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ELIZABETHAN SONNET CYCLES: PHILLIS - LICIA

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Elizabethan Sonnet Cycles: Phillis - Licia

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INTRODUCTION

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The last decade of the sixteenth century was marked by an outburst of sonneteering. To devotees of the sonnet, who find in that poetic form the moat perfect vehicle that has ever been devised for the expression of a single importunate emotion, it will not seem strange that at the threshold of a literary period whose characteristic note is the most intense personality, the instinct of poets should have directed them to the form most perfectly fitted for the expression of this inner motive.

The sonnet, a distinguished guest from Italy, was ushered to by those two "courtly makers," Wyatt and Surrey, in the days of Henry VIII. But when, forty years later, the foreigner was to be acclimatised in England, her robe had to be altered to suit an English fashion. Thus the sonnet, which had been an octave of enclosed or alternate rhymes, followed by a sestette of interlaced tercets, was now changed to a series of three quatrains with differing sets of alternate rhymes in each, at the close of which the insidious couplet succeeded in establishing itself. But these changes were not made without a great deal of experiment; and during the tentative period the name "sonnet" was given, to a wide variety of forms, in the moulding of which but one rule seemed to be uniformly obeyed—that the poem should be the expression of a single, simple emotion. This law cut the poem, to a relative shortness and defined its dignity and clearness. Beyond this almost every combination of rhymes might be found, verses were occasionally lengthened or

shortened, and the number of lines in the poem, though generally fourteen, showed considerable variation.

The sonnet-sequence was also a suggestion from Italy, a literary fashion introduced by Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Astrophel and Stella*, written soon after 1580, but not published till 1591. In a sonnet-cycle Sidney recorded his love and sorrow, and Spenser took up the strain with his story of love and joy. Grouped about these, and following in their wake, a number of poets, before the decade was over, turned this Elizabethan "toy" to their purpose in their various self-revealings, producing a group of sonnet-cycles more or less Italianate in form or thought, more or less experimental, more or less poetical, more or less the expression of a real passion. For while the form of the sonnet was modified by metrical traditions and habits, the content also was strongly influenced, not to say restricted, by certain conventions of thought considered at the time appropriate to the poetic attitude. The passion for classic colour in the poetic world, which had inspired and disciplined English genius in the sixties and seventies, was rather nourished than repressed when in the eighties Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* and Sidney's *Arcadia* made the pastoral imagery a necessity. Cupid and Diana were made very much at home in the golden world of the renaissance Arcadia, and the sonneteer singing the praises of his mistress's eyebrow was not far removed from the lovelorn shepherd of the plains.

It may reasonably be expected that in any sonnet-cycle there will be found many sonnets in praise of the loved one's beauty, many lamenting her hardness of heart; all the

wonders of heaven and earth will be catalogued to find comparisons for her loveliness; the river by which she dwells will be more pleasant than all other rivers in the world, a list of them being appended in proof; the thoughts of night-time, when the lover bemoans himself and his rejected state, or dreams of happy love, will be dwelt upon; oblivious sleep and the wan-faced moon will be invoked, and death will be called upon for respite. Love and the praises of the loved one was the theme. On this old but ever new refrain the sonneteer devised his descant, trilling joyously on oaten pipe in praise of Delia or Phyllis, Cœlia, Cælica, Aurora, or Castara.

But this melody and descant were not, in some ears at least, without monotony. For after Daniel's *Delia*, Constable's *Diana*, Lodge's *Phillis*, Drayton's *Idea*, Fletcher's *Licia*, Brooke's *Cælica*, Percy's *Cœlia*, N.L.'s *Zepheria*, and J.C.'s *Alcilia*, and perhaps a few other sonnet-cycles had been written, Chapman in 1595 made his *Coronet for his Mistress Philosophy*, the opening sonnet of which reveals his critical attitude:

> "Muses that sing Love's sensual empery,
> And lovers kindling your enragèd fires
> At Cupid's bonfires burning in the eye,
> Blown with the empty breath of vain desires,
> You that prefer the painted cabinet
> Before the wealthy jewels it doth store ye,
> That all your joys in dying figures set,
> And stain the living substance of your glory,
> Abjure those joys, abhor their memory,
> And let my love the honoured subject be

Of love, and honour's complete history;
Your eyes were never yet let in to see
The majesty and riches of the mind,
But dwell in darkness; for your god is blind."

It must be confessed that the "painted cabinet" of the lady's beauty absorbs more attention than the "majesty and riches of the mind," but the glints of a loftier ideal shining now and then among the conventions, lift the cycle above the level of mere ear-pleasing rhythms and fantastical imageries. Moreover, the sonnet-cycles on the whole show an independence and spontaneousness of poetic energy, a delight in the pure joy of making, a *naïveté*, that richly frame the picture of the golden world they present. When Lodge, addressing his "pleasing thoughts, apprentices of love," cries out:

"Show to the world, though poor and scant my
skill is,
How sweet thoughts be that are but thought on
Phillis,"

we feel that we are being taken back to an age more childlike than our own; and when the sonneteers vie with each other on the themes of sleep, death, time, and immortality, the door often stands open toward sublimity. Then when the sonnet-cycle was consecrated to noble and spiritual uses in Chapman's *Coronet for his Mistress Philosophy*, Barnes's *Divine Century of Spiritual Sonnets*, Constable's *Spiritual Sonnets in Honour of God and His Saints*, and Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, all made before 1600, the

symbolic theme was added to the conventions of the sonnet-realm, the scope of its content was broadened; and the sonnet was well on its way toward a time when it could be named a trumpet, upon which a mighty voice could blow soul-animating strains.

One of the most fascinating questions in the study of the sonnet-cycles is as to how much basis the story has in reality. Stella we know, the star-crossed love of Sidney, and Spenser's happy Elizabeth, but—

> "Who is Silvia? What is she
> That all the swains commend her?"

Who is Delia, Diana, Cœlia, Cælica, and all the rhyming of musical names? And who is the Dark Lady? What personalities hide behind these poet's imaginings? We know that now, as in troubadour days, the praises of grand ladies were sung with a warmth of language that should indicate personal acquaintance when no such acquaintance existed; and the sonneteers sometimes frankly confessed their passion "but supposed." All this adds to the difficulty of interpretation. In most cases the poet has effectually kept his secret; the search is futile, in spite of all the "scholastic labour-lost" devoted to it. Equally tantalising are the fleeting symbolisms that suggest themselves now and then. The confession sometimes made by the poet, that high-flown compliment and not true despair is intended, prepares us to accept the symbolic application where it forces itself upon us, and to feel the presence here and there of platonic or spiritual shadowings. Those who do not find pleasure in the Arcadian world of the sonneteer's fancy, may still justify

their taste in the aspiration that speaks in his flashes of philosophy.

PHILLIS

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One of the first to take up the new fashion of the sonnet-cycle, was Thomas Lodge, whose "Phillis" was published in 1595. Lodge had a wide acquaintance among the authors of his time, and was in the thick of the literary activity in the last two decades of the sixteenth century. But in spite of his interesting personality and genius, he has had to wait until the present time for full appreciation. To his own age he may have appeared as a literary dilettante, who tried his hand at

several forms of writing, and being outshone by the more excellent in each field, gave up the attempt and turned to the practice of medicine. This profession engaged him for the last twenty-five years of his life, until his death in 1625 at the advanced age of sixty-seven or eight. During all these years the gay young "university wit" of earlier days was probably forgotten in the venerable and successful physician. It was as "old Doctor Lodge" that he was satirised in a Cambridge student's Common-place Book in 1611. Heywood mentions him in 1609 among the six most famous physicians in England, and in the *Return from Parnassus*, a play acted in 1602, he is described as "turning over Galen every day."

Yet no one had been in the last twenty years the sixteenth century more responsive than Lodge to the shifting moods of that excitable period. Lodge was the son of a Lord Mayor of London, and was a contemporary at Oxford with Sidney, Gosson, Chapman, Lyly, Peele and Watson. His life included a round of varied experiences. A student at Lincoln's Inn, a young aspirant for literary honours, friends with Greene, Rich, Daniel, Drayton, Lyly and Watson, a taster of the sorrows that many of the University wits endured when usurers got their hands upon them, for a time perhaps a soldier, certainly a sailor following the fortunes of Captain Clarke to Terceras and the Canaries, and of Cavendish to Brazil and the Straits of Magellan, in London again making plays with Greene, off to Avignon to take his degree in medicine, back again to be incorporated an M.D. at Oxford and to practise in London, adopting secretly the Roman Catholic faith, and sometimes

hiding on the continent as a recusant from persecution at home, imprisoned perhaps once for debt, and entertaining a concourse of patients of his own religion till his death in 1625:—the life of Lodge thus presents a view of the ups and downs possible in that picturesque age.

The wide variety of his literary ventures reflects the interests of his life. Some controversial papers, some unsuccessful plays, two dull historical sketches in prose, some satirical and moralising works in prose and in verse, two romantic tales in verse and three in prose, a number of eclogues, metrical epistles and lyrics, some ponderous translations from Latin and French, and two medical treatises; these widely differing kinds of writing are the products of Lodge's industry and genius. All, however, have but an antiquarian interest save two; the prose romance called *Rosalynde, Euphues' Golden Legacy*, could not be spared since Shakespeare borrowed its charming plot for *As You Like It*; and *Phillis*, bound up with a sheaf of his lyrics gathered from the pages of his stories and from the miscellanies of the time, should be treasured for its own sake and should keep Lodge's memory green for lovers of pure poetry.

Lodge's lyric genius was a clear if slender rill. His faults are the more unpardonable since they spring from sheer carelessness and a lack of appreciation of the sacred responsibility of creative power. He took up the literary fashion of the month and tried his hand at it; that done, he was ready for the next mode. He did not wait to perfect his work or to compare result with result; therefore he probably never found himself, probably never realised that after three