Hank Whittemore: Queen Elizabeth as the Dark Lady

In the quest to know the true meaning and intention of the Sonnets, nothing is more critical (and urgent) than determining the identity of the so-called Dark Lady. Having accepted Oxford as author and reached a consensus that Southampton is the so-called Fair Youth, we cannot understand the 154-sonnet sequence without identifying this powerful, dominant female, to whom de Vere writes at the very end of the series devoted to her (127-152):

> And all my honest faith in thee is lost.
> For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,
> Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,
> And to enlighten thee gave eyes to blindness,
> Or made them swear against the thing they see.
> For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye,
> To swear against the truth so foul a lie. (152)

Those final lines could not have been addressed to anyone other than Queen Elizabeth. He had devoted his life to her service amid the stormiest kind of relationship between two of the most sharp-tongued individuals in world history. What other woman could force this strong-willed man of high rank, for whom Truth was not just a motto but among the highest of human values, to "swear against" it for her sake, under the weight of "so foul a lie"? Has there ever been a more wretched confession of self-betrayal?

Correctly identifying the subject of these lines opens a window on de Vere's motives for writing the Sonnets in the first place. I will present evidence that the real story for "eyes not yet created" (81) involves the most important question of the time: the fast-approaching succession to the throne, which will determine the future of England. My presentation is based on three themes:

Metaphor. In only five of the twenty-six Dark Lady sonnets is the woman associated with "dark" or "black" (127, 130, 131, 132, 147). In these instances, however, Oxford is never speaking literally but metaphorically. It's not about physical coloring. Her eyes are "black" because of her negative (royal) viewpoint; they are "so suited" to those of a "mourner." [In 25 he had referred to Elizabeth's flower, the marigold, to describe her "favorites," or courtiers, basking under "the sun's eye" of her approval, until "at a frown they in their glory die" in darkness.] Also he's writing about her decisions or actions: "In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds."

Terminology. In this series Oxford employs many words or phrases he has already used when writing to and about the queen, and uses them exclusively for her. He speaks, for example, of her Majesty's "will" and of his "service" to her. He is "commanded by the motion of thine eyes" (149) and urges her to "use" her "power" as an absolute monarch. She has "tongue-tied" (140) or silenced him. In 151 he echoes Spenser's image in *Mother Hubbard's Tale* (line 614) of courtiers who, like male sex organs, "rise and fall" in her presence. She is the (sovereign) "mistress" who

was once a lofty “goddess” but has become a reprehensible mortal who merely “treads on the ground” (130). Near the end of the series, he recalls his own youthful sonnet praising Elizabeth and asking himself “Who taught thee” how to “love” or devote himself to her, but now, though remaining loyal to the end, he turns those idealistic words inside out to express his disillusionment. This time he asks the queen “Who taught thee” how to make him “love thee more” or continue to support her “the more I hear and see just cause of hate?” (150).

Context. Identifying the woman as Elizabeth allows us to find the correct time frame and historical circumstances for these sonnets, without which no real-life story is possible. Oxford opens this series upon the failed rebellion of 8 February 1601, when her eyes are “Raven black” in reflection of that dark-winged harbinger of death perennially residing in the Tower, where Essex and Southampton now face execution. Robert Cecil, firmly in charge, has told Elizabeth that these former young lights of her court intended to kill her, so it’s no wonder that her eyes “mourn becoming of their woe” (127).

The series comes fully alive when perceived as Oxford’s record of the queen’s final two years (she died on 24 March 1603). After Essex and other rebels are executed, Southampton remains confined, but she never lifts a finger to free him. Meanwhile she is unwilling—or unable—to settle the succession, triggering fears of civil war and takeover by a foreign power. Having used his own great abilities all through life in her Majesty’s service, Oxford is “frantic mad with ever-more unrest” at having to still “love” or support her despite this tragic ending of the reign.

I plan to show how the sonnets and events of history illuminate each other to tell Oxford’s story. For example, the queen’s expected beheading of Southampton drives him to liken his own suffering to that of Christ (“I am forsaken” - 133); he pleads with her (133-134) to let him put up “bail” by offering to exchange places and be his “guard” in “my jail”; he begs her to “kill me” (139) or execute him instead; and after the younger earl writes a poem in the Tower begging for “mercy” and she spares his life, Oxford responds with relief that “Straight in her heart did mercy come” (145). Yet he finally records his bitter disappointment in her failure to protect England and in his own self-betrayal by having sworn “against the truth so foul a lie” (152).

Oxford will depict the court’s self-destruction allegorically in the expanded *Hamlet*, published soon after his death on 24 June 1604. In the final scene, Fortinbras of Norway arrives to take over Denmark amid its royal wreckage, just as James of Scotland triumphantly arrived to rule a crippled England (Norway is north of Denmark, just as Scotland lies north of England). With his dying words Hamlet laments that things “standing thus unknown” will stay behind him unless Horatio can “report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied.” His friend promises to “speak to the yet unknowing world how these things came about.”

Five years later the Sonnets are published for “the eyes of all posterity” (55) to read and, hopefully, understand. I believe these poems contain the story that “Hamlet” desperately implored Horatio to tell. The winners of England’s power struggle would write the official

history (with its false biography of the poet), but the 1609 quarto may represent a rare report from the losing side. Oxford knew his story was important, not in a strictly personal sense, but for the “yet unknowing world” to learn “how these things came about” in his beloved isle that so deeply wounded itself.

Only when Elizabeth is recognized as the “Dark Lady” can this all-important story come into proper focus.