

Sonnets of Shakespeare: A New Evaluation

Joe Winter

Poet, Educator, and Translator, UK

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* remain at the edge of the public's awareness of the works of the poet-dramatist and also, to an extent, on the border of the academic world's engagement with the oeuvre. Every now and then a new edition comes out, or a more general book, to assist students and the "ordinary readers" come to grips, as best they can, with the extraordinary declamation that the sequence of 154 poems amounts to. But such enterprises themselves scarcely come to grips, in my opinion, with what is going on in the sequence. I have a book coming out in April of this year—April, of course, being Shakespeare's month, when he was born and died, and this year is the 400th anniversary of his death. In it I endeavor to gather together the diverse threads, at least to a small extent, and to provide an intelligible hypothesis as to the intent of the whole. The book will be called *Two Loves I Have*, a quotation from Sonnet 144. The two loves, the young man and the older woman, to whom or about whom the poet devoted so much poetic energy, may or may not have existed outside the poet's imagination. Some think they were merely creations of the mind behind a sonnet-drama, so to speak. Others—including myself—think they probably did exist. It does not really matter: they are real to the poems, as one reads. What matters more is that readers appreciate the poetry, and experience the underlying thought in such a way that does not interfere with their own individual journey of understanding, different for everyone alive.

I have used the terms "the intent of the whole" and "the underlying thought" as though I knew what Shakespeare had in mind. That is not the case. The poems' intent is bound to be beyond what he had had consciously in mind. It is bound to change from age to age as the writing engages anew with new and different minds; and the "underlying thought" similarly is ours as much as the artist's; and so it is with all works of art. What I offer is in the nature of a joined-up approach to two different series of poems, those to the man and those to the woman, and the reader is of course at complete liberty to reject my approach and indeed is almost bound to do so, somewhere along the line. There are three minds involved in the reading of a poem, the poet's, the reader's, and that of the poem itself, something indefinable but assuredly there. As in all works of art it is what makes the art live.

Gradually, as I read or quote from one sonnet and then another, I hope that the approach I take to these two diverse series as to the sequence as a whole, will be felt to stand as a reasonable hypothesis. I would ask for no more than that. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* offer something of an outlandish journey, with frequent moments of intense interest, some enchanting, some enchantingly strange, some savage, hurtful, even vicious, not least to the writer himself (or to the narrator's persona). It is a lacerating double series of poems, an exposed nerve, yet it is not overdramatic. It is as life is, often quiet, somber, sometimes joyful, and with moments where existence itself simply seems to wield a lash. Above all, it is a journey of experience and learning: of knowing. This is true for the writer-persona and the reader both.

“From fairest creatures we desire increase”: The first line of the first poem states the theme of the miniseries of the first seventeen sonnets, all of which exhort a certain young man to sire a son. It is the only true way to ensure that his beauty will stay in the world after his death. At one point, the writer appeals to the youth’s similarity to his *mother* as an argument for his begetting a son (the idea of his siring a daughter appears inconceivable, if that is the right word). What seems to have happened is that Shakespeare wanted to write a sonnet-sequence that would, as was the custom, echo the medieval literary passion for a kind of pilgrimage of the soul, a knight-errant seeking the all but unattainable grail of a lady’s love—and did it his own way. I shall assume for the purposes of this paper that the youth in question did exist, the “dark lady” also; it becomes wearying to add the reservation each time they are mentioned; and as far as the sequence of sonnets is concerned, they are there on the page. So the writer took advantage of a close friendship with a younger man that was to become a passionate friendship, one of the deepest love; and used an extraneous factor—the apparent need to get him married off—to embark upon a journey that was to become a quest, a pilgrimage, in search of a holy grail: to experience in words the meaning and the mystery of love.

In the opening seventeen poems, the poet comes to terms with the demands of the sonnet form and of his chosen variant: three quatrains, alternately-rhymed *abab cdcd efef*, ending with a succinct closing couplet *gg*. It works: he allows his passion for the youth’s company, his admiration for his looks and indeed his character—“fair, kind and true” he calls him later—to take him over, so giving freedom to the poetic force within him to seek out its object or end. It is a gradual, tortuous, repetitive process, taking in three relationships: the writer’s with the youth, the writer’s with the lady, and the youth’s with the lady. It has the tang of reality throughout. At the same time, at least for the first services, in the first 126 poems to the youth, there is something unreal on a physical level and real in the world of ideal forms. The writer is investigating the Platonic ideal.

For now, however, he is urging a young man to find some young woman, presumably marry her—and “get a son.” Some magically arresting moments are upon us already. Here is Sonnet 12:

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
 And see the brave day sunk in hideous night,
 When I behold the violet past prime,
 And sable curls all silvered o’er with white;
 When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
 Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
 And summer’s green all girded up in sheaves,
 Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard;
 Then of thy beauty do I question make
 That thou among the wastes of time must go,
 Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake,
 And die as fast as they see others grow.
 And nothing ‘gainst time’s scythe can make defence
 Save breed to brave him, when he takes thee hence.

Again and again, from the first sonnet till the last, short passages, lines here and there leap out—an occurrence that will happen differently for every reader. Here, for me, it is lines 9 and 10 which I find unutterably beautiful. At such times, the last thing one wants to do is examine the intricacies of the phrasing, etc. Sometimes, to read and hear poetry is akin to taking a drink, if one may put it coarsely—after all, it may be of nectar—and allowing the elixir to enter one without analyzing the ingredients.

In Sonnet 18, the writer drops the poem-excuse of the need for the youth to “get a son.” He has his “sonnet-legs” now; the form is second nature to him. Its quatrains progressively develop a rhetorical sweep till the couplet, often wonderfully, subsumes all that has gone before in a resolution that leaves feeling and reason, the mind and the heart, as a single and complete moment of existence. As at the end of every true poem, there is a unity of saying and feeling. Shakespeare’s use of the sonnet-couplet is unique and often very subtle, with a layer or layers of meaning that one only half-gathers on first reading or hearing, if that. And yet the couplets almost always work in that the essential meaning is clear, and other possible readings seem to be there as confirmatory in some way.

My book has quite a lot to say on the couplet in the sonnets. It gives the text of each poem and a commentary on it that deals with particular words whose lexical meaning the reader may not know. The commentary also develops—like a long essay—themes and ideas about the whole. Regarding Sonnet 18 I say in the book:

It is a love-poem. Nothing could be more expressive of the poet’s commitment than the closing words. The ritual exhortation of the first group of poems has disappeared as if it had never been; there is a sense of exuberant play, and sometimes steadier, stronger. Something is burning behind the scenes. Whatever else is going on there, to make the full statement, the means employed does not for a moment interrupt the end. In a sense this poem, the first of a long series in which the poet has freed himself of an initial encumbrance, is the key to the rest of the section 1 to 126. We will continue to know or sense next to nothing of what the youth is actually like. Other worlds hover within that of the poet’s regard for a person. But the personal aspect still is the be-all and end-all. And never is it more joyfully engaged in than here.

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 wand’rest 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.

Now it is the poetry that will ensure the youth's immortality—not any child of his own. And yet, Shakespeare is not boasting. Rather he is celebrating the act of poetry, the achievement of Art, to counter the ravages of Time.

Time is on stage as a character of immense power. The next poem begins, “Devouring Time, blunt thou the lion’s paws, /And make the earth devour her own sweet brood; /Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger’s jaws, /And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood.” Time is the enemy, and the battle is death-defying. It is fought till the last breath of the first series, Sonnet 126 line 14. The second series, 127 to 154, all to or about the woman, amazingly does not even contain “time” as a word.

In several sonnets, the writer evinces a sense of unworth, of being despised by the crowd, of being treated unfairly by Fortune in the game of life. How much he really feels this we do not know. There must be something in his experience to make it sound so real—even when it is Shakespeare we are dealing with, who can fling himself into a world of make-believe characters and indeed make us believe. Sonnet 29 uses the idea of a cursed situation very finely to illuminate the sense of a pure relief prompted by a loving friendship.

When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

But a snake is to enter the Garden of Eden. Sonnet 40 begins: “Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all; /What hast toughen more than thou hadst before? /No love, my love, that thou mayst true love call; /All mine was thine, before thou hadst this more.” In brief, the young man has met the poet’s mistress and embarked upon an affair with her. The writer, or writer-persona, is hurt to the quick, as may be imagined but steadfastly refuses to blame his dearest friend. It is essential to the course of the poetic quest that he does not. The young man represents an ideal: the most he can be found guilty of is allowing himself to be led astray. He is a paragon, the ideal form. It certainly makes for a riveting *mise en scène*.

“Those pretty wrongs that liberty commits,” the poet begins the next sonnet, “When I am sometimes absent from thy heart”—such wrongs could scarcely be a greater betrayal of their friendship. He blames the woman. “For thou art covetous, and he is kind,” he says to her in 134, regarding what must surely be the same situation. Though the entire poem to the woman follows those to the man, in the original and accepted edition that was printed by Thomas Thorpe in 1609, it is at least probable some of them overlapped in their composition. But he reserves his outburst of disgust and disappointment for the woman.

And for himself. Time and again he draws attention to a sense of unworthy, as well as to a wretched figure he is convinced, for one reason or another, he cuts in the eyes of the world. I would draw attention here to a remarkable underlying similarity between the person of the narrator of the Sonnets and the narrator of Rabindranath’s *Gitanjali*. I have translated the latter, and while there are any number of differences on the surface, the personal tone of the speaker is hauntingly similar. It is as though there were two situations, differing in time and place, subject and language, for the same person. Both speak of *biraha*, though Shakespeare deals with earthly love and different words. In both the soul is naked, the *aim* on a rack—and this though Shakespeare may be making up the whole set of outward circumstances. Both know they are of no worth, but try only to admit their faults, to be who they are and do what they can. Both are ideal composers of the confessional lyric, and neither wallows in any kind of self-admiring sham emotion, in what may be called a false nobility of suffering. The two poets face the world, and see the world, with the eyes of the same soul.

This is in passing. Coming back to the series to the young man, our author can summon a poetic effect from nowhere it seems. “Like as the waves makes towards the pebbled shore,” he begins Sonnet 60, and the line simply lodges in one’s bones. The pebbles are there, the sea clattering gently over them, the tide coming in, the inevitability of the natural force summoned by the precise yet spontaneous music of the line. It is a line, as so many, of genius of Shakespeare. He is talking of the depredations of Time, that only art may make a stand against. There is a wonderful phrase later in the same poem: “Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth” How often as a teacher have I thought of this, seeing a young person, young people before me, at a moment in life when (to quote myself again), “a young person passes a relatively amorphous stage and is stamped, almost branded, with a look that for a good many years is his or hers. It is not entirely facial expression; it is also gestures, a way of being, a vital outwardness, carried unknowingly like a banner. What better word than “flourish”? Or “transfix” for its catching and setting? What can this ever-living poet not say?”

There are three sonnets together, halfway through the first series, Sonnets 64, 65, and 66 that are very different from one another and yet are unsurpassed by any of the others, I feel, for poetic delicacy and sheer force. I know of no succession of poems like them anywhere. I shall read them with a brief comment on each:

64

When I have seen by time's fell hand defaced
 The rich proud cost of outworn buried age;
 When sometime lofty towers I see down-razed,
 And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;
 When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
 Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
 And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,
 Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;
 When I have seen such interchange of state,
 Or state itself confounded to decay;
 Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare
 That Time will come and take my love away.
 This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
 But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

Note how finely the argument is presented. The three quatrains starting with "When I have seen," the seamless transition into the final couplet. And what a couplet it is. I have an anecdote here. Once as teacher at a comprehensive school in London I recited this poem during a talk on "change." Three years later a girl I had never taught approached me: could she study English for A level? She had remembered the last line and found it in her parents' copy of Shakespeare, and gone on from there on her own. She ended up at Oxford reading English, though I believe she went on to become a full-time musician. Maybe, in four hundred years, it will happen again.

65

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
 But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
 How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
 Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
 O how shall summer's honey breath hold out
 Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
 When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
 Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
 O fearful meditation! Where, alack
 Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
 Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
 Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
 O none, unless this miracle have might,
 That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

The same battle, with dread Time, but how differently presented! And here, of course, there is a solution: his love, featured in lines of blank ink, will win through. Another personal note: all his adult life my father would go through the words of this poem to himself when in the

dentist's chair. Maybe it was the idea of "gates of steel, rocks impregnable" that gave him heart, so to speak, as he lay back in the chair and delivered himself up to the terrible rictus we are all forced to in that situation. But I think it was also the wondrously compelling nature of the poem. At line 9, as so often in a sonnet, the author's line of thought takes on something new, gathers force, inner assurance. The volta, the "turn" in a sonnet is recognized as exercising then: "O fearful meditation!" It is tremendous. So much more could be said on these two magnificent, and quite different, poems. And yet would anything be said at all? It is influence at this point. But never has there been such a deepening of awareness as here. "O how shall summer's honey breath hold out /Against the wreckful siege of battering days, /When rocks impregnable are not so stout, /Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?" he has said. And the third, Sonnet 66, stands alone in its shattering vision, and its commandeering of the poetic form to make it yield up its truth.

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscalled simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill:
Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that to die I leave my love alone.

I can hardly bring myself to comment on this. The merest detail: was ever the simplest word "and," used so well?

When Shakespeare gives himself to nature, he can find a remarkably gentle tone, for one so much taken up in the cut and thrust of argument. "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," begins Sonnet 73, and for once he is talking of Time not as a vicious enemy—"with Time's injurious hand crushed and o'erworn"—but as a gentle force, inexorable it may be, but hard savage. But he rarely allows such a Keatsian foray into descriptive verse. He is intent on the shuddering collision of people. The narrator of the sonnets—his own persona—is the sole protagonist, each poem a soliloquy reflecting the vicissitudes of a drama. At times his character is utterly alone. "Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing" begins Sonnet 87. And gradually the first series winds towards its climax.

I would like to move to Sonnet 120. This has a most extraordinary depth to it. There has been

a quarrel. The narrator realizes he has been cruel, and he grasps the other's pain only by recalling how he himself was hurt by the other in a previous set-to. There is a searing honesty in the lines. He remembers the other apologized then; but he, the speaker, has not done so this time. It appears to have been a terrible time, a lacerating nightmare, in the aftermath of which our poet outlines the situation simply as a life-or-death one. The poem is his apology. Not merely his voice, his very being seems to speak.

That you were once unkind befriends me now,
 And for that sorrow, which I then did feel,
 Needs must I under my transgression bow,
 Unless my nerves were brass or hammered steel.
 For if you were by my unkindness shaken,
 As I by yours, y'have passed a hell of time;
 And I, a tyrant, have no leisure taken
 To weigh how once I suffered in your crime.
 O that our night of woe might have remembered
 My deepest sense, how hard true sorrow hits,
 And soon to you, as you to me, then tendered
 The humble salve, which wounded bosoms fits.
 But that your trespass now becomes a fee;
 Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me.

Just a note: I have always been intrigued by the line “My deepest sense, how hard true sorrow hits.” Is this not the dramatist's deepest sense? His deepest preoccupation is to do with the nature of authority and power, in the state and in the individual. But the great tragedies tell unerringly of what he is most keenly attuned to. The five words say it perfectly: “how hard true sorrow hits.”

After such an episode there is little more to say. The series to the man comes to a close, with a most beautiful *envoi*. Nature has held the young man back from the claim of Time, but must in the end surrender him. It is as if Shakespeare at last discovers his true aim, and embraces the object of his quest, by letting go.

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 minutes 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.

The poet employs the tolling bell of continuous couplets. The passionate friendship of three years or so (as one of the poems tell us) has given birth to one of the deepest, and dearest, explorations of love in Earth's history.

But we are not finished. The second and final series, numbers 127 to 154, takes up love from a different angle. The poet writes of his mistress: with intimate affection, with fury, with life's truth. The Platonic Idea is gone. Time, the enemy has gone. Yet, the second series is knit to the first with hoops of steel.

Shakespeare speaks now of the shock of loving. The first series, the commitment to the form of an ideal love, is balanced by the engagement of the body—he has a sexual relationship with the lady, described openly in one sonnet; whereas he makes it clear in the first series that such a thing with the man is out of the question. And the engagement is of the full range of the emotions. In the first series, whatever the youth has done, the poet cannot show anger. Now he does. And it is for the same reason: the affair between the woman and his friend for which he finds the woman wholly to blame. It is an unlikely scenario: one imagines the young man, almost certainly an aristocrat, exercised a form of *droit du seigneur*, and the pair of them betrayed the wretched poet with responsibility on both sides. Remember that I am assuming, for the sake of convincing, that the characters did exist: it may all have been an invention for the sake of a sonnet drama. Still the same truths hold. And so we have a riveting portrait of a relationship that screams of frustration, hurt, delight, simple love, and ease. Taken with the series to the man, it completes an account of the nature of love and loving that, to my mind, has never been quite comprehended. My book, *Two Loves I Have*, advances a hypothesis of a sort, and leaves the reader to decide.

She is dark. At first, it seems merely that her eyes are black, but the emphasis on the “Blackness” seems to go beyond that. I suggest—tentatively—that she may have been of Moorish or Carribean heritage, in whole or part, and that Shakespeare was revolted at himself for being attracted to her. And yet, there are times when there is not a trace of self-disgust, and we are treated to a picture of an even couple, in love.

One of my favorites is Sonnet 138, where the poet delightfully talks of the lies they both tell.

When my love swears that she is made of the truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue;
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?

And wherefore say not I that I am old?
 O, Love's best habit is in seeming trust,
 And age in love loves not to have years told.
 Therefore I lie with her, and she with me.
 And in our fault by lies we flattered be.

He pretends to believe her when she says she's always truthful. Why? So that she will think he is naive—and young. They both know the real situation, yet both let the fiction endure, because “O, Love's best habit is in seeming trust.”

That line alone, that admits the necessity of a fiction, has more down-to-earth *reality* in it than all the 126 poems to the man. But the ardent and dear portrayal of a friendship was in its way no less real. The two sides of the equation almost jostle in the extraordinary venture of the poet to find equilibrium. I believe he succeeds in doing this. Both sides are necessary.

There are some fearsome moments in the second series and none more so than when the poet talks of lust.

129
 The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
 Is lust in action; and till action, lust
 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
 Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight,
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
 Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad,
 Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme,
 A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe,
 Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
 All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

The poet evinces what amounts to a self-hatred at times. His attitude towards the woman is often described as misogynistic, but in truth, the bitterest current is reserved for himself. The second series is chockfull of an almost demonic energy, more negative than positive but with some glorious moments of ease and naturalness together. He is sharp towards his mistress, sharp and scornful. “In Faith I do not love thee with mine eyes, /For they in thee a thousand errors note” begins 141. She is “the worser spirit coloured ill.” He ends 147: “For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, /Who art as black as hell as dark as night.” Again and again he reviles her: and his love is always creeping through. He calls her “my music” and says, “I love to hear her speak.” “Yet my five wits nor my five senses can /Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee,” he writes, and we believe him. I think he was color-prejudiced. It is noticeable that in *The Merchant of Venice*, the chief character, Portia, otherwise to the

modern eye wholly delightful and praiseworthy, says of the Prince of Morocco, a suitor for her hand who chooses the wrong casket and has to go, "Let all of his complexion choose me so." He has left by then: but it is clear he was a modest, admirable person. Shakespeare withholds and reveals the prejudice in his portrayal of the same character, as he does with Shylock the Jew, as he does with Othello the Moor. He assigns to Shylock a magnificent speech affirming the equality of all humans, and to Othello, a quite remarkable ease and balance of character at the beginning of his play, the very pattern—so it seems— of greatness. Yet they are dismissed. Of course, the so-called Dark Lady of the Sonnets may have had nothing dark about her except her eyes; but I think it possibly went further than that.

It is merely a hypothesis; and it matters little. But I would like to end with three sonnets from the series to the woman which will remind of the remarkable dramatic scope of the writer. In the first of these, Sonnet 143, he is breathtakingly honest about an aspect of his love for the lady. To some small degree—and it may be so, even if to a very small degree, with all heterosexual men—his approach to her is as a small infant's to its mother.

Lo, as a careful housewife runs to catch
 One of her feathered creatures broke away,
 Sets down her babe and makes all swift dispatch
 In pursuit of the thing she would have stay,
 Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
 Cries to catch her whose busy care is bent
 To follow that which flies before her face,
 Not prizing her poor infant's discontent;
 So run'st thou after that which flies from thee,
 Whilst I thy babe chase thee afar behind;
 But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me,
 And play the mother's part, kiss me, be kind:
 So will I pray that thou mayst have thy 'Will,'
 If thou turn back, and my loud crying still.

Under the guise of a farmyard scene he admits his infantile dependence. There is an interesting wordplay at the end. All editors I have come across take the final word, "still," as a verb: I pray that you will "have thy will,"—Will, also his name—if you turn back to me and quieten my loud wailing. But I see it differently. If "still" is not the verb but the adverb, suddenly the last line, or half-line, is far stronger, and the overall scene surely more accurate in psychological terms. So, as before, I hope you will be with me, if you turn back and you'll not only have your "Will," but his loud crying still, just as a baby will often carry on sobbing after its mother has picked it up to comfort it, when it has felt neglected.

There are a handful of new readings I give here and there in my book. In each case Shakespeare probably meant more than one reading to operate—even when they appear to be mutually exclusive. Such is, or can be, poetry.

I have always been fond of Sonnet 151 where the poet is open about sex. Perhaps the lady has

accused him of insincerity in his affection. It is a magnificent reply:

Love is too young to know what conscience is;
 Yet who knows not, conscience is born of love?
 Then, gentle cheater, urge not my amiss,
 Lest guilty of my faults thy sweet self prove.
 For thou betraying me, I do betray
 My nobler part to my gross body's treason;
 My soul doth tell my body that he may
 Triumph in love; flesh stays no farther reason,
 But rising at thy name, doth point out thee
 As his triumphant prize. Proud of this pride,
 He is contented thy poor drudge to be,
 To stand in thy affairs, fall by thy side.
 No want of conscience hold it that I call
 Her 'love' for whose dear love I rise and fall.

Here is no hesitation, no querulousness as to her hue, or her interest in another or others. It is an exhilarating defence of his interest, physical and emotional, in an acceptance of the bond of man-woman.

The final poem I shall read is Sonnet 146 where the poet addresses his own soul. There is a famous textual crux where the 1609 printer repeated the last three words of line 1 to start line 2, clearly quite wrongly: "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth, /My sinful earth these rebel powers that thee array..." I thought about how the line probably started in Shakespeare's version for some fifty years—off and on I hasten to add—and only when writing the commentary on that poem for my book did it come to me: "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth, /Rich in these rebel powers that thee array...." Whether I am right, let us take the poem so:

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,
 Rich in these rebel powers that thee array?
 Why dost thou pine within, and suffer dearth,
 Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
 Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
 Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
 Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
 Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?
 Then soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,
 And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
 Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
 Within be fed, without be rich no more:
 So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
 And, Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

In its way, it is the most intimate of all the poems. The presence of the person about whom the series is nominally written is no more than a shadowy one, as with a number of other poems. For instance, the very famous 116: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments. Love is not love /Which alters when it alteration finds, /Or bends with the remover to remove." There the young man is in the background, sharer of a marriage of minds. In this one, "Poor soul," it is the woman who appears finally perhaps in a reference to the speaker's shame at sexual excess. "Dying" could mean the act of sexual release. But all that is secondary to the moment of conversation, dialogue even, with his moral self. It is the nearest expression I have found in Shakespeare to a religious acceptance on the part of the author.

We are done. The poems to the woman complement those to the man, round out the exploration of love. I end my book, *Two Loves I Have*, with these words: "The sequence has a fragmentary surface, but an inner tensile strength: over the whole, as if finely welded within, it can seem a balanced hold. It is one man's statement on the gift of love and the shock of loving; one man's voice, as if expressed from the marrow of his bones, on longing and belonging and exclusion. It is one poet's quest that has for a time been a part of us; and made of all these, in air of fourteen lines, it is one craftsman's music."

