

*Column**A year in the life*

By Hank Whittemore

1601 (II): “I ... watch the clock for you”

On the evening of February 19, 1601, as the day-long treason trial drew to its close amid the lofty gloom of Westminster Hall, the twenty-five peers on the tribunal delivered their unanimous verdict one by one in order of rank, from lowest to highest, ending with Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who now uttered the single public word from his lips all day: “Guilty.”

Robert Devereux and Henry Wriothesley, the Earls of Essex and Southampton, were brought again to the bar. “The peers here, who have heard the evidence and your answer in defense, have found you guilty,” said the Clerk of the Crown, who glared at Essex: “Now what can you say for yourself why you should not have judgment of death?”

The tall, proud Lord Essex replied by paraphrasing a well-known line of Shakespeare (from *Henry IV, Part 1* when Prince Hall tells Sir John Falstaff: “Why, thou owest a death!”) as he addressed the judges: “I do not speak to save my life, for I see that were in vain. *I owe God a death*, which shall be welcome how soon ever it pleaseth her Majesty!”

Given that Shakespeare himself was hearing his own written words within this real-life context, it would be difficult to find a more extraordinary historical moment – except for when Southampton, his beloved Fair Youth of the private sonnets, turned to the noble audience and pleaded for help:

“I pray you truly to inform the Queen of my penitence,¹ and be a means for me to Her Majesty to grant me her gracious pardon.² I know I have offended³ her, yet if it please her to be merciful unto me, I may, by my future service, deserve my life⁴ ... I have spent the best part of my patrimony in Her Majesty’s service, with frequent danger of my life, as your Lordships well know ... But since I am found guilty by the law, I do submit myself to death, yet not despairing of Her Majesty’s mercy to me.”

For Oxford, in that dank Westminster courtroom, this may have been the most

painful of all the sorrows he had endured in his half-century of life to now. Seven years earlier he had publicly committed himself to Henry Wriothesley by pledging

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in print: “The love I dedicate to your Lordship is without end ... What I have done is yours, what I have to do is yours, being part in all I have devoted yours.”⁵ Privately he had celebrated his personal bond with Southampton by telling him how “happy I that love and am beloved” while calling him “Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage thy merit hath my duty strongly knit.”⁶ Yet just now, having no choice in the matter, he had voted to send the 27-year-old earl to death – for a crime against the state that he himself may have helped to trigger through writings such as *Richard II*, which had been revived for political propaganda on the eve of the failed attempt to remove Secretary Robert Cecil from his power behind the throne.⁷

Given that he had made such declarations to Southampton, it becomes virtually impossible to think that Oxford, who so desperately clung to the truth as the last defense against the erosion of his soul, would fail now to do what he could to help him. Also, given his compulsion to express

the truth in words, and having already done so in private sonnets to Henry Wriothesley, it is just as unthinkable that he would fail amid the current crisis to take up his “tables” or writing tablets with a vengeance, motivated with a greater than ever sense of mission to set the record straight.⁸

Such is the perspective of *The Monument*, my forthcoming edition of *Shake-Speares Sonnets*, presented to set forth and demonstrate a coherent explanation of both the form and the content of the 154 consecutively numbered verses. In my view Oxford reacted to Southampton’s tragedy by launching into what would become the most intensely sustained poetical sequence the world has known. The scenario envisions him writing two or three sonnets at a single sitting or even up to a dozen at a time, before revising and carefully arranging the initial outpouring with 60 sonnets in precise correlation with 60 days—from Sonnet 27, upon the imprisonment of Southampton on the night of February 8, 1601, for playing a lead role in the Essex Rebellion, until Sonnet 86 in alignment with the calendar on April 8, 1601, two months later.⁹

These 60 daily sonnets, ultimately comprising the first segment of a 100-sonnet center within Oxford’s “monument” of verse for posterity, coincide with events that came one upon another as the Cecil-run government rushed to ensure its own safety, exaggerate the rebels’ crimes and prosecute them with all the power and authority of the Crown to carry out its justice of choice. Unfolding pell-mell were the public proclamations of treason, the summoning of the peers, the Essex-Southampton trial on February 19, the beheading of Essex six days later at the Tower of London; the trial and condemnation of five others at Westminster Hall on March 5; the public mutilation of two of them on March 13 at Tyburn and the beheading of two more on March 18 at Tower Hill, where Londoners continued to gather each morning in expectation of Southampton’s death, until it dawned on

them that he had been spared.

Within this chronological framework Oxford is viewed as continuing apace by recording his agreement with Cecil to further conceal his relationship with Southampton from the world and bury his name beneath that of "Shakespeare," culminating with Sonnets 78-86 of the so-called Rival Poet series. He would begin the next 20 verses with Sonnet 87 (revealing the new, lesser judgment against Southampton of "misprision" of treason) and cover the remaining two years of his imprisonment until Sonnet 106, thereby completing this extraordinary "Chronicle of wasted time" in correspondence with the younger earl's final night in the Tower on April 9, 1603.¹⁰

By this reckoning Oxford includes 80 sonnets to record the full two years and two months during which Southampton was reduced to the commoner "Mr. Wriothesley, Henry" (legally "the late earl") while remaining "supposed as forfeit to a confined doom" in Her Majesty's fortress.¹¹ He followed with a series of 20 sonnets (107-126), matching each of the 19 days between April 10 (when Southampton was actually liberated from imprisonment) and April 28, 1603 (the date of Elizabeth's funeral, the official end of the Tudor dynasty), capped by the concluding envoy (126), addressed to "my lovely Boy."

So ends the 100-sonnet center (see *Figure 1 for highlights*) of the "monument" that Oxford would build for Southampton.

Within this sequence he would promise him in Sonnet 55 to preserve the "living record of your memory" and reinforce that pledge in Sonnet 81 with concise testimony that he had agreed to "die" or allow his own identity as "Shakespeare" to stay hidden from contemporary view and disappear completely for at least some generations to come:

From hence your memory death cannot
take,
Although in me each part will be forgotten.
Your name from hence immortal life shall
have,
Though I (once gone) to all the world must
die...
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read...

Shortly after the trial, waiting in the Tower to learn his fate, Essex also began to set down his thoughts and feelings in

THE 100-SONNET CENTER

Sonnets 27 - 126

THE PRISON YEARS

Sonnet 27	Feb 8, 1601
Sonnet 30	Feb 11, 1601
Sonnet 38	Feb 19, 1601
Sonnet 44	Feb 25, 1601
Sonnet 52	March 5, 1601
Sonnet 60	March 13, 1601
Sonnet 65	March 18, 1601
Sonnet 66	March 19, 1601
Sonnet 87	April 9, 1601
Sonnet 97	Feb 8, 1602
Sonnet 104	Feb 8, 1603
Sonnet 105	March 24, 1603
Sonnet 106	April 9, 1603

THE FINAL DAYS

Sonnet 107	April 10, 1603
Sonnet 125	April 28, 1603
Sonnet 126	April 29, 1603

SONNETS 27 – 106 (80)

Rebellion and Imprisonment
Peers Summoned to Trial
Trial of Essex-Southampton
Execution of Essex
Trial of other Conspirators
Merrick & Cuffe Executed
Danvers & Blount Executed
Southampton's Life Spared
"Misprision" of Treason
1st Anniversary of Rebellion
2nd Anniversary of Rebellion
Death of Queen Elizabeth I
Final Night in the Tower

SONNETS 107 – 126 (20)

Liberation by King James
Funeral of Queen Elizabeth
Farewell to Southampton

Figure 1

poetical form. During the four days leading to his execution, he completed 384 lines to the Queen:

I see that my continuance in this *place*
Cannot be long...
To gain thy favor whil'st my life dost last...
Ev'n in the meanest *place* to wait on thee¹²

Essex's use of "place" for the Tower recalled the trial, when the Lord High Steward told the two condemned lords: "You both shall be led from hence to the *place* from whence you came, and there to remain during her Majesty's pleasure—from thence to be drawn upon a hurdle through the midst of the City, and so to the *place* of execution..."¹³

The unmistakable reference to the royal prison-fortress as the "place" appears in Sonnet 44 on February 25, 1601, when Essex lost his head to the executioner's axe. Oxford, using the "noted weed" or familiar costume of poetry,¹⁴ vows that the "thought" in his mind can nimbly leap to the "place" where "he" (the thought) would prefer to be:

No matter then although my foot did stand
Upon the farthest earth removed from
thee,
For nimble thought can jump both sea and
land
As soon as think *the place* where he would
be.

In the very next line, alluding to the expectation that Southampton will follow Essex on the scaffold, Oxford feels the blade on his own neck as well:

But ah, thought *kills* me...

In Sonnet 45 he continues to merge his life with that of the younger earl:

My *life* being made of four, with two alone
Sinks down to *death*...

And in the ensuing days he will confront death by referring both to Southampton's mortality and to his own obliteration:

"*Die* to themselves ... Sweet *deaths*" (54); "Gainst *death* and all oblivious enmity" (55); "This thought is as a *death*" (64); "For restful *death* I cry ... Save that to *die*" (66); "After my *death* ... *deceased* I" (72); "*Death's* second self ... As the *death* bed" (73)...

Within the 80 prison verses this thread will reach a crescendo in the powerful lines of Sonnet 81, when their twin fates come together in a single great reckoning with fate:

Or shall I live your Epitaph to make,
Or you survive when I in earth am rotten,
From hence your memory *death* cannot
take,
Although in me each part will be forgotten.

(Continued on page 24)

Year in the Life (cont'd from page 23)

"The death of Essex left Sir Robert Cecil without a rival in the Court or cabinet," Strickland writes, "and he soon established himself as the all-powerful ruler of the realm."¹⁵

"The fall of Essex may be said to date the end of the reign of Elizabeth in regard to her activities and glories," Stopes adds. "After that she was Queen only in name. She listened to her councilors, signed her papers, and tried to retrench in expenditure; but her policy was dependent on the decisions of Sir Robert Cecil."¹⁶

The Secretary had envisioned even swifter revenge. "By the time my letters shall come unto you," he had written to Sir George Carew two days after the failed Rebellion, "both he [Essex] and the Earl of Southampton, with some of the other principals, shall have lost their heads."¹⁷

Edward de Vere would have to deal with Cecil, his brother-in-law, to secure a stay of the younger earl's execution. To further gain the promise of Southampton's eventual release with a royal pardon, he would be forced to continue at the Secretary's mercy. In the near future Cecil would enter a secret correspondence with James VI of Scotland, preparing for the King's succession while retaining his own power behind the throne; and it may well be that Oxford himself would become the unidentified "40" in the correspondence.¹⁸

"I must plainly confess that both ye and your faithful colleague 40 have by your vigilant and judicious care so easily settled me in the only right course for my good," James would write to Cecil on June 3, 1602, adding, "I always and ever shall account [you and 40] as one." The King would also write to the hunchbacked Secretary "assuring 40 that with God's grace he shall never be disappointed of his confidence in my honesty upon your relation ... and thus, praying 40 to be assured that *by your means only* he shall hear from me." (On July 29, 1602, however, the King would write directly to "40," promising "that all my dealings with you shall ever be accompanied with these three qualities: honesty, secrecy, and constancy," reiterating that "I will deal with you by no other way but by the means of 10 [Cecil]."¹⁹

Our previous column concluded 20 days (and 20 sonnets) after the failed Rebellion and only two days after the beheading of Essex. In Sonnet 46 on

February 27, 1601, Oxford echoes the trial and how Southampton, upon the verdict, delivered a plea for the Queen's mercy. Key words are woven within his poetical fabric:

My heart doth *plead* that thou in him dost lie...
But the *defendant* doth that *plea* deny...
To *'cide* this title is *impaneled*
A *quest* of thoughts, all tenants to the heart,
And by their *verdict* is *determined*...

Such words are found in a similar context in the plays of English royal history:

"What **lawful quest** [jury] hath have given their **verdict** up unto the frowning judge?" – Richard III, 1.4.180; "Thy son is banished upon good advice, whereto thy tongue a party-**verdict** gave" – Richard II, 1.3.233; "Forthwith that Edward should be pronounced a traitor and all his lands and goods be confiscated [Southampton's current fate]. What else? And that succession be **determined** [Cecil's current goal]" – 3 Henry VI, 4.6.54

February 28: "A League"

Oxford in Sonnet 47 alludes to the "league" or alliance that Secretary Cecil has forced him to enter on Southampton's behalf:

Betwixt my eye and heart a *league* is took...
"You peers, continue this united **league**"
– Richard III, 2.1.2

March 1: "Locked Up"

Continuing this historical record in Sonnet 48, he refers to the "wards" or guards at the Tower:

How careful was I, when I took my way,
Each trifle under *truest bars* to thrust,
That to my use it might unused stay,
From hands of *falsehood*, in sure *wards* of trust!

"**Truest Bars** = "most reliable locks or barricades" – Duncan-Jones; **Falsehood** = "The usual adverbs in legal records alongside the descriptions of particular treasons are 'falsely' and 'traitorously'" – Bellamy; **Wards** = "Meaning 'guards' ... the range of its applications include chests and prison cells" – Booth²⁰

Then he directly addresses Southampton, who is literally "locked up"

in the Tower, where the Crown has dispatched "thirty extraordinary guards to help with the additional duties" occasioned by the Rebellion:²¹

Thee have I not *locked up* in any chest,
Save where thou art not, though I feel thou art
Within the gentle *closure* of my breast,
From whence at pleasure thou mayst come and part.

"O thou bloody prison, fatal and ominous to noble peers! Within the guilty **closure** of thy walls Richard the Second here was *hack'd to death!*" – Richard III, 3.3.9

March 2: "Lawful Reasons"

He fears in Sonnet 49 that Southampton will "frown" upon him and regard him "strangely" for having cut a deal with Cecil; but he also emphasizes that he is acting "against myself" while arguing for the "lawful reasons" by which the younger earl can be saved:

And this my hand *against myself* uprear,
To *guard the lawful reasons* on thy part...

The crux of the legal agreement behind the scenes is that he and Southampton will "leave" each other by being able to "allege no cause" of any relationship:

To *leave* poor me, thou hast the strength of laws,
Since why to love, I can *allege no cause*.

March 3: "My Grief"

He testifies in Sonnet 50 that, riding on horseback from the Tower back to his Hackney home, he has just visited with Southampton to explain the details of the bargain face to face. The journey is only a few miles, but he suffers from the "weight" and "woe" of their meeting:

The beast that bears me, tired with my *woe*,
Plods duly on to bear that *weight* in me...

The cutting of all ties with Southampton from this point on produces the "grief" that lies ahead of him in life; behind, in the Tower, is the Fair Youth himself:

My grief lies onward and my joy behind.

March 4: "Where Thou Art"

Sonnet 51 is a companion piece in which Oxford uses his ride from "where

thou art" to weave in allusions to Southampton's "offence" and his own efforts to legally "excuse" his crime by lessening the judgment against him:

Thus can my love *excuse* the slow *offence*
Of my dull bearer, when from thee I speed
From *where thou art*...

"My nephew's *trespass* may be well forgot;
it hath the *excuse* of youth and heat of
blood, an adopted name of privilege, a
hair-brained Hotspur, govern'd by a
spleen; all his *offences* live upon my head
and on his father's" – 1 Henry IV, 5.2.16;
"My soul is heavy and troubled for my
offences" – Southampton, writing from
the Tower to the Privy Council after the trial²²

March 5: "Up-Locked"

Standing trial for high treason are Sir Christopher Blount, Sir Gelly Merrick, Henry Cuffe, Sir John Davis (not Davies) and Sir Charles Danvers. All are found guilty and sentenced to death (Davis, who may have been a Cecil agent in their midst, will be spared), as Oxford expands upon the two previous verses by referring again, in Sonnet 52, to his prison visit:

So am I as the rich, whose blessed *key*
Can bring him to his sweet *up-locked*
treasure...

By the terms of the bargain made with Cecil to save his life, the "solemn" and "rare" sight of Southampton was among such "feasts" that, from now on, will occur only "seldom" (if at all) in the "long year" that appears to lie ahead,

Therefore are *feasts* so *solemn* and so *rare*,
Since *seldom* coming in the long year
set...

"Thus did I keep my person fresh and new;
my presence ... *seldom*, but *sumptuous*,
showed like a *feast*, and wan by *rareness*
and *solemnity*" – the King in 1 Henry IV,
3.2.53

March 6: "Strange Shadows"

Edward de Vere ("every" = *E. Ver*) and Henry Wriothesley ("one" = his motto *One for All, All for One*) both suffer in Sonnet 53 under the "strange shadows" of Elizabeth's imperial frown:

What is your substance, whereof are you
made,

That millions of strange shadows on you
tend?

Since *every one* hath, *every one*, *one* shade,
And you, but *one*, can *every* shadow lend.

Having introduced "Shakespeare" with *Venus and Adonis* dedicated to Southampton in 1593, he now reinforces the identification of him as the Fair Youth of the Sonnets:

Describe *Adonis* and the counterfeit

"Here Oxford/Shakespeare

now makes his first

specific pledge to build

a 'monument' for the

Fair Youth to preserve

'the living record

of your memory...'"

Is poorly imitated after you...

March 7: "Sweet Deaths"

Robert Cecil writes to George Carew "to let you know what is like to become of the poor young Earl of Southampton, who, merely for the love of the Earl [of Essex], hath been drawn into this action." Because "most of the conspiracies were at Drury House, where he [Southampton] was always chief," he continues, "those that would deal [plead] for him (of which number I protest to God I am one, as far as I dare) are much disadvantaged of arguments to save him."²³

The Secretary hereby puts himself on record as a Southampton supporter, while prolonging the agony by claiming to be "disadvantaged of arguments to save him." Cecil may be building up the difficulty, in anticipation of taking credit for any reprieve, but at the same time he may genuinely doubt that the Queen can be dissuaded from going forward with the execution.²⁴

Oxford writes of Southampton in

Sonnet 54 as "Sweet Roses" whose inner substance cannot be killed even if he is executed:

Of their *sweet deaths* are sweetest odors
made.

And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,
When that shall vade, by verse distills your
truth.

Duncan-Jones understands the final line as "by means of verse [in general], your truth is preserved and transmitted to future generations."²⁵ But Oxford is also referring to "my" verse of these specific sonnets and paving the way for the great lines that immediately follow.

March 8: "The Living Record"

With Oxford still uncertain about Southampton's fate, his towering verse in Sonnet 55 is motivated directly by these grim circumstances. Here Oxford/Shakespeare now makes his first specific pledge to build a "monument" for the Fair Youth to preserve "the living record of your memory" for posterity. And we cannot avoid including the entire sonnet, which emphasizes the fundamental struggle that Edward de Vere is waging for Henry Wriothesley against the forces represented by Time:²⁶

Not marble nor the gilded monument²⁷
Of Princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these
contents

Than unswept stone, besmeared with
sluttish time.

When wasteful war shall *Statues* overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor *Mars* his sword nor war's quick fire
shall burn

The living record of your memory.²⁸
'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth! Your praise shall still
find room

Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending
doom.²⁹

So till the judgment³⁰ that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.³¹

March 9: "This Sad Interim"

In Sonnet 56 he likens this sorrowful, nerve-racking time of Southampton's imminent execution to a force as powerful as the royal sea:

Let this sad *Int'rim* like the Ocean be
Which parts the shore, where two
contracted new

(Continued on page 26)

Year in Life (cont'd from page 25)

Come daily to the banks...

"Here, then, we have Shakespeare typifying his Friend variously as a **sun**, a **god**, an **ocean** or a sea: three familiar metaphors which he and his contemporaries use to represent a sovereign prince or king." – Leslie Hotson³²

March 10: "Watch the Clock for You"

Oxford in Sonnet 57 embarks on a series of 10 verses for 10 days that build in desperation (and literary power) as they lead to the moment of truth for Southampton. They are akin to the sequential chapters of a dramatic narrative, recounting the history of what took place behind the scenes as Edward de Vere waged war with Time on behalf of the younger earl whom he now, directly and specifically, calls his sovereign:

Nor dare I chide the world without end
hour
Whilst I (my sovereign) watch the clock for
you.

March 11: "Imprisoned Absence"

He writes to the imprisoned earl in Sonnet 58 as a "vassal" or subject addressing his king:

Being your *vassal* bound to stay your
leisure.
O let me suffer (being at your beck)
Th' imprisoned absence of your *liberty*,

The last line above suggests "lack of the liberty of you," Booth writes, expanding this to "lack of the privilege of unrestricted access to you" – that is, an accurate report by Oxford that he can no longer visit Southampton in the Tower.

"His *liberty* is full of threats to us all" – Hamlet, 4.1.14; "I am sorry to see you ta'an from *liberty*, to look on the business present. 'Tis His Highness' pleasure you shall to **the Tower**." – Henry VIII, 1.2.204

Even if Elizabeth spares him and King James releases him, Southampton will need a royal "pardon" from the new monarch to avoid being re-accused of the same crime; and now he has it in his own power to accept the bargain with Cecil and gain the promise of one:

Be where you list, your *charter*

The "Invention" at the Center

153-154

(2)

1—26/27—76/77—126/127—152
(26) (50) (50) (26)

Sonnet 76: "My Verse"

Sonnet 77: "Thy Book"

Figure 2

is so strong
That you your self may *privilege* your time
To what you will. To you it doth belong
Your self to *pardon* of self-doing *crime*.
I am to wait, though waiting so be *hell*...

"**Charter**: a written document delivered by the sovereign ... granting **privileges** ... granting **pardon** ... to receive a **pardon**" – O. E. D.; "Then I crave **pardon** of Your Majesty" – 3 Henry VI, 4.6.8; "Thus in haste I crave Your Majesty's **pardon**" – Oxford to the Queen, June 1599³³; "y'have passed a **hell** of Time, / And I, a tyrant, have no leisure taken / To weigh how once I suffered in your **crime**" – Sonnet 120

March 12: "A Former Child"

Oxford, having offered *Venus and Adonis* as "the first heir of my invention" for Southampton, is now "laboring" by the same "invention" (method of concealing yet revealing) to give him rebirth and growth in these private sonnets. Under the dire circumstances as time keeps running out, he opens Sonnet 59 by describing this supreme effort in a four-line howl:

If there be nothing new, but that which is
Hath been before, how are our brains
beguiled,
Which, *laboring* for *invention*, bear *amiss*
The second *burthen* of a former child!

"**Bear Amiss**" suggests "miscarry" – Booth; "**Burthen**" = burden; "My first **burthen**, coming before his time" – John Lyly, 1580, dedicating *Euphues his England* to Oxford

March 13: "Crooked Eclipses"

Merrick and Cuffe are hanged, drawn and quartered as Oxford braces for Southampton's own reckoning in Sonnet 60:

So do our minutes hasten to their end...

Alluding to Cecil's "crooked" figure and to his malignant or devious character, he blames both him and Time (Elizabeth) for the destruction of Southampton's "gift" of life and blood:

Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And *time* that gave doth now *his gift*
confound.

March 14: "The Watchman"

Edward de Vere glances at himself as "ever" in Sonnet 61, vowing to Southampton:

To play the watchman *ever* for thy sake.
For thee watch I, whilst thou dost wake
elsewhere,
From me far off, with others *all too near*.

"As we be knit **near** in our alliance" – Oxford to Cecil, February 2, 1601

March 15: "Thee, My Self"

As the hour draws even closer for Southampton to lose his head, Oxford records that his own self-love is but a reflection of his love for him. He merges their two selves in Sonnet 62 to indicate that, by "painting" or writing these verses for posterity, he shares in his fate:

'Tis *thee* (*my self*) that for my self I praise,
Painting my age with beauty of thy days.

March 16: "I Now Fortify"

His intensity grows in Sonnet 63 as Southampton faces death at any moment:

Against my love shall be as I am now,
With time's injurious *hand*
crushed and o'er-worn,
When hours have *drained*
his blood...

"O let her [Elizabeth] never suffer to be **spilled the blood** of him that desires to live

*but to do her service ... The **shedding of my blood** can no way avail her* – Southampton from the Tower, to the Privy Council after the trial³⁴

Bringing it all back to “now” in the diary, Oxford incorporates the real situation with “knife” for the executioner’s axe, “cut” for the expected beheading and “life” for the flesh-and-blood life of Southampton that is about to be lost:

For such a time do *I now fortify*
Against confounding Age’s cruel *knife*,
That he shall never *cut* from memory
My sweet love’s beauty, though *my lover’s*
life.

*“In fine, she hath the **hand** and **knife**,/
That may both save and end **my life**”* – Oxford poem (“The trickling tears”), The Paradise of Dainty Devices, 1576; *“And there **cut** off thy most gracious head”* – 2 Henry VI, 4.10.81

March 17: “As a Death”

For the bargain with Cecil to save Southampton and gain his release with a pardon, the royal “ocean” of King James must “gain advantage” on the “shore” of England by an “interchange of state” through his succession, as Oxford envisions in Sonnet 64:

When I have seen *the hungry Ocean* gain
Advantage on *the Kingdom of the shore...*
When I have seen such *interchange of*
state...

*“Even to our **Ocean**, to our great King John*” – King John, 5.4.57; *“And says that once more I shall **interchange my wane state** for Henry’s regal crown”* – 3 Henry VI, 4.7.3

Because this will also mean the obliteration of Elizabeth’s own “state” and dynasty, Oxford will continue to “weep” even if that which he “fears to lose” (Southampton) is spared:

Or *state* itself confounded to decay,
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate
That Time will come and take my love away.
This thought is *as a death*, which cannot
choose
But weep to have that which it fears to
lose.

*“But you must know that your father **lost** a father, that father **lost, lost** his”* – Hamlet, 1.2.89

March 18: “Hold a Plea”

Danvers and Blount are beheaded on Tower Hill, leaving no more excuse for the Crown to delay Southampton’s execution. Writing in Sonnet 65 of the younger earl’s “sad mortality” and “beauty” while referring to him as a “flower” about to be crushed, Oxford echoes the legal “plea” and “action” to save his life:

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor
boundless sea,

“...the London public will

begin to assume that her

Majesty must have

commuted Southampton’s

sentence to perpetual

imprisonment.”

But *sad mortality* o’er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty a *plea*,
Whose *action* is no stronger than a flower?

*“But if I shall defer anything in this **action**,
I will leave the whole consideration thereof to Her Majesty”* – Oxford to Burghley, June 7, 1595³⁵

He refers to the “gates of steel” within the Tower fortress:

Nor *gates of steel* so strong but time
decays...

O fearful *meditation!* Where, alack,
Shall time’s best jewel from time’s chest lie
hid?

Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot
back?

*“I am come to survey **the Tower** this day
... **Open the gates!**”* – 1 Henry VI, 1.3.1
*“With **meditating** that she must die at
once”* – Julius Caesar, 4.3.190

March 19: Southampton Is Spared
Sonnet 66, a virtual suicide note unlike

all the other verses (and echoing Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy), falls within this chronology as the 40th sonnet on the 40th day proceeding from Southampton’s imprisonment on February 8, 1601; viewed from this perspective it becomes Shakespeare’s exhausted emotional response to Queen Elizabeth’s private decision on March 19 to spare the Fair Youth from execution:

Tir’d with all these, for restful death I cry...

Among his listed complaints appears the limping, swaying figure of Robert Cecil, who in fact holds sway over Oxford, Southampton and Elizabeth as well as over England’s destiny:

And strength *by limping sway disabled...*

*“It is tempting to suspect a glance at the control of the State, including vigorous military men like Raleigh and Essex, **by the limping Robert Cecil**”* – Dover Wilson³⁶

After a week or so the London public will begin to assume that Her Majesty must have commuted Southampton’s sentence to perpetual imprisonment. No legal explanation for the reprieve will be announced or recorded by the government (although Cecil will get credit in history for having obtained the royal mercy), but Oxford supplies the answer in Sonnet 87 for “eyes not yet created” (see endnote 30).

This column will continue the “living record” in the next issue, when Oxford reaches the exact midpoint of the 100-sonnet center of his “monument” for posterity (*see Figure 2*) and explains his “invention” for writing “my verse” of the Sonnets.

Endnotes:

¹ “Penitence” is echoed in Sonnet 34: “Though thou *repent*, yet I have still the loss.”

² “Pardon” is echoed in Sonnet 58: “Yourself to *pardon* of self-doing crime.”

³ “Offended” is echoed in Sonnets 34, 42, 51, 89 and 110 of the Fair Youth series (and nowhere else).

⁴ Both “mercy” and “my life” will be repeated in Sonnet 145 of the Dark Lady series, when, according to this view of the chronology of the poems, Oxford will react to the Queen’s reprieve of Southampton’s execution by writing: “Straight in her heart

(Continued on page 31)

Year in the Life (continued from page 27)

did *mercy* come ... And saved my life, saying, 'Not you.'"⁵
⁵ From the dedication of *Lucrece* in 1594.
⁶ Sonnets 25 and 26.
⁷ It would seem entirely possible that Cecil threatened to charge Oxford himself with treason for writing the deposition scene in *Richard II* and/or for allowing the Lord Chamberlain's Men to perform it at the request of the conspirators – although it's difficult to see how he could have avoided revealing Oxford as the author of the Shakespeare works. There is no direct evidence that Southampton personally gained the playwright's authority to use the play for propaganda, but many historians have assumed it (possibly correctly); for example: "It was he [Southampton] who had arranged the performance of *Richard II* before the rebellion," Catherine Drinker Bowen writes without qualification in *The Lion and the Throne* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1956, p. 154). And Oxford appears to suggest in Sonnet 35 that he had authorized Southampton to use the play: "All men make faults, and even I in this./ Authorizing thy trespass with compare..." Also in that verse he pledges to help the younger earl by making some legal agreement that would harm himself: "Thy adverse party is thy Advocate./ And 'gainst myself a lawful plea commence."⁸
⁸ Hamlet interrupts his own tirade against King Claudius to write down his thoughts and feelings. "O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!" he cries, only to stop cold and mutter, "My tables. Meet it is I set it down that one may smile, and smile, and be a villain – at least I am sure it may be so in Denmark. (*Writes*)" – *Hamlet*, 1.5.106; and this appears to reflect Oxford's habit.
⁹ Scholars such as Duncan-Jones see linkages

of two or three sonnets throughout the sequence, particularly among the 80 "prison" verses, to the point where they all read as a continuous narrative poem.
¹⁰ Sonnet 106: "When in the Chronicle of wasted time..."
¹¹ Sonnet 107, celebrating Southampton's release from the Tower on April 10, 1603: "Not mine own fears nor the prophetic soul/ Of the wide world dreaming on things to come/ Can yet the lease of my true love control./ *Supposed as forfeit to a confined doom.*"
¹² May, Steven, *Studies in Philology* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 48; and *The Elizabethan Courtier Poets* (Asheville: Pegasus Press, 1999), 255, 330; the poem was later entitled *The Passion of a Discontented Minde*; to May goes credit for confirming Essex's authorship and offering details of its composition in the Tower.
¹³ *The Arraignment, Tryal, and Condemnation of Robert Earl of Essex*, 1679, edited by Margaret Pierce Secara and reproduced at <http://renaissance.dm.net/trial/index.html>. A direct record is in Calendar of State Papers Domestic, Acts of the Privy Council (Cecil Papers, Hatfield House); and William Camden included an account in his *Annals* of 1630.
¹⁴ Sonnet 76: "And keep invention in a noted weed"
¹⁵ Strickland, Agnes, 675.
¹⁶ Stopes, Charlotte Carmichael, *The Life of Henry, Third Earl of Southampton* (New York: AMS Press, 1969, reprinting of the 1922 edition), 243.
¹⁷ Stopes, op. cit., 198; Handover, P.M., *The Second Cecil* (Great Britain: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1959), 224, citing the Camden Society, 66.
¹⁸ Researcher Nina Green first suggested that Oxford may have been "40" on her private

email forum *Phaeton*; otherwise the most frequently mentioned possibility has been Oxford's friend Charles Howard, Earl of Nottingham, Lord High Admiral (and hero of the 1588 victory over the Armada), who was also one of Elizabeth's closest confidantes.
¹⁹ Akrigg, G. P. V., ed., *Letters of King James VI & I* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 192-195; James wrote to the Earl of Mar and Edward Bruce on April 8, 1601, that Cecil "is king there [England] in effect."
²⁰ Duncan-Jones, Katherine, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Great Britain: the Arden Shakespeare, third series, 1997), 206; Bellamy, John, *The Tudor Law of Treason* (Great Britain: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), 33; Booth, Stephen, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977), 211.
²¹ May, *Studies in Philology*, op. cit., 95, citing *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, ed. John Roche Dasent (London, 1906), XXXI, 155, 262.
²² Salisbury Papers, vol. XI, p. 72: "After February 19, 1601."
²³ Stopes, op. cit., 224.
²⁴ "Elizabeth did not waver – though once, it is true, she remanded the order for Essex's execution, then canceled her remander" – Bowen, op. cit., 163.
²⁵ Duncan-Jones, op. cit., writing that "whereas in Sonnet 1 [and other marriage sonnets] procreation was recommended as the means of preserving *beauty's rose*, that power is here attributed to poetry."
²⁶ TIME, appearing only in the Fair Youth series (1-126) represents the ever-dwindling time left in the life and reign (and ultimately the dynasty) of Queen Elizabeth; this is the concrete timeline of the diary.

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Year in the Life (continued from page 31)

- ²⁷ Nearly all editions emend “monument” to the plural “monuments,” but I see no reason for it.
- ²⁸ Within the monument is this diary linked to real events in real time, so the record of Southampton’s life is in fact “living” and dynamic, as he had promised in Sonnet 18: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”
- ²⁹ Southampton, upon his release in Sonnet 107, will have been “supposed as forfeit to a confined doom” or judgment of perpetual imprisonment.
- ³⁰ Oxford is writing of various kinds of “judgment” aside from the biblical Final Judgment. One meaning is related to the verdict of high treason against Southampton at the trial, which will be reduced to a “better judgment” of “misprision” of treason, enabling him to be released and to gain a royal pardon. This reduction of the verdict will be announced in Sonnet 87: “So thy great gift [of life] upon *misprision* growing / Comes home again, on *better judgment* making.”
- ³¹ “Lovers” as Brutus uses the term: “Romans, countrymen, and lovers, hear me for my cause.” – *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.13, i.e., loyal subjects or supporters.
- ³² Hotson, Leslie, *Mr. W. H.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 28.
- ³³ Chiljan, Katherine, ed. (*Letters and Poems of Edward, Earl of Oxford*, 1998), 123; Oxford to Elizabeth, June 1599, Cecil Papers 71.26.
- ³⁴ Stopes, op. cit., 225-26.
- ³⁵ Chiljan, op. cit., 106.
- ³⁶ Wilson, J. Dover, ed., *The Sonnets* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), notes for Sonnet 66.

Will in the World (continued from page 4)
 living-but-thought-about-as-if-dead John Shaksper—“a play about a son struggling to set his father’s soul free.” Greenblatt, however, in any event, does not think that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s most autobiographical play; he thinks that distinction belongs to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He suggests, too, that Shakespeare lived a double life—one amongst the London glitterati and another, quietly and alone, in rented rooms or in occasional domestic retreat during summer holidays with the wife and kids in Stratford – the same wife with whom he did not want to share a grave, a daughter with whom he would have a difficult relationship, and a little boy who may have inspired but did not even appear in, let alone dominate, the dramatic action in the play ostensibly loosely named after him.

Shakespeare’s “life,” as one can readily see both in Greenblatt’s book and Gopnik’s survey, makes absolutely no sense of the man—Adam Gopnik’s desperate attempt to give Greenblatt’s chaotic and disharmonious biography shape and symmetry aside. Greenblatt, like the biographers before him, is left largely to supposition, conjecture, guesswork, intuition, imagination and reliance on hearsay and rank nonsense in attempting to sort the man from the legends and reconcile the man to the works. He seems, in his attempt to come to terms with the phantom writer from Stratford, to want it each way, all ways and every way – and perhaps, finally, we cannot fault Greenblatt or reviewers like Adam Gopnik too much for that. Theirs, after all, is the

path of all would-be Shakespeare biographers and their apostles who, like so many before them, have begun their hopeful journey to the Emerald City of Stratford by taking one of many roads only to have their journey ended by discovering that once they gain entry to the citadel, they find out they’ve entered a world where horses constantly change their colors and all the residents are dupes who are ruled by a fraud.

Greenblatt’s “biography” (for which, it is rumored he was paid \$1 million dollars), leaves readers, therefore, right where they began: dazed and baffled in Munchkinland, ready for yet another house to be dropped on them, lost in the forest, or drugged and asleep amongst the poppies. When will readers, one has to wonder, stop paying heed to the frenzied wizards of Stratfordianism and, fed up with being told to stop their pestering inquiries because “Oz has spoken!” start to exercise their curiosity and discover that the man who is the real wizard is the man behind the curtain?
 —DWright

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