



Sonnet 107

Not mine owne feares, nor the prophetick soule,
Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come,
Can yet the lease of my true love controule,
Supposde as forfeit to a confin'd doome.
The mortall Moone hath her eclipse indur'de,
And the sad Augurs mock their owne presage;
Incertenties now crowne them-selves assur'de,
And peace proclaimes Olives of endlesse age.
Now with the drops of this most balmie time,
My love lookes fresh, and death to me subscribes,
Since spight of him Ile live in this poore rime,
While he insults ore dull and speachlesse tribes.
And thou in this shalt finde thy monument,
When tyrants crests and tombs of brasse are spent.

Shakepeare

DATING SONNET 107

Shakespeare and the “mortall Moone”

Eric Miller



St Fame dispos'd to cunnycatch the world,
Uprear'd a wonderment of Eighty Eight:
The Earth addreading to be overwhurld,
What now availes, quoth She, my ballance weight?
The Circle smyl'd to see the Center feare:
The wonder was, no wonder fell that yeare.

*Gorgon or the Wonderful Year*¹



It has long been generally believed that if there was any one poem in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* which could provide a certain date for its composition that poem was *Sonnet 107*, the so-called “dating sonnet.” Since at least 1866, dozens of genuine and would-be scholars have published claims to being the first person in history to discover its true date (Acheson 35). Claims for a “certain date” for *Sonnet 107* cover a time span of just over two decades (1588 to 1609) (Mattingly 708). Since there seems to be so little in the other sonnets by which they can be dated, the handful of seeming topical references in *Sonnet 107* makes it extremely important to dating all the sonnets, or at least, important to those who see them as a chronological series. Since the *Sonnets* have so much to do with the possible biography (and identity) of Shakespeare, there may be more written on this particular issue than on any other topic in Shakespeare studies.

There are six of these potentially topical references; they are, in order: 1) prophecies of things to come, feared and then mocked; 2) a confin'd doom (a state of imprisonment); 3) the mortal Moon's eclipse; 4) sad Augers (learned soothsayers); 5) Olives of endless age (the initiation of a time of peace); and 6) a balmy (healing and/or mild, fragrant) time. So far, no one of the dozens of theorists have based a case for a particular date or interpretation on more than two or three out of the six. Although it's likely that some are related, others will not fit together in any one of the leading dating scenarios. The true scenario will show all six of these motifs woven seamlessly together to tell a believable story.

A brief look at the history of the theories

Claims for a collaterally-fixed historical reference for *Sonnet 107* include the following: the Spanish Armada in 1588 (Hotson, Butler); the Queen's escape from threatened peril in 1594 (Acheson); the Queen's grand climacteric in 1595-6 (Harrison); the Queen's illness in 1599-

1600 (Chambers); the Essex rebellion in 1601 (Tyler); the Queen's death in 1603 (Massey, Minto, Lee, Beeching); the end of religious wars in France in 1594 (Rowse); a lunar eclipse in 1595 (O.F. Emerson); and another lunar eclipse in 1605 (Ledger). Writing in 2000-01 in an online article, Dr. G.R. Ledger has summarized the main theories:

1. 1595: The year of [a] lunar eclipse. I have not opted for this date because none of the other references, to peace, to crowning and to the balmy time, none of these are congruent to that or even to the following year. The moon was said to be mortal because it died every lunar month.
2. 1595-6: The year of Elizabeth's grand climacteric, when she was 63. Being the product of two mystic numbers, seven and nine, such a year in a person's life was thought to be supremely critical. . . . The identification of Elizabeth with the moon, or Diana, was a commonplace of courtly and literary flattery of the time, so it is easy to accept that "the mortal moon" referred to her. However, it is unclear why a grand climacteric year should be referred to as an eclipse, and the subsequent references to peace etc. do not seem to be appropriate.
3. 1599: Elizabeth was rumored to be seriously ill, but survived her illness.
4. 1603: The year of Elizabeth's death. This requires us to accept that "hath her eclipse endured" means "has suffered her own death," a possible interpretation, but by no means certain. The other events referred to follow on from her death.
5. 1605: The year of a lunar eclipse in October. The subsequent events referred to are still equally valid if we accept this slightly later date. (4-5)²

Arthur Acheson (1913) informs us of other earlier claims, such as that of Dr. Tyler for 1598 and notes that Massey's claim for *Sonnet 107* is based on Southampton's release from prison:

It was suggested by Gerald Massey, that the fifteenth *Sonnet* in this book, (107), was a single gratulatory poem written by Shakespeare in 1603, to celebrate Southampton's liberation from the Tower, upon the accession of James I. A very casual examination

Eric Miller is a journalist, poet, playwright, from San Diego. He has worked as a due diligence professional in forensic accounting, as a litigation manager, and as a legal researcher and writer of briefs for the US 9th Circuit Court of Appeals. In the 1970s Miller began working with the eminent psychologist, historian, scientist, and best-selling author Immanuel Velikovsky in areas of cultural studies and research. In 1978 he became involved with the Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies, an experimental college of Agriculture, Astronomy and the Arts, helping to establish its "university without walls." While living and working on-campus, Eric began work on his PhD project, a critical investigation of the life and works of Sigmund Freud. He has made repeated trips to China and Taiwan to obtain research for his two-volume work on Venus worship in ancient China.

of its relations to the contexts I have given it, will show it to be an integral portion of the book. If this *Sonnet* was written in 1603, the remainder of the sequence must also have been written at that time. Gerald Massey assumes that the allusion to “the mortal moon” having endured an eclipse, is to the death of Queen Elizabeth. Dr. Tyler suggested that this *Sonnet* was written in 1598, and that it referred to the recent escape of Elizabeth from an attempt upon her life, and that it also made reference to the Peace of Vervins established in that year. I can prove both of these opinions untenable, and can give convincing evidence for the date I assign to the sequence. The allusion to the escape of the Queen from a recent peril, and also to a rumored peace, aptly fits the facts regarding domestic and international happenings late in 1594. (35)

Like so many others, Acheson is stone certain of his own interpretation’s rightness and the inadmissibility of all other interpretations. Obviously all of them are speculating. But Acheson is not alone in repudiating the theory that *Sonnet 107* has anything to do with the death of Queen Elizabeth and, by extension, the release of Southampton from prison.

Oxford University Shakespeare scholar, Peter Levi, nicely sums up his own view (1988):

Wise men agree that *Sonnet 107* must be about the death of the Queen (“The mortal Moon hath her eclipse endured”), the arrival of James I (“this most balmy time”) and Southampton’s emergence from prison, but I do not agree with them. The sonnet is about omens in nature: there was an olive tree in the church glass at Stratford and “My love looks fresh” is not a likely compliment to a thirty-year-old prisoner after three years in the Tower. The reference to “tyrants’ crests and tombs of brass” has nothing to do with Elizabeth; such an insult would be unthinkable. The olive and the balm are scriptural but not necessarily royal. Balm heals: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there!” We can therefore reject the dating of this sonnet to 1603. (98)

As he continues, Levi indicates he dates the poem to the general period of the *Sonnets*, circa 1590-94 (holding that they were commissioned by the Earl’s mother, the Countess of Southampton) (96). A.L. Rowse, whom Levi follows in large measure, is equally convinced that he is the only one who knows the truth of the matter:

There is no real difficulty here All Elizabethan scholars of any judgment recognize that “the mortal moon” refers to the Queen, she is always Cynthia, the chaste deity, the “terrene moon,” the “mortal moon” with all the poets. She has come through an eclipse—as indeed she had that winter with the Lopez conspiracy³ (182-83). . . . We can therefore reject the dating of this sonnet to 1603. (98)

Apparently Rowse and Levi agree that the phrase “the mortal moon” did not mean that the Queen had died. (Incidentally I know of no other cases where the Queen was specifically referred to as “the mortal moon,” as Rowse implies.)

One group of Shakespeare commentators holds that the phrase “the Mortal Moon hath her eclipse endured” indicates the death of the Queen, and another group holds that the phrase means the opposite, that the Queen “endured” a threat to her life—that she was threatened, but survived. This is just one of the numerous problems that arise when seeking a clear cut interpretation of this sonnet, but it is crucial to dating it and thus, by extension, possibly the rest. G.R. Ledger, an Honorary Fellow in Classics at Redding University (UK),⁴ is one who does grasp the importance of resolving all the topical references. He summarizes:

Of all the sonnets this is the most difficult to give an adequate summary of, or to delve into its many meanings. It appears to be pregnant with hidden mysteries, and references abound to what appear to be contemporary events, situations and personalities. The majesty of the opening lines fills one with a sense of impending revelation, which indeed follows in the next two quatrains, but unfortunately, as soon as the spotlight of analysis is turned upon them, all the hidden meanings cloak themselves in mist, and the references to peace, mortal moons, the augurs and the balmy times evaporate into uncertain generalizations with no footing anywhere. (2-3)

Although the most recent commentator to jump into the fray, Oxfordian Hank Whittemore, sees himself, like his predecessors, as the great discoverer of truth, for him *Sonnet 107* goes even further, becoming the pivotal point of a “monumental” reconstruction of English history:

Once the intended picture is seen, the reader experiences a total paradigm shift that’s truly remarkable Shakespeare has been viewed as writing about a “love triangle” in the 1590s involving Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton as the Fair Youth and a mysterious Dark Lady; but in fact the central story takes place during 1601-03, when Southampton was confined for treason in the Tower of London. The Dark Lady turns out to be Queen Elizabeth I of England, who was “stealing” Southampton by keeping him in her prison.

A key is *Sonnet 107*, known as the “dating” verse for celebrating Southampton’s release by King James in 1603, shortly after the Queen’s death. Now, instead of an anomaly, this powerful sonnet becomes the high point of a continuous chronicle. And a key word is “Time,” which translates into the diary’s very real timeline This is a brand-new picture of the most intensely sustained poetical sequence the world has known. Replacing the old one, it opens a new era of Shakespeare research and study, bringing the literature and the history into alignment. (1)

But no more than his predecessors has Whittemore been able to weave all six of Shakespeare’s topical references in *107* into his scenario. Since he sees the sonnet as pivotal, as its “high point,” until he can show that all six of these topical references combine to tell the same story, the “continuous chronicle” of his 900-page revision of history will go the way of its predecessors.

The “prophetick soule of the wide world”

Most recent editors see 107 in relation to events in 1603. Admittedly it is possible to see the “mortal Moon’s eclipse” as Elizabeth’s death, “Olives of endless age” as the announced intention of James I to bring an end to hostilities with Spain and Scotland, and even to see the greatly-feared but failed prophecy that hangs over the entire poem as the fears the English felt about possible disturbances over a Scottish King:

Not mine own fears, nor *the prophetick soule*
Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come,
 Can yet the lease of my true love controule,
 Supposde as forfeit to a confin’d doome.
 The mortall Moone hath her eclipse indur’d,
 And *the sad Augurs mock their owne presage,*
Incertenties now crowne them-selves assur’d,
 And peace proclaimes Olives of endlesse age.

Yet there are problems with all of these. Some have attempted to accommodate the eclipse of the mortal Moon by hitching the scenario to a particular eclipse of the moon (1595, 1605), although this ignores the fact that the moon can hardly be seen as genuinely “mortal” (everyone knows the “new moon” isn’t really new) and, although astrologers were wont to ascribe various earthly happenings to eclipses of the sun and moon, eclipses were too commonplace to evoke the kind of fear or “incertenties” that he describes. That this fear was one the Poet shared with others is confirmed by the “Augurs” (plural) who have been forced to “mock” their own prognostications. The history of the period shows no concern on this level over a simple eclipse of the moon.

Ledger notes that elsewhere Shakespeare refers to augurs or soothsayers as those who “dream on things to come”:

this can apply both to mine own fears and to the prophetic soul of the wide world. Both of them have the potential to foretell the future: dreaming = musing on, prognosticating. Shakespeare uses “dreamer” in the sense of “soothsayer” in *Julius Caesar*: “A soothsayer bids you beware the Ides of March. . . . He is a dreamer; Let us leave him. Pass” (*JC.1.2.19, 24*). (8)

Ledger comments, moreover, that the image of a “wide world dreaming on things to come” paired with the word *soul* calls up the Platonic idea that the world possesses a soul:

From the times of the earliest Ionian philosophers, the question was debated as to whether or not the universe had a soul. Later, Plato considered the question in the *Timaeus*. The phraseology here seems to be biblical, reminiscent of darkness being upon the face of the deep and the spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters (*Gen.1.2.*). (7)

That this *soul* is “prophetick” suggests that what has caused the Poet’s fear is the prophecy of an event that would affect the entire *world*. Such an event could only be the kind of disaster associated with biblical events like the Deluge. If we’re to associate such an event with the mortal Moon surviving (or succumbing to) an eclipse, and if in addition we associate the mortal Moon with the Queen, then we’re looking at a level of prophesied disaster that would surely have found its way into the record books!

A “confin’d doome”

What does Shakespeare mean when he says that neither his own fears, nor the prophecy, can *control* the *lease* of his “true love”? And who is it that is suffering from “a confined doom”?

It’s true that *Sonnet 107* fits better with the events of 1603 than with most other scenarios. It is possible to see Southampton as Shakespeare’s “true love” who was, until James freed him in early April, 1603, in a “confined doom,” and to see James’s vows to bring peace as the “olives of endless age,” thus covering two of the six motifs in the first half of *107*. Unfortunately, that the Queen, the “mortal Moon,” died rather than “enduring” her “eclipse” remains a problem, and there is nothing to which the major motifs of the beginning quatrain: the world prophecy and the self-mocked augurs, can connect.

Also, it’s quite probable that by “my true love” Shakespeare is referring more to his feelings than to a person (such as Southampton). Ledger points out that the antecedent to “supposde” could be any one of three phrases: “the prophetic soul of the wide world,” “forfeit to a confin’d doome,” “the lease of my true love,” or simply, “my true love.”

The most likely, and the most satisfactory both in sense and grammatically, is “the lease of my true love,” since it is spatially the closest; “forfeit to a confined doom,” . . . though superficially transparent, and perhaps paraphrasable as “liable to surrender due to the harsh conditions of destiny,” is elusive. A *forfeit* is a penal fine, or penalty for failure in a contractual obligation. *Doom* probably here means *fate*, *destiny*, and *confined* implies imprisonment, or restriction of freedom in some way a “confined doom” could be a destiny which threatens restrictions, a harsh and punitive destiny. (9)

If the antecedent for the phrase “supposed as forfeit to a confin’d doom” is “the lease of my true love,” it is quite natural to assume that “my” true “love” means exactly that—the love of the speaker for the object of his love. It is not his lover who is “supposed as forfeit to a confined doom,” it is his own love that is “supposed as forfeit,” and, as Ledger points out, it is his own confinement that causes his forfeit, because it is his fate to be imprisoned as a “penal fine” for unlawful behavior—a “harsh and punitive destiny.”

The term *doom*, while it may well indicate *fate/destiny* also has a precise legal meaning as “a sentence” or “a judgment” (Black 434). Moreover, the first two definitions in the OED have a legal connotation while *Shakespeare’s Glossary* gives both the legal and end-of-the-world sense before that of the more general meaning of “harsh and punitive destiny” (Onions 80).

The “mortall Moone’s” eclipse

The next quatrain informs us once again that certain dire prophecies failed to materialize:

The mortall Moone hath her eclipse indur'de
And the sad Augurs mock their own presage,
Incertenties now crowne them-selves assur'de,
And peace proclaimes Olives of endlesse age.

As noted previously, the interpretation of the first line in the second quatrain is crucial to an interpretation of the sonnet as a whole, and also to its date. If interpreted one way it indicates that the Queen died; if interpreted another, that she survived, which puts it before 1603.

Another point is crucial here, which is that the prophecy and the Queen’s eclipse are not separate points, but are related, i.e. that the dire prophecy included the prophesied “eclipse” of the Queen. If the prophecy predicted the death of the Queen—which is altogether likely if we are to link the word *eclipse* with the standard practice of sixteenth-century soothsayers, whose astrological prophecies traditionally foretold changes in the State, which in the case of monarchies, were the inevitable result of the deaths of princes—the lines would surely have been written differently. So that the second line: “And the sad Augurs mock their own presage” must then indicate that the prophecies were wrong because the Queen did not die. She survived, forcing those sad (OED: “learned”) Augurs who had prophesied her death to mock their own “presage.” Had the Queen actually died, there would have been no reason for them to mock their own prophecies.

Moreover, it should be particularly noted that the two ideas, the idea of the mortal moon enduring her eclipse and the sad augurs mocking their own presage are grammatically part of the same thought—only a comma separates the lines—giving the sense that the two parts are a complementary part of a whole. Vendler implies the same perception with her discussion of the grammatical methodology of lines answering lines as “Event” and “Speech-Act.” Indeed, the very quatrain we discuss is her first example of the “same general syntactic pattern” (453).

Peter Irvin, as we noted above, was right to repudiate the suggestion that the Queen died, despite the fact that “wise men agree,” for “the sonnet is about omens in nature . . .” and the mortal Queen had once again—like the moon itself—endured her eclipse and reemerged as a living Queen. Many commentators have noted the fact that the word “eclipse” refers to a temporary condition, not a permanent one such as death brings. In reviewing Park Honan’s *Shakespeare: A Life*, in 1999, Ralph Berry makes the point:

The symbolism is all wrong: death is permanent, “eclipse” is temporary. . . [*Sonnet 107*] is obstinately fixed at 1603 (death of Elizabeth) and not 1596 (grand climacteric) which most commentators accept. “Eclipse” has a meaning (temporary, not permanent) that . . . cannot be dismissed as the bogey of “literal-minded commentators.” (1)

This last is an apparent reference to Katherine Duncan-Jones’s orthodox opinions. She, of course, accepts the convention that *Sonnet 107* refers to the Queen’s death.

“This most balmie time”

The third quatrain describes the relief that followed the failed prophecies:

Now with the drops of this most balmie time,
My love lookes fresh, and death to me subscribes,
Since spight of him Ile live in this poore rime
While he insults ore dull and speachlesse tribes.

Here we have a reference to a particular time of year, when the weather is “balmy” (healing and/or mild, moist, fragrant) and that his love, like other living things, has been revitalized, “My love lookes fresh, and death to me subscribes” (instead of the other way round). Ledger comments:

The root meaning is to append one’s name to the bottom of a document, as a testimony and witness to the contents. By extension in Shakespeare it comes to mean to submit, or admit, or yield to (some fact or authority), to acquiesce (OED 7-9, with examples mostly from Shakespeare). (11)

The last two lines of the quatrain may express the idea that, while death may continue to rule over tribes lacking eloquent literary cultures, he will live forever, remembered for his “poore rime.”

The final couplet is straightforward:

And thou in this shalt finde thy monument,
When tyrants crests and tombs of brass are spent.

Thus he ends by lauding the fact that, even when the crests and tombs that tyrants build to immortalize themselves have wasted away into nothingness, his love shall live in the “monument” of his verse. Ledger gives an excellent summary of the entire sonnet, showing how central are the failed prognostications of doom to the entire sonnet:

The first quatrain, taken in the context of what follows, seems to suggest that the prognostications of doom that the poet’s fears and the spirit of the world had prompted were entirely wrong. They have wrongly suggested that the poet’s love is circumscribed by time and death, whereas he now knows it to be everlasting. This is confirmed in the second quatrain by the descriptions of failure and error of the augurs in giving misleading and false predictions, for the dooms and catastrophes that they foretold have turned out instead to be . . . peace and tranquility (3-4)

We believe that the prophecies of doom referenced in the poem are not only hugely important to its interpretation, but that they are not at all mysterious or impossible to locate in time. That date is April 28, 1583.

Richard Harvey and the end of the world

The beginning of 1583 was greeted with news that the most momentous event in modern history was about to happen—the end of the present world and the Second Coming of Christ. As predicted by Richard Harvey and other astrologers, this was supposed to happen at noon on April 28, 1583 (Harvey 7) due to a “triple conjunction” of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces. The prediction apparently caused panic or “near panic” among the superstitious.⁵

Richard Harvey was the second of three brothers whose wealthy ropemaker father had them educated at Cambridge. Of the three, Gabriel is the best known today, although during the 1580s, his younger brothers, Richard and John, became known for their astrological predictions.⁶ Harvey was just twenty-three when he published the *Astrological Discourse* that predicted disaster due to this rare triple conjunction, some aspect of which was due to occur at noon on April 28th. Some interpreted this rare aspect, which had also occurred in 7 AD, as the “star of the East” that notified the “three wise men” (Babylonian astrologers) of the birth of the Savior, suggesting that this time it portended the Second Coming accompanied by world-wide disasters.

As Harvey described it:

For it was termed the great and notable conjunction, which should be manifested to the ignorant sort, by manie fierce and boisterous winds then suddenlie breaking out. It was called the greatest and most souereigne conjunction among the seuen planets: why so? Because laws, and empires and regions are ruled by the same: which foretellethe the coming of a prophet, & like the destruction of certeine climates and parts of the earth, and new found heresies, and a new founded kingdome, and damages through the pestilence, and abundant showers. . . which dooth foreshow, that weightie and woonderfull things shall come into the world. (Harvey qtd. in Dodson 60)

A professional astrological consultant brings some insight to the use of the word *eclipse*. According to her, what the astrologers feared at this time was not so much the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces itself, but a second conjunction of Mars with the Moon, that was occurring just before noon on April 28th. To the astrologers, the moon was seen as “ruling” the Queen, while Mars, planet of war and violence, represented a threat of some kind to royalty, since the planets were in Leo, the sign of crowned heads of state. Conjunctions take place frequently, but what made these seem so frighteningly potent was the fact that both conjunctions, Moon-Mars and Jupiter-Saturn, shared not just one plane, that of celestial longitude (in the same degree of the zodiac), but two, since both were also within six degrees or less of the same angle of declination (relative to the equatorial plane). Such a conjunction is known as an *occultation*, meaning that, relative to the viewer, one planet is occulting (blocking) the energy of the other. An eclipse is simply an occultation of one of the *lights*, the Sun or the Moon. With the Moon passing through two of the three celestial coordinates (the third is latitude) where Mars was located, and with the Moon passing *between* the Earth and Mars, it was Mars that was being eclipsed by the Moon, not the other way round. Thus the Moon was the stronger body, so, according to the modern astrologer, the perceived danger was actually more to the Queen’s enemies than to herself.

By this we can see that Shakespeare knew enough about astrology to know that an occultation, or eclipse, was involved in the prophecy, and also that, because it involved the Moon and the sign Leo, the astrologers must have been afraid that it meant a threat to the Queen. The moment passed, the Queen continued about her business and so, to everyone's relief, "the mortall Moone hath her eclipse endured."

By 1587, when a revised edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles* was published, the excitement over the failed predictions had not yet died away:

[T]he common sort of people yea and no small multitude of such as thinke scorn to be called fooles, or counted beggers, whilst they were in expectation of this coniunction, were in no small imaginations, supposing that no less would have been effectuated than by the said discourse was prophesied. Into these fancies not void of fears and mistrust they were drawne with the more facilitie, for that they had read, and heard, & pondered, and suspected, and in part beleaved the predictions of such events as should insue by the influence of that coniunction. (qtd. in Dodson 60)

Harvey's predictions caused hysteria among the superstitious, but when nothing happened he became a laughing-stock, although it appears his younger brother John, nothing daunted, continued to publish astrological tracts for another two or three years (Hibbard 184). A decade later Thomas Nashe would use Richard's humiliation to torment his brother Gabriel Harvey during their notorious pamphlet duel (Hibbard 184).

"Olives of endlesse age"

Thus "the prophetick soule of the wide world," the "mocked Augers," and the relief felt when the "mortall Moone" "endured" her "eclipse," all can be accommodated by the period of late April to early May, 1583. As for the "balmie time," it should be obvious that of all periods of the year that the weather may have been pleasant in Renaissance England, to a people that did not yet know about electric lighting or central heating, after the bitter weather of the long winter, spring, with its warm, balmy, fragrance, must have seemed sent straight from Heaven.

Thus five of the six topical references work better for the spring of 1583 than any other point in time discussed to date. As for the sixth, the enduring peace suggested by "Olives of endlesse age" that so many have attempted to fit into other time slots, it too fits most easily in 1583 when the Treaty of Pliusa, brokered by the Queen, put an end to twenty-five years of war among the nations of northern Europe: Denmark, Poland, Lithuania, Russia and Sweden.⁷ The date of the actual signed treaty of 1583 is unknown; it is reported that it took effect in August, but negotiations would have taken place months in advance. The so-called Peace Portrait of the Queen (opposite page), dated c.1580-1585, most likely refers to this event, since no other similar event in which the Queen took an active role is recorded as taking place during this period. Adding to the mood of peace, just before the predicted catastrophe of April 28, on March 18, 1583 a treaty had been signed between the Dutch States General and the duc d'Anjou.

Oxford in a “confin’d doome”

As Ledger notes regarding: “Supposde as forfeit to a confin’d doom,” *forfeit* is a legal term for a penal fine, or penalty for failure in a contractual obligation. *Doom* here probably means *fate* or *destiny*, and *confin’d* implies imprisonment, or restriction of freedom. Thus “a confin’d doome” is a destiny that threatens restrictions, a “harsh and punitive destiny” (9).

It should be noted that, by asserting that the false prophecies have not come to pass, the charlatans are unmasked and there is peace instead of end-of-the-world terror and destruction, this does not mean that the Poet himself is free, that he has been released from his confinement (or house arrest) or necessarily even his “doom.” Indeed, he seems in the last quatrain to show that he is still in the spell of a doomful fate, one nonetheless in which his love achieves transcendence through his verse.

Coincidental with the fateful date of Harvey’s end-of-the-world, beginning-of-the-new-world predictions, the Earl of Oxford was still under house arrest, as the Queen had steadfastly resisted all pleas to allow him back at Court since June, 1581, when she freed him from his three-month stay in the Tower. Most Oxfordians are familiar with the facts surrounding Oxford’s imprisonment following his illicit dalliance with Ann Vavasor, the Queen’s Maid of Honor, and the birth of their illegitimate son. Although it seems he had been reunited with his wife by April 1583, he was still not allowed to return to Court (Ward 223-28, Nelson 284-91). As late as May 12, two weeks after the predicted doom of April 28, Sir Walter Raleigh wrote to Burghley with regard to his own ongoing efforts to intercede with Elizabeth on Oxford’s behalf and to free him from his punishment. Oxford would not be released until June 2nd (290-1).

Another small but telling point is the fact that Shakespeare uses property terms to explain how his fears and the dire world-wide prophecies cannot “control the lease” of his true love. This may suggest that the Poet had property concerns at the time that worked their way into his love poetry, that he was losing control over leases on properties he thought were his, a situation that perfectly describes Oxford’s in 1583 (within three years the pressure of his debts would cause the Queen to grant him a generous annuity).⁸ By 1603, due to his 1592 marriage with the heiress, Lady Trentham, such pressures were less of a concern. His chief property concern by 1603 was to re-acquire the stewardship of the Forest of Waltham.



Detail from the “Peace Portrait,” so called because Elizabeth grasps an olive branch in her right hand. Painted c. 1580-1585, the portrait is thought to be by Marcus Gheeraedts the Elder.

Who or what was meant by “my true love”?

Many accept on faith that *Sonnet 107* commemorates the death of Queen Elizabeth, of Southampton’s release from prison, and that Southampton is the ‘true love’ who is referred to in the poem. However, if *Sonnet 107* was written circa April/May of 1583, this could not have been Southampton, who was only nine years old at the time. To whom or what then does Shakespeare refer when he says “My love looks fresh . . .”?

Whoever may have been the (Fair) Youth and (Dark) Lady for whom Shakespeare wrote the bulk of the sonnets, there is nothing in *Sonnet 107* that indicates that either one was the referred-to beloved. Due to the problems with dating *Sonnet 107*, some commentators have sought to resolve the problem of its dating by seeing it as an anomaly. It may not, in fact, belong to either set. If so it would not be the only anomalous sonnet in the series; since they had no idea where to place the sonnets numbered 153 and 154, the editor/s simply tacked them on at the very end.

Does Oxford’s life in April 1583 offer any clues as to the identity of the recipient of his love? Choices include: his wife, Anne Cecil, his mistress and the mother of his only son, Ann Vavasor, or Queen Elizabeth herself. Based on the situation Oxford was in at the time, the poem can easily be seen as one of many similar attempts made over the years by Court poets to soften up an angry and intransigent Elizabeth (one is reminded of Raleigh’s *Book of the Ocean to Cinthia*). Whatever his fate, coos the Poet in his most dulcet and dovelike tones, he will always love his noble mistress, rejoicing that she has survived the doomsayers with their false prophecies of danger to her and to her kingdom. Despite his current punishment, he himself is of good cheer, knowing he will live on in his verse, just as she, too, will live in his poetic monument when the crests and tombs of other, tyrannical, monarchs have passed away. In the final couplet where it is stated that “And thou in this shalt find thy monument,” “in this” refers to his identification of her as the “mortal Moone”—which everyone would know was a reference to her Majesty. What then is more natural than to assume it was to the Queen herself that the poem was written?

The above proposed interpretation has the virtue, it seems to me, of dealing in the least possible arbitrary way with the known historical-biographical elements of *Sonnet 107*. It clearly shows that Harvey’s false prophecy is the subject of “Shakespeare’s” commemorative poem; it highlights the fact of Oxford’s personal situation of being under house arrest, of the “balmy” April weather, and connecting the addressee with a name bound to invoke the identity of Queen Elizabeth, England’s Royal moon-goddess. *Sonnet 107* is entirely in the tradition of the cult and custom of the Court to profess unrequited love for the Queen and to exalt her glory. The poem was also a perfect vehicle for Oxford to gracefully beg deliverance from his “doom” and to remind her of the quality of his art and his unique ability to immortalize her: “thou in this shalt find thy monument.”——————☛

Notes

1 “Gorgon or the Wonderful Year” was a verse satire on current topics published in 1593 as by Gabriel Harvey (though the rhyme-scheme is not in his style). Like 1583, 1588 was similarly feared. Both the fifteenth-century astrologer Regiomontanus and the early sixteenth-century philosopher Melancthon had prophesied end-of-the-world disasters for that year (www2.prestel.co.uk).

2 This range of dates does not include 1621, the date the Baconians assign to *Sonnet 107* as the date of Bacon’s release from prison. Ledger also rejects “the early date of 1588 which was at one time proposed, [Butler, Hotson] based on the alleged reference to the crescent formation of the Spanish Armada, seems now generally to have been abandoned as unworkable” (3), though he does not tell us why. He also does not deal with other claims to the “true” decipherment of the dating of *Sonnet 107* for the years 1594, 1598, or 1569, etc. Apparently they are passé theories from the contemporary point of view. Nor does he discuss the additional theories mentioned hereafter.

3 The jury is still out on whether or not Lopez actually posed a threat to the Queen.

4 Ledger posted this material on his website. Much important material is now available online.

5 Before we get too contemptuous of our superstitious forbears, we should recall the excitement that attended “Y2K,” the advent of the recent millennium (January 1, 2000, or as some hold, 2001), when similar disasters were feared by large numbers of supposedly “modern” educated persons.

6 [Editor: The Harveys came from Saffron Walden in Essex, the hometown of Oxford’s tutor, Sir Thomas Smith. Following Oxford’s departure in 1562, Smith acted as Gabriel Harvey’s patron, promoting him at Cambridge. It seems likely that the deep interest in astrology shown by all three Harvey brothers originated with Smith, who was fascinated by the subject, had numerous books on astrology in his library, created a celestial globe with his own hands, and drew up a number of horoscopes for his family and himself. That Smith’s student, Oxford, was considered versed in astrology is shown by references to his knowledge in contemporary dedications.]

7 Historian William Camden wrote c.1607: “It is not to be buried in oblivion how in these dayes the warre growing hot betwixt the Muscovite and the Swethian, under the Northerne Climate, John King of Sweden, being unable to sustaine the power of so great an Emperour, sent Eric of Wimsbruge his kinsman, Andreas Riche one of this counsell, and Raschy his Secretary, on a noble Embassy to Queene Elizabeth, and by his letters intreated her to mediate a peace with the Muscovite by her Embassadour, which shee did without delay, and perswaded the Muscovite to a peace upon reasonable conditions” (Camden 1583.1).

8 After quoting a letter of October 1584 to Burghley from Oxford asking for help with his tangled finances, Nelson notes, “Because Oxford had not paid his debt to the Crown, any properties he sold were encumbered with liens; if the Queen were to call in her debt, the obligations would fall on those who had purchased the lands” (294). In other words, by 1583, Oxford’s finances were largely in the hands of others.

Works Cited

BOOKS AND ARTICLES

- Black, Henry C. *Black's Law Dictionary*. 5th edition. St. Paul, MN: West, 1979.
- Dodson, Sarah. "Holinshed's Sources for the Prognostication about the years 1583 and 1588." *Isis* 38, Nov. (1947): 60-62.
- Harvey, Richard. *Astrological Discourse upon the great and notable coniunction of the two superiour planets, Saturne & Jupiter, which shall happen the 28 day of April, 1583*. London: Henrie Bynneman, 1583.
- Hibbard, G.R. *Thomas Nashe: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1962.
- Levi, Peter. *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare*. New York: Henry Holt, 1988.
- Mattingly, Garrett. "The Date of Shakespeare's Sonnet CVII." *PMLA* 48.3 (Sept. 1933): 705-721.
- Nelson, Alan H. *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. Liverpool: LUP, 2003.
- Onions, C.T. *A Shakespeare Glossary*. Ed. Robert D. Eagleson. Oxford: OUP, 1986.
- Rowse, A.L. *William Shakespeare, A Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- _____, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problem Solved*. London: Macmillan, 1964.
- Shakespeare's Sonnets*. 1609. Reprint. New York: Shephard-Walwyn, 1974.
- Vendler, Helen. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.
- Ward, B.M. *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550-1604)*. London: John Murray, 1928.

INTERNET

- Acheson, Arthur. *Mistress Davenant: The Dark Lady of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. London, Quaritch, 1913. 10 Sept. 2006 <<http://members.fortunecity.com/flopezr/html/english/books/mistdave.htm#p35>>
- Berry, Ralph. Review of Park Honan's *Shakespeare: A life*. Oxford: OUP, 1999. 10 Sept. 2006 <www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2242/is_1600_274/ai_54869166>
- Camden, William. "Anno Domini 1583." *Annales of Elizabeth R.* Hypertext edition by Dana F. Sutton. University of California Irvine. 10 Sept. 2006 <<http://e3.uci.edu/~papyri/camden/10>>
- Ledger, G.R., *Shakespeares-Sonnets.com*. Oxford: Oxquarry Books, 2000-01. 10 Sept. 2006 <www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/107comm.htm: 1-14>
- Whittemore, Hank. "Shakespeare Sonnets Solved, Author Claims." ed. Christopher Simmons. Send2Press: 2005. 10 Sept. 2006 <<http://send2press.com/newswire/2005-06-0628-003.shtm>>