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Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen
Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup
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Brentano Claudius Schiller Lafontaine Kralik Iffland Sokrates
Strachwitz Bellamy Schilling Raabe Gibbon Tschchow
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Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus
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**Testimony of the Sonnets as to the
Authorship of the Shakespearean
Plays and Poems**

Jesse Johnson

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ALBERT E. LAMB**

**PARTNER AND FRIEND FOR TWENTY YEARS
OF THE ROYAL LINE OF LOYAL GENTLEMEN**

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INTRODUCTORY

The Shakespearean Sonnets are not a single or connected work like an ordinary play or poem. Their composition apparently extended over a considerable time, which may be fairly estimated as not less than four years. Read literally they seem to portray thoughts, modes or experiences fairly assignable to such a period. Though variable and sometimes light and airy in their movement, the greater portion appear to reveal deep and intense emotion, the welling and tumultuous floods of the inner life of their great author. And their difficulty or mystery is, that they indicate circumstances, surroundings, experiences and regrets that we almost instinctively apprehend could not have been those of William Shakespeare at the time they were written, when he must have been in the strength of early manhood, in the warmth and glow of recent and extraordinary advancement and success.

[Pg 2]

It is this difficulty that apparently has caused many to believe that their literal meaning cannot be accepted, and that we must give to them, or to many of them, a secondary meaning, founded on affectations or conceits relating to different topics or persons, or that at least we should not allow that in them the poet is speaking of himself. Others, like Grant White, simply allow and state the difficulty and leave it without any suggestion of solution.

Before conceding, however, that the splendid poetry contained in the Sonnets must be sundered or broken, or the apparent reality of its message doubted or denied, or that its message is mysterious or inexplicable—we should carefully inquire whether there is not some view or theory which will avoid the difficulties which have so baffled inquiry.

I believe that there is such a view or theory, and that view is—that the Sonnets were not written by Shakespeare, but were written to him as the patron or friend of the poet; that while Shakespeare may have been the author of some plays produced in his name at the [Pg 3]theatre where he acted, or while he may have had a part in conceiving or framing the greater plays so produced, there was another, a great poet, whose dreamy and transforming genius

wrought in and for them that which is imperishable, and so wrought although he was to have no part in their fame and perhaps but a small financial recompense; and that it is the loves, griefs, fears, forebodings and sorrows of the student and recluse, thus circumstanced and confined, that the Sonnets portray.

Considering that the Sonnets were so written, there is no need of any other than a literal and natural reading or interpretation. Commencing in expressions of gratulation and implied flattery, as they proceed, they appear to have been written as the incidents, fears and griefs which they indicate from time to time came; and it may well be that they were written not for publication, but as vents or expressions of a surcharged heart. With such a view of the situation of the poet and of his patron, we may not only understand much that otherwise is inexplicable, but we may understand why so much and such re[Pg 4]splendent poetry is lavished on incidents so bare, meagre, and commonplace, and why they present both poet and patron with frailties and faults naked and repellent; and we can the better palliate and forgive the weakness and subjection which the Sonnets indicate on the part of their author. With such a reading the Sonnets become a chronicle of the modes and feelings of their author, resembling in this respect the *In Memoriam* of Tennyson; and their poetry becomes deeper and better, often equalling, if not surpassing in pathos and intensity anything in the greater Shakespearean plays.

Such is the result or conclusion to which the discussion which follows is intended to lead. I shall not, however, ask the reader to accept any such conclusion or result merely because it removes difficulties or because it makes or rather leaves the poetry better; but I shall present—that the Sonnets contain direct testimony, testimony not leading to surmise or conjecture, but testimony which would authorize a judgment in a court of law, that the Sonnets were not written by Shakespeare, and [Pg 5]that they very strongly indicate that Shakespeare was the friend or patron to whom so many of them are addressed.

How such a conclusion from such testimony may be affected by arguments drawn from other sources I shall not discuss, contenting myself if into the main and larger controversy I have succeeded in

introducing the effect and teaching of this, certainly, very valuable and important testimony.

TESTIMONY OF THE SONNETS AS TO THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS AND POEMS

CHAPTER I

OF THE CHARACTER OF THE SONNETS AND THEIR RELATION TO THE OTHER WORKS OF THE SAME AUTHOR

In these pages I propose an examination and study of the Shakespearean Sonnets, for the purpose of ascertaining what information may be derived from them as to the authorship of the Shakespearean plays and poems. I am aware that any question or discussion as to their authorship is regarded with objection or impatience by very many. But to those not friendly to any such inquiry I would say, let us at least proceed so far as to learn precisely what the author of these great dramas says of himself and [Pg 8]of his work in the only production in which he in any manner refers to or speaks of himself. Certainly an inquiry confined to such limits is appropriate, at least is not disloyal. And if we study the characters of Hamlet, Juliet or Rosalind, do we not owe it to the poet whose embodiments or creations they are, that we should study his character in the only one of his works in which his own surroundings and attachments, loves and fears, griefs and forebodings, appear to be at all indicated?

From the Homeric poems, Mr. Gladstone undertook to gather what they indicate as to the religion, morals and customs of the time; of the birthplace of the poet, and of the ethnology and migrations of the Hellenic peoples. Those poems were not written for any such purpose; they were for a people who, in the main, on all those subjects knew or believed as did their author. And it is both curious and instructive to note how much information as to that distant period Mr. Gladstone was able to gather from the circumstances, incidents, and implications of the Homeric poetry. The value of such deductions no one can question. [Pg 9]We may reject as myths the Trojan War or the wanderings or personality of Ulysses, but

from these poems we certainly learn much of the method of warfare, navigation, agriculture, and of the social customs of those times.

So reading these Sonnets, we may perhaps not believe that the grief or love of the poet or the beauty of his friend was quite as great as the poetry indicates. But we may fairly take as correct what he says of his friend or of himself, as to their relations and companionship, the incidents and descriptions, which were but the framework on which he wove his poetic wreaths of affection, compliment, or regret.

But before entering on this inquiry, it is quite relevant to ascertain what relation these Sonnets bear to the Shakespearean plays and poems. The works of Shakespeare, as published, contain thirty-seven separate plays. Most of them are of the highest order, and rank with the most consummate products of poetic genius. But criticism seems to have established, and critics seem to agree, that in the works accredited to him are plays of a lower order, which certainly are not from the same [Pg 10]author as the remainder, and especially the greater plays. In this widely different and lower class, criticism seems to be agreed in placing the greater portion of *Pericles*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens*, two parts of *Henry VI.*, and *Henry VIII.*[1] In addition to those, there are at least ten plays not now published as Shakespeare's, that are conceded to be of a lower order and by a different author, but which, apart from internal evidence, can be almost as certainly shown to be his work as many of the greater of the recognized Shakespearean plays. In the same high class of poetry as the greater of these dramas are the Sonnets; and they are unmistakably, and I think concededly, the work of the author of those greater plays.

It is of our poet, as the author of these greater dramas as well as of the Sonnets, that we would seek to learn in the study of the Sonnets. It is only in the Sonnets that the poet speaks in the first person, or allows us any suggestion of himself. His dramas reveal to us the characters he has imagined and desires to [Pg 11] portray; but they reveal nothing of the author. His two great poems are dramatic in substance and equally fail to give us any hint of their creator; but in the Sonnets his own is the character whose thoughts and emotions

are stated. There we come nearest to him; and there it would seem that we should be able to learn very much of him. Perhaps we shall find that they do not present him at his best; it may be that they were intended only for the eye of the friend or patron to whom they are addressed. Perhaps they reveal the raveled sleeve, the anxieties of a straitened life and of narrow means. Certainly, while they reveal the wonderful fertility, resource, and fancy of the poet, they do not indicate that in outward semblance, surroundings or history their author was either fortunate or happy; and as we read them, sometimes we may feel that we are entering the poet's heart-home unbidden and unannounced. But if we have come there when it is all unswept and ungarnished, may we not the more certainly rely on what it indicates?

Before entering on the study of the Sonnets [Pg 12] we may inquire what, if anything, there is, distinctive of our great poet, the recognition of which may aid us in their interpretation.

Taine says that "the *creative* power is the poet's greatest gift, and communicates an extraordinary significance to his words"; and further, that "he had the prodigious faculty of seeing in a twinkling of an eye a complete character." [2]

The poet does not bring those characters to us by description, but he causes them to speak in words so true and apposite to the character he conceives that we seem to know the individuals from what they say and not from what the poet wrote or said. But the poet goes much farther, and in all his works presents surroundings and accessories, impalpable but certain, which fit the characters and their moods and actions. The picture of morning in *Venus and Adonis* is apposite to the rich, sensuous and brilliant colorings of the queen of love; the reference in *Romeo and Juliet* to the song of the nightingale "on yond' pomegranate tree" is but an incident to the soft, warm and love-[Pg 13] inviting night; Rosalind moves and talks to the quickstep of the forest; in *Macbeth* the incantation of the witches is but the outward expression of an overmastering fate, whose presence is felt throughout the play. Let us then, in studying the Sonnets, consider that they are from the same great master as the dramas. And we shall be thus prepared, where the meaning seems plain and obvious, to believe that the writer meant what he

said, and to reject any interpretation which implies that when he came to speak of himself he said what he did not mean, or filled the picture with descriptions, situations or emotions, incongruous or inappropriate. And if in so reading they seem clear and connected, fanciful and far-drawn interpretations will not be adopted. We should not distort or modify their meaning in order to infer that they are imitations of Petrarch, or that the genius of the poet, cribbed and confined by the fashion of the time, forgot to soar, and limped and waddled in the footsteps of the inconspicuous sonnet-eers of the Elizabethan era.

I would illustrate my meaning. Sonnet [Pg 14] CXXXVI. is sometimes said to be an invocation to Cupid.[3] That seems to me to destroy all its grace and beauty. The first two lines of the Sonnet,

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power
Dost hold Time's fickle glass, his sickle, hour –

are quite appropriate, if addressed to the god of love. But the lines succeeding are quite the reverse. In effect they say that you have not grown old because Nature, idealized as an active personality, has temporarily vanquished Time, but will soon obtain the full audit. If the Sonnet is addressed to the god of love it reduces him to the limitations of mortality; if it is addressed to his friend, it indicates that, though but for a little while, Nature has lifted him to an attribute of immortality. The latter interpretation makes the poet enlarge and glorify his subject; the former makes him belittle it, and bring the god of love to the audit of age and the ravage of wrinkles. This is the last sonnet of the first series; with the next [Pg 15] begins the series relating to his mistress. Reading it literally, considering it as addressed to his friend, it is sparkling and poetic, a final word, loving, admonitory, in perfect line and keeping with the central thought of all that came before. From this Sonnet, interpreted as I indicate, I shall try to find assistance in this study. But if it is a mere poetical ascription to Cupid, it, of course, tells us nothing except that its author was a poet.

I should not, however, leave this subject without stating that the fanciful interpretation of these Sonnets does not seem to be favored by more recent authors. I find no indication of such an interpreta-

tion in Taine's *English Literature*, or in Grant White's edition of Shakespeare. Professor Edward Dowden, universally recognized as a fair and competent critic, says: "The natural sense, I am convinced, is the true one." [4] Hallam says: "No one can doubt that they express not only real but intense emotions of the heart." [5] Professor Tyler, in a work relating to the [Pg 16] Sonnets, says: "The impress of reality is stamped on these Sonnets with unmistakable clearness." [6] Mr. Lee, while regarding some of these as mere fancies, obviously finds that many of them treated of facts. [7] Mr. Dowden, in a work devoted to the Sonnets, states very fully the views which have been expressed by different authors in relation to them. His quotations occupy sixty pages and, I think, clearly show that the weight of authority is decidedly in favor of allowing them their natural or primary meaning.

There are one hundred and fifty-four of these Sonnets. The last two are different in theme and effect from those which go before, and may perhaps not improperly be considered as mere exercises in poetizing. They have no connection with the others, and I would have no contention with those who regard them as suggested by Petrarch, or as complaisant imitations of the vogue or fashion of that time. Those two Sonnets I leave out of this discussion, and would have what may be here said, [Pg 17] understood as applying only to the one hundred and fifty-two remaining.

These one hundred and fifty-two Sonnets I will now insist have a common theme. Most of them may be placed in groups which seem to be connected and somewhat interdependent. Those groups may perhaps, in some cases, be placed in different orders, without seriously affecting the whole. To that extent they are disconnected. But in whatever order those groups are placed, through them runs the same theme — the relations of the poet to his friend or patron, and to his mistress, the mistress of his carnal love, who is introduced only because the poet fears that she has transferred her affections or favors to his friend, wounding and wronging him in his love or desire for each.

It is easy to pick out many Sonnets which may be read as disconnected and independent poetry. But very many more verses could be selected from *In Memoriam* that can be read independently of the

remainder of that poem. And there are none of the Sonnets, however they may read standing alone, that do not fit the mode and movement of those with which [Pg 18]they stand connected. There is, I submit, no more reason for sundering Sonnets of that class from the others, than there is for taking the soliloquy of Hamlet from the play that bears his name.

This statement of the theme and the connected character of the Sonnets is not essential to the views I shall present. Nevertheless, if it is accepted, if we are able to agree that they all are relevant and apposite to a common theme, it strengthens the proposition that we should seek for them a literal meaning and should reject any construction which would make any of their description or movement incongruous to any other part. Of course we shall expect to find in them the enlargement or exaggeration of poetic license. But so doing we must recall the characteristics of their great author, who with all exaggeration preserves harmony and symmetry of parts, and harmony and correspondence in all settings and surroundings. With such views of what is fair and helpful in interpretation, I propose to proceed to a closer view of the first one hundred and fifty-two of what are known as the Sonnets of Shakespeare.

Footnotes:

[1] Brandes's *William Shakespeare, a Critical Study*. Temple edition of Shakespeare, introduction to plays above named.

[2] Taine's *English Literature*, pp. 83, 84.

[3] Lee's *Life of Shakespeare*, p. 27. The Sonnet is printed in full at p. 28.

[4] Dowden, *Shakespeare: His Mind and Art*, pp. 102, 103.

[5] Hallam's *Literature of Europe*, Vol. II., Chap. V.

[6] Tyler, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 10.

[7] Lee's *Life of Shakespeare*, pp. 97, 125, 126.

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CHAPTER II

OF THE AGE OF THE WRITER OF THE SONNETS

Adopting the views which fix the later period as the date of the Sonnets, it seems practically certain that they were written as early as 1598,—though some of them may have been written as late as 1601,—and that a great portion were probably written as early as 1594.[8] Shakespeare was born in 1564. Consequently they appear to have been written when he was about thirty or thirty-four, certainly not over thirty-seven years of age.

It will be the main purpose of this chapter to call attention to portions of the Sonnets which seem to indicate that they were written by a man well past middle age, — perhaps fifty or sixty years old, and certainly not under forty years of age.

[Pg 20]But before proceeding to the inquiry as to the age of the writer, I invite attention to what they indicate as to the age of the patron or friend to whom the first one hundred and twenty-six seem to have been written. In poetry as in perspective, there is much that is relative, and in the Sonnets the age of the writer and that of his friend are so often contrasted, that if with reasonable certainty, and within reasonable limits, we are able to state the age of his friend, we shall be well advanced toward fixing the age of the writer.

The first seventeen of these Sonnets are important in this connection. They have a common theme: it is that his friend is so fair, so incomparable, that he owes it to the world, to the poet, whose words of praise otherwise will not be believed, that he shall marry and beget a son. The whole argument clearly implies that the writer deems such admonition necessary, because his friend has passed the age when marriage is most frequent, and is verging toward the period of life when marriage is less probable. His friend appears to the writer as making a famine where abundance[Pg 21]dance lies; he tells him that he beguiles the world, unblesses some mother; that he is his mother's glass and calls back the April of her prime; asks him why he abuses the bounteous largess given him to give; calls him a profitless usurer; tells him that the hours that have made him fair

will unfair him; that he should not let winter's rugged hand deface ere he has begotten a child, though it were a greater happiness should he beget ten. He asks if his failure to marry is because he might wet a widow's eye, and then in successive Sonnets cries shame on his friend for being so improvident. He tells him that when he shall wane, change toward age, he should have a child to perpetuate his youth; and the thought again brings to the poet the vision of winter, summer's green borne on winter's bier, and he urges him that he should prepare against his coming end, by transmitting his semblance to another; that he should not let so fair a house fall to decay, but should uphold it against the stormy blasts of winter by begetting a son; seeing in his friend so much of beauty, he prognosticates that his friend's end is beauty's [Pg 22] doom and date. Noting that nothing in nature can hold its perfection long, he sees his friend, most rich in youth, but Time debating with decay, striving to change his day to night, and urges him to make war upon the tyrant Time by wedding a maiden who shall bear him living flowers more like him than any painted counterfeit. He tells him that could he adequately portray his beauty, the world would make him a liar, and then closes this theme by saying:

But were some child of yours alive that time,
You should live twice in it, and in my rhyme.

Any impression as to the age of the poet's friend which this brief synopsis of the first seventeen Sonnets conveys, I think will be increased by reading the Sonnets themselves. I have refrained from stating any portions of Sonnets II. and VII., desiring to present to the reader their exact words. Sonnet VII. reads as follows:

Lo! in the orient when the gracious light
Lifts up his burning head, each under eye
Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,
Serving with looks his sacred majesty;
[Pg 23] And having *climb'd the steep-up heavenly hill,*
Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
Yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
Attending on his golden pilgrimage;

But when from highmost pitch, with weary car,
Like feeble age, he reeleth from the day,
The eyes, 'fore duteous, now converted are
From his low tract, and look another way:
*So thou, thyself out-going in thy noon,
Unlook'd on diest, unless thou get a son.*

The poet sees his friend, as is the sun after it has climbed the morning steep and is journeying on the level heaven toward the zenith. Certainly that must indicate that his friend was advanced toward the middle arch of life.

Sonnet II. reads as follows:

When *forty* winters shall besiege thy brow
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tatter'd weed, of small worth held:
Then, being ask'd where all thy beauty lies,
Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
To say, within thine own deep-sunken eyes,
Were an all-eating shame, and thriftless praise.

.....

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

[Pg 24]

These lines indicate that his friend had not yet reached forty years. And equally do they indicate that in the mind of the poet the fortieth year was not in the ascending scale of life, but was at, or perhaps beyond, the "highmost pitch" toward which, in the seventh Sonnet, he described his friend as approaching.[9]

Taking these seventeen Sonnets together, reading and re-reading them, can we suppose that they were composed by the great delineator, of or toward a person under or much below thirty? They imply that the person addressed was not so far below middle life that a