The phenomenology of infatuation

The English classicist H. D. F. Kitto opens his essay on *Hamlet* – the best ever written about the play – with this sly remark:

> Surely the real problem of *Hamlet* lies in certain facts briefly reported by Waldock, that up to the year 1736 no critic seems to have found any great difficulty in the play, but since that date one interpretation after another has been proposed and rejected.

Kitto appears to be sliding into his subject conversationally, from left field so to speak, and we may find ourselves awaiting the statement of his own thesis, but in fact we already have it: there is *no* problem; if we read the play straight through without preconceptions, allowing Shakespeare's words alone to determine our response, the alleged mysteries that have generated almost all *Hamlet* criticism never arise in the first place.

Surely the salient fact about the sonnets of Shakespeare is that up until the 19th century, no critic ever found anything to admire in them. Only after Bardolatry overtook the English critical mind during the Romantic era did kind words begin to be said about them; and only since the middle of the 20th century, when the lit-crit industry in American and British universities began to churn out an overabundance of Ph.D.s in search of new literary fields to plow up, have they begun to be regarded as great poetry.

George Steevens, one of the preeminent Shakespearean scholars of the 18th century, wrote that "The strongest act of Parliament that could be framed would fail to compel readers unto their service." The quote later became notorious, but in its time it commanded assent or only a mild demur.

Wordsworth, blind to his own considerable deficits, nonetheless smoked out those of Shakespeare's sonnets: "Their chief faults – and heavy ones they are – are sameness, tediousness, quaintness, and elaborate obscurity." Keats, who revered the plays, said of the sonnets that "They seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally – in the intensity of working out conceits." These are sound judgments.

The pertinent bibliographical information about them can be briefly stated. There are 154 of them. They were published in 1608 in a volume that is the only source that exists. Their ordering appears to be haphazard, and the text is marred by the usual number of printer's errors to be found in Elizabethan publications. The first 126 are addressed to a young man, dubbed "the Fair Youth" by commentators; the remaining 28, to a woman who has been given the sobriquet of "the Dark Lady."

Two of the poems are not sonnets – not if Petrarch is allowed a vote. No. 126 is only 12 lines. The original editor was puzzled by this and put parenthetical marks where the 13th and 14th lines were presumed missing. Moreover, the twelve lines consist of six rhymed couplets. Clearly, then, No. 126 is not a sonnet at all: many commentators consider it a kind of "envoy" to the series that is dedicated to the man. No. 145 has the requisite number of lines in the usual rhyming pattern, but the meter is iambic tetrameter, and the content is embarrassingly weak and little related to the surrounding sonnets. It is difficult to make out how someone else's poem would find its way into the collection, but to my ear it sounds spurious, or at best the sort of thing that Shakespeare might have written when he was a teenager.

No. 99 seems at first glance to have 15 lines, but I believe the first line is a kind of title or proem announcing the theme: "The forward violet thus did I chide." The remaining 14 lines then give us the chiding in the exact form of an impeccable Shakespearean sonnet. We find something similar in a letter of Keats, where he gives us information in prose that we need in order to understand the sonnet that follows:

> I was led into these thoughts, my dear Reynolds, by the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness. I have not read any Books. The Morning said I was right. I had no Idea but of the Morning, and the Thrush said I was right, seeming to say,
>
> O thou whose face hath felt the Winter's wind . . . .

Early editions of Keats's poems titled it "What the Thrush Said." I call it an unrhymed Shakespearean sonnet with no sense of paradox, because it falls so perfectly into an octave of two quatrains and a sestet that elaborates upon it, with rhetorical devices that make the structure unmistakable, whereas to any reader with an ear, Shakespeare's No. 145 is *not* a sonnet. A single reading of both poems will convince the reader that iambic pentameter is essential to the sonnet effect while the rhyme scheme is ancillary.

The first point to establish is that Shakespeare's sonnets are so-so poetry.

The sonnet form no more suits Shakespeare than the song form suits Beethoven: a song affords no scope for instrumental drama using the accumulation of elapsed time as a great intensifier; and a sonnet affords no scope for character revealed in a speech that is generated by a dramatic situation. We have lamed some of

Shakespeare's greatest soliloquies by extruding them from their dramatic contexts and delivering them as exercises in clear diction and a sonorous delivery. Macbeth's "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" gains immeasurably from being treated as a manic-depressive explosion of sarcastic singsong, a mixture of rage and despair directly produced by news of the Queen's death and Macbeth's astounding outburst that her timing is abysmal. Reciting it "poetically" denatures it. But another thought to consider, heretical as it may sound at first, is that Shakespeare's prose may be superior to his verse: some of Hamlet's greatest speeches, and Falstaff's, as well as Edmund's credo and the fool's jesting in *King Lear*, plus many wonderful passages in the histories and comedies, eschew meter; on the other hand, some of Shakespeare's rhymed couplets in the early plays embarrass even his most dedicated fans.

Helen Vendler makes much over the sonnets as lyric poetry. But Shakespeare was a born *dramatist*. His gift was characterization in conjunction with a professional's grasp of how to keep a plot moving on a bare stage. The 14-line schema is too short to turn into a mini-drama like the great soliloquies, too long to strike fire like Hamlet's aphorisms, and too formal to sound like ordinary speech. But a stronger objection to the sonnets is that we have every reason to believe that they were dashed off and that we may be reading, if not rough drafts, then mere exercises in versification to which he gave little time and thought. Their extreme confinement of subject matter indicates that he wrote them mostly to keep his hand in.

The sonnet form inevitably calls up an air of artificiality, and the English Lit term that gets overused in relation to Shakespeare's sonnets is "conceit," *i.e.*, the controlling idea or metaphor that runs through the whole poem. So Shakespeare builds Sonnet 87 on a financial conceit: Your worth is so great that I can't afford you any longer; I'm releasing you from the contract because I can't contribute any value at my end. Sonnet 46 invokes the legal system: My heart is filing a lawsuit against my eye to bar it from sharing in the contemplation of my beloved. "But the defendant doth that plea deny"; an inquest is "impannelled" and a "verdict is determined." The Bardolators persuade themselves that this is pretty rich stuff; but with an algorithm for the meter and rhyme scheme and a few rules for consistency, you could train Watson the Jeopardy-playing computer to churn out sonnets based on such conceits.

The second thing to establish is that the sonnets exhibit veritable monomania and our interest inevitably flags. Love is a traditional subject of sonnets, but even an exalted passion can become cloying; this is the more so as we grow dubious about the one-sidedness of the love. A character in Tom Stoppard's play *Hapgood* says this:

> There is something appalling about love. It uses up all one's moral judgment. Afterwards it is like returning to a system of values, or at least to the attempt.

As we begin to suspect that Shakespeare's love for the Fair Youth is unrequited, we correspondingly begin to worry that he is wandering into the precincts of pathology.

The "story" told by the sonnets is easily summarized. Shakespeare, in his 30s or 40s, is besotted with a man of good birth who is perhaps a decade-and-a-half younger. He is also erotically entangled with a bewitching brunette, toward whom his feelings oscillate wildly – he is sexually mesmerized by her but lacerated by her infidelities and full of self-loathing at his inability to break with her. One crisis occurs when Shakespeare's fickle young man begins to keep company with a "Rival Poet"; another is when he sleeps with Shakespeare's mistress.

Toward the Fair Youth, Shakespeare's feelings are lofty and idolatrous. The youngster is the cynosure of all eyes and the pattern of all perfection. The sonnets exalt the youth's beauty and only occasionally pay homage to other virtues; they also give evidence against the character of the youth from time to time. Shakespeare worries that his beloved is being contaminated by worldliness, and is trading too easily upon his charms in order to ruthlessly get what he wants. But he is quick to excuse these faults, sometimes by a logic that is overtly specious.

Anyone who reads the sonnets straight through will quickly conclude, however, that this "story" is only implicit in the material. Shakespeare has no narrative that he sets out to impose upon the whole. The ordering of the sonnets is not chronological or even sensible. There is a strong impression that they may have been written in batches, with up to a dozen or so on one theme. Like many of Emily Dickinson's poems, they appear to be first drafts. By this, I do not mean that they are straight from Shakespeare's pen without any corrections; I mean that he sat down to write a sonnet, worked it out, recopied it, and never touched it again. It was done in one sitting and treated as an exercise, one that he carried through and edited as he wrote, and completed to his own satisfaction, and then filed away.

Here is a précis of the content of the first 126 sonnets:

- There has never been beauty to match yours and it is impossible to believe there ever will be again. You should have children in the hope that their features will show posterity just how beautiful you were. In lieu of this, my poor verse will attempt to give subsequent generations some idea of your beauty. Poetry does have the virtue of lasting as long as the words are read, so in the future my poems will testify to the beauty that those who are born too late will never see with their own eyes.

- You are all the world to me. My love for you is total, sovereign over me, and inextinguishable. You are the only subject of my poetry. I am not worthy of you and cannot ask for reciprocation. You are right to prefer other poets to me. They write better than I do; but I love you best.
- Even though you are perfect, you do have faults – you've done nothing admirable with your life, you keep low company, you are shallow, you love flattery, you are disloyal, you slept with my mistress. But even faults in you turn to virtues, or at least cannot be held against you, paragon that you are. Mortals do not judge gods: I have no grounds for complaint, being a low fellow myself; and sometimes I have been guilty of forgetting to make you my every thought.

To say that, over the arduous task of reading them, they become tedious, is to fall short, very short, of describing the weariness of the experience. Long before intermission, you would give away half your possessions to read a sonnet about a cat, a river bank, or a recipe for clam chowder.

The sonnets to the Dark Lady are equally monomaniacal:

- I am your slave: I love you so much that your slightest displeasure turns me into a baby crying for its mother's forgiveness; and your most fleeting smile in my direction makes me so aroused that I barely have time to get my pants off.
- I loathe myself to the last iota of self-contempt for loving you, because you are evil incarnate, and worse than that, you pursue other men before my very eyes. But I can't break with you. I see no way out of my predicament.

The double crux of the sonnets is a reference, in both parts, to a sexual liaison between the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady. Shakespeare is very explicit in describing his attitude toward this: The woman, whom he lusts after but hates, has ensnared the young man whom he loves beyond all power of language to describe; it will come out all right in the end if only she does not succeed in alienating the affections of the two men for each other.

In Sonnet 40, Shakespeare takes us into the heart of the triangle. The poet breaks out to the friend, expansively, albeit miserably, and with a hint of sarcasm: "Take all my loves, my love, yea take them all." But: "I cannot blame thee." Well, we knew that. Can Shakespeare spin this out over 14 lines? Yes, by way of another conceit, in this case, that "All mine was thine, before thou hadst this more." The young man was already in possession of every particle of Shakespeare's property, so naturally he has full warrant for the use of Shakespeare's mistress. Therefore "I do forgive thy robbery, gentle thief/Although thou steal thee all my poverty," because he is not *really* a burglar – he is merely helping himself to his own. Shakespeare is only concerned that the fair youth may be deceiving *himself*. He wants no moral harm to come to his friend. The closing couplet emphasizes the point that matters most to Shakespeare, to which the friend's betrayal and any feelings Shakespeare has for his mistress are secondary:

> Lascivious grace, in whom all ill well shows,
> Kill me with spites yet we must not be foes.

Vendler is wowed by the catachresis of "lascivious grace." (A catachresis is a startling metaphor or strained comparison, in this case yoking into one figure of speech two words that would seem to be harshly antithetical in meaning.) She is right to say that the phrase "skirts blasphemy," as a Christian reader could not fail to associate "grace" with God's greatest blessing upon us and a mark of holiness. What I am wowed by is not that Shakespeare could write such a remarkable phrase, but that he could mean it.

Shakespeare has no insight into this experience, and no curiosity. He never examines himself: "How did this happen to me? What does it mean?" He looks upon the young man obsessively, is happy when the young man smiles upon him, unhappy when the young man frowns, feels fulfilled when in his presence, miserable when he isn't. If he were asked "Why do you think you love him so?" he would undoubtedly begin by saying "Because he is so beautiful." Analysis of motive is never Shakespeare's strong point, even in the plays: he is a dramatist, not a psychologist. But here he shows no interest even in his own psychology. We get only his phenomenology – what it felt like to be him, whipsawed between transcendence and abasement.

While the sonnets, excepting a dozen or so that strike immediate fire, are individually undistinguished, they accumulate intensity in the mass by their single-mindedness. Their power to disturb us, as with the poems of Emily Dickinson and the "terrible sonnets" of Gerard Manley Hopkins, is augmented by Shakespeare's inability to make sense of his experience, to understand it in rational terms. But his sonnets are less intriguing than their poems because, as powerful as his experience is, he does so little to plumb its depths and takes so many steps to distance his rhetoric from it. His elaborated forms of artifice, which are so celebrated by his latter-day enthusiasts, stand between us and the his emotion – a serious deficit, because almost the sole interest for us *is* the emotion. Shakespeare is undergoing one of life's most consuming experiences. But his turning it into laboriously elaborated conceits and shoddy puns not only shuts readers out but guarantees that he will fail to engage deeply with his potentially incendiary material. This impression is confirmed by the handful of memorable sonnets that dispense with cleverness and do take us into the heart of the experience in ordinary language and plain speech. The few riveting sonnets expose the faults of all the others.

The love described verges on pathology – an observation that elicits from Bardolators the usual run of excuses. Their simplest riposte is "No, it doesn't." A few defenders who do admit the problem borrow a page from Keats's apologists, who have to reckon with his letters to Fanny Brawne: just as Keats's champions pile calumnies on the unoffending lady and rue the day that Keats met her, Shakespeare's protectors find fault with the young man who was unworthy of Shakespeare's love.

The real value of the sonnets lies precisely in the fact that W. H. Auden considered almost too obvious to bother proving:

> What is astonishing about the sonnets, especially when one remembers the age in which they were written, is the impression they make of naked autobiographical confession.

That the experience described happened to a real person, not to a fictive persona, makes the monomania of the treatment, and even the boredom that is increased by repetition, psychologically interesting. The formalists try to take away from us the only reason to read the sonnets in the first place. If these poems *aren't* a window into the soul of the real Shakespeare, who cares? – they are practically worthless as art. Keats got them exactly right: the conceits are so labored they seem like workshop exercises, although every now and then Shakespeare gets off a good line. The modern formalist says, "Conceits, hooray! Real poetry. Artifice. Style." If we disdain the conceits and try to catch a glimpse of Shakespeare writhing like a god in pain, the formalists take this as a sign that we are children unfit for poetry: we are lacking the aesthetic sense; we are disabled for the one competency needed, the ability to respond to "the poem *qua* poem." Thus the New Critical stance robs the sonnets of their only claim to our attention.

Homoeroticism

Even after Bardolatry seized the Brits, the sonnets were resisted. When they were finally embraced, those sturdy Victorians had to cope with their . . . *unseemliness*. So out came the first and still the favorite defense: Elizabethan manly men were lavish in their rhetoric of friendship; Shakespeare's sonnets go no further than his plays in vaunting the chaste love between manly men. Franz Grillparzer, a 19th century Austrian writer, responded to this argument in a few choice and unanswerable words:

> To vindicate Shakespeare, since a great part of his sonnets are addressed to a *male* person, the interpreters adduce from his dramas many passages in which the word "lover" is used by man to man for "friend," "favorite," "devotee." But in all these instances, *beauty* is never the cause of the affection.

Shakespeare writes about the young man's beauty in *almost every sonnet*. Only occasionally does he add goodness or truth from the "Platonic triad," and he mentions all three qualities together in only *one* sonnet.

A. C. Bradley, the greatest of Shakespearean critics, also rejects the argument that there is "nothing to see here":

> The sonnets to the friend are, so far as we know, unique in Renaissance sonnet literature in being a prolonged and varied record of the intense affection of an older friend for a younger, and of other feelings arising from their relations. They have no real parallel in any series imitative of Virgil's second Eclogue, or in occasional sonnets to patrons or patron-friends couched in the high-flown language of the time.

However, he tries to minimize the possible scandal of Grillparzer's remark:

> Allowance being made, however, on account of these facts [that the Elizabethan language of deference, and also of affection, is to our minds habitually extravagant and fantastic; and that in Elizabethan plays friends openly express their love for one another as Englishmen now rarely do], the sonnets will still leave two strong impressions – that the poet was exceedingly sensitive to the charm of beauty, and that his love for his friend was, at least at one time, a feeling amounting almost to adoration, and so intense as to be absorbing. Those who are surprised by the first of these traits must have read Shakespeare's dramas with very inactive minds, and I must add that they seem to be somewhat ignorant of human nature. We do not necessarily love best those of our relatives, friends, and acquaintances who please our eyes most; and we should look askance on anyone who regulated his behavior chiefly by the standard of beauty; but most of us, I suppose, love any human being, of either sex and of any age, the better for being beautiful, and are not the least ashamed of the fact. . . . And as to the intensity of the feeling expressed in the sonnets, we can easily believe it to be characteristic of the man who made Valentine and Proteus, Brutus and Cassius, Horatio and Hamlet; who painted that strangely moving portrait of Antonio, middle-aged, sad, and almost indifferent between life and death, but devoted to the young, brilliant spendthrift Bassanio; and who portrayed the sudden compelling enchantment exercised by the young Sebastian over the Antonio of *Twelfth Night*.

Grillparzer might have responded, "Yes, but the same doubts are aroused by precisely some of your examples." Those characters' idolatries have also caused a few raised eyebrows. Antonio's abject and irrational love for Bassanio compels some playgoers to take a second look and scratch their heads, and partly for the same reason that the sonnets perplex us – they cannot help wondering what Antonio sees in the young man, if not . . . you know.

It is quite wonderful to read how the worldly celebrators of Shakespeare's manliness adjudged themselves to be experts on homosexuality, as distasteful as it was for them even to contemplate the subject. They "knew" that all homosexual men are gynophobic. So in their minds, all they had to do was produce the Dark Lady sonnets and then sum up triumphantly: Shakespeare cannot possibly have had any homosexual leanings, because, look you, he had sex with women. The very existence of a bisexual man was an impossibility to their minds. Their final piece of evidence was Sonnet 20:

> A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted
> Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
> A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
> With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;
> An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
> Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
> A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
> Much steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.
> And for a woman wert thou first created;
> Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,
> And by addition me of thee defeated,
> By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
>   But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
>   Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

See, they exult, Shakespeare explicitly says that the young man is made for women's pleasure, not his, so both men are resolutely heterosexual – let us move on. Whereas we notice that the overall impression is "You are so beautiful I naturally want you but I guess I can't have you."

Vendler calls Sonnet 20 a "myth of origin" – How did the rose get its thorns, How did the leopard get its spots, or in this case, Young man, how did you get to be so breathtakingly beautiful? The provocative elements seem to be "master-mistress of my passion" and "since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure." The crowd that gets all antsy at any suggestion of the Bard's possible erotic attraction to a man takes that line and says "Case closed": after all, they argue, Shakespeare tells us that once the young man was endowed with a prick, he was created to give pleasure to women; and the possession of that prick defeated what would have otherwise been Shakespeare's purpose – to woo the most beautiful woman alive. What these stalwarts pass over lightly is the *propriety* of addressing the young man in this particular way: "You have a woman's beauty, and *more* than a woman's beauty (because as a man you won't be a manipulative hussy); everyone is stopped in his and even her tracks by your beauty. You are so beautiful that Nature herself fell in love with you, so she added a prick at the last possible moment (I hope you don't mind me talking frankly), and that made you off-limits to me; otherwise I would have been unrelenting in my pursuit of you. Well, let the women have your prick; I get the rest of you." Yes, this sonnet seems to grudgingly concede at the end – the young man was made for women's pleasure. But when I see a sonnet that says "Hello, young man, my my my my my, oh by the way I know you are a gift to women not to me," my first thought is *not* that this is a poem celebrating heterosexuality.

I see no reason to assume that Shakespeare and the young man did the deed of darkness, although the way Shakespeare portrays himself psychologically, I don't see how he could have said no if the young man had said "Step into this private room with me." But I also see no reason to deny the evidence of the sonnets and my own eyes: Shakespeare is saying to a young man, "You are my every thought, my day, my night, my summer, my winter, my religion, my morality." Why? "Because you are so very very beautiful."

In Sonnet 20, Shakespeare does emphasize the Fair Youth's heterosexuality, while his own emerges by default and somewhat tenuously: "I can't have you" does not necessarily mean "I don't want you." The Dark Lady sonnets, however, are sexually explicit – the two lovers get between the sheets whenever she gives him a "come hither" look. But what *those* sonnets say is, "Every time I lie with you, I'm ashamed afterwards." The sonnets *in toto* seem to expound a kind of Madonna-Whore complex, but distributed between the genders: Lust = sex = humiliating feelings of abasement and degradation = the woman; Love = disinterested devotion = exalted feelings of worshiping human beauty and perfection = the young man. Such a dichotomy apparently was instantiated in Oscar Wilde, who was able to perform satisfactorily with his wife and to sire two children, but who absolutely adored Bosie with every fiber of his being. (And from the record of Bosie's dissipated and despicable conduct, it surely had to be on account of his beauty – that young man offered little else to an artist of Wilde's manifold gifts other than an Oxford education and a mediocre poem about "The love that dare not speak its name.")

The fictive persona

There is much to think about besides how pedestrian the sonnets are and how hard the critics have had to work to blind themselves to this deflating truth. There is the radical inappositeness of the New Critical dictum that the narrator of the poem is never to be taken as the poet speaking *in propria persona*. Almost everything of interest would be forbidden us by formalist critics, who insist that each sonnet is a total fiction produced by a poet who imagined (in addition to a purely made-up personage drolly named Will who speaks the sonnets) a Beloved Friend and a Dark Lady and a Rival Poet, and then amused himself creating little scenarios for the four characters to enact.

David West, aggressively taking up the formalist cudgels, denies that Sonnet 134 is about the young man, or about anybody:

> This, as stated so often, is not an account of anything that happened to William Shakespeare, but the latest episode in the plot of these poems, exploiting this new character arriving so late upon the stage.

Re Sonnet 40: "She may, and she may not, be the same person as the Black Lady of 127-52." Re Sonnet 42, which is perfectly clear in the reading:

> Lines 1-4 are addressed to the beloved, line 5 to the mistress and to the beloved, but lines 6-10, where the mistress is spoken of in the third person, show that it is the beloved he cares about. In the last four lines Shakespeare is speaking to himself. Such switches of addressee could not have happened in real life. The poem is a drama in the mind, and this is of course not the maunderings of William Shakespeare but the self-delusion of a dramatic character.

"In real life"? A poem *never* gives an arrangement of lines that would be addressed to another person or set of persons in real life – we don't speak to one another in rhymed stanzas. But that would not mean that the sequence of thoughts does not track an actual experience. No reader finds any difficulty with the alleged "switches."

> That thou hast her it is not all my grief,
> And yet it may be said I loved her dearly;
> That she hath thee is of my wailing chief,
> A loss in love that touches me more nearly.
> Loving offenders thus I will excuse ye:
> Thou dost love her, because thou know'st I love her;
> And for my sake even so doth she abuse me,
> Suffering my friend for my sake to approve her.
> If I lose thee, my loss is my love's gain,
> And losing her, my friend hath found that loss;
> Both find each other, and I lose both twain,
> And both for my sake lay on me this cross:
>   But here's the joy; my friend and I are one;

Sweet flattery! then she loves but me alone.

The entire poem is no doubt the poet "speaking to himself," but he mentally addresses the young man, saying that he knows of the affair; and in expressing his relief that he and the young man are still friends, he is not saying anything he wouldn't say to the young man in person. The mistress is incorporated into a single line that is also addressed to the young man: "Loving offenders, thus I will excuse ye." I find the assertion that "such switches of addressee could not have happened in real life" passing strange, especially since he is addressing the young man *in his imagination*. (West and I agree about this – we differ in that I take the speaker of the poem to be the poet named William Shakespeare and West takes the speaker to be a fictional character, a poet named Will.)

Let us imagine two scenarios: in one, precisely these events happened to the man Shakespeare and the sonnet is an autobiographically accurate account of his feelings; in the other, none of it happened, and the poet Shakespeare sat down at his writing desk to construct a little drama in 14 lines using three fictional characters, with the persona who is speaking the poem included as one of them. In either case, the objective is to write clearly and render the drama so that the reader can easily follow it. The challenge is the same whether the account of "the self-delusion of a dramatic character" is journalistic or novelistic. West's argument is excessively woolly-headed, so stubbornly orthodox as to out-Herod Herod.

If we *could* be persuaded that the formalists are right, we would say that Shakespeare made a hash of it, and precisely where we would least expect him to fail: in dramatization; in clarity of plot and character. H. C. Beeching in 1907 goes to the heart of the matter:

> The story of the Sonnets represents a real experience; for, indeed, a dramatist of Shakespeare's skill and genius could hardly have written an imaginary drama of passion, in which there were so many broken links.

Life is as confused and ambiguous as the sonnets, but art does not imitate life in these respects. There is no warrant for obscurity in a work of fiction, and no excuse for it in an artist whose primary career as a dramatist had honed to the highest degree his ability to make things clear even to an audience of illiterates.

In 1909, Bradley, while acknowledging that some of the sonnets may have been "mere exercises of art," and that "all of them are poems, and not letters, much less affidavits," nonetheless agrees with Beeching that the sonnets tell a true story, and for the same reason:

> The author of the plays could, I make no doubt, have written the most intimate of these poems to a mere creature of his imagination and without ever having felt them except in imagination. Nor is there any but an aesthetic reason why he should not have done so if he had wished. But an aesthetic reason there is; and this is the decisive point. No capable poet, much less a Shakespeare, intending to produce a merely "dramatic" series of poems, would dream of inventing a story like that of these sonnets, or, even if he did, of treating it as they treat it. The story is very odd and unattractive. Such capacities as it has are but slightly developed. It is left obscure, and some of the poems are unintelligible to us because they contain allusions of which we can make nothing. Now all this is perfectly natural if the story is substantially a real story of Shakespeare himself and of certain other persons; if the sonnets were written from time to time as the relations of the persons changed, and sometimes in reference to particular incidents; and if they were written for one or more of these persons (far the greater number for only one), and perhaps in a few cases for other friends, – written, that is to say, for people who knew the details and incidents of which we are ignorant. But it is all unnatural, well-nigh incredibly unnatural, if, with the most skeptical critics, we regard the sonnets as a free product of mere imagination.

A formalist's formalist

Stephen Booth, the author of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* – a work likely to remain for many decades the definitive critical edition, given its comprehensive annotations and judicious commentaries – adopts the method of glossing every possible meaning of every suggestive word, to the point where Vendler gently taxes him with throwing in the towel too quickly on the possibility of reaching *an* interpretation at all. David West is properly impatient, and for the right reason:

> A word may have a wide spread of meaning, but that does not mean that its whole spread is working in every context.

Booth would answer West, I think, that his objective was to put the entire smorgasbord before his readers and allow them to make their own choices. Such is the limited virtue of Booth's approach. West is correct, however, that Booth, when he ventures on interpretation, implies strongly that all the meanings are present simultaneously, and that Booth thinks this multivalence is intrinsic to the value of the sonnets.

While the non-specialist will be alienated by Booth's encyclopedic thoroughness combined with an abstemious refusal to venture any practical help at all, the avid Bardolator – who wants to engage deeply with every line, every word even, and feel that nothing has been missed – will find Booth's compendium essential reading. Occasionally, Booth sets aside his own fussiness: his discussion of Sonnet 116, like Vendler's of 129, is illuminating and beautiful.

He is witty in his refusal to take up "the problem of" the sonnets: "William

Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter." This is amusingly arch, but goes too far: the sonnets certainly provide evidence that Shakespeare was sexually aroused by at least one woman. If the Dark Lady sonnets are to be believed, Shakespeare was vigorously heterosexual; and if Sonnet 20 is to be believed, not homosexual or bisexual, however responsive to male beauty. Thus Booth's statement makes sense only if we take the view that Shakespeare sat down to write sonnets as if they were chapters in a poetic novel – "Let's see, I'll make up three characters out of whole cloth, and weave a kind of story about them: an estimable narrator; a beautiful young man with the faults of youth; an entrapping siren. The young man and the mistress betray our protagonist. This pains him greatly, but what he is most concerned about is that he not become separated from the youth. Hmmm . . . what else? Since my protagonist is a poet, I'll bring in a rival poet who turns the head of the youth." On Booth's reading (and others of the same persuasion), these characters are as fictional as Othello and Desdemona. I don't really have a counter-argument to this other than a direct appeal to the reader: Does this seem likely to you? Even Vendler, a rival formalist, assumes a close relationship between Shakespeare and the allegedly fictive persona.

We have mentioned the obvious rejoinder to Booth's hypothesis: if his notion is correct – if Shakespeare made up from scratch an entertaining little story in verse – why are so many aspects of the narrative so muddy? Why did the master of drama organize this interesting material so haphazardly and ineffectually? Per Bradley and Beeching, why are there so many broken links in the drama? Why so many obscurities? Why so many allusions of which a reader can make nothing?

Booth's aggressive agnosticism terminates in incoherence and absurdity:

> The sonnets . . . often ring with passion and sincerity, but to assume therefore that they reflect particulars of Shakespeare's sex life is to be as unreasonable as Hamlet would be if he assumed that the first player was a chum of Hecuba's. The sexual undercurrents of the sonnets are of the sonnets; they probably reflect a lot that is true about their author, but I do not know what that is; they reveal nothing and suggest nothing about Shakespeare's love life.

On the one hand, Booth, impressed by the "passion and sincerity" of the sonnets, concedes that they contain "sexual undercurrents" and that they "probably reflect a lot that is true about their author." To follow this up with the statement that they "reveal nothing and suggest nothing about Shakespeare's love life" is certainly to give with one hand and take away with the other. I suppose Booth means only that Shakespeare drew upon his own experience in order to novelistically create a fictional plot involving four main characters, one of them the first-person narrator of the story.

To argue that the sonnets do not even *suggest* anything about Shakespeare's love life is to adopt too stringent a separation between poet and persona. Is it plausible to argue that the young man and the dark mistress may well be mere coinages of Shakespeare's brain, characters like Petruchio and Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and that every sonnet is a poem written by an imaginary lover to an imaginary beloved, and the whole series a kind of epistolary novel? Yet Booth would at the same time disdain any effort to work out the plot of the novel from the incoherent sequence; and certainly caution is advisable, because if this *is* a novel, it is one of the clumsiest ever written.

Stefan George

The German modernist poet Stefan George, writing in 1909, attributed the long neglect of the sonnets to their being "entirely unromantic" and went on to accuse "the duller brains" of finding in them only "stylistic exercises worked out to order" and "the baser brains" of searching for scandal in the content and finding only "their own full loathsomeness." George's comment on the subject matter deserves attention:

> In our day, men and poets have spoken out plainly: at the center of the sonnet sequence, in every situation and degree, stands the passionate devotion of the poet to his friend. One must accept this even where one does not understand; and it is likewise foolish to cast aspersions, either with reproaches or with justifications on what one of the greatest mortals found good. Over-materialistic and over-intellectual ages especially have no right to bandy words on this point, since they cannot possibly suspect anything of the world-creating power of super-sexual love.

George was decidedly homosexual in orientation but the historical record indicates that he was a lifelong celibate. At the age of 34, he was captivated by the sight of a 14-year-old boy on a Munich street. With the approval of the boy's parents, an intense but Platonic association ensued, which ended two years later with the boy's untimely death from acute disease. The youngster was then memorialized and mythologized by George's subsequent poetry. George clearly viewed Shakespeare's sonnets through the lens of his own personality and sexuality; but just as clearly, his personality made him especially suited to pronounce upon their content. All the evidence indicates that Shakespeare, like George, felt a deep, chaste love for a much younger man.

W. H. Auden also urges us to remember that there can be experiences beyond the range of those that ordinary people have: he viewed the sonnets as embodying the

Vision of Eros, a state that, like George's "super-sexual love," transcends everyday lust and affection and is felt by the person who undergoes it to be mystically "given."

> The sound and sensible citizen, alarmed at the thought that our Top-Bard could have had any experience with which he is unfamiliar, has either been shocked and wished that Shakespeare had never written them, or, in defiance of common sense, tried to persuade himself that Shakespeare was merely expressing in somewhat hyperbolic terms, such as an Elizabethan poet might be expected to use, what any normal man feels for a friend of his own sex.

The disturbing element in Shakespeare's adulation, for me, has nothing to do with same-sex attraction – it is Shakespeare's self-abasement before his beloved and the way his adoration seems untethered to any consideration related to how the callow young man actually behaves and actually treats him.

I understand that the person who is in the grip of the Vision of Eros does not feel this to be a problem: the very nature of the Vision is that the object of it is numinous and appears to embody all perfection. Shakespeare is powerless over his addiction and in need of a twelve-step program for lovesickness. That he emphasizes, over and over, the physical appearance of his beloved is disconcerting but also only to be expected: as Auden reminds us, to the afflicted party the object of the Vision of Eros is *always* a paragon of beauty. Such susceptibility to beauty is not necessarily a point of moral fatality: the cosmologist Brian Swimme would see in such an attraction an instance of "allurement," which is one of the "powers of the universe." As the emotional basis of sexual procreation, allurement has been an indispensable means to one of the most important evolutionary ends of the cosmos. It is biologically appropriate to be seized by the radiance of the opposite sex; and in a same-sex attraction, the allurement has simply migrated out of the original reproductive situation and adapted itself to the constitution of the individual who is experiencing it. Such a migration is not even distinctively human: animals of different *species* sometimes form intense bonds with each other. Cats especially seem to exert what can best be described as charisma, not only on their human owners, but on other mammals as well: the Internet abounds in photographic evidence of dogs, coyotes, deer, dolphins, gorillas, and even a bear in a German zoo who are mesmerized by their feline companions.

What we have in the sonnets, then, is, as Auden proposes, an intensive revelation of the nuts and bolts of an experience that is authentically rare, whether ostensibly "heterosexual" or "homosexual." Indeed, Auden, following George, goes on to suggest that our assigning it such labels misrepresents it. Shakespeare famously created heroines that playgoers have been falling in love with for four centuries – notably, those in the comedies who make a finer impression on our minds than the pedestrian heroes who are paired with them. He must have loved them himself, and perhaps his Vision of Eros would have been activated by such a woman had she appeared at the right time. But there is this to be said in general about Swimme's principle of allurement as it pertains to sexual attraction: it is all too easily sullied by social conditioning and debased by commodification. What a boy begins hearing about girls, long before puberty, poisons that well: by the time he is of an age to act on his erotic longings, he has almost certainly been spoiled for any purity of response to them. By "purity" I do not mean puritanical constraint and sexual repression – I mean the innocence of being entirely taken up by the allurement, without the clouding of what he has learned from grosser wits about the proper sexual consumption of these delicious human bon-bons. So there are good reasons that, past early adolescence, a young man can never again undergo in the presence of the *opposite* sex the seizure of an uncomplicated allurement; his response is likely to be contaminated by crass motives that are directed toward the use and the exclusive ownership of the beloved object for his erotic pleasure. He will have to remember grade-school crushes as his last encounters with pristine allurement and innocent enchantment.

Here I, like Stefan George, speak from my own experience. I realized, listening to Swimme, that the strongest episode of unadulterated allurement that I had ever experienced occurred when I was seven. My classmate Yvette, a French-born waif with large brown eyes who sometimes tied my shoelaces for me, persuaded me to ride the school bus with her past my own stop. We got off together and walked to a farmhouse where things could only end badly: she was immediately sent crying to her room by her unfeeling mother, who then managed to call my baffled parents and direct them to a rural site they had never before visited. I have wondered many times since then what that shy and right-doing boy could have possibly been *thinking* as he rode into *terra incognita*. The answer can only be that allurement overwhelms the organism and disables cognitive functioning, as Shakespeare's account seems to confirm.

If the "dark lady" sonnets tell us nothing else about Shakespeare, they certainly let us know that he found his own vulnerability to heterosexual lust confounding and shaming. The culminating sonnet in the series, after blaming his mistress for his predicament, blames himself even more. His famous definition of "lust in action" as "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame" indicates that his relations with the opposite sex were hopelessly compromised by his own mixed motives. Chastely loving the young man liberated Shakespeare to experience allurement with a conscience cleared of self-interest – especially that most mortifying and loathsome form of self-interest that manifests itself in the use of another person's body for physical pleasure, even in the absence of any love for her, and sometimes in the absence of any kind of caring for her at all.

All this said, a lofty subject and an elevated moral tone cannot immunize the sonnets against the single most unanswerable complaint about them: their sameness of substance, their veritable monomania. Not even that rarest of rarities, an authentic experience of the Vision of Eros, can sustain so many 14-line effusions, especially when the majority of them seem to have been casually tossed off without any intent to polish them for publication or even to clarify their myriad obscurities and incoherencies for the benefit of later readers. But when we throw the New Criticism to the four winds and read the sonnets as the autobiographical confession of an obsessive love, like William Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris*, they come into their own – not so much as great poetry, but rather as a fascinating human document in which every feeling is pressed into a verse form that is extraordinarily rigid and restrictive. In the production of this series – it is not even a "sequence," as it is sometimes described by scholars – Shakespeare's decision to investigate his experience in precisely such a constrained manner becomes part of the fascination. Auden:

> Those sonnets which express passionate emotions, whether of adoration or anger or grief or disgust, owe a very great deal of their effect precisely to Shakespeare's artifice, for without the restraint and distancing which the rhetorical devices provide, the intensity and immediacy of the emotion might have produced, not a poem, but an embarrassing "human document." Wordsworth defined poetry as emotion recollected in tranquillity. It seems highly unlikely that Shakespeare wrote many of these

> sonnets out of recollected emotion. In his case, it is the artifice that makes up for the lack of tranquillity.

Shakespeare's distancing of his writerly self from his emotional self doubles the psychological interest. Unfortunately, it halves the aesthetic interest. The ostensible subject matter of love is depicted in the sonnets as an emotional tsunami and mystical given; but in a state of transport, does one organize and rhyme a series of tropes? Even if a poet did recollect such an emotion in tranquillity, per Wordsworth's prescription, could the application of so much wordy calculation to a poor conceit be an adequate objective correlative for the experience? Is it likely that the composing of a clever 14-line poem in three rhymed quatrains and a closing couplet would constitute an aesthetic analogue of this transport?

Helen Vendler says that "the speaker is a person who wishes to analyze and summarize his experience as well as to describe and enact it." I don't know how Vendler and I can be reading the same body of poetry. I take my stand with Auden: "Shakespeare contents himself with simply describing the experience." I find little analysis or summation. The speaker undergoes the experience. He is helpless to alter it; he can only describe it, or rather, describe himself in the grip of it, over and over again. The sonnets risk tedium because the description is fundamentally ever and always the same. Oh, yes, this happens, and that happens, but Shakespeare himself confesses the monotony of his project:

> Why is my verse so barren of new pride,
> So far from variation or quick change?
> Why with the time do I not glance aside
> To new-found methods and to compounds strange?
> Why write I still all one, ever the same,

And keep invention in a noted weed,
That every word doth almost tell my name,
Showing their birth and where they did proceed?
O, know, sweet love, I always write of you,
And you and love are still my argument;
So all my best is dressing old words new,
Spending again what is already spent:
   For as the sun is daily new and old,
   So is my love still telling what is told.

It is still more cussed cleverness for Shakespeare to say, *in an artistically arranged sonnet*, "My love is so transcendent that it has overwhelmed the artist in me, I can only be boring about it." The confession of barrenness is mildly ironic in a sonnet intended to be an engagingly poetic account of his debility; but as a descriptor of the entire sequence, it is only too apt.

As the most famous sonnet of all tells us, Shakespeare's love never alters, even "when it alteration finds" in the beloved, but rather "bears it out even to the edge of doom." This is noteworthy in our unfaithful species, even remarkable, but thin gruel for poetry. Only by treating the fictive persona as a real person of flesh and blood – as George, his romanticism notwithstanding, and Auden, for all his formalism, urge us to do – are we permitted to make contact with the content of the sonnets in all their excess and strangeness, and so get from them all that they have to give.