

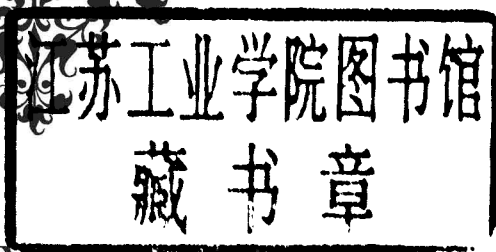
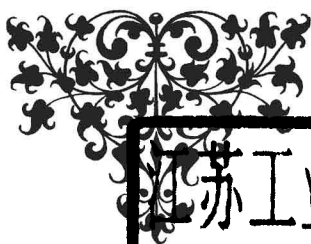
HELEN VENDLER

THE ART OF
SHAKESPEARE'S
SONNETS





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HELEN VENDLER

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am sincerely grateful to those who have preceded me in writing about the *Sonnets*. Though I mention only recent scholars in my Introduction, I am of course also indebted to all those, from the eighteenth century onward, who have reflected on these poems. My understanding of individual sonnets has been helped over the years by the editions and commentaries and books and articles and translations I have absorbed. The sheer volume of comment on Shakespeare precludes my footnoting work by others on individual sonnets, but I regard my own writing as part of a long collaborative effort to take the measure of Shakespeare—an effort that shows no sign of waning.

Over the nine years of work on this commentary, I was funded for residence at various places, to all of which I am grateful. To the Rockefeller Foundation for a residency in 1987 at the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, where I began my work on this commentary; to read and annotate the *Sonnets* in that most generous of atmospheres was a distinct happiness. To the National Humanities Center in North Carolina, where for two months the staff assisted me in getting an unwieldy manuscript under computer control, and where the Fellows provided absorbing conversation on many subjects; I thank Robert Connor, Director of the Center, for inviting his Trustees (of whom I was then one) to come for short stays at the Center. To Drue Heinz and the Hawthornden Foundation for a memorable five-week stay at Hawthornden Castle, Edinburgh, Scotland; the poet Daniel Halpern encouraged me to apply, and I owe him gratitude for the company (and solitude) I found there. To the Wilson Center, where (though I was funded for work on Yeats) I also began revisions of the first complete draft of this work; my semester stay was enlivened by the company of James Morris, Director of the Literature and Culture Division. To Magdalene College, Cambridge University, where, as the Parnell Fellow, I spent three months in eloquently beautiful surroundings working on various projects, of which this was one; I thank the Master, Sir John Gurdon, and the Fellows for their hospitality and friendship. And finally, to Harvard University, which granted me sabbatical leave in 1994–95, a leave the more deeply appreciated because it came in the wake of illness.

Though I do not normally show work in progress to others, the long evolution of this commentary led to my giving parts of it as lectures, and to printing four essays deriving from it (see Bibliography). I thank especially Professor Ruth Stevenson and the Department of English at Union College for my time spent there as Lamont Professor; the lecture and workshop on the *Sonnets* that I gave there has appeared in a collection of essays on teaching Shakespeare of which Professor Stevenson is coeditor. When Professor Sylvan Barnet of Tufts University requested a short essay to include in his revised *Sonnets* for the Signet Shakespeare, he caused me to think further about synecdoche; he also has been unstintingly helpful on many other occasions. Professor Russ MacDonald of the University of Rochester solicited an essay from me for his collection *Shakespeare Re-read*. And the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, by inviting me to speak, generated an essay printed in its *Bulletin*. Professor Jonathan Bennett of the Department of Philosophy at Syracuse University evoked another effort, a lecture, given at Syracuse, which later became one of three Messenger Lectures on Shakespeare's *Sonnets* at Cornell University, where my kindly host was the poet A. R. Ammons. The genesis of the commentary came from a 1973 essay on sonnet 129 that I wrote in honor of I. A. Richards, at the invitation of the late Professor Reuben Brower of Harvard University; the delights of thinking about sonnet 129 were such that I found I could not forgo thinking about the other sonnets. I also wish to thank Professor Massimo Bacigalupo of the University of Genoa for sending me a photocopy of Basil Bunting's copy of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (altered under Ezra Pound's direction), and for alerting me to the existence of Bunting's Shakespeare. Two poets—my former colleague at Boston University, George Starbuck, and Howard Moss of *The New Yorker*—by their inspired parodies of the *Sonnets*, helped me see (or see through) the poems with a poet's eye; I am sorry that they did not live to receive my thanks. Professor Emeritus George T. Wright of the University of Minnesota was kind enough to take pleasure in my writing on Shakespeare as he saw it evolve over several years, and gave me much-needed support when my ideas were still sketchy ones. Elsie Duncan-Jones, scholar of Hopkins and Marvell, by her friendship, her love of poetry, and her spirited interest in literary criticism, encouraged me by example.

I owe debts of gratitude to colleagues close to home: to President Neil Rudenstine, who permitted an extra sabbatical term and a reduced teaching load in one semester in order to let this work go forward, and who visited my undergraduate seminar to discuss the *Sonnets* with us; to Professor

Gwynne Evans, editor of the Cambridge Shakespeare, who, in an act of extraordinary generosity, read my manuscript and offered numerous annotations, additions, and corrections from his exemplary knowledge of the texts; errors remaining are mine. The late Professor Hyder Rollins, editor of the *Variorum Sonnets*, left a bequest to the Harvard English Department which helped me to meet research expenses. I warmly thank Margareta Fulton of the Harvard Press, my impeccable editor since 1960, for her long sponsorship of this project; Maria Ascher, my erudite copy-editor, who contributed the anagram-insight noted of sonnet 8; and my former assistant Susan Welby, who resiliently coped with computer conversion and successive manuscripts.

I am grateful to the Getty Foundation for permission to reproduce on my book jacket a Renaissance panel painting incorporating a quotation from Petrarch's *Canzoniere*; the painting is thought to be by Holbein, and was once owned by Prince Henry (the son of James I). The Harvard Library, the Library of Congress, and the Folger Shakespeare Library were places indispensable to me, as they have been to so many others. The Quarto *Sonnets* are reproduced by permission of the Folger Library.

My mother was the first person to introduce me to Shakespeare's sonnets. She quoted them often, and had memorized many of them. Her last pieces of writing (which we found after Alzheimer's disease had robbed her of memory) were fragments of the *Sonnets* which, either from fear of forgetting or as a means of self-reassurance, she had written down on scraps of paper. It is no mean tribute to the *Sonnets* that they, of the hundreds of poems she knew by heart, were the last to fade. I remain grateful to her and to my father (my first teachers), and to the university instructors who enlarged my knowledge of poetry: among the dead, Sister Marie Barry, I. A. Richards, Douglas Bush, Reuben Brower, Northrop Frye, and Rosemond Tuve; among the living, Morton Berman and John Kelleher. Their minds formed mine, and I hear their voices when I read the poems they taught me.

In affection and admiration, I have dedicated this book to Joan Levine. We met in 1960 as young mothers at Cornell, and we were colleagues for many years in the Department of English at Boston University. Evenings of talk and laughter we have spent together are now so many as to be innumerable; because many of our conversations were about the *Sonnets*, I feel her presence throughout this commentary.

Finally, I must thank Shakespeare himself, whose poems have kept me company for so many decades. His envoi to the young man of the *Sonnets* seems strangely applicable to himself:

Acknowledgments

[Thou] hast by waning grown, and therein show'st
Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self grow'st.

The culture and rhetorical practice that gave rise to the Renaissance sonnet have almost disappeared, yet the intense lyric energy stored in Shakespeare's poems, made visible I hope in this Commentary, gives me confidence that the *Sonnets* will remain intelligible, moving, and beautiful to contemporary and future readers.

CONVENTIONS OF REFERENCE

I HAVE reprinted both the 1609 Quarto *Sonnets* and a modernized version of my own. All editors repunctuate according to their own understanding of the connection among the lines and quatrains of a given sonnet. While considering, and often adopting, the choices made by such editors as Booth and Evans, I have finally followed my own best understanding of the articulation of a sonnet in modernizing its punctuation. The emendations in my modernized sonnets are chosen from emendations already proposed by others. In each dubious case, my comments explain my choice among available emendations. Because some of Shakespeare's linguistic play depends on Quarto spelling, I specify whenever an interpretive remark requires reference to the Quarto. Otherwise, it can be assumed that whatever I say in the Commentary is as true of the Quarto as of the modern text.

In the comment on each sonnet, I aim to disclose some of the sonnet's significant features—imaginative, structural, semantic, syntactic, phonemic, graphic—and to point out their cooperation in a mimetic aesthetic result. That is, I assume that the features of these poems are designed to cooperate with, reinforce, meaningfully contradict, and play with one another. I also assume that such interplay has a psychologically mimetic end (to enact, by linguistic means, moves engaged in by the human heart and mind). I assume, too, that all of this play and enacting would be of no use unless the result were aesthetic novelty with respect to lyric tradition—by which I mean that something striking, memorable, beautiful, disturbing, surprising, etc. has been created.

Though many of the *Sonnets* play (often in blasphemous or subversive ways) with ideas central to their culture, I assume that a poem is not an essay, and that its paraphrasable propositional content is merely the jumping-off place for its real work. As I say in my Introduction, I do not regard as literary criticism any set of remarks about a poem which would be equally true of its paraphrasable propositional content. The poetics from which Shakespeare's sonnets issue is not the only poetics from which poems can be constructed, but the Aristotelian conventions about the unity of the literary work seem to apply particularly well to a form so tightly structured as the Shakespearean sonnet. However, there are ways

in which most of the sonnets are self-contradicting, as I will say below; and the sequence itself, with its two main subsequences and its several subsubsequences, is a powerful dispersive structure. Nonetheless, it would be absurd to believe that Shakespeare, the most hyperconscious of writers, was inscribing lines and words in a given sonnet more or less at random. Since another set of words would have done equally well to transmit the propositional or paraphrasable content of the poem, content by itself (as it is usually defined) cannot possibly be the guide at work in determining the author's choice of words and syntactic features. If at first I seem excessive in finding orders and structurings, I hope readers will become convinced of the existence of such structurings as they read further in the Commentary.

My comments vary in length. Some amount to small essays on the sonnet in question (a temptation not to be resisted in the case of the most complex poems, such as 73, 116, and 129). Others are brief sketches of linguistic features that would need to be accounted for in any critical examination of the sonnet. In the past, I have often wished, as I was reading a poem, that I could know what another reader had noticed in it; and I leave a record here of what one person has remarked so that others can compare their own noticings with mine. In such a way, we may advance our understanding of Shakespeare's procedures as a working poet—that is, as a master of aesthetic strategy. In no case does my commentary exhaust any given sonnet. These are sketches, not completions. And yet, since the sonnets are still the least investigated, aesthetically speaking, of Shakespeare's works, there is room for a first sketch of the salient stylistic self-presentation of each of these poems.

I have not followed a single expository scheme for each sonnet. For variety's sake, I have taken up different aesthetic problems at different times; and I have deliberately changed topics for the first twenty sonnets, so that anyone reading straight on would find many of Shakespeare's concerns raised early. After that, I have let each sonnet dictate what seemed most essential to discuss. I cannot pretend to understand all the sonnets equally well; some still elude me (and my instinct in such cases is to think I have not found the spring that will open the box, rather than to judge that Shakespeare had nothing interesting in mind).

At the end of each sonnet-commentary, I have consistently pointed out what I call (for want of a better name) the Couplet Tie—the words appearing in the body of the sonnet (ll. 1–12) which are repeated in the couplet (ll. 13–14). By “words” I really mean “a word and its variants”; for example, in this context, *live*, *lives*, and *outlive* count as the same “word.” Shakespeare expended real effort in creating verbal connections between

the body of a sonnet and its couplet, and the words he chose to reiterate in this way are almost always thematically highly significant ones. (It is this repetition which has caused some readers—who seem to read only for theme—to assert that the couplets are superfluous; but see my comments on the problem of the Shakespearean couplet in the Introduction.) After giving the root version of each word of the Couplet Tie, I print, in brackets, the variants in which it appears: *live* [*outlive*] [*-s*]. If the root word itself does *not* appear in the poem, I print it in brackets: if, for instance, “being” and “been” were the Couplet Tie, I would print [*be*] [*-ing*] [*been*]. After each Couplet Tie “word,” I print in parentheses the line numbers in which it appears.

Often, Shakespeare used a more complex form of repetition than the Couplet Tie. He frequently firmly connected the four units of his sonnet—three quatrains and a couplet (Q₁, Q₂, Q₃, and C, in my abbreviated form of reference)—by repeating in each of these units a single “word” (as defined above). That single “word” appears (at least) four times in the sonnet, (at least) once in each part. In sonnet 7, for instance, Q₁ contains the word *looks*, Q₂ the word *looks* again, Q₃ the word *look*, and C the word *unlooked-on*. I call the root word that is so used—in this case, the root word *look*—a KEY WORD, and register it at the end of my commentary, preceding the Couplet Tie (which of course contains it). It is easy for an author writing a sonnet to use a given word in Q₁, and still fairly easy in Q₂; but as the vortex of meaning and development tightens, Q₃ puts a greater demand on ingenuity to insert the word; and C—with only two lines to work within instead of four, and with closure necessary—is the hardest of all.

Sometimes Shakespeare plays games with his KEY WORD. In sonnet 55 (*Not marble nor the gilded monuments*), we find *outlive* in Q₁, *living* in Q₂, and *live* in C. Though we began by thinking (as we read the octave and couplet) that we might be about to find the fourth use that would make *live* a KEY WORD, we are momentarily “disappointed” as we look back on Q₃ and find no mention of anything “living” or “outliving” anything else:

’Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.

It is only on a second reading that we notice, with distinct amusement, the “tucked-away” KEY WORD *live* in *oblivious*, making the pattern phoneti-

cally (if not graphically) complete in all four units of the poem. There are other such instances (e.g., 106, where instead of *praise* in a fourth appearance, for instance, we find *press*). The most complex such game occurs in 105, where the key word *one* appears (sometimes in phonemic, sometimes in graphic, form) *twice* in each of the four units. Without a sense of Shakespeare's wish to put the KEY WORD into each of the three quatrains and the couplet, one misses the ingenuity of *oblivious* in 55 and of *expressed* in 106, and one does not see the reason for their location in their respective poems.

Once a potential KEY WORD has been spotted in three of the members of a given sonnet, one feels it "ought" to appear in the fourth. When it doesn't, one suspects that the expected word has been designedly suppressed in the part where it is missing. I register here, in addition to any KEY WORD, the existence (when it occurs) of a DEFECTIVE KEY WORD, because I think we are meant to notice the *absence* of the expected word; it is, I find, almost always thematically relevant that the word is "suppressed" in the quatrain or couplet where we (alerted by its appearance in each of the other three units of the poem) have supposed it would appear. See Appendixes 1 and 2, on KEY WORDS and DEFECTIVE KEY WORDS.

Throughout, I have italicized phrases from the *Sonnets* in order to avoid a page littered with quotation marks. Any word here italicized comes directly from the sonnet in question. I have occasionally, for syntactic coherence, rearranged the words of a phrase: discussing the line *O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem* (sonnet 54), I might say, "The speaker says that *beauty seem[s] beauteous* when accompanied by truth." The convention of italicizing is meant to indicate that these words actually occur in the poem, even if not in this order, whereas in my sentence the word "accompanied" does not form part of the poem. Usually, however, I keep the cited words in the order in which they appear in the sonnet. On the occasions when I wish to summarize quickly the plot of a sonnet, or quote a string of connected phrases, I have omitted the usual ellipses signifying omission and the virgules signifying line-breaks. Of 147, for instance, I might write, "The speaker says, in rapid succession, *My love is as a fever, reason hath left me, past cure I am.*" This choice, too, is made to avoid excess punctuational distraction.

Sometimes, when I wish to make a point about a single word and that word alone, I enclose the relevant line of the sonnet in quotation marks and italicize only the word which is the object of attention. I might say, "In writing 'But thy *eternal* summer shall not fade,' Shakespeare attaches

to an innately demarcated concept—a season (summer)—a word (*eternal*) cognitively inapplicable to it.” In this way, I sequester the word *eternal* from the rest of its line, in order to make a point about it. When I wish to indicate how Shakespeare might alternatively have written a given line (though he did not), I use italics within brackets: [*But thy delightful summer shall not wane*].

In many cases in the Commentary, I have resorted to a diagram of some feature of a sonnet so that it can be grasped at a glance. These patterns can be phonetic (see 126), syntactic (129), relational (144), or conceptual (43)—but they always have ideational import, on which the specific commentary usually remarks. I know that diagrams are offensive to some readers, who feel that algebra is being substituted for explanatory language; but the density of Shakespeare’s sonnet-structure is often so dense that it can be best untangled through giving a separate diagram for each subordinate structure. (One structure—say, a logical one—may divide up the sonnet in three parts: eight lines for a thesis, four lines for an antithesis, two lines for a synthesis. A second structure visible in the same sonnet—say, a pronominal one—may divide up the sonnet in two parts: six lines of reflection, eight lines of direct address. Yet a third structure in the same sonnet—say, a change from religious to secular diction—may divide up the sonnet into two entirely different parts: twelve lines of the religious, two lines of the secular. Each of these structures may need a separate map to demonstrate its own inner complexity.) Irritated readers can skip my schemes, and simply read the Commentary without them. But the shorthand of a scheme has often been useful to me, and I include diagrams for those to whom they appeal. In diagrams, when I want to refer to *line numbers*, I place them in parentheses: (4–6) means “lines 4 through 6 of the sonnet.” When I want to sum up the *number of lines* devoted to a certain topic, in order to show its proportional space in the sonnet, I attach in the diagram the number unbracketed, placing it beside the portion of the diagram to which it refers.

Diagrams sometimes entail abbreviations. I use, as I have said above, the abbreviations Q₁, Q₂, Q₃, and C for the four units of each sonnet; the abbreviation Quarto for the 1609 *Sonnets*; and occasionally the abbreviations YM for the young man of the poems, and S for the speaker of the poems. I usually refer to the person uttering the sonnet as “the speaker,” but when he represents himself in the poem as a poet, I sometimes call him “the poet.” When I refer to “Shakespeare,” I mean the author who invented the text spoken by the fictive speaker, and who structured and ornamented that text for his own aesthetic ends. “Shakespeare” stands al-

ways in an ironic relation to the fictive speaker, since the written poem exists on a plane other than the temporal “now” of the imagined speaker’s moment.

In printing compound words—e.g., *myself*—I have used sometimes the two-word form *my self*, sometimes the compound one, as the sense of the sonnet seems to require. *My self* is the separable self objectified; *myself* can substitute for “I” or “me.”

I use the acute accent for stress, the grave accent to show an *e* that is pronounced. And I have used boldface to emphasize one portion of an italicized word.

Biblical quotations are taken from the Geneva Bible, since the Authorized Version was published after the *Sonnets* appeared.



And I'll be sworn upon't that he loves her;
For here's a paper written in his hand,
A halting sonnet of his own pure brain.

—William Shakespeare, *Much
Ado about Nothing*, V, iv, 85–87

There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it.

—William Shakespeare,
Hamlet, IV, vii, 114–115

Through torrid entrances, past icy poles
A hand moves on the page!
Sheets that mock lust and thorns that scribble hate
Are lifted from torn flesh with human rue.

—Hart Crane, “To Shakespeare”

I neer found so many beauties in the sonnets—they seem to be
full of fine things said unintentionally—in the intensity of work-
ing out conceits.

—John Keats to J. H. Reynolds,
22 November 1817

Our talking about poetry is a part of, an extension of, our experi-
ence of it, and as a good deal of thinking has gone to the making
of poetry, so a good deal may well go to the study of it.

—T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and
the Use of Criticism*

When Shakespeare wrote, “Two loves I have,” reader, he was
not kidding.

—John Berryman,
The Freedom of the Poet



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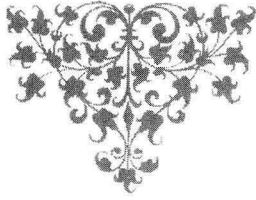
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INTRODUCTION

There are indeed a sort of underlying auxiliars to the difficulty of work, call'd Commentators and Critics, who wou'd frighten many people by their number and bulk, and perplex our progress under pretense of fortifying their author.

—Alexander Pope to Joseph Addison, 1714

In fact, every poem has the right to ask for a new poetics. This is created only once to express the contents, also given only once, of a poem.

—Anna Swir, quoted by Czeslaw Milosz
in his introduction to *Talking to My Body*,
by Anna Swir

Writing on the Sonnets

Before I begin to describe my own intentions in commenting on Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, I must say a few prefatory words. I intend this work for those who already know the *Sonnets*, or who have beside them the sort of lexical annotation found in the current editions (for example, those of Booth, Kerrigan, or Evans). A brief account of the reception history of the *Sonnets* can be found in these editions, as well as a more comprehensive bibliography than I can offer here. The older reception history in Hyder Rollins' *Variorum Sonnets* is still the most complete—and the most sobering to anyone hazarding a new addition to that history. Perhaps total immersion in the *Sonnets*—that is to say, in Shakespeare's mind—is a mildly deranging experience to anyone, and I cannot hope, I suppose, to escape the obsessive features characterizing Shakespearean sonnet criticism.

How are the *Sonnets* being written about nowadays? And why should I add another book to those already available? I want to do so because I admire the *Sonnets*, and wish to defend the high value I put on them, since they are being written about these days with considerable jaundice.¹ The spheres from which most of the current criticisms are generated are social and psychological ones. Contemporary emphasis on the participation of literature in a social matrix balks at acknowledging how lyric, though it may *refer to* the social, remains the genre that directs its *mimesis* toward