

Introduction: the sonnets

Why are there proper names in Shakespeare's dramatic works, but none in Shakespeare's sonnets? What roles do proper names (or the absence of proper names) play in these poems, and how are such roles related to the varieties of language used in the sonnets and Shakespeare's plays? Are the sonnets primarily concerned with description, or is their language chiefly performative? And how are these questions about language, proper names and genre conceptually related to the life of the author and the historical conditions under which the texts were produced?

These questions provide a framework for the analysis of Shakespeare's sonnets in this book, which takes as the central condition of the sonnets the fact that their author was also the period's foremost dramatist. The sonnets are deeply informed by the player-poet's peculiar self-consciousness about his lowly social status. Despite the added sense of personal inadequacy and social taint that such self-consciousness about his profession brings to the poet's Petrarchan moments, as player-dramatist he is, nevertheless, able to bring to the poet's task an extraordinarily developed sense of language as a *performative* force. By focusing on such performative dimensions I seek to take forward an approach to language that began in the philosophical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin. It enjoyed some status within literary criticism and theory in the 1970s and 1980s, but has lately received less attention in the era of high historicism. Austin's status within literary theory never recovered

¹ This is not to claim that there were no other dramatists who were also substantial poets. Marston, Chapman and, especially, Jonson, were both poets and dramatists, but none of them wrote substantial sonnet sequences, nor is their poetry informed by a self-consciousness of the common player's lowly social position.

² See Mary Louise Pratt, Towards a Speech-Act Theory of Literary Discourse (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977). For a pioneering application of these two philosophers' work to Shakespeare, see Keir Elam, Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse: Language Games in the Comedies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). A very fine, recent post-speech-act study of the rhetoric of social exchange in early modern England is Lynne Magnusson's Shakespeare and Social



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from the polemic between Jacques Derrida and John Searle,3 and the apparently formalist focus of speech-act theory has been overlooked by Cultural Materialist and New Historicist concerns with Foucauldian notions of discourse and power. But Wittgenstein and Austin offer a powerful picture of the multifarious ways in which language works as a form of action in the world: negotiating, constituting and informing social and personal relationships in the situations of its actual use.⁴ Until Lynne Magnusson's path-breaking book, Shakespeare and Social Dialogue, little close attention had been paid to the intricate relationship between dialogical interaction and social context. In place of the current bifurcation of criticism into 'formalist' analysis of language on the one hand, and 'historicist' or 'materialist' interest in culture and politics on the other, Magnusson shows that we need a philosophical framework that is alive to the utterance in all its situated richness, rather than the sentence or the sign or the code as product of an overarching system of language, discourse or ideology. Such a framework will enable the fullest investigation of both the linguistic textures and forces of literary texts and the actions upon and within them of society, politics and history.

The aim of this book is thus to link close linguistic analysis with questions of power and society. By treating Shakespeare's sonnets as the product of a dramatist who was himself embroiled in a social struggle for acceptance and status, I hope to make palpable their shape and force as situated forms of social action. Plainly, Shakespeare's dramatic art made possible the extraordinary uses of language in the sonnets. But the plays themselves also render more palpable circumstances of address that escape inclusion within the restricted body of the sonnet. The concrete situation of address that is the condition of the Petrarchan sonnet is clearest in the plays in which sonnets are represented, not as disembodied texts, but as a performative discourse in which embodied characters seek to transform their circumstances and relationships. Each of the plays through which the sonnets are discussed in the following pages – As You Like It, Antony and Cleopatra, Love's Labour's Lost, Twelfth Night, Hamlet, King

Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Magnusson's book appeared after I had completed most of the present work, so I have been unable to incorporate its many insights into the body of my text. My book is much the poorer for this omission.

³ See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988) and John R. Searle, 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph* 2 (1977), 198–208 (201).

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953) and J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).



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Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Troilus and Cressida, Othello and All's Well that Ends Well – either represents the sonnet as a form of social action or embodies forms of verbal practice that approximate key moments in the 1609 Quarto. The sonnets as 'embodied texts' are thus closely imbricated, in both sociological and aesthetic terms, with their poet's work in the newly commodified space of the theatre.

The notion of an embodied text has recently been used by Douglas Bruster to argue that the period during which the sonnets were written, and in which Shakespeare became increasingly well known through his appearance in the new, professionalised theatre, saw a dramatic increase in the connections between author and text.⁵ Shakespeare's sonnets display a consistent awareness of the ways in which 'every word doth almost tell my name' (sonnet 76), not merely in stylistic but also in social terms. His presence, even attenuated through writing, is thought to disgrace the young man of birth. The very 'public space' in which 'writers publicized hitherto private bodies and identities, including their own' (Bruster, 'Structural Transformation', 65) contaminates those of high birth who are brought into its ambit as more than aloof spectators, at the same time as it transforms the very conditions of traditional authority.⁶ Some have argued that the familiarity of the sonnets precludes the possibility of an aristocratic addressee or lover.⁷ But this overlooks the way in which familiarity alternates with extreme abjection and the power of the new public space, which was both shaped by and in turn shaped Shakespeare's 'publick manners' (sonnet 111), to transfigure relationships of authority and subjection.

If Shakespeare's sonnets may be said to be 'embodied' in Bruster's sense by the presence of their public poet in their 'every word', they are also embodied through the representation of similar sonnets in the plays themselves. Approaching Shakespeare's sonnets through the staged worlds of his plays enables one to interrogate two sets of critical assumptions. The embodiment of addressee, the sonneteer and the sonnet itself through the plays counters the recent tendency to dissolve

Douglas Bruster, 'The Structural Transformation of Print in Late Elizabethan England', in Print, Manuscript, & Performance: The Changing Relations of the Media in Early Modern England, ed. Arthur F. Marotti and Michael D. Bristol (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), 49–89.

⁶ See Robert Weimann, Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse, ed. David Hilman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), for an extensive account of the transformation of authority through the dynamics of representation in both its political and mimetic senses.

⁷ See especially, Joseph Pequigney, Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).



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the corporeality of the referent in a solution of textuality and subjectivity, either through a formalist concentration on their verbal or lyrical complexity, or through a more theoretical interest in their forging a new poetic subjectivity. Such embodiment also questions the assumption that the primary work of the sonnet in general, and Shakespeare's sonnets in particular, is to praise their subjects through description. I shall focus on the performative, rather than the descriptive, nature of their language; that is to say, on the ways in which they seek to be transformative rather than merely denotative. This will mean reopening the question of the 'dramatic' nature of the sonnets: taking seriously the fact that the 1609 Quarto is the only major body of sonnets in early Modern England written by a dramatist, and exploring the interaction of the sonnet and the theatre on a variety of sociological and aesthetic levels.

To take into account the fact that the 1609 Quarto was the only body of sonnets written by a dramatist opens a wider passage between the poems and the plays via the rootedness of their common author in a particular community at a particular time. Such a passage will naturally reveal their differences, among the most obvious being the fact that the sonnets, unlike the plays, are written in an autobiographical mode. This raises the question of names and pronouns, and the logical role that they play in the two genres. I will argue that the grammatical or logical

⁸ These two critical positions are exemplified by two of the most influential recent critics of the sonnets: Stephen Booth and Joel Fineman. That they continue to exert an inordinate degree of influence is shown by the fact that they continue to be the two most frequently cited critics in the most recent collection of essays on the sonnets. See James Schiffer (ed.), Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays (New York: Garland, 1999), 52.

⁹ For early interest in their dramatic nature see G. K. Hunter, 'The Dramatic Technique of Shakespeare's Sonnets', Essays in Criticism, 3 (1953), 152-64 (161); Giorgio Melchiori, Shakespeare's Dramatic Meditations: An Experiment in Criticism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 15. See also, Anton M. Pirkhoffer, 'The Beauty of Truth: The Dramatic Character of Shakespeare's Sonnets', in New Essays on Shakespeare's Sonnets, ed. Hilton Landry (New York: AMS Press, 1976), 109-28; and David Parker, 'Verbal Moods in Shakespeare's Sonnets', Modern Language Quarterly, 30.3 (September 1969), 331-9. Such criticism has been superseded by investigations of their 'inner language' (Ann Ferry, The 'Inward' Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, and Donne (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)); the exploration of their 'speaker's psyche' (Heather Dubrow, Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 212); their novel construction of poetic subjectivity (Joel Fineman, Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986)); their formal, essentially poetic structure and richness (Stephen Booth, An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1969) and Shakespeare's Sonnets, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978); and Helen Vendler, The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997)); or the social, sexual or ideological 'scandal' that they represent (Margareta de Grazia, 'The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets', in Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays, ed. Schiffer, 89-112; Peter Stallybrass, 'Editing as Cultural Formation: The Sexing of Shakespeare's Sonnets', in Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays, ed. Schiffer 75-88, and Joseph Pequigney, Such Is My Love).



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questions of proper names and pronouns, and the sociological condition of the player-poet in his relation to a well-born addressee, are closely related. Can the modes and conditions of address indicated by the preponderance of the second-person pronoun in Shakespeare's sonnets (by comparison with Sidney, Spenser, Daniel and Drayton)10 be related to the peculiar interdependence of player and audience that informs Shakespeare's work in both genres? And how is this relationship complicated or illuminated when a sonnet's situation of address is represented on stage? How is the sense of the textual or 'inward' nature of the poems as lyrics complicated by reading them through the historical embodiment of sonnets in theatrical representations? C. L. Barber's suggestion that in Shakespeare's sonnets 'poetry is, in a special way, an action, something done for and to the beloved'II brings the poems closest to the primary means of Shakespeare's livelihood. It emphasises their concern with what Jacques Berthoud has explored as the 'dialogical interaction' of the plays. 12 The sonnets' performative language encompasses much more than the solitary mind of their lyric speaker or isolated reader: it arises out of the triangular relationship of addresser, addressee and the context or event of such action that is not merely a grammatical effect of language. It is a relationship embodied in particular lived circumstances, which Shakespeare's dramatic works frequently re-present in that fullness on the public stage.

However Shakespeare's plays and sonnets may be united or differentiated in poetic terms, they share a mutual investment in *interaction*: in provoking a response, and themselves responding to provocation, through the negotiation of relationships that are erotic, political, filial and ideological. They seek self-authorisation, justifying themselves in the 'eies of men' (sonnet 16). Whether we approach them sociologically or internally via the fiction of a poetic 'persona', the poet of the sonnets is clearly a *player*-poet. He suffers from the social and personal vulnerability of someone whose role as a poet is always informed by his position as actor and

¹⁰ See Melchiori, Shakespeare's Dramatic Meditations, 15:

The most notable variation in respect of the other collections remains... Shakespeare's use of the second person, which is almost as frequent as that of the first: 37.2 percent as against 40.3 percent, while in the other poems under consideration the highest percentage reached is 20 percent... This balance between I and thou, this direct exchange, this dialogue, is also an obvious demonstration of the dramatic and theatrical character of his [Shakespeare's] poetic genius, even when using the lyrical form.

¹¹ C. L. Barber, 'An Essay on the Sonnets', in *Elizabethan Poetry: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Paul J. Alpers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 299–320 (303).

¹² Jacques Berthoud, Introduction to *Titus Andronicus*, The New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001).



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playwright. At the same time, the sureness of his poetic art arises out of the practice of the theatre. He might consequently be said to be playing at being a poet proper in purely sociological, though not aesthetic, terms, pretending through the writing to the superior poetic and social status of a Sidney, a Greville or a Surrey.¹³ That we now consider him the greatest poet of the age does not change the ways in which his poetry is informed by a sense of his own inferior social station — as indelible, by his own admission, as the stain upon the dyer's hand. Shakespeare's role as a man of the theatre thus conditions his sonnets in both a sociological and an aesthetic sense. They are the products of a powerful hand steeped in the aesthetic practice of the stage, but they are also marked by the perceived social inferiority of that practice.

Although it might seem obvious that Shakespeare's plays represent to the highest degree the 'interactive dialogue' by which 'individuals may be imagined to exist in society', the sonnets are no less embroiled in such forms of social interaction and dialogue (Berthoud, Introduction, Titus Andronicus, 22). Such dialogue represents the singularity of each speaking position and its place in a wider social context; but it does not reduce the one to the other. Insofar as they are the centre of their own lives,' Berthoud remarks, 'individuals belong to themselves; but insofar as they are members of a community, with its history, its institutions, and its social and cultural divisions, they belong to others' (22). Viewing these intensely individual poems through the glass of the plays enables us to see how the sonnets enact, 'at the moment of its operation' (22), the degree to which people belong both to themselves and to others. The voice that speaks in the sonnets is neither wholly 'solitary' nor entirely public. It is both the centre of a singular manifold of feelings, attitudes and passions, and at the same time continually displaced by its necessary acknowledgement of a world of others.

Reading Shakespeare's sonnets in the context of his plays renders more visible the circumstances that make speech acts intelligible and make possible the language of interiority. Such contexts of embodiment and address, often obscured in the case of the lyric, are inescapable on the stage. In chapter 2 I ask what happens to our reading of the sonnets when we take such embodiment seriously as the very condition, not only of the theatre, but also of the sonnet's address. To ask such a

¹³ Paul Ramsey, The Fickle Glass: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets (New York: AMS Press, 1979), 33, reminds us of the actor-poet of the sonnets' intense feeling of insecurity and vulnerability before a greater poet's verse: 'the rival poet's sonnets are at once laudatory, even a little awe-struck, and satiric: a little mocking, but also more than a little frightened'.



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question is to complicate the signified with the referent – in the form of embodied addressee and addresser and the actual circumstances of the address, including unequal social relations – and to leaven the concept of subjectivity with the public reality of an audience. It also reopens questions regarding the disembodying force of Petrarchism itself, and the asymmetrical nature of the voiced and the silenced in the poems.

In chapter 1 I explore most fully what it means to read the sonnets as a primarily performative art, using 'performative' in the technical sense instantiated by the philosophy of speech acts. In developing my argument I use as my foil the critical text that has had an unsurpassed impact in the field: Joel Fineman's Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets. 14 Channelled through the work of Lacan and Derrida, Fineman's thesis is deeply informed by a contrary, Saussurean picture of language. It depends upon the assumption that the tradition of sonnet writing, of which Shakespeare's sonnets are a belated and transformative part, is primarily concerned with description, with matching what the pen writes to what the eye sees through an 'idealizing language' that is essentially 'visionary' (Shakespeare's Perjured Eye, 11). To praise someone in this tradition is essentially to try to describe them. Thus Shakespeare's poems to the 'dark lady' are said to transform the specular descriptiveness of epideixis by discovering, before the fact, the neo-Saussurean principle that there is an essential and unbridgeable disjunction between language and the world: 'because they are a discourse of the tongue rather than of the eye, because they are "linguistic", Shakespeare's verbal words are, in comparison to the *imago*, essentially or ontologically at odds with what they speak about' (15). The self-reflexive recognition of this ontological disjunction constitutes the decisively modern poetic subjectivity that Fineman attributes to Shakespeare's sonnets. They invent a modern subjectivity by recognising what has always been ontologically true about language and its relation to (or rather disjunction from) any object in the world. My major argument against the Fineman thesis is that Shakespeare's sonnets offer very little description at all. They are not primarily concerned with presenting what Fineman calls the imago. It is natural to assume that the sonnets make good their promise to the young man to make him live in their lines by making his image outlast the hardiest of human monuments. How else, we may ask, can this promise

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¹⁴ Fineman's book remains the most referred-to text in a collection of mostly new essays published as late as 1997. See *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. Schiffer.



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be made good, especially in the absence of the beloved's name? Without either name or image, what can survive?

A close examination of the first 126 sonnets, traditionally assumed to be addresses to the 'fair friend', reveals very little by way of portraiture. Do we know what the friend looked like? Well, we like to think we know: blond hair, blue eyes, young, beautiful. Rather than being a product of anything that Shakespeare actually tells us about him (see sonnet 144), such a portrait is the negative image of the 'women colloured il' (sonnet 144). We are certain that he is blond; but that is because the poems call him 'fair'. The two words are not synonymous. Rosaline, in Love's Labour's Lost is called 'fair', yet her eyes and hair are as 'raven black' as the dark beauty of the sonnets. Beatrice (Much Ado About Nothing), Cressida (Troilus and Cressida), Julia (The Two Gentlemen of Verona) and Hermia (A Midsummer Night's Dream) are also called 'fair', sometimes repeatedly and obsessively, and yet they variously fall short of the blonde ideal. ¹⁵ It is one of the well-known paradoxes of the sonnets that there is no natural synonymy between colouring and beauty or between physical fairness and spiritual light. So why do we assume that the 'fair friend' has blond hair? Do the poems tell us this; do they describe him as having blond hair? We assume too hastily that, because he is twinned with a woman 'colloured il', the young man cannot have dark hair. There is literally very little explicit portraiture in the sonnets to support this assumption.

The 1609 Quarto is curiously reticent about indulging in the Petrarchan blazon, despite its repeated invocation of the image of the beloved. Apart from the counter-discursive sonnet 130 ('My mistres eyes are nothing like the sun') – an anti-blazon – the only poem that comes close to such anatomy is the playful sonnet 99:¹⁶

THE forward violet thus did I chide,
Sweet theefe whence didst thou steale thy sweet that smels
If not from my loues breath, the purple pride,
Which on thy soft cheeke for complexion dwells?
In my loues veines thou hast too grosely died,
The Lillie I condemned for thy hand,
And buds of marierom had stolne thy haire,
The Roses fearefully on thornes did stand,
Our blushing shame, an other white dispaire:
A third nor red, nor white, had stolne of both,

¹⁵ Lysander addresses Hermia as 'fair love' (2.2.41), yet she is enough of a brunette for him later to call her an 'Ethiope' and a 'tawny tartar' (3.2.258 and 265).

All quotations from the sonnets are taken from the reproduction of the 1609 Quarto Shakespeare's Sonnets, ed. Stephen Booth, with the necessary transcriptions.



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And to his robbry had annext thy breath,
But for his theft in pride of all his growth
A vengfull canker eate him vp to death.
More flowers I noted, yet I none could see,
But sweet, or culler it had stolne from thee.

Quirky in tone and attitude as much as for its extra line, this poem gestures towards the ideals of colouring traditionally expected of (or projected on to) an English, Petrarchan beloved. But such gestures are teasingly grotesque. 'Roses damaskt, red and white' (sonnet 130) are fair enough; 'purple pride' 'too grosely died' upon the beloved's cheek (even if we read 'purple' as 'red'), a little over the top. The roses 'blush shame' and stand in 'white dispaire', not because they reflect his colouring, but because they have been caught red-handed, stealing the beloved's beauty. That is to say, their colouring is presented as the temporary result of the player-poet's censure; they are not the eternal mirrors of his features. Such epithets are, however, readily transferable to the beloved himself by anyone who is determined to see him as an instance of 'roses damaskt'. Although John Kerrigan quotes John Gerard's The Herbal (1597) to the effect that marjoram was a whitish herb, G. Blakemore Evans notes that it remains unclear whether the comparison is meant to invoke the colour, texture or fragrance of the young man's hair.¹⁷ The poem as a whole is less concerned with a description of the beloved than in elaborating a series of mischievous reprimands, whereby the player-poet is able to project the beloved as the source of all beauty through speech acts that are not primarily descriptions. Although not as blatant as sonnet 130, this poem is as much a parody of hyperbolic description, and its place within a cluster of poems centrally concerned with imaginative projection further calls into question any status we might be tempted to give it as an exercise in presenting an imago.

Even if we grant, on the strength of one sense of the word 'fair' and the supposed whiteness of the herb to which his hair is compared in sonnet 99, that the young man is blond, the other sonnets offer scant information on which to base an identikit. If anything, they coyly play with the idea of his picture without offering anything concrete. In fact the image of the beloved is invoked variously as the object of contention between the player-poet's eye and heart (sonnets 24, 47, 47), or as the haunting 'shadow' of his absent dreams (sonnets 27, 37, 42, 53, 61, 98),

¹⁷ John Kerrigan (ed.), The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint, The New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986); G. Blakemore Evans (ed.), The Sonnets, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 208.



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or as something quite beyond description (sonnets 17, 18, 21, 79, 82, 83, 84, 85). Sonnet 17, for example, speaks conditionally of its own poetic power, suggesting that even if it could offer an accurate image of the beloved, it would be scorned as the invention of a 'poet's rage / And stretched miter of an Antique song'. And the cluster of poems responding to the rival poet famously (and strategically) claim that any attempt to describe the youth that goes further than tautology ('you are you') insults him. The only image that is invoked as a true and possible reflection of the beloved is that of his own imagined offspring, and he is himself considered to be an exact reflection of his mother, but the poems offer descriptions of neither. The sonnets speak of offering images, of drawing pictures, of making the beloved live on in their own 'black lines'. But to speak of pictures is not to draw them, to use the word 'images', even repeatedly, is not to present one. The gestures of description or portraiture throughout the 1609 Quarto are a series of elaborate feints; there is no shadow so shadowy in their lines as the figure to which they promise eternal life.

Without the grounding presupposition that it is the fundamental aim of these poems to render in words what the eye sees, Fineman's claim – that Shakespeare's sonnets make the revolutionary discovery that words can never match the world – is empty. If the sonnets were trying to do something other than describe, then their supposed failure to match insufficient word to ineffable, ideal object would be less momentous, indeed it would not matter at all. The poems are performative rather than constative. This is internally apparent from their speech acts. But the pre-eminence of rhetoric in the early modern period also shows that language was principally appreciated as a force working in the world rather than as a (always-already failed) reflection of it. Thomas Wilson, for example, opens the dedication of his Art of Rhetoric (1560) with a tale about the power of words to achieve what weapons could not. 18 George Puttenham's The Arte of English Poesie (1589) is informed throughout by an awareness of poetic language as a power that imprints itself upon the receiving consciousness: it 'carieth his opinion this way and that, whether soever the heart by impression of the eare shalbe most affectionately bent and directed'. 19 The sonnet tradition of the period forms part of a general interest in language as a form of action. David Parker recognises this

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¹⁸ Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric (1560)*, ed. Peter E. Medine (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 35.

19 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London: 1589), Scholar Press Facsimile (Menston,

England: The Scholar Press, 1968), c iiij.