

## **Katherine Chiljan: Anne Vavasour as the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's Sonnets**

The identity of the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets has puzzled orthodox scholars since Shakespeare studies began. But when J.T. Looney identified Shakespeare as the 17th Earl of Oxford, the mystery was over. Who else but Anne Vavasour, the dark-haired lady whom he turned to after he was estranged from his wife, with whom he had an illegitimate son (that he named after himself)? Oxford was put in the Tower of London by a jealous Queen Elizabeth for his affair with Vavasour in March 1581. Oxford was released a few months later but was expelled from the royal court.

Oxford reconciled with his wife in December 1581, but Vavasour's influence remained. Street brawls erupted between Oxford and his men and the men of Vavasour's uncle, Sir Thomas Knyvett; this is reminiscent of the street brawls between the Capulets and Montagues in Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet*. In March 1582, Oxford and Knyvett dueled and both were injured. In January 1585, Vavasour's brother, Thomas, challenged Oxford to a duel, implying that Oxford was still seeing, or was in touch with, his sister. The facts show that Vavasour was certainly one of the major loves of Oxford's life, even though this love caused him public disgrace and physical injury.

The Dark Lady has dark features, including eyes and hair, is promiscuous, and has a strong sexual appetite. Two portraits of Vavasour show her as a brunette. Vavasour was a known wanton at the court, and was famously propositioned by the Earl of Leicester, as told in *Leicester's Commonwealth* (1584). The Dark Lady was also married at the time of her affair with the great author (Sonnet 152); Vavasour was married to Captain John Finch, sometime before 1590. In this year, Vavasour was living with Sir Henry Lee. Later in life, Vavasour married again, and was fined as a bigamist since her first husband was still alive.

Although there is no documentary evidence, it is likely that Oxford resumed his affair with Vavasour not long after his wife's decease in 1588, resulting in the Dark Lady sonnets. Oxford and Vavasour were certainly tied by their lovechild, Edward Vere, whom Vavasour was raising, possibly in a town near Castle Hedingham. The poet of the sonnets was pained by the Dark Lady's roving eye; circa 1589 Vavasour had been seeing Sir Henry Lee. The poet was further pained upon the discovery of an affair between her and his beloved Fair Youth. This was certainly Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, a young man of arresting beauty, like the Fair Youth, and circa 1590, a favorite of Queen Elizabeth.

Besides Shakespeare's sonnets, other literary evidence points to Vavasour as the Dark Lady. *Willobie His Avisa* (1594), an anonymous satirical work, is about Avisa, a married lady who has many suitors. Her fifth and final suitor is Henry Willobie, or H.W., which corresponds to Henry Wriothesley. Willobie seeks advice from his friend, W.S., an "old player." W.S. corresponds to

William Shakespeare, i.e., the Earl of Oxford. W.S. had also been Avisas's suitor. This mirrors the love triangle in Shakespeare's sonnets. As the initials of the two men fit Southampton and Oxford's names, it follows that the Dark Lady's real name began with "A." The pronunciation of Avisas's name sounds like "A.Vavasour."

Another satirical work, *Penelope's Complaint* (1596), referred to Avisas as "Anne" in a prefatory verse. Below is a Latin translation:

Why does **Avisas** seek titles, why does she entice dowries?

Is **Anne** to be compared to your Penelope?

Another association between Anne Vavasour and "Avisas" was an earlier poem written by Sir Walter Raleigh titled, "The Advice." "Avis" is French for "advice." The poem was written for Vavasour regarding her affair with the Earl of Oxford. A combination of factual and literary evidence, therefore, connects Anne Vavasour with the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets.