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Who was the Rival Poet of Shakespeare's Sonnet 86?

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Many of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed to a patron. One of them, No. 86, is about a rival poet. Its text reads as follows, in the 1609 first edition:

> Was it the proud full saile of his great verse,
> Bound for the prize of (all to precious) you,
> That did my ripe thoughts in my braine inhearce,
> Making their tombe the wombe wherein they grew?
> Was it his spirit, by spirits taught to write,
> Aboue a mortall pitch, that struck me dead?
> No, neither he, nor his compiers by night
> Giuing him ayde, my verse astonished.
> He nor that affable familiar ghost
> Which nightly gulls him with intelligence,
> As victors of my silence cannot boast,
> I was not sick of any feare from thence,
> But when your countinance fild vp his line,
> Then lackt I matter, that infeebled mine.[1]

Shakespeare had only one known patron, namely Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, to whom *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* were lovingly dedicated in 1593 and 1594 respectively. So, unless anyone has any reason (and none has yet been offered) for inventing a second patron, at a different period, Sonnet 86 was addressed to Southampton at that time.

In those years, history records only four rivals for his favours. George Peele paid courtly compliments to Southampton in *The Honour of the Garter* (1593) and in *Anglorum Feriae* (1595). Barnaby Barnes's volume of love-lyrics *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* (1593) contains several dedicatory sonnets, including one to Southampton. The same is true of Gervase Markham's epic narrative *The Tragedy of Sir Richard Greville* (1595). Thomas Nashe's

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prose satire *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) begins with a prose address to Southampton. Lastly, Nashe's undated manuscript poem *The Choice of Valentines* was accompanied by two dedicatory sonnets addressed to "the Lord S.," who may have been Southampton.

Those are all the known relevant facts. Should they not therefore be relied upon? Even so, the topic cannot be tackled without drawing on the *Sonnets* as a textual source. Now, these are notoriously deep waters, navigable only by powerful aestheticians. Such strengths are as rare among editors as a among ordinary readers; but we are all entitled to put an oar in. Of course Shakespeare may just be imagining things, as his expert commentators often claim; but so may they. In order to steer any course at all, it seems reasonable to start from the facts and to proceed on the basis of minimal assumptions.

One phrase in Sonnet 86 echoes Barnes, namely "when your countenance filled up his line." Barnes's sonnet to Southampton includes the actual words "your countenance." Thus Southampton's favour is solicited for the love-lyrics of *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*, so "that with your countenance graced they may withstand" envy and criticism. The word "countenance" has indeed "filled up" Barnes's line—to overflowing, since it adds an extra syllable.

This congruence between the two sources suggests that Shakespeare's thirteenth line (which scans "countenance" correctly) means what it says. On that basis, which poet had been taught by spirits to write above a mortal pitch, received aid from his compeers by night, and was nightly gulled with intelligence by an affable familiar ghost? Those words are regularly tortured into confessing some connection with Marlowe or Chapman. But Marlowe died in 1593; and there is no record that Chapman's innocuous claim to have conversed with the spirit of Homer was made before 1609. Besides, their two candidatures cancel each other out. Above all, neither of them can be shown to have sought Southampton's favour at a time when he was Shakespeare's well-known patron.

But Barnaby Barnes did, with a sonnet which has a line filled with Southampton's countenance, and in 1593, when *Venus and Adonis* was first published. Barnes, furthermore, was a notorious occultist. His intimate friend William Percy asks him, by name, in his own *Sonnets to Coelia* (1594):

"What tell'st thou me, by spells thou hast won thy dear?" John Ford, who also knew Barnes well, writes in *The Lover's Melancholy* "If it be not Parthenophil . . . 't is a spirit in his likeness" (3.4),[2] while the villain Orgillus in Ford's *The Broken Heart* is asked "You have a spirit, sir, have ye? a familiar / That posts i' the air for your intelligence?" (3.4, p. 215), which looks very like an allusion to Sonnet 86.

Barnes himself had already made comparable claims, in 1593. His envoi to *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* says that having burned frankincense on an altar and kindled a fire of cypress-wood he called on threefold Hecate, invocated the Furies, and despatched a black goat to bring Parthenope (Greek for virgin) naked to his side. Then he made a libation of wine to the Furies, burnt brimstone, and cut rosemary with a brazen axe, to make magic boughs. All these rituals were observed at night.

This diabolism should surely be taken seriously. In 1598 Barnes was rightly arraigned as a poisoner before the court of Star Chamber; he escaped justice only by flight. His later play *The Devil's Charter*, about a poisoner, dramatises the conjuration of spirits, from sources including the *Heptameron* of Petrus de Abano. This *grimoire* gives instructions about the appropriate robes, incense, incantations, magic diagrams, goatskin parchment, and other paraphernalia to be used in raising the apparitions that rule the hours and the seasons. They will then fulfil one's wishes and answer one's questions, as in Sonnet 86.

No wonder that in Middleton's *Black Book* c. 1604 Satan addresses Barnes thus: "I am not a little proud, I can tell you, Barnaby, that you dance after my pipe so long." A tobacco-pipe is ostensibly meant; but no doubt a smokescreen was still needed so that all such allusions could be masked as mere licence in one sense or another. Every necromancer includes a romancer. The sensible Shakespeare remained unimpressed, as Sonnet 86 freely implies in its manifest ironies (and indeed as it says straight out, in the word "gulls"). Perhaps he felt that his rival's pretensions to demonic inspiration were worthless—like the poetry those procedures allegedly produced.

Despite this inference, modern commentators are disposed to assume that "great verse" in the first line of Sonnet 86 must correspond with their own evaluation of poetic merit, some 400 years later. But this ignores the famous fact that Shakespeare in the *Sonnets* calls himself "old," "poor," "ignorant," "despised" and so forth, presumably by contrast with his young, rich, well-educated and admired patron. So perhaps "great" was also seen from his master's viewpoint? If so, that proud full sail may merely mean windy over-inflation.

Southampton himself, however, would have been predisposed to accept and encourage Barnes. They both hero-worshipped the Earl of Essex, under whose command they both served as soldiers. Further, Barnes was the son of the Bishop of Durham and hence at home in elevated social as well as literary circles, including Southampton's own. Barnes was thus a celebrity as well as a poet. He wrote commendatory sonnets or dedications to the Countess of Pembroke, Sir William Herbert, Lady Strange, Lady Bridget Manners and the Earls of Northumberland and Essex, as well as Southampton; he was invoked, in praise or blame, by writers or orators as diverse as Thomas Bastard, Thomas Campion, Thomas Churchyard, Sir Edward Coke, John Florio (Southampton's Italian tutor), Sir John Harington, Gabriel Harvey, John Marston, Thomas Michelborne, Thomas Nashe and the publisher John Wolfe, as well as the sonneteer William Percy and the dramatists Thomas Middleton and John Ford. Barnes was thus a far more famous and exalted personality, and for far longer, than any other rival, whether evidenced (like Peele, Markham or Nashe) or not (like Marlowe or Chapman).

In all the respects so far cited, Barnes is by far the best-qualified candidate. The sole stumbling-block is the phrase "great verse," as already quoted from Sonnet 86. But Barnes has been praised as a poet by such competent critics as Bullen, Lee, Dowden, Gosse, Saintsbury, Boas and C. S. Lewis. His "chains . . . of adamant" is echoed by Milton's *Paradise Lost* (I. 48). His style has a colourful if pretentious music of its own, as in "that white lily leaf, with fringéd borders / Of angels' gold, veiled the skies / Of mine heaven's hierarchy" (Madrigal 4). He was, furthermore, already an acclaimed poet and scholar in the early 1590s, when his youthful verse was first published; thus Churchyard's *Praise of Poetry* (1595) names only three living English poets—Spenser, Daniel and (at the same level) "one Barnes that Petrarch's scholar is."

That description accords well with Shakespeare's claim that Southampton's eyes had "added fethers to the learneds wing" (Sonnet 78, line 7); having merit in the Earl's eyes would certainly have raised the Oxford-educated scholar Barnes to further heights of achievement and esteem. As Barnes says to Southampton in his own dedicatory sonnet: "Vouchsafe . . . To view my Muse with your judicial sight; / Whom when time shall have taught by flight to rise / Shall to thy virtues, of much worth, aspire." Further, that same sonnet fulsomely praises Southampton's eyes as "those heavenly lamps that give the Muses light." Shakespeare also says that a rival had not only praised Southampton's eyes (Sonnet 83.13-14), but also mentioned his "vertue" and admired his "beautie" (79.9-10). Barnes's sonnet mentions Southampton's virtue, three times, and admires his beauty. Further, Shakespeare is content to "crie Amen / To euery Himne that able spirit affords" (85.7); in other words, a rival sometimes refers to his own love-lyrics as hymns. Barnes twice refers to his love-lyrics as hymns—as indeed they are. Shakespeare describes that same rival as a "spirit" (*ibid.*, and again in 80.2); and, as we have seen, Barnes was described as a spirit, by John Ford.

There are many other evidential interconnections between Barnes and the *Sonnets*. Thus, long before any rival poet is mentioned, Shakespeare scornfully rejects "that Muse" which is "Stird by a painted beauty," uses "heauen it selfe for ornament" and so forth, with a dozen specific comparisons (Sonnet 21.1-8)—all of which occur in Barnaby Barnes. The Dark Lady Sonnet 130 is equally forthright about other poets' "false compare." Commentators commonly quote parallels from Thomas Watson, a decade earlier; but almost all the over-effusive examples that so distressed Shakespeare are again found in Barnaby Barnes. That contemporary poet was famous for the "new found methods, and . . . compounds strange," typical of "the time," that Shakespeare avowedly abjured (Sonnet 76.3-4). *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* was praised by its publisher for its "variety of conceits"; it also exemplifies more poetic forms and sources (including Renaissance French, Italian and English models, as well as classical Greek and Latin) than any other known collection of lyrics then or since. Unlike Shakespeare, furthermore (Sonnets 21.1, 67.5, 82.13, 83.1-2), one rival poet approved of painting; Barnaby Barnes admired it as an enhancement of his inamorata's beauty.

There is other evidence in Shakespeare's works that he had studied *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*. For example, Barnes mentions a "Siren" and adds that from his "love's 'lembic" he has "still 'stilled tears"; cf. "*Syren* teares / Distil'd from Lymbecks" (Sonnet 119.1-2). Again, Barnes in the same poem describes a "Fiend" dressed "in Graces' garments"; cf. Shakespeare's "fiend . . . covered . . . with the garment of a grace" in *A Lover's Complaint* (316-17). Perhaps these echoes derive from a close reading of the copy that Barnes had presented to Southampton in 1593, with "dedicated words" (Sonnet 82.3, 4), thus rivalling Shakespeare as "thy Poet" (Sonnet 79.4, 7). The contents of Barnes's volume, conversely, suggest that he had seen some of Shakespeare's sonnets in manuscript, as well as *Venus and Adonis*. The allusions include "Master . . . Mistress," "Charter . . . Bonds," "hot June," "devouring Time" and the over-deliberate wordplay in "When Mars returned from war / Shaking his spear afar; / Cupid beheld! / At him, in jest, Mars shaked [sic] his spear!" (Ode 15) The blatant puns and latent bawdry may well also have been intended as a pointed dig at Shakespeare.

Times and tastes change but the nature of evidence stays the same. Shakespeare's deference to his rival presents no real difficulty; his *Sonnets* are habitually self-abnegatory. Their young patron was his sun (33.9, 14) and God (110.12); *Venus and Adonis* pays tribute to him by name and (in a Latin epigraph) to the sun-God Apollo. Southampton had only to countenance Barnes for the latter to be hailed as the wielder of a "goulden quill," the writer of "good words" as well as the compiler of many a "precious phrase by all the Muses fil'd" (85.3-5). Besides, Barnes compares his sweetheart to each of the nine Muses, by name, one after the other.

But Shakespeare reserves his position vis-à-vis that "proud full sail." "My sawsie bark," although ("inferior fare to his") (Sonnet 80.7) nevertheless won the combat. The smaller vessels had famously outmanoeuvred the great galleons of the Spanish Armada, only five years earlier. Both "proud" and "pride" (in Sonnet 76.1 as well as 80.12) presaged a fall. Who now remembers Barnaby Barnes? Yet he might well have been the main rival poet, on merit, as well as on the facts of the case. Then he and Shakespeare together would be the pair described as "both your Poets" (Sonnet 83.14).

This conclusion in turn would confirm Southampton as the patron of the *Sonnets*, and the early 1590s as the period when his patronage was sought by others. Shakespeare reacts to that general rivalry by "Doubting the filching age will steale his treasure" (Sonnet 75.6) and complaining that "euery *Alien* pen hath got my vse / And vnder thee their poesie disperse" (Sonnet 78.3-4). Their compliments include crude flattery, or "grosse painting" (Sonnet 82.13), in their "comments of your praise" (Sonnet 85.2); nevertheless young Southampton is typically extenuated as being "inforc'd to seeke anew / Some fresher stampe of the time bettering dayes" (Sonnet 82.7-8). Barnes was indeed far fresher, i.e. years younger, than Shakespeare and all the other rivals, whether evidenced or putative. He was born in 1571[3] and died in 1609, the year when the *Sonnets* were published. He may never have suspected that they rated him as a rival. But they portray his features, among other good likenesses of real people in actual circumstances. The *Sonnets* therefore, are *prima facie* biographical. So why not attribute all their utterances to Shakespeare, in the first instance, and not to an imaginary "speaker"?

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NOTES

[1] The 1609 text is reprinted, for example, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977).

[2] See John Ford, Four Plays, ed. Havelock Ellis (London: Benn, 1960) 65.

[3] For this fact, and others, this essay is indebted to the well-researched chapter on Barnaby Barnes by Mark Eccles in *Thomas Lodge and other Elizabethans*, ed. C. Sisson (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1933). The most accessible source of Barnes' *Parthenophil and Parthenope* is the text included in vol. I (*Elizabethan Sonnets*) of the re-issue (Constable, 1904) of Arber's *An English Garner*, with a new introduction by Sidney Lee. This re-asserts (p. lxxvi) the probability that Barnes was the Rival Poet, an identification already promulgated by Lee in his *Life of Shakespeare* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1898; often reprinted with various pagination) as satisfying "all the conditions of the problem." No one has ever refuted that thesis; I have repeated some of its relevant points and added others.