

Shakespeare's Sonnets and the History of Sexuality: A Reception History

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Most readers of Shakespeare's sonnets today first encounter the poems in the form of a paperback book. Even a moderately well stocked bookstore is likely to offer a choice. Some of these editions are staid academic affairs. Others, however, package the sonnets as ageless testimonials to the power of love. A particularly striking example is *Shakespeare in Love: The Love Poetry of William Shakespeare*, published by Hyperion Press in 1998. The title says it all. The book was published as a tie-in to Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard's film of the same name, also released in 1998. There on the cover is Joseph Fiennes passionately kissing Gwyneth Paltrow. Other photographs from the film illuminate scenes and speeches from selected plays, along with the texts of sixteen of the 154 sonnets first published as Shakespeare's in 1609. These sixteen sonnets, presented to the unwary buyer as "the love poems of William Shakespeare," have been carefully chosen and cunningly ordered. The first two selections, sonnets 104 ("To me, fair friend, you never can be old") and 106 ("When in the chronicles of wasted time / I see descriptions of fairest wights"), give to the whole affair an antique patina. Next comes that poem of ten thousand weddings, sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments"). Two sonnets explicitly referring to a woman, 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun") and 138 ("When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her"), then establish a thoroughly heterosexual, if not altogether conventional, context for the eleven sonnets that follow (18, 23, 24, 29, 40, 46, 49, 57, 71, 86, 98), even though all eleven of these poems in the 1609 Quarto form part of a sequence that seems to be addressed to a fair young man. All told, the paperback anthology of *Shakespeare in Love* participates in the same heterosexualization of the historical William Shakespeare that Norman and Stoppard's film contrives (Keevak 2001: 115–23).

Contrast that with the earliest recorded reference to Shakespeare's sonnets. Francis Meres included in his book of commonplaces, *Palladis Tamia, Wit's Treasury* (1598), a catalog of England's greatest writers, matching each of them with a famous ancient writer. "The soul of Ovid," Meres declares, "lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued

Shakespeare, witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, and his sugared sonnets among his private friends" (Meres 1938: fols. 280v–281).¹ It was a high compliment. For Renaissance writers and readers, Ovid was the greatest love poet of all time: witness his how-to manual (*Ars Amatoria*), his love lyrics (*Amores*), and his encyclopedia of violent transformations wrought by love (*Metamorphoses*). The love Ovid wrote about was not, however, the sort that led to the marriage of true minds. Shakespeare's narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* share with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* a fascination with the violence of desire. Venus's predatory lust for Adonis ends in the young man's being gored by a wild boar. Tarquin's brutal violation of the chastity of his friend's wife ends in her sheathing a knife in her breast. Of the 154 sonnets included in *Shakespeare's Sonnets Never Before Imprinted* (1609), fully half express disillusionment or cynicism. The first editions of both of Shakespeare's narrative poems bear dedications to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. The "private friends" mentioned by Meres as the first readers of Shakespeare's sonnets may have included the other young men who counted Southampton as friend and patron. The nature of the books dedicated to Southampton, as well as the testimony of at least one eyewitness, suggest that the earl was, in Katherine Duncan-Jones's words, "viewed as receptive to same-sex amours" (Duncan-Jones 2001: 79). With this group of readers Joseph Fiennes and Gwyneth Paltrow sort very oddly indeed. The distance from Southampton House on The Strand in the 1590s to *Shakespeare in Love* at the local cineplex in the 1990s points up the need for a reception history of Shakespeare's sonnets.

Meres's allusion to Ovid likewise suggests the need for a history of sexuality. In describing the various configurations of erotic desire in Ovid's poems we are apt to say that the poems imply a certain sexuality, or perhaps a certain range of sexualities. Sexual acts between man and boy, sexual acts between woman and woman, sexual acts between woman and beast, sexual acts between father and daughter all find places in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. With what authority, however, can we speak of "sexuality" in connection with Ovid's poems? Or Shakespeare's? "Sexuality," after all, is a relatively recent word. It was coined about 1800 as a strictly biological term, as a name for reproductive activity that involves male and female apparatus. In fact, the earliest recorded application of the word in English refers specifically to the reproductive processes of plants (*OED* "sexuality" 1). It was not until the later nineteenth century that the word came to mean manifestations of a sexual "instinct" and not until the early twentieth century, with the publication of Sigmund Freud's works, that the subjective experience of sexual desire was added to the ensemble of meanings (Smith 2000b: 318–19). (Curiously, both of these later meanings are absent from the *OED*, even in its revised 1989 edition.) "Sexuality" and "sexual" are not in Shakespeare's vocabulary. The word "sex" occurs in Shakespeare's plays twenty-one times but only in the anatomical sense of female as distinguished from male. "You have simply misused our sex in your love prate," Celia chides Rosalind after she has said unflattering things about women to Orlando (*As You Like It* 4.1.185 in Shakespeare 1988).²

To describe stirrings of feeling in the genitals the word that Shakespeare and his readers would have used instead was "passion." Sonnet 20, for example, addresses the

speaker's beloved as "the master mistress of my passion" (20.2). The word "passion" in this context carries a quite specific physiological meaning. According to the ancient Greek physician Galen and his early modern disciples, light rays communicating the shape and colors of another person's body enter the crystalline sphere of the eyes, where the sensation is converted into an aerated fluid called *spiritus*. *Spiritus* conveys the sensation to the brain, where imagination receives the sensation and, via *spiritus*, sends it to the heart. The heart then determines whether to pursue the object being presented or to eschew it (Wright 1988: 123). Whichever the choice, the body's four basic fluids undergo a rapid change. If the heart decides to pursue the object, quantities of choler, phlegm, and black bile are converted into blood. The person doing the seeing experiences this rush of blood as passion. What a person told himself or herself was happening when a good-looking person excited feelings of desire was thus different in the 1590s from how the same experience would be explained today. What causes a person to feel desire for genital contact with another body? A sudden flux of blood, or release of the infantile id? The very question proves the validity of Michel Foucault's claim that sexuality is not a natural given. Sexuality has a history: "It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power" (Foucault 1980: 105–6).

In the course of his multi-volume *History of Sexuality*, left unfinished at his death, Foucault suggests several points when major paradigm shifts occurred, but for the purposes of Shakespeare's sonnets the crucial change came about in the eighteenth century. It was during the Enlightenment that sexuality was isolated as an object of rational inquiry. What had been an ethical concern in Shakespeare's time ("Two loves I have, of comfort and despair, / Which like two spirits do suggest me still," declares sonnet 144) became in Diderot's time a medical concept (Foucault 1980: 23–4). In the course of the nineteenth century the medical concept became a psychological concept. It is Freud who is responsible for the modern conviction that sexuality is a core component of self-identity. We have, then, two histories to consider in these pages: the history of how Shakespeare's sonnets have been read and interpreted and the history of how men and women have experienced and articulated feelings of bodily desire. We can trace these interrelated histories in four broad periods, each defined by a major event in the publishing history of Shakespeare's sonnets: 1590–1639, 1640–1779, 1780–1888, and 1889 to the present.

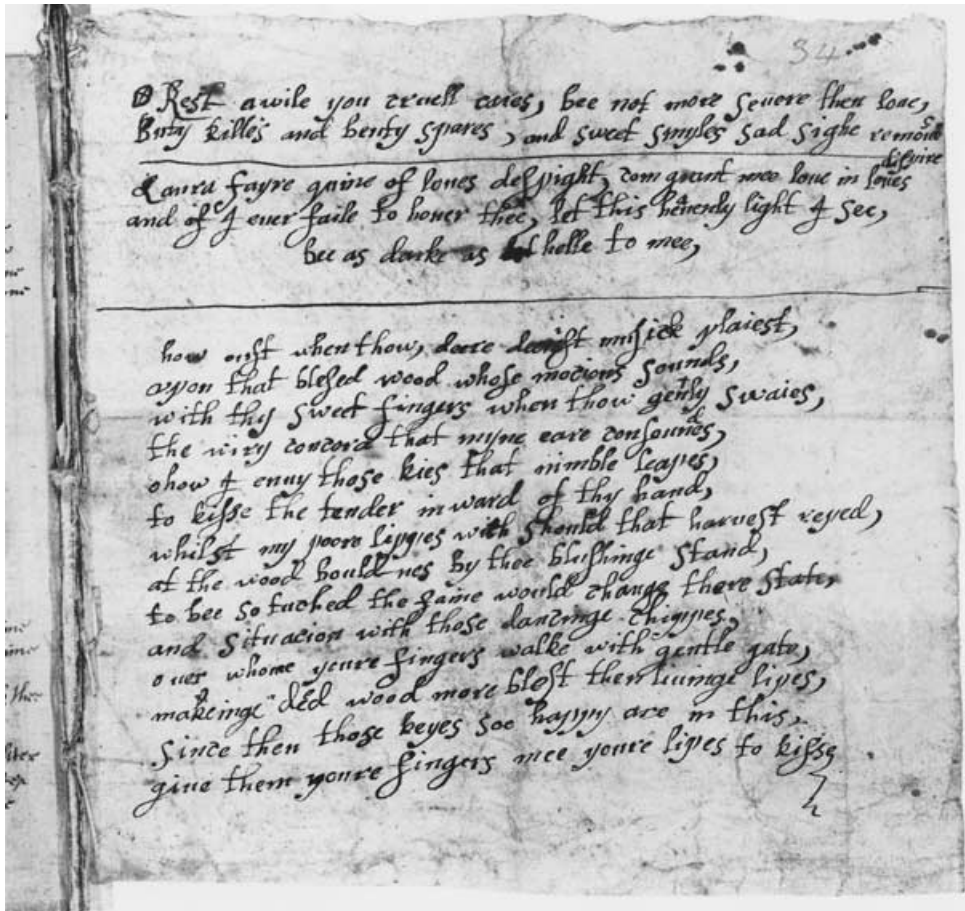
The Man of Two Loves: 1590–1639

Each word in Meres's reference to Shakespeare's "sugared sonnets among his private friends" is worthy of scrutiny. Of the six words, "sugared" may be the oddest. In the

days before coffee and tea had reached England, what was most likely to be “sugared” was wine. Biron in *Love's Labor's Lost* mentions three varieties, “metheglin, wort, and malmsey,” in one of his verbal games with the Princess (5.2.233). In *1 Henry IV* Poins adds a fourth when he hails Falstaff as “Sir John Sack and Sugar” (1.2.112–13). But the adjective is still puzzling. By the 1590s “sonnets” were a well-established verse form, perfectly devised for expressing both sides of being in love, the pleasures and the pains, thanks to the *volta* or “turn” that typically divides the fourteen lines into two parts. Shakespeare's sonnets, taken as a whole, are rather longer on the pains than the pleasures. Metheglin, wort, malmsey, and sack might be appropriate ways of describing Michael Drayton's sonnets or Edmund Spenser's or Sir Philip Sidney's but hardly the piquant, often bitter poems that make up most of the 1609 Quarto of *Shake-speare's Sonnets*. Combined with the reference to “mellifluous [literally, “honey-flowing”] and honey-tongued Shakespeare,” Meres's taste metaphor may have less to do with the poems' content than with the feel of Shakespeare's words in the mouth. In his own time Shakespeare was known, not as a creator of great characters, but as a writer of great lines, and lots of them.

“Sugared” may also refer to the way the sonnets were circulated, “among his private friends.” In 1598, when Meres was writing, Shakespeare's collected sonnets were eleven years away from publication in print. Before then, they seem to have been passed around in manuscript, probably in single copies or in small groups rather than as a whole 154-poem sequence. The word “among” suggests the way manuscript circulation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries served to establish and maintain communities of readers who shared a certain place of residence, institutional affiliation, profession, religion, or political purpose (Love 1993; Marotti 1995). The word “his” confirms Shakespeare's already recognized status as an author unmistakable for anyone else; the words “private” and “friends,” the close-knit, even secretive character of the readers who passed his sonnets from one to another. This sharing of poems, Meres implies, was like sharing a cup of sweetened wine, perhaps like kissing on the lips. Ben Jonson catches the scenario in a famous lyric: “Drink to me only with thine eyes, / And I will pledge with mine; / Or leave a kiss but in the cup, / And I'll not look for wine” (Jonson 1985: 293). Reading Shakespeare's sonnets in manuscript, Meres seems to imply, was in itself an act of passion.

Be that as it may, reading Shakespeare's sonnets in manuscript was an act of identity-formation, both for individuals and for the social group to which they belonged. To judge from surviving manuscripts, erotic desire figured prominently in that process of identity-formation. No manuscripts of the sonnets from Shakespeare's own time have survived, but a single sheet of paper, datable to 1625–40 and bound up a century or so later in Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poetic 152, gives us some idea of how Shakespeare's sonnets may have circulated as individual poems in the 1590s.³ On the six-by-six-inch sheet, five poems – all of them about the pains and the pleasures of love – have been written out in a neat italic hand. Vertical and horizontal creases in the paper suggest how it might once have been folded for passing from hand to hand. In the sequence of poems two stanzas from John Dowland's song “Rest awhile, you



Sonnet 2 in Manuscript Circulation, Bodleian MS Rawlinson Poetic 152, fol. 34v (1625–40)

cruel cares” precede a version of the Shakespeare sonnet that figures as number 128 in the 1609 Quarto (“How oft, when thou my music music play’st”), which is in turn followed by two more love poems, “This is love and worth commanding, / Still beginning, never ending” and “I bend my wits and beat my brain / To keep my grief from outward show” (MS Rawlinson Poetic 152, fols. 34–34v). Neither Dowland nor Shakespeare is credited with the first two poems, even though the source in each case was almost certainly a printed book that prominently displayed the author’s name on the title page: *Songs or Ayres . . . Composed by John Dowland* (1597) and *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1609). Instead, the writer has appropriated the poems: he has given them his own voice, imbued them with his own passion. (It is not impossible, of course, that the sheet was written out by a woman, especially considering that italic hand was commonly taught to women.) Shakespeare’s sonnet takes its place in a veritable litany of ever mounting desire. The first Dowland stanza asks for smiles; the second wants

more: "Come grant me love in love's despair." Shakespeare's sonnet continues the progression toward physical closeness: the speaker uses a phallic pun ("saucy jacks") to fantasize about kissing first "the tender inward" of the lady's hands and then her lips. The third poem carries the erotic fantasy even further: "twining arms, exchanging kisses, / Each partaking other's blisses, / Laughing, weeping, still together / Bliss in one is mirth in either." If the third poem represents consummation, the final poem finds no release from the writer's desires: "I force my will, my senses I constrain / To imprison in my heart my secret woe, / But musing thoughts, deep sighs, or tears that flow / Discover what my heart hides all in vain." The transcription of sonnet 2 demonstrates graphically how Shakespeare's sonnets, for the poems' earliest readers, were not part of a sequence that came equipped with its own narrative implications. Copied out by hand, each poem became the writer's poem and the reader's poem; the passions of the poem became the writer's passion and the reader's passion.

That became even more true when certain sonnets were copied, along with diverse other poems, into blank books like the "tables" mentioned in sonnet 122 ("Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain / Full characterized with lasting memory"). Aside from the single sheet in MS Rawlinson Poetic 152, all nineteen other survivals of Shakespeare's sonnets in early seventeenth-century manuscripts occur in this form. Many of these books belonged to single individuals, even if the poems came from a common repertory; others show marks of joint compilation. The earliest is a miscellany of poems put together by George Morley (1597–1684) while he was a student at Christ Church, Oxford, between 1615 and 1621, just a few years after Shakespeare's death in 1616. Morley went on to become Bishop of Winchester, and his manuscript resides today in the library of Westminster Abbey. The poem that Morley copied is a version of the sonnet that appears as number 2 in the 1609 Quarto, "When forty winters shall besiege thy brow." No fewer than 31 variations in Morley's version from the 116 words in the Quarto text suggest to Gary Taylor that Morley may have been copying from a manuscript of an earlier version of the poem than the 1609 Quarto presents, especially since the variations betray parallels with scripts that Shakespeare was writing in the 1590s (Taylor 1985). Morley does not provide an attribution. Like the writer of the single sheet in MS Rawlinson Poetic 152, he seems to be less interested in who originally wrote the poem than in his own uses for it.

What Morley has done is to imagine the sonnet as a seduction device very much of a piece with the other poems he has copied: he entitles it "To one that would die a maid." Now, "maid" in early modern English could refer to a virgin of either sex, male as well as female, but the other poems in Morley's collection suggest that it was a female recipient he had in mind. Morley's version of sonnet 2, Taylor has demonstrated, is likely the exemplar for four other surviving manuscript copies of sonnet 2, all of which repeat the title "To one that would die a maid" (Taylor 1985: 217). One other manuscript, from the 1630s, heads the poem "A lover to his mistress" (Beal 1980: 452–4). The title suggests that the copyists thought of sonnet 2 more as an ingenious argument for getting someone into bed than as a persuasion to marry and beget children. The "you" of the poem is assumed to be a woman, not the fair young

man implied by the first nineteen sonnets in the 1609 Quarto. Among the poems collected in Morley's manuscript is Donne's elegy "On his mistress going to bed" (Westminster Abbey MS 41, fols. 14v–15). The tone of the entire collection can be gathered from the poem that immediately precedes Shakespeare's sonnet, an epigram on an old woman who has worn her teeth away with talking too much, and the poem that follows it, a memorial tribute to a fart inadvertently let out by a speaker in parliament (fols. 49–49v).

Another group of manuscript copies of sonnet 2 comes closer to the context created in the 1609 Quarto. In four of the surviving table-books the poem bears the title "*Spes Altera*," "Another Hope," which implies that the collectors took the sonnet's third quatrain quite seriously: "O how much better were thy beauty's use / If thou couldst say, 'This pretty child of mine / Saves my account and makes my old excuse,' / Making his beauty by succession thine" (2.9–12 as transcribed in Taylor 1985: 212). The title "*Spes Altera*," as Taylor points out, comes from the last book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, where Aeneas's son Ascanius is praised as "*magnae spes altera Romae*" (12.168), "great Rome's other hope," just before the decisive battle in which Aeneas defeats Turnus, wins the hand of Lavinia, and secures the lands that become the site of Rome. In political terms this scenario resembles the context provided for sonnet 2 in the 1609 Quarto, where it appears second in a sequence of poems advising a noble young man to marry and beget heirs. In sexual terms the emphasis falls, not on the genital pleasure of a single night, but on a vision of fecundity that spans time and space. In this respect, "*Spes Altera*" is not unlike the moment of sexual consummation that Edmund Spenser imagines for himself and his bride in the *Epithalamion* he wrote for his own wedding day. First Spenser invokes Juno, goddess of marriage, then

glad Genius, in whose gentle hand
The bridal bower and genial [i.e., generative] bed remain
Without blemish or stain,
And the sweet pleasures of their loves' delight
With secret aid does succor and supply
Till they bring forth the fruitful progeny.
(lines 398–403 in Spenser 1989: 678)

Similar images color the marriage-night blessing that Puck pronounces at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The curtains and hangings on early modern bedsteads, richly embroidered with plants and animals, suggest that Spenser's and Shakespeare's contemporaries, some of them at any rate, liked to imagine themselves in just such settings of procreative plenitude when they had sex (Smith 1996: 95–121).

Yet another sexual scenario is set in place by the first book in which any of Shakespeare's sonnets appeared in print, *The Passionate Pilgrim*, published by William Jaggard in either 1598 or 1599. Only fragments of that first edition survive; the title page is not among them. A second edition followed in 1599 and a third in 1612, both proclaiming the entire book to be "*by W. Shakespeare.*" Despite that claim, only five of the twenty verses in the first and second editions can be attributed to

Shakespeare on the basis of other evidence: the two poems that lead off the collection, "When my love swears she is made of truth, / I do believe her" (the poem that became sonnet 138 in the 1609 Quarto) and "Two loves I have, of comfort and despair" (144 in the 1609 Quarto), versions of two sonnets that are incorporated into the dialogue of *Love's Labour's Lost* ("Did not the heavenly rhetoric of thine eye / . . . / Persuade my heart to this false perjury?" [4.3.57–70] and "If love make me forsworn, how shall I swear to love?" [4.2.106–19]), and a song that likewise figures in that play ("On a day – alack the day – / Love whose month is ever May / Spied a blossom passing fair / Playing in the wanton air" [4.3.99–118]). The other fifteen selections include, without any attributions, Christopher Marlowe's lyric "[Come] live with me and be my love," followed by Sir Walter Raleigh's reply, as well as poems by Richard Barnfield and Bartholomew Griffin. All in all, *The Passionate Pilgrim* reads like a sheaf of leaves taken from a manuscript table-book.

More than Shakespeare's sonnets, it is Marlowe's poem, printed here for the first time, that establishes the tone of the whole affair: "Live with me and be my love, / And we will all the pleasures prove / That hills and valleys, dales and fields, / And all the craggy mountains yield" (Shakespeare 1939: sig. D5). The implicit setting for all twenty poems is the pastoral dream world that Shakespeare and his contemporaries knew as a *locus amoenus* (literally, a "delightful place"), a landscape of flowers and fields where the season is always May and the only occupations are being in love and writing poems about being in love. In this context, "When my love swears she is made of truth" is drained of all the acerbic cynicism it has in the 1609 Quarto. In the final couplet of *The Passionate Pilgrim* version the speaker simply abandons himself to voluptuous pleasure: "Therefore I'll lie with love, and love with me, / Since that our faults in love thus smothered be" (sig. A3). Compare that with the wincing pun on "lie" in the 1609 version: "Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be" (138.13–14 in Shakespeare 1977).⁴ If there is a story line to *The Passionate Pilgrim* it is provided by four sonnets, dispersed through the first half of the collection, that recount Venus' attempted seduction of Adonis. The tremendous popularity of Shakespeare's narrative poem on the same subject, first published five years earlier and already reprinted four times, made it plausible for readers in 1598 to imagine that he had written these four sonnets, too. A smirking sensuality pervades the four Venus and Adonis sonnets: to warn Adonis of the thigh-wounds he might receive from hunting the boar, "She showed hers, he saw more wounds than one" (Shakespeare 1939: sig. B3). Amid the bowers of bliss erected in *The Passionate Pilgrim* the sonnet "Two loves I have, of comfort and despair" becomes no more than a conventional lament about unsatisfied desire, or perhaps a boast that the sonneteer enjoys not one love but two.

By 1609, when Thomas Thorpe published *Shakespeare's Sonnets Never Before Imprinted*, quite a few of the poems had, therefore, a sexual history already – and a remarkably varied one, at that. The addition of a substantial number of other sonnets in the 1609 volume and their arrangement into a 154-poem sequence reconfigured the place of the sonnets in the history of sexuality once again. Shakespeare's personal

connection with the 1609 publishing venture is a controversial issue (Duncan-Jones 1983). Whoever may be responsible for the arrangement of the poems, the 1609 Quarto does suggest several groupings. Sometimes the connections are imagistic, as in the many pairs of sonnets that ask to be read as a diptych. In sonnet 27, for example, the speaker first specifies an occasion – “Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed” (27.1) – and then describes how he cannot rest from the cares of the day, how his thoughts “intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee” (27.6). The beloved’s “shadow” appears to him “like a jewel hung in ghastly night” (27.11). Sonnet 28 follows as a natural conclusion – “How can I then return in happy plight / That am debarred the benefit of rest” (28.1–2) – and repeats the images of night, starlight, journey, and oppression. Other groupings are thematic. Sonnets 1–19, all seemingly addressed to the same young man, are concerned with securing immortality, either through the begetting of children or, later in the group, through the verses that the poet writes. Sonnet 20 introduces erotic desire by addressing the recipient as “the master mistress of my passion” (20.2), praising his woman-like beauties (20.1, 5), celebrating his manly constancy (20.3–6) and skin coloring (20.7–8), and making punning sport with his penis (20.11–14). Still other groupings seem situational. Sonnets 33–42 contain dark allusions to some offence that the beloved has committed, possibly by stealing the poet’s mistress (“That thou hast her, it is not all my grief” [42.1]). A rival poet is implied in sonnets 78–86. Finally there is the question of whom the poet addresses or whom he is thinking about from poem to poem. Sonnets 1–19 and 20–1 clearly imply a male recipient. Sonnet 126 (“O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy pow’r / Dost hold time’s fickle glass, his sickle hour”), with its male addressee, is followed by a poem that abruptly introduces a dark-hued woman as the subject of most of the ensuing poems: “In the old age black was not counted fair” (127.1). Read in isolation, many of the sonnets seem ambiguous with respect to the subject’s gender (Dubrow 2000: 113–34).

What do they imply when read in sequence? Thorpe mystifies the question by providing a dedication that looks on the page like an epigram engraved on stone. It reads like a riddle. Who is “M[aste]r W. H.,” identified by Thorpe as “the only begetter” of the sonnets? Who, for that matter, is “the well-wishing adventurer” who is “setting forth”? Syntactically he has to be Thomas Thorpe, who is setting forth the poems in print, but many readers of the collected sonnets have felt themselves to be cast in the role of adventurer or explorer amid the sonnets’ cryptic allusions. By connecting Master W. H. with “that eternity promised by our ever-living poet,” Thorpe’s dedication prepares the reader to assume that the ensuing sonnets, the first nineteen of them at least, are addressed to Master W. H. Nothing explicitly challenges that assumption until sonnet 127. Do the poems, then, fall into a group addressed to the man right fair and a group addressed to the woman colored ill? At the least we can say that all the sonnets explicitly addressed to a male subject occur before sonnet 126, while all those explicitly addressed to a female subject occur after 127. Whether that distinction applies to *every* poem before 126 and after 127 is harder to tell. Certainly sonnet 20 is not the only sonnet in the first group to speak of the man right fair in

erotic terms. Sonnet 106 (“When in the chronicle of wasted time / I see descriptions of the fairest wights”) takes Petrarchan poetry’s conventional blazon of a lady’s hand, foot, lip, eye, and brow and applies it to “ev’n such a beauty as you *master* now” (106.8, emphasis added). The sentiment voiced in the couplet of sonnet 106 – “For we which now behold these present days, / Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise” (106.13–14) – is typical of the way the poems addressed to the fair young man preserve the idealism of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition, even as the gender of the subject changes from female to male. Contrast with the sexual cynicism bruited in many of the poems addressed to the woman colored ill could hardly be sharper.

What sonnets 20 and 106 do *not* register is anxiety over erotic appreciation of the fair young man’s beauty. Aristotle’s valuation of bonds between male and male over all other human ties, marriage included, was maintained in early modern ethics. Such bonds, after all, cemented the political power of patriarchy. The fact that male–male bonds could be celebrated in erotic images, in the very terms that might be read as signs of sodomy, constitutes one of the central ironies of early modern culture (Bray 1994: 40–61). In their own time, Margreta de Grazia (2000) has argued, the real “scandal” of Shakespeare’s sonnets was to be found in the poems addressed to the woman colored ill, not in the poems addressed to the man right fair. All the distinctions on which the edifice of early modern society was founded – not just sexual difference but social rank, age, reputation, marital status, moral probity, even physical availability – are undermined by sonnets 127–52: “It is Shakespeare’s gynerastic longings for a black mistress that are perverse and menacing, precisely because they threaten to raze the very distinctions his poems to the fair boy strain to preserve” (p. 106). Sonnet 144 confirms such a reading: “Two loves I have of comfort and despair / Which like two spirits do suggest me still; / The better angel is a man right fair, / The worser spirit a woman colored ill” (144.1–4).

The circulation of Shakespeare’s sonnets in manuscript from the 1590s through the 1630s, the printing of two of them in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1598–9, and the appearance of a collected edition in 1609 point up a fundamental fluidity, not only in what the poems could mean to different readers, but in what those readers’ passions made them desire in other people. Our need to have an authorized fixed text and our need to typecast people according to “sexual orientation” are both revealed to be anachronistic back-projections.

The Cavalier Poet: 1640–1779

The most telling evidence of how people read the 1609 Quarto of Shakespeare’s sonnets is to be found in manuscript table-books of the 1620s and 1630s, in which poems from the printed edition passed back into the manuscript culture from which they had originally emerged. Aside from sonnet 2, which seems to have circulated independently of the Quarto, the surviving manuscripts include single instances of sonnets 8, 32, 71, 116, 128, and 138. The only sonnet to be copied more than once,

number 106, shows the same personal appropriation that we have noticed already with respect to sonnet 2. The two collectors who copied out “When in the chronicle of waste time, / I see descriptions of the fairest wights” in MS Pierpoint Morgan MA 1057 and Rosenbach MS 1083/16 seem not to have noticed the gender of the verb in the phrase “Even such a beauty as you master now”; both of them entitle the poem “On his mistress” (Beal 1980: 452–4). At least two readers of the 1609 Quarto, however, seem to have picked up on the homoeroticism of many of the first 126 sonnets. A copy of the Quarto in the Rosenbach Library in Philadelphia bears the comment after sonnet 154, “What a heap of wretched infidel stuff,” with the word “infidel” capitalized and tricked out in fresh ink (Shakespeare 1998b: 69). “Infidel” may refer to Shakespeare’s apostasy before the court of love; it may also have specific reference to Moors, who were infamous as sodomites (Hutcheson 2001). A more appreciative response to the sonnets’ erotic ambidexterity is registered in Sir John Suckling’s play *Brennoralt* (written ca. 1640), in which lines adapted from sonnets 33, 99, 104, and 140 are given to a woman who lives her life disguised as a man (Shakespeare 1998b: 73–4).

In 1640, the very year that Suckling was writing his play, there appeared a revised edition of the sonnets that smoothed over any awkward questions about erotic feelings being addressed to a man. In his preface to *Poems Written by Wil. Shake-speare, Gent.* the editor, John Benson, claims to be giving the reader “some excellent and sweetly composed poems, of Master William Shakespeare, which in themselves appear of the same purity, the author himself then living avouched” (Shakespeare 1640: sig.*2). Now, “purity” may refer to the style Benson attributes to the sonnets – later in the preface he calls them “serene, clear, and elegantly plain” (sig.*2v) – or perhaps to the accuracy of the texts he has edited. To “avouch” purity, however, seems to be making some kind of moral claim. By rearranging the order of the poems from the 1609 Quarto Benson destroys any sense of a narrative that involves a man right fair and a woman colored ill. Generic titles invite the reader to regard the book as the kind of random miscellany that more up-to-date poets like Thomas Carew were publishing in the 1640s (Baker 1998). Thus “Two loves I have” becomes “A Temptation”; “When my love swears she is made of truth” becomes “False belief.” Thematically related sonnets get grouped into threes that are printed as new 42-line poems (albeit with the three concluding couplets of each sonnet indented). The sonnets numbered 1, 2, and 3 in the 1609 Quarto, for example, become “Love’s cruelty.” Interspersed with the 1609 are poems from the 1612 edition of *The Passionate Pilgrim*, including the amorous sonnets on Venus and Adonis. Through it all, a conventional male-to-female eroticism is insinuated.

Whether Benson set out to censor the homoeroticism in the 1609 Quarto or whether he was simply trying to turn Shakespeare into a “cavalier” poet like Carew is open to question (de Grazia 2000). Serene, clear, and elegantly plain, cavalier poetry typically strikes a politer, more public tone than Shakespeare’s anguished, idiosyncratic sonnets (Baker 1998). On three occasions, but just three, Benson supplies titles that specify a female addressee for poems that the 1609 Quarto groups among those

addressed to the fair young man; on three other occasions Benson alters the texts of the poems themselves so that "he" becomes "she." At the same time, however, Benson retains intact sonnet 20 ("A woman's face") and gives it a title, "The Exchange," that calls witty attention to Nature's substitution of penis for vagina in lines 9–12. In context, the poem could be read as spoken by Venus, since it is preceded, first by one of the Venus and Adonis sonnets from *The Passionate Pilgrim*, then by one of the Petrarchan sonnets from *Love's Labour's Lost*, "If love make me forsworn." It is followed by a particularly passionate amalgam of three sonnets, "The disconsolation," made up of "Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed," "How can I then return in happy plight," and "When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes."

At least one early reader of the 1640 edition was not distracted by Benson's coy title for sonnet 20. In a copy of the book in the Folger Shakespeare Library the reader has provided, as he does for many of the poems, an alternative title: "The m[ist]ress masculine" (Shakespeare 1640: sig. B4). Does this imply that the reader has taken the poem's "master mistress" to be a manly woman? Perhaps. On the other hand, the reader may be echoing Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida* when the straight-talking satirist taunts Patroclus as "Achilles' male varlet," his "masculine whore" (5.1.14, 16). By 1640 the phrase *masculus amor*, "masculine love," had emerged as a code word for male–male eroticism (Cady 1992: 9–40). Benson may have attempted to forestall such sodomitical readings by grouping under the title "The benefits of friendship" three sonnets from the young man group: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past," "Thy bosom is endeared with all hearts," and "If thou survive my well-contented day." Worth noting is the fact it was precisely during these years, during the 1630s and 1640s, that increasing prudery about female homoeroticism began to be registered in English translations of Ovid's heroic epistle from Sappho to Phaon. The implication is that writers and readers were newly aware of sexual behavior that had passed without comment fifty years before (Andreadis 2001: 30–7). The very phrase *masculus amor* means that, in the 1620s and 1630s, something new was being recognized that now required a name. Was that something the very thing that Benson wished *not* to name?

Benson's edition had staying power. It formed the basis for every reprinting of Shakespeare's sonnets for 126 years. An edition of *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and Shakespeare's "miscellany poems" printed in 1709 retains Benson's texts and titles, even as it breaks up the amalgamated poems into their three-sonnet constituent parts (Shakespeare 1709: title page). Bernard Lintott's edition of about two years later returns to the 1609 Quarto text but bills the entire sequence as "One hundred and fifty sonnets, all of them in praise of his mistress" (Shakespeare 1998b: 43). Lintott's title page – *A Collection of Poems in Two Volumes . . . Being All the Miscellanies of Mr. William Shakespeare, Which Were Published by Himself in the Year 1609* – stresses the diffuseness of the poems and does not encourage readers to look for any sort of plot, much less one that involves a male beloved. It was just in the years that these editions were being printed that the sex of the bodies one desired was beginning to be taken as an index of one's own gender identity. Randolph Trumbach has pointed out

how the rake-figure in comedies of the 1660s, 1670s, 1680s, and 1690s, with his mistress on one arm and his boy-lover on the other, came to be bifurcated: the rake who prefers men and the rake who prefers women (Trumbach 1990: 105–24). In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries erotic desire itself was felt to be effeminating, regardless of the sex of the bodies a man might desire. Hearing of Mercutio's murder, Romeo exclaims, "O sweet Juliet, / Thy beauty hath made me effeminate / And in my temper softened valour's steel" (3.1.113–15). By the early eighteenth century it was only men who desired other men who were identified as effeminate (Bray 1982: 81–114; Trumbach 1989: 129–40; 1998: 49–65). In such a culture, to declare "Two loves I have" was to invite criminal charges. The isolation of the man who desires other men made him an easier target not only for satire but for legal prosecution. The eighteenth century witnessed a huge increase in prosecutions for sodomy (Crompton 1985: 12–62).

The National Bard: 1780–1888

Authenticity was the watchword that guided Edmund Malone, the first great Shakespeare scholar, in editing Shakespeare's sonnets in 1780. Malone's edition appeared as a supplement to Samuel Johnson and George Steevens's edition of Shakespeare's plays, published two years earlier. Where editors and publishers since the seventeenth century had been content to reprint the most recent edition of Shakespeare's texts, Johnson, Steevens, and Malone returned to the earliest texts. Malone in particular brought to the project an historian's sense of the cultural distance that separated late-eighteenth-century readers from the texts they were reading (de Grazia 1991). When it came to the sonnets, Malone's quest for authenticity ran into problems. The public and conventional cast that Benson and his successors had given to the sonnets disappeared when Malone took the 1609 Quarto as his copy text. Above all, there was the problem of the first 126 sonnets. It is to Malone that readers ever since have owed the conviction that sonnets 1–126 all concern a man and sonnets 127–54 a woman. Steevens, for his part, made no attempt to hide his repugnance at the first group. For Malone's 1780 edition Steevens supplied this note on sonnet 20: "It is impossible to read this fulsome panegyric, addressed to a male object, without an equal mixture of disgust and indignation" (Vickers 1981: 288). To leave no question about what he was talking about, he cited the term "male varlet" from *Troilus and Cressida*.

Malone, in the first edition, seems to have agreed. When Steevens complained, in a note to sonnet 127, that the sonnet form in general was not to his taste, Malone conceded that Shakespeare's sonnets do seem to have two "great defects": "a want of variety, and the majority of them not being directed to a female, to whom alone such ardent expressions of esteem could with propriety be addressed" (Vickers 1981: 294). For the edition of 1783 Malone went further: he tried to explain away these "ardent expressions of esteem" by appealing to history. In reply to Steevens's note on sonnet 20 Malone wrote, "Some part of this indignation might perhaps have been abated if

it had been considered that such addresses to men, however indelicate, were customary in our author's time, and neither imported criminality, nor were esteemed indecorous" (Vickers 1981: 551). And to prove the point he cites Shakespeare's use of the word "lover" in contexts that are clearly not sexual. In a note on sonnet 32 Malone repeats his assertion about historical difference and goes on to note that Shakespeare's age "seems to have been very indelicate and gross in many other particulars besides this, but certainly did not think themselves so" (Vickers 1981: 552). That, basically, has been the dodge adopted ever since by critics who feel uneasy about the first 126 sonnets. Steevens remained unconvinced. In his 1793 edition of Shakespeare's plays Steevens spoke for many eighteenth-century readers in dismissing the sonnets, along with *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, as essentially unreadable works: "We have not reprinted the sonnets etc. of Shakespeare, because the strongest act of Parliament that could be framed, would fail to compel readers into their service; notwithstanding these miscellaneous poems have derived every possible advantage from the literature and judgement of their only intelligent editor, Mr. Malone" (quoted in Shakespeare 1998b: 75).

With respect to sexuality, Malone's notes on the sonnets display two rather contradictory aims: on the one hand to extirpate suspicions of sodomy by thoroughly historicizing the poems and, on the other, to get at the authentic Shakespeare by reading the poems autobiographically. Thus Malone can seize on lines from one of the sonnets addressed to the young man – "So shall I live, supposing thou art true, / Like a deceived husband" (93.1–2) – and put them forward as proof that the historical William Shakespeare knew sexual jealousy from the inside: "he appears to me to have written more immediately *from the heart* on the subject of jealousy than on any other; and it is therefore not improbable that he might have felt it" (Vickers 1981: 291, emphasis original). When Malone amplified this opinion in the 1783 edition, he insisted that jealousy "is a passion which it is said 'most men who have ever loved have in some degree experienced'" (Vickers 1981: 554). Malone is caught here between his desire that Shakespeare be understood in historically informed terms and his desire that Shakespeare be regarded as just such a man as Malone and his eighteenth-century contemporaries would have him be. Key to both concerns is Shakespeare's imputed sexuality. No better evidence than Malone's notes could be found of Foucault's contention that sexuality emerged as a distinct domain of knowledge in the late eighteenth century. In speculating about Shakespeare's sexuality Steevens and Malone are not just talking about certain physical actions that a man might make with his body; they are talking about a whole way of *being* as a person. They desperately want Shakespeare to share their middle-class values. Among the Shakespearean forgeries that William Henry Ireland concocted in the 1790s was a love-letter from "Willy" to his wife "dearest Anna," enclosing a lock of his hair. "I pray you," the letter goes, "perfume this my poor lock with thy balmy kisses, for then indeed shall kings themselves bow and pay homage to it" (Folger MS W.b.496, fol. 93). Michael Keevak has suggested that Ireland's forgery was a response to imputations of sodomy in Malone's notes to the sonnets (Keevak 2001: 23–40). Shakespeare's ethical probity was important in the

eighteenth century because it was precisely then that Shakespeare was being constructed as “the national poet” of Great Britain (Dobson 1992).

Malone’s desire to read Shakespeare’s sonnets autobiographically touched off two centuries of speculation about who Master W. H. might have been (William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke? Wriothesley, Henry? William [Shakespeare] Himself?), not to mention the dark lady (Anne Hathaway? Mary Fitton? Emilia Lanier?) (Schoenbaum 1991: 314–30, 376–7). It also anticipates an early nineteenth-century shift in what readers ever since have understood poetry to *be*. Well into the eighteenth century poets could still aspire to speak in the public voice that Milton had assumed or, in matters of the heart, with the smooth urbanity that John Benson tried to impose on Shakespeare’s sonnets. With the Romantic revolution in style and sensibility came the conviction that the very reason for poetry’s existence is to express the writer’s private, subjective experience. Shakespeare’s sonnets, with their insistent “I,” seemed, to Romantic readers, to be just poems. By one count, forms of the first-person singular pronoun – “I,” “me,” “my,” “mine” – constitute the single most frequently recurring word group in Shakespeare’s sonnets: 1,062 instances in all (Spevack 1968, 2: 1255–87). Writers of Wordsworth’s generation grew up with the eighteenth-century’s contempt for the sonnet as an artificial, un-English verse form. By 1827, however, Wordsworth had changed his mind, at least with respect to Shakespeare. In a sonnet called “Scorn not the sonnet” Wordsworth gave Shakespeare’s sonnets the highest praise a Romantic poet could give: “With this key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart” (Wordsworth 1981, 2: 635). What nineteenth-century readers found in Shakespeare’s heart, especially if they read the sonnets in sequence, did not match their own notions of sexual propriety.

For Wordsworth, the cynical sonnets to the dark lady were the problem; for Coleridge, it was the poems to the young man (Stallybrass 2000: 75–88). In 1803 Coleridge made private notes about the thoughts he had on reading Shakespeare’s sonnets, in particular the thoughts he had on reading sonnet 20. He imagines his infant son Hartley reading the poem many years later. He realizes that Hartley will need some knowledge of Greek history and “the Greek lovers.” Coleridge instances “that Theban band of brothers over whom Philip, their victor, stood weeping.” “This pure love,” Coleridge writes to himself, “Shakespeare appears to have felt – to have been in no way ashamed of it – or even to have suspected that others could have suspected it.” And yet, surely, Shakespeare would have realized that “so strong a love would have been more completely a thing of permanence and reality, and have been more blessed by nature and taken under her more especial protection, if this object of his love had been at the same time a possible object of desire – for nature is not soul only” (quoted in Stallybrass 2000: 81–2). Coleridge recognizes sonnet 20 as a poem of homoerotic desire but denies the possibility that such a love could ever really exist.

Thirty years later he came back to the issue in *Table Talk*. Sonnet 20, he decided, was “a purposed blind.” The sonnets “could only have come from a man deeply in love, and in love with a woman” (quoted in Stallybrass 2000: 82–3). Reasons for such

denial were viscerally immediate: prosecutions for sodomy in England reached an all-time high in the early nineteenth century (Crompton 1985: 12–62). Peter Stallybrass has summarized the dilemma: “Steevens and Malone between them had constructed and passed down an impossible legacy: a legacy from Malone of the *Sonnets* as crucial documents of the interior life of the national bard; a legacy from Steevens of that interior life as one that would destroy the life of the nation” (Stallybrass 2000: 84). Coleridge speaks for many later nineteenth-century readers of the sonnets in knowing what the poems are about and yet willfully *not* knowing what they are about. Henry Hallam, the ardent friend of Tennyson and the subject of “In Memoriam,” lamented the “circumstances” of the sonnets’ production and concluded, “It is impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had never written them” (quoted in Stallybrass 2000: 83).

Hostage in the Culture Wars: 1889–present

For many readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, probably for most readers in fact, the sexuality implied by Shakespeare’s sonnets was not an issue for the simple reason that those readers encountered the poems as scattered items in anthologies and not as a 154-poem sequence. That remains true for most readers today, the readers of *Shakespeare in Love* included. Alexander Chalmers, who collected the works of major British poets in the early nineteenth century and published them in multi-volumed sets, speaks for received opinion about Shakespeare’s non-dramatic poems when he almost apologizes for printing all 154 sonnets. Chalmers quotes Steevens’s judgment about Shakespeare’s non-dramatic poems needing more than an act of parliament to make them popular. “Severe as this may appear,” Chalmers concludes, “it only amounts to the general conclusion which modern critics have formed. Still it cannot be denied that there are many scattered beauties among the sonnets” (Chalmers 1810: 15). Looking for “scattered beauties” permitted editors to avoid questions of sexuality altogether.

A major example is the selection of Shakespeare’s sonnets printed in Francis Turner Palgrave’s *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*, first published in 1861. Put together with advice from Tennyson, Britain’s Poet Laureate from 1850 to 1892, the anthology was frequently reprinted and extended throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 2001 the sixth edition was still in print. Palgrave’s principles of selection and arrangement for the original edition are specified in the preface. Individual poems have been chosen simply because they constitute “the Best” (Palgrave 1890: vii, capitalization original); within the chronological limits of the anthology’s four books, the poems have been arranged “in gradations of feeling or subject.” Poems by different authors are interspersed with each other. The result, Palgrave trusts, will be “a certain unity, ‘as episodes,’ in the noble language of Shelley, ‘to that great Poem which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world’” (ibid: ix, capitalization original). Within Book One, which covers the years 1525 to 1616,

Palgrave notes a progression from the “simplicity” of the earlier poems, through “pastoral fancies and Italian conceits,” to “the passionate reality of Shakespeare” (ibid: 417).

With respect to sexuality, Shelley’s one great mind turns out to have thoroughly predictable and anodyne thoughts. In the 1890 edition of Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* Book One contains 80 poems, 34 of which are by Shakespeare, a little more than 40 percent of the whole. Palgrave’s notion of what constitutes “the Best” can be suggested by a tally of poems by other poets: William Drummond of Hawthornden seven, Thomas Campion six, Sir Philip Sidney five, Ben Jonson zero, John Donne zero. The predominance of Campion, the writer of lute-songs, is telling: fully 14 of the 34 Shakespearean selections are songs from the plays. Of the 20 sonnets that are printed, only 2 come from the group numbered 126 to 154 in the 1609 Quarto. Lifted out of their context in the Quarto, neither sonnet 146 (“Poor soul, center of my sinful earth”) nor 148 (“O me! what eyes hath love put in my head, / Which have no correspondence with true sight!”) gives any idea of the tortured relationship between the speaker and the dark lady. Neither poem makes any explicit reference to the lady, her darkness, or her sexual treachery.

What of the fair young man? He, too, is absent. Although 18 sonnets from the group 1–126 are included in *The Golden Treasury*, not a single one refers explicitly to the young man. The context in which the reader is expected to view the sonnets is created by the first six poems in Book One. Thomas Nashe’s rollicking lyric “Spring” leads off the collection; then comes a poem by Drummond that has been given the title “A Summons to Love.” The first two Shakespeare sonnets, the Quarto’s number 64 (“When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced / The rich proud costs of outworn buried age”) and 65 (“Since brass, nor stone, nor boundless sea, / But sad mortality o’ersways their power”), are grouped together under the title “Time and Love.” The poems that follow, Marlowe’s “Come live with me and be my love” and the anonymous song lyric “Fain would I change that note / To which fond love has charmed me,” maintain the amorous cast of the episode but keep it utterly non-specific. Throughout *The Golden Treasury* generic titles reminiscent of Benson’s edition of 1640 maintain this public character. For example, Shakespeare’s sonnets 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”) and 106 (“When in the chronicle of wasted time / I see descriptions of the fairest wights”) are printed successively under the same repeated title: “To his love.” The effect is to invite the reader to project his or her own sexuality onto the poems. And that sexuality is plainly assumed to be the sexuality of middle-class Britons of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. “The passionate reality of Shakespeare” turns out to be the quotidian reality of the Victorian reader. The moral cast of the whole affair is suggested by Book One’s final episode, which is concerned with death. The last three Shakespeare sonnets in Palgrave’s sequence are numbers 71 (“No longer mourn for me when I am dead”), 146 (“Poor soul, center of my sinful earth”), and 66 (“Tir’d with all these, for restful death I cry”). Through it all Palgrave displays an absolute unwillingness to see homoeroticism, even when it is staring him in the face in sonnet 106’s celebration of “such a beauty as you master now.”

Oscar Wilde changed all that. Alan Sinfield has argued that it was Wilde's arraignment for gross indecency with Lord Alfred Douglas in 1895 that solidified the notion of "the male homosexual" that still has wide currency (Sinfield 1994: 1–24). Before the trial many of Wilde's associates could accept his effeminate manner and his aesthetic interests without ever entertaining the idea that he had pursued sexual relations with other men. After the trial it was hard not to make that connection. We can see that process of identity-formation in Wilde's story "The Portrait of Mr. W. H.," printed in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1889 and enlarged (though not republished) four years later. Although a piece of fiction, the story amounts to a scholarly case that Master W. H. was a boy actor named Willie Hughes. All the competing theories of Mr. W. H.'s identity from the eighteenth century and after are considered. The reluctance of commentators since Malone to push the question of Shakespeare's sexuality too far is registered even by the character in the story who concocts the theory, Cyril Graham. The first-person narrator of the story hears about Cyril's theory second hand, from Cyril's friend Erskine. "The problem he pointed out," Erskine tells the narrator,

was this: Who was that young man of Shakespeare's day who, without being of noble birth or even of noble nature, was addressed by him in terms of such passionate adoration that we can but wonder at the strange worship, and are almost afraid to turn the key that unlocks the mystery of the poet's heart? Who was he whose physical beauty was such that it became the very corner-stone of Shakespeare's art; the very source of Shakespeare's inspiration; the very incarnation of Shakespeare's dreams? (Wilde 1994: 56)

Cyril goes so far as to pay an artist to forge a portrait of Willie Hughes. Pictured with his right hand resting on an open copy of the sonnets, the boy presents an intriguingly ambiguous appearance with respect to gender:

He seemed about seventeen years of age, and was of quite extraordinary personal beauty, though evidently somewhat effeminate. Indeed, had it not been for the dress and the closely cropped hair, one would have said that the face, with its dreamy wistful eyes, and its delicate scarlet lips, was the face of a girl. (Ibid: 50)

The telling word here is the "though" that follows "beauty." The reason for Cyril's dedication to the theory is patent: he is just such a person himself. The uncle who raised him thought him effeminate, and at Eton Cyril turned out to be good at riding and fencing but despised football. "The two things that really gave him pleasure were poetry and acting" (p. 52). When the forgery is exposed, Cyril commits suicide. Erskine, in a letter to the narrator, frames his own death as martyrdom to the cause of Willie Hughes. The narrator's attitude to the theory, and to putting one's life on the line in the theory's defense, is presented with exquisite irony: first he dismisses it, then he embraces it, finally he holds it at an ambivalent distance. As well he might. The deaths of Cyril and Erskine imply that the fantasy of homosexual love could not

be tolerated in Victorian society. "I believe there is something fatal about the idea," Erskine confesses to the narrator (p. 62).

Ambivalence is something Wilde himself was not able to maintain when he was brought to trial in 1895. Wilde's public exposure gave a voice and a body to "the male homosexual" that Freud was soon to theorize in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and later writings. That voice and that body Wilde shared with Cyril Graham. Wilde's appearance, according to one of his friends, was anything but vigorous: "fleshly indulgence and laziness, I said to myself, were written all over him . . . He shook hands in a limp way I disliked; his hands were flabby, greasy; his skin looked bilious and dirty" (quoted in Sinfield 1994: 2). In locating sexual identity in the first 126 sonnets Wilde put the dark lady of sonnets 127–54 in a decidedly precarious position. Read in terms of Freud's binary sexual typology, the dark lady sonnets present an identity crisis. If sonnets 1–126 are homosexual poems, and sonnets 127–54 are heterosexual poems, then what about the two together? They can only constitute a pathological middle identity as "bisexual" poems. It is precisely the first seventeen sonnets' advice about marrying that makes the narrator of "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." at first doubt Cyril Graham's theory. He finally decides, however, that what Shakespeare had in mind was a "marriage" between Mr. W. H. and Shakespeare's muse. Actual women have no place in Cyril's scheme. For the both/and of the sonnets in their own day the Freudian theory of sexuality substituted either/or.

Until very recently Freudian theory and middle-class propriety have governed discussions of the sexuality implied by Shakespeare's sonnets. When W. H. Auden dismissed the possibility of homosexuality in his preface to the 1964 Signet Classics edition, he did so in terms supplied by Sigmund Freud fifty years before. Responding to the eagerness of "the homosexual reader" "to secure our Top-Bard as the patron saint of the Homintern," Auden says of the sonnets that "men and women whose sexual tastes are perfectly normal, but who enjoy and understand poetry, have always been able to read them as expressions of what they understand by the word *love*, without finding the masculine pronoun an obstacle" (Auden 1973: 99–100). "Normal," a medical term, is the operative word here. Auden finds in the sonnets a "Vision of Eros" (capitals original) that transcends the labels "heterosexual" and "homosexual," a vision that "cannot survive an actual sexual relationship" (p. 101). When Auden made that statement, it was still three years until the British parliament would decriminalize consensual sexual relations between adult men and two years more until the Stonewall Riot would set an agenda for gay liberation in America. Nonetheless, Auden was denying the nature of his own private life, not to mention the personal convictions about the sonnets that he shared with friends, as Joseph Pequigney reveals in *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1985), the first systematic riposte to prevailing evasions of the sexuality question. The reluctant acceptance that Pequigney's book met with can be witnessed in Robert M. Adams's judgment in *The New York Review of Books*: "This is certainly a book that had to be written, that will make impossible any return to the old vague euphemisms, but that, after reading, one will be glad to keep distant in one's memory, if one wants to enjoy

the sonnets themselves" (Adams 1986). If scholars and general readers have been more reluctant to acknowledge homoeroticism in Shakespeare's sonnets than in his plays, the reason might be found in the sonnets' insistent "I." Too many readers have too much invested in Shakespeare's speaking "I" to consider that the sexuality of that "I" may not be the same as their own. Too much is at stake, as well, for Western civilization. If Shakespeare is to remain the lynchpin in the canon, he certainly can't be gay. Or even bisexual. Or so the unspoken argument goes.

Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, the drift of academic criticism of Shakespeare's sonnets has been away from the autobiographical preoccupations of Malone and his successors. Each of the critical methodologies that have been adopted since the 1940s gives a different sort of attention to sexuality. New criticism, with its disciplined focus on the text itself, attempts to dodge the question of sexuality entirely. "William Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual," Stephen Booth quips. "The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter" (Shakespeare 1977: 548). Helen Vendler's extensive commentary on the sonnets is premised on the assumption that the sonnets are "lyrics" and hence bear only a tangential relationship to social and psychological concerns. "Contemporary emphasis on the participation of literature in a social matrix," she contends, "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, emphasis original). The "true 'actors' in lyric" are not dramatic persons but words (p. 3). Sonnet 144 in Vendler's reading becomes a poem about a breakdown in the distinction between the words "angel" and "fiend," reflected in the shifting places, left and right, those two words (and their synonyms) occupy in succeeding lines of the sonnet (605–6). By refusing to examine questions of sexuality, New Critics tend, by default, to assume a normative heterosexuality. Vendler will accept that the "controlling motive" of the first 126 sonnets is "sexual infatuation," but she insists that the speaker's infatuation with the young man "is so entirely an infatuation of the eye – which makes a fetish of the beloved's countenance rather than of his entire body – that gazing is this infatuation's chief (and perhaps best and only) form of intercourse" (p. 15).

New historicism, by contrast, has made sexuality a central issue. The emphasis in new historicist studies like Margreta de Grazia's "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets" and Valerie Traub's "Sex without Issue: Sodomy, Reproduction, and Signification in Shakespeare's Sonnets" falls, not on speculation about Shakespeare's emotional life or on love as a thematic concern, but on the social work that the sonnets were doing with respect to sexuality for the poems' original readers (de Grazia 2000: 89–112; Traub 2000: 431–54). Foucault's insistence that sexuality is a cultural construct invites a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets as part of a social process whereby erotic feelings and certain bodily acts are coordinated toward politically useful ends. Thus in de Grazia's analysis it is unruly desires expressed in the dark lady sonnets, not affection for the man right fair, that threatened the social order of early modern England. Sonnet 144 epitomizes the situation by casting the man right fair as "the better angel" and the woman colored ill as "the worser spirit" (144.4).

Deconstructionist readings seize on the fact that the various kinds of social work that the sonnets were performing in 1609 may not have been mutually compatible. Difference-marking is the place where such contradictions are most likely to appear. In my own essay “I, You, He, She, and We: On the Sexual Politics of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” I attempt to deconstruct the seeming fixity of all these pronouns, with particular attention to the way “he” is implicated in “she,” just as “she” is implicated in “he.” Sonnet 144 may try to keep the two separate, but sonnets 106 (“When in the chronicle of wasted time / I see descriptions of the fairest wights”) and 133 (“Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan / For that deep wound it gives my friend and me”) demonstrate how much “he” depends on “she” for its very existence – and how much “I” depends on both (Smith 2000a: 411–29). In sonnet 144 “I” is constituted totally in terms of “he” and “she.”

Sexual desire assumes existential importance in Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory. For Freud, identity-formation is a function of sexual development; for Lacan, it is a function of language. Entering into the symbolic order of language, Lacan argues, entails an estrangement from the illusion of wholeness with the world that all human beings know as infants. That lost sense of wholeness becomes, for Lacan, the fundamental object of human desire, not only desire for the interiority of another person’s body but desire for the escape that fictions seem to offer from one’s own language-boundedness. In a sophisticated and subtle application of Lacan’s theory, Joel Fineman has found in Shakespeare’s sonnets a tension between the visual and the verbal that constitutes, Fineman believes, the very source of modern subjectivity. In Fineman’s reading, sonnet 144 figures as a paradigm of this tension. The poet’s image of “one angel in another’s hell” (144.12) conflates the man right fair and the lady colored ill, so that both figures undermine the poet’s ideals and the adequacy of his language. The dark lady becomes “the material conclusion of an originally immaterial imagination, the loathsome heterosexual object of an ideally homosexual desire” (Fineman 1986: 58). Correspondence is severed between the poet’s vision and the words he has to express that vision.

If surviving manuscripts of Shakespeare’s sonnets, successive editions, and critical interpretations have anything in common, it is the fact that sexuality is a culturally contingent concept. Hence, readings of Shakespeare’s sonnets since the 1590s inescapably reflect the concerns and the concepts of the people who have been doing the reading across those four centuries and more. As documents in the history of sexuality Shakespeare’s sonnets belong to the 1690s, the 1790s, the 1890s, the 1990s, and the 2090s as much as they belong to the 1590s.

NOTES

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, spelling and orthography in this and other original texts have been modernized.
- 2 All quotations from Shakespeare’s plays are taken from *Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) and hereafter are cited in the text.

- 3 A census of surviving manuscripts containing sonnets by Shakespeare is provided in Beal (1980), 1, 2: 452–4.
- 4 Quotations from the 1609 Quarto of Shakespeare's sonnets are taken from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (1977) and hereafter are cited in the text.

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