

# **Hidden, Game-like Aspects of Shakespeare's Sonnets**

**Roy Neil GRAVES**

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### Abstract

Shakespeare's 154 Sonnets, which appeared under mysterious circumstances in London in 1609 in a small-format Quarto volume (Q), have aroused nearly endless discussion for four centuries. Almost every aspect of the texts has generated uncertainty and controversy. Many sensible critics have tried to read the Sonnets seriously as expressive lyrics that partly reveal Shakespeare as a person and hint at his odd relationships with a handsome young male friend, a Dark Lady or "perverse mistress," and perhaps even a "rival poet" vying for the attention of his male friend—who might have been his only known patron Henry Wriothesley, the third earl of Southampton. The Sonnets as 154 visible texts in Q have many formal and typographical oddities and often show complex semantic and syntactic ambiguities including puns, which Shakespeare the writer always loved to use; though many of the sonnets are ostensibly serious, some are overtly playful, with puns on "Will and his will" and insistent inversions of conventional Petrarchan conceits. Editors often comment on these eccentric elements while trying at the same time to regularize the texts and construe the poems so that they convey substantive meanings. Quite a few of the poems have become famous, but a large number of the Sonnets are difficult, and some seem not to be very good poems. Why the Sonnets as a whole are not better poems than they are is one of the mysteries of the Quarto.

My own discoveries since 1979 have led me to take a unique view of the texts, reading them essentially as parts of a playful cycle grounded in wit, a cycle that the poet aimed at a private audience, a coterie of in-group readers. Uniquely and astoundingly, I have found that the 154 visible sonnets in Q hide *another* set of 154 unrhymed, sonnet-length poems that are even more riddle-like than the visible texts; these hidden poems—which I call the Lost Sonnets or Runes (an old generic term meaning "mysterious inscriptions")—use the same lines that the visible poems do, but the Runes use the Q lines in different, systematic combinations that are controlled by sequence and parallelism in the cycle and by an elaborate numeric scheme that is based on the "numbers" of the sonnet form itself, numbers that essentially amplify the equation  $11 \times 14 =$

154." Until my findings, scholars had no reason to think that 154 (the number of visible texts in Q) was anything more than an incidental or accidental number; my arguments, by contrast, begin with the fact that 154 is a carefully chosen number because it represents the *most syllables a regular sonnet can have*—fourteen lines, each with eleven syllables (counting the "feminine ending" that is always a possibility in an iambic pentameter line). Thus the whole Q structure, built of 154 functional units, embeds the idea of a jam-packed Megasonnet, with each "number" or text in the cycle standing, in effect, for one "syllable" of the entire utterance.

To begin reconstructing the 154 hidden Runes, one must first imagine the whole visible cycle to be built like a sonnet-shaped numbers box, a box that includes the numbers 1-154; in this structure, the first column (Set I) contains the vertically arranged numbers 1-14, the second column (Set II) contains numbers 15-28, the third (Set III), 29-42—and so on through a total of eleven sets comprising a total of 154 numbers, each number representing one visible sonnet, each of which has a numeric heading. This authorized Megasonnet plan is the core of the hidden structure in the Q cycle.

As a next step in understanding Shakespeare's hidden plan, a modern reader/player (an awkward term that I have come to use) takes each of the eleven *sets* in the Megasonnet scheme and imagines that set, with its 14 numbers, hand-written or printed, arranged on a large folio-sized leaf or spread. Doing this, one can first envision fourteen poems in the poet's minuscule hand (the size of the script in the *Thomas More* fragment, expertly identified as Shakespeare's own handwriting), with the 14 poems arranged on the leaf in four horizontal rows comprising, respectively, 4-4-4-2 poems and thus mimicking, on the whole spread or leaf, the sonnet shape with its three quatrains and closing couplet. In such an arrangement, one can read not only the fourteen visible sonnets that comprise each set, each read in a conventional "down-the-page" manner; one can also read "across" the spread to discover 14 "hidden" poems, the Runes: To read these hidden poems, a reader/player links first lines with first (to create the first hidden sonnet or "rune" in the set) and then links second lines with second (to create Rune 2), third lines with third (to create Rune 3), and so on until 14 hidden poems emerge from the set spreads. *Eleven* such sets, each housing 14 hidden poems, generate the 154 Runes or Lost Sonnets, each of which can be reassembled, edited, and paraphrased as a meaningful, game-like poem that is playful, ambiguous, and challenging. These 154 reassembled poems, the Runes, bear the marks of authorization and are too full of wit and sense to be my own fabrications. An artfully ingenious poet who was writing in an era that valued sprezzatura (or "suppressed design") in art, Shakespeare could have used this "set" arrangement in the process of composition, painstakingly adding each line on the spread or leaf so that it would fit meaningfully into a visible ("vertical") sonnet text and, concurrently, would add incrementally to a hidden ("horizontal") text, also 14 lines long.

Given the complexity of the rhyme scheme in the visible Sonnets, the Runes are necessarily unrhymed. One can thus call them blank verse sonnets. They often have the "feel" of sonnets, with a sense of completion and focus, but they do not strictly respect any patterns of quatrain, sestet, octave, or closing couplet. For them to do so would have been an impossible demand on the author during the dual-composition process that generated them.

Any reader/player who is trying to reconstruct the hidden poems encounters a special problem with Sonnet 99, the opening text in Set VIII, because number 99 has 15 lines! Trial-and-error study has convinced me that the poet intends the reader/player to "use" *either* lines 99.1-14 or lines 99.2-15 in the process of recomposing the hidden texts in Set VIII; by using lines 99.1-14 and omitting line 99.15, the reader/player sees a set of "A" variants emerge; using lines 99.2-15 (and omitting line 99.1) generates a set of "B" variants. Runes 99A-112A and Runes 99B-112B (as I label them) vary by only one line, but in each case that line is *the first one* in the hidden text, thereby setting the poem off in a certain logical or dramatic direction that varies if the first line is changed. My conclusion is that, by making Sonnet 99 a super-numeric text, Will wanted to tease his reader/players, members of his private audience, with a special challenge at this point somewhat late in the cycle, when a reader/player thinks that he (or she?) has got the scheme totally figured out. The extra line in 99 (and in Set VIII) also would have served as a special challenge to the writer himself, since in this set he had to create *three* overlaid sets of meaningful texts at once rather than just two concurrent sets, his usual pattern in the other ten sets in Q.

Given our limited time in this lecture, Runes 1 and 65 can serve to illustrate the typical nature of the hidden poems. Each presents some problems but conveys too much sense and wit to be accidental.

Collectively these 154 poems invite us to reconsider and perhaps reinterpret long-discussed aspects of the Sonnets. For example, we can now reinvestigate what Will might have meant by the Perverse Mistress, recognizing for the first time that that character might be a figurative conceit for the writing project itself, which involved (and surely must have seduced) both the poet and his handsome friend and was a medial link between them, creating a triangular relationship; similarly, we can now deduce that the so-called Rival Poet might—in a playful, figurative sense—be Will himself, as author of the hidden poems; this speculation makes sense because the Runes effectively vie with the Sonnets for the attention of the reader (and of the handsome friend), and the Runes also probably tended to detract from the apparent skill of the writer of the Sonnets because composing the hidden poems made it harder for Shakespeare to keep the Sonnets coherent and graceful. More generally, the Runes also encourage us to read the Sonnets and the semantic components of all their lines more playfully, more licentiously, than we have been accustomed to doing.

Although I have explained my findings in numerous scholarly contexts since 1979, with various American media including *The Boston Globe* taking note of my arguments, mainstream Shakespeareans have not collectively accepted the reality of the Lost Sonnets. Still, any reader who wants to take the considerable time that careful evaluation of my arguments would require can go to my web site titled *Shakespeare's Lost Sonnets*, at <[www.utm.edu/staff/ngraves/shakespeare](http://www.utm.edu/staff/ngraves/shakespeare)>, and can make an empirical judgment based on extensive amplifications of all the hidden texts, with contextual materials including edited texts, paraphrases, and clarifying comments that offer ways to approach these knotty texts. I personally acknowledge the complexity of the project and admit my own difficulties in trying to resolve the new questions that it raises, questions now overlaid on many old ones that readers and scholars have always had about the Sonnets. But one truth is certain: Any reader who begins to think that Q might hide a complex system of lost wit and sub-textual meaning will never be able to reread the 154 visible Sonnets again without suspecting that somehow the poet, in crafting them to be so puzzling and tantalizing, has been playing an ingenious game with an unsuspecting reading public for the last four centuries.

Whether or not a reader accepts my arguments as valid, these texts are an inexhaustible source for those who appreciate literary complexity and open-ended mysteries.

**Keywords:**

A Sequence of Sonnet-like Poems Hidden behind Shakespeare's Sonnets, Coterie

In 1609, at a time in the Renaissance when writing sonnet cycles was popular in England, William Shakespeare's Sonnets appeared in London under mysterious circumstances in a small book, the 1609 Quarto. Scholars refer to this book as Q, an abbreviation for "Quarto." (A quarto is a fairly small book that results when large sheets of paper are folded into one-fourth their original size.) The printing agent for the Q project was named Thomas Thorpe, a "small-time entrepreneur" who "did not have a shop of his own"; Thorpe, not Shakespeare, signed the oddly worded dedication of Q with the initials "T.T." (Booth 543). Scholars generally agree on Thorpe's identity but can only speculate about his relationship to Shakespeare or his exact role in bringing out the Sonnets. Of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets in Q, only two had appeared earlier, in 1599, in differently worded forms from the versions in Q; all the rest occur *only* in Q (Booth 545). For four hundred years, Shakespeare's Sonnets have fascinated the world, often being taken out of context and read individually, sometimes as love poems. Today I want to look at the whole Q

project and suggest a non-traditional view that emphasizes the hidden wit and playfulness—and the ingenious craftsmanship—in this cycle of 154 sonnet texts.

Although Shakespeare's Sonnets include some of the most famous poems ever written in English, the volume has generated nearly endless disagreement and confusion among scholars and general readers. Some of the poems seem to be deeply felt lyrics that suggest the poet's personal emotional involvement. In some ways they seem like love poems. But together the Sonnets do not tell a clear personal story, and they seem to be carefully designed to leave many predictable questions unanswered. The general, traditional interpretation, in summary, is that the Sonnets express the poet's deep friendship and perhaps even romantic love for an attractive younger man, one whom the speaker encourages in the early poems to marry and have children; besides this male friend, the other major character who is clearly developed in Q (beside the poet, the speaker or persona or "voice" of the Sonnets) is the so-called Dark Lady or Perverse Mistress, who appears mainly in the last twenty-eight poems or so. This figure is a woman who seems to be involved in some kind of triangular relationship with both the poet and his handsome friend. Additionally, a few of the sonnets imply the presence of a "rival poet," someone also seeking the favor of the friend, just as the poet does, by writing verses to him. Many of the poems address the male friend or speak of the Dark Lady in tones of affection, sometimes intense. Sonnet 20, for example, addresses the beautiful male friend as "the Master Mistress of my passion," while 147 opens, "My love is as a fever, longing still" and seems to refer to the mistress. In other texts, the poet/speaker seems frustrated and impatient because he is laboring alone, a writer isolated from the friend's presence or dissatisfied with and conflicted over the mistress, who does not have the ideal qualities of a Renaissance beauty.

Though some of the poems are seriously philosophical and seem to show honest emotion, others are playful in tone; Sonnets 135 and 136, for example, include repeated plays and puns on the name "Will," heightened in Q with capitalization and italic type. And the last 28 poems in the cycle are ironic in ways that scholars call "anti-Petrarchan" because they invert the usual conventions of the love cycle, established by the Italian poet Petrarch, by depicting Shakespeare's "Mistress" as earthy and unattractive, not beautiful and enticing. Many critics have wondered whether the Sonnets are sincere, or whether they merely create an interesting romantic fiction with artfully contrived tension and drama. Certainly the poet seems intent on keeping his personal life mostly hidden in the texts.

In addition to endless speculation about the identities of the handsome friend, the Dark Lady, and the rival poet—and guesses about the poet's relationships to these figures—readers over the centuries have puzzled over other questions: Did Shakespeare authorize the publication of the Sonnets, or did Thorpe somehow steal the manuscript to benefit himself? Why are some of the poems so difficult, and why are some really not very clear or well written? Why is the printing

in Q so careless? Why do some of the texts have formal irregularities that deviate from the usual sonnet patterns? Why does the series of texts seem so disorganized and so lacking in an overall purpose, narrative, or thematic focus? Why would a married man write a cycle that seems to express romantic love for another man? And who were these people, the handsome friend and Dark Lady—and maybe a rival poet—if indeed they really existed at all?

I must tell you, early on, that my own views of the Sonnets are not traditional and that I tend to see the individual texts and the whole sequence as much more playful, more like games, than most Shakespeareans do. I also see them as having hidden, private meanings; because these meanings are so well hidden, I deduce that these hidden meanings were intended for close friends of the poet but not for general readers. This situation makes the poems what we would call coterie texts, texts written for a small private audience. The truth is that literary and artistic coteries were fairly common in Shakespeare's day, especially because England did not tolerate total freedom of speech and maybe just because Renaissance artists enjoyed entertaining their friends and being a part of something like a private club. I have published my theories in two articles in one of the Shakespeare journals in the United States (see Graves, articles in *Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal*, 1995 and 1997), but essentially my theories have not been supported or affirmed by any influential group of traditional scholars or critics. So you can make your own judgments after I try to explain my arguments to you.

Maybe a future generation of scholars including you yourselves can determine whether my views make enough sense and have enough evidence to be absolutely convincing.

My interest in literary coteries in the Middle Ages and Renaissance began in 1977 when I was a mature graduate student. In 1979, after I had made some original discoveries in medieval texts of what appeared to be playfully hidden, private communications that had been lost for centuries and not mentioned in literary histories, I started to study Shakespeare's Sonnets to see whether they, too, might bury some lost, game-like elements. I did this because the Sonnets have always been mysterious, and people have often discussed them as being full of riddle-like elements. The medieval models that I had partly reconstructed about 1977 seemed to be "hiding" lost messages in manuscript texts by means of four elements that writers (or scribes) could control: 1) sequence in the text, 2) parallel positioning, 3) visual emphasis (such as enlarged initial capital letters), and 4) numerological patterning. (Many early writers, including Dante and Petrarch, are known to have paid attention to numeric elements in their compositions. And we should remember that the sonnet form itself is like a "numbers box" and that "to be skilled with numbers" in the Renaissance meant to be good at managing metrical verses.)

One example of a hidden composition that I found about 1977 occurred in a medieval poem called *Pearl*, perhaps by the same poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In *Pearl*, I had

found that by linking up the sequence of line units that the medieval scribe had emphasized in the manuscript by capitalization and then reading these sequential lines as a newfound poem that was much shorter than the whole poem text, a "hidden message" came through that had previously been lost. *Pearl* is an allegory about a "lost jewel," and I concluded that the shorter, hidden poem I had found was partly what the *Pearl* poet was privately referring to, even though his general readers would not have caught his meaning.

With this medieval model in mind, I began to analyze Shakespeare's Sonnets by linking up the sequence of *first* lines in the early Sonnets, lines that have enlarged capital letters in Q. I was amazed to find that this sequence of first lines seemed to hide meaningful communication. The process of reconstructing what was hidden in the Sonnets was complicated, involving extensive trial-and-error. In brief, after a lot of experimentation, what I discovered was that Shakespeare has written his 154-poem sonnet cycle so that it hides *another* 154-poem cycle. This hidden cycle, written for a coterie of private readers and perhaps known among a limited circle in Will's day, has never been publicly discussed until 1979 when I uncovered it. It uses the same lines of poetry that a reader can see in the visible texts in Q, but the hidden cycle uses these lines in *systematically* rearranged orders and groupings. Soon I began to call these 154 hidden texts the "Lost Sonnets."

I had started my study of buried game elements in Q by thinking that maybe just the first lines of the Sonnets could be regrouped to form new (but hidden) poems, possibly even *one long poem* made up of the 154 first-lines. But what I eventually found was that not just the first lines, emphasized with initial capital letters, but in fact *all* of the lines in the Sonnets "work twice," once in a visible poem and once in a hidden poem. I also found that each hidden poem was the same length as a sonnet but was unrhymed. This hidden pattern, co-existing with the visible Sonnets, means that each line in the Q cycle has *two* different functions and contextual meanings because each line works as part of the statement of a visible sonnet and also as part of the statement in a hidden sonnet.

In a short presentation, I cannot hope to convince you that what I have found is real, but I can at least illustrate the pattern so that you may examine the evidence for yourself later if you like. My web site, titled *Shakespeare's Lost Sonnets*, lets readers explore my argument extensively and look at all the evidence for it. But you and other readers would need to remember that many other scholars would be skeptical about my argument because it sounds so complicated and because it seems so unlikely that these "hidden poems" would have been in Shakespeare's texts for 400 years, "hidden in plain sight," and not have been discovered before now.

To illustrate the pattern and get down to specifics, I'd like to start by showing you what kind of poem emerges if we read the *first* lines of the *first* fourteen poems in Q. This poem is not easy, but it is also not really any harder than many of the visible Sonnets in Q are. This hidden text



sounds a lot like an unrhymed sonnet, one in which the poet addresses a listener and encourages him—for the context suggests that the listener is male—to cheer up and to marry and have children; finally, as you will hear, the speaker reassures the listener of his own love for him. We can infer from what we hear the poet saying that his listener is reaching middle age and is being slow to make any romantic move that might lead him to marry and have children. Essentially, this hidden poem repeats the same "story" that the first fourteen visible sonnets tell. You will also notice that Shakespeare's usual pattern of double meanings or ambiguity is at work in this newly heard sequence. Let's listen to an edited version of these lines, re-punctuated in much the same way that modern editors re-punctuate the visible sonnets to make them easier for a reader to follow.

### Rune 1

(First lines, Set I: Sonnets 1-14)

|   |  |
|---|--|
| From fairest creatures we desire increase*.         | <i>increase</i> (pun): improvement, offspring (children)                   |
| When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,          |  |
| Look in thy glass*, and tell the face thou viewest, | <i>glass</i> (pun): mirror, drinking glass                                 |
| 4 "Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend*       | <i>spend</i> : pass idly, waste  |
| Those hours that with gentle work did frame*?"      | <i>frame</i> : pass constructively (ME)                                    |
| Then let not winter's ragged hand deface.           |  |
| Lo, in the orient*, when the gracious light*        | <i>orient</i> : dayspring; <i>light</i> = alight (arise from [a high] bed) |
| 8 Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?      |  |
| Is it for fear? To wet a widow's eye*?              | To make a woman cry; also a sexual pun about intercourse                   |
| For shame deny that thou bear'st love to any*!      | <i>any</i> : a joking pun on "Annie," Will's wife's name                   |
| As fast as thou shalt wane*, so fast thou grow'st   | <i>wane</i> : decline, weaken  |
| 12 When I do count the clock that tells the time.   |  |
| O, that you were yourself! But love you are.        |  |
| Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck.          |  |

I would be making a bad joke to say the lines 7-8 here make a nice little couplet for a Japanese reader, or any Asian listener: "Lo, in the Orient, when the gracious light / Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly." (In other words, "Get up in the morning, here in the East, ready to enjoy the day; don't mope around or be sad!")

More to the point, you'll notice that this reconstructed poem uses the opening line of Sonnet 12, which we are studying today in Professor Tanaka's Anglo-American cultural studies class, but that this hidden poem uses the line in a different situation (or context) from that other poem,

where it *opens* the poem. If you were to read all 14 or so of the visible opening poems in Q, you would also notice that the theme of this poem is similar to others in this set, but the exact statement is different and the poem is unrhymed. Also you note that this new poem is not just a summary of all the visible poems that it draws its lines from; it actually creates a new situation, a different scenario.

I call the hidden sonnets "runes," using an early English generic term that means "mysterious inscription" or "whispered communication." So here you have Rune 1.

You probably will not have noticed from this edited version something that you will see when you look at the original first fourteen lines from Q, arranged to create what I believe is the authorized text of the poem:

**F**rom fairest creatures we desire increase,  
**V**Vhen fortie Winters shall beſeige thy brow,  
**L**ooke in thy glaſſe and tell the face thou vieweſt,  
**V**Nchriſty louelieneſſe why doſt thou ſpend,  
**T**hoſe howers that with gentle worke did frame,  
**T**hen let not winters wragged hand deface,  
**L**oe in the Orient when the gracious light.  
**M**Vſick to heare, why bear'ſt thou muſick ſadly,  
**I**S it for feare to wet a widdowes eye,  
**F**or ſhame deny that thou bear'ſt loue to any  
**A**S faſt as thou ſhalt wane ſo faſt thou grow'ſt,  
**V**Vhen I doe count the clock that tels the time,  
**O**That you were your ſelfe, but loue you are  
**N**Ot from the ſtars do I my iudgement plucke,

Now, let me ask you what you observe in the lower right of this text, reading downward? Do you notice that, using the printed forms in Q, the poet's hidden text creates a vertical acrostic letter-string that spells out AVON? And where have you heard that word? Yes, we call Shakespeare the "Bard of Avon," using the name of the river that ran through Stratford, England, Shakespeare's home town. This striking coincidence occurs at the beginnings of lines 11-14 in the reconstructed hidden text.

One test of whether a poem makes sense or not, as you well know, is whether it can be

paraphrased—whether it can be restated in simpler language that makes sense. So let us try a paraphrase of Rune 1. The one that I have worked out uses an unauthorized title that I have supplied, one that puns on the poet's own phrase in the last line; I think that Shakespeare himself would have heard this pun: The word "knot" in the Renaissance could mean a riddle, a "knotty" or difficult poem. A "knot from the stars," then, would be a puzzle that comes to us as if out of nowhere, just as this poem seems to:

### 1. Knot from the Stars

We expect progress and improvement even from those who are most beautiful—and we hope they reproduce themselves by having children.

When the ravages of forty years attack your face and mind,

look in your mirror (or maybe the bottom of your drinking glass) and say to yourself,

“Wasteful loveliness, why do you idle away 4

the hours of your life that you once spent in graciously constructive service?”

Then don't let winter's ragged claw deface you, don't let it rip away your identity.

Look: As people with good attitudes toward life are arising at daybreak from their high beds

ready to listen to the music and enjoy life, why do you mope, melancholy and distracted? 8

Are you fearful? Are you trying to make some woman cry? Are you afraid of lovemaking?

Shame on you for denying that you love anyone at all!

However quickly you may waste away, you grow at just that rate

at any given point in time—when I'm the one who measures how things are going. 12

O, I wish you were more yourself. But really you're unchanged. You still embody love, and are beloved. I don't divine my findings or reach my conclusions from gazing at the stars. (Those are based on what I know personally about you.)

You see here how the text seems to create drama, suggesting an interaction between the speaker and his listener and also using the comments and rhetorical questions of the speaker to suggest what the listener is doing: The poet's listener and friend is depressed, avoiding people, and not taking the necessary steps to interact with others or to reproduce himself by having children. Still, the speaker loves him. The last line suggests that the speaker knows the listener personally and is not just imagining everything he is saying or making it all up. His knowledge and his affection for the listener are personal and earthly, not just "pulled from the sky."

Since our time is limited, we obviously do not have time to explore the other 153 sonnet-length texts that are hidden in Q. And I admit that this first one is somewhat easier than some of the others are. But what I want to do next is to explain to you how the Quarto system works to hide all 154 of the poet's runic compositions; if we understand this system, we are effectively

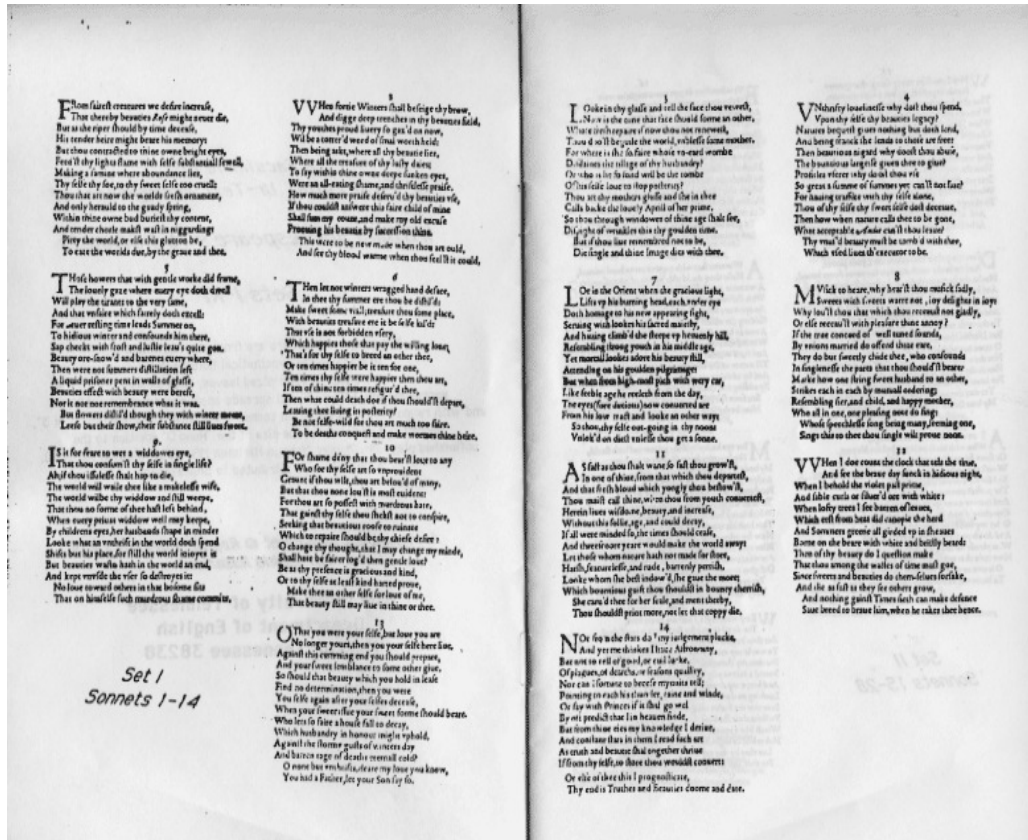
pulled into the poet's circle of private friends, now dead these four hundred years, and can reconstruct the lost texts and begin to try to read and understand them, remembering that they are somewhat like riddles and may have playful as well as serious meanings. The poet means them, I think, to be challenging games as well as meaningful poems.

First, I want you to imagine that all 154 of the visible sonnets in Q could have been arranged in the poet's mind as a numbers box that takes the shape of a Megasonnet. Each *numeral* in this box stands for one visible sonnet in Q. (The 154 Sonnets, as you know, have numeric titles.) And each vertical *column* forms a *set* of 14 sonnets. If you understand this system, you'll see that the whole system is made up of eleven 14-line sets. (I use Roman numerals to designate the sets.) Since a jam-packed sonnet—that is, one with 11 syllables per line and with “feminine” line endings—has 154 syllables, Q is secretly built like a Giant Sonnet in which each visible number is one “syllable” in its total utterance: Before my studies of the Sonnets began in 1979, scholars, I believe, always thought that the number 154 was a random or arbitrary number without significance; but its significance as the maximum number of syllables in a sonnet clearly seems to me to be more than coincidental.

### Shakespeare's Lost Megasonnet: The Organization Plan of the 1609 Quarto Texts

|    | <u>Sets</u> | <u>I.</u> | <u>II.</u> | <u>III.</u> | <u>IV.</u> | <u>V.</u> | <u>VI.</u> | <u>VII.</u> | <u>VIII.</u> | <u>IX.</u> | <u>X.</u> | <u>XI.</u> |
|----|-------------|-----------|------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------------|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| 1  | 15          | 29        | 43         | 57          | 71         | 85        | 99         | 113         | 127          | 141        |           |            |
| 2  | 16          | 30        | 44         | 58          | 72         | 86        | 100        | 114         | 128          | 142        |           |            |
| 3  | 17          | 31        | 45         | 59          | 73         | 87        | 101        | 115         | 129          | 143        |           |            |
| 4  | 18          | 32        | 46         | 60          | 74         | 88        | 102        | 116         | 130          | 144        |           |            |
| 5  | 19          | 33        | 47         | 61          | 75         | 89        | 103        | 117         | 131          | 145        |           |            |
| 6  | 20          | 34        | 48         | 62          | 76         | 90        | 104        | 118         | 132          | 146        |           |            |
| 7  | 21          | 35        | 49         | 63          | 77         | 91        | 105        | 119         | 133          | 147        |           |            |
| 8  | 22          | 36        | 50         | 64          | 78         | 92        | 106        | 120         | 134          | 148        |           |            |
| 9  | 23          | 37        | 51         | 65          | 79         | 93        | 107        | 121         | 135          | 149        |           |            |
| 10 | 24          | 38        | 52         | 66          | 80         | 94        | 108        | 122         | 136          | 150        |           |            |
| 11 | 25          | 39        | 53         | 67          | 81         | 95        | 109        | 123         | 137          | 151        |           |            |
| 12 | 26          | 40        | 54         | 68          | 82         | 96        | 110        | 124         | 138          | 152        |           |            |
| 13 | 27          | 41        | 55         | 69          | 83         | 97        | 111        | 125         | 139          | <b>153</b> |           |            |
| 14 | 28          | 42        | 56         | 70          | 84         | 98        | 112        | <b>126</b>  | 140          | <b>154</b> |           |            |

Now, I ask you to imagine *each* one of the eleven sets in this number box in an arrangement that we can illustrate by using Set I as an example:

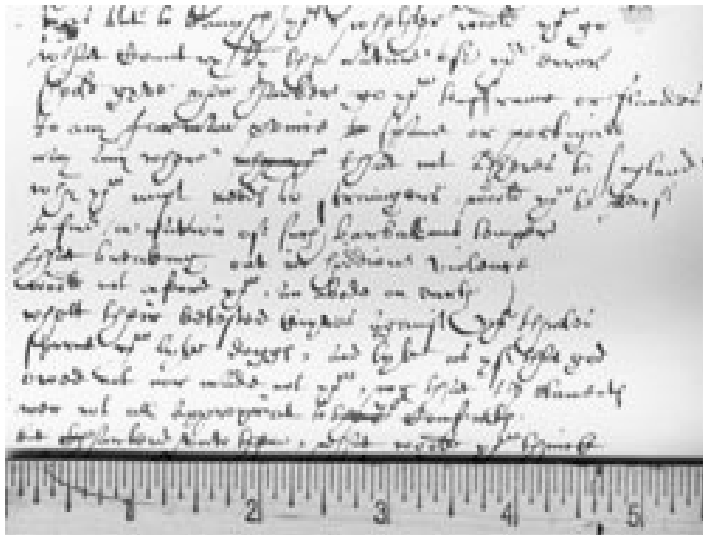


Set I  
Sonnets 1-14

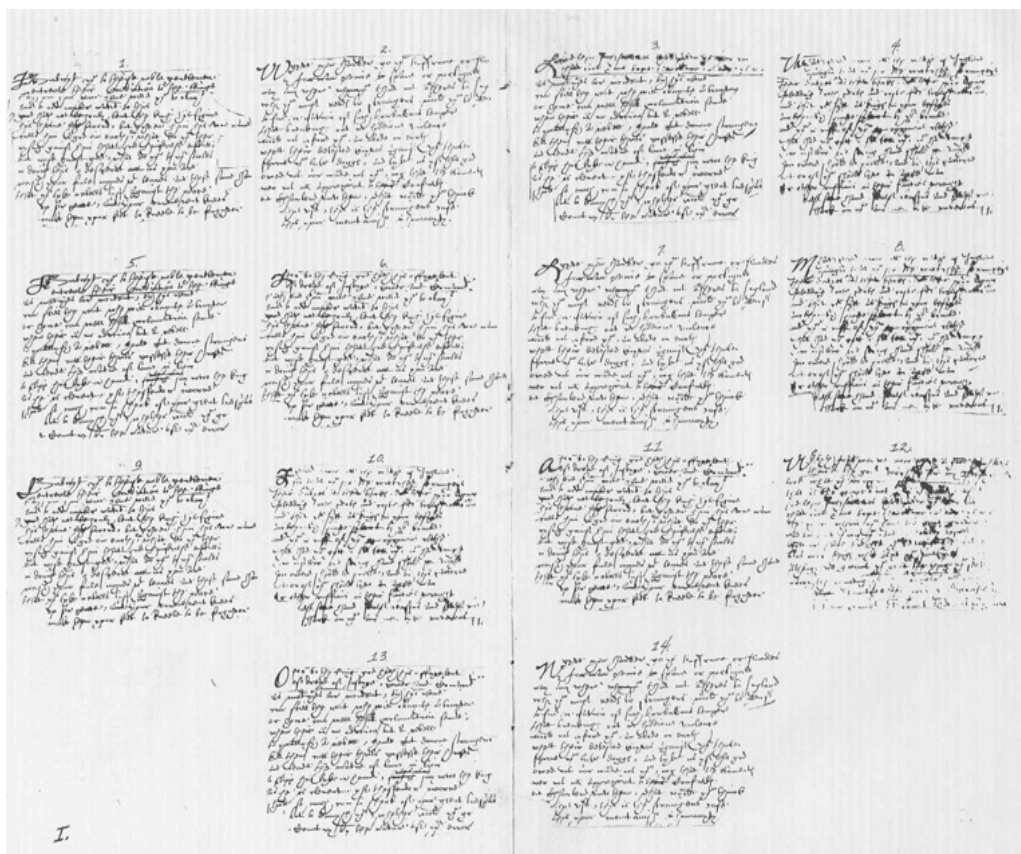
This, I believe, is the form in which Shakespeare first composed the Sonnets. These double-page leaves, which are as large as those in "folio" books, would be about the size of four sheets of modern notebook paper, perhaps 22 inches (wide) by 17 or 18 inches (high). Here you can see how this arrangement takes fourteen poems (or numbers) and sets them on the page so that they imitate the shape of the sonnet form itself, though the way that the sets imitate the sonnet form is very different from the way the Megasonnet "numbers box" mimics it. Who can tell me how *this* arrangement imitates the sonnet shape? Yes, you see that this arrangement would have divided each set into an arrangement of 4-4-4-2, mimicking the sonnet structure itself.

In the original form of the Quarto text as I have reconstructed its eleven components, the writing on these large sheets would have had to be very small. And the truth is that we do have

one bit of handwriting evidence that allows us to imagine the poet writing in a very small hand, called minuscule. For three pages of an unfinished play manuscript about the life of Sir Thomas More do exist and have been attributed by handwriting experts to Shakespeare because the writing matches known samples of Shakespeare's signature (Thompson). Here, with a ruler to show the scale, is a sample of fourteen lines from that manuscript:



Thus, devising a paste-up using such a script (and adding initial capital letters and couplet indentions), we can imagine that Shakespeare's original pages, the eleven set spreads that make up the 154 poems in Q, would each have looked something like this:



Since the *printed* version of this arrangement is readable for us and this recreation of a *handwritten* version is not, let's return to the printed form of Set I to imagine how the fourteen visible poems in this group, Sonnets 1-14, could hide another fourteen sonnet-length texts, authorized by Shakespeare and written concurrently with the visible sonnets.

Now, we've already seen how Rune 1 reappears when we string together the first lines in this set. You see that you can read along the *top* of the fourteen visible poems in the Set I spread, linking up the lines with capital letters in this series to create Rune 1. To create the other thirteen poems that are hidden on this spread, let's imagine that we start by linking all fourteen of the *second* lines together to form Rune 2. Then we link up all the *third* lines together to form Rune 3. And so on: We can proceed in this manner to recreate the fourteen poems that the poet has hidden in this set, using the same lines as those in the visible sonnets, but in different, systematic combinations.



Now we have to imagine that we can carry out the same operation with Sets II, III, IV, V, and so on, until we have uncovered all 154 of the lost or hidden sonnets in Q, the Runes, as I call them. You can see that if Shakespeare actually did write the *hidden* sonnets while he was composing the *visible* sonnets, he could have done it, laboriously, while working on one of the large set spreads or leaves. It would have been tedious, painstaking work. Let's go back and look at the spread for Set I to imagine the process. How do you think he could have done it? It seems likely that Shakespeare started by writing Sonnet 1 and then by writing the first lines of Sonnets 2-14. As he added each new line, starting with the second line of Sonnet 2, he would have had to test that line to make sure that it advanced the idea of both the vertical and the horizontal text. (In effect, he is creating a grid, as if he were weaving a rug.) As he moved farther and farther into the 28 poems that make up a given set and got more and more of the poems on the page finished, the task would have become harder and harder. You can see why some of my critics do not think it would have been possible. But we know that Shakespeare was a genius, not limited in his tasks the way most of us ordinary humans are. (In Sonnet 114, Will's persona refers, immodestly, to "my great mind," and surely our finding the Runes helps convince us that this phrase is an accurate description.) In any case, the texts that he created in this way all make sense and can be paraphrased, and that evidence is hard to argue with, though studying all of the evidence is so tedious and complicated that I do not believe anyone, not counting me, has yet done so.

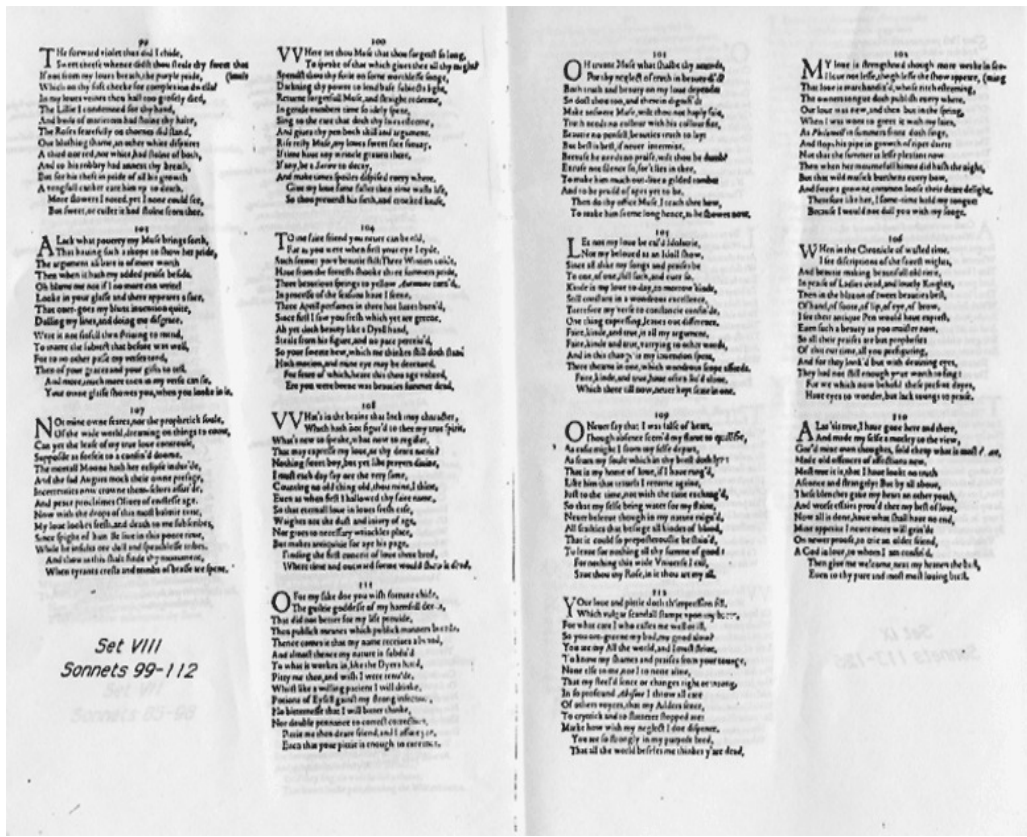
Our time is limited, but let me add a few more points. First, nothing in the Quarto hints overtly that the hidden poems lie submerged in the cycle, and nothing suggests the pattern of the set arrangements. Thus I think of the plan that I have discovered as a hypothetical reconstruction of a lost document—the lost handwritten (or "holograph") text of the Sonnets that the printer, Thorpe or his agent, must have worked from.

Second, analysis of the individual sets, once they are reconstructed, does seem to reveal some kinds of thematic unity: The fact that different sets often seem to treat different topics suggests that they may have been independently composed. For example, the first fourteen poems, Set I, focus mainly on the beautiful male friend and the poet's urging him to marry and have offspring. And the last two sets, beginning with Sonnet 127, focus on the Dark Lady materials. My personal guess is that the poet wrote these two sets, Sets X and XI, *first*, not last and that they may have circulated privately as a shorter, independent cycle. But by putting these last two sets at the end, Shakespeare creates a kind of ironic closing couplet for the whole Megasonnet structure—two units that round off the ending of the cycle with a twist, introducing a new character who inverts the previously established relationship with the male friend and thus provides the same kind of "reversal" for the whole cycle that a closing couplet often does for a

given 14-line sonnet text. In the Megasonnet, however, this "couplet" close occurs as a vertical rather than a horizontal terminus to the full text.

A third concluding point is that discovering the hidden sonnets leads us to read the visible texts differently. For example, the poet often seems to complain in the visible Q texts about how hard the composition project is and how it isolates him from his beautiful friend. Now we can understand that the difficulty was real, not just conventionally dramatized: My own view is that the Sonnets are the poet's magnum opus, his "great work," and that he labored over the texts, re-working and revising them during his last decade as a professional writer and then himself pushed the Sonnets into print, with the help of Thorpe, his printing agent. Also, we can now imagine that the so-called "rival poet" and "Dark Lady" may be figurative constructs, not real people. The "rival poet" might be a conceit for Will himself as author of the Runes, since in effect he was competing with himself, and his efforts in the hidden texts would have tended to detract from the finished quality of the visible sonnets. Furthermore, the so-called Perverse Mistress may be a metaphoric equivalent of the writing project itself, with a pun in "mistress" on "mysteries" and perhaps on "mss.," manuscripts. The famous line "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (Sonnet 130.1), for example, may joke about printed "I's" that are not like the sun because the sun is round and bright (like an "O") while the letter "I" is straight and black; here "My Mysteries..." might mean "My riddles," the enigmatic Sonnet texts. If the poet's writing project was his "mistress," with whom he spent many days and nights that separated him from his beloved male friend, we can understand how she might seem to be a "lover" for both the poet and his friend, creating a sort of romantic triangle; after all, the poet was writing, as he often says in the Sonnets, to honor his handsome friend and perpetuate his memory. (Ironically, of course, the friend's name is lost to history, though he may have been Henry Wriothesley, the third earl of Southampton.) So the poet's "mistress" or "mysteries," the writing project itself, would have created a kind of complex three-way relationship that involved the poet, his male friend, and the text itself, with the writing actually taking away from the male friendship and vying for attention.

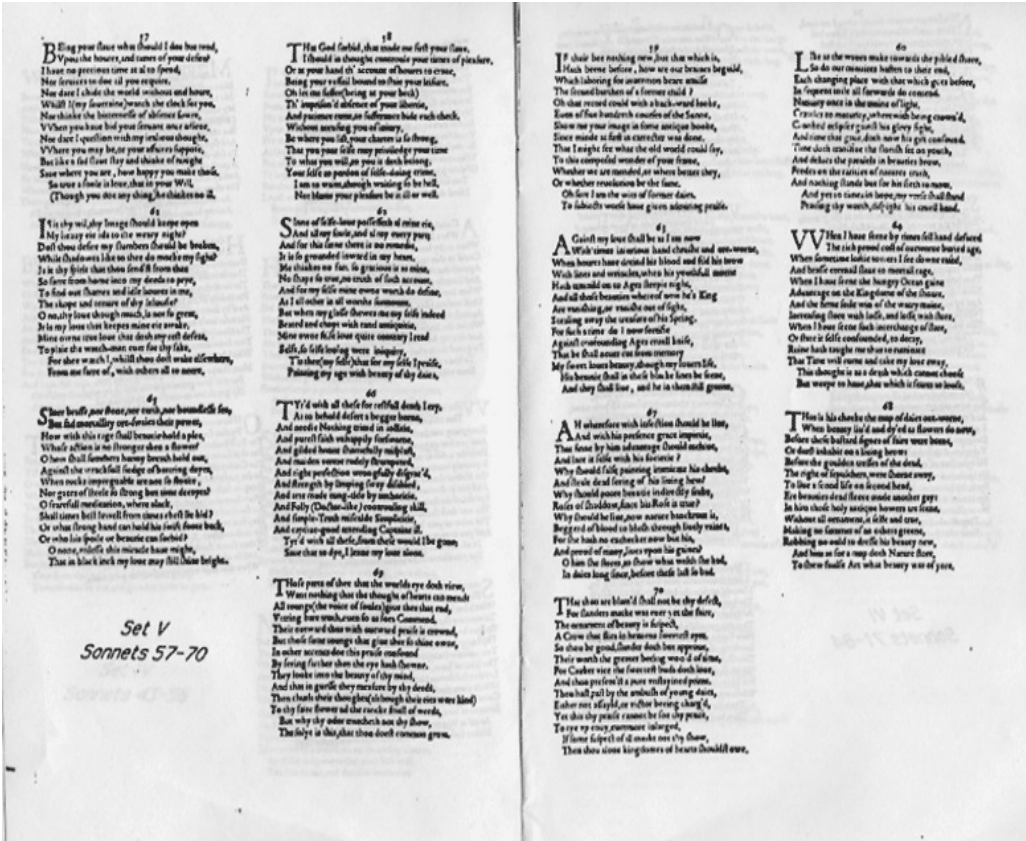
One particular difficulty occurs in the numeric scheme I have summarized: That is, in Set VIII, the first visible poem, number 99, has an extra, 15th line. You can see this on the set spread:



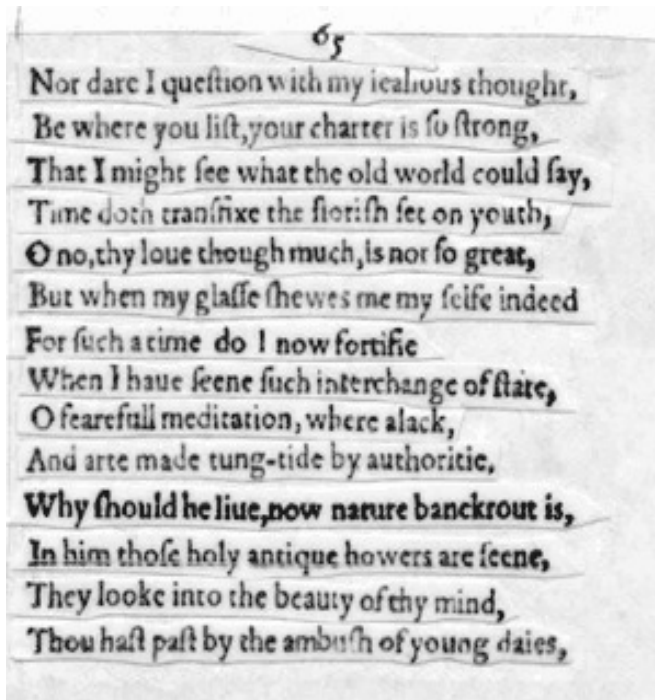
Can someone tell me what the problem would be here for someone trying to reconstruct the fourteen hidden poems on this page? You're right: The fifteenth line in Sonnet 99 does not fit because it does not have any fifteenth lines to match up with as you move across the spread horizontally! My conclusion, after a lot of trial-and-error, is that the poet intentionally put this numeric oddity into his scheme as an extra challenge to his group of private readers, a part of his Game. I believe that the "solution" here is that each of the hidden runes in Set VIII has "A" and "B" variants. A reader must decide whether to omit the first line *or* the last line of Sonnet 99 in the reconstruction process; omitting line 15 creates what I call the "A" variants in this set; omitting line 1 creates the "B" variants. Both sets of variants make sense, though each is slightly different from the other, sometimes radically different because the variable line is the first one of the text, and different opening lines can instigate quite different implicit narratives or scenarios.

In closing, I'd like to present one other example of one of the hidden sonnets, this one selected almost at random from all the other 153 possibilities. Let's briefly examine Rune 65, made up of the sequence of ninth lines in Set V, Sonnets 57-70. First, let's look at how this hidden sonnet

occurs in the overall scheme. In Set V, we can see the string of ninth lines, beginning "Nor dare I question with my iealous thought" (Sonnet 57.9), and we can trace those lines across the set spread:



Taking the ninth lines out of this Q set and arranging them as a fourteen-line poem generates this unedited text:



Does anyone notice that the ending of this poem (the vertical acrostic at the bottom left) spells out "WIT"? Also, the opening vertical letter string "N.B." may be an abbreviation for *Nota bene*, a common Latin phrase (and abbreviation) meaning "Note well" or "Pay attention." You may even hear a pun on "TO B..." at the start of lines 4-6, perhaps an echo of the famous soliloquy from *Hamlet*.

Whether or not these vertical letter strings are meaningful—and I myself do believe that they are probably crafted to contain wit—we can edit this text so that it is a readable poem, with some marginal glosses to clarify certain elements. Doing that, this hidden poem is what we have. Let's read it together:

### Rune 65

(Ninth lines, Set V: Sonnets 57-70)

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Nor dare I question with my jealous thought:      |   |
| Be where you list*, your charter* is so strong    | <i>list</i> : choose; <i>your charter</i> : our pact, your claim on me      |
| That I might see* what the old world* could say.  | <i>see</i> : confront and accept; <i>old world</i> suggests The Globe       |
| 4 Time doth transfix* the flourish* set on youth. | <i>transfix</i> : cut through; <i>flourish</i> : rhet. or pen embellishment |

O, know thy love, though much, is not so great  
 But when my glass shows me myself indeed.  
 For such a time do I now fortify

8 When I have seen such interchange of state.  
 O, fearful meditation! Where a lack  
 And art made tongue\* tied by authority, made tongue tied...: have made a tongue speechless (as in the Runes)  
 Why should he\* live? Now nature bankrupt\* is, he: that tongue (i.e., the poet); bankrupt: stripped bare

12 In him\* those holy antique hours are seen. him: the poet (pun: hymn); pun: "wholly antic whores"  
 They look into the beauty of thy mind;  
 Thou\* hast passed by the ambush of young days. Thou: Perhaps the poet, addressing his own image

Now, let's see how the poem can be paraphrased, to make some of its meaning more directly apparent:

### 65. Such Interchange of State

I should never be jealous nor insecure:  
 Wherever you choose to be, our bond is so strong  
 that I could stand to hear anything this old world might say.

4 Time (and also the meter of my poem here) cuts through the undue emphasis placed on youth.  
 Oh, be assured that our love, though strong, is strongest  
 when I face my aging self squarely in the mirror.  
 Right now I fortify myself against such a time

8 when I witness the reversed condition that time brings with age (and also when I contemplate  
 the perversely interlocked condition of these texts).  
 Oh, what a terrible thought! Where loss  
 and cosmetics (or artful shrewdness, in the case of these texts) combine to authorize  
 speechlessness,  
 why should one's voice go on? Now that nature lacks resources, is stripped bare,

12 one sees in that voice times like those of old—an age worth revering.  
 Such times look into the beauty of your mind;  
 you, poet, have evaded the ambush of youth.

I realize that this particular poem is not easy. More generally, I acknowledge that my subject today is a very complicated topic, and I appreciate your attention. I know that in a short presentation I can't hope to make a fully convincing argument, proving that the Sonnets are really

a complicated kind of double-composition game. But perhaps this explanation and these two examples of the lost texts that I believe Shakespeare composed some four hundred years ago will encourage you to study the Sonnets further. My own conclusion, based on the findings I have summarized, is that the *visible* Quarto texts are themselves much more playful in their meanings than most scholars want to recognize, and that the hidden materials in Q show that they are much more complex in their natures than we have ever understood. What we see on the surface does not come close to being all that the Quarto lines contain, all the potential that they may communicate.

The so-called Riddle of the Sonnets is very old, and my findings do not help to simplify that riddle. But it's reassuring to know that the Sonnets will always be there for us to study, and, as we do, we are likely to discover ever-new layers of meaning that emerge from the mind of our greatest English poet.

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