

WOMAN'S REFLECTION IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

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Abstract: Shakespeare's paired portraits of a beautiful, unattainable young man and a dark, promiscuous woman can easily be read as expressions of the deepest misogyny. But it is worth remembering that the Petrarchan tradition he challenged was also consistent with misogyny. Petrarch himself had written misogynist satires on women, and the objectified, ideal lady of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition stood as an implicit rebuke to the human imperfection of women as they actually were. The Petrarchan lady modelled the features that constituted a beautiful woman – in life as well as in art. Petrarch's figuration of Laura played a crucial role in the development of a code of beauty... that causes us to view the fetishized body as a norm and encourages us to seek, or to seek to be, ideal types, beautiful monsters composed of every individual perfection.

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Like "Romeo and Juliet", Shakespeare's sonnets stage a complicated negotiation with the Petrarchan tradition. Written at a time when the vogue of the sonnet sequence was so familiar that it was an easy subject to parody, even in plays written for the amusement of a public theatre audience, Shakespeare's sonnets were clearly belated. They were also novel, however, in two important respects. In the first place, their repeated subject is the speaker's devotion to a beautiful young man. Other poets, as far back as Dante and Petrarch, had written occasional sonnets of praise to male patrons and friends, but in Shakespeare's, the figure of the beautiful young man is assigned the central role traditionally occupied by the Petrarchan lady. Although many of Shakespeare's sonnets do not specify the gender of the beloved, it appears that the first 126 sonnets were addressed to one or more men. It is not clear whether these sonnets depict various stages or aspects of the speaker's relationship with a single man or express his feelings for a number of beloved persons, both male and female; but in many of these poems, a beautiful young man is end resembles the sun, and owed with the traditional attributes of the Petrarchan lady. His bright eyes are star like, he himself resembles the sun, and he is also compared to flowers and other beautiful objects in nature. In temperament, he is often depicted as cold, remote, and unapproachable. He seems to occupy a

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social position higher than the poet's, and he is repeatedly represented as beloved rather than loving. Also like the Petrarchan lady, the fair young man is the inspiration for the poet's writing, which, in turn, will immortalize both the poet's voice and the beloved's image.

In the latter sonnets, when Shakespeare does introduce a lady, she is the complete opposite to the Petrarchan ideal. Dark rather than fair, she is also lustful rather than chaste; and instead of inspiring the poet to spiritual elevation, she degrades him in shameful lust.

In addition to discrediting the physical bodies of actual women, the Petrarchan ideal silenced women's voices. As Vickers observes, "bodies fetishized by a poetic voice logically do not have a voice of their own"¹. The poet's speech, in fact, requires the lady's silence².

Shakespeare's dark lady is a notable exception, especially in Sonnet 130, which insists on the human imperfections of the lady's body, but uses them to discredit the Petrarchan ideal in terms that closely anticipate Vickers' critique³.

This sonnet constitutes a remarkable anomaly, not only among the sonnets that surround it in Shakespeare's own collection but also within the larger tradition of Petrarchan sonnets with which it engages. To be sure, this is not the only sonnet in which Shakespeare repudiates the conventions of Petrarchan praise.

In Sonnet 21, for instance, apparently addressed to the young man, he dismisses the tradition of comparing the beloved with sun and moon, with earth, and sea's rich gems. In the Sonnet 130, Shakespeare rejects the hyperbolic conventions of Petrarchan comparison in order to claim sincerity for his own love. What is different about 130, is the detailed specificity of both the rejection of the Petrarchan conventions and the description of the beloved person.

Describing a woman with dun-coloured breasts, whose hair resembles black wires growing on her head and whose breath reeks with an all-too-human odour, Sonnet 130 is remarkably graphic in its repudiation of the Petrarchan ideal. The repellent details of the woman's shadow of the Petrarchan lady, who is here identified as an impossible ideal, constructed as an aggregate of inhuman similes that deny the reality of women's bodies and the sexual disgust they could evoke. Older criticism typically resisted that confrontation, sanitizing the woman's description in Sonnet 130 as playful and emphasizing that at the time this sonnet was written, reeks need not have meant stinks.

Modern editors have spent more time glossing reeks than any other word in the poem, attempting to neutralize its nasty connotations by carefully explaining that it had not yet acquired its current pejorative meaning. Douglas Bush and Alfred Herbage, in their 1961, Pelican edition, glossed "reeks" as "breathes forth". In 1964

¹ Morris Bishop, *Petrarch and His World*, Indiana University Press, 1963, p. 329.

² Elizabeth Cropper, *On Beautiful Women*, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo and the Vernacular Style, *Art Bulletin*, 58, 1976, p. 376.

³ Nancy J. Vickers, *Writing and Sexual Difference*, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 96.

casebook on the sonnets flatly declares, "the modern sense of *smell unpleasant* was not used in Elizabethan English"⁴. The Riverside Shakespeare was careful to inform its readers that "reeks" meant "is exhaled", with no pejorative connotation. Even so astute a critic as Stephen Orel notes in his 2001, Penguin edition that "reeks" was "not pejorative until the eighteenth century". These glosses are misleading because, although the pejorative connotation were not yet as firmly attached to the word as they have since become, they were already there-and had been for several hundred years. As early as 1430, John Lydgate had used "reek" to describe the odour of sweat, and both Shakespeare and his contemporaries had also used it to describe unpleasant odours, such as blood and sweat, including the sweat of horse. One sixteenth-century writer explicitly used the word as a synonym for "stink"⁵. Shakespeare himself used it in *Henry V* to describe the odour of dead bodies buried in dunghills. In the face of all this lexical evidence-easily obtainable, since it is cited in the Oxford English Dictionary-the scholarly reluctance to accept even the possibility that the poet found the lady's breath disagreeable seems more than merely fastidious. The shameful secret is not simply that the lady may have had bad breath. It is the disgust for the flesh-especially female flesh-that would prevent the poet from loving a lady who smelled like anything less delightful than perfume.

The sexual loathing that shadowed the Petrarchan ideal had a long and venerable genealogy in medieval Christian contempt for the flesh, and for female flesh in particular. In medieval thought, all flesh male as well as female, tended to fall on the wrong side of the binary opposition that divided masculine from feminine gender. A woman, said St Jerome is "different from man as body is from soul"⁶. These associations did not disappear with the Reformation. To Martin Luther, "we are the woman because of the flesh, that is, we are carnal, and we are the man because of the spirit... we are at the same time both dead and set free"⁷. This same distinction between masculine spirit and feminine flesh can be seen as late as the middle of the seventeenth century, when the radical reformer Gerrard Winstanley condemned sinners who had "been led by the powers of the curse in flesh, which is the feminine part; not by the power of the righteous Spirit which is Christ, the masculine power"⁸.

The images that define the difference between the speaker's two loves in Sonnet 144 draw explicitly on this misogynist tradition. The speaker, like the protagonist of a Christian morality play, is pulled between two figures. His "better

⁴ *A Casebook on Shakespeare's Sonnets*, edited by Gerald Willen and Victor B. Reed, 1996, p. 132.

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, in which Carolin Burrow notes that "the sense to stink is not recorded before the eighteenth century".

⁶ Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. I, 1999, p. 83.

⁷ Rosalie Osmond, *Mutual Accusations: Seventeenth – Century Body and Soul dialogues in Their Literary and Theological Context*, Toronto University Press, 1990, p. 83.

⁸ Gerrard Winstanley, *The New Law of Righteousness*, edited by George H. Sabine, Cornell University Press, 1941, p. 157.

angel”, a “saint”, is “a man right fair”. His “worser spirit” is “a woman coloured ill”, a “female evil”, who threatens to separate the speaker from his good angel by corrupting the young man, wooing his purity with her foul pride. The speaker imagines the young man in the woman’s hell, a metaphor that identifies the site of damnation with her vagina. Although indebted to Christian misogyny, the gendering of lust as female was also ratified by classical tradition, which allowed for a spiritual love between man and man but not between man and woman. A reference to this tradition is a text roughly contemporary with Shakespeare’s sonnets appeared in Edmund Spenser’s *Shepherdess Calendar* (1579), a set of twelve pastoral eclogues, which were published with marginal glosses, or comments, attributed to a writer identified as E.K. in a gloss to the January eclogue, E.K. invokes classical precedent to argue that “paederastice is much to be preferred before gynerastice” because “unlike the love which” enflamed men with lust toward woman kind, male homoerotic love could be purely spiritual. He offers the example of Socrates’ love for Alcibiades, whose object, he argues, “was not the young man’s person, but hys soule, which is Alcybiades owne selfe”.

The unease provoked by the story of homoerotic desire that seems to lie behind Shakespeare’s sonnets appears to be a distinctly post-Shakespearian phenomenon. In Shakespeare’s own time, as Margareta de Grazia has persuasively argued, the true scandal of Shakespeare’s sonnets was undoubtedly his lustful passion for the dark lady. That passion, unlike his love for the young man, cannot be sublimated because it represents a threat to the genealogically and racially based social distinctions that are celebrated in the sonnets addressed to the fair, aristocratic young man. “The bay where all men ride” (Sonnet 137), the woman’s body is a place of pollution that threatens to mingle aristocratic with common and black with fair blood⁹. The furious misogyny of the dark lady sonnets is authorized by a long tradition of medieval Renaissance thought that defined a man’s sexual passion for a woman as dangerous and degrading, but it is also fuelled by the biological capacity of the dark, promiscuous woman to produce mongrel children.

The fury is probably most explicit in Sonnet 129, which characterizes sexual congress as an “expense of spirit in a waste of shame”, and sexual desire as a poisoned bait which drives “the taker mad” and “leads men to this hell”. As Thomas Green notes, this sonnet expresses a view of sexual intercourse which, while strikingly different from “the restorative, therapeutic release our post-Freudian society perceives”, was commonly accepted in Shakespeare’s time¹⁰. As Green also points out, the sonnet draws on the medieval and Renaissance belief that sexual intercourse shortened a man’s life. But it is also noteworthy that the

⁹ Margareta de Grazia, *The Scandal of Shakespeare Sonnet’s*, Shakespeare Survey, 1994, pp. 35-49.

¹⁰ *Anti-hermeneutics: The Case of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129*, in “Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance”, Yale University Press, 1982, p. 148.

sonnet genders that the sonnet genres the passion it condemns as heterosexual and identifies the danger it threatens as a danger to men.

Here, as in Sonnet 144, the word "hell conflates the woman's vagina with the place of eternal damnation and torment. Moreover, the lust the sonnet condemns was identified as a feminine and effeminising vice. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century, with the Oscar Wilde trials, that male effeminacy was identified with homosexual desire¹¹.

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, although excessive passion in either sex was condemned, women were believed to be more lustful than man: sculptured images of the deadly sins that adorned medieval cathedrals depicted lust as a woman, and excessive lust in men was regarded as a mark of effeminacy. In Shakespeare's sonnets, the speaker's lust for the woman reduces him to the level of an animal who swallowed a poisoned bait; swallowed, the bait drives him mad, his higher reason overcome by his base bodily appetites. It also renders him effeminate because manliness required rational self control.

Critical uneasiness about the homoerotic passion expressed in the sonnets is based on the modern belief that the dividing line between virility and effeminacy is based on sexual orientation: virile men desire women; effeminate men desire other men. This uneasiness has produced arguments either that the sonnets have nothing to tell us about Shakespeare's personal feelings or that the love they express, although Shakespeare's, is not actually homoerotic¹².

However, the passion that is identified as effeminising in Shakespeare's sonnets is not his homoerotic love for the young man but rather his heterosexual lust for the dark lady; and the critics have been equally evasive in their discussions of the dark lady sonnets. The story of the poet's degrading lust for a sexuality promiscuous dark woman is typically read as a witty rebuttal to the Petrarchan idealization of fair, unattainable ladies and the ennobling effects of loving them. As far as we go, these readings are generally convincing, but they insulate the misogyny expressed in most of the dark lady sonnets within the sanitized precincts of literary history. The hysterical misogyny those sonnets express is rarely acknowledged, either as Shakespeare's own pathology or as the dark underside of Petrarchan tradition itself.

The remarkable power of the misogynistic sonnets is no guarantee, that they contain autobiographical revelations. Shakespeare's plays provide overwhelming evidence that he was capable of expressing virtually any sentiment with a thoroughly convincing eloquence. These sonnets may equally well have been written to cater to the taste of an aristocratic patron or that of the readers Shakespeare hoped to impress.

¹¹ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, London, Cassel, 1994, p. 148.

¹² Margareta de Grazia, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

But regardless of their autobiographical import, they constitute a powerful register of the pathological misogyny that coexisted with Petrarchan idealization and, indeed, constituted the foul matrix in which it grew. If women's lust was dangerous to men, the Petrarchan lady had to be icily chaste. If women's bestial, corporeal bodies were inherently loathsome, the Petrarchan lady had to be compounded of sweet flowers, precious jewels, and bright, remote heavenly bodies.

What matters in those sonnets is not Shakespeare's personal feelings, which remain unknowable, but their contribution to a misogynistic legacy that persists even in the twenty-first century, in the advertisements for a flourishing cosmetics industry, in the epidemic of anorexia as teenaged girls starve their bodies, and in the agonies of self-loathing that drive mature women to endure the painful mutilation of liposuction and plastic surgery.

In view of that legacy, sonnet 130 deserves much closer attention than it has usually received, for it offers a direct challenge to its readers to confront and disown the paradoxical union of misogyny and sublimation that produced the Petrarchan ideal. What makes this sonnet so remarkable is that it claims as an object of love a lady who is not sanitized by Petrarchan abstraction, idealization, and dismembered commoditisation. Scholarly commentators, however, have typically warned their readers against taking Sonnet 130 too seriously. Stephen Booth wrote, "This poem, a winsome trifle is easily distorted into a solemn critical statement about sonnet conventions"¹³. Murray Krieger was fascinated by the ways Shakespeare's sonnets "wrestled" with the Petrarchan convention, but he dismissed Sonnet 130 as a "too obvious" "example of anti-Petrarchan Petrarchism" and merely playful¹⁴.

These dismissive judgements would be accurate if the poem ended after the first quatrain, which reads like a simply reserved version of a Petrarchan catalogue poem, differing only in that each of the conventional comparisons is denied. As in a typical catalogue sonnet, one line each is given to eyes, lips, breast and hair, listed in no apparent order, simply as an itemized list. The Petrarchan catalogue also formed the subject of easy parody in *Twelfth Night* in an interchange that emphasizes the artificiality of sonneteering rhetoric. Viola, disguised as the boy Caesario, has been sent to court Olivia on behalf of her master. Reciting what she says is a part she has studied, she presents Olivia with an abbreviated version of the same argument against celibacy that Shakespeare had used in his own sonnets.

In Sonnet 130, the lover uses a similar literalism to deflate the hyperbolic terms of Petrarchan praise, listening in what looks at first like a random inventory a collection of conventional Petrarchan comparisons, each of which is invoked only to be denied. By the end of the poem, however, it is clear that it is not the lady but

¹³ *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, edited by Stephen Booth, Yale University Press, 1977, p. 452.

¹⁴ *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics*, Princeton University Press, 1964, p. 79.

the comparisons themselves that he finds inadequate. Moreover, the stakes in Sonnet 130 are considerably higher than they are in the easy satire of Petrarchan convention that was itself a commonplace by the time this sonnet was written.

The anti-Petrarchan critique is far more searching, and the final turn to a declaration of love is much harder won. What begins in Sonnet 130 as an apparently random list of discrete attributes ends by evoking the presence of a living woman. Even as he admits that the lady's breath does not smell like perfume, that her voice is far less pleasing than music, and that he cannot compare her gait to that of a goddess, the poet reminds us that she breathes and speaks, that she walks, and that the object of his love is a real woman, alive and active.

The transformation begins in the second quatrain. After the rapidly itemized inventory of eyes, lips, breast, and hair, the second quatrain slows down, devoting two lines each to cheeks and breath; and it moves purposefully from the colour of the lady's cheeks to the scent of her breath. The terms of the description proceed from the detached, evaluative sense of sight to the intimacy of scent. At the same time, with the mention of her breath, the lady herself comes to life. The attributes described in the first six lines- lips less red than coral, dun-coloured breasts, hairs like black wires, cheeks that do not resemble damask roses-could just easily belong to an effigy or a corpse. In their descriptions, moreover there is no indication that the speaker regards the lady with anything than disdain. It is not until the beginning of the third quatrain that he reveals, "I love to hear her speak".

Significantly, that revelation comes immediately following the reference to the lady's breath-a reference that has often seemed to be the most damaging description of all. But the lady's reeking breath marks the turning point of the sonnet's action. The first attribute named that can belong only to a living creature, it both incorporates and radically revises the traditional Christian association of breath with spirit, the principle of life that emanated God; for although the reference to the lady's reeking breath calls her to life, the life it evokes is overwhelmingly physical. As such it directly challenges a crucial element of the sonnet tradition, which was informed from the time of Petrarch with the traditional Platonic and Christian ascetic dualism that privileged divine spirit over earthly matter. The reference to the lady's reeking breath initiates a celebration of her flesh, living, but neither sublimated nor sanitized.

It is also significant that the lady's breath is the first attribute named that cannot be detected by sight, the most judgemental of the senses and the most physically and emotionally detached. In moving from the lady's eyes to her breath and from the poet's sight to his other senses, the poem inverts not only the hierarchy of matter and spirit, but also the related hierarchy of the senses, both of which were widely accepted in Renaissance thought.

Building on the arguments in Plato's *Republic* and *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, medieval and Renaissance thinkers understood the senses to be ranged in a hierarchical order with sight, associated with reason and God, as the

highest, followed by hearing and the lower senses of smell, taste and touch. Rejecting the Platonic comparison, the sonnet also inverts the Platonic hierarchy of the senses, for it is only after the speaker abandons the detached, comparative judgements of sight for the intimate, earth-bond sense of smell that he can begin to speak of the attributes that make his mistress beloved.

The Shakespearian sonnet, unlike the Petrarchan, is characteristically divided by its rhyme scheme into three quatrains and a couplet rather than an octave and a sestet; but in many of Shakespeare's sonnets, there is a conceptual break between the second and third quatrains, which remembers the old division. In Sonnet 130, the second quatrain ends with the description of the lady's breath, the first attribute that cannot be detected by sight, and the first that could only belong to a living woman; and the third quatrain begins with the first revelation of the speaker's true feelings - I love to hear her speak. The third quatrain also continues and identifies the reconstitution of the lady as a living woman. In the first eight lines, every item in the description even the lady's breath, was a discrete, static entity, designated by a noun. In the third quatrain, verbs replace nouns, as the lady speaks and walks. No longer a lifeless collection of inert, disjointed attributes, the lady has come to life as an active human presence. The breath of life initiated the transformation; what completes it are her speaking voice and her solid, earthbound corporeality as she "treads in the ground".

Although Sonnet 130 seems to anticipate modern feminist critiques that identify the inherent misogyny of the Petrarchan tradition, there is no doubt that Shakespeare was also capable of imagining, and perhaps also feeling, the most pathological extremes of sexual loathing.

Written at a time when the Petrarchan tradition was all but exhausted, it offers a profound criticism of the traditional tropes of Petrarchan praise, but manages even as it does so to accomplish exactly what those tropes were designed to achieve; for the essential project of Petrarchan poetry was not simply or even primarily to celebrate the beloved lady but to display the poet's virtuosity in competition with his long line of predecessors in the tradition. However, the originality and intellectual rigour with which Sonnet 130 challenges that tradition and imagines a love whose object is an actual woman rather than a disembodied ideal opens a place within the misogynist corpus of Petrarchan poetry in which real women can imagine themselves as the objects of a heterosexual love that is not tainted by the misogynist disgust that elsewhere shadows the Petrarchan ideal.

Many of Shakespeare's sonnets, give powerful expression to that disgust. Sonnet 130 is an anomaly not only within the sonnet tradition but also within the corpus of Shakespeare's own sonnets. The temptation to scrutinize Shakespeare's writings for evidence of his personal commitments remains tantalizing, even though it has been repeatedly discredited. Thus, Shakespeare has been claimed as, inter alia, a royalist, a democrat, a Catholic, a Puritan, a protofeminist and a misogynist. What is indisputable, is that he was a writer of remarkable power and that his writing still has an authority unequalled by any other secular texts.

Many editions of Shakespeare's poems, and of the sonnets in particular, present themselves as having solved some or all of the many unanswered questions which surround these works. The questions have varied each age, as have the answers. Commentators since the late eighteenth century have argued over the identity of "Mr. W.H." to whom the Sonnets volume is dedicated, and have worked themselves into a fine froth over the nature of Shakespeare's sexuality. Of late *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* have generated suggestive but equally inconclusive debates over a string of slightly different questions: critics have argued about whether *Lucrece* is a republican poem, over the sexual politics of *Venus and Adonis*, and over the ways in which Shakespeare represents sexual desire. The main aim is not to offer definitive answers to any of these questions, but to provide and feed the information.

Shakespeare in the past century was perceived primarily as a dramatic poet, and his poems tended to be split into two groups, the Sonnets and the rest, each of which stimulated a different kind of critical attention. From the early nineteenth to the twentieth century the Sonnets were seized upon as objects of biographical speculation. By the late 1930s they also became a central testing ground for the literary methods of New Criticism. *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, long on rhetoric, void of biography, did not suit either of these literary critical fashions. With the exception of some brilliant appreciation by Coleridge the poems languished in a pool of faint praise mingled with outright condemnation from the 1790s until 1970s, when readers began to recognize the power of Shakespeare's early responses to Ovid and to relish their implied view of personal identity as the improvised product of rhetoric and play¹⁵.

An earlier string of institutional accidents effectively divided the poems from the plays. The poems were not included in the First Folio of Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories and Tragedies in 1623. This was partly because many of those responsible for putting the volume together were men of theatre. But it was also partly because *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* were extremely popular, and remained marketable commodities in their own right throughout the seventeenth century. Their printers would have been very unlikely to wish to surrender their rights to print them, even if they had been asked to do so by the compilers of the Folio.

In the eighteenth century collected editions of Shakespeare, the poems and the sonnets were usually either left out altogether, or shuffled off into final volumes or appendices to the dramatic works. Supplementary volumes, several of which sought to masquerade as the final volumes of prestigious collected editions of the plays, gave eighteenth century readers the impression the poems were an optional extra. Economic pressures and simple limitations of space have usually meant that modern annotated editions of the Sonnets have appeared in separate volumes from

¹⁵ The best recent survey of critical opinion in Philip C. Kolin, *Venus and Adonis: Critical Essays*, New York and London, 1997.

the other narrative poems and *The Passionate Pilgrim*. All of these material forces have conspired to make it seem unnatural to ask the question, "What sort of poet was Shakespeare?" unless one wants the answer, "Well, there are some good lines in *Hamlet*".

The picture of Shakespeare the poet which emerges from this, is not one of a writer who wanted to be a poet rather than a dramatist, nor it is a picture of someone who sought programmatically to follow any of the number of career patterns available to early modern poets. Being a poet in the period from 1590 to 1610 was not easy, and gave room only for circumscribed autonomy. Poets worked with and within traditions which were made for them. They also learnt, often with frenzied speed and some rapacity, from other poets. Fashions changed rapidly and markedly, and poets who wished to attract the benison of patrons had to adapt themselves to these changes or die. Poets also had to work within the complicated and often haphazard process by means of which early modern printing presses produced books. The treatment of copy in this period—which was owned not by its author but by the first printer to obtain a manuscript and pay to have it entered in the Stationers' Register, and which might be set by compositors of varying levels of experience and skill—meant that authorial control over texts, their layout, and even the timing of their publication, was always less than complete. Even if Shakespeare had laid out for himself a literary career, running through Ovidian narrative poetry in *Venus and Adonis*, to the graver offering of *Lucrece*, through *Sonnets*, to a concluding *Complaint*, it would have been something which he would have had neither the time nor the power to shape entirely for himself.

His non-dramatic works were in many respects the products of occasion: it is likely that periods of plague, during which the theatres were closed, led to a burst of work on *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*; and it's possible that later periods of plague enabled periods of revision and augmentation of the *Sonnets*.