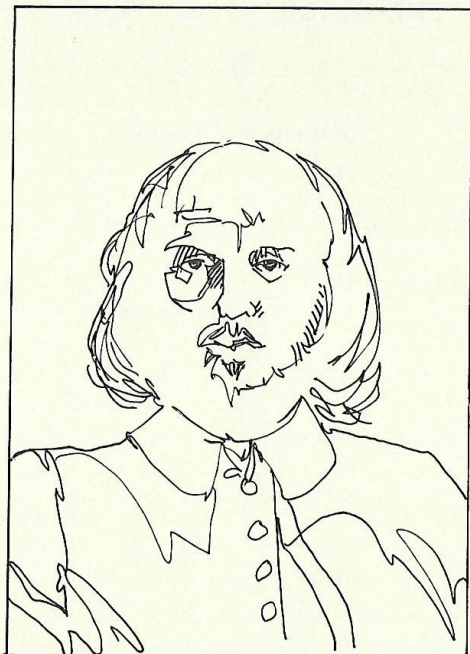


THE GUILD
Shakespeare



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Shakespeare

SONNETS AND POEMS

BY
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Editor's Introduction to

THE SONNETS

and

OTHER POEMS



Although Shakespeare is now revered as the consummate poet, a writer of incomparable genius, he actually composed no more than a handful of what he and his contemporaries normally classified as works of literature. He appears to have defined himself primarily as a man of the theatre, an actor and a "wrighter" of "insubstantial Pageants" for the Elizabethan stage, and we have no way of knowing whether he ever envisaged his playscripts as masterpieces that would eventually be treasured alongside the classics of Greek and Roman antiquity.

But there would appear to be no doubt about the poems we examine in this volume. They were all written for private contemplation, for the enjoyment of individual readers. They invoked a future audience that would find solace in them as Beauty's fragile testament against the "bloody Tyrant Time." And in two cases at least, they carried the imprint of the author's own hand as they issued forth in meticulous editions.

Venus and Adonis, which Shakespeare called the "first heir" of his poetic "invention," was probably a product of the two-year period, from June 1592 to June 1594, when London's acting companies were forced to suspend their operations because of an outbreak of the plague. Turn-

ing from playwrighting to literary endeavors, Shakespeare wove a mythological narrative that drew from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and capitalized on a fashion for erotic romances that was being catered to by authors like Thomas Lodge (whose *Scilla's Metamorphoses* had been printed in 1589) and Christopher Marlowe (whose *Hero and Leander* probably circulated in manuscript for several years before its publication, five years after the author's death, in 1598).

When *Venus and Adonis* came off the press in 1593, it bore a florid dedication to "the Right Honorable Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton," a handsome courtier nine years younger than Shakespeare who seems likely to have been the poet's patron in the early 1590s. The poem's six-line stanzas employed an *ababcc* rhyme scheme that had been established by such prestigious literati as Edmund Spenser, and its ornamental style was designed to appeal to an elegant clientele quite different from the bustling crowd that frequented the public playhouses in which the young theatre professional was accustomed to plying his trade. *Venus and Adonis* was a witty narrative about the Goddess of Love's fumbling attempts to seduce an unresponsive youth more interested in the hunt than in amorous pursuits, and it proved to be an immediate and sustained success, with nine reprints during the poet's lifetime and six more between 1616 and 1640. The many surviving references to it indicate, moreover, that it reached an appreciative readership much broader than the courtly set for whom it was originally conceived.

The grace of Shakespeare's narrative appears to have gratified its dedicatee as well, because a year later the poet was back in print with what he called a "graver labor" and an even more fervent expression of devotion to the same nobleman. Like its predecessor, *The Rape of Lucrece* drew on Ovid for inspiration, and it too employed a stanza much admired by Renaissance literary connoisseurs (in this case rhyme royal, a seven-line form with an *ababbcc* scheme whose tradition in English poetry extended all the way back to Geoffrey Chaucer). *Lucrece* went through

eight editions prior to 1640, and among Shakespeare's works its popularity seems to have been exceeded only by *Venus and Adonis*.

Meanwhile, the poet was probably at least beginning to produce the "sugred Sonnets" that were circulating "among his private friends" by 1598, according to a reference to them in *Palladis Tamia*, a small volume of literary appreciations by a schoolmaster and cleric named Francis Meres. Whether Shakespeare planned to print his *Sonnets*, however, and if so when, is anything but certain. Sonnets 138 and 144 somehow made their way into a 1599 miscellany called *The Passionate Pilgrim*. And the entire collection as we know it was offered to the public in what is usually assumed to have been an unauthorized edition by Thomas Thorpe in 1609.

Thorpe dedicated his volume "To the onlie Begetter of these Insuing Sonnets, Master W.H.," wishing him "All Happiness and that Eternity promised by our ever-living Poet." Just who the "onlie Begetter" of the manuscript was, and whether he represented the author or one of his close associates in any sense, remains a mystery. Other mysteries shroud the identities of the persons the *Sonnets* appear to refer to (the Young Man addressed in Sonnets 1–126; the Dark Lady addressed, described, or alluded to in most of the remaining Sonnets, 127–154, and the Rival Poet discussed in Sonnets 79, 80, 83, and 86), the order in which the individual poems were written and were meant to be arranged, and the relationships, if any, between the *Sonnets* and the poet's personal life. The name most frequently proposed for the Young Man is the Earl of Southampton (though another courtier, the Earl of Pembroke, has also had some scholarly backers). The leading contender for Rival Poet is Christopher Marlowe (though some have advocated George Chapman, another poet and dramatist of the period). And the name that has been most vociferously propounded for the Dark Lady is Emilia Bassano Lanier, the loose, dark-skinned daughter of an Italian Court musician.

Two centuries after they were composed, Wordsworth commended

the *Sonnets* as the key by which "Shakespeare unlocked his heart." They have a ring of truth that makes it virtually impossible for most of us to respond to them as fictions divorced from the poet's own passions and perplexities. At the same time, however, they ring so many changes on Renaissance literary conventions that some interpreters believe they have no more bearing on Shakespeare's own life than do dramatic works like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Macbeth*.

Each sonnet is to some degree a self-enclosed unit, a cell that can be scrutinized in isolation from the body of which it is an integral part, and one of the pleasures of reading these remarkable poems is the satisfaction that derives from delving into a series of puzzles that test one's wits and engage one's sensibilities to the utmost. They exhibit ways of thinking and feeling about problems that every human being faces at one point or another, and many of them arrive at formulations so eloquent and profound as to seem universal in their applicability (Sonnets 18, 29, 30, 55, 60, 64, 65, 73, 104, 116, 129, and 146, to single out a few).

All but three of the Sonnets are 14-line poems in iambic pentameter, with three quatrains (rhymed *abab cdcd efef*) and a concluding couplet (*gg*). The basic form of "the English sonnet" was introduced by an earlier Renaissance poet, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, but it is now so firmly identified with Shakespeare that it is generally referred to as the Shakespearean sonnet. In this collection the three exceptions to the norm are Sonnet 145 (which has the usual rhyme scheme but is written in iambic tetrameter, a four-stress line), Sonnet 99 (which adds a fifth line to the first quatrain, for a total of fifteen lines overall), and Sonnet 126 (which is comprised of six couplets, for a total of twelve lines).

The volume in which the *Sonnets* first appeared was also the venue for the first issue of *A Lover's Complaint*, a narrative and dialogue in the same rhyme-royal stanza that Shakespeare had employed in *The Rape of Lucrece*. *A Lover's Complaint* is one of the most mannered poems of the English Renaissance (so much so that Shakespeare's authorship of it has

occasionally been questioned), and it features the plaintive tale of a young woman who has allowed herself to be seduced by an irresponsible gallant. Whether the poet was planning to publish the work himself we have no way of ascertaining. Like the *Sonnets*, it seems to have elicited little or no attention in Shakespeare's lifetime; and like the *Sonnets*, it appears to have enjoyed its first reprint in the rearrangement of *Poems Written by Wil. Shakespeare* that John Benson published in 1640.

The Phoenix and Turtle emerged in 1601 in a collection of poems appended to Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr, or Rosalin's Complaint, Allegorically Shadowing the Truth of Love, in the Constant Fate of the Phoenix and Turtle*. Just what occasioned the Chester anthology we don't know; nor can we do any more than speculate about why Shakespeare chose to add his name to those of John Marston, George Chapman, and Ben Jonson as a contributor to the volume. All we can do now is ponder a three-part elegy in which the author invites us to contemplate the union of one bird (the Arabian Phoenix) proverbial for its uniqueness and another (the Turtledove) proverbial for its fidelity. The poem opens with five stanzas in which a funeral procession is assembled to mourn the death of the legendary Phoenix and Turtle. Once gathered, the various birds sing an anthem to bemoan the demise of "Love and Constancy." Then a different stanza form introduces a concluding Threnos (lament for the dead) in which Reason grieves that "Truth and Beauty buried be."

In many cases, complexities and ambiguities in Shakespeare's texts are either diminished or obliterated when modern spelling and punctuation supplant the original appearance of a passage. Whenever it is not mandatory to modernize, therefore, this edition endeavors to retain something approximating the flavor of the first printings. Thus readers here will sometimes read *borne* when they might expect to see *born* (in Sonnets 68, 78, and 151, for example), and *travail* when they might expect *travel* (in Sonnets 27 and 34, to cite two instances); the original

spellings of these words frequently embody two or more modern meanings.

As is usual in *The Guild Shakespeare*, the poems in this volume are reproduced with a minimum of editorial emendation. Only when there appears to be an obvious solution to an obvious error is the text altered. Otherwise the reader is offered an edition that presents the words and much of the punctuation to be found in the original printings. In some instances this practice preserves what appear to be flaws or unfinished passages (a pair of lines, 9 and 11, that fail to rhyme as expected in Sonnet 25, for example). In others it retains features that may or may not have been intended by the poet: such apparently "imperfect" rhymes as *steel'd/held* in Sonnet 24 and *Monument/Contents* in Sonnet 55, for example, or such forms as *perfects* (for "perfect'st") in Sonnet 51. A note on emendations at the end of the volume lists many of the changes that other editions normally make in their presentation of these poems.

Another feature of the *Guild* edition that readers should find helpful is the Glossary that follows the note on emendations. Even in the *Sonnets*, where most of the vocabulary will seem familiar, Shakespeare's words frequently have meanings that differ from those usual today.

Finally, readers will note that many words are capitalized in this edition of Shakespeare's poems. Most of the words upper-cased here are lower-cased in the original printings of these texts. The capitalization style adopted for the *Guild* printing is an extension of the one employed by the compilers of the First Folio, the 1623 memorial volume in which Shakespeare's dramatic works were first offered to readers in a comprehensive collection. It is the capitalization practice followed elsewhere in *The Guild Shakespeare*, and it is designed to help modern readers adapt to a mode of literary representation more patterned, heightened, and "artificial" than what we normally find in the writing of later periods. Renaissance poets reveled in "Art," and Shakespeare put it to better use than anyone else who ever wielded a pen.

Sonnets

71

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 vildest Worms to dwell.
 Nay if you read this Line, remember not
 The Hand that writ it, for I love you so
 That I in your sweet Thoughts would be forgot
 If thinking on me then should make you woe.
 O if (I say) you look upon this Verse
 When I (perhaps) compounded am with Clay,
 Do not so much as my poor Name rehearse,
 But let your Love ev'n with my Life decay,
 Lest the wise World should look into your Moan,
 And mock you with me after I am gone.

72

O lest the World should task you to recite
 What Merit liv'd in Me that you should love
 After my Death, dear Love, forget me quite:
 For you in Me can nothing Worthy prove,
 Unless you would devise some virtuous Lie
 To do more for me than mine own Desert,
 And hang more Praise upon deceased I
 Than niggard Truth would willingly impart.
 O lest your True Love may seem False in this,
 That you for Love speak well of Me untrue,
 My Name be buri'd 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,
 And so should you, to love things Nothing Worth.

73

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 ru'ned Quiers, 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 nourish'd by.
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy Love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

74

But be contented when that fell Arrest
 Without all Bail shall carry me away:
 My Life hath in this Line some Interest,
 Which for Memorial still with Thee shall stay.
 When thou reviewest this, thou dost review
 The very Part was consecrate to Thee.
 The Earth can have but Earth, which is his Due;
 My Spir't is thine, the better Part of Me.
 So then thou hast but lost the Dregs of Life,
 The Prey of Worms, my Body being dead,
 The coward Conquest of a Wretch's Knife,
 Too base of thee to be remembered.
 The Worth of That is that which it contains,
 And that is This, and This with Thee remains.