#### 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

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.

#### Translation

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

#### 9 YET THIS ABUNDANT ISSUE SEEMED TO ME

**ABUNDANT** = full or royal blood, as in "Making a famine where *abundance* lies" – Sonnet 1, line 7; **ISSUE** = offspring; i.e., Southampton, who is still the royal child; "Look how *the father's face lives in his issue*" – Ben Jonson, of "Shakespeare" and his works in the First Folio, 1623;

"We note that the terms Shakespeare uses here – *succession*, *heir*, *issue* – he elsewhere applies to *the paramount problems of royalty*" – Leslie Hotson, referring to the Sonnets

"Ah, if thou *issueless* shalt hap to die" – Sonnet 9, line 3; "When *your sweet issue* your sweet form should bear" – Sonnet 13, line 8; "Care not for *issue*; *the crown will find an heir*" – *The Winter's Tale*, 5.1.146; "That *if the king should without issue* die" – *Henry VIII*, 1.2.133

### 10 BUT HOPE OF ORPHANS, AND UNFATHERED FRUIT;

HOPE OF ORPHANS - Both Oxford and Southampton had been orphaned at a young age and had become royal wards of Elizabeth in Burghley's custody; Oxford envisions his son as royal bastard and orphan; "expectation of the birth of children whose father is dead; or, such hope as orphans bring" - Dowden; Oxford and Elizabeth are now both "dead" as father and mother, as in "Thy end is *Truth's and Beauty's doom and date*" – Sonnet 14, line 14; **HOPE** = Southampton has been the "hope" of the world; in the dedication of Venus and Adonis to Southampton as by "Shakespeare," Oxford publicly referred to "the world's hopeful expectation for him; "Come hither, England's hope" – 3 Henry VI, 4.6.68, the King to young Henry, Earl of Richmond, who is destined to become King Henry VII, whose reign begins the Tudor Rose dynasty which will continue to the time of Queen Elizabeth; "The loss of a son of so great hope ... sons of great hope" - Queen Elizabeth to George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, on the death of his son, circa Sept. 5, 1582, Collected Works, 256-257; "The hope and expectation of thy time" - 1 Henry IV, 3.2.36, the King to his son Prince Hal; and when the prince becomes King Henry V, he survives "to mock the expectation of the world" in 2 Henry IV, 5.2.126; "If he outlive the day, England did never owe so sweet a hope" - 1 Henry IV, 5.2.66-67, of Prince Hal, future King Henry V; "I hope to reign" - 2 Henry VI, 4.2.127; "Yet hope, succeeding from so fair a tree as your fair self" -*Pericles*, 1.1.115

Till then, *fair hope* must hinder life's decay And I the rather wean me from despair For love of Edward's offspring in my womb

3 Henry VI, 4.4.16

"Will answer *our hope in issue of a king*" - 1 Henry VI, 5.5.73; "True hope is swift, and flies with swallow's wings: Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings" - Richard III, 5.2.23-24; the earl of Richmond, afterwards Henry VII, founder of the Tudor dynasty; **ORPHANS** = "You *orphan heirs* of fixed destiny" - The Merry Wives of Windsor, 5.5.40; **UNFATHERED** = a child without Oxford as acknowledged father; "But out alack, he was but one hour mine" - Sonnet 33, line 11; "If my dear love were but the child of state, It might for Fortune's bastard be unfathered" - Sonnet 124, lines 1-2; "As a decrepit father takes delight/ To see his active child do deeds of youth, So I, made lame by Fortune's dearest spite" - Sonnet 37, lines 1-3; **FRUIT** = "Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, and put a barren scepter in my gripe, thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand, no son of mine succeeding" - Macbeth, 3.1.60-63; "The royal tree hath left us royal fruit" - Richard III, 3.7.166

Hadst thou been killed when first thou didst presume, Thou hadst not lived to kill *a son of mine*. And thus I prophesy: that many a thousand Which now mistrust no parcel of my fear, And many an old man's sigh, and many a *widow's*, And many an *orphan's* water-standing eye... Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain, And yet brought forth less than a mother's *hope*, To wit, an ingest deformed lump,

## 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