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Sonnets

William Shakespeare

Edited by Alessandro Gallenzi



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With only a few exceptions, the rhyme scheme of the poems follows the standard “English” structure of the sonnet made popular by poets such as George Gascoigne and Sir Philip Sidney: three iambic-pentameter quatrains in alternate rhymes followed by a final rhyming couplet, or ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Traditional in form, Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence is in many ways unconventional, compared with similar works by some of his contemporaries. What is unique is the complexity of the language, the intensity of the emotional drama that permeates them and the liberty with which themes of physical passion and homoerotic love are presented. Inevitably, as in any collection of this extent, the quality of the poems is uneven, with many redundancies and repetitions, but Shakespeare’s linguistic virtuosity, inventiveness and psychological insight rank him among the best sonnet writers and love poets of all time.

Presenting a book published over four hundred years ago to the modern reader is a daunting task. My approach was to follow as closely as possible the text in the 1609 Quarto, updating its spelling and punctuation whenever necessary. I added notes only when I felt that they were required for a clearer understanding of the poem, as I believe that excessive annotation can get in the way of appreciating the poetry. For the various emendations suggested in the notes I am greatly indebted to the many scholars who preceded me, in particular Katherine Duncan-Jones, whose outstanding edition for the Arden Shakespeare series remains the starting point for anyone wishing to delve deeper into the mystery and the hidden treasures of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*.

– Alessandro Gallenzi

Sonnets

TO. THE. ONLY. BEGETTER. OF
THESE. ENSUING. SONNETS.
Mr. W.H. ALL. HAPPINESS.
AND. THAT. ETERNITY.
PROMISED.
BY.
OUR. EVER-LIVING. POET.
WISHETH.
THE. WELL-WISHING.
ADVENTURER. IN.
SETTING.
FORTH.¹

T.T.

SONNETS

1 *SETTING. FORTH*: “starting off”, “setting out”, but also “publishing”.

I

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:
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.
Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buriest thy content
And, tender churl, mak'st waste in niggarding.
Pity the world, or else this glutton be:¹
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.

1 *this glutton be*: "be a glutton to this extent".

II

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow
 And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
 Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
 Will be a tattered weed, of small worth held:
 Then being asked where all thy beauty lies,
 Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
 To say "Within thine own deep-sunken eyes"
 Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.
 How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use,
 If thou couldst answer: "This fair child of mine
 Shall sum my count and make my old excuse",¹
 Proving his beauty by succession thine.

This were to be new-made when thou art old,
 And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.

1 *Shall sum my count and make my old excuse*: Interpretations of this line vary. Possibly: "Sum up the balance of my life and make up for my own old age".

III

Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
 Now is the time that face should form another,
 Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,
 Thou dost beguile the world, unless some mother.
 For where is she so fair whose unear'd¹ womb
 Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
 Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
 Of his self-love to stop posterity?
 Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee
 Calls back the lovely April of her prime:
 So thou through windows of thine age shalt see,
 Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time.
 But if thou live remembered not to be,
 Die single, and thine image dies with thee.

1 *unear'd*: "unploughed", "unsown", i.e. still virgin.

IV

Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend
 Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?
 Nature's bequest gives nothing, but doth lend,
 And being frank, she lends to those are free.
 Then, beauteous niggard, why dost thou abuse
 The bounteous largesse given thee to give?
 Profitless usurer, why dost thou use
 So great a sum of sums, yet canst not live?
 For having traffic¹ with thyself alone,
 Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive;
 Then how, when nature calls thee to be gone,
 What acceptable audit canst thou leave?
 Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee,
 Which, used, lives th'executor to be.

¹ *traffic*: "commerce", "intercourse", with a sexual innuendo.

V

Those hours that with gentle work did frame
 The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell
 Will play the tyrants to the very same
 And that unfair¹ which fairly doth excel:
 For never-resting time leads summer on
 To hideous winter and confounds him there,
 Sap checked with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,
 Beauty o'ersnowed and bareness everywhere;
 Then, were not summer's distillation left,
 A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
 Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,
 Nor it, nor no remembrance what it was.
 But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet,
 Leese² but their show: their substance still lives sweet.

¹ *unfair*: As a verb: "deprive of beauty".

² *Leese*: Archaic for "lose".

VI

Then let not winter's ragged hand deface
 In thee thy summer, ere thou be distilled:
 Make sweet some vial, treasure thou some place
 With beauty's treasure, ere it be self-killed.
 That use is not forbidden usury,
 Which happies those that pay the willing loan;
 That's for thyself to breed another thee,
 Or ten times happier, be it ten for one;
 Ten times thyself were happier than thou art,
 If ten of thine ten times refigured thee:
 Then what could death do, if thou shouldst depart,
 Leaving thee living in posterity?
 Be not self-willed, for thou art much too fair
 To be death's conquest and make worms thine heir.

VII

Lo, in the Orient when the gracious light
 Lifts up his burning head, each under eye¹
 Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,
 Serving with looks his sacred majesty;
 And having climb'd the steep-up heavenly hill,
 Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
 Yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
 Attending on his golden pilgrimage;
 But when from highmost pitch, with weary car,
 Like feeble age, he reeleth from the day,
 The eyes, 'fore duteous, now converted are
 From his low tract, and look another way:
 So thou, thyself out-going in thy noon,
 Unlooked on diest, unless thou get a son.

¹ *each under eye*: "each eye under the sun".

VIII

Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?
Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy.
Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly,
Or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy?¹
If the true concord of well-tunèd sounds,
By unions married, do offend thine ear,
They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds
In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear:
Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,
Strikes each in each by mutual ordering,
Resembling sire and child and happy mother,
Who, all in one, one pleasing note do sing:

Whose speechless song being many, seeming one,
Sings this to thee: "Thou single wilt prove none."

¹ *annoy*: "pain", "vexation".

IX

Is it for fear to wet a widow's eye
That thou consum'st thyself in single life?
Ah, if thou issueless shalt hap to die,
The world will wail thee like a makeless¹ wife;
The world will be thy widow and still weep
That thou no form of thee hast left behind,
When every private widow well may keep,
By children's eyes, her husband's shape in mind.
Look what² an unthrift in the world doth spend
Shifts but his place, for still the world enjoys it,
But beauty's waste hath in the world an end
And, kept unused, the user so destroys it.
No love toward others in that bosom sits
That on himself such murd'rous shame commits.

¹ *makeless*: "mateless" or "widowed".

² *Look what*: "whatever", "that which".