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Preface

The chief aim of this book is to make *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (the original title of the volume published in 1609) more readily accessible to readers of the twenty-first century. Because of the many changes in the language and the modes of poetic expression since Shakespeare's era, the modern reader is easily daunted if he ventures to sit down and read the poems straight through. Shakespeare's audience had no need of elaborate annotation such as that found in later editions, though even they may well have been puzzled at times. Although the earlier narrative poems--*Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*--were frequently reprinted and made Shakespeare's name well-known, the sonnets were not published again until 1640, and then only in a badly garbled form. As a result, all succeeding editions are reconstructions, beginning in the late eighteenth century with Edmond Malone's ground-breaking scholarship. The masses of subsequent inquiries have focused on biographical and textual matters. While new editions have, in cumulative fashion, worked out the most likely wording and punctuation of the sonnets, attempts to identify real persons and historical situations behind the characters and incidents in the sonnets have failed to produce a convincing consensus. Barring new discoveries, such problems will never be resolved.

As for the attempts to read the sonnets as revelations concerning Shakespeare's private life, they too have failed because very little is known about him other than certain external facts about his life, his death (his will has survived), and his career prior to his appearance on the London theater scene. As one famous scholar remarked, all the provable facts about Shakespeare's life can be summarized on a letter-sized sheet of typewritten paper. Therefore, we cannot say that the sonnets reveal his emotional life. No letters by him, no diaries or journals, no remarks on anything or anyone else have been preserved. What books he may have owned have disappeared. Except for one letter written to him by his future son-in-law asking for money, everything has vanished into thin air. There is not even a laundry list left behind.

What we can do, however, is to read the sonnets as a work of lyrical fiction, a series of monologues and poetic epistles by a single character--a person invented by the author. Shakespeare may have used his own experiences, but he didn't have to, as he amply demonstrated in his dramas. Did he not create voices for Caliban as well as Ariel, Cordelia and her sisters as well as Lear, Iago as well as Othello--and so many others? My task has been to render as carefully as possible the psychological experiences that one man has undergone in dealing with emotional tensions (largely derived from his sexual impulses). Although the poems have been attacked as having no coherent story, they should be seen as an intelligible sequence following the spate of sonnets in the late sixteenth century.

The reader will have to judge whether the unifying threads I have found make sense--as a human tragedy, not as simply a miscellaneous collection of "love songs" and instructive verses.

This book--*Threading Shakespeare's Sonnets*-- provides not only a modern text but a new running commentary that reveals, poem by poem, the emergent meaning of the whole. The overall impact of this tragedy is far more potent than the response evoked by any single lyric.