

A LOVER'S COMPLAINT

A line-by-line translation

Shakespeare

FROM off a hill whose concave womb reworded
A plaintful story from a sistering vale,
My spirits to attend this double voice accorded,
And down I laid to list the sad-tuned tale;
5 Ere long espied a fickle maid full pale,
Tearing of papers, breaking rings a-twain,
Storming her world with sorrow's wind and rain.

Upon her head a platted hive of straw,
Which fortified her visage from the sun,
10 Whereon the thought might think sometime it saw
The carcass of beauty spent and done:
Time had not scythed all that youth begun,
Nor youth all quit; but, spite of heaven's fell rage,
Some beauty peep'd through lattice of sear'd age.

15 Oft did she heave her napkin to her eyne,
Which on it had conceited characters,
Laundering the silken figures in the brine
That season'd woe had pelleted in tears,
And often reading what contents it bears;
20 As often shrieking undistinguish'd woe,
In clamours of all size, both high and low.

Sometimes her levell'd eyes their carriage ride,
As they did battery to the spheres intend;
Sometime diverted their poor balls are tied
25 To the orb'd earth; sometimes they do extend
Their view right on; anon their gazes lend
To every place at once, and, nowhere fix'd,
The mind and sight distractedly commix'd.

Her hair, nor loose nor tied in formal plat,
30 Proclaim'd in her a careless hand of pride
For some, untuck'd, descended her sheaved hat,
Hanging her pale and pined cheek beside;
Some in her threaten fillet still did bide,
And true to bondage would not break from thence,
35 Though slackly braided in loose negligence.

Shakescleare Translation

As I sat at the foot of a hill, I heard a tearful story echoing
from a nearby valley ¹. I wanted to know what this
resounding voice was saying, so I decided to write down ²
the whole sad tale. Before long, a pale, flighty-looking girl
came along. She was ripping up pieces of paper and
breaking rings ³ in half while screaming and crying a
storm's worth of tears.

Though she wore a straw hat to protect her face from the
sun, you could almost imagine you could see what
remained ⁴ of her former beauty. Her ⁵ girlish looks
weren't completely gone--she still had some youth left. In
spite of God's curse ⁶, her aging face was still ⁷
beautiful.

She kept wiping her eyes with a handkerchief which had
fancy letters embroidered on it. She soaked it ⁸ with tears
that wouldn't stop coming; she'd been crying for a long
time. She would read what was embroidered on the
handkerchief, then shriek sadly and wordlessly. She cried
big cries and small cries, both high-pitched and low-
pitched.

Sometimes, she looked up as if she were angry at the sun
and the moon ⁹. At other times, she looked down at the
ground; then straight ahead; then everywhere at once
without really seeing--as if her mind and her eyes were both
distracted.

Her hair was neither down nor braided, indicating she
didn't care how she looked. Some of her hair had fallen out
from under her hat, ¹⁰ and was hanging next to her pale,
sunken cheek. Some of her hair stayed faithfully ¹¹ in the
braid, even though it was braided loosely and carelessly.

¹ The speaker compares the valley to a "womb." The imagery of pregnancy and gestation, along with that of death and decay, occurs throughout the poem.

² Shakespeare uses a typical opening formula for these kinds of poems: he pretends it's a true story he heard from someone else and that he only writes down.

³ The paper (love notes) and rings (symbols of commitment, like engagement or wedding rings today) are tokens from the girl's lover, who has abandoned her.

⁴ This stanza makes use of words associated with death or decay, such as "carcass" and "scythed," which refers to harvested crops.

⁵ Time is personified here as a robber who steals the girl's beauty. This is a recurring trope in Shakespeare, especially in the sonnets.

⁶ God has cursed the girl for having premarital sex, which Renaissance Christians considered a sin.

⁷ The metaphor of a lattice--a wall made of criss-crossed, thinly cut wood strips on which ivy and vines grow--implies that the girl's beauty has to be glimpsed through something (old age) The speaker can just barely see her beauty--like flowering vines growing on the other side of the lattice--in glances.

⁸ The girl "launders" (washes) the letters which spell out her lover's name with her tears. Symbolically, she purifies the name--and, by extension, the man himself. The language recalls Christian baptism, a religious ritual in which a person is sprinkled with or submerged in water to signify spiritual rebirth.

⁹ "Spheres" literally refers to the planets, the sun, moon, and stars. It's also used metaphorically (like the phrase "the heavens") to refer to God or divine powers.

¹⁰ "Sheaved" in the original text could refer to the material of the hat, but also to the language of harvest used earlier in the poem.

¹¹ Shakespeare personifies the hair as a servant who is faithful ("true to bondage").

A thousand favours from a maund she drew
Of amber, crystal, and of beaded jet,
Which one by one she in a river threw,
Upon whose weeping margent she was set;
40 Like usury, applying wet to wet,
Or monarch's hands that let not bounty fall
Where want cries some, but where excess begs all.

Of folded schedules had she many a one,
Which she perused, sigh'd, tore, and gave the flood;
45 Crack'd many a ring of posied gold and bone
Bidding them find their sepulchres in mud;
Found yet moe letters sadly penn'd in blood,
With sleided silk feat and affectedly
Enswathed, and seal'd to curious secrecy.

These often bathed she in her fluxive eyes,
And often kiss'd, and often 'gan to tear:
Cried 'O false blood, thou register of lies,
What unapproved witness dost thou bear!
Ink would have seem'd more black and damned here!
55 This said, in top of rage the lines she rents,
Big discontent so breaking their contents.

A reverend man that grazed his cattle nigh--
Sometime a blusterer, that the ruffle knew
Of court, of city, and had let go by
60 The swiftest hours, observed as they flew--
Towards this afflicted fancy fastly drew,
And, privileged by age, desires to know
In brief the grounds and motives of her woe.

So slides he down upon his grained bat,
And comely-distant sits he by her side;
When he again desires her, being sat,
Her grievance with his hearing to divide:
If that from him there may be aught applied
Which may her suffering ecstasy assuage,
70 'Tis promised in the charity of age.

'Father,' she says, 'though in me you behold
The injury of many a blasting hour,
Let it not tell your judgment I am old;
Not age, but sorrow, over me hath power:
75 I might as yet have been a spreading flower,
Fresh to myself, if I had self-applied
Love to myself and to no love beside.

'But, woe is me! too early I attended
A youthful suit--it was to gain my grace--
80 Of one by nature's outwards so commended,
That maidens' eyes stuck over all his face:
Love lack'd a dwelling, and made him her place;
And when in his fair parts she did abide,
She was new lodged and newly deified.

'His browny locks did hang in crooked curls;
And every light occasion of the wind
Upon his lips their silken parcels hurls.
What's sweet to do, to do will aptly find:
Each eye that saw him did enchant the mind,
90 For on his visage was in little drawn
What largeness thinks in Paradise was sawn.

'His qualities were beauteous as his form,
For maiden-tongued he was, and thereof free;
Yet, if men moved him, was he such a storm
95 As oft 'twixt May and April is to see,
When winds breathe sweet, untidy though they be.
His rudeness so with his authorized youth
Did livery falseness in a pride of truth.

As she sat on the bank, she took lots of trinkets ¹² out of a basket--all sorts of precious stones--and threw them into the river, one by one. She cried as she sat there, adding water to water like a stockbroker adds money to money, or like a king ¹³ who gives gifts to the wealthy instead of the poor people who need them.

She had several folded notes which she read, sighed over, tore up, and dropped into the river. She tossed a number of rings made of intertwined gold and ivory, burying them in the mud. She pulled out more sad letters written in blood, tied up carefully with strings of silk to keep their secrets safe.

She cried over these letters. She kissed them and then began to tear them. She shouted, "This blood betrayed me! It's just a record of lies, despite the fact that it's supposed to seal a promise! Black ink ¹⁴ would be more appropriate for this damned stuff!" That said, she angrily tore the letters up, destroying them so they were no longer readable.

An upstanding man ¹⁵ who grazed his cattle nearby happened upon this crazy scene. He was given to bragging--he wanted people to know that he'd been to the court and the city, and that he'd spent plenty of time there. Since he was older, he wanted to know (in brief) why she was so upset.

So, using his staff as a support, he lowered himself down to sit next to her, while maintaining an appropriate distance. Once he sat down, he asked her again to tell him the reason she was crying, and if there was anything that he could do to ease her suffering. He promised her as any old man would.

"Sir ¹⁶," she said, "although you can tell that I've been through a lot, don't think that I'm old. Sadness, not age, has ruined me. I would have still been a fresh, blossoming flower ¹⁷ if I'd loved myself and no one else.

"But poor me! I gave in to a young man's advances too soon. Outwardly, he was as handsome as Nature could make a man, and girls couldn't stop looking at him. It was as if Love ¹⁸ herself, without a home, decided to live in him. When she took up residence in his beautiful body, he became Love reincarnated.

"His brown hair hung in loose curls. His voice was like the gentlest, silkiest breeze. Sweets to the sweet: everyone who saw him was enchanted by him, thinking he looked like a perfect human being in Paradise ¹⁹.

"He was as talented as he was beautiful. He spoke sweetly and often. Although, if men made him angry, he'd become a storm all right--but an April shower, the kind of storm whose winds smell nice even though they're wild. His apparent innocence and his obvious youth made his lies seem believable.

¹² "Favours" are tokens of affection exchanged by lovers.

¹³ Comparing the girl's tears to a "usurer" (moneylender) and a king emphasizes through a double monetary metaphor that she cried into a river that already has as much water as it needed.

¹⁴ The girl finds black more appropriate than red because what the lover wrote in red blood (representing seriousness and honesty) was a lie--and so worthy of being damned to hell. Black is associated with demons, the devil, and all things evil.

¹⁵ The old man is a stand-in for the speaker, listening in on the young girl's story.

¹⁶ Here and later in the text, "father" is a title of respect and does not mean that the man is related to her.

¹⁷ The flower metaphor will continue throughout the poem; the girl, her beauty, and her virginity are all likened to a blossom.

¹⁸ By loosely personifying Love here, the poet evokes Venus and Cupid, the Roman gods of love. The girl explains that the young man is handsome and as skilled in love as the gods themselves.

¹⁹ She refers to Adam, the first man created by God in the Book of Genesis. The allusion suggests that the man appears to be perfect and without sin, as Adam was before the Fall.

'Well could he ride, and often men would say
 100 'That horse his mettle from his rider takes:
 Proud of subjection, noble by the sway,
 What rounds, what bounds, what course, what stop he
 makes!
 And controversy hence a question takes,
 105 Whether the horse by him became his deed,
 Or he his manage by the well-doing steed.

'But quickly on this side the verdict went:
 His real habitude gave life and grace
 To appertainings and to ornament,
 110 Accomplish'd in himself, not in his case:
 All aids, themselves made fairer by their place,
 Came for additions; yet their purposed trim
 Pieced not his grace, but were all graced by him.

'So on the tip of his subduing tongue
 115 All kinds of arguments and question deep,
 All replication prompt, and reason strong,
 For his advantage still did wake and sleep:
 To make the weeper laugh, the laugher weep,
 He had the dialect and different skill,
 120 Catching all passions in his craft of will:

'That he did in the general bosom reign
 Of young, of old; and sexes both enchanted,
 To dwell with him in thoughts, or to remain
 In personal duty, following where he haunted:
 125 Consents bewitch'd, ere he desire, have granted;
 And dialogued for him what he would say,
 Ask'd their own wills, and made their wills obey.

'Many there were that did his picture get,
 To serve their eyes, and in it put their mind;
 130 Like fools that in th' imagination set
 The goodly objects which abroad they find
 Of lands and mansions, theirs in thought assign'd;
 And labouring in moe pleasures to bestow them
 Than the true gouty landlord which doth owe them:

'So many have, that never touch'd his hand,
 Sweetly supposed them mistress of his heart.
 My woeful self, that did in freedom stand,
 And was my own fee-simple, not in part,
 What with his art in youth, and youth in art,
 140 Threw my affections in his charmed power,
 Reserved the stalk and gave him all my flower.

'Yet did I not, as some my equals did,
 Demand of him, nor being desired yielded;
 Finding myself in honour so forbid,
 145 With safest distance I mine honour shielded:
 Experience for me many bulwarks builded
 Of proofs new-bleeding, which remain'd the foil
 Of this false jewel, and his amorous spoil.

"He could ride a horse well. Men would say, 'That horse gets his temperament from his rider! Obedient, majestic-looking...look at those steps, those leaps, those starts and stops he makes!' And then they'd debate whether the horse was good because he was a good rider, or if he had an easy time because the horse was so good in the first place.

"But they quickly decided that his inner qualities brought life and style to everything he wore. He was impressive in and of himself, not just by outward appearance. Anything he put on looked better because he was wearing it. When things were supposed to add to his glory, they ended up not doing that at all; instead, he made *them* glorious.

"He had all kinds of arguments, deep questions, prompt replies, and strong reasons always on the tip of his tongue. When he spoke, it was to everyone's advantage: he'd make a crying person laugh, and a laughing person cry. He had the voice and the ability to convey emotion whenever he wanted.

"He was well-loved by everyone, young and old. Men and women were equally enchanted by him, either to daydream about him or to follow him personally wherever he went. People would do what he wanted before he even asked. They asked themselves what he would say, and then made themselves do that.

"People stared at him so that they could memorize his image ²⁰ forever, like idiots that get their hearts set on some fancy property or mansion they see abroad and--imagining it's theirs already--work harder to get that than they do to pay the old landlord whom they actually owe.

"So many women, who had never so much as touched his hand, imagined themselves as his girlfriend. Poor me! I had that privilege--he was my own property ²¹ forever--the whole thing, not just a part. With his handsome looks and his smooth-talking, he cast me under his spell, and I had sex ²² with him without marrying him first.

"But unlike other women I know, I didn't ask anything from him in return. Nor did I immediately give into him just because he wanted me. My conscience wouldn't allow it, so I kept a safe distance to protect my virginity. I'd learned from experience to put up walls ²³ between us. That was all that protected my virginity, ²⁴ which he wanted for himself ²⁵.

²⁰ In Shakespeare's day, the "imagination" (literally, the part of the brain that produces images) was considered morally suspect. Because the imagination could produce daydreams and other powerful, potentially fictitious visions (especially sexual ones), strict Christians preached about the importance of controlling the imagination by filling it with "true" images from the Bible and Nature.

²¹ The girl continues the real estate metaphor from the previous stanza, though now instead of condemning others for coveting property they do not own, she laments the property she acquired. In both instances, property stands in for sexual intimacy.

²² This is the central confession of the poem: the maiden's "complaint" that she had sex with her lover, who abandoned her. Here, she uses a metaphor of a flower to describe her sexual liaison. The "stalk" is essential to the flower, as marriage was essential for sustained sexual intimacy in Shakespeare's time. Likewise, flower is aesthetically pleasing for a short time before it wilts--just as her lover's perception of her novelty quickly wore out.

²³ The girl describes "bulwarks" (fortified walls around a fortress), or defenses that she placed between herself and her lover to ward off his sexual advances. These bulwarks must withstand "proofs new-bleeding"--bloodshed in battle, or the blood resulting from the stretching of the hymen after a woman's first

150 'But, ah, who ever shunn'd by precedent
The destined ill she must herself assay?
Or forced examples, 'gainst her own content,
To put the by-past perils in her way?
Counsel may stop awhile what will not stay;
For when we rage, advice is often seen
155 By blunting us to make our wits more keen.

'Nor gives it satisfaction to our blood,
That we must curb it upon others' proof;
To be forbid the sweets that seem so good,
For fear of harms that preach in our behoof.
160 O appetite, from judgment stand aloof!
The one a palate hath that needs will taste,
Though Reason weep, and cry, 'It is thy last.'

165 'For further I could say 'This man's untrue,'
And knew the patterns of his foul beguiling;
Heard where his plants in others' orchards grew,
Saw how deceits were gilded in his smiling;
Knew vows were ever brokers to defiling;
Thought characters and words merely but art,
And bastards of his foul adulterate heart.

170 'And long upon these terms I held my city,
Till thus he gan besiege me: 'Gentle maid,
Have of my suffering youth some feeling pity,
And be not of my holy vows afraid:
That's to ye sworn to none was ever said;
175 For feasts of love I have been call'd unto,
Till now did ne'er invite, nor never woo.

180 "All my offences that abroad you see
Are errors of the blood, none of the mind;
Love made them not: with acture they may be,
Where neither party is nor true nor kind:
They sought their shame that so their shame did find;
And so much less of shame in me remains,
By how much of me their reproach contains.

"But what woman has ever avoided danger when she has to see it for herself? Could the examples of women who've been forced against their will make her see what lies ahead? Advice only delays us when we're set on something. When we're angry, advice--trying to calm us down--ends up making us angrier.

"And advice can't satisfy our desires, when we reign them in because someone told us to. It's like being forbidden to eat delicious candy, which we don't do because we're afraid of punishment someone's preached about on our behalf. Our desires are far from rational judgement! Our desires make us want to taste, despite our better judgement ²⁶ telling us not to.

"I could have said, 'This man's unfaithful,' considering I knew about his track record of sick seduction. I heard about the seeds ²⁴ he planted in other gardens. I saw how he smiled through his lies. I knew his promises were only assurances to ruin me. I thought his letters, his words, were just a ploy--what you'd expect to come ²⁸ from such an evil heart.

"And I held my ground ²⁹ on these terms for a long time, until he began to push back ³⁰, saying, 'Sweetheart, take pity on me, I'm young and I'm suffering. Don't be afraid of my promises ³¹ to marry you! I've sworn to you what I've never sworn to anyone else. Other women have asked me to have sex with them. Until now, I never asked anyone, and never tried to convince anyone.

"All my wrongdoings you've heard about are physical mistakes, not mental ones. Love wasn't a part of those. When neither person is actually in love with the other one, and faithful to them, it's just an action. Those women looked for shame, and they found it. And every time they blame me, it becomes more apparent how little I have to be ashamed of.

penetrative sexual encounter. In Shakespeare's day, this "hymen proof"--a bloody sheet--was often displayed after a wedding night to confirm the new bride's virginity to the groom's family.

²⁴ The girl calls her virginity a "false jewel," indicating that its value was not what she thought, or that she's now found it to be worthless, like a fake diamond or fool's gold.

²⁵ The lover seeks her virginity as his "amorous spoil," or a reward of sexual conquest.

²⁶ The speaker personifies Reason (rational judgment) as the antithesis of Desire. In the final line, Reason speaks, telling Desire that, if she tastes "sweets" (has sex with the lover) it will be the only time--a foreboding warning.

²⁷ In this metaphor, the "plants" (or seeds) refer to sexual intimacy with other women, and perhaps to pregnancies resulting from those relationships.

²⁸ She refers to his letters as "bastards"--children born out of wedlock. The metaphor continues the garden imagery from a few lines previous, building the sense of scandal.

²⁹ Again, she compares her virginity to a city that needs to be defended as in a battle.

³⁰ The lover "besieges" the girl, like an enemy army assaulting the outer defenses of her "city."

³¹ In Shakespeare's day, a couple were legally considered married if two things had happened: a verbal or written promise to get married, and consummation (sex). With the social scandals and pregnancies resulting from this form of "pre-contract," many legal cases at the time dealt with men who had to prove their vows in court after having sex with women.

"Among the many that mine eyes have seen,
 185 Not one whose flame my heart so much as warm'd,
 Or my affection put to the smallest teen,
 Or any of my leisures ever charm'd:
 Harm have I done to them, but ne'er was harm'd;
 Kept hearts in liveries, but mine own was free,
 190 And reign'd, commanding in his monarchy.

"Look here, what tributes wounded fancies sent me,
 Of paled pearls and rubies red as blood;
 Figuring that they their passions likewise lent me
 Of grief and blushes, aptly understood
 195 In bloodless white and the encrimson'd mood;
 Effects of terror and dear modesty,
 Encamp'd in hearts, but fighting outwardly.

"And, lo, behold these talents of their hair,
 With twisted metal amorously impleach'd,
 200 I have received from many a several fair,
 Their kind acceptance weepingly beseech'd,
 With the annexions of fair gems enrich'd,
 And deep-brain'd sonnets that did amplify
 Each stone's dear nature, worth, and quality.

"The diamond,--why, 'twas beautiful and hard,
 Whereto his invised properties did tend;
 The deep-green emerald, in whose fresh regard
 Weak sights their sickly radiance do amend;
 The heaven-hued sapphire and the opal blend
 210 With objects manifold: each several stone,
 With wit well blazon'd, smiled or made some moan.

"Lo, all these trophies of affections hot,
 Of pensived and subdued desires the tender,
 Nature hath charged me that I heard them not,
 But yield them up where I myself must render,
 215 That is, to you, my origin and ender;
 For these, of force, must your oblations be,
 Since I their altar, you enpatron me.

"O, then, advance of yours that phraseless hand,
 Whose white weighs down the airy scale of praise;
 Take all these similes to your own command,
 Hallow'd with sighs that burning lungs did raise;
 What me your minister, for you obeys,
 Works under you; and to your audit comes
 225 Their distract parcels in combined sums.

"Lo, this device was sent me from a nun,
 Or sister sanctified, of holiest note;
 Which late her noble suit in court did shun,
 Whose rarest havings made the blossoms dote;
 230 For she was sought by spirits of richest coat,
 But kept cold distance, and did thence remove,
 To spend her living in eternal love.

"But, O my sweet, what labour is't to leave
 The thing we have not, mastering what not strives,
 235 Playing the place which did no form receive,
 Playing patient sports in unconstrained gyves?
 She that her fame so to herself contrives,
 The scars of battle 'scapeth by the flight,
 And makes her absence valiant, not her might.

"Of all the women my eyes have seen, not one of them has
 so much as warmed my heart, let alone set it on fire. None
 of them made me feel even a little bit for them. None of
 them ever made me do anything for them. I hurt ³² them,
 but they didn't hurt me. I've collected hearts like a king
 collects servants, but my own heart was free, and reigned
 like a commanding monarch.

"Look at all the gifts ³³ women have sent me when I hurt
 their feelings: white pearls ³⁴ and red rubies, representing
 their pale faces and blushes when they were overcome with
 emotion in front of me. I rightly understood that the
 fainting and blushing were just part of the fear and shyness
 which were set ³⁵ in their hearts and now showing
 outwardly.

"Look at all these locks ³⁶ of their hair, lovingly set in
 metal frames. I've received these from lots of beautiful
 women who begged me, crying, to accept them. They're
 decorated with pretty gems and thoughtful sonnets
 explaining each stone's type, worth, and quality.

"The diamond? It's beautiful and hard ³⁷; they sent that
 one hoping it'd make me the same. The emerald helps to
 cure weak eyesight ³⁸. The sapphire and the opal can go
 with anything. Each of these stones -- with their little witty
 sayings--either made me smile or made me groan.

"Look at all these trophies of love, of desires that have
 been over and done with. Common sense tells me not to
 collect them, and that I should give them to the person I
 love...that is, to you, my first and last. They'll be my offering
 to you. Since they were left at my altar ³⁹, they're now due
 to you, whom I love.

"So give me your pale hand, and stop clutching those
 letters with all their high-minded compliments. Instead,
 imagine I was saying all those fancy words to you, sighing
 and shouting for emphasis. I'm yours. I'm completely at
 your service. I'll do anything you want. And so all these
 random letters are re-directed to your ears, all at the same
 time, with their combined power.

"Look, this letter came to me from a nun, a holy sister
 who'd taken a vow. She refused the king himself in court a
 while ago, though he could have made her (and any other
 woman) extremely wealthy. You see, lots of high-class men
 sought after her, but she kept her distance and ran away to
 the convent to give all her love to God instead.

"But darling, isn't it tough to let go of something we never
 had? To master something we've never tried? To act a part
 we know nothing about? To fiddle around in one place
 when we're free to roam? The nun you've heard so much
 about may have escaped unharmed, but she hasn't exactly
 shown herself to be a strong person; she took the easy way
 out.

³² The "hurt" can refer to emotional pain, but also to the physical change from "virgin" to sexually active woman--an important cultural distinction in Shakespeare's day.

³³ "Tributes" here refer to the gifts sent during or after a war.

³⁴ Repeated several times in this stanza, the contrast between bloodless white and bloody red equates the gifts with the women's bodies before and after sex.

³⁵ "Encamped" and "fighting" continue the battle imagery, now personifying the women's fear and shyness as soldiers that both hold down the fort (the mental/emotional value of virginity) and fight outwardly (showing physical signs of not wanting to have sex).

³⁶ Locks of hair were common mementos in Shakespeare's day, shared between lovers and between family members alike.

³⁷ A double entendre referring to an erection.

³⁸ The joke (on this past girlfriend's part) is that the emerald will help the young man see her properly, implying he had started to ignore her.

³⁹ Here the speaker uses the language of the church--altars, oblations, and patrons--to describe the flow of letters between himself and his lovers. In other words, he compares himself to a god, and his lovers to worshippers.

240 "O, pardon me, in that my boast is true:
The accident which brought me to her eye
Upon the moment did her force subdue,
And now she would the caged cloister fly:
Religious love put out Religion's eye:
245 Not to be tempted, would she be immured,
And now, to tempt, all liberty procured.

"How mighty then you are, O, hear me tell!
The broken bosoms that to me belong
Have emptied all their fountains in my well,
250 And mine I pour your ocean all among:
I strong o'er them, and you o'er me being strong,
Must for your victory us all congeat,
As compound love to physic your cold breast.

"My parts had power to charm a sacred nun,
255 Who, disciplined, ay, dieted in grace,
Believed her eyes when they to assail begun,
All vows and consecrations giving place:
O most potential love! vow, bond, nor space,
In thee hath neither sting, knot, nor confine,
260 For thou art all, and all things else are thine.

"When thou impresses, what are precepts worth
Of stale example? When thou wilt inflame,
How coldly those impediments stand forth
Of wealth, of filial fear, law, kindred, fame!
265 Love's arms are peace, 'gainst rule, 'gainst sense,
'gainst shame,
And sweetens, in the suffering pangs it bears,
The aloes of all forces, shocks, and fears.

"Now all these hearts that do on mine depend,
270 Feeling it break, with bleeding groans they pine;
And supplicant their sighs to you extend,
To leave the battery that you make 'gainst mine,
Lending soft audience to my sweet design,
And credent soul to that strong-bonded oath
275 That shall prefer and undertake my troth.'

'This said, his watery eyes he did dismount,
Whose sights till then were levell'd on my face;
Each cheek a river running from a fount
With brinish current downward flow'd apace:
280 O, how the channel to the stream gave grace!
Who glazed with crystal gate the glowing roses
That flame through water which their hue encloses.

'O father, what a hell of witchcraft lies
In the small orb of one particular tear!
285 But with the inundation of the eyes
What rocky heart to water will not wear?
What breast so cold that is not warmed here?
O cleft effect! cold modesty, hot wrath,
Both fire from hence and chill extincture hath.

'For, lo, his passion, but an art of craft,
Even there resolved my reason into tears;
There my white stole of chastity I daff'd,
Shook off my sober guards and civil fears;
Appear to him, as he to me appears,
295 All melting; though our drops this difference bore,
His poison'd me, and mine did him restore.

"Forgive me--although I'm bragging about nothing but the truth. I came across her by accident and immediately took down her defenses ⁴⁰. Now she wants to run away from the convent. Her love for me is like a religion--and it's taken the old religion's place. She put up walls because she didn't want to be tempted, but now she's doing whatever she can to reach temptation.

"So believe me: you're a tough one ⁴¹! I've broken a lot of hearts. They cried all their tears to me, but I'm crying you an ocean here, too. I was the strong one compared to them, but you're much stronger than me. You've triumphed over all of us. Your victory is that you've kept all the powers of love from touching your cold heart.

"I had the ability to win over a holy nun, who, despite all her discipline and her religious fasting, believed her eyes when she saw me for the first time, and immediately promised to be faithful to me. You could be my lover! But promises, relationships, and positions have no power to touch, tie, or keep you. You're everything, and everything else is yours.

"The way you conquer men is beyond comparison with any other woman in history. The way you set our hearts on fire makes us forget all our obligations: money, religion, the law, family, our reputations! Love fights peacefully against our better judgment, common sense, and fear of shame. So suffering for love makes all the bitter things (violence, shock, fear) sweet.

"You're breaking my heart, so you're breaking all the hearts that are in love with me by extension. As they feel my heart break, they're crying out with painful longing and are sighing, pleading to you on my behalf, asking you to stop fighting against me. They're listening, gently, as I make my case, and they believe me when I swear I'll be faithful to you if you promise to be mine.'

"That said, the tears overflowed from his eyes which, up to that point, were gazing into mine. A salty river flowed quickly down each cheek. His beautiful eyes ⁴² made those tears look good. His eyes filled, the tears obscuring his irises like roses drowned underwater, but still visible from the surface.

"Oh, sir, there were countless, damned lies in each of those little tears! But whose heart isn't softened when someone starts crying? Who could be so cold-hearted ⁴³ as to not feel anything? My heart is so variable--hot and cold--shyness and anger come from it and are extinguished in turn.

"Because, look: all his emotion was just acting. At that very moment I let my guard down, began to cry, and handed over my virginity ⁴⁴. I got rid of all my inhibition ⁴⁵, all my perfectly reasonable fears. I became to him what he was to me: a bucket of tears ⁴⁶. But the difference was this: his tears poisoned me, while mine healed him.

⁴⁰ "Force," "immures," and the reference to putting out an eye once again characterize the young man's encounter with women as a battle. The nun is his most difficult conquest. Though she had pledged her life to serve the church without ever marrying, he convinced her to run away and leave it all behind to love him.

⁴¹ The young man now flips his metaphor, using it to describe the girl. He's represented himself as a powerful king and strong fighter throughout; now he flatters her, saying she's more powerful and strong than even he--all in terms of sexuality.

⁴² This stanza is filled with the imagery of bodies of water: his eyes are like dams that let water escape; his face is the "channel" for the "stream" of his "brinish" (salty) tears.

⁴³ The image here is of a "rocky" heart eroded by tears, as real stones are by rainwater over time.

⁴⁴ The girl describes her virginity (or sexual virtue) as a white piece of clothing that she wears and then takes off.

⁴⁵ The battle imagery continues: her reasoning for not having sex with the young man is personified as guards and soldiers.

⁴⁶ The water imagery (of the rivers, lakes, and oceans of tears) and the hot and cold imagery come together here, where the girl describes herself as melting into a liquid (tears).

'In him a plenitude of subtle matter,
Applied to cautels, all strange forms receives,
Of burning blushes, or of weeping water,
300 Or swooning paleness; and he takes and leaves,
In either's aptness, as it best deceives,
To blush at speeches rank to weep at woes,
Or to turn white and swoon at tragic shows.

'That not a heart which in his level came
305 Could 'scape the hail of his all-hurting aim,
Showing fair nature is both kind and tame;
And, veil'd in them, did win whom he would maim:
Against the thing he sought he would exclaim;
When he most burn'd in heart-wish'd luxury,
310 He preach'd pure maid, and praised cold chastity.

'Thus merely with the garment of a Grace
The naked and concealed fiend he cover'd;
That th' unexperient gave the tempter place,
Which like a cherubin above them hover'd.
315 Who, young and simple, would not be so lover'd?
Ay me! I fell; and yet do question make
What I should do again for such a sake.

'O, that infected moisture of his eye,
O, that false fire which in his cheek so glow'd,
320 O, that forced thunder from his heart did fly,
O, that sad breath his spongy lungs bestow'd,
O, all that borrow'd motion seeming owed,
Would yet again betray the fore-betray'd,
And new pervert a reconciled maid!"

"Since he was incredibly manipulative, he could get away with all sorts of tricks. He could pretend to be blushing embarrassedly, or crying, or pale and about to faint. He could take or leave any appearance as it was appropriate, depending on the best way he could deceive someone. He could blush when they spoke, cry when they were sad, or get pale and faint when they complained.

"Not a single woman he went for could escape the force of his powerful attack, since he was handsome and seemed so nice and sweet. With the power of his good looks, he won over whomever he wanted to screw. He'd claim he didn't want what he was aiming for. When he wanted sex the most, he'd compliment innocent girls and talk about how great virginity was.

"So he used his good looks ⁴⁷ --which were just a deception--to cover up the hidden demon ⁴⁸ inside. Inexperienced girls let the devil have his way because he appeared to them like an angel. When you're young and naïve, how could you not make love to him? Poor me! I messed up, and yet I ask myself if I would do it again.

"The pretend tears, the fake blushes that flushed his cheeks, the forced racing heartbeat, the deep sighs he heaved...if he did it all over, it'd trick me again like I was tricked before--and make me lose my virginity a second time!"

⁴⁷ Like the girl's virginity, the young man's good looks and deceptive behavior are also compared to clothes that he can put on or take off. This recurring motif emphasizes the performed nature of virtue and how appearances can't be trusted.

⁴⁸ The young man is compared to a "fiend" (demon) and then "the tempter" himself, a nickname for Satan, the enemy of humankind who, according to the Bible, causes humans to sin against God.

How to Cite

To cite this Shakescleare translation:

MLA

Sincox, Bailey. "A Lover's Complaint: A Shakescleare Translation." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 17 Jul 2017. Web. 14 Sep 2017.

Chicago Manual

Sincox, Bailey. "A Lover's Complaint: A Shakescleare Translation." LitCharts LLC, July 17, 2017. Retrieved September 14, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-lovers-complaint>.