

## A Salvo for Lucy Negro\*

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### 1.

As my correspondence shows me, since the October 1998 publication of my *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Oxfordians are the sub-literary equivalent of the sub-religious Scientologists. You don't want to argue with them, as they are dogmatic and abusive. I therefore will let the earl of Sobran be and confine myself to the poetic power of Shakespeare's sonnets, and the relation of that power to the now venerable quest to demonstrate that someone – anyone but 'the Man from Stratford' – wrote the plays and poems of William Shakespeare.

The academy, as everyone knows, is shot to pieces. Even at Yale, I am surrounded by courses in gender and power, transsexuality and queer theory, multiculturalism, and all the other splendors that now displace Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, and Dickens. But the worst may well be over. A decade ago, I would introduce my Graduate Shakespeare seminar (never my Undergraduate) by solemnly assuring the somewhat resentful students that all of Shakespeare, and not just the sonnets, had been written by Lucy Negro, Elizabethan England's most celebrated East Indian whore. Anthony Burgess, in his splendid fictive life, *Nothing Like the Sun*, had identified Lucy Negro as the Dark Lady of the sonnets and thus Shakespeare's peerless erotic catastrophe, resulting in heartbreak, venereal disease, and relatively early demise. Stone-faced (as best I could), I assured my

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graduate students that all their anxieties were to be set aside, since the lustful and brilliant Lucy Negro actually had composed the plays and sonnets. Thus they could abandon their political reservations and read 'Shakespeare' with assured correctness, since Lucy Negro was, by definition, multicultural, feminist, and post-colonial. And also, I told them, we could set aside the covens of Oxfordians, Marlovians, and Baconians in the name of the defrauded Lucy Negro.

Since I long ago joined Samuel Butler, who had proclaimed that the *Odyssey* was written by a woman, when I suggested in *The Book of J* that the Yahwist was a human female, I felt it would have been redundant had I introduced Lucy Negro into my Shakespeare book as the creator of Falstaff, Hamlet, Rosalind, Iago, Cleopatra, and the other glories of our language. And I propose to say no more about Lucy Negro here, except that she far outshines Oxford as a rival claimant, since she at least slept with Shakespeare! Instead I will devote the remainder of this brief meditation to a surmise as to why the Oxfordians, Marlovians, and Baconians cannot cease to try to badger the rest of us.

The sorrows of the poet of the sonnets are very complex, worthy of the best shorter poems in the language. In fact, we don't know for sure who this narcissistic young nobleman was, though Southampton will do, and there are many candidates for the Dark Lady, though none so exuberant as Lucy Negro. All we actually do know, quite certainly, is that the frequently unhappy (though remarkably restrained) poet indeed was Will Shakespeare. These are "his sugared sonnets among his private friends", doubtless a socially varied group extending all the way from lowlife actors (and Lucy Negro!) to the petulant Southampton, patron and (perhaps) sometime lover.

There is a shadow upon the sonnets, as upon so many of the darker Shakespearean plays. We can call it scandal or public notoriety, something that transcends the poet's ruefulness at being a poor player upon the stage of the Globe. If the late *Elegy for Will Peter* is Shakespeare's (and I think it is, despite being a weak poem), then the shadow of scandal lingered for more than a decade. Yet the sense of self-wounding is only a small edge of the greater show of morality, which is the authentic darkness of the best sonnets and of all Shakespeare from *Hamlet* onward. The sonnets are poetry for kings and for enchanted readers, because few besides Shakespeare can fully portray that shadow, which in this greatest of all poets becomes "millions of strange shadows".

2.

Astonishing as the sonnets remain, they are of a different order than, say, *As You Like It*, *Henry IV* (1 and 2), *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, and about a dozen other Shakespearean dramas. Most simply, the sonnets do not invent (or, if you prefer, represent) human beings. Necessarily more lyric than dramatic, these poems have their clear affinities with Falstaff and Hamlet and many more of Shakespeare's protagonists, and yet the affinities remain enigmatic. Unless you are a formalist or an historicist, Falstaff and Hamlet will compel you to see them as larger even than their plays, and as more 'real' than actual personages, alive or dead. But the speaker of the sonnets presents himself as a bewildering series of ambiguities. He is not and yet he is William Shakespeare the playmaker, and his two loves of comfort and despair, a young nobleman and a dark woman, never have the substance or the persuasive force of Anthony and Cleopatra, and of their peers in the greater plays. Shakespearean characters are adventures in consciousness; even the speaker of the sonnets evades that immensity. Of the inwardness of the fair young man and of the dark lady, we are given only intimations.

We cannot recover either the circumstances of the personal motives (if any) of the sonnets. *Love's Labour's Lost*, uniquely among the plays, shares the language of the sonnets. Shakespeare's apparent dilemma in the sonnets, rejection by beloved social superior, seems analogous to Falstaff's predicament in the *Henry IV* plays, but the speaker of the sonnets has little of Sir John Falstaff's vitality, wiliness, and aplomb. Some of the sonnets turn violently aside from life's lusts and ambitions, but these revulsions are rendered only rarely in Hamlet's idiom. It is dangerous to seek illuminations for the plays in the sonnets, though sometimes you can work back from the dramatic to the lyric Shakespeare. The poetic achievement of the sonnets has just enough of the playwright's uncanny power to show that we confront the same writer, but the awesome cognitive originality and psychological persuasiveness of the major dramas are subdued in all but a few of the sequences.

From at least *Measure for Measure* through *Othello*, and on through *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, sexuality is represented primarily as a torment – sometimes comic, more often not. As an archaic bardolator,

I am not inclined to separate this dramatic version of human reality from the playwright himself. Formalist and historicist critics frequently give me the impression that they might be more at home with Flaubert than with Shakespeare. The high erotic rancidity of *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Timon of Athens* is too consistently ferocious to be dramatic artifice alone, at least in my experience as a critical reader. The bed trick, harlotry, and venereal infection move very near the center of Shakespeare's vision of sexuality.

3.

Those who devote themselves to the hapless suggestion that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare are secret, perhaps unknowing resenters of his cognitive and imaginative power. The greatest of all converts to the Oxford lunacy was Dr Sigmund Freud, who could not acknowledge that his masterly forerunner had been a rather ordinary young man out of Stratford-upon-Avon. The earl of Oxford, dead before Shakespeare's last twelve dramas had even been composed, left behind some commonplace lyrics, not worthy of rereading. Those who resent Shakespeare always will be with us; our only response should be to return to the plays and the sonnets.