

John Hamill: Who was The ‘Dark Lady’ of Shakespeare’s Sonnets?

Penelope Devereux (Rich), the wildly notorious noblewoman—cousin to Queen Elizabeth and sister of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex—is my choice for the ‘Dark Lady.’ Seeing the evidence in the context of 1593-94, the reasons are overwhelming. The following is predicated on assumptions that most Oxfordians agree on, that Oxford was the author of Shakespeare’s works, that the Third Earl of Southampton was the ‘Fair Youth’ of the Sonnets, and that the Sonnets were written probably from 1590 mainly because Southampton would have been 17 in 1590 when the first 17 sonnets, the so-called ‘Procreation’ Sonnets, were addressed to him. Oxford’s age fits as well, since Sonnet 2 (“When forty winters shall besiege my brow”) seems to refer to the fact that Oxford turned 40 in 1590.

The ‘Dark Lady’ got this title because she is mentioned as ‘black’ or ‘dark’ in four sonnets—127, 131, 132, and 147. But was she fair or dark? In 131:

“In nothing are thou black save in thy deeds,
And thence this slander, as I think, proceeds.”

The Dark Lady is morally black in the Sonnets. Why? Jealousy? Sonnets 40-42 and 133-144 speak of how the Dark Lady created a sexual triangle by seducing his ‘man right fair.’

In January 1581 Penelope became one of the Queen’s Maids of Honor. She married Lord Rich in November 1581 and had five children with him. Penelope’s reputation by 1594 was destroyed by her open affair with Charles Blunt (Lord Mountjoy). With Blunt she had six children. Penelope was referred to as a Black Lady both early and late in her life by Philip Sidney (Black lady, eyes and soul) and King James (A fair woman with a black soul). She had black eyes, was famous for dressing in black, adorned her bedroom in black, and her favorite color was black.

In 1593-94, four books insinuate that Southampton was in some triangular relationship. Thomas Nashe in ‘The Unfortunate Traveler’, and in his lascivious poem ‘The Choosing of Valentines’ to Lord S.—which is a parody of ‘Venus and Adonis.’ Also, Thomas Edwards, in his poem ‘Envoy to Narcissus’ has cryptic references to Penelope and Oxford. Barnfield dedicates his ‘The Affectionate Shepherd’ to Penelope, implying subtly she was in a triangular affair with them.

‘Venus and Adonis,’ published in 1593 and dedicated to Southampton, names him God-Father to his ‘first heir of my invention.’ The description of Adonis is identical to the Fair Youth of the Sonnets. ‘Venus and Adonis’ is about an older woman pursuing a younger man. The poem implies Venus gives birth. Penelope was referred to as ‘Venus’ from 1591 to 1604 by Sidney, Spencer, Breton, Locke, Daniel, and Craig. ‘Penelope’s Complaint’ refers to Penelope as ‘Venus.’

In the first sonnet to the Dark Lady (127), Oxford accuses her of having a bastard, “And beauty

slandered with a bastard shame.” Oxford was not present at the birth of his only son and heir, Henry Vere, in February 1593, nor did he announce the birth. There was no record of Elizabeth Trentham, Oxford’s wife, being pregnant. In fact, in 1600, Elizabeth Trentham was referred to as an ‘Immaculate Virgin.’ Penelope was not in public view from the fall of 1592 to June 1593. Penelope missed Christmas court in December-January 1592-93. These facts persuade me that Henry Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, was the son of Penelope and Southampton. But, there’s more!

An anonymous poem, ‘Willobie His Avisa’ (WHA), was published in 1594. It retells the ancient Greek myth of Penelope and Ulysses about a ‘chaste and constant wife’ who is pursued by suitors. Two are identified as H.W. and W.S., which are generally accepted as Southampton and Shakespeare (Oxford). WHA seems to portray the adultery of a famous woman that was still topical in 1635 when it was last published. WHA went through five editions from 1594 to 1609. The authorities ordered it burned in 1599, but there was no mention that it was referring to Queen Elizabeth. WHA has the first published mention of Shakespeare and was written as a parody of Shakespeare’s ‘The Rape of Lucrece,’ about a man raping his best friend’s wife.

Who was Avisa? WHA parallels not just ‘Lucrece’ and ‘Venus and Adonis,’ but the Dark Lady Sonnets. It is commonly accepted that identifying Avisa would identify the Dark Lady. The purpose of a libel is to expose scandalous behavior, not to conceal it. The identification of Avisa and the suitors should be covert but clear to some readers in 1594. WHA provides clues to Avisa’s background, all of which fit Penelope:

1. Avisa was from the west of England
2. Avisa’s father was ‘of ancient stock’. He was a descendant of Kings and ruler of Staffordshire
3. Avisa’s house location fits the Leez Priory in Essex
4. Avisa was about 30 years old, was a Maid of Honor, and had an unhappy marriage for ten years
5. The suitor D.H. is the only suitor who assigns a name other than Avisa, and it is Penelope
6. Avisa, in calling her husband Ulysses, is also intimating that her name is Penelope
7. The 1596 WHA adds a new poem, ‘Victory of English Chastity.’ It places Avisa on trial with Penelope and rules that Penelope is a whore.

Avisa’s six suitors can all be associated with Penelope, and all topical to 1594: One, Cavaleiro, clearly matches Don Antonio Perez, who arrived in England in 1593 and was closely associated with Penelope, was her ‘guardian’ at Essex house in London, and wrote her outrageous letters with sexual innuendos in 1594. Another suitor, H.W., clearly matches Southampton, who was a confidante of Penelope Rich. H.W.’s final words in WHA are, “inopem me copie fecit.” (my

riches make me poor). Passages in the H.W. courtship imply that Avisia had a child by H.W.

‘Penelope’s Complaint’ (1596), another libel related to WHA, provides Penelope’s side of the story. It states that Penelope is chaste and Avisia is a whore. This confirms that WHA was seen as an attack on Penelope Rich.

Henry Wriothesley and Henry Vere became very close in adulthood. Incredibly, one portrait of Henry Vere is actually a portrait of Henry Wriothesley. The portrait is clearly of Southampton but is labeled as Henry Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford. He is also shown as holding a baton over his breastplate with his left hand—a usual way to portray bastardy. Clearly this implies that Henry Vere is the bastard son of Southampton.

WHA in 1594 is subtly announcing that Henry Vere is a bastard and the son of Penelope and Southampton, not Oxford. No wonder WHA was still a topic of scandal in 1635 when it was last republished. The scandal would affect several of the major Noble houses in England: the De Veres, the Cecils, the Southamptons, the Devereux, the Sidneys, the Herberts, the Blunts and the Pembrokes. These noble families, the most powerful in England, were all related. All this evidence overwhelmingly points to Penelope Devereux Rich as the ‘Dark Lady.’

