From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have found in Shakespeare's Sonnets wonderful poetry written about a mysterious youth, a dark lady, and a rival poet, and have presented a myriad of possible interpretations to these and other aspects of the poems. Some believe that the Sonnets are biographical, and it may well be that Shakespeare had one or many individuals in mind as he wrote. Current criticism makes it clear, however, that interpretations which have assumed biographical facts about the author have not succeeded in making out a conclusive case. And as to whether a young man or woman is a central part of the Sonnets, the gender of the addressee in most of the Sonnets is in fact unspecified. Indeed, "Shakespeare is exceptional among the English sonneteers (Sidney, Spenser, and Daniel, for example) in leaving the beloved's gender unspecified in so many of the sonnets: about five-sixths of them in the first 126 and just less than that in the collection entire."[1]

Even without decisive facts about the Sonnets and their origin, "serious scholarly as well as popular interest in the Sonnets seems never to have been greater." This includes publications in the last few decades of several new editions of the Sonnets as well as "significant criticism." "Much of the liveliness of today's criticism of the Sonnets, of course, is fueled by scholarly disagreement; the only complete agreement seems to be on the value of affording careful study of these poems and the cultural conditions from which they emerged."[2]

As for Shakespeare himself, he has been paid almost every kind of tribute, and his works are at the pinnacle of all respected world literature. Emerson, in commenting on Shakespeare, stated: "What point of morals, of manners, of economy, of philosophy, of religion, of taste, of the conduct of life has he not settled?"[3] There is no shortage of commentary on these varied themes. In addition, there have been

[1] Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets," quoted in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), p. 97.

[2] Ibid., pp. 41-42.

[3] "Shakespeare or, the Poet," in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Select Essays and Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 190.

writers, such as Noble and Shaheen, who have identified throughout the plays many passages that are similar to, or echo, an expansive list of Biblical passages.[4]

While there is a growing interest in the Sonnets, it is also true, as Helen Vendler has stated that "rather few sonnets have been examined in detail, since critics tend to dwell on the most famous ten or fifteen out of the total 154; in fact, the *Sonnets* represent the largest tract of unexamined Shakespearean lines left open to scrutiny."[5] This reading of all 154 Sonnets, with close attention to Biblical themes, is an area of inquiry never before undertaken.

The Bible has been identified by several writers as a source of major importance to Shakespeare. As for the Sonnets, there has not generally been an exploration of their religious or spiritual meanings, except to identify verses that are suggestive of Biblical passages. It should be recalled that for writers in Shakespeare's time, it was contrary to English law to make direct reference to religion in their works; it was therefore necessary for such themes to be occluded within the text and beneath a literal reading. Elizabethan audiences were not unaware of the fact that multiple levels of interpretation were to be found in poetry and drama. Edmund Spenser described such to be true, and it is often accepted that great literature can be understood, as Dante has suggested in his *Il Convivio*,[6] on four distinct levels: first, the plain or literal meaning; second, the allegorical meaning; third, the moral meaning; and last, the anagogical or esoteric meaning. Religious or spiritual aspects would thus be found in the three last-mentioned levels of meaning.

While Shakespeare's plays have garnered the major attention with regard to identifying Biblical themes and passages, this area is left without complete exploration in the Sonnets. It is the intent of this work to complete for the Sonnets what has been done for

[4] See, for example, Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge* (New York: Octagon Books, 1935) and Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999).

[5] Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997), p. 13.

[6] See especially Book 2, Chapter 1, available online at: http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/books/convivi (English translation by Richard Lansing).

Shakespeare's plays. The goal is not to supplant the criticism already in place with a claim for an exclusive interpretation along religious lines. Stephen Booth tells us that "Nothing one says or thinks about a poem can change it. What one says about a poem can sometimes change the angle of a reader's perception of it, but one cannot stop the poem from doing all that it does or argue it into doing what it does not do. No interpretive description of a poem can nullify any of the actions the poem performs upon a reader's understanding."[7] An attempt to argue that one interpretation of the Sonnets is better than another only creates divisiveness. Because one critical commentary throws a shaft of light upon some elements in a poem does not necessarily throw a shadow across the position taken by another, or make it less valid. In his plays and Sonnets, Shakespeare was able to write simultaneously on the levels of literal meaning as well as the allegorical, moral, and anagogical meanings. The Sonnets flow from the same pen as the plays and are filled with equally limitless dimensions.

To assist the reader in understanding the approach to the Sonnets taken in this book, and as an example of the multiple, interpretive readings, Sonnet 7 is here examined in part. The complete treatment of Sonnet 7, with its Theme, Glossary, Commentary, and Suggested Biblical Passages, is found in this book.

SONNET 7

Lo, in the orient when the gracious light
Lifts up his burning head, each under eye
Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,
Serving with looks his sacred majesty;
And having climb'd the steep-up heavenly hill,
Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
Yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
Attending on his golden pilgrimage.
But when from highmost pitch, with weary car,
Like feeble age, he reeleth from the day,

[7] *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), pp. 514-515.

The eyes, 'fore duteous, now converted are
From his low tract, and look another way:
So thou, thyself outgoing in thy noon,
Unlook'd on diest, unless thou get a son.

The *literal meaning* usually assigned to this sonnet is as follows: The poet is making a comparison of the youth, to whom he is speaking, with the sun, which in its morning beauty in the East is gazed upon with adoration ("*Doth homage*"). This youth is then in the prime of his life. As time progresses to "*his middle age*," his beauty is yet admired ("*adore his beauty still*"). But just as the sun travels across the heavens, so the youth eventually reaches "*feeble age*." As the sun fades, so also, will the youth be neglected when he becomes old ("*outgoing in thy noon*") and die and be forgotten, unless he is able to "*get a son*." The idea is that procreation is needed to carry on one's lineage; otherwise, one is forgotten like the sun set below the horizon.

On a *deeper level*, the *Biblical theme* suggested by this Sonnet reads: Life is a journey of the soul. If it is directed outwardly toward a shallow material life, the inner radiance will not shine forth, but die. When the eye is reverently directed heavenward, the soul may receive "*the gracious light*" of the Spirit and experience the rebirth or resurrection promised by the Son of God. The words in line 1 of the Sonnet, "*orient when the gracious light*," is read as the light of the Spirit described as coming from the East. The "*son*" in the final line of the Sonnet is found in the suggested Bible passage whose text reads: "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." **(Matt. 24:27)**

This treatment of the Sonnets demonstrates that it is possible to reach various conclusions about the meaning or interpretation of a Sonnet, though it does not seek to make any claims for exclusivity. It is proposed that for a more complete understanding of the Sonnets, one should take a balanced approach, looking at meanings, which as Dante suggests, may be found in the plain or literal interpretation; the allegorical; the level of morality; or the anagogical or esoteric. As with the examination of Shakespeare's plays, it is possible to find all of these meanings, or a combination of them, in the Sonnets.

As mentioned, Shakespeare's Sonnets may be interpreted literally as applying to a youth, lover, other poets, "the dark lady," and the like.

We also find within them an exploration of human love, the beauty of the inner man, the soul, mortality, temptation, time, and death. Nor can one overlook the Biblical themes of lust, greed, gluttony and the other of the "deadly sins," as well as references to man's "nobler part" or "better angel," which writers on the Sonnets have acknowledged as referring to the soul of man.

Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Bible is written to more completely explore the Sonnets; in doing so it seeks to identify themes at the religious and scriptural level of interpretation. This work is offered to the reader for thought and contemplation. It is only a beginning glimpse into the depth of Shakespeare's spiritual heart. Of course, each one will reach his or her own interpretations and conclusions. Indeed, is it not part of what we admire in Shakespeare that he has given ample scope for appreciation to all audiences on all levels of understanding? Like Truth, Shakespeare's nature is multi-dimensional and limitless. *Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Bible* is another facet of the diamond that is Shakespeare himself.

Ira B. Zinman

"*Introduction to Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Bible*"
by Ira B. Zinman

Features in
Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Bible:
A Spiritual Interpretation with Christian Sources
© 2009 Ira B. Zinman
All Rights Reserved.
For Personal Usage Only
www.worldwisdom.com