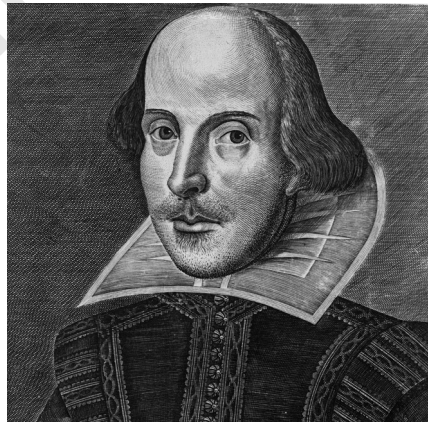


Shakespeare's Sonnets

The 'Friend(s)', the 'Dark Lady' and Anne

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was England's finest playwright and a significant poet besides, but little is known of his personal life. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, the son of John Shakespeare (an alderman, a glover and a rogue) and Mary (née Arden), he attended the local grammar school. At the age of eighteen, amid some small scandal, he married Anne Hathaway, a yeoman's daughter from nearby Shottery, eight years his senior and already pregnant with his child. They were to have three children, Susanna, and the twins, Judith and Hamnet; in 1596, at the age of 11, Hamnet would die of the plague. Sometime between 1585 and 1592 Shakespeare left for London and what was to be a prosperous career in the theatre, returning to live in Stratford for the last few years of his life. In his will he famously left the 'second-best bed' to his wife – not an insult, but a twinkling jest as well as a compliment. The best bed



William Shakespeare. Title Portrait of the First Folio (1623) by Martin Droeshout.

would have been saved for guests; the second-best was the marital bed which, after too long apart, he would come back to share with Anne.

Just as many mysteries swirl around *Shakespeare's Sonnets – Never before Imprinted*, so this chapter is full of 'may' and 'might', 'likely', 'probably' and 'perhaps'; but it starts on firmer ground, with a consideration of Sonnet 18:

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 wander'st 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.¹

The speaker in the poem is addressing someone he loves, probably his anonymous patron, usually known as the 'friend' or 'fair youth' (to whom we shall return later), but the subject could be anyone, man or woman, anywhere: tellingly there is no physical description apart from a disembodied beauty. He compares the subject to a 'summer's day': it is a rhetorical question expecting a positive answer, but the expectation is dashed. Summer, a metaphor for human mortality, is short-lived: the evocative 'darling buds of May' – new life waiting to burst out in all its glory – are shaken by 'rough winds', the tribulations which shake us all to a lesser or greater extent; sometimes the sun is too hot, and sometimes his 'gold complexion', which personifies the sun as rich and resplendent (and may also hint at the 'gold complexion' of the 'friend'), is 'dimmed' by clouds; and earthly beauty will always be stripped away ('untrimmed'), whether by chance or by the passage of time, and will fade.

1. All quotations from Shakespeare's sonnets in this chapter are from Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Methuen Drama, 2010).

Then in the third quatrain the focus changes (as it so often does in sonnets). Now the poem is about time and its ravages, which is one of the dominant themes of the *Sonnets*. In the real world, in contrast to the circularity of the seasons, death is inevitable, but there is the startling claim that the poem is able to overcome death. It can capture a moment for always, offering 'eternal summer' (notice the repetition of 'eternal' in lines 9 and 12) and so free it from the shadow ('shade') of death – another effective personification. In Sonnets 1 to 17, known as the 'procreation sonnets', the speaker has urged his patron and the apparent object of his affection to continue the family line by marrying and having children, but here, in the concluding couplet with its confident monosyllables, he can as a poet do more, both for his 'friend' and incidentally for himself. The 'friend' will survive unchanged as long as people go on living and seeing, and the repeated stress on 'this' and the caesura in the final line shift attention to the sonnet itself and its power to defeat time. The fact we are reading it more than 400 years later rather proves the argument.

The Sonnet

The sonnet is a fourteen-line poem with a regular rhyme scheme, in which each ten-syllable line is an iambic pentameter. The main influence came from the Italian poet Petrarch (1304-74). In 1327 Petrarch met and fell in love with Laura. She rejected him because she was already married but, although they had hardly met, he celebrated his love for her throughout his life in 366 lyric poems, 317 of which are sonnets, collected on his death in *Il Canzoniere* (1374).² The Petrarchan sonnet is structured in two sections, an eight-line octet (rhyming ABBA/ABBA) and a six-line sestet (where there may be a number of different rhyme schemes, including CDCDCD) which responds to or develops the theme of the octet. In England, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the sonnet form was taken up by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey,³ but it was Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil*

2. *Il Canzoniere* was originally published as *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*.

3. Tottel's *Songes and Sonettes* (usually known as *Tottel's Miscellany*) was an early anthology of poems published in 1557. It included 54 sonnets, of which 27 had been written by Wyatt and 15 by Surrey. Shakespeare was well acquainted with the *Miscellany*: some lines in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Hamlet* and *The Rape of Lucrece* are strikingly similar to lines in the anthology.

and *Stella*, a narrative sequence of sonnets composed in the 1580s and published posthumously in 1591, and Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), another narrative sequence, which became especially popular. Others, like Samuel Daniel (*Delia*, 1592) and Michael Drayton (*Idea*, 1619), followed suit, though none was as successful.

Not surprisingly Shakespeare, too, was attracted to the sonnet form, adapting it for his own purposes. Unlike the Petrarchan and Spenserian sonnet, the English or Shakespearean sonnet, pioneered by Surrey, is made up of three four-line quatrains (rhyming ABAB/CDCD/EFEF), followed by a couplet (GG). The third quatrain often marks a change or 'turn' (a *volta*), as in Sonnet 18 above – a widening of emphasis before the whole is drawn together in the concluding couplet. Almost inevitably Shakespeare's sonnets also owe a particular debt to Elizabethan dramatic blank verse, including his own; many are dramatic monologues written for the speaking (and often declamatory) voice. Often it is the opening lines that draw us immediately into the speaker's experience, in the same way as in the poems of Donne (see chapter 2) – for example: in Sonnet 10, 'For shame! Deny that thou bear'st love to any ...'; Sonnet 90, 'Then hate me if thou wilt: if ever now; / Now, while the world is bent my needs to cross ...'; and Sonnet 117, 'Accuse me thus: that I have scanted all ...' Often it is questions, real or rhetorical, that demand a response, as in Sonnet 18 (above) and Sonnet 149, 'Canst thou, O cruel, say I love thee not, / When I against myself with thee partake?' (the first of six questions). And often, as G.K. Hunter argues, the sonnets display the 'heartfelt simplicity which gives the utterance of Shakespeare's greatest dramatic creations their full force'.⁴

Publication

The probable date of composition of the majority of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* is between 1593 and 1599, although there is still a hotly contested debate about this and there are almost certainly a number of outliers – Paul Edmondson's and Stanley Wells's insightful and challenging edition, *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare* (2020), places Sonnets 153 and 154 before 1582 (they are based on schoolboy translations of Greek epigrams) and Sonnets 105 to 126 between 1600 and 1604.⁵ In 1593 and into 1594 the

4. See G.K. Hunter, 'The Dramatic Technique of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Essays in Criticism*, 3:2 (April 1953), pp. 152-64.

5. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (eds), *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

theatres were closed by an outbreak of plague and there is a general but contested opinion that the main body of sonnets was written then, tying in with the inclusion of sonnets in Shakespeare's plays of the period. For example, *Love's Labours Lost* (c. 1594-95) includes a number of sonnets⁶ and in *Romeo and Juliet* (c. 1595-96) there are both the opening chorus and the chorus which begins Act II, as well as the delicate sonnet incorporated in the dialogue when Romeo and Juliet meet at Capulet's ball.⁷ Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) were written at this time. Others have placed the *Sonnets* earlier because of apparent historical references in the text, but the evidence for this is flimsy and ambiguous.⁸ A much later date is possible but doubtful: by the end of the sixteenth century the short-lived Elizabethan fashion for sonnets was already on the wane. Although it is likely that Shakespeare circulated some of his sonnets privately among friends, as was the normal practice, he must have decided (initially at least) not to offer them to the public.

It was not until 1609 that *Shakespeare's Sonnets – Never before Imprinted* was finally published by Thomas Thorpe, an established 'stationer', but we do not know whether this was because Shakespeare changed his mind or because Thorpe obtained the manuscript by underhand means; nor do we know what part, if any, Shakespeare played in the publication. Did he, for example, arrange the sonnets in some sort of order or did Thorpe decide on the order himself? Either way, Thorpe's publication, known as the Q manuscript, loosely groups together the sonnets which try to persuade a handsome young man to marry (1 to 17), the more conventional love sonnets addressed to one or more 'friends' (18 to 126) and the sonnets about the 'dark lady' (127 to 152). Some subsequent editors have offered their own different orderings (and so different narratives) but none has yet achieved wide acceptance. Most convincing are Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells who have constructed a putative dating and chronological order based

6. *Love's Labours Lost*, IV, 2, 100-13, and in IV, 3, the 'sonneteering scene'. In the play, Rosaline is dark-skinned – 'No face is fair that is not full so black' (IV, 3, 249) – suggesting that Shakespeare might have had a 'dark lady' on his mind.

7. *Romeo and Juliet*, I, 5, 92-105. Another sonnet begins immediately afterwards but is interrupted by the Nurse.

8. See, for example, Lesley Hotson, *Shakespeare's Sonnets Dated, and Other Essays* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), and James G. McManaway, 'Recent Studies in Shakespeare's Chronology', *Shakespeare Survey* 3 (1950).

on a study of vocabulary and grammatical preferences in Shakespeare's entire oeuvre, while retaining the more intricate pairings and sequences of the Q manuscript in which a single idea is approached from different angles.⁹

Unless new evidence comes to light, the circumstances surrounding the writing and publication of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* will remain a mystery, but the lack of information has set off centuries of critics on a fiercely fought literary detective hunt, attempting to construct a single cohesive narrative for the sonnets and leading to dangerous dead-ends which either divert attention from the poems or muddy the critical response. L.C. Knights argues more credibly that *Shakespeare's Sonnets* is 'a miscellaneous collection of poems, written at different times, for different purposes, and with very different degrees of poetic intensity. ... The first necessity of criticism is to assess each poem independently, on its merits as poetry, and not to assume that we are dealing with an ordered sequence.'¹⁰ In similar vein, Stanley Wells highlights 'the fallacy of reading the 154 poems as a unified collection' and consequently challenges the conventional belief that 'all of the first 126 poems are necessarily addressed to a male, and that those so addressed are not necessarily addressed to the same male'.¹¹ Indeed, there are very few of Sonnets 18 to 126 which specifically address a male and it seems just as likely that they were inspired by a number of different 'friends', male and female, as well as by imaginary ones. Moreover, some of the most striking and personal sonnets introduce the subject of marriage – and isn't it probable that these were written with Shakespeare's long-suffering wife, Anne, in mind?

Amid all this surmise one thing is definite – that in diverse ways *Shakespeare's Sonnets* gives a glimpse of Shakespeare's sometimes chaotic and conflicted life in London when away from the theatre: the dalliances with young and wealthy patrons, the sexual and professional rivalries, the adultery, the abiding and guilt-ridden love for the distant Anne, and the obsession with human mortality and the immortality of

9. Oscar James Campbell (ed.), *The Sonnets, Songs and Poems of Shakespeare* (London, New York, NY, and Toronto: Bantam, 1964); Edmondson and Wells (eds), *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare*. Edmondson's and Wells's chronology is based on the work of MacDonald P. Jackson – see 'Vocabulary and Chronology: The Case of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Review of English Studies* 52 (2001), pp. 59-75.

10. L.C. Knights, *Explorations*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946), pp. 40-65.

11. Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare, Sex and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 76.

art. It is also worth noting that the sonnets are of variable quality: this chapter concentrates on some of those which are small masterpieces and avoids the ones which would probably have been forgotten if they had been penned by a different poet.

The 'Dark Lady'

Although in the Q manuscript the sonnets to the notorious 'dark lady' are placed at the end of the sequence, Edmondson and Wells believe them to be much earlier (1590-95) – when Shakespeare was a young man living away from his wife in the sleazy world of Elizabethan theatre and experiencing the dubious delights of London for the first time.¹² Certainly they have the feel of poems written by someone young, confused and arrogant, rather than someone older and wiser, and it is barely credible that the angry relationship with the 'dark lady' was a late addendum to Shakespeare's romantic life. John Berryman describes the 'dark lady' sonnets as 'mostly very bad poems indeed, contemptuous, trivial and obscene', but although they are sometimes rudely explicit, they describe vividly the infatuation and self-disgust which are the consequence of obsessive sexual desire.¹³



Mary Fitton (1592) – a possible 'dark lady'? Artist unknown.

The identity of the 'dark lady' is itself a puzzle and there are a number of possibilities. There is seductive Mary Fitton, a maid of honour to Queen Elizabeth, who arrived at Court in 1595 and was a frequent visitor to Wilton House, near Salisbury, the Pembroke family seat. She was later to become the mistress of William Herbert/Pembroke, whom we shall soon meet, and in 1601 bore him an illegitimate son who died immediately after birth. There is Penelope Rich, the unhappily married sister of the treacherous Earl of Essex, who had already been

12. Edmondson and Wells, *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare*, pp. 55-81.

13. John Berryman, *Berryman's Shakespeare: Essays, Letters, and Other Writings* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 286.

the inspiration for the dark-eyed Stella in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. There is Emilia Lanier, championed with characteristic bravado by A.L. Rowse, one of a family of court musicians and the mistress of Lord Hunsdon, who became a patron of the Lord Chamberlain's Men.¹⁴ Or was the 'dark lady' just one of the many prostitutes, like Lucy Negro from Clerkenwell, who would ply their trade in and around the insalubrious Elizabethan playhouses?

Whoever the inspiration might have been, we are introduced to the 'dark lady' in Sonnet 130. In marked contrast to the idealised love of Sonnet 18 (above), it challenges the idea that beauty should be 'fair' and parodies the artificiality and cliché that characterise Elizabethan love poetry:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head;
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
 But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
 And in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
 I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
 I grant I never saw a goddess go;
 My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.

In this sonnet the speaker undermines a number of conventional poetic tropes, taking a swipe at love poems which create worlds in which women are seen as perfection and worshipped as goddesses. The placing of the stress on 'My' at the beginning of lines 1 and 12 also suggests that the speaker is enjoying the defying of social convention. The mistress' eyes are not like the sun, nor her lips like coral, nor her breasts white like snow. Her hair is black and wiry,¹⁵ there are no 'damasked' roses in her cheeks (flowers of love, a mix of red and white), her breath smells,

14. A.L. Rowse, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1973).

15. In Elizabethan poetry it was not uncommon for hair to be described as 'golden wires', so 'black wires' does not necessarily imply ethnicity.