

## HONEY BOY

There appears general agreement that the sonnets open with a sequence addressed to a teenage nobleman ('The Fair Youth'). The notion that numbers 1 to 17 are a self-contained sub-set also seems reasonably uncontroversial. Dubbed the procreation sonnets, their purpose seems essentially to be - through flattery and persuasion (unctious urging + mild scare tactics) - to get the young man to seize the day, make hay while the sun shines and get married pronto - his beauty being such that it'd be a crime against posterity (humanity even) for his gorgeous genes not to be passed-on, and reproduction made of the masterpiece he is.

A cynic might ponder whether the fair youth's fortune was perhaps as lavish as his looks - that the haste to propel him to couple might be financially or dynastically motivated. But I run ahead of myself. Some advance the idea that the procreation sonnets reflect the youth's age at the time of writing; a present on his turning 17. But who was the birthday boy?

For years it's been fairly unanimously accepted to be Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton. One glance at a portrait of him as a young man is enough to see a certain extravagance in his looks, somewhat feminine for men of the time even -with his long, lustrous red hair, cascading free or done up in a love-lock; his pert, rosy lips and chalk white skin (remember this description for a future blog). In fact, the most recently 'discovered' portrait of him had for several hundred years been assumed a countess. He certainly doesn't appear to be hiding his light under any bushel though, indeed appears inordinately proud of his image, and perhaps therefore susceptible to the kind of forthright, look-in-thy-glass type flattery of the early sonnets.

On a definite side note, Southampton's apparent narcissism was undelined for me last year - when, visiting the Titchfield church in which his remains are buried, I noted he'd been given the sweetest (literally) and grandest send off imaginable (fit for a Pharaoh no less): embalmed in a honey-filled coffin. Southampton was extolled in similarly Godlike fashion when living, in the named dedication to Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. Many have understandably assumed him and the Mr WH of the sonnet's own dedication to be one and the same (albeit with back to front initials). As such, the title of 'Shakespeare's patron' has stuck to Southampton ever since. Trouble is, there is absolutely no proof whatsoever that the Stratford man had (or would, or could ever really have) fraternised with someone of the status of an Elizabethan Earl. Certainly the intimate demands (of the 'beget children for love of me' variety) and all the homoerotic suggestiveness, affection and flirting makes the notion of Shakespeare (as most people know him) penning the poems for Southampton's delectation risible (at best), kamikaze (at worst).

This is the kind of stuff and nonsense that we are expected to buy wholesale, like good little simpletons, and the kind of thing which sends me, personally, into ranting frenzies. After leaving Southampton's tomb, I figured I'd also take

in the ruins of his manor house, up the road - where I found, shamelessly hawked and touted on every information board, references to these kind of outright fibs concerning the phantom friendship between nobleman and bumpkin. On that day, tipping fully over to the bad side, I spent half a frenzied hour sticking up post-it notes on said signs, in the rain - stating 'Lies, Lies, Lies!' in hostile red pen (yes it was me, English Heritage, what ya gonna do?). However, not to dwell, I'm actually going to move on and restore my equilibrium with some tangible facts.

Southampton was certainly acquainted with Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. So well acquainted in fact that the late, great writer and journalist Josef Sobran, in his wonderful and intriguing book *Alias Shakespeare*, purports they had a sexual relationship that scandalised the court and was the primary reason for Oxford's being shunned by society, and going into exile - as well as the reason for his absence from, and fluctuating pronouncements of blame and forgiveness to, his younger lover (who should not even 'so much as his name rehearse' or be tainted by association). This is a fascinating line, and befitting of other aspects of De Vere's candidature and history on record, but for exploration in a later post.

Suffice to say here that there are more than enough facts to support Oxford's connection to the procreation sonnets. When Southampton was 17 for instance, he was actually being urged by De Vere (then 40) to marry his daughter Elizabeth. Though Southampton demured (for which he was fined the astronomic sum of £3000) the history fits the words like a proverbial Warwickshire glove.

More recently, the 3rd Earl of Pembroke, William Herbert, was also suggested as a potential Mr W H. The most obvious bonus here is that no shifting around of initials is needed - and intriguingly, when he too was 17, De Vere (then 47) was also trying to cajole him to marry another of his daughters (Bridget) - though again unsuccessfully. So really, whichever it was (even if both, and the poems were recycled for a second occasion) the importance these links is hard to dismiss. Added to the fact that William Herbert's brother Philip actually did marry De Vere's 3rd and youngest daughter Susan (anyone else thinking King Lear?) and that the two brothers took joint responsibility for funding the publication of the First Folio, this connection is a strong one.

On a side note, Wriothesley was apparently pronounced Rose-ly, and the Fair Youth's sonnets are indeed laden with specific allusions, puns and references to roses; as they are to sweet, sweets, sweetnesses etc. So Southampton has it for me just now, over Herbert, by a honeycomb.

I suppose it doesn't automatically follow that De Vere must have written them though. He could, of course, have commissioned someone else to write them for him, for the purpose. Incidentally, a deal of fuss has been made about the poet or publisher addressing W.H as a humble mister, rather than a Sir or something more elevated. It occurs to me that Mr might mean 'master' though, and an appropriate address to a young, unmarried man of 17- although perhaps

someone will enlighten me that this is far too simplistic and not Elizabethan practice? It's also been suggested that master might be a Masonic term, for a member not fully initiated. But this, I couldn't possibly confirm.

Other theories of Mr W H include him being a lad called William Hall - said to be the person who procured the manuscript of the sonnets for the publisher -though this would make for a rather banal meaning to his being the 'onlie begetter' of the sonnets (rather the 'only courier'). Oscar Wilde had a suitably wild theory that the initials were of a boy player called Willie Hughes ('all hues in his controlling'), but I fear, my dear, such things are the stuff fluff is made of. Whoever he was, one thing is certain - life appears pretty sunny with him by sonnet 18 (thought by some to signify his coming of age). It's also suggested, in what would become one of the most famous sonnets of all times, the text is rather more self-celebratory than Fair Youth worshiping - with the poet proposing the power of his own words, that can triumph over Nature herself and capture both the moment, Time and Youth, for posterity, through the poem's eternal lines.