

**Master William's Hamnet:**

**A New Theory on Shakespeare's *Sonnets***

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*This essay suggests the Fair Youth in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* is Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, to whom he later dedicated the cycle. Nevertheless, the larger claims of the essay are independent of the biographical details of Shakespeare's life, and even independent of the particular ordering of the *Sonnets* as they have come down to us.*

**Introduction to the *Sonnets***

The 154 *Sonnets* were published in 1609<sup>1</sup>. It has not been determined exactly when they were written. The *Sonnets* are love poems, apparently written first to a man, then to a woman, neither of whom is ever named. The *Sonnets* were published with this dedication:

TO . THE . ONLIE . BEGGETTER . OF .  
THESE . INSVING . SONNETS .  
Mr . W . H . ALL . HAPPINESSE .  
AND . THAT . ETERNITIE .  
PROMISED .  
BY .  
OVR . EVER-LIVING . POET .  
WISHETH .  
THE . WELL-WISHING .  
ADVENTVRER . IN .  
SETTING .  
FORTH .  
T . T .

1 All *Sonnets* are cited from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

We do not know if Shakespeare wrote this dedication, or if the publisher, Thomas Thorpe, did. We do not know if W. H. is the same person who inspired the *Sonnets* or someone else. Therefore, who is this Master W. H.?

### Current Theories on the *Sonnets*

The *Sonnets* are unique in that many of them are directed to a man. From the time the *Sonnets* were published, they were largely ignored. As Hallet Smith argues in her introductory essay to the *Sonnets*, in the *Riverside Shakespeare*, from 1640 till 1780 these sonnets were edited so that the addressee would appear as a woman, rather than a man.<sup>2</sup> The question about Shakespeare's addressee in these poems could thus only emerge at the end of the eighteenth century, when the *Sonnets* were published in their original form.

Assuming the Fair Youth described in the poem is the same man to whom the *Sonnets* are directed, the men most often proposed by critics as being W. H. are: Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton; and William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. Both were important patrons of poets, quite possibly Shakespeare's, the former at the beginning of his career, the latter towards the end of it. Both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* are dedicated to Henry Wriothesley<sup>3</sup>. At age 17, in 1590, Wriothesley was urged to marry but declined. He married Elizabeth Vernon in 1598. If Henry Wriothesley were to be the Fair Youth the *Sonnets* would have begun at an early point of the 1590's. Yet W. H. cannot be Wriothesley since his initials are backwards. William Herbert's<sup>4</sup> name does coincide with the initials. In 1623 the editors dedicated to him the *First Folio* (Shakespeare's works reunited for the first time in a single book.) William Herbert moved to London in 1598, at the age of 18; he had an illegitimate son in 1601; and married Mary Talbot in 1604. If William Herbert were to be the Fair Youth the *Sonnets* would have been written towards the end of the 1590's, a less likely date. However, both were noblemen and could not have been addressed as "Master", a title that would correspond to an inferior social class. They would have been called "Lord."

2 Smith, *Riverside*, 1747-48.

3 Park. "Wriothesley," *ODNB*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30073>>.

4. Stater, "Herbert, William," *ODNB*, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13058>>.

W. H. could be a printer's error; it should say W. S. or W. Sh., referring to William Shakespeare, a theory proposed by Bernard Russell and Jonathan Bate.<sup>5</sup> "William Himself" could be another way of writing it. Another theory suggests W. H. refers to William Halt, a printer and colleague of Thomas Thorpe, in which case the dedication was not written by Shakespeare. Other names mentioned are: William Holme, another colleague of Thorpe; William Harvey, the stepfather of William Herbert; William Haughton, a contemporary playwright; William Hart, Shakespeare's nephew and male heir, who at the time of the publication was barely 9 years old, therefore rendering him unlikely; William Hatcliffe of Lincolnshire; and even "Who He", that is to say, a deliberately enigmatic name.<sup>6</sup> In the short story "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.", Oscar Wilde argued that W. H. meant Willie Hughes, a seductive young actor who played female roles in Shakespeare's plays (there is no evidence for the existence of such person). Conclusion: in no case can one affirm definitively that this or that person fulfills the requirements to be W. H., or the Fair Youth, much less who might be the Dark Lady, whom many later sonnets mention.

What do all these theories have in common, and why are they wrong? No one doubts that there was a man to whom Shakespeare wrote the *Sonnets*, and to whom he perhaps dedicated them afterwards. While Russell suggests W. H. could be Shakespeare, he is referring to the dedication; he does not question the content of the poems. There was a man with whom Shakespeare was clearly in love, whether or not we can identify him. The trivial, melodramatic story of the *Sonnets*, following this interpretation, is that the author is in love with another man, he feels jealousy towards him, and finally blames a woman for taking him away. The problem is why, at the beginning, is it imperative to ask a man to have children, when that would require a woman and not the author himself? Why does the Dark Lady acquire more importance than the Fair Youth, who at the end almost completely disappears?

### **A New Theory on the *Sonnets***

Our first conjecture is that the Fair Youth and W. H. is the same person. Besides plot and dedication, the third element to consider is the composition date. We have three facts regarding the composition of the *Sonnets*:

5 Bate, *Genius*, 61-2. Also see Foster, "Master W. H.," 53.

6 Schiffer, "Reading New Life," 11, 12, 24-7.

1. On September of 1598, Francis Meres registered and published a book entitled *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury*, in which he includes the catalogue of Shakespeare's plays: his comedies, tragedies and poems. Francis Meres mentions Shakespeare's "sugared sonnets", which are only shared among his "private friends." "*The witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous & honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his Venus and Adonis, his Lucrece, his sugared sonnets among his private friends, &c.*"

2. Sonnet 104 indicates Shakespeare has been working on this cycle for 3 years. This is the only hint provided in the *Sonnets*.

*Three winters cold  
Have from the forests shook three summers' pride,  
Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turn'd  
In process of the seasons have I seen,  
Three April perfumes in three hot Junes burn'd,  
Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green (3-8).*

3. In 1599, Sonnets 138 and 144 appeared in an anthology entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim*<sup>7</sup>, published by William Jaggard, along with other poems, badly attributed to Shakespeare or of authorship unknown (*Riverside*, 1787-8).<sup>8</sup>

From these facts, we infer two things: a) composition of the *Sonnets* took three years (perhaps three years and a few months), as mentioned in Sonnet 104; b) by 1599 Shakespeare had written Sonnets 104, 138 and 144, therefore probably all of the *Sonnets*.

Shakespeare not only meditates on time (Sonnet 12 makes reference to the hours of the day, Sonnet 60 to the minutes in each hour), but also knows exactly how long has he been working on the cycle (as Sonnet 104 indicates), a rare feature given that he worked interspersed by long lapses, constantly expressing doubts about his *Sonnets*. One would suppose a work of this nature would be very difficult to date, unless a specific event was his reference point.

7 The full text of *The Passionate Pilgrim* can be found online at [https://archive.org/stream/passionatepilgri00shakrich/passionatepilgri00shakrich\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/passionatepilgri00shakrich/passionatepilgri00shakrich_djvu.txt)

8 *Riverside*, 1787-78.

Sonnet 104 marks three years. The *Sonnets* may have been finished by 1599; therefore, a three-year period between 1596 and 1599 must be when the *Sonnets* were written. Among many probable dates, the one that seems most probable is the one from mid-1596 to the end of 1599. Hamnet, Shakespeare's only son, was buried on August 11<sup>th</sup> of 1596: that is the date in which the *Sonnets* started.

Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway (already pregnant) obtained a marriage license in 1582. He was 18 years old, she was 26. Anne gave birth to Susana in 1583, then to twins Judith and Hamnet in 1585. At that point Shakespeare disappears from all records. He may have left Stratford at the time the twins were born. His name appears again in 1592 in Green's attack of Shakespeare, who is now living in London and has become a playwright.<sup>9</sup> When Hamnet dies at the age of eleven, Shakespeare regrets not having lived with him. He will write a great poem to his memory.

The first thing we have to realize is that the sonnet, a form to which many poets dedicated their best efforts, suited Shakespeare perfectly: there is a pun between "sonnet" and "son." Shakespeare wrote "son" in the following way: "sonne" (as can be seen in his will.) The first page of the work says "*SHAKESPEARES SONNETS*." It was a provocation to blatantly evidence the author's name and not the addressee's, as was the custom in the day, but what the title really means is: "*SHAKESPEARES SONNE*." If the words were reversed ("*Sonnets*, by Shakespeare"), the meaning of the title would not have been evident. The identity of the addressee is revealed by the title itself, Shakespeare's son.

W.	H.
William's	Hamnet.
<i>SHAKESPEARES SONNE(TS)</i> .	

Shakespeare, in various documents, most importantly in the *First Folio*, is called "Master William Shakespeare."<sup>10</sup>

Let us analyze the content of the *Sonnets* to be sure that it coincides with the dedication. In Sonnets 1 to 17 it is either God or

<sup>9</sup> The biographical information in this paragraph comes from Harry Levin's General Introduction to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (see especially *Riverside*, 4).

<sup>10</sup> See *Riverside*, 59, where a facsimile of the second page of the First Folio demonstrates that Shakespeare could be referred to as "Mr. William Shakespeare."

Shakespeare's soul (his kindest essence) who is speaking through Shakespeare. It is a mysterious voice that externally implies Shakespeare is talking to himself. The subject of his conversation is Hamnet. Shakespeare is writing as if he had a mirror in front of him. The narrator admits to being a poet at work. "*Pity the world, or else this glutton be, / To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee*" (1.13-14): start writing, for Hamnet's sake and for your own. "*When forty winters shall besiege thy brow*" (2.1): Shakespeare was 32 years old at the time. If you do not write this poem, your son "*Will be a totter'd weed of small worth held*" (2.4). "*Thou art thy mother's glass and she in thee / Calls back the lovely April of her prime*" (3.9-10): Shakespeare was born in April. Look at your deep sunken face in the mirror. You have to create a new face; you have to repair it. The word "repair" (also used in Sonnet 10) indicates an initial collapse. The poem departs from a breakdown.

Shakespeare writes this in the summer of 1596. Do not shut yourself up in your tomb (implying there's another tomb more important than his.) Prepare yourself for winter. If you capture Hamnet's essence, he will live:

*never-resting time leads summer on*

*To hideous winter*

[...]

*But flowers distill'd, though they with winter meet,*

*Leese but their show, their substance still lives sweet* (5.5-14).

In Sonnet 6 Shakespeare says "*Make sweet some vial*" (3) for your child's memory. He is concerned he is misusing his son but "*That use is not forbidden usury, / Which happies those that pay the willing loan*" (5-6). Shakespeare at the start envisioned many sonnets: "*Ten times thy self were happier than thou art, / If ten of thine ten times refigured thee*" (9-10). "*Be not self-will'd*" (13).

Shakespeare accuses himself of not loving anyone: "*Grant, if thou wilt, thou art below'd of many, / But that thou none lov'st is most evident*" (10.3-4).

It is now autumn: “*When lofty trees I see barren of leaves, [...] And summer’s green all girded up in sheaves*” (12.5-7). Do something for your son, “*You had a father, let your son say so*” (13.14). Sonnet 14 says he could not foresee the plague, that is, his son’s loss.

In Sonnet 16 Shakespeare declares he could have other sons, women are available and he is enjoying prosperous times, it would be a way of recreating Hamnet. But Shakespeare can only recreate him by writing; he is not interested in any son other than Hamnet.

Shakespeare sees at all times the corpse of his son before him. He thinks someone will find out, hidden amidst his praises, those human remains:

*Who will believe my verse in time to come*

*If it were fill’d with your most high deserts?*

*Though yet heaven knows it is but as a tomb*

*Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts.* (17.1-4.)

Shakespeare has to write how much he loved Hamnet, he has to describe his beauty, his purity, but Shakespeare realizes that a mere description will not concede him life; the description will not hide the image of a carcass. For his son to live in the *Sonnets* he has to be alive in Shakespeare’s imagination. Shakespeare has to revive him. “*But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme*” (17.13-14).

In Sonnet 18, Shakespeare has stopped talking to himself; he speaks to his son as if he were alive. The way to start is by comparing him to the day he died, assuring him he is more beautiful: “*Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?*” (1). His son has acquired life, he shall be eternal. “*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee*” (13-14).

Sonnet 20 is crucial to identify Hamnet: being a boy, his features are feminine, but he has a certain purity that women do not have. His son is astonished by everything; he attracts both men and women (being loved by both Shakespeare and his mother.) Nature planned to give Shakespeare a daughter (Judith, Hamnet’s twin sis-

ter), but then it surprised him by giving him a boy. His son delighted his mother; Shakespeare also wants to demonstrate his love to him.

*A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted  
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;  
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted  
With shifting change as is false women's fashion;  
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,  
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;  
A man in hue all hues in his controlling,  
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.  
And for a woman wert thou first created,  
Till Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,  
And by addition me of thee defeated,  
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.  
But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,  
Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure. (1-14).*

In Sonnet 21, Shakespeare says these poems are not striving to impress a woman: they are addressed to Hamnet. The love he has for him is that of a child, that is to say, Shakespeare is identifying with him completely: “*believe me, my love is as fair / As any mother's child*” (10-11). Shakespeare will take care of Hamnet's memory:

*my heart,  
Which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me:  
How can I then be elder than thou art?  
[...]  
Bearing thy heart, which I will keep so chary  
As tender nurse her babe from faring ill (22.6-12).*

In Sonnet 23, Shakespeare has been unable to name his son; it hurts him too much. If he acknowledges he has died, everyone else would know. Shakespeare does not want that to be known: “*So I, for fear of trust, forget to say / The perfect ceremony of love’s rite*” (5-6). His son has to remain anonymous. His love will be a secret between them: “*O, learn to read what silent love had writ*” (13).

Every time Shakespeare mentions the sun he is referring to his son. “Sun” and “son”, being homophonous, were often spelled “sonne.” “Sun”, “son” and “sonnet” are all related words referring to Hamnet: “*windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun delights to peep*” (24.11-12).

Hamnet is the window through which Shakespeare sees within his own heart. The problem is that Shakespeare describes the son that his eyes see, but he did not know his son’s heart. That is his disgrace, his sadness: “*They draw but what they see, know not the heart*” (24.14).

In Sonnet 27 (as well as Sonnets 43 and 61) Shakespeare tells us how he writes to Hamnet at night. His son, appearing in his father’s imagination, proves death is not so terrible. But Shakespeare cannot find peace before him:

*Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed*

*The dear repose for limbs with travel tired*

*But then begins a journey in my head*

*To work my mind, when body’s work’s expired*

*For then my thoughts (from far where I abide*

*Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,*

[...]

*Lo thus by day my limbs, by night my mind*

*For thee, and for myself, no quiet find* (1-14).

His remorse intensifies: “*day doth daily draw my sorrows longer; / And night doth nightly make grief’s length seem stronger*” (28.13-14).

In Sonnet 31, Shakespeare for the first time suggests his son, Hamnet, is dead.

*How many a holy and obsequious tear  
Hath dear religious love stol'n from mine eye,  
As interest of the dead, which now appear  
But things remov'd that hidden in thee lie!  
Thou art the grave where buried love doth live,  
Hung with the trophies of my lovers gone,  
Who all their parts of me to thee did give:  
That due of many now is thine alone.  
Their images I lov'd I view in thee,  
And thou (all they) hast all the all of me (5-14).*

His son was a sun covered by cloud before its time:

*Even so my sun one early morn did shine  
With all-triumphant splendor on my brow,  
But out, alack, he was but one hour mine,  
The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now (33.9-12).*

In Sonnet 34, Shakespeare pictures his son as the day. Hamnet tries to comfort him but Shakespeare no longer has him. Shakespeare tenderly scolds him:

*Why didst thou promise such a beauteous day,  
And make me travel forth without my cloak,  
To let base clouds o'ertake me in my way,  
Hiding thy brav'ry in their rotten smoke?  
[...]  
Though thou repent, yet I have still the loss (1-10).*

In Sonnet 35, Shakespeare asks his son not to worry about having died; Shakespeare forgives him that mischief.

Shakespeare, in Sonnet 36, confesses he and his son have to be apart. This is the first time he declares the decision of never revealing Hamnet's name.

*Let me confess that we two must be twain,  
Although our undivided loves are one:  
[...]  
I may not evermore acknowledge thee,  
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame,  
Nor thou with public kindness honor me,  
Unless thou take that honor from thy name (1-12).*

In Sonnet 38, Shakespeare insists his son is alive and therefore inspires him. Shakespeare has set out to deceive the reader.

*How can my Muse want subject to invent  
While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse  
Thine own sweet argument... (1-3).*

Hamnet and Shakespeare must live apart so that honor is bestowed only to Hamnet, not to him.

*O, how thy worth with manners may I sing,  
When thou art all the better part of me?  
What can mine own praise to mine own self bring?  
And what is't but mine own when I praise thee?  
Even for this, let us divided live,  
And our dear love lose name of single one.  
That by this separation I may give  
That due to thee which thou deserv'st alone (39.1-8).*

In Sonnets 41 and 42, Shakespeare reveals Hamnet and Anne loved each other. Because Shakespeare and his son are identical, it is a relief for Shakespeare to know his wife loves him as well.

Shakespeare says how much he wants to see his son alive, what distance he could jump in order to do so. Shakespeare, made of earth and water, cannot travel to where Hamnet is, made of air and fire (notice the separate reigns which they inhabit, life and death.) These two elements tell Shakespeare his son is healthy, no longer sick. It is important to emphasize how much Hamnet's health concerns Shakespeare, knowing he died of the plague.

In Sonnet 48, Shakespeare fears someone will steal his sonnets; they are circulating among his friends: "*Thou best of dearest, and mine only care, / Art left the prey of every vulgar thief*" (7-8).

In spite of his paternal adoration, Shakespeare knows Hamnet could blame him for expressing it now when he is dead, rather than while he was alive. Shakespeare acknowledges his fault, and accepts his son has no reasons to love him back: "*To leave poor me thou hast the strength of laws, / Since why to love I can allege no cause*" (49.13-15). Shakespeare says "*My grief lies onward and my joy behind*" (50.14).

Sonnet 52 indicates that a year has passed since his son died. He is writing this in August of 1597: "*seldom coming in the long year set, / Like stones of worth they thinly placed are*" (6-7).

In Sonnet 53, Hamnet is much more than Adonis, Shakespeare's representation of himself a few years back: "*Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit / Is poorly imitated after you*" (5-6).

In Sonnet 54 Shakespeare describes the flowers that disappear in the autumn. The theater company in which Shakespeare acted was forced on a provincial tour from the beginning of 1597 until October of that year, as the result of a prohibition against playing in London. The previous sonnets would have been written during this tour; that is why so many images of travel, distance and loneliness appear. In Sonnet 56, Shakespeare asks Hamnet to keep on inspiring him, for he has returned to his familiar environment in London.

In Sonnet 59 Shakespeare acknowledges his poems are not going well, "*The second burthen [the Sonnets] of a former child*" [Hamnet] (4). Shakespeare compares the *Sonnets* to what other poets have written. His poems are not deteriorating because of lack of inspiration; it is Shakespeare who must make more of an effort.

In Sonnet 61, Hamnet's image possesses Shakespeare; he begins to be terrified of him. "Will" is a pun meaning "intention", "William", but also Hamnet's testament before he died, thereby conveying the funeral sense of the poem. "*Is it thy will thy image should keep open / My heavy eyelids to the weary night?*" (1-2). Shakespeare sometimes cannot find the words for the next sonnet. Hamnet is his inspiration, and Shakespeare must wait for him to come. He is his son's slave. Yet: "*His beauty shall in these black lines be seen, / And they shall live, and he in them still green*" (63.13-14). Many flowers have been born, taking their beauty from Shakespeare's son.

In Sonnet 69, Shakespeare acknowledges that his *Sonnets* have received praises from the public. Since, by our chronology, he is writing this in September of 1598, he is referring to the commentary his friend Francis Meres published that year, mentioning his "sugared sonnets". Shakespeare has taken a moment to contemplate his unfinished work. While alive Hamnet was not only beautiful: his son must reveal something more powerful than that. Shakespeare believes the commentary is superficial, but maybe the image he is giving of Hamnet is superficial as well. Hamnet is not only Shakespeare's wonder and inspiration, he is also his torment. The commentary implies Shakespeare's poetry is dead. None of his friends understood it evoked a corpse. Shakespeare concedes they are right, saying Hamnet is in fact dead, calling the critics worms that devour the beautiful corpse of his child. However, emphasizing the earth in which Hamnet lies, Shakespeare accepts that the *Sonnets*, up until this point, have been unremarkable. Shakespeare is to blame:

*Those parts of thee that the world's eye doth view*

[...]

*Thy outward thus with outward praise is crown'd,*

*But those same tongues that give thee so thine own,*

*In other accents do this praise confound*

[...]

*(although their eyes were kind)*

*To thy fair flower add the rank smell of weeds:*

*But why thy odor matcheth not thy show,*

*The soil is this, that thou dost common grow (1-14).*

In Sonnet 72, Shakespeare realizes that he does not deserve to be loved back:

*O, lest the world should task you to recite  
What merit liv'd in me that you should love  
After my death, dear love, forget me quite,  
For you in me can nothing worthy prove;  
Unless you would devise some virtuous lie,  
To do more for me than mine own desert,  
And hang more praise upon deceased I  
Than niggard truth would willingly impart:  
O, lest your true love may seem false in this,  
That you for love speak well of me untrue,  
My name be buried where my body is,  
And live no more to shame nor me nor you.*

*For I am sham'd by that which I bring forth,  
And so should you, to love things nothing worth (1-14).*

Sonnet 73 refers to the autumn of 1598. In Sonnet 75, Shakespeare does not know whether to share his son with the world.

Shakespeare shows his frustration in Sonnet 76. His style does not change, although “*you and love are still my argument*” (10). The worst thing is that every word is on the verge of revealing Hamnet’s identity. Shakespeare is starting to consider new methods. “*For as the sun [his son] is daily new and old, / So is my love still telling what is told*” (13-14).

Shakespeare recognizes, in Sonnet 80, that there is a rival poet who is better than him. Who is that rival poet? In the first place, why is Shakespeare reading other author’s works? The golden age of Elizabethan poetry is reaching a high-point in 1598. The amount of sonnet cycles being published is overwhelming (though the trend will soon fade away.) Marlowe, who was stabbed in the eye, inspired

Sonnet 74. Marlowe's last poem, *Hero and Leander*, was completed in 1598 by Chapman, who is emerging as a confident poet. At any moment a masterpiece will emerge that will put Shakespeare's *Sonnets* to shame. Edmund Spenser died at the beginning of 1599. Perhaps Shakespeare feels he cannot catch up with all that is happening on the scene and wants to compare his *Sonnets* to what others have done, having spent two years at work. In respect to playwriting, Shakespeare's theater has been torn down and is being rebuilt elsewhere. From late 1597 until 1599 Shakespeare is anxious, knowing the new building will stage his works. He has invested in that. Now is the time to become a better playwright; towards that end is this literary instruction aimed.

We suppose the rival is Philip Sidney. This particular sequence was written at the end of 1598; the year the entire works of Sidney were published in a single volume. The *Sonnets* could have been influenced by *The Defence of Poesy*, and *Astrophel and Stella*.

*The Defence of Poesy* was published in 1595 and was republished again in the edition of 1598. Sidney says poetry has "the power to move the human will and thus to motivate its own reproduction" (just as the *Sonnets* constitute Shakespeare's son.) Sidney responds to the accusations against poetry, and at the end says:

*I conjure you all that have had the evil luck to read this ink-wasting toy of mine, [...] to believe that there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused [...] to believe [poets] when they tell you they will make you immortal by their verses.*

*But if [...] you be born [...] that you cannot hear the planet-like music of poetry, if you have such earth-creeping a mind, that it cannot lift itself up to look to the sky of poetry: then [...] much curse I must send you in the behalf of all poets, that while you live, you live in love, and never get favor; for lacking skill of a sonnet; and when you die, your memory die from the earth, for want of an epitaph.*

Addressing the curse of *The Defence of Poesy*, the dedication of the *Sonnets* is in fact a funerary inscription over Hamnet's corpse. The *Sonnets* are the tomb in which he lies.

*Or I shall live your epitaph to make,  
Or you survive when I in earth am rotten;  
From hence your memory death cannot take,  
Although in me each part will be forgotten.  
Your name from hence immortal life shall have,  
Though I (once gone) to all the world must die;  
The earth can yield me but a common grave,  
When you entombed in men's eyes shall lie;  
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,  
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read (81.1-10).*

*Astrophel and Stella* was first published in 1591. Stella means "star"; Astrophel, "he who loves the star." One cannot reach the other. The same relationship exists between Shakespeare and Hamnet, for one is alive and the other is dead. The 1598 edition of *Astrophel and Stella* was novel in many aspects, especially one: Stella's real identity was revealed. This may have inspired Shakespeare to reveal his own identity, something he had not done until this point; he might have planned not to do so at the start.

Shakespeare says to Hamnet: "*O how I faint when I of you do write, / Knowing a better spirit doth use your name*" (80.1-2). Maybe he implies Philip Sidney employed the sonnet better than him, or that Stella is better suited to the name "star" than Hamnet is to "sun". The rival poet is called a spirit, thus he appears to be dead. Shakespeare, in Sonnet 108, calls Hamnet "*my true spirit*" (2), indicating he is dead.

In Sonnet 83 Shakespeare criticizes other mediocre poets (it is both impossible and irrelevant to determine who they are), and simultaneously reveals his own deceitfulness when he says "*When others would give life and bring a tomb*" (12). Shakespeare says "*There lives more life in one of your fair eyes / Than both your poets [Shakespeare and Sidney] can in praise devise*" (13-14).

In Sonnet 87, Shakespeare decides to abandon these writings, for there is nothing more to say about his child. Hamnet's love is impossible: "*Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing*" (1).

In Sonnet 88, Shakespeare explains he can only demonstrate his love by creating a theatre play in which both disappear, instead of praising Hamnet dully:

*Upon thy part I can set down a story  
Of faults conceal'd, wherein I am attained,  
That thou in losing me shall win much glory.  
And I by this will be a gainer too,  
For bending all my loving thoughts on thee,  
The injuries that to myself I do,  
Doing thee vantage, double-vantage me (6-12).*

In Sonnet 87, Shakespeare says farewell to his son. He has already declared how beautiful he is, he can say no more nor less. Shakespeare has been writing the *Sonnets* for two and a half years. Shakespeare has to quit this poem for it recounts Shakespeare's role as a bad father. It is undeniable: his son hates him.

*Thy sweet beloved name no more shall dwell,  
Lest I (too much profane) should do it wrong,  
And haply of our old acquaintance tell.  
For thee, against myself I'll vow debate,  
For I must ne'er love him whom thou dost hate (89.10-14).*

Shakespeare enrages his son, telling him "*Then hate me when thou wilt, if ever, now*" (90.1). This way Shakespeare feels they are communicating.

Sonnets 97, "*How like a winter hath my absence been / From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!*" (1-2), and 98, "*From you have I been absent in the spring*" (1), were written in the summer of 1599, after long interruptions, and they imply that Shakespeare has been working on his plays.

Shakespeare realizes how badly he has treated his son's memory:

*O, blame me not, if I no more can write!  
Look in your glass, and there appears a face  
That overgoes my blunt invention quite,  
Dulling my lines, and doing me disgrace.  
Were it not sinful then, striving to mend,  
To mar the subject that before was well? (103.5-10).*

Sonnet 104 says “*Ere you were born was beauty’s summer dead*” (14). Shakespeare recalls that he started this cycle right after Hamnet died. Sonnet 104 marks the exact chronology of the poem: three summers have passed, three winters have passed, three springs have passed, three Aprils and Junes have passed. Shakespeare wrote this in August, 1599: he will very soon finish the work.

1596. Summer: death of Hamnet, the poem begins.

Autumn.

Winter.

1597. Spring (April.)

Summer.

Autumn.

Winter.

1598. Spring (April.)

Summer.

Autumn.

Winter.

1599. Spring (April.)

Summer: in August he writes Sonnet 104, saying: 3 years have passed.

Autumn: here the poem could have finished.

Winter: at the latest, the poem finished here.

In Sonnet 108 Shakespeare acknowledges Hamnet is dead.

*What's new to speak, what now to register;  
That may express my love, or thy dear merit?  
Nothing, sweet boy, but yet like prayers divine,  
I must each day say o'er the very same,  
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,  
Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name.*

[...]

*Finding the first conceit of love there bred,  
Where time and outward form would show it dead (3-14).*

*O, never say that I was false of heart,  
Though absence seem'd my flame to qualify,  
As easy might I from myself depart  
As from my soul which in thy breast doth lie:  
That is my home of love; if I have rang'd,  
Like him that travels, I return again,*

[...]

*Never believe, though in my nature reign'd  
All frailties that besiege all kinds of blood,  
That it could so preposterously be stain'd,  
To leave for nothing all thy sum of good;  
For nothing this wide universe I call,  
Save thou, my rose, in it thou art my all (1-14).*

Sonnet 110 states another farewell:

*Alas, 'tis true, I have gone here and there,  
And made myself a motley to the view,  
Gor'd mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,  
Made old offenses of affections new;  
Most true it is that I have look'd on truth  
Askaunce and strangely: but by all above,  
These blenches gave my heart another youth,  
And worse essays prov'd thee my best of love.  
Now all is done, have what shall have no end,  
Mine appetite I never more will grind  
On newer proof, to try an older friend,  
A god in love, to whom I am confin'd.  
Then give me welcome, next my heaven the best,  
Even to thy pure and most most loving breast (1-14).*

The original poem, the one meant to Hamnet, seems to end around here. It could have ended in Sonnet eighty, ninety, one hundred and something. Shakespeare makes it unclear whether he is addressing Hamnet or the Dark Lady; he may have intended to have both readings available. Certainly Sonnets 111 to 154 are all meant to the Dark Lady. The tone has changed; the funerary sense has entirely vanished. Perhaps Shakespeare addressed his female lover many Sonnets ago and we have not realized it until now. Shakespeare achieved his task: to reveal Hamnet died without anyone noticing it. If he bluntly proclaimed it he would forever be blamed as the unloving father of a pitiful creature, not a wondrous one. Shakespeare barely knew his son. He could not find an ending for the poem. He decided the best way to address Hamnet's death was to abandon the *Sonnets* and write for him *The Phoenix and the Turtle* (Shakespeare's last poem, published in 1601), the real ending of the *Sonnets*. The Phoenix is Shakespeare, the Turtledove is Hamnet:

*Love and Constancy is dead,  
Phoenix and the Turtle fled  
In a mutual flame from hence.  
So they loved as love in twain  
Had the essence but in one,  
Two distincts, division none:  
Number there in love was slain.*

[...]

*Either was the other's mine.  
Property was thus appalled,  
That the self was not the same;  
Single nature's double name  
Neither two nor one was called.  
Reason, in itself confounded,  
Saw division grow together,  
To themselves yet either neither,  
Simple were so well compounded.*

[...]

*Death is now the Phoenix' nest;  
And the Turtle's loyal breast  
To eternity doth rest.  
Leaving no posterity (22-59).*

What seems to have happened is Shakespeare merged two different projects into one. The first project concerned Hamnet's death. The second project described a female lover; this second section was written perhaps before Hamnet died, we are not certain; it does not belong to the three year period established in Sonnet 104.

The exact moment in which one section ends and the other begins cannot be determined. It seems Shakespeare merged both projects so that the transition is practically unnoticeable. Why did Shakespeare decide to include this love affair at the end of Hamnet's poem?

First of all, we must consider Shakespeare's two previous poems. In *Venus and Adonis*, published in 1593, Anne Hathaway is Venus, Shakespeare is Adonis. Venus loves Adonis and wants to be loved by him; Adonis asks not to be loved and asserts he does not love her. Venus is a mature, lustful, aggressive, and devious woman. Adonis is a thoughtful, melancholic young man: "*Measure my strangeness with my unripe years; Before I know myself, seek not to know me*" (524-525). In the poem it is clear who's innocent and who's perverse. Shakespeare writes "*glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth*" (548). Since this is a reflection of their relationship, written years after their separation, we suppose there was an infidelity on her part which Shakespeare wished he had foreseen; therefore he later explains her character in that manner.

*The Rape of Lucrece*, published in 1594, is a reversal of *Venus and Adonis*. Now Lucrece is pure and Tarquin is evil. Shakespeare becomes the executioner and not the victim. He is referring to the tormented life he was following as a bachelor, perhaps realizing *Venus and Adonis* was unjust to Anne in that he, too, was an insatiable creature, a passionate monster. He wrote *The Rape of Lucrece* simultaneously to *A Lover's Complaint*. Both share the same poetic structure; both seem to lay the guilt on him rather than on her. Both these poems seem to deal with love affairs in general, not a particular person such as the Dark Lady.

Afterwards he may have tried his hand at sonnets. In *The Passionate Pilgrim* there are a few Sonnets in which Venus and Adonis are the main characters, written at the same time or soon after *Venus and Adonis*, around 1593 or 1594. Sonnet 4 says:

*Sweet Cytherea, sitting in a brook*  
*With young Adonis, lovely, fresh, and green,*  
*Did court the lad with many a lovely look,*  
 [...]  
*She told him stories to delight his [ear];*  
*She show'd him favors to allure his eye;*  
*To win his heart she touch'd him here and there*  
 [...]

*But whether unripe years did want conceit,  
[...]  
The tender nibbler would not touch the bait,  
But smile and jest at every gentle offer.  
Then fell she on her back, fair queen, and toward:  
He rose and ran away, ah, fool too froward! (1-14).*

Sonnet 9 says:

*Anon Adonis comes with horn and hounds;  
She, silly queen, with more than love's good will,  
Forbade the boy he should not pass those grounds.  
"Once," quoth she, "did I see a fair sweet youth  
Here in these brakes deep-wounded with a boar,  
Deep in the thigh, a spectacle of ruth!  
See, in my thigh," quoth she, "here was the sore."  
She showed hers, he saw more wounds than one,  
And blushing fled, and left her all alone (6-14).*

In 1595, because of *The Defense of Poetry*, Shakespeare could have read and been influenced by *Astrophil and Stella*. The Dark Lady sequence, which he presumably wrote between 1595 and mid-1596, imitates the dark, abstract nature of Sidney's work. Sonnet 127 is not the beginning of a sequence, but rather a climactic point that, in the *Sonnets*, could have started at least from Sonnet 111, if not many Sonnets before that. The Dark Lady appears to have been Shakespeare's mistress. The sequence, from what can be inferred, develops in the following way: Shakespeare swears to a woman she is virtuous; she thinks virtue is nothing and urges Shakespeare to think of her as cruel; Shakespeare does not agree to it and feels hated by her; he then becomes vile so as to please her; she turns into some sort of goddess because of the influence she exerts over him; Shakespeare reveals his own feelings of power and majestic self-praise so as to be equal to her (Sonnet 135 and 136); Anne Hathaway finds out of his love affair and forgives him (Sonnet 145); Shakespeare's mistress ignores, hurts, and abandons him; he feels betrayed but cannot stop loving her (Sonnet 153 and 154).

There are three possible reasons why Shakespeare decided to add the Sonnets concerning the Dark Lady at the end, even though she was entirely unrelated to Hamnet:

1) To confuse the reader into believing the whole cycle described a romantic triangle, thereby maintaining Hamnet's identity a secret. For that aim he edited and merged his Sonnets together in such a way that the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady seem not only alive but to have known each other.

2) The only thing Hamnet wanted to know, according to Shakespeare, is not how much the author loved him, or how beautiful he thought he was, but why did he abandon his family, why did he never invite his wife and children to London to live with him? Perhaps Shakespeare, by adding the Dark Lady's Sonnets, is explaining to Hamnet he had a passionate love affair in London that impeded that invitation.

3) Perhaps Shakespeare realized that, when writing the previous Dark Lady's Sonnets, there were some elements that by chance or doom coincided with Hamnet's death, and also coincided with the elegy he later wrote to him. These elements may appear to have some prophetic quality that, when Hamnet died, surprised and made Shakespeare think that the Sonnets he had written until that point and Hamnet's death were somehow related. For example: In Sonnets 111, 118, 119, 147, to say a few, Shakespeare constantly mentions –his love affair in mind– he is in a sickly state, feverous, infected, ill, drinking draughts of vinegar or poison which were commonly taken to avoid the plague, exactly as later happened to Hamnet. The Dark Lady seems to evoke Death, the plague itself, irresistible to all mortals, cruel, lustful, and mad. Shakespeare on some occasions imagines a child that he could have later identified with Hamnet. Shakespeare may have felt that Hamnet's poem not only resembled the Dark Lady's poem, but was in some fateful way caused by it. One lacked an ending, the other lacked a beginning, yet both share an unnerving mood: "*So shall thou feed on Death, that feeds on men, / And Death once dead, there's no more dying then*" (146.13-14).

In any case, what ties Hamnet and the Dark Lady is the guilt Shakespeare may have felt towards them. One and the other impeded Shakespeare to fully love either of them. Only Shakespeare understood the connection between Hamnet and the Dark Lady; for him it was the right choice to, after writing the poem or before its publication, merge them together.

### Conclusion

The Fair Youth is Hamnet. Shakespeare did not want the Dark Lady's identity to be known. Who is the person to whom the *Sonnets* are dedicated to? Only to Hamnet. How does one write a dedication to Hamnet? a) These *Sonnets* are dedicated to Hamnet. b) These *Sonnets* are dedicated to Hamnet, William Shakespeare's son. c) These *Sonnets* are dedicated to Hamnet, Master William Shakespeare's son. d) These *Sonnets* are dedicated to *Master William's Hamnet*. The dedication is, in fact, an epitaph, a message inscribed onto a tomb:

TO . THE . ONLIE . BEGGETTER . OF .  
THESE . INSVING . SONNETS .  
MASTER . WILLIAM'S . HAMNET . ALL . HAPPINESSE .  
AND . THAT . ETERNITIE .  
PROMISED .  
BY .  
OVR . EVER-LIVING . POET .  
WISHETH .  
THE . WELL-WISHING .  
ADVENTVRER . IN .  
SETTING .  
FORTH .  
THOMAS . THORPE .

*Juan Daniel Millán (1988-2016) was primarily a painter, but also an author focused on philosophy and fiction. Millán's paintings have been exhibited in Mexico City and New York City, as well as published in Studio Visit Magazine. His artwork can be seen at [juandanielmillan.tumblr.com](http://juandanielmillan.tumblr.com). The University of Hawaii published his article entitled "Contemporary art understood as a postontological realization" ([www.huichawaii.org/assets/calhoun%2c-juan---contemporary-art-understood-as-a-postontological-realization.pdf](http://www.huichawaii.org/assets/calhoun%2c-juan---contemporary-art-understood-as-a-postontological-realization.pdf)). In 2016 The University of Arts and Sciences of Chiapas published his book entitled "Sol entre nubes" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8wzEpwuNZ8>). Sadly, Juan Millán died on 16 June 2016, slipping from the rocks into a waterfall he was painting (Las Brisas, Cascadas Las Nubes, in Chiapas, Mexico).*

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