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EN 252

24 April, 2008

### Critical Debate Over the Sonnets

The text of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* as we know it today is one of literature's most incessantly argued points of controversy and speculation. The surviving facts concerning the works are few and the contextual evidence provided by the sonnets themselves offers an ambiguous arena for conjecture at best. It is generally assumed that the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man – though there is no hard proof that there is only one – and sonnets 78-80 and 82-86 are generally acknowledged as a Rival Poet sequence, while 127-154 are thought to address a Dark Lady. It is important to understand at least a brief history of their conception and publication (which, in truth, the existing concept of their factual history *is* brief) in an effort to understand their peculiar place in Shakespeare's canon. Though it has been argued that perhaps some of the sonnets explore themes in Shakespeare's plays, these themes have always proved universally transcendent in Shakespeare's hand. They provide no development of theories or creeds by which to live, they are merely content to exist as beautifully as they possibly can, in a splendid form which enables the reader to exist more beautifully in the reading of them.

*Shakespeare's Sonnets* were published for the first time in the 1609 Quarto by Thomas Thorpe, and according to Colin Burrow, editor of The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Sonnets and Poems, "it is very likely that Shakespeare at least provisionally put the sonnets into the order in which they appear" (91). No one is certain exactly when they

were written, yet Burrow believes that Shakespeare may have begun work on them as early as 1591 (in particular, sonnets 127-54) and that they were completed by 1604 (sonnets 104-26) (105). They were initially distributed by William Aspley and John Wright. Hallett Smith, in his introduction to The Riverside Shakespeare edition of the sonnets, writes: “Quite evidently the publication was not authorized nor seen through the press by the author, for the text is considerably worse than the texts of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* and there is no dedication by the author” (1839). This is further evidenced by the fact that there appears to have been no final revision of the text before being printed in the Q. For instance, as Burrow points out: “Q contains the odd line that does not rhyme (25.9, 69.3, 113.6), a couplet that is repeated in two poems (36 and 96), a fifteen line-sonnet (99), a sonnet with a second line which repeats, unmetrically, a phrase from its first line (146), and a repeated error in which ‘their’ is printed for ‘thy’, an error which mysteriously stops at Sonnet 128, at a point in the sequence when some unusual spellings also begin to appear” (92). Prior to the initial Quarto publication, at least a few of the sonnets were circulated in manuscript form for up to a decade’s time. Sonnets 138 and 144 appeared in a collection called *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599. Over the centuries, many have attempted to rearrange the sequence of the sonnets, to no convincing avail. Therefore, they appear in most modern editions in their original order.

Perhaps most puzzling about the original 1609 Quarto edition of the sonnets is the mysterious dedication by Thomas Thorpe to a Master W.H.:

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.  
THESE.INS VING.SONNETS.  
Mr.W.H.ALL.HAPPINESSE.  
AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.  
PROMISED.  
BY.

OVR.EVER-LIVING.POET.  
 WISHETH.  
 THE.WELL-WISHING.  
 ADVENTVRER.IN.  
 SETTING.  
 FORTH.

T.T. (Riverside Shakespeare 1843)

There are two primary candidates said to belong to the initials in the dedication: William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke. Pembroke was one of the dedicatees of the First Folio of 1623, yet as Hallett Smith writes, “His initials are right, but it would have been disrespectful for a common publisher to call an Earl ‘Master,’ and there is no evidence of any connection between Shakespeare and Pembroke as early as the most probable dating of the composition of the sonnets would require” (1839). The other, Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, has been suggested, but there is no evidence that Shakespeare maintained any sort of contact with him after 1594. Besides, as Colin Burrow coyly points out, “H.W.; W.H.; What’s in a sequence?” (100). Further, Burrow makes the connection that Thomas Thorpe “only signed prefatory matter if the author of the work was dead or out of the country... [making] it very probable that Shakespeare was not in London while the sequence was being set, and indicates that he was not immediately involved in the final stages of printing” (99). Other, even less credible notions, assert that perhaps “W.H.” is a misprint for “W.S.” or “W.SH.” (meaning William Shakespeare).

While many scholars expend a great deal of time and energy immersed in this minutia surrounding the conception and publication of the sonnets – as well as for whom they were intended and how closely they reflect actual relationships in Shakespeare’s life – others tend to support the more artistic perspective that this information is incidental and that the sonnets are more than capable (as time has proven them to be) of standing on

their own as one of the crowning achievements of English literature. Whether or not Shakespeare intended the sonnets to be published at all, let alone in the form that they were in the 1609 Quarto, is a question which holds some merit to investigate considering some of the sonnets lend themselves to the quality and style of writing one might perhaps find in a journal of exercise writings. W.H. Auden asserts that 49 of the 154 sonnets are entirely memorable, while most of the rest are memorable for a few sparkling lines. Some have hypothesized that, at least in part, the sonnets represent a method used by Shakespeare of working out some of the themes he wished to explore in his ensuing plays, while others attribute many of the seemingly unfinished works in the series to print errors. Whatever Shakespeare intended for his sonnets, the mysteries they present extend beyond the particulars surrounding their publication, the periods during which they were written, and for whom.

Most of Shakespeare's sonnets explore themes more transcendent than very specific relationship particulars. Although certain sonnets, such as sonnet 42, seem to provide background information into the forming of a love triangle between Shakespeare, his friend, and a female lover, they also provide psychological insight into Shakespeare's state of mind at the time. If one were to adopt W.H. Auden's assertion that "he wrote them, I am quite certain, as one writes a diary, for himself alone, with no thought of a public," it would still remain entirely improvable whether or not these lines reflect actual events in Shakespeare's life (xxxv). It is perhaps a good thing as well, for even though it invites unending misguided scrutiny, it allows Shakespeare to maintain a desirable amount of anonymity as an artist. Auden continues, encouraging one to dismiss engaging in biographical study of the sonnets, to say that "Not only would most genuine writers

prefer to have no biography written; they would also prefer, were it practically feasible, that their writings were published anonymously” (xix). Readers with creative minds are able to concern themselves not with gossip column trivia, but with the intense emotions and enormous concepts Shakespeare philosophizes on.

It is important in one sense not to view the sonnets as a complete work in accordance with their sequencing. This frees the reader to make their own connections, if they wish to do so, with individual themes, characters, or concepts. Shakespeare’s sonnet 55 exemplifies a poetic fashion of the time in which the poet considers the “immortality” of his verse. In particular, he boasts of the legacy he will create in the image of his subject through the verse:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time. (55.1-4)

The fact that Shakespeare seems to possess an awareness of his abilities as a writer to endure, gives rise to the consideration that perhaps, at least in part, he intended to eventually publish the sonnets. In this first quatrain, he establishes the intentions for his subject, an intimation of love (or at least great admiration), as well as images of works indicative of human pride in “the gilded monuments,” which he counters in the next quatrain:

When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory. (55.5-8)

Shakespeare develops the scope of his immortalization of the subject by writing that his verse will not only survive the decaying effects of time, but also the “wasteful” wrath of

Mars (the Roman god of war, son of Juno and Jupiter). Material objects seem to provide a contrast to the will of Shakespeare's affection in the introductory octave of this sonnet.

He continues:

'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom. (55.9-12)

Shakespeare here references the Last Judgment, according to Stephen Booth's analytic commentary, "in three different aspects, each of which evokes a response that contrasts with the responses evoked by the other two. The context of line 12 emphasizes the time of the Last Judgment as the time of the end of the world and activates suggestions of *doom* meaning 'ruin,' 'death,' 'end'" (229). Though this final quatrain makes up an entire sentence and perfectly contains the thoughts and imagery it intends, it also moves seamlessly into the quieter ending couplet:

So, till the judgement that yourself arise,  
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes. (55.13-14)

It seems consistent that in Shakespeare's most successful sonnets, the artifice of the form disappears in his ability to create movement. W.H. Auden elaborates, "it seems to me wise of Shakespeare to have chosen the form he did rather than the Petrarchan. Compared with Italian, English is so poor in rhymes that it is almost impossible to write a Petrarchan sonnet in it that sounds effortless throughout" (xxv). In some of the least successful sonnets, it seems as though the common snare is the apparent anti-climax of the couplet. In this one, however, it is almost possible to accept the combination of the final quatrain with the ending couplet as a sextet by Shakespeare's utilization of "judgement," which maintains a certain continuity of theme and imagery.

It is this continuity in Shakespeare's works – one of presentation without downright explanation; one of seamless ethereal movement in language – that continues to intrigue and astound. While it seems to be indicative of human nature to indulge curiosity for curiosity's sake, there have been entirely too many fruitless inquiries into the particulars surrounding the sonnets. The sonnets as they exist today provide not only enjoyable reading and study, but as Walter Cohen writes in his introduction to them in The Norton Shakespeare, “The fascination and the challenge of the sonnets are that their language is of almost unequaled complexity, while the soul they examine is apparently Shakespeare's own” (1921).

*Works Cited*

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