

SHAKESPEARE'S SEXUALITY: *and how it affects the Authorship Issue*

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IN SHAKESPEARE, whose works deal with every aspect of human life, we would expect to see much about sex, and indeed we do. Everything he wrote deals with it in some way. Even to events and relationships that are not inherently sexual he gives sexual overtones, or allows them to be so interpreted by his actors and directors. As the English poet laureate, John Masefield wrote, “Sex ran in him like the sea.” Few would argue with this. But what exactly do his plays, poems, and sonnets tell us about Shakespeare’s own sexuality, and what role does it play in the on-going Shakespeare authorship challenge?

J.T. Looney’s ground-breaking book *Shakespeare Identified* (1920) began the modern era of the authorship controversy by analyzing Shakespeare’s works for clues to the author’s true identity. With surprising ease he found that it was Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, who reflected, not just some, but all the eighteen qualities suggested by the works. One, however, was less than fully explored: Shakespeare’s “doubtful and somewhat conflicted attitude to woman”; despite the fact that, as Looney claimed, this one characteristic might “afford an explanation for the very existence of the Shakespeare mystery” (103, 118-9).

Joseph Sobran, in his *Alias Shakespeare* (1997), was not the first to point out Shakespeare’s homoeroticism, but he was the first to connect it to apparent homosexual behavior in the biography of the Earl of Oxford. Yet, despite Sobran, few Oxfordians seem to understand either its importance or how it supports Oxford’s case for the authorship. Orthodox Shakespeare scholars are just as hesitant. As Maurice Charney states, “The issues of the homoerotic in Shakespeare are hopelessly entwined in academic controversy. Everything seems to come back to the unanswerable question of Shakespeare’s own sexual orientation” (159). With Oxford as Shakespeare, “the question” is no longer unanswerable.

Homosexuality in Renaissance England

Since the 1960s a new wave of feminist and “queer theory” literary criticism has been redefining the traditional straight male interpretations of literary history. Since then, scholars such as Alan Bray, Bruce R. Smith, and Charles Summers have been providing us with extensive and definitive research into early modern views on sexuality. For instance, nobody thought of themselves as “gay”

in the sixteenth century. The term *homosexual* did not exist until a distinct homosexual subculture developed in the late nineteenth century (Smith *Desire* 11-12).

This of course does not mean that homoerotic feelings and behavior did not exist until the nineteenth century. Evidence of homosexual desires and behavior are to be found in every culture on earth and at every time and place in history—most obviously among our cultural ancestors, the ancient Greeks, for whom it was a prominent cultural feature. But even in cultures where it was not officially accepted, it has often been tolerated as a secondary form of human sexuality. In the sixteenth century, the more tolerant attitudes towards all forms of sexual behavior that had characterized pagan and medieval Catholic cultures were undergoing a process of reversal by the rigid moral standards of the Protestant Reformation.

The closest that early modern English comes to a term for homosexuality is *sodomy*. But to the Elizabethans, sodomy was solely an act; it was not a lifestyle. In other words, if a man committed an act of sodomy, what he did was called *buggering* and the participants were not considered to be anything other than ordinary men who had committed the crime of *buggery*. The concept of *being* a homosexual, that is, of homosexuality as a permanent condition, did not yet exist (DiGangi *Drama* 4). In addition, the term *sodomy* was not specific to anal intercourse, as it is today, but was a general term for a variety of socially-taboo acts categorized as general “debauched behavior,” including buggery, sorcery, heresy, bestiality, Papism, and treason both to the monarchy and to God (Bray 16-28).

In England, perceptions of homosexual behavior during the period in question went from a minor sin, one that could be absolved by confessing to a priest, to a criminal act, the most “detestable abominable sin amongst Christians, not to be named” (Coke 38). As Alan Bray puts it, “it is difficult to exaggerate the fear and loathing of homosexuality to be read in the literature of the time” (62). The mere accusation was enough to destroy a man’s honor and social standing.

Henry VIII, in his efforts to seize wealth and power from the Church, created the first anti-sodomy law as part of a whole panoply of legislation attacking the Roman Catholic Church and passed by the Reformation Parliament of 1533-1534—a law revoked under his daughter, the Catholic Mary Tudor. Her Protestant sister, Queen Elizabeth, made sodomy a felony again under a statute passed by Parliament in 1562-1563, this time punishable by death (Crompton 362- 366). (The concept of homosexual intercourse between women did not yet exist.)

For these and other reasons, most literary works involving same-sex attraction were not openly published. With the exception of a few texts such as Christopher Marlowe’s *Edward II*

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(1593), Richard Barnfield's *Affectionate Shepherd* and *Certaine Sonnets* (1594-95), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1590-1604?), and John Donne's remarkable dramatic monologue in a lesbian voice, *Sapho to Philaenis* (1613?), homoeroticism in the English Renaissance tends to be expressed implicitly rather than explicitly (Summers 1). Could this have something to do with the fact that works by Shakespeare have such an uneven publishing history, with roughly a half remaining unpublished until the First Folio in 1623? Could this have something to do with the likelihood that the name itself, "Shake-speare," is a semi-obvious cover for a writer whose identity had to be hidden due to his obvious predilection for homoerotic themes and banter?

"There has been a flurry of interest in the whole subject of the homoerotic in Shakespeare, None of these books attempt to prove that Shakespeare was a practicing homosexual, but by calling attention to the large amount of homoerotic material, they raise serious questions about the nature of love in his works" (Charney 3). "There are obvious homoerotic discourses in Shakespeare's works that are an important aspect of the theme of love. In Marlowe the homoerotic references are so direct and so overt that critics do not hesitate to speak of Marlowe as a homosexual writer" (159). Also, "Marlowe represents homoerotic situations and incidents in his plays and poems more frequently and more variously than any other major writer of his day" (Summers 22). Although "it is surprising how much same-sex love there is in Shakespeare," unlike in Marlowe or Barnfield, it is not limited to a particular response, but shows "a dramatic expression of a whole variety of sexual impulses" (Charney 6). As Stanley Wells observes, "From the beginnings of Shakespeare's career . . . to the end of it, . . . his plays are full of close, loving, even passionate male friendships" (9). And, we might add, a few female friendships as well. Unlike our current society, which tends to categorize sexuality as either heterosexual on the one hand or homosexual on the other, many of Shakespeare's characters would have to be placed somewhere on a continuum between the two, a condition that today we generally term *bisexual*.

Homosexuality in the Theater

"Much has been written on the public theater as a site of homoerotic titillation and assignation" (DiGangi *Family* 283). In spite of the anti-sodomy laws, the English theater in the sixteenth century had a strong cross-dressing tradition and was an especially important arena for the expression of various lewd and erotic desires (Thompson 7). "The Elizabethan and Jacobean theater acquired a reputation for homosexuality" (Bray 54). The theater was the target of attacks by Puritans like that of Phillip Stubbes in his *Anatomic of Abuses* (1583), who derided

the flocking and running to Theaters and Curtains, daily and hourly, night and day, time and tide, to see plays and interludes, where such wanton gestures, such bawdy speeches, such laughing and fleering, such kissing and bussing, such clipping and culling, such winking and glancing of wanton eyes and the like, is used as is wonderful to behold. Then, these goodly pageants being done, every mate sorts to his mate, every one brings another homeward of their way very friendly, and in their secret conclaves covertly they play the sodomites or worse. And these be the fruits of plays and interludes for the most part. (Smith *Desire* 155)

William Prynne in 1633, “cites this passage as proof of the specifically homoerotic character of the stage” (Orgel 30).

Homoeroticism on the English stage was inescapable, because, for a variety of reasons, plays in England were performed solely by the boy companies or by youths and men in the adult companies. Women did not act on the stage, so the love scenes between Romeo and Juliet, Kate and Petruchio, Antony and Cleopatra, were played, not by a man and a woman, or a youth and a girl, but by two males, adult and/or juvenile.¹

Indeed, seductive boy actors had the reputation of sexually arousing men (Greenblatt 186). These were referred to in sermons and Puritan pamphlets as *ganymedes*, *minions*, *catamites*, or *ingles*, Elizabethan slang terms for youths used for sexual purposes.² In Greek mythology, the youth Ganymede was Jove’s cupbearer and minion. In *Two Noble Kinsmen*, Arcite states, “Just such another wanton Ganymede set Jove afire once” (4.2.15). Ben Jonson, in his *Every Man In His Humour*, has a page, Cinedo, who seems to be used by his master for sexual purposes. In John Florio’s Italian dictionary of 1598, a *cinedo* is defined as “a bardarsh, a bugging boy, a wanton boy, an ingle” (DiGangi *Drama* 70). In Ben Jonson’s play *Poetaster*, enacted by the Children of the Chapel Royal in 1600, upon hearing that his son wants to become an actor the elder “Ovid” roars, “What? Shall I have my son a stager now, an ingle for players?” (1.2.13-14). “The gallants who frequented the play led fast lives, and were constantly charged with the corruption of innocence” (Bellinger 213).

In 1598, playwright John Marston railed against “male stews” (brothels) and homosexual prostitution in London: “But ho! What Ganymede is this that doth grace the gallant’s heels? One who for two day’s space is closely hired” (33-35). Guilpin and Middleton both satirized urban gallants and their “ganymedes” in 1598 and 1599 (DiGangi *Desire* 67). Male servants and pages also had the reputation of being used for sexual purposes. Sir Francis Bacon made “his male servants his catamites and bedfellows” (Bray 55). Edward Guilpin also described a sodomite as someone “who is at every play and every night sups with his ingles” (DiGangi *Desire* 69). This charge is repeated in 1627 by Michael Drayton in his *The Moone-Calfe*, where the theaters are denounced as one of the haunts of the sodomite (Bray 54-55).

Puritans were particularly offended by boy actors dressed up as women. Did not Deuteronomy 22:5 forbid men to wear women’s clothes? John Rainolds in his *Th’Overthrow of Stage-Plays* (1599), leaves no doubt about the reason for this prohibition: cross-dressing leads to homosexual acts” (Smith 147). After evaluating the sexual themes and context of the theaters, present-day writer Stephen Orgel concludes that Rainolds had a valid point (7-29).

According to Andrew Gurr, the reopening of the boy’s playing companies in 1599 and 1600 coincided with the expansion of satiric discourse, much of it homoerotic, in print and onstage (153-159). “Before London’s public theaters were closed by Puritan edict in 1642, “play-boys” disguised as girls disguised as boys appeared in at least seventy-five plays by nearly forty playwrights. . . . Scripts by Fletcher, Massinger, Middleton, Heywood and others, represent, according to Michael Shapiro, exploitation of ideas originally put on the stage by Shakespeare” (Smith *Desire* 150).

It is interesting to note that specific locales where “gays” would meet did not start developing until after the theaters were closed under Cromwell. According to Alan Bray, it was not until

the Restoration in 1660 that "Molly Houses" began to take an identifiable form, at which point the theaters ceased to be a focal meeting place for homosexual encounters (108-114). It was also at this time that women were finally allowed to act at the theaters. With boys no longer required to play women's roles, this particular form of homoerotic titillation came to an end. However, once women were allowed on the stage, they, like the boys before them, were scorned in the popular mind as little more than whores.

Bisexuality in Shakespeare's Plays

As You Like It

In Shakespeare's plays the boy actors sometimes teased the audience about their gender. In *As You Like It*, for example, the character Rosalind (played by a boy) "disguised" herself as a boy called Ganymede, who was wooed by the shepherdess Phebe (also played by a boy) who was "herself" deeply attached to her cousin Celia (also played by a boy). Lesbian eroticism is suggested when Phebe loves "at first sight" the cross-dressed Rosalind/Ganymede (3.2.398). As Ganymede, Rosalind is free to carry on a "pretend" flirtation with Orlando that would have been unseemly for a female. Orlando's playful wooing of "Ganymede" as a female, invoked a more complex kind of homoerotic tension for a sixteenth-century audience. Watching Orlando practice his seduction techniques on a boy pretending to be a girl pretending to be a boy pretending to be a girl, the gender confusion goes well beyond the simple amusement it brings today's audiences, for whom Rosalind is always a female to begin with. Thus Shakespeare cleverly took advantage of the all-male configuration of his company to give additional meaning to the phrase, *double entendre*. And despite the traditional finale, wherein all issues of class and gender must be resolved in favor of social norms, this play actually ends on a note of gender confusion. When the youth who has played Rosalind/ Ganymede delivers the Epilogue, offering to kiss the men in the audience, how can we be sure exactly which character is speaking: Rosalind, Ganymede, or the actor as himself?

If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had
beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and
breaths that I defied not. And I am sure, as many as
have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths will,
for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell. (Epi. 16-21).

Since antiquity, and especially in the Renaissance, Ganymede was a familiar representation both in art and literature of the beautiful Trojan youth, abducted and loved by Jupiter over Juno's jealous objections. Its most famous English version is to be found in Book X of Arthur Golding's 1565 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ganymede's story is touched on in both *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. That Shakespeare has Rosalind choose Ganymede for her disguise may suggest that she suspects that the way to Orlando's heart is through his youthful preference for males. "Orlando and Ganymede are therefore legible as a sexually-involved gallant and page—a familiar

couple in 'the street, the ordinary, and stage' of late sixteenth-century London, if we are to believe the satires contemporary with *As You Like It*" (DiGangi *Family* 279). Above all, since *As You Like It* is clearly a holiday play, it is on the most obvious level a reflection of the holiday pastime known as *mumming and disguising*, in which cross-dressing for both men and women was a constant, and in which, for that reason, an Elizabethan audience would see no particular significance. One thing we can be certain of where Shakespeare is concerned, any ambiguities and confusions are purposeful and intended to reinforce his message. Nor are they limited to a single interpretation, something we might already have gathered from the title—*As You Like It*. The subtitle of that other gender-bender, *Twelfth Night or What You Will*, sends the same message.

As You Like It was partially based on the bawdy comedy *Il Marescalco*, an Italian play by Pietro Aretino, which was supposedly based on an actual event at the Gonzaga court of Federigo, Duke of Mantua (Hamill 16). This is one of the earliest plays in which, as a joke, a boy actor is disguised as a girl, tricking the male character into marrying him/her. Shakespeare made use of the same trope in the last act of *Merry Wives of Windsor* where both Dr. Caius and Slender are tricked into marrying boys. He used it again in the Induction to *Taming of the Shrew*, in which a page is dressed up as a woman to fool a bumpkin into thinking the boy is his wife. In the Induction, the lord requests that the bumpkin be carried "gently to my fairest chamber and hang it round with all my wanton pictures" (Ind.1.46-47), possibly a reference to *I Modi*, the famous book of *Postures* with text by Aretino and pornographic illustrations by Giulio Romano.

Romano was the Renaissance painter/sculptor/architect famous not only for producing the first commercial pornographic book in Europe, but also for his representations of Ganymede in several erotic frescoes in the Palazzo Te at Mantua. No artist in Europe painted more depictions of Ganymede than Giulio Romano (Saslow 84). He was also the only artist mentioned by name by Shakespeare (as the creator of the statue of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*). Shakespeare, whoever he was, was certainly impressed by Giulio Romano.

In *Twelfth Night*, the confusions about gender are the most complex of all. When the shipwrecked Viola, played by a boy actor, disguises "herself" as Cesario, both Duke Orsino and Lady Olivia are excited by desire. It is surprising to hear Orsino call his beloved Cesario Olivia's "minion" (5.1.123). Orsino prolongs the confusion to the very end by insisting on calling Viola "Cesario" until he/she/he changes back into female clothes in order to become his wife. "That is, he imagines, not Viola in her female clothes, but a transvestite Cesario. At this moment of comic closure, Cesario is transformed, not into Viola, but Ganymede: the effeminate page, the transvestite boy player, the master-mistress as his 'master's mistress'" (5.1.324)(DiGangi *Drama* 42).

Shakespeare's transvestite comedies: *Twelfth Night*, *Merry Wives*, and *As You Like It*, encourage the audience to delight in, not just mistaken identities, but in mistaken *sexual* identities. As Valerie Traub has emphasized, homoeroticism in Shakespeare's comedies, whether male or female, "is constructed . . . as merely one more mode of desire" (12), but this is not true of the comedies alone. Two of his dramas also rely on female-to-male cross-dressing as a means of creating tension and dramatic excitement: Portia in *Merchant of Venice* and Imogen in *Cymbeline*.

Troilus and Cressida

More openly sexual than the light-hearted gender-bending of the comedies is the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in *Troilus and Cressida*. Achilles's refusal to fight causes Patroclus to be concerned, not just over their reputation, but also that their involvement might in some way have actually weakened Achilles:

To this effect, Achilles, have I moved you:
 A woman impudent and mannish grown
 Is not more loathéd than an effeminate man
 In time of action. I stand condemn'd for this.
 They think my little stomach to the war
 And your great love to me restrains you thus.
 Sweet, rouse yourself, and the weak wanton Cupid
 Shall from your neck unloose his amorous fold,
 And, like a dew-drop from the lion's mane,
 Be shook to air. (3.3.205-215)

Later the forthright Thersites expresses his disdain of Patroclus:

THERSITES Prithee, be silent, boy; I profit not by thy talk:
 thou art thought to be Achilles' male varlet.

PATROCLUS Male varlet, you rogue! What's that?

THERSITES Why, his masculine whore. (5.1.15-18)

The depiction of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers helps explain the vehemence of Achilles's revenge when Patroclus is killed by Hector. When he gets the news, Achilles cries: "Where is this Hector? Come, come, thou boy-queller, show thy face! Know what it is to meet Achilles angry!" (5.5.45-48). While Achilles is portrayed as bisexual, Patroclus is the only "outright homosexual" in Shakespeare's plays (Asimov 473).

Richard II

In *Richard II* Shakespeare portrays homoerotic love in a much more negative way, one that leads to the overthrow of a king. In the play the Duke of York accuses Richard of succumbing to flattery and delighting in lascivious meters and vile fashions "thrust forth" by Italian imitators (DiGangi *Drama* 116-17). Then Gaunt brings out what York had only intimated regarding Richard's sexual will:

A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown,
 Whose compass is no bigger than thy head;
 And yet, incagéd in so small a verge,
 The waste is no whit lesser than thy land. (2.1.197-203)

In Bolingbroke's denunciations of Bushy and Greene, the site of the transgressions against the King's body expands from the "small verge" of the crown to the actual bedchamber:

You have misled a prince, a royal king,
 A happy gentleman in blood and lineaments,
 By you unhappied and disfigured clean:
 You have in manner with your sinful hours
 Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him,
 Broke the possession of a royal bed
 And stain'd the beauty of a fair queen's cheeks
 With tears drawn from her eyes by your foul wrongs. (3.1.8-15)

Bolingbroke implies that the male favorites have prevented the royal couple from harmoniously occupying their bed and producing an heir to the throne, while raising the specter of sodomy. Richard's failure to produce an heir dangerously undermines national stability.

Merchant of Venice

The play that most poignantly depicts romantic friendship between males is *The Merchant of Venice*, where the love shared by Antonio and Bassanio coexists with Bassanio's desire to marry. The dilemma of an older man in love with a younger one who is at the same time attracted to a woman is also explored in *Twelfth Night*, and also in *the Sonnets*.

Both the Antonios of *Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* portray a strong homosexual bond in the face of the impending marriage of their beloved to a woman. Each Antonio loves his friend "more than life itself," and both are willing to prove it, physically and financially. Unlike characters that are torn between their love for a man and a woman, neither Antonio shows any interest in a woman. The Antonio of *The Merchant of Venice* assures Bassanio that along with his purse and his "extremest means," "his person" lies unlocked to his friend's "occasions" (1.1.138-9). The melancholy that plagues Antonio at the beginning of the play is understood when Bassanio leaves for Belmont to marry Portia. As his friend Salarino comments, "Why then you are in love. . . ."

I saw Bassanio and Antonio part:
 And even there, his eye being big with tears,
 Turning his face, he put his hand behind him,

And with affection wondrous sensible
 He wrung Bassanio's hand; and so they parted. (2.8.46-50)

Salanio, adds, "I think he only loves the world for him." Bassanio in turn is clear about his devotion to Antonio: "to you Antonio, I owe the most in money and in love" (1.1.130-31).

Believing he is about to die, Antonio bids Bassanio farewell and asks him to—

Commend me to your honourable wife:
 Tell her the process of Antonio's end;
 Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death;
 And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge
 Whether Bassanio had not once a love. (4.1.269-73)

—a speech that allows a talented actor to seethe with passion. The "usage of one man as the 'love' of another is rare, and with the exception of *the Sonnets* does not occur elsewhere in Shakespeare, or in the period" (Pequigney *ELR* 211). "It is understandable, then, that the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio is . . . most frequently treated in performance as homoerotic." (Wells 81)

Bassanio, the object of Antonio's obsession, for whom he has risked all, his money and his life, tells his friend in front of the Venetian court, in front of Shylock and, unknowingly, in front of his own wife Portia, who is present disguised as a male jurist:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
 Which is as dear to me as life itself,
 But life itself, my wife, and all the world
 Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
 I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
 Here to this devil, to deliver you. (4.1.279-284)

At the end, Portia returns the contentious marriage ring to Bassanio through Antonio, saying to him: "Give him this. And bid him keep it better than the other" (5.1.254-55). By this gesture, by returning the ring through the friend, Portia signifies her acceptance of Antonio into the marriage/family. The sexual relationship between the two men is now over (perhaps), but thanks to the trusting magnanimity of Portia, their love at least may continue. That this interpretation of the play's psychology is now more openly accepted is clear from the recent (2004) film. With Joseph Fiennes as Bassanio, Jeremy Irons as Antonio, and Lynn Collins as Portia, the subtleties of Shakespeare's love triangle are fully explored for the present-day film audience.

Twelfth Night

Shakespeare's other homosexual Antonio, the ship's captain who saves Sebastian's life in *Twelfth Night*, is passionately attracted to Viola's twin brother. Far from suffering the inarticulate melancholy of Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, this Antonio's love is "the strongest and most direct expression of homoerotic feeling in Shakespeare's plays" (Adelman 88). After their first meeting, Sebastian and Antonio were inseparable "for three months. . . . No int'rim, not a minute's vacancy, both day and night did [we] keep company" (5.1.92-94). When Sebastian instructs his friend not to accompany him because of his "many enemies in Illiria," Antonio states: "But come what may, I do adore thee so, that danger shall seem sport, and I will go" (2.1.47-48). Separation is so unacceptable to Antonio that he ignores Sebastian's instructions and follows him to Illiria. Later, when Sebastian thanks Antonio for all the efforts he has taken to rescue him, Antonio replies:

I could not stay behind you. My desire,
More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth,
And not all love to see you—though so much
As might have drawn one to a longer voyage—
But jealousy might befall your travel (3.3.4-8)

Antonio will see to it that they "keep company" this night as he goes off to arrange for their dining and sleeping together at the Elephant Inn. There, says Antonio, "shall you have me" (3.3.42). Later in the play, despite his anger from having confused Sebastian with his uncomprehending twin sister, the obsessed Antonio continues to idolize Sebastian, stressing his beauty: "And to this image, which methought did promise most venerable worth, did I devotion" (3.4 371-75). In the last act, Antonio describes his sacrifices:

That most ingrateful boy there by your side,
From the rude sea's enraged and foamy mouth
Did I redeem; a wreck past hope he was:
His life I gave him and did thereto add
My love, without retention or restraint,
All his in dedication; for his sake
Did I expose myself, pure for his love,
Into the danger of this adverse town. . . .

"The only real parallel in Shakespeare for such eroticized speech about a fair youth occurs in *the Sonnets*" (Pequigney *ELR* 203).

Nor is Sebastian any less responsive; reunited with his friend, he expresses the most ardent feeling: "Antonio! O my dear Antonio, How have the hours rack'd and tortur'd me since I have

lost thee!" (5.1.216-18). Despite having just fallen madly in love with Olivia, Sebastian's emotions continue to revolve around Antonio.

Sebastian's name is a clue to his bisexuality.³ Considered the (unofficial) patron saint of homosexuals, St. Sebastian was a favorite subject of Renaissance painters, who invariably portrayed his beautiful semi-nude body bound to a column or post and stabbed with a dozen arrows, making it both a homoerotically charged object of desire and a source of solace for the rejected homosexual.

Sebastian and Bassanio, who can erotically respond to both sexes, are clear examples of this recurring theme of bisexuality, while both Antonios, whose desires appear to be limited to males, are two of the few who are purely homosexual. "Bisexual experiences are not the exception but the rule in *Twelfth Night*, and they are vital to the course of love leading to wedlock for the three principal lovers other than Sebastian: Orsino, Olivia, and Viola" (Pequigney *Antonios* 207). The author seems to relish this sexual intrigue and the ultimate solution that preserves the open relationship. Though their loves marry, neither Antonio is abandoned or rejected, indeed, as Valentine hopes will happen at the end of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, they are incorporated into the "family," the ultimate "happy ending" for a bisexual.



St. Sebastian by Andrea Mantegna, c. 1459, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Latent Homoerotic Desires

Shakespeare's own homoerotic feelings seem to come through even in situations where no such desires would normally be present, a possible biographical revelation. For instance, in *King Lear*, the Fool nonchalantly reveals his own sexual bias as he lists what not to trust:

He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf,
A horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath. (3.6.18-19)

In *Henry IV, Part Two*, the Hostess, in her sly commentary on Falstaff, says—

In good faith, 'a cares not what mischief he doth,
If his weapon be out he will foin like any devil.
He will spare neither man, woman, nor child. (2.1.15-18)

—a comment that, if taken literally, would make a monster of the old buffoon.

Scenes like the following that express erotic desires in combat and death seem out of place and add nothing to the story. As with Achilles and Patroclus, it is often combat that brings out undertones of eroticism in male friendship (Smith *Desire* 59). In *Henry V*, for example, after kissing Suffolk's wounds, York, a witness reports, turned

. . . and over Suffolk's neck
 He threw his wounded arm, and kissed his lips,
 And so espoused to death, with blood he sealed
 A testament of noble-ending love. (4.5.24-27)

We can hear expressions of homoerotic feeling in certain speeches of Shakespeare's plays, that seem remarkably direct. In *Coriolanus* for example, the warrior Aufidius welcomes his archenemy in undeniably erotic terms:

. . . Know thou first,
 I loved the maid I married; never man
 Sighed truer breath. But that I see thee here,
 Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart
 Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
 Bestride my threshold. (4.5.113-118)

According to Stanley Wells, the character who has "surely the most homoerotically charged lines in Shakespeare is Iago, when attempting to substantiate his imputation of Cassio's adultery with Desdemona, he tells Othello what happened when he shared Cassio's bed." (84-85):

In sleep I heard him say, "Sweet Desdemona,
 Let us be wary, let us hide our loves";
 And then, sir, would he grip and wring my hand,
 Cry, "O sweet creature!" then kiss me hard,
 As if he pluck'd up kisses by the roots
 That grew upon my lips; then laid his leg
 Over my thigh, and sigh'd, and kiss'd; and then
 Cried, "Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!" (3.3.423-30)

"The straightforward description of one man making love to another is anaesthetized by its presentation as a heterosexual dream fantasy. . . . Besides Cassio, there are at least two other characters in the play to whom Iago might be represented as being sexually attracted—Roderigo and Othello himself" (Wells 85-86). Many actors, among them Sir Laurence Olivier, have chosen to convey the homosexual impulses that drive Iago's otherwise "motiveless" malignity.

The nonsexual yet intimate bonding in such plays as *Henry V*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is also infused with romantic and erotic feeling, as is the more subtle relationship between Falstaff and Prince Hal in *Henry IV, Part Two*. Again and again, as Smith points out, the plots in Shakespeare's plays turn on the intimate relationship of two male friends driven apart by a woman: Proteus/Silvia/Valentine, Romeo/Juliet/Mercutio, Bassanio/Portia/Antonio, Sebastian/Olivia/Antonio, Bertram/Helena/Parolles, Othello/Desdemona/Iago, Polixenes/Hermione/Leontes (*Desire* 66-67) and Palamon/Emilia/Arcite.

For instance, in *Romeo and Juliet*, the specific object of Mercutio's sexual and verbal interest is not Juliet's pudenda, but Romeo's: "O Romeo, that she were an open arse and thou a popp'rin'-pear" (2.1.37-38); "Mercutio's lewdest verbal jab is an image of anal sex." (Smith *Desire* 64). Mercutio's obsession with phallic puns, specifically with puns related to Romeo's phallus, has also been noted by Joseph Porter and by Donald Foster (286). Similarly, in *All's Well that Ends Well*, Sue Sybersma concludes that the role of Parolles runs parallel to Helena's and Bertram's throughout the play, while his story is so interwoven with their conflict that it cannot be seen as a mere subplot but as subtly portraying Parolles as a contender for Bertram's affection (4). Oxfordians see Bertram as a self-portrayal that evokes Oxford's difficult relationship with his wife, Anne Cecil.

In several cases, in order to maintain their friendship one friend will rather bizarrely offer to give up the woman he loves to the other. This kind of male-to-male bonding had been expressed in English literature before Shakespeare. In Sir Thomas Elyot's 1531 *The Boke of the Governour*, friends Titus and Gysippus are inseparable until Gysippus falls in love with Sophronia and wishes to marry her, but when he realizes that Titus is also in love with her, he relinquishes her to his friend. Lyly's *Endimion* also shares this plot.

The Governour and *Endimion* are cited by Bullough as possible sources for *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In this play, the bond between two friends is most clearly demonstrated at the end when Valentine graciously offers his beloved Silvia to his friend Proteus, following his attempt to rape her! The happy ending is announced by Valentine: "And, that my love may appear plain and free, all that was mine in Silvia I give to thee (5.4.82-83). Silvia is to be disposed of as if she were cattle. (It is noteworthy that Sylvia has no lines in this scene.) Indeed, Valentine entertains the hope that now that he and his friend Proteus, are both betrothed to be married, they will enjoy "One feast, one house, one mutual happiness" (5.4.171). As with Bassanio and Antonio, though Valentine is marrying, he is concerned not to lose the love or the company of Proteus.

Similar feelings of generosity may be expressed in *Sonnet 40* concerning a relationship that seems to be developing between the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady.

Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all;
 What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?
 No love, my love, that thou mayst true love call;
 All mine was thine before thou hadst this more.

In the play *Two Noble Kinsmen*, “Palamon and Arcite’s discourse is full of homoerotic terms expressing their love and devotion to each other” (Charney 161), as when Arcite says to Palamon:

And here being thus together,
We are an endless mine to one another;
We are one another’s wife, ever begetting
New births of love. (2.1.137-40).

A little later Palamon asks: “Is there any record of any two that loved better than we do, Arcite?” Arcite replies: “Sure there cannot.” Yet these sentiments do not appear to conflict in any way with their interest in the opposite sex.

Essentially, Shakespeare did not portray sexual identity as rigidly polarized, nor did he present homosexual and heterosexual desires as incompatible or mutually exclusive. Shakespeare portrays almost as many different kinds of human sexual response as he has characters, thereby calling into question, whether purposely or not, sexual roles as defined by tradition.

Homoeroticism in the Poetry:

Venus and Adonis

Shakespeare’s long narrative poem shares a homoerotic focus with other examples of the genre like Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* (printed 1598) and Francis Beaumont’s *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* (1602). These seem to be aimed at a particular audience that found this theme appealing. Dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, this interest shows up not in the plot situation in which the aggressive goddess Venus falls in love with the adolescent Adonis, but in the perspective that the likely mostly male readers are invited to take toward that situation. Erotic desire in the poem is all on Venus’s side. The center of erotic attention is not her body, but that of Adonis. As Bruce Smith notes:

Looking at Adonis through Venus’s eyes, the reader discovers a hermaphroditic charm not unlike that radiated by the cross-dressed heroines of Shakespeare’s comedies or the fair youth of *the Sonnets*. Wooed by Venus, Adonis blushes like a maiden (l.50). His voice is like a mermaid’s (l.429). His face is hairless (l.487). When, in desperation, Venus wrestles this paragon of beauty to the ground, the reader joins Venus in the active role of ravishing him (*Shakespeare* 656).

Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey,
And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth.
Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,
Paying what ransom the insulter willeth,
Whose vulture thought doth pitch the price so high
That she will draw his lips’ rich treasure dry. (547-552)

But alas for Venus, Adonis is not interested; he would rather go hunting with his friends.

The fact that this poem was dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, the young Earl of Southampton, who according to his biographers, seems to match the physical and psychological description of Adonis, is revealing. Were the poet's sympathies with Adonis, or with Venus? Would Southampton have identified with Adonis? Is Adonis modeled on the same aloof youth of *the Sonnets*?

Finally, probably from frustration, and seen from the perspective shared by Venus and the reader, the goring of Adonis by a wild boar is portrayed as an act of rape or seduction:

'Tis true, 'tis true; thus was Adonis slain;
 He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,
 Who did not whet his teeth at him again,
 But by a kiss thought to persuade him there,
 And, nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine
 Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin. (1111-1116)

States Campbell: "Failure to construe the [homosexual] imagery here is an instance of scholars' tendency to notice Shakespeare's bawdy only when it is heterosexual" (136).

The Rape of Lucrece

Also dedicated to Southampton, *The Rape of Lucrece*, published in 1594, is more sexual even than *Venus and Adonis*. The poem focuses again on the familiar theme of two male allies set apart by a woman (Smith *Shakespeare* 6). However, it is not this that has attracted the most attention, but the remarkable tone of the dedication: "The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end; . . . What I have done is yours; what I have to do is yours; being part in all I have, . . ." "Speaking of the overflowing affection in these lines, Nichol Smith declared, 'There is no other dedication like this in Elizabethan literature'" (Akrigg 198). What he is actually saying is that there is no other dedication with such homoerotic overtones. "This was not, as might have been expected, an exercise in praise . . . , this was a public declaration of fervent, boundless love" (Greenblatt 246). Many others have also noted the similarity in tone and language to the tone used in addressing the Fair Youth in *the Sonnets*.

Shakespeare's Sonnets

The Sonnets are the most tantalizing and controversial of Shakespeare's works. They have been interpreted to prove almost any scenario. For us the interpretation is critical, because if it can be shown that they are autobiographical, it would reveal much about the author's sexual orientation. "By every indication, Shakespeare had nothing to do with publishing the volume of 'Shakespeare's Sonnets' that the printer Thomas Thorpe put on the market in 1609" (Smith *Shakespeare* 7). The best evidence of this is that, unlike the poems, which were very carefully proofread, *the*

Sonnets are full of errors and the dedication was not by the author, but by the publisher.

Because *the Sonnets* may imply a scandalous autobiography and one that does not match anything we know about Shakspeare of Stratford, many scholars have tried to separate the speaker “I” in the sonnets from the author in order to disassociate the author from the seeming homosexual and adulterous passions he describes. In this view, *the Sonnets* are no more than a literary exercise, and so do not reflect actual events. But since they were published over a decade after the decade-long “sonnet craze” ended in 1597, sonnet cycles of this sort would have been outdated by 1609 (Berryman 263). If *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* was written for commercial purposes, it missed its market by twelve years. If *the Sonnets* are not autobiographical, why publish so late? Why not give the characters names? Why be so ambiguous about everything but the emotions?

If the Master Storyteller chose to hide his characters and plot behind a veil of mystery it must have been for a reason. The most likely explanation is that the characters and events are too real to reveal to any readers but those most intimately involved. Understanding how sexual *the Sonnets* are, the need for anonymity should be clear. This anonymity and subtlety are necessary for the author’s own protection as much as for his loved ones, for if any of the protagonists could be identified, not only embarrassment but potentially dishonor and ruin would befall all involved.

This is the only time that the author uses the first person perspective, the “I,” in his writings. If he ever wrote autobiographically, he did so in *the Sonnets*, another clue that the name used by the author, “Shakespeare,” must be an alias. Why hide the names of the characters in *the Sonnets* and reveal his own? Shakspeare of Stratford experienced no known repercussions as a result of the publication of *the Sonnets*. In fact, unlike Marlowe, Bacon or Oxford, Shakspeare of Stratford was never accused of a sexual crime. For the seven years remaining between the publication of *the Sonnets* and his death in 1616, not a word in any document or publication makes a connection between the two.

By its heading alone: “*Shake-speares Sonnets*, Never before Imprinted,” the book not only communicates a sense of privacy breached, but that these are all the sonnets that “Shake-speare” ever wrote, or ever will write. The title itself carries a sense of finality, a sense confirmed by the preface in which Thomas Thorpe praises “our ever-living poet,” a term used exclusively for those that have attained immortality (Sobran 94). It should be clear that by the time *the Sonnets* were published, the author was dead.

“He was but one hour mine”

The Sonnets are different from other sonnet sequences because “like some of Richard Barnfield’s, but none, so far as I know, by any other sonneteer of the period, many of Shakespeare’s sonnets are explicitly addressed to, or concern, a man” (Wells 53). Sonnet cycles were the established format to express one’s most intimate and passionate feelings for an idealized loved one, but in all but these two instances the loved object is a female. The majority of the poems—126 of 154—are concerned with the author’s obsession with a fair-complexioned young nobleman of surpassing physical beauty, who, though idealized, is of questionable character and who is considerably younger than the speaker. Looney, while he avoids the subject of homosexuality, admitted that sonnets, traditionally, have been

the vehicle for the expression of the most intimate thought and feelings of poets. Almost infallibly, one might say, do a man's sonnets directly reveal his soul. . . . [Shakespeare's *Sonnets*] express a tenderness, which is probably without parallel in the recorded expressions of emotional attachment of one man to another. (100)

The first seventeen sonnets are the so-called marriage sonnets, in which the poet urges the Fair Youth to procreate, to make a copy of himself for posterity. According to Bruce R. Smith, by *Sonnet 16* ("But wherefore do not you a mightier way / Make war upon the bloody tyrant, time"), the author has begun . . . to insinuate his own designs on the young man, first by promising to preserve the young man's beauty in the medium of verse, then by speaking more and more openly about his own desires. The following sonnets—up to #126—shift in interest to describe a growing obsession with the Fair Youth, continuously praising his beauty and claiming that he will immortalize that beauty in his verse (nothing more is said from then on about marriage and children). By *Sonnet 18* ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?") the Poet himself has fallen in love with the Youth.

The pair formed by *Sonnets 20* ("A woman's face with nature's own hand painted, hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion") and *21* ("So is it not with me as with that muse, stirred by a painted beauty to his verse") conjoin the two things that preoccupy the speaker in all the ensuing sonnets to the young man: making love and making verse (Smith *Shakespeare* 7). His infatuation continues through 126 sonnets before the sequence ends with the final 28. These last are written to a woman by whom the author is sexually aroused and whom he alternately praises and reviles.

THE author of *the Sonnets* dwells on the emotional and sexual love of a young man and a woman, expressing it through numerous creative puns with such dexterity that much of the sexual imagery can be overlooked by the casual reader. "Stephen Booth's ingenuity has revealed how charged these poems are—even the most idealistic ones—with sexual puns" (Smith *Desire* 229). Martin Seymour-Smith states "It is likely that at least on one occasion Shakespeare did have some kind of physical relationship with the Friend. The sonnets addressed to him, particularly 33-36, are difficult to explain under any other hypothesis." This seems to be the result of an intimacy, however brief: "he was but one hour mine" (34), a view that, long before *Queer Theory*, had been expressed by Samuel Butler, Martin Smith, Gore Vidal, and numerous others (Hughes 6).

"None of Shakespeare's poems are as explicitly homoerotic as any of Barnfield's. Yet Shakespeare's are more intense in their expression of love—perhaps simply because Shakespeare was the greater poet" (Wells 65). The homosexual consciousness of the first 126 sonnets is seen not merely in the celebrations of the young man's beauty, in the obsessiveness of the author's love, or even in his repeated attempts to define his relationship with the young man in terms of marriage ("So I shall live, supposing thou art true, like a deceived husband"; "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments"), but also in his profound sense of being different (121-2).

This sense of difference is expressed without apology in the startling and angry *Sonnet 121*, in which the author declares "I am that I am," defiantly defending a sexuality that is socially maligned; Giroux interprets it "as Shakespeare's response to the 'reproach' of being homosexual" (30). For Summers (3) and Pequigny (*Love* 99), the sonnets that reflect alienation, abnegation and resigna-

tion, that give “Shakespeare’s” sequence its distinctive aura of embattlement, despair and melancholy, correspond particularly well to a homosexual theme, one of forbidden and frustrated love. In the context of the first 126 sonnets there is no doubt as to what type of sexuality this is: his love for the Fair Youth, the object of all these sonnets. He challenges contemporaries who criticize his amorous conduct, which to his mind is defensible, though reproached by others. Stating that, despite how others view it, his sexual “pleasure” is made *just* rather than *vile* “by our feeling,” he moves from a defensive stance to counterattack when he reproaches his reproachers for their own “rank” thoughts:

’Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed,
When not to be receives reproach of being;
And the just pleasure lost, which is so deemed
Not by our feeling, but by others’ seeing:
For why should others’ false adulterate eyes
Give salutation to my sportive blood?
Or on my frailties, why are frailer spies,
Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
No, I am that I am, and they that level
At my abuses reckon up their own:
I may be straight though they themselves be bevel;
By their rank thoughts, my deeds must not be shown;
Unless this general evil they maintain,
All men are bad and in their badness reign.

Robert Giroux asserts, “My own conclusion, based on the poet’s gradual self-discovery revealed by the first twenty sonnets, and on *Sonnets 104, 108, 121, and 144* in particular, is that Shakespeare experienced real love” (Giroux 25). Greenblatt agrees: Shakespeare “became aware that he was longing for the youth himself. . . . He is in love with him (339). Joseph Pequigney, who has had significant influence in academia on the interpretation of *the Sonnets*, writes:

I argue: 1) that the friendship treated in *Sonnets 1-126* is decidedly amorous-passionate to a degree and in ways not dreamed of in the published philology, the interaction between the friends being sexual in both orientation and practice; 2) that verbal data are clear and copious in detailing physical intimacies between them; 3) that the psychological dynamics of the poet’s relations with the friend comply in large measure with those expounded in Freud’s authoritative discussions of homosexuality.⁴(*Love 1*)

Many of the poems are immersed in expressions of obsessive desire and of grief in his absence. The author speaks of emotions that typically affect the lovesick: of sleepless nights when the poet’s thoughts make a pilgrimage to the beloved (27 and 61), of the poet as a slave to his friend’s desire

(57), of being deceived (93), of sexual dependency (75). Paul Ramsey concedes that the clause "Thy self thou gav'st" at 87.9, if said of a woman, would certainly suggest consummation." Why should the identical clause take another meaning if the recipient is a man? (Pequigney *Love* 50). Several times the young man is cryptically referred to as the speaker's "Rose"—traditionally used in poetry as a symbol of great passion (1.2, 54.11-13, 67.8, 95.2-3, 98.10-11, 109.13-14)" (Smith *Desire* 252). "Rose" could also be a pun on the likely dedicatee of *the Sonnets*, Henry Wriothesley, whose name was probably pronounced *Rosely* (Green 15-37). And because it is unlikely that the author would address more than one as his "Rose," it should also be clear that he is always addressing the same youth.

In addition, Pequigny recounts how *the Sonnets* are filled with recurrent expressions of anxious sexual jealousy (*Love* 102-3). In *Sonnets* 33-35, the author reacts bitterly to the fact that the youth has had sexual relations with someone else, but when he begs for forgiveness, he is forgiven. *Sonnets* 40-42 refer to a sexual triangle between the Poet, the Youth and a woman. In *Sonnets* 48, 49, 57, 58, 61, and 69 the author expresses anxiety over the youth's faithfulness. In *Sonnets* 78-86 the author relates his bitterness at the youth's attraction to a rival male poet. In *Sonnets* 87-96 the author is haunted again by fears of the youth's waning love and concern over potential scandal (in fact the couplet of 96 exactly repeats the couplet in 36, which expresses the need for caution about exposing their relationship to the public). In *Sonnets* 106-112 which seem to take place after a lull in time, and again in 117-120, the author again admits transgressions and begs forgiveness. In *Sonnets* 133-144, addressed to the Dark Lady, the author refers to the same sexual triangle as described in *Sonnets* 40-42, in which he blames her, not the Youth, for their deceit.

"The love which he (the author) felt for Southampton may well have been the most intense emotion of his life" (Akrigg 237). Stanley Wells concludes that "It would be a naive young man who, addressed in these terms, did not regard himself as the object of desire. If Shakespeare himself did not, in the fullest sense of the word, love a man, he certainly understood the feelings of those who do" (Wells 65). Though they may imply it, these two scholars cannot bring themselves to state the obvious: that Shakespeare was bisexual. Bruce R. Smith suggests that "the difficulty that modern readers have had with the sexuality of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* has been less a problem with decoding these sexual puns than with assuming that the speaker cannot be erotically involved with a man and a woman at the same time" (Smith *Shakespeare* 8).

While the sexuality of the sonnets addressed to the Dark Lady is quite explicit and is not questioned, "the notion that such a relationship is implicit in the earlier group was for a long time anathema to admirers of Shakespeare" (Wells 60). The author is obsessed and conflicted by his attraction to both of his subjects, as *Sonnet 144* confesses:

Two loves have I, of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still.
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman colored ill.

Yet, there is still controversy on whether he wants both of them sexually. Taken altogether, the sonnets to the Fair Youth seems to tell the story of a growing obsessive love, one that's consummated, if only briefly or infrequently, while the relationship with the woman, while altogether sexual, is frequently despised. The idealized relationship with the youth may best be seen as a failed love affair, one in which a woman, as in many of the plays, interferes with their relationship. And again, as in the plays, both of these men appear to be bisexual.

The Heterosexualization of the Sonnets

That thirty-one years elapsed without a second edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* indicates either that further publication was forbidden by the authorities or that publishers feared to promote it. (*Venus and Adonis* had gone through no fewer than sixteen editions by 1640). Their (possible) early suppression may have been caused by the high rank and political importance of the Fair Youth, who was fully grown by 1609, but their subsequent neglect is surely attributable to their portrayal of homosexual desire.

This seems confirmed by the extraordinary lengths the publisher of the second (1640) edition, John Benson, went to disguise the homoeroticism of the original. Surely it was to conceal the fact that the first 126 sonnets were written to a male that Benson rearranged them, changed a few "he's" to "she's," adding spurious titles to suggest that the poet's interest was solely directed to a female, and, in the process, obliterating the Fair Youth and any hint of a real story (de Grazia 146). Then, as Bruce R. Smith points out, "when George Granville adapted *The Merchant of Venice* for a production in 1701, he supplied a prologue in which the ghost of Shakespeare, conversing with the ghost of the Restoration playwright John Dryden, makes a point of disowning any suspicion of homosexuality. "Dryden" begins by berating current audiences who prefer "French Grimace, Buffoons, and Mimics" to British drama:

Through perspectives revers'd they Nature's view,
Which gives the passions images, not true.
Strephon for Strephon sighs; and Sapho dies,
Shot to the soul by brighter Sapho's eyes

"Shakespeare" is horrified:

These crimes unknown, in our less polish'd age,
Now seem above correction of the Stage (*Shakespeare* 9)

"The message here is clear: *Shakespeare is not a sodomite!* In the newly-refined culture of the eighteenth century, "the homoeroticism in Shakespeare's works became unreadable and unspeakable" (658). Even to consider that the greatest sonnets in the English language may have been inspired by homoerotic passion had become unthinkable.

It was not until 1780, when Edmund Malone and George Steevens published their edition of Shakespeare's works, restoring the original pronouns, format and order of the sonnets, that the current understanding slowly began to take root, namely that the first 126 sonnets were addressed to a male (Pequigney *Love* 2-3). After nearly a century-and-a-half of believing that all of them were erotic love poems addressed to a woman, many were understandably shocked to learn that most of *the Sonnets* were addressed to a teenaged boy.

In reaction to *Sonnet 20* ("A woman's face with nature's own hand painted hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion"), Steevens felt compelled to exclaim: "It is impossible to read this fulsome panegyrick, addressed to a male object, without an equal mixture of disgust and indignation" (De Grazia 148). To make clear what he was talking about, Steevens cited the term "male varlet" from *Troilus and Cressida* (Smith *History* 16). It is clear that, rather than reading this sonnet as a denial of sexual interest in the youth, Steevens saw it as a confirmation that the poet was in love.

SUDDENLY there was some explaining to be done. Edmund Malone, Steeven's co-editor and arguably the first great Shakespeare scholar, saved the day by explaining that "such addresses to men, however indelicate, were customary in our author's time, and neither imported criminality nor were esteemed indecorous" (Sobran 98). Keevak points to attempts by scholars such as Malone, Coleridge, and Boswell to circumvent an unnamed danger (that the Bard could have been guilty of sodomy) by asserting that any suggestion of sexual attraction between males (in the poems or plays) represents "not a love affair between men but only an idealized friendship," one that is not really sexual (39). But Pequigny denies that this was ever a customary way for heterosexual men to address each other, either then or now (*Love* 19).

The language of *Sonnet 20* through 126 is, as C.S. Lewis justly observes, "too lover-like for that of ordinary male friendship," continuing, "I have found no real parallel to such language between friends in sixteenth-century literature" (503). Such a statement from one who spent his entire career from matriculation to the grave, studying, teaching and writing about early modern English literature, first at Magdalen College, then as the first Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University, should, one would think, command the utmost respect.

Pequigney further notes that the author "keeps referring to the beloved as his 'love' (13.1, 22.9, 89.5), 'my love' (40.1, 3), 'dear my love' (13.13), or 'sweet love' (76.9), and for this form of address between men I can find no precedent whatever. This term of endearment was never employed by friends in the Renaissance, though it was by lovers to their ladies. The vocatives supply fresh and substantial evidence of eroticism in the conversation between the poet and his young 'love'" (76). Throughout the first seventeen sonnets: "In praising his beauty while continually adverting to its procreational use, masturbatorial misuse, (*Sonnet 4*—'having traffic with thyself alone'), and celibate nonuse, the praiser manifests a mental habit of yoking that youthful masculinity with sex. This repeated reaction, in poem after poem, to another male is problematical. It is not to be accounted for as Renaissance friendship and commentators who hold that it is never produce the requisite precedents" (19).

An even more belabored attempt to avoid the suggestion of homoerotic desire was Malone's

rationalization of Shakespeare's references to himself as the "lover" of the male youth. Malone's longest footnote, stretching across six pages, pertains to *Sonnet 93* ("So shall I live supposing thou art true") which dwells on sexual jealousy. Malone would avoid the scandal that Shakespeare experienced sexual jealousy for a youth by changing Shakespeare's Youth to Shakespeare's wife, thereby violating his own ascription of the first 126 sonnets to a male!

Some such as James Boswell sought to avoid the issue by claiming that the sonnets were not sexual because they were simply a literary exercise written in imitation of classical Roman homoerotic poetry (de Grazia 152). But why would a heterosexual writer choose to imitate poetry concerning homosexual love when the literature is replete with heterosexual models, especially in an age when homosexual love could not only lead to social disgrace, but terrible legal consequences?

The history of *Sonnets* criticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been a history of tortured logic as one desperate attempt after another attempted to prove that Malone was right, among them Michael Wood in his book *Shakespeare*, where he suggests that Shakespeare was addressing his eleven-year-old son Hamnet in *the Sonnets* (166)!⁵ Even so, by 1991 Bruce R. Smith could make the claim that "Since Joseph Pequigney's *Such Is My Love*, Malone's argument has finally begun to be questioned, however reluc-

tantly" (231) while in her 1997 book on *the Sonnets*, Helen Vendler was forced to agree that since Pequigney there has been an increasing willingness to admit that the controlling motive of the first 126 sonnets was sexual infatuation with a youth (15).

Yet, despite the growing acceptance of the true nature of *the Sonnets*, their homoeroticism still continues to cause trouble. Edward Dowden, who wrote as long ago as 1881, may best express the main reason so many would prefer them to be fictional—*homo-phobia*: fear of homosexuality: "The *Sonnets* as autobiographical, we find ourselves in the presence of doubts and difficulties, exaggerated, it is true, by many writers, yet certainly real" (Smith *History* 18). As the poet Robert Browning put it: "Did Shakespeare unlock his heart? Then so much less the Shakespeare he."



Reluctance to acknowledge homoeroticism in works by Shakespeare, the pillar of British literature, appears even in the statements of English poets and writers known to be homosexuals themselves. The great English poet, W.H. Auden, himself openly gay, confessed to a gathering at Igor Stravinsky's apartment in the early 1960s that "it won't do just yet to admit that the top Bard was in 'the homintern'" (Smith *Desire* 231).⁶ In his preface to the New American Library paperback of *the Sonnets* the same year, Auden reinforced this stance. Homosexual readers, he complains in this preface, "have ignored the fact that the sonnets to 'the dark lady' are unequivocally sexual and that Shakespeare, after all, was a married man and a father" (qtd. in Pequigney *Love* 79)

A.L. Rowse, poet, historian, Shakespeare scholar, and a confessed homosexual, insists that Shakespeare was not only not homosexual, he was *overly heterosexual*. According to Rowse, the purpose of *the Sonnets* was purely to urge his patron, Southampton, to marry, and so were written in terms that might persuade the as-yet sexually ambiguous and narcissistic youth. "There is not the

slightest trace of homosexuality in Shakespeare or even interest in the subject—as there was in Marlowe and Bacon” says Rowse (*Shakespeare* 144).

Despite these and other similar denials, the evidence of homoeroticism in the plays, narrative poems and autobiographical sonnets clearly point to an author who experienced sexual desires for men as well as women. And that the theme of a love/sex triangle consisting of two males and a female repeats so often in the works of Shakespeare strongly suggests that this was a theme that ran through the author's own life, one that we would expect to find traces of in his biography.

The Sexuality of the Author

As to the sexuality of William Shakspeare of Stratford, we have next to nothing with which to make a determination. We have no personal letters from him or to him and no one else makes any reference to his personal life. There is no oral tradition of any kind in Stratford for Shakspeare. In the end, Shakspeare dictated a standard will which states nothing about his love for his wife or daughters or indeed anyone else. His heartiest commendations are for the local loan shark.

The Earl of Oxford, on the other hand, fits all eighteen of J.T. Looney's characteristics of Shakespeare, including the rather vague second to the last: “doubtful and somewhat conflicting in his attitude towards women.” To this we can add the 1998 observations of psychologist Harold Grier McCurdy, who concluded, after evaluating the Shakespeare canon, that he saw the playwright as “a bisexual personality, predominantly masculine, aggressive, prone to wide fluctuations of mood” (549). Thus solid evidence that Oxford was bisexual should certainly add to his status as leading candidate for the authorship of the Shakespeare canon.

Yet such evidence is understandably rare for anyone from that period. There is little argument about the homosexuality of several writers from the period, such as Marlowe, the Bacon brothers, and Oxford's cousin, Henry Howard, later Earl of Northampton. Sir John Harrington, the Queen's cousin, is another possibility. Author of a considerable body of poetry, though little of it about love, Harrington never married, a thing that means nothing today but that was highly unusual at a time when, for dynastic reasons, homosexual aristocrats married and had children. The best known example of this is King James, who despite his male favorites, secured the Stuart dynasty by marrying and having children. It is thought that Richard Barnfield, author of the only published homoerotic sonnets other than Shakespeare's, later married and had children (www.1911encyclopedia.org). John Donne's passionate love poetry, some written for men (41, 45), some for women, is solid evidence of his either/or bias. Donne married and fathered twelve children.

Evidence for Oxford's bias would most likely be found in four areas: his relationship with his wife and other women, the charges launched at him by his cousin Henry Howard and Gabriel Harvey, his involvement in the theater, and his connection, if any, with the Earl of Southampton.

As for the first, it is clear that Oxford had sexual relations with women. He married twice, fathering five legitimate children. More to the point, he had at least two mistresses, one of whom gave him a son. It seems evident that his relationship with this last, Ann Vavasor, a Queen's Maid of Honor, was a genuine passion, as he was reported to be making plans at one point to elope with

her to Spain (Nelson 231-2). Nevertheless, the fact that his relationship with his wife was fraught with tension and that it resulted in his breaking off with her entirely, opens the door to another interpretation than that he suspected her of adultery or that he wished to be free from the interference of her father, Lord Burghley. It may also have been a simple preference for the lifestyle of a bachelor, one he managed to maintain in the company of male secretaries and pages for at least nine years until forced back into the family fold by order of the Queen.

The showdown with his cousin Henry Howard and former friend Charles Arundel in 1581-84, in which both sides accused each other of treason, has left Oxford accused by historians of having “buggered” several youthful members of his household. To put this into context, Howard also accused him of having sex with sheep, mares and ghosts, and with making such statements as, “when women were unsweet, fine young boys were in season” (Nelson 213-18).

Naturally, it must be considered that Howard and Arundel hoped to do as much damage as possible to Oxford’s credibility with the Queen, which then was at its peak, and to save themselves from the Tower or worse. Despite the frequent truth of the old saying: where there’s smoke there’s fire, sometimes all there is is smoke and more testimony is required than the ravings of frightened enemies. Orazio Coquo, a sixteen-year-old youth of Venice whom Oxford had taken into his household during his stay in 1575, and who had accompanied him to England in 1576, remained in his London household for about a year as his page, during the period that Oxford was separated from his wife. Upon the youth’s return to Venice in 1577, when questioned by the Inquisition about his patron’s religious practices, Orazio had nothing negative to say on this or any other subject (Nelson 155-57). It should be noted that simply keeping a page, a long tradition with the nobility, was hardly an indication of sexual impropriety; no doubt some were abused, but the expectation was always that they would be treated with respect.

Still, in view of Oxford’s known reputation for wild behavior, it may be that Howard and Arundel were aware that their allegations would be credible. Indeed, we do have a picture of Oxford that could support their accusations. Over a period of years, Gabriel Harvey, the Cambridge don, made consistently disparaging remarks about Oxford. In June 1580, just prior to the Howard and Arundel libels, Harvey, in his *Speculum Tuscanismi*, described him as “vain,” “frivolous,” “womanish,” “no man, but minion. . . .” (Nelson 225-7). Harvey was forced to apologize, but then in 1589, he again attacked Oxford with not very subtle puns, accusing his amanuensis, John Lyly, of being his “minion secretary,” and “once the foil [mirror] of Oxford, now the stale [prostitute] of London.”⁷

The claim has been made that the homosexual allegations of Howard and Arundel must be false since the Queen obviously didn’t believe them as she did nothing about them. Yet, while it is true that charges of pederasty were considered serious, they were rarely prosecuted against anyone and never against anyone of Oxford’s rank. Francis Bacon and his brother Anthony, both known homosexuals, present a parallel case involving some of the same principals. Anthony was tried and convicted of sodomy in Navarre in 1586-87. In France at that time, unlike England, sodomy was treated seriously as a capital crime, punishable by burning at the stake. However, it was Anthony’s luck to be good friends with the King of Navarre (later Henri IV of France), who personally intervened and had the sentence quashed (Jardine 107-10). Although at the time “all traces of this awk-

ward affair were carefully eliminated from English records," the facts were uncovered 400 years later in the French archives by Daphne du Maurier, a descendant of the Bacon family (60-67). This scandalous and embarrassing event was apparently never mentioned by anyone in their private correspondence (or if it was, it has not survived) either in England or in France. If Anthony Bacon's international sex scandal could be suppressed so effectively, certainly the fact that an eccentric lord was accused of sodomy (or of scripting plays under an alias) could also be suppressed.

For whatever reason, and for all their brilliance, both Bacon brothers were seemingly disapproved of by the Queen, as were Oxford and Southampton. Despite their various talents and training, none of them were given positions of office and power on a level with their qualifications until after her death. Could it have been their perceived homosexuality? (Could it be that her peculiar rage over Southampton's relationship with Essex had a similar cause?) It is also interesting to note that as soon as she died, both Oxford and Southampton were given significant gifts and offices, while Francis Bacon rose rapidly in Court office, ultimately to become Lord Chancellor, all due to the friendly offices of the homosexual King James.

Although Oxford's recorded involvement in the theater from 1583-1604 does not give automatic evidence of homosexual behavior, it does put him squarely in the environment that, as shown above, was giving most concern to the city fathers due to the erotic content of the plays, the initiation of the boy actors into cross-dressing and erotic role-playing, and the theaters as places where sexual assignments of all kinds could easily take place. During the period of the early 1580s that he was patron of the combined boy companies of the Children of Paul's and the Children of the Chapel, Oxford was in a position of power with regard to these boys, whose ages ranged from eight to fourteen (or whenever their voices deepened). It also seems likely that the Master of the Children's Chapel from 1550 to 1583, Sebastian Westcott, was a homosexual. He never married and his closest relationships were with certain of his charges, to whom he left his estate when he died (Chambers 2.15-16). If Oxford was Shakespeare, and was writing for the boys while he was their patron, he was surely providing some of the very material that the puritans were finding so offensive. This proves nothing about his actual behavior, but it shows that he had the opportunity.

Finally, the question of whether or not Oxford had a relationship with Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, is important because Southampton has been confirmed as the Fair Youth of *the Sonnets*, the work by Shakespeare that is most certainly autobiographical in nature.

Shakespeare, Oxford, and the Earl of Southampton

Most orthodox scholars agree that Southampton was the Fair Youth of *the Sonnets*. There are several compelling reasons for this. Southampton was the only person to whom Shakespeare dedicated any of his works, the two long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. The similarity of the tone and language of *Sonnet 26* ("Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage thy merit hath my duty strongly knit, to thee I send this written embassy, to witness duty, not to show my wit Then may I dare to boast how I do love thee") to the tone and language of the dedication in *Lucrece* ("The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end, . . . What I have done is

yours; what I have to do is yours; being part in all I have . . .”) has been noted by many scholars (Hughes 7). This dedication reinforces the public acknowledgment of the sentiment expressed in *Sonnet 26*—“This I do vow, and this shall ever be; I will be true, despite [Time’s] scythe and thee.” According to scholars who have studied and commented on them over the past fifty years or so, the early sonnets were written at the same time as *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, the early 1590s.⁸

Southampton, born in 1573, turned seventeen in 1590, an appropriate age for the Fair Youth. He was considered “fair” as is the “lovely boy” of *the Sonnets*. He was a nobleman, as they imply. *The Sonnets* inform us that the youth’s father was dead (“you had a Father, let your Son say so”) (13, 14), while his mother was living (3) as were Southampton’s parents. Most significant is the fact that, at this same time, Southampton’s guardian, Lord Burghley, was pressuring him to marry, a theme reflected in the first seventeen sonnets, the so-called *Marriage Sonnets*. Although there is no document directly connecting Oxford and Southampton, the fact that it was



Oxford in his forties*

Oxford’s daughter that Southampton was being urged to marry at the same time that the *Marriage Sonnets* were being written demonstrates a connection that requires little else to confirm their relationship. Oxford’s age fits as well, since *Sonnet 2*—“When forty winters shall besiege thy brow”—could refer to the fact that Oxford turned forty in 1590.⁹

This first series of sonnets do not identify the potential bride, nor do they state that it is the poet’s daughter that the youth should marry—to be more specific would have prevented them from ever being shared or published. And, since Southampton was still a self-absorbed seventeen-year-old with no interest as yet in marriage or women, it makes sense that a prospective father-in-law might portray the dynastic need to marry and beget children in narcissistic terms of preserving the youth’s own beauty and virtue. The following year, the first book to be dedicated to Southampton, *Narcissus*, was written by John Clapham, Lord Burghley’s secretary—its theme the dangers of self-love. The sonnets seem to flow chronologically from about 1590 until *Sonnet 105*. *Sonnet 106* seems to represent a jump in several years. Rendall believes that they jump to March 1603 with the release of Southampton (251). This lapse of time would account for the lack of references in *the Sonnets* to the most dramatic years of Southampton’s life. “This interval, it will be noted, coincides with the restless, tempestuous years during which Southampton, dragged at the heels of Essex, plunged from adventure to adventure, at home and on the continent, until he landed himself under sentence of high treason and attainder, a prisoner in the Tower for life” (251-2).

WE know that Oxford had both wives and mistresses, so that unless we reject outright the evidence given here of homosexual inclinations, he may be seen as a bisexual. But what about Southampton? As is shown above, in his teen years Southampton was considered so cold to the female sex that he had to be encouraged to marry by the homoerotic terms of the sonnets of

* From the Ashbourne portrait in the Shakespeare Folger Library in Washington, DC. (Not yet proven to be Oxford.)

Shakespeare and Clapham's *Narcissus*. Along similar lines is Thomas Nashe's lascivious poem, *The Choosing of Valentines* (also known as "Nashe's Dildo"), dated to 1593, and thought to be a parody on *Venus and Adonis*. This opens and closes with a sonnet "to Lord S" in which he is addressed as "a rose" (Green 90), and which comically details the failed attempts of a man to have sex with a woman. There is also William Burton's translation of *The most delectable and Pleasant History of Clitiphon and Leucippe*, dedicated to Southampton in 1597, which contained a striking defense of "Greek love" (Green 145). Thus, the books dedicated to Southampton suggest that he was, as Duncan-Jones suggests: "viewed as receptive to same-sex amours" (79).

However, when in his early twenties, Southampton finally married, it was to a cousin of Essex's, Elizabeth Vernon, to whom it seems he was (relatively) faithful henceforth and with whom, as is obvious from their letters, he shared a strong love relationship and several children. According to Rowse, "His wife was the only woman we hear of in his life" (*Southampton* 161-162) ". . . excepting always his mother" (71).

Nevertheless there exists a contemporary report of homosexual activities that took place after Southampton's marriage, while he was in Ireland with Essex. This involved a subaltern of Essex's, one Piers Edmonds, who "ate & drank at his [Southampton's] table and lay in his tent. The Earl of Southampton gave him a horse The Earl of Southampton would cull and hug him in his arms and play wantonly with him" (Akriegg 182). Essex too provided Edmonds with gifts.

After returning from Ireland, Southampton continued to give offense by absenting himself from Court. On October 19, 1599, Roland White wrote to Robert Sidney: "My Lord Southampton and Lord Rutland come not to Court, they pass away the time in London merely in going to plays every day" (Giroux 95). The young Earl of Rutland, two years younger than Southampton, was also dazzled by Essex. A year after Southampton's marriage, Rutland too married into Essex's family, wedding his fourteen-year-old stepdaughter, Elizabeth Sidney (Sir Philip Sidney's daughter). Rutland was later "famed in song and story for never having consummated his marriage with his wife" (Green 152-3). Rutland too provided Piers Edmonds with money, so Captain Edmonds collected gifts from all three earls. Something might also be made of "the fact that neither of Southampton's closest friends Sir Charles and Sir Henry Danvers, ever married" (Akriegg 181). Charles Danvers was one of the few executed for his part in the Essex rebellion.

In his 1995 book *Alias Shakespeare*, Joseph Sobran makes the case that *the Sonnets* describe Oxford's and Southampton's tumultuous homosexual affair and that this affair led to the need for an alias, a need that continued even after Oxford died, since Southampton was still alive and a lord in Parliament. Weakened as he was by his adherence to the rebellious Essex, had Southampton been openly revealed as the Fair Youth of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, as he surely would have had Oxford been revealed as its author, his political future would have been seriously damaged, if not destroyed.



Southampton in his teens*

*From the Hilliard miniature in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

There are simply no other early 1590's noblemen in England who fit all these criteria: a young, beautiful, fatherless, effeminate, bisexual nobleman, who was pressured to be married in his teens and refused, who loved the theater, was infatuated with a nobleman who wrote poetry, was confined to prison and released in 1603, and is the only one to whom "Shakespeare" publicly declared his love in a dedication, or, for that matter, to whom he dedicated anything at all.

Southampton, Oxford, and the Earl of Essex

Akrigg and Rowse believe that Southampton was sexually attracted to the handsome, virile Earl of Essex, seven years his senior. Records show that Southampton followed Essex everywhere he could, attempting to accompany him on the military expedition of 1596 and then successfully accompanying him on the naval Azores expedition in 1597. After turning down Oxford's daughter Elizabeth Vere, in 1598 Southampton married Essex's penniless first cousin, naming their daughter after Essex's sister Penelope. The evidence also suggests that it was a mutual infatuation. Essex kept Southampton by his side constantly, even in his military campaigns, to the point of making him his second in command in Ireland over the Queen's furious objections.

Most telling of all is the fact that of all the young rebels who clustered around Essex in 1601, Southampton was the only one who remained loyal to him following his downfall, refusing to denounce him at the trial where they were tried and sentenced together. The beginning of the trial started dramatically when they publicly demonstrated their affection by kissing each other's hands and embracing (Akrigg 121-2).

A.L. Rowse sees their relationship reflected in the plays: "Essex was Southampton's adored leader (later Patroclus to his Achilles, in *Troilus and Cressida*)" (*History* 41). Harold Bloom also holds that Essex may have been "the model for the play's outrageous Achilles" (327) as does Eric Mallin. Some discerning scholars have proposed that, if Southampton was the Fair Youth of *the Sonnets*, the Rival Poet must have been Essex. Essex was Queen Elizabeth's Master of the Horse, Admiral and a Privy Councilor, but, like most young men at Elizabeth's Court, he also wrote poetry (May 250-64). As Oxfordian scholar Peter Moore explains:

Sonnets 78 to 86 describe a man who was Shakespeare's rival for the affections of Southampton during the 1590s. . . . The man who is known to have had Southampton's affection during that period was the heroic and charismatic Earl of Essex. . . . Essex was rated a gifted poet by his contemporaries. Essex wrote poems for specific occasions rather than out of dedication to poetry, he penned his verses only for his own circle and the Queen, and very little of his poetry survives. . . . It may be protested that Essex's talent was so slender that Shakespeare could not possibly have regarded him as a rival. But this objection ignores the fact that the rivalry lay in the eyes of Southampton and not in the views of literary critics. Any poetic praise from Essex was bound to make Southampton ecstatic, given his idolization of Essex. . . . The rival was of "tall building and goodly pride," a description that fits Essex. (8-12)

Moore continues: "Shakespeare contrasts himself to his mighty Rival with much nautical metaphor. . . ." (80 and 86). Essex was the Queen's admiral and he and Southampton were at sea together much of the time. "Sonnet 86 says that the Rival has "that affable familiar ghost which nightly gulls him with intelligence" (11.9-10)—Essex maintained his own intelligence service which was headed by the poet Anthony Bacon, who lived with him at his mansion in the Strand from 1595 to 1600. Shakespeare's Rival was a "spirit, by spirits taught to write" and had friends "Giving him aid" (86)—various people are known to have assisted Essex with his writing, including Francis and Anthony Bacon. Moore continues: "Finally, comes the following passage on the Rival: 'He lends thee virtue, and he stole that word from thy behavior' (79)"—Essex's mottoes were *Virtutis Com Invidia* (literally "envy accompanies manly virtue") and *Basis Virtutum Constantia* ("loyalty is the basis of manly virtue").

The Poet openly reveals his sexual jealousy: "So I shall live, supposing thou art true, like a deceived husband. . . ." (93.1-2). If Oxford had the feelings for Southampton that the Poet describes in *the Sonnets*, he would, of course, have been intensely jealous of Southampton's relationship with Essex. We know for a fact that (by 1595) Oxford disliked Essex intensely, something he made clear in a letter to Robert Cecil, claiming that he had "received diverse injuries and wrongs" from him (Chiljan 53).¹⁰ The relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, noted by several scholars as a possible reference to Essex and Southampton, is one of the few examples in the Shakespeare canon where homosexuality is openly portrayed in a negative way.

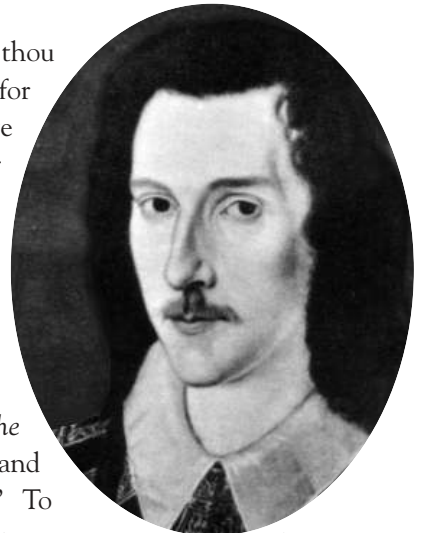
In the dedication to Southampton of his picaresque novel, *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), Thomas Nashe addresses him as "a dear lover and cherisher you are, as well of the lovers of poets, as of the poets themselves." To which other poets was he alluding? This dedication may have caused controversy since it is missing from the quickly-issued second edition.

Essex's circle at Essex House became, in the 1590s, a center for "scholars, statesmen, spies and sodomites" (Green 99-162). "Indeed, of the basically homosexual orientation of the men who appear to have been Essex's closest friends and associates—Anthony and Francis Bacon, and Henry Wriothesley—there can be no doubt" (Green 150). Based on the evidence touched on above, we would add the Earl of Rutland and Sir Charles Danvers to the list.

Surely if Southampton was the Fair Youth, Essex was—he had to have been—the Rival Poet.

Conclusion

In the New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004), Peter Holland acknowledges that the "explicit homoeroticism [of *the Sonnets*] suggests that Shakespeare's sexuality was consciously bisexual in its desires" (952). Scholars increasingly acknowledge that the author expresses bisexual desire in the plays, poems, and sonnets, but they are still reluctant to discuss it, or how it



Essex in 1590*

*From a private collection.

should be reflected in his biography. Keevak states that the paucity of information we have about Shakespeare's life has allowed scholars to desexualize him even though his poetry and plays point to his bisexuality. "The author of the Shakespeare canon speaks about both heterosexual and homoerotic desire in a variety of modes: across the broad expanse of public theater, among the coterie readership of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, within the circle of friends who read his sonnets in manuscript. . . . In *the Sonnets*, as in the plays, it is *both/and*, not *either/or*, that makes better sense of the textual evidence" (Smith *Shakespeare* 658). However disquieting, it seems clear that the author was erotically involved with both the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady at the same time, just as, in his plays, the plot turns again and again on the predicament of two friends whose intimate relationship is threatened in some way by a woman. One usually writes about what one is personally interested in. This author was obviously interested in the complexities of bisexuality.

Of the leading candidates for authorship: Shakspeare, Bacon, Marlowe, and Oxford, Oxford alone shows evidence of being bisexual. Keevak observes that Baconians, Marlovians and Oxfordians have all failed to use their claimant's homo- or bisexuality as a powerful argument for authorship. Keevak faults the Oxfordian movement for failing, since the beginning, to discuss Oxford's "attitude toward either sex," despite Looney's claim that this "may indeed afford an explanation for the very existence of the Shakespeare mystery" (119).

The Sonnets, the most intimate and self-revealing of all of the author's works—the only ones that address the reader with the personal "I"—corroborate the bisexual interest repeatedly revealed in the plays and poems. "Did forbidden passion lead the poet to adopt the pen-name by which we have confusedly known him, hoping to glorify Southampton forever while his own name lay 'buried'?" (Sobran 100). Many scholars have made the point that we would understand Shakespeare's works better if we knew more about the author as a man and knew his sexual orientation. Admitting that Oxford was probably bisexual, with all the emotional suffering that this could bring from a homophobic community, presents a whole new opportunity to interpret both the works of "Shakespeare" and the connections between his plays and Oxford's biography. _____ 🍷

Endnotes:

- 1 That women were not allowed on the stage was not due to any legal prohibition, but only because it was improper for a woman to be seen in such a lewd environment. "In the year 1629 a visiting company of French players gave performances at Blackfriars, with actresses . . . the audience would have none of them. They were hissed and 'pippin-pelted' from the stage" (Bellinger 213). The Spanish stage, which developed at about the same time as the English stage, did use women as actors. The Church dealt with the problem, considering the relative dangers of putting before the public women in seductive roles or boys playing women. It concluded that allowing women to act was the lesser of two evils (Gerstinger 25). England was the last European country to accept women on the stage (Bellinger 213).
- 2 The terms *ganymede*, *ingle*, and *catamite* in this context first appeared in English texts in 1591, 1592, and 1593 respectively (Brown 251). The use of *minion*, which originally meant only *darling* or *pet*, came to mean *male whore* in the 1580s as a result of the famous "minions" of Henri III. In *Massacre at Paris*, Marlowe has the Queen say, in reference to Henri, "His mind you see, runs on his minions, and all his heaven is to delight himself" (Rowse *History* 34).
- 3 In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Julia, like Rosalind in *As You Like It*, disguises herself as a youth, in her case to pursue her lover, she chooses to call herself *Sebastian*, just as Rosalind calls herself *Ganymede*, both signalling the bisexual nature of their disguise.
- 4 It is interesting to note that Pequigney cites Freud extensively, yet never mentions that Freud was an Oxfordian. Freud was convinced that Oxford was Shakespeare in large part because of the homosexual elements of *the Sonnets*.
- 5 *The Sonnets*, filled as they are with sexual puns and bitter sexual jealousy, do not reflect the language or emotions in which one would address one's own son. Keevak notes that similar examples of "tortured logic" have been adopted by some Oxfordians in efforts to prove that *the Sonnets* were addressed to the author's son, Southampton, supposedly fathered on Queen Elizabeth, and are therefore not homoerotic (77), a theory which does nothing to change their nature while vastly complicating the story of their authorship.
- 6 "Homintern" is a pun on *Comintern*, the international Communist organization created by Lenin in 1919 to overthrow Capitalism. Auden's point is probably that both groups were regarded as subversive.
- 7 Eric Malim holds that John Marston in his 1598 satirical attack *Scourge of Villainy*, and Joseph Hall in his 1597 *Virgidemarium* were referring to Oxford in such lines as "the dear spirit acute Canaidos," or "Shall then that foule infamous Cyneds hide/ Laugh at the purple vales of the other side?", they were referring to Oxford. Noemi Magri cautions that *Canaidos* and *Cyneds* had the same meaning: "effeminate dancer, degenerate youth, pederast" (28).
- 8 Akrigg refers to the word studies by Herman Isaac (1884), Conrad Davis (1916), Claes Shaar (1962), himself (1968) and others that point definitively to the early 1590s as the period when the bulk of the sonnets were written, this due to the correspondence between their wording and that of the long poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Since these are firmly dated to their publications in 1593 and '94 respectively, all but a few of the sonnets are also firmly fixed to this period (203-4).

9 One additional piece of evidence corroborating Southampton as the Fair Youth is the so called “dating Sonnet,” #107, which can be dated with some assurance to the spring of 1603, the only one so far that can be dated from three points of reference. The keys to this are: 1) “supposed as forfeit to a confined doom,” suggesting the surprise release of Southampton from confinement to life imprisonment. 2) The Queen was often referred to as Diana, the moon, thus the phrase: “The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,” suggests “a permanent cessation of light” (cf. OED 1b), a possible reference to her death. Shakespeare also uses *eclipse* to portend death in *Antony and Cleopatra* (3.13.153). Also in *Henry VI Part 1* (4.5) *eclipse* stands for death (“Then here I take my leave of thee, fair son, born to eclipse thy life this afternoon.”) In addition the word *endured* is used by Shakespeare in *King Lear* (“Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither”) as “to suffer without resistance, to submit, to undergo.” “Her eclipse” instead of “an eclipse,” further emphasizes a permanent rather than a temporary state” (Giroux 193). And 3) “Incertainties now crown themselves assured and peace proclaims olives of endless age,” which suggests the peaceful accession of James I to the Crown in 1603 despite the decades-long anxiety over the succession.

There is a final curious event that may reflect a tie between Oxford and Southampton. On the night Oxford died, June 24, 1604, Southampton was inexplicably arrested by order of the King. We do not know how Oxford died, and we do not know why Southampton was arrested (Nelson 425-6). In any case, the Earl was promptly released and rewarded with more favors from King James. Even more curious is the fact that there are no references by anyone to Oxford’s death (Paul 25), just as there are no references to Southampton’s arrest. These two significant events of that twenty-four hour span were either never recorded or were later obliterated from the records. This remarkable episode remains a mystery, but the timing would seem to suggest some sort of connection.

10 There were rumors that Oxford’s daughter Elizabeth was having an affair with Essex, but this appears to have taken place at least a year or more after his 1595 letter to Cecil.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ELR *English Literature Renaissance*

DNB Dictionary of National Biography

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