
The Old Suitor: A New Allusion to William Shakespeare?

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Another arrow out of Cupid's quiver,
The which was carried by the winde at will.
--Richard Barnfield, *The Affectionate Shepherd*
(Grosart 9: 1st day, lines 44-45; Stanza 8, lines 2-3)

Richard Barnfield claimed that his controversial *The Affectionate Shepherd* was nothing more than a nonliteral reworking of Virgil's second eclogue. However, many scholars believe that Barnfield's real intention was to make a homosexual proposition to a young man (very likely an aristocratic patron of poets)¹ and that his statement that he was merely imitating Virgil was disingenuous (McCarthy 114).

I agree with this latter conclusion and further assert that Barnfield's work is even more nimble than it appears. I propose that

(1) In 1594, Barnfield was competing against William Shakespeare for the patronage and affections of the aristocrat Henry Wriothesley.

(2) *The Affectionate Shepherd* has propositional intent but also functions as libel targeting Shakespeare; the work contains hitherto unrecognized Shakespearean allusions.

(3) In order to send his personal message, Barnfield reworked a classical Ovidian myth, inserting contemporary figures masquerading as characters, including one I name "the Old Suitor."

(4) This Old Suitor, a defamatory caricature of Shakespeare, allowed Barnfield to surreptitiously reveal his opinion of the famous poet and to send Wriothesley an admonition concerning Shakespeare's amorous intentions.

The Characters

The Affectionate Shepherd starts by introducing us to a number of characters. Critics agree that the narrator -- a poetic shepherd named Daphnis -- represents Barnfield himself (Daugherty 10). Daphnis is in love with a good-looking young man he calls Ganymede.

Daphnis links Ganymede to the River Thames, and his non-Arcadian gifts to Ganymede of a golden tennis racket and ball suggest that Ganymede was a London-based aristocrat. Ganymede is described as “young and wild” (Grosart 34: Second day, line 410; Stanza 69, line 2) and depicted as rather naive. Daphnis clearly wants Ganymede to read his narrative and directs much conduct literature at him.

Ganymede is scornful to all women except Guendolen, a beautiful but unchaste aristocrat. Daphnis laments that Ganymede is under her spell and begs him to leave Guendolen.

Enter the Old Suitor. Daphnis does not formally name this character but describes him grotesquely. The Old Suitor is aged, physically revolting, diseased,² and hopelessly infatuated with Guendolen. Daphnis warns Ganymede about the Old Suitor’s intentions toward Guendolen (implying that the Old Suitor is a person known to Ganymede), adopts a mocking tone, and personally insults and ridicules him. By emphasizing his physical ugliness, Daphnis implies that the Old Suitor does not belong with the beautiful people of Ganymede’s circle.

Despite his being a minor character, the Old Suitor’s prominent introduction in the poem suggests an important emphasis from Barnfield. Further, the Old Suitor provokes a highly emotional reaction from Daphnis that is difficult to explain—especially considering that his dialogue adds nothing to the narrative of the poem. One wonders why Barnfield includes the character at all or makes him the recipient of the poem’s most emotive attack.

The Old Suitor is courting Guendolen, and since Daphnis desperately wants Guendolen to leave Ganymede, one assumes he might encourage the Old Suitor. Rather, he wishes the Old Suitor were dead. This indicates a more complicated relationship, that the mere presence of the Old Suitor in Ganymede’s circle is somehow problematic for Daphnis and his stated goal—the undivided affection of Ganymede.

The Parodies

The Old Suitor's narrative states that Death had set his sights on him but that Death's arrow was accidentally substituted by Cupid's golden arrow. This pierced the Old Suitor's heart, and he became infatuated with Guendolen. The Old Suitor is physically revolting, so Guendolen shies away from his kisses. Undeterred, he swears his undying love and crowns Guendolen with a garland of bay leaves.

Many Elizabethan readers would recognize this as an ironic parody of Ovid's version of the Daphne and Apollo myth. All of the elements of the traditional myth are present in Barnfield's narrative. However, Barnfield's revision is ironically inverted: the young clean-shaven god Apollo has been replaced by a lecherous old man with a filthy beard. The innocent virgin Daphne is replaced with a manipulative and unchaste woman. But despite these inversions, the central themes remain: both Apollo and the Old Suitor are shot by Cupid's golden arrow; both become hopelessly infatuated; both unrelentingly chase their muse; both swear their undying love; both crown their muse. Apollo's crown becomes a canopy of bay leaves; the Old Suitor crowns Guendolen with a bay garland.

In addition to the Ovidian myth, clear echoes of Petrarch appear in the Old Suitor's dialogue. Barnfield's specific linkage of bays to the Old Suitor's infatuated love is a Petrarchan conceit. In Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, laurels and Laura (the object of the poet's desire) are inseparable.

Barnfield is cynically presenting the Old Suitor as a Petrarchan lover. Again, however, in Barnfield's caricature, honest Petrarch and chaste Laura are replaced by a treacherous syphilitic and his unchaste object of desire. These clever inversions, upon further investigation, give way to an even more inventive and insidious message: the libel of a fellow poet.

The Insults

First, the Old Suitor's garland of bay leaves is a classical reference to poetry, originating from the ancient Pythian Games, which awarded bay leaves to champion poets. Elizabethans understood the poetic significance of bays, as explained in a

marginal comment on a poem by John Selden explains “Baies (*faire Readers*) belong to the materials of Poets Girlands” (Hazlitt 17). Barnfield himself mentions bays on a number of occasions and always links them to poetry. The following line from *Greene’s Funerals* describes Greene’s admission into the Elysian Fields, where he is hailed as a champion poet:

Come deck his brows with Bays
That deserves immortal praise.
(R. B. Gentleman, *Greenes Funerals*. Sonnet IV, lines 17-18)

In *Poems in Diverse Humours*, Barnfield bestows Edmund Spenser with a laurel (bay) crown:

Live Spenser euer in thy Fairy Queene:
Whose like (for deep Conceit) was neuer seene.
Crownd mayst thou be, unto thy more renowne
(As King of Poets) with a Lawrell crowne.
(Grosart 190: Barnfield, “A Remembrance of Some English Poets,”
Stanza 1, lines 1-4).

In Ovid’s myth, Apollo was also a lovesick *poet*. So in linking Apollo’s crown of bay to the Old Suitor’s garland, Barnfield is further insinuating that the Old Suitor, like Apollo, is an infatuated poet.

Second, Barnfield sets up the Old Suitor as a shepherd. Daphnis reveals that the Old Suitor’s infatuation has driven him to actions representative of those of Arcadian shepherds:

[Makes] him trim upon the holydaies
And Crownes his love with Garlands made of Baies.
(Grosart 9: 1st day, lines 59–60; Stanza 10, lines 5-6.)

These are pastoral references. In pastorals, shepherds are dressed up (trimmed) for holy days, during which they sing and write poetry and make garlands to honor their loves. This line is reiterated in William Browne’s *The Shepherd’s Pipe* (London: N.O. for George Norton, 1614), through a conversation between the poetic shepherds Cuttie and Willie:

O how our neatest swains [shepherds]
Do trim themselves when on a holy day.

(Browne, Fifth Eclogue, lines 111-112; Goodwin ed. 2:148).

Just as his poetic peers often did, Barnfield frequently gave real-life poets the pastoral persona of shepherds.³ The Old Suitor is a “poetic shepherd,” because he does not honor Guendolen with rose or myrtle garlands but uses bays (the medium of poetry) to express his love.

Once Daphnis’s insults are seen to have been directed toward a shepherd-poet, it is important to identify the poet that Barnfield is libelling. To this end, Barnfield describes the arrow of love that had struck the Old Suitor (all bolded text throughout is my emphasis added):

Another arrow out of Cupid’s quiver
The which was carried by the wind at **will**
And under death the amorous **shaft did shiver**.
(Grosart 9: 1st day, Lines 44-46. Stanza 8, lines 2-4)

Here is seen a close juxtaposition of “will” and a “shaft” that “shivers.” A shaft that shivers could be synonymous with a shaking spear. Put together, we arrive at will-shake-spear: William Shakespeare.⁴ Barnfield’s use of Cupid’s golden arrow as a cue to point out the infatuated poet being libelled is an accomplished literary device.

But the embedded puns do not stop there. Looking deeper into the narrative, we see that the Old Suitor is a person whom Guendolen cannot “shake” off (1st day, 57; Stanza 10, line 3, Grosart 9) and that he is in love “up to his eares” (1st day, line 67; Stanza 12, line 1, Grosart 10). This is punning word play—in the style of Petrarch and Sidney—that reveals a name. Putting these phrases together, we get **shake-up-to-the-ear**s: Shakespeare.⁵

The Affectionate Shepherd was written at a time when homosexuality was potentially a capital offence. Additionally, Elizabethans did enforce libel laws, so poets had to reveal the real-life inspirations for their characters in creative ways.⁶ This meant Ganymede could not be named. Neither could any member of Ganymede’s circle, due to the risk of Ganymede being identified through association. Since Barnfield could likewise not openly name Shakespeare, he performed a balancing act. The hints surrounding the Old Suitor’s identity could not be so opaque as to be missed entirely nor so transparent as to justify retribution.

Consequently, Elizabethan libellers often punned on their target's names. In the anonymous libel *A Dreame Alluding to my L of Essex*, the name of Robert Cecil is punned upon in "Cicelye" (*A Dreame* line 28) as is Walter Rawleigh as "meat blood rawe" (*A Dreame* line 15). Barnfield's image of an Old Poet whom Guendolen cannot *shake* is easily recognized as a pun on the distinctive surname held by only one Elizabethan poet. In presenting Shakespeare's name as an embedded anagram within the poem's text, Barnfield was likely imitating Petrarch, in whose sonnet V of the *Canzoniere*, the name "Laureta" twice appears as an embedded anagram.

The powerful Shakespearean connections of the Old Suitor dialogue continue. Barnfield laments that Death's misguided arrow has killed a beautiful young man instead of the Old Suitor. Barnfield then describes Death's encounter with the Old Suitor:

At last Death met with **one of feeble age**:
 Wherewith he drew a shaft and at him hurld
 The unknowne arrow with a furious rage,
 Thinking to **strike him dead with Deaths blacke dart**
 But he, alas, with Love did wound his hart!
 (Grosart 9: 1st day, lines. 50-54; Stanza 9, lines 2-6).

This has an uncanny resemblance to a passage from Shakespeare's 1593 *Venus and Adonis* (which predates *The Affectionate Shepherd* by one year). In Shakespeare's passage, Venus also laments death's error, its dark "dart" here striking an "infant" rather than one of "feeble age":

But hatefully at random dost thou hit.
Thy mark is feeble age, but thy false dart
 Mistakes that aim and cleaves an infant's heart....
 Loves golden arrow at him should have fled
 And not **Death's ebon dart to** strike dead.
 (*Venus and Adonis*, lines 940-942; 947-948)

In the same work, Venus sings of "How love makes young men thrall **and old men dote**" (*Venus and Adonis* line 837). Compare this to Barnfield's infatuated Old Suitor "that in his age **began to doate again**" (Grosart 8: 1st day, line 26; Stanza 5, line 2).

It now becomes obvious that Barnfield is ironically revising Shakespeare's work and using it as a weapon against him. Barnfield is cynically implying that the infatuated poet of feeble age who deserves to be struck dead is Shakespeare himself.

Barnfield wouldn't have been the first to have had this idea. Another poet, Robert Greene, had already libelled Shakespeare by revising his work and punning on his surname:

There is an upstart crow, beautified with our own feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a players hyde supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you. And being an absolute Johannes Factotum is in his own conceit the only **shake**-scene in a country. (Greene, *Greenes Groatsworth of Wit*)

Greene's "upstart crow" is widely accepted to be Shakespeare, because the description twists a quote from Shakespeare's work ("his Tygers hart wrapt in a players hyde" is a play on "O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide," from *3 Henry VI* 1.4. 138). Not only that, but it refers to a "player" (actor) as well as a writer of blank verse, and it puns on Shakespeare's surname. Barnfield was certainly aware of this libel by Greene, because he specifically mentions it in Sonnet IX of *Greene's Funerals*:⁷

Greene gave the ground to all that had wrote upon him.
Nay more, the men that so eclipsed his fame,
Purloined his plumes: —can they deny the same?
(B., R, Gentleman, *Greenes Funerals*, Sonnet IX, lines 4-6).

This must be a reference to the "upstart crow" who "beautified" himself with Greene's own feathers ("purloined his plumes"). Barnfield openly idolized Greene, and if libelling a fellow poet by twisting his quotes into insults and ironically punning on his surname was good enough for Greene, it was surely good enough for his young disciple.

The Warning Message

Patrons were difficult to secure, and competition for aristocratic patronage could get ugly. Rivals vying for the affections and patronage of the same young aristocrat couldn't afford to pull their punches. In his poem, *Musophilus*, Samuel Daniel describes

this ruthless competition: “The number of writers has grown so great that there is not room for all, they kick and thrust and shoulder and quarrel like scolding wives” (Sheavyn 32).

Libellers often grossly exaggerated their target’s perceived weaknesses, and Barnfield celebrates Ganymede’s youth and despises the Old Suitor’s age. In 1594, Shakespeare was thirty years old. If Shakespeare truly inspired the Old Suitor, and Barnfield considered him decrepit, then Ganymede must have been (and represented someone) significantly younger than thirty. In depicting the Old Suitor as being decrepit Barnfield was referencing the pastoral conceit that youth and age were often at debate with each other and that old and young shepherds were ill suited to live together or trust each other. Barnfield verified this conceit by linking it to the competitive triangular relationship that had the young shepherd, (Ganymede) and the older poetic shepherd (the Old Suitor) both competing for Guendolen. Barnfield was intimating that Shakespeare was untrustworthy and too old to associate with the person Ganymede represents. Not only that, but he was also trying to reveal that Shakespeare’s *true* affections lay not with the man represented by Ganymede but by the *woman* represented by Guendolen—a woman perhaps quite close to the patron. Such an insidious betrayal would be fodder indeed for accusation.

I assert that the love triangle of *The Affectionate Shepherd* alludes to real-life events that involved the young patron “Ganymede,” his unchaste mistress, and his personal poet. By including this love triangle Barnfield could be certain that the real-life Ganymede would realize the sequence had been written for him. Barnfield is most dismissive of Shakespeare and depicts him as a person with ideas ridiculously above his station and who imagines himself to be entitled to court his patron’s aristocratic mistress. Barnfield (as Daphnis) disdainfully reveals the Old Suitor’s ongoing infatuation with Guendolen and gleefully reveals to Ganymede that the Old Suitor has sworn deep oaths to steal Guendolen from him. Daphnis is clearly trying to ingratiate himself to Ganymede and presents himself as Ganymede’s most reliable friend—the only person who will not betray him. Barnfield is doing the same. But to whom?

The Affectionate Shepherd was written for Ganymede, a young, tennis-playing aristocratic patron, who in 1594 was

associated with Shakespeare and who, Barnfield believed, would have enjoyed reading homoerotic verse. The person who clearly fits this profile is Henry Wriothesley, the twenty-one-year-old Earl of Southampton.

Wriothesley's candidacy for Ganymede is reinforced by the presence of a certain "H.W." in another libel, *Willobie His Avisia*. This work by a young Oxford scholar laments that a young and gullible aristocrat with the initials H.W. has become blindly infatuated with a woman named Avisia. She is ironically referred to as "the chastest woman in England." Avisia is given the persona of a predatory eagle, and H.W. becomes the Ganymedic prey of this unchaste woman. H.W. is betrayed by his "faithful friend," the treacherous "Mr W.S.," who is described as a syphilitic "Old Player" (note that "player" echoes Greene's use of the word in his aforementioned libel). Mr. W.S. is a smooth talker who quotes Ovidian love poetry, is infatuated with Avisia, and is distrusted by the young author of *Willobie His Avisia*.

I suggest that *The Affectionate Shepherd* and *Willobie His Avisia* are *Roman à clefs*; both describe the love triangle of Shakespeare's Sonnets from the rival poet's frame of reference.⁸ Barnfield's intent was to persuade Ganymede (Henry Wriothesley) to part company with both Guendolen (his mistress) and William Shakespeare. If Barnfield's plan succeeded, then the way would be clear for him to become Wriothesley's personal poet *and* lover. George Klawitter cautiously forwarded Henry Wriothesley as "a very good candidate" to be Barnfield's Ganymede (Klawitter, p. 80), and I think he was entirely correct in his assessment. Further, I believe this key insight can unlock the Shakespearean sonnet sequence for future research and discovery.

Notes

1. In the sixth stanza of *The Second Days Lamentation of The Affectionate Shepherd*, the narrator Daphnis professes his love to Ganymede, specifically telling him that he intends to immortalize him through poetry in exchange for "one kinde looke; A small reward for my so great affection."

2. The Old Suitor is depicted as constantly stroking a beard that is filthy with salivation, and Elizabethans would understand that the depiction of a love-sick man who salivated uncontrollably was intended to be syphilitic. The Elizabethan treatment for syphilis was mercury, chosen because it caused uncontrolled salivations, which would supposedly remove the foul humour that had caused the disease.
3. In *The Affectionate Shepherd*, Barnfield gives himself the persona of a shepherd. In the Sonnets of *Cynthia*, by naming “Grete Colin, cheefe of Shepheards all,” and “gentle Rowland, my professed friend” (Grosart 96: Sonnet XX, lines 9–10), Barnfield encourages his readership to conceive of Spenser and Drayton as the shepherd characters to whom these poets give voice.
4. Shakespeare was definitely called “Will Shakespeare” by contemporaries. Both Thomas Heywood and Leonard Digges (see Morgan) used this appellation.
5. A number of poets punned on the word “shake” when referring to William Shakespeare. See, for example, the anonymous eulogy penned in a Folger Shakespeare Library First Folio, “Here lyes Shakespeare who none but death could shake” (Kathman). See also Ben Jonson in his eulogy, “To the Memory of My Beloved Master Shakespeare and What He Hath Left Us,” where he twice puns on Shakespeare’s surname: “shake a stage” (Jonson A3v) and “shake a lance” (Jonson A4).
6. For instance, in his work *Quip for an upstart courtier*, [Robert Greene] made a caricature of Gabriel Harvey but did not openly name him. Nonetheless, it was obvious whom he was intended to be.
7. Klawitter accepts *Greene’s Funerals* as part of Richard Barnfield’s canon.
8. If aligned with the Shakespearean sequence, the triangular relationships in both *The Affectionate Shepherd* and *Willobie His Avisia* seem to be describing the timeline *after* the Fair Youth has

taken Shakespeare's Dark Lady, during which Shakespeare forges an uneasy truce with the Fair Youth but remains resentful.

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