

## New Light on *Willobie His Avis* and the Authorship Question

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In an interesting and well-written essay, “On the Authorship of *Willobie His Avis*” (*Brief Chronicles*, Fall 2011, 135-67), Robert Prechter asserts that this intriguingly anonymous Elizabethan verse novella was written by George Gascoigne, a soldier-poet who died in 1577. Prechter also argues that its publication in 1594 was arranged by Nicholas Breton, Gascoigne’s stepson. Following B.N. De Luna’s proposal in *The Queen Declined* (1970), but with certain variations, Prechter goes on to support the identification of Avis as Queen Elizabeth I, and the characters in the poem as her historical suitors. However, unlike De Luna, Prechter identifies the fifth suitor, “H. W.,” as Don Juan of Austria, a claim originally advanced by W. Ron Hess, and “H. W.’s” friend, “W. S.,” as Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, the leading candidate in the SAQ.

The connection Prechter makes between Gascoigne, Breton and *Willobie His Avis* is an outstanding piece of research that answers many questions about the poem’s origination and publication. But I believe he is mistaken about the identity of several of the poem’s pseudonymous characters, and that he overlooks the evidence that Breton revised his stepfather’s work and added the narrative about the fifth suitor, H.W. I believe this mysterious figure was Henry Wriothesley, third earl of Southampton.

### A Love Triangle

In “The Dark Lady and Her Bastard” (*Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, Winter 2005), I argued that *Willobie His Avis* was a cleverly disguised exposé of a bisexual, triangular love affair involving Edward de Vere (i.e., “Shakespeare”), his wife Elizabeth Trentham, and Henry Wriothesley. This arrangement is also reflected in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. In addition, by subtly identifying the main characters in the *Sonnets*, something which of course they take great care to conceal, *Willobie His Avis* provides powerful support for the overall Oxfordian thesis. If de Vere’s second wife was indeed the subject of the piece, then why in 1594, in a poem naming “Shakespeare” and *The Rape of Lucrece*, would he be satirized under the initials “W.S.”? Does *Willobie His Avis* provide the key to the Shakespeare authorship issue?

*Willobie His Avis* not only identifies important individuals, but exposes their adulterous behaviors, one of which resulted in an illegitimate birth. Although it is never openly stated, the poem suggests that Avis not only surrendered herself to both W.S. and H.W., but bore a child by a man who was not her husband. However, Avis was not Queen Elizabeth I, as Prechter and many others maintain—among other things, there is no evidence that the Virgin Queen ever gave birth.

But the Countess of Oxford, Elizabeth Trentham, had a son named Henry, born February 24, 1593. Never before had there been a Henry in Oxford's or Trentham's families, so why choose this name? More than this, if Oxford were Shakespeare, and wrote the *Sonnets*, why did he never mention his son? Because—as I propose—Henry wasn't his at all, but the issue of the Fair Youth, Henry Wriothesley.

In the first sonnet to the Dark Lady (127), the poet accuses her of having a bastard:

And beauty slandered with a bastard shame,

And in Sonnet 143 he calls her a wife who has a child:

Lo, as a careful housewife runs to catch  
One of her feather'd creatures broke away,  
Sets down her babe, and makes all swift dispatch  
In pursuit of the thing she would have stay;

Prechter's conclusions about Gascoigne's and Breton's roles in the matter tend to support this scenario, as we shall see. Additional evidence, presented below, concerning Breton's intimate and apparently scandalous association with Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke, supplies a rationale for the poem's publication and its continued popularity.

### 'Willobie' and 'Avisa'

*Willobie His Avis* is coded throughout with double meanings about a chaste "Lady," Avisa, who is pursued by several suitors, also identified by codes or initials. The most significant for SAQ scholars are "H.W." and "W.S." Of almost equal importance is the prefatory epistle to the poem which actually mentions Shakespeare by name, the first direct reference to him anywhere:

Yet Tarquyne pluckt his glistening grape,  
And Shake-speare paints poor Lucrece rape.

This hints that the poem was written with *Lucrece* (also 1594, but earlier) in mind. *Avisa* may even have been partly intended as a parody of Shakespeare's poem—the initials W.S. and H.W. would inevitably recall its amorous dedication by Shakespeare (W.S.) to Southampton (H.W.). The apparent purpose of *Avisa* was thus to expose scandalous behavior, not conceal it. Its chief characters, though masked by initials, must have been identifiable to many readers at the time, otherwise the poem loses its point. Its lampooning tone creates the impression that it is a tale of adultery committed by an important woman, and the fact

that it was banned and burned in 1599 corroborates its libelous nature. The offended parties must have complained to the authorities. Many attempts have been made to identify them and the poem's author, but so far consensus has not been reached.

### ***The Taming of A Shrew***

*Avisa* might also have been influenced by the anonymous play, *The Taming of A Shrew*, published like *Lucrece* and *Avisa* in 1594. Its well-known story, refurbished in 1623 as *The Taming of The Shrew*, tells of a wealthy woman of strong character who rebuffs several suitors, but finally marries. And whom does she marry?—an impoverished nobleman who gains great wealth from the match. In 1586 Oxford was financially so pressed that the Queen granted him an annuity, while his marriage to Elizabeth Trentham five years later also greatly improved his circumstances. Curiously, one of George Gascoigne's plays, *The Supposes*, performed at Grey's Inn, is also considered to be among the sources for the later *The Taming of the Shrew*, 1623 (Anderson 33 -34).

### **Angell Article**

Since Prechter mainly follows De Luna, he dismisses Pauline Angell's 1937 *PMLA* article, "Light on the Dark Lady: A study of some Elizabethan Libels," as "far-fetched." Worse, he does not even try to address the detailed evidence she presents identifying *Avisa* as Elizabeth Trentham, and H. W. as Southampton, despite the fact that Mark Anderson's *Shakespeare By Another Name* (2005) and my "The Dark Lady and Her Bastard," cited earlier, independently confirmed these identifications. We also made similar connections between *Willobie His Avisa* and the triangular love affair in the *Sonnets*. Prechter's failure to address these issues is a serious shortcoming.

### **George Gascoigne**

To be fair and clear, Prechter develops and presents a good case for George Gascoigne as the author of *Willobie His Avisa*. He identifies strong writerly styles, such as the use of vocabulary and unique phrases. He also identifies historical publishing associations between *Avisa* and Gascoigne's other publications. His evidence is well documented and, in my opinion, generally persuasive.

But Prechter's case also includes a lot of speculation. In his view, *Avisa* represents Queen Elizabeth and the suitors the known candidates for her hand, among them Don Juan of Austria, whom Prechter identifies as "H. W." Prechter believes that the work was started in the 1560s, and was completed before Don Juan died in 1578, because H. W. is still alive by the end of the poem. And since Gascoigne died in 1577, Prechter's data fit his timeline perfectly.

But Gascoigne's death is also a problem, since *Avisa* was not published until 1594, more than 17 years later. According to Prechter, the poem remained in manuscript until Gascoigne's stepson Nicholas Breton decided to publish it. But

why wait all that time, nearly two decades? And why risk antagonizing the authorities if *Avisa* were indeed a parody or satire of Queen Elizabeth? Prechter offers a partial answer:

Gascoigne...saw himself as, or at least aspired to be, a literary champion of Elizabeth, fitting the role of the author who wrote the ringing defense of Avis's—and Elizabeth's—chastity...Gascoigne, most tellingly, is also on record as having written, in 1575, two years before *Avisa* was concluded, a lengthy, ringing tribute, in verse, to Queen Elizabeth's chastity...One might suggest that Gascoigne refrained in 1577 from publishing his extensive narrative poem about the Queen's adventures in love because he would have feared authorities' negative reaction to it...(147-8)

Prechter does not elaborate this point, which is crucial. If *Avisa* were written as a tribute to Queen Elizabeth's chastity, why would Gascoigne "have feared authorities' negative reaction to it"? This contradicts the idea that *Avisa* was viewed as a satire about the Queen. If this were the perception in 1594, or after it was published again in 1596, the reaction would have been much fiercer than merely banning it three years later and having it burned. It would not have appeared in six editions until 1635 after it resurfaced again in 1605. When it was called in by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1599, it was part of a general suppression of books considered libelous and not singled out for slandering the Queen, or being treasonous. No record shows that either the censors or the public saw *Avisa* as an attack on Elizabeth I.

Prechter continues:

A better, and in this case irrefutable, reason that Gascoigne did not take this narrative poem to press is that he died just as he would have completed the fifth section. One must also understand that just because *Avisa* comes down to us in apparently finished form does not mean that it was in fact finished. Ultimately, the reason why Gascoigne would not have rushed the poem to the printer's (sic) becomes obvious once we think about it: The story of Elizabeth and her suitors was—as history proves—a work in progress, one that the author, in concert with Dorrell's testimony, would have updated over the years as new would-be husbands entered the scene. Surely Gascoigne viewed *Avisa* as a lifelong project that was as yet incomplete. He may or may not have intended to publish it, but he surely intended to keep writing it. Dorrell's 1596 assertion that after the author's death the poem "lay in wast papers in his studie, as many other prettie things did, of his devising" is likely accurate. (148)

However, if we make the assumption that *Avisa* is topical to 1593-94, when it was published, and if H.W is indeed Southampton, Gascoigne cannot have been

the author of the entire poem, since he died in 1577. This view is supported by other scholars. Campbell (948) sees *Avisa* as “providing a clue to the relationship of the Fair Youth, Dark Lady, and poet of the Sonnets” and thinks that it might be the motivating source also for *The Rape of Lucrece*. A.L. Rowse asserts that

it has often been observed that *The Rape of Lucrece* parallels the Dark Lady sonnets, as *Venus and Adonis* does the earlier Southampton ones...writers’ work reflects their experience. (Annotated II 710).

This theory is reinforced by the fact that *Avisa* in the poem is called a British Lucretia or Lucrece-Avis (“Let Lucrece-Avis be thy name”), both of course evoking Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*.

Since *Avisa* is a libel or a satire on the supposed chastity of a woman called *Avisa*, it makes more sense to identify her as a noblewoman such as Countess Elizabeth Oxford, rather than Queen Elizabeth. But since this doesn’t fit his thesis, Prechter asserts

The story of *Avisa* and her wooers so well shrouds the real-life actions of Elizabeth and her suitors that the true subject of the poem went undetected by outsiders for nearly 400 years. (162)

If the public however could not guess that the Queen, or anyone else, was the subject of the libel, why would this rather dull poem have gone into six editions? Who would have cared, unless *Avisa* and her suitors could be sniggeringly identified? As Akrigg notes:

Contemporaries must have found hidden meanings behind the poem’s bland repetitive moralizings, for *Willobie His Avisa* went through five editions in fifteen years, even though the authorities tried to suppress it in 1599. (216)

Who seems to be having a scandalous affair in 1593-94 to make *Willobie His Avisa* such a topical hit?

### **Identity of the Author**

As noted, Prechter thinks George Gascoigne wrote it, but his argument unwittingly makes an even stronger case for Gascoigne’s stepson Nicholas Breton. Everything he claims for Gascoigne applies to Breton while, again as he notes, nobody could imitate Gascoigne’s writing style more closely than his stepson, who was of course still living when *Willobie* was published.

Prechter states:

Given all these parallels, we may conclude that whoever packaged *Avisa* and wrote Dorrell's preface was intimately familiar with Gascoigne's *Flowres* and *Posies* and used them as a model. This is useful information. Whomever we identify as Hadrian Dorrell, the editor of *Avisa*, must fit everything we know about him. Whoever wrote the prefacing material

- 1) was alive in 1605, when the final edits to *Avisa* appeared in the fourth edition;
- 2) was a poet capable of writing the verses by Abell Emet, Contraria Contrariis and Thomas Willobie;
- 3) attended Oxford University;
- 4) was religiously inclined;
- 5) had access to George Gascoigne's papers and might have been the person whom Gascoigne "chose," as Dorrell puts it, to possess those papers;
- 6) used ampersands, as Dorrell did in his 1594 preface and his 1596 apology;
- 7) knew Gascoigne's *Flowres* well enough to imitate aspects of its preface;
- 8) was (ideally) old enough to have brought *Flowres* to press in 1573;
- 9) wrote prose and poetry that sounds like Dorrell's;
- 10) can (ideally) be linked to the name Henry Willobie. (154-5)

Prechter concludes:

To my knowledge, the only man who fits this description is Nicholas Breton, who was born in 1545 and did not die until 1626. A prolific writer, he composed in a variety of different literary genres, including pastoral and religious verse, prose tales, imaginary letters, essays, and satires. He was born in London, England. He was a stepson of the English poet George Gascoigne and studied at the University of Oxford. One could hardly ask for a better summary of a plausible editor for *Avisa*. (155)

And, I would add, if Breton were not the original author, he may have been more than just the editor. He may have edited the entire work and updated the last chapter to include H.W. as Henry Wriothesley, and W.S. as Oxford, to make the poem topical to 1594.

Prechter continues, as if to confirm Breton's authorship: "Breton, moreover, is well known as a careful student of Gascoigne's work." He quotes Grosart:

It is interesting, because of the biographic fact...that Breton's mother in her widowhood married George Gascoigne, to find that his step-son paid him the most flattering of all homage, of walking in his footsteps. There are various evidences that the poems of Gascoigne were familiar to Breton. Thus, in the *Floorish upon Fancy*, the "Dolorous Discourse..." echoes Gascoigne's "Passion of a Lover" [in which] lines 7-8 are taken in substance from it...So too the opening of "A Gentleman

talking on a time,” etc., is nearly verbatim from Gascoigne, “When first I thee beheld in colours black and white.” It is thus clear that in his earliest book, the *Floorish upon Fancy*, the influence of Gascoigne was deeper than that of any other in his after-books...This is precisely the description we would hope to find when searching for an author who could imitate, at times nearly verbatim, aspects of Gascoigne’s *Flowres* and *Posies*. Breton’s use of religious and moral language fits Dorrell’s as well. (156)

In an age of subtle multiple allusions, each of the characters in the poem could represent more than one person. It is possible that *Willobie His Avis* was originally a work by Gascoigne with the Queen and her early suitors in mind, and that Breton updated it, made it topical, and changed the focus to more clearly match Elizabeth Trentham. He then added the final and longest chapter on H.W. who was clearly Southampton, the final suitor, including the references to W.S. that match Oxford.

Prechter himself suggests such a scenario:

As noted earlier, some stylistic considerations, such as the rash of ampersands, have led scholars to suggest that the editor, Dorrell, “meddled” with the fifth section of *Avisa*. De Luna also noted format changes in the form of a different heading, failure to start on a new page and the omission of “the breathing space, large type, and ornamental border normally heralding the appearance of a new suitor.” The introduction of a third party in the story is also new, as are the prose interjections “written from a point of view completely exterior to the rest of the work.” The fifth suitor’s name, Henrico Willobego, is nearly identical to the supposed author’s, another difference from the other sections, even though, as de Luna and others confirmed, “the author and the fifth suitor are clearly meant as separate persons.” H.W. writes many poetic letters to Avis, and is the only suitor to do so. H.W.’s story takes up three times the space of any of the others. These myriad differences prompted de Luna to state, “Various aspects of this fifth suit, in short, suggest that parts of it may well be an interpolation by some writer other than Willobie himself ...The likeliest suspect is “Hadrian Dorrell”, the self-admitted filcher of Willobie’s poem.” (152)

Though Prechter claims that the style of this last chapter still matches Gascoigne’s, I believe that on this point De Luna is correct—the last chapter seems to indicate another hand.

As I have mentioned, it is possible that Elizabeth the Queen and Elizabeth the Countess were both targets for diverse reasons—perhaps in different drafts by different authors at different times. But this means the allusions have to be both topical to 1594 and, say, the 1560s or even earlier. Gascoigne may have written the

first draft as a parody of the Queen, and Breton reworked it in 1594 as a libel against Elizabeth Trentham.

If the story in *Avisa* is only about Queen Elizabeth, Prechter might well be right that its author was Gascoigne and not Breton. But if *Avisa* is also Elizabeth Trentham, the younger man has to have written it. Prechter concludes:

Thus, two known facts relating to Nicholas Breton—his attendance at Oxford University and a link via relatives in Wiltshire to Henry and Thomas Willobie—fit Dorrell’s only hints of self-identification. So, until a better candidate comes along, Nicholas Breton seems to be the best choice for the man behind the names Hadrian Dorrell, Abell Emet, Contraria Contrariis and Thomas Willobie.

All of these “people” provide commentaries in *Avisa*. Are they the same person?

### Identity of the Characters

De Luna’s controversial proposal is that Elizabeth I was *Avisa*. She identifies the five suitors as the Queen’s: (1) Thomas Seymour in 1547, the Nobleman, (2) Philip II of Spain, Cavaleiro, (3) The Duke d’Alencon, D.B., the Frenchman, (4) D.H., a combination of Sir Christopher Hatton and the Archduke Charles of Austria, and (5) H.W., Italo-Hispalensis, a combination of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex. Prechter disagrees with her identification of H.W., believing him to be Don Juan of Austria. He also disagrees with De Luna that W.S. is Shakespeare, maintaining as I do that it’s Oxford.

It is important to note that the descriptions and actions of *Avisa*, Cavaleiro and H. W. match those of Elizabeth Trentham, Don Antonio Pérez, and Henry Wriothesley more closely than those of Queen Elizabeth I, Philip II and Don Juan of Austria. This too is consistent with the date of publication.

### Who was Avisá?

One of the strongest and least forced clues that de Luna presents is that *Avisa* signs five of her epistles “Alwais the Same,” a translation of Elizabeth I’s personal motto, *Semper eadem*. However, the subject of the Queen’s suitors of the 1540’s or 1570’s was not topical in 1594. Beyond this, many of the story’s details pointedly exclude Elizabeth Tudor as *Avisa* while confirming Elizabeth Trentham. For instance:

1. *Avisa* was a Maid of Honor to the Queen for 10 years before she married, as was Elizabeth Trentham. This rules out the Queen herself.

2. *Avisa* was born in the west of England. Elizabeth Trentham was born in Staffordshire, to the northwest of London. This again rules out London-born



Queen Elizabeth. But because this does not fit her thesis, De Luna is forced to describe the discrepancy as a false clue, though on no other basis than evidentiary inconvenience.

3. Avisá's father was a mayor of a town but not of noble stock; Trentham's father was not a nobleman, and was twice the sheriff of Staffordshire, a similar office. None of this applies to Queen Elizabeth.

4. Avisá was about 30 years old when she wed; Elizabeth Trentham also married at about the age of thirty. The Virgin Queen of course never married.

5. Avisá lived "in public eye," true of Elizabeth I of course but also of the Countess Elizabeth Trentham, wife of one of the most distinguished noblemen in the land. *Avisa* contains numerous details about the village of Stoke Newington, where she and Oxford lived, literally minutes from The Theatre and The Curtain in Shoreditch (Allen 142).

6. *Avisa* describes the area as a vale where "muses sing, here Satyres play," references to The Theatre and The Curtain, near St. George's Inn. The Queen of course lived in castles, not in a vale as described above.

### Who was H.W.?

Prechter identifies H.W. as Don Juan of Austria. However, he relies heavily for this on the work of Ron Hess who

came to the rescue with a crucial insight. Based on "the only clear clue about 'Mr. H.W.' that [*Willobie His Avisá*] gives," i.e., his description as being "Italo-Hispensis," an Italianate Spaniard, Hess proposed that H.W. is Don Juan of Austria. He observed "from about 1574 to as late as Feb. 1578 there were secret efforts by emissaries from both sides to negotiate marriage between Queen Elizabeth and Don Juan. [There is] evidence that Oxford's travels to Italy in 1575-76 were an elaborate mission to contact, probe, engage, and ultimately betray Don Juan of Austria, the heroic half-brother of Philip II of Spain. Don Juan, despite being born in Bavaria, was of Spanish descent and upbringing and associated with the Earl of Oxford in Italy, thus justifying Willobie's moniker." (140)

Unfortunately, this is about the extent of the evidence presented for Don Juan. We need hardly add that there are no apparent connections between the initials H.W. and the dashing, illegitimate son of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, and half-brother of Philip II of Spain.

On the other hand, not only are "H. W." Henry Wriothesely's initials, and both W. S. (Canto 55) and Avisá (Canto 64) refer to him as "Harry"—the name

Southampton was called by his family. H.W. is described as a “new actor” and “a young man and a schollar of very good hope,” again nothing to do with Don Juan.

H.W. ends all his epistles to Avisia with Italian phrases, seven of which are found in John Florio’s *Giardino de Recreatione*, published in 1591 (Angell 666). Florio was Southampton’s tutor. He was praised in 1592, at age 19, as brilliant in the learned arts and enthralled by the theater, and was studying Italian with Florio at that time (Angell 665-6; Sams 97-100). Thus, the clues in *Avisia* clearly point to Henry Wriothesley as W.H., rather than Don Juan.

### Who was W.S.?

According to Eric Sams, “the *Sonnets*...describe just such a triangular relationship as outlined in *Avisia*, where W.S. ‘not long before had tryed the curtesy of the like passion’, (married her?) and thus definitely date these *Sonnets* to 1593-4” (98).

The narrator then describes W. S. as “now newly recovered of the like infection,” meaning that though W.S. had been in love with Avisia “not long before,” he was now “recovered” from the “infection” of her love.

Could this be why the author dedicated a poem in 1594 to Southampton about a man raping his friend’s wife? Just as the *Sonnets* forgive the Fair Youth for his affair with the Dark Lady, could the amorous dedication to *Lucrece* also be the author’s confirmation of his forgiveness, and of his love for Southampton? Avisia is the married woman whom the two men are pursuing. Her husband is discreetly never identified. In addition, W.S. seems to know Avisia quite well. He seems to know details about her that none else knows. Is he her husband? The only distinguishing trait mentioned for W.S. in *Avisia* is that he is “an old player”. Oxford in 1594 was 44 years old. He would have been considered at the time “an old player”.

Angell argues that *Avisia* implies that both Southampton and Shakespeare succeeded in their seduction of Avisia/Elizabeth. But how could the commoner Shakspere, as she states, have had an affair with Elizabeth Trentham, the Countess of Oxford? Even more unlikely is De Luna’s identification of Avisia as Queen Elizabeth, and of W.S. as Shakespeare, the Stratford man (107). It should be noted that neither Angell nor De Luna overtly raises the possibility of W.S. being Oxford. How could Shakspere of Stratford have had an affair with the Queen? The libel should have made much of this issue, but doesn’t. As mentioned before, if the censors thought *Willobie His Avisia* referred to the Queen it would have never been published and its author hunted down. It is, of course, ludicrous that an actor would offer advice to a nobleman about how to bed a queen—the Queen.

Angell notes the passages in the H.W. section of *Avisia* that describe a woman who brought forth a man child, a woman who was with child by whoredom, and a man who stole his neighbor’s wife (667).

H. W. is presented as receiving W. S.'s endorsement of the seduction of his own mistress (wife?). *Avisa* even has W. S. play the role of procurer, actually encouraging H. W. Angell's interpretation, developed independently from the *Sonnets*, which also mention a bastard, suggests a bizarre arrangement in which W.S. serves as a willing cuckold in favor of Southampton, who then might have been the father of Henry de Vere, born in 1593. Angell surmises that

It is possible that this is a neat stroke of ridicule calculated to wound the *amour propre* of the unhappy Shakespeare (667).

But why would Shakespeare be the cuckold when Oxford was the one married to Elizabeth?

Let us not forget that the dedication of *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 was also from Shakespeare (W.S.) to Southampton (H.W.). Not only is *Avisa Lucrece*, but also *Venus*. *Venus and Adonis* of course describes an older woman who pursues a younger man. In the *Sonnets*, references to age differences, associated with the themes of Time and Mutability, persistently recur.

*Avisa* thus satisfactorily identifies the main characters in the *Sonnets* (which make a point of hiding them). Southampton was indeed the Fair Youth, the consensus among most scholars today. What is not generally accepted is that Oxford's second wife, Elizabeth Trentham, was the Dark Lady. She was the only woman with whom Oxford is known to have had a sexual affair at the time that both the *Sonnets* and *Willobie His Avisa* were written. Yet in his most personal and revealing poetry Oxford mentions neither his marriage nor the birth of a son and heir in 1593. That his son was fathered by someone else may explain why.

If this is true, the bisexual affair reveals that Oxford is Shakespeare. This is the most significant implication of this theory.

### **Who Was Cavaleiro?**

Of special relevance in the dating of *Avisa* is the part of the suitor Cavaleiro. Who was he? De Luna suggests King Philip II of Spain, one of Queen Elizabeth's suitors in the 1550s. We have seen however that this was a dead issue by the mid-1590s. On the other hand, Don Antonio Pérez fits the description of the suitor perfectly. He was well known in 1594, and had had many contacts with the Queen, Essex and Bacon.

Famous, pompous and arrogant, in 1594 the Don was recognized by everyone at court. As a special ambassador from the French king, he arrived in England in the Spring of 1593 and by the next year was notorious.

*Avisa* was published in September and became immensely popular. Was this because it was topical, revealing a current scandal? *Cavaleiro* is the only Spanish word in the poem, and it means knight or gentleman. The character himself could be used to denote a generic Spaniard, for as he says he is "a stranger seem as yet,

and seldom seen before this day.” Later he talks about his wealth, and calls himself “an old gamester.” Why would Philip, the richest man on earth, need to brag about his wealth, or claim to be old if he was young at the time in 1558? All this matches Pérez, not Philip.

In the opening lines of the “Cavaleiro” canto Avisá says: “What now? What news? New wars in hand? More trumpets blown of fond conceits?” This seems a clear enough reference to the reason for Pérez’s presence in England at all: the King of France had sent him to persuade Elizabeth to join with him against Spain. Part of Avisá’s response mentions Cavaleiro’s “filthy love...Sodom’s sink...wanton will,” etc. This was Pérez’s reputation in 1594, not Philip II’s in 1558.

The defining clue that Pérez is Cavaleiro is Avisá’s cautionary tale, repeated twice for emphasis, of a brain-sick youth who was stricken blind for looking dishonestly upon a godly woman. While in England Pérez was fond of repeating the canard that Philip II had killed both his wife, Queen Elisabeth de Valois, and his son, Don Carlos, because of an illicit romance between them.

In a letter he sent to M. du Vair, a government official, a copy of which I obtained from the Bibliotheque Nationale de France, DUPUY 661- FOL 19 et 21, Pérez repeats the story of Don Carlos’s death. According to Winstanley, the information found by H. Forneron and A.T. du Prat in their research of the Pérez files in Paris (94-98) relates how Pérez claimed that Don Carlos was brain sick in love with the Queen and fell down some steps at the palace which left him blind. As De Luna puts it:

in descending a dark stair...he (Prince Carlos) fell and suffered a severe fracture of the skull. As a result of this injury, Don Carlos...became totally blind. (58)

He was imprisoned and later ordered to be killed by the King.

The description in *Willobie His Avisá* matches Pérez’s claims about Don Carlos and his love for Elisabeth of Valois, and how it led to his unfortunate demise. This surely identifies Cavaleiro as Pérez, widely recognized in 1594 as a flamboyant, bisexual figure. That he tried to woo Elizabeth Trentham could be interpreted as part of the slander against both of them, whether it happened or not, again corroborating my insistence that *Willobie* was topical in 1594, and not about Queen Elizabeth and her suitors 30 or 40 years earlier.

The Spanish royal scandal became so famous throughout Europe that Pérez’s story is remembered to this day. Over 50 plays, books, and operas have retold it. The most famous versions include Schiller’s play and Verdi’s opera, both called *Don Carlos*, in which Don Antonio Pérez repeats his calumnies against Philip II. The plot and characters in both play and opera revolve around the mythical love affair between Don Carlos and Queen Elisabeth of Spain, and its tragic finale.

### Nicholas Breton

As I have said, in my opinion Prechter unknowingly makes a strong case for Nicholas Breton as *Avisa's* most likely author. But who was Breton? He lived ca. 1553-1625—the exact dates are not certain. As Gascoigne's stepson, he wrote many religious and pastoral poems, satires, dialogues, and essays. Breton enjoyed the patronage of Sir Philip Sidney and his sister, Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, and may even have become her lover. In 1598 he was accounted one of the country's best lyrical poets. *The Dictionary of National Biography* notes:

Among his early patrons, the chief was Mary, countess of Pembroke; he dedicated to her the "Pilgrimage to Paradise," 1592, to which is added the "Countesse of Pembroke's Love," where he speaks of himself as "Your Ladishipp's unworthy named Poet." He also wrote for her his "Auspicante Jehoua," 1597, and the Countess of Pembroke's "Passion." Passages in "Wit's Trenchmour" (1597) refer to the rejection of the poet's love-suit by a lady of high station, and it seems not improbable that Breton's intimacy with the Countess of Pembroke passed beyond the bounds of patron and poet. Whatever the character of the relationship, it ceased after 1601.

Apparently, Breton and the countess had a falling out at one time, but later reconciled. He wrote much in her honor until 1601, when she seems to have withdrawn from active literary life. According to her biographer, Margaret Hannay, after her husband's death in 1601 the Countess carried on a flirtation with a handsome and learned young doctor, Sir Matthew Lister. The rest of her time was spent managing Wilton and the other Pembroke estates on behalf of her son, William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, who gradually took over her role as literary patron.

Breton had a strongly religious/moralistic bent and may have felt personally outraged at the scandalous sexual impropriety of Oxford and Trentham. If his stepfather did originally write *Willobie His Avisa* about Elizabeth I, he may have updated it to draw a contrast between her virtue and Trentham's vice.

### Mary Herbert and Edward de Vere

Mary Sidney was born 27 October 1561, the third daughter of Sir Henry Sidney and Lady Mary Dudley Sidney, and thus the niece of Sir Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Queen Elizabeth's favorite. She and her sisters were given a superb education, comparable to that of Elizabeth and the learned Cooke sisters. She was schooled in scripture and the classics, trained in rhetoric, and grew up fluent in French, Italian, Spanish, and Latin. She may also have known some Greek and Hebrew. Her uncle Leicester subsequently arranged her marriage on 21 April 1577 to the wealthy Henry Herbert, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, his close friend and contemporary.

Mary was Herbert's third wife. They had four children, including William, later third Earl of Pembroke, and Phillip, the fourth earl and the first of Montgomery. Readers will know that the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare's plays were dedicated to them. The family must have been on good terms with de Vere because in 1597 William Herbert, the third earl, was a candidate to marry his daughter Bridget Vere. In 1604 Philip Herbert, the fourth, married another daughter, Susan Vere, a few months after Oxford died.

It is well known that after her marriage the Countess gathered around her a brilliant group of poets, musicians, and artists. She was reputedly second only to the queen as an Elizabethan *femme savante*. Curiously, the one major literary figure of the time, who seems to have been absent or was not included in her circle, was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.

In 1579, the famous tennis-court quarrel occurred between Oxford and her brother, Sir Philip Sidney. The two men belonged to rival factions at court who disagreed, among other things, about the Queen's suitors. In addition, Oxford and Sidney were poetic rivals—among Sidney's poems is a sharp retort to Oxford's "Were I a King."

The origin of the tennis-court spat is unclear; apparently it was a quarrel over which of the two had reserved the court first. In the heat of the moment Oxford contemptuously called Sidney a "puppy," and Sidney issued a challenge. Fortunately, Elizabeth forbade the two men to duel, ordering Sidney to apologize as Oxford as his social superior. Sidney refused and withdrew from the court. (Sobran, 123.)

In 1580, Howard and Arundel claimed that Oxford "resolved not to face Sidney in a duel, but rather to have him murdered," and described the details of the plot (Nelson, 200). Whether this claim was true or not, it seems to have been widely believed. Anderson notes that "Sidney and de Vere were as destined to become rivals as the fox and the hound" (37). He adds:

De Vere and Sidney were well suited for each other's enmity. Both were exceptionally intelligent and well-educated young men wielding great worldly knowledge and literary talents. Both were also quick to anger and prone to carrying grudges. (Anderson, 152)

We should also note that the poetic rivalry between Sidney and Oxford seems to have lasted beyond Sidney's death in 1586. According to Ramon Jiménez, Oxford apparently responds in *Henry V* to Sidney's criticism that modern dramas were breaking with Aristotle's unities of time and place by making outrageous demands upon their audiences' imagination. As Sydney noted in his *An Apology for Poetry*, (1582?) armies on stage were ridiculously represented by "four or five most vile and ragged foils, / Right ill-disposed in brawl ridiculous."

Jiménez continues:

Why would the playwright...for the first time lament the confines of his theater and repeatedly apologize? My answer is that he did so to rebuke the fatuous Sidney, who, a few years before, on the tennis court, he had called “a puppy.” ...Oxford takes Sidney’s contemptuous phrase about “four swords and bucklers,” turns it into poetry, and then flings it back in Sidney’s face.(Jiménez 1)

Fifteen eighty-six was a difficult year for Mary Sidney. Her father, mother and brother all died. Promoting Philip’s legacy became paramount to her, leading to an increasingly active participation in the world of literary networks. Poets Philip had supported, such as Abraham Fraunce, Edmund Spenser, Thomas Moffet and Nicholas Breton, now received her patronage. In his dedication to *Delia* (1592), Samuel Daniel described Mary as “the happie and iudiciall Patronesse of the Muses.” Indeed she ultimately became the first non-royal woman in England to receive a significant number of dedications. She conscientiously edited Philip’s work, prepared an improved version of *Arcadia*, and published it in 1593. Five years later she authorized another edition of his works, including *A Defence of Poetry*, *Certain Sonnets*, and *The Lady of May*. Her edition of his *Astrophil* poems corrected Thomas Nashe’s corrupt version of 1591.

It is curious that it seems that Oxford never became a member of Mary Sidney Herbert’s literary circle; at least there is no documentation of it. There is no mention in Hannay’s biography of Mary Sidney Herbert of Oxford being at Wilton. Nor, though they must have been acquainted, is there evidence that Oxford and the second earl were friends. While it’s true that Pembroke’s Men performed at least three Shakespeare plays—the title pages of *Titus Andronicus* (Q1, 1594), *The Taming of a Shrew* (Q1, 1594), and *The True Tragedy of Richard, Duke of York (Henry VI, Part 3, Q1, 1595)*, all mention that they were acted by “the Honorable Earl of Pembroke his servants”—not enough is known to draw any further conclusions.

These three anonymous plays were among the first Shakespeare plays published, and in the same time frame as *Willobie his Avisia*. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that Pembroke was friendly with their anonymous author. His troupe was apparently active for only a couple of years. However, it is interesting to note that the Pembroke was a close friend of Leicester’s, the uncle to his wife Mary Sidney, and who was not on the best terms with Oxford. In addition, the Herberts were friends and allies of Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex, Leicester’s stepson, also not on friendly terms with Oxford. It seems that the Sidneys, the Herberts, the Dudleys, and the Devereaux were on the opposite social side of the de Veres.

The connection with Mary Sidney Herbert could provide another clue as to why it was Breton who wrote or updated *Willobie His Avisia* in order to satirize Oxford and his wife. Mary would have been in a position to provide him with all the information and gossip he needed—the scandal of the three-way affair described in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* seems to have been well known in some cir-

cles. As the leader of a major literary salon the Countess would surely have been aware of Oxford's "sugar'd sonnets among his friends" as Francis Meres famously put it in *Palladis Tamia* (1598). Could it be that Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, was behind the publication of a work intended to expose Oxford to public humiliation? Her obsession with her brother's legacy may well have motivated her to destroy his rival's reputation.

But we need not speculate so far. Because of his strong religious/moralistic bent, or his love for the Countess, or to gain her favor, Breton may have simply taken it upon himself, after learning about the scandal, to write the poem and publish it. And then again, maybe he was just a literary opportunist.

Finally, we know that by 1593 Marlowe, Barnfield, and Drayton had formed a group of poets with linked interests with Shakespeare in homoerotic poetry, and there are clear signs of direct influence and aesthetic fellowship among them (Daugherty 1-6; Smith *Desire* 135-136; Wells *Sex* 56 -57). This, and the bad blood between the families, and Breton's close relationship with Mary Sidney Herbert, may thus have been the motivating factors for the 1594 revision and publication of *Avisa*.

### Oxford as Author

Some Oxfordians have argued that *Willobie His Avis* was written by de Vere himself, seeking revenge upon his faithless wife. The claim is that among the anonymous works of the period *Willobie his Avis* is the most Oxfordian. But Prechter makes a convincing case against this proposal, noting that

These tempting items seem initially to favor a case for Oxford's authorship. But it is also apparent that most of them involve serious contraindications. The cumulative weight of certain stylistic aspects attending *Avisa* and a related fact undermines the case for Oxford's involvement.

Prechter presents twelve points to support this view, summarizing his reasons for the confusion and why Oxford could not be the author (142-143):

The observation that *Avisa* has some Shakespearean qualities fits Gascoigne's authorship, because the similarity of Gascoigne's and Oxford's poetic styles is already a matter of record. Their writing styles are so similar that it has become traditional in some circles to assert that Oxford wrote all or at least a portion of *A Hundreth sundrie Flowres*, or even brought it to press. But a close inspection of that book and Gascoigne's other works confirms that, despite a few Shakespearean parallels, Gascoigne consistently wrote simple verse lacking in Oxford's artifice, euphuism and passion, the poetic qualities we find in *Avisa*. (148)



However, it is curious that the initials H.W. for Henry Willobie are the same as for one of the fictitious editors of *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers*, published in 1573, almost 20 years before. *Avisa* uses the same posie “Ever or Never” at the end of the poem as Gascoigne did in *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowers*. Oxford and Gascoigne knew each other from the time they attended Gray’s Inn together in 1566. So there could be a connection.

In any case, it seems that the de Vere and Herbert families, if there were an ongoing quarrel, had reconciled by 1597, when Mary’s son William decided that he wanted to marry Oxford’s daughter Bridget. This could explain the editor’s insistence in the second edition of *Avisa* (1596) that

thus much I dare precisely advouch, that the Author intended in this discourse,  
neyther the description nor prayse of any particular woman, Nor the naming or  
ciphering of any particular man.

Mary’s second son Herbert also married a de Vere, Oxford’s daughter Susan, in 1604. *Avisa* was published again in 1605 with an added poem under the name Thomas Willobie, which extended the claim that the character *Avisa* was not a libel on any real woman. This theory provides an explanation of the 1596 and 1605 editions with their denials, and their connection with the two Herbert-Vere marriages. If *Avisa* was intended to parody Queen Elizabeth, why have a new edition years after her death in 1605 claiming that it was not a libel against any woman or man? Would the editions of 1609 and 1635, long after Oxford’s death, have anything to do with the equally long-dead Queen? It’s more likely that its references were to still-living noble families—current gossip.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the 1594 *Willobie His Avisa* is not mainly the praise of a constant virgin, Queen Elizabeth. It is more likely a topical libel against a well-known married woman, Elizabeth Trentham, Oxford’s wife, that created a stir among the literati. It was banned in 1599, but it did not face the fury of the authorities as it would have been had it been recognized as an attack on the Queen.

The poem is moreover something that Nicholas Breton could have written or updated, under the patronage of the Countess of Pembroke, and later tried to cover up to reflect the reconciliation of the families. Paraphrasing Prechter, until a better candidate comes along, Breton seems to be the best choice for the man behind the names Hadrian Dorrell, Abell Emet, Contraria Contrariis and Thomas Willobie, and finally as the author of *Willobie His Avisa*.

But most important, as mentioned at the beginning, if Elizabeth Trentham was indeed the main subject of the piece, why in 1594 in a poem that even names “Shakespeare” and *The Rape of Lucrece*, would her husband, the 17th earl of Oxford, be satirized under the initials “W.S.”?

These identifications, I suggest, resolve the whole Shakespeare authorship polemic.

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