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Sonnets

William Shakespeare

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About the Book

INTRODUCTION BY GERMAINE GREER

Shakespeare’s sonnets are lyrical, haunting, beautiful and often breath-taking, representing one of the finest bodies of poetry ever penned. They demonstrate the writer’s skill in capturing the full range of human emotions within a carefully prescribed form and creating something unique in every one. Some are familiar – *Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?* – others unexpected, but together they form an extraordinary meditation on the nature of love, lust, beauty and time.

About the Author

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire and was baptised on 26 April 1564. Thought to have been educated at the local grammar school, he married Anne Hathaway at the age of eighteen and they went on to have three children, before Shakespeare moved to London to work in the theatre. Two erotic poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* were published in 1593 and 1594 and records of his plays begin to appear in 1594. The first collection of his sonnets was published in 1609 but evidence suggests that he had been writing them for more than ten years prior to this for a private readership.

William Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616.

Sonnets

William Shakespeare

With an Introduction by
Germaine Greer

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since its rediscovery, editing and republication by Edmund Malone in 1780, Shakespeare's sonnet sequence has been treated as a conundrum and the poems as items of forensic evidence. Scholars have thought about, written about and argued about the sonnets for entire lifetimes, but still they retain their mystery, because they are not meant to be solved. They are meant to be as mysterious as life itself. Hundreds of very clever people have laboured mightily to arrive at versions of the story that the sonnets tell, only to convince their readers that the sonnets cannot be made to tell a story at all. The poems display, not Shakespeare's life or himself, but his art. The poems may have been spun off lived experience, but they are not ways of recounting events. They are events in themselves. It is our privilege and our challenge as readers to work out what is happening in the poems, not what once happened outside them. It would be improvident indeed to barter their immense riches for celebrity tittle-tattle.

The hard evidence that Shakespeare wrote sonnets consists in thirteen surviving copies of a quarto book called *Shakespeares Sonnets.* The publisher's title cannot be taken entirely on faith; when, ten years earlier, William Jaggard (who would in 1623 print the First Folio) published a book with the title *The Passionate Pilgrim by William Shakespeare* only about a quarter of the bits and pieces in it had anything to do with Shakespeare. However, none of the 154 sonnets in the 1609 quarto has ever been attributed to any other poet in print or in manuscript. We know that sonnets by Shakespeare circulated in manuscript because Francis

Meres praises his ‘sugared sonnets among his private friends’ in *Palladis Tamia,* an account of London literary life which was published in 1598, but no manuscript version of any of the poems or earlier has ever been found. By 1598 the vogue for sonneteering had run its course; that Shakespeare’s sonnets were thought worthy of publishing in 1609 has more to do with the reputation of Shakespeare than with the popularity of the sonnet form.

We have no idea how Thomas Thorpe, the publisher, came by his copy-text. He was a respected member of his profession, who had published works by Marlowe, Jonson, Chapman and Marston. George Eld, the printer of *Shakespeares Sonnets,* worked with Thorpe in 1605 on a quarto edition of Jonson’s tragedy *Sejanus*, with marginal annotations by that most exacting of authors, and would go on to print Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* in 1609. Thorpe followed the correct procedure by entering the title in the Stationers’ Register in May 1609, to signify his ownership of the copyright and prevent any other publishers beating him to it. The full title of the published book, *Shakespeares Sonnets. Never before Imprinted* suggests that Thorpe was aware that he was publishing a literary property that had been around for some time. The only way Shakespeare could have made money from the publication was if he had actually sold the copy-text to Thorpe. If he had, he probably would have seen it through the press as he did his rollicking bestseller *Venus and Adonis,* but the number of obvious errors in the printing, for example four substitutions of ‘their’ for ‘thy’ in Sonnet XLVI, suggests that, contrary to Thorpe’s usual careful practice, the proofs were not corrected, by Shakespeare or anyone else. We don’t know if the book sold well; no contemporary ever quotes it. An alternative version of Sonnet II that can be found in thirteen manuscripts of later date is not indebted to Thorpe’s edition and its many variants suggest a parallel evolution. A great amount of ink has been wasted on the

final and most intractable mystery of the sonnets, Thorpe's riddling dedication of his printing to 'Mr W. H'. The present writer has no intention of adding to it.

The adventure that awaits the reader of the sonnets is different in every case. The same reader reading them at different stages in her life will find herself renegotiating them, encountering new ambiguities, new awarenesses, in an endlessly renewable process of discovery. The sonnets are all written in the first person, and nearly all of them are addressed to someone, mostly as 'thou', less often as 'you'. The reader occupies the intellectual space of the speaker, identifying (or not) with his sentiments and ideas, and of the addressee as well, male or female. The distance between speaker and subject seems to vary; sometimes the speaker talks down to the subject and at other times abases himself before him, or her. We are more aware of gender in some sonnets than we are in others. The reading of the sonnet happens in real time; we begin in one place and end up in another. The sonnet's structural engineering provides the launching pad for each journey; we traverse one quatrain, then a second and a third to arrive at a concluding couplet. A pivot called the volta or turn, at the end of the second quatrain, divides the sonnet into two sections called an octave and a sestet, which usually contrast with each other in some way; in scale or tone or perspective. This architecture is further strengthened by rhythms within the line, the pulse of the five iambs and the internal pause in each line called the caesura, and by the rhyme that marks the line endings. To all of this patterning we add subtle and not so subtle patterns of sounds, vowel colour, all pulled backwards and forwards by the demands of syntax. The amount of energy thus built up within each capsule of fourteen lines is enormous.

Originally the sonnet was a little song, a lyric. Some of Shakespeare's are more obviously lyrical than others, but even then the meaning is intricate, coiled upon itself and ready to spring. Sonnet XVIII might seem simple, but part of the art is to hide art. The poet asks a simple question:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Apart from the reader's rather wobbly position as both speaker and hearer of this question, the line seems simple enough, until we try to work out where the melody comes from. It makes as little odds to point out that the ten syllables contain eight different vowel sounds and ten different consonants as that they do not contain a single poetic device. Instead they ask about a poetic device, 'Shall I use a simile?' and then, in apparently rejecting it, make use of it:

Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

Than a summer's day, understood, but before the reader can protest at the hyperbole, the poet proves his point.

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:

Flattering hyperbole has given way to hard fact. The poet has suggested one course but taken another. A summer's day is not good enough as a comparison for his beloved, for reasons that are undeniable. The rhythm has become choppy, in a succession of clattering monosyllables. The next quatrain complicates the rhythm still further by giving us four accented syllables at the opening. The iambs snag on the trochee 'sometime', which is repeated as the rhythm slows.

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimm’d;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimm’d;

The last line grinds bumpily to a halt in a negative. The poet uses the volta to launch himself as the winner on a ‘But’.

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:

Can the poet be placing himself in competition with Death? There should be an intake of breath here, when he defies reality as it has been defined in the preceding quatrains. What follows is his vaunt:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The beloved has been annihilated and replaced by the poet’s words. By a strange turn of syntactic events the poet has become the progenitor of his subject. What began as honey has been infused with gall. Having vanquished Death in Sonnet XVIII, the poet takes on Time in Sonnet XIX and once again declares himself the winner. But he is playing a dangerous game.

In Shakespeare’s time, poets often wrote on behalf of their patrons, wooing reluctant ladies for them or even lamenting the death of children in more moving terms than their patrons could command. Just so we think that the opening sonnets of the collection published by Thomas Thorpe in 1609 were commissioned by a nobleman (or noblewoman) anxious to persuade a reluctant son to marry and continue the family line. Shakespeare pleads with all the bravura at his command, but we would be on very dodgy ground if we

were to decide that what we are reading is evidence of an actual interaction, let alone of intimacy. What we can feel in the sonnets is the ebb and flow of closeness, the changing dynamic of a human relationship, and the losing battle to keep love untainted by resentment. Parents reading Shakespeare's sonnets will find something approaching their own complex and sometimes agonising sentiments towards their children. All kinds of love, from the most innocent and disinterested to the most predatory, will find their echo here.

Though there is no trusting Thorpe's ordering of the sonnets, Sonnets XVIII and XIX probably date from the mid-1590s when Shakespeare seems to have been fascinated by verse forms and the dynamic interaction of form and meaning. In *Romeo and Juliet*, published in 1595, Juliet meets the masked Romeo for the first time and instantly they improvise a sonnet. Romeo speaks the first quatrain:

If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Juliet supplies the next quatrain, repeating one of his pairs of rhyme words:

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss.

The volta brings a change. Romeo answers with a single line:

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

Juliet rejoins:

Aye, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

Romeo’s reply completes the third quatrain:

O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray: grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

Juliet supplies the first line of the closing couplet:

Saints do not move, though grant for prayer’s sake.

Which Romeo completes:

Then move not, while my prayer’s effect I take.

They kiss, and the die is cast. The interchange is strangely artificial. It is almost as if Romeo and Juliet have encountered each other online, and made love to each other by e-mail. Such things do happen, especially to very young people. If Romeo is a predator, Juliet is lost. The Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* is a sonnet, and Act II begins with another, but after that sonnets are forgotten. Other characters fall in and out of rhyme. Romeo, like both the Capulets, has a penchant for speaking in rhyming couplets, of which Friar Laurence has an inexhaustible store. As the tragedy gathers pace, rhyme gradually disappears. In *The Comedy of Errors,* artifice and earnestness go together when the wronged wife Adriana is moved to express her distress in rhyming couplets, but in *Love’s Labour’s Lost,* rhyming is eventually understood to be part of a sophisticated game, to be abandoned when things get serious. Berowne is the most facile rhymer, uttering whole speeches in quatrains. He can fall to sonneteering apparently inadvertently (I. i. 80–93 and V. ii. 401–414) and the King of Navarre can do it too (I. i. 161–174). The ladies are prepared to bandy rhyming

couplets with their attendant Boyet for hours, but when they are sent as much love in rhyme ‘as would be crammed up in a sheet of paper’ they are deeply unimpressed. The lords’ poems aren’t bad; Jaggard saw fit to include three of them in *The Passionate Pilgrim.* Dumaine’s appears as well in *Englands Helicon,* an anthology of 1600, but Katharine rejects Dumaine’s verses as ‘a huge translation of hypocrisy’. Dumaine’s mistake is to suppose that love poems play any part in wiving or for that matter in relationships. In love poetry it is the poet who creates the beloved and presents him or her to the public in what guise he will. The point of the poem is not to elicit a response from the beloved but from the reader. Shakespeare knew that his claims of eternising his beloved were nonsense, that he was the one who would achieve eternal fame while his beloved sank into impenetrable obscurity, but the irony only spurred him on to more dazzling displays of mock argument.

There are sonnets, however, that sound a very different note; Sonnet CXVII, for example.

Accuse me thus: that I have scanted all
Wherein I should your great deserts repay.
Forgot upon your dearest love to call,
Whereto all bonds do tie me day by day;

The reader might well be flummoxed. After having let the poet call the shots, now we are being asked to accuse him of neglect. Who are we standing in for now? To whom do all bonds tie him day by day? Surely not to the beautiful youth. The poet is guilty of worse than mere neglect.

That I have frequent been with unknown minds,
And given to time your own dear-purchased right;
That I have hoisted sail to all the winds
Which should transport me furthest from your sight.