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978-0-521-14463-6 - Shakespeare's Sonnets: Self, Love and Art

Philip Martin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

In a recent book, Stephen Booth has expressed quite simply what many readers have found: 'Shakespeare's sonnets are hard to think about. They are hard to think about individually and they are hard to think about collectively.'¹ For this reason it is no use projecting a grand scheme in an essay as short as this. I shall not attempt to give a comprehensive picture of the whole sequence: many sonnets will not be mentioned at all, while others will be discussed at considerable length and in some cases more than once. I have had to abandon early hopes of making extended comparisons between the Sonnets and Shakespeare's other works: references to these are occasional only, and brief. It seems best to consider the Sonnets in their immediate context, in the context, that is, of the short Elizabethan love poem, particularly the love sonnet and more especially the work of Sidney, Daniel, Drayton and Spenser, the other chief poets who used the form. Shakespeare's Sonnets, after all, make up one of the sonnet-sequences of the 1590s, even if they were not published until nearly a decade after the craze had died down, and even if in many ways they are strikingly different from the rest.

I assume that Shakespeare wrote his sonnets, or most of them, during the nineties, though we cannot be certain

¹ Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven and London, 1969), p. 1.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

about this. For the most part they read like fairly early work; some of them were undoubtedly in circulation by 1599, since versions of Sonnets 138 and 144 appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in that year; and it seems likely that it was to the Sonnets we have, or to some of them, that Francis Meres referred in 1598, in his famous phrase about Shakespeare's 'sugred Sonnets among his private friends'.¹ The word 'private' suggests not only that the poems were circulating in manuscript according to the common practice but that Shakespeare may have wished them to be kept like that: they were, perhaps, like so many of the Sonnets we know as his, intimate in tone and reference, intended for a few eyes only. Further, it seems likely that the *Shakespeare's Sonnets* of 1609 appeared without Shakespeare's authority,² which does something to indicate that those poems may well be the ones which Meres had seen or heard of.

But all this, in Sir Thomas Browne's words, is a matter of 'but wavering conjecture'. The dating of the Sonnets, like so much else about them, has not been settled and probably never will be. Their date is of some importance, of course, especially if one wants to establish their relation to other works by Shakespeare, such as *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Measure for Measure* or *Troilus and Cressida*, or to works by other poets, such as certain sonnets by Sidney, Daniel and Spenser which Shakespeare may have imitated or, in Spenser's case, inspired. Or to take the famous line in Sonnet 94 about 'lilies that fester': did Shakespeare write the sonnet before or after the line was used in *Edward III*, and if Shakespeare himself wrote the scene in which it occurs, was he quoting the sonnet or does the sonnet quote the play? One would of

¹ Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia* (1598), quoted in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (London, 1963), p. 4.

² *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, ed. H.E. Rollins (Philadelphia and London, 1944), vol. II, pp. 1-18.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

course be glad to know for certain when the Sonnets were written: it could enable us to read them better. But as it is, we must proceed on what seems a reasonable if approximate calculation: I should say, *c.* 1593 to *c.* 1603 at the outside, and perhaps not so late.

In any case, it is not of crucial importance. The same may be said more strongly of other questions on which so much has been written, and which I mention only to dismiss as irrelevant to this study: Who was the Young Man? Who was the Rival Poet? Who was the Dark Lady? The weariness of spirit shown by Rollins in his *Variorum* edition of the Sonnets testifies to the vanity and vexation of so many generations and volumes of debate; and the material he has assembled, the infinite variety of the hypotheses put forward by commentator after commentator, sounds its own grave warning. The identities of the three people are not known, very probably they can never be known, and for a reading of the Sonnets as poetry they are of little or no importance. I shall not discuss whether the Fair Friend is Southampton, or Pembroke, or any of the other young pretenders; nor whether the Rival Poet is Marlowe, or Chapman, or another; much less grope about for the name of the Dark Lady, which, of the three, is the one we are least likely ever to know. Obviously, critical judgments must rest on sound scholarship, but the scholarship available on this subject, even more than on the dating of the Sonnets, leaves us in much doubt. Of the three people nothing is known, but nothing need be known, beyond the characters and characteristics attributed to them by the Sonnets themselves. Their names may not be there, but what they *are*, what they mean to the poet and sometimes to one another, what they must mean to us, is written into the poems. The friend, for example, may or may not have been Southampton, but in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

and for the poems there is no doubt what sort of person he is: young, beautiful, narcissistic and in some sense an aristocrat, someone with the attitudes, likeable or not, of those that have power. No one can know exactly what situation it was that Shakespeare's imagination worked on to produce the relationship between the poet and the friend. William Empson has offered an ingenious account¹ of how that imagination conceivably worked. Assuming that the relations given by the Sonnets are the same as the biographical ones – young aristocrat and ageing admirer of lower rank – he shows how in *Henry IV* the friend is transformed into Prince Hal and the poet into Falstaff. It is quite plausible, and anyone who has written the most modestly successful poem or story knows how curiously his material may come together: something from his present combining with something from his past, something experienced in daily life with something felt in the reading of a book, or an actual situation becoming inverted or reversed, so that the roles of two people in life may be subtly exchanged in the work of art. It is possible that the situation in Shakespeare's life was that of the Sonnets, as Empson assumes (and with him so many less acute commentators). It is also possible, as my colleague F.H. Langman has suggested to me, that in the Sonnets Shakespeare has reversed the roles: finding himself perhaps loved by a man older than himself, he puts himself in that man's position. The flexible imagination which created the plays is quite capable of this. The point of the suggestion, however, was not to form yet another theory about the story behind the Sonnets, but to stress the futility of the whole approach and to draw attention away from the raw material, which we cannot know and which

¹ William Empson, 'They that have power' in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Harmondsworth, 1966), pp. 75–96.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

cannot help us, towards the poems themselves. If only more of the commentators were as sensible as the mid-nineteenth-century editor, Robert Bell: 'All poetry is auto-biographical. But the particle of actual life out of which verse is wrought may be, and almost always is, wholly incommensurate to the emotion depicted, and remote from the forms into which it is ultimately shaped.'¹ And as M.M. Mahood adds: 'Some trifle light as air may have rendered Shakespeare the man jealous of a friend's affection and so created the tormented "I" of the sonnets as well as the two Antonios and certain aspects of Falstaff.'² It is with the creations alone that I am concerned.

Two other questions often raised are not so easily dismissed, and neither can be given a simple answer. One is whether the Quarto of 1609 gives the Sonnets in their right order, and the other is whether the Sonnets form a sequence or merely a collection. In some respects the questions are related. As for the first, it is clear that in certain instances the order has almost certainly been upset in the Quarto, if 'order' is taken to mean a narrative or emotional progression. The most striking instances occur among the sonnets to the mistress. It is odd to find 130, 'My Mistres eyes are nothing like the Sunne', immediately following 'Th'expence of Spirit in a waste of shame', and one can only say that whatever the order in which the poems were written, this does not strike us as the order of feeling, the order of their 'psychological necessity'.³ It is not that the two poems form a contrast: that, of course, might well be part of an artistic effect. Instead they are simply at odds, thrown into uneasy

¹ Quoted by Rollins, vol. II, p. 139.

² M. M. Mahood, 'Love's Confin'd Doom' in *Shakespeare Survey* 15 (1962), p. 61.

³ Tucker Brooke's phrase, quoted by Edward Hubler in *The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York, 1952), p. 38.

Cambridge University Press

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Philip Martin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

company. 'Th'expence of Spirit' is out of place and premature here: the relationship revealed by the poems on either side of it is not yet profound enough to yield such an intense and troubled poem. Nevertheless, I shall not attempt, as many have done, to rearrange the Sonnets. I accept the order of the Quarto *faute de mieux*, while noting that some poems seem in that edition to be misplaced. I am more concerned with themes and poetic quality than with the progression of a story or even with the emotional or psychological development traced by the Sonnets. It strikes me, however, that the order of the first 126 sonnets, to the friend, is more plausible than that of the group to the mistress. The first group (or two groups: 1-17, 18-126) could well be in the order of composition which is at the same time the order of feeling, with all the likely fluctuations and veerings of the imagination. But in any case, since we don't *know* what Shakespeare's order was, we may as well accept the order of the Quarto.¹

As for the second question – sequence or collection? – again no satisfactory answer can be given. The Sonnets are more than a collection, certainly, but what kind of a sequence do they form? One which is not very tidy or carefully planned, and at some points more sequential than at others. No one could miss, for instance, the close-knit unity of the first seventeen, or the continuous movement formed by 71-4. There are sequences within the larger sequence: the sonnets to the friend, the sonnets to the mistress; but these are not completely self-contained. They do illuminate

¹ The text I have used throughout this study is that of Martin Seymour-Smith (London, 1963), which, except for occasional amendments recorded in footnotes, follows the Quarto in order, spelling and punctuation. Wherever 'Seymour-Smith' is mentioned I am referring to this volume, and in most cases to the introduction and the commentary which accompany the text.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

each other, though to what extent this was Shakespeare's conscious intention it is hard to know. There are, too, as I have just suggested, minor sequences within these two major ones: poems exploring a phase of the relationship or developing a line of reflection which it has prompted (for example the three sonnets on the friend's fault, 33–5, or the self-analytical sonnets, 109–11). To what extent should each poem be read on its own, to what extent is it intended to give meaning to its group and take meaning from it, to what extent does one group throw light on another, or the whole body of the Sonnets on an individual poem? While it is not possible to give cut-and-dried answers and one must take each case separately, as a general rule I shall try to judge each sonnet as an entity, even if it forms part of a group, and shall resist calling in one sonnet to support another which seems unable to stand up alone.

It must be added that if the Sonnets form a sequence we still face the difficulty of taking in all of them at once. I suspect that not many readers try, and that of those who do, some abandon the attempt. If so, it does not necessarily reflect on them or on the poems, for as C.L. Barber says:

To read through the sonnets at a sitting, though it is useful for surveying the topography they present, does violence to them and to the reader—it can produce a sensation of hothouse oppression. Each poem needs to be dwelt on; each requires the kind of concentrated attention which could have been given when they were received singly or in small groups. To read and reread is essential if we are to enjoy the way each moves, the use it makes of the possibilities of the sonnet form, the particular development in it of a design of sounds and images. The sonnets ask for a special sort of attention because in them poetry is, in a special way, an action.¹

This, like other comments of Barber's, seems to me apt and

¹ C.L. Barber, 'An Essay on the Sonnets' in *The Sonnets* (Laurel Shakespeare), (New York, 1962), p. 11.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

perceptive; certainly it represents my own experience of the poems. In what follows I shall, as Barber suggests, dwell on some of them, not only to see how each moves, how each uses the form, but more generally to discover the kind of poetic life which each gives to its subject. This will involve a good deal of close attention to the language and especially to its 'wordplay', the fruitfulness of its quibbling, since, as John Dover Wilson reminds us (*contra* Dr Johnson):

Shakespeare habitually thought in quibbles, if indeed 'quibble' be the right term for what was one of the main roots of his poetic expression. When he used a word, all possible meanings of it were commonly present to his mind, so that it was like a musical chord which might be resolved in whatever fashion or direction he pleased. To miss a quibble, then, is often to miss the interwoven thread which connects together a whole train of images; for imagery and double meaning are generally inseparable.¹

Since the Sonnets are so numerous and so dense, one must decide which aspects of the sequence and which specific poems to concentrate on. The main concerns of the sequence can readily be listed: love, time, death, all that is meant by 'mutability', and the means available to transcend it – begetting children and creating poetry. It is more difficult to trace adequately the links between these main themes in the poetry itself. The concern with love, for instance, takes in self-love as well, and that in turn has more than one aspect. 'Self-love' can mean two things and not, as we commonly think, one only: self-love may be a destructive habit, time-wasting and self-wasting, an 'all-eating shame' in the words of Sonnet 2, but as Erich Fromm insists in his book *The Art of Loving*,² it may also be a necessary virtue. The Sonnets deal with both of these, not only with the first. Time, too, can be seen doubly: as 'eater of youth'

¹ J. Dover Wilson (ed.), *Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1936), Introduction, p. xxxv.

² Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (London, 1966), pp. 45–9.

Cambridge University Press

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Philip Martin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

but also as the condition in which man can get 'increase' by wedding Beauty to Use. He can choose either to defy death or to die twice by not living creatively, that is, by not building his monument in his children. In this context the role of the poet is to erect other monuments, but neither in stone nor in flesh: poems, which will commemorate the self who made them and still more the other self whom he loved.

Shakespeare's feeling for selfhood, it seems to me, underlies the whole body of the Sonnets; it is implied in his concern with poetry, with mutability, above all with love, and it is uncommon in the love poetry of the time. It is often said that in the Sonnets he is much concerned with narcissism, and so he is, but this is only part of the larger concern to which I am pointing. The Sonnets reveal and create many intricate and shifting patterns among their many pre-occupations. My main purpose in this study is to explore one pattern in which self, love and art are related to each other.

I begin with two chapters on sonnets which deal with what Sonnet 62 calls 'sin of self-love'. The first chapter deals with sonnets on the youth, the second with sonnets on the poet himself. I want to show both what these poems are like individually and how they embody characteristic pre-occupations that recur throughout the sequence. The poet's own self-examination, considered in chapter 2, implies not self-hatred but a feeling for the value of the self, a value which certain experiences can erode. Hence the particular relevance, to the general theme, of the Dark Lady sequence, where, counterbalancing the youth's narcissism which is the theme of the first group (1-17) and of many poems in the second (18-126), the poet faces his own partial destruction of himself.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

This leads in the third chapter to a discussion of Shakespeare's sense of a positive self-love. I think he would have agreed with Fromm that the Biblical injunction to 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' makes little sense if one does not love oneself as well: in Sir Thomas Browne's words, once more, 'How shall we expect Charity towards others, when we are uncharitable to ourselves?' In the early sonnets the self-regarding youth is said to be 'possest with murdrous hate', and Shakespeare later applies the same insight to himself. In positive terms, Shakespeare's sense of selfhood can be seen in the awareness he always conveys of his own being, even in sonnets where he seems to abase himself completely, to confess that he is 'passion's slave': here, very often, what looks at first like total loss of self-respect turns out to be something very different. A frequently ironic awareness of his predicament subtly but genuinely reverses that predicament, enables him to transcend it. We can see this in a poem like Sonnet 57:

Being your slave what should I doe but tend,
Upon the houres, and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at al to spend;
Nor services to doe til you require,

where the characteristically sly balancing of tones, the unobtrusive but calculated exaggerations, suggest a detached awareness, and assessment, of the very weakness the poem confesses.

It is this multiple awareness, both of different possibilities in himself and of the selfhood of others, this patient but not (finally) passive acceptance of the truth, which characterize the love that Shakespeare professes; a love that recognizes selfhood even while it is prepared to give the self unreservedly to another: 'for I love you so,/That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot'. Paradoxically this self-