Sexing Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Reading Beyond Sonnet 20

While there is widespread agreement that Sonnets 1–17, the marriage or procreation sonnets, form a relatively coherent group, and that 18 and 19 are generic enough to fit any imaginable context, Sonnet 20 splits readers into two groups: those who see an end to any clear sequence after this point, and those who read on, finding a narrative line connecting the rest of the sonnets in a meaningful pattern. In the 2004 Oxford guide to Shakespeare’s Sonnets, Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells confidently assert that the sonnets are “better thought of as a collection than a sequence, since . . . the individual poems do not hang together from beginning to end as a single unity.”¹ More specifically, they dismiss such “myths and superstitions” as Edward Malone’s 1780 division of the sonnets into two groups: “Though some of the first 126 poems in the collection unquestionably relate to a young man, others could relate to either a male or a female. Even the poems in the second part of the collection, known inauthentically as the ‘Dark Lady’ Sonnets, are not necessarily about one and the same person” (p. xiii). By contrast, Colin Burrow’s Introduction to The Complete Sonnets and Poems in the Oxford Shakespeare in 2002 claims that “This position has been overturned in the past twenty years or so, and has effectively been replaced by a new orthodoxy. According to this, Shake-speare’s Sonnets were printed with the author’s consent and in an order which reflects their author’s wishes.”² G. Blakemore Evans’ Cambridge edition of the Sonnets (2006) also accepts the two-part division: “It is generally assumed, for lack of evidence to the contrary, that all of Sonnets 1–126 are addressed to the

same young man, and all Sonnets 127–52 to the same woman.”3 Evans may well be right about the widespread acceptance of this model, but his remark also points up just how thin the underlying ice really is: “lack of evidence to the contrary” surely cannot suffice to carry such a burden of proof.

The oddity is not of course that the two sides disagree, but that both sides claim that there is no other side, that the field has been won for their team. My own reading of the discussion has led me to conclude that both sides are correct, but in different ways. Those who argue that the Sonnets are mostly an unordered miscellany have all the logic and evidence on their side, but virtually everyone who writes about the sonnets ignores these arguments, apparently seduced by the lure of narrative, and proceeds to read them as two sustained narrative sequences, one telling the story of the narrator’s love for a man and the other his love (more or less) for a woman. Both sides of the debate, interestingly enough, are routinely found in the work of a single critic. Helen Vendler’s fine book on the Sonnets provides a typical example of this widespread inconsistency.

She begins with as hard-nosed an antinarrative stance as I could wish for: “Because lyric is meant to be voiceable by anyone reading it, in its normative form it deliberately strips away most social specification,” including, she obligingly specifies, gender.4 She even concedes, “the construction of a story ‘behind’ the sequence has been rebuked by critics pointing out how few of the sonnets include gendered pronouns” (p. 14). She then wraps up her argument rather oddly: “I have . . .

3. *The Sonnets*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Updated ed., Cambridge, Eng. 2006), p. 106. Katherine Duncan-Jones (*Shakespeare’s Sonnets* [Nashville, 1997]) and Stephen Booth also support this division, if in the latter case cautiously: “there is therefore some basis for the widespread critical belief that sonnet 126 is intended to mark a division between sonnets principally concerned with a male beloved and those principally concerned with a woman” (*Shakespeare’s Sonnets* [New Haven, 1977], p. 430). One might add to the list of skeptics about structure Sylvan Barnet, who contends that “The 154 poems do not narrate a continuous story—they should be regarded as individual lyric poems” (“Shakespeare: An Overview,” in *The Sonnets*, ed. William Burto [New York, 1999], p. xxx), and Harold Bloom, who remarks of the Sonnets that “more seems to be lost than gained when we read them through in order” (*Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Poems* [Broomall, Penn., 1999], p. 52).

4. Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p. 2. Dympna Callaghan, like so many critics, shares this inconsistency: “the addressee of the first 126 poems [is] a fair young man” (p. 2), yet “the majority of the sonnets do not reveal the gender of the person to whom they are addressed” (*Shakespeare’s Sonnets* [Malden, Mass., 2007], p. 13). Her notes on individual poems then concede that some of these very sonnets “may have been written to a different addressee” (p. 109; see also pp. 142, 143 for further explicit exceptions to the rule).
decided, in the interests of common sense, to hold to the convention which assumes that the order of the Sonnets as we have them is Shakespearean. In this convention, we take the first 126 sonnets as ones concerning a young man, and the rest as ones concerning a dark-haired and dark-eyed woman” (pp. 14–15). Given the history of attempts to rearrange the Q order, hilariously recounted by Hyder Rollins in the New Variorum set, I take no issue with Vendler’s invocation of common sense to accept the order as we have it, but her two additional stipulations are thoroughly debatable. The postulate that this order is Shakespearean is accepted without evidence; furthermore, even establishing that the order is Shakespearean would not prove her implicit claim that that order creates a meaningful narrative rather than, say, represents the chronology of composition of the sonnets. Her final comment, however, is the symptom of a more specific problem that I want to consider in this essay: having spent the first fourteen pages of her Introduction establishing beyond doubt that these sonnets are not gendered with regard to speaker or addressee and do not tell a story, why is it common sense to conclude that 1–126 are all about a boy? The predictably slippery slope follows shortly, with discussions of the “plot” of the sonnets and its “dramatis personae” (p. 18).

Two main approaches, by no means mutually exclusive, have dominated this discussion: either the Young Man and Dark Lady sonnets are read as belonging to sustained and usually interlaced narrative sequences, or the sonnets are seen as a series of \( n \) number of contiguous mini-sequences connected by themes and images; we might call these the strong and weak sequence theories. My hope in this essay is to point up some of the weaknesses and inconsistencies in the arguments offered in support of both theories and to present some new lines of analysis that may help to reestablish the burden of logical proof where it belongs, at the door of those critics who want to make sweeping interpretive claims about the sequence of the sonnets.\(^5\)

II

The strong sequence theory, according to which 1–126 tell a story about a boy and 127–54 are about a woman, is accepted by most critics, but for

\(^5\). The tradition of reading of the sonnets as a narrative has produced at least three literal novelistic treatments, by Anthony Burgess, Lennard J. Davis, and Erica Jong.
no particularly good reasons. The strongest of the recent assaults on this model has been Heather Dubrow’s, but although she is cited in virtually every essay published in the past decade, I can’t see that anything beyond lip service has been paid. Dubrow herself presses the point no further than to hypothesize that this or that given sonnet might be to the Friend or Dark Lady rather than vice-versa, which effectively retains the essentials of the 1780 dichotomy. One point of contention in this discussion has been how many of the sonnets are gendered by addressee or topic. Many critics have counted, and they all end up with different numbers. The most frequently cited number is offered by Margreta de Grazia, who asserts that the lover’s gender is only specified in about one-fifth or one-sixth of the sonnets, perhaps some 25–30 sonnets. Sasha Roberts comes up with a similar or slightly higher number, as she claims that “over 120 of the sonnets . . . do not specify an addressee through a gendered pronoun.” Edmondson and Wells count 31 definitely gendered sonnets, but very sensibly add to their list another 31 sonnets with features that to a given interpreter might imply the gender of the addressee (p. 30). By my own count, 43 of the sonnets are marked for gender, a conservative number that certainly seems in the same ball park as the other estimates, and which should not lead us too far astray. In this reading there are 15 sonnets to or about a man, 20 to or about a woman, 8 that specifically address or discuss both men and women, and 111, about 72% of the total, that are entirely unmarked for gender.


7. The highest count is represented by Arthur Marotti’s anomalous claim—as far as I know, followed by no one—that all but five of the first 126 are clearly addressed to or refer to the young man (“Shakespeare’s Sonnets as Literary Property,” in Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus [Chicago, 1990], p. 156).


10. One obvious complication in such tabulations is in agreeing upon which cues count as marking the gender of the addressee. Bruce R. Smith, e.g., argues that Sonnet 106, even though “it is full of references to ‘she,’” is nevertheless to be read as addressed to a male: “the gender of this object is specified in the phrase ‘such beauty as you master now’” (“I, You, He, She, and We: On the Sexual Politics of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” in Schiffer, p. 417). Smith’s idiosyncratic
any “rule” that fails to classify three quarters of the instances it putatively covers should be regarded with a higher degree of skepticism than this one has encountered.

But the point I’d like to press here has even more to do with the distribution of gendered sonnets than with their simple quantity. The accompanying graph lays this out in what I hope is an easily grasped form. As narrative theory has been teaching us at least since Ian Watt explained the opening paragraph of The Ambassadors, our reading of extended texts is inevitably dominated by their beginnings. In Meir Sternberg’s words, “The ‘natural’ manner of presenting an expository object (a character, a state of affairs, a fictive world or framework with all its distinctive properties and probabilities) is of course to concentrate all the relevant information . . . at the beginning.”

“Due to the successive order of presentation, the first block [is] read with an open mind, while the interpretation of the second—in itself as weighty—[is] decisively conditioned and colored by the anterior, homogenous primacy effect; the leading block establish[es] a perceptual set, serving as a frame of reference to which subsequent information [is] subordinated as far as possible” (p. 94). Sternberg’s color metaphor could not be more apt for my chart, as readers who begin with the opening red sonnets typically color the intervening and subsequent sonnets red. The process begins as early as Sonnet 2, now universally taken to refer to a man, but identified in the titled manuscript copies as addressed to a woman: “To one that Would die a Maid” or “A Lover to his Mistress.”

Modern practice is to infer its addressee from 1 and 3, and to color number 2 in red. Having approach to counting pronouns also complicates matters: the word “she” does not appear in this sonnet. But Smith ignores the fact that Shakespeare uses “master” with women elsewhere, as when the Bawd declares that Marina “has me her quirks, her reasons, her master reasons” (Pericles 5.6.7–8). To look no further, the OED provides additional contemporary examples of “master” and “mastering” used of women in various ways: “She is in dede a stoute master woman” (1534) and “Yet must not shee be sterne, mastring, imperious and importunate” (1603).


12. Edmondson and Wells, p. 117. Marotti asserts that these titles “change the addressee from male to female,” disregarding the obvious objection that the addressee’s gender is never marked in the first place (“Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the Manuscript Circulation of Texts in Early Modern England,” in Schoenfeldt, p. 190).

13. Even Sonnet 3, which I have coded “male” rather than “both” in my chart to avoid imposing any controversial readings, presents a mixed message as to gender. While the pun on “husbandry” in line 6 marks the addressee as male, it is the mother rather than the father whose image is mirrored (line 9), “lovely” prime recalled (10), and dramatic role eventually occupied (11–12) by the addressee, which would seem to mark her as female.
Shakespeare’s Sonnets coded by gender of addressee

- Male
- Gender Neutral
- Female
- Dual Gender

Fig 1.
established a consistent pattern (although the consistency may be more a product of our agendas than of the author’s intent), we then color 4 and 5 red on the basis of 1–3 and 6. The gaps to be filled in keep getting bigger and bigger—not one of the thirty-two sonnets between 68 and 101 is marked as addressed to a man—but critics seldom balk at the task, eventually managing to turn seven blue, four yellow, and ninety-nine ungendered green sonnets into red ones. I have yet to see any detailed defense of this method, though I suspect that some ingenious critic will soon invoke Shakespeare’s own thinly veiled assurance that the opening red sonnets can “the multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one[s] red” (Macbeth 2.2.59–60).

Before I leave this matter of gender, I want to mention briefly one issue, or rather the absence of an issue, that surprises me. Although the possibility is raised from time to time in passing, there do not seem to be many readings that argue for a deep blue sea colorization process, positing a female speaker for the sonnets. Vendler actually apologizes for including her own recording of selected sonnets with her book because she is “acutely conscious that . . . the ideal reading of the sonnets would be done by a male voice” (p. 37). Among the few editors to have suggested otherwise are Massey (1866), and the highly imaginative Von Mauntz (1893), each of whom assigns several sonnets to be spoken by Elizabeth Vernon, one of the chief characters in their novelizations of the sequence. Edmondson and Wells stipulate for Sonnets 78–86 (the “Rival Poet” group) that “depending on how the Sonnets are spoken or the context in which they are reproduced, some could be imagined as being from a female to a female,” although they offer no such readings (p. 45). To offer one further line of analysis, we all know that lots of lines and images from the sonnets are recycled into the plays. As Edmondson and Wells put it, “When read alongside the plays, the Sonnets can soon seem like a collection of fourteen-line monologues, compressed character

14. Joseph Pequigney, for instance, concedes that Sonnet 5 does not address the youth, but then claims that “this is hardly an exception, since it forms a double sonnet with Sonnet 6, which does.” See Such is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare’s Sonnets (Chicago, 1985), p. 27. Here as elsewhere Pequigney assumes rather than demonstrates the continuity of addressee that he claims to be proving.

15. See Hyder Rollins, The Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Sonnets, 2 vols., II (Philadelphia, 1944), for these and other fascinating examples. Sasha Roberts similarly suggests that we should not necessarily “presume a male speaker” for Sonnet 129 (p. 179), but this unelaborated statement is confined (literally) within a parenthesis, and does not disrupt her own detailed tracing of the traditional narrative sequence.
studies which, in the plays, are given fuller dramatic development” (p. 101). They list 26 examples of lines and passages carried over from the sonnets to the plays. By my count, 11 of those 26 borrowed lines or speeches are assigned to women in the plays. We can’t say many things about what Shakespeare did or did not imagine when writing these lines, but let’s not dismiss too lightly the fact—and facts are hens’ teeth in these matters—that in 11 of 26 instances, 42% of the time, the author certainly did imagine these lines and sentiments as being spoken by a woman. Recall also that the “deep-brained sonnets” described in “A Lover’s Complaint,” the poem that closes the Q sequence of the Sonnets, are written by female admirers of the young man of the poem, not by a male poet.

The second school I want to scrutinize under my topic, that of the “soft sequence” critics, turns from global statements about the structure to focus instead on the manifold connections that they find linking consecutive series of sonnets. Stephen Booth discusses a test used by child psychologists,

in which a subject is given a pile of blocks and asked to divide it into smaller piles by type. In such a test there might be two dozen blocks: six cubes, six spheres, six cones, and six pyramids. Each of the six blocks in each of the four shapes would be a different color: one red cube, one blue, one yellow, one green, one orange, one purple; one red sphere, one blue, and so on. The red cube, the yellow, and the blue would each have a hole through it; the green, orange, and purple spheres would have holes, and so the yellow, purple, and green [cones], and the red, orange, and blue pyramids. The child can divide the blocks into two piles, those that have holes and those that don’t, or he can set cubes and pyramids, which have angular corners, against spheres and cones, which have round, or he can divide cones and pyramids, which come to a point, from spheres and cubes, which don’t. The child can divide the blocks into four groups by shape or six groups by color.16

Booth goes on to “assume that a psychologist would fear for a child who started with a red cube, put a red pyramid next to it, put a blue pyramid with a hole in it next to that, then added a red cube with a hole in it next

to that, then a green cone with a hole in it, then a yellow pyramid without a hole, and so on.” His point of course, is that the reader of Shakespeare’s sonnets “is very like the child so much in need of psychiatric care. As the child’s mind moves in and out of different systems for perceiving relationships, so does the mind of Shakespeare’s reader” (p. 117). I decided to try a version of Booth’s experiment on thirty Brit Lit I students.17

I went to Random.net and had the site generate thirty random sequences for the numbers 1–154. I then handed out the first five numbers in each of the thirty random sequences to my thirty students. The writing prompt that they were given was “Many of Shakespeare’s sonnets are found in manuscripts in different sequences than the order in which they were printed in 1609. Discuss the ordering principles, if any, of the manuscript sequence you have been given.” Each student was thus literally handed a red cube, a blue pyramid with a hole in it, a green cone, and so on. I expected that my students would react in the three ways Booth predicted: sort the blocks in clear patterns, sort the blocks in a jumbled manner, and “give up trying to sort the blocks and just sit and cry in frustration” (p. 117). But what happened gave me a mild surprise. There was only one group: every one of the thirty students readily spotted and elucidated the organizing principles of their five-sonnet sequence. As with the blocks, it seems, sonnets may be classified in so many ways that no set of sonnets can fail to be related in at least a few of them. In fact, my students’ discussions of their groupings relied on many of the standard techniques used by established critics.

Some of them relied on patterns of imagery to unify their group. The student given the sequence 74–104–97–73–134, for example, found seasonal imagery intricately worked into her set. “The first poem is about death and becoming food for worms. The second through fourth express this cycle of life and death through seasonal imagery: in 104 the poet reflects on the changes from April and spring to autumn; in 97 the change is even more grim and terminal, going from summer to winter. Then Sonnet 73, ‘That time of year thou mayst in me behold,’ brings the metaphor back to the speaker’s own old age, which the seasons have

17. My thanks to all of those students for their efforts and insights, especially to those whose essays have been excerpted here: Elizabeth Verni, Gregory Kelly, David E. Patterson, Rachel Campbell, and Ian Mello. Thanks also to Jessica Arruda for technical assistance, and to Adam Max Cohen, Lori Williams, and, especially, Elizabeth M. Willingham, who helped me develop the idea, the subsequent conference paper, and eventually this essay.

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been symbolizing. The final sonnet adds a twist: the spring that has turned to winter and dies is a relationship that the speaker has just ended.” Just in case you are thinking that the student had both 73 and 74 in her group, so the germ of the pattern is authorial, let me remind you that 74 has no seasonal imagery at all—the imagery is in 104-97-73 only, and the (narrative) logic of the spring-to-autumn/summer-to-winter parallelism only holds when the sonnets are read in this reversed order.

Other students found their interpretive key in rhetorical continuity. As the student given 110-52–81-43-23 observed, “The whole set moves like one long speech, which could be to a man or woman or to Love in the abstract. He loved too early in youth, but now [always fitting the random sequence into a coherent narrative temporality] sees love as a great treasure.” Several students saw their sonnets as unified dramatically, developing a well-characterized narrator in a clearly defined narrative context. I’ll offer two brief examples to suggest some patterns. The student assigned 86–108–150–123–49 was reading “The private writings of a middle-aged pedophile to a ‘sweet boy’ he loves. He’s obsessed with his age, because the lover is so much younger. There’s no intention that the young boy would ever read the poems.” The student reading 31–9–107–5–44, on the other hand, inferred a different scenario: “Beauty never really fades, but is renewed with each generation, both literally through children and in their memories, but also through these poems. A series of verse letters to his children written in his old age.”

Some students read their sequence against famous literary analogues, as in the case of 107–48–106–56–29, in which “An old man is infatuated by, but rejected by, a youth. But he can’t help obsessing over him and waiting for a chance even as the young man fights to get away. In the emotional struggle the old man praises the young boy one minute and lashes out at him the next. . . . This reminds me of the episode of The Simpsons where billionaire Mr. Burns chooses Bart to be his heir and will do anything to prove his love for him. But spoiling him with material objects cannot win over somebody’s true love, so Bart leaves everything because the feelings aren’t mutual. All of the riches in the world can’t change a person’s mind if their heart just isn’t there.”

Edmondson and Wells provide a handy tabular survey listing the most commonly discussed “Small groups of sonnets and sequences within Shakespeare’s collection,” and my students found very much the same sort of patterns that real critics have found (p. 33). The table, for example, identifies Sonnets 97–99 as a group unified by the motif of the seasons.
My student found the same seasonal pattern in 104–97–73—in fact, comparing the two sequences in this regard reveals that the random sequence is strikingly tighter and more elegant in the progression and development of the imagery. Of the 36 patterns noted in the Edmondson and Wells chart, 20 are only two-poem sets and 30 of them are groups of five or fewer sonnets. Any claim that any two things form a pattern deserves to be greeted skeptically, and my experiment suggests that literally any group of five sonnets can be linked together with ease by even the most pedestrian critic.\footnote{As Schiffer, a self-proclaimed “agnostic” on this issue, shrewdly notes, “changes in emotion displayed in the sequence suggest changes in situation over time. Narrative is as much an effect as a cause of lyric modulation and contrast from sonnet to sonnet. Even if the order of the 1609 quarto were different, this effect of change over time, of narrative, would still be present” (“Incomplete Narrative,” pp. 48, 49–50).}

Real critics aren’t obliged to submit to the constraint of reading groups of five consecutive sonnets; in practice, the most common approach is to cherry-pick your own groups according to your interpretive agenda. Joseph Pequigney’s Such is My Love, probably the most influential modern treatment of the sonnets as a narrative sequence, begins by spending three chapters and forty-one pages showing how the first twenty sonnets “set the stage” for his radical reading of the story of the sonnets. Chapter 4 then begins with the announcement that “Until now I have been taking up the sonnets more or less as they successively occur in the Quarto, in furtherance of my long-range purpose of upholding Q’s order of presentation, but I cannot, of course, continue on this vein through all 154 poems of the cycle. From now on my demonstrations of the rightness of the original order will have to be selective, and at this point I will make a leap to Sonnet 52” (p. 42).

Pequigney’s “of course” implies that the sheer number of the sonnets is the obstacle, but the entire set has been read dozens of times by other critics. William J. Rolfe outlines the narrative of Sonnets 1–126, virtually poem by poem, in the space of four pages (30–34).\footnote{William J. Rolfe, Shakespeare’s Poems (1883. Rpt. New York, 1890), pp. 30–34.} The reason Pequigney cannot continue reading the sonnets consecutively is, of course, that the only way to make the reading he creates plausible is to present them in the order he does, which is 20–52–87–75–50. We never learn how sonnets 21–49 fit in or why Shakespeare screwed it all up so badly. He defends Shakespeare’s supposed order by abandoning it, yet like so many critics, he seems oblivious to his own disregard of the very
sequence whose integrity he is insisting upon. In arguing that the young man never has sexual relations with the dark lady, he concedes that “The evidence is mixed and inconsistent,” but contends that it can be correctly interpreted once “it is collected, sifted, and, above all, examined in the order of its presentation in the sonnet sequence” (p. 147). He then proceeds to demonstrate his adherence to this ruling principle of authorial order by analyzing the sequence 134-42-133-144-22-48-109-110-41.

I choose this example merely for its familiarity, not for its egregiousness—this methodology has become the norm rather than the exception. David Hawkes’s “Sodomy, Usury, and the Narrative [again that word!] of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” follows precisely the same formula. Having set the stage with a close reading of the first twenty sonnets, he then takes off on the springboard of Sonnet 20 to reveal a previously hidden narrative that consists of the sequence 76-83-40-48-134.20 Nor is this approach limited to trendy moderns. Rollins cites the example of C. M. Walsh’s 1908 edition, which rearranges the sonnets to produce a group of thirty poems addressed “To His Fair Effeminate Friend, in Whom Beauty is Embodied” (p. 97). Walsh also has to abandon his reading after Sonnet 20, in his case skipping ahead to Sonnet 53 before he can find another one that suits his analysis. Ironically enough, Pequigney himself hammers some of these earlier critics for doing precisely the same thing he does, but in the service of readings he personally finds unpalatable. He dismisses J. Dover Wilson’s argument that Shakespeare was not a pederast as a homophobic “ploy” on the grounds that Wilson “assembles and reorders [sonnets] toward bringing out ‘the outlines of the story’” (pp. 76–77).

My conclusion is not that we should abandon the pastime of arranging the sonnets into sequences, which has always been one of the distinctive pleasures of this particular text. As Booth puts it, reading the sonnets in groups “is pleasing because the reader’s sense of coherences rather than coherence gives him both the simple comfort of order and the comfort that results from the likeness of his ordered experience of the sonnets to the experience of disorderly natural phenomena” (Essay, pp. 171–72). But let us quit giving free passes to claims that this or that “arrangement . . . is so intelligible, coherent, and aesthetically satisfying as to be

indubitably and conclusively that of Shakespeare himself.” 21. Critics who describe their pet sequences for us are not deciphering the Rosetta Stone; they’re reciting the playlists for their iPods. Enjoy your playlist, but stop insisting that you took it from Shakespeare. You made it up yourself, by arranging the sonnets you like in the order that you like to hear them. Leave your students the freedom to do the same. As for me, I will leave my sonnet iPod on shuffle play.