

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00090-1 - The Secret Drama of Shakespeare's Sonnets

Gerald Massey

Excerpt

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## A BRIEF PRELIMINARY ACCOUNT

### OF THE

# SONNETS.

ONLY Twice does Shakspeare speak to us in prose outside of his Plays.

The first time is when he dedicates the poem of *Venus and Adonis*, as the First heir of his Invention, to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, and says, "If your Honour seem but pleased I account myself highly praised, and vow to take advantage of all idle hours till I have honoured you with some graver labour." In the year following this promise was fulfilled. To the same friend the Poet offered the fruit of his "graver labour" in the poem of *Lucrece*. In the second dedication he again looks forward and speaks of literary work to be done in the future. "What I have done is yours," he says. "What I have to do is yours,—being part in all I have devoted yours." "What I have to do is yours" implies future work; all future work will be a continuation of all past work, and both are included in the inclusive "all I have devoted yours," *i. e.* all which I have devoted to you.

Now, whether the work thus spoken of had been done in the past, or is being done in the present, or is to be done in the future according to an agreement or understanding, Shakspeare himself here tells us that such past, present, and future work was wholly and solely devoted to his young friend, the Earl of Southampton. So stands the record in Shakspeare's own writing when he makes another promise more emphatic than the one he had just fulfilled, and again pledges himself by another reference to work in hand, more express in meaning than was his primary dedication. From this personal record we learn that he *has work in hand which is pre-dedicated at the time of writing to the same friend*. This second and more serious promise given publicly had no fulfilment, unless the work devoted to Southampton was the *Sonnets of Shakspeare*, known four years later to be circulating amongst the poet's "Private Friends." But, as Mrs. Cowden Clarke observed in a letter addressed to me (July 25, 1866),

*"Shakspeare was not the man to write lightly and meaninglessly such words as 'The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end,' and 'what I have done is yours; what I have to do is yours; being part in all I have devoted yours!' Shakspeare was not the man to write thus to his friend Southampton overtly, and to write to his friend of the Sonnets as he there does, unless they were one and the same person."*

The earliest notice we have of Shakspeare's Sonnets yet identified by name is from the pen of Francis Meres, Master of Arts of both Universities, in his work entitled '*Palladis Tamia; Wit's Treasury*, being the second part of Wit's Commonwealth,' which was published in the year 1598. Meres at that date

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recognizes Shakspeare as the foremost writer, the most all-round poet, of the Elizabethan age, and proclaims him to be one of the very best in Comedy, in Tragedy, and in Lyrical Poetry. The writer shows that he was up to date in his familiarity with Shakspeare's writings, for he quotes an expression used by Falstaff in the first part of *Henry IV.*, II. iv.<sup>1</sup>—a play which had only been entered on the Stationers' Register Feb. 25th, 1597-98. Meres was also greatly impressed with the English glory of Shakspeare's language. "As Epius Stolo said that the Muses would speak with Plautus' tongue if they would speak Latin, so I say that the Muses would speak with Shakspeare's fine, filed phrase, if they would speak English." And of the Poems and Sonnets Meres remarks that "*As the soul of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras, so the sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakspeare; witness his 'Venus and Adonis,' his 'Lucrece,' his sugred Sonnets among his Private Friends.*" This mention of the Sonnets supplies us with an important link of connection. We learn from Meres that in the year 1598 the Sonnets of Shakspeare were known and somewhat renowned in MS. for him to proclaim their sweetness as Love-Poetry, and they were also numerous enough to be classed and concisely reviewed by him among the Poet's other Works. Meres was a Warwickshire man. He is characterized by Heywood in his *Apology for Actors* as "an approved good Scholar whose work was learnedly done." Thus, according to Francis Meres, in 1598, Shakspeare had made his "Private Friends," for whom he had written the Sonnets; and if the Sonnets be the same, the private friendship publicly recognized by the Critic must of course have included that which is celebrated by the Poet in his first 126 Sonnets.

The Title to Thorpe's Collection, printed in 1609, reads with an echo to the words of Meres—*Shakspeare's Sonnets, never before Imprinted*, though so often spoken of, and so long known to exist in MS.

An understanding on the subject is implied in the familiarity of phrase. The inscriber appears to say, "You have heard a great deal about the 'Sugred Sonnets,' mentioned by the critic, as circulating amongst the poet's private friends; I have the honour to set them forth for the public."

The Sonnets were published in 1609, with this inscription:—

TO . THE . ONLIE . BEGETTER . OF .  
 THESE . INSVING . SONNETS .  
 M<sup>r</sup> . W . H . ALL . HAPPINESSE .  
 AND . THAT . ETERNITIE .  
 PROMISED .  
 BY .  
 OVR . EVER-LIVING . POET .  
 WISHETH .  
 THE . WELL-WISHING .  
 ADVENTVRER . IN .  
 SETTING .  
 FORTH . T. T.

<sup>1</sup> Falstaff says, "here's Lime in this Sack too; there is nothing but Roguery to be found in Villainous Man." Meres applies this to the "Corrupt times, when there is nothing but roguery in villainous man." This familiarity with Falstaff makes it fairly certain that the *Merry Wives of Windsor* had not appeared when Meres wrote in 1598, or he would have included it in his list of Shakspeare's Plays.

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The book is inscribed by Thomas Thorpe, a well-known publisher of the time who was himself a dabbler in literature. He edited a posthumous work of Marlowe's, and was the publisher of plays by Marston, Jonson, Chapman, and others. Shakspeare makes no sign of assent to the publication; whereas he prefaced his *Venus and Adonis* with dedication and motto; the *Lucrece* with dedication and argument.

After the Sonnets were printed by Thorpe in 1609, we hear no more of them for thirty-one years. In 1640 a new edition appeared with an arrangement totally different from the original one. This was published as 'Poems written by Wil. Shakspeare, Gent. Printed at London by Tho. Cotes, and are to be sold by John Benson.' In this arrangement we find some of the pieces printed in the *Passionate Pilgrim* mixed up with the Sonnets, and the whole of them have titles which are chiefly given to little groups. Sonnets 18, 19, 43, 56, 75, 76, 96, 126 are missing from the second edition. This publication of the Sonnets as poems on distinct subjects shows, to some extent, how they were looked upon by the readers of the time. The arranger, in supplying his titles, would be following a feeling and answering a want. Any personal application of them was very far from his thoughts. Sonnets 88, 89, 90, and 91 are entitled *A Request to his Scornful Love*. 109 and 110 are called *A Lover's excuse for his long Absence*. Sonnet 122, *Upon the Receipt of a Table Book from his Mistress*; and 125, *An Entreaty for her Acceptance*. The greater part of the titles however are general, and only attempt to characterize the sentiment.

The most remarkable feature of this publication is Benson's address, to which sufficient attention has never been directed.

## " TO THE READER.

*"I here presume, under favour, to present to your view some excellent and sweetly composed poems of Master William Shakspeare, which in themselves appear of the same purity the author himself, then living, avouched! They had not the fortune, by reason of their infancy in his death, to have the due accommodation of proportionable glory with the rest of his ever-living works. Yet the lines will afford you a more authentic approbation than my assurance any way can to invite your allowance; in your perusal you shall find them serene, clear, and elegantly plain, —such gentle strains as shall recreate and not perplex your brain. No intricate or cloudy stuff to puzzle intellect, but perfect eloquence, such as will raise your admiration to his praise. This assurance will not differ from your acknowledgments, and certain I am my opinion will be seconded by the sufficiency of these ensuing lines. I have been somewhat solicitous to bring this forth to the perfect view of all men, and in so doing glad to be serviceable for the continuance of glory to the deserved author in these his poems."*

At first sight one might fancy that Benson referred to the purity of Shakspeare's life as avouching for the purity of the Sonnets. But after long questioning the conclusion is forced upon me that Shakspeare *had himself defended them* against some such "exsufficate and blown surmises" or conjectures of his day as we find extant in ours. Benson emphatically states that *the author himself when living avouched their purity!*

To avouch is to affirm or testify, and therefore the plain English of this must be that Shakspeare, in his life-time, gave his own personal testimony to the

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purity of his Sonnets. This vindication would not have been made unless some contrary charge had been brought against them. Benson having heard of this looked into the Sonnets for himself, and found they justified the claim that Shakspeare had made on their behalf. Therefore he says, "*I have been somewhat solicitous to bring this forth to the view of all men,*" with intent to do justice to the Sonnets and their Author.

In the editions that followed the first two, sometimes the one order prevailed, sometimes the other. Lintot's, published in 1709, adhered to the arrangement of Thorpe's Collection. Curll's, in 1710, follows that of Cotes. Gildon gave it as his opinion, that the Sonnets were all of them written in praise of Shakspeare's mistress. Dr. Sewell edited them in 1728, and he tells us, by way of illustrating Gildon's idea, that "a young Muse *must* have a Mistress to play off the beginnings of fancy; nothing being so apt to elevate the soul to a pitch of poetry, as the passion of love." This opinion, that the Sonnets were addressed to a mistress, appears to have obtained, until disputed by Malone and Steevens. In 1780, the last-named critic published his *Supplement to the Edition of Shakspeare's Plays* (1778), and the notes to the Sonnets include his own conjectures and conclusions, together with those of Dr. Farmer, Tyrwhitt, and Steevens. These four generally concur in the belief that 128 of the Sonnets are addressed to a man; the remaining 28 to a lady. Malone considered the Sonnets to be those spoken of by Meres. Dr. Farmer thought that William Harte, Shakspeare's nephew, might be the person addressed under the initials "W. H." However, the Stratford Register soon put a stop to William Harte's candidature, for it showed that he was not baptized until August 28, 1600. Tyrwhitt was struck with the peculiar lettering of a line in the 20th Sonnet,—

A man in *Hew* all *Hews* in his controlling,

and fancied that the Poet had written it on the colourable pretext of hinting at the "only begetter's" name, which the critic conjectured might be William Hughes. The Sonnets were Steevens' pet abhorrence. At first he did not reprint them. He says, "We have not reprinted the Sonnets, &c. of Shakspeare because the strongest Act of Parliament that could be framed would fail to compel readers into their service, notwithstanding these miscellaneous poems have derived every possible advantage from the literature and judgment of their only intelligent editor, Mr. Malone, whose implements of criticism, like the ivory rake and golden spade in Prudentius, are, on this occasion, disgraced by the objects of their culture. Had Shakspeare produced no other works than these, his name would have reached us with as little celebrity as time has conferred on that of Thomas Watson, an older and much more elegant sonneteer." Afterwards he broke out continually in abuse of them. The eruption of his ill-humour occurs in foot-notes, that disfigure the pages of Malone's edition of Shakspeare's poems. He held that they were composed in the "highest strain of affectation, pedantry, circumlocution, and nonsense." "Such laboured perplexities of language," he says, "and such studied deformities of style prevail throughout these Sonnets, that the reader (after our best endeavours at explanation!) will frequently find reason to exclaim with Imogen—

I see before me, man,—nor here, nor here,  
Nor what ensues, but have a fog in them  
That I cannot look through."

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"This purblind and obscure stuff," he calls their poetry. And in a note to Sonnet 54 he asks with a sneer, "but what has truth or nature to do with sonnets?" Steevens however was not altogether without warrant for his condemnation if he read the Sonnets as utterances entirely personal to the Poet.

Boswell, second son of Dr. Johnson's biographer, in editing a later edition of the work in which Steevens' notes are printed, had the good sense to defend the Sonnets against that censor's bitterness of contempt, and the good taste to perceive that they are all aglow with the "orient hues" of Shakspeare's youthful imagination. He ventures to assert that Steevens has not "made a convert of a single reader who had any pretensions to poetical taste in the course of forty years," which had then gone by since the splenetic critic first described the Sonnets as worthless. Boswell also remarks anent the personal interpretation that the fondling expressions which perpetually occur would have been better suited to a "cockered silken wanton" than to "one of the most gallant noblemen that adorned the chivalrous age in which he lived."

In 1797 Chalmers had endeavoured to show that the Sonnets were addressed to Queen Elizabeth, although Her Majesty must have been close upon sixty years of age when the Sonnets were first commenced. He argues that Shakspeare, knowing the voracity of Elizabeth for praise, thought he would fool her to the top of her bent; aware of her patience when listening to panegyric, he determined, with the resolution of his own Dogberry, to bestow his whole tediousness upon her.

Dr. Drake, in his *Shakspeare and his Times* (1817), was the first to conjecture that Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, was the youthful friend of Shakspeare who was addressed so affectionately in the Sonnets, as well as inscribed to so lovingly in the dedications of his poems. He thought the unity of feeling in both identified the same person, and maintained that a little attention to the language of the times in which Thorpe's inscription was written, would lead us to infer that Mr. W. H. had sufficient influence to "obtain the manuscript from the Poet, and that he lodged it in Thorpe's hands for the purpose of publication, a favour which the bookseller returned by wishing him *all happiness and that eternity* which had been promised by the bard in such glowing colours to another, namely, to one of the immediate subjects of his Sonnets." Drake contended, logically enough, that as a number of the Sonnets were most certainly addressed to a female, it must be evident that "W. H." could not be the "only begetter" of them in the sense which is primarily suggested. He therefore agreed with Chalmers and Boswell that Mr. W. H. was the *obtainer* of the Sonnets for Thorpe, and he remarks that the dedication was read in that light by some of the earlier editors. Having fixed on Southampton as the subject of the first 126 Sonnets, Drake is at a loss to prove it. He never goes deep enough, and only snatches a waif or two of evidence floating on the surface. When he comes to the latter Sonnets he expresses the most entire conviction that they were never directed to a *real* object. "Credulity itself, we think, cannot suppose otherwise, and, at the same time, believe that the Poet was privy to their publication."

About the year 1818 Mr. Bright was the first to make out that the "Mr. W. H." of Thorpe's inscription was William Herbert, afterwards Earl of Pembroke. It is said he laboured for many years in collecting evidence, brooded over his cherished idea secretly, talked of it publicly, and was then anticipated



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in announcing it by Mr. Boaden in 1832. Mr. Boaden argued shallowly that the Earl of Southampton could not be the man addressed by Shakspeare, and assumed desperately that William Herbert was! He held him to be the "only begetter," or Inspirer. Thus Mr. Bright escaped the infamy of persistently trying to tarnish the character of Shakspeare for the sake of a pet theory; that is, if *his* discovery included the personal interpretation elaborated later by Charles Armitage Brown, which will be dealt with in my next chapter.

Wordsworth, in his Essay supplementary to the famous preface, printed with the Lyrical Ballads, has administered a rebuke to Steevens, and reprehended his flippant impertinence. He says, "There is extant a small volume of miscellaneous poems, in which Shakspeare expresses his own feelings in his own person. It is not difficult to conceive that the editor, George Steevens, should have been insensible to the beauties of one portion of that volume, the Sonnets; though in no part of the writings of this Poet is found in an equal compass a greater number of exquisite feelings felicitously expressed. But from a regard to the critic's own credit he would not have ventured to talk of an Act of Parliament not being strong enough to compel the perusal of these little pieces, if he had not known that the people of England were ignorant of the treasures contained in them; and if he had not, moreover, shared the too common propensity of human nature to exult over a supposed fall into the mire of a genius whom he had been compelled to regard with admiration, as an inmate of the celestial regions, 'there sitting where he durst not soar.'"

This was written by Wordsworth in 1815; he had read the Sonnets for their poetry, independently of their object, but held that "*with this key Shakspeare unlocked his heart,*" which has become the one Article in the *Credo* of some readers of the Sonnets. About the same time Coleridge lectured on Shakspeare at the Royal Institution, and publicly rebuked the obtuse sense and shallow expressions of Steevens.

Coleridge thought that the person addressed by Shakspeare was a woman. He fancied the 20th Sonnet might have been introduced as a blind. He felt that in so many of the Sonnets the spirit was essentially feminine, whatever the outward figure might be, sufficiently so to warrant our thinking that where the address is to a man it was only a disguise; for, whilst the expression would indicate one sex, the feeling altogether belied it, and secretly wooed or worshipped the other. Poet-like, he perceived that there were such fragrant gusts of passion in them, such "subtle-shining secrecies" of meaning in their darkness, as only a woman could have called forth; and so many of the Sonnets have the suggestive sweetness of the lover's passionate words, the ecstatic sparkle of a lover's eyes, the tender, ineffable touch of a lover's hands, that in them it must be a man speaking to a woman.<sup>1</sup>

Charles Knight maintained that certain of the Sonnets, such as Nos. 56, 57, and 58, and also the perfect love-poem contained in Sonnets 97, 98, and 99, were addressed to a female, because the comparisons are so clearly, so exquisitely the symbol of womanly beauty, so exclusively the poetic representatives of feminine graces in the world of flowers, and because, in the Sonnets where Shakspeare directly addresses his male friend, it is manly beauty which he extols. He says nothing to lead us to think that he would seek to compliment his friend on the

<sup>1</sup> See *Table Talk*, p. 231.

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delicate whiteness of his hand, the surpassing sweetness of his breath. Mr. Knight has found the perplexities of the personal theory so insurmountable, that he has not followed in the steps of those who have jauntily overleaped the difficulties that meet us everywhere, and which ought, until fairly conquered, to have surrounded and protected the Poet's personal character as with a *chevaux-de-frise*. He wisely hesitated rather than rashly joined in making a wanton charge of immorality and egregious folly against Shakspeare. He considered that many of the Sonnets must be dramatic in sentiment, and as a printer found plenty of proofs that they were not printed in the written order, nor overlooked by the author. He likewise considered it impossible that William Herbert, afterwards Earl of Pembroke, could have been the "only begetter" of the Sonnets.<sup>1</sup>

Hallam inclined to the personal theory of the Sonnets, and evidently thought we might assume that William Herbert was the youth of high rank, as well as personal beauty, accomplishment and licentious life, whom Shakspeare so often addressed as his dear friend. He remarks that, "There is a weakness and folly in all excessive and misplaced affection, which is not redeemed by the touches of nobler sentiments that abound in this long series of Sonnets." "No one," he says, "ever entered more fully than Shakspeare into the character of this species of poetry, which admits of no expletive imagery—no merely ornamental line." But, so strange, so powerful is the Poet's humiliation in addressing this youth as "a being before whose feet he crouched, whose frown he feared, whose injuries—and those of the most insulting kind, the seduction of the mistress to whom we have alluded—he felt and bewailed without resenting;" that on the whole, "it is impossible not to wish the Sonnets of Shakspeare had never been written."

Mr. Dyce, in 1864, rested in the conclusions which he had reached thirty years before. He then said, "For my own part, repeated perusals of the Sonnets have well-nigh convinced me that most of them were composed in an assumed character, on different subjects, and at different times, for the amusement—if not at the suggestion—of the author's intimate associates (hence described by Meres as 'his sugred Sonnets among his private friends'); and though I would not deny that one or two of them reflect his genuine feelings, I contend that allusions scattered through the whole series are not to be hastily referred to the personal circumstances of Shakspeare." He left the problem where he found it, and made no attempt to make it double.

Mr. Bolton Corney, who presented me with a copy of the pamphlet he printed for private circulation, has recorded his conviction that the Earl of Southampton was the "Begetter" of the Sonnets; that they were written in fulfilment of a promise made to the Earl in 1594; that the Sonnets mentioned by Meres in 1598 formed the work which was promised in 1594 and reached the press in 1609, but that they are, with slight exceptions, mere poetical exercises. He protests against the theory that they relate to transactions between the Poet and his patron:—1. Because as an abstract question the promise to write a poem cannot imply *any such object*. 2. Because in the instance of *Lucrece* no such object could have been designed. 3. Because, in the absence of evidence, it is incredible that the man of whom *divers of worship had reported his uprightness of dealing*

<sup>1</sup> *Studies of Shakspeare*, by Charles Knight. London, 1849.

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should have lavished so much wit in order to proclaim the grievous errors of his patron—and of himself. He denounces the vaunted discovery of Mr. Brown as a most unjustifiable theory, a mischievous fallacy. He accepts M. Chasles' reading of Thorpe's inscription, and thinks a Frenchman has solved the Shakspeare problem which has resisted all the efforts of our "homely wits." Believing that the Earl of Southampton was really the "only begetter" of the Sonnets, and that the inscription addresses the "only begetter" as the objective creator of them, Mr. Corney feels compelled to accept M. Chasles' interpretation; he thinks that William Herbert dedicates the Sonnets to the Earl of Southampton, and that Thorpe merely adds his wishes for the success of the publication. He assumes that the initials "W. H." denote William Lord Herbert. Thus, he holds that the sense of the inscription is:—To the only begetter (the Earl of Southampton) of these ensuing Sonnets, Mr. W. H. (William Herbert) wishes all happiness, and that eternity promised (to him) by our ever-living Poet. This was the private inscription, in imitation of the lapidary style, written on the private copy which had been executed for the purpose of presenting to the Earl; and Thorpe, in making the Sonnets public, let this dedication stand, merely adding that the "well-wishing adventurer in setting forth" was "T. T."

There have been various minor and incidental notices of the Sonnets, which show that the tendency in our time is to look on them as Autobiographic. Mr. Henry Taylor, in his *Notes from Books*, speaks of those Sonnets in which Shakspeare "reproaches Fortune and himself, in a strain which shows how painfully conscious he was that he had lived unworthily of his doubly immortal spirit." Mr. Masson<sup>1</sup> states resolutely, that the Sonnets are, and can possibly be, nothing else than a record of the Poet's own feelings and experience during a certain period of his London life; that they are distinctly, intensely, painfully autobiographic. He thinks they express our Poet in his most intimate and private relations to man and nature as having been "William the Melancholy," rather than "William the Calm," or "William the Cheerful." Mr. Masson once wrote a work on the Sonnets which has not been published.

The Sonnets seem to have placed Ulrici in that difficult position which the Americans describe as "facing North by South." To him the fact that Shakspeare passed his life in so modest a way and left so little report, is evidence of the calmness with which the majestic stream of his mental development flowed on, and of the clear pure atmosphere which breathed about his soul. Yet, we may see in the Sonnets many traces of the painful struggles it cost him to maintain his moral empire. His mind was a fountain of free fresh energy, yet the Sonnets show how he fell into the deeps of painful despondency, and felt utterly wretched. They tell us that he had a calm consciousness of his own greatness, and also that he held fame and applause to be empty, mean, and worthless. This is Ulrici's cross-eyed view. He reads the Sonnets as personal confessions, and he concludes that Shakspeare must have been so sincere a Christian, that being also a mortal man, and open to temptation, he, having fallen and risen up a conqueror over himself, to prove that he was not ashamed of anything, set the matter forth as a warning to the world, and offered himself up as a sacrifice for the good of others, most especially for the behoof of the young Earl of Pembroke, for, according to Ulrici, he alone can be the person addressed.

<sup>1</sup> *Essays, chiefly on English Poets.*



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Gervinus, in his Commentaries on Shakspeare, is of opinion that the Sonnets were not originally intended for publication, and that 126 of them are addressed to a friend; the last 28 bespeaking a relation with some light-minded woman. It is quite clear to him that they are addressed to one and the same youth, as even the last 28, from their purport, relate to the one connection between Shakspeare and his young friend. Gervinus considers that these should properly be arranged with Sonnets 40—42. He maintains that the real name of the "only begetter" was not designated by the publisher, the initials W. H. were only meant to mislead; that this "Begetter" is the same man whom the 38th Sonnet calls in a similar sense the "Tenth Muse," and whom the 78th Sonnet enjoins to be "most proud" of the Poet's works, because their influence is his, and born of him. He does not believe that the Earl of Pembroke could be the person addressed, the age of the Earl and the period at which the Sonnets were written making it an impossibility. He thinks the Earl of Southampton is the person, he being early a patron of the drama, and a nobleman so much looked up to by the poets and writers of the time, that they vied with each other in dedicating their works to him. Gervinus also thinks that a portion of Sonnet 53 directly alludes to the poems which the Poet had inscribed to the Earl, and that he points out how much his friend's English beauty transcends that old Greek beauty of person, which the Poet had attempted to describe, and set forth newly attired in his *Venus and Adonis*. This foreign critic wonders why in England the identity of the object of these Sonnets with the Earl of Southampton should have been so much opposed. To him it is simply incomprehensible, for, if ever a supposition bordered on certainty, he holds it to be this.

When writing my article on Shakspeare and his Sonnets, which appeared in the *Quarterly Review* for April 1864, I was not aware of, or should have mentioned, the fact that Mrs. Jameson had already suggested a portion of my hypothesis independently attained. Mrs. Jameson says of the Sonnets, "It appears that some of them are addressed to his amiable friend Lord Southampton; and others I think are addressed in Southampton's name to that beautiful Elizabeth Vernon to whom the Earl was so long and so ardently attached."

According to Herr Bernstorff<sup>1</sup> the Sonnets do not speak to beings of flesh and blood, no Earls of Southampton or Pembroke, no Queen Elizabeth or Elizabeth Vernon, no corporeal being, in short, nobody whatever, but Shakspeare's own soul, or his genius or his art. This author considers that the Sonnets are a vast allegory, in which Shakspeare has masked his own face; he has here kept a diary of his inner self, not in a plain autobiographic way, but by addressing and playing a kind of bo-peep with his döppl-ganger.

It is Shakspeare who in the 1st Sonnet is the "only herald to the blooming spring" of modern literature, and the world's fresh ornament. The "beast that bears" the speaker in Sonnet 51 is the Poet's animal nature. The "sweet roses that do not fade" in Sonnet 54 are his dramas. The praises so often repeated are but the Poet's enthusiasm for his inner self. All this is proved by the dedication, which inscribes the Sonnets to their "only begetter," W. H.—*William Himself*. The critic has freed the Shakspearian Psyche from her Sonnet film, and finds that she has shaken off every particle of the concrete to soar on beautiful wings, with all her inborn loveliness unfolded, into the empyrean of

<sup>1</sup> *A Key to Shakspeare's Sonnets*. English translation. London, 1862.

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pure abstraction! There sits the Poet sublimely "pinnacled, dim in the intense inane," at the highest altitude of self-consciousness, singing his song of self-worship; contemplating the heights, and depths, and proportions of the great vast of himself, and as he looks over centuries on centuries of years he sees and prophesies that the time will yet come when the world will gaze on his genius with as much awe as he feels for it now. "Is this vanity and self-conceit?" the critic asks, and he answers, "Not a whit, simple truthful self-perception!" Into this region has he followed Shakspeare, where "human mortals" could not possibly breathe. He keeps up pretty well, self-inflated, for some time, but at length, before the flight is quite finished, our critic gives one gasp, showing that he is mortal after all, and down he drops dead-beaten in the middle of the latter Sonnets.

Mr. Heraud says<sup>1</sup>—"After a careful reperusal, I have come to the conclusion that there is not a single Sonnet which is addressed to any individual at all." He maintains that the "*Two Loves*" of Sonnet 144 are "the Celibate Church on the one hand, and the Reformed Church on the other!" And in the latter Sonnets, our Poet is reading his Bible—"Has the very Book open before him, he is in fact reading the Canticles; and there he finds the Bride, who is '*black but comely*'—at once the bride of his CELESTIAL FRIEND and his own." This is too good to omit, although I can only make a note of it; good enough surely, if boundless folly can reach so far, to tickle Shakspeare in eternity and make him feel a carnal gush of the old human jollity!

But, it may be asked, why recognize such rootless and literally groundless imaginings as these? Wherefore notice such vain shadows at all in the presence of realities firm and fast as the centre? What says Delius in Randolph's *Muses' Looking-Glass* when he has been censured for his fear of Shadows? "*Who knows but they come leering after us to steal away the substance!*"

Every red herring trailed across the true scent will be sure to mislead some deluded followers. But the Sonnets are no more allegorical than they are autobiographical; neither were they intended to set forth that system of philosophy which Mr. Richard Simpson sought for in them. The editor of the "Gem edition" at one time accepted the personal theory, and according to his own admission could make but little way with it.<sup>2</sup> Although each Sonnet "is an autobiographic confession," he remarks, "we are completely foiled in getting at Shakspeare himself," and these "revelations of the Poet's innermost nature" appear to "teach us less of the man" than the tone of mind which we trace or seem to trace in his dramas. The "strange imagery of passion which passes over the magic mirror has no tangible existence before or behind it." And yet these Sonnets are autobiographic. It is Shakspeare showing himself to us, they say (with M. Chasles), not only in person, for they insist that he has sounded the depths of his heart in "a drama more tragic than the madness of Lear or the agonies of Othello." According to this view our great Poet has written an autobiography that is impersonal, a subjective revelation which reveals nothing definite, and he has also mixed up the sexes in a confusion that is unparalleled in poetry. But this was the greatest master of expression, the one man whose art of uttering just what he meant to say and suggest was incomparable, supremely potent, and of infinite felicity!

<sup>1</sup> *Shakspeare, his Inner Life*, by John A. Heraud. London, 1865.

<sup>2</sup> *Songs and Sonnets by William Shakspeare*. London, 1865.