

The Form of Shakespeare's Sonnets

Here we shall discuss the overall form as it relates to the arrangement of Shakespeare's Sonnets and its subsections and argue that the poems are more properly regarded as a collection than as a sequence. They do not hang together on the thread of a single narrative or by virtue of a single addressee. Almost all of the male love poems in the sense that they address a loved person or spring out of the poet's shifting relationship with such a person, and changes in the relationships hint at an underlying narrative, but it can scarcely be called a story.

As the collection was first printed it falls into two major divisions. The first one-hundred-twenty-six poems include none that are clearly addressed to, or concern, a woman, along with all the ones that are clearly addressed to, or primarily concern, a male. The sonnets from 127 onwards include all the poems that are overtly addressed to, or primarily concern, a female. This is clearly a deliberate and careful division. But it should not be assumed that the first part does not include any poems which might be addressed to a woman, and vice versa. As Colin Burrow writes, in these poems "one is not quite sure who is male and who is female, who is addressed or why, or what their respective social roles are." Nor should it be taken for granted that all the poems in the first part refer to a man, however likely this may seem. Some of the poems in the first part are regularly reprinted in anthologies as non-specific love poems. In particular, Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?," is often taken to refer to a woman, and Sonnet 116, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds," is a popular choice for reading at heterosexual weddings and funerals. Table 1 shows more clearly how the collection can be gendered, depending on questions of context and ordering.

The last poem of the first group, beginning "O thou, my lovely boy," is not a strict sonnet, being a series of six rhyming pentameter couplets, as if the sonnet were entirely made up of conclusions. There are then only twelve lines in the poem in which the poet relinquishes the power of his love to the inevitability of Time.

Because of its placing and its formal irregularity this poem is sometimes described as an envoi—a farewell, or closing poem. It marks a clear end to the first major part of the collection. In the 1609 Quarto two open, line-long empty brackets paradoxically emphasize the

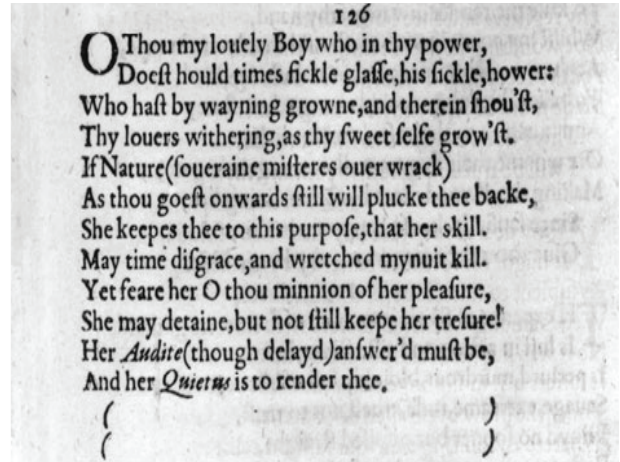


Image 1. The empty brackets printed after the twelve lines of Sonnet 126 have provoked much speculation about their significance.

absence of lines 13 and 14, suggesting perhaps that they have been erased by Time making "Her audit (though delayed)"—presumably over one-hundred-twenty-five sonnets.

Though the poem has something of the typical sonnet structure, in its original printing it is followed enigmatically by two pairs of brackets. Although for many years the general assumption was that the parentheses were simply a printer's aberration, or his way of indicating that the poem appeared to be incomplete, more recently they have been relentlessly interrogated, yielding an extraordinary range of interpretations which must derive rather from the reader than from the author. They have been compared to the (empty) marks in an account book; to the shape of an hourglass that contains no sand; to little moons that "image a repeated waxing and waning of the moon, pointing to fickleness and frailty"; to representations of a grave; and—because they stand in for a couplet—to the image of a failure to couple. They may be seen as marking a breathing space before the reader embarks on the second part; in their suggestion of curtailment they may indicate that the male/male relationship of the first part has petered out in infertility; they may even invite readers to contribute a couplet of their own devising.

Table 1. *Sexing the Sonnets: Male and Female addressees*
Sonnets which suggest a male addressee

| | |
|----|-----|
| 1 | 33 |
| 3 | 39 |
| 6 | 41 |
| 7 | 42 |
| 9 | 63 |
| 13 | 67 |
| 16 | 68 |
| 19 | 101 |
| 20 | 108 |
| 26 | 126 |

Sonnets which might imply a male addressee, either because of their context, or because of their subject matter, but which could imply either a male or a female, if read independently

| | |
|----|----|
| 2 | 36 |
| 4 | 54 |
| 5 | 79 |
| 8 | 80 |
| 10 | 81 |
| 11 | 82 |
| 12 | 83 |
| 14 | 84 |
| 15 | 85 |
| 34 | 86 |
| 35 | |

Sonnets which suggest a female addressee

| | |
|-----|-----|
| 127 | 141 |
| 130 | 145 |
| 138 | 151 |
| 139 | |

Sonnets which might imply a female addressee, either because of their context, or because of their subject matter, but which could imply either a male or a female, if read independently

| | |
|-----|-----|
| 93 | 134 |
| 119 | 135 |
| 131 | 136 |
| 132 | 147 |
| 133 | 152 |

Sonnets which refer to male and female subjects

| | |
|----|-----|
| 41 | 106 |
| 53 | 144 |

By our count, only twenty of the poems, all in the first group (Sonnets 1–126), can confidently be said, on the evidence of forms of address and masculine pronouns, to be addressed to, or to concern, a male, while seven, all in the second group (Sonnets 127–52), are clearly about a female. Other sonnets which might seem definite about the gender of their addressees rely on context, or subject matter, rather than pronouns (see Table 1). Some of the poems in the earlier group relate to the poet's relationship with a woman, and four of those in the later part—Nos. 133, 134, 135, and 144—show the poet anguishing about his relationship between a man and a woman; in the last of these, Sonnet 144—"Two loves I have, of comfort and despair"—he is torn between a man and a woman, and pretty clearly prefers the man, his "better angel." All the rest of the poems in the collection (those not listed individually on Table 1) could in theory be addressed to, or be about, either a

male or a female. Some of the most intense love poems, such as Sonnets 27, 43, and 61, could, considered on their own, be addressed either to a male or to a female.

Of the one-hundred-fifty-four poems in the collection, one-hundred-twenty-three are addressed to an individual, whether male or female. The remaining thirty-one vary in their degree of relevance and connection to those that surround them. So, for example, Sonnet 5 when considered on its own is a meditation on the effects of time on human and natural beauty, concluding with the reflection that they can be countered by ‘distillation.’ But it leads straight into the following poem which, beginning ‘Then let not . . .,’ applies to an individual the moral implied in the preceding one. The structure of the two poems taken together resembles that of Sonnet 12, where a generalized reflection on the effects of time is applied to an individual; in Sonnets 5 and 6, however, the generalization takes up one sonnet and its application another. These poems form a double sonnet which is essentially a single poem. Others are linked through contradiction (and 74). Some sonnets without personal addressees are linked to their neighbors in that, though they do not address anyone in particular, they write about a specific individual in the third person, for example Nos. 63–8—a mini-sequence in the first three of which the poet reflects upon the effects of time on his love, followed by three in which world-weariness is redeemed only by thought of the beloved. Other short sequences within the collection are linked by theme or subject matter, for example Nos. 100–3, in which the poet is searching for and responding to his muse. Many small groupings may be suggested within the collection as a whole; more are listed in Table 2.

Three poems have no obvious thematic connections with the sequence and could have been printed independently as generalized meditations. First is Sonnet 94, the enigmatic ‘They that have power to hurt and will do none . . .,’ which in subject matter seems out of place in a collection of love poems (though the imagery of flowers in its sestet looks forward to the sonnet that follows). It comes in the midst of a sequence of loosely connected poems, stretching back at least as far as Sonnet 79, in which initially the poet expresses jealousy of a rival poet. There is nothing in any of the ‘rival poet’ poems to show that they are addressed to a male; the assumption that they are derives from the fact that they are in the first part of the collection and from their link with the love triangle revealed in Sonnets 133–6 and 144. Increasingly the poet resents the beloved’s love of praise,

regretting his own incapacity to supply it. Sonnet 87 is a poem of renunciation—‘Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing’—and in the following three the still-loving poet declares himself not merely guilty of any faults that his lover may find in him but willing to take disgrace upon himself if it will help to justify his lover in joining with the rest of the world to spite him (Sonnet 90). There is a little relief in Sonnet 91, where the relationship seems to have been partly resumed though it is still precarious: ‘thou mayst take | All this away, and me most wretched make.’ In Sonnet 92 he fears that the beloved may ‘be false, and yet I know it not,’ and this

Table 2. *Groups of sonnets*

Note: Identifying groups of sonnets within the collection will always be, to some extent, subjectively inflected. This table has no claim to exhaustiveness in its search for links between one sonnet and another/others.

| Small groups of sonnets and sequences within Shakespeare's collection | Reason for linkage: a keyword, or theme |
|---|---|
| 1-17 | Persuasion to procreate |
| 5 and 6 | <i>Then</i> |
| 9 and 10 | <i>shame</i> (last line of 9, first line of 10) |
| 15, 16, and 17 | Writing for eternity |
| 23 and 24 | Eyesight |
| 27 and 28 | Insomnia |
| 33 and 34 | Weather and relationship |
| 40, 41, and 42 | Attacking, love triangle |
| 44 and 45 | The four elements |
| 46 and 47 | <i>Eye</i> and <i>heart</i> |
| 50 and 51 | <i>Thus</i> and journey |
| 55-60 | Different experiences of Time when in love |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| 57 and 58 | Slave of love |
| 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68 | Time and beauty |
| 67 and 68 | Thus |
| 69 and 70 | Blame |
| 71 and 72 | <i>World</i> |
| 73 and 74 | <i>But</i> |
| 78, 79, 80, 82, 83, 84, 85 and 86 | Rival poet/s |
| 88, 89 and 90 | <i>Against myself/hate</i> |
| 91, 92 and 93 | <i>But</i> , falsity |
| 97, 98 and 99 | Seasons |
| 100, 101, 102 and 103 | Muse sonnets (Muse also mentioned in others) |
| 106, 107, 108 and 109 | Echoes on writing, peace, and time (Kerrigan, pp. 8-9) |
| 109 and 110 | Contradiction of constancy and falsity |
| 111 and 112 | Pity |
| 113 and 114 | <i>Mind</i> |
| 118 and 119 | Sickness/Fever |
| 125 and 126 | <i>Render</i> |
| 129 and 130 | Stand alone sonnets, work almost antithetically, unusual so close together |
| 131, 132 and 133 | Groaning sonnets |
| 131, 132, 133, 134, 135 and 136 | Love triangle |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| 134, 135 and 136 | <i>Will</i> |
| 140, 141 and 142 | <i>Eyes and sin</i> |
| (137), 138, 139, 140, 141 and 142 | Lies, dishonesty |
| 153 and 154 | Classical allusions, Cupid, translations |

leads into Sonnet 93 in which he imagines himself 'like a deceived husband.' (This is the only phrase in the whole mini-sequence which might be taken to imply that the poet is addressing a male; he could not feel *like* a husband if he were addressing his wife, and it would seem odd to use this phrase of a mistress.) This poem anticipates Sonnet 138, which is clearly about a woman, in its willingness to accept false appearances as reality. The idea that the beloved's beauty is such that, 'whate'er thy thoughts or thy heart's workings be, | Thy looks should nothing thence but sweetness tell' (Sonnet 93) provides at least a hint of a context for the otherwise independent Sonnet 94, which is about people who are 'lords and owners of their faces.' It's not, however, the same—in Sonnet 93 the person addressed simply cannot express anything but 'sweetness,' whereas in Sonnet 94 he or she has and exercises the ability to keep his or her features under complete control. But perhaps it's enough to plant a seed from which Sonnet 94 may have sprung. It may also be relevant that the ability to control facial expression is a virtue in members of the acting profession to which Shakespeare belonged.

The enigma in this poem resides partly in these lines:

*The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.*

What exactly is it saying? The first two lines refer to people who restrain themselves from causing hurt even if they 'show' the desire to do so. The next two indicate, however, that these people remain impassive even while 'moving others'—to what? Then we are told that these people 'rightly do inherit nature's graces,' as if the qualities we have been told they display deserve reward,

which is not entirely evident. Lines 7 and 8 seem as if they should sum up what has so far been said: 'They are the lords and owners of their faces, | Others but stewards of their excellence.' Is impassivity a virtue? In what sense are people who cannot control their expressions 'stewards of their excellence'? Are they stewards of their own excellence, or of the excellence of those who are 'lords and owners of their faces'?

The rest of the sonnet is more straightforward. Metaphorically it says that beauty ('the summer's flower') is sweet even if it does not propagate itself ('Though to itself it only live and die'), but if it becomes infected it is worth no more than 'The basest weed.' What is the tenor of the metaphor? And the couplet appears to be trying to make a link with the octave: 'For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds. | Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.' (This last line is found also in the anonymous play, attributed at least in part to Shakespeare, *Edward III*. Though proverbial in tone, it has not been found elsewhere.) But what exactly is the link? The poem struggles to give an impression of profundity but its excessive use of generalization and metaphor inhibits communication.

The next poem that lacks clear links to its companions, though it is relevant enough as a withdrawal from the particular to the general in a love sequence, is Sonnet 116, 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds,' an eloquent tribute to the power of love which nevertheless has a sting in its tail: 'If this be error and upon me proved, | I never writ, nor no man ever loved.' Does this mean that it is not an error, or that it is an illusion to which all lovers are susceptible? And, for that matter, do the last words stand independently as 'no man ever loved' or refer back to 'I' to mean 'I never loved any man'? And is the poem a tribute to the power of love in general, or of love of man to woman (as generally supposed) or of man for man, as the context might suggest?

Most detached of all is the great but damaged Sonnet 146, which would be more at home in a religious than in an amatory sequence. It may be significant that it immediately follows the Anne Hathaway sonnet (Sonnet 145), which also seems irrelevantly imported into the collection. The antithesis between soul and body has occurred earlier, and will be repeated in a grosser context in Sonnet 151. It is a Renaissance topos; *Love's Labour's Lost* might be regarded as an extended dramatization of it. Shakespeare develops it here with consummate skill in a perfectly formed poem, marred only by the textual dislocation in its second line. The couplet is worthy of

John Donne ('Death, thou shalt die,' *Holy Sonnets*, 6) and anticipates Dylan Thomas's 'Death, thou shalt have no dominion' (itself biblical in origin): addressing his soul, Shakespeare writes

*So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.*

(Sonnet 146)

The Chronology of the Collection

Discussion of the form of the collection cannot avoid consideration of whether it was written as a whole, and if not, when individual poems were composed. This is a highly contentious topic. Although the Sonnets were not initially written in the order in which they are printed in the 1609 text, there are a few fixed points. The irregular Sonnet 145, with its puns on Hathaway, is probably the earliest, dating from around 1581–2. Francis Meres's reference to Shakespeare's 'sugared sonnets' in 1598 shows that some of them were written by then (curiously, the phrase 'sugared sonnets' also occurs in Barnfield's *Greene's Funerals*, of 1594: Sonnet 9—a poem in the six-line stanza form of *Venus and Adonis*—Meres declares himself a friend of Barnfield's, who was a fan of both Marlowe and Shakespeare; it looks if they may have formed something of a poetic circle). There is no absolute certainty that these sonnets are among those printed in 1609; and 'sonnets' could mean simply lyrics. But in 1593 versions of two sonnets, Sonnets 138 ('When my love swears that she is made of truth') and 144 ('Two loves I have, of comfort and despair'), appear as Shakespeare's in *The Passionate Pilgrim*. As this is an unauthorized publication, we must suppose that they were printed from a privately circulated manuscript, presumably released by an indiscreet 'private friend.' Both are among Shakespeare's more intimate poems; maybe this, as much as the fact that they were printed without authority, was what caused Shakespeare's sense of offence with the publisher. And both, obviously, were finally printed in the later part of the collection. The latest datable sonnet may be Sonnet 107, in which the line 'The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured' may, but does not certainly, refer obliquely to the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603.

The poems may then have been written over a period of some twenty years, and some could even date from as late as the year in which the collection first appeared; this is in itself an argument against the supposition, once current, that they were conceived as a sequence. Beyond

this, attempts to date them have to rely principally on evidence from literary context and style, neither of which is infallible. The vogue for sonnet sequences initiated by the publication of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* in 1591 climaxed around 1596. Shakespeare's use of the form in plays extends as far as *Cymbeline*, written about 1610, but is most apparent in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Romeo and Juliet*, of around 1595. This is in any case the period during which Shakespeare makes most use of lyric forms in his plays—*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is another example—so it would not be surprising to find him writing sonnets at the same time. Readers who know Shakespeare's plays may easily be tempted to see a broad resemblance between the stylistic development apparent in them and that between the earliest and latest printed poems in the collection. Shakespeare's earliest plays are those that display the greatest formality of style. The first seventeen of the Sonnets, which all play variations on the theme of procreation and are relatively distanced in their use of the sonnet form, may seem to belong to the same world as the early comedies.

The later sonnets include some of the most intense poems, resembling some of the anguished self-revelations of characters in the plays. The common impression that the latest printed poems were also the last to be written is based on a subjective reaction—not necessarily any the worse for that, but in contradiction to the results of recent, more scientifically based studies. Some of these rely on analyses of the Sonnets' vocabulary in relation to that of the plays (whose chronology itself is also, it has to be admitted, far from certain). They identify words that occur rarely within the canon as a whole, and within plays that are close in date of composition. Occurrence of such words within the Sonnets is taken to indicate composition around the same date. Studies carried out by MacDonald P. Jackson suggest that most of the sonnets from 1 to 103, and 127 to the end, were written from 1593 to 1599 (when the vogue for the sonnet form was at its height), that most of the so-called 'Dark Lady' sonnets are among the earliest, and that most of the sonnets from 104 to 126 were written in the seventeenth century. Jackson believes it is unhelpful to think of the Sonnets as chronologically homogeneous and that Burrow's edition represents the dating of the Sonnets too tidily. Burrow suggests, for example, that the latest sonnets were finished by 1604. We believe that, on balance, there can be no immediate objection to the proposition that Shakespeare was still writing or revising Sonnets up until their publication in 1609. The fairly recent

theory that the differences between Sonnets 138 and 144 as printed first in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599 and later in 1609 result from revision rather than corruption in the earlier publication encourages the idea that individual sonnets may have been subject to some degree of revision at the time that they were assembled as a collection, presumably by Shakespeare himself. Other poets did the same kind of thing: Michael Drayton, for instance, reworked his sequence, first published as *Idea* in 1594, over a period of twenty years until it appeared in its final form as *Idea's Mirror* in 1619. It seems clear, then, that at some point in the early seventeenth century someone, presumably Shakespeare himself, arranged a pre-existing set of poems in which smaller groupings exist and in which connections concerned with dates of composition can be identified.

Within the two major divisions a number of other groupings may be discerned. Most clearly, the first seventeen poems as printed include all those that implore a young man to marry and to have children. Another mini-sequence of poems about separation and absence preluded by Sonnet 39—'let us divided live'—is taken up by Sonnets 41 and 42 in which it is linked with the theme of the youth's infidelity with the poet's mistress, and continues to Sonnet 52—'So am I as the rich . . .'. It is interrupted by the nevertheless not unrelated Sonnet 49, in which the poet meditates on how he might feel if the youth deserted him. Within this subgroup come pairs of sonnets which together virtually constitute a single poem. Sonnet 44's concern with two of the elements, earth and water, is picked up in the first line of Sonnet 45, 'The other two, slight air and purging fire.' Then Sonnet 46, beginning 'Mine eye and heart are at a mortal war,' is followed by one beginning 'Betwixt mine eye and heart a league is took.' Sonnets 79 to 80 and 83 to 86 concern the poet's rivalry with another poet for the young man's favors; the preceding sonnet—Sonnet 78—may be regarded as a prelude since in it the poet writes of how 'every alien pen' has found inspiration in his friend's beauty.

Some of the links between sonnets discussed above may result from contiguity of composition. Indeed certain linked sonnets may also be regarded as 'double sonnets,' or two-part poems. Other links may be the result rather of reorganization after the initial act of composition. It is often argued that the placing of certain sonnets has numerological significance. The numbering of Sonnet 60, with its emphasis on minutes and hours, is clearly appropriate. And the number 12 fits well with the

ticking rhythm of that sonnet's opening line—'When I do count the clock that tells the time.' The physical effects of time on the lover are discussed in both Sonnet 63, the age at which the human body was thought to face its major crisis in development, or 'grand climacteric,' and Sonnet 49, the age at which a 'minor climacteric' was believed to occur. It is difficult to know whether to ascribe esoteric significance to the matches between number and content or to put them down to coincidence. They may be no more than a sophisticated kind of game with the reader, or a way of adding a few grace notes by way of decoration. If they are intentional the numbering must be Shakespeare's own, which might otherwise be doubted: the poems may have been unnumbered in the manuscript, and numbers may have been added either by a scribe or by a compositor.

Beliefs about the date of the Sonnets have critical consequences. The possibility that they were written over a long period of time, as well as the fact that they are not necessarily printed in the order in which they were composed, is a reason for questioning whether there may have been more than one friend, more than one lover. So, if the Sonnets are 'about' specific individuals, possibly commissioned or presented as gifts to Shakespeare's 'private friends,' there may have been more than two of them. At least four kinds of persons, three males and one female, figure in the collection. One is the poetic voice (and this may be re-imagined as female); another is a male addressee. A third is a poet who is amorously entangled with both a male addressee and the fourth person, a 'black' woman who is the initial poet's lover. Various characteristics which could be attributed to these personae may be identified, and an attempt to do this may help to illuminate a particular dimension of the sequence. The shifting impressionism of the poems' characterization creates a desire for a precision which the poems themselves deny. So we must emphasize that since the addressees may not remain constant throughout the collection, these characteristics may not inhere in any single individual, whether real or imaginary.

The Poet's Voice

The poet—or perhaps we should say the shifting persona of the poet—reveals a few aspects of himself relevant to the implied narrative at different points in the collection. The poet never states that he is married; he even goes so far as to suggest that his relationship to the male friend resembles that of a wife to her husband: 'So shall

I live, supposing thou art true, | Like a deceived husband' (Sonnet 93). He has, however, a female partner, not only in the second but also in the first part; Sonnet 41, for instance, rebukes the friend for breaking a 'two-fold troth: | Hers, by thy beauty tempting her to thee, | Thine, by thy beauty being false to me.' In some of the poems the poet is older than the friend, most obviously in Sonnet 73:

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.*

In Sonnet 62 he describes himself as 'Beated and chapped with tanned antiquity,' and in Sonnet 138 says that his mistress 'knows [his] days are past the best.' Though some of the poet's expressions of unworthiness ('Being your slave . . .,' Sonnet 57) may simply be poetic tropes, at various points he expresses a sense of being victimized: 'Now, while the world is bent my deeds to cross, | Join with the spite of Fortune' (Sonnet 90), 'O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide, | The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds' (Sonnet 111). He is the victim of an unspecified 'vulgar scandal' (Sonnet 112). A sense of his own unworthiness in comparison with the beloved is a recurrent theme. Some unspecified cause, a 'separable spite' (Sonnet 36), often keeps him apart from his friend—is this disparity of rank?—geographical separation?—the poet's married state?—the fact that they are both male?; a number of the Sonnets express grief and longing in absence. He loves both the friend and a woman who is 'black' in appearance and in character, and is torn between them. And the poet's name is Will[iam] (Sonnets 135–6, and possibly Sonnet 143).

The Young Man (or Men)

A beloved is not certainly named, though it is possible to infer from the puns throughout Sonnets 135 and 136 that he, too, is a Will. He is certainly unmarried in some of the poems, and none of the others contradicts this. Early poems in the collection address a man in loving terms while criticizing, sometimes harshly, his selfishness in failing to marry and so to defy time by passing his beauty on to posterity.

One feature of Shakespeare's collection that differentiates it from all others is that the beloved, though frequently idealized in the first part, is nevertheless faulty: 'for the first time in the entire history of the sonnet, the

desired object is *flawed*.' This is true of both parts of the collection. Sonnet 35—and, in conjunction with it, the preceding two poems—alludes to an unnamed 'trespass,' a 'sensual fault' which the poet forgives; Sonnet 41 speaks of 'pretty wrongs that liberty commits' and clearly implies that the friend has offended sexually with the poet's mistress:

*yet thou mightst my seat forbear;
And chide thy beauty and thy straying youth,
Who lead thee in their riot even there
Where thou art forced to break a two-fold truth:
Hers, by thy beauty tempting her to thee,
Thine, by thy beauty being false to me.*

The poem that follows (Sonnet 42) says that, though the poet loved the woman dearly, 'That she hath thee is of my wailing chief, | A loss in love that toucheth me more nearly.' Yet in a later, or at least later numbered, poem (Sonnet 53) the poet can write of his beloved's 'constant heart.' In Sonnet 67 a young man is apparently accused of keeping bad company. Sonnet 70 defends him against unspecified slander to his 'pure unstained prime.' Sonnets 78–80 and 81–6 are those concerned with the 'rival poets.' There is an implication in the couplet of Sonnet 88 that the poet is willing to take responsibility for his friend's wrongs (it is not clear whether the 'faults concealed' of line 7 are the friend's as well as the poet's), and this poem is followed by others such as Sonnets 93, 95–6, and 120 which show a troubled sense of the friend's transgressions.

In spite of his rebukes, the poet, as in sonnet sequences of the period addressed to women, shows a determination to idealize the beloved.

A Woman—or Some Women

As we have seen, it is common in sonnet sequences of the period for the woman addressed to bear a romantic, often classically derived name—Laura, Diella, Celia, Idea, Diana, Zepheria, and so on. No woman's name, whether romantic or ordinary, attaches itself to the woman (or women) of Shakespeare's sonnets. She is spoken of or addressed only generically as, for instance, 'my mistress' (Sonnets 127; 130), 'my music' (Sonnet 128, not specifically addressed to a woman), 'my love' (Sonnet 130), and 'Dear heart' (Sonnet 139). The term 'dark lady,' which in popular and even in critical usage has attached itself to the Sonnets, is an imposition upon them. 'Lady' is not found, and 'dark' only

once (Sonnet 147). Even 'black' occurs in only five of the sonnets (Sonnets 127, 130, 131, 132, and 147). In three of them it is the occasion for praise: the woman's (natural) blackness of eyes and brows shames those who make fair 'the foul with art's false borrowed face' (Sonnet 127); though (paradoxically) 'black wires grow on her head' yet the lover thinks her 'rare | As any she belied with false compare' (Sonnet 130). Her black eyes demonstrate her mourning for his 'pain'; and if her heart would mourn for his too, he would 'swear beauty herself is black, | And all they foul that thy complexion lack' (Sonnet 132). In two of the poems, however, 'black' provides an occasion for bitter wordplay on the word's literal and metaphorical senses. 'Thinking on' her 'face' he regards her 'black' as 'fair,' but she is 'black' in her 'deeds' (Sonnet 131). His 'thoughts' and 'discourse' are 'as madmen's are' because he has 'sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, | Who art as black as hell, and dark as night' (Sonnet 147). In Sonnet 152, though she is not explicitly 'black,' the poet has falsely 'sworn [her] fair,' and in Sonnet 144 she is 'coloured ill.'

There are, then, only seven among the second group of twenty-eight sonnets in which a woman is explicitly or implicitly dark in coloring. There are, however, other poems in which a woman whom the poet loves is reviled as dark in character. Although Sonnet 129—'Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame'—could, considered on its own, be unrelated to the rest of the collection, in context it reads like a poem of self-condemnation for the poet's subjugation to sexual desire. The difficult Sonnet 133 curses 'that heart that makes my heart to groan | For that deep wound it gives my friend and me.' Not only has the woman betrayed the poet, she has also enslaved his 'sweet'st friend,' his 'next self,' so that 'Of him, myself, and thee I am forsaken.' Nothing is left: he is bereft of himself, of the 'sweet'st friend' who is his 'next self,' and of the woman herself. His heart is imprisoned in her 'steel bosom'; he pleads that she will at least let his own heart stand bail for his friend's so that he can be the friend's prison-warder. The friend means even more to him than the woman.

Sonnet 134 runs straight on to beg the 'covetous' woman to restore his 'kind' friend to him. But there is no hope: 'Him have I lost; thou hast both him and me; | He pays the whole, and yet am I not free.' Then, in Sonnet 135, he puns tortuously and despairingly on the word 'will.' The word occurs thirteen times in this sonnet; on seven of these occurrences in the Quarto it is both italicized and capitalized; the same is true of three of its

seven occurrences in Sonnet 136 and of its single one in Sonnet 143, where again a pun is clearly intended. Although such details could derive from the compositor, some at least of these are likely to have been marked in the manuscript.

So many senses of the word are pertinent in Sonnet 135 that it is often difficult to say which is uppermost, or even whether particular ones are present at any given point. Of course they may be present in the reader's mind even if they were not in the poet's. And we cannot be sure at what points capitalization should be used in a modern text to indicate the personal name. In the opening lines the name seems to be dominant: 'Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy will, | And Will to boot, and Will in overplus'—that is, Will (the poet) is subjugated to her will (in the primary sense of sexual desire). The idea that she has 'will' in overplus may, in view of the following line—'More than enough am I that vex thee still'—act simply as an apology for continuing to trouble her, but could also imply that she is oversexed, and must surely also suggest that this is the name of his friend. If this is agreed it strengthens the case for a real-life addressee. In the following lines 'will' in the senses successively of vagina and penis dominates:

*Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,
Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?
Shall will in others seem right gracious,
And in my will no fair acceptance shine?*

Then in the sestet multiple meanings proliferate: 'So thou, being rich in will'—that is, in sexuality, and the organs of the lovers named Will—'add to thy Will | One will of mine to make thy large Will more'—that is, if she agrees to his demands she will increase her sexual appetite (with a possible, however improbable, secondary sense of 'enlarge her vagina by enclosing his penis in it along with all the others'). Sonnet 152 implies not simply infidelity but adultery in that she has broken her 'bed-vow'—in other words, that she is married.

Other Poets

Along with the poet, the male friend (or friends), and the woman (or women) of the second group of sonnets, there is at least one additional though shadowy player in the drama, often known as 'the rival poet.' (While context suggests that the relevant poems—Sonnets 78–86—are about male friends, as is always assumed, it has to be admitted that so far as their content goes they could be

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If thy soule check thee that I come so neere,
I Swear to thy blind soule that I was thy *Will*,
And will thy soule knowes is admitted there,
Thus farre for loue, my loue-sure sweet fullfill.
Will, will fullfill the treasure of thy loue,
I fill it full with wils, and my will one,
In things of great receipt with ease we prooue,
Among a number one is reckon'd none.
Then in the number let me passe vntold,
Though in thy stores account I one must be,
For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold,
That nothing me, a some-thing sweet to thee.
Make but my name thy loue, and loue that still,
And then thou louest me for my name is *Will*.

Image 2. Printers in Shakespeare's time felt free to alter details of the way texts were presented in their manuscripts, including capitalization and italicization; and the manuscript used for the Sonnets may not have been in Shakespeare's hand. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to attribute significance to the use of italics and capitals for seven of the thirteen instances of the word 'will' in Sonnet 135; Sonnet 136 (above) ends with the words 'my name is *Will*.'

addressed to a woman. Likewise, depending on how the Sonnets are spoken or the context in which they are reproduced, some could be imagined as being from a female to a female.) In Sonnet 79 the poet complains that his 'sick Muse' has had to give way to another, and plays with the conceit that his rival's praise is worthless because all the qualities he (the rival) ascribes to the friend were there already. Sonnet 80 sees the poet panicking because a 'better spirit' is praising his friend, Sonnet 83 refers to 'both your poets;' Sonnet 84 has a conceit similar to that of Sonnet 79 while rebuking the friend for being 'fond on praise;' in Sonnet 85 the poet claims to be 'tongue-tied' in face of the rival's praise, while asking the friend to respect him for his 'dumb thoughts,' and Sonnet 86 again expresses humility in face of the 'proud full sail' of the rival's 'great verse.'

Little more can be deduced about this poet. He appears to be regarded as learned: the friend's eyes have 'added feathers to the learned's wing' (Sonnet 78; the friend is 'all my art, and dost advance | As high as learning my rude ignorance' (Sonnet 78), and Sonnet 86 speaks mysteriously of 'his spirit, by spirits taught to write | Above a mortal pitch,' of 'his compeers by night | Giving him aid,' and of 'that affable familiar ghost |

Which nightly gulls him with intelligence.'

There are then scattered gestures towards an impressionistic narrative that could lie behind the Sonnets. The poet loves one or more young men, and/or women, and his love is to some degree reciprocated. The poet also loves a 'black' woman. Another poet also loves the person or persons, who respond to his praise. One or more women has an affair with one or more young men which the poet deeply resents. There is no resolution to the situation.

The Sonnets conform to no predetermined formal structure. The collection is like a patchwork composed of separately woven pieces of cloth, some bigger than others, some of them re-stitched, rearranged from time to time and finally sewn together in a composition that has only a deceptive, though at times satisfying, unity. It is as if Shakespeare were providing us with all the ingredients necessary to make our own series of narratives about love. To insist on one story alone is to misread the Sonnets and to ignore their will to plurality, to promiscuity. To seek for a tidy pattern in these loosely connected poems is like trying to control or tidy the inevitable mess and freedom that love itself creates.

Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells

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