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Interrogating the Sonnets

Paul Edmondson et Stanley Wells

- 1 It is 1596. Shakespeare is in London rehearsing a scene from *Henry IV Part Two* when a messenger bursts into the room and tells him he must return to Stratford immediately. His son Hamnet is seriously ill and his father is needed back at home. Without hesitation Shakespeare takes to his horse to begin the three-day journey. He arrives in time to consult Dr John Hall (who appears to have arrived in Stratford some ten years before he was expected) about prescriptions and to nurse the dying Hamnet in his arms. Anne Shakespeare steps forward from her simmering and long-suffering silence to give her husband a lash of her shrewish tongue, accusing him of being a tight-fisted whoremonger. The boy's burial takes place in what is definitely not Holy Trinity churchyard and harsh words between the now son-less couple are exchanged over Hamnet's pathetic little grave. Shortly afterwards John Shakespeare reprimands his daughter-in-law before an open parlour fire in what is presumably the Henley Street house.
- 2 Shakespeare seems, understandably, to have no wish to hang around and is soon to be seen visiting a stately home and talking to a grand and imposing aristocratic lady. She wants her seventeen-year old son to marry, moreover to beget an heir. Shakespeare has already written a sheaf of sonnets, 'one for each of [her son's] years', for her careful attention, and hands them over. 'This is very good, Master Shakespeare: "When forty winters shall besiege thy brow, / And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field.'" She discreetly places a purse of coins within Shakespeare's sight; he no less discreetly picks it up and politely takes his leave. On the way out he is arrested by the entry into the room of a drop dead gorgeous young man. A current passes between them; Shakespeare is clearly shaken by the sight of the beautiful, and flirtatiously seductive, youth, who is none other than William Herbert, the future Earl of Pembroke and ultimately (with his brother Philip) a dedicatee of Shakespeare's posthumous First Folio.
- 3 A little later Shakespeare encounters the younger William, now sporting a wispy little beard, in a brothel called 'Cupid's Arrow' kept by a villainous-looking George Wilkins on Turnmill Street. It emerges that Shakespeare is enjoying – while paying for – the favours

of a black-haired and swarthy looking Moroccan half-caste, Lucie, from France, who is working as one of the prostitutes. He and she have sex, an energetic bout of passion which we are invited to suppose is much more enjoyable for our poet than anything that he might have thus far experienced with his wife. Meanwhile, William Herbert gleefully goes off to a neighbouring room with a couple of whores.

- 4 The friendship between the poet and the saucy young aristocrat deepens; the relationship between Shakespeare and the French mistress becomes frustrated. She can charge well for her favours and doesn't want to be wasting her time on true love. While William Herbert is asleep beside an idyllic stretch of river, Shakespeare (who is lying next to him) is able to contemplate the body and face of the beautiful youth at close quarters. He stretches forth a hand which hovers over the delicate young flesh. As his hand moves closer we see Shakespeare – who is wearing a single earring – thinking about writing a sonnet; the quill in his hand becomes an erotic symbol of power and transgression. The pen hovers over the paper in the act of composition; Shakespeare's hand hovers over William Herbert; the pen and the man who wields it are equally and dangerously charged. The young man awakes just as Shakespeare's hand touches his skin, and if he knows of Shakespeare's desire he shows no sign of wanting to satisfy it. Instead he strips off all his clothes and bathes provocatively in front of his poet friend.
- 5 Back in the brothel a jovial, raucous, and rival poet turns out to be Ben Jonson, who tells Shakespeare that King James too is mad about the boy. Shakespeare, waking after a steamy night to find sores on his body and fearing that he may be developing the plague or a venereal disease, returns to Stratford to consult good old Dr John Hall. Syphilis seems to be the order of the day and only prolonged immersion in boiling hot baths with mercury will offer Will a cure for his willy. The cadaverous keeper of the baths takes sadistic pleasure in inviting Shakespeare to step into the boiling tub. His eye is arrested and lingers on the poet's naked body.
- 6 For the time being the thousand natural shocks that Shakespeare's flesh is heir to subside. He continues the awkward and frustrated relationship with his French mistress (who has put her prices up); she is now young Herbert's kept woman and enjoying a hidden life of considerable luxury. Later, in 1609, Shakespeare (who has a habit of going off into a semi-trance as he thinks up a sonnet) again senses a twinge of Neapolitan bone-ache and decides to call it a day. He goes to see his old friend the publisher Thomas Thorpe at his bookstall outside St Paul's and offers him a collection of sonnets. These papers, not quite 'yellowed with their age' (Sonnet 17), hold the secrets of the stories and scenes from his life that we have been privy to. Thorpe knows that short poems don't sell anything like as well as plays – 'verses, Will – I don't like verses' –, but Shakespeare insists 'This is what I want published,' and money is no object. Thorpe objects that publication might work better if the sonnets were visibly dedicated to a noble patron. But Shakespeare, who has written his own dedication, demurs, insisting on a more coded term of reference to 'Mr. W. H.' – the name by which the young man had been known on his visits to Cupid's Arrow. Our poet, his 'sable curls' now 'ensilvered o'er with white', and prosperously attired in black velvet with silver trimmings, steps into his waiting carriage, a grand, canopied but funereal-looking affair replete with coachman, liveried footman and plumes. Thorpe asks where he is going, and the last words Shakespeare speaks are 'Home – I am finally going home.' The carriage pulls off, and we see it pass a large castle as it wends its way back to dull little Stratford, taking a diseased Shakespeare (who still has several plays to write) to face his wrathful wife.

- 7 We have just enjoyed describing scenes from William Boyd's film *A Waste of Shame*, shown on BBC television in November 2005. It is a polished piece of work with high production values, very well cast and performed by a fine group of actors headed by Rupert Graves as Shakespeare. Boyd is a distinguished novelist. The project was funded jointly by the BBC and the Open University. Professor Katherine Duncan-Jones of the University of Oxford assisted as an academic advisor, and the Open University also supplied an Academic Consultant. Not a little public money was spent on a film which, for all its merits as a piece of entertainment, propagates unprovable and unhelpful biographical hypotheses, theories offered as if they were facts that could be deduced from Shakespeare's *Sonnets* themselves. Though the film is not presented as a contribution to scholarship, nevertheless it has apparently respectable academic backing and no doubt will be seriously considered by not a few Open University students. We'd now like to interrogate some of its underlying assumptions, many of which continue to afflict both popular and scholarly discussion of the *Sonnets*.
- 8 To extrapolate a consecutive narrative from these poems is to assume that they form a coherent sequence. It is a dubious assumption. Undoubtedly the collection as we have it is to some degree consciously ordered. Some of the sonnets form pairs and mini-sequences. The table from our book¹ printed as an appendix shows these. All those that are addressed to a male occur within the first one hundred and twenty-six. Similarly all those clearly addressed to a female occur within the last twenty-eight sonnets. But within this division of the sexes of the implied addressees, most of the sonnets remain silent about the gender of the beloved. One of the clearest of the mini-sequences is formed by the first seventeen of the poems, as was realized perhaps for the first time by an anonymous seventeenth-century annotator of a copy of John Benson's 1640 re-arrangement, *Poems By Will Shakespeare Gent.*² It is often supposed that these sonnets were written to commission from a parent (such as Lady Pembroke) who wished to persuade a reluctant son to take a bride. Sir Sidney Lee offers the following summation of many earlier arguments in his century-old biography of Shakespeare: 'The opening sequence of seventeen sonnets, in which a youth of rank and wealth is admonished to marry and beget a son so that "his fair house" may not fall into decay, can only have been addressed to a young peer... who was as yet unmarried.'³ Well, that's possible – though there is nothing to show that the addressee was 'a young peer' –, but whereas in the film Shakespeare has written poems before even seeing the young man, some of them imply an already existing close relationship between the poet and the recipient. He addresses this alleged stranger as 'love' and 'dear my love' (13), is 'all in war with time' for love of him (15), and writes of the youth's love for himself:
- Make thee another self *for love of me*,
That beauty still may live in thine or thee.
- 9 Moreover it might seem a bit cheeky of a poet to rebuke a young aristocrat he has not so far met for masturbating, as this one does in Sonnet 4:
- For having traffic with thyself alone,
Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive.
- 10 He was presuming much if he wrote all this to a man he had never seen before.
- 11 Furthermore, the reading implied by the film relies on the assumption that each of those first seventeen sonnets is addressed to a man, and to the same man, whether or not he is aristocratic. If read as individual poems not all even of these early-printed sonnets can be confidently assigned to a male addressee. Take for instance Sonnet 5:

Those hours that with gentle work did frame
 The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell
 Will play the tyrants to the very same,
 And that unfair which fairly doth excel;
 For never-resting time leads summer on
 To hideous winter, and confounds him there,
 Sap checked with frost, and lusty leaves quite gone,
 Beauty o'ersnowed, and bareness everywhere.
 Then were not summer's distillation left
 A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
 Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,
 Nor it nor no remembrance what it was.

But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet,
 Lose but their show; their substance still lives sweet.

- 12 There are no telling personal pronouns to signify a male addressee. Summer being led on to 'hideous winter' is gendered as masculine in line 6, but that doesn't necessarily reveal anything about the addressee. Rather, the imagery of flowers being distilled in spite of the by now masculinised winter is more suggestive of a female subject. Further ambiguity occurs in line 8 with the reference to 'Beauty o'er-snowed, and bareness everywhere', where, as Colin Burrow points out in his exemplary Oxford edition, 'bareness' could imply 'barrenness'.⁴ This is surely a word more associated with the female than with the male body. At the epicentre of Sonnet 5, Shakespeare hints at a womb which is unable to bear children, as much as at a womb which should be desirous for them.
- 13 Uncertainty as to whether the addressee is male or female recurs frequently throughout the entire collection – and we use the term 'collection' deliberately in preference to the more tendentious word 'sequence'. By our reckoning only twenty of the entire collection of 154 sonnets considered independently of their context can safely be assigned to a male addressee, and as few as seven to a female. We list these sonnets in Appendix 2.⁵
- 14 Where does this leave the so-called 'dark lady'? In the film she is fully embodied and bodily embraced, establishing this unhelpful eighteenth-century nomenclature as a living and breathing presence in Shakespeare's encoded autobiography. She is constructed as an important presence in Katherine Duncan-Jones's 1997 Arden edition.⁶ Ready to believe that the poems reflect Shakespeare's personal experience, and – like many other Shakespearians – that only one 'young man' is involved, Duncan-Jones adopts a largely biographical approach, coming out – like the film on which she advised – in favour of William Herbert as the male addressee (to whom she devotes the better part of seventeen pages of her introduction). She exaggerates what she calls the 'outrageous misogyny' (50) of the 'dark lady' poems, describing the woman, in spite of the declarations of love in for example 127, 128, 130, 132, 139, and 141, as 'no more than a sexual convenience' (51) – another point of view that may be deduced from the film. Encouraged perhaps by her wish to see the collection as a unified sequence, Duncan-Jones is credulous of numerological interpretations, suggesting with dubious logic that the procreation sonnets are seventeen in number because 'eighteen was the age at which young men were believed to be ready for consummated marriage' (99), and weirdly seeing significance in the idea that 'the total of these "dark lady" sonnets is twenty-eight, corresponding with the lunar month or menstrual cycle' (49). Duncan-Jones here serves to represent the army of critics who happily relate one sonnet to another in order to substantiate biographical claims. She sees Sonnets 127-130 as a consistent and misogynistic attack. Notice her convenient evasion of the praise lavished on the mistress in some of the sonnets she takes

to task: 'And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare', says the poet in Sonnet 130. Surely this is a case of critic belying poet. In the film, Shakespeare's voice-over happily elides a variety of sonnet extracts. This disingenuous device propagates an impressionistic approach to the sonnets. It apparently forms non-existent poems, and, ironically, doesn't do Shakespeare's *Sonnets* justice.

- 15 We have no objection to the belief that Shakespeare himself is responsible for the ordering of the *Sonnets*, though at the same time we strongly resist the idea that the order in which they were printed represents the order in which they were composed. Even the commonly used phrase 'the first seventeen sonnets' is apt to convey the sense that they are the first written rather than the first printed, which is not necessarily so. It seems clear to us that Shakespeare was imposing order on material that he had been producing over a long period of time. And furthermore he was, and had been, revising it. Gary Taylor's argument that versions of two of the sonnets first printed in *The Passionate Pilgrim* of 1599 (Sonnets 138 and 144) are actually unrevised versions, rather than corruptions, as previously thought, suggests that Shakespeare may have returned to these and other sonnets and have polished them over many years.⁷ Alternative versions of Sonnets 2 and 106 (which exist in manuscript) also support this belief. Since the sonnets are notoriously difficult to date within the collection itself, it seems reasonable to accept that Shakespeare might have been revising any number of them right up until their publication in 1609.

- 16 A crucial poem in relation to dating is Sonnet 145 with its compelling pun on 'hate away' (Hathaway).

Those lips that love's own hand did make
Breathed forth the sound that said 'I hate'
To me that languished for her sake;
But when she saw my woeful state,
Straight in her heart did mercy come,
Chiding that tongue that ever sweet
Was used in giving gentle doom,
And taught it thus anew to greet:
'I hate' she altered with an end
That followed it as gentle day
Doth follow night who, like a fiend,
From heaven to hell is flown away.
'I hate' from hate away she threw,
And saved my life, saying 'not you.'

- 17 If we take this to be an early poem about Shakespeare's wife, as Andrew Gurr convincingly argued in 1971,⁸ then the dating of the entire collection is thrown wide open. It means that at least one of the poems was written before Shakespeare's marriage in 1582 (perhaps during a heady and passionate affair leading up to illegitimate impregnation). It would appear to be Shakespeare's earliest surviving work, yet it is printed well towards the end of the 1609 quarto. A similar case in point is the so-called dating Sonnet 107. There appears to be a topical allusion in the following lines:

The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
And the sad augurs mock their own presage,
Incertainties now crown themselves assured,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age

- 18 Over the years this has been variously interpreted as alluding to the Spanish Armada of 1588, to the Queen's grand climacteric in 1596, and to her death followed by the accession

of King James in 1603. It seems fair to say that scholarly consensus now favours the last named point of view, which would place this poem no earlier than 1603.⁹ Positioned as it is, this contradicts a common assumption that the sonnets were composed within a three-year period during the time that Shakespeare was also writing his early comedies and *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare mentions the passing of three years in Sonnet 104:

To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
 For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
 Such seems your beauty still. Three winters cold
 Have from the forests shook three summers' pride,
 Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned
 In process of the seasons have I seen,
 Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burned
 Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green.

- 19 April is also mentioned on two other occasions (Sonnets 21 and 98), perhaps adding weight to this fictional frame of reference. But these have to remain no more than tantalizing suggestions, chimerical and intangible, hovering over the collection for readers who determinedly seek narrative cohesion.
- 20 We think it is important to acknowledge that the 1609 quarto seems to signal the division between Sonnets 1-126 and 127-154 with the use of two pairs of empty brackets, printed at the end of Sonnet 126. Their significance has been endlessly and inconclusively debated, but the fact that they signal a break in our reading, at what is clearly a turning point in the collection, cannot be ignored. As we have said, there are no poems unambiguously addressed to a male after this point, and no poems unambiguously addressed to a female before it. But the cumulative effect of this gender division actually serves to resist narrative sequentiality even further. The critics who find a story that the sonnets somehow tell usually end up having to re-order the collection in order to do so – there are for instance allusions to a rival – possibly a poet, and possibly more than one rival – in the poet's love in both parts of the collection.
- 21 There are other respects, too, in which the film reflects disputable points of view expressed elsewhere by, among others, its Academic Adviser. If you think you've heard before about the brothel in Turnmill Street kept by George Wilkins, try this from Duncan-Jones's *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life*: 'Most likely both men [Shakespeare and Mountjoy's apprentice Stephen Belott] often dined or supped in Turnmill Street, where Shakespeare customarily stopped on his way back from the Globe Theatre' (208). Pure guesswork. And if the idea that Shakespeare died from syphilis contracted in that brothel seems familiar that might be because the same writer states that 'graphic images of sweating tubs and venereal infection [which] close both *Troilus and Cressida* and *Shakespeare's Sonnets* [...] support a supposition that Shakespeare's visits to Turnmill Street had left him with an unwanted legacy of infection...' (224). This, we may note, both implies that writers can write only from their own experience and ignores the fact that of all the sonnets the last two, with their references to baths, are the most heavily dependent on a literary source. Both of them play variations on a single passage deriving from an ancient Greek epigram by Marianus Scholasticus:

Beneath these plane trees, detained by gentle slumber, Love slept, having put his torch in the care of the Nymphs; but the Nymphs said to one another 'Why wait? Would that together with this we could quench the fire in the hearts of men.' But the torch set fire even to the water, and with hot water thenceforth the Love-Nymphs fill the bath.¹⁰

- 22 This literary source surely disposes of the common notion that Shakespeare's sonnets refer to the city of Bath, and (unless he is finding the possibility for puns that go beyond his source) makes it less likely that they refer to treatments for venereal disease. If any of the Sonnets can be regarded as literary études, these, we would suggest, must be top of the list. But on page 225 of *Ungentle Shakespeare* you will find an engraved picture of a man being treated for syphilis in a sweating-tub which bears considerable resemblance to the one in the film.
- 23 And what about the scene in which Shakespeare himself takes his Sonnets to Thorpe for publication? Duncan-Jones writes, with no hard evidence whatever, that the dedication, though signed by Thorpe, was 'authorized by Shakespeare' (*Ungentle Shakespeare*, 217). But she knows perfectly well that the dedication to the poems is signed not by Shakespeare but with Thorpe's initials, and we find it surprising that she could associate herself with the film's suggestion that Shakespeare wrote it.
- 24 Mention of literary études brings us to what is perhaps the most fundamental question about the *Sonnets*, especially in regard to biographical issues. Opinions range over a broad spectrum. At one extreme is the view that all the poems are literary in origin, showing Shakespeare inventing the poems out of his head with no reference to his personal life. At the other extreme is the belief that all of them are attempts, as William Wordsworth put it, to unlock his heart – poems written for and originally circulated only among his 'private friends', as Francis Meres wrote, and as the script of Boyd's film supposes. We stand, I suppose, somewhat to the left of centre on this issue. We have already pointed to the literary origin of the last two poems, in which Shakespeare may indeed have been conducting an exercise in translation. There are other poems which stand outside the overall frame of reference of the collection and could have been written not exactly as études but as private, personal meditations with no specific corollary in Shakespeare's personal life. There are three obvious examples: No. 94, 'They that have power to hurt and will do none', stands apart from the rest of the collection. Another is No. 116, the famous 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds' (which of course, though it is popularly regarded as a celebration of heterosexual love, is found among the young man sonnets); and the third is the great but damaged Sonnet 146, 'Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth', which, though it is printed among the 'dark lady' poems, would be more at home in a religious than in an amatory collection.
- 25 At the other extreme are poems which do indeed sound to us like personal and private documents that Shakespeare might even have preferred not to see in print – and it is worth remembering that whether or not he authorized publication of the 1609 quarto, it is pretty indisputable that the poems appeared years after most of them were written and that Shakespeare was not, like many if not all of his fellow-sonneteers, writing them as a professional enterprise. Among these poems we would single out, for instance, those that pun on the poet's name, in particular Nos 135, in which the word 'will' occurs thirteen times, and 136, with seven occurrences, the last in the line 'And then thou lov'st me for my name is Will.' Other poems include what appear to be personal allusions which would be meaningless to the uninformed reader: we think for example of the enigmatic reference to 'a separable spite' in 36, the reference to 'both your poets' in 83, the generally enigmatic 86, with its talk of 'spirits taught to write / Above a mortal pitch', and 'that affable familiar ghost / Which nightly gulls him with intelligence,' or 110 in which the poet says he has 'gone here and there / And made myself a motley to the view.' These surely are not poems written for uninformed readers.

- 26 In short, then, it seems to us that Shakespeare's sonnet collection is a mixed bag of poems written over a considerable period of time, some of them 'public', others intensely private, arranged for publication in a manner which though not entirely haphazard does not form a consistently coherent sequence, and addressed, in so far as they have avowed addressees, to more than the single young man and dark lady who are posited in Boyd's film. It is worth remembering that in Sonnet 31 the poet writes of 'the trophies of my lovers gone', which does not suggest single-mindedness. This line alone is enough to release these poems to pluralism, if not to promiscuity.
- 27 So far we have been deconstructive. How could we adopt a more positive approach? To answer this question in full we should have to invite you to read our book, and of course we should be delighted if you were to do so. As Heminges and Condell wrote in and of the First Folio, 'whatever you do, buy.' But let us just sketch some of the advantages of freeing ourselves from the traditional framework of discussion. One is that it enables a closer concentration on the poetical and rhetorical techniques that have gone into the discussion of individual poems, on their form and style. Another is that it encourages us to see the poems within a broader perspective – for example, in relation to Shakespeare's plays, on which we have a chapter. Furthermore it helps us to think about the originality of these poems – their overturning of the conventions normally associated in Shakespeare's time with sonnet sequences, their independence of pre-existing models, their rebellion against Petrarchan predecessors, and their addressing of a male instead of a female, as in all other collections except Richard Barnfield's. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are exceptionally frank about sex. Take, for example, the extraordinary Sonnet 151, whose closing couplet might almost be uttered by the poet's penis:

My soul doth tell my body that he may
Triumph in love; flesh stays no farther reason,
But rising at thy name doth point out thee
As his triumphant prize. Proud of this prize,
He is contented thy poor drudge to be,
To stand in thy affairs, fall by thy side.
No want of conscience hold it that I call
Her 'love' for whose dear love I rise and fall.

- 28 There is nothing remotely like that in any other sonnet collection of the period. We have also found it of interest to write about the *Sonnets* in relation to 'A Lover's Complaint', about their place within the English and continental poetic tradition, about their critical reputation, and about their after-life in the works of other writers and in performance. These are immensely rich poems, and their richness is only enhanced by thinking about them independently of the biographical framework encapsulated in William Boyd's script.
- 29 The *Sonnets* conform to no predetermined formal structure. The collection is like a patchwork composed of separately woven pieces of cloth, some bigger than others, some of them restitched, rearranged from time to time and finally sewn together in a composition that has only a deceptive, though at times satisfying, unity. It is as if Shakespeare were providing us with all the ingredients necessary to make our own series of narratives about love. To insist on one story alone is to misread the *Sonnets* and to ignore their will to plurality, to promiscuity. To seek for a pattern in these loosely connected poems is like trying to control or tidy the inevitable mess and freedom that love itself creates.

NOTES

1. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Oxford Shakespeare Topics (Oxford : O.U.P., 2004), 33.
 2. Cited in William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1944), Sonnet 1, headnote.
 3. Cited in *The Sonnets of Shakespeare*, ed. Raymond McDonald Alden (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 16.
 4. William Shakespeare, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: O.U.P., 2002), 686.
 5. From Edmondson and Wells, 30.
 6. William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Thomas Nelson, 1997).
 7. Gary Taylor, 'Some Manuscripts of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol. 68 (1985-6), 210-246.
 8. Andrew Gurr, 'Shakespeare's First Poem: Sonnet 145', *Essays in Criticism*, 21 (1971), 221-6.
 9. See e.g. Colin Burrow's note in his Oxford edition.
 10. Quoted from Burrow's edition, 686.
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RÉSUMÉS

Il existe de nombreuses hypothèses sur les *Sonnets* de Shakespeare. Par exemple, qu'ils forment une séquence cohérente, qu'ils sont autobiographiques, qu'ils furent écrits sur une période d'environ trois ans, que les dix-sept premiers furent une commande, que les 126 premiers sont « adressés » à un jeune homme, que les numéros 127 à 152 forment un groupe autour de la « dame noire », que la publication du quarto de 1609 fut autorisée par Shakespeare, et que les deux derniers suggèrent que l'auteur souffrait d'une maladie vénérienne. Cet article à deux voix commencera par réexaminer ces hypothèses. D'où viennent-elles ? Pourquoi les perpétue-t-on ? Quelle autre façon avons-nous d'articuler une approche critique de Shakespeare ?

Many assumptions are often made about Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: for instance, that they form a coherent sequence, that they are autobiographical, that they were written over a period of around three years, that the first seventeen were written to commission, that the first 126 are 'addressed' to one young man, that Nos 127 to 152 form a group concerned with a 'dark lady', that publication of the 1609 quarto was authorised by Shakespeare, and that the final two suggest that the author suffered from a venereal disease. This joint-authored paper will start by examining these assumptions afresh. Where do they come from? Why are they perpetuated? How else might we frame a critical approach to the *Sonnets*?

AUTEURS

STANLEY WELLS

Stanley WELLS is Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and Professor Emeritus of the University of Birmingham. Formerly Director of the Shakespeare Institute, he is General Editor of the Oxford and Penguin editions of Shakespeare. Among his recent publications are *Shakespeare : For All Time, Looking for Sex In Shakespeare* and (with Paul Edmondson) *Shakespeare's Sonnets. Shakespeare and Co*, a book about Shakespeare in relation to his contemporaries, was published in 2006. **Paul** EDMONDSON is Head of Education at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and Honorary Fellow of the Shakespeare Institute. He is co-supervisory editor of the revised Penguin Shakespeare, author with Stanley Wells of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, and has recently published a book on *Twelfth Night* in Palgrave Macmillan's Shakespeare Handbooks series.