



Unraveling History: Do Shakespeare's Sonnets Reveal the Secret Legal History of the 1601 Essex Rebellion Trial?

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The Social Law Library and The Friends of the Oxford Library present:

Unraveling History: Do Shakespeare's Sonnets Reveal the Secret Legal History of the 1601 Essex Rebellion Trial?

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In 1609 Shakespeare's Sonnets, an opaque series of 154 numbered poems, was published. Over the ensuing four centuries, scholars have argued about their meaning. But they have all noted that the verses are filled with legal language, coupled with expressions of the Poet's despair over something done by the "Fair Youth" (whom

many scholars identify as the Earl of Southampton), and what that means for them both. To date it has generally been assumed that the subject matter was a love affair gone wrong, and that all the legal terms were merely metaphors about love.

Now comes a new theory about Shakespeare's Sonnets that clarifies the enigmas surrounding them—who were the persons involved, what were the historical circumstances, and why they are filled with legal terms. It begins to answer questions about one of the most famous events in Elizabethan history—the Essex Rebellion of 1601 and the subsequent trial of its two ringleaders, the Earls of Essex and Southampton. Both were condemned to death, but only Essex was executed; Southampton's life was mysteriously spared, and he was freed two years later.

This new theory proposes that the poet we know as Shakespeare was Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, who, by reason of his rank, actually participated in the trial and found himself in the incredible situation of having to vote to condemn to death his beloved Fair Youth. This is the real drama of Shakespeare's Sonnets. Viewed this way, we can now discern, for the first time, why Southampton was not executed and why he was released from confinement —because the man who was Shakespeare acted as judge, juror (“thy adversary” in Sonnet 35) and as post-trial defense attorney (“thy advocate” in the same Sonnet). In the process he managed to bargain successfully with the State for the Fair Youth's life! How did he do it? The answers lie in the Sonnets themselves, hidden in plain sight for almost 400 years.

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