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William Shakespeare
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THE POEMS

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VENUS AND ADONIS

Vilia miretur vulgus; mihi flavus Apollo
Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua

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TO THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE
HENRY WRIOTHESLEY,
EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON, AND BARON
OF TITCHFIELD

RIGHT HONOURABLE,

I know not how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolished lines to your lordship, nor how the world will censure me for choosing so strong a prop to support so weak a burden: only, if your honour seem but pleased, I account my self highly praised, and vow to take advantage of all idle hours, till I have honoured you with some graver labour. But if the first heir of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather, and never after ear so barren a land, for fear it yield me still so bad a harvest. I leave it to your honourable survey, and your honour to your heart's content; which I wish may always answer your own wish, and the world's hopeful expectation.

Your honour's in all duty,
William Shakespeare

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EVEN as the sun with purple-coloured face
 Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn,
 Rose-cheeked Adonis hied him to the chase;
 Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn.
 Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
 And like a bold-faced suitor 'gins to woo him. 5

'Thrice fairer than myself,' thus she began,
 'The field's chief flower, sweet above compare,
 Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
 More white and red than doves or roses are; 10
 Nature that made thee with herself at strife
 Saith that the world hath ending with thy life.

'Vouchsafe, thou wonder, to alight thy steed,
 And rein his proud head to the saddle-bow;
 If thou wilt deign this favour, for thy meed 15
 A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know.
 Here come and sit, where never serpent hisses,
 And being set, I'll smother thee with kisses;

'And yet not cloy thy lips with loathed satiety,
 But rather famish them amid their plenty, 20
 Making them red and pale with fresh variety;
 Ten kisses short as one, one long as twenty.
 A summer's day will seem an hour but short,
 Being wasted in such time-beguiling sport.'

With this she seizeth on his sweating palm, 25
 The precedent of pith and livelihood,
 And, trembling in her passion, calls it balm,
 Earth's sovereign salve to do a goddess good.
 Being so enraged, desire doth lend her force
 Courageously to pluck him from his horse. 30

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Over one arm the lusty courser's rein,
 Under her other was the tender boy,
 Who blushed and pouted in a dull disdain,
 With leaden appetite, unapt to toy;
 35 She red and hot as coals of glowing fire,
 He red for shame, but frosty in desire.

The studded bridle on a ragged bough
 Nimble she fastens—O, how quick is love!
 The steed is stalléd up, and even now
 40 To tie the rider she begins to prove.
 Backward she pushed him, as she would be thrust,
 And governed him in strength, though not in lust.

So soon was she along as he was down,
 Each leaning on their elbows and their hips;
 45 Now doth she stroke his cheek, now doth he frown,
 And 'gins to chide, but soon she stops his lips,
 And kissing speaks, with lustful language broken,
 'If thou wilt chide, thy lips shall never open.'

He burns with bashful shame; she with her tears
 50 Doth quench the maiden burning of his cheeks;
 Then with her windy sighs and golden hairs
 To fan and blow them dry again she seeks.
 He saith she is immodest, blames her miss;
 What follows more she murders with a kiss.

55 Even as an empty eagle, sharp by fast,
 Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh and bone,
 Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste,
 Till either gorge be stuffed or prey be gone;
 Even so she kissed his brow, his cheek, his chin,
 60 And where she ends she doth anew begin.

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Forced to content, but never to obey,
 Panting he lies and breatheth in her face;
 She feedeth on the steam as on a prey,
 And calls it heavenly moisture, air of grace,
 Wishing her cheeks were gardens full of flowers, 65
 So they were dewed with such distilling showers.

Look how a bird lies tangled in a net,
 So fast'ned in her arms Adonis lies;
 Pure shame and awed resistance made him fret,
 Which bred more beauty in his angry eyes. 70
 Rain added to a river that is rank
 Perforce will force it overflow the bank.

Still she entreats, and prettily entreats,
 For to a pretty ear she tunes her tale;
 Still is he sullen, still he lours and frets, 75
 'Twixt crimson shame and anger ashy-pale;
 Being red, she loves him best, and being white,
 Her best is bettered with a more delight.

Look how he can, she cannot choose but love;
 And by her fair immortal hand she swears 80
 From his soft bosom never to remove
 Till he take truce with her contending tears,
 Which long have rained, making her cheeks all wet;
 And one sweet kiss shall pay this countless debt.

Upon this promise did he raise his chin, 85
 Like a dive-dapper peering through a wave,
 Who, being looked on, ducks as quickly in;
 So offers he to give what she did crave;
 But when her lips were ready for his pay,
 He winks, and turns his lips another way. 90

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Never did passenger in summer's heat
 More thirst for drink than she for this good turn.
 Her help she sees, but help she cannot get;
 She bathes in water, yet her fire must burn.

95 'O, pity,' 'gan she cry, 'flint-hearted boy!
 'Tis but a kiss I beg; why art thou coy?

'I have been wooed, as I entreat thee now,
 Even by the stern and direful god of war,
 Whose sinewy neck in battle ne'er did bow,
 100 Who conquers where he comes in every jar;
 Yet hath he been my captive and my slave,
 And begged for that which thou unasked shalt have.

'Over my altars hath he hung his lance,
 His batt'red shield, his uncontrolléd crest,
 105 And for my sake hath learned to sport and dance,
 To toy, to wanton, dally, smile and jest,
 Scorning his churlish drum and ensign red,
 Making my arms his field, his tent my bed.

'Thus he that overruled I overstayéd,
 110 Leading him prisoner in a red-rose chain;
 Strong-tempered steel his stronger strength obeyéd,
 Yet was he servile to my coy disdain.
 O, be not proud, nor brag not of thy might,
 For mast'ring her that foiled the god of fight!

115 'Touch but my lips with those fair lips of thine—
 Though mine be not so fair, yet are they red—
 The kiss shall be thine own as well as mine.
 What see'st thou in the ground? hold up thy head;
 Look in mine eyeballs, there thy beauty lies;
 120 Then why not lips on lips, since eyes in eyes?

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‘Art thou ashamed to kiss? then wink again,
 And I will wink; so shall the day seem night.
 Love keeps his revels where there are but twain;
 Be bold to play, our sport is not in sight.
 These blue-veined violets whereon we lean 125
 Never can blab, nor know not what we mean.

‘The tender spring upon thy tempting lip
 Shews thee unripe; yet mayst thou well be tasted;
 Make use of time, let not advantage slip;
 Beauty within itself should not be wasted. 130
 Fair flowers that are not gath’red in their prime
 Rot and consume themselves in little time.

‘Were I hard-favoured, foul, or wrinkled-old,
 Ill-nurtured, crooked, churlish, harsh in voice,
 O’erworn, despiséd, rheumatic and cold, 135
 Thick-sighted, barren, lean, and lacking juice,
 Then mightst thou pause, for then I were not for thee;
 But having no defects, why dost abhor me?

‘Thou canst not see one wrinkle in my brow;
 Mine eyes are grey and bright and quick in turning; 140
 My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow,
 My flesh is soft and plump, my marrow burning;
 My smooth moist hand, were it with thy hand felt,
 Would in thy palm dissolve, or seem to melt.

‘Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear, 145
 Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green,
 Or, like a nymph, with long dishevelléd hair,
 Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen.
 Love is a spirit all compact of fire,
 Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire. 150

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- ‘Witness this primrose bank whereon I lie;
 These forceless flowers like sturdy trees support me;
 Two strengthless doves will draw me through the sky
 From morn till night, even where I list to sport me.
 155 Is love so light, sweet boy, and may it be
 That thou should think it heavy unto thee?
- ‘Is thine own heart to thine own face affected?
 Can thy right hand seize love upon thy left?
 Then woo thyself, be of thyself rejected,
 160 Steal thine own freedom, and complain on theft.
 Narcissus so himself himself forsook,
 And died to kiss his shadow in the brook.
- ‘Torches are made to light, jewels to wear,
 Dainties to taste, fresh beauty for the use,
 165 Herbs for their smell, and sappy plants to bear;
 Things growing to themselves are growth’s abuse.
 Seeds spring from seeds and beauty breedeth beauty;
 Thou wast begot; to get it is thy duty.
- ‘Upon the earth’s increase why shouldst thou feed,
 170 Unless the earth with thy increase be fed?
 By law of nature thou art bound to breed,
 That thine may live when thou thyself art dead;
 And so in spite of death thou dost survive,
 In that thy likeness still is left alive.’
- 175 By this, the love-sick queen began to sweat,
 For where they lay the shadow had forsook them,
 And Titan, tired in the mid-day heat,
 With burning eye did hotly overlook them,
 Wishing Adonis had his team to guide,
 180 So he were like him, and by Venus’ side.

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II

And now Adonis, with a lazy sprite,
 And with a heavy, dark, disliking eye,
 His louring brows o'erwhelming his fair sight,
 Like misty vapours when they blot the sky, 185
 Souring his cheeks, cries 'Fie, no more of love!
 The sun doth burn my face; I must remove.'

'Ay me,' quoth Venus, 'young, and so unkind!
 What bare excuses mak'st thou to be gone!
 I'll sigh celestial breath, whose gentle wind 190
 Shall cool the heat of this descending sun;
 I'll make a shadow for thee of my hairs;
 If they burn too, I'll quench them with my tears.'

'The sun that shines from heaven shines but warm,
 And lo, I lie between that sun and thee; 195
 The heat I have from thence doth little harm;
 Thine eye darts forth the fire that burneth me;
 And were I not immortal, life were done
 Between this heavenly and earthly sun.'

'Art thou obdurate, flinty, hard as steel? 200
 Nay, more than flint, for stone at rain relenteth.
 Art thou a woman's son, and canst not feel
 What 'tis to love, how want of love tormenteth?
 O, had thy mother borne so hard a mind,
 She had not brought forth thee, but died unkind.'

'What am I that thou shouldst contemn me this? 205
 Or what great danger dwells upon my suit?
 What were thy lips the worse for one poor kiss?
 Speak, fair; but speak fair words, or else be mute.
 Give me one kiss, I'll give it thee again,
 And one for int'rest, if thou wilt have twain. 210