

THE PRISON YEARS

ENVOY TO THE EIGHTY PRISON SONNETS FINAL NIGHT IN THE TOWER

Sonnet 106 *The Chronicle of Wasted Time* 9 April 1603

The diary of the Sonnets has become “the Chronicle of wasted time,” because the “time” of Elizabeth’s life has expired without Southampton’s succession to the throne.

Having made the bargain for Southampton’s release, Oxford can also predict the near future. He foresees “the fairest wights”, i.e., his royal son as Captain of the Isle of Wight; and predicts “lovely Knights”, i.e., that Southampton will be made a Knight of the Garter. Now that Elizabeth has died (“Ladies dead”) and James VI of Scotland has been proclaimed King James I of England, Henry Wriothesley will emerge from the Tower as a free man. Oxford too is emerging from the darkness of his son’s prison years; and he can only “wonder” at “these present days” while both he and his son “lack tongues to praise,” i.e., they can say nothing publicly about what has happened and why.

Sonnet 106

Translation

When in the Chronicle of wasted time,
I see descriptions of the fairest wights,
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme,
In praise of Ladies dead, and lovely Knights,

Then in the blazon of sweet beauty’s best,
Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
I see their antique Pen would have expressed
Even such a beauty as you master now.

So all their praises are but prophecies
Of this our time, all you prefiguring,
And for they looked but with divining eyes,
They had not still enough your worth to sing:

For we which now behold these present days,
Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.

When, in this chronicle of royal tragedy,
I predict my royal son will rule the Isle of Wight,
And know Eliza gave royalty to my former sonnets
To her, and forecast him as a Knight of the Garter,

Then in this record of her most royal blood,
With praises of your hand, foot, lip, eye, brow –
I see that the old writers would have expressed
Just such royal blood that you still possess.

So all other descriptions of you are but prophecies
Of this time – they all prepare for your arrival,
And since they saw only what they could see,
They could not write of your royal birthright.

For those of us seeing these current royal events
Can only marvel, without opportunity to speak.

Sonnet 106

1 WHEN IN THE CHRONICLE OF WASTED TIME

THE CHRONICLE = this diary of the Sonnets; “historical account of events in order of time” – Schmidt; “Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear, let them be well used, for they are *the abstract and brief chronicles of the time*” – *Hamlet*, 2.2.532-533, likening actors and/or plays to news accounts

Trimmed up *your praises with a princely tongue,*
Spoke to your deservings like a chronicle *1 Henry IV*, 5.2.56-57

To fill King Edward’s fame with prisoner kings
And make her *chronicle* as rich with praise
As is the ooze and bottom of the sea
With sunken wrack and sunless treasures. *Henry V*, 1.2.162-165

Let me embrace thee, good old *chronicle,*
That hast so long walked hand in hand with Time
Troilus & Cressida, 4.5.201-202

Look in *the Chronicles*: we came in with
Richard Conqueror *The Taming of the Shrew*, Ind. 1.3-4

For ‘tis a *chronicle of day by day* *The Tempest*, 5.1.163

I and my sword will earn our *chronicle* *Antony & Cleopatra*, 3.13

Whose *chronicle thus writ* *Coriolanus*, 5.3.145

WASTED TIME = the *time* of Queen Elizabeth’s life is over and, therefore, it has been *wasted* in terms of Southampton’s chance to succeed her as Henry IX; “I *wasted time*, and now doth *time waste me*” – the King in *Richard II*, 5.5.49, “this deed is *chronicled* in hell” – *Richard II*, 5.5.116; “such waste in brief mortality” – *Henry V*, 1.2.28; “March is *wasted* fourteen days” – *Julius Caesar*, 2.1.59; “how *thy precious minutes waste*” – Sonnet 77, line 2; **WASTE** = “expend unnecessarily, squander, dissipate, consume, spend, dwindle, wear away, decay” – Schmidt; “*Make use of time*, let not advantage slip./ Beauty within itself should not be *wasted*./ Fair flowers that are not gathered in their prime/ Rot, and consume themselves in little *time*” – *Venus and Adonis*, 1593, dedicated to Southampton, with these lines among those Oxford inserted specially for his son when the marriage to Elizabeth Vere was still viable.

The *time* of Elizabeth’s life has run out, wasting her *beauty* or Tudor blood that is possessed by her son, Southampton: “But *beauty’s waste* hath in the world an end” – Sonnet 9, line 11; “Then of *thy beauty* do I question make./ That thou among the *wastes of time* must go” – Sonnet 12, lines 9-10; “Thy end is *Truth’s* (Oxford’s) and *Beauty’s* (Elizabeth’s) *doom and date*” – Sonnet 14, line 14, referring to the end of their son’s claim to the throne; “Where *wasteful time* debateth with *decay*” – Sonnet 15, line 11; “And with old woes new wail *my dear time’s waste*” – Sonnet 30, line 4; “In gentle numbers *time* so idly spent/ ... And make *time’s spoils* despised everywhere./ Give my love (my royal son) fame faster than *time wastes life*” – Sonnet 100, lines 6, 12-13; “Th’expense of spirit in a *waste* of shame” – Sonnet 129, line 1, to Elizabeth, referring to the waste of her son’s “spirit” or royal blood.

Time’s glory is to calm contending kings,
To unmask falsehood and bring truth to light,

To stamp *the seal of time* in aged things...

Lucrece, 939-941

Had he done so, himself had *borne the crown*,

Which *waste of idle hours* hath quite thrown down. *Richard II*, 3.4.65-66

2 I SEE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE FAIREST WIGHTS

SEE DESCRIPTIONS: Oxford predicts the future, according to his own knowledge, based upon the bargain he made for his son's freedom; **FAIREST** = most royal; "From fairest creatures" – Sonnet 1, line 1; **WIGHTS** = living beings, persons; a deliberate archaism (as in "old rhyme" in the next line); often indicating those who are strong and courageous in warfare; **FAIREST WIGHTS** = *Southampton, who will be made Captain of the Isle of Wight on July 7 this year*; again the plural used for the singular.

3 AND BEAUTY MAKING BEAUTIFUL OLD RHYME

BEAUTY = his blood from Elizabeth; the royal blood that has been filling the lines of these sonnets; **OLD RHYME** = ancient verses, but Oxford is referring to his "old" verses to the Queen and to his "old" sonnets during Southampton's golden time of this diary; ("In the *old age* black was not counted fair,/ Or if it were it bore not beauty's name" – Sonnet 127, lines 1-2); i.e., it was "beauty" or Elizabeth's blood in Southampton that made Oxford's former sonnets so "beautiful" (or filled with her royal blood) in the first place; "So should my papers (yellowed with their age)/ Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,/ And your true rights be termed a Poet's rage/ And stretched meter of an Antique son" – Sonnet 17, lines 9-12

4 IN PRAISE OF LADIES DEAD AND LOVELY KNIGHTS,

LADIES DEAD = Elizabeth, who is now dead; "our *sovereign lady*" – i.e., Elizabeth, in *The Arte of English Poesie*, 1589, p. 303; "our most rightful and lawful *sovereign liege lady* and Queen" – Act of Recognition of the Queen's Highness' Title to the Imperial Crown of this Realm, 1559; **LOVELY KNIGHTS** = Southampton; **LOVELY** = royal; filled with "love" or royal blood; "O Thou my *lovely Boy*" – Sonnet 126, line 1; **KNIGHTS** = *Southampton will be created a Knight of the Garter on July 9 this year*; "When first this Order was ordained, my lords, Knights of the Garter were of noble birth, valiant and virtuous, full of haughty courage, such as were grown to credit by the wars" – *1 Henry VI*, 4.1.33-36, an apt description of Southampton and his own qualifications as a Knight; "the *sacred name of Knight* ... this most honorable Order" – *1 Henry VI*, 4.1.40-41

5 THEN IN THE BLAZON OF SWEET BEAUTY'S BEST

BLAZON = the praising or trumpeting forth of admirable qualities; coat of arms; "heraldic term derived from a Middle English word for 'shield' and meaning 'coat of arms'" – Booth; of the "sacred" rooms of royalty in Windsor Castle, where Oxford spent much time at Court: "The several chairs of order look you scour with juice of balm and every precious flower; each fair installment, coat, and several crest, with loyal blazon, evermore be blest" – *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 5.5.62-65; "The heavens themselves *blaze forth the death of princes*" – Julius Caesar, 2.2.31; official proclamation: "But this *eternal blazon* must not be to ears of flesh and blood" – *Hamlet*, 1.5.21-22; "O thou goddess, thou divine Nature, how thyself thou *blazon'st in these two princely boys*" – *Cymbeline*, 4.2.169-171; **SWEET** = royal; **BEAUTY'S BEST** = the best or most royal of those who have inherited Elizabeth's "beauty" or blood, i.e., Southampton; **BEST** = "*Best of my flesh*" – *Coriolanus*, 5.3.42; "All these I better in *one general best*" – Sonnet 91, line 8, referring to his son; "*best is best*" – Sonnet 101, line 8

6 OF HAND, OF FOOT, OF LIP, OF EYE, OF BROW,

Of each of these physical manifestations of his royalty; echoing Ophelia's speech about Prince Hamlet: "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword, th'expectancy and rose of the fair state, the glass of fashion and the mould of form, th'observed of all observers" – *Hamlet*, 3.1.151-154

7 I SEE THEIR ANTIQUE PEN WOULD HAVE EXPRESSED

I SEE (repeated from line 2, but “shrewder” - Kerrigan); I discern what older writers would have expressed about kings; **THEIR ANTIQUE PEN** = (“And your true rights be termed a Poet’s rage and stretched meter of an *antique song*” – Sonnet 17, lines 11-12; “Nor draw no lines there with thine *antique pen*” – Sonnet 19, line 10, speaking to Time itself); **WOULD HAVE** = would have wanted to; **EXPRESSED** = “More than that tongue that more hath more expressed” – Sonnet 23, line 12; “One thing expressing, leaves out difference” – Sonnet 105, line 8; “What’s new to speak, what now to register,/ That may express my love or thy dear merit?” – Sonnet 108, lines 3-4; “Lest sorrow lend me words, and words express/ The manner of my pity wanting pain” – Sonnet 140, lines 3-4; “My thoughts and my discourse as madmen’s are,/ At random from the truth vainly expressed” – Sonnet 147, lines 11-12

8 EVEN SUCH A BEAUTY AS YOU MASTER NOW.

SUCH A BEAUTY = such Tudor blood from your mother Elizabeth; **MASTER** = possess or control, as king; related to king as Master; “our new *Master* and Sovereign Lord” – Oxford to Robert Cecil, April 25/27, 1603; “the *Master* Mistress of my passion” – Sonnet 20, line 2, referring to Southampton as both king and queen, i.e., monarch, who inspires Oxford’s “passion”, i.e., his deepest feelings and his private verse; **NOW** = this day in my diary; at this immediate time, when you are about to be liberated from the Tower; “And all those beauties whereof *now* he’s King/ Are vanishing, and vanished out of sight” – Sonnet 63, lines 6-7; (see note on Henry Constable for line 10 below, his line containing “all those beauties”).

9 SO ALL THEIR PRAISES ARE BUT PROPHECIES

ALL = Southampton, *One for All, All for One*; **ALL THEIR PRAISES, etc.** = all the praises of ancient kings are prophecies; all my praise for you and your royal blood in these sonnets have been forecasts of your immortality as a prince; **PROPHECIES** = this verse itself contains prophecies of the immediate future: that King James will appoint you as Captain of the Isle of Wight (“fairest wights”) and make you a Knight of the Garter (“lovely Knights”); as opposed to the false prophecies of those who predicted civil war over the throne and expected Southampton to spend the rest of his life in the Tower or be executed: “Not mine own fears nor *the prophetic soul/ Of the wide world dreaming on things to come*” – Sonnet 107, lines 1-2, which immediately follows this verse

10 OF THIS OUR TIME, ALL YOU PREFIGURING.

THIS OUR TIME = of this current period of time in England’s history; this present time of royal succession; “Yet *the long time* which we spent in her service, we cannot look for such much left *of our days* as to bestow upon another” – Oxford to Robert Cecil, April 25/27, 1603, referring to the death of Queen Elizabeth ; “Twice *in my time* it had passage by law” – Oxford to Robert Cecil, May 7, 1603; “But I hope truth is subject to no prescription, for truth is truth though never so old, and *time* cannot make that false which was once true” – Oxford to Robert Cecil, May 7, 1603; “In seeking whereof I am grown old and spent *the chiefest time of mine age*” – Oxford to Robert Cecil, June 19, 1603

ALL = Southampton; **ALL YOU PREFIGURING** = all foretelling your arrival as the royal prince and rightful king; prefigure = to form or shape in anticipation; the only usage of “prefigure” or “prefiguring” in the Shakespeare works; “Ah, yet doth beauty like a Dial hand/ Steal from *his figure*” – Sonnet 104, lines 9-10; “What’s in the brain that ink may character/ Which hath not *figured* to thee my true spirit?” – Sonnet 108, lines 1-2

NOTE: Lines 9-10 mirror a sonnet by Henry Constable [1562?-1613?] – “But all those beauties were but figures of thy praise/ And all their poets did of thee but prophesy”; Tucker suggests “the parallel is so close as to suggest a common source” for both Shakespeare and Constable; Kerrigan observes how the Old Testament was viewed as prefiguring (in its typology) the New Testament coming of Christ, adding that “all you prefiguring” can be read “prefiguring all that is you (which is a great deal).”

11 AND FOR THEY LOOKED BUT WITH DIVINING EYES,

FOR = because, or if; **BUT WITH, etc.** = only with eyes trying to predict the future; **DIVINING** = predicting, forecasting; also related to the divinity of kings; “Nothing, sweet boy, but yet like prayers divine” – Sonnet 108, line 5

12 THEY HAD NOT STILL ENOUGH YOUR WORTH TO SING:

STILL = (usually emended to “skill”); up to now; eternally; in referring to the “antique pen” as his own, Oxford “still” or as yet doesn’t have power to write well enough for his son; usually emended to “skill” in reference to writers of the past who chronicled kings; but it is Oxford as “Shakespeare” who has chronicled the royal history of England in his chronicle plays; **YOUR WORTH** = your royalty; (the letters in *worth* are found in the name “Wriothesley”); “by the glorious worth of my descent” – *Richard II*, 1.1.107; **SING** = express in songs and sonnets; “Since all alike my songs and praises be/ To one, of one, still such, and ever so” – Sonnet 105, lines 3-4; “Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” – Horatio to the now-deceased Prince in *Hamlet*, 5.2.366-367

13 FOR WE WHICH NOW BEHOLD THESE PRESENT DAYS

WE = the royal “we” of monarchs, Southampton; **THESE PRESENT DAYS** = these unfolding days of the succession, with James proceeding from Edinburgh to London to claim the English throne; the time being recorded in this diary

14 HAVE EYES TO WONDER, BUT LACK TONGUES TO PRAISE.

HAVE EYES TO WONDER = “beholding with amazement” – Booth; “marvel at, be astonished at” – Crystal & Crystal; i.e., Oxford is “wondering at” or beholding the succession of James and the imminent liberation of Southampton – wondering with amazement that it is all happening as planned; “That you will wonder what hath fortified” – *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 5.4.167; related to “wonderful” in the sense of amazing, astonishing, extraordinary; “Why, saw you any thing more wonderful?” – *Julius Caesar*, 1.3.14; “Makes me from wond’ring fall to weeping joys” – *2 Henry VI*, 1.1.34; akin to “wondrous” as in “Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind,/ Still constant in a wondrous excellence/ ... Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords” – Sonnet 105, lines 5-6, 12; **BUT LACK TONGUES TO PRAISE** = but remain “tongue-tied by authority” as in Sonnet 66, line 9; i.e., but cannot praise you in public; neither of us, father and son, can utter the truth in public; “O learn to read what silent love hath writ” – Sonnet 23, line 13; “Then may I dare to boast how I do love thee,/ Till then not show my head where thou mayst prove me” – Sonnet 26, lines 13-14