

Sir Philip Sidney Satirized in *Merry Wives of Windsor*

Charles Vere

The first question I always ask regarding a Shakespeare play is, “What was the author’s motivation in writing this work? On the most immediate level, what is he attempting to convey to us, the readers or spectators?” No author of fiction sets out from the very first to explore abstract notions like love, honor, jealousy, and vengeance: such themes will emerge from his depiction of a specific problem or situation that is a key issue in his life. In other words, the author moves from the specific to the general (his method is inductive) and not the other way around.

One of the great weaknesses of the Stratfordian hypothesis of authorship is that this question of motivation can never be explained on a specific, human level. Thus, Shakespeare, uniquely among great authors, apparently writes simply to explore complex philosophical ideas rather than to heal certain wounds in his own psyche by dramatizing situations from his life. In other words, his works do not seem to be rooted in an individual human life.

After all, Hamlet himself is unequivocal with regard to the purpose of his particular production at court: “The play’s the thing/Wherein to catch the conscience of the King.” He puts on *The Murder of Gonzago* (or *The Mousetrap*) as a way of telling the truth to the court regarding his father’s death, and of undercutting the official story (the propaganda) put out by Claudius and Polonius. For Hamlet is interested not in how things seem, but in how they are. Indeed, just as Hamlet uses the play within the play as a way of telling his story and reporting his cause aright to the unsatisfied, so the author himself, within the wider play of *Hamlet*, is doing precisely the same. Both Hamlet and the author choose a well-known story or history by virtue of its relevance to their own situations and adapt it for their purposes.

Perhaps more than any other figure of the Elizabethan Age, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, has had his life and achievements obscured and distorted by the official story of the time, and for that we have in large measure to thank the real-life Polonius of Queen Elizabeth’s Court, William Cecil, Lord Burghley. For those convinced that Oxford was the true author, the plays on the most

A trustee of the Shakespeare-Oxford Society, the Earl of Burford is in the midst of a lecture tour of American universities concerning the authorship of the Shakespeare canon.

immediate level become the author's monumental attempt to tell the story of his life to the world, a story which was suppressed by the political power-brokers of the age. Equally important for someone reared in accordance with the feudal code of honor, they are an attempt to defend his good name and reputation: they are an act of self-vindication.

This approach to *Hamlet* should also serve us well in examining the play of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (*MWW*). The Elizabethans possessed a very allegorical bent of mind, and just as the court witnessing Hamlet's production of *The Mousetrap* immediately understand that they are not being told about the actual murder of the Duke of Urbino by Luigi Gonzaga in 1538, but that a situation closer to home is being presented, so we must understand that Shakespeare uses the old stories of his plots as a mechanism for saying things that would otherwise (in their undisguised form) be considered too close to the bone. *MWW* is a case in point.

In this play, Oxford is concerned with the story of the courtship of his first wife, Anne Cecil, daughter of William Cecil, later Lord Burghley. In this his chief rival was Philip Sidney. We do not know whose interest in Anne came first, but a formal marriage settlement was drawn up between Sidney and Anne Cecil on August 6th, 1569, and this seems to have remained valid until the summer of 1571, when Cecil announced his daughter's engagement to the Earl of Oxford. While historical accounts have tended to depict Anne Cecil and Philip Sidney as childhood sweethearts, the only basis for this assumption seems to be a desire on the part of historians to paint Oxford as the villain of the story, a heartless cad who broke up a promising love match for his own selfish ends. However, this received wisdom has been consistently questioned in recent scholarship, a good example being Katherine Duncan-Jones's account of the affair in her 1991 book, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet*.

Duncan-Jones is keen to stress Sidney's apparent indifference regarding the proposed marriage. She writes: "Though the Cecil connection was attractive to Sidney, little Anne herself may have been of relatively little interest. It is noticeable that in his three early letters to Cecil, he fails to mention her, although the first two were written during the height of the marriage negotiations." (51) What Sidney was anxious to do, however, was to please the two main negotiating parties, namely Cecil and his uncle, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. This version of events is borne out by the situations described in *MWW*, where Anne Page represents Anne Cecil, Slender is Sidney, Robert Shallow is Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and Fenton is the Earl of Oxford.

There are many portraits of Sidney in the plays, some of which are clearly caricatures, among them Boyet in *Love's Labor's Lost*, Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*, and Slender in *MWW*. (Indeed, the latter two are first cousins,

in a manner of speaking.) The sheer weight of detail of both character and circumstance in Shakespeare's portrayal of Slender make it certain that a specific identity is intended, and that that identity is Sidney's. Those characteristics of Slender's which contribute to his identification as Sidney include:

1. Humorlessness/tedious gravity
2. Slender physique; history of ill-health
3. Lack of interest in women/possible homosexual proclivities
4. Lukewarm feelings toward his prospective bride
5. A clichéd, redundant and often trite use of language
6. His expression of an imagined love in stilted terms
7. His obsession with and insecurity over his family lineage
8. His dependence on the word and wealth of his uncle

In addition, as Percy Allen has pointed out, the financial arrangements for the marriage of Anne and Slender in *MWW* reflect with remarkable accuracy the arrangements agreed upon by Cecil and Leicester in the case of Sidney's prospective marriage to Anne Cecil.¹ At the time of his marriage, Sidney was to have a little over the "three hundred pounds a year" mentioned so disparagingly by Anne Page in III.iv., but with the prospect of substantially more after his mother's death. (Slender of course remarks in I.i: "I keep but three men and a boy yet, till my mother be dead...") Likewise the "seven hundred pounds" left for Anne by "her grandsire upon his death's-bed" when she should reach seventeen, together with the "better penny" her father will confer, all fit in with the figures contained in the Cecil/Sidney marriage negotiation documents held at Hatfield House.

The deep-seated insecurity of both Leicester and Sidney with regard to their ancestry and social status is reflected with caustic humor in the initial dialogue between Shallow and Slender concerning the former's coat of arms. Slender is very keen to justify his uncle's claim to gentility, just as Sidney was always eager to justify his uncle's claim to nobility, as when he defended Leicester from attacks on his family honor in his *Defense of Leicester* (1584). This was a reply to the anonymous tract of the same year commonly referred to as *Leicester's Commonwealth*. Revealingly, in his *Defense*, Sidney fails to address the main issues raised by the *Commonwealth*, concentrating instead on defending Leicester's genealogical credentials and thus, also, his own:

I am a Dudley in blood, that Duke's daughter's son, and do acknowledge, though in all truth I may justly affirm that I am by my father's side of ancient and always well-esteemed and well-matched gentry, yet I do acknowledge, I say, that my chiefest honor is to be a Dudley, and truly am glad to have cause to set forth the nobility of that blood whereof I am descended.²

Although he was Leicester's nephew and heir, Sidney himself was without title until 1583 when, rather appropriately in the context of *MWW*, he was knighted so that he might act as proxy for his friend, Prince Casimir, at the latter's investiture as a Knight of the Garter. Thus, Sidney's knighthood was very much of the carpet kind, a point driven home by Shakespeare in his portrayal of him as Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*. Instead, Sidney had to be content to bask in the reflected glory of his uncle. As Slender says of his uncle, Shallow:

All his successors, gone before him, hath done't [i.e., written themselves "armigero"], and all his ancestors, that come after him, may: they may give the dozen white luces in their coat. I.i.14-16

The "dozen white luces" of Shallow's coat of arms is surely mentioned to identify Shallow as Leicester, whose father, John, Duke of Northumberland, had twelve luces (or pikes) on his coat of arms. Moreover, Shallow is an appropriate name for someone of whom it was said, "Wise word or witty never passed his lips. Cool counsel lay beyond him." Leicester's insecurity regarding his ancestry led him to commission extravagant and bogus family trees from the College of Arms. It is interesting, too, that among the titles conferred upon Leicester by Queen Elizabeth were Constable of Windsor Castle and Chief Seneschal of the Borough of Windsor. Windsor was thus a place where Leicester commanded the choice of the Member of Parliament, often by force and intimidation. In this respect, Shallow's (and Slender's) insistence that he, Shallow, is "of the Peace" is highly ironic.

It is appropriate that the subject of the projected marriage between Slender and Anne Page should be raised by the Welsh parson Sir Hugh Evans, since Sidney, Leicester, and Cecil all had very strong Welsh connections, and it was income from lands and benefices in Wales that would have furnished Sidney with a great deal of the income he was to bring to the marriage. Leicester was to provide the lion's share of the financial backing for Sidney, and it is clear from the records that Sidney was loath to offend either his uncle or Cecil in this matter, whatever the nature of his feelings for Anne Cecil. Thus, Slender bows before his uncle's authority, saying in I.i., "Nay, I will do as my cousin Shallow says..." and later in the same scene (to Shallow), "I will marry her, sir, at your request..." In III.iw., speaking directly to Anne, he is equally explicit: "Truly, for mine own part, I would little or nothing with you. Your father and my uncle hath made motions: if it be my luck, so; if not, happy man be his dole!" It is interesting to note that, in using the phrase "hath made motions," Slender is echoing Cecil's own phrase in his letters concerning the proposed marriage.

Slender, then, doesn't so much woo as simply fall in, albeit rather gracelessly, with the plans of his uncle and Anne's father. His attempts to pose as a lover

are feeble in the extreme and consist in the main of such sighings as, “Ah, sweet Anne Page” and “O, sweet Anne Page.” “Sweet” is a word Sidney uses often in his sonnets to Stella, which are quintessentially highly stilted and formalized expressions of a love which can hardly have been genuine. That a dig is being made at Sidney’s inability to pose convincingly as a lover is confirmed by Falstaff’s opening line to Mrs. Ford in III.iii., which is also the first line of Sidney’s second song in *Astrophel and Stella*:

Have I caught my heavenly jewel?³

In fact, it is probably not farfetched to posit that the very first line of the play, spoken by Shallow, is making indirect reference to Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* (which literally means “Starlover and Star”). The line is “Sir Hugh, persuade me not: I will make a Star Chamber matter of it.” What is certain is that Windsor is the ideal setting for the theme of Sidney’s merits as a love poet. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, with whom modern English love poetry began, spent much of his early life at Windsor as companion to Henry VIII’s natural son, Henry, Duke of Richmond, and it was at Windsor that he experienced the first stirrings of love:

...Proud Windsor, where I, in lust and joy,
 With a King’s son, my childish years did pass,
 In greater feast than Priam’s sons of Troy.
 Where each sweet place returns a taste full sour,
 The large green courts, where we were wont to hove,
 With eyes cast up into the Maiden’s tower,
 And easy sighs, such as folk draw in love... (2-8)⁴

Reference is made directly to Surrey in I.i.179-180, when Slender remarks: “I had rather than forty shillings I had my book of Songs and Sonnets here.” Surrey’s *Book of Songs & Sonnets* had first been published in 1557, with at least eight subsequent editions over the next thirty years. Sidney’s poetry is imitative of Surrey’s whereas Oxford’s is strongly influenced by it. Surrey was, of course, Oxford’s uncle. Finally, it may be of significance that Oxford spent a good deal of time convalescing at Windsor in 1570, for this may be the time at which his love for Anne Cecil first truly blossomed.

With regard to Sidney’s feebleness as a lover, Shakespeare seems to go even further in *MWW* by suggesting that perhaps Sidney isn’t interested in women at all. At the masque of fairies at Herne’s Oak, Slender is tricked into making off with the postmaster’s boy instead of Anne Page. When Mr. Page exclaims, “Upon my life, then, you took the wrong,” (V.v.189) the literal-minded Slender replies:

What need you tell me that? I think so, when I took a boy for a girl. If I had been married to him, for all he was in woman’s apparel, I would not

have had him. (V.v.190-93)

Now, not only are there strong indications that Sidney's two best friends, Greville and Dyer, were themselves homosexual, but according to Katherine Duncan-Jones in her biography, there were rumors of transvestism concerning Sidney. Pyrocles, who in many ways represents Sidney in the *Arcadia*, is disguised as a woman almost throughout the action of the romance.

The Earl of Oxford, the successful wooer of Anne Cecil, represents himself as Fenton, the young gentleman. Like Oxford, he is of high birth ("he is of too high a region"), writes verses, has wasted his substance and has kept wild society. As Fenton himself says in explaining her father's objections to Anne:

He doth object I am too great of birth,
And that my state being gall'd with my expense,
I seek to heal it only by his wealth.
Besides these, other bars he lays before me—
My riots past, my wild societies—
And tells me 'tis a thing impossible
I should love thee but as a property. (III.iv.4-10)

Indeed, Oxford was considered of too high a region for Anne Cecil, and so Queen Elizabeth created her father William Cecil, Lord Burghley, to make the disparity in rank less apparent.

Fenton also resembles Hamlet in one most important respect. As the ultimate orchestrator of the fairies' masque at Herne's Oak, he seeks to solve his problems through the drama, and in this particular case succeeds. His adversaries are foiled and bewildered, while he wins Anne. Hamlet, too, uses the drama as a means of resolving issues. In IV.vi., the Host refers to Fenton's theatrical plan as a "device," which is the term Oxford himself used in his early poetry, with the meaning of a masque or theatrical scene staged for a specific purpose. In one of his earliest poems (written in his teens), in which one finds the seeds of Hamlet's later soliloquies and which is entitled *Revenge of Wrong*, he writes in the final stanza:

My heart shall fail and hand shall lose his force,
But some device shall pay despite his due...⁵

So Fenton's triumph is the author's triumph. Here is an author with an intimate knowledge of Windsor and its environs, who has managed in masterful fashion to narrate his own story (the unofficial story) of the wooing of Anne Cecil, and who has given us in the process a hilarious and myth-deflating portrait of his chief rival, Sir Philip Sidney. Not only does he mock Sidney's pretensions to nobility and those of his uncle (both of whom were "new men," relatively speaking), but he also subtly mocks the notion of Sidney as a great love poet and a valorous knight. He makes it clear that he, Fenton, was Anne's

choice, while Sidney, as Slender, was merely the pawn of those negotiating on his behalf.

Thus, not only did the Earl of Oxford have a clear motive in writing *MWW*, but he possessed the intimate knowledge of Sidney needed for such an effective satirization. He knew Sidney well and, mingled with the scorn he felt for the traditional picture of Sidney as England's most complete Renaissance man, was a genuine sense of rivalry. Both men possessed an extraordinarily wide range of interests, and both were discerning and generous patrons. But, ultimately, it was Oxford who was the real-life Hamlet, and he rather than Sidney was "Th' expectancy and rose of the fair state,/The glass of fashion and the mould of form." The fact that the two men had wooed the same woman provided an excellent opportunity for Oxford to have a bit of fun at the expense of his old rival.

When Sidney died in the Netherlands in 1586, William Shakespeare of Stratford was 22 years of age and had, as far as we know, never left his native town. How did he come by his personal knowledge of Sidney? What was his motivation for satirizing him? Finally, how could he have hoped to have effected such a satirization with impunity? These are questions that must be addressed. Even if one posits a knowledge of Sidney for the Stratford man, one is still left with a motivational void. Why did he write the play, and what was he trying to say? Ultimately, my contention is that the true Shakespeare was born four years before Sidney, and that the literary debt was not Shakespeare's but Sidney's. Only removing the plays from their historical context can the notion of the Stratford man's authorship be upheld.

Notes

1. Percy Allen, *The Case for Edward de Vere as "Shakespeare"* (London, 1930).
2. K. Duncan-Jones, ed., "Defense of Leicester," *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford, 1973) 134.
3. *Sir Philip Sidney's Astrophel & Stella, Wherein the Excellency of Sweet Poesy is Concluded* (London, 1888).
4. George Frederick Nott, ed., "Prisoned in Windsor, He Recounteth His Pleasure There Passed," *The Works of Henry Howard Earl of Surrey* (London, 1815).
5. J. Thomas Looney, *The Poems of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford* (London, 1921).

Bibliography

- Buxton, John. *Sir Philip Sidney & The English Renaissance*. London, 1954.
The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia, Maurice Evans, ed. London, 1987.
Haynes, Alan. *The White Bear—The Elizabethan Earl of Leicester*. London, 1987.
Hurstfield, Joel. *The Queen's Wards*. London, 1958.
Looney, J. Thomas. *Shakesepare Identified*. London, 1920.
Ogburn, Charlton. *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. 1984.
Ogburn, Dorothy and Charlton. *This Star of England*. 1952.
Shakespeare's Merry Wives of Windsor. H.J. Oliver, ed. Arden, 1971
Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Poesy. Dorothy M. Macardle, ed. London, 1927.
Stone, Lawrence, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558-1641*. Oxford, 1965.