

Chapter 1

Shakespeare and English poetry

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Anyone can be creative; it's rewriting other people that's a challenge.

- Bertolt Brecht

Most students and some scholars are surprised to learn that Shakespeare's greatest publishing success in his lifetime was Venus and Adonis. They are also surprised to learn that Shakespeare at his death was at least as well known for his non-dramatic poetry as for his work in the theater. Attention to the nondramatic poetry tends to get swamped by the interest inevitably generated by the remarkable and sustained accomplishment of the plays. This tendency to marginalize the non-dramatic verse is a process at least as old as the First Folio of 1623, in which the compilers, for whatever reason, fail to include Venus and Adonis, Lucrece, the Sonnets, and "The Phoenix and Turtle," in their collection of Shakespeare's works. Prior to the First Folio, though, the tendency was for publishers to advertise Shakespeare's accomplishments in non-dramatic poetry. William Jaggard, whose son Isaac published the First Folio, had in 1599 issued a work designed to capitalize on Shakespeare's growing fame as a poet: The Passionate Pilgrim (1599). A collection of twenty poems purported to be by Shakespeare, this volume prints several poems from an early comedy by Shakespeare, Love's Labour's Lost, as well as versions of two of the sonnets that would eventually be published in the 1609 Sonnets, and several poems by other poets. Many of the poems in The Passionate Pilgrim involve the theme of Venus and Adonis, repeatedly identified with Shakespeare since it was the subject of his biggest hit. Other poems in The Passionate Pilgrim deal with the myth of Philomel, one of the several narratives behind Shakespeare's popular Lucrece. Aspiring to make money on Shakespeare's growing reputation as a poet, Jaggard had no doubts that Shakespeare was at once a poet and a playwright. Shakespeare, then, was not just a dramatist who happened to compose a few poems in his spare time; rather, he was, in Patrick Cheney's



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useful term, a "poet-playwright." ² Like a fine athlete who uses the same muscle group for different sports, Shakespeare moves with facility between the two intimately related pursuits of poetry and drama.

When reading Shakespeare's non-dramatic poems, it is nonetheless important to remember that Shakespeare was one of the great writers of comic and tragic drama, if only because this encourages us to look for related elements in the poems. Indeed, I hope that this Introduction will allow readers to see afresh the comedy embedded in the clumsy but lush eroticism of Venus and Adonis, as well as the tragedy stemming from the disturbing physical and psychological violence in Lucrece. It might also help us to comprehend the mysterious mathematics of human amatory relationships in "The Phoenix and Turtle," and the astonishing gamut of expressions of emotional commitment and erotic betrayal in the Sonnets. This Cambridge Introduction is designed to celebrate the achievement of Shakespeare's poems, to investigate what they have to say to us at this moment in cultural history, and to make available to today's reader some sense of the range and intelligence of current engagements with them. While poetry is certainly a central element of the plays, this volume focuses on Shakespeare's remarkable forays into non-dramatic poetry, in the effort to correct the imbalance of attention. While the Sonnets have been the subject of much scrutiny - some of it profoundly critical and scholarly, but much of it glorified rumor-mongering or biographical speculation – the other poems have been almost completely ignored outside the academy.

This is, finally, a book about magic – the magic that can lead a particular combination of words to produce pleasure and meaning in readers centuries later. Shakespeare in fact self-consciously aspires to perform this magic repeatedly in his Sonnets, and even makes this aspiration the theme of many of them. "Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme," brags the opening of Sonnet 55. The speaker of that poem outrageously claims that his poetry is more powerful and perdurable than the most apparently immutable monuments – a claim that is validated every time the poems are read (and would cease to have truth value when they are no longer read). This is the miraculous transformation celebrated in Shakespeare's Sonnet 65 - "That in black ink my love may still shine bright." "Still" here means both "always" and "yet"; Shakespeare here asserts that something as ephemeral as love can be rendered perpetual through art. He asks the transient media of ink and paper to perform a kind of transubstantiation on the fleeting desires experienced by transient beings toward transient beings, converting impermanence to infinity. As Shakespeare claims in the concluding couplet of Sonnet 18, "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."



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As I write this, the volume *Shakespeare's Sonnets* celebrates its 400 birthday; men (and women) are still breathing, eyes are still seeing, and the literary accomplishment of these phenomenal poems still shines remarkably bright. One testament to the continuing resonance of Shakespeare's remarkable literary accomplishments occurred recently. On April 23, 2009, in honor of the 445th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, the city of Chicago, Illinois, declared, via mayoral proclamation, the day to be "Talk Like Shakespeare Day" in Chicago. Posters were produced with such advice as "Instead of *you*, say *thou*. Instead of *y'all*, say *thee*." And "Instead of cursing, try calling your tormenters jackanapes or canker-blossoms or poisonous bunch-back'd toads." The poster also recommends:

When in doubt, add the letters "eth" to the end of verbs (he runneth, he trippeth, he falleth). To add weight to your opinions, try starting them with methinks, mayhaps, in sooth or wherefore.

"Talk Like Shakespeare Day" offers good-humored testimony to the remarkable cultural clout that Shakespeare continues to wield. It is a statement of the abiding relevance of Shakespeare, and the effort, via genial fun, to commemorate the near miracle by which a Stratford commoner became the most revered poet in the English language.

But the defining rubric of the civic commemoration also suggests that Shakespeare speaks a language significantly different from our own; it indicates that only through a deliberate effort can we speak, or comprehend, the language of Shakespeare. The purpose of this volume is not to help one learn to speak like Shakespeare; rather, it is to help today's reader understand the rich and varied ways that Shakespeare's poetic language works. The commentary will be designed to provide readers with ways of understanding, appreciating, and enjoying these emotionally intense and highly wrought poems. I intend to honor the aesthetic and intellectual complexity of these poems without making them seem impossibly, and unapproachably, complicated. In order to do this, I will bring in large contextual issues when this is necessary to the understanding of a poem, but will for the most part focus on the close reading of individual stanzas and poems.

It is important to remember that even experienced readers sometimes need help with Shakespeare's language and syntax. Those of us who have dedicated significant portions of our lives to Shakespeare still find that his words can prove difficult to comprehend; indeed, sometimes they get harder rather than easier to understand with study. This is partly because Shakespeare sometimes uses words no longer current in English. It is also a function of the fact that he uses words that are themselves familiar, but whose meanings have changed

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over time. At the end of *A Lover's Complaint*, for example, the injured maid complains of her former lover that "When he most burnt in heart-wished luxury, / He preached pure maid, and praised cold chastity" (lines 314–15). Although it might seem to a contemporary reader that the maid is blaming her lover for his expensive taste, she is actually castigating him for his hypocritical lust. "Luxury" was a word closely linked to lechery in the early modern lexicon – a point which a modern reader can easily miss.

At the same time, vestiges of Shakespeare's language and images linger in our vocabulary, even when we are not aware of them. Shakespeare's works have so completely permeated our language that certain plays can seem almost too familiar, even on a first reading. I had a student several years ago who told me that he would like *Hamlet* better if it did not include so many clichés. The student was not wrong, however naive the comment. *Hamlet* has been so fully absorbed into the culture that it is sometimes hard to hear it afresh, even for first-time readers or spectators. Phrases such as "in my mind's eye," "to thine own self be true," or "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it," can sound stale to the twenty-first-century reader simply because of the play's immense and continuing impact on our culture.

For better and worse, this is less of a problem with Shakespeare's poems. Certain sonnets have been comfortably absorbed into the lexicon – Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), for example, has become proverbial for expressions of tender affection, and Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds") is frequently heard in various commitment ceremonies (in part because it articulates a marriage of ungendered minds, not gendered bodies). But, in general, Shakespeare's poetry is far less well known than his most popular plays; perhaps our comparative ignorance of the poems can be an asset, allowing us to hear them with fresh ears.

Versification and meter

When reading Shakespeare's poetry, it is important to remember that experiences and emotions are raw, messy things that rarely resolve themselves into fourteen lines of metrically regular rhymed verse without some effort. Shakespeare's contemporaries understood that effort, and praised him for his smooth lyric surface. There is in fact a kind of gratifying regularity in the standard Shakespearean line, which makes the deviations from this norm all the more effective. A kind of music emerges from the blend of expectation and surprise, and this music can provide a key to the meaning and mood of the lines, if we have ears to hear.



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Form is never just the container of emotion, however; rather, affect is also a function of form. Certain forms, in other words, express, and even produce, certain affects. Any single poem, moreover, is the combination of a nearly infinite possible combination of words. When reading Shakespeare's poetry, it is particularly important to pay attention to the formal and linguistic qualities of his poetry. The aural and rhythmic qualities of words cluster to produce subliminal and somatic effects that underpin or subvert the overt semantic sense; these are the fundamental building blocks of Shakespeare's poetic art. Shakespeare loves to explore the ambiguities lurking in the polyglot language that was Elizabethan English. Reading his poetry with an Oxford English Dictionary (OED) at hand is always rewarding, because of his remarkable ability to exploit the etymological roots, the secondary and tertiary meanings, and even false etymologies, of the words he uses. When the speaker of Sonnet 92, for example, declares that "I see a better state to me belongs / Than that which on thy humor doth depend" (lines 7–8), the contemporary reader can be confused or even misled if operating under the assumption that the current meaning of "humor" as "the tendency to provoke laughter" is operative. But a quick glance at the OED reveals that "humor" has a rich and complex history; deriving originally from the four humoral fluids thought to cause various emotional states, the word comes to mean the whims or moods elicited by these fluids.³ The speaker of Sonnet 92, in other words, argues he deserves better treatment than his capricious audience currently provides.

Reading the poetry out loud is always useful as well. This is in part because complex syntactic patterns — with inversions of standard word order for purposes of meter and rhyme — frequently reveal their grammatical structure when enunciated. But it is also important to read the poetry out loud because only then can the music or cacophony of a given line be fully apprehended. Shakespeare's characteristic verse line is iambic pentameter, ten syllables with every second one stressed. In the plays, the pentameter is largely non-rhyming, which is rather curiously called "blank verse." Hamlet even jokes with Rosencrantz about metrics when a troop of players visit Denmark, suggesting that "The lady shall say her mind freely — or the blank verse shall halt for't" (*Hamlet*, 2.2.302–03). Shakespeare's verse is unusually flexible, allowing a wide range of rhythmical effects. It should not be understood as a set of strict rules but as a flexible array of practices rooted in dramatic necessity.

Even as the plays use poetry, they also imagine characters who abuse poetry. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at once mocks the use of "wailful sonnets" in courtship, and explores "the force of heaven-bred poesy" (3.2.69, 71). Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* famously links "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet" as figures of imaginative delusion (5.1.7). In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*,

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poetry is merely a prop in erotic courtship, as the idiotic Slender wishes that he had brought his copy of *Songs and Sonets* (Tottel's famous *Miscellany*, the first significant anthology of English poetry, published in 1557) to impress the girl he hopes to seduce. In *As You Like It*, Touchstone announces that "the truest poetry is the most feigning," aligning it at once with desire and with lies (3.4.15). In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus asks scornfully about the role of poetry in a world at war: "What should the wars do with these jigging fools?" (4.3.137). We should remember, moreover, that this is the same play in which Cinna the poet is torn apart by a mob who first think he is Cinna the conspirator, and then decide instead to "Tear him for his bad verses" (3.3.28). But poetry is also the chosen medium of heightened speech and solemn emotion in Shakespeare's plays. It sets up the formal expectations that allow Shakespeare to produce such intense, character-driven works. It is also regularly used to close out scenes, as if the gratifying closure of rhyme were the best way to signal the end of an action.

In the non-dramatic poetry, Shakespeare explores various possibilities of literary form, achieving a remarkable marriage of the demands of stanzaic form with the claims of English syntax. The form of Venus and Adonis is a six-line stanza, composed of a quatrain followed by a couplet. It is a stanza that is particularly effective at conveying an alternating tension and balance. The quatrain allows for the development and embellishment of an idea, while the couplet gives each stanza a kind of closure; this closure is then opened up, or rendered provisional, in the subsequent stanza. The stanza form of Lucrece is rhyme royal, the same form that Chaucer used in Troilus and Criseyde; it has one more line than the stanza used in Venus and Adonis, added to the quatrain, giving the stanza in essence two couplets. Lucrece is almost twice as long as Venus, as if this "graver labour" (as Shakespeare termed it in the Dedication) needed more stanzaic space and length to deliberate its weightier subject. This stanza works well to highlight ideas and emotions as they are being worked out, and suits the well-developed inwardness of the two protagonists. Shakespeare returns to this form in "A Lover's Complaint," the poem that follows the Sonnets in the 1609 collection, as if he felt its format was particularly appropriate to the lament of wronged females. In "The Phoenix and Turtle," Shakespeare uses a trochaic tetrameter to convey the poem's enigmatic action. Here, Shakespeare may be revisiting the tetrameter that he had frequently used for various songs in the plays. Indeed, the short lines of this short, odd, gnomic poem provide apt background music for the myriad issues about desire and number that surround the poem.

It is perhaps in the Sonnets that we can best see Shakespeare's remarkable metrical range and lyric virtuosity. The narrow compass of the sonnet



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becomes the perfect stage for displaying verbal agility and intellectual ingenuity. Certainly the use of stanzaic form in the narrative poems demonstrates their formal affinity with the Sonnets; Venus and Adonis and Lucrece build a story out of various tightly organized formal units, just as a sonnet sequence creates expectations of episodic development from the quanta of individual poems. The remarkable formal virtuosity displayed in the Sonnets may have been enhanced by Shakespeare's development of the quatrain and the couplet (ababcc) in Venus and of rhyme royal (ababbcc) in Lucrece. Both stanzaic forms begin with a quatrain, and use the couplet to generate closure, so they provide a good training ground in the building blocks of sonnets.

In 152 sonnets (there are 154 poems, but two exhibit a variant form) composed of three quatrains and a couplet, Shakespeare manages to convey an amazing range of human experience. The two variants, as we will see, draw attention to the norm, even as they vary from it significantly. The sonnet provides the perfect vehicle for a voice engaged in the effort to articulate an intrinsically unruly desire in socially approved forms and metrically acceptable ways. Like the protagonists in a Shakespearean comedy, the speakers of the poems try to synchronize a desire they can only partially control with circumstances and expectations beyond their control. The typical Shakespeare sonnet is made up of three quatrains, or four-line stanzas, followed by a couplet that summarizes or revises what was said in the first twelve lines. The rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet – ababcdcdefefgg – is somewhat less demanding of a wide range of rhyme words than the form used by Sidney (typically abbaabbacdcdee), which is useful in a language such as English. The three quatrains also prove effective for argument and rumination. A typical Shakespearean sonnet will employ terms of argumentative transition (e.g., when, then, but) at the beginnings of a quatrain or couplet. After three quatrains where all rhymes are separated by a line, the proximate rhyme of the couplet bestows the aural effect of epigrammatic wisdom that lends closure to the

Shakespeare's poetic line is based less upon rigid syllable counts than on a careful arrangement of stresses within an understood metrical norm, as one might expect from a poet who had written both for the theater and for the page. It aspires to set up expectations that it deliberately either fulfills or frustrates. Throughout all of Shakespeare's poetry abides a dynamic antagonism between the halter of form and the spur of emotion. The Sonnets will sometimes dilate a subject for twelve lines before tying it up, or turning it over, in the couplet. Shakespeare indeed possesses a remarkable capacity to unfold and then overturn a position, either in the couplet or in the next poem. Perhaps



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this ability to imagine various perspectives helped make him such an effective playwright, since every character in his plays is allowed a significant voice, even if it contradicts other voices. This trait, which played so well on the stage, is also likely what attracted Shakespeare both to the sonnet and to the sonnet cycle, since the process of exploring one side of an issue, and then another, is perfect both for the individual sonnet, and for the relationship between sonnets.

It is telling that the same process of dilation and summation or renunciation occurs, but at a heightened speed, in the stanzas that constitute *Venus* and *Lucrece*. When he wants music, Shakespeare makes the line flow with a kind of gratifying regularity. It is easy for modern readers to miss the effort that produces such music. In his prefatory poem to the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, though, Ben Jonson, a fellow poet and playwright, praises Shakespeare for his "well toned, and true-filed lines." Jonson knows the immense art required to file the rough matter of language and the refractory substance of passion into metrically regular verse.

Shakespeare, in other words, frequently embeds the intense drama of his poetry in a mellifluous form that belies its often turgid content. His lyric poetry is not as overtly dramatic as that of his contemporary John Donne, whose poems aspire to the rough staccato immediacy of dramatic utterance. Shakespeare by contrast achieves in his sonnets a remarkable confluence of syntax and form that can sometimes seem to mute rather than amplify the drama implicit in the poetry. This surface smoothness — a valued effect in Shakespeare's day — should not lead us to underestimate the drama that seethes under the apparently placid surface.

Throughout his career, Shakespeare aspires to develop a metrical norm which he then plays with subtly or disturbs aggressively. It is typical of the aesthetic sophistication of his formal choices that he uses one of the most metrically regular lines in his entire corpus to inaugurate the poem in which he most self-consciously plays with the idea of convention: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (Sonnet 130). Meter here serves as a kind of counterpoint to his lavish and gently comic description of an unconventional mistress:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more red than her lips' red; If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head. I have seen roses damasked, red and white, But no such roses see I in her cheeks, And in some perfumes is there more delight



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Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go –
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

The pendular first line is followed by a largely irregular second line; the poem's metrics cleverly perform the poem's meaning, which is to praise a mistress by suggesting that she varies from the same norms of poetic praise the poem invokes. This delightful poem suggests that the litany of Petrarchan clichés – eyes like suns, cheeks like roses, etc. – is most effective when invoked in order to be disavowed. The regularity of the concluding couplet provides apt background music for the poem's final gesture, which is to practice just the kind of comparison it has ostensibly disavowed.

When he writes a poem about his love for an androgynous young man, though, Shakespeare cleverly chooses to compose the entire poem in the unstressed end rhyme known as "feminine rhyme":

A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion; A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted With shifting change, as is false women's fashion; An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling, Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth; A man in hue, all hues in his controlling, Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth. And for a woman wert thou first created, Till Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting, And by addition me of thee defeated, By adding one thing to my purpose nothing. But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure, Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

We will examine Sonnet 20 in more detail in chapter 6. Right now, it is enough to observe that the poem uses a particularly effective blend of meter and rhyme to tell the story of a young man who started out as a woman, but who was endowed with a penis by Nature after Nature began doting on her. The poem's dizzying metamorphoses suggest that perhaps sexual identity based in the addition of a "thing," a penis, is as arbitrary, and as artful, as the addition of a syllable to a line of poetry.

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Sonnet 87 also uses feminine rhymes in all but two lines. In this poem, though, the effect is very different; here, the extra syllable produces the lugubrious effect of a dying fall, which suits well the poem's valedictory message:

Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know'st thy estimate:
The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;
My bonds in thee are all determinate.
For how do I hold thee but by thy granting,
And for that riches where is my deserving?
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,
And so my patent back again is swerving.
Thy self thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,
Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking;
So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,
Comes home again, on better judgement making.
Thus have I had thee, as a dream doth flatter,
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

The financial and legal terminology that suffuses the poem ("dear," "charter," "bonds," "patent") demonstrates the tension between the emotional connection that painfully lingers and the rational claim that is being surrendered.

Meter, then, serves as a remarkable resource for Shakespeare. At its best, his poetry is capable of finding exactly the right music for the sentiment he wishes to convey. When he wants to convey frustration or disgust, moreover, Shakespeare writes lines which are as ponderous and unmusical as possible; in Sonnet 129, for example, he brilliantly characterizes the morally negative causes and the dire consequences of headlong lust through a clogged, halting rhythm:

Lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust.

(lines 2–4)

To attempt to read that last line as even a variant of an iambic pentameter is to experience in one's mouth and ear the expressive force of Shakespeare's metrics. The line brilliantly resists metrical expectation, just as the poem describes a passion which chafes against moral regulation.

A very different kind of metrical accomplishment is achieved in "The Phoenix and Turtle." In this poem, Shakespeare uses a trochaic (a foot composed of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable – an inverted iamb) tetrameter (four feet per line) to describe the poem's action, perhaps