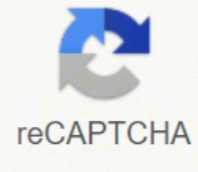


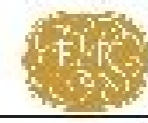


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WILLIAM NELLES

Sexing Shakespeare's Sonnets: Reading Beyond Sonnet 20

While there is widespread agreement that Sonnets 1–17, the marriage or procreation sonnets, form a relatively coherent group, and that 18 and 19 are generic enough to fit any imaginable context, Sonnet 20 splits readers into two groups: those who see an end to any clear sequence after this point, and those who read on, finding a narrative line connecting the rest of the sonnets in a meaningful pattern. In the 2004 Oxford guide to *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells confidently assert that the sonnets are “better thought of as a collection than a sequence, since . . . the individual poems do not hang together from beginning to end as a single unity.”¹ More specifically, they dismiss such “myths and superstitions” as Edward Malone’s 1780 division of the sonnets into two groups: “Though some of the first 126 poems in the collection unquestionably relate to a young man, others could relate to either a male or a female. Even the poems in the second part of the collection, known inauthentically as the ‘Dark Lady’ Sonnets, are not necessarily about one and the same person” (p. xiii). By contrast, Colin Burrow’s Introduction to *The Complete Sonnets and Poems* in the Oxford Shakespeare in 2002 claims that “This position has been overturned in the past twenty years or so, and has effectively been replaced by a new orthodoxy. According to this, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* were printed with the author’s consent and in an order which reflects their author’s wishes.”² G. Blakemore Evans’ Cambridge edition of the Sonnets (2006) also accepts the two-part division: “It is generally assumed, for lack of evidence to the contrary, that all of Sonnets 1–126 are addressed to the

1. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Oxford, 2004), p. 19.
2. *Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford, 2002), p. 95.

Sonnet 18

<p>Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate: Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, And summer's lease hath all too short a date: Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, And often is his gold complexion dimm'd, And every fair from fair sometime declines, By chance, or nature's changing course, unbarren'd, But thy eternal summer shall not fade, Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st, Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st 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.</p>	<p>In line 1, what is the speaker's main point? What is the implied structure of this sonnet given the first line?</p> <p>According to the speaker in line 1, which is more beautiful: the sun or the day or the person being compared to it?</p> <p>What are the "darling buds of May" in line 3?</p> <p>In lines 3–4, what does the speaker reveal about summer? How should this information be relevant to the one person of "thee" in a "fairer day"?</p> <p>In lines 5–6, how is the sun personified? What does the use of this device reveal about summer?</p> <p>In line 7, what does the speaker say about the person being compared? What does the word "barren'd" mean in this context? How might we define "barren'd"?</p> <p>Line 8: What is a "course" effect relationship? What is the cause/effect relationship depicted in these lines?</p> <p>How does the message shift in line 9? What word signals this shift?</p> <p>What is the effect of repeating the words "ow'st" and "wast" in lines 9–10?</p> <p>How does the speaker personify Death in line 10?</p> <p>According to the speaker in the second quatrain (lines 9–10), how is the person being compared to sun or never better than summer?</p> <p>What does "this" refer to in line 12?</p> <p>What is the final statement about the person being described (lines 12–13)?</p> <p>What device does the speaker use to see past the final line?</p>
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Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave, doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.
And yet to times in hope, my verse shall stand
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

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