

Who Really Won the Tennis Court Quarrel?

Based upon a presentation at the Thistle Hotel, London, 27 Sept. 2014

What follows is an attempt once again to hone and clarify what is, at its root, a simple story: Boy meets boy, they hate each other, they write mean poems back and forth to and about each other in an attempt to discredit and ultimately ruin each other. And it works. Their factions join in and it becomes like gangland wars, except, for 16th c. courtier poets it was a war of words—what I'm calling The Poet Wars. Really rather beautiful when you think about it. But just as lethal when you realize the goal was death to posterity.

The cap to a paper I was preparing on why the SAQ matters to actors came in a reverse situation, playing several small roles in a “tavern” production of Henry V—and provided the launching pad for this unfurling investigation. During rehearsal, as I waited my turn, I listened to the Dauphin go on and on, and on, about his horse. And my thought was, I wish he would just shut up about the stupid horse. Then I realized, that is what the playwright wants us to think. And because I had internalized Ramon Jimenez's three brilliant papers on the Henry trilogy* [this is one of the truncated bits], I ran home to see if Sir Philip Sidney wrote a poem about his horse.

He wrote several. Not only poems, but the preface of Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie* (from which Jimenez derives so many of his insights) begins, at length, with extensive praise of horses and horsemanship; Sidney won praise and a prize for his horsemanship in one of the Accession Day tilts, and, as Alexander Waugh pointed out to me,

Sidney's very name, Philip, means “horse lover”. The Dauphin is a wicked lampoon of Philip Sidney.

Another layer to the caricature lies in making him French. Aside from his lack of appreciation for foreigners on stage, Philip Sidney was no fan of the French. He was in Paris during the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572 and, as one of the leading lights in the faction of ‘radical Protestants’ at court, he was also no fan of Catholics. Lampooning his devotion to horsemanship as well as making him French was just the kind of jeering humor onstage that Sidney rails against in *An Apologie*.

The early mention of tennis balls in the play as a gift from the Dauphin to King Henry also twigged me to the famous Tennis Court Quarrel between Philip Sidney and Edward de Vere in 1579. Various scholars over the centuries have dismissed the conflict as a one-off, but closer examination reveals that it stretches as far back as 1569, if not before, right up until Sidney's death in 1586.

It does continue after that, but it passes into the hands of others, takes on a different hue, and moves from the world of the court to the world at large, further discussed below. In short, the Poet Wars go public.

The Rivalry

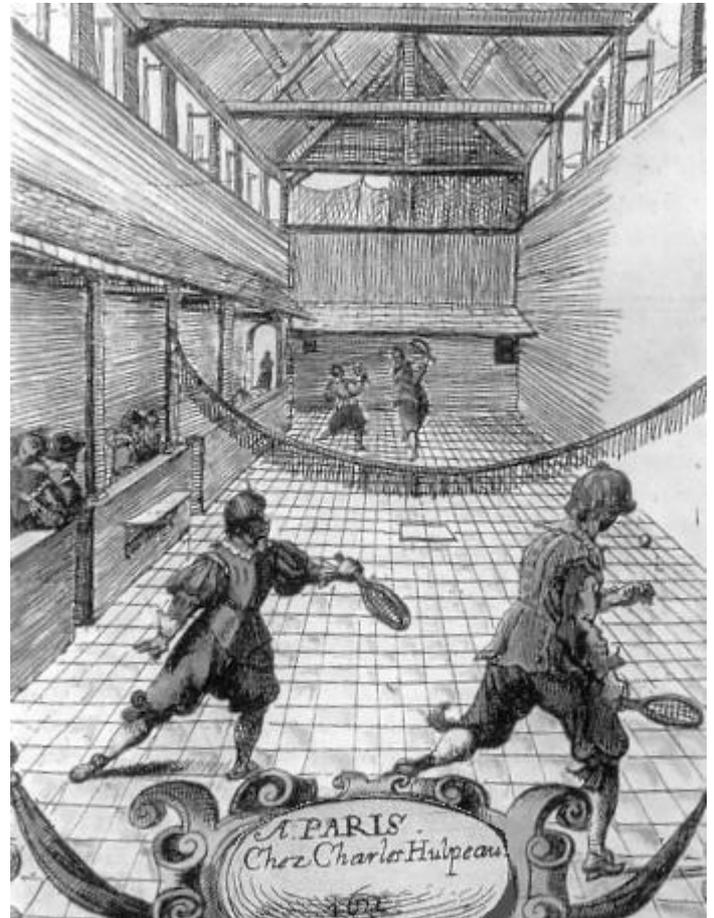
Because this is meant to be a thumbnail sketch, I won't cite every shard of poetic poison arrows that these two courtier poets (and their acolytes) exchanged, but the more you read their output side-

by-side, the more you see. However, Andrew Aguecheek* is worth touching on for its sheer obviousness. Indeed, Sir Philip suffered a bout of small pox which left his face/cheeks pockmarked (aguecheek = sickness of the cheek), but another researcher* pointed out to me that Sidney's birthday was November 30—St. Andrew's Day, so Sir Andrew Aguecheek (with his fractured French) = Sir Philip Sidney, which would have easily elicited jeering appreciation from a court audience.

Eva Turner Clark supplies another early identification of Sidney in the figure of Slender from *Merry Wives of Windsor*, along with his uncle Shallow (Robert Shallow, actually, mirroring Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester), and the wooing of Anne Page (Anne Cecil). The dowry amounts involved in the real marriage negotiations between Cecil and the Sidneys are echoed in the play almost to the penny. * Further recent research examines why Slender's first name is Abraham—a word synonymous with "abram" or "auburn" at that time. Sidney's hair was auburn, so his character name here becomes wholly a physical description. But Slender also makes reference to his "Book of Songs and Sonnets"*[I.i]; Anderson suggests this is a joke* by the playwright, making De Vere's own uncle Slender/Sidney's favorite poet. But in fact, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and his book were indeed near and dear to Sidney's heart, and although the full weight of evidence in this investigation bears out what I understand to be Richard Malim's thesis in his recent book*, that De Vere was the foment of so much of the output of Elizabethan literary life, it is possible that it was Sidney who started the 16th c. sonnet craze.

That *Merry Wives* seems to address the rivalry for the hand of Anne Cecil (Fenton's

situation closely echoes Oxford's own) may mark the beginning of the rivalry between the two courtier poets both situationally and in poetic caricature.



Real tennis court with spectator's gallery

But the fact that Sidney's uncle, the earl of Leicester, was granted much of Oxford's lands and income streams while he was still a minor provided a pretty solid basis for animosity. Added to which, Sidney stood to inherit all of Leicester's wealth (including that gleaned from Oxford estates) should Leicester die without an heir, thus catapulting Sidney to Oxford's equal if not superior in some areas. This is why the TCQ (Tennis Court Quarrel) may be seen as the apex of their rancor; having escalated for over a decade, not only was it a clash of rank, a "sir" encroaching on the territory of a peer of the realm, Sidney also had the cheek (pun

intended) to talk smack back to Oxford, *and* to challenge him to a duel (Oxford threatened to assassinate Sidney). In Sidney's defense, his reputation as a diplomat was at stake, because the viewing galleries at the tennis court were filled with visiting dignitaries from foreign courts, most notably the French: the marriage negotiations for Queen Elizabeth to François, Duc d'Alençon & d'Anjou (what I've dubbed the French Marriage Crisis to bookend Peter Dickson's nomenclature for the Spanish Marriage Crisis of 1621–23) were in high gear in 1579.

Sidney had carved a reputation on the continent as a respected English ambassador and negotiator* even though he hadn't been able to gain the same traction on home turf. The TCQ clash threatened to undermine the hard-won respect Sidney had built in countries he hoped to revisit, so ceding to Oxford would have confirmed him as the "puppy" Oxford accused him of being. The TCQ is only the historical pinnacle of this clash of reputations—it was big, it was deep, it was mean. Its after-effects stretched far beyond the grave.

Stepping away from the Shakespeare canon, the acknowledged writings of De Vere and Sidney underscore their animosity, most notably in De Vere's poem pondering whether the most desirable state is "a kingdom, or a cottage, or a grave" (perhaps echoing Hamlet's *To be or not to be* musings). Sidney's response stanza basically says, 'For you? I pick "grave". Definitely.'

The Dating Markers

Continuing with the rivalry expressed in their works, we see Sidney caricature Oxford's Knight of the Tree of the Sun in a tiltyard entertainment c.1580 as Amphialus in *The Arcadia*, which

substantiates the dating of that narrative poem to c.1581.

A hybrid identification occurs this way: Boyet (little boy) in *LLL* has been postulated as a lampoon of Sidney. Of him, Berowne (posited by some to represent Oxford) says, "This fellow pecks up wit as pigeons pease." Sidney, in his sonnet cycle *Astrophil & Stella*, says, "I am no pick-purse of another's wit." Scholars date *A&S* to c. 1581, which, if there is indeed a corollary here, would place *LLL* prior to that.

More substantially, all the plays that include lampoons of Sidney (and there are more than the four mentioned here) must be dated before his death in October 1586. There is no reason to lampoon him afterward, in fact it would have been anathema to do so (in the same way that, over 17 years after her death, no one would dare lampoon Princess Diana). In 1587, more than four months after Sidney's death from gangrene in the Netherlands during the conflict with the Spanish, he gets a full state funeral, with a 35-foot scroll recording the hundreds of attendees and elaborate proceedings. It is a mere 8 days after Mary Queen of Scots is decapitated—a state-sanctioned diversionary tactic, with Sidney elevated to the status of National War Hero in perpetuity.

The Pseudonym

Prior to his death, Sidney's poetry was circulated in manuscript and well-known in court circles. But after his death, the Sidney publication machine went into full swing, spearheaded by his best friend, Fulke Greville, who had been with him since the first day of primary school at Shrewsbury. Katherine Duncan-Jones* cites the Sidney poem

about the triangulated deep loving friendship shared by these two plus poet Edward Dyer.

By 1588, Oxford has a £1000 annuity from the crown, sold Fisher's Folly, lost his wife Anne; Robert Dudley has died; and the victory over the Spanish Armada has changed the whole mood of the country. Elizabeth never did marry the French duke and England is safe from returning to the sway of Catholic Rome. Radical Protestants can breathe easier and the Sidney faction morphs into the Sidney Circle, headed by Philip's sister, Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke and mother to the two boys who would become the Incomparable Paire of Brethren to whom the First Folio is dedicated, William and Philip Herbert.

In 1590, the first Sidney publication is released, *The Arcadia*, edited by Fulke Greville—it is Sidney's revised version, after he decided not to engage in the poison arrow poetry any longer.* The following year, *Astrophil & Stella* is available for public consumption. In addition to being a National War Hero, Sidney is now The Greatest Poet in the Land.

For someone who hated Sidney (and no one hated Sidney more than Oxford), this was too much. Other publications were coming out, too, from the Sidney Circle, such as Edmund Spenser's *Tears of the Muses*, noting, in the Thalia (muse of comedy & shepherds) section, "our pleasant Willy ah! is dead of late" preceded by "Where be the sweet Delights of Learning's Treasure, That went with comick Sock to beautify / The painted Theatres, and fill with Pleasure?" It may be worth noting here a line from the Messenger in *Much Ado*, "O, he's returned; and as **pleasant as ever** he was."

The Sidney publishing onslaught was in high gear in the 1590s and just as Mary Sidney Herbert was preparing to publish *her* version of her brother's

Arcadia (the original one he wrote for her, sans the noble revise by himself and Greville, which includes Oxford lampoons such as the character Dametas) in 1593, out comes the fully formed *Venus & Adonis* onto the publishing scene, with a "new" author, William Shakespeare, not on the title page as you'd expect, but only on the epistolary dedication which declaims it a "first heir" and promises a "graver labour" to come.

It is a name that formally embraces the Wills, Willies, and Willys, of Spenser (in *Shepheardes Calendar*, as well as *Tears*), of Nashe, and possibly Sidney himself in an early poem, and perhaps in the character of Dametas "shaking of his staffe".* Gabriel Harvey, firmly in the Sidney camp by 1579, gets a hat tip here too for his 1578 Latin encomium to Oxford alluding to his "countenance shaking spears". It is a name the Sidney Circle will recognize *because they essentially gave it to him*. It is a wily way of saying, *hey*, I'm still here *and* up to my old tricks.

For the character of Adonis is a horse lover, far more interested in his courser than intercourse with Venus, and his goal is to hunt the boar, and kill the boar; but he is killed *by* the boar—Oxford's crest is a boar. In addition, scholars peg *Venus & Adonis* as Ovidian—Sidney hates Ovid; Charles Boyce* says *V&A* "seems to be for a select audience." He is, unwittingly, spot on.

Close on its heels in 1594 comes *Lucrece*, with the same authorial construct, no author on the title page, but on the dedication. I will not assay interpretation here.

Perhaps predictably by now, the next publication is a Sidney imprint, his *An Apologie for Poetrie*, fresh for public consumption in 1595, but also... *Willobie His Avis*, a pseudonymous work that hails Sidney Circle poets and lambasts Shake-

spare, notably using only the surname in hyphenate, a hat tip to 16th c. pseudonyms. There's also an intriguing character called W.S. Orthodox scholars are puzzled by this attack on a new, clearly talented and wildly popular poet. But that's because they're clueless to this long-standing feud or the undercurrents of its current iteration.

Next up: Another pseudonymous work in 1596, *Polimanteia*, with Alexander Waugh's excellent find of the word *Oxford* placed strategically over "courte-deare-verse", an anagram of sorts, which also acknowledges, in my view, that Oxford's verse *was dear to the court*—that's where he was "best for comedy"*; the mention of Shakespeare's *Lucrece* in the printed marginalia, cleverly placed to break the word so it "naturally" has the tell-tale hyphen, acknowledges his present work. *Polimanteia's* excessively long subtitle also exhorts everyone from Oxford, Cambridge, the Innes of Court, and "All the Rest" to *quit with the polemics already!* Of course, you have to know a war of words is going on.

This carries on to the end of the decade, with Sidney publications like his *Certaine Sonnets* and the debut, as it were, of the *very first* Shakespeare play with the author's name attached, albeit just the surname, and hyphenated. What was it? *Love's Labour's Lost*, the play that in my view, was first performed at court c.1579 and pretty much threw everybody under the bus, Sidney, Harvey, Muscovites, the lot—anything for a laugh and to showcase the author's cleverness; virtually giving birth to the vaudeville mantra "no gag too thin," and kicking off the Poet Wars in earnest.

The Passing of the Baton & the FF

Another sea change takes place in 1603–1604 with the deaths of Queen Elizabeth and Oxford. A

letter from William Herbert several months after the earl's death, saying that *now* Susan Vere and his brother Philip Herbert could finally marry, was my third initial alert that all was not well between the Sidney and Oxford clans. Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Fulke Greville had been in a deep sulk after Sidney's death in 1586. But publishing *The Arcadia* in 1590 had given him his *raison d'être*: keeping Sidney's lofty ideals alive and expanding on them for the good of the country. But he was fired after Queen Elizabeth's death, and Robert Cecil, who was not a fan, had no intention of employing Greville. So what did he do with his decade free from government service?

Well, for one thing, he bought Oxford's house in Hackney in 1609, at a reduced price from the dowager countess Elizabeth (*née* Trentham). The Sonnets show up that year, and *Troilus & Cressida*, and a pirated version of Greville's own play *Mustapha*). He also took over, after his father's death in 1606, the job of Recorder of Stratford-upon-Avon. From c.1621 till his murder in 1628, his page was William Davenant, the purported "godson" of Shakespeare, who almost single-handedly pulled Shakespeare's plays through the Civil War and back onstage in the Restoration.

Oxymoronically, the last leg of this story is the most speculative but the most evidential. And there is about to be more. However, this has gone on long enough for one newsletter so I'll end with the bones of the story promised at the outset:

Oxford & Sidney were rivals

They fought with the lance & the pen

When Sidney was dead

Greville fought in his stead

& by him was Ox buried.

~GQ

(ginnypeague@aol.com) *footnotes on website