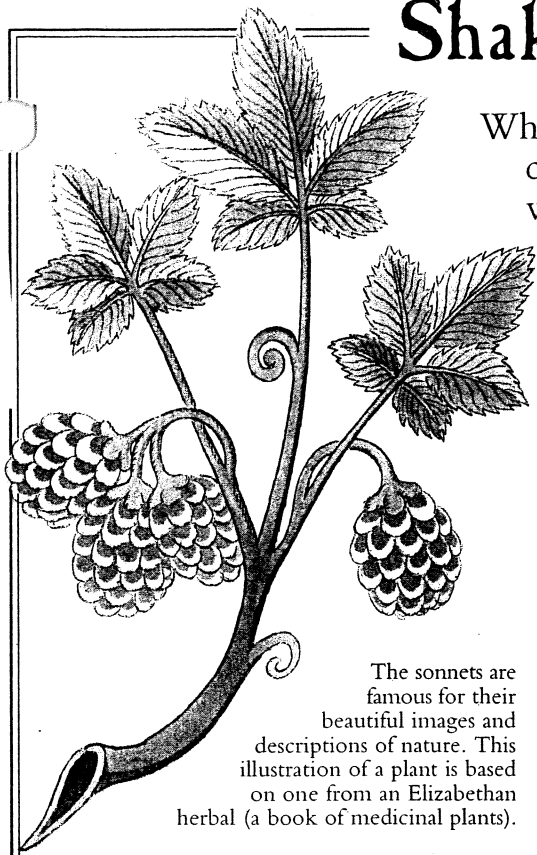


Shakespeare's poems and songs



The sonnets are famous for their beautiful images and descriptions of nature. This illustration of a plant is based on one from an Elizabethan herbal (a book of medicinal plants).

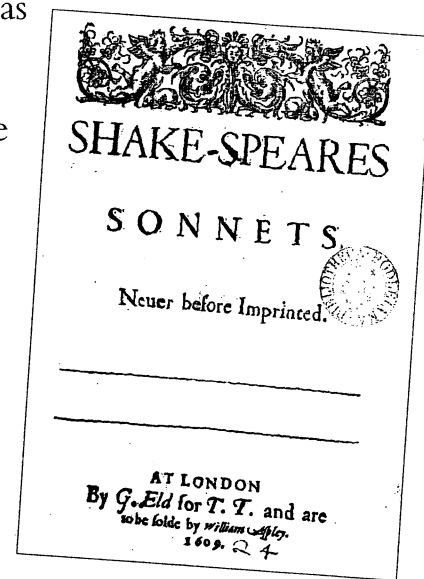
The sonnets

Shakespeare's collection, or sequence, of 154 sonnets was first published in 1609. Around this time, sonnet sequences were very fashionable. They often told a love story, with individual names disguised. For example, the poet Philip Sidney (1554-1586) wrote a sonnet sequence called *Astrophel and Stella*, in which "Stella" may refer to a real woman, Lady Penelope Rich.

Shakespeare's sonnet sequence seems to be about his love for two people - a young man (possibly a patron) and an older woman. Experts still argue about whether these were real people, and whether the sonnets tell us anything about Shakespeare's life, or whether he made the story up. The first 126 sonnets record the poet's love for his friend, sometimes complaining that he is not loved in return, or even that the friend prefers another poet. The later sonnets, 127 to 154, address a lady, known as the "dark lady". She has betrayed the poet by loving other men, including the poet's young friend.

When Shakespeare was alive, poetry was considered the most artistic form of writing. Shakespeare's most famous poems are his sonnets, a sequence of short poems about love, fame and a mysterious relationship. Poets usually depended on patrons, aristocratic friends who supported and promoted them. Shakespeare's poems are dedicated to the rich man who was his patron.

The title page of the first edition of Shakespeare's sonnets. They are dedicated to a mysterious "Mr. W. H.", who may have been Shakespeare's patron, Henry Wriothesley (see opposite page).



What is a sonnet?

A sonnet is a short poem with fourteen lines and a strict rhyme scheme. It was introduced to England from Italy in the 16th century, and has been used by English poets ever since.

There are several kinds of sonnets, each with a different rhyme scheme. The kind Shakespeare wrote, shown below, is now known as the Shakespearean sonnet.

These letters show how the sonnet rhymes - line a rhymes with line a, b with b and so on. Shakespeare uses this rhyme scheme in almost all his sonnets.

This sonnet, number 18, talks about someone's beauty, which is even more perfect than a summer day.

After the first eight lines, there is often a change of direction and a new idea is introduced.

a *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*
 b *Thou art more lovely and more temperate.*
 a *Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,*
 b *And summer's lease hath all too short a date.*
 c *Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,*
 d *And often is his gold complexion dimmed,*
 c *And every fair from fair sometime declines,*
 d *By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;*
 e *But thy eternal summer shall not fade*
 f *Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;*
 e *Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade*
 f *When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.*
 g *So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,*
 g *So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Nature, the weather and the seasons are used as metaphors (see page 34) throughout Shakespeare's sonnets.

Shakespeare usually uses the last two lines of a sonnet to make a statement. Here he says that this poem will immortalize the beautiful person he writes about.

Unlike the rest of the lines, the last two lines are a rhyming couplet - two lines that rhyme with each other.

Songs from the plays

There are songs in many of Shakespeare's plays, especially the comedies. They are often sung by clowns, fairies or country people to celebrate the seasons, or to mark special occasions, such as weddings and funerals. Shakespeare didn't always invent these songs himself. Some of them were already popular at the time, and he borrowed or adapted them for use in his plays.

Feste (right), the clown in *Twelfth Night*, sings a song (below) to entertain the other characters. The song says that life is short and we must enjoy it while we can.

*What is love? 'Tis not hereafter,
Present mirth hath present laughter.
What's to come is still unsure.
In delay there lies no plenty,
Then come kiss me, sweet and twenty,
Youth's a stuff will not endure.*



Ariel, the "airy spirit" in *The Tempest*, sings a famous song (below) to make Prince Ferdinand think that his father, King Alonso, has drowned at sea. The song contains a phrase, "sea-change", that is now used in English to mean a big change.

*Full fathom five thy father lies.
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange...*



Shakespeare and his patrons

Shakespeare's patron was Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton (1573-1624). *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Venus and Adonis* (see below) are dedicated to him. Some experts have suggested that the sonnets may also be addressed to him. They are dedicated to "Mr W. H." This might stand for Henry Wriothesley, with the initials reversed. Another possibility is William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. The First Folio (see page 15) was dedicated to him and his brother in 1623, after Shakespeare's death.

Left: a portrait of Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. Was he the "fair friend" whose beauty Shakespeare praised so highly in the sonnets?

Other poems

Shakespeare wrote several poems besides the sonnets. His first major poem, *Venus and Adonis*, was published in 1593, and may have been written the previous summer when the theatres were closed due to plague. In the poem, the goddess Venus tries to woo the beautiful Adonis and distract him from his hunting. Eventually she finds him killed by a boar. A year later, Shakespeare published *The Rape of Lucrece*. These two poems were his first works to be printed. His other poetry includes songs, *The Lover's Complaint* (1609), a pastoral (country) poem about a jilted lover and *The Phoenix and the Turtle* (1601), a poem celebrating the mystery of married love.

Venus, the Roman goddess of love, often appears in art and literature and would have been familiar to Shakespeare's readers. This picture of Venus is from *The Birth of Venus* by the Italian painter Botticelli (1444-1510).

