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LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Autodidactic sonnets

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Abstract: True to one of the themes in this issue of our journal, my essay raises two broadly pedagogical questions. First, what did Shakespeare learn about writing sonnets from his most accomplished contemporaries, Sidney and Spenser, and secondly what does he teach his own readers about how to read his sonnets? A single answer to both is proposed: he learned and taught that the abiding and primary subject of the sonnet is the sonnet itself and the kind of beauty it offers to readers. For want of a better term, “autodidactic” is proffered as a clumsy word to describe this two-way process of self-learning and self-teaching.

Subjects: Shakespeare; Pedagogy; Education; Poetry; Early Modern/Renaissance Literature; Language & Literature

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The answers offered lead paradoxically to some explanations why, despite all attempts by the writer to have his poems read aright, they have ever since been wrenched awry, viewed “Askance and strangely” (Duncan-Jones, 2010, Sonnet 110)¹ as we seek biographical knowledge which is deliberately withheld, instead of reading as the poems explicitly envisage. A poem can be “Consumed with that which it was nourished by” (2010, Sonnet 73), in that the kinds of extrinsic curiosity the sonnets have excited through tantalizing hints are a distraction from their signalled intentions in terms of the reader-response they expect. They deliberately withhold the “names” of those they claim to immortalize (“Your name from hence immortal life shall have” [2010, Sonnet 81]), because the true subjects are not individual people but the abstract quality which inspires the poems, beauty and the medium which praises beauty, the sonnet itself.

We might catch a glimpse of how Shakespeare learned something of sonnet writing from the cameo in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* of the schoolmaster Holofernes, who writes a poem himself, later turns playwright in composing “The Nine Worthies”, and whose favourite writer is also Shakespeare’s,

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PUBLIC INTEREST IMPACT STATEMENT

Shakespeare is still remarkably present, having been acclaimed as Man of the Millennium in 2000 and celebrated for his birth (2014) and his death (2016) around the world. His Sonnets have perennially been hailed as among the greatest poems ever written, and have been hailed as innovating modern self-consciousness. This article contributes to an understanding of how Shakespeare learned to write sonnets and how they teach us how to read them. He learned crucial lessons from sonnets by Sidney (the sonnet as drama) and Spenser (the sonnet as metaphor) about how to write sonnets, and he teaches readers of his own sonnets that the central subject of his poems is not living people nor feeling-states, but the sonnet itself as a beautiful artefact.

Ovid. In an internal joke, Shakespeare may even be self-critically describing his own style and “gift” of poetic composition, in the words of Holofernes in presenting his alliterative and old-fashioned epiphonem on the death of the deer:²

This is a gift that I have—simple, simple; a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions. These are begot in the ventricle of memory, nourished in the womb of *pia mater* and delivered upon the mellowing of occasion. But the gift is good in those in whom it is acute, and I am thankful for it. (Woodhuysen, 1998, 4.2.65–71)

Reproving the curate Nathaniel for his mangled reading of Berowne’s misdelivered sonnet, Holofernes gives instructions on how to compose such a “canzonet” along lines approved by Quintilian and Elizabethan rhetoricians:

You find not the apostrophus and so miss the accent. Let me supervise the canzonet. [*Takes the letter.*] Here are only numbers ratified, but, for the elegancy, facility and golden cadence of poesy, *caret*. Ovidius Naso was the man; and why indeed “Naso”, but for smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention? *Imitari* is nothing. So doth the hound his master, the ape his keeper, the tired horse his rider. (1998, 4.2.119–127)

The gist of Holofernes’ criticism is pertinent to this essay. Berowne’s sonnet, he points out, is only technically proficient with its “numbers ratified” (the right number of lines organized correctly), but it displays no more than “imitation” in its slavish obedience to rhetorical rules and models (like the ape following its keeper). It crucially lacks the unexpected “jerks of invention” which would individualize the work and give it the kind of poetic qualities of an Ovid. The criticism is an extension of Shakespeare’s joke at his own expense, since the sonnet under discussion is ultimately his own, and was later included under attribution to him in William Jaggard’s *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599). Some such recognition may lie behind his artist’s dissatisfaction in not fully liberating his own *inventio*:

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? [1998, 76]

The elements of self-referentiality and parody are compounded each time one of the four courtiers in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* writes, and in Armado’s florid explanation of how love has fired him to write a sonnet: “Assist me, some extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure I shall turn sonnet. Devise, wit; write, pen; for I am for whole volumes in folio” (1998, 1.2.174–177). As Berowne has warned, love is first learned in a woman’s eye, but thereafter the expression of love becomes a bookish affair. The relation between *imitatio* and *inventio* in Elizabethan rhetoric is to some extent built into Shakespeare’s own more accomplished sonnets as part of the very subject, as the poet sometimes strives to create against his own lack of inspiration.

However, Shakespeare’s real lessons in the art are learned not from the likes of schoolmasters such as his rhetorical pedant, but from his famous contemporaries. Two sonnets, not written by Shakespeare but certainly by writers known to him, taught him that the acts of writing and reading could be central subjects in such poems. They are in collections which, respectively, gave to Shakespeare the ingredients for his own amalgamations of the “salt” of Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* and the “honey” of Spenser’s *Amoretti*, respectively (Colie, 1974). In the first sonnet of his sequence, Sidney, or rather his *persona* Astrophil, provides a lesson in how to write, and just as importantly he gives clues about how to read the poems which are to follow (Ringler, 1962). Beginning “Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show” the sonnet describes in orderly fashion the steps taken by

an early modern poet, following received, humanist educational steps, to “show” his love in accomplished poetry. For inspiration and instruction, first he studies models from the past, hoping they will lead to his creative imitations, “Oft turning others” leaves, to see if thence would flow | Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunne-burn’d braine’ (1962). This takes him only so far:

But words came halting forth, wanting Invention’s stay,
Invention, Nature’s child, fled step-dame Studie’s blowes,
And others’ feete still seem’d but strangers in my way. (1962)

The poetic models derived from “step-dame Studie” simply intimidate and get in the way, their metrical “feet” tripping him up. He lacks the next step after *imitatio*, the novelty and personal ingredient supplied by *inventio* of his own, to assert his own voice above his models. Nearing despair, (“Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes”(1962)), the poet realizes that true invention must come only from within himself, and derive from his feelings. Perhaps disingenuously he admits he must call on a quality which at least appears to be authentically personal, new and original: “Foole’, said my Muse to me, ‘looke in thy heart and write’”(1962).

Ever since they were written, Sidney’s sonnets, like Shakespeare’s, have been dogged by speculations that they record an illicit love affair between the poet Sidney himself (Astrophil) and Lady Penelope Rich (Stella). This may be so, but the biographical significance may be a diversion, since the sequence as it stands depicts fictional *personae* and is written to persuade us they are, in Aristotelian terms, “probable impossibilities”, not “improbable possibilities”, standing as exemplary figures in a fiction of love, but not real people. A calculated effect to make us believe in the feelings of the people, and an impression of subjectivity are part of the skill to be demonstrated by the adept sonneteer. Given this, it is an open question whether the final line of Sidney’s first sonnet is an expression of heartfelt, subjective emotiveness, or alternatively the fruit of a guileful, rhetorical exercise designed to persuade the reader of its truth to feelings. The radical ambiguity is part of the sonnet’s makeup and *raison d’etre*.

Sidney’s poem offered Shakespeare two other insights which will become important when he came to writing sonnets. First, the creation of the poem itself is likened to childbirth, as the poet realizes he is “great with child to speak, and helplesse in [his] throwes” (1962). Again, the image suggests that the real subject of the poem itself is neither love nor a singular beloved, nor the poet’s true feelings, but rather the creation of a poem, visualized as analogous to the birth of a child. This is all in line with Petrarch’s advice to Boccaccio that true invention creates not a copy of the original like a portrait, but a “family resemblance” with the author’s chosen model, a relationship of “father and son”, providing an “air” of likeness but not a similitude (Jones, 1977, p. 19). We might now call it DNA. The allusion is immediately suggestive in the light of Shakespeare’s first 17 sonnets, ostensibly addressed to a beautiful youth (1977, 1–17). Brooding on how time will inevitably destroy his beauty, the poet suggests different ways to preserve it, including having a child or (amounting to the same thing) letting the poet immortalize this unblemished quality in verse, to “engraft it new” (1977, 15). The two are connected through the notion of propagation, since child-bearing need not be understood literally but, as in Sidney’s example, refer also to the theory of the imitative nature of poetry and art. Once beauty is recognized as the true subject of the poems, rather than a particular individual, then imitating a beautiful poem is the writer’s equivalent to giving birth to a new “child” in the form of a poem which will encapsulate and enhance the kinds of beauty that otherwise would fade and be lost. Such beauty can be that of a rose or a summer’s day, as much as residing in a young man’s facial lineaments. Like children, poems are presented as living replicas, an artist’s Pygmalion-like enactment of “breed” (1977, 11 and 12) in his own craft, and the fixity of the art-work lends a permanence capable of outlasting time (1977, 19) through procreation by artistic praise of the disembodied quality itself. The young man’s imagined baby might just as well be a new poem, seeking to emulate Shakespeare’s in its perfection in capturing the value of the present moment for future readers. This mode of reading seems supported recently by Katharine Craik in a brilliant article which this essay builds upon and (I hope) complements. She says of

Sonnet 32, that in this work the speaker imagines his readers in the act of rereading: “... it is a confident statement of how the intense emotional engagement involved in writing can be accessed—and shared—by dedicated acts of reading, rereading, resurveying” (Craik, 2016, p. 320). These need not be re-readings by the beloved object but by *any* reader. A quintessence of beauty may be resurrected on every new reading, a result which, as Craik reminds us, is anticipated in Sonnet 81:

The earth can yield me but common grave,
When you entombed in men’s eyes shall lie.
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o’er-read,
...
You still shall live, such virtue hath my pen,
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

As the first line declares, it is just as important that death will come to the poet as to the “sitter”, but to the poem it may not. “You still shall live” can be addressed to the sonnet in order to capture the nuance of its future existence in “the mouths of men”. Keats in a poem whose epigraph announces Shakespeare’s sonnet (“The stretchèd metre of an antique song” [Sonnet 17]) was to rehearse the sentiment his first line of *Endymion*, “A thing of beauty is a joy forever”.

The traditional motive behind Renaissance sonnets was praise, which can just as appropriately be of beauty, or love as a distanced anatomy of a singular experience of love—or even viewed hypothetically as an act of the imagination. Right down to today, poets have used the sonnet form to explore an extraordinarily wide range of material and attitudes, but in many of Shakespeare’s the coveted praise will attach itself to the skill of the poem itself, leaving the presence of an individual as merely a convenient occasion or stimulus. Attributing a voice to his poem itself as addressed by the poet in Sonnet 62, gives to a poem which will some day become old, “Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity” like the writer’s face, an inflection expressed in the concluding lines, “Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise, | Painting my age with beauty of thy days”. Such a reading gives a different sense to a poem written by somebody who could scarcely have been elderly, and was most likely in his late 20s. The writer is more confident of the poem’s longevity than of his own in the triumphant opening of Sonnet 55: “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments | Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme ...”.

Secondly, already implicit and just as importantly, Sidney’s sonnet reveals the writer’s hope as to how his work will be *read*, and its desired effect:

That she (dear She) might take some pleasure of my pain:
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain. (Ringler, 1962)

In other words, he is writing to be read by a particular person in a particular way, drawing a set of affective responses through a sympathetic reading—pleasure, sympathy, pity, grace—just as the writing is claimed to be fuelled by his own feelings. It need not matter who the person is, since in an important sense it is any reader of this sonnet. Again, the subject is not a specific moment in love, nor a “real” lady, but the poem itself, as an autonomous, created artefact seeking to find an ideally receptive readership. The general point of address can be made by simply replacing the word “she” with “you”, targeting each new reader in turn. Given the coterie nature of manuscript circulation

among courtiers eager to display among their circle *sprezzatura* and aware of “the stigma of print” endorsed by Castiglione and Puttenham (Saunders, 1951, pp.139-64),³ reluctant to publish except under anonymity or appearing in unauthorized ways (Spenser being the exception), the original readers were probably not lovers, but fellow poets envisaged mainly as a competitive collectivity, and indeed predominantly male. Sidney’s collection was not published until after his death, and the circumstances of publication of Shakespeare’s in 1609, whether authorized or not, will probably never be known. Sidney’s sonnet is not only showing his readers how he went about composing it, but also teaching his readers how he wishes it to be read in order to have its desired effect. The fact that it is the first sonnet in Sidney’s sequence makes the pedagogical element primary and effective, insofar as the lessons taught will relate to the examples which will follow. Shakespeare, I suggest, learned the lesson and followed it.

The second, preliminary example is from Spenser’s *Amoretti*, and significantly it is once again the very first poem in the sequence, as though also implicitly guiding the reader as to what to expect and how to read. Since the general point of self-referentiality in the sonnet form has been made already, I simply highlight the words relating to the writing and reading processes:

Happy ye *leaves* when as those lily hands,
which hold my life in their dead-doing might,
shall *handle* you and *hold* in love’s soft bands,
lyke captives trembling at the victors sight.
And happy *lines*, on which with starry light,
those laming eyes will deigne sometimes to look
and *reade* the sorrowes of my dying spright,
written with teares in harts close bleeding *book*.
And happy *rymes* bath’d in the sacred brooke,
of *Helicon* whence she derived is,
when ye behold that Angels blessed looke,
my soul’s long lacked foode, my heavens blis.
Leaves, lines, and rymes, seeke her to please alone,
whom if ye please, I care for other none. (Smith & de Selincourt, 1966)

Once again, even more clearly than in the case of Sidney’s sonnet, a substitution of “her” with “you” (as reader or text) orientates us. The primary subject is not love, nor a living person, nor the poet’s feelings, but a material book evidencing the composition and anticipated reception of poems which build in an expectation of the reading process. The first image of “leaves” sets up a metaphor whose double application is clinched in the penultimate line, “leaves, lines, and rymes”, revealing that the initial reference is not so much to nature as the pages of the book in which the sonnet appears, and this also lies behind the specific tenor of the thought of a volume being handled physically by a “trembling” reader. Setting up a metaphor which is a vehicle for generating others is one technique which Shakespeare learned from Spenser in particular, and which he duplicated many times in his own sonnets, allowing the metaphor’s tenor to emerge and develop through linked metaphors. In Spenser, the double image of the spring equally refers to something natural and also to the metaphor for

inspiration itself as from Mount Helicon, the Muses' home. Once again, the poet hopes the lines will be read by a deliberately unnamed "you" who, although ideally the person he loves, yet can be any reader, and will elicit certain desired responses which will lead the reader to sympathize with the persona's suffering etched in his "harts close bleeding book". Even if we know the biographical fact that Spenser's ultimate target is his future wife yet, as in Sidney's case, that is largely irrelevant to the core of the finished artefact, which is now depersonalized and available to all readers, aspiring to the autonomy of a literary work which is "for short time time an endlesse monument" (*Epithalamion*, 432).

In contrast to the stream of consciousness and dramatic presentation of *Astrophil and Stella*, the sonnets in *Amoretti* are consciously anti-realistic and metaphorical, representing the *value* of experience rather than documenting fluctuating circumstances and feelings. They develop ideas through imagery and metaphor rather than expressing volatile emotional states, moving towards *stasis* and serenity of art itself, eventually culminating in the marriage poems, *Prothalamion* and *Epithalamion*. Once again, the writer is constructing a reader, and teaching that reader how to read the sonnet in terms of its chosen artistic and emotional purpose and rhetorical method, which are different from Sidney's. Whereas Sidney's central image is the poem as the volcanic result of creativity resembling childbirth which "braves time" by providing a new poem which leads to the next and the next in perpetuity, Spenser more characteristically emphasizes the different but equally immortalizing ability of art to freeze time in the repetition and continuity of cycles in nature paralleled by the formality of quatrains in a sonnet. Both models were of utility to Shakespeare, and he learned from them.

Already we are deep into Shakespearean territory. He has taken different lessons from Sidney and Spenser. He fuses Sidney's sonnet-as-drama (mainly exemplified in Shakespeare's 127–152) and Spenser's sonnet-as-sustained metaphor (mainly Shakespeare's 1–126 and 153–154). He has learned from both, first, that the natural unit as vehicle for thought in the English sonnet is the sequence of quatrains capped by a couplet, rather than the Petrarchan octet and sextet which had been adopted from their Italian models by earlier imitators like Wyatt and Surrey. Shakespeare's sonnets consistently follow a structural logic rhetorically based on the progression from metaphor to referent: "like as" [or "how like"] "... so is ... and so ... therefore ...". In this case, the syntax itself is guiding us how to read. As my own reading trick, I find the meanings become more evident if I imagine or even print a gap between each quatrain, and similarly separate the couplet; or as in Spenser's practice, represent each quatrain as a sustained syntactical unit. But more intrinsically functional than this rather technical aspect, the metaphors in Shakespeare often proceed in Spenserian fashion from the natural world to the world of art, a progression routinely clinched in the couplet. Most typically the beauty considered relates to poetry itself, but more generally to art, sometimes drama ("As an unperfect actor on the stage" [23]), music ("Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?" [8]; "How oft when thou, my music, music play'st" [128]), visual art: "On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set | And you in Grecian tires are painted new" [53]; "Mine eye hath played the painter ... [24], and his own father's craft in '... the dyer's hand ...'" [111]). I make no pretence that the approach advanced here operates in all the sonnets by any means—how could any such simple formula unlock the astonishing variety and complexity of these poems?—but it applies in enough cases to suggest that it may be generally illuminating. There are, I suggest, enough examples to build an argument that the central subject of his Sonnets is, as in the case of Sidney and Spenser, not individuals nor even love, but the art of the sonnet as it seeks to capture the moment of perfect beauty before it fades.

Continually we find attention drawn with reference to the process of writing and to the vocabulary of literary theory as it existed in Renaissance humanist educational training: "What strained touches rhetoric can lend" (82); "For who's so dumb, that cannot write to thee, | When thou dost give invention light?" (38); "... I read such art | As truth and beauty shall together strive ..." (14); "Why write I still all one, ever the same, | And keep invention in a noted weed ... So all my best is dressing old words new" (76); "That over-goes my blunt invention quite, | Dulling my line" (103); "Those lines that I before have writ do lie" (115); "Desiring this man's art and that man's scope" (28); "Three themes in one ['fair, kind, and true'], which wondrous scope affords" (105); "And beauty making beautiful old rhyme" (106); "... I'll live in this poor rhyme" (107); "Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit | Is poorly imitated after you" (53); "Nay, if you read this line, remember not | The hand that writ it" (71); "art

made tongue-tied by authority” (66) (no doubt a frequent fate of the dramatist in facing objections from the Master of Revels). No less than eleven sonnets include in the first or last two lines the word “verse” (often “my verse”), as though proudly to proclaim and highlight its primacy as subject (17, 19, 21, 38, 54, 60, 76, 78, 79, 86, 103).

We also find repeatedly metaphors that lead us back to a contemplation of the special “beauty and truth” of poetry. In the light of the writer’s oft-repeated anxieties about the failing quality of his writing, “summer’s green all girded up in sheaves” (12) can refer as pointedly to his promising earlier output now bound up in bundles of pages, as to post-harvest corn. In one poem making explicit reference to exactly this elegiac thought, the image of “Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang” (73) refers not just to limbs of wintry trees or pillaged monasteries, but also the “quires” of bundled sheets of paper in a book, now diminishing with age into “yellow leaves, or none, or few” as the writer finds his creativity waning. The 10- and 100-fold reproduction of the distilled vial of beauty in sonnets 5 and 6 makes as much sense if it denotes poems or publications, leaving both writer and subject “living in posterity”. The famous *double-entendre* in 20 can refer equally to a penis and the pen of beauty’s amanuensis and celebrant, the sonneteer. The recognition may be enough to teach sonnet 73’s lesson that it “makes thy love more strong, | To love that well which thou must leave ere long”. Time is the enemy of youth, beauty and also the art itself which seeks to defy time: the poem is created in and about time, yet it can be destroyed by time, but also if it is successful it may destroy time.⁴ In such a case, evanescent beauty cannot be claimed as victim to bragging time, since the poem (“this”) will revive beauty in future re-readings:

When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st,
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (18)

And as we are reminded later in the sequence, “death once dead, there’s no more dying then” (146). What many of the first 126 Sonnets add up to are poems about poems, and poems striving to teach readers how to read poems. In other examples, the subject is a frustrated, “tongue-tied” or even failed attempt to write, and in the couplet we find that love or admiration of living beauty, still not substantial grounds for enquiry or exploration in their own right, act as the stimulus or catalyst that finally liberates the poet’s thoughts and, more pertinently, his pen.

One historical clue may support the general argument being advanced. It never seemed to occur to Romantic writers, the first post-Elizabethan generation to value the Sonnets, that there is any particular autobiographical element in their content. The first analytical reader of Shakespeare’s sonnets was Coleridge, and his special interest was akin to Shakespeare’s in incorporating lessons from Sidney and Spenser, meditating how to make his own images work as effectively as Shakespeare’s in presenting passions in the Sonnets and narrative poems. Coleridge’s attention is that of a professional poet’s response to poems which he regarded as models offering lessons about writing and reading poems (Coleridge, 1817). Similarly, Keats looked at the Sonnets as providing enviably good models and lessons for a young poet seeking, however vainly, to emulate his “only presider” as a mentor:

I neer found so many beauties in the sonnets—they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally—in the intensity of working out conceits—Is this to be borne? Hark ye!
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which < erst > From heat did canopy the he < a > rd,
And Summer’s green all girded up in sheaves,
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard. (Rollins, 1958, p. 189)

He dubbed Shakespeare “the Whim King” to describe the apparently arbitrary but effortlessly intuitive use of self-generating metaphors (“Each changing place with that which goes before, | In sequent toil all forwards do contend” [60]). Furthermore, if I am right in a previous suggestion that the Sonnets (for example 14 and 101) were on Keats’s mind when he put into the mouth of a Grecian Urn the enigmatic suggestion that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”, then this poem as a whole can be re-interpreted as a similarly autodidactic work, teaching readers the all-important differences between art and life: “That is all ye know on earth, and all ye *need to know*” (my emphasis). Keats’s “Ode” describes with an uncanny precision the aloof self-sufficiency of the “beauty and truth” which form the Sonnets’ central subject and mission, simultaneously tempting and blocking the reader or viewer’s curiosity which asks “Who are these coming to the sacrifice?”, by speaking from a separate realm of art outside and beyond time.

Of course, the argument that Shakespeare’s sonnets are not centrally about love (which is merely an occasion) does not require that they do not shed light on this fraught subject which persists as the mainstream interpretation of them. As in his plays, we find many different models of love as complex and involving many different kinds as well as emotions: same-sex, bisexual (42), always deeply ambivalent. A “master-mistress” of the speaker’s passion may not be a love object at all but, as Oscar Wilde playfully suggested, a boy actor whose “female” lines are written by Shakespeare, advanced in a spirit more artistically pitched than sexual (20). Love can be unrequited because the love object may be as cold and unresponsive as Adonis (94) or Sidney’s Stella, while marriage, the “world-without-end bargain” (116) can be a mixed blessing for both partners. It is surely not uncommon for an older lover to worry that the ravages of time will be expected to influence the judgment of the younger in a relationship (60, 73), driving the older to rely on such a reassurance as, “And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand, | Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand”, where “my verse” emphatically trumps “thy worth”. But all these paradigms of conflicts involved in love are offered for *readers* to compare their memories and experiences, rather than necessarily (if at all) as descriptions of actual, lived relationships, exactly as in *Venus and Adonis*, albeit placed in first-person narration. Likewise, many different kinds of analysis and pleasure may be stimulated by sonnets, ranging from the artisan’s appreciation of the ingenuity displayed in fitting complex thoughts and emotions into a very constrained, rule-bound form, through to believing statements to be heartfelt self-expression of personal feelings.

The final paradox is a heavy irony that might have caused the author either amusement or frustrated irritation if he could have known the future, posthumous reception of his sonnets. For modern readers, his scrupulous care in refusing to provide “names” but instead writing for an anonymous reader about an abstract quality, has become self-defeating, in the face of a relentless historical and biographical curiosity equivalent to Keats’s innocent viewer seeking to know the story behind the personages represented in motion on his Urn. Shakespeare has succeeded too well in teaching us how to read as his intended target, to the extent that we reach beyond the poem as it stands, into the realm of speculating on a range of individual personalities as constructed readers. Countless readers have been so convinced by the apparent sincerity and plausibility of the address that they have turned their attention away from the subject itself—the writing and reading of a sonnet representing the unique “beauty and truth” of art—towards hypothesizing and searching for “real-life” addressees, whether the Earl of Pembroke, the Earl of Southampton, Aemilia Lanyer, Anne Shakespeare, George Chapman or a host of others. There are surely two main reasons for this deflection of attention. The first lies in the simple skill in writing poems in a genre deliberately calculated by practitioners like Sidney and Spenser to persuade its original (male, courtly) readership of an emotionally convincing, subjectively motivated, and inwardly suffering speaker, whether or not such a being exists as author. We deduce that if the “person” addressing us is so emotionally individuated, then so must be the presumed addressee and the “characters”. In a perverse sense, the more successful the sonnet is in conveying deeply felt emotion, the more spectacularly it may fail in its primary aim.

The second reason may lie in a radical change of tack after Sonnet 126, as Shakespeare moves from the Spenserian model of the sonnet as lyric and sustained metaphor to the Sidneian more dramatic model. It is no accident, I think, that the thick allusions to art and poetry quoted and referred to above occur in sonnets before this. From 127 on, Shakespeare returns to his instinctive vocation as playwright, conceiving characters (whether fictional or biographically based is indifferent to the poems) in plausible, complex situations, albeit ones which are implied rather than fully rehearsed. The author as lyric voice now becomes one among several characters each of whom, in the face of an explosive amatory triangle, feels a range of appropriate emotions such as, anger, envy, lust, bitter jealousy, shame, self-loathing and more nobly, self-abasing and uncomplaining forgiveness. The writer is freer now to explore love itself as an emotional state, which may be a form of emotional dependency and helplessness, or can be seen as ignobly comic when intellectual distance is maintained (130), depending on an implied context of interrelationship. All such feelings are stimulated and defined situationally in quasi-theatrical “scenes” which present in conflict constructed characters, a “dark lady”, a “young man” and a “rival poet”—and the hapless poet himself. In this fictional scenario, it seems initially valid to look for real-life equivalents—*except* that if we assume a more dramatic intention, there need not be real people at all but instead *personae*. The figures could just as well be “named” Cleopatra, Adonis and Cassio. After all, Shakespeare did, with some satirical intent, include sonnets in some of his plays, such as *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (in which the pedagogical is to the fore, where love is first learned in a woman’s eye but thereafter turned into rhetoric), *As You Like It*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, where the contexts in the two former cases show them as clearly embedded in fictions and open to ridicule. Or for that matter, the fabled but unspecified names may be Astrophil and Stella, if Shakespeare partly found the creative resource in Sidney for turning the lyric into drama, using dramatic monologues delivered with the immediacy of a speaking voice and a thinking mind in conversation with an implied other, or in one-sided epistolary communication representing anguish of love, enduring dynamic and changeable feelings. In Sonnets 127–152, instead of finding a poet’s *persona* addressing his anonymous reader or a character-as-reader as in 1-126, we have something more like a crowded *dramatis personae* enacting a play whose imputed narrative lies in the gaps between sonnets.

Among all the conflicting interpretations of the Sonnets, there is common agreement at least on the proposition that 153 and 154 stand aside from the rest. Their mode is allegorical and subjects mythological, the “I” being a victim of a mischievous Cupid, as the lovers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* are at the mercy of Puck. As A. D. Cousins points out, 153–154 “evoke Cupid, Venus and Diana in order to imply that although the fire of sexual desire can be temporarily quenched it cannot be conquered” (Cousins, 2011, p. 140), or, I would add, it cannot be tamed or controlled by a sonnet. This in turn leads to the maddening compulsiveness of the enterprise for the writer, continually returning to the “love-kindling fire” to try yet again to contain its power and complexity. The terrain here looks more like that in *Venus and Adonis*, and if I am right in a surmise advanced in another place, the Sonnets may have all been written around the same time as Shakespeare was forced by the plague which closed the theatres in 1592–1594 to make a “vow to take advantage of all idle hours” by writing romance (White, 2014, pp. 53–66). Sidney, uses a similar phrase when, confined to his sister’s stately home, he composed “this idle work”, the *Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* and for both writers “idle” need not mean written in ‘spare time’ but in enforced unproductivity. Shakespeare’s description to his patron of *Venus and Adonis* fits a clutch of Sonnets just as well and draws on their characteristic imagery, “I shall be sorry it had so noble a god-father, and never after ear [sic] so barren a land, for fear it yield me still so bad a harvest”. These two intriguing and comparatively naïve little poems have the function of an allegorical couplet concluding the collection in epigrammatic fashion, offering some more evidence of how the writer wishes the sonnets as a whole to be received, in this case ruefully, as ineffectual remedies to cure love, by distancing and generalizing personal feelings in the cool water (repeated in both 153 and 154), of an apollonian medium of measured poetry.

It seems that no matter how hard the writer tries to attune his readers to read his sonnets in a certain way, they retain an obdurately perverse capacity to invite readings which do otherwise, either literalizing the metaphorical, realizing the fictional, or not seeing the primary subject at all.

Again we think of the innocent spectator speculating irrelevantly about the “backstory” of figures inscribed on Keats’s urn, instead of heeding the Urn’s own cautionary lesson that “beauty is truth, truth beauty, That is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”. It may indeed be all we need to know to read a Shakespearean sonnet. However, whether for right reasons or wrong, their intended capacity to endure through time has persisted. Influential teachers are first astute learners, and in his autodidactic Sonnets we find Shakespeare to be both.

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Notes

1. I have benefited also from the editorial and critical work in other recent editions, such as Booth (1977), Ingram and Redpath (1978), Kerrigan (1986), Burrow (2002). Also consulted are the essays in Schoenfeldt (2007), Callaghan (2007) and Schoenfeldt (2010).
2. For some thoughts about Holofernes as teacher, see Winson, 1997.
3. Also see the revisionist account by May (1980).
4. Kerrigan in his Introduction to the New Penguin text (above) analyses at length the multiple paradoxes of time in the Sonnets.

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