Teaching the Sonnets and de Vere's Biography at School – Opportunities and Risks

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eachers are facing a new situation for which they are not really prepared. Being forced by the media (e.g., Roland Emmerich's 2011 film, *Anonymous*) to take a stance on the authorship question, they are at a loss. Up to now the authorship issue has been considered a topic dealt with at university level, but the universities in Germany prefer not to respond. Although doubters of all kind belong to academia the universities refuse to develop an appropriate interest in the issue. Brunel University in London (thanks to Prof. William Leahy) seems to be an exception.

True, a huge amount of work pressure, not to speak of endless correction tasks, has increased at public schools and made it more difficult for teachers to do some extra research on Shakespeare. There exist, in addition, some mental barricades, which make the issue even appear annoying. The feeling of safety that the Stratfordian version offers is too tempting to be abandoned, especially when one has no idea about the questions connected with it.

The question remains: "What am I to tell my students?" Not knowing what to do, teachers have clung to two seemingly convincing means of escape:

1: No biography is needed to understand the works of the Bard. A convincing argument, no doubt, because it has led to great results and not detracted from the depth, topicality and grandeur of Shakespeare's works. But the argument is also misleading, as it brutally undermines new and better ways of understanding. In addition, people are often inconsistent, e.g., the staunch Stratfordian Harold Bloom, who puts forward the thesis that both Hamlet and Falstaff are Shakespeare's most

biographical characters.[1] Or Helen Vendler, the outstanding commentator on the sonnets, who claims the speaker of the sonnets feels as a social outcast (Sonnet 71) without putting it in a special social context.[2] Whenever possible, commentators refer to biographical experiences, constantly violating the conviction that the works speak for themselves.

2: The Elizabethan worldview as a substitute for the missing biographical facts. Generations of students have been made familiar with the idea of the chain of being as essential for the Elizabethans. Needless to say this is correct, but it does not really help to explain any drama, with the exception of *Macbeth*, and ignores historical reality to an unbearable extent. What kind of complex police state existed when Elizabeth I was in power, how unsafe the throne was, how her position was continually under attack, how aristocracy defined itself —all these essential aspects are left out.

The educational publishers hesitate to respond accordingly. *Green Line Oberstufe*[3] does write about different candidates; but the authors do not realize that the Stratford biography is totally inconsistent with what they wrote beforehand about the Bard's comprehensive knowledge of languages.

Relating Edward de Vere's biography to his works does involve chances and risks, which we would like to discuss openly. W. H. Auden's saying that Shakespeare's sonnets are "naked autobiographical confessions" is well known, just like Browning's counterargument that the sonnets are nothing but "literary exercises." For us, personally, it is incomprehensible that the depth, the suffering and sincerity that pervade the sonnets should have no relation to the author's own experiences. The question arises whether we know of any other poet who voiced his own weaknesses and shortcomings with such honesty —to admit all that in front of yourself, so to speak, makes Shakespeare a citizen of the 21st century and goes far beyond viewing the sonnets as stylistic exercises.

With the example of Sonnet 29 we would like to show practicable and one-sided or simply wrong ways of approaching this poem.

The schoolbook *Shakespearean Sonnets and Elizabethan Poetry*[4] shows consistency in dealing with the sonnets. There is not even a hint to whoever wrote them in this book, nor is the Earl of Southampton is mentioned as the addressee, although a great number of orthodox scholars agree on it. The author, Elena Gross, offers useful worksheets on the Elizabethan worldview mentioned above, even though they do not play a decisive role in interpreting the sonnets. As an introduction to Sonnet 29, she offers a list of quotations on "envy" to prepare the students for the key topic, according to her view. In doing so, she builds a bridge for the students and helps them to train their competence in questions dealing with the beautiful language of the poem. Thus, she leads them to a better understanding of the topic "envy."

In contrast, Helen Vendler[5] evokes the two levels of reality, the hierarchy of the social world and the hierarchically structured world of nature—it is exactly in this place the so-called Elizabethan worldview could come in, but Gross does not mention it here. Vendler, as usual, makes the text speak. As she does not need to

help students, she can neglect any didactical reduction and, as a consequence, comes to a more comprehensive interpretation. Indeed, she is sure that biography plays a part when she says: "The self-pity of the opening is based on genuine misfortune, if the domestic fiction of the poem is to be believed; we do not doubt that the speaker is "*outcast*" (emphasis added). The fact that we have no information as to why the speaker feels outcast is painful unless one has been conditioned into thinking that biographical parallels do not matter anyway.

Many books dealing with the Elizabethan Age have not helped to solve this puzzle. Can the authorship issue come to more plausible conclusions? Yes, it can: In his book *Will, Wunsch und Wirklichkeit*, Robert Detobel writes:

> If we see the Sonnet as a poem written by an immensely gifted courtier, who, out of aesthetic delight, has violated a certain code of behavior and, as a consequence, was excluded from court life, at least temporarily, we not only approach the drama of the poem, but also the drama of the poet. Assuming that Edward de Vere was the author this interpretation makes sense.[6]

It has to be clear about what we can achieve with a biography and what we cannot. Hans Albert Koch, in his review of a biography of the brothers Grimm, defined biography as follows:

> One of the oddest things in modern literary studies is that the biographical approach is looked at with scorn – at a time when the literary genre "biography" is very successful. What is being withheld is the fact that an author's biography does *not* offer a *sufficient* but a definitely *necessary condition* for the understanding of his work.[7] (Emphasis added)

What we are trying to do is to work according to objective criteria, to structure the tasks in a way useful for students and to present material that appeals to them both emotionally and intellectually. But before dealing with such a task, the risks must not be denied. To deal with it in a freewheeling manner would have disastrous consequences. When James Shapiro associates the opening lines of Sonnet 27 ("Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed/The dear repose for limbs with travel tired") with Shakespeare's concern about the bad state of the highway between London and Stratford, for the repair of which he supported a petition in 1611, the term "freewheeling" is rather an understatement.[8] Of course, Oxfordians and other Non-Stratfordians as well are not necessarily immune to this type of hazardous allusion spotting, fossilizing each metaphor into the concreteness of a street name in the index of a city map or, vice versa, diluting a particular phrase to the windy metaphorical meaning that fits one's own strained interpretation. Such approaches not only overstretch the idea of biographical factors, they also destroy all feelings for a poem as a piece of art and ignore the value of the phonetic level.

In an attempt to use the chance of the release of Emmerich's *Anonymous,* Sony Pictures promulgated a study guide for students. It subscribes to a crude way of

dealing with an author's biography, and does not really challenge the student's critical thinking with tasks like "Use the information on this sheet to research the theory that William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon was not the author of the plays."[9] Such tasks are simply not interesting and, sorry to say so, sheer manipulation. We can imagine that brilliant students see through it and feel repulsed. We should not repeat the mistakes the orthodox theory continually makes. In this case we definitely side with Shapiro, when he makes fun of such a didactic concept and labels teachers who are willing to take part in it "tired and unimaginative."[10]

In an attempt to make the *Sonnets* speak and to connect them to de Vere's authorship, we tried to approach the following three sonnets in a way that we hope meets academic standards. We follow that with an approach to three more sonnets.

Activities

Try to approach this topic by starting from personal experiences and observations:

1. You have come to realize that your peer group has treated you like an outsider for days. What strategies can your group employ to make you feel this way? Write them down:

    -
    -

2. Think of <u>different</u> ways of reacting that YOU may show:

    -
    -

    Before concentrating on the sonnets, find out what Elizabethan aristocracy expected of peers and how outsiders were treated, then compare them to your findings: Are there any similarities and differences?

Nobility: Not Just a Matter of Title

Characteristics I - spending

Being a nobleman or an aristocrat not only denoted you were a person of high social rank, but it also implied a certain attitude towards life.

In order to be a real aristocrat you were expected to spend or waste money to a great extent. Sir Thomas Smith, an Elizabethan scholar, wrote: "in England no man is created baron, except he may spend of yearly revenue thousand pounds or one thousand marks. Viscounts, earls, marquesses and dukes more according to the proportion of the degree and honour."[11]

When in June 1586 the Earl of Oxford was granted by the Queen a pension of 1,000 pounds a year to prop up his ruined estate, it was in all likelihood to allow him to spend according to his rank.

Characteristics II - Learning

Just as it is difficult for us to understand that social prestige in the 16th and 17th centuries was based on spending, it is equally difficult to realize that at the beginning of the 16th century the aristocracy was, by and large, hostile to learning. A nobleman was supposed to be good at blowing the horn, skilled in hunting or training a hawk—this was enough to be properly educated.[12] The ability to write was regarded as sufficient for the son of a nobleman. Due to the change in the social landscape, however, the aristocracy could no longer afford to cultivate a negative view on learning, for in the long run they would have lost their influence and power. So, they were forced to educate themselves and their children and keep playing an important part in the affairs of the state.

Characteristics III - Honesty

To be a nobleman meant to conform to a certain mode of behavior, which was not written down, but built on the common sense of people reputed to be "honest." The term covers a wide field of meanings such as:

Appropriate social behavior (comparable to today's idea of "political correctness");

Sincere; Noble; Of good reputation: It depends on how one is esteemed by others, seen "through men's eyes," thus good reputation may conflict with self-esteem;

Civil: civil manners paved the way to a civilized society governed by law instead of violence.

Both honest manners and learning, in other words, came to be seen as requirements for participating in the government as a political leader. The crux of the matter, however, is: Who actually decides who really is honest or dishonest, when there is no written law to judge by?

Inward and outward honesty

When honesty refers to certain rules of outward behavior, people may follow them for the sake of success only; they completely forget the other meaning of honesty, namely being sincere and being true to one's values. In Elizabethan aristocratic society honesty was essential. No matter how corrupt you were inwardly, as long as you played your social role correctly, nobody seemed to mind. In other words, the ethics of the court were ethics of behavior, not ethics of inner conviction or mentality. Moreover, this society was characterized by fierce rivalry and competition for favor. Small wonder people were tempted to discredit others by exposing their behavior

as dishonest, even if this was not the case. One is painfully reminded of the present day, where competition may lead to uncontrollable bullying as well. Yet there is an essential difference. Nowadays you may live and communicate with people from different classes whereas in Elizabethan times a member of the upper class was irrevocably bound to this class. It was practically impossible for him to live outside it; to become an outcast, as a consequence, meant to be socially dead.

The Earl of Oxford was honest and hated all empty ceremonies. That is why he sums up his state of mind in Sonnet 121 by saying, *"I am that I am."*

An unwritten code of behavior is as powerful as a written one, because an informal group of people decides who should be condemned morally. This strategy of ostracizing a person makes him defenseless, even if he is innocent, even if he is honest or has broken a rule that is worth breaking. It is enough to be punished with a contemptuous look by others. This penalty is worse than imprisonment because it meant isolation and loneliness; being outcast is a prison-like experience indeed. Isolation was the high price Shakespeare had to pay for real honesty.

Sonnet 29

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate, 4
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising, 8
Haply I think on thee, and then my state
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate; 12

For thy sweet love rememb'red such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

1 in disgrace out of favor

1 Fortune fortune was the goddess of luck, either good or bad, in Roman religion. She was represented turning a wheel the direction of which she could at any time change, so symbolizing the mutability of luck

2 state social status

3 bootless hopeless, useless

6 featured with features like his, beautiful

7 art skill of any kind

7 scope: area of activity, sphere of influence

10 state state of mind, feeling

14 state social status

Activities

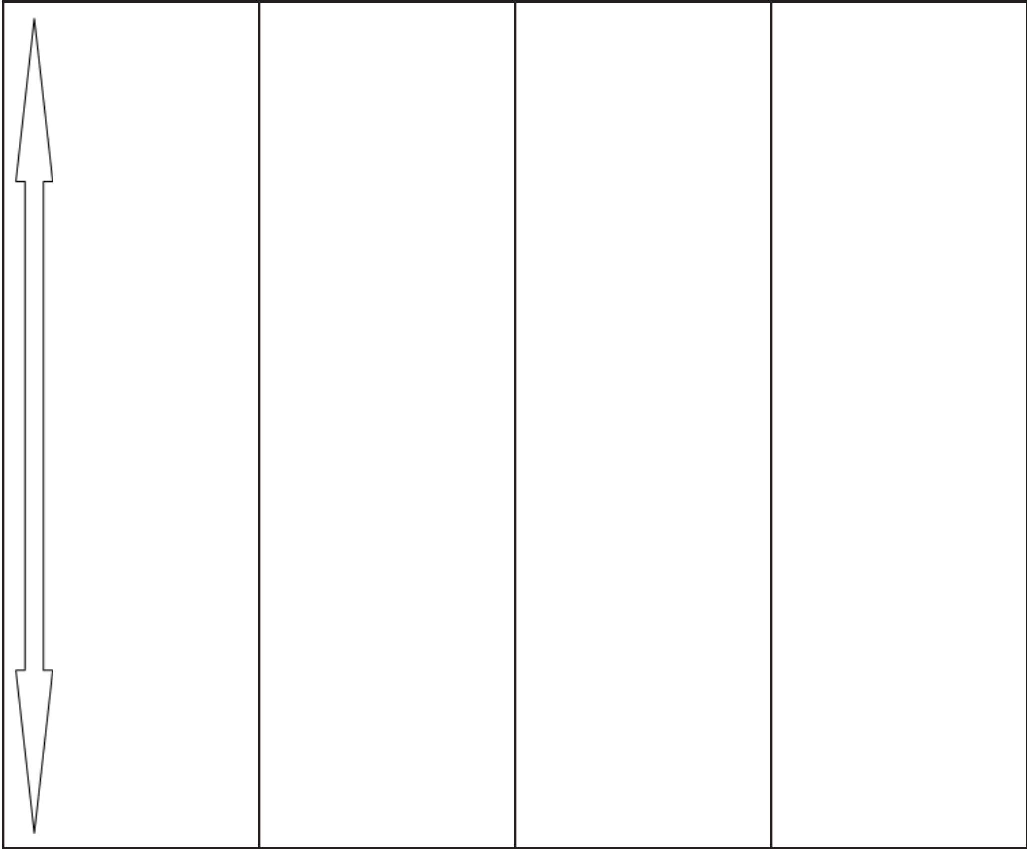
1. What exactly is meant with the first line?
2. Lines 2 to 9 describe the speaker's reaction after realizing he is an outcast; explain them in your own words.
3. Work out what helps him to regain a balanced mental state.
4. Sonnet 29 obviously covers a wide range of feelings and thoughts, which are given emphasis by the use of various stylistic elements. Match the elements that are given in alphabetical order (some are used more than once) to the correct lines or phrases and discuss their effect in this particular context:

anaphora, antithesis, chiasmus, enjambment, ennumeration, personification, simile

The thought of his beloved leads the speaker out of his depression. Is this a satisfactory solution for you? Why? Why not?

Language awareness

This poem deals with a variety of positive and negative feelings. Try to formulate them and visualize them in this "thermometer," finding at least two expressions for one line (one example is given):



Sonnet 121

To prepare: One person must volunteer to be an outcast.
Everyone then writes down on a slip of paper a statement that is intended to damage this person's reputation. Next form a passage through which the outcast has to pass. In turn, each person hurls his or her accusation, then gives the outcast the slip of paper. In the end the outcast talks about his experiences and tries to formulate an appropriate verbal response. While he or she is thinking, the others also write down what they expect him or her to say.

Or

"The others say...the others say...the others say...." Discuss the importance of the others' judgment of you. Should we be immune towards it or take it seriously?

'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed,

When not to be receives reproach of being,

And the just pleasure lost, which is so deemed
Not by our feeling but by others' seeing. 4
For why should others' false adulterate eyes
Give salutation to my sportive blood?
Or on my frailties why are frailer spies,
Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
No, I am that I am, and they that level 8
At my abuses reckon up their own;
I may be straight though they themselves be bevel;
By their rank thoughts my deeds must not be shown 12
Unless this general evil they maintain:
All men are bad and in their badness reign.

2 receives reproach of being if one is not so and is nevertheless reproached to be so

3 so deemed regarded as immoral

5 adulterate the Latin "adulter" means both "adultery " and "false." "False adulterate" would be "false false"

6 give salutation pronounce their blessing

6 sportive playful

8 which who

8 wills wishes, desires

9/10 level at to aim at, to shoot at

11 bevel not straight, not upright

12 rank foul, rancid, smelling bad

Activities

1. Below are paraphrases of two lines in a jumbled order. Match the paraphrases to the two appropriate lines in the sonnet:

- Even true joy is lost if it is only considered true joy in the others' view and not because I feel the joy.
- My personal integrity cannot be attacked by anybody; indeed, I think the

others do not realize that they merely fight their own devils when judging me.

- I'd rather be immoral than seem immoral as the others' judgment does not differentiate anyway.
- Why should the others who are even more wicked than I am watch me and criticize deeds that I consider good?
- The others who are even more false than I—why should they be the ones to bless my playful deeds?
- Perhaps it is I who is honest and direct and it is they who are dishonest and have no right to judge my deeds.
- What counts is that they are convinced in general that all men are bad and corrupt by nature.

2. The speaker meditates upon the difference between *being* and *seeming*. Why was it difficult in Shakespeare's days to be authentic? Why is it even difficult nowadays?

3. Do you agree with the first line or do you see it as an overreaction of a vulnerable person? Discuss.

4. In his letter to Lord Burghley from 30 October 1584 Oxford furiously included the sentence "I am that I am." Briefly explain the circumstances leading to this statement, which is also part of this sonnet.

5. In groups prepare a shared reading of the sonnet, trying to agree on the poem's tone and mood: Melancholic? Aggressive? Defiant? Lighthearted? Ironic? Does the mood change or remain the same throughout the sonnet?

Language Awareness

There are many ways of cementing your command of English vocabulary. The golden rule to follow is always "Use them or lose them." This sonnet is full of verbs dealing with judgment:

1 esteem

2 reproach
3 deem
7 spy (also: "to spy")
8 count (bad)
10 reckon

First find synonyms for the given words. Then (as homework or pair work or group work), invent a gap text for your neighbor in which the above mentioned words and/or their synonyms are used. Make a little story out of the sentences with the missing words, then it is more interesting! There should be eight gaps.

Or

Fill in the right words, using the words underlined above and their synonyms:
All her life she ___ it clever not to marry one of her suitors; among them were highly ___ kings and adventurers. No doubt, some people ___ this one of her great virtues. Moreover, her secret service depended on a network of ___. As an unmarried woman on the throne she was in constant danger and rebellions were common. She ___ Sir Walter Raleigh among her closest friends, but in the end he suffered her bitter ___, ended up in the Tower and was eventually beheaded. It would be interesting to find out what would have happened to England if her sister Mary Tudor had outlived her—would England still be ___ for Shakespeare? After all it was her interest in the theater that made her ___ it worth supporting.

"I Am That I Am"—Oxford's Letters to Burghley Between 1575 and 1584 and Shakespeare's Sonnet 121

In January 1575 Oxford leaves England for Italy. In March he is in Paris and receives a letter from Lord Burghley that his wife is with child. Oxford is satisfied for two reasons. The first reason he gives relates to his travels, only the second to a possible successor. "For now it hath pleased god to give me a son of mine own (as I hope it is), methinks I have the better occasion to travel, since whatsoever becomes of me, I leave behind me one to supply my duty and service either to my prince or else my country." Knowing that he possibly will have a son to continue the ancestral line, he can more lightheartedly proceed with his travels.

From a letter of 24 September 1575 one could conclude he is less concerned about his health than about the restrictions his weakness will impose on the time available for traveling. "Yet with the help of god now I have recovered the same and am past the danger thereof though brought very weak thereby, and hindered from a great deal of travel. Which grieves me most, fearing my time not sufficient for my desire."

On 27 November 1575: "And as concerning my own matters, I shall desire your Lordship to make no stay of the sales of my land, but that all things according to my determination before I came away." In Oxford's letter of 3 January 1576 emerges the fundamental and irreconcilable opposition between Oxford's and Burghley's worldviews. Oxford wants to go on with the sale of his land so that he may continue his travels; Burghley advises him otherwise. "In doing these things your lordship shall greatly pleasure me. In not doing them you shall as much hinder me.... Mine is made to serve me and my self, not mine."[13] In Italy Oxford was looking to satisfy his thirst

for learning and art. The phrase expresses that aesthetic self-realization was his supreme aim, to which anything else was subordinated.

A very important letter in connection with Shakespeare's Sonnet 121—its importance seems to have passed unnoticed thus far—is that of 10 July 1576. Oxford writes to Burghley: "Now if your Lordship shall do so, then you shall take more in hand than I have, or can promise, for always I have and I will still prefer mine own content before others." B.M. Ward and Conyers Read have transcribed it this way.[14] It is more appropriately written with genitive apostrophe: "for always I have and I will still prefer mine own content before others.'" That is, "I'll do what contents me and not what contents others," or "If what seems good to me but what others look askance at and think bad, I'll nevertheless do what in my view is right."

In lines 3 and 4 of Sonnet 121 Shakespeare expresses the same determination: "Others' seeing" are the "men's eyes" of the opening line of Sonnet 29.

Then, in the letter of 30 October 1584: "My lord, this other day your man[15] Stainner told me that you sent for Amis my man, and if he were absent that Lyly should come unto you. I sent Amis for he was in the way. And I think very strange that your Lordship should enter into that course towards me, whereby I must learn that I knew not before, both of your opinion and good will towards me. But I pray, my Lord, leave that course, for I mean not to be your ward nor your child, I serve Her Majesty, and I am that I am, and by alliance near to your lordship, but free, and scorn to be offered that injury, to think I am so weak of government as to be ruled by servants, or not able to govern myself."

Oxford was then financially engaged in the theater. He had leased the Blackfriars theater in 1583 and subleased it to John Lyly. "Sportive blood" in line 6 of the sonnet may refer to that. Probably it was for this reason Burghley had sent for Lyly. If not a perfect one, the correspondence between Oxford and Burghley between 1575 and 1584 offers a close match with Shakespeare's Sonnet 121 and provides an excellent background for it. An autobiographical background!

Sonnet 111

O for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means which public manners breeds 4
Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
And almost thence my nature is subdued
To that it works in, like the dyer's hand.
Pity me then, and wish I were renewed, 8
Whilst like a willing patient I will drink
Potions of eisel 'gainst my strong infection;

No bitterness that I will bitter think,
No double penance to correct correction. 12
Pity me then, dear friend, and I assure ye
Even that your pity is enough to cure me.

1 Fortune The Roman goddess presiding over good and bad luck. The young man reproves her for the sake of the poet
1 chide rebuke, scold
2 guilty goddess It is the goddess who is made responsible for some things the poet has done and which have caused him troubles.
4 public means It may mean "governmental means"; it may also mean "income from the public," for instance, the public stage. It may mean both.
4 public manners in this case it rather means "vulgar," causing inappropriate behavior
5 brand stigma, in Elizabethan times the hand or face of a criminal was branded with a hot iron
6 is subdued cannot escape; is subject to
10 Potions of eisel medicine mixed with vinegar, often used against the plague and other infections
12 double penance I will not be against suffering twice the punishment

Activities

1. Modern publications often stress the fact that actors in Elizabethan times had a very low status, but this is only a half-truth when we look at the biography of the sonnet-writer. Sum up what deeply troubled Shakespeare when writing this sonnet with the unforgettable line, "Thence comes it that my name receives a brand."

2. This is a prose version of sonnet 111. It contains four mistakes. Find them and correct them:

On my behalf, my friend, you scold the goddess Fortune whose changeability influenced my doings that proved so hurtful and left no other means of living to me than those created by the public stage where I learned to behave properly in public.

It is this connection with the public stage that has brought me into disrepute and has impregnated my habits no more than the dye impregnates the hand of the dyer, whose hand takes on the color of the material he is working with.

Then lament me and wish that I may renew myself, and I, against my will, shall be a patient pleased to obey; I shall swallow any bitter medicine in any quantity to cure my illness and not refuse to be punished over and over again to correct myself steadily.

Have compassion for me, but I cannot certify that your compassion will be sufficient to put me back on the right path.

3. Analyze the meaning and function of the powerful imagery used in lines 5, 6-7 and 9-10.

The Narrative Underlying Sonnet 111

Together with Sonnet 110, Sonnet 111 tells us a story about the author's life. Again, together with some sociohistorical information and a particular piece of documentary evidence, the story, insofar as we can reasonably expect to uncover it, points to author other than William Shakespeare to whom authorship is generally attributed. Why?

A Motley to the View

Sonnet 110 opens: Alas, 'tis true, I have gone here and there

And made myself a motley to the view.

A "motley" is the multi-colored dress of the court jester. The word can be understood literally or metaphorically. But "view" here means "exposure to the public," such as a professional actor was regularly exposing and had to expose himself to. For an aristocrat, this was a serious breach of the behavioral code of his class and almost equivalent with committing "social suicide." Hence, the rueful reflection in the third line of sonnet 110.

In 1531 Sir Thomas Elyot published his *Book named the Governor*, a sort of manual for the re-education of the old feudal aristocracy to the new court aristocracy. "Governor" here means "political leader." According to Elyot the new aristocrat, the "governor" or political leader, ought to possess two things: learning (the majority of the old feudal aristocracy had considered learning as effeminate and only proper for a clerk, not for a knight) and refined or "honest" manners. Training in different arts such as poetry, music and painting was also part of this re-education. However, the aristocrat should reserve such artistic performances to his leisure time and privacy, and should never expose himself to the public view performing music, painting, etc. The Roman emperor Nero is held up as the negative example, because he used to sit in the theater where the people of Rome could watch him. Elyot reveals that he is aware of the danger that the loss of respect caused by the behavior of even one individual aristocrat might rebound on the whole ruling elite. The pressure of the aristocracy, as an entire class, on each member to conform to the aristocratic behavioral code, which was a basic element of their legitimating ideology, was enormous. Elyot's assessment of Nero in 1531 does not differ in essence from that of the Roman historian Tacitus. Tacitus's unconditional damnation of Nero's behavior is not rooted in the emperor's predilection for poetry, playing and singing as such, but rather in his not restricting it to the private sphere.

Harmful Deeds

If Shakespeare was really an aristocrat who had acted on the public stage, the poet's complaint that "thence comes it that my name receives a brand" becomes perfectly understandable in the light of the values of a courtly aristocratic society. The poet speaks of his "harmful deeds," not of his harmful "profession."

In 1572 Parliament enacted an "Act for the punishment of vagabonds for relief of the poor & impotent." Paragraph 5 stipulated that rogues and vagabonds included "all Fencers, Bearwards, Common Players in Interludes & Minstrels, not belonging to any Baron of this Realme or towards any other honorable personage of greater degree."[16]

On 10 May 1574 the Privy Council issued a patent to Leicester's Men, a company of players in the service of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, the queen's favorite, giving them "authority to perform music, and plays seen and allowed by the Master of the Revels [revels or festivities were an important part of court life; they were supervised by the master of the Revels, himself a subordinate of the Lord chamberlain of the Queen's Household], both in London and elsewhere, except during the time of common prayer, or of plague to London."[17] The 1572 act against rogues and vagabonds did not apply to this company. About 1579 several other companies of players existed in the service of a peer or a knight. The 1572 act did not apply to those players because they officially belonged to the household of a lord.

The statement that players were of base status needs qualification. In no way can it be evidenced by reference to the 1572 act. Officially, those players were servants of some lord, not itinerant players. In 1583 a new company was set up with the best players from other companies, including as the Earl of Leicester's Men and the Earl of Oxford's Men: it was known as the Queen's Men. They were sworn in by Sir Francis Walsingham, secretary of state, as "grooms of the Queen's chamber," hardly a low social status.

At the same time that the Court and the Privy Council promoted and protected the playing companies the authorities of the City of London were not so well disposed towards the theater. That is why nearly all of the theaters were situated in so-called "liberties," precincts over which the city of London had no legal jurisdiction. This aversion was primarily directed at the theater as a place where all sorts of people congregated: whores and panderers, thieves and other lewd people; besides, it was also seen as a focus of epidemics, mainly the plague. Without doubt, something of this deprecatory view of the theater did rub off on the players themselves. Puritans were principled enemies of any form of theater, which in 1642 led to the closing of all the theaters. Andrew Gurr calls it the "prime paradox" of the history of the theater "that the survival and the growing prosperity of such companies, the King's Men above all, was due almost entirely to the support and consistent protection given them by the highest authority in the land" (*The Shakespearian Playing Companies* [Oxford, 1996], 9).

Sonnet 111 remotely indicates that the poet had performed on the public stage. However, from another source we can safely conclude that he did, and that this was the cause of his disgrace. In a courtly society, "disgrace" or "loss of favor" nearly always meant "banishment from Court," the center of power.

Sometime before 1611 John Davies of Hereford, an epigrammatist and literary insider, wrote an epigram "To our English Terence, Mr. Will Shake-speare" [modernized spelling and punctuation]:

> Some say, good *Will*, whom I in sport do sing,
> Had'st thou not played some kingly parts in sport,
> Thou hadst been a companion for a *King*.

"A companion for a king" in an absolute monarchy was one who regularly attended the monarch, i.e., a courtier. Shakespeare was banished from Court for having acted on the stage. Davies of Hereford indicates a reason, most likely THE reason why Shakespeare's name received a brand.

Finally, at the end of sonnet 110, lines 10 and 11, and, more overtly, in lines 9-12 of sonnet 111, the poet promises correction to the friend. That implies that the young aristocrat, too, had uttered his disapproval of the poet's "harmful deeds," while it is nearly impossible to imagine that a professional actor's name would receive a "brand" from what is, in another sense, his very brand, namely his profession.

Language Awareness I

The goddess "Fortuna" or "Fortune" has become part of our everyday language as well. Work with the *OED* to locate and find:

Compounds with "fortune"	Idioms with "fortune"	Adjectives derived from "fortune"	Prefix un + "fortune"

Language Awareness II

Rephrase the given sentences with the words at the beginning without changing their meaning:

a. Although I will try out all sorts of medicine, your pity will have a healing effect on me as well.

   Despite ___.

b. You cannot possibly remain the same person if you work with common players every day.

It is impossible ___.

c. You accused me of my harmful deeds, but I think you should blame Fortune for them.

You'd rather not ___.

d. My situation is in a way hopeless, but I promise to take measures against it.

In spite of ___.

e. My name has received a brand because of my involvement in the common theater.

My status should have prevented me ___.

f. Being disgraced by your peers is worse than being in prison.

Being in prison is not ___.

g. The brand in the face of a criminal prevented him from being taken seriously by others.

Because ___.

Sonnets 71, 72 and 81: Self-doubts, suffering, oblivion and – ever-living poetry

Sonnet 71

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled
From this vile world with vildest worms to dwell; 4
Nay, if you read this line, remember not
The hand that writ it, for I love you so
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,
If thinking on me then should make you woe. 8
O if (I say) you look upon this verse,
When I (perhaps) compounded am with clay,
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse,
But let your love even with my life decay 12
Lest the wise world should look into your moan,
And mock you with me after I am gone.

2 surly bad-tempered and rude
2 sullen bad-tempered and dull
2 bell funeral bell
4 vile disgusting, terrible, extremely bad, wicked
8 make you woe make you suffer deeply
10 compounded mixed, combined
11 rehearse repeat, utter
12 Lest for fear that

Sonnet 71-Activities

1. **No longer mourn for me when I am dead**: Take this first line of a famous sonnet as an opening statement in a letter you want to write to a close friend. Think of what such a line might imply (e.g., illness, old age, threat of suicide or even longing for death).

2. Make a list of what the speaker requests the addressee not to do.

3. Explain the lines which show that the speaker's relationship to the world is despondent.

4. Analyze the stylistic means that underline the speaker's feelings and say why they are so effective.

5. Do you think it is a sign of true love to intend to spare one's lover any feelings of mourning?

6. Write the addressee's possible answer **or**

   Imagine the two people meet and have a detailed conversation about this important topic. Write down this conversation.

7. You are asked to recite this poem for a radio program. Apart from your voice or voices, some background music will be used along with it. What kind of music or musical instruments do you think might be appropriate?

Language awareness

In this sonnet there are many words from two-word fields. Fill in these tables:

Transience of human life

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives
mourning	mourn	mournful
		dead
	decay	
	remember	
	forgot	

Feeling of being rejected by the world:

Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives
warning	fled (flee)	sullen
moan	mock	vile
		poor
		wise

Sonnet 72

This sonnet resumes topics from Sonnet 71, doubting the speaker's merits and his works.

1. Put the jumbled lines in the right order, then compare your solution with other pairs and talk together about your choice.

That you for love speak well of me untrue,
O lest the world should task you to recite
Unless you would devise some virtuous lie
What merit lived in me that you should love, 4
For I am shamed by that which I bring forth,
Than niggard truth would willingly impart:
For you in me can nothing worthy prove,
To do more for me than mine own desert, 8
After my death (dear love) forget me quite;

And so should you, to love things nothing worth.
And hang more praise upon deceased I
O lest your true love may seem false in this, 12
My name be buried where my body is,
And live no more to shame nor me nor you:

2 lest for fear that
6 niggard mean, miserly
7 prove find, show
8 desert deserving
11 hang more praise In those days it was common practice to hang epitaphs on the hearse or funeral monument
12 in this In this respect

2. Write the main messages the speaker tries to convey in your own words and in the form of imperatives (8-12 messages might be possible).
3. Work with a partner. Which three lines or expressions do you consider most essential? Why? Compare your findings with the results of other pairs.
4. One student wrote about this sonnet:

> Stating clearly that neither he as a human being nor his works have any value whatsoever seems absurd to me. For me it simply does not make sense that the speaker's personality seen through the eye of his beloved should lead to his suffering. If Shakespeare was the author, I am really at a loss when it comes to interpreting this sonnet.

In the light of what you know about Oxford's biography, formulate an answer that may satisfy the student.

Language awareness

Use the OED and explore the word family of the key words of this sonnet. You may devise word trees or any other form that helps you to remember these expressions:
merit
worthy/worth
desert (deserve)
true
shame
lie

Sonnet 81

Or I shall live your epitaph to make,
Or you survive when I in earth am rotten,
From hence your memory death cannot take,
Although in me each part will be forgotten. 4
Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
Though I (once gone) to all the world must die;
The earth can yield me but a common grave,
When you intombed in men's eyes shall lie: 8
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,
And tongues to be your being shall rehearse,
When all the breathers of this world are dead 12
You still shall live (such virtue hath my pen)
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

1 Or...Or Whether...or
3 hence these sonnets
4 in me in my case
8 intombed remembered in an exquisite tomb
9 gentle here: gentlemanly, i.e., noble, lovely
11 tongues to be people not yet born, future generations
11 rehearse utter
12 breathers of this world all the people alive in those days

Activities

1. True or false? Correct the following statements concerning the content of the sonnet if necessary:

    a. The speaker imagines two future scenarios, that either he or his beloved will outlive the other.

    b. The speaker is convinced that both he and his beloved will cease to live on in the memory of others.

    c. Posterity will definitely continue talking about the speaker.

d. The beloved will always be remembered because of the sonnets written for him.

e. The grave the speaker expects to be laid in is not one that fits a poet of such quality.

f. The splendid tomb the beloved will be given is the reason that the speaker will never be forgotten.

g. The speaker has already provided a different monument for his beloved, which will be read and appreciated by generations to come.

h. Future generations will not enjoy repeating the name of the beloved.

i. Due to the powerful words the beloved person formulates he will be immortal.

2. Explain the different fates the two people will face in case the speaker dies first:

Speaker's fate	**Fate of the beloved**
❖	❖
❖	❖
❖	❖

Even though not explicitly said, Sonnet 81 is a love poem—this is hidden in its form: The American scholar Helen Vendler pointed out that the structure of the lines suggests that the two people "embrace" each other. Lines 1 and 4 "embrace" the beloved, lines 5 and 8 "embrace" the speaker. From line 9 on they share a common destiny, being mentioned together.

To make this visible and audible, prepare a shared reading of the sonnet. Pay special attention to the use of personal pronouns, **or**

If you prefer painting or drawing, try to make the connection of the two visible in a picture or any other form of visualization.

3. Explain why, under the orthodox view that Shakespeare of Stratford wrote the sonnets, the assertions in line 4 and in line 13 (brackets) are contradictory and not understandable. Then explain why they make sense in the context of the historical background offered by the scholar Robert Detobel below.

Language awareness

This sonnet covers a number of expressions referring to the sense of sight: l. 8 "men's eyes," l. 10 "eyes not yet created," l. 10 "shall o'er read," l. 1 "epitaph."

Find seven useful or idiomatic expressions dealing with the word "eye" and with the word "sight" in the *OED* and be prepared to explain them in the next lesson.

Looking back on Sonnets 71, 72 and 81, which are the key points that should be kept in mind? Write them down on a poster.

What were the most striking insights for you? Why?

All of Shakespeare's sonnets are sprinkled with unforgettable phrases. Choose at least two you are likely to remember and explain why.

Sonnets 71, 72, and 81

A term existed in the Middle Ages for how the poet urges the young man to behave after his death in Sonnet 71 and its continuation in Sonnet 72. It is *damnatio memoriae*, "damnation of memory." In ancient Rome the same phenomenon was called *abolitio nominis*, abolishment or eradication of the name. The worst curse one Jew can pronounce on another is "may his name and memory be obliterated." "Damnation of memory" was applied to persons who had committed particularly horrible crimes such as high treason or who through their behaviour were thought to have drawn scandal on their community. One act that could entail damnation of memory was suicide. Damnation of memory, though no longer explicitly so called, continues into our own time. The most famous case is probably that of the English rock singer and songwriter Gary Glitter, whose name was removed from the Wall of Fame of the Cavern Club in Liverpool (commemorating among others the Beatles and the Rolling Stones) after he was convicted of child pornography charges.

The essential difference is of course that in our case the poet proclaims damnation of memory on himself. Obviously, the speaker's disgust with the world is real, existential, hence biographical. To illustrate the poet's self-indictment one could chose two sentences from the Book of Job and replace the second person plural in the first one and the third person singular in the second one by the first person. "My memory may be compared unto ashes, and my body to a body of clay" (Job 13,12). And: "My remembrance shall perish from the earth, and I shall have no name in the street" (18,17). Or else Revelation 3, 1-2: " I know thy works, for thou hast a name that thou livest, but thou art dead... for I have not found thy works perfect before God."

Indeed, sonnet 72 concludes:

> For I am shamed by that which I bring forth,
> And so should you, to love things nothing worth.

From the distance of several centuries, the poet's pejorative view of himself and his works—which are now honoured, admired, and even idolized as works of literary genius—is an astounding, if not bewildering, confession. It is the more so if we do not overlook the active verb "to flee" in lines 3 and 4 of Sonnet 71. "When I am fled from this vile world," the poet writes. He does not write "When I'll be gone from this vile world," or "When I shall have departed this vile world," or "passed away from this vile world." "To flee" from a world of which he has grown weary indicates a deliberate, premeditated action. It means "to commit suicide."

In Sonnet 81 this negative picture is not only bewildering but also bewilderingly paradoxical.

If the poet survives the youth, he will write his epitaph. An epitaph generally consists of a few verses inscribed on a grave or tomb. It is important to stress the fact that such an epitaph would be written on a one-time occasion, namely the youth's death, from which one is inclined to infer that at the moment of writing these lines the poet is envisaging the youth's death as an imminent real possibility.

The sonnets are not that epitaph. The sonnets will be the friend's everlasting monument, outliving the memory of "tyrants," as is stated elsewhere (see Sonnet 107). The poet's pen immortalizing a beloved lady, an admired hero or some other honoured person was a favourite topic of Renaissance lyric poetry. The primal simile expressing the idea of the poet as the essential agency of eternity was the story about Alexander the Great weeping at the tomb of the Greek mythological hero Achilles for lacking a poet like Homer to sing his feats. In the minds of Renaissance poets, Achilles rather participated in Homer's fame than vice versa. Homer's fame, of course, was not blotted out from men's memory. Nor do we find such a statement on obliteration, a curse on their own work and name in the sonnets of Shakespeare's contemporaries Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, etc., who all are making similar promises of eternity. Yet Shakespeare is fully aware of the supreme excellence and everlasting value of his poetry. It is the "virtue of his pen" from which the eternal memory of the youth will spring. In spite of this, he seems to be sure that nobody will remember him, or, put differently, that his authorship will not be connected with his *own name*.

How can this dilemma be satisfactorily solved? Some scholars have tried to explain that these lines could be interpreted ironically, though, in our view, not in a way that can said to be satisfactory. They leave us in the lurch as to why or how Shakespeare might have come to think so gloomingly about the fate of his own name, contrary, it must be stressed, to that of any other contemporary poet. And what made him think about the death of the much younger friend, who under normal circumstances would have a longer life expectancy than the poet himself?

Hamlet might answer: "Yea, there's the rub." The circumstances under which Sonnet 81 was written might not have been "normal." The youth's life might have been threatened, because of a dangerous illness or from some other cause. That assumed, the opening line of the sonnet would be all but trivial; it would suddenly take on a piercing dramatic quality which, however, would evaporate if we are set to squeeze out of the sonnets any biographical content.

The case for Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, as the young man addressed in the sonnets can now be considered firmly established. We know of one point in time in his life (and also within the generally accepted period of composition of the sonnets) when he was in great danger and/or about to die. This was in February 1601, when he was sentenced to death for high treason. It is also useful in this context to recall that the use of the word "epitaph" is suggestive of death in a foreseeable future, whereas the "monument" of the sonnets is to last forever. Shortly after Shakespeare had dedicated *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) to him, possibly in between, Southampton had moved away from the poet into the orbit of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, born in 1565, eight years before Southampton. Essex was a prominent military commander, though rather more dashing than effective. He had been a favorite of Queen Elizabeth, but since 1596 (if not earlier) his fortunes were declining and reached rock bottom by the end of the century after his disastrous military campaign in Ireland. Southampton had participated in the military expedition to the Azores (1597) and in Ireland (1599), both under the command of Essex. In brusque contempt of the queen's orders, the disappointed Essex had returned to England. As a consequence of his disobedience, a lucrative monopoly (the duties on imported wine) was not renewed in 1600, which deprived him of his major source of income. Not willing to reflect on his own mistakes and inadequacies, Essex made Sir Robert Cecil responsible for his loss of the queen's favor. By 1600 Cecil, Secretary of State, had succeeded his father, Lord Burghley, as the queen's most influential minister. Essex sought to gain control of the levers of power by disempowering Cecil. The episode is known as the Essex Rebellion, in the planning and execution of which Southampton was deeply involved.

The attempted coup started in the morning of Sunday, 8 February 1601. At the end of the same day the rebellion was quelled. On 17 February Essex and Southampton were indicted of high treason. The trial was held on 19 February. Essex and Southampton were both convicted and condemned to death. Essex was beheaded on 25 February. Southampton's penalty was commuted into lifelong imprisonment. The exact date of the commutation is not known, but it must have occurred before the end of March.

Sonnet 81 could have been written between February and March when Southampton's life was in the balance. It could also have been written later in the year, during the first six months or so of Southampton's imprisonment in the Tower, when Southampton was reported to have been very sick.

If Shakespeare of Stratford wrote Sonnet 81 between February and March or in September 1601, the poet's statement that "each part of me will be forgotten" is incomprehensible. For soon after the publication of *The Rape of Lucrece* in 1594 the name of the author acquired great notoriety. In 1598 Richard Barnfield, himself a poet, hailed him:

> And *Shakepeare* thou, whose hony-flowing Vaine,
> (Pleasing the World) thy Praises doth obtaine.

Whose *Venus*, and whose *Lucrece* (sweete, and chaste)
Thy name in fames immortall Booke have plac't.

And wished him along with Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton, to

Live ever you, at least in Fame live ever;
Well may the body dye, but Fame dies never.

Allusions by contemporaries do exist from which could be gleaned that the name Shakespeare was indeed a pseudonym. But they are couched in the dark oblique language of the time, although the messages are not lost beyond recovery.

One hint, however, is not that oblique. In 1596 Thomas Nashe (1567-1600/1), the foremost satirist of the last decade of the sixteenth century, pays tribute to a famous poet and patron in his pamphlet *Have With You to Saffron-Walden*. Nashe is thought to have been well acquainted with the author William Shakespeare. Yet Nashe never mentions the name Shakespeare. Had Nashe meant William Shakespeare of Stratford, there would have been no reason not to name him: the name was known, by then even famous, it stood beneath the dedications to Southampton of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Nashe's eulogy is directed at an unnamed author, and implies that this author is not writing under his own name: He wishes that this author acquire no other fame than that merited by his pen, precisely the fame Shakespeare states in the sonnets will be lost to him, devoured by oblivion.

In his pamphlet Nashe reproaches his literary foe, the rhetorician Gabriel Harvey, of having assumed, during a visit of the queen to the then Secretary of State Sir Thomas Smith in Audley End in 1578, the role of preceptor of two persons in his book *Gratulationes Valdinensis* ("Congratulations from Walden"; Saffron-Walden was Harvey's birth town). The book consists of four volumes with a total of six speeches Harvey had planned to deliver. Volume I contains the speech to the queen, volume II to the Earl of Leicester, volume III to Lord Burghley, and volume IV to the Earl of Oxford, Sir Christopher Hatton and Sir Philip Sidney. Nashe writes that Harvey had taken "the wall[18] of Sir *Philip Sidney* and another honourable Knight (his companion) about Court attending; to whom I wish no better fortune than the forelocks of Fortune he had held in his youth, & no higher fame than he hath purchased himself by his pen; being the first (in our language) I have encountered, that repurified Poetry from Art's pedantism, & that instructed it to speak courtly. Our Patron, our *Phoebus*, our first *Orpheus* or quintessence of invention he is...."

The person meant is a courtier, still alive, who in his youth had been fortunate, i.e., had enjoyed the queen's favor but had later lost it. The statement could apply to Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford. In fact, only Oxford can be meant. He is unequivocally identified by the process of logical elimination. Of the six persons addressed by Harvey, three were dead by 1596: Sir Philip Sidney (1586), the Earl of Leicester (1588) and Sir Christopher Hatton (1591). The queen herself and Lord

Burghley were alive, but they could neither be addressed as Sir Philip Sidney's "knight companion" nor as poet, let alone as the foremost poet, the Phoebus (Apollo) and Orpheus of the age. The statement implies that Nashe feared Oxford would not earn the fame merited by his writings (his pen). Nashe's fear concords with Shakespeare's complaints about the obliteration of his name.

Endnotes

[1] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human* (New York, 1988), 403.

[2] Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Harvard University Press, 1999),. 328.

[3] Green Line Oberstufe, published by Stephanie Ashford et al (Ernst Klett Verlag, 2009), 174-189.

[4] Elena Gross, *Shakespearean Sonnets and Elizabethan Poetry* (Ernst Klett Verlag, 2011).

[5] Vendler, 161.

[6] Robert Detobel, *Will, Wunsch und Wirklichkeit* (Verlag Uwe Laugwitz, 2010), 84 .

[7] Hans-Albert Koch, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 March 2010.

[8] Detobel, 149-150.

[9] www.ymiteacher.com/pdf/AnonymousCollege.pdf

[10] *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, ed. by Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 236-237.

[11] Sir Thomas Smith, *de Republica Anglorum*, ch. 17. 1 mark = 2/3 pound, 1000 marks = 666.66 pounds.

[12] J.H. Hexter, "The Education of the Aristocracy the Renaissance," in *The Journal of Modern History* Vol. XXII (March 1950), 2.

[13] *Mine*: Material possessions

[14] B.M. Ward, *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford 1550-1604* (London: John Murray, 1928), 126; Conyers Read, *Lord Burghley and Queen Elizabeth*, Vol. II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 137. Alan Nelson so renders it on his website; it is not mentioned in his biography of Oxford, *Monstrous Adversary*.

[15] My man= my servant

[16] Edmund K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 1923, Vol. IV, 270.

[17] Chambers, 272.

[18] To take the wall: see *Romeo and Juliet*, I.i.10-11. "I will take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's." To take the wall of somebody is to take the best and surest side of the path and thereby to show one's superiority to that person.