

A. L. ROWSE

**SHAKESPEARE'S
SONNETS**

**A modern edition
with prose versions,
introduction
and notes**

THIRD EDITION

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*A Modern Edition,
with Prose Versions, Introduction and Notes*

by

A. L. ROWSE

THIRD EDITION

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To
President Ronald Reagan
for his professional appreciation
of
William Shakespeare

Introduction to the Third Edition

WHO MR W. H. WAS

All the problems of Shakespeare's Sonnets — for long regarded as the greatest of literary mysteries — have now been solved unanswerably, as in this edition. All of them were solved in my original biography, *William Shakespeare* (1964), except one: the identity of his young mistress, the Dark Lady. I might never have discovered her, if my original findings — the date when the Sonnets were written, the explanation of the publisher's dedication, the identification of Mr W. H., and the rival poet — had not been correct. Discovering the identity of the Dark Lady (when not looking for her) was a bonus for getting all the other answers right, and also for sticking to my last without giving up, in spite of every kind of obtuseness, obfuscation and obstruction.

I must admit that it is very difficult for people to get the story of the Sonnets right, the story is so subtle and complex. It is no use people trying their hand — as hundreds have done — or hoping to get it right, unless they are immersed in the Elizabethan age, Shakespeare's own background, and have spent a lifetime of research in it. They simply do not qualify to hold an opinion on these difficulties, beginning with the dating — an indispensable precondition of getting it right. This is where an Elizabethan historian is indispensable, to read the topical references in the Sonnets, which are in logical and intelligible sequence as they are.

Many literary scholars have been all over the place in dating: hence their confusion and the consequent worthlessness of their work. However, it must be allowed that the majority of literary scholars have got the dating right — the Sonnets were written 1592 to 1594/5 — on the obvious, commonsense ground that they were written along with *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, published respectively in 1593 and 1594. The tradition in the main line was right; all my findings are in keeping with it,

conservative—and, what is new and original, no less traditional but *definitive*. No need for controversy—mere waste of time—let alone all the confusion from crackpots, some of them making money out of confusing the public's mind. I greatly blame the academic Shakespeareans, who complain at all the confusion they have to contend with, for leaving the gates wide open for the crackpots to canter in, for leaving questions open and uncertain when they have been settled for them—not by themselves but, less surprisingly, by a leading authority on the age in which Shakespeare lived and wrote.

As the very outset there is a stumbling block which has been responsible for a great deal of the confusion: Thomas Thorp, the publisher's, dedication. He had got the manuscript of the Sonnets some fifteen years after Shakespeare had ceased writing them, immersed as he was in the work of the Lord Chamberlain's Company—acting, writing, producing, touring—from 1594 when it was founded. Everybody knows that T. T., Thomas Thorp, wrote the dedication, and scholars know that he was given to writing flowery dedications. He dedicated the Sonnets to Mr W. H., the only person who had got the manuscript—so the crucial point to notice is that *Mr W. H. was the publisher's dedicatee*, not Shakespeare's, who had nothing to do with the publication.

My old friend, Agatha Christie—a good Shakespearean—used to say that everybody misses the significance of the obvious. It is obvious to everybody that Mr W. H. was Thorp's man, and yet almost everybody continues to assume that Mr W. H. was Shakespeare's young man to whom he addressed the Sonnets. How obtuse! when the young lord of the Sonnets is the obvious person, the patron, Southampton. Again, the majority of literary scholars, from Malone onwards, have realised that, without being able to explain the odd dedication.

I must again allow that it is difficult for people to get this right. Even those eminent scholars, Sir Edmund Chambers and Professor Dover Wilson, got it wrong on the assumption that Mr W. H. was Shakespeare's man, not drawing the conclusion from the undeniable fact that he was the publisher's man. Chambers was massively learned but imperceptive; Dover Wilson had bright insights, but was enthusiastic and notoriously erratic. They both of

them absurdly plumped for a young lord, on the mistaken assumption that Mr W. H. was Shakespeare's youth.

Everybody knows, or should know, that no lord could be addressed as Mr. What people do not know, and need an Elizabethan social historian to tell them, is that it was regular social usage to address a *knight* as Mr. But I have only quite recently learned that it was regular political usage too. Sir Simonds D'Ewes wrote, 'it is usual in this Journal of the House of Commons . . . *de an.* 8 and 9 *Regin. Eliz.*, according to the use of former times, to style knights by the term of Mr prefixed only to their surnames.'¹ So Mr W. H. could never refer to a lord, but could refer to a knight. Who was he?

It is obvious that he was someone in close proximity to Southampton, to be the only person who had got the manuscript for Thorp. Now Southampton's mother, the old Countess, married as her third husband, a young man, Sir William Harvey. When she died in 1607, she left all her household goods and chattels to him. In 1608 he married a young wife, Cordelia Annesley; this is why in 1609 Thorp is wishing him 'all happiness, and that eternity promised by our ever-living poet', i.e. that which Shakespeare had promised Southampton years before in the Sonnets, if he would marry, have progeny, and carry on the family to posterity. Thorp called himself 'the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth', in his flowery way, because 1609, the year of publication, was that of the Second Charter to Virginia, by which everybody who was anybody was subscribing to adventure their money, becoming adventurers, in setting forth the first permanent English colony in America.

1607 — 1608 — 1609: this is the answer, the first and unanswerable explanation of Thorp's dedication, which has created so much confusion. It needed an Elizabethan social historian to work it out and solve the problem. Now the way is clear.

¹P. W. Hasler, *The House of Commons, 1558-1603*, I. 13. (*The History of Parliament.*)

SOUTHAMPTON, THE PATRON

That the obvious person, the lordly young patron—he is several times addressed as a lord, virtually described as such in Sonnet 125—was the young man to whom the Sonnets were addressed should have been obvious on logical grounds alone. For, what was the Rival Poet rivalling William Shakespeare for, but the patronage of the patron? That is, the Sonnets were written to and for the patron. Q.E.D. Once more, this is mere commonsense; yet how few people have seen that the Sonnets are patronage poems, written by an Elizabethan poet in course of duty to his patron. They are much more besides—they tell such a strange story, more like a play or a novel when read in sequence, as they should be to understand it and them. Even as such they are utterly exceptional: other Elizabethan sonnet-sequences were not written to a patron, who happened to be a young man, but to the young ladies of their loves, Sidney's Stella, Daniel's Delia, Drayton's Idea, Constable's Diana, etc.: all women.

Here again the majority of literary scholars, from Malone onwards, have known all along that the addressee of the Sonnets was Southampton, but have not known how to explain the confusion created by Thorp with his 'only begetter, Mr W.H.' Others, especially Victorian and Victorian-minded professors, have been embarrassed and fussed by the tone and language of the Sonnets, and wondered whether they were not homosexual.

This was very naïf of them, and really quite anachronistic, showing not much knowledge of Renaissance life and manners, the conventions and decorum of Elizabethan society. It was proper for an Elizabethan poet to address his patron or his love in courtly, flowery language—when one addressed the Queen one wrote as if addressing a deity, witness Spenser's *Faery Queene*, or Sir Walter Raleigh's *Book of the Ocean* [Water, i.e. Walter, the l. was not pronounced then] to *Cynthia* [i.e. the goddess, the Queen]. William Shakespeare's language was always rather exaggerated and became extraordinary, elliptical and extreme, later on. (I propose to write about it, in the course of modernising him, making him more intelligible and accessible to moderns, who find the language of 400 years ago too difficult.)

It was appropriate decorum that an impecunious actor-poet should address a star in the Elizabethan firmament, a figure coming to the fore at Court and in society, in polite, deferential, flowery language. Also the youth was beautiful, as beautiful as a woman—and Renaissance people had no Victorian impediment in recognising the fragile and passing beauty of youth, whether in women or men. Witness the contemporary Court poets in France, celebrating the young Henri III as combining both masculine and feminine attributes.

Nevertheless, the Sonnets are not homosexual, as some people would like to think—and others, no less absurdly, fear. Shakespeare makes it perfectly clear in Sonnet 20 that he is not interested in the youth sexually—if only he were a woman! Everything in his life and work shows that Shakespeare was an enthusiastic heterosexual, very susceptible, even inflammable where women were concerned. He was utterly infatuated with the dark young woman, driven 'frantic-mad' by her, as a strongly sexed heterosexual well might be—and his language throughout the Plays shows him the sexiest of writers. The more one knows of Elizabethan language the more of it is revealed to one.

Shakespeare's love for his beautiful young lord was real, and in the Sonnets one can watch its growth and progress; its complications and set-backs; concern, anxiety, regret over the entanglement of the youth with the promiscuous Dark Lady, for which Shakespeare felt himself responsible. It is extremely difficult to get it all right—one needs the pen, or analytical power, of a Benjamin Constant or a Stendhal. One hesitates to use the ambivalent word platonic, or to describe the relationship as 'ideal', when it was certainly real and plunged into uncomfortable depths, distressing for the poet.

There is an unmistakable tutorial tone: Shakespeare was nearly ten years older, the youth without a father, an unsatisfactory man who had treated the charming mother badly, then died leaving the boy heir to the earldom at the age of eight. It was a wonder he was not more spoiled, as Elizabethan aristocrats were apt to be. Head of his family, he would not take on the responsibility of marrying and carrying it on, as everyone urged him to do. He was not as yet responsive to women, when the Sonnets begin as part of

the campaign to persuade him to marry; gallant and spirited, he wanted to be free and to shine in action. He had run away at seventeen, from the great Lord Burghley's surveillance as guardian, to serve in Normandy under Essex, his idol, whom he followed in his chivalrous, dangerous course to the gates of death—a suspended death sentence and imprisonment in the Tower. All this came later, contemporary with the heart-ache of *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*, though the period of patronage—of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—had ended, when Shakespeare achieved the independence of becoming a sharer in the Lord Chamberlain's Company in 1594, the generous patron purchasing it for him.

The Sonnets begin in a kind of paradisaical innocence, the poet clearly inspired by the society—the world, the power and the glory—opening up for him by the relationship, the opportunity for which his nature yearned and to which it ardently responded. The relationship gets closer, becomes involved, has its strains and disillusionments as is the way in life—it is all very real and recognisable beneath the highly charged, emotional language. No doubt the sensitive poet's heart was touched. He had every reason to be grateful for the fortunate turn his life had taken at last, after the long hard struggle and the discouragements of his earlier life—the Sonnets express again and again his resentment at his lot, that fortune had not done better for him in the lottery. Above all, for a writer, was the inspiration he received from the relationship: 'So are you to my thoughts as food to life', even when regret, reproach, grief come in to play their part, as happens in real life—not in the idealised sequences of Drayton and Daniel.

There are ups and downs in the experiences of these crucial, fateful years, decisive in the life of our greatest writer—and the Sonnets are his inner autobiography. Hence, though a few of the pleasant, non-committal—or not too much committed—ones circulated in the group of friends, they were not for publication, as others' were: too near the bone. After something like a breach comes *redintegratio amoris*, a new theme. At length comes an exhaustion of themes—after more than a century of Sonnets—and an evident cooling-off in the relationship, with the actor fully employed with the new Company and about the country, new

associations and demands, frequenting 'unknown minds'.

The patron has some reason to complain; yet Shakespeare insists that there is no 'alteration' in his mind, he constantly recognises Southampton's 'dear-purchased right' in him and his 'great deserts'. Life goes on; the sequence ends appropriately with Shakespeare's assurance that his mind does not change, the affection remains constant. It had never been that of an external honouring the rank and station of a peer, bearing 'the canopy'. His oblation was 'poor but free . . . but mutual render, me for thee.' Thus the intimacy ends, with a magnificent but courteous — 'let me be obsequious in thy heart' — assertion of equality, man to man, no breach of tact.

It does not seem that the young Earl and his busy, hard-working poet were together much — perhaps chiefly at intervals over the performance of plays, *Love's Labour's Lost*, which is a private skit on the group, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was shaped up for the Countess's second marriage, to Sir Thomas Heneage on 2 May 1594. Absence was the normal condition for the busy poet, playing, touring, with family demands upon him at home; while a rich young Earl had plenty of other interests and friends to occupy him, in London or in the country. In reading the outpourings of the poet the silence of the patron can be almost heard and felt. It is not to be supposed that the young man was so deeply upset, as was the altogether deeper nature of William Shakespeare, by the triangular imbroglio over the Dark Lady.

There was a reason for this. Though Emilia Lanier got hold of the young peer, he was much more able to defend himself than Shakespeare was — for he was not all that attracted by women: he was bisexual. Even after his forced marriage some years later (1598) — a marriage he tried to get out of — we find him enjoying the embraces of braggadoccio Captain Piers Edmonds in his tent in Ireland.

Here is a complete reversal of situation for people who do not know what they are dealing with; it adds a further difficulty for ordinary minds in understanding the Sonnets and their subtle psychological situation. It was not William Shakespeare, for all his emotional language, who was homosexual; it was the young lord who was ambivalent, not attracted to women until seduced by the experienced Emilia. Shakespeare's very virility may have been an

element in the adolescent Earl's attraction to him. We must go no further than that, but it is amusing that the situation is the opposite of that apprehended by the (imperceptive) Victorian professoriate. However, modern minds are better acquainted with this sort of thing, and can understand such a *renversement*.

THE RIVAL POET

Southampton's involvement with Shakespeare's young mistress, stealing 'all my poverty', naturally put a strain upon the relationship. Still the older man felt partly responsible for it; for the rest, beggars can't be choosers, and he ends by forgiving 'the gentle thief':

Take all my loves, my love, yea take them all:

needs must. It was a humiliating situation for the older man between the two young people; but in the conflict between love and friendship—or, in other words, infatuation and necessary duty—friendship won, as in the ending of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* which critics find so improbable. In these critical years of plague, 1592 and 1593, which closed the theatres, when four or five of his contemporaries and rivals died, Shakespeare was virtually dependent on his youthful, generous patron.

Thus the rivalry with Marlowe for Southampton's patronage was a serious challenge and evidently placed still more of a strain upon the relationship. For, if Marlowe won outright and established a monopoly, Shakespeare tells us that he would be 'cast away', while his life would last no longer than his lord's love and support.

What would happen in this second critical conflict? This part of the story occupies Sonnets 78 and 86 and belongs to the first half of 1593.

We now know that relations between Shakespeare and Marlowe were closer than hitherto realised, and their respective social origins and status contrary to what has been supposed. Here is another difficulty for people unacquainted with the nuances of Elizabethan

society. It used to be thought that, because Marlowe was a University man, he was of superior social station. The reverse is true. His father was a Canterbury cobbler, the family distinctly unrespectable; the talented boy went on to Cambridge with Archbishop Parker's scholarship, intended for the Church.

Shakespeare's father, the Alderman, was a leading citizen of Stratford, but the son clearly attached more importance to his mother's family, an heiress in a small way, a sprig of the Arden clan, who were Warwickshire gentlefolk. Alderman Shakespeare spent too much time on the town's affairs, and his own went downhill. The son did not go on to the university: no matter—neither did Ben Jonson, Kyd, Dekker, Drayton, Webster, Chapman or many others whose university was the theatre. William Shakespeare stood out among them all for his determination to be taken as a gentleman, and this was accepted—the epithet regularly applied to him was 'gentle', which meant gentlemanly. But he had hampered himself by having to marry at nineteen, with a wife and three children to support by twenty-one; Marlowe had no such impedimenta, for he was a well-known, indeed aggressive, homosexual.

What importance might that have had in the competition for the adolescent young lord's favour, himself ambivalent, at least homo-erotic? No-one has thought of that, and perhaps few—until today—have understood such complications, certainly not the Victorian professoriate.

Marlowe was only two months older than Shakespeare, but with the early triumph of his *Tamburlane* he was ahead of the actor struggling upwards by writing plays—to the envious Greene's disgust. Marlowe's plays were superior to Shakespeare's early efforts, and so was his poetry. Indeed, so long as he lived, he maintained the lead. In the Sonnets describing the rivalry he is always regarded, not just with courtesy, as superior: that 'abler spirit', that 'worthier pen', he 'of tall building and of goodly pride', while Shakespeare's 'saucy bark' is 'inferior far to his'. Marlowe belongs to the company of the 'learned', whom his junior regards with proper respect and towards whom he evinces an engaging sense of inferiority.

Then, suddenly, the rivalry ends, the rival disappears and is mentioned no more. Sonnet 86 is valedictory, practically all in the past tense: it is all over, luckily for Shakespeare. That Sonnet recognisably describes Marlowe, as my Note on it shows in detail. But those that follow show the strain it had placed on Shakespeare and his relation to the young lord dangerously 'fond on praise'. Things were never quite the same, after these two crises in the story.

Marlowe was killed in the tavern brawl at Deptford on 31 May 1593, after drinking all day with his dubious companions, spilling what genius so wantonly! He left unfinished the poem, *Hero and Leander*, which he was writing in competition with *Venus and Adonis* for the narcissistic young patron's favour. The beautiful youth is recognisably described as Leander in the one, and as Adonis in the other; and there are a number of parallels in phrasing which show that the two poets were aware of each other's work.

Though *Hero and Leander* is unfinished, everyone recognises its superior artistry to *Venus and Adonis*, which we can allow is more comic, more joyously rambling and in that sense gives promise of better to come. Possibly it promises larger potential development, though here we are aided by hindsight: no one can say what Marlowe might have achieved, had he lived.

Here we need go no further in the matter — better to trace the story in the Sonnets and Notes, in the two competitive poems, and the biographies of the poets. For the problem is solved: there need be no further nonsense about Who was the Rival Poet, with such 'candidates' suggested as Gervase Markham, the poet of farriery. Though any suggestion, other than the correct one, is hardly any better.

Once more we must enforce that this finding is in keeping with the tradition: most commentators have realised that Marlowe was Shakespeare's rival for the patronage of the patron. But they were unable to make it certain — what again is obvious — for lack of precise dating. Literary scholars have been all over the place with their dating — quite unnecessarily, for they have realised clearly enough that the Southampton sonnets are closely related to *Venus and Adonis*, which was published in 1593. So why be confused — and confuse other innocents?

The historian has been able to corroborate this commonsense by precise dating from the topical references in the Sonnets and to make it definitive. There never was any justification for wobbling all over the place; now there is no answer, no need for any further discussion. As for being 'controversial'—there is no 'controversy', for there is no rational ground for any other reading of the evidence.

THE DARK LADY : EMILIA LANIER

Shakespeare's affair with this remarkable young lady occupies the last section of the Sonnets in numbering, 127 to 152, though not in time. The affair belongs to 1592-3 contemporaneously with the earlier period of the relationship with Southampton, as Sonnets 34 and 35 show. But the Dark Lady sonnets are different in tone: for one thing they are darker and more upheaved. They are Shakespeare communing with himself about the affair, sometimes light-heartedly, in the end tormentedly, rendered 'frantic-mad' by the young woman, who gives him his dismissal.

All the same the poems were sent to the patron, they were his right—this is what he was paying for, to speak vulgarly. And so they fetched up in the Southampton *cache*, again in an intelligible order. We do not have to exclude the possibility that the young lady herself saw some of the more flattering missives, though that would be mere conjecture. Unlikely, out of the question, that she saw the unflattering, defaming ones; for, as we shall see, when Thorp got hold of them and published them, she was furious and reacted vehemently—in keeping with her temperament as Shakespeare describes her.

The patron was the recipient, as of all that his poet was writing at the time, 'since all alike my songs and praises be, To one, of one, still such and ever so'—no-one else. But the difference of tone is very noticeable, in keeping with the difference between the two objects of his affection, two very different spirits and affairs, one of the mind and heart, the other sexual, torment of body, mind and heart:

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 coloured ill.

Whatever stress Shakespeare incurred in his relationship with his patron, his mind and attitude in the matter are well under control; in the affair of this strongly sexed man with the young woman he loses control of himself, he is infatuated, against what he knows to be her bad character and what other people say about her. For, notice, he tells us that she is a quite well known person, indeed notorious; and everything shows that she was a lady of superior social standing to Shakespeare, if an equivocal one.

The relationship with her is one of infatuation, and everything shows how sexual it was, even the disgust it aroused by reaction in himself. Nothing of this in his affection for his young patron. Yet the *New Critic*, R. P. Blackmur, got this completely the wrong way round—thought the poems to the patron were those of infatuation, when the situation was the exact opposite! If this is all that critics can do for them, ordinary readers may be excused for getting mixed up—though they may have more commonsense; which is also what the Sonnets need for their understanding, along with a good deal of knowledge of the age and its social nuances, subtlety of poetic and psychological perception.

It was always commonsense to realise that, since the Dark Lady was so clearly described as Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*—with Southampton as the King, Shakespeare as Berowne, Antonio Perez as Don Armado, and probably Florio as schoolmaster (he was Southampton's Italian tutor), the young lady was known in the Southampton circle. We learn subsequently, quite independently—from the State Papers and Salisbury Mss—that her husband, Alphonso Lanier, became on friendly terms with Southampton. She was even better known to the Lord Chamberlain, Lord Hunsdon, Patron of Shakespeare's Company, for she had been kept in 'pomp and pride'—so Simon Forman tells us—as mistress of the great man. Hunsdon was first cousin of the Queen herself, owning property in Blackfriars, with which Shakespeare was familiar from these very days; for it was here that his two long

poems were printed in 1593 and 1594 by his fellow townsman from Stratford, Richard Field.

The musicality of the young lady, an element in the spell she put upon the most musical of dramatists, is corroborated by her background. She was the orphan daughter of Baptista Bassano, one of the Queen's Italian musicians, brought up in the ambience of the Court by Susan, Countess of Kent. When pregnant by the Lord Chamberlain she was discarded and married off, with a proper dowry and jewels, to another of the Queen's musicians, Alphonso Lanier. After such grandeur, however equivocal, she looked down on her husband and demeaned him to Forman as a mere 'minstrel'. He was, as a matter of fact, a decent fellow, friend of Archbishop Bancroft (whose hobby, and consolation, was music); but she was given to demeaning other people—she demeaned William. She had reason to be resentful, with her talents and intelligence—that she was highly intelligent, we later find evidence—and with her luck in life. She was now down on her luck, cast down from on high. The susceptible poet fell for her at this moment, out of compassion and pity, a vulnerable state of mind for older men, confronted with distressful youth and beauty:

If thy unworthiness raised love in me,
More worthy I to be beloved of thee.

Other emotions entered in, above all sexual passion, though at times Shakespeare—always double- or even treble-minded—was capable of viewing his predicament comically: as in the bawdy 'Will' Sonnets 135 and 136—now for the first time fully interpreted—which gave such a headache to all the Victorian commentators. These offer an emotional let-up in the increasing tension of the affair, and must have made Southampton laugh, as others of them may have provided a salutary warning, particularly against venereal infection, so common among Elizabethans—it would seem from the end-sonnets that the poet had a touch of it. (So had Robert Greene and George Peele; so had Hunsdon's son, also Patron of the Company as Lord Chamberlain, Forman's acquaintance over many years.)

If we were to look at the affair from the young lady's point of