

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

UNIT-V SHAKESPEARE

SHAKESPEAREAN THEATRE AND AUDIENCE

In Shakespeare's day, London theaters like the Globe could accommodate up to 3,000 people watching popular plays. With theaters running most afternoons, that could mean as many as 10,000-20,000 people could see a play every week! Who were these people? Shakespeare's audience was the very rich, the upper middle class, and the lower middle class. All of these people would seek entertainment just as we do today, and they could afford to spend money going to the theater. To get into the Globe, it would cost a penny (there are 240 pence to one pound). In Elizabethan England, one penny would buy a loaf of bread, a pint of ale, or a ticket to the theater. Those who paid just one penny would be known as Groundlings, because they stood on the ground in what was known as "the yard," which is the area closest to the stage. For another penny, they could sit on a bench just behind the yard. For a penny more, they could sit more comfortably on a cushion. To get into the upper galleries, which were covered and had seats, cost would start at 6 pence.

Audiences in Shakespeare's time behaved much differently than what we think of today when we go to the theater. In general, audiences were much more rowdy and directly involved in the show than we are today. There was not electricity for special theater lights, so both the stage and the audience were in broad daylight, allowing them to see each other and interact. Shakespeare's soliloquies would be said directly to the audience, who could potentially answer back! The audience would move around, buy food and ale in the theater, clap for the hero, boo the villain, and cheer for the special effects. The audience might dance at the end of a comedy along with the characters onstage. If an audience didn't like a play, they might even throw furniture and damage the theater!

Shakespeare used several tricks to get and hold his audience's attention. One that you may notice is that his plays rarely begin with the main characters onstage; usually a minor character begins the first scene. This was because at an Elizabethan theater the lights could not dim to indicate the beginning of a play, it would just begin with characters walking onstage and beginning to speak, usually over the audience's noise as they settled in to watch the play. The first scene would usually set the mood of the play, but the opening dialogue would not be vital because it might not be easily heard.

Another trick that Shakespeare used was to break up the main action of the play with clowning. In most of his plays, there is comic relief in the form of "clown" or "fool" characters sprinkled throughout the show, making jokes or clowning around onstage. This ensured that even during a 3-hour history play, there would be something that appealed to everyone.

Being an Audience Today

Audiences today can take a cue from Elizabethan audiences to inform how to watch a Shakespeare play. Here are some tips:

- Remind yourself that the first scene mostly sets the mood of the play, and rarely has vital dialogue, so if you miss some of the words at the beginning, that is ok. It can take a couple minutes to tune your ear to Shakespeare's unusual language. It's a little bit like listening to a friend with a heavy accent speak; at first it can be difficult to understand, but after a minute or two it's easy. Our actors are professionally trained to make sure that you understand the words, so you'll catch on quickly!
- Enjoy the play, and feel free to express your enjoyment. Laugh at the clowns, clap for the heroes, gasp at important revelations, and applaud for the actors at the end to thank them for their work. This will keep you engaged in the show, and help let the actors know that the audience is paying attention and enjoying the play.
- Remember that in a play, unlike in a movie, the actors can see and hear you, too! Even with more sophisticated theater lighting that keeps the stage lit and the audience dim, the actors are often very close to the first few rows, and they can definitely hear the audience. That means please don't talk to your neighbor during the show, don't allow your phone to make noise, and don't text (it lights up your face!) – these can all be very distracting.
- And finally, remember that the theater is for everyone. In Shakespeare's day it was a very affordable form of entertainment that appealed to everyone. Theater is not meant to be only for the upper class, only for college graduates, or only for older people. Shakespeare's plays can speak to you whether you have seen lots of plays or no plays at all, if you're rich, poor, young, old, or if you enjoy cheap jokes, amazing speeches, or action sequences. Shakespeare wrote his plays to be for everyone, and that still shows through today.

Compared to the technical theaters of today, the London public theaters in the time of Queen Elizabeth I seem to be terribly limited. The plays had to be performed during daylight hours only and the stage scenery had to be kept very simple with just a table, a chair, a throne, and maybe a tree to symbolize a forest. Many say that these limitations were in a sense advantages. What the theater today can show for us realistically, with massive scenery and electric lighting, Elizabethan playgoers had to imagine. This made the playwright have to write in a vivid language so the audience could understand the play. Not having a lighting technician to work the control panels, Shakespeare had to indicate whether it was dawn or nightfall by using a speech rich in metaphors and descriptive details. Shakespeare's theater was far from being bare, the playwright did have some valuable technical sources that he used to the best of his ability. The costumes the actors wore were made to be very elaborate. Many of the costumes conveyed recognizable meanings for the audience such as a rich aristocrat wearing silk clothes with many ruffles. Many times there were musical accompaniments and sound effects such as gunpowder explosions and the beating of a pan to simulate thunder.

The stage itself was also remarkably versatile. Behind it were doors for exits and entrances and a curtained booth or alcove useful for actors to hide inside. Above the stage was a higher acting area which symbolized a porch or balcony. This was useful in the story of Romeo and Juliet, when Romeo stood below Juliet and told her how he loved her. In the stage floor was a trap door which was said to lead to "hell" or a cellar, this was especially useful for ghosts or devils who had to appear and disappear throughout the play. The stage itself was shaped in a rectangular platform that projected into a yard that was enclosed by three story galleries.

The building was round or octagonal in shape but Shakespeare called it a "wooden O." The audience sat in these galleries or else they could stand in the yard in front the stage. A roof and awning protected the stage and the high-priced gallery seats, but in the case bad weather, the "groundlings," who only paid a penny to stand in the yard, must have gotten wet. The Globe theater was built by a theatrical company in which Shakespeare belonged. The Globe theater, was the most popular of all the Elizabethan theaters. It was not in the city itself but on the south bank of the Thames River. This location had been chosen because, in 1574, public plays had been banished from the city by an ordinance that blamed them for corrupting the youth and promoting prostitution.

A playwright had to please all members of the audience. This explains the wide range of topics in Elizabethan plays. Many plays included passages of subtle poetry, of deep philosophy, and scenes of terrible violence. Shakespeare was an actor as well as a playwright, so he knew well what his audience wanted to see. The company's offered as many as thirty plays a season, customarily changing the programs daily. The actors thus had to hold many parts in their heads, which may account for Elizabethan playwrights' blank verse writing style.

Shakespeare's Clowns and Fools

The Shakespearean fool is a recurring character type in the works of William Shakespeare.

Shakespearean fools are usually clever peasants or commoners that use their wits to outdo people of higher social standing. In this sense, they are very similar to the real fools, and jesters of the time, but their characteristics are greatly heightened for theatrical effect. They are largely heterogeneous. The "groundlings" (theatre-goers who were too poor to pay for seats and thus stood on the 'ground' in the front by the stage) that frequented the Globe Theatre were more likely to be drawn to these Shakespearean fools. However they were also favoured by the nobility. Appearing in most of Shakespeare's dramas, the clown or fool figure remains one of the most intriguing stage characters in the Shakespearean oeuvre and has frequently captured the interest of contemporary critics and modern audiences. Taking many forms, Shakespearean fools may be generally divided into two categories: the clown, a general term that was originally intended to designate a rustic or otherwise uneducated individual whose dramatic purpose was to evoke laughter with his ignorance; and the courtly fool or jester, in whom wit and pointed satire accompany low comedy.

The dramatic sources of Shakespeare's simple-minded clowns are at least as old as classical antiquity. In the plays themselves, such figures as Bottom of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Dogberry of *Much Ado About Nothing* are typically classified as clowns, their principal function being to arouse the mirth of audiences. The history of the courtly fool or jester in England is somewhat briefer, with these fools making early appearances in the courts of medieval aristocracy during the twelfth century. By the time of Queen Elizabeth's reign, courtly fools were a common feature of English society, and were seen as one of two types: natural or artificial. The former could include misshapen or mentally-deficient individuals, or those afflicted with dwarfism. Such fools were often considered pets—though generally dearly loved by their masters—and appear infrequently in Shakespeare's writing. The artificial fool, in contrast, was possessed of a verbal wit and talent for intellectual repartee. Into this category critics place Shakespeare's intellectual or "wise-fools," notably Touchstone of *As You Like It*, Feste of *Twelfth Night*, and King Lear's unnamed Fool.

Critical analysis of Shakespearean clowns and fools has largely explored the thematic function of these peculiar individuals. Many commentators have observed the satirical potential of the fool. Considered an outcast to a degree, the fool was frequently given reign to comment on society and the actions of his social betters; thus, some Shakespearean fools demonstrate a subversive potential. They may present a radically different worldview than those held by the majority of a play's characters, as critic Roger Ellis (1968) has observed. Likewise, such figures can be construed as disrupting the traditional order of society and the meaning of conventional language, as Roberta Mullini (1985) has argued. As for so-called clowns—including the simple "mechanicals" of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Trinculo of *The Tempest*, and Launcelot Gobbo of *The Merchant of Venice*—most are thought to parody the actions of other characters in the main plots of their respective plays and to provide low humor for the entertainment of groundlings. Several critics, however, have acknowledged the deeper, thematic functions of Shakespeare's clowns, some of whom are said to possess a degree of wisdom within their apparent ignorance.

Other topics of critical inquiry concerning fools are varied. Several scholars have studied the significance of certain Elizabethan actors who were thought to have initially enacted the roles Shakespeare wrote. Preeminent among these is the comedic actor Robert Armin, for whom several critics have suggested Shakespeare created the witty, even philosophical, fool roles of Feste, Touchstone, and Lear's Fool. Still other critics have focused on Shakespeare's less easily categorized clowns. Walter Kaiser (1963) has examined Falstaff's multifaceted function in the *Henriad*, which he has argued bears similarities to those of Shakespeare's other "wise fools." William Willeford (1969) has focused on the darker side of folly by exploring the title character of *Hamlet* as a unique form of the Shakespearean fool. Additionally, Catherine I. Cox (1992) has investigated Shakespeare's characteristic blending of comedy and tragedy through the use of clowns and other purveyors of laughter in his tragic plays.

SHAKESPEAREAN WOMEN

Women in Shakespeare is a topic within the especially general discussion of Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic works. Women appear as supporting and central characters in Shakespeare's plays, and these characters, as well as the Dark Lady of the sonnets, have elicited a substantial amount of criticism, which received added impetus during the second-wave feminism of the 1960s. A considerable number of book-length studies and academic articles investigate the topic, and several moons of Uranus are named after women in Shakespeare.

In Shakespeare's tragedies and his plays in general, there are several types of female characters. They influence other characters, but are also often underestimated. Women in Shakespearean plays have always had important roles, sometimes the leading role. Whether they create the main conflicts and base of the plays, or bring up interesting moral and cultural questions, they are put in challenging situations. Some women are stronger than others, and their effect on the play is different for each one. They often surpass the male heroes.

This article picks out Shakespeare's most powerful female characters across all of his plays. Social and political power was entirely in the hands of the men in Elizabethan England and particularly, well-born men. Both women and men in the lower classes were powerless but women in the upper classes were in a particularly unenviable position as their value was generally reckoned to be a rich or powerful man's path to more riches or more power: daughters were considered to be possessions and were passed from father to husband to forge alliances between the rich and powerful. The father had the sole right to make the decision about his

daughter's marriage. Once she was married her function was to produce an heir and daughters who could be used for the family's further advancement.

One cannot therefore talk about Shakespeare's powerful women in the social or political sense, but there are a number very powerful women in Shakespeare, in the personal sense. They sometimes have political influence behind the scenes, working on their husbands to bring about some political result. Also, using the Elizabethan theatre convention of women disguising themselves as men, Shakespeare is able to present some women in a way that allows them to be taken seriously. At the end of the plays where he does that, however, the women always revert to their female role and the conclusion is marriage and declarations of their subservience to men and their reversion to the conventional female role. Perhaps even Shakespeare failed to imagine the model of equality that is so familiar to us and which we take for granted.

Nevertheless, all the men in those cultures are surrounded by women, some ineffectual but many very strong. Every male has either a grandmother or a mother, a sister, or a daughter who he knows to be strong, even though she may be wearing clothes that signify her submissive condition, such as head and face covers, whole body coverings etc.

One of the most interesting things in Shakespeare is his presentation of strong women. Here is a list of ten of his strongest women.

✂ Cordelia in *King Lear*

The vain and foolish Lear decides to retire as king and give all his lands and money to his three daughters, their portions based on their declarations of how much they love him. The two older daughters, Goneril and Regan, go overboard in their hypocritical statements. Cordelia says she loves him according to her duty as a daughter and the bond between a parent and child. Enraged, he banishes her and tells her two suitors, both princes, that whoever wants her can have her but without the dowry they had been expecting. The Duke of Burgundy declines but The King of France agrees to take her for herself. She has stood up to her father, showing great courage. Later, when the other two have cruelly rejected Lear and he lies, defeated and imprisoned in a dungeon, she is with him, also imprisoned – she comforts him and raises him up. She has helped him to learn what the bond between a father and daughter is. She has shown great strength throughout, and when her sisters have her hanged. Lear dies of a broken heart.

✂ Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*

Portia is unusual in that, since her father's death, having no brother, she has had to perform the role of a man and manage the very wealthy estate he has left her. Nevertheless, he has been able to exercise power over her from beyond the grave by stipulating in his will that those wealthy and powerful men who come to woo her from around the world will have to undergo a test and choose from three caskets, one of which contains the permission to marry Portia. When a judge is required by the Duke of Venice to try the case Shylock has brought against Antonio, who is reluctant to yield the pound of flesh he has agreed to give Shylock if he is unable to pay a loan in time. Portia comes disguised as a famous young judge and shows extraordinary qualities in delivering her judgment. Her power lies in her wisdom, recognised by all those who do not know that she is a woman. In a real sense she exercises power over everyone present.

✂ Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*

Lady Macbeth is thought of as a very strong woman. She certainly exercises power over her husband, Macbeth, in the first half of the play, as she encourages him to murder Duncan. She

uses her sexuality, she taunts him and mocks his lack of courage. She appeals to his sense of obligation towards her. She comes in more strongly as he wavers and finally he goes ahead with it. She seems like a strong woman but psychologically, she is not strong enough to deal with her guilt. Their marriage falls apart and they become estranged. She suffers terrible nightmares and finally commits suicide.

Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*

Much Ado about Nothing is a remarkable play in which Shakespeare intertwines an ancient mythological story with an ultra-modern love story invented by himself. Beatrice is a feisty, independent woman, seen by all those around her as such. She does not have to disguise herself as a man because of her reputation in the family as a feisty woman who shouldn't be tangled with. She is highly intelligent and would be regarded as a feminist in our time. There is no question of her being told who to marry, as she will always do as she pleases, but in any case, she has contempt for men. She particularly dislikes Benedick, a soldier who visits Messina regularly and stays in her uncle, the governor's, house. Shakespeare has invented the most incredible wordplay between these two characters, who are both anti-marriage. But they are tricked by their friends into falling in love. Beatrice draws Benedick into a plot to get revenge on Claudio, who has betrayed her cousin, Hero, who was about to marry him. The play ends with the couple confirmed in their love and their decision to marry. Beatrice reverts to the traditional female role but in her case there is a decided edge to it.

Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*

Emily Blunt in *Romeo & Juliet*

Juliet would not be thought of as a woman in our time but at just fourteen she is already a commodity which her father, a rich merchant, is preparing to trade for a connection with a noble family. He is in the middle of that process just as she is falling in love with the teenaged Romeo. She has only one thing on her mind – to marry Romeo, who is not only not her father's choice, but forbidden fruit in that their families are involved in an ancient feud in which all contact between them is forbidden. Without telling her father the reason, she refuses to marry the Count of Paris. This is spectacularly brave for the time and her father, Capulet, simply cannot understand it. He swears at her, threatens her and even strikes her. She does not give way, and desperate for a way out without giving up her love for Romeo, she seeks the advice of Friar Lawrence. His solution is to take a drug that will make her appear dead. She will be placed in a tomb and Romeo will come and take her away. She is terrified of waking in a tomb stuffed with corpses but takes the drug. She is a female of enormous determination and courage and is without doubt one of the strongest of all Shakespeare's characters.

Desdemona in *Othello*

Although Desdemona submits passively to her husband, Othello, as he strangles her to death, she demonstrates her strength at the beginning of the play when her father asks the Duke of Venice to stop her marriage to the Moor, Othello. He has ideas about who he wants to marry her to but she has fallen in love with a black man and he is opposed to their marriage, which has already taken place in secret by that time. The Duke asks her to give an account of herself and in a remarkable speech she convinces him. In that speech she comes across as a modern woman – an independent woman who has been a good daughter but is now ready to ally herself with her husband. If her father doesn't like that then it's just too bad. It isn't his business anymore. It required enormous strength to say things like that in a room full of powerful men at that time.

Rosalind in *As You Like It*

Rosalind is the central character in the play. She is disguised as a man throughout, until the end, and is able to organise everyone to fit in with her needs and desires. Her aim is to turn the man she wants to marry into someone who can match her qualities and be as strong as she is.

Viola in Twelfth Night

Finding herself shipwrecked on the beach at Ilyria, and having lost her twin brother in the wreck, Viola's first instinct is not to appeal for help as a helpless woman but to disguise herself as a man and find a job as a servant in the household of the Duke. As a man she has the freedom to move around without a chaperone. Her ability to adapt herself to her circumstances in spite of her female upbringing where she has been protected by men and all decisions about her have been made by men, is an indication of her strength. It is not only that adaptation that suggests strength but the ability to manipulate her circumstances for her own desired outcome, which is to marry the Duke.

Margaret of Anjou in four history plays

Margaret of Anjou is a character in four of Shakespeare's plays: *Henry VI pts. 1, 2, 3* and *Richard III*. The historical Queen Margaret was the wife consort of King Henry VI of England. In Shakespeare's tetralogy Henry is a weak king and a meek and mild man. Shakespeare's Margaret is a ruthless, ambitious, intelligent woman who dominates him completely. She becomes involved in the power games that are going on around her and takes her enemies on. She thrives in a man's world of politics and war, and even enters the battlefield in *Henry VI Part 3* and stabs the Duke of York. In *Richard III* she acts like a prophet, cursing the nobles for their responsibility for the downfall of the House of Lancaster. All of her prophecies about them come true: they are all betrayed in one way or another and end up being executed.

Hermia in A Midsummer Night's Dream

Rather than marry Demetrius, the man her father has chosen for her, after arguing her case, she runs away with Lysander, the man she loves. Her father begs the Duke, Theseus, to use the full weight of the law to make her comply and she is told that if she does not marry Demetrius her punishment will be death. Like other strong female characters in Shakespeare, Hermia stands up to her father, and even the most powerful man in their world. She does this with logical argument and remains calm while doing it. She then courageously runs away with her lover. Her strength lies in her calm assertiveness and her determination to control her own destiny rather than hand it to the men around her.

"SUPERNATURAL SOLICITING" IN SHAKESPEARE

There are two methods of using the supernatural in literature. It may be used to work out results impossible to natural agencies, or it may be employed simply as a human belief, becoming a motive power and leading to results reached by purely natural means. The first may be fitly called the poetical method and examples of its use may be found in most of the great poets, conspicuously in Tasso, Milton, and Spenser. The second may be justly called the dramatic method. In this Shakespeare stands alone, and it is thus used by him only in the two great dramas of "Hamlet" and "Macbeth."

A fair illustration of the poetic method is found in Goethe's "Faust," his great dramatic poem, where Mephistopheles, by supernatural power, turns back the tide of life, makes young again the aging Faust, and fills the new-made man with all the fire and quick-speeding wine of a new life.

If a spiritist medium should tell one that a certain very stable stock would suddenly and greatly

fluctuate, and he should act upon that statement, moved neither by knowledge of the market, nor by his own judgment, but solely by superstitious confidence in the spiritistic power and knowledge of the medium, it would afford a fair example of what I have called the dramatic method of using the supernatural. While Shakespeare has also made use of the supernatural as a subtle and mysterious poetical atmosphere, cast like a spell-working autumn haze about his two greatest dramas, yet, viewing it from the purely dramatic standpoint, as a motive force to human action, he has used it precisely and only as in the example just given.

In dealing with this element after the first method, creative genius is chiefly employed in construction of the supernatural machinery. That once wrought, the master may work out what results he will. Having once transcended the bounds of natural life and means, he is limited only by his own taste and judgment. In the use of the second method, the creator works within the realm of the human soul, dealing with desires, thought, will, motive, beliefs and their consequences, working out into action. In the first case, the poet brings the forces of another world to bear upon this world; in the second, he deals strictly with the forces of this world, including man's beliefs respecting another world, without regard to whether such beliefs are true or false.

Shakespeare, in two groups of two plays each, has exhibited marvelous skill in the use of both methods. This is so apparent that one is almost tempted to believe that the dramatist intended a contrast which is so patent. In "Hamlet" and "Macbeth," while seeming to tread upon the very boundaries of an unknown and unfathomable world, he has really confined himself rigidly to the phenomena of superstitious beliefs working out to solution purely moral and psychological problems. Discounting poetical illusions and waving aside the delicious spell of mystery, there is nothing left in "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" but human beliefs translated into human action. In "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and in "The Tempest," where he ascends to the heights of almost pure poetry, he gives the imagination full scope in the creation of supernatural agencies and a free, but firm-held rein in driving on to grotesque results impossible to natural agencies.

In "Macbeth" the witches hail the returning warrior as Glamis and the thane of Cawdor and king that shall be. Banquo they hail as father to a line of kings. Of the "two truths" told as "prologue to the swelling act of the imperial theme," Macbeth knows that he is thane of Glamis and the spectator knows, although Macbeth does not, that he is thane of Cawdor. Banquo's wholesome soul, believing with mind as superstitious and ear as credulous as Macbeth's, hears and heeds not. The darkly brooding soul of Macbeth hears, heeds and acts. Through a complicated train of causation, moral, psychological and external, first, his own black desires and dream of murder, and afterward the witch suggestion and the powerful aid of his wife, acting upon a weak nature, culminating in assassination — Macbeth becomes king. Again, the witches tell him that he need not fear till Birnam wood shall come to Dunsinane, nor then until he shall be assailed by one not of woman born. Birnam wood never does come to Dunsinane and he is never assailed by one not of woman born, and yet he perishes miserably. This, briefly and meagrely told, is the sole part of the apparent supernatural in "Macbeth." It plays a far other and more important part as a poetical agency and it serves to suggest the profoundest problems that have ever vexed human philosophy, including the great problem of free-will and fixed fate — two worlds "twixt which life hovers like a star." Considered from a purely dramatic standpoint, it is merely a superstitious belief acting upon a weak, wicked and willing soul, moving to results. Considered from the poetic standpoint, it enchains, charms and appals the spectator.

It is true that there is a further prophecy by the witches which deserves consideration. They hail Banquo father to a line of kings and actually show that royal line to the anxious Macbeth. If this

be taken for actual prophecy. it much be remembered that its part in the drama is still solely the effect it has upon the mind of Macbeth, driving him to seek safety in further wrong-doing, and thus impelling him more swiftly and more surely to ruin. Within the bounds, however, of that little world for which it exists, the drama itself, it is not prophecy, for it is not fulfilled within the limits of the action.

The temptation of Macbeth by the weird sisters is very like the temptation of Eve by the serpent, in Genesis. It is merely suggested to our first parents that they make the delights of the Garden of Eden complete by eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The witches only suggest to the soldier, flushed with victory and hurrying home in the hey-day of success, a glittering prize, fitted to round off and complete his glory and power. It is merely, in both cases, a shining bait cast out to free moral agents. There is no supernatural power or constraint in either case.

Two classical instances are identical with the use of this element in "Macbeth." When the people of Eira consulted the oracle as to their fate, they were told that their city would fall when a he-goat drank of the waters of the Neda. In the Messenian dialect the same word means a he-goat and a wild fig tree. When a wild fig tree, growing upon Neda's banks, had grown down until its branches drank of the river's waters, a soothsayer announced the oracle fulfilled. The Spartans attacked and the disheartened inhabitants fell easy prey, not because of any truth in the oracle, but because of their own superstitious beliefs and fears.

When the people of the Messenian town of Ithome appealed to the oracle, they were told that whichever of the contending powers — Messenia or Sparta — should first lay before the shrine of Jove in Ithome a hundred tripods, would be conqueror in the pending strife. For lack of means, the Ithomeans were hindered in preparing such tripods as they deemed a suitable offering. The Spartans, being of a practical turn of mind, hastily prepared a hundred small tripods, stole into it home by night, and laid them before Jove's altar. As soon as this was noised abroad in Ithome, the Spartans assaulted and took the town. The Ithomeans yielded to their own superstitious fears, scarcely resisting.

In "Hamlet," the dramatist is at great pains to give his ghost thorough verification. It appears thrice to three persons, and the third time also to Hamlet, to whom it makes ghostly impartment of the manner of his father's death. Equal pains are taken to surround the ghost and its appearance with all that is ordinarily circumstantial to superstitious beliefs and ghostly appearances in popular legend. The ghost walks at midnight, and starts like a guilty thing at cock-crow. The talk of the guard is of old-time ghostly visitations, when the "sheeted dead did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets," and of the superstitions concerning the crowing of cocks all night long near the time of our Saviour's birth. When it appears to the guard upon the post of martial watch, the ghost is fitly clad in soldier's garb. When it appears to Hamlet, and to him alone, in his mother's chamber, it is becomingly clad in night robes — "My father in his habit as he lived !" The stage direction in the quarto is, "Enter ghost in his night-gown."

This thorough verification was meant to enthrall the spectator with ghostly environment; but enough of the usual concomitants of superstitious appearances are suggested to preserve it from suspicion of actual supernatural power or knowledge. As in "Macbeth," it was intended that the drama should run its course under a subtle canopy of the weird and mysterious. Thus each is made, not only a rigidly practical drama of human life, motive and action, strictly governed by natural laws of daily force and operation, but each is also invested with a rare poetic charm such as no dramatist save Shakespeare has ever been able to cast about his work, with the single

exception of Goethe, in "Faust," in which, however, the purely poetic supernatural element is employed. The poet's warrant for thus surrounding his two great dramas with a subtle atmosphere of the occult, the mysterious, the supernatural, is found in the fact that human life itself is so invested. Man's life is lived out with the physical eye guiding his way through this natural world, and with the mind's eye fixed upon and ever glancing fearfully at the thick-crowding shadows of an unknown world around him.

For all the witnesses that may testify to the appearance of the ghost, the suggestive point is that it is of no importance to any but Hamlet. With the rest, merely some strange apparition, like many strange appearances, accounted for or unaccountable, all thought of it would have faded utterly within a brief time. To Hamlet, already brooding over his father's death, already more than suspecting his uncle, it is revelation. To him it can speak. What is more, to him it can speak truly, because he needs no ghostly messenger to tell him how his father died. His exclamation, "Oh ! my prophetic soul, mine uncle !" is conclusive of his belief in murder. What would have been to Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio the wonder of an hour, to Hamlet imparts the manner of his father's death — nothing more. Wonderful as is the complete investment of the entire drama with a very "Sleepy-Hollow" spell of enchantment, the ghost actually comes from the other world merely to tell Hamlet, that, instead of having been stung by a serpent while sleeping in his orchard, the king was slain by a subtle poison poured into his ear. Place, circumstances, and the agent, Hamlet knew and suspected already. The ghostly disclosure is of the slightest. It is enough for the dramatist's purpose, which was chiefly to invest the drama with a mysterious spell of supernaturalism, also using the superstitious beliefs of Hamlet as dramatic forces creating human action.

Thence on the ghost works only through Hamlet's belief. Even that is not without some mingling of doubt. Hamlet's mind, suspicious and darkly brooding, treading upon the border line between sanity and madness, is not wholly given up to hallucinations. He doubts it may be a foul fiend he has seen. The play within the play, framed and acted before the court, whether like the scene of his father's death or not, is near enough to "catch the conscience of a king." "I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound." From the end of the third act on to the end Hamlet is wholly absorbed in the fact of murder and the duty of vengeance, and forgets the ghost entirely.

The ghost appears twice to Hamlet and the second time to him alone. When he is wrought to passion's highest tension in the terrific scene with the queen mother, it comes again for the sole purpose of reminding him of his duty. His mother sees nothing although her attention is especially called to it. It appears as it appeared in the first scene, as a ghost of the mind should appear, clad fitly with time and place. The dramatist's purpose in the second introduction was for its effect upon the spectator, to continue the spell of mystery, for it really plays no other part.

The ghost is introduced, fulfills its part as a motive power conducive to action, and its far larger and subtler poetical part — comes again merely as a passing reminder to the spectator that it was, and then fades out entirely and is seen no more, heard of no more. While it still mysteriously affects the spectator to the very close of the drama, it has no other or further effect upon Hamlet, or part in the play. Curiously, it is not even mentioned in the two concluding acts, not when Hamlet is alone, when the over-wrought mind would have given out some note of it, if it were still remembered, not even in the friendly communings of Hamlet and Horatio, not even in the suggestive graveyard scene. There is in "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" neither veritable ghost nor witch, but only a semblance of these; there is a subtle working out of results through human belief in such agencies and in their presence and potency.

in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and in "The Tempest," pitched far above the ordinary dramatic plane, in the realm of almost pure poetry. Shakespeare draws nearer to the method of the great poets, in their purely poetical works, at the same time keeping a carefully drawn dramatic line between his supernatural forces and his unfolding dramatic facts. Where he might have allowed the supernatural to run riot in results impossible to natural agencies, he yet preserved a temperance and a moderation which are remarkable, when we consider the character of his creations and how a man of meaner mould might have been tempted to revel in supernatural results. In "Jerusalem Delivered," in "Paradise Lost," and in the "Faery Queen," we are not shocked as the spectator of a drama would be — and the reader of a novel ought to be — by monstrous creations producing monstrous results. In these two dramas, in which Shakespeare has most wrought with supernatural agencies, he has been considerably careful about the manner of their use. His supernatural agencies are so filmy and insubstantial, or so grotesque, that the spectator almost feels that he has dozed, nodded and dreamed some light airy dream — when Puck has flitted across the stage — when Caliban has crawled into the scene, during some momentary nightmare — when the senses were benumbed by summer drowsiness, leaving the eyes yet open and the brain still conscious.

In "The Tempest" the dramatist weaves a delicious web of magic about a solid tissue of fact. The play opens with a bit of practical navigation no expert can find flaw in. In the next scene Prospero appears in wizard robes with magic wand. Thence on the drama runs its course under the spell of a weird and pervasive charm that fills us with all the delights of dreamland. Prospero raises and lays the storm, calls spirits from the vasty deep, sends his minions to plague Caliban, to lead the shipwrecked mariners hither and thither about the enchanted isle, to bring prince and maid together, to confound treason, to daze and mislead Caliban and his drunken companions, to provide celestial music, serve celestial feasts, summon gods and goddesses, and to call nymphs and naiads to featly dance upon the yellow sands of the shelving shore. Magical events upon a magic island! All magic and mystery! And yet for all the sweet haze of an overhanging spirit of incantation, investing the entire drama, through which we see every event distorted, at bottom lies a firm, well-constructed substratum of dramatic fact, a practical chain of unfolding human life relations, about which all this magic is thinnest gossamer web of mere delightful frill and fringe.

In "A Midsummer Night's Dream," there is more of magic and less of dramatic fact; in "The Tempest," there is more of dramatic fact and less of magical result. While events shape themselves which Prospero assigns directly to his occult powers, yet there is no event of any great dramatic importance that might not have fallen out in due course of nature. The usurpation of Antonio, the banishment of Prospero and Miranda and their landing upon a desert island, the hymeneal voyage of the king of Naples, the storm, the shipwreck, the escape, the dispersal upon the island, the conspiracies of Antonio and Caliban, the sweet and natural courtship of Ferdinand and Miranda, and the denouement, romantic in themselves, are but ordinary facts of life that might well have run the same course without magical intervention. Although the events are in themselves romantic, how dry and barren they would seem if now divested of all the exquisite poetry of that magic! Prospero invests the facts with a subtle charm and then blows it away with a breath at the end — into air, into thin air — leaving a solid basis of fact. It is like the making of the ring in "The Ring and the Book."

He mingles gold With gold's alloy, and duly tempering both,
Effects a manageable mass, then works;
But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
Oh, there's repristination. Just a spirit

O'	the	proper	fiery	acid	o'er	its	face
And	forth	the	alloy	unfastened	flies	in	fume,
While		self-sufficient	now	the	shape		remains.

The train of human motive, desires, purpose, and action has all the time worked itself out just as these might have done in ordinary life. Except as a poetic investiture none of that wondrous supernatural, with its weird creations, from the light, delicate Ariel down to the grotesque and earthy Caliban, is absolutely necessary to the dramatic results sought of natural creations, running from the pure and graceful Miranda down to the swinish Trinculo and Stephano.

In "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the dramatist revels in a wild, poetic debauch, a very midsummer nightmare, beginning in the capital and ending in the capital, leading the bewildered and enchanted spectator, meantime, through wild wood and tangled grove, by moonlit bank, into fairy bower shadowed with lithe vine, rank weeds and lush grass, dewy and fragrant beneath the starlight, to repose upon flowery meads, or in leafy forest, listening to the music of hound and horn. An exuberance of magic about a thin dramatic thread ! From the time we leave the suburbs of Athens with the lovers until we return to Athens with the merry royal hunting and bridal party, we are in an enchanted land, where all is grotesque and distorted, wild and extravagant. Not merely the atmosphere and setting is magical as in "The Tempest," all is spell, charm and incantation. The most essential parts of the meagre plot are worked out by actual supernatural means. When we awake upon the clear morrow of all this enchantment, we rub our eyes and look about us to find it all vanished — Bottom merely an ass without the ass's head, the lovers, who left Athens all at cross purposes, now sweetly congenial and agreed, but no fairy king, queen, nor court, nor sportive Puck anywhere. There is this difference, however, between "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "The Tempest."

When Prospero had blown off the iridescent bubbles of his magic and drowned his wizard arts with his book, magic robe and staff, the fact-fabric was left just like any ordinary fact-fabric of this world of intermingling men and women. When the spectator wakes upon the morrow after a midsummer night's dream in fairyland, with Oberon, Titania and sportive Puck, where men and women wander exposed to strange metamorphoses, due to the kindly or jealous fancies of the royal fairy, or to the malicious mirth of fun-loving Puck, all in a land of dewy, sweet-smelling flower and shrub, one essential fact — the love of Demetrius and Helena — remains as an effect due solely to supernatural power. In both plays there is an exuberance of fancy and imagination. In both the dramatist leans strongly towards a highly poetical use of the supernatural. The differences between them, with respect to this element, are chiefly differences of degree. In other plays Shakespeare makes minor use of the supernatural. In two cases the denouement is made to depend upon the prophecy or vision and pregnant disclosures. Even in these the supernatural plays but small part in the drama. Except in the four plays mentioned there is no investing atmosphere of supernaturalism such as is actual in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and "The Tempest," and only apparent in "Hamlet" and "Macbeth."

William Shakespeare wrote these lines, but his use of the mythological tradition of otherworldly appearances in his plays is anything but insubstantial. Sometimes he crafted them as a permeating presence, other times passing rather quickly, but even so still an important representation in the work. Whether the supernatural aspect in is the appearance of a ghost or the description of an ancient god, it often bears a connection to the larger scheme of the play.

Hamlet and *Macbeth* are both examples in which the supernatural element enters the play at the opening of the action. The way a theatrical production begins has a great effect on the audience's perception of the play, and both of these plays emphasize the supernatural from the start. The witches are the first characters we see in *Macbeth*, already prophesying and spouting paradoxical sayings. The stormy stage and odd characters establish early that this story occurs within an eerie and unnatural place. *Hamlet* brings the Ghost of the dead king to the plot's fore in the first few scenes, beginning with a silent, awe-inspiring appearance in the first scene. Although the Ghost does not speak and is only onstage briefly, attention is directed toward that strange vision as soon as we meet Horatio. The eager introduction of the otherworldly being does two important things. One, it makes the audience pay attention. Two, it creates a somewhat uncomfortable atmosphere as we recognize these plays as stories in which the world is not quite natural. As *Hamlet* puts it, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I, iv, 67). Or in Scotland, as the case may be.

Both of these presences carry through multiple scenes, and the sights are at one point confirmed by multiple witnesses, but later seen only by the play's title character. Hamlet is actually the last to see the Ghost of all characters who report the sight. The first to see it are the guards Marcellus and Barnardo, who bring in Horatio, Hamlet's school friend, to confirm the appearance. When it appears in Queen Gertrude's room in Act III, it is visible only to Hamlet. As *Macbeth* opens, the audience sees the weyward sisters before any of the play's characters. When Macbeth crosses paths with them, Banquo is there as a witness to their presence and their prophecy. When Macbeth approaches the lair of the witches he is alone, and they are the only others present when they show him the visions that describe his defeat. When Banquo's ghost appears closely following his murder, Macbeth alone can see the apparition. This could very well be a factor in the portrayal of the madness of Hamlet and Macbeth, or it may attest to the unpredictability of the supernatural – or both.

Such visions incite the curiosity of any observers, who want to know whether the sights are real, and to understand their nature. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the origin of any of these supernatural elements is always questioned, and never determined. The weyward sisters never actually reveal what they are: we know they are strange, and are witches, but beyond that we are told nothing. They make no effort to answer "What are you?" (I, iii, 45), and when Macbeth demands that they explain what they have declared, they vanish. Hamlet believes that the Ghost is either truly the ghost of his father or a devil, and expresses that doubt even with his resolve.

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
 Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
 Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
 Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
 That I will speak with thee (I, iv, 21-25).

However, although distrusting the supernatural visions themselves, the characters are put in a position to believe the words of ghosts and witches. Hamlet forestalls that belief until he has tricked Claudius into a show of remorse, but after the trick he will "take the Ghost's word for a thousand pound" (III, ii, 264). In his mother's chamber, he addresses the Ghost as his father, but he still displays an air of reservation. Although he never determines the true nature of the spirit,

he sees the truth of its words. Macbeth first speculates in wonder, "to be king/ stands not within the prospect of belief,/ no more than to be Cawdor" (I, iii, 71-73). When he learns that he has in fact been named Thane of Cawdor, he reasons that the rest of their foresighted speech must be true as well. That belief leads him to conspire with Lady Macbeth, to kill King Duncan, and later to kill Banquo. This seems a fundamental difference between Hamlet and Macbeth. As soon as a part of the witches' address to him comes to pass, Macbeth takes all of it as truth, so early trusting in that which should still be shrouded in uncertainty. Hamlet takes much more time to believe the Ghost's revealing words. More than anything else this indicates Hamlet's tendency to doubt, and Macbeth's ambition.

We see all of these parallels in the dramatic functions of supernatural beings in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, yet supernatural characters represent different thematic elements of each play. Hamlet's Ghost is an embodiment of uncertainty, a very strong force in the dramatic action. As previously stated, the nature of the Ghost is continuously questioned. Hamlet speaks, "The spirit that I have seen/ may be the devil, and the devil hath power/ t'assume a pleasing shape," i.e., the shape of his father (III, i, 575-577). Later, he described the Ghost as it leaves the scene, "My father, in his habit as he lived," but it appears a more superficial description than a real trust in the form (III, iv, 126).

Uncertainty pervades *Hamlet*, questions infusing the text from the first line, "Who's there?" (I, i, 1). It faces the characters at every turn. Hamlet comes under scrutiny for his actions as others try to determine the cause of his madness. Polonius speculates to Ophelia, "Mad for thy love?" (II, i, 86); Claudius states "What... hath put him/ so much from th'understanding of himself, I cannot deem of" (II, ii, 7-10); Gertrude believes that the cause is "his father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage" (II, ii, 57). In Claudius's prayer scene, both he and Hamlet have important questions to ask: Claudius wonders how he can repent for his deed, while Hamlet hesitates in that moment to make the killing blow, asking, "Am I then revenged?" (III, iii, 84).

In many other ways uncertainty rears its head in this play. Claudius becomes so unsure of what to do about Hamlet, once he suspects that Hamlet knows what he has done, that he ships him off to England. Equal consideration could be given to accident and suicide as the cause of Ophelia's death, since no one witnessed her drowning. Hamlet offers one of the most famous literary uncertainties known: "To be, or not to be" (III, i, 58). Here he is questioning the very purpose of existence, and what happens after death, the existential question that no philosopher has yet been able to answer with surety. Shakespeare brings all of this questioning into focus with the Ghost's presence. The characters at first search for confirmation that the spirit is not a trick of the eyes, and then must wonder at its origins and its intentions. Uncertainty is so prevalent that we may begin to understand Hamlet's troubled state: it would be difficult to reconcile one's existence in a world in which everything must be questioned.

The weyward sisters are illustrations of the duality and paradox that melds reality and fantasy in *Macbeth*. Within their first lines comes a confusion of nature, as they tell us "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I, i, 10) – a mixed-up sentiment Macbeth echoes at his first entrance: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I, iii, 36). Their physical appearance reflects that confusion as well. When Banquo addresses them, he remarks, "You should be women,/ and yet your beards forbid me to interpret/ that you are so" (I, iii, 42-44). Very plainly *there* on the stage for the audience to see, the witches do not share the same kind of existence as Macbeth or Banquo. They seem instead to exist between the corporeal world and another, less tangible plane, a mingling of being

barque cannot be lost./ Yet it shall be tempest-tossed" (I. iii. 23-24). They are therefore as limited as Macbeth, who manages to kill Banquo but not his son Fleance. To rid the world of both would be impossible by the terms of the play, as Banquo's descendants are fated to wear the crown.

Other supernatural images in Macbeth, namely Banquo's ghost and the visions the weyward sisters show to Macbeth, could be viewed as striking representations of fear. The word "fear" appears often in *Macbeth*. Both Macbeth and his wife feel fear surrounding the murder of Duncan, he in its contemplation and she in the act itself. Malcolm and Donalbain, the sons of the king, flee in fear at their father's death, as does Fleance at Banquo's (granted that Banquo instructs him to run). When the spirit of Banquo appears to Macbeth, we see him respond hysterically, insisting that the ghost not lay blame on him – "Never shake thy gory locks at me" (III, iv, 49-50). Lady Macbeth exclaims to him, "This is the very painting of your fear (III, iv, 60). The apparition only occurs because Macbeth and his lady are still in the midst of their murderous scheme. He has already said, "If it were done when 'tis done... we'd jump the life to come" (I, vii, 1-7). The evil of the deed itself is not enough to quell Macbeth's desires. His problems begin because the act will have to extend to others, and because he will have to live with the murders. Therein lies his fear, and brings about this vision of Banquo's ghost.

The apparitions, the first two rather fearful in appearance, create an intriguing paradox as, in revealing what Macbeth should fear, they in fact defer his fears. Beware Macduff, the armed head tells him; no man of woman born will harm you, says the bloody child; a crowned child with a branch – probably a representation of Malcolm – assures him that he will be defeated only when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Macbeth appears to accept the interpretation that he will remain undefeated, yet he retreats to Dunsinane and fortifies its defenses as an extra precaution. In retrospect, it would seem that Dunsinane was the one place he should have avoided to keep the visions' words from coming to pass.

Elements of the supernatural appear in Shakespeare's plays in more than the visual staging; they sometimes appear in fantasy-laden speeches of the characters. The beauty of the words alone is commendable, but supernatural images in Shakespeare's speech are more than mere flowery language. These emergences of the supernatural usually extend for a few lines, unlike the ongoing images of *Hamlet's* Ghost and *Macbeth's* witches, but they can still have marvelous impact on an attentive audience and a solid connection with the rest of the play's content.

Romeo and Juliet contains one notable speech of that variety. Mercutio talks of a fairy called Queen Mab, a tiny creature that stirs dreams and desires. Immediately we see a connection to the work at large: desire has a significant role in the story. However, the contents of the dreams Mab invokes go beyond simple wish fulfillment. The way Mercutio describes it, Mab is in the business of inflaming natures. She makes lovers dream of love and lawyers of lawsuits,

And sometimes comes she with a tithe-pig's tail
 Tickling a parson's nose as a lies asleep;
 Then dreams he of another benefice.
 Sometime she driveth o'er a soldier's neck,
 And then dreams he of cutting foreign throats,
 Of breaches, ambuscades, Spanish blades... (I, v, 79-84).

This inducement of disposition-appropriate dreams calls to mind the argument that Romeo is only responding to his lover's nature when he meets Juliet. Witnessing the swift transfer of his hopeless pining for Rosaline to his incredible longing for Juliet, it does not seem much of a stretch to believe that he is merely following his lust. Chasing women is an inborn quality in Romeo. Mercutio deems, "You are a lover" (I, iv, 17). If we accept this as an explanation for Romeo's pursuit, then Juliet is another Queen Mab, inciting Romeo's nature to seduce her.

The dreams that Mab reportedly sets on offset the possibility of pure love with their depravity. When the fairy rides in her hazelnut chariot across the lips of ladies, "oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues/ Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are" (I, iv, 75-76). These ladies are indulgent and impure; their breath is "tainted." The lawyer Mercutio describes will go to "smelling out a suit," like a predatory animal catching the scent of blood (I, iv, 78). The soldier is disturbingly bloodthirsty, and once Mercutio's speech has built up he talks of Mab as follows: "This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,/ That presses them and learns them first to bear" (I, iv, 92-93). The descriptions of the dreams begin simply, and increase in detail and immorality with each new dreamer. In an account of a societal structure that is being pulled apart by desires, Mercutio's language deteriorates accordingly. The construction of his speech becomes less coherent as the speech continues. Eventually, it becomes obvious that he is ranting. At this point, Romeo cuts him off.

The way in which this speech ends speaks quite powerfully to *Romeo and Juliet* as a whole. Romeo interrupts Mercutio mid-sentence, saying, "Thou talk'st of nothing" (I, iv, 96). The idea that speech is an insufficient medium recurs throughout the play. We witness the concept's expression in the infamous balcony scene. Romeo begins to profess his love by the moon, but Juliet interjects, "O, swear not by the moon" (II, i, 151). After a short exchange, she then bids him not swear at all: "I have no joy of this contract tonight" (II, i, 159). She has enough intelligence to see that she cannot trust an oath made so impulsively. The contract that will bring her joy is a vow of marriage, the promise of a lifetime together. Being the romantic he is, Romeo is all too willing to prove his words.

Unsupported talk means nothing; actions show the character - and this is true not only in *Romeo and Juliet*. Hamlet's vow to kill Claudius is barely convincing until he carries it out; Lady Macbeth asks, "Art thou afeard/ to be the same in thine own act and valour/ as thou art in desire?" (I, vii, 39-41); Hamlet and Macbeth question the tidings of their otherworldly visions until they have seen sufficient evidence. Still, we see a difference here: Romeo can tell Mercutio that he talks of nothing, but neither Hamlet nor Macbeth can extricate themselves from the grips of the fantasies they experience.

When the supernatural appears only in language, rather than in the play's reality, it has a very different effect on the characters. Romeo is allowed to dismiss the strange fairy Queen Mab because it is clear that she is Mercutio's invention, and does not have any bearing on the real world. Because Romeo does not see her with his own eyes, she does not dwell in his mind. In *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, the witches and ghosts are waking apparitions, not so easy to ignore. It is difficult to disregard such things as unreal, because in order to do so they would have to admit that they cannot trust their sight.

must doubt what he sees: "Mine eyes are made the fools o'th' other senses./ or else worth all the rest" (II, i, 44-45). Inevitably the characters of these plays decide that they really do see Ghosts and weyward women, dreamlike visions in waking moments. These supernatural beings they see "look not like th'inhabitants o'th' earth/ and yet are on't" (*Macbeth*: I, iii, 39-40). The world of *Romeo and Juliet* remains one in which we can trust our eyes and set expectations for what may appear before us; that is how a supernatural presence functions when it is contained in another character's language. When the fantastic vision appears before us and speaks its own speeches, we know that we have entered a different and unpredictable world.

SHAKESPEAREAN SOLILOQUIES

Shakespeare's plays are full of soliloquies and monologues (many of which we've translated into modern English in our soliloquies section), though they aren't actually the same thing. This page explains both the definition of a soliloquy and the definition of a monologue in the context of Shakespeare's plays. What Is A Soliloquy?

A soliloquy is a word taken from Latin and it means 'talking by oneself.' It's a device that dramatists – and Shakespeare to great effect – used to allow a character to communicate his or her thoughts directly to the audience. The character may be surrounded by other characters but the convention is that they can't hear the soliloquy because it is essentially a piece in which the character is thinking rather than actually speaking to anyone. Audiences in Elizabethan times took the convention for granted. Modern playwrights use a whole range of devices to communicate the thoughts of a character to the audience as the soliloquy has become old fashioned: modern audiences generally expect something more realistic, although they relate to the soliloquies when they attend performances of Elizabethan plays.

Shakespeare's plays feature many soliloquies, some of which are his most famous passages. Perhaps the most famous is Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' soliloquy, where Hamlet contemplates suicide. The audience is taken through his thought processes, where he balances the pros and cons of ending his life – an all time classic soliloquy.

SHAKESPEARE AS A SONNETEER AND A NARRATIVE POET

While William Shakespeare's reputation is based primarily on his plays, he became famous first as a poet. With the partial exception of the *Sonnets* (1609), quarried since the early 19th century for autobiographical secrets allegedly encoded in them, the nondramatic writings have traditionally been pushed to the margins of the Shakespeare industry. Yet the study of his nondramatic poetry can illuminate Shakespeare's activities as a poet emphatically of his own age, especially in the period of extraordinary literary ferment in the last ten or twelve years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

Shakespeare's exact birth date remains unknown. He was baptized in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564, his mother's third child, but the first to survive infancy. This has led scholars to conjecture that he was born on April 23rd, given the era's convention of baptizing newborns on their third day. Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, moved to Stratford in about 1552 and rapidly became a prominent figure in the town's business and politics. He rose to be bailiff, the highest official in the town, but then in about 1575-1576 his prosperity declined markedly and he withdrew from public life. In 1596, thanks to his son's success and persistence, he was granted a coat of arms by the College of Arms, and the family moved into New Place, the grandest house in Stratford.

Speculation that William Shakespeare traveled, worked as a schoolmaster in the country, was a soldier and a law clerk, or embraced or left the Roman Catholic Church continues to fill the gaps left in the sparse records of the so-called lost years. It is conventionally assumed (though attendance registers do not survive) that Shakespeare attended the King's New School in Stratford, along with others of his social class. At the age of 18, in November 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, daughter of a local farmer. She was pregnant with Susanna Shakespeare, who was baptized on May 26, 1583. The twins, Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare, were baptized on February 2, 1585. There were no further children from the union.

William Shakespeare had probably been working as an actor and writer on the professional stage in London for four or five years when the London theaters were closed by order of the Privy Council on June 23, 1592. The authorities were concerned about a severe outbreak of the plague and alarmed at the possibility of civil unrest (Privy Council minutes refer to "a great disorder and tumult" in Southwark). The initial order suspended playing until Michaelmas and was renewed several times. When the theaters reopened in June 1594, the theatrical companies had been reorganized, and Shakespeare's career was wholly committed to the troupe known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men until 1603, when they were reconstituted as the King's Men.

By 1592 Shakespeare already enjoyed sufficient prominence as an author of dramatic scripts to have been the subject of Robert Greene's attack on the "upstart crow" in *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*. Such renown as he enjoyed, however, was as transitory as the dramatic form. Play scripts, and their authors, were accorded a lowly status in the literary system, and when scripts were published, their link to the theatrical company (rather than to the scriptwriter) was publicized. It was only in 1597 that Shakespeare's name first appeared on the title page of his plays—*Richard II* and a revised edition of *Romeo and Juliet*.

While the London theaters were closed, some actors tried to make a living by touring outside the capital. Shakespeare turned from the business of scriptwriting to the pursuit of art and patronage; unable to pursue his career in the theatrical marketplace, he adopted a more conventional course. Shakespeare's first publication, *Venus and Adonis* (1593), was dedicated to the 18-year-old Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. The dedication reveals a frank appeal for patronage, couched in the normal terms of such requests. Shakespeare received the Earl's patronage and went on to dedicate his next dramatic poem, *Lucrece*, to the young lord as well. *Venus and Adonis* was printed by Richard Field, a professionally accomplished printer who lived in Stratford. Shakespeare's choice of printer indicates an ambition to associate himself with unambiguously high-art productions, as does the quotation from Ovid's *Amores* on the title page: "Vilia miretur vulgus: mihi flavus Apollo / Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua" (Let worthless stuff excite the admiration of the crowd: as for me, let golden Apollo ply me with full cups from the Castalian spring, that is, the spring of the Muses). Such lofty repudiation of the vulgar was calculated to appeal to the teenage Southampton. It also appealed to a sizable slice of the reading public. In the midst of horror, disease, and death, Shakespeare was offering access to a golden world, showing the delights of applying learning for pleasure rather than pointing out the obvious morals to be drawn from classical authors when faced with awful catastrophe.

With *Venus and Adonis* Shakespeare sought direct aristocratic patronage, but he also entered the marketplace as a professional author. He seems to have enjoyed a degree of success in the first of these objectives, given the more intimate tone of the dedication of *Lucrece* to Southampton in the following year. In the second objective, his triumph must have outstripped all expectation. *Venus and Adonis* went through 15 editions before 1640; it was first entered in the Stationers' Register on April 18, 1593. It is a fine and elegantly printed book, consisting of 1,194 lines in 199 six-line stanzas rhymed *ababcc*. The verse form was a token of social and literary ambition on Shakespeare's part. Its aristocratic cachet derived from its popularity at court, being favored by

several courtier poets, such as Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Arthur Gorges, and Sir Edward Dyer. *Venus and Adonis* is unquestionably a work of its age. In it a young writer courts respectability and patronage. At one level, of course, the poem is a traditional Ovidian fable, locating the origin of the inseparability of love and sorrow in Venus's reaction to the death of Adonis: "lo here I prophesy, / Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend /... all love's pleasure shall not match his woe." It invokes a mythic past that explains a painful present. Like so many texts of the 1590s, it features an innocent hero, Adonis, who encounters a world in which the precepts he has acquired from his education are tested in the surprising school of experience. His knowledge of love, inevitably, is not firsthand ("I have heard it is a life in death, / That laughs and weeps, and all but with a breath"). There is a staidly academic quality to his repudiation of Venus's "treatise," her "idle over-handled theme."

Shakespeare's literary and social aspirations are revealed at every turn. In his Petrarchism, for example, he adopts a mode that had become a staple of courtly discourse. Elizabethan politicians figured themselves and their personal and political conditions in Petrarchan terms. The inescapable and enduring frustrations of the courtier's life were habitually figured via the analogy of the frustrated, confused, but devoted Petrarchan lover. Yet Shakespeare's approach to this convention typifies the 1590s younger generation's sense of its incongruity. Lines such as "the love-sick queen began to sweat" are understandably rare in Elizabethan courtly discourse. Power relations expressed through the gendered language of Elizabeth's eroticized politics are reversed: "Her eyes petitioners to his eyes suing / ... Her eyes wooed still, his eyes disdain'd the wooing." It is Venus who deploys the conventional *carpe diem* arguments: "Make use of time / ... Fair flowers that are not gath'ed in their prime, / Rot, and consume themselves in little time"; she even provides a *blason* of her own charms: "Thou canst not see one wrinkle in my brow, / Mine eyes are grey, and bright, and quick in turning."

Like most Elizabethan treatments of love, Shakespeare's work is characterized by paradox ("She's love, she loves, and yet she is not lov'd"), by narrative and thematic diversity, and by attempts to render the inner workings of the mind, exploring the psychology of perception ("Oft the eye mistakes, the brain being troubled"). The poem addresses such artistic preoccupations of the 1590s as the relation of poetry to painting and the possibility of literary immortality, as well as social concerns such as the phenomenon of "masterless women," and the (to men) alarming and unknowable forces unleashed by female desire, an issue that for a host of reasons fascinated Elizabeth's subjects. Indeed, *Venus and Adonis* flirts with taboos, as do other successful works of the 1590s, offering readers living in a paranoid, plague-ridden city a fantasy of passionate and fatal physical desire, with Venus leading Adonis "prisoner in a red-rose chain." In its day it was appreciated as an erotic fantasy glorying in the inversion of established categories and values, with a veneer of learning and the snob appeal of association with a celebrated aristocrat.

Since the Romantic period the frank sexuality of Shakespeare's Venus has held less appeal for literary critics and scholars than it had to Elizabethan and Jacobean readers. C.S. Lewis concludes in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (1954) that "if the poem is not meant to arouse disgust it was very foolishly written." In more recent years a combination of feminism, cultural studies, renewed interest in rhetoric, and a return to traditional archival research has begun to reclaim *Venus and Adonis* from such prejudice.

The elevated subject of Shakespeare's next publication, *Lucrece*, suggests that *Venus and Adonis* had been well received, *Lucrece* comprises 1,855 lines, in 265 stanzas. The stanza (as in *Complaint of Rosamund*) is the seven-line rhyme royal (*ababbcc*) immortalized in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (circa 1385) and thereafter considered especially appropriate for tragedy, complaint, and philosophical reflection. In places the narrator explicitly highlights the various rhetorical set pieces ("Here she exclaims against repose and rest"). *Lucrece* herself comments on her performance after the apostrophes to "comfort-killing Night, image of Hell," Opportunity, and Time. Elizabethan readers would have appreciated much about the poem, from

its plentiful wordplay ("to shun the blot, she would not blot the letter"; "Ere she with blood had stain'd her stain'd excuse") and verbal dexterity, to the inner debate raging inside Tarquin. Though an exemplary tyrant from ancient history, he also exemplifies the conventional 1590s conflict between willful youthful prodigality and sententious experience ("My part is youth, and beats these from the stage"). The arguments in his "disputation / 'Tween frozen conscience and hot burning will" are those of the Petrarchan lover: "nothing can affection's course control," and "Yet strive I to embrace mine infamy." But the context of this rhetorical performance is crucial throughout. Unlike *Venus and Adonis*, *Lucrece* is not set in a mythical golden age, but in a fallen, violent world. This is particularly apparent in the rhetorical and ultimately physical competition of their debate--contrasting Tarquin's speeches with Lucrece's eloquent appeals to his better nature.

The combination of ancient and contemporary strengthens the political elements in the poem. It demonstrates tyranny in its most intimate form, committing a private outrage that is inescapably public; hence the rape is figured in terms both domestic (as a burglary) and public (as a hunt, a war, a siege). It also reveals the essential violence of many conventional erotic metaphors. Shakespeare draws on the powerful Elizabethan myth of the island nation as a woman: although Tarquin is a Roman, an insider, his journey from the siege of Ardea to Lucrece's chamber connects the two assaults. His attack figures a society at war with itself, and he himself is shown to be self-divided." Tyranny, lust, and greed translate the metaphors of Petrarchism into the actuality of rape, which is figured by *gradatio*, or climax: "What could he see but mightily he noted? / What did he note but strongly he desired?"

The historically validated interpretation—for Shakespeare's readers, descendants of Brutus in New Troy—is figured by Brutus, who "pluck'd the knife from Lucrece's side." He steps forward, casting off his reputation for folly and improvising a ritual (involving kissing the knife) that transforms grief and outrage at Lucrece's death into a determination to "publish Tarquin's foul offense" and change the political system. Brutus emerges from the shadows, reminding the reader that the poem, notwithstanding its powerful speeches and harrowing images, is also remarkable for what is unshown, untold, implicit. Until recently few commentators have taken up the interpretative challenge posed by Brutus. Traditionally *Lucrece* has been dismissed as a bookish, pedantic dry run for Shakespeare's tragedies, in William Empson's phrase, "the Bard doing five-finger exercises," containing what F.T. Prince in his 1960 edition of the poems dismisses as defective rhetoric in the treatment of an uninteresting story. Many critics have sought to define the poem's genre, which combines political fable, female complaint, and tragedy within a milieu of self-conscious antiquity. But perhaps the most significant recent developments have been the feminist treatments of the poem, the reawakening interest in rhetoric, and a dawning awareness of the work's political engagement. *Lucrece*, like so many of Shakespeare's historical tragedies, problematizes the categories of history and myth, of public and private, and exemplifies the bewildering nature of historical parallels. The self-conscious rhetorical display and the examination of representation is daringly politicized, explicitly, if inconclusively, connecting the aesthetic and the erotic with politics both sexual and state. At the time of its publication, *Lucrece* was Shakespeare's most profound meditation on history, particularly on the relations between public role and private morality and on the conjunction of forces—personal, political, social—that creates turning points in human history. In it he indirectly articulates the concerns of his generation and also, perhaps, of his young patron, who was already closely associated with the doomed earl of Essex.

In 1598 or 1599 the printer William Jaggard brought out an anthology of 20 miscellaneous poems, which he eventually attributed to Shakespeare, though the authorship of all 20 is still disputed. At least five are demonstrably Shakespearean. Poem 1 is a version of Sonnet 138 ("When My Love Swears that She Is Made of Truth"), poem 2 of Sonnet 144 ("Two Loves I Have, of Comfort and Despair"), and the rest are sonnets that appear in act 4 of *Love's Labor's*

Lost (1598). Investigation of Jaggard's volume, called *The Passionate Pilgrime*, has yielded and will continue to yield insight into such matters as the relationship of manuscript to print culture in the 1590s, the changing nature of the literary profession, and the evolving status of the author. It may also, as with *The Phoenix and Turtle* (1601), lead to increased knowledge of the chronology and circumstances of Shakespeare's literary career, as well as affording some glimpses of his revisions of his texts.

"With this key / Shakespeare unlocked his heart," wrote William Wordsworth in "Scorn not the Sonnet" (1827) of the *Sonnets*. "If so," replied Robert Browning in his poem "House" (1876), "the less Shakespeare he." None of Shakespeare's works has been so tirelessly ransacked for biographical clues as the 154 sonnets, published with *A Lover's Complaint* by Thomas Thorpe in 1609. Unlike the narrative poems, they enjoyed only limited commercial success during Shakespeare's lifetime, and no further edition appeared until Benson's in 1640. The title page, like Jaggard's of *The Passionate Pilgrim*, relies upon the drawing power of the author's name and promises "SHAKE-SPEARES / SONNETS / Never before Imprinted."

The 154 sonnets are conventionally divided between the "young man" sonnets (1-126) and the "dark lady" sonnets (127-152), with the final pair often seen as an envoy or coda to the collection. There is no evidence that such a division has chronological implications, though the volume is usually read in such a way. Shakespeare employs the conventional English sonnet form: three quatrains capped with a couplet. Drama is conjured within individual poems, as the speaker wrestles with some problem or situation; it is generated by the juxtaposition of poems, with instant switches of tone, mood, and style; it is implied by cross-references and interrelationships within the sequence as a whole.)

There remains a question, however, of how closely Shakespeare was involved in preparing the text of the sonnets for publication. Some commentators have advocated skepticism about all attempts to recover Shakespeare's intention. Others have looked more closely at Thorpe, at Benson, and at the circulation of Shakespeare's verse in the manuscript culture: these investigations have led to a reexamination of the ideas of authorship and authority in the period. Although scholarly opinion is still divided, several influential studies and editions in recent years have argued, on a variety of grounds, for the authority, integrity, and coherence of Thorpe's text, an integrity now regarded as including *A Lover's Complaint*.

The subsequent history of the text of the sonnets is inseparable from the history of Shakespeare's reputation. John Benson's *Poems: Written by Wil. Shake-speare. Gent* (1640) was part of an attempt to "canonize" Shakespeare, collecting verses into a handsome quarto that could be sold as a companion to the dramatic folio texts ("to be serviceable for the continuance of glory to the deserved author in these his poems"). Benson dropped a few sonnets, added other poems, provided titles for individual pieces, changed Thorpe's order, conflated sonnets, and modified some of the male pronouns, thereby making the sequence seem more unambiguously heterosexual in its orientation. In recent years there has been increasing study of Benson's edition as a distinct literary production in its own right.

The Romantic compulsion to read the sonnets as autobiography inspired attempts to rearrange them to tell their story more clearly. It also led to attempts to relate them to what was known or could be surmised about Shakespeare's life. Some commentators speculated that the publication of the sonnets was the result of a conspiracy by Shakespeare's rivals or enemies, seeking to embarrass him by publishing love poems apparently addressed to a man rather than to the conventional sonnet-mistress. The five appendices to Hyder Edward Rollins's Variorum edition document the first century of such endeavors. Attention was directed toward "problems" such as the identity of Master W. H., of the young man, of the rival poet, and of the dark lady (a phrase, incidentally, never used by Shakespeare in the sonnets). The disappearance of the sonnets from the canon coincided with the time when Shakespeare's standing as the nation's bard was being

established. The critics' current fascination is just as significant for what it reveals about contemporary culture, as the "Shakespeare myth" comes under attack from various directions.

(The sonnets were apparently composed during a period of ten or a dozen years starting in about 1592-1593. In *Palladis Tamia* Meres refers to the existence of "sugared sonnets" circulating among Shakespeare's "private friends," some which were published in *The Passionate Pilgrim*. The fact of prior circulation has important implications for the sonnets.) The particular poems that were in circulation suggest that the general shape and themes of the *Sonnets* were established from the earliest stages. Evidence suggesting a lengthy period of composition is inconvenient for commentators seeking to unlock the autobiographical secret of the sonnets. An early date (1592-1594) argues for Southampton as the boy and Christopher Marlowe as the rival poet; a date a decade later brings George Herbert and George Chapman into the frame. There are likewise early dark ladies (Lucy Negro, before she took charge of a brothel) and late (Emilia Lanier, Mary Fitton). There may, of course, have been more than one young man, rival, and dark lady, or in fact the sequence may not be autobiographical at all.

No Elizabethan sonnet sequence presents an unambiguous linear narrative, a novel in verse. Shakespeare's is no exception. Yet neither are the *Sonnets* a random anthology, a loose gathering of scattered rhymes. While groups of sonnets are obviously linked thematically, such as the opening sequence urging the young man to marry (1-17), and the dark lady sequence (127-152), the ordering within those groups is not that of continuous narrative. There are many smaller units, with poems recording that the friend has become the lover of the poet's mistress (40-42), or expressing jealousy of the young man's friendship with a rival poet (78-86). Sonnet 44 ends with a reference to two of the four elements "so much of earth and water wrought," and 45 starts with "The other two, slight air and purging fire." Similarly indivisible are the two "horse" sonnets 50 and 51, the "Will" sonnets 135 and 136, and 67 and 68. Sonnets 20 and 87 are connected as much by their telling use of feminine rhyme as by shared themes. Dispersed among the poems are pairs and groups that amplify or comment on each other, such as those dealing with absence (43-45, 47-48, 50-52, and 97-98).

"My name is Will," declares the speaker of 136. Sonnet 145 apparently puns on Anne Hathaway's name ("I hate, from hate away she threw"). Elizabethan sonneteers, following Sir Philip Sidney, conventionally teased their readers with hints of an actuality behind the poems. Sidney had given Astrophil his own coat of arms, had quibbled with the married name of the supposed original for Stella (Penelope Rich) and with the Greek etymology of his own name (Philip, "lover of horses") in *Astrophil and Stella* sonnets 41, 49, and 53. Shakespeare's speaker descends as much from Astrophil as from Daniel's more enigmatic persona, most obviously in the deployment of the multiple sense of *will* in 135 and 136. Yet Shakespeare's sequence is unusual in including sexual consummation (Spenser's *Amoretti* led to the celebration of marriage in *Epithalamion*, 1595) and unique in its persuasion to marry. There is evidence that some contemporary readers were disturbed by the transgressive and experimental features of 1590s erotic writing. Works by Marston and Marlowe were among those banned in 1599 along with satires and other more conventional kindling. Benson's much-discussed modification of the text of the *Sonnets* indicates at least a certain level of anxiety about the gender of the characters in the poems. Benson retained Sonnet 20 but dropped 126 ("O Thou My Lovely Boy") and changed the direct address of 108 ("Nothing, Sweet Boy") to the neutral "Nothing, Sweet Love."

The speaker sums up his predicament in 144, one of the *Passionate Pilgrim* poems:

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 color'd ill.							

The speaker's attraction to the "worser spirit" is figured in harsh language throughout the sequence: in fact, the brutal juxtaposition of lyricism and lust is characteristic of the collection as a whole. The consequent disjointedness expresses a form of psychological verisimilitude by the standards of Shakespeare's day, where discontinuity and repetition were held to reveal the inner state of a speaker.

The anachronism of applying modern attitudes toward homosexuality to early modern culture is self-evident. Where Shakespeare and his contemporaries drew their boundaries cannot be fully determined, but they were fascinated by the Platonic concept of androgyny, a concept drawn on by the queen herself almost from the moment of her accession. Sonnet 53 is addressed to an inexpressible lover, who resembles both Adonis and Helen. Androgyny is only part of the exploration of sexuality in the sonnets, however. A humanist education could open windows onto a world very different from post-Reformation England. Plato's praise of love between men was in marked contrast to the establishment of capital punishment as the prescribed penalty for sodomy in 1533.

In the *Sonnets* the relationship between the speaker and the young man both invites and resists definition, and it is clearly presented as a challenge to orthodoxy. If at times it seems to correspond to the many Elizabethan celebrations of male friendship, at others it has a raw physicality that resists such polite categorization. Even in sonnet 20, where sexual intimacy seems to be explicitly denied, the speaker's mind runs to bawdy puns. The speaker refers to the friend as "rose," "my love," "lover," and "sweet love," and many commentators have demonstrated the repeated use of explicitly sexual language to the male friend (in 106, 109, and 110, for example). On the other hand, the acceptance of the traditional distinction between the young man and the dark lady sonnets obscures the fact that Shakespeare seems deliberately to render the gender of his subject uncertain in the vast majority of cases.

For some commentators the sequence also participates in the so-called birth of the author, a crucial feature of early modern writing: the liberation of the writer from the shackles of patronage. In Joel Fineman's analysis, Shakespeare creates a radical internalization of Petrarchism, reordering its dynamic by directing his attention to the speaker's subjectivity rather than to the ostensible object of the speaker's devotion: the poetry of praise becomes poetry of self-discovery.

Sidney's *Astrophil* had inhabited a world of court intrigue, chivalry, and international politics, exemplifying the overlap between political and erotic discourse in Elizabethan England. The circumstances of Shakespeare's speaker, in contrast, are not those of a courtier but of a male of the upwardly mobile "middling sort." Especially in the young man sonnets, there is a marked class anxiety, as the speaker seeks to define his role, whether as a friend, a tutor, a counselor, an employee, or a sexual rival. Not only are comparisons drawn from the world of the professional theater ("As an unperfect actor on the stage" in sonnet 23), but also from the world of business: compared to the prodigal "Unthrifty loveliness" of the youth (sonnet 4), "Making a famine where abundance lies" (1), the speaker inhabits a bourgeois world of debts, loans, repayment, and usury, speaking in similar language to the Dark Lady: "I myself am mortgaged to thy will" (134).

Yet Shakespeare's linguistic performance extends beyond the "middling sort." He was a great popularizer, translating court art and high art—John Lyly, Sidney, Edmund Spenser—into palatable and sentimental commercial forms. His sequence is remarkable for its thematic and verbal richness, for its extraordinary range of nuances and ambiguities. He often employs words in multiple senses (as in the seemingly willfully indecipherable resonance, punning, polysemy, implication, and nuance of sonnet 94). Shakespeare's celebrated verbal playfulness, the

polysemy of his language, is a function of publication, whether by circulation or printing. His words acquire currency beyond himself and become the subject of reading and interpretation. This linguistic richness can also be seen as an act of social aspiration: as the appropriation of the ambiguity axiomatically inherent in courtly speech. The sequence continues the process of dismantling traditional distinctions among rhetoric, philosophy, and poetry begun in the poems of 1593-1594. The poems had dealt in reversal and inversion and had combined elements of narrative and drama. The *Sonnets* occupy a distinct, marginal space between social classes, between public and private, narrative and dramatic, and they proceed not through inverting categories but rather through interrogating them. Variations are played on Elizabethan conventions of erotic discourse: love without sex, sex without love, a "master-mistress" who is "prick'd ... out for women's pleasure" as the ultimate in unattainable ("to my purpose nothing," 20) adoration. Like Spenser's *Amoretti*, Shakespeare's collection meditates on the relationships among love, art, time, and immortality. It remains a meditation, however, even when it seems most decided.

The consequences of love, the pain of rejection, desertion, and loss of reputation are powerful elements in the poem that follows the sequence. Despite Thorpe's unambiguous attribution of the piece to Shakespeare, *A Lover's Complaint* was rejected from the canon, on distinctly flimsy grounds, until quite recently. It has been much investigated to establish its authenticity and its date. It is now generally accepted as Shakespearean and dated at some point between 1600 and 1609, possibly revised from a 1600 first version for publication in Thorpe's volume. The poem comprises 329 lines, disposed into 47 seven-line rhyme-royal stanzas. It draws heavily on Spenser and Daniel and is the complaint of a wronged woman about the duplicity of a man. It is in some sense a companion to *Lucrece* and to *All's Well That Ends Well* (circa 1602-1603) as much as to the sonnets. Its connections with the narrative poems, with the plays, and with the genre of female complaint have been thoroughly explored. The woman is a city besieged by an eloquent wooer ("how deceits were gilded in his smiling"), whose essence is dissimulation ("his passion, but an art of craft"). There has been a growing tendency to relate the poem to its immediate context in Thorpe's *Sonnets* volume and to find it a reflection or gloss or critique of the preceding sequence.

Interest in Shakespeare's nondramatic writings has increased markedly in recent years. They are no longer so easily marginalized or dismissed as conventional, and they contribute in powerful ways to a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's oeuvre and the Elizabethan era in which he lived and wrote.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, on what may have been his 52nd birthday.

Shakespeare's Sonnets is the title of a collection of 154 sonnets by William Shakespeare, which covers themes such as the passage of time, love, beauty and mortality. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man; the last 28 to a woman.

The sonnets were first published in a 1609 quarto with the full stylised title: *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS. Never before Imprinted.* (although sonnets 138 and 144 had previously been published in the 1599 miscellany *The Passionate Pilgrim*). The quarto ends with "*A Lover's Complaint*", a narrative poem of 47 seven-line stanzas written in rhyme royal – though some scholars have argued convincingly against Shakespeare's authorship of the poem.^[1]

The sonnets to the young man express overwhelming, obsessional love.^[2] The main issue of debate has always been whether it remained platonic or became physical.^[3] The first 17 poems, traditionally called the procreation sonnets, are addressed to the young man urging him to marry and have children in order to immortalize his beauty by passing it to the next generation.^[4] Other sonnets express the speaker's love for the young man; brood upon loneliness, death, and the

transience of life; seem to criticise the young man for preferring a rival poet; express ambiguous feelings for the speaker's mistress; and pun on **the** poet's name. The final two sonnets are allegorical treatments of Greek epigrams referring to the "little love-god" Cupid.

The sonnet was invented in 13th century Italy: '**sonnetto**', a little sound. The first major practitioner was Dante (1265-1521), who developed from Provençal poetry what he called his '**rime petrose**', stony rhymes, about the hard, unyielding cruelty of the lady. But literary scholars don't speak of the Dantean, but of the Petrarchan sonnet. The first important thing to know about Francesco Petrarch is that he has two R's to his name. If you are having difficulty staying awake already, be of good heart, for if you henceforward **spell** Petrarch with two R's, not 'Petrach', you can take something educationally valuable away into your dreams. Petrarch – two R's still, mind you – lived 1304-74. Two of his literary works were in Italian, rather than Latin, the *Canzoniere* and the *Trionfi*. The *Canzoniere* consisted of 366 poems, 317 of them sonnets. Petrarch's first sonnet, line one, refers to them as '**rime sparse**', scattered rhymes, and they are often referred to using that expression. So, Petrarch **didn't** invent the form we call the Petrarchan sonnet. Nor did he invent the trick of carrying a single metaphor through the 14 lines of a sonnet which gets referred to as a Petrarchan conceit (when **the** poet compares his state, being in love, to a ship at sea, or to the unmeasurable mountains, that kind of thing).

Petrarch (two R's) did, however, produce the first unified collection of love lyrics (Dante's *Vita Nuova* had narrative links in prose). They dealt with his love for Laura. If she ever existed, he saw her first on 6th April 1327, and on 6th April 1348 she died, perhaps in the Black Death which was spreading across Europe from 1347 – 'the light of her life was withdrawn from the light of day'. He continued addressing poems to her after her death, so that the sequence can be divided between the *in vita* and the *in morte* sections, poems 1-> 263 and 264 -> 366. During the Laura *in morte* section, the previously failed relationship picks up considerably. One night, she comes and sits on Petrarch's bed, to comfort him. When she was alive, she was always an incitement to sin, and nothing as naughty as that was ever allowed to happen, but once she is in heaven, she can guide him there, to heaven, with complete moral safety.

Petrarch wrote about the possibility of a sublimated, virtuous love, with Laura as his spiritual guide. You will readily concede, I am sure, that the unknown woman who was Petrarch's mistress, bearing him illegitimate children in 1342 and 1347, was not a suitable subject for poetry. This is highbrow literature, not life as lived. Laura may never have existed.

The '**rime sparse**' are beautiful poems, impassioned, using the Italian sonnet form of an octave and sestet for a repeated pattern of pressure and release, anguish and consolation which seems very close to the dynamic of emotional experience. The poems are voiced with a rich Italian *cantabile*. And Petrarch goes on being staggeringly constant: several sonnets commemorate the numbers of years that have gone by since that transfiguring meeting one Easter Sunday in Avignon, 'that burning knot in which hour by hour I was caught for 21 whole years'. Rather less superhuman in his devotion, Shakespeare's 104th sonnet commemorates three years of love.

Petrarch's influence spread as the Renaissance itself spread from Italy. He had many 15th century Italian followers (a mob called the *petrarchisti*), while it took his form 200 years to reach Spain, and 300 to get to France and England. Clement Marot wrote the first French sonnets in the 1530's, du Bellay doing the first sonnet sequence in 1549. As far as English poetry was concerned, the first English Renaissance man was Sir Thomas Wyatt, who began translating sonnets from Petrarch in the 1530's, progressing to write sonnets that seem to be original to him.

The first sonnet sequence in English was the unsurpassed 'Astrophel and Stella' of Sir Philip Sidney, written in the early 1580's, and published after his death, in 1591, to trigger the major decade of Elizabethan sonnet writing.

Formal properties of the sonnet (in general)

So, what was meant by a sonnet, in the strict sense?(2) The classic Italian or Petrarchan form rhymes its 10 syllable lines ABBA ABBA CDC DCD or ABBA ABBA CDE CDE: it is a form with 4 or 5 rhyme words, with a distinct *volta* or turn between the octave and the sestet. Petrarch only very rarely ends a sonnet with a couplet, doing that constitutes a rare deviation from his usual sestet patterns.

Major practitioners in English fought hard against the problem that English, as a language, provides fewer rhyming words than Italian, something which makes strict 'Italian' form sonnets hard to write in English. Sidney always uses a two rhyme octave, Spenser had his own variation, but in English poetic practice, the sonnet tended to devolve into a less demanding form, using 7 rhyme sounds: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. This is called the Shakespearean or English sonnet. Naturalisation of the form began immediately, a far-reaching adaptation to the English inner-ear: for Wyatt, bringing the sonnet into English, usually kept an ABBA ABBA octave, but he *always* ends a sonnet with a couplet. There ceased to be an important turn in the sonnet after line 8, rather it divided itself into a semi-*volta* after 8, and a formal division after line 12, before the final couplet. As Barbara Smith says in her book, *Poetic Closure*, the English version pushes the sonnet towards the epigram, and, she goes on, the epigram tends to be a form which sums up a subject, and dismisses it, says what doesn't have to be said again. Wyatt writes sonnets of crisis, the climactic, end-of-the-affair poems (as Thomas Greene points out), rather than Petrarchist poems in which small dramas are played out again and again, over and over, never to a finish.

In diverting towards something like the epigram, the English sonnet became (she argues) more analytic, intellectual, edged. One could add that this might be the case when it is being well handled. At its worst, the pattern of three quatrains and a couplet could lead to one of the quatrain units being mere restatement, elegant variation, or, to be frank, padding, and for the couplet to have a life of its own as an epigram, a two line epitome of what's already been said, or (at other times) wrenching the poem round with a contradiction to all that has gone before. When Sir Philip Sidney used a couplet ending, he always tied it in to the main part of the sonnet with some kind of syntactic link, or by use of such devices as 'head-rhymes', having the same word at the start of lines 12, 13 and 14.

Shakespeare as sonneteer

Throughout the 1590's sonnets were, as one of the sonneteers, Michael Drayton, put it 'impressed' in bundles.(3) Shakespeare was mentioned as writing sonnets by 1599, but his sequence was not published until 1609, by Thomas Thorpe, with the unusual title, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*: unusual in its (to us) very ordinary commercial pitch (author first, as the main commodity offered). The title isn't a *To Delia* (Samuel Daniel) or a *Fidessa, more chaste than kind* (Bartholomew Griffin's non-masterpiece) that is, entitled for the beloved, or a linking of the names of the lover and beloved, like *Astrophel and Stella* or *Parthenophil and Parthenope*. The publisher wants to sell on the basis that these are sonnets by no less a poet than Shakespeare. It didn't seem to work, as no second edition was called for, until there was another attempt to sell

the poems in 1640. It isn't known how far Shakespeare authorised the 1609 edition: it would have been nice to have had his own title, if the sonnets ever had one. Even the precise nature of the sequence isn't known, for it seems to be mid-way between being (this seems to be mainly the case) a sonnet sequence and (residually) a personal anthology. What might be Shakespeare's earliest surviving poem is there, sonnet 145, in octosyllabics, and apparently punning gamely (in a Warwickshire accent) on Ann Hathaway's name. The rest seem to spring from an initial commission to write sonnets to persuade a young man to get married, then there follow personal love poems to this same young man. He then betrays the poet by starting an affair with the poet's own mistress, who might be the same woman as the Dark Lady (who is, by the way, never called that anywhere in the sequence). Unnamed like the young man, she seems to have had a husband called Will, perhaps another lover called Will, and, in William Shakespeare, a 'Will in overplus'. The so-called 'Dark Lady' sonnets, 28 of them, bring the sequence to its close. The structural effect of this block of sonnets might be taken to be analogous to the 20 palinodic sonnets which end Thomas Watson's 'Hecatompethia, a passionate century of love': at sonnet 80, there is a heading, 'My love is passed', and the poet describes his revulsion from his love. Acid self-appraisal, revulsion and the wish to break away for higher things are similarly expressed in this concluding part of Shakespeare's sequence.

The Sonnets –all 154 of them - are hard to read *en bloc*, and, as Winifred Nowotny wrote of them, are 'resistant to generalisation'. They vary in quality. Elizabethan sonnets in general, as J W Lever pointed out in his book on the form, exploit the fact that while the sonnet is *ostensibly* the most personal of forms, the form in which you wrote about your deepest feelings, it is *in actuality* the most conventional of forms, in which you could most easily imitate the way other poets had expressed their feelings.(4) Some of Shakespeare's sonnets float down the limpid river of Elizabethan sonneteering – sometimes doing it very well, but generally the more interesting don't go with the flow, but leave idealisation behind for something more difficult.

Prior to a rediscovery by the Romantic poets – and even they did not admire them without qualification - the Sonnets were not popular. In the 1640 edition, there might be a clue to the problem. The publisher, John Benson made interventions in the text to hide the gender of the beloved: 'To make him seem long hence, as he shows now', in 101, was altered to read 'To make her seem long hence, as she shows now'. 'Nothing, sweet boy' in 108 became 'Nothing, sweet love', 'To me fair friend you never can be old' again used the same recourse to a gender-neutral term: 'To me fair love you never can be old'. Sonnet 18, by the way, did not get into Benson's capricious collection of *Poems by Will Shakespeare, Gent*, as he had the nerve to call it. This farrago went on being accepted as the right text up till 1818. I will say more about the issue of the homoerotic element in the poems later on.

A sonnet is a form of a poem which specifically has fourteen lines and a structured form. It was popularized in Italy where it originates; hence the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, named after Petrarch due to his expert and extensive use of this form. The Elizabethan or Shakespearean sonnet is so named because it was formed and became distinct from the Italian sonnet during the Elizabethan era and Shakespeare was its most prolific and famous user in writing about love. Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnets are divided into three quatrains (four lines each) and a rhyming couplet at the end with a recognizable rhythm created by the rhyme scheme and the five stressed syllables per line (iambic pentameter).

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In making use of the form of the sonnet himself, Shakespeare is credited with having penned 154 sonnets, with almost all of them following the Shakespearean format. Each sonnet largely presents an idea in each of the four line stanzas and the rhyming couplet completes the picture.

The apparent sequence which Shakespeare's sonnets follow has been the subject of much discussion and debate among critics but the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man although most of the time this is not explicitly expressed and the latter section is about Shakespeare's relationship with a woman with only the last two sonnets being adaptations of classical verse. There is no known autobiographical element to these sonnets although some critics have gone to great pains to find a connection other than his instinctive ability to create beauty and question the definitions of it from his surroundings.