

Was Queen Elizabeth's 1571 Gift to Oxford Given to the Earl of Southampton?

By Jan Cole

At 21 years of age Edward de Vere was victorious in the Accession Day Tilts on 17 November 1571. Instituted as an annual celebration of the date on which Elizabeth came to the throne, the Accession Day tilts or tournaments consisted of the medieval-style jousting of knights in armour, the “knights” being her courtiers. Sidney, Oxford, the Earl of Leicester, the Earl of Southampton, Fulke Greville, Thomas Vavasour, Thomas Knyvet, and many other well-known names appear in the



manuscript records of the tilts, which are preserved in the College of Arms, together with the cross-hatched scores or “tallies” that recorded how many passes were made and how many opponents’ lances were shattered. The tilts

were accompanied by fantastic pageantry, including set speeches, scenery and tableaux. Each courtier wore armour and carried a shield painted with specific emblems and a motto, the whole known as an *impresa*. The pageantry and speeches in total were referred to as “devices”. These were written down and in 1589, for example, Edmund Tilney (Master of the Revels) was paid for “the fair writing of the devices ... in two copies for the queen”.

On occasions the chief peers among the courtiers posed as fictional “knights” using pseudonyms such as “The Knight of Pendragon Castle”, “The Black Knight” or “The Discontented Knight”. Elizabeth herself would watch them from a gallery, dressed as one of her semi- mythological selves: Diana, Astraea, Gloriana. The jousts usually took place in the tiltyard at Whitehall (on the site of the present Horse Guards Parade), but sometimes at Windsor. Their blend of fancy-dress, spectacle, theatre and ceremony were all part of that curious mixture of medieval courtesies and Elizabethan statecraft that gave rise, in literature, for example, to Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and to the set speeches and mini- masques that entertained Elizabeth on her summer progresses when she visited the homes of her hosts in the country. It was the queen’s custom to award an exceptionally expensive gift as the first prize. This appears to have been a small portable book of blank pages, known as a “table” or “tablet” (interestingly, the word “tablet” has reappeared in the 21st century as a name for the hand-held computer). Oxford was not the only courtier to receive such a book, but the records state that in 1571 the first prize in the jousts went to Oxford and the queen’s gift was “a tablet of diamonds” (Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol.I, pp.52-53; 140-145), evidently a notebook of blank pages whose cover was richly decorated with jewels. He may well have received other “tables” in other tilts between 1571 and 1581, after which his name no longer appears in the lists. Sonnet 122 mentions a gift of “tables”:

Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain
Full character’d with lasting memory,
Which shall above that idle rank remain
Beyond all date, even to eternity;
Or at the least, so long as brain and heart
Have faculty by nature to subsist,

Till each to razed oblivion yield his part
Of thee, thy record never can be missed.
That poor retention could not so much hold,
Nor need I tallies thy dear love to score.
Therefore to give them from me was I bold,
To trust those tables that receive thee more.
To keep an adjunct to remember thee
Were to import forgetfulness in me.

In this sonnet, the author has parted with a notebook given to him by someone very dear to him but claims that his natural faculties of memory (the metaphorical “tables” of his brain and heart) contain a more lasting memento. As Katherine Duncan-Jones remarks, “this sonnet recalls *Hamlet* I, 5, 95-110, in which Hamlet needs no external help to retain the memory of his father “within the book and volume of my brain,” but turns to his tables to note down the smiling villainy of Claudius. Cf. also Sonnet 77, in which the poet appears to give the young man a book with vacant leaves for him to write in.”

Originally, a tally was a stick etched or scored with notches to record a figure (such as debts or payments). For the jousts, parchment or paper was used, marked in ink with a horizontal line upon which the score of broken lances was kept for each competitor. These records were called “tallies”, the word “score” (meaning to win) obviously deriving this. Interestingly, Oxford’s curious doodle beneath his signature on some of his letters.



It sometimes appeared below Oxford's signature with an earl's coronet above. Could the "tally" beneath his signature commemorate a score of seven broken lances in the tilts, and the "crown" above his signature commemorate the queen's gift? I'm unable at present to ascertain whether his 1571 score was seven, but in any case, it is a very high score, three or four being the norm. Oxford's doodle, rather like a graffiti "tag" today, obviously points to something he wanted to be identified with, possibly his prowess in the tilts - the only way he could compare himself with the illustrious military exploits of his ancestors and of his cousins, Francis and Horatio, who were both generals in the queen's army.

To return to Sonnet 122, could the "tables" referred to have been the queen's 1571 gift of "a tablet of diamonds"? If so, the "thee" in this sonnet, with its obvious jousting imagery ("Nor need I tallies thy dear love to score") would refer to Queen Elizabeth and the poem is evidence of Oxford's loyalty and warm devotion to his sovereign. He regrets having given away this precious gift to someone. Why would he want to give away the book and to whom? Could "this book" in Sonnet 77 be the same one referred to in Sonnet 122? If so, and the recipient of this "gift of a gift" in Sonnet 77 is the young man of the first seventeen sonnets, then the queen's gift (his prize in the 1571 tilt) was possibly given to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. If so, on what occasion might this have been a suitable gift?

Sonnet 122 is intensely retrospective in tone. The author is both fondly remembering the giver and the gift and using the gift itself (a



book to write memories in) as a physical and metaphorical image to record intensely emotional memories, which he claims will last for eternity. He doesn't, he says, actually need gifts like this book (metaphorically a "tally") in order to record or remember the love with which it was given (Nor need I tallies thy dear love to score), so giving it away to someone else can be justified.

By contrast, Sonnet 77, is very much in the present tense, and orthodox scholars agree that this sonnet was probably sent with the book. The author anticipates some future date when the ageing recipient of the, by then, used notebook will look at it when he is an old man. In it he will find his memories. Perhaps these books were used as journals or personal diaries.

Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear,
Thy dial how thy precious minutes waste,
The vacant leaves thy mind's imprint will bear,
And of this book this learning mayst thou taste.
The wrinkles which thy glass will truly show
Of mouthèd graves will give thee memory.
Thou by thy dial's shady stealth mayst know
Time's thievish progress to eternity.
Look, what thy memory cannot contain
Commit to these waste blanks and thou shalt find
Those children nurs'd, delivered from thy brain
To take a new acquaintance of thy mind.
These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
Shall profit thee, and much enrich thy book.

Here, the recipient is recommended to use the “waste blanks” or blank pages of the book to write things down that he can’t otherwise remember (compare Sonnet 122). The things he’ll write in the book are imaged as “children” delivered from his brain. The references to a mirror (“glass”) and to a clock (“dial”) point to wasted time, and the wrinkles he sees in the mirror to rapid ageing. Both place this sonnet in the same group as those advising the young man to marry. Sonnet 77 is exceptionally complicated in its layers of imagery and seems to express an even more intense emotion than Sonnet 122. A blank notebook - and the poet’s very strong feelings about it - links the two sonnets.

If the above interpretations are correct, Oxford had a clear conscience in giving away the queen’s gift to Southampton. By contrast, Southampton could not justify his refusal to marry Oxford’s daughter, Elizabeth, and the only “children” he will have if he remains single are the memories written in the book.

If my interpretations are correct, Sonnet 122 and Sonnet 77 were written at about the same time. The first looks back to Oxford’s famous victory in the tilt of 1571 (when he was 21) and the gift of a book he’d received from the queen. The second was written at the time of sending the book to Southampton after realising that he would not marry his daughter. This would date both sonnets to between October 1593 (Southampton’s 20th birthday) and December 1593, by which time it was clear Henry Wriothesley had refused to marry Oxford’s daughter, who married William Stanley on 26 January 1594. A twenty-first birthday was a very important milestone for a peer, not just a coming-of-age but the day he reached the age at which he could inherit. Southampton would become 21 in October 1594. The month that falls between October and December is, of course, November, when the court would

be preparing for the Accession Day Tilt. In November 1593 was Oxford

(now 43) reminded of his great victory as a 21-year-old in 1571? And did he decide to give the book as a New Year's Gift to Southampton (who, had he married Elizabeth Vere, would have been his son-in-law) as he entered his 21st year?

These are speculations but serve to show that by analysing Shakespeare's *Sonnets* using what we know about Oxford's biography, much food for thought arises. Orthodox Shakespearians have tried and tried again to fit the *Sonnets* to William of Stratford's life, without success because so little is known about it. In Oxford's case, we have a relatively full biography whose details can be compared with the language and imagery in the sonnets. These complicated but beautiful poems are the most personal of all the Shakespeare writings, and in them we may discover events and actions in Oxford's life that are otherwise hidden.

Books consulted:

Duncan-Jones, Katherine (ed): *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, The Arden Shakespeare (2007)

Sylvia Morris: blog 15 August 2015 -
<http://theshakespeareblog.com/2014/08/taking-notes-shakespeare-and-table-books/>

Strong, Roy: *Fair England's Knights: the Accession Day Tournaments*, chapter V in *The Cult of Elizabeth*, Pimlico (1977)