

this book as well (2). Like the manifold “false starts, second thoughts, and changes of mind” that he deftly excavates from the Shakespearean text and that he reminds us are “characteristics of any work in progress” (2), the “occasional inconsistencies, repetitions, and things” he admits to having “changed [his] mind about” over the course of the thirty years of scholarship represented here trace the development of a line of thinking that has come to seem so familiar that it is easy to forget that it is no more inevitable (or perhaps even internally consistent) than the Shakespearean text itself (5).

However, if it is true that “the one thing we really do know about Shakespeare’s original text is that it was hard to read” (2), the same cannot be said of these essays, which are decidedly readable (and rereadable), in spite—or because—of the sly caveat concluding his introduction: that he has “not undertaken any major revisions” (5).

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The Secret Architecture of Shakespeare’s Sonnets. Steven Monte.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. viii + 340 pp. \$110.

This study argues that *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1609) “contains intricate hidden organisation, and that Shakespeare was far more engaged with other poets and with pursuing a career as a poet than is generally assumed” (1). Monte accepts as Shakespeare’s the 1609 order of 154 sonnets followed by “A Lover’s Complaint.” The volume’s “architecture,” he claims, has been “hidden” at least since the early decades of the seventeenth century when readers were no longer familiar with the conventions of Elizabethan sonnet sequences (1). The main structure “consists of seventeen groups of poems whose first group contains seventeen sonnets, and whose subsequent groups decrease in size incrementally from sixteen sonnets to one poem. . . . The structure is pyramidal because the poem groups . . . form a pyramid with tapering layers. The design reinforces the conceit of poetry as a monument, and it highlights relations between poems” (2).

As Monte acknowledges, the pyramidal design was first proposed by Alastair Fowler in *Triumphal Forms: Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry* (1970) and later modified by a handful of scholars; the disagreements have to do with reaching the magic number 153 (the total of poems in seventeen tapered steps) since there are 154 sonnets plus “A Lover’s Complaint.” Monte also makes “correction[s]” to Fowler’s hypothesis (43), the most important being the inclusion of “A Lover’s Complaint” as the final pyramid step. He advances his thesis about structure by drawing on studies by Thomas P. Roche, Katherine Duncan-Jones, and René Graziani, who have recognized number symbolism throughout *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*.

To his credit, Monte anticipates the skepticism of many readers about a pyramid design; he also helps his case by placing Shakespeare within the milieu of the 1590s,

when sonnet sequences were in vogue and ambitious English poets sought to outdo one another in showing their craft through complex numerological symbolism and structure. His notice of images, phrases, and even entire lines in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* that echo sonnets by competitors like Barnabe Barnes, George Chapman, Henry Constable, and Samuel Daniel (Monte's candidate for the rival poet) will be of special interest to scholars of the period. Equally impressive is his analysis of the ways groups of sonnets are linked in duos and trios by correlative conjunctions, pronominal patterns (*you* or *thou*), imagery, and theme. I think readers should give serious consideration to Monte's theory that *Shakespeare's Sonnets* was at first intended to be the final part of a triptych (along with *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*) dedicated to Henry Wroithesley, the third Earl of Southampton; that the volume's publication was delayed when Southampton was imprisoned in 1601 because of his association with the Earl of Essex's rebellion; and that then perhaps it was revised and recycled for a new patron, William Herbert, the third Earl of Pembroke.

Monte discovers other patterns within the 1609 collection that compete with the pyramid design, some nonconsecutive (the Monument Trio—Sonnets 55, 81, and 107—with the first and last twenty-seven poems equidistant from Sonnet 81), others consecutive (a ten-step pyramid running from Sonnets 21 to 75). While many of his speculations are intriguing, there are times when his numerological calculations threaten to die in their own too much. Monte also claims greater narrative coherence in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* than is justified, and at times indulges in unsubstantiated biographical speculation.

Furthermore, questions arise about the main thesis: Who perceived the design at the time *Shakespeare's Sonnets* was first published? Monte cannot be sure anyone did. And why would Shakespeare hide such intricate design if it is meant to display his artistry? Further, while it is a good start to identify "the procreation sonnets" (Sonnets 1–17) as the first of the seventeen pyramid steps, none of the subsequent steps Monte proposes has the same internal cohesion as this initial group. Finally, if each step is tapered, Monte's final step, "A Lover's Complaint," seems a rather cumbersome object to balance atop a pyramid. These reservations aside, this monograph makes valuable contributions to Sonnet studies; it aspires to offer for the whole of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* the kind of careful analysis of structure and meaning that scholar-critics like Stephen Booth and Helen Vendler provide for each individual sonnet.

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