

W[illiam] S[hakespeare], "A Funeral Elegy for Master William Peter," (London: G.Eld for T.Thorpe, 1612). Normalized text, ed. Donald Foster.

TO MASTER JOHN PETER of Bowhay in Devon, Esquire.

The love I bore to your brother, and will do to his memory, hath craved from me this last duty of a friend; I am herein but a second to the privilege of truth, who can warrant more in his behalf than I undertook to deliver. Exercise in this kind I will little affect, and am less addicted to, but there must be miracle in that labor which, to witness my remembrance to this departed gentleman, I would not willingly undergo. Yet whatsoever is here done, is done to him and to him only. For whom and whose sake I will not forget to remember any friendly respects to you, or to any of those that have loved him for himself, and himself for his deserts.

W. S.

A FUNERAL ELEGY.

Since time, and his predestinated end,

Abridged the circuit of his hopeful days,

Whiles both his youth and virtue did intend

The good endeavors of deserving praise,

5 What memorable monument can last

Whereon to build his never-blemished name

But his own worth, wherein his life was graced. . .

Sith as that ever he maintained the same?

Oblivion in the darkest day to come,

10 When sin shall tread on merit in the dust,

Cannot rase out the lamentable tomb

Of his short-lived deserts; but still they must,
Even in the hearts and memories of men,
Claim fit respect, that they, in every limb
15 Remembering what he was, with comfort then
May pattern out one truly good, by him.
For he was truly good, if honest care
Of harmless conversation may commend
A life free from such stains as follies are,
20 Ill recompensed only in his end.
Nor can the tongue of him who loved him least
(If there can be minority of love
To one superlative above the rest
Of many men in steady faith) reprove
25 His constant temper, in the equal weight
Of thankfulness and kindness: Truth doth leave
Sufficient proof, he was in every right
As kind to give, as thankful to receive.
The curious eye of a quick-brained survey
30 Could scanty find a mote amidst the sun
Of his too-shortened days, or make a prey
Of any faulty errors he had done.
Not that he was above the spleenful sense
And spite of malice, but for that he had
35 Warrant enough in his own innocence
Against the sting of some in nature bad.

Yet who is he so absolutely blest
That lives encompassed in a mortal frame,
Sometime in reputation not oppressed
40 By some in nothing famous but defame?
Such in the bypath and the ridgeway lurk
That leads to ruin, in a smooth pretense
Of what they do to be a special work
Of singleness, not tending to offense;
45 Whose very virtues are, not to detract
Whiles hope remains of gain (base fee of slaves),
Despising chiefly men in fortunes wracked.
But death to such gives unremembered graves.
Now therein lived he happy, if to be
50 Free from detraction happiness it be.
His younger years gave comfortable hope
To hope for comfort in his riper youth,
Which, harvest-like, did yield again the crop
Of education, bettered in his truth.
55 Those noble twins of heaven-infused races,
Learning and wit, refined in their kind
Did jointly both, in their peculiar graces,
Enrich the curious temple of his mind;
Indeed a temple, in whose precious white
60 Sat reason by religion overswayed,
Teaching his other senses, with delight,

How piety and zeal should be obeyed.

Not fruitlessly in prodigal expense

Wasting his best of time, but so content

65 With reason's golden mean to make defense

Against the assault of youth's encouragement;

As not the tide of this surrounding age

(When now his father's death had freed his will)

Could make him subject to the drunken rage

70 Of such whose only glory is their ill.

He from the happy knowledge of the wise

Draws virtue to reprove secured fools

And shuns the glad sleights of ensnaring vice

To spend his spring of days in sacred schools.

75 Here gave he diet to the sick desires

That day by day assault the weaker man,

And with fit moderation still retires

From what doth batter virtue now and then.

But that I not intend in full discourse

80 To progress out his life, I could display

A good man in each part exact and force

The common voice to warrant what I say.

For if his fate and heaven had decreed

That full of days he might have lived to see

85 The grave in peace, the times that should succeed

Had been best-speaking witnesses with me;

Whose conversation so untouched did move
Respect most in itself, as who would scan
His honesty and worth, by them might prove
90 He was a kind, true, perfect gentleman.
Not in the outside of disgraceful folly,
Courting opinion with unfit disguise,
Affecting fashions, nor addicted wholly
To unbeseeming blushless vanities,
95 But suiting so his habit and desire
As that his virtue was his best attire.
Not in the waste of many idle words
Cared he to be heard talk, nor in the float
Of fond conceit, such as this age affords,
100 By vain discourse upon himself to dote;
For his becoming silence gave such grace
To his judicious parts, as what he spake
Seemed rather answers which the wise embrace
Than busy questions such as talkers make.
105 And though his qualities might well deserve
Just commendation, yet his furnished mind
Such harmony of goodness did preserve
As nature never built in better kind;
Knowing the best, and therefore not presuming
110 In knowing, but for that it was the best,
Ever within himself free choice resuming

Of true perfection, in a perfect breast;
So that his mind and body made an inn,
The one to lodge the other, both like framed
115 For fair conditions, guests that soonest win
Applause; in generality, well famed,
If trim behavior, gestures mild, discreet
Endeavors, modest speech, beseeming mirth,
True friendship, active grace, persuasion sweet,
120 Delightful love innated from his birth,
Acquaintance unfamiliar, carriage just,
Offenseless resolution, wished sobriety,
Clean-tempered moderation, steady trust,
Unburthened conscience, unfeigned piety;
125 If these, or all of these, knit fast in one
Can merit praise, then justly may we say,
Not any from this frailer stage is gone
Whose name is like to live a longer day. . .
Though not in eminent courts or places great
130 For popular concourse, yet in that soil
Where he enjoyed his birth, life, death, and seat
Which now sits mourning his untimely spoil.
And as much glory is it to be good
For private persons, in their private home,
135 As those descended from illustrious blood
In public view of greatness, whence they come.

Though I, rewarded with some sadder taste
Of knowing shame, by feeling it have proved
My country's thankless misconstruction cast
140 Upon my name and credit, both unloved
By some whose fortunes, sunk into the wane
Of plenty and desert, have strove to win
Justice by wrong, and sifted to embane
My reputation with a witless sin;
145 Yet time, the father of unblushing truth,
May one day lay ope malice which hath crossed it,
And right the hopes of my endangered youth,
Purchasing credit in the place I lost it.
Even in which place the subject of the verse
150 (Unhappy matter of a mourning style
Which now that subject's merits doth rehearse)
Had education and new being; while
By fair demeanor he had won repute
Amongst the all of all that lived there,
155 For that his actions did so wholly suit
With worthiness, still memorable here.
The many hours till the day of doom
Will not consume his life and hapless end,
For should he lie obscured without a tomb,
160 Time would to time his honesty commend;
Whiles parents to their children will make known,

And they to their posterity impart,
How such a man was sadly overthrown
By a hand guided by a cruel heart,
165 Whereof as many as shall hear that sadness
Will blame the one's hard fate, the other's madness;
Whiles such as do recount that tale of woe,
Told by remembrance of the wisest heads,
Will in the end conclude the matter so,
170 As they will all go weeping to their beds.
For when the world lies wintered in the storms
Of fearful consummation, and lays down
Th' unsteady change of his fantastic forms,
Expecting ever to be overthrown;
175 When the proud height of much affected sin
Shall ripen to a head, and in that pride
End in the miseries it did begin
And fall amidst the glory of his tide;
Then in a book where every work is writ
180 Shall this man's actions be revealed, to show
The gainful fruit of well-employed wit,
Which paid to heaven the debt that it did owe.
Here shall be reckoned up the constant faith,
Never untrue, where once he love professed;
185 Which is a miracle in men, one saith,
Long sought though rarely found, and he is best

Who can make friendship, in those times of change,
Admired more for being firm than strange.
When those weak houses of our brittle flesh
190 Shall ruined be by death, our grace and strength,
Youth, memory and shape that made us fresh
Cast down, and utterly decayed at length;
When all shall turn to dust from whence we came
And we low-leveled in a narrow grave,
195 What can we leave behind us but a name,
Which, by a life well led, may honor have?
Such honor, O thou youth untimely lost,
Thou didst deserve and hast; for though thy soul
Hath took her flight to a diviner coast,
200 Yet here on earth thy fame lives ever whole,
In every heart sealed up, in every tongue
Fit matter to discourse, no day prevented
That pities not thy sad and sudden wrong,
Of all alike beloved and lamented.
205 And I here to thy memorable worth,
In this last act of friendship, sacrifice
My love to thee, which I could not set forth
In any other habit of disguise.
Although I could not learn, whiles yet thou wert,
210 To speak the language of a servile breath,
My truth stole from my tongue into my heart,

Which shall not thence be sundered, but in death.

And I confess my love was too remiss

That had not made thee know how much I prized thee,

215 But that mine error was, as yet it is,

To think love best in silence: for I sized thee

By what I would have been, not only ready

In telling I was thine, but being so,

By some effect to show it. He is steady

220 Who seems less than he is in open show.

Since then I still reserved to try the worst

Which hardest fate and time thus can lay on me.

T' enlarge my thoughts was hindered at first,

While thou hadst life; I took this task upon me,

225 To register with mine unhappy pen

Such duties as it owes to thy desert,

And set thee as a president to men,

And limn thee to the world but as thou wert. . .

Not hired, as heaven can witness in my soul,

230 By vain conceit, to please such ones as know it,

Nor servile to be liked, free from control,

Which, pain to many men, I do not owe it.

But here I trust I have discharged now

(Fair lovely branch too soon cut off) to thee,

235 My constant and irrefragable vow,

As, had it chanced, thou mightst have done to me. . .

But that no merit strong enough of mine
Had yielded store to thy well-abled quill
Whereby t' enroll my name, as this of thine,
240 How s'ere enriched by thy plenteous skill.
Here, then, I offer up to memory
The value of my talent, precious man,
Whereby if thou live to posterity,
Though 't be not as I would, 'tis as I can:
245 In minds from whence endeavor doth proceed,
A ready will is taken for the deed.
Yet ere I take my longest last farewell
From thee, fair mark of sorrow, let me frame
Some ampler work of thank, wherein to tell
250 What more thou didst deserve than in thy name,
And free thee from the scandal of such senses
As in the rancor of unhappy spleen
Measure thy course of life, with false pretenses
Comparing by thy death what thou hast been.
255 So in his mischiefs is the world accursed:
It picks out matter to inform the worst.
The willful blindness that hoodwinks the eyes
Of men enwrapped in an earthy veil
Makes them most ignorantly exercise
260 And yield to humor when it doth assail,
Whereby the candle and the body's light

Darkens the inward eyesight of the mind,
Presuming still it sees, even in the night
Of that same ignorance which makes them blind.

265 Hence conster they with corrupt commentaries,
Proceeding from a nature as corrupt,
The text of malice, which so often varies
As 'tis by seeming reason underpropped.

O, whither tends the lamentable spite

270 Of this world's teenful apprehension,
Which understands all things amiss, whose light
Shines not amidst the dark of their dissension?

True 'tis, this man, whiles yet he was a man,

Soothed not the current of besotted fashion,

275 Nor could disgest, as some loose mimics can,

An empty sound of overweening passion,

So much to be made servant to the base

And sensual aptness of disunioned vices,

To purchase commendation by disgrace,

280 Whereto the world and heat of sin entices.

But in a safer contemplation,

Secure in what he knew, he ever chose

The ready way to commendation,

By shunning all invitements strange, of those

285 Whose illness is, the necessary praise

Must wait upon their actions; only rare

In being rare in shame (which strives to raise
Their name by doing what they do not care),
As if the free commission of their ill
290 Were even as boundless as their prompt desires;
Only like lords, like subjects to their will,
Which their fond dotage ever more admires.
He was not so: but in a serious awe,
Ruling the little ordered commonwealth
295 Of his own self, with honor to the law
That gave peace to his bread, bread to his health;
Which ever he maintained in sweet content
And pleasurable rest, wherein he joyed
A monarchy of comfort's government,
300 Never until his last to be destroyed.
For in the vineyard of heaven-favored learning
Where he was double-honored in degree,
His observation and discreet discerning
Had taught him in both fortunes to be free;
305 Whence now retired home, to a home indeed
The home of his condition and estate,
He well provided 'gainst the hand of need,
Whence young men sometime grow unfortunate;
His disposition, by the bonds of unity,
310 So fastened to his reason that it strove
With understanding's grave immunity

To purchase from all hearts a steady love;
Wherein not any one thing comprehends
Proportionable note of what he was,
315 Than that he was so constant to his friends
As he would no occasion overpass
Which might make known his unaffected care,
In all respects of trial, to unlock
His bosom and his store, which did declare
320 That Christ was his, and he was friendship's rock:
A rock of friendship figured in his name,
Foreshowing what he was, and what should be,
Most true presage; and he discharged the same
In every act of perfect amity.
325 Though in the complemental phrase of words
He never was addicted to the vain
Of boast, such as the common breath affords;
He was in use most fast, in tongue most plain,
Nor amongst all those virtues that forever
330 Adorned his reputation will be found
One greater than his faith, which did persevere,
Where once it was protested, always sound.
Hence sprung the deadly fuel that revived
The rage which wrought his end, for had he been
335 Slacker in love, he had been longer lived
And not oppressed by wrath's unhappy sin. . .

By wrath's unhappy sin, which unadvised
Gave death for free good will, and wounds for love.
Pity it was that blood had not been prized
340 At higher rate, and reason set above
Most unjust choler, which untimely drew
Destruction on itself; and most unjust,
Robbed virtue of a follower so true
As time can boast of, both for love and trust:
345 So henceforth all (great glory to his blood)
Shall be but seconds to him, being good.
The wicked end their honor with their sin
In death, which only then the good begin.
Lo, here a lesson by experience taught
350 For men whose pure simplicity hath drawn
Their trust to be betrayed by being caught
Within the snares of making truth a pawn;
Whiles it, not doubting whereinto it enters,
Without true proof and knowledge of a friend,
355 Sincere in singleness of heart, adventurers
To give fit cause, ere love begin to end:
His unfeigned friendship where it least was sought,
Him to a fatal timeless ruin brought;
Whereby the life that purity adorned
360 With real merit, by this sudden end
Is in the mouth of some in manner scorned,

Made questionable, for they do intend,
According to the tenor of the saw
Mistook, if not observed (writ long ago
365 When men were only led by reason's law),
That "Such as is the end, the life proves so."
Thus he, who to the universal lapse
Gave sweet redemption, offering up his blood
To conquer death by death, and loose the traps
370 Of hell, even in the triumph that it stood:
He thus, for that his guiltless life was spilt
By death, which was made subject to the curse,
Might in like manner be reproved of guilt
In his pure life, for that his end was worse.
375 But O far be it, our unholy lips
Should so profane the deity above
As thereby to ordain revenging whips
Against the day of judgment and of love.
The hand that lends us honor in our days
380 May shorten when it please, and justly take
Our honor from us many sundry ways,
As best becomes that wisdom did us make.
The second brother, who was next begot
Of all that ever were begotten yet,
385 Was by a hand in vengeance rude and hot
Sent innocent to be in heaven set.

Whose fame the angels in melodious choirs
Still witness to the world. Then why should he,
Well-profited in excellent desires,
390 Be more rebuked, who had like destiny?
Those saints before the everlasting throne
Who sit with crowns of glory on their heads,
Washed white in blood, from earth hence have not
gone
All to their joys in quiet on their beds,
395 But tasted of the sour-bitter scourge
Of torture and affliction ere they gained
Those blessings which their sufferance did urge,
Whereby the grace fore-promised they attained.
Let then the false suggestions of the froward,
400 Building large castles in the empty air,
By suppositions fond and thoughts untoward
(Issues of discontent and sick despair)
Rebound gross arguments upon their heart
That may disprove their malice, and confound
405 Uncivil loose opinions which insert
Their souls into the roll that doth unsound
Betraying policies, and show their brains,
Unto their shame, ridiculous; whose scope
Is envy, whose endeavors fruitless pains,
410 In nothing surely prosperous, but hope. . .
And that same hope, so lame, so unprevailing,

It buries self-conceit in weak opinion;
Which being crossed, gives matter of bewailing
Their vain designs, on whom want hath dominion.

415 Such, and of such condition, may devise
Which way to wound with defamation's spirit
(Close-lurking whisper's hidden forgeries)
His taintless goodness, his desertful merit.
But whiles the minds of men can judge sincerely,

420 Upon assured knowledge, his repute
And estimation shall be rumored clearly
In equal worth--time shall to time renew 't.
The grave, that in his ever-empty womb
Forever closes up the unrespected,

425 Who when they die, die all, shall not entomb
His pleading best perfections as neglected.
They to his notice in succeeding years
Shall speak for him when he shall lie below;
When nothing but his memory appears

430 Of what he was, then shall his virtues grow.
His being but a private man in rank
(And yet not ranked beneath a gentleman)
Shall not abridge the commendable thank
Which wise posterity shall give him then;

435 For nature, and his therein happy fate.
Ordained that by his quality of mind

T' ennoble that best part, although his state
Were to a lower blessedness confined.
Blood, pomp, state, honor, glory and command,
440 Without fit ornaments of disposition,
Are in themselves but heathenish and profaned,
And much more peaceful is a mean condition
Which, underneath the roof of safe content,
Feeds on the bread of rest, and takes delight
445 To look upon the labors it hath spent
For its own sustenance, both day and night;
Whiles others, plotting which way to be great,
How to augment their portion and ambition,
Do toil their giddy brains, and ever sweat
450 For popular applause and power's commission.
But one in honors, like a seeled dove
Whose inward eyes are dimmed with dignity,
Does think most safety doth remain above,
And seeks to be secure by mounting high:
455 Whence, when he falls, who did erewhile aspire,
Falls deeper down, for that he climbed higher.
Now men who in lower region live
Exempt from danger of authority
Have fittest times in reason's rules to thrive,
460 Not vexed with envy of priority,
And those are much more noble in the mind

Than many that have nobleness by kind.
Birth, blood, and ancestors, are none of ours,
Nor can we make a proper challenge to them
465 But virtues and perfections in our powers
Proceed most truly from us, if we do them.
Respective titles or a gracious style,
With all what men in eminence possess,
Are, without ornaments to praise them, vile:
470 The beauty of the mind is nobleness.
And such as have that beauty, well deserve
Eternal characters, that after death
Remembrance of their worth we may preserve,
So that their glory die not with their breath.
475 Else what avails it in a goodly strife
Upon this face of earth here to contend,
The good t' exceed the wicked in their life,
Should both be like obscured in their end?
Until which end, there is none rightly can
480 Be termed happy, since the happiness
Depends upon the goodness of the man,
Which afterwards his praises will express.
Look hither then, you that enjoy the youth
Of your best days, and see how unexpected
485 Death can betray your jollity to ruth
When death you think is least to be respected!

The person of this model here set out
Had all that youth and happy days could give him,
Yet could not all-encompass him about
490 Against th' assault of death, who to relieve him
Strook home but to the frail and mortal parts
Of his humanity, but could not touch
His flourishing and fair long-lived deserts,
Above fate's reach, his singleness was such.
495 So that he dies but once, but doubly lives,
Once in his proper self, then in his name;
Predestinated time, who all deprives,
Could never yet deprive him of the same.
And had the genius which attended on him
500 Been possibilitated to keep him safe
Against the rigor that hath overgone him,
He had been to the public use a staff,
Leading by his example in the path
Which guides to doing well, wherein so few
505 The proneness of this age to error hath
Informed rightly in the courses true.
As then the loss of one, whose inclination
Strove to win love in general, is sad,
So specially his friends, in soft compassion
510 Do feel the greatest loss they could have had.
Amongst them all, she who those nine of years

Lived fellow to his counsels and his bed
Hath the most share in loss; for I in hers
Feel what distemperature this chance hath bred.

515 The chaste embracements of conjugal love,
Who in a mutual harmony consent,
Are so impatient of a strange remove
As meager death itself seems to lament,
And weep upon those cheeks which nature framed

520 To be delightful orbs in whom the force
Of lively sweetness plays, so that ashamed
Death often pities his unkind divorce.
Such was the separation here constrained
(Well-worthy to be termed a rudeness rather),

525 For in his life his love was so unfeigned
As he was both an husband and a father. . .
The one in firm affection and the other
In careful providence, which ever strove
With joint assistance to grace one another

530 With every helpful furtherance of love.
But since the sum of all that can be said
Can be but said that "He was good" (which wholly
Includes all excellence can be displayed
In praise of virtue and reproach of folly).

535 His due deserts, this sentence on him gives,
"He died in life, yet in his death he lives."

Now runs the method of this doleful song
In accents brief to thee, O thou deceased!
To whom those pains do only all belong
540 As witnesses I did not love thee least.
For could my worthless brain find out but how
To raise thee from the sepulcher of dust,
Undoubtedly thou shouldst have partage now
Of life with me, and heaven be counted just
545 If to a supplicating soul it would
Give life anew, by giving life again
Where life is missed; whereby discomfort should
Right his old griefs, and former joys retain
Which now with thee are leaped into thy tomb
550 And buried in that hollow vault of woe,
Expecting yet a more severer doom
Than time's strict flinty hand will let 'em know.
And now if I have leveled mine account
And reckoned up in a true measured score
555 Those perfect graces which were ever wont
To wait on thee alive, I ask no more
(But shall hereafter in a poor content
Immure those imputations I sustain,
Learning my days of youth so to prevent
560 As not to be cast down by them again);
Only those hopes which fate denies to grant

In full possession to a captive heart

Who, if it were in plenty, still would want

Before it may enjoy his better part:

565 From which detained, and banished in th' exile

Of dim misfortune, has none other prop

Whereon to lean and rest itself the while

But the weak comfort of the hapless, "hope."

And hope must in despite of fearful change

570 Play in the strongest closet of my breast,

Although perhaps I ignorantly range

And court opinion in my deep'st unrest.

But whether doth the stream of my mischance

Drive me beyond myself, fast friend, soon lost,

575 Long may thy worthiness thy name advance

Amongst the virtuous and deserving most,

Who herein hast forever happy proved:

In life thou lived'st, in death thou died'st beloved.