identify the subject of the *Sonnets* anywhere in the sequence, his own identity would most likely be revealed—or, were he to reveal his own identity, the identity of the Youth would also be revealed. It is this that provides us with the background to that part of the *Sonnets* mystery that has to do with its publishing: why it was published at the particular time that it was published; who published it; the mysterious dedication¹¹ that has caused so much argument over the years; and, not least, that it was probably "suppressed" (withdrawn from sale by order of the authorities)¹² shortly after it appeared for sale.

Despite the fact that the players are never identified, the story itself isn't hard to follow. The poet begins by urging the young man, "my lovely boy" as he calls him, to marry so that his beauty will be passed on to future generations. With *Sonnet 18* he shifts abruptly to assurances that it will be his own sublime poetry that will render the Youth immortal.¹³ This continues through to the end, although the Youth's beauty continues to be a prime theme.

Over the course of a hundred more sonnets they have good times and bad, the Poet alternately praises and berates the Youth for his behavior; there are misunderstandings; a woman of dark complexion threatens to come between them; another poet appears to rival Shake-spear in the Youth's affections; the Youth betrays the Poet in some way; later the Poet betrays the Youth; they part, reunite, and so forth. As the elder, the Poet takes an admonishing tone from time to time, warning the Youth to watch his behavior. After one last declaration of eternal devotion, the Poet ends his final sonnet with a warning that the Youth's beauty will not last forever.¹⁴

All in all it seems a fairly straightforward account of a romance—or at the very least an extremely warm friendship—between two persons of the same sex and class but different age groups. Off-topic

11 Giroux calls the dedication "weird" (12). I believe its mystery was solved by John Rollett in his article, "Secrets of the Dedication," published in *The Oxfordian* Vol II (1999).

12 Most agree that the reason the first edition was so fleeting was that it was suppressed. If so, the most logical reason was that the primary subject of the poems, the so-called Fair Youth, was a leading social figure whose reputation was at stake. Who would have cared whether or not an anonymous poet yearned for Willy Hughes (Oscar Wilde) or the Prince of Purpoole (Hotson).

13 This is a classic trope, far from original with Shakespeare. In using it he is filling a long-admired and accepted convention with his own passion.

14 Kenneth Muir states it succinctly: "However much we shuffle the pack, we have the same basic facts: that the poet loved a younger man, probably of aristocratic birth; that he urged him to marry and then claimed that he would immortalize him in his verse; that other poets shared his friend's patronage and favor; that at some point the poet's dark-haired mistress seduced the friend; and that the young man's character had serious faults, as the poet was reluctantly forced to acknowledge" (6-7).

digressions, flights of fancy, philosophy or soul-searching, are natural adjuncts to any intimate relationship. After all, lovers and close friends do occasionally express to each other thoughts on other subjects than “the relationship.” Nor do such relationships in real life usually proceed in a straight line from hot to cold. Normally they go in circles from high to low and back to high again, returning again and again to approach the original *extase* till Time in its inexorable sweep brings the joyride to an end.¹⁵

The “sonnets decade”

The “sonnet craze,” as the scholars call it, that swept Europe in the sixteenth century,¹⁶ came late to England.¹⁷ It began—or at least the public (printed) part of it began—in 1590, kicked off by the (unauthorized) publication of Sir Philip Sidney’s cycle of 108 poems, *Astrophil and Stella*.¹⁸ By 1597 it had run out of steam (Muir 200). That *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* was not published until over a decade later is seen today as anomalous and in need of an explanation. Although scholars in previous times have suggested dates as late as the 1600s, no mainstream scholar today believes that more than one or two (if any) were actually written later than the mid-1590s.

The major themes

Much of the beauty of *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* comes from the interweaving of their many themes and subtexts. We’ve no room here to go into this important subject in any depth, but we must at least mention four major themes, the first being the striking prevalence of sexual imagery, which is quite apart from the sex of the subject. Without ever being in the slightest bit crude or obvious, the poet garnished his sonnets with layers of sexual innuendo and imagery, both male-male and male-female. Those who

15 W.H. Auden speaks for those who question the order of the sonnets because the sentiment seems frequently to revert back to an earlier stage of the relationship, but this is a purely literary criticism. In real life love relationships are far more circular than linear in nature. As Shakespeare claimed over and over, the relationship was eternal, “No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change . . . I will be true, despite thy scythe and thee” (*Sonnet 123*). But Time, of course, ultimately brought it to an end, not long after this was written.

16 It is estimated that some 300,000 sonnets were written in Europe in the 16th century. 326 volumes of sonnets were published in Italy alone between 1575 and 1600 (Muir 30).

17 The more important English sonnet cycles of the period include: 1591: Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*; 1592: Samuel Daniel’s *Delia* and Henry Constable’s *Diana*; 1593: Thomas Lodge’s *Phyllis*, Thomas Watson’s *The Tears of Fancie*, Giles Fletcher’s *Licia*; and Barnabe Barnes’s *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*; 1594: *Celia* by William Percy, *Ideas Mirrour* by Michael Drayton, and the anonymous *Zepheria*; 1595: *Cynthia* by Richard Barnfield, the *Amoretti* by Spenser, and *Emaricdulfe* by E.C.; 1596: *Fidessa* by Bartholomew Griffin, *Diella* by Richard Linche, and *Chloris* by William Smith. 1597 saw Robert Tofte’s *Laura* and Fulke Greville’s *Caelica*, but there is nothing of note after 1597, except, of course, *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* in 1609 (Schaar 195).

18 Technically the first published sonnet cycle was Thomas Watson’s *Hecatompethia* (1582) published shortly after the actual composition of Sidney’s sonnets (1581). But it was the immense popularity of *Astrophil and Stella* in 1591 that initiated the rush of sonnet cycles published over the course of the next six years.

wish to read them without taking any notice of this can do so, so great is the craft of the artist, but there can be no denying its existence.

Please note that this is not my judgement alone, it is that of every single writer whose book I read while preparing this paper for a conference in 1999¹⁹ (see Bibliography). You will not find one, not even the most repressed Victorian, who, even as he wrings his hands over the “problem” of the beloved’s sex, would deny that the *Sonnets* are lavish with sexual nuance, and although some commentators insist that this relates solely to homosexual relations,²⁰ it cannot truly be said in and of itself to be specific to any particular sexual bias. The upbeat sonnets are an uninhibited verbal romp among the salacious puns and every other kind of resonance offered by the English language, in a sort of locker room atmosphere of one guy to another, yet in such good taste that unless you’ve had it pointed out to you, or have enough experience with the language of the period to hear it for yourself, you might read them all without ever noticing the sexy subtext—as many have done and continue to do—a sort of subliminal advertisement for life, love and sexual fulfillment.

The second theme is what Edward Hubler calls Shakespeare’s evocation of the medieval “doctrine of plenitude” (70), acquired in large part, he believes, from Chaucer’s translation of Jean le Meun’s thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, a ground-breaking work in its time, filled with subtle sexual imagery from the Courtly Love tradition of the Middle Ages. Although Shakespeare’s love of bawdy puns and images often blend easily with this theme, this abundance is found, not in wordplay, but in images exploring the fecundity of Nature, a sort of generalized sexuality stemming from the earthy power that fertilizes, enlivens and restores all living things, which he expresses through images of ripeness, fullness, fertility, the flowers of spring, the rich produce of summer as opposed to their opposites, the “yellow leaf” of autumn, the barrenness, decay and death of winter.²¹

Obviously these two themes, fecundity and sexuality, are closely related, differing only in the manner of their expression. Their juxtaposition suggests that the two are one, separated only by viewpoint, the bawdy wordplay reflecting modern society’s embarrassment over sex while the Rose metaphors reflect the view of preliterate pagan times that sexual desire is sacred because it brings forth life. To the ancient Europeans, Poets were magicians who could make things happen by their powers of language. The sexual and nature’s bounty themes of the *Sonnets* can be seen as a form of sympathetic magic invoked by Shakespeare as community Shaman, magic by which he seeks to initiate the youth he loves into adult life, marriage, and procreation.

19 The Shakespeare Oxford Society Conference at the Marriott Hotel in Newton, Massachusetts, October 1999.

20 Leading proponents of the theory that the Poet and the Youth were involved in a physical sexual relationship include Samuel Butler, Gore Vidal, Joseph Pequigney, Martin Green and Oxfordian Joseph Sobran. Dover Wilson holds the preferred Victorian view, that of “Platonic passion.” Akrigg sees it as a normal passing phase.

21 Claes Schaar notes that of the sonnet themes of the period the procreation argument is peculiar to Shakespeare. He finds it nowhere else in the hundreds of sonnets of the period (16). Muir agrees (35).

A third and rather different sub-text is the continual reference to human events in legal terms, specifically the terminology of contract law. Whenever Shakespeare reaches for a metaphor in the *Sonnets* it's as likely to be a legal metaphor as one from sex or plenitude. And finally, throughout, there throbs the constant awareness of Time—how it gives only to take away.

Identifying the principals: Southampton vs. Pembroke

The English novelist Samuel Butler, writing in 1899, reports that it was a Dr. Nathan Drake who in 1817 was the first to suggest in print that the Fair Youth was the young Earl of Southampton, chiefly because the dedication to *The Rape of Lucrece* was so similar to the wording of *Sonnet 26* (“Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage thy merit hath my duty strongly knit”). Two years later one Heywood Bright suggested William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke. For a good hundred years the major contest for the identity of the youth was between these two. Both were considered good-looking as youths; both got into trouble with women at Court; and both had the irresponsible, somewhat spoiled temperament of the Fair Youth as portrayed in the *Sonnets*.²²

One of the earliest sonnets (#3) states, “Thou art thy mother’s glass and she in thee calls back the lovely April of her prime.” The mothers of both Southampton and Pembroke were alive when their sons were in their teens and early twenties, and both were known for their beauty as girls.²³ In exhorting the youth to marry, the poet states “You had a father, let your son say so.” This use of the past tense indicates that the youth’s father was dead, as was Southampton’s (from age eight), while Pembroke lost his father in 1601 at age twenty—late for most scenarios but still possible, though just barely.

Pembroke was in the lead for a long while, partly because his initials, W.H. (William Herbert) were the same as those in the dedication to the *Sonnets* in 1609, and also because he didn’t have Southampton’s biggest problem—his age. Southampton was only nine years younger than William of Stratford—not nearly enough to make sense of Shake-spear’s fatherly tone and his frequent references to their great age difference. Pembroke, on the other hand, was in his teens when Stratford was in his forties. Particularly helpful to the Pembroke theory was that it was able to provide a Dark Lady, one Mary Fitton, a Maid of Honor whom Pembroke cruelly seduced and abandoned.

Alas for theories, someone eventually discovered a portrait of Mary Fitton who, as it turned out,

22 Northrop Frye points out that despite the Poet’s promises to make the Youth immortal, he tells us nothing about him beyond the fact that he is “beautiful and sometimes true and kind, if not overvirtuous. . . . [forcing us] to conclude that Shakespeare has lavished a century of the greatest sonnets in the language on an unresponsive oaf as stupid as a doorknob and as selfish as a weasel.” Frye also sees in him the “sulky urchin” of *Venus and Adonis* (27).

23 The so-called Prince Tudor or Incest theory which holds that the Countess of Southampton was no more than Henry Wriothesley’s foster mother, ignores the similarities between the Countess’s wedding portrait and the miniature of her son by Hilliard, commented on at length by A.L. Rowse. Robert Giroux calls them “mirror images” (69). Indeed, if one covers the lower half of both faces, one sees the identical forehead, eyes and brows.

They must have some explanation as well for the cold treatment of this charming youth, by the woman they believe was his real mother, the Queen—treatment the Countess complained bitterly about in her 1601 letter to Robert Cecil (Akrigg 129) blaming it as the primary reason for her son’s involvement in the Essex rebellion.

had a fair complexion, grey eyes and light brown hair—a small and rather unimpressive fact as evidence goes, which nonetheless proved all too damaging to the Pembroke theory.²⁴ It was finished for good and all some thirty years ago when the *Sonnets* finally acquired their present dates, dates that place them much too early for the Earl of Pembroke. These, as is now accepted by most who study the subject (most broadly, 1589 to 1595/6), establish their composition at a time when Southampton was between the ages of sixteen to nineteen, the proper age of the Fair Youth as reflected in the *Sonnets*.²⁵

Finally, Southampton is the only candidate who can claim a solid connection to the Poet since it was to “Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton” (not to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke) that both Shake-spear’s long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, were dedicated.

The dating game

For a good three hundred years the dates of the *Sonnets* were as problematic as the dates of the plays.²⁶ The first scholar to come up with the dates now commonly accepted was a German, Hermann Isaac, who published his findings in 1884 in the German *Jahrbuch* (176-264, cited in Rollins II, 63). Isaac examined *Shake-speare’s Sonnets*, his two narrative poems (*Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*) and all the plays, searching for similarities of language, theme and imagery that might place them near each other in time. His results showed that there were a number of close connections between the *Sonnets* and both of the long poems, as well as connections among these three and two of the early plays.

Then in 1916, Hyder Edward Rollins published some tests made earlier by an American, Conrad Davis, that showed results almost identical to Isaac’s (cited in R.M. Alden’s *Sonnets* 447 ff). At the time that Davis made his tests he was unaware of Isaac’s German study. Since then a handful of scholars have verified the findings of these two in their own independent studies. The results of these tests vary, but only slightly; the basic results are always the same. Close ties of language, theme and imagery show that the *Sonnets* were written at the same time that the Poet wrote *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and that all three were written during the same time frame that the First Folio versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Love’s Labors Lost* were written. There are also close ties to *Edward III* (Schaar 117).²⁷ Because plays were often published long after they were first written and performed, no firm

24 In fact not one of the necessary characteristics of the Dark Lady fit Mary Fitton. Far from the passionate and loose-moraled mistress of the *Sonnets*, she was the well-born and well-bred daughter of a highly-placed courtier.

25 William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, would someday play an important role in the story of “Shakespeare,” but as his patron, not his “Fair Youth.”

26 Stratfordian scholars have created a chronology based on the dates of publication or entry in the Stationers’ Register and the dates when Shakespeare of Stratford is thought to have arrived in London. That and his age leave the Stratford bio out of the equation while the only marker for a play’s age is its date of registration or publication (or, rarely, a contemporary mention), the *terminus ad quem*. There are no markers for their composition, which could well have been many years before getting noted in some contemporary record.

27 The similarities between *Edward III*—written sometime before 1595 when it was registered and only recently accepted into the canon—and the *Sonnets* were first pointed out as early as the late 1700s when Steevens observed that

dates for the plays have ever been established, but we do have solid dates for the two long poems: *Venus and Adonis* was registered with the Stationers on April 19, 1593, while *Lucrece* was registered a year later, on May 9, 1594.²⁸

Giving the poet time to create the first poem, *Venus and Adonis*, and polish it to his satisfaction—three to six months should suffice—puts its composition in the latter half of 1592, about the time Southampton turned nineteen. Even this would be the latest likely date for the composition of the earlier sonnets, since the narrative poems were probably circulated in manuscript within Shakespeare’s literary coterie for a year or two before they were published—a consideration that those who seek to date the *Sonnets* tend to ignore.²⁹

As for how long it took to write the entire series, luckily one of the few solid facts to be gleaned from the *Sonnets* is stated in #104: “Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned, since first I saw you fresh which yet are green.” If we take any time between 1590 and 1593 as the date he began them, and if we accept his word that there were three years between the first twenty or so sonnets and *Sonnet 104*, we find ourselves somewhere between 1591 and 1596 for 3/4ths of the Fair Youth sequence.³⁰ If we agree with the mainstream that the final twenty-six sonnets,³¹ those composed to or for the Dark Lady, were written at approximately the same time that *Sonnets 40-42* were written, that leaves us with only twenty-four—#s 104-126—that fall outside this date range. However, since the tests done by these scholars in search of links connecting the *Sonnets* and the two long poems and plays has turned up close links with the later sonnets as well (Schaar 194), scholars feel safe in assuming that, possibly apart from

the last line of *Sonnet 94*: “lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds,” can be found word for word in *Edward III*: 2.1.451. This line caused protracted debate over who borrowed from whom, the then anonymous author of *Edward III* (Robertson in 1924 attributed it to Robert Greene) from Shakespeare, or vice versa (Schaar 129), an argument that was finally settled by the recent acceptance of the play into the canon.

That Shakespeare should repeat a line from *Sonnet 94* word for word in *Edward III* (or the reverse) suggests that both were written within a very small time frame, and therefore that *Sonnet 94* was written sometime during or more probably well before 1595 when *Edward III* was entered with the Stationers.

28 Giroux confirms that Claes Schaar in 1962, G.P.V. Akrigg in 1968, and Roderick Eagle in 1969, in studies independent of one another, all came up with similar results. While they found different numbers and examples of parallels, both Isaac and Davis agree on the same five Shakespearean works as leading the list: *Venus and Adonis* in which Davis finds 64 parallels and Isaac 34, *Lucrece*: 60/38, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*: 49/36, *Romeo and Juliet*: 48/47, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: 35/31 (203). Schaar: “As early as 1821, Boaden in Boswell’s third Variorum edition stated his opinion that Shakespeare’s procreation sonnets—with nos. 18 and 19, were based on a passage in *Venus and Adonis*,” and that the sonnets ‘will be found only to expand the argument’ of [*Venus and Adonis*] 169-174.” (137)

29 “One year later [after the publication of *Venus and Adonis*] Shakespeare was ready to acknowledge (‘Then may I dare to boast how I do love thee’) in public print, in that extraordinary dedication of *Lucrece*, what he had written privately in *Sonnet 26*” (Giroux 202).

30 Schaar: “I should like particularly to stress the possibility that 46 sonnets date before or around 1592. . . . the vast majority of the sonnets we have examined seem thus to have been written between 1591-92 and 1594-95 (185).

31 There were two more, but these final two have no obvious connection to either the Youth or the Lady.

one or two that may have been added or inserted at a later date, the entire sonnet cycle was completed sometime between 1595 and '96.³² These studies in literary forensics come as close as is possible to the certainties of hard science. (It is simply not possible to eliminate the subjective element entirely from a phenomenon that is so entirely subjective as is the composition of poetry.) The impact of these results, now accepted by those mainstream Shakespeareans who care to comment,³³ comes in part from the fact that they have been replicated more than once by scholars from very different views and backgrounds, and in part from the fact that they tie in so well with known facts about Southampton.

Well in keeping with the marriage theme of the first seventeen sonnets is the fact that the young earl's family and advisors were urging him to marry during this same period (1590-1595) (Akrigg 32). Another poetic work dedicated to Southampton has been found, a long poem in Latin by one of Burghley's secretaries based on the Greek myth of Narcissus who drowned in a pond in which he was admiring his own image (33)—apparently another attempt to win Southampton away from his reputed “self-love” to thoughts of marriage and the procreation of heirs.

The Dark Lady

As most who have read about Shakespeare know, *the Dark Lady* is the nickname scholars gave the long-identified subject of *Sonnets 127* through *154*—a woman of high temper and something less than a snow-white complexion for whom, or about whom, the poet wrote his most sexually charged and anguished verse. She also puts in an appearance in *Sonnets 40-42* to the Fair Youth, where she wreaks havoc by seducing him. All mainstream scholars I have read who venture an opinion are agreed on this scenario. Although it's been her sex life and her coloring that have animated most latter day discussions of the Lady among literary folk, we must keep in mind that it was her musicianship that won great Shakespeare's heart, which should speak well for her talent.

As for her coloring, please note that two hundred years of commentary by sometimes misguided but generally quite intelligent thinkers has never for a moment doubted that when Shakespeare called her “dark” or “black,” it was to her coloring that he was referring. True, he did have fun with second-

32 Please note that, unlike the dates offered by traditional Shakespeare scholars for the plays, studies by Isaac, Davis et al that place the *Sonnets* in the early 90s were not influenced by a need to conform to the Stratford biography. If anything, the Stratford thesis should be embarrassed by them since they force it to defend the notion that the greatest poet of all time obsessively mourned his wrinkles at the age of thirty!

33 Hubler (1952): “I believe they were written over a period of four or five years beginning in 1592.” Muir (1979): “Schaar claims that the vast majority of the sonnets . . . seem to have been written between 1591-2 and 1594-5 . . .” He accepts Schaar's dating as “the most probable” (4). Rowse: “the *Sonnets* were written . . . 1592 to 1594-5” (1). Most scholars now accept that they were written at the same time as *Venus and Adonis*, *Lucrece*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Love's Labors Lost*. Among those who published opinions on this point Schaar lists: Gregor Sarazin (1897), Sir Sidney Lee (1898), J.A. Fort (1929), E.K. Chambers, Dover Wilson, John Quincy Adams, Tucker Brooke, and F.Y. St. Clair (1962) (192-99). With some of these, however, reliance on the orthodox (E.K. Chambers) chronology forces them to date them later. Baldwin, for this reason, dates them to 1593-99. Ignorant of the Isaac/Davis tests, Samuel Butler in 1899 guessed the mid-1580s, among the first things Shakespeare ever wrote (118, 132, 148). Auden, based mostly on style, guesses early rather than late. Not one suggests anything later than 1599.

ary meanings of “dark” (troubled) and “black” (wicked), but had the Lady been blonde and blue-eyed he would necessarily have had to find some other set of words to play around with. “Black” was the standard Elizabethan adjective for women with black or dark brown hair, those we used to call “brunettes.” Spaniards and Italians were “black,” while those with brown hair and medium complexions were “brown,” as in “the nut-brown maid” of the old ballad. Further, her “mournful” eyes and her “dun” colored skin confirm a woman with classic Mediterranean coloring.

In 1974, pop historian A.L. Rowse published his identification of the Dark Lady as one Emilia Bassano Lanier, mistress of Lord Hunsdon, Lord Chamberlain of the Queen’s household. Hunsdon was also patron of the acting company that bore his title, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (renamed the King’s Men in 1603) the company that, from 1594 until the theaters were closed in 1640, remained the sole known producer of Shakespeare’s plays.

Emilia was the daughter of Baptista Bassano, a Court musician on the Queen’s payroll and a member of the largest and most important of the musical families who provided the music for all the plays and other entertainments provided at Court. The recorder consort was made up solely of the male members of the Bassano family (Lasocki 143). Born in 1569, Emilia was in her early twenties during the period when the early sonnets were written.

In 1995, music historians David Lasocki and Roger Prior backed up Rowse’s claims with additional information on the Bassanos, long known to historians of Renaissance music as Court musicians, composers, and makers and menders of musical instruments. The grandfather of Baptista Bassano and four of his brothers had come to the Court of Henry VIII from the town of Bassano, just north of Venice, during the period that Henry was pouring money into his courtship of Anne Boleyn. Regarded no doubt as converts to Christianity,³⁴ the Bassanos were, they believe, Sephardic Jews whose great-grandparents had been forced by Ferdinand and Isabella to migrate to Italy from Spain in 1492 (92-7). Born into the educated class, cultured and refined, in Italy they earned their living playing and crafting instruments for the Venetian Doges and other aristocrats until invited in 1535 to entertain the English Court. Once established in London they eventually located in what was then the east side of the city, midway between the Tower and the theater inns on Bishopsgate (aka Gracious) Street.

Emilia’s father, Baptista, was the first of his five older brothers to move north of the east end to the liberty of Norton Folgate, outside the City Wall, on or near Bishopsgate Street. Although Baptista died in 1576, his common law wife Margaret (also a member of a family of Court musicians) was still living in their house in Norton Folgate when Oxford purchased Fisher’s Folly just up the street. Emilia would have been eleven in 1580 when Oxford and his crew moved into Fisher’s Folly. Several of her musician cousins, sons of her father’s older brother Antonio, moved to the same neighborhood during

34 Although in sixteenth-century England Jews were required by law to convert, it seems that, as with Catholics and dissenting Protestants of various sorts, they were left in peace as long as they attended their local Anglican church on a fairly regular basis.

the 1580s (37-42), during the period of Oxford's residence at Fisher's Folly (1580-'89).

At some point during these years Emilia was taken into the household of the well-educated Countess of Kent, where it is likely she received the education that later enabled her to write a book of original poetry and to run a school for children of rank.³⁵ Susan Bertie, Countess of Kent, was sister to Oxford's brother-in-law, Sir Peregrine Bertie, Lord Willoughby. Certainly Oxford would have had plenty of opportunity to meet Emilia Bassano, if not during her childhood then during her teenage years while she was living with his sister-in-law, or if not then, then after she became the mistress of the Lord Chamberlain of the Queen's Household, Henry Hunsdon. Hunsdon, then in his sixties, would have had plenty of contact with the Bassanos since it was his job to see that the Court was provided with music and entertainment.

We know from the diary of Simon Forman that Hunsdon kept Emilia in royal style until she became pregnant (in 1592), whereupon he arranged her marriage to Court musician Alphonse Lanier. Lanier gave her the name by which she is known today, for apart from her growing fame as the Dark Lady, it is as Emilia Lanier that she has been acclaimed in recent years as one of the most important female writers in the history of the English language. Published in 1611, hers is the first book of original poetry, or original writing of any kind, to be published by a woman writing in English. It also includes an exceedingly outspoken feminist introduction—another first in English literary history.

Although we have (as yet) no certain portrait of Emilia or direct description of her coloring, her heritage fits well her appellation of "the Dark Lady," for although her mother had an English name (Margaret Johnson), it would not be surprising if from the Spanish/Jewish/Italian heritage of her father's family she had acquired the black curly hair and olive complexion that is almost universal among the peoples of the northern shore of the Mediterranean. Her family's heritage also makes it more than likely that she was an accomplished musician, as required by *Sonnet 128*. As Lord Hunsdon's mistress it would have been his "bed vow" that the Poet claims she broke in *Sonnet 152*.

Without a doubt, Emilia Bassano would have been perceived by her contemporaries as a courtesan, precisely as the Dark Lady was described by Shakespeare. And as he claims in *Sonnets 127, 131* and *132*, she was probably not considered beautiful by the Court community, who prized—formally at least—skin like snow and hair like spun gold. But that she was compelling, a woman with powerful sex appeal, is confirmed by the diary of astrologer and physician Simon Forman, where A.L. Rowse discovered her in 1974 (xi). That Emilia Lanier was able to write and publish a volume of original verse, dedicated only to women and introduced by a feminist diatribe, urges her spunk, her talent, her intelligence, and the obvious fact that she had connections.

For four years, Emilia and her husband Alfonse ³⁶ lived in relative comfort on Hunsdon's con-

35 Most of our information on Emilia Bassano comes from Lasocki and Prior, some from Suzanne Woods.

36 Alfonse was the brother of Clement Lanier who had a career as a composer as well as a Court musician. Among Clement's descendants are the nineteenth-century American poet Sidney Lanier and the twentieth-century playwright Thomas Lanier (Tennessee) Williams (Rowse xxiv). Emilia's mother Margaret Johnson was the aunt of composer and

tinued benefactions, which were intended in part to provide for the child born in 1593 that everyone must have regarded as Hunsdon's son. That he was named Henry (Hunsdon's given name) fosters this interpretation, but, as we know, the Fair Youth's name was also Henry—Henry Wriothesley (pronounced “Rosely”). To make matters even more interesting, Oxford, like Emilia, was also married at this time to someone more socially appropriate, a Queen's Maid of Honor. With his wife's assistance he, like Emilia, acquired a son in 1593, one that, also like Emilia, he named Henry—this despite the fact that through seventeen generations of Oxford earls there had never yet been a Henry, nor was there a Henry on the throne at the time.

Although there is no hard evidence of a connection between Emilia and Southampton, there is evidence of a connection between her husband Alfonse Lanier and Southampton, under whom Lanier fought in the Islands Campaign of 1597. In 1604, Southampton asked Robert Cecil (by way of the Bishop of London) to see that Lanier be given a monopoly on the weighing of hay and straw (Lasocki 108).³⁷ This would have brought a modest but dependable income to the Lanier household, something to replace the support they lost when Hunsdon died, and something that Emilia fought in the courts to retain for herself, her son and her grandchildren after her husband's death in 1613 (Rowse 33).³⁸

Rowse points out that Emilia's book was published roughly a year-and-a-half after the publication of the *Sonnets* in 1609. He feels that she wrote and published her book—brimming with the righteous wrath of a woman scorned—as a response to the humiliation from Shake-spear's portrayal of her in *Sonnets 127-152*. Rowse believes she wished to show the world of the liberal nobility—a world in which she claimed to have, and no doubt hoped to keep, some standing—that there was more to her, and to women like her, brilliant, talented, educated women, than their sexual relations with men.

It seems that, like the *Sonnets*, her book was suppressed soon after publication, as there was but one edition and of that no more than four copies have been found (including one, bound in leather, from Prince Henry's library) making it one of the rarest books of the early modern period. The likelihood that it was stopped suggests that Rowse is correct about its background, since—feminist tone aside—there's nothing about the contents that would cause the authorities to suppress it.

With the dates settled and the identity of the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady determined, only three of the major problems remain unresolved. Unresolved, that is, for the orthodox scholars, since two of these present no difficulties at all for Oxfordians, and the third not nearly so many. With Oxford turning forty the year Southampton turned seventeen (1590), the problem of the difference in their ages vanishes and, since both Poet and Youth occupied the same rung of the social ladder, the seemingly con-

lutenist Robert Johnson (1582-1633), whose settings for several of the songs in Shakespeare's plays are still played and recorded today.

37 Though the suit was brought in 1604, it did not get approved until shortly after Robert Cecil's death in 1612.

38 What kept them afloat between Hunsdon's death in 1596 and 1604 was probably the sale of the jewels and other gifts Emilia collected from Hunsdon and perhaps other lovers during her late teens and early twenties.

descending tone of some of the *Sonnets* can be seen as a fond elder talking down to a younger member of his own class, thus dismissing the attitude problem.

However, a third problem remains: Whoever he was, why would the Poet write such sexually-charged poetry to or for the teen-aged Southampton? Was he simply following a convention, admitting the youth into an all-male world of erotic sonneteering? Or—was the Poet a homosexual, or more precisely a bi-sexual, since there's far more male-female sexual wordplay in them, and in all of Shakespeare's works, than there is male-male sexual wordplay? Or—was he simply attempting to attract the attention of a youth who was known, like many another of his age, to enjoy this sort of bawdy banter?³⁹ Or—was he operating out of an age-old homosexual subculture into which every university-educated male aristocrat was initiated as a matter of course and had been since the days of the Greeks?⁴⁰ Or—did Southampton's feminine qualities, noted by more than one contemporary, cause an inappropriate but essentially innocent response on the part of the Poet? These are but a handful of the suggestions put forth by commentators on the *Sonnets*. There is no consensus answer to this question. Everyone who addresses the subject has his or her own opinion—based, no doubt, chiefly on their own basic nature and personal experience.

Was Shakespeare seeking patronage?

Oxfordians generally discount the traditional view that the poet was seeking Southampton's patronage—but should they? Certainly the imagery of abundance, beginning, in fact, with the first line of the very first sonnet (“From fairest creatures we desire increase”) suggests that, whether consciously or not, he was making some sort of plea for support. We know that Oxford was in dire need of funds at the time the sonnets were written; we also know that Southampton was widely believed to be the heir to a fortune and, although he would not be in charge of his own estates until October 1594, by seventeen he would certainly have been in a position to obtain loans from money-lenders that would come due, with interest, when he turned twenty-one. As one known to appreciate poetry, scholarship and the theatre, Southampton was the very partner Shakespeare needed to help bear the expense of his theater and publishing ventures. Surely the fact that when he began writing these early sonnets he was envisioning the youth as his future son-in-law should make the argument better than anything else could.

Nor does this necessarily mean that the love expressed by the *Sonnets* was necessarily insincere. Patronage was an important, accepted and necessary function, one that was subscribed to on all levels. In exactly the same way that artists and scholars applied to wealthy merchants and nobleman for their support, noblemen also applied unceasingly to each other, to the Lord Treasurer and to the Queen for their patronage, both for themselves and for those for whom they themselves functioned as patrons.

39 Thomas Nashe's lascivious poem, “A Choise of Valentines,” which dates from this period, was dedicated to a “Lord S,” variously identified as Southampton or Lord Strange.

40 Gore Vidal's opinion.

Patronage was a system that worked from top to bottom of the social scale. Such exchanges of favors were what bound men together in dependable support systems. No one was too low or too high to reach out to someone on the next highest rung for jobs, loans, preferment and outright gifts.

Who's to say that Southampton did not—as a contemporary rumor had it—provide Shakespeare with funds for his theatrical enterprise?⁴¹ Who's to say that Southampton didn't lend or give Oxford the funds he needed to tide him over until Fortune once more began to smile at him, and that this is the reason for the tone of genuine gratitude in the dedications to *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*? According to his biographer, Southampton was “deep in financial difficulties” in 1597 because he had been “living very lavishly” since 1594 (Akrigg 58). For a youth who was in his twenties during the 1590s, the period when the greatest playwright of all time was just hitting his stride and when these dedications were written, isn't it altogether possible, even likely, that it was partly his effort to keep Shakespeare's theater afloat that this aristocratic youth went into debt?

“Sex ran in him like a river”⁴²

Intense and “inappropriate” love relationships are almost as disturbing to the community as they are to those intimately involved. Oxford's drastic and obvious loss of favor with his Garter community at this time may reflect, not only their distress at his financial debacle—many aristocrats suffered similar financial troubles without reprisal—but his indiscretions with two vulnerable members of their community, the young Earl of Southampton and Lord Hunsdon's mistress. These indiscretions, perhaps too flagrant to ignore, generated in response that atmosphere of universal condemnation and judgement confronted by the author in *Sonnet 121* (“'t is better to be vile than vile-esteem'd”). Oxford's loss of Burghley's support may have been due as much to Burghley's embarrassment and shame over his son-in-law's flamboyant mid-life crisis as to anything else. Since no (nonliterary) evidence of this episode survives, historians have been forced to explain this universal disdain for Oxford as due to his financial troubles or bitterness over Oxford's treatment of his wife, Burghley's recently deceased daughter.

But what good will it do us—some four hundred years later—to side with historians and an outraged Court community? If we are ever to understand why the *Sonnets* were written it behooves us to set judgement aside and review the facts and expressed emotions with as much dispassion as we can muster. Midlife crisis is a fact. Everyone goes through it, just as everyone goes through birth, puberty, coming of age, and death. Should we be surprised that Oxford's midlife crisis was sexual in nature? Surely that sexual desire was one of the driving forces in Oxford's life should be a major point in his favor as Shakespeare, one of the sexiest authors that ever wrote. What kind of midlife crisis would we

41 This rumor originated with Shakespeare's first biographer, Nicholas Rowe, who presumably picked it up from William Davenant in or before 1709. It held that Southampton gave Shakespeare a thousand pounds to go through with a purchase that “he'd a mind to” (Schoenbaum 133).

42 Walt Whitman's comment on Shakespeare.

expect from the author of *Venus and Adonis*, which relays one kind of sexual encounter, of *Lucrece*, which relays another kind of sexual encounter, of *Taming of the Shrew*, a third kind, of *Measure for Measure*, several kinds, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*, where sexual desire gone haywire fuels the comedy, of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, where it leads to tragedy?

Shakespeare a Romantic

Although the term “Romantic Agony” is generally heard in connection with the behavior and attitudes of artists of the early nineteenth century, it would do equally well for the verbal artists of the mid-sixteenth century, the reasons for it, social and political, being much the same. That this is so may come as a surprise to many English professors, but that this first Romantic era has been misinterpreted is probably because, although it was intense, it was relatively short and there were not nearly so many artists involved. More significant perhaps, those that were involved have been obscured by self-imposed anonymity, so their biographies cannot be connected to their works in the same way that connections can be established between the romantic lives of Byron, Keats and Shelley, Keats and their works.

The essence of a Romantic period is the effort by a group of artists of that time to express their true feelings, however extreme, terrible, or in conflict with the prevailing social temper. The term “Romantic agony” refers in part to the expression of passion that is the hallmark of the Romantic artist, but it also refers to their emotions and behavior. Since it is necessary to feel passion in order to express it, the Romantic Poet, eager for the experience that will bring the energy and inspiration he craves, may actually seek experiences that ordinary folk would shun. And since Romance is a sometime thing that can evaporate before any work of significance has been accomplished, the most fruitful situation in an artistic sense is one whereby the romance is either intensified or prolonged. Nothing intensifies romance like forbidden love; nothing prolongs it like frustration. The writers of sonnets usually satisfied the forbidden factor by yearning for a woman who was already married and the frustration factor in her “cruel” refusal to yield to them sexually, but same-sex love is if anything even more forbidden than loving a married woman while loving someone who can’t respond due to emotional coldness or a different sexual orientation is certainly about as frustrating as it’s possible to get.

Think *Jules and Jim*, if Jules were considerably older than Jeanne Moreau’s character, and Jim were young enough to be Jules’s son. Think Jules as much in love with Jim as with Jeanne and, unable to express his sexuality with the Youth (or as much as he’d like to), expressing them with the Dark Lady instead (and when alone, with pen and paper). Consider fatherless Emilia, well aware that she will never get the sweet tenderness from the Poet that he lavishes on Southampton, seduces him, partly out of revenge and partly because no normal woman, given the opportunity to initiate a charming and inexperienced youth into the pleasures of sex, would forgoe the experience.

Poor Shake-spear! Not at all what he’d intended! Yet, ironically, it was by this means that he made it possible for the Youth to achieve what he urged for him in the earliest sonnets, a successful ini-

tiation into the world of heterosexual adulthood—necessary for the propagation of the species and the all-important continuation of the Southampton line.

Shakespeare is born

By 1596 Southampton was a bearded, broad-shoulder warrior, fully committed to the Essex party. Oxford's daughter, tired of waiting, had married another Earl, one not so charming perhaps, but with even greater wealth and an eager willingness to support her father's theatrical enterprise. The liberal wing of the Court community, having come to realize the value of their Prospero/Oberon over the period of the two or three years that they had to do without him, rallied to his support. The Lord Chamberlain's Men was instituted under the leadership of the very Earl whose mistress Oxford had suborned, in large part to reserve to the Court community the use and protection of his works. "The lovely boy" existed now only in his memory and in the poetry he had written while drunk with passion.

But something profoundly durable remained. Returning to his books and his literary projects, he found that by opening his heart (and his pen) to this tempest of emotions he had acquired a new language, a greater freedom of expression, a more flowing and powerful syntax. From the ashes of passion a phoenix was born, the language of Shakespeare. The voice that had been struggling for so long to find itself was now fully fledged. For the Lord Chamberlain's Men he began to rewrite his early plays, some as early as sketches written during his teenage years for the Westminster School, then interludes for the Children of the Chapel for Court holidays, then comedies for the Queen's Men and most recently dramas for the Lord Strange's Men at the Rose. Some he had already rewritten once or twice. Others were failed experiments with style and format, kept for the sake of a good scene or two. All these he rewrote, dictating to an amanuensis, in some cases keeping scenes that were good enough as they were, in others rewriting the entire play, the words flowing freely now and without forethought.

That was not the only legacy. Of Southampton he left us his ever-living portrait, not only as the Fair Youth of the *Sonnets*, but also as Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, Cesario in *Twelfth Night*, Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and not least, Adonis. He left us the Lady in a handful of spunky, witty heroines from Kate to Cleopatra, while of himself in his role as third party to the triangle of the *Sonnets* he left those mature but pining lovers, both Orsino and Antonio in *Twelfth Night* and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*.

I think if we will observe our own lives and the circumstances under which we experience the grand upheaval we call "falling in love," we will find that (once past the teen years) it rarely happens when we're pleased with ourselves, enthusiastic about our goals, or happy with our daily routine. Boredom, isolation, loneliness, a fear of missing out on life, a feeling of being disregarded by those from whom we feel we deserve love, respect, particular notice—any or all of these can contribute to a tendency to lose our hearts to someone or something outside ourselves. All of these describe Oxford's state at the time he met Southampton, a mood reflected by the melancholy that pervades the *Sonnets*.

Not only was he ruined financially and out of favor at Court, forced to sell his City mansion and let go of his staff, his wife dead, his daughters alienated—whether by his own doing or their grandfather’s—in any case he no longer had a family of his own and was still, at forty, without an heir nor any hope of getting one. One after another, he saw the deaths (or other departures) of most of the men and women who had been important to him in one way or another since his youth, including all but one of his private literary coterie.⁴³ And so he turned for comfort to a young woman, one whose own anomalous position in Court society did not allow her to judge him (though it seems she did anyway). And then along came that “kind” seventeen-year-old.

But why Southampton? Was he all that extraordinary? Could there have been some deeper reason that Oxford chose this youth out of all others? Well, in point of fact there weren’t all that many others from which to choose. The Court community was, after all, fairly small. Each generation was represented by no more than a handful of peers. It wasn’t every year that saw the advent of a youth of Southampton’s qualities and status. The numerous encomia written about him, the many publications dedicated to him during the early ’90s, show the unusual excitement that surrounded his advent, the hopes that he seemed to engender in all hearts, both sentimental and political.

More to the point, Southampton was in many ways a replica of Oxford himself. Both lost their fathers at an early age and inherited their titles in childhood; both spent time under Burghley’s roof as wards of the Crown and both had to deal with Burghley’s efforts to marry them to his relations (something Southampton—unlike Oxford—managed to escape). Both were bonded in youthful friendship to an Earl of Rutland and both had but one sibling, a sister named Mary. Both were attractive, both were highly educated, both were alumnae of St. John’s, both loved poetry, literature and the theater, and both craved a military career. Falling in love with Southampton was like falling in love with himself. He almost says as much in *Sonnet 22* (“My glass shall not persuade me I am old . . .”).⁴⁴

Fatherless from the age of eight, raised from then on by Burghley, who did not share the values of his class, Southampton was vulnerable. Love offered by a man of his own rank, on his own social

43 His greatest rival, Sir Philip Sidney, died in combat overseas in 1585. Christopher Hatton, his rival for Elizabeth’s affections in the early 70s, died in 1587, as did his boyhood companion, the Earl of Rutland. Both his wife and his great rival, the Earl of Leicester died in 1588. His Falstaff, Sir John Perrot, died in the Tower just in time to avoid hanging in 1590. 1592-96 saw the death or disappearance of all but one of the University Wits: Robert Greene and Thomas Watson in 1592, Christopher Marlowe in 1593, Thomas Kyd in ’95, and George Peele in ’96. Only Thomas Nashe survived the holocaust.

44 “Prince Tudor” Oxfordians would have it that the reason for Oxford’s interest in Southampton was that he was the boy’s real father. No one would deny that there is a great deal of fatherly feeling expressed in the *Sonnets*, but this hardly requires that we see this as fact. Feelings of parental-type love inevitably attend every affectionate relationship between youth and age. When he met Southampton Oxford was estranged from his daughters and still lacked an heir. How can we doubt that he yearned for a son? The natural human need for that one being that will live on when one is gone, the child of one’s own sex to whom one can pass on, not just estates and titles, but the philosophy and the fruits of one’s life experience—this breathes from every syllable of the early sonnets. Had Southampton truly been the son of his flesh there would be no need to write 126 poems to create a bond that would have existed as soon as the Youth was informed of their true relationship.

level, would have been hard to resist. For a youth lacking experience of life, Oxford would have been the ideal role model, a man who seemed to know instinctively the right thing to say and do, something that is, of course, not really instinctive, but like most social skills must be acquired by imitation. To a seventeen-year-old still in school at Gray's Inn, Oxford held the key to what must have seemed the most glamorous scene in all of London, the world of the private theatre and the entertaining house party. Even more impressive, through Oxford Southampton was admitted into that exciting world behind the scenes where plays and music were rehearsed, where he met the actors and the musicians, talented, witty, and stimulating—among them the Bassanos.

Hoping to bind him to himself to Southampton with the hoops of steel called marriage, Oxford wooed the youthful Narcissus with the kind of compliments that the nobility cherished. On his seventeenth birthday in October of 1590 he gave him seventeen “sugared” sonnets, one for every year of his life, bound in velvet and tied with a ribbon.⁴⁵

For a time it seemed that he was successful. Eager for the kind of entrée that Oxford could provide to the adult world of the London sophisticate, Southampton was his. But only for a time.

OXFORD had Southampton in the same way that Dante had Beatrice, that Petrarch had Laura, that the author of the medieval poem “The Pearl” had his vision, that Jodi had the yearling. As he says himself in *Sonnet 87*, he had him “as a dream doth flatter, in sleep a king, but waking no such matter.” He had him as everyone who loves at this level of intensity has the object of their passion, as a *cosa mentale*, more a thing of the mind than the flesh—while the thing itself, the youth, the deer, the pearl, the girl, be she Beatrice or Laura, is inevitably lost. He had him for a brief moment in time as a friend, a would-be son-in-law, an angel for his next play, the son he craved, the son, not of his flesh but of his soul, perhaps even as his lover. He lost him, as all must lose when they love at this level of intensity.

And think how it must have been for the poor kid to have this level of expectation placed upon him? It's stressful to be loved like this, as all will agree who have endured it. Ultimately the *Sonnets* were less about Southampton than they were about Oxford himself, less about his proclaimed desire to preserve the Youth from oblivion than his own need as an artist to preserve the experience of his passion. A gifted writer from childhood, Oxford was not committed to perfecting his talents until his loss of status in the nineties left him with nowhere else to go. The process of putting this emotional supernova, this “vision,” as one scholar states it, into words, forged the tools that he would continue to use throughout the nineties in the plays produced by the Lord Chamberlain's Men on the stages of the Theatre, the Curtain, the Swan, the Globe, and Blackfriars. It was this affair, with—as noted by another scholar—its profoundly Christian theme of redemption through suffering, that forced the quantum leap, from good to great, from great to genius. Young Southampton was great Shakespeare's muse, a thing far more necessary to the soul of a world class poet than any lover, patron or son.

45 There is common agreement among *Sonnet* examiners that the first seventeen form a unit, all in the same style and urging the same theme, the so-called “marriage sonnets.”

He had him, then he lost him, first to that demonic Cleopatra, that Rosaline with “two pitch balls” for eyes, who no doubt taught both of them a thing or two about women—but who was never a serious threat to their relationship. The rivalry that the relationship was not able to survive intact was with another man, one well known to readers up on the history of the latter years of Elizabeth’s reign. That man was Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex.

The Rival Poet

Certainly Essex has been proposed as the Rival Poet before this, as has at one time or another every man who ever set pen to paper.⁴⁶ That he has not been taken seriously is partly because his poetry was known only by second hand report until recently, and partly because it seemed unlikely that the Stratford playwright would presume to treat a great nobleman like Essex as a literary rival. It is also partly because we tend to compartmentalize the past, separating literary events and personalities from those that are historical or political. Essex is seen as belonging to a different sphere of life than that occupied by Southampton’s Poet. But of course there should be no division, now or then—but especially then. Oxford, Southampton and Essex all occupied very much the same sphere, one in which political allegiance and love poetry were bound up together—“two dishes but to one table,” as Hamlet said in another context—for although Shake-spear may refer to Essex as a rival poet, what was most most seriously at stake for Oxford and his coterie was not Southampton’s literary patronage, his kinship or even his personal affection—it was his political allegiance.

We don’t have copies of poems written by Essex to Southampton, or if we do we don’t recognize them as such, but it isn’t much of a reach to suggest that they ever existed. Like most of the leading courtiers, Essex wrote poetry, and, knowing their relationship, some of it must have been personal. Thanks to Stephen May, we have a few of his poems and, although they’re not highly regarded today, that’s not to say that they weren’t admired by his coterie. How can we doubt that they were admired by his most devoted adherent, the young Earl of Southampton?

Whether Southampton was drawn to Essex’s poetry because of its artistry or because he saw in it the true heart of the writer scarcely matters—the result was the same. As his biographers make clear, Henry Wriothesley had loved Robert Devereux since he was nine and Devereux fifteen, two fatherless boys under Burghley’s roof (Akrigg 27). Denied the company of his mother and sister from the age of six, raised in his crazy father’s all-male household until he was eight,⁴⁷ Southampton desperately needed someone to love and admire.

Every incident in his youth points to his passionate desire to fight beside his hero, first in Cadiz,

46 Only one however has suggested this from an Oxfordian perspective: Peter Moore, who urged Essex as the Rival Poet in an article in 1989 in the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*.

47 The description given by Akrigg of the nature of the 2nd Earl of Southampton and his devotion to the servant to whom he tried to leave all his wealth, leave one with the feeling that during two of his most formative years, little Henry Wriothesley was surrounded by an entire household of male homosexuals.

wherein he was (probably) disappointed, then gloriously in the Azores, ignominiously in Ireland, and finally, shamefully, in the streets of London. It was during 1590 to 1595, the period when Essex began building the power base that would so dangerously polarize the Court community from '95 on, that the *Sonnets* were written. And although they sprang from what the Poet obviously believed to be a pure and holy passion—they were also a weapon in the battle for the heart and mind of a youth whose allegiance would be crucial to the history of the final years of Elizabeth's reign.

Scholars have detected references to Queen Elizabeth in the *Sonnets*. Like the swell of the national anthem on a film soundtrack, these may have been intended to rouse emotions in Southampton that would keep his loyalties in place, loyalties to the Queen, the nation, and the rule of English law. With seventeen generations of service to the Crown as a backdrop, Oxford threw his private passion and his great talent into a five-year effort to keep the allegiance of this one wayward but important youth. He failed, and those who know the history of the Essex rebellion know the result of his failure. But in failing he gave the world some of the greatest love poetry ever written. In failing he forged a language of beauty for poets and power for statesmen, a language that would one day become the lingua franca of our modern world.

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