

THE PRISON YEARS

**FIRST ANNIVERSARY
OF THE REBELLION**

Sonnet 97
The Fleeting Year
8 February 1602

It has been exactly one year since February 8, 1601, and the beginning of this long series of sonnets with Sonnet 27. Oxford marks the anniversary of the Rebellion by referring to the "fleeting year" that Southampton has spent in prison according to Her Majesty's "pleasure." This tragic, bleak time has yielded only "hope of Orphans, and un-fathered fruit" – referring to Southampton as a royal orphan unable to acknowledge Oxford, his true father.

Sonnet 97

Translation

How like a Winter hath my absence been
From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen?
What old Decembers barren everywhere!

And yet this time removed was summer's time,
The teeming Autumn big with rich increase
Bearing the wanton burthen of the prime,
Like widowed wombs after their Lord's decease:

Yet this abundant issue seemed to me
But hope of Orphans, and un-fathered fruit,
For Summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
And thou away, the very birds are mute.

Or if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer,
That leaves look pale, dreading the Winter's near.

How like a death your imprisonment has been –
By Her Majesty's pleasure, it's been one year!
What deaths have I felt? What daily losses!
What end to all our hopes for you!

And yet, ironically, we went through a summer,
And then through the actual autumn,
Which was like your own birth,
When the Queen was empty and alone again.

Yet this past harvest seemed to me to represent
Your hopes as a royal orphan without me as father,
Because our hopes all depend on you,
And with you in prison, your parents are silent.

Or if we do speak, it's with such sadness,
That we slowly die, dreading Elizabeth's death.

1 HOW LIKE A WINTER HATH MY ABSENCE BEEN

LIKE A WINTER = like death; like the end of your royal claim, lineage and dynasty; also, it is winter now (February 1602); **MY ABSENCE** = my absence from you in the Tower; “O *absence*, what a *torment* wouldst thou prove” – Sonnet 39, line 9; i.e., the preceding year of your imprisonment has been like a death; “*From you have I been absent* in the spring” – Sonnet 98, line 1, immediately following this verse; “The *imprisoned absence* of your liberty” – Sonnet 58, line 6; “Those pretty wrongs that *liberty* commits/ When I am sometime *absent from thy heart*” – Sonnet 41, lines 1-2; “I will acquaintance strangle and look strange,/ Be *absent from thy walks*” – Sonnet 89, lines 8-9

2 FROM THEE, THE PLEASURE OF THE FLEETING YEAR!

FROM THEE = Southampton has been “absent” in the Tower, but Oxford writes as a subject who has been “absent” from his son’s royal presence; **PLEASURE** = Her Majesty’s pleasure, i.e., the Queen’s royal will, which has kept you in prison; “I am sorry to see you ta’en from liberty, to look on the business present. ’Tis *his Highness’ pleasure* you shall to the Tower” – *Henry VIII*, 1.1.204-207; “The same to be yearly delivered and paid unto Our said Cousin at four terms of the year by even portions: and so to be continued unto him *during Our pleasure*...” – Queen Elizabeth’s annual grant of 1,000 pounds to Oxford by Privy Seal Warrant signed by her on June 26, 1586; **THE PLEASURE OF** = “Now are we well prepared to know *the pleasure of our fair cousin Dauphin*” – the King in *Henry V*, 1.2.235-236 **THE FLEETING YEAR** = the suggestion is “that *the year in question is long and dreary* rather than *fleeting*” – Booth; perhaps also alluding to the existence of the Fleet, where Southampton was incarcerated in November 1598 for marrying Elizabeth Vernon, who was carrying his child; OED indicates “fleeting” referred to “*confinement in the Fleet Prison*,” citing Oxford’s childhood tutor, Sir Thomas Smith, in 1589: “After they ... bin well disciplined as well by wordes, as by *fleeting* a while”; and citing Oxford’s former friend at Cambridge, Gabriel Harvey, in 1592: “And that was all the *Fleeting*, that ever I felt”; the phrase “fleeting year” in this sonnet therefore calls to mind “the imprisoned year”; also, the OED cites the word used in another sense by Oxford’s uncle, Arthur Golding, in 1587: “The *fleeting* of souls out of one body into another”; various meanings include “floating of a fish, swimming ... that moves constantly, shifting, unstable ... flowing; fluid (‘fleeting sacrifices’ = drink offerings) ... passing swiftly by, chiefly of life or time ... passing or gliding swiftly away ... existing for a brief period; not permanent or enduring; transitory, passing, fading; to ‘fleet’ can mean ‘to dissolve or waste away’” – OED

“Then he was to be *imprisoned at the king’s pleasure*” – Bellamy, 184, referring to an incident in 1555 in the reign of the boy-king Edward VI

3 WHAT FREEZINGS HAVE I FELT, WHAT DARK DAYS SEEN!

FREEZINGS = as though time has been frozen; stoppages of royal blood; **DARK DAYS** = a period of prolonged despair; opposite of the golden time of “Summer’s day” – Sonnet 18, line 1; “Looking on *darkness*, which the blind do see” – Sonnet 27, line 8, which began the diary of this first year of Southampton’s imprisonment, from Feb 8, 1601 to Feb 8, 1602; “Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day/ And make me travail forth without my cloak,/ To let base clouds o’ertake me in my way./ Hiding thy bravery in their rotten smoke?” – Sonnet 34, lines 1-4

4 WHAT OLD DECEMBER’S BARENESS EVERYWHERE!

OLD DECEMBER’S = the December or final period (“winter”) of royal hope, which is dying; **BARENESS** = empty of new royal blood; an image of the womb of the Sonnets as barren or childless, i.e., not able to recreate his son’s claim to the throne; “Why is my verse so *barren* of new pride” – Sonnet 76, line 1; “*Bare* ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang” – Sonnet 73, line 4; “The *argument all bare*” – Sonnet 103, line 3, with “argument” referring to “And *you and love are still my argument*” of Sonnet 76, line 10, i.e., you and your royal blood & claim to the

throne; a play on “bear” as in bear a child; “Duty so great, which wit so poor as mind/ May make seem *bare*, in wanting words to show it” – Sonnet 26, lines 5-6

5 AND YET THIS TIME REMOVED WAS SUMMER’S TIME,

THIS TIME REMOVED = this period of Southampton’s imprisonment; the time of absence and separation, when all has been the opposite of Sonnet 25, line 14: “Where I may not *remove*, nor be *removed*”; “Love is not love/ Which alters when it alteration finds,/ Or bends with the remover to remove” – Sonnet 116, lines 2-4, a reaffirmation that no separation can alter or remove the “love” or royal blood of Oxford’s son; **SUMMER’S TIME** = in substance, regardless of this terrible tragedy, Southampton’s royal blood still exists, i.e., underneath it all it is still the “Summer’s day” of Sonnet 18, line 1

6 THE TEEMING AUTUMN BIG WITH RICH INCREASE,

TEEMING = “delivering ... fruitful, pregnant” – Booth; **BIG** = pregnant; the Autumn was nevertheless pregnant with your royal blood, i.e., as I see it in my mind as I record in these sonnets; “And grow *big-bellied with the wanton wind*/ ... *her womb then rich* with my young squire/ ... And for her sake do I rear up her boy;/ And for her sake I will not part with him” – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2.1.129-137; **RICH** = (*her womb then rich*) – *MND*, 2.1.131; royal; related to the *treasury* of royal blood; “So am I as *the rich whose blessed key*/ Can bring him to his sweet up-locked treasure” – Sonnet 52, lines 1-2, Oxford referring to visits with his son in the younger earl’s prison room of the Tower; “For how do I hold thee but by thy granting,/ And *for that riches* where is my deserving?” – Sonnet 87, lines 5-6; “And all those beauties whereof now he’s King/ Are vanishing, or vanished out of sight,/ Stealing away *the treasure of his spring*” – Sonnet 63, lines 6-8; **RICH INCREASE** = re-creation or rebirth of you; same as “From fairest creatures *we desire increase*,/ That thereby beauty’s *Rose* might never die” – Sonnet 1, lines 1-2; Southampton, even as a jailed nobody, is still alive and growing, and therefore his royal blood is *increasing* as well – within himself and within these sonnets that are recording his royal life and blood; “But if the first *heir* of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather, and never after *ear so barren a land*, for fear it *yield me still so bad a harvest*.” – Oxford’s first dedication as “Shakespeare” to Southampton *Venus and Adonis*, 1593

7 BEARING THE WANTON BURTHEN OF THE PRIME,

BEARING = enduring as well as giving birth to; **WANTON** = related to Southampton as his child; (Ingram & Redpath: “frolicsome – of children”); “And grow *big-bellied with the wanton wind*” – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2.1.129; **BURTHEN** = (burden); as in “the *second burden of a former child*” of Sonnet 59, line 4; **THE PRIME** = as in “Thou art *thy mother’s glass*, and she in thee/ Calls back *the lovely April of her prime*” – Sonnet 3, lines 9-110; **PRIME** = spring; the late stage of pregnancy, in April and May 1574 when the Queen was about to give birth.

When wert thou born, Desire?

In pomp and *prime* of May.

By whom, sweet boy, wert thou begot? Oxford poem, excerpt in *Art of English Poesy*, 1589

8 LIKE WIDOWED WOMBS AFTER THEIR LORDS’ DECEASE:

Like the womb of a pregnant widow who, after her husband’s death, still carries their unborn child; like abandoned wombs; like the womb of Elizabeth, who is now a “widow” because of her failure to acknowledge Oxford as her husband and to acknowledge Southampton as her son; as England or the world itself has become his widow: “Thou dost *beguile the world, unbless some mother*,/ For where is she so fair whose *un-eared womb*/ Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?/ Or who is he so fond will be *the tomb*/ Of his *self-love to stop posterity*?” – Sonnet 3, lines 4-8; “Ah, if thou issueless shall hap to die,/ The world will wail thee like a makeless wife;/ *The world will be thy widow* and still weep,/ That thou no form of thee hast left behind” – Sonnet 9, lines 3-6; “Making *their tomb the womb wherein they grew*” – Sonnet 86, line 4, i.e., these verses are nonetheless giving Southampton new life

11 FOR SUMMER AND HIS PLEASURES WAIT ON THEE,

SUMMER AND HIS PLEASURES = Southampton's (his Majesty's) royal "pleasure" or will or commands; "But thy *eternal Summer* shall not fade" – Sonnet 18, line 9; as opposed to the royal pleasure or will of Elizabeth in line 2 above, i.e., "the *pleasure* of the fleeting year"; **WAIT ON THEE** = wait upon or attend on Southampton, who is a king; attend, as your servants, hoping or waiting for your liberty and royal presence; "I am to *wait*, though *waiting* be so hell,/ Not blame *your pleasure*, be it ill or well" – Sonnet 58, lines 13-14; "We *wait upon your Grace*" – *Richard III*, 1.3.323 (First Folio; the quartos have "we will attend your Grace"); "your *waiting vassals*" – *Richard III*, 2.1.122

12 AND THOU AWAY, THE VERY BIRDS ARE MUTE.

THOU AWAY = you in the Tower; "Yet seemed it Winter still, and you away" – Sonnet 98, line 13; **VERY BIRDS** = royal birds, i.e., Elizabeth and Oxford as the principals of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, a funeral dirge or song, 1601; "Bare ruined choirs, where *late the sweet birds sang*" – Sonnet 73, line 4; "For these *dead birds* sigh a *prayer*" – final line of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*; **VERY** = "Ver"; Edward de Vere; "The *very part* was consecrate to thee" – Sonnet 74, line 6; "The young Earl of Oxford, of that ancient and *very family of the Veres*, had a cause or suit, that now came before the Queen; which she did not answer so favourably as was expected, checking him, it seems, for his unthriftiness. And hereupon his behaviors before her gave her some offence." – Gilbert Talbot to his mother, June 28, 1574 (Shortly afterward the Queen gave birth to Southampton in May/June 1574); **MUTE** = silent, i.e., both parents are mute, as Oxford has been forced into public silence: "And art made *tongue-tied by authority*" – Sonnet 66, line 9; similar to "dumb" or speechless as in "For who's so *dumb* that cannot write to thee,/ When thou thyself dost give invention light?" – Sonnet 38, lines 7-8; and "O learn to read *what silent love hath writ!*/ To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit" – Sonnet 23, lines 13-14; "Either our history shall with full mouth speak freely of our acts, or else our grave like Turkish *mute* shall have a tongueless mouth, not worshipped with a waxen epitaph" – the King in Henry V, 1.2.231-234, referring to the "mute" or officer in Turkey who acts as an executioner

13 OR IF THEY SING, 'TIS WITH SO DULL A CHEER

SING = the way these sonnets or "little songs" are being sung to you, as hymns or prayers: "Haply I think on thee, and then my state/ (Like to the Lark at break of day arising)/ From sullen earth *sings hymns at Heaven's gate*" – Sonnet 29, lines 10-12, referring to praying at Traitor's Gate of the fortress Tower controlled by Elizabeth or Heaven; "What's new to speak, what now to register/ That may express my love, or thy dear merit?/ Nothing, sweet boy, but yet *like prayers divine*,/ I must each day say o'er the *very same*" – Sonnet 108, lines 3-6; or if they do sing your praises, the song they sing is **DULL** = "faint, spiritless, woebegone" – Booth; "Plods on *dully*, to bear that *weight in me*" – Sonnet 50, line 6; "and do not kill/ The spirit of love with a *perpetual dullness*" – Sonnet 56, line 8; "Because I would *not dull you with my song*" – Sonnet 102, line 14; "*Dulling my lines*, and doing me disgrace" – Sonnet 103, line 8; **CHEER** = "When I perceive that *men as plants increase*,/ *Cheered and checked* even by the self-same sky,/ Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,/ And wear their brave state out of memory;/ Then the conceit of this inconstant stay/ Sets you *most rich* in youth before my sight,/ Where wasteful time debateth with decay,/ to *change your day of youth to sullied night*" – Sonnet 15, lines 5-12

14 THAT LEAVES LOOK PALE, DREADING THE WINTER'S NEAR.

LEAVES LOOK PALE = "That time of year thou mayst in me behold/ When *yellow leaves*, or none, or few, do hang/ Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,/ *Bare ruined choirs*, where late the sweet birds sang" – Sonnet 73, lines 1-4; **DREADING THE WINTER'S NEAR** = fearing the end, i.e., the death of Elizabeth and the succession without Southampton able to fulfill his true promise as king; dreading the end of all his son's hope as Henry IX, and the end of the Tudor dynasty; "That thereby *beauty's Rose might never die*" – Sonnet 1, line 2; playing on "How *like a Winter* hath my absence been" of line 1 above; **NEAR** = by blood

