

**SHELBURNE  
ESSAYS:  
SECOND SERIES**

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Shelburne Essays: Second Series by Paul Elmer More

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**PAUL ELMER MORE**

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# Shelburne Essays

By

Paul Elmer More

—  
*Second Series*  
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Οὐ γὰρ πρό γε τῆς ἀληθείας τιμητέος ἀνὴρ.

PLATO, *Republic*.

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1907

#### ADVERTISEMENT

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# SHELBURNE ESSAYS

## SECOND SERIES

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### ELIZABETHAN SONNETS

THE Introduction to Mr. Sidney Lee's reprint of the Elizabethan Sonnets, in *Arber's English Garner*,<sup>1</sup> has fallen plumply into the quiet waters of criticism. Since the gracious appearance of Charles Lamb we have grown accustomed to speak of every versifier of the great Queen's days with bated breath; their freshness, their exquisite felicity, their unflagging inventiveness, have become a byword of praise among all whose reading of the period extends beyond Shakespeare. But now comes this iconoclast, with his terrifying knowledge of the three hundred thousand sonnets produced by Europe in the sixteenth century, and declares roundly, nay, proves beyond cavil, that

<sup>1</sup> *Elizabethan Sonnets*, newly arranged and edited. With an Introduction by Sidney Lee. Vols. XI. and XII. of *An English Garner*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1904.



the famous sonnet-sequences of Sidney and Spenser and Daniel and Drayton, to name only the better known, are a mere tissue of words and ideas stolen from Italy and France. Worse than that, a number of these poems are lifted solidly from Petrarch and Ronsard and others without a sign of credit or apology. It is shocking, but, to be perfectly frank, his argument only confirms the opinion which many have begun to hold, that it would be an act of wisdom to revise our somewhat unreasonable estimate of the whole Elizabethan literature.

In one respect it may seem that Mr. Lee has gone too far. Because a poem is manifestly an imitation or even a barefaced theft, it does not always follow that the incident described is unreal or that the sentiment is insincere. Sidney's sonnet on his victory in a tournament—

Having this day my horse, my hand, my lance  
Guided so well that I obtained the prize—

may very well be modelled on Petrarch's account of a Court entertainment, but it would be captious to conclude that such a tourney did not actually take place, or that the chivalrous knight was not heartened in the combat by Stella's "heavenly face." Again the same cavalier's apostrophe to his couch—

Ah, bed! the field where joy's peace some do see,  
The field where all my thoughts to war be trained—

is no doubt an echo of innumerable cries from sleepless Petrarchists, yet the emotion may be sincere enough for all that. It is a fairly common thing, I suppose, for young poets to be in love and to tumble their beds—and to make capital of their agony the next morning in whatever tags of rhyme they can summon up. There is thus a certain danger in dogmatising too absolutely about any particular sonnet.

With this caveat, however, I am prepared to follow Mr. Lee in his somewhat sweeping denunciation of the Elizabethan sonneteers. His collection embraces fifteen series, extending from Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, published in 1591 (though composed earlier), to Robert Tofte's *Laura, the Toys of a Traveller*, published in 1597, and including the work of Watson, Barnes, Lodge, Constable, Daniel, Drayton, Spenser, and others of less renown. Shakespeare, it will be observed, is omitted, and Sidney, as Mr. Lee himself admits, rises in part fairly above the level of the sonneteering herd; but with these exceptions it must be acknowledged that the perusal of this branch of Elizabethan literature is likely to prove a dull task to most readers. All that was required was a moderate acquaintance with Desportes or some other writer of the Pleiad and a modicum of skill in making rhymes, and, look you, your ambitious gentleman was ready to bestow immortality on any Diana or Delia who might offer to break his heart.

Write! write! help! help, sweet Muse! and never cease!  
In endless labours pens and papers tire!  
Until I purchase my long-wished Deaire,

exclaimed the fluent Barnabe Barnes, speaking for himself and his brothers; but it was against the Petrarchian canon that the long-wished desire should ever be satisfied, and hence these "grief's commentaries" never ending. Of actual experience or observation there is, so far as the language betrays, painfully little. The whole thing is a juggling with traditional figures and phrases. One might go through these passionate pretences, pencil in hand, and check off the score or more recurring themes with perfect ease. There is the Phoenix, springing from fire and fit symbol of ever-renewed love; there is the silly theft of Nature, who must needs borrow the hues of my lady to paint her roses and lilies; there is the inevitable comparison of love with a living death; rocks, woods, hills, and streams are witnesses to so many plaintive despairs that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth together; Echo retorts upon a querulous lover in sonnet after sonnet; a hundred times we read, "I burn yet am I cold, I am a-cold yet burn," and a thousand times we hear the cry, "Give me my heart, for no man liveth heartless." To be sure the ideas are often combined differently in these pilfered repetitions, but the disguise is transparent.

**My heart mine eye accuseth of his death,**