

Well-Wishing Adventurers: *Shakespeare's Sonnets* and *Narrative Poems* by A. D. Cousins and Recent Responses to Shakespeare's Non-Dramatic Verse

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Although the Fair Youth is not Hamlet, the ageing Speaker not Lear, and the Dark Lady (anxiety-inducing though she be) not Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare's Sonnets have reaffirmed in the last five years of the twentieth century their enduring attractiveness to editors and critics. A surge of new editions in the mid 1990s has been followed by a slew of fresh critical analyses in the final years of the century. Indeed, it is well beyond the scope of this review to note all the critical responses to Shakespeare's non-dramatic verse in the past five years, but suffice it to say the most recent work shows the poems still have much to offer the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth.

With older editions of the Sonnets, such as Stephen Booth's and John Kerrigan's, still very much in use, 1996-1997 saw three new and substantial editions. G. Blakemore Evans produced the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition in 1996 with a 164-page commentary that displays a vast knowledge of early-modern texts, highlights countless Shakespearean analogues, and attempts clear explanations of often complex critical debates that have arisen in regard to certain poems. In the following year (1997) the so-called 'Arden Three' edition of the Sonnets appeared under the editorship of Katherine Duncan-Jones with a detailed and up-to-date, 105-page introduction that gives much space to issues of dating and publication history. In the same year (1997), Helen Vendler's massive tome, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, appeared (672 pages), complete with facsimile reproduction of the 1609 quarto text, the editor's modernised version, and a CD of Vendler reading selected sonnets.¹ We may conclude, therefore, that the recent major editions of the Sonnets remain firmly in the hands

of well-established and conservative textual, historicist and formalist scholars. Not so the criticism.

In 1999, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, appeared, edited by James Schiffer and containing a broad spread of critical essays from the 1990s.² This lengthy collection (474 pages) begins with Schiffer's well-researched survey of criticism of the Sonnets and then reprints four recent essays on the Sonnets including influential work by Peter Stallybrass (1993), Margreta de Grazia (1994), and Heather Dubrow (1996). The remainder of the collection is given over to fifteen new essays from a variety of perspectives. Schiffer's volume is, as he claims, *the Sonnets* volume for the 1990s (xiii) and illustrates three things. First, it demonstrates the substantial influence on modern Sonnets criticism of earlier works by Heather Dubrow (*Captive Victors*, 1987; *Echoes of Desire*, 1995) and Joel Fineman (*Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, 1986).³ Second, it reveals the diversity of critical response in our day, extending from formalist, thematic and historicist close readings of particular poems, through discussions of Shakespeare's authorisation, ordering, and autobiographical presence in the 1609 quarto, to feminist, queer and poststructuralist discussions of homosexuality, misogyny and academic prejudice. Third, one sees that while enduring critical questions of Time, Petrarchism, loss, symbols and structure are capable of being usefully reworked, much recent analysis centres upon questions of sexuality. In Appendix 1 of Booth's edition (1977) he writes wisely (if cagily): "William Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter" (548). Schiffer's collection indicates how prevailing attitudes have developed since then by including an essay on Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr W. H.," and essays dealing with homoeroticism, homosexuality (as opposed to homosociality), sodomy (in regard to the Dark Lady, not the Youth), and the homophobic sexual politics of Sonnets criticism.

A. D. Cousins' new addition to the Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library, entitled *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Narrative Poems*, is "the first comprehensive study of the Sonnets and narrative poems for over a decade" (jacket blurb) and takes its place as a valuable third term in a critical equation including Dubrow's *Captive Victors* and Fineman's *Perjured*

Eye.⁴ It will therefore be the focus of the rest of this review. Unaware of Schiffer's collection as his is of Cousins' book (for both were in press simultaneously), and closer to Dubrow's style than Fineman's, Cousins' monograph takes the reader into a thick textual forest of interwoven discourses. The study is the product of a mature and well-read literary scholar and has the effect of entering the reader into the Sonnets and narrative poems as poems of creative genius and also as together constituting a complex rhetorical matrix. Cousins is aware of recent theoretical focal points but he finds too much of interest in the discursive fabric of the poems to be side-tracked into bending Shakespeare's words and phrases into service of modern politico-theoretical agendas.⁵ Neither is this a work of arch-formalism like Vendler's. Cousins' management of historical concepts and texts, and his sharp eye for the intricate turns of various theses developed in and across Shakespeare's poems, leaves Vendler's *New Criticism* for the 1990s far behind.⁶

The result is that one comes away with a complex sense of what the poems are about, how they are comprised and even (what is rarer) a valuable summation of how the interests of the Sonnets overlap with those of the narrative poems. The first half of the book is divided equally between *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, the second half addresses the Sonnets. The extra-textual history of each work is addressed and English and Continental generic precursors are noted, but these factors are dealt with concisely and do not impede discussion of the primary texts in themselves. Also, Cousins doesn't let himself get bogged down in questions of dating, ordering, authorship, authorisation or autobiography.

What, then, are the character and preoccupations of Shakespeare's non-dramatic verse according to Cousins? Unlike some recent studies that consider "A Lover's Complaint" as the final stage in a poetic work commencing with 154 sonnets,⁷ Cousins focuses on Sonnets 1-154 as a complete set in itself and discusses its thematic connections with *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Those in favour of the "Complaint theory" may be disappointed but Cousins is in the majority in assessing the Sonnets as a single work and his discussion of the other poems usefully adds to our understanding of the ties that bind all three major poetic works.

In regard to Shakespeare's first-published poem, *Venus and Adonis* (1593), Cousins takes note of Lodge's introduction of the neo-Ovidian epyllion ("minor epic") into English poetry (*Scyllaes Metamorphosis*, 1589), and concludes that Shakespeare, taking up the opportunity afforded by Lodge's innovation and the plague-closed theatres, "in his new role as non-dramatic poet wrote for a new audience—particularly including the Earl [of Southampton] as (possibly) a patron—a new poem of a new kind" (14). Cousins then demonstrates via detailed close reading of the poem how the various mythographic forms of Venus are invoked and parodied by the narrator. To oversimplify an intricate argument, he identifies Venus as an ironised amalgam of *Venus mechanitis* (rhetorician of love), *Venus vulgaris* (goddess of wholly sensual love) and *Venus verticordia* (goddess of chastity). She fails as a rhetorician by not matching her discourse to her audience and thus repels Adonis. This failure hinders the expression of her desire as *Venus vulgaris* and the result is the promotion of chastity in Adonis in ironic parody of her *verticordia* role. Complex and detailed reading of the main characters and their words also demonstrates Shakespeare's ironic treatment of Venus' other roles: *Venus genetrix* (goddess of generative power), *Venus apaturia* (the deceiver, of herself and Adonis), *Magistra divinandi* (the instructor in prophesying), *Venus meretrix* (the prostitute), and *Venus victrix* (the conqueror). Shakespeare's Venus is, therefore, "diverse, unstable yet not incoherent [. . .] her almost infinite variety is nonetheless held together by the force of her self-centred sexual desire" (28). Cousins concludes, "the reader sees the goddess of love, and so erotic love itself, as discordia concors, centred upon desire's selfishness" (28). And if her inconsistencies and egocentrism do not adequately humanise the goddess of love, Shakespeare's alignment of her with the unrequited Petrarchan lover does.

Adonis responds with a complex "rhetoric of chastity" that resists Venus' "assertive (male) rhetoric of seduction" by the employment of a "female rhetoric of rejection" and a "Platonic male rhetoric of love" (29). Venus' attempt to coerce the non-compliant Adonis by declaring his dangerous emulation of Narcissus is superseded by Adonis' refusal to accept her offer of self-knowledge by sexual union desiring instead to pursue his own sense

of his developing subjectivity without losing his self and becoming merely her "concupiscent prize" (33). Adonis, then, may be seen as something of an anti-Narcissus because he seeks self-knowledge only as it remains distinct from sexual experience and thus ironically dies in "parodic sexual encounter with the boar" (33). The narrative establishes Adonis as object of desire for the male gaze to Venus' detriment and Cousins notes Shakespeare's sceptical response to the varied rhetorics of desire and chastity in a poem that indicates "love's multiplicity by no means excludes homoerotic desire" (40). Cousins concludes: "Shakespeare's first poem, inventively ludic, sceptical, emphatically various in its representations of sexuality, and meta-Ovidian in its sophisticated self-awareness [. . .] reveals how shrewdly he understood the rhetorical possibilities of the epyllion and, in doing so, its social possibilities as a means for displaying his virtuosity as a poet in the competition for patronage" (40).

Having noted that Shakespeare's second narrative poem, *Lucrece* (1594), is a tragic tale of female violation as opposed to the earlier poem's comedic account of sexual harassment of the male, Cousins develops the continuities between the poems even as he introduces the new ideas of history and exemplarity. *Lucrece* is established as another minor epic (emphasising the epic aspect more fully than its precursor) and is related to both *de casibus* and tyrant tragedies as well as self-consciously revitalising the genre of the complaint (62). A useful complement to Cousins' discussion is Mary Jo Kliezman's essay (1999) which compares *Lucrece* and *Hamlet* as explorations of the complaint as a means of self-definition and self-determination.⁸

Cousins examines "the reciprocal formation of consciousness and of role among Shakespeare's Tarquin, Collatine and Lucrece" (63). Tarquin is a "Platonic type of tyrant" and a "demonic parody of the Petrarchan lover" who "violates the Petrarchan discourse of love" even as he violates Lucrece in her dual role as Petrarchan lady and chaste Roman matron (63). Collatine is guilty for his hubris which has catastrophic results: his "boastful vying with the proto-tyrant redirects Tarquin's violence and desire from the enemy/foreign/public to the kindred/Roman/private" (63). The result is new rendition of the Fall as Collatine, a self-betraying Adam, brings the

Satanic Tarquin into his private Eden and tempts him to violate his unwilling Eve (Lucrece) (64). Lucrece senses that her identity is imposed from without and therefore fears its possible erasure from without. Her sense of self is inseparable from her “profound consciousness of herself as an exemplar of chastity and her profound fear of becoming an exemplar of unchastity” (67). Overcome by desire, Tarquin embodies Cicero’s pre-civil humanity (89) and Lucrece’s self-defensive oratory fails to civilise and deter him (90) as also her delimited cultural roles as chaste Roman matron and *mulier economica* do not equip her with “prudence,” the ability adequately to read his evil (91). Her dire action after the rape is consequent upon her sense of the power of future history to rewrite actuality and her knowledge of how fragile she is as a good exemplum (67). Her suicide and the subjectivity it strives to preserve become malleable in the politically adept oratory of Brutus who turns Lucrece’s personal tragedy to his political advantage (102-03). Thus, Cousins shows how the poem treats exemplarity sceptically: “It works and it does not” (80), it is secure and yet needs constant shoring up. Recent feminist readers of the poem, such as Coppelia Kahn and Margo Hendricks, also raise questions of Lucrece’s voice and power, and should find much that is useful and acute in Cousins’ analysis of female subjectivity even if the prevailing tone of his discussion is not committed to feminist politics.⁹

The analysis of the Sonnets commences with discussions of Petrarch’s *Rime*¹⁰ and Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* and leads into examination of Sonnets 1-19 via the Narcissus myth which is seen, significantly, to interweave all the narrative poems along with issues of desire, self-knowledge and prudence. While Lucrece’s role automatically denied her the practical wisdom of Ciceronian *prudentia*, the Youth is urged to show such wisdom by the Speaker who marshals the figure of Father Time in an attempt to counsel the Youth to engage in the economy of nature, to marry and reproduce (135). The Speaker fails as counsellor, turns to elaborate praise and dispraise of the Youth, and in the process indicates that he himself figures Narcissus also (144). Sonnets 20 and 53, which are discussed in some detail, are crucial in the construction of the Youth as androgyne (147-57). Cousins demonstrates how the Speaker’s language

of friendship (with its homosocial and homoerotic associations) ends up merging together in the Youth the issues of androgyny and misogyny, Petrarchism and Ciceronian friendship (152-53). However, in Sonnets 20-126 the Speaker repeatedly destabilises the ideal fiction of the Youth with the result that his "implicit transcendence of Laura becomes doubtful" because every aspect of his harmonious androgyny is rendered precarious and difficult to sustain thereby resulting in a sceptical vision of contraries (154-55). The Speaker also "fictionalises himself" as complexly and unstably as he does the Youth (161), the portrait of both figures arising via a sceptical maintenance of opposites. The Speaker's doubt grows, the Youth's duplicity accentuates, and the Speaker's self-consciously paradoxical devotion and self-praise intensify.

Sonnets 20 and 127 are usefully described as pendant histories of the Youth and the Dark Lady, the latter figure arising as a demonised and misogynist Laura and double to the Youth who complexly (and sceptically) transcends Laura (189-92). Cousins gives account of the "speaker's self-division between those two flawed objects of flawed desire" (199). There follows an analysis of the later sonnets in which the Speaker depicts vividly his self-divisive desire, misogyny, friendship and self-disgust, and the Cupid poems are discussed as an authentic conclusion to a sonnet sequence that has begun with desire and ended with the Speaker "resigned to domination by desire" (208).

The book ends with a conclusion that usefully identifies the concerns of the non-dramatic verse as a whole and gives insight into Shakespeare's primary preoccupations in his poetry. These issues include the relation of prudence to time; the nexus of self-knowledge, sexuality and death epitomised in the Narcissus myth; the matrix of homoerotic, homosocial and misogynist discourses; and the disturbances of desire, history, discourse and sceptical method. It is no exaggeration to say the conclusions of *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Narrative Poems* arise easily from the robust gains made by its penetrating analysis of the fabric of Shakespeare's poetry and that such gains are the more durable for not succumbing to over-theorised or politicised assaults on the poems.

Any well-wishing adventurer setting forth this year on a study of Shakespeare's non-dramatic poetry would do very well to read Schiffer's collection and Cousins' monograph to see the spread and quality of the most recent responses to the playwright's verse. Both works will not lack favourable citation in the next decade's criticism the form of which they will in part determine.

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NOTES

¹Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977); *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. John Kerrigan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986); *The Sonnets*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, intro. by Anthony Hecht (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, The Arden Shakespeare, 3rd Series, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Thomson Publishing Company, 1997); Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1997). See also, *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 1997).

²*Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland 1999). Two other recent readings of the Sonnets (and there are many more I do not have space to refer to) are: Alistair Fox, *The English Renaissance: Identity and Representation in Elizabethan England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 83-91; and David Schalkwyk, "What May Words Do? The Performative of Praise in Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49.3 (1998): 251-68.

³Heather Dubrow, *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987) and *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and Its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995); Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986).

⁴A. D. Cousins, *Shakespeare's Sonnets and Narrative Poems* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2000).

⁵For example, Cousins situates his study in relation to recent work on early-modern homosexuality (11), the gaze (33-40, 45-46), scepticism (10), Lucrece's subjectivity (63, 107-08), and Renaissance sonnets (138-39).

⁶I am thinking of A. D. Nuttall's apt appraisal of Vendler's book in, "Vendler and Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Raritan* 17.4 (1998): 131-40: "This is New Critical close reading in a late 1990s mode, every poem treated separately, allowed its proper autonomy. The criticism is correspondingly minute, specific, local" (133).

⁷See Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Introduction' to *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 88-95. Duncan-Jones' edition includes "A Lover's Complaint" (429-52) but does not mention it in her edition's title. This fact, together with her introductory remarks, means her edition explicitly and implicitly asserts the "Complaint" is a formal counterpart and conclusion to the sonnet sequence. Other recent supporters of the "Complaint theory" include: Ilona Bell, "'That which thou hast done': Shakespeare's Sonnets and *A Lover's Complaint*," *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Schiffer, 455-74; and MacD. P. Jackson, "Aspects of Organisation in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1609)," *Parergon* New Series 17.1 (July 1999): 109-34. One might contrast the view of Douglas Bush and Alfred Harbage in their Pelican edition of the Sonnets (1961; rev. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). They note that the 1609 quarto contains "in addition to the 154 sonnets, a poem of doubtful authenticity (*A Lover's Complaint*. 'By William Shakespeare')" (17) and they do not reprint it. "A Lover's Complaint" is included in *The Riverside Shakespeare* ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), and Hallett Smith's non-committed (almost uninterested) introduction concludes: "If it is by Shakespeare, it neither detracts from his achievement nor adds anything to it" (1781). Walter Cohen provides a slightly more favourable introduction to the "Complaint" in *The Norton Shakespeare* (see note 1) where it appears directly after the Sonnets.

⁸Mary Jo Klietzman, "'What Is Hecuba to Him or [S]he to Hecuba?' Lucrece's Complaint and Shakespearean Poetic Agency," *Modern Philology* 97.1 (1999): 21-45.

⁹Coppelia Kahn, "The Sexual Politics of Subjectivity in *Lucrece*," *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women* (London: Routledge, 1997) 27-45; Margo Hendricks, "'A word, sweet Lucrece': Confession, Feminism, and *The Rape of Lucrece*," *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dymrna Callaghan (London: Blackwell, 2000) 103-18.

¹⁰Cousins' discussion of Shakespeare's Petrarchism would be complemented usefully by Gordon Braden's essay, "Shakespeare's Petrarchism," *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Schiffer, 163-83. Braden argues, interestingly, "that Shakespeare's sequence is in certain ways one of the most Petrarchan sequences of the age—that some of its most distinguishing marks are not mockeries or refutations of Petrarchism, but fulfilments of some of that movement's original potentialities" (171).