

Marlowe's Ghost

"Did Christopher Marlowe write Shakespeare's plays?"

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Who wrote *Venus and Adonis*, and why?



By DARYL PINKSEN

There has always been some mystery surrounding the writing of *Venus and Adonis*. Why was it written? What was the poet's connection to the Earl of Southampton? Did Shakespeare really write it? In 1593, his name was not known as a poet. From what we can infer from his life after 1593, he was an actor and aspiring entrepreneur, connected in some way to the theater industry, but he was not a scholar, and not then a gentleman, which makes the sophistication of the work¹ so remarkable.

Venus and Adonis is a beautiful poem, with an effusive dedication, but – its exquisite verse aside – there is general agreement that the poem was written with a specific purpose in mind. It delivered a message to the Earl of Southampton, to try and nudge him toward an arranged marriage that, as everyone knew, he had stubbornly refused for three years. If William Shakespeare was indeed its author, how did this virtual nobody decide to write a poem, one requiring months of intense concentration,² that dared to be so bold with a young Earl?

The time involved, hundreds of hours, was too great for the poet to have written the poem on speculation. He would have needed financial support during its creation. And its message was too specific, and too well known to have been against the wishes of its dedicatee, to have been crafted with the hope of reward from Southampton. The impetus and the financing must have come from elsewhere. One explanation, as suggested by Stephen Greenblatt in his 2005 biography, *Will in the World*, is that:

It is possible that someone . . . had taken note of the fact that the young earl was excited by the talents or by the person of an actor who was also a promising poet. Whoever noticed this excitement . . . might well have had the clever idea of commissioning the poet to try his hand at persuading the narcissistic, effeminate young earl to marry.³

In order to determine if this explanation is credible, we need to explore the context within which the poem was written.

When Southampton's father (the 2nd Earl of Southampton) died, William Cecil⁴ – Lord Burghley – the most powerful of the Queen's ministers, and Master of the Wards, became his legal guardian. This gave Burghley full control over the young Earl's properties and inheritances. Until he reached the age of twenty-one, Lord Burghley would oversee, and profit, from the Earl's interests, while Southampton would have to make do with a modest allowance. As Southampton's guardian, the wardship also gave Burghley the right to impose a marriage contract on him.

Burghley had been born a commoner, but as the Queen's most trusted minister had grown steadily in wealth, influence, and power. When Southampton came to live at his estate, Burghley was the most powerful man in England. The one thing he lacked was a noble lineage for his offspring, so he used his position to make this a reality. In 1571, he saw to it that one of his earlier wards, Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, was married to his daughter Anne Cecil. That union resulted in a granddaughter for Lord Burghley, the Lady Elizabeth Vere.

In 1590 or thereabouts, when Southampton reached the age of 17, Lord Burghley arranged a marriage between his young charge and Lady Elizabeth. Southampton knew the contract was legally binding, and he knew the possible consequences of refusing, but he wanted no part of it. Like Adonis, he preferred to remain a bachelor, saying – with respect – that it was not the lady he objected to, but the idea of marriage itself. He was, after all, only seventeen.

In 1593, the year *Venus and Adonis* was published, the Earl of Southampton had been under pressure from Lord Burghley for several years, but he had not budged. It was not that he lacked fear, he knew that if he did not fulfill the marriage contract by his twenty-first birthday, Lord Burghley had the right to impose a crippling fine on his estate. Neither was Burghley's blatant conflict of interest an impediment – it was he who held the power to determine the fine's amount in cases of breached marriage contracts. But Southampton had made up his mind and thought, wrongly it turns out, that he could persuade Burghley to back down.

The potential fine, and its imagined size, was pressure enough. But, as Southampton's guardian, another of the threats Burghley could use to try and force his ward to obey his wishes was to neglect Southampton's properties in the final years of his wardship, leaving his estates and financial interests in shambles. This was not an idle threat, and Southampton was worried. As Akrigg tells us in his 1968 book, *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton*,

In 1592 we have an alarmed young Earl writing to Michael Hicks, Burghley's confidential servant, asking him to use his influence with Burghley, to avoid 'the greate decay and daunger' which threatened much of his inheritance through lack of maintenance.⁵

When Southampton finally did reach the age of majority, on Oct 6, 1594, he had still not fulfilled Burghley's marriage contract. As punishment for his disobedience, Burghley imposed a fine of £5000, then a staggering sum (a well-paid schoolmaster might earn a yearly salary of £20). To twist the knife, Burghley demanded payment immediately, forcing Southampton to borrow at interest.

When *Venus and Adonis* was published in June 1593, Southampton had just over a year left to fulfill Burghley's contract. *Venus and Adonis* tells the tale of a young man who is desired by the goddess of Love, but spurns her advances, preferring the bachelor's life. The story ends in tragedy, with Adonis killed by a boar, leaving Venus to lament the loss. Everyone in the know understood the message being sent to Southampton was, "change your mind, and give in to Burghley's demands."

It is hard to imagine that the writer of the poem believed it would be enthusiastically received by Southampton. Despite the flattery of the dedication, and the beauty of the poetry, the writer must have known that the message delivered by the poem was against Southampton's wishes. To him it would have represented more unwanted pressure. Under the circumstances it seems unlikely that its author would have written and published this poem without the bidding, or at least the blessing, of Lord Burghley, the person to whom it mattered the most that the poem achieve its intended result.

So how did its writer end up being given this task? Fortunately, there is a precedent which may help us answer that question. *Venus and Adonis* was not the first poem dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. In 1591, a Latin poem was published by a poet named John Clapham with a dutiful dedication to the Earl of Southampton. The poem's title? *Narcissus*, the story of a young man who becomes so enthralled with his own image that he drowns while trying to find his fading reflection in a pool.

Clapham's purpose was on full display in the poem, as Katherine Duncan-Jones tells us: "Clapham's fairly undistinguished poem scarcely veils its propaganda purpose. In its echos sequence, for instance, line 17's echo word is 'veré' no doubt alluding to Elizabeth Vere."⁶ How would Southampton have received Clapham's blunt message? Not well, one would think. To be called a *Narcissus* was hardly a compliment, and who did this John Clapham think he was, lecturing his superior? John Clapham, as it turns out, had nothing to fear from Southampton – he served a much more powerful, much richer, master. Clapham was a secretary of Lord Burghley. The message being delivered was Burghley's, not Clapham's. As Akrigg tells us:

The usual motive for a dedication, a handsome reward from the dedicatee, could not be looked for from seventeen-year-old Southampton, living on a pitifully small 'exhibition'. It would be Burghley, gratified at seeing the treatment given the wretched young nobleman, who would supply Clapham with his reward.⁷

The message was Burghley's, the reward was from Burghley; all that Clapham did was provide the medium. The poet was communicating *Burghley's* wishes, not his own, and certainly not Southampton's.⁸ Whoever wrote *Venus and Adonis*, although Burghley's direct involvement cannot be proven, was performing the same service as Clapham.

And there exists the possibility that this was not the first time that the writer of *Venus and Adonis* had tried to persuade the young Earl to marry. When *Shakespeare's Sonnets* were published in 1609, there was no preface from the poet, and no patron was named. Instead, the printer, one Thomas Thorpe, included a cryptic dedication to a "Mr. W.H.", whose identity remains a mystery. The sonnets variously deal with a rival poet, one or perhaps several patrons, and a mysterious dark lady. The sonnets do not seem to be arranged in any kind of

order. And while many of the poems sound like personal reflections on real situations with real people, none of the characters has been positively identified.

There is one sequence of sonnets, however, that appear to have been deliberately grouped. The first seventeen of the 154 *Shakespeare's Sonnets* praise a young man's beauty, and urge him to marry and procreate. The theme is so similar to Clapham's *Narcissus*, and to *Venus and Adonis*, that there is wide agreement that the young man – at least in these first seventeen sonnets – was the Earl of Southampton. The fact that there are seventeen poems in the sequence, all with the same theme, suggests that they may have been commissioned specifically for Southampton's seventeenth birthday in 1590.

The theme repeated throughout the first seventeen sonnets is insistent – marry, and produce children. Although we cannot be sure which was written first, the writer of the first seventeen sonnets writes as if he were familiar with Clapham's poem and is responding to it, but chooses a more subtle and ingenious path. Where Clapham's *Narcissus* suggests that Southampton's love of himself (he was, by all accounts, a striking young man) was a vice that, if uncorrected, would lead to his ruin, the sonneteer accepts the dedicatee's self-love, and presents it in a novel way, not as impediment, but as the driving force behind the need to procreate.

The poet is gentler with Southampton than Clapham, more conscious of the psychology of privileged youth. He seeks to persuade Southampton through flattery. Where Narcissus gazed into a reflecting pool and became so enthralled with himself that he drowned, the sonneteer suggests that the love of one's own image is natural, and rather than curb it, should be given full rein, leading naturally to the desire to re-create that image in a son:

Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
Now is the time that face should form another. *Sonnet III, 1-2*

The poet reflects that time and age are enemies of life and beauty, but they can be cheated through producing an heir, in effect giving one's youthful image a second life:

Die single, and thine image dies with thee. *Sonnet III, 14*

Thy unused beauty must be tomb'd with thee *Sonnet IV, 13*

In the spring of 1593, the writer of *Venus and Adonis* is still conscious of Clapham's poem, as Akrigg continues:

The text of *Venus and Adonis* supplies evidence that Shakespeare knew Clapham's poem. The basic pattern is the same: the meeting with Venus, the departure of the young man, Venus's lamentation, and the final metamorphosis – in Clapham's poem into a narcissus, in Shakespeare's into an anemone.⁹

Clapham's *Narcissus*, Shakespeare's first seventeen sonnets, and *Venus and Adonis*, all perform the same function, to try and persuade Southampton to marry. And not to marry just anyone – he must marry Lady Elizabeth Vere and produce children with her – as Lord Burghley had commanded.

The writer of *Venus and Adonis* was most likely someone in Burghley's circle; someone over whom he had influence; someone who could be relied upon to deliver verse of the highest quality, preferably someone who Southampton was familiar with and respected. Shakespeare, as far as we know, had no association with Lord Burghley either before or after *Venus and Adonis* was published. But Christopher Marlowe did.

Marlowe had been recruited into the intelligence network at Cambridge, while Lord Burghley was Chancellor of the University. He and Southampton's time at Cambridge overlapped between 1585 and 1587, when Marlowe was emerging as

the nation's most promising new poet. It is safe to assume that Marlowe and his work were well known to Southampton.

In 1587, when Marlowe was denied his M.A. because of rumours of Catholic leanings, and his frequent absences, the Privy Council, led by Lord Burghley, wrote a letter praising Marlowe for doing his country good service, dismissed all rumours against him as unfounded, and ordered the Cambridge Dons to bestow Marlowe his degree without delay. When Marlowe was arrested for “coining” in Flushing, Netherlands, in 1592, on a mission to expose Catholic plots against the Crown, Marlowe and his accuser (the now infamous Richard Baines) were sent back to Lord Burghley, by then the head of the intelligence network after assuming the role upon the death of Sir Francis Walsingham in 1590.

Like Clapham, Marlowe was in Lord Burghley's employ. Lord Burghley knew Christopher Marlowe, both as poet and spy. But if Marlowe did write *Venus and Adonis*, this would still require an explanation of why his name does not appear on the dedication page.

Venus and Adonis had been registered at the Stationer's Company, without attribution, on April 18, 1593, a little over a month before Marlowe's arrest on May 20th. On May 30th, Marlowe had his fateful meeting at Deptford, where he was either killed, or escaped into exile with the help of his friends. About two weeks later, *Venus and Adonis* was published, now with an author's name attached to the dedication. The occasion marked the first appearance of William Shakespeare's name as a writer – but Marlowe's fingerprints are all over it.

A similar Ovidian poem by Christopher Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*, assumed to have been written before *Venus and Adonis*, but not published until four years later in 1597, is often cited as an influence on Shakespeare when he wrote *Venus and Adonis*. John Bakeless argued that, “*Hero and Leander* influenced Shakespeare directly and powerfully when he was writing *Venus and Adonis*”¹⁰ . .

. . . Shakespeare had read *Hero and Leander* since he quotes from it, since his scheme and treatment are essentially similar in *Venus and Adonis*”¹¹

Jonathan Bate, in discussing the poet George Chapman’s later additions to Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, completed in 1597, seems to feel that Chapman did not do a fair job. His opinion is that “in its playful sprightliness . . . *Venus and Adonis* was a far truer continuation of *Hero and Leander* than Chapman’s additions.”¹² Scholarship on *Venus and Adonis* must assume that Shakespeare had access to Marlowe’s unpublished *Hero and Leander*, even though no one else seems to have known it existed.

Between April 18th, when *Venus and Adonis* was registered, and June of 1593, when the poem was published, much had changed for Marlowe’s once good name. He had been arrested on suspicion of heresy, and the “Baines Note” of Marlowe’s blasphemies, delivered days later, had administered the coup de grace on his reputation. Whether Marlowe was alive or dead in June 1593, publishing *Venus and Adonis* with Christopher Marlowe's name on it was no longer an option. It would have associated Southampton's name with a now despised atheist, heretic, and blasphemer. And for Burghley, this would have meant associating his (or so he thought) future grandson-in-law, and granddaughter’s, names with Marlowe, a name that he correctly predicted would live in infamy. He would not have permitted this to happen.

The poet also supplied an epigram beneath the title which hints at his identity and circumstance. The Latin couplet,

*Vilia miretur vulgus: mihi flavus Apollo
Pocula Castalia plene ministret aqua,*

from the Roman poet Ovid’s, *Amores* (1.15), had been translated several years earlier, by Christopher Marlowe. The epigram, as translated by Marlowe, read:

Let base-conceited wits admire vile things,
Fair Phoebus lead me to the Muses' springs.

Readers of Ovid would have immediately been reminded of the theme of the poem that the epigram was lifted from: a poet's defiance of death through the immortality of verse. If Marlowe had indeed escaped into exile the previous month, and not been killed (as was claimed in the coroner's report), then the decision to include a quote from Ovid's *Amores*, *Epigram 15*, was a perfect choice. Inviting his readers to recall how the poem ends, the epigram on the title page of *Venus and Adonis* would have been the perfect announcement of the "first heir of Marlowe's invention" as a dead man:

Then though death rakes my bones in funeral fire,
I'll live, and as he pulls me down, mount higher.

Marlowe's ruined name was no longer an option for *Venus and Adonis*, but why William Shakespeare's? Printing the poem and dedication with no author's name attached may have been regarded as an admission that the author was a "persona non grata," and so a name would have been needed, but why him?

The man assigned the job of printing *Venus and Adonis* was Richard Field, a printer well-known to Lord Burghley. Field began his career by publishing Lord Burghley's *The Copy of a Letter Sent out of England to Don Bernadin Mendoza* in 1588. And there is further evidence that there were close connections between the two men. In 1589, Richard Field dedicated Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy* to Lord Burghley.¹³

Richard Field was a native of Stratford, just a few years older than William Shakespeare, and his family and the Shakespeares were close. As David Kathman summarizes in his online essay, "Shakespeare and Richard Field,"

I think we can be virtually certain that William Shakespeare and Richard Field knew each other from childhood, and it's entirely reasonable to think that the relationship continued when they were both living in London.¹⁴

Shakespeare, as expertly illustrated in an article by Anthony Kellett¹⁵, was a canny businessman who knew an opportunity when he saw it, and he knew how to capitalize on those opportunities. As a shareholder in a theater company, providing his name as a front for Marlowe – London's premier playwright – had the potential to net huge profits. The details are unknowable, but we do know one thing; we can draw a direct line from Marlowe, through Lord Burghley, to Richard Field, and from him, to Shakespeare.

Understanding the historical background of *Venus and Adonis* is vitally important, because its registration and publication straddle the period between Marlowe's reign as the greatest poet in England, and his subsequent pariah status as heretic and atheist. The simultaneous emergence of William Shakespeare as a name associated with poetry and drama, work universally described as being heavily influenced by Christopher Marlowe, appears to be no coincidence.

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References

1 “The poem is so smartly attuned to London literary fashions of the early 1590s that it must have been written if not in London, then in its literary atmosphere.” Burrow, Colin, ed. 2002. *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.8

2 “There is every reason to think that *Venus and Adonis* was the product of unusually careful and studied labour. It may have taken a considerable time to perfect, perhaps between six and ten months.” Duncan-Jones, Katherine. 2001. *Ungentle Shakespeare*. London: Thomson Learning. p.60

3 Greenblatt, Stephen. 2004. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company. p.229-30

4 See Graves, Michael A.R. 1998. *Burghley: William Cecil, Lord Burghley*. London: Addison-Wesley.

5 Akrigg, G.P.V. 1968. *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton*. Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. pp.32-3

6 Duncan-Jones, p.64

7 Akrigg, p. 34

8 The Oxfordian claim that, “only someone of equal or greater social standing to Southampton would dare to write a poem which treated the Earl like a disobedient child,” is hereby debunked. John Clapham did exactly that. He was a secretary.

9 Akrigg, p.196

10 Bakeless, John. 1942. *The Tragical History of Christopher Marlowe*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books. Vol II. p.263

11 Bakeless, p. 293

12 Bate, Jonathan. 1997. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd. p. 131

13 Burrow, p.12

14 See “Shakespeare and Richard Field,” at <http://shakespeareauthorship.com/field.html>, accessed July 11 2009.

15 See “William Shakespeare, Businessman – Forgotten genius,” at <http://marlowe-shakespeare.blogspot.com/2009/07/william-shakespeare-businessman.html>, accessed July 11, 2009.