

# On Shakespeare in Sonnets



# On Shakespeare in Sonnets:

*A Study in the Theory  
and Practice of Reader  
Response Criticism*

By

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## PART I

# POETRY AS LITERARY CRITICISM: SONNETS AND READER RESPONSE

### About the Poems and the Project

Jane Tompkins noted that “although theorists of reader-oriented criticism disagree on many issues, they are united in one thing: their opposition to the belief that meaning inheres completely and exclusively in the literary text” (201).<sup>1</sup> In her introduction to *The Reader in the Text*, Susan Suleiman suggests, going a step further, that “[t]he words *reader* and *audience* [as opposed to the privileged *author*] once relegated to the status of the unproblematic and obvious, have acceded to a starring role” (3). Following Suleiman, more recent criticism and theory has placed the reader more centrally in the consideration of literary effects and affects—she sees interpretation as a “communal, context-specific act” (45).<sup>2</sup> Reader Response criticism, the subject of this introductory essay, presents the notion that a text does not reach completion until a reader fulfills it: readers’ intellectual and affective responses enliven the nascent possibilities that the text (maybe or maybe not the author) has provided in truncated form—truncated not through any fault of an author, but because that is the nature of a text. The text represents potential that the reader brings to one of many possible conclusions. Reader Response also allows that a reader’s rejoinder or counterpoint to a text may have as great importance, as significant content, and as impassioned creativity as the work that elicited it. A look at the Book Review section in the *Sunday New York Times*, for instance, uncovers many *reviews* that are first and foremost Reader-Response *essays*. They deal partly with the books in question, but mostly with reviewer/essayists’ take on the books as thinkers

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation comes from her essay in the collection, “The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response,” Chapter 12, pages 201-32.

<sup>2</sup> “Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism,” pages 3-45.

who have also written on the subject. They aim creatively, as “writerly” pieces, to draw attention to the reviewers’ own books or views and skills.

Reviews in many venues serve different purposes than do other sorts of literary criticism: they may aim, for instance, more at entertainment than explication. They may aim to boost the writer’s career or cv or to support his or her critical camp or attack another’s. Yet any form of writing may do that. In *S/Z* Roland Barthes made the distinction between *texte lisible* and *texte scriptable*—the second term allows that the text changes as the reader reads; the reader is not passive but participates in the discourse.<sup>3</sup> The idea is not a simple dichotomy, but more of a sliding scale. *On Shakespeare, In Sonnets* may from a first glance at the poetry in Part II appear more “readerly,” in Barthes’ sense, but its aims are much more open: to re-engage the reader in creative response to Shakespeare’s plays as I have done in the sonnets.

In *The Open Work* Umberto Eco defined Reader Response about as succinctly as one can both on its own and as it connects to aesthetics:

Aesthetic theorists . . . often have recourse to the notions of “completeness” and “openness” in connection with a given work of art. . . . The addressee is bound to enter into an interplay of stimulus and response which depends on his unique capacity for sensitive reception of the piece. In this sense the author presents a finished product with the intention that this particular composition should be appreciate and received in the same for as he devised it. As he reacts to the play of stimuli and his own response to their patterning, the individual addressee is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense conditioning which is peculiarly his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations, and prejudices. Thus, his comprehension of the original artifact is always modified by his particular and individual perspective. In fact, the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood. (3)

Eco suggests here that whatever the author may have in mind, the reader experiences a text according to what he or she has in mind. The work provides potentials for readings—the better it is, the more potentials it provides. Both culture and individual experience inflect or even produce the realization of those potentials, each of which adds to the subsequent “form” of the work, its complex or matrix of achieved as well as potential readings.

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<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, Hill and Wang, 1974, originally published in France in 1970).

In this introductory section I aim to explore two ideas: that what we normally distinguish as “creative” work—the text that we readily identify as poem, story, story, play, novel, memoir, rather than criticism—may serve just as significantly as critical work as can what we segregate as critical prose; the act of Reader-Response criticism need not end with reading, but may well continue into writing. We need not and perhaps should not detach writing from reading and need not and should not distinguish the creative and the critical as separate activities. These ideas have, I think, always been intuitively obvious, though academe has tended to reinforce the distinction and has sometimes directed teacher-scholars to remain in their various corners of nominal expertise. I have had colleagues ask why I thought myself prepared to write on (or teach) anything other than the subject of my dissertation; I have thought of an academic dissertation as a way to study a subject and learn to write a book about it, a procedure one may then apply to any fields one chooses. I have never thought of teaching (mine or anyone else’s) as restricted to those areas on which one has written books or as leading students to the final word on anything; it should, I hope, encourage them to such further inquiries as interest them, to extend their reading and to build on what they have read and will read with their own new interpretations and writings. Each phase of teaching and writing leads us to get better—more attentive, incisive, and interesting—as readers, critics, and writers.

The idea of reader as writer merits further elaboration and discussion and, I would add, application: that’s where Part 2 of this little volume comes in. Shakespeare’s plays and the sonnet form that he used so effectively (and affectively) have inspired a great deal of creative as well as critical response from readers. Directors and actors must necessarily interpret to conduct their art, but so may writers who find inspiration in texts or productions—writers not only as critics, but as creators in their own time and place. The project that after many years has generated this book began with the composition of Part 2, the sonnets themselves. In *Vita Nuova* (1295) Dante become both writer and critic, assembling a series of poems (including twenty-five sonnets and other forms) amidst a narrative that describes both the circumstances of the poem and how he structured them and for what purpose—so he folded the criticism, a mix of author’s and reader’s response, right in the text. There the distinction of writer and critic becomes moot, and *Vita Nuova* influenced my early thinking about breaking down the barrier between author and critic.

Every artist has influences; every artist produces art because of exposure to those influences; therefore, to a greater or lesser degree, every artist’s work involves if not begins with interpretation or critique, and we

have no reason to restrict the writer's response to influences by requiring only explicatory prose. The reader-become-writer can reasonably take up any artistic/meditative form or format that he or she as responder desires—responding from desire rather than educational/scholarly cues, pressures, or predispositions may or may not lead to a successful result, but it should certainly lead to a spirited and interested effort. Building on how poetic response elaborates on one's sources of inspiration, Part 3 of this volume will consider, briefly, each of the plays and how the individual sonnets of Part 2 critique them as works of literary art: another kind of response or completion among a nearly infinite variety of possible approaches.<sup>4</sup>

Many authors have already, even frequently, accused their reviewers of writing fiction, but we also know that writers with literary intent have always in their own "creative" work returned to other writers who have inspired and moved them.<sup>5</sup> Vergil in the *Aeneid* was clearly rewriting Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, just in reverse order, and certainly with all the trimmings and with the addition of his own purposes as a Roman rather than Greek poet and citizen. Many other writers have taken up in quite different ways the irresistible story of Odysseus, either recomposing or adding to the narrative—each comprises some level of venerative critique along with more or less inspired expansion.<sup>6</sup> In his history plays Shakespeare often "borrowed" from Holinshed—sometimes word for word—and he re-wrote Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* for his own purposes, leaving out any shreds of human decency that his predecessor's characters exhibit. Milton expanded on the Biblical Fall—just a bit—aiming not so much to show God's ways to humans as just, but to justify

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<sup>4</sup> See *On Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Poets' Celebration*, edited by Hannah Crawforth and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, a recent anthology of poets responding to Shakespeare's sonnets with poems of their own. A number of studies dedicated to Shakespeare's sonnets have appeared; see for instance those of James Schiffer and Neil Rudenstine. For studies of the sonnet form and/or its history, see Stephen Burt and David Mikics, Michael R. G. Spiller, Roger Kuin, and Christopher Warley. For anthologies of sonnets see A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth, Phillis Levin, and Houston Peterson.

<sup>5</sup> Nearly everyone involved in literature has encountered Wimsatt and Beardsley's famous essay on the Intentional Fallacy (in *The Verbal Icon*, 1954, 3-19), and yet no one writes without intention, whether personal or familiar or political or professional; Samuel Johnson once opined that anyone who writes for any reason other than money is a blockhead.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses," Nikos Kazantzakis, *Odysseus: A Modern Sequel*, Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, and Edward S. Louis, *Odysseus on the Rhine*.

us, in a carpenter's sense of the word, writer and reader to God: to bring us willingly back to the potential of Grace. Göthe Romanticized Marlowe's Faust and applied to him that Grace whether he wanted it or not. Adrienne Rich re-wrote Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," trouncing the speaker for daring to try to control and direct his beloved's emotions. Some authors keep tweaking and rewriting themselves: Jane Austen, for instance, added incrementally to her critique of the same social perceptions and practices. W. H. Auden warns in *The Dyer's Hand* that the greatest danger for the poet is that, having written a good poem, he or she will continue indefinitely writing or rewriting that same poem, having grown enamored of it, rather than starting from scratch with something new and newly creative. J. R. R. Tolkien wrote and rewrote the stories of the *Silmarillion*, never quite getting it to publication in his lifetime, but caught up in the idea of sub-creation<sup>7</sup>: creating myth as the Creator guides, an idea much like William Blake's in his prophetic books.

Readers' thoughts will, I suspect, move quickly to examples of writers as readers— favorites and otherwise. Writers have filled literary history with works built on works, perhaps from the beginning, especially if we believe written literature to have derived from oral roots: the recorded work must differ in some ways from the spoken, since the spoken, in its use of variability and formulas, would have differed with each speaking. *Gilgamesh* may well comprise a concatenation of earlier stories under the rubric of one hero-king. Homer must have got his stories of the Trojan War from someone, and he would have assembled them according to the themes and purposes of his own time. Just as the Modern responded to the Victorian and the Victorian to the Romantic and the Romantic to the Neoclassical, so the Neoclassical derived from the Renaissance, which grew out of the medieval as well as the Classical. What Harold Bloom called the anxiety of influence I call the productivity of influence: we write because we read or heard something we like, and we want to add to the tradition from which it comes. The process may as well prove enlivening as anxious.

The poems that first got me thinking about this idea some thirty years ago, Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again," make as good a place as any to start an analysis. Reader Response poems long before the official recognition

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<sup>7</sup> See "On Fairy-Stories," first delivered in a lecture in 1939 and published in 1947, now available in an expanded edition with scholarly commentary by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas Anderson (*Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*, New York and London: HarperCollins, 2008).

of Reader Response as a critical school, those sonnets don't recapitulate plot elements from the original, but instead encapsulate the poet's ecstatic reactions to the wild power of the originals. "On First" begins with "Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold"—Homer's golden age and the incomparable output of the Classical world—then observes "Yet did I never breathe its pure serene/ Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold." The speaker, having then understood Homer more fully than he ever had, concludes, "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies . . . Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes/ He stared at the Pacific . . . Silent, upon a peak in Darien." Upon re-reading, the astonishment of the magnitude of Homer's accomplishment has struck him viscerally as it never had before, like explorers looking around a corner of the globe to see a new, long, terrifying, but tantalizing way home. I once wrote a parody of this poem with the speaker as a baseball player who has just got a single in the seventh game of the World Series: he watches with ecstatic joy as his teammate Chapman hits a home run to win the Series. Not Keats, obviously, but if poems can critique seriously and beautifully, why can't they also have a bit of silly fun? That, too, is Reader Response.

Keats's *Lea*r poem is, I think, even more Classical than his Homer poem, because it offers a means to get to the catharsis that not everyone so easily finds after this tragedy; the Chapman's Homer poem, by contrast, is more modern, more of an objective correlative. Because of the power of its horrors, *King Lear* may be easier to critique through an artistic response than by means of analytical prose: one can perhaps better get to the ideas by emotional rather than exclusively rational methods. Keats begins, again, with an image of gold turning to feelings of serenity: "O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute." He terms the play a "fierce dispute/ Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay" and asserts that he must "burn" through this "bitter-sweet . . . Shakespearean fruit." Now bitter, yes, but sweet?—the play has little narrative sweetness, but for a poet like Keats one can imagine the effect of the power of the language and the imagery. *King Lear* works by building noble character not on actions but on words and thoughts that flash back and forth through the chasm between heaven and hell—and they end in hell. Keats's narrator concludes by asking Shakespeare, "Let me not wander in a barren dream,/ But, when I am consumed in the fire,/ Give me new phoenix wings to fly at my desire." While the world of the play may be a nightmare, and its horrors may annihilate my sense of rootedness in "myself," may I find at the end release to express my chastened self both in art and in life—that's where the poem has taken the reader. The catharsis comes in the freedom to move from the world of deadly suffering to a world of hopeful

creation—ironic in Keats’s case, because of his short life, but powerful as encouragement to find a way, as Blake’s character Los would say, to create one’s own course rather than to be enslaved to another’s.

More than twenty-five years ago I began my own first attempt of any magnitude at this kind of criticism by quietly composing a couple of poems in response to Shakespeare’s plays—they appear in the collection in Part 2. I thought to combine my interests in Shakespeare, whom I was studying with some intensity at the time, and in writing poems, something I hoped to learn to do better than I had done. The idea struck me as an apt way to achieve worthwhile content, better for me than the contemporary tendency toward confessional or at least highly personal poetry, since, while I have some skill with language, I’m not a particularly interesting person and had no great personal revelations to make to the world. Since I had been re-reading Shakespeare’s sonnets as well as the plays, my own poems readily, even demandingly guided themselves into sonnet format.<sup>8</sup> The sonnet’s traditional question-answer, problem-solution, thesis-antithesis pattern works well for brisk, focused, and trenchant reader response, and it makes one discern exactly what he or she has to say about a subject: no space for lollygagging or self-indulgence if one wants to get at some essence of the play in so few lines. In Part 2 the titles of the poems will identify the plays that spawned them, and the subsequent commentary will focus more on thematic directions and personal *affect* of the plays (that is, the emotions they evoke) than on the structure of the individual poems. The *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* poems came first of all of them, mostly because I was spending more time with those plays. “After *Romeo and Juliet*” considers the play not as an isolated instance, but as Shakespeare’s drawing the play from and placing it in literary history. It comes at an important point in the evolution of his own drama, and it takes up human problems that had troubled other authors as much as they had him. This play connects him to Marlowe, the chronicles of English, Danish, and British history, some of his contemporary playwrights and sonneteers, Greek and Roman dramatists, medieval Romance writers in their interest in love at first sight—and, on the other end, to readers from our time who still worry over the same problems.

What has always struck me about *Romeo and Juliet* is that, given its beginning in cases of thwarted love that should, unthwarted, have ended a family blood-feud, the play should have turned out as a comedy. The two

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<sup>8</sup> About twenty-five years ago a student stopped by my office to complain that since our study of Old English poetry she found she couldn’t stop speaking in three- to four-beat alliterative lines, and she continued speaking for about two or three minutes just so to prove it to me.

young persons marry, making the two families one family: end of feud. But blind anger and selfish notions of dignity and status in addition to just plain bad luck get in the way. And in all this time, and for all the storytellers who have approached this issue from kidnapped Helen and Pyramus and Thisbe to vampires and lycans in pitched warfare and religion-inspired terrorism, we still refuse to set aside our own egos for the sake of mutually respectful peace. That's the essence I aimed to capture in the poem, to make the point that the issues that have wrought past suffering continue to do so. Obviously someone else taking up the play as subject for creative response would find different hot-spots for treatment: that's the virtue of Reader Response, that we can see a text in many ways and can bring to it our personal and peculiar ways to read, study, appreciate, and respond.

Among the plays that took the longest time for me to generate poems, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* created difficulties because for our time they remain especially fraught with historical and contemporary politics that don't apply to the originals. American audiences especially have a hard time separating *Othello* from the struggles of African-Americans for equal rights and opportunities, and for most of the world the twentieth-century Holocaust makes separating even a Renaissance play such as *Merchant* from attempted genocide a very difficult task.

Another poet may feel compelled to address those issues as essential to our current world, but I chose instead to comment on Portia's question, "Which is the Merchant here, and which the Jew?" My goal here is not Cultural Criticism of our time and place, but creative response to the play as a work of art, and for me Portia condenses the play around a problem of perception—a common motif in Shakespeare's plays. Antonio is the first merchant, a merchant *from* Venice in the play, having been one since before the play began. Bassanio is the second merchant, a merchant *in* Venice in the play, angling for money to get a rich wife, then angling with the wife to keep an undeserved fortune. Portia, surprisingly beloved by Shakespeare's audiences and critics, becomes the third merchant, a merchant *for* Venice, when she saves a cruel and self-absorbed Antonio and bales out the handsome and lazy gold-digging boy Bassanio. Many anthology editors place this play among the comedies, but it is at best a problem, problem, problem play and at worst a horror play: the play ends with terribly matched couples who look to me destined for disastrous relationships. To rephrase Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride*, I don't think that play means what we think it means, and my response comes partly from common misunderstanding and partly from what strikes me as the emotional as well as intellectual center of the play.



The hardest poem to write, technically and emotionally, was the one on *Titus Andronicus*, because it has always been my least favorite of the plays—in fact, I have always quite disliked it. It has power as a play, and I can see why audiences of Shakespeare’s time responded to it, especially given their taste for revenge tragedy. Emotionally it runs riot with me. I fell back on Keats for help, since *King Lear* may be equally (or more) disturbing, but *Lear* is infinitely more artful. I dealt with *Titus* as I did with *Romeo and Juliet*, placing it in literary history rather than grappling only with its emotional effects, which can be overwhelming.

Having first started to read *Titus Andronicus* when I was in my early twenties, I set it aside; while I was in graduate school, thinking for the first time about a career teaching literature, I steeled myself to read it through. I decided then that, regardless of the direction any career might take, I would never teach it or go to see it if someone dared to play it. I suspected, and to some extent still do, that Shakespeare, early in his career and confronted with a request to write a revenge tragedy, thought, “All right, if that’s what you want, that’s what I’ll give you, and I’ll give you such a tragedy that you will never ask for such a thing again!” What a bloody, nasty, ugly spectacle of a play—and I know you’re thinking now, “So what does he think of *King Lear*, a Sunday family picnic? No, I don’t think that. For me *Lear* has enormous dramatic purpose and not one but multiple catharses, while *Titus* addresses the unredemptive quality of deep human wickedness and how an active public presence may make encounters with it unavoidable. Perhaps he intended to scare the teeth out of the audience. In the sonnet I’ve tried to capture my own sense of the play’s horror and to warn anyone like me who’s sitting down to read it for the first time: audience beware. Yes, it’s Shakespeare, but in case you *like* it, copies should come with discount coupons for psychoanalysis. If you’re like me, you need to take care about what you read or what you view, even when it’s Shakespeare, or what movies you see, because images can remain indelibly in the memory—the images in *Titus* drip with blood and horror.

As a whole, Part 2 of *On Shakespeare, In Sonnets* comprises a collection of thirty-eight sonnets commenting on the accepted canon—I’ve not included the apocryphal plays such as *Edward III* or *Edmund Ironside*, though like many others I’m increasingly convinced that Shakespeare had at least a hand in them. As I continued to work on the individual poems over many years, the idea of a sequence evolved for me into an experiment: what if one set out to do not single poems, but a collection of critique poems, a small body of poems on a great body of plays? How would it go, if even I could do it? As I look back, the sonnet

still seems to me the perfect form for the attempt. Sonnets and sonnet sequences began as a genre/venue to express and elaborate on romantic love. Shakespeare turned them into something more than that: he begins, if we have the sequencing right, with 126 sonnets about mentoring/friendship love, follows with twenty-six more about a jealous love triangle, and concludes with two traditional erotic-love poems—perhaps just to show that he could really do them if he wanted to. Other poets doubtlessly influenced by Shakespeare have since turned sonnets to other uses: Milton used the sonnet for compact reflection on any personal issue that struck him, and Hopkins turned them toward expressionist spiritual fervor. I certainly don't class my effort in that league, but I hope it does communicate my continuing love and appreciation for Shakespeare and his work in such a way that the poems will help anyone who troubles to read them find some new perspectives on the plays—and so re-enliven their own connection with the plays. I hope also that I can contribute to the case that the separation of creative and critical work is artificial, that the suggestion that some of us may be poets and some of us must be critics is sadly short-sighted. I've never seen any good reasons why criticism can't be fun to write and read or why poetry and fiction can't critique other literary work just as effectively as expository critical prose—"creative" writers have done their share of critique, though more often social than literary. I hope the reader will consider that thought not only as a conclusion to an essay, but also as an invitation to indulge his or her creative spirit as that spirit moves. Readers have the right to look for fun as well as substance in criticism.

The poems in this volume while responding to Shakespeare's plays owe a debt to his sonnets as well—and to the critical response to those sonnets. Scholars/critics have often wanted to read the sonnets as autobiographical, but I don't believe we need to do that to enjoy then and appreciate them. In fact, I think they resist autobiographical reading: at the time he was writing them Shakespeare would have been in his late twenties to early thirties, closer to the age of the man addressed in the first 126 poems rather than to the speaker, but probably in between the two. Shakespeare's sonnets work as a collection because they include so many wonderful poems, because they respond in interesting ways to a growing tradition, and because their enigmas continue to draw us back for re-reading. Shakespeare, too, may have been critiquing the tradition by asking, "What else can the sonnet do beyond the usual Courtly or romantic love?"

## Building a Critique by Building a Series

Poem sequences, hardly unique to the Renaissance, though they burgeoned there, have an interesting and hardy history. The *Gilgamesh*, as we have it, comprises an assembly of tablets carved in cuneiform and assembled by scholars into a fragmented but still compelling story. *The Canterbury Tales*, a long way from complete, collects stories Chaucer's pilgrims tell as they make their way from London to Canterbury and back again, and the order makes a difference. Even Dante's *Commedia* follows a simple but obvious sequence: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*. In nearly any collection of lyric poems, even the most variable and diffuse, the poet has in mind some kind of order, whether a chronology or symphonic movements of thought and emotion. Different than a collection, a sequence or series uses each subsequent poem to build upon what has come before and set up what will come next, so that the whole has an emotional and intellectual progress, like a narrative. The poems exhibit an organic connection whether they approach one theme or several. They may proceed as a single voice, or they may work polyphonically or symphonically, or they may express evolving voices. Sequences create a small but appreciable space and time of their own: the world of the text expands incrementally but retains a coherence and cohesiveness that can wrap an audience in space as it builds both familiarity and lyricality.

While Edgar Allen Poe preached the virtue of the short poem—indeed, he asserted that we can reasonably call only a short poem—a *poem*—a sequence of short poems such as sonnets allows for the compact music and intensity of each short unit to work in tandem within an evolving matrix of poems, a collocation of images and emotions built by the combination of poems that can still stand alone effectively. *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (both the original and its many translations<sup>9</sup>) accomplishes miracles using only quatrains that, with their combination of beauty and pithiness, can make some sonnets seem long. Given the brevity of a sonnet and the greater brevity of a quatrain, a reader can linger over a single poem or proceed poem by poem for whatever duration the sequence permits. Reading (and writing) them can become almost an addiction.

Sonnets were the literary pearls of the Renaissance, and sonnet sequences built those pearls into elaborate and decorative strings: careful reading of a sonnet sequence is the “string theory” of the Renaissance.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Fitzgerald's translation/rendering first caught my heart more than forty years ago both for how the whole works as a sequence and how the individual poems work as poems. Fitzgerald revised his translation four times, leaving us five versions of the sequence: scholars argue over their favorites. As a translation is a critique, so is a revision: it critiques and adjusts earlier versions for whatever reason—accuracy, aesthetic preference, highlighting a theme, adjusting to cultural differences.

Many poets attempted sequences, and many found ways to innovate either technically or in subject matter. While the majority of sequences, deriving from Italian sources,<sup>10</sup> take up the subject of the romantic love of a man for a woman, poets varied their approaches to find an individual voice while staying within a tradition: a mark of Renaissance aesthetics. A list of English Renaissance sonneteers includes not only Thomas Wyatt the Elder and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, the two poets who brought the form into English, but also, in addition to Shakespeare with his collection of 154, these authors of sequences: Anne Lok (perhaps the first English poet to publish a sonnet sequence in 1560), Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, Bartholomew Griffin, Alexander Craig, Giles Fletcher, Henry Lok, Thomas Lodge, Fulke Greville, Lady Mary Wroth, Thomas Watson, Henry Constable, William Percy, Richard Lynche, William Drummond, and John Donne—a grand list (perhaps partial) indeed, and with some interesting variants in subject matter. While some are longer and some briefer, in each case the poet had structural notions of how to assemble the individual poems into a whole. A glance at Alex Preminger’s *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (old or new edition) yields considerable information about the history and development of the form. Created by Sicilian poet Giacomo da Lentino (or Lentini) in the first third of the thirteenth century, the sonnet took on its typical “Italian” form of fourteen lines divided into an octet (or octave) and sestet with eleven-syllable lines and a rhetorical pattern of thesis-antithesis, question-answer, or problem-solution. In the *Vita Nuova* Dante combined the sonnet form with other poetic structures and explanatory prose, and in the fourteenth century Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* made the combination of form and subject matter—romantic love—famous and popular. In the fifteenth century the sonnet, taking the Renaissance with it, migrated to Spain, Portugal, and France, and the English imported and restructured it in the sixteenth century. Many of the early sonnets are translations of Petrarch, but even those early poems exhibit a shift toward the English taste for a closing couplet to complete the poem with what James Joyce might call a “satisfying click.” Wyatt’s and Surrey’s sonnets, though not in long sequences, appeared in Richard Tottel’s *Songs and Sonnets* (1557), later known as *Tottel’s Miscellany*, one of the most influential books of lyric poetry in English literary history: readers’ tastes for varied and lively forms and praise for individual experience and its lingering pleasures grew with this volume. Gradually as a rhetorically variable, intensely focused, and neatly packaged burst of emotion, the sonnet came to encompass nearly any topic a poet wished to address: note for instance Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* and in the Victorian age

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<sup>10</sup> While we call the quatrain, quatrain, quatrain, couplet pattern the “English Sonnet” as opposed to the Italian pattern of octet, sestet, many writers of English sonnets have used the Italian pattern, too.

Hopkins' deeply religious sprung-rhythm poems. The protean sonnet has undergone a natural evolution.

Mary Wroth flipped the subject matter from a man longing for a woman to a woman dealing with her love for a man: the love remains romantic and faithful, but it reverses the perspective.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare created sonnets on three topics: the joys and sorrows of friendship-love, the encouraging of a younger friend to reproduce while asserting he will immortalize him anyway through his poems, the frustrating experience of a love triangle—the emotions of the whole sequence span a wider and different range than do most sonnet sequences. As with Wroth's poems they often circle back to humor with an underlying sense of mortality. Shakespeare even played with meter and length. Sonnet sequences serious and playful survive into our time, just as popular with writers if not with readers. For just a few examples, to show the variability of what sonnets can accomplish poetically and intellectually, the reader may consult Albrecht Haushofer's *Moabite Sonnets*, a wrenching 1944 collection of eighty sonnets composed by a man awaiting execution in the Holocaust and smuggled out before his death, Paul Engle's *American Child* (about his daughter), and Marilyn Hacker's artful, passionate, conversational, and highly personal *Love, Death, and the Changing* (1990), more than 200 pages of sonnets with occasionally interspersed longer though similarly formal poems. I pick those three because they sit within arm's length of where I'm writing; interested readers may find many more.

We have, of course, many other kinds of poem sequences, not only those with sonnets. Like their forebears, American poets have established a rich tradition of them, from the more obvious *Spoon River Anthology* of Edgar Lee Masters and the less obviously but just as powerfully sequential *Leaves of Grass* of Walt Whitman, to Gwendolyn Brooks' Annie and Bronzeville poems which, like the work of Masters and E. A. Robinson in the Tilbury Town poems, explore persons and places—while those sequences may not comprise sonnets exclusively, they have influenced and inspired many other poets and scholars. They have had a strong effect on me as a reader, writer, and teacher, on how I think about reading and writing poems and on what kinds of subject matter feel apt to me for poetic treatment. Those poets have innovated while also remaining closely in touch with tradition, and they have experimented with the effects of what individual poems can do both as poems and as parts of sequences. I find their interest in place and in the individuality of joy and sorrow compelling, even more so as I get older and as I observe an increasing sense of displacement in the world: we live in a time of refugees, of immigrants and *émigrés*, of an abyss of personal technological devices

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<sup>11</sup> Aemilia's Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, 1611, the first book of poetry published by an English woman under her own name with professional intent, while not a sonnet sequence has sequential elements.

and another of acquisitive greed that separate humans from our humanity. In our mobile age of coming and going, getting and spending, the old ice-breaking question of “Where are you from?” often has no simple answer—it may for a lifetime remain personally and politically unanswerable. And why can’t love of literature, especially of particular work or a particular author, follow in the tradition as a topic of love sonnets, just as love of place did?

Sonnet sequences, both shorter and longer series, remain popular with writers even if they don’t get as much attention from readers as they once did. While in the sonnets in this volume I aim at a creative-critical response to our greatest poet, I laud and appreciate poets who have used sequences for social rather than literary criticism: why can’t Reader Response slip into Cultural Criticism, political criticism, psychological exploration, or whatever subject arouses the interests and passions of a poet when the poet wishes? The poet’s question then involves how to make the sequence, sonnets or otherwise, serve the purpose at hand, how to make them interesting topically and linguistically. A sequence allows for variety, expansion and nuance even as it pursues a single purpose.

Poem sequences permit or even encourage a plot construction by lyric-episodic addition: Shakespeare’s sonnets create in the first two sections veiled plots elucidated by emotional increments and incidental biography. They don’t take up stories as more strictly narrative poems do, but they suggest events with swathed brushstrokes rather than firm lines and borders. The writer may proceed by precision or by suggestion, allowing the reader a great deal of freedom to fill out the narrative with guesses, speculation, or whatever the reader pleases to imagine or impose. Critics have often done so with Shakespeare’s sonnets in the attempt to know more about the poet than we can know or more than the poet wanted us to know—that limitation has left his audience tantalized ever since, and the sense of mystery brings the reader-as-sleuth back to the poems again.

For me the sonnet makes an ideal tool for *play* as well as criticism: like a short story or a book review, it requires concentration and clarity—traits often unusual in criticism, which can often turn to extended argumentative discourse—and an ideal tool for wit and humor, because it gives the reader little time for lack of attention. As such a short form requires brevity of expression, it also encourages highly focused thought free of waste. My goals in the collection here include expanding on what Keats did with *Lear*, focusing my own critical response to the plays within the boundaries established by the sonnet (playing tennis with the net, as Robert Frost might say). Brevity requires one’s best attempt at wit, however limited one’s wit, and concentration requires honing in on the plays’ most significant concerns—and giving a feel for the sequence of the plays that one by one add up to Shakespeare’s dramatic career. The plays (and, I hope, the sonnets) have distinct *affect* while building on similar ideas and a growing sense of what humans need to know about and

confront in our world. The sonnet lives as a form, and its range grows; it has a tradition of appreciation for the past and innovation in the present, of expressing our most powerful emotions in the smallest possible space. It tastes like anything from a tiny cup of espresso to a jar of kosher dill pickles to a dark-chocolate truffle to a bite of pecorino with black truffle cheese. It brings the moment to life and preserves that moment of unique and memorable flavor. And no one need argue that Shakespeare's plays live and thrive: they inspire performances all over the world and new readings and interpretations generation after generation. I aim here to give not *the* meaning of the play, but to recreate, as Keats did, a feeling of the play, one that will lead readers back to what they experience from a reading or a performance. Public performance—"publication"—aims to share the *gestalt* of the play that remains for anyone's response. Public performance—publication—of a poem aims at a similar, but smaller (and more easily repeatable), experience. One reader's thoughts and feelings can help illuminate another reader's thoughts and feelings: E. M. Forster once said "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" but equally I don't always know what I think (or feel) until someone else helps me find the terms to recognize and communicate it: I'm not sure I know what I think until I see how *you* respond.

Building a sequence allows the poet to approach a series of ideas or impressions or to take one idea and consider it from many different perspectives. Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát* follows the narrator from waking to sleep, on a walk through town, through meditations on mortality, and symbolically from birth to death: the poem serves as a critique of a life or a day, or a way of looking at the movements of life. While keeping the themes and affective qualities of the original, the "translator" introduces motifs of his own. Mary Wroth plays not with the romantic love motif of the sonnet tradition, but with the expression of emotion in poetry as both are gendered by the female speaker. Yet the poems remain intellectually gender-neutral, since their expression of what she considers a laudable human trait, faithfulness of her speaker's love even in the face of the unsteadiness of her beloved, remains an appealing idea to many readers regardless of gender. The sequence allows for all kinds of adjustments from the highly technical to the thematic. It can critique a tradition in detail and turn that tradition in entirely new directions. Henry Lok's meditative sonnets created a space for Donne's Holy Sonnets, and Donne's powerful use of the form gave a kind of literary-historical permission for Milton's and Hopkins' later innovations in subject and tone. A single poem builds a house or plants a garden; a sequence constructs a town or a city, often one that in a later time becomes a model or inspiration for new cities. A single poem moves the heart; a sequence may move the mind and body to respond to the heart's vitality. The sonnet sequence especially brings with it expectations and substantial, unavoidable

intertextuality: a reader expects both impassioned snippets and an intellectually satisfying whole.

## On Reader Response Criticism, Its Ideas and Exponents

As a loose “school” of criticism, the Reader Response approach built on Phenomenology as it arose in philosophy and came to influence literary criticism. In addition to its influence as a way of thinking about texts as texts, phenomenology also implies that a work comes from a number of intellectual, emotional, and historical vectors: it emerges from its time, its creator’s life and experiences, its artistic forebears, its audience—all the elements that collect to produce the circumstances that generated it—as well as its readers’ time and all the experiences that have created their intellectual and aesthetic lives. The term *phenomenology*, coming from the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl, originally implied the study of experience and consciousness through one’s own viewpoint or perspective. Georges Poulet considered the problem of the *reader’s* consciousness: “the act of reading is a process of opening oneself up to an ‘alien’ consciousness,” the implied consciousness of the author as one finds it in a text—[r]eading breaks down the barrier between subject and object.”<sup>12</sup> Phenomenology moved more fully into the study of literature especially through the work of Hans Robert Jauss, who argued that, as M. A. R. Habib puts it, “the history of a work’s reception by readers played an integral role in the work’s aesthetic status and significance”<sup>13</sup>—that is, a work, as soon as anyone reads it, enters into literary history, and not just the work but the history of its interpretation influences subsequent readings, affects the common consciousness. Jauss encouraged not just the consideration of the production of a literary work, but the opening up of aesthetic and interpretive response as a dialogue between reader and text.<sup>14</sup>

Jauss’s argument echoes, but extends, T. S. Eliot’s idea in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that each new text and each new interpretation change how we read everything past and how we create everything to come. A matrix of assumptions and expectations shapes our interpretations both intellectual and aesthetic, and the experiential distance between reader and writer decrease as, over time, we get more searching and detailed critiques—we have both historical and personal “literary series.”<sup>15</sup> Wolfgang Iser, perhaps the most influential thinker in the

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory Castle, *The Blackwell Guide to Literary Theory* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 174.

<sup>13</sup> M. A. R. Habib, *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory* (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 721.

<sup>14</sup> Habib, 721.

<sup>15</sup> Habib, 723-24.



practice of Reader Response, expands Jauss's discussion of the "artistic pole" of the author and the "aesthetic pole" of the reader, arguing that the literary work lies somewhere between the two—text and reader "converge" in a nonlinear, polysemic experience subject to time and change.<sup>16</sup> As a writer develops and organizes a text, the reader undergoes a similar process of organizing his or her experience of it. Readers develop our capacity to find and even formulate meaning as we improve our skills and familiarity with texts.<sup>17</sup> Yet readers will face inevitable and necessary "blanks" and "negations"—dislocations or "deformations of organized structures of familiar knowledge" that characterize the literary experience and give rise to "a fecundity or richness of meaning." The act of "consistency-building" that characterizes our work with a text, our making sense of "the conditions that bring about its various possible effects"<sup>18</sup> extends, I think, to writing: the interpretive act does not end with reading, but continues into the reader's step from interpreter to writer. The act of writing moves the response to *inter-pretation*: to bring about traffic between, from praise to appraisal to commerce. Reading leads to writing, which leads again to reading and new writing.

Habib's chapter on Reader Response also invokes Stanley Fish, another of the usual sources: Fish's idea that "the controversies over meaning in Milton's sonnets are not '*meant* to be solved but experienced'"<sup>19</sup> can also extend to the reader's writing: the reader can communicate even an understanding or feeling for those controversies in new writings. Constraints on reading may come from an "institution" (a socio-professional context) rather than from the "linguistic system" that also makes up part of its context, but creative response in some ways disables both potential limitations: the poem that responds to a text need not get that text "right" so much as express the reader's response in a way that can open new possibilities of expressions for subsequent readers. Eco's theory of the "open text" comes into play similarly here: "[t]he reader's freedom inheres in the task of completing the text," and "while the author cannot know how the work will be completed, it 'will still be his own'"<sup>20</sup>—though not entirely, once the reader has built something onto it, has written in response to it. The reader's freedom to respond to an indeterminate or at least always partly open text induces, even requires a creative outlet—necessarily bound by the reader's experiences and itself open to completion by another's response, the text waits alive and breathing. Free response is, as Derrida might say, an act of *dissemination* in response to the polysemy of the text: I respond as my context allows me

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<sup>16</sup> Habib, 724-25.

<sup>17</sup> Habib, 727.

<sup>18</sup> Habib, 731-33.

<sup>19</sup> Habib, 733.

<sup>20</sup> Castle, 148.

by disseminating the complex original in my own work in my own way.<sup>21</sup> The *glyph*, to use another Derridean term, implies both the mark the writer makes and the in-scription in the reader's thoughts: it appears in the physical written text and in the physical biological text of the reader's brain, a physical response to a physical stimulus. Glyphs, observed, produce more glyphs, and so begins the process of interpretation—i.e., more glyphs.

More careful consideration of the reader began before the explosion of theory in the 1970s. C. S. Lewis's 1961 book *An Experiment in Criticism* compared *unliterary* and *literary* readers, those who will read a book once versus those who will return to a book often and with pleasure. In 1938 Louise Rosenblatt first published *Literature as Exploration*, where she lays out her theory of reading as a continual, evolving transaction between text and reader, an idea upon which she later expanded in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* in 1978. New Critic I. A. Richards' 1929 *Practical Criticism* discusses an experiment in which he urged students to read and respond to poems with no outside knowledge of author or context, focusing only on the text—the essential quality of New Criticism, but also a significant step toward interest in what a reader does and how. Among these earlier works Rosenblatt's does the most to diminish the traditional distinction between author/text and reader, the first major step in the development of Reader Response as a recognized method of literary criticism.

The breakdown in subject and object, the sense of one's own creative consciousness as reader, and the further experience of the original poems (in my case Shakespeare's) in the creation of my own poems: that process shows Reader Response in full swing. In a sense one undergoes the loss and integration of one's own consciousness in the original text and in the new work—the reorganization of the critical response in the creative response takes place in a space beyond where the consciousness lay prior to the reader. Those ideas, the leap of faith in the willingness to give up one's own consciousness to a kind of mutual consciousness with author/text, drew me to the idea of creating a sonnet sequence as a *study* of Shakespeare's plays, a book in response to a book, but not a book wholly *about* that book. "Books," wrote Poulet, "are objects. On a table, on shelves, in store windows, they wait for someone to come and deliver them from their materiality, from their immobility"<sup>22</sup>; [a] book is not shut in by its contours, is not walled-up as in a fortress [at least not in free societies]. It asks nothing better than to exist outside itself, or to let you exist in it"<sup>23</sup>—or rather, to let it exist in you, a matter of symbiosis; [w]hen

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<sup>21</sup> More recent studies in response/audience-oriented studies have turned to biology, psychology, poetics, film criticism, and the visual arts.

<sup>22</sup> Georges Poulet, "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority," 41.

<sup>23</sup> Poulet, 42.

I am absorbed in reading, a second self takes over, a self which thinks and feels for me"<sup>24</sup>—and when I write, a third self takes over, the earlier one self-informed (in-formed) sufficiently by the book to become a new self-ready to write. While the text is both subject and object for the writer, it also becomes so for the reader. What, then, if the text contains not poems, but a collection of essays, such as the volumes by Tompkins and Suleiman and Crosman that I have cited above? An editor reshapes and recontextualizes what an author has written just as a reader does in the act of interpretation and/or enjoyment: the polyphonic work comes to the reader with many voices and for the reader creates an even greater potential for varied readings and responses. Roland Barthes makes this point not about collections or anthologies, but about any work, about “the whole being of writing”; he asserts, “a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, and this place is not the author . . . but the reader.”<sup>25</sup> The form of the response as poems rather than essays simply alerts the reader more explicitly that the writer aims at pleasure as well as rhetorical effects.

Barthes' *Contestation* creates an interesting problem: does the new reading or new writing *contest* with the original text, and if it does, for what purpose: importance, authenticity, supremacy? Often when reading book reviews I get the sense that the reviewer is *competing* with the author. Many reviewers seem to believe they must find flaws in a book and point them out—I don't know whether the intent is to say, “Look, I'm smarter than you” or “I could have done that book better than you” or, “O, Editor, won't you please review my (better) book, too?” Do pleasure readers think the same way as professional readers, who may well have writing or teaching opportunities on the line, depending on the success of the review? When would I find myself *contesting* with an author whose work I'm reading: as a pleasure reader, if I'm reading a mystery and trying to solve it, or as a professional reader, if I have a stake in an argument, and I want to be correct and the writer to be wrong? Years ago a professor with whom I was taking a course used the phrase that he liked to “grapple with the author's mind”—reading as combative act? I found that an interesting metaphor at the time, and I still do, but as I think about it, it also troubles me: why grapple with it rather than play with it or sojourn with it or conspire with it or simply learn from it and enjoy it? But then his assertion wasn't compulsory or exclusive, just personal. If I think of the author's (or text's) voice not as demanding or intimidating, but as welcoming and encouraging, perhaps then especially I will feel moved to write something in response to it. Does the author not want me to write,

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<sup>24</sup> Poulet, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 12.

but to go out and buy more of her books and not compete, or does she want me feel part of her community as a contributor rather than merely an admirer?

In the “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” Wordsworth called poetry the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion recollected in tranquility by one who has thought long and deeply. To write anything worth writing and reading—except by some miraculous cosmic accident or divine intervention—one must have *read* long and deeply and probably repeatedly: a text worth reading seldom gives up all its gems on a first digging. Reading requires a collaboration between reader and author, and writing comes from a leap of faith born of collaboration: we sometimes write to do better than what we’ve read, but mostly because we love what we’ve read and, as in biology, love spurs new creation in an act of continuity. In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes describes reading as an almost sexual act, a turning down of the sheets and entering into pleasurable space. The publication of a book has sexual implications for the author—“I must seek out this reader (must ‘cruise’ him)” —and for the reader: “The text that you write must prove to me *that it desires me.*”<sup>26</sup> I had never thought of reading as a sexual act, and I still don’t, but I can see it reasonably as a generational act, especially if the reading moves one to writing. The new writer becomes not just the friend and admirer but the child of the author, and she may in turn bear children of her own—she may then abandon or nurture them, but the writer must take that chance. Even the reader offers irreplaceable living time in taking up the author’s book. The pleasure of the reader is an underrated aspect of literary study because we think of pleasure as personal, anecdotal, and subjective; I wonder how many writers find equal pleasure in their labor. Writing always brings labor and sometimes brings pleasure: occasionally in the feeling that something has come out right, and not entirely by one’s own doing, but especially in learning that a reader has found pleasure in the product—I don’t think that a sexual metaphor, either. The act of reader response can as well be familial, collegial, friendly—sometimes *tui shou* or *chi sao*. If we push or stick together for mutual benefit, the author communicates with me, and we both gain something from it.

One could make an argument that any literary criticism involves phenomenology and reader-response: that idea lies at the heart of much of Deconstruction as a critical endeavor. Anything we write is subject to our own backgrounds, understanding, and predilections, and depends on what we know and how we like to approach reading and writing. But an interesting part of the goal (and necessity) of Reader-Response criticism is that its writing (much like poetry) must be interesting not only for what it says about the work or works in question, but in itself. The writer must turn a personal reading into something artful, something that has literary

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<sup>26</sup> *The Pleasure of the Text*, 6.

qualities of its own—not necessarily a rival of the original, but pleasurable for its own qualities. All writing that one shares with another person says (quietly or loudly), “I will prove worth your time; I will give you pleasure or something useful or applicable”—published writing begins with those boldest of assertions. All writing comes from a personal (or perhaps *collective*) consciousness (or Unconscious?), and all writing comes with its own pressures and vectors. It bears the influence of all that has come before it, of much that it is coeval or consanguineous with it, and of the author’s hopes for its effects; it suffers from the inevitable limitations of the author’s time, place, perceptiveness, kindness, skill—one can go on with such a list, and both writers and readers must live with it.

“Of making many books there is no end”: already the writer of Ecclesiastes (12:12) seems a little piqued by how much writing humanity had produced. Beginning with the *glyph*, the incision in the cortex that begins with reading, one mark begets another, and those marks reach and incise another cortex. If we attend and care, we can hardly avoid the response that moves from thought to spoken or signed word to written word, which leads to more written words. In the phenomenon of reader response we find the essence of what being human means: human being as created observer, auditor, *subcreator*—the stuff that thoughts are made of and made on. In its making Reader Response embodies the practical side of Postmodernism; if meaning does not inhere in a text, but adheres to it as we read and respond, the reader’s response not only completes the text, but gives it additional life it would otherwise lack. Horace wrote that poetry should be sweetly useful; only use, and better yet joyful use, of either poetry or prose makes the text sweet.

