

INTRODUCTION

Many teachers of English make an eclectic use of the one hundred and fifty-four poems that were collected somehow or other in 1609 and published together as *Shake-speares Sonnets*. Acting on the evident integrity of each one of these little exercises, individual teachers select one or two or three to exemplify metrical organization or figurative style or poetic tone, or sometimes simply to show a skeptical or a complacent class what can be done with the language. Many editors, similarly, pick out one or a few or several poems from the *Sonnets* to fill the pages of popular anthologies and literary texts. Such practices seem to me to be critically proper and culturally beneficial.

In my own experience, however, and in my observation of colleagues, I have detected an impressionistic, not to say careless, choice of the particular sonnet or sonnets to be presented to readers and pupils. Winters and Fields, the only editors I know who made their selections—for the anthology *Quest for Reality*—strictly on the basis of excellence, printed Sonnets 73, 77, 87, and 129. Most other editors of anthologies for which Shakespeare's short poems were suitable have reproduced two of these, 73 and 129, which are probably the most widely respected of his sonnets. Few editors, however, have included 87, and almost no other anthologist has printed 77. Neither the *Norton Anthology* nor the *Norton Introduction*, the editors of which disagree between themselves on other selections, prints either of these poems. Very few editors, again, have recognized 121, which I will attempt to establish among Shakespeare's most excellent sonnets; and hardly anyone has presented another of my first choices, 104. The point is not merely that we disagree widely about the relative merits of Shakespeare's sonnets but, further, that we disagree without making any apparent effort at rational selection or rational explanation. In general, editors seem to begin with a number of conventional favorites, 55, 116, and 146, for example, in addition to 73 and 129; and then to add others, on grounds that would be hard to deduce, until they fill up a certain space. Teachers, similarly, pick particular sonnets for assignment and discussion which have achieved conventional eminence or been illuminated in a literary publication, which they hold in some kind of personal regard, or with which

they once had good classroom luck; usually, of course, they confine their choices to the sonnets they find in their present text. Scholars and critics have unfortunately failed, moreover, to provide teachers and editors with much guidance. Even L. C. Knights, who described the individual evaluation of these extremely various poems as the most pressing concern facing students of *Shake-speares Sonnets*, has himself dodged it. And most critics are as impressionistic, as rationally unaccountable for their likes and dislikes, as the teachers and editors.

Since we do nevertheless often choose which ones of Shakespeare's sonnets to print and assign and discuss, and since we are almost always forced to choose a very few and to neglect the rest, selection is a matter of real and practical concern. It is surely true, moreover, as Knights asserted, that the collection as a whole is very uneven: certain individual sonnets are supremely excellent, many are fine, and others, some of which are among the most famous, are demonstrably defective. It seems evident to me, especially when one or another of these poems is presented as an emblem or an example of English poetry—and this is a common application of these remarkable little effusions of our greatest writer—that the selection of one with a weak quatrain or a striking lapse in energy or a serious failure of coherence does harm to readers and students. Those who teach or publish a selection of the sonnets should, then, take special pains to discover and to disclose the best. Teachers and editors, to speak more modestly, since no aesthetic determination can be final, should make their choices evaluatively, presenting the one or the four or the twenty sonnets that they have decided, by the time they make their selection, to be the very best one or four or twenty. The present monograph is one step toward the fulfillment of this proposition.

I have erected the evaluative pyramid of Shakespeare's sonnets that I believe to be in order continuously aware of the limitation to such an enterprise that Aristotle has described. "It is the mark of an educated man," as he recognized in the introduction of his *Nichomachean Ethics*, "to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits." This warning is especially pertinent to anyone who is attempting, as I have done in this essay, to exalt the very best poems in *Shake-speares Sonnets*, to designate the second and third best, and, relatively speaking, to depress the remainder. I have faced the indicated danger in a number of ways: first, by building on the great tradition of interest and study that surrounds these sonnets. This tradition, although not fully explicit on the point, has distinguished a number of poems, several of which I have already listed, as especially worthy of attention; and has suggested, by its very neglect, that many of the others are much less so. There are a number of other poems, moreover, besides those that have been exalted by convention, which have been especially distinguished by individual critics: 94 (by

William Empson), 124 (by Arthur Mizener), 12 (by Stephen Booth), 107 (by Leslie Hotson), 71 (by Mark Van Doren)—to list a few of these. Every single well-known or well-served poem in the collection I have tried to take explicit notice of. There are no doubt a number of elegant poems—15, 54, and 106, for instance—a number of engaging poems—18, 23, 97, and 141, for instance—and several problematical poems—chiefly 53, 66, 110, and 144—to which I have paid scant attention. I felt that these, although quite valuable, were not among the very best of the sonnets; and, further, that this was the general opinion about them. It may be argued with some justice that I have actually constructed only the peak of my evaluative pyramid. I have attempted, however, to discuss, often at length, every poem that any segment of the tradition might have judged to be among the most excellent. When I found myself in substantial agreement with the cultural consensus, as in the case of 129, or with a great literary critic, as with Yvor Winters on 87, I have taken heart; when not, I have taken pains. All my efforts to relocate any sonnet or otherwise to modify the traditional structure of opinion I have explained as fully as I was able. My evaluative pyramid is thus to a considerable extent a rationalization and to some extent a reconstruction of the pyramid of attention and regard erected by our culture as a whole.

I have tested my individual judgments on colleagues and often reconsidered my arguments in response to their criticism. Arnold Stein and Stanley Fish, for example, helped me refine “A Poem Turned in Process,” which first appeared in the pages of *English Literary History*. John Parish, who serves on the board of RICE UNIVERSITY STUDIES, read my whole manuscript and made suggestions that have prompted me to improve almost every page. Christopher Drummond criticized several chapters of the work with an especially beneficial skepticism. And Monroe Spears has shared his fine apprehension of the sonnets with me over the course of the last decade. The wealth of books and essays on the *Sonnets*, many of which are acknowledged in my notes, further augmented and focused my reliance on the literary tradition and my effort to share and by sharing to sharpen my arguments and my determinations. I was unable, however, to benefit adequately from any of the “Five Books on Shakespeare’s Sonnets” that Thomas P. Roche, Jr., recently reviewed in *Shakespeare Quarterly*. I especially regret my tardy discovery of one of them, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Meditations* by Giorgio Melchiori: the analyses of Sonnets 121 and 129 presented in this book would have strengthened my evaluation of those two poems, and its explication of 146 might have prompted me to consider that one once again. Luckily the author of another of these five recent books, Stephen Booth, participated with Barbara Herrnstein Smith and me a few years ago on the panel of an MLA Seminar, “Evaluating Shakespeare’s Sonnets.” Their performance at that meeting, their

acquaintance, and the examples provided by their published works have helped me to measure my judgments more carefully and to assert them with less complacency. Various encouraged and controverted by such colleagues as these, I have striven to achieve the degree of precision in my evaluations that seemed both possible and necessary.

I have tried to establish all of my opinions, in the words of Dr. Johnson, not dogmatically but deliberately. My particular evaluations have been squared, not only with judgments that can be drawn from the culture, but also with certain widely accepted standards of poetic excellence, primarily, for reasons that I explain in my first chapter, with the principle of integrity. My conclusions, moreover, have been presented experimentally, argumentatively. I hope that other students of Shakespeare's sonnets and, indeed, of English literature in general will find it worth their while publicly to approve or to oppose these conclusions; and that the evaluative attitude, which I here advocate, will spread. "I publish not this so much for anything else," George Berkeley averred while contemplating the release of his shocking philosophy of immaterialism, "as to know whether other men have the same ideas as we Irishmen." It is in the same spirit that I herewith present my evaluations of Shakespeare's sonnets.