



A “Gnostic” Interpretation of Shakespeare’s Sonnets

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A “Gnostic” Interpretation of Shakespeare’s Sonnets

As we know, William Shakespeare is widely regarded as one of the greatest, if not the greatest, writer in the English language. Indeed, his genius is acknowledged globally, and his plays are constantly performed and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world. Although Shakespeare created highly vivid and memorable characters in his dramas and comedies, the personality of the author himself remains quite mysterious, for very little about Shakespeare’s politics, religion, personal history, or favorite pastimes can be deduced from the texts attributed to him.

Shakespeare’s surviving works consist of 38 plays, two long narrative poems, and 154 sonnets. For this exploration of Quakerism, Spirituality and the Arts we are going to focus on the 154 sonnets and the challenges they present to readers.

Since their publication in 1609 the sonnets have elicited 400 years of perplexed and agitated commentary, and a host of tortured theories as to their meaning. I am going to offer yet another theory about Shakespeare’s intent in these poems. Perhaps my theory will not hold water with literary scholars, but the approach I am going to take will, at least, give us an opportunity to remind ourselves of some useful human experience in the realm of spiritual reality.

First, let me explain why I am calling this a “gnostic” interpretation of Shakespeare’s sonnets.

GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism is admittedly a somewhat vague and slippery word. Its root is in the Greek term *gnosis*, meaning knowledge.

To understand the term *gnostic*, we first have to realize that the religious movement which sprang from the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was very diverse in the earliest centuries of the Christian era.

The term “gnostic,” derived from the Greek word for knowledge, has been applied to some of these variant versions of early Christianity. Such groups of Christians claimed possession of special or esoteric knowledge of the Truth. Perhaps this was conceived of as a special or privileged awareness, or perhaps as the possession of a secret key to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Thus, a *gnostic* is a person who claims to know something other people do not know,

and which other people perhaps cannot understand. There is inherent in the perspective a tendency towards elitism. The church "fathers" were perhaps right to disallow the tendency, although one can regret their strategies for stamping it out.

Through time the meaning of the term gnostic has blurred, and it is now often used to refer to any variety of early Christianity which came to be deemed heretical by the mainstream church. But originally it referred to a particular sort of heresy – those believing that there is a secret or hidden truth in Jesus' teachings which people with a special key, or understanding, or awareness, can apprehend.

Gnostic tendencies are a natural part of humankind's religious landscape; they are part of religion's "business as usual." Almost every faith community or sect feels it has some special knowledge. Some believe this knowledge is potentially accessible to all. Others think that only a special elect shall ever gain it.

The Gospels do in some ways encourage gnostic ways of thinking. Jesus spoke in parables, often somewhat obscure parables. The fact that he explained one or two of these, giving a kind of key, but did not explain the others, invites the idea that there is a hidden meaning to the Gospels which the particularly insightful might find. Jesus' statement about people who have ears but who cannot hear, and his exasperation at being misunderstood, invite the adoption of a "gnostic" perspective. Even innocent passages in the Gospels can elicit a gnostic interpretation. For example, when Hollywood depicts the Sermon on the Mount, there are usually shots of a mountainside covered with people raptly listening to Jesus' words. (How could they hear him over the distances involved?) But it is possible to read the opening sentences of the fifth chapter of Matthew in another way. Jesus saw a throng, and retreated from it up a mountain, where the apostles joined him and where he taught them privately. Again, in such a reading there is the suggestion that the true faith was shared only with an elect.

(There is a painting by Nicolas Poussin with which some of you may be familiar. It is entitled *The Sermon on the Mount*. It shows a plain filled with people, from which arises a steep hill. At the top of the hill, in the distance, is tiny figure of Jesus surrounded by a few other tiny figures. The artist was scarcely trying to make any point about gnosticism. But a literal reading of the Gospel text could lead naturally to the depiction the artist offers).

The term "agnostic" is, of course, the opposite of "gnostic." An agnostic asserts he or she does not know something.

Since knowledge about the early church remained fairly vague for many centuries, and since the term "gnostic" tended to be applied in a loose, catch-all way to any early Christian tendency which came eventually to be regarded as

heretical, the term has carried a strongly negative connotation until very recently.

In modern times the term has been rehabilitated. First, as the official church has tended to fall more and more into disrepute, justifiably or not, there has grown up a new friendliness to those Christians who were thrown out, a new sympathy for the underdogs. Secondly, shortly after the Second World War there was unearthed a trove of Christian writings in the Egyptian desert near Nag Hammadi, writings giving clear and fairly detailed accounts of alternative versions of the Christian faith in the words of people who really adhered to them. Previously, we relied for our knowledge of these alternative Christianities on the descriptions given by their detractors, the very detractors who succeeded in stamping them out. So the Nag Hammadi discovery has greatly increased interest in Christian movements known as gnostic.

For the present reflection on Shakespeare's sonnets, I am using the term "gnostic" in its most generic sense. That is, I feel it useful to term this reflection a "gnostic" interpretation of the sonnets because I am going to be so bold as to suggest the possibility that there is a hidden key, or special perspective, which can unlock the sonnets' true meaning, a meaning which tends to be lost on ordinary readers.

SONNETS IN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

The sonnet goes back a long way in European literature, and the form had been exploited with powerful effect long before Shakespeare turned his attention to it. A sonnet is a fourteen line poem consisting of three quatrains and a closing couplet. The form apparently first arose in Italy in the thirteenth century. The fact that it is still being used today indicates that it has been a remarkably enduring art form. Rainer Maria Rilke is a well-known poet of the twentieth century who employed the sonnet form extensively. The well known contemporary Quaker Kenneth Boulding wrote a series of poems called *The Naylor Sonnets*, with which some here may be familiar.

The Italian language, as we know, is a wonderfully musical one, with many rhyming words and with a great regularity of accent and meter. Therefore, the traditional Italian sonnet follows a very strict meter and rhyme scheme. The Italian sonnet was picked up by writers in Spain, Portugal, France, and even in Poland, from which it entered the various other Slavic literatures. English writers, given our language's less musical character, have taken liberties with the form, retaining the fourteen lines, the internal structure, or sense, of three quatrains and a "wrap up" couplet, but allowing themselves more freedom with rhyme and meter.

While traditionally sonnets were expected to be love poems, and the form was

associated with the spirit of chivalry, troubadours and romance, subject matter began to vary fairly early on, with Milton writing about his blindness, for example, and others even addressing political questions and historical events through their sonnets. There are sonnets which deal with heavy themes like time, death and eternity, in spite of the genre's smallness of scale. But overall, the form has retained a strong association with matters of the heart and with the light conceits of lovers.

We should also bring into view the fact that some sonnets have been produced in "sets," tied together by a common theme, and even carrying a kind of narrative line from one poem to the next. This issue will arise in connection with the Shakespeare sonnets. Are these 154 love poems intended to be seen as a related set, or simply as 154 individual poems each to be taken on its own merits?

ROMANCE/SEXUALITY AS A SPIRITUAL METAPHOR

A final background thought useful for a gnostic interpretation of the sonnets is the common use in earlier ages of romance and sexuality as a spiritual metaphor. Time does not permit us any detailed consideration of this. But I want only to remind us that well before Shakespeare's time it was a practice to employ the language and images of sexuality and romance to express spiritual truth.

Dante lived several centuries before Shakespeare. Dante represents his love for Beatrice as a spiritual quest. Moreover, we all know that there is one book of the Bible where God is never mentioned -- The Song of Songs. Yet most Biblical interpreters see God as present everywhere in The Song of Songs, viewing it as an extended metaphor which depicts a romance between God and the human soul. Finally, we all know that mystics of the Middle Ages often used graphic sexual and romantic images to express their experience of union with God. Modern people, particularly people with a Freudian bent, are apt to treat these testimonies derisively, claiming that the mystics were merely experiencing fantasies rooted in sexual deprivation. Nevertheless, there does exist a body of spiritual writings which do often employ the imagery of romance and sexuality to express spiritual experience.

(All metaphors have their weakness. While the image of sexual intercourse as a metaphor for mystical spiritual experience has power in expressing the idea of union with God combined with an incomparable intensity of feeling, the fact that God in these metaphors, at least in our western tradition, is male, and the human soul is female, obviously has its dangers. While the metaphor is accurate in that God enters us, and not vice versa, and God "plants" life in us, and not vice versa, it can lead to trouble if the assumption is made that therefore maleness is more Godlike than femaleness, and that therefore a woman cannot be the vicar of

Christ at the alter, as it is, alas, all too commonly argued).

Again, this is a fascinating subject which time will not permit an exploration of now. At any rate, Shakespeare gives every evidence of having had a thorough familiarity with earlier literature, including not only medieval works, but Greek and Roman classics as well, and so we need not be surprised if he, too, resorts to images of romance and sexuality as metaphors for expressing spiritual experience and truth.

“THAT OF GOD” IN SANSKRIT TRADITION

I hope this is not too abrupt an interruption of the train of thought, but in order to explain where my gnostic theory of Shakespeare’s sonnets comes from I have to refer to my hobby of calligraphy.

Knowing of my interest in calligraphy, a friend gave me the gift of a copy of Shakespeare’s sonnets in an edition made from a set as handwritten by the English calligrapher Frederick Marns. I have to admit that Shakespeare’s sonnets are not on my ordinary reading schedule, and I may never have looked at them after a college English course had not this new publication of a calligraphed edition of them come to hand. **Illustration 2** in the handout offers a sample of calligrapher Marns’ beautiful work. (The handout follows the last page of this text).

But it happened that at the time that I got this gift of the Shakespeare sonnets, I was, in my own calligraphy practice, seeking to expand my repertoire to the Sanskrit language, since there are so many wonderful texts of deep spiritual import in that language. So it was sometime in the mid-1990s that my simultaneous perusal of Shakespeare’s sonnets while working on Sanskrit calligraphy caused an “ah-ha” moment which I am going to share with you in these two sessions.

Before actually talking about the content of specific passages of Sanskrit, let us consider a little about the Sanskrit language itself.

First, Sanskrit is the sacred language of the civilization of India. Sanskritists claim (although western scholars are inclined to doubt them) that the language was never a household language -- it was never a tongue which children learned at their mothers' knees. Rather, it has always been a language of scholarship. Not being a "living" language, it has never evolved. Therefore, according to this theory, it is the same today as it always was, and when we read ancient texts in Sanskrit we can be confident we know exactly what is meant, or was meant. I feel it useful to mention this, because the issue of time and the assaults of time will come up repeatedly in connection with the 154 Shakespearean sonnets.

Sanskritists believe that the language has not been altered by time the way almost everything else is, including ordinary languages. In fact, some believe Sanskrit is the authentic, pre-Tower-of-Babel language descended from heaven.

However much western scholars may doubt this theory, the language is not susceptible to western methods of dating texts. Scholars ordinarily use the evolution of language as a way of dating ancient texts. The rich treasure of sacred writings which exists in Sanskrit tends to defy western methods of dating. Sanskritists tend not to cooperate with western curiosity about the date and origin of texts. From their perspective the content of the text is timeless and eternal. Its specific history is of little interest. Western scholars are usually reduced simply to stating that a text is "more than 2,000 years old," or that it arose sometime between the second millennium before Christ and the first after.

In our western tradition we have an image that the created world was "spoken" into existence by God. God said "Let there be light" and there was light. But we are inclined to regard this creative spoken act as a discrete event in a time long ago. It invites the idea that after doing this speaking the Creator might leave the scene or lapse into inactivity -- like building a clock, winding it up, and walking away. Now most Christian theologians would not subscribe to such a visualization, but the imagery of a discrete act of "speaking" the world into existence in a distant time seems to invite it.

In an Indian visualization, the created world is also spoken into existence by the Creative Principle, but it is sustained by a continuing sound uttered by the Creator. I suppose that in Indian theory, if the Creator stopped uttering this sustaining sound, the universe as we know it would vanish. According to Sanskrit tradition, this sound being constantly uttered by the Creator is outside of human hearing. The thing which is closest to it, however, is the pure "ah" sound: the sound we make when we completely relax our facial and vocal muscles and utter a clear and pure sound, perhaps something like a sigh; this pure "ah" sound also resembles the first sound a baby makes when coming into the world. All other sounds are variations of this pure "ah" sound. By moving our tongue and lips we change the "ah" to the other vowels. Using the various parts of the vocal mechanism we also "bend" and "shape" the pure "ah" sound to form consonants.

It will be useful to refer to **Illustration 3** in the handout. As we look at the Sanskrit writing, the horizontal line represents the pure "ah" sound which underlies all that we hear and that represents the Creator's active sustaining presence. The symbols "hanging" from the pure "ah" sound are "instructions" for forming the various consonants. The loops and swirls above and below the line of writing give instructions for modifying the "ah" to form the other vowels. But the very structure of the written language expresses a theological perspective: the Creator's activity is ongoing and permeates all. All things seen and known,

including we human beings ourselves, are manifestations of, or a variants of, the fundamental energy of the Creative Principle.

Even if you have not had much chance to encounter Sanskrit vocabulary, you are probably aware that many words have a lot of the "ah" sound in them: dammapada, sanskara, mahatma, etc.

I would like us to turn to a few passages of the Sanskrit calligraphy I was practicing at the time I received the book of Shakespeare's sonnets. Let us turn to **Illustration 4** in the handout. We have not yet looked at the sonnets, but as we read the passages of Sanskrit I would like you to keep in mind that a recurring theme in the sonnets is time and the assaults of time on the things we cherish, including our loved ones. The passages we are going to look at come from the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the key scriptures of the civilization of India.

From the world of the senses comes heat and cold, pleasure and pain. They come and they go; they are fleeting. Those who are strong of spirit rise above them.

The person who is unmoved by these, the wise one who is beyond happiness and unhappiness, is living in eternity.

The impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal. The person who has seen this has attained the end of all knowledge.

Realize that that which Pervades the universe is indestructible; no power can affect this unchanging, imperishable Spirit.

This Spirit dwells in our bodies, though our bodies come to an end in their time. But the Spirit remains -- immeasurable, immortal . . .

The Spirit within us is never born and never dies. It abides in Eternity: it is for evermore. We, in our essential nature, never undergo change. Birthless, eternal, immutable, beyond time past and time to come, we do not die when the body dies.

The wonder of the eternal inner Spirit is seen by a few , . . a few even speak of its glory.

But there are many who listen without understanding.

The Spirit that is within all beings is immortal in them all , . . it is eternal and cannot die. Do not grieve for what cannot be harmed.

I am using these verses for illustration because I happened to be working on

them when the sonnets were given to me. But the awareness of something within us which is akin to the Creative Principle underlying all reality, which is actually our own true self, and which, in contrast to all the passing and changeable aspects of our persons and personalities which we mistakenly believe to be our true selves, lasts forever, is very strong throughout Sanskrit tradition, and is not found only in these passages I happened to be working on. It is this sense of the eternal within us which I want to keep in view as we look in more detail in the next session at Shakespeare's sonnets.

"THAT OF GOD WITHIN" IN QUAKER EXPERIENCE

Finally, in preparation for taking a look at the sonnets, I would like us to reflect briefly on the familiar Quaker concept of "that of God within." Again, time really does not permit an exhaustive treatment of this interesting subject. But let us simply look at some excerpts from *The Power of the Lord Is Over All*, the wonderful collection of the pastoral letters of George Fox gathered, edited and introduced by our Friend T. Canby Jones. Let us just consider a very few passages by turning to **Illustration 5**:

Babes in Christ, born again of the immortal Seed, in it wait . . . The same Seed now, the same birth born in you now, . . . is the same today, yesterday and forevermore. (Page 11).

. . . the pure Wisdom and Knowledge . . . comes from above, . . . which is hidden from the world . . . walk out of your own ways and out of your own thoughts. Dwelling in that which is pure . . . it commands your own reason to keep silent and (It) casts your own thoughts out. (Page 15).

So let your life be in that which never ends, nor never changes, in whom there is no changing nor altering. (All) who come to this will not go back again to outward things . . . (Page 203).

Therefore, all you that love the Light within you, stand still in it, out of all your own thoughts, carnal reasonings, considerings and imaginations , . . and wait for Power and Strength from God the Father of lights , . . so will the Way of Salvation be known and the true Power, Joy and Comfort to your souls which no man can give. . . (Pages 476, 477).

George Fox's writing style is such that it is a little difficult to extract pithy, summary statements from his texts. But I think it fair to summarize by saying that George Fox had a perspective remarkably similar to that of the ancient Sanskrit sages. He saw the Inner Light, or that of God within, as separate and distinct

from our egos or our "creatureliness." He saw this Inner Light as the same thing in all of us and therefore as a source of unity, and he saw it as eternal and everlasting and as very distinct from anything caught up in the changing of times and fashions.

With this background I hope we are prepared for a more detailed look at Shakespeare's sonnets which we will undertake next time. I will review the bafflements the sonnets cause scholars, including the fact that no clear image of the love object emerges in these 154 love poems by one of the world's otherwise most vivid writers. There is even an absence of gendered pronouns. We will see whether these love sonnets are really about two human lovers, or are a metaphor for something else. And we will examine the significance of the recurring theme of time and its assaults as it appears in the sonnets.

(END OF PART ONE)

Today we will conclude our two part session on Shakespeare's sonnets.

Last time we reviewed briefly the form and history of the sonnet, noting that the form is traditionally used for love poetry, but it has been employed since early times for weightier subjects, in spite of its smallness of scale. We also noted that throughout history sexuality has been employed metaphorically to illuminate spiritual truth.

We also briefly reviewed the term gnostic. Although generally used to designate any branch of the early Christian movement which was ultimately deemed heretical by the mainstream church, it can more precisely be applied to movements or sects which held that there is a hidden wisdom in religious writings which can become available to those who find the key to it, but which remains obscure and unknown to everyone else. We are on a gnostic quest for such a key which may unravel the mysteries of Shakespeare's sonnets.

Finally, in preparation to examining the sonnets, we recalled the idea of "that of God in everyone." But we did more than simply reiterate a profound idea which unfortunately has become somewhat hackneyed with facile and superficial use. Rather we tried to examine the true import of the idea by considering passages from the *Bhagavad Gita* and from the letters of George Fox.

Both George Fox and the ancient Sanskrit sages seek to raise our awareness of something within us which is akin to the Creative Principle underlying all reality. This godliness within us is actually our own true self, and, in contrast to all the passing and changeable aspects of our persons and personalities which we mistakenly believe to be our true selves, it lasts forever. The "Inner Light" or "that of God within us," is separate and distinct from our egos or our "creatureliness." This Inner Light as the same thing in all of us and therefore is a source of unity, and, as eternal and everlasting, is very distinct from anything caught up in the changing of times and fashions.

With this brief summary of our last conversation, which I realize was probably frustrating for some people, since we never really got to Shakespeare, let us now turn to the bard himself.

WHO WAS SHAKESPEARE?

Certain very limited things about William Shakespeare are well known and clearly documented. His baptism is recorded at the church in Stratford on Avon. It occurred on April 26, 1564. His death is known to have occurred on April 23, 1616, making him 52 years old when he died. He married Anne Hathaway, also of Stratford, in 1582, when he would have been eighteen years old. The birth of their three children is documented: their older daughter was named Susanna,

and she was followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. The son, Hamnet, died while a boy.

Shakespeare left a very detailed will which was drafted one month before his death, suggesting that he knew he was suffering from a fatal illness. His father was middle class and reasonably well off. Shakespeare enlarged his fortune considerably and left a respectable estate.

He apparently achieved recognition for his talents as a playwright in London by the time he was a mere twenty years old. But the "First Folio" of his plays was not published until seven years after his death, in 1623. The texts were gathered by friends and admirers, and are thought to be authoritative. No written or manuscript copies of any of Shakespeare's works have ever been found; this strange fact has given rise to many theories about alternative authorship. At any rate, beyond certain bare facts, very little is known about William. If all anyone ever knew about one of us was the dates of our birth and death and the times of our various school graduations, obviously a lot would seem obscure about our lives, and so it is with Shakespeare. Surprisingly, this very literate man has not left any correspondence, either. At least, no correspondence has surfaced. This seems very strange to me. Since he was well known and apparently much admired at the time of his death, it is reasonable to expect that anyone who had letters from him would cherish them and pass them along. Yet none have materialized. Did this erudite individual really not write any letters to anyone?

What we can detect of his life in Stratford has a certain flavor of bourgeois respectability about it. He eventually bought one of the largest houses in town, for example.

But what of his life in London? The theatrical world in those days was a hurly burly place, a kind of *demi-monde*. Is it possible that Shakespeare led a kind of double life, the life of a prosperous, middle class man of letters when in the provinces, and the life of a rootless Bohemian when in London? Some who read the sonnets and seek to unravel their mysteries need to postulate such a double life.

For myself, considering the single-minded focus it would require to write a succession of masterpieces like the plays, and considering the lofty ethical and spiritual perspective which so attracts us to Shakespeare's writing, I find it hard to imagine the sort of disorderliness which some hypothesize about his unknown London life-style. We do know that women's parts in the London theater of those days were played by men, and that many of Shakespeare's comedies rely on cross-dressing and gender confusion for their humor. So he was, at least, conversant with a side of life not exactly associated with rural rectitude.

THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF THE SONNETS; AN OVERVIEW OF THE SONNETS

The 154 sonnets, unlike the plays, were published a few years before Shakespeare's death, in 1609. As I mentioned earlier, sonnet reading is not my ordinary pastime. I approached the collection somewhat at random. I found myself reminded that Shakespeare's way with words and ideas is indeed awesome. To the extent that I made any connection among the sonnets, it seemed to me that the two protagonists which emerged were not two lovers at all, but the "personalities" of Time, on the one hand, a kind of villain whose ravages are eloquently described by the poet in countless colorful ways, and, on the other hand, counterpoised against Time, a certain perspective, a knowledge, or an attitude which softened or obliterated Time's blows. While many, or most, of the sonnets are indeed love poems in style and specific content, the love interest appears to me simply to be a formal excuse or occasion for depicting this other interaction -- the interaction between Time and the soul.

Nevertheless, there was a lot about these sonnets which was tantalizing and which seemed to encourage further exploration. I decided to do some research, particularly as I became more conscious of the sympathetic resonance that seemed to me to occur between the message of the sonnets and the passages from Sanskrit literature which I was using for calligraphy practice. And in doing this research I stumbled, to my surprise, upon a vast body of commentary which the sonnets have generated.

The sonnets, having been published just exactly 400 years ago, have stimulated nearly four centuries of perplexed and agitated commentary, commentary with certain obsessive characteristics! I am sure that many of you, at least those of you who have been students of literature, are quite aware of this state of affairs, but it was new information for me.

First, although the sonnets were published in 1609, no one knows when during Shakespeare's life prior to 1609 they were written. Were they written in close succession or over many years?

Secondly, although, as has been mentioned, sonnets had been published as sets previously, the idea of a "set" of 154 tends to strain credibility. Are these 154 separate poems, to be considered one by one, each on its own merits, or are they to be viewed as interrelated? Is the sequence significant? Some people see the sequence as very revealing and significant. Others insist that the pile must have fallen off the table in the publishing house and been swept up at random. Several scholars have tried to rearrange the sonnets so that they make more sense in relationship to each other, but no one has made a case for their rearrangement which convinces many other people.

Through history the sonnets have elicited both extravagant praise and perplexed

disappointment, sometimes even from the same critic. For example, writing in the 1940's, John Russell Brown of the University of Sussex comments:

The attractions of the sonnets are indeed very great. They win the admiration of readers by a variety of virtues. They express strong feelings, but they preserve artistic control. They have a density of thought and imagery that makes them seem the quintessence of the poetical experience. They delight by a felicity of phrase and verse movement, no less memorable than that familiar in the plays.

But he also writes:

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, explorations of Shakespeare's personality have constantly been made by studying the sonnets. William Wordsworth proclaimed that 'with this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart.' But many readers feel that Shakespeare the man is elusive in the sonnets, just as he is in the plays. It has been natural to look in the poems for 'personal details' about the author. One can observe allusions to his insomnia, to his disapproval of false hair and painted cheeks, to his love of music, and, according to some, to his bisexuality. It does not amount to very much.

Brown goes on to say:

The sonnets on the whole retain an obstinate privacy that is a bar to enjoyment and which therefore must be judged a fault, one that would hinder altogether the enjoyment of any poems less brilliant. The sonnets do not quite 'create a world' within which they can be apprehended. There is a sense of a missing (or unascertainable) body of experience and reference that falls short of poetical mystery.

Much agitated scholarship is clearly designed to "salvage" Shakespeare's reputation.

How could he have released so murky and ill-formed a body of work? The sonnets reveal none of the skill in story-telling that we have come to regard as typical of Shakespeare. Most surprising, there is a complete absence of character development of any kind. How could the person who depicted Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, and King Lear have written 154 love poems without revealing anything about the personality and the attractive qualities of the love object?

In fact, something noticed in modern times but overlooked, or delicately avoided, in previous eras, is that there is even an absence of gendered pronouns in these sonnets. So the love object, the mysterious woman or "dark lady" referred to in

the commentary of earlier centuries, has become, in modern times, a mysterious man or youth. In fact, there is now a substantial array of contemporary scholars who seem convinced that the first 126 sonnets are written to a young man, and the remainder to a "dark lady," making of Shakespeare truly a personality of our own century! While once scholars spoke of Shakespeare's "admiration" for the young man, they now frankly describe the controlling motive of the first 126 sonnets as sexual infatuation. Some scholars are certain that they detect the following when they carefully examine the sonnet sequence as a whole and extract from it a narrative thread: Shakespeare was sexually infatuated with a young man, but was frustrated of this infatuation; he then observed the young man become seduced by a promiscuous woman; whereupon Shakespeare himself developed a desire for this woman as a way of vicariously relating to the young man sexually.

Some people argue that the reception history of the sonnets tends to tell us more about the preoccupations of the age in which any particular commentary was written than about the sonnets themselves. I am inclined to think that to be the case with respect to the above theory, in spite of the consensus that seems now to exist about it. I have to admit I have not read the sonnets from end to end scrutinizing them to see if this theory fits. I can testify that it is certainly not something that jumps out at one from a casual reading of a random sampling of the poems.

I have no objection to people wishing to understand a homosexual theme in the sonnets. Michelangelo wrote many sonnets to male love objects, after all, so why need we be surprised if Shakespeare did also. All I can say as a casual reader is that the idea does not jump out at one from the texts, and some careful sleuthing would seem to be necessary to get evidence of it. But I do wish to add my own bit of theorizing to the four centuries of sonnet commentary.

SOME EXAMPLES

In order to test the interpretive theory I wish to explore today it is necessary to posit the idea that the mysterious "thee" to whom the sonnets are written is neither a woman nor a man, that is, it is not a specific individual who was a contemporary of Shakespeare, but rather the mysterious "thee" is simply – *the reader*. The sonnets are addressed to you and to me. We are not eavesdropping on a conversation between a poet and his lover. The ambiguity about gender is due to the fact that the sonnets are addressed to everywoman and everyman who might read them, and they employ the traditional form and style of the love poem to convey to the reader that there is something enchanting or beautiful about himself or herself which transcends time.

Again, we are hampered by a lack of time for a thorough study, but let us

consider a few examples. First, let us turn to sonnet number 123. (See **Illustration 6**). This is one of about half a dozen sonnets that might be categorized as blatantly philosophical, rather than romantic, in tone. Looking at it might be useful if we wish to detect an underlying perspective which could be a key to the other poems. In the illustration, the upper half of the page shows the sonnet as it appeared in the original 1609 edition. In the lower half of the page it is shown as it is usually published in modern times, with contemporary spellings and with our style of the letter "s" rather than the old style, where "s" looked like "ʃ".

Here, in sonnet 123, Shakespeare addresses Time directly, and claims that the latest "wonder" thrown up by contemporary history is really nothing new or novel at all. Furthermore, the ancient wonders, the pyramids, are only admired because our own time here on earth is so fleeting that their age enchants us. Finally, at the end, Shakespeare claims a capacity to be true and constant (constant being equivalent to unchangeable) in spite of Time's scythe and its continual haste. The terms "vow" and "true" in the closing couplet remind one of the genre's love tradition. Yet it could scarcely be argued that this particular poem is about romance as such. It seems, at least to me, rather to be an assertion that the poet has within himself something which can transcend time and the wiles of fashions, both ancient and contemporary.

Let us now look at sonnet 53 (**Illustration 7**) which is more directly a "romantic" bit of verse. Here the poet is indeed addressing a love object. On the mundane level, the sonnet could be read as a declaration that every good and beautiful thing reminds the poet of the loved one; that everything seems to have its own character, yet the loved one not only partakes of all these different characters but seems to have the capacity to imbue objects with his/her own beauty. As a love poem, the sonnet expresses the sort of extravagant flattery to which the profoundly smitten is apt to give voice. He sees the loved one in every beautiful thing he looks upon. But let us read the poem metaphysically, with the tradition of the love lyric merely lending structure. The poem, addressed to the reader rather than a mysterious but specific man or woman, affirms that all beauty is in the "eye" of the beholder in this sense: we each have within us that mysterious, "constant" quality which is akin to everything that is noble and beautiful; this substance of which we are made virtually defines what beauty is through its power to recognize its own kinship with other things of supreme value. We lend the "shadow" of the beauty within us to external objects perceived as beautiful. Here the parallel employment of analogies to Adonis and to Helen seems deliberately intended to suggest that the gender of the "you" is not relevant, that the "you" is whomever might be reading the verse.

Let us now, before time completely runs out, try to give this theory the acid test by looking at the very famous sonnet number 18, which for many people epitomizes the love sonnet. (See **Illustration 8**).

The first thing I would like to observe is that although contemporary commentators see in the sonnet series a somewhat sordid tale of sexual infatuation and frustration, the sonnets we have been looking at seem preoccupied with the perceived "constancy" of the "thee" to whom they are addressed. In sonnet 18 the first two quatrains fall into a traditional love lyric pattern. The love object is lovelier than a summer day and more constant in character -- no rough winds nor overbearing heat! But then, reading on the mundane level, the sonnet takes on a completely excessive cast. The love object's eternal summer shall not fade? When the person's countenance is lined with age Death still cannot boast his nearness? How does this immortality come about? The final couplet, read on the mundane level, proposes that because the poem will survive, its addressee, too, achieves immortality.

In other words, having started out flattering the love object, the poet ends up flattering himself and his verse. The mysterious addressee, about whom 154 sonnets have revealed nothing, achieves immortality through this verse? Traditional commentary invariably interprets the final couplet as an accolade to art and its enduring quality. This scarcely seems convincing. On the whole, read on the strictly romantic level, the poem uses artful technique to advance an idea which is incredibly exaggerated and embarrassingly self-congratulatory.

Now if the "thee" is "that of God" within every reader, man or woman, what becomes of the poem? Suddenly, at least to me, the poem loses its fatuous quality. That of God within us does indeed compare favorably with a summer's day, and will indeed remain constant as we age. The final couplet, rather than being a form of self-flattery by the poet, might simply be stating that the words give life just as anything gives life which calls us to a recollectedness of our own true nature and its constancy and beauty. Shakespeare addresses everyman and everywoman across the centuries, calling all to an awareness of that quality in each of them which is the same, which is constant, which is unwavering, and which transcends time. The poet employs the art of the love lyric to do something which weighty theologizing often cannot do -- convince us that there is indeed something beautiful and enchanting about ourselves if we can come to understand our own true nature.

Let me conclude this part of our reflection together by stating that I am not sure this gnostic "key" works for every one of the 154 sonnets. I simply have not had time to explore the matter thoroughly enough. Some of the sonnets are dark and bitter. Could they represent a "dark night's journey," spiritually speaking? Suffice it to say that exploring this idea that there is a belief in "that of God within" expressed in the sonnets needs more study.

But really what matters is not what is in Shakespeare's sonnets, but what is within us.

Are we aware of the Inner Light? Do we see it as constant? Are we clear that it is not the same as all the things within us that come and go, like our moods, and even our philosophies? Do we feel loved for it? And do we revel in it? And does our awareness of that of God within us bring us to a plane which Time cannot touch?

THE CRAFT OF CALLIGRAPHY

Let me close with just a few words about calligraphy, since that is, in part, what started this line of inquiry, and since it, too, has a relationship to the issue of time.

I began this hobby because I respond to the visual arts. I liked the look of elegant writing upon a page. I enjoy "layout." So my original motivation was in producing a visual "product."

Gradually I came to appreciate the act of calligraphy as a meditative practice. If, as Friends, our devotional goal is an inner silence and a centeredness in the present moment, any craft which focuses our full attention in the present, and which tends to produce an inner silence thereby, is useful. At least for an amateur calligrapher, it is impossible to create a piece successfully if you have your mind elsewhere, if you are thinking of the argument you had last week, or are planning the menu for the company coming over to dinner tomorrow night. Such wanderings and roving of mind would quickly result in a misspelling, an ink blot, or an uneven slant to the letters. Since every situation of ink, paper and pen is different, not only does the practice of the craft bring you into the present, it also fosters the posture of "obedience" and of "listening" which is so characteristic of the Quaker spiritual approach. One must be attentive to what is occurring – one must watch the flow of ink, adjust the pressure on the pen depending upon whether the nib has more or less ink in it, take care that the letters are formed rightly, make small adjustments of spacing depending upon the overall pattern forming on the page and the length of the line. None of this can be done inattentively and absentmindedly.

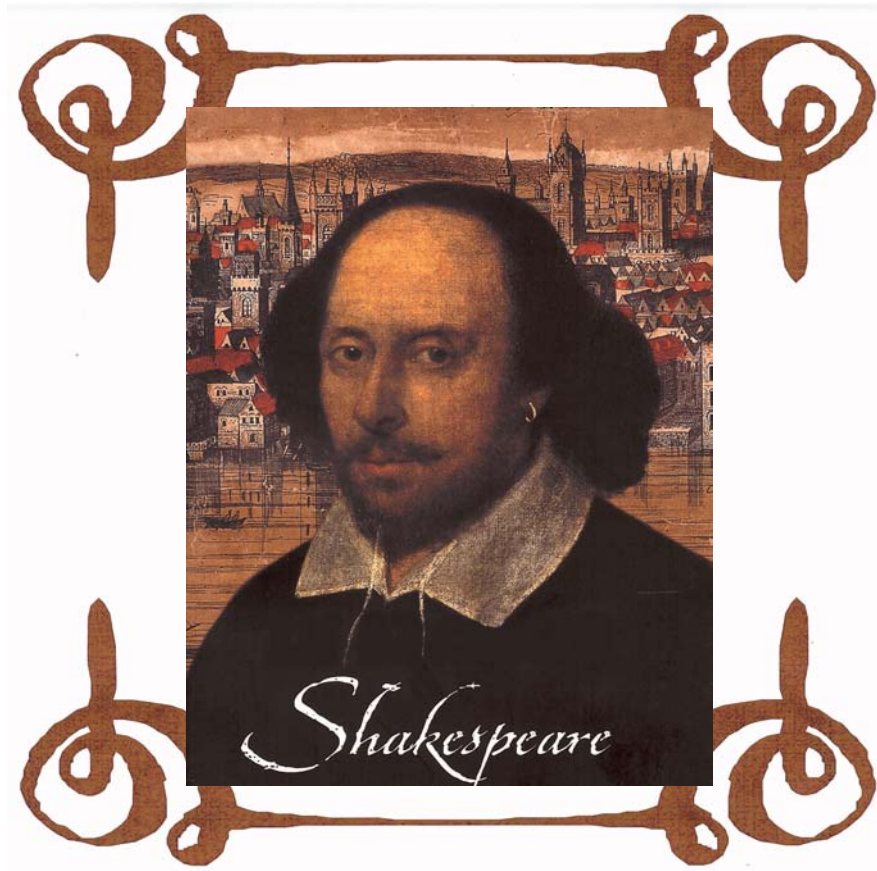
In calligraphy or in any other craft one's best efforts will go awry from time to time. One will cause a ruinous blot on a work one has labored over for many hours. These are the occasions to practice "letting go," remaining silent within, avoiding swearing under one's breath, and calmly starting again without a lot of inner agitation.

A third dimension which calligraphy brings into view is this. If one is going to devote considerable effort to the careful scribing of a passage of text, and if one is going to set it on vellum, which can last for a thousand years, and if one is going to embellish it with the brightness of gold, it makes one ponder just what content is fitting for such an exercise. There is something about the act of

calligraphy itself which focuses the mind on ideas which really matter, on the truth which is eternal. **Illustration 9** is an item of my homemade calligraphy which is a little too bulky for me to have brought along to show you in its original form. (Read) This is not an idea that one expects to go out of date very soon! So my practice of calligraphy has proven to have this sifting quality, asking me to focus on those truths that are really worth living by, those Truths which transcend time, which are not merely current fashion. There is something contradictory about the practice of calligraphy and preoccupation with trendiness and fads, at least for me. Moreover, the ideas one calligraphs "take possession" of one in a different way than do ideas one merely scans with one's eyes as one reads a page. While the challenge remains to live and breath the ideas in daily life, they seem to filter more deeply into one's being as the result of having been lovingly penned than from having been studied in other ways.

I associate the practice of calligraphy with a connectedness with the eternal and beautiful Truths which are available within all of us. As we acknowledge the turning of the year, let us affirm this divine and beautiful inner character which we all possess, something eternal, something of God within which does not change, which time does not erase, and which, as the bard observes, forms the true substance whereof we are made.

*Daniel A. Seeger
Quaker Center, Ben Lomond, California
December 30, 2009*



A “Gnostic” Interpretation of Shakespeare’s Sonnets

PART ONE

Introduction
Background Concepts
 Gnosticism
 Sonnets in European Literature
 Romance and Sexuality as a Metaphor
 “That of God Within” in Sanskrit Tradition
 “That of God Within” in Quaker Experience

PART TWO

Who was William Shakespeare?
The Reception History of the Sonnets
Overview of the Sonnets
Some Examples
The Craft of Calligraphy and the Inner Light

People of Shakespeare's Era

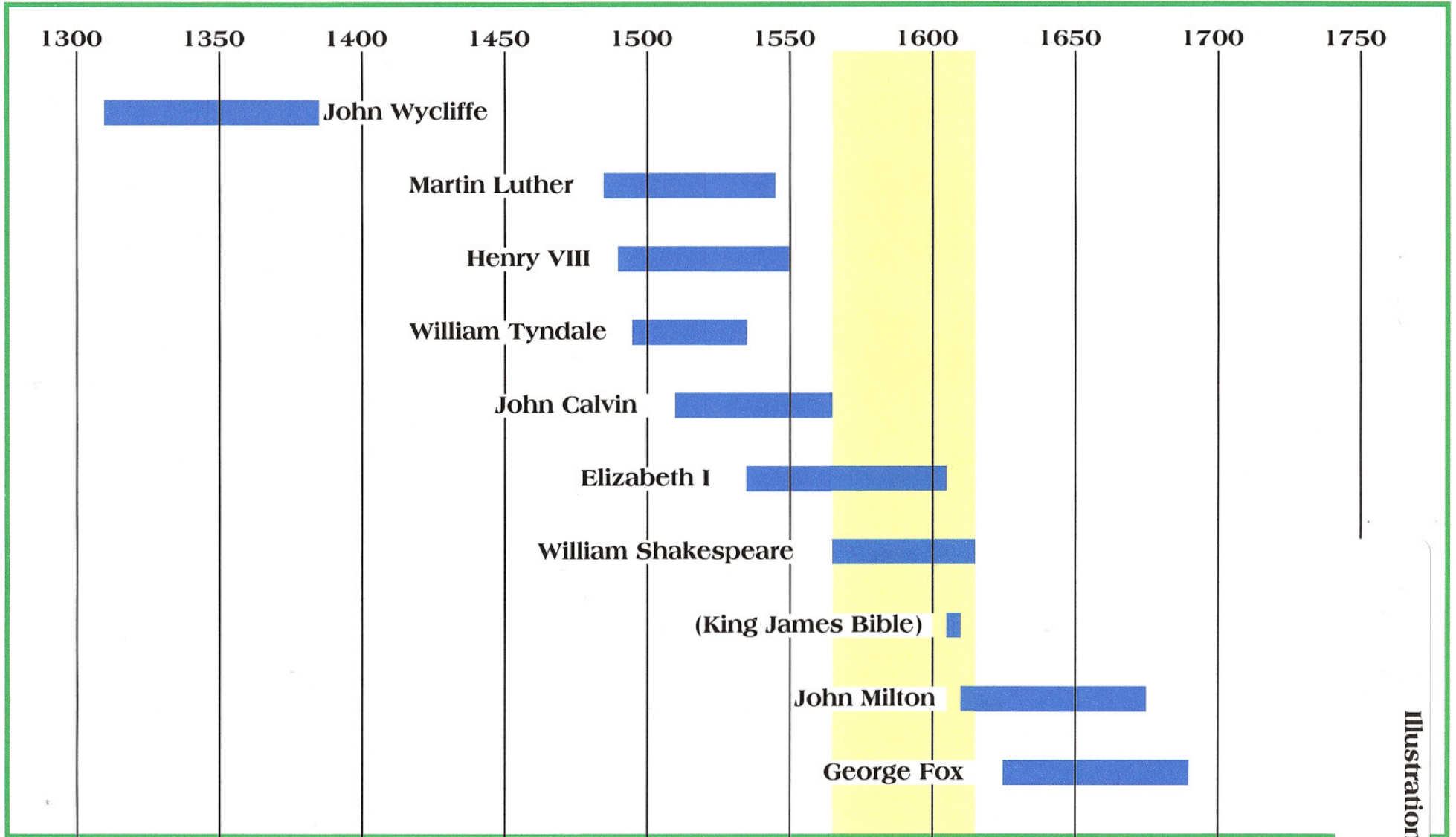


Illustration 1



When in disgrace with Fortune and mens eyes,
I all alone beweepe my out-cast state,
And trouble deafe heaven with my bootlesse cries,
And looke upon my selfe and curse my fate.
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possest,
Desiring this mans art, and that mans skope,
With what I most injoy contented least,
Yet in these thoughts my selfe almost despising,
Hapbye I thinke on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the Larke at breake of daye arising)
From sullen earth sings himns at Heavens gate,
For thy sweet love remembred such welth brings,
That then I skome to change my state with Kings.

ॐ

शान्ता महान्तो निवसन्ति
 सन्तो वसन्तवल्लोकहित
 चरन्तः।

तीर्णाः स्वयं भीममवार्षवं
 जनानहेतुनान्यानपि
 तारयन्तः ॥

There are saints, calm and great, who bring good to others, quietly and unasked, as does the spring. They have already crossed the dreadful ocean of life themselves and help others to cross it, spontaneously and without any motive.

14 मात्रास्पर्शास्तु कौन्तेय शीतोष्णसुखदुःखदाः ।

From the world of the senses comes heat and cold, pleasure and pain. They come and they go;

आगमापायिनोऽनित्यास्तांस्तितिक्षस्व भारत ॥

they are fleeting. Those who are strong of spirit rise above them.

15 यं हिनयन्त्येते पुरुषंषुर्षभ ।

The person who is unmoved by these, the wise one who is beyond happiness and

समदुःखमुखं धीरं सोऽमृतत्वाय कल्पे ॥

unhappiness, is living in eternity.

16 नासता वदन्त भावा नाभावा वदन्त सतः ।

The impermanent has no reality; reality lies in the eternal. The person who

उमयोरपि दृष्टोऽन्तस्त्वनयोस्तत्त्वदर्शिभिः ॥

has seen this has attained the end of all knowledge.

17 अविनाशि तु तद्विद्धि येन सर्वमिदं ततम् ।

Realize that That which pervades the universe is indestructible; no power can

विनाशमव्ययस्यास्य न कश्चित्कर्तुमर्हति ॥

affect this unchanging, imperishable Spirit.

18 अन्तवन्त इमे देहा नित्यस्योक्ताः शरीरिणः ।

This Spirit dwells in our bodies, though our bodies come to an end in their time.

अनाशिनाऽप्रमेयस्य तस्माद् यध्यस्व भारत ॥

But the Spirit remains – immeasurable, immortal ...

20 न जायते म्रियते वा कदाचिन् नायं भूत्वा

The Spirit within us is never born and never dies. It abides in Eternity: it

भविता वा न भूयः ।

is for evermore.

(20) अजो नित्यः शाश्वतोऽयं पुराणो न

We, in our essential nature, never undergo change. Birthless, eternal, immutable, beyond

हन्यते हन्यमाने शरारे ॥

time past and time to come, we do not die when the body dies.

29 आश्चर्यवत्पश्यति कश्चिदेन माश्चर्यवद्ब्रूति-

The wonder of the eternal inner Spirit is seen by a few; a few even speak

तथैव चान्यः।

of its glory.

आश्चर्यवच्चैनमन्यः शृणोति श्रुत्वप्येनं

But there are many who listen

वेद न चैव कश्चित् ॥

without understanding.

ॐ

30 देही नत्यमवध्यो ऽयं देहे सर्वस्य भारत ।

The Spirit that is within all beings is immortal in them all; it is eternal and

तस्मात्सर्वाणि भूतानि न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥

cannot die. Do not grieve for what cannot be harmed.

Verses from Chapter Two of the Bhagavad Gita

Penned by Daniel A. Seeger. December, 1997

Illustration 5



Excerpts from George Fox's letters
Taken from *The Power of the Lord Is Over All*
Edited by T. Canby Jones

Babes in Christ, born again of the immortal Seed, in it wait . . . The same Seed now, the same birth born in you now, . . . is the same today, yesterday and forevermore. (Page 11).

. . . the pure Wisdom and Knowledge . . . comes from above, . . . which is hidden from the world . . . walk out of your own ways and out of your own thoughts. Dwelling in that which is pure . . . it commands your own reason to keep silent and (It) casts your own thoughts out. (Page 15).

So let your life be in that which never ends, nor never changes, in whom there is no changing nor altering. All who come to this will not go back again to outward things . . . (Page 203).

Therefore, all you that love the Light within you, stand still in it, out of all your own thoughts, carnal reasonings, considerings and imaginations, . . . and wait for Power and Strength from God the Father of lights, . . . so will the Way of Salvation be known and the true Power, Joy and Comfort to your souls which no man can give. . . . (Pages 476, 477).

 123 

NO! Time, thou shalt not boſt that I doe change,
 Thy pyramyds buylt vp with newer might
 To me are nothing nouell, nothing ſtrange,
 They are but dreſſings of a former fight:
 Our dates are breefe, and therefor we admire,
 What thou doſt foyst vpon vs that is ould,
 And rather make them borne to our deſire,
 Then thinke that we before haue heard them tould:
 Thy registers and thee I both deſie,
 Not wondring at the preſent, nor the paſt,
 For thy records, and what we ſee doth lye,
 Made more or les by thy continuall haſt:
 This I doe vow and this ſhall euer be,
 I will be true diſpight thy ſyeth and thee.



No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change:
 Thy pyramids built up with newer might
 To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;
 They are but dressings of a former sight.
 Our dates are brief, and therefore we admire
 What thou dost foist upon us that is old,
 And rather make them born to our desire
 Than think that we before have heard them told.
 Thy registers and thee I both defy,
 Not wond'ring at the present, nor the past,
 For thy records, and what we see, doth lie,
 Made more or less by thy continual haste.
 This I do vow and this shall ever be:
 I will be true despite thy scythe and thee.

WHat is your substance, whereof are you made,
 That millions of strange shaddowes on you tend?
 Since euery one, hath euery one, one shade,
 And you but one, can euery shaddow lend:
 Describe *Adonis* and the counterfet,
 Is poorely immitated after you,
 On *Hellens* cheeke all art of beautie set,
 And you in *Grecian* tires are painted new:
 Speake of the spring, and foyzon of the yeare,
 The one doth shaddow of your beautie show,
 The other as your bountie doth appeare,
 And you in euery blessed shape we know.
 In all externall grace you haue some part,
 But you like none, none you for constant heart.



What is your substance, whereof are you made,
 That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
 Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
 And you, but one, can every shadow lend:
 Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
 Is poorly imitated after you;
 On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
 And you in Grecian tires are painted new;
 Speak of the spring and foison of the year:
 The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
 The other as your bounty doth appear,
 And you in every blessed shape we know.
 In all external grace you have some part,
 But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall Death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET NUMBER 18
PENNYED BY DANIEL A. SEEGER, DECEMBER, 1997

Illustration 9

