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A Lover's Complaint

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Summary

posted Aug 10, 2013, 7:19 AM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 10, 2013, 7:19 AM**]

Acknowledgement: This work has been summarized using *The Complete Works of Shakespeare Updated Fourth Ed.*, Longman Addison-Wesley, ed. David Bevington, 1997. Quotations are for the most part taken from that work, as are paraphrases of his commentary.

Overall Impression: This poem was pleasant enough.

Per Bevington: This poem was published, along with his sonnets, without WS's permission. It takes the form of the Elizabethan poetic genre, the "complaint", in which typically there is a pastoral setting, rustic shepherds and shepherdesses, plaintive laments of deserted or unrequited lovers, etc. These complaints often bewailed moralistically the hazards of blind passion and might have been used didactically. This poem presents multiple points of view: the poet-narrator, the spurned maiden, the old shepherd, and the male wooer. It portrays in rich metaphorical language the tense and bitter struggle between the sexes also seen in the "Dark Lady" sonnets.

Line 1: The poet begins his tale of overhearing the distraught maid as she tears up letters, breaks rings, etc. She is still somewhat young in looks, despite her great distress. Her hair is partially disordered. 36 She throws love tokens, letters (some penned in blood), and rings drawn from her basket into the river. She cries out in tears about the falseness of her wooer. 57 An old shepherd, once himself a swaggerer and man about town, overhears her and descends the river bank to offer her a sympathetic ear and consolation.

Line 71: She tells him her story. She is still young despite her appearance. She listened to the

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wooer's suit too early in her life. His curly brown hair gave him an appearance as in Paradise. He had only an early growth of beard and was beautiful in manner and form. He could ride a horse well. He was skilled in speech to make the weeper laugh and the laugher weep. He enchanted both sexes, and women gave themselves to him even when he did not seek it. 135 Many became obsessed with his image and came to think of themselves as his mistress. But she kept her distance cautiously for a while, but eventually appetite overcame reason. 169 She knew him to be untrue and was aware of his past treacheries; she knew of the children he had sired in others. But he began to besiege her, arguing as follows:

Line 177: Have some pity on my suffering. I have been called to love before without inviting it. I made past errors of blood (mere physical acts), not of the mind or of love. No woman has kindled in me such heart warming passion. 197 He shows her the love tokens and treasures other women have given him: diamond, emerald, sapphire, opal, etc. He is willing to give all these to her as one sacrifices at an altar. Here is a love token given him by a woman who had become a nun. She had rare beauty but rejected the suits of the men in court, at least before she met him. It isn't difficult to give up something that has not yet been tried. 246 After he came before her eyes, she wanted to give up her vows for his love--she who had wanted to be cloistered to remove herself from temptation now wanted to be free to venture everything for love. 264 Love is so powerful that neither vows, bonds, nor confinement cannot stop it. 274 The many hearts that other women have extended to him feel his heart aching because of her resistance, and supplicate her to give in. They also help to prove the credibility and truthfulness of his pledge of love. He looks down tearfully.

Line 288: She stops quoting him and speaks her own thoughts. What witchcraft there is in a tear--even a rocky heart is worn down by a tear. His tears and crafty passion stole her reason and led to her loss of chastity. But afterwards his tears poisoned her, though hers had restored him. 302 He can assume whatever forms he wishes to accomplish his goals. No woman's heart can resist his determined assault. He disguised his lechery with talk of purity and chastity. 316 He concealed his inner fiendish self with an outer garment of grace. Who would not surrender to such a man? To receive again such pleasure as she experienced when she fell, she might fall again. 323 His infectious tears, his passionate cheeks, the forced thunder of his heart, his sad looks, all his affected passion could yet betray this penitent maid again.

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Critical Essays

posted Aug 10, 2013, 7:17 AM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 10, 2013, 7:17 AM**]

A Lover's Complaint, the haunting poem printed at the end of the first quarto of Shakespeare's sonnets (1609), has always divided readers. Shirley Sharon-Zisser has indeed remarked in a previous essay that its story "'is as banal as it is heart-breaking'" (146). A young maiden has been abandoned by a treacherous male seducer, and confides in a "reverend man" (l. 57) whom she encounters on a hillside. The story may be simple, but the structure and narrative of *A Lover's Complaint* are troublingly difficult—or, depending on one's point of view, exhilaratingly sophisticated. The poem's extraordinary opening and seemingly irresolute ending ("the most baffling denouement in the canon" [73], according to contributor Patrick Cheney) continue to fascinate readers, including many contributors to the present volume. The nine essays collected here explore the historical, cultural, rhetorical, and psychological contexts of this "most neglected of Shakespeare's texts" (1), aiming to establish its central importance for the interpretation of the plays.

The peculiarities of *A Lover's Complaint* have not been universally admired. The introduction by Sharon-Zisser and Stephen Whitworth makes clear that the history of the poem's reception has on the whole been one of neglect—partly because of recurring doubts since the early nineteenth century surrounding its ascription to Shakespeare. Even now, some readers remain unconvinced. Jonathan Crewe argues in his 1999 introduction to the Pelican Shakespeare edition of the narrative poems that *A Lover's Complaint* is remarkable partly for the resistance it offers to our desire "to resolve which poems are finally and definitively Shakespearean." The poem indeed resembles a case study in effacement, frustrating attempts not only to establish its authorship but also to determine the identities of the unnamed maiden and her seducer.

Despite these general reservations, *A Lover's Complaint* has attracted admirers over the centuries. Edmond Malone praised "'this beautiful poem'" in the commentary to his 1780 edition of Shakespeare's poetry, suggesting that Shakespeare here "'perhaps meant to break a lance with Spenser'" (38). Keats thought highly enough of *A Lover's Complaint* to copy his "Bright Star" sonnet alongside it in his copy of Shakespeare's poems (38). But many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editors omitted *A Lover's Complaint* altogether. "For a poem about seduction," James Schiffer remarks, "*A Lover's Complaint* seems often to have failed to seduce its readers" (145).

The poem's rhetorical and psychological complexity persuades the commentators represented

here of Shakespeare's authorship. The approaches they pursue are, however, as varied as the quality of their essays. Two of the best find in *A Lover's Complaint* an unexpected defense of women's speech, where previous readers found only a desolate maiden with a modest, repentant, or guilty voice. Ilona Bell reads the poem alongside contemporary complaints, notably Sir Henry Lee's "Sitting Alone upon my Thought" and Anne Vasavour's "Though I Seem Strange," arguing that *A Lover's Complaint* resembles an exculpatory rather than a *de casibus* complaint. On this interpretation, Shakespeare challenges the misogynistic didacticism that often colors male-authored female complaints and defends instead both female desire and female passion. Heather Dubrow regards the poem as an exploration of "authorizers," or forms of communication that distribute power among speakers (121). The maiden gains authority by appropriating the voice of the young male seducer—memorably described as "the Bill Clinton of the early modern world" (129)—whose reported speech comprises nearly one-third of the poem. Shakespeare thus deals with the narrative problems posed by rival storytellers, and he raises questions of authorship and agency pertinent to our understanding of early modern culture at large. Like Dubrow, who argues that *A Lover's Complaint* problematizes any association of silence and powerlessness with femininity, Schiffer proposes in his essay on seduction that the poem stages a "double reversal of early modern gender roles" (142). Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's remark that "'to seduce is to appear weak'" (142), Schiffer notes that the youth's seduction of the young maiden depends on his adoption of a tearful, feminized persona. Shakespeare deliberately left the poem unfinished in order to stage the young woman's desire not...

Analysis

posted Aug 10, 2013, 7:16 AM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 10, 2013, 7:16 AM**]

One of the four full-length Shakespeare love poems, this poem is written in seven-line stanzas and is written in rhyme royal, just like another Shakespeare love poem, the Rape of Lucrece. The rhyme royal rhyming scheme is (aba-bb-cc). This full length poem is 394 lines long, and has 2579 words. so if you haven't read it yet and don't have the time to do so, have a look at my summary below.

The poem tells the story of a young maid who laments over her seduction by a persuasive, womanising young man. He eventually dumps her and breaks her heart. The story begins with her weeping and wailing by the river, and an old shepherd hears her and takes pity, and goes over to console her. He finds her throwing love tokens into the river as she weeps, old love

letters (some written in blood) and jewellery, all given to her by the same man. The shepherd notices that although she looks bedraggled, she is still young and must have been pretty before she became in such a state.

She tells the story of how she was an innocent and chaste young woman, not to be easily seduced by red-blooded men. This young man had a reputation as a notorious womaniser, and the young maid was wary to begin with. Eventually his charms and popularity seduced her. Shakespeare goes on to describe the young man's many qualities, he was very handsome, and had wit and charm and a twinkle in his eye. He had a "subduing tongue" and could "make the weeper laugh, the laugher weep" He gave her gifts and love tokens from his previous lovers to show how much her loved fer, and she accepted them and almost believed her loved her. Perhaps he did, it is not made clear in the poem, but soon the young maid started to fall in love with the young man, even though she knew of his nature as a womaniser and a cheater.

Eventually the young man started becoming untrue and deep down she knew it, but she was so in love that it blinded her and she ignored it. The young man eventually left her to pursue other woman, and now the young woman is sad and alone.

Shakespeare explores two different themes of the nature of love here, both are very dangerous. In this Shakespeare love poem, there is firstly the power of love to blind all to sense. The young maid was at the time a chaste and good young lady, and she knew that the young man was a fickle seducer, but yet at the time she was blinded by love and it robbed her of all reason.

Another theme is the cruelty of love, how this young woman was cheated and dumped unkindly by this man. Sometimes people have very little concern for other peoples feelings. This could also be interpreted as a theme on how fickle men's hearts are. In this poem, we are unsure whether the man really over loved the young maid or whether he was just using her, but some lines portray him in a bad light. I particularly like this very clever description near the end of the poem "...though our drops this difference bore, His poison'd me, and mine did him restore." This is my favourite line in the poem, and it describes how the seducing young man's false tears tricked the young maid into falling in love with him, but her real tears gave the young man strength and boosted his ego. The use of the word poison almost gives an evil edge to the young man's motives I like this poem's description of each character's flaws and qualities. The young maid's description invokes pity in the reader "Her hair, nor loose nor tied in formal plat... Hanging her pale and pined cheek beside", this description makes her seem very plain in appearance, almost as if she could be pretty, but has no strength or energy to care about her appearance. We could all learn from Shakespeare's romantic writings here.

This in my opinion is one of the best Shakespeare Love Poems to learn poetry from because of its simple themes of the dangers of love. Many of you may be able to relate to the story of the young maid in this poem, but if you're looking for clever description, this is one of the best poems to look at.

Cluivee Lee is interested in Shakespeare love poems, especially learning about them, discussing them, and reading them.

poem

posted Aug 10, 2013, 12:22 AM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 10, 2013, 12:22 AM**]

A Lover's Complaint

FROM off a hill whose concave womb reworded
A plaintful story from a sisting vale,
My spirits to attend this double voice accorded,
And down I laid to list the sad-tuned tale;
Ere long espied a fickle maid full pale,
Tearing of papers, breaking rings a-twain,
Storming her world with sorrow's wind and rain.

Upon her head a platted hive of straw,
Which fortified her visage from the sun,
Whereon the thought might think sometime it saw
The carcass of beauty spent and done:
Time had not scythed all that youth begun,
Nor youth all quit; but, spite of heaven's fell rage,
Some beauty peep'd through lattice of sear'd age.

Oft did she heave her napkin to her eyne,
Which on it had conceited characters,
Laundering the silken figures in the brine
That season'd woe had pelleted in tears,
And often reading what contents it bears;
As often shrieking undistinguish'd woe,
In clamours of all size, both high and low.

Sometimes her levell'd eyes their carriage ride,
As they did battery to the spheres intend;
Sometime diverted their poor balls are tied
To the orb'd earth; sometimes they do extend
Their view right on; anon their gazes lend

To every place at once, and, nowhere fix'd,
The mind and sight distractedly commix'd.

Her hair, nor loose nor tied in formal plat,
Proclaim'd in her a careless hand of pride
For some, untuck'd, descended her sheaved hat,
Hanging her pale and pined cheek beside;
Some in her threaden fillet still did bide,
And true to bondage would not break from thence,
Though slackly braided in loose negligence.

A thousand favours from a maund she drew
Of amber, crystal, and of beaded jet,
Which one by one she in a river threw,
Upon whose weeping margent she was set;
Like usury, applying wet to wet,
Or monarch's hands that let not bounty fall
Where want cries some, but where excess begs all.

Of folded schedules had she many a one,
Which she perused, sigh'd, tore, and gave the flood;
Crack'd many a ring of posied gold and bone
Bidding them find their sepulchres in mud;
Found yet moe letters sadly penn'd in blood,
With sleided silk feat and affectedly
Enswathed, and seal'd to curious secrecy.

These often bathed she in her fluxive eyes,
And often kiss'd, and often 'gan to tear:
Cried 'O false blood, thou register of lies,
What unapproved witness dost thou bear!
Ink would have seem'd more black and damned here!'
This said, in top of rage the lines she rents,
Big discontent so breaking their contents.

A reverend man that grazed his cattle nigh--
Sometime a blusterer, that the ruffle knew
Of court, of city, and had let go by
The swiftest hours, observed as they flew--
Towards this afflicted fancy fastly drew,
And, privileged by age, desires to know
In brief the grounds and motives of her woe.

So slides he down upon his grained bat,

And comely-distant sits he by her side;
When he again desires her, being sat,
Her grievance with his hearing to divide:
If that from him there may be aught applied
Which may her suffering ecstasy assuage,
'Tis promised in the charity of age.

'Father,' she says, 'though in me you behold
The injury of many a blasting hour,
Let it not tell your judgment I am old;
Not age, but sorrow, over me hath power:
I might as yet have been a spreading flower,
Fresh to myself, If I had self-applied
Love to myself and to no love beside.

'But, woe is me! too early I attended
A youthful suit--it was to gain my grace--
Of one by nature's outwards so commended,
That maidens' eyes stuck over all his face:
Love lack'd a dwelling, and made him her place;
And when in his fair parts she did abide,
She was new lodged and newly deified.

'His brown locks did hang in crooked curls;
And every light occasion of the wind
Upon his lips their silken parcels hurls.
What's sweet to do, to do will aptly find:
Each eye that saw him did enchant the mind,
For on his visage was in little drawn
What largeness thinks in Paradise was sawn.

'Small show of man was yet upon his chin;
His phoenix down began but to appear
Like unshorn velvet on that termless skin
Whose bare out-bragg'd the web it seem'd to wear:
Yet show'd his visage by that cost more dear;
And nice affections wavering stood in doubt
If best were as it was, or best without.

'His qualities were beauteous as his form,
For maiden-tongued he was, and thereof free;
Yet, if men moved him, was he such a storm
As oft 'twixt May and April is to see,

When winds breathe sweet, untidy though they be.
His rudeness so with his authorized youth
Did livery falseness in a pride of truth.

'Well could he ride, and often men would say
'That horse his mettle from his rider takes:
Proud of subjection, noble by the sway,
What rounds, what bounds, what course, what stop
he makes!'

And controversy hence a question takes,
Whether the horse by him became his deed,
Or he his manage by the well-doing steed.

'But quickly on this side the verdict went:
His real habitude gave life and grace
To appertainings and to ornament,
Accomplish'd in himself, not in his case:
All aids, themselves made fairer by their place,
Came for additions; yet their purposed trim
Pieced not his grace, but were all graced by him.

'So on the tip of his subduing tongue
All kinds of arguments and question deep,
All replication prompt, and reason strong,
For his advantage still did wake and sleep:
To make the weeper laugh, the laughers weep,
He had the dialect and different skill,
Catching all passions in his craft of will:

'That he did in the general bosom reign
Of young, of old; and sexes both enchanted,
To dwell with him in thoughts, or to remain
In personal duty, following where he haunted:
Consents bewitch'd, ere he desire, have granted;
And dialogued for him what he would say,
Ask'd their own wills, and made their wills obey.

'Many there were that did his picture get,
To serve their eyes, and in it put their mind;
Like fools that in th' imagination set
The goodly objects which abroad they find
Of lands and mansions, theirs in thought assign'd;
And labouring in moe pleasures to bestow them

Than the true gouty landlord which doth owe them:

'So many have, that never touch'd his hand,
Sweetly supposed them mistress of his heart.
My woeful self, that did in freedom stand,
And was my own fee-simple, not in part,
What with his art in youth, and youth in art,
Threw my affections in his charmed power,
Reserved the stalk and gave him all my flower.

'Yet did I not, as some my equals did,
Demand of him, nor being desired yielded;
Finding myself in honour so forbid,
With safest distance I mine honour shielded:
Experience for me many bulwarks builded
Of proofs new-bleeding, which remain'd the foil
Of this false jewel, and his amorous spoil.

'But, ah, who ever shunn'd by precedent
The destined ill she must herself assay?
Or forced examples, 'gainst her own content,
To put the by-past perils in her way?
Counsel may stop awhile what will not stay;
For when we rage, advice is often seen
By blunting us to make our wits more keen.

'Nor gives it satisfaction to our blood,
That we must curb it upon others' proof;
To be forbod the sweets that seem so good,
For fear of harms that preach in our behoof.
O appetite, from judgment stand aloof!
The one a palate hath that needs will taste,
Though Reason weep, and cry, 'It is thy last.'

'For further I could say 'This man's untrue,'
And knew the patterns of his foul beguiling;
Heard where his plants in others' orchards grew,
Saw how deceits were gilded in his smiling;
Knew vows were ever brokers to defiling;
Thought characters and words merely but art,
And bastards of his foul adulterate heart.

'And long upon these terms I held my city,
Till thus he gan besiege me: 'Gentle maid,

Have of my suffering youth some feeling pity,
And be not of my holy vows afraid:
That's to ye sworn to none was ever said;
For feasts of love I have been call'd unto,
Till now did ne'er invite, nor never woo.

"All my offences that abroad you see
Are errors of the blood, none of the mind;
Love made them not: with acture they may be,
Where neither party is nor true nor kind:
They sought their shame that so their shame did find;
And so much less of shame in me remains,
By how much of me their reproach contains.

"Among the many that mine eyes have seen,
Not one whose flame my heart so much as warm'd,
Or my affection put to the smallest teen,
Or any of my leisures ever charm'd:
Harm have I done to them, but ne'er was harm'd;
Kept hearts in liveries, but mine own was free,
And reign'd, commanding in his monarchy.

"Look here, what tributes wounded fancies sent me,
Of paled pearls and rubies red as blood;
Figuring that they their passions likewise lent me
Of grief and blushes, aptly understood
In bloodless white and the encrimson'd mood;
Effects of terror and dear modesty,
Encamp'd in hearts, but fighting outwardly.

"And, lo, behold these talents of their hair,
With twisted metal amorously impleach'd,
I have received from many a several fair,
Their kind acceptance weepingly beseech'd,
With the annexions of fair gems enrich'd,
And deep-brain'd sonnets that did amplify
Each stone's dear nature, worth, and quality.

"The diamond,--why, 'twas beautiful and hard,
Whereto his invised properties did tend;
The deep-green emerald, in whose fresh regard
Weak sights their sickly radiance do amend;
The heaven-hued sapphire and the opal blend

With objects manifold: each several stone,
With wit well blazon'd, smiled or made some moan.

"Lo, all these trophies of affections hot,
Of pensived and subdued desires the tender,
Nature hath charged me that I hoard them not,
But yield them up where I myself must render,
That is, to you, my origin and end;
For these, of force, must your oblations be,
Since I their altar, you enpatron me.

"O, then, advance of yours that phraseless hand,
Whose white weighs down the airy scale of praise;
Take all these similes to your own command,
Hallow'd with sighs that burning lungs did raise;
What me your minister, for you obeys,
Works under you; and to your audit comes
Their distract parcels in combined sums.

"Lo, this device was sent me from a nun,
Or sister sanctified, of holiest note;
Which late her noble suit in court did shun,
Whose rarest havings made the blossoms dote;
For she was sought by spirits of richest coat,
But kept cold distance, and did thence remove,
To spend her living in eternal love.

"But, O my sweet, what labour is't to leave
The thing we have not, mastering what not strives,
Playing the place which did no form receive,
Playing patient sports in unconstrained gyves?
She that her fame so to herself contrives,
The scars of battle 'scapeth by the flight,
And makes her absence valiant, not her might.

"O, pardon me, in that my boast is true:
The accident which brought me to her eye
Upon the moment did her force subdue,
And now she would the caged cloister fly:
Religious love put out Religion's eye:
Not to be tempted, would she be immured,
And now, to tempt, all liberty procured.

"How mighty then you are, O, hear me tell!

The broken bosoms that to me belong
Have emptied all their fountains in my well,
And mine I pour your ocean all among:
I strong o'er them, and you o'er me being strong,
Must for your victory us all congest,
As compound love to physic your cold breast.

"My parts had power to charm a sacred nun,
Who, disciplined, ay, dieted in grace,
Believed her eyes when they to assail begun,
All vows and consecrations giving place:
O most potential love! vow, bond, nor space,
In thee hath neither sting, knot, nor confine,
For thou art all, and all things else are thine.

"When thou impresses, what are precepts worth
Of stale example? When thou wilt inflame,
How coldly those impediments stand forth
Of wealth, of filial fear, law, kindred, fame!
Love's arms are peace, 'gainst rule, 'gainst sense,
'gainst shame,
And sweetens, in the suffering pangs it bears,
The aloes of all forces, shocks, and fears.

"Now all these hearts that do on mine depend,
Feeling it break, with bleeding groans they pine;
And suppliant their sighs to you extend,
To leave the battery that you make 'gainst mine,
Lending soft audience to my sweet design,
And credent soul to that strong-bonded oath
That shall prefer and undertake my troth.'

'This said, his watery eyes he did dismount,
Whose sights till then were levell'd on my face;
Each cheek a river running from a fount
With brinish current downward flow'd apace:
O, how the channel to the stream gave grace!
Who glazed with crystal gate the glowing roses
That flame through water which their hue encloses.

'O father, what a hell of witchcraft lies
In the small orb of one particular tear!
But with the inundation of the eyes

What rocky heart to water will not wear?
What breast so cold that is not warmed here?
O cleft effect! cold modesty, hot wrath,
Both fire from hence and chill extincture hath.

'For, lo, his passion, but an art of craft,
Even there resolved my reason into tears;
There my white stole of chastity I daff'd,
Shook off my sober guards and civil fears;
Appear to him, as he to me appears,
All melting; though our drops this difference bore,
His poison'd me, and mine did him restore.

'In him a plenitude of subtle matter,
Applied to cautels, all strange forms receives,
Of burning blushes, or of weeping water,
Or swooning paleness; and he takes and leaves,
In either's aptness, as it best deceives,
To blush at speeches rank to weep at woes,
Or to turn white and swoon at tragic shows.

'That not a heart which in his level came
Could 'scape the hail of his all-hurting aim,
Showing fair nature is both kind and tame;
And, veil'd in them, did win whom he would maim:
Against the thing he sought he would exclaim;
When he most burn'd in heart-wish'd luxury,
He preach'd pure maid, and praised cold chastity.

'Thus merely with the garment of a Grace
The naked and concealed fiend he cover'd;
That th' unexperient gave the tempter place,
Which like a cherubin above them hover'd.
Who, young and simple, would not be so lover'd?
Ay me! I fell; and yet do question make
What I should do again for such a sake.

'O, that infected moisture of his eye,
O, that false fire which in his cheek so glow'd,
O, that forced thunder from his heart did fly,
O, that sad breath his spongy lungs bestow'd,
O, all that borrow'd motion seeming owed,
Would yet again betray the fore-betray'd,

And new pervert a reconciled maid!"

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