

Shakespeare's Five "Outlier" Sonnets

Alex McNeil

Four centuries after their publication, there still exists widespread disagreement about Shakespeare's Sonnets. We know they were first published in 1609 (though two had appeared previously, in slightly different form). But were they meant to be published? Is the order correct? Do they refer to actual people and events, and if so, who are those people and what are the events?

To begin with, a few things may be accepted as fact. The 1609 sonnet quarto contains 154 consecutively numbered sonnets.¹ There are no breaks within the sonnet sequence; a sonnet ends on one line, the number of the next sonnet is on the following line, and the new sonnet begins on the very next line. Almost every page contains thirty-six lines of text, so that many sonnets are printed on two quarto pages.²

Although there are no physical or typographical divisions within the 154 poems, it is generally agreed that they fall into three groups. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to the "Fair Youth," whoever he was; the next 26 are addressed to someone who has come to be known as the "Dark Lady," whoever she was; and the last two are not addressed to another person, but are based on a Greek epigram.

Furthermore, three sonnets are not composed of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter verse. One – sonnet 99 – contains fifteen lines, one – sonnet 126 – contains twelve lines, and one – sonnet 145 – is written in iambic tetrameter.

Taken together with the last two sonnets – numbers 153 and 154 – these five poems may be considered as "outliers" within the overall sonnet sequence.³ They raise perplexing questions among traditional scholars, who speculate whether sonnets 99 and 126 are the author's final versions, whether sonnet 145 is even Shakespearean, and whether sonnets 153 and 154 belong in the sequence. I will examine those five sonnets to see whether, from an Oxfordian perspective, they can be seen to make sense as elements of the entire sequence, ones which were deliberately placed where

they appear in the form that we have them. In so doing, I will focus more on the construction of those sonnets and their relationship to other sonnets rather than on an interpretation of the text of those sonnets; however, in some cases, an attempt at interpretation is necessary.

Sonnet 99

The forward violet thus did I chide,
Sweet thief whence did thou steal thy sweet that smells
If not from my love's breath, the purple pride,
Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells?
In my love's veins thou hast too grossly dyed,
The lily I condemned for thy hand,
And buds of marjoram had stol'n thy hair,
The Roses fearfully on thorns did stand,
Our blushing shame, another white despair.
A third nor red, nor white, had stol'n of both,
And to his robb'ry had annexed thy breath,
But for his theft in pride of all his growth
A vengeful canker ate him up to death.
More flow'rs I noted, yet none I could see,
But sweet, or color it had stol'n from thee.

No scholar has failed to observe that this sonnet contains fifteen lines. Traditional scholars have noted that the inclusion of a fifteen-line sonnet is not without precedent; Barnabe Barnes and Bartholomew Griffin used them,⁴ and even eighteen-line sonnets were not unknown. Stephen Booth points out, however, that the inclusion of the "extra" line within the first quatrain is unusual; such extra lines usually are found in the concluding sestet.⁵ John Kerrigan finds that "the irregularity of 99 is startling" and that it "is often judged to be a draft."⁶ R.J.C. Wait concurs, noting that the five-line first quatrain is "as if Shakespeare had not decided on its final form but did not think it worthy of further attention."⁷ Booth, however, concludes that the author indeed intended to write what he wrote: "Formally, Shakespeare's extra line is number 5, but it is syntactically indispensable; substantively, line 1 is introductory and thus distinct in function from 2-5, but, since it identifies the object of the following four lines, it cannot be considered extra either."⁸ Helen Vendler tersely characterizes sonnet 99 as an "experiment" which was "not repeated."⁹ Katherine Duncan-Jones, after noting that "Uniquely, the sonnet is fifteen lines," finds that the aberration "reinforces the sense of a potentially unlimited catalogue of flowers."¹⁰

Although traditional scholars link sonnet 99 thematically to its predecessors (especially sonnets 97 and 98), few bother to ask themselves *why* the poet would place an outlier – a fifteen-line poem – at this point; instead, they merely observe

that he has done so. Among the few traditional scholars who have asked why is Joseph Pequigney, whose answer is arguably the closest to what an Oxfordian might offer. Pequigney notes that sonnet 99, like sonnet 126, is irregular, and that 126 marks the close of one period of the sonnets (i.e., the end of the “Fair Youth” sequence). Thus, Pequigney finds that sonnet 99 too marks the end of a period, which he calls the “middle period” of the sonnets. He finds additional support for his argument in the fact that there is a change of tone in the very next sonnet – sonnet 100 – which is addressed not to the young man, but to the poet’s muse, and suggests that some period of time has elapsed between the two poems (the three quatrains of sonnet 100 begin with “Where art thou, Muse,” “Return, forgetful Muse,” and “Rise, resty Muse”).¹¹

The best known Oxfordian work on Shakespeare’s sonnets is Hank Whittemore’s *The Monument* (2005). His theory, which remains controversial even among Oxfordians, is that the sonnets depict real-life events involving Edward de Vere (the poet), Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton (the Fair Youth), and Queen Elizabeth (the Dark Lady), and that Southampton was the unacknowledged royal child of de Vere and the Queen. Structurally, Whittemore identifies a central series of exactly 100 sonnets (27-126) which, he maintains, chronicles the twenty-six-month period between the Essex Rebellion of February 1601 and Southampton’s release from confinement in April 1603, shortly after the death of Elizabeth and the accession of James VI of Scotland as her successor. This central series is flanked by two groups of exactly twenty-six sonnets (1-26 and 127-152), with the final two sonnets (153 and 154) acting as a coda.

Within the 100-sonnet central series, Whittemore does not see them as being written at the same pace throughout; in other words, the poet is not producing a sonnet a week for 100 weeks. Rather, Whittemore finds a period of intense production of the first sixty of the central 100 sonnets (27-86) coinciding with the sixty-day period immediately following the Essex Rebellion.¹² During that period, of course, Southampton was arrested, tried for treason, convicted and sentenced to death, only to have the death sentence apparently commuted to life imprisonment. At the end of that period in April 1601 – beginning with sonnet 87 – the pace of production slowed, with the last forty of the 100 central sonnets constructed during the remaining twenty-four months of Southampton’s imprisonment. Whittemore thus dates sonnet 99 to some time in mid-1602. Though he doesn’t discuss the sonnet’s unique structure, he, like Pequigney, believes that there is a lapse of time between sonnets 99 and 100.¹³

I believe that Whittemore’s and Pequigney’s analyses are persuasive, and that sonnet 99 should be seen neither as an “experiment” nor as a poem not “worthy of further attention,” but as a poem deliberately constructed in fifteen lines, rather than fourteen, to mark the end of a time period within the overall pattern of the sonnets.

Sonnet 126

O Thou my lovely Boy who in thy power,

Dost hold time's fickle glass, his sickle hour:
Who hast by waning grown, and therein show'st,
Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self grow'st.
If Nature (sovereign mistress over wrack)
As thou goest onwards still will pluck thee back,
She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill
May time disgrace, and wretched minute kill.
Yet fear her O thou minion of her pleasure,
She may detain, but not still keep her treasure!
Her *Audit* (though delayed) answered must be,
And her *Quietus* is to render thee.
()
()

As printed in the 1609 quarto, sonnet 126 consists of twelve lines, with six rhyming couplets, followed by two blank lines, each bracketed by parentheses.

There is virtual consensus among scholars, traditional and nontraditional, that the sonnet functions as an "envoy," marking the end of the long series of 126 sonnets addressed to the "Fair Youth," a man who is some years younger than the poet himself. That much is obvious from its opening words and from the fact that the next twenty-six sonnets are addressed to a woman. Traditional scholars, however, find themselves in disagreement about two related questions – whether the sonnet is complete and whether the two bracketed lines are authorial.

In their transcriptions of the original quarto text, several scholars omit the two bracketed lines and reproduce the poem in just twelve lines. That decision is highlighted in Booth's book, where his modern transcriptions of the sonnets are printed on pages directly opposite the original text; thus, on facing pages we see a twelve-line poem in modern spelling and typeface opposite the original version with its twelve lines of text and two bracketed lines. Booth is confident that the insertion of the parentheses was done by the printer: "The Q printer appears to have expected a sonnet to have at least fourteen lines whatever its rhyme pattern; he bracketed two final blank lines, apparently to indicate he thought something was missing."¹⁴ Kerrigan, while conceding that the parentheses may have been authorial, finds it far more likely that they were made by "someone connected with the script's publishing or printing," and thus excludes the bracketed lines ("not without regret, as accidentals") from his transcription.¹⁵

Duncan-Jones, believing the parentheses to be authorial, claims to be the first modern editor to retain them.¹⁶ Vendler also retains the parentheses, though she doesn't offer an opinion on who was responsible for them. She remarks: "The Quarto's two sets of eloquently silent parentheses (which I retain) emphasize the reader's desire for a couplet and the grim fact of its lack. Inside the parentheses there lies, so to speak, the mute effigy of the rendered youth."¹⁷ Pequigney writes that while most editors assume they were inserted by the printer (or someone else besides the author), "a further hypothesis is inviting: that these parentheses might

have been added by Shakespeare himself. This is pure speculation, which does not entail postulating canceled verses, much less guessing what they might have said. Instead, one might ponder the import of the parentheses as they are presented in Q: as terminal and empty.”¹⁸

As I see it, there are three basic scenarios which could explain the appearance of the parentheses in sonnet 126 in the 1609 quarto:

1. The author wrote the poem exactly as it appears, with twelve lines of verse and two blank lines with parentheses.
2. The author wrote only a twelve-line poem, and the printer (or possibly someone else) added the parentheses.
3. The author wrote a fourteen-line poem, and the last two lines of verse were missing, which prompted the printer to insert the parentheses.

Although a case could be made for each scenario, the second – the one which attracts the most adherents among traditional scholars – is actually the least likely. If the printer received a twelve-line poem, but thought that two more lines were needed in order to make it a proper sonnet, it would indeed be presumptuous of him to add parentheses on his own; if he thought that all the poems should be fourteen lines, why didn't he cut a line from sonnet 99? If the printer thought (or had been informed) that two more lines were going to be supplied, and wanted to reserve space for them (see note 2, *supra*), it would have been just as easy to insert two blank lines instead of two pairs of parentheses. If he received the final couplet, he'd have to reset the two lines anyway, as the final couplet would not be printed within those punctuation marks. If he didn't receive the final couplet, or learned somehow that the poem was supposed to be only twelve lines, the text would look better if there were two blank lines instead of two lines with parentheses.

Many of the factors which weigh against the second scenario also apply to the third scenario – that the author wrote a fourteen-line poem with the final two lines missing. The printer could have inserted blank lines as placeholders. Moreover, most traditional scholars agree that the twelve lines of verse in sonnet 126 form a complete poem, and that its meaning is intact without the need for a seventh couplet.

With the second and third scenarios seen as unlikely, it remains for Oxfordian Hank Whittemore to tip the scales in favor of the first – that the author constructed sonnet 126 exactly as it appears, including the bracketed final couplet. Whittemore agrees with traditional scholars that sonnet 126 is an envoy to the “Fair Youth,” but goes further to suggest that the sonnet was the last one written (i.e., that sonnets 127-152 correlate in time and references to events that took place within the first 126 sonnets¹⁹). “The different rhyme scheme and structure underscore the finality of the series . . . The use of the parentheses, in place of a final couplet, is also deliberate (i.e., not the printer's idea). The poet is intentionally leaving this one unfinished, because he has to. Only Nature can ultimately determine what will happen to Henry Wriothesley, because Oxford will die before he does. The Sonnets will be published after Oxford's death and before Henry Wriothesley's death.”²⁰

This is a comprehensive and altogether satisfying explanation for the appearance of what really is a fourteen-line poem, comprised of twelve lines of six couplets and two blank lines indicated by parentheses. If the poet was Oxford, and the Fair Youth was Henry Wriothesley (Southampton), Oxford was a generation older than Southampton. We know that Oxford was in poor health by the early 1600s, and by mid-1603 (when sonnet 126 was likely written, if not somewhat later) he may have anticipated death, but with every reason to expect that Southampton, now released from confinement and in good graces with the new King, will outlive him. He cannot know what will become of Southampton – only time will tell – and it will remain for posterity to write the final couplet. The poet's election to use six couplets, rather than three quatrains, echoes the sense of finality, as the couplet was the concluding form of each fourteen-line sonnet in the series.²¹ Stunningly, Oxford has composed a *final* poem made up of *final* forms (couplets), intentionally leaving it *unfinished*.

Sonnet 145

Those lips that love's own hand did make,
Breath'd forth the sound that said "I hate,"
To me that languished for her sake.
But when she saw my woeful state,
Straight in her heart did mercy come,
Chiding that tongue that ever sweet,
Was used in giving gentle doom:
And taught it this anew to greet:
"I hate" she altered with an end,
That followed it as gentle day,
Doth follow night who like a fiend
From heaven to hell is flown away.
"I hate," from hate away she threw,
And saved my life saying "not you."

Perhaps more than any other, sonnet 145 puzzles traditional scholars, who cannot agree that is even by Shakespeare, whether it belongs in the sonnet sequence or when it was written. Pequinney calls it "the most trivial and inane of all,"²² Booth calls it "the slightest of the sonnets," and offers that "one cannot be convinced that it is Shakespeare's."²³ Kerrigan calls it "a pretty trifle which has been much abused," and goes on to say that, "More than any other sonnet, 145 casts doubt on the authority and order of Q."²⁴ Vendler takes note of its structural shortcomings: the first twelve lines contain "fourteen subjects and verbs, a disproportion so grotesque as to render the sentence entirely unidiomatic," and the sonnet's rhymes are "wrong," creating an effect "of cacophony, not euphony, since rhymes occur faster in tetrameters than in pentameters."²⁵

Many traditional scholars agree with the suggestion, apparently first made by Andrew Gurr in 1971, that the reference in line 13 to “hate away” is a pun on the name of William Shakspere’s wife, Anne Hathaway, and that the poem is probably by Shakespeare but dates much earlier than the rest of the sonnets.²⁶

Thus, many traditional scholars would be prepared to excise sonnet 145 from the sequence were it not for the fact that they also recognize that it bears unmistakable thematic similarities to its immediate neighbors. Booth describes the quandary: “It does, however, take up the topic of damnation and salvation that is the common denominator of 144 and 146. If we are to believe that 145 is spurious, we must assume that it was chosen and placed by a literate pirate who was either improbably careful or improbably serendipitous.”²⁷ Kerrigan is in a similar predicament: “However aberrant 145 may be in form, whatever its date of composition, and despite its original tenor (apparently describing a wife rather than a mistress), it fits into the collection. More importantly, there is no other place where it could fit half so well; and whoever located it between 144 and 146 had a knowledge of the sequence superior to anything that the average scribe . . . or compositor . . . might be likely to possess.”²⁸

An elegant solution to the problems posed by sonnet 145 is again made by Whittemore. It was indeed written by “Shakespeare,” and though it is written in the first person, *the speaker is not the poet himself, but the Fair Youth*.²⁹ Whittemore’s brilliant observation immediately answers all the problems faced by the traditionalists. Why is the poem in tetrameter, rather than pentameter? To indicate to the reader that a new voice is speaking. The poet was, of course, also a playwright, and knew full well how to depict different characters in the plays by having them speak with different words and different cadences; in a play, of course, those differences are further established by having different actors deliver the speeches. But in a poem, the only way he could communicate that another character was speaking (other than to write a clumsy introductory line to a sonnet) would be to change the meter and the words being used. Why is the sonnet “not as good” as the others? Again, because the poet is writing in another voice, that of someone who is not as sophisticated in versifying. Why does the sonnet contain thematic links to sonnets 144 and 146? Because the poet intended it, and meant it to go exactly where it is.

Further support that a “persona” other than the poet himself is writing sonnet 145 lies in the fact that it is the only sonnet in which quotation marks appear.³⁰ The female character of the sonnets – the Dark Lady – is directly quoted as saying “I hate” in lines 2, 9 and 13, and “Not you” in line 14. The poet has thus arranged for both of his other subjects to speak directly in this sonnet.

I should point out here that Whittemore’s solution to sonnet 145 transcends arguments concerning the Shakespeare Authorship Question. Even if one does not believe that Oxford is Shakespeare, even if one does not believe that the Fair Youth is Southampton, or even if one does not believe that Southampton was really a royal child, the solution is still sound. It offers a much more logical explanation for the

structure and placement of sonnet 145 than anything so far offered by traditional scholars.

If one does put credence in Whittemore's theses about the overall meaning of the sonnets, then sonnet 145 goes far in supporting them. Whittemore maintains that the principal story of the sonnets reports the efforts made to save Southampton's life following his conviction for treason, efforts which were successful. If that is so, then the sonnets record not only the poet's reaction to the news that Southampton's life would be spared, but also Southampton's own reaction. Whittemore sees the poet's reaction to the news first appearing in sonnets 66 and 67, with a hint of the legal maneuvering given later in sonnet 87.³¹ Presumably, Southampton would have learned of his fate at the same time, so sonnet 145 should also be dated to mid- to late March 1601. The last line of sonnet 145 is meant to be taken literally: "And saved my life saying 'Not you.'" She – the Queen – literally saved Southampton's by deciding that he would not be executed.

Further support for this interpretation of sonnet 145 comes from outside the sonnets. In 2007 Professor Lara Crowley of Texas Tech University discovered in the British Library a poem attributed to Southampton asking the Queen for mercy. It is the only poem known to have written by Southampton. Crowley is satisfied that it is authentic, if "unpolished," and speculates whether Southampton had any help in composing this work of 74 lines, consisting of 37 rhymed couplets in iambic pentameter. She describes it as a "heartfelt plea" that is "lyrical, powerful and persuasive."³² So, if Southampton was known to have written a poem (with or without assistance) begging for his life, it is perhaps not surprising that another poem – sonnet 145 – expresses his reaction to learning that his plea has been answered.

Sonnet 153

Cupid laid by his brand and fell asleep,
A maid of *Dian's* this advantage found,
And his love-kindling fire did quickly steep
In a cold valley-fountain of that ground,
Which borrowed from this holy fire of love
A dateless lively heat, still to endure,
And grew a seething bath which yet men prove
Against strange maladies a sovereign cure.
But at my mistress' eye love's brand new-fired,
The boy for trial needs would touch my breast.
I sick withal the help of bath desired,
And thither hied, a sad distempered guest,
But found no cure; the bath for my help lies
Where *Cupid* got new fire – my mistress' eye.

Sonnet 154

The little Love-God lying once asleep
Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,
Whilst many Nymphs that vow'd chaste life to keep
Came tripping by, but in her maiden hand
The fairest votary took up that fire,
Which many Legions of true hearts had warmed;
And so the General of hot desire
Was sleeping by a Virgin hand disarm'd.
This brand she quenched in a cool Well by,
Which from love's fire took heat perpetual,
Growing a bath and healthful remedy
For men diseased; but I, my Mistress' thrall,
Came there for cure, and this by that I prove:
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love.

We now consider the final two sonnets. In general, comparatively little analysis is given by traditional scholars to sonnets 153 and 154, and even less effort is given to try to link them to the other 152 poems. Philip Martin, in his book *Shakespeare's Sonnets, Self, Love and Art*, doesn't discuss them at all. Helen Vendler, in her 672-page book, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, devotes only a page and a half to them. R.J.C. Wait, in *The Background of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, finds that they "appear to have no connection with the main sequence, though that does not necessarily mean that they were not written in the order in which they appear in the 1609 Quarto."³³

Because of their iteration of subject matter, some critics are puzzled that both sonnets were included in the Quarto. Wait speculates that, "In view of the highly personal nature of the experience behind all the poems it would not be surprising if [Shakespeare] felt he could not undertake" the task of supervising their publication. That, to Wait, would explain such anomalies as the 15-line sonnet 99 "or two alternative versions of a Greek original, like sonnets 153 and 154."³⁴ Joseph Pequigney finds the inclusion of both sonnets "puzzling and pointless. . . . One version would do, and one would do much better than the other."³⁵ Citing James Hutton, Pequigney deduces that sonnet 154 was written first, then rewritten as sonnet 153, and concludes that 153 belongs in the sequence, and 154 ("a blemish on the work") does not.³⁶ Kerrigan disagrees, observing that readers in 1609 "could never have thought the pair of Cupid poems 'irrelevant,' 'inexplicable,' or 'non-Shakespearean,' as most recent editors have."³⁷

All scholars agree that the two sonnets are derived from an ancient Greek epigram. Booth notes that a version of the epigram was printed in Florence in 1594, but concludes that "it is most unlikely that Shakespeare knew the Greek text. . . . [T]here is no saying what Shakespeare's immediate source was."³⁸ Booth offers a translation of the epigram made by James Hutton:

Beneath these plane trees, detained by gentle slumber, Love slept, having put his torch in the care of the Nymphs; but the Nymphs said one to another, "Why wait? Would that together with this we could quench the fire in the hearts of men." But the torch set fire even to the water, and with hot water thenceforth the Love-Nymphs fill the bath.³⁹

Many traditional critics seize on the apparent sexual imagery of these two sonnets. To Vendler, they tell "two versions of the same story – how Cupid's fiery brand (a mythological version of the phallus) cannot be quenched or cooled by being plunged (by the nymphs, agents of chastity) into water, but rather will heat the very 'well' (a symbol of the vagina) into which it is dipped. These mythological poems sum up, in classical terms, the impossibility of repressing erotic desire."⁴⁰ Booth finds that "Shakespeare heightens the latent bawdiness of the epigram" by his use of "valley-fountain," "cool well" and "bath" (baths were known as sites of sexual activity in Shakespeare's time).⁴¹ Dympna Callaghan goes perhaps the farthest, deducing that the poet has "galloping venereal disease contracted from his female lover," and has sought a cure "in what was known as a 'sweating tub,' a bath of almost boiling water, a 'seething bath' thought to alleviate symptoms of syphilis and gonorrhea."⁴² She sees these concluding poems with the poet insisting "on the extremity of his disease, and we leave him in the rather undignified posture of a sick man in a sweating tub. This is not a gloriously poetic ending."⁴³

Let's look at these two sonnets a different way. That they should indeed be looked at differently is suggested by their appearance and structure. After 152 poems written from a deeply personal point of view, the reader suddenly encounters two final sonnets that are constructed very similarly and are directly based on a known classical source; the poet does speak in both poems, but he does not appear until the third quatrain of each. He has also inserted "my mistress" into each sonnet; she must be the same woman who is addressed in the rest of the sequence. The two sonnets bear stylistic connections to other sonnets. As Pequigney observed, the "lie[s]/eye" rhyme of sonnet 153 echoes that of sonnet 152.⁴⁴ "Brand" is used in sonnet 111, "maladies" and "healthful" in sonnet 118, and "dateless" in sonnet 30.⁴⁵ All of this suggests that sonnets 153 and 154 (or at least one of them) belong where they are, and should be seen as a conclusion to the "Dark Lady" series of sonnets 127-152.⁴⁶

But what the two final sonnets really show is something else altogether: they show Shakespeare's approach to his work. They are meant to show that he is constantly revising his work.⁴⁷ That is why two sonnets derived from the same source appear in the quarto, rather than just one. Whittemore concurs, maintaining that sonnet 153 was written by de Vere in the mid-1570s, much earlier than the rest, and that "Sonnet 154 represents the mature poet revising it. . . . They appear to be the epilogue, but they actually serve as the prologue to his royal chronicle or dynastic diary. Viewed this way, their placement at the end of the 154-sonnet sequence becomes an invitation to begin again, at the beginning of the story."⁴⁸

That sonnet 154 is a later work (a revisiting of sonnet 153, rather than a

revision of it, as both were intended to be published) is evidenced in several ways. First, of course, it comes *after* sonnet 153, not before it. Second, as Whittemore points out, sonnet 154 contains the word “Virgin” (with a capital V), the only appearance of that word in the entire sequence; this suggests to Whittemore that it “refers to a time, later in Elizabeth’s life, when she had become a political and professional virgin, and her Cult of Virginité had taken effect.”⁴⁹ Third, the poet’s own circumstances within the two sonnets strongly indicate that a significant period of time has elapsed between them. In sonnet 153, the poet relates his version of the original Greek epigram in the first two quatrains, and describes his own plight in the sestet. At the end of the sonnet, he holds out some hope of a cure for his plight, whatever it is (“the bath for my help lies/ Where *Cupid* got new fire: my mistress eye”).

In sonnet 154, however, the poet takes more than eleven lines – almost three quatrains – to retell the Greek epigram, and does not make his entrance until the middle of the twelfth line. He no longer expresses hope that his “cure” lies with his “mistress,” stating instead that he “came there [to the bath] for cure.”⁵⁰ The truncation of the poet’s personal experience in sonnet 154 suggests that he is now older, and perhaps even that he does not expect to live much longer; the more somber tone of sonnet 154 further suggests that the course of events – whatever they may have been – had not played out as the poet had earlier hoped.

Sonnets 153 and 154 also offer insight into another aspect of Shakespeare’s approach to his work – how he deals with source material. They provide an apt subject for the application of the four-part test articulated by Daniel Wright:

1. What does Shakespeare retain from his sources?
2. What does he omit from his sources?
3. What does he modify in his sources?
4. What does he invent that does not appear in his sources?⁵¹

Answering these questions should be a useful process for any Shakespeare scholar to follow when exploring the relationship between Shakespeare and his source material. It is, of course, universally accepted that Shakespeare drew on a vast array of sources – classical and contemporary, translated and untranslated, published and unpublished – and that he almost always adapted them as he incorporated them into his works. Analyzing the particulars of the adaptations should give all of us a better understanding of the works.

Comparing the two sonnets to the text of the Greek epigram, it appears that the poet has retained the entire basic story of the epigram (which is only a short work), and has made few omissions (there is no reference to “plane trees” in either sonnet). However, we can spot what may be a significant modification. In the original text, the nymphs (plural) grab Cupid’s torch, while in sonnet 153 “a maid of Dian’s” and in sonnet 154 “the fairest votary” (both singular) do the deed. The poet has also made explicit the curative powers of the bath in both sonnets, while the epigram

mentions only the filling of the bath.

More importantly, however, instead of simply retelling or reworking the epigram, the poet has inserted himself into both sonnets: he has gone to the bath. The epigram has no first-person speaker; the sonnets do. This illustrates that Shakespeare has a personal connection to his sources, and that the adaptations he makes to his sources are intentional. It is personal experience that shapes the works, and sources are used as a tool in the shaping process. To suggest, as some critics have, that Shakespeare's works are not formed as much by personal experience as by imagination and skill strains credulity.

To conclude, these five sonnets should not be seen as "outliers" because of their odd form or content, but rather as deliberate efforts by the poet, intended to serve specific purposes for the reader. They belong where they are found in the overall sonnet sequence in the form in which they appear. Furthermore, these conclusions stand largely independent of the Shakespeare Authorship Question itself and of whatever is the "real story" of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

Endnotes

- ¹ Sonnet 1 is not preceded by a number. The 1609 publication, though titled *Shake-speares Sonnets*, also included the 350-line poem “A Lover’s Complaint.”
- ² Although the compositor had no problem starting a sonnet at the very bottom of a page (e.g., sonnets 101 and 137), he avoided having one end with a single line on a page. He managed to squeeze thirty-seven lines onto one page so that sonnet 141 would end at the bottom.
- ³ In addition, line 2 of sonnet 146 appears to be missing two syllables. The last three words of line 1 (“my sinful earth”) are repeated at the beginning of line 2, which obscures the meaning of the line and breaks the rhythm. Virtually all scholars deem this a printer’s error. I agree, and do not discuss this sonnet here.
- ⁴ John Kerrigan, ed., *William Shakespeare – The Sonnets and a Lover’s Complaint* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 300.
- ⁵ Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 321.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ R.J.C. Wait, *The Background to Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 101. Wait (and other critics) further note that sonnet 99 closely resembles a sonnet by Henry Constable published in 1592 and again in 1594; Wait calls Shakespeare’s sonnet 99 “no more than a pastiche” of Constable’s (99).
- ⁸ Booth, 321.
- ⁹ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 424.
- ¹⁰ Katherine Duncan-Jones, ed., *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (London: Thomson Learning, 1997), 308.
- ¹¹ Joseph Pequigney, *Such Is My Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 189.
- ¹² Whittemore does not believe that the poet actually wrote a sonnet each day for a period of sixty days as if he were writing a diary, but rather that they were constructed and arranged to chronicle that period.
- ¹³ Hank Whittemore, *The Monument* (Marshfield Hills, MA: Meadow Geese Press, 2005), 536.
- ¹⁴ Booth, 430. He goes on to observe that “The poem’s sudden *quietus* after twelve lines is – probably accidentally – an illustrative analogy that demonstrates the justice of the warning the poem offers.” *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Kerrigan, 350.
- ¹⁶ Duncan-Jones, xii, stating her conclusion that it was “unlikely” that the printers inserted the parentheses, and noting that printer “George Eld’s compositors were accustomed to working for such meticulously niggling writers as Ben Jonson, and . . . habitually reproduced the characteristic spelling forms they encountered.”
- ¹⁷ Vendler, 538.

McNeil - Outlier Sonnets 44

- ¹⁸ Pequigney, 206.
- ¹⁹ Pequigney concurs that sonnet 126 is the last to be composed, though for different reasons (208).
- ²⁰ Whittemore, 660. Whittemore further suggests that the poem's construction of twelve lines of six couplets (12/6) may be a numerical play on its placement as sonnet 126. Ibid. See also Duncan-Jones at 364, noting the significance of the 12/6 form.
- ²¹ See Kerrigan at 350-351 (describing sonnet 126 as "a couplet conclusion to the meta-poem" of the first 126 sonnets).
- ²² Pequigney, 168.
- ²³ Booth, 500.
- ²⁴ Kerrigan, 376-377.
- ²⁵ Vendler, 608-609.
- ²⁶ See, e.g., Dymrna Callaghan, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. 2007), 149, and suggesting a composition date as early as 1582 (22); Booth at 501 (finding Gurr's "hate away" suggestion "persuasive"); Vendler at 609 (finding it "convincing").
- ²⁷ Booth, 501.
- ²⁸ Kerrigan, 376-377.
- ²⁹ Whittemore, 731. Whittemore does not stress this interpretation as strongly as he could have. I am indebted to Oxfordian Peter Rush for pointing out Whittemore's interpretation in an as yet unpublished manuscript.
- ³⁰ Pequigney, 168.
- ³¹ Whittemore, 381-390, 478-479.
- ³² Hank Whittemore, "Southampton's Tower Poem," in William Boyle, ed., *A Poet's Rage* (Somerville, MA: Forever Press, 2013), 74-75.
- ³³ Wait, 145-146. Wait identifies the Youth as Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton, and dates Sonnets 1-104 and 127-154 to 1592-94, and Sonnets 107-126 to 1603-05.
- ³⁴ Wait, 200.
- ³⁵ Pequigney, 178.
- ³⁶ Pequigney, 179.
- ³⁷ Kerrigan, 14. He also writes that seventeenth century readers would not have ignored "A Lover's Complaint," the 350-line poem that immediately follows the sonnets in the 1609 quarto, making the important point that they "would have read the volume as a volume," not as a collection of separate or unrelated poems. Ibid.
- ³⁸ Booth, 533. Duncan-Jones notes that Shakespeare's versions of the Greek epigram "seem closer to the Greek original than any of the Latin or vernacular adaptations of it," but can only conjecture about how this could be. Duncan-Jones, 422. More recent scholarship suggests that Shakespeare did indeed know Greek. See, e.g., Earl Showerman, "Shakespeare's Greater Greek: Macbeth and Aeschylus' Oresteia," *Brief Chronicles III* (2011), 37-70. That Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, knew Greek is virtually certain. Whittemore, *The Monument*, 28, citing Stephanie Hughes in *The Oxfordian*, vol. III (2000).
- ³⁹ Booth, 533.
- ⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and Narrative Poems* (London: Everyman's Press, 1992), introduction by Helen Vendler, xx-xxi.
- ⁴¹ Booth, 533.
- ⁴² Callaghan, 71.

⁴³ Callaghan, 73.

⁴⁴ Pequigney, 177.

⁴⁵ In *Shakespeare's Fingerprints* (2002), Michael Brame and Galina Popova note that the "fire/hot desire" rhyme of sonnet 154 is also found in *Venus and Adonis* 1073-1074 (115), and a "hot desire/fire" rhyme occurs twice in *A Hundred Sundrie Flowres*, a work which they attribute to Oxford (229).

⁴⁶ See Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 649, who writes that their "triviality of expression makes them seem odd envoys to the second sequence, as compared with #126 as envoy to the first sequence." She opines that the two sonnets were early work, "inserted as a plausible and conventional end-note to the abruptly terminated Dark Lady sequence," so as to match first series of sonnets (1-126) with its formal ending.

⁴⁷ That Shakespeare was a reviser of his works is recognized by virtually all scholars, and is evident in the differences between (and among) the quarto and folio editions of his plays and in the differences between sonnets 138 and 144 as they were originally published and as they appear in the 1609 quarto. See Duncan-Jones at 13-17, expressing her conviction that Shakespeare's sonnets were extensively revised by the author.

⁴⁸ Whittemore, *The Monument*, 28. Whittemore believes that the two sonnets allude to the Queen's visit to the City of Bath (accompanied by Oxford) in 1574, and to "his anguish over Elizabeth's refusal to acknowledge their" son, who would be raised as the 3rd Earl of Southampton (and who is the "Fair Youth" of the sonnets). Id. at 29.

⁴⁹ Whittemore, 36.

⁵⁰ See Vendler at 648-649, astutely noting that sonnet 153 envisages a cure, while sonnet 154 does not.

⁵¹ Daniel Wright, "The Precepts of the Biocritical Method as They Apply to the Analysis of Shakespeare's Sources," address given at the 17th Annual Shakespeare Authorship Studies Conference, Concordia University, Portland, OR, 11 April 2013.