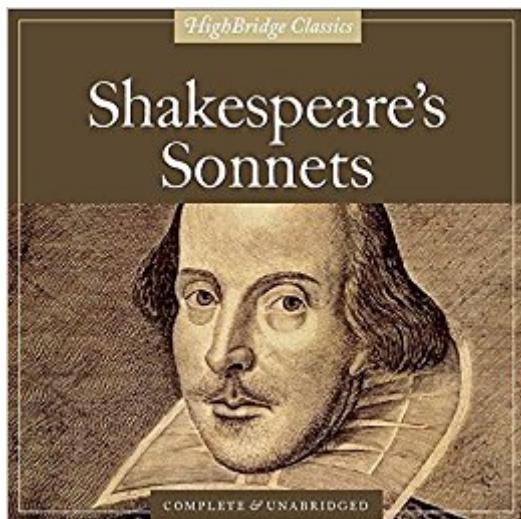


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Shakespeare's Sonnets (Highbridge Classics)



Synopsis

The bard's sonnets read by a leading actor of stage and screen Simon Callow. Savor the most celebrated love poems in the English language. Written almost 400 years ago, the sonnets of William Shakespeare are passionate and exalted, rich in imagery and alliteration, and full of mystery and intrigue. This selection presents all 154 sonnets composed from 1593-1601. In words and rhyme, he reveals his infatuation with the "Dark Lady," his relationship with a rival poet, and his private thoughts on love, death, beauty, and truth: timeless themes that span the centuries to touch our hearts today.

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Customer Reviews

This guy read the Auden in Four Weddings and Funeral I think. Simon Callow treats his voice as an instrument. He can strum and roar and hiss and bellow. And he has taken some trouble with the notes and tones. This may seem a rather contrived sensibility at first, but he uses his velvet oboe of his voice to a fine effect, calling it to the issue of the meaning perhaps more than a concern for a natural tone. And I quickly got over this modern quibble. The sonnets are contrivances and they are also concerned with terrible truths. Callow has invented a style that fits. And to his credit, it is also startlingly passionate.

I read these sonnets two a day over the summer, and I wish there were more than 154 of them so I could keep going into the fall. I think I'll pick up "The Tempest" next. The poetry in this volume is

beautiful, equisite and full of passion. What makes Shakespeare worth reading is the way he lets the world into his lines. His metaphors appeal deliciously to the senses, like a beam of sunlight through a high window in the afternoon, or the smell of a new cut lawn in the spring. Shakespeare's writing is immortal, not because a conspiracy of teachers got together and decided it should be, but because it is full of life, and nothing that is full of life can really ever die. If you're not used to reading Elizabhean English or are put off by the thought of Shakespeare, this is a good place to start. This edition helpfully "translates" each sonnet into modern English on a facing page along with definitions for the more troubling words. Even with the help, I still don't think Shakespeare is all that easy to read. But anything you do in this world that makes you feel more passionate about life is a pretty good thing. If you give Shakespeare some of your time, he's bound to pay you back with plenty of interest.

This is a nicely bound, low priced volume of Shakespeare's sonnets. But it is more than just that. Each sonnet is on a page by itself with explanatory notes on the facing page. While most of us do not need a spoon-feeding of these wonderful works, we sometimes do come to an abrupt halt at "some in their garments like new-fangled ill", or "sometimes a blusterer that the ruffle knew of court". In the above instances we are talking about fashionable but absurd garments, and a braggart's display. Also, many elisions are changed to modern words (e.g. advised for aduis'd) except where such a change would hinder the flow of the sonnet. There are also over 100 pages of historical and critical comments at the front of the book, which you can read or ignore as you choose. All in all this is an excellent package of the sonnets with a very useful set of notes. It's great that all of the notes are adjacent to the sonnets, so that you do not have to page back and forth, and that there are no nasty little note reference numbers marring the lines of the sonnets.

The sonnets are annotated with grace, precision and completeness here. Virtually every puzzle (or potential quibble) is commented upon in the rich notes facing each sonnet, and if there are ambiguities, they are allowed to flourish, rather than being settled. So there's plenty left for the reader to do, deciding which way to tilt the reading, and great enjoyment to be had. Smart, comprehensive, and readable (though it's true that to speak of its being readable in the most literal sense requires me to squint while reading the notes in anything but bright light). This is the indispensable collection of Shakespeare's Sonnets for a reader interested in savoring their incredible richness.

The secondary source material found in the appendices, the fantastic footnotes, the capacious introductions, the big clear typeface, the textual editing decisions, all make the Ardens the best single-volume Shakespeares by a long shot. The rest pale by comparison. The only drawback, god forgive this y-chromosomed curmudgeon, that I can see in this particular Arden is that the editor, Katherine Duncan-Jones, often tends to lean a bit too far to the left, indulging into too much gender politic-ing. Duncan-Jones also spends a quite a bit of time arguing in a rather extended manner for composition dates that are self-consciously 'provocative' and seem to be much too speculative for an introduction. One could match this with Booth's version, which by comparison seems perhaps a touch more shallow and hidebound-- but more solid, and get a nice complimentary set of typefaces and editorial views that would balance out nicely, I would suspect.

William Shakespeare is best known as a playwright. When you think of Shakespeare, you automatically think of plays -- "Romeo and Juliet," "Macbeth," "Hamlet," etc. But he was also a poet of considerable skill. And while he sprinkled his various plays with poetry and songs, his poems are best appreciated when they're read all by themselves -- particularly the cluster of brilliant "Sonnets" that he penned. These works just have a unique, hauntingly vivid flavour of their own. Each sonnet has no title, and is simply identified by numbers. And while Shakespeare's love poems are the best known of these works, he addresses different themes in them -- old age, writer's block, loneliness, the cruelty of the world, sex, beauty, a mysterious rival poet, and Shakespeare's own complicated romantic feelings (love that "looks upon tempests and is not shaken"). And these poems are absolutely lovely. Some of these sonnets are pretty well-known ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?/Thou art more lovely and more temperate") but most of them are a little more obscure. They have vivid metaphors and imagery ("let not winter's ragged hand deface," "gold candles fix'd in heaven's air") and hauntingly lovely passages ("What is your substance, whereof are you made,/That millions of strange shadows on you tend?"). And these sonnets really give you new insights into Shakespeare as a person -- he feels uncertainty, passionate love, unhappiness, lust and quirky humor. But while it's obvious these sonnets were deeply personal, they can still be appreciated on their own, particularly as love poetry. William Shakespeare's "Sonnets" are rich with meaning, language and atmosphere -- the Elizabethan English takes a little deciphering, but it's well worth it.

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