THE DILEMMA OF SHAKESPEARE'S SEXUALITY
ARRIVING FROM THE SONNETS

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

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The first 126 poems\(^1\) in Shakespeare's Sonnets address a young man in terms of "love" and "my love." Since the seventeenth century, numerous words and volumes have been filled with haggling over whether William Shakespeare was or was not, in fact, a homosexual. Available evidence and logic proves that Shakespeare was not homosexual at all. Going beyond this rather surface argument, however, an investigation of Shakespeare's unique concept of love in his Sonnets is vital to understanding these poems and their author.

It is amazing to discover just how much shock and controversy Shakespeare's Sonnets have provoked through the ages. Edward Hubler claims, for instance, that, with the exception of Hamlet, no work of Shakespeare's has caused more commentary.\(^2\) Since Thomas Thorpe first published them in 1609,\(^3\) decades of suspicions, accusations, and innuendos have been directed toward the love sonnets, provoking an equal
number of refutations and defenses from Shakespeare loyalists. Coleridge declared, for instance, that in all of Shakespeare's work, there "is not even an illusion to that very worst of all possible vices," and defended Shakespeare's love for the young man of the Sonnets as "pure." Similarly, W. A. Sievers went out of his way to urge that when Shakespeare wrote the Sonnets, he "believed in" his friend, and his love for the "fair youth acquired a religious significance, and was sacred." But not everyone, naturally, was convinced. Francis Birrell asserted in 1933 that such "complete absorption in another person of the same sex, whether 'Platonic' or not, seems to me psychologically homosexual." Birrell's statement seems discreet when compared with Wyndham Lewis's charge that Shakespeare in his Sonnets is one "whose wits and senses have been sharpened and specialized in the school of Sodom." The continuing argument over Shakespeare's sexuality seems to be a perennial one, still fashionable today.

Technically, the dispute may still be unsolvable four centuries later today, since any opinion or claim of modern scholars and critics seems unprovable by any existing facts of evidence. Readers today cannot determine with absolute certainty what
is fact and what is rhetoric, or what is legend and myth in the Sonnets. L.C. John introduces even more confusion into the matter when he points out that "any actual feeling in Shakespeare's sonnets would almost of necessity have been cloaked in some conventional figure." Only a close study of the text--the sonnets themselves--and of the literary conventions and conceits common in Elizabethan literature and the sonnet tradition will produce any solution or conclusion whatever to the controversy of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

Locking to the sonnets, then, in the search for some answer to the conflict, we find that some of them offer, at first reading, obvious arguments against those eager to label Shakespeare a pederast, in that Sonnets 127 to 152 seem to involve a woman, supposedly Shakespeare's mistress. Sonnet 129 denounces sex as a disgusting but enslaving "Hell":

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame Is lust in action, and till action, lust Is perjured, murderous, 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. 10

This sonnet is labeled by Knight, in "The Mutual Flame," as one of the great "lust-sonnets." Lust is imagined as a traitor, a hunted object and a hunter. Shakespeare, after stating that "lust in action" (2) is a waste of mentality and spirituality, says that lust in the mind or heart, before action, is "perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame" (3). "Not to trust" (4) sums up the nature of the traitor lust. When the act of lust is completed (5), it immediately becomes an object of loathing. In line 6, the object of physical desire is "hunted" and pursued "past reason." Conflict is resumed in line 7, which begins with a repetition of "past reason," an emphasis upon the irrationality of desire and the ensuing disgust, the knowledge beforehand of the consequences, and the poet's sense of helplessness. The word "dream" (12) changes the tone a little, from the self-loathing of lines 3 to 10 to the realization (13-14) that the experience itself is fleetingly pleasant, and that men will always seek this simultaneous "Heaven" and "Hell." So Shakespeare, disgusted as he is, does resign himself to the inevitability of normal hu-
man sexuality, if his subject is his female mistress. Unfortunately, there is no evidence in the sonnet that the sex of the person in question is female and, even more important, it is not just sexuality which repels the author, but "lust," which is a perversion of sexuality, just as homosexuality is a perversion of sexuality.

Another much-discussed example of Shakespeare's sonnets to his mistress is Sonnet 143:

Lo, as a careful housewife runs to catch
One of her feathered creatures broke away
Sets down her babe, and makes all swift dispatch
In pursuit of the thing she would have stay
Whilst her neglected child holds her in chase,
Cries to catch her whose busy care is bent
To follow that which flies before her face,
Not prizing her poor infant's discontent--
So runn'st thou after that which flies from thee,
Whilst I thy babe chase thee afar behind,
But if thou catch thy hope, turn back to me,
And play the mother's part, kiss me, be kind.
So will I pray that thou mayst have thy "will,"
If thou turn back and thy loud crying still.

Here the poet develops, in the entire octave, a simile from the domestic incident of a housewife's temporary neglect of her infant (3) while she chases "one of her feathered creatures," probably a duck or goose. The last 6 lines establish parallels in the love relationship of the poet and his mistress: Shakespeare himself is the infant (10),
and his mistress is the mother (9 and 12), equating an Oedipus attachment with a mature, heterosexual one. Shakespeare parallels the unmanageable mistress with the indifferent mother; the feeling of helplessness in the lover with the fact of helplessness in the infant; the grief in both lover and infant unless the mistress or mother return. If the comparison is a conceit, then the author could be dealing knowingly with mature, heterosexual love, relating it to the Oedipus complex. But if the parallel reflects Shakespeare's personal longing to play the role of his lover's baby, such a wish seems to be a deviation from the normal relationship, far from a mature sexual attitude. Once again, a sonnet could be interpreted either as a defense for Shakespeare against the charges of abnormal sexuality or as a support for such indictments.

The center of gravity of the Dark Lady sonnets is found in Sonnet 130,12 where the poet stresses the ordinary humanity of his mistress, and ridicules the Petrarchan convention prevalent in Renaissance sonnets. The legendary Dark Lady, whatever her identity, called forth several anti-Petrarchan sonnets, freeing at least a segment of Elizabethan sonnets from the meaningless phraseology cloaking
the works of most of the poets of the day. The Petrarchan concept of love was originally used by the Italian poet Petrarch in sonnets to his Laura, and rests upon elegant and exaggerated comparisons, expressing in extravagant terms the beauty, cruelty, and charm of the beloved and the suffering, sorrow, and despair of the forlorn lover. Shakespeare departs from this convention and confronts reality squarely in Sonnet 130:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips red.
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun,
If hair be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

So the sonnet is addressed to a female, "my mistress." Here, as all through the 129-152 sequence, the Dark Lady is very physically present and threateningly sinister, her relationship to the poet being ultimately destructive for him. The poet shows his lady ugly, but in a rather humorous description of all the virtues of beauty which she has not. Shakespeare seems held by a sexual fascination to a mistress whom he does not hold in the traditional Petrarchan awe and wonder, so that he seems to dis-
like himself in his sonnets. This type of rail-
lery can also be viewed in the perspective of con-
vention. During the Renaissance, much love poetry
faddishly and sharply veered away from the former
adulatory sonnets written in praise of the golden-
haired, dark-eyed Lauras, to mocking sonnets dedi-
cated to women not beautiful, not fair, not good,
not anything at all that Petrarchans had declared
them to be. The Petrarchan adoration of the loved
one made her the center of all earthly beauty, and
even related all creation to her. It made no dif-
fERENCE whether she were living or dead.14 So
Shakespeare is not "blazing a new trail," as Pear-
son says, in his protests of the extravagant ideal-
ization of womanhood which was the Petrarchan con-
vention.15 The Shakespearean convention seems much
more realistic than the Petrarchan. But the basic
fact remains that the author of the Sonnets, though
expressing uncomplimentary sentiments to this pro-
stitute, is physically desirous of her. The Dark
Lady is an "incarnation of desire rather than love,"16
but it is this very desire that partially refutes
the accusations of any homosexuality on Shake-
speare's part.

Sonnets 127 to 152, however, are not the ones
which provoke all the disgust and dismay, accusations and innuendos, particularly within the ranks of literal readers. The bulk of the sonnet sequence, 1 to 126, is addressed to a fair youth called "sweet boy" (106) and "my lovely boy" (126). Arranged in the traditional order, these love poems tell a story of sorts. The first seventeen sonnets call on the beautiful youth to marry so that his type may be preserved and continued in his children. Sonnet number one is representative of this series:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the riper should be time decrease
His tender heir might bear him memory;
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-sustantial fuels,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thy self thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.
Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament,
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buried thy content,
And, tender curl, mak'st waste in niggarding.
Rity the world, or alse this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.

A paraphrase of this first of Shakespeare's sonnets to the fair youth is: we desire such lovely people as yourself (1) to bear children, so beauty (2) may never die. If you in your old age (3) should die, your "tender heir" (4) could carry your memory. But you, Shakespeare tells him, are be-
trotted only to yourself ("contracted to thine own bright eyes") and use your beauty and abilities only for your own ends (6), creating want and deprivation where there could be abundance of offspring (7), thereby being the worst enemy of your own self (8). Shakespeare says, you bury your possibilities of bearing children ("thy content") within yourself ("within thine own bud") and, young miser ("tender churl"), you cause waste of life, and of beauty, by behaving so niggardly. Have pity on the world, or else you are a glutton, who, like the grave, eats up what duly belongs to the world.

Even though these first sonnets are addressed to another man in terms of "thy sweet self" (1 and 4), and "dear my love" (13), there remains the one obvious fact which makes the charge of homosexuality seem improbable; it is simply that they are urging, as sincerely as it is possible to tell, the fair youth to marry a woman to bear his progeny. Would a conscious pederast try to convince the object of his amorous affections to become betrothed to another person? It seems unlikely. George W. Knight speculates that this coaching of the young man to marriage may be just a poetic convention, a "thought mold" into which all Shakespeare's apprehensions of
the boy's beauty and fears of its passing could be poured. As has been the problem in so many other sonnets, however, the question of accepting their contents either as direct, literal truth, or as literary conceits, disguised by convention, seems unsolvable. One speculation bears no more weight than any other, and there is seldom any overriding evidence in favor of a certain hypothesis to persuade the reader to accept the idea unconditionally. How much of any love poetry is real and how much is conventional is a matter for individual judgement. The poet does, however, stress the beauty and the rightness of natural love, and causes it here to lead to marriage—or at least to the production of progeny.

Sonnet 18, next in the traditional sequence, seems to have been composed together with 17 and to stand apart with it from the remainder of the cycle. The two were perhaps intended as a sort of finale to the first 17 sonnets. At any rate, they both stress the concept of immortalizing the object of their author's affections, as if the sonnets were capturing the miracle of youth and beauty in airtight, time-proof bottles for eternal enjoyment. Sonnet 18 says:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines in time thou growest;
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

So Shakespeare promises that the youth's prime ("eternal summer") will never fade, nor will his beauty die ("nor lose possession of that fair thou owest"). Even death, Shakespeare triumphantly claims, cannot claim the youth, and he will even increase in fame "when in eternal lines in time thou growest."

If Sonnet 130 is the center of gravity in the series addressed to the Dark Lady, Sonnet 20 is the crux of those concerning the young man. This sonnet probably causes the greatest alarm of all one hundred and fifty-four poems in the ranks of those contending that the Sonnets are a disgusting revelation of their author's homosexuality. Edmund Moll, in the Shakespeare Variorum, charges that "one can scarcely deny the erotic nature of the sonnets."19 He admits that the conventions of the day and the cult of friendship have been stressed by Shakespeare's defenders, with the intent of freeing the author from the reproach of homosexuality, but Sonnet 20 alone proves Shakespeare's guilt, according to Moll.
"There are no sheltering conventions in 20," Moll claims. But Eric Partridge, in his Shakespeare's Bawdy, quotes Hesketh Pearson as saying, "homo-sexualists have done their utmost to annex Shakespeare and use him as an advertisement of their own peculiarity. They have quoted Sonnet 20 to prove that he was one of themselves. But Sonnet 20 proves conclusively that he was sexually normal." This sonnet reads:

A woman's face, with nature's own hand painted, Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion; A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted With shifting change, as is false women's fashion; An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,

Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth; A man in hew all hews in his controlling, Which steals men's eyes, and women's souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created; Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting, And by addition me of thee defeated, By adding one thing to my purpose nothing, But since she prickt thee out for women's pleasure, Mine by thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

Sexual allusions in Sonnet 20 are nearly inescapable. The endearment "master-mistress of my passion" is enough to raise eyebrows, but next comes the thought of "Nature" as having "defeated" the poet by "adding" to his friend "one thing (i.e. the male organ) to my purpose nothing," with the follow-
ing resignation of the youth to "women's pleasure." This follows a characteristic pun in the first line of the couplet: "since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure." The play on words is on "prick'd," meaning both chosen by and furnished or decorated with a "prick" or male organ by nature, making the boy sexually useless to Shakespeare. Pearson adds a final statement to the controversy, saying that the discussion provoked by Sonnet 20 is unnecessary, for its chief purpose is to picture a youth possessed of all the graces of womanly charm, in addition to his own masculine appeal. But, in spite of the undeniably sexual sentiments, Shakespeare does make it clear that the maleness of the boy excludes that youth from any sexual activity with the author, and in fact encourages him to fulfill the purpose for which nature chose him, as stated in the concluding couplet of Sonnet 20:

But since she prickt thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine by thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

From this point to Sonnet 126, the poet addresses the youth on various topics and occasions and in a variety of moods. A sense of intimacy increases; admiration becomes love. The poet at first is shy
and tongue-tied in the presence of his friend, and
can express himself only in writing, as Sonnet 23
reveals:

Oh, let my books be then the eloquence
And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,
Who plead for love, and look for recompense,
More than that tongue that more hath more expressed.
Oh, learn to read what silent love hath writ.
To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.

The poet is separated from the fair youth by
death, but thinks continuously of him, as in Son-
net 27:

For then my thoughts, from far where I abide,
Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,
And keep my drooping eyelids open wide
Looking on darkness which the blind do see.

The poet is outcast, but comforted by the thought
of his love, as illustrated in Sonnet 29:

Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate.

And Shakespeare warns his friend not to honor
him publicly, lest the youth become tainted with
scandal, as Sonnet 36 shows:

I may not evermore acknowledge thee,
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame,
Nor thou with public kindness honor me,
Unless thou take that honor from thy name.

The opening two lines of this sonnet read:

Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our undivided loves are one,
suggesting the conclusion reached earlier from Sonnet 20 (in page 8 of my paper), that Shakespeare realizes the physical impossibility and socially perilous connotations of such a love in the public eye, and therefore rejects any real sexual relationship.

The friend next steals the poet's mistress, the Dark Lady, but is forgiven in Sonnets 40 to 42, a triple expression of the one theme. The opening quatrain in Sonnet 41 forgives the fair youth:

Those pretty wrongs that liberty commits,
When I am sometimes absent from thy heart,
Thy beauty and thy years full well befits,
For still temptation follows where thou art.

Shakespeare calmly terms the boy's falling into temptation's snares "pretty," as though this offense were trivial, and a little amusing. If it were a love of the usual romantic, sexual type, it would seem that such a betrayal would warrant a more intense protest from the offended party.
Shakespeare was, in fact, more upset by this whole incident according to Dover Wilson, who thinks that the major theme of the Sonnets is the poet's "infatuation" for a woman, and that the youth causes Shakespeare "distress and agony" by amusing himself with making love to the poet's mistress. From the sonnets analyzed in the sequence to that Dark Lady (especially Sonnet 130), I doubt that Shakespeare was in the least infatuated with this mistress, but rather disgusted with himself for being attracted sexually by her. If Shakespeare was caused any "distress and agony" by the boy's relations with Shakespeare's mistress, it probably stemmed from the poet's love for the youth—certainly not from any real attachment to a homely prostitute.

If Shakespeare cared little for the Dark Lady, aside from a sexual attachment, and reprimanded the youth for being seduced by this mistress, the logical conclusion would be that Shakespeare and the youth shared a homosexual love. But Edmund Malone, "the most learned of the eighteenth century editors of Shakespeare," wrote, in reply to a "stupid" note by Steevens upon Sonnet 20 (see page 8 of my paper):
Such addresses to men, however indelicate, were customary in Shakespeare's time and neither imported criminality, nor were esteemed indecorous. To regulate our judgement of Shakespeare's poems by the modes of modern times is surely as unreasonable as to try his plays by the rules of Aristotle.24

The love in question, an admiration of a mature Shakespeare for a seemingly much younger youth, though repellent in modern terms, was nothing strange or unusual at the time the sonnets were written. In Elizabethan England "friend" and "lover," "friendship" and "love" were interchangeable terms.25 A long tradition of "classical friendship" precedes Shakespeare and the youth, in the Biblical David's love for Jonathan, Homer's Achilles, Plato's Phaedrus, and Virgil's Eclogues. Tennyson's In Memoriam aroused concern in Victorian England, though it was in this same tradition of friendship, as did Marvell's Definition of Love. Other authors suspected of homosexual tendencies were Michelangelo, da Vinci, Montaigne, and Sir Thomas Browne. But, according to the dictates of classical friendship, women were too inferior to men to become real "friends." Such love, divine and transcending sex, was possible only to men, for the passion of women made them incapable of so exalted an experience.26
This exalted male love-friendship motif or convention can be traced to Italy and, even previous to Italy, to Greece. The Athenian ideal of beauty was best portrayed in the adolescent figure of the male with down-bent head and austerely graceful body lines. Love of the classics and all things Greek swept over Italy and France into England, turning the romantic passion for woman into the Renaissance passion for masculine beauty. Beautiful, accomplished ladies attempted at this time in English history to become learned, to become comrades rather than lovers, to delight in hunting and hawking, in learning the classics, and in pondering the philosophies of the Greeks. The Italian exaltation of love and friendship resulted in raising the love of man above love of woman so that the sonnets were addressed to men in the same adulatory manner as they were previously addressed to women. The convention no doubt stimulated Shakespeare in the Sonnets, since the very air of Elizabethan England was at this time charged with Italian philosophy, art, music, and culture in all its varied forms.

Another theory which makes a homosexual interpretation of the love in the Sonnets less sub-
stantial is that Shakespeare may have been addressing his literary patron. As love for man superceded love of woman in Italy and England, extravagant love sonnets to the patron became conventional. Every poet had to have one, and, according to the convention, the friendship was one-sided on the poet's part. Shakespeare, if we carry this patron-wooing idea into the poems, acknowledges the convention precisely: he is dutiful, even obsequious, endures the patron's variable moods (41), and debases himself constantly, as in Sonnet 43's ending couplet:

To leave poor me thou hast the strength of laws
Since why to love I can allege no cause.

This dedicating of love poetry to patrons is a convention which was "handed down" to England from Italy. The patron now became the object of the loftiest sentiments usually or previously applied to the women representing physical and spiritual beauty. Pearson notes the effusions of love from Italian Tasso about his patron, the Duke of Ferrara:

I confided in him not as we hope in men, but
as we trust in God.... It appeared to me, so long as I was under his protec-
tion and fortune, that death had no power over me. Burning thus with de-
vo tion to my lord, as much as man ever did with love to his mistress, I be-
came, without perceiving it, almost an idolator.

Shakespeare, in Sonnet 105, protests against this extreme of idolatry, saying:

Let not my love be called idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be
To one, of one, still such, and ever so.

But in his own Sonnet 26, together with the manuscript of Lucrece, which were sent and dedi-
cated to his patron, we find the following:

To the Right Honourable, Henry Wriothesley,
Earle of Southampton, and Baron of Tichfield.
The love I dedicate to your Lordship is without end; wherof this sonnet without beginning is but a superfluous Moity. The warrant I have of your Honourable disposition, not the worth of my untutored lines, makes it assured of acceptance. What I have done is yours, what I have to doe is yours, being part in all I have, devoted yours. Were my worth greater, my duety would shew greater, meane time, as it is, it is bound to your Lordship; to whom I wish long life still lengthened with all happiness.

Your Lordship's in all duety. Wm. Sh.

And Sonnet 26 shows the same phraseology and attitudes of devotion, even in terms of love, to
the male patron:

Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage
Thy merit hath my duty strongly knit,
To thee I send this written embassage,
To witness duty, not to show my wit.
Duty so great, which wit so poor as mine
May make seem bare, in wanting words to show it;
But that I hope some good conceit of thine
In thy soul’s thought, all naked, will bestow it:

Till whatsoever star that guides by moving,
Points on me graciously with fair aspect,
And puts apparel on my tatter’d loving,
To show me worthy of thy sweet respect:
Then may I dare to boast how I do love thee,
Till then, not show my head where thou mayst prove me.

Thus this theory, that the Sonnets of Shake-
speare which were dedicated to a male in terms of
love are completely within bounds of literary con-
vention and necessity, becomes more than mere
theory and begins to make those placing Shake-
speare in the homosexual ranks apocryphal and
alarms with little real cause for their accusations.

Sonnets to the fair youth continue to reveal
aspects of the relationship (poetic, at least)
that he shared with Shakespeare. The poet is el-
derly, or feels elderly, as we see in Sonnet 73’s
famous first four lines:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Lore ruined choirs where late the sweet birds
sang.

Related to the Petrarchan conceit, discussed earlier on page 4 of my paper, is the medieval courtly love philosophy, in which falling in love is accompanied by great emotional disturbances. According to the strictest courtly love code, true love was impossible in the married state. Basically, courtly love was illicit and sensual, but a sort of platonic idealism soon appeared. Platonic doctrines are concerned with the aspirations of the human spirit; they exalt mind over matter.33 Accordingly, the soul of the lover, in a quest for perfection, ascends from the lower, or sensual level, to the spiritual. Knight applies this philosophy to the Sonnets: the Dark Lady representing the lower, sensual level, the youth supplying the higher, "super-sexual," spiritual plane to which the poet can rise. Knight thinks that Shakespeare sees in the fair youth a symbol of higher, bisexual integration; an ideal beyond the biological desire for the Dark Lady, which elevates the Shakespeare-youth relationship above homosexuality.34
In the remaining sonnets in this fair youth sequence, more aspects of the friendship are discovered. Shakespeare is jealous because others seek the youth's patronage, especially one poet whose verse bears "proud full sail" (86). And once again, as in Sonnet 41, the poet gently rebukes the youth for wantonness:

Both grace and faults are loved of more and less,
Then makest faults graces that to thee resort.

The poet is later (in Sonnet 109) reconciled after an absence:

Oh, never say that I was false of heart,
Though absence seemed my flame to qualify.

In Sonnet 117, the poet defends himself against the charge of ingratitude:

Accuse me thus: that I have scanted all
Wherein I should your great deserts repay,
Forgot upon your dearest love to call,
Whereeto all bonds do tie me day by day;
...but shoot not at me in your wakened hate,
Since my appeal says I did strive to prove
The constancy and virtue of your love.

The last of this series is Sonnet 126, technically not a sonnet at all, and which serves as a conclusion to the preceding poems and is writ-
ten in six rhymed couplets. This "farewell" sonnet once again urges the youth to defeat Time by having offspring, as in the first 17 sonnets, and warns him against the ravages of Time and Nature:

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy pover Dost hold Time's fickle glass, his sickle, hour; Who hast by waning grown, and therein show'est Thy loves withering as thy sweet self grow'est; If Nature, sovereign mistress over wrack, As thou goest onwards, still will pluck thee back; She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill May Time disgrace and wretched minutes kill. Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure! She may detain, but not still keep, her treasure; Her audit, though delay'd, answer'd must be, And her quietus is to render thee.

Throughout all of the preceding analyses and speculations, one possibility, probably the most important and basic, has not been considered: that perhaps the Sonnets were not autobiographical. The entire homosexual controversy rests upon the assumption that the Sonnets are direct transcripts of the poet's real experience. Frye argues that, if the youth is real, "the world's greatest master of characterization" would surely give the boy an individualizing touch. If Shakespeare's Sonnets are autobiographical, he says, then the poet has "lavished a century of the greatest son-
nets in the language on an unresponsive calf as stupid as a doorknob and as selfish as a weasel. Regardless of the youth's character, the subject of homosexuality would never have been raised if Shakespeare's readers hadn't been so eager to prove the boy a real man. Pearson says that believing Shakespeare wrote the sonnets to demonstrate his own literal beliefs and experiences or that he wrote in any definite order is "preposterous" except perhaps in the case of certain groups dealing with one same theme. But even these were often interrupted by poems on fashionable topics or conventions of the day, for "Shakespeare was nothing if not an opportunist!" Pearson exclaims.

Poetry is not merely the reporting on experience, obviously. Imagination is the essence of a poem. The experience of love and the writing do not necessarily have any direct connection, since one is experience and the other craftsmanship. Besides, precise biographical deductions are hazardous, especially from works written three and a half centuries ago. Editors' mutilations in translation and mechanical errors could easily
distort meaning, even without knowing how far the Sonnets preserve, or were even meant to preserve, strictly literal, autobiographical truths. Shakespeare's Sonnets are probably combinations of his own emotional experience, fashionable bits of philosophy, and conventions concerning love, "floating" in from Italy and France, common sense reasoning from his own life's events—all these elements have played a role.

Although positive, incontroversible evidence cannot prove whether or not Shakespeare was involved in a homosexual relationship with the young man in the Sonnets, the conventions of the time, the sonnets themselves, and the logical conclusions drawn from both suggest that the poet was not a homosexual. Edward Hubler considers the matter "a balance of probabilities." He notes, had a hurried marriage at eighteen and was twice a father before he was twenty-one. Obviously he was not strictly homosexual. Hubler goes on to say that the probability of a homosexual episode, a love affair with the fair youth at the same time as a sexual entanglement with the mistress, is possible, but certainly not probable. The charge of homosexuality leveled against Shakespeare can
neither be proved nor disproved on available evidence, but the balance of probabilities certainly discredits it. And, more importantly, an elucidation of William Shakespeare's unique concept of love in his sonnets promotes such an understanding of the sequence as to eliminate any dwelling on the question of their author's sexuality.
NOTES


4 Shakespeare Variorum, p. 234.

5 Ibid., p. 236.

6 Ibid., p. 237.

7 Ibid., p. 239.


9 Stevens and Malone, Shakespeare Variorum, p. 197.


15 Ibid., p. 274.

16 Northrop Frye, The Middle of Shakespeare's Sonnets, p. 52.

17 Knight, p. 79.
NOTES, Cont.


28. Ibid., pp. 281-2.


31. Ibid., p. 262.

32. Ibid., p. 266.

33. Thrall and Hibbard, p. 112.

34. Knight, p. 41.


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