

# *Essex, The Rival Poet*

## of Shakespeare's Sonnets

by Peter Moore

**S**hakespeare's *Sonnets* appeared in 1609, apparently published without the author's consent, and probably suppressed by the authorities as they were not republished until 1640. There are 154 sonnets; the first 126 address a young aristocrat, commonly called the Fair Youth, with whom Shakespeare was infatuated – though whether the motivation was sexual is quite unclear. I join the majority who believe it was not. The next 26 describe Shakespeare's relations with his unfaithful mistress, the Dark Lady. These sonnets were apparently written during rather than after the fair youth series, and so Sonnet 126 may be taken as the closing poem. Sonnets 78 to 86 concern a rival poet who competed with Shakespeare for the affections of the fair youth. Sonnets 153 and 154 are an unrelated finial.

The principal questions about the *Sonnets* are the identities of the fair youth, the dark lady, and the rival poet, the dates of their composition, the problem of whether their 1609 order is correct, and what, if any, topical allusions are found in them. This article supports the consensus that the fair youth was Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, a vain and reckless young man who, following a treason conviction and two years of imprisonment, matured into a model husband, a courageous champion of Parliamentary rights, and a hard working patron and director of the Virginia colony. He was born in 1573 and died on campaign in the Netherlands in 1624. Shakespeare's only dedications (of *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 and *The Rape of Lucrece* in 1594) were written to Southampton. No substantial candidate has emerged for the role of the dark lady. The most often proposed rival poets are George Chapman and Christopher Marlowe, but the arguments for them are thin. Even weaker cases have been offered for virtually every other contemporary professional poet. The conventional wisdom is that the *Sonnets* were begun in the early or mid-1590s and continue past the death of Queen Elizabeth and the advent of King James in 1603 (which events are referred to in Sonnet 107). This series of articles will argue that the conventional wisdom is correct. As has been indicated, I also feel that within the two subseries (Sonnets 1 to 126 and 127 to 154), the *Sonnets* are in the right order.

And now to the rival poet.

Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex, was the brilliant but flawed star of the late Elizabethan firmament. He was the Queen's most illustrious (though not her best) military and naval commander during the 1590s. He was her last great favorite and he attempted to take over her government from the astute and cautious dynasty of William Cecil, Lord Burghley and his son Robert. Desperation and mental instability led him into a botched coup that cost him his head in February 1601. He was intelligent, handsome, athletic, improvident, charming, a generous patron of writers, a commander of real talent, a confirmed womanizer, a devout Protestant who leaned toward Puritanism, a ditherer on several critical occasions, and a dangerously unstable egotist who finally lost touch with reality. He was also the best friend and hero of the youthful third Earl of Southampton. He was also a poet whose talent was admired by his contemporaries.

Essex exerted a major gravitational force on his age and he influenced William Shakespeare, who praised Essex in *Henry V*. Contemporaries also saw a resemblance, intended or not, between Essex and Bolingbroke in *Richard II*. It has plausibly been suggested that *Love's Labour's Lost* had something to do with Essex's circle, that the description of Cawdor's execution in *Macbeth* evokes the death of Essex, and that

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**Author Note:** My research on the *Sonnets* resulted in a series of four articles. This one, the first of them, demonstrates why Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, was the rival poet of Sonnets 78 to 86. The second shows that Sonnets 78 to 100 can be dated quite firmly to events in the life of the Earl of Southampton between his return from the Azores voyage in late 1597 and his departure for Ireland in early 1599. The third article discusses the implications of the first two articles with regard to the authorship controversy and will bring the 17th Earl of Oxford into the picture (particularly with regard to some of the later Sonnets). The fourth and concluding article argues that the *Sonnets* as published in 1609 are in the right order. It is partly motivated by original material, but also by the fact that most learned commentators believe the question of the order of the *Sonnets* is one of subjective literary judgment. In fact, there exist a number of completely objective, non-judgmental reasons for believing that the *Sonnets* are properly ordered.

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**Peter Moore** established himself as a scholar of the Renaissance in England by contributing articles to six peer-reviewed journals in Europe and the United States between 1993 and 2006. He was a professional military officer, graduating from the University of Maryland with a degree in engineering and achieving the rank of lieutenant colonel in the US Army. This article is reprinted from from his collected essays, edited by Gary Goldstein and published posthumously under the title *The Lame Storyteller, Poor and Despised* by Verlag Uwe Laugwitz in 2009. It is available in paperback and as an e-book via *Amazon.com*.

“The Phoenix and the Turtle” glorifies Essex’s love for Elizabeth. Above all, Essex appears in books about Shakespeare as the hero of Southampton, Shakespeare’s sole dedicatee. There are more than ten good reasons for proposing Essex as the rival of the *Sonnets*, and, in Ben Jonson’s words, “I therefore will begin.”

First, Sonnets 78 to 86 describe a man who was Shakespeare’s rival for the affections of Southampton during the 1590s. The man who is known to have had Southampton’s affection during that period was the heroic and charismatic Earl of Essex. Southampton attempted to serve under Essex in the Cadiz expedition of 1596, but was forbidden by the Queen; he did serve under and was knighted by Essex on the Azores expedition of 1597. Southampton sought Essex’s counsel when in financial difficulties, agreed to marry Essex’s penniless cousin (whom he had gotten with child) in 1598, and named his daughter after Essex’s sister. During the failed Irish campaign of 1599, Essex made Southampton his General of the Horse and was furious when Queen Elizabeth vetoed his decision.

In December 1599 Essex was near death with fever and wrote Southampton a moving letter of counsel. This letter, published in Thomas Birch’s *Memoirs of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, holds several points of interest. Like Shakespeare’s Sonnets 2 and 4, it addresses Southampton in terms of the parable of the talents (Matthew 25). It also contains the following passage, which confirms that on some previous occasion Essex eulogized Southampton: “What I think of your natural gifts... to give glory to God, and to win honour to yourself... I will not now tell you. It sufficeth, that when I was farthest of all times from dissembling, I spoke freely, and had witnesses enough.”<sup>1</sup>

Southampton was Essex’s right-hand man during the 1601 uprising, and they were tried and sentenced together; they kissed hands and embraced at the start of the trial, and Essex did what he could to protect Southampton. Both were adjudged to die, but Southampton was spared, though deprived of titles, estates, and liberty.

Second, Essex was rated a gifted poet by his contemporaries and was admired as a writer by Ben Jonson (who called him “noble and high”) and as a critic by Gabriel Harvey. Essex’s friend and sometime secretary Sir Henry Wotton wrote that it was “his common way . . . to evaporate his thoughts in a Sonnet.” Essex wrote poems for specific occasions. Rather than out of any dedication to poetry, he penned his verses only for his own circle and the Queen, so little of his poetry survives. Thus the puzzling disappearance of the poems of Shakespeare’s rival is quite understandable if Essex wrote them. Rival poems by a professional like Chapman should have survived.

Essex’s verse is hardly in a class with Shakespeare’s, nor is it close, but it is technically accomplished, sincere, and moving. It may be protested that Essex’s talent was so slender that Shakespeare could not possibly have regarded him as a rival, but this

objection ignores the fact that the rivalry lay in the eyes of Southampton and not in the views of literary critics. Any poetic praise from Essex was bound to make Southampton ecstatic, given his idolization of Essex. This is a sufficient answer to the objection, but two lesser points may be added. First, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* contain criticism that may not have been welcome to Southampton, e.g., "thou dost common grow" (69, 14). Next, Southampton was quite an active young man in the 1590s: a jousting, athlete, gambler, patron, womanizer, brawler, and above all, a would-be warrior who finally got his chance and distinguished himself on the Azores voyage. But Shakespeare's praise is all of passive qualities such as being fair and beautiful. His poetics may endlessly fascinate, but his subject matter can be tedious. Praise of Southampton's martial prowess by the great Essex might have been more agreeable.<sup>2</sup>

Third, the rival is said to be "learned" (78, 7); it is implied that he knew the art of rhetoric, a major academic subject in those days (82, 10), and he had a "polished form of well-refined pen" (85, 8). Essex received his MA from Cambridge in his mid-teens, maintained a lifelong interest in intellectual matters, and surrounded himself with educated men.

Fourth and fifth, the rival was "of tall building and of goodly pride" (80, 12), and his pride is further alluded to in Sonnet 86. Several contemporaries recorded that Essex was notably tall. His pride was inordinate even by the standards of Elizabethan nobility – it consumed and finally destroyed him.

Sixth, Shakespeare contrasts himself to his mighty rival with much nautical metaphor in Sonnets 80 and 86. Shakespeare is a "saucy bark" (80, 7), while the rival is "the proudest sail" (80, 6) whose "great verse" is called "the proud full sail" (86, 1). So we may suppose that the rival was something of a sailor. Essex distinguished himself on the Lisbon voyage of 1589, won further glory as co-commander of the 1596 Cadiz expedition, and was sole commander of the ill-managed Azores venture of 1597. (Essex unjustly placed the blame on his Rear Admiral, Sir Walter Raleigh).<sup>3</sup>

Seventh, Sonnet 86 says that the rival has an "affable familiar ghost/Which nightly gulls him with intelligence" (lines 9-10). Seekers of the rival poet always take this passage as indicating occult practices and try to show that their candidates were up to such activities. The task is not difficult, as almost everyone back then was more or less superstitious by modern standards, but a far more mundane explanation is available. Essex maintained his own international intelligence service as part of his rivalry with the Cecils, who commanded the official intelligence agency. It was Essex's aim to be better informed than the government and to be the first to tell the Queen of foreign events. Essex's chief of intelligence was the erudite Anthony Bacon, who had friends all over Europe and who lived in Essex's mansion in the Strand from 1595 to 1600.

Thus, without conjuring up necromancers and astrologers, we find the affable

familiar ghost: an intelligence director whose greatest asset was his legion of overseas friends (hence, *affable*), and who lived as part of Essex's household (a *familiar* in the old-fashioned sense). *Ghost* is appropriate for a man who was active behind the scenes, but who suffered from so many ailments (dying in 1601) that he became a virtual recluse after moving to Essex House and was forced to decline invitations from the Queen to present himself at Court.

Eighth, the rival was a "spirit, by spirits taught to write" (86, 5), and had friends "giving him aid" (86, 8). Various people are believed to have assisted Essex with his writing, including his personal secretary Henry Cuffe, an occasional poet and former professor of Greek, Anthony Bacon, who is known to have written some sonnets, and Lord Henry Howard (later Earl of Northampton), a part-time consultant of Essex's. It is perfectly possible that Essex received aid from the professional poets he patronized, including George Chapman, in which case some of the other rival poet theories would be part right. But there is one poet who is known to have ghost-written serious essays and also a masque for Essex: Anthony Bacon's brother Francis.

Ninth, we can find support for the new theory of the Bacons as the rival poet's ghost writers by considering some word play in the passage, "affable familiar ghost/ Which nightly gulls him with intelligence." *Ghost* and *gulls* are linked by alliteration, but also by the superstition (prevalent then and now) that gulls are inhabited by the ghosts of drowned sailors. *Gulls* is thus a bridge between the two sets of imagery, nautical and ghostly, used in Sonnet 86. These words also harbor an appropriate Latin pun (all of the principals mentioned in this article were fluent in Latin), since the Latin for familiar ghost is *Lar* or *Lans*, usually encountered in its plural form *Lares*: the Latin for ghost or spectre is *larva*. The Latin for gull is *larus*; the modern scientific name for the gull family is *Laridae*. The Latin for bacon is variously *laridum*, *lardum*, or *larida*. It may be added that making puns, anagrams, and acrostics on names was a popular sport in that age.

Tenth comes the following passage on the rival: "He lends thee virtue, and he stole that word/From thy behavior" (79, 9-10). Essex's mottoes were *Virtutis Com Invidia* (literally *virtue with envy* or, more loosely *manliness draws envy*) and *Basis Virtutum Constantia* (*loyalty [is] the basis of virtue or manliness*).

The remaining items of evidence concern not only the identity of the rival, but also the question of the dates of the rival poet sonnets. My hypothesis is that Sonnets 78 to 86 were written soon after Essex and Southampton returned from the Azores in late October 1597.

Eleventh, despite objections by William Shakespeare, cosmetics were used by men as well as women in the Elizabethan Age. Judging by contemporary poetry, the fashionable complexion consisted of a face as white as lilies, a touch of roses in the cheeks, and lips like rubies (teeth were usually compared to pearls). Those not blessed by

nature with such an appearance could paint their faces with white lead and redden their lips and cheeks with rouge. Sonnet 82 (“And their gross painting might be better used/Where cheeks need blood; in thee it is abus’d” lines 13-14) and Sonnet 83 (“I never saw that you did painting need” line 1) disparagingly associate the rival with the use of cosmetics.

There are two portraits of Essex in the National Portrait Gallery in London, both believed to have been painted around 1597. In any event, they are later than August 1596, as Essex is wearing the beard grown on the Cadiz voyage. One is a full-length portrait of Essex standing in the robes of a Knight of the Garter; it is reproduced in color in *National Portrait Gallery in Colour*, edited by Richard Ormond, who dates the portrait circa 1597. The other is a head and shoulders portrait of Essex in a white satin doublet (he wears the same garment in the standing portrait), with a ruff over a transparent collar over a wide blue ribbon that suspends his St. George medal. It is reproduced in color in *The Horizon Book of the Elizabethan World*, by Lacey Baldwin Smith and bears the date 1597. During the early part of that year, Essex would have had something of a tan left over from his several months at sea during the summer of 1596. During the latter part of 1597, Essex would have been bronzed by his voyage to the Azores. However, the standing portrait shows Essex with a ghastly pallor; his face has obviously been painted white and his lips have probably been carmined as well. The head and shoulders portrait shows him with lips of a bright, artificial red, unquestionably carmined, and a face that is not quite as pallid as in the other portrait, but that is far too pale for a man who had been making summer voyages to the latitude of southern Spain.

Yet Essex had another link to cosmetics at that time. At the beginning of 1598, the Queen gave him all of the available stock of cochineal, partly as an outright gift and partly by selling it to him at a reduced price. She then banned any further imports for two years; the total profit to Essex was reportedly the immense sum of £40,000. Cochineal is a bright red dye used then for textiles but also for painting the lips and cheeks. The two portraits of Essex are of around 1597, and the Elizabethan year 1597 was, by modern reckoning, April 4, 1597 to April 3, 1598, so the two portraits may show Essex wearing his own product. In short, Shakespeare simultaneously complains about the rival poet and face paint, while Essex used cosmetics and had a monopoly on rouge.

Twelfth is Shakespeare’s assertion in the nautical Sonnet 80 (lines 3-4) that his rival “spends all his might/...speaking of your [Southampton’s] fame.” Hyperbolic praise was common in Elizabethan poetry, but the first incident in Southampton’s career that would reasonably justify lauding his fame was his return from the Azores in late October 1597 with a knighthood and the spoils of one of the few prizes taken on that voyage.

We also know that Southampton’s success was exaggerated. The prize that he looted

and abandoned was quite small, but one courtier sent a friend the following information. "This morning my Lord Essex's letters came to court of his safe landing in Plymouth. He had unfortunately missed the (Spanish) King's own ships with the Indian Treasure but fell on the merchant fleet. Four of them he hath taken, and sunk many more, my Lord of Southampton fought with one of the King's great Men of War, and sunk her." So it appears that Essex was indeed puffing the fame of the fair youth.

Thirteenth, the theme of Sonnet 79 may be stated as follows: "You [the fair youth] owe the rival poet no thanks for his praise, because he is simply repaying his debt to you." A partisan of Southampton's who was resentful of Essex could very well make such an argument in the wake of the Azores expedition, in which the value of the loot was far less than the cost of the voyage. The five prizes taken kept the expedition from being a total failure, and one of them was seized by Southampton while his ship was detached from the fleet. So Shakespeare would feel justified in telling Southampton that Essex was simply giving him his due by knighting and praising him.

Fourteenth, and rather tenuously, we may note Shakespeare's remark in the same sonnet that "my sick Muse doth give another place" (79, 4). This line may be paraphrased in two ways, either "my sick Muse yields to another Muse," or "my sick Muse yields to another sick Muse." It is impossible to be certain as to whether the pronoun *another* includes the adjective *sick* as well as the noun *Muse*, but such a reference would be highly appropriate. When Essex returned from the Azores he found that the Queen blamed him for the expedition's failure and that two of his rivals at court had stolen marches on him during his absence. He responded by shutting himself up in his house for several weeks, claiming to be ill. So Shakespeare would be quite justified in implying that his rival's muse is sick.

*Shakespeare's Sonnets* describe a rival who was Southampton's friend, a poet, learned, tall, proud, probably a sailor, who had an affable familiar ghost who dealt in intelligence, who received assistance in his writing from friends, whose name makes a plausible Latin pun on Bacon, who was associated with the word *virtue* and with cosmetics, who boosted Southampton's fame while being in his debt, and who could be said to have a sick muse. This is quite a detailed portrait, and Essex matches it perfectly.

## Notes

- 1 Thomas Birch, *Memoirs of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*. London, A. Millar, 1754. p. 484.
- 2 The most recent and thorough analysis of Essex's surviving poems is in "The Poems of Edward De Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford and of Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex," by Steven W. May, *Studies in Philology*, LXXVII, Early Winter 1980, No. 5.
- 3 If the arguments offered in this article in favor of Essex as the rival are applied one by one to Sir Walter Raleigh, it will be seen that a surprisingly strong case can be made for him as the rival poet. At any rate, the case for Raleigh is far superior to the arguments that have been offered in favor of Chapman, Marlowe, or any other professional poet. I mention this not to suggest Raleigh as a backup candidate behind Essex, but to underscore the dereliction of orthodox Shakespeare scholars. The courtier poets of the Elizabethan Age held high prestige, while the leading candidates for the role of Shakespeare's fair youth (Southampton and the Earl of Pembroke) were both courtiers. Yet it never occurred to the Shakespeare establishment that the rival poet might be a courtier.