7

Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Sonnet

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SONNET

When Shakespeare wrote his first sonnets, probably in the early 1590s, he was making a contribution to a genre that had existed in English for not much more than 50 years. In that time, however, the sonnet had become extraordinarily fashionable. First imported by the courtier and diplomat Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–42), and refined and modified by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–47), the form found a wider readership as a result of the publication in 1557 by the bookseller Richard Tottel of an anthology entitled *Songs and Sonnets written by the Right Honorable Lord Henry Howard late Earl of Surrey and other*. Better known as *Tottel's Miscellany*, this volume contained 271 poems by Wyatt, Surrey, the translator Nicholas Grimald, and a number of other unnamed writers, in a variety of forms imported from Europe and adapted to the vernacular language (it also included the earliest examples of blank verse). It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of *Tottel's Miscellany* to the early development of English lyric poetry; its publication was followed by many similar anthologies, and it initiated a process of dissemination to a broader audience of poems originally limited through manuscript circulation to an aristocratic elite.

As we saw in the opening chapter, this process of popularization of poetry, and particularly of the sonnet form, was given its strongest boost by the prestige attached to the name of Sir Philip Sidney, who between 1582–1583 wrote his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*. Sidney's sonnets were originally written for private reasons, and there is no evidence that they were circulated during his lifetime; if they were, they would have remained within his own coterie. *Astrophil and Stella* was not published until 1591, some years after his death, in an unauthorized edition. In large part because of the glamour associated with Sidney's name, *Astrophil and Stella* initiated the vogue for writing sonnets that between 1592 and 1609, the year of publication of Shakespeare's sonnets, produced more than twenty sequences. Most of the sequences, it should be noted, appeared before 1598, so the actual publication of Shakespeare's sonnets occurred well after the original vogue was ended.

As we know it today, the sonnet might seem to be a rather constricting form, with its fourteen lines of iambic pentameter (ten syllables, or five 'feet' each consisting of an unaccented syllable and an accented one) and its strict rhyming patterns. There are two major versions of the sonnet-form, differentiated by their rhyme-schemes: the Italian, or Petrarchan, and the English, or Shakespearean, though in Tudor England the term 'sonnet' was sometimes rather loosely applied to a variety of lyrical forms. The Petrarchan form is the one imported by Wyatt; Surrey anglicized it, largely by changing the rhyme-scheme. This 'English' form is the one that Shakespeare used for almost all his sonnets, and inevitably it is now closely associated with his name.

Petrarch was not the inventor of the form that has his name, though he was its greatest practitioner, and as we have seen he is associated with those conventional elements that are called 'Petrarchan'. The form appears to have originated in southern Italy a century or so before Petrarch wrote, but he made it so fashionable that it was exported to Spain in the fifteenth century, to France and England in the sixteenth, and to Germany in the seventeenth.[1] The Italian sonnet was a fourteen-line poem with eleven syllables to a line, and as Petrarch developed it, it fell into two parts, an eight-line section (now called an 'octave') with the rhyme-scheme *abbaabba*, and a six-line section (the 'sestet') *cdecde*, though there were variants of this (*cdcdcd*, *cdedce*, *cdeced*). Whatever the variant within the sestet, Italian sonnets avoided ending with a couplet. I shall return to a consideration of the implications of these rhyme-schemes later.

A sonnet that exhibits clearly many of the devices developed by Petrarch is number 132 of the *Canzoniere*:

  S'amor non è, che dunque è quel ch'io sento? a
ma s'egli è amor, per Dio, che cosa e quale? b
se bona, ond'è l'effetto aspro e mortale? b
se ria, ond'è sì dolce ogni tormento? a
  S'a mia voglia ardo, ond'è 'l pianto e lamento? a
s'a mal miogrado, il lamentar che vale? b
O viva morte, o dilettoso male, b

come puoi tanto in me, s'io no 'l consento? a
E s'io 'l consento, a gran torto mi doglio. c
Fra sì contrari vènti in frale barca d
mi trovo in alto mar, senza governo, e
sì lieve di saver, d'error sì carca, d
ch'i' medesmo non so quel ch'io mi voglio, c
e tremo a mezza state, ardendo il verno. e

A modern translation of this sonnet (without attempting a replication of the rhyme-scheme) renders it as follows:

If it's not love, then what is it I feel?
But if it's love, by God, what is this thing?
If good, why then the bitter mortal sting?
If bad, then why is every torment sweet?
If I burn willingly, why weep and grieve?
And if against my will, what good lamenting?
O living death, O pleasurable harm,
how can you rule me if I not consent?
And if I do consent, it's wrong to grieve.
Caught in contrasting winds in a frail boat
on the high seas I am without a helm,
so light of wisdom, so laden of error,
that I myself do not know what I want,
and shiver in midsummer, burn in winter.[2]

In the octave the poet attempts to understand through a series of questions the conflicted feelings aroused in him by his unattainable love; the paradoxes of the pains of love and his inexplicably willing acceptance of them are characteristically expressed though oxymoron ('O viva morte, o dilletoso male'). In the sestet the poet at first appears to accept this confusing state of being, since he embraces it freely, but the focus switches to his sense of being abandoned and without direction, and to a more general sense of alienation.

The unequal two-part structure of the Italian sonnet, which almost necessitates a dialectical movement between 'observation and conclusion, or statement and counter statement',[3] is often seen as its essential feature. The octave states and develops an idea or position, but after the eighth line there is a turn, or 'volta', and the sestet often presents a response to, or even a reversal of the octave's argument. Sir Thomas Wyatt, in importing the sonnet into England, mainly translated or adapted poems from Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Here is his version of number 134:

I find no peace and all my war is done.	a
I fear and hope, I burn, and freeze like ice.	b
I fly above the wind yet can I not arise.	b
And nought I have and all the world I seize on,	a
That looseth nor locketh, holdeth me in prison	a
And holds me not, yet can I scape no wise;	b
Nor letteth me live nor die at my device	b
And yet of death it giveth me occasion.	a
Without eyen I see and without tongue I plain.	c
I desire to perish and yet I ask health.	d
I love another and thus I hate myself.	d
I feed me in sorrow and laugh in all my pain.	c
Likewise displeaseth me both death and life,	e
And my delight is causer of this strife.[4]	e

As with all of his adaptations, Wyatt has retained the division between octave and sestet, but he has ended the sestet with a couplet, which changes the argumentative structure of the sonnet, making it tend towards a neat conclusion in the final two lines. This is the first step in the development of the English sonnet.

The English sonnet, which has a rhyme-scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg*, was essentially the invention of the Earl of Surrey. The rhyme-scheme breaks the poem into three quatrains and a couplet (4/4/4/2), thus allowing for a different and in some ways more flexible argumentative structure from the 8/6 division of the Italian sonnet, and tending to isolate and emphasize the final couplet to make a witty point, or conclusion, or reversal of the argument. An obvious way to develop an argument within this structure is to present an idea or state of mind within the first quatrain in terms of one metaphor, restate it or develop it in terms of another metaphor in the second quatrain, do the same in the third quatrain, and provide some kind of comment on it in the couplet. There are other ways to structure an argument, however. In this sonnet Surrey treats the three quatrains as if they were a single unit, thus dividing it 12/2:

The soote season, that bud and bloom forth brings,	a
With green hath clad the hill and eke the vale;	b
The nightingale with feathers new she sings;	a
The turtle to her make hath told her tale.	b
Summer is come, for every spray now springs;	c

The hart hath hung his old head on the pale; d
The buck in brake his winter coat he flings, c
The fishes float with new repaired scale; d
The adder all her slough away she slings, e
The swift swallow pursueth the flyes small; f
The busy bee her honey now she mings. e
Winter is worn, that was the flowers' bale. f
And thus I see among these pleasant things, g
Each care decays, and yet my sorrow springs.[5] g

The body of the sonnet presents a series of natural images expressing fruitfulness and renewal, and then the couplet presents in contrast the sorrowful state of the speaker, which turns out to be the poem's real point, though for the reader its best effects may lie in the natural description.

Why Surrey felt it desirable to modify the form is unclear; perhaps he was simply trying to make it easier by reducing the number of rhymes needed (the *abbaabba* form needs three words to rhyme with the word at the end of the first line; the *abab* form needs only one), perhaps reflecting the smaller number of rhyming words in English. John Fuller thinks that Wyatt and Surrey failed to grasp the point of the Italian sonnet,[6] but this seems rather unfair; both were experimenting, and the structure that their experiments eventually produced clearly must have satisfied Shakespeare. As to the poetic line, they chose iambic pentameter, presumably, as the closest English approximation to the eleven-syllable line of the Italian sonnets. They also used iambic pentameter for other lyrical forms, and Surrey made it the basis of his blank-verse translations of Virgil. Their work in effect initiated the establishment of iambic pentameter as the dominant line of English poetry. This is not, as it might seem, a simple matter of choosing the line that seems most 'natural' to English. As Antony Easthope has argued, the dominance of iambic pentameter is an ideological issue: 'The metre can be seen not as a neutral form of poetic necessity but a specific historical form producing certain meanings and acting to exclude others'.[7] The meanings it excludes are those related to older English verse forms, promoting instead a court culture that located its values in classical models. What is true of the line is true also of the sonnet: its initiating energies are reflective of aristocratic culture.

It is easy to see why the Petrarchan conventions of love and service produced in the sonnet should have fulfilled so completely the needs of Elizabeth's court, and why sonnet sequences should have dominated literary fashion during the last decade or so of her reign (the list of sonnet sequences at the end of this section indicates that the vogue effectively ended with her death). A female monarch governing a patriarchy, surrounded by powerful and potentially dangerous nobles, Elizabeth needed to encourage as many ideas as possible that would legitimate her rule. She fostered myths of her own divinity and initiated public ceremonies and entertainments that used a romanticized medievalism to promote models of order and service. Sidney competed in tournaments under the name 'Sir Philisides', and we can understand his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* to be at least in part an act of political courtship, for any work that attempted to win the favour of a woman who was powerful, distant and cruel, beautiful and virtuous and, above all, unattainable, clearly coded within its fictions an account of the courtier's relationship to his monarch.

Technically, the development of the sonnet sequence was in part a means of compensating for the restrictions of the individual sonnet, allowing the poet to play variations on his theme, to develop connections and contrasts from sonnet to sonnet, to build beyond the limits of a single poem. While the publication of *Astrophil and Stella* was instrumental in initiating the sonnet vogue, it was not the first sonnet sequence to be published in England. As early as 1560 a woman named Ann Lock published a series of 21 sonnets that were essentially paraphrases of psalms, prefaced by five original sonnets. This is a very interesting set of poems, but its publication was too obscure for it to have had any influence. In 1582 Thomas Watson published *Hekatompathia or Passionate Century of Love*; and in 1584 John Soowthern published a brief sequence of generally inept sonnets entitled *Pandora*. Of these two, Watson is the more significant. He referred to his poems as sonnets, though this was actually a sequence of a hundred eighteen-line poems, which gives some indication of how flexible the early idea of the sonnet was. His title-page indicates a degree of unease about the publication; the poems were, it states, 'Composed by Thomas Watson Gentleman; and published at the request of certaine Gentlemen his very frendes'.[8] Watson was a man of some distinction, a classical and legal scholar who enjoyed the patronage of the powerful aristocrat Sir Francis Walsingham and the friendship of Sidney himself. He was clearly aware of the elitist abhorrence of the idea of exhibiting themselves to a common audience that restrained aristocratic writers from publishing. Thus his insistence that he and his circle are gentlemen, and that the poems were published under pressure from his friends, with the implication that this was against his will, is a means of negotiating any potential embarrassment.

The manuscript circulation of poems amongst coteries of the powerful was not simply a matter of fastidiousness. It was a means whereby the court culture maintained its exclusiveness. Power needs secrets, and even sonnets can be secrets in this sense: they carry the values of the select group. Sidney had a keen interest in writing and in the development of a literature in English, but for him the idea of a literature could have been in no sense democratic. Apart from his seminal sonnet sequence, he wrote the most significant piece of criticism of the Elizabethan period, *An Apology for Poetry*, and the vast romance *The Arcadia*. None of this was published during his lifetime, however; it remained the possession of his closest friends. The printing press had no small influence on what has been called the 'crisis of the aristocracy', for it allowed the broad dissemination of their closely guarded secrets.

In order to understand the complex functioning of sonnet sequences in Shakespeare's society, it is worth looking a little more closely at *Astrophil and Stella*, a sequence of 108 sonnets interspersed with eleven songs. The very title sets up an intricate set of resonances. Meaning 'star-lover and star', it emphasizes the distance between the suitor and his object and the cold beauty of the woman. The name 'Astrophil' contains Sidney's own name within itself, but only in part, tantalizing the reader with the idea that the sequence is autobiographical. Astrophil is self-absorbed, however, often comically, sometimes darkly so, and the dominant experience of these sonnets is of frustration. The immediate model for Stella was Penelope Devereux, daughter of the first Earl of Essex, who in 1581 married Robert, Earl Rich, and thus became unattainable except through adultery. Obviously, the ostensible intimacy of the sequence made it potentially scandalous. But as we have seen, the relationship between poet and unattainable object had been a convention of sonnet sequences from Petrarch onwards, so if this work is autobiographical, it is so in a very limited sense. Without doubt, the poems reflect a keen understanding of the self-deceptions that arise from a struggle to elevate desire to something higher than mere appetite, and Sidney might well have shared much of the experience that Astrophil analyses, but he seems to stand at some distance from his creation, holding him up for judgement as much as for sympathy.

The 'narrative' of *Astrophil and Stella*, insofar as there is one, tells of the gradual growth in Astrophil of what he identifies as love. Insistently rebuffed by Stella but unwilling to take 'No' for an answer, he minutely examines his own obsessive behaviour. The closest he comes to satisfying his desire is when he steals a kiss from the sleeping woman, but the sequence ends in futility and defeat in the final sonnet:

> But soon as thought of thee breeds my delight,
> And my young soul flutters to thee his nest,
> Most rude despair my daily unbidden guest,
> Clips straight my wings, straight wraps me in his night,
> And makes me then bow down my head and say,
> Ah what doth Phoebus' gold that wretch avail
> Whom iron doors do keep from use of day?
>
> (108, 5–11)

This, like the sequence it concludes, is a fine account of sexual frustration, but if we look beneath its surface we can see that it is also a rendering of social frustration. In 1580, partly because of his opposition to the proposed marriage of Queen Elizabeth to the Duke of Alencon, Sidney went into a kind of voluntary exile at Wilton, the home of his sister, and it was there that he did much of his writing, particularly of *Astrophil and Stella*. It is difficult not to see the queen behind Stella, the real object of Astrophil's thwarted desire. Sonnet 41 is based on Sidney's own participation in a tournament in May 1581:

> Having this day my horse, my hand, my lance
> Guided so well, that I obtain'd the prize,
> Both by the judgement of the English eyes,
> And of some sent from that sweet enemy France,
> Horsemen my skill in horsemanship advance,
> Town-folks my strength: a daintier judge applies
> His praise to sleight, which from good use doth rise:
> Some lucky wits impute it but to chance:
> Others, because of both sides I do take
> My blood from them, who did excel in this,
> Think nature me a man of arms did make.
> How far they shot awry; the true cause is,
> Stella lookt on, and from her heavenly face
> Sent forth the beams which made so fair my race.

These tournaments were held for the entertainment of the queen and to win her favour, and there is an obvious, wish-fulfillment sense in which she is the beaming Stella of this poem. The sequence, from this perspective, is an oblique way of expressing the disappointments of Sidney's public career. In an influential essay, Arthur Marotti has perceived in Elizabethan sonnet sequences 'the metaphorizing of ambition as love', and we shall see that this has its significance in relation to Shakespeare too.[9]

Popular aristocrat though he was, Sidney was caught in the web of patronage. Just as the horseman puts his skills on display for favour, social or political, so the poet put his skills on display for much the same reasons. But he was unquestionably serious in his literary interests, and as he demonstrates in his *Apology for Poetry*, he had an ardent concern for the future of English poetry. In his sonnet sequence, he had to distinguish himself from his forebears, and while, as we have seen, he respected many of the Petrarchan conventions, he also sought to add something of himself. He was more of an experimenter with form than was Shakespeare, occasionally trying different line-lengths, and using a wider range of rhyme-schemes, although he tended to favour the final couplet. He gave to the voice of his poems a colloquial, even dramatic quality. Consider the first poem of his sequence:

> Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
> That the dear she might take some pleasure of my pain:
> Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
> Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,
> I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
> Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain:
> Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
> Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sun-burn'd brain.
> But words came halting forth, wanting Inventions stay;
> Invention Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows,
> And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.
> Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
> Biting my truand pen, beating myself for spite,
> Fool, said my Muse to me, look in thy heart, and write.

He begins with the pain/pleasure paradox familiar in Petrarchan convention, but then finds himself limited by 'others' leaves' and 'others' feet', the generic traces set up by his forebears. The last three lines of the poem resolve his problem: his Muse exhorts him to look inward, to find something of his own to set beside the conventions. This is not simply advice to be 'original'; it also moves the poet away from the externals of custom to introspection and the expression of his own subjectivity.

Sidney here confronts the crucial problem that the English sonnet had developed in its brief life: it had set up elaborate generic expectations that threatened to inhibit writing. The Petrarchan sonnet is an expression of love, but if the poet is forced to use the language and conventions implied by the genre, whose love is he expressing? Shakespeare used this dilemma to comic effect in *Love's Labour's Lost* (written at about the time when sonnet-writing would have been a preoccupation with him), in which four young noblemen attempt to woo four aristocratic ladies by writing poems for them. The young men believe themselves to be serious, but the ladies think they are playing a game. The artifice of the courtly language that the young men use actually inhibits communication, for how can conventional phrases express individual feeling? In his sonnets, Sidney did more than most of his followers to resolve this problem, though he was not always successful.

As we have seen, it was never a part of Sidney's intention to publish his writings, but after his death, interest in his public reputation encouraged curiosity about them, and after 1590 unauthorized printed versions of most of his works began to circulate, including the 1591 publication of *Astrophil and Stella*. In 1598 his sister Mary published a folio edition that collected together all his important works, presumably to reassert family control over them. The prestige of Sidney's name had a lot to do with raising the reputation of printed literature, and obviously opened up the secrets of court writing to the scrutiny of a less noble public. It took some time, nevertheless, for the sense that there was something demeaning about publication to be dissipated. Samuel Daniel, whose sequence *Delia* (1592) was the first to appear in print after Sidney's, enjoyed the patronage of the Countess of Pembroke, and in dedicating the volume to her, he wrote:

> Right honorable, although I rather desired to keep in the private passions of my youth, from the multitude, as things utterd to my selfe, and consecrated to silence: yet seeing I was betraide by the indiscretion of a greedie Printer, and had some of my secrets bewraide to the world, uncorrected: doubting the like of the rest, I am forced to publish that which I never ment. But this wrong was not onely doone to mee, but to him [Sidney] whose unmatchable lines have indured the like misfortune; Ignorance sparing not to commit sacriledge upon so holy Reliques.[10]

Twenty-eight of Daniel's sonnets were included in the first unauthorized edition of *Astrophil and Stella*, and it is possible that he is being disingenuous here, since he might well have been involved in the pirating.[11] His view of his poems as 'secrets', however, and his claim that he only published *Delia* because he was forced into it, is an indication of his discomfort about how publication might have affected his relationship with his aristocratic patron.

The explosion of sonnet sequences that followed the publication of *Astrophil and Stella* inevitably turned convention into cliché, and few of the sequences that followed Sidney's repay much attention today. The most significant of them is Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), which tries to domesticate into Christian marriage the implicitly adulterous sexual desire that underlies Petrarchism. Although Spenser draws much from the Petrarchan model, he structures his sequence upon the cycle of the church year, and while the sequence itself follows convention by ending in disappointment, it was published along with a poem titled *Epithalamion*, which was a celebration of Spenser's own wedding. He thus wrought an uneasy fusion between the erotic and the spiritual, the conventional and the autobiographical.

This, then, was the context in which Shakespeare produced his sonnets. Introduced into England by noblemen, the sonnet's conventions were modified for the needs of an aristocratic readership, and the sonnets and sonnet sequences were only reluctantly set free into the growing middle-class market. Sonnet sequences can consequently be seen, in part, as the location of a struggle between an elite culture trying to keep hold of its privacy, which was intimately connected to the sources of its power, and an increasingly dynamic and inquisitive public culture anxious to penetrate that privacy. Sonnet sequences inevitably had an ideological weight at the point when Shakespeare intervened in their history.

Sonnet sequences printed prior to Shakespeare's

1560	Ann Lock, *A Meditation*
1582	Thomas Watson, *Hekatompathia*
1584	John Soowthern, *Pandora*
1591	Sir Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*
1592	Samuel Daniel, *Delia*
	Henry Constable, *Diana*
1593	Barnabe Barnes, *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*
	Thomas Lodge, *Phillis*
	Giles Fletcher, *Licia*

	Thomas Watson, *The Tears of Fancie*
1594	Michael Drayton, *Ideas Mirrour*
	William Percy, *Sonnets to the Fairest Coelia*
	Zepheria (anon.)
1595	Barnabe Barnes, *A Divine Centurie of Spiritual Sonnets*
	E.C., *Emaricdulfe*
	Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti*
1596	Bartholomew Griffin, *Fidessa*
	Richard Linche (?), *Diella*
	William Smith, *Chloris*
1597	Richard Barnfield, *Cynthia*
	Robert Tofte, *Laura*
	Henry Lok, 'Sundrie Sonnets' and 'Affectionate Sonnets' in *Ecclesiastic*
1598	Robert Tofte, *Alba*
1604	William Alexander, *Aurora*
1605	John Davies of Hereford, *Wittes Pilgrimage*
1609	William Shakespeare, *Shake-speare's Sonnets*

SHAKE-SPEARE'S SONNETS

Shakespeare's own sonnets were published in 1609 in a quarto volume by Thomas Thorpe, a publisher of good reputation who seems previously to have specialized mainly in the publication of plays and masques. On 20th May of that year an entry was made in the Stationers' Register on Thorpe's behalf indicating his intention to publish a book entitled *Shakespeares Sonnettes*, and later in the year the quarto volume appeared, proclaiming on its title-page that these were 'SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS. Never before Imprinted'. Along with the sonnets the volume contained a poem entitled 'A Lover's Complaint', which for a long time a majority of scholars doubted was Shakespeare's work. The volume was printed by George Eld, and appears to have been done carelessly or in haste, though the extent of the carelessness is a debatable issue. There remain in existence thirteen known copies of the text; variant title-pages indicate that they were to be sold by two different booksellers, John Wright and William Aspley, presumably to allow broader distribution. A sign of the popularity of any publication was the frequency with which it was reprinted; the sonnets were not printed again until 1640, when a bookseller named John Benson published a volume entitled *Poems:*

Written by Wil. Shake-speare. Gent. This was a cynical attempt to fool readers into believing they were getting something new. Benson changed the order and omitted some of Shakespeare's poems, while including poems by other writers; he ran some sonnets together, making them appear to be longer poems; and he changed pronouns in some of the poems to make it appear that they were addressed to a woman. This egregious volume was unfortunately the only edition available for many years (perhaps the reason why the sonnets remained unpopular), and it was not until 1780 that Edmond Malone produced a critical edition that allowed readers to experiene the sonnets in their original form.

Following the title-page of the 1609 Quarto was this rather enigmatic dedication; the capitalization and use of points must have been intended to underscore its significance:

TO.THE.ONLY.BEGETTER.OF.
THESE.ENSUING.SONNETS.
M^{r}.W.H.ALL.HAPPINESS.
AND.THAT.ETERNITY.
PROMISED.
BY.
OUR.EVER-LIVING.POET.
WISHETH.
THE.WELL-WISHING.
ADVENTURER.IN.
SETTING.
FORTH.

T.T.

The peculiarity of this dedication and its potential relationship to the content of the *Sonnets*, along with the date and circumstances of publication, have raised a number of vexed issues. Among these are: the dates of composition of the individual sonnets and the circumstances surrounding their publication as a sequence; the ordering, integrity and meaning of the sequence itself; the identity of 'Mr. W.H'.; the extent to which the sequence can be understood as autobiographical and the related question of the identities of the young man, the 'dark lady' and the rival poet who figure in it. There are no certain answers to any of these questions, but important issues are raised by the kinds of speculative answers that have been given.

To take first the issues raised by the date of publication: as we have seen, the vogue for sonnet sequences was intimately connected to the last years of Elizabeth's reign and was effectively ended by her death. There was a minor revival of interest in the early years of James's reign, but the only substantial Jacobean sequences prior to Shakespeare's were Alexander's *Aurora* and Davies's *Wittes Pilgrimage*. So why did Thorpe, who was a businessman, think it would be commercially viable to publish a collection of poems which, even after revision, would have seemed to belong to an outmoded fashion? Perhaps the weight of Shakespeare's Jacobean reputation and the new uses to which he had put the sonnet conventions seemed to warrant the risk; if so, Thorpe was apparently misled, for the publication of the volume was met by what Katherine Duncan-Jones, editor of the recent Arden edition, calls a 'resounding silence'.[12] There is no contemporary record of any reader enthusiasm, and, as I noted above, the *Sonnets* was not reprinted in Shakespeare's lifetime; compare this with the reception of *Venus and Adonis*, which went into at least 16 editions.

Although Shakespeare's sonnets were not published until 1609, he must have begun writing them many years earlier, but when he began is not known, nor why he decided to try his hand at this form. Nor is the order in which they were written known, nor indeed whether Shakespeare originally intended to produce a sequence or whether he simply brought together into a semblance of order sonnets written for a number of different purposes over a number of years. Tentative dates have been proposed for a few individual sonnets; the earliest relates to sonnet 145, for which Andrew Gurr, finding in the phrase 'hate away' a possible play on 'Hathaway', the maiden name of Shakespeare's wife, has suggested the year 1582.[13] Other critics have surmised that he probably started writing them around 1592 or 1593, when he also started work on *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. This date has been particularly attractive to scholars who believe that there is biographical information to be found in the sonnets, and especially to those who believe that the young man addressed in them is the Earl of Southampton, to whom Shakespeare had dedicated the narrative poems. This theory has claimed support from sonnet 104, which appears to make an insistently specific time reference:

> Three winters cold
> Have from the forests shook three summers' pride;
> Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned
> In process of the seasons I have seen,

Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned
Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.

(104.3–8)

Taking this literally, supporters of the Southampton theory have suggested that the poems were composed between about 1592 and about 1596; certainly, the Elizabethan sonnet vogue was at its height in the early 1590s, and it seems probable that Shakespeare would have been interested in offering his own modifications of the fashionable form. This does not mean that he wrote all, or even most, of the sonnets at that time, however. The 'three years' of sonnet 104 could well be a conventional phrase for 'some length of time' and almost certainly should not be understood literally, but even if it is, this is a slim base upon which to build a case.

Other critics have proposed a quite different set of dates. In sonnet 107, which apparently alludes to a contemporary event, we are informed that

The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
Incertainties now crown themselves assured,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.

(107.5–8)

Although there are alternative interpretations, most critics take this to be a reference to the death of Elizabeth I in 1603 (the eclipsed moon); the national uncertainty this had created was dispelled by the accession of King James I. Taken in conjunction with sonnet 104, this would give a span of composition starting around 1599, and would imply a different identity for the young man. In truth, though, there is little in the sonnets that can be given a sufficiently sure and precise topical interpretation to allow dating to go beyond mere speculation. There have recently been statistical and computer-based stylometric analyses that count the use of rare words to generate a kind of evolutionary model whereby individual sonnets can be assigned a tentative date in relation to plays and to each other. This work has some potential, but the main problem with it is that the sonnets were presumably subject to revision, so such methods cannot identify a date that can certainly be accepted as the date of composition rather than of possible reworking.

The earliest reference to Shakespeare as a sonnet-writer comes in Francis Meres's *Palladis Tamia* of 1598, where Meres refers to the poet's 'sugared Sonnets among his private friends'. This is an intriguing remark, but not very helpful. Who were the private friends? Meres himself was an enthusiastic reader and playgoer, but it is not probable that he was one of them, so how did he know about the sonnets? Their circulation could not have been very private. And which sonnets were circulating? A modern reader might well be taken aback by the implications of the word 'sugared', though it is clear that Meres does not use it pejoratively; however we take the word, it does not seem appropriate as a description of many of the sonnets. It is, of course, quite possible that the sonnets to which Meres refers were not included in the 1609 quarto and that they no longer exist. Shakespeare had toyed with the form in some of his plays: the opening chorus of *Romeo and Juliet* is a sonnet and, as we have seen, in *Love's Labour's Lost* he mocked the courtly fashion of wooing in rhyme. It is generally assumed that those plays were composed between 1593 and 1595. In 1599 William Jaggard published a miscellany entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim*, which included versions of sonnets 138 and 144, along with two sonnets and a song from *Love's Labour's Lost* and a number of other poems that Jaggard tried to pass off as Shakespeare's. But if the sonnets to which Meres referred in 1598 did eventually reappear in 1609, we know nothing about how many there were, or whether they circulated as individual sonnets or as connected groups or sub-sequences.

In the absence of better evidence, a reasonable assumption would be that Shakespeare began writing sonnets seriously around 1592, after the sensation caused by the publication of *Astrophil and Stella*, and while the theatres were closed for the plague. This does not exclude the possibility that he had experimented with the form earlier than 1592. By 1598 there was a number of them circulating widely enough in manuscript for Meres to have heard about them, and no doubt Shakespeare revised and added to them over the years. Duncan-Jones has suggested that the publication of the sonnets, like the writing of his two narrative poems, was prompted by the effects of the plague, which between 1608 and 1610 caused prolonged closings of the theatres; Shakespeare's living being largely dependent on his income from the theatres, he might well have been forced by need to sell the sonnets for publication (although his financial circumstances were much better than they had been 17 years earlier).[14] This theory depends, however, on the assumption that the sonnets were published with Shakespeare's authorization, which is a view not universally held. The dominant opinion has been that the

1609 quarto edition was pirated by its publisher Thomas Thorpe, and printed without Shakespeare's permission.

This is an important issue. The case against Thorpe can be summed up in Joel Fineman's comment: 'From the many errors in Thorpe's text, it seems clear that Shakespeare did not authorize publication of his sonnets'.[15] The assumption that underlies this is that if Shakespeare had authorized Thorpe's quarto he would have supervised its composition, or at the very least checked it thoroughly. But an argument that rests largely on what is perceived as the careless state of printing of the quarto disappears if it can be shown that the printing was not, in fact, unusually bad. Duncan-Jones, in editing the text, has argued that the number and significance of the misprints has been greatly over-stated, and does not justify such skepticism about the authority of the text.[16] I might add that it seems improbable that Thorpe, who unlike Jaggard was a reputable publisher, would have risked printing without permission work by a writer as well-known as Shakespeare was by 1609. This being so, I am inclined to accept the argument that the volume was published with the poet's permission.

The reason why this issue is important is that if publication was indeed unauthorized, then we cannot be sure that the order of the poems is as Shakespeare intended them. Certainly, there appears to be no clear narrative progression to the sonnets if we take the sequence as a whole, and some critics have imagined themselves able to re-organize them into a different pattern; for example C.F. Tucker Brooke, in his edition of the *Sonnets*, proposed what he considered to be a more coherent order.[17] However, even if we assume that Shakespeare had no hand in the publication, such reorganization is not legitimate. In the absence of any other information the order in the Thorpe text has to be taken as authoritative, because any reordering has even less authority. On the other hand, it is legitimate to ask what the order in the 1609 quarto means. Does it have a coherent shape, or is it a collection of individual sonnets and groupings put together with no more than a very rough organization? It appears that the 154 sonnets make up two inter-connected sequences. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man whom the speaker first urges to marry in order to project his beauty and worth into the future, but who then becomes an object of desire for the speaker himself as the sonnets explore the ambiguous joys and pains that such a relationship generates. The remaining 28 are addressed to an older woman (though the two final poems seem disconnected from the rest) who provokes lust and revulsion in the speaker. The two sequences overlap when a sexual triangle apparently develops among speaker, youth and lady, and the first sequence contains a subsequence starting with sonnet 78 in which the speaker is concerned with other poets who vie for the young man's attention, particularly one 'better spirit' who has become known as the 'rival poet'.

While it is generally accepted that the first 126 sonnets are addressed to the young man, it has to be acknowledged that many individual sonnets contain nothing within them to indicate the gender of the addressee. Most readers who are familiar with sonnet 18 ('Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?') only from anthologies would assume, if they have any familiarity with the conventions of love poetry of the period, that it is addressed to a woman, and there is nothing in the sonnet to suggest otherwise. But within the *Sonnets* the poem comes at the end of a series of 17 sonnets quite clearly addressed to a young man, and so it is logical to associate sonnet 18 with them. This meaning is entirely dependent on suppositions made about its location in the context, which is why it is legitimate to ask questions about the significance of the order. Does the narrative implied in the 'plot' I gave above arise out of the sequence, or has it been imposed upon it? Heather Dubrow has recently questioned whether the order of the poems does in fact justify commonly held assumptions about the division of the sequence and the identity of the addressee.[18] This also opens up the whole question of the appropriateness of the term 'sequence' for this or indeed any of the Elizabethan sonnet collections, since its implication of connectedness and progression encourages the reader to seek a narrative or thematic consistency that might not be there.

The 1609 quarto has generated other questions that have been posed so frequently (and sometimes with an obsessiveness that has turned them into 'mysteries') that I have to address them, even though I think in some ways they represent a massive misdirection of scholarly energy. These relate to the possible autobiographical element of the sonnets, and to approach them I will return to the poem's dedication. There is no complete agreement on what precisely it means, but I think its phrasing can be reordered like this: THE WELL-WISHING ADVENTURER IN SETTING FORTH WISHETH TO Mr. W.H., THE ONLY BEGETTER OF THESE ENSUING SONNETS, ALL HAPPINESS AND THAT ETERNITY PROMISED BY OUR EVER-LIVING POET. The initials 'T.T'. at the end of the dedication are obviously Thorpe's, and presumably he composed the dedication on Shakespeare's behalf if Shakespeare authorized the volume, and on his own behalf if he did not. Thorpe is the 'adventurer in setting forth'; to 'set forth' here means to publish, and he is an adventurer because his venture involves financial risk. 'Mr. W.H.', is the only begetter of the sonnets, perhaps because they were made possible by his patronage, either in the past or, since publisher and poet are hoping to receive patronage for dedicating the volume to him, in the future. 'Begetter' might also mean 'inspirer', however, if Mr. W.H. is the young man addressed in the *Sonnets*. The 'eternity promised' by the poet refers to the claim first made in sonnet 18 and reiterated in others, that verse can confer a kind of eternity: 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee'. The claim that the poet is 'ever-living' has been perceived as blasphemous,[19] but this is to take too seriously what is clearly playful hyperbole; it is not much different from Ben Jonson's statement that Shakespeare was 'for all time', which no one suggests is blasphemous. If verses are to immortalize their subject, the verses themselves must be immortal, and that is all that Thorpe means.

There have been numerous attempts to identify Mr. W.H., some convincing, most not. Shakespeare's brother-in-law William Hathaway has been proposed, as has his nephew William Hart, but in the early seventeenth century a volume of poems was a valuable property and no one made vanity dedications. Such candidates as these and others can be dismissed as fanciful, in spite of ingenious arguments in their support. There would not have been much sense in Shakespeare's dedicating a manuscript that had taken years to produce to a man who did not have the wealth, generosity and power to do him good, and so Mr. W.H. must have been someone from whom he could expect patronage, almost certainly an aristocrat. A reasonably strong case can be made for only two such individuals, Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, and William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke.

Henry Wriothesley has seemed an attractive probability to many because he was certainly Shakespeare's patron in 1593, when he was aged 19 and apparently on the verge of an illustrious career, and thus would have been the right age to be addressed as 'the world's fresh ornament' in the first sonnet. The evidence, as we have seen, suggests that the poet began writing his sonnets in the early 1590s. Shakespeare had dedicated both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* to Southampton, and there would be a pleasing symmetry if the *Sonnets* had been dedicated to him as well. On the other hand, in 1609 Southampton was 35; he had been implicated in 1601 in Essex's failed attempt to depose Queen Elizabeth, and had spent some time imprisoned in the Tower of London; it would have seemed impolitic under the circumstances to remind him of his youthful promise. And if he *was* Mr. W.H., what purpose was there in reversing his initials? There does not seem to have been any reason to conceal an identity that Shakespeare had proudly publicized in the dedications to his narrative poems.

The case for William Herbert, in my view, is rather stronger, and not only because there is no need to manipulate his initials. The son of Sir Philip Sidney's sister Mary, Countess of Pembroke, he was, like his mother, a generous patron of writers, among them Jonson, Daniel, Donne and Chapman (any one of whom might have been the 'rival poet'). There is no evidence of any direct connection to Shakespeare, but as Lord Chamberlain for James I Herbert had much official business with Shakespeare's acting company, the King's Men, and he also had a genuine interest in the theatre, which led to a particular friendship with Richard Burbage, the company's leading actor.[20] John Heminges and Henry Condell, the editors of the 1623 folio edition of Shakespeare's plays, dedicated it to Herbert (by then Earl of Pembroke) and his brother Philip, Earl of Montgomery, claiming that the brothers had graced Shakespeare, when he was alive, 'with so much favour', which suggests that he had received some form of patronage from them and that Heminges and Condell perceived Herbert, at the very least, to be an important figure in Shakespeare's career. He was younger than Southampton, being still under 30 in 1609, and so perhaps could be seen as the more appropriate recipient of a body of sonnets addressed to a young man.

What has been a more intriguing endeavour for many scholars has been the attempt to identify Mr. W.H. not just as the poems' patron, but also as their subject. If Mr. W.H. is the young man addressed in the *Sonnets*, this clearly opens up the possibility that the speaker of the *Sonnets* can be identified as Shakespeare himself and that they encode an actual relationship; if they do, then the lady, and the rival poet who makes a brief appearance in the sequence, might also be identifiable. The desire to know more about the historical Shakespeare has led readers to rummage amongst the *Sonnets* for hints of biographical information and, very often, to find things that are not there. As with Mr. W.H. , so with the dark lady;

there have been numerous nominees for the role but few of them convincing. Perhaps the favourite candidate has been Mary Fitton, although evidence suggests she was not in fact of dark-complexion. Mary Fitton was a lady-in-waiting in Elizabeth's court with whom William Herbert had a scandalous affair for which he was briefly imprisoned in 1601. Obviously, her candidacy strengthens the case of those who believe Herbert was Mr. W.H., although it also entails a rather late date of composition for many of the sonnets. The poet Aemilia Lanyer has also been proposed as the dark lady. Born into a family of court musicians, Aemilia Bassano was of mixed English-Jewish-Italian ancestry and therefore (presumably) dark. Brought up in aristocratic households, she was for a time the mistress of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, who as Lord Chamberlain was the patron of Shakespeare's acting company. She became pregnant, and was married off in 1592 to her cousin Alphonso Lanyer, who was also a court musician. She had, obviously, theatrical connections. To relate her to any proposed Mr. W.H. is, however, an impossible task.

Fitton and Lanyer are conveniently to hand (both were around at about the right time, depending on what you think the right time was; both were connected to someone who was distantly, though problematically, connected to Shakespeare; both were sexually adventurous). However, there is no compelling evidence for either case. Against both women (especially Mary Fitton) is the remoteness of the probability of a sexual triangle that would include Shakespeare. Hunsdon organized Aemilia Bassano's marriage to avoid scandal and is hardly likely to have reacted with anything but hostility if she had carried on an affair with one of his servants (which Shakespeare technically was). An affair between Shakespeare and a lady-in-waiting in Elizabeth's court is even more improbable, given the rigidity of class attitudes; the idea that he could have shared Mary Fitton with one of the most prominent young aristocrats in the country and then publicized the affair in a sonnet sequence defies credibility.

The problem that all autobiographical interpretations of the *Sonnets* share is the inherent improbability of the transgression of social boundaries that any literal reading must assume. Such assumptions fit very well into the romanticized image of Shakespeare as a universal genius whose abilities were fully appreciated in his own time, but they do not fit with the realities of a society whose government repeatedly enacted sumptuary laws in an attempt to regulate the quality of clothing that different classes of people could wear in order to make visible the social distinctions that were fundamental to its understanding of itself. There was no meritocracy and Shakespeare was a mere professional, a poet and player. Also problematically, if the 'I' of the poems is identified with Shakespeare himself, how does this affect our response to the homoerotic elements of the sonnets addressed to the young man? This is, certainly, a difficult issue no matter how we read it, but the possibility that a mere poet and playwright would parade his erotic desire for a real and identifiable aristocrat seems remote indeed.

As I wrote earlier, I think that this concentration on the autobiographical possibilities of the sonnets has largely been a waste of scholarly energy. It has also diverted attention away from what I think is the real creative significance of the poems. If we are to understand the sonnets as art we should understand them as fiction in the same way that we understand the plays as fiction. When Hamlet says 'O that this too too solid flesh would melt' (1.2.129) we do not assume that there is a direct relationship between the speaker's words and the author's experience. It is Hamlet who is thinking about the attractions of suicide, and while it is possible that Shakespeare at some time in his life contemplated suicide and certain that he grasped imaginatively Hamlet's state of mind, we do not confuse Hamlet with Shakespeare. I think the 'I' of the sonnets must be understood in a similar way. Even if real events do lie behind the *Sonnets*, they have been fictionalized into a complex artistic structure that has a richer range of potential meanings than any autobiographical reading could provide.

First, we can see *Shake-speare's Sonnets* as a work that violently challenged the values of the genre of the sonnet sequence as they were reflected in the conventions that had developed from Petrarchan origins into the fashionable clichés of the late Elizabethan period. In the *Sonnets* the unattainable ideal woman, a romantic fiction, is replaced first by a young man who may or may not be attainable, but who generates a range of often conflicting feelings and responses in the poems' speaker; and then by a woman who certainly is attainable, and who generates both desire and loathing in the speaker. Seen from this perspective, Shakespeare's sonnet sequence can be understood as his attempt to impose a different mood upon the genre. Second, in challenging the values of the genre Shakespeare is also challenging the values of those who made it fashionable, the values of the cultural elite of late sixteenth-century England – which was, of course, also the political elite. The *Sonnets* construct a myth in which the speaker-poet attempts to assert control over the powerful and attractive youth by offering him immortality through his poems – a myth of social restructuring, in a sense, that underscores the satirical intensity of many of these ‘love’ sonnets.

11. Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, p. 66.
12. G. Schmitz, *The Fall of Women in Early English Narrative Verse* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) pp. 88–98.
13. See, for example, J. Dundas, 'Mocking the Mind: The Role of Art in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*', *Sixteenth Century Journal*. 14, 1 (1983) 134–22; E. Freund, '"I see a voice": The Desire for Representation and the Rape of Voice', in Avrahan Oz (ed.), *Strands Afar Remote: Israeli Perspectives On Shakespeare* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998) pp. 62–86.
14. Prince, *Poems*, pp. xxxiv–xxxv.
15. See especially the work of C. Kahn, J.O. Newman, N. Vickers, W. Wall and L. Woodbridge.
16. E.P. Kuhl, 'Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*', *Philological Quarterly*. 20 (1941) 352–60. This initiative was followed up extensively by G.P.V. Akrigg, *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).
17. See B. Nass, 'The Law and Politics of Treason in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*', *Shakespeare Yearbook*. 7 (1996) 292–311.
18. L. Woodbridge, 'Palisading the Elizabethan Body Politic', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. 33 (1991) 327–54.
19. S. Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 10.
20. St. Augustine. *The City of God* (tr.) Henry Bettenson, (ed.) David Knowles (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972) p. 29.
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22. J. Hart, 'Narratorial Strategies in *The Rape of Lucrece*', *Studies in English Literature*, 32 (1992) 59–77, p. 75.
23. R. Lanham, 'The Politics of *Lucrece*', *Hebrew University Studies in Literature*. 8 (1980) 66–67, p. 71.
24. Cousins, *Poems*, p. 63.

Chapter 7

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3. J. Fuller, *The Sonnet* (London: Methuen, 1972) p. 2.
4. Sir Thomas Wyatt, *The Complete Poems*, in R.A. Rebholz (ed.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978).
5. *The Poems of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey*, in Frederick M. Padelford (ed.) (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1928).
6. Fuller, *The Sonnet*, p. 14.

7. A. Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983) p. 64.
8. W. Thomas, *The Hekatompathia: or, Passionate Centurie of Love*. A facsimile reproduction with introd. by S.K. Heninger, Jr. (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1964).
9. A. Marotti, '"Love Is Not Love": Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order', *ELH*, 49 (1982) pp. 396–428.
10. D. Samuel, *Poems and a Defence of Ryme*, in A.C. Sprague (ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).
11. For a full account of the murky circumstances surrounding the publication of *Astrophil and Stella*, see H.R. Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts, 1558–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) especially Chapter 11.
12. Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 7.
13. A. Gurr, 'Shakespeare's First Poem: Sonnet 145', *Essays in Criticism*. 21 (1971) pp. 221–6.
14. Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, pp. 10–13.
15. J. Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p. 319, n. 6.
16. Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, pp. 38–40.
17. C.F. Tucker Brooke (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Oxford UP, 1936). See also B. Stirling, *The Shakespeare Sonnet Order: Poems and Groups* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
18. H. Dubrow, '"Incertainties now crown themselves assur'd": The Politics of Plotting Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47 (1996) 291–305.
19. Noted in Kay, *Sonnets and Poems*, p. 108.
20. L. Barroll, *Politics, Plague, and Shakespeare's Theatre* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991) pp. 38–41.

Chapter 8

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