

About This Volume

Although Shakespeare is considered a leading dramatist in the English language—perhaps in any language—his poetry, particularly his sonnets, has gotten just as much scrutiny in academia as his famous plays. What is it about those one-hundred-fifty-four sonnets from the collection originally published in 1609 that makes them emotionally demanding even to contemporary readers with so much literary criticism at their disposal? How can Shakespeare’s sonnets still provide so much wisdom and remain so elusive at the same time? How many more generations of scholars, one wonders, will attempt to unravel their mysteries until we reach a point at which another book on the sonnets would indeed be unnecessary?

The amount of scholarship focused on Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* is truly considerable, spanning centuries, and the number of scholars attempting to shed new light on the sonnets continues to grow well into the twenty-first. There is also renewed interest in the sonnets across high school programs and community colleges, brought on in recent years by the Common Core initiative, which encourages close readings of shorter literary texts, including poetry. So a volume that serves as a one-stop resource on Shakespeare’s sonnets for students encountering the form for the first time as well as those studying it in more depth seems both timely and necessary in 2014. This book serves that dual purpose: to provide the context for the beginner as well as to broaden literary horizons with new critical analysis for more advanced students.

The volume is divided into six distinct sections: The Author and His Work, Historical and Literary Contexts, Close Readings of 25 Sonnets, Critical Readings 1 (Form and Technique), Critical Readings 2 (Main Themes), and Resources. Taken together, the essays in these sections provide a sweeping overview of the sonnets, the time in which they were written, key biographical details that may help explain some of the obvious and less obvious themes, the way in which they were written, the historical events that may have influenced Shakespeare’s fascination with love, pain, and aging, among other topics, and the literary influences that may explain their peculiar form.

The Author and His Work eases the reader into William Shakespeare’s life and his work both as a dramatist

and poet. It then introduces Shakespeare as the author of the *Sonnets* and ends with an essay that focuses on the sonnets’ lasting allure. Here Rafeeq McGiveron brings the reader into the twenty-first century and explains why our fascination with the sonnets continues and is likely to continue.

Historical and Literary Contexts consists of four essays that provide the context students need to fully grasp the time in which Shakespeare lived and created, including those years immediately preceding the original publication in 1609. Although not focused on Shakespeare exclusively, the opening essay, “English Poetry in the Sixteenth Century,” provides an overview of a “consistently poetic” century in which poets “were constantly aware of themselves as poetic craftsmen.” Indeed, the poetry of the latter part of the century—commonly referred to as the Elizabethan poetry—is said to have heavily influenced the Bard. The essay that follows almost stands in opposition and challenges us to question how much of this history is truly necessary when interpreting works of art. Just how much importance does historical context play when we are attempting to read a life, asks Andrew Hadfield in “Does Shakespeare’s Life Matter?,” concluding: “We cannot always know the lives of the poets and, even if we do, reading literary works in terms of what we know is problematic and fraught with difficulties....” In the end, however, Shakespeare’s life does matter, but Hadfield warns the reader that it may not mean quite what we think, or perhaps not as much as we think because writers have always been able to manipulate the ways in which they were read, even in Elizabethan England.

“Sins of the Sonnets” is an overview of the various editions of the *Sonnets* that have been published over the years (and there have been countless versions in the last one hundred years alone; see Resources section for a full listing). It is an attempt to analyze how previous scholars have interpreted the sonnets. William Logan, who hardly needs an introduction in the world of literary criticism, leaves no stone unturned—even at the expense of appearing confrontational—and doesn’t shy away from challenging even the most revered critics and their widely-accepted theories. Logan’s essay provides the necessary literary context to help us understand how we’ve come to collectively perceive the sonnets, but it

also serves as a reminder of just how controversial and inconclusive Shakespeare scholarship has been.

The last essay in this section plays on the title of Jan Kott's famous book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Here Robert C. Evans explores both the similarities and (especially) the differences between Shakespeare's sonnets and various more recent examples of the form. The essay focuses on "Shakespearean" sonnets by E. E. Cummings (the notorious experimental writer); on a work by the African American woman poet Gwendolyn Brooks; on a sonnet by Eavan Boland, one of Ireland's most important modern authors; and on a final Shakespearean sonnet by Carol Ann Duffy, the United Kingdom's current Poet Laureate. Together, these comparisons of Shakespeare's sonnets with those by more recent authors help the contemporary reader understand how the form of the sonnet has evolved since Elizabethan England and what it's morphed into in modern times.

Section 3 is a collection of twenty-five shorter essays that provide new critical analysis of some of the most famous and beloved sonnets. Three scholars, including Robert C. Evans, Ashleigh Imus, and T. Fleischmann, provide close readings of select sonnets while paying special attention to recurring themes and their key meanings, place each in the context of the original collection of the sonnets and, when appropriate, draw useful thematic comparisons to other works of literature, both classic and contemporary. The three scholars also point to various examples of how the themes explored by Shakespeare hundreds of years ago continue to be explored in the twenty-first century, with unexpected

references to popular culture, including film franchises and music by teenage icons. Each essay provides a listing of keywords, an abstract, and a "for further reading" listing.

Sections 4 and 5 delve deeper by providing more advanced treatments of the recurring themes and the sonnets' delicate structure. This part of the book demands some preliminary knowledge and is recommended for the undergraduate student of literature looking to expand his or her basic understanding. The essays here discuss both the form and technique of the sonnets (Critical Readings 1) as well as persistent themes (Critical Readings 2), including, among others, love, passion, sexuality, aging, and death. The essays that appear in these two sections are reprinted from various journals and books published in the past fifteen years, and with permission from copyright holders. We are grateful to the various publishers and authors for giving us permission to make their works part of this new collection.

Finally, the last section of the book consists of various resources designed to enrich further research. These include a detailed chronology of Shakespeare's life, a listing of the various editions of the *Sonnets*, a fully annotated and up-to-date guide to free online resources that provide more information and analysis, another annotated guide to literary criticism, a general bibliography, and an index. The last section also reprints the entire collection of one-hundred-fifty-four sonnets as it was originally published.

Mirela Roncevic

Sonnet 1

*From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripper should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory:
But thou contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thy self thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel:
Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament,
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own buduriest thy content,
And, tender churl, mak'st waste in niggarding:
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.*

Abstract

Sonnet 1 introduces the conventional themes of beauty, love, aging, reproduction, and legacy, which reemerge as central themes in Shakespeare's entire sonnet sequence. Yet, by addressing a beloved young man and encouraging procreation over chastity, Sonnet 1 departs from the sonnet conventions of Shakespeare's time.

Keywords

- Abundance
- Age
- Beauty
- Confessional Poetry
- Contrast
- Desire
- Iambic Pentameter
- Marriage
- Mortality
- Procreation

Context

The first sonnet in Shakespeare's 154-sonnet sequence is in many ways thoroughly conventional and yet deeply subversive. The poem's central themes and images invoke such well-known Western literary tropes as love, beauty, mortality, and aging. Yet, by addressing the sonnet to a beloved but then encouraging him to marry another and procreate, the sonnet subverts the conventions that characterized love poetry of the time.

Both structurally and thematically, the sonnet

proceeds through contrasts. In the first quatrain, the speaker praises the man's beauty and claims that human desire for reproduction is intensified in the face of the "fairest creatures" (line 1), whose beauty implies a privileged evolutionary status but also a greater duty to reproduce, so that "his tender heir might bear his memory" (4). In the second and third quatrains, the speaker shifts his tone to criticize the beloved for failing to act upon this reproductive imperative. The speaker accuses his beloved of self-absorption, stating, "But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes, / Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel" (5-6). The beloved here is likened to a candle whose lifetime is waning and who is selfishly consuming his own life essence. This image launches a series of contrasts; the outcome of his refusal to procreate is famine in the context of abundance, making him a cruel foe to his own sweet self. The speaker reminds the young man that although he is now "the world's fresh ornament" (9), with time, his beauty will wither within him without being passed on to future generations. He then warns the young man that he is selfishly hoarding his beauty to himself and, paradoxically, "makest waste in niggarding" (12) by saving his chastity. The final couplet counters the earlier mention of famine by saying that, should the beloved choose not to pity the world and never produce offspring, he is nothing more than a glutton eating what he owes to the world, "the world's due" (14).

The themes of beauty, love, aging, reproduction, and legacy and their accompanying images reappear throughout the sonnet sequence, so that this first sonnet acts as an introduction to the whole collection, particularly the first seventeen sonnets, which are collectively known as the "procreation sonnets." The related themes of procreation and mortality were well established in the English literary tradition by Shakespeare's time. The biblical book of Genesis, for example, commands humans to increase and multiply. The speaker's accusations of gluttony and covetousness also refer to the capital vices, which are based in Christian theology.

The praise of a beloved's beauty and exhortation to act properly are central elements of the French and Italian courtly lyric tradition that Shakespeare inherited. This inheritance is evident in details such as the sonnet's conventional address of "beauty's rose" in the first line.

The sonnets of fourteenth-century Italian poet Frances Petrarch, which alternately praise and blame his beloved, Laura, popularized the sonnet form throughout Western Europe. These sonnets heavily influenced Shakespeare's poetry, particularly Sonnet 1, with its paradoxical contrasts as noted above, which were a prominent feature in the love poetry of Petrarch. By Shakespeare's time, the love sonnet was well established in English literature by writers such as Thomas Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey. Philip Sidney, with his sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*, also popularized the genre in the 1590s.

In this context, however, Shakespeare's treatment is remarkably unconventional in that the speaker addresses a beloved young man rather than a woman and urges him to marry another. While the sonnet introduces the whole sequence, it also belongs to its own subgroups. The first 126 sonnets in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence are all addressed to an unnamed young man, known as the "Fair Youth," and in Sonnets 1 through 17, the speaker urges the young man to marry and have children. This exhortation to procreate was a surprising one for the time and for the genre, given that sonnets typically praised beauty and urged chastity. Moreover, as literary critic Helen Vendler points out in her book *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, the images used to describe the man also derive from different categories: while the terms "foe," "glutton," and "churl" all imply a human, the rose and bud are organic and the candle's light fed by its own fuel implies an inorganic metaphor (48). This deliberate use of dissonant metaphors "presses the reader into reflection; and this technique, recurrent throughout the sonnets, is the chief source of their intellectual provocativeness" (Vendler 48).

The themes of beauty, mortality, and reproduction have been popular throughout the ages, but procreation has taken on particularly rich significance in twentieth-century literature. In particular, the refusal to procreate has flourished as a theme in modern poetry, perhaps most notably in T. S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, whose central theme of barrenness evolves into a metaphor for the despair of modernity. Contemporary poets such as Sharon Olds have moved on to treat the theme of procreation in the context of female sexuality and in more celebratory terms. Shakespeare's work thus provided an important model for modern artists who address timeless themes with original perceptions and inventive approaches.

Ashleigh Imus

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Sonnet 18

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Abstract

Perhaps the most famous love poem in English literature, Sonnet 18 is a powerful poem on the ability of art to preserve beauty through the ages. Beauty in the natural world fades with time, but artists through the ages have celebrated the ability of their work to capture life's most fleeting and alluring moments, rendering them unchanging and eternal in art.

Keywords

- Age
- Art/Artists
- Beauty
- Eternity
- Hyperbole
- Iambic Pentameter
- Mortality
- Poetry

Context

One of the best-known sonnets, Sonnet 18 is concerned both with the beauty of the young man it addresses and the poem's ability to capture and preserve his beauty. The sonnet begins with the suggestion of a whimsical comparison—that the youth looks as lovely as a summer's day. This comparison, however, is found lacking; the young man is said to be even fairer than the idealization of summer, as summer days inevitably grow shorter and harsher as the season ends. This comparison establishes the structure of the first twelve lines of the poem,

as the fanciful first thought is heightened into hyperbole until the speaker broaches the subject of death. With the coming cold of winter acknowledged, the closing couplet asserts that the youth is in fact superior to summer because his beauty will last forever, as it has been captured by and preserved in the sonnet. As long as people live, the final couplet claims, this verse will keep the young man's allure alive. The sonnet itself, then, is able to undo the progression toward death that began with the first dreamy comparison.

Sonnet 18 is categorized with the first 126 sonnets in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, which all address an unnamed young man known as the Fair Youth. However, Sonnet 18 marks an important turning point in the sonnet sequence's treatment of the Fair Youth, who is suddenly regarded with a more romantic love than in the first seventeen poems, which are known collectively as the "procreation sonnets." Sonnets 1 through 17 consistently argue the merits of marriage and fatherhood, urging the young man to find a wife and to continue his legacy and preserve his beauty in future generations through procreation. In Sonnet 18, however, the speaker himself finds a way for the young man's legacy and beauty to endure through poetry.

This impassioned belief in the lasting power of art was a popular theme in the work of nineteenth-century Romantic poets, whose poetry was often characterized by hyperbolic statements similar to that which Shakespeare employs in Sonnet 18. For example, John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819), one of the most famous Romantic poems, focuses on the questions raised by art's eternal potential. The poem's speaker praises the scenes painted on an urn both because of their beauty and because that beauty, made permanent on the vase, will never fade. The art is superior to nature, as he declares, "Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed / Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu" (lines 21–22). As with Sonnet 18, the joy here is twofold. In part, it rises from enjoying the beauty of the object itself (the Fair Youth and the urn). Yet, as enthralled as both poets are with beauty, they are perhaps more excited that they have managed to find a way to make that beauty endure. Keats and other Romantics (such as Percy Bysshe Shelley in his 1818 poem "Ozymandias") did consider some potential downfalls to this sense of eternal art—flaws

that are not explored in the amorous Sonnet 18. However, the joy and ecstasy of beauty, particularly the artist's satisfaction at capturing or replicating beauty in art or literature, remain consistent.

Just as Shakespeare and Keats suggest art can make beauty eternal, so too do artists working the modern medium of filmmaking use their work to preserve the glamour and allure of young love. For example, the trilogy of romantic films titled *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004), and *Before Midnight* (2013) also play off of this idea. In the first film, a young man and a young woman meet while on vacation and decide to spend one romantic day together, enraptured by the optimism of their youth and each other's beauty. In the sequel, however, nine years have passed without them seeing each other, and the young man has written a book about their affair. Reconnected, the romantic story he captured forever in the book must face the reality of the actual woman, now older and changed by her life.

In Sonnet 18, the Fair Youth is still like the main characters of these films, with his innocence and beauty idealized. The beloved in the sonnet and these films ultimately do change, shaken by the "rough winds" (3) of life. Even so, the works of art remain, and just as the sonnet's couplet promises, the beauty of the Fair Youth continues to inspire today, his flawless good looks only outdone by the gorgeous sonnet that keeps his memory alive.

T. Fleischmann

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Chronology of Shakespeare's Life

1533: King Henry VIII divorces Catherine of Aragon and marries Anne Boleyn, who gives birth to Elizabeth. Henry breaks with the Church of Rome; the English Reformation begins.

1534: The Act of Supremacy is passed by the Reformation Parliament; Henry VIII is now head of the Church of England.

1547: Henry VIII dies; Edward VI, his son with Jane Seymour, becomes king of England and continues the Reformation in England.

1549: The Act of Uniformity is passed. The first Book of Common Prayer is issued; it is revised in 1552.

1553: Edward VI dies; his sister Mary, daughter of Catherine of Aragon and wife of Philip II of Spain, becomes queen of England. She restores Roman Catholicism to England, and Protestants are persecuted.

1557: John Shakespeare, a glover, marries Mary Arden of Wilmcote; they live in a house on Henley Street in Stratford-upon-Avon.

1558: Queen Mary dies childless; her sister, Elizabeth, becomes queen.

1560: The Geneva Bible is published.

1563: John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* is published in English.

1564: William Shakespeare is born on April 23 and is baptized on April 26.

1565: John Shakespeare is elected one of fourteen alderman of Stratford on July 4; he will become bailiff for one year in 1568 and chief alderman in 1571.

1570: Pope Pius V excommunicates Elizabeth I. Shakespeare presumably enters Stratford's grammar school.

1576: James Burbage builds the Theatre in Shoreditch, London.

1577: A rival theater, the Curtain, opens in Bishopsgate.

1580: Pope Gregory XIII proclaims Elizabeth an enemy of the Church and asks loyal Catholics to assassinate her.

1582: Shakespeare courts Anne Hathaway, who becomes pregnant; the two marry on November 28. They live with William's parents in the Henley Street house.

1583: Shakespeare's daughter Susanna is christened on May 26.

1585: Shakespeare's twins, Judith and Hamnet, are born on February 2.

1585–1592: The "lost years": nothing definite is known of Shakespeare during this period.

Works by William Shakespeare

The following list provides dates of the writing (wr.), production (pr.), and publication (pb.) of Shakespeare's works. The writing and production dates that appear here are based on consensus culled from current scholarship; they may differ in some particulars from what individual scholars have determined for themselves to be most accurate.

Drama

Henry VI, Part I, wr. 1589-1590, pr. 1592, pb. 1623
Edward III, wr., pr. c. 1589-1595, pb. 1596 (attributed to Shakespeare)
Henry VI, Part II, pr. c. 1590-1591, pb. 1594
Henry VI, Part III, pr. c. 1590-1591, pb. 1595
Richard III, pr. c. 1592-1593, pb. 1597 (revised 1623)
The Comedy of Errors, pr. c. 1592-1594, pb. 1623
The Taming of the Shrew, pr. c. 1593-1594, pb. 1623
Titus Andronicus, pr., pb. 1594
Love's Labour's Lost, pr. c. 1594-1595, pb. 1598 (revised 1597 for court performance)
The Two Gentlemen of Verona, pr. c. 1594-1595, pb. 1623
Romeo and Juliet, pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1597
Richard II, pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1600
A Midsummer Night's Dream, pr. c. 1595-1596, pb. 1600
The Merchant of Venice, pr. c. 1596-1597, pb. 1600
King John, pr. c. 1596-1597, pb. 1623
The Merry Wives of Windsor, pr. 1597, pb. 1602 (revised c. 1600-1601)
Henry IV, Part I, pr. c. 1597-1598, pb. 1598
Henry IV, Part II, pr. 1598, pb. 1600
Much Ado About Nothing, pr. c. 1598-1599, pb. 1600
Henry V, pr. c. 1598-1599, pb. 1600
Julius Caesar, pr. c. 1599-1600, pb. 1623
As You Like It, pr. c. 1599-1600, pb. 1623
Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, pr. c. 1600-1601, pb. 1603

Twelfth Night: Or, What You Will, pr. c. 1600-1602, pb. 1623
Troilus and Cressida, pr. c. 1601-1602, pb. 1609
All's Well That Ends Well, pr. c. 1602-1603, pb. 1623
Othello, the Moor of Venice, pr. 1604, pb. 1622 (revised 1623)
Measure for Measure, pr. 1604, pb. 1623
King Lear, pr. c. 1605-1606, pb. 1608
Macbeth, pr. 1606, pb. 1623
Antony and Cleopatra, pr. c. 1606-1607, pb. 1623
Pericles, Prince of Tyre, pr. c. 1607-1608, pb. 1609
Timon of Athens, pr. c. 1607-1608, pb. 1623
Coriolanus, pr. c. 1607-1608, pb. 1623
Cymbeline, pr. c. 1609-1610, pb. 1623
The Winter's Tale, pr. c. 1610-1611, pb. 1623
The Tempest, pr. 1611, pb. 1623
The Two Noble Kinsmen, pr. c. 1612-1613, pb. 1634 (with John Fletcher)
Henry VIII, pr. 1613, pb. 1623 (with John Fletcher)

Poetry

Venus and Adonis, 1593
The Rape of Lucrece, 1594
The Passionate Pilgrim, 1599 (miscellany with poems by Shakespeare and others)
The Phoenix and the Turtle, 1601
A Lover's Complaint, 1609
Sonnets, 1609