

Shake-speare's Sonnets:

Their Dates, their History, and the Story They Tell

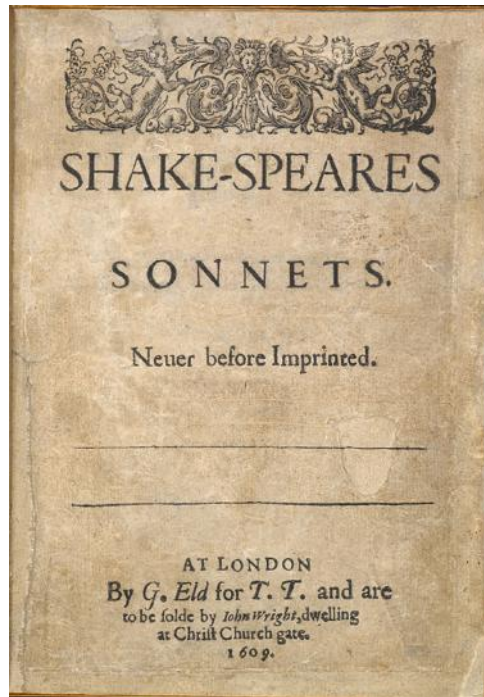
by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

Shake-speare's Sonnets is the sole document still in existence in which the great poet divulges anything specific about his own life. Unfortunately for those who seek to place it in context with his life, it is his feelings alone that he reveals, no facts. Generations of scholars, led astray by the Stratford biography, have added layers of confusion to the questions that readers from his own time must have had as they attempted to identify the three personalities in the story. Dubbed by critics the Fair Youth, the Dark Lady, and the Rival Poet, these have remained objects of the most intense argument for centuries as the Poet himself, misidentified as William of Stratford, contributed nothing but confusion.

Locating them by means of topical events has been difficult, even impossible, because the author is just as vague about the wheres and whens as he is about the whos. External events appear through his emotional responses, too dimly to be connected to historical events with any certainty, but this has not stopped a great many from trying. A bibliography from 1979 gives 1,580 titles of books on *Shake-speare's Sonnets* alone (Hayashi). These have produced a variety of scenarios, not only for the story they tell, but for how it may have been edited by its publishers, why it wasn't published for at least a decade after it was first mentioned in print, who was responsible for having it published, the identity of the "Mr. W. H." to whom it was dedicated, and dozens of other questions demanding solutions. Much has become clear over the centuries, but questions still remain.

Due to the lack of evidence, it has become the fashion for Shakespeare scholars to refuse to comment. Some opine that it's simply impossible to know the truth, others that the Youth, the Lady and the Rival are no more than figments of Shakespeare's imagination. But for Oxfordians battling the Stratford mystique the truth about *Shake-speare's Sonnets* is crucial to proving not only who he was, but how and why his identity got lost.

The story itself is simple enough; told in two coincident sequences, the first, to the Fair Youth, the second, to the Dark Lady. The Poet, apparently no longer young, appears to have fallen in love with an attractive young aristocrat at the same time that he's sleeping with another man's mistress, a woman of dark complexion, volatile temperament, musical talent, and irresistible sex appeal. In sonnets 40–42, the Lady seduces the youth not long after she's been introduced to him, apparently by the Poet. Sonnets 133 and 134 in the sequence to the Lady refer to what we must assume is the same triangle. In other words, for some weeks or months it appears that the Poet was writing in romantic/sexual terms to or about both the Youth and the Lady at the same time. Sonnets 78–86 refer to a second poet who threatens to come between himself and the Fair Youth.



The Sonnet Tradition

When in doubt, begin with what is certain, here the history of sonneteering. According to history, the originator of the 16th-century version of the sonnet cycle was the Italian Petrarch (1304–1374), premiere poet of the European Renaissance, whose formula—14 lines divided into octet and sestet; the first a statement, the second a response—set the standard for the decade that English poets would use it to express an unrequited love. Petrarch's sonnets

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to Laura, as with Dante's canzoni to Beatrice, are addressed to women with whom they have fallen in love but who will not or cannot respond because they belong to someone else.

The English were similarly inspired by the sonnet cycles of later Italians, Tasso, Michelangelo (yes, the great sculptor) and Ariosto, and by the French Ronsard, Desportes, Du Bellay, and La Primaudaye. Although there are variations, most follow the standard format: a series of poems, sequential in time, addressed to a greatly desired but unattainable female. While earlier Petrarchan formulae had fallen by the 1590s into the stilted artificiality of what C. S. Lewis dubbed "the drab era," the English sonnet cycles of the decade reveal a fresh new appetite for spontaneity.¹

Astrophil and Stella

This trend was apparently sparked by the posthumous publication of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, a cycle of 108 sonnets, seemingly written on a regular basis over a period of months some time before 1585 when Sidney died from wounds suffered in the Lowlands war. These express his yearning for *Stella* (Latin for *Star*); *Astrophil* (Latin for *Starlover*) gradually comes to accept that he is not going to have his moment of bliss.

Following their publication in 1590 by his sister, Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, Philip's cycle was soon followed by the publication of cycles of varying lengths by poets Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, Richard Barnes, Edmund Spenser, Sir Walter Raleigh, George Gascoigne, Thomas Lodge and Henry Lok, and at least a dozen others. While it's generally been assumed that Shakespeare's came later, that may be only because it took so long for his to get published.

Because in matters of form Shakespeare followed the Petrarchan tradition, we can assume with some confidence that, apart from the division into two sequences, they were published in the order in which they were written and in which they were meant to be read; and that the first 126 were to only the one youth and the subsequent 26 to just the one Lady.

Those who claim to see other scenarios for their composition than a chronological response to real feelings about two real individuals may suggest a multitude of possibilities, but because the story told by *Shakespeare's Sonnets* is sufficiently coherent in the order in which they were published, and because it was traditional for a sonnet cycle to be written or presented as a sequence in time, we can assume, not only that they were written to real persons, but also that (with perhaps one or two exceptions) they were published in the order in which they were written. As publisher Robert Giroux, author of one of the most comprehensive and intelligent books on the subject, puts it: "Unless one accepts the order as given, chaos is come again" (177).²

As for the purpose of *Shake-speare's Sonnets*, the tradition was for the poet to express a real emotional experience with what artistry he was capable of while preserving the privacy of the one addressed. As with Sidney's *Stella*, most sonnet cycles were addressed to some *Delia* or *Phyllis*, cover names for the real object of their devotion, usually a married woman or one whose family would have been far from honored had her identity been revealed.³ Some, like Spenser's *Amoretti*, remain nameless, as do Shakespeare's. What is immediately evident to a reader is that the first 126 poems, many expressing the utmost in passionate love, many suffused with sexual imagery, were written, not to a woman, but to a youth in his teens, a fact first made known in 1778 when the great Shakespeare editor Edmund Malone reinstated both the original order, which had been scrambled, and the original pronoun, changed by prudish editors from *he* to *she*.

Him or Her?

The revelation that the greatest love poems in English had been written from one male to another so distressed the homophobic Victorians that they almost didn't recover. Having just been awakened to Shakespeare's genius, busy with turning him into a sort of literary St. George, so alarmed were they by Malone's revelation⁴ that, according to Giroux, we came within an ace of losing them altogether. The suggestion that the great Shakespeare was gay was simply intolerable. Surely this is one of the main reasons why the 19th-century authorities, tempest-tossed by the Authorship Question, lost interest in anyone but William of Stratford, about whom nothing was known, bad or good.

Although Shakespeare's contemporaries were not so easily shocked as the Victorians,⁵ the prevalence of sexual imagery may have something to do with the fact that the first edition of *Shake-speare's Sonnets* wasn't published until the sonnet craze had been over for more than a decade, why very few copies of it have turned up since, and why, when a second edition of his collected works was published in 1640, the sex of the pronoun was changed; this history that lends weight to the theory, still widely advocated, that it reflects a sexual relationship, that both men were gay (to use the present term).⁶

Yet this may well be nothing but an overreaction to the imagery, for there is nothing in *Shake-speare's Sonnets* that makes it a certainty that the Poet and the Youth had sex. Although Shakespeare makes it clear enough that both had sex at different times with the Dark Lady, there is nothing whatsoever to confirm that the Poet "made love" to the Youth in any other way than by bombarding him with poems.

Sex in the Sixteenth Century

One of the problems we face in understanding *Shake-speare's Sonnets* is the great difference between the role played by sex in the lives of the Elizabethans, their ancestors and centuries of descendants, and the role it plays in our lives today. For many centuries the governments of all nations were based on sex, that is, the results of a King having sex with his legally wed Queen, in hopes that it would lead to the birth of male heirs, who, if they survived into adulthood (a big *if* in those days) their family would continue to rule the nation. All the drama that in a democracy we associate with electing candidates they associated with the monarch's sex life. Youthful heirs to the great aristocratic titles came under the same pressure to marry and produce heirs as soon as they were physically capable.

What is Shakespeare asking during the first seventeen sonnets? He's pressuring the Youth to marry, and produce heirs, exactly what someone who was in a position to guide a young earl would have done at that time. The real question should be, why did Shakespeare base his argument, not on this practical aspect, but on replicating the Youth's beauty?

Shakespeare's Dilemma

Surely we can see that when it came to publishing *Shake-speare's Sonnets*, the Bard was between the proverbial rock and a hard place. His primary purpose, stated repeatedly from sonnet 18 until sonnet 126, was to render the Youth immortal—a sort of human Adonis—by means of his poetry, something that would not be possible unless it got published. However, even if published, how could it immortalize someone who could not be identified? This does not make sense, but neither do a great many other issues from that time.

Also, consider Francis Meres' claims in "Wit's Treasury" (*Palladis Tamia*), that by 1598, when his book was published, Shakespeare's "sugar'd" sonnets were already being "shared among his private friends"—so such questions had been around for at least a decade before the question arose in 1609 for those readers who were not "among his private friends."

Think about this for a minute. Try to see the problem in all its reach and complexity, for this is certainly a major factor in the mystification of Shakespeare's identity, not only as author of *Shake-speare's Sonnets*, but of everything by Shakespeare published before or after, an issue that is primary for Oxfordians seeking to understand how the author's identity got lost. In such a well-defined and unchanging world, were the Youth's identity to be revealed, Shakespeare's identity would also have been revealed. (Were Shakespeare actually William of Stratford, this would not have been an issue.)

It is this that makes *Shake-speare's Sonnets* publication so important: why it was published at the particular time that it was published, who published it, the mysterious dedication⁷ that has caused so much argument over the years, and, not least, that it was probably suppressed (withdrawn from sale by order of the authorities) shortly after it appeared in the bookstalls.⁸ The story of the publication of *Shake-speares Sonnets* has everything to do with this problem, as much of a problem for the publisher as it was for the author and perhaps also for his 17th-Century literary executors.

The Story Told by *Shake-speare's Sonnets*

Apart from the identity and publishing issues, the story itself may seem a little weird to us in the 21st century, but it isn't hard to follow. The poet begins by urging the young man—"my lovely boy"—to have children so that his beauty will be replicated in his son. At sonnet 18 he drops this approach, shifting abruptly to assuring the Fair Youth that with his sublime poetry he will render him immortal.⁹ From #18 on, the tone shifts from that of a counselor to that of a lover, with praise of his beauty the overriding theme.

Over the course of a hundred more sonnets, they have good times and bad, the Poet alternately praises the Youth for his goodness and berates him for his behavior; there are misunderstandings; a woman of dark complexion threatens to come between them; a second poet appears to rival him in the Youth's affections; the Youth betrays the Poet in some way; later the Poet betrays the Youth; they part, meet again, and so forth. As the elder, the Poet takes a harsh tone from time to time, warning the Youth to watch his behavior, lest "thou dost common grow" (#69). After one last declaration of eternal devotion (#123), he returns to the issue of the Youth's beauty with the warning that it won't last forever.¹⁰

All in all, it seems a fairly straightforward account of a romance—or at the very least an extremely affectionate friendship—between two males of the same class but different ages. Off-topic digressions, flights of fancy, philosophy and soul-searching are natural adjuncts to any intimate relationship, for, after all, lovers, mates and close friends do occasionally exchange thoughts on something other than their feelings for each other.

Nor do such relationships in real life generally proceed in a straight line from passion to coldness, but go in circles from high to low and back to high again, or almost as high, returning again and again in an effort to reach the original feeling¹¹ until, as Feste puts it in *Twelfth Night*, "the whirligig of time brings in his revenges." This the Poet refuses to accept, claiming again and again that his love for the Youth will last forever: "No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change...I will be true, despite thy scythe and thee" (123).¹² But Time, of course, does bring it to an end—just three sonnets later.

The Major Themes

Much of the beauty of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* comes from the interweaving of their many themes and subtexts. I haven't the space here to deal as fully with this aspect as it deserves, but I must at least mention the four major themes, the first being the prevalence of sexual imagery. Without ever being in the slightest bit crude or obvious, the poet garnished his poems with layers of sexual innuendo and imagery. Those who wish to read them without taking any notice of this can do so, so great is the craft of the artist, but there can be no denying its existence. This is not my judgement alone, it is that of almost every authoritative author whose works I explored while preparing this essay. You will find scarcely one who denies that *Shakespeare's Sonnets* are lavish with sexual nuance.

The upbeat sonnets are an uninhibited verbal romp among the salacious puns and every other kind of resonance offered by the English language in a sort of locker room atmosphere of one guy to another, yet in such good taste that unless you've had it pointed out to you, or have enough experience with the language of the period to hear it for yourself, you might read them all without ever noticing the sexy subtext (Martin Green). Nevertheless, Shakespeare is not nearly so enthusiastic about the sex act itself. In *Sonnet 129* he calls it "an expense of spirit in a waste of shame...perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame, enjoyed no sooner but despised straight." It's *desire* he supports, not the sex act.

The second theme is what Edward Hubler calls Shakespeare's evocation of the medieval "doctrine of plenitude" (70), acquired in large part, he holds, from Chaucer's translation of Jean le Meun's thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, a ground-breaking work in its time, filled with subtle, lyrical sexual imagery from the Courtly Love tradition of the Middle Ages.

Although Shakespeare's love of bawdy puns and images blends easily with this theme, the theme itself is found, not in wordplay, but in images exploring the fecundity of Nature, the force that fertilizes, creates, heals and restores all living things. This he expresses through images of ripeness, fullness, and fertility, the perfumed and colorful flowers of spring as opposed to the "yellow leaf" of autumn and the barrenness, decay and death of winter. The juxtaposition of these two themes, fecundity and sexuality, suggests that the two are one, separated only by viewpoint—the bawdy wordplay a product of Christian embarrassment, the Rose metaphors the prehistoric tribal view of sexual desire as the sacred force that creates and maintains all living things.¹³

To the prehistoric tribal Europeans and even the Irish bards and singers, poets were magicians who could drive events through the powers inherent

in language (Graves 18–22). These sexual and nature's bounty themes can be seen as a form of sympathetic magic invoked by the Bard who, as tribal shaman, seeks to initiate the youth he loves into the realities of adult sexuality and procreation. The first seventeen sonnets—known as the “the marriage sonnets”—should be termed “the procreation sonnets,” since he never actually uses the word *marriage*. What is clear is that he is urging the Youth towards the kind of sexual relations that can create progeny—not quite the same thing.

A third and rather different sub-text woven throughout *Shake-speare's Sonnets* is the continual reference to human events in legal terms, specifically the terminology of Contract Law. Whenever Shakespeare reaches for a metaphor in *Shake-speare's Sonnets* it's just as apt to be a legal reference as one from sex or nature. In a series of passionate love poems, this is another oddity demanding an explanation.

Finally, throughout, there throbs the constant awareness of Time, how it gives only to take away, a theme that rarely occurs to poets under forty.

Identifying the Principals

Southampton vs. Pembroke

The English novelist Samuel Butler, writing in 1899, reports that Dr. Nathan Drake in 1817 was the first to suggest in print that the Fair Youth was the young Earl of Southampton, chiefly because the dedication to *The Rape of Lucrece* is so similar to the wording of *Sonnet 26*: “Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage thy merit hath my duty strongly knit.” Two years later one Heywood Bright suggested William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke. For a good 100 years the major contest for the identity of the Youth was between these two. Both were in their late teens, considered good-looking, got themselves in trouble with women at Court, and both have been described as irresponsible and spoiled, as Shakespeare (occasionally) describes the Youth.¹⁴

In one of the earliest sonnets (#3) he states, “Thou art thy mother's glass and she in thee calls back the lovely April of her prime.” The mothers of both Southampton and Pembroke were alive when their sons were in their teens and early twenties, and both were known for their beauty as girls. In exhorting the youth to marry, the poet states “You had a father, let your son say so.” The use of the past tense indicates that the father of the Fair Youth is dead, as was Southampton's (from age eight), while Pembroke lost his father in 1601 at age twenty—rather late, but still defensible.

Pembroke was in the lead for a long while, partly because his initials, W. H. (William Herbert) were the same as those in the infamous 1609 Dedication, and also because he didn't have Southampton's problem with the Stratford

biography—his age—Southampton was only nine years younger than William of Stratford—too small a spread to make sense of the Poet’s fatherly tone and his frequent references to their great age difference. Pembroke was in his teens when William was in his forties, a much more acceptable age difference. In seeking to explain the Dark Lady, Pembroke advocates came up with one Mary Fitton, a Queen’s Maid of Honor whom he had seduced and abandoned.

Alas for theories, someone eventually discovered a portrait of Mary Fitton who, as it turned out, unlike the Dark Lady of *Shake-speare’s Sonnets*, had a fair complexion, blue eyes and auburn hair. This proved too damaging to the Pembroke theory for it to survive (Rowse *Forman* 234). In fact, not one of the necessary characteristics of the Dark Lady fit Mary Fitton; far from the passionate, musically talented and loose-moraled mistress of *Shake-speare’s Sonnets*, she was the well-bred daughter of a reputable courtier.



Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, circa 1594, from a miniature in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

The Pembroke theory was finished for good when *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* finally acquired their present dates of composition, dates that place them much too early for the Earl of Pembroke to have been the Fair Youth.¹⁵ These dates, roughly 1589 to 1596—now generally accepted by all who study the subject—establish their composition at a time when the teenaged Southampton was the right age for the Fair Youth.

Finally, and most solidly, Southampton is the only candidate who can claim a real-life connection to the Poet since it was to “Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton” that both of Shakespeare’s long narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, were dedicated during the same period that we can now be certain that the early sonnets were written, thanks to two Shakespeare scholars whose works have finally established reliable dates for *Shake-speare’s Sonnets*.

Isaac and Davis

For a good 300 years the dates of *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* were as problematic as the dates of the plays. While orthodox scholars have generally adhered to a chronology based either on dates of publication or entry in the Stationers’

Register—where plays were concerned, their actual dates of composition could well have occurred many years before they were registered or published.¹⁶

The first scholar to come up with the dates now commonly accepted for the composition of *Shake-speare's Sonnets* was a German, Hermann Isaac, who published his findings in 1884 in the German *Jahrbuch* (176–264 as cited in Rollins 2.63). Isaac examined *Shake-speares Sonnets*, his two book-length narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, and all the plays—seeking similarities of language, theme and imagery. His results show that *Shake-speare's Sonnets* display just such similarities to both of the long poems and to two of the earliest plays, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Love's Labour's Lost*. Then in 1916, Shakespeare scholar Hyder Edward Rollins published some tests made by an American, Conrad Davis, that showed results almost identical to Isaac's (cited in R.M. Alden's *Sonnets* 447 ff). It seems that Davis made his tests before he learned of Isaac's work. Since then, a handful of scholars have verified the findings of these two. The results of their comparisons vary, but only slightly.

While we can't pinpoint the exact date when anything by Shakespeare was first written, we can date with some precision when the narrative poems reached the public, due to the fact that they were published shortly after they were registered with the Stationers Company (their dates in the Register conform with the dates on their title pages). *Venus and Adonis* was registered with the Stationers on April 19, 1593, *Lucrece* a year later on May 9, 1594. Close ties of language, theme and imagery indicate that most of the sonnets were written during the same period that he was writing these poems, and that all three were written at around the same time that the First Folio versions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Love's Labors Lost* were written.¹⁷ There are also close ties to *Edward III* (Schaar 117).¹⁸

Giving the Poet time to create *Venus and Adonis* and polish it to his satisfaction—three to six months should suffice—puts its composition in the latter half of 1592. Even this would be late for the earliest sonnets, since the narrative poems were probably circulated in manuscript within Shakespeare's literary coterie for some period before they were published (a consideration that university philologists with no feeling for poetry are inclined to ignore).

As for how long it took to write the entire series, luckily one of the few solid facts to be gleaned from them is stated in #104: "Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned, since first I saw you fresh which yet are green."¹⁹ If we take any time between 1590 and 1593 as the date he began them, and if we accept his word that there were three years between the first twenty or so sonnets and sonnet 104, we find ourselves somewhere between 1591 and

1596 for three-quarters of the Fair Youth sequence.²⁰ This is also a believable time span for the kind of intense relationship that the sonnets describe; much longer and he would seem to be suffering from an unhealthy obsession.

If we agree with the mainstream that the final twenty-six sonnets, those composed to or about the Dark Lady, were written at approximately the same time that *Sonnets 40–42* were written for the Fair Youth, that leaves us with only twenty-four, 104–126, that fall outside this date range. However, since tests done by these scholars searching links between *Shake-speare's Sonnets* and the two long poems have turned up similar links with the later sonnets as well (Shaar 194), scholars feel safe in assuming that—possibly apart from one or two that may have been added or inserted at a later date (possibly the strangely anomalous #103)—the entire cycle was completed sometime between 1595 and 1596.²¹

Since it is simply not possible to eliminate the human element entirely from a phenomenon that is so entirely human as is the composition of love poetry, these studies in literary forensics come as close as is possible under the circumstances to the certainties of “hard” science. The impact of these results, now accepted by those mainstream Shakespeareans who have ventured to comment,²² comes in part from the fact that they have been replicated more than once by scholars from very different viewpoints and backgrounds, and in part from the fact that they tie in so well with the known facts about the Earl of Southampton.

Well in keeping with the procreation theme of the first seventeen sonnets is the fact that the young earl’s family and advisors were urging him to marry during this same period: 1590–1595 (Akrigg 32). Early marriage was regarded by the young peer’s family as of utmost importance, so that a son and heir (or two) might be produced before the ever-present danger of his early death robs the family of their precious title.

Identifying the Dark Lady

Where Shakespeare may be overly subtle with sexual imagery relevant to the Fair Youth, he is anything but subtle with the Lady. She puts in an appearance in the earlier sequence in sonnets 40–42 where she wreaks emotional havoc by seducing the Youth; it is a more direct and doubtless more effective lesson in how to go about producing heirs than 126 sonnets.

Although it’s been her sex life and her coloring that have animated most latter-day discussions of the Lady and her identity, we must keep in mind that it was her musical talent that won the great Poet’s heart.

How oft when thou, my music, music play’st,
Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds

With thy sweet fingers when thou gently sway'st
The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,
Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap,
To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,
Whilst my poor lips which should that harvest reap,
At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand!
To be so tickled, they would change their state
And situation with those dancing chips,
O'er whom thy fingers walk with gentle gait,
Making dead wood more bless'd than living lips.
Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,
Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss. (Sonnet 128)

As for her coloring, note that over 200 years of commentary, sometimes misguided but generally quite intelligent thinkers have never doubted that when Shakespeare called her *dark* or *black*, he was referring to her coloring. True, he did have fun with secondary meanings of *black* and *dark* as *troubled* and *wicked*, but his treatment of women with a similar coloring in his plays (in particular *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act IV Scene 3) should make it clear that he was describing her looks.

However we may interpret it today, back then *black* was the standard Elizabethan adjective for Caucasians with dark brown hair, more recently described as *brunettes*. The "black Irish" had hair of a darker brown than the Celtic medium or light brown. Spaniards and Italians were *black*, while those with brown hair and medium complexions were *brown*, as in "The Nut-brown Maid" of the old ballad. Persons of African descent that today we term *black* were labelled *blackamoors* or *Ethiopians*; none of them feature in his plays (Othello was a Turk, not an Ethiopian). The Lady's "mournful" eyes and "dun" colored skin confirm a woman with the classic "olive" Mediterranean coloring.

In 1974, historian A. L. Rowse published his identification of the Dark Lady as Emilia Bassano Lanier, mistress of Henry Hunsdon, the Queen's Lord Chamberlain, patron and creator of The Lord Chamberlain's Men, the company that, from 1594 until the theaters were closed in 1640, remained the sole known producer of Shakespeare's plays.

Emilia Bassano

That Emilia was an accomplished musician should be no surprise. As the daughter of Baptista Bassano, a Court musician on the Queen's payroll, she belonged to the largest and most important of the musical families who provided concerts and background music for dinners, plays, and various other entertainments enjoyed by the Court. The important Recorder Consort

consisted solely of Emilia's cousins and other male members of the Bassano family (Lasocki 143).

Born in 1569, Emilia was in her early twenties during the period when the early sonnets were being written, exactly the right age for the Dark Lady, who was young enough that the Poet felt himself old by comparison, but old enough to be another man's mistress, and also old enough to be seen as the one doing the seducing where the Youth was concerned.

In 1995, music historians David Lasocki and Roger Prior backed up the Rowse claim with additional information on the Bassanos. Long known to historians of Renaissance music as Court musicians and composers as well as makers and menders of musical instruments, Baptista's father, Alvise Bassano, and four of his brothers had come originally from Venice to the Court of Henry VIII during the period that the King was lavish with his courtship of Anne Boleyn. Commonly accepted as Protestants—they would have made the legally mandated annual appearance at Easter Communion—it may be that they had embraced Protestantism, or its culture at least, after serving for several generations at the Catholic Courts of the Venetian Doges—but it may also be that their forefathers were Sephardic Jews among those forced by Ferdinand and Isabella to leave Spain in 1492 (92–7).

In any case, born into the highly educated liberal class that entertained the Courts of Venice, in 1535 their patriarch, Jeronimo Bassano, had been invited in 1535 to live and entertain at Henry's Court. Once in London, he and his family established themselves in a large messuage on Mark Lane in East London, near the Tower. As their fellow Court entertainer, fluent in Italian and fond of the Mediterranean lifestyle, Oxford would certainly have been as familiar with the Bassanos as he was with anyone else at Elizabeth's Court.

As the youngest of the five Bassano brothers, Baptista was the first to leave the East End, moving with his common-law wife, the daughter of one of the English Court musicians, to the northern suburb of Norton Folgate, not far from where the great public Theatre would be built in 1576, the year of Baptista's



Illustration of Elizabethan musicians, circa 1600.

death. His wife and her three children were doubtless still living there four years later when Oxford and his crew moved across the road into Fisher's Folly. Two of Emilia's cousins, Andrew and Edward Bassano, members of the Recorder Consort, were also living in Norton Folgate at that time (37–42).

At some point following her father's death, little Emilia was taken into the household of Susan Bertie, Countess of Kent, the sister of Sir Peregrine Bertie, Oxford's brother-in-law and friend (he was married to Oxford's sister Mary). By her late teens she was living with Lady Margaret Clifford and her daughter, Anne Clifford, later the second wife of the Earl of Montgomery, patron of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, whose first wife had been Susan Vere, Oxford's youngest daughter. Highly educated by these female patrons, Emilia revealed her literary skills in the book that has made her famous as Amelia Lanier.²³



Nicholas Hilliard miniature in the V&A's collection (museum no. P.134-1910) has been suggested as a portrait of Amelia or Emilia Bassano, married to Alphonso Lanier.

She became the mistress of Henry Carey, first Baron Hunsdon and Lord Chamberlain. We know from the diary of Simon Forman that Hunsdon kept her in royal style until 1592 when she became pregnant, whereupon he arranged her marriage to her cousin, Court musician Alphonse Lanier. From Lanier she acquired the name by which she is known today, for apart from her role as Shakespeare's "unjust" mistress, it is as Emilia Lanier that she has been acclaimed as one of the most important female writers in the history of the English language. Published in 1611, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* appears to be the first book of original poetry, or original writing of any kind, by an English woman to be published. Its exceedingly outspoken feminist introduction is another first in English literary history.²⁴

Although we have (as yet) no certain portrait of Emilia, her heritage fits well her appellation of the "Dark Lady," for although her mother had an English name, it would not be surprising if from the Spanish/Italian/Jewish? heritage of her father's family she inherited something of the wavy black hair and olive complexion universal among the peoples of the lands that lie along the northern shores of the Mediterranean. That her uncles had such coloring is born out by contemporary documents and references to the Bassanos as "black."

Her family's status as court musicians also makes it more than likely that she was an accomplished musician herself, as required by *Sonnet 128*. As the Lord Chamberlain's mistress it would have been their "bed vow" that she and the Poet broke, as he claims in *Sonnet 152*.

Without a doubt, Emilia Bassano would have been perceived by her contemporaries as a courtesan, precisely as the Dark Lady is described by Shakespeare. And as he claims in sonnets 127, 131 and 132, she was probably not considered beautiful by the Court community, who prized—formally at least—snow white skin and golden hair. But they would certainly have been aware that, if not classically beautiful, she had tremendous sex appeal, as confirmed by the diary of astrologer and physician Simon Forman, which is where A. L. Rowse discovered her in 1974 (xi). Forman himself was so attracted to her that he drew up several horoscopes ahead of their future meetings to see if there was any chance of establishing a more intimate relationship, which, it is clear, did not occur. Emilia's question for Forman was whether Alphonse would be successful in raising his rank during that expedition.

For four years, Emilia and Alphonse²⁵ lived in relative comfort on Hunsdon's continued benefactions, which were intended in part to provide for the boy born in 1593 that everyone must have regarded as Hunsdon's son. That the baby was named Henry—Hunsdon's given name—encourages this, but Henry was also the Fair Youth's given name, and her pregnancy in 1592 fits the time frame when most agree *Shakespeare's Sonnets* were being written and the Dark Lady was involved with the Fair Youth.

To make matters even more interesting, Oxford, like Emilia, was married that year to someone more appropriate to his rank, Elizabeth Trentham, one of the Queen's ladies in waiting, an heiress who could support him in the style in which, as a peer of the realm, he was supposed to live. Oxford's new Countess soon gave birth to a son that was also named Henry. That's a lot of Henrys.

Although apart from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, there's no hard evidence of a connection between Southampton and Emilia, there is a connection between Southampton and Alphonse. It was under Southampton's command that Alphonse Lanier fought in the Islands Campaign of 1597; Emilia's hope for good results from this voyage was the reason for her first visit to Forman. In 1604, Southampton asked Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, to see that Alphonse be given a monopoly on the weighing of hay and straw (Lasocki 108). This would have brought a modest but dependable income to the Lanier household, something to replace the financial support they lost when Hunsdon died (Rowse 33). While Salisbury (understandably) never got around to it, as soon as he died, the monopoly was approved by the Privy Council, to which Oxford's last and greatest patron, the 3rd Earl of Pembroke, had just been appointed by King James.

Rowse points out that Emilia's book was published roughly a year-and-a-half after the publication of *Shake-speare's Sonnets* in 1609. He feels that she wrote and published her book—together with its scorching introduction—as an angry response to the humiliation of how she had been portrayed in *Sonnets* 127–152. Rowse believes she wished to show the world of the liberal nobility—a world in which she claimed to have some standing—that there was more to her, and to women like her: brilliant, talented, educated women, than their sex appeal.

Like *Shake-speare's Sonnets*, her book was suppressed soon after publication, as there was but one edition and of that no more than four copies have turned up (one of these, bound in leather, was found in Prince Henry's library) making it one of the rarest extant books from that time. That it was stopped suggests that Rowse is correct about its origins, since, apart from its feminist tone, there's nothing about the contents—a straightforward statement of Christian theology—that would cause the authorities to take exception to it.

The most likely agent for the suppression of both books would be the Earl of Southampton, who, as a member of the Privy Council by then, respectably married and the father of sons, was doing everything he could to overcome the stain of his conviction as a traitor for his part in the Essex Rebellion. The adult Southampton would have been quick to use his authority to suppress anything that might recall the embarrassing peccadillos of his youth.

Three Problems

With these dates settled and the identities of the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady determined, three major problems remain: 1) the age of the Poet vis a vis the age of the Fair Youth, 2) the condescending tone used by the Poet to a member of the ruling class, and 3) the sexual overtones of the sonnets to the Fair Youth. These remain, that is, for the orthodox Shakespeare scholars. The first two present no difficulties for Oxfordians. With Oxford turning forty the year Southampton turned seventeen (1590), the problem of the difference in their ages vanishes. And with both Poet and Youth members of the same social class, the condescending tone of some of the sonnets makes sense as that of an elder admonishing a youth of his own class.

As for the third issue, why the Poet would think it appropriate to write such sexually-charged poetry to the teen-aged 3rd Earl of Southampton, certain difficulties remain. The answer to these lies in the situation that Oxford was in when he wrote *Shake-speare's Sonnets*. That will be explored in a follow-up article.

Endnotes

1. The 1590s should be regarded as the first “Romantic Era” in English poetry; the one launched at the turn of the nineteenth century by Byron, Keats and Shelley should be seen as the second.
2. Robert Giroux of the publishing firm Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux.
3. Some of the sonnet cycles appear to have had the Queen in mind as the unapproachable beloved, as clued by the cover names *Cynthia* or *Diana*, the names of Greek goddesses used by poets hoping to find favor with the aging Vestal.
4. In 1854, the Victorian critic Henry Hallam wrote: “Notwithstanding the frequent beauties of these sonnets...it is impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had never [written] them. There is a weakness and folly in all excessive and misplaced affection, which is not redeemed by the touches of nobler sentiments...” (qtd in Butler 156). Hallam’s attitude is interesting because in his own “lovely” youth he had been the object of a similar passion from Alfred Lord Tennyson.
5. It seems the Elizabethans *had no term* for a permanent sexual bias; the term *homosexual* with its Latin aura of a failure of nature (like an idiot or an albino) wasn’t invented until the late nineteenth century when scientism was labelling everything under the sun with Latin terms and the English were in the grip of a century of homophobia of terrifying dimensions (Crompton, Smith). The term used until then was *sodomite*, which, like the term *alcoholic*, carried no further discrimination. Only since 1533 was sodomy a crime (Crompton 14), but the law was enforced no more than twice during Elizabeth’s reign, and that not for consenting adults but for teachers who molested the boys in their care.

In short, adult same-sex relations were frowned upon but tolerated by the Elizabethans, an attitude in no way comparable to that of the Victorians when men who had merely been *accused* of being gay could be locked for hours on end in a public pillory where they were subjected to screaming mobs, actively encouraged to throw everything from rotten vegetables to stones and bricks at them, leaving them dead or maimed for life (13–62). Like Oscar Wilde, men of importance and social standing were threatened with prison and the loss of all their titles and worldly goods, causing some, like Lord Byron, to flee to the continent. That it was during this period of homophobic hysteria that the question of Shakespeare’s identity was first made public has a great deal to do with the Academy’s refusal to look further than the prudent William.

6. Leading proponents of the theory that *Shake-speare's Sonnets* describe a sexual relationship include Samuel Butler, Gore Vidal, Joseph Pequigney, Martin Green, Joseph Sobran, and other Oxfordians and academics. Dover Wilson holds the preferred Victorian view, that of "platonic passion." Southampton's biographer, G. P. V. Akrigg, whose Bard was the Stratford William, describes it (in passing) as a normal developmental phase between two young friends.
7. Giroux calls the dedication "weird" (12). In our view its mystery was solved by authorship scholar John Rollett in his 1999 article in *The Oxfordian*: "Secrets of the Dedication."
8. Most agree that the reason the first edition was so fleeting was that it was suppressed. If so, the most logical reason was that the primary subject of the poems was someone whose reputation mattered. Who would have cared whether or not an anonymous poet yearned for a Willy Hughes (*per* Oscar Wilde) or the Prince of Purpoole (*per* Leslie Hotson).
9. A classic trope, far from original with Shakespeare.
10. Kenneth Muir states it succinctly: "However much we shuffle the pack, we have the same basic facts: that the poet loved a younger man, probably of aristocratic birth; that he urged him to marry and then claimed that he would immortalize him in his verse; that other poets shared his friend's patronage and favor; that at some time the poet's dark-haired mistress seduced the friend; that the young man's character had serious faults, as the poet was reluctantly forced to acknowledge" (6–7).
11. W. H. Auden speaks for those who question the order of *Shake-speare's Sonnets* because the sentiment seems frequently to revert back to an earlier stage of the relationship, but this is a purely literary criticism. In real life love relationships are far more circular than linear. These fluctuations of feeling add to the sense that they are genuine and not merely a clever convention.
12. Those who seek to refute the homosexual theory by proposing that the Youth was in fact Shakespeare's own son must ignore such declarations. What father would ever feel it necessary to swear eternal devotion to his own son?
13. Claes Schaar notes that of the sonnet themes of the period, the procreation argument is peculiar to Shakespeare. He finds it nowhere else in the hundreds of sonnets of the period (16). Muir agrees (35).
14. Northrop Frye points out that despite the Poet's promises to make the Youth immortal, he tells us nothing *about* him beyond the fact that he is

“beautiful and sometimes true and kind, if not over-virtuous. [Ultimately] we are forced to conclude that Shakespeare has lavished a century of the greatest sonnets in the language on an unresponsive oaf as stupid as a doorknob and as selfish as a weasel.” Frye also sees in him the “sulky urchin” of *Venus and Adonis* (27).

15. William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, would eventually play a leading role in the story of *Shake-speare's Sonnets*, but not as the Fair Youth.
16. While we have firm dates for the publication of many of Shakespeare's plays in quarto, there is absolutely no hard evidence for when any of them were first written. Yeoman work establishing workable dates has been done by both authorship and academic scholars, but they have been forced to rely on third party evidence.
17. Giroux confirms that Claes Schaar in 1962, G. P. V. Akrigg in 1968, and Roderick Eagle in 1969, in studies independent of one another, all came up with similar results. While they found different numbers and examples of parallels, both Davis and Isaac agree on the same five Shakespearean works as leading the list: *Venus and Adonis* in which Davis finds 64 parallels and Isaac 34; *Lucrece*: 60/38; *Love's Labor's Lost*: 49/36; *Romeo and Juliet*: 48/47; and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: 35/31 (203). Schaar: “As early as 1821, Boaden in Boswell's third *Variorum* edition stated his opinion that Shakespeare's procreation sonnets [the first 17]—with nos. 18 and 19, were based on a passage in *Venus and Adonis*,”; therefore, *Shake-speare's Sonnets* ‘will be found only to expand the argument’ of [*Venus and Adonis*] 169–174.” (137)
18. The similarities between *Shake-speare's Sonnets* and *Edward III*, which was written sometime before 1595 when it was registered, were first pointed out as early as the late 1700s when George Steevens observed that the last line of sonnet 94: “—lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds—” is also found word for word in *Edward III* (2.1.451). This caused protracted debate over who borrowed from whom; the then anonymous author of *Edward III* from Shakespeare, or vice versa (Schaar 129)—an argument settled by the acceptance of the play in the canon in the 1990s. That Shakespeare should repeat a line from sonnet 94 word for word in *Edward III* (or the reverse) suggests that both were written within a narrow time frame, and therefore that sonnet 94 was written sometime during or more probably well before 1595 when *Edward III* was entered with the Stationers.
19. One of the things that's become clear after thirty years of relating history to Shakespeare is not to question one of his stated facts. If he makes a point of something, in this case the passage of three years, we should take him at his word.

20. Schaar: "I should like particularly to stress the possibility that forty-six sonnets date before or around 1592...the vast majority of the sonnets we have examined seem thus to have been written between 1591–92 and 1594–95" (185).
21. Note that, unlike the dates offered by traditional Shakespeare scholars for the plays, studies by Isaac, Davis et al that place *Shake-speare's Sonnets* in the early 1590s were *not* influenced by a need to conform to the Stratford biography. If anything, Stratford theorists must be embarrassed by them since they are forced to defend the notion that the great poet obsessively mourned his wrinkles at the age of thirty!
22. Hubler (1952): "I believe they were written over a period of four or five years beginning in 1592" (1952); Muir: "Shaar claims that the vast majority of the sonnets...seem to have been written between 1591–2 and 1594–5" (1979); he accepts Schaar's dating as "the most probable" (4). Most now accept that they were written at the same time as *Venus and Adonis*, *Lucrece*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Love's Labors Lost*. Among those whose opinion have been published Schaar lists: Gregor Sarazin (1897), Sir Sidney Lee (1898), J.A. Fort (1929), E. K. Chambers, Dover Wilson, Joseph Quincy Adams, Tucker Brooke, and F.Y. St. Clair (1962) (192–99). With some of these their reliance on the orthodox (Chambers) chronology forces them to date them later. Baldwin, for this reason, dates them to 1593–99. Ignorant of the Isaac/Davis tests, Samuel Butler in 1899 guessed the mid-1580s, among the first things Shakespeare ever wrote (118, 132, 148). Auden, based mostly on style, guesses early rather than late. Not one suggests anything later than 1599.
23. Most of our information on Emilia Bassano Lanier comes from Lasocki and Prior, some from Suzanne Woods.
24. This is usually ascribed to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), but Lanier's book (1611) predates hers by almost two centuries.
25. Alphonse was the brother of Clement Lanier who had a career as a composer as well as a Court musician. Among Clement's descendants are the 19th-century American poet Sidney Lanier and the 20th-century playwright Tennessee Williams, whose middle name is Lanier (Rowse *Salve* xxiv). Emilia's mother, Margaret Johnson, was the aunt of composer and lutenist Robert Johnson (1582–1633), whose settings for several of the songs in Shakespeare's plays can still be heard today .

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