

Wojciech Skalmowski

(Bruksela)

The Sonnets: A Shakespearian Joke?

Abstract: The article proposes a radically new interpretation of the *Sonnets* based on the hypothesis that they belong to comic (mock-erotic) poetry and intend to amuse the initiated reader with the contrast between their bombastic rhetoric and the triviality of their real subject. The poems represent purported soliloquies of the narrator tormented by prolonged constipation and trying to win the favour of the anthropomorphized object of his sorrows ('Mr. W[aste] H[eap] I presume) by flattery and submission. The author's argument is based on the internal consistency and explanatory power of the proposed approach; the reader is encouraged to study the paper with the text of the *Sonnets* in his/her hands.

The problem of the meaning of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* resembles that of the Loch Ness Monster: some claim to have seen parts of it, but the sum total of these sightings does not add up to much. The hesitantly accepted consensus about the facts and sentiments underlying the *Sonnets* is very blurred indeed¹, but its *faute de mieux* status and the scholarly tradition brought about a certain indifference to its blatant inconsistencies and absurdities. The traditional picture of the Shakespearian "Nessie" might be summarized as follows: (1) for several years Shakespeare was in love — whatever its character — with an unnamed young man who treated him badly, but whom he nevertheless adored and praised in a most exaggerated way; (2) at the same time Shakespeare loved an unspecified woman who was physically repellent and treated him badly, but whom he nevertheless *ditto*; (3) the *Sonnets* contain a host of enigmatic allusions which we do not understand, but — it is usually suggested — this does not, or at least should not impede our assimilation of their poetic message.

Although the sincerity of those who claim that they enjoy the *Sonnets* in spite of the fog which envelopes them cannot be questioned — *de gustibus non est disputandum* — the fact remains that we do not fully understand them, neither in the more superficial sense of the word (e.g. who are the "fools of time"? who was the rival poet? etc.), nor in the deeper one, of being able to follow the psychological motivation of the author. If his feelings for the "sweet boy" were really so intensive as the rhetoric of the *Sonnets* suggests, a suspicion of his homosexual tendencies would be inescapable. However, apart from the fact that nothing in Shakespeare's life points to it — he was married and had children, venting such feelings on paper would not only have been dangerous (homosexuality was a capital offence in Elizabethan England), but also counterproductive: even assuming that the poems were originally destined for the "sweet boy's" eyes only, they would have hardly mollified his heart, if he were not a professed homosexual, too. Otherwise his reaction would be that of indignation and anger. If he was a homosexual, the sonnets urging him to marry and "breed" as many children as possible would look out of place to say the least.

Even if there were any solution of these incongruities, the "dark lady" sonnets would have made a nonsense of it. Assuming that it is possible for somebody to combine a homo- and a heterosexual love at the same time, the very character of this second love and the manner of its declaration ("In faith I do not love thee with mine eyes"², etc.) are something which could hardly be described as compatible with a sane mind. On the other hand there is

¹ cf. Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, edited with analytic commentary by..., New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977; see especially pp. 543-549 (= Appendix 1, Facts and Theories About Shakespeare's Sonnets). All the quotations from the Sonnets in this article are given according to the Edited Text of the 1609 Quarto edition in Booth's book, pp. 1-133.

² Son. 141, v. 1

no doubt that the *Sonnets* were written by a sane person, as their stylistic excellence testifies. All this is very strange.

This brief recapitulation of the known difficulties of the traditional interpretation of the *Sonnets* as personal confessions is intended as a reminder that there is still room for other explanations here and as an introduction to a new theory, which uses as its tools the so-called close reading method and a certain initial assumption, the origin of which will be discussed at the end of this article. The essence of this assumption may be summarized as follows: the *Sonnets* belong to **comic** poetry and were written as a deliberate parody of love songs. Their aim is to amuse the initiated reader/listener with the contrast between the bombastic language and the triviality of the real object of the author's concern. The hidden semantic universe of the *Sonnets* is Rabelaisian: the poems are purported soliloquies of a person tormented by, or dreading the prospect of a prolonged constipation. The narrator sees the only effective remedy in ingratiating himself by flattery and submission with the capricious object of his sorrows. The drama involves several anthropomorphized personalities, the principal among whom is the Object itself (hence referred to as O.), who is depicted as a youngster endowed with all possible virtues. Next comes the "Mistress" (M.), whose interference in the affair between the author/narrator (A.) and O. plus her physical unattractiveness are the reason, why she is at the same time insulted and flattered by the "I"-person: it is she who finally decides about the possibility of the wished-for encounter with the sweet boy. The words: "...being both from me both to each friend..."³ hardly leave any doubt as to her identity. The true identity of the second poet, who competes with A. in praising O.'s glory aloud, also becomes pretty obvious — from this point of view, especially if we recognize "that affable familiar ghost/Which nightly gulls [i.e. imitates] him with intelligence"⁴ as personified snoring.

With this in mind let us now peruse the *Sonnets* in order to see whether these *dramatis personae* fit the roles previewed for them by the theory. If they do, the plausibility of the proposed assumption will be strengthened by its compatibility with "the facts of the text".

A. — the author/narrator — describes himself as old⁵ and unfavoured by worldly fortune⁶, but the "sweet love" of O. is a compensation for all his past and present sorrows⁷. He writes poetry, which is the direct consequence of his love for O.⁸ and the only means, except "breeding" by O. himself, by which the extraordinary beauty of the beloved can be preserved for posterity⁹. A. is conscious that his poetry falls short of O.'s perfection¹⁰, that others may write better — though certainly not love more¹¹ — than he does, he even abstains from praising O. too abundantly in order "not [to] dull you with my song"¹², but he regards his poetry as the duty of a vassal, on a par with his duty of "tending" "...upon the hours and times of your desire"¹³. At the same time A. is careful to stress that his poetry is meant neither to "show [his] wit", nor to ingratiate himself with O.¹⁴ He even goes so far as to urge O. to keep his distance from him, because otherwise A. — praising O., "the better part of me" — would be praising himself¹⁵. A.'s modesty causes him to repeat the same encouragement to separate

³ Son. 144, v. 11

⁴ Son. 86, vv. 10-11

⁵ cf. e.g. Son. 22 and 138

⁶ cf. Son. 25

⁷ cf. Son. 29, 30, 37

⁸ Son. 38, 76, 78, 79

⁹ cf. Son. 55, 60, 63-65, 81

¹⁰ Son. 103

¹¹ Son. 32

¹² Son. 102, v. 14

¹³ Son. 57, v. 2; cf. also Son. 58

¹⁴ Son. 26

¹⁵ cf. Son. 39

in another sonnet: *Let me confess that we two must be twain, [...] So shall these blots that do with me remain, / Without thy help by me be borne alone*¹⁶.

Like his poetry, A.'s love is purportedly selfless and humble. Although a prolonged absence of O. appeared to A. as a sudden winter in the middle of summery splendour ("What old December's bareness everywhere! / And yet this time removed was summer's time, / The teeming autumn, rich with big increase"¹⁷), he recognizes the sovereignty of O.¹⁸ and is even ready to excuse his disappearances¹⁹. In A.'s view real love must be a faithful servant who does not criticize his master: "So true a fool is love, that in your will, / Though you do anything, he thinks no ill"²⁰. It may not depend on the good or bad turns of fortune ("Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds"²¹) — in other words "Love's not time's fool [...]"²². The constancy of A.'s love is particularly stressed in Sonnet 124 in which A. declares that it (his love) was "builed far from accident; / It suffers not in smiling pomp, nor falls / Under the blow of thrall'd discontent" and that it "nor grows with heat, nor drowns with show'rs" — assurances intensified by reference to "the fools of time, / Which die for goodness, who have lived for crime", i.e. egoistic, reward-oriented feelings which live only as long as the situation is bad and die as soon as the first turn of good fortune fulfils the wishes of the person professing them.

O. — the object of A.'s love — is of masculine sex and, as Sonnet 20 clearly states, A.'s attraction to him has a purely sentimental and not sexual character (cf. "Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their [i.e. women's] treasure"²³). All the same A. is at great pains to secure for himself O.'s graces and faithfulness. Sonnet 105 states that O. is at the same time "fair, kind and true". However, A. appears to be somewhat overoptimistic here and contradicts his own statements elsewhere, because even if there is no doubt about the physical beauty of O.²⁴, the two remaining qualities are questionable. Frequent absences of O.²⁵ and broken promises of an encounter²⁶ hardly testify of his kindness towards A., even if O. has sometimes sudden spells of repentance (cf. "Ah, but those tears are pearl which thy love sheds, / And they are rich, and ransom all ill deeds"²⁷). The exuberant mood of Sonnet 105 might be ascribed to the fact that this poem belongs to a sequence culminating in Sonnet 107 where the happy return of O. — against the worst fears of A. and of "the prophetic soul / Of the wide world"²⁸ — is celebrated. At that moment it might indeed have seemed that "The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured" and "peace proclaims olives of endless age"²⁹. The general picture, however, is more bleak, even if A. knows to excuse — albeit "gainst myself"³⁰ — the frequent neglects on the part of O. as a necessary evil (cf. "Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud, / Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun"³¹). A. accepts resignedly the situation in which his encounters with O. form as a rule a "seldom pleasure": "Therefore are feasts so solemn and so rare, / Since seldom coming in the long year set, / Like stones of worth they thinly

¹⁶ Son. 36, vv. 1-4

¹⁷ Son. 97, vv. 4-6; cf. also Son. 98 and 99

¹⁸ Son. 49

¹⁹ Son. 87-89

²⁰ Son. 57, vv. 13-14

²¹ Son. 116, vv. 2-3

²² *ibid.*, v. 9

²³ Son. 20, v. 148

²⁴ cf. Son. 20, 59, 63, 99, 106, a.o.

²⁵ cf. Son. 27, 28, 43-45, 97, 98, 113, a.o.

²⁶ cf. Son. 33 and 34

²⁷ Son. 34, vv. 13-14

²⁸ Son. 107, vv. 1-2

²⁹ *ibid.*, v. 5 and 8, resp.

³⁰ Son. 35, v. 11

³¹ *ibid.*, vv. 3-4

placed are, / Or captain jewels in the carcanet”³². No wonder that A. does not need any “tables” or “tallies”³³ by which “dear love to score”; he even finds that “To keep an adjunct to remember thee / Were to import forgetfulness in me”³⁴. On the other hand, A. does not oppose the idea of keeping a written record as such; he even recommends it once³⁵ to O. as a means of diverting his mind from devastating “Time’s thievish progress to eternity”: instead of idly watching how his “precious minutes waste” O. should “commit to these waste blanks” everything which his “memory cannot contain”.

In spite of A.’s patience, O.’s lack of “constant heart” and “truth” is often bewailed. There are veiled allusions to these two faults in Sonnets 53 and 54, and the reproaches grow quite strong in Sonnets 93 and 94, even if the offences of O. are partly excused in the following two poems by the offender’s beauty and youth. An actual case of O.’s infidelity is recorded in Sonnets 41 and 42: he allowed himself to be seduced by “her”, i.e. apparently the vicious Mistress of the second part of the cycle.

Two sequences (Sonnets 109-112 and 117-120) are devoted to A.’s own faults and omissions on account of O. It is not clear what really happened, but Sonnet 110 lets the reader understand that A. somehow grew overconfident in O.’s love and temporarily turned his attention to other matters — with disastrous consequences. The second sequence even hints at some deliberate experiments with O.’s fidelity. In Sonnet 117 A. admits that “[I] Forgot upon your dearest love to call, / Whereto all bonds do tie me day by day; [...] I have hoisted sail to all the winds / Which should transport me farthest from your sight”, but he adds as an excuse at the end: “I did strive to prove / The constancy and virtue of your love”. Sonnet 118 deplores the fact that some kind of risky “policy in love, t’anticipate / The ills that were not grew to faults assured, / And brought to medicine a healthful state, / Which rank of goodness would by ill be cured”. However, from the Sonnet 119 we learn that the crisis must have been finally beneficial for A.; cf. his exclamation at the end of this poem: “O, benefit of ill, now I find true / That better is by evil still made better; / And ruined love when it is built anew / Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater. / So I return rebuked to my content, / And gain by ill thrice more than I have spent”.

A. is not the only person around who voices the praise of O.: the sequence of sonnets 79-86 develops the theme of the Second Poet. A. calls his rival a “better spirit”³⁶ and qualifies his production as being “above a mortal pitch”³⁷. However, A.’s admiration is not unreserved. Sonnet 82 mentions disapprovingly the “strained touches” of rhetoric and “gross painting” applied by others — a procedure which A. finds improper and even destructive for O.’s beauty. His advice for anybody who deals with the subject is formulated in Sonnet 84: “Let he but copy what in you is writ, / Not making worse what nature made so clear, / And such a counterpart shall fame his wit, / Making his style admired everywhere”. Sonnet 86 testifies that the rival poet must have followed this advice because A. claims he “struck me dead” and this was achieved neither by the awe which “the proud full sail of his great verse” might inspire in A., nor by the aid borne to the Second Poet by “his compeers by night”. All that would not suffice — as A. assures O. — to silence him: “But when your countenance filled up his line, / Then lacked I matter, that enfeebled mine”.

Passing time, ageing and, eventually, Decay and Death are the greatest potential enemies of O. and — because of the total dependence of the lover on the beloved — of A. himself; cf. “My glass shall not persuade me I am old, / So long as youth and thou are of one date, / But

³² Son. 52, vv. 5-8

³³ Son. 122

³⁴ *ibid.*, vv. 13-14

³⁵ cf. Son. 77

³⁶ Son. 80, v. 2

³⁷ Son. 86, v. 6

when in thee time's furrows I behold, / Then look I death my days should expiate"³⁸. Although A.'s poetry is intended as a means of immortalizing O.'s beauty in its prime freshness³⁹, there exists a much "mightier way" to "make war upon this bloody tyrant Time"⁴⁰ — procreation. The sequence of Sonnets 1-17 is devoted to the task of persuading O. by various arguments of the virtues and advantages of "breeding". Perhaps the most typical exhortation of this kind is that found in Sonnet 6: "Ten times thyself were happier than thou art, / If ten of thine ten times refigured thee: / Then what could death do if thou shouldst depart, / Leaving thee living in posterity?".

Concern about the ravages of Time is a recurring motif. It appears also in Sonnet 104, which is usually interpreted as a statement that its author met his friend three years earlier. Actually it seems to say only that A. has been worried since that time about O.'s unimpaired condition. In spite of the bold assurance at the beginning: "To me, fair friend, you never can be old", A. feels that O. maybe ageing imperceptibly; cf. "Ah yet doth beauty, like a dial hand, / Steal from his figure, and no pace perceived"⁴¹. Line 8 of this sonnet ("Since first I saw you fresh, which yet are green"), closing a paragraph with the description of three year's cycles, may be interpreted not as a reference to seeing for the first time, i.e. meeting, but as indicating that A. for the first time then turned his attention to O.'s physical qualities and more specifically to his "freshness". The description of the period following this *prise de conscience* lets the reader understand that it was the time of growing disillusionment and general deterioration; cf. "Three winters cold / Have from the forests shook three summer's pride", / Three beauteous springs to yellow autumn turned"⁴² etc. In order to prevent further damages A. assures the Future — the "age unbred"⁴³ — that beauty (O.'s beauty, no doubt) had already passed its summit. The tacit conclusion of this statement is that O.'s "sweet hue" should shrink no more, exactly like a shadow on the sundial ceases to diminish when noon-hour recedes.

The dominant note of the so-called "dark lady" sequence (Sonnets 127-154) is the direct and indirect stress on the extraordinary ugliness of the heroine⁴⁴. Sonnets 130 and 141 especially leave no doubt about M's lack of physical attractiveness, cf. "And in some perfumes is there more delight / Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. / I love to hear her speak, yet well know / That music hath a far more pleasing sound. / I grant I never saw a goddess go; / My mistress when she walks treads on the ground"⁴⁵. The last line of the quoted fragment seems to hint at a particularly pronounced plumpness or even obesity of M. One cannot avoid the impression that A.'s love for her is less passionate and pure than in case of O. It even seems that it is the concern for O.'s security and well-being, which is the chief motive of A.'s *Hassliebe* for M. This is obvious, e.g. from Sonnet 133, in which A. tries to convince M. that she should entrust him with the guardianship of O.: "Prison my heart in thy steel bosom's ward, / But then my friend's heart let my poor heart bail; / [...] Thou canst not then use rigour in my gaul"⁴⁶. There is, however, little hope that A.'s reasonings might convince her; only the grossly laid flattery of A.'s pretended love for M. and his begging appeals to her "will"⁴⁷ and pity⁴⁸ might bring about some relief. M. has the strongest position

³⁸ Son. 22, vv. 1-4

³⁹ cf. Son. 55, 60, 63-65

⁴⁰ Son. 16, vv. 1-2

⁴¹ Son. 104, vv. 9-10

⁴² *ibid.*, vv. 3-7

⁴³ *ibid.*, v. 13

⁴⁴ cf. Son. 127, 130-132, 141, 149, 150, 152

⁴⁵ Son. 130, vv. 7-12

⁴⁶ Son. 133, vv. 9-12

⁴⁷ Son. 135 and 136

⁴⁸ Son. 132 and 139

in the strange love-triangle, consisting of A., “the better angel” (O.) and herself — “the worser spirit”, as Sonnet 144 calls her without any equivocation. A. complains in this poem that M. all too easily “tempteth my better spirit from my side” and “would corrupt my saint to be a devil” and, moreover, all this happens outside his knowledge and influence as long as it pleases the demonic M. to hold O. in her capricious sway; cf. “Yet this shall I ne’er know, but live in doubt, / Till my bad angel fire my good one out”⁴⁹.

It seems that A. has learned by experience the extreme hardships of the struggle against the mighty will of M. Son. 129 records this bitter knowledge. Its famous opening words: “Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action” — after a plausible emendation of “expense” to “expanse” — can be reformulated as follows: the gradual recovery of courage after failure (“shame” in the sense of “dishonour” in a lost battle; “waste”, i.e. a desert, refers to a ravaged battlefield) results in a longing for renewed combat. This longing, however, brings more pains than it had promised to remove; cf. “[...] till action, lust / Is perjured, murd’rous, bloody, full of blame”, etc. — in other words: “A bliss in proof, and proved a very woe”⁵⁰. Nevertheless, this sentiment must be quite widespread, because A. concludes: “All this the world well knows, yet none knows well / To shun the heav’n that leads men to this hell”.

Special mention must be made of Son. 128 because of the ambiguity of its metaphors. The main image of the poem is contained in the words: “How oft, when thou my music music play’st / Upon that blessed wood [...] / Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap / To kiss the tender inward of thy hand, / Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap, / At the wood’s boldness by thee blushing stand”. While “my music” is an obvious metaphor for the person addressed (apparently M., because the sonnet belongs to the “dark lady” section, though there is no mention of the sex of the addressee), “playing” itself is taken by all the commentators as a literal activity, with “wood”, “jacks” and “chips” mentioned throughout the poem as references to an actual instrument (spinet or virginal) and its parts. However, this is not the only interpretation possible: one might see in the sonnet’s imagery a reference to a bucolic scene situated in real “wood”, i.e. in a forest, where M. — perhaps humming or singing — touches absent-mindedly various “chips” and “jacks” forming the brushwood and which then “nimble leap”, thus arousing the envy of A. There is at least a possibility of such an interpretation, especially in view of the other pastoral metaphor used in the Sonnets, *viz.* in Sonnet 16: “Now stand you at the top of happy hours, / And many maiden gardens yet unset, / With virtuous wish would bear your living flowers [...]”⁵¹.

The two closing sonnets — Sonnets 153 and 154 — are variants of one and the same allegorical concept formulated in the mythological convention, which — as it seems to me — can be deciphered satisfactorily only in the context proposed in this article. The concept may be reconstructed as follows: the “Cupid’s brand”, i.e. apparently the “fire” of the sexual organ, was once stolen by a playful nymph and dipped “In a cold valley-fountain of that ground”⁵². Thanks to this “grew a seething bath”, which has formed since then “against strange maladies a sovereign cure”⁵³. A. seems to have here in mind a natural phenomenon — best describable, indeed, in terms of hot water imagery — which accompanies or rather precedes the “action” mentioned with such awe in Sonnet 129. However, in A.’s own case the results of this therapy have been nil; cf. “I sick withal the help of bath desired, / And thither

⁴⁹ Son. 144, vv. 13-14. In a popular edition of the Sonnets (W. Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, introduction by W. H. Auden, edited by William Burto) by Signet Classic, New-York-Scarborough-London, 1964, the commentary to these lines (on p. 184) runs as follows: “fire my good one out, i.e., communicate venereal disease”. Actually it is this kind of Shakespeare scholarship which made me less self-conscious about my amateur’s status in this field.

⁵⁰ Son. 129, vv. 2-3 and v. 11, resp.

⁵¹ Son. 16, vv. 5-7

⁵² Son. 153, v. 4

⁵³ *ibid.* v. 7 and v. 8, resp.

hied, a sad distempered guest, / But found no cure; [...]”⁵⁴. His disappointment is expressed in still more poignant words in Sonnet 154: “[...] but I, my mistress’ thrall, / Came there for cure, and this by that I prove: / Love’s fire heats water, water cools not love”⁵⁵.

This brief survey of the main motifs of the *Sonnets* cannot pretend to the rank of a thorough analysis — which would require a volume, but its sole intention is to demonstrate that a different, unserious approach towards the discussed texts is possible and seems to be fruitful. From the proposed point of view most difficulties of the traditional interpretations disappear and find common sense solutions within the same frame of reference.

Probably the most shocking aspect of the proposed theory is precisely the said frame of reference, i.e. the very idea that the Swan of Avon would use his pen for writing light and mildly obscene verse. In order to convince oneself that he was indeed not above such subjects it is sufficient to look at the incomplete poem no. 9 in *The Passionate Pilgrim*. It belongs to the Venus and Adonis theme; its second part is quoted here⁵⁶ for the convenience of the reader:

*Her stand she takes upon a steep-up hill:
Anon Adonis comes with horn and hounds;
She, silly queen, with more than love’s good will
Forbade the boy he should not pass those grounds;
Once, quoth she, did I see a fair sweet youth
Here in these brakes deep-wounded with a boar,
Deep in the thigh a spectacle of ruth!
See in my thigh, quoth she, here was the sore:
She showed hers; he saw more wounds than one,
And blushing fled, and left her all alone.*

No special interpretation is necessary in this case to see what the intended *pointe* of this little poem is. The fact that two “dark lady” sonnets appeared in the same collection *The Passionate Pilgrim* might be taken as an indication that perhaps they too (and their equals in the *Sonnets*) belong to some lighter *genre* than a sincere, straightforward “lyrical confession”.

The idea that Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* might in fact be a joke occurred to me for purely formal reasons in connection with my long-standing professional interest in Classical Persian ghazels. Like the *Sonnets*, these lyrical poems consist of the most exaggerated praise of a mysterious “Friend” and “Beloved”. Like the *Sonnets*, they are still interpreted today as “serious”, although opinions as to the true identity of the object of their praise are divided. Some regard these poems as “mystical”, other interpreters see in them a conventionalized erotic poetry and, finally, a third school takes the ghazels for panegyric court-poetry. None of these views is really convincing, for reasons the discussion of which would exceed the scope of this article.

I began to doubt the serious character of the ghazels at a time when I was elaborating a hypothesis concerning the origin of Old Iranian mythology; it occurred to me that perhaps its underlying idea survived until Islamic time and has been adopted by certain poets of the Classical (Modern) Persian period in their works⁵⁷. As briefly as possible the hypothesis is as follows: the Zoroastrian myth about the creation of the universe as presented in Old and Middle Iranian literature is so complicated and absurd at the same time, that it seems to be a

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, w. 11-13

⁵⁵ Son. 154, vv. 12-14

⁵⁶ Quoted from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, London: Spring Books, 1960¹³, p. 1066

⁵⁷ A more detailed (though still tentative) outline of this hypothesis may be found in my paper “Wheel Within Wheel: Remarks on Bundahisn”, in: *Middle Iranian Studies* (W. Skalmowski & A. Van Tongerloo, eds.), Leuven: Peeters, 1984, pp. 269-311.

deliberate allegory of something existing in the real world. Otherwise — without some relatively tangible model — it would not have survived for nearly three millennia in virtually unchanged form. After having considered dozens of likely “models” (ranging from iron production to the basic notions of mathematics) it suddenly occurred to me that the only reality corresponding — and astonishingly well at that — to the bizarre Iranian myth, is that of human anatomy and physiology. The myth seems to be based on a projection of the human body (microcosm) onto the universe (macrocosm), in which the mythical rivers, seas and mountains duplicate as it were the veins, digestive organs and bones of man. The “history of humanity” in the myth roughly corresponds to various phases of food transformation from the moment of its entering into the mouth until it is ready for evacuation. However strange this interpretation may appear, it seems to me the only possible rational explanation of the origin of the Iranian myth. I feel obliged to add at this stage that my interpretation is not endorsed by most of my orientalist colleagues. What was the purpose of the myth (assuming, as I do, that it was a deliberate mystification)? It could be argued that the chief function originally — notwithstanding later incorporation of the myth into a religious tradition — was pedagogical. The strange story in which the mythological “men” represented at the same time human beings (macrocosmic aspect) and their intestinal content (microcosmic aspect) might have served as a theoretical base of “dialectics” of sorts, i.e. of a way of speaking in which an utterance would make sense both when applied to normal persons *and* to the product of human digestion. In other words, the myth could have served as an introduction to ironical and ambiguous rhetoric, which permitted the skillful user to treat others as dirt and, moreover, to do it in what would seem most polite and flattering way. The utility of this trick in composing comic poetry — comic, that is, to the initiated audience — is self-evident. It might be that the knowledge of it was once widespread in educated circles of the ancient world and that the Iranian myth is only one of its more articulate instances.

It is, of course, nothing other than a supposition — and a very far-fetched one. Still more far-fetched is the supposition that the knowledge of the trick was not confined to the Middle East, and that it somehow — perhaps through Greek and Latin poetry (Horace’s *Carmina* seem to me a very promising field for interpretative investigations of this kind) — made its way into European Renaissance literature. However, certain phenomena of this period are more understandable when regarded from this angle. The short analysis of the *Sonnets* in this article was intended as a demonstration of this claim.

I had two options: either to present a shaky theory which seems to work well in this particular case, or to be silent about this whole matter. The second solution would have been more prudent and scholarly, of course. I chose the first chiefly because I owe to the *Sonnets* many spells of hearty laughter and find it a pity not to share them with others. And besides: maybe I am right?

«**The Sonnets: A Shakespearian Joke?**» by Wojciech Skalmowski. From *Dialogues Dialogi*. Quarterly by the Canadian Polish Congress (Alberta Branch), Oct.-Dec. 1986, Jan.-March 1987; Vol. III, No 1/2 (9/10), pp. 45-49.

About the author: W. Skalmowski is Professor Emeritus of Iranian and Slavic Studies at the University of Leuven, Belgium. Born in 1933 in Poznań, Poland, he studied in Cracow and Berlin and taught at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow (1960-1968), Harvard University (1969-70) and KU Leuven (1970-98). Next to c. 100 scholarly papers in English, French and German, he has written c. 170 literary essays and book-reviews in the Paris-based Polish monthly *Kultura* and c. 120 book-reviews (in Dutch) in *Standaard der Letteren* (Brussels). His most recent publication is *Studies in Iranian Linguistics and Philology*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2004. He may be contacted via e-mail address: wskalm@poczta.onet.pl