

THE PRISON YEARS

DAY EIGHT IN THE TOWER

Sonnet 34

Ransom All Ill Deeds

15 February 1601

Proceeding directly from the previous two verses, Oxford grieves that the birth of his royal son, promising a future on the throne, has been hidden behind the “clouds” of the Queen’s refusal to acknowledge him. Now, Southampton has committed treason and has lost any chance for succession. Oxford’s son grieves and wants to “repent,” but Oxford still must make a sacrifice to save his life, gain his release from the Tower and, finally, secure the promise of a royal pardon for him. He must become a Christ figure and bear the cross, by sacrificing his own identity (as father and as “Shakespeare,” the name he linked to Southampton). His son’s tears (likened to Elizabeth’s pearls) are Oxford’s as well; and all this suffering and sacrifice is the “ransom” (akin to the legal fines or “ransoms” actually paid by other conspirators of the Rebellion) to be paid for Henry Wriothesley’s life, liberty and restoration of honor.

Sonnet 34

Translation

Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day
And make me travail forth without my cloak,
To let base clouds o’er-take me in my way,
Hiding thy bravery in their rotten smoke?

‘Tis not enough that through the cloud thou break,
To dry the rain on my storm-beaten face,
For no man well of such a salve can speak
That heals the wound and cures not the disgrace.

Nor can thy shame give physic to my grief;
Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss;
Th’offender’s sorrow lends but weak relief
To him that bears the strong offence’s loss.

Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy love
sheeds,
And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds.

Why did you promise such a royal destiny
And make me labor for you without defense,
To let the Queen’s disfavor stop my purpose,
Burying your royalty beneath her negative view?

It’s not enough that your royalty is seen by me
To make me feel better,
For I cannot speak well of such relief
That eases my pain but doesn’t cure your disgrace.

Nor can your shame [for treason] help my grief!
Though you repent, I continue to lose you;
Your sorrow [for treason] lends only weak relief
To me as I bear the burden of your treason’s loss.

Ah, but those tears are shed by your royal blood –
And they, being royal, atone for your crime.

Sonnet 34

1 WHY DIDST THOU PROMISE SUCH A BEAUTEOUS DAY

BEAUTEOUS = related to “beauty” or Elizabeth, i.e., Southampton as the son of Elizabeth who had been filled with golden royal hope; (“Which like a jewel hung in ghastly night,/ Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new” – Sonnet 27, lines 11-12); **BEAUTEOUS DAY** = same as the “Summer’s Day” of royal hope (Sonnet 18, line 1) that once held such promise for Oxford to see his son named to succeed Elizabeth; following Sonnet 33, the birth of the royal son as the sun that brings forth its golden beams of day; **WHY DIDST THOU PROMISE SUCH A BEAUTEOUS DAY** = this question springs from the previous verse, in which Oxford describes how “my Sunne one early morn did shine” – Sonnet 33, line 9, and thereby promised a royal destiny; such a golden time filled with “beauty” or royal blood of the Queen; “Seeking that *beauteous roof to ruinate*” – Sonnet 10, line 7, referring to Elizabeth’s House of Tudor

2 AND MAKE ME TRAVAIL FORTH WITHOUT MY CLOAK,

TRAVAIL FORTH WITHOUT MY CLOAK = labor or go forth in life without protection, i.e., he has been forced to plead with both the Queen and Robert Cecil for his son’s sake, as though stripped naked; (“The dear repose for limbs *with travail tired*” – Sonnet 27, line 2); “yet I am one that hath long besieged a fort and is not able to compass the end or reap the fruit of his *travail*” – Oxford to Burghley, June 25, 1586; “I do well perceive how your Lordship doth *travail* for me in this case of an especial grace and favor” – Oxford to Robert Cecil, June 19, 1603

3 TO LET BASE CLOUDS O’ERTAKE ME IN MY WAY,

BASE CLOUDS = the disgrace of treason; (“But out alack, he was but one hour mine,/ The *region cloud* hath masked him from me now” – Sonnet 33, lines 11-12; i.e., the “clouds” of disgrace relate to the “region cloud” or Elizabeth Regina’s dark cloud of imperial disgrace, casting its shadow over both Southampton and Oxford; Southampton is now at best a “base commoner”; “But if that flower (Southampton) with *base infection* (other rebels in the Tower) meet,/ The *basest weed* (Southampton) outbraves his dignity” – Sonnet 94, line 12; “As on the finger of a throned Queen,/ The *basest Jewel* will be well esteemed” – Sonnet 96, lines 5-6; “Dark’ning thy power to lend *base* subjects light” – Sonnet 100, line 4; “In thy heart-blood, though being all too *base* to *stain* the temper of my knightly sword” – *Richard II*, 4.1.28-29; “Disgrace not so your king, that he should be so abject, *base*, and poor” – *1 Henry VI*, 5.5.48-49; **O’ER-TAKE ME** = ambush me

4 HIDING THY BRAVERY IN THEIR ROTTEN SMOKE?

HIDING THY BRAVERY = concealing your royalty from the world; **THEIR ROTTEN SMOKE** = the ugly vapor of the clouds of disgrace; clouds of Elizabeth’s displeasure.

“Now for so much as I understand, it is meant to delay the report to the end to get a composition of Her Majesty, and so to bring all my hope in Her Majesty’s gracious words to *smoke*.”

- Oxford to Robert Cecil, January 1602

5 ‘TIS NOT ENOUGH THAT THROUGH THE CLOUDS THOU BREAK

It does no good that you still rise, sun-like, through these clouds; **THROUGH THE CLOUD THOU BREAK** = Southampton, because of his royal blood, still breaks through the cloud of disgrace as the prince; this concept, that nothing can extinguish his royal blood, is similar to that in the Bath sonnets: “Love’s fire heats water, water cools not love” – Sonnet 154, line 14

6 TO DRY THE RAIN ON MY STORM-BEATEN FACE,

TO DRY THE RAIN, etc. = to dry my tears by basking me in the sunshine of your royalty;
RAIN = tears; also, a play on “reign”; to take away your reign as king; to remove the triumph from my face, as when you were born “With all triumphant splendor on my brow” – Sonnet 33, line 10; “The trickling tears, that fall along my cheeks” – Oxford poem, published 1576

7 FOR NO MAN WELL OF SUCH A SALVE CAN SPEAK,

SALVE = cure; “And find no secret *salve* therefore” – Oxford poem, *Paradise of Dainty Devices*, 1576); “Against strange maladies a *sovereign cure*” – Sonnet 153, line 8; “Myself corrupting, *salving thy amiss*” – Sonnet 35, line 7; “She is *my salve*, she is my *wounded sore*” – Oxford poem, published 1576, of Elizabeth; “So long to fight with secret sore,/ And find no *secret salve* therefore” – Oxford poem, published 1576

8 THAT HEALS THE WOUND, AND CURES NOT THE DISGRACE:

THAT HEALS, etc. = that heals the grief but fails to remove the **DISGRACE** that Southampton now suffers while awaiting trial as a traitor, in addition to the disgrace of losing his royal claim, i.e., his loss of royal/divine grace; **WOUND** = “For that *deep wound* it gives my friend and me” – Sonnet 133, line 2, to Elizabeth during this time period; “Who was the first that gave *the wound* whose fear I wear for ever? Vere” – from Verses Made by the Earle of Oxforde, Rawlinson Poet.MS 85 f.11; Chiljan 183

9 NOR CAN THY SHAME GIVE PHYSIC TO MY GRIEF:

THY SHAME = your own regret; “So to the laws at large I write my name, and he that breaks them in the least degree stands in *attainder* of eternal *shame*” – *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.153-155; **GIVE PHYSIC** = offer a remedy for my grief; “Fraud is the front of Fortune past all recovery/ I stayless stand, to abide the shock of *shame* and infamy/ ... The only loss of my good name is of these *griefs* the ground” – Oxford poem, published 1576

10 THOUGH THOU REPENT, YET I HAVE STILL THE LOSS,

REPENT = “And I *repent my fault* more than my death, which I beseech your Highness to forgive” – *Henry V*, 2.2.152-153, the plea of Scroop, a traitor; “Get ye therefore hence, poor miserable wretches, to your death, the taste whereof God of his mercy give you patience to endure, and true *repentance* of all your dear *offences*!” – the king to the nobles who betrayed him, in *Henry V*, 2.2.178-182; “As I intend to prosper and *repent*, so thrive I in my dangerous affairs of hostile arms” – the king in *Richard III*, 4.4.397

Clifford, ask mercy and obtain no grace.

Clifford, *repent* in bootless penitence.

Clifford, devise excuses for thy faults.

While we devise fell tortures for thy faults. 3 *Henry VI*, 2.6.69-72

Oxford **STILL** or always will have this **LOSS**, as father of the prince; i.e., the loss of his kingship, the possible loss of his life by execution

11 TH’OFFENDER’S SORROW LENDS BUT WEAK RELIEF

TH’OFFENDER’S SORROW = Southampton’s sorrow; he has committed the “offence” of treason; (“I know I have *offended* her, yet if it please her to be merciful unto me, I may live and by my service deserve my life” – Southampton at the trial, referring to the Queen’s mercy; “I would wish therefore that you likewise submit yourself to her Majesty’s mercy, acknowledging your *offences*” – the Lord Steward to Essex at the trial)

OFFENDER = “Besides, the King hath wasted all his rods on late *offenders*, that he doth lack the very instruments of chastisement” - 2 *Henry IV*, 4.1.215-216

Thy cruelty in execution

Upon *offenders* hath exceeded law

2 *Henry VI*, 1.3.132-133

12 TO HIM THAT BEARS THE STRONG OFFENCE'S LOSS.

BEARS = as in bearing the Cross; suggestive of bearing a child; **THE STRONG OFFENCE'S LOSS** = an image of Oxford bearing the Cross in pain; most editors use "cross" although in *Q* the word is again "loss" as in line 10 above; and in fact it is the "loss" of Southampton's kingship that causes Oxford the most grief; "My nephew's *trespass* may well be forgot ... All his *offences* live upon my head and *on his father's*. We did train him on, and, his corruption being ta'en from us, we as the spring of all shall pay for all" – *1 Henry IV*, 5.2.16-23; "Yet you Pilates have here delivered me to my sour *cross*, and water cannot wash away your sin" – *Richard II*, 4.1.240-242; Oxford in Sonnet 42 will explain that Southampton has lost the Queen's support and that he, Oxford, has lost both of them by losing the hope that she would name their son as heir to the throne:

And losing her, my friend hath found that *loss*;
Both find each other, and I lose both twain,
And both for my sake lay me on this *cross*.
Sonnet 42, lines 10-12

OFFENCE = "O, my *offence* is rank, it smells to heaven ... May one be pardoned and retain *th'offence*?" – King Claudius in *Hamlet*, 3.3.36, 56; "And where *th'offence* is, let the great axe fall" – *Hamlet*, 4.5.215; "Hath the late *overthrow* wrought this *offence*?" – *1 Henry VI*, 1.2.49

Southampton will write to the Privy Council after the trial of Feb. 19: "I beseech your Lordships be pleased to receive the petition of a poor condemned man, who doth, with a lowly and penitent heart, *confess* his *faults* and acknowledge his *offences* to her Majesty. Remember, I pray your Lordships, that the longest liver amongst men hath but a short time of continuance, and that there is none so just upon earth but hath a greater account to make to our creator for his *sins* than any *offender* can have in this world." (Stopes, 225-226; Salisbury Papers, vol. XI, p. 72)

13 AH, BUT THOSE TEARS ARE PEARL WHICH THY LOVE SHEEDS,

TEARS = "For I should melt at *an offender's tears*, and lowly words were ransom for their *fault*" – *2 Henry VI*, 3.1.126-127; **PEARL** = royal; ("Suggestive of Christ's comparison of the kingdom of heaven to a pearl of great price, Matthew, 13.46" – Duncan-Jones); the tears Southampton sheds are "pearls" inherited from his mother the Queen, who often wore seven to eight ropes of pearls, some to her knees; (One observer described them as the size of nutmegs; Elizabeth owned more than 3,000 pearl-encrusted gowns (www.mikimoto.fr/en.pearl.htm); Oxford suggests the Queen herself is weeping (through her son) with pearls over this tragic situation; **WHICH THY LOVE SHEEDS** = that your royal blood sheds; calling forth an image of Christ shedding His blood on the Cross.

14 AND THEY ARE RICH, AND RANSOM ALL ILL DEEDS.

RICH = royal, i.e., Southampton's tears, the pearls; a "rich" price will be paid by Oxford to "ransom" him from execution and to arrange for his eventual release and pardon. **RANSOM** = "The action of procuring the release of a prisoner or captive by paying a certain sum ... the fact or possibility of being set free on this condition ... the sum or price paid or demanded for the release of a prisoner, i.e., 'a king's ransom,' a large sum ... in religious use, of Christ or His blood" – *OED*; suggestive of Jesus "gave himself a *ransom* for all men," Timothy, 2.6; "But that your *trespass* now becomes a *fee*;/ Mine *ransoms* yours, and yours must *ransom* me" – Sonnet 120, lines 13-14, referring back to this sonnet, and to Oxford's forfeiting of his identity as Southampton's father and, too, of his identity as "Shakespeare" who dedicated his works to Southampton; i.e., Oxford is paying this "ransom" or "fee" for his son's "trespass" or crime of treason to gain his freedom; "His *ransom* there is none but I shall pay ... His crown shall be the *ransom of my friend* ... The Duke of Bedford had a *prisoner* ... For him was I exchanged and *ransomed* - *1 Henry VI*, 1.2.148, 150; 1.4.26-28

On any ground that I am ruler of,
The world shall not be *ransom for thy life*
2 Henry VI, 3.2.295-296

For I should melt at an *offender's* tears
 And lowly words were *ransom* for their *fault* 2 *Henry VI*, 3.1.126-127

This one thing, only
 I will entreat: my boy, a Briton born,
 Let him be *ransom'd* *Cymbeline*, 5.5.83-85

Be not so rash; *take ransom, let him live* 2 *Henry VI*, 4.1.28

And was he not in England prisoner?
 But when they hear he was thine enemy,
 They *set him free without his ransom paid* 1 *Henry VI*, 3.3.70-72

Of the world's *ransom*, blessed Mary's Son *Richard II*, 2.1.56

Why, yet he doth deny his prisoners,
 But with proviso and exception,
 That we at our own charge shall *ransom* straight
 His brother-in-law, the foolish Mortimer 1 *Henry IV*, 1.3.76-79

Once more I come to know of thee, King Harry,
 If for thy *ransom* thou wilt now compound,
 Before thy most assured *overthrow* *Henry V*, 4.3.79-81

My *shame* and *guilt* confounds me.
 Forgive me, Valentine: if hearty *sorrow*
 Be a sufficient *ransom* for *offence*,
 I tender it here; I do as truly suffer *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 5.4.73-76

Titus Andronicus, my lord the emperor
 Sends thee this word: that if thou love thy sons,
 Let Marcus, Lucius, or thyself, old Titus,
 Or any one of you, chop off your hand
 And send it to the king, he for the same
 Will send thee hither both thy sons alive,
 And that shall be the *ransom* for their *fault* *Titus Andronicus*, 3.1.151-157

John Chamberlain to Dudley Carleton, May 27, 1601: "...for there is a commission to certain of the Council to *ransom and fine* the Lords and Gentlemen that were in the action..." (Stopes, 233; D.S.S.P. CCLXXIX, 91); Oxford, behind the scenes, is working to pay a form of "ransom" for the life of his son; **ALL** = Southampton, *One for All, All for One*; **ILL DEEDS** = acts of treason; ("He feared they were come into an *ill action*" – Witherington's testimony at the Essex-Southampton trial, referring to men at Essex House on the morning of the Rebellion); "How oft the sight of means to do *ill deeds* make *deeds ill done!*" – *King John*, 4.2.219-220