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from Horace Davis

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SHAKSPERE'S SONNETS

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LECTURE 1

SHAKSPERE'S SONNETS

AN ESSAY BY
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SHAKSPERE'S SONNETS.

EVERYBODY reads Shakspeare's plays, but very few are familiar with his sonnets. The old-fashioned diction and the odd, obsolete words might have excused this neglect ten years ago, but to-day the admirable notes of Dowden and Rolfe open the door for everybody to study them, and whoever has the courage to penetrate their mysteries will find a strange fascination in them. The wonderful beauty of illustration and the compact, condensed expression of thought remind the reader at times of Shakspeare's best plays, while the gusts of intense personal feeling that sweep across some of these poems make him feel very near the heart of the great poet, adding to the mystery that clouds their real meaning, and investing them with a personal interest that challenges us to an eager search for their true interpretation.

Are they really a chapter from his own life, and do they tell us a part of that experience which found utterance in the despair of a Hamlet and the passion of a Lear? Suppose that in the process of repairing Crosby House in London or the old Henley street homestead in Stratford, a workman should chance upon a bundle of old letters in some dusty recess,

giving a picture of Shakspeare's life in London from his own pen, what a thrill of eager surprise would move the world of letters! How the news would be telegraphed around the globe. With what interest should we watch the deciphering of the crabbed, faded characters that opened to us the heart of the great poet! Such a series of pictures, I believe, we have in the sonnets, where we see reflected the moods of his inner life. Love, jealousy, disappointment, despair, and again the peaceful happiness of renewed affection, flit in succession across the magic mirror as we turn the pages of this wonderful book. "With this same key Shakspeare unlocked his heart."

A singular mystery shrouds the London life of this greatest of modern poets. The era in which he lived abounded in copious writers; a flood of light is thrown upon it by abundant records of every kind. This man moved freely among the men of his day; his poems went through many editions; his plays were popular, his friends were numerous, some of them among the highest in the land,—and yet his twenty-five years in London are almost a blank mystery to us. Everything that could throw light upon this period has been examined—the contemporaneous writers have been sifted for any allusion to his name, the local records have been searched, and the end of it all is, the personal relations of his London life are a sealed book.

He comes to London about 1586, a country boy,

barely twenty-two years old, already loaded down for the race in life with a wife and three infant children,—but without profession or means of support, for his father is a bankrupt. He plunges into the labyrinth of London life and is lost to sight. In 1592 a gleam of light crosses his path: the six years in London have won him a place, and he is already, at twenty-eight years of age, sufficiently known as a playwright and actor to excite the envy of his disappointed rivals and the respect of admiring friends; and we read with pleasure Chettle's praise of his civil demeanor, his excellence in his profession, his grace in writing, his uprightness of dealing, and his good name among people "of worship," that is, of gentle blood.

After this we lose all track again and get no further light on his personal life in London, unless what we may draw from his works. The records give a meager catalogue of dry bones. He acted upon the stage, and he patched up old plays for the company to which he belonged. He published in 1593-4 two poems which pleased the current taste and went through several editions. He acquired an interest in his dramatic company and wrote for its use the grand series of his plays, which were probably withheld from publication as far as possible that the company might have the sole use of them on the stage.

He was a prudent business man, prospered in the world enough to buy a homestead in Stratford in 1597, when only thirty-three years old, and by 1599 had

acquired a valuable interest in the Blackfriars' theater. During his remaining life at London he accumulated considerable means, which were mainly invested at his old home. Exactly when he retired to Stratford is uncertain, probably by 1610. This barren list contains about all we know of the London life of Shakspeare,—nothing of his friends, of his social life, of his personal habits, nothing whatever of the experience which led him to explore regions of human nature which no other man has ever dared to describe. Can we gleam anything more from his plays?

If we can ascertain with reasonable certainty their chronological order a careful examination of them in this view will give some clue to the growth of his genius and some hint of the nature of his personal experience. True poetry must flow from the heart; in all highest works of the imagination which deal with the emotions and the passions that sway the lives of men and women, only the genuine has true power. The man must have felt it; the story must be written in his own blood.

The general order of the plays is now pretty well agreed upon. First come the light comedies of incident, with few well-defined characters; such as *Love's Labor's Lost* and *Comedy of Errors*, or plays of pure fancy like *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or lyric drama, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, full of pretty conceits and amorous passions.

Apparently tiring of this gay pageant, he turns to

English history, and clothes with life the grand series of national heroes that adorn his historical plays.

Life now runs smoother and freer with Shakspeare and blossoms into his best comedies, *Much Ado*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*. After this group the shadow of the coming storm begins to darken the landscape, and the next plays, though we call them comedies, are grave and somber in tone, heralding the solemn march of tragedy. *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* deal with the trials and sorrows of life, while *Troilus and Cressida* is absolutely repulsive in its distrust of humanity.

At last the storm fairly breaks upon us with a constantly darkening cloud of ingratitude and crime. *Julius Cæsar* and *Hamlet* are followed in rapid succession by *Othello*, *Lear* and *Macbeth*, where men that should have been heroes are hurled to the depths of despair and crime by their own folly and the ingratitude of those in whom they placed the most trust. Then come *Antony*, *Coriolanus* and *Timon*, men of heroic stature broken down and ruined by their own follies rather than the faults of others.

At this point a marvelous change comes over the scene. The storm passes by, the sky clears up and the sun breaks through the clouds bathing the landscape in a pastoral beauty.

The five remaining plays, which some think were

written at Stratford, are neither tragedies nor comedies, and are often called romances,—sometimes the Plays of Reconciliation. In these Shakspeare seems to have become reconciled to life and looks upon it with much kinder feelings. In all of them families broken asunder are reunited, friends long separated are reconciled, and a spirit of forgiveness breathes through them all. Posthumus sounds their key-note in his reply to Iachimo when the latter confesses his villainy,—worse than that of Iago, because it lacked the motive:

“Kneel not to me,
The power that I have on you is to spare you,
The malice toward you to forgive you. Live
And deal with others better.”

What fate would Shakspeare have visited on such a wretch five years earlier, when he drew the picture of Iago? Prospero in the same tone of forgiveness, refuses to wreak his vengeance on his enemies:

“Yet, with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
Do I take part: the rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance.”

In this happy spirit of reconciliation and peace Shakspeare closes his volume.

Now I am sure he gave us his own experience in all the deeper motives of his plays. While I would not identify him with any one character, I believe the atmosphere of each group of plays expresses a mood of experience through which he had

passed. In this conviction I read the story of his London life thus : The current ran smoothly for many years ; it was full, free and happy. Then came some blow that shook his faith in humanity. Perhaps the first hint of the change is in the melancholy Jaques with his sentimental misanthropy. This mood deepened rapidly as the emptiness of human life forced itself upon him ; the hollowness of men's professions, their ingratitude and faithlessness darkened his meditations.

But he never sank into utter despair, like Othello, nor into the blank, rayless night of unfaith, like Timon. His soul was too great for that ; his faith and hope triumphed over his sorrows. He felt it was better to love than to hate, to forgive than to brood over his wrongs, and he came out of his bitter experience a wiser and a better man, serene and peaceful. A new heaven had opened before him, and the earth was transfigured by its light with a brighter beauty than it had worn before his trials. In this peaceful mood his life ended.

It is true that Halliwell-Phillips and other matter-of-fact Shakspeare scholars laugh at this and call it the Shakspeare "mythus," a creature of the imagination, without solid existence. But to me it is very real, and the testimony of the plays to the struggles of his inward life is as sure and unerring as the witness of the records to his outward prosperity.

The sonnets give some confirmation of this idea, for

they tell a very similar story—not that they run parallel in time with that great wave of feeling pictured in the tragedies, for they belong to an earlier period of his life, but they record a similar experience which must have left its mark on his soul. Let us now turn to an examination of these remarkable poems with a special view to tracing in them the personality of Shakspeare.

The little volume contains one hundred and fifty-four sonnets which were first printed in 1609, piratically without much doubt; but they had been mentioned eleven years earlier in 1598, by Francis Meres, as “Shakspeare’s sugred sonnets among his private friends,” and in 1599 two of them had found their way into print. This is all that is known of their origin. I am satisfied for various reasons, but especially from a careful comparison with the plays, that they were written between 1593 and 1597; but the majority of writers on Shakspeare are in favor of a later date.

As to the meaning of these poems, there is a great diversity of opinion. They appear on the surface to be addressed to two different persons, Nos. 1.—cxxxvi. to a young nobleman, Shakspeare’s friend and patron, and the remainder to a woman. But many writers regard these apparent personalities as merely a veil to conceal an allegorical or hermetic meaning; they have thus been made to sing the praises of dramatic art, of eternal beauty, of ideal manhood, of Queen Elizabeth, of the Catholic Church, and many other fantastic no-

tions have been found in them,—or put there. Some have thought they were mere exercises of the poet's fancy; and others that they were written for the use of his friends, possibly for hire.

But the most natural explanation is that they were the simple outflow of his feelings, addressed in the first series to his young friend and patron, for whom he seems to have felt the warmest regard,—while the second series expresses his relations to his mistress; and I believe that but for the stain these last are thought to cast upon Shakspeare's morals, there would be no question as to their real meaning; they are so overflowing with warm human feeling,—no allegory, no exercise of pure fancy, no poetry written for hire, could be so full of throbbing life.

Assuming the sonnets to be genuine and properly arranged, a real mirror of Shakspeare's experience, the story they tell is this :

In the first flush of assured success, with the hot blood of youth boiling in his veins, and thrown by his profession in closest personal contact with the riotous life of the London stage at that period of loose morals, Shakspeare fell under the influence of a woman who threw a strange spell over him. Of dark complexion, with black eyes, she was not handsome, but her presence fascinated him, and he yielded to her charms, though he knew it was a double crime, for she was the wife of another man.

About the same period he formed a friendship for a

handsome, gifted young nobleman, whom he calls Will, — who returned his regard, and became his patron, though much younger than Shakspeare. The dark woman at last met Will, and perhaps thinking a handsome young nobleman a better prize than a poor play-actor, set her net for him, and soon snared the victim. This double treachery cut Shakspeare to the quick, and you may trace the growth of his sorrow from a bare suspicion to the full assurance of the bitter truth, resulting in his separation from his friend. Later on the breach between them was healed; the woman disappeared from the scene, or at least from the sonnets, and Shakspeare was very happy in a renewal of his love for Will, which ripened into the most intense personal affection possible between man and man. But as his friend reached maturity, he formed new acquaintances and neglected Shakspeare, which again caused him great grief.

Another poet came upon the scene sharing Will's regard and bounty, which filled Shakspeare with jealousy and produced estrangement between the friends. Then came explanations and a partial reconciliation. In the midst of these changes the sonnets tell of journeys,—two at least in number,—by which the friends were separated, and Shakspeare mourned his bereavement during the absences. And so various alternations followed in the course of their love, as Shakspeare always called it. Sometimes the stream ran smooth, and then again it was turbulent and broken, till at last

chastened by life's trials, they joined hands in an everlasting friendship, and Shakspeare says:

No, let me be obsequious [devoted] in thy heart,
 And take thou my oblation, poor but free,
 Which is not mixed with seconds, knows no art,
 But mutual' render, only me for thee.

CXXV.

With this argument as an introduction, we will run rapidly through the volume, letting Shakspeare tell his own story as far as possible. The book opens with seventeen sonnets addressed to a youth just coming to manhood—in terms of extreme personal compliment, urging him to marry and perpetuate his name.

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
 That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
 But as the ripper should by time decease,
 His tender heir might bear his memory.

I.

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
 And see the brave day sunk in hideous night,
 When I behold the violet past prime,
 And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white,
 When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
 Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
 And summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
 Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,
 Then of thy beauty do I question make,
 That thou among the wastes of time must go,
 Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
 And die as fast as they see others grow;
 And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
 Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

XII.

After these follow nine sonnets praising his friend's beauty in language which in these less passionate days would seem extravagant in a correspondence between two men.

For example, in number xx.:

A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted
 Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
 A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
 With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;
 An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
 Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
 A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
 Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.

At this point a shade of melancholy, perhaps suspicion, or even jealousy, begins to mingle with the sonnets, hinting that some other writer less sincere was trying to supplant him in his friend's regard. Thus in xxiii. he excuses his failure to make more open declaration of his love, saying his heart was overcharged, its utterance was choked.

As an unperfect actor on the stage
 Who with his fear is put beside his part,
 Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage,
 Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart,
 So I, for fear of trust, forget to say
 The perfect ceremony of love's rite,
 And in mine own love's strength seem to decay,
 O'ercharg'd with burden of mine own love's might.
 O, let my books be then the eloquence
 And dumb presagers of my speaking breast.

xxiii.

In reading these poems we are surprised, almost shocked at the extravagant praise of this young man's beauty and the ardent phrases of Shakspeare's affection. He calls him "my love," "dear boy," "lord of my love," "my master-mistress," "my beloved," "my rose," "dear heart," "next my heaven the best,"—terms, most of which we feel to-day are sacred to the passion of man for woman. "The true motto for the first group of Shakspeare's sonnets," says Furnivall, "is to be seen in David's words: 'I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant hast thou been to me: Thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of woman.'" Shakspeare lived in an age when men's passions ran higher than to-day, and were expressed with more freedom. The same Italian fashion that brought in the sonnet brought this style of expression, which seems to us so excessive. "It was then not uncommon," says Dyce, "for one man to write verses to another in a strain of such tender affection as fully warrants us in terming them 'amatory.'" In confirmation of this odd use of endearing epithets, turn to what old Menenius says of Coriolanus, "I know the general is my lover," and still stronger when Portia says of Antonio, "He is the bosom lover of my lord," or the language of Aufidius's servant describing the reception his master gave to Coriolanus, "Our general makes a mistress of him."

The next group, from XXVII. to XXXII., written in absence, are tinged with sadness and run upon grave themes. In XXIX. he bewails his lot in life, lamenting his "outcast state." His vocation of actor was held in great contempt, and undoubtedly separated him from public intimacy with his friend of gentle blood.

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
 I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
 And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
 And look upon myself and curse my fate,
 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
 Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
 Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
 With what I most enjoy contented least;
 Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
 Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
 Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate :
 For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

XXIX.

Who was the man whose "sweet love" could lift Shakspeare to heaven's gate, and inspire him to sing such songs of love?

Can our language furnish any tribute of affection more graceful than this?

The closing poem of this group, XXXII., is written in great depression, as if Shakspeare felt that he had a rival whose poems eclipsed his own, and who bade fair to overtop him in his friend's esteem.

If thou survive my well-contented day,
 When that churl Death my bones with dust shall cover,
 And shalt by fortune once more re-survey
 These poor rude lines of thy deceased lover,
 Compare them with the bettering of the time,
 And though they be outstripp'd by every pen,
 Reserve them for my love not for their rhyme,
 Exceeded by the height of happier men.
 O, then vouchsafe me but this loving thought :
 " Had my friend's Muse grown with this growing age,
 A dearer birth than this his love had brought,
 To march in ranks of better equipage ;
 But since he died and poets better prove,
 Theirs for their style I'll read, his for his love."

XXXII.

These lines refer to his poems, including his sonnets, probably, and not to his plays. The dramas were in the nature of professional work, written for actual presentation on the stage and not for glory ; but the poems he regarded as the basis of his literary fame and of his patron's regard. Such was certainly his feeling at this early period of his life, whatever may have been his later sentiments. Fleay says : " Poems were fit work for a prince, but plays were only congruous with strolling vagabondism ;" and so Halliwell-Phillips remarks : " Works of a strictly poetical character were held in far higher esteem than dramatic compositions." " The contemporaries of Shakspeare allude more than once to the two poems as being his most important works and as those on which his literary distinction chiefly rested."

This sonnet conveys the impression that he was made unhappy by the jealous fancy that his poetical rivals, the "happier men" of his own day, in the progress of the times would excel his own "poor rude lines," and displace him from his friend's regard.

At this point let us leave the sonnets written to his young patron and take up the second series, from CXXVI. to CLII., addressed to the Dark Woman; most of which are parallel, in order of time, with xxx. to XLII. She was not beautiful, and he admits it while he confesses her power, for there was a witchery in her black eyes he could not resist.

Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me,
 Knowing thy heart torments me with disdain,
 Have put on black and loving mourners be,
 Looking with pretty ruth upon my pain;
 And truly not the morning sun of heaven
 Better becomes the grey cheeks of the east,
 Nor that full star that ushers in the even
 Doth half that glory to the sober west,
 As those two mourning eyes become thy face.

CXXXII.

Such a pair of "mourning eyes" might well prove dangerous, but she re-inforced their power by throwing the spell of music over him too, as she played on the virginal, the piano of Elizabeth's day.

How oft when thou, my music, music play'st,
 Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds
 With thy sweet fingers, when thou gently sway'st
 The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,
 Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap

To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,
 Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,
 At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand !
 To be so tickled, they would change their state
 And situation with those dancing chips,
 O'er whom thy fingers walk with gentle gait,
 Making dead wood more blest than living lips.
 Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,
 Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss.

CXXVIII.

No harmony his mistress drew from the virginal
 certainly could equal the exquisite music of these
 words.

But he soon becomes aware that the Dark Woman
 is laying snares for his young friend, and suspects he
 too may have fallen a victim to her charms.

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
 Which like two spirits do suggest me still;
 The better angel is a man right fair,
 The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.
 To win me soon to hell, my female evil
 Tempteth my better angel from my side,
 And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
 Wooing his purity with her foul pride.

CXL.

At this point we will leave the sonnets to his mis-
 tress, and turn back to the first series, where we find
 a kindred group begins at XXXIII. Shakspeare has
 sustained a wrong at the hands of his friend.

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
 Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,
 Kissing the golden face the meadows green,

Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy ;
 Anon permit the basest clouds to ride,
 With ugly rack on his celestial face,
 And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
 Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace ;
 Even so my sun one early morn did shine
 With all-triumphant splendor on my brow ;
 But out, alack ! he was but one hour mine,
 The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now.
 Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth ;
 Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun
 staineth.

XXXIII.

His friend offers some apology, which Shakspeare says "heals the wound but cures not the disgrace."

Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,
 And make me travel forth without my cloak,
 To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way,
 Hiding thy bravery in their rotten smoke?
 'Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break,
 To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face,
 For no man well of such a salve can speak,
 That heals the wound, and cures not the disgrace ;
 Nor can thy shame give physic to my grief ;
 Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss ;
 The offender's sorrow lends but weak relief
 To him that bears the strong offence's cross,
 Ah ! but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds,
 And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds.

XXXIV.

Still it is better we should be separated, said Shakspeare in sonnet xxxvi. I cannot help loving you, but the disgrace is such and so publicly known that it is better you should not honor me with any marks of

your good will,—we must separate. Sonnet XL. confesses the cause of the breach between the friends: the Dark Woman had tempted Will, who had fallen a victim to her charms. It was a double treachery and a double bereavement.

I do forgive thy robbery, gentle thief,
 Although thou steal thee all my poverty;
 And yet, love knows, it is a greater grief
 To bear love's wrong than hate's known injury.

XL.

The Dark Woman now disappears from the sonnets, and I believe she ceased to cast her baleful spell over Shakspeare's life. There has been much speculation as to who the woman was that could so entrance this prince of poets, but there is no clue to her identity. Perhaps the black-eyed Rosaline of Love's Labor's Lost is an early likeness of her, and possibly the faithless Cleopatra, "that serpent of old Nile . . . with Phœbus's amorous pinches black," is a later sketch from memory. If so, we have her portrait without her name. In all the witchery she cast over him Shakspeare knew she was false to him as well as false to her duty, and when in excuse for her shortcomings she reminded him of his lapses from duty, he answered:

O, but with mine compare thou thine own state,
 And thou shalt find it merits not reproving;
 Or, if it do, not from those lips of thine,
 That have profan'd their scarlet ornaments
 And seal'd false bonds of love as oft as mine,

CXLII.

In leaving this chapter of the sonnets let us not pass harsh judgment upon Shakspeare's lapse from duty, but remember that the times were wild, the morals of England were loose and ungoverned, his fellows in his profession with whom he was necessarily on terms of intimacy were generally profligate in morals and dissipated in habits, and he himself in the very flush of early manhood. The calm, deep wisdom of later years was not yet his; as Dowden says, he could understand Romeo, but he could not have conceived of Prospero. Still it is characteristic of the manliness and honesty of his soul that he never fooled himself with justifying his sin. He deploras the "mad fever" which his mistress's eyes kindle in his blood, but he never defends his own conduct. And if I read aright some of the later sonnets, he outlived this madness, and looked back on the spells the siren had cast over him, with a shudder of aversion.

Losing sight of the Dark Woman, we turn again to the story of his relations to his young friend. With ~~†~~XLIII. begins another group. Shakspeare is away on a journey and much depressed. In XLVI. he has received Will's picture, which gives him great comfort in his absence, but an increasing sadness comes over the lines. At times there is a relief from it, and then it wells out again with renewed force,—love with increasing jealousy, as though Will, as he grew older, was slipping farther and farther from his grasp.

Then he weeps to think that his friend's beauty

must fade; that he must live in such a wicked world; and in a strain that reminds us of Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be," he bewails the heartlessness and degeneracy of the times, deploring that Will's name had been tarnished by public scandal. In this sad frame LXXI. and LXXII. look forward to death, and he hopes his friend will forget him, as he was unworthy to be remembered.

No longer mourn for me when I am dead
 Than you shall hear the surly, sullen bell
 Give warning to the world that I am fled
 From this vile world, with vilest worms to dwell;

* * * * *

But let your love even with my life decay,
 Lest the wise world should look into your moan,
 And mock you with me after I am gone.

LXXI.

Sonnet LXXII. continues the same strain, and expresses in remarkable language his dislike for his dramatic works :

My name be buried where my body is,
 And live no more to shame nor me nor you!
 For I am sham'd by that which I bring forth.

This must refer to his plays. Sonnet LXXIII. is full of tender feeling. In it Shakspeare is still haunted with the thought of approaching death :

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
 Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day

As after sunset fadeth in the west,
 Which by and by black night doth take away,
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
 In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
 Consum'd with that which it was nourished by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

This mention of himself as in the decline of years, when he could hardly have been much over thirty-five, is very singular. In LXII. he says :

My glass shows me myself indeed,
 Beated and chopped with tann'd antiquity,

and LXXI., which we just read, seems to expect that the "surly, sullen bell," will soon "give warning to the world that he has fled." These and other similar passages have caused much discussion, and are appealed to as proving that Shakspeare could not be speaking in his own name in these sonnets. But in CXXXVIII., addressed to his mistress and published in 1599, he laments that his "days are past the best," though he was only in his thirty-fifth year, and in Romeo and Juliet Lady Capulet, though only twenty-eight years old, says :

This sight of death is as a bell,
 That warns my *old age* to a sepulchre.

Thus, also, Robert Greene in his Farewell to Folly, when only thirty years old, says age is approaching.

As already stated, men lived faster in those days, and grew old much earlier. Besides, Shakspeare is here comparing himself involuntarily with a man much younger than himself, and ten years from twenty-five to thirty-five cover a wider gap than twenty will later in life. But the more I read this group of sonnets, the more I feel Shakspeare at this time must have been in feeble health and anticipated the near approach of death, which probably contributed to his despondency.

At LXXVIII. he begins to complain that other poets have usurped his place, especially some one man of great learning and grace of diction, of whom he writes thus, in LXXX., which is particularly interesting as giving us a glimpse of the modest estimate Shakspeare placed upon his poems ; though I do not suppose this sonnet has any reference to his plays.

O how I faint when I of you do write,
 Knowing a better spirit doth use your name,
 And in the praise thereof spends all his might,
 To make me tongue-tied, speaking of your fame!
 But since your worth, wide as the ocean is,
 The humble as the proudest sail doth bear,
 My saucy bark, inferior far to his,
 On your broad main doth wilfully appear.
 Your shallowest help will hold me up afloat,
 Whilst he upon your soundless deep doth ride;
 Or, being wrack'd, I am a worthless boat,
 He of tall building and of goodly pride.
 Then if he thrive and I be cast away,
 The worst was this,—my love was my decay.

The favors received by his rival continue to cause him great anxiety and depression of spirits ; and he contrasts his own "tongue-tied muse" with the "golden quill" and "precious phrase" of the other poet.

A singular distrust of his own powers wells up to the surface of the sonnets whenever he comes into competition with the poets of his own day. This is based, seemingly, upon his own lack of early opportunity and early education ; a fear that his "poor, rude lines" may be "outstripped" in his friends' favor by "ranks of better equipage." His own early equipment for literary life had been very limited, while his poetical rivals, both sonneteers and dramatists, were armed with the discipline of a university education, Daniel, Drayton, Chapman and Davies having been educated at Oxford, Greene and Marlow at Cambridge. Hence, Shakspeare speaks of his own "poor, rude lines," "untutored lines," "unpolished lines," and contrasts himself with the "bettering of the time," "better equipage," and the "height of happier men."

And when he meets his mysterious rival of the later sonnets, the same discouraging thought rises to his mind as he contrasts his own "rude ignorance" with "the learned's wing," the "precious phrase by all the muses filed," speaks of his rival's "arts" and "graces" and superior "style," calls himself an "unlettered clerk" as contrasted with "that able spirit," with his "polished form of well refined pen," and satirically alludes to the "strained touches rhetoric can give," in comparison with his own "true plain words."

The fault of interpretation has been that the sonnets have been placed too late in Shakspeare's life, when these differences had vanished. In his early days he felt keenly his deficiencies, but in his later life this want had disappeared; and such a tone of self-distrust as pervades the sonnets, honest enough and natural enough in the beginning of his career, would have been a piece of affectation, unworthy of Shakspeare a few years later, when experience had stored his mind and refined his powers, and when the success of both poems and dramas justified Meres (1598) in placing him in the front rank of English poets.

Returning to the sonnets, listen to the singular description of his rival in LXXXVI.

Was it the proud full sail of his great verse,
 Bound for the prize of all too precious you,
 That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse,
 Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?
 Was it his spirit, by spirits taught to write
 Above a mortal pitch, that struck me dead?
 No, neither he, nor his compeers by night
 Giving him aid, my verse astonished.
 He, nor that affable familiar ghost
 Which nightly gulls him with intelligence,
 As victors of my silence cannot boast;
 I was not sick of any fear from thence;
 But when your countenance fill'd up his line,
 Then lacked I matter; that enfeebled mine.

There is a buccaneer flavor about the first couplet that takes us back to the age which rang with the ex-

plots of Raleigh, Drake and Hawkins. It would seem that so definite a description as he gives here of his rival could be easily identified, but the scholars are still at odds as to who it was. Dowden inclines to the opinion it was Chapman, the translator of Homer.

Shakspeare now falls into the deepest despondency and resolves that he will never see his friend again, though still protesting the most ardent love. While in this fever of jealousy, other hard trials seem to have fallen upon him and he utters this cry of despair.

Then hate me when thou wilt—if ever, now;
 Now, while the world is bent my deeds to cross,
 Join with the spite of fortune, make me bow,
 And do not drop in for an after-loss.
 Ah, do not, when my heart hath 'scaped this sorrow,
 Come in the rearward of a conquer'd woe;
 Give not a windy night a rainy morrow,
 To linger out a purposed overthrow.
 If thou wilt leave me, do not leave me last,
 When other petty griefs have done their spite,
 But in the onset come; so shall I taste
 At first the very worst of fortune's might,
 And other strains of woe, which now seem woe,
 Compared with loss of thee will not seem so.

XC.

After some more alternations of hope and depression Shakspeare becomes so deeply discouraged by his friend's neglect that he ceases to write sonnets.

From the warnings the poems give of public scandal connected with his friend's name we may infer he

was drinking deep of the riotous gayety of London life, as was perhaps natural to a rich and handsome young nobleman of that day.

A break of a year and a half now ensues in the continuity of the sonnets, apparently an entire suspension of intercourse between the friends. When the curtain rises again the rival has disappeared and Shakspeare is once more in peace and harmony with his friend, and breaks out into this vigorous protest of his desolation when separated from Will.

How like a winter hath my absence been
 From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
 What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
 What old December's bareness everywhere!
 And yet this time remov'd was summer's time;
 The teeming autumn, big with rich increase,
 Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime,
 Like widow'd wombs after their lord's decease:
 Yet this abundant issue seem'd to me
 But hope of orphans and unfathered fruit;
 For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
 And, thou away, the very birds are mute;
 Or, if they sing, 't is with so dull a cheer
 That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near.

XCVII.

Then he chides his Muse for her long silence :

Where art thou Muse that thou forget'st so long,
 To speak of that which gives thee all thy might?
 Spend'st thou thy fury on some worthless song
 Darkening thy power to lend base subjects light?
 Return forgetful Muse, and straight redeem
 In gentle numbers time so idly spent.

C.

We may reasonably suppose the "time so idly spent" on "worthless song" and "base subjects" was devoted to the production of his plays, probably about the time of Shylock and Portia, or perhaps Jack Falstaff and Hotspur.

That Shakspeare should speak of his plays with aversion will not seem so remarkable if we remember first, these sonnets were written prior to 1597, before the creation of his best tragedies; moreover, at that time the playwright was usually an actor also; he belonged to the company he wrote for, and Shakspeare as we well know acted in his own plays, while both professions were regarded with great contempt. "In his day to become an actor was to cast social ambition aside, and to tread self esteem under foot," says Richard Grant White. The playwrights of his time were generally men of low, dissolute habits, most of whom came to miserable ends. Under these circumstances it is not strange that Shakspeare regarded his plays, certainly at this early period of his life, simply as the tools with which he earned his bread in a hateful profession, a calling which branded him as an outcast from the society he longed to enter.

It is often inferred that he was indifferent to his plays, because he never published them; but we should bear in mind that they were written for his dramatic troupe to act and not for us to read. He owned an interest in one of the leading companies in London, with which he acted and for which he wrote plays; and

by publication his company would have lost the exclusive use of them. Therefore, no complete edition of his plays was issued till 1623, seven years after his death; while, on the other hand, his poems were published by himself with great care and with formal introductions, the *Venus* in 1593 and the *Lucrece* in 1594.

Bearing all this in mind, read again xxix., already quoted, where he laments his "outcast state," and speaks of himself as

Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;

and LXXII., where he says, "I am shamed by that which I bring forth," and the lines already quoted from c., addressed to his Muse,

Spend'st thou thy fury on some worthless song,
Darkening thy power to lend base subjects light?
Return, forgetful Muse, and straight redeem
In gentle numbers time so idly spent.

From all this, we are led irresistibly to the conclusion that the connection of his name with his plays brought him no satisfaction at the time the sonnets were written.

Returning to our story, he excuses his long silence spent on such "worthless song" and "base subjects" in the following lovely sonnet :

My love is strengthen'd, though more weak in seeming;
I love not less, though less the show appear:
That love is merchandiz'd whose rich esteeming

The owner's tongue doth publish everywhere.
 Our love was new and then but in the spring,
 When I was wont to greet it with my lays,
 As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,
 And stops her pipe in growth of riper days;
 Not that the summer is less pleasant now
 Than when her mournful hymns did hush the night;
 But that wild music burthens every bough,
 And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.
 Therefore, like her, I sometime hold my tongue,
 Because I would not dull you with my song.

CII.

After singing over with ever varying form the same old refrain of Will's beauty and truth, he looks back with a sigh over his own past life :

O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
 The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
 That did not better for my life provide
 Than public means, which public manners breeds.
 Thence comes it that my name receives a brand,
 And almost thence my nature is subdued
 To what it works in, like the dyer's hand.
 Pity me then and wish I were renew'd.

CXI.

After this his distrust and jealousy disappear and the course of his love runs smoothly through the remaining sonnets. In cxvi. he praises the eternal quality of true love, his faith in the "marriage of true minds," with an earnestness that no poet has ever equaled :

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments. Love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:
 O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wandering bark,
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
 Love 's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his bending sickle's compass come;
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
 If this be error, and upon me prov'd,
 I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

As he looks back at his experience he shudders at what he has been through, and draws new comfort because his love has been rebuilt stronger than before.

What potions have I drunk of Siren tears
 Distill'd from limbecks foul as hell within,
 Applying fears to hopes and hopes to fears,
 Still losing when I saw myself to win!
 What wretched errors hath my heart committed,
 Whilst it hath thought itself so blessed never!
 How have mine eyes out of their spheres been fitted
 In the distraction of this madding fever!
 O, benefit of ill! now I find true
 That better is by evil still made better;
 And ruin'd love, when it is built anew,
 Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater.
 So I return rebuk'd to my content,
 And gain by ill thrice more than I have spent.

CXIX.

Again and again he repeats in various forms his remorse at his own lack of fidelity and his earnest assurance that no change in life can ever affect their relations. And at last he closes by warning his friend

that kind as Nature had been to him, she must at last surrender him to the great conqueror, Death,—and with this solemn thought the poems close.

The sonnets are a record of temptation and trial, a great spirit struggling through sin and suffering into peace, through distrust and suspicion, through the trials of jealousy and wounded feelings, into reconciliation and love. Shakspeare's soul was too great to have settled into sensual enjoyment as the end of life, or to stop on the way towards something better and rest contented in misanthropy and cynicism. The sweep of his vision was too wide to be satisfied with these. Through repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation he attained a peace and happiness which nothing else could have given him. The story is very similar to that which is drawn from the plays; but the closing scenes of the sonnets lack one element which gives a calmer beauty to the later plays,—the presence of domestic happiness. In every one of the later plays called "romances," and these are necessary to complete the picture of his life, the unity of a broken family is restored, domestic sorrows are healed, jealousy rooted out, and the family is brought together in happiness and harmony. In each of these plays the central attraction is a lovely girl, just budding into womanhood, round whose fortunes the story revolves. Marina, Perdita, Imogen, Miranda,—what grace and beauty they express. In two of these dramas, Pericles

and Winter's Tale, a wife and mother is restored from the dead to the arms of a happy husband and children; while in that part of Henry VIII. which is generally believed to be almost the last work of Shakspeare's pen, the chief interest gathers about the dying queen forgiving the king from whom she had suffered so much wrong, and blessing him with her last breath.

“Tell him, in death I blessed him, for so I will.”

In 1609 Shakspeare is thought to have returned to Stratford to rejoin his family, from whom he had been separated for so many years. His daughters were then in the bloom of early womanhood, and his wife was still living. It is grateful to me to believe that the “well contented spirit” of the later plays was the reflection of his own heart in his Stratford home. There he had found a peace that the brilliant society of London and the plaudits of popular favor had never brought him.

And now, as we leave him at rest under his own roof-tree, does the story thus outlined grate harshly on our feelings? Does this admission of his transgressions cloud our ideal of Shakspeare? Such transcendent genius as his must always move in the presence of great danger, from the very fullness of its powers and strength of its emotions.

His strength's abundance weakens his own heart.

It is not given to such men to tread the safe and beaten ways of common life. They are driven by

their passions into the wilderness of temptation. Their paths lie along giddy heights and across deep gulfs of despair. Some drop by the wayside and perish. Shakspeare was saved by his generous trust in human goodness and that love which

Is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark.

Under its guidance he came out of the storm and bitter experience of life reconciled to the world; a renewed faith in men and women brightened the close of his life, and shed peace and contentment on his own heart.

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