

A Biographical Approach to the Sonnets in the EFL Classroom

By Robert Detobel and Elke Brackmann

Sonnet 134

Lead-in:

1. Think – pair – share:

"I hold it true, whate'er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all."

(from Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, 1850)

- I. Think about whether these lines written about 160 years ago are still true nowadays.
- II. Exchange your views with a partner and jot down your ideas.
- III. Classroom discussion!

2. Pair work:

Obviously there are many ways of how love relationships come to an end. Write them down, then make a ranking as to the amount of pain the different ways of separating imply.

Language awareness:

- a) Check the following expressions in the box in an English-English dictionary and then decide which of the German equivalents (in the other box) suit the legal terms best:

On bail - to bail s.o. out - to be mortgaged - to forfeit - surety - a bond - statute - a usurer - to sue - a debtor - a loan - a loan shark

Ein Schuldner - Hypothekenschulden haben - Verfassung/Satzung - für jd. die Kautions stellen - jd. verklagen - ein Wucherer - ein Kredit - auf Kautions - ein Kredithai - Kautions/schriftl. Verpflichtung/Vertrag/Schuldverschreibung - einbüßen/Schulden bezahlen/verwirken/verfallen - Bürgschaft/Bürge

b) Now fill in the correct words:

- (1) The small business ended up in the hands of a terrible
.....
- (2) Under theof the organization the nurse was not allowed to work abroad as she did not have all the necessary qualifications.
- (3) Everybody was astonished that the landlord was released
.....
- (4) The student was asked to provide a person as
.....for his loan.
- (5) Unfortunately he had tohis summer house to pay the costs for his divorce.
- (6) The entrepreneur was forced by histo pay a high rate of interest as there was a lot of risk involved.
- (7)is an old-fashioned word for “loan shark” nowadays.
- (8) After all the efforts to heal the rift between the two had failed, she
.....for divorce.
- (9) After the financial crisis many banks were
.....by their governments.
- (10) Being involved in doping the athletehis right to take part in the Olympics.
- (11) He did not mind paying back his As the interest rates were extremely low.
- (12) Trying to support her friend financially the businesswoman became a
.....herself.

Trying to support me in a special situation he acted as a surety for me, with the result that he is now completely dependent on you as well, unable to escape you, maybe even enjoying it. Both of us are helplessly bound to you.

To reverse the situation I offer myself as a debtor to you, whilst you, in return, give him, who is my consolation, back to me.

You use love only to your own advantage: now it is two people who pay for you and I am tormented by the loss of my friend whom I have somehow wronged

It is definite that I have lost him and you have power over us; for sure he pays for everything (out of his free will?), but this state of freedom does not give me any pleasure

2. What is the woman blamed for? Make a list of the accusations directed against her.
3. Analyze the images in lines 8-10 and work out why this seemingly emotionless language matches the content.
4. Step into the shoes of the three persons individually: The speaker – the lady – the young man. A mediator has asked each of them to write down his motives and feelings in the form of a diary entry. Then compare your entries and find out similarities and differences.
5. Read the essay “The Dark Lady and Sonnet 134” by the Shakespearean scholar Robert Detobel. Then do one of the tasks:
 - a) Analyse Mr. Detobel’s line of argumentation concerning the writer and the Dark Lady.
 - b) Work out Mr. Detobel’s basic assumptions concerning the Dark Lady.
 - c) In what way does the biographical background shown in the essay put the message of the poem in a wider context and help to see it as a form of autobiographical confession?

6. One student wrote: “Honestly I cannot understand the speaker and his quietly accepting the situation he is in. He keeps complaining, even offers himself as a debtor. How can anyone be so dependent? It surprises me the speaker is supposed to be a man to boot.” Discuss.

Rounding up:

Have again a look at your results from the lead-in tasks 1 and 2: Has working with this sonnet changed or confirmed your ideas or added new aspects? Can negative experiences connected with love perhaps be of importance as well? Discuss.

Frankfurt and Wuppertal, July 2011
© Robert Detobel, Elke Brackmann

Robert Detobel: The Dark Lady and Sonnet 134

Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* are generally divided into two subcycles. Sonnets 1-126 are considered to be addressed to the youthful friend and the rest, sonnets 127-154, to the dark lady. Yet it seems more appropriate to restrict the dark lady sonnets to 126-152, as the two closing sonnets represent variations on a conventional theme, the unquenchability of love-fire.

The youth, the dark lady, the poet himself and the rival poet are quasi the “actors” in the drama of the sonnets. Much has been speculated about the identity of the fair youth, the dark lady and the rival poet and their relation to the life of the poet. However, in each of the three cases there is practically no external evidence and even less internal evidence, i.e. knowledge derived from the lines of the sonnets.

The best evidence exists for the “fair youth”. In 1593 Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* was published, in 1594 the *Rape of Lucrece*. Both were dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. The first seventeen sonnets, the so-called “recreation sonnets”, urging the youth to marry and to beget a son and heir, exhort the youth not to let his narcissism have the upper hand, that is to behave like Adonis towards Venus. Contrary to the traditional story of Venus and Adonis, in Shakespeare’s poem Adonis rejects Venus’ love. In sonnet 53 the youth’s beauty is compared to that of Adonis: it even surpasses his. Adonis’ negative character trait is his self-love, and this aspect of the youth’s reluctance to marry is several times reprimanded in the first seventeen sonnets. Thus a certain continuity exists between the two long poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* and the *Sonnets*. An even stronger argument can be found in the dedication of *The Rape of Lucrece*. Strangely, it seems to have escaped as yet the attention of the scholars. I myself owe this insight to a private communication with a person interested in this question.

The dedication reads: “The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end... What I have done is yours; what I have to do is yours...” “What I have to do” can only refer to the

Sonnets. Therein the poet expresses his infinite love for the youth, “A god in love to whom I am confined” he says in Sonnet 110. Sonnet 107 is perhaps the best datable sonnet, written shortly after the death of Queen Elizabeth I and the accession of King James I, coinciding with the Earl of Southampton’s release from the prison to which he was confined for life (which in effect meant: as long as the monarch who had passed the sentence, was alive). Most scholars would now agree that the Earl of Southampton is the fair youth of the sonnets.

The identity of the rival poet is less clear. Or rather *was* less clear until the late Peter Moore identified the Earl of Essex (“The Rival Poet of *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*” in *The Lame Storyteller, Poor and Despised*, Buchholz i.d.H 2009, pp. 2-11). Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, like so many other courtiers, did indeed write sonnets. Moore points out that the rivalry between Essex on Shakespeare was not about the quality of their respective poetry but about Southampton’s friendship. The sonnets about the rival poet are 78-80 and 82-86. These sonnets reveal a number of particularities of his: he is tall, learned, extremely proud, and he keeps an “affable familiar ghost/Which nightly gulls him with intelligence” (sonnet 86, lines 9-10). All this, and some other features, applies to the Earl of Essex. Sonnet 81 is not directly about Essex, but it might as well indirectly have to do with it. It can be plausibly argued that this sonnet (“Or I shall live your epitaph to make”) was written while Southampton’s life was in danger in February/March 1601. In February 1601 Southampton had been sentenced to death together with his bosom friend Essex for their coup d’état (their failed attempt to seize power). Essex was beheaded the same month, whereas Southampton’s death sentence was commuted into lifelong imprisonment.

The identification of the Dark Lady looks far more difficult. In this article, an attempt will be made to identify her from sonnet 134 along similar lines as Peter Moore identified the Earl of Essex from sonnets 78-86. But first we should glance at the other sonnets in which the dark lady is spoken of.

Sonnets 40-42

Sonnets 40-42 are sometimes called the “betrayal sonnets”. Even though the speaker reproaches the youth for taking his love the tone remains conciliatory. We shall meet a similar strategy in sonnet 134 where the poet is toying with the interpretation that the friend has bound himself to the lady as “surety” for him (“And sue a friend came debtor for my sake”).

In the “Dark Lady” cycle other sonnets correspond to sonnets 40-42. But while in sonnets 40-42 the initiative is placed with the youthful friend: “gentle thief” (41), “That thou hast her” (42), it is the lady who is seen as the driving force: “Is’t not enough to torture me alone,/But slave to slavery my sweet’st friend must be.” (Sonnet 133).

Considering the whole of the sonnets, the poet seems undecided as from whose will the betrayal has proceeded. Was it the youth? Or was it the lady?

Sonnet 41

Lines 5-9 of this sonnet read:

Gentle thou art, and therefore to be won,
Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed.
And when a woman woos, what woman's son,

Will sourly leave her till he have prevailed?
Ay me, but yet thou **mightst my seat forbear...**

What does “my seat forbear” mean? “Seat” is a metaphor one would intuitively associate with “legal wife” rather than with an extra-marital liaison. And it is indeed in this sense Shakespeare uses it in Othello, II.1.290-4, where Iago, to feed his hatred, suspects Othello to have seduced his wife Emilia.

For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards,
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife.

That it is Iago's spouse who is meant is confirmed by Iago himself:

I hate the Moor,
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
He has done my. I know not if't be true,
But I for mere suspicion in that kind
Will do as if **for surety**. (I.iii.384-8).

So it looks as if with one lucky stroke the mystery of the dark lady is solved. If William Shakespeare of Stratford is the poet of the Sonnets and the Earl of Southampton the youth, the dark lady whom the youth seduced is Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway. Few, very few orthodox scholars would accept this solution for it looks too unlikely. If the poet is the Earl of Oxford, the dark lady is his second wife, Elizabeth Trentham. This looks more likely, although no external evidence exists to support it.

Sonnet 152

However, our hypothesis should be able to pass the test of the other sonnets. Sonnet 152 is certainly about some “dark lady”, but is it about THE dark lady, the same as in sonnets 40-42 and 133-134 and 144? This sonnet contains no reference to a triangular situation: the youth is absent from it. Moreover, the poet is speaking of an adulterous love to a mistress, not of his wife. The woman has broken her bed-vow by swearing love to the poet and has then again forsworn this love by turning love into hate.

In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn,
But thou art twice forsworn to me love swearing,
In act thy bed-vow broke and new faith torn,
In vowing new hate after new love bearing:

On the other hand, the poet himself is “twenty times forsworn”. “

For all my vows are oaths but to misuse thee.” It seems as if this sonnet is rather about the ruses — and at the same time self-deception — ruling the game of wooing and seducing between man and woman.

A possible answer would be that some sonnets are about a particular woman but that in other sonnets the image of this particular “dark lady” evaporates into a more airy, general musing about the fundamental tensions between men and women. Sonnet 129, for instance, can be interpreted as the unmasking of a myth, namely the myth of the sexual union of man and woman as the apogee¹ of love, which proves to be based on a mutual self-delusion:

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight...

Sonnet 134

One sonnet, however, might be applicable to the relationship between Edward de Vere and his second wife. Helen Vendler notes the “cold language”, coagulated, indeed, to metaphors from the business world.

So now I have confessed that he is thine,
And I myself am **mortgaged** to thy will,
My self I'll **forfeit**, so that other mine,
Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still:
But thou wilt not, nor he will not be free,
For thou art covetous, and he is kind,
He learned but **surety-like** to write for me,
Under that **bond** that him as fast doth bind.
The **statute** of thy beauty thou wilt take,
Thou **usurer** that **put'st forth all to use**,
And **sue** a friend, came **debtor** for my sake,
So him I lose through my unkind abuse.
Him have I lost, thou hast both him and me,
He **pays** the whole, and yet am I not free.

“Shakespeare’s language”, Helen Vendler observes, “for human transaction here, as elsewhere in the *Sonnets*, is ruthlessly legal, proffering words like *statute* and *bond* and *pay* as appropriate terms for a certain sort of human relation.” (*The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Cambridge, MA, 1999, pp. 571-2). However, the language is not merely legal; more precisely, the metaphors are taken from commercial law: mortgage, forfeit, surety, bond, statute, usurer that put’st forth all to use, debtor.

Statute of thy beauty

While it is true that the primary meaning of statute is an act passed by Parliament, the term can cover other meanings. It is interesting to look into a passage in the graveyard scene (V.i) in *Hamlet* because we there have a similar cascade of legal terms, one of them being

¹ Most desired and fulfilled goal; where sth. is great and most successful

“statute”. Contemplating different skulls, Hamlet fancies that one skull might be that of a lawyer:

There's another. Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddits now, his quilllets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? Hum! This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his **statutes**², his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will scarcely lie in this box; and must th' inheritor himself have no more, ha? (V.i.96-110).

If the Earl of Oxford is Shakespeare, this passage takes on a tremendous autobiographical ring. The above passage from the play fits Oxford's life almost seamlessly. He had only left a small estate to his heir, the “inheritor”, Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, despite the fact that the interests of the heir were protected by statute; However, there were many legal loopholes helping you to circumvent this law. It is of vital importance to state that before his marriage to Elizabeth Trentham in 1591 Oxford had acknowledged 59 recognizances and had been using almost as many times the fictitious process called “fine”. Oxford was heavily indebted and economically dependent on Mrs Trentham. “

“Thou usurer that put'st forth all to use” — A quip³ at the Countess of Oxford?

The word “usurer” is derived from use. In Elizabethan times, though a ten percent interest was legal, public opinion considered every moneylender who took interest to be a usurer.

On the assumption that Oxford is the author of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, this consideration may invest line 10 of Sonnet 134 with a meaning beyond the metaphorical. For “putting forth to use” was precisely what the Countess of Oxford had been doing.

Even before their marriage in December 1591 Elizabeth Trentham seems to have started managing Oxford's financial affairs. On 4 July 1591 Oxford sold property (Christchurch Garden) to Francis Trentham and Sir John Wolley on condition that the profits from the estate went to himself and after his death to the countess. Francis Trentham was the countess' brother.

On 12 March 1592 another of Oxford's estates was put under the trusteeship of Francis Trentham and Ralph Sneyd to the Use of the Earl of Oxford. Ralph Sneyd was Elizabeth Trentham's uncle. (THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES C 142/286/165).

On 4 July 1591, still before the marriage, the fees Oxford earned from his office of Lord Great Chamberlain of England were placed under the trusteeship of Francis Trentham and John Wolley and after the death of Wolley a few years later under the sole trusteeship of the Countess' brother: to the Use of Oxford and afterwards to the Use of Countess Elizabeth (THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES C 142/286/165).

² Here: a written document by which a debtor acknowledges he owes a certain amount to the lender.

³ A quick and clever remark

Until his second marriage Oxford seems to have cared very little about his finances (as Lord Burghley complains of in his letter of 21 June 1586 to Sir Francis Walsingham and in some other letters). But after his marriage, there are only a few fines⁴, no recognizances, no common recoveries⁵. It is after 1591 that Oxford starts applying to the Queen for several monopolies and/or lands — without any noteworthy success. It seems clear that his marriage with the queen's longstanding lady-in-waiting Elizabeth Trentham, a marriage which the queen herself had supported, was also purposed to refurbish Oxford's finances. Elizabeth Trentham was a wealthy heir and, from what we can infer from her letters, a resolute and skilled businesswoman. Financially, Oxford was dependent on her, not only on her love but also on her wealth. And so he was "mortgaged to her will".

It is significant that Oxford left no testament. It must be noted that real estate (lands) were no subject of a testament. Lands could be conveyed by last will, but there was no legal obligation to do so. The proper subject of a testament were chattels (possessions). As things stood, there was no longer any subject for a testament, all goods having been "put to the use" of the Countess, as can be learnt from a suit initiated against her in 1610.

It is not known when the conversion of Oxford's goods to the use of the countess had taken place. It might have been shortly before his death, it might also have taken place at an earlier date.

Before this background the line "Thou usurer that put'st forth all to use" seems to acquire more than only a metaphorical meaning.

Conclusion

After all the case for Elizabeth, Countess of Oxford, as the lady in the triangle with Shakespeare/Oxford and Southampton seems not an implausible one when we consider sonnet 134 and, perhaps, sonnet 41 ("my seat"). But given that there are other twenty-five other sonnets about the "dark lady", from which, in my view, little to nothing can be concluded about the identity of THE dark lady (I, for one, am unable to reach convincing conclusions), it must remain an open question whether sonnets 127-152 are addressed to one particular "dark lady" or whether the Countess of Oxford is but one incarnation of a rather ontological "dark lady".

© Robert Detobel, 2011

⁴ A final document that conveys property or land that by parliamentary legislation was unalienable, that is, untransferable otherwise than by inheritance, to sb. else

⁵ Another legal procedure in form of a fictitious suit to circumvent the inalienability of land prescribed by parliamentary legislation.

