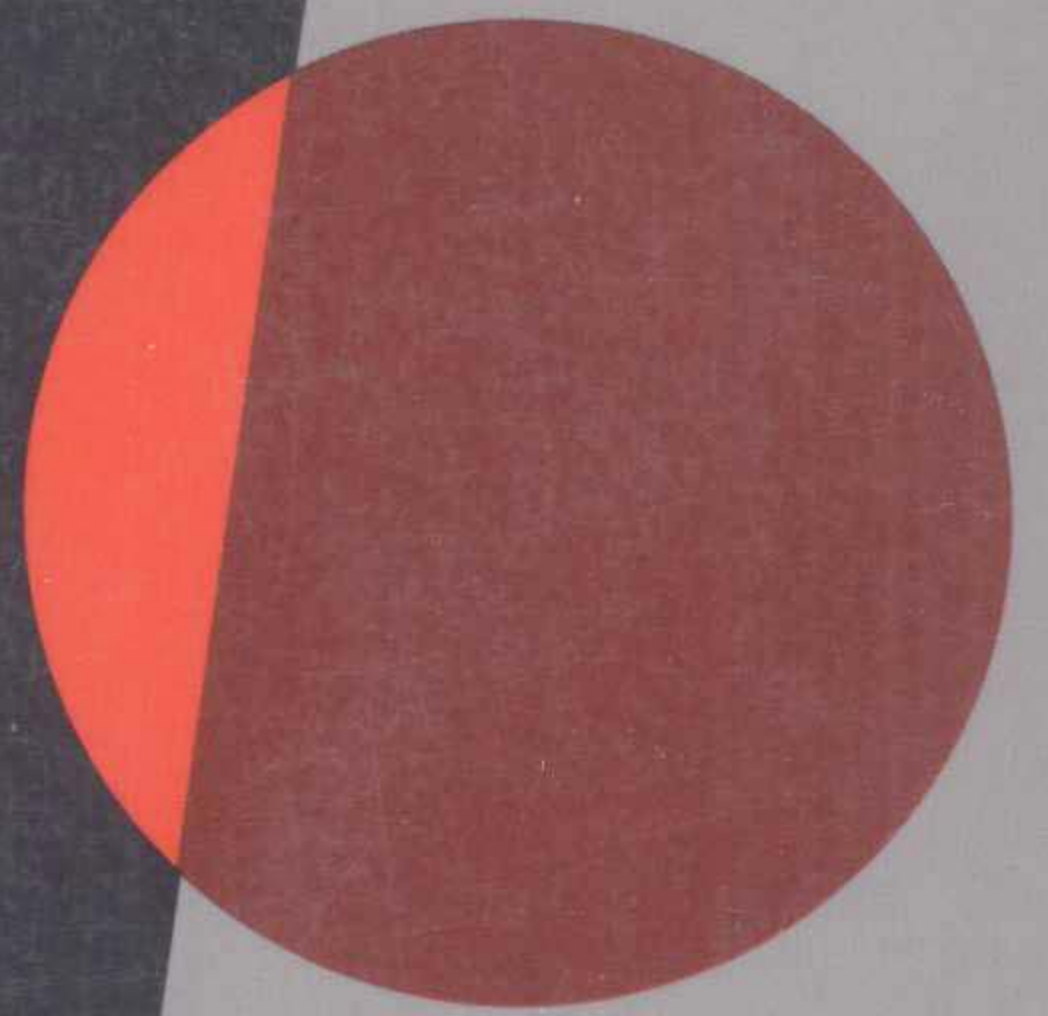


CONTINGENCIES OF VALUE

Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory



Barbara Herrnstein Smith

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Alternative Perspectives
for Critical Theory

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Contingencies of Value

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Fixed Marks and Variable Constancies: A Parable of Value

Evaluating Shakespeare's Sonnets

My text is a passage from the first scene of *King Lear*. The kings of Burgundy and France, for some time rivals in the courtship of Cordelia, are confronted by her abrupt disinheritance. Burgundy, with embarrassed politeness, will decline the offer of her now dowerless hand. The king of France (a better man) will seize it nonetheless, observing:

Love's not love
When it is mingled with regards that stand
Aloof from the entire point . . .

My topic is evaluation: and what I shall suggest here is that it is not like love—or at least not like love so conceived. For evaluation is, I think, always mingled with regards that stand aloof from the entire point: always compromised, impure, contingent; altering when it alteration finds; bending with the remover to remove; always Time's fool.

Our title here is tricky: "*Evaluating Shakespeare's Sonnets*."¹ No agent: *who's* doing the evaluating? No tense: evaluating *when*? But its form is perhaps proper enough: the agents are innumerable and unspecifiable; the activity is continuous and ongoing; the evaluating of Shakespeare's sonnets has had a past and will have a future. All the evaluatings have been contingent, and all of them will be—which is, I think, as it must and should be. I'll begin by looking at the past.

The sonnets have been the subject of evaluation for more than three and a half centuries and, as such, have exhibited a very mixed, variable, and compromised history. The first evaluatings of them were performed

by the poet, in letting them stand: not merely in his not ripping them up, but in the thousand individual acts of approval that the whole complex act of poetic creation must have entailed: each word and line that was not rejected, that was preferred to another, and thus pronounced *good*—or good enough.

It has been noted that the sonnets themselves exhibit considerable self-evaluation and -devaluation: the topos of modesty—“my pupil pen,” “my slight Muse,” “these poor rude lines”—coexists with large claims of poetic value: such virtue hath his pen, so powerful is his rhyme, that eyes not yet created shall o’er read his lines and, through them Death, to him subscribe. Here we might also note that the poet himself assumes and asks for *biased* readers, readers who will value the poems, he says, “for their love, not their style”; for the poems are sent, he says, “to witness duty, not to show [his] wit”—not as literary achievements, but for what they reflect of his personal feelings. But, we may observe, the feelings that they *do* reflect are not always the sorts of things the biased and implicated reader might wish to know or want to hear: vows of irrational adoration, betrayals of naked resentment, bullying pleas and blackmailing apologies. We do not know how the sonnets were valued and evaluated by their immediate readers—those *thou*’s to whom they were addressed and into whose hands they may have been delivered—though it is an interesting exercise for the modern reader to imagine what it might have felt like to *receive* such embassages as these:

Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire? . . .

Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know’st thy estimate . . .

Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure!
She may detain, but not still keep her treasure . . .

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as Hell, as dark as night.

What *could* the value of the sonnets have been for those original readers? Certainly impure, certainly mingled with regards that stood aloof from the entire point, certainly variable: very different, we might imagine, when the poems were received in the midst of a love affair from when perused or disposed of years later—when *all* the lovers were old, and love had long been cold.

But such evaluations are presumably not part of literary history. As

“works of literature,” the sonnets must be judged insofar as they appeal to their real readers, whom they continue to greet over the shoulders of those *thou*’s to whom they were once addressed. So we move from surmising the vagaries of their private, personal value to the record of their public value and evaluating. But, before we come to their “reputation”—or what Hyder Rollins, in the *Variorum* edition of the sonnets, calls their “vogue”—we should acknowledge an intermediary history of valuing, also variable, also contingent, and notoriously compromised: for example, the simple fact that they were found to be, for whatever motives, ah! *publishable*; worth the printing and presumably, for some purchasers, worth the price; and even, as the thirteen surviving copies of the Quarto attest, for some reasons worth the keeping. Each of these acts—publishing, printing, purchasing, and preserving—is an implicit act of evaluation, though we may think it necessary to distinguish *them*, with their mixed motives, from real literary evaluation, the assessment of intrinsic worth.

The question then becomes whether, and to what extent, the sonnets were found worth the *reading* by their original public audience. We cannot be sure, of course, but, as with any body of poetry, that too must have been a variable matter: for example, the sonnets, individually and as a group, would not have been valued quite the same way by fellow poets as by such readers as might pick them up to pass the time of day.

As we know, there is reason to believe that the Quarto edition was suppressed—possibly by the poet, possibly by others. If so, either way, the suppression was another act of both valuing and devaluing the sonnets: an implicit witness to their having been found, though perhaps good for *something*, still *not* good for something else. Value is impure; evaluation is contingent.

And so it goes. Thirty years later, they were found at least worth the pirating and republishing. Thereafter, especially with Malone’s edition in 1780, we can begin to trace the fortunes of the sonnets in the hands of the literary establishment—the editors and anthologists, the critics and scholars, the professors and students of Eng. Lit., down to our own time and this very moment—and, with less assurance, their fortunes in the hands of those myriad inarticulate nonprofessionals for whom, during more than 350 years, the sonnets have figured in some way: the “reading public,” those who, for whatever reasons, have treasured or dismissed them, bought them as gifts for friends, read them aloud to lovers, quoted them in letters, or tossed them out when cleaning up the attic.

I shall not chronicle in any detail those fortunes—which, as we

know, have been extraordinarily variable and, until fairly recently, fairly dismal. We might recall, however, that the sonnets have been characterized, by men of education and discrimination, as inept, obscure, affected, filled with “labored perplexities and studied deformities,” written in a verse form “incompatible with the English language,” a form given to “drivelling incoherencies and puling, petrifying ravings.” We might recall especially Henry Hallam’s remarking of the sonnets that “it is impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had not written them” and that his assessment or distress was shared, at some point in their lives, with some variations, by Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Hazlitt.

Wish Shakespeare had not written them? Lord, man (we may wish to shout back into that abysm of time), did you really *read* them? Well, presumably Hallam did read them, as did Dr. Johnson, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, and Byron (from each of whom I have been quoting here): but whether any of them read the same poems we are reading is another question. Value alters when it alteration finds. The texts were the same, but it seems clear that, in some sense, the *poems* weren’t. How else can we account for the—to us, astonishing and perverse—evaluations of them by our eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colleagues? or those of John Crowe Ransom and Yvor Winters, in an age not so remote from ours? The taste of the times? Congenital rigidities of mind? Cultivated frigidities of spirit? To be sure; but in so accounting for them, we cannot thereby *discount* them. Those evaluations were not facile, ill-considered, or perfunctory; they were, we sense, straight from the heart and head; we can still feel Coleridge’s shudder and Wordsworth’s disdain and Hallam’s embarrassed exasperation. Their disgust was as true as anything—except, perhaps, true love.

Well, where are we now?—and *who* are we, anyway? We and our absent counterparts—scholars, teachers, critics, and students of the sonnets: it is clear that we are not quite the reading public, those who now encounter the sonnets in anthologies of “great poetry” or who purchase them in cheap editions with ornate typefaces (but no footnotes) or in expensive editions with goldleaf borders (but still no footnotes) and among whom, we know, many of the sonnets are popular . . . but probably the “wrong” ones—or the right ones, but probably “for the wrong reasons.”

Granted *we* are not *them*, it may still be asked where *we* fit in this long fitful history of the sonnets’ evaluations. Can it be that we fit at the *end* of it?—that *now, here*, with our authoritative and annotated texts in our hands and, in our heads, the sonnets not only of Petrarch and Sidney

but also of Keats, Millay, and Berryman, *we*, untrammelled by historical ignorance, intellectual provincialism, or personal eccentricity, are the ones who can finally provide a *just* assessment of the sonnets' *true* value—as *literature*? Or would we not, rather, be Time's fools—or fools of some sort—to think or claim so?

By way of answer, I should like to give an account of another history of the sonnets' value and evaluating: that is, my own, a history that also culminates here, at this time, and culminates with my solemn and sincere declaration that *I cannot* evaluate Shakespeare's sonnets—which is not to say that I believe the sonnets cannot or should not be evaluated. On the contrary, I believe that they should be, must be, and, in fact, are and will be evaluated, continuously, repeatedly, privately, and publicly, by us and by them and by all who follow. My own incapacity in this regard happens to be a somewhat special case, but I think it is an instructive one for the question at issue.

I cannot evaluate Shakespeare's sonnets partly because I know them too well. It may be thought that one's ability to deliver a just assessment of an artwork is enlarged by experience: we look to the expert, the connoisseur, the man or woman of knowledge—deep knowledge of the thing itself, and broad knowledge of the *kind* of thing it is and of others of its kind. But experience not only deepens and broadens us: it also batters, scars, individualizes, and specializes us; experience is a provincialism of its own, separating us from our fellow creatures. To evaluate a work of art is, among other things, to estimate its potential value for others; but while our ability to make that estimation correctly certainly increases in time with all our general and specific knowledge, it also decreases in time as we become less and less *like* anyone else, and thus less able to predict anyone else's responses on the basis of our own.

But that is not the only or even the basic reason why I cannot evaluate Shakespeare's sonnets. The basic reason is that I am too conscious of how radically variable and contingent their value has been, and remains, for me. I shall not give you a narrative of the history of my own engagement with the poems: a history that spans thirty-five years, during fifteen of which I professed them almost without interruption, sometimes every term, and during two years of which I prepared an edition of them. There is no other work or body of literature that I know so well—though there are no doubt other people who know it better; but the sonnets are so strung through my life, and my life has been so strung through them, that there have been times when I believed I had written them myself. I shall not give you a narrative account of their

value for me because the point will be made sufficiently if I indicate its range. And that range is “savage, extreme, rude, cruel,” and “not to trust”—which suggests, by the way, that if poetic value is not like true love, it may be a little bit like true lust.

In any case, it would be only slight hyperbole to say that there is not one of Shakespeare’s sonnets that has not, at some time, been the occasion of the finest and most intense kind of literary experience of which I am capable; and there is also not one among them that has not, at some time, struck me as being awkward, strained, silly, inert, or dead. Some of the sonnets that are now (i.e., this week or the day before yesterday) my favorites, I once (i.e., last week or ten years ago) thought of as obscure, grotesque, or raw; and some that I once saw as transparent, superficial, or perfunctory have subsequently become, for me, thick with meaning, subtle, and profound. But I have, in the very process of demonstrating to a class or friend the subtlety and profundity of a sonnet, been struck in the midst of my own words by how limp and thin it was, or have seen its power suddenly collapse upon the page into bathos or barbarism. A sonnet that I had never assigned to a class and disdained to comment upon will, during a half-casual rereading, suddenly leap from the page and startle me into awe and recognition—often because, since last reading it, I have lived the poem, lived something like its occasion or something like its motive. Most appalling, there are sonnets that I allude to in class or conversation, only to find that they have disappeared, truly *are not there*, and others that I had not “forgotten” but which, at some reading, I realize were never there before.

I have said nothing here of the form, style, logic, figurative language, or structure of the poems. I can’t see them anymore and couldn’t, today, “analyze” a Shakespeare sonnet if my life depended on it: all such matters have, for me, been absorbed or reabsorbed into the art of the whole and my experience of it. And, amusingly enough for a card-carrying anti-intentionalist, I now find myself, both in class and in my private musings on the poems, drawn more and more into thinking about the man himself, wondering what he really felt, and speculating about what really happened: What the devil *were* that unappreciative young man and obsessing mistress really like? and what were they all really *doing* with and to each other?

Sonnet 116 will serve as well as any other to make this a bit more concrete. For a long time, I didn’t much like it at all. As a discriminating young snob, I was predisposed to find the value of any poem inversely proportional to the frequency of its appearance in anthologies. More-

over, I had heard this one read too often at the wedding ceremonies of friends. It became an embarrassment just to glance at its opening lines, an agony to recall the couplet. And, to cap it, a professor whose *opinions* I valued very highly had once demonstrated in class, with great wit and dash, that the sentiments of 116 were as inane as its logic was feeble and its imagery vague.

So it stood until several years ago, when I was immersed in teaching the plays, editing the poems and rereading the critics, and immersed also in my own life and a second marriage—of true minds, of course, or maybe . . . or maybe not. And, at that point, I discovered an altogether different 116. It was not, as I had previously thought, the expression of the poet as Polonius, intoning sentimental *sententiae* on the virtue of remote virtues but, rather, the poet as Troilus or Hamlet or Lear, in a fury of despair, attempting to sustain the existence, by sheer assertion, of something which everything in his own experience denied. So (I might have said then), to be sure, the arguments are frail and the sentiments false and strained: but this is nonetheless a powerful sonnet because, among other things, that very frailty and strain and falseness are expressive of what is strong and true, namely the impulse *not* to know, *not* to acknowledge, not to “admit” what one does know and would wish to be otherwise.

A lovely reading of the poem, I think . . . when I believe it. And it does have the virtue of rescuing, for me, the value of one sonnet: which is to say, of letting me have, as something good, what would otherwise be something bad—which, in the total economy of the universe, must be reckoned as a profit. But, as for evaluating the sonnet: that I cannot do. Not only does its value, for me, depend upon which of two mutually incompatible interpretations I give it (and I still can give it either) but I’m also aware of the fact that I sometimes enjoy it even when I’m giving it the weak interpretation, and sometimes enjoy elements of it when I’m barely giving it any interpretation at all. For example, it’s sometimes nice just to experience again the semi-abstract symmetries of its syntax and sound patterns, those boldly balanced mouth-filling clauses: *Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds / Or bends with the remover to remove . . .* a pleasure to say. Or again, like Professor Booth, I sometimes enjoy “bombast,” and can take pleasure in the sheer excesses of the poem, as such.² Experienced against a daily background of scrupulously qualified professional precision, in which one has heard one’s colleagues or oneself saying, often enough, things like: “Well, it seems to me that, in a sense, it might be possible, under certain circumstances, for

some forms of what is commonly referred to as 'love' to have a relatively lengthy duration . . . ,'' it's really *nice* to hear a good, strong, unqualified absolute or two:

O no, it is an *ever* fixèd mark
That looks on tempests and is *never* shaken . . .
Love alters not . . .
But bears it out even to the edge of *doom*.

It's just an element of the poem, but it's there among the others; and sometimes it just hits the spot. But, of course, nothing hits the spot *all* the time, because the spot is always different.

Now, before I draw the moral that justifies my imposing on you this autobiographical excursion, I should grant the possibility that I am unusually, atypically, even pathologically, unstable in my responses. But I don't want to grant it, and don't really believe it. To be sure, the spectrum of value I've outlined here is mightily "acquainted with shifting change" ("as is false women's fashion," saith the poet); I would maintain, however, that its ranges and extremes are not atypical but, on the contrary, precisely representative. What is peculiar in my relation to the sonnets is not a matter of my temperament but of my profession, one consequence of which is that I have had both the reason and the occasion to read and deal with the same work of literature many times over, in many moods, in many circumstances, over a long span of years—during which time many things (or a sufficient number of them) have happened to me. Aside from professors, poets, and other special types (such as actors and directors), most people, taken one by one, simply do not experience literary works that way; and even professors and poets, because they are mortal, can't experience a great many of them that way.

But out of this peculiarity emerges a kind of universality: for what I have been describing here, a bit melodramatically perhaps, would, I think, be the shape of the experience of anyone who had the reason and occasion to do the same. Moreover, and more pertinently, I think it is also the shape of the entire culture's experience of the sonnets' value, over the entire history of their existence: past, present, and future. In other words, I should like to claim that the two histories I have briefly chronicled here are mirrors and containers of each other: that while the history of the sonnets' value must include, as one brief chapter, the history of their value for me, my personal history is also a picture and parable of the total history of the sonnets' value for all their readers, ever.