

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

Life and Work in Shakespeare's Poems

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IN BORGES'S HAUNTING TALE CALLED 'Shakespeare's Memory' a Shakespearean scholar meets a man called Thorpe (a name which we will meet again later on) who claims to possess Shakespeare's memory, and who offers to pass it on to our hero. The scholar, a thorough German, thinks this will enable him to write his master work: a biography of Shakespeare, written with true inside knowledge, and so he accepts the offer of Shakespeare's memory. At first nothing happens; then odd sounds and half-glimpses of something almost forgotten begin to spring on him at unexpected moments. These sensual recollections become more frequent until they form a pervasive sense of guilt at some unremembered act. He finds, though, that Shakespeare's memory can tell him nothing specific about the content of Shakespeare's mental processes and nothing at all about Shakespeare's works. Despite this he is gradually dominated by his parasitic memory, until it begins to swamp his own recollections. Eventually, fearing madness, he dials a telephone number at random, and passes on Shakespeare's memory to its next, anonymous, host.¹

Surely this is a tale with a moral for anyone attempting to write about Shakespeare's life and works: it suggests that the experience of being Shakespeare is irretrievable even to someone who possesses his memory.

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Obras Completas 1975–1985* (Buenos Aires, 1989), pp. 393–9. The tale contains what is either a delicious typo or an engaging deliberate Borgesian error: the scholar writes an article to prove that Sonnet 117 was written in the Armada year of 1588, and then discovers that Samuel Butler had suggested the same date for the poem in 1899. This clearly must be a reference to Sonnet 107 rather than 117, and suggests that one model for Borges' hero was the indefatigable Leslie Hotson, who dates 107 to 1588 (as Butler had done) in 'The Mortall Moone', repr. in *Shakespeare's Sonnets Dated and Other Essays* (London, 1949), pp. 4–21.

Proceedings of the British Academy, 97 15–50. © The British Academy 1998.
Read at the Academy 21 October 1997.

Few of us, if we were honest about it, would wish to re-enact Shakespeare's life—to inhabit the anxieties of a first performance, or the even greater anxiety of the desperate last-minute revisions which might have occupied the night before a first performance, to feel the chill of touring performances outside, or to relive the possible infidelities of his love life. Fortunately my aim is not to retrieve Shakespeare's life and mind from his works. I have slightly rearranged the brief of the Chatterton lecture, and have decided not to discuss 'the life and works of a dead English poet', as the lecturer is supposed to, but to talk about life and work *in* Shakespeare's poems instead. This may keep at bay the insanity suffered by Borges's hero, as well as the pandemic of madness which strikes those who have attempted in real life to consider Shakespeare's poems as the key to his mind. Poor Delia Bacon was the first to drive herself into madness and destitution in her attempts to prove that Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare, but her life has its fictional parallel in the zealous efforts of the hero of Oscar Wilde's 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' to prove that the Sonnets were addressed to a boy player called Willie Hughes.² One of the most entertaining pieces of biographical madness is G. W. Phillips's *Sunlight in Shakespeare's Sonnets*,³ which proves (how could so many readers have missed it?) that the Sonnets tell how Shakespeare was seduced by an aristocratic woman, whose illegitimate son by Shakespeare then went on to cuckold his father with Anne Hathaway. With sunlight (and what a terrible pun it is) like that who needs darkness? But there are darker biographical productions: the ingenious Martin Green infers from the lines 'Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day, I And make me travel forth without my cloak' (34. 1–2)⁴ that Shakespeare had forgotten to wear a condom, which his father, a glover, sold under the counter, and so had contracted venereal disease from the young man. Green is undeterred by the facts that condoms are not recorded in England before 1660 and were never called 'cloaks'.⁵ The end of this lecture will make a case for keeping something like life in play while reading Shakespeare's Sonnets, but it will be a slightly less sickly version of life.

The chief aim of this lecture is to think about the Sonnets and the narrative poems as a group, and to relate them to some of the material realities from

² See S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1991), pp. 385–94.

³ (London, 1935).

⁴ All quotations from the non-dramatic verse will be my own modernisations of the earliest quartos.

⁵ Martin Green, *The Labyrinth of Shakespeare's Sonnets: An Examination of Sexual Elements in Shakespeare's Language* (London, 1974), pp. 16–24. Green speculates further (p. 24) that 'Conceivably, his observation as a child of the traffic in condoms which might have formed a significant portion of his father's business, and the resultant exposure to him of the horrors of venereal disease, may have imbued in Shakespeare both that fascination with, and revulsion over, sexual activities, which is so characteristic a feature of his works.' It is a great shame that 'conceivably' there is not a joke.

which they grew. I hope in the process to go some way towards explaining why scholars have worried for so long about the life that lies behind those enigmatic works, the Sonnets. This does not sound a radical aim. But actually Shakespeare's poems and Sonnets have rarely been considered together as a group and are even more rarely treated as a major part of Shakespeare's works. Indeed the poems and Sonnets tend to moulder at the back of collected editions of his work, and lurk unobtrusively in multiple volume editions: they are found in volume twenty of twenty one in the Boswell Variorum, in volume ten of ten in Malone, or, more remarkably, in volume seven of Rowe's six volume edition. The Sonnets first appeared in 1609, towards the end of Shakespeare's theatrical career, which might give some chronological basis to this positioning; but, if recent and rigorous stylometric tests are to be believed, several of the Sonnets are very likely to have been composed at the start of Shakespeare's career, and the whole sequence should be thought of as something approaching Shakespeare's life's work, receiving touches of the poet's pen until shortly before its publication.⁶ The first printed work to bear Shakespeare's name was *Venus and Adonis* (1593). The second was *Lucrece* (1594). These facts give strong grounds for putting the poems at the front of our thinking about Shakespeare, and perhaps even at the front of collected editions of his works. It also should prompt us to ask why we do not think of Shakespeare as primarily a non-dramatic poet.

One reason for this is, of course, that he wrote quite a few pretty good plays. But there are other reasons. The narrative poems were extremely successful in their time. Eight editions of *Lucrece* and sixteen of *Venus and Adonis* survive from between 1593 and 1640 (and it is quite possible that other editions were printed and then eagerly read to pieces). *Venus and Adonis* was Shakespeare's most popular printed work. The very success of the narrative poems, oddly, made them peripheral to the Shakespearean canon: since they remained marketable commodities through the seventeenth century printers jealously guarded their right to reprint the copy. This may well explain why there was apparently no serious effort to include the poems in the first Folio of 1623. In the eighteenth-century editions which until very recently provided the models of editorial method and disposition the poems will very often be found in the supplementary volumes which contain *dubia* and *spuria*, somewhere among *Edward III* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*. This is usually thought to be a consequence of the low critical esteem which the poems enjoyed. But it may be one of the more unlikely by-products of the copyright act of 1710. This act is chiefly famous for having granted, for the first time in English law, limited rights to authors to control and benefit from the printing of their works. But the same act also provided that printers who already owned the copyright on existing works

⁶ See A. Kent Hieatt, Charles W. Hieatt, and Anne Lake Prescott, 'When did Shakespeare Write *Sonnets* 1609?', *Studies in Philology*, 88 (1991), 69–109.

would retain it for twenty-one years. This meant that if a printer could rapidly find and print old works to which no-one else had a valid claim, he might expect to enjoy the benefit of copyright for the majority of his working life.⁷ This unique legal position may well have been the precipitating force behind a scramble for Shakespeare's poems at the end of the first decade of the eighteenth century. In 1709 Bernard Lintott produced a reprint of the narrative poems and the first quarto of Shakespeare's Sonnets; in 1710 Edmund Curll and E. Sanger printed a volume of the poems, edited by the shadowy George Gildon⁸ which was designed to look like the seventh volume of Rowe's collected edition of the theatrical works. For copyright purposes it seems likely that Gildon's volume could count as a different work from Lintott's, since it presents a version of John Benson's re-ordered and partly bowdlerised version of the Sonnets, in which individual poems are combined together and given titles of a kind that makes them appear to resemble Cavalier epistles to a mistress. The dates at which Lintott's and Curll's volumes appeared are extremely significant, however, both for their proximity to each other and for their proximity to the 1710 copyright act.⁹ It is not clear who, if anyone, owned the copyright to the Sonnets before this date, since their first publisher, Thomas Thorpe, is not known to have assigned it to anyone else; but it does appear from the subsequent printing history of the poems and Sonnets that Curll and Sanger's rights to the copy of Benson's reordered and re-titled version were respected.¹⁰ There were two issues of

⁷ See Marjorie Plant, *The English Book Trade: An Economic History of the Making and Sale of Books* (London, 1965), pp. 117–18 and Terry Belanger, 'Tonson, Wellington and the Shakespeare Copyrights', in R. W. Hunt, I. G. Phillips, and R. J. Roberts (eds.), *Studies in the Book Trade in Honour of Graham Pollard*, Oxford Bibliographical Society Publications, ns 18 (Oxford, 1975), pp. 195–209. Also of note is Giles E. Dawson, 'The Copyright of Shakespeare's Dramatic Works', in Charles T. Prouty (ed.), *Studies in Honour of A. H. R. Fairchild*, University of Missouri Studies, 21 No. 1 (Columbia, 1946), pp. 12–35.

⁸ Gildon's name appears attached to the introduction in few extant copies (the remainder are signed 'S. N.'), but later editors attribute the work to him: so Thomas Evans, *Poems Written by Mr William Shakespeare* (London, n.d. [1775]), fol. ¶2^a refers to 'Mr Gildon'. On Gildon see R. M. Alden, 'The 1710 and 1714 Texts of Shakespeare's Poems', *Modern Language Notes*, 31 (1916), 268–74. It is unclear whether or not Gildon was responsible for the significant revisions to the 1714 edition: Tonson paid £28 7s. to John Hughes, the editor of Spenser, in connection with the 1714 edition of Rowe, on which see Kathleen M. Lynch, *Jacob Tonson, Kit-Kat Publisher* (Knoxville, 1971), p. 131.

⁹ The act was passed in 1709, but its provisions took effect from 1 April 1710. See Plant, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁰ It is possible that Humphrey Moseley acquired the copyright to Benson's text, or at least the unsold copies of it, in around 1655, since 'Poems Written by Mr William Shakespeare Gent.' figures in a catalogue of books for sale bound with the second part of James Howell's *Dodona's Grove*, which Moseley printed in 1650. See Harry Farr, 'Notes on Shakespeare's Printers and Publishers, with Special Reference to the Poems and *Hamlet*', *The Library*, 4th Series 3 (1923), 252. For a defence of Benson's methods, see Margreta de Grazia, 'The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Shakespeare Survey*, 46 (1993), 35–49, and Josephine Waters Bennett, 'Benson's Alleged Piracy of Shakespeare's Sonnets and some of Jonson's Works', *Studies in Bibliography*, 21 (1968), 235–48.

Rowe's Shakespeare in 1714, one of which is said to be in eight volumes and is printed for that great collector of Shakespearean copyrights Jacob Tonson; the other includes the poems, and is said to be in nine volumes. The ninth volume is 'Printed by J. Darby . . . for E. Curll, K. Sanger and J. Pemberton. Sold by J. Tonson in the Strand'. The most probable explanation for the existence of these different versions is that by 1714 Tonson accepted *de facto* Curll and Sanger's ownership of the copyright of the poems and Sonnets, and came to some reciprocal arrangement with them as to the printing and selling of copies.

Subsequent high-profile editions of Shakespeare continued this tradition of shuffling the poems into supplements. When Pope's edition of the dramatic works appeared in 1725 it too was rapidly augmented by a supplementary volume of the poems, edited this time by George Sewell;¹¹ the presence of Pemberton's name on the title page of this volume marks a connection with the earlier consortium of printers. Title pages are not easy to interpret, but this evidence may indicate that a collected edition of Shakespeare's plays and poems could not be produced in the early eighteenth century without the collaboration of Curll, Sanger, or Pemberton. For copyright reasons as much as any other the non-dramatic verse had to shiver in a supplementary volume (and certainly by 1775 printers were recognising public demand for the poetical verse).¹² Tonson, otherwise an energetic pursuer of Shakespearean copyrights, simply failed to obtain the copyright of these works.

This may appear to be no more than bibliographical archaeology, but archaeology can sometimes reveal the foundations of our present attitudes. The majority of modern editions unthinkingly follow the precedent thus accidentally established. This is even true of Edmund Malone's revolutionary edition of the poems and Sonnets in 1780.¹³ Malone returned the Sonnets to the order in which they appeared in 1609, and was the first to suggest that the

¹¹ The 1725 edition refers on its title page to 'Mr Shakespeare's miscellany poems'. Both Gildon and Sewell had been involved in producing miscellany poems: Gildon's 'Miscellany Poems upon various occasions' appeared in 1692; Sewell wrote the preface for Addison's 'Miscellanies in Verse and Prose' in 1725. They evidently thought that Shakespeare's poems could be presented to readers as contributions to this vogue. A reprint of 1728 of Sewell's edition is said to be printed for Tonson, who again appears to be manoeuvring for a stake in the poems.

¹² The 'Advertisement' to Thomas Evans's edition of *Poems Written by Mr William Shakespeare* (London, n.d. [1775]) states that 'several editions of the Poems of Shakespeare have been printed, but the eager desire to be possessed of the complete works of the noblest of poets, have rendered them scarce'.

¹³ For a more sceptical account of Malone, see Margreta de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford, 1991). De Grazia tells a convincing tale of how Malone transforms Shakespeare's works into historical documents, and how he denigrates the work of printers and players in order to elevate both Shakespeare's originary genius and his own editorial brilliance, but is less generous in her treatment of Malone than anyone who has attempted to edit the Sonnets must be.

first 126 of the Sonnets were addressed to a young man and that the remainder were directed to a mistress.¹⁴ Malone's edition, despite its originality of editorial content, shows remarkable continuity with its predecessors: it is another supplementary volume, called a *Supplement to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays Published in 1778 by Samuel Johnson and George Steevens*, in which the inferior labour of editing the non-dramatic verse was shuffled off onto a younger and less well-known man. The poems appeared annexed in this way partly because Steevens hated them: he famously stated that 'the strongest act of Parliament that could be framed, would fail to compel readers into their service'.¹⁵ It is also more than likely that the analogy with Gildon and Sewell's volumes helped to determine the volume's marginal relation to the dramatic works: by 1780 a supplement was just where one put the non-dramatic verse. And editors, who are very good at being unthinking, have unthinkingly followed this august precedent, more or less to this day.¹⁶

What Malone also established was the idea that the narrative poems and the Sonnets had little in common and ought to be thought about in quite different ways. The Sonnets had a basis in autobiography; the narrative poems were mere genre pieces of antiquarian interest, which came well out of a comparison with Drayton and Daniel at their second best, but which seemed wearisome to an enlightened modern reader.¹⁷ This aspect of Malone's work has scarcely been undone to this day. Editors and critics have often pointed out that Venus, when she persuades Adonis to breed, anticipates the 'procreation' Sonnets, and have diligently followed Malone in finding echoes of the dedication to *Lucrece* in Sonnet 26, but have done surprisingly little more to develop connections between the poems and Sonnets.¹⁸ Some critics have sensed a recurrent interest in the perversities of sexual passion in all these poems, or

¹⁴ *Supplement to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1780), p. 579. On the after-shocks of this biographical reading, see Peter Stallybrass, 'Editing as Cultural Formation: The Sexing of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 54 (1993), 91–103.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Sonnets*, A New Variorum Edition, 2 vols. (Philadelphia and London, 1944), ii, 337–8, from 'The Advertisement to the Plays of William Shakespeare' (1793).

¹⁶ The Oxford Shakespeare embeds the poems in chronological position among the dramatic works. The effect of this is to invite readers to think of the Sonnets in conjunction with *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*, and the narrative poems in the context of *Richard III* and *the Comedy of Errors*. This is misleading given the high likelihood that at least Sonnets 127–54 were written in the mid-1590s (on which see Hieatt, Hieatt, and Prescott, see above, n. 6), and that one of the most satisfying contexts in which to read them is provided by *Love's Labour's Lost*.

¹⁷ Malone concludes that although the narrative poems 'appear to me superior to any pieces of the same kind produced by Daniel or Drayton', nonetheless Shakespeare's 'disposition was more inclined to the drama than to the other kinds of poetry; that his genius for the one appears to have been almost a gift from heaven, his abilities for the other, only the same as those of other mortals.' The poems, he claims, are marred by 'the wearisome circumlocution with which the tale in each of them is told', *Supplement* (London, 1780), p. 575.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 602.

have drawn attention to the ways in which both in the Sonnets and in the narrative poems lovers are forced into passivity as a price of their desire.¹⁹ But through the majority of their critical life these two groups of poems have sat apart from one another in the critical mind: Jonathan Bate's *The Genius of Shakespeare* follows this fashion and plunders the Sonnets for biographical clues while all but ignoring the narrative poems.²⁰ The poems and Sonnets suffer a longstanding critical need to be viewed together and pulled nearer to the front of our view of Shakespeare.

* * *

But why not just take them, as Malone more or less did, and as tenaciously old-fashioned critics continue to do, as windows onto the life and mind of Shakespeare? The current critical climate is not hospitable to readings of this sort, and for good reasons. Many critics writing today would hold a version of a materialist and historicist thesis about human identity. This has three main prongs. The first is that personhood is not the same thing now as it was c.1600. The second is that personhood is both a material and a relational phenomenon: that is, you are what you are by virtue of how you stand in relation to other people, by virtue of what you possess and of what and how you earn. These material circumstances change through time so much that it makes no sense to speak of one's having the same experiences as Shakespeare. The third prong is that texts and minds do not mix: writers leave material textual traces behind, which echo other texts and other voices, which refract their social circumstances, and which are recorded by the quirky means of the early modern printing house. And the printing house was a place of messy labour:

Two men are requisite about the presse, one to take, to gather, and order the sheetes, or leaves; thother to beate on the fourme which is on the presse, and to distribute or bray the ynke on the stone or block: which could not serve the turne by reason of the great travaile required therein, if they did not draw the presse one after the other, and by turnes . . . The ynke is made of the smoke or sweat of oyle, which must be beaten, and distributed, because of the thicknes . . .²¹

¹⁹ See Heather Dubrow, *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets* (Ithaca and London, 1987); Jonathan Bate, 'Sexual Perversity in *Venus and Adonis*', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 23 (1993), 80–92. For some suggestive links between attitudes to descriptive language in *Venus and Adonis* and the Sonnets, see Pauline Kiernan, 'Death by Rhetorical Trope: Poetry Metamorphosed in *Venus and Adonis* and the Sonnets', *Review of English Studies*, 184 (1995), 475–501.

²⁰ Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London, 1997), pp. 34–64.

²¹ Louis Le Roy, trans. R[obert] A[shley], *Of the Interchangeable Course, or Variety of Things in the Whole World* (London, 1594), fol. 22^r. (Usage of 'i' and 'j' and 'u' and 'v' have been modernised). The manufacture of printing ink from boiling linseed oil is described by Steve Wood, *The History of Printing Ink*, British Printing Society Jubilee Series of Monographs, 1 (London, 1994), pp. 2–3 and John Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing*, ed. Herbert Davis and Harry Carter, 2nd edn. (London, 1962), pp. 82–6.

Here's work indeed: even the ink is made of sweat. And this is how Shakespeare's poems as artefacts were made. Critics in the materialist school would argue that texts are so thoroughly a material and social production that they cannot be thought of as the work of one great genius, let alone as a key to unlock the heart of a single man.²² To read Shakespeare now one should think about work—how Shakespeare was paid, about the labour of a compositor—and the material relics which result. One should look at typographical oddities in the early quartos, and how they complicate the concept of a single authorising genius. Rather than seeing the poems as transcriptions of life one should dwell on gems, jewels, and splodges of ink: acknowledge that you live in a material world.

This position has generated a large body of subtle work, and has shifted our focus on the literature of early modern England from the self and its demands, towards the many ways in which objects and material relations shape human needs and designs. A recent collection of essays called *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* is founded on the belief that personal identity in the Renaissance was rooted in a dialectical relation between agents and material objects: its varied essays suggest that in this period people established their identity through money, clothes, paper, ink, and the physical form of the book.²³ This movement has made us sceptical, if the New Criticism had not already achieved this, about any claims that poems relate simply to lives and minds. The materialist outlook also speaks directly to Shakespeare's period, in which material metaphors and aids were often invoked in discussions of how minds worked. Thomas Wright's discussion of memory in *The Passions of the Mind* is representative: 'for although true friends have always a secret cabinet in their memories to talk in their minds with them whom they love although absent, yet except the memory be revived by some external object oblivion entereth'.²⁴ Pictures and love tokens—material objects—help the memory, which is itself figured as a material space, a 'secret cabinet'.

²² The mastermind of this movement is of course Jerome McGann, whose *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago and London, 1983) has generated considerable interest in the sociology of text production. Analogous work on the Sonnets includes Randall McLeod (as Random Clod), 'Information Upon Information', *Text: Transactions of the Society for Textual Scholarship*, 5 (1991), 241–78, and Randall McLeod, 'Unemending Shakespeare's Sonnet 111', *Studies in English Literature*, 21 (1981), 75–96. See also Margreta de Grazia and Peter Sallibrass, 'The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44 (1993), 255–83. The interest in the material realities of the Elizabethan print shop also, of course, owes much to D. F. McKenzie's detailed analysis of the erratic work-patterns of early modern compositors in 'Printers of the Mind: Some Notes on Bibliographical Theories and Printing House Practices', *Studies in Bibliography*, 22 (1969), 1–75.

²³ Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Sallibrass (eds.), *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge, 1996).

²⁴ William Webster Newbold (ed.), *The Passions of the Mind in General* (New York and London, 1986), p. 200.

mind and the material world, matters more here than material things. The poem presents us with what might be called a subjectivity effect, and it does so by showing that its author knows what he sees, and knows what the world sees, and knows that there is a disparity between what the world sees and what he sees. This disparity establishes the power of love as a transformative force which distinguishes the lover's experience from that of his readers: we see crows or doves; he sees his beloved.

Sonnet 113, with its mind sinking into the eye, is also one of several Sonnets which attach a peculiar—by which I mean idiosyncratically Shakespearean—emphasis to the word 'mind'. 'Mind' is an extraordinarily powerful word in the Sonnets: it can evoke the sinking of consciousness into itself in the absence of the beloved ('Since I left you, mine eye is in my mind'), or the alienness of strangers ('That I have frequent been with unknown minds' (117. 5)). It is often used in contexts where its precise sense is extremely hard to pin down: Sonnet 59 asks

O that record could with a backward look,
 Even of five hundred courses of the sun,
 Show me your image in some antique book,
 Since mind at first in character was done,
 That I might see what the old world could say
 To this composèd wonder of your frame. (59. 5–10)

The wishful transformation of the young man into an antiquity is odd enough, but even odder is the suggestion that images or printed characters can bear the stamp of mind. 'Mind' can mean 'disposition' or 'memory' in this period, but still the suggestion that somewhere back then people were making material images of 'mind' has the elusiveness which invites speculation about what mind is and about how it relates to printed matter. What gives the poem its teasing flavour is Shakespeare's responsiveness to the pliability of the word 'character' in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-centuries: its primary sense is 'writing' or 'print', but the noun can also mean 'idiosyncratically individual handwriting' (*OED* 4c, which aptly cites the Duke in *Measure* 4. 2. 192–3: 'Look you, sir, here is the hand and seal of the Duke. You know the character, I doubt not').²⁶ The growing interest in Theophrastus' *Characters* in the 1590s and early years of the seventeenth century may have helped to push the word towards its later senses of 'personal qualities or distinguishing attributes'.²⁷ The word occurs four times in different forms in the Sonnets, and on each occasion it is used in a way that is slightly different from the

²⁶ All quotations from the dramatic works are from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (eds.), *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1986).

²⁷ See J. W. Smeed, *The Theophrastan 'Character': A History of a Literary Genre* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 1–35.

usages in the dramatic verse.²⁸ When Shakespeare uses the verbal form of 'character' in the dramatic works to describe the operations of memory it tends to have a close connection with the processes of making a material record: Julia in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* addresses Lucetta as 'the table wherein all my thoughts | Are visibly characterized and engraved' (2. 7. 3–4), and Polonius, ever the technically correct schoolmarm, urges Laertes 'these few precepts in thy memory | See thou character' (*Hamlet* 1. 3. 58–9). The Sonnets tend to blur over the precise nature of the physical medium on which memories are characterized, leaving the word adrift towards pure mental space: 'What's in the brain that ink may character | Which hath not figured to thee my true spirit?' begins Sonnet 108. The verb 'character' there does not bed thought down into print: it is raised towards an immaterial sense of 'body forth distinctively' by its proximity to 'spirit'. When the Sonnets describe records or emotions they often gently press the balance away from the materiality of table books and written texts towards the enigmatically mental: 'What's in the brain' becomes in itself a question and an object of enquiry for readers. This in turn can prompt the thought that there is something irretrievably private about mental realities, that memories and emotions can only be offered in the characterized form of print, and yet that the medium is their product rather than their master.

Here a pair of poems is particularly relevant. The first of them, Sonnet 77, has traditionally been thought (since Steevens in 1780) to have originally accompanied the gift of a blank commonplace book:

Look what thy memory cannot contain,
Commit to these waste blanks, and thou shalt find
Those children nursed, delivered from thy brain,
To take a new acquaintance of thy mind.
These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
Shall profit thee, and much enrich thy book. (77. 9–14)

On the face of it this poem offers much to materialistic critics: memory must be written down, and needs a material record. As critics are coming to recognise, the ways in which writers from this period recorded their thoughts in the physical form of a commonplace book have a profound effect on how they shaped their learning as they wrote, and on the ways in which they

²⁸ The other occurrences are 85. 3, 108. 1, 122. 2. 85. 3 is particularly obscure: 'My tongued Muse in manners holds her still, | While comments of your praise, richly compiled, | Reserve their character with golden quill' is often emended to 'thy character', suggesting that the writings store away the distinguishing attributes of the young man. (On the 'their/they' error in Q see n. 50 below). This emendation should be regarded with some suspicion, however, since it tallies so neatly with the view that the Sonnets are concerned with inner mental attributes. The unemended form suggests that the distinctive elegance of the writings is hoarded away like a hidden treasure.

we would put it) 'characterising' about the unique privacy of the memory. What it means to call Shakespeare *early* modern is to recognise the weight given to the former of these definitions; but what it means to call Shakespeare *early modern* is to insist that he is easing the verb 'charactered' towards its later senses. The later part of the poem suggests that the poem envisages its own future life: 'Till each to razed oblivion yield his part | Of thee, thy record never can be missed' might hint that the friend and his (or conceivably her) poems will only live for as long as the poet is alive to remember them. That same phrase also though admits the far grander possibility that the poet's memory of the works lost with the commonplace book will live as long as this poem has readers: 'Till each' could mean 'until all people'. Either way memory is linked to life; and either way a scripted 'character' blends into a personal record. But also either way we never discover what was actually written on the mysterious missing table book.

These examples suggest why generations of readers have speculated about what was in Shakespeare's mind, and what lay hidden in his memory. The poems raise urgent questions about the ways in which scripted and printed characters can hold on to life. But the poems I have just been discussing also show why no-one has definitively answered these questions, why Borges's narrator finds Shakespeare's memory so lacking in biographical content, and why so many commentators have thought that they alone held the key to Shakespeare's Sonnets. These poems raise questions about mind and its relations to matter. They suggest that there is a mental realm of memory beyond and above material records, that things can 'live in your memory' (as Hamlet puts it) even when their material record is lost. But, crucially, they do not tell their readers what is in the private realm of memory, or what the lost commonplace book actually had in it. If we think of Shakespeare's presentation of mind as a materialist one we should see his materialism as heuristic: that is, material objects are invoked to hint at the existence of mental realities which resist material embodiment.

Another example will clarify this rather difficult point. *A Lover's Complaint*, a poem which until quite recently was regarded as peripheral to the canon,³² begins with the destruction of material objects, and those objects are again enigmatic and personal to an equal degree. A young woman is

³² For arguments for the poem's authenticity, see Kenneth Muir, '“A Lover's Complaint”: A Reconsideration', in Edward A. Bloom (ed.), *Shakespeare 1564–1964* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1964), pp. 154–66; reprinted in *Shakespeare the Professional and Related Studies* (London, 1973), 204–19; MacD. P. Jackson, *Shakespeare's 'A Lover's Complaint': Its Date and Authenticity*, University of Auckland Bulletin, 72, English Series, 13 (Auckland, 1965). John Kerrigan's edition of *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (Harmondsworth, 1986) returned the poem to where it belongs, after the Sonnet sequence. His *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint'* (Oxford, 1991) presents the most critically convincing account of the poem's relation to its tradition.

'Tearing of papers, breaking rings a-twain' (6), and 'Cracked many a ring of poesied gold and bone' (45). The poem, though, refuses to reveal what was actually in the papers or what was poesied on the rings. (Thomas Whythorne, the Elizabethan music-master whose insatiable and disastrous courtships of widows are recorded in his autobiography, relates how he gave a ring engraved with the words 'The eye doth find, the heart doth choose, and love doth bind till death doth loose' to one of his would-be inamoratas:³³ Shakespeare is deliberately less revealing). And this air of material enigmas is further developed later in the poem, when we seem, by virtue of eavesdropping on a conversation between two lovers, to have discovered something about the prior history of these objects. The female narrator tells how the young man who courted and ruined her received gems and 'deep-brained Sonnets' from the many women who wooed him, which he then passed on to her:

"And lo, behold these talents of their hair,
With twisted metal amorously impleached,
I have received from many a several fair,
Their kind acceptance weepingly beseeched
With the annexions of fair gems enriched,
And deep-brained sonnets that did amplify
Each stone's dear nature, worth and quality.

"The Diamond? Why, 'twas beautiful and hard,
Whereto his invised properties did tend. (204–12)

It has been suggested that these tokens are what we see the young woman destroying at the start of the poem.³⁴ But they are a little less transparent than that. Certainly the language of this part of the poem is obscure even by the standards of *A Lover's Complaint*. 'Annexions' is a coinage, and the significance of the diamond is so arcane that it prompts a phrase which still nobody is quite sure they understand: 'invised properties' probably means 'hidden qualities', but it even hides its hiddenness in impenetrable obscurity. Seeing these objects does not give access to the emotions behind a love affair in material form. It gives readers all the intimacy of eavesdroppers, and all the eavesdropper's sense of puzzlement: we see apparently significant objects and apparently significant exchanges, and yet the specific significance of these things in the lives of those we observe is withheld from us. This might lead us to say that in Shakespeare's poems objects do not reveal emotions; they encrypt them intriguingly, and start his readers on a quest for mind. An object is held up as something which offers a point of access to an experience, but the experience which it signifies, and whatever those mysterious 'deep-brained sonnets' actually relate, is withheld from us.

³³ Thomas Whythorne, *The Autobiography*, ed. James M. Osborn (London, 1962), p. 159.

³⁴ So John Kerrigan (see above, n. 32), p. 18.

I have so far suggested that an interest in the limitations of material vehicles for conveying mental realities is a strong unifying thread in Shakespeare's poetic *oeuvre*. This creates enigmas, which have encouraged critics in the past to speculate about Shakespeare's life and mind. The next section of this lecture attempts to trace the roots of this interest in the enigmas of personal experience back to *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. I will also attempt to offer an explanation for Shakespeare's curious desire simultaneously to proffer and withhold the workings of the mind. The explanation I will present is in its way a materialist one. I shall suggest that this feature of his works can be related to the very odd demands of the early modern book-buying public. Briefly put, many of those who bought poems in this period wanted to obtain private and occasional material—exchanges between lovers, communications between poets and their patrons—but they also wished to obtain this material in cheap printed form. They wanted the accessibility and the economy of print, whilst also wishing to obtain works with the cachet of private manuscripts. What I think Shakespeare does is to insist more strongly and more delicately than any other poet in the period that those private exchanges, private documents like commonplace books, and the even more private mental realities to which they bear witness, remain private even when they are published in material forms. I will also suggest that in the narrative poems Shakespeare is worrying about the risks of publishing and selling a poem, and about the kinds of work which poems can perform.

* * *

Venus and Adonis, as I have said, was the first printed work to which Shakespeare's name was attached, and *Lucrece* was the second. These simple facts can give cues as to how these poems should be read: they are the first efforts of a young poet to make a name in print. And, as such attempts often are, they are anxious even despite their florid accomplishment. *Lucrece*, as has recently been recognised, is rich in metaphors both of trading and of publication. These metaphors often overlap with the horror at sexual impurity which hangs over the whole poem: Lucrece's beauty is 'published' by Colatine at the start of the poem ('why is Colatine the publisher | Of that rich jewel he should keep unknown?' (33–4)) and his rash willingness to vulgarise the beauty of his wife is what initially provokes Tarquin to assault her. The link between publication and prostitution is quite common in Shakespeare's plays, and a page smirched by an alien hand is often associated with sexual impurity (think of Othello's 'Was this fair paper, this most goodly book | Made to write "whore" upon?').³⁵

³⁵ *Othello* 4. 2. 73–4. On the association in Shakespeare, see Ann Thompson and John O. Thompson, *Shakespeare: Meaning and Metaphor* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 163–70 and 177–83.

Wendy Wall has related this link between publishing and be-whoring to fears among writers in the 1590s that publication effeminised: to print a poem for money, rather than to allow it to circulate in manuscript among a small coterie, was akin to selling it on the streets in a sort of printed version of pimping.³⁶ As Wall suggests, being read, being published, becoming a material object for sale, and being sexually violated are all elements in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*. But the poem does not simply yield its secret character to a print audience: it publicly proclaims itself to be called *Lucrece* on its title page; the more risqué title *The Rape of Lucrece* is privily concealed within the volume's running-titles (until the edition of 1616). Characters in the poem also resist being read, and retain for themselves something of the reserve of a poem written for private circulation; or to put that more strongly, they resist translation of mental impulse into material form. Lucrece herself fears that her rape will be published in her face:

Yea, the illiterate, that know not how
To cipher what is writ in learnèd books,
Will quote my loathsome trespass in my looks. (810–12)

The verb 'to cipher', meaning 'to interpret a coded writing' is peculiar to *Lucrece*. It occurs three times in the poem in this sense but nowhere else in Shakespeare's works, and its frequency in the poem suggests that minds are harder to read than Lucrece allows. Indeed her responses to her rape are so opaquely ciphered that no-one whom she encounters can read them. Lucrece's maid sees 'sorrow's livery' (1222) on her face, but is unable to interpret the reasons for her grief, and it proves impossible throughout the poem to read the mind's construction in the face. When the groom to whom Lucrece consigns her letter to her husband blushes, Lucrece assumes he does so because he sees her shame ciphered in her face. Actually, Shakespeare tells us, he blushes because he is a bashful fellow ('it was defect | Of spirit, life, and bold audacity' (1345–6)). Lucrece misreads others, and she does so because she mistakenly believes that her shame is published in her appearance. Physiognomy is not as reliable a guide to character in life as it is in the depiction of the sack of Troy, where Ajax and Ulysses' faces 'ciphered either's heart; | Their face their manners most expressly told' (1396–7). Tarquin has forced upon Lucrece a state of near-derangement in which she thinks all her thoughts and actions are made immediately legible to others. In fact her mind is hidden, and material

³⁶ Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca and London, 1993), p. 69: 'So feminized, the book became an appropriate object of male desire: desirable in its own right in the marketplace of sonnet sellers and buyers.' Wall's account of *Lucrece* develops some elements explored in Nancy Vickers's influential "'The Blazon of Sweet Beauty's Beast": Shakespeare's *Lucrece*' in Patricia Parker, Geoffrey Hartman, and David Quint (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (New York and London, 1985), pp. 95–115.

objects—from physiognomic signals, to letters to her husband, to the tapestry representation of the sack of Troy onto which she projects her grief—cannot contain or reveal it. This she discovers as she moves from the company of the maid and the groom (who are the two characters in the poem whose real life equivalents were most likely to have been illiterate in early modern England) to adopt a writerly relation to an audience. As she tries to compose a letter to her husband she discovers the difficulty of publishing even so public a shame as a rape, or even of saying simply ‘come home’:

Her maid is gone, and she prepares to write,
 First hovering o'er the paper with her quill.
 Conceit and grief an eager combat fight:
 What wit sets down is blotted straight with will.
 This is too curious good; this blunt and ill.
 Much like a press of people at a door
 Throng her inventions which shall go before. (1296–1302)

She revises and re-revises her letter, and eventually opts for a cryptic expression which holds ‘her grief, but not her grief’s true quality’. The cabinet of her mind remains closed to those who observe her, and at the end of the poem it closes its doors altogether to prying eyes:

Immaculate and spotless is my mind;
 That was not forced, that never was inclined
 To acesyary yieldings, but still pure,
 Doth in her poisoned closet yet endure. (1656–9)

Hidden away, her mind resists the kind of public and published stigma which she fears by hiding in its closet. This was the most symbolically private of solitary places for Elizabethans of more than middling rank, and the place in which private papers and hidden tokens of love resided, and from which printed poems were often said to have been liberated.³⁷

³⁷ On the ways in which closets could be used to present a zone of private experience to a select audience, see Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Adornment* (Chicago and London, 1991). On p. 69 she writes ‘The history of the Elizabethan self, in short was a history of fragmentation in which the subject lived in public view but always withheld for itself a “secret” room, cabinet, case, or other recess locked away (in full view) in one corner of the house.’ Fumerton also makes suggestive relations between the private treasuring of miniatures and the coy semi-self-revelations of the Elizabethan sonnet, although she does not extend her observations to include Shakespeare. More recent work on the closet, such as Alan Stewart, ‘The Early Modern Closet Discovered’, *Representations*, 50 (1995), 76–100, has emphasised its role as a space for collaborative male labour. Closets and chambers in Shakespeare’s poems, however, do tend to be places in which, as Angel Day puts it in *The English Secretorie* (London, 1592), p. 109, ‘we do solitarie and alone shutte up our selves’. Nashe’s preface to the unauthorised first Quarto of *Astrophil and Stella* (London, 1591) describes how poetry ‘although it be oftentimes imprisoned in Ladyes casks, & the president bookes of such as cannot see without another mans spectacles, yet at length it breakes forth in spight of his keepers, and useth some private penne (instead of a picklock) to procure his violent enlargement’.

The most trenchant recent critique of *Lucrece* the poem is that by Ian Donaldson. He argues that the work is radically confused: sometimes its heroine appears to belong to a shame culture, in which her pollution by Tarquin matters because it will cause horror in those who see her and acquire a social stigma; at other times Shakespeare seems to represent pre-Republican Rome as a proto-Christian guilt culture, in which Lucrece's own perception of her moral weakness is the primary grounds of her misery.³⁸ The features of the poem which I have just been considering go some way towards countering this criticism. The poem delicately and quite deliberately suggests that Lucrece inhabits both these kinds of world. She thinks she lives in a shame culture in which all can see her violation published in her countenance; but guilt, her consciousness of what has been done to her and of what she feels about it, remains hidden within her. The poem refuses to publish her shame; indeed it keeps it in the closet, albeit a poisoned one. As Shakespeare never lets us forget, *Lucrece* is a chamber work: its main action, the rape, occurs within a private chamber, and readers are insistently reminded of the geography of the violation: the Argument plants the word: 'The same night he treacherously stealeth into her chamber'; it is then harped on throughout Tarquin's hesitant advance: 'The locks between her chamber and his will | Each one by him enforced retires his ward' (302–3); 'Now is he come unto the chamber door | That shuts him from the heaven of his thought' (338–8); until he arrives at Lucrece's inner sanctum: 'Into the chamber wickedly he stalks, | And gazeth on her yet unstained bed' (365–6). The first touch of Tarquin's hands on Lucrece create an inner privacy within her private chamber, as her veins shrink back into the private spaces of her body:

They, must'ring to the quiet cabinet
Where their dear governess and lady lies,
Do tell her she is dreadfully beset,
And fright her with confusion of their cries. (442–5)

The dominant metaphor here, as so often in the poem, is of a city under siege; but the passage also places great emphasis on the domestic inner spaces of the citadel of that city. A cabinet, a closet, these hidden places of personal retreat, are where Lucrece habitually resides. The effect of the rape and its violation of her private spaces is to force her to generate more privacy and more privacy, until, at the end of her story, the mind hides from all eyes in its 'poisoned closet'.

The preoccupation of *Lucrece* with hidden spaces and private zones enables us to put the case against Wendy Wall's view of *Lucrece* a little more strongly: Wall occasionally overstates the commodity value of texts in

³⁸ Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and its Transformations* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 40–56.

the period and so can correspondingly underestimate what makes them critically intriguing to readers. The majority of those who bought verse in this period are unlikely to have done so in order to feel as they picked up a new collection of poems that they were enjoying complete material possession of a person or a poem or an experience or mental state. They did not, as Wall can suggest in her more enthusiastic moments, feel as though they were buying not just *Lucrece* the book, but also Lucrece the woman. It is likely that many of them bought poems in the hope of intimacy with elevated doings, but also in the knowledge that what they bought would present them with only a glittering carapace of greatness, which would leave them feeling more on the outside of a charmed circle than ever. Many of those who bought the strange volume of poems attributed to Shakespeare called *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599 are likely to have done so in the hope that it would contain what Francis Meres in the previous year had described as Shakespeare's 'sugred Sonnets among his private friends'.³⁹ Purchasers of poems might wish to feel as though they were just on the edges of an intimate circle of friends, not quite sure what private allusions meant, not perhaps even quite sure who the poems were originally for, but relishing them anyway. In the process of publishing Lucrece's story Shakespeare plays to these expectations among his readership: he intimates that material forms, faces, poems, tapestries, letters, will never completely deliver the imprint of mind. Minds and material entities do not marry in Shakespeare's verse or in life without impediments.

I have begun my account of Shakespeare's career as a poet with his second published poem *Lucrece* because it sets the outlines of my case so clearly: that Shakespeare's poems, to abuse a legal phrase, are poems of material non-disclosures. Shakespeare's first poem, *Venus and Adonis*, however, has a similar, though less explicit, plot of material vulgarisation and mental reservation. The verbal mannerisms, distinctive vocabulary and sheer sexiness of *Venus and Adonis* were immediately imitated by other poets. The poem determined the public view of Shakespeare for the next decade: one of the ways in which *The Passionate Pilgrim* volume of 1599 was designed to look as though it was by Shakespeare was by its inclusion of sonnets about Venus and Adonis of a richly erotic kind.⁴⁰ The frenzy of erotic writing to which *Venus and Adonis* gave rise, though, has all but obscured its more anxious side. This is a poem,

³⁹ Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia* (London, 1598), sigs. 201^v–202^r.

⁴⁰ For an account of the reception of *Venus and Adonis*, see Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Much Ado with Red and White: the Earliest Readers of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593)', *Review of English Studies*, 176 (1993), 479–501. On *The Passionate Pilgrim*, see Arthur F. Marotti, 'Shakespeare's Sonnets as Literary Property', in Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (eds.), *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry* (Chicago and London, 1990), pp. 150–4, and C. H. Hobday, 'Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis Sonnets', *Shakespeare Survey*, 26 (1973), 103–9.

like *Lucrece*, which worries about publication, and which, like many poems from the 1590s, is preoccupied with awkward questions about what kinds of work words can achieve. So far I have concentrated more on life and minds than on work; but *Venus and Adonis* is centrally preoccupied with what it is to labour in words. The dedication to the Earl of Southampton promises that Shakespeare will devote all 'idle hours' to the production of 'some graver labour', which presumably is a reference to *Lucrece*, which was printed in the next year. Shakespeare's way of describing his ambition has a hint of anxiety to it, as it just glancingly suggests that hours might still be 'idle' even when they are filled with the scribbling work of writing poetry.⁴¹ The senses of 'idle' in this period extend from 'Not engaged in work, doing nothing, unemployed' (*OED* 4a), which might mark Shakespeare's use of it as glancingly a proud claim to the leisured ease of a gentleman; but the darker range of the word, 'vain, frivolous, trifling' (*OED* 2a), points a recognition that writing may achieve little. That association of words with vanity and material ineffectiveness shoots through the poem. Throughout *Venus and Adonis* words are trying in vain to work. Venus begs and beseeches and bullies Adonis to sleep with her—in vain. The poem confronts the active but ineffective eloquence of Venus with Adonis's zealous interest in what many Elizabethans would have thought of as 'real' work. Indeed Adonis has what could almost be called a bourgeois preoccupation with honest labour. For him the sun does not simply sink, but 'His day's hot task has ended in the west' (530). When his horse bolts in pursuit of a mare he solemnly declares that 'all my mind, my thought, my busy care, | Is how to get my palfrey from the mare' (383–4): for him mind and urgent labour are inseparable. Adonis, the hoarder, declares 'The night is spent' (717); Venus the eloquent spendthrift retorts 'Be prodigal' (755). The poem dramatises a clash not just between Venus's life of leisure and Adonis's life of active pursuit, but between someone who wants to work through words, and someone who thinks the only way to live is by material labour. The encounter between these two attitudes to labour can become wonderfully corporeal, as when the ever-active Adonis thinks that Venus has passed out, and assumes that the more frantically he works at it the better his chances of reviving the languishing goddess ('He wrings her nose, he strikes her on the cheeks, | He bends her fingers, holds her pulses hard. | He chafes her lips . . .') (474–6)). But it can also become a tangled debate about how words can bear on material realities. The one point at which the idle Venus thinks she is about to get through to the stubbornly laborious Adonis is when she taps in to his burgher mentality: she promises him 'increase' through reproduction, and presents herself as an object for sale:

⁴¹ The classic studies of this area of anxiety are Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley and London, 1976) and the same author's account of the ways in which poets attempted to fashion poetical careers for themselves, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley and London, 1983).

To sell myself I can be well contented,
 So thou will buy, and pay, and use good dealing.
 Which purchase if thou make, for fear of slips,
 Set thy seal manual on my wax-red lips. (513–6)

Nice goddesses, of course, do not sell themselves. Venus has trapped herself by accommodating her speech to the financial concerns of her audience. And once Adonis has kissed her she ups the price, like a genteel courtesan who pretends not to know the meaning of money: her 'vulture thought doth pitch the price so high | That she will draw his lips' rich treasure dry' (551–2). As she goes on to persuade Adonis to use his capital of beauty in procreation she meets her first real resistance. Adonis (finally) says 'You do it for increase—O strange excuse, | When reason is the bawd to lust's abuse' (791–2). 'Increase', as Adonis well knows, means both 'profit' (*OED* 4) and 'biological multiplication, offspring' (*OED* 6: 'From fairest creatures we desire increase' as Sonnet 1 begins, at once urging marriage on the young man and stretching out a needy paw for reward). The pun here accuses Venus of taking payments for sex, and the way Venus is described after Adonis's rebuke hints at her metamorphosis into a fallen woman. When Adonis leaves her for the active business of the hunt her company becomes a throng of echoes, whom Shakespeare figures as servile barmen:

For who hath she to spend the night withal
 But idle sounds resembling parasites,
 Like shrill-tongued tapsters answering every call? (847–9)

These tapsters, like poor Francis in *I Henry IV* who cries 'Anon, anon Sir' to every call, are the lowest sort of company. This is not a respectable joint. Venus, the goddess who does not even need to tread on the ground, has engaged her eloquence to achieve the simple goal of seduction, and then sinks to the status of Doll Tearsheet, selling herself in taverns. In a printed poem addressed to a noble patron, and a patron who was being persuaded to marry during the period of the poem's composition by the material means of financial penalties, this is a touching tale: it fuels Southampton's resistance to seduction, and invites a reward for doing so. But it also entertains the awkward suggestion that to put words too openly to work is to prostitute the muse.⁴² This poem frisks lightly, but it also worries about the material efficacy of words, and the potential costs to an author of selling his works in public.

The poem, though, like *Lucrece*, is not simply a study in the materialities of work and print. It is also, like *Lucrece*, fascinated by the privacies of the mind. Adonis, as well as jealously hoarding his financial and sexual reserves,

⁴² G. P. V. Akrigg, *Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton* (London, 1968), pp. 31–3 and 195–6.

keenly preserves a little sanctum of mental space into which Venus's seductive eloquence can win no access:

For know, my heart stands armèd in mine ear,
 And will not let a false sound enter there,
 Lest the deceiving harmony should run
 Into the quiet closure of my breast;
 And then my little heart were quite undone,
 In his bed-chamber to be barred of rest. (779–84)

Adonis equates virginity with retaining a private retreat in 'the quiet closure of my breast', and when he finally escapes homeward from Venus's grasp it is presumably to his solitary bed-chamber. His retreat is reminiscent of Sonnet 48, in which the poet's love is hidden away as a secret treasure 'Within the gentle closure of my breast'. And this hidden intimacy is a state to which even Venus aspires: she too ends the poem retreating into a solitary chamber. Her eyes flee back from the sight of the dead Adonis, and the description of their flight is among the greatest passages in Shakespeare's non-dramatic verse:

So at his bloody view her eyes are fled
 Into the deep-dark cabins of her head,
 Where they resign their office, and their light,
 To the disposing of her troubled brain,
 Who bids them still consort with ugly night,
 And never wound the heart with looks again,
 Who, like a king perplexèd in his throne,
 By their suggestion gives a deadly groan,
 Whereat each tributary subject quakes,
 As when the wind imprisoned in the ground,
 Struggling for passage, earth's foundation shakes,
 Which with cold terror doth men's minds confound.
 This mutiny each part doth so surprise
 That from their dark beds once more leap her eyes,
 And, being opened, threw unwilling light
 Upon the wide wound that the boar had trenched
 In his soft flank . . . (1037–53)

What makes the passage so agile, so needful of its remarkable cross-stanzaic enjambement,⁴³ is its materialism, its rootedness in the material fact of battery and retreat, of guards excited by assault into entering the most secret inner reaches of the citadel. It takes us back to the landscape of *Lucrece*, in which

⁴³ The punctuation of Field's compositors generally follows stanzaic patterns. A full stop is routinely placed at the end of a stanza. Of the six exceptions to this rule, four are the result of the need to compress the line to fit the forme (lines 372, 432, 678, 1068), and two (lines 834 and 876) have no relation to the syntax. The comma which ends line 834 ('cry so,') is probably the result of eyeskip from the line above ('wo, wo,').

women flee into the depths of a secret chamber in order to escape an invading catastrophe. 'Cabin' is probably used in *OED* sense 3b: 'A small room, a bedroom, a boudoir', or it may have the same sense as 'cabinet': 'A small chamber or room; a private apartment, a boudoir' (*OED* 3). For Shakespeare those inner reaches were equated with areas of mental reservation. But the passage works by generating subjectivity from those material realities: it presents a woman whose perceptual apparatus is wrenched out of kilter with what is actually before her by the intensity of emotion. This is a privacy of the mind, and it is a form of subjectivity which owes its origins to the experience of being made to see the world in a uniquely separate way by suffering a distinctive pain. Venus, like Lucrece and like Adonis, is finally stung into solitude; at the end of the poem she hurries away 'In her light chariot' to Paphos 'where the queen | Means to immure herself and not be seen' (1192–4), and her eyes withdraw from the sight of the dead Adonis 'as the snail, whose tender horns being hit, | Shrinks backward in his shelly cave with pain' (1033–4). The snail, carrying a private bedroom on its back, is the perfect emblem of the wincing inwardness finally celebrated in this most adolescent of poems. *Venus and Adonis* offers its readers a deliciously public display of sexual desire, which, as the title-page boasts, one could buy as a material object 'at the signe of the white Greyhound in Paules Church-yard'; but at its end it shrinks back into the concealed cabinet of the mind.

* * *

The narrative poems, then, lightly touch on questions of what it is to publish, and on what sorts of emotional reality remain private even in printed works. I have also suggested that this interest is distinctively tuned to the market for poetry in the 1590s. I would like now to return to Shakespeare's Sonnets, and explore in a little more detail the ways in which the extraordinarily enigmatic volume in which they first appeared can be related to some of the qualities I have found in the narrative poems.

There has been a huge amount of debate about the Sonnets, about whether they were illicitly printed, or whether Shakespeare authorised their publication. There has been even more debate about who, in real life, the 'Mr W. H.' might be who is referred to in the printer's dedication to the volume (and Jonathan Bate and Katherine Duncan-Jones have shown this year that there is still life in the old battles between advocates of Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton and William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke).⁴⁴ I am by conviction a sceptic: my only firm belief about the Sonnets is that there must be something pretty remarkable about the volume which contains them to have stimulated

⁴⁴ See Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London, 1997), pp. 53–64 and Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London, 1997), pp. 45–54.

this amount of debate. I would therefore not want to say, as most editors do, that the balance of probabilities must lie with one side or the other in these debates. I would rather want to understand why both sides might have a case. And this leads me to my root conviction about the volume called *Shake-speares Sonnets*. It is a volume which gives off such radically conflicting signals about its relations to the life of its author that it could have been designed to do so. Moreover it could have been designed to operate more or less exactly on the borderline between the published and the privately concealed on which I have attempted to locate *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. These features of the volume become apparent if it is inspected as a material object, through the eyes of a notional seventeenth century book-buyer. Once this inspection is over it might be possible to draw some conclusions about how best to read the poems.

A potential buyer who picked up a copy of *Shake-speares Sonnets* from the stall of William Apsley or John Wright in 1609 would immediately have recognised that they were holding a different kind of work from either *Lucrece* or *Venus and Adonis*. The volume at first sight would look like a real work: it seems monumental, with its author's name not tucked away at the end of the dedication, but blazoned on the title page and used as a running title for each opening. The first page of the volume contains the printer's dedication, studded with lapidary full stops designed to give it the appearance of a carving on stone.⁴⁵ Scattered through the volume are poems which proclaim their status as perdurable works: (55) 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments | Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme . . .'. Individual poems too, draw voraciously on the vocabulary of labour: the language of the law, 'charters', 'sessions', 'leases', 'pleas', weaves into the metaphorical texture of the poems, as does the exchange of capital and interest. The arts of the parfumier, the painter, the dyer are all welded together in a collection which both looks like a work and is uniquely accommodating of labour and its language.

A reader who looked more closely at the volume, however, might begin to notice features which qualified this initial impression of the monumental. The dedication, with its teasing use of those initials W. H., might remind its would-be purchaser of a tradition of erotic fictions which use their preliminary matter to hint that the characters in the fiction might have some bearing on real life. George Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F. J.* is found in a volume prefixed by an epistle, supposedly from someone called H. W., but almost certainly by Gascoigne himself, which relates how its manuscript passed to him from someone called G. T. to his printer A. B.⁴⁶ The proliferation of initials in

⁴⁵ This account of the volume owes much to the intriguing thoughts of Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'What Are Shakespeare's Sonnets Called?', *Essays in Criticism*, 47 (1997), 1–12, although I believe that the volume also gives off quite contrary signals.

⁴⁶ *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres bound up in one Small Poesie* (London, 1573), fo. 201.

F. J. invites its readers to apply them to real people, although it is fairly clear that they are inventions of the author.⁴⁷ Some sonnet sequences, notably Giles Fletcher's *Licia*, invite readers to apply the generic name of the woman to whom they are addressed to real people, whilst also deliberately not making such identifications explicit:

It may bee I am so devoted to some one, into whose hands these may light by chance, that she may say, which thou now saiest (that surelie he is in love) which if she does, then have I the full recompense of my labour . . . If thou muse what my LICIA is, take her to be some *Diana*, at the least chaste, or some *Minerva*, no *Venus*, fairer farre; it may be shee is Learnings image, or under some heavenlie woonder, which the precisest may not mislike; perhaps under that name I have shadowed *Discipline*. It may be, I meane that kinde courtesie which I found at the Patronesse of these Poems.⁴⁸

In Fletcher's preface the invitation to muse on the identity, allegorical or otherwise, of his mistress is left teasingly open. This is how erotic fictions make themselves spicily real in the period: they simultaneously invite and shrink from what early modern writers would have termed 'application' of works to life. 'W. H.' is as likely to be a late contributor to this tradition as he is to be a real life nobleman.⁴⁹ His presence at the threshold of the volume

⁴⁷ See Adrian Weiss, 'Shared Printing, Printer's Copy, and the Text(s) of Gascoigne's *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*', *Studies in Bibliography*, 45 (1992), 71–104. On Gascoigne's prefatory manoeuvres, see John Kerrigan, 'The Editor as Reader: Constructing Renaissance Texts', in James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (eds.), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 102–24. Another notable example of the deliberately suggestive use of initials is Alexander B. Grosart (ed.), *Willobie his Avisas; or the True Picture of a Modest Maid, and of a Chaste and Constant Wife (1594)* (Manchester, 1880), p. 8, in which 'Hadrian Dorrell', almost certainly a fictional character, claims of the name 'AVISA' that 'I think it to be fained name, like unto *Ovids Corinna*' and that it may be an acronym for 'Amans Uxor Inviolata Semper Amanda'. He goes on, in a gesture typical of the efforts of early modern erotic writers at once to detach their work from reality and at the same time to embed themselves in the stuff of life: 'Yet I would not have *Avisa* to be thought a politike fiction, nor a truthlesse invention, for it may be, that I have at least heard of one in the west of England, in whom the substance of all this has been veriefed . . . This forceth me to conjecture, that though the matter be handled poetically, yet there is something under these fained names and shoves that hath been done truly.' The poem famously contains a character called W. S., a player who is also an unsuccessful lover. This led the indefatigable Arthur Acheson, in *Mistress Davenant and the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London, 1913), to argue that the 'Dark Lady' was the wife of an Oxford landlord. For a characteristically judicious discussion of *Willobie* and the Sonnets, see Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., *The Sonnets*, A New Variorum Edition, 2 vols. (Philadelphia and London, 1944), ii, 295–313. The analogy between the two volumes lies in their shared willingness both to invite and eschew application, rather than in any common shared allusion to facts in Shakespeare's life.

⁴⁸ Giles Fletcher, *The English Works*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison, Wisconsin, 1964), pp. 78–80.

⁴⁹ For the engaging suggestion that he owes his life to a misprint of 'W. SH.', see Donald Foster, 'Mr W. H., RIP', *PMLA*, 102 (1987), 42–54.

invites readers to scrutinise it for signs of life, whilst also providing an assurance that whatever biographical traces the volume offers will be well concealed. If we look at the monumental volume of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* as a physical object we can see that it provokes—deliberately or not—niggling questions about the life to which it relates.

The volume might also reasonably prompt speculation about where the text of the poems came from. It contains the odd line that does not rhyme (25.9), a couplet that is repeated in two poems (36 and 96), a fifteen line Sonnet (99), a Sonnet with a second line which repeats, unmetrically, a phrase from its first line (146), a repeated error in which 'their' is printed for 'thy', an error which mysteriously stops at Sonnet 128, at a point in the sequence when some unusual spellings also begin to appear.⁵⁰ These features would be less pronounced to an early modern reading public, used to haphazard orthography and accustomed to correcting and sometimes even rewriting printed texts as they copied them into their own commonplace books;⁵¹ but they might also qualify the initial impression of the monumental. Whatever the origins of this volume

⁵⁰ Q confuses 'their' and 'thy' at 26. 12, 27. 10, 35. 8, 37. 7, 43. 11, 45. 12, 46. 3, 46. 8, 46. 13, 46. 14, 69. 5, 70. 6, 128. 11, 128. 14, and possibly also at 85. 3. As MacD. P. Jackson's analysis of compositorial preferences in the Sonnets, 'Punctuation and the Compositors of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, 1609', *The Library*, 5th Series 30 (1975), 1–23, shows, the error is usually made by compositor B, although 35. 8 and 37. 7 were set by compositor A. The most probable explanation (offered by Malone) is that the copy contained two letter abbreviations for the personal pronoun in which 'they' and 'thy' looked alike, but the absence of errors after 128 is striking. The mistress is consistently addressed as 'thou', which may conceivably have helped the compositor to unscramble difficult copy; but this would of course also make instances of the possessive pronoun very high (around 2.1 instances per poem as against 1.5 instances per poem for the earlier part of the sequence, or 1.6 if one includes the occurrences erroneously set as 'their') and so multiply the opportunity for error. This suggests that the copy for the poems after 128 may have significantly differed in orthography from the early part of the sequence. This is also suggested by some unique or unusual spellings: 'Broake' is found only in 143. 2 and 152. 3; 'bouldness' is unique; 'ynough', 133. 3 occurs also in Q1 of *Troilus* (also printed in 1609 by Eld, so this could be a compositorial quirk); 142. 14 'mai'st' appears to be unique; 'wofull' occurs thirty-two times elsewhere in the canon and is usually pre-1600. This hypothesis sits suggestively beside the recent claim on stylometric grounds that Sonnets 126–54 are among the earliest poems in the sequence. See A. Kent Heatt, Charles W. Heatt, and Anne Lake Prescott, 'When did Shakespeare Write *Sonnets* 1609?', *Studies in Philology*, 88 (1991), 69–109. For the view that 'The 1609 edition represents not that dream of a traditional textual editor, the author's final intention, but rather a set of poems in various stages of composition', see Heather Dubrow '“Incertainties now Crown Themselves Assur'd”': The Politics of Plotting in Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47 (1996), 299. Marotti, 'Shakespeare's Sonnets as Literary Property' voices a similar opinion about the miscellaneity of the Sonnet sequence.

⁵¹ For scribal adaptations of some Sonnets, see John P. Cutts, 'Two Seventeenth Century Versions of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116', *Shakespeare Studies*, 10 (1977), 9–16; Mary Hobbs, 'Shakespeare's Sonnet II — “A Sugred Sonnet”?', *Notes and Queries*, 224 (1979), 112–3; R. H. A. Robbins, 'A Seventeenth Century Manuscript of Shakespeare's Sonnet 128', *Notes and Queries*, 212 (1967), 137–8. For manuscript versions of individual Sonnets which may reflect authorial variants, see Gary Taylor, 'Some Manuscripts of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 68 (1985), 210–46.

it does not have the appearance of a printed work which derives from a finely revised authorial fair copy (and here it will be clear that I am not as confident as Katherine Duncan-Jones that the volume is likely to have been authorised by Shakespeare: its physical appearance is more ambiguous than she allows).⁵² It looks much more like the printed offshoot of a partially revised manuscript, which its author may have wished to keep private. A keen early modern collector of sonnet sequences might dig deep in his (or again, conceivably, her) memory when he brought the volume home: what other work, this person might ask, blazons its author's name on the running titles of each page? Most sonnet sequences have no running titles, or at most use the title of the fictional addressee at the top of each page. Most sonnet sequences have an authorial dedication, rather than one signed by the printer, and most sonnet sequences carefully dispose one or two complete poems onto each page, and add an ornamental border at the top and maybe at the bottom of each page.⁵³ *Shakespeare's Sonnets* has none of these features, and to contemporary readers versed in the genre it would have looked unusual: Sonnets topped by the name of Shakespeare stagger across pages, their form broken by the printed page. Our Jacobean sonnet-buyer might recall that only one other printed sonnet sequence shares all these features, and that was the 1591 edition of *Sir P. S. His Astrophil and Stella*, an edition which was called in, and which is manifestly the printed offshoot of a manuscript which walked away from its rightful owner.⁵⁴ This unauthorised volume also blazons the unmistakable initials of Sir Philip Sidney over every page. As a physical object, the Quarto of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* manages to look like a monumental achievement at

⁵² See Appendix.

⁵³ Exceptions are rare: Barnabe Barnes' *Parthenophil and Pathenophe* (1593), sig. A2^v contains an epistle from the Printers: 'The Author though at the first unknowne, yet enforced to accorde to certaine of his friendes importunity herein, to publish them by their meanes, and for their sakes . . .'. The poems that follow are disposed chaotically across openings. The general pattern, especially marked in sequences such as Bartholomew Griffin's *Fidessa* (1596) and Richard Barnfield's *Cynthia* which were printed for Humphrey and Matthew Lownes, is to present one sonnet per page with ornamental borders at the top and bottom of each page.

⁵⁴ The case for attending to physical similarities between these two volumes has been persuasively made by Marotti, 'Shakespeare's Sonnets as Literary Property', pp. 154–5. For the converse and equally defensible view, that the resemblances to the 1591 edition of *Astrophil and Stella* should be interpreted as signs that Shakespeare's sequence is the summation of its genre, at once recalling and overgoing its origin, see Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'What Are Shakespeare's Sonnets Called?', *Essays in Criticism*, 47 (1997), 1–12. For discussion of the first quarto of *Astrophil and Stella*, see H. R. Woudhuysen, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts 1558–1640* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 365–84, J. A. Lavin, 'The First Two Printers of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*', *The Library*, 5th Series 26 (1971), 249–55, and McDonald P. Jackson, 'The Printer of the First Quarto of *Astrophil and Stella* (1591)', *Studies in Bibliography*, 31 (1978), 201–3. For various accounts of why the volume was called in, see William A. Ringler (ed.), *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 542–3, and Germaine Warkentin, 'Patrons and Profiteers: Thomas Newman and the "Violent Enlargement" of *Astrophil and Stella*', *Book Collector*, 34 (1985), 461–87.

the same time as appearing to be a product of miscellaneous processes: it looks at once like a monument and like a heavily revised manuscript copy hyped into print by an eager printer, who may or may not have liberated it from the author's private closet.

If our Jacobean reader stopped his physical appraisal of the volume and began to read it, he would find this elusive blend of the monumental and the messily quotidian replicated in the poetic structure of the volume. The poems which seem to claim the most for the immortalising power of monumental verse often also suggest that organic frailties play across their surface, turning a marble monument into a work which lives by virtue of being continually re-read, and recreated in the hearts of new lovers. Sonnet 18 ('Shall I compare thee to a summer's day') ends not just with promise of a poetic monument, but with a claim that its subject's future life is dependent on the continuation of biological life:

Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (18. 11–14)

Sonnet 55 begins proudly declaiming that 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments | Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme'. But the couplet confesses that what guarantees the survival of 'The living record of your memory' is the poem's continuing appeal to readers. This is what makes it live: 'So, till the judgement that yourself arise, | You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes'. Possessive apostrophes are not used in the Quarto: its 'louers' could correspond to either the modern singular possessive form or to the possessive plural. The young man's vitality comes either from the singular gaze of his lover, whose claim to immortalise his subject thus dwindles to a hyperbole exchanged between friends, or from the repeated rehearsal of his beauty by subsequent readers, in which case the hyperbole is warranted. These senses hint that the life of this monumental poem depends upon its being re-read, re-lived, inscribed in new lives. They also generate uncertainty as to whether the poem was designed to hide in a private communication between friends, characterised in the idiosyncratic hand of Shakespeare, or to be blazoned in print for eternity.

What makes the volume *Shake-speares Sonnets* unique is the extent to which its every element can be seen under the marmoreal aspect of a work or in the shifting light of life: its appearance, its dedication, its willingness to link monuments with the quotidian, all these features invite from its readers a deliberate interplay between reading the collection for the life as a private manuscript record of a secret love, and reading it as a monumental printed work. Recent scholarship enables us to add to these features a multiplicity of other structures within which to read the poems. There are moments when the

sequences seem to take a chronological pattern, relating a narrative which it is tempting to associate with autobiography. When the poet writes

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. (104. 3–8)

it is right to bear in mind the convention that sonneteers live life in multiples of three.⁵⁵ But recent stylometric tests have shown that Sonnet 104 begins a mini-sequence of poems which show a higher incidence of 'late rare words' and a lower incidence of 'early rare words' than the group which precedes it.⁵⁶ Stylistic analysis prompts the teasing suggestion that three years actually might have passed in Shakespeare's life since he wrote Sonnet 103. An autobiographical frame is one of the narrative structures which a reader of the Sonnets needs to keep in play, but this sort of living sequencing has to be allowed to coexist with an awareness of scrupulously artful shapeliness. So Sonnet 49 appears to be out of place to many readers, since it occurs among a group of poems about travel and absence. It begins anticipating a future catastrophe with 'Against that time (if ever that time come) | When I shall see thee frown on my defects'; in doing so it anticipates 63, with its fearful opening 'Against my love shall be as I am now, | With Time's injurious hand crushed and o'er-worn'. And it does so in a manner which is artful despite the Sonnet's apparent oddity of placement: the human body was believed to suffer a 'grand climacteric' at 63 (and this fact has often been invoked in relation to Sonnet 63),⁵⁷ but (and this point has not to my knowledge been made about the poem before) it also was believed to suffer a minor climacteric at 49. The two poems are consciously linked as crisis poems. The effect of jutting this numerological artistry, reminding us of the frailty of life, in among the horsey business and packing away of jewels with which Sonnets 48–51 are concerned, is to juxtapose a craftsman's control over the pattern of his poem with the daily shocks of living bustle. The combination of miscellaneity and apparent artfulness which

⁵⁵ Horace's declaration in *Epodes*, XI. 5–6 ('This third December since I ceased to desire Inachia is shaking the leaves from the trees') was imitated by Desportes and Ronsard, on which see Rollins, *The Sonnets*, A New Variorum Edition. There are signs this was not simply a convention, however: Daniel refers in the 1592 text of *Delia* (31. 6) to three years of courtship, but extends it to five in 1594.

⁵⁶ See Hieatt, Hieatt, and Prescott, 'When did Shakespeare write *Sonnets* 1609?' 91. 'Zone 3', of which 104 marks the start, is however a section of the sequence with a relatively low instance of rare words, and so firm conclusions about the dates of poems in this part of the sequence are difficult to draw.

⁵⁷ See René Graziani, 'The Numbering of Shakespeare's Sonnets: 12, 60, and 126', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35 (1984), 79–82, which notes that the 126 poems to the young man equal twice the number of the grand climacteric.

governs the structure of the Sonnets volume, and what appears to have been the extraordinarily extended period of its composition, go to make the poems uniquely demanding: they tempt their readers to identify characters, to turn them into a unified narrative, to read for the life, to fancy they see an artful pattern behind the whole; but the poems always retreat at the last moment from a full revelation either of life or of a full shaping design.⁵⁸

Since the 1960s the editorial tradition of the Sonnets has been unhealthily divided. Editors influenced by the New Criticism have concentrated, often to brilliantly illuminating effect, on the verbal complexity of the poems, but have sometimes shrunk from the intricacies of bibliographical analysis and have tended to dismiss biographical interpretations as ‘gossip’ or ‘chit-chat’.⁵⁹ Editors in the biographical school have put much energy into determining the occasions and addressees of the poems, and have laboured with the empiricist’s belief that truths are always single and always determinable—*either* Southampton, *or* Pembroke. The time has come for this division to end. It will only end when critics and editors appreciate two things: firstly, that there are no empirically ascertainable certainties about the addressees or the origins of the Sonnets; secondly that that indeterminacy is a very important part of the reading experience of the poems. The Sonnets draw a large measure of their power from their willingness to suggest that they offer clues to lives and mental experiences which remain nonetheless irretrievable. And given that they are by the author of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, those poems preoccupied by not quite publishing mental secrecies, this is what one would expect. When Sonnet 53 begins

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.

⁵⁸ On the miscellaneity of sonnet sequences, see Germaine Warkentin, ‘“Love’s Sweetest Part, Variety”’: Petrarch and the Curious Frame of the Renaissance Sonnet Sequence’, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 11 (1975), 14–23. Carol Thomas Neely, ‘The Structure of English Renaissance Sonnet Sequences’, *ELH*, 45 (1978), 359 notes that ‘The Italian model—fragmentary composition followed by careful selection and arrangement into a sequence—both justifies the expectation of structure in the sequence and predicts its loose elastic nature’. On the origins of the term ‘sonnet sequence’, see William T. Going, ‘Gascoigne and the Term “Sonnet Sequence”’, *Notes and Queries*, 199 (1954), 189–91 and ‘The Term “Sonnet Sequence”’, *Modern Language Notes*, 62 (1947), 400–2. For arguments that individual Sonnets suit their positions in the sequence see Graziani, ‘The Numbering of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’. This approach yields more convincing fruit than the root-and-branch numerology of Alastair Fowler, *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 174–97.

⁵⁹ John Kerrigan, *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, p. 11 says that biographical criticism ‘soon finds itself spinning off the text into vacuous literary chit-chat’. L. C. Knights begins his essay on the Sonnets of 1934 with the sally ‘That there is so little genuine criticism in the terrifying number of books and essays on Shakespeare’s Sonnets can only be partly accounted for by the superior attractiveness of gossip’, repr. in Peter Jones (ed.), *Shakespeare: The Sonnets. A Casebook* (London, 1977), p. 74.

the words 'substance' and 'shadow' seem at first to belong to the register of metaphysics, as they do generally in the Sonnets. 'Substance' carries the primary senses 'essential nature' or 'That of which a physical thing consists; the material of which a body is formed and in virtue of which it possesses certain properties' (*OED* 6a), which is opposed to the shadow, or insubstantial image, of a thing. The proximity of the poem to 54, which is about artistic representation, suggests that 'shadow' could mean 'artistic representation' (*OED* 6b) as well as having the daemonic overtones which commentators have sometimes found in the poem: so 'what are you made of that you generate so many representations?'. But then why 'tend', a word which can be used of the activities of servants or underlings (and which is so used in 57: 'Being your slave, what should I do but tend | Upon the hours and times of your desire?')? Does this word suggest that a more material scene is obliquely imaged in the lines, in which a person of miraculous 'substance' in *OED* sense 16a ('Possessions, goods, estate; means, wealth') is tended on by 'shadows', in the sense of 'parasites or toadies' (*OED* 8a)? This material scene of a rich patron thronged by scroungers is fleetingly registered in the poem. But, as so often happens in the Sonnets, the suggested presence of a material scenario forces a flurry of metaphorical activity from the poet. The material import of 'substance' prompts the poet to erect a barrage of defensive metaphors so thick that they momentarily suggest supernatural influence, or that a horde of Platonic shadows clusters around the true form of the addressee's beauty.⁶⁰ A game has nearly been given away, and the best way to hide it is with ghostly suggestion.

This example suggests that one should read the Sonnets experimentally, inventing for them possible circumstances, embedding the poems in those circumstances, and listening to how they sound. They will evade succumbing to those circumstances because their power lies in their ability to suggest that they could live in almost infinitely multiple circumstances. This form of experimental embedding, though, enables the range and depth of the poems' language to emerge at its richest. And this is how their earliest readers might well have responded to Sonnet sequences, as they copied individual sonnets into their commonplace books, or slipped copies of poems under the doors of their mistresses' chambers.⁶¹ The poems in the sequence in which they appear

⁶⁰ For a reading of another Sonnet which is alive to its material circumstances, see John Barrell, 'Editing Out: The Discourse of Patronage in Shakespeare's Twenty-Ninth Sonnet', in *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester, 1988), pp. 18–43.

⁶¹ Thomas Whythorne, *Autobiography*, p. 21 describes how he left a poem for a lady 'between the strings of a gittern'. Whythorne's autobiography is frequently invoked as evidence for the social deployment of verse in the period. It was probably composed in 1575, shortly after the publication of George Gascoigne's *Adventures of Master F. J.*, to which it has more than passing resemblances. Both narratives may have roots in reality, or the 'factual' account of Whythorne's life may have roots in fiction. Shakespeare's fellow Warwickshireman Michael Drayton gives no less equivocal evidence of the practical utility

in Q and preceded by their dedication to Mr W. H. have a quality which one might call situational ambiguity. That is, they suggest a multiplicity of additional possible senses if their readers are prepared to try them out, to see how they fit, in different narrative settings. Let us finally consider one very famous example, Sonnet 116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments; love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,
 Or bends with the remover to remove. 5
 O no, it is an ever-fixèd mark,
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wandering barque,
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks 10
 Within his bending sickle's compass come.
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
 If this be error and upon me proved,
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

The greatness of the poem lies in its willingness to allow temporal effects to play across the surface of its vision of love as an immutable force. It does not simply assert the immutability of love; it suggests that there are specific temporal circumstances which make it necessary to state that immutability. Several critics have been prompted to embed this poem in the life: Seymour-Smith in his note imagined that 'The situation seemed to be that the Friend, no doubt flattered at first by Shakespeare's "return" to him, was soon puzzled by his obviously changed attitude. No doubt he upbraided Shakespeare for this . . . in some such petulant terms as: "You no longer love me as you used to, because I am older", and so on.'⁶² Helen Vendler, in a rigorously aesthetic reading of this Sonnet, also feels that its form of love derives from a dramatic setting: she sees it as an answer to a declaration by the friend that loves do just end.⁶³ These critics are doing what readers of the Sonnets are invited to do. I

of sonnet-writing when he ruefully acknowledged that a sonnet he wrote for a 'witless Gallant' succeeded in winning the mistress over, but the poems he writes to his Idea miserably fail to gain her affection, *Idea. In Sixty Three Sonnets* (1619), Sonnet 21. Drayton's suggestion that poets wrote poems for friends and patrons to use, though, may be one further expression of the sonneteer's traditional sense of the ineffectiveness of his own verse in winning a mistress over.

⁶² Martin Seymour-Smith (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London, 1963), p. 169.

⁶³ Helen Vendler, *Ways into Shakespeare's Sonnets* The Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture, 3 December 1990 (London, 1990), pp. 20–4. She too is prompted to imagine an actual conversation: 'The young man has, after all, said, "I did love you once, but now impediments have arisen through alteration and removes."'

do not think either of them are right, because I believe that the success of the poem, and indeed the success of all the Sonnets, depends on its refusal to offer sufficient grounds for applying it to any one circumstance. Its opening lines raise practical problems of stress, emphasis, and sense which invite exploration of embedding the poem in a variety of possible dramatic scenarios. Its opening line probably means chiefly 'I will not acknowledge that there are any barriers to love'. But how strong is the stress on 'me'? Strong enough to carry a hint of rebuke? And the echo of the Solemnization of Matrimony makes this a particularly strong claim, turning it into a churchly vow, taken at that critical moment when the couple are asked if there is any impediment to their marriage. Why at such a sacred moment use the word 'admit', and why that emphasis on 'alteration'? Could one imagine that the poem was written by someone who is nobly forgoing a lover rather than simply reaffirming his vows, that the marriage of true minds alluded to in the first line is not between the poet and his addressee, but between the addressee and another person? 'Admit' on this reading would not mean 'confess' but 'allow to enter' (*OED* 1). The first lines would mean 'Do not allow *me* [and that is where a reader might well let the iambic stress fall] to come between you and the person with whom you have such a perfect mental affinity: I love you so truly that I can keep on loving you forever even when I forgo you.' When set in this sort of imaginary life the poem takes on new resonances, some noble, some bitter—or it wins its nobility through and despite of bitterness: to say that love alters not where it alteration finds becomes a rebuke (you have altered; I have not); the heroic 'bears it out even to the edge of doom' becomes deliberately strained, an instance of the scarcely suppressed irony masquerading as masochism in which the Sonnets abound. A love emerges which is above circumstance; but that expression of love is strategically directed to someone who has betrayed that ideal, and so is embedded in circumstance. I would not wish to present this as a new or even as a true hypothesis about the poem; rather I use it as an example to suggest that the life, the literary vitality, of the poem depends on one's willingness to experiment with its relations to the surrounding sequence, to its author's life, to other possible lives.

The Sonnets have fascinated so many for so long because of their unique ability, inscribed in their physical form, their order, their vocabulary, to be both monumental works and suggestive fragments of life at once. The life from which they spring can never, of course, be recaptured, but that does not mean that we should give up the chase. We should perhaps, though, devote less energy to fruitless attempts to associate Shakespeare, sexually or otherwise, with members of the English nobility, and put more energy into imagining the kinds of dramatic microclimate—the occasions, the emotional and social structures—which gave these poems their first life. Even if we know that the content of Shakespeare's memory will always elude us, even if we know that his life will never be known by us as it was by him, to keep looking for

these unfindable entities is a central criterion of a serious engagement with his poems. And, moreover, it is what his poems invite his readers to do.

Appendix: Were Shakespeare's Sonnets Really Authorised?

Katherine Duncan-Jones has argued in 'Was the 1609 *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS* Really Unauthorized?', *Review of English Studies*, NS, 34 (1983), 151–71, and in her edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London, 1997), pp. 32–41, against the received opinion that Shakespeare's Sonnets were printed without their author's consent. Her case rests in part on a revisionary account of the career of Thomas Thorpe. She notes Thorpe's close relations with theatrical circles, his work for the super-scrupulous Ben Jonson over *Volpone* and *Sejanus*, and his role in producing high quality printed editions of theatrical texts throughout the early years of the seventeenth century. The range and distinction of Thorpe's productions leads Duncan-Jones to conclude that it is likely that the printer came by his copy through personal contact with Shakespeare, possibly with Jonson as an intermediary.

If this case is accepted in its totality it has significant critical and editorial consequences: the order, the spelling, even the odd loose end of the text in Q might be seen as deriving from a copy which had authorial sanction. Duncan-Jones couches her argument strongly in order to counter the many attacks which have been launched against Thorpe, and this means that evidence which could be regarded as running against her case is given relatively light treatment. She does not discuss the fact that Thorpe's first effort with William Apsley to register a piece of copy, 'a panegyric or congratulation for the concord of the kingdomes of great Britaine in the unitie of religion under king JAMES' on 23 June 1603, was cancelled because the work was already registered to 'Master Seaton', Edward Arber, ed., *A Transcript of the Stationers' Register*, 5 vols. (London and Birmingham, 1875–94), iii, 37. This could, of course, have been a simple mistake by a young printer, but it may be an indicator that Thorpe was not at the start of his career completely scrupulous in his quest for copy to print (obtaining copy without an author's consent in this period was not a crime; to print copy registered in the name of another printer, however, violated one of the key principles of the stationers' company). Nor does Duncan-Jones give a very full account of Thorpe's apparent piracy of the copy of Marlowe's *Lucan's First Book Translated* from Blount, as discussed by W. W. Greg, 'The Copyright of *Hero and Leander*', *The Library*, 4th Ser., 24 (1944), 165–74. This case too is difficult: Thorpe's subsequent close relation with Blount may imply that the printers collaborated over the volume and tried to generate excitement by making the

copy appear to have been stolen (Blount assigned his rights to print *Sejanus* to Thorpe on 6 August 1605, Arber, iii, 297). Taken in conjunction with Thorpe's unlicensed printing of *The Odcumbian Banquet*, however, which Duncan-Jones dismisses as a harmless caper, the episode of Marlowe's *Lucan* might indicate that Thorpe was capable of seeking copy from other printers as well as directly from authors' hands (*contra* Duncan-Jones's claim that the evidence 'points to Thorpe as a publisher who bought his copy directly from authors', pp. 160–1), and/or that he was willing to use preliminary matter to feed an audience's taste for the illicitly obtained. That Q has been seen as having been printed without its author's consent, and that its publisher's prefatory matter has fuelled speculation about the origins of the volume is not entirely surprising in view of Thorpe's earlier career.

Duncan-Jones provides strong evidence that Thorpe was careful about the typographical accuracy of the texts which he published, and this finding is partly what prompts her decision to follow the Quarto at several points in her edition when the majority of editors choose to emend. The examples of *Volpone* and *Sejanus* are striking; but there are counter-examples. The translation of *Lucan* by Sir Arthur Gorges is referred to by Duncan-Jones as a 'finely-printed text of a most distinguished translation' (p. 163). Here one must qualify her opinion: the volume is sumptuous in its appearance, but the quality of typesetting is relatively poor, with many pages showing clear compositorial errors. Here too questions about the origins of the copy are deliberately raised in the preliminary matter: the preface, purportedly by Gorges's son Carew who was then only ten, states that he stumbled on the poem 'in my fathers study, amongst many other of his Manuscripts' (sig. A3^v) and arranged with his schoolmaster to have it printed. This too is difficult evidence to assess, and might reasonably be seen as an effort on the part of the author to avoid the stigma of print. But this example does also show that relatively inaccurately printed works which are presented as having arrived in the printer's hands through intermediaries were part of Thorpe's stock-in-trade, as well as carefully prepared play-texts.

Thorpe otherwise only signed prefatory matter for volumes whose authors were dead (as in the case of Marlowe's *Lucan*, and the 1616 edition of John Healey's translation of *Epictetus Manuall*) or out of the country (as appears to have been the case with the 1610 edition of Healey's *Epictetus* and the same author's translation of *The Citie of God*). There are three works for which Thorpe may have composed anonymous preliminary matter, two of which are consistent with this pattern: Arthur Dent died in 1607, and Thorpe printed his *The Hand-Maid of Repentance* with an anonymous preface 'To the Christian Reader' in 1614. This was despite the fact that the copy was entered to John Wright, who published a substantial number of Dent's posthumous works, on 23 July 1614 (Arber iii, 551). The claim in the preface

that the copy 'hath by Gods goodnes come unto my handes' (sig. A4^b) is either a piece of Pecksniffery or a suggestion that Wright informally allowed Thorpe to publish the copy. Jan van Oldenbarnveld was a Dutchman who had no discernible connection with the printing of *Barnevels Apology* for Thorpe in 1618, and the unsigned epistle to the reader suggests there was no relation of any kind between author and printer, since it presents 'Barneveltius' as a dotard. Theophilus Field's *A Christians Preparation* (1622) is the only work for which Thorpe may have composed an epistle for a living author whom he knew. Its 'Epistle to the Reader', signed 'Anonymous' (in Greek), is, however, the least likely of the three unattributed epistles to be Thorpe's, since its author claims friendship with Field, who was then the Bishop of Llandaff. Even this epistle, though, claims that the copy for the work which follows was originally only intended for the eyes of certain 'High and Honourable personages', and was only printed by the 'incessant importunity' of the anonymous author of the preface.

Given the extent of the plague in 1609 it is quite likely that Shakespeare was not in London at the time the Quarto was going through the press, and so one should hesitate before inferring from the presence of a signed dedication by Thorpe that the printer obtained the manuscript without its author's consent. Yet the analogy with other sonnet sequences, which usually only have dedications by their printers in cases where piracy is clear or suspected, and with the other works for which Thorpe produced signed preliminary matter, does admit the possibility that the Quarto may have been printed with less involvement from its author than Duncan-Jones implies.

These facts taken together do not comprise proof that Shakespeare's Sonnets were unauthorised (and even if it could be proven that Shakespeare authorised the publication this would not necessarily imply that the copy from which Eld's compositors worked was finally revised, or that Thorpe's Quarto presents a miraculous incarnation of authorial final intentions). But the evidence presented in this appendix does constitute grounds for regarding the case as 'not proven', as the Scots would say. Thorpe was quite capable of producing a volume printed with its author's consent which accurately reflected its copy. He was also quite capable of producing volumes which offered the excitement of unauthorised publication. The appearance of the Quarto of *Shake-speares Sonnets* leaves it open to readers to opt for either of these alternatives, or to teeter uncertainly between the two.