

11-2018

Shakespeare and the English Sonnet: A History

Heather Davidson
Utah State University

Elizabeth Peel
Utah State University

Mary Leishman
Utah State University

Keil Nicholas
Utah State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/english_3315

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davidson, Heather; Peel, Elizabeth; Leishman, Mary; and Nicholas, Keil, "Shakespeare and the English Sonnet: A History" (2018).
ENGL 3315. 5.
https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/english_3315/5

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Exhibits at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in ENGL 3315 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact dylan.burns@usu.edu.



Shakespeare and the English Sonnet

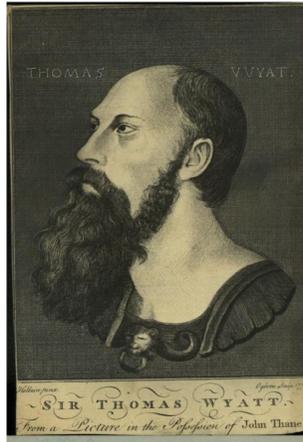
A History

Heather Davidson, Elizabeth Peel, Mary Leishman, Keil Nicholas

UtahStateUniversity
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



Portrait of the Poet Petrarch by Gentile Bellini, 1507



Sir Thomas Wyatt by John Ogborne, 1775

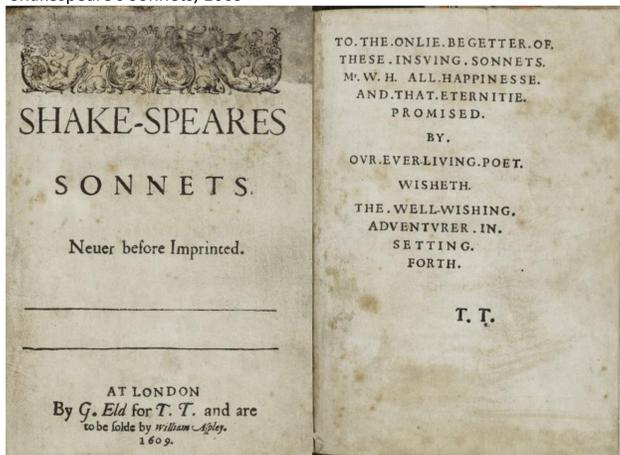
Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets broke many established conventions.

- Gender: The idealized beloved in the sequence is a fair young man, named "the master-mistress of my passion" in Sonnet 20.
- Unattainable Love: Shakespeare complicates this convention by addressing some sonnets to an unattainable man and others to a promiscuous woman, the dark lady.
- Beauty: The speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets both embraces and mocks traditional standards of beauty, evidenced in his love for both the fair young man and the dark lady.

Following Shakespeare's death, publishers sometimes changed the pronouns in his sonnets about the fair young man and removed Sonnet 20 from the sequence to fit into a more conventional world view.

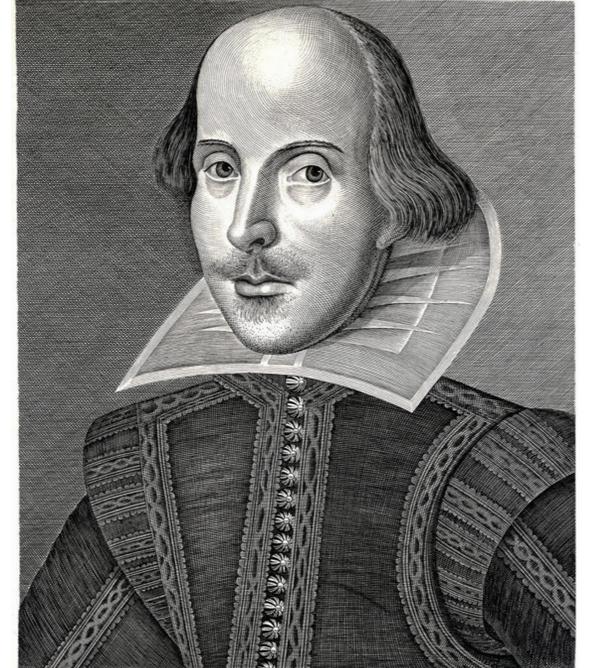
Shakespeare's Sonnets, 1609



Sonnet 130

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

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.



Portrait of William Shakespeare by Martin Dreshout, 1623

Sonnet Form

A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem that first appeared in late twelfth century Italy but was popularized by the poet and scholar Francesco Petrarch a century later. Petrarch's sonnets typically followed an ABBA ABBA CDECDE rhyme scheme, or some variation. This sonnet form, introduced in English poetry by Sir Thomas Wyatt, became wildly popular in the sixteenth century. Usually written as a sequence of connected poems, sonnets expressed the emotions of an enamored male poet in pursuit of an unattainable woman. Often with love as the central theme, sonneteers employed an evocative range of imagery and metaphor – touching topics such as nature, war, beauty, fate, and mortality. Later poets, including Shakespeare, are known for violating these typical conventions. Shakespeare's provocative sonnets became so popular that the English sonnet form is now commonly called the Shakespearean sonnet.

Dedication Page

The dedication to Shakespeare's sonnet sequence reads, "To the only begetter of these ensuing sonnets Mr. W.H. All happiness and that eternity promised by our ever-living poet wisheth the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth. T.T." Mr. W.H is the dedicatee of the sonnets, although his true identity remains a mystery. Could he be the real-life model for the fair young man? If true, the dedication further complicates the ideas of love, fidelity, and betrayal that Shakespeare represents in his sonnets through the poet's infatuation with both the dark lady and the fair young man.

Breaking the Form

Sonnet 130 is a great example of Shakespeare writing in the English sonnet form, following an ABAB CDCD EFEF GG rhyme scheme and using three quatrains and a couplet. He then breaks from tradition by playing with traditional conceits of beauty, (eyes like suns, red cheeks, perfumed breath), by stating the exact opposite, showing beauty in a non-traditional way. Rather than having his love unattainable, Shakespeare removes the dark lady from a pedestal, writing that she "treads on the ground." The sonnet is also contradictory, complimenting her by stating he doesn't care about her beauty, while listing all the ways she is not traditionally beautiful.