

Why Was *Venus and Adonis* Published?

Richard Lester

As long as “William Shakespeare” the poet was assumed to be William Shakspeare of Stratford, the dedication of *Venus and Adonis* to the Earl of Southampton was easily explained: he was soliciting patronage from a wealthy noble. But if Shakespeare was actually the Earl of Oxford, that motive wouldn’t be valid: he was certainly not looking for a patron, and he wasn’t trying to get published in order to sell his literary wares. So Oxfordians assumed he was just expressing his devotion to Southampton. And of course that fitted the already current supposition that Southampton was the “fair friend” of the *Sonnets*.

If that really was his motive, it should be consistent with what we know about *Venus* and its dedication, and also about the two men. First, why would Oxford publish this expression of devotion to Southampton to the general public? What makes us think that these two Earls would be interested in such exposure of a personal relationship? The situation was completely different from that of a poet addressing his patron in which publication is essential. If Oxford had wanted to express his feelings about Southampton to some smaller audience that they did care about, he could have circulated the poems in manuscript, as he did with his *Sonnets*, and as Philip Sidney did with *Arcadia*.

Second, why would Oxford offer what appears to be an old poem written for another purpose as an expression of devotion? What kind of respect would that show? Various writers have observed that in subject matter and mood *Venus* seems like something written by a much younger man: the familiar Ovid story, the hot-blooded love theme, the passion for hunting. Not the sort of thing one would expect from a middle-aged man. Some Oxfordians have suggested that *Venus* was offered precisely because it was appropriate for a young man,

Historian Richard Lester was formerly assistant director of historical analysis and study valudation for the U.S. Army’s Concepts Analysis Agency

whether it was written years before, or especially written for Southampton just before its publication in 1593. But in either case it would be a kind of talking down to, which is not at all characteristic of Shakespeare. Other Oxfordians suggested that *Venus* was offered because it carried a warning of the Queen's possessiveness, which Oxford himself had experienced when he was young. But if that was a discernible meaning of the poem, it would seem to make open publication even harder to explain.

Third, why the expression, "first heir of my invention"? If *Venus* was new in 1593, it certainly would not have been Oxford's first literary work. But of course some writers have claimed that plays would not have been considered significant enough to cite in a dedication, even to someone who was supposedly very fond of the theater, and his shorter poems had not yet been printed and therefore also wouldn't count. But even if *Venus* was a first in some sense or other, why would Oxford call attention to the fact? It doesn't seem to add to the honor of the dedication.

Perhaps it was this problem that led some Oxfordians to the hypothesis that "first heir of my invention" referred to his first public use of the pseudonym, "Shakespeare," not to the poem itself. But this isn't consistent with the evidence of *Oenone and Paris*, a derivative "minor epic" published the following year.¹ Its dedication, which is an obvious parody of the dedication of *Venus*, started with: "Here you have the first fruits of my endeavors and maidenhead of my pen..." which indicates that the author understood "first heir of my invention" to mean first literary work. There is no hint of the poem being the first "heir" of an invented name, and one would think that he wouldn't have failed to parody such a reference if he thought it had that meaning. Also, the word "invention" was so commonly used to refer to literary inspiration or effort that, without some indication of a special meaning, it would have been understood that way.

Furthermore, with regard to the first use of the pseudonym, there is evidence that at least three of Shakespeare's plays were already known several years before *Venus* as being by Shakespeare. The rather obvious allusions to William of Stratford in *As You Like It* (V,i), *Henry IV part 2* (V,i), and *The Taming of the Shrew* (Induction), in about 1589, 1590, and 1592, respectively, would seem to be inexplicable unless there was a similarity of names, recognizable to at least some of the audience, that was either an annoyance to the playwright or some kind of joke.²

So why should Shakespeare refer to the name as an "invention" in 1593? Some Oxfordians say it was the official launching of the cover-up, with "Shakespeare" as the pseudonym and Shakspeare of Stratford as the stand-in. If so, then why didn't Oxford continue to use the name after *The Rape of Lucrece*? As far as we know it didn't appear again publicly until 1598. And why didn't "Shakespeare" show up publicly as an actor starting at that time? The first such appearance was about a play given in 1598, and even that was a reference made

19 years later.

But perhaps the most troubling thing about the *Venus* dedication that the traditional Oxfordian interpretation doesn't seem able to explain is its similarities to Philip Sidney's dedication of *Arcadia* to his sister, Lady Pembroke. It turns out that the most likely explanation of this unexpected connection also seems to answer all the preceding questions. Therefore, it merits a careful examination.

Arcadia and its dedication were written by about 1581 and circulated in manuscript not long after, but they weren't printed or published until 1590. The overall character of the two dedications is quite different: Sidney's is long and casual, and Shakespeare's is concise and formal. All the more reason to be surprised by the use of many of the same words and images:

Both dedications refer to use of idle time:

Arcadia: this idle work of mine...

Arcadia: Read it... at your idle times.

Venus: I... vow to take advantage of all idle hours.

Both refer to deformities:

Arcadia: though... it have deformities.

Venus: If [it] prove deformed...

Both express concern about offending:

Arcadia: your name... a sanctuary for a greater offender

Venus: I know not how I shall offend...

Both refer to fathering the poem:

Arcadia: this child which I am loth to father.

Arcadia: I hope, for the father's sake...

Venus: I shall be sorry it had so noble a god-father

Both develop the begetting image in a similar way:

Arcadia: having many fancies begotten [which if not] delivered
would have grown a monster, and more sorry might I be that
they came in than that they gat out.

Venus: if the first heir of my invention proved deformed, I shall...
never after [plow] so barren a land, for fear it yield me still
so bad a harvest...

Finally, note that both use the word “sorry” to express potential regret.

It seems impossible that this group of words and images would occur by chance in the two dedications since they were all either uncommon or unique. The word “idle” appeared in only 3 other earlier dedications and introductory letters out of 45 surveyed, “offend” or “offense” appeared in only 5, and “deformed” or deformities,” “sorry,” and the fathering and begetting images seem to have been unique to the *Arcadia* and *Venus* dedications.³

Furthermore, it seems unthinkable that Shakespeare would have borrowed these words and images from Sidney’s dedication just because he liked them. *Arcadia* was so recently printed and so well-known that his borrowing would have been obvious.⁴

It seems that the only possible explanation is that Oxford, again assuming that he was Shakespeare, deliberately used words and images from Sidney’s dedication in order to invite comparison between his *Venus* and Sidney’s *Arcadia*. And there seems to be no other reason for doing this than that he was competing with Sidney—or rather with Sidney’s ghost, which had been raised by the recent publication of his works. Oxford was presumably incensed at the high praise accorded Sidney when *Arcadia* and *Astrophil and Stella* were published in 1590 and 1591. He apparently wanted to show the same audience that he could do better, or, more exactly, had done better at about the same age. Of course, the comparison would hardly have been considered fair if Oxford brought out a product of his mature years to compare to something Sidney wrote in his mid-twenties.⁵

Thus, according to this theory, *Venus* really was the first heir of Oxford’s invention, in the sense of first major product of his literary effort, just as *Arcadia* was Sidney’s first major work. If so, Oxford would certainly have wanted to make it clear to the 1593 audience that *Venus* was his earliest work, not his latest. This assumes, of course, that some significant part of the 1593 audience knew “William Shakespeare” did or could have written *Venus* some 15 years before.

This competition motive becomes more understandable when seen in the context of the apparent rivalry between Oxford and Sidney, the first evidence of which goes back to 1579 when Oxford called a “puppy” at the tennis court.⁶ They were in different literary, religious, and political groups. Sidney had been very close to the Earl of Leicester, who was certainly no friend of Oxford’s. And there seems to have been competition for military assignments in the Netherlands in 1585. Oxford had been recalled from his very short command just about the time Sidney received his assignment, and it appears that the former was caused by the latter. Then to make matters worse—Sidney died a hero on the Continent in 1586, with the highest praise from Spenser, Raleigh, Greville, and others, and with a magnificent funeral that seems excessive considering his rank and literary accomplishments.⁷ Finally, Sidney was praised again when his works were printed in 1590 and 1591.

As a kind of corroboration of this theory that Oxford was presenting his

work as superior to Sidney's, the title page of *Venus and Adonis* bore the following (in Latin): "Let the common people admire common things, so long as to me Apollo hands goblets brimming with the waters of Castaly." Castaly was the spring sacred to the muses on Mount Parnassus.

Another kind of corroboration of the theory is that the dedication of *Venus* was parodied a year after its publication. This seems surprising if it was indeed taken at the time as a serious expression of devotion to the Earl of Southampton, a young noble already presented at Court and a protegee of arguably the most powerful man in England after its Lord Treasurer, William Cecil (Lord Burghley). But not so surprising if it was actually recognized as a deliberate imitation of another dedication.

This theory, as mentioned before, seems to be able to answer all of the questions cited above about *Venus* which the traditional Oxfordian theory couldn't answer: it was published openly because Oxford wanted to address the audience of *Arcadia*; it was an early poem because it was in competition with Sidney's work of about 1580; and it was explicitly stated to be his first work because it actually was; and it contained similarities to Sidney's *Arcadia* because he was deliberately trying to call attention to it.

But it raises other, more important, questions: why would Oxford have used Southampton for this message about *Arcadia*? What exactly was their relationship? Oxford obviously had something else in mind besides devotion to Southampton when he dedicated and published *Venus*. And this seems to undercut, or even deny, the face value meaning of the dedication. These two contradictory motives might still be reconcilable if we had reason to believe that Southampton would have cooperated in this attempted putdown of Sidney. But that doesn't seem likely. Southampton was a close friend and protegee of Essex who had been a loyal follower of Leicester. Sidney also had been close to Essex and Leicester: the former inherited Sidney's best sword and later married his widow and the latter man was, of course, Sidney's uncle. Therefore, Sidney was probably highly respected by Southampton. But if Southampton wouldn't have cooperated, what are we to conclude about Oxford dedicating *Venus* to him anyway? And what does this do to the idea that Southampton was the "fair friend" of the Sonnets?

Endnotes

¹ J.Q. Adams, in his *Oenone and Paris*, by T.H. (Washington, DC, 1943) pointed out that it had the same theme of unrequited love, approximately the same plot, the same setting, the same style, and a parallel title. Furthermore, like *Venus and Adonis*, the story of "Oenone and Paris" came from Ovid. The Folger Director said, "Throughout the text, verbal plagiarism of Shakespeare's poem is everywhere conspicuous." Incidentally, Adams identified T.H. as Thomas Heywood.

² The dating of these plays is according to the evidence given by Eva Turner Clark in *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays*.

³ This informal survey, though not exhaustive, included all apparently comparable dedications and introductory letters prior to 1593 (except those with Sidney's *Arcadia* and *Astophil and Stella*) that could be found. Most were from *The Renaissance in England* by Hyder Rollins and Herschel Baker.

⁴ Note that the similarities with the *Arcadia* dedication, although not immediately explainable for Oxford as Shakespeare, make even less sense for Shakspere of Stratford

⁵ This paper focuses on *Venus and Adonis* for simplicity's sake, but much of the logic applies also to *Rape of Lucrece* and other similarities appear to make the latter part of the comparison. For instance, Shakespeare's "what I have done is yours, what I have to do is yours" seems to recall Sidney's "Now it is done only for you, only to you."

⁶ E.T. Clark pointed out two reasons for thinking Oxford and Sidney were friends, at least for a time: first, Oxford seems to have depicted Sidney as Ned Pains in *Henry IV*, and Pains was a friend of Prince Hal, who apparently represented Oxford; and second, they were both friends of Baron Willoughby D'Eresby.

⁷ J.T. Looney pointed out the curious coincidence of the sentencing and execution of Mary Stuart and the death and burial of Sidney. Mary was sentenced on 25 October 1586; Sidney died 3 days later. Mary was executed on 8 February 1587 and Sidney was buried 8 days later with extraordinary pomp. Looney hypothesized that the 3 months delay in burying Sidney and the grandeur of the funeral were to distract public attention from Mary's execution, and to hold up Sidney as a national hero of the Protestant war against the Catholics, with Mary as the ultimate cause of his death.