

THE PRINCE TUDOR THEORIES

I must admit, when I first stumbled on the *Prince Tudor* theory I didn't give it the time of day. In retrospect though, I probably came upon it prematurely, as now it feels an intriguing possibility that illuminates the sonnets in all kinds of ways. For the uninitiated, the basic idea is that our honey boy, Henry Wriothesley, is purported the illegitimate son of Edward De Vere and none other than The Virgin Queen herself - given away at birth to be reared as the child of a compliant 2nd Earl of Southampton and his wife. There is plenty of precedent for this kind of thing. In fact, it was reasonably common for children born on the wrong side of aristocratic beds to end up as the changeling wards of others (who no doubt made themselves richer and more highly treasured for their loyalty in the process).

So far (perhaps) so good. However, there is a sequel – the *Prince Tudor II* theory - but I won't go into that just yet, at the risk of losing you utterly by over-egging the pudding (like a certain film does, which shall remain *Anonymous*. If ever there was a missed opportunity). Suffice to say, it bolts on the suggestion that De Vere was also the son of Elizabeth himself! This adds incest into a mix that's already quite a lot to stomach. Though it certainly gives substance to the oft trumpeted Freudian aspects of the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude (which I must confess, I've never quite bought). Anyway, I'm just going to deal with *Theory 1* for now.

I shouldn't let the moment pass without a slight digression though, for anyone unaware - Sigmund Freud was convinced in his belief that De Vere wrote Shakespeare; though he felt the *Prince Tudor* theories (both) distracted from the general credibility of the case. He had a point. Stratfordians have often tried to cast aspersions on the sanity of doubters. The fact that the first person to bring De Vere as a candidate to the attention of the world was called Thomas Looney, is something they've been dining-out on for years.

The portraits of Elizabeth and Southampton certainly show striking resemblances. Southampton's cascade of red-copper hair, swept back from his chalky, bony face, is unmistakably reminiscent of Gloriana. There've been many rumours about the illicit love life of the Queen down the years - of various affairs and illegitimate children born to her in secrecy (including, purportedly, Francis Bacon and the Earl of Essex!). We do know for a fact that Elizabeth left strict instructions that she should not, on any account, be examined after her death. Some have said this was because she did not die as intact as all were led to believe, or that a postmortem might have shown her womb had known motherhood.

There's certainly much evidence that De Vere was one of the Queen's special favourites at court - and there's documented proof that he was gifted a substantial annuity (of £1000 pounds) for unspecified services; though subsequently suggested as potentially to fund the writing and putting-on of plays at court with one of his two theatre troupes. Even years after their supposed affair, Eliza was to fly into a furious, jealous rage when hearing De Vere had impregnated one of her Ladies-in-Waiting, Anne Vavasour. A tantrum so cyclonic that resulted in him, her and even their newborn baby being thrown into the Tower of London. Like with so many of her favourites, Elizabeth could be possessive and fabulously unforgiving if they dandled with someone else on the side. De Vere was also celebrated as a champion jousting, and the Queen gave him a prize of a diamond studded journal to celebrate his triumph at one tournament she presided over as guest of honour. Literally, he shook his spear for her.

There is also much about Elizabeth's treatment of Southampton to suggest a (justified) paranoia on her behalf that he might usurp her one day, should his true parentage become

known. Southampton was thrown into the Tower of London in 1601 for his part in the Essex rebellion. De Vere had to use all his remaining influence with the Queen to plead for Southampton's life. If Elizabeth's illegitimate child, he had more claim to the hotly contested throne spot than most. Though she spared him from the block (unlike Essex), Southampton and his black-and-white (called Trixie, apparently) were not freed. That didn't occur until James 1st was on the throne - when a particularly grovelling letter to him from Southampton, accompanied by the present of a picture testifying to his famed good looks (as well his reputation of being bisexual, no doubt) warmed the gay Scotsman's heart.

On the subject of sexuality, if we are to accept that De Vere was Southampton's father, the love expressed in the *Fair Youth* sonnets is perhaps transmuted into something more fatherly in tone. This is certainly a credible hypothesis, as there are actually no explicit suggestions of a directly sexual relationship between the two men in the poems - although certainly a passionate, idealistically romanticised, deeply loving yet Platonic one. The poetry of the *Fair Youth* sequence is sufficiently different from the fevered, overt sexuality of the latter sonnets to the *Dark Lady* that all of the hysteria/shame/pronoun-changing of the past could have been avoided.

Anyone's concerns about the sexuality of the writer positively pale in comparison to the revelations of the *Prince Tudor* theories though. Intriguingly, the narrative would absolutely account for the references in the sonnets to disgrace, exile, loss of name and vilification; as they would to for the frenzied attempts made for their publication to be suppressed (a fact brushed aside by traditionalists). There is also much here to justify why such elaborate measures might have been taken to obfuscate the true author, even after his death, and protect those implicated within the poems (and plays) still living.

Sonnet 33 contains the line '*he was but one hour mine*', one of those seemingly specific references in the sonnets that bears some explanation. It could of course mean a mere hour of sexual congress with a lover or even just an intensely memorable meeting - but given that the sonnet also puns quite extensively on the word *sun* (son) it's intriguing to consider a father mourning his child, suddenly taken away from him, and his anger and grief at being forbidden to ever acknowledge him.