

The Puzzling Life of Edward de Vere—Political Allegory in *Venus and Adonis*

Surname Wordplay

by Michael Stepniewski, 10/2012

For the full essay see: devereshakespeare@wordpress.com

Wordplay... makes up the enduringly strange character of [Shakespeare's] writing.

Nicholas Royle, *How to Read Shakespeare*, 23

The True identity of Master William Shakespeare will not be proved by our judgement; it is not a question of who *we think* he *is*. Rather, it is a question of who *he knew* he *was*. Despite protests to the contrary, this *is* the great puzzle of English Literature. In Shakespeare's wordplay, now examined with unprecedented skepticism, we detect a man consumed by the uncertainty of his being.

The themes of dual identities, mistaken identities, and lost identities are central to his work. As Marjorie Garber has stated, the great protagonists of the Shakespeare canon have in common the search for 'self'. Ultimately, the author and his art were creatures of the 'Will'. While orthodox scholars see in that 'Will' a Stratford native named Shakspeare, an unorthodox amateur, like myself, may justifiably conclude Edward de Vere **to be**—the 'grief' of his Monarch's Will and the agency of Will[iam] Cecil.

I believe this verity can be discovered directly in Shake-speares Art, particularly the non-dramatic poetry, and most particularly in *Venus and Adonis*. His art constitutes a truthful and factual letter to the reader—nowhere so apparent as *V&A*; it need only be stripped of a translucent shroud of metonymy and indeterminacy. It is his 'Existential Deposition' and, if I understand the nature of poetic expression, more valid than any sworn statement.

Surname wordplay—the painful fragmenting of de Vere's identity made manifest—appears everywhere in the canon. I want to remind the members attending the Shakespeare Authorship Conference of some significant examples on the surnames de Vere, Oxford, Seymour, and Tudor. Let me begin by noting that our author was not the only writer of the period who referred to Shakespeare's 'hidden' identity in clever wordplay. The prime example is, of course, the famous poem *To the memory of my beloved, The Author Mr. William Shakespeare*, by Ben: Jonson. Jonson, a great Latinist, evidently wanted to prove himself equal to the task of eulogizing 'Shakespeare'—though he durst not presume to do so for Edward de Vere; he frames the poem like this *Note: Underlined words are 'Emergent' or words of special interest as well as 'surname wordplay'*:

Ex. 1a **To draw no envy (Shakespeare) on thy name,
Am I thus ample to thy Booke, and Fame;**

.....
**Shine forth, thou Starre of Poets, and with rage,
Or influence, chide, or cheere the drooping Stage;
Which, since thy flight from hence, hath mourn'd like night,
And despaire day, but for thy Volumes light.**

I want to focus on the wordplay in the last line, because it 'neatly' affects the others:

Parse **[And despaire** (wordplay dis: 'expressing negation'; alt.: 'denoting separation' + pairs: 'a set of two things used together or regarded as a unit') **day** (wordplay de: 'denoting formation from'), **but** ('otherwise than') **for** ('before'; 'toward, to, on the way to') **thy Volumes** (Latin *volumen* 'a roll', from *volvere* 'to roll': here playing on '[a] turn of Vere', i.e. [a] variant of Truth = Illumination, Light, etc.) **light** ('capacity to give 'illumination of mind').]

Interpret. ~ *And unpairs 'de', otherwise before your 'turn of Vere'—Light. ~*

Hugh Holland, also prefacing the First Folio with a poem, plays on the de Vere name:

Ex. 1b **Dry'de' is that veine, dry'd is the Thespian Spring,
Turn'd all to teares,** *Upon the Lines and Life of... William Shakespeare, l.5*

Interpret. ~ *Dry 'de' is that vein, dried is the Thespian Vere, ~*

~ *Turn'd all to teares, ~ See notes on Hildegard von Bingen, devereshakespeare@wordpress.com, the 'Ode to Green', p. 155, V&A ll. 393-538*

Someone has bothered to count 1700 examples of the *ever*-ambiguous 'ever' in the Shakespeare canon; here's the use that first caught my eye:

Ex. 2a **As proper men as ever trod upon neat's leather have gone upon my handiwork.**

Julius Caesar l i 24-26, (cobble) .

Parse: **[As** ('in the same degree, of the same quality'*; equally) **proper** ('fine*') **men as** ('equal to') **ever** (= E.Ver) **trod** (= shod, 'past participle shoe') **upon neat's** (neat: 'archaic a bovine animal'; neat's = an Ox's) **leather** (skin) **have gone** (to walk about, appeared; alt.: 'no longer present, departed', 'to vanish, to come to an end'*) **upon my handiwork** ('work of the hand'* of a cobbler, i.e. sole-mending, *wordplay* soul-mending).]

Or, as I understand it:

~ *Equally fine men, like to E. Ver, shod with Ox's skin, have vanished with my soul-mending.* ~

This is the *very* essence of polysemy; *such* ambiguity is elegant, *strangely* intended, and *O so* satisfying. The author was so taken with the game that he repeated his success:

Ex.2b **As proper a man as ever went on four legs cannot make him give ground** *Tempest II ii 59-60* .

And again:

Ex. 2c ... , **he's a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat's leather** *Tempest II ii 68-9* .

And on and on. De Vere's concern is his 'loss of fair' in being "unkept", "for call you that keeping for a gentleman of [his] birth that differs not from the stalling of a ox?" *As You Like It I i 8-10* . Incidentally, the word present is used here precisely as derived from Latin—*praesentia*: 'being at hand', from *prae*: 'before' + *esse*: 'be'.

If 'ever' signifies E. Vere, then 'O' = Oxford is an obvious correlative. The use of a single letter to represent princes ('who must not be named') is derived from the Queen, Elizabeth R. 'O' ["interjection expressive of pain, of surprise or of desire, or used to give the speech the character of earnestness"*; alt.: = Oxford; shorthand for an impassioned self address, self admonishment, or an address to Oxford by another] appears frequently as an indicator of specific Oxford-related subtext.

Ex. 3 **O, had thy mother borne so hard a mind,
She had not brought thee forth, but died unkind.** *Venus and Adonis 203*

We all agree with this much. Now let's move on to the scary part:

Ex. 4a **A summer's day will seem an hour but short,** *V&A 23*

I think there's Tu-d'or in *them thar* 'wills'... (you'll have to forgive me, I've been doing *but* this *too long*).

Interpret. ~ A 'Vere de' will (otherwise) hem 'Seym' an o u r short, ~

or: ~ A 'Vere de' hereditament—'Seym', an h o u r, [except] short, ~

or: ~ A de Vere-Tudor inheritance, 'Seym', only an o u r short, ~

This is a straightforward equation; the de Vere on the left of the 'will' equals the Seymour on the right.

How about this one? Is this example too 'low' for the exalted Shakespeare intellect?:

Ex 4b **Being proud, as females are, to see him woo her,** *V&A 309*

Don't 'bee sham'd'—I had to blink twice, too.

Interpret. ~ [With] Princely want of modesty, as Regina [was] to Se-ym-ou-r, ~

It's not just *Venus and Adonis*! In *The Tempest* we find this jewel from Ariel's Song:

Ex. 4c **Sea nymphs hourly ring his knell:** *The Tempest I ii 403*

Interpret. ~ [Syllables among] 'Sea nymphs hourly' toll his death: ~

or: ~ [Syllables among] 'Sea nymphs hourly' circle his nomination/proclamation: ~

This is the last of five statements that must be 'fully fathomed' if you are to understand de Vere's / Seymour's, elegy-like riddle to Henry Stanley, Lord Strange, 4th Earl of Derby. For more on 'Ariel's Song', see my essay, p.153.

Now, perhaps, you'll concede the likelihood that Ben Jonson played successfully in the penultimate line of his *To the memory of my beloved*, quoted above:

Ex. 1b **Which, since thy flight from hence, hath mourn'd like night,**

Interpret. ~ *Which, since thy flight from hence, hath Seym[d] mour darkness,* ~ *Or some such foolery.*

Some examples of surname wordplay need hardly any explanation:

Ex. 5a **And now the happy sea-son once more fits** *V&A 326*

Ex. 5b **"More I could tell, but more I dare not say:**

The text is old, the orator too green.

Therefore, in sadness, now I will away; V&A 805-7

Similarly:

Ex. 5c **Have I, thy schoolmaster, made thee more profit
Than other princes can, that have more time**

For vainer hours, and tutors not so careful. *The Tempest* I ii 172-4 note: *vain* = apparent, *seeming*.

Interpret. ~ For Seem-R-ours, and Tudors not child careful. ~

Ex. 5d **Would in thy palm dissolve, or seem to melt.** V&A 144 note: *would* = Woodstock, Plantagenet.

Interpret. ~ Plantagenet in thy palm dissolve, ore 'Seym' to melt. ~ Note: 'ore seam' and vain/vein of prev. ex.

The final steps are now inevitable:

Ex. 6a **"Vouchsafe, thou wonder, to alight thy steed,**

And rein his proud head to the saddlebow; V&A 13-14

I am convinced that the 'wonder' is the Primo-Tudor; that is, de Vere is the One-d'or among Tu-d'or. He is asked to be so trusting as to 'rein'/submit his 'Will' to the saddlebow of 'Packhorse Cecil' and to the Master of the Horse, Robert Dudley.

A *delightful* play on the Vere name—and with sledgehammer subtlety—is found in *The Winter's Tale* I ii 44-66. Who can miss it? **Verily, Verily, Verily, Verily, Verily**—with a "**verier wag o' th' two**" for good measure.

That last... ~ *the More Vere intail O the Tu* ~ is of interest because of the single syllable that expresses the whole, i.e. Tudor. This is but one example among hundreds. Keep a keen eye for each more or see, ore or seem, same or hour (*but short*), one or two, won or too, day or light, etc.

Here's a *more* straightforward approach:

Ex. 6b **Foul cankering rust the hidden treasure frets,** Note *fret*: 'to corrode, to eat or wear away'*

But gold that's put to use more gold begets." V&A 767-8

How many golds in the *hidden treasure*? Two? And *so* you then have Two-d'or? No doubt! Look above at ll.765-6—Or theirs, Or butcher sire = Golden theirs, Golden butcher sire—Tudor indeed. Also note the two lines that preface the important stanzas ll.757-68:

Ex. 6c **'What is thy body but a swallowing grave,**

Seeming to bury that posterity... Note *posterity*: 'what *more* follows'.

Perhaps the most elegant 'surname wordplay' is to be found in Sonnet 18:

Shall I compare thee to a 'Somers-de'? Note: *Somers* = *Summers*, from Edward Seymour (*Somerset*)

Thou art 'mour' 'Lovely' and 'mour' 'in-Tempest-uous':

Rough heirs do shake *the darling scions of Mary*

And 'Somers's' estate hath All 'Tu', short a da[te]: Note: *Tu + da, two + date — te (minus 2)*

Attainted 'Tu' hot, the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his d'or complexion dimmed;

And the Vere 'right', from right, by attainer declines,

By chance, or Nature's changing course, [if] not amended:

But thy 'Ever Somer' shall not fade

Nor lose possession of that Right thou own,

Nor shall death brag thou 'Veer' in his protection

When in E.Ver lines to Cecil thou 'Rise'.

Southampton, as men can speak, 'Midas' (Dudley) can 'Seat'. Note: *So + outhampton (long)*.

Southampton, this lives, and this animates thee. Sonnet XVIII

Don't you see? This surname wordplay is precisely the method orthodox scholars **crow** about with Robert Greene's "**Upstart /Shake-scene**" quote. Greene's comment is ambiguous, but we may safely assume he is using wordplay in the same manner as Ben Jonson, and Hugh Holland as noted above in examples 1a and 1b. No one contests "Shake-scene" is a reference to Shake-speare. Now—whether the 'hide' wrapping "his tiger's heart" refers to 'skin' or 'disguise' (*hide*: 'a camouflaged shelter') remains uncertain. What is not uncertain, is that such wordplay is counted as significant evidence.

De Vere's quibbling on his 'verity' is so highly developed as to lose ambiguity; but, I believe few have looked to find the Sey/mour and Tu/dor 'variety' that is closely associated. It is repeated frequently, yet requires concentration. To students of poetry who are accustomed to fashionable metaphor, direct allusion by name fragments is unexpected; by design it is not obvious. Had it been obvious, it would not have gone unnoticed for so long.

From where I now stand, it appears there is remarkable internal consistency; a metonym or 'emergent' word that has particular meaning in one place, has related meaning in most if not all instances. I believe this can be proved by feeding each suspected example from throughout the plays and poems into a spreadsheet that notes probable meaning. This will give a solid basis for my supposition.

Clearly, we must allow many of the examples shown in this essay as evidence of de Vere's hand in Shakespeare. If we maintain a balance sheet, I predict few if any may be credited to Will of Stratford, but many hundreds are creditable to Vere, Seymour, and Tudor. In doing so we will have begun to establish the means to 'truly' read Shakespeare. We will have discovered his method—and we'll double our pleasure. No! The pleasure will grow exponentially. Unraveling his 'hidden treasure' for ourselves must be far more satisfying than being spoon-fed a baseless myth by *the recalcitrant* or *the blind*.

Vere, Seymour, Tudor self-referencing can become very sophisticated. Here is an example of his *unexampled* mastery of the syllogism from the mouthpiece of de Vere's 'twin' Polixenes [*Poly* Greek *polloi*: many + Greek *xenes*: 'altered characteristics in form, color, etc.', morphological variation]:

Ex. 7a Polixenes **We were, fair queen,
Two lads that thought there was no more behind
But such a day to-morrow as to-day,
And to be boy eternal.** *The Winter's Tale* I ii 62-5

Wow! Having fun! Let me draw on the 'ever' growing glossary to fathom the writers intentions:

Interpret. ~ *We Vere (fair heir Queen)*

*Tu Bois, that thought there was nom [d']ore behind
Otherwise the Seym, a de Tu-mour-O, the Seym Tu-de,*

And 'to be' Wood forever. ~ Note: Wood is evolved from French Bois, here indicating Woodstock/Plantagenet.

The interplay of English, French, Latin, and Greek is an artifact of languages de Vere and Elizabeth held in common.

Now we may test the predictive power of this surname wordplay. We ask, where the devil is the poet 'coming from' in the following passage:

Ex. 8a **Upon his hurt she looks so steadfastly,
That her sight dazzling, makes the wound seem three,
And then she reprehends her mangling eye,
That makes more gashes where no breach should be:
His face seems twain, each several limb is doubled,
For oft the eye mistakes, the brain being troubled.** *Note: wordplay troubled = trebled V&A 1063-68*

Did you find some basis for this passage in Ovid? No, I didn't either. This is a case of dual—or is it treble?—identity:

Ex. 8b **My tongue cannot express my grief for one,
And yet (quoth she) behold two Adons dead,** *V&A 1069-70*

Venus is confused. I'm confused. Does Adonis 'Seym' three, or does he 'Seym' twain... shall we concede that he does 'Seym-mour', and call it good?

So, where in Shakespeare does all this wordplay come together? Everywhere!

Interpret. ~ *Enter three 'Which Is'. ~ Or, ~ Enter three 'Which R'. ~*

~ When shall we three meet again?

In Jove, Enlightning, golden Reign? or, In Vere, Somers-day, Tudor?

When the casting-off of Burleigh's done.

When the Battle's lost, and One

That will be heir, the placement of Son. ~ Macbeth I i 1-5