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Allen Cabaniss
University of Mississippi

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Allen Cabaniss

To a person interested in study of the Christian liturgy, its history, practice, influence, and derivatives, perception of a liturgical allusion is sometimes the reward of conscious search, as, for example, in considering the Apocalypse or Pliny the Younger’s celebrated letter to Emperor Trajan. More frequently it has been an accidental result of reading with another purpose in mind, as, for instance, while perusing the Satiricon of Petronius or De consolatione philosophiae of Boethius or the Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf. In much the same manner there has arisen a suspicion that in the Shakespearean sonnets a subtle reflection of the liturgy may be discerned. To an investigation of that supposition I now turn.

Once the possibility of an association between Shakespeare’s sonnets and a part of the liturgy or a derivative of it arises, an initial inspection reveals a certain resemblance between the structure of the poems and the Holy Rosary. From mid-sixteenth century onward the Rosary has consisted of one hundred fifty-three Hail Marys divided into fifteen groups of ten and one of three, each group now introduced by Our Father and concluded by Gloria Patri. It is quite impressive therefore to observe that there are one hundred fifty-four sonnets in the Shakespearean sequence, the last two being variants of the same theme. A second datum of some importance is the prominence of the word rose in the Sonnets. That word is intimately
related to the term *rosary* and is employed in at least one instance in medieval literature to mean the Rosary of Christian devotion. These two rather obvious points, however, prove nothing; they merely emphasize the suspicion which requires still further inquiry.

Since the fifteenth century each decade of the Rosary has been devoted to a meditation on one of the fifteen “mysteries” in the life of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are *The Joyful Mysteries* — (1) The Incarnation or annunciation of the Incarnation, (2) The Blessed Virgin’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth, (3) The birth or nativity of Christ, (4) The purification of the Blessed Virgin, (5) Christ lost and found at the age of twelve or the finding of Christ in the Temple among the doctors; *The Sorrowful Mysteries* — (6) Christ’s agony in Gethsemane, (7) His flagellation, (8) His being crowned with thorns, (9) His carrying the cross, (10) The crucifixion; *The Glorious Mysteries* — (11) The resurrection of Christ, (12) His ascension into heaven, (13) The coming of the Holy Ghost, (14) The assumption of the Blessed Virgin into heaven, and (15) Her coronation.

We may quickly test our theory about the sonnets by selecting fifteen poems at intervals of ten to determine whether they bear any resemblance to the fifteen mysteries. In order not to be too arbitrary I chose as the starting-point Sonnet VII. (1) Of the first ten poems it conveys the strongest and clearest reminiscences of the Joyful Mystery of the Incarnation. As one reads lines 1-8, he inevitably recalls Psalm 18:6f. (Vulgate): “In sole posuit tabernaculum suum; et ipse tanquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo. Exsultavit ut gigas ad currendam viam; a summo caelo egressio ejus. Et occursus ejus usque ad summum ejus; nec et qui se abscondat a calore ejus.” Parts of this passage occur as the antiphon on Magnificat at First Vespers of Christmas, as one of the antiphons in the first Nocturn of Matins of Christmas and Matins of the Octave of Christmas, and as the versicle and response at the end of that Nocturn on both Christmas and Christmas Octave. Under these circumstances the word *Orient* in line 1 of Sonnet VII recalls the Great Advent Antiphon, “O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae . . . ,” proper to Magnificat on December 21. In view of the foregoing parallels we
can quite justifiably state that verbally Sonnet VII may have some relation, however remote, to the first Joyful Mystery. It is therefore a convenient point of departure from which to begin a cursory inspection of the poems at intervals of ten.

(2) At first glance Sonnet XVII seems to reflect nothing of the second Joyful Mystery. Yet, strangely enough, the phrases, “in time to come” (line 1) and “The age to come” (line 7), make one think of the words, “ecce enim ex hoc beatam me dicent omnes generationes,” and “a progenie in progenies,” in the hymn of the Blessed Virgin. Still further, the references to poetry, “my verse” (line 1), “fresh numbers” (line 6), and “stretched miter of an Antique song” (line 12), remind us that the larger part of the Biblical narrative of the visitation is taken up with a typical Scriptural poem composed by the Blessed Virgin. Line 8, “Such heavenly touches nere toucht earthly faces,” is certainly apt, and so is line 13, “But were some childe of yours aliue that time.”

(3) Sonnet XXVII contains some words which might be faint allusions to the Joyful Mystery of the Nativity. The references to “my bed” (line 1) and “trauaill tired” (line 2) are surely not inappropriate, and “a zelous pilgrimage to thee” (line 6) might summon up remembrance of two pilgrimages to the new-born Messiah, that of the shepherds and that of the Magi. But, above all, lines 11f, “like a jewell (hunge in gastly night) / Makes black night beautious,” recalls a typical medieval conceit that the birth of Christ caused the night in which He was born to shine with preternatural light.

(4) Lines 11f. of Sonnet XXXVII, “That I in thy abundance am suffic’d, / And by a part of all thy glory liue . . . ,” an expression of intimate union of the poet and the person to whom the poem was addressed, suggest a phrase and an idea from the Gospel account of the fourth Joyful Mystery. The aged prophet Simeon, speaking to the Blessed Virgin, assures her that her indissoluble union with her Divine Son will mean that whatever happens to Him will happen also to her, “et tuam ipsius animam pertransibit gladius.” This thought and virtually these words reappear in the first stanza of the great medieval hymn, Stabat Mater dolorosa.

(5) The fifth Joyful Mystery is reflected throughout Sonnet
XLVII by the suggestion of separation of the poet from the person
to whom the poem was written, by the poet’s longing for reunion, and
by the anticipation of joy at reunion.

(6) Sonnet LVII is an excellent allusion to the first Sorrowful
Mystery. Christ bade His disciples to wait and watch while He
went farther to pray. The entire Sonnet is one about the waiting
and watching of a slave who does the master’s bidding without
understanding it. Especially impressive is line 5, “Nor dare I chide
the world-without end houre,” containing that phrase with which
English liturgical prayers close (“world without end”), immediately
evoking the thought of prayer. The word houre is also quite Scrip-
tural in this context.

(7) The flagellation (the second Sorrowful Mystery) is intimated
by the phrases of Sonnet LXVII, “with his presence grace impietie”
(line 2), “Why should he live, now nature banckrout is, / Beggerd
of blood . . .” (lines 9f.), and “before these last [daiies] so bad”
(line 14).

(8) Lines 5-8 of Sonnet LXXVII may be vaguely suggestive of
the suffering endured from the crowning with thorns (the third
Sorrowful Mystery).

(9) On the other hand, Sonnet LXXXVII in its entirety is a
beautiful expression of what one might feel in the presence of the
fourth Sorrowful Mystery. The first line, “Farewell thou art too
deare for my possessing,” is eminently apt, but especially so are
lines 5f., “For how do I hold thee but by thy granting, / And for
that ritches where is my deserving?” as well as the phrase in line 9,
“Thy selfe thou gau’st.”

(10) In a similar manner Sonnet XCVII is the sad reaction of one
to the absence of his beloved, parallel to the grief of the disciples at
the crucifixion (the fifth Sorrowful Mystery). Particularly apt are
the words, “dark daies” (line 3), “old Decembers barenesse euer
where” (line 4), and “thou away, the very birds are mute” (line 12).

(11) The parallels in Sonnet CVII to the first Glorious Mystery
are unusually striking: the “eclipse indur’de” (line 5), the “sad
Augurs” proven false in their “presage” (line 6), the end of “incur-
tenties” (line 7), the peace and victory of “endlesse age” (line 8), and
the assurance of "Ile liue" (line 11); perhaps also, "this most balmie time" (line 9) and "My loue lookes fresh" (line 10). The phrase, "tombes of brasse are spent" (line 14), immediately recalls the doctrine of the harrowing of hell and Christ's victorious assault on the gates of brass of the lower world.¹⁸

(12) The second Glorious Mystery is only vaguely intimated in Sonnet CXVII by lines 7f.: "That I have hoysted saile to al the windes / Which should transport me farthest from your sight."

Up to this point the parallels between the Mysteries of the Holy Rosary and the Shakespearean Sonnets are impressive. But Sonnets CXXVII, CXXXVII, and CXLVII, which should on this theory agree in some manner with the third, fourth, and fifth of the Glorious Mysteries, do not, as a matter of fact, do so. Yet it is probably worthy of mention that, as the last two Mysteries shift from events in the life of Christ to events in the life of His mother, the earlier Sonnets (through CXXVI) seem to be directed to a man, while those after Sonnet CXXVI seem to be directed to a woman. Moreover, since three of the Hail Marys of the Rosary are used for meditation on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (or love), it is rather curious to observe that Sonnet CLI has negative allusions to faith in the words, "gentle cheater" (line 3), "betraying" (line 5), and "treason" (line 6), while Sonnets CLIII and CLIV, variations on the same theme, are quite obvious allusions to (profane) love. Sonnet CLII should, of course, parallel in some way the virtue of hope, but instead alludes strongly to treachery, the opposite of faith.

Before proceeding further let us test the theory by selecting a few other Sonnets at random to determine whether they may at intervals of ten suggest the Mysteries. We may do this briefly and schematically, beginning with Sonnet I (the enumeration is that of the Mysteries as listed earlier): (1) I, lines 1f., 4, 9f.; (2) XI, lines 1, 3f.; (3) XXI, lines 6f., 11f.; (4) XXXI, no apparent resemblance; (5) XLI, lines 2, 10; (6) and (7), LI, LXI, no apparent resemblances; (8) LXXI, lines 1f., 14; (9) LXXXI, lines 1, 8; (10) XCI, lines 9-14; (11) CI, lines 11f.; (12)-(15), CXI, CXXI, CXXXI, CXLII, no apparent resemblances.
Beginning with Sonnet III we have these results: (1) III, lines 2, 5f., 9f.; (2) XIII, lines 1f., 7; (3) and (4) XXIII, XXXIII, no apparent resemblances; (5) XLIII, lines 3, 9-14; (6) LIII, line 5 (reference to Adonis); (7) LXIII, lines 3f.; (8) LXXIII, lines 2f., 5-8; (9) LXXXIII, lines 11f.; (10) XCIII, lines 5, 9f., 13f.; (11) CIII, lines 5-12; (12) CXIII, line 1; (13)-(15) CXXIII, CXXXIII, CXLI, no apparent resemblances.

And with Sonnet X, we have these results: (1) X, no apparent resemblance; (2) XX, the entire Sonnet, especially line 2; (3) XXX, lines 13f.; (4) XL, lines 1-4; (5) L, the entire Sonnet; (6) LX, the entire Sonnet; (7) LXX, lines 2f.; (8) LXXX, no apparent resemblance; (9) XC, the entire Sonnet; (10) C, no apparent resemblance; (11) CX, the entire Sonnet, especially lines 8f., 11-14; (12) CXX, no apparent resemblance; (13) CXXX, line 1f. (the references to red, the liturgical color for festivals of the Holy Ghost); (14) and (15) CXL, CL, no apparent resemblances. (It is worth noting that in all four of our groups of Sonnets there are no seeming resemblances to the fourteenth and fifteenth Mysteries.)

Notwithstanding the fact that our scheme does not work with absolute precision, we are entitled, I believe, to assume that there is a similarity, however secular, of the Sonnets to the Holy Rosary. But we have yet to consider reasons for the supposed resemblance. First, would William Shakespeare, nominally an Anglican, have made allusions to what was in his day a peculiarly Roman Catholic practice? Of course the answer is, "Yes." This point requires no belaboring, having been studied quite adequately by John Henry de Groot in his thesis, The Shakespeares and "The Old Faith." I cite only one of many appropriate remarks from his volume:

... there must have been occasions when out of the deep well of the subconscious there arose reminiscences of the Old Faith—thoughts and feelings of an almost nostalgic sort which, in becoming vivid to the artist, would take him back to the house on Henley Street. Once more he would hear the voice of his mother at prayer. In her he would see a faint reflection of Mary, the Virgin Mother of God. The very name would strengthen the association. Often, through-
out the busy writing years, bits of Catholic imagery, Catholic sentiment, Catholic tradition, slipping unawares along the channels of the imagination, would enter the main stream of the poet's creative effort and give to that stream slight shifts of direction and touches of color discernible today in the poet's poems and plays.\(^\text{16}\)

A second reason is even more relevant. It pertains to the sonnet tradition. Hardly had the sonnet been invented (in the thirteenth century)\(^\text{18}\) when a development of it was contrived, namely, the sonnet-SEQUENCE.\(^\text{17}\) Here we could go very far afield in quest of origins, but a few remarks must suffice. From its earliest days monasticism had encouraged, had indeed based its worship on, the recitation of the Psalms in course. By early medieval times this practice was commuted for unlettered brothers to a comparable recitation of a hundred fifty Psalters, and by the time of the High Middle Ages was still further varied by the substitution of Ave Marias for Psalms or Psalters. The practice proved to be quite popular among the laity. Among literary persons there evolved by analogy a yet greater variation. Cycles of short poems or hymns in Latin, called psaltery, were composed, often original, but more often employing the language of the corresponding Psalms or phrases from the Psalter or, eventually, "tags" from the Ave Maria.\(^\text{18}\) Similar works were composed in the European vernaculars. The influence of such poetry on sonnets and sonnet-sequences may not have been direct but it was unavoidable.\(^\text{19}\)

Shakespeare's Sonnets, however, are not religious. How, then, can they be associated with a religious background? To answer that question we introduce our third point. One of the commonest tendencies in medieval literature was toward parody,\(^\text{20}\) whether in Latin or the vernaculars, in prose or verse, for serious purposes or profane use. One type of parody was artistic imitation of ecclesiastical texts: an example is the quaintly charming Lay Folks Mass Book.\(^\text{21}\) Another type was the devotional multiplication of services parallel to the staple of Mass and Divine Office. The Rosary itself is an illustration of that. The third parodistic category includes neither the artistic, serious or profane, nor the votives, pious or superstitious, but secular imita-
tions. This category may be further divided in a twofold manner: parodies which were serious, cynical, or satirical, written in an attempt to correct abuses; and those which had no object other than humor, mockery, or simple entertainment. An example is the late twelfth-century Anglo-Norman drinking-song, "Or hi parra," which imitates the eleventh-century hymn, "Laetabundus." The extent to which parody was carried in the medieval period is almost inconceivable to us. Yet once we recognize that fact, we can understand how an utterly secular sequence might have had the Rosary as its ultimate background.

A fourth and final reason for suspecting that to be true of Shakespeare’s Sonnets is the immense importance of the Rosary before and during the years in which he was beginning to write. The intricate history of the Rosary need not detain us, but a few facts must be recalled. During the century before Shakespeare the Rosary devotion had been developed, spread, and popularized by such zealous enthusiasts as Dominic the Prussian, Alain de la Roche, and Henry Egher. The form was generally standardized, the Ave Maria was lengthened, and the usage of meditating on the Mysteries was added. Especially influential in promotion were organizations devoted to frequent use of the Rosary, notably the one of Cologne established by the famous Dominican, James Sprenger, co-author of Malleus maleficarum. The Protestant Reformation served to accentuate its importance, since the Rosary was believed to be especially effective against heresy.

When Shakespeare was only seven years of age, there occurred, on Sunday, October 7, 1571, that battle of Lepanto which Cervantes, Shakespeare’s older contemporary, called "la mas memorable y alta ocasion que vieron los pasados siglos, ni esperan ver los venideros." It was indeed a great victory, and popular opinion attributed it to processions which the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary had made that very day in Rome. The pope, St. Pius V, who only the year before had excommunicated (and deposed) Shakespeare’s queen, immediately ordered a festival of the Rosary for the anniversary of the battle. In 1573 his successor, Gregory XIII, extended the commemoration as a major double to all churches in the Roman Catholic world which had
altars dedicated to the Rosary and increased the spiritual privileges attached to its use. The fame of Lepanto must have been made even more vivid in England when, in 1576, the hero of the engagement, Don John of Austria, arrived in the Netherlands as the new governor. His presence just across the Channel was the occasion of many a plot to rescue the imprisoned Mary of Scotland and place her on the English throne with Don John as her consort.

The year 1575, when Shakespeare was eleven years old, was a papal Holy Year or Jubilee. The persecuted English Roman Catholics could not, of course, participate in the celebration. But in order to allow them some part in the observance, Pope Gregory XIII made an exception in their case: a bull authorized a special arrangement whereby they might share the indulgences through prescribed recitations of the Rosary either in the form which has become customary or in the form called Brigitine. Thus, whether Shakespeare ever used this devotion or not, he must have been aware of its significance. And, if our analysis of the Sonnets is correct, they reflect it in a distant and thoroughly secular manner.

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3This paper was read in part at a meeting of the South-Central Modern Language Association, Dallas, Texas, Nov., 1937.


8The word rose appears in the Sonnets thirteen times, as follows: I, line 2 (capitalized and italicized); XXXV, 2 (plural and capitalized); LIV, 3, 6, 11 (capitalized, two plurals); LXVII, 8 (twice, capitalized, one plural); XCII, 2 (capitalized); XVIII, 10 (capitalized); CXI, 8 (plural and capitalized); CXV, 14 (capitalized); CXIX, 5f (capitalized, plurals). For this paper I make use of the facsimile edition published by Columbia University Press for the Facsimile Text Society (New York, 1938), thereby assuming as substantially correct the original 1609 order of the Sonnets.

8See the interesting discussion by R. J. Browne, "The Rosary in the Nibelungenlied?" Germanic Review, XXX, No. 4 (Dec., 1955), 307-312.


Collect for the first Mass of Christmas: "Dominus, qui hanc sacratissimam noctem veri luminis fecisti illustratone clarescere: da, quasemus, ut, cujus lucis mysteria in terra cognovimus, ejus quoque gaudiis in caelo perfraumar. . . ."


Matt. 26:36-44, and parallels.


Cf. Ps. 106:16 (Vulgate) and many similar passages assembled and discussed in Cabaniss, "The Harrowing of Hell, Psalm 24, and Pliny the Younger" (see Note 1 above). Leslie Hotson, Shakespeare’s Sonnets Dated and Other Essays (London: Hart-Davis, 1949), pp. 4-21, has made some very interesting observations about this Sonnet.


Ibid., p. 157; see also pp. 2, 224, for similar but briefer statements.


Cf., inter alia, Houston Peterson, ed., The Book of Sonnet Sequences (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), viii: "Sequences of sonnets developed in Italy in the thirteenth century almost as early as the sonnet itself."

The great collection, Anecdota hymnica medii aevi, by G. M. Dreves, C. Blume, and H. M. Bannister, has in its 55 volumes (Leipzig, 1886-1922) many of the psalteria, showing an almost geometrical multiplicity of variations.

It is possible also that there may exist an inner and more profound relation between the sonnet form and the liturgical form of prayer called the collect. Clarity, precision, fixity, economy, and unity characterize both. But an investigation of this possibility would require another paper.

See, e.g., Paul Lehmann, Parodistische Texte (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1923), edited to illustrate his slightly earlier Die Parodie im Mittelalter.


The important work on the history of the Rosary is a part of a series of articles by Herbert Thurston on "Our Popular Devotions." He deals specifically with the Rosary in The Month, XCVI (1900), No. 436 (Oct.), 403-418; No. 437 (Nov.), 513-527; No. 438 (Dec.), 620-637; XCVII (1901), No. 439 (Jan.), 67-79; No. 440 (Feb.), 172-188; No. 441 (Mar.), 286-304; No. 442 (Apr.), 383-404; see also "The Names of the Rosary," ibid., CIII (1908), Part I, No. 527 (May), 518-529, and Part II, No. 528 (June), 610-623; also "Genusflexions and Aves: A Study in Rosary Origins," ibid., CXXVII (1916), Part I, No. 623 (May), 441-452, and Part II, No. 624 (June), 546-559. Thurston has summarized his studies in the article, "Chapelet," in F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, eds., Dictionnaire d'archeologie chretienne et de liturgie, III, col. 399-406.

In addition to the citations in the preceding Note, consult Thurston, "The Dedication of the Month of May to Our Lady," The Month, XCVII, No. 443 (May, 1901), 470-483; and "Notes on Familiar Prayers, I: The Origins of the Haıl
Mary," ibid., CXCI (1913), No. 584 (Feb.), 162-176; No. 586 (April), 379-384 (pp. 384-388 discuss the Regina Caeli).


26Sixth lesson of Matins for feast of the Most Holy Rosary.


29Queen Elizabeth I is reputed to have been an ardent user of the Rosary as her sister Mary had been.