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"Pyramids of Egypt": Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and a Victorian Turn to Obscurity

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> Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic you have frowned,
> Mindless of its just honours; with this key
> Shakespeare unlocked his heart.[1]

> In literary value Shakespeare's sonnets are notably unequal. Many reach levels of lyric melody and meditative energy that are hardly to be matched elsewhere in poetry. The best examples are charged with the mellowed sweetness of rhythm and metre, the depth of thought and feeling, the vividness of imagery and the stimulating fervour of expression which are the finest proofs of poetic power. On the other hand, many sink almost into inanity beneath the burden of quibbles and conceits.[2]

For nineteenth-century readers Shakespeare's *Sonnets* promised much. The efforts of the previous century's scholars had seen Shakespeare's texts become the focus of a project seeking to refine and purify English into a language of culture and literary aspiration.[3] In so doing, scholars were able to make of Shakespeare an "Enlightenment culture hero" whose example could formulate eighteenth-century readings of authorship as "Shakespeare the Author" moved to "the centre of a struggle for the right to speak for the core of the national culture."[4] Such conditions formed the background to Edmund Malone's 1780 edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the first to print the unexpurgated 1609 Quarto together with extensive textual notes and commentary and so the first to bring the poems into the Shakespearean canon.[5] Vital to Malone's handling of these poems, Margreta de Grazia asserts, was his desire to read them according to a developing notion of authorship that emphasized intention on the part of individual writers, who thus determined the precise dynamics at play in their texts. Accordingly, the *Sonnets* became the record of "personal artistic complexity and growth" as Malone emphasized the poems' importance as "writing in Shakespeare's own person."[6] Strikingly,

the absorption of such lyrical potential into the Shakespearean canon offered the promise of compelling revelation just as the sonnet form was revived as a staple of sensibility, with writers such as Charlotte Smith characterizing it as especially suited to the expression of single, strong emotions. By moving away from the dramatic frames that more usually shaped this figure's cultural presence, and yet installing protective scholarly apparatus, Malone's edition promised a legitimized lyrical utterance from the heart of an iconic English speaker. Such a legacy was a rich one for the nineteenth century to inherit.

Yet, the revelation transpired to be troubling, not only to those who wished to protect a particular version of Shakespeare as English cultural icon, but also to those who understood the sonnet form itself as having a gentle, emotional appeal that, when used with "correctness of expression and harmony of structure," created "melody and softness of versification" that produced an "attractive tenderness in sentiment and expression."[7] On reaching for the *Sonnets* for revelation, readers were confronted with a series of poems addressed (Malone's apparatus coolly insisted)[8] in the first 126 poems to a young man, and in the remaining twenty-eight to a dark lady, apparently a mistress figure (emphatically not a wife). Intertwined between the two, and apparently the object of Shakespeare's jealousy, emerged a rival poet figure. Furthermore, such complex emotional and erotic addresses were expressed in highly wrought conceits, elaborate metaphors, and non-Petrarchan arrangements, directly contravening contemporary fashion for the Italian model, which persisted across the following century.[9] If the *Sonnets* revealed Shakespeare's heart, they also revealed his non-conformity, his acute lack of "fit" with idealized notions, not only of national cultural authority, but also of legitimate sonneteering.

The *Sonnets*' profound and energetic challenge to the terms of Shakespeare's cultural authority has received considerable notice.[10] This essay seeks to illustrate how nineteenth-century responses to this collection of poems also constitutes an intriguing and complex perspective on Victorian attitudes towards the sonnet form itself, particularly in terms of its perceived status as autobiography or emotional lyric. Indeed, I suggest that the *Sonnets*' example concentrates a debate between these two terms, with the former alluding to historically specific circumstances and the latter intimating a sense of timeless universality. Such a perspective is one that proceeds from a Wordsworthian influence on Victorian poetics. Indeed, it is Wordsworth's view of the *Sonnets* as the "key" to Shakespeare's heart that offered the most concise, oft-repeated, and compelling characterization of them as revelatory, a proposition with which Victorian commentators developed an enduring and complex dialogue. However, where Wordsworth's sonnets and poetics emphasized the communication of personal sentiment, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* attracted a critical discourse that emphasized obscurity, darkness, lyrical mediation, and deferral. As the two quotations that begin this essay demon-

strate (roughly pegging each end of the Victorian period), Wordsworth sets an agenda of liberation and openness with his striking metaphor for personal disclosure; Sidney Lee's response demonstrates the after-effects of a such a legacy as admiration is covered by caveat, exasperation, generalization, and abstraction. While this may be read as the progress of coyness, I argue that a more subtle process of accommodation takes place as commentators worked to view Shakespeare's *Sonnets* through the lens of Victorian poetics (a process that significantly does not always yield clear-sighted views). The result is not straight-forward assimilation or neutralization, but a re-reading of the sonnet form as it shifts from autobiographical record, to complex, even dangerous, and mediated lyrical expression—expression, indeed, that was demanding of the reader, rather than comforting. From this perspective, the history of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in the nineteenth century contributes to the complex landscape of Victorian lyrical expression by prompting the accommodation of encoding, abstruseness, irony, stretch, and performance into a form associated with direct expression. Such conditions may then be seen to affect statements such as George Saintsbury's view of the *Sonnets*, which values the collection for its intellect, its reach, its abstract capture, and its redrawing of love—aspects which aggrandize the poems, but subtly shift attention from the specific circumstances of Shakespeare's personal life:

> What is important is that Shakespeare has here caught up the sum of love and uttered it as no poet has before or since, and that in so doing he carried poetry—that is to say, the passionate expression in verse of the sensual and intellectual facts of life—to a pitch which it had never previously reached in English, and which it has never outstepped since. The coast-line of humanity must be wholly altered, the sea must change its nature, the moon must draw it in different ways, before that tide-mark is passed.[11]

In closely considering a range of critical commentary on the *Sonnets*, published from the 1830s to the end of the 1890s, this essay argues that Shakespeare's example became the prompt to a broader reconsideration of the sonnet form. In loosely chronological progression, discussion begins with interrogation of the wider effects of commentators' repeated desire to read the poems autobiographically, a process which, I suggest, in fact dislodged the form's association with direct expression. From this conundrum there issues—as seen in the middle part of my discussion—a renewed sense of the sonnet as a form associated with "moods" rather than "character." Igniting a new discourse of intensity, seen in discussions particularly from the 1870s onwards, this development then aligns the sonnet not so much with revelation as with complex emotional experience, providing a counterpoint to the discourse that would associate the sonnet form with clarity, proportion, and measured expression.

As the century drew to a close, these differing discourses begin to intertwine: the *Sonnets* may continue to be the subject of literary-historical speculation, but such an interpretation is implicitly challenged by a more creative reading—exemplified by Oscar Wilde—in which Shakespeare's example, and the form itself, became totemic not of autobiographical disclosure, but of the performance of intensely felt lyrical feeling.

The *Sonnets*' Autobiographical Disclosures, 1830s–1860s

Several commentators point to Malone's edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (particularly its enthusiasm for literary-historical research into the "man behind the works") as a vital stage in the subsequent understanding of the sonnet as a specifically autobiographical form, particularly as it coincided with contemporary investment in sonnets as vehicles for expressing deep, personal feeling. As Joseph Phelan suggests, Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784 onwards) "helped to position the sonnet as a fundamentally autobiographical form," a sentiment developed by Smith's admirer, Wordsworth, who described his own sonnets as "transcripts of the private heart," so, says Phelan, "sum[ming] up the attempt in the work of Wordsworth and many of his contemporaries to reposition the sonnet as a site of privileged autobiographical utterance within the system of poetic genres."[12] Clearly, by claiming the same heart-felt inspiration for Shakespeare's *Sonnets* Wordsworth neatly draws the older poet into his own process of legitimizing sonnets by allying both writer and form to indicators of authenticity (not only the heart, but "transcript," which plays down the form's complex arrangement, suggesting instead a spontaneous and natural record). In Natalie Houston's summary Wordsworth and Malone then contributed together to a "popular reading of Shakespeare's sonnets as a kind of autobiography [that] created a widespread understanding of the sonnet form itself as truthful and documentary."[13] However, this neat conclusion skirts over the considerable complexities and anxieties that underpinned Victorian readings of the *Sonnets* as autobiographical—complexities that illustrate Phelan's sense of a discourse of contradiction surrounding the sonnet form in nineteenth-century culture (p. 2). Far from providing coherent revelation—as "autobiography," "truthful," and "documentary" suggest—the *Sonnets* denoted obscured anguish, ambivalence, and sexual irregularity. Even David Masson, who most overtly attached to an autobiographical reading of the *Sonnets*, finds them only "distinctly, intensely, painfully" so.[14]

The plain reason for such anomaly lies in the fact that while the elision between autobiography and lyric (suggesting the lived experience, and the passionate feelings prompted by it) was relatively unproblematic in the case of writers such as Smith and Wordsworth, the case of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* presented the intensity of emotion that would label them lyrical (and this constituted their unique value in a cultural economy looking to locate the "man

behind the works"), but the objects of his desire and loving affection reveal autobiographical details that were discomforting for commentators looking to construct an English literary icon. It would mean acknowledging Shakespeare's desire for a young man, and his extra-marital sexual experience, together with a persistent strain of mournful jealousy. Indeed, Stallybrass describes "the great *obstacle* that they formed in the smooth reproduction of the national bard" (p. 99, italics in the original). The intriguing result of this "obstacle," however, is that the relation between autobiography and lyric becomes the unspoken focus in discussion of the *Sonnets* across the century, constituting the currency in cultural debates looking either to deny or to recognize same-sex desire, jealousy, and melancholia in a figure now compellingly synonymous with national character. The complex process of unraveling, accommodating, excusing, and distinguishing between these two categories in what we might term this "land-mark case" of sonneteering (since it is born as much of the century's attitude toward the sonnet as towards Shakespeare) then constitutes a disruptive counter-narrative to that which would identify the *Sonnets* simply as an indicator of Victorian investment in the form as autobiographical.

Traditionally, the problem of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* has been attributed to their disruption of broader cultural investment in Shakespeare as national icon. But this overlooks the importance of their contravention of Victorian sonnet ideology, which may even be understood to precondition the problem they posed for Shakespeare's reception. Henderson's early-century investment in the form as gentle and emotional (when correctly handled) has already been mentioned, but this notion persisted across the century. In 1841 the *Christian Remembrancer* said of the form:

> There is no safer and more healthful kind of poetry. Capable, as we have already said, of pleasing none but the real lovers of the art, it presents little inducement to the writer to seek adventitious attractions, or to have recourse to vicious ornament. It rarely has room enough for rhetoric, and its narrow limits render a flaw either in the sense or the diction too perceptible to be tolerated. Hence, in cultivating the Sonnet, we are promoting the purity of our language.[15]

The journal's sense that the form's set-piece arrangement is a curb against vanity chimes with Phelan's indication that, for John Keble, the form's purity and sincerity stemmed precisely from its conventionality (Phelan, chap. 4).Indeed, echoing the eighteenth-century project of purification-via-Shakespeare, the writer commends the form as an ascetic tonic, guarding against the evils of excess whilst issuing its own health-giving properties. As such, the sonnet is brought into a Christian purview in which poetry is valued for its special capacity to impart emotional and spiritual succor—"the glorious art of Poetry" is "a kind of medicine divinely bestowed upon man"[16]—because poetic conventions

(such as sonnet arrangements) operate as encodings that can protect and transport spiritual significance, or even divine presence, allowing poetry to "express many things more touchingly, many things more seriously and weightily, all things more truly" (Keble, p. 481) than other writing. Indeed, the sonnet constitutes a special concentration of this capacity: "There is no form of verse better adapted for meditative religious poetry. A sensitive conscience may fear to give utterance to devotional feeling in any lengthened strain, from a dread of being led in the course of it into insincerity or unreality" ("On the Sonnet," p. 328). While William Davies guards against wrongful use of this facility—"it is necessarily an artificial construction; and yet . . . the artifice employed must be always kept out of sight, and its artificial nature in a manner neutralised by a simple, unaffected, and straightforward mode of utterance"—nevertheless, at base, he declares that "the Sonnet might be almost called the alphabet of the human heart, since almost every kind of emotion has been expressed, or attempted to be expressed in it."[17] Furthermore, this emotional weight is vitally imparted to the reader, in the case of Charles Tomlinson precisely because of its ambiguous status between emotion and comfortingly familiar convention. Indeed he began translating Petrarch's sonnets into English because, "in the winter of the year before last, finding myself in the presence of a great and abiding grief, I felt the need of some kind of employment that could be taken up and laid down as best suited the occasion, without injury to it or to my power of mastering it; and at the same time sufficiently difficult to absorb my best attention."[18] Pragmatism led to comfort as Tomlinson found that "the varied notes of sorrow poured out by him became grateful to me" (p. 1). Increasingly, therefore, the sonnet becomes totemic of a refined lyricism that "is discourse; it is utterance; it is man speaking to man, man telling man his thoughts and feelings."[19] As these examples demonstrate, the success of the sonnet form as poetry is dependent on a causal relationship between authentic feeling and conventional expression in which readers may not only sense the feeling of others, but also recognize their own.

Clearly, then, the contravention of the cherished principles specifically surrounding the sonnet form informs the agitated responses of those such as Henry Hallam to Shakespeare's use of it in his *Sonnets*. Lamenting their tone of address, Hallam admitted, "it is true that in the poetry as well as in the fictions of early ages, we find a more ardent tone of affection in the language of friendship than has since been usual"; but Shakespeare breaks even that caveat: "Yet no instance has been adduced of such rapturous devotedness, such an idolatry of admiring love, as the greatest being whom nature ever produced in the human form pours forth to some unknown youth in the majority of these sonnets."[20] Despite their sonnet arrangement, Shakespeare's feelings are, in every way, unconventional, unrecognizable. Further, Hallam attaches an implied erotic excess to linguistic deviancy: "so extravagant in the phrases

that the author uses" (p. 290), "so many frigid conceits are scattered around" (p. 291). He thus articulates his discomfort with Shakespeare's apparent desire for a young man in terms that derive from contemporary investment in the sonnet as conventional and benevolently communicative. This move then explicitly places them outside that enlightened space: there is "thrown an unaccountable mystery over the whole work" wherein "the obscurity is often such as only conjecture can penetrate" (p. 291). Of greatest concern—and this is only half-admitted by Hallam—is that with such distorted poetics comes distorted sincerity: "We might almost fancy the poet to have written without genuine emotion, did not such a host of other passages attest the contrary" (p. 291). Ultimately, Hallam's troubled conclusion cannot entertain a view of the *Sonnets* as insincere (and so, by contemporary terms, unpoetic), and so he is forced to reject them on terms that half-admit their autobiographical veracity: "Not withstanding the frequent beauties of these sonnets, the pleasure of their perusal is greatly damaged by these circumstances; and it is impossible not to wish that Shakespeare had never written them" (p. 291). Other writers echoed Hallam's example. *The Times*' "Thunderer" apparently relished the opportunity, afforded by the publication of Tennyson's elegy to Hallam's son, *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, in 1850, to lambast Shakespeare's *Sonnets* again in terms that group together their tone of affection with deviant style: "Very sweet and plaintive these verses are; but who would not give them a feminine application? Shakspeare may be considered the founder of this style in English."[21] The writer then moves from an exaggeration of Hallam's discomfort at finding excess where one expected proportion to scurrilous accusation of both Tennyson and Shakespeare: "One [leading defect] is the enormous exaggeration of the grief. . . . The disproportion of phrase is sometimes ludicrous, and occasionally it borders on blasphemy," a fault that may be attributed to "floating remembrances of Shakspeare's sonnets" (p. 8).

The aesthetic and moral concerns prompted by such a problematic text as Shakespeare's *Sonnets* demanded that Victorian commentators devoted great energies and print material to the poems, seeking to identify the historical persons who may have inspired such intense if troubling emotion. James Schiffer (pp. 3-74) provides a useful summary of the many suggestions put forward (including, most commonly, the Earl of Pembroke, William Herbert—fitting with the "Mr. W. H." of the dedication—or the Earl of Southampton, Henry Wriothesley, but also including "Willie Hughes" and even Queen Elizabeth I), which largely concentrate on unraveling the concerns prompted by the first group of poems. Charles Armitage Brown may have claimed that "the right understanding of these poems by no means depends on the discovery of the person to whom they were addressed," but he nevertheless considers the likely candidates and their biographies, choosing to "take the liberty, till better instructed, of designating him Master William Herbert, afterwards

Earl of Pembroke" (p. 44). This proves vital to Brown's other important claim that "in his time the language of love or of friendship was the same. His contemporaries spoke of a friendship between those of the same sex by the term of *love*; and the usual term of address for a friend, as may be seen in their letters, was *lover*" (p. 48, italics in the original). De Grazia describes this strategy as one in which the offence is made "linguistic and literary and not behavioural."[22] Such strategies go further in deflecting attention from the effusive passion directed toward the young man by operating also as a limiting device. By naming the particular man addressed, the *Sonnets*' inappropriate content could be attributed to the transient charms of a specific person from the past, rather than denoting a more lasting Shakespearean inclination or, indeed, a more persistent and intoxicating register of same-sex desire inscribed in English literary tradition.

Despite their apparent allegiance to embedding the *Sonnets* into Shakespeare's life and experience, such literary-historical readings posed a significant disruption to Victorian readings of the sonnet form—with Shakespeare's as typical—as autobiography. Gerald Massey's famous and widely circulated (if less widely accepted) theories loom large here. Although Massey picked up on investigators' efforts to excavate Shakespeare's personal history, his conjectures led him further away, not only from Shakespeare but also from conventional understanding of the sonnet form. With ever-increasing degrees of complexity, Massey set about devising a convoluted heterosexual narrative (constructed from clues within the poems) to lay over the most troubling aspects of the *Sonnets*' content, and claimed the sequence as an elaborate inducement to the Earl of Southampton to marry. Shakespeare thus emerged as the ghost-writer of a dramatic romance and the *Sonnets* as a series of epistles passed between members of the aristocracy in a preamble to epithalamion.[23] This argument works to account for Massey's startling claim, explained in his earlier article for the *Quarterly Review*, that the poems "do not express . . . the conduct or character of Shakespeare himself," but "most startlingly represent the character of Southampton."[24] While such solution offered a route away from a moral conundrum, it radically threatened the sonnet form as autobiography. As Massey admitted, it made Shakespeare, of all poets, "the most remote in his own personality" (p. 431). While claiming that Shakespeare is "at the heart of it all," the commentator finds that "yet he is nowhere visible" (p. 431). Effectively, by overpopulating the *Sonnets* with various historical figures, Massey and others introduced the possibility that the "I" of the poems' first-person address, which had so fueled fascination, was the site of performative ghost-writing, or even absence, rather than authentic Shakespearean expression. Despite the eccentricity of Massey's suggestions, the *Sonnets* were becoming the example that profoundly disrupted poetic logic and principle (a proposition that registers as concern across their reception history) since they created

distance, rather than intimacy, between their writer and his readers: "It is as though [Shakespeare] were in the next room; there is a partition wall between us" (Massey, p. 438).

Concluding thus Massey reprises Hallam's concerns that, far from offering a direct view of the English literary past, Shakespeare gives only a distorted, refracted view: "We learn Shakespeare, in fact, as we learn a language, or as we read a difficult passage in Greek, with the eye glancing on the commentary" (Hallam, pp. 332-333). Apparently unwittingly invoking Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* ("but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me"), Hallam's phrasing fuses the problem for cultural nationalism that the *Sonnets* posed with their linguistic obscurity. But, as has been seen, such obscurity issues specifically from the conjunction between the sonnet form and autobiography insisted on by cultural conditions at large in mid-century England. Commentators and poets' enthusiasm for the sonnet as an expressive form may have contributed to Victorian valuation of the *Sonnets*, yet, I suggest, this conjunction intriguingly unravels its own precepts even as it insists on them. Rather than constituting the definitive sonnet-as-autobiography case, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* serve to mark the limits, in fact, of the sonnet form as autobiography in a Victorian setting, since to read the *Sonnets* as autobiography necessitated the acceptance of inexorably self-canceling solutions. If Shakespeare's feeling was autobiographically truthful, and hence evidence of an intense and extra-marital desire in an English national icon, then the *Sonnets* became non-conformist with Victorian definitions of poetry since such autobiographical feelings were expressed to the reader only through complex, knotted and "frigid" conceits. Against a cultural reading of sonnets as containing in "every word . . . a breathing vitality: the utmost simplicity of expression being united to the greatest profundity of conception"—poems that "seem born out of the soul as naturally as flowers out of the earth" (Davies, p. 192)—the *Sonnets*' archaic wordplay, pun, riddle, and implied networks of imagery suggested a hidden language and cryptic allusion. Rather than denoting "melody and softness," and rather than delivering an eloquent reflection of values and principles already upheld within the reader, such skittish poems shifted before the eyes, evading meaning and doubling and trebling their dimensions with each linguistic trick. They therefore profoundly disrupt the sonnet-as-autobiography's understood convergence with investments in the lyric and poetic as benevolently expressive and communicative of identifiable feeling: the sonnets may be autobiographically lyrical, but only at the expense of both terms' cultural associations. To outwit this conundrum, the poems become historical documents that are only obscurely available to Victorian readers, disrupting appreciation of the timeless appeal of the autobiographical sonnet by exposing its historical contingency. At its extremity this solution finds the complexity of the *Sonnets*' mode attributable not to the feelings or the expressiveness of

their author, but to the circumstances surrounding their production; hence, the *Sonnets* become the record of an encoded, courtly, aristocratic romance in an arcane mode. With this they are neither the utterance of "Everyman" or, indeed, autobiographical at all.

The result of such a notable conflict of cultural interests is that the *Sonnets*, in fact, constitute an aporia for Victorian autobiographical readings of the sonnet, literally denoting a path that is impassable: "These sonnets appear like the pyramids of Egypt, baffling the traveller's skill to question them."[25] In seeking their meaning, the reader "enters the threshold, and scans the characters, carved on the stones, but they are a mystery to him." His path is terminal as "he passes into the chambers of the dead; they too are a mystery. He sees the cere-cloth and papyrus-scroll, and mummy-coffin, and the vaulted roof over head; they were all meant to immortalize the dead clay, but are now only a wonder and a mystery" (p. 117). Faced with such obscurity, one might expect to find the *Sonnets* shut up from Victorian view. And yet commentators are undeterred; indeed, it is in their complex engagement with these poems that we see the degree of cultural pressure exerted by the arrangement of "infinite riches in a little room"[26] on Victorian readings of autobiography and lyric.

Mid-century Interlude: Ways out of the Darkness

The *Westminster Review* was not the only baffled commentator in the face of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. Wholly relinquishing the frames of reference that the sonnet form elsewhere denoted, F. G. Fleay claimed that "the whole poem of the Sonnets was meant to be a mystification to outsiders; and the various meanings of these symbols are doubly intertangled, partly from intention, partly from some confusion in the author's thoughts."[27] Richard Chenevix Trench also found dams stemming the flow of feeling anticipated by their form, admitting that:

> Shakespeare's Sonnets are so heavily laden with meaning, so double-shotted, if one may so speak, with thought, so penetrated and pervaded with a repressed passion, that, packed as all this is into narrowest limits, it sometimes imparts no little obscurity to them; and they often require to be heard or read not once but many times, in fact to be studied, before they reveal to us all the treasures of thought and feeling which they contain.[28]

Henry Brown endorsed such a view by urging those who may not "like" Shakespeare to "'read him therefore again and again,'" particularly in the case of the *Sonnets* which are "throughout as dark as the Plays are clear!"[29] He goes on to claim that the poems are "pre-eminently parodies" of the sonneteering-tradition, constituting a complex rebuttal of the theory that would read them

as genuine expressions of desire while installing notions of performative, rhetorical excess firmly into the past. Strikingly putting the light out on the readability, at least, of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as autobiography, the Reverend George Gilfillan wonders that "it is most singular how the mystery, which more or less shrouds Shakspeare's entire history, should have intensified into a very blackness of darkness over the only work of his which partakes of an autobiographical character."[30] In attempting to beat a path across the aporia posed by the *Sonnets*, however, Gilfillan focuses on a choice that implies the conflict I suggest is brought about by the notion of an autobiographical sonnet in the case of Shakespeare: "We incline, so far as our present light goes, to that theory which would save Shakespeare's *character*, although at the expense of the artistic *coherence* of his Sonnets" (p. xxix, italics in the original). Gilfillan specifically places the poems beyond the definitive boundaries of the sonnet form's poetics of purity as voiced by Davies:

> The sonnet must consist of one idea, mood, or sentiment, solely; and never more than one. It must be a full, rounded, and complete organism; having all its parts maintained and elaborated in themselves, yet each dependent on the other; a portion of the same economy; as it were, a member of one body. (p. 190)

Instead Gilfillan sacrifices the poems' artistic status in conventional terms to a new poetics of variety, even accommodated performance, under an implied caveat of abstracted emotion:

> These seem the records of a vast number of moods, some his own, and some assumed, which have been thrown at haphazard, and without any order, as if into a common receptacle; and they constitute when taken out and read a mere chaos—although it be a chaos of interest and poetic beauty. (Gilfillan, p. xxix)

Radically shifting Davies' view of the sonnet as cohesive, Gilfillan implies that Shakespeare's "character" may be saved by viewing the *Sonnets* as various and haphazard. The persistent oddities of desire and misplaced emotion that might otherwise constitute a character flaw can be dissolved into a generalized range of muddied, overlapping, confused, and apparently transient "moods," which may take over an individual poem, but do not cohere into a single voice in pursuit of deviant desires. Gilfillan's strategy is rather startling in this way. It subtly shifts the ideology of "single-thought" expressions in the sonnet form away from its association with sincerity and deeply held feeling and towards the sense that a sonnet may simply be a holding station—a "receptacle"—for singular passing thoughts and fancies. As such, it destabilizes established connections between "character" and consistency by making Shakespeare's saved

character continuous with a reading of it as capable of adopting myriad forms and moods. Such characterization implies the need for a new reading method to be afforded to autobiographical and lyrical sonnets that can accommodate such variety, and indeed even entertain the possibility of irony and performance at the source of lyrical expression. Even so, its acknowledgement that even such "chaos" still possesses some brand of "poetic beauty" allows that aesthetic value (the very concept Gilfillan was willing to sacrifice) may emerge phoenix-like from the ashes. The *Sonnets* thus emerge as a morass of intensely felt yet disorganized emotion requiring a committed and sensitive reader to draw from them their moments of poetic worth and beauty.

Later Decades and the Turn to Transient Lyrical Feeling

In this Gilfillan anticipates the emerging responses to the *Sonnets* appearing in ensuing decades. Most strikingly, his notion that there is beauty and interest to be found in these poems if readers are willing to find new ways of approaching them feeds into a newly robust attitude towards the poems, clearly voiced by Robert Bell in his response to Massey's conjectures. Rather than characterizing the *Sonnets* as obscure, Bell turns on the commentators themselves, finding that Massey's notions "spread like a nightmare over the imagination."[31] By shifting the source of the obscurity in this way, Bell is able to characterize the poems against their would-be explicators as newly fresh, clear and—echoing the earlier view of the sonnet form as healthy—even benevolent:

> We must absolutely banish [interpretations] from our thoughts before we can go back to the poems with an unencumbered sense of pleasure. But when we have banished them, and find ourselves able to read the Sonnets again at our ease, it is like getting away in to the tranquilising repose and pure air of the country from the smoke and uproar of the town. (p. 741)

Bell anticipates William Sharp, who exasperatedly condemned those who "vainly evolv[ed] from their inner consciousness strange and monstrous imaginings," preferring instead to acknowledge "nothing but a plain declaration of the writer's loyal, self-renouncing, nobly persistent love for a younger and perhaps not wholly worthy friend" together with (in those poems address to the "Dark Woman") "the revelation of a great passion that for a season rendered full of bitter import the life of the greatest of our countrymen."[32] Vital to this renewal of enthusiasm for the *Sonnets*' expressive potential is the vigorous assertion of the veracity of feeling contained within the poems. This is achieved partly by shifting, again, accusations of inauthenticity onto the *Sonnets*' commentators and away from the poems themselves: "It is argued they can't be real or refer to real personal facts, because, if so, they reflect upon

Shakspeare's moral character. . . . Those who maintain this view must prove that the sonnets of Spenser, Drayton, and Daniel, and others, were also merely exercises of the imagination" ("Sonnets of Shakespeare," p. 126). Indeed, those who wish to reclaim the *Sonnets* are adamant that the poems' special value explicitly issues from their expression of sincere and personal feeling. Here we see a return to something approaching the disclosing, autobiographical implications of the sonnet form seen earlier in the century. Yet, where this return had been seen as a condition of the sonnet form, now a subtle shift allows a specifically Shakespearean use of the sonnet, which actually side-steps the specific biographical history of Shakespeare's life (now fading from view in response to the complexities discussed earlier) and focuses instead on the concentration of strong "Shakespearean" feeling. Commentators deal briskly with the personal implications of the *Sonnets* to relate how Shakespeare used the form to concentrate obscured but strongly felt emotion: the sonnet is not so much a record of autobiographical disclosure as of universal lyrical feeling. George Dawson, addressing an audience at the Masonic Hall in Birmingham, indeed, described the poems as "no playbook, but a leaf torn out of the human heart, speckled with the life-blood of the man who wrote it."[33] Extending this emotionalism to the rightful appreciators of such poetry, he went on to insist that "those who remembered that there were passions in the soul that shook it almost to death, who knew what it was to faint with emotion, to weep with passion, to lie almost dead with the over-mastering of feelings—let them open the book" (p. 6) No longer the neutralizer of agitation, the sonnet becomes its stimulation as near-erotic passion, rather than benevolent succor, passes from writer to reader.

Describing the poems in such fevered terms, Dawson in fact anticipates the tone of commentators in the last decades of the century who seek not only to assert the strength of feeling expressed, but also the strength of feeling excited by reading the poems. Tentatively probing the view of the sonnet itself as emotionally secure in its legitimate, Italian form, Dowden recourses to terms that evoke an aesthetic (or even decadent) sensual experience to ask "And what indeed was a sonneteer's passion but a painted fire? What was the form of verse but an exotic curiously trained and tended, in which an artificial sentiment imported from Italy gave perfume and colour to the flower?"[34] He then claims that for Shakespeare and his contemporaries such poetry "was not commonly caught out of the air, but—however large the conventional element in it may have been—was born of the union of heart and imagination; in it [are] real feelings and real experience" (p. xviii). We see here an intriguing shift in which the *Sonnets* are less problematically assimilated with the broader sonnet tradition; indeed, they trounce it, but this is achieved by emphasizing the emotional tone as intensified by artistic arrangement rather

than the specific circumstances that prompted it.

Where the conjunction between the sonnet form and such feelings may, in hands other than Shakespeare's, have inculcated benevolent action through soothing reassurance and gratifyingly harmonious expression, commentators in the latter half of the century center on the poems themselves, emphasizing less their effect on readers, and increasingly viewing Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as the records of "moods" that were melancholic, inward-looking, tortured, and heart-felt. Vitally, these moods are characterized by their singular intensity and by their non-narrative nature—discussion is generally accompanied by denials that the *Sonnets* constitute a single poem or consistent story, as had been suggested by Massey and others.[35] Such characterization does not preclude them from the discourse of the lyric. Rather, in a complex remembrance of Mill's assertion that poetry is "feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude,"[36] emphasizing the *Sonnets*' inward-looking, melancholic nature allows them to be labeled as safely meditative rather than erotically supplicatory: "They are . . . confessions;—confessions, such only as a great heart dare reveal;—confessions such as men make on bended knee in the privacy of their thoughts;—confessions, such as they think but One besides themselves can hear" ("Sonnets of Shakespeare, p. 128). As Sharp goes on to echo, they are a "private journal of his passion, and certainly not love-missives" (p. 21). This allows commentators explicitly to maintain an air of robust common-sense in opposition to those who would blur and obscure the emotions contained within the poems while yet still bracketing off these poems from the everyday life of Shakespeare:

> "So little is known of Shakspere," we often say with a sigh, but in truth we know more of him from his plays and from these very sonnets than of any other man that ever lived; not perhaps what sort of a coat he wore, or how he ate, or what he drank, but how he lived in his own world of thought—how he moved in that inward life of joy and sorrow, through which we all must pass. Here it was that Augustus Schlegel erred when he thought that the sonnets would afford material for a fresh biography of Shakspeare. They do not contain a number of mere facts which can be printed in so many columns of letter-press, and which generally pass under the name of biography, but relate to what is far more important—Shakspere's own thoughts, his communings with his own soul, his records upon the "whips and scorns of time," which he himself endured within his own breast."
>
> ("Sonnets of Shakespeare," p. 125)

In the case of commentators such as Sharp, or Palgrave—who nevertheless spoke of "reality" being "stamped on the *Sonnets*"[37]—this distinction is especially

marked as they encourage this setting apart of the *Sonnets* by settling on the equation of emotional pitch with transience. So Sharp points to Shakespeare as possessing humanity at its most intense—"[he] pipes a solitary tune of his own life, its love, its devotion, its fervour, its prophetic exaltation, its passion, its despair, its exceeding bitterness" (p. 15). Meanwhile Palgrave insisted that such feelings constituted a period of intensity through which Shakespeare nevertheless passed: "There is pleasure also in the belief, that this phase of feeling was transient, and that the sanity which, not less than ecstasy, is an especial attribute of the great poet, returned to Shakespeare" (p. 243). Sharp concurs by claiming that "Shakespeare, like many another man, had to pass through the dark valley of humiliation and weariness and sorrow" (p. 16) and is able to use this to assert, in fact, Shakespeare's expression of the general experience: "We may rest assured that he was pre-eminently manly, and therefore that he experienced all those emotions to which men are ordinarily liable" (p. 14). Palgrave and Sharp here strikingly evoke nineteenth-century readings of homosexual feeling as a youthful phase in order that they may embrace the *Sonnets* for their refreshing honesty and yet also protect their author from persistent association with such non-conformity.[38] Of concern to this essay is the fact that their emphasis on the quality of feeling limits their autobiographical detail (this was only a phase) in order to find in them emotional evidence that would assimilate them to the lyrical tradition. The very fact of this distinction then constitutes the sharp end-point of the *Sonnets*' engagement with the Victorian lyric since it prompts readers into reading the poems not in terms of their reflection of a parallel set of historical data, but on their own terms:

> The external facts, could we reach them, are of a very minor importance. A poet's story differs from a narrative in being in itself a creation. . . . Their dates, objects, and circumstances of publication belong only to the prose of the matter. Their history must be looked for within.
>
> (Palgrave, p. 241)

What is obscurely approached in these readings is the sense that these sonnets-as-lyrics emerge not as denotative of an autobiographical presence "behind" the poems, channeling their feeling into holding vessels, but rather as the very fabric and method of subjectivity itself. In suggestions that Shakespeare's is a "character rather to be *felt* than to be expressed by so many phrases and words set down upon paper" ("Sonnets of Shakespeare," p. 133, my italics), we catch glimpses of a radical reading of the lyric, in which subjective experience is not the premise of sonnet-lyrics, but their *effect*. Once these terms are set, then the potential for lyricism to reach beyond the historical circumstances of composition is unlocked.

It is this sense of unlocking from circumstances that then sets the terms

for their significant celebration in the last decade of the century. To return to Saintsbury's 1898 assessment, the poems are released to become "a harmonic of mighty heart-throbs and brain-pulsings which, once caught, never deserts the mind's ear. Like all the greatest poetry, this is almost independent of meaning though so full of it; you can attend to the sense or disregard it as you please, certain in each case of satisfaction" (p. 320). By such means, Shakespeare is understood to have "carried poetry—that is to say, the passionate expression in verse of the sensual and intellectual facts of life—to a pitch which it had never previously reached in English" (p. 319). Unlike the other man of letters, Lee, whose conjectures regarding the *Sonnets* were reported in the periodical press at the end of the decade, Saintsbury's enthusiasm is startling for its willingness to disregard the necessity of establishing historical circumstances around the poems. Lee may admit that the *Sonnets* "reach levels of lyric melody and meditative energy that are hardly to be matched elsewhere in poetry" (p. 87), but his main concern is to establish the identity of the various persons implied, and to historicize the use of conceits. However, Saintsbury's view is perhaps most surprising because it post-dates what had become the most notorious public debates of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, at Oscar Wilde's trial of 1895, which itself followed the publication of the short story, "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." It is here that the implications of this Shakespearean-driven debate of the autobiographical potential of sonnets reaches its striking conclusion. At that trial, Wilde was questioned over his depiction of relations between men as portrayed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and whether such depiction derived from his own experience. Defending himself, Wilde added layers to this already literary accusation by evoking Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:

> [Wilde:] The whole idea was borrowed from Shakespeare, I regret to say—yes, from Shakespeare's sonnets.
>
> [Carson:] I believe you have written an article to show that Shakespeare's sonnets were suggestive of unnatural vice?
>
> [Wilde:] On the contrary I have written an article to show that they are not. I objected to such a perversion being put upon Shakespeare.[39]

In the context of the complex critical debate examined in this essay, Wilde's strategy is risky. In bringing Shakespeare's *Sonnets* into view, Wilde not only gestures at a literary icon; he also opens the door on a century of debate of the extent to which a sonnet can be understood as an autobiographical expression. As one who was intimately familiar with the critical commentary surrounding Shakespeare's poems, Wilde aligns himself neatly with the commentators who had also sought to "object to . . . perversion being put upon Shakespeare."[40] With such assertion, Wilde thus ushers in a reading of the sonnet form not as autobiography (where autobiography denotes a lived experience), but as

intense, yet abstracted, emotion. In dismantling the poetics of direct expression on which the courtroom sought to convict him by mapping his literary expression onto his bodily activity, Wilde precludes himself, Shakespeare, and the sonnet form itself from its indication of disclosure or even confession. Rather we see the complex playfulness of Wilde's strategy, and of the sonnet form at the end of the century: an endless evasion of circumstance, confession, and autobiographical record, as is consistent with the legacy of the text he evokes:

> Enigmas, written indeed in golden characters, but written in an unknown tongue; and which, although apparently intended to cast light on the history, do, in reality, only reveal new riches in the genius and new mysteries in the personal experience of the poet.
> (Gilfillan, p. xxxvi)

In typically dizzying fashion, at the moment when Wilde may speak together with Shakespeare in an autobiographical mode, he simply opens the door on a century of contention, on the case of lyricism distinct from autobiography, and on a series of poems that Victorian commentators had repeatedly sought to divorce from circumstances. As Palgrave said of the poems, "though each is an autobiographical confession, we find ourselves equally foiled" (p. 239).

Afterword

This essay's exposition of the complexity and debate that is, in fact, implied by the notion that for the Victorians Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were autobiographical then serves to illustrate the contingencies upon which ideologies of form are constructed. Such consideration is vital if we are fully to understand not only the richness of Shakespeare's reception history, but also the specific and ongoing significance of the sonnet as a lyrical form in the nineteenth century. It is clear that the sonnet form in the nineteenth century denotes as much dissemblance as disclosure, as much performance as sincerity. Such histories are then imperative to our understanding of the cultural import of subsequent uses of the form, perhaps especially where we find writers specifically appealing to the past. When it is acknowledged that Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were, for the Victorians, not simply the "key that unlocked Shakespeare's heart"—and not even simple historical artifact—but a contentious, dangerous, obscure and fascinating text, it is possible to see how Shakespeare's poems became something understood as simultaneously expressive and reflexive: how they were effectively shaped into Victorian cultural products.

Notes

1 William Wordsworth, "Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned," (1827) in *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 300.

2 Sidney Lee, *A Life of William Shakespeare*, with portraits and facsimiles (London, 1898), p. 87.

3 See Simon Jarvis, *Scholars and Gentlemen: Shakespearian Textual Criticism and Representations of Scholarly Labour, 1725-1765* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

4 Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 134.

5 James Schiffer, "Reading New Life into Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Survey of Criticism," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 20.

6 Margreta de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 161, 134.

7 *Petrarca: A Selection of Sonnets from Various Authors with an Introductory Dissertation on the Origin and Structure of the Sonnet*, ed. George Henderson (London, 1803), pp. xxi, xxiii, xxii; quoted in Natalie Houston, "Valuable by Design: Material Features and Cultural Value in Nineteenth-Century Sonnet Anthologies," *VP* 37, no. 2 (1999): 251.

8 "Mr Oldys observes . . . that [sonnets 92 and 93] 'seem to have been addressed by Shakespeare to his beautiful wife.' . . . He must have read our author's poems with but little attention; otherwise he would have seen that these, as well as all the preceding Sonnets, and many of those that follow, are not addressed to a female" (Edmond Malone, *Supplement to the edition of Shakespeare's plays published in 1778 by Johnson & Steevens*, 2 vols. [1780;. facsimile edn. London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1995], p. 653).

9 "There is only one point about the Italian sonnet that requires to be mentioned. In form it is what is generally known as legitimate" ([John Dennis], "The English Sonnet," *Cornhill Magazine* 25 [May 1872]: 581). See also Alison Chapman, "Sonnet and Sonnet Sequence," in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 99-114; and Houston, "Valuable by Design," pp. 243-272.

10 See de Grazia; and Peter Stallybrass, "Editing as Cultural Formation: The Sexing of Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Modern Language Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1993): 91-103.

11 George Saintsbury, *A Short History of English Literature* (London, 1898), p. 319.

12 Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 43.

13 Natalie Houston, "Affecting Authenticity: *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Modern Love*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 104.

14 David Masson, "Shakespeare and Goethe," *British Quarterly Review* (November 1852), repr. in *Essays Biographical and Critical* (Cambridge, 1856), pp. 8, 12. See also Charles Armitage Brown, whose study was titled *Shakespeare's Autobiographical Poems* (London, 1838) and yet who claimed that "these *Sonnets* are not, properly speaking, sonnets," and later named each a "stanza, (I refuse to call them *sonnets* for the future)" (pp. 44, 46).

15 "On the Sonnet," *Christian Remembrancer* n.s. no. 2 (December 1841): 328.

16 John Keble, "Inaugural Oration, or Lecture I," in *Keble's Lectures on Poetry, 1832-1841*, trans. Edward Kershaw Francis, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 1:22.

17 [William Davies], "The Sonnet," *Quarterly Review* 134, no. 1 (1873): 190, 186.

18 Charles Tomlinson, *The Sonnet: Its Origin, Structure, and Place in Poetry with Original Translations from the Sonnets of Dante, Petrarch, etc., and remarks on the art of translating* (London, 1874), p. 1.

19 Francis Garden, unsigned article, *Christian Remembrancer,* n.s. no. 4 (July 1842): 49.

20 Henry Hallam, *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1839), 3:290.

21 Manley Hopkins, "The Poetry of Sorrow," *Times* (November 28, 1851): 8.

22 Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Shakespeare Survey* 46 (1994): 38.

23 Gerald Massey, *Shakespeare's Sonnets never before interpreted: His private friends identified: together with a recovered likeness of himself* (London, 1866).

24 [Gerald Massey], "Shakespeare and his Sonnets," *Quarterly Review* 115 (April 1864): 459. Later, Charles Mackay made a similar claim: "For these and other reasons that might be cited, the unconnected sonnets scattered through the third series may well be ascribed to Marlowe, whose position they so faithfully portray, and not to Shakespeare, into whose character and circumstances they do not fit in the slightest respect" ("A Tangled Skein Unravelled, or the Mystery of Shakespeare's Sonnets," *The Nineteenth Century* 16 [August 1884]: 251).

25 "The Sonnets of Shakespeare," *Westminster Review* n.s. no. 12 (1857): 117.

26 *English Sonnets: A Selection*, 2nd edition, ed. John Dennis (London, 1881), p. x.

27 F. G. Fleay, "On the Motive of Shakspere's Sonnets (1-125). A Defence of his Morality," *Macmillan's Magazine* 31 (March 1875): 441.

28 Richard Chenevix Trench, *A Household Book of English Poetry* (London, 1868), p. 392n.

29 Henry Brown, *The Sonnets of Shakespeare Solved and the mystery of his friendship, love, and rivalry revealed* (London, 1870), p. 1.

30 George Gilfillan, *The Poetical Works of William Shakspeare and the Earl of Surrey* (Edinburgh, 1856), p. xxix.

31 Robert Bell, "Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Fortnightly Review* 5, no. 30 (1866): 741.

32 *The Songs, Poems and Sonnets of William Shakespeare*, ed. William Sharp (London, 1885), pp. 10-11, 12.

33 "Mr. G. Dawson on the Sonnets of Shakespeare," *Birmingham Daily Post* (February 16, 1872): 6.

34 *The Sonnets of William Shakspere*, ed. Edward Dowden (London, 1896), p. xvii.

35 "We must guard against the theory that they are continuous poems in the sonnet-stanza" ("Sonnets of Shakespeare," p. 127); "They were not intended, at the time when they were written, to form a consecutive poem" (T. Spalding, "Shakspere's Sonnets," *Gentleman's Magazine* 242 [March 1878]: 300). The view that the collection should be viewed as a continuous whole was put forward particularly by Charles Armitage Brown and by Fleay (pp. 433-445). An emphasis on lengthy, intertwined narratives over discrete episodes of intensity is seen in discussions of the *Sonnets* that seek to characterize the

nature of the love they express between men, focused especially through comparison with Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. See Rhian Williams, "Shakespeare, His Sonnets, *In Memoriam*, and the Reviewers," *Tennyson Research Bulletin* 8, no. 3 (2004): 178-189.

36 J. S. Mill, "What is Poetry?" in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson and others, 33 vols. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981-91), 1:348.

37 *Songs and Sonnets by William Shakespeare*, ed. F. T. Palgrave (London, 1880), p. 241.

38 For consideration of this Victorian attitude and its bearing on Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, and on responses to them, see Jeff Nunokawa, "*In Memoriam* and the Extinction of the Homosexual," *English Literary History* 58, no. 2 (1991): 427-438.

39 *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, ed. H. Montgomery Hyde (London, 1948), pp. 129-130.

40 For full consideration of Wilde's relationship with Victorian commentary on the *Sonnets* see Russell Jackson, "Oscar Wilde and Shakespeare's Secrets," in *In the Footsteps of Queen Victoria*, ed. Christa Jansohn (London: LIT Verlag, 2003), pp. 301-314.