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“Who is't can read a woman?” Politic lock-picking and Shakespeare's sonnet 94

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They that haue power to hurt, and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces,
And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others, but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lillies that fester smell far worse than weeds.¹

1. Sonnet 94 has seemed to many commentators something of a square peg in a round hole between sonnets 93 and 95. As a result, it has often been hoisted out of its place in the sequence and subjected to 'close readings', especially in the heyday of New Criticism. In his 1986 edition of the poems, John Kerrigan took arms against "this general reluctance to read the poem in context" redressing the balance by showing numerous points of contact – thematic, lexical, syntactical – between 94 and its next-door neighbours. He was nevertheless compelled to acknowledge its uniqueness:

I am very grateful to Maria Rosa Gamurrini and Lorella Pianaccioli for helping me to lay hands on essential bibliography for this essay.

¹ All quotations from Shakespeare's Sonnets are from Duncan-Jones, ed., 1997; those from his plays are from Wells and Taylor, eds, 1988.

For the first and almost the last time in the sequence, Shakespeare writes impersonally, neither addressing the friend nor describing him explicitly as *he*, and scrupulously avoiding *I* and *me* and *my*. (Kerrigan, ed., 1986:290)

It was Kerrigan's conviction that the ordering of the sonnets is Shakespeare's own that led him to insist on contextualising sonnet 94 in the sequence². At the same time he revealed something of the strain of interpretation involved, a strain that can be detected in various other commentators who have taken a similar stand (cf. Dover Wilson, ed., 1969:200; Serpieri, ed., 1991:628; Duncan-Jones, ed., 1997:300; Vendler 1997:403).

On the other side, the most outspoken case for extracting this sonnet from its niche in the sequence was put forward in 1976 by Giorgio Melchiori in *Shakespeare's Dramatic Meditations*:

Sonnet 94 [...] is a soliloquy in so far as it has to *get away* from the *private* context of the surrounding poems, and to debate, before the sessions of the poet's silent thought, matters of general concern. (Melchiori 1976:68)

Like 121 and 129, it has the "extraordinary distinction of *not* mentioning love *and* not using any second person pronominal forms" (*ibid.*:37). He argues that it is preposterous "to assume, as nearly all critics do, [...] that the single flower in the sestet of Sonnet 94 is *tout court* the boy – and to interpret the Sonnet merely in that key" (*ibid.*:63). Melchiori goes on to place the sonnet squarely in the political context of plays like *Richard II* and *Edward III*, with which it shares, among other things, the vocabulary and imagery of corrupt power, reprehensible delegation and favouritism. In what follows I will first offer some fresh arguments in support of a politically-conscious reading of the sonnet and then try to show that this need not prevent us from slotting sonnet 94 back into the fair youth sequence as a whole.

Positions like Melchiori's are reinforced if, for the sake of hypothesis, we imagine how the sequence might have looked without 94:

93
So shall I live, supposing thou art true,
Like a deceived husband; so love's face
May still seem love to me, though altered new,
Thy looks with me, thy heart in other place;
For there can live no hatred in thine eye,
Therefore in that I cannot know thy change.
In many's looks, the false heart's history

² Duncan-Jones (ed., 1997:16) argues that Shakespeare authorized the 1609 quarto of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, revising and re-ordering poems written over a fairly long period. Not all commentators share her confidence that the volume had his imprimatur.

Is writ in moods and frowns and wrinkles strange;
But heaven in thy creation did decree
That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell;
Whate’er thy thoughts or thy heart’s workings be,
Thy looks should nothing thence but sweetness tell.
How like Eve’s apple doth thy beauty grow,
If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show.

95

How sweet and lovely dost thou make the shame
Which like a canker in the fragrant rose
Doth spot the beauty of thy budding name:
O in what sweets dost thou thy sins enclose!
That tongue that tells the story of thy days,
Making lascivious comments on thy sport,
Cannot dispraise; but in a kind of praise,
Naming thy name, blesses an ill report.
O what a mansion have those vices got,
Which for their habitation chose out thee,
Where beauty’s veil doth cover every blot,
And all things turns to fair that eyes can see!
Take heed, dear heart, of this large privilege;
The hardest knife ill used doth lose his edge.

Would commentators have felt a jolt between these two sonnets? The mode of address to the young man is identical; the theme of beauty masking inner corruption develops quite logically from one to the other. The corrupting fruit of the former leads smoothly into corrupted flower of the latter. There is a crescendo of recrimination in 95 as it zooms in from the beautiful *mansion* to the *vices* dwelling there (line 9). Nothing in 95 is rendered obscure by the omission of 94. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the *faces* of the octave of 94 may easily be linked to *love’s face* as a concealing mask in 93, or that the sestet of 94 contains sick flower imagery analogous to that which appears in 95. Nor can we overlook the amount of significant vocabulary that 94 shares with 93: *husband, show, deeds, sweet, heaven* – and the list would get longer if we included near-synonyms. Thus it would be rash to rule out the possibility that it *was* written for this place in the sequence and deliberately echoed the previous sonnet. Interestingly, however, there are more lexical reprises between 93 and 95 than between 94 and 95. The latter two share only *sweet* among their key words, whereas in 95 *lovely* and *heart* pick up the thrice-used *love(s)* and *heart(s)* of 93, and the two poems also share *eye(s)* and *beauty*. They thus have in common with each other, but not with 94, a cluster of words unequivocally related to the theme of the young man’s beauty. Duncan-Jones (ed., 1997:298) sees beauty as linking all *three* poems: “the speaker [in 94] develops the idea that the gift of beauty carries with it an obligation to be-

have virtuously”. But it is by no means obvious that those who have power to hurt have it because of their beauty as she claims. Kerrigan partly avoids this shoal by adopting the friend’s inscrutability as his thematic link. Serpieri similarly locates the cohesion of the three in the seeming/being dichotomy. Even so, the link between 94 and the other two seems to be rather tenuous. Eve’s enticing apple in 93 is an image of the inner corruption of the young man as he betrays the poet-as-deceived-husband of line 2; the word *sins* in 95 (line 4) seems to hark back to Eve’s first disobedience. The canker in the rose of 95 is an image of the same inner corruption that breeds the fair youth’s conjectured infidelity in 93. The *base infection* of the flower in 94, on the other hand, is intransitive, devouring the flower itself; it does not appear to stand for or arise from the young man’s betrayal of the poet, to which no reference is made. Rather, it seems to develop from the octave’s focus on the moral status and obligations of the mighty in general. They are slow to temptation but not immune to it, hence they may well be corrupted by those *others* delegated to *hurt* on their behalf. At the thematic level at least, sonnet 94 will not stir smoothly into the surrounding micro-sequence. Whatever its relevance to the fair youth, it is resonant with the broader political issues that inform such topically allusive sonnets as 107, 123-5. There, in fact, the young man is depicted against a backdrop of mutability in the state. Hence when weeds and flowers reappear in sonnet 124, it is to image those subject to the whirligig of politics and not, or not simply, the beauty of a young man exposed to vice. And when the idea of external appearance resurfaces in 125, it is associated with the courtly genuflections of *dwellers on form and favour* (125: line 5). It seems reasonable, then, to enquire further into the latent political implications of sonnet 94 at the time. What I shall try to show is that the rhetorical mode of the sonnet invites not only a general reflection on governance but also a topical reading of the contemporary scene – what in Elizabeth’s day was sometimes dubbed “politic lock-picking”. I will also suggest, at the end of this essay, that there is room even for this topical dimension within the interlocutory drama acted out between the poet and the young man.

2. David Bevington (1968:9) has observed that “allegorical lock-picking was a courtly pastime amounting to a disease”. It was also a useful survival aid among the Elizabethan intelligentsia in general. Ben Jonson bitterly denounced “invading interpreters [...] who cunningly and often utter their own virulent malice under other men’s simplest meanings” in the Epistle prefixed to *Volpone* (Campbell, ed., 1998:4), and pilloried what he called the “state-decipherer, or politic picklock of the scene” in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair* (*ibid.*:333). But writers and especially playwrights, as Paul Yachnin points

out (1991:57), “seem to have promoted ‘invading interpretation’ as a way of transferring the production of potentially offensive topical meaning from their own texts to the ‘malicious’ imaginings of their audiences”. Lock-picking, in fact, goes hand in hand with the multiple encoding indulged in by the protesting writers themselves, including those of sonnet sequences. Veiled topicality and interpretative ‘application’ are typical of what Annabel Patterson has called “the hermeneutics of censorship” under Elizabeth’s nervously authoritarian regime. In that period “there was clearly and widely understood a theory of *functional* ambiguity, in which the indeterminacy inveterate to language was fully and knowingly exploited by authors and readers alike” (Patterson 1984: 18). In sonnet 28 of *Astrophil and Stella*, a major influence on Shakespeare’s own collection, we find Sidney, an adept at political innuendo now out of favour with the Queen, disingenuously protesting:

You that with allegory’s curious frame
Of others’ children changelings use to make,
With me those pains, for God’s sake, do not take;
I list not dig so deep for brazen fame.
When I say ‘Stella’, I do mean the same
Princess of beauty, for whose only sake
The reins of love I love, though never slake,
And joy therein, though nations count it shame.
I beg no subject to use eloquence,
Nor in hid ways to guide philosophy.
Look at my hands for no such quintessence,
But know that I, in pure simplicity,
Breathe out the flames which burn within my heart,
Love only reading unto me this art. (Duncan-Jones ed., 1994:51-2)

Simultaneously discouraging and instigating allegorical reading, Sidney knew he could build upon his coterie readership’s zest for political lock-picking. Behind Stella they might, if they wished, find not only Penelope Rich née Devereux, but also Elizabeth. It is worth remembering here that Puttenham, in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), glossed *allegoria* as “the Courtier or figure of fair semblant” since it is “requisite our courtly Poet do dissemble not only his countenances and conceits, but also all his ordinary actions of behaviour, or the most part of them, whereby the better to win his purposes and good advantages” (quoted in Hyland 2003:48). Ten or fifteen years after Sidney’s, Shakespeare’s sonnets are likely to have been read in manuscript (or listened to) by at least a few of the heirs of the Leicester-Pembroke-Sidney connection, namely by members of the Essex milieu. The two strongest candidates for the role of the fair youth himself, in fact, are Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, Essex’s brother-in-arms, and Sidney’s nephew, William Herbert,

Third Earl of Pembroke. And regardless of whether or not the sonnets were actually addressed to him, the fact that Southampton was the dedicatee of both *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) attests to Shakespeare's early patronage relationship with a leading figure in that milieu. Since Shakespeare could thus plausibly expect some members of the Essex circle to be among the readers of his sonnets – if not in manuscript then eventually in print³ – it may be instructive to conjecture how they (or, of course, their enemies) might apply their lock-picking skills to sonnet 94. I will thus be attempting to recover a historically-probable type of reading, one based on the assumption that, in addition to the author's intentions embodied in a work, the intentions of a defined set of potential individual readers of the time are also constitutive of a work's hermeneutic meaning⁴.

Type out the octave as prose, and it reads very much like the kind of opening sentence we find in Francis Bacon's 1597 edition of the *Essays*: elaborately symmetrical, aphoristic, cryptic and ambiguous. And like many of Bacon's beginnings in that volume it is followed in the sestet by a swerve of sense that demands a special effort of interpretation if it is to be brought into focus. The sonnet seems to invite just the kind of reading that Bacon's politically-disillusioned collection does. Here is how F. J. Levy describes the essayist's rhetorical style in the first edition of his work:

Here was no place for the method of axiom and deduction, which promised a certainty belied by the intractable materials of politics. Instead, the broken method of aphorism would be the more fruitful way. Here, by the artful juxtaposition of words, of maxims, of paragraphs, even of essays, the author could encourage his reader to construct his own provisional manual of politics. [...] the aphoristic method was inherently ambiguous, as indeed it had to be if Bacon were not to seize the initiative from his reader. (Levy 1987:161)

As Levy points out, the Essex circle

came gradually to mistrust the open and flowing Ciceronian style, redolent of the Roman republic, with its overtones of civic humanism, and to replace it with a sharper and more secretive style, abrupt and appropriate to tyranny, that of Seneca and Tacitus. (*ibid.*:151)

³ In the fair youth sonnets only (1-126), Sasha Roberts (2003:172) has found repeated allusions to the material acts of transmitting verse in manuscript. Dennis Kay (1998:108) suggests that the 1609 title *Shake-speares Sonnets: Neuer before Imprinted* "implies they have had a prior manuscript existence" within the "circle of the poet's closest acquaintances".

⁴ My approach draws on Bevir (1999:54) who advocates "a weak intentionalism that equates hermeneutic meanings with the meanings utterances have for particular individuals, whether they be authors or readers".

The fact that sonnet 94 has attracted so much critical interpretation tends to confirm that it constructs an active, inquisitive kind of model reader. Dennis Kay (1998:139) argues that the polysemy of its language “seems to anticipate, indeed to rely upon, publication, whether by circulation or printing”. Its evasive generalisations requires the rather green fair youth to take a seat alongside a more politically-seasoned group of addressees capable of appreciating the Baconian ironies of the proposition that “They that have power to hurt” by “moving others” are the ones who “rightly do inherit heaven’s graces”⁵. The Machiavelian motif of the delegation of dirty work by the powerful to serviceable underlings has far more relevance to the domain of the Prince than to that of the youthful heir of a noble family. Who more than renaissance princes count on willing *stewards* to keep their *excellence* spotless? And who more than they *inherit heaven’s graces*? Once our lock-picking readers begin to look aloft, a well-known planet is likely to swim into their ken, that *mortal moon*, Elizabeth herself, in the closing years of her reign⁶. Can we imagine a Shakespeare so naïve as not to foresee the possibility of some such localising reading-process?⁷

Once we recognise the facility with which a generalised ‘type’ of power can summon up its local ‘token’, a cluster of phrases and concepts take on a new colouring, as well as suggesting a possible dating for the sonnet. For instance, who more aptly than Elizabeth could be said to inherit *heaven’s graces* (by divine appointment and priestly anointment) while making a cult of husbanding her *nature’s* riches (virginity) from expense (lines 5-6)? And who more literally could be called a lord and *owner* of her face (line 7), given that in 1596 her Council ordered the suppression of all “likenesses of the Queen that depicted her as being in any way old” (Strong, 1987:147) and decreed that the standard Mask of Youth face-pattern be adopted for all portraits? Before proceeding with my other exhibits, it is worth comparing the wording of “lords and owners of their faces” with the line in *Edward III* from which it derives (cf. Melchiori 1976:44-5)⁸, since the rewording suggests that Shakespeare was consciously accommodating his readers’ penchant for lock-picking. Like the

⁵ The first quatrain is an ironical variation on a phrase from Sidney’s *Arcadia* II 15: “but the more power he hath to hurt, the more admirable is his praise, that he will not hurt” (Evans, ed., 1987:316).

⁶ Melchiori (1976:53) stops short of acknowledging a specific allusion to Elizabeth, though he clearly associates this sonnet with her reign “at a time in which the ruler – Queen Elizabeth – was going to die without direct descendants”.

⁷ Cf. David Weiser (1987:100) on this sonnet: “It avoids identifying and addressing people too powerful to be criticized, although it drops some tantalizing hints. An informed readership would enjoy being riddled, while the poet could not be accused of slandering anyone.”

⁸ *Edward III* was printed in 1596, with a second edition in 1599; it may have been written as early as 1591 (Duncan-Jones, ed., 1997:17).

last line of the sonnet (“Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds”), this phrase is borrowed from (the probably Shakespearean) Act 2 Scene 1 of the play. But unlike the former it is significantly retouched. In the original it reads: “The Lord and master of thy word and othe”. As Melchiori points out (*ibid.*: 46), those that have power in the sonnet are no longer *lords and masters* of their integrity (as Edward held Warwick to be in this episode of the play) but merely of their appearances, their faces. But why did Shakespeare bother to change *masters* into the metrically identical *owners*? One answer might be that the noun *owners* makes room for female as well as male proprietors and thus opens the way for its ‘application’ to the Queen’s ownership of the ‘copyright’ on her painted face. For Shakespeare to have gone further and used *mistresses*, on the other hand, would not only have created a clash with *lords* and caused metrical problems; it would have torn away the veil of generalisation that enables the poet to speak.

The garden imagery of the sestet permits Shakespeare to shift his focus to the source of the contagion threatening the powerful:

But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outraves his dignity: (lines 11-12)

Corruption is presented not simply as coming from *outside* the person in power, who may *meet* infection, but, emphatically (via the repetition of *base*, *basest*) from *below*. Since there is no particular reason why the powerful shouldn’t become corrupt under their own steam, it is worth inspecting this emphasis for further topical implications. Commentators have noticed various analogies linking the sestet to *Richard II*, Act 3, Scene 4. In the famous gardeners’ scene, we are told that England, “our sea-walled garden, the whole land, / Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up” and that

He that hath suffered this disordered spring
Hath now himself met with the fall of leaf.
The weeds which his broad spreading leaves did shelter,
That seemed in eating him to hold him up,
Are plucked up, root and all, by Bolingbroke –
I mean the Earl of Wiltshire, Bushy, Green. (III.4.44-5; 49-54)

Weeds, then, conjure up parasitical favourites preferred by the ruler over the upper aristocracy: “Base men by his endowments are made great” (II.3.138). As Melchiori notes, other key motifs in the sonnet recur insistently in *Richard II*: the concept of stewardship; “the contrast between outward appearance, or ‘office’ and the real ‘person’”, driven home by the “obsessive repetition throughout the play of *face*, *outface* etc.[...]”. Moreover

there is no other play in the canon where the words *base* and *sour* (in constant opposition with *sweet*) are repeated so many times, reproducing [...] the iconic antinomies of the sestet of Sonnet 94, supported by the frequent recurrence, in *Richard II*, of such terms as *flower*, *summer* [...] and by the presence of the infection-fester-corruption word-cluster.

The sonnet could be taken as the imaginative core of a much wider dramatic structure centring on Richard, the passive leader, a projection into English history of the responsibilities of 'They that have power', and the debate on the implications of the exercise of power. (Melchiori 1976:67-8)

It is well known that the Earl of Essex commissioned a performance of *Richard II* for his faction on the eve of the 8th February 1601 uprising. For them, the Queen had by now become another Richard, hemmed in and corrupted by 'favourites'. Clearly Essex saw himself as a Bolingbroke redivivus, the much-needed weeder of Elizabeth's unruly garden. And there can be no doubt about whom he saw as the smothering weeds, namely the anti-Essex coalition led by Robert Cecil. Cecil only received his knighthood in 1591 but this did not prevent his father Burghley from getting Elizabeth to appoint him Privy Councillor in the same year⁹. The Earl of Essex, on the other hand, though England's outstanding military aristocrat, had to wait till 1593 for appointment to the Council. Nor was this all Essex had to endure. As Haigh points out, "in 1596 Burghley had Robert Cecil made Secretary while Essex was away sacking Cadiz; and in 1597 Cecil also gained the chancellorship of the Duchy of Lancaster while Essex was on the Azores expedition" (Haigh 1988:89). During the mid-1590s, moreover, Robert Cecil had acquired a control over access to the Queen – and hence a stranglehold on patronage – "not previously achieved by any other councillor" (Adams 1991:68).

It is from about the end of 1595 that tension between Essex and the Queen began to escalate. Having thrown his military prowess, his finances, and his capital of honour-affiliations behind the confrontation with Spain, he was deeply frustrated by the Queen's withdrawal of support from Henri IV of France once the Spaniards had been ousted from their foothold on the shores opposite England. He was equally galled by her refusal to allow him to follow up the assault on Cadiz with a military occupation of the port. As Paul Hammer notes, "Essex's broader concern was that, by pulling back from France, Elizabeth might be withdrawing England into an increasingly passive role in the war against Spain" (Hammer 1999:246). Elizabeth was becoming for Essex the epitome of inaction, not yet using her power to hurt, perhaps, but certainly not using her power do what he and Bacon would have considered good (see p. 18 below)¹⁰.

⁹ In 1591 Spenser used a similar garden analogy when attacking Cecil's father, Burghley in "The Ruins of Time" as one "that first was raised for virtuous parts, / And now broad spreading like an aged tree, / Lets none shoot up, that nigh him planted be" (quoted in Guy 1990:439).

¹⁰ As early as 1587 we find Walsingham complaining to Burghley that 'she hathe no

The Earl's familiarity with *Richard II* probably dated from as early as 1595, when it was on stage. He reportedly saw the play often and applauded it warmly (Gurr, ed., 1984:7). He and his circle would have been able to read it in print from 1597 onward. If, as seems likely on the basis of the analogies listed above, sonnet 94 was written within a few years of *Richard II*, then it will not be difficult to imagine its lock-picking readers completing the picture by associating the sonnet's *basest weeds* with Robert Cecil and his allies. And at that point, would it be possible for them not to associate the festering *lily* with the ageing Queen? As an emblem of chastity associated with the Virgin Mary, the lily was easily associated with Elizabeth. It figures as a motif on her robes in a number of paintings, most prominently the 'Hardwick' portrait dated around 1599 (Strong 1987:151). Interestingly, four years after the publication of the sonnets, it is as a "a virgin, / A most unspotted lily" that she is celebrated at the end of Cranmer's prophecy in *Henry VIII* (V.4.60-1) in a scene usually ascribed to Shakespeare's co-author in this play, John Fletcher.

Putting the pieces together, then, our lock-picking readers might construe the sonnet roughly as follows:

We may perhaps concede that a ruler like our ageing, prevaricating Queen does well to let others (*stewards of [her] excellence*) act on her behalf and to refrain from action (*unmoved, cold*) as well as temptation, prodigality and reproduction (*husband nature's riches from expense*). Though her inertia may be selfishly motivated, as a symbolic embodiment of the harmonious order of the garden-state she may still be beneficial ("The summer's flower is to the summer sweet, / Though to itself it only live and die"). But when she delegates her decisions to corrupt, upstart ministers, they *outrave* her, and she loses even her aesthetic function since the corruption of her overgrown *weeds* reflects back upon her, polluting the very symbol of the state.

A dozen poems further on in the 1609 quarto, in the most manifestly topical and datable of the sonnets (107), not long after the accession of James I in 1603 we find the poet cryptically celebrating the release of the fair youth from imprisonment:

Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come,
Can yet the lease of my true love control,
Supposed as forfeit to a confined doom.
The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
Uncertainties now crown themselves assured,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
Now with the drops of this most balmy time

power to doe things in season' (quoted in Hammer 1999:329, n. 60).

My love looks fresh, and death to me subscribes,
Since 'spite of him I'll live in this poor rhyme,
While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes;
And thou in this shalt find thy monument,
When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.

Commentators nowadays agree that the *eclipse* of the *mortal moon* alludes to the death of Elizabeth, for whom, as Henry Chettle complained in 1603, Shakespeare signally failed to write an elegy (Duncan-Jones, ed., 1997:24; Honan 1999:297). The *uncertainties* that *now crown themselves assured* clearly hint at the peaceful succession and coronation of James, who arrived with an ambitious project for European pacification. The release of the object of the poet's *true love* at this *balmy time* strongly suggests that he was one of the supporters of the Essex rebellion freed by the new king on his accession. Since James ordered Southampton's release within a fortnight of being proclaimed king (24th March 1603) it is hard not to identify the young man with Essex's chief supporter¹¹. If this is the case, we have further – and later – evidence of the poet's contiguity with the Essex milieu, which would buttress the case for Shakespeare's earlier awareness of the possibility of 'Essexian' readings of sonnet 94.

At this point we might hazard a more specific date for the writing of sonnet 94, one which will help to throw light on why *they that have power to hurt* are depicted as not only *unmoved* and *cold*, but also *to temptation slow*. I have previously suggested that the sonnet belongs to the years following *Richard II*. If Essex and the Queen were in Shakespeare's mind, it seems unthinkable that he would have written it in this form after the failed coup in 1601: the poem presents the power to hurt as an impending menace rather than as power definitively exerted. But from about 1596 on, as Essex fell out of favour and found himself vastly outnumbered by the Cecil faction in Council and Court (Adams 1984:68), for the Queen to have been personally slow to the temptation of punishing or humiliating him would clearly have had its advantages. Unfortunately for the headstrong Earl, the Queen did not resist such a temptation often or long enough. These are years of continual rebuffs, culminating in Elizabeth's refusal to renew his monopoly for the importation of Spanish wine, which left him destitute and drove him to his desperate coup.

In conclusion, then, it seems likely that Shakespeare wrote his sonnets on the assumption that they would be listened to or read in manuscript and/or in print by some members of the Essex circle, and hence that those poems dealing with general ethical-political themes might well be subjected to

¹¹ Duncan-Jones (ed., 1997:22) believes that Pembroke was the young man and tries rather unconvincingly to dissociate sonnet 107 from the release of Southampton.

a topical reading. He must have been perfectly aware, for instance, that concepts like active virtue could readily be associated in that milieu (as they were in Sidney's time) with a commitment to vigorous English intervention on the Catholic-Protestant chess-board of Europe. That for men of Essex's persuasion, "power to do good" – rather than simply not to hurt – "is the true and lawful end of aspiring", as Bacon phrased it in "Of Great Place" (Pitcher, ed., 1985:91). That the image of an inactive, immobile figure in power could easily be made to stand for the prevaricating Queen. Shakespeare would also, as the gardeners' scene in *Richard II* testifies, have expected stories of flowers being outbraved by base weeds to receive a political interpretation, one in which flowers invariably figured as monarchs and weeds as evil counsellors or favourites¹². And, of course, he would know perfectly well – like Richard's queen and Queen Elizabeth herself¹³ – how rife the pastime of political allegorising and lock-picking was.

Leah Marcus has argued that "the Author's Intent or putative intentionality" can still be a

very useful construct, particularly when it is demoted from its traditionally privileged position as the overriding determinant of meaning. [...] If Shakespeare [in some of his plays] avoided the appearance of intentionality, it was at least some of the time by design. We must try to distinguish between a lack of intentionality and the avoidance of intentionality, which may be a radically different thing. (Marcus 1988:42)

I would suggest that if Shakespeare had really wished to avoid the risk of an 'Essexian' reading unlocking sonnet 94 as *intending* (among other things) a disenchanted portrait of the ageing Queen and her government, he would have known what to strike out. But by giving prominence to phrases like *husband nature's riches from expense, lords and owners of their faces, the basest weed outbraves his dignity*, and *Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds*, he must have realised that in an 'Essexian' reading they might easily snap together to form a very specific gestalt. A gestalt of which he would become the implied, or constructed, 'begetter'. Shakespeare must similarly have foreseen, of course, that admirers and

¹² Shakespeare seems to count on an identical mode of reading flowers and weeds in the context of politics in the first quatrain of 124: "If my dear love were but the child of state / It might, for fortune's bastard, be unfathered, / As subject to time's love or to time's hate, / Weeds among weeds, or flowers with flowers gathered".

¹³ Elizabeth was, of necessity, an expert lock-picker herself. Lord Burghley wrote in 1595: "I think never a lady beside her, nor a decipherer in the court, would have dissolved the figure to have found the sense as her Majesty hath done" (quoted in Bevington 1968:8-9). And she was fully aware that discontented subjects compared her to bad gardeners like Richard. When William Lambarde showed her Richard II's portrait, she complained: "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" (quoted in Guy 1990:408).

servants of the Queen might suspect him of angling for just such a reading. Hence the layers of defensive armour: the ambiguous, oracular tone; the generalising mode of ethical censure of tyranny sanctioned by the classical-humanist tradition; the possibility of claiming that this sonnet, like the others, does after all refer to the young man; and, no doubt, a degree of practical caution in restricting the circulation not only of his “sugred Sonnets among his private friends” but also of his bitter ones ¹⁴.

David Bevington (1968:301) once persuasively argued that in Elizabethan drama, the “[t]reatment of controversial subjects was almost invariably generic: not simply whether Elizabeth should marry Leicester or the Duke d’Alençon, but whether the type of bountiful prince can ignore the dangers of unsettled succession”. Bevington’s classic critique of the kind of personal allegory-hunting so popular among scholars in the early decades of the twentieth century led him to stress the need to recover the more generalising and moralising patterns of political allusion. But, as his use of the word *simply* implies, the one, of course, by no means rules out the other. Allusive modes by definition thrust greater responsibility on the audience or reader for the meanings produced. At the same time they thrive upon well-defined horizons of expectations. If this attempt to read sonnet 94 against a particular, late-1590s horizon is persuasive, then we can perhaps see it as the nearest Shakespeare came in his surviving writings to frontal criticism of the Queen and her ministers ¹⁵.

After his sigh of relief in sonnet 107, Shakespeare’s political attitude becomes more pessimistic and defeatist – understandably, given the Essex tragedy. Sonnets 123 to 125 explicitly dissociate the private domain of the poet’s love for the young man, which “suffers not in smiling pomp, nor falls / Under the blow of thrall’d discontent” (124: lines 6-7), from the vicissitudes of the world of power:

It fears not policy, that heretic,
Which works on leases of short-numbered hours,
But all alone stands hugely politic,
That it nor grows with heat, nor drowns with showers. (124: lines 9-12)

¹⁴ Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia* (1598), fol 282r. The confidence of Meres’s praise of Shakespeare’s sonnets (along with the narrative poems) seems to suggest that they already enjoyed a reputation among readers of distinction, however ‘private’ they were kept.

¹⁵ Bevington (1968:18-19) is sharp with twentieth-century lock-pickers who have made Shakespeare into an Essex sympathizer. Here I am only suggesting that Shakespeare may have written with an eye on the Essex faction, not that he was a wholehearted Essex devotee. If, as Richard Wilson (2004:121) has recently argued, Shakespeare was a *politique* Catholic looking to Essex for the hope he gave of toleration, this would further motivate his enabling of an ‘Essexian’ reading, as well as the political pessimism of later sonnets like 124-125.

When Shakespeare alludes more specifically to the fall of Essex, it is in the voice of a poet who has now withdrawn from a degree of *proximity* with that world to an outpost of disillusionment rather than stoic aloofness:

Have I not seen dwellers on form and favour
Lose all, and more, by paying too much rent,
For compound sweet forgoing simple savour,
Pitiful thrivers, in their gazing spent? (125: lines 5-7; my italics) ¹⁶

In sonnet 94 his vantage point on power was perceptibly closer to that of the fallen faction. After 1603, and probably after the Gunpowder Plot in which some Essex-coup survivors were involved, the world of the young friend in the sonnets that conclude the fair youth sequence is no longer presented as a potential microcosm of the state but as an island to itself.

3. Could this topical reading of 94 be reconciled with the narrative of the young man and the poet if one wished to slot it back into the sequence? I want to glean four suggestions from Helen Vendler's work on the sonnets in order to suggest how that might be done: (1) "the *Sonnets* need be read as speech acts" (Vendler 1994:28); I would specify further: as a series of interlocutory moves; (2) in many sonnets, "the utterances of the speaker are being generated by invisible strings 'behind' the poem – the concurrent deducible actions or remarks of an implied other" (Vendler 1997:30); (3) "The mask of impersonality [found in 94 and 129] is always assumed for a reason – at least in a sequence so determined to use personal pronouns throughout" (*ibid.*:404); (4) proverbial, or proverbial-sounding phrases, present frequently in the couplet but sometimes also earlier, indicate "the turn of the speaker to the *consensus gentium*", and imply "mental quotation marks" such as "everyone knows that" (*ibid.*:26-7). With these cues in mind, it seems possible to plug the sonnet that I have explicated in topical political terms back into the interlocutory relationship of the poet and the young man. The opening line "They that have power to hurt, and will do none" is visibly built on the Latin proverb *posse et nolle, nobile*; the closing one has equally proverbial roots, both English and Latin. The poet, having in the previous sonnet glimpsed the potential falsity of the young man but mistrusting his own subjective powers of moral suasion, now turns to an argument based on *consensus gentium*. He offers the young man a spectacle of the hypocrisy of place and power in the greater world, in public figures that would be only too familiar to this aristocrat. "You know as well as I", the

¹⁶ Duncan-Jones (ed., 1997:362) sees a probable allusion here to Essex's loss of the sweet wine monopoly.

sonnet's pragmatics seem to say, “how the world goes today: you can decipher my allusive *exempla* as well as any. Yet that world is also your own mirror: in it you can see yourself reflected, a flower as corruptible as those who rule our land. Powerful flowers like the Queen may be *to the summer sweet* for all their selfishness, but take care: just as she can be outbraved and corrupted by weeds, so can you.” The final couplet will thus also pick up the thread of the flower-weed-odour cluster already associated with the young man in sonnet 69¹⁷. If we read sonnet 94 as deploying some such interlocutory strategy, then the topical – as well as the general – political meanings fold themselves functionally into the young man sequence. On the one hand the sonnet points outward towards the predicament of the English state, on the other that predicament becomes a monitory emblem for the friend in his little world of man. The fair youth is thus interpellated simultaneously as the poet's addressee in a private emotional drama and as a model-cum-empirical reader capable of deciphering the poet's encrypted messages from the standpoint of a historically specific socio-political milieu.

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¹⁷ “To thy fair flower add the rank smell of weeds. / But why thy odour matcheth not thy show, / The soil is this, that thou dost common grow.” (69: lines 12-14)

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