

Sonnets to a Young Man

William Shakespeare, Keith Hale

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By the beginning of the Twentieth Century, almost anyone in England who knew anything about Shakespeare knew that he had written his famous love sonnets to a beautiful adolescent male who was fifteen when the first sonnet was written. The debate was not about what gender the poems addressed but what specific young man had been the object of Shakespeare's affection. Read in sequence, the sonnets tell a story. Shakespeare was instructed by his patron to try to get the patron's son to marry and pass along his lineage and beauty. The first seventeen sonnets are therefore called the procreation sonnets because this is precisely Shakespeare's message to the boy. Beginning with Sonnet 18, however, we see an abrupt turn: Shakespeare has clearly fallen in love with the fifteen-year-old. Furthermore—and this cannot have pleased his patron—Shakespeare suggests there is really no need for the boy to marry and procreate in order to live beyond his time, for Shakespeare is immortalizing him for eternity through the sonnets.



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