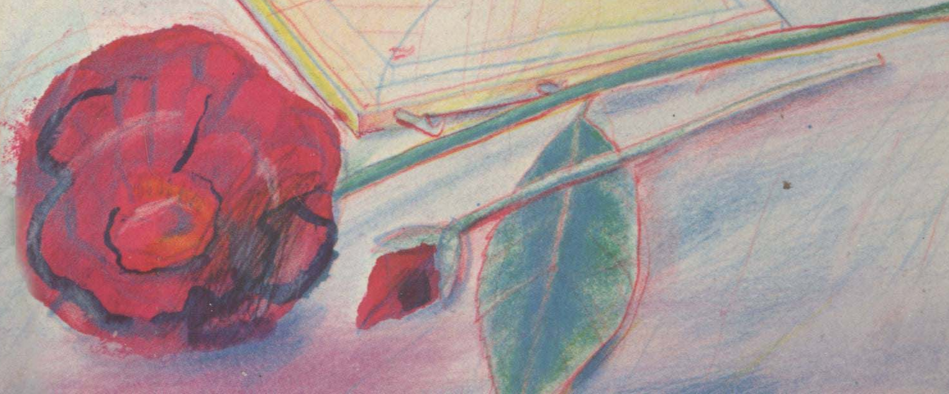
The Reader and Shakespeare's Young Man Sonnets

Gerald Hammond



The Reader and Shakespeare's Young Man Sonnets

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To my mother

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Textual note

The text of the sonnets is in a fairly respectable condition and I have preferred, wherever it makes sense, to retain the Quarto reading, even if proposed emendations sometimes make better sense. For the punctuation I have generally followed the example of Stephen Booth's edition. Any major deviation from the quarto or from Booth is signalled in the notes.

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Introduction: 'The Well-Wishing Adventurer'

In 1946 L. C. Knights began a discussion of Shakespeare's Sonnets by questioning why there should have been 'so little genuine criticism in the terrifying number of books and essays on the subject'. Part of the answer, he felt, lay in 'the superior attractiveness of gossip', but more important was the prevalence of two widespread unconscious assumptions, that the sonnets form a continuous and ordered collection and that they are, in the words of Benson, the publisher of the 1640 edition, 'serene, clear and elegantly plain'.[1]

Even before Knights' essay the second assumption needed to be qualified by reference to the analyses of sonnet complexities by William Empson and Arthur Mizener; and since 1946 that work has been continued by Winifred Nowottny, Rosalie Colie, and most importantly Stephen Booth.[2] Booth's book, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets*, and his recent edition of the sonnets, complete with analytical commentary, have made it impossible for any critic now to assume that a Shakespearean sonnet is anything but a highly complex structure of language and ideas, and my debt to his work is apparent on every page of this book. Most writing on the sonnets is still gossip, but genuine criticism is no longer the rare thing it was.

As for Knights' first assumption, I am not certain that it has ever been widely held. When Keats wrote to Reynolds that the sonnets 'seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally – in the intensity of working out conceits' he voiced what was, and despite modern criticism, remains, a common enough feeling, that the sonnets individually and as a collection lack coherence; and the critical consensus since the early nineteenth century has ascribed to the collection very different degrees of inspiration. That this is so is supported both by the venerable but still lively tradition, begun by Benson, of reordering the sonnets, and by the general state of appreciation of the collection which prizes sonnets like 18, 55, 94, 116, 129, and 146, and neglects the rest. Something of this common feeling is reflected in Knights' essay. Although he is disposed to write of the sonnets as if they present a developing thesis – at one point he says that 'in the Sonnets Shakespeare is

working out a morality based on his own finest perceptions and deepest impulses' – he still finds it necessary to assert several times that they in no way constitute an ordered collection; for instance, 'they vary from the most trivial of occasional verses to poems in which a whole range of important emotions is involved'.[3] This book is written in opposition to that last statement, at least in so far as it applies to the first 126 sonnets. While the final 28 sonnets in the collection contain the unevenness which Knights describes, there is in the sonnets addressed to the young man an organised, coherent, and developing sequence of poems.[4]

Since it is one of my purposes to argue that the order of the sonnets in Thorpe's Quarto is substantially right, I think it appropriate to make use of the concluding words of Thorpe's dedication for the title of my introduction. 'The Well-Wishing Adventurer in Setting Forth' is most probably Thorpe's self-congratulation at having adventured the money for the volume and having had it published ('set forth'): but the sonnets encourage our most flexible responses to language and it is not unfitting to turn Thorpe's self-congratulation into congratulation of ourselves as readers, with the well-wishing adventurer becoming, to give an equivalent phrase, the good-natured reader, and his 'setting forth' the beginning of his journey through the sequence. The journey gives me my basic metaphor – better than the generic term 'narrative' because it involves progress and a goal without its having a story's watertight unity. That there is a narrative is not difficult to demonstrate: the sequence begins with friendship between a devoted poet and a self-centred young man, develops into a series of betrayals by the young man, with the poet's attempts to live with such treatment, and ends with the poet's own betrayal of the young man and consequent independence from him. But what makes the sequence truly sequential is not this narrative – after all, one betrayal by the young man is very like another – but the reader's developing experience of the nature of love poetry.

In tracing this developing experience I generally follow the numbered order of the sonnets. My first three chapters take most of their examples from the early sonnets and use them to explore some of Shakespeare's major poetic strategies: chapter 1 discusses the ways in which sonnets simultaneously require separate and often irreconcilable responses from the reader; chapter 2 treats obtrusive metaphoric structures in sonnets and groups of sonnets; and chapter 3 shows the rise of the sardonic tone in the sequence. In the remaining chapters I discuss what I take to be the sequence's major narrative concerns, with the aim of demonstrating its developing poetic complexity. The reader learns how to read sonnets, and what to read into them; and because the final stage of his journey, Sonnets 97–126, demands a

significantly greater awareness from him of the subtleties of technique and meaning in Shakespeare's love poetry I devote my last six chapters to these final thirty sonnets.

Throughout the book I make three assumptions which need the reader's assent. Two of them I have already indicated, that the Quarto order is substantially right and that all the sonnets have the same young man as their subject. The first is made in the teeth of generations of attempted reorderings, but with the double security that no one of them has gained any kind of general acceptance, and that Thorpe's order contains enough defensible groupings to make a case for his having printed them as he found them. For the second, to assume that the subject is the same throughout is really only to agree that Shakespeare's sonnets share this characteristic with the majority of Elizabethan sonnet sequences.

My third assumption is implicit in the book's title, that it is possible to accept the existence of a character whom I can call 'the reader' and whose responses I can discuss and evaluate with some objectivity. In doing this my purpose is to argue for a critical approach to the sonnets in particular, and Renaissance poetry in general, which is not circumscribed by the ideas and ideologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is not to propose that the poetry ought to be approached as if we had an entirely innocent eye – as Gombrich has shown us, there can be no such thing anyway – but that we should take care not to have either our common sense or our moral responses subordinated to what we have been told are the Renaissance notions and values of such and such a thing. It is, after all, a peculiar literary belief of this century that we need to interpret a work of literature by way of the opinions of the age in which it was written, and it ignores our own feelings about the criticism of previous centuries, where the critical opinions we value most – Johnson on Shakespeare, or Blake and Shelley on Milton – are precisely those which insist on applying contemporary values and responses to the literature of the past.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 15 will help me illustrate what I mean:

When I consider everything that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment,
That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows
4 Whereon the stars in secret influence comment.
When I perceive that men as plants increase,
Cheered and checked ev'n by the selfsame sky,
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
8 And wear their brave state out of memory.
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay

Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,
Where wasteful time debateth with decay
12 To change your day of youth to sullied night.
And all in war with time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

Within the sequence's opening group this sonnet marks an important change in the relationship between the poet and the young man: the first fourteen sonnets' insistence that procreation is the means by which the young man may gain immortality now gives way to a different suggestion – the major immortalising claim of the sequence – that the poet can give his subject eternal life through his poetry. By the end of this sonnet, though, the reader is still not aware that the change has happened – it needs the first quatrain of the next sonnet to make clear what was being proposed by the idea of engrafting in the couplet:

But wherefore do not you a mightier way
Make war upon this bloody tyrant time?
And fortify yourself in your decay
With means more blessed than my barren rhyme?

This kind of retrospective action of one sonnet upon another is one of the strongest arguments for the sequence's coherence; but what I want to emphasise here is that this major change of theme is entirely accessible to a modern reader who has very little experience of reading Renaissance poetry. This may seem an obvious thing to say, but it is important because a grasp of the basic intent of the sonnet is the reader's primary need – with it he is encouraged to make the discriminations and judgements which allow him to follow the twists of a sonnet's argument; without it he is lost. And my belief is that the modern, non-expert reader is seldom as precariously positioned to understand a Shakespearean sonnet as the commentators' comments might lead us to believe.

To take a small example from this sonnet, consider the way Ingram and Redpath explain the word "holds" in line 2 in their edition: '"stays", as in "Hold still!" to a horse'.[5] The usefulness of this comment is that it makes the modern reader see that his instinct to take "holds in" as the verb (= 'contains') needs to be set against a more abstract alternative, where perfection is a state in which everything for one moment rests: but because they give only this gloss Ingram and Redpath actually diminish the reader's understanding of the sonnet, for by making him mistrust his own instinct to read the verb as "holds in" they have already begun to obscure the primary

experience of the sonnet, which is for the reader to be caught between the abstract and the concrete, veering between the two throughout the fourteen lines.

Before I pursue this point let me attempt further to explore the modern reader's response to the details of Sonnet 15. One word which might give him trouble is "conceit" in line 9, although he will need very little exposure to Renaissance poetry to understand how restricted is the word's modern meaning.[6] Possibly more room for misinterpretation comes in the sonnet's theatre image: it is introduced in line 3, but how far it extends through the sonnet is difficult even for the expert reader to decide. That the world should be a "huge stage" is a persuasive metaphor for this poem because of its presentation of the poet in each quatrain as a looker on: "When I consider . . . When I perceive . . . Sets . . . before my sight." I would expect the non-expert reader to have the instinctive tact to appreciate that "stars" in line 4, despite its proximity to the theatre image, does not have its modern sense of 'stars of stage and screen'; but about "Cheered and checked ev'n by the selfsame sky" it is not easy to know how far the modern reader's instincts can be countered. Ingram and Redpath comment that 'Elizabethan audiences . . . "cheered and checked" as in line 6', but Stephen Booth adds the rider that "cheered" did not yet have 'its modern and special theatrical meaning "to shout applause"' (and neither did "sets", in line 10, have its modern theatrical meaning).[7] And, in the couplet, "engraft" will still have its primarily botanical sense, but again a modern reader will find it difficult to keep out of his mind the plastic surgery connotations of grafting skin; and to ask him to do so is artificially to stop the poem living for him – it becomes not so much a part of his actual experience, but instead an artefact with carefully defined historical parameters.[8]

There are also, it would seem from editorial glosses, a number of things which the non-expert reader will miss; in particular, the force of individual words. For example, it is not difficult to show that "influence" and "comment" in line 4, "brave" in line 8, and "wasteful" in line 11, have all stronger and more emphatic senses than they do today.[9] Editors spell these meanings out, but again I am not convinced that the modern reader is seriously handicapped. The very peculiarity of seeing the words used in what seem to be slightly off-centred ways requires him to make what are, in effect, only semantic adjustments of the kind he is used to making almost every day when new meanings are coined, or when he goes to see Shakespeare at the theatre. I can think of only one linguistic handicap for the non-expert reader of this sonnet, and that is so peripheral that the commentators seem largely to have missed it – namely, the ghost-pun on the word "weed". Sonnet 15 takes up two favourite images from the sequence, the world as a stage and

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men as plants: they come together in line 8, "And wear their brave state out of memory". As Ingram and Redpath note, this line not only completes the second quatrain's description of men growing and dying like plants, it also evokes the image of a faded theatrical costume: 'a decayed player continued to wear the finery (often originally handed over from noblemen's wardrobes) long after it had lost both gloss and fashion'.[10] Or, to put it in the words of Sonnet 2,

> When forty winters shall besiege thy brow
> And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
> Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
> Will be a tottered weed of small worth held.

And for a man to be worn out means, in terms of the men as plants metaphor, that he will be overcome by weeds – as Sonnet 94 has it (and note the echo with Sonnet 15 in the verb "outbraves"):

> The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
> Though to itself it only live and die;
> But if that flower with base infection meet,
> The basest weed outbraves his dignity.
> For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
> Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Line 8 in Sonnet 15 provides something else worthy of comment in addition to the ghost-pun on "weed", and that is the word "memory". Few editors bother to gloss it; and why should they since its meaning in the sonnet is so obviously the same as in its modern usage? That, at least, would be the reaction of the non-expert reader, but the Renaissance specialist, brought up these days on the writings of Frances Yates, knows that although the word's meaning may not have changed, its connotations are very different. Almost the perfect specialist essay on a Renaissance poem takes this sonnet for its subject: Raymond B. Waddington's 'Shakespeare's Sonnet 15 and the Art of Memory' is a *tour de force* which sees the poem as very nearly a compendium of the accumulated culture of the previous eighteen hundred years.[11] Its declared purpose is to challenge the 'largely linguistic method' of reading a sonnet which Stephen Booth had developed in *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* and to illustrate 'the way in which certain kinds of reflective lyrics should be read'.[12]

Against my admiration for Waddington's essay as a piece of scholarly criticism I have to set my concern that the way in which he expects this

Shakespearean sonnet to be read will make it inaccessible to all but a handful of readers. Beginning with two Petrarchan sonnets for contrast and poems by Lord Vaux and Surrey for comparison he then goes on to consider the Renaissance's inherited tradition of Prudence, which means Cicero's *De inventione*, Titian's *The Allegory of Prudence* (via Panofsky), Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine's *Confessions* and *De doctrina christiana* (via Yates), Donne's *Sermons*, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*, Elizabethan 'Memory Theatres', Giordiano Bruno, Robert Fludd's *Ars Memoriae*, Pico della Mirandola, *The Faerie Queene*, Ficino's translation of the *Pimander*, and rhetorical training in the Elizabethan grammar schools. Not everything cited is an indispensable link in the chain, but the effect is to make Sonnet 15's 'meaning' dependent upon the reader's experience and knowledge of the breadth and the intricacies of Renaissance culture – much more, in fact, than any cultured Renaissance man could have been expected to bring to the poem. I shall do Waddington's essay harm if I attempt to summarise his interpretation of the sonnet – the argument needs to be followed stage by stage; but let me note that part of his summary is to say that this sonnet marks the poet's change from a passive state of mere observation to the activity of rational analysis, the latter state being signalled by the increasing abstractness of the sestet.

My belief – and it informs every chapter of this book – is that the great number of non-expert readers, so long as they are careful and engaged readers, may find a way of reading a reflective lyric which is as subtle and coherent as that of a scholar of Renaissance ideas, without their having to relate the poem to the entire culture within which it was written. In the case of Sonnet 15 the increasing abstractness which Waddington points out provides a useful example because, as so often in Shakespeare's sequence, the sonnet's initial hold upon the reader must inevitably be bound up with its perplexing juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete. Set alongside words and phrases of clear imaginability are others of studied vagueness: the reader's mind grasps an image, but in the act of holding on to it meets immediately with an expression which loosens its hold. The opening lines present the movement in miniature:

> When I consider everything that grows
> Holds in perfection but a little moment

I have already touched on the concrete/abstract possibilities of "holds"/"holds in", but the reader's adjustments begin as early as "consider" in line 1. The experience of reading a sonnet is, from the first word to the last, a continuous process of forming expectations and anticipations which are

either frustrated or satisfied. With "When I consider", as in the opening line of Milton's sonnet on his blindness, the reader begins to anticipate a sonnet of introspection, but "everything that grows" forces him to readjust those anticipations – the sonnet now seems to fit into a clearly imaginable context, that of the poet contemplating nature: at its most literal, gazing at a flower. But line 2 moves the reader back to the abstract by revealing that "everything that grows" had not been the direct and complete object of the poet's consideration but only the beginning of his description of the content of his introspection – i.e. 'when I consider *how* everything that grows holds in perfection . . .'

My claim is not that the reader makes such readjustments deliberately or even consciously, but that in any serious reading of Sonnet 15 he experiences at a basic level of his responses a process of anticipation–frustration–satisfaction, but with the satisfaction contaminated by the counter-image of the poet actually contemplating nature (rather than himself) which the first line had briefly established. And for the remainder of the sonnet these readjustments continue. In the first quatrain, for instance, in line 2 the image of the container in "holds in" surrounds the unimaginable abstraction of "perfection"; line 3's solid theatre finds itself governed by "stars" in line 4, and, moreover, stars which comment on the action. In the second quatrain the imaginable – the poet, men, plants, and players – is made vague by verbs which do not properly fit – "increase", "decrease" and "wear out". "Increase" in particular torments the reader, whose associations for the word have been formed by its being the opening rhyme word of the sequence:

> From fairest creatures we desire increase,
> That thereby beauty's rose might never die

There it stood as the definitive word to describe the procreation which the poet so strongly argues for. Procreate or die out is the message which Sonnet 1 has for the young man, and which the next thirteen sonnets repeat – a choice embodied in the rhyme word which the poet chose for "increase": not, as in Sonnet 15, "decrease", but "decease". Now, though, the reader's associations for the word – in particular its opposition to mortality – are frustrated; "increase" no longer signifies the eternity which procreation promises, nor any kind of eternity for that matter, but only the tiny spot of time when a thing stands at its highest point and when its "decrease" is about to begin. And it contrives to be, as I have said, not quite the right verb to fit either part of the simile: to have "men as plants increase" is a less satisfactory, because less imaginable, equation than having men as plants flourish or men

as plants ripen (to take two characteristic words from the procreation group).

It seems fair to say that even to the entirely non-expert reader the increased abstractness which Waddington perceives in the sestet is not unprepared for: in essence it is the reasonable development of the readjustments he has to make at the sonnet's very beginning. There the abstractness was the poet's; in the sestet it comes to relate directly to the young man – "rich in youth", "your day of youth", "sullied night", these are all vague and hardly imaginable forms of description – while it clarifies the image of the poet as a dreamer who sees distinctly. The promise of the opening line, that the poet might actually be contemplating a natural object rather than an idea, comes to unexpected fruition when the object he contemplates turns out to be the young man, set carefully before his sight. At least, we have to take his word for the vision, for although we see the poet clearly, what he sees remains an abstraction to us.

No discussion of Sonnet 15 can be satisfactory without some consideration of its place in the sequence – I shall return to it in my treatment of the procreation group in chapter 1—but what I have described here should at the least act as an example of the kind of analysis I undertake in tracing the reader's experience of the sonnets.

1 'This Poet Lies': Text and Subtext

I begin by wondering why Shakespeare's sonnets should be so unpopular. Despite their being the only collection of poems by our greatest poet, as a sequence they remain almost as unconsidered and unread as they were in his lifetime.[1] Individual sonnets are known and loved, but as exceptions to the general run of a collection of lifeless poems. Even literary critics have treated them with disdain. In the last forty years, apart from scattered forays by a handful of critics (most of them listed in my Introduction), they have been the happy hunting ground of biographical detectives, novelists, or the kind of literary moralist who constructs arguments by welding together lines and quatrains pulled painfully out of their context. And it is significant that, apart from the work of Stephen Booth, even the good critics have concentrated upon individual sonnets or sonnet groups, leaving the sequence as a whole in benign neglect.

Why should this neglect exist? It can hardly be the result of the intellectual complexity which generates so much silence about *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. The sonnets present few specifically intellectual problems, and if they did the vogue for Metaphysical wit has provided the techniques and the audience for that kind of explication. My suggested answer is that the sonnets cause reader and critic alike the more fundamental problem of determining the tone, both of individual poems and groups of poems, and of the sequence as a whole. This difficulty destroys the reader's basic allegiance to the sonnets, and only from such an allegiance does constant rereading of the work and eventually a good work of criticism emerge. It is, after all, quite possible to read a poem and have no clear understanding of its ideas, but be engaged with it all the same. In such a case we find ourselves responding intuitively to its level of seriousness and the poet's commitment to his subject. But the opposite is not easily done and even a fair degree of certainty about a poem's meaning may not overcome a reader's frustrating uncertainty at, to put it crudely, not knowing whether the poet means what he says or not.

My argument is that this kind of uncertainty is built into many individual

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