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INTERPRETATIONAL CIRCLE AS THE KEY PRINCIPLE OF THE PHILOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S NON-DRAMATIC TEXTS

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Abstract: Scholars engaged in the Shakespeare studies are familiar with the common problem arising in such kind of investigations – that of the insufficiency of the information concerning the biography of the great writer, the textual history of his works, the intended meaning of some of his texts. As the present research shows, in contrast to Shakespeare's dramatic texts whose biographical interpretations are largely unreliable, his non-dramatic works provide rich material for further biographical interpretations, these latter in their turn enabling the reader to come to a better understanding of texts under discussion. The present study is aimed at proving that the right approach to interpreting Shakespeare's non-dramatic works consists in moving within a kind of interpretational circle: after gathering the initial information about the content of a text and the more general context in which it was created, after realizing the objective limitations of a biographical approach to each particular text, a scholar may pass on to carefully extracting from a non-dramatic work by Shakespeare the information which may be treated as biographically and historically relevant.The analysis carried out in the paper has shown that Shakespeare's sonnets are the most fruitful material for gathering biographical information and that the interpretation of the texts of the sonnets as such does not require any profound knowledge of the general historical and cultural context, while the text of "The Phoenix and the Turtle" cannot be understood without taking recourse to the widest imaginable historical and cultural information; Shakespeare's narrative poems "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece" may be placed in-between these two extremes.

Keywords: interpretational circle, William Shakespeare, Shakespearean studies, Shakespeare's Sonnets, "Venus and Adonis", "The Rape of Lucrece", "The Phoenix and the Turtle".

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1. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's biography and his literary works have been investigated for so long and in such minute detail that it might seem that at present little can be added to the mammoth collection of objective facts revealed by previous generations of scholars and to the interpretations of these facts offered by clear-sighted and well-informed philologists. This, however, is not the case. In Shakespearology there are very few points upon which general consensus has been reached, and the relationship between biography and text in Shakespeare's case is one of the most celebrated questions provoking mutually exclusive answers. Due to the relative insufficiency of information concerning the great Bard's biography scholars tend to turn to his texts in the hope of gleaning at least some scraps of additional knowledge; due to the relative obscurity of some of his texts philologists turn to Shakespeare's biography in the hope of clarifying the meaning of the texts they are studying. In a situation like this matters of methodology inevitably come to the fore, and as within this approach the figure of the real man from Stratford takes pride of place, the immanent analysis is of necessity to be disregarded here, the exasperating cautiousness of the relativist-minded critics saying that nothing really can be taken for granted in any academic investigation is to be ignored as well. This does not mean to say that a Shakespearologist studying and interpreting the moot points of the biography and the texts of the great author may give free rein to imagination and improvisation. As because of the insufficiency of information a scholar is likely to work mainly with circumstantial evidence, he is to check and recheck his assumptions and his conclusions separately and en masse, trying to arrive at a more plausible interpretation of Shakespeare's biography and his texts compared to what has been offered by this scholar's predecessors.

The present article is meant for a wide circle of readers, professional scholars, teachers, and students, who specialize in philology, history, and cultural studies. As it touches upon the problems connected not only with Shakespearology but with the XVI century English literature and English and European history generally, it may help to broaden the readers' horizons and inspire them further on to conduct their own independent research.

The reference material given at the end of the article reflects but a tiny bit of the relevant investigations, but it is not too succinct all the same. As the subject under study is not widely known, introducing some hierarchy within the sources mentioned is deemed to be necessary. Of particular importance in this context are the following books mentioned in the References: [Chambers, 1930], [Chambrun, 1957], [Sams, 1997], [Wilson, 2004], [Asquith, 2005], [Hogge, 2005], [Heylin, 2009], [Dodwell, 2013], [Asquith, 2018].

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

When in the 1940s Leo Spitzer [Spitzer, 1948] introduced the notion of a "philological circle" as the key principle of analyzing works of verbal art in the unity of their form and content in order to reveal the linguistic elements responsible for creating a certain aesthetic effect, he must have been aware of the fact that he was speaking about much more general things inherent to scientific research as a whole. When a certain dual relationship is investigated, like that of form and content in a work of verbal art, one may move from establishing the significance of a particular linguistic element within the conceptual system of a text, see whether the element in question exhausts the aesthetic linguistic description of the text, and if it does not, one should return to the linguistic description of the text yet again to reveal other elements which when brought together may give a

more satisfying answer to the question concerning the aesthetic uniqueness of the text under investigation. Analysis and synthesis here go side by side, and the procedure should be repeated several times, when the units deduced analytically are studied at another level of investigation, and the validity of the conclusion made is later checked by going back to yet another series of analytical operations.

Inspired by Spitzer's idea of moving from the particular to the general and then back to the particular, we have found a certain analogy between his methodology of stylistic analysis and the principles underlying the investigations in those present-day Shakespeare studies where historical and biographical material of various kinds is introduced in order to interpret Shakespeare's texts whose content thus clarified is used in its turn to further the initial historical and biographical knowledge the scholars possess. What we encounter in this case is the interpretational circle, if we may put it this way, and moving from a textual detail to biography and history and then back to the imaginative text is not the only possible direction of study, for we may start with a biographical or historical detail and look for the corresponding information in a text, so as to return to biography or history at the next stage of the analysis. Whatever the starting point, the interpretational circle is evident throughout, and it is the analysis of this methodological phenomenon as applied to William Shakespeare's non-dramatic works that we will now give our attention to.

The non-dramatic works we are about to analyze in the present article are Shakespeare's Sonnets, his narrative poems "Venus and Adonis" (1593) and "The Rape of Lucrece" (1594), and the poem "The Phoenix and the Turtle" (1601). There are two more non-dramatic texts in Shakespeare's oeuvre, "The Passionate Pilgrim" and "A Lover's Complaint", but as their authenticity is not immediately apparent and is heavily compromised, we decided to confine ourselves to the texts which are widely considered to have been written specifically by William Shakespeare and to find the way into the Shakespearean cannon without any suspicion of forgery.

The non-dramatic works were chosen for our interpretational circle analysis for the following reason: in contrast to the dramatic texts which should not be treated as appropriate material for revealing their author's views and biography (shall we equate Shakespeare with Iago or with Othello or with Shylock or with Antonio or with Bassanio?), non-dramatic texts offer a more obvious connection between what is said in them and who says it, although all the same there is a certain biographical distance between the real man and the author the way he reveals himself in the Sonnets, for example. Shakespeare's non-dramatic works do not offer tantalizing difficulties as to the time of their creation and their publication (the Sonnets, in this case, being the one notable exception), which makes it easier to draw biographical parallels and simultaneously not to incur criticism of those otherwise hostile scholars who adhere to the mutually exclusive chronological theories concerning the time Shakespeare's "Hamlet" was created and first performed (the dating here ranges from 1589 to 1602).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The interpretation circle as applied to the four non-dramatic works just mentioned (we would prefer to treat the Sonnets as a single collection rather than as 154 separate texts) begins in every case with a summary of their content and some brief information concerning the dates of their writing and subsequent publication, as well as the addressees of the texts explicitly specified. It is correspondingly 1) a highly emotional account of the relations between a poet and his young patron, between a poet and a certain Dark Lady, and between the three of them, this account being preceded by a group of the 17 "procreation sonnets"; 2) an Ovid-based and radically reconsidered story of

Venus and Adonis, where the young gentleman stays cold to the advances of the sexually aggressive Venus and finds his death when trying to kill a monstrous boar during the hunt; 3) an Ovid-based story of a Roman noblewoman called Lucrece raped by a princeling called Tarquin, (this awful fact she reports to her husband and her father to call for vengeance), and committing suicide immediately after the relevant information is imparted to her relatives; 4) a mysterious description of a gathering of birds who came to lament the untimely death of the Phoenix and the Turtle, an ideal couple whose members formed one indivisible entity and simultaneously retained their separateness and uniqueness, and whose demise marks the extinction of Beauty, Rarity and Grace.

Chronologically, the most difficult case is the Sonnets which were first published as a collection in 1609, but the time when the bulk of the collection was written, in the opinion of different scholars, ranges from the beginning of the 1590s to the year 1597 and onwards; the main text is supplied with a dedication where two sets of initials are adduced ("Mr.W.H." and "T.T."), the first of these being one of the seemingly inscrutable riddles of Shakespearology. With the three other texts no serious chronological discrepancies are found: the two narrative poems were published with an explicit dedication to one and the same person, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, in 1593 and 1594 respectively, and could not have been written much earlier than that, while the poem "The Phoenix and the Turtle" was published within the so-called "Chester Collection" in 1601 and apparently has got nothing to do with the general dedication preceding this collection. The content, the chronology, and the potential dedicatees thus tentatively or confidently clarified and identified, it is time for us to turn to the interpretational circle and to see whether there is any difference in the approach to the four texts mentioned with respect to their content and the historical and biographical information to be received if the circular movement is repeated several times.

Trite and irritating though some saws may be, in connection with the Sonnets it is difficult not to agree that in them Shakespeare must have revealed some secrets of his heart. Thus, it is tempting to start extracting from them biographical information at once, to discuss their chronological and thematic order (the inference here being that the original order of writing must have been consciously violated when they were first published), and to group and regroup them according to one's own revelatory insights. From this point of view the Sonnets seem to be the exact opposite of "The Phoenix and the Turtle", for the latter is conceptually so hermetic that without an adequate biographical interpretation, the reader will be unable to appreciate the text (if only he does not agree with placing it within the Parlement-of-Foules tradition). With the two narrative poems getting in-between these two extremes ("Venus and Adonis" still being closer to the Sonnets and "The Rape of Lucrece" in some sense approaching "The Phoenix and the Turtle"), we receive a working classification of texts to be treated differently in terms of the interpretational circle, the textual component being the key to biography and history in the first two cases and the biographical and historical component being the primary one compared to the textual component in the last two instances.

By and large, this statement is true, but there is one important reservation to be made here. Whatever the biographical value of the Sonnets, we cannot begin to interpret them biographically straightaway, because first, we need to establish when they were written and to whom they were addressed. In the absence of direct evidence, we have to turn to the circumstantial information, which strongly suggests Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton (1573-1624), as the dedicatee of the Sonnets. Southampton was the only benefactor Shakespeare is known to have had during his lifetime, his two narrative poems were dedicated to the young earl. Southampton lost his father when he was 8 years old and became a ward of the all-powerful William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth's chief minister. In the years 1590-1591 Southampton was 17 and reluctant to get mar-

ried, which was deplored by his mother and his grandfather, as Southampton's refusal to marry his guardian's granddaughter was fraught with him having to pay an exorbitant fine to the Cecil family and could have ruined the Southamptons financially. The Sonnet cycle begins with the 17 "procreation sonnets", where the author implores the addressee to get married immediately and to produce offspring; otherwise, in the absence of progeny, posterity would have no idea of how beautiful the young gentleman was, and Nature itself would be offended at such a waste. A strange line of reasoning indeed, if the texts were addressed to a very young man, but quite understandable if they were commissioned by the young gentleman's mother who knew he was in love with poetry and due to the persuasiveness of the poetic imploring could be cajoled into entering upon the problematic marriage project. Further circumstantial evidence (the texts of the *Parnassus plays* and of *Willobie his Avisa* [Sams, 1997, pp. 86-102]) suggests direct parallels between the situations described in the Sonnets and the biographical information which may be extracted from the non-Shakespearean texts just mentioned, and the case for Southampton as the dedicatee of the Sonnets could be considered complete if it had not been for one awkward detail – Southampton's abbreviated name is H.W., and not W.H., who was the supposed addressee of the Sonnets.

Many a serious scholar has stumbled upon this indisputable fact, which to many was the unsurmountable obstacle to discarding the Southampton theory altogether. As a result, an apparently true Mr. W.H. was found among Shakespeare's supposed surroundings – William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke (1580-1630). Like Southampton, William Herbert was reluctant to get married at a young age, he was a patron of arts, handsome, courageous, and dashing [Heylin, 2009], and in addition to these prerequisite qualities he is mentioned in the obsequious dedication to the first edition of Shakespeare's Complete Plays (the 1st Folio of 1623), this dedication having been written by Shakespeare's fellow-actors John Hemminge and Henry Condell to express their gratitude to Pembroke and his brother Earl of Montgomery for help in preparing the 1st Folio for publication and for being the patrons of the deceased playwright while he was still alive.

Putting forward a candidate like this requires some doctoring of the crucial circumstantial evidence (the *Parnassus plays* and *Willobie his Avisa*, for example), and the line "You had a father" from Sonnet XIII is a good example of how difficult it is to explain away the overt reference to the addressee's "fatherless" state, which is quite natural if in connection with the "procreation sonnets," we are talking about Southampton, and which is quite inexplicable if we think it applies to William Herbert who lost his father at the age of 21. If because of Herbert's identification "the procreation sonnets" are to be moved to the year 1601 instead of 1590-1591, it flatly contradicts other incontrovertible textual references involving matters of chronology. The same, incidentally, applies to Sonnet CXXIV, which begins with the lines "If my dear love were but the child of state / It might for Fortune's bastard be unfather'd", containing the lexis one would naturally associate with Southampton in his adolescence. But the temptation proves too great, as the problematic W.H. abbreviation corresponds neatly to what the Pembroke theorists intended to find.

When confronted with this seemingly irrefutable evidence and with the suppression of some other diametrically opposite but equally irrefutable evidence, an uninitiated reader may feel at a loss and may wish to forget about it all, thinking that there is little chance that the impasse in question will ever be broken. However, the English-speaking academic community should be well aware of the fact that the stalemate had ended as far back as the year 1957 (for the French-speaking reader it was the year 1947) when the groundbreaking posthumous edition of Countess de Chambrun's book "Shakespeare: A Portrait Restored" was published [Chambrun, 1957]. Blissfully unrestricted by the necessity to take into account the intricate Protestant-biased traditions of British and American Shakespearology, the French scholar of American origin Clara Longworth de Chambrun

(1873-1954) had an exhaustive knowledge of Shakespeare's works and his epoch, and so she was prepared to search for evidence in the direction no Protestant scholar was likely to explore. In her book, she offers a score of outstanding discoveries, and her answers to the questions concerning the identity of Mr. W.H. and the exact meaning of the dedication to the Sonnets are a good example of how profoundly she knew the epoch she was writing about [Chambrun 1957, pp.118-121].

The dedication placed after the title page of the 1609 edition of the Sonnets runs as follows:

TO. THE. ONLIE. BEGETTER. OF.
THESE. INSUING. SONNETS.
Mr. W.H. ALL. HAPPINESS.
AND. THAT. ETERNITY.
PROMISED.
BY.
OUR. EVER-LIVING. POET.
WISHETH.
THE. WELL-WISHING.
ADVENTURER. IN.
SETTING.
FORTH.
T.T.

As all the words in the dedication are singled out with the help of the ornamental dots it is not at once apparent whether we are dealing with one sentence or with two and whether Mr. W.H. is an indirect object if the whole text is read as one sentence or the subject of the first sentence if we divide the text into two sentences.

One thing is clear so far: the dedication is not written by Shakespeare, for it is signed by the publisher Thomas Thorpe (T.T.), but it may mean either "Thomas Thorpe wishes happiness and eternity to Mr. W.H. who is the only begetter (inspirer or procurer) of the sonnets" or "Mr. W.H. wishes happiness and eternity to the unnamed begetter (here it is undoubtedly 'the inspirer') of the sonnets, of which the publisher informs the public and emphasizes his warm attitude to the enterprise he is part of". The division into two sentences is endorsed by the fact that the lines beginning with the words "the well-wishing" are spatially separated from the previous part of the dedication. But the crucial evidence against Mr. W.H. being the inspirer of the Sonnets comes from altogether unexpected quarters: a dedication to the volume of spiritual poetry – attributed to the Jesuit martyr Saint Robert Southwell (1561-1595), but probably written by an eminent English Catholic aristocrat Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel – produced in 1606 by a London printer George Eld who three years later would print Shakespeare's Sonnets for Thomas Thorpe [Chambrun, 1957, pp. 119-121]. This volume of spiritual poetry also contains a dedication (mercifully, with no ornamental dots this time) signed by the very same person – W.H. – and written in a syntactically unambiguous form: "To the Right Worshipfull and Vertuous Gentleman, Mathew Saunders Esquire. W.H. wisheth, with long life, a prosperous achievement of his good desires" [Chambrun, 1957, p.120]. After this preamble comes an explanation of what this volume of poetry is like, to be followed by the final phrase: "Your Worships unfeigned affectionate W.H." [Chambrun, 1957, p.120]. The printer George Eld and, judging by the structure of the dedication, the W.H. in both cases are the same people, the latter most emphatically being not the addressee, but the procurer of the Sonnets who had passed the manuscript to the publisher.

As for the identity of the mysterious Mr. W.H., Countess de Chambrun suggests that it was a certain William Hervey (c.1565-1642), a step-father of the Earl of Southampton, an eminent man of letters and a politician with expressed Catholic sympathies (hence his participation in the publishing of Southwell's and/or Howard's "Four Meditations"), who after the demise of Southampton's mother in 1607 became his wife's sole legatee and who was uniquely placed to prepare the text of the Sonnets for publication [Chambrun, 1957, p.121]. The identification of Mr. W.H. is a lot less significant if he is not the addressee of the Sonnets, but it is relevant for recreating the Sonnets' textual history, and for this reason we decided to introduce the explanation of who he was side by side with the by far more exciting ideas concerning the actual addressee's identity.

It would have been natural if specialists in Shakespeare studies had gratefully accepted the knowledge their French colleague was so generously imparting. After all, she was a recognized scholar with a doctoral degree from the Sorbonne and an incumbent of the French Academy's prestigious Bordin Prize, no mere under-informed and unproductive amateur. But in this case, like in many other similar situations, the availability of the results of a particular research was exacerbated by the availability of the results of a plethora of other particular studies, which makes it impossible even for like-minded persons to read their peers' works thoroughly or to read them at all. All things considered, it comes as no surprise that Clare Asquith, a convinced propagator of the Catholic dimension in Shakespearology does not mention the Countess in either of her two seminal books [Asquith, 2005; Asquith, 2018], that Eric Sams [Sams, 1997], a brilliant specialist in Shakespeare's "lost years" to which the creation of the Sonnets is rightfully attributed, includes two of the Countess's books in his bibliography, but offers an erroneous syntactic interpretation of the dedication with Mr. W.H. (correctly identified as William Hervey) in the capacity of the indirect object, while Richard Wilson includes the 1957 edition in his bibliography [Wilson, 2004] without mentioning William Hervey anywhere in his text, for all his obvious interest in everything connected with Saint Robert Southwell. Compulsory higher education is no good thing, and Shakespearology would have fared much better had the ranks of the would-be specialists been reduced to a passable minimum.

Now let us return to the main subject of the present paper. The discussion of the textual history of the Sonnets and their potential "begetters" is the kind of preliminary information anyone who wishes to enter an interpretational circle as applied to Shakespeare's sonnet sequence must possess. The itinerary from biography to text thus cleared, it is now possible to use the text of the sonnets as the starting point and to begin suggesting theories concerning the relations of the characters delineated, always checking these postulates through reference to the existing historical information. No less justified is the purely aesthetic approach, which consists in reading the Sonnets the way they are, without any reference to the likely prototypes of their characters or the situations possibly reflected in the texts themselves.

Interpreting "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece" is a more challenging task, for both texts are based on an allegory which is much more global than the one we occasionally come across in a particular sonnet or group of sonnets. With "Venus and Adonis", however, the situation is less complicated, as the lascivious and not-so-young Venus is rather obviously associated with Queen Elizabeth whose amorous courting of the adolescent Adonis strongly resembles the enforced love the Virgin Queen was trying to impose upon her reluctant subjects, all the while expecting reciprocity which she hardly ever received from people like Henry Wriothesley. The poem should be read as a warning to those mercilessly courted and effectively bridled by the state, and after clearing the path from history to text one might move in the opposite direction, using the interpretational circle as leading from text to biography, drawing amusing or stunning parallels

between the behavior of Elizabeth and that of Venus with her implicit sympathy to the murderous boar pig who appears to have shared her love for Adonis, or the behavior of young English aristocrats with pronounced Catholic leanings and that of Adonis whose only desire is to be left alone and not to be importuned by protestations of aggressive love he is not willing to share. Many minor details of the narration may be important here, and the method to be used when moving around the interpretational circle is precisely the same as it is with the Sonnets: it is either an unhurried quest for parallels and allusions or concentration on the poem as such, completely disregarding any potential parallelism.

Not so with "The Rape of Lucrece". In the dedication to the Earl of Southampton preceding "Venus and Adonis" Shakespeare promised his patron to honour him "with some graver labour", and he was as good as his word publishing his second narrative poem just a year after the first one got to the printer's press. Graver surely it is, for the husband innocently boasting of his wife's fidelity manages to provoke the wild jealousy of a princeling who subsequently gets into the couple's house in the absence of the husband, premeditates rape, is entertained by the unsuspecting wife who shortly after supper goes to her private chamber and falls asleep, to be woken up by the rapist who had finally made up his mind and discarded all moral qualms which had initially prevented him from acting according to his sinister plan. Lucrece asks for mercy but receives none, she is ravished by Tarquin who leaves the place shortly after he had satisfied his lust, and Lucrece is left disconsolate, finding it impossible to continue living after the infamous act had taken place. The only way out of this impossible situation, in her opinion, is a suicide, which she commits in the presence of her husband and her father whom she had previously summoned to hear her sorry tale. Under the leadership of Lucius Junius Brutus the infuriated Romans dethrone the Tarquin dynasty, the republican rule is established, and the rapist together with his family is sentenced to eternal exile from Rome.

This text may be read as yet another piece of ancient literature faithfully retold by the 16th-century English poet of genius, but there are several points in the text which do not allow such a straightforward interpretation. Why does it take Shakespeare so long to show the moral qualms of the rapist in the making? Why does Lucrece speak at such length of the Opportunity? Why does Lucrece study so carefully the picture showing the siege of Troy and why does she become so furious at the sight of one particular character painted in the picture – namely, Sinon? Other questions are less significant, but they are also there: for example, why do Collatine and Lucretius begin an unseemly quarrel over Lucrece's dead body and why does everybody eventually agree to follow Brutus?

One way to be rid of these questions is to say that according to the euphuistic tradition of his times Shakespeare chose to be nauseatingly long-winded and that the text is to be taken at its face value – as an overelaborate retelling of an ancient tale. But an attentive reader coming across such metaphorical descriptions of Lucrece as "the late-sacked island" (1740), which is "bare and unpeopled" (1741), such visual descriptions of the heroine as "her bare breast, the heart of all her land" (439), "to make the breach and enter this sweet city" (469), a "never-conquered fort" (482) "her mansion battered by the enemy" (1171) and many others, may feel that after all there must be some global allegory here concealed under the over-ornate style. What if the raped Lucrece is the personification of a raped country, as these regularly repeated metaphors seem to imply? There are definite historical parallels between the old tale retold and the veiled description of the desperate state of England in the 1590s, which Shakespeare consistently carries out in his second narrative poem, beginning with Henry VIII's rapacious attack on the ecclesiastical system of his own country [Clark, 2021; Schroder, 2020], the dissolution of its monasteries [Willmott, 2020] on a scale

not comparable to anything done by Protestants in other European countries [Jakobsen, 2021]. In the near-destruction of his country's unique spirituality the king was supported by opportunists of various kinds, Henry Wriothesley's own grandfather included, and all this was followed by years of indecision on the part of the suppressed adherents of the old religion who preferred setting old scores to any coherent resistance [Asquith, 2018], the only acceptable solution, in this case, being the dethroning of a monarch turned tyrant (Brutus is introduced in the poem in the capacity of a national liberation leader). Here parallels are self-evident, and they are not the result of the reader's fantasy running wild – they are firmly rooted in the metaphorical system of the text hinting at the presence of some global allegory behind the unhurried narration.

All these points require no detailed discussion, but in one case the reader feels understandably puzzled. Why is it that Shakespeare thought it apt to introduce an inexplicably long scene when Lucrece is studying the picture of the destruction of Troy? Why does she fall into an uncontrolled fury at the sight of the figure of Sinon whose pictorial image makes her so incandescent with rage that she tears the picture of "the senseless Sinon with her nails" (1564)? Shortly before that Lucrece equates Sinon with Tarquin and expresses utter disbelief at the feigned dignity of the appearance of this vile person who had caused the fall of Troy. If there was a person in Shakespeare's England who had wreaked on the country a devastation comparable to the fall of Troy and, Tarquin-like, had raped it, all the while feigning mildness and restraint, it was Southampton's guardian William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Due to the platitudes he periodically used to utter – "Live not in the country without corn and cattle about thee, for he that must present his hand to the purse for every expense of household may be likened to him that keeps water in a sieve" [Wright, 1962, p.11] – he is sometimes seen as a prototype of Polonius, Ophelia's garrulous father, but the analogy here is false. Burghley was a much more sinister and infinitely more powerful politician than his would-be substitute from "Hamlet". Apart from producing dicta in the Chinese-sage style, during his long and uninterrupted career Burghley kept robbing wealthy families through the intricate system of wardships and generously helped himself and his family to the spoils; Edmund Spenser in his "Mother Hubberd's Tale" (1591) could not miss an opportunity to satirize the behavior of the revered politician describing him as a Fox who overfeeds his cubs and introducing a somewhat cruel allusion to the deformity of Burghley's younger son Robert Cecil:

> He fed his cubs with fat of all the soil,
> And with the sweet of others sweating toil;
> He crammed them with the crumbs of Benefices,
> And fill'd their mouthes with meeds of malefices:
> He clothed them with all colours, save white,
> And loaded them with lordships and with might,
> So much as they were able well to bear,
> That with the weight their backs nigh broken were [Spenser, 1904, p.523].

Not satisfied with mere self-aggrandizement, Burghley invented and applied harsh legislation against Catholics and Puritans, which ranged from heavy fines and banishment to interminable imprisonment and execution (among Burghley's many victims special mention should be made of Mary Stuart, the martyr Scottish queen [Graham, 2008]).

Combining it all with entering upon hopelessly ineffective international warfare whose sole result was the death or the invalidization of so many young people, Burghley placed the country in a situation of acute crisis similar to that caused by Henry VIII's harsh policies. Henry the Tarquin and Burghley the Sinon had destruction as their preferred method of dealing with the opponents, they were true connoisseurs in the art of dissimulation, they invented or accepted financial schemes

which led to their personal advancement and simultaneously impoverishing their people, they were engaged in grandiose building projects, they started wars that were not likely ever to end. Lucrece had every reason to hate people of this kind, the rapists of the first order that they were, though only one of them had brutally violated her person. If Lucrece is the allegorical representation of the despoiled soul of England similar to the destroyed soul of Troy, to her and especially to the readers of her sad story the actions of both Tarquin and Sinon are equally pernicious. Lucrece's hatred would be shared by the understanding readers of Shakespeare's poem whose chief addressee, the Earl of Southampton, had been constantly humiliated and nearly ruined by the deludingly mild old man.

Venus and Sinon make a nice couple indeed, each of them given a narrative poem of their own where Spenser would bring them together (the Fox and the Ape of the repressed "Mother Hubberd's Tale"), but though separated, these two very clearly epitomize the misdeeds of their prototypes – Elizabeth Tudor and William Cecil – and their catastrophic mismanagement of the country which was unfathomably unfortunate to have been governed for so many years by the senior politicians of this kind. Characteristically, none of the two modern biographies of Burghley [Alford, 2008] and of Burghley and his family [Loades, 2007] goes so far as to mention Spenser or Spenser's text, while in Spenser's recently published biography [Hadfield, 2012] the Mother Hubberd episode is introduced – but without the mentioning of Queen Elizabeth. As we can see, Shakespeare's narrative poems were not the first to satirize and condemn the ill-assorted couple, though some historians are not very comfortable about this obvious fact even nowadays.

Burghley and his coterie were everywhere. Infiltration was the favoured tactic of Elizabeth's secret services [Haynes, 2009], and some fellow playwrights of Shakespeare were ready to side with the winners. Thus, Thomas Norton (1532-1584), the co-author of the famous "Gorboduc", combined his literary pursuits with being a rack master and was responsible for personally torturing the captured Catholic priests and laymen. An M.P. for Berwick (1562), he was competing in perfecting his rack-mastery with an M.P. for Beverly (1572) and later for Old Sarum (1584, 1586), called Richard Topcliffe (1531-1604), a psychopath and a sadist commissioned personally – and secretly – by the Queen to eradicate Catholicism in the country and authorized by the Privy Council to use torture as a matter of course. Elizabeth's personal contribution to the elimination of her opponents and the espionage effort may seem quantitatively unimpressive, but the quality of the work done by the particular highly professional and dedicated psychopath she had hired was beyond reproach. If he ever failed, he failed rarely, unable to break the spirit of a convinced Catholic and a future martyr of Robert Southwell's caliber [Hogge, 2005]. The rational and pragmatic Queen Elizabeth forgave Topcliffe this failure, being aware of the fact that in certain cases even committed professionals are powerless.

The other two playwrights we are going to mention here had no such lofty connections and assumed the more mundane role of an *agent provocateur.* The first of them is Anthony Munday (1560? – 1633) who as a young man infiltrated the Rome English Seminary [Devlin, 1969], was honoured – impossibly! – by attending an audience with the ageing pontiff, revealed to the English government the identities of so many Catholics returning to England from Italy and acted as a witness at the November 1581 trial where the celebrated Jesuit priest Edmund Campion (1540-1581) and his comrades were condemned to death through being hanged, drawn and quartered, on trumped-up charges of participating in a mass conspiracy to murder the queen. The second playwright to be added to the list is Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), who was no less successful in infiltrating the Rheims seminary and in divulging to the authorities the names of people who had trusted him [Judd, 2021]. Temperamentally he was very different from Munday (the latter being a circumspect sycophant), and instead of living until the ripe old age Marlowe met an untimely

violent death at the hands of his colleagues – the government spies. Not that those members of the spying community had any specific grudge against Marlowe, it was business pure and simple throughout, as they were ordered to get rid of an agent who was gradually turning into a liability and a security risk.

In the intelligence hierarchy, whose members were one way or another connected with the theatre, there was room even for a lowlier placed group of agents who specialized in eavesdropping, though the work of *agent provocateur* was not entirely unfamiliar or inaccessible to them. Here we mean actors, some of them talented, some of them not, who used their professional gift of the gab to induce the unsuspecting interlocutors to share their innermost thoughts and grievances with their attentive listeners [Andrew & Green, 2021, pp.11-32]. Typically, the continuation would be the following: the actors quietly moved to another place where they would combine theatre with surveillance, while those who had been imprudent enough to share dangerous opinions with complete strangers would be routinely arrested and interrogated in accordance with the principles actively propagated by Norton and Topcliffe. Such were the conditions under which William Shakespeare lived and worked, and such were the people with whom he had to establish professional and personal ties.

When treated as an old tale retold, "The Raping of Lucrece" requires no commentary at all. When read as a global allegory – and we have every reason to believe that it was intended as such – Shakespeare's narrative poem should be analyzed within the interpretational circle when careful attention should be given to the full story of English Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the interrelation between history and text inevitably shifts in the direction of history. The interpretational circle, however, remains intact, for first we look at a detail like Cardinal Wolsey alerting Henry VIII to the wealth and the glory the pre-reformed English Church possessed and see whether it fits in the general context of "The Rape of Lucrece"; on getting an affirmative answer we turn to other details like those concerning Henry's opportunist associates and see whether it also fits in; and thus we continue moving around the interpretational circle, accepting certain parallels and discarding some other, until we get a more or less plausible explanation of what the global allegory lying at the heart of "The Rape of Lucrece" is called upon to reveal.

Having thus considered the three texts whose interpretation requires ever-increasing attention to history, we will now turn to the last example where the role of history and biography is especially great. The text we will be speaking about is the mysterious poem "The Phoenix and the Turtle" published under Shakespeare's name in 1601.

The most commendable thing about this truly hermetic text is that it consists of 67 lines only. Had it been the size of "Venus and Adonis", for example, it would have become absolutely impossible to interpret, and the other three works of Shakespeare we have talked about in this paper would have been included in the hopeless category of "also-ran" in our imaginary non-interpretability competition.

In the first 5 stanzas of the poem several birds are mentioned who are invited to be present at the funeral rites accompanying the burial of the Phoenix and the Turtle; in the next 8 stanzas the unusual non-marital spiritual relations of this apparently married couple are described with the idea that in their case one plus one made one constantly repeated; the last 15 lines state the fact that on the demise of the two birds the world has lost its precious essential qualities. Shakespeare's text contradicts the traditional Phoenix legend in that there is no resurrection of the mysterious bird, which in Shakespeare's poem is coupled with an equally significant mate – again, contrary to the

tradition. A versificatory exercise it could be, an original twisting of the old legend with no hidden meaning to be attached to it, but any sensitive reader is likely to disagree with this interpretation – for reasons unquantifiable and purely intuitive, as there is too much emotion in the following lines of the poem for it to be a mere poetic experiment:

Here the anthem doth commence:
Love and constancy is dead;
Phoenix and the Turtle fled
In a mutual flame from hence.

So they loved, that love in twain
Had the essence but in one;
Two distincts, division none:
Number there in love was slain. (21-28).

In the absence of allusions to islands, forts, and cities which have served as a key to the true identity of Lucrece and Tarquin the only clue to the hidden meaning of the hermetic text we are dealing with now is the description of the details of the funeral rites with its mentioning of 'the requiem' – "Lest the requiem lack his right" (16), and of prayers for the dead – "For these dead birds sigh a prayer" (67). A requiem as part of the funeral service is a specifically Catholic phenomenon not found in the Protestant tradition; the same applies to the prayers for the dead, which were banned in Elizabethan England. The invitation to "sigh a prayer" was sufficiently seditious in the year 1601, when the poem was published, for Shakespeare not to leave any clearer clues as to the identity of people disguised under the heavy veil of allegory. Given the general tragic tone of the poem and the reference to tyranny, our search then narrows down to a couple engaged in chaste marital relations, professing Catholicism and passing away under tragic circumstances about the year 1601. The identification of Phoenix as Anne Line [Dodwell, 2013], a devout Catholic who for several years had been in charge of a safe house in London where Catholic priests returning to England from the continent found shelter and who was sentenced to death and executed for these clandestine activities (the execution took place on February 27, 1601) was first suggested by Countess de Chambrun [Chambrun, 1957, pp.238-247] and is now supported by a number of scholars (who would have done well to have acknowledged the borrowing). The Turtle is more difficult to identify, the candidates here being either Roger Line (the husband of Anne, who was imprisoned and banished for his Catholic views in the 1580s and who died in Flanders several years before Anne's execution) or the Benedictine priest Mark Barkworth who was executed together with Anne, but no record of their communication prior to the day of the execution survives.

The identification, of course, is purely hypothetical. But accepting Anne Line as a prototype allows one to arrive at a convincing list of further identifications: "the bird of loudest lay" from the first line of the poem could have been William Byrd, the leading composer at Elizabeth's court, specializing among other things in Catholic liturgical music; Henry Garnet, head of the Jesuit mission in England, is a likely candidate for the role of "a treble-dated crow"; John Gerard, an English Jesuit who supervised Anne Line's work as a hostess of a safe house, is "the death-divining swan" who is conducting the funeral service; the eagle who could not have been present physically but is still invited is King James VI of Scotland, son to the martyr Catholic Scottish queen Mary Stuart; the shrieking harbinger who is debarred from attending the ceremony is the pursuivant and the torturer Richard Topcliffe whom we have already mentioned in connection with "The Rape of Lucrece".

The poem as a whole may be treated as a requiem commemorating the gradual extinction of Catholic spirituality, a text much more pessimistic compared to that of "The Rape of Lucrece" and auguring nothing good for England. The explanation for the poet's demoralized state is not difficult to find, as the tragic death of Anne Line coincided with the execution of the Earl of Essex on February 25, 1601, and the concomitant incarceration of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, for his participation in the Essex rebellion, who was to spend more than two years in the Tower and to be released after Elizabeth's death by King James.

Thus, this most hermetic of Shakespeare's texts may be deciphered through turning to contemporary history and to the writer's biography. Moving around the interpretational circle, in this case, gives pretty little to infer about the author's life story from the text, but offers a lot for the understanding of the text itself due to analyzing the broader historical and biographical context.

4. GENERAL CONCLUSION

As our analysis has shown, William Shakespeare's non-dramatic texts – some of them under-anthologized and underestimated – are not just beautiful pieces of writing unrelated to the actual events of his life and to the history of his country generally. Their immanent interpretation leads to failure and without an understanding of the why and the wherefore the reader is unlikely to appreciate them. The productive analysis of these works of verbal art involves moving round the interpretational circle, from history to text and then back from text to history. Biographical and historical inferences are most profitable, multiple, and convincing in the case of the Sonnets, less so with "Venus and Adonis", while "The Rape of Lucrece" and especially "The Phoenix and the Turtle" are next to incomprehensible without the extensive knowledge of extralinguistic information, and in their interpretation, one should move almost exclusively from history to text, and practically never from text to history.

Conflict of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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