

Eric Sams

Who was the Rival Poet of Shakespeare's Sonnets?

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Once it was Barnaby Barnes. Now it's either Marlowe or Chapman. Most modern specialists don't much care, because they (unlike ordinary readers over the last four centuries) eschew biography. But at least we now know that the original recipient of the Sonnets was the Earl of Southampton, in the early 1590's. As Professor Jonathan Bate says in his recent acclaimed book *The Genius of Shakespeare*, all other candidatures depend on things not known to exist.

But so does his own preferred rival poet, namely Marlowe. There is no evidence that either Marlowe or Chapman ever sought Southampton's patronage at the material time. Only three writers are known to have done so in print. Barnes's volume of love-lyrics *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*, which appeared in 1593, contains a dedicatory sonnet to Southampton. So does Markham's epic narrative in ottava rima, *The Tragedy of Sir Richard Grenville*, published late in 1595. Nashe's prose satire *The Unfortunate Traveller*, published in 1594, begins with a two-page prose address to Southampton.

There the relevant historical facts end. Next comes inference from the Sonnets themselves. These are deep waters, navigable mainly by powerful aestheticians; but everyone is entitled to put an oar in. Of course Shakespeare may just be imagining things, as commentators claim; but so may they. In order to steer any course at all, it seems sensible to accept statements of fact at face value unless they can be shown to need interpretation. So the absence of verse eliminates Nashe, who in any event was not known as a poet. Nor was Shakespeare's old (pace Sonnet 73) or ignorant (78.14) or poor or despised (37.9) – except in comparison with his young, well-educated, rich and admired patron. For all anyone knows to the contrary, though, the rival poet's verse was indeed “bound for the prize of all-too-precious-you” (86.2); and en route for Southampton he might well have invoked that nobleman's virtue (79.9), praised his eyes (83.13-14) and mentioned his countenance (86.13).

Markham does indeed allude to eyes and virtue, thus:

“Thou glorious laurel of the Muses' hill,
Whose eyes doth crowne the most victorious pen,
Bright lamp of virtue

But so does Barnes, more often, more fulsomely, and much earlier: “To the ... Virtuous Lord,

Henry, Earl of Southampton", "thy virtue, of much worth", "Vouchsafe, right virtuous Lord, with gracious eyes/ (Those heavenly lamps which give the Muses light, /Which give and take, in course, that holy fire)". Barnes also adds Southampton's countenance; he asks that his verses may be so received "That with your countenance graced they may withstand" envy and criticism. The word certainly fills up a line, as Shakespeare says (86.13-14) – literally, and to overflowing, since it adds a superfluous syllable.

Barnes is thus identified as a better candidate than Markham. Further, those same eyes, as Shakespeare reminds Southampton, had been praised by the rival for their "life" (83.13); Barnes activates them as givers and takers of fire. Above all, they had been praised by "both your Poets", with a capital P (83.14); and the other was of course Shakespeare himself. So Barnes was *prima facie* not just a rival poet but the Rival Poet, who had been "taught to write above a mortal pitch" by "spirits", his "compare by night, giving him aid", and was "nightly gulled ... with intelligence" by an "affable familiar ghost" (86.5-10).

No one has ever conjured up the least wisp of evidence to suggest that either Marlowe or Markham had ever so much as contemplated any such hair-raising practices. Chapman comes closer, although his few vague and harmless hints about inspiration from the spirit of Homer were not published until 1609, and he is not recorded as having sought Southampton's patronage until 1610. But there is documentary evidence that young Barnes (1571-1609) was already a self-confessed occultist by the required date, some twenty years earlier. First, his dear friend William Percy asked him, by name, in his own *Sonnets to Ceolia*, dated 1594, "What tell'st thou me 'By spells though hast won they dear'?" And Barnes himself had indeed indulged in magic arts at night, as the last poem in *Parthenophil and Parthenope* told the world twelve times, like the iron tongue of midnight. First, the poet burns frankincense on an altar and kindles a fire of cypress-wood. Then he calls on threefold Hecate, invokes the Furies, and dispatches a black goat to bring Parthenope (Greek for virgin) naked to his side. Next, he makes a libation of wine to the Furies, burns brimstone, and cuts rosemary with a brazen axe, to make magic boughs.

What rites are these, if not devil-worship? No wonder that in Middleton's *Black Book* c. 1604 Satan jestingly says "I am not a little proud I can tell you, Barnaby, that you dance after my pipe so long". A tobacco-pipe is ostensibly meant; but no doubt a smokescreen was still needed, so that all such allusions could be masked as mere license in one sense of another. Every necromancer includes a romancer. But Barnes's diabolism has to be taken seriously. In 1598 he was rightly arraigned as a poisoner before the court of Star Chamber, and escaped justice only by flight. In his later play *The Devil's Charter*, about a poisoner, he draws on the *Heptameron* of Petrus de Abano, which helpfully identifies the spirits that rule the hours and seasons, and gives instructions about the appropriate robes, incense, incantations, magic

diagrams, goatskin parchment, and other paraphernalia to be used in conjuring these spirits, as in *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*; they will then fulfill one's wishes and answer one's questions, as in Sonnet 86.

Like the Rival Poet, further, Barnes refers to his love-lyrics as "hymns" (85.7). Like the Rival Poet, again (80.2, 85.7), he was associated with a "spirit"; in John Ford's *The Lover's Melancholy* a character says "If it be not Parthenophil, it is a spirit in his likeness", while Ford's villain Orgillus in *The Broken Heart* is asked "You have a spirit, sir, have ye? A familiar/That posts i'the air for your intelligence?".

There are many other evidential interconnections between Barnes and the Sonnets. Thus, long before any Rival Poet is mentioned, Shakespeare scornfully rejects "that Muse" which is "stirred by a painted beauty", uses "heaven itself for ornament" and so forth, in a dozen comparisons (21.1-8), all of which occur in Barnaby Barnes. The Dark Lady Sonnet 130 is equally forthright about other poets' "false compare". Commentators commonly quote parallels from Thomas Watson, a decade earlier; but almost all the over-effusive examples that so distressed Shakespeare are found in Barnaby Barnes, at the material time. That contemporary poet was also famous for the "new-found method and compounds strange" that Shakespeare avowedly abjured (76.4). And there is much other clear evidence in Shakespeare's works that he had read *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*, no doubt in the copy that Barnes had presented to Southampton in 1593. The contents of that volume, conversely, suggest that Barnes had seen some of the sonnets in manuscript, as well as Venus and Adonis. The allusions include "Master ... Mistress", "Charter ... Bonds", "hot June", "devouring Time" and the blatant puns in "When Mars returned from war/shaking his spear afar/ Cupid beheld./At him, in jest, Mars shaked [sic] his spear."

The main obstacle to Barnes's definitive identification is the one word "great" in "the proud full sail of his great verse" (86.1). That proud full sail may merely have meant over-inflation. But its greatness has caused many commentators to be blown off course – even those who claim that nothing in the Sonnets is necessarily true or sincere. On the facts, Shakespeare regularly deprecates his own attributes and attainments while exalting those of his patron, as cited above, or of his rival, as in "my saucy bark, inferior far to his" (80.7). But it was the smaller more manoevrable vessels that had famously overcome the great galleons of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Such ironies could easily have induced the encomium "his great verse", especially if Barnes's volume had been welcomed and admired by the much-loved patron.

And Southampton would have been disposed to accept and encourage Barnes. They both hero-worshipped the Earl of Essex, under whose command they both served as soldiers. Further, Barnes was the son of the Bishop of Durham, and hence moved with ease in elevated social as well as literary circles, including Southampton's own. He was thus a celebrity as well as a poet.

He wrote commendatory sonnets or dedications to the Countess of Pembroke, Sir William Herbert, Lady Strange, Lady Bridget Manners and the Earls of Northumberland and Essex as well as Southampton; he was invoked, in praise or blame, by writers or orators as diverse as Thomas Bastard, Thomas Campion, Thomas Churchyard, Sir Edward Coke, John Florio (Southampton's Italian tutor), Sir John Harington, Gabriel Harvey, John Marston, Thomas Michelborne, Thomas Nashe and the publisher John Wolfe, as well as the sonneteer William Percy and the dramatists Thomas Middleton and John Ford. Barnes was thus a far more famous personality, and for far longer, than either Marlowe or Chapman. He was, furthermore, already an acclaimed artist and scholar in the early 1590s, when his verse was first published; thus Churchyard's *Praise of Poetry* (1595) names only three living English poets – Spenser, Daniel and "one Barnes that Petrarch's scholar is". This corroborates the claim that Southampton had "added feathers to the learned's wing" (78.7), namely by raising the Oxford-educated Barnes still higher in the world's estimation.

Barnes was also praised as a poet by Bullen, Dowden, Gosse, Saintsbury, Boas and C.S. Lewis, as well as by Shakespeare. His phrase "adamantine chains" was good enough for Milton in *Paradise Lost*. His style has a colourful if sometimes pretentious music of its own, as in "that while lily leaf, with fringed borders/Of angels' gold, veiled the skies/of mine heaven's hierarchy". Times and tastes change, but the nature of evidence stays the same. Of course Barnes could have been the Rival Poet, on merit; on the facts, he was. This conclusion in turn entails that certain lines and phrases from the Sonnets are basically true and significantly biographical. So why not treat the entire text thus, unless proved otherwise?