

Introduction to *Threading Shakespeare's Sonnets*

Any reader approaching the complete Shakespearian sonnets for the first time will probably have been moved to do so by sampling a handful of individual sonnets in a school room. No one I have talked to has claimed to have studied all the one hundred and fifty-four sonnets intensively in order and come away with a coherent notion of the whole. This is not surprising. From first to last, the poems present formidable problems, even to professionals. Questions that arise immediately are hard to answer. Is there really a narrative going on? Who are all these nameless people who seem so far away from the rich and vivid characters who step so memorably from the plays? Are they fictional or veiled realities? Can we leap from one sonnet to the next and just hope that some sense will eventually appear?

Even with copious footnotes and commentary, most of us soon find the going rough. I can remember pondering the very first line for a considerable time and wondering what "fairest creatures" might be meant and what kind of "increase" we should want from them--and why. The second line merely complicated matters: how could we expect a rose (and "beauty's Rose," at that) never to die? By the time I reached the end of the first quatrain, I was further befuddled: whose heir might bear whose memory, anyway? I might have added, "Who cares?" But after such bafflement, I turned to more accessible sonnets, like "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" and found the ground smoother. So I persisted. So did frustration.

Years later, after much fumbling, I began, with the much needed help from scholarly editions, to understand more. Still, the continuity and the main thrust of the sequence eluded me. Though the whole has become largely intelligible, I have come to realize that there will forever be insoluble problems, such as why the friends of the speaker who are "hid in death's dateless night" in Sonnet 30 are made to miraculously reappear in the next sonnet. How can the speaker have supposed them to be dead? We can only guess.

Despite the hazards, it is a great pleasure to follow the threads of the sonnets and work out the narrative line with the help of previous scholarship. A good modern edition will cast much light into the darker pathways. This book is intended to give an overall interpretation based on the mass of information that has accumulated about the sonnets. The sonnet by sonnet explication should aid readers new or experienced to find their ways through the great maze that Shakespeare created.

The threads employed by Shakespeare are many and varied in type and length. There are, from the start, major threads like the rose, which is a symbol

with many meanings, and time, which may be a personification or simply a universal measure. Time is usually an all-powerful destroyer but it is sometimes an enemy that can be defeated by the immortality of poetry. Some threads have minor ones attached, as does the rose in the first sonnet, where it stands for the youth in all his beauty but also is connected to his "bud," which can signify, on another level, the glans penis. Once seen in all their intricacies and diverse connotations, the threads, when followed, enrich our reading as we find the poetic fabric being sewn together.

The frequency and the duration of the threads can emphasize themes, forces, and interrelationships. For example, the thread of gluttony is very long: it crops up initially at the end of Sonnet 1 as a fatal sin the youth may, without guidance, commit. This thread has a literary history, too, as one of the Seven Deadly Sins of medieval literature. In Shakespeare's sequence, all the sins manifest themselves as connecting threads. They are linked to and dominated by pride, the greatest sin of all and that which causes the speaker's downfall. They are also linked to the strongest narrative thread, which is that of betrayal, especially the self-betrayal of the speaker, which results from his pride as the youth's mentor. This can also be seen in the first sonnet when the speaker accuses the youth of being a foe to himself. Ironically, it turns out that the charge applies more forcibly to the speaker, who does not see his own errors until the closing sonnets--if then.

The Speaker as Hero

The crucial fact underlying the sequence is that all the sonnets are spoken by one person; in effect, it consists of 154 soliloquies linked by the various threads. Although the sonnets are individual entities of fourteen lines (with two exceptions), they gradually form both characters and emotions into a finely knit progression requiring many inferences by the reader. Though at first the poems seem disjunctive, the narrative connections begin to emerge from scattered clues. The broad lines have always been apparent although even they were tangled in the second edition (1640), which prevailed through most of the eighteenth century. With the return of interest in the sonnets during the nineteenth century, scholarly efforts were largely directed towards the text and the identities of the persons that appear. Biographers began to squeeze out of the sonnets "facts" concerning Shakespeare's life. In some circles, notably those who wish to deny Shakespeare's authorship, such activities continue to this day. Professional scholars, however, now believe that no definite models can be found for the characters. Trying to find out who the youth and the mistress and the rival poet really were has been deemed a futile pursuit. More importantly, the speaker is no longer seen as Shakespeare himself in any literal sense.

In the Romantic era and long afterwards, the idea that poets could and should write about themselves became dominant. When poets wrote about themselves they either meant it--or pretended to do so. The cult of personality prevailed, even after the unreliable narrators began to come on stage in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In a famous line in 1827, Wordsworth asserted that the sonnets were a key with which Shakespeare "unlocked his heart." But in 1876, Browning rather shrilly responded, "Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!" But Browning did not always stick to the principle implied, despite his remarkable dramatic monologues. Modern scholarly editions do not refer to the speaker as anything but that and no autobiography can be drawn from the poems.

Shakespeare left no personal statements about his role as poet; in fact, he left no manuscripts at all--no letters, no journals, no recorded conversations (as did Ben Jonson). It is true that the speaker in the sonnets is a poet, but there is no evidence that he is Shakespeare's mouthpiece. It is also true, however, that the sonnets *might* have been created from his personal experience. Unfortunately, we do not know what his experiences were, and so we must not pretend that what we read is Shakespeare's personal confession. Besides, thoughtful study of the character of the speaker also makes it very unlikely that the author is speaking.

Let us draw the picture of the speaker as he emerges from the poems. As a character he is largely credible. He is a poet, but one who would be called an anti-hero today. He is clever, though over proud of his logic, and he is not long on self-knowledge. He is less vivid and concrete than the males in Shakespeare's plays but he has more lines than Hamlet, with whom he has some things in common, especially his inconsistent, melancholic speech and behavior. Though we cannot envision him physically, his strings of words reveal in depth his emotional experiences, though sometimes in a teasing fashion. He responds intensely to the other characters, who are themselves not fully drawn. Compared with their flimsiness, he is solid, but still scarcely complete. We know that Hamlet went to Wittenberg, but did our speaker go to a university or even a grammar school?

Shakespeare, as author, knows all about the speaker, but he does not tell us any more than he wants to and that is precious little. We also learn that little only from the speaker's lips. Much is simply overheard: what the speaker tells the young man who becomes his friend and what he says when he addresses the woman who is his mistress. We are also allowed to hear some meditative interior monologues that seem to be addressed directly to us as readers. The remarkable lecture on lust (Sonnet 129), for example, seems like an agonized shout, and the declarative voice in Sonnet 116 (which is a direct antithesis) forcefully praises "the marriage of true minds."

We also come to know the speaker through his succession of cameo appearances: in one instance when he has a vision of his friend like a jewel in the darkness (Sonnet 27), in another when he thrusts his bloody spur into the horse that carries him away from his friend (Sonnet 50), and in a third when like a madman he denounces both himself and his mistress, whom he discovers to be "as black as hell" when he had thought her "bright" (Sonnet 147). These are but random glimpses. The narrative as a whole is like a train ride, during which we can mentally recreate, scene by scene, the landscape of the speaker's love.

At the beginning the speaker acts like a kindly tutor, advising the youth, whose parents the speaker has known, to perpetuate his beauty by wedding and producing offspring stamped with his superlative virtues. Two things immediately become clear: the speaker loves to contrive arguments to persuade the youth, but he fails to realize (or mention, if he does understand) that the offspring may not live up to expectations. Shakespeare is creating a character who does not have the omniscience of the author and therefore a distance between them is established.

Obviously the speaker does not persuade the youth to take his well-meant advice. All through the first seventeen sonnets the speaker repeats--with subtle variations--his argument for procreation. Perhaps the youth sees the weaknesses of the arguments; perhaps he is bored by the repetition; perhaps he has other plans. We do not know. Shakespeare's focus is always on what is in the speaker's mind, and the speaker is portrayed as quixotic: intent on his own logic in support of his obsession--to seek a mate for his young friend, who is painted as the ideal of beauty. In the speaker's eyes he can do no wrong (except to refuse to procreate); his virtue is supreme.

Later on, the speaker realizes how wrong his eyes have been, but he keeps on with his misperceptions right to the close of the narrative. He is another example of Puck's verdict, "Lord, what fools these mortals be." But the speaker's errors are much more serious in their consequences than any of the characters' mistakes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Is he tragic? His actions take a disastrous course despite his good intentions, which is the basic tragic movement from *Oedipus Rex* to the present. On the other hand, he is clearly gifted, intelligent, wise to most of the ways of the world, humble--sometimes to the point of cringing--idealistic, true--in his fashion--to the man and the woman whom he loves. Sometimes he is comic but he never loses his dignity as Bottom does. Instead, he becomes a tragic figure--corrupted and diseased. We also see a lover who is divided about his loves and whose emotional swings are swift and strong. Today he might be diagnosed as suffering from a bipolar disorder. Without this there would be little drama.

The Other Males

The young man has been much described and debated by scholars, who have tried to track down his original. Some have called him Mr. W. H., thus linking him to the elusive dedicatee of the volume, but no connection has ever been established. All attempts to identify Mr. W. H. have failed. Those wishing to follow the history of this controversy will find a fascinating account in the compendious Variorum Edition of the sonnets edited by Hyder Rollins. This is a sixty-four page appendix in small print, and it concludes as follows:

The friend, or W. H., remains unknown. Theories about him are still theories: he may have existed, he may be a fictitious, a conventional, a dramatic figure or figures. In any case, Wyndham . . . was not far wrong in asserting that any attempt to identify the friend of the sonnets must "prove detrimental to an aesthetic appreciation of their lyrical excellence" . . . (Vol. 2, p. 241)

No evidence has emerged since this statement that could unseat this judgment.

What can truthfully be said about the youth is that his portrait is drawn from Petrarchan tradition, except for his sex. He is beautiful, young, aristocratic, a paragon and a cynosure worshipped by society. Later in the sequence he turns out to have feet of clay, but the speaker continues to be true to him. The two men have become bosom friends after the first stage of the narrative, but the youth deserts the speaker for others, including the speaker's mistress. Although the circumstances are not revealed, the youth has some friends that he has lured away from the speaker. The friends mentioned in Sonnets 30 and 31 are mentioned only fleetingly; they are like ghosts, serving only to confirm the youth's faithlessness.

Just as hard to pin down is the so-called "rival poet," who comes on stage briefly at a distance as someone eclipsing the speaker in popularity because he wields "a worthier pen" (Sonnet 79). This poet (along with some other rivals) appears fitfully in Sonnets 78-86, and is characterized only by a few phrases: he has "a golden quill" (88) and writes verses of "proud full sail" (86). Using such clues, scholars have rounded up all the usual suspects from among Shakespeare's contemporaries, and, as usual, have convicted none.

The Mistress

The pattern of identification in the case of the mistress is no different and is similarly unsuccessful. For years she has been called the "Dark Lady," even

though she is definitely not a lady in rank or character. The word *black* is used to describe her from her first appearance in Sonnet 127, where her eyes are “raven black” and “black” is rated as the current preference in beauty. The word *dark* does occur once, and the modern equivalent would be *brunette*; but “the mistress” is the best descriptive term, especially since she is the mistress in the modern sense to more than one male--both the speaker and his friend. She is tyrannical and capricious, with a wandering eye to boot, not the pure idol that Petrarch’s Laura is. She (if it is truly she in Sonnet 128) plays upon a keyboard, which the speaker envies because of her tender touch. This might seem a clue, but the situation was often used in Elizabethan literature.

The upshot of all this scholarship is that the characters are traditional types rather than discernible individuals. Shakespeare’s interest is in the situations and the emotions that are bred by them. The last glimpse that we get of the triangle--in Sonnet 144, “Two loves I have of comfort and despair”--is unique among sonnet sequences, but the characters and their situation most resemble a miniature morality play.

“The World”

Finally, there is another “character,” a thread laid down in Sonnet 1 in the form of the pronoun “we” and made specific--twice--in the couplet. The character (or force, if you will) is “the world,” a phrase of surprising frequency: 27 times in the sequence, 5 of them in Sonnet 9. The phrase varies in its denotation, but it is used mainly to indicate the public, especially the court and the upper classes, which determine social laws. Long before John Stuart Mill, Shakespeare realized the supreme tyranny of public opinion. Shakespeare uses “the world” as a force to be reckoned with and develops situations where that force cannot be defied without penalty. For example, the speaker feels at one point that he must stay away from his friend in society so that the friend’s image will not be ruined by his association with the speaker, who has fallen from grace in certain circles. (Sonnet 36) Tracing this thread will be one of particular interest since it affects the action all the way through to the catastrophe.

Narrative structures

As random as the sonnets sometimes seem, the whole sequence is guided by various forms, such as the continuation of the threads. The poetry itself is traditionally cast in the English form of the sonnet developed by Wyatt and Surrey in the middle of the sixteenth century. Because English has so many fewer rhyming words than Italian, aspiring poets in Britain modified the Italian rhyme scheme, and generally followed Wyatt and Surrey by using the pattern of abab cdcd efef gg. (Of the 154 sonnets, only a few are irregular.) Because of the

traditional *volta*, or turn of thought at the end of the octave (the first eight lines) or at the beginning of the final couplet, or both, the form is suited to narrative shifts and contrasts. A simple, but subtle, example is Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), which establishes the transiency of beauty in the octave, then, at the turn, contrasts the permanence of the person addressed, who shall achieve immortality through the speaker's verses. After the second turn at the couplet, both the person addressed and the readers are swept forward in a vision of life eternal.

Tragic structure

Those who bought copies of the Quarto in 1609 were well aware of the popular sonnet sequences that flourished in the 1590's after the widely admired *Astrophel and Stella* by Sir Philip Sidney, which appeared posthumously in 1591. That sequence and the deluge of sonnets that followed bore titles named after the lady being praised and had at least a token narrative of a conventional nature drawn from the Italian tradition. Shakespeare, entering the lists towards the end of the sonnet vogue, used the conventions in a different way. His sequence was strikingly different in being addressed first to a young man and then to a woman of great sexual appetite and little fidelity. As a successful dramatist Shakespeare knew how to paint vivid portraits in short spaces. Characters like Richard III and Prince Hal could reveal themselves quickly in intimate speeches. (Hamlet's seven soliloquies can be taken out of context and read seriatim as a psychological novel.) The story of the speaker of the sonnets takes longer to develop fully and lacks the framework of specific narrative detail, but it is nevertheless a strong and dramatic tale. In fact, it follows the basic form of the Shakespearian and other classic tragedies.

The opening section of the sonnets in which the speaker tries to convince the youth of the virtues of procreation is equivalent to the exposition in a drama. The relatively sunny scenes between the speaker as avuncular teacher and his youthful friend as resistant pupil reveal a subtle agon not unlike that between Polonius and his son Laertes, who almost completely ignores his father's lecture. All the sonnets are structured like arguments and seem at first like excessive repetitions. Although we are not told what the youth replies, his answers are obviously rejections.

The second section of the sonnets has a complication similar to that in a Shakespearian tragic structure: the speaker gives up trying to convince the youth to get married and have children and begins to fall in love with the youth himself. Gradually the men become close friends, and the speaker treats the youth more like an adult and an equal. As the emotional intensity increases, the pair become "one soul in bodies twain" (a common phrase of the period), and the crucial step

is taken when each gives his heart to the other. (Sonnet 22) The bliss is short lived. Not only does friction develop, but the agon is complicated by the introduction--at first very briefly--of the triangle involving the mistress, who becomes the mistress of each man in turn. (The first stage of this is evident in Sonnets 39-42.) The plot proceeds slowly because the speaker is unwilling to give up his love for his friend, the one thing that endures, with difficulty, until the close.

Much longer is the third section, which follows the waves of emotion that become more complex as they ebb and flow. As the center of the sequence approaches, the speaker sinks into the deepest despondency, imagining his death and asking his friend not to mourn longer than the bell tolls. (Sonnet 70) Though he discovers that his love has betrayed him (Sonnet 80) and his poetic power seems spent, he continues to praise his friend and recover from his hatred. But the oscillations continue, too, and the speaker reveals his own infidelity. By the end of the section (Sonnet 126), the friend has taken up with others, and the empty spaces at the end of the poem suggest the finality of their relationship.

The pathos--typical of the fourth act in a tragedy--begins early and lasts long; the sonnets' structure is more like that of *King Lear*, which takes a downward plunge with the rejection of Cordelia at the end of act one. The fourth section, the sonnets addressed to the mistress (127-152), intensify the bitterness of the speaker, and cynicism predominates. More swiftly than the sorrows of the speaker and his friend, the harsher infatuation with the mistress comes to grief when the speaker loses her utterly to the young friend, whom she keeps in thrall. The speaker's descent into hell, then, is complete when he loses both his loves and fails to find a way out. (Sonnet 144) Ironically he still has doubts, but the reader does not.

In the last section, as in a drama's last act, the speaker/protagonist makes a tragic discovery--this time without a doubt. In Sonnet 152, we learn that the speaker has found out that the mistress has been unfaithful to her husband (she has broken her "bed-vow") and, in effect, betrayed at least three men. The speaker has gone from one catastrophe to another. To cap it all, he reveals that he is himself "forsworn": he has betrayed himself by swearing her "fair" all along.

In Sonnets 153 and 154, the catastrophe is rounded out by a final discovery: the speaker has contracted a venereal disease and is seeking a cure in the sweat baths that were commonly built to relieve afflictions like syphilis. That Shakespeare had such an idea in mind is supported by his frequent mention of such illnesses. One striking parallel in the plays comes in Pandarus' vicious epilogue to *Troilus and Cressida*:

Brethren and sisters of the hold-door trade, [prostitution]
Some two months hence my will shall here be made.
It should be now, but that my fear is this,
Some galled goose of Winchester [prostitute] would hiss.
Till then I'll sweat and seek about for eases,
And at that time bequeath you my diseases.

By the end of the sonnets the triumph of Cupid is complete. As the last two poems show, all efforts by Diana and her maidens to defeat Cupid, "the general of love," will fail. That eternal agon is foredoomed.

Other Narrative Devices

Because the tragic progress is recounted through the words of one man, other narrative means are devised by Shakespeare to enhance the story. The chief of these we can call affective: the forward motion is propelled by subtle (and not so subtle) shifts in the speaker's emotions. Since he is torn (his agon is largely internal) his positive and negative feelings, especially those towards the youth, are closely juxtaposed. In Sonnet 26 ("Lord of my love"), for example, the speaker happily takes on the role of vassal to his friend and trusts him to inspire his poetry. But when (in Sonnet 27, "Weary with toil") he retires to write and suffers a disturbing (though beautiful) vision of his friend, he can find no rest either for himself or his friend, in body or in mind. The horseback poems (Sonnets 50 and 51) also illustrate cleverly how emotions can slow and speed journeys to and from the loved one. As the speaker rides, he feels both the grief that lies ahead and the joy that lies behind.

The pendulum of feeling swings often and swiftly but there are just enough variations to create a sense of forward motion. Sometimes, Shakespeare builds groups of sonnets that intensify a single emotion, like the growth of his love for the youth in Sonnets 18 through 26 or his disgust with his sins of the flesh that rises to a crescendo from Sonnet 141 (which acknowledges the falsity of his sight) through Sonnet 146 ("Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth") to the horrified admissions of betrayal at the end of the sequence. That Shakespeare is using this wave technique consciously is apparent from the beginning of Sonnet 60:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

The movement of (and within) the sonnets thus reflects the emotional ebb and flow of our own lives.

The simple repetition of theme that characterizes the first seventeen sonnets is a subtle way of moving emotions forward, including the implied resistance of the youth. The reader doesn't realize quite what is happening until the end of this first group when the contending promises of personal immortality--through procreation and through the poet's verses--are neatly packed together in the couplet of Sonnet 17. The speaker has promised both to the youth by way of finally winning him over. Now he can go on in Sonnet 18 to direct praises of the youth on his own behalf.

Another device used to enrich the narrative is the miniature allegory. Because the whole story is essentially allegorical, a periodic change of scale can create a sense of moving quickly on. The brief digressions add another drama to the main stream. The most obvious allegories appear in the catastrophe, when the tragic agon created by the triangle is epitomized in Sonnet 144 "Two loves I have, of comfort and despair." There the speaker, like an everyman in a morality play, is torn between a good angel and a bad one. And finally, the two Cupid sonnets (153 and 154) cap the whole sequence by adding mythic allegory to a pair of poems which tell the same story twice, thus echoing of the repetitive form used in the opening section. Sonnet 1 established the thread of Eros by using the myth of Narcissus. The thread reappears throughout and culminates in the agon between Venus (the mother of Eros, or Cupid) and Diana, the goddess of chastity. Eros, "the general of hot desire," wins the battle, and the results, especially the diseases incurred by humans, demonstrate the hazards of our sexual being.

Vocabulary

Anyone attempting to read the sonnets must be forewarned: the differences between Elizabethan English and our current usage abound. All the words cannot possibly be listed here, so a scholarly edition such as the Arden or the Oxford Shakespeare is a more than useful aid. The commentary that follows has rendered the meanings of every sonnet according to the best lexical information available, but many problems are well-nigh unsolvable. *The Oxford Complete Sonnets and Poems* edited by Colin Burrow is exceptionally thorough regarding difficult words and passages and gives the reader a chance to decide for himself among the various possible meanings. In addition, it must be said that while the *New Oxford English Dictionary* is unmatched for definitions generally, all the many meanings for a given word are not applicable and the dates of citations must be noted. In some instances a citation may indicate that a particular word or phrase is found only in Shakespeare's sonnets, and therefore the editors had to construct their own meaning. In the last analysis, the meaning

of a given word in a given line is determined by the context. Ironies and ambiguities often must be matters of individual interpretation.

Certain key words must be mentioned in advance because they are vital to an understanding of the whole. First, the words *friend* and *lover* were interchanged quite freely in the late sixteenth century. The word *love* did not imply a sexual relationship as a rule, so that when Shakespeare has one man use the verb to express the admiration of one man for another--as he does, for example, in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*--a sexual relationship is not intended. (The word *lover* appears in only two places in the sonnets but sexual relations exist and are expressed in other ways.) The word *friend* is very flexible in its reference and was certainly used at times to mean what we now call a lover or sexual partner. Unfortunately it is not easy to tell. There is no absolute evidence that the speaker and his friend were lovers in the physical sense, but there is no evidence to the contrary either. That the speaker and the mistress were sexual partners--with each other as well as with others--is plainly stated in Sonnet 152 in the final climactic revelation.

The word *mistress* can be ambiguous, too, and did not usually imply a physical relationship. This is important when trying to determine, for example, the significance of the speaker's phrase describing the youth as the "master mistress of my passion" in Sonnet 20. Its meaning has caused much controversy: does it refer to a sexual relationship or does it only denote the control of the emotions generally? If, as the following commentary suggests, Sonnet 20 is pivotal, Shakespeare could well have left the whole poem intentionally ambiguous. The reader is just realizing that the speaker's feelings towards the youth are more than avuncular.

More problems arise when certain ordinary words have slang meanings now obsolete or obscure. Did Shakespeare intentionally use them for his audience of "private friends"? In Sonnet 1, for example, the word *bud*, which is used in the context of implied masturbation (l. 11) by the narcissistic youth, has the slang meaning of penis. This is startling to a modern reader, but the durability of this usage is shown by its having been found in recent years in the Bahamas. However, the hazards are great. In the same sonnet the important symbol of the rose appears, and the slang meaning of rose for the female genitalia has been brought up as pertinent not long ago. But does it really apply here? Context, again, is all. What could this mean as applied to the youth? It seems unlikely that we can ever be sure how Shakespeare and his contemporary readers felt about it. Slang is slippery and ephemeral. We should remember that if double entendres weren't double, they would lose their force. And sometimes we must accept being left in linguistic limbo.

Long-standing Issues

When W. H. Auden declared in 1964 that more nonsense had been written about Shakespeare's sonnets than any other literary work in the world, his judgment was not new. And the mountain of criticism has continued to grow; bardolatry is not dead.

To get matters into perspective, we need to remember that information about the sonnets did not begin to accumulate until the late eighteenth century when Edmond Malone completed the first scholarly edition, *Plays and Poems*, in 1790. Though Shakespeare probably began writing the sonnets by the mid 1590's-- and there has been much futile dispute about their dates--there was no recorded mention of them until 1598. Then a gentleman of letters, Francis Meres, published a book titled *Palladis Tamia*, which surveyed literature past and contemporary. It specially praised Shakespeare, named some of his plays, and cited his "sug' red sonnets among his private friends." None of the sonnets were published until 1599 when two were pirated by the printer William Jaggard for a volume he put together under the title *The Passionate Pilgrim*. Jaggard falsely claimed that all the poems in the book were written by Shakespeare.

The complete sonnet sequence did not appear until 1609. This book, the first Quarto, was made available by Thomas Thorpe, who wrote the cryptic dedication which no one has yet deciphered. Far too much time, energy, and paper has been devoted to this problem, so I shall say no more. The actual title of the Quarto was *Shake-speare's Sonnets*, a point of interest because no other sonnet sequence was given the author's name as title. Most sonneteers followed the lead of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) by using an invented name, most often that of the woman worshipped in the poems. *Diana*, *Cynthia* and *Delia* are examples of the ladies so honored. The fact that Shakespeare's sonnets have his name suggests, but does not prove, that he did not invent the title any more than he wrote the dedication. Was the collection compiled by Shakespeare himself? Was it given to Thorpe by the author or an intermediary? The chances are we shall never know.

What does seem likely is that the sonnets as published were transmitted intact to the publisher; although this cannot be proved, the sonnets are now treated as if they were a whole presented in the order intended by Shakespeare. In the preceding centuries, the order has been widely disputed and alternate orders have been proposed. Any reader wishing to follow this controversy should begin by consulting Hyder Rollins' account in the Variorum edition of 1944. The text you will be reading has been modernized in keeping with my understanding of the work, and as few changes as possible have been made

other than in punctuation, capitalization, and italics. Obvious errors have been silently corrected. Most importantly, the sonnets are numbered as they are in the 1609 Quarto. This is universal practice now, but in the second Quarto of 1640, the sonnets were re-ordered and the numbers removed by the publisher, John Benson, and until Malone's scholarly edition in the late eighteenth century, his ill-advised changes were influential.

The issue of the text is linked to the issue of sexuality. No very early reactions to the sonnets were recorded at all except the brief clause, already quoted, by Francis Meres. Some of the poems copied in private manuscripts have survived. However, no significant comments appeared until the second Quarto. Like the first publisher, Thomas Thorpe, the second, John Benson, was an entrepreneur primarily interested in making money. At the same time he did not want to alienate an increasingly Puritan society. To that end, he gathered the sonnets, re-arranged them--cutting some up in the process--and shoved them together to disguise the fact that they were fourteen-lines originally. He also gave them titles of his own devising to suggest their morality, and finally wrote a preface which, strangely, described the sonnets as "serene." Eight of the poems were omitted and other poems by other poets were mingled with Shakespeare's without acknowledgment. His main change, however, was switching male and female pronouns to conceal the fact that many of the poems were addressed to a young man.

In the eighteenth century, sonnets were out of fashion and ignored. Dr. Johnson did not think them worth criticizing. He edited Shakespeare's plays, but he did not deign to do the same for the sonnets. Though he admired the plays he did not think them great sources of moral instruction, and one suspects that he thought the same about the sonnets. He simply didn't comment. It was the same Johnson who told Boswell that all stories ought to be true. With the Romantics, the sonnet was restored, but the taint of what the Victorians considered sexual immorality still clung to Shakespeare, who was cheerfully bowdlerized. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, opinions began to change because bardolatry had taken over. Though Oscar Wilde was scarcely the most popular advocate of the sonnets, he was influential, and *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889), a fanciful picture of a boy-actor in Shakespeare's plays, gave further impetus to the search for the identity of the friend in the sonnets. Readers of all sorts had already begun to look for the "true" story behind them. What would Dr. Johnson have said?

In the twentieth century, and now in our own, sexuality in the sonnets became a primary matter of interest, and the arguments and theories have somewhat clouded over the poetry. It cannot be denied that *homosexuality* and *homoeroticism* are words that came into being in the nineteenth century and that

the sixteenth century drew no line separating “gay” from “straight.” The Tudors were scarcely liberated, however. Sodomy was forbidden and the statutes decreed capital punishment for the convicted. We can be somewhat pleased to find out that only one execution is known to have taken place. But we must also confess that both the Elizabethans and the Victorians were more oppressive than not.

It is time now to go back to the sonnets and reread them for what they are: explorations of the relationship between sexuality and what we have invented as “love.” Ultimately they constitute the tragedy of the flesh and the eternal story of Eros and self-betrayal. To appreciate Shakespeare’s accomplishment, we need to read the whole sequence, not just a smattering of anthology favorites. Shakespeare’s story may at last be seen as the best one.

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