

## Unveiling the Sonnets

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The following paper is based on preparations for a panel discussion on Shakespeare's Sonnets at the 2006 Shakespeare Authorship Studies Conference at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon. I appeared there with author Hank Whittemore to present and defend Whittemore's "Monument Theory" on the meaning and purpose of the Sonnets. As a friend and colleague of Whittemore for 20 years, and as an editor of his work in the *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* and *Shakespeare Matters*, this was not the first time we had worked together or participated in joint presentations on the Monument Theory. Whittemore's article, elsewhere in this tribute to Elizabeth Holden, explains the Monument Theory in much more detail than I will attempt in this paper. My purpose here is to provide a perspective on how a *bonafide* historical context influences the interpretation of certain words in several of the sonnets, thereby transforming interpretation of the sonnets themselves from mere speculation or guessing into sound theorizing.

In an article in *Modern Language Notes* in 1917, Henry David Gray neatly captured the dilemma of all commentators who dare take on the infamous sonnet enigma; his words ring as true today as they did 89 years ago:

[One might do well to introduce himself thus] . . . "I am a Southamptonite, dating the Sonnets with Sarrazin from 1592 to 1596, accepting with Dowden the quarto order of the first 125 as chronological, with Massey identifying the Dark Lady as Elizabeth Vernon, and with Wyndham proclaiming the Rival Poet to be Drayton." Or, "I am a Pembrokist, dating the Sonnets with Mackail from 1598 to 1603, with Tyler identifying the Dark Lady as Mary Fitton, and holding with Minto that the Rival Poet is Chapman." Or, "I agree with Sir Sidney Lee that the Sonnets are literary exercises which do not record the poet's own experiences; I believe with Alden that it is impertinent to try to identify the Dark Lady; I think with Fleay that

W.H. is not the youth to whom the First Series is addressed at all but Thorpe's 'only procurer' of them; I am confident, with Walsh, that the order is wholly haphazard and must be completely readjusted to make the Sonnets intelligible; I haven't the faintest idea who the Rival Poet could have been, for I hold with Rolfe, that many of the First Series may have been addressed to a woman." Or finally: "I am a free lance among the Sonnets' critics with a special set of conjectures all my own; though I do agree with Butler that W.H. is William Hughes, with Acheson that the Dark Lady is Mistress Davenant, and with Montgomery that the Rival Poet is Spenser; I realize, with Beeching, that Sonnet 107 must refer to the death of Elizabeth, though the majority, as McClumpha shows, are contemporary with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Love's Labour's Lost*." Having thus, or by some similar formula, presented his credentials, the new

champion may enter the lists and proceed to break his spear against the Veiled Knight who guards the Mystery of the Sonnets. (17-18)

Little has changed since Gray's time, even with the subsequent identification, by J.T. Looney, of Edward de Vere, the 17th earl of Oxford, as Shakespeare, for Oxfordians have battled each other just as furiously over these same points as have any groupings of Stratfordians or anti-Stratfordians. But identifying who's who in the Sonnets is just half the task of the Sonnet Mystery; the other half is resolving the question of "Just what *is* the story?" Indeed, one might ask (and many have): "Is there any story at all?" Theories that suggest a story range from speculations on love trysts to love triangles to peculiar forms of adultery, to suggestions that the Sonnets are all about man-on-man love, most often referred to as homosexual love. The only point on which most can agree is that the poet exhibits deep passion and deep anguish over *something*.

More recently, writing on Sonnet 29 in the *Durham University Journal*, David Thatcher covers some of this "what is the story" ground in what he describes—quoting Harold Bloom—as engagements in "strong misreading" that only complicate and add to already "weak and repetitious ones [i.e., other interpretive scenarios] still at large" (59-60). Thatcher offers (echoing Sonnet 66, while still talking about readings and misreadings), that he, too, is "tired, especially with biographical interpretations." Yet Thatcher, peeling away successive layers of Sonnet 29 to prompt questions like "What is this?" and "Why is that?" seems to contradict the basis for his exasperation, for, in posing such questions to us, he surely must recognize that, in the end, such questions, of course, can only be answered by knowing *who* is writing to *whom* and about *what*. For example, Thatcher notes that [a] crucial ambivalence the poem [Sonnet 29] never resolves is whether the disgrace is real or illusory, deserved or undeserved,

making it difficult for the reader to know if sympathy towards the speaker (the conventional reaction) is really an appropriate and justified response. Theoretically, only an historical human narratee, if there had been one, might have been in a position to know what precisely the narrator was referring to in this opening line. . . . But such knowledge is irrecoverable. (61)

There we have the sonnet dilemma in a nutshell: "Such knowledge is irrecoverable." *But what if such knowledge were not irrecoverable?* What if there were a correct answer to the entire Sonnet Mystery, and all that one needed to achieve it were the proper set of interpretive tools?

#### Sonnet commentary background

These essays by Gray and Thatcher are just two of the thousands of writings to have been published over the past two centuries on *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. In a recent book of critical essays on the Sonnets,<sup>1</sup> James Schiffer introduces the collection with an excellent sixty-eight page essay that surveys the history of sonnet commentary, making several interesting points along the way.

Perhaps most helpful in Schiffer's survey is its presentation of a history that has ebbed and flowed more than once over the "biographical vs. fictive" schools of interpretation, and, as part of the larger sonnet debate, advances the notion that appreciating the Sonnets' themes does not require knowing the particular events in the author's life that may have inspired any particular verse. This notion is summed up in a 1907 quote from commentator Walter Raleigh:

It would help us but little to know the names of the beautiful youth and the dark woman; no public records could reflect even faintly those vicissitudes of experience, exultations and abysses of feeling

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which have their sole and sufficient record in the Sonnets. . . . Poetry is not biography; and the value of the Sonnets to the modern reader is independent of all knowledge of their occasion. That they were made from the material of experience is certain: Shakespeare was no puny imitative rhymster. But the processes of art have changed the tear to a pearl, which remains to decorate new sorrows. The Sonnets speak to all who have known the chances and changes of human life. Their occasion is a thing of the past; their time is eternal. (qtd. in Schiffer 32)

Schiffer then comments that "such attention to theme divorced from . . . biography, while not exactly new, would become a dominant note as sonnets criticism moved into the twentieth century" (33). But it is this "divorce" of theme from biography that really is at the heart of the Sonnets' mystery, and demonstrates—even if unknowingly—the overriding importance of the authorship debate in *any* commentary on *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Without having "real" known biographical facts with which to buttress any biographical interpretation, all interpretations become thematic musings, with any biographical implications being nothing more than attempts to recover the "irrecoverable knowledge," the absence of which Thatcher laments but which Raleigh says is irrelevant anyway.

So the traditional critical approach to the Sonnets that has evolved from this situation is that all that needs to be done is to identify a Fair Youth and a Dark Lady, and then proceed to *hypothesize* unknown events into a story of some sort—or else, as Raleigh wrote, ignore the story of the Poet, the Youth and the Dark Lady altogether and just enjoy the eternal pearl of the poems' lyrical beauty. For Stratfordians, of course, this approach can never be tempered with the idea that it is Shakespeare himself (the Poet) who needs to be "correctly"

identified before any progress can be made, but *this is where the authorship debate and anti-Stratfordian Sonnet commentary become factors in our hopes of achieving as full an understanding of the Sonnets as possible.*

Yet for all Sonnet commentators (Stratfordian and anti-Stratfordian) the equally important task of identifying an *actual* history involving the parties (Poet, Fair Youth, Dark Lady) about which the Poet was writing has presented a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. And it has been attempts to overcome this obstacle that have resulted in an abundance of commentary that "hypothesizes" what this actual history "must" have been based *only* on what any given Sonnet "seems" to be about to the interpreter of those Sonnets.

All this highly subjective, impressionistic criticism has led to the current state of the traditional sonnet debate. For example, Joseph Pequigney's *Such is My Love* (1985), with its homoerotic reading of the Sonnets, has won many converts. Yet Pequigney's reading coexists with those of Booth (1977), Kerrigan (1986), Vendler (1997) and Duncan-Jones (1998), all of which steer clear of going down the autobiographical road in interpreting the Sonnets.

One of the gems in Schiffer's essay is the story of an early round of sonnet commentary in which Edmund Malone responded to George Steevens' moral revulsion over Shakespeare's declaration to his addressee in Sonnet 20 that he is "the master-mistress of my passion." In his 1783 edition of Shakespeare, Steevens had written that "[i]t is impossible to read this fulsome panegyrick, addressed to a male object, without an equal mixture of disgust and indignation." Malone responded in 1790 that "[s]ome part of this indignation might perhaps have been abated if it had been considered that such addresses to men, however indelicate, were customary in our author's time, and neither imported criminality, nor were esteemed indecorous . . ." He added that "Master-mistress" does not mean "man-mistress," but [rather] "Sovereign mistress" (the same two words are used

together in Sonnet 126, line 5). Little did he know (as we shall see) the import of what he was saying, because while he was certainly not promoting the youth as really “sovereign” in any sense, he nonetheless introduced into the equation a thesis that has resonated for the past 150 years among many anti-Stratfordian commentators (notably Oxfordians, but before them, Baconians). In rejecting possibly homosexual allusions, Malone found *royal* allusions (qtd in Schiffer 21-23).

That initial showdown over interpreting a single line in one sonnet set the stage for the next 200 years, with the central point of contention always being whether to accept the words as literally true and autobiographical (and hence, as some commentators maintain, “diminish” Shakespeare since the perceived man-to-man love could, to them, only be homosexual) or adopt more benign interpretations that are not autobiographical and thereby “protect” Shakespeare from any suggestion that he was gay or bisexual (Schiffer 27-31). This “true/diminishing” vs. “benign/protecting” dichotomy has also bedeviled anti-Stratfordian commentary, for the suggestion that the Poet was being “real” when he calls the Youth “my sovereign” in Sonnet 57 (one of many royal allusions throughout the sonnets<sup>2</sup>) has been every bit as contentious for some anti-Stratfordians as the homosexual thesis has been for Stratfordians.

The notion of the royal allusions being real was introduced into the Oxfordian movement in the 1930s by B. M. Ward and Percy Allen.<sup>3</sup> Their theory was that the Poet/Fair Youth relationship was not one of an older lover and a younger lover but rather one of father and son—and that the son was a prince, seen by the father as the rightful heir to Elizabeth (the Dark Lady). This theory—generally referred to among contemporary Oxfordians as the “Prince Tudor” theory (Whittemore xxxv-xxxvi)—has divided the Oxfordian movement ever since it was first proposed, not least because there seems to be no independent historical evidence for it, but also because it seems, to many, so outrageously

“over the top,” or “hopelessly romantic,” or—worst of all—conspiratorial.

This theory of the *Sonnets* was aptly summed up by Charlton Ogburn, Jr.:

We are left with a compelling question raised by the *Sonnets*. It is a question that is inescapable and one that traditional scholarship is resolved upon escaping at all costs ... How is it that the Poet of the *Sonnets* can—as he unmistakably does—address the fair youth as an adoring and deeply concerned father would address his son and as a subject would his liege-lord? (75)

The “royal” theory has been the source of much contention among Oxfordians over the past seventy years. The exact details of who may have slept with whom to create such a scenario we will leave to another day,<sup>4</sup> but the import of demonstrating the “royal” theory, if it can be demonstrated, is crucial to the resolution of the Shakespeare Mystery, as this is the one issue that divides Oxfordian scholars more than any other contested issue within the Oxfordian community.

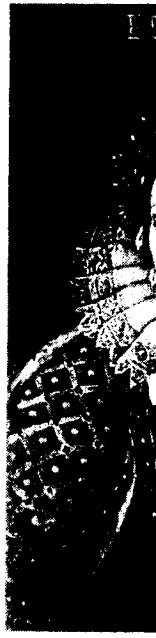
### A proposed solution

Writing in support of Hank Whittemore’s “Monument Theory” of the *Sonnets*’ meaning and purpose in the Summer 2004 *Shakespeare Matters* (in an article titled “With the *Sonnets* Now Solved...”), I chose a headline that boldly declared the *Sonnets* Mystery solved. In response, Lynne Kositsky and Roger Stritmatter submitted an article, “Critique of the Monument Theory,” for publication in the Fall 2004 issue of *Shakespeare Matters*. In the years since the publication of that article, the debate has raged, with opponents of the Monument Theory (with its royalist “Prince Tudor” implications) contending that one cannot claim the *Sonnets* are “solved,” or that there is no answer to the sonnet enigma.

Therefore, let me justify the above headline by restating it: I think the sonnets *can be*

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*solved* if one has the right elements in place, and I submit that, in Whittemore's work, *they have been solved*. By "solved" let me be clear about what I mean, for it goes back to Thatcher's contention that "only an historical human narratee 'might' . . . know what was being referred to . . . but that knowledge is irrecoverable." I believe that knowledge is indeed "recoverable," and that several particular words within the sonnets, when read in the light of their actual historical context—as opposed to the subjective guesses of dehistoricized impressionistic readers—reveal the true story. The key to recovering this true story lies in correctly identifying the narrator (Poet), the narratee (Fair Youth), the Dark Lady, and the historical circumstances. *All* these elements must be identified before anyone can dare declare, "Sonnets solved."

Unlike all previous sonnet theories, the Monument Theory accomplishes this. It hypothesizes "Poet" identity (Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford), "Fair Youth" identity (Henry Wriothesley, 3rd earl of Southampton), "Dark Lady" identity (Queen Elizabeth I) and *documented* historical circumstances that are applicable to the *entire* sonnet sequence while bringing to the foreground *key*

*words* that appear in the sonnets but have never been understood in *contextual terms*, i.e., a *bona fide* historical context. Briefly, I believe that the key to the solution lies in *both* the primary historical context identified by Whittemore—the Essex Rebellion of 1601—and in the relationship of the Poet to the Fair Youth as one of father to royal son. Further, it is important to note that both father and son were involved in the Rebellion and that both suffered its consequences.

In my 2004 article supporting the Monument Theory, I focused on three sonnets (35, 87, 120), and I wish to revisit them in this essay in more detail to make the point that the answer to the mystery of the sonnets has been embedded in the sonnets the whole time, hiding in plain sight, waiting to be found. When one places the royal allusions (Hotson Ch. 2-3, Whittemore 773-777) and the abundance of legal language (Whittemore xlvi) in the sonnets side-by-side with the royal succession agenda and the subsequent treason trials of the Essex Rebellion, the meaning of the Sonnets comes into focus.

### Essex Rebellion background

Before delving into these three sonnets, let's first look at some of the history surrounding the Essex Rebellion, since it is posited as being central to the Monument Theory. As I wrote in 2004, one important question that seldom has been asked (let alone answered) about the Essex Rebellion is why the life of its co-leader, the 3rd earl of Southampton, was spared (he was tried with Essex, convicted of treason and sentenced to die). A second question is why the author, Shakespeare, was not rounded up, tried and punished—or even interrogated—when his play *Richard II*, depicting the deposition of a monarch, was used to *set the stage for the Rebellion*. A third question focuses on just what the conspirators' goals were that day (i.e., were they, in fact, advancing James's claim as Elizabeth's successor?). And a final question asks what Essex had been up to in the years leading up to the rebellion, a period during which he was often



perceived as a contemporary Bolingbroke to Elizabeth's Richard II. Much of this history has been written about in Essex biographies and other histories of the period, but always from a conventional viewpoint in which neither Shakespeare nor Southampton is seen as having any stake in the succession debate.

A recent article by Chris Fitter in *Early Modern Literary Studies* sheds some light on this last question (about Essex), and, of special significance, Fitter attempts to comprehend what Shakespeare was up to as he wrote and rewrote *Richard II* over a period of five years leading up to the Rebellion (Fitter never considers that Shakespeare could have been revising work written before 1596).

After the Rebellion's failure, it was recorded at the rebels' trial that Prosecutor Edward Coke said Essex had designs on becoming King Robert the First (Camden par. 18) and that Robert Cecil had stated that Essex wished to set himself up as King (Harrison 151). In fact, some of Cecil's words seem remarkable, considering that Essex had no blood claim to the throne whatsoever (Bolingbroke, at least, was Richard II's cousin, the son of one of his uncles):

And had I not seen your [Essex's] ambitious affections inclined to usurpation, I could have gone on my knees to her Majesty to have done you good ... You, my good lords, counselors of state, have had many conferences, and I do confess I have said the King of Scots is a competitor, and the King of Spain is a competitor, and you [i.e. Essex] I have said are a competitor: you would depose the Queen, you would be king of England, and call a Parliament. (qtd in Keeton 55-56)

Here is Cecil mentioning Essex right in the company of the two most powerful claimants angling to succeed Elizabeth. How could this perception of Essex as a "would be king of England" have developed in the

years leading up to 1601 without Essex ever having faced any *serious* rebuke? Neither the Privy Council hearing in the Fall of 1599 nor the quasi-official "commission" hearing in June 1600—both of which did begin to take action in response to these perceptions, precipitated by the dedication to Essex in Dr. John Hayward's 1599 *History of Henry the Fourth*—seem sufficiently serious forums for consideration of the risks allied to a potential usurper. And consider further that Essex's almost year-long house arrest during this period was just that—house arrest, *not* the Tower (which is where Hayward was sent and remained until Elizabeth died). Moreover, it was just six months after his release from house arrest that the Rebellion took place. It is even recorded that Robert Cecil had seen *Richard II* in 1597 and that, upon learning of this fact, Essex was "wonderful merry" at Cecil's reaction to the play (we have no direct evidence of what Cecil's reaction was, just that Essex commented upon it). Chris Fitter's take on this (Fitter pars. 31-32, 36-37)—the main point of his essay, in fact—is that Shakespeare actually is sabotaging the overreaching earl more than seriously promoting his Bolingbroke-like ambitions, so perhaps Cecil is enjoying a laugh at Essex's expense. If so, he must have overlooked the depose-and-kill-the-monarch ending of the play, or perhaps—in the *realpolitik* world of Elizabethan statecraft—he had a different ending in mind.

Fitter's article makes clear what dangerous times these were with the politics of succession so unsettled, and how risky it was for anyone to speak out. Yet speak out is exactly what some (including Shakespeare) did. Robert Parson's *Conference About the Next Succession to the Crowne of England* (1594/1595) contained a dedication to Essex that Fitter describes as "treasonably suggesting him to be Elizabeth's next heir" (Fitter par. 7). As noted above, the dedication to Essex in Hayward's 1599 *History of Henry the Fourth* had landed the author in the Tower for his daring. Yet, even as Fitter makes the case for Shakespeare's active

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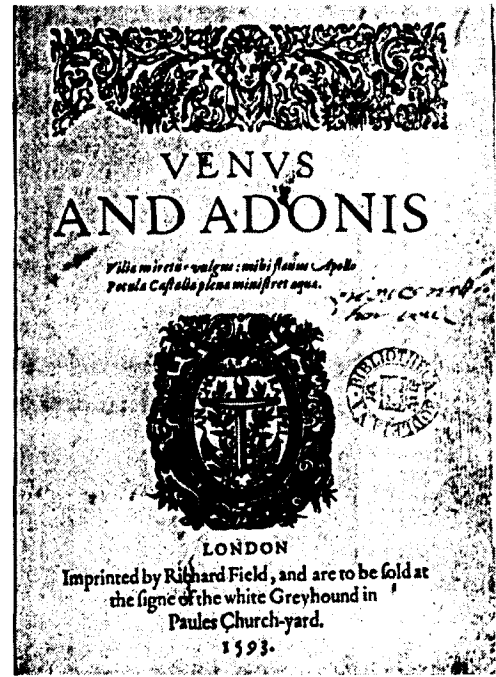
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involvement in such dangerous politics with his *Richard II*, he never asks how Shakespeare could have—or why he would have—dared to do so. At one point, Fitter cites a letter from Rowland Whyte to Robert Sidney in which Whyte says, "To wryte of these Things are [sic] dangerous in so perillous a Tyme." And in the next sentence Fitter writes, "And this is precisely what Shakespeare now did" (Fitter pars. 39-40).

One final note on Fitter's intriguing examination of the period: he never mentions the earl of Southampton. Considering that he is explicating Shakespeare's political agenda on the succession, the Queen, and the Earl of Essex, and given the sudden appearance of Shakespeare on the literary scene in 1593-1594 (coincident with the rise of Essex) with two long poems dedicated to Southampton, Fitter's omission seems strange. It does seem to reflect the larger problem that Oxfordians have frequently noted over the years—namely, that if one has the wrong Shakespeare, then any history involving him cannot be fully, nor correctly, understood. Southampton was definitely involved with Essex throughout this period, and was, in fact, a co-leader and co-conspirator in the Rebellion. If, as Fitter speculates, Shakespeare was actually sabotaging Essex during this critical period when Essex was openly seen as a Bolingbroke-like challenger in the succession sweepstakes, how can Fitter not wonder how Southampton (publicly linked to Shakespeare through the popular *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* poems) factors into all of this?

The unanswered question here—if Fitter is right in his speculation about Shakespeare and Essex—is, then, what was Shakespeare up to? Just what are his concerns in *Richard II* about the succession crisis of the 1590s? His play does seem to suggest approval of the notion of Bolingbroke usurping a monarch such as Richard, but if Shakespeare didn't approve of Essex as an Elizabethan Bolingbroke, did he have another Bolingbroke in mind? After all, the future of the Elizabethan state was at stake in these years; would there be a peaceful



succession or civil war if the Tudor Dynasty were to disappear without an heir having been named before the Queen's death?

### Why was Southampton spared?

To return to the Southampton side of the equation in the Essex Rebellion, we must ask how, in the *quid pro quo* world of Elizabethan justice, Southampton's life was spared without any record of something having been done, either by him or by someone acting for him. For all the other conspirators there is a record of their swift executions following their trials (Essex, Blount, Meyrick, Danvers and Cuffe), or of staggering fines being assessed and—for the most part—paid (e.g., by Rutland, Bedford, Neville, and many others), or, in the interesting case of Sir John Davis, of full cooperation with the state that secured the death penalty for himself and the four others tried with him (Blount, Meyrick, Danvers, and Cuffe), yet as these other four went to their deaths within weeks of their trial, he (Davis) was spared and eventually granted a pardon by the Queen in 1602 (Devereux 198); was this a *quid pro quo* for his cooperation? And was it

the only one exacted following the Rebellion? After all, what was it that saved the co-leader of the Rebellion itself: Henry Wriothesley, 3rd earl of Southampton?

Charlotte Stopes, in her biography of Southampton, mentions this *quid pro quo* system:

... As soon as the Privy Council felt safe by the apprehension of the chief offender, they turned their attention towards possible mercy, in order to ingratiate themselves with the people. This rarely meant politic mercy, as in the case of Mountjoy, who was needed where he was; or even compassionate mercy, as in the case of the Earl of Southampton. It in general expressed itself as mercantile mercy, measured in proportion, not to the degree of the offender's guilt, but of his capacity to pay. (233; emphasis added)

Although Stopes notes the "mercantile" nature of the system, in the absence of any record of a *quid pro quo* for Southampton, she concludes that it was "compassion" alone that spared him. In the face of the enormity of Southampton's crime, however, is such a sentimental conclusion credible?

A closer examination of the extant records involving Southampton tells a different story than that offered by Stopes. The primary records are Southampton's letters to the Privy Council in February and March of 1601. While these letters (in which "her Majiestie" and "mercy" are mentioned often) are reproduced in their entirety by Stopes (225-231), they are curiously absent in both Rowse's and Akrigg's biographies (perhaps—however difficult it is to imagine—because neither saw Southampton's reprieve as a story worth reviewing in detail). The story that these letters tell is of a man who seems to have a defense counsel (his "advocate" [Sonnet 35]) hovering over his shoulder, telling him exactly what to say and how to say it. The letters, even

as they beg for mercy for his "fawte" [fault], reflect a perfect understanding of the legal difference between "treason" and the lesser charge of "misprision of treason" as it was used at this time. When Southampton writes that he had no idea what Essex was up to, and no idea that events were headed toward treason, he sets himself up to be plea-bargained from treason and death to "misprision of treason" and life in prison ("supposed as forfeit to a confined doom" [Sonnet 107]). That precise legal mechanism had been perfected throughout the 120-year Tudor dynasty, whereby treason charges could be, at the discretion of the Crown, reduced to "misprision of treason" (Bellamy 30; Rastell 153).

Finally, while the phrase "misprision of treason" cannot be directly linked to a reduction in sentence to account for the failure of the State to execute Southampton with the other conspirators sentenced to die, it has been used to refer to the fate of one of his fellow conspirators: Sir Henry Neville. In a 1978 article by Clayton Roberts and Owen Duncan about the English parliament circa 1614, Neville is mentioned, and a reference is made by the authors to his having been accused of "misprision of treason" in the Essex Rebellion and thereby imprisoned. The article does not cite any contemporary source for using this phrase, but it does state that although he knew of the plot, he did not inform Cecil, and that Neville, "for this was accused of misprision of treason and sent to the Tower" (494).<sup>6</sup> Southampton, in his pleading letters to the Privy Council, not only acknowledged not informing anyone, but even claimed that he really didn't know where the events for which he had been convicted were headed—almost as if he were asking *how* he could have informed anyone. And Neville, though he was released on the same day as Southampton (10 April 1603), had his lands restored and also was pardoned (James and Rubinstein 147), still *had to pay* a substantial portion of his original £10,000 fine (estimated at £3,000 [James and Rubinstein 146]). Further, as Neville's biographers note, Neville was tainted

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by the Rebellion for the rest of his life and barred from high office. Neville's punitive treatment highlights how Southampton—the co-leader of the rebellion—stood *alone* among all the conspirators as apparently having been required to *perform nothing* and *pay nothing* for his special treatment. In fact, not only was Southampton not punished; he was fully restored, pardoned, *and even honored* upon his release; he even was made a Knight of the Garter.

So, was Southampton as disconnected from intimate association with Essex and the conspirators of the Rebellion as his pleading letters to the Privy Council would indicate? I think not. The historical record seems to belie his words, beginning with his unarguably close association with Essex in the years leading up to the Rebellion. Both of them, after all—and more than once—had been arraigned before and were in frequent trouble with the Queen over their disobedient behavior. There is also an intriguing account from John Nichols about an event in the spring of 1603, shortly after Southampton's release and pardon (Akrigg 136-137; Massey 77-78) that is illuminating. Nichols reports that Southampton told James' wife, Queen Anne, that the Rebellion could have—perhaps would have—succeeded if *only they could have followed through with their plans*. The Nichols report relates how Queen Anne remarked "in amazement" that "so many great men did so little for themselves," a remark to which (in Akrigg's words), "Southampton had a ready reply: they [the Essex Rebellion conspirators] had no choice but to yield, since their sovereign had sided with their enemies" (136).

Lord Grey, an Essex/Southampton opponent in the years leading up to the Rebellion (one of "their enemies"), is then reported to interrupt, saying (in Akrigg's words) that "he and his friends could have done much more than the Essexians" (137). Argument ensued, and Grey and Southampton were sent briefly to the Tower. But consider what this moment in 1603 reveals: Southampton is still fighting the same fight and *justifying* what occurred

in 1601—and this from someone who had claimed in his letters to the Privy Council that he didn't even *know* what was going on! The tone of the exchange (as reported) seems to cast in doubt that the placement of James of Scotland on the throne of England was the goal of the Rebellion; otherwise, what are they arguing over? Why would Queen Anne say that so many great men did so little for *themselves* if they were doing it for James? Southampton's words, uttered just months after his release, are not the same words one finds in his obsequious letters written two-and-one-half years earlier.

Also of interest in this matter of the Essex-Southampton relationship is an attempt by Captain Thomas Lee, just days after the Rebellion, to find a way to get *both* Essex and Southampton out of the Tower and into the presence of the Queen to explain themselves (Lacey 298; Myers 48). Lee, a notorious assassin involved with Essex in Ireland, was caught, and within two days tried, convicted and executed for treason. James P. Myers, writing about Lee in a 1991 article, reports that at his trial<sup>7</sup> he said his only intention was "with the aid of a half dozen resolute men [to] step unto the queen, and kneel before her, and never rise till she had signed a warrant . . . and never stir till the earls of Essex and Southampton were brought to the queen's presence" (qtd. in Myers 48). Myers comments that Lee's true intentions may never be known and that he was reported to have died "still [denying] the treason for which he was executed" (48). Myers further notes that Lee's trial also does not make apparent that Lee "until the Essex Rebellion, had enjoyed repute as the Crown's creature, a successful mercenary and assassin . . . Evidence in the state papers suggests that someone [other than his brother Sir Henry], possibly the Cecils or the queen or even all three, had for almost twenty years protected him . . ." (48). Myers then notes:

Given, moreover, the residual popularity of Essex and the lingering potential for further disturbances, Lee's treason could conveniently

be made to pressure the vacillating monarch into authorizing Essex's death. The ploy succeeded: Cecil, writing of Essex's execution to the lord deputy of Ireland on 26 February, pointedly observed that the earl's death 'was the more hastened by the bloody practice of 'Thom' Lee'. (49)

Myers' speculation leaves open the possibility that the entire Lee episode was a Cecil ploy from the beginning. If so, it would reinforce and reaffirm how cut-throat and double-dealing were the politics of this era, especially the politics surrounding the Rebellion. Lee's claim that he wished only to bring *both* Essex and Southampton before the Queen is noteworthy, but who it was who put him up to risking and losing his life in this cause to present Essex and Southampton before Elizabeth is unknown.

In both of these instances, we can see that Essex and Southampton were, indeed, co-leaders of the Rebellion. Southampton's protestations to the Privy Council were transparently false, but they were necessary if he were to hope to secure a reprieve from his death sentence. However—and astonishingly—there is no written record in Southampton's case of exactly how or why his sentence alone was commuted when *all* of the other conspirators were punished in severe degree. The upshot of all this history is that Rebellion co-leader Southampton was clearly unique in how his case was handled. History has yet to explain why he received such special and unaccounted-for leniency. If Southampton did not have to pay for his acts with his life, did someone else pay Cecil's, i.e., the State's, price for the young earl's life?

With some of this background in place, let's take a look at how Sonnets 35, 87 and 120 may be concerned with those events and their consequences.

**"That which thou has't done"**

Sonnet 35 begins, "No more be grieved at that which thou has't done." The word "that" clearly refers to "something done" which, in turn, is the key to the "story." But how can we ever know what "that" is which has been done? Isn't it "irrecoverable knowledge"? Consider, however, that "that" is referenced again in the same sonnet—both as a "trespass" and as a "sensual fault":

All men make faults, and even I  
in this  
Authorizing thy trespass with com-  
pare (ll. 5-6)

For to thy sensual fault I bring in  
sense  
(Thy adverse party is thy advocate)  
(9-10)

Consider further that "trespass" is repeated once later in the sequence (Sonnet 120) in which we observe that "trespass" and "crime" are used interchangeably:

To weigh how once I suffered in  
your crime (8)

But that your trespass now becomes  
a fee,  
Mine ransom yours, and yours must  
ransom me (13-14)

So, using just these two sonnets, one could propose a straightforward formula:

that = fault = trespass (Sonnet 35)  
= crime = trespass (Sonnet 120)

by this, we can see that "that which thou has't done" refers not to just a minor offense of some sort, but to a crime (and "crime" also appears in Sonnet 58 [12] as the Youth's "self-doing crime"). Is there a Fair Youth candidate who is known to have committed a crime? Yes: Henry Wriothesley, 3rd earl of Southampton, was convicted of treason in the Essex Rebellion and sentenced to death.<sup>8</sup> And considering that the range of Sonnets between 35 and 120 covers almost the entire 100 middle-sonnet

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sequence (27-126), it seems reasonable to consider that the *only thing* being discussed between the Poet and the Youth throughout this entire sequence is just this one thing: "that which thou hast done," i.e., the crime which you have committed."

The other key word/concept that can be gleaned from these sonnets (35, 120 and also Sonnet 34) is "ransom" as some form of expiation of the Fair Youth's crime. Our chief consideration here is to recall that—with Southampton posited as the Fair Youth—we have a Fair Youth who had been convicted of a crime and sentenced to die but was later reprieved. In a world where "ransom and fines" were almost always paid to obtain commutations by convicts who could afford them, there is no record of any ransom or fine being paid by the youthful Southampton for his commutation. But might a ransom have been paid for him by another? *Is it possible that the Sonnets may provide the missing explanation for Southampton's freedom and what price was paid—and by whom—to obtain it?* We will return to this point later.

### Trespass and treason

Kositsky and Stritmatter point out in their article critiquing the Monument Theory that the word "treason" does not appear in Sonnet 35 (11) nor even in the middle century of sonnets (27-126), the sequence postulated by Whittemore to be a chronological diary and record of Shakespeare, Southampton and the Essex Rebellion. Therefore, they contend, there is no reason to gloss the words "trespass" or "fault" as references to Southampton's treason. It should be noted here that Whittemore, however, provides in his book several examples from Shakespeare's plays where Shakespeare treated these words interchangeably (Whittemore 478-479).<sup>10</sup>

However, there is another Shakespearean work which uses "trespass" and "fault," *plus* the words "treason" and "crime," interchangeably: *Rape of Lucrece*. In fact, those four words are used throughout that poem in reference only to the *one event* being discussed: Tar-

quin's acts of bursting into Lucrece's bedroom and raping her (the actual word count is: Treason=6, Trespass=6, fault=12, crime=5) (Furness). Significantly, although those words are used to discuss a single event, their usage actually is differentiated within the poem: "treason" is associated exclusively with Tarquin (in his own words or those of the poet/narrator), while "fault" and "trespass" are used principally—though not exclusively—to describe Lucrece (in her own words or those of the poet/narrator). The usage of "crime" is split evenly between Tarquin and Lucrece, with two instances of Lucrece speaking of "his" crime—i.e., Tarquin's crime—and two instances of her speaking of "my" crime, plus one instance of the poet/narrator saying "Though men can cover crimes with bold stern looks / Poor women's faces are their own faults' books" (1252-53).

This word usage results in a "Rashomon" effect of how two people see the same event. For Tarquin, it clearly was treason to do what he did—as he acknowledges before and after the fact—fully considering (like Hamlet) the consequences of what he wants to do but then (unlike Hamlet) acting anyway ("a disputation / 'Tween frozen conscience and hot-burning will," 246-47). But Lucrece feels complicit and talks of "my trespass," "my fault," and "my crime" in (she thinks) "leading Tarquin on" or "allowing" the rape. The extended diversion within the poem where she views the painting of the Fall of Troy reinforces this point, allowing her to curse Helen for her "trespass" (line 1476) in arousing a passion in Paris that caused him to kidnap her.

These distinctions in *Lucrece* demonstrate that the same words in the Sonnets may show how the several parties actually saw and reacted to the events of "that which thou hast done" and what the nuanced use of these words may suggest about these reactions. Tarquin, having spent the first third of the poem talking "sense" to himself about what he was thinking of doing, then goes and does it (his rational "sense" gives way to

his emotional "sensual" act). This, I submit, is his "sensual fault," his "treason" (perhaps anticipating Sonnet 35, "to thy sensual fault I bring sense").<sup>11</sup> I should emphasize, too, that I do not mean here "sensuous," which some erroneously equate with "sensual" ("sensuous" means loving, while "sensual" means willful<sup>12</sup>). This poem recounts, after all, not a love story but a *rape*. Then, as now, rape is not about sex; it is about the tyrannical use of power. Tarquin's soliloquies about it underscore that fact: he wants to possess what someone else has, even at the risk of "dispossessing" himself.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the consequences of Tarquin's treason are political disaster for two families: his own, and Lucrece's (when she commits suicide in defense of her chastity).

### Sonnet 87 and "misprision"

With this hypothesis in place, i.e., the "that" over which the youth must "no more be grieved" is his "trespass/sensual fault/crime" in the Essex Rebellion (referred to by Shakespeare as "thy trespass" and "your trespass" in sonnets 35 and 120), other sonnets in the central century-sonnet sequence (27-126) can be read in a proper light. One of the most important of these sonnets is 87, about which Kositsky and Stritmatter write, "In many ways, the crux of Whittemore's argument can be found in a single word in Sonnet 87 [misprision]" (12). While acknowledging that Southampton's death sentence might have been commuted to "misprision of treason," they note that "of treason" is not in the poem,<sup>14</sup> and they claim that 87 is a sonnet about simple "emotional leave-taking." Further, they note that the sonnet is full of financial metaphors (dear, possessing, estimate, charter, bonds, granting, worth, riches, gift, patent) and therefore conclude:

If we want to understand "misprision" in its actual, as opposed to hypothetical, context, we should read the word in relation to this financial schema. Stephen Booth notes that one definition of "misprision" is "undervaluation,"

which accords perfectly with the language of the sonnet without recourse to the meaning Boyle and Whittemore depend on to make their thesis . . . The *context of the sonnet* does not support [glossing "misprision" as "misprision of treason"]. Instead, the *preferred meaning* is clearly "undervaluation." To accept the meaning supplied by Boyle and Whittemore requires us to ignore the *obvious* context (with its extensive monetary metaphors) of the sonnet itself in favor of a *hypothetical* context, which the sonnet, without the misconstruction of the word "misprision," entirely fails to support. (12; emphasis added)

This critique illustrates much that has been misdirected in Sonnet scholarship for almost two centuries. Although Kositsky and Stritmatter argue for a supposedly "obvious" context that trumps a "hypothetical" context, they at the same time also postulate that such an obvious context must be understood *only* within this sonnet's internal context, not the larger, external context provided by the other sonnets in the sequence (e.g., by "trespass" equaling "treason" in sonnets 35 and 120) let alone any *genuine historical context* within which the Poet lived, wrote, and—most especially—interacted with the Fair Youth.

Apart from Shakespeare's own parallel usage of these words (trespass and treason),<sup>15</sup> it should be noted here that there is, in fact, an independent contemporaneous linkage of the words "misprision" and "trespass" that should settle any questions about whether the word "trespass" could be used to describe a high crime (rather than a misdemeanor or some other petty offense). In a 1567 legal lexicon there appears a revealing entry for "Misprision of felonie or trespass" (Rastell 152). The entry states "that in every treason or felonie is included *misprision*, and where any hath committed treason or felonie the

[Queen] may and [arraigne will" (Rastell

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[Queen] may cause the same to be indited and [arraigned] but of *misprision* only if she will" (Rastell 153; emphasis added).<sup>16</sup>

The usage of "misprision," coupled with "trespass," in this entry, is evidence, therefore, that "trespass" was synonymous with "felonie"; and, accordingly, it is not unreasonable to see how Shakespeare could also equate it with "treason," especially in light of his usage of those words in *Lucrece*, as if they described degrees of guilt/culpability over the same offense—similar to determining whether a killing was manslaughter or murder. Although such usage of "trespass" may have been slipping into obscurity by 1567, the timing would be a perfect fit for those, like Oxfordians, who believe that Shakespeare was seventeen years old in 1567 and being trained in the law at that time at Gray's Inn. It also is especially interesting to note, in this context, that the Queen could commute any indictment of treason or felony to misprision *at her will*—an important point for the argument that converting Southampton's conviction for treason to "misprision" is exactly what Southampton was seeking in his letters to the Queen.

Turning to some of the more recent mainstream Sonnet commentaries, we find that Helen Vendler has nothing to say about the word "misprision," while Booth (as previously noted) glosses it as "undervaluation" (291) and Duncan-Jones declares it "a false estimate" (284).<sup>17</sup> It is true that there is nothing within Sonnet 87 alone that would compel a reader to think "misprision of treason" *solely* by the appearance of the word "misprision." But this is where the element of historical context must be considered, together with the context provided by considering *all* of Shakespeare's Sonnets to be in authorial sequence and telling a single story. As noted earlier, the key words "trespass" and "fault," linked with the word "crime," lead us *outside* the Sonnets and into what is an event in history: the Essex Rebellion. For *anyone* who postulates Southampton as the Fair Youth, this event must, in my view, come first and foremost in any consideration of the "that" which the

Fair Youth has done. Let me also suggest that if the words "misprision of treason" had ever been associated with Southampton in the historical record, or by any of his biographers, Sonnet commentary would long ago have picked up on it, and there would be no question about it.

### The Southampton mystery

Finally, to get to the heart of Sonnet 87, even, as many commentators have, after identifying Southampton as the Fair Youth of the Sonnets, we need to ask ourselves, "Who is Southampton? What is his relationship to Shakespeare? Why is he allied with Essex, and what is their relationship?" Establishing these contexts mean, therefore, not only recognizing that Southampton was a co-leader of the Essex Rebellion but affirms the need to inquire into the many unanswered questions about the Rebellion and its leaders and explore what Shakespeare's perspectives on these persons and events were.

As we noted earlier, Essex's name had been bandied throughout the 1590s as one who might play a possible late-sixteenth-century Bolingbroke to Elizabeth's Richard II; indeed, he was accused at his trial of seeking to become King Robert I. Shakespeare's Richard II had been performed, on Essex's and Southampton's orders, the night before the attempted coup, seemingly both to justify a monarch's downfall and to rally support for the coming coup, yet the author, Shakespeare, never was mentioned during the post-rebellion trials nor was he ever party to those involved in the play and its production questioned, tried and punished for participating, however indirectly, in the Rebellion. And Southampton, notably, once sentenced to die, was inexplicably spared—a point where the Shakespeare problem, i.e., the Shakespeare *authorship* problem, seems to intersect with this little-noticed Southampton mystery. Historians cannot say for certain why Southampton was spared in 1601 anymore than they can say for certain why Shakespeare was never held to account for his role in the Essex Rebellion.

These curiosities lead us back to the “Prince Tudor” theory, i.e., the thesis that Southampton himself may have harbored his own royal aspirations as the unacknowledged son of the Queen and the poet, Oxford/Shakespeare. In addition to the previously-noted curiosities in the Sonnets’ references to the Fair Youth, we are told by Shakespeare that the youth has a “charter of his worth” (87:3), and other sonnets also provide a backdrop to this boy’s “charter of worth,” such as the Poet’s astonishing address to him as “my sovereign” in Sonnet 57. Indeed, as also noted earlier, “royal language” is used *throughout* the sonnet sequence to describe the Youth. Add to this an historical context (the Essex Rebellion) concerned with royal succession and, I believe, we have before us—achieved within a defined historical context—the revelation of what Sonnet 87 is all about.

**Kings and a king**

Sonnet 87 is not the only instance in the sonnets of a “king” being mentioned in a discussion of value and worth. In Sonnet 29, Shakespeare declares, “For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings / That then I scorn to change my state with kings” (13-14). So, Shakespeare tells us, there are things in this world more valuable than kingship.

As we noted earlier in looking at the Essex Rebellion, Southampton was convicted of treason and sentenced to death, but was then reprieved from his death sentence. At the trial of Essex and Southampton, Essex was accused of seeking to set himself up as King, yet no record exists of Southampton’s motives in the Rebellion—other than his letters to the Privy Council, wherein he pleads for mercy and proclaims that he only was involved out of his “love for Essex” (Stopes 225-231).<sup>18</sup>

With these key elements in place, we can now look at the final lines of Sonnet 87 —“Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter, / In sleep a king, but waking no such matter” (13-14)—and ask why these particular verses appear here. Turning to Helen Vendler’s comments, we find:

The deposed-by-daylight king of the last line generates the several puns of the closing: mist-a-king [line 10], m-a-king [line 12], w-a-king [line 14], the “nutshells” hiding the nut, a king, which is phonetically speaking, close to “aching.” (381)

In fact, Vendler notes, ten of the sonnet’s fourteen lines end in verbs with “-ing.” It’s as if the whole sonnet could be entitled, “To a King—not.” Vendler also remarks on the legal terms used in the sonnet, emphasizing that these terms represent *exchanges* between Poet and Youth, which she calls “the giving-and-recalling, or swerving [line 8], of what was, or seemed to be, a gift” [lines 7, 11]. She calls it a “gift of love,” and notes that it is a “key word” in the sonnets, with “gift,” “gives,” “gav’st,” and “gift” again appearing in each quatrain, but then becoming suddenly absent from the couplet (making it, in her overall scheme of sonnet analysis, a “defective key word”).

Yet neither Vendler (in noting this “gift of love”) nor Kositsky/Stritmatter (in noting what they call the sonnet’s “financial schema”) consider that a “king” itself is a thing of value (being the *Youth’s* own “worth”), and if what is occurring in Sonnet 87 is an “exchange” involving “gifts” or “giving,” then we must remember that Shakespeare has already noted, back in Sonnet 29, that “love” (and I would add “life”) is more valuable than kingship. The “gift of love” could, in fact, be worth a *king’s ransom*.

**Let’s make a deal**

Continuing with Sonnet 87, it is reasonable at this point, I believe, to infer that the word “misprision” (“So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,” line 11) alludes to a “deal”—a legal maneuver—that saved Southampton’s life, not to a “false estimate” or an “undervaluation” as more traditional glosses would have it. Furthermore, let us consider that this deal may be the financial transaction alluded to in the sonnet. Southampton, after

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all, had “risked” his life in the Rebellion—“his own worth then not knowing”—and, in fact, had *lost his life* by receiving a death sentence. The Poet, in turn, has given him back his life (“...thy great gift, *upon misprision growing*” in line 11 being not a further reference to something going *from Youth to Poet*, but rather from *Poet to Youth*; emphases added).<sup>19</sup> However, the consequence of the deal is that, from now on, the youth is a king in (the Poet’s and his) dreams only. Kingship has been surrendered in exchange for life, echoing Sonnet 29. Sonnet 87 records a deal concluded (“My bonds in thee are all determinate”) and the end of a dynasty (“In sleep a king . . .”). And lest we doubt that the most important word in this sonnet is “king,” we can thank Helen Vendler for her insight on the phonetic clues that lead us repeatedly to that word (382-383).

But much as I like what Vendler says about this sonnet, she also has this to say:

The *universal appeal* of this much-anthologized sonnet springs from its very *lack of particular detail*: there are no sexually precise pronouns, no references to a new sexual or affectional or poetic rival, and (because of the modern persistence of its legal vocabulary) *no estranging historical allusions*. (383; emphasis added)

No “estranging historical allusions?” This comment from one of the leading authorities on the sonnets perfectly illustrates all that is at stake in the authorship debate, and, moreover, it illustrates that to correctly interpret a sonnet (its “universal appeal” notwithstanding), one must have the correct historical context—the “particular detail”—about which the Poet is writing. *Standing alone, the sonnet cannot fully explain itself*. What Vendler says is similar to what the critic Walter Raleigh had written in 1907 when he declared that “the value of the Sonnets to the modern reader is independent of all knowledge of their occasion . . . for [once] the processes of art have changed the

tear to a pearl [echoing Sonnet 34, line 13] . . . their occasion is a thing of the past; their theme is eternal” (qtd. in Schiffer 32). Thus Vendler is being true to her mission to gloss the sonnets independent of any consideration for their having been composed within the context of an external story (the “occasion”)<sup>20</sup> by which the authorial intent of the composition might be derived.

Similarly, the Kositsky/Stritmatter assertion that Sonnet 87 has its “own context,” and that therefore it is “obvious” what is being talked about by looking at this lone sonnet divorced from its context and its place within the series, is, in effect, to claim to know the occasion that inspired the writing without actually knowing the history. This, however, is just another manifestation of “old paradigm” thinking, i.e., “This is a self-evident love sonnet—and only a love sonnet, period”—and, as such, everything about it is obvious (since everyone knows all about love) and the occasion that inspired it, if we care to know anything about it, can be deduced from the “sonnet pearl” without having any knowledge about the cause of the particular “tears” that became that “pearl.”

*But how can there be a Sonnet Mystery if everything is obvious?* Absent a genuine historical context, *everything* in such an interpretive universe can only be—indeed, *must* be—confined to conjecture and empty speculation. In contrast, the Monument Theory introduces a documented historical context, i.e., the Essex Rebellion—with its genuine “tears” over a known “occasion” that never has been part of any previous sonnet commentary.<sup>21</sup> Raleigh and Vendler may eschew contemplation or investigation of the “occasion” behind the Sonnets, but anyone engaged in the authorship debate cannot.

Finally, let us consider the word “deal” that I’ve been using. As already noted earlier in this essay, there is no official record of any “deal” to save Southampton. And yet Southampton was spared. Even with the skilled legal advice he must have gotten in order to compose his Privy Council letters, was more

done to rescue him from the headsman? If so, what—and by whom? Were ransom and fines paid by anyone for Southampton, as happened for the other surviving conspirators? Again, there is no official record of it, but unless the State was determined simply to release the convicted leader of a rebellion against the Crown without the imposition of *any* penalty or ransom, we have no alternative but to conclude that a ransom of *some* kind was paid, by someone.

### Sonnet 120

We now come to the idea that the sonnets can furnish historical information not found in official records. Such a notion is, of course, premised on the Monument Theory's recognition that the middle 100 sonnets (27-126) are a diary of events surrounding the Essex Rebellion. I believe that the depth of analysis contained in *The Monument* makes such a case, with Whittemore's extensive research on the meanings and uses of words in each Sonnet—meanings and uses confirmed not by a reader's subjective or impressionistic appraisal but by comparing the uses of those words *used elsewhere by Shakespeare himself*. Accordingly, Whittemore makes an overwhelmingly persuasive case that these verses are about actual historical, *political* events in the participants' lives that disclose, definitively, the identities of those participants—including the Poet, Shakespeare.

In the Sonnets, the word "ransom" appears twice: in Sonnets 120 and 34 (and Sonnet 87 talks of something of value being exchanged). Sonnet 120 also uses the words "crime" and "trespass" interchangeably. More significant, however, is how Sonnet 120 links the occasion of "trespass" and "ransom" in its couplet: "But that your trespass now becomes a fee; / Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me" (13-14). Here, historical context informs a reading and yields far more intelligible results than commentators, left to historical guessing or purely impressionistic musings, have so far proposed. Of the three most recent commentators on the Sonnets

that I have been citing, only Booth analyzes the couplet in detail. He notes that "trespass" *must* refer to the "crime" mentioned in line 8, and declares that "becomes" likely means "turns into" or "takes on the nature of," although he adds that it also could mean "is suitable to" or "is becoming to." He concludes with a purely literary construct on the whole problem however, noting that Shakespeare has skillfully made two separate but intertwined statements: "I feel your pain because my own pain was once as great," and "I do *not* feel your pain because my own pain was once as great." In other words, the "fee" that the trespass has required is offset by the poet's own trespass, i.e., you offended me, and then I offended you, so we're even (Booth 290-291). This is similar to the glosses of Duncan-Jones ("the speaker's trespass cancels out that of his friend . . ." [350]) and Vendler ("[my trespass] 'buys back' yours" [510]).

None of them, however, considers that "Mine" in line 14, refers, in fact, to the "fee" to be paid—not to the "trespass"—and that "and yours . . ." in line 14 therefore must be saying "and your fee is to ransom me." But within a context of "trespass=treason=crime=conviction for crime," a fee is exactly what is needed to "ransom" the trespasser and get the convicted off the hook! The Essex Rebellion's context for the composition of this poem makes perfect sense of such a reading, but, even more importantly, it tells us something we *didn't* know: that Southampton didn't receive "compassionate mercy" (as Stopes speculated); rather, we learn that a ransom *was paid*—and paid by the Poet, Oxford/Shakespeare. Shakespeare, indeed, is telling us in straightforward language that *he* has paid the fee to ransom Southampton's trespass, and now "[your—Southampton's—fee] must ransom me." A ransom has been paid—and it truly was a *king's* ransom.

### Ransom "me," not "mine"

So, why did the Poet write, "ransom me"? Is Shakespeare telling us something by using "me" rather than "mine"? He could

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easily have written the couplet as, "But that your trespass becomes a fine / Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom mine." But if written that way, he would be saying that he, too, had committed a trespass. Clearly, *he did not see it that way*. He wrote in Sonnet 35 that "all men make faults, and even I in this, authorizing thy trespass with *compare* . . ." (emphasis mine). In other words, "I may have committed a fault, but not quite the trespass you committed, and certainly not the treason for which you were convicted" (an offense which, I suspect, Oxford/Shakespeare felt was not actually treason). This parsing of words echoes *The Rape of Lucrece*, where Tarquin's rape is called treason, but Lucrece feels complicit and speaks of her "fault" and her "trespass" in describing the same event.

The ransom payment that Oxford/Shakespeare made was not one of money, but himself. Not only was Southampton's claim to the throne surrendered in the deal to save Southampton ("In sleep a king, but waking no such matter" [Sonnet 87]), but also Oxford's claim to the authorship of his anonymous and pseudonymous works ("I, once gone, to all the world must die" [Sonnet 81]). Like Lucrece, seeing himself as complicit in the Essex Rebellion ("authorizing thy trespass with *compare*" [Sonnet 35]), he commits a form of suicide—literary suicide: he agrees to be consigned, forever, to oblivion. It was done under great duress, with Southampton being held hostage in the Tower and the only acceptable ransom being, in effect, a "hostage swap." But he did it, and that is why he doesn't ask for a ransom for "my trespass [mine]," but rather just for himself ("me"). He knew that a political dynasty—the Tudors—would expire with him. And if Southampton were indeed an unacknowledged Tudor heir, then Elizabeth herself had also played Lucrece, placing her reputation for chastity—her political persona as the Queen married only to her country—above all else, ending her life as a phoenix that *would not* arise from its ashes, "leaving no posterity . . ." (from *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, lines 59-61).<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

To conclude, I would assert that we, with confidence, now can say, in the words of Henry David Gray—with whose words I opened this essay—that the "Veiled Knight who guards the Mystery of the Sonnets" (18) is, of course, the author himself. Yet even Oxfordians, who identify Shakespeare as Oxford (and most of whom affirm that the Fair Youth is Southampton), still have come up short and been at sixes-and-sevens in attempts to solve the mystery because of their inability unanimously to affirm the need to recognize the historical context of these verses as the means by which their right meaning can be discovered. Fortunately, Hank Whittemore's Monument Theory now has provided the context that completes the unveiling, exposing, in unprecedented detail, the connection between the verses and their historical context, thus resolving the mystery and "solving" the sonnets.

In concentrating on only three sonnets (35, 87, and 120), I hope I have made the point that—absent context—individual words and individual sonnets can be (and have been—and are!) interpreted to mean almost anything. Without a comprehensive context, meaning, indeed, is always going to be utterly subjective and remain solely in the eye of the beholder. With context, however, multiple musings and imaginings can be discarded and replaced with the provision of the author's purpose and the context for the work's correct interpretation, for only with a clearly defined external historical context can anyone hope to "unveil" the author's intent in writing these sonnets.

Of greater significance is that the Monument Theory provides, for the first time, a unified theory of how the Shakespeare authorship problem came into existence, and in so doing provides answers to two outstanding unanswered questions from the history of the Essex Rebellion: why Southampton was spared execution, and why Shakespeare was spared punishment for his supporting role in those events. The simple answer to both these

questions—an answer that *only* Oxfordians can provide—is that the true Shakespeare (Edward de Vere, 17th earl of Oxford) was punished—virtually erased from history—and it was his punishment, his sacrifice, that saved Southampton. “Shakespeare” died so that Southampton could live.

Such a simple and elegant solution to the authorship problem is just what Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens called for over twenty years ago in Washington, DC at the 1987 Moot Court Trial on the Shakespeare Authorship Question. In his closing statement, Justice Stevens declared that while he suspected a conspiracy involving the Queen and Burghley could be behind this incredible story, Oxfordians had yet to articulate an all-encompassing account:

I would submit that, if their [Oxfordians'] thesis is sound, . . . one has to assume that the conspiracy—[and] *I would not hesitate to call it a conspiracy*, because there is nothing necessarily invidious about the desire to keep the true authorship secret . . . [T]he strongest theory of the case requires an assumption, *for some reason we don't understand*, that the Queen and her Prime Minister decided, ‘We want this man to be writing under a pseudonym.’ . . . Of course *this thesis may be so improbable that it is not worth even thinking about*; but I would think that the Oxfordians really have not yet put together a concise, coherent theory that they are prepared to defend in all respects. (qtd in Boyle, “The 1987 Moot Court Trial” 7-8; emphasis added)

The Monument Theory of the Sonnets provides this “concise, coherent” theory, but because of the still controversial nature of the “Prince Tudor” aspect of the theory—not to mention a general aversion by some to the suggestion that the Shakespeare problem is the

result of a (gasp!) conspiracy—the question remains: is it a theory that can be defended? That Justice Stevens himself, even as he postulated a possible conspiracy and called for a “concise, coherent theory,” could also suggest that such a theory might be “improbable” confirms just how vexing the Shakespeare authorship debate really is and likely will continue to be.

Meanwhile, with a theory in hand that would seem to solve the Sonnet mystery, and also solve the “how and why of the authorship problem,”<sup>23</sup> I would now submit that it is now up to others to refute—if they can—rather than reactionarily reject what Whittemore has accomplished. I do not think, however, that that is any more likely to happen than we are to see a refutation of Copernicus’s heliocentric model of the solar system or a refutation of Watson and Crick’s double helix solution to the mysteries of how genes work: the sun is at the center of our solar system and things revolve around it; two complementary strands of chemicals drive the reproduction of life, and that is how genes work. But discovery is discovery, and facts discovered will remain facts to the end of time (“For truth is truth though never so old, and time cannot make that false which was once true,” as Edward de Vere once wrote [qtd. in Fowler, *Letters* 771]).

It is time to build on what Whittemore has discovered and defined in his “monumental” study and complete our work in gaining the world’s acceptance of Edward de Vere as Shakespeare with attendant appreciation for the reasons this writer wrote what he did and allowed his name to be buried these many centuries, in expectation of a time when “eyes to be” could behold his work and “tongues to be” could salute his noble purpose.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*. Ed. James Schiffer. New York: Garland, 1999. Schiffer notes that Herbert S. Donow’s 1981 bibliography on the Sonnets lists 1,898 items, and in a footnote (n.2, p. 57) also mentions that a 1972 book by Ball State

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University Professor Tetsumaro Hayashi, entitled *Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Record of 20th-Century Criticism*, lists even more—2,503 entries. Such a number of books and articles written on Shakespeare's Sonnets testify to readers' and scholars' intense and persistent attraction to these enigmatic verses.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Hotson, for example, offers a detailed catalog of these royal allusions in Chapters 2 and 3 of *Mr. W. H.* Of course, being a Statfordian, Hotson had to invent a Fair Youth connection (he proposes William Hatcliffe as W.H.) and a royal context (Hotson imagines Hatcliffe as a "Prince of Purpoole" during Christmas celebrations at Gray's Inn) to which, he suggests, the royal allusions refer. His work is mentioned—dismissively—by Schiffer as demonstrative of "the flaw in evidential logic that Schoenbaum describes is a frequent problem in biographical criticism" (42). Whittemore, however, notes that no less venerable a critic as G. Wilson Knight made extended observations on the royal imagery of the Sonnets, calling the Sonnets the "heart of Shakespeare's royal poetry" (Whittemore 806).

<sup>3</sup> These thoughts were first published in a 1937 pamphlet by Percy Allen and B. M. Ward: *An Enquiry into the Relations between Lord Oxford as "Shakespeare," Queen Elizabeth, and the Fair Youth of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (cited in a 24-page supplement to the April 1939 issue of *The Shakespeare Fellowship News-Letter* in which Allen and Ward debated Canon G. H. Rendall and Mr. T. M. Aitken about their theory). Whittemore gives an updated overview on the Tudor heir theory on pages xxxv-xxxvi of *The Monument*. Baconians also had considered the royal factor in their analysis of the Sonnets and contemplated how that factor figured into the authorship debate, often by concluding that when Shakespeare speaks of something as "royal," he literally means it.

<sup>4</sup> Another variation of this theory is that Oxford himself is a son of Elizabeth who, born in 1548, was her first child at a time when rumors circulated of her possible impregnation by the Lord Admiral, Thomas Seymour; in response, the 30-year old William Cecil (later Lord Burghley) came to her aid during this crisis and remained at her side for the next 50 years, sheltering and educating Oxford—eventually even marrying Oxford to his daughter. If Oxford, however, were both the son of Elizabeth and the father of Southampton by her, that would constitute incest—a

sexual practice far more common in the Elizabethan world than often supposed, but hateful to the ears of Victorian-minded moralists who are scandalized that Shakespeare could have been a practitioner of such a sexual abomination. Many studies, however, have been written on the extensive theme of incest in Shakespeare. If incest is the deep, dark secret at the core of the Shakespeare problem, that would explain, of course, much about the imposition of secrecy on the authorship then and account for the perpetuity of the secrecy and reluctance to pursue its implication that continues today; for more on this, refer to Professor Daniel Wright's address to the Shakespeare Oxford Society in October 2008, "All My Children: Royal Bastards and Royal Policy."

<sup>5</sup> Throughout the Tudor dynasty, especially after Henry VIII's break with Rome, treason charges against political opponents became the standard means of applying political control, and the lesser charge of "misprision of treason" became a useful bargaining chip for the Crown, utilized on a case-by-case basis. See Bellamy's *The Tudor Law of Treason* for a history of how this practice evolved.

<sup>6</sup> Southampton then embarked upon a storied political career that culminated in his becoming a political opponent of James in the early 1620s, allied with—surprisingly?—the 18th earl of Oxford, Henry de Vere. And at this same moment in history the First Folio (1623) was published.

<sup>7</sup> Myers cites from Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials (London, 1809-28) as his source on Lee's trial.

<sup>8</sup> This is where, in my view, Joseph Pequigney and his version of the homosexual theory of the sonnets (and, for that matter, all the gay sexual theorists of the Sonnets) wander astray, for although Pequigney also looks at the connections among these same key words, he departs in many conjectural directions after doing so. For example, on page 104 of *Such is My Love*, while discussing Sonnet 35, he observes that "trespass" (35.6), some "ill-deed" (34.14) and a "sensual fault" (35.9) constitute the "cause of the quarrel [between the Poet and the Youth]." He then notes, however, that E.A.M. Coleman, in *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare*, has remarked that "fault" frequently occurs in early modern English with a "sexual flavour" and so concludes that the modifier "sensual" confirms that the "fault" is somehow sexual.

Here, therefore, is someone who looks at this same linkage of words ("trespass" and "fault") as clear referents to something that is going on between the Poet and the Youth but who provides only subjective speculation with no historical context outside the Sonnet to inform his interpretation. As we shall see, Southampton himself referred, in writing, to his participation in the Rebellion as his "fawte, i.e., fault," and Whittemore, in his glosses on Sonnet 35, supplies several examples of "sensual" being used within this period in distinctly non-sexual contexts—including one derived from William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who wrote in 1584 that "I favor no sensual & willful recusants" (qtd in *The Monument* 250).

<sup>9</sup> None of the major recent books on the sonnets—Booth (1977); Kerrigan (1986); Vendler (1997); Duncan-Jones (1998)—has anything to say about Shakespeare's meaning in using the word "crime." It is not even mentioned in their extensive glosses of words in the Sonnets. This absence of any discussion about "crime"—and its centrality in interpreting the meaning of the Sonnets—shows how the absence of a real historical context clouds the judgment of anyone tackling the Sonnet mystery. It also is of interest to note that both Booth and Duncan-Jones, in discussing Sonnet 120, observe that comparisons can be made back to Sonnet 34. Duncan-Jones specifically suggests that the use of the word "salve" in both sonnets may be related. But neither Booth nor Duncan-Jones ventures any farther than this, and they do not consider the possible interconnections between such vital words as "ransom" in Sonnet 34, "trespass" in Sonnet 35, and the use of both words ("ransom" and "trespass") in Sonnet 120. So the notion that the Poet is talking about the same event, using the same language in Sonnets 34-35 and 120, is absent from their commentary, let alone any consideration that both instances of "trespass" may be referring to a real "crime."

<sup>10</sup> Kositsky and Stritmatter wrote in response to articles by William Boyle and Hank Whittemore in *Shakespeare Matters* (Summer 2004)—not to Whittemore's *The Monument*, which had yet been published—and so were unaware of Whittemore's explanation for this. Yet, astonishingly, they dismissively write in their article: "Doubtless reply will be made that we have not waited to evaluate the entirety of the evidence contained in Mr. Whittemore's book.

This is true but also irrelevant. No larger case which depends on the kind of examples cited in these two articles can be regarded as a sound one" (13).

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note how this aspect of Tarquin can be seen more in Essex than Southampton. Chris Fitter, commenting on how he sees Essex reflected in *Richard II*, writes, "Shakespeare's motivation for freezing the career of the hot and headlong young nobleman in a lucid frost of maximal suspicion must remain, of course, conjectural" (Fitter par. 45), and in describing Essex as "hot and headlong," he also could be describing Tarquin in *Lucrece*. This view of Essex and its possible parallel with Tarquin touches on my growing suspicion that the "graver labor" of *Lucrece* may also (like *Richard II*) have been part of a broader 1590s succession politics agenda, perhaps intended as a cautionary tale that may well have been anticipating what came to pass in 1601 and warning Southampton to beware of his relationship with Essex.

<sup>12</sup> In *Webster's New World Dictionary*, "sensual" is defined as follows: "1. Of, derived from, or perceived by the senses, 2. Enjoying sensation." "Sensual" is defined as: "1. Of the body and the senses as distinguished from the intellect [emphasis added], 2. Connected or occupied with sexual pleasure." It is this first definition of "sensual" that is closest, I believe, to Shakespeare's intent in depicting Tarquin's thinking as he anticipates taking (raping) Lucrece. This is why so much of the poem begins with his "soliloquy," preoccupied with the consequences of what he is about to do, but with his intellect unable to control his senses.

<sup>13</sup> A 2001 article ("Tarquin Dispossessed") in *Shakespeare Quarterly* by Catherine Belsey contains many interesting observations on the political ramifications of Tarquin's act, Lucrece's response and the subsequent political fallout. I have drawn much from her observations, especially regarding the notion of what it means to be "dispossessed." She does not, however, discuss the semantic—and possibly legal—subtleties of "treason" vs. "trespass."

<sup>14</sup> There are several good reasons why "of treason" would not be used. First, it would make the actual historical context too obvious. Second, it may not scan right for the poet in composing this sonnet. Third, if Shakespeare's use of the words "treason" and "trespass" do represent a difference in his mind—and

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perhaps also in law—over degrees of culpability (as in Lucrece), then that is one more reason not to use the word “treason” in the middle hundred sonnets, particularly if he genuinely believes that Southampton did not actually commit a treasonable offense (his judicial conviction notwithstanding). It also is interesting to note that the only appearance of the word “treason” in the Sonnets is in Sonnet 151, where it appears along with the only three instances of the word “conscience.” Its usage here (“... I do betray / My nobler part to my gross body’s treason”—lines 5-6) may correspond to what we have been considering about Tarquin in *Lucrece*, i.e. that his “treason” is his surrender to his “sensual” urges because of his “frozen conscience.” There is not space in this essay to explore the larger meaning of this sole appearance of the word “treason,” coupled with “conscience,” nor why the Poet uses it to describe himself *vis à vis* the Dark Lady (Elizabeth) rather than the Youth (Southampton) who was convicted of that crime.

<sup>15</sup> Whittemore provides several examples from the Shakespeare plays in *The Monument* (see, for example, p. 248).

<sup>16</sup> The well-known legal concept of misprision is repeated over the centuries in such authorities as Edward Coke’s *Institutes of the Laws of England* and William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.

<sup>17</sup> The exact quote from Duncan-Jones (in her gloss of line 11) is: “upon misprision growin’ means coming into existence as the result of a false estimate” (284).

<sup>18</sup> Southampton’s letters, as Whittemore notes in *The Monument* (301-302), are virtually Shakespearean in their pleas for mercy from the Queen, but they are also savvy in laying the groundwork for a commutation of his conviction for treason to one of conviction for “misprision of treason” and its accompanying life sentence rather than death sentence (301-202).

<sup>19</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh, in a letter to the Privy Council begging for his life after his conviction for treason in November 1603, wrote, “For a greater gift none can give, or receive, than life . . .” (qtd in Hume 199). Raleigh’s death sentence was, indeed, later commuted to misprision of treason, which, incredibly, is what Attorney General Edward Coke said is all that he was accusing him of in the first place. Raleigh’s

treason conviction was, however, reinstated (as it could be, since he was never pardoned), and he was executed in 1618 (Hume 281).

<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that Professor Helen Vendler had been sent an early draft of Whittemore’s work in spring 1999, and she wrote a letter to Shakespeare Oxford Society Trustee Elliott Stone in reply, declaring, “I am no historian, and have by now learned the limits of my own interests, which are rhetorical and not historical.”

<sup>21</sup> For the record, we should note that Stritmatter believes that Southampton likely was a putative Tudor heir, as demonstrated most recently in his 2004 article on *Venus and Adonis* in the *Tennessee Law Review* (216). Lynne Kositsky, his co-author in critique of the Monument Theory, does not, however, accept the “Tudor Heir” theory. And as readers may have discerned by now, it is being postulated in this essay that the Monument Theory of the Sonnets (with the Essex Rebellion at its center) is a clinching argument *both* for Oxford being Shakespeare and for Southampton being the Fair Youth *and* a candidate for the succession.

<sup>22</sup> The Essex Rebellion context of *The Phoenix and the Turtle* has been explicated in Anthea Hume’s “Love’s Martyr, The Phoenix and Turtle, and the Aftermath of the Essex Rebellion.” While the author is primarily concerned with Robert Chester’s *Love’s Martyr* as a political allegory about the failed Essex Rebellion and the succession issue (with the Phoenix representing the Queen, and the Turtle the “loyal and loving subjects of the Queen” [57]), she also discusses Shakespeare’s role in the 1601 collection and his unique take on the succession issue (Shakespeare’s Phoenix alone *does not arise from its ashes*, but is instead described as “leaving no posterity . . . t’was married chastity,” ll. 59-60). Oxfordians William Plumer Fowler, Dorothy Ogburn and Professor Daniel Wright also have discoursed on this poem, making sense of its enigmas by positing that it is about Oxford (Turtle), Elizabeth (Phoenix) and Southampton (Rarity) and the end of a dynasty (Tudor) because the Phoenix *will not acknowledge* her posterity. Hume posits that the Turtle is the people of England, which explains how the chaste Virgin Queen could leave “no posteritie.” Oxfordians Fowler, Ogburn and Wright, however, argue that “married chastity” and “no posterity” represent something more tangible, i.e., a real but

unacknowledged heir. Still, all four (Hume, Fowler, Ogburn and Wright) agree that the outcome was the same—the Tudor dynasty “unofficially” ended with the Essex Rebellion.

<sup>23</sup> By the “how and why of the authorship problem” I mean the situation that occurred after the author’s death. It is a “given” for all anti-Stratfordians that the true author wrote anonymously during his lifetime. The greater mystery, heretofore, is why the attribution to the Stratford man took place, and why it has, until now, endured for four centuries. The Monument Theory of the sonnets, plus the Tudor Heir theory regarding the crisis of the succession, provide compelling “reasons of state” for this situation, i.e., the attribution of the works of “Shakespeare” to the Stratford man, Shaksper, in order to de-politicize the works and leave them sanitized of any supposed relationship to politics and people at the Court.

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