

Book Reviews

Helen Vendler's Art and Shakespeare's Sonnets

The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets

by Helen Vendler

Harvard University Press, 1998

Reviewed by Warren Hope. Mr. Hope is author of *The Shakespeare Controversy* (1992).

Helen Vendler's large and beautifully produced—package, I'm tempted to call it, reluctant to call it a book—brings to mind some comments of poets on poetry. A couple of examples.

The American poet Elinor Wylie said she thought discussing poetry in public was vulgar. The English poet A.E. Housman said his test of a true poem was whether it caused the chin whiskers to bristle if he recited it silently to himself while shaving. What these two comments have in common is a sense of poetry as primarily a private matter. Nothing could be further from Helen Vendler's view.

Vendler comes across as a refreshingly old fashion critic. She has the good taste to refrain from committing sociology in public, for instance. Her critical method is basically that of what was once called, long ago, when cats had wings, "the New Criticism." By that I mean simply the pedagogical method that sprang up soon after the first World War and was associated primarily with the critical writing of T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson, and John Crowe Ransom—all themselves practicing poets or, at least, writers of verse.

This critical method was perfect for classes in English literature at colleges and universities. (The radical change in the university curriculum from the traditional study of Classical Languages and Literature as a way of preparing for one of the learned professions to the pursuit of advanced degrees in English, History, Applied Economics, and so on had begun shortly before the War through an imitation of the preaching and practices of German pedagogues.) There was no need for students to know or study biography, history, the tradition of poetry in English, foreign languages, or anything else. Instead, students could be presented with one or more short poems and spend fifty minutes discussing them, noticing linguistic details as they went.

In part, this method was a response to the threats posed by the faculties of

the sciences and the business schools. Literature had become old hat, vague, subjective, and, worst of all, impractical and unscientific. To call an academic discipline “unscientific” in the first half of this century was roughly equivalent to calling it atheistic at the time of the Inquisition. Poems could neither calculate the trajectory of an artillery shell nor bilk the public by peddling worthless stocks and bonds. So what good were they? The “new critics” responded that they were complex, unified wholes that could only be seen in all their complexity and wholeness through the concentrated sharpening of well-trained wits. Vendler echoes this limited but honorable tradition when she says she will support each of her remarks on Shakespeare’s sonnets with “instant and sufficient linguistic evidence.”

I trace the lineage of the “new critical” approach to Shakespeare’s sonnets this way It began with the analysis of Sonnet 129 (“Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame”) published by Laura Riding and Robert Graves in their *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), an analysis that relied on, insisted on, the 1609 text of the poem and revealed the astonishing riches two intelligent, thoughtful poets could find in those fourteen lines. Their performance inspired William Empson to write *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, a quasi-holy text for the new critics, by applying their method.

Later, Martin Seymour-Smith, the poet, prepared an edition of the sonnets relying on the 1609 text and offering his own ingenious, idiosyncratic, and heart-rending commentary. Still later, Stephen Booth prepared an edition of the sonnets that combines the 1609 text with parallel modernized versions of the poems and Booth’s commentary. (Of these, only Booth appears in Vendler’s list of *Works Consulted*.) It is for this reason that I tend to think of Vendler’s book as a package. Vendler’s *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* is the Booth edition but with Vendler’s commentary and modernizations rather than Booth’s and with a CD of Vendler reading some of the sonnets affixed to the inside back cover.

When the book is placed in this tradition it becomes clear that the quality of Vendler’s commentary and the sound of her own voice are the thing’s sole distinguishing features, the only justifications for publication—that is, for manufacturing and distributing the package. I can say at once that it is pleasant to listen to Vendler reading selected sonnets. Hearing the poems can no doubt help readers understand them and gain more from them than they otherwise might. Vendler’s commentary, however, is at once slipshod and mistaken, even if one accepts her critical approach. Worse, her critical approach necessarily misleads readers—not only about these poems but about the nature of poetry.

In order not to be guilty myself of vulgarly discussing poetry in public at too great a length, I will try to make both these points by considering Vendler’s commentary on a single sonnet, Sonnet 73, which reads in Vendler’s modernization

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Vendler opens her commentary on this sonnet with an assertion that deflects the reader's attention from the poem under consideration to Sonnet 1, "The *self-substantial fuel* of the first poem of the Sonnets reappears as the self-nourished, self-consuming fire of 73." This is to my mind a startling assertion, reflecting an exceedingly peculiar way to read a poem. It in fact reflects an inability to read a poem. Vendler is so anxious to make some point, perhaps any point, that she is unable to concentrate on the words on the page before her without hauling in memories of other poems and her own critical apparatus. Worse, the statement is demonstrably false, using the criteria Vendler herself established, "instant and sufficient linguistic evidence." The words "self-substantial fuel" of Sonnet 1 clearly do not reappear in Sonnet 73 at all. To say the phrase "reappears as the self-nourished, self-consuming fire of 73" is not to engage in reading a poem but to engage in a mockery of writing one, producing a poor, pathetic, prose excuse for a poem. In other words, Vendler is not interested in the relatively modest but difficult job of trying to make clear to readers what Shakespeare's words mean. She is far more interested in immodestly and easily presenting readers with her own "interpretation" of what Shakespeare wrote, a collection of prose paragraphs that she might think displays her ingenuity and learning but in fact is quite enough to turn impressionable people away from poetry for keeps.

Listen to the dull, pseudo-scientific, self-important, self-help- book lingo the reader finds at the start of Vendler's third paragraph "Three models of life are proffered by the speaker although he displaces them into perceptions he ascribes to the addressee (*thou mayst in me behold; in me thou seest; this thou perceiv'st*), they are really self-created perceptions." This kind of deadly statement makes even a sympathetic reader wonder that Vendler is able to navigate the streets of Cambridge, Mass. much less a poem. The poor woman apparently thinks that describing Shakespeare's relatively plain and deeply

moving words as “models of life” can increase their value by elevating them to the heights of hokum palmed off on the unsuspecting young at the Harvard Business School. She lacks the taste or learning to realize she in fact demeans and cheapens them in this way.

There is yet worse to come. By yoking Sonnets 1 and 73 she pretends to know who the “thou” addressed in both sonnets is or, at least, that the “thou” addressed in both sonnets is the same person, the “young man” as she says. She must think there is sufficient “linguistic evidence” to justify this conclusion, because she certainly does not want to commit the new critical sin of looking into Shakespeare’s biography for evidence on this issue. The poet, however, is not the poet but “the speaker,” that old, grey new critical dodge by which the first-person singular is always and inevitably thought of as a character or *persona*. Speakers, unlike poets, do extremely odd things. They proffer models of life. They ascribe self-created perceptions to addressees—the clever little devils. They even turn circles into straight lines. “The first two models,” Vendler one day bemoaned, “are linear ones—spring, summer, autumn, winter; morning, noon, afternoon, sunset, twilight, night.” This is so peculiar, even Vendler feels uneasy with it and goes on to explain, muddying the muddle. The speaker, in the explanation, first becomes “a poet”—“A poet can invoke these models,” the instructive Vendler instructs, “either with emphasis on potential cyclicity...or with emphasis on their terminal force.” Eventually, the speaker, a poet, in the explanation, is given a name, “We are not, I think, justified in invoking cyclicity when *the poem itself* does not. Shakespeare, since he is allegorizing human life, does not say, ‘But the tree will have new green leaves in the spring,’ and we are not at liberty to invoke here the cyclicity of days or seasons.”

Whew. Before our very eyes, the speaker becomes a poet and then Shakespeare. More, the speaker, the poet, Shakespeare does exactly what we do—or at least what Helen Vendler does when she reads Shakespeare—invokes. He invokes. She invokes. We invoke. But we are not free to invoke at will. Our invocations are limited to what is invoked in *the poem itself*. Circles we can make lines. Speakers we can make poets. But there are limits placed by *the text itself*, a holy of holies of the new critics that barely continues to exist at all, it is so weighed down by and covered over with reeking, pretentious critical prose. We can not see the poem for the wheeze.

Vendler’s commentary consists of the kind of writing I sometimes receive from bright, ambitious, miseducated graduate students. I always give such work a non-punishing but disappointingly low grade, an attempt to stop the students in their tracks so I can give them some advice and ask them some questions. Read the poem, over and over, before you even think of reading what others have said about it; write the poem out in long hand; imagine someone speaking it to you, imagine you are the “thou” of the poem. Now, which lines stay with you? Do any of them have a physical effect on you—say, cause the

toes to curl, or make the pit of your stomach go suddenly cold, or cause the eyes to water involuntarily? Isn't "Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang" a magical line? Why do you read poems? Do you ever read them for the sheer pleasure of it, when they aren't assigned in class? Do you like poems?

I wish Helen Vendler would consider these questions. It's never too late to fall—or refall—in love with poems. And falling in love with them, being struck dumb by them, is the necessary first step in coaxing them open.

Shakespeare's Fictional Life

The Late Mr. Shakespeare: A Novel

by Robert Nye

New York Arcade, 1999

Reviewed by Micah Stern.

This hefty novel, written in a sprightly prose, is a great deal of fun—a good read, a diversion, an entertainment. It is a grab bag of legends, rumors, gossip, scholarship, jokes, literary criticism, quotations, lists, catalogs, songs, proverbs, leg-pulls, remedies, recipes, bawdinesses, old wives' tales, allusions, and illusions. It purports to be a life of Shakespeare by a fellow player. In fact Shakespeare's life merely provides a peg on which the narrator of the book, Robert Reynolds (is the family name an anagram suggesting we should identify R Nye with Old S?), alias Pickleherring, hangs the richly embroidered if fraying cloak of his own life story.

Pickleherring is an aged comedian who at times dresses up in women's clothes and rents a room in a brothel owned by a man who strayed from *Measure for Measure* into the pages of this book, Pompey Bum. He alternates rummaging through his memory and his boxes of notes on Shakespeare with watching the whores through a peephole and conversing with his eponymous landlord. He was a posthumous child, born after his father's death, who found his way in the world by meeting Shakespeare, the player and playwright, and being recruited as a child actor by him. He begins writing his *Life of William Shakespeare* during the plague of 1665 and finishes it when faced with the conflagration of the Great Fire of London. It is this circle of death and destruction that makes the rollicking book compulsively readable. It shakes the spear of life at the spectre of death.

Pickleherring's life of Shakespeare is no mere contribution to knowledge or idle pastime but a matter of life and death—for the narrator, at least, and potentially for us. He says as much, in an iambic pentameter line, on page 93