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A COMPANION TO

SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

EDITED BY MICHAEL SCHOENFELDT
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Finally, I am deeply grateful to the contributors for their rare combination of brilliance, patience, and perseverance. I learned an immense amount about the sonnets, and about contemporary criticism, in the process of editing the collection, and I hope that readers of all levels will have a similarly edifying experience. I am grateful for the opportunity to reprint previously published work by three influential and prominent critics – Stephen Booth, Helen Vendler, and Stephen Orgel – alongside the twenty-two essays composed specifically for this volume. I am particularly pleased to inaugurate the volume with an essay from Stephen Booth’s wonderful first book on the sonnets. One of my teachers in graduate school, he taught us all how to read the sonnets anew.
Introduction

Michael Schoenfeldt

There has perhaps never been a better time, since their publication almost four hundred years ago, to read Shakespeare's sonnets. Subjects that were formerly the source of scandal — the articulation of a fervent same-sex love, for example, or the clinical exploration of the harmful effects of love, imagined as the ultimate sexually transmitted disease — are now sites of intense scholarly interest. Similarly, issues to which earlier readers and cultures were largely deaf — the implicit racism inherent in a hierarchy of light and dark, the myriad ways that social class can distort human interaction, and the subjugation of women in an economy of erotic energy — have been the subject of rigorous critical scrutiny for at least thirty years. With the privilege, and the inconvenience, of some historical distance, we are now better able to apprehend the hidden injuries and byzantine delicacies of the class structure in early modern England. The purpose of this collection is to exploit this opportunity; it intends to celebrate the achievement of the sonnets, to investigate what they have to say to us at this moment in our critical history, and to exemplify the remarkable range and intelligence of current engagements with the sonnets.

By including in this collection of essays the text of the 1609 quarto volume entitled Shake-speares Sonnets. Never before Imprinted., I hope to make available to the contemporary reader a text that is at once of great historical interest and easily approachable by an intelligent reader. Indeed, I would argue that the 1609 quarto edition is the perfect venue for beginning readers of the poems; the occasional strangeness of early modern spelling and typography can actually help counteract the uncanny familiarity of certain Shakespearean utterances. Compared to those besetting most early modern poetry, moreover, the editorial problems of the sonnets are relatively minor. Indeed, there is only one serious and insoluble textual crux — sonnet 146, which repeats in its second line the last words of the first:

Poore soule the center of my sinfull earth,
My sinfull earth these rebell powers that thee array . . .
Among the more plausible suggestions as substitutes for the second “my sinfull earth” are “feeding,” “fenced by,” “foil’d by,” and “pressed with.” But the sonnets are generally free of the kinds of textual issues that challenge and baffle readers today. Although original spelling and punctuation can occasionally pose problems for the modern reader, they can also provide opportunities to explore that particularly Shakespearean mode of generating layers of significance via riddling inference and syntactic suspension – modes that modernized texts sometimes disguise.

The text of the 1609 poems, then, is in comparatively good shape; but the volume is cloaked with a kind of mystery that has served as an open invitation both to conspiracy theorists and to reasoned scholarly speculation. Indeed, if one set out intentionally to create a copy-text of tantalizing irresolution, it would be hard to achieve the level attained in this volume by the accidental contingencies of history and biography.

We do not know when Shakespeare wrote the sonnets – they might have been penned during a brief burst of productivity while the theaters were closed because of the plague, or worked on throughout his career. The poems were first published in Shakespeare’s lifetime, possibly many years after their composition, and dedicated to a mysterious Mr. W. H. with an elusive utterance signed not by the poet but by the printer Thomas Thorpe. We do not know whether Shakespeare approved this publication or not; he certainly did not rush into print with his own authorized edition, as writers so frequently did on the heels of pirated publication of their works (Duncan-Jones 1997). But there survives no dedication from Shakespeare of the collection of sonnets to a particular patron, such as he gave to his two previous non-dramatic publications, the narrative poems Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece. Rather, many of the energies of dedicatory tropes of deference and submission seem to have been absorbed within the collection itself. In fact, sonnet 26, “Lor d of my love,” sounds so much like a dedicatory epistle that some critics, hungry for biographical clues to the identity of the addressee, have used resemblances between this poem and Shakespeare’s dedication of The Rape of Lucrece to the Earl of Southampton to argue that the Earl must be the young man of the sonnets.

Perhaps this thick aura of mystery explains in part why the most significant and substantial scholarly engagements with the sonnets over the last several years have been editorial.1 While the 1609 title-page attests to the established reputation and concomitant marketability of a new work by Shakespeare – Shake-speares Sonnets. Never before Imprinted. – the dedication by the printer Thomas Thorpe employs enigmatic initials and allusive language to imply a kind of coterie knowledge of the central players in the collection (knowledge to which we are not privy):

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF. TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF. THESE.INSVING.SONNETS. THESE.INSVING.SONNETS. M’.W.H. ALL.HAPPINESSE. M’.W.H. ALL.HAPPINESSE. AND.THAT.ETERNITIE. AND.THAT.ETERNITIE. PROMISED. PROMISED.
We do not know what “begetter” means here – does it refer to the patron of the poems, or to the inspirer of the poems, or to the person who helped Thorpe obtain a copy of the poems, or even to the poet himself? – nor do we know who Mr. W.H. is. It is clear that Thorpe has read the poems closely, and is aware that one of their central tropes is the promise of eternal recognition (one of the ironies of literary history is that we are ignorant of the identity of the young man, and know a good amount about the poet). We do know that some of the poems circulated in manuscript before their publication – in 1598 (eleven years before the publication of *Shake-speares Sonnets*) Francis Meres refers in *Palladis Tamia* to “Mellifluous & hony-tongued Shakespeare, witness his . . . sugred Sonnets among his private friends” (Meres 1598). But we do not know which sonnets he refers to here. Despite the vendor’s claims that the sonnets were “never before imprinted,” sonnets 138 and 144 had been published in a variant form in a popular anthology, *The Passionate Pilgrim*, in 1599, ten years before *Shake-speares Sonnets* appeared.

There are other layers of uncertainty shrouding the collection. We are not certain whether these poems were intended to be read as a sequence, or whether they were written as individual verses and published by Thorpe as a sequence simply to suit the fashion of the time. Even if we assume that Shakespeare was writing a deliberate sequence, we cannot be certain that the 1609 text sets the poems in the precise order Shakespeare intended. But various themes and narrative strands do emerge over the course of the volume. The collection, first of all, is divided into two large sequences: sonnets 1–126, which are written to a beautiful young man, and sonnets 127–52, which are written to a “dark lady.” In addition, there are many small thematic or narrative sequences: sonnets 1–17 urge the young man to reproduce, and also meditate on poetry as a mode of reproduction and immortality. Sonnets 91–6 suggest the poet and the young man quarrel and then reconcile, perhaps after some erotic betrayal. Sonnets 133–4 depict the dark lady’s unfaithfulness with the young man, while sonnets 135, 136, and 143 develop puns on the poet’s name, “Will,” and his desire, or “will.” Sonnets 153 and 154, the last sonnets in the collection, depict the whimsical yet all-conquering power of Cupid; they describe the futility of any human attempt to “cure” the disease of love. The 1609 sequence concludes with *A Lover’s Complaint*, a 329-line narrative poem spoken by a jilted female desolated by erotic abandonment. Although many earlier critics doubted whether the poem was Shakespeare’s, John Kerrigan and others have argued decisively for its thematic importance to the collection (Kerrigan in Shakespeare
1986; Burrow in Shakespeare 2002). Many Elizabethan poets had concluded their sonnet sequences with complaints – Samuel Daniel’s *Delia* (1592) and Thomas Lodge’s *Phillis* (1593) are two celebrated examples. The tone of despair in *A Lover’s Complaint*, moreover, provides an apt conclusion to the frequently cynical collection of sonnets that precedes it. Just as the last sonnet suggests that the effort to contain love only gives it further fuel, ending with the line “Love’s fire heats water, water cools not love,” so the abandoned female in *A Lover’s Complaint* admits in her final lines that she would do it all again.

Indeed, one of the most striking things about the sonnets is how utterly unsentimental and rigorously tough-minded their account of love and friendship is. Although they contain some of the most justly celebrated accounts of love and friendship in the English language – sonnet 18, “Shall I compare thee to a Summers day?” and sonnet 116, “Let me not to the marriage of true mindes / Admit impediments” are among the most famous descriptions of the tenderness and authenticity which love is capable of producing – the collection also contains two of the most haunting portraits of the mad compulsions and intemperate behaviors of love in the English language: sonnet 129, “Th’expence of Spirit in a waste of shame” and sonnet 147, “My love is as a feaver longing still.” In these poems, love is inseparable from lust, and entails an invariably torturous experience; even its longed-for satisfactions, as 129 (one of the first poems in English to depict orgasm) makes clear, are ephemeral and unsatisfying. Like the miniature of the Young Man in Flames whose portrait graces the cover of this book, these poems depict love as a kind of auto-da-fe, searing all who experience its burning heat (Fumerton 1991). The last two sonnets (153 and 154) pay tribute to the contagious and intractable power of Cupid’s “heart inflaming brand” (154. 2). The caloric economy of the sonnets includes the warming fires of passionate commitment and the corroding flames of venereal disease described in the bitter conclusion of sonnet 144.

Whether intended to be read as such or not, the collection as a whole provides a fascinating study of the various pathologies and occasional comforts of erotic desire. Unlike most early modern sonnet sequences, which tend to explore only a single relationship in fastidious (if not repetitive) detail, Shakespeare’s sequence explores love in an impressively wide range of moods, situations, and expressions. It describes love between two men, as well as love between men and women. It depicts love between the old and the young. It portrays love traversing putative social and gender-based hierarchies in both directions. It characterizes love as a highly idealized emotion, and as a deeply degrading passion. With all their various love objects, the sonnets explore an enormous range of emotional temperatures, from cool deference to fevered passion.

The sequence as a whole is haunted by the related phenomena of death and change. The poems struggle to find a satisfying answer to the question of what might abide in a world whose only constant is change. Some of the answers that are offered provisionally include progeny (sonnets 1–14), poetry (sonnets 15–17, 54–5, 60), love (*passim*), memory (sonnets 1–18, 54, 64–5, 77, 107, 121–2), and beauty (sonnets 63–8). The poems wonder if anything, including the composition of poetry, can challenge the
inherent transience of existence. As a result, the poems engage in the recursive and self-fulfilling claim that as long as they are being read, they prove that poetry can survive (see, for example, the conclusions of sonnets 18 and 55). The poems also wonder whether the ephemerality of an object itself enhances the value of and love for that object or diminishes them; as sonnet 73 concludes: “This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong, / To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.” Haunted by the transience of love objects and the mobility of desire, the poems aspire to discover what might survive the ravages of time.

The sonnets analyze love in its most heterodox incarnations. The first group of seventeen sonnets, dedicated to the effort to persuade an aristocratic young man to preserve his beauty through procreation, signal that the poems inhabit territory very different from that of the conventional Elizabethan sonnet sequence, typically addressed to a distant mistress. Women are important in these poems primarily as sites of biological reproduction – “From fairest creatures we desire increase,” remarks the first line of the first sonnet. Even the beauty of women – the source of so much poetic description in the period – is here merely an indicator of their potential as vehicles for reproducing the young man’s beauty.

Shakespeare’s sonnets, moreover, scrutinize both heterosexual and same-sex love with great conviction and insight. Only Richard Barnfield and Christopher Marlowe explore love between males with similar vigor (Pequigney 1985; Smith 1991; Hammond 1996). While many of the sonnets do not bear overt markers of the gender of the addressee, some deliberately flout the conventions of heterosexual courtship. Sonnet 20 in particular is addressed to the “Master Mistris” of “my passion,” a beautiful young man who encapsulates all that is good in women and men. Nonchalant antifeminism here underwrites praise of the young man, who has “A womans gentle hart but not acquainted / With shifting change as is false womens fashion” (ll. 3–4). This fascinating fable about the complex origins of same-sex love cleverly employs in every line the final unaccented syllable that we still call “feminine rhyme.” Bawdy puns on “quaint” (l. 3) and “prick” (l. 13) preclude the poem’s resolution into the comfortable neoplatonism to which so many readers have tried to consign it.

Sonnet 144, “Two loves I have of comfort and despair,” turns the tropes of traditional homophobia on their head. The speaker of this poem is divided between same-sex and heterosexual commitments. Strikingly, his “femall evill” is opposed to “my better angel.” Heterosexuality here entails a world of evil and disease; it is same-sex love which is seraphic. The speaker, moreover, is deeply worried that his two lovers will betray him, and in the process his female evil will infect his better angel with the fiery corruptions of venereal disease. The female lover, furthermore, belies traditional definitions of beauty; while the young man is “right faire,” the “worser spirit” is “a woman colloured ill” (ll. 3–4). Her darkness, which may only be an indication of hair or skin coloring, demonstrates how easily western culture has translated differences of color into hierarchies of morality (Hall 1995, 1998; Floyd-Wilson 2003; Iyengar 2005). This sonnet provides the nightmarish consummation of the various scenarios of erotic betrayal that suffuse the sonnets.
Shakespeare, then, discovers little comfort in the pursuit of erotic pleasure. Indeed, sex is troubling because its pleasures are so fleeting, and because it is inherently an act that entails the loss of control. Sexual intercourse is not, for the author of the sonnets, a consummation devoutly to be wished, but a nightmare from which one wishes to awake. The sonnets, though, make available to the reader other forms of comfort and pleasure. Of primary importance among these is the sensuous pleasure that emerges from reading words combined carefully into patterns of expectation and surprise. Allied with this pleasure is the profoundly comforting rhythm of the Shakespearean sonnet form – identifying a problem or situation in the first quatrain, discussing it in the two subsequent quatrains, and resolving, restating, or revealing an essential paradox in the couplet. As one reads through the sequence, one senses a developing aura of logical inevitability about the final couplet. Indeed, the kinds of control the poems discuss provide on the verbal and formal plane a central component of the pleasure they offer. When synchronized with the pendular erotics of iambic pentameter and blended with the visceral pleasure of finding rhythmical and tonal sounds to convey apt emotions, this emergent liturgy of desire produces a soothing inevitability in the concluding couplet. Indeed, one could argue that one of the central pleasures of the sonnets emerges from the tension between their syntactic smoothness and formal regularity and their radical and radically disordered content.

The capacity of these remarkable poems to embody complex emotional states in formally accomplished language remains a draw to readers almost four centuries after their composition. Repudiating traditional paradigms both of the sonnet and of romantic love, their taut formal structures and loose narrative configurations explore the ethical import of aesthetic and erotic effects. Indeed, Shakespeare’s accomplished fluency of syntax sometimes causes us to miss the deep tensions and heightened drama contained in the sonnets. But Shakespeare the poet learned much from Shakespeare the dramatist, and vice versa. Shakespeare is not just writing sonnets with the left hand, as John Milton would say of his own composition of polemical prose. Indeed, when Shakespeare seeks in his plays to achieve a kind of heightened affect, it is the formal appurtenances of poetry – meter and rhyme – to which he turns (Cheney 2004). Yet Shakespeare’s lyric poetry is not as overtly dramatic as that of his contemporary John Donne, whose poems aspire to the staccato immediacy of dramatic utterance. Shakespeare achieves in his sonnets a remarkable confluence of syntax and form that can sometimes seem to mute rather than amplify the drama implicit in the poetry. This surface smoothness – a valued effect in Shakespeare’s day – should not lead us to underestimate the drama that seethes under the surface. Shakespeare’s sonnets participate in various dramatic scenarios, both within individual poems and within clusters of various poems.

Compared to Shakespeare’s plays, which were published in several unauthorized editions while he lived, and in an “authorized” edition, the First Folio, seven years after his death, the sonnets were published only once in Shakespeare’s lifetime, in an edition that may or may not have been authorized. The volume seems not to have been a major hit; a second edition did not appear until 1640, and this was a highly revised and
reordered production, John Benson’s *Poems: Written by Wil. Shake-speare. Gent.* It is telling that this second edition advertises Shakespeare’s status as a gentleman (he had used his profits from the theater to buy the family a coat of arms). It is also telling that the sonnets were excluded from the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, assembled in 1623. There were no reprintings of the sonnets between 1640 and 1709.

This collection of essays aspires to represent the myriad ways that are available today for appreciating the remarkable achievement of the sonnets. The chapters are informed by the latest theoretical, cultural, and archival work, but never forget the accomplishment of earlier generations of scholars and close readers. They are designed to be at the cutting edge of critical thinking about the sonnets, yet accessible to undergraduates and the informed general reader, for whom the sonnets have always held a great interest. Together, they offer a kind of tutorial in current critical engagement with the sonnets by some of the best minds working on Shakespeare and poetry today.

The collection deliberately mixes scholars with established reputations and those whose voices are just emerging. All of the contributors are attentive to the pleasures and rigors of close reading, a method pioneered and honed in the twentieth century for dealing particularly with lyric poetry. But they are also alert to the avenues opened by literary theory, as well as the most recent engagements of archival scholarship. By using these critical and scholarly tools, the essays together begin to delineate some of the aesthetic accomplishment of these fascinating and elusive lyrics.

The essays have been divided into nine parts addressing discrete but overlapping themes, a structure which overall constitutes a kind of deep but not exhaustive core sample of current thought about the sonnets. It is telling that the two largest sections are devoted to exploring, in turn, editorial theory and models of desire, since these have been such fruitful venues for writing on the sonnets.

Part I, “Sonnet Form and Sonnet Sequence,” is focused on the two competing modes of significance and attention that all readers of the sonnets must confront: the aesthetic integrity of the highly wrought individual sonnet versus the inviting threads of theme, imagery, and narrative that connect individual poems. We begin where most significant work on the sonnets in the second half of the twentieth century commenced, with Stephen Booth’s deeply intelligent account of the aesthetic value of their formal complexity. We then move to the work of one of the finest close readers working today, Helen Vendler, before proceeding to the larger questions of narrative and sequence in the work of James Schiffer, himself an editor of one of the signal collections of essays on the sonnets (Schiffer 1999). In the final essay in this section, Margreta de Grazia explores the ethics implied by the larger narrative patterns of the sonnets.

Part II, “Shakespeare and His Predecessors,” is focused on Shakespeare’s particular transmutation of the poetic forms he inherited. Richard Strier explores how Shakespeare aggressively remakes the rich materials of his Petrarchan literary inheritance, while Heather Dubrow shows Shakespeare dealing with the model provided by a
near-contemporary, Samuel Daniel. Dympna Callaghan shows Shakespeare working through his predecessors as well as his contemporaries – primarily Spenser and Sidney – in developing his particular ideas about time.

Part III, “Editorial Theory and Biographical Inquiry: Editing the Sonnets,” looks at two related areas in scholarship on the sonnets. Beginning with an essay by Richard Dutton on the implicit if unstated relations between biography and editorial theory, this part contains essays by Stephen Orgel and Colin Burrow – two major editors of Shakespeare – discussing the complex, cumulative, and unending project of editing the sonnets. It concludes with an essay by Lars Engle on the ways in which biography tacitly informs the work of the highly influential twentieth-century critic William Empson, one of the best close readers of the sonnets.

Part IV, “The Sonnets in Manuscript and Print,” analyzes the scribal and print cultures from which the sonnets emerged. While Arthur Marotti looks at the sonnets as they circulated in various manuscripts in the period, Marcy North explores the published sonnets through the history of the publishing conventions of sonnet sequences.

Part V, entitled “Models of Desire in the Sonnets,” explores the various patterns of erotic utterance that emerge in the sonnets. The first essay, by Douglas Trevor, looks at the distinctly non-platonic nature of the objects for whom the various speakers express affection. Bradin Cormack, by contrast, explores Shakespeare’s Latinate linguistic resources for articulating desire. Rayna Kalas uses a close reading of the pivotal sonnet 126 to explore the poetics of subjection and the trajectory of desire. Jyotsna Singh concludes the section by considering Shakespeare’s particular development of a resonant vocabulary of emotional experience. Part VI, “Ideas of Darkness in the Sonnets,” contains essays by Ilona Bell and Elizabeth Harvey that explore in very different ways the discourses emerging around the issues of race, gender, complexion, and aesthetics that suffuse the sonnets.

In Part VII, “Memory and Repetition in the Sonnets,” Garrett Sullivan focuses on the centrality of memory to notions of identity in the poems, while Amanda Watson looks at the arts of memory, and how these models of memorialization are assimilated into the sonnets’ repeated efforts to commemorate the young man. Part VIII, “The Sonnets in/and the Plays,” is devoted to the symbiotic relationship between Shakespeare’s dramatic and lyric productions. Where Patrick Cheney looks at how Shakespeare uses the sonnet form in the plays, William Flesch explores how the plays and the sonnets are part of a continuous project of delineating personal identity.

The final Part IX, “The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint,” reconsiders the importance of the poem with which the 1609 volume ended. Here Margaret Healy highlights the alchemical imagery pervading the poem, and Catherine Bates analyzes the appropriate-ness of the posture of female abjection as a conclusion to the volume.

No party line was followed in the solicitation or composition of these essays; indeed, I tried to encourage a wide range of critical commitments, and to foster some productive tensions among the various essays. If there was a tacitly governing paradigm at work, it was simply an aspiration to emphasize the kinds of scholarly, critical, and archival work that interrogate the theories that inform it; an aspiration rooted in
admiration for a variety of practitioners in whose work theories are subjected to texts and contexts just as rigorously as texts have been subjected to theories. The poems, of course, remain far richer and more interesting than anything we can say about them. We must never forget, moreover, that we read them in large part for the complex pleasures they give us.

In her introduction to *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Helen Vendler, a vigorous and articulate advocate of the exquisite pleasures of poetry, asserts that political concerns and aesthetic interests are inevitably opposed, and further, that recent criticism has erred in its emphasis on the former at the expense of the latter:

I . . . wish to defend the high value I put on them [the sonnets], since they are being written about these days with considerable jaundice. The spheres from which most of the current criticisms are generated are social and psychological ones. Contemporary emphasis on the participation of literature in a social matrix balks at acknowledging how lyric, though it may refer to the social, remains the genre that directs its mimesis toward the performance of the mind in solitary speech. (Vendler 1997: 1–2)

I would agree that the aesthetic has been ignored in recent criticism, to the detriment of our comprehension and appreciation of these remarkable poems. I would argue, though, that the political and the aesthetic are not necessarily opposed, and are in these poems absolutely inseparable. I would also argue that the following essays offer eloquent testimony to that effect. Our appreciation for the aesthetic accomplishment of the sonnets is enhanced by our attention to the poems’ shrewd transmutation of social, historical, and psychological materials. I would assert, furthermore, that the sonnets’ deliberate and obsessive participation in the partial fiction of deeply social speech constitutes a substantial portion of their aesthetic accomplishment. In their profound exploration of the psychological dimensions of such speech, and their provisional struggle to stave off in formally accomplished language the harrowing transience of existence, they still have much to say to us.

Notes


2 Viable candidates for the mysterious Mr. W.H. include Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, whose initials may have been accidentally transposed by an otherwise careful printer, and William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke, co-dedicatee of the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays.

3 Benson claims, almost certainly disingenuously, that his edition, which frequently combines several sonnets into a single poem to which he devotes a thematic title, and which mingles those conglomerate poems with poems that are not by Shakespeare from an anthology entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim* (the expanded second edition of 1612), allows the poems finally to “appeare of the same purity, the Author himselfe then living avouched” (Shakespeare 1640).
References and Further Reading


Meres, Francis (1598). *Palladis Tamia, or Wit’s Treasury*. London.


PART I
Sonnet Form and
Sonnet Sequence
Shakespeare and the Essence of Verse

An artist usually presents a given object or idea in one relationship to other objects and ideas; if he opens his reader's consciousness to more than one frame of reference, he focuses on the object in one of its relationships and subordinates all other relationships to it. The essential action of the artist in creating the experience of an audience is the one that in grammar is made by indicators of relationship like “although,” “but,” “after,” “because,” “however.” In literature such indicators of relationship tell the reader that he is not in the borderless world outside art where he himself has always to work upon what he perceives, to arrange it around a focal point chosen and maintained by himself. Syntactic organization tells the reader that he is dealing with what we are likely to label “truth,” experience sorted, classed, and rated, rather than with “what is true,” the still to be sorted data of “real” experience.¹

The great distinction between the experience of life and of art is that art, by fixing one or more sets of relationships, gives its audience an experience in which objects are as they must be to be thought about, in which the audience can see what I have called “truth” without having to hunt it out and pull it out, in which “what is true” and “truth” can be the same. Art presents the mind with an experience in which it is at home rather than one in which it must make itself at home by focusing, stressing, and subordinating. All works of literary art, from the simplest sentence of the simplest mind to King Lear, are alike in that they are fixed orderings that place their audiences in an experience ready fitted to the experiencer's manner and means of experiencing.

Such orderings incline to be self-defeating. What we ask of art is that it allow the mind to comprehend – know, grasp, embrace – more of experience than the mind can comprehend. In that case, art must fail because the impossibility of its task is one of

its defining factors. To state it simplistically, we demand that the impossible be done and still remain an impossi-
bility. When an artist focuses his audience's mind and distorts what is true into a recognizable, graspsable shape to fit that mind, he not only does what his audience asks but what cannot long satisfy audience or artist just because the desired distortion is a distortion. Art must distort; if it is to justify its existence, it must be other than the reality whose difficulty necessitates artistic mediation. It must seem as little a distortion as possible, because its audience wants comprehension of incomprehensible reality itself. We do not want so much to live in a world organized on human principles as to live in the world so organized. Art must seem to reveal a humanly ordered reality rather than replace a random one. Our traditional values in art exhibit its self-contradictory nature; all the following adjectives, for example, regularly say that the works of art to which they are applied are good: “unified,” “sublime,” “clear,” “subtle,” “coherent,” “natural.” In a style we are likely to value both simplicity and complexity; we ask that a character be both consistent and complex. Above all, what we want of art is the chance to believe that the orderliness of art is not artificial but of the essence of the substance described, that things are as they look when they have a circle around them. We don’t want to feel that art is orderly. We want to feel that things are orderly. We want to feel that art does not make order but shows it.

There are as many ways of trying for the contradictory effects of art as there are artists. All of them aim at replacing the complexities of reality with controlled complexities that will make the experience of the orderly work of art sufficiently similar to the experience of random nature, so that the comfort of artistic coherence will not be immediately dismissed as irrelevant to the intellectual discomfort of the human condition. No work of art has ever been perfectly satisfactory. That is obvious. No work of art has ever satisfied the human need to hold human existence whole in the mind. If a work of art ever succeeded perfectly, it would presumably be the last of its kind; it would do what the artist as theologian describes as showing the face of God. All works have failed because the experience they are asked for and give is unlike nonartistic experience. Neither reality nor anything less than reality will satisfy the ambitions of the human mind.

Of all literary artists, Shakespeare has been most admired. The reason may be that he comes closest to success in giving us the sense both that we know what cannot be known and that what we know is the unknowable thing we want to know and not something else. I have tried to demonstrate that in the sonnets Shakespeare copes with the problem of the conflicting obligations of a work of art by multiplying the number of ordering principles, systems of organization, and frames of reference in the individual sonnets. I have argued that the result of that increase in artificiality is pleasing because the reader’s sense of coherences rather than coherence gives him both the simple comfort of order and the comfort that results from the likeness of his ordered experience of the sonnet to the experience of disorderly natural phenomena. In nonartistic experience the mind is constantly shifting its frames of reference. In the experience of the sonnet it makes similar shifts, but from one to another of overlapping frames of reference that are firmly ordered and fixed. The kind and quantity of mental action necessary in nonartistic experience is demanded by the sonnet, but that approximation of real