

THE MONUMENT

“SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS” by EDWARD de VERE, 17th EARL of OXFORD

By Hank Whittemore

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reviewed by Newsletter Editor Kevin Gilvary

Hank Whittemore's suitably magnificent tome attempts to demonstrate how the sequence of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets charts the changing feelings of Edward de Vere towards his unacknowledged royal son, Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. The bulk of the poems deal with the period when the younger earl was languishing in The Tower under sentence of death. This study is one of the first to address the sequence and to explain their published order.

HW “How Wonderful ! Hank Whittemore's book on Henry Wriothesley” I thought to myself when I received a large volume book delivered from New York State to me on my birthday. Delightfully bound, and easy to read both continuously and in chunks, it has adorned my coffee table all summer, more often left open at a page than closed for display. I have been intrigued both by the overall interpretation and by individual snippets. The Sonnets will not be quite the same for me again.

Hank Whittemore is an author, widely respected in the USA. He has a string of publications on a number of important topics, most notably on the Watergate Affair. This account of the Sonnets is in the same vein: full of political intrigue that could bring down a ruler. Whittemore contends that the sonnets were written by Edward de Vere to record the imprisonment of his unacknowledged, royally borne son, the Earl of Southampton. He is thus not only an Oxfordian but a proponent of the Prince Tudor Theory. This theory is to many commentators, independent of the Authorship Question, but not for Hank: the sonnets can only be understood as a continuous diary charting a father's frustration and anger.

Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, was born in 1574. Southampton is usually seen as the Fair Youth, especially if the sonnets are dated to the early 1590s. We have had interpretations of the author's gratitude to a generous benefactor, a homosexual attachment or a paternal fondness.

While Southampton's parents were ostensibly Henry, the second earl, and Mary, the daughter of Viscount Montague, it has been argued by some Oxfordians that the third earl was in fact the Prince Tudor, ie the result of a secret liaison between Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Oxford. What *The Monument* has done is to lead me to re-examine each of the following contentions: that Elizabeth ever had a child, or that any such child was the third earl of Southampton; or that Edward de Vere was the father.

It might be possible to disentangle these premises. Perhaps Southampton was the son of the Queen by someone else eg Leicester. I have often wondered if Oxford was the father of Southampton by Mary Montague; and that under a pseudonym de Vere is expressing his covert paternal love. I believe I heard this from DVS members Sir Ian McGeoch and possibly Alan Robinson.

Hank's detailed and thorough introduction takes us through the Authorship Question and the Establishment of Oxford's Credentials. He then explains how he adopts a unified approach to understanding the sonnets. The key to his interpretation lies in his consistent understanding of various terms as coded reference: thus Dian, Goddess, Fortune, Mother always refer to Queen Elizabeth; Henry Wriothesley is referred to as Adonis, Thou, Thyself etc. His royalty is encoded in terms such as Abundance, Eternal, Golden and Majesty. His negative stature in Elizabeth's eyes is contained in Base, Disgrace, Rotten etc. Two

questions emerge: are these identifications valid? Are they always valid? Without being convinced of either, I feel I cannot totally dismiss them. Perhaps in time I will move my position.

The schematic sequence according to Hank is as follows: 1-26 for Southampton's birthdays 1575-1601; 27-126 reflect on his rebellion and imprisonment until Elizabeth's death; 127-152 balance the first 26 poems, identifying the Dark Lady as – now that would be telling. The final two poems are, according to this scheme, early poems. The influence of poems from other cultures eg the Greek Anthology and Ronsard, is recognised. At the same time, it is entirely possible that these poems are not just literary exercises but have a definite resonance with the author's circumstances. After all, we believe that *Othello* is not just an adaptation of an obscure story from an Italian author, Cinthio, little read in contemporary England, but a full examination of the cause and effects of jealousy by someone profoundly remorseful over the 'green-eyed' monster.

To indicate Hank's method, I reproduce two (out of ten) pages of commentary on Sonnet 125 *Were it ought to me I bore the canopy*. I have felt that the wonderful poetry of the sonnets is so stripped of context as to be capable of lending support to almost any viewpoint. This poem is significant as it contains a specific contextual clue in the sequence. Some Stratfordians believe that this poem refers to a minor occasion. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Arden³ edition, 1997) suggests any specific historical allusion would be to the triumphal procession of James I. Others, eg Stephen Greenblatt (*Will in the World*, 2004: 247), reject biographical interpretation as 'pulling against the strong gravitational force of the individual poems.' [Any ideas what that means?]

Oxfordians believe that the canopy-bearing refers to de Vere in his capacity as lord great chamberlain and can be dated either to the Victory Celebrations of 1588 or to the Queen's funeral in 1603. There is an uneasy feeling that Oxford would have been proud of such a public display of importance. Hank answers this by saying that the poem records Oxford's ambivalence at the death of his Queen, lover and mother of his

unacknowledged child. His ceremonial function now pales into insignificance at the prospect of his son and the rightful heir to the throne languishing in prison awaiting the verdict of the usurper. Mmm, makes you think.

Without going into much detail, I will just mention interpretations of two favourite sonnets of mine; I have always been moved by Sonnet 60 (*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore*). Hank notes the comparison with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (but omits the reference: 15, 201-5 in Golding's 1567 translation) and interprets waves and ocean as reference to royalty. In Hank's scheme, this poem dates to 13 March 1601, when the Essex supporters Gelly Merrick and Henry Cuffe were taken to Tyburn and executed. Grim.

My favourite sonnet is 138 *When my love swears she is made of truth*, which Hank notes had been published (with slight variation) in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599. My romantic notion of the whimsical lover is suddenly transformed. Instead of the ageing lover (*she knows my days are past their best* - how could Strat-man have written that at the age of 35?) happily going along with his love's little white lies, Hank presents a picture of a bitterly angry poet, unable to reveal his lover or his son. Powerful stuff.

This Reference Edition is beautifully presented in both content and appearance. There is a review of critical interpretations and useful indexes at the end. The pages are large, almost A4 size, and the type is set in one column all the way across the page. An indication of the appearance of the page follows on the next two pages. At first, I thought that this would make it difficult to read, but my fears were unfounded. The merit of this approach is to allow the poems to sit comfortably alongside a rendition of the literal meaning. Such juxtaposition would be difficult if the commentary were in two columns.

Hank Whittemore has made an important contribution to the Prince Tudor Theory; he also makes a strong case for the Sonnets as a sequence charting Oxford's feelings towards Southampton. Make sure you read it. ■

[Excerpt from Hank Whittemore: *The Monument* pages 650-51]

THE FINAL DAYS
FUNERAL OF QUEEN ELIZABETH I

“The canopy”

Sonnet 125

And Take thou My Oblation

28 April 1603

Held today is the grand funeral procession of Elizabeth I of England. As her body is carried through the streets of London to its temporary tomb in Westminster Abbey, the Tudor Rose dynasty that begun under Henry VII in 1485 is officially coming to its end. Four or six unnamed noblemen bear the royal canopy over her effigy atop the casket; but Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, Lord Great Chamberlain, is probably not one of them. (He would have avoided it, given his negative attitude toward the Queen for having kept their son in the Tower and prevented him from succeeding her. It's also possible that he was too infirm to walk such a distance.) Oxford marks the occasion of the funeral only to scoff at such external ceremony and, more importantly, to make his oblation to Southampton – his sacrificial offering to his royal son, who is a king or god on earth. He will be “obsequious” (dutiful at the funeral rites) only by way of making this final sacrifice to Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton. In the same way that the Tudor Rose dynasty is coming to an end, so is this chronological diary; all that remains is the farewell envoy of Sonnet 126.

Wer't ought to me I bore the canopy,
With my extern the outward honoring,
Or laid great bases for eternity
Which proves more short than waste or ruining?

Have I not seen dwellers on form and favour
Lose all and more by paying too much rent
For compound sweet; Forgoing simple savor,
Pitiful thrivers in their gazing spent?

No, let me be obsequious in thy heart
And take thou my oblation poor but free,
Which is not mixed with seconds, knows no art,
But mutual render only me for thee.

Hence, thou suborn'd Informer, a true soul
When most impeached stands least in thy control.

Would it matter to me if I bore the canopy today,
With my outward self honoring Elizabeth in public,
Or joined great ceremonies for eternal fame
That will be no match for time's waste of them?

Have I not seen poor courtiers seeking favor
Lose everything by selling their souls
For royal gifts; giving up unalloyed pleasure,
Pathetic aspirers wasting time with adoring looks?

No, let me honor her funeral with your heart,
And take now my sacrificial offering freely given,
Which is not corrupting and has no contrivance,
But only mutual sacrifice of me for you, my son.

From now on, testify falsely! A true prince
Accused of treason has least in control as king!

J Thomas Looney in *Shakespeare Identified* of 1920 suggested that this verse is Oxford's “expression of his private feelings” about the Queen's funeral procession. Looney declared that Sonnet 125 “*may be taken as his last sonnet.*”

1 WER'T OUGHT TO ME I BORE THE CANOPY,

Oxford may or may not have been one of the noblemen in the procession who “bore the canopy” over the Queen’s coffin; the wording of the opening line can be taken two ways: (1) *Does it mean nothing to me that I bore the canopy?* (2) *What would it matter to me if I bore the canopy?* Whatever the case, he is expressing profound sorrow and even bitterness; the end has finally come and all hope for his son’s succession has been lost. The story is over; **OUGHT** = nothing; echoing Southampton as “none” or the opposite of “one”; (*Is it nothing to me . . . Would it matter to me etc*) Oxford is also summing up his more than forty years of service to the Queen, starting when he became a royal ward in 1562; and so his opening line might read: “What does it matter to me if I participated in so many royal ceremonies to support the state?” **I BORE THE CANOPY** = Oxford may have helped to bear the canopy over the Queen’s effigy during her funeral procession, but there is no record of it; (“a rich embroidered “*canopy to kings*” – 3 *Henry VI*, 2.5.44-45) several unnamed noblemen bore the canopy, but given Oxford’s negative attitude toward the Queen for her treatment of Southampton, he may have declined; **CANOPY** = “a cloth covering, carried tent-like over the head of a dignitary in a ceremonial procession” – Booth, emphasizing the *processional* aspect); by his pointed use of canopy, Oxford was marking the occasion of the funeral in correspondence with the chronology of his diary, which had proceeded with one sonnet each day from April 10, the day of Southampton’s liberation from the Tower. to this day, April 28.

“A covering or hangings suspended over the couch, throne, bed etc or held over a person walking in *procession*” – *OED*; “They *bear the four staves of the Canopie over the Kings head* at the time of his coronation” – *OED* citing 1576, but which king and when is unclear; “A covering over a shrine or over the Host when borne in procession” – *OED*

“Enter trumpets, sounding; then two aldermen, Lord Mayor, Garter, Cranmer, Duke of Norfolk with his marshal’s staff, Duke of Suffolk, two noblemen bearing great standing bowls for the christening gifts: *then four noblemen bearing a canopy . . .*”

- *Henry VIII*, 5.2. Stage Directions Christening of Princess Elizabeth

When lofty trees I see barren of leaves

Which erst from heat did canopy the heard

- Sonnet 12 lines 5-6

Under the *canopies of costly state*

- 2 *Henry IV* 3.1.13

2 WITH MY EXTERN THE OUTWARD HONORING,

Honoring with my outward display; “Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty but seeming so, for my peculiar end; for when my *outward* action doth demonstrate the native act and figure of my heart in *complement extern*” – *Othello* 1.1.58-62; “Princes have but their titles for their glories, an *outward honor* for an inward toil.” *Richard III*, 1.4.78-9

3 OR LAID GREAT BASES FOR ETRNITY,

In the context of the lines, Oxford is speaking of his participation in royal ceremonies (such as the Queen’s funeral and the up-coming coronation of James) that will be forgotten in due time; but he is also glancing at the “great bases” or foundations of this Monument of the Sonnets to preserve Southampton for eternity; also the lines or “bases” of the individual sonnets or *pyramids* of Time; (Sonnet 123, line 2: “Thy pyramids”)