Classic Poetry Series

James Shirley

- 17 poems -

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James Shirley (September 1596 – October 1666)

James Shirley (or Sherley) was an English dramatist.

He belonged to the great period of English dramatic literature, but, in Lamb's words, he "claims a place among the worthies of this period, not so much for any transcendent genius in himself, as that he was the last of a great race, all of whom spoke nearly the same language and had a set of moral feelings and notions in common." His career of play writing extended from 1625 to the suppression of stage plays by Parliament in 1642.

Life

Shirley was born in London. He was educated at Merchant Taylors' School, London, St John's College, Oxford, and St Catharine's College, Cambridge, where he took his B.A. degree in or before 1618.
His first poem, Echo, or the Unfortunate Lovers (of which no copy is known, but which is probably the same as Narcissus of 1646), was published in 1618. After earning his M.A., he was, Wood says, "a minister of God's word in or near St Albans." Apparently in consequence of his conversion to the Roman Catholic faith, he left his living, and was master of St Albans School from 1623–25. His first play, Love Tricks, seems to have been written while he was teaching at St Albans. He removed in 1625 to London, where he lived in Gray's Inn, and for eighteen years from that time he was a prolific writer for the stage, producing more than thirty regular plays, tragedies, comedies, and tragicomedies, and showing no sign of exhaustion when a stop was put to his occupation by the Puritan edict of 1642. Most of his plays were performed by Queen Henrietta's Men, the playing company for which Shirley served as house dramatist, much as Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Massinger had done for the King's Men.

Shirley's sympathies were with the King in his disputes with Parliament and he received marks of special favor from the Queen. He made a bitter attack on William Prynne, who had attacked the stage in Histriomastix, and, when in 1634 a special masque was presented at Whitehall by the gentlemen of the Inns of Court as a practical reply to Prynne, Shirley supplied the text—The Triumph of Peace. Between 1636 and 1640 Shirley went to Ireland, under the patronage apparently of the Earl of Kildare. Three or four of his plays were produced by his friend John Ogilby in Dublin in the theatre in Werburgh Street, the first ever built in Ireland and at the time of Shirley's visit only one year old. During his Dublin stay, Shirley wrote The Doubtful Heir, The Royal Master, The Constant Maid, and St. Patrick for Ireland. In his absence from London, Queen Henrietta's Men sold off a dozen of his plays to the stationers, who published them in the late 1630s. Shirley, when he

returned to London in 1640, would no longer work for the Queen Henrietta's company as a result; his final plays of his London career were acted by the King's Men.

On the outbreak of the English Civil War he seems to have served with the Earl of Newcastle, but when the King's fortunes began to decline he returned to London. He owed something to the kindness of Thomas Stanley, but supported himself chiefly by teaching, publishing some educational works under the Commonwealth. Besides these he published during the period of dramatic eclipse four small volumes of poems and plays, in 1646, 1653, 1655, and 1659. He "was a drudge" for John Ogilby in his translations of the Iliad and the Odyssey, and survived into the reign of Charles II, but, though some of his comedies were revived, he did not again attempt to write for the stage. Wood says that he and his second wife died of fright and exposure after the Great Fire of London, and were buried at St Giles in the Fields on 29 October 1666.

Shirley was born to great dramatic wealth, and he handled it freely. He constructed his own plots out of the abundance of materials that had been accumulated during thirty years of unexampled dramatic activity. He did not strain after novelty of situation or character, but worked with confident ease and buoyant copiousness on the familiar lines, contriving situations and exhibiting characters after types whose effectiveness on the stage had been proved by ample experience. He spoke the same language with the great dramatists, it is true, but this grand style is sometimes employed for the artificial elevation of commonplace thought. "Clear as day" becomes in this manner "day is not more conspicuous than this cunning"; while the proverb "Still waters run deep" is ennobled into — "The shallow rivers glide away with noise — The deep are silent." The violence and exaggeration of many of his contemporaries left him untouched. His scenes are ingeniously conceived, his characters boldly and clearly drawn; and he never falls beneath a high level of stage effect.

Works:

Tragedies

The Maid's Revenge (licensed Feb. 9, 1626; printed, 1639)
The Traitor (licensed 4 May 1631; printed, 1635)
Love's Cruelty (licensed Nov. 14, 1631; printed, 1640)
The Politician (acted, 1639; printed, 1655)
The Cardinal (licensed 25 May 1641; printed, 1652).

Tragicomedies

The Grateful Servant (licensed Nov. 3, 1629 as The Faithful Servant; printed 1630)
The Young Admiral (licensed 3 July 1633; printed 1637)
The Coronation (licensed Feb. 6, 1635, as Shirley's, but printed in 1640 as a work of John Fletcher)
The Duke's Mistress (licensed Jan. 18, 1636; printed 1638)
The Gentleman of Venice (licensed Oct. 30, 1639; printed 1655)
The Doubtful Heir (printed 1652), licensed as Rosania, or Love's Victory in 1640
The Imposture (licensed Nov. 10, 1640; printed 1652)
The Court Secret (printed 1653).

Comedies

Love Tricks, or the School of Complement (licensed Feb. 10, 1625; printed under its subtitle, 1631)
The Wedding (ca. 1626; printed 1629)
The Brothers (licensed Nov. 4, 1626; printed 1652)
The Witty Fair One (licensed Oct. 3, 1628; printed 1633)
The Humorous Courtier (licensed 17 May 1631; printed 1640).
The Changes, or Love in a Maze (licensed Jan. 10, 1632; printed 1639)
Hyde Park (licensed 20 April 1632; printed 1637)

The Ball (licensed Nov. 16, 1632; printed 1639)
The Bird in a Cage, or The Beauties (licensed Jan. 21, 1633; printed 1633)
The Gamester (licensed Nov. 11, 1633; printed 1637)
The Example (licensed 24 June 1634; printed 1637)
The Opportunity (licensed Nov. 29, 1634; printed 1640)
The Lady of Pleasure (licensed Oct. 15, 1635; printed 1637)
The Royal Master (acted and printed 1638)
The Constant Maid, or Love Will Find Out the Way (printed 1640)
The Sisters (licensed 26 April 1642; printed 1653).

Dramas

A Contention for Honor and Riches (printed 1633), morality play
The Triumph of Peace (licensed Feb. 3, 1634; printed 1634), masque
The Arcadia (printed 1640), pastoral tragicomedy
St. Patrick for Ireland (printed 1640), neo-miracle play
The Triumph of Beauty (ca. 1640; printed 1646), masque
The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses (printed 1659), entertainment
Cupid and Death (performed 26 March 1653; printed 1659), masque
Honoria and Mammon (unperformed; printed 1659), morality.

A Hymn

O FLY, my Soul! What hangs upon
   Thy drooping wings,
   And weighs them down
With love of gaudy mortal things?

The Sun is now i' the east: each shade
   As he doth rise
   Is shorter made,
That earth may lessen to our eyes.

O be not careless then and play
   Until the Star of Peace
Hide all his beams in dark recess!
Poor pilgrims needs must lose their way,
When all the shadows do increase.

James Shirley

Cease, Warring Thoughts

Cease, warring thoughts, and let his brain
No more discord entertain,
But be smooth and calm again.

Ye crystal rivers that are nigh,
As your streams are passing by,
Teach your murmurs harmony.

Ye winds that wait upon the spring,
And perfumes to flowers do bring,
Let your amorous whispers here
Breathe soft music to his ear.

Ye warbling nightingales repair
From every wood to charm this air,
And with the wonders of your breast
Each striving to excel the rest.
When it is time to wake him, close your parts,
And drop down from the trees with broken hearts.

James Shirley

Death the Leveller

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against Fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and Crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crookèd scythe and spade.

Some men with swords may reap the field,
And plant fresh laurels where they kill:
But their strong nerves at last must yield;
They tame but one another still:
Early or late
They stoop to fate,
And must give up their murmuring breath
When they, pale captives, creep to death.

The garlands wither on your brow,
Then boast no more your mighty deeds!
Upon Death's purple altar now
See where the victor-victim bleeds.
Your heads must come
To the cold tomb:
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in their dust.

James Shirley

Death's Final Conquest

The glories of our birth and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against fate:
Death lays his icy hands on kings;
Sceptre and crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.

Some men with swords reap the field,
And plant fresh laurels where they kill;
But their strong nerves at last must yield;
They tame but one another still:
Early or late
They stoop to fate,
And must give up their murmuring breath,
When they, pale captives, creep to death.

The garlands wither on your brow,
Then boast no more your mighty deeds;
Upon death's purple altar now,
See where the victor victim bleeds:
All heads must come
To the cold tomb,
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in the dust.

James Shirley

Death's Subtle Ways

Victorious men of earth, no more
Proclaim how wide your empires are;
Though you bind in every shore
And your triumphs reach as far
As night or day,
Yet you, proud monarchs, must obey
And mingle with forgotten ashes when
Death calls ye to the crowd of common men.

Devouring Famine, Plague, and War,
Each able to undu mankind,
Death's servile emissaries are;
Nor to these alone confined,
He hath at will
More quaint and subtle ways to kill;
A smile or kiss, as he will use the art,
Shall have the cunning skill to break a heart.

James Shirley

From Ajax Dirge

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armor against fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings.
    Scepter and crown
    Must tumble down
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.

Some men with swords may reap the field
And plant fresh laurels where they kill,
But their strong nerves at last must yield;
They tame but one another still.
    Early or late
    They stoop to fate
And must give up their murmuring breath,
When they, pale captives, creep to death.

The garlands wither on your brow,
Then boast no more your mighty deeds;
Upon death’s purple altar now
See where the victor-victim bleeds.
    Your heads must come
    To the cold tomb;
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in their dust.

James Shirley

On Her Dancing

I stood and saw my Mistress dance,
Silent, and with so fixed an eye,
Some might suppose me in a trance:
But being asked why,
By one I who knew I was in love,
I could not but impart
My wonder, to behold her move
So nimbly with a marble heart.

James Shirley

Peace Restored

You virgins, that did late despair
To keep your wealth from cruel men,
Tie up in silk your careless hair:
Soft peace is come again.

Now lovers' eyes may gently shoot
A flame that will not kill;
The drum was angry, but the lute
Shall whisper what you will.

Sing Io, Io! for his sake
That hath restored your drooping heads;
With choice of sweetest flowers make
A garden where he treads;

Whilst we whole groves of laurel bring,
A petty triumph for his brow,
Who is the master of our spring
And all the bloom we owe.

James Shirley

Sililoquy On Death

I have not lived
After the rate to fear another world.
We come from nothing into life, a time
We measure with a short breath, and that often
Made tedious, too, with our own cares that fill it;
Which, like so many atoms in a sunbeam,
But crowd and jostle one another. All,
From the adored purple to the haircloth,
Must centre in a shade; and they that have
Their virtues to wait on them, bravely mock
The rugged storms that so much fright them here,
When their soul's launch'd by death into a sea
That's ever calm.

James Shirley

Song of Nuns

O fly, my soul! what hangs upon
Thy drooping wings,
And weighs them down
With love of gaudy mortal things?

The Sun is now i' the east; each shade,
As he doth rise,
Is shorter made,
That earth may lessen to our eyes.

Oh, be not careless then and play
Until the star of peace
Hide all his beams in dark recess.
Poor pilgrims needs must lose their way
When all the shadows do increase.

James Shirley

The Fair Felon

In Love's name you are charged hereby
To make a speedy hue and cry,
After a face, who t'other day,
Came and stole my heart away;
For your directions in brief
These are best marks to know the thief:
Her hair a net of beams would prove,
Strong enough to capture Jove,
Playing the eagle; her clear brow
Is a comely field of snow.
A sparkling eye, so pure a gray
As when it shines it needs no day.
Ivory dwelleth on her nose;
Lilies, married to the rose,
Have made her cheek the nuptial bed;
Her lips betray their virgin red,
As they only blushed for this,
That they one another kiss.
But observe, beside the rest,
You shall know this felon best
By her tongue; for if your ear
Shall know this felon best
By her tongue; for if your ear
Shall once a heavenly music hear,
Such as neither gods nor men
But from that voice shall hear again,
That, that is she, oh, take her t'ye,
None can rock heaven asleep but she.

James Shirley

The Garden

This Garden does not take my eyes,
Though here you show how art of men
Can purchase Nature at a price
Would stock old Paradise again.

These glories while you dote upon,
I envy not your spring nor pride,
Nay, boast the summer all your own,
My thoughts with less are satisified.

Give me a little plot of ground,
Where might I with the Sun agree,
Though every day he walk the round,
My Garden he should seldom see.

Those Tulips that such wealth display,
To court my eye, shall lose their name,
Though now they listen, as if they
Expected I should praise their name.

But I would see my self appear
Within the Violet's drooping head,
On which a melancholy tear
The discontented morn hath shed.

Within their buds let Roses sleep,
And virgin Lilies on their stem,
Till sighs from lovers glide, and creep
Into their leaves to open them.

I'th'center of my ground compose
Of Bays and Yew my summer room,
Which may so oft as I repose,
Present my arbor, and my tomb.

No woman here shall find me out,
Or if a chance do bring one hither,
I'll be secure, for round about
I'll moat it with my eyes' foul weather.

No bird shall live within my pale,
To charm me with their shames of art,
Unless some wandering Nightingale
Come here to sing and break her heart.

Upon whose death I'll try to write
An epitaph in some funeral stone,
So sad, and true, it may invite
My self to die, and prove mine own.

James Shirley

The Glories of our Blood and State

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Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings.
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Must tumble down,
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And plant fresh laurels where they kill;
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Upon death's purple altar now,
See where the victor-victim bleeds.
Your heads must come
To the cold tomb;
Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet and blossom in their dust.

James Shirley

The Last Conqueror

Victorious men of earth, no more
Proclaim how wide your empires are;
Though you bind-in every shore
And your triumphs reach as far
As night and day,
Yet you, proud monarchs, must obey
And mingle with forgotten ashes, when
Death calls ye to the crowd of common men.

Devouring Famine, Plague, and War,
Each able to undo mankind,
Death's servile emissaries are;
Nor to these alone confined,
He hath at will
More quaint and subtle ways to kill;
A smile or kiss, as he will use the art,
Shall have the cunning skill to break a heart.

James Shirley

To a Lady Upon a Looking-Glass Sent

When this crystal shall present
Your beauty to your eye,
Think that lovely face was meant
To dress another by.
For not to make them proud,
These glasses are allowed
To those are fair,
But to compare
The inward beauty with the outward grace,
And make them fair in soul as well as face.

James Shirley

To the Painter Preparing to Draw M.M.H.

Be not too forward, painter; 'tis
More for thy fame, and art, to miss
All other faces, than come near
The Lady, that expecteth here.
Be wise, and think it less disgrace
To draw an angel, than her face;
For in such forms, who is so wise
To tell thee where thy error lies?
But since all beauty (that is known)
Is in her virgin sweetness one,
How can it be, that painting her
But every look should make thee err?
But thou art resolute I see;
Yet let my fancy walk with thee:
Compose a ground more dark and sad,
Than that the early Chaos had,
And show, to the whole sex's shame,
Beauty was darkness till she came.
Then paint her eyes, whose active light
Shall make the former shadows bright,
And with their every beam supply
New day, to draw her picture by.
Now, if thou wilt complete the face,
A wonder paint in every place.
Beneath these, for her fair neck's sake,
White as the Paphian Turtles, make
A pillar, whose smooth base doth show
It self lost in a mount of snow;
Her breast, the house of chaste desire,
Cold, but increasing others' fire.
But how I lose (instructing thee)
Thy pencil, and my poetry!
For when thou hast expressed all art,
As high as truth, in every part,
She can resemble at the best,
One, in her beauty's silence dressed,
Where thou, like a dull looker-on,
Art lost, and all thy art undone;
For if she speak, new wonders rise
From her teeth, chin, lip, and eyes;
So far above that excellent
Did take thee first, thou should repent
To have begun, and lose i'th'end
Thy eyes with wonder how to mend.
At such a loss, here's all thy choice,
Leave off, or paint her with a voice.

James Shirley

Two Gentlemen That Broke Their Promise

There is no faith in claret, and it shall
Henceforth with me be held apocryphal.
I'll trust a small-beer promise, nay, a troth
Washed in the Thames, before a French wine oath.
That grape, they say, is binding; yes, 'tis so,
And it has made your souls thus costive too.
Circe transformed the Greeks; no hard design,
For some can do as much with claret wine
Upon themselves; witness you two, allowed
Once honest, now turned air, and à la mode.
Begin no health in this, or if by chance
The King's 'twill question your allegiance;
And men will, after all your ruffling, say
You drink as some do fight, in the French way:
Engage and trouble many, when 'tis known
You spread their interest to wave your own.
Away with this false Christian: it shall be
An excommunicate from mirth, and me;
Give me the Catholic diviner flame,
To light me to the fair Odelia's name;
'Tis sack that justifies both man and verse,
Whilst you in Lethe-claret still converse.
Forget your own names next; and when you look
With hope to find, be lost in the church-book.

James Shirley