

Review Article

The Distressing Case of Dr. A. L. Rowse

Essayist, poet and Cornish patriot, Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and Senior Fellow of the Huntington Library, Pasadena, Dr. A. L. Rowse is a decidedly versatile gentleman. Since 1950, when he published *The England of Elizabeth*, he has been generally regarded as one of Britain's leading Tudor historians. Understandably, great interest was stirred in mid-September last when the *London Times* published four special articles by Dr. Rowse headed "Historian Answers Questions about Shakespeare", and based upon a new book of his to be published a few weeks later. In the first of these articles, Dr. Rowse declared:

I am prepared to stake my reputation as an Elizabethan scholar on the claim that all the problems of the Sonnets save one — the identity of Shakespeare's mistress, the Dark Lady — are susceptible of solution, and that I have solved them.

The sonnets are, of course, of key importance for any real understanding of Shakespeare. Individual poems may be obscure, but the outline of the story that they unfold is generally clear. Writing initially to persuade a handsome young man that he ought to marry in order to preserve his beauty for the world, Shakespeare subsequently undertakes to give at least a literary immortality to this friend. As the sonnets proceed, the poet finds himself more and more involved in a complex psychological relationship with this "master-mistress" of his passion. There is an estrangement. A reconciliation follows, but subsequently the friend steals the poet's mistress. For a while a rival poet takes Shakespeare's place in the regard of his friend. Shakespeare for a long time deliberately blinds himself to the faults of the friend, compulsively putting all blame upon himself and indulging in fantastic rationalizing in the process. Ultimately he admits the vicious character of the young man and looks elsewhere for love. He returns, after a lengthy interval, to writing sonnets in praise of the friend, excusing, through arguments more ingenious than convincing, his own disloyalty. In a series of sonnets laced with bitter self-contempt he addresses his mistress, the dark lady, taken over by his friend. To her he addresses some of the most obscene insults ever incorporated into poetry. Two literary exercises follow, and the series ends.

Taken *in toto*, Shakespeare's sonnets are one of the most fascinating documents, psychologically, in all literature. Written possibly over a few years, possibly over many, they show the anguish of a man who, with all the sensitivity of poetic genius, is caught between his reason and his desires, both normal and perverse, a man unable to divest himself of a Christian conscience yet trying at times to break away from it. Moving along by fits and starts, the sonnets provide a pitiful narration of human suffering and a merciless record of human folly. They also contain some of the noblest poetry in our literature. Moreover, as Miss M. M. Mahood has demonstrated in a fine article in *Shakespeare Survey*, they again and again illumine the themes of various of Shakespeare's plays. They bristle, however, with problems: Just when did Shakespeare write them? Do we have them in the order in which he composed them? How did they finally come to be printed? Who is "Mr. W. H.", the mysterious "only begetter" to whom the printer Thorpe dedicated the first edition? Who was the friend? Who was the rival poet? And who was the Dark Lady? These are the questions, all except the last, which Dr. Rowse has staked his reputation upon having answered conclusively.

While *The Times* was releasing Dr. Rowse's answers to an expectant world, that savant went on T.V. in Britain, adding to the pre-publication excitement about his book. He then crossed to the United States where at the Pierpont Morgan Library he delivered a lecture, "The Problem of Shakespeare's Sonnets Solved". The next day he was interviewed by a reporter from *The New Yorker*, to whom he announced that he had added "a completely new dimension to Shakespeare the man". Finally, on October 3, Macmillan published in London the loudly heralded *William Shakespeare: A Biography*.^{*} Advance copies had been sent to André Maurois and C. P. Snow, who had come up with endorsements which figured largely in the advertisements heralding the great event. "This is a wonderful work", said C. P. Snow. "It is true", avouched Maurois, "that A. L. Rowse has solved once and for all the question of Shakespeare's sonnets." "This is a great book", he added.

In view of the enormous publicity, the prestige of the author, and the fascination of the subject, the book itself was sold out on the first day. Obviously, Rowse's *Shakespeare* was destined to keep the printing presses whirling for some time to come. Over in the United States, the Book-of-the-Month-Club had decided to make the book its sole selection for January, 1964. One thing was already clear—Rowse would win the royalties jackpot for books on Shakespeare in 1964, the quadricentennial year of the dramatist's birth.

Well, 1964 is here and Rowse's *Shakespeare* is being enormously widely circulated. What sort of a book is it? Opening it, one is greeted by a preface which will long be

^{*}*William Shakespeare: A Biography*. By A. L. Rowse. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd. [Toronto: Macmillan of Canada Ltd.], 1963. Pp. xiv. 485. \$8.95.

remembered as one of the curiosities of literature. In it Dr. Rowse, throwing all reticence to the winds, proclaims that

. . . this approach to Shakespeare's life and work, and their relation to the age has produced discoveries that have astonished me, shed light upon problems hitherto intractable, produced results which might seem incredible, if it were not for the consideration that this is the first time that a historian of the Elizabethan period has tackled them . . . I am overwhelmed by what historical investigation, by proper historical method, has brought to light.

It has enabled me to solve for the first time, and definitely, the problem of the Sonnets, which has teased so many generations and led so many people into a morass of conjecture.

In this claim to be the first historian to study the sonnets, Rowse is of course indulging in the sheerest poppycock. The chief of our scholars of Elizabethan literature are of necessity intimately acquainted with the history of their period. Men of the calibre of C. J. Sisson, Leslie Hotson, and G. B. Harrison¹ are as competent as Rowse in the field of Elizabethan history. As for the professional historians of the period, Rowse is *not* the first to study the sonnets. Garrett Mattingly back in 1933 published an article giving a far more cogent case for dating Sonnet 108 in 1603 than Rowse has been able to provide for assigning any of the sonnets to his period of 1592-95.

Certain things can be said in commendation of Dr. Rowse's book. It is eminently readable, even if the author's off-the-cuff observations tend to become tedious and platitudinous. Rowse, moreover, has read most of the standard books on Shakespeare, and has synthesized his material well. Along the way, he has plenty of little insights and suggestions of his own. He is well worth listening to when he touches on the parallels between Raleigh and Coriolanus, or between Bertram and his mother in *All's Well* and the Earl of Southampton and his in real life. Unfortunately Rowse has not been content to give suggestions as suggestions. Some evil genius impels him to dogmatism. Thus, while it is interesting to speculate that Shakespeare may have played the part of Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Rowse (without a tittle of evidence) declares "no doubt he played the part himself". The opening line of Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?", may suggest that the poem was written in summer (though no law prohibits writing a summer poem in the autumn or winter), yet Rowse lays it down, "With early summer [in 1592, according to his thesis] we have the first sonnet to become famous, Sonnet 18." Nowhere is this dogmatism more painfully present than in Rowse's allegedly definitive answers to the sonnet problems.

1. Discovering in *King John*, III, iv, 2, a possible reference to the new armada being outfitted by Spain in 1595, Rowse exults: "All commentators have taken this as a reference to the Armada of 1588." Apparently he is unaware that G. B. Harrison, for one, did not make this mistake. Harrison, in his edition of Shakespeare (widely used as an undergraduate textbook) has pointed out that various passages in *King John* may well relate to the Armada scare of 1595.

It is time now that we consider the historian's solutions. The friend he identifies as the Earl of Southampton, the rival poet as Christopher Marlowe, and Mr. W. H. as Sir William Harvey, the third husband of Southampton's mother. Unfortunately, none of these identifications is new, none of them has ever been proved, and Rowse has hardly anything that can be called new evidence to support any of them.

It seems incredible that Dr. Rowse should ever have thought that he could get away with writing a book like this and retain any sort of a reputation as a scholar. Probably the whole sorry matter is basically one of *hubris*, a determination to astound the world with loudly proclaimed discoveries, and a basic attitude (to borrow a quotation from another of his reviewers) of

I am Sir Oracle
And when I ope my lips let no dog bark.

If it was *hubris*, Nemesis soon followed. Shocked and appalled, the Shakespearean scholars moved in for the kill.

One of the first to be heard from was Dr. Josephine Waters Bennett of Hunter College who, after hearing Rowse's lecture at the Morgan Library, tersely reported to the editor of *The Shakespeare Newsletter*:

There was no reference to the discovery of any new evidence. The historian simply reviews the evidence well-known to literary scholars and throws the weight of his prestige as a historian to the Southamptonites.

In England, on the day of the publication of Rowse's book, *The Times* (after its four special articles based on the book) did an about-face with a review in which Ivor Brown acidly announced that Rowse's findings were best described by a line from Sonnet 107, "Incertainties now crown themselves assured", and warned that Rowse's "self-crowning" would not go unchallenged. On the same page *The Times* printed a letter from John Dover Wilson, probably our greatest living Shakespeare scholar, declaring that every one of Rowse's points had been advanced by previous literary scholars, remarking on how unsubstantial his arguments were, and concluding, "I therefore feel bound to warn the public that his case is by no means proved." The next day Professor William Empson in *The New Statesman* made it clear he could not take Rowse's book seriously. Three days later Professor T. Spencer, Director of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, in a review in *The Observer*, noted that Rowse had no new facts and "not much in the way of new guesses". On October 10, Professor L. C. Knights in *The Manchester Guardian* noted that none of Rowse's suggestions was new, and none was certain, and referring to only one passage used a phrase which most critics would extend to cover the entire work—"a bluff confidence trick". A day later the roof fell in on the hapless Rowse, with two utterly devastating reviews from younger men. Writing in *The Spectator*, Philip Brockbank, Lecturer at Reading University, stripped Rowse of the name of

“historian” and characterized him as “a journalist culling what is racy and plausible from secondary printed sources”. In *The Listener*, Professor Christopher Ricks of York University wrote:

. . . by definitely solving something, Dr. Rowse means plumping for one of the many available suggestions, without acknowledging that they existed before, and without mentioning any of the known counter-arguments.

He then proceeded to do a detailed job on Rowse, pointing out that the suggestion that Mr. W. H. was Sir William Harvey was first made in 1867, and that the identification of Christopher Marlowe as the rival poet had first been suggested in 1866. On and on the bad reviews continued. The only exception was that of Cyril Connolly in *The Sunday Times*, who displayed his incompetence in a field of intensive scholarship by swallowing Rowse hook, line, and sinker, though even Connolly was disturbed by the egotistical tones of the great historian. Early in November a *New York Times* correspondent summed everything up when he reported that the chief event of the autumn literary season in England had been “the Ritual Sacrifice of A. L. Rowse”. He was careful to point out that in this case the victim had, in fact, “demanded the knife”.

Looking back on the whole sorry business, one finds it ludicrous and a little sad. By association, if not direct complicity, a number of institutions and persons have lost face, among them the house of Macmillan, *The Times*, C. P. Snow, and Cyril Connolly. How did it all happen? Any properly qualified reader would have told Macmillan that the book was not worth printing. Any properly trained scholar would have warned *The Times* not to touch Rowse’s wares. It comes home to one that the whole thing is a case of The Establishment falling flat on its face. We sometimes dismiss “The Establishment” as the frenzied fiction of malcontent junior intellectuals. It is in fact a very convenient label for a number of persons and institutions which have achieved such status that they are content to accept each other on grounds of each other’s reputations and no longer scrutinize each other’s actual present performance. Each benignly accepts the others because of the status each has achieved in its own field. *The Times* is The Establishment newspaper, Macmillan is an Establishment publishing house, Cyril Connolly by now an Establishment critic, Maurois an Establishment French man of letters, Snow an Establishment pundit. But now Rowse, the Establishment historian (how nicely in the preface to his book before this one he pays tribute to “the hospitable roof of Christabel, Lady Aberconway, at lovely Maenan”) has let down The Establishment side. And it is the ruthless young men from the new universities who have given the Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, the butchering he bloody well asked for.