

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

101

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Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xi

William Shakespeare 1564-1616	1
<i>English poet and playwright</i>	
<i>Entry devoted to "A Lover's Complaint" 1609</i>	
Alfred, Lord Tennyson 1809-1892	117
<i>English poet and playwright</i>	
Franz Werfel 1890-1945	296
<i>Austro-Czech novelist, playwright, poet, novella writer, and essayist</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 367

PC Cumulative Nationality Index 481

PC-101 Title Index 485

“A Lover’s Complaint”

William Shakespeare

Poem, 1609.

INTRODUCTION

“A Lover’s Complaint” consists of forty-seven stanzas in the seven-line rhyme royal verse form. Since it was originally published in the same 1609 volume as Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, it has long been attributed to Shakespeare, although there have always been scholars who questioned that attribution. In recent years, the debate over authorship has intensified and the work has been eliminated from the Shakespeare canon by the publishing division of the Royal Shakespeare Company. There are, however, a number of prominent scholars who still insist that the poem is the work of Shakespeare.

TEXTUAL HISTORY

“A Lover’s Complaint” appeared at the end of the 1609 volume of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, published by Thomas Thorpe in an unauthorized edition. There is no other evidence pertaining to its date of composition or authorship, and there are no references to the poem by Shakespeare or any of his contemporaries. The fact that the volume was unauthorized—although that is also a point of contention among literary scholars—casts doubt on the integrity and credibility of the publisher.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

There are three major characters in “A Lover’s Complaint”: the first-person narrator of the poem, the young woman, and the old man to whom she relates her sad story of seduction and abandonment. The narrator overhears the lament of the young woman, who is unnamed and who appears older than her years—apparently as a result of her ordeal. The setting is pastoral, which conforms to the conventions of the complaint form popularized during the Elizabethan era by such poems as *The Complaint of Rosamond* by Samuel Daniel and *The Complaint of Elstred* by Thomas Lodge. The narrator watches from a distance as the woman throws a number of letters and other love tokens associ-

ated with her unfortunate affair into the river. The old man, referred to in the poem as a “reverend man,” appears on the scene and although he is a stranger to the woman, she confides in him about the reason for her grief, calling him “Father” as she does so. She reveals that some of the letters and mementos she received from her seducer were originally given to him by other women. She concludes her story by confessing that if her seducer returned, she would succumb to his charms yet again.

MAJOR THEMES

Critics have suggested that “A Lover’s Complaint” attempts to expose the banality of the familiar narrative of seduction and abandonment involving an aristocratic male and a maiden of lower social status. Like so many Shakespearean texts, gender relations play an important part in the story, represented as a battle between men and women. Another suggestion involves the relationship between language and desire, since the callow youth seduces the woman by means of both spoken and written language.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Most scholarship on “A Lover’s Complaint” focuses on the authorship question with several critics conducting exhaustive comparisons with other Shakespearean texts to either prove or disprove that the poem’s inclusion in the volume of sonnets was appropriate. Ward Elliott and Robert J. Valenza use computer-aided analysis to present a case against MacDonald P. Jackson’s 1965 conclusion that Shakespeare wrote “A Lover’s Complaint.” Jackson, in turn, examines their challenge to the poem’s authenticity and “provisionally” reaffirms his original belief that Shakespeare authored the poem, probably between 1603 and 1607. Marina Tarlinskaja (see Further Reading) admires Jackson’s scholarship, but contends that the poem “cannot possibly point to ‘mature’ Shakespeare” and finds it unlikely that the poem “belongs to Shakespeare even at a very early stage of his career.”

The decision by editors Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen to eliminate “A Lover’s Complaint” from the

Royal Shakespeare Company's 2007 edition of Shakespeare's complete works was apparently based on the work of Brian Vickers (see Further Reading), who attributes the poem to John Davies of Hereford. Jackson (see Further Reading) disputes the evidence Vickers provides as well the earlier scholarship of Elliott and Valenza. In his examination of Vickers's work, Kenji Go responds to Vickers's contention that the "rerouted love tokens" given to the young man by his earlier conquests amounts to "a grotesque episode" in the poem's story, making the work very "unShakespearean." Go maintains that an examination of the "emblematic significance" of the love tokens will not only make them appear less grotesque, but will also provide "a fresh case for [the poem's] Shakespearean attribution"—a case that Go makes through a comparison with Samuel Daniel's *The Complaint of Rosamond*.

Other concerns of scholars in recent years include the poet's attitude toward the woman's plight. Richard Allen Underwood, who assigns authorship of the poem to Shakespeare, believes that the poet's original intention was to satirize the complaint genre, but that the composition process was interrupted by the writing of *All's Well that Ends Well*, causing Shakespeare to reconsider his female character in a more sympathetic light when he returned to the poem. Underwood points to similarities between the unscrupulous lover of the poem and *All's Well's* Bertram whose behavior is also less than honorable. The critic suggests that in the poem "it is as if Shakespeare were saying, this is how it would really be if a polished aristocrat were to cajole a young woman into becoming his mistress just as Bertram tries so busily to do with Diana Capilet." John Kerrigan also notes the comparison between the young seducer of the poem and Bertram, and between the young woman and Desdemona of *Othello*, Ophelia of *Hamlet*, and Juliet of *Measure for Measure*. However, Kerrigan finds that "more striking than congruities in character . . . is the spiritual density of the poem and its reliance on confessional monologue," associating it with a number of Shakespearean texts—most notably *Hamlet*—wherein "tragedy takes shape around a set of penitential situations." Katharine A. Craik also focuses on the role of female confession, comparing it to reconstructions of female criminal confessions that appeared in contemporary ballads. She believes that the poem "reveals how Shakespeare imagined the experimental genre of male-authored, female-voiced lament as inseparable from the unruliness of female confession." Shirley Sharon-Zisser (see Further Reading) suggests that the poem is "a fascinating exploration of the erotics of rhetoric," an exploration that also informs the *Sonnets* and a number of plays, and "that brilliantly and intriguingly anticipates many of the insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Venus and Adonis 1593
The Rape of Lucrece 1594
The Phoenix and Turtle 1601
Sonnets 1609

Other Major Works

The Tragedy of Richard the Third (play) 1592-93
The Taming of the Shrew (play) 1593-94
A Midsummer Night's Dream (play) 1595-96
The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet (play) 1595-96
The Merchant of Venice (play) 1596-97
The Tragedy of Julius Caesar (play) 1599
The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark (play) 1600-01
All's Well That Ends Well (play) 1602-05
Measure for Measure (play) 1604
The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice (play) 1604
The Tragedy of King Lear (play) 1605
The Tragedy of Macbeth (play) 1606
The Tempest (play) 1611

CRITICISM

Richard Allan Underwood (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: Underwood, Richard Allan. "A General Discussion of *A Lover's Complaint*." In *Shakespeare on Love: The Poems and the Plays: Prolegomena to a Variorum Edition of A Lover's Complaint*, pp. 60-103. Salzburg, Austria: Institut Für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1985.

[In the following essay, Underwood discusses the many parallels between "*A Lover's Complaint*" and Shakespeare's comedy *All's Well That Ends Well*.]

The first crux of the poem occurs in its first stanza (vs. 1-7). The "I" of the poem is an eavesdropper who first overhears a woman's lament, lies down to listen, and then observes "a fickle maid full pale" tearing up love tokens, "storming her world [a microcosm] with sorrowes, wind and raine." The hill's "concaue wombe" symbolically complains as it echoes the woman's shrieks. Thus from the first the setting suggests a woman's travail and is by implication sympathetic. The "I" of the poem is presented as a poet of the kind Yeats

referred to when he said of Shakespeare’s view of history, “He meditated as Solomon, not as Bentham meditated, upon blind ambitions, untoward accidents, and capricious passions, and the world was almost as empty in his eyes as it must be in the eyes of God.” And yet it is the “I” of the poem who is telling us all we know of it, and after a re-reading or two, one gets the feeling that there is something askew in the telling, something of satire or mockery at the beginning that gives way to sympathy in the second half, almost as if the poet (Shakespeare, or the “I” of the poem?) had begun with the intention of gently satirizing the complaint form, and then after a time had come back to the piece he had started some time before, in the end treating the seduction seriously, so far as he could think of the young man and the woman as two characters in a play with real emotions that he could not help depicting.

I have concluded that Shakespeare picked up the poem again sometime before or after writing *All’s Well that Ends Well*, or around 1605. The young man resembles Bertram very closely. The woman of *A Lover’s Complaint* is not Helena, however. She is simply a young girl, dazzled by the sinecure of neighboring eyes and the poet, although sympathetic, underscores the ordinariness of her love and its futility by the heavy use of anaphora in the closing stanza,

O that infected moisture of his eye,
O that false fire which in his cheek so glowd:
O that forc’d thunder from his heart did flye,
O that sad breath his spungie lungs bestowed,
O all that borrowed motion seeming owed . . .

Here he reverted to the slightly arch tone he had begun with, and a satirical re-working of the conventions of the genre. It may be that it was his finished portrait of Bertram in *All’s Well* that prompted Shakespeare to return to *A Lover’s Complaint* and give all his sympathies to the woman, but without enlarging the dimensions of her role.

The fineness of the “I’s” perceptions is contrasted to those of the “reuerend man that graz’d his cattell ny,” who appears in line 57. This onetime “blusterer” simply wants gossip, the news of who did what to whom. It is a judgement on the girl that she tells him all he wants to hear, even to retailing dialogue concerning her seduction; she tells him that all her lover’s transparent ploys “Would yet againe betray the fore-betrayed, / And new peruert a reconciled Maide” (vs. 328-329).

The tone of the poem is another crux. The poem begins, at any rate, as many another lover’s complaint does, in a pastoral setting. And as MacDonald Pairman Jackson has written, “The introduction of the ‘onlooking listener’ . . . can be argued to serve a purpose in the poem as we have it.”

The poet [and here I believe Jackson means the “I” of the opening lines] represents himself as in something like the position of a spectator at a play. The ‘sad-tuned tale’ of the natural setting in which he reclines and listens is rather in the nature of an overture to the main performance. Soon the principal character comes on stage, as it were, indulging in melodramatic gestures. This initial resemblance to an afternoon in the theatre can hardly be accidental in a poem so much concerned with acting.²

Jackson is right, as he so often is in his 1965 monograph. He adds the following:

A Lover’s Complaint is largely devoted to the analysis of a deceiver through the words of the deceived. The latter tells her story to “a reverend man,” quoting at length the actual speeches of her seducer, and the pair (speaker and listener) are imagined as watched and heard by the poet who reports the “entertainment”³ to us. Thus the point of view changes as we move from the poet to his description of the maid, to the words of the maid, and then focus on the young man himself and almost enter his mind as we hear his own words. This method permits the presentation of a greater complexity of attitude to the situation. It is hard to say whether the deceiver or the deceived commands the greater part of our interest.

The dramatic character of the poem was recognized by Martin Platt when he staged the poem in 1978. He made two characters of the young woman who is speaker: Platt called these “The Woman” and “The Woman as a Young Girl.” (This production is discussed in the *Appendix*.) In devising this doubling, and suggesting thereby what the young man’s effect as seducer had been on many, Platt brilliantly showed that the “Woman” would still give herself to him, so powerful was the young man’s charm. What took place is visualized as *drama*.

What the “I” of the poem says in the opening lines in effect distances us from all that takes place on the little stage he overlooks, and again reveals the quasi-dramatic nature of the work. That is, Shakespeare, or someone like him, is putting this tawdry little scene at arm’s length and presenting it to us in a dispassionate way: this is what I learned, says the persona. But of course this is a pose, and by his selection of detail the “I” of the poem is guiding us to some sort of judgment. In the second stanza (8-14), for example, the “fickle maid” of the first stanza is described as the “carkas of a beauty spent and donne,” in whom “Some beauty peept, through lettice of sear’d age.” One imagines her as in her early twenties, seduced in her late adolescence. (Old age to the Elizabethans is as it is pictured in *Sonnet 73*, “That time of year thou mayst in me behold,” etc.) By exaggerating her aged appearance whereas she is still a young woman, the poet exaggerates all that she says, and he emphasizes this in the next stanza (15-21) as he describes her “napkin” or handkerchief:

Oft did she heave her Napkin to her eyne,
Which on it had conceited characters . . .⁴

Meanwhile, as the poem progresses we observe with Kenneth Muir that the tone of the poem is strongly influenced by the number of war images. "The largest group of images . . . is taken from war, and these express the battle between the sexes. The aim of the villain-hero is to make the woman surrender without marriage; the conscious aim of the heroine is to preserve her chastity, and, unconsciously, to conquer the man by persuading him to marry her, his former conquests adding to the glory of her victory."⁵ Professor Muir does not mention that the man is actively working the "former conquests" argument so strongly that the woman merely responds to it as folderol, although he suggests it when he says that

the woman is not won by his arguments. She had fallen in love with him before he began to woo, and she is overcome not by his words but by his tears which made her pity him and believe his "holy vows." She confesses at the end of the poem that he was so beautiful, and so good an actor, that his tears and blushes

Would yet again betray the fore-betrayed,
And new pervert a reconciled maid.

Muir is right, in any event, when he speaks of the importance of the war imagery in *A Lover's Complaint*; he thinks this begins with the woman's straw hat ("a plattid hiue of straw," v. 8) which "fortified her visage from the Sunne" (v. 9).⁶ It is present in the fourth stanza of the poem in lines 22-23,

Some-times her leueld eyes their carriage ride,
As they did battry to the spheres intend:⁷

Such references help sustain the hyperbolic manner that sets the sardonic as well as the serious character of the relationship. The whole of stanza 4 (22-28) describes the woman's eye movements; stanza 5 (29-35) the appearance of her hair. Rollins (p. 336) quotes the editor C. Knox Pooler on the latter: "She had the remains of coquetry as she had the remains of beauty, and is careful to hint that she is not as old as she looks." In stanza 6 (36-42), the woman begins throwing scores of love favors into the nearby river; it is in keeping with the tone of the first part of the poem—with its hyperbole and exaggeration of emotion—that the "I" of the poem tells us that

A thousand favours from a maund she drew . . .
Which one by one she in a riuier threw,

surely an exaggeration.⁸ She then in stanza 7 (43-49) rips up "folded schedulls" (written letters, as in v. 1312 of *Lucrece*), "Crackt many a ring of Posied gold and bone" (rings inscribed with mottoes), and probably thinking that she had made a brave end to all by her violence,

Found yet mo letters sadly pend in blood,
With sleided silke, feate and affectedly
Enswath'd and seald to curious secrecy.

Her seducer had not only penned letters in blood (presumably his own) but had carefully packaged them. Stanza 8 (50-56) deserves to be quoted in full because it encapsulates the love/hate/fascination attitude of the woman to the young man that is elaborated in the rest of the poem:

These often bath'd she in her fluxiue eies,
And often kist, and often gaue to teare,
Cried O false blood thou register of lies,
What vnapproued witnes doost thou beare!
Inke would haue seem'd more blacke and damned
heare!
This said in top of rage the lines she rents,
Big discontent, so breaking their contents.

It is in the next stanza (57-63) that the "reuerend man" appears; like Chaucer's Franklin, he is a very worldly man, in fact, "Sometime a blusterer that the ruffle [hurliburly] knew / Of Court of Cittie, and had let go by / The swiftest houres obserued as they flew" (58-60), a proven vehicle for carrying us the time the "I" has set. "Reuerend" means that he is getting on in years—his "age" is mentioned in v. 70, and the woman addresses him as "Father" in v. 71—but I take it that the "I" of the poem is using the word "reuerend" somewhat ironically also, in that he calls him a "blusterer" (v. 58), a once-used word in Shakespeare, also a word almost never glossed by editors because it means the same thing today. The older man is windy, one full of sound and fury, and the connotations are of boasting, swaggering, bullying: in short he is Parolles, not a man but mere words, "Sometime a blusterer" like the character in *All's Well That Ends Well*, who here, imagined in age, "comely distant sits he by her side" (v. 65), just as in a similar meeting near the beginning of *All's Well* (I. i. 108-214), Parolles enters to the despondent, weeping Helena, whose words just before this are

But now he's gone, and my idolatrous fancy
Must sanctify his [Bertram's] reliques.

The woman in *A Lover's Complaint* has tangible "reliques," many of them "trophies of affections hot" (v. 218) given the young man by women and passed on to her as his "origin and ender" (222), in addition to all those letters written in blood. Helena's "reliques" are mental:

'Twas pretty, though a plague,
To see him every hour, to sit and draw
His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls,
In our heart's table—heart too capable
Of every line and trick of his sweet favor.

(I. i. 94-98)

Notice her mention of Bertram's "curls"; the woman of *A Lover's Complaint* tells her immediate auditor, the "reuerend man," that her seducer's

brownny locks did hang in crooked curles,
And euery light occasion of the wind
Vpon his lippes their silken parcels hurles,

(85-87)

with the same close observation.⁹

The maid of *A Lover's Complaint* is no Helena, that extraordinary young woman who wills herself to be a heroine; but Shakespeare seems to have something of the matter of *A Lover's Complaint* in mind as he writes the plays of 1600-1609: a certain sourness in love is what we see in *All's Well*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*—and at the beginning of the period in *Hamlet*.¹⁰ But it is Parolles, the character in *All's Well That Ends Well*, whom one likens to the reverend man, the "blusterer that the ruffle knew / Of Court of Cittie," who had "let go by / The swiftest houres obserued as they flew," and who now, "priuiledg'd by age desires to know / In breefe the grounds and motiues of her wo."

Allowing for the many differences in the two situations, the similarities are striking. In the play Parolles, a young man, is about to leave for court with Bertram; the blusterer comes on a distraught young woman weeping over a curled young man she fears she has lost forever ("a bright particular star"), one of a higher social class who has not deigned to notice her. They speak of assaults on virginity, using the language of war. In the poem, an older version of Parolles, perhaps somewhat wiser but not much, has returned to the country, and the same martial metaphor predominates; the young woman has been noticed and courted, but she has lost her curled lover one thinks forever.

This brings up the question of the maid's social class: the "reuerend man" does not treat her as a milkmaid—"comely distant sits he by her side" (65), and he *requests* (66-70) that she open her heart to him—"hee againe desires her" (66), whatever he can do being "promist in the charitie of age" (70).

H. E. Rollins (p. 341) quotes one writer who notes that the Youth—the Lover—never once uses *Thou* when addressing her, it is always *You* or some modification of the pronoun. It would seem that the "fickle maid full pale" (5) of the poem ["maid" occurs 21 times in *All's Well*, tied to Helena or Diana] is of gentle birth, but probably not of high estate. The place where she is tearing up love tokens and letters may have been a trysting place, but she did not sneak there from a scullery. She is a member of the aristocracy, or is in such a privileged position as Helena, whom the Countess of

Rosaillion wants to call "daughter." All that is ambiguous about poem and play in this regard, the heroine's birth vis-a-vis the lover's social class, can be cleared up by concentrating on the woman in poem and play: Helena is a heroine, the "maid" is a victim; ironically Helena must resort to an elaborate trick to lie with her husband and conceive his child, whereas the maid of the poem, deflowered and proud of it, would welcome any such play that would place her once again in the arms of her lover. Each woman loves her man with "idolatrour fancy" (*All's Well*, I. i. 99). Each is literally infatuated in the modern sense of the word, having nothing to do with the gods, each merely inspired with a foolish and extravagant passion, to paraphrase one dictionary.

If we were to pursue the hypothesis that much of the same matter inspired *A Lover's Complaint* and *All's Well that Ends Well* we might go about it this way. Let us say Shakespeare wished to imagine a dramatic situation and had cast about in this fashion: Bertram, heir of a noble name, has a lovely girl about the chateau who venerates him; he exploits her sexually, then forgets her when he is called to court. (At a certain northern court, a young man named Hamlet appears after his father's death and the young woman he loves and almost believes himself engaged to is warned away from him by her father and brother who think he simply wants to seduce her and afterward choose a more suitable queen.) It might be a good idea to have someone who is chaste menaced by a seducer who is using his raw power, as Isabella is menaced by Angelo in *Measure for Measure*. In the first sketch, why not make Bertram indifferent to the girl, Helena, and portray her stalking him lawfully as his wife, whereas he flees her! This he writes down as most "dramatic." He sees the obverse, thinks about it. He has the curled young man and his idiot follower in mind, Bertram and Parolles, and he begins to write a complaint that he instinctively begins from the dramatist's point of view, that of the "I" of the poem. It could even be that he wanted a complaint to go with a sonnet collection, as Katherine Duncan-Jones has suggested.¹² He knows the form is old-fashioned and begins by imitating it somewhat archly, re-reads Daniel's *Rosamond* and finds there the excellences that moved him when he wrote *Lucrece* years before, and ends by enthusiastically letting himself go as he couples the "maid" and her seducer in a "dramatic" framework.

This is, of course, mere conjecture. But Angelo of *Measure for Measure*, that "angel" who so powerfully and so deviously lusts for Isabella, seems to be a reformed rake. Bertram in *All's Well* proves himself a rake as he hazards even his venerable family ring in order to possess the lady Diana. Each man is a "seemer" and a liar exposed as such in plays that end with the prospects of happiness and the begetting of children in marriage. In the poem, there are no such prospects. In

the plays (*Measure for Measure* and *All's Well*) the men perjure themselves as men had in the earlier comedies, but in a more vicious way—they say that the women they are linked to were loose (Mariana and Diana). The preternaturally successful seducer of his shire's women, one thinks, would make the same objections. But in *A Lover's Complaint*, there is no question of the young man being brought to book. The difference in the dramatic situation, then, has first to do with the ingredients—characters, plot, conflict. There is a Duke to test Angelo, and Isabella has a brother; Shakespeare has invented a girl named Mariana who will lie with Angelo in place of Isabella (who will emerge unspotted). Virtue has to hide in *All's Well* as Helena goes in disguise as a pilgrim to Florence, but a King and an honest nobleman arrange all for the best. There are no auxiliary characters in *A Lover's Complaint* of this sort, however. It is as if Shakespeare were saying, this is how it would really be if a polished aristocrat were to cajole a young woman into becoming his mistress, just as Bertram tries so busily to do with Diana Capilet.

So in *All's Well* we have a young man who resembles the young man of the poem, and in the poem we have a young woman who resembles Helena in her doting and tears and desperation, but in no other wise. She tells her story to a stranger whom she calls "Father," whereas Helena tells hers to someone who acts as her mother. Helena is an orphan; the "maid" of *A Lover's Complaint* is in an orphaned state, having no visible family, only the suggestion of one in that she is deferred to and people say "you" to her and not "thou." We are given an entertainment, a quasi-drama, provided by the poet/speaker—the "I" of the poem. Then we are given an auditor, and it is his character that leads us to compare him—a "blusterer"—to Parolles in *All's Well*.

Let us look at the first act and scene of *All's Well*. Bertram, the young Count of Rossillion, is about to depart for the King's court, leaving behind his mother and Helena, his mother's ward, daughter of a famous physician, now dead. We learn that Helena loves Bertram, though she feels that she is hopelessly beneath him. In the opening lines, moreover, Bertram speaks of being "now in ward, evermore in subjection" to the King. Thus both Bertram and Helena, as wards, are under the care of a guardian.¹³ The Countess gives her "unseason'd courtier," Bertram, some advice in the manner of Polonius (64-72) and commends him to Lafew, an old hand at court. As for Bertram, he parts from Helena thus: "Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her" (76-78); only after he leaves do we learn of her "idolatrous" longings for him (81-100). Even as her breast is heaving, in comes Parolles. "Words" as a name can compass a lot; it might suggest "scribbler" and all the identity problems of the writer or playwright; or it might mean someone like the "blusterer" in *A Lover's Complaint* who is named to suggest his boast-

ing, swaggering, bullying emptiness. I believe the first meeting of Helena and Parolles in *All's Well* suggests the meeting of the maid and the reverend man of *A Lover's Complaint*:

PAROLLES

Save you, fair queen!

HELENA

And you, monarch!

PAROLLES

No.

HELENA

And no.

PAROLLES

Are you meditating on virginity?

HELENA

Ay. You have some stain of soldier in you; let me ask you a question. Man is enemy to virginity; how may we barricade it against him?

PAROLLES

Keep him out.

HELENA

But he assails, and our virginity, though valiant, in the defense yet is weak. Unfold to us some warlike resistance.

PAROLLES

There is none. Man, setting down before you, will undermine you and blow you up.

HELENA

Bless our poor virginity from underminers and blowers up! Is there no military policy how virgins might blow up men?

PAROLLES

Virginity being blown down, man will quicklier be blown up. Marry, in blowing him down again, with the breach yourselves made, you lose your city.

(*All's Well*, I. i. 108-128)

Then, for the next 35 lines or so, Parolles argues against virginity with Helena as his foil. But let us glance again at the lines quoted. After some hyperbolic greetings, the immediate subject is virginity (introduced by Parolles) and the siege metaphor is introduced by Helena. We get "soldier," "barricado," "assails," "defense," "warlike resistance," "undermine you and blow you up," "military policy," and Parolles' general observation at the end that when Helena (or any virgin) falls, "you

lose your city." (Cf. vs. 176-7 of the poem: "And long vpon these termes I held my Citty, / Till thus hee gan besiege me . . .").

Now we notice another group of images the two works have in common. Parolles says that virginity is "a commodity will lose the gloss with lying; the longer kept, the less worth." Then he likens virginity to "an old courtier," who "wears her cap out of fashion, richly suited, but unsuitable, just like the brooch and the toothpick, which wear not now" (I. i. 156-159).

Thus we have a weeping maid who loves a curled youth, a blusterer who comes upon her in her grief and wants to know what she is thinking about, and the talk thereafter is of virginity and the war of the sexes; the would-be courtier himself uses the simile "like an old courtier," which the "reuerend man" has become in the poem. Parolles has more to say about the role he envisions at court before the scene ends; first he distances himself from Helena:

Little Helen, farewell. If I can remember thee, I will think of thee at court.

(I. i. 187-8)

Helena skewers him with her wit in the next lines, and then, knowing he has been bested but still ignorant of her merit, he waves her off:

I am so full of businesses, I cannot answer thee acutely. I will return perfect courtier, in the which my instruction shall serve to naturalize thee, so thou wilt be capable of a courtier's counsel, and understand what advice shall thrust upon thee; else thou diest in thine unthankfulness, and thine ignorance makes thee away. Farewell.

(I. i. 205-211)

In the poem the Parolles/"reuerend man" figure does "return perfect courtier" (or so he would think) and sits down to give a young woman "a courtier's counsel." The "businesses" Parolles speaks of are the same bustles or displays encompassed in the "ruffle" of court or city Shakespeare links to the reverend man in vs. 58-9 of the poem.¹⁴ In stanza 10 of the poem, the reverend man asks the maid

Her greeuance with his hearing to deuide:
If that from him there may be ought applied
Which may her suffering extasie asswage

all this "promist in the charitie of age" (vs. 67-70).

It is unlikely that so many resemblances of theme, character, diction and emphasis between play and poem should be accidental. In fact, it is as if Shakespeare took the first scene of *All's Well* and made a poem of it, leaving out all the wit and energy of Helena and

portraying her as a bereft, uncreated self; he dilates on her maiden fantasies about Bertram; and he satirizes the blustering Parolles in a few strokes as his incarnation, the "reuerend man that graz'd his cattell ny" (57-58).¹⁵

But this has been a long digression. Let us return to stanza #11 (71-77) and go on through the poem. Here (71-77) the woman described all this time by the "I" of the poem (v. 4) begins to speak. She instantly becomes a "character," as in a melodrama, and she "plays" to her immediate auditor, whom she calls "Father." She exaggerates her physical signs of age as she speaks to him, just as the "I" of the poem had done as he described her in Stanza #2 (8-14); she might have been "a spreading flower" had she not given all her love to [stanza #12] "one by natures outwards so commended, / That maidens eyes stucke ouer all his face" (80-81).¹⁶ In stanza #13 (85-91) she mentions his "browny locks" that hung in "crooked curles," concluding,

Each eye that saw him did inchaunt the minde:
For on his visage was in little drawne,
What largenesse thinkes in parradise was sawne.

The word "sawne" apparently means "seen," as Malone observed, although James Boswell suggested "sown" for its resemblance to the Scottish pronunciation of the two words. (See Rollins, p. 342.) It is Shakespeare's neologism, and the want of a rhyming word can not fully explain its presence. I think it is an attempt to be remote and old-fashioned, and Malone in 1790 thought in general that perhaps Shakespeare "meant to break a lance with Spenser" (Rollins, p. 586). Malone seems to have devoted more thought to *A Lover's Complaint* than all but a few subsequent commentators. At any rate, I believe "sawne" is in keeping with the tone of the poem up to this point—the setting is artificial, the lady protests too much about her "age," and her actions and words are extravagantly suited to the pastoral setting, as in so many poems featuring male or female laments. The important lines are those that link the young man to Adam: "For on his visage was in little drawne, / What largenesse thinkes in parradise was sawne" (vs. 90-91). The maid is willing to remember the youth as an innocent, beautiful young man, like Adam in the Garden of Eden. She knows better, however, and later (stanza 46) likens him to the devil; but here she is concerned to present him as he seemed to her, and to others ("Each eye that saw him did inchaunt the minde").

The next stanza (92-98) is also crucial, in that it suggests the preternatural powers of the youth, who would seem to be in his middle 'teens:

Smal shew of man was yet vpon his chinne,
His phenix downe began but to appeare
Like vnshorne veluet, on that termlesse skin
Whose bare out-brag'd the web it seem'd to were.

Yet shewed his visage by that cost more deare,
And nice affections wauering stood in doubt
If best were as it was, or best without.

Various readings of “phenix downe” are given in Rollins (pp. 342-3), all of them reasonable. I prefer the likenesses I have made between *All’s Well* and *A Lover’s Complaint* (discussed above): Helena seems to have Bertram in mind when she thinks of Bertram at court as “a phoenix” (*All’s Well*, I. i. 168); the maid of the poem, an unrealized Helena, also thinks of her lover as a phoenix, or “phenix,” and so “His phenix downe” (v. 93) means the soft new hairs on his face, rather like “vnshorne veluct” (v. 94). The poet in the lines that follow gives us the woman’s angle of vision, once again hyperbolically, inasmuch as the “nice affections” that “wauering stood in doubt / If best were as it was, or best without,” were surely female. The outrageously trivial question—did he look better with the sproutings or without them?—should be nothing new to any reader born in this century: the young man is a “star” who has a following. When given a chance to speak for himself, he pleads that most of the women he bedded threw themselves at him, and that is perhaps true. Like most successful seducers, he is a gambler; he will take what is given him, and yet he is prepared to hazard all.

In stanza #15 (99-105) the young man is described as “maiden tongu’d” and “thereof free,” which to me means that he was able to converse fluently with women—that is, his “qualities were beautilous as his forme” to a woman. Not only was he at ease with women in social settings, but

Against the thing he sought, he would exclaime,
When he most burnt in hart-wisht luxurie,
He preacht pure maide, and praisd cold chastitie.

(vs. 313-315)

Here is the other meaning of “maiden tongu’d”: not only was he restrained in all he said, he “preacht pure maid,” spoke highmindedly of women, as we learn from the later lines of the poem. The verses that follow (101-103) about his anger are to show that he was no spooney; and yet these are subtly undercut by the verses that follow,

His rudenesse so with his autoriz’d youth
Did livery falsenesse in a pride of truth.

(vs. 104-5)

If, as William Empson has suggested,¹⁷ Shakespeare had Southampton in mind, then “authoriz’d” may cleverly suggest Shakespeare’s role in this mythography, or anti-mythography if it be that. Leaving all biographical conjectures aside, however, it is safe to say that here again the youth resembles Bertram in *All’s Well*. The lines of the poem suggest that persons were accustomed to his angry outbursts and made allowances for them

because of his birth, perfectly willing to assume that he was a plain blunt honest man like Kent, whereas he is a seemer like Iago, with the difference that Iago dwells on sexual matters but is presented as cold, whereas the young man of the poem is hot and dwells on continence.

The verses of the poem (104-105) also call to mind Bertam’s flouting of the King of France in Act II and his treatment of his mother in Act III; the curled darling of the play, like the one of the poem, whose “rudenesse” goes with his “authoriz’d youth,” is a spoiled brat. When Bertram rejects his golden wife and exits with Parolles at the end of II. iii., one can only sigh, “A man is known by his friends.” And his friend knows him: of the seven times Bertram is styled “boy” in the play, five times it is by Parolles (see Spevack, p. 145). He calls him this lightly (“An thy mind stand to’t, boy, steal away bravely,” II. i. 29, and “To th’ wars, my boy, to th’ wars!” II. iii. 278); then, when he imagines himself captured by hostile forces in Act IV, he sings like a bird, significantly expanding on his notion of Bertram as “boy”: Bertram is now “one Count Rossillion, a foolish idle boy, but for all that very ruttish” (218-220), “a dangerous and lascivious boy, who is a whale to virginity, and devours up all the fry it finds” (224-225), and finally “that lascivious young boy the Count” (IV. iii. 302-304). These “boy” judgements are earlier reinforced by the King, who in tendering Helena to Bertram calls him “Proud scornful boy, unworthy this good gift” (II. iii. 151), and what the Countess of Rossillion says of her son when she receives his letter: “This is not well, rash and unbridled boy” . . . (III. ii. 26). I see vs. 104-105 of the poem as marking another resemblance with the play, and certainly Bertram’s protestations in the last act and scene of the play “liuery falsenesse in a pride of truth.”

Stanzas 16 and 17 of the poem (106-112, 113-119) are about the youth’s horsemanship; in III. iii of the play Bertram is made general of the Duke of Florence’s horse troops. This part of the poem is narrated by the maid, and there is some silliness here as spoken by the impressionable girl that I believe is intended; for example,

Whether the horse by him became his deed,
Or he his mannad’g, by ’th wel doing Steed.

(vs. 111-112)

The next stanza begins, “But quickly on this side the verdict went,” suggesting that a lively discussion settled all this! Surely there is some archness of tone here and irony comprehending subject as well as speaker. William Empson finds the whole portrait one of Southampton, “who had been already an earl when still a child; no wonder, after puzzling their heads, they decided that he was the one who was clever, and not just his horse (lines 114-19).”¹⁸ The muddy lines 117-

119 mean that all things were graced by him, not the other way around. The lines on horse and rider may not be out of place in the poem, but still I find it significant that Bertram, who is so like the youth, is made commander of horse.

Stanza 18 (120-126) sums up the youth's formidable powers of expression and persuasion, ending,

He had the dialect and different skill,
Catching all passions in his craft of will,

(vs. 125-6)

lines that the editor George Steevens in 1780 for the first time applied to Shakespeare himself; this is true enough as compliment, but Shakespeare was not writing about himself as he described the youth of *A Lover's Complaint*. In some of the sonnets Shakespeare puns outrageously on his name, however, and perhaps "his craft of will" (126) like "his *authoriz'd* youth" (104) suggest the role of the poet as he writes about Southampton in the sonnets, if there is such a biographical connection.

If "craft of will" is Shakespeare slyly having his say, the last lines of stanza 19 (127-133) lend themselves to such a reading:

That he didde in the general bosome raigne
Of young, of old, and sexes both enchanted,
To dwell with him in thoughts, or to remaine
In personal duty, following where he haunted,
Consent's bewicht, ere he desire haue granted,
And dialogu'd for him what he would say,
Askt their own wils and made their wils obey.

That is, those close to the youth were "enchanted" and "bewicht" by him, and vied in apprehending his next wish, slavishly, so dazzling was he; poets who hoped for his patronage or its continuance "dialogu'd for him what he would say"—wrote sonnets to him, gave him significant thoughts or utterances in sonnets (or made him a character in poems)—and "Askt their own wils and made their wils obey" (v. 133). People like Shakespeare who were dazzled by a young patron were dutifully obedient; something has changed, now, and the "I" of the poem via the wronged maid grinds his teeth on each quibble, "Askt their own wils and made their wils obey." This is a perfectly good reading if you think Shakespeare means himself, as he may. If so, he is also doing sleight of hand as he interests us in the main story, because he really wants us to focus on the youth, who "didde in the general bosome raigne / Of young, of old, and sexes both . . ." (vs. 127-8). Even though she speaks of his "craft of will" (v. 126) the maid is fascinated by him.

The point (that men and women can dote on a "star") is elaborated in the next stanza (134-140). As I write this, the entertainer Michael Jackson is a multi-million dollar

enterprise in the United States; his popularity can make people rich who merchandise shirts with his picture embossed on them. In England at the time of the youth, "Many there were that did his picture gette / To serue their eies, and in it put their mind" (vs. 134-135). Once again, this is hyperbole, but it suggests in little a group hysteria centering on the youth and his devotees who

Like fooles that in th' imagination set
The goodly objects which abroad they find
Of lands and mansions, theirs in thought assign'd,
And labouring in moe pleasures to bestow them,
Then the true gouty Land-lord which doth owe them.

(vs. 136-140)

("Owe" here means "own," as "owed" in v. 327 may mean "owned.") A stronger psychological portrait of the maid begins to emerge at this point in the poem: probably she was one who "did his picture gette" like other "fooles," thus even in her present neglect and disgrace she takes pride in the youth's attentions to her. She begins stanza 21 (141-147), "So [meaning "thus"] many haue that neuer toucht his hand / Sweetly suppos'd them mistresse of his heart" (vs. 141-2), proudly comparing herself to the "many" who longed to lie with him as she eventually had. She speaks of her "wofull selfe that did in freedome stand" before it was overwhelmed by "his art in youth and youth in art," so that finally she threw her affections "in his charmed power, / Reseru'd the stalke and gaue him al my flower" (vs. 146-7). The word "charmed" comes up again in v. 193.

The young woman at this point is both confessing and dramatizing her fall, therefore she goes back in time in stanza #22 (148-154): unlike some of her "equals," meaning girls of her age, she stayed away from the youth, certainly never offered herself as some had:

With safest distance I mine honour sheelded,
Experience for me many bulwarkes builded
Of proofs new bleeding which remaind the foile
Of this false lewell, and his amorous spoile.

(vs. 151-4)

The jewel motif that will be significant in the speeches of the youth is introduced here, and the military metaphor (here *sheelded* and *bulwarkes*) begun in stanza #4 is resumed, to be fully orchestrated as the poem goes on. "Spoile" itself originally meant *hide, arms or armor stripped from an enemy*, and Shakespeare uses this martial suggestion along with the meanings *mar* and *ruin* to express the maid's meaning. (The youth himself calls his gifts "trophies of affections hot" in v. 218, reinforcing the meaning of "spoile" in v. 154).

It is in stanza 23 (155-161) that Shakespeare most evidently follows the example of Samuel Daniel in *The Complaint of Rosamond* as the seduced maid turns philosopher: