Shakespeare Contra Erasmus: A Reply to Catherine Nicholson

by David P. Gontar (September 2017)

For never any thing can be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it. –Theseus

I. Introduction: The Sonnet in the Plays

It is one of the most provocative of coincidences that there are in Shakespeare's works—other than the sonnets—precisely 14 references to this poetic form. (See, "sonnet," *Open Source Shakespeare*) Of these, 13 are in the plays. There are also 14 "procreative" sonnets. Desirous as we are to know the nature of these famous verses there is little need of speculation as we can always return to those plays for elucidation. There we discover one salient fact about Shakespeare's own view: the sonnet is a deliberate and intimate vehicle of communication

of one to another usually associated with praise or endearment. Its mission is never to advertise skill or technique, but rather to affect, impress or move. Sonnets are heartfelt messages or *envois* composed for and almost always delivered to a personage of vital importance to the sender, sometimes employing terms understood only by the privy parties. And though they may reflect in diverse ways on the moral aspect of our lives, the formal cause of the Shakespearean sonnet is never mere instruction or edification.

The distinction between facility and unction is illustrated *con brio* in *Love's Labour's Lost,* a lively court comedy in which verses by the king and his confreres are crafted to win the affections of the Princess of France and her ladies-in-waiting. To achieve that end each lord fashions a love poem focusing on the tension between romantic ardor and hasty vows of academic asceticism. The sonnets spring naturally from the rich linguistic soil of the court. The stanzas form a hierarchy of quality, beginning with the sonnets of Berowne and the king, descending to the juvenile efforts of Longaville and Dumaine. Rarely if ever included in collections, here is Shakespeare's sonnet from *Love's Labour's Lost*.

If love make me forsworn, how shall I swear to love?

Ah, never faith could hold, if not to beauty vowed.

Though to myself forsworn, to thee I'll faithful prove.

Those thoughts to me were oaks, to thee like osiers bowed.

Study his bias leaves and makes his book thine eyes,

Where all those pleasures live that art would comprehend.

If knowledge be the mark, to know thee shall suffice:

Well learnèd is that tongue that well can thee commend,

> All ignorant that soul that sees thee without wonder,
>
> Which is to me some praise that I thy parts admire.
>
> Thy eye Jove's lightning bears, thy voice his dreadful thunder,
>
> Which not to anger bent, is music and sweet fire.
>
> Celestial as thou art, O, pardon, love, this wrong,
> That sings heavens praise with such as earthly tongue. (Bate, 332)

So far as we know this is the earliest recorded sonnet of Shakespeare, the first quarto of *Love's Labour's Lost* dated 1598. It deserves special attention, being in iambic hexameter and directed by Berowne to a particular lady, Rosaline, to convey the depth and durability of his love, for which he is willing to be "forsworn." Its purpose is not preceptive or exhibitionist but amatory, and expressly rejects vain philosophy in favor of a study of the object most worthy of attention, Rosaline. At the same time it is a formal embassage (Cp. Sonnet 26, l.3) sent to her by courier, the jest being that it is handed to the wrong person. (3.1.120-127; 4.1.100) Shakespeare apparently conceived of the sonnet as an elaborate *billet-doux* sufficiently versatile to include sentiments of desire, flattery, shame and fear. This example is charmingly awkward, almost cringing before the lady whose voice is "dreadful thunder." If we didn't know better, wouldn't it be tempting to see in Berowne a self-portrait of a young cavalier torn between swashbuckling amours and his incipient career as the world's greatest literary artist? The sonnet is a descendant of Italian culture and perhaps the Troubadour tradition and became a staple of court life in the 16th century. (See, *e.g.*, Sir Walter Raleigh's sonnet to his son. Shakespeare knew the legacy of Petrarch well. See also, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, 1.3.103,107,111; note Hamlet's "words of so sweet breath composed as made the things

more rich," 3.1.105-106. There is another potential self-portrait.)

Earlier in the same play, we witness the same phenomenon a step lower in the social scale when picaresque Don Adriano de Armado, court parasite and acolyte in the king's circle, finds himself with a crush on dairymaid Jaquenetta. He exults:

> Adieu, valour: rust, rapier: be still, drum, for your manager is in love; yea, he loveth. Assist me, some extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure I shall turn sonnet. Devise, wit: write, pen, for I am for whole volumes in folio. (1.2.136-139)

Though we aren't treated to the text of Don Adriano's "volumes," we do grasp his scheme: to captivate with a sonnet the unlettered lass he has met in the park "in the posteriors of this day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon." (5.1.61) As with Berowne and his fellow penmen, Don Adriano sets himself the task not of writing about love, but giving expression to his romantic urges in a metrical message to his lady love. Of course this letter too goes amusingly astray. The point is that the sonnet is again conceived not as a disinterested literary exercise but as a social instrument whose aim is conquest and union.

The lush Euphuistic style of the late 16th century is expressly satirized by Shakespeare in this word-worldly comedy. Florid, super-sophisticated or antiquarian verbiage exploited by a number of characters in rounds of courtly one-upmanship (including Rosaline's sparring with Boyet and Katherine) is diagnosed by Shakespeare as a social malaise. It sows confusion and equivocation, encourages snobbery and resentment and lies at the root of misunderstandings between

the sexes. Only at the end of the play, after the damage has been done, does Berowne finally grasp that on account of the insinuative and oblique nature of his speech, Rosaline has lost faith in him, forcing him to recant.

> Thus pour the stars down plagues for perjury.
>
> Can any face of brass hold longer out?
>
> Here stand I lady, dart thy skill at me;
>
> Bruise me with scorn, confound me with a flout.
>
> Thrust thy sharp wit quite through my ignorance,
>
> Cut me to pieces with thy keen conceit,
>
> And I will wish thee never more to dance,
>
> Nor never more in Russian habit wait.
>
> O, never will I trust to speeches penned,
>
> Nor to the motion of a schoolboy’s tongue
>
> Nor never come in vizard to my friend,
>
> Nor woo in rhyme, like a blind harper’s song!
>
> Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,
>
> Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation,
>
> Figures pedantical; these summer-flies
>
> Have blown me full of maggot ostentation.
>
> I do forswear them; and I here protest,
>
> By this white glove—how white the hand, God knows!—
>
> Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed

> In russet yeas and honest kersey noes.
>
> And, to begin, wench,—so God help me, law!—
>
> My love to thee is sound, sans crack or flaw. (5.2.416-437)

Euphuistic speech is a chain reaction setting off clouds of inflated discourse. It is alliterative and essentially hollow, though its recursions be camouflaged by synonymous constructions. At the center of this whirlwind of words in *Love's Labour's Lost*, like Satan in the bowels of Hell, is Holofernes the pedant. His own poetical ventures, though resting on classical knowledge, exhibit obsessive, childish iteration and a taste for smut.

> The preyful princess pierced and pricked a pretty pleasing pricket.
>
> Some say a sore, but not a sore, till now made sore with shooting.
>
> The dogs did yell, put 'l' to sore, then sorrel jumps from thicket.
>
> Or pricket sore, or else sorrel, the people fall a-hooting.
>
> If sore be sore, then I, to sore makes fifty sores o'sorrel.
>
> Of one sore I an hundred make by adding but one more "L." (4.2.45-50)

The reader will easily detect the elements of "doggerel" lurking in this mass of squirming syllables, whose worth seems scarcely better than that cranked out by Longaville and Dumaine. Yet when confronted with Berowne's sonnet in celebration of Rosaline and his love for her, Holofernes

instinctively reaches for his monocle, ascending the brightest heaven of condescension:

> You find not the apostrophus, and so miss the accent. Let me supervise the canzonet. Here are only numbers ratified, but for the elegancy, facility and golden cadence of poesy, *caret* [that is, it is lacking]. Ovidius Naso was the man: and why indeed 'Naso', but for the smelling out the odiferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention? *Imitari* is nothing: so doth the hound his master, the ape his keeper, the tired horse his rider. (4.3. 95-99)

Faced with naïve feeling cast in verse, Holofernes can only sniff, taking refuge in technicalities and preposterous comparisons with Ovid. He is didactic but vacuous. The pedant is an aesthete, an overeducated mediocrity congenitally incapable of producing a true sonnet or appreciating one. He is not a lover but a seducer (4.2. 61-62). And, since real poetry proceeds from authenticity, Holofernes is disqualified *ab initio*. Other instances of realistic sonnets abound. In *Much Ado About Nothing* when Beatrice and Benedick find they are loved by one another, do either of them compose scientific treatises on love and sex? No, each "turns sonnet" and, though we aren't given a chance to hear them, we are startled to see that Beatrice's to Benedick is that rarity of rarities, a formal sonnet from a woman to a man. Shakespeare shows us that Benedick the soldier hasn't a drop of poetic talent ("I can find no rhyme to 'lady' but 'baby,'" "I was not born under a rhyming planet," 5.2.24-26) yet he marches bravely on and finishes his verse.

Plainly its value lies not in linguistic adroitness, nor will it fructify in the brains of others. It cannot contain literary allusions. That's not the purpose of a Shakespearean sonnet. These two combatants in the war of the sexes have been writhing in repressed love for years, hurling incendiary

apothegms at each other in public. Affections restored, each purges the air of pestilence by waving a censer-like sonnet at the other. Even the scoundrel Parolles in *All's Well that Ends Well* uses the "sonnet" form to undermine Bertram's seduction of Diana (4.3.239-248), and winds up extemporizing a counter-sonnet after his disgrace (4.3.239-248). Recall that another cad, Sir Proteus, in the early *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, presumes to teach Thurio how to pursue Silvia:

> You must lay lime to angle her desires
>
> By wailful sonnets, whose composèd rhymes
>
> Should be full-fraught with serviceable vows. (3.2.68-70)

Or, call to mind the famous sonnet jointly improvised by Romeo and Juliet on first meeting at the Capulet feast with its extended trope of holy palmers, a conceit through which we gaze on a seemingly perfect love (1.4.213-226). Here poetry grows into pledges and performance. Remember, too, Slender's reference to Songs and Sonnets when he sees pretty Anna Page. (The Merry Wives of Windsor, 1.1.140) In the same play Falstaff quotes from one of Sidney's sonnets in Astrophel and Stella: "Have I caught thee, my heavenly jewel?" (3.3.30).

A sonnet that did not adopt some "serviceable" goal (to use Sir Proteus's modifier) would be incomprehensible to Shakespeare, a kind of perversion of letters. Each sonnet (or sonnet scheme) in his plays cleaves to its charter as a living symbol by which the relation to the other is manifest and vivified. The true Shakespearean sonnet, then, is never an abstraction, disquisition or art for art's sake. Rather it arises *in situ* as the embodiment of the relational figure, even where that bond appears to lapse or present as a rift. As the form of the relation becomes art so it passes from mere happenstance and particularity to something of general meaning

and significance. In Hegelian terms, then, the sonnet is the concrete universal. W. K. Wimsatt writes in *The Verbal Icon,* "The excellence of Shakespeare, says Coleridge, consists in a union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular. In one terminology or another this idea of the concrete universal is found in most metaphysical aesthetics of the 18th and 19th centuries." (Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon*, 72) Berowne's sonnet in *Love's Labour's Lost* doesn't "express" mere sentiments via well-known techniques such as rhyme, meter, metaphor, irony, etc., as though it were no more than a sort of venting of emotion in words. Rather, it is the felt relation of speaker and object in all its breadth and subtlety. Hence it can in no way be regarded as mere declaration, lesson or idea. It is rather, not only the relation in concrete form, but serves a vital end: to touch the significant other with one's passion. On this point Theseus and the Princess of France concur about the value of speaking from the heart: her view that "sport best pleases that doth least know how" (5.2.539) matches his condemnation of "saucy and audacious eloquence." (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.107)

II. Shakespeare's Sonnets

When we examine the poems of 1609 under the title of SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS we see they are entirely consistent with the intimate dyadic posture of the sonnets in the plays. It's easy to see why the vast majority of readers over the past four centuries have always recognized that the 144 *Sonnets* are not hornbook exercises designed to inculcate memory and articulation but, rather, the dramatic sonnets are envois directed to some actual historical individual or individuals for purposes of sensitive communication, preservation, nurture, guidance and persuasion. We also have a sense that, on account of the risk that these delicate *envois* might be

intercepted or purloined, the contents of some aspects are conceptually encrypted so as to shield personal affairs. Such is the nature of the *Sonnets,* and though subjective impressions and styles of reading come and go, no facts have ever been adduced to bring that sturdy realism into serious question. As with the amateurs depicted in *Love's Labour's Lost*, the Voice of the *Sonnets* fairly seethes with the burdens of social entanglements. Who would fardels bear indeed! That is why the *Sonnets* have survived and are so assiduously cultivated in the 21st century, while the cooler, more cerebral essays of Montaigne or Erasmus are, beyond the Ivory Tower, almost completely unknown. The sentiments of the *Sonnets*, whatever their ultimate meaning may be, are palpable, urgent and poignant in their resonant sallies. To imply otherwise argues a kind of tone-deafness, the "malady of not marking." (*King Henry IV*, Part Two, 1.2. 86) Human beings have unresolved issues which they seek to address through literature. Though many would challenge this, it is what makes us human. One of the reasons Shakespeare is a hero to so many is that he is someone who has "looked on tempests" and is "never shaken" on account of his love. (116) That *means* something, whether one eventually pierces the ironic veil in this bitter indictment or not. This is why ordinary readers *respond* to Shakespeare. Something momentous is there that lifts us up and transfigures what is left of our tattered souls. Planted within, the *Sonnet* grows. Resonates. To put it bluntly, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" is not a weather report. Yes, someday the microchip lodged at the base of each baby's brain will accomplish a similar feat but at the cost of destroying the very humanity Shakespeare cherishes and nurtures.

A Shakespeare who could give us Berowne's "right Promethean fire" and then callously churn out hornbook exercises which caricature poetry recks not his own rede. (*Hamlet*, 1.3.54) For consider: Is it possible that one could exclaim, "So long as

men can breathe or eyes can see, so long lives this and this gives life to thee" (18) and mean anything less? In reading the proclamation by "a prophet new inspired" (*The Tragedy of King Richard II*, 2.1.31) of someone's immortality, and finding that prophecy miraculously fulfilled in our very reckoning with those lines, could we then rise up against greatness itself, against our own redemption in literature, by setting it all down as so much sententious bombast, full of sound and fury, yet signifying nothing? Does Shakespeare turn cynic in the *Sonnets* before our very eyes, straining to out-Timon Timon? Shall we follow him and trample on what remains of our idealism? Is that the "brave new world" to which the bard finally invites us? (*The Tempest*. 5.1.205-206) It takes a cold heart to turn Shakespeare's poetry into a sham.

As noted at the commencement of this discussion, another complication with the number 14 arises in connection with the first 14 of the *Sonnets*, popularly termed "procreative." These patently encourage a handsome but headstrong youth to win immortality by getting a son. Later that goal will be sought by the poet through the eternality of those *Sonnets* which memorialize the comeliness of that young man. Such amiable conceits have given many the idea that Shakespeare was sexually attracted to this fellow, a somewhat controversial notion having little to recommend it. What sets the fourteen procreation sonnets apart is the fact that they are one and all dedicated to an identical theme, urging the recipient to get a son to perpetuate his alluring lineaments. Of course the willingness to repeat the same refrain over and over has long puzzled scholars. Now in the post-modern era in which "the wiser youngsters of today" (RL Stevenson) have turned away from the biographical narrative of the *Sonnets,* a straightforward reading of those mysterious poems is replaced by pure subjectivity. The *Sonnets* currently have no more inherent meaning than the psychologist's Rorschach (inkblot) test. This confers on us the supreme blessing: the freedom to

say whatever we wish without fear of correction.

Enter Catherine Nicholson

In Chapter 11 of *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry* (Jonathan F.S. Post, ed., Oxford University Press, 2013), Professor Catherine Nicholson takes apparent issue with those *naifs* who would still treat at least the first 14 *Sonnets* "as working through a set of intensely (perhaps embarrassingly) private erotic concerns . . . ." (Nicholson, 192) Bracketing the question of whether the first 14 *Sonnets* are indeed "erotic" or not, "working through private concerns" isn't at all how they would have been viewed by late Renaissance readers, says Nicholson, especially those savvy folks familiar with a certain screed by Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536). Shakespeare's *Sonnets* 1-14 turn out to be neither personal nor original: "on the contrary, they conspicuously and ingeniously rework a text borrowed from one of the most widely used volumes in the 16th-century English grammar school . . . *De Conscribendis Epistolis*." (Nicholson, 192, emphasis added) She continues:

> As part of his theoretical disquisition on the art of letter-writing . . . Erasmus supplied schoolboy readers with an array of sample letters, including a long epistle urging a youthful male acquaintance to overcome his reluctance to marry and shoulder the privileges and responsibilities of continuing the family line. (Nicholson, 192)

It is not without significance, however, that this "long epistle" is neither made a part of Nicholson's article nor quoted at length. Yet it is as clear as is the summer's sun (*King Henry V*, 1.2.88) that:

> In his handling of Erasmus's epistle on marriage, Shakespeare *might simply be said to have* combined a number of Erasmus' classroom exercises . . . into a sustained bravura performance. (Nicholson, 193, emphasis added)

Might simply be said to have? Conspicuously? Which is it? How tenuous grow the tenets of philosophy! An expert on letter writing as renowned as Erasmus would no doubt be able to explain what would possess a man to write to a non-relative to impel him to marry. The letter is actually neither an even-handed treatment of marriage and celibacy nor, *a fortiori,* is it a pattern for other forms of literature such as sonnets. An authentic presentation would at least have included the advisee's reply. That's why our greatest philosopher wrote *Dialogues*—not monologues. This leads us to ask in what sense Shakespeare might have been influenced under the circumstances. Nicholson's claim in brief runs this way: Erasmus, in making the case for matrimony, argues that it has the inestimable merit of leading to the next generation. Shakespeare picks up on this theme in focusing on "increase," but what actually increases is not the human population but the *Sonnets* themselves.

> For the products of 16th-century training, the rhetorical force of the image may well have inhered in its very conventionality, its familiar—indeed generic—power. For as Erasmus suggests about the epistolary form itself, familiarity is the mother of *rhetorical inventiveness,* and variety is the engine of continuity: the rose that blooms in Sonnet 1 begets the mirror image reflected in Sonnet 3, the perfume distilled in Sonnet 5, the musical notes that sound in Sonnet 8, the seal impressed in Sonnet 11, the counterfeit painted in Sonnet 16, while the argument these figures illustrate remains—like the genealogical succession

> it is meant to inspire—constant. (Nicholson, 193, emphases added)

Put plainly, the first phalanx of *Sonnets* are, at bottom, not about Shakespeare's friend; they are about themselves. They "increase" (See, *Sonnet* 1, l.1) like words on a Scrabble board. They enact and celebrate their prolificacy. For Nicholson, the poet seems to be no more than an organ exploited by the *Sonnets* to reproduce, a fitting theme for a sci-fi horror film. Needless to say, the colorful trope of the self-referential and mimetic proclivities of the procreative *Sonnets* is not founded on any contemporaneous documents or historical facts. It is a mere hypothesis, and, in light of our review of the role of sonnets in the plays, a jarring one, flying in the face of the texts. Granted, Erasmus did pen a tedious essay in epistolary form designed to show the desirability of marriage to a somewhat supercilious youth. And that essay may have found its way into the curricula of some English grammar schools in the 16th century. But these points hardly justify a conclusion of wholesale influence. For in the first place, absent *petitio principii*, there is no reason to suppose that Shakespeare ever read the epistle in question. Second, what possible motive would there have been for Shakespeare in his maturity to compose and circulate amongst his sophisticated friends unpublished pleadings in favor of marriage, a theme regarded by Erasmus as suitable for wayward or abstemious schoolboys?

Note that the letter of Erasmus in question is not an actual epistle, as is, *e.g.*, his missive to Martin Luther of May 1519. (*Collected Works*, Vol. 76; "De Libero Arbitrio," University of Toronto Press, 1999) The latter was one of a number of communiqués produced by him and sent to theological colleagues, including Professor Doctor Luther at the University of Wittenberg. On Nicholson's theory the *Sonnets*

are pretended letters. But we saw in our inspection of the plays that Shakespeare's characters, bound like Laocoon in amative complexities, produce actual sonnets—or hope to—and post them to their beloveds. Whence, then Nicholson's invitation to pure didacticism? As we confront Shakespeare's procreation *Sonnets* circa 1609, can we be reasonably certain that, like the model epistle of Erasmus in *De Conscribendis Epistolis*, they were not actual envois meant for the eyes of flesh and blood persons? Is it indeed "conspicuous" (*i.e.*, fairly self-evident) that the first fourteen *Sonnets* must be self-replicating mannequins rather than condign remonstrations? After all, it is often lamented that Shakespeare, the world's flagship writer, left us no letters. Are they not hiding in plain sight?

Of course, if Nicholson's thesis is correct, the letter to the young man in *De Conscribendis Epistolis* and Shakespeare's early *Sonnets* are mere poseurs. All that's missing is the warrant for the claim. For it can hardly be denied that two compositions may resemble one another in some respects without supposing one to be derived from the other. If the influence of the Dutch theologian on our English poet on this particular point is as "conspicuous" as Nicholson avers, there would by now be a general consensus to that effect amongst serious readers. Where is that consensus?

One interesting corollary Nicholson adds is the claim that Erasmus and Shakespeare both practiced the making of "commonplaces," that is, "conventional formulas available and adaptable to any speaker, anywhere, and at any time." (Nicholson, 188) Though she is not especially generous in furnishing examples of such "commonplaces" it may be inferred that these were ordinarily little more than proverbial sayings or adages. She notes that Erasmus was "Renaissance Europe's foremost theorist and practitioner of the art of

commonplacing." (Nicholson, 188) It is added that he explains in his preface to his *Adagia* that "commonplaces acquire distinction by being '*passed around*': like 'a road . . . well polished in use and circulating', *the commonplace proves its singular merit by spreading itself as widely as possible.*" (Nicholson, 188, emphasis added)

> Commonplace marks . . . secure the value of the play-text by *not* insisting on its integrity as a complete work, or, to put it more precisely, the value of the whole depends upon the dispersal of its component parts into the hands and mouths of the multitude. (Nicholson, 188)

It is then suggested that William Shakespeare was a fellow traveler with Erasmus along the path of commonplacing as a source of value and merit in Renaissance literature. If it could be shown that Shakespeare sometimes wrote largely for the purpose of manufacturing truisms and quotable quotes this might have some plausibility, but why then did he not publish the *Sonnets* himself—or so many of his other works? The fact that he is so often quoted—more than any other writer—hardly entails that it was ever his principal wish to be so. To hunt after mere fame may be a desideratum for a puppet like the King of Navarre, not for the genius who created him. (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 1.1.1-7) Nothing could be more alien to Shakespeare than such vulgarity. There is no evidence he was ever a scribe or schoolmaster, or sought to make a penny as a purveyor of primers. The "mouths of the multitude" are always displayed by him with unconcealed revulsion. It will be recalled that what is "common" is a term of reproach in *Hamlet*. (1.2.73) In fact, it is a reproach in the *Sonnets* themselves.

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

Want nothing that the thought of hearts can mend:

All tongues, the voice of souls, give thee that due,

Utt’ring bare truth, even so as foes commend.

Thy outward thus with outward praise is crowned,

But those same tongues that give thee so thine own

In other accents do this praise confound

By seeing farther than the eye hath shown.

They look into the beauty of thy mind,

And that, in guess, they measure by thy deeds.

Then, churl, their thoughts, although their eyes were kind,

To thy fair flower add the rank smell of weeds:

But why thy odour matcheth not thy show,

The soil is this, that thou dost common grow. (69)

“Passed around” evokes nothing more directly than the kissing scene in *Troilus and Cressida* in which Troilus’s celestial beloved permits herself to be passed about amongst the salacious Greeks for introductory busses like a bottle of beer in boot camp. (Gontar, 107) As for the “road well polished in use and circulating,” that is precisely the denigrating trope by which Doll Tearsheet is ridiculed by Prince Hal and Poins:

PRINCE HENRY

This Doll Tearsheet should be some road.

POINS

> I warrant you, as common as the way between St. Albans and London.
>
> (*King Henry IV*, Part Two, 2.2. 116-117)

The difficulty is candidly granted by Nicholson:

> To a degree that unsettles many of our assumptions about their unique value, these poems invoke commonplacing as the guarantor of textual and personal—virtue; nonetheless . . . They also identify the commonplace as the natural habitation of the bawd, the pimp, and the whore.
>
> [O]n the one side, commonality stands as the ultimate proof of value; on the other, commonness threatens to dissolve value into a promiscuous lack of distinction. (Nicholson, 189-190)

To resolve this seeming paradox, let us turn to the medieval philosophers, who took an interest in the effects of equivocation on logic. Their maxim was, “When you meet a contradiction, make a distinction.” Let’s consider an example. Where “commonness” means that in the long experience of time humanity has learned the best policy is to treat one’s neighbor as we would wish to be treated, we have an insight widely adopted as the distilled wisdom of the ages. It is “common” in the sense of representing a universal ideal which has stood the test of time and cultural differences. The fundamental truth of human life is “common” in the sense that it is accessible to all persons everywhere. In that limited sense, the “common” is consonant with virtue. Yet our kind is notorious for including many who fail to rise to the level of decency, probity and self-understanding. Such persons may pay lip service to the ideal but in the rough and tumble of the quotidian round fail in its application. That failure is

common in practice. Hence, insofar as we refer to the recognized virtues of our race, “common” is consistent with what may be commended; where, to the contrary, “common” denotes the unvarnished aspects of social intercourse it is a reference of base import.

We can see, therefore, that the practice of “commonplacing,” meaning the highlighting of certain locutions as “conventional formulas available and adaptable to any speaker, anywhere, anytime,” is the gross manufacturing of slogans, jingles and platitudes. It is public relations and commercial advertising. Such a business would well qualify for William James’ epithet “the perfection of rottenness.” The most that such assemblages of words can aspire to is the status of a cliché, a verbal coin so frequently traded as to be barren of import. The idea that goodness could be extracted from literature in the form of one-liners is to cheapen art and degrade education, in fact a not “uncommon” occurrence. The work of Shakespeare, on the other hand, stands as a lonely bulwark against such corruption of language and thought.

The nadir of this “reworking” of the epistle of Erasmus is Nicholson’s idea that “increase” in the fictive procreation *Sonnets* refers symbolically to the regeneration not of the poet’s beloved but of the *Sonnets* themselves, which have the potential to spread like kudzu across the literary landscape. The unfortunate Droeshout portrait of “Shakespeare” is another instance of this exuberant tendency (Gontar, 243 ff.). With reference to *Sonnet* 11, she writes: The injunction with which the sonnet ends, “to print more, not let that copy die,” reminds the youth that “copy,” like its Latin antecedent *copia*, refers both to the original from which further iterations are derived and to the successive versions which are perfectly preserved in one another,” all tending to an “ongoing, repetitive dialogue.” (Nicholson, 194-195) The

Sonnets follow their own linguistic dialectic; the "youth" addressed is a mere symbol. What we are left with then is a 21st century version of what FH Bradley famously called an "unearthly ballet of bloodless categories," a reductio ad absurdum of certain systems of neo-Hegelian philosophy. At this point human beings take a back seat; fecundating abstractions rule the roost.

Part of the reason the subjective turn is taken is that on the standard Shakespearean biography there is no "objective correlative" in the sense of a factual narrative fitting the trope of "increase." Who is this speaker? What is his relation with the addressee? What does he gain if the young man does get some girl with child? Since the *prima facie* narrative fails to cohere with any factual background of William of Stratford we have decided to cut the *Sonnets* loose, letting them float away into a world of pure imagination, a world in which poetry writes itself. In the words of Gertrude Stein describing Los Angeles, "there is no there there." Note, however, that some have had the audacity to preserve the *Sonnet's* sense by proposing a radical shift in paradigm. Suppose, for example, that the regal voice we hear in these everlasting verses is that of a peer, a displaced monarch addressing his son, gotten of the reigning Queen, Elizabeth Tudor (beauty's rose). We may not like it, but lo and behold, all of the pieces fall neatly into place. The young man, son of the poet/narrator and the Queen, is urged to solve the nightmare of England's succession by getting a son who will one day continue the family dynasty as king. That is why there is a premium set on "increase." How different is the complacent friend in Erasmus's letter, who must be persuaded to end his chastity to take up the role of *pater familias*. There is absolutely nothing in the procreative *Sonnets* suggesting that Shakespeare's youth is chaste. On the contrary, when he has "traffic with himself alone," he is obviously doing what members of the male sex always do when

trying to find a substitute for sexual intercourse. There is nothing “chaste” about that. Have another look.

> From fairest [pun on family name] creatures we desire increase [a son]
>
> That thereby beauty’s rose [Elizabeth Tudor, Tudor Rose] might never die,
>
> But as the riper [the aging poet] should by time decease,
>
> His tender heir [grandchild] might bear his memory [take the throne].
>
> But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes [lascivious]
>
> Feed’st thy light’s flame with self substantial fuel [self-arousal],
>
> Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel [addicted to self gratification];
>
> Thou that art now the world’s fresh ornament
>
> And only herald to the gaudy spring [pleasing to ladies]
>
> Within thy own bud [hand, penis] buriest thy content [sex, seed]
>
> And, tender churl, mak’st waste in niggarding. [squandering instead of planting]
>
> Pity the world or else this glutton be,
>
> To eat the world’s due by the grave and thee. [onanism is self-destructive].

Contrary to Nicholson, the most natural and accessible reading of *Sonnet* 1 is prudently literal; “increase” refers to the

male heir who should inherit not merely the young man's personal attributes but the Crown as well. The notion that the first 14 *Sonnets* are really about the growth of an indefinite number of like verses is gratuitous and senseless, particularly when we have an objective signification ready-to-hand. And when we hear from the advocate herself that the case she presents is entirely a function of preconceived ideas, and that the *Sonnets following* the first 14 completely depart from the model we have been considering, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that what we have been presented with is a house of cards that topples at the slightest breath.

> [I]t must be admitted that reading the Sonnets in this fashion—partially and selectively, with *one's own rhetorical agenda in mind*—is the only way to maintain the impression that Shakespeare wholeheartedly embraces the poetics of the commonplace book. For if we read past the opening sonnets to the fair youth, the poet's faith in the virtues of abundance and accessibility undergoes a series of stressful trials: the incursion of his mistress into His relationship with the fair youth, followed by the competitive advances of the rival poet, precipitates a yearning for a more proprietary model of erotic and literary value. (Nicholson, 196, emphasis added)

III. De Conscribendis Epistolis

As the present undertaking involves a contested matter, we may not be judged uncharitable or ungrateful to observe that to comment extensively on a particular work, claiming that another by a later writer is a restatement of it, without placing before the reader those portions of both works which support that comparative thesis, is at best an inconvenience, and may lead some to conclude that the most vital and essential evidence for the claim has been deliberately left

out. In fact, the copiously cited epistle isn't even included in Nicholson's "Select Bibliography" and neither is the edition of Shakespeare identified from which quotations are made. (Nicholson, 202-203) To bring forth a scholarly essay to persuade us that the first 14 *Sonnets* are nothing more than a "re-working" of a section of *De Conscribendis Epistolis* without a detailed exposition of the latter is to concede failure at the outset, and implies a curious willingness to waste the reader's time. For all Nicholson's fervor the epistle of Erasmus is entirely missing from her article. And it goes without saying that this lacuna has a direct bearing on the "conspicuousness" of the view that Shakespeare's first 14 Sonnets are little more than restatements of that epistle. When we repair to the omitted manuscript we find it to be of such a wholly different character as to be incommensurate with the drama underlying the *Sonnets*. A plain reading of Erasmus's epistle is enough to convince anyone it had zero impact on Shakespeare. When that silly copybook lesson is put away we are free to return to the procreative *Sonnets* to try to discern in the spirit of realism and objectivity the role they played in the succession dilemma in Elizabethan England about which so much has been written.

1. De Conscribendis Epistolis: Availability

Those interested in consulting an English translation of this letter may find it in: Desiderius Erasmus, *Literary and Educational Writings*, JH Sowards, ed., C. Fontazzi, trans., Vol. 3, University of Toronto Press, 1985, pp. 129-145. The pertinent chapter is titled, "On The Writing of Letters," and the section is #47: An example of a letter of persuasion."

What follows are comments on this letter as it pertains to the claim it was adapted by Shakespeare in the *Sonnets*.

2. Age of Correspondents

The letter of Erasmus is couched in expressions of parity. The writer and the man counseled are coevals (“my beloved kinsman,” 129). Their long friendship “began almost from the cradle.” The recipient has very often advised the sender, who says he always followed those recommendations. In the *Sonnets*, on the other hand, the avuncular poet is substantially older than his comrade. (See, *e.g.*, 37, 71, 74) There is no evidence this young man ever presumed to advise Shakespeare and his voice is never heard. But we do hear the retort of the address in Erasmus’s epistle.

3. Relation of Personages to One Another

Erasmus’s parties are friends. There is no sign of emotionality, stress, intensity of feeling or concern that would imply a relationship more effectively grounded in consanguineous bonds or close dealings. In the *Sonnets* the poet is obviously involved with his interlocutor in an intimate bond of shared experiences and feelings. All manner of tropes are used to convey a connection of extraordinary profundity, intensity and impact. What happens to the advisee affects the poet directly. It matters to him personally and his own interests are at stake.

4. Marriage v. Reproduction

In the Erasmus epistle the addressee is being urged to set aside mere compunctions and an implied squeamishness over sexual relations, and to accept matrimony as his mode of life. “[R]enounce the single state. Surrender yourself to holy wedlock.” (129-130) In the procreative *Sonnets* to the contrary

we encounter not a single mention of “marriage” (though *Sonnet* 8 celebrates the harmony of “sire, child and happy mother”); it is the getting of a son that matters. For Erasmus, reproduction is but a side effect of the ideal condition: matrimony, the ideal state of “man.” Matrimony commends itself for a number of reasons, including the blessings of companionship. Reproduction is but one of those advantages. For the poet of the early *Sonnets*, however, what is earnestly desired is a son. Think King Henry VIII: marriage is just a means to that end.

> Lo, in the orient, when the gracious light
>
> Lifts up his burning head, each under eye
>
> Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,
>
> Serving with looks his sacred majesty.
>
> And having climbed the steep-up heavenly hill,
>
> Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
>
> Yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
>
> Attending on his golden pilgrimage,
>
> But when from highmost pitch, with weary car,
>
> Like feeble age he reeleth from the day,
>
> The eyes, fore duteous, now converted are
>
> From his low tract and look another way:
>
> So thou, thyself outgoing in thy noon,
>
> Unlooked on diest unless thou get a son. (7)

The central metaphors here are monarchy and the sun, with an

obvious pun on “son.” Look at the words “majesty” and “duteous.” These are not terms to be taken lightly. If read literally, the young man addressed is like the sun, a monarch above all things. The poet is the monarch who preceded him, whether in mere right or fact not being stated. The young king is urged to get a son to succeed him. Surely this plain reading still repays consideration, far more so than one which dwells on magically self-replicating verses.

Erasmus’s untitled epistle is different, basically a thesis which might have been labeled “Against Celibacy.” Yet it should not be forgotten that, as Nicholson points out herself, it was composed not with the intention of actually promoting marriage and condemning those who scant it; the purpose of the letter is to serve as a model of eristic composition, an exercise in *rhetoric* for grammar school *students* learning to *write**Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*, *New English Review Press, 2013.*