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For further discussion of the ideas put forward in this article, along with other Shakespearean matters, see my blog <http://www.shakespeare-et-al.blogspot.com>.

‘SURPRISED INTO SONNETEERING’: SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS AND THE GRAY’S INN REVELS OF 1594-5

In his 1944 Variorum edition of Shakespeare’s 1609 *Sonnets*, Hyder Edward Rollins stated with undisguised frustration that finding the answer to the critical question of when the sonnets were written was ‘an idle dream’¹, but since his time significant advances in stylometric analysis of Shakespeare’s work have put us in a much better position with the dating of *Sonnets*.² The current position is summarised by Gary Taylor and Rory Loughnane in their *The Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare’s Works* for the New Oxford Shakespeare.³

¹ Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: the Sonnets Part II (Philadelphia, 1944), 53.

² The majority of stylometric studies that impact on our understanding of dating involve rare-word analysis. See MacD. P. Jackson, ‘Vocabulary and Chronology: The Case of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’, *RES*, lii (2001), 59-75.

³ Gary Taylor and Rory Loughnane, ‘The Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare’s Works’, in Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan (eds.), The New Oxford Shakespeare: Authorship Companion (Oxford, 2017), 573-5. For some of the sonnet groupings Taylor and Loughnane provide a ‘best guess’ range in addition to a wide date range. Where available, I have used the best guess range, and marked it with an asterisk. Sonnets 127-154 include three sonnets which are probably outliers to the date range 1590-5: 145 (possibly as early as 1582), and 153 & 154 (indeterminate, possibly late, date).

Table 1

<i>Sonnets</i>	<i>Date Range</i>
1-60	1595-1597
61-77	1594-1595*
78-86	1598-1600*
87-103	1594-1595*
104-126	1600-1604*
127-154	1590-1595

For convenience, we can reformat Table 1 into chronological order, with reference to the three major ‘figures’ in *Sonnets*: the so-called ‘Young Man’, ‘Dark Lady’, and ‘Rival Poet’.⁴

Table 2

<i>Sonnets</i>	<i>Date Range</i>
1. ‘Dark Lady’ Sonnets (127-154)	1590-1595
2. Early ‘Young Man’ Sonnets (61-77, 87-103)	1594-1595*
3. Middle ‘Young Man’ Sonnets (1-60)	1595-1597
4. ‘Rival Poet’ Sonnets (78-86)	1598-1600*
5. Late ‘Young Man’ Sonnets (104-126)	1600-1604*

If this timeline is correct it suggests that Shakespeare originally started writing sonnets to a woman (or women) in the period 1590-5, then, sometime in 1594-5, changed focus to writing sonnets to a young man. According to the New Oxford chronology, Shakespeare wrote four plays during the period 1594-5: *The Comedy of Errors* (‘mid-late 1594’), *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (‘late 1594 early 1595’), *Richard II* (‘mid-1595’), and *Romeo and Juliet* (‘late 1595’).⁵ In

⁴ Writers variously refer to a young male addressee in *Sonnets* as the ‘Friend’, ‘Fair Youth’, or ‘Young Man’; I use the latter throughout. It is by no means certain that when a young man is addressed in *Sonnets* he is always the same person, but it is generally agreed that one particular young man is the dominant addressee. To avoid repetitive qualification throughout this article, when I refer to the ‘Young Man’ it should be read as a reference to this dominant male figure in *Sonnets*. The complex nature of the ‘Dark Lady’ and ‘Rival Poet’ figures will be discussed later in this article.

⁵ For the date of Shakespeare’s plays I have used Taylor and Loughnane’s ‘best guess’, ‘most likely’, or ‘most probable’ dates. I have omitted the nonextant

theory, we might expect that the stylometric evidence would show that for each of these four plays there is a positive statistical correlation between the play and *Sonnets*. However, what we actually find is that while that is true for *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Richard II*, and *Romeo and Juliet* (and for the next play in the New Oxford chronology, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), it is not at all true for *The Comedy of Errors*, which, in fact, has one of the most significant *negative* statistical correlations between a play and *Sonnets* in the canon. It is only once we get to *Love's Labour's Lost* that stylometric evidence shows a sudden upwards inflection point in the correlation between Shakespeare's plays and his sonnets.⁶ While there are numerous works that attest to a close connection between *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Sonnets*⁷, what the stylometric evidence adds to our understanding is that the play is closely connected with the *start* of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, or more precisely - since the majority of the Dark Lady sonnets were

Love's Labour's Won, and *1 Henry VI*, because Taylor and Loughnane's date of 1595 for the latter is for their proposed 'Shakespeare adaptation' of an original version written in 1592.

⁶ Eliot Slater, 'Shakespeare: Word Links Between Poems and Plays', *N & Q*, xxii (1975), 157-63). Based on Slater's definition of a rare-word, *The Comedy of Errors* has an extraordinarily low number of rare-word connections with *Sonnets*, even allowing for the shortness of the play. MacDonald Jackson later revisited Slater's work, and corrected 'several misleading results', but this did not change Slater's original key finding that the group of four 'lyrical' plays starting with *Love's Labour's Lost* provided the highest statistical correlation with *Sonnets*. This finding, Jackson concluded, was consistent with 'a burst of sonnet-writing around 1595' (MacDonald P. Jackson, 'Vocabulary Links between Shakespeare's plays as a guide to chronology: a reworking of Eliot Slater's tables', *Shakespeare*, 11:4 (2015), 446-458). See also MacD. P. Jackson, 'Dating Shakespeare's Sonnets: Some Old Evidence Revisited', *N&Q*, xlix (2002), 237-41 for a corroboration of Slater's finding regarding the four lyrical plays, based on an analysis of the verbal parallel data of Hermann Conrad and Horace Davis.

⁷ Harold Bloom, for example, notes that *Love's Labour's Lost* 'uniquely among the plays, partly shares the language of the Sonnets' (Harold Bloom (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Poems* (Pennsylvania, 1999), 9). For the 'remarkable affinity' between the opening lines of the play and *Sonnets*, see John Kerrigan (ed.), *Love's Labour's Lost* (London, 1982), 14. The most detailed discussion of verbal parallels is in C. F. McClumpha, 'Parallels Between Shaksper's Sonnets and Love's Labour's Lost', *MLN*, xv (1900), 336-48.

probably written before *Love's Labour's Lost*⁸ - the start of Shakespeare's sonnets *to a young man*.

Between the composition of *The Comedy of Errors* and the composition of *Love's Labour's Lost*, then, it would seem that something happened to inspire Shakespeare to change focus from writing sonnets to a woman, as was the norm at the time, and instead write them to a young man. Katherine Duncan-Jones noted that 'Romantic critics have liked to view Shakespeare as surprised into sonnetteering by some real-life experience'⁹, but no convincing case for any such experience has ever been presented. However, with stylometric evidence now pointing to some sort of watershed moment in Shakespeare's sonnet writing between the composition of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, we cannot help but be struck by the fact that these two plays share a feature otherwise unique in the canon: both can be closely connected with the Gray's Inn Christmas Revels of 1594-5, a major event on the Elizabethan calendar, and one, moreover, that involved a very special young man. *The Comedy of Errors* was played at those revels on the night of 28 December 1594¹⁰, and *Love's Labour's Lost*, probably composed shortly after, but possibly even during, the revels appears to be significantly influenced by the revels activities,

⁸ Taylor and Loughnane date the Dark Lady sonnets to 1590-5 i.e. largely, though not necessarily wholly, before their date of 'late 1594 early 1595' for *Love's Labour's Lost*. There is little dispute among scholars about the likelihood of an early date for the Dark Lady sonnets. In the view of Colin Burrow, for example, it is 'so probable as to amount to a moral certainty' that 'the sub-sequence 127-52 includes the earliest poems to have been written': Colin Burrow (ed.), *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford, 2002), 134.

⁹ Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Revised edition, Arden Shakespeare 3rd series, 2010), 49. Duncan-Jones does not wholly endorse, but neither does she dismiss, the possibility that *Sonnets* was inspired by some real-life experience.

¹⁰ It is now almost universally agreed that the 'Comedy of Errors (like to *Plautus* his *Menechmus*) [that] was played by the Players' on the night of 28 December 1594 at the revels was Shakespeare's play. Our knowledge of the Gray's Inn Revels of 1594-5 is based on a highly detailed account of the activities called *Gesta Grayorum*, published by William Canning in 1688. Throughout this article, I have used W. W. Greg's edition: W. W. Greg (ed.), *Gesta Grayorum 1688* (London, 1914).

and even to directly allude to them.¹¹ Might the Gray's Inn Revels of 1594-5 be the real-life experience that surprised Shakespeare into sonneteering to a young man?

Gray's Inn was one of England's four Inns of Court, law societies which still exist today. Christmas at the Inns of Court was usually celebrated in a conventional manner, supervised by a master of the revels responsible for the feasting, music, dancing, and gaming that were a standard part of the festivities. Periodically, however, a more serious and grander celebration was undertaken, presided over by a Christmas Prince, who had the prestigious leading role in a mock-serious emulation of royalty, and took responsibility for the more elaborate and expensive entertainment involved.¹² The Gray's Inn Revels of 1594-5 were one such occasion, and the Christmas Prince, known at Gray's Inn as the 'Prince of Purpoole', was a young man called Mr Henry Helmes.

In 1964, Leslie Hotson put forward the radical proposal that the Young Man of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* was indeed a Prince of Purpoole at the Gray's Inn Christmas Revels. However, it was not Henry Helmes that he proposed, but William Hatcliffe, the *previous* Prince of Purpoole at the 1587-8 revels.¹³ Much of Hotson's enthusiasm for Hatcliffe was due to the fact that the latter had the initials 'W. H.'. Thomas Thorpe's epigraph to *Sonnets* begins with the words 'To the onlie begetter of these insving sonnets, Mr. W. H.', and Hotson, along with a range of scholars at the time, believed that 'Mr. W. H.' referred to the young man addressed in many of those sonnets. However, other scholars believed that 'Mr. W. H.' instead referred to the man who delivered the *Sonnets* manuscript to Thorpe. It was not, in other words, a fact that Shakespeare's Young Man had the initials 'W. H.', and recent scholarship has cast

¹¹ For detailed discussions of the connections between *Love's Labour's Lost* and the revels see Lynne Magnusson, 'Scoff Power in *Love's Labour's Lost* and the Inns of Court: Language in Context', *Shakespeare Survey*, lviii (2004), 196-208; John Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* (Oxford, 2016), 67-96.

¹² Alan H. Nelson and John R. Elliott, Jr (eds.), *Records of Early English Drama (REED) Volume 1* (Cambridge, 2010), xviii.

¹³ Leslie Hotson, *Mr W. H.* (New York, 1964).

even greater doubt on that assumption: ‘Mr. W. H.’ may be no more than a misprint for ‘Mr. W. S.’ (i.e. Shakespeare himself), a suggestion originally put forward at length by Donald Foster¹⁴, and accepted in the most recent Norton Shakespeare edition of *Sonnets*.¹⁵

In the end, it was not Hotson’s debatable interpretation of Thorpe’s ‘Mr. W. H.’ that was the main problem with his proposal. The problem was to do with dating. Hotson believed that *Sonnets* in its entirety was written in the period 1587-9¹⁶, and most scholars found it hard to accept that Shakespeare could have written these poems years before he had written *Venus and Adonis*, *Lucrece* and the vast majority, if not all, of his plays. The stylometric evidence for the dating of *Sonnets* that we now have confirms, of course, that they were right to be so sceptical.

Yet the general idea that the Young Man of *Sonnets* might have been a Christmas Prince at one of the Inns of Court had considerable merit. Whatever his identity, the person addressed in those poems had to have been no ordinary young man, and a Christmas Prince more than satisfied that requirement. To have a Christmas Prince at all presiding over the revels at one of the Inns of Court was comparatively rare. Apart from William Hatcliffe and Henry Helmes, the only other instance we know of in Shakespeare’s lifetime was when Richard Martin, as Prince d’Amour, presided over the Middle Temple Revels of 1597-8.¹⁷

The role of Christmas Prince was not purely ceremonial. The Prince’s personal, and his Inn’s, ‘honour’ depended on the success

¹⁴ Donald W. Foster, ‘Master W. H., R. I. P.’, *PMLA* cii (1987): 42-54.

¹⁵ Lynne Magnusson, ‘Textual Introduction’, in Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus and Gordon McMullan (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare Third Edition* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 2248. For a detailed discussion of the decision to accept Foster’s suggestion, see Lynne Magnusson, ‘Thomas Thorpe’s Shakespeare: “The Only Begetter”’, in Hannah Crawford, Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, Clare Whitehead (eds.), *The Sonnets: The State of Play* (Bloomsbury, 2017), 33-54.

¹⁶ Hotson, 300.

¹⁷ Nelson and Elliott, Jr, xx.

of the revels, and he was heavily involved in their organization and funding. The latter responsibility alone was not for the faint hearted. We do not know how much personal expense Henry Helmes spared for the 1594-5 revels, but Richard Vyvyan was reported to have spent £3,000 or £6,000 as Prince d'Amour of the Middle Temple in 1635-6.¹⁸

The nature of a Christmas Prince's role corresponded closely with many of the dominant themes and features of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. For the period of his reign, the Christmas Prince was a lens through which to view the concerns and priorities of the Inn he represented, and Hotson noted that the extensive use of legal terminology and metaphor in *Sonnets* could be readily explained by this connection.¹⁹ He also argued that since the Christmas Prince was a 'king', it explained the unusual prevalence of regal imagery in *Sonnets*.²⁰ But he was a king only briefly, and thus also the embodiment of the *Sonnets* themes of fleeting Fame, the ravages of Time, and the inevitability of Death. Tradition demanded that once

¹⁸ Nelson and Elliott, Jr, xx-xxi.

¹⁹ While reference to the law was by no means uncommon in Shakespeare's work overall, nor in the works of other writers of the time, in *Sonnets* an underlying legal theme seems subtly insistent. Andrew Zurcher has recently argued at length that much of *Sonnets* is framed by the aims and concerns of the Inns of Court, and that 'many editors and readers have failed to appreciate the legal semantic resonance of many of the words Shakespeare uses in the *Sonnets*' to the point where there has been no less than a 'mass and selective blindness to Shakespeare's sustained legal preoccupations' in these poems. Zurcher emphasizes, in particular, that the importance to the Inns of the issue of the Succession is a necessary background for our understanding of Sonnets 1-17, the so-called 'marriage' or 'procreation' sonnets, and that the dangerous oppositional character of these poems may have made them unpublishable while the Queen was alive: 'The emphasis in the opening sonnets upon the obligations of "succession" must have teetered ... on sedition'. (Andrew Zurcher, *Shakespeare and Law* (London, 2010), 65-8). On the latter point, see also Cathy Shrank, 'Counsel, succession and the politics of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*' in David Armitage, Conal Condren, and Andrew Fitzmaurice (eds.), *Shakespeare and early modern political thought* (Cambridge, 2009), 108-9.

²⁰ Hotson's emphasis on regal imagery in *Sonnets* was not unique. Almost a decade earlier, G. Wilson Knight had argued the same thing in detail (G. Wilson Knight, *The Mutual Flame* (first published 1955), in *G. Wilson Knight: Collected Works Volume V* (London, 2002), Section III).

the revels were finished the Christmas Prince 'died', and the man who played the role returned to being his less exalted self - in the case of both William Hatcliffe and Henry Helmes, no more than a mere gentleman.

Detached from its disabling connection with William Hatcliffe and a too early dating for *Sonnets*, Hotson's broad argument provided a plausible alternative to the main candidates for Shakespeare's Young Man, Henry Wriothesley (the 3rd Earl of Southampton) and William Herbert (the 3rd Earl of Pembroke), both of whose candidacies are compromised by the frequently harsh tone of address to the Young Man in *Sonnets*.²¹ Shakespeare's sonnets diverge noticeably from other sonnet sequences of the time, where the loved one is invariably, and usually abjectly, praised beyond measure. While there is no shortage of praise of the Young Man in *Sonnets*, there is also no shortage of criticism and even insult. As Michael Spiller notes: 'for the first time in the entire history of the sonnet, the desired object is *flawed*'.²²

In the Elizabethan period it is highly unlikely that a man of Shakespeare's standing would have addressed an earl in this way, particularly if he were seeking patronage from that same earl. As G. Wilson Knight succinctly put it: 'Elizabethan poets did not rise by such methods'.²³ The strength of Hotson's proposal was that a Christmas Prince could, within the conceit of the revels, be regarded as royalty, yet in reality be of a social class low enough that it made him addressable in critical terms that would have been unthinkable if he had actually been royalty or a member of the nobility.

Given that Shakespeare appears to have started writing sonnets to his Young Man shortly after, perhaps even during, the Gray's Inn

²¹ Dympna Callaghan, one of the few editors of *Sonnets* not to entirely dismiss Hotson's idea, notes that his 'case is fanciful and overstated in many regards, but it is one whose merits have at least as much to recommend them as the Southampton and Pembroke theses' (Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Malden, Mass., and Oxford, 2007), 34).

²² Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London, 1992), 156.

²³ Wilson Knight, 9.

Revels of 1594-5, we have to consider that it may have been Henry Helmes who was that young man. This is especially so when we find that in addition to the considerable personal qualities that Helmes must have had – you did not become a Christmas Prince otherwise – as the Prince of Purpoole he presided over revels whose core theme was *male friendship*, linked for the occasion with the friendship between Gray's Inn and the Inner Temple.

When *The Comedy of Errors* was played on the night of 28 December 1594 part of its function was to facilitate a celebration of this friendship between the inns that was to take place a few nights later. The *Gesta Grayorum* account of the night asserts that the players were called in to perform the play at the last moment, when an unspecified 'something to be performed for the Delight of the Beholders' was hastily cancelled, due to a 'disordered Tumult and Crowd upon the Stage'.²⁴ But this supposedly impromptu performance of Shakespeare's play is likely a dramatic fiction, the 'disordered Tumult' being part of a manufactured rift between Gray's Inn and the Inner Temple designed to lead to a pre-programmed reconciliation between the two inns a few nights later.²⁵

This reconciliation took place on 3 January 1595, with a spectacular celebration of male friendship and the bond between Gray's Inn and the Inner Temple. The audience could hardly have been more distinguished: 'there was a most honourable Presence of Great and Noble Personages, that came as invited to our Prince; as namely, the Right Honourable the Lord Keeper, the Earls of *Shrewsbury*,

²⁴ Greg, 22.

²⁵ It is an open question whether *The Comedy of Errors* was actually commissioned for the Gray's Inn Revels of 1594-5, but that the performance of the play was pre-planned is widely, though not universally, held. Those in support include Charles Whitworth (ed.), *The Comedy of Errors* (Oxford, 2003), 4; T. S. Dorsch (ed.), revised by Ros King, *The Comedy of Errors* (Cambridge, 2004), 32-3; Janet Clare, *Shakespeare's Stage Traffic* (Cambridge, 2014), 109-10. Hotson makes the salient point that the Middle Temple Revels of 1597-8 have the same construct as the Gray's Inn Revels, with 'disorder' supposedly disrupting one night of the revels, only for the league between the Middle Temple and Lincoln's Inn to be renewed a few nights later (Hotson, 50-1).

Cumberland, Northumberland, Southampton, and Essex, the Lords Buckhurst, Windsor, Mountjoy, Sheffield, Compton, Rich, Burleygh, Mounteagle, and the Lord Thomas Howard; Sir Thomas Henneage, Sir Robert Cecill; with a great number of Knights, Ladies, and very worshipful Personages'.²⁶

When all these great and noble personages were settled, and Henry Helmes, the Prince of Purpoole, had ascended his throne, the assembled were then presented with a device whereby famous pairs of friends offered incense to the Goddess of Amity:

Then issued forth of another Room the first pair of Friends, which were *Theseus* and *Perithous*; they came in Arm in Arm, and offered Incense upon the Altar to their Goddess, which shined and burned very clear, without Blemish; which being done they departed.

Then likewise came *Achilles* and *Patroclus*; after them, *Pilades* and *Orestes*; then *Scipio* and *Lelius*: And all these did, in all things, as the former, and so departed.²⁷

This parade of famous friends was then followed by the entry of '*Gravius* and *Templarius*'; and they two came lovingly, Arm in Arm, to the Altar, and offered their Incense as the rest'. After some theatre business, the arch-flamen of the Goddess ...

... did pronounce *Grayus* and *Templarius* to be as true and perfect Friends, and so familiarly united and linked with the Bond and League of sincere Friendship and Amity, as ever were *Theseus* and *Perithous*, *Achilles* and *Patroclus*, *Pilades* and *Orestes*, or *Scipio* and *Lelius*; and therewithal did further divine, that this Love should be perpetual. And Lastly, denounced an heavy Curse on them that shall any way go about to break or weaken the same; and an

²⁶ Greg, 25.

²⁷ Greg, 25.

Happiness to them that study and labour to eternize it for ever.²⁸

We have no reason to think that Shakespeare was in the audience to view this elegant display of Friendship and Amity on the night of 3 January 1595, but certainly he would have known of it – the audience of Elizabethan luminaries alone attests to its significance. Moreover, if the performance of *The Comedy of Errors* on the night of 28 December 1594 was indeed ‘programmed from the start’²⁹, then Shakespeare probably knew beforehand of the activities planned for 3 January 1595, having been approached during the planning of the revels to ensure his play was fit and ready for the ‘Night of Errors’ that would subsequently lead to this night of reconciliation between Gray’s Inn and the Inner Temple. If that was the case, then it seems more likely than not that Shakespeare and Henry Helmes would have met to discuss the matter personally, rather than leave the planning to intermediaries. It would have been important for both men that the performance of *The Comedy of Errors* was a success. To Shakespeare and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the performance ‘must have seemed ... almost as prestigious as a Court appearance, in view of the number of high-ranking dignitaries and noblemen in attendance’³⁰, and for Henry Helmes his honour, which depended on the success of the revels, was at stake.

The grand night of 3 January 1595 was not the only night where we find a significant connection between Henry Helmes and one of the major themes of *Sonnets*. On Shrove Tuesday 1595, the revels officially ended with Helmes and seven others presenting Francis Davison’s *The Masque of Proteus* before the Queen at Greenwich. At the end of the performance ‘Pigmies brought eight Escutcheons, with the Maskers Devices thereupon, and delivered them to the Esquire, who offered them to Her Majesty’. Each device presented to the Queen contained an *impresa*, consisting of a motto and a

²⁸ Greg, 25-6.

²⁹ Whitworth, 4.

³⁰ Whitworth, 2.

picture designed together to represent – obscurely, but not too obscurely – a particular conceit of the owner. Henry Helmes’s impresa was as follows:

H.Helmes, *Prince*, {*In the Bark of a Cedar-tree, the Character E engraven.*} *Crescetis*.³¹

We do not need to guess what Henry Helmes’s conceit was, as William Camden tells us in his *Remains Concerning Britain*, where, in a list of examples of imprese, we find the following: ‘His meaning might be perceyved out of the last Eglogue of *Virgil*, containing *Gallus* loving lamentations, which pourtrayed a tree, and in the barke engraved *E*, adding this word, CRESCETIS’.³² Camden coyly does not name the owners of the imprese he describes, but there can be no doubt that he is here referring to Henry Helmes’s impresa, and that the single word ‘crescetis’ points to ‘crescent illæ, crescetis, amores’ (‘They will grow, thou, too, my love, will grow’³³) from Virgil’s Tenth Eclogue. Henry Helmes’s personal motto was about Love’s Growth or the Union of Love.³⁴

Following *The Masque of Proteus*, ‘there was fighting at Barriers; the Earl of *Essex* and others Challengers, and the Earl of *Cumberland* and his Company Defendants; Into which number, our Prince was taken, and behaved himself so valiantly and skilfully therein, that he had the Prize adjudged due unto him, which it pleased Her Majesty to deliver him with her own Hands ... The Prize was, a Jewel, set with seventeen Diamonds, and four Rubies; in value, accounted worth an hundred Marks’. Thus were the Gray’s

³¹ Greg, 66-7.

³² William Camden, *Remaines concerning Britaine, Reviewed, corrected, and encreased* (London, 1614), 225. The ‘E’, of course, stands for ‘Elizabeth’. The cedar-tree was often associated with royalty.

³³ John Manning, *The Emblem* (London, 2004), 170.

³⁴ In Shakespeare’s time, ‘crescent illæ, crescetis, amores’ could be understood as not just referring to engraving and the growth of love, but also to engrafting and the union arising from love. In Otto Vænius’s 1608 Latin-English version of his *Amorum Emblemata*, dedicated to William and Philip Herbert, ‘crescent illæ, crescetis, amores’ is depicted as Cupid grafting a new shoot onto a tree, followed by verse headed ‘Two United’ (Otto Vænius, *Amorum Emblemata* (Antwerp, 1608), 4-5).

Inn Revels of 1594-5 ended, ‘which, although it shined very bright in ours, and others Darkness; yet, at the Royal Presence of Her Majesty, it appeared as an obscured Shadow: In this, not unlike unto the Morning-star, which looketh very chearfully in the World, so long as the Sun looketh not on it: Or, as the great Rivers, that triumph in the Multitude of their Waters, until they come unto the Sea. *Sic vinci, sic mori pulchrum*’.³⁵

With the end of the revels, so ended Henry Helmes’s brief reign as the Prince of Purpoole, his short lease on kingship over. Representative of the great *Sonnets* themes of Friendship and Love, Helmes was also, as a Christmas Prince, a potent symbol of the evanescence of Fame, and a reminder that Time’s constant companion was Mortality. The title page of *Gesta Grayorum* warns us from the start, that - no matter the glory described therein - the ‘High and mighty PRINCE, HENRY’ ... Died, A. D. 1594’.

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The Register of Admissions to Gray’s Inn shows that ‘HENRY HELME, gent., of Rougham (Ruffy), Norfolk (Master of the Revels, Prince of Purpoole)’, was admitted to Gray’s Inn on 17 June 1594.³⁶ Helmes was born c. 1576, so at the time of admission he would have been around 17-18 years old. He was the first son of William Helmes of Rackheath, Norfolk and his wife, Eleanor. Little else is known of his family background, other than that he had succeeded his father by 1597.³⁷

Unlike William Hatcliffe, his predecessor as Prince of Purpoole, Henry Helmes did not fade into obscurity once his reign was ended. In 1596, ‘according to a bill in the Court of Requests signed by [Francis] Bacon and Henry Byng, Helmes went to sea “for the

³⁵ Greg, 68.

³⁶ Joseph Foster, *The Register of Admissions to Gray’s Inn, 1521-1889* (London, 1889), 85.

³⁷ The most complete (though not exhaustive) account of Henry Helmes’s life currently available is his entry on *The History Of Parliament* website: <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/helmes-sir-henry-1576-1627> [accessed 18 August 2018]. Information in this section is taken from this entry unless otherwise indicated.

public service” on the 2nd earl of Essex’s voyage to Cadiz, leaving behind him “divers trunks of apparel, jewels, etc. worth £500 at the least”. Later records show that Helmes maintained relationships with both Bacon and Byng till the end of his life.

Following the Cadiz expedition, we next find Henry Helmes back in England, fighting against Henry Goodere in the 1596 Accession Day (17 November) Tilt at Whitehall, and also participating in the ‘Earl of Essex’s Challenge’ on 19 and 20 November. Bacon assisted in Helmes’s preparation for these major events on the Elizabethan calendar, writing to the Earl of Shrewsbury on 15 November: ‘I was desired by Mr Helmes our late prince to use my favour with your good Lordship to borrow him a horse and armour to show as a prince upon this day of change’.³⁸

By September 1598, Henry Helmes had become a Gentleman Pensioner to the Queen, a prestigious position he retained when James came to power.³⁹ The captain of the pensioners at the time was George Carey, the Second Lord Hunsdon, and patron of Shakespeare’s troupe, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Helmes may well have been chosen as a pensioner on the recommendation of Carey, who as ‘the captain of the band would be in an advantageous position for the exercise of patronage’.⁴⁰ Their association went back to at least 1597, if, as Tighe suggests, ‘Helmes was probably the Captain Helmes whose name appeared on a list of captains then within the realm drawn up in October 1597. The addition of “L. chamberlain” next to his name may indicate that he was associated with the second lord Hunsdon’.⁴¹

³⁸ Marion E. Colthorpe, *Folgerpedia: The Elizabethan Court Day by Day 1596*, 52-3:

https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/mediawiki/media/images/pedia_folgerpedia_mw/c/c4/ECDbD_1596.pdf [accessed 8 August 2018].

³⁹ W. J. Tighe, ‘The Gentlemen Pensioners in Elizabethan Politics and Government’, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Cambridge University, 1983), 390.

⁴⁰ Tighe, 42.

⁴¹ Tighe, 390.

It is also around September 1598 that we find Henry Helmes appearing in surprising literary company. Lewes Lewkenor's translation of *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, by Cardinal Gasparo Contarini⁴², published in 1599, but 'entered in the Stationers' Register in December'⁴³ of 1598, and containing an 'Epistle Dedicatorie' to the Countess of Warwick dated August 1598, was prefaced by four commendatory poems: three sonnets by 'Edw. Spencer.', 'I. Ashley' and 'Maur. Kiffen.' - and an eight-line poem by one 'Henry Elmes'.⁴⁴ Despite the abbreviated spelling, there is no reason to doubt that the authors of the sonnets were Edmund Spenser, John Astley and Maurice Kyffin, nor that 'Henry Elmes' was our Henry Helmes, who appears variously in the records as 'Helmes', 'Holmes' or 'Elmes'.⁴⁵ We do not know when Lewes Lewkenor and Henry Helmes became acquainted, but it must have been before August 1598, the date of the 'Epistle Dedicatorie'. At the least, the two men could have been brought together by becoming gentleman pensioners around the same time. Lewkenor did not enter into ordinary as a Gentleman Pensioner till June 1599,

⁴² Lewes Lewkenor, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (London, 1599).

⁴³ John H. Astington, 'Sir John Astley and court culture', *Shakespeare Studies*, xxx (2002), 106-9.

⁴⁴ The poem by 'Henry Elmes' is undistinguished, but can be read in full in Wayne H. Phelps, 'Sir Henry Helmes, Prince of Purpoole', *N&Q*, xxvii (1980), 136.

⁴⁵ For the identification of Spenser, Astley, and Kyffin, and a discussion of other connections between Spenser and Lewkenor, see Andrew Hadfield, *Edmund Spenser: A Life* (Oxford, 2012), 293-5. For the identification of 'Henry Elmes' as Henry Helmes see Phelps, 136 and Franklin B. Williams, Jr., *Index of Dedications and Commendatory Verses in English Books before 1641* (London, 1962), 92. Helmes appears as 'Sir Henry Elmes' in 'House of Lords Journal Volume 3: 19 April 1621', in *Journal of the House of Lords: Volume 3, 1620-1628* (London, 1767-1830), pp. 78-80: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/lords-jrnl/vol3/pp78-80> [accessed 25 August 2018]. For evidence that Shakespeare knew of Lewkenor's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, see Kenneth Muir, 'Shakespeare and Lewkenor', *RES*, vii (1956), 182-3.

but by 'September 1598 his name began to appear as a substitute on the check rolls'.⁴⁶

Henry Helmes's sudden appearance alongside Edmund Spenser in Lewkenor's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* intersects with the latest scholarly thinking on the dating of Shakespeare's sonnets 78-86, the so-called Rival Poet sonnets. Taylor and Loughnane's 'best guess' dating of these sonnets to 1598-1600 is based on MacDonald Jackson's landmark 2005 article, *Francis Meres and the Cultural Contexts of Shakespeare's Rival Poet Sonnets*, where he put forward a persuasive case that rare-word studies and other indicators suggest that the Rival Poet sonnets were most likely written in the period 1598-1600, and originated 'in a general sense of rivalry fuelled by Francis Meres's glib inventory of England's top poets and playwrights' in his *Palladis Tamia*, published in late 1598.⁴⁷ Jackson mainly argues for the presence of Marlowe and Chapman in a composite Rival Poet figure, but he also acknowledges the possibility that other poets, especially Spenser, may be present in that figure:

In listing England's 'best' writers in the lyric mode, Meres began with Edmund Spenser, who 'excelleth in all kinds' of poetry (p. 283a). In 1599 Spenser died. His monument would eventually describe him as 'The Prince of Poets in his Time'. Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, and others lauded by Meres may have contributed to Shakespeare's picture of the Rival Poet and Poets.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Tighe, 157 and 404. Helmes and Lewkenor later appear as consecutive entries in a list of the Gentlemen Pensioners for the Michaelmas quarter 1600: J. L. Nevins, 'Portraits of Gentlemen Pensioners Before 1625', *The Volume of the Walpole Society*, xxxiv (1952-1954), 13.

⁴⁷ MacD. P. Jackson, 'Francis Meres and the Cultural Contexts of Shakespeare's Rival Poet Sonnets', *RES*, lvi (2005), 224-46.

⁴⁸ Jackson, *Francis*, 244. For the significance of Spenser's death in January 1599, see James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599* (New York, 2005), 69-70.

Spenser, Daniel, Drayton and Shakespeare himself are, in fact, the dominant living poets in *Palladis Tamia*. The quadrumvirate of ‘Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, Shakespeare’ appears a number of times in Meres’s ‘Comparative Discourse’, most notably in his lists of ‘the best Lyrick Poets’, and ‘the most passionate among us to bewaile and bemoane the perplexities of Love’ – lists from which Marlowe and Chapman are conspicuously absent. ‘Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, Shakespeare’ is also the same grouping and order of poets praised in Richard Barnfield’s *A Remembrance Of Some English Poets*, published in 1598, the same year as *Palladis Tamia*.⁴⁹ Shakespeare could hardly have failed to notice that when he was included in this group by both Meres and Barnfield he was always listed last, and Spenser – dubbed the ‘King of Poets’ by Barnfield – was always listed first. If *Palladis Tamia* helped to engender ‘a general sense of rivalry’ in Shakespeare that is reflected in the composite Rival Poet figure, it seems unlikely that Spenser wouldn’t have been at least some part of that figure.

Henry Helmes’s appearance in print in 1599 did not end with Lewkenor’s *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*. In that same year, John Minsheu’s *A Spanish Grammar* was published, with Helmes one of the ‘Right Worshipfull Gentlemen Stvdenets of Grayes Inne’ to whom the book is dedicated: ‘*I may not forget ... Master Helmes and Master Gill both for their good parts better knowne then I can heere set downe*’.⁵⁰ If Helmes was the Young Man of *Sonnets*, his presence as a commendatory poet and dedicatee of Lewkenor’s and Minsheu’s books in 1599 might help to explain why, in the Rival Poet subsequence, while Shakespeare allows that the young man may ‘ore-looke | The dedicated words which writers

⁴⁹ Richard Barnfield, ‘A Remembrance Of Some English Poets’ in his *Poems: In Divers Humors* (London, 1598). Meres refers to Barnfield in the ‘Comparative Discourse’ as ‘my friend master Richard Barnefielde’.

⁵⁰ John Minsheu, *A Spanish Grammar* (London, 1599). Henry Helmes seems to have maintained a long term interest in Minsheu’s work; he is listed as a subscriber to the latter’s 1617 *Ductor in linguas, The Guide into Tongues* in John Minsheu, *A Catalogue and True Note of the Names of such Persons which ... haue Receaued the Etymologicall DICTIONARIE of XI. Languages etc.* (London, 1617).

vse | Of their faire subiect, blessing euery booke' (82), he also complains that because he has invoked the young man so often for his Muse 'euery *Alien* pen' has done the same (78).⁵¹ Both *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* and *A Spanish Grammar* are works involving translations from foreign languages, and, as Katherine Duncan-Jones has noted, the italicized and capitalized word 'Alien' might suggest 'a pen employed, learnedly, in translating alien, i.e. non-English, writings'⁵².

On the accession of James I, Helmes was knighted at Whitehall on 23 July 1603. On 16 July 1607, we find the now Sir Henry Helmes in the audience at Merchant Taylors' Hall for an entertainment before the king.⁵³ In 1609, Helmes headed a consort applying for land in the Ulster Plantation, but did not himself become an undertaker.⁵⁴ In 1610, Helmes entered parliament, elected for St. Albans on the recommendation of Francis Bacon. He served in this capacity till 1614, though without any parliamentary contribution of note.⁵⁵ Following the end of his parliamentary career, Helmes appears to have spent much of the remainder of his life working with Bacon, helping among other things to facilitate some of the dubious financial activities that eventually led to Bacon's downfall as Lord Chancellor.

Henry Helmes died on 15 February 1627, and was buried at St. Dunstan-in-the-West. He was survived by his wife Anna Helmes and his only daughter and heir Elizabeth 'then aged 14 years and

⁵¹ Quotations from *Sonnets* in this article are from the 1609 Quarto, commonly referred to as 'Q'.

⁵² Duncan-Jones, 266.

⁵³ 'Memorial XXXII: The Banquet given to James I, 1607', in Memorials of the Guild of Merchant Taylors of the Fraternity of St. John the Baptist in the City of London, ed. C M Clode (London, 1875), pp. 147-181. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/taylors-guild-london/pp147-181> [accessed 25 August 2018].

⁵⁴ Rev. George Hill, An Historical Account of the Plantation in Ulster at the Commencement of the Seventeenth Century, 1608-1620 (Belfast, 1877), 148 & 271.

⁵⁵ *The History Of Parliament* website: <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/constituencies/st-albans> [accessed 25 August 2018].

more'.⁵⁶ In his will, Helmes instructed 'that his daughter was to be ruled in her choice of a husband by [Henry] Byng, to whom he left £200'.

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The survey of Henry Helmes's life in the previous section shows that what we know of it is certainly not inconsistent with him being the special young man addressed in many of Shakespeare's sonnets. In the years following his reign as the Prince of Purpoole, Helmes continued to move in high circles, rose to the position of Gentleman Pensioner, was knighted under James I, and eventually became a member of parliament. In addition, significant events in his life match the period of 1598-1600, when Shakespeare appears to have felt unease at a range of threats to his relationship with the young man that is reflected in the figure of the Rival Poet.

But what of that other major figure in *Sonnets*, the Dark Lady? For that we need to go back to where it all started for Henry Helmes - the Gray's Inn Revels of 1594-5. On 20 December 1594, the first grand night of the revels, Helmes was crowned as the Prince of Purpoole. As part of the ceremony, he was presented with a mock list of '*some special Persons there are, charged by their Tenures, to do special Service at this your glorious Inthronization*'.⁵⁷ One of these 'special persons' was described as follows:

*Lucy Negro, Abbess de Clerkenwell, holdeth the Nunnery of Clerkenwell, with the Lands and Privileges thereunto belonging, of the Prince of Purpoole by Night-Service in Cauda, and to find a Choir of Nuns, with burning Lamps, to chaunt Placebo to the Gentlemen of the Prince's Privy-Chamber, on the Day of His Excellency's Coronation.*⁵⁸

⁵⁶ W. P. W. Phillimore and George S. Fry (eds.), Gloucestershire Inquisitiones Post Mortem, Part I (London, 1893), 51.

⁵⁷ Greg, 11.

⁵⁸ Greg, 12.

In his 2012 book, *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans: Prostitution, Literature, and Drama, 1500-1650*, Duncan Salkeld demonstrated that this 'Lucy Negro' who did 'special Service' for Henry Helmes was a reference to a notorious Clerkenwell prostitute and brothel keeper known as 'Black Luce' (real name Luce Baynham), and proposed that she may have been Shakespeare's Dark Lady:

[While] it ought perhaps to be pointed out from the start that none of the details here set forth establish Lucy Negro as the 'dark lady' of the sonnets ... The evidence does, however, have implications worth considering; it seems certain that she and Shakespeare knew of each other, either directly or indirectly; it is highly likely that they were in the same hall at Gray's Inn on the night of 28 December 1594 [when *The Comedy of Errors* was played]; and it seems, furthermore, that Shakespeare tailored his writing to acknowledge her presence on that occasion. There is of course an element of doubt in these last two surmises, but what we can conclude with some confidence is that Shakespeare's sonnets speak of a woman with exactly her blend of notoriety.⁵⁹

Salkeld is suitably cautious about his proposal, but taken in its entirety his argument is a strong one, and, if correct, we thus find that the final member of the three major figures in *Sonnets*, the Dark Lady, can be closely connected with Henry Helmes. This does not mean, however, that we should see the character of Lucy Negro as being behind *all* of sonnets 127-52. Those poems likely refer to more than one woman⁶⁰, and we know from the stylometric evidence that the majority were probably written before the Gray's Inn Revels of 1594-5.

⁵⁹ Duncan Salkeld, *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans: Prostitution, Literature, and Drama, 1500-1650* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), Chapter 6: 'Shakespeares, the Clerkenwell Madam and Rose Flower', 119-150. That 'Lucy Negro' and the Dark Lady may have been one and the same was originally proposed by G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare At Work 1592 – 1603* (London, 1933), 310.

⁶⁰ See e.g. Burrow, 131: the figure of the Dark Lady is 'a complicated poetic creation ... [whose] role is slightly different in each poem, and there is no particular reason to think of her as one person'.

If Lucy Negro is alluded to in sonnets 127-52 she will be a late-composed part of that subsequence that corresponds to what Katherine Duncan-Jones describes as ‘elaborate mockery of a woman who is no more than a sexual convenience’⁶¹, a ‘manifestly non-aristocratic woman who is neither young, beautiful, intelligent nor chaste, but ... provides a perfectly adequate outlet for male desire’⁶². A woman, in other words, who sounds very much like a prostitute.⁶³ While Shakespeare may well have had some real-life experiences with this disreputable woman, if she was Lucy Negro from the revels we are not required to posit any. As Finkelpearl notes: “‘Law-sports’ at the Inns always contained jokes about sex ... The convention was to assume a society of merry devils whose main occupation was frequenting the stew’s’.⁶⁴ It would have been entirely within the spirit of the revels for Shakespeare to write a handful of sonnets to a Clerkenwell brothel madam simply to entertain Henry Helmes and other ‘merry devils’ of Gray’s Inn.

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This article does not claim that the Gray’s Inn Revels of 1594-5, and their Prince of Purpoole, Henry Helmes, were the undoubted inspiration for Shakespeare’s 1609 *Sonnets*. It does, however, propose that there is enough evidence consistent with that possibility to warrant further investigation.

When Lynne Magnusson, on behalf of the Norton Shakespeare, took the major step of accepting Donald Foster’s suggestion that Thomas Thorpe’s ‘Mr. W. H.’ was a misprint for ‘Mr. W. S.’, she believed it had significant implications for the different ways in which we might subsequently see *Sonnets*:

Even though the careful argumentation of Foster’s article evidently convinced many leading scholars, there has been

⁶¹ Duncan-Jones, 50.

⁶² Duncan-Jones, 47.

⁶³ Duncan-Jones herself does not draw this conclusion.

⁶⁴ Philip J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple* (Cambridge: Massachusetts, 1969), 42.

scant discussion following from it about how these identifications might reorient questions or reading practices either for Thorpe's epigraph or for *Shakespeare's Sonnets* as a whole. This is critically important, since unexamined background assumptions about this paratext, especially when imagined as a patron dedication to the Earl of Pembroke or the Earl of Southampton, tend to orient interpretation of the sonnets along certain set lines, even when Thorpe's epigraph is not explicitly referred to. It seems clear that we have absorbed Foster's misprint perspective as one viable view, but we have not truly re-read the poems in light of his argument to understand how it frees up possibilities for fresh interpretation.⁶⁵

A century or so of extraordinary scholarly effort has largely led to an impasse in debate about whether the Earl of Pembroke or the Earl of Southampton was the young man addressed in many of Shakespeare's sonnets – an impasse which may have arisen simply because neither of those earls *was* that young man. But if Magnusson is right, we are no longer bound by the initials 'W. H.' or assumptions 'imagined as a patron dedication' to one of those earls, and there is now the opportunity to re-read Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in a different light and 'understand how it frees up possibilities for fresh interpretation'.

This article is offered as one possibility for fresh interpretation of these remarkable poems.

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⁶⁵ Magnusson, 'Thomas Thorpe's Shakespeare: "The Only Begetter"', 35.