

What are Shakespeare's *Sonnets*?

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When Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium* first appeared and began to attract attention, his wife reportedly said that she was shocked that Wallace would publish such private poems. Critics and scholars who have not only noted but repeated this statement have, no doubt wisely, ignored it.¹ After all, their interest was not in Wallace Stevens the attorney, much less Mrs. Stevens's husband. They were interested in Wallace Stevens the exotic human sponge, who had absorbed streams of philosophy and rivers of verse, mostly French, and had acquired the knack of squeezing himself every now and then, secreting new blends of these liquids on a page. Still, it is possible to sympathize with Mrs. Stevens's concern about what the eyes of strangers might make of lines like these:

And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music.²

It is all very well for Wallace Stevens and his critics to attribute this sentiment to Peter Quince, a fictional character from one of Shakespeare's plays. Mrs. Stevens knew better.

We can all agree that Shakespeare did not have Wallace Stevens's poems in mind when he wrote his sonnets. My point is merely that the fact of publication, while fixing the wording of poems, alters their context and meaning. Publication in fact severs poems from the contexts in which they originally arose and gives them the chance to live in any number of new contexts—contexts that may not have even been foreseen by their author. But this severing of poems from their original context does not represent a clean break. Something of that original context lingers with them as they take on a life of their own, separate from their author and the circumstances that compelled him to write.

If Shakespeare could have known nothing of Wallace Stevens's doings and writings, he no doubt did have that miracle of preservation, the Psalms of the

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Hebrew Bible, in his mind's eye when he wrote his sonnets. Psalm, after all, is just another name for sonnet—a little song. Beside that, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* constitute a roughly equivalent number of little songs as that contained in the Book of Psalms. Finally, Shakespeare clearly echoes phrases and sentiments found in English versions of the Psalms. The religious character of the Psalms does not at all disqualify them from membership in the tradition that includes both Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*. On the contrary, when the psalmist—or one of a number of psalmists—in Psalm 48 refers to an event from the reign of Jehosophat, the destruction of ships bound for Tarshish, he does so in the conviction that he will be understood by his readers or listeners. That conviction carries the words into the future so that they continue to be understood by those who are unaware of the event—but understood in a way that is different from that of the poem's original audience, just as you or I understand "Peter Quince at the Clavier" in a way that is different from the way that Mrs. Stevens understood it.

Shakespeare's sonnets, then, are primarily little songs, short lyric poems, that have a life of their own, separate from their author and the original circumstances that moved him to write. As poems, Shakespeare's sonnets do not cause a great deal of uncertainty at all. For lovers and readers of poems, they are simply a handful of powerful but unforgettable poems along with several more handfuls of memorable lines and phrases. Certainty is a matter of faith. Readers are convinced that some of Shakespeare's sonnets are poems by the effect they experience when reading them. This faith need not cause them to read the sonnets in their entirety, or wonder if there is a relationship between the various sonnets, or ask when they were written, or concern themselves with why they were written or to whom they were originally addressed. Just as a college student may be overwhelmed by "Sunday Morning" or "The Snow Man" without inquiring into their position in *Harmonium*, much less Wallace Stevens's relationship with his wife; just as a child in Sunday school may learn the 23rd Psalm by heart and carry it with him to his death without asking about its relationship to Psalms 22 and 24, or worrying about which reign of the Kings of Judah it dates from; so readers of Shakespeare's sonnets may be repeatedly moved by "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" or "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought," or "Let me not to the marriage of true minds," or "That time of year thou may'st in me behold," without even being aware that there are more than a hundred other sonnets by Shakespeare. Uncertainty, doubt, enters only for those of us who are moved by the love of these poems to know more about them, when we are willing to treat them as something less than poems, when we want to use them as documents that shed light on their author, the circumstances in which he wrote, or the historical period in which he flourished.

This point is no doubt obvious but it is worth making. Some of Shakespeare's sonnets live as poems no matter what any of us may or may not try to do with the rest of them, with the group of sonnets published in 1609. Furthermore, trying to do something with the sonnets as a group is necessarily a secondary activity to reading those members of the group that live as poems. Criticism and scholarship are certainly legitimate activities, but they are secondary to reading poems for pleasure.

The question, "What are Shakespeare's Sonnets?" then becomes, "What are those sonnets by Shakespeare that do not live as poems?" It is this latter question that scholars and critics have tried to answer with appeals to internal and external evidence. By and large, there have been three answers to this question: (1) they are documents written to please or acquire a patron; (2) they are literary exercises produced by an ambitious poet who wanted to demonstrate his ability in a popular form; and (3) they are autobiographical documents that sprang directly from their author's life.³ None of these answers has either achieved a final and widespread consensus or is fully satisfactory. The limitation of these answers is clear. None of them accounts for all of the sonnets. The search for a patron cannot explain those sonnets that insult the potential patron much less the poems addressed to "the dark lady." Sonnets 153 and 154 may be explained as literary exercises, but can we think of the self-accusatory "Sin of self love possesseth all mine eye" coming into being in this way? Finally, if the sonnets are autobiographical, why has hundreds of years of scholarship failed to make a coherent story of them that clearly reflects the life as we know it?

To my mind, the best answer to the question was offered in the last century by that quirky writer, Samuel Butler. We need not accept Butler's dating of the sonnets, nor his sense of who the young man addressed in many of them was, nor his rearrangement of them, to find his description of them as "unguarded letters in verse" both helpful and valuable.⁴ This description allows for the audiences that Shakespeare says that he has in mind—the recipients or addressees of the sonnets and posterity. This description also accounts for our sense of a lived life in and behind the poems, or at least most of them, but also our sense of confusion, our inability to make a coherent story of them. As Butler pointed out, our sense that the sonnets are autobiographical is right unless we mean by that that they constitute a memoir, an attempt by the author to tell his life story. Instead, we are put in the position of being readers of letters to unknown recipients. Something of the sense and circumstances can be deduced, but clarity and complete coherence are not to be hoped for.

What all of this means for me, at least, is that some of the sonnets can and should be read and reread as poems, for the sheer pleasure that reading poems gives. If we want to go beyond that, our speculations on when the sonnets were

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written, to whom they were written, and the circumstances under which they were written, will be most profitable if we think of the sonnets as “unguarded letters in verse.” Most importantly, perhaps, this description accounts for the disparity between what the poet says and the fact of the publication of the sonnets. If the author wished to please or acquire a patron, he could have seen the poems through the press and prefaced them with a dedication. If he wished to demonstrate his skill with “the Elizabethan sonnet sequence,” he could have sold the manuscript to a printer and won shillings as well as praise. But the author of “unguarded letters in verse” could express shame at their contents while wishing them to be preserved. The poet’s lack of connection with the publication of the sonnets becomes explicable with Butler’s sense of what Shakespeare’s sonnets are.

Notes

1. See the exemplary and pioneering *Wallace Stevens and the Making of Harmonium*, by Robert Buttel, in which Mrs. Stevens’s opinion is quarantined in a footnote.
2. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1990), 90.
3. For a survey of these speculations, see Hyder Rollins, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Sonnets* (1944).
4. For a more complete discussion of Butler on the sonnets, see my *The Shakespeare Controversy* (1992), 70-76.