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# REVIEWS

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Helen Vendler. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997. 672p. and CD recording.

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*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* investigates what Helen Vendler finds aesthetically most provocative in each individual Shakespeare sonnet as a “writer’s project invented to amuse and challenge his own capacity for inventing artworks” (4). *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* is comprised of a single introductory chapter outlining Vendler’s critical perspective and 153 individual “sonnet-commentaries” (sonnets 153 and 154 appear together in one essay). Her reason for employing such a format is to restore the “comprehension of the internal logic and ‘old finery’ of Elizabethan lyric” which has disappeared almost completely from today’s examinations of the sonnet (8). The value of Vendler’s book is not only that it can help readers better understand how to approach the language of Shakespeare’s sonnets, but also that it will help them uncover evidential — or textual — clues in a clearer, more deliberate fashion, leading them to a greater appreciation of the power and permutations of language manipulated by a poet intent upon expressing the “inner life” of a speaker.

Envisioning this book as a supplement rather than a definitive examination of the sonnets, Vendler provides fresh and unexpected interpretations of the sonnets based on clear textual evidence rather than through a dominant theoretical perspective. Vendler mines linguistic strategies directly from Shakespeare’s compositional acts and constructs upon them an interpretation of the poet’s duty “to create aesthetically convincing representations of feelings felt and thoughts thought” (16). For example, she dismisses charges of misogyny in Shakespeare’s sonnets by pointing out that if the speaker of the sonnets is “tormented by his self-enslavement to a flagrantly unfaithful mistress, we can scarcely expect from him at the moment, a judiciousness about women” (17). Such a judiciousness would violate the poet’s duty to represent accurately the “inner life” of his speaker. Vendler concentrates instead upon the poet’s ability to convey accurately the speaker’s “realness” (misery, torment, joy, wonder, or exuberance) to the listener/reader within a mere fourteen lines. She points out that it is in the “simultaneous marshalling of temporal continuity, logical discreteness, and psychological modeling that

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* surpass those of other sonneteers. His enormous power [orders] intellectually recalcitrant materials into lyrically convincing schemes" (168). Vendler asserts that Shakespeare, as sonneteer, was seeking as many ways as possible to manipulate the sonnet form already mastered by others. His orchestration of it results in vignettes, musings, and one-sided conversations with imagined listeners which do not reveal an extended hidden narrative or meaning but do "comprise a virtual anthology of lyric possibility — in the poet's choice of subgenres, in arrangements of words, in tone, in dramatic modeling of the inner life, [and] in speech acts" (12). She argues convincingly that Shakespeare employs these multiple compositional strategies (temporal, emotional, semantic, conceptual, philosophical, perceptual, and dramatic) to represent a "motivated change in feeling in the speaker" (23) as he navigates his relationships with the Young Man and the Dark Mistress.

Vendler's practice of fronting each commentary with its sonnet, in both the 1609 Quarto and modernized versions, invites her own readers to participate in her exploration of the sonnets. Unlike most critical treatises where the poems appear as a block in the front of the text followed by an analysis, here each sonnet and its analysis appear together. Because many of the sonnets are printed on the right-hand page, the pause for page-turning before moving into the analysis allowed time to speculate upon what "key words," "defective key words," and "couplet ties" Vendler might be concentrating on. Once I became familiar with her method of analysis, I could formulate my own interpretation and check my findings against hers. In this way, the book encourages readers to try harder with each successive sonnet to locate each fragment of meaning from words with multiple or hidden meanings, or words embedded within others.

If a fault occurs with Vendler's investigation, it would be that which plagues any critic who attempts to extend a single reading to one hundred percent of an author's body of work. She occasionally forces a sonnet to "fit" her analytical framework, resulting in an unconvincing commentary and troublesome connections (i.e., orthographic ties: *heaven/Eave/Eve/deceived*; anagrammatic ties: *war/drawn/inward/outward/flowers*; effects of sound: *rage/wrackful*; chiastic ties: *since/how:how/when*; homophones: *morel/mar, steel/still*; and etymological resemblances: *sing/single or sun/delights*). Fortunately, this happens only occasionally and, for the most part, Vendler is able to provide credible evidence for her interesting and, frequently, unexpected interpretations — particularly for those sonnets extolled as Shakespeare's ten or fifteen best.

Believing that actors often do not spend enough time studying the sonnets to understand them and read them appropriately, Vendler chose to record selected

sonnets herself. This CD recording, bound into the back cover of the book, provides a valuable tool in helping readers fully appreciate the textual and acoustical clues — the *allure de la phrase* — of Vendler's interpretation (33). *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* is not intended to be read straight through nor is it intended for the novice. It is intended for readers already familiar with the sonnets, although those who aren't but do keep a lexical annotated edition of the sonnets nearby should do fine. Readers should also have access to a good glossary of poetic terms as Vendler, author of eight other books on poetry, uses critical terms generally unfamiliar to those not frequently engaged in the analysis of lyric forms. ♦