

When Shakespeare 'originated' his Sonnets, did they have a 'Euphuism' meaning?

By W Ron Hess

Let's entertain a suggestion for how to understand the 1609 Sonnets by William Shakespeare which may show that "the Beloved Youth" originated as "Euphuism," or the 17th Earl of Oxford as a heroic embodiment of a new form of the English Language that Oxford's circle was championing in "Euphuism" during the 1570s up to the mid-80s, after which it "fell out of style," probably to Oxford's lament. Might the Sonnets have originated and been understood with this "clear" meaning? Alternative interpretations for the Sonnets may simply reflect added levels of meaning, perhaps layered-on in revisions; and so this new interpretation should supplement, rather than supplant them. Think of it this way: before the Sonnets reached their current form, crammed with double-entendre and hidden meaning, might there have been a "clear" version first, and when? (From Hess IIIA Appen. J & IIIB Appen. T).

If we study to find a "clear" meaning in the Sonnets, easily and openly deduced by Elizabethans, we must first examine the 1640 Poems: written by Will. Shakespeare. Gent., a poetry anthology printed by Thomas Cotes for John Benson. The 1640 project used the form of a 1570s-90s "chap-book" or "miscellany," and had a less-than-faithful scrambled selection of all of Shakespeare's poetry, including 146 of the sonnets that had been earlier published in the 1609 collection. In their dedication to the reader, the Cotes-Benson team claimed to present what "the Authour himselfe then living avouched," [1] and said the whole collection was: "serene, clear," "elegantly plain," & "perfect eloquence" (as cited in Hotson, 2-3). Yet Cotes-Benson's statement was in many ways peculiar, because they had just confused interpretation of the Sonnets by: a) scrambling them; b) in Sonnet 101 they changed 3 instances of "he" to "she"; and c) for several sonnets they affixed grouping titles that appeared to address a feminine "Muse" instead of a masculine "Beloved Youth." [2] How could the Sonnets have been "clear" or "plain" if their sequence and gender could be changed, the two main elements for interpreting them?

Yet, we can't lightly dismiss the 1640 edition, because Oxford's son-in-law Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke-Montgomery, was still Lord Chamberlain in 1640 (serving 1626-41), with authority over Stationers such as Cotes-Benson. And Master of the

Stationers Co. from 1639-40 was John Smethwick, followed in 1640 by Master Wm. Aspley, the only two Stationers to have shared in both the 1623 F1 and 1632 F2 projects. Also, those who pretend the Cotes-Benson project was illicit simply overlook the shady background of the 1609 project and of each of its likely participants (Eld-Thorpe-Hall, while variants listed Aspley or J. Wright Sr.) and the suspicion that the 1609 edition "pirated" A Lovers Complaint, hiding it unregistered behind the Sonnets (where Sid Lubow sees ALC as the Sonnets' mythology-based "key").

We need more background. In France from 1550 to 75, Pierre Ronsard and Juaquim Du Bellay joined a handful of other great poets in the group "la Pleiades." They consciously made French more powerful for philosophy and love poetry, trying to excel the Greco-Roman poet-playwrights. From 1570 to 75, "the Pleiades" linked to a parallel "Academic movement" that brought Florentine-type academies to Paris, exalting music and poetry above all subjects. When Oxford visited Paris in 1575, Ronsard and the academies were still active, and so we should note that the academy established by the "King of Navarre" in Love's Labour's Lost was clearly of that pre-1576 type (Yates, 22, 27-28, 35, 264). But when Oxford revisited Paris in 1576, Ronsard in ill-health had retired to the countryside, "the Pleiades" had disbanded, and the new king Henri III had forced consolidation of the academies into "the Palace Academy," now emphasizing rhetoric and logic (Hess I Sect. 4.F). Ronsard had prominently adopted Ovid's theme of immortalizing his language and various mistresses (successively his "Cassandre," "Marie," and "Helene"); and as his health diminished toward his 1585 death, and he felt exiled from Henri III's Court, he readily adopted Ovid's themes of exile, and his still-active pen dissolved into "anguish of the incurable invalid in nights spent alone in pain, longing for sleep, watching for the dawn, and praying for death" (Ency. Brit. X, 170; Lewis-1944, 306). I argue that all of Shakespeare Sonnets' themes came from Ovid (via Golding's translation) or other great earlier poets, with many reflecting Ronsard's peculiar approach to Ovid!

Hess II Appen. C notes Oxford in knight-errant roles such as "Euphuism" (= "natural genius"),

The 40th stanza (pgs. 23-24), right after Queen Elizabeth's alleged contribution, was:

IN which you ask't my name (confesse / your
selfe, ift be not so)
And whether I before, had e
ver [B] beene in love or no. /// [begin pg. 24]
My name, quoth I, is Soothern, and Madame,
let that suffice:
That Soothern which will rayse the Eng-
lishe language to the Skies. [C]
The wanton of the Muses, and
Whose well composed ryme,
Will live in despite of the hevens,
And Triumph over tyme. &c. // [D]

Notes:

[A] The 4 poets' mistresses were immortalized thru their verses (Petrark's Laura, Tien's Corine, Ovid's Bathyll, & Ronsard's Cassandre). [B] The "Confession" of "e/ ver" = "Edward deVere." [C] "Soothern's" Great Boast. [D] Immortality for the "Englishe language" through these "Euphuist" lines = a major Sonnets theme!

Hess IIIB Appen. T notes "immortality conveyed by the poet's lines" was an artifice of Ovid's that Ronsard, Du Bellay, & their "Pleiades" had used, and later became a core theme of the 1609 Sonnets. Also note the artifice at least as old as Ovid of the poet's "Muse" serving as his "fickle mistress" (i.e., often inspiring or favoring others instead, or afflicting him with "writer's block").

Possibly the earliest of the "proto-Sonnets" were originally meant to be at the end of Pandora but were withheld during the "suppression" process, and were revamped circa 1592-3 for Charlewood's intended project. Unfortunately, much (but not most) of Pandora's extant poetry was poor, not in itself justifying such boasts. Which implies that there was a withheld greater and better body of poetry by the poet "Soothern" (= Oxford). I argue early forms of most of the poetry in the Cotes-Benson 1640 "chapbook" was likely in that better body, including most of the Sonnets. Hence, Pandora's boast:

"That Soothern which will rayse the Eng- /
lishe language to the Skies,"

can successfully substitute for every occurrence in the Sonnets of addresses to "the Beloved Youth" except where his "love" is for his Muse. This is the crux of the Sonnets' "clearness," that they were really addressing "English" & "Euphuism." It helps to

assume that most of the Sonnets were of a time circa 1583-89 when Oxford's proud "Euphuism" had already gained great favor, but was beginning to slip "out of style." Yet "Euphuism" does dominate "early" Shakespeare plays, such as Love's Labour's Lost, Two Gentlemen, Comedy of Errors, etc. (Ogburn Jr., 696-98).

Below are a few sample Sonnets to illustrate this new paradigm. Not bothering to rhyme, we simply substitute "Euphuism," "Euphues" (Oxford's alter-ego, the embodiment of "Euphuism"), "my Muse," or a similar concept for "my love," "thee," and "thou"-type words we can interpret as addresses to "the Beloved Youth." I find no Sonnets that can't be fit into this substitution exercise. This new paradigm allows the Sonnets to address "the Beloved Youth" as if she/he was either the poet's fickle Muse (Sid Lubow identifies her with "Melpomene," Muse of tragic song, verse, and drama, literally "the Dark Lady") or with "Euphues" the embodiment of "Euphuism," Oxford's proudest creation.

Note that this new paradigm especially complements the thesis of Sid Lubow, whose new book will describe the Sonnets as a variation of Ovid's "Echo & Narcissus" myth, with the 1609 A Lover's Complaint (ALC) as its key. [6] And it fits well with orthodox Leslie Hotson's 1949 and David Honeyman's 1997 orthodox theories. Nor does it necessarily conflict with any other theories, since the "proto-Sonnets" of c.1583 to c.1600 may have been later adapted into somewhat different form and order, plus added to, for what we see today. But the simplicity, directness, and "clearness" of this new paradigm requires no "conspiracy theory," no "royal birth" or "incest," no tacky sharing of a "Dark Lady" by two men, no adulterous affair with a "married Dark Lady," nor a "homosexual Shakespeare."

We only need to connect to what we already know about Oxford and Shakespeare, plus recognize Oxford's larger political, cultural, and literary context. Adherents for Sonnet interpretations often ask: "How else can we explain line xyz unless we accept a 'bisexual relationship,' or a 'Tudor heir,' etc.?"

Instead, from now on, let's ask ourselves: "What would Shakespeare's wider audience have been able to readily and openly equate with a 'Beloved Youth?'" Only "Euphuism's" seductive "new English" would have met that "open" description, and thus should provide us with a clear "translation" for the "origination" meaning of the Sonnets.

Most revealing, our new paradigm makes perfect sense out of Cotes-Benson's 1640 supposed "gender-bending" of "the Beloved Youth," claiming:

- [2] In 1640 Cotes-Benson scrambled in a "chapbook" form 146 of the Sonnets together with all of Lover's Complaint, Phoenix & the Turtle, Sonnets to Sundry Notes of Music, most of Passionate Pilgrim, translations of Ovid (that may compare to Oxford's uncle Golding's work), and several dedications. It was printed by Thomas Cotes, who with his brother-partner Richard had printed the 1632 2nd Folio (F2) and Pericles Q6. So, in 1632-40, on the eve of the Civil Wars and while Oxford's son-in-law Philip Herbert was still Lord Chamberlain, the Cotes brothers were the first to print all of Shakespeare's canon, although in separate editions spread over 8 years. The 1640 project lacked SON Sonnets 18, 19, 43, 56, 75, 76, 96, & 126, and in lieu of Sonnets 138 & 144 used the 1599 Pass. Pilg.'s versions. Except for 3 changes of "he" to "she" in Sonnet 101 (addressed to the poet's female Muse with Sonnet 100 under a grouping title of "Invocation to His Muse"), the 1640 Poems didn't really "gender-bend" any text, yet its grouping titles did confuse gender on Sonnets 113-15 ("Selfe flattery of her beautie"), 122 ("Upon receipt... from his Mistris"), & 125 ("An intreatie for her acceptance") while retaining refs. to "his" or neutral gender in the text (see Smith-1994, 268). Another oddity was a reversed woodcut of the Droeshout portrait, with a cape on its shoulder & laurel sprig in hand. There was also a "W.B." dedication to "Shakespeare" in his "three-fold, foure-fold Tombe," said to have died in 1616. I argue this last was extension of a "Shakespeare myth" using deceptions by Ben Jonson and others in the 1623 1st Folio (F1) and perpetrated under the F1's "incomparable paire": a) William Herbert (Lord Chamberlain 1615-26) and b) his brother, Oxford's son-in-law, Philip Herbert (Lord Ch. 1626-41).
- [3] From 1567 to at least 1589 there were poetry chapbooks whose names began with "Glasse" or "Mirrour of...", where Sackville's poems in *The Mirrour of Magistrates* have been said to be among the finest English poetry from Chaucer to Spenser, a collection growing over many editions. Oxford's secretary Munday's 1579 *The Mirrour of Mutability* was lavishly dedicated to Oxford, complete with Oxford's heraldry and two acrostic poems featuring Oxford's name and titles. These popular "mirrours" or "glasses" were held up for society to see its deceits.
- [4] Chaucer's to Surrey's English was the mother of "Euphuism." Until the 1570s, Chaucer was the epitome of English poetry, and his works are treasured even today. But by Oxford's time, it was clear that the old English was in need of a more vibrant, Latinate-fortified "Euphuism" that could go toe-to-toe with the revitalized French of Ronsard, DuBellay, & their "Pleiades," and rival the ancient poets (introducing "a second Sorbonne").
- [5] In Sonnet Sonnet 18, line Sonnet 6, we could plug-in EUPHUISM for "his," but it works better if "his" = "eye of heaven" = the Sun god Apollo, patron of song and poetry, whose shining-gold is a metaphor for poetry. The heat of the poet god might also relate to too-heated meaning in the poetry of the time. Note that 1609 Sonnet Sonnets 1 and 2 also refer to "eyes" or "eye," possibly = Apollo, but when plural (the two celestial eyes) also = his sister Diana (who was the "mistress" of the 1584 Pandora). Note also Oxford's role played in a Jan. 22, 1580/1 joust as "the Knight of the Tree of the Sunne" (Hess IIIA Appen. I). For line Sonnet 3, a lady informs me that "darling buds of May" could reflect Cockney slang of the time for homosexuals; yet for once I think a Shake-speare line should be taken at face value, here as a celebration of the joyous time of the year, of life, and of the birth of a new language! She also suggested a relation to the 1582 calendar shift on the continent (Julian to Gregorian, Oct 15 directly followed Oct 4, 1582); so in 1583 the buds of late-April instead bloomed in May (and in 1583 Pandora was being compiled)!
- [6] Sid Lubow provided a draft copy of his book, which I've tried not to ape here. A Lover's Complaint (ALC) was in the back of the same 1609 publication as the Sonnets, and was attributed to Shakespeare too (but ALC's omission on the Title page and in the

S.R. help to add suspicions that the 1609 project was illicit!). Sid argues the "Dark Lady" of the Sonnets was the poet's personal muse, or "Melpomene" the Muse of Tragedy (including verse and song). Here it's also possible she was merged with Pallas Athena, virgin goddess of war, wisdom, arts, and literature, with the Greek epithet "Pallas" (= "shaker"), and often depicted as "the Spear-shaker." Hess IIIA Appen. M suggests a "Palladine Manner" in which Oxford-Sh. regarded "Pallas" as his personal muse.

- [7] If the 1584 Pandora's poetry was uneven in quality, how could it have "originated" along with presumably excellent "proto-Sonnets?" Yet, how much improvement might a genius like Shakespeare have reasonably developed over one or two decades if he was revising and adding to the Sonnets almost to the day of Oxford's death (e.g., the differences between Sonnets Sonnet 138 & 144 from

their 1599 to 1609 versions)? If we take Shakespeare's true masterpiece-level works to have been modified and polished over several decades, what might they have looked like in 1584? Much of Pandora, ALC, and parts of the 1640 project may be the answers! Also, Pandora's French last page and Latin motto, plus Latin-based "euphuistic" over-use of mythology and coinages Latinate or "Frenchified" (as it was called by Steevens' 1788 commentary) suggest that much of Pandora (and the proto-Sonnets) may have been first written in French and/or Latin, and translated into English. Still, Pandora was a 1584 "brave experiment" that failed, not because it was "suppressed," but because it attempted what the English language was ill-suited for -- the over-elaborate use of "Euphuism." Oxford-Shakespeare learned and improved!

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