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**"Undivided Loves":
Coordination and Coherence
in Shakespeare's Sonnets**

Jay Curlin

*Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our undivided loves are one.*
(Sonnet 36)

The reader of today is generally accustomed to thinking of the sonnets of William Shakespeare as isolated, independent lyric poems. While anthologies have certainly kept alive something of Shakespeare's memory as a writer of nondramatic verse, doing their part to ensure that, "so long as men can breathe or eyes can see," at least certain of his more famous sonnets will continue to live, they have also tended to strengthen the perception that one should approach Shakespeare's sonnets individually, with little sense of any larger context of which they might be a part. Indeed, it has been suggested that those of Shakespeare's sonnets that have been made popular to a general audience by their regular inclusion in anthologies are precisely those that can be most easily severed from the sequence, and that those that bear clear traces of having been taken from a sequence have no hope of ever achieving the more permanent renown of an "anthology piece" (Crossman 481).

Yet the sequence has fared no better at the hands of many editors intimately acquainted with the entire series. Since the sonnets were first published in 1609, readers have continually puzzled over their logical relationships to one another and have reshuffled the sequence repeatedly in an attempt to restore some

order to what seemed a narrative and thematic chaos. First published at least a decade after the vogue for sonnet sequences had passed, the sonnets appear to have been largely ignored for the next thirty years. When they next appeared, in John Benson's edition of 1640, the sonnets had been entirely reordered, the text of many had been altered to suggest that those clearly addressing a man were actually addressed to a woman, and several sonnets had been fused into longer individual poems. "For nearly 150 years [this edition] was the basis for what the world knew of Shakespeare's sonnets" (Smith 1841-42). When new editions began to appear, their editors often adopted Benson's practice of rearranging the poems, and Hyder Rollins has declared that Benson is "largely responsible for the obsession for uprooting and resetting the sonnets that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries overmastered many amateur as well as professional scholars" (74). By the time Rollins' *Variorum* edition of the sonnets was published in 1944, Rollins could chronicle twenty distinct rearrangements of the sonnets between 1640 and 1938; and he predicted that, with so many possible variations still available to the editor, future restructuring of the sonnets was inevitable: "Mathematically, the possible rearrangements of the one hundred fifty-four sonnets are to all intents innumerable: billions, trillions, octillions, and the like are numbers too small to limit them" (112). The last thirty years, in which at least three major studies introducing new arrangements have been published, have confirmed the truth of Rollins' prediction.¹

Despite such a rich variety of alternative arrangements, the order that has best stood the test of time, and which is most widely accepted today, is that of the original 1609 Quarto. Over a century ago, Edward Dowden, an editor of an edition of 1881, pronounced, "Repeated perusals have convinced me that the sonnets stand in the right order, and that sonnet is connected with sonnet in more instances than have been observed" (qtd. in Rollins 79),

and modern scholarship has tended to agree. To the recurring complaints about the inconsistency of the narrative, many have noted that narrative progression was never a particularly important element of an Elizabethan sonnet sequence: "Rather than telling a chronological story, the typical Elizabethan sonnet sequence offers a thematically connected series of lyrical meditations . . ." (Bevington n. pag.) Kenneth Muir has noted that, even with such generally coherent sequences as Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Spenser's *Amoretti*, sonnet sequences "have never been narrative poems in fourteen-line stanzas." For Muir, to attempt to reorder the sonnets into a "novel in verse" is to violate "the spirit of the genre" (7). Indeed, many have found in the original sequence considerably more structure than one can generally expect of the genre. C. S. Lewis remarked that, unlike most sequences of Shakespeare's day, in the 1609 version "at last we have a sequence which really hints a story, and so odd a story that we find a difficulty in regarding it as fiction" (503).² In perhaps the most ambitious description of possible structures in the 1609 sequence, Alastair Fowler has outlined a complex numerological pattern based on pyramidal numbers, arguing that the original order exhibits "an elaborate structural symmetry" and "a design far too positive for us to be free to change it at will" (183).³

As much as I agree with the consensus that "No one can improve upon the accidentally established order we possess . . ." (Blackmur 131), one can easily understand why Benson, that first rearranger of the sequence, would be tempted at least to fuse certain of the sonnets into single poems, for one of the most extraordinary features of the sequence is the frequency with which Shakespeare links individual sonnets so tightly that it is, indeed, difficult not to perceive them as separate stanzas of a single poem. Earlier in the century, Surrey had composed similar "extended sonnets" in which, as in "Prisoned in Windsor" and "Epitaph on Sir Thomas Wyatt," he would conclude a lengthy series of qua-

trains with a single couplet;⁴ but there is no similar precedent for Shakespeare's fusion of sonnets in the sequences of his peers. In *Astrophil and Stella*, the sequence that began the vogue in England, "there is very rarely any sense of one sonnet building on the previous one," and "each sonnet seems like a fresh start" (Duncan-Jones 167). In contrast, the connections in Shakespeare's sequence are so very frequent, and so very tight, that readers of the sequence are often left with the sense that they are reading, if not actually a narrative poem, at least a single lyric poem in multiple stanzas. Kenneth Muir has gone so far as to say that each of the first seventeen sonnets, the famous "procreation" group in which the poet is urging a young man to sire a child, "can be regarded as a stanza of a 238-line poem" (46).

While I believe that this rather overstates the case, it points to an element of the sonnets to which I should like to direct attention, and that is the degree to which Shakespeare's many syntactic connections between the sonnets not only compel readers to make the same types of combinations that Benson made in 1640 but lead them to expect similar coordination between sonnets that are not so obviously linked. R. P. Blackmur declared that the unifying theme of the sequence is infatuation (132); but I believe we come much closer to the truth if we see the series as devoted primarily to the desire for unity, the longing for a bond so close with the beloved that two have actually become one, a conceit that one can find throughout the sequence. In Sonnet 22, the poet has so absorbed his friend that he is bearing the young man's heart as tenderly as a nurse cares for "her babe." In 37, he is as a "decrepit father" who, by "engrafting" himself onto his "active child," is able to enjoy the latter's "deeds of youth" as though they were his own. This organic conceit of engrafting is one of Shakespeare's favorites throughout the sequence, and he displays its effects most obviously in the way in which pairs of sonnets tend repeatedly to grow together.

We see this perhaps most obviously in the procreation sonnets, which, while somewhat less unified than Muir would have us believe, are clearly the most tightly unified group in the sequence, as Ramsey and others have noted (15). The coordination is not initially apparent as one reads the first five sonnets, which, though all clearly addressing the same subject of the young man's need to beget a son, seem no more obviously unified than variations on a single theme. When one arrives at the sixth sonnet, however, one suddenly finds something very different, for the sonnet begins with a transitional word that clearly looks backward at something that has preceded it: "Then let not winter's ragged hand deface / In thee thy summer ere thou be distilled." Were one to encounter the sonnet in isolation, one would surely assume either that the poet had adopted the device of appearing to begin a sonnet in mid conversation or that, as is of course the case with Sonnet 6, one had happened upon an excerpt from a sequence to which the poem was intimately connected. The conjunctive adverb with which the sonnet begins clearly signals that one has, in fact, reached the conclusion of a line of reasoning. In general, we expect the logical divisions of an Elizabethan sonnet to follow the structural components of the form, so that, after three quatrains devoted to individual premises, one would expect the conclusion of an argument in the couplet; or, as is more frequently the case with Shakespeare, one might find the argument divided in the original Italian division of octave and sestet.⁵ But Shakespeare frequently yokes sonnets together in his sequence to develop a more extended argument than a single sonnet could contain. If reading the sonnets sequentially, one hardly notices that one has moved to a new sonnet as one moves between 5 and 6, for the connection is seamless. The poet has directed the young man's attention in Sonnet 5 to the ravaging effects of winter and the ability of perfume to preserve the "substance" of summer's flowers after winter has destroyed their form. In Sonnet 6, he then

applies the analogy directly to the young man: "Then let not winter's ragged hand deface / In thee *thy* summer ere *thou* be distilled" (emphasis added). This technique of describing an image fully before making the analogy explicit is common in the sequence and is frequently employed within the bounds of a single sonnet, as one finds in the very next sonnet, where the daily progress of the sun is described fully in the three quatrains before the poet makes explicit in the couplet its connection to the young man: "So thou, thyself outgoing in thy noon, / Unlooked on diest unless thou get a son." But Sonnets 5 and 6 show us how Shakespeare can use this same structural development to bring together two poems. Though each can stand alone as a separate sonnet developing a separate thought, they become together tenor and vehicle of a single metaphor.

The only other pair of sonnets in the procreation section to employ so obvious a conjunction are Sonnets 15 and 16, the second of which begins "But wherefore do not you a mightier way / Make war upon this bloody tyrant time?" Perhaps even more than is the case with Sonnet 6, the opening of Sonnet 16 could not help briefly puzzling the reader who came upon it in isolation, no matter how clear the rest of the sonnet might be; for the coordinating conjunction with which it begins would suggest that one had found the contrasting second half of a compound statement and would be left wondering to what other idea it might possibly have been offered as a contrast. In the 1609 sequence, however, the compound thought is entirely clear in the union of Sonnets 15 and 16. In his preface to William Burto's edition of the sonnets, W. H. Auden inadvertently illustrated how very dependent the two sonnets are upon each other; for he offered the first sonnet of this tightly united pair as evidence that the arrangement of 1609 was suspect: "15 seems not to belong, for marriage is not mentioned in it" (cited in Crossman 484). But this objection is answered completely when the two sonnets are read as a single

statement, for the essential element of procreation most certainly appears in the second half of the compound idea.

Earlier in the sequence, the poet has lamented that the only thing that can resist "time's scythe" is "breed," that the young man's death will be "truth's and beauty's doom and date" (Sonnets 12 and 14); but Sonnet 15 represents for the first time the idea that there might be an alternative to siring a child, that the poet himself might be able to distill the young man's essence within the vial of his art. As with the earlier sonnets, Sonnet 15 is devoted to the "conceit" of the "inconstant stay" of "everything that grows" and what this conceit of course implies about the young man's "day of youth." In the couplet, however, the poet introduces the idea that the very sonnets he is writing may enable him to "engraft" the young man into something new: the undying poem that, like the images on Keats's Grecian urn, is static and, hence, "Holds in perfection" more than "a little moment." It is an entirely new note in an argument that has been attempting to persuade the young man to sire a child, and it is therefore understandable that the poet offers it as a tentative attempt to "war with Time," his confidence by no means sure that this is a war that he can win.⁶

Just as Shakespeare introduces the idea of engrafting for the first time, he fuses this couplet to the following sonnet with a coordinating conjunction: "But wherefore do not you a mightier way / Make war upon this bloody tyrant time?" and we can now see what the poet has contrasted. He has just offered his own humble services in the war with time but now asks why his friend does not join the battle with the "mightier way" of procreation: "And fortify yourself in your decay / With means more blessed than my barren rhyme?" The sonnet Auden found so very out of place in a procreation sequence therefore becomes perfectly appropriate when seen in the united pair of which it is a part. Moreover, the two sonnets together work as the perfect transition in the

sequence as Shakespeare shifts gradually from arguing that a child is the young man's only possible bid to immortality to offering his poetry as an even more enduring substitute. When the idea is first mentioned, the poet is hesitant to make such a claim, describing his art throughout Sonnet 16 as a "barren rhyme," a "painted counterfeit," a "pupil pen," a very weak substitute for the type of "living flowers" the young man could grow in "maiden gardens." At the close of the sonnet, procreation is presented as definitely superior to art, the only real way that the young man can continue to live: "To give away yourself keeps yourself still, / And you must live, drawn by your own sweet skill." In the following sonnet, however, the last of the procreation series, the focus is almost entirely upon writing and the difficulty of representing realistically to future ages the "high deserts" of the young man. Procreation is mentioned only, and for the last time, in the closing couplet, when a descendant of the young man is brought in as the means by which the truth of the poet's description of his friend's "heav'nly touches" is confirmed: "But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice; in it and in my rhyme." Here, the child and the poetry appear to be equally important in preserving the young man's memory, and the child disappears altogether in the sonnet that follows, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" the preeminent statement of the permanence of art.

Sonnets 15 and 16 therefore not only show us the importance of coordination in Shakespeare's sequence but serve together as an important transitional link in the thematic development of the sequence. Such obvious syntactic conjunction of sonnets within the opening sonnets is admittedly rare, occurring only twice in the procreation section; but one finds it repeatedly throughout the rest of the sequence. Between Sonnets 27 and 28, for example, Shakespeare employs the same conjunctive adverb with which he unites Sonnets 5 and 6: "How can I *then* return in

happy plight” (emphasis added). After having described in Sonnet 27 the exhaustion resulting from sleepless nights spent thinking of the young man, the poet opens the following sonnet with the very logical question of how he can return each day “in happy plight” when he is nightly “debarred the benefit of rest” (2). Sonnet 21 begins, like Sonnet 16, with a coordinating conjunction that can look back at both the preceding sonnet and the entire group of twenty sonnets that has preceded it: “So is not with me as with that muse, / Stirred by a painted beauty to his verse.” Since Sonnet 20 has described the object of his poetry as both a man and one with a face “with nature’s own hand painted,” the poet can very logically assert in the following sonnet that his situation therefore is *not* that of the poet inspired by the standard “painted beauties,” who are, for one, female and, for another, beautiful only artificially. But the conjunction can also lead the reader to see the sonnet as a commentary on the entire sequence up to this point. While those sonnets have certainly been filled with the type of “couplement of proud compare” of which he accuses other poets in Sonnet 21, he has declared in Sonnet 20 that, unlike other poets, he is dealing with the real thing, with natural beauty itself, so that his comparisons of the young man with the other beauties of nature are legitimate.

When one becomes sensitive to the type of explicit connections we have seen yoking sonnets into obvious pairs, the entire sequence begins to assume a coherence not apparent upon a first reading. Patterns and connections begin to suggest themselves between sonnets no more apparently associated with each other than mere juxtaposition within the sequence; and the sequence approaches the unity of a dramatic monologue, even when, in Sonnet 127, the silent audience changes to the mysterious Dark Lady. This too can perhaps be best displayed in the highly unified procreation section. While I would hardly agree with Robert Crossman that the curious Sonnet 10 is “the most important and

interesting poem in the whole group" (481), the poem is certainly interesting; and it illustrates perfectly how our greater awareness of the cohesion of the sonnets enhances both our comprehension of individual poems and our sensitivity to the various shifts in tone that permeate the sequence.

Crossman says of Sonnet 10 that it "can never be an anthology piece because it makes sense only in the context of the story that the procreation sonnets tell . . ." (481), a claim that greatly exaggerates the sonnet's dependence on its context but which does us, at least, the service of suggesting how intimately wedded a sonnet can be in the sequence even without the types of obvious transitional connections we have been examining. Any discerning editor should have no compunction about isolating the poem in an anthology; for there is nothing particularly mysterious about its meaning, nothing that would remain incomprehensible for a reader unaware of the gist of the procreation sequence. Indeed, I should think the average reader would find the poem considerably clearer than many of the more frequently anthologized sonnets:

For shame deny that thou bear'st love to any,
Who for thyself art so unprovident.
Grant if thou wilt, thou art beloved of many,
But that thou none lov'st is most evident;
For thou art so possessed with murd'rous hate
That 'gainst thyself thou stick'st not to conspire,
Seeking that beauteous roof to ruinate,
Which to repair should be thy chief desire.
O change thy thought, that I may change my mind.
Shall hate be fairer lodged than gentle love?
Be as thy presence is, gracious and kind,
Or to thyself at least kind-hearted prove.
Make thee another self for love of me,
That beauty still may live in thine or thee.

While the sonnet may leave one in the dark a bit longer than some

of the other sonnets, all surely becomes clear in the closing couplet; indeed, in waiting until then to unveil the point of the preceding quatrains, Shakespeare is actually being truer to the logic of the form than is generally his custom. Once one finds in the couplet that the persona is requesting of his audience that he make "another self" so that beauty "may live in *thine*," it surely does not tax the intellect too much to understand that the person addressed is being asked to produce offspring. Once that becomes clear, it requires no sage to understand that the person addressed has, up to this point, refused to procreate, that the persona perceives such a refusal as self-destructive and analogous to ruining the very roof one is responsible for repairing, and that the current tirade has been set off by his auditor's having pronounced himself a loving person nonetheless. The sonnet yields this much of its own without any recourse to the larger context Crossman considers so essential for understanding.

Nor does Crossman perceive the relationship of Sonnet 10 to that context in quite the way that I have in mind in examining the poem as an example of the cohesion of the sequence. For Crossman, the surrounding context of the sequence is necessary only for the light the narrative details shed on the theme of the poem: after having read nine sonnets on the subject of procreation, the reader arriving at Sonnet 10 need not wait even until the couplet to know the cause of the anger or the point of the roof analogy. Indeed, Crossman pronounces the sonnet the "most important" of the group only because it is the first in which the poet attaches the important word *love* to his relationship with the young man, a detail to which I would attach considerably less significance. What I *do* find interesting about the sonnet, however, is how it manages to cohere tightly with the sonnets that precede and follow it without any explicit connections.

I have remarked above that a reader unaware of the context of Sonnet 10 would have to assume that the heated opening line

were in direct response to the auditor's having claimed to bear some type of love. Within the context, no such imagined scenario is needed; not only do we learn the reason for the anger, but we discover that it is in response to the poet's own question in the preceding sonnet. No conjunctions of any sort alert the reader to the unity of the two sonnets, but the content reveals them to be every bit as much of a piece as the tightly connected pairs we have already examined. In Sonnet 9, the poet has opened the poem with what quickly proves to be a rhetorical question: "Is it for fear to wet a widow's eye / That thou consum'st thyself in single life?" The poet seems initially to be genuinely wondering if the young man has resisted marriage only out of concern for the widow he would eventually leave behind. But the poet immediately rejects the validity of such a concern, noting that, in seemingly preventing the pain of one person, the young man is widowing an entire world: "Ah, if thou issueless shalt hap to die, / The world will wail thee like a makeless wife." The very notion that the young man might even have considered such an excuse appears to annoy the persona, and a growing sense of resentment seems to build throughout the sonnet as a consequence. Does the young man not know that the ordinary widow has, at least, the solace of children to keep "her husband's shape in mind," while the widow he is making of the earth will be left with neither him nor his "form"? Does he not realize that the waste of his own beauty by deliberate sterility is the destruction of a treasure that is rightly the world's? How dare he mask such "murderous shame" under feigned solicitude for a widow? "No love toward others in that bosom sits / That on himself such murderous shame commits." It is the first moment of anger in the sequence, ironically the consequence of the poet's having answered his own question and having ascribed to his friend a chain of reasoning that he has imagined himself.

The anger with which Sonnet 10 begins is, therefore, both a

continuation and intensification of the heat with which Sonnet 9 has closed. In the dramatic monologue formed by the two sonnets, the silent audience has not, of course, had a chance to speak, but he is now being rebuked for entertaining what the poet has simply assumed to be his thoughts. The poet will admit later that eyes "draw but what they see, know not the heart" (25.14). Yet neither can such passion be maintained for long by the adoring poet, and we find the angry tone abruptly dropped as the poet shifts from the octave to the sestet of Sonnet 10: "O change thy thought, that I may change my mind." Nothing in either sonnet would lead one to assume that the persona has ever really known the precise nature of the young man's "thought," but the speaker clearly would rather not continue thinking of his friend as one incapable of love and "possessed with murd'rous hate." Moreover, the poet must surely know that spleen has a very limited rhetorical appeal. The sestet of the poem is so remarkably different in tone that one can barely recognize the supplicant who has replaced his anger with flattery and solicitation, while the unloving and self-destructive brute of the octave is now described as "gracious and kind." For a brief, rare moment, the poet has allowed himself to vent an anger that builds throughout one sonnet and climaxes in another, but it resolves into a reasonable tone of supplication and gentle persuasion that continues as the poet returns, in Sonnet 11, to the recurring idea of the first seven sonnets: that the waning parent has the comfort of seeing himself growing in his children.

This is the basic theme throughout Shakespeare's sequence, that connections bring seemingly separate entities into such union that any trace of distinct identities is mercifully lost. The aging parent "converting" from youth can look at his children and call their blood his own (11.4). The decrepit father, "made lame by fortune's dearest spite," can "engraft" himself on the rich "store" of his child and be no longer "lame, poor, nor despised" (37.3-9). The body of one friend can be merely a frame to hold the portrait

of the other, as we find in Sonnet 23; and the friend can unite within himself an even greater plurality by being "endeared" with the hearts of "all those friends . . . thought buried": "Their images I loved I view in thee, / And thou, all they, hast all the all of me" (31.1,4,13-14). In a sequence devoted to such unions, such blurring of distinctions, it is little wonder that the sonnets themselves should blend into one.

Notes

¹ See, for example, S. C. Campbell's *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Edited As a Continuous Sequence by Uniform Title* and its companion *Only Begotten Sonnets: A Reconstruction of Shakespeare's Sonnet Sequence* (1979), and John Padel's *New Poems by Shakespeare: Order and Meaning Restored to the Sonnets* (1981). The contemporary restructuring that has gained the widest acceptance, however, is that offered by Brents Stirling in *The Shakespeare Sonnet Order* (1968). For a thorough account of the history of the many rearrangements of the sonnets from 1640 to 1938, see Rollins' discussion of the issue in the Variorum edition (74-116).

² Katherine Duncan-Jones has noted that Sonnet 76 seems an explicit comment on Shakespeare's refusal to vary his structure as randomly as was usually the case in Elizabethan sonnet sequences (168):

Why is my verse so barren of new pride,
So far from variation or quick change?
Why with the time do I not glance aside
To new-found methods, and to compounds strange?
(1-4)

Shakespeare's Sonnets, ed. Stephen Booth. All subsequent references to the sonnets are to this edition.

³ For the many who have endorsed the original order and who see a considerable degree of structure in the 1609 sequence, see, for example, Blackmur (131-32), Booth (545-46), Crossman (470), Dubrow (*Captive Victors* 183), Duncan-Jones (155), and Ramsey (1112). The second of Duncan-Jones' two main grounds for arguing for the integrity of the 1609 Quarto is structural: "Within the 1609 text many elements of thematic and structural

coherence are to be found . . ." (155).

⁴ While unequal in length, both "Prisoned in Windsor" and "Epitaph of Sir Thomas Wyatt" are identical in their basic form. The iambic-pentameter ABAB quatrain that Surrey developed for the sonnet is maintained throughout each poem, and each is concluded with the closing couplet of the English sonnet. Though "Prisoned in Windsor" has fifty-four lines and the epitaph thirty-eight, one can therefore not help feeling that Surrey has simply extended the boundaries of a single sonnet.

⁵ Shakespeare's tendency not to exploit more logically the divisions of the English sonnet led John Crowe Ransom to pronounce that "generally [the sonnets] are ill constructed" (88): "Structurally, Shakespeare is a careless workman. But probably, with respect to our attention to structure, we are careless readers" (91).

⁶ Booth notes that, before reading Sonnet 16, the reader can have no clear idea of what Shakespeare might mean by "I ingraft you new," and that, within the context of the preceding argument, the reader may assume that he is merely describing his attempts to persuade the young man to procreate as the engrafting of the young man to a wife (158).

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