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154 Ways of Looking
at a Sonnet

Kevin Murphy on *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*

The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets
Helen Vendler
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W. H. Auden, in his introduction to a 1972 edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, summed up the then-state of scholarship and criticism as follows:

Probably, more nonsense has been talked and written, more intellectual and emotional energy expended in vain, on the sonnets of Shakespeare than on any other literary work in the world. Indeed, they have become the best touchstone I know of for distinguishing the sheep from the goats, that is, those who love poetry for its own sake and understand its nature from those who value poems only either as historical documents or because they express feelings or beliefs of which the reader happens to approve.¹

He goes on to say some not very kind words about the "goats of idle curiosity," that is, those people who read the sonnets to discover what they can about Shakespeare's personal life, an activity he compares to opening someone else's mail. On the other hand, he doesn't have much better things to say about the "goats of ideology" who have read the sonnets in such a way as to avoid or deflect the full impact of passionate devotion contained in them or who have neglected to acknowledge that the passion depicted therein is directed at both a young man and a woman.

Since Auden's essay there have been several comprehensive editions of the *Sonnets* which have moved well beyond his criticisms, but the *Sonnets* themselves continue to be a site of critical contention.²

¹ *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (1972), 1722.

² See, for example, Stephen Booth's *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1977), John Kerrigan's "*The Sonnets*" and "*A Lover's Complaint*" (1986), and more recently G. B.

The English Renaissance, or the Early Modern Period as it is now known, has been a fertile ground for a variety of innovative critical approaches, with New Historicism leading the field, and the *Sonnets* have attracted an array of psychoanalytic, sociopsychological, and semantic studies, all of which place the poems in broad social contexts. These different approaches to the literature of the period, and to the *Sonnets* in particular, have at times pitted, at least at the level of methodology, contextual analysis against more traditional "close reading" (what used to be known as New Criticism), much to the traditionalist's disadvantage. With the appearance of Helen Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, however, the focus of attention clearly, and perhaps definitively, shifts back to the poems themselves.³

Helen Vendler, who is the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard, is best known for her reviews of contemporary poetry which regularly appear in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The New Republic*. Her criticism, both positive and negative, has provoked controversy in different circles (She has, on the one hand, described Sharon Olds' poetry as "pornographic" and Philip Levine's as "gushing," while, on the other, she has consistently forwarded, much to the puzzlement of other poets, the poetry of Jorie

Evans's *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1996). Katherine Duncan-Jones has also edited the new Arden edition of the *Sonnets* which is about to be released.

³ For a range of these textual and contextual approaches, see, for example, *Shakespeare Reread*, ed. Russ MacDonald (1994). For a more comprehensive review of recent Shakespeare scholarship and criticism, see Vendler's "Works Consulted," which runs 11 pages.

Graham). Regardless of the direction of the criticism, though, there is no question as to Vendler's power in shaping contemporary poetic opinion (At one point a *New York Times* caricature portrayed her as a head on a tank). But she has also written books on the drama of William Butler Yeats and the poetry of Wallace Stevens and George Herbert. In addition, in what proved to be a tour de force of close analysis, she wrote an entire volume on the six odes of John Keats, a book she considers her favorite work to date.

Extending the method of analysis in the Keats volume, Vendler here, after providing a 41-page introductory essay, presents the text of each of the 154 sonnets of Shakespeare, first reprinting the 1609 Quarto text, and beneath placing a modern version. Opposite each sonnet, she provides a "mini-essay" for each poem (there is a combined essay for sonnets 153 and 154), one which proposes to examine the sonnet as an "aesthetic" entity. The bulk of the volume, then, is over 600 pages of poetic text and commentary, a daunting prospect. As Vendler herself cautions, "Of course, this Commentary is not intended to be read straight through. I think of it as a work that those interested in the *Sonnets*, or students of the lyric, or poets hungry for resource, may want to browse in."

The modesty of this disclaimer, however, downplays the reach and the engagement of the book. In her acknowledgments she lists her teachers of poetry throughout her intellectual formation, from Sister Marie Barry, her first teacher of poetry at Emmanuel College, to I. A. Richards and John Kelleher, her mentors when she was a graduate student at Harvard. More poignantly, she recounts her first exposure to the poems:

My mother was the first person to introduce me to Shakespeare's sonnets. She quoted them often, and had memorized many of them. Her last pieces of writing (which we found after Alzheimer's disease had robbed her of memory) were fragments of the *Sonnets* which, either from fear of forgetting or as a means of self-assurance, she had written down on scraps of paper. It is no mean tribute to the *Sonnets* that they, of the hundreds of poems she knew by heart, were the last to fade.

In the course of writing the commentaries, Vendler memorized all 154 poems, or, as she says more tellingly, "I found it necessary to learn the *Sonnets* by heart." As her introductory essay makes clear, Vendler intends to defend vigorously not only her particular approach to the reading of the sonnets but also her understanding of lyric poetry in general. Vendler has spent a lifetime with these poems, and these analyses constitute nothing less than a personal and professional apologia.

At the outset of her introductory essay, then, she indicates her dissatisfaction with current approaches to the sonnets, and, in doing so, points to the salient assumptions of her own criticism:

Contemporary emphasis on the participation of literature in a social matrix balks at acknowledging how lyric, though it may refer to the social, remains the genre that directs its *mimesis* toward the performance of the mind in *solitary* speech. Because lyric is intended to be voiceable by anyone reading it, in its normative form it deliberately strips away most social specification (age, regional location, sex, class, even race).

This solitariness is crucial: the speaker's words are not meant to be "overheard" by a reader (as suggested by John Stuart Mill and T. S. Eliot); moreover, the speaker's imagined addressee "can by definition never be present." Vendler insists, "Lyric can present no 'other' as alive and listening or responding in the same room as the solitary speaker." For Vendler the lyric presents a kind of Emersonian Soul momentarily withdrawn from the restraints of social distortion and definition, and therefore free to articulate sentiments of a more universal character.

Further, not only does the lyric free the speaker from identification by sex, class, or race, but it also contains and requires a relationship with its reader which distinguishes the lyric from drama and fiction. As she says,

The act of the lyric is to offer a reader a script to say....While the social genres "build in" the reader as either as listener (to the narrator of a novel) or as audience (to a play), the private literary genres--such as the Psalms, or prayers printed in prayer books, or secular lyrics--are scripted for repeated personal recitation. One is to utter them as one's own words, not as the words of another.

This equation, at least in terms of genre, of Psalms, prayers, and secular lyrics is revealing. Vendler approaches lyric poetry with, if not a religious, at least a devout sensibility.⁴

⁴ Vendler, when asked directly by Henri Cole in a *Paris Review* interview, described herself as an atheist with no belief in an afterlife. On the other hand, when he asked her if she believed in the existence of souls, Vendler noted the interdependence of body and soul: "We have a very highly organized nervous system, which when it works well is

In terms of the *Sonnets* themselves, Vendler says that she regards her own writing "as part of a long collaborative effort to take the measure of Shakespeare--an effort that shows no sign of waning." She acknowledges a range of interpretations, from the psychoanalytic to the historical, paying particular gratitude to Stephen Booth's edition of the *Sonnets* with its rich emphasis on Shakespeare's language. Still, Vendler finds Booth wanting ("Booth gives up too easily on interpretation"), and, in spelling out her disagreement, presents the axiom of her own critical method:

But any respectable account of a poem ought to have considered its chief formal features. A set of remarks on a poem which would be equally true of a prose paraphrase of that poem is not, by my standards, interpretation at all.

Commentary on the propositional content of a poem is something entirely different from the interpretation of a poem, which must take into account the poem's linguistic strategies as well as its propositional statements.

This of course goes to the heart of "close reading," a term that Vendler doesn't like (As Richard Howard has pointed out, it implies there might be such a thing as a faraway reading). She much prefers to consider herself approaching poetry "from the point of view of the writer." As she has said elsewhere:

It's a view from the inside, not from the outside. The phrase "close reading" sounds as if you're looking at the text with a microscope from outside, but I would rather think of a close reader as

something that we refer to as the soul." *The Paris Review*, "The Art of Criticism III," (Winter 1996) 209.

someone who goes inside a room and describes the architecture. You speak from inside the poem as someone looking to see how the roof articulates with the walls and the wall articulates with the floor. And where are the crossbeams that hold it up, and where are the windows that let light through?⁵

In line with this writerly stance or perspective, Vendler wishes to ask of Shakespeare's sonnets the two questions that W. H. Auden in *The Dyer's Hand* said interested him in reading any poem. (The choice of Auden is doubly appropriate not only because he excelled as both poet and critic but also because his title comes from Sonnet 111--"My nature is subdued/ To what it works in, like the dyer's hand"). For Auden, a poem is first of all a "verbal contraption," and the initial question he puts to it is "How does it work?" Once that technical perspective is established, he will then move on to the second, more broad array of moral issues and questions which frequently constitute the starting point of most interpretative modes.

But this distinction (and interrelation) between the technical and the moral implications of the poem is crucial. As Vendler says, "Like any poet, Auden knows that the second question cannot be responded to correctly until the first has been answered. It is the workings of the verbal construct that give evidence of the moral stance of the poet." Vendler goes to state the central justification of both her method and her subsequent analyses:

I believe that the deepest insights into the moral world of the poem, and into its

⁵ "The Art of Criticism III," *The Paris Review*, 190.

constructive and deconstructive energies, comes precisely from understanding it as a contraption made of "words," by which I mean not only the semantic units we call "words" but all the language games in which the words can participate. Because many essays on the sonnets attempt moral and ethical discussion without any close understanding of how the poems are put together, I have emphasized in this Commentary the total "contraptionness" of any given sonnet as the first necessary level of understanding.

This prioritizing of form over content, or more accurately, this fusion of the two, is at the heart of Vendler's criticism.

Beyond this central issue, Vendler will not address or explore many of the issues which have sidetracked earlier commentators. She will not, for example, concern herself with a search for the biographical origins of the *Sonnets*. She will distinguish between Shakespeare the author and the fictive self whom she names as the speaker of the sonnets, but acknowledges that at times the two are "designedly blurred," since the person speaking in the sonnets is also an author. In addition, "in the interest of common sense," she has decided to hold to the convention that "assumes that the order of the sonnets as we have them is Shakespearean."

What Vendler will concern herself with, though, as she turns to the individual sonnets is Shakespeare's "wonderful fertility in structural complexity." The Shakespearean sonnet form, though not invented by Shakespeare, is "manipulated by him in ways unknown to his predecessors." Its four-part form (three isomorphic quatrains and an anomalous couplet) offers a greater variety of permutation and possibility than does the two-part Petrarchan form, and Shakespeare's manipulation of the logical

relationships between these parts is parallel to “an evolving inner emotional dynamic” in the mind of the fictive speaker of each poem. As Vendler says, “The crucial rule of thumb in understanding any lyric is that every significant change in linguistic pattern represents a motivated change in feeling in the speaker.”

Moreover, as Vendler explores the manner in which the various compositional strategies reveal and clarify the mental processes of the speaker, that character is given “realness” and “depth” of character as each sonnet contributes to an incremental “thick description” of this mind in emotional and intellectual transfiguration. From one perspective, then, the poems present, à la Wallace Stevens, 154 ways of looking at a sonnet; from another, their sum is to be understood as greater than the individual parts. As she says, “Shakespeare’s speaker, alone with his thoughts, is the greatest achievement, imaginatively speaking, of the sequence.”

When Vendler approaches the individual poems, some of the changes in linguistic pattern that she points to throughout the *Sonnets* can be very technical. She proposes, for example, what she calls a “Couplet Tie,” in which the significant words from the body of each sonnet are repeated in the couplet. Tracing these words throughout each sonnet illuminates “how the same words take on different emotional import as the poem progresses.” Frequently, too, Vendler provides a diagram sketching the particular shift in rhetoric, semantics, or image occurring throughout the sonnet at hand, a device that can prove, as one reads through the essays, to be as irritating as it is illuminating.

But what Vendler calls the “strategies of unfolding” within each poem is

most intriguing and varies widely among the poems. For example, in a familiar sonnet such as 73 (“That time of year thou mayst in me behold”) in which the speaker compares himself to late autumn, twilight, and the glowing embers of a dying fire, Vendler points out that the interpretation of the poem would be different if the *sequence* of images differed. The shift from chronological to spatial imagery has a significant effect on the shape and consequence of the poem. Even more closely, she notes the implications, both linguistic and psychological, of using the verbal “glowing” in the third comparison which replaces the nouns (“that time of year” and “twilight”) of the first two. A prose paraphrase of the sonnet which does not take into account these linguistic features of the poem would not, according to Vendler’s criteria, constitute interpretation at all.

At times, Vendler’s “mini-essay” provides a one- or two-page commentary on lexical or anagrammatical matters. At other times, though, her analysis is much more substantial. Her essay accompanying Sonnet 129 is one of the highlights of the volume, and her analysis provides a good illustration of these strategies of unfolding. First, here is the poem:

**Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of
blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have,
extreme;
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe,
Before a joy proposed, behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows yet none
knows well**

**To shun the heaven that leads men to
this hell.**

This interrogation of lust and its aftermath is surely one of the most famous of the sonnets, all the more so given its anguished tone, which contrasts sharply with other sonnets addressed to the Dark Lady.

Most critics have approached this poem as a definition of lust along what Vendler calls an "axis of similarity"; that is, lust is initially defined negatively as "an expense of spirit" (which puns on an ejaculation of semen as well as an expenditure of spirit), and all the characteristics subsequently attributed to lust throughout the poem add to and support this negativity. Vendler, on the other hand, proposes a different approach, one which emphasizes the changing description of lust across the poem.

She notes the poem opens in an impersonal voice (unlike the first-person speaker in most of the sonnets), one which attempts to define lust in a philosophic or homiletic manner. But this supposed objectivity quickly collapses into an outpouring of adjectives of social trespass ("perjured," "full of blame," "not to trust" and so forth). Further, by the third quatrain, any pretense at the homiletic has disappeared. As Vendler archly observes, "a cleric might be conceived of as pronouncing the octave, but not the sestet, which certifies lust as 'a bliss in proof,' 'a dream,' and a 'heaven.'"

But for Vendler an even more fundamental shift in the description takes place across the poem. In the first eight lines we have a repentant mind in the act of self-loathing, a sort of "morning after" remorse in which the mind which repents attempts to separate itself from the mind which yielded. But in the third quatrain, the diction changes

dramatically: in this section lust at first seemed like a "bliss," later it turned out to be a "woe"; more tellingly, to the speaker lust first seemed like a "joy," later it turned out to be a "dream." What was presented earlier in terms of revulsion takes on a very different coloration, one which counterbalances the initial disgust with an emotion more alluring. As Vendler says, "The poem gives us, in short, two absolutely incompatible yet two absolutely reliable retrospective accounts of lust." As it happens, we all understand intimately these two models of experience: "the model of 'What I think of it now that I look back' and the model of 'How it felt while it was happening'."

What makes Vendler's interpretation appealing is the fact that one version does not take precedence over the other. To illustrate the simultaneity she sees at play in the poem, she borrows a metaphor from the visual arts: "The poem corrects its first judgmental telling by a second, affective one, but, unlike an overpainted painting, does not entirely obliterate the first sketch." Instead, the couplet (whose final "this hell" brings the speaker full circle back to the anguished start of the poem) acknowledges ironically the cycle of attraction and remorse which will be compulsively played out over and over: "Though the third layer of ironic knowledge we see still the two underpaintings--the penitenti--the first of a post-erotic hell, the second of a brief erotic heaven." Vendler supports this complex portrait of retrospective remorse and vulnerability with detailed analyses of the diction, grammar, and sequence (what she calls "the conspicuous signals afforded by the poem"), and the result is a brilliant rendering of the poem's aesthetic dynamic.

For all Vendler's enlightening and subtle interpretations, and there are many of them, there are places where Vendler's strict definition of the lyric as a solitary activity and

her interpretations of the poems seem to strain against each other. In some cases, she says we should consider a sonnet a “reply” to some previous assertion made by one of the protagonists. She considers, for example, Sonnet 116 (“Let me not to the marriage of true minds”) to be such a case; that is, that the rhetorical shape of the poem is less a definition of ideal unchanging love than it is a reply to the young man's assertion that love does indeed alter as circumstances change. At other times, she sees a “ghost-poem” lurking beneath the surface of the sonnet, one which suggests assertions which the speaker feels constrained not to articulate directly.

Both these circumstances produce a “dramatic” element in sonnets where no “other” is supposedly allowed to be alive, or listening, or responding in the same room. But along these same lines, isn't it also clear that sonnets such as 18 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer's day”) or 55 (“Not marble nor the gilded monuments”) are not only affirmative but also *persuasive*? If the young man being directly addressed in both those poems is not physically present, his imagined presence is surely directing the rhetorical strategies being employed in the poems. And these strategies may involve assumptions of class as well as aesthetic superiority, a point raised by Auden in his “goats and sheep” essay.

From a different perspective, too, what are we to make of the “solitariness” of Sonnets 135 and 136, the two infamous “Will” poems? In both these poems directly addressed to the Dark Lady, the speaker puns on “Will” to refer to, among other things, sexual genitalia (both male and female) and his name. He directs her to let his “will” join all the other wills who have enjoyed her (“Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,/ Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?” or, more outrageously, “Will will fulfill the

treasure of thy love,/ Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one”) Vendler strains to provide a plausible rationale for such rhetoric. She says the “conspicuous urbanity” of 135 might be understood in light of the speaker's sense of humiliation. But with 136, despite a parallel supposition, she is forced to pose the question, “Is there anything serious about this sonnet?”

Both these poems (or performances) have, thinly sheathed with wordplay, a crude and distinctly male sexual aggression at their core, and envisioning them sincerely spoken by a solitary soul is as difficult as imagining Lenny Bruce delivering one of his routines to an empty nightclub. In light of such “dramatic” circumstance, it becomes even more difficult, perhaps especially for a reader of Vendler's sensibility, to “utter them as one's own words, not as the words of another.” But once one allows these dramatic elements to influence or shape our understanding of the sonnets, Vendler's rationale for avoiding social specifications, especially those of class and sex, weakens considerably.

But this caveat should not detract from the fundamental achievement of the book. Vendler again and again lights up the individual poems, and at times the compact essays placed opposite the text of the sonnets are reminiscent of Meyer Schapiro's extraordinary one-page illuminations opposite the paintings of Cezanne and Van Gogh. She is especially good in her rendering of the cluster of sonnets which terminates each of the relationships, and her commentary on 152, the last sonnet dealing directly with the Dark Lady, admirably reviews the terrain she has covered:

The self-lacerating intelligence in the later sonnets produces a voice so undeceived about reality (*the truth*) and himself (*the perjured eye*) that the reader admires the

clarity of mind that can so atomize sexual obsession while still in its grip, that can so acquiesce in humiliation while inspecting its own arousal, that can lie so freely while acknowledging the truth. To represent a voice in all its paradoxical incapacity and capacity is the victory of Shakespeare's technique in the second subsequence.

Even though there are now critics who chafe at such analysis as insulated and elitist, it's clear that Auden as poetic shepherd would unhesitatingly include Vendler among those who love poetry for its own sake and understand its nature. More practically, it's hard to imagine anyone who wanted to teach the *Sonnets*, at any level and from any perspective, not benefitting from this monumental book.

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