

The Sonnets: Notes

WHAT IS A SONNET?

Shakespearean sonnet: a 14 line stanza, written in iambic pentameter, that employs the rhyme scheme *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*, and can be divided into three quatrains and a couplet.

Iambic Pentameter: lines of poetry that can be divided into 5 metric feet with alternately unstressed and stressed syllables.

Shall I/ compare/ thee to/ a sum/ mer's day
Thou art/ more lov/ly and/ more temp/orate

The first eight of the fourteen lines make up the octet and the last six lines are the sestet. The Shakespearean sonnet—which differs slightly from the Italian (or Petrarchian) sonnet and the Spenserian sonnet—ends with a rhymed couplet and follows the rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef gg*. Thus, the octet/sestet structure can be alternatively divided into three quatrains (sets of four lines) with alternating rhymes concluding in a rhymed couplet. With the lone exception of Sonnet 145, the meter of Shakespeare's sonnets is iambic pentameter, each line being comprised of five double-syllable iambic feet. Of all poetic meters, iambic pentameter comes closest to conversational English; the verse speech that prevails in Shakespeare's plays is uniformly composed in iambic pentameter.

Shakespeare did not originate the sonnet form. The basic structure of the sonnet arose in medieval Italy, its most prominent exponent being the Early Renaissance poet Petrarch. The appearance of English sonnets, however, occurred when Shakespeare was an adolescent (around 1580). Both Edmund Spenser and Philip Sydney, among others, worked in this form a decade or so before Shakespeare took it up in the early 1590s, possibly seeking to exploit the ongoing popularity of the sonnet among literary patrons of the day. Sonnets 153 and 154 differ from the other 152 poems included in the first edition of the *Sonnets* in that they are clearly based on an epigram from ancient Greek poetry that was in all probability known to Shakespeare (and others) through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Apart from these two pieces, none of the sonnets has an identifiable literary (or historical) source.

Given this and the intimacy of the themes broached by Shakespeare in the sonnets, it is natural that scholars would entertain a search for autobiographical sources and that this search would focus on three identity issues: (1) who is the young man to whom Sonnets 1-126 are addressed? (2) who is the Dark Lady of Sonnets 127-154? (3) who are the

rival poets who intrude in the love triangles of Sonnets 78 through 86? As to the first question, the starting point for the search of the young man's actual identity (and virtually all of the hard evidence at hand) is an inscription to a "Mr. W. H." in the first edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, these initially referring to a male who is called the "onlie beggeter" (only source) of the volume's contents. Literary historians have come up with a host of actual men whose names resonate with the "W. H." initial tag. They include two individuals—William Herbert (Earl of Pembroke) and (with the WH initial order reversed) Henry Wriothesley (the Earl of Southampton)—both of whom were young nobles in the 1590s and literary patrons associated with Shakespeare and his circle. But there are problems with both of these (and all the other) candidates for the model of Shakespeare's young man.

As to the second question, the identity of the Dark Lady to whom Sonnets 127 through 154 are addressed is based on even thinner evidence. On purely speculative grounds, Mary Fitton, Emilia Lanier, and Lucy Morgan (all ladies of Queen Elizabeth's court) have been suggested as women whom Shakespeare might have had in mind when he wrote the second broad grouping in his sonnets. Third and last, as to the possible identity of the rival poet who appears in Sonnets 78 through 86, the names of George Chapman and/or Christopher Marlowe are often mentioned. The conclusions that we reach from trying to identify the persons addressed in the sonnets are twofold: no convincing identification of the young man, the Dark Lady, or the rival poet has ever been made; there is no reason to believe that any individual in Shakespeare's personal life directly corresponds with the beloved youth, the loose woman, or the artistic competitor of his sonnets.

There is one final background issue that must be raised, which is the nature of the love between the explicitly male speaker of the sonnets and the young man to whom the first 126 poems are formally addressed. The tender terms, and indeed the jealousy, that the speaker extends toward the beloved youth of the sonnets has led some to interpret these poems as expressions of a homosexual love affair and, still further, that Shakespeare himself engaged in sexual relations with other men. It is to Sonnet 20 that proponents of this thesis most often refer. There we read the opening lines: "A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted / Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion," as the speaker continues on to say that his lover has been endowed by Nature with the charms of woman but that the speaker's love for the young man has been "defeated" by Nature through an "addition" (possibly the male penis). Aside from the seeming strangeness of a male openly authoring love poetry to another man (and the Elizabethans would have seen this activity in a different, possibly broader, light) and these intriguing references, the sonnets do not necessarily describe homosexual or even physical intimacy between the speaker and the young man addressed. Indeed, within Sonnet 20 the speaker says that he was "defeated" by Nature, implying that his love for the youth could not be consummated. Again, the questions in this patch of the background to the sonnets are unresolved, and open-ended.

We do not know when Shakespeare composed his sonnets, though it is possible that he wrote them over a period of several years, beginning, perhaps, in 1592 or 1593. Some

of them were being circulated in manuscript form among his friends as early as 1598, and in 1599 two of them—138 and 144—were published in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, a collection of verses by several authors. The sonnets as we know them were certainly completed no later than 1609, the year they were published by Thomas Thorpe under the title *Shake-speares Sonnets*. Most scholars believe that Thorpe acquired the manuscript on which he based his edition from someone other than the author. Few believe that Shakespeare supervised the publication of this manuscript, for the text is riddled with errors. Nevertheless, Thorpe's 1609 edition is the basis for all modern texts of the sonnets.

With only a few exceptions—Sonnets 99, 126, and 145—Shakespeare's verses follow the established English form of the sonnet. Each is a fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter, comprising four sections: three quatrains, or groups of four lines, followed by a couplet of two lines. Traditionally, a different—though related—idea is expressed in each quatrain, and the argument or theme of the poem is summarized or generalized in the concluding couplet. It should be noted that many of Shakespeare's couplets do not have this conventional effect. Shakespeare did, however, employ the traditional English sonnet rhyme-scheme: *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*.

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, taken together, are frequently described as a sequence, and this is generally divided into two sections. Sonnets 1-126 focus on a young man and the speaker's friendship with him, and Sonnets 127-52 focus on the speaker's relationship with a woman. However, in only a few of the poems in the first group is it clear that the person being addressed is a male. And most of the poems in the sequence as a whole are not direct addresses to another person. The two concluding sonnets, 153 and 154, are free translations or adaptations of classical verses about Cupid; some critics believe they serve a specific purpose—though they disagree about what this may be—but many others view them as perfunctory.

The English sonnet sequence reached the height of its popularity in the 1590s, when the posthumous publication of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) was widely celebrated and led other English poets to create their own sonnet collections. All of these, including Shakespeare's, are indebted to some degree to the literary conventions established by the *Canzoniere*, a sonnet sequence composed by the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch. By the time Shakespeare wrote his sonnets, there was also an anti-Petrarchan convention, which satirized or exploited traditional motifs and styles. Commentators on Shakespeare's sonnets frequently compare them to those of his predecessors and contemporaries, including Sidney, Sir Thomas Wyatt, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Samuel Daniel, and Edmund Spenser.

The principal topics of twentieth-century critical commentary on the sonnets, however, are their themes and poetic style. Analyses of formal elements in the poems include examinations of the rhetorical devices, syntax, and diction Shakespeare employed here. The multiple and indefinite associations of his words and phrases have proved especially intriguing—and problematic—for scholars as well as general readers. The complexity and ambiguity of Shakespeare's figurative language is also a central critical

issue, as is the remarkable diversity of tone and mood in the sequence. Shakespeare's departures from or modifications of the poetic styles employed by other sonneteers have also drawn a measure of critical attention.

Many of Shakespeare's themes are conventional sonnet topics, such as love and beauty, and the related motifs of time and mutability. But Shakespeare treats these themes in his own, distinctive fashion—most notably by addressing the poems of love and praise not to a fair maiden but instead to a young man; and by including a second subject of passion: a woman of questionable attractiveness and virtue. Critics have frequently called attention to Shakespeare's complex and paradoxical representation of love in the sonnets. They have also discussed at length the poet-speaker's claim that he will immortalize the young man's beauty in his verses, thereby defying the destructiveness of time. The themes of friendship and betrayal of friendship are also important critical issues, as is the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the youth. The ambiguous eroticism of the sonnets has elicited varying responses, with some commentators asserting that the relationship between the two men is asexual and others contending that it is sexual.

Because these lyrics are passionate, intense, and emotionally vivid, over the centuries many readers and commentators have been convinced that they must have an autobiographical basis. There is, however, no evidence that this is so. Nevertheless, there has been endless speculation about what these sonnets may tell us about their creator, and researchers have attempted to identify the persons who were the original or historical models for the persons the speaker refers to and addresses. The fact remains, however, that we do not know to what degree Shakespeare's personal experiences are reflected in his sonnets; nor do we know with any measure of certainty whether the persons depicted in these poems are based on specific individuals or are solely the product of Shakespeare's observation, imagination, and understanding of the human heart.

Contradictions and uncertainties are implicit in Shakespeare's sonnets. Both individually and as a collection, these poems resist generalities and summations. Their complex language and multiple perspectives have given rise to a number of different interpretations, all of which may at times seem valid—even when they contradict each other. Few critics today read the sonnets as personal allegory. Indeed, most commentators assert that speculation about what these verses may imply about Shakespeare's life, morals, and sexuality is a useless exercise. The speaker is as closely identified with each reader as he is with the writer who created him. His confused and ambiguous expressions of thought and emotion heighten our own ambivalent feelings about matters that concern us all: love, friendship, jealousy, hope, and despair.

Shakespeare's sonnets do not describe or enact a clear sequence of events, nor do they follow a straightforwardly logical or chronological order. They allude to only a few specific actions, and even these are presented in general rather than particular terms. The setting too is generalized, with no reference to any specific locale. There is a sense

of time elapsing as the sonnets portray developments in the speaker's relationships with the young man and the woman, but there is only one suggestion about how long either of these associations lasted.

In Sonnets 1-17—the most coherent group in the sequence and often referred to as the "procreation sonnets"—the speaker urges a young man of aristocratic birth to marry and have children so that his unusual beauty will be preserved for the ages. The last three sonnets in this cluster hint at another possibility of forestalling the destructiveness of time: the Poet will immortalize the Friend's beauty in his verses. This idea is more fully developed in Sonnets 18 through 26, where the Poet makes extravagant claims about the fame and durability of his verses but also expresses humility about his art. In addition, new motifs are introduced, particularly the possibility of a physical or sexual relationship between the Poet and the Friend (Sonnet 20), and the existence of a rival poet (Sonnet 21). Beginning with Sonnet 27 and continuing thereafter, it appears that while the Poet was away from his Friend, his mistress seduced the young man. There is a suggestion in Sonnet 40 that the youth similarly betrayed the Poet on another occasion. Sonnets 28 through 126 depict a recurring cycle of contrition and coldness on the part of the Friend, and forgiveness, understanding, praise, and reproach on the part of the Poet. In these verses the Poet alternates between confidence in his art and in his friendship with the young man, and doubt and anxiety that either of these will prove to be of lasting value. For example, in Sonnets 32, 76, 87, 105, and 108, the speaker expresses his fears about the worth and originality of his poetry, and in Sonnets 71-74, he questions whether he will be remembered after his death. Sonnets 27-28, 43-45, and 97-99 suggest that there may have been more than one period when the Poet and the Friend were estranged. And in Sonnets 78-80 and 82-86, the speaker refers again to another poet or poets who are vying for the young man's attention and patronage.

Sonnets 127-54 portray the Poet's relationship with the woman known as the Dark Lady. There is even less of a sequential story line here than in the first 126 sonnets. The Poet's attitude toward his mistress—and himself—shifts radically from one poem to the next. He teases her, insults her lusty sensuality, accuses her of repeated infidelities, praises her unfashionable dark beauty, upbraids himself for his own carnal desires, and plays bawdily on the numerous meanings of "will." As with the majority of the sonnets to the young man, the Poet's conflicting thoughts and emotions do not follow any logical sequence. Critics disagree about whether either of these two sections of Shakespeare's sonnets comes to a close with a sense of finality or resolution.

"Characters" in the Sonnets

There are no "characters" in Shakespeare's sonnets as the term is usually understood in literary analysis. None of the figures who appear or are referred to in the sequence is given a proper name. Specific details about physical features or demeanor are noticeably scarce. For the sake of convenience, many modern commentators have adopted some form of the designations used here, but these names do not appear in the sonnets.

The Poet: This phrase denotes the speaker of the sonnets as distinguished from the man who wrote them. The Poet is a complex and contradictory figure. He appears to be generous and long-suffering—even self-effacing—yet he also expresses anger and pride. The Poet describes himself as older than his friend and mistress, but he gives few indications of what his age may be. Furthermore, he calls himself a liar, which raises doubts about his reliability as a reporter. This is important because it is only through the Poet that we know anything about the other figures in the sonnets.

Most late twentieth-century critics maintain that the Poet is the principal focus of the sonnets as well as the most significant figure. In their judgment, the sequence depicts a mind torn between conflicting thoughts and emotions as the speaker deals with the central issues of human existence: love and friendship, birth and death, self-knowledge and self-delusion, sin and virtue, the vagaries of fortune, and the ravages of time. Many commentators view the Poet as prone to misjudge both himself and the Friend. Others contend that he willfully avoids facing the truth about the young man's nature and conduct—either because he continues to love the youth or because he doesn't want to acknowledge the malignant effect of this relationship on himself. Most agree that the sonnets depict a man who is struggling to make sense of his life and bring order out of chaos.

Many critics have explored what they see as the Poet's moral, ethical, or intellectual confusion. They emphasize the dilemma he faces in remaining constant to a beloved who has proved inconstant. They note that he appears to be both generous and self-interested. They highlight the contrast between the occasions on which he proudly affirms the power of his poetry and the instances when he expresses grave doubts about both the value of art and the worth of his own verses. Such inconsistencies have been variously explained. Some commentators allege that if the sonnets were reordered the poet could be shown progressing steadily from one state of mind to the next rather than fluctuating back and forth throughout the sequence. Others view this wavering between confidence and uncertainty as a function of the discrepancies in age and social rank between the Poet and the Friend. Still others see it as a realistic portrayal of the quandary facing a man whose beloved is simultaneously attractive and loathsome.

Many critics disparage what they regard as the Poet's servile attitude toward the Friend. Others condemn his relationship with the Dark Lady, remarking that the Poet seems unable to break away from a relationship that he finds degrading. The Poet's passivity or hesitancy to take action is frequently noted. To some critics, he seems trapped in a state of reflection, beset by fears and anxieties. Several commentators point out that the Poet repeatedly says he is a liar—though some maintain that he is himself the principal victim of his dishonesty. In connection with this, many critics caution that since the Poet represents himself as an unreliable witness, we should not assume that what he says about the Friend and the Dark Lady is necessarily true or accurate. Indeed, his descriptions of the other figures in the sequence may reveal as much about himself as about those he describes.

The Friend: He is characterized as younger than the Poet, of superior or aristocratic rank, and not married. The Poet describes him as unusually beautiful, and at times his inner virtue seems to match his outward nature. On other occasions he appears cold, narcissistic, even morally corrupt. Sometimes he returns the Poet's love, yet he is also accused of having a sexual relationship with a woman—perhaps the one who is the Poet's mistress. (

Commentary on the Friend is a mixture of biographical speculation and literary analysis. For hundreds of years, researchers have attempted to determine whether there was a specific person on whom Shakespeare modeled the young man of the sonnets. Many searches have begun with the enigmatic dedication of the 1609 edition of the poems to "Mr. W. H.," described as "the only begetter of these ensuing sonnets." Some scholars have contended that "begetter" means that "Mr. W. H." provided the publisher with the text of Shakespeare's sonnets. Others believe that "Mr. W. H." alludes to the youth who inspired the poems, and over the centuries, an impressive array of possible candidates has been proposed. At the top of the list are Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (1573-1624), and William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke (1580-1630). Most late twentieth-century commentators believe that the issue of who "begat" the sonnets will never be resolved and is, moreover, irrelevant. Instead they focus on the picture of the Friend that the Poet provides us. And it is important to remember, they point out, that the only perspective we have on this young man is the Poet's constantly changing point of view.

Critics have variously viewed the Friend as aloof, sensitive, vulnerable, impulsive, and inscrutable. Many have emphasized his essential egotism. The opening sonnets celebrate his physical beauty, but subsequent ones question his integrity and faithfulness, and increasingly he is portrayed as arrogant and self-important. Commentators have remarked that the treatment of the Friend throughout the sonnets is characterized by a remarkable lack of specificity: His beauty is generalized rather than particularized, and all we hear or see of his speech and actions is through second-hand reports. The Poet accuses him of a grave fault—seemingly of a sensual nature—but this fault is never particularized. Some critics stress the Friend's accomplishments, his grace, and his beauty. Others focus on his pride, his susceptibility to flattery, and his apparent rejection of the Poet.

The Dark Lady: She is specifically called "dark" only once, but it seems she has dark hair and eyes. Her social rank or status in society is not specified. She may be a married woman, though the Poet refers to her as his "mistress." He alternately describes her as ill-favored and attractive and characterizes her as sensual, tyrannical, and playful. He further alleges that she has betrayed him by seducing his young friend.

Commentary on the Dark Lady often deals more with the speaker's frame of mind in Sonnets 127-152 than with the woman herself. And as with the Friend, much of what has been written about her is principally concerned with whether she has a historical antecedent. Mary Fitton, a lady in waiting to Queen Elizabeth, is high on the list of candidates. Others include Luce Morgan, a London brothel-keeper, and Emilia Lanier, a woman whose virtue was apparently regularly compromised. Again, as with the Friend,

most critics doubt that we will ever know if there was a "real-life" prototype of the Dark Lady. However, few believe that if we did, this would affect our responses to the poems that allude to her.

The Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets is even more shadowy than the Friend. There is general agreement that she is lusty and seductive and that the Poet is irresistibly drawn to her. Commentators suggest that although the Poet loves her—or has loved her in the past—he also despises her. She has apparently seduced the Friend while carrying on an affair with the Poet, but the extent of her promiscuity—indeed, whether she is married and therefore an adulteress—is not evident to all readers. Several critics have evaluated the Dark Lady sonnets in the context of literary conventions, arguing that these verses represent a parody of Petrarchan lovers by depicting a mistress who has neither virtue nor beauty. Over the centuries, many commentators have identified the Dark Lady with a debased form of love. However, late twentieth-century studies, especially those written from a feminist perspective, have been more sympathetic, challenging the accuracy or reliability of the Poet's account of her and calling for an appraisal that takes into account his obvious bias.

The Rival Poet(s): Sonnets 21, 78-80, and 82-86 refer to a competitor or competitors for the Friend's favor and patronage. The Poet describes his rival(s)' verses as more ornate and artificial than his own, and he represents them as a threat to his relationship with the Friend.

Other items....

Themes

Human love—in a variety of manifestations—is a principal focus of Shakespeare's sonnets. Commentators have called attention to the many different kinds of love expressed in these verses: spiritual and erotic, parental and filial, love that ennobles and love that corrupts. They point out that these verses explore the paradoxical nature of human passion from different perspectives, sometimes idealizing love and sometimes treating it sardonically. Many critics emphasize Shakespeare's innovative and unique treatment of the traditions of courtly and Petrarchan love. They compare the Renaissance ideal of human love—a relationship in which earthly and heavenly desires are balanced and complementary—with the sonnets' representation of these desires as polar opposites.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, critics have argued, love is sometimes presented as an inspiration for transcendent art, with the lover claiming that he can eternalize his beloved's worth and beauty by enshrining them in his poetry. Thus love and art can unite to triumph over time and its destructive effects. Love in the sonnets is also represented as an impulse that can help a person realize the noblest virtues of human nature: patience, understanding, selflessness, and forgiveness. Yet some commentators maintain that the sonnets' depiction of self-effacing love represents a satire on the servile lover of sonnet tradition, who willingly assumed the role of abject servant and devoted himself to obeying his mistress's every wish. Critics have pointed

out that love in the sonnets sometimes manifests itself as infatuation, turning the lover's head and blinding his judgment. It is also represented, particularly in Sonnets 127-52, as lust or carnal desire, a passion that corrodes the soul and debases the lover. Yet as critics point out, some of the Dark Lady sonnets wittily and exuberantly portray sensual love as a vital expression of human nature. Love is also represented as friendship, and some commentators have read the relationship between the Poet and the Friend in terms of the classical notion that an intimate friendship between two men has greater intrinsic value than a sexual relationship between a man and a woman.

Over the centuries, commentators have alternately denied, confronted, accepted, and celebrated the ambiguous eroticism of the sonnets. One seventeenth-century editor changed all the masculine pronouns and adjectives into their feminine counterparts so that the beloved of Sonnets 1-126 became a woman. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors and commentators struggled with the implications of the use of masculine address in the central portion of the sequence. Twentieth-century critics are divided on the issue of whether the relationship between the Poet and the Friend is sexual. But virtually everyone agrees that whatever the nature of that relationship, it sheds no light on the personal life of the author of the sonnets. Stephen Booth's pronouncement on what is termed the biographical fallacy has been frequently cited by other critics: "William Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter."

In Shakespeare's sonnets, an important theme associated with love is betrayal of love. Most commentators agree that although the Poet accuses the Dark Lady of sexual infidelity, he is far less concerned about her faithlessness than he is about the Friend's. As critics have noted, the Poet fears that the young man will prove inconstant, yet he tries to suppress his doubts and trust the youth. When the Friend betrays him, the Poet attempts to justify and excuse his infidelity, then reproaches the young man for his deception and himself for believing in the youth. Several commentators remark that the shock of betrayal is intensified because the Poet is convinced that there is a direct symmetry between the young man's outward appearance—his extraordinary beauty—and his inner self; when the Poet realizes there is disparity rather than correspondence, he is desolate. Nevertheless, commentators generally agree that the Poet's love for the young man is sustained to the end—though perhaps it becomes tempered by a more realistic appraisal of his friend's true nature.

Several critics have asserted that narcissism is an important motif related to the principal theme of love. In their judgment, many of these verses underscore the sterility and deceptiveness of self-love and emphasize the belief that "To give away yourself keeps yourself still" (Sonnet 16). This motif is perhaps most evident in the so-called "procreation sonnets" (1-17), where the Poet urges the young man to marry and beget children so that his beauty and virtue will be replicated in succeeding generations of his family. But critics have pointed out that the sonnets equate self-love with barrenness in other ways as well. A narcissistic view of one's natural gifts as personal assets rather than attributes to be shared with others is also sterile: hoarding one's treasures rather than using them is the same as wasting them, for time will ultimately consume them.

Moreover, some commentators observe, the sonnets warn that self-love inevitably traps the narcissist into believing what false friends and lovers tell him about himself.

Language and Imagery

The linguistic inventiveness of the sonnets is one of their chief characteristics. Critics have noted that the language is dense and complex, rich in significance, contradictions, overtones, and echoes. They have also remarked that Shakespeare's vocabulary, imagery, and diction are inseparable from the various themes or topics within each poem. Some commentators have argued that the ambiguity of Shakespeare's language is a reflection of his ambivalent attitude toward the subjects of his poetry. Others have evaluated the wide range of tone in the sequence, pointing out the often abrupt shifts from playfulness to derision, intensity to detachment, ecstasy to despair. Studies of the sonnets' elaborate verbal patterns have focused on such elements as alliteration and assonance, syntax, neologisms, punning and other forms of wordplay, as well as Shakespeare's use of paradox and antithesis.

The figurative or metaphorical language of the poems is a chief topic of critical interest. There is widespread agreement that the imagery of Shakespeare's sonnets is functional rather than ornamental. Imagery often serves as a unifying agent between individual sonnets, creating a formal pattern which links together poems that are otherwise discontinuous in logic or topic. Commentators have often remarked on the multiple associations of a single image, arguing that readers should not try to find one meaning—in this rich mixture of connotations—that is more significant than the others. Images drawn from nature appear frequently throughout the sequence, particularly with reference to the passing of the seasons and the cycle of growth and decay. Other important metaphorical patterns are linked to treasure or riches, corruption and disease, scarcity and abundance, and the effectiveness of procreation and poetry as means of immortalizing beauty and defying time.

Common Difficulties in Understanding the Sonnets

Many modern readers are surprised by the difficulty that they encounter in trying to understand Shakespeare's sonnets. The sonnets are, of course, short poems composed in standard fourteen-line form with a uniform rhyme pattern and in a poetic meter (iambic pentameter) that mirrors conversational English. Granted, there are some archaic words and phrases embedded in Shakespeare's sonnets, but most editions include explanatory notes that provide definitions and synonyms. It would seem, then, that these brief pieces would be relatively easy to comprehend and explain. Nevertheless, those who come to these verses for the first time are likely to be perplexed; even after several readings, the sonnets may prove hard. This is not necessarily the result of any shortcoming on the reader's part. Rather, his or her sense of not getting what a Shakespeare sonnet is "about" often stems from approaching its text with certain preconceptions that must be modified or jettisoned altogether.

Shakespeare did not invent the sonnet form, and by the time that he took it up, the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet had evolved into an instrument of logic and rhetoric. The Italian sonnets present the reader with a cohesive argument: its first two quatrains (eight lines) pose a problem or issue, the third quatrain provides a solution to that issue, the closing couplet reiterates the solution in figurative language. This is not the case with Shakespeare's handling of the sonnet. One of the most common mistakes made by new readers of his sonnets is the presumption that they are logical vehicles through which Shakespeare presents a cogent expression of certain ideas. True, in some cases, the Shakespearean sonnet may seem to approximate an argument or debate. But not only does Shakespeare deliberately depart from the Italian model's rhetorical structure, modern critics maintain his purpose is not to convey thoughts but instead to evoke an emotional response, a mood, from the reader. In attempting to grasp a Shakespeare sonnet, the reader must be aware that there is no correct answer as to what it means, but rather a range of possible responses from the reader. The sonnets have musical qualities, with the tempo of the piece and the sounds of its words being as significant as the content they denote.

Part and parcel with their lack of logical specificity, in virtually all of the Sonnets the reader finds what Stephen Booth terms "constructive vagueness." Along with straightforward, even conversational statements, the sonnets include generalized epithets, indeterminate signifiers and floating referents, with an adjective in one portion of the verse naturally modifying a noun in another quatrain of that poem. The sonnets contain an inordinately high incidence of demonstrative pronouns ("this" and "that"), which appear to refer to some "thing" (the narrator's love, for example, or the sonnet itself), but that "thing" may well have gone through poetic transformations before and/or after the appearance of the pronoun. Thus, in the sonnets about the power of poetry to overcome human mortality when the narrator says that "this" will ensure that his lover's memory will transcend the grave, the "this" in question is the sonnet before us and, at the same time, the thought which follows. Impersonal pronouns are used in the sonnets in a similar manner. As Booth observes, in Sonnet 124, Shakespeare uses the word "It" five times. While the word "it" refers to something hard and concrete, it is also imprecise and general, potentially capable of referring to anything. On each occasion, moreover, Shakespeare qualifies the word "it" with subjective adjectives and, in some cases, with negations. The language of the sonnets, then, is purposely ambiguous and multivalent: we can never "pin down" any line to a specific meaning.

Many of the sonnets contain one or more implicit or explicit conditional clauses. "If" something is true, the narrator will assert, then something else must also be true. But "if" we do not accept such contingencies, then the logical relationship collapses. Thus, in the famous Sonnet 116, if the reader refuses to accept the narrator's condition that he or she should not consider that there may be "impediments" to the marriage of true minds, then the statement that "Love is not Time's fool" is called into question. On occasion, Shakespeare seems to explicitly remind us of the conditionality involved in the narrator's conclusions. In Sonnet 65, for example, the narrator concludes that his words (written in black ink) might endure and keep his feelings toward his beloved from evaporating under the grinding power of time, and this directs the reader to the

possibility that they "might" not endure. Some of the narrator's claims, moreover, are difficult for the reader to believe. This is especially true of the "compensation" sonnets in which the narrator tells us that his love for the fair youth is so powerful that it overcomes all of his personal deficiencies and discontents, including his sorrow over the deaths of other loved ones. No matter how great the narrator's love may be, the notion that it makes up for such losses is hard to swallow.

The narrator, moreover, is not merely a disinterested, objective voice. He is a character trying to persuade, even manipulate, the person to whom his sonnets are addressed. We cannot take him at his word. The narrator is aware of the contradictions in his attitude toward his beloved. Thus, in Sonnet 35, he speaks of both his "love" and his "hate" toward the young man. From time to time, we wonder why the narrator is so infatuated with the fair youth. He insists that his love is purely Platonic, but his focus is not on the young man's outstanding character or intellectual abilities, but upon his physical beauty. Indeed, we learn very little about the young man from the 126 sonnets addressed to him other than that he is physically attractive, younger than the narrator, and of a social status that is higher than that of the narrator. His character, moreover, seems to be that of a fickle, narcissistic and self-absorbed youth. The narrator appears to repress strong erotic feelings toward the young man by praising him for qualities that the fair youth simply does not possess. The narrator insists that his love is chaste, but there is a strong undercurrent of passion and, in fact, guilt. Irony and repression abound in the sonnets.

The dominant world-view of Shakespeare's age was a mixture of Christian belief and neo-Platonic philosophy. The narrator participates in this cultural tradition, but he also undermines its central planks. His carnal attraction toward the youth's beauty (to say nothing of the dark lady's wiles) is at odds with neo-Platonic ideals. His suggestion that all beauty and truth will perish when his beloved dies would be the equivalent of blasphemy to the genuine neo-Platonic thinkers of his day for whom such abstractions existed on a higher plane independent of their manifestation in particular cases (or persons). The immortality of which the narrator speaks does not rest on the existence of a neo-Platonic realm or of a Christian heaven. There are some Christian allusions in the sonnets, but they are comparatively rare, and, in fact, irreverent. Sonnet 4 includes an allusion to the parable of the talents from the Gospel of Matthew, there is a reference to the Christian belief in resurrection (Sonnet 55), and the narrator speaks of "my heaven" in Sonnet 110. But there are also prominent parodies of Christian belief. Sonnet 105 contains a parody of the Anglican doxology ("To one, of one, still such, and ever so"). In Sonnet 121, the narrator proclaims, "I am that I am," echoing Jehovah's self-assertion in the Old Testament Book of Exodus (3:14) with the heretical inference that the narrator is God himself. In short, the narrator does not have a conventional, consistent ideology, but is given the usurping elements from the belief systems of Elizabethan times and twisting them to his purpose.

Rather than try to logically analyze the sonnets, the reader would be better served by attempting to identify the feelings that they evoke from him or her and relating those responses to the properties of the text, to its sounds and image clusters, its variable

tempo, its departures from logical and rhetorical conventions. Modern critics of Shakespeare's sonnets generally maintain that their meaning has less to do with the narrator's (or even the poet's) purposes than it does in describing a mood or an emotional experience to which the reader can relate.

WORDS IN THE SONNETS

Because Shakespeare's sonnets were written four hundred years ago, they inevitably contain words that are unfamiliar today. Some are words that are no longer in general use—words that the dictionaries label *archaic* or *obsolete*, or that have so fallen out of use that dictionaries no longer include them. One surprising feature of the *Sonnets* is how rarely such archaic words appear. Among the more than a thousand words that make up the first ten sonnets, for instance, only eleven are not to be found in current usage: *self-substantial* ("derived from one's own substance"), *niggarding* ("being miserly"), *unfair* ("deprive of beauty"), *leese* ("lose"), *happies* ("makes happy"), *steep-up* ("precipitous"), *highmost* ("highest"), *hap* ("happen"), *unthrift* ("spendthrift"), *unprovident* ("improvident"), and *ruinate* ("reduce to ruins").

Somewhat more common in the *Sonnets* are words that are still in use but that in Shakespeare's day had meanings that are no longer current. In the first three sonnets, for example, we find *only* used where we might say "peerless" or "preeminent," *gaudy* used to mean "brilliantly fine," *weed* where we would say "garment," *glass* where we would say "mirror," and *fond* where we would say "foolish." Words of this kind—that is, words that are no longer used or that are used with unfamiliar meanings—are defined in the facing-page notes of the New Folger Library Shakespeare edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

The most significant feature of Shakespeare's word choice in the *Sonnets* is his use of words in which multiple meanings function simultaneously. In line 5 of the first sonnet, for example, the word *contracted* means "bound by contract, betrothed," but it also carries the sense of "limited, shrunken." Its double meaning enables the phrase "contracted to thine own bright eyes" to say succinctly to the young man that he has not only betrothed himself to his own good looks but that he has also thereby become a more limited person. In a later line in the same sonnet ("Within thine own bud buriest thy content"), the fact that *thy content* means both (1) "that which is contained within you, specifically, your seed, that with which you should produce a child," and (2) "your happiness" enables the line to say, in a highly compressed fashion, that by refusing to propagate, refusing to have a child, the young man is destroying his own future well-being.

It is in large part through choosing words that carry more than one pertinent meaning that Shakespeare packs into each sonnet almost incalculable richness of thought and imagery. In the opening line of the first sonnet ("From fairest creatures we desire increase"), each of the words *fairest*, *creatures*, and *increase* carries multiple relevant senses; when these combine with each other, the range of significations in this single line is enormous.

In Shakespeare's day, the word *fair* primarily meant "beautiful," but it had recently also picked up the meaning of "blond" and "fair-skinned." In this opening line of Sonnet 1, the meaning "blond" is probably not operative (though it becomes extremely pertinent when the word *fair* is used in later sonnets), but the aristocratic (or upper-class) implications of "fair-skinned" are very much to the point, since upper-class gentlemen and ladies need not work out of doors and expose their skins to wind and sun. (The negative class implications of outdoor labor carried in the sonnets by "dark" or "tanned" is carried today in the label "redneck.") The second word, *creatures*, had several meanings, referring, for example, to everything created by God, including the plant kingdom, while in some contexts referring specifically to human beings. When combined with the third word, *increase* (which meant, among its pertinent definitions, "procreation," "breeding," "offspring," "a child," "crops," and "fruit"), the word *creatures* takes the reader's mind to Genesis 1.28 and God's instructions to humankind to multiply and be fruitful, while the plant-life connotation of all three of the words provides a context for later words in the sonnet, such as *rose*, *famine*, *abundance*, *spring*, and *bud*. The words Shakespeare places in this first line ("From *fairest creatures* we desire *increase*")—with their undoubted link to concerns about upper-class propagation and inheritance—could well have alerted a contemporary reader to the sonnet's place in a familiar rhetorical tradition, that concerned with persuading a young gentleman to marry in order to reproduce and thus secure his family line and its heritable property.

While almost every line of the 154 sonnets begs for a comparable kind of unpacking of Shakespeare's words, we will here limit ourselves to two additional examples, these from lines 2 and 4 of the same sonnet (Sonnet 1). First, the word *rose* in the phrase *beauty's rose* (line 2) engages the reader's mind and imagination at many levels. Most simply, it refers simultaneously to the transitory rose blossom and the enduring rosebush that bears it. But the *rose* signifies as well that which is most beautiful in the natural world. (See, e.g., Isaiah 35.1: "The desert and the wilderness shall rejoice; the waste ground shall be glad and flourish as the rose.") And *beauty's rose* not only meant youthful beauty but also inevitably called up memories of the *Romance of the Rose* (widely published in Chaucer's translation), in which the *rose* stands allegorically for the goal of the lover's quest. (The fact that the lover in the *Romance* desires a specific unopened rosebud, rather than one of the rosebush's opened flowers, may have implications for the word *bud* in line 11.)

The word *rose*, then, gains its multiple resonances by referring to both a flower and its bush and through meanings accumulated in cultural and poetic traditions. In contrast, the particular verbal richness of the word *his* in line 4, "*His* tender heir might bear *his* memory" (and in many of the other sonnets), exists because Shakespeare took advantage of a language change in process at the very time he was writing. Until around 1600 the pronoun *his* served double duty, meaning both *his* and *its*. However, in the late 1590s and early 1600s, the word *its* came into existence as possessive of *it*, and *his* began gradually to be limited to the meaning it has today as the possessive of *he*. Because of the emerging gender implications of *his*, the pronoun as used in line 4, while primarily meaning *its* and thus referring to *beauty's rose*, also serves as a link

between the sonnet's first line, where the *fairest* creature is not yet a *rose*, and the young man, first directly addressed in line 5.

The diction of the *Sonnets* is incredibly rich in meanings. When it seems possible to you that a given word might have more than one relevant meaning, take a moment to test out possible additional meanings and decide if they add richness to the line. The only hazard here is that some words have picked up new meanings since Shakespeare's death. Especially careful study of the diction of his *Sonnets* thus compels one to turn to a dictionary based on historical principles, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

SENTENCES IN THE SONNETS

When Shakespeare made the decision to compose his *Sonnets* using the English (in contrast to the Italian) sonnet form, he seems at the same time to have settled on the shape of the *Sonnets'* sentences. The two forms are distinguished by rhyme scheme: in the Italian sonnet, the rhyme scheme in effect divides the poem into two sections, the eight-line *octave* followed by the six-line *sestet*; in the English, it sets three four-line quatrains in parallel, followed by the two-line rhyming couplet.

While Shakespeare finds almost infinite ways to provide variety within the tightly controlled form of the English sonnet, and while the occasional sonnet is made up of a single sentence (e.g., Sonnet 29), his sentences tend to shape themselves within the bounds set by the quatrain and the couplet—that is, most quatrains and most couplets are each made up of one sentence or question, with occasional quatrains made up of two or more sentences or questions. (Quatrains that, in modern printed editions, end with a semicolon rather than a period or question mark are often so marked only to indicate that the thought continues into the next quatrain; syntactically, the clause is generally independent and could be completed with a period instead.)

The reader therefore seldom finds in the *Sonnets* the long, complicated sentences often encountered in Shakespeare's plays. One does, though, find within the sentences the inversions, the interruptions of normal word order, and the postponements of essential sentence elements that are familiar to readers of the plays.

In the *Sonnets* as in the plays, for example, Shakespeare often rearranges subjects and verbs (i.e., instead of "He goes" we find "Goes he"); he frequently places the object before the subject and verb (i.e., instead of "I hit him," we might find "Him I hit"), and he puts adverbs and adverbial phrases before the subject and verb (i.e., "I hit fairly" becomes "Fairly I hit"). The first sonnet in the sequence, in fact, opens with an inversion, with the adverbial phrase "From fairest creatures" moved forward from its ordinary syntactical position after the verb. This transformation of the sentence "We desire increase from fairest creatures" into "From fairest creatures we desire increase" has a significant effect on the rhythm of the line and places the emphasis of the sentence immediately on the "fairest" creature who will be the topic of this and many sonnets to follow.

In Sonnet 2 the sentence “Thy beauty’s use would deserve much more praise” is transformed into “How much more praise deserved thy beauty’s use,” in large part through a double inversion: the transposing of the subject (“thy beauty’s use”) and the verb (“deserved”) and the placing of the object before the inverted subject and verb. Again, the impact on the rhythm of the line is significant, and the bringing of the word *praise* toward the beginning of the line emphasizes the word’s echo of and link to the preceding line (“Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise”) through its reiteration of the word *praise* and through repetition of the vowel sound in *shame*.

Occasionally the inversions in the *Sonnets* seem primarily to provide the poet with a needed rhyme word. In Sonnet 3, for example, the difference between “*she calls back* / In thee the lovely April of her prime” and “*she in thee / Calls back* the lovely April of her prime” seems largely to rest on the poet’s choice of “thee” rather than “back” for the sonnet’s rhyme scheme.

However, Shakespeare’s inversions in the *Sonnets* often create a space for ambiguity and thus for increased richness and compression. Sometimes the ambiguity exists only for a moment, until the eye and mind progress further along the line and the reader sees that one of the initially possible meanings cannot be sustained. For example, in Sonnet 5, the line “And that unfair which fairly doth excel” seems initially to present “that unfair” as the demonstrative adjective *that* followed by another adjective, *unfair*, until a reading of the whole line reveals that there is no noun for these apparent adjectives to modify, and that “that unfair” is more likely an inversion of the verb *to unfair* and its object, the pronoun *that*. The line thus means simply “deprive that of beauty which fairly excels”—though wordplay on *fairly* as (1) “completely,” (2) “properly,” and/or (3) “in beauty” makes the line far from simple.

Often the doubleness of meaning created by the inversion remains unresolved. In Sonnet 3, for example, the line “But if thou live remembered not to be” clearly contains an inversion in the words “remembered not to be”; however, it is unclear whether “remembered not to be” inverts “to be not remembered” (i.e., “[only] to be forgotten”) or “not to be remembered” (i.e., “[in order] to be forgotten”). Thus, while the primary meaning of the line may well be “if you live in such a way that you will not be remembered,” the reader cannot dismiss the line’s simultaneous suggestion that the young man is intentionally living to avoid being remembered. The inversion, in other words, allows the line to carry two distinct tones, one of warning and the other of accusation.

Inversions are not the only unusual sentence structures in Shakespeare’s language. Often in his *Sonnets* as in his plays, words that would in a normal English sentence appear together are separated from each other, usually in order to create a particular rhythm or to stress a particular word or phrase. In Sonnet 1, for example, in lines 5-6 (“But *thou*, contracted to thine own bright eyes, / *Feed’st* thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel”), the subject *thou* is separated from its verb *feed’st* by a phrase that, because of its placement, focuses sharp attention on the young man’s looks and the behavior that the poet sees as defining him.

A few lines later in the same sonnet, we find the lines

Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament

And only herald to the gaudy spring

Within thine own bud *buriest* thy content . . .

Here the subject *Thou* is separated from its verb *buriest*, first by a clause that in its extreme praise (“that art now the world’s fresh ornament / And only herald to the gaudy spring”) is in interesting and direct contrast to the tone of accusation of the basic sentence elements within which the clause is set (“Thou *buriest* thy content”); the separation is further extended through the inversion that moves forward a prepositional phrase (“Within thine own bud”) that would in ordinary syntax come after the verb.

Line 12 of this same sonnet—“And, *tender churl*, mak’st waste in niggarding”—exemplifies a familiar kind of interruption in these poems, namely, an interjected compound vocative. (Again, the archaic word “niggarding” means miserliness.) Direct address to the beloved in the form of compound epithets, especially where one term of the compound (“tender”) contradicts the other (“churl”), in meaning or in tone, is a device that Shakespeare uses frequently in the *Sonnets*, heightening the emotional tone and creating the kind of puzzle that makes the sonnets so intellectually intriguing. (Sonnet 4, for example, contains three such vocatives: “Unthrifty loveliness,” “beauteous niggard,” and “Profitless usurer.”)

Sometimes, rather than separating basic sentence elements, Shakespeare simply holds back the subject and predicate, delaying them until other material to which he wants to give particular emphasis has been presented. The first quatrain of Sonnet 2 holds off until line 3 the presentation of the subject of the sentence, and delays the verb until line 4:

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow

And dig deep trenches in thy beauty’s field,

Thy youth’s proud *livery*, so gazed on now,

Will be a tattered weed of small worth held.

In this quatrain, the subject and predicate, “thy . . . livery . . . will be a tattered weed,” are held back while for two lines the poet draws a vivid picture of the young man as he will look in middle age. Sonnet 2 is, in effect, an attempt to persuade, an exhortation to the recipient to change; the powerful description of youth attacked by the forces of time gains much of its strength from its placement in advance of the basic sentence elements. (One need only reverse the order of the lines, placing lines 3-4 before lines 1-2, to see how much power the poem loses with that reversal.)

In addition to the delaying device, the quatrain contains two further Shakespearean sentence strategies—a subject/verb interruption in lines 3-4 followed by a compression in line 4. The phrase “so gazed on now,” which separates the subject and verb (“livery . . . will be”), stresses both the beauty of the young man and the briefness of the moment for which that beauty will exist. The last line, an example of the kind of compression that one finds throughout the *Sonnets*, would, if fully unpacked and its inversion reversed, read “[that will be] held [to be] a tattered weed of small worth.”

METAPHOR AND METRIC EFFECTS IN THE SONNETS

The first quatrain of Sonnet 2 also serves as a small example of how Shakespeare’s word choice and word order operate to create the visual and musical effects that distinguish the *Sonnets*. While this topic is so large that we can only touch on it here, it seems appropriate to look at least briefly at two of the *Sonnets*’ most important poetic techniques—metaphor and metrical effects.

The metaphor, a primary device of poetry, can be defined as a play on words in which one object or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which it is said to share common features. Consider its many uses in the first quatrain of Sonnet 2:

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty’s field,
Thy youth’s proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tattered weed of small worth held.

The young man’s forehead, “so gazed on now,” is imaged as a “field” that Time places under siege, digging “deep trenches” in its now youthful smoothness. The metaphor fast-forwards the aging process, turning the youth’s smooth forehead in imagination into a furrowed, lined brow. While the word “field” could allude to any kind of open land or plain, the words “besiege” and “trenches” make it more specifically a battlefield ravaged by the armies of “forty winters.”

In line 3 the metaphor shifts, and the young man’s youthful beauty is imaged as his “livery,” a kind of uniform or splendid clothing that under the onslaught of time will become a “tattered weed” (*weed* having here the meaning “garment”). The quatrain seems, then, divided into two parts, with the metaphor shifting from that of the brow as a field to the brow (and other youthful features) as clothing. But the word *weed* carries its inevitable, though here secondary, meaning of an unwanted plant in a “field” of grass or flowers. This wordplay, which expands the scope of the word *field*, forces the reader to turn from line 4 back to lines 1 and 2, to visualize again the ravaged “field” of the once-smooth brow, and thus to experience with double force the quatrain’s final phrase “of small worth held”—a phrase that syntactically belongs only to the tattered clothing, but that, in the quatrain’s overlapping metaphors, applies more broadly to the young man

himself, now “so gazed on,” but moving inevitably toward the day when he, no longer beautiful, will be considered “of small worth.”

We mentioned at the outset that the language of the *Sonnets* is, like poetic language in general, highly structured. Nowhere is this fact more in evidence than in the rhythm of the *Sonnets*' lines. All of the *Sonnets* (except for Sonnet 145) are written in what is called “iambic pentameter” (that is, each line is composed of five metrical “feet,” with each foot containing two syllables, usually with the first syllable unstressed and the second stressed). But within this general pattern, Shakespeare takes advantage of several features that characterize pronunciation in English—for example, the syllable stresses that inhere in all English words of more than one syllable, as well as the stress patterns in normal English sentences—and he arranges his words to create amazing metrical variety within the structure of the iambic pentameter line.

To return to the first quatrain of Sonnet 2: the first line of the sonnet (“When forty winters shall besiege thy brow”) contains three two-syllable words; two carry stress on the first syllable (“forty” and “winter”) and one of which is stressed on the second syllable (“besiege”). Shakespeare combines these words with four one-syllable words, three of which are unstressed in normal English sentences—a conjunction (“When”), an auxiliary verb (“shall”), and a possessive pronoun (“thy”). The resulting combination of words produces an almost perfect iambic pentameter (the only departure being the pyrrhic third foot, with its two unstressed syllables—“-ters shall”): “When *forty win*ters shall *besiege*' thy *brow*' ”.

After thus establishing the meter, the poet can depart radically from the iambic in line 2 without creating confusion about the poem's overall metric structure. Line 2 (“And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field”) begins with an iamb (“And *dig*' ”) but then moves to a “spondee,” a foot with two stressed syllables (“*deep*' *trench*'-”); the resulting rhythm for the opening of the line is the very strong series of three stressed syllables of “*dig*' *deep*' *trench*'-”. The line then moves to the unstressed syllables in the pyrrhic foot (“-es in”) before ending in iambic meter (“thy *beau*'ty's *field*' ”)—a pattern that produces three unstressed syllables in mid-line.

Line 3 (“Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now”) echoes the opening rhythm of line 2—that is, an iamb followed by a spondee to create three stressed syllables (“Thy *youth*'s' *proud*' *liv*'-”) again followed by three unstressed syllables (“-er-y so”); but then, instead of returning to the iambic, as did line 2, the line concludes with another group of three stressed syllables (“*gazed*' *on*' *now*' ”). Line 4 seems to return us to the base of iambic pentameter (“Will *be*' a *tat*tered *weed*' of *small*' ”) only to end with a spondee (“*worth*' *held*' ”), so that the beat of three stressed syllables (heard once in line 2 and twice in line 3) concludes the quatrain. Within the quatrain, rhythms like these direct attention to such key words and phrases as “besiege” and “gazed on now.”

With metaphors and metrics, as with word choice, word order, and sentence structure, every sonnet provides its own richness and its own variations, as well as occasional exceptions to any generalizations we have suggested. (Two of the *Sonnets*, for

example, deviate even from the standard fourteen-line length, with Sonnet 99 having 15 lines and Sonnet 126 having only 12.) But each sonnet provides rich language, a wonderfully controlled tone, and an intellectual challenge sufficient to reward the most patient and dedicated reader.