

Shakespeare's Sonnets as Biography

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Shakespeare was commissioned to convince the wayward Earl of Southampton to settle down, that is, marry, have children and overall act as a gentleman and a member of the nobility. The procreation sonnets, the first series of sonnets, deal with the theme of the Earl seeing the value of having a family, his legacy will continue and as he ages, he will retain his youth, beauty and eventually lasting memory in his progeny. Those are some of the arguments he uses to convince the Earl of the value of procreation. However, soon in the sonnet series it is apparent that he becomes romantically and even sexually involved with his subject. I am certain this is not how the Earl's parents envisioned the writer's role with their son and I would assume that he would only keep this within his sonnets. These for the love sonnet sequence, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" being a famous example. Again, this is definitely going to be a controversial assertion, but this was written, I firmly believe, for the Earl. This has not been so directly and plainly stated, Ranga, but it is so. Now, after this comes the "rejection" series where it is obvious that the Earl has been unfaithful, taking other lovers, including Shakespeare's own mistress for which is soundly chided in a particular sonnet. Of course, the Earl was in the most lustful period of his life and with his social station and his attractiveness, it must be assumed it was only natural this would be the case. These facts are also mentioned in the sonnets along with the observation that later on in life his attraction will wane, but this artist can preserve his beauty forevermore in his verse.

Along this series appears a rival, various names have been mentioned but not one definitively. He mocks this other writer but clearly he is disturbed and jealous of this competitor for the Earl's affection. To step aside, it must be noted that Shakespeare was busy acting and writing and separated from his wife, Anne, whom he married, it appears, out of necessity as she was pregnant at the time and many years his senior. The pressure of the theatrical environment and this separation from a woman who was not truly his beloved allowed the temptations of other romance to overtake him. After this series of sonnets comes what I will coin the "escapist" series in which he plays with philosophical themes (referencing neo Platonic philosophy as well as Horace and Virgil) which is his form of distraction, but also are among his most complex, uneven and, for him, plainest works. Of course, there is the introspection shown in Sonnet 73,

"That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang..."

where he contemplates his own mortality but perhaps also as a reminder to the Earl that:

"This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long."

In the following series, comes the "dark lady" whom he takes up as a lover that provides him with sexual satisfaction and some escape from the misery of the Earl's unfaithfulness, but it is apparent that she does not stimulate him because of her beauty, his descriptions of her are unflattering. He exhibits humor even in this, however and throughout this collection, a few sonnets exhibit the wordplay with his name, "Will",

"So will I pray that thou mayst have thy 'Will,'
If thou turn back, and my loud crying still."

(Sonnet 143)

I interpret this collection of sonnets as a poetical biography of the experiences of the artist's life, not simply the work of a sonneteer trying to impress the literary world with customary hyperbole

and emotional extremes. You can discern a man whose intellectual capabilities also were related to heightened emotional sensitivity, hence the romance, sexuality, insecurity, despondency, and examination of the purpose of his being that are constant themes throughout.

In presenting this account of his life through this work, you will be portraying an artist who is heterosexual, insecure, at the same time confident of the quality of his work and then its inadequacy, happy beyond measure from his relationships then completely distraught by them, highly confident and then insecure, from one emotional extreme to the other, again, not simply because his is following the formal of a sonneteer, but because of his intellectual predispositions. This is the nature of genius, in sum.

The Earl was beheaded for conspiring against the throne at the age of thirty-three and this left an indelible melancholic mood the artist would live with after. If it is true that the sonnets were published early in his career, it could be argued that this single event had an influence on the creation of his tragic plays, but this is pure speculation on my part.

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