# *Avisa: Queen Elizabeth or Penelope Rich?*

By Robert Prechter, Jr.

In a paper for *Brief Chronicles* in 2011, I presented a case that *Willobie His Avisa* (1594) comprised text composed by George Gascoigne (1525-1577) as well as editorial and supplementary text written by his stepson, Nicholas Breton, who brought the work to press. Gascoigne's celebration of the chaste Avisa, representing Queen Elizabeth, extended his similar tribute to the chaste Zabeta, also representing Queen Elizabeth, in *The Princely Pleasures at Kenelworth Castle*, published on March 26, 1576.

John Hamill wrote a rebuttal for the 2012 edition of *The Oxfordian*, proposing that Avisa represents Elizabeth Trentham. He has since abandoned that thesis and switched to promoting the idea that Avisa represents Penelope Rich. His theses involve intricate and atypical (if not unique) "sex scandals" involving Henry Wriothesley, Elizabeth Trentham, Countess of Oxford and her husband, the 17th Earl of Oxford and, in the latest instance, Penelope Rich as well.

In a presentation made in 2022, Hamill proposed "that the 1594 book *Willobie His Avisa* is a libel against Penelope Rich. [He] further argues that Penelope Rich is the 'dark lady' of the Sonnets, and that Southampton and Penelope Rich were the biological parents of Henry de Vere (b. 1593), who was raised as Oxford's son by his second wife, Elizabeth Trentham" (Hamill SON 2022).

In brief, the case for Rich is that a 20-year-old bisexual youth impregnated a 31-year-old married woman with at least three children, and that another

married couple, at the pinnacle of English nobility, were content to raise the philandering couple's illegitimate son as if he were their own biological offspring, thereby conferring upon the double bastard one of the noblest titles in the land, that of an earl.

A more logical scenario is that de Vere and Trentham were married and 14 months later had a child. Such normalcy, however, would eliminate the basis for proposing that Penelope Rich is both the Dark Lady and Avisa.

Hamill expanded his thesis in a book, *The Secret Shakespeare Sex Scandals—Bisexuality and Bastardy: Why the true identity of "William Shakespeare" is still being concealed*, that integrates numerous assertions—some contributed by other researchers—to bolster his hypothesis. However, his arguments are questionable and at times self-contradictory.

Consider the following observations: On the basis that the name *Lucrece*, which may derive from the Latin *lucrum*, meaning *profit*, is a "synonym" for *rich* (which it isn't), he writes,

> That Avisa is Penelope Rich is further hinted at by essentially calling her a 'British Lucretia', as seen in the lines:
>
> *Let Lucrece-Avis be thy name*,
> *This English Eagle soars alone*,
> *And far surmounts all others fame*,
> *Wh're high or low*, *wh'er great or small*,
> *This Britain Bird out-flies them all*.
> (Hamill 263)

Yet only the second word of the first line pertains to his claim. The third word, *Avis*, is the Latin word for *bird*, on which the ensuing lines expand, as follows: "This English Eagle *soars alone*,/And *far surmounts all others fame*…. This Britain Bird *out-flies them all*." Of all English women, only Queen Elizabeth would serve as a good match for those words. Indeed, it would have been borderline treason to apply them to anyone else.

In identifying the suitors in the poem, Hamill writes:

> The first suitor is referred to as The Nobleman, who we believe to be Penelope's husband, Robert, Baron Rich, and while *she refuses him*…

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> it is stated that Avisa married before her second suitor arrived. [T]he implication is that he [the first suitor] marries her despite her refusal. (Hamill 273; emphasis added)

The poem, however, does not imply that Avisa married her first suitor. She simply refuses him. In contrast, the sequence of events described does fit the suitors of Queen Elizabeth. As a juvenile, she was pursued by Thomas Seymour, then became "married" to England as its queen, and then encountered her second suitor.

He goes on:

> The first suitor came along while Avisa is still of "tender age" (Penelope was 18 when she married Robert Rich) and he is described as a Nobleman of "riper years" (Rich was 23 at the time of their marriage).... (Hamill 273)

This line of reasoning is not tenable. In the Elizabethan era, age 18 was not "tender" for first relationships; it was late. In 1591, for instance, Robert Greene dedicated *A Maidens Dreame* to a 13-year-old bride. Age 23, moreover, is barely "riper years" for a male suitor. Contrast this couple's ages to those of Elizabeth Tudor and Thomas Seymour, who were 13 and 38 when they became involved in 1547, perfectly matching the description in the poem.

Hamill notes that in *Willobie*, "H.W. is presented as receiving W.S.'s endorsement of the seduction of his own mistress" (Hamill 303), which he himself calls "a bizarre arrangement in which W.S. [Oxford] serves as a willing cuckold in favor of Southampton, who might be the father of Henry de Vere, born in 1593 and raised by Edward de Vere as his son and heir" (Hamill 303). In contrast, Ron Hess's simpler interpretation has Oxford in Europe in 1575–1576 inviting Avisa's fifth suitor, Don Juan of Austria, to forge an alliance with Queen Elizabeth, a perfectly reasonable state of affairs in which Oxford was acting on behalf of the English government (Prechter 135).

Quoting another scholar, Hamill admits that *Willobie* employs the same initials, H.W., as well as the same motto, "Ever or Never," that George Gascoigne uses in *A Hundreth sundrie Flowres*, and that "there are some similarities in the ways *Flowers* and *Willobie* were published" (ibid.). That is true, and my thesis accounts for these details: Gascoigne authored both works, and his stepson brought them to press. However, Occam's Razor is not to be employed here. Instead, Hamill concludes:

> Thus, a possibility is that *Willobie* might have been a way Oxford revenged himself against both his mistress and his [homosexual] lover.

> [It] could have been a way to subtly and safely express his outrage, but from behind the scenes…. (Hamill 265-66)

In other words, the Earl of Oxford wrote *Willobie His Avisa* to attack Penelope Rich and the Earl of Southampton. But consider the following: first the author paints Oxford as a "willing cuckold" in the gambit, then he has him expressing "outrage" and seeking "revenge" upon the couple. These claims are illogical when considered together, and Hamill does not attempt to resolve the contradiction.

Further claims that do not directly support my thesis nevertheless do so indirectly by falling short of supporting the case for Rich.

To most scholars, Shakespeare's dedication to Southampton in *Venus and Adonis* is straightforward and humble: "I know now how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolished lines to your lordship… But if the first heir of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a god-father." Yet Hamill interprets his scenario into it:

> The phrase, "I know not how I shall offend" seems to imply that this is the purpose of the poem. But more subtly, could the claim of "if the first heir of my invention prove deformed"…be a reference…to his first heir, Henry de Vere who was "deformed" by being a bastard born of an affair? (Hamill 304)

First, it seems dubious that the entire purpose of *Venus and Adonis* is to offend the dedicatee, which would constitute a rare, if not unique, aspect in the history of literature. Second, the term *deformed* cannot refer to an illegitimate child already born. Shakespeare says, "*If* [it] *prove* deformed," meaning in the future, which fails to support the idea that some deformation had already occurred (my emphasis).

Hamill proposes that the third suitor—a "Frenchman" identified as "D.B."—and the sixth suitor, W.S., are the same person. Why would the poet use different identities for the same person? And why would he not bother to mention that an old suitor had returned? Hamill further states that this dual suitor is the Earl of Oxford, yet he concedes, "there is evidence that Penelope was in close contact with all of these suitors except one—Oxford" (Hamill 299), which seems to present a serious problem for the entire case.

Hamill notes that there are lyrics at the end of the publication that are to be sung "To the tune of Fortune" and declares, "'Fortune,' as we know, is a synonym of 'rich'…." (Hamill 271). But it isn't. "Fortune My Foe" was a well-known ditty of the day, "licensed as a ballad in 1565-6" in which *fortune* means *luck* or *destiny*, as determined by the goddess Fortune. The original song's opening line is, "Fortune my foe, why dost thou frown on me?" *Willobie*'s lyric proves the link. It reads, "Did fortune fawne, or did our fortune

frowne…Welcome to me, whatever fortune bring." The *Willobie* singer, moreover, turns the source's theme on its head, declaring that from now on, "this still shall be my song, Fortune *my friend*" (my emphasis). If Fortune stands for Penelope Rich, then the supposition that *Willobie* is an attack on her collapses. What began as implausible evidence becomes contradictory evidence.

In a fundamental leap, Hamill declares that *Willobie His Avisa*, which is subtitled *the true picture of a modest Maide*, *and of a chast and constant wife*, is not about its announced subject but rather is composed entirely in the method of *ironia*, in which the author employs "a form of deliberate mockery in which one says the opposite of what is obviously true," in this case with the aim of berating Avisa and "dispraising her unchaste behavior" (Hamill 261). He needs this argument because he keeps repeating that Penelope was promiscuous, which contradicts the idea of a chaste Avisa. Yet he offers no passages from the poem demonstrating an ironic tone. Ironia is transparently self-revealing ("Joseph Stalin was such a sweet man"), so a pervasive sardonic tone should be evident throughout. Without demonstrating such, his claim stands unsupported.

More claims follow suit: a mention of Penelope of *The Odyssey*, he says, indicates the unchaste Penelope Rich (Hamill 262). But it doesn't; it refers to a famously chaste woman of classical literature. He describes an opposing thesis as the idea that *Willobie* is an "attack on the Queen" (Hamill 263), when in fact it celebrates the Queen. He suggests that *Willobie* is "a parody of *The Rape of Lucrece*" (Hamill 262), the only basis offered being that the editor of the volume briefly mentions "poor Lucrece rape" in the preface. He proposes (Hamill 296) that Henry Wriothesley secretly composed *Diella* by R.L. Gentleman, yet Wriothesley was far too poor a poet to carry it off (see the Henry Wriothesley chapter in *Oxford's Voices*). He notes that in the very first canto of *Willobie*, there is a passing reference to sodomy. He asks, "Is this reference to sodomy another clue to the sexuality of H.W. and W.S.?" (Hamill 306). It is not, because the reference is in the first canto, which is placed quite far from the text about H.W. and W.S., which appears toward the end of *Willobie*, and Hamill makes no attempt to link them.

In conclusion, the Penelope Rich hypothesis is that Oxford invited his homosexual lover, Henry Wriothesley, to impregnate a significantly older, married woman, Penelope Rich; that Rich bore a child unremarked by anyone; that Oxford and his new wife Elizabeth Trentham took in the baby to raise as their own and to anoint him the 18th Earl of Oxford; that despite being a willing cuckold and foster father, Oxford suddenly hated the boy's mother so much that he wanted revenge; so, he spent weeks writing a long, murky poem celebrating the mother's chastity, through which he was actually berating her promiscuity, seemingly knowing every detail of her sex life both before and

after his involvement; and we know all this because Oxford was also the secret author or editor of Gascoigne's *A Hundreth sundrie Flowres*, which we may presume because it has aspects akin to those attending *Willobie*, composed, we are told, two decades later, also secretly by the Earl of Oxford, for the shallow purpose of berating the mother of his foster child, with prose so opaque that it's hard to tease out its meaning; even as we celebrate Shakespeare for clear expression and far superior verse. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, and we have yet to encounter a convincing point, much less a coherent argument.

Eric Sams wrote about orthodox biographies of William Shakespeare, "What I noticed immediately…was that people were just making things up! Absolutely non-stop!" (Sams 69). This is what seems to be going on with the Penelope Rich hypothesis.

When we take time to sort out authorship, we almost always find that things are simpler than they seem. Such is the case with *Willobie His Avisa*: George Gascoigne, a self-proclaimed champion of the Queen, wrote a poem celebrating Elizabeth's chastity in rebuffing all suitors, but passed on before he could publish it. After a long delay, his stepson decided to bring it to press.

We must applaud the author of *Avisa*, for *Avisa* is a loftily-minded tribute by a loyal poet to his beloved queen, written primarily about political machinations at the highest level of statecraft, in which his sovereign delicately and profitably maintained her independence from foreign influence in the service of the English state. Gascoigne may not have been an admirable poet, but he was an admirable subject.

The editor of the book was high-minded, too. Breton did not set out to wound anyone or expose anything; he simply wanted the public to read and appreciate one of his stepfather's most interesting works. He succeeded. People are still reading it.

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