CHAPTER 7

"O, let my books be . . . dumb presagers": poetry and theatre in the Sonnets

William Shakespeare is a man of the theatre who wrote a sonnet sequence.

For the English Renaissance, this is an unusual profile. Almost exclusively, the writers who composed sonnet sequences were not the same as those who worked in the theatre. The sonneteers, rather than being professional dramatists, belonged predominantly either to an amateur class of poets (for example, Sir Philip Sidney and Richard Barnfield) or to a laureate class (Edmund Spenser and Michael Drayton).[1] By contrast, the main professional dramatists (from Thomas Kyd to John Ford) did not produce sonnet sequences, even though nearly without exception they wrote in other poetic forms, from love lyric and pastoral to epyllion and satire.[2]

Shakespeare's Sonnets therefore constitute an unusual site for viewing the intersection of poetry and theatre during the English Renaissance. Sonnet 23 illustrates succinctly the discursive form of that intersection, which the sequence as a whole sustains: "O, let my books be then the eloquence / And dumb presagers of my speaking breast" (9–10).[3] While we shall examine Sonnet 23 in detail later, for now we may note simply that these lines intriguingly conjoin the medium of printed books of poetry (editorial tradition suggests *Venus* and *Lucrece*) with that of staged theatre (the dumb show of a play). That these lines turn out to contain a long-standing textual crux could well make the examination more enticing.

[1] For this classification, see Helgerson, *Laureates*. Sonneteers belonging to the amateur class include Henry Constable, Barnabe Barnes, Giles Fletcher the Elder, Sir Robert Sidney, Bartholomew Griffin, William Smith, and Sir John Davies. According to Gabriel Harvey, Spenser wrote *Nine Comedies* (Letter III in G. G. Smith, ed., *Essays*, 1: 115), while Drayton wrote tragedies, but in both cases the plays have not survived, and some question whether Spenser's ever existed (see Oruch, "Works, Lost").

[2] Other dramatists who did not write sonnet sequences include John Lyly, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, George Peele, George Chapman, Ben Jonson, John Marston, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher, Francis Beaumont, and John Webster. On Samuel Daniel, Thomas Lodge, and Fulke Greville as partial exceptions, see Cheney, "Poetry," 222–24.

[3] The *Riverside* notes that "books" "may mean these sonnets, or, if the addressee is Southampton, the two poems *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*," and it glosses "dumb presagers" as "presenters, as in the dumb show of a play" (1847).

In this chapter, we will look further into the Sonnets' sustained conjoining of these two principal forms of production during Shakespeare's career.[4] Such an investigation can prove useful in itself as an analysis of a neglected topic, yet the analysis may prove especially profitable in the current critical conversation about Shakespeare as an early modern author. As we shall see, the Sonnets constitute an unexplored territory for viewing him as inextricably caught in the cultural predicament of conjoining the two forms that engaged him throughout his professional career.

THE CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

We can indeed profit from viewing Shakespeare's Sonnets as the product of the world's most famous man of the theatre, the writer or collaborator of forty-two known plays, an actor in a professional company, and a shareholder in a commercial, public theatre. Sometime between the mid-1580s and the early seventeenth century, the famed dramatist wrote 152 sonnets in the Petrarchan tradition, and they were finally published in 1609 (with or without his consent) in a quarto volume titled *Shake-speares Sonnets*. The volume includes two anacreontic sonnets (153, 154) and *A Lover's Complaint*, in what was then a familiar format for a printed volume of verse.[5] Shakespeare did not write his sonnets simply when the theatres closed due to plague in 1592–93; as recent scholarship has demonstrated, he worked on them throughout his career.[6] As we have seen, in 1598 Francis Meres encourages contemporaries to integrate Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets" centrally into his profession as a public dramatist and a published poet (*Palladis Tamia*, reprinted in *Riverside*, 1970).

[4] To my knowledge, no one has done so. For different models relating poetry and drama, see Hunter, "Dramatic Technique"; Melchiori, *Dramatic Meditations*; Dubrow, *Victors*, esp. 190; Henderson, *Passion Made Public*; Wright, "Silent Speech," 137; Schalkwyk, "Embodiment," "Performative," *Performance*. While Schalkwyk characterizes Shakespearean self-representation in terms of the Austinian performative, I contextualize it in terms of Shakespeare's historical predicament of being an English author at this time, a man of the theatre who has turned to sonneteering. Schalkwyk looks compellingly at sonnets representing theatre – notably Sonnet 23 – but we still lack a detailed investigation into the discursive presence of poetry and theatre *in the text* of the Sonnets as a whole.

[5] See Duncan-Jones, "Unauthorized?" and her edition, as well as J. Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*. On the 1580s dating of Sonnet 145, see Gurr, "First Poem."

[6] As noted in chapter 1, Burrow, "Life," suggests that we think about the Sonnets "as something approaching Shakespeare's life's work" (17). For further details, see Hieatt, Hieatt, and Prescott, "When," 73–74. Duncan-Jones suggests "four probable phases of composition": before 1598; 1599–1600; 1603–04; and August 1608–May 1609 (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 12–13; see 1–28). In *Ungentle*, she remarks, "Writing, revising and re-ordering sonnets was probably a regular activity throughout his adult life" (214; see 214–16). J. Kerrigan believes that "Shakespeare was consciously shaping a collection when he wrote *A Lover's Complaint* in c. 1602–5" (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 12; see 10–18). Finally, see G. Taylor, "Manuscripts."

Some readers might dispute that Meres refers to sonnets from the 1609 quarto, emphasizing instead the conditions of manuscript circulation and arguing that Shakespeare did not intend the Sonnets for publication.[7] Yet the Meres passage suggests a more complicated cultural milieu, since Meres situates the Shakespearean manuscript sonnets he has read in an authorial practice that includes both printed poems (*Venus*, *Lucrece*) and printed and/or staged plays (quartos began appearing in 1594, and in 1598 Shakespeare's name began to appear on them). Moreover, the recent work by Wendy Wall and Colin Burrow emphasizes how the Sonnets – in Burrow's formulation – "could have been designed to operate more or less exactly on the borderline between the published and the privately concealed": "What makes the volume of *Shake-speares Sonnets* unique is the extent to which its every element can be seen [to] . . . invite from its readers a deliberate interplay between reading the collection for the life as a private manuscript record of a secret love, and reading it as a monumental printed work" (Burrow, "Life," 38, 42). Wall finds the collection periodically brooding over the problem of print publication (*Imprint*, 197). Such criticism is important because it presents a Shakespeare whom critics are increasingly beginning to see: not simply the writer of plays who assiduously avoids print and bookish immortality, but rather the author of both plays and poems whose works as a whole show a fascination with – sometimes also a fear and distrust of – print publication. While acknowledging that the Sonnets are situated on the "borderline between the published and the privately concealed," we might then profit by looking into certain neglected features of the former, especially since recent criticism has emphasized the latter.

In fact, scholars writing on the Sonnets have long emphasized Shakespeare's presentation of himself as a poet – a writer of lyrics – in the very sonnets he is composing.[8] Indebted to Petrarch (and before him, Ovid) as well as his sixteenth-century English heirs (Sidney, Daniel, Spenser), Shakespeare's self-representation appears as the subject of the poet's verse in over twenty-five different sonnets (e.g., 18, 55, 60, 63, 106, 116, 130), including this from Sonnet 60: "to times in hope my verse shall stand" (13). To these sonnets, we need to add the Rival Poet sonnets (78–86), in which

[7] See, e.g., Love, *Scribal Publications*; Marotti, "Property," esp. 170n30 on Meres. Marotti's essay is invaluable for re-historicizing Shakespearean authorship, yet we need to complicate his thesis, taking his own cue: "Despite the decision to publish two narrative poems early in his career . . . Shakespeare was . . . a professional actor, playwright, and theatrical shareholder" ("Property," 144).

[8] For Shakespeare's signature as a poet, see Fineman, *Perjured*, 6. See also Leishman, *Themes and Variations*, 27–91; Muir, *Sonnets*, 30–44, 112–22; Hammond, *Reader*, 61–78, 95–110, 135–49, 195–213. On "Shakespeare's Petrarchism," see the essay of this title by Braden; and on Shakespeare's Ovidianism, see Bate, *Ovid*, 87–100.

this poet-figure presents himself as a rival versifier for the artistic affection of the young man: "Was it the proud full sail of his great verse . . . / That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse" (86. 1–3). To these two groups, we can add still other sonnets that refer to the media of printed books or to the literary tradition (11, 25, 53, 59, 77, 117), as represented in Sonnet 59, "Show me your image in some antique book" (7), or in Sonnet 53, which refers to the literary images of both "Adonis" and "Helen" (1–8). We also need to add Shakespeare's use of the vocabulary from the print medium to reflect on sexual experience, as in Sonnet 11 when the speaker advises the young man to marry and procreate: "Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die" (14). For readers today, as presumably for Shakespeare's first readers, the Sonnets present a speaker who quite literally speaks as a poet, the author of the very sonnets we are reading. As Burrow, Wall, and others help us see, the poet, who calls himself Will in Sonnet 136 (14), situates his own poems on the borderline between print and manuscript.[9] From the perspective of the present argument, he is therefore distinctly compelled by the career of the print poet.

Yet scholars writing on the Sonnets have noted that in at least a few sonnets – most notably, 110, 111, and 112, but also 25, 29, 72, and 87 – Shakespeare presents this same poet-figure or sonnet writer as a man of the theatre, as this from Sonnet 110: "I have gone here and there, / And made myself a motley to the view" (1–2).[10] Stephen Booth observes: "If this poem were not by a professional actor, the line would simply say, 'I have made myself a public laughingstock' . . . However, Shakespeare's profession is – and presumably always was – known to his readers (see 111. 3–4), and this line therefore is colored by (and colors the following lines with) its pertinence to the particular circumstances of its author's life. The fact of Shakespeare's profession operates – much as the accident of his first name does in the 'Will' sonnets . . . – to give witty, pun-like extra dimension to statements complete and meaningful in themselves" (Booth, ed., *Sonnets*, 354). We can extend this important principle of representation and reception to other sonnets referring to Shakespeare's theatrical career, as well as to many sonnets that rely on theatrical metaphors (5, 15, 23, 24, 33, 61, 70, 98, 113), which Will often uses to represent erotic experience, sometimes without fanfare or even note: "Mine eye hath play'd the painter and hath [stell'd] / Thy beauty's form in table of my heart" (24. 1–2). To these two groups, we can add a large number of sonnets that inscribe

[9] On the "name" of "Will," see Pequigney, "Sonnets," 298–301; Schalkwyk, *Performance*, 183–88.

[10] See H. Smith, *Tension*: "It is traditional to see references to Shakespeare's career as an actor in the little series 110–112" (26; see 26–28). See Hubler, *Sense*, 115–22; Honan, *A Life*, 128, 161.

Shakespeare's working vocabulary from the theatre, even though in many instances we would be wary to claim a specific theatrical evocation. This vocabulary includes the word "show" (e.g., 5. 14); "mask" (33. 12); "rehearse" (21. 4); "play" (5. 3); "part" (8. 8); "act" (152. 3); "action" (65. 4); "actor" (23.1); "entertain" (39. 11); "shadows" (43. 5–6); "mock" (61. 4); "trim" (66. 3); "case" (108. 9); and, perhaps taking a cue from Sir Philip Sidney, "dumb" (23. 10). Shakespeare's insertion of this theatrical discourse into his sonnet sequence, while not surprising, is nonetheless unusual enough during the period to warrant attention.

Despite Shakespeare's inclusion of a discourse of poetry and a discourse of theatre in his Sonnets, critics tend to separate their analyses of poetry and theatre. Most importantly, critics who see Shakespeare worrying about print publication in his Sonnets do not concern themselves much with the theatrical matrix of the sequence.[11] The inventory of both theatrical and poetic matrices, together with the practice among Shakespeare's contemporaries of separating sonnets from plays, pinpoints the historical significance of the Sonnets as lying partly in their unusual representation of the intersection of these two forms at a critical time in English literary history. During the last twenty years, critics have tended to locate the Sonnets' historical significance in terms of Shakespeare's representation of subjectivity and/or sexuality.[12] In a recent, seminal essay, Peter Stallybrass argues that "In the case of the Sonnets . . . we can read the inscription of a new history of sexuality and 'character'" ("Sexing," 92). Stallybrass adds, "But that new history emerges unpunctually, dislocated by its need to write itself over the culturally valued but culturally disturbing body of the Sonnets" (92–93). In Shakespeare's sequence, we can also read the inscription of a new history of authorship and "character," discovering this history to emerge in a similarly unpunctual and dislocated fashion.

According to such a history, Shakespeare's Sonnets are important because they present a new type of European author, memorably represented in the Meres passage: the author who pens both poems and plays. Shakespeare's Sonnets are noteworthy for lots of reasons but especially for their original representation of the interconnection between these two fundamentally

[11] Cf. Wall, *Imprint*, 197n51. Valbuena, "Reproduction," reveals that Shakespeare's language is suffused with the discourse of early modern writing practices.

[12] Most famously, Fineman has argued that the Sonnets invent modern subjectivity (*Perjured*; see Ferry). This view has been tempered by such critics as de Grazia, "Motive"; Schoenfeldt, *Bodies*, 74–95. Others, such as B. R. Smith, argue that in the Sonnets "Shakespeare improvised a new form of discourse": "Shakespeare seeks to speak about homosexual desire with the same authority that Petrarch assumes in speaking about heterosexual desire" (*Homosexual Desire*, 228–70; quotations from 265, 264).

nascent literary forms. More specifically, the Sonnets' new history of authorship and authorial character publicizes a cultural clash between printed poetry and the even newer, more socially compromising medium of staged theatre. No other English Renaissance sonnet sequence does so. To represent the clash of media, Shakespeare presents Will in deep introspection suffering a personal dilemma between being a playwright-actor ashamed of his profession and being a poet working hard to be affirmative about his career as a sonneteer.[13]

David Schalkwyk classifies Will as an "actor-poet," presumably because the theatre representations appear to pertain to Shakespeare's role as an actor rather than as a playwright ("Performative," 252). This seems basically right, but we might note two complications: first, it might be difficult, even unwise, to disentangle Shakespeare's theatrical roles as actor and playwright, not least because in the Sonnets a poet is literally writing about his role as an actor; and second, we might come to see one of Shakespeare's major contributions to the representation of authorship during the period to lie in the fact that he presents the author also as an actor.[14] Such a new history emphasizes the homology between the twin but typically separate topics of much recent criticism on Shakespeare's plays and poems: cross-dressing in the plays; and homoeroticism in the Sonnets.[15] Shakespeare, we might say, countered the large-scale European convention of Petrarchism, through which a male poet addressed a sonnet sequence to a female beloved, *because he was a man of the theatre*; this sonnet author experienced the staging of same-sex relationships in costumed disguise as a matter of daily professional practice.[16]

Shakespeare's self-conscious deployment of homoeroticism, theatre, and printed poetry appears to be unique. We might then attribute his "most

[13] Dubrow, "Politics," argues that the Sonnets are best viewed as "internalized meditations unconnected to a narrative line" (123). For a recent rebuttals to Dubrow, see (e.g.) Traub, "Sex," 442.

[14] See *The Roman Actor* (1626), wherein Massinger uses the actor as a metaphor for the playwright (see Butler's intro., x). Cf. Honan: "there was a possible tactical advantage, for Shakespeare's actors, in having these elegant lyrics in print in London at a critical time in 1609" (*A Life*, 362). Schalkwyk, *Performance*, demonstrates persuasively that the Sonnets concern themselves with Shakespeare's career as a player-poet; however, by focusing on the Austinian performative, Schalkwyk turns away from (in particular) intertextuality.

[15] On theatrical cross-dressing, see Orgel, *Impersonations*. On homoeroticism in the Sonnets, see Pequigney, *Such*; B. R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire*, 228–70, "Politics"; Traub, "Sex." Critics neglect the homology, even though they may discuss the Sonnets and plays (e.g., B. R. Smith, "Politics," 414).

[16] One did not need to be an actor to write sonnets addressed to another man, as testified to by Richard Barnfield's twenty sonnets in his 1595 *Cynthia* (Duncan-Jones, *Sonnets*, ed., 47). Unlike Sidney, Daniel, Spenser, and others, however, Barnfield does not include a discourse of theatre. He does present himself as a poet writing in a tradition of English and European poetry in service of fame.

salient" alteration to the Petrarchan sequence – "that most of them are addressed to a young male" (de Grazia, "Scandal," 38) – not simply to the personal circumstances of his sexual biography, nor even to his characteristically witty and innovative overturning of convention, but also to his singular position in the theatrical world. In his Sonnets, Shakespeare can be seen to transpose the homoerotic gender paradigm from the theatre to the Petrarchan sequence. He is a man of the theatre writing sonnets, and he capitalizes on his unique position in the literary system to present Will precisely as the theatrical man turning his dramatic hand to non-dramatic poetry. It is in this context that we might usefully view Shakespeare's opposing representations of his twin arts, conveyed through Will's public shame over the theatre and his bid for public fame through his poetry.[17] By claiming poetic fame for Will and his subject through his Sonnets, Shakespeare is not simply participating in the long tradition extending from Homer through Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, to Dante, Petrarch, and Spenser: he is simultaneously offsetting a public infamy acquired through his role in the new English theatre. If the Sonnets are "Shakespeare's life's work," we might come to see Shakespeare positioning himself in another European economy besides that of the theatre: the economy of a literary career, designed principally to secure the high cultural authority of poetic immortality.[18]

While we might wish to hold off claiming that the Sonnets constitute an advertisement for Shakespeare's status as a new English and European poet-playwright, his sequence nonetheless constitutes a historically significant meditation on, inscription of, and register for an author who is fundamentally a sixteenth-century invention – or, more accurately, the re-invention of a Roman writer that for Marlowe, Jonson, and Thomas Heywood traces to Ovid (chapters 1 and 2). Recalling Meres' Ovidian comparison, we may understand the conjunction of poetry and theatre in the Sonnets precisely in Ovidian terms: Shakespeare plots Will's aesthetic and subjective struggle for identity amid the triangulated love affair with the young man and the dark lady along a distinctly Ovidian path of amorous poetry and tragedic theatre. Like Ovid in the *Amores* (and Marlowe in his translation), Will stages a narrative of the poet-playwright caught between claims of poetry's power to immortalize and love's power to produce shame. Distinctly, however, Shakespeare shifts the site of shame

[17] See Engle, "Shame"; however, Engle does not situate shame in the theatrical matrix of the Sonnets, even though he reports that "Markets and theaters are, for Shakespeare, the most prominent local instances of such economies" (187).

[18] See Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle*, for the assumption that poetic immortality in the Sonnets comes from "the printed book" (177).

from love and poetry in the Ovid/Marlowe dynamic to the place of the stage.[19]

It is difficult to determine just how we are to gauge Shakespeare in relation to the Ovid/Marlowe dynamic. For instance, it might seem peculiar that an English Renaissance writer such as Shakespeare could discover in Ovid a model for the poet-playwright, since the great classical writer left a canon decidedly tipped in favor of poetry over drama. Yet in order to take the cue of Marlowe, Jonson, Heywood, and others, we need not insist that Ovid balanced the two; we could simply acknowledge that Ovid achieved his combination in a way that was compelling in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Consequently, we might see Shakespeare perfecting an imperfect Ovidian model that Marlowe had instigated yet had left incomplete when he died prematurely in 1593. With their intense interest in classical authors – and especially their shared passion for Ovid – Marlowe and Shakespeare together can be seen to realize a model of authorship that Ovid had advertised but had failed to realize. Although Ovid says he is better "apt" for the "high designs" of "tragedies" than he is for the low designs of love elegy (*Amores*, 2. 18. 13–18; trans. Marlowe), his chronic disposition for erotic entanglements recurrently impedes the success of this notable dramatic temperament. Effectively, Ovid invents a career path that Marlowe begins to traverse and that Shakespeare is left more fully to chart.

Like Marlowe's other heir, Ben Jonson, Shakespeare may have really "wanted to be a poet rather than a playwright" (Yachnin, *Stage-Wrights*, xii). We might find it striking, however, that Shakespeare does not use his poetry to erase his role in the theatre, but rather makes his shameful theatrical profession a part of his self-presentation. The Sonnets thus stage a kind of crisis: the new English poet-playwright – so popular that in 1599 Jaggard could pirate *The Passionate Pilgrim* under Shakespeare's name – is caught in a compromising predicament with a morally bankrupt young man and an equally bankrupt dark lady. Of this narrative, Michael C. Schoenfeldt has recently observed that Shakespeare's sonnets "[M]ust have struck the 1609 reader as a radical disruption of the conventional narrative of erotic courtship. In the early sonnets, woman is not the idealized recipient of the erotic aspirations of a male speaker but rather a means of biological reproduction, to be frequented so that men may lay claim to the fragile immortality of progeny; in the later poems, woman, now identified with a

[19] On this place, see Mullaney, *Place*. On the "presence" of Ovid in the Sonnets, in relation to the "absence" of Petrarch, see Braden, "Ovid, Petrarch," 99. On "shame" in the "Ovidian model," see Brown, "Breaking the Canon," 66–67. For a different view of the *Amores* and Marlowe's translation, see Stapleton, *Harmful*.

culturally derogated darkness, is the object of a wasteful, enervating, uncontrollable desire that contrasts markedly with the idealized love of a young man" ("Matter," 240). Schoenfeldt's view of Shakespeare's narrative of sexual physiology and subjectivity corresponds to a striking statistic pertaining to the narrative of authorship and authorial character: with very little exception, Shakespeare confines both his poetic and his theatrical vocabulary to the young-man sonnets (1–126), so that in the dark-lady sonnets (127–52) this vocabulary virtually disappears.[20] Altogether, Shakespeare presents a narrative in which Will, the new Ovidian poet-playwright, loses the voice of his profession to the engulfing swirls of a dangerous, triangulated sexual desire: "desire is death" (147. 8). Against such mighty rage, how can poetry hold a plea?[21]

Finally, we might wish to be cautious when gauging Will's authorial self-presentation as definitive of Shakespeare's own view of his career or even of his own personal predicament, because it so clearly resembles Spenser's famous presentation of his persona in the 1579 *Shepheardes Calender*, wherein Colin Clout abandons his career as a poet after Rosalind, his own distinctly rose-tinted Petrarchan mistress, rejects him. Like Spenser, Shakespeare presents a powerful narrative of artistic failure precisely to claim authority as a (national) author.[22] Without recalling Spenser's paradoxical use of his failed, clownish persona to present himself as England's great laureate poet, we might have some difficulty processing Shakespeare's presentation of a rather negative model of authorship that even Ovid (and Marlowe) had presented more positively. Just as we need not confuse Spenser with Colin, so we need not confuse Shakespeare with Will. Thus, we may apply to Shakespeare the principle critics find operating in Spenser's *June* eclogue: the "topos of inability or affected modesty is in effect an indirect tactic of self-assertion."[23] Because the Sonnets are today Shakespeare's best-selling book, and because Shakespeare eventually displaced Spenser as England's "National Poet," we may conclude that in terms of reception history the author of the Sonnets succeeded admirably in substantiating the claim.[24]

[20] The only significant uses occur in "compare" at 130. 14 and in "play" at 143. 12; see Sutphen, "Dateless," 210.

[21] On "Desire is Death," see Dollimore.

[22] De Grazia borrows her classification for Will's relations with the young man and the dark lady, not from "the post-Enlightenment categories of homosexual and heterosexual," but from E. K.'s note to the *Januarye* eclogue: pederasty and gynerasty, respectively ("Scandal," 46). According to Bednarz, *Poets' War*, "Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida* identifies failure as an essential condition of experience" (263).

[23] Cain, intro., *June* eclogue, *Shepheardes Calender*, in Oram, et al., eds. *Yale Edition*, 108.

[24] For the history of the Sonnets' publication from the seventeenth century onwards, see (in addition to Burrow, "Life," 17–21) de Grazia, *Verbatim*.

Here we might wonder how a work that was basically erased not simply from the First Folio but from the canon itself until the eighteenth century could prove so historically influential. Although we may not be used to viewing the Sonnets the way we are here, they nonetheless record, as countless critics have helped us see (not least Joel Fineman), a large-scale artistic project that matches and even exceeds that of Petrarch's in the *Rime sparse*. Thus, we may not wish to ignore but rather to marvel at just how the Sonnets have undergone a long, extremely complex historical process of reception that finally gets around to recognizing the achievement of this project.[25]

SONNET 15

While many sonnets present Will as a poet and several present him as man of the theatre, a substantial number show him bringing poetry and theatre into conjunction.[26] Let us begin by considering Sonnet 15, long recognized to be important for articulating the central theme of the sequence and for first presenting the art of poetry as a solution to the problem of time and death – those relentless stalkers of the young man's beauty.[27] Sonnet 15 is less often recalled as the first poem to employ a substantive theatrical discourse and thus the first to conjoin theatre with poetry:

> When I consider every thing that grows
> Holds in perfection but a little moment,
> That this huge stage presented nought but shows,
> Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
> When I perceive that men as plants increase,
> Cheered and check'd even by the self-same sky,
> Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
> And wear their brave state out of memory:
> Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
> Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,

[25] See N. Frye, "Twain": "Shakespeare's sonnets are the definitive summing up of the Western tradition of love poetry from Plato and Ovid, to Dante and Petrarch, to Chaucer and Spenser" (106).

[26] The longer version of this chapter, "Poetry," also discusses Sonnet 54. Others not discussed there or here that *conjoin* poetry and theatre in thought-provoking ways include Sonnets 5, 8, 17, 21, 26, 38, 53, 76, 103, and 105. All of these, like the ones discussed here, appear in the young-man sequence, except the special case of 144, to be examined presently.

[27] Schoenfeldt notes that line 9 contains the "theme that unifies this collocation" (*Bodies*, 89): "this inconstant stay." Evans observes that Sonnet 15 "first sounds the Horatian and Ovidian theme of immortality assured through poetry" (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 127; see Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Sonnets*, 1: 41–43). Herman adds that "The thematic emergence of poetry . . . overlaps with the emergence of homoeroticism" ("What's the use," 277).

> Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay
> 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 ingraft you new.
> (Sonnet 15)

This sonnet, a perfect instance of the "Shakespearean sonnet" of three rhymed quatrains and a concluding couplet, is relatively straightforward. Relying on his famous logical pattern, Will tells the young man that "When" he considers the decay and death of all natural things, "Then" he looks on the young man both to discover meaning and to write that meaning into poetry.

Yet Sonnet 15 is also important because it relies on an authorial narrative to represent the central cognitive paradigm of the sequence – what many have seen as the heart of its enduring value: the English Ovidian poet-playwright locates meaning both in the individual's meditation on beauty as a consolation for the tyranny of time and death and in the individual's verse inscription. The cognition itself is hardly new, tracing back to the *Iliad* and receiving famous forms in Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, and later in Dante, Petrarch, and Spenser (among others). Shakespeare certainly brings a rich intelligence and a fresh talent to the topics of subjective perception and poetic fame, but what may make the articulation historically new is the conjunction here of poetry with theatre. If we look carefully at the fiction, Will presents himself as an actor on a stage writing poetry to combat time and death.

In the first quatrain, Will presents his speaking subject, "I," as an actor on a stage performing a cognitive action, as if in soliloquy.[28] The simple syntax of the first line is paradigmatic: "I consider . . . thing." The speaking subject uses his mind to consider material reality – not just any material reality, but one that "grows." Thus, Will considers the natural world in its capacity to change and mature. In line two, his word "but" at the midpoint intimates a problem, as Will considers that natural things retain their perfection for only a "little moment." In line three, he introduces the theatrical metaphor (it is not a simile) to place himself, the perceiver of natural decay, on a "huge stage" that presents nothing but "shows." This is certainly a tautology – but it is worse, a cliché: the trope of the world as a stage presenting man as an actor and life as a show is so popular a formulation during the period – the very motto of the Globe Theatre itself

[28] In "Politics," B. R. Smith argues that "'I,' 'he,' and 'she' exist ontologically in these texts exactly as three principal characters might in a theatrical script" (424)

(*Totus mundus agit histrionem*) – that we might intelligently seek to bypass commentary here altogether.[29] Such a bypass, however, would commit us to erasing the historicity of Will's self-presentation, through which he locates intellectual consideration on the stage, his platform for materialist speculations in lines 1–3: the world is nothing but a show, while the show itself merely stages the world.[30] Yet in line 4 Will extends his materialist philosophy to the metaphysical domain, now framing his platform with a sky and its astral bodies, which indeed were displayed on the canopy overarching the stage at the Globe: "Whereon the stars in secret influence comment." For a Christian audience, this line is important and challenging: Will presents the stars "comment[ing]" on the "nought" of the "show" with "secret influence."[31] As Katherine Duncan-Jones observes, Will presents the stars "as audience to the theatre of the world, [which] comment on and guide human life, but in ways that are undiscernible to us (*secret*)" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 140). As G. Blakemore Evans reports, however, "Shakespeare's use of 'comment' has caused difficulty, since though spectators at a play may comment, the stars were believed to do much more than 'comment' in a passive sense" (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 128). Evans goes on to say that he has "assigned a meaning to 'comment' (with support from the *OED*) which suggests the action of a commentator or reviewer who makes crucial or 'critical' decisions that affect the future of a 'work'" (128; see Booth, ed., *Sonnets*, 286). Thus, Will frames his fiction of an actor on a stage considering the death of nature within a larger setting that includes the religious sphere. The play in which he finds himself is looking like a tragedy, especially one emphasizing the tragic hero's victimization by a metaphysical agent. For Shakespeare's Christian audience, the repercussions must have been – and remain – striking.

In the second quatrain, Will registers the very strike of those repercussions. In line 5, he uses anaphora to consolidate and specify the materialist (and theatrical) consideration of the first quatrain, when he perceives that men "increase" the way "plants" do. In line 6, he metaphysics the subject (to adapt a phrase from the opening of *The Winter's Tale*) in the sonnet's most unsettling line: "Cheered and check'd even by the self-same sky." The line is unsettling because of the (Christian) implications of a single sky performing two opposed actions: this meteorological domain both encourages

[29] The trope was intriguing even to individuals who were not associated with the theatre; see Greenblatt, *Ralegh*.

[30] Engle, "Shame," focuses on the treatment of eternity in the Sonnets as social endurance rather than transcendence (186). See his "Certainty," which responds to Bernard's "Platonic" argument.

[31] On "nothingness" in Shakespeare, see Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 642–49.

and rebukes, empowers and impedes, offers hope and takes it away, creates fortune and misfortune equally (cheers "and" checks). If read in the context of the Sermon on the Mount to which Hamlet refers (5. 2. 219–20), or of the Christian tradition from Augustine to Dante to Hooker, the line is not simply unsettling; it is blasphemous. In Will's tragic theatre, unlike in Dante's divine comedy, the sky is not the lucid source of salvation or damnation, nor does it offer a special providence for the fall of a sparrow.[32] Quite literally, the sky overhanging Will has turned cloudy; no longer does the individual perceive the divine clearly, and worse, no longer does the divine communicate clearly to the individual. Once more, Evans helps in understanding the theatrical resonance of the religious representation: "Encourage, solaced (by good fortune), or, possibly, applauded (as in the theatre . . .) and hindered, cut short, reproved (by bad fortune), or cried down, taunted (as in the theatre)."[33] Will's transposition of the cosmic drama to the stage is an important register for the historical context of the Sonnets: the much-discussed advent of science and philosophy and its effects on the truths and authority of Christian teaching (see Cruttwell, *Shakespearean Moment*, 1–38). In Sonnet 15, Shakespeare presents Will as a man of the theatre acting out a tragedy of particular relevance to the early modern audience. As editors note, both lines 7 and 8 retain theatrical imagery in Will's portrait of men who "[v]aunt" in their youth only to "decrease" in their "height" and who "wear their brave state out of memory" (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 128). The image catches the sad (yet perhaps slightly humorous) perplexity of this particular tragic individual: he is a young actor who vaunts his voice in splendid costume even as he falls into oblivion, the terrorizing Western alternative to poetic immortality. Moreover, in scripting himself as an actor in a tragedy, Will presents himself simultaneously as the writer of that play. His representation of himself as a playwright is thus identical with his role as a sonneteer.

If the octave uses theatre to represent the material and metaphysical problem of living in an uncertain universe, the sestet thus discovers a solution to lie in the intertwined activities of philosophical vision and written verse. In lines 9–10, Will reports that the "conceit" (both his conception and his literary image) of this murky universe is richly offset by his "sight" of the

[32] Cf. Sir John Cheke, who, says Riggs, "coined the term 'Atheists' to describe people who do not 'care whether there be a God or no, or whether . . . he will recompense good Men with good things, and bad Men with what is Evil'" ("Marlowe's Quarrel," 20).

[33] Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 128. He adds, "Booth notes that Jonson seems to echo the theatrical suggestion of lines 3–6 in his poem 'To the Memory of . . . Shakespeare' in the First Folio (1623), line 78: 'Or influence, chide, or cheere the drooping Stage'" (128).

young man. In lines 11–12, he locates this perception again on the stage, witnessing a "debate" between two other actors in a morality play, "Time and Decay," who struggle over the youth to "change" his "day of youth to sullied night" – to perform an Ovidian degenerative metamorphosis on him. In this tragedic Ovidian theatre, Will imagines Time killing Nature, as Heaven betrays man by passively standing by, simply "comment[ing]" on the hapless protagonist.

Only in the couplet does Will present his poetry as the solution to this tragic predicament: as Time kills the young man, Will "ingraft[s] him new" – makes him immortal through his verse. As Bruce R. Smith reports, "Many readers have noted the pun here on 'engraft': it suggests the Greek root *graphein*, 'to write,' at the same time that it sets up images of horticultural grafting in the next sonnet."[34] More locally, poetic ingrafting also solves the problem from the preceding quatrains, where the growing plant increases only to decay; the poet is himself the gardener who can intervene protectively in this process, extending the life of the dying plant. In this sonnet, only the poet-playwright, not any other cultural or cosmic agent, including a real gardener or a real deity, can say to Time what Will says in Sonnet 123: "Thy registers and thee I both defy . . . / I will be true despite thy scythe and thee" (9, 14). In sum, Sonnet 15 presents Will as an actor on the stage writing both drama and poetry to solve the West's most enduring problem, the tragic fact of human mortality. Will's idea of poetry is once again hardly new, but his opposition between poetry with its living fame and theatre with its illusory show is especially fresh and important, at least in the English sonnet tradition.[35]

SONNET 23

The representation of sonneteer and stage appears substantively next in Sonnet 23:

> As an unperfect actor on the stage,
> Who with his fear is put besides his part,
> Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage,
> Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart,
> So I, for fear of trust, forget to say
> The perfect ceremony of love's [rite],

[34] Smith, *Homosexual Desire*, 247. Freinkel, "Rose," traces the grafting image to its religious sources in St. Paul (Romans 11: 19–23) and in Luther (*Lectures on Romans*) (244–45). On husbandry, see Greene, "Thrivers."

[35] On fame from classical through modern culture, see Braudy,

> And in mine own love's strength seem to decay,
> O'ercharg'd with burthen of mine own love's might.
> O, let my books be then the eloquence
> And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,
> Who plead for love, and look for recompense,
> More than that tongue that more hath more express'd.
> O, learn to read what silent love hath writ:
> To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.
>
> (Sonnet 23)

As in Sonnet 15, the general drift here is relatively straightforward. In the first two quatrains, Will employs a theatrical simile designed to explain to the young man why he has forgotten to declare his love to him. In the third quatrain, Will offers a substitute for such a declaration by telling the youth to view his "books" as the "dumb presagers" of his love. Finally, in the couplet Will summarizes this directive by encouraging the young man to learn to read in print what Will has been unable to say in person.

Like Sonnet 15, Sonnet 23 is important for its clear combination of theatre and books. What precisely is that combination? In terms of the literal fiction, Will relies both on a theatrical simile (the actor on a stage) to explain his silence and on a theatrical metaphor (the dumb presagers) to describe the function of his books. In effect, then, he doubles the representation of poetry and theatre, introducing considerable complication: in a sonnet, he likens himself to an actor; and in this sonnet he equates his books of poetry with a play. The complication helps make its own point: Shakespeare's ingrained thinking process both separates and intertwines the two modes of his professional career. Yet, by borrowing Booth's principle from Sonnet 110, perhaps we can see Shakespeare presenting Will as a (clownish) man of the theatre who nonetheless has managed to write poetry of educational value – and is saying so in a Petrarchan sonnet. At the core of Will's educational program is the idea that runs throughout the sequence as a kind of refrain: that true love is silent and does not speak a part. Printed verse, not public theatre, is the fit medium to display the integrity of this faith in silent desire; theatre, by its nature, is a shameful public profession because it violates that integrity.

Yet the combination of theatre and poetry in Sonnet 23 is both more detailed and more complicated than even this preliminary formulation allows, as recent scholarship reveals. The primary problem lies in the textual crux of the word "books" in line 9. In the eighteenth century, George Sewell emended the 1609 quarto's "books" to "looks," mainly because of the problem "books" creates for the meaning of "dumb presagers" in

line 10. As Booth explains, the word "presagers" has "not been satisfactorily explained . . . No other instance of 'presager' or any form of 'presage' is known where the reference is not to foreshowing the future" (Booth, ed., *Sonnets*, 172). Evans adds, "since Shakespeare's 'books'" are "already written," they "cannot properly be said to prophesy or foretell" (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 136). The word "looks" makes more sense, some editors insist, because "looks" can function as "dumb presagers" of Will's "eloquence."

I confess that I do not understand this line of argument, since a similar thought appears famously in Sonnet 106 (Cheney, "Sonnet 106"). Referring to past writers, Will observes,

> I see their antique pen would have express'd
> Even such a beauty as you master now.
> So all their praises are but prophecies
> Of this our time, all you prefiguring,
> And for they look'd but with divining eyes,
> They had not still [or skill] enough your worth to sing.
> (Sonnet 106. 7–12)

Here Will engages in a similarly tortuous, hyperbolic writerly thought grounded in impossibility: writers of old wrote works that prophesy the young man; however, because such writers looked only with divining eyes (able to foretell the youth), they lacked the style or skill to sing his worth consciously.[36] In the context of Sonnet 106, the word "books" in Sonnet 23 makes perfect sense: Will asks that his books function as presagers, foreshadowers, of his current poems celebrating the young man. In effect, Will assigns to his own poetry the principle he later assigns to the poetry of others; in both instances, the young man's beauty warrants the time-bending conceit (this turns out to be one of the few things to the youth's credit).

Before turning to the question of which books Will has in mind, we may note something rather curious here; perhaps lines 9–10 construct a fable for modern Shakespearean scholarship: the text's conjunction of printed poetry and staged theatre is precisely what has baffled us. Yet it is such a conjunction that the text presents, and thus we might profitably submit rather than try to erase it. Through theatrical discourse in a sonnet that refers to his printed poems, Will presents himself as a new English Ovidian poet-playwright caught between two interconnected, clashing media, even

[36] All editors gloss the textual crux here of "style" versus "skill," but neither reading seriously affects the argument. All three 1997 editions of the complete works – *Riverside, Norton, Longman* – print "books" and follow up with notes on Shakespeare's reference to his printed poems or works. Moreover, Booth, J. Kerrigan, and Duncan-Jones all print "books," as does Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Sonnets*.

in his relationship with the young man. This clash is precisely the context for negotiating that relationship.

In the first quatrain, Will likens himself both to an actor in the theatre whose stage fright has compelled him to forget his part and to a wild "thing" (or animal) whose anger has weakened his wrath. As Booth helps us see, the phrasing is more complicated: "Before a reader comes to line 4 and sees that *Or* introduces a parallel construction that presents an alternative for the whole of lines 1 and 2, *Or* can seem to introduce an alternative only to *fear* in line 2, an alternative cause of the actor's lapse of memory" (Booth, ed., *Sonnets*, 171). This reading extends the theatre simile to the whole of the quatrain, making its topic fully professional. Will is identifying either two causes or two alternative causes or perhaps two interlocked causes to the problem he withholds until the second quatrain: the intersection of opposing emotions of fear and desire interferes with his ability to "speak." Facing the young man, Will feels like a fearful actor on the stage (and/or a powerful creature with great energy) unable to act out his desire.

In the second quatrain, line 5 supports the interlock of fear and desire as the emotions Will experiences on the stage, for here the two become one: "So I, for fear of trust, forget to say." *Fear of trust/forget to say*: the loaded line brings to bear on poetry and theatre two ideas central to the Shakespeare canon – the fear of infidelity and the problem of memory and forgetting.[37] Will's fear of trusting the young man, perhaps himself, impedes his ability to write poetry, just as his stage fright impedes his ability to act in the theatre. Will does not cordon his relationship with the young man off from his double life as a poet and dramatist but rather interlocks the two in a complex dynamic. The echo between "*unperfect* actor" in line 1 and poetry's "*perfect* ceremony of love's rite" in line 6 – noted by editors – reinforces the structural conjunction between Will's twin professional media, as Evans's gloss helps us see: "word-perfect 'performance' or observance (such as would be given by the 'perfect actor'" on the stage) (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 136).

In the third quatrain, Will supplies a solution to his problem: let his "books" speak for him, as the dumb show speaks for the play the audience is about to view. We do not know which books Will has in mind, but editors have turned up three main possibilities: (1) the present sonnets; (2) Shakespeare's past printed books, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of*

[37] Sonnet 23 confirms what Sonnet 152, the last in the Petrarchan part of the sequence, clarifies, that Shakespeare's Sonnets are fundamentally about the problem of infidelity – sexual, marital, philosophical, theological, and of course professional: "new faith torn" (152. 3). The problem of memory and forgetting is less often discussed; see Sullivan, "Forgetting."

Lucrece; and even (3) the "written text of a stage play."[38] Each of these possibilities contains an intriguing line of inquiry that we can only sketch in briefly here. Taking the three in reverse order: If the books are Will's written scripts for stage plays, in effect he is encouraging the young man to read Shakespeare's plays as prefigurations of his sonnets, the representation of dramatic characters functioning as presagers for the young man. This reading conjoins poetry and theatre in an important dyad that could lead the historical young man (who ever he was) to view those plays in terms of himself. What would be the effect of carrying out such an interpretive program, even for a single play published before 1609, such as *1 Henry IV* or *Hamlet*? (Has anyone ever devised a sounder strategy for securing patronage? It couldn't hurt box-office receipts either.) If, on the other hand, the books refer to *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, we might ask, What do these poems communicate to that same young man (or even to readers viewing this scenario, such as Shakespeare's "private friends" or his public friends, ourselves)? Plotting the terms of an interpretative program here is easier to perform. *Venus and Adonis* might well encourage the young man to avoid the brutal fate of Adonis' narcissism by listening to the authority of Venus (169–74) – the same authority Will has urged on to the young man in Sonnets 1–17: the young man would free himself from the fatal danger of virginity by marrying and then procreating. By contrast, *The Rape of Lucrece* might entreat the young man to avoid the equally brutal fate of Tarquin's devouring lust – the very bestial desire that Will encounters (albeit with the dark lady's complicity) through the "sensual fault" of Sonnet 35 (line 9; see Sonnet 34). According to this possibility, then, Shakespeare's two minor epics would acquire the status of humanist manifestoes training a young man (and young men generally) in the art of sexual character, in the hopes of turning tragic fate aside. Finally, if the books are the sonnets we are presently reading, Will is simply telling the young man that his sonnets – at the least the first twenty-two – function as presagers of his interior voice: his "speaking breast."

That last phrase deserves a pause, for, as Naomi J. Miller nicely observes, Will employs the discourse of early modern "codes of maternity," and this topic bears intriguingly on our discussion:

> "As an unperfect actor," the speaker fears the responsibility of the mother's part, and fears as well the "strength's abundance" of "some fierce thing." . . . The nursing metaphor underlying the "speaking breast" allows the poet to establish a maternal dumb show, in which the sonnets "express" the milk of the poet's love. (N. J. Miller 347, 355)

[38] Quoted in Booth, ed., *Sonnets*, 172. For the present sonnets and Shakespeare's two previously printed poems, see Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 203; Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 156.

Although Miller does not engage the theatrical metaphor (from her title), she prepares us to re-imagine Will as that "actor on the stage": he is (also) "play[ing] the mother's part" (143. 12), cross-dressed quite.

In the couplet, Will directs the young man to "learn to read" such milky books, for to "hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit." Here Will finalizes the sonnet's obsessive dichotomy between promulgation and silence, publication and inwardness, speaking and feeling, writing and loving.[39] For his part, Shakespeare turns Will's attempt to explain his lapse in celebrating the young man into a forum on the problem "express[ing]" his twin career as an English Ovidian poet-playwright.

SONNETS 29, 55, 108

In Sonnet 29, one of the most well-known in the sequence, Will appears to locate his public "disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes" (1) in the theatre and his consolation to such disgrace once again in his thought of the young man and in the "hymns" about the youth that he sings at "heaven's gate" (12). Although we do not know for sure the misfortune to which Will alludes, readers often suspect the author's life in the theatre.[40] The opening quatrain, with its portrait of Will "beweep[ing]" his "outcast state" and "troubl[ing] . . . deaf heaven" with his "bootless cries," certainly has the feel of drama, especially tragedy, with its suffering actor strutting on the stage. Therefore, we may wonder whether to detect a pun in "bootless" (perhaps a reference to the *cothurnus* or boot of the tragic actor?).[41] Those who do read theatre into the first quatrain (in particular) would see Will

[39] For Will's "oscillation" between "subjectivity" and "civic temperament," see Martin, *Policy*, 134–36.

[40] See, e.g., Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 141. Evans also links the reference to bad "Fortune" at 111. 1 with Shakespeare's life in the theatre, citing Sir John Davies' two references to Shakespeare, the theatre, and fortune (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 222; see Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 332). Kerrigan glosses line 4 ("And look upon myself") as follows: "The poet is not navel-gazing but has become the spectator of his own predicament (compare *3 Henry VI*, 2. 3. 25–8 . . .)" (Kerrigen, ed., *The Sonnets*, 210).

[41] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *bootless* can mean both "Void of boot or profit" (first entry, def 3) and "Without boots" (second entry), citing *1 Henry IV*, 3. 1. 66–67, when Glendower says he has sent Bullingbrook "Bootless home and weather-beaten back," to which Hotspur rejoins, "Home without boots, and in foul weather too!" The *Oxford English Dictionary* notwithstanding, here Shakespeare brings the two meanings of the word together. In "To the memory of my beloved," Jonson dresses Shakespeare himself in this guise: "to heare thy Buskin tread, / And shake a Stage" (36–37; *Riverside Shakespeare*, 97).

locating "disgrace" in his public role as an actor. Consequently, in the third quatrain, when Will provides the consolation for such misfortune in the thoughts he has of the young man and in the "hymns" he sings, we may once more see Will opposing poetry to theatre: his present practice as a private sonneteer consoles him for his disgraceful public profession.

The details of the antithesis deserve further attention. In the theatre of the octave, Will presents himself as a disgraced sufferer who seeks recourse in "heaven," only to find that high locale "deaf" – as if tragic theatre had no access to Christian grace, bound by the pagan determinism of "fate." In the poetic expression of the sestet, however, Will's "state" of thinking on the young man is "Like to the lark at break of day arising," able to "sing . . . hymns at heaven's gate." Since the lark is the bird that can sing while rising in flight, sixteenth-century writers often used it as a symbol of the individual's intellectual ascent to God.[42] Here Shakespeare uses the lark to evoke Christian resonance for his art, as the word "hymns" confirms. While theatre leaves the individual bootless – in an impotent state of misfortune – poetry puts his soul in touch with the deity. The image of the lark-like hymn singing "at heaven's gate" is pristine in its theological precision, compelling us to situate Shakespeare's claim for poetry in a longer Western continuum that stretches from Virgil and Ovid to Dante and Spenser. Whereas Virgil and Ovid vaunted poetry's power to secure fame along a horizontal axis (on earth, in time, and in the ears of posterity), both Dante and Spenser vaunted poetry's power to secure Christian glory along a vertical axis (in heaven, for eternity, and in the ears of God, Christ, and the saints).[43] By contrast, Shakespeare appears to be claiming an intermediate power for poetry, spatially between Virgilian earthly fame and Dantean Christian glory: Shakespeare's hymn cannot get the individual *into* heaven to secure grace and salvation, but it can get the individual *to* "heaven's gate." The conceit of an art that can sound to the Day of Judgment occurs in a related form throughout the Shakespeare canon, in both poems and plays, including three times in the Sonnets and most importantly in Sonnet 55:

> '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.
> So till the judgment that yourself arise,
> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.
> (Sonnet 55. 9–14)

[42] See Cheney, *Flight*, 88, 269n11.

[43] See Cheney, *Flight*, 7–10.

In the history of fame, Shakespeare's tender little words "to" and "till" acquire dramatic significance, segueing the relation between classical Virgilian fame and Dantean Christian glory. Will dramatically writes a verse in which the young man steps forth with great authority in the eyes of posterity "to" the "ending doom" – "till" the "judgment." Shakespeare is not as bold as Dante or Spenser, but he is bolder than Virgil or Ovid.[44] The final *telos* of Shakespearean poetry, we may speculate, is to prepare the individual's soul for this momentous occasion; this may well be the promised end of Shakespearean subjectivity in the Sonnets. In the plays, we witness the same *telos* most powerfully when the Eastern Star says to Charmian, in her characteristically theatrical way, "I'll give thee leave / To play till doomsday" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5. 2. 231–32).

An extended, even technical version of poetry and theatre appears in Sonnet 108:

> What's in the brain that ink may character
> Which hath not figur'd to thee my true spirit?
> What's new to speak, what now to register,
> That may express my love, or thy dear merit?
> Nothing, sweet boy, but yet like prayers divine,
> I must each day say o'er the very same,
> Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I mine,
> Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name.
> So that eternal love in love's fresh case
> Weighs not the dust and injury of age,
> Nor gives to necessary wrinkles place,
> But makes antiquity for aye his page,
> Finding the first conceit of love there bred,
> Where time and outward form would show it dead.
> (Sonnet 108)

This densely complex sonnet could be the topic of a separate essay. Duncan-Jones notes the significance of the sonnet's number: "Reaching 108, the total number of sonnets in Sidney's *AS* [*Astrophil and Stella*] . . . the poet takes stock of his achievements. He can find no new way of representing either himself or the youth in words, but is compelled to reiterate what he has often said before; in so doing he continually rediscovers his

[44] See also Sonnets 116. 2 and 122. 4, as well as *Lucrece*, 924, *Love's Labor's Lost*, 4. 3. 270, *Richard III*, 3. 1. 78, *Henry V*, 4. 1. 137. Cf. Engle, "Certainty," 837–38 on Shakespeare's commitment to contingency; Greenblatt, who ends *Purgatory* with a note on "the afterlife" in Sonnet 55 (313n1). In "Ovid, Petrarch," Braden traces Shakespeare's use of immortality in the Sonnets to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but he misjudges the historic significance of Sonnet 55 when he sees it showing merely "poetry's ability to defy time" (108).

first love and the young man's first beauty, revivified in language though vanished in nature" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 326). Sonnet 108 also needs to be situated historically in the context of both Plato and Scripture, as its discourse of philosophy and religion indicates, especially the Platonically precise "eternal love" but also the various echoes of Christian worship: "prayers divine" and "hallowed . . . name."[45] Most obviously, the sonnet is important for its reflection on the seminal challenge of Shakespeare's poetic art: to write "eternal love in love's fresh case"; to present the particular instance or thing of love so that it partakes of the eternal essence, thereby freeing it from the dust of death – in effect, to write verse that allows the young man to prepare for (or participate in) Christian immortality.

Shakespeare's inclusion of a discourse that pertains either to printed poetry or to staged theatre helps support this reading. While the word "show" has clear theatrical resonance, and "antiquity" clear resonance for printed books, most of the words straddle the borderline between the two forms: "character," "figured," "speak," "say," "express," "form."[46] The word "case" is a case in point. John Kerrigan identifies four different meanings for the phrase "love's fresh case": "(1) in the (constantly) fresh circumstances of (truly true) love; (2) contained in affection's sprightly (though *old*) argument (meaning 'my love poetry'); (3) covered by affection's youthful vigour (*case* suggesting 'skin', and thus the *wrinkles* of line 11); (4) clad in affection's sprightly garb (common meaning of *case* in the period)" (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 321). To these four meanings, Evans adds a fifth: "in the case of a newly conceived love" (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 219). To these five, we can add a sixth, prepared for by Kerrigan's fourth meaning – one that pertains to the theatre: "case" as dress, costume, as in *Measure for Measure*'s "How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit" (2. 4. 13), but specifically "case" as theatrical disguise, as in Hal's directive to Poins in *1 Henry IV* during the robbery at Gad's Hill: "Case ye, case ye, on with your vizards" (2. 2. 53).[47] According to the theatrical meaning of "case," then, Will can be seen to talk not just about an author's expressive challenge but also about the challenge facing a playwright and an actor: the challenge of staging "eternal love" freshly. The emphatic word "show" in the last line compels this theatrical ring for the sonnet as a whole. Characteristically, the verbal play of "show"

[45] Editors emphasize Scripture but neglect Plato. Duncan-Jones glosses "eternal love" as having "strong religious connotations, as in Sidney's *CS* [*Certain Sonnets*], 32: 13–14" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 326).

[46] On "character" as a print term, see Burrow, "Life," 24–25.

[47] See *Romeo and Juliet* 1. 4. 29–30; *1 Henry IV*, 1. 2. 179; *Henry V*, 3. 2. 4.

shifts to where we might expect it – the negative side of the poetry/theatre dialectic, allowing Will to "show" what will die: "outward form."

SONNET 144

Sonnet 144 is the final poem of Shakespeare's Sonnets to bring poetry and theatre into significant alignment. This sonnet is notable not simply because a version of it was published along with a version of Sonnet 138 in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, but also because it is (as we have seen) "one of the strongest sonnets in the volume," and the only one that summarizes the triangulated plot of sexual desire between Will, the young man, and the dark lady.[48] As Duncan-Jones adds, "The sonnet's number in the sequence, 12 × 12, known as a 'gross', may be especially appropriate to this enumeration of the speaker's amorous possessions, which prove to be 'gross' also in the sexual sense" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 402). That Shakespeare would conjoin poetry and theatre in such a significant sonnet makes it especially worth entertaining here.

Unlike Sonnet 55 or Sonnet 111, Sonnet 144 contains no explicit reference to either Will's role as a poet or as a playwright, nor does it employ overt poetic or theatrical discourse. Instead, it presents Will as a sonnet writer who deploys a religious metaphor evocative of the morality play tradition, especially as staged famously in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.[49] The effect of the morality play metaphor – and perhaps even of the Marlovian one – is to present Will as a sonneteer staging and rewriting his morality play predicament in terms at once personal and erotic.[50]

The first quatrain stages a dialectic between the young man and the dark lady as types of "love," conveyed through several fields – gender, aesthetics, ethics, theology, and finally personal affect:

> Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
> Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
> The better angel is a man right fair,
> The worser spirit a woman color'd ill.
> (Sonnet 144. 1–4)

Thus the young man is (indeed) a "man," "fair," "better," and an "angel" who brings Will "comfort," while the dark lady is a "woman," "color'd

[48] Quoted in Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 59. Evans quotes Leslie Fielder, who calls 144 "the thematic key to the entire sequence" (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 262).

[49] Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 375; Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 262; Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 402.

[50] On the morality play in *Doctor Faustus*, see Grantley, "Theatricalism," 234–35.

ill," "worser," and a sinister "spirit" who brings him "despair." As Booth observes, "comfort and despair" are "both terms in theology, an area which the poem immediately invades" (Booth, ed., *Sonnets*, 497). Through this dialectic, Will converts his lyric expression into a theatrical event.

The second quatrain puts the dialectic into action:

> To win me soon to hell, my female evil
> Tempteth my better angel from my [side],
> And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
> Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
> (Sonnet 144. 5–8)

Here we learn that the dark lady has seduced the young man in order to carry out revenge against Will. Critics rightly see Shakespeare rewriting the plot of *Everyman* or *Doctor Faustus*, since the bad angel turns her attention, not to the mortal soul in the middle, but to her mirror opposite, the good angel, effectively cutting Will out of the theological deal. Moreover, lines 6–8 introduce the important blurring of boundaries between the two halves of the dialectic, for the good angel is here subjected to the temptation of the evil angel: Will's "saint" becomes a "devil," the young man's "purity" is wooed by the dark lady's "foul pride." The distinction between masculine and feminine, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, comfort and despair begins to evaporate, to be replaced by a new murkiness that resembles the atmosphere from Sonnet 15.

The third quatrain then shows Will's reaction to this atmospheric murkiness; he loses his ability to see clearly:

> And whether that my angel be turn'd fiend,
> Suspect I may, yet not directly tell,
> But being both from me, both to each friend,
> I guess one angel in another's hell.
> (Sonnet 144. 9–12)

He can only suspect, not actually determine, whether the young man and the dark lady betray him behind his back. In the end, he is left to "guess," thereby creating a mental fiction in which "one angel [enters] in another's hell." The line is ambiguous, since it does not specify which spiritual creature and which afterlife are which: the dark lady and the young man have become indistinguishable. Will's emphasis here on inwardness ("suspect," "tell," "guess") marks his dramatic progress during the three quatrains, from his formulation of a dialectic, to his representation of a dialectical action, to his own reaction to that action.

In the couplet, Will summarizes his inward condition as one of ignorance, and he gestures toward an end to the (Im)morality play he has been staging: "Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt, / Till my bad angel fire my good one out." As Booth puts it, he will live in doubt "'Until she gets tired of him and kicks him out' and 'Until he shows symptoms of venereal disease'" (Booth, ed., *Sonnets*, 500). At the close, Will reaches clarity, but only through perceiving the grim effects of a maliciously lustful sexuality.

Will's phrase "live in doubt" is among the most useful in the entire sequence for registering the historical context in which Shakespeare produced his Sonnets. The phrase anticipates Donne's more famous articulation, two years later in the *First Anniversary*: "And new Philosophy calls all in doubt, / The Element of fire is quite put out; / . . . / Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone."[51] While this view of "doubt" during the period is well known, what might be fresh is Shakespeare's portrait of a new kind of author as the mouthpiece to the deeply anxious expression of the age: the English Ovidian poet-playwright.

PASTORAL AND EPIC THEATRE

The presence of Ovidian poetry and theatre in the Sonnets is inflected by the Virgilian career dynamic outlined in earlier chapters. We may take the cue of William Empson, who titles his famous chapter on Sonnet 94 in *Some Versions of Pastoral* "They That Have Power: Twist of Heroic-Pastoral Ideas into an Ironical Acceptance of Aristocracy" (87–115). However influential Empson's essay has been, it remains oblique, so perhaps it should not be surprising to discover that his Virgilian paradigm of epic and pastoral has not taken root in subsequent discussions of either Shakespeare's most discussed sonnet or of the Sonnets generally.

Curiously, Empson's chapter title is the only explicit statement of his thesis, so we may need to recall his special "version of pastoral," emphasized in his larger study: pastoral is an ideological practice of "putting the complex into the simple," the gentleman-courtier into the shepherd-poet. In other words, Empson's famous version "piled the heroic convention onto the pastoral one" (12). While Empson analyzes the intersection of the plant or pastoral imagery and the class or epic imagery in Sonnet 94, he reminds us that such imagery is gathered in from elsewhere in the sequence – from Sonnet 15, for instance, but especially from the memorable "rose" sonnets.

[51] Donne, *First Anniversary*, 205–13. Critics often see Shakespeare in the Sonnets living in doubt (Dubrow, *Victors*, 256–57), and we may wish to lean on his phrase in Sonnet 144 to encapsulate this frame of mind.

Indeed, Shakespeare's sequence opens precisely with this version of pastoral, as Will uses recurrent metaphors from what Empson regards as pastoral simplicity to encourage the young man to marry and procreate: "From fairest creatures we desire increase / That thereby beauty's rose might never die" (1. 1–2). Georgio Melchiori well documents these opening sonnets' "concern with concrete principles of good husbandry: ploughing (Sonnet 3), the distillation of perfume from flowers (Sonnet 5 and 6), cattle-rearing (Sonnet 6), harvesting (Sonnet 12), grafting (Sonnet 15), the cultivation of flowers and plants (Sonnet 16)" (*Dramatic Meditations*, 27–28). Bruce R. Smith adds that "The pastoral images of the first twenty sonnets are replaced by chambers and closets (46), beds (27, 142), chests (48, 52, 65), mirrors (63, 77), and clocks (57). The delights of the *locus amoenus* give way to the confidences of the bedchamber" (*Homosexual Desire*, 254). In other words, a pastoral ideal gives way to a courtly one.

By taking these cues and that of Sonnet 94, we can extend Will's "pastoral" and "heroic" concern beyond the Procreation Sonnets in order to see Will, not simply as an Ovidian poet-playwright in the Marlovian vein, but also as a Virgilian pastoral-epicist in the Spenserian vein. Indeed, Will's representation in Sonnet 32 of his "poor rude lines" (4) introduces Spenser's humble pastoral style into the Sonnets.[52] Similarly, Will's representation in Sonnet 106 of "ladies dead and lovely knights" evokes Spenser's epic project:

> When in the chronicle of wasted time
> I see descriptions of the fairest wights
> And beauty making beautiful old rhyme
> In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights.
> (106. 1–4)

While each of the first three lines carries Spenserian weight, line 4 is a quite specific *imitatio* of the most important programmatic line in the entire *Faerie Queene*: "And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds" (1. Proem 1). Spenser's line is the first articulation in his romantic epic of his persona as the Virgil of England. As suggested in chapter 2, he opens his epic by relying on a theatrical metaphor that may have interested Shakespeare:

> Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
> As time her taught, in lowly Shepheards weeds,
> Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,

[52] For details, see Cheney, "Sonnet 106," to which the following discussion is indebted. "Rude" (with cognates) is Spenser's habitual word for his pastoral poetry (*Colin Clouts*, 363, 669, *Januarye*, 67, *June*, 77, *December*, 14; Envoy, 5, *Astrophel*, Proem 12) and for the pastoral poet writing epic (*Fairie Queene* 1. 12. 23, 3. 2. 3).

> For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,
> And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;
> Whose prayses having slept in silence long.
> (Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, 1. Proem 1)

Here Spenser announces his Virgilian turn from pastoral to epic. If Shakespeare is imitating the penultimate line, he is imitating the very site of Spenser's generic progression. From this brief moment, we can discern that Shakespeare's Sonnets present the author as an Ovidian/Marlovian poet-playwright traveling along the Virgilian/Spenserian path.

Sonnet 102 offers a clear map to this authorial representation:

> My love is strength'ned, though more weak in seeming,
> I love not less, though less the show appear;
> That love is merchandiz'd whose rich esteeming
> The owner's tongue doth publish every where.
> Our love was new, and then but in the spring,
> When I was wont to greet it with my lays,
> As Philomela in summer's front doth sing,
> And stops [her] pipe in growth of riper days:
> Not that the summer is less pleasant now,
> Than when her mournful hymns did hush the night,
> But that wild music burthens every bough,
> And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.
> Therefore like her, I sometime hold my tongue,
> Because I would not dull you with my song.
> (Sonnet 102)

As in the previous sonnets we have examined, here we can clearly locate the discourse of both theatre ("show") and poetry ("lays"). Beyond this, however, the form of the conjunction is anything but clear.

In line 4, for instance, the word "publish" might seem to evoke an anxiety over printed poetry (see Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 584), except that Will himself aligns it with the shame of "show" from line 2 (cf. Wall, *Imprint*, 197). As in Sonnet 23, Will distinguishes between the loving poet's silence as a form of integrity and the prospect of over-broadcasting as the mark of only "seeming" to "love." Yet in Sonnet 102 the word "show" describes Will's praise of the young man through the art of poetry: "I love not less, though less the show appear." That is to say, Will's poetry in praise of the young man is a "show," even though it appears less now that it once did. In lines 3–4, Will employs the mercantile terms of both the counting-house and the print shop to distinguish between his reticence in expressing his love and his "merchandiz[ing]" of love through "publish[ing]" it "every where." Will

does not say "publish" *at all*; he says "publish every where." Thus, in the first quatrain, while the word "publish" shows Shakespeare worrying about print publication, it also associates publication with "show" as a shameful form of publicity violating intimate truth. Unlike other sonnets we have examined, here poetry and theatre are complicit in the economy of shame.

Only in the second quatrain do we begin to acquire more authoritative direction. Line 5, "Our love was new, and then but in the spring," introduces a change from the present of the first quatrain to the past, "When" Will was "wont" to "greet" the spring with his "lays." Even though he no longer praises the young man, in the past he was able to "publish" his love through the "show" of poetry. As in the first quatrain, Will sees poetry as a type of theatre, but here it is not shameful. The simile then comparing Will's writing process with the singing cycle of "Philomela" clarifies a crucial point: just as the nightingale sings in the spring but "stops [her] pipe in growth of riper days" – in late summer – so Will enacts a human process. He does not stop his pipe because he loves the young man "less," but rather because he participates in a natural or seasonal cycle. He compares himself with Philomela to convince the young man that his poetic process is natural rather than merely theatrical.

Yet this is no more than a version of Shakespearean humor, since the author evokes the ancient myth of Philomela. As Evans remarks, the word "'mournful' reflects the tragic events surrounding Philomela," especially as Ovid retold those events in Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses* (424–674), but also as Shakespeare himself had adapted the events in *Titus Andronicus* (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 211) – and, we may add, in *The Rape of Lucrece* and elsewhere. While Philomela clearly has the "Ovidian" associations that editors conventionally assign to it, we might recall that both before and after Ovid Philomela appears as the arch-myth for both pastoral and tragedy. For Shakespeare, we might say, unlike for Spenser, the nightingale becomes the quintessential figure for the fusion of theatre with poetry.

In line 8, Will evokes the tradition of Philomela as the myth of pastoral from Theocritus to Spenser: "And stops [her] pipe in growth of riper days." The importance of this line has escaped attention, for it is among the clearest excavations in the English Renaissance of an ancient archaeological artifact: the nightingale as a musical instrument of pastoral poetry.[53] While drawing on an ancient tradition, Shakespeare also situates himself historically. Editors cite Nicholas Breton in Sonnet 1 of his 1604 *The Passionate Shepherd* (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 211), Sidney in the *Old Arcadia* (66. 13–14;

[53] See Cheney, *Flight*, 69–70, 265n46; on the panpipe and birds, see 265n45.

Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 314), Petrarch in Song 311 (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 584), and Barnabe Barnes in *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 584). While poet after poet during the period does present him or herself as a type of Philomela, Spenser's E. K., we have seen, traces English origins to Gascogine and identifies Spenser himself as the prime inheritor after Gascoigne's death in 1578. If we recall merely that the "Elizabethans, probably influenced by the Philomela story, usually associated the song of the nightingale with the female" (Evans, ed., *Sonnets*, 211), we erase this specific Elizabethan genealogy. Conversely, by recalling that Shakespeare's "*Philomel* resembles a sheperd(ess) playing panpipes in a pastoral landscape" (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 306), we profitably situate Will's pastoral self-representation along Spenser's Virgilian path.[54]

In fact, Will's phrasing in lines 6–8 clearly echoes that of Colin Clout in the *November* eclogue, where Spenser's persona is called "The Nightingale . . . sovereigne of song" (25) and where the shepherd himself refers to "Philomele" steeping her "song with teares" during his Song of Dido (141). Let us place the two sets of lines together:

> When I was wont to greet it with my lays,
> As Philomela in summer's front doth sing,
> And stops [her] pipe in growth of riper days.
> (Shakespeare, Sonnet 102. 6–8)

> The mornefull Muse [Melpomene] in myrth now list ne maske,
> As she was wont in youngth and sommer dayes.
> (Spenser, *November*, 19–20)

Perhaps Spenser's theatrical metaphor, "maske," attracted the theatrical man. In any event, here we discover another Spenserian link between poetry and theatre, pastoral and tragedy. In line 6, Shakespeare's phrase "was wont" is distinctly Spenserian, occurring no fewer than 238 times in his canon (with cognates), often in the context of both pastoral and poetry. Like Will, Colin Clout famously stops his pipe in "growth of riper days" (see *June*, 36).[55]

Thus, in a sonnet conjoining Marlowe's Ovidian discourse of poetry and theatre with Spenser's discourse of pastoral and epic, Shakespeare uses the Philomela myth as a point of intersection between the two literary representations. Effectively, Will presents himself as a pastoral tragedian singing "mournfull hymns." In the third quatrain, he then uses his identity with Philomela to detach himself from rival poets who have also been using "wild

[54] On Spenserian pastoral and Shakespearean dramatic pastoral, see Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, 185–86.
[55] The phrase "mournfull hymns" recalls the "hymne" to Dido sung by Colin, who invokes Melpomene, "mournefulst Muse of nyne" (*November*, 53).

music" to "burthen . . . every bough."[56] Here Will justifies "stop[ping]" his poetry through an ornithological process, in which countless birds eventually join with the nightingale in singing their songs. Consequently, in this "riper" season the nightingale-poet ends his song to affirm his distinction as the sovereign of song.

In the couplet, Will confirms his likeness to Philomela. Perhaps his phrasing about "hold[ing] his tongue" and not "dulling" the young man glances at Philomela's loss of her tongue through the brutality of Tereus. As Wall reveals, Elizabethan poets like Spenser and Gascoigne recurrently cross-dress their voices in the garb of a female, including Philomela, to air their shame over printing their art (*Imprint*, 260–62). While Wall refers to Sonnet 102 only in passing (262), we might extend her analysis about the shame of publication to the twin domains of poetry and theatre, including Shakespeare's pastoral theatre here.

MANUSCRIPT AND PRINT AUTHORSHIP

So far, we have discussed poetry and theatre in terms of the narrative sequence that begins with the young-man sonnets and ends with the sonnets to the dark-lady. Recent textual scholarship, however, suggests that Shakespeare's compositional practice reversed this narrative order: he wrote the dark-lady sonnets first, c. 1591–95; and the young-man sonnets second, c. 1595–1604 (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 103–11, 131–38). This scholarship has intriguing implications for the present argument, because the discourse of poetry and theatre occurs almost exclusively in the young-man sonnets. While we can follow such critics as Fineman and Margreta de Grazia in formulating a critical narrative based on the structure of the 1609 quarto, foregrounding subjectivity or sexual scandal, we can take the editorial cue of Burrow to see how the Sonnets also register Shakespeare's increasing interest in the twin forms of authorship itself, the conjunction of poetry and theatre, from the mid-1590s through the first years of the seventeenth century. The author did not abandon poetry for theatre but came to see their conjunction as the central form of his art.

Having said so, we might acknowledge the challenge we confront in reconstructing the historical context for the Sonnets, for Shakespeare's collection has long been at the eye of a critical storm over the issue of authorship. On the one hand, the 1609 quarto has been so mysterious that from the

[56] Burrow glosses "burthens" by recalling that the "noun 'burden' can mean *chorus* (*OED* 10)" (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 584).

perspectives of both the bibliographer and the biographer we would not be unwise to abandon the category of the author altogether. The question was forcefully raised by Duncan-Jones in the title of a seminal essay, "Was the 1609 *Shake-speares Sonnets* Really Unauthorized?" Our answer to this question commits us to a series of critical positions – especially, in the current critical climate, our sense of the relation between a manuscript and a print Shakespeare. Those answering yes to the question, believing the Sonnets unauthorized, are compelled to identify the author as a manuscript rather than a print poet. On the other hand, the bibliographical (and biographical) work done by Duncan-Jones, Kerrigan, and others – those who answer that the Sonnets are indeed authorized – presents us with a radically different Shakespeare: not a private coterie poet in the mold of Donne but a public proto-national poet in the mold of Spenser. In these terms, the Sonnets would become not simply a manuscript poem circulated randomly among private friends but rather a carefully controlled collection that moves from scribal circulation to print publication.

Critics of differing professional temperaments will presumably suit themselves to whichever position they find comfortable, and few would be so unwise as to think rational argument could budge anyone either way. One suspects, however, that the truth lies elsewhere: that Shakespeare is neither Donne nor Spenser; the Sonnets are neither fully a manuscript-authored nor a print-authored poem. Presumably, this peculiar reality is why both Shakespeare and his collection have been so intriguing for so long: here we have an author and his work defying the binary categories in which we are used to thinking. We are witnessing, then, a new model of authorship, one that recent scholarship is only now learning to formulate. Among recent critics, Richard Helgerson most succinctly articulates this new model, in an evident attempt to reconcile recent historical theories of social construction with past theories of intentionality, saying of Shakespeare, "He helped make the world that made him" (*Forms*, 215). While recognizing Shakespeare's historical complexity in straddling the divide of early modern authorship – between manuscript and print culture, coterie poet and national poet, Donne and Spenser – we have attended to the second part of the opposition, because what seems missing in recent criticism is the kind of close intertextual work that demonstrates Shakespeare's interest in the Spenserian project.

At least since Charles Gildon and more famously Edmund Malone, critics have tried to capture the special relation that the Sonnets have to the plays, for better or for worse. As we have seen, Shakespeare himself *represented* his own sense of that relation. The Sonnets are surely not theatre,

but for that they need not apologize. Yet neither are they the Elizabethan or Jacobean lyric as usual – as testified to by so much criticism on their "dramatic" quality, or on their intimate connection with the inwardness of such plays as *Hamlet*. What is unusual in the Sonnets is Shakespeare's own self-consciousness about precisely this character for his historic composition. The Sonnets are poems not merely *by* a practicing man of the theatre but also *about* a theatrical man who tries to write them. In this, they may well find their final distinction from so much other great English Renaissance poetry. Shakespeare's book of sonnets is historically the dumb presager of his national eloquence.

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