



# The Drama in Shakespeare's Sonnets: 'A Satire to Decay'

*Mark Jay Mirsky*

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*The Drama in Shakespeare's Sonnets: "A Satire to Decay"* is a work of detective scholarship. Unable to believe that England's great dramatist would publish a sequence of sonnets without a plot, Mark Jay Mirsky, novelist, playwright, and professor of English, proposes a solution to a riddle that has frustrated scholars and poets alike. Arguing that the Sonnets are not just a "higgledy piggledy" collection of poems but were put in order by Shakespeare himself, and drawing on the insights of several of the *Sonnets'* foremost contemporary scholars, Mirsky examines the *Sonnets* poem by poem to ask what is the story of the whole.

Mirsky takes Shakespeare at his own word in Sonnet 100, where the poet, tongue in cheek, advises his lover to regard "time's spoils"—in this case, "any wrinkle graven" in his cheek—as but "a satire to decay." The comfort is obviously double-edged, but it can also be read as a mirror of Shakespeare's "satire" on himself, as if to praise his own wrinkles, and reflects the poet's intention in assembling the *Sonnets* to satirize the playwright's own "decay" as a man and a lover.

In a parody of sonnet sequences written by his fellow poets Spenser and Daniel, Shakespeare's mordant wit conceals a bitter laugh at his own romantic life. *The Drama in Shakespeare's Sonnets* demonstrates the playwright's wish to capture the drama of the sexual betrayal as he experienced it in a triangle of friendship and eroticism with a man and a woman. It is a plot, however, that the playwright does not want to advertise too widely and conceals in the 1609 Quarto from all but a very few. Despite Shakespeare's moments of despair at his male friend's betrayal and the poet's cursing at the sexual promiscuity of the so-called Dark Lady, *The Drama in Shakespeare's Sonnets* sees the whole as a "satire" by Shakespeare and, particularly when read with the poem that accompanied it in the 1609 printing, "A Lover's Complaint," as a laughing meditation on the irrepressible joy of sexual life

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