

**Berwick Educational Association**

## **An Introduction to Shakespeare's Sonnets**

**A lecture by Dr Richard Moore  
Friday 4<sup>th</sup> May 2018 10am -12 noon  
Berwick Voluntary Centre,  
Tweed St, Berwick**



William Shakespeare was born in April, 1564, the oldest son of John Shakespeare, a glover, trader, and landowner, married to Mary Arden, the daughter of an affluent landowner from Wilmcote. John was ambitious, filling many municipal offices in Stratford. This included that of burgess, which privileged him to educate his children without charge at the King's New School in Stratford. He rose by election to the position of Alderman in 1565; and in 1568 he was elected Bailiff (equivalent to mayor). In the same year he made an application to the Herald's office for a grant of arms. Here perhaps we see the beginning of William's interest in theatre: in his position as Bailiff John Shakespeare was responsible for licensing companies of actors who applied to play in the Guild Hall.

It was not, however, as a budding playwright that William Shakespeare, the son, was first lauded but rather as a poet. His actual progress to literary fame seems to have begun at some point after 1585, when he joined a troupe of players and made his way to London. As a member of London's leading theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Company, he did indeed write plays and eventually became a sharer in the Globe Theatre. But poetry was an equal love. His dedications to the poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* bear the signature "William Shakespeare". The printing was by his Stratford contemporary and probable school-fellow Richard Field. Modern editors think that Shakespeare may even have been in the printing house in the course of the poems' production, so tidy, neat and almost error-free are their first editions.

The Sonnets were published later than the early poems, appearing under the publisher Thomas Thorpe in 1609. They are, however, very much poems of youth, the first seventeen, for instance, being traditionally called the procreation sonnets and addressed to a young man urging him to marry and have children in order to immortalise his beauty by passing it on to the next generation. Other poems express the speaker's love for the young man, brood upon loneliness, death and the transience of life, and seem to criticise the

young man for preferring a rival poet. The sonnets suggest ambiguous feelings for the speaker's mistress and are obsessed with Time and Evanescence. These were to become major preoccupations in the History Plays and *Troilus and Cressida*. During the Study Morning we shall study the sonnets to trace both biographical links and links with the theatrical masterpieces.

We shall also consider some of the mysteries surrounding the sonnets. Who was the dedicatee? Why may Shakespeare not have wished for their printing? Are they, as one critic suggests, *parodies* of the 300-year old Petrarchan tradition, rather than seriously intended? Who was the rival poet? Might it have been Christopher Marlowe or even Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex? How much of *The Passionate Pilgrim* is by Shakespeare and what secrets lie behind its later re-printing?

However one views the poems, they certainly touch on universal and timeless issues. Love, Time, Value and Reputation are key themes, as is Beauty and its Transience. Many critics think that Shakespeare deliberately shrouds identities and even gender in mystery, so that often we do not know whether the poem is addressed - or refers - to a man or a woman. Sometimes there is a sense of androgyny – of a master who is also a mistress. The poems, in fact, simultaneously reveal and conceal – expose and hide, guide and deliberately mislead.

No one can fully solve all the puzzles the Sonnets suggest. But we can at least begin to try. Come and be enlightened and perhaps also slightly perplexed as we try to untangle some of the mysteries. Whatever we discover, it will be an intriguing study-journey and the poems themselves will grant their own literary rewards.

*Note* : The main sonnets studied will be Numbers 6, 12, 17, 18, 29, 33, 90, 99, 104, 106, 109, 116, 144, 154. All may be downloaded from the Internet.

The cost of the lecture is £6 including refreshments. All are welcome, and no previous knowledge is assumed.

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To book by mail, please fill in the booking form below, and mail to BEA, 7 Ravensdowne, Berwick-upon-Tweed TD15 1HX along with a cheque in favour of Berwick Educational Association. If you have any queries, please email [berwickea@gmail.com](mailto:berwickea@gmail.com) or phone Cian McHugh on 01289 303254

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(Shakespeare's sonnets)