

# *A Reply to Robert Prechter's "Avisa: Queen Elizabeth or Penelope Rich?"*

by John Hamill, Matt Hutchinson, and Alexander Waugh

Robert Prechter's article "Avisa: Queen Elizabeth or Penelope Rich?" published in *The Oxfordian* 25 (233–241), strives to demonstrate that John Hamill's argument for Penelope Rich as the wife "Avisa" in the anonymous 1594 pamphlet *Willobie His Avisa* is misplaced and the work is a straightforward paean to the unmarried Queen Elizabeth (Prechter, 2023: Hamill 2022). We shall attempt to show that Prechter is incorrect and that *Willobie* is not about Queen Elizabeth, but was an intended libel against the promiscuous courtier and sister of the Earl of Essex, Lady Penelope Rich.

We begin with Prechter's short summary of Hamill's theory, which posits that Edward de Vere and his wife, Lady Oxford, adopted a male heir (Henry de Vere) as their own, in the full knowledge that he was the natural son of Penelope Rich by Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. Prechter states:

In brief, the case for Rich is that a 20-year-old bisexual youth impregnated a 31-year-old married woman with at least three children, and that another married couple, at the pinnacle of English nobility, were content to raise the philandering couple's illegitimate son as if he were their own biological offspring.... (Prechter, 233–34)

Penelope Rich was born in January 1563 while Henry Wriothesley was born in October 1573. Henry de Vere's birth in February 1593, places conception around May 1592. Southampton would therefore have been eighteen, not

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twenty, at the time of this “philandering,” while Penelope Rich would have been twenty-nine, not thirty-one. Rich had six children alive at this time.

Prechter continues with a quotation from the orthodox scholar Eric Sams, insinuating that Hamill was “just making things up”:

Eric Sams wrote about orthodox biographies of William Shakespeare, “What I noticed immediately...was that people were just making things up! Absolutely non-stop!” (Sams, 69). This is what seems to be going on with the Penelope Rich hypothesis. (Prechter, 238)

The citation here is incorrect—the quotation occurs in Rosenbaum’s *The Shakespeare Wars* (69–70), not, as Prechter erroneously lists, in Sams’ book *The Real Shakespeare*. More importantly, in the book that Prechter cites, *The Real Shakespeare*, Sams devotes an entire chapter to *Willobie His Avisa* and reaches a conclusion diametrically opposed to Prechter’s and on parity with Hamill’s—that *Willobie* was a libel that made lewd commentary on the protagonists of *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. For instance:

The scurrilous *Willobie*, the gutter press of its day, also offers broad hints of even graver scandals. ‘H.W. being sodenly infected with the contagion...the secresy of his disease...W.S....was now newly recovered of the like infection...wound...weak and feeble...Phisitions [physicians]...a plaster, if not to heal, yet in part to ease his malady’; these ostensible metaphors of passion are surely deliberate references to the cause and course of venereal disease. This is confirmed by canto lx (208), which both by quotation and by textual reference directs the reader’s attention to the passage in Proverbs (5:3ff) warning men against the harlot (‘her feet go down to death, her steps take hold on

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hell’) and the mortal malady she harbours (‘lest... thou mourn at the last, when thy flesh and body are consumed’). (Sams, 98–99)

Some literature exists to suggest that Shakespeare may have been suffering from venereal disease, symptoms of which could prevent the author from fathering a child. Sams continues:

At the same time, ‘Avisa’ may also represent a very different character, namely the so-called Dark Lady, whose favours the poet shared with his fair friend (Sonnets 41.9; 1 44. 1 314 etc.). On this interpretation, which has been the subject of much speculation, Avisa’s categorisation as ‘chaste and constant’ would be intended as ribald irony. (Sams, 97)

Sams also notes that:

The Sonnets of course describe just such a triangular relationship as outlined in *Willobie*, where W.S. ‘not long before had tried the curtesy of the like passion’ (190–91) (cf. Sonnets 40, 41, 42, etc.). Given that this allusion is indeed direct and intentional, and that Avisa shadows the Dark Lady as well as Elizabeth I, here for the first time is a definite date. W.S. was ‘now newly recovered’, i.e. the Dark Lady infatuation so memorably recorded in the Sonnets was over by 1594. (Sams, 98)

By quoting Sams against Hamill, Prechter has demolished his entire argument—and Sams is far from alone in his viewpoint, such that Prechter’s contention that *Willobie* is a simple paean to Elizabeth is a minority view, both among Oxfordian and Stratfordian scholars.

For instance, in his article for *The Oxfordian* (2019), “What Role Did the Herbert Family Play in the Shakespeare Cover-Up?” Bruce Johnston writes:

In 1594 a salacious allegorical poem entitled *Willobie His Avisa* was published.... Oxfordian scholars identify the two males in *Avisa*’s lurid

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**Alexander Waugh** *co-edited, with John Shaban, Shakespeare Beyond Doubt? Exposing an Industry in Denial (2013) in which he authored a chapter on Shakespeare’s knowledge of Italy. In 2014, Waugh debated on behalf of the Oxfordian theory in the Fleet Street debate, Does the Authorship Question Matter? In his 2014 Kindle e-book, Shakespeare in Court, Waugh exposed the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust as a prime source of fraudulent misinformation about William Shakespeare. In 2015 he was presented the Oxfordian of the Year Award. Waugh was a past President of the Shakespeare Authorship Coalition and until his passing this year, served as Chairman of the De Vere Society. Waugh is also author of several books, including Classical Music: A New Way of Listening (1995), Opera: A New Way of Listening (1996), Time (1999), and God (2002). With Roger Stritmatter, he has recently completed a three-volume scholarly study of contemporary allusions to William Shakespeare.*

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love triangle as: (i) de Vere/Shakespeare—an older, married “actor” with the initials W.S.; and (ii) Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton—a youth tutored by W.S. to woo the now-married former mistress of W.S. This *Avisa* scenario resembled the lurid triangle in de Vere’s Sonnets that were circulating in manuscript during the 1590s and printed in 1609. By hyphenating “Shake-speare,” the 1594 *Avisa* text signalled to the general public that this name was a pseudonym. *Avisa* thus poisoned the “William Shakespeare” name for Oxford, and also signalled to rogue publishers, printers and plagiarists that they might pirate the plays and poetry of de Vere and perhaps face manageable risks. (Johnston, 73)

Katherine Chiljan in *Shakespeare Suppressed* writes that Avisa’s “chastity and fidelity is so overstated that it is almost suspicious” (Chiljan, 233). Chiljan continues:

the reference to a scandalous love triangle, [was] intended to embarrass this nobleman, the author of *Lucrece*.... The *Willobie* writer gave enough clues to confirm Southampton’s identity as H.W.—Henry Willobie; and by placing him in a love triangle with Shakespeare, the *Willobie* writer also revealed his belief that Southampton was the fair youth of the Sonnets. (Chiljan, 241).

Chiljan also saw Avisa as the “dark lady, the married woman with whom the great author and the Fair youth were romantically involved” (Chiljan, 241).

It is worth pointing out that *Willobie His Avisa* is based around the story of the mythological wife Penelope who, during her husband’s long absence, rebuffs a number of suitors. As early as 1588-89, Penelope Rich was associated with the Greek Penelope via poets and musicians of the time, such as William Byrd. As Professor Jeremy Smith writes:

Byrd had a prominent role to play in the legacy that surrounded Sidney after his untimely death. Byrd’s *Psalmes* of 1588 featured two poignant elegies for Sidney, prominently placed, and at least one poem that celebrated Rich.... Byrd also used quantitative metrics in “Constant Penelope,” where he cast Sidney’s muse as Ulysses’s wife “Penelope.” (Smith, 530)

Further,

Byrd’s *Songs* (1589) featured two more works that concerned Rich; they appeared side by side in the collection. The twenty-seventh song, “Penelope, that longed for the sight [of her Ulysses],” features another Homeric reference, and in the twenty-sixth, “Weeping full sore,” the adjective “rich” appears as a thinly disguised pun for Sidney’s muse (“This Lady Rich is of the gifts of beauty / But unto her are gifts of

fortune dainty”). The “rich” pun was a device the poet and his followers (including Constable in particular) often used. (Smith, 531)

The shadowing of Penelope Rich with Elizabeth was also common in the 1590s. Jeremy Smith, a Professor of Musicology with a specialization in early modern music and composers such as William Byrd, notes that the *Triumphes of Oriana* (1601) was not a straightforward paean to Elizabeth as is sometimes believed, but that its publisher, Thomas Morley, “and his mentor, William Byrd, were enmeshed, via their music, with strategies surrounding the royal succession” (Smith, 507).

Smith continues:

By proposing a different allegorical identity for Oriana and also for the character Diana, who appears in key works by Byrd and in all the Oriana madrigals as well... the Psalmes and the Triumphes originally reflected a shared goal among Essexians and Catholics to promote James VI, whose wife Anna of Denmark is our ‘true’ Oriana, as Elizabeth’s successor. In this enterprise the Psalmes played an important role: propping up Essex as the “heir to Sir Philip Sidney.” But the real star was Lady Penelope Rich, née Devereux. (Smith, 511)

Smith spends many pages detailing Penelope Rich’s portrayal as Diana. Rich, like Elizabeth, was often associated with Diana, by Constable for instance, in his *Diana* Sonnets, and as the dedicatee of Montemayor’s *Diana*, translated out of Spanish by Bartholomew Yong (c. 1582) who “praised singular knowledge and delight wherewith she [Lady Rich] entertaineth and embraceth this particular subject of DIANA.”

In his *Affanie*, which many Oxfordians are aware of due to Fitzgeoffrey’s tantalising epigrams to “Bardus” or “The Bard,” Fitzgeoffrey writes:

#### 4. To Cynthia

Depart the sky, Cynthia, in the night Elizabeth will rule the stars, more bright, more chaste. Or rather do not depart the sky, let you govern the stars by night, and she the English by night and by day.

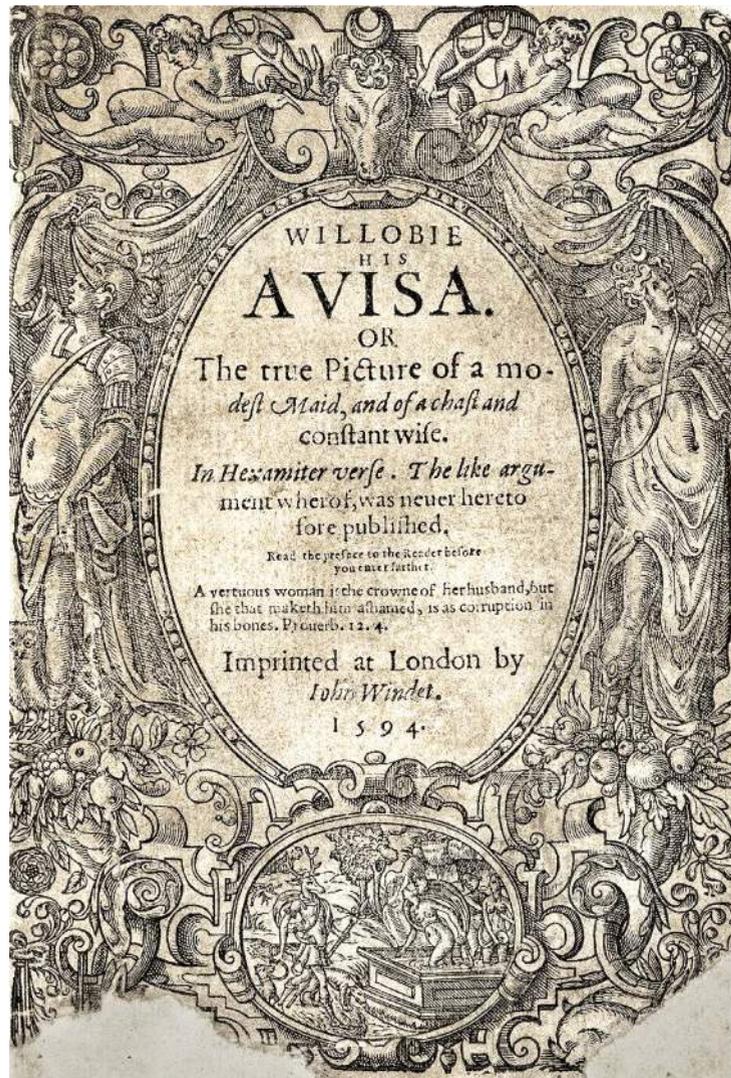
Fitzgeoffrey is clearly distinguishing between Queen Elizabeth and another woman going by the name “Cynthia,” who is associated with night sky stars, as Penelope Rich had been when Sidney cast her as “Stella,” not to mention Lady Rich’s love of black. She wore black clothes and had her rooms at Essex House painted in black and adorned with black drapery and furniture. Oxfordians need to reconsider their automatic identifications of “Diana” and “Cynthia” to Elizabeth, as Penelope Rich was frequently referred to by these names as well.

## Noticeable omissions from Prechter's argument

Prechter fails to mention numerous points that counter his thesis. For example, key to establishing the real-life identity of Avisa is the fact that she is described, over and over, as a married woman. Indeed, she is alluded to twice on the title page alone as a wife. All through the book she is described as a "constant" and/or "loving" wife, with both adjectives bearing delicious double meanings. In Canto 52 Avisa plainly states "I am a wife," admitting the same in Cantos 13, 35 and 54. In Canto 53 she is told "You are a wife." This important fact about Avisa should not be ignored by those attempting to read the poem as a simple paean of praise to the unmarried Queen Elizabeth.

Prechter further omits all mention of the title page engraving to *Willobie His Avisa*, with its blatant allusions to cuckoldry. Here the figures of Diana (Lady Rich as aforementioned) and Pallas/Minerva (Shake-speare) are seen together hiding under a bedsheet. Above them is the head of a blind stag. There are in fact two stags depicted on this page, just as two stags serve as supporters to the heraldic arms of Penelope's husband, Lord Rich.

*Figure 1: title page of "Willobie His Avisa or The true Picture of a modest Maid, and of a chaste and constant wife".*



Antlers and horns are symbols of cuckoldry. At the top of the page we see two cherubs, representing erotic love, each with an arm around an antler, each looking to one of the bedsheeted figures while pointing as though to link the two via cuckoldry (Figure 2).



The scene of a horned Acteon and Diana at the bottom evokes the famous phrase “grow horns like Acteon,” another cuckold reference (Figure 3).



Needless to say, Robert Rich had been known as a cuckold to Penelope for some time, as Professor William Ringler states:

Lord Rich continued to maintain outwardly amicable relations with his wife and acquiesced in her infidelity because it was to his advantage to do so — her brother the Earl of Essex, who was something of a philanderer himself, was considered the most influential nobleman in the kingdom. (Ringler, 444)

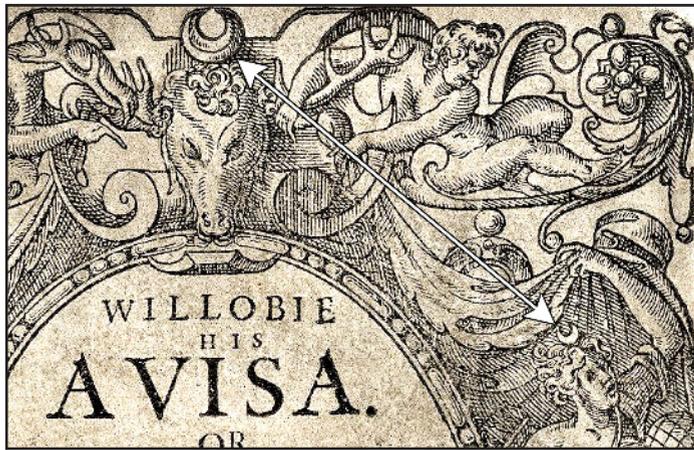
On the right of the title page Diana is depicted with her crescent moon and arrows (Figure 4).





The subject on the left is Pallas Athena, with helmet, breastplate, scrolls signifying writing, owl, pomegranate and olive branch (Figure 5).

On the left-hand side Pallas-Minerva (born from the head of Zeus shaking her spear) is likely representing Shakespeare. Diana is specifically linked to the blind stag above (the cuckold) by each of them having a crescent moon upon his/her head (Figure 6).



Also absent from Prechter's argument is any mention of a pamphlet called *Penelope's Complaint*, which was published to counter *Willobvie His Avisa* in 1596. As Michael Mooten observes:

*Penelope's Complaint* purports to be a reaction against the libelling of Penelope that occurred in *Willobvie His Avisa*: this immediately confirms to us that the central theme of *Willobvie His Avisa* has been an attack on an unchaste woman named Penelope. If this wasn't the case then why would there even be a need for a pamphlet like *Penelope's Complaint* to defend the morals of Penelope that *Avisa* had called into question? (Mooten, n.d.)

Equally important to the assessment of *Willobvie* is the fact that it was censored under the Bishops' Ban of 1599. Again, this crucial evidence is omitted by Prechter. The ban, which had nothing to do with Elizabeth, was engineered by Essex's good friend John Whitgift and, as Cyndia Clegg has argued, may well have been done on Essex's behalf to protect the Essex circle from political satire (Clegg, 1997). This fits with Penelope Rich (Essex's sister), not Elizabeth, being *Avisa*. If *Willobvie* was a simple paean to Elizabeth about her chastity, why on earth was it censored?

One point Prechter makes that should be conceded is when Hamill ponders Kurt Kreiler's contention that Oxford wrote *Willobie*. Prechter points out the obvious contradiction—why Oxford would want to expose his own scandalous behaviour? Hamill agrees that this is not a strong argument on Kreiler's part, and just raised it as a theory. He has since rejected it.

Prechter cites some possible mismatches between the characters in *Willobie His Avis* and those whom Hamill identifies as real-life counterparts, but fails to realise this was common with *Roman-a-clefs*. "As Annabel Patterson has argued," writes Penny McCarthy, citing Patterson's *Censorship and Interpretation*, in *Roman-a-clefs*, "the writer making the allusion is likely to aim off exactitude in order not to be too blatant" (McCarthy, 29).

There are plainly more mismatches between those whom Prechter seeks to identify as real-life counterparts (Elizabeth's potential suitors) than he has found against Hamill's thesis. Prechter should not expect to have it both ways. It is worth pointing out that Barbara De Luna's *The Queen Declined*, which argues that *Willobie* is primarily about the Queen rebutting her suitors, has not been accepted on either the Stratfordian or non-Stratfordian side of academia.

Other points raised by Prechter in his article need to be cross-examined. On page 234, for instance, he chides Hamill for detecting a hint of the name Penelope Rich in the *Willobie* line "Let Lucrece-Avis be thy name." While Prechter concedes that "Lucrece" (from the Latin *lucrum*) can allude to the English words "rich" or "riches," he insists that only "this word pertains to his claim. The other, *Avis*, is the Latin word for bird." Indeed, he is correct on that score, but were he to look up the word "penelope" in any number of old dictionaries he would find that it is used to mean "a certain bird." As Levaniouk (2001) writes in relation to the mythological Penelope:

A good point to begin looking for Penelope's diachronic dimension is her name, which, I suggest, is a *nom parlant*. When Penelope compares herself to Aedon, she compares herself both to a woman with a bird name, and to a bird. Penelope's own name is also derived from that of a bird, and it signals her belonging to a thematically related group of bird-women in myth.

Thus, Hamill is correct in his assertion that the "Let Lucrece-Avis be thy name" hints at the name Penelope Rich as "Rich-Penelope." Hamill is also correct in connecting the words fortune or fortunate to Penelope's surname, Rich, but Prechter does not agree:

Hamill notes that there are lyrics at the end of the publication that are to be sung "To the tune of Fortune" and declares, "'Fortune,' as we know, is a synonym of 'rich'..." (Hamill 271). But it isn't. "Fortune My Foe" was a well-known ditty of the day, "licensed as a ballad in 1565–6" in

which fortune means luck or destiny, as determined by the goddess Fortune. The original song's opening line is, "Fortune my foe, why dost thou frown on me?" (Prechter, 236)

"Fortune" may not be an exact synonym for "rich," but "fortunate" certainly is and contemporaries had no difficulty in connecting the words "fortune" and "fortunate" to the name of Penelope Rich. As Sidney wrote of her in his *Astrophel and Stella*: "She hath no misfortune but that rich she is," while John Davies in his *Microcosmos* (1603), dedicating a poem to Penelope Rich, wrote: "To descant on thy name as many do...I should (dear Lady) allude unto that which with it compared is...to be rich was to be fortunate...thou wast much more than most unfortunate though richly well thou plaidst that haplesse part." Is Prechter aware of Waugh's identification of Penelope Rich as "fortunate Cleopatra" with corresponding margin note "Lucrecia" in William Covell's *Polimanteia* of 1595? This occurs in the same sentence as Shakespeare is revealed to be "Our de Vere a secret" and as Southampton is shown to be the narcissist hidden in the phrase "dearly beloved Delia" and its corresponding margin note "All Praise worthy." In Daniel's *Cleopatra* the super-rich queen is forced to give away her beloved son, the illegitimate Caesarian—corresponding neatly with the theory that Penelope Rich gave her illegitimate son, Henry Vere, to the Oxfords in 1593.

Prechter seems to be unaware that "Fortune my foe" was most famous in the Elizabethan era for being sung at the funeral of the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Essex—Penelope's father—and would therefore have been strongly associated with the Essex circle and with her. Moreover, he ignores the fact that the words of the song as given in *Willobie his Avisa* are not the same as the words of "Fortune my Foe." It is merely stated that the words from *Willobie* are sung "by a constant wife [i.e., Avisa]...to the tune of Fortune." Thus she sings to the tune of Essex the related tune of fortune, including the words "I am content...This is my choise and therewith I am content...content am I." These are the last words from Avisa's mouth, which clearly allude to the famous saying "Content is rich"—used even by Shakespeare, and set to music in a song entitled "Content is Rich" by William Byrd, who was evidently alluding to Penelope Rich.

Prechter continues to attack Hamill's use of "ironia" to interpret *Willobie*:

In a fundamental leap, Hamill declares that *Willobie His Avisa*, which is subtitled *the true picture of a modest Maide, and of a chaste and constant wife*, is not about its announced subject but rather is composed entirely in the method of *ironia*, in which the author employs "a form of deliberate mockery in which one says the opposite of what is obviously true," in this case with the aim of berating Avisa and "dispraising her unchaste behavior" (Hamill, 261). He needs this argument because he

keeps repeating that Penelope was promiscuous, which contradicts the idea of a chaste Avis. Yet he offers no passages from the poem demonstrating an ironic tone. (Prechter, 237)

As noted, virtually every commentator has suspected *Willobie* is a libel and not what it claims to be—the cover supports this. On the *Shakespeare Documented* website of The Folger Shakespeare Library, a staff member writes of *Willobie*'s introductory poem:

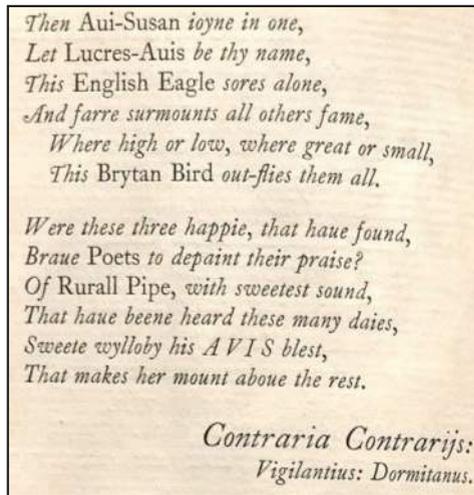
The poem lacks an authorial attribution and is instead signed, “Contraria Contrarijs: Vigilantius: Dormitanus” (roughly, “Contrary to the contrary: watchful: sleeping”).

This poem is signed off with the intriguing phrase (Figure 7):

Contraria Contrarijs [opposite of opposites]

Vigilantius: Dormitanus [Vigilant: dormant]

Vigilant, or “wide awake,” is clearly the opposite of “dormant” or “deep sleep.” This seems to be telling the reader to be open to the possibility that some of the story may be the opposite of what is being said: the most obvious example of this would be that the woman is not fending off these suitors at all, but sleeping with them. Indeed, the concluding line of the poem, “That makes her mount above the rest,” can be seen as playing on the word “mount” as “ascend” but also “copulate.”



As Michael Mooten observes, the “ironia” trope was well known to Elizabethans, with numerous publications either deploying it as a technique or describing it. Mooten quotes from Abraham Fraunce’s 1588 publication *The Arcadian Rhetorike*, which describes *ironia* as

a trope, that by naming one contrarie intendeth another. The speciall grace whereof is in iesting and merie conceipted speaches. This trope continued maketh a most sweet allegorie, and it is perceiued by the contrarietie of the matter it selfe, or by the manner of vtterance quite differing from the sense of the wordes, for then it is apparant that wee speake but iestinglie, and not as wee thinke.

The book contains a goldmine of information for the rhetoricians of the time, many examples of which are used throughout *Willobie*.

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Mooten writes:

Fraunce goes on to describe a form of Ironia called 'praeteritio'. This form of Ironia praises its target but keeps subtly letting slip hints that the praise is disingenuous (Mooten, n.d.)

As Fraunce himself puts it:

There is also a kinde of Ironia called...Praeteritio in Latin, a kinde of pretēded omitting or letting slip of that which indeed wee elegātly note out in the verie shewe of praetermission, as when we say; I let this passe; I passe it ouer with silence. Like vnto this is that which is called of the Latinists Negatio, a denial or refusall to speake, as, I will not say that which I might, I will not call you, &c. when neuerthelesse we speake and tell al.

Indeed, the introductory poem uses several rhetorical devices that suggest Penelope is Avisa.

Tarqayne pluckt his glistering grape,  
And Shake-speare, paints poore **Lucrece** rape.  
Though **Susan** shine in faithfull praise,  
As twinkling Starres in Christall skie,  
**Penelop's** fame though Greekes do raise,  
Of faithfull wiues to make vp three,  
To thinke the Truth, and say no lesse,  
Our **Auisa** shall make a messe.

A "messe" is a group of four: the four faithful wives are Lucrece, Penelope, Susan and Avisa. The poem continues:

Two thousand years have scarcely seen  
Such as the worst of these has been

Mooten writes:

This caustic comment is clearly telling us that something is amiss with one or more members of this group of virtuous women. The author now takes a cue from Ovid and performs a metamorphosis. The women now undergo a poetic metamorphosis into birds of chastity.

From the text:

Then Avi-Susan joyne in one  
Let Lucrece-Avis be thy name  
And far surmounts all others fame.  
Were these three happie that have found  
Brave poets to depaint their praise?

Sweet Willobie his AVIS blest,  
That makes her mount above the rest.

Mooten argues:

We see that Susan and Lucrece become birds of chastity and Avis emerges as an Eagle but Penelope is conspicuous by her absence. How has a group of four suddenly shrunk to a group of three? The Elizabethans were well versed in the use of rhetorical devices. ‘Occultatio’ is the rhetorical device of drawing attention to something by deliberately omitting to mention it. . . . We also notice that a progression is occurring, each woman’s name is coming closer to spelling Avis. We start with Avi-Susan, then we have Lucres-Avis, Penelope is not named in this sequence but the sequence is insinuating that her name is going to be Penelope-Avisa. The progression must be

Avi Susan... Avi  
Lucris Avis... Avis  
Penelope Avisa... Avisa

Both Susan and Lucrece have been accounted for, so the only explanation is that Avis and Penelope have been merged into one. Now they are one and the same and together represent a living English woman and consequently Penelope is no longer a figure of Greek mythology.

The poem continues:

This English Eagle sores alone,  
And farre surmounts all others fame,

About which Mooten comments:

We notice that an Eagle is definitely not the traditional bird of chastity. Doves, swans and turtle doves were the normal birds of chastity, but all of these are the prey of the predatory Eagle: the Eagle is the enemy of the birds of chastity. Hadrian Dorrell tells us that the name Avis has been chosen because it reflects Avis’s nature. Dorrell explains that A’ Visa is a Latin derivative meaning “The bird not seen.” The bird not seen in this poetic metamorphosis is Penelope. (Mooten, n.d.)

This, coupled with the poem signed as “contrary to contraries” seems to be alerting the reader to the possibility that some of the story may be the opposite of what is being said.

Further evidence suggests Penelope Rich is the target of *Willobie His Avis*, as it concludes with a poem entitled “The praise of a contented mind.” William Byrd had set to music a poem “My Mind to me a Kingdom is,” naming it “In praise of a contented mind.”

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Professor Steven May has written an authoritative article on why the attribution of the poem "My Mind to me a Kingdom Is" in the mid-19th century to Edward Dyer is incorrect, concluding that its true author was Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford (May 386).

In Willobie His Avisa "The Praise of a Contented Mind" contains another "messe" or group of four, yet this time with very unchaste women—Eve, Cressida, Helen of Troy, all of whom Elizabethans considered harlots, and Penelope. The poems contain numerous allusions to stars, evoking "Stella" of Philip Sidney's sonnets, although this identification was not widely known at the time.

In his attempt to separate Penelope Rich from the mythological Penelope Prechter continues contra Hamill as follows:

More claims follow suit: a mention of Penelope of *The Odyssey*, he says, indicates the unchaste Penelope Rich (Hamill, 262). But it doesn't; it refers to a famously chaste woman of classical literature. (Prechter, 237)

As noted above, Penelope Rich was associated with the Penelope myth as early as 1588–89. Indeed, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* sonnets, in which Penelope Rich is portrayed as Stella, consists of 108 sonnets—the same number of suitors in the Penelope myth. Alluding to the mythological Penelope would have turned contemporary readers' thoughts to Penelope Rich. Alastair Fowler (1970) quotes the 17<sup>th</sup>-century polymath Sir Thomas Browne, who, drawing from Eustathius's commentary on *The Odyssey* and on Athenaeus, describes an Ancient Greek game called Penelope:

Prodigal paramours disposed their men, when they played at Penelope. For being themselves an hundred and eight, they set fifty-four stones on either side, and one in the middle, which they called *Penelope*, which he that hit was master of the game. (Fowler, 175)

Thus continues Fowler, "the absence of the 109th or Penelope sonnet-stone from Sidney's sequence confesses Astrophil's failure as a lover" (175).

In summing up Prechter states:

When we take time to sort out authorship, we almost always find that things are simpler than they seem. Such is the case with *Willobie His Avisa*. (Prechter, 238)

This is bemusing given a) the Shakespeare Authorship Question continues to divide scholars after several centuries with no consensus being reached as to the authorship of the works of Shakespeare; b), scholars cannot agree on the authorship of numerous works of the time, including *Willobie His Avisa*, along with other works in the "golden age of the pseudonym" such

as *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*; and c) Prechter himself claims that Oxford wrote Nashe's and Greene's works—among others—a claim supported by very few.

Prechter concludes:

George Gascoigne, a self-proclaimed champion of the Queen, wrote a poem celebrating Elizabeth's chastity in rebuffing all suitors, but passed on before he could publish it. After a long delay, his stepson decided to bring it to press. (Prechter, 238).

Why after such a long delay? Gascoigne died in 1577. *Willobie* was published in 1594. Which scholar supports Prechter's identification of Gascoigne as the author of *Willobie*? Prechter finishes his essay with

Breton did not set out to wound anyone or expose anything; he simply wanted the public to read and appreciate one of his stepfather's most interesting works. He succeeded. People are still reading it. (Prechter, 238).

Prechter's critical assessment of *Willobie* is not supported, either as a straightforward paean to Elizabeth or as a good piece of literature. *Willobie* is commonly perceived to be a pedestrian piece of poetry, described by *The Oxford Companion to English literature* as "uninspired" (Drabble, 1071) and "dull," "written in glib and jingling verse" in the *Stanford Studies in Language and Literature* (Gray, 144). It is of great interest due to its being the first independent mention of "Shake-speare" and its likelihood of being a *roman-a-clef*, depicting real Elizabethans, not because of its poetic qualities.

For a more balanced review of Hamill's work, the reader is urged to consult Earl Showerman's review of Hamill's book in the Winter 2023 *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* and Eddi Jolly's review in the October 2023 *De Vere Society Newsletter* (Showerman 2023; Jolly 2023). For those wanting to learn more about *Willobie*, they should consult Michael Mooten's essay, Hamill's book and watch Alexander Waugh's several online presentations on *Willobie*, which give much detail and further insight into this fascinating piece of the Shakespeare puzzle.

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Reply to Prechter's "Avisa: Queen Elizabeth or Penelope Rich?"

