II

THE PROBLEM OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS SOLVED

Fie upon him! He will discredit our mystery.
Abhorson the executioner, Measure for Measure.

I

The questions relative to Shakespeare's Sonnets have been blown up into the greatest problem in our literature. This is a comparatively recent phenomenon, going back only to the sentimentalism of the later Victorians and so on into this century. The question of the Sonnets did not much disturb the mind of the sensible eighteenth century — Edmund Malone, for example. But the amount of rubbish written since on this subject is hardly believable — I mean, by reputable Shakespearean scholars, for I am not wasting time on the lunatics and crackpots. By the injudicious use of anagrams and acrostics, along with much misdirected ingenuity, one can arrive at anything. You remember Ronald Knox's plausible demonstration that Tennyson's In Memoriam was written by Queen Victoria in memory of the Prince Consort, and that Alfred Tennyson was in fact Queen Victoria.

Much of what has been written even by Shakespearean 'experts' is on the same level. What is wanting is a little of the historian's plain common sense — provided that he is intimately familiar with the Elizabethan age, its everyday circumstances, social conditions and usages; otherwise one's opinion on these matters is not of much value. And this applies to most people: a consideration that saves one time and energy. However, they can use their common sense, of more use than any amount of misdirected ingenuity.

For the first psychological consideration is perfectly simple, yet of decisive importance. Shakespeare never wrote the Sonnets to create a puzzle at all: he wrote them directly and straightforwardly for another person. The subject of the Sonnets

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is that of his relations with that person, the young man and, hardly less important, with the Dark Lady, Shakespeare’s mistress.

So the solution to the problem that has been created should be equally simple, straightforward and obvious. As, in fact, it is.

The second point is that there are two inspirers of the Sonnets: the young man and Shakespeare’s mistress. So the phrase, ‘the only begetter’, which has been sentimentalised ad nauseam, cannot possibly mean ‘the only inspirer’, for there were two — one cannot omit the lady: she is almost as important in the story as the young man. The phrase, in any case, is not Shakespeare’s; for the dedication is the publisher’s, Thomas Thorpe’s, who was somewhat effusively grateful to the one and only person who got the manuscript for him, instead of having to collect the Sonnets from here, there and everywhere. That is what the phrase means. Thorpe had reason to be grateful to Mr. W. H., who had got the manuscript for him; for in Elizabethan days the publisher who obtained a manuscript by publishing it might claim the copyright.

No wonder Thorpe was somewhat effusive, his dedication a little clumsily inflated and over-written. We, too, have reason to be grateful to him: without him should we have had the Sonnets?

Nearly all the trouble has arisen from Thorpe’s dedication. It is this that has muddled people up, led them along false scents, created a needless mystery. They have for the most part been looking, quite mistakenly, for a Mr. W. H. as the inspirer of the Sonnets, instead of the only person who had got the manuscripts. If you search for a needle in a haystack, you naturally emerge with hayseeds in your hair; if you insist on looking for a mare’s nest, you are quite likely to find one.

Alas, there is perhaps nothing surprising in this though it is very boring. For, as a great scholar, A. E. Housman, knew well: ‘Now to detect a non sequitur, unless it leads to an unwelcome conclusion, is as much beyond the power of the average reader as it is beyond the power of the average writer to attach ideas to his own words when those words are terms of textual criticism.’ In other words, most people are incapable of thinking, strictly speaking; they merely think what they want to