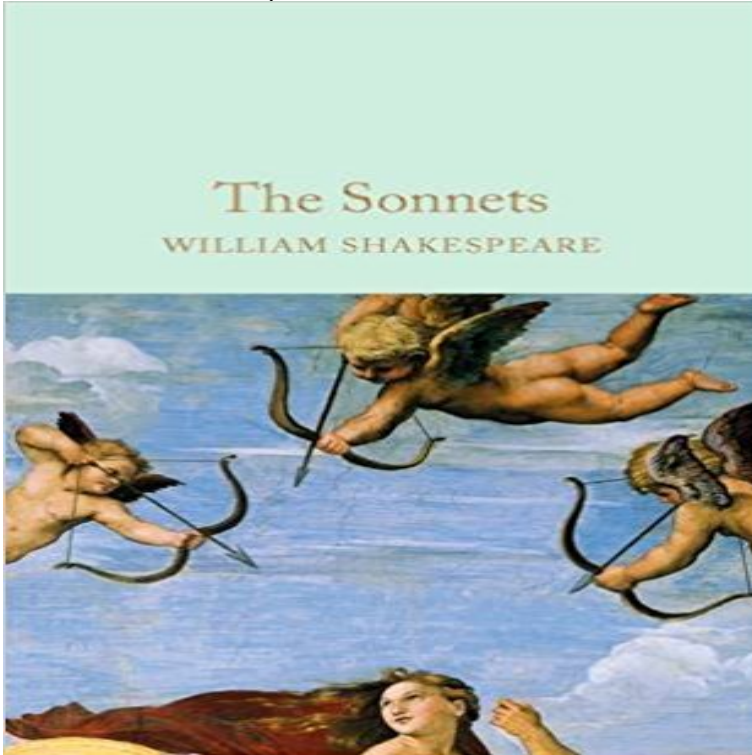


# The Sonnets (Macmillan Collectors Library)



Excerpt from *The Sonnets of Shakespeare: From the Quarto of 1609 With Variorum Readings and Commentary* The Sonnets of Shakespeare have a place beside the play of Hamlet in contention for the doubtful honor of being the cause of more perplexity and controversy than any other literary work in the English tongue. More persons, otherwise seemingly normal members of society, have thought that they were the first to understand one or the other of these works, or have professed to make illuminating discoveries regarding them, than could be computed as critics of any writing since the Iliad. If the present editor can come to the end of his task with any feeling of complacency, it is because he has spent some years with the Sonnets and still finds himself without a revelation. In other words, his complacency must be due only to the existence of some evidence that he is still sane - a poor substitute, no doubt, for the enthusiasm of the seer. It is the purpose of this volume, then, not to present a new theory of the Sonnets, but to bring together a body of critical material illustrative of them, sufficient for all the purposes of the less ambitious reader, and adequate to set the most tireless student on the track of what he wishes to know. The Bibliography is intended to serve as a convenient outline of the history of the text and its interpretation; but it may be well to say something here of the general course of this history. Though seemingly among the fairly popular lyrical collections of the seventeenth century, the

Sonnets largely dropped out of sight toward the end of that century and through the greater part of the eighteenth century. The age, therefore, of the building of the modern text of Shakespeares plays saw no similar work accomplished for the Sonnets, which were not even included in any edition of the Works of Shakespeare (save in occasional supplementary volumes) until Ewings Dublin edition of 1771, and not again till Malones of 1790. It is to Malone that we owe, in effect, the acceptance of the narrative and lyrical poems as a part of the standard Shakespeare text; and it is also to him, in large measure, that we owe the modern text of the Sonnets. Practically all the well-known editors of Shakespeare of the nineteenth century, beginning with Boswell (but with the exception of Singer), paid due attention to the Sonnets, and, together with numerous lesser commentators, from time to time proposed improvements in the text; but it cannot be said that it was given to any later critic to add in a distinguished way to the textual work of Malone, -though it was given to a number of his successors to reject certain of his errors. Dyces conservative work on the text, in the Aldine edition of the Poems (1832) and in his Works of Shakespeare, should perhaps be mentioned. In 1866 the Cambridge editors (Clark and Wright) issued the ninth volume of their Shakespeare, containing the Sonnets, and gave for the first time something like a history of the text up to that period, which was brought down to 1893 in the revised edition. About the Publisher Forgotten Books publishes hundreds of thousands

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