

William Shakespeare

(1564–1616)

Author of *Sonnet 29* • *Sonnet 106* •
Sonnet 116 • *Sonnet 130*

Shakespeare may be the most admired author of all time. If he were living today, he would be a celebrity, and the facts of his life would be widely available in magazine articles, books, and Web pages. Instead, we know few facts about him, and these few had to be painstakingly traced from legal and church records or deduced from references in his work.

Bare-Bones Biography Shakespeare was born in the country town of Stratford-on-Avon and probably attended the town's free grammar school. When he was eighteen, he married twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway. They had a daughter, Susanna, and twins, Hamnet and Judith.

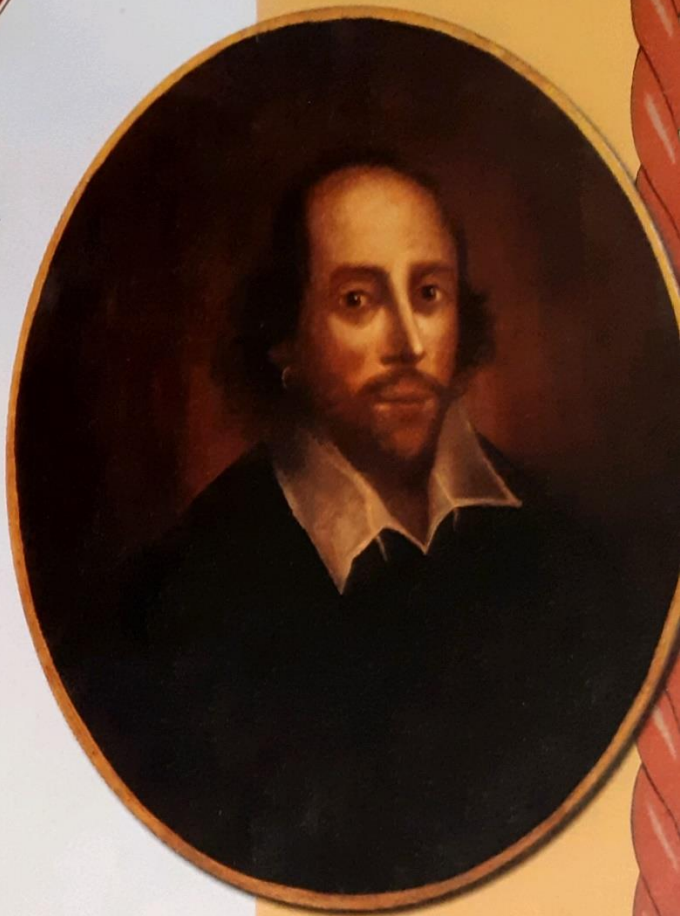
Shakespeare acquired a public reputation as an actor and a playwright. In addition, he was part owner of a London theater called the Globe, where many of his plays were performed. (For more about Shakespeare and his work as a dramatist, see pages 316–319.)

The Sonnet In the years 1592–1594, London's theaters were closed because of an outbreak of the plague. This general misfortune may have had at least one benefit: It may have provided the time that Shakespeare needed to write some of his 154 sonnets.

In writing a long sequence of sonnets, Shakespeare was being fashionable. Elizabethan poets enjoyed the sonnet form, writing fourteen-line lyric poems to both real and imaginary lovers.

The great Italian poet Petrarch (1304–1374) pioneered the writing of sonnet sequences. His sequence charts each pang and longing of the speaker's unfulfilled love for an idealized lady. This poetic device led to endless inventiveness—the beloved's beauty invites extravagant comparisons, and she provides a focus for the poet's ingenuity.

Shakespeare's Sequence Like the sonnet sequences of other poets, Shakespeare's 154 sonnets are numbered. Most of them are addressed to a handsome, talented young man, urging him to marry and have children who can carry on his talents. Readers treasure Shakespeare's masterful use of the sonnet to bring the fundamental experiences of life—time, death, love, and friendship—into tight focus.



*“Not marble nor the
gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this
pow’rful rhyme . . .”*

*—William Shakespeare,
from Sonnet 55*



1 2 *Sonnet 29*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless¹ cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
3 5 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's **scope**,
With what I most enjoy contented least.
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
10 Haply² I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From **sullen** earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

1. **bootless** futile.
2. **Haply** *adv.* by chance.

Sonnet 106

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

When in the **chronicle** of wasted time
I see descriptions of the fairest wights,¹
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme,
In praise of ladies dead and lovely knights,
5 Then in the blazon² of sweet beauty's best
Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
I see their antique pen would have express'd
Even such a beauty as you master now.
So all their praises are but prophecies
10 Of this our time, all you **prefiguring**;
And, for they look'd but with divining eyes,
They had not skill enough your worth to sing:
For we, which now behold these present days,
Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.

1. **wights** (*witz*) *n.* human beings; people.
2. **blazon** *n.* here, catalog of lover's physical attributes.

Vocabulary

scope (*skōp*) *n.* range of perception or understanding
sullen (*su' ən*) *adj.* gloomy; dismal

4 ◀ Critical Viewing

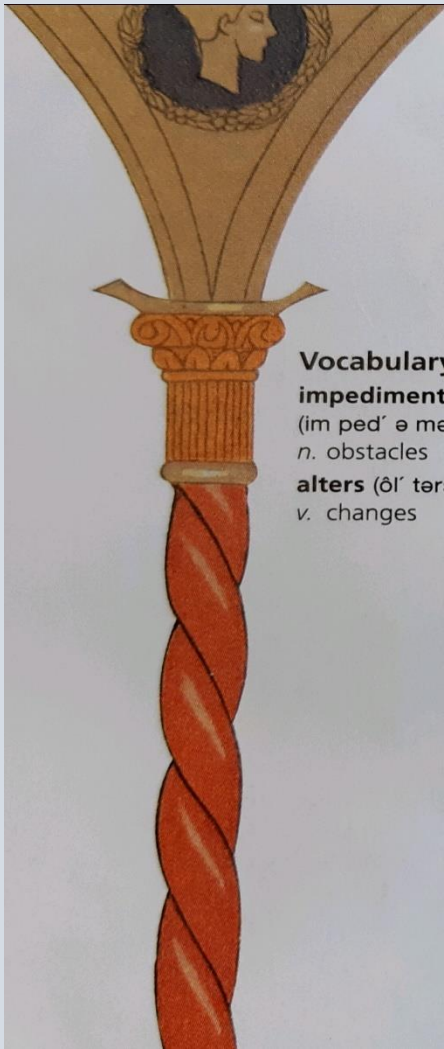
In what ways does the style of this illustration reflect the style of Shakespeare's sonnets? **CONNECT**

5 Vocabulary

chronicle (*krän' i kəl*) *n.* historical record of events in chronological order
prefiguring (*prē fig' yer in*) *v.* foreshadowing

6 Comprehension

What is the speaker's state of mind at the end of Sonnet 29?



Vocabulary
impediments
(im ped' ə ments)
n. obstacles
alters (ôl' ters)
v. changes

Sonnet 116

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit **impediments**. Love is not love
Which **alters** when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.

5 O, no! It is an ever-fixèd mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,¹
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be
taken.²

7
10 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass³ come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.⁴
If this be error, and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

1. **star . . . bark** the star that guides every wandering ship: the North Star.
2. **Whose . . . be taken** whose value is unmeasurable, although navigators measure its height in the sky.
3. **compass** range; scope.
4. **doom** Judgment Day.

Sonnet 130

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Shakespearean Sonnet

Identify the rhyme scheme of the sonnet's first quatrain.



Spiral Review

Check Context

Clues Based on the context of the poem as a whole, what is the meaning of the term "false compare" in the last line?

9

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

5 I have seen roses damasked,¹ red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.²
I love to hear her speak. Yet well I know
10 That music hath a far more pleasing sound.
I grant I never saw a goddess go;³
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied⁴ with false compare.

1. **damasked** variegated.
2. **reeks** emanates.
3. **go** walk.
4. **belied** (bē lid') misrepresented.

The Mystery of the SONNETS

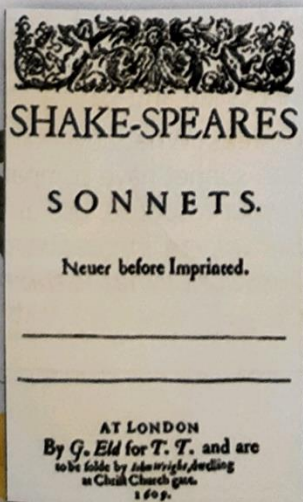
For centuries, readers have puzzled over Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, which tells a story of love and betrayal. The early poems address a beautiful young man, whom the poet urges to get married and have children. The later poems concern a dark-haired woman, who torments the poet with jealousy. Midway through the sequence, a rival poet makes an appearance, further complicating the situation.

Were these characters real people?
Or were they simply creations of Shakespeare's dramatic imagination? Literary detectives have proposed various historical figures as the characters in the sonnets. But the only facts we know for sure are that the sonnet sequence was published in 1609 and dedicated to a "Mr. W.H."

CONNECT TO THE LITERATURE

Does knowing the story told by the sonnets make reading individual sonnets more interesting? Why or why not?

Title page from the 1609 edition of *Shake-Speares Sonnets*. ▼



WILLIAM HERBERT

Some think William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke and a patron of the arts, was the young man of the sonnets. Shakespeare's "First Folio" was dedicated to him.



GEORGE CHAPMAN

His powerful translation of Homer inspired John Keats. Chapman is thought by many to be the rival poet of Shakespeare's Sonnets.



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Nicholas Hilliard painted this portrait, which some believe to be the young Shakespeare, in 1588.



CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

Poet and dramatist Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593) may have been the rival poet.



EMILIA BASSANO

Some historians think Emilia Bassano, the daughter of a court musician, was Shakespeare's mysterious "Dark Lady."



HENRY WRIOTHESLY

The third Earl of Southampton, Wriothesly became Shakespeare's patron in 1593. Many believe he was the "fair youth" of the sonnets.