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**A Reconsideration of Samuel Butler's  
*Shakespeare's Sonnets Reconsidered***

I

In his *Shakespeare's Sonnets Reconsidered* Butler confidently announced that he had returned the sonnets to their "original" order and had uncovered the true story behind them. They did not deal with Shakespeare's relationship to either the Earl of Pembroke or the Earl of Southampton as weightiest opinion had it, but were addressed rather to William Hughes, a young, handsome, but callous fellow who later was to become a naval cook, with whom Shakespeare, in the greenness of youth before the creation of his plays, had become enamoured. Shakespeare, in a friendly gesture, tried unsuccessfully to encourage in him an interest in the opposite sex, first by urging him to beget issue, and then by introducing him to his own mistress, the Dark Lady. The friendship however was shaken when Mr. W.H., for the sake of mere sport, lured Shakespeare to a pederastic rendezvous, broke in on him and so surprised him *in flagrante dilecto*. The trick was deplorable, but then, so Butler assures us, Shakespeare was young and the age lax, and he soon forgave all. From that time on, however, the relationship showed signs of strain: frequent mutual recriminations alternated with Shakespeare's self-abasing protestations of love and steadfastness; Mr. W.H. sought other company and otherwise made known his displeasure: they met less and less, and the friendship ended in a sudden rupture.

This story, by no means unreasonable *prima facie*, was bound to become, as in fact it has, little more than yet another addition to the growing accumulation of contradictory autobiographical sonnet theories.<sup>1</sup> It is still mentioned because of Butler's own minor reputation and his relative importance among the obscure tribe of commentators. But his claim of having deciphered the sonnet story had been made before<sup>2</sup> with similar confidence; and it is not surprising therefore that when Butler's edition was published in October, 1899, it was, with the

exception of a few polite notices, given little attention by reputable London journals and prominent Shakespearean scholars.<sup>3</sup> The theory has not fared better among his admiring critics who on the whole have not tried to defend what Shakespeareans have long dismissed.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Butler's most recent biographer, Philip Henderson, claims that everything does "fall into place" when the sonnets are read in accordance with the theory. Clara Stillman before him held a similar view, only she added that the relative silence which had greeted the work signified that no one wished "to face any new truth about Shakespeare, especially one presented by Butler."<sup>5</sup> Neither of them provides proof.

The claim, typical of Butler's defenders, most interested in his rebellious spirit than in his letter, is exaggerated. By 1899 Butler had certainly acquired the reputation of crank and satirist whose ideas it was best not to take seriously;<sup>6</sup> and perhaps his attack in the edition on the then distinguished Sidney Lee may have made some journals cautious. However, there is nothing in the way of scholarship to distinguish Butler's work from that of his predecessors. He was the first to argue for 1585-88 as the dates of the sonnets; but otherwise his scholarly work is derivative. Furthermore, it was not Butler but a younger paradoxalist, Oscar Wilde, who first announced that Mr. W.H. was a commoner, a boy-actor in Shakespeare's Company.<sup>7</sup> It is more likely then that by 1899 there were already too many so-called truths cluttering the path to the sonnets.

Yet Butler quite clearly did want to offend: he would not have worked out his theory had he not felt the urge to challenge orthodox opinions. And in fact by making the sonnets speak exclusively of an attachment between two men, Butler has earned the distinction of having brought into the open once more the vexed question of what sort of sexuality the sonnets reveal—or rather, conceal. In the concluding sentence of his prefatory study Butler defines the relationship as "more Greek than English"—an ambiguous description though Butler tells us that "English" describes the non-sexual friendship between Patroclus and Achilles.<sup>8</sup> But despite the ambiguity, this statement was obviously calculated to displease Victorian bardolators who would regard the innuendo as an insult hurled at an hallowed national institution. And indeed Butler's insistence on his understanding of the relationship was part of a deliberate attack on the then prevalent interpretations of the sonnets.

Commentators before Butler's time had noticed the undisguised warmth with which Shakespeare praised the beauty of his male friend,<sup>9</sup>

but criticism in 19th century England was marked by attempts to rescue Shakespeare's name from the odium of illicit relationships, though it appears Shakespeare's love for the Dark Lady gave most offense.<sup>10</sup> Critics who eschewed autobiographical readings, the impersonalists, avoided confronting the issue by interpreting the sonnets allegorically, or by regarding them as poetical exercises, or as the delineation of the progress of Platonic love.<sup>11</sup> This approach held considerable sway against autobiographical critics, the "personalists", but for all its general reasonableness, it was not simply informed by a desire for avoiding the patent contradictions of autobiographical theories, but also, as Samuel Schoenbaum has recently pointed out, by "an anxiety to redeem the god of their idolatry from self-confessed impurities of the flesh."<sup>12</sup> Even Oscar Wilde, whatever may have been his private views in the matter, called Shakespeare's love for the boy-actor Platonic.

It was this tendency toward largely literary criticism of the sonnets in the name of respectability that Butler set out to attack. Benson's 1640 text of the sonnets, he declares, was preferred up to Malone's time because it was felt the sonnets "wanted bowdlerizing for the public, and that this operation had been sufficiently performed by (Benson's) dislocations, intercalations, and occasional change of sex";<sup>13</sup> and the impersonalists of his own time were equally anxious to free the Bard from any odious imputation which Thorpe's 1609 text might suggest (XIV, 7;70). He however is not to be deterred by such misplaced delicacy: the sonnets, he declares, are verse letters, "unguarded expressions" of Shakespeare's inmost feelings, not literary "trials of skill", as Sidney Lee had called them (XIV, 52; 54), and hence ought to be read with an eye to the real circumstances to which they seem to refer.

His correspondence with Fernand Henry suggests that for Butler any reading of the sonnets as artistic transmutations of experience was indeed an evasion of the "real" issues they presented. Henry, in his study and translation of the sonnets which appeared just after Butler's edition, had also criticized the prudery of English editors who had recoiled from dealing with the feelings frankly expressed by Shakespeare. Like Butler, he excused the poet by emphasizing the corrupting forces of a milieu which could easily lead him astray. But, he argued, frank acceptance of Shakespeare's confessed faults should not turn the critic into a detractor, for the sonnets bear sufficient witness to the admirable dignity and nobility of his sentiments and ideas.<sup>14</sup> The spirit of this defense resembles somewhat Butler's own, for he too writes that although no one is without sin, a truly corrupt tree can bring forth only specious fruit,

and hence, if a work, such as Shakespeare's, be "wholesome, genial, and robust", the faults of the author are "superficial, not structural" (XIV, 144).

For Henry, then, the beauty of the sonnets resided in the ideas, Shakespeare's generalizations from experience. And so he wrote Butler, after having read his edition, that the sonnets do express artistically the superiority of friendship to ordinary love. Butler disagreed: sonnet 23 ("As an unperfect actor on the stage"), he replied, cannot refer to mere friendship, for the poet's hesitation in saying the "perfect ceremony of love's rite" to Mr. W.H. implies his desire for a greater (possibly sexual) intimacy with him.<sup>15</sup> He disapproves of Shakespeare's behavior of course, but "A am not going to hold up hands in holy horror", especially since in anyone under 30 such offensiveness is venial. Henry had also pointed out in his study that the sentiments of the sonnets, though sincere, are expressed in a language dominated by metaphor and hyperbole, so that words lose their usual significance: "ils abolissent la pensée du poète, ou du moins ils la déforment comme fait un miroir grossissant pour l'image qui le transverse." Butler, however, told Henry that Shakespeare had recorded his passion for Mr. W.H. directly, and though he occasionally lied, he spoke the "naked truth"; hence, the more his words are taken *au pied de la lettre*, "the better they will be understood."

The poet Robert Bridges rejected also this conception of the sonnets. For him the sequence was an "organic" whole, the sonnets all composed in a definite thematic relationship to each other. Taken as a whole, he told Butler, the sonnets express Shakespeare's ideal of love, dissociated (as it were) from sexual impulses; this in fact was the "key" to the sonnets. But Butler would not accept this possibility: such ideal friendship, he wrote, is appropriate for an elderly gentleman of 64, "like myself", but not for a young poet who in 1585 was about 21.<sup>16</sup> Bridges could only reply that Butler had underestimated the "(excuse the term) ideal, or poetic cast of 'the poem' ". He added: "I think that if you had worked your analytical genius more at the artistic construction than at the circumstantial explanation, you would then have convinced yourself. . . . It is not the logic which fails in this book."<sup>17</sup> Bridges was quite correct, for, as we shall see, the flaw in Butler's approach was his complete disregard for the "making" aspect of the sonnets.

But it seems strange, given Butler's convictions, that his definition of the relationship is obscured by what Samuel Schoenbaum calls "prissy reticences".<sup>18</sup> In 23, as we have seen, Butler finds the poet requesting

greater intimacy, and sonnet 34 (to which we shall return), he tells us, indicates that the poet was lured by Mr. W.H. to a seemingly homoerotic encounter. Yet though 35 does speak of Mr. W.H.'s "sensual fault", the phrase, Butler insists, can only refer to his dallings with the poet's mistress, and must have therefore gotten misplaced: Mr. W.H. had his faults, but sensuality was not one of them (XIV, 84). But when he is faced by sonnets in which the poet clearly confesses his own sensual sins (109 to 112), Butler tells us not to take the words (*pace* his advice to Henry) *au pied de la lettre*, though he hastens to add that Shakespeare, because of his "frank and fearless" nature, did indeed have his wild oats to sow. Again, though he calls the story "squalid", the poet was really enamoured of the "good spirit within" Mr. W.H. of which his external beauty was but a symbol (XIV, 96; 103). The relationship, then, is Greek, not sensual; it "passeth the love of woman", but is not Platonic friendship, yet betrayed the poet into one "grave" indiscretion for which he felt a bitter remorse though he never was guilty of it again.

This vagueness indicates that Butler may have shared the caution of Victorian critics. The Oscar Wilde scandal was still in memory, and Butler may have wished to avoid having his work linked to the discredited playwright; and though he intended to deal frankly with the sonnets, he did not wish to tarnish the poet who was also his idol. In any case, he in effect bowdlerized his conception of Shakespeare by narrowing the illicitness to one trivial encounter: it does seem much ado about little.<sup>19</sup> The intent of Butler's hints is, however, clear: he wished to undercut the impersonalists' sentimentalized interpretations, and state as plainly as the times allowed that the sonnets told of a down-to-earth, homoerotic passion between two young men.

## II

Butler's story has always been held suspect. Schoenbaum observes that biographies of the Bard often seem to be oblique biographies of their authors. Indeed after the publication of H.F. Jones's *Memoir* in 1919, Butler students did notice the parallel between his delineation of Shakespeare's passion and his relationship with the barrister Charles Paine Pauli, and they concluded that Butler had read himself into the sonnets, and had transformed them (in Schoenbaum's words) into the "receptacle for his own frustrations and the vehicle of unconscious self-analysis."

The details of the Pauli-Butler friendship are now familiar. The two met in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1863: Pauli was unhappy with his lot in the raw colony and had applied to Butler for help, perhaps luring him on by his openness and familiarity. Butler responded by paying for Pauli's passage to London and by promising to help him financially until he was called to the Bar. For the next 33 years, in fact, even when he was himself hard pressed, Butler provided Pauli with at least £200 a year. At first they lived close to each other in Clifford's Inn, but Pauli moved away soon to an address he never disclosed and Butler never tried to discover. After an autumn holiday spent together in Dieppe in 1866, during which Pauli confessed himself miserable in Butler's company, they agreed to meet henceforth only two or three times a week over lunch. Butler's occasional and timid attempts to inquire into Pauli's affairs always ended in the latter's breaking into tears and declaring his continued hardship. Butler, believing him, ceased his inquiries, and maintained his generous loyalty. In the cathartic account of their relationship, composed while on holiday in Italy during April and May 1898, he confessed that for him Pauli has been "a fine handsome fellow,"—a Towneley (whose model, incidentally, he had been), an Erewhonian Ydgrunite in all but health (he had suffered from pulmonary disease)—in fact, all Butler would like to have been but was not. He had hoped his unwavering devotion, as that "of a dog to his master", and his unconditional forgiveness (so like Shakespeare's) of the unjustified coldness which he "should not have stood for a moment from anyone else", would melt Pauli's reserve.<sup>20</sup> But it was not to be. On December 27, 1897, Pauli died unexpectedly, and Butler was fated to learn that Pauli for some 30 years had been successful enough as a barrister to have left an estate of £9,000; had had numerous friends whom he had kept in complete ignorance of Butler; and had (it must have seemed as the final insult) neither mentioned him to his testators, nor even referred to him in his will. Butler's humiliation was utter: he knew now that for half a lifetime he had been devoted to a "worthless" fellow, had been moved to passionate admiration by a handsome face and dapper manner that hid a calloused and opportunist spirit.

The parallels between this private history and the story of the sonnets are apparent: in both instances a talented young man, on the brink of discovering his gifts, becomes the self-effacing vassal to a shallow wordling who holds the proffered friendship in little esteem. Like Shakespeare, Butler was conscious of his unrecognized merits, and of how much he lived "in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes",

and the one compensating friendship of his youth was to prove illusory. but there is other evidence (until now ignored) which suggests not only that Butler did read himself into the sonnets, but also that the revelations after Pauli's death urged him to enter the sonnet controversy in the first place.

H.F. Jones, in his introduction to Volume XIV of the *Works* (the sonnet edition), seems unaware of the significant fact that Butler's scholarly interest in the sonnets came close on the heels of Pauli's death. He merely repeats Butler's own account of how two articles on the sonnets by two distinguished Shakespeareans, each cancelling out the claims of the other,<sup>21</sup> urged him to his researches. But he had studied the sonnets more than a year earlier, in 1896, in Sir Israel Gollancz's edition (1896), and had reached conclusions similar to those developed in his edition: he found then that neither the Pembrokist nor the Southamptonite theory was convincing; that Mr. W.H. was a William Hughes, of a social class no higher than Shakespeare's; that the order of the sequence is correct up to 125, the remainder being in a disconnected jumble; and that sonnets 34 and 35 show how Shakespeare had been betrayed by some cruel joke. But he also believed that the relationship, after the betrayal, suggested no other affection "than the very warm one which Jones and I have for one another, for Hans and Rémy Faesch, and a dozen others—or rather two dozen—or than I have for Alfred, and doubtless shall have for his babies if I live till they are a little older."<sup>22</sup> This does sound very like the sort of friendship that Butler claimed, in his letter to Bridges, did not exist between Shakespeare and Mr. W.H. What else then but the revelations after Pauli's death would make him alter his opinion and make him realize that they spoke of a quite passionate attachment? He could not but have seen himself portrayed in many of the sonnets with a relevance and immediacy unsuspected in 1896—as in 57 for example (dealing with the poet's subservience to his friend), which ends:

So true a fool is love that in your will,  
Though you do anything, he thinks no ill.

These lines would have rung in 1898 with a terrible truthfulness in Butler's ears, and would have shocked him into an awareness of their full meaning; and this awareness, rather than the two articles, would more likely have urged him into the controversy, determined to prove the truth of what he thought he saw in the sonnets. Within a few months after completing the account of his relationship with Pauli, he had memorized all the sonnets and was in a position to reshuffle them until they would yield their story.

## III

To some extent everyone reads himself into the sonnets without, however, claiming to have found the poet's real and only meaning. The question to ask is, How and to what extent did Butler let the pressure of his experience mislead him in his analysis?

We see him clearly relying on his experience when he delineates Mr. W.H.'s character, and his feelings for the poet: he is heartless, vain, attractive but worthless, imperceptive of Shakespeare's feelings yet eager to maintain his hold on them but also anxious to keep other company. He is described, Butler believes, in sonnet 94, as one of those

Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,  
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow;

and who, when they commit base deeds, like festering lilies, "smell far worse than weeds". On the other hand, Butler emphasizes that Mr. W.H. was too young "fully to realize the detestable nature of his own action" in tricking Shakespeare, and seems to have been "bitterly penitent" for a time (XIV, 138). But he never "cared two straws for Shakespeare, who no doubt bored him", though he was anxious to remain a friend since he enjoyed the flattery which Shakespeare could lay on thicker than anyone else. It all sounds very much like Pauli, if we ignore for a moment the trick Mr. W.H. concocted.

His experience guides him even more clearly in his argument for the poet's social status. Sidney Lee's best evidence, he claims, for maintaining that Mr. W.H. was a nobly-born patron is 78 where the poet describes himself as his friend's "vassal". Yet this word, Butler points out, cannot denote a poet-patron relationship for

what man who is as devotedly attached to another as Shakespeare evidently was to the worthless fellow whom he was addressing, does not hold himself the vassal of that friend, without for a moment considering himself as his dependent? Indeed I have known cases in which a friend has for years held himself the vassal of another whom he believed to be absolutely dependent on him (XIV, 60).

We have here an unequivocal reference to himself. Nonetheless his criticism of Lee's gloss is convincing. In fact, he is correct in insisting that the sonnets do not, as had always been assumed, unmistakably delineate an Elizabethan courtier. Neither the epithet "beauteous roof" in 10, nor "fair house" in 13, connotes only noble lineage: both can also

refer to the beautiful tenement in which Mr. W.H.'s spirit is housed (XIV, 62). That is, Butler shows us that what appears to be the conventional language of address to a patron can also be the language of address to the beloved.

All this is quite reasonable. However, Butler hedges when he considers 37, where Shakespeare speaks of his friend's "beauty, birth, or wealth, or wit" which "Intitled", in his "parts crowned do sit." If Mr. W.H. was good-looking he tells us, "of the same social status as Shakespeare himself, not living from hand to mouth and not a fool (which, by the way, I think he probably was) Shakespeare would be well within his rights in writing" such lines (XIV, 61). Here we see Butler ready to maintain, by ignoring the specific denotation of "Intitled" and "birth", that the poet is referring still to a commoner. He is betrayed, in short, into an inconsistent approach in his readings—now exact and literal, now free and associative. The flaw is particularly noticeable in his argument for the poet's age.

He tells us, for example, that when Shakespeare speaks of his "pupil pen" he clearly indicates that he is at the very beginning of his career, and about 21, and has not written anything of significance. The famous "mortal moon" sonnet (107) corroborates this, for Butler takes it to refer to the defeat of the Armada in 1588, when Shakespeare was 24, and the relationship, as we are told in 104, had lasted three years. On the other hand, such references to aging, as we find in 73 ("That time of year") and 22 ("My glass shall not persuade me") he dismisses as the exaggerations of a youth just arrived at the peach-fuzz stage of manhood who would (as in sonnet 2) find a man of forty on the verge of senility. Obviously, Butler is having it both ways.

This inconsistency also undermines his argument for the rearrangement of the sonnet sequence. Butler assumed the entire sequence dealt with the poet's relationship to Mr. W.H., and that the second set of sonnets (127 to 154), since many refer to the triangular relationship with the Dark Lady described in the first set, had somehow been dislodged. Consequently he freely inserted these sonnets into the first set not only in order to create a coherent and chronological story out of the triangular relationship, but also to flesh out the "vile trick" referred to in sonnet 34 and its consequences. But in reconstructing this trick retrospectively from 34 Butler shows an appalling literal-mindedness; he cannot doubt

that Shakespeare was . . . made to 'travel forth without' that cloak. . . . Hardly had he laid the cloak aside before he was surprised according to a preconcerted scheme, and very roughly handled, for we find him lame soon afterward (sonnet 37, lines 3 and 9) and apparently (sonnet 89) not fully recovered a twelve-month later. (XIV, 83).

But how can "base clouds", if as literally understood as "cloak", yield the idea of a preconcerted ambush? Butler is oblivious to the obvious working out of the weather conceit begun in 33, and to the metaphoric meaning in 37 of "lame" ("made lame by Fortune's dearest spite"). But he seems to have derived this interpretation from 121, where the poet asks

For why should others' false adulterate eyes  
Give salutation to my sportive blood?

Since he placed this sonnet before 33 and 34, a new context is created for the last line: Mr. W.H.'s "vile" trick is made to seem a sort of spying on Shakespeare's "sportive" endeavor. And, to support his literal reading of 23. "The perfect ceremony of love's rite" already referred to, Butler makes a significant emendation in the last line:

O, let my looks (Q: books) be then the eloquence  
And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,  
Who plead for love, and look for recompense,  
More than that tongue that less (Q: more) hath more expressed.

With this reading, Butler's contention that the poet is here asking for passionate intimacy is rendered less objectionable.

Such reconstruction shows considerable ingenuity, but utilized certainly in the service of some preconceptions. Whether or not Butler experienced such a trick at Pauli's hands can never be known,<sup>23</sup> but it is clear that the episode was for Butler more than a bit of brawling high spirits. Even Shakespeare, he believed, referred to it again in 89, 90, and 95. So it appears that Butler regarded it as the one piece of concrete evidence of Mr. W.H.'s violation of the poet's trust and openness, and thus a symbol of what eventually killed the friendship.

The most conspicuous failure of Butler's critical acumen is apparent in his treatment of the so-called Dark Lady relationship. Any reader will find that the sonnets deal with two sorts of love: the sexual love (or lust) for the lady that leads to "despair", and the love of the friend which brings "comfort". To Butler, however, the Dark Lady played no significant role in the poet's life. He points out that only five of the last 28 sonnets are addressed to the Lady, who is the poet's mistress, since the rest lack pronoun references, and he goes so far as to claim that some of these sonnets were written by Shakespeare, who encouraged the liaison in the first place, for Mr. W.H. to give to the lady as his own. Furthermore, Butler finds no difficulty declaring the poet's love for the lady is

an affectation. So, for example, though the poet speaks in 42 of being jealous of Mr. W.H.'s dallings with the Lady, Butler states that he only pretends to be more hurt than he is. Again, 147 to 150, full of expressions of torment, cannot refer to her for "the passionate emotions which they breathe in every line indicates an intensity of feeling which the dark woman does not seem elsewhere able to excite." He admits Shakespeare "loves her dearly" (42) but that is not the same as being "frantic mad with evermore unrest" (147): these sonnets consequently must be addressed to Mr. W.H., at a time when the relationship is reaching its crisis point. The famous 129 ("Th' expense of spirit") as well as 145 (dealing with the courtly ardour for a lady) he dismisses to an appendix as irrelevant to either loves.

Again, the intent is clear: Butler wishes to maintain that the expressions of pain and disappointment refer exclusively to the young man. But the argument is now hopelessly conjectural and careless of even the surface meaning of the poems. Obviously, when Butler considered the Dark Lady, his experience and common sense failed him no doubt because there was no parallel to the triangular affair in his life. His interest in the opposite sex, in fact, was most casual, while his friendship for Pauli was possibly of a homophilic nature. In any case, Butler had a French lady friend in Handel Street—he called her "Madame"—whom he visited once a week and shared with his friend H.F. Jones. In his well-known friendship for Miss Eliza Savage there was much repulsion and no sexual attraction. Butler had nothing to guide him in estimating the Dark Lady's place in Shakespeare's life, and by stressing what he did know, reduced her to a sexual partner whom the poet desired but could not quite respect.

#### IV

The crucial readings, then, are untenable, and they are so because Butler refused to regard a poem as a *tertium quid*, validly independent of the psychological moment of its creation. Such an attitude, however, was not simply adopted for the polemical purposes of his edition; it was a deeply rooted habit of mind, as we can see if we consider one of the sonnets Butler composed as a result of his Shakespeare researches.

He wrote them, H.F. Jones tells us, in order to imitate not only the form but also the spirit of Shakespeare's approach to his subject matter (*Works*, XX, 390), and it was Shakespeare's theme of immortality that chiefly attracted Butler's attention, for six of his eleven sonnets deal with it. The first of these (the best of the lot) expresses Butler's confident belief in his posthumous fame:

Not on sad Stygian shore, nor in clear sheen  
 Of far Elysian fields, shall we meet those  
 Among the dead whose pupils we have been,  
 Nor those great shades whom we have held as foes;  
 No meadow of asphodel our feet shall tread,  
 Nor shall we look each other in the face  
 To love or hate each other being dead,  
 Hoping some praise, fearing some disgrace.  
 We shall not argue saying " 'Twas thus" or "Thus,"  
 Our argument's whole drift we shall forget;  
 Who's right, who's wrong, 'twill be all one to us;  
 We shall not even know that we have met.  
     Yet meet we shall, and part, and meet again  
     Where dead men meet, on lips of living men.

It is a generalized statement, not really reflecting the spirit of humility of Shakespeare who feels certain his sonnets will bear witness not so much to him as to his love, and give life to his friend long after their author is forgotten (as in 55, for example). Butler's sentiment also does not have a context; it grows neither from the terror of "that fell arrest without bail" (74), nor from the hope of a love that transcends the tooth of time. The sonnet is a plain-style philosophical statement, and lacks almost all poetic ornament: it is, to adopt W.H. Auden's distinction, all Prospero without a touch of Ariel—even though it expresses the one fervently held conviction which gave him the strength to carry on his literary pursuits despite the almost total neglect with which all his work after *Erewhon* had been met. And the other sonnets on this theme are logical justifications of this belief.<sup>24</sup>

In such attempts at imitating the spirit of Shakespeare, we see that even in poetry Butler was first of all a man of ideas, and it is therefore not surprising that he would have little sensitivity for the connotative quality of Shakespeare's verse, for Elizabethan conceits, metaphors, and the like. And his literary taste corroborates this conclusion. He

liked literature that spoke plainly and directly to him. His favorite writers were Bunyan, Defoe, and Swift, and he heartily despised most of the well-known 19th century writers—Dickens, George Eliot, R.L. Stevenson, for example, and Pater (who was to him all "powder and paint")—and others in whom he detected conscious attempts at a literary style. Despite his dislike for Bunyan's doctrines, he loved *Pilgrim's Progress* because of its terseness, simplicity, its defiance of established literary canons; Butler, rather characteristically, enjoyed the unsophisticated allegorical figures as creations quite independent of their theological context (*Works*, XX, 187-91). He was also fond of his

namesake, Samuel Butler, whose *Hudibras*, written in often clumsy, jingling rhymed couplets, is of course another example of 17th century straightforward plainness and common sense.

Butler wrote Robert Bridges that he was in fact a "prose man" except for Shakespeare and Homer, and would never read Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, or Wordsworth "except such extracts as I occasionally see in Royal Academy Catalogues." He could only admire the craftsmanship of "Venus and Adonis" or "The Rape of Lucrece"—both, significantly, "pure" creations addressed to the imagination primarily. Not the poetical or imaginative, but the "practical side of literature", he told Bridges—literature as a problem to be solved—could stir his full enthusiasm.<sup>25</sup> This critical attitude toward literature had been encouraged by his (to him) successful detective work on the *Odyssey*. Two years before the sonnet edition he had published *The Authoress of the Odyssey* in which he proposed that the epic had been written by a woman who appears in the story as Princess Nausicaa, and that the settings all reflect the geographical features of her Sicilian home-town of Trapani and its environs. The theory has not been accepted by Greek scholars; but it is remarkable that Butler could have spent several years verifying his findings on the spot, on maps, in libraries, on the assumption—the very one made by Schliemann—that the poem is in its essentials a faithful mirror of specific places known by the writer. But if an ancient poem could yield such information when considered as a transcript, what would not Shakespeare's sonnets yield if dealt with similarly. "I resolved, therefore," he tells us in the Preface, "that as soon as my translation of the Iliad (1898) was off my hands, I would treat the Sonnets much as I had done the Odyssey" (XIV, xvii). This required the matching of external with internal evidence which, as we have seen, was derived by a disregard for strictly literary considerations. This is not to say he was completely unaware of them, but that his awareness simply had no effect on his *a priori* assumption that Shakespeare, like the Odyssean author, had created unpremeditated transcripts of actual experience.

The extent to which this assumption determined his reading can be estimated by considering his reasons for removing two of the six sonnets that did not fit his story, 129 and 146 ("Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth"). Both are "occasional" sonnets, he claims, in no way referring to Mr. W.H. However, 144 ("Two loves I have, of comfort and despair"), he also calls "occasional" even though he leaves it in the sequence, because though it concerns Mr. W.H. and the Mistress, it is not

“addressed to either of them” (XIV, 198). On the other hand 116, also a general reflection (“Let me not to the marriage of true minds”) is not occasional, because it expresses the poet’s irritated asseveration of his love in terms subsequently to be proved wrong, for there are “impediments” to the once happy friendship: no one, Butler insists, would write that love is not love which alters when it alteration finds “unless he is aware both of coldness and alteration” (XIV, 97). It seems, then, that he attached the label “occasional” to sonnets which were either not addressed to Mr. W.H., or which did not suggest a *specific* psychological context. The sonnets can only be verse letters, or reflections on an immediate experience.

In fact, Butler seems to have thought that to look to anything but the psychological truth the sonnets reveal is to seize on the means and ignore the end, and to accuse Shakespeare, in effect, of insincerity, of creating the psychological situation in cold blood—a charge far worse in his mind than the charge of a youthful irregularity. That is why he angrily rejected Sidney Lee’s contention that because of the ornate elements, the sonnets were linked to the 16th century sonneteering tradition and were in fact prompted by Shakespeare’s desire to write in a popular literary tradition. There could be no such link, for Butler felt that, unlike Shakespeare, other 16th century sonneteers were “insincere”—that is, inventing their sentiments for art’s sake—and otherwise reeking with affectation (XIV, 57).

Butler touched on this critical problem in his last sonnet, written in January of 1902, entitled “Academic Exercise”:

We were two lovers standing sadly by  
 While our two loves lay dead upon the ground;  
 Each love had striven not to be the first to die,  
 But each was gashed with many a cruel wound.  
 Said I: “Your love was false while mine was true.”  
 Aflood with tears he cried: “it was not so,  
 ‘Twas your false love my true love falsely slew—  
 For ‘twas your love that was the first to go.”  
 Thus did we stand and said no more for shame  
 Till I, seeing his cheek so wan and wet,  
 Sobbed thus: “So be it; my love shall bear the blame;  
 Let us inter them honourably.” And yet  
 I swear by all the truth human and divine  
 ‘Twas his that in its death throes murdered mine.

Jones thought the title stood in ironic relation to the sonnet, and thus constituted a challenge to the assumption of impersonalists (*Works*,

XX, 390): they, like Sidney Lee, would be inclined to regard it as a professional trial of skill (the means), when it actually reveals a specific situation and a genuine feeling out of the author's life (the end)—we must suppose it refers to the Pauli friendship.

Now Butler was quite correct in sensing the unique quality of shakespeare's sonnet sequence—its immediacy above all—for it does stand apart from the 16th century Neo-platonically inspired sonnet sequences in both language and thematic preoccupations.<sup>26</sup> But the opposite of ornate artifice is not necessarily straight-forward confession, and we are left with the vexing question, On what basis does the critic decide what in a poem is genuine and straightforward, and what merely metaphoric and imaginative? In Butler's case, certainly, the choice was made on the basis of personal conviction and the pressure of experience, for when he claims that references to aging are youthful exaggerations, and expressions of jealous torment mere affectation, we can gather that there is no principle at work but Butler's own sense of what is real.

However, Butler's determination not to let literary interpretations impair the parallel he perceived between his and Shakespeare's experience was nurtured by another, though related, impulse: he wanted to get a sense of the man behind the work. In a well-known note he declared that the personality of the author is more important than his work, for once that is grasped, we care comparatively little about "the history of the work or what it means or even its technique; we enjoy the work without thinking of more than its beauty, and of how much we like the workman" (*Works*, XX, 103). Though he undoubtedly liked most of Shakespeare's dramatic work, he more than once said that if Shakespeare "had told us more about what he himself saw, said and did—what he thought of the men and women and things of his day, what people he was fond of, what places he most frequented etc., and less even about Hamlet and Othello, it would have been better."<sup>27</sup> For in the plays, he wrote in his edition, Shakespeare is hidden: "there is a veil at all times over the face of the author" (XIV, 142). But in the sonnets he speaks more directly to us and we behold the poet "face to face".

But the sort of man he liked was one who shared his love for the ordinary, the straightforward, the down-to-earth—qualities suggested of course by a straightforward style. His taste is well expressed in a charming note: "I would like a Santa Famiglia with clothes drying in the background" (*Works*, XX, 81): the Santa Famiglia alone would have been too "high falutin," for his pragmatic sensibility; but the clothesline would bring the subject into his ken and reveal an artist who preferred

the commonplace to the sublime. He actually did dislike *Othello* and *Lear*, both of which suggest the "sublime" Shakespeare. But he loved his comic creations. Shakespeare, he declared in a passage that offended Robert Bridges particularly, must have drawn Falstaff, Bardolph, Pistol, Mrs. Quickly, and Doll Tearsheet from life and been in fact their frequent companion; had it been otherwise, he could not have drawn them as he did (XIV, 96). "By this sort of argument," Bridges replied, "what must he not have known? Prospero Caliban and Imogene."<sup>28</sup> But for Butler, Shakespeare's supposed familiarity with a Mistress Quickly was proof positive of Shakespeare's earthiness and therefore an indication of the human side of an incomparably sublime genius.

This "earthy" Shakespeare, however, had been all but ignored in Butler's time. In fact, the largely reverential attitude of Victorians toward the Bard, reflected, as we have seen, in the approach to the sonnets, was instrumental in transforming him into a great mystery, a symbol of the highest wisdom, a transcendental genius, into a "cloudy hilltop", as Matthew Arnold for example put it, that foils the mortal gaze.<sup>29</sup> Butler was completely out of sympathy with such a view, and in his edition he dwelled on the poet's indiscretions and moral blindness precisely because these qualities revealed the human and down-to-earth aspects of "the most human of all poets" (XIV, 139). In the sonnets we see "the man whom of all other we would most wish to see, in all his beauty, in all his sweetness, in all his strength and"—Butler adds—"happily, in all his weakness—for in the very refuse of his deeds there is a strength and warrantise of skill which it were ill to lose" (XIV, 143; *italic mine*). No doubt Shakespeare's weakness was doubly significant to him since it seemed so like his own, and provided a real link between himself and the poet whom he too worshipped in his own way.

Consequently, his study of the sonnets is first of all informed by a desire to humanize, so to speak, the national idol. He had already done as much for Homer, as well as Handel, in whose work he detected the sort of robust and down-to-earth individual he admired. With his portrait Butler wanted to puncture through the aura of reverence with which his contemporaries had invested Shakespeare, and as a self-styled Ishmael it was congenial work for him. It provided yet another opportunity to challenge official opinion on an important issue. But in this and his other demystification attempts he was also in harmony with 19th century positivism, carrying out in his own pragmatic, and often reductive way, the work of redefinition in which Matthew Arnold, for example, had been engaged. Butler did, despite his failure, provide the

necessary common sense contrast to the pious and sentimental attitude to Shakespeare. No doubt he went too far in this populist campaign and erred in a different direction; yet he is one of the first figures of prominence in quite some time to insist openly on the quite human story to which the sonnets bear forever a sphinx-like testimony.

## NOTES

1. Several critics have accepted Butler's dating (see below), but only Robert Graves has held to (and developed) Butler's theory *in toto* ("The Sources in *The Tempest*"). No prominent scholar has endorsed it, on Butler's or other grounds. Butler's most significant emendations and readings are of course found in Hyder Rollins' *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Sonnets* (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1944), 2 vols. Most sonnet editors, if they mention Butler at all, usually do so to dismiss him. Edward Hubler, for instance, explains justly that Butler's case cannot be proved, but "the balance of probabilities discredits" his and other's charge of homosexuality; Butler, because of his extrapolation of "vague references into specific events", has produced one of the more "fantastic" books on Shakespeare (Edward Hubler, *Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Commentators* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1962), 14-15).
2. For example, first by Keats's friend Armitage Brown, in 1838; and by Gerald Massey (*The Secret Drama of Shakespeare's Sonnets Unfolded* (1872; enlarged ed. 1888). A.L. Rowse claims with absolute confidence to have solved the sonnet problem once and for all.
3. Only F.J. Furnivall showed interest—at first. When he met with Butler, he admitted himself unacquainted with the details of Butler's argument and with the sonnets (H.F. Jones, *Samuel Butler: A Memoir* (London: Macmillan Co., Ltd., 1920), II, 305. Henceforth referred to as *Memoir*). Referring to this meeting Butler wrote: "I saw more plainly even than before that no one in my life-time is likely to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest my book or the immortal poems of which it treats" (*Memoir*, II, 314: note for Dec. 8, 1899). *The Spectator*, *Saturday Review*, and *Fortnightly Review* ignored the edition; the *Athenaeum* finally printed a scathing review (Jan. 27, 1900, pp. 123-124), thought by Butler to have been written by Watts-Dunton (*Memoir*, II, 316).
4. Valéry Larbaud, the French novelist and Butler's most energetic popularizer in France, accepted Butler's dating, but rejected the story without hesitation (Introduction to Emile Le Brun, ed., *Shakespeare: Les Sonnets* (Paris, 1927).)
5. Philip Henderson, *Samuel Butler: the Incarnate Bachelor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), 209-217. Clara Stillman, *Samuel Butler: Mid-Victorian Modern* (New York: The Viking Press, 1932), 283. Quite incorrectly she insisted that the theory was based less on "subtle inferences" than on interpretations of "actual words and known conditions and events."
6. The *Athenaeum*, in whose pages so much of the sonnet controversy was carried on, as well as the *Spectator*, had in the past been antagonistic to Butler's work.
7. "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." (1889). Butler does not mention Wilde but he must have known about the essay.
8. *The Shrewsbury Edition of the Works of Samuel Butler* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1925), XIV, 145. Henceforth referred to as XIV in the text.
9. See Rollins, II, 232-234.
10. See Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970), 260; 272-273.
11. See Schoenbaum, pp. 252-279.
12. Schoenbaum, p. 441.
13. Schoenbaum, however, indicates that the influential editions in the 18th century derived from Benson's readily available text; the 1609 quarto was rare, and had been reprinted but twice up to Malone's time (pp. 171-72).

14. C. Knox Poole, ed., *The Works of Shakespeare: Sonnets* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1918), xxxiii-xxxiv.
15. *Memoir*, II, 316-339; letter of January 22, 1900. 57 and 58 are further proof of this point for Butler.
16. *Memoir*, II, 314-15; letter of January 3, 1900.
17. Letter of January 25, 1900, reproduced in Donald Stanford, "Robert Bridges and Samuel Butler on Shakespeare's Sonnets: An Exchange of Letters," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XXII (Autumn, 1971), 329-330.
18. Schoenbaum, p. 453.
19. Malcolm Muggeridge has a point when he charges that Butler was more absurd than the Victorian critics: they had denied homosexuality completely, while he had dwindled it to a single and unlikely episode (*The Earnest Atheist* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1936), 125).
20. See *Memoir*, II, 106-114; II, 284-287. "I had felt from the very beginning that my intimacy with Pauli was only superficial, and I also perceived more and more that I bored him. I have not the least doubt that I did so, and I am afraid he is not the only one of my friends who has had to put up with much from me on the same score . . . he was at times very irritable and would find continual fault with me: often, I have no doubt, justly, but often, as it seemed to me, unreasonably" (*Memoir*, I, 113).
21. William Archer, "The Case Against Southampton," *Fortnightly Review*, LXVII (Dec. 1897), 817-34; Sidney Lee replied in the issue for February, 1898, "Shakespeare and the Earl of Pembroke," LXIX (9 Feb., 1898), 210-33.
22. *MS. Notebooks*, V, 117: entry for Dec. 21, 1896. But see Introduction to XIV: Butler says it had been many years (by 1898) since he had attended to the sonnets (p. xvii). Jones met Hans, a Swiss of about 20, enroute to England, and introduced him to Butler, and for the next year and a half they took Sunday walks together. Hans left for Singapore in February, 1896. Butler and Jones met his brother Rémy in Basel in September. Alfred Cathie was Butler's affable Cockney man-servant.
23. Muggeridge (n. 19) holds up Butler's reading of 34 as a symbol of his general literal-mindedness: it is "a *reductio ad absurdum* of his whole technique," since the homoerotic episode can only be sustained by the text if "brav'd forth without my cloak" is taken to mean Shakespeare did so with a view to making improper advances (p. 125). He infers (I find no reason for this) that the episode reflects what once happened between Butler and Pauli. Schoenbaum observes wryly: "An element of literalness in these readings of Sonnet 34 is difficult to deny" (p. 454).
24. The sonnets are all found in *Works*, XX, 424-428. One excluded sonnet, addressed to the deceased Miss E.M.A. Savage is found in *Letters Between Samuel Butler and Miss E.M.A. Savage (1871-1885)* edited by Geoffrey Keynes and Brian Hill (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), 374.
25. *Memoir*, II, 321-22; letter of February 6, 1900.
26. This point is well established by J.B. Leishman's *Themes and Variations in Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York: Hilary House, 1961).
27. *MSNB*, I, 120: December 1881; see also *MSNB*, IV, 76 (May, 1891) for a similar sentiment.
28. Letter of December 31, 1899, reprinted in Donald Stanford's article. See n. 16. Bridges here noted: "I was sorry that in so elaborate a book there was so little exposition of analytical detail—for the poem seems to me full of careful 'construction' (even to the point that suggests revision and intercalations of later work among earlier.)"
29. Matthew Arnold, "Shakespeare."