

A Response to the Rebuttal—Avisa: Queen Elizabeth or Penelope Rich?

by Robert R. Prechter, Jr.

I would like to begin by expressing great respect for much of the work of my fellow Oxfordians who authored the preceding rebuttal. The present reply addresses only one subject.

My 2011 article for the journal *Brief Chronicles* hypothesized that George Gascoigne wrote the main verse and prose material within *Willobie His Avisa*, loosely chronicling the suitors of Queen Elizabeth until his death in 1577. To access the paper, see the Works Cited section at the end.

The rebuttal on the foregoing pages promotes an opposing idea: that Penelope Devereux Rich is the subject of *Willobie* as well as Shakespeare's Dark Lady and the mother of a bastard child fathered by the Earl of Southampton, whom Edward de Vere and Elizabeth Trentham secretly adopted and raised as the 18th Earl of Oxford. Even after carefully reviewing the proponents' latest material, I remain unaware of any substantive evidence, historical or literary, for any of those claims.

With three renowned authors collaborating on the rebuttal, the finest features of their case are surely before us. The following review will cover first their objections to my case and then the elements of their positive case.

Replies to Refutations

The rebuttal says, "*Willobie* is not about Queen Elizabeth but was an *intended libel* against the promiscuous courtier...." Quite fittingly, George Gascoigne's

story, “The Adventures [of] Master F.J.,” published within *A Hundreth sundrie Flowres* (1573), elicited the very same charge, against which Gascoigne had to defend himself. Their impression of *Willobie* fits my case just fine.

The rebuttal corrects my timeline, saying that Southampton was only 18, not 20, at the time of Henry de Vere’s conception, and Penelope Rich was 29, not 31, and she already had given birth to six children. This adjustment *lowers* the likelihood of a sexual liaison between Southampton, who was a teenager, and Rich, who was 29 and so actively producing children with her husband that she would have to have been quite deft to produce yet another baby, never mind covertly.

The writers say, “Prechter fails to mention numerous points that counter his thesis.” They give four examples. The first is that Avisa is a married woman. But I did cover that point: Queen Elizabeth was “married” to England. The second instance is an interpretation of the artwork on the cover of *Willobie*. Since I do not think it qualifies as a point (see discussion below), it was not “omitted.” The third purported omission is that *Willobie* “was censored under the Bishops’ Ban of 1599.” That ban—which in fact failed—fits my narrative as well as theirs. The fourth instance is “any mention of a pamphlet called *Penelope’s Complaint*, which was published to counter *Willobie His Avisa* in 1596.” Rest assured, my book *Oxford’s Voices* features an entire chapter on Peter Colse’s book, covering the reason for the response (which is compatible with the ban) and who I think really wrote it.

The rebuttal says I fail to understand the equation that *Avis* is the Latin word for bird, and that *penelope* in old dictionaries means “a certain bird,” so Avisa = Penelope. Yet Queen Elizabeth was referred to as a phoenix, and portraits of her feature a phoenix and a pelican, respectively, in pendants, earning them the titles the “Phoenix” and “Pelican” portraits. So, by the same logic, Avisa = Elizabeth. If an Elizabethan poet were to refer to a great woman of the day as a Bird, which connection would be far better known?

The rebuttal notes, “Barbara De Luna’s *The Queen Declined*, which argues that *Willobie* is primarily about the Queen rebutting her suitors, has not been accepted on either the Stratfordian or non-Stratfordian side of academia.” That is true and unfortunate. She was not alone, however, as G.P.V. Akrigg came to the same conclusion in 1968. But consider: How does anything being out of favor in academia help the case that Penelope Rich is Avisa, which is far further out of favor in academia?

In my short article, I commented that the editor of *Willobie* hoped the public would read and appreciate the poem. The writers misinterpret that statement to mean I think the poem is “a good piece of literature” and proceed to school me by quoting two authorities on its shortcomings. But my article

calls the poem “murky” and the poet “not admirable”; my paper states that the poem suffers from “a dearth of poetic artifice”; and the Henry Willobie chapter in *Oxford’s Voices* declares flat out, “the poem is tedious.” So, I have not been schooled. On the contrary, the poem’s tedium is perfectly in accord with the wearying narrative verse that George Gascoigne produced under his own name.

As far as I can tell, the writers have no idea who wrote *Willobie*, whereas my case is holistic in relating its author to the subject matter and writing style. Hamill even entertains the idea that our own Earl of Oxford wrote *Willobie*, writing, “a possibility is that *Willobie* might have been a way Oxford revenged himself against both his mistress and his lover...a way to subtly and safely express his outrage, but from behind the scenes...” (Hamill, 165). Never mind the unsubstantiated claims of “outrage” and “revenge.” Since we agree the poem is bad, how can it be Oxford’s?

Reviewing “Positive” Evidence Offered for the Case

The rebuttal corrects the source of my quote, “people were just making things up...!” Apologies for the error; I must have read or misread a secondary source. The quote is still Sams’, however, and the sentiment still applies, as I trust you are about to see.

Supposed Hints within Texts and Pictures

The rebuttal discerns “blatant allusions to cuckoldry” within the artwork on the title page of *Willobie*. We are told, “Here the figures of Diana (Lady Rich as forementioned) and Pallas/Minerva (Shake-speare) are seen together hiding under a bedsheet.” That is not so. Rather, there are two characters *not* identified as Rich and Shakespeare on *opposite* sides of the page, facing *away* from each other, holding drapery *above their heads*, not around them like a sheet. (Go to figure 1 on page 264 to see for yourself.) Had the artwork intended to depict a promiscuous woman, it surely would have featured Venus, not the virginal goddess Diana. The writers continue, “There are in fact two stags depicted on this page, just as two stags serve as supporters to the heraldic arms to Penelope Rich’s husband, Lord Rich.” This observation might be convincing if, say, two stags were supporting the heraldic arms of Lord Rich. Instead, there is a stag’s head at the top of the page, and the image at the bottom is the half-stag, half-human Acteon in metamorphosis before Diana bathing. In opposition to the writers’ claim that Acteon’s horns imply cuckoldry, Ovid’s story relates that Acteon was punished severely for invading the virgin goddess’s space. If anything, both images better fit my view of *Willobie*’s theme: that the Virgin Queen stood aloof from, and drove away, her suitors.

The writers advise, “Oxfordians need to reconsider their automatic identifications of ‘Diana’ and ‘Cynthia’ to Elizabeth, as Penelope Rich was frequently referred to by these names as well.” That is fine, but none of their examples even remotely indicate that Rich is Avisa, the Dark Lady or the secret mother of Henry de Vere. To promote their case about the name Cynthia, they assert that Charles Fitzgeoffrey’s poem “To Cynthia” “is clearly distinguishing between Queen Elizabeth and *another woman* going by the name ‘Cynthia’ . . .” But Fitzgeoffrey isn’t doing anything of the sort. He is talking about the moon and the queen. As Wikipedia notes, “Selene, the Greek personification of the *moon*, and the Roman Diana were also sometimes called *Cynthia*” (Wikipedia). Here are Fitzgeoffrey’s lines:

Depart the sky, Cynthia, in the night Elizabeth will rule the stars, more bright, more chaste. Or rather do not depart the sky, let you govern the stars by night, and she the English by night and by day.

Translation:

Go away, Moon, and let Queen Elizabeth rule the night. Better yet, stay where you are, governing the stars at night, while our queen governs the English people around the clock.

In trying to advance a connection, the rebuttal asserts that “Cynthia” in the poem denotes Rich, who was “associated with the night sky stars” as Philip Sidney’s Stella. Rich cannot, however, be both the moon and separately the stars. Fitzgeoffrey’s poem rightly distinguishes between them, saying that Cynthia, the moon, *governs* the stars. So, the whole analysis is void. Even if it were valid, it wouldn’t tell us anything about Avisa.

The writers refer to W.C.’s *Polimantia*, where names mentioned in some of the text and marginalia are presumably codes for other names. They assert that the phrase, “fortunatelic fortunate Cleopatra” indicates Penelope Rich. Why? because “fortune” equals “rich.” On the other hand, Cleopatra equals Cleopatra. So, what else is involved? Well, in Samuel Daniel’s *Cleopatra*, we are told, “the super-rich queen is forced to give away her beloved son, the illegitimate Caesarion—*corresponding neatly with the theory that Penelope Rich gave her illegitimate son, Henry Vere, to the Oxfords in 1593.*” This is a clear example of a predetermined theory being used to wrench meaning out of a text. My chapter on W.C. in *Oxford’s Voices* gives a much neater (and more exciting, in my view) interpretation of the meaning of W.C.’s choice of words, and it does not require any substitute identifications.

The rebuttal spins even further into the realm of conjecture when attempting to derive meaning from a short poem in the preface to *Willobie* signed

“Contraria Contrarijs,” under which is written, “Vigilantius: Dorminatus.” The writers find vast significance in those words:

Vigilant, or “wide awake,” is clearly the opposite of “dormant” or “deep sleep.” This seems to be telling the reader to be open to the possibility that some of the story may be the opposite of what is being said: the most obvious example of this would be that the woman is not fending off these suitors at all, but sleeping with them. Indeed, the concluding line of the poem, “That makes her mount above the rest,” can be seen as playing on the word “mount” as “ascend” but also “copulate.”

This type of analysis fills countless pages in Hamill’s book, but it’s not persuasive. First, the signature relates to the poem, not the whole book. Second, one opposite does not imply another, much less the “obvious example” that “awake” and “sleep” mean that Avisia is having sex with men she is depicted as rebuffing. And “mount” here does not remotely mean “copulate.” See for yourself:

Sweete wylloby his AVIS blest,
That makes her mount above the rest.

The author is *sweet*, Avisia is *blessed*, and she soars *above the rest*. She does not *mount* anybody, nor is she *mounted* by anybody. The poet is offering kind words, not salacious charges. Birds “mounting” toward the sky is a common trope in Elizabethan poetry.

The rebuttal includes a questionable two-page analysis of an introductory poem in *Willobie*. Let us note just one problematic claim: The poem cites four chaste women from fiction. The writers quote a comrade who calls the concluding lines “a caustic comment” and proceeds to speculate on why it’s there, but it is not a caustic comment. The poet says, “Two thousand years have scarcely seen / Such as the worst of these has been.” In other words, over two millennia, few women have been as chaste as the least chaste of these heroic women. Time and again, the writers’ method is to turn a clear meaning into something conspiratorial, without clinching the argument.

The writers make much of the fact that Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* comprises 108 sonnets. Why? because there are not 109 of them! Apparently, an ancient Greek game called Penelope involves 54 stones on two sides, totaling 108, and one stone in the middle representing Penelope, so clearly, “the absence of the 109th or Penelope sonnet-stone from Sidney’s sequence confesses Astrophil’s failure as a lover” (Fowler 175). I don’t know if Sidney had such a concept in mind, but even if he did, how therefore is his beloved Stella Willobie’s Avisia? Or the Dark Lady? Or the secret mother of Henry de Vere?

Quotes from Others

The rebuttal quotes a slew of scholars, but to what end? I doubt most of them have signed on to the Penelope Rich case.

Eric Sams, notes the rebuttal, wrote a chapter interpreting *Willobie* as pertaining to “scandals” and that Avisa “*may* represent...the so-called Dark Lady” of Shakespeare’s sonnets. But even Sams admitted, “Avisa shadows the Dark Lady *as well as Elizabeth I...*” (Sams 98). That Avisa tracks Elizabeth is half a point directly in my favor, with no offsetting implication that Penelope Rich is the Dark Lady, much less Avisa.

The rebuttal quotes a scholar who noted that “Shake-speare” is mentioned in “the 1594 *Willobie* text.” The reference is in the *prefacing* text, a detail important to a proper dating analysis. Regardless, the poet’s mention of the Bard is in no way indicative of scandals involving the Earl of Oxford. Erin A. McCarthy explained, “Whoever wrote it does not, as John Leigh notes, praise Shakespeare and his poem so much as argue that Henry Willoughby has created *an equally virtuous poetic subject*” (McCarthy). The poet’s sentiment fits my hypothesis, not theirs.

Curiously, the writers admit that *Willobie* “is based around the story of mythological wife Penelope who, during her husband’s long absence, rebuffs a number of suitors.” They quote William Byrd celebrating Penelope Rich as being akin to “Ulysses’s wife.” Yet they simultaneously and vociferously charge that Penelope Rich was promiscuous, making the overall argument self-contradictory. For what it’s worth, I don’t think she was promiscuous. She had children exclusively by her husband (in a forced marriage) and then exclusively by her true love.

My article of last year challenged the writers’ claim that *Willobie* is written in the style of *ironia*. Instead of providing examples, they quote a scholar who sensed that within the poem, the “chastity and fidelity is so overstated that it is almost suspicious” (Chiljan 233). But “almost suspicious” does not equate to *ironia*, so we continue to await examples. Elizabethan literature, as we know, is packed with paeans to Elizabeth’s chastity and fidelity, and they all seem overstated. *Willobie* is another case in point.

In sum, I find not only the absence of a comprehensive case that Penelope Rich is Avisa, the Dark Lady, and the secret mother of a noble bastard, but also the lack of a single convincing point. I find a hodgepodge of loosely connected assertions, none of which leads, either individually or collectively, to the desired conclusion. I believe my paper presented a logical case for both the theme and authorship of *Willobie*, and I welcome one and all to give it a look.

Works Cited

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