

Shakespeare's Sonnets

Dympna Callaghan



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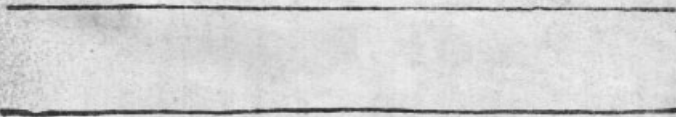
For my Father, Edward Callaghan



SHAKE-SPEARES

S O N N E T S.

Neuer before Imprinted.



AT LONDON
By *G. Eld* for *T. T.* and are
to be solde by *William Aspley.*
1609.

Title page to the first Quarto. Reproduced by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

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Preface

Early in the summer of 1609, while the theatres were closed in the aftermath of an outbreak of plague, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* went on sale for the first time. Published in an easily portable quarto format, measuring five by seven inches, these paper-covered texts were available for sale at the sign of The Parrot in St. Paul's Cross Churchyard, and at Christ Church Gate near Newgate. This slim volume of eighty pages has become one of the greatest works of English poetry. We cannot, alas, recover the precise experience of that moment in the annals of literature, and because extant copies of the first edition of the *Sonnets* are so rare (only thirteen copies survive), fragile and valuable, it is unlikely that most readers will ever see, let alone touch, one of them. For this reason, most readers encounter the sonnets in editions where densely packed critical comments and annotations in small typeface far overwhelm the 154 short poems that Shakespeare wrote. Battered with age and usage, the Quarto itself, in contrast with the scholarly tomes in which most modern editions are presented, is surprisingly unintimidating as a physical object. It contains the sonnets themselves, followed by the long poem, *A Lover's Complaint*, at the end of the book, and otherwise contains no prose matter except for a short dedication page.

The reader's access to the text may be impeded rather than enabled by the barrage of secondary literature that has grown up around *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Among some of the most controversial of Shakespeare's works, the sonnets have spawned copiously footnoted theories about their composition and about Shakespeare's life that range from

plausible scholarly speculation to outrageous invention ungrounded in either historical fact or literary evidence. Such criticism also often ignores the fact that the sonnet is a tightly organized form whose quite rigid parameters serve as the poem's premise: in other words, the pre-existing foundation on which the thought of the sonnet, its ideas, can be expressed. Indeed, much of the energy of Shakespeare's sonnets arises from various degrees of friction and synthesis between form and content, idea and expression, word and image.

The goal of this volume is to provide an introduction to *Shakespeare's Sonnets* rather than to detail new theories about their composition. In deference to their lyrical complexity as well as the passage of time since the sonnets were first published, this volume offers critical guidance as well as analytic insight and illumination. Drawing on key and current critical thinking on the sonnets, the aim of chapters that follow is to engage the poems themselves and to clarify and elucidate the most significant interpretive ideas that have circulated around these complex poems since their first publication.

For all the complexity of the sonnets, whose meanings unfold though layer upon layer of reading and rereading, it is also important to reassure ourselves that they are not beyond normal human understanding. While deeper knowledge of the sonnets will indeed afford a more profound complexity to their meaning, they have been subject to an undue degree of interpretive mystification especially by those who have been looking to decode a hidden meaning about Shakespeare's life. In an endeavor to penetrate the density of Shakespeare's sonnets' structures, ideas, and images, I have provided a brief summary of the central "matter" of each poem at the back of the book. In so doing I have tried to maintain the sense that poetry can never be reduced to or even separated from its rhythms, from the very fact that it *is* verse and therefore an exacerbated act of language, whose intensified resonances and reverberations and variously amplified and compacted meanings make the sonnets such sublime lyrical expressions.

If this book has an agenda it is this: that the focus of the following analysis is on the sonnets rather than on their author. Such a reading is in obedience to Ben Jonson's verse injunction beneath the Droeshout engraving of Shakespeare on the First Folio of 1623 (the first comprehensive edition of Shakespeare's plays), which urges us to read the poet's inventions rather than to invent the poet:

This figure that thou here seest put,
It was not for gentle Shakespeare cut;
Wherein the Graver had a strife
With Nature, to out-do the life
Oh could he but have drawn his wit,
As well in brass as he hath hit
His face; the print would then surpass
All that was ever writ in brass
But since he cannot, Reader look
Not on his picture, but his book.

While it is impossible to recapitulate the history of the sonnets' reception without recourse to some of the theories that have been expounded over the years, these figure only minimally in the pages that follow. Shakespeare's writing – the poetry itself – is the topic of this volume's assessment.

In order to maintain this focus on the sonnets themselves without undue distraction, I have silently modernized early modern spellings throughout, including those of the Quarto, and kept notes and references to a minimum. Author and title citations to early modern works are given in the text, while the Works Cited list refers to secondary sources.¹ I remain immensely indebted nonetheless to the wealth of scholarly and editorial labor that has gone before me.

Introduction: Shakespeare's "Perfectly Wild" Sonnets

He had at last discovered the true secret of Shakespeare's Sonnets; that all the scholars and critics had been entirely on the wrong track, and that he was the first, who, working purely by internal evidence, had found out who Mr. W. H. really was. He was perfectly wild with delight.

Oscar Wilde, *Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889)

In Oscar Wilde's story, *Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, the narrator's friend, Cyril Graham, purports to have discovered the "secret" of the sonnets. This great secret of the sonnets is, of course, the identity of the young man to whom most of the sonnets were written. Cyril's theory and indeed Cyril himself, whose obsession with the identity of the young man precipitates his descent into madness and suicide, turn out to be like Wilde's onomastic pun "perfectly wild." The theory is, in other words, simultaneously lunatic and the epitome of the author's own transgressive homoerotic posture amid the straight-laced hypocrisies of English Victorian culture. (Wilde was tried, convicted, and imprisoned for sodomy.) Wilde's novella neatly summarizes a range of theories on the sonnets while also wittily demonstrating them to be what one of the great critics of these poems, Stephen Booth, has described as the "madness" they seem to induce: "[T]hese sonnets can easily become what their critical history has shown them to be, guide posts for a reader's journey into madness" (Booth, 1977, x). Indeed, Wilde's character Cyril Graham ends up committing suicide on the continent; but by then the contagion of his obsession has also infected the hitherto skeptical narrator of the story.

So what is the mystery of the sonnets, and what provokes generation after generation of readers with the urge to solve it? *Shakespeare's Sonnets* is a series – and arguably a sequence (a deliberate narrative arrangement of poems) – of 154 poems, which refer to three principal characters: first, the poet himself, the “I,” the speaker of the *Sonnets* whose thoughts and feelings they relate. This “I” may be a direct representation of Shakespeare himself or a more mediated figure, namely the persona of the poet, who plays the role named “I” throughout the course of the poems. The title of the volume, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, however, actively encourages the reader to identify Shakespeare with the voice of the sonnets. This point is reinforced by the fact that Thomas Heywood refers to Shakespeare as publishing his sonnets “in his own name” (Duncan-Jones, 1997, 86). Stephen Greenblatt observes that “Many love poets of the period used a witty alias as a mask: Philip Sidney called himself ‘Astrophil’; [Edmund] Spenser was the shepherd ‘Colin Clout’; Walter Raleigh (whose first name was pronounced ‘water’), ‘Ocean.’ But there is no mask here; these are as the title announces, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*” (Greenblatt, 233).

The second character in the sonnets is the addressee of the first 126 poems, a fair young man, the “fair friend” (Sonnet 104), or a “lovely boy” as the poet calls him in Sonnet 126. It is typically assumed that the sonnets refer to a single male addressee rather than to different young men. Similarly, the remainder of the poems, Sonnets 127–154, are understood to be mainly about a single “woman colored ill.” She has come to be known as the “dark lady,” even though Shakespeare himself never calls her that. The poems do not name any of these figures even though there are a number of poems (135, 136, and 143) that pun on the name “Will,” which is of course an abbreviation of “William,” Shakespeare’s own name. But since William is such a common name, it is also not beyond the realm of possibility that “Will” is also the name of the youth.

Other sonnet sequences, even when plainly composed more of fiction than fact, name their addressees: Shakespeare’s famous Italian predecessors give their sonnet characters names: Dante writes to Beatrice; Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* addresses his beloved Laura; and there is no secrecy surrounding the identity of Tommaso Cavalieri, the real-life figure to whom the great artist Michelangelo addressed many of his sonnets. Among Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Thomas Lodge’s eponymous sequence names the object of its devotion in the title:

Phyllis (1593), as does Samuel Daniel’s *Delia* (1592), while Richard Barnfield’s *Cynthia* (1595) contains amorous sonnets written to a male addressee, Ganymede, the mythological name for Jove’s cup-bearer. Shakespeare’s great English predecessor in the sonnet form, Sir Philip Sidney, puns on his own name, Philip, in the title of his sequence of 118 poems, *Astrophil and Stella*. “Astrophil” means star lover, while “Stella,” as well as being a first name, is the Latin word for star. Sidney’s sonnet sequence, however, unlike *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, reveals the lady’s real historical identity as that of Lady Penelope Rich. The absence of specificity in Shakespeare is, furthermore, not just about names, but also about times and places. Whereas in Petrarch, for example, who was the most important precursor of all European sonnet writing, we are told the day and exact time the poet met Laura, April 6, 1327, at the Church of St. Clare in Avignon; or to take an example temporally closer to Shakespeare, Samuel Daniel tells us of his trip to Italy. In Shakespeare’s sonnets in contrast, we never find out when or where, let alone why or how, the poet, the “lovely boy,” and the “woman colored ill” met. We are given only the broadest hints: Sonnet 107 suggests the poet met the youth three years previously; 77 and 122 refer to the gift of a notebook from the poet to the youth; 50 and 110 describe journeys that separate the poet and the youth. The combination of such tantalizing hints and the absence of specific information is partly what has fueled an inferno of speculation over the centuries. What makes readers desperate to know “the real story,” the back-story or the secret of these poems, is not just that the poet in Shakespeare’s sonnets seems so emotionally invested in both the figures he writes about (that is true of many poets), or even that the poet intimates a specifically erotic interest in the youth he writes about (Michelangelo and Barnfield, as we have seen, also did that), but that the poet appears to be caught in a painful love triangle with the youth and the woman, whom he accuses of seducing his “fair friend.” In other words, there is a singularly scandalous scenario at the heart of what is unquestionably one of the greatest aesthetic achievements in the English language.

It is in part this scandal, or to be more accurate this complex constellation of relationships between the three principal characters and the degree of emotional reality with which they are rendered, that makes it impossible to regard the sonnets as entirely fictional, at least in any simple or straightforward sense. An important constituent of