

INTRODUCTION

**THE
SHAKESPEARE
*CODES***

Introduction

by
David Basch

2000

THE SHAKESPEARE CODES

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's Sonnets is one of the most popular and celebrated of the poet's works. The poetic power of its cadences and the breathtaking beauty of its expressions have left readers rightly awed and appreciative. Despite this general acceptance, there is another side to these 154 poems that have made them highly problematic. To the many scholars who have studied the poems in depth, the *Sonnets* has been classed among the most challenging of Shakespeare's works.

Since the appearance of the *Sonnets* in 1609, scholars have grappled with the alleged irregularities surrounding its publication and with the difficulties of its content and meaning. For though many sonnets have universally captured admiring hearts and minds, there are at least as many that have proven troubling. Not all of them readily reveal their thoughts and others seem to do so in ways that appear contradictory and puzzling. Nor is there certainty that the original *Quarto edition* — named for the then four page printing method used — faithfully renders the Poet's original intentions. What is more, to some minds, the poems present a troubling picture of the Poet's relationships with a handsome young man and a certain woman known as *the Dark Lady*.

Ever since its publication 400 years ago, the difficulties of the *Sonnets* have led to the writing of a continuing stream of books in attempts to unravel its mysteries. This is a stream that has not ceased to this very day which has seen its own bumper crop of new efforts. While many of these interpretive books would seem to speak with authority and finality, under closer scrutiny they do fall short. They leave many puzzles in their wake as this work remains stubbornly ambiguous in its form, cryptic in its message, and above all controversial about what it appears to tell about the Poet himself. For example, can the flawed person that many commentators think they find in

INTRODUCTION

these poems be the same man that is regarded as the soul of his age and of our own? On a very basic level, we have yet to learn precisely whether these poems are merely a diary-like collection of randomly composed individual poems about events in the Poet's life, as some allege. Or is it that they constitute a true artistic whole, a work organically integrated and possessing a grand meaning to which all the poems contribute however elusive that meaning may be?

It is in the context of this problematic background that *The Shakespeare Codes* appears as the latest of the continuing stream. Like the others, this book too purports to resolve in a fundamental way the mysteries of the *Sonnets* that have resisted earlier commentators. But surely this is a claim that must seem altogether presumptuous in the face of the many previous stellar attempts to do the same. The "nay" sayers would be all too correct in their negative response to such a seemingly immodest claim, but for the fact that this book is truly unique among earlier efforts. *Unlike all other attempts to grapple with the Sonnets, this book has had the advantage of being directly informed by the Poet himself in a way never before available.*

As astonishing as such an assertion must appear, it is nevertheless what has come to pass. The fact is that William Shakespeare had prepared the text of his sonnets so that it embeds various devices for communicating his own personal thoughts. These devices comprise *an ingenious set of codes* that have awaited discovery ever since the poems appeared. *It is this communication from the Poet himself that has informed this present book and is what justifies yet another work along this most beaten path.* As a result of the assistance from the Poet himself, this book comes closer to accomplishing what others could not in penetrating the veil of the *Sonnets* in both the meaning of its poems and in its ultimate message.

With the above as the dramatic promise of *The Shakespeare Codes*, it would be most unreasonable to now

THE SHAKESPEARE CODES

detain the reader by continuing an overlong introduction. Hence, the rest of this section will be brief.

This book is presented in two major parts. **Part 1** is made up of seven chapters that, by and large, constitute the overall analysis of *the Sonnets and its codes*. *Chapter 1, "Prologue,"* begins by furnishing the reader with a background to the *Sonnets*. This includes a description of the features that have made the Poet's work troublesome as well as a discussion of some of the theories that have been posed to explain this away. Those who have been unfamiliar with the difficulties surrounding the poems will gain a better understanding and appreciation for what is finally revealed. What is interesting is that the general scheme of what later emerges is actually anticipated in the recounting of earlier problems, but this could only be dimly glimpsed behind the disguises the Poet used in presenting his work. Moreover, without this prologue, some readers would always be plagued by the tantalizing thought as to whether, *had they known of the details of this information*, they would themselves have intuited some or all of what is later revealed. *Therefore, Chapter 1* offers this type of reader a chance at this anticipation — *a fragile, one time opportunity for testing that will be forever lost by what is to be learned.*

Chapter 2, "Enter Poet," initiates the probe of the Poet's interventions in his *Sonnets*. This chapter introduces some of the earliest portents by others that there was something more to these poems than met the superficial eye. This led to a careful consideration of certain unusual features of some of the poems. It is here that the first signs were found that there were indeed present in them some kinds of "codes."

Though the word "code" suggests similarities to those alleged in Shakespeare's work by earlier writers, what is presented here is for the most part unlike the "ciphers" and complex *coded schemes* that were the rage among some commentators decades before. Many of these were attempts to prove that *Francis Bacon* was the real author

INTRODUCTION

of Poet's plays. But these previous complex and recondite attempts have remained thoroughly unconvincing and have largely been discredited. (See, for example, William and Elizabeth Friedman, *The Shakespearean Ciphers Examined*, 1957.) Unlike such flawed predecessors, the new findings disclose far more rigorous and precise patterns that are clearly evident and easily communicated to the interested reader. These become evident in certain unusual details in some of the sonnets and their correspondences and led to a careful program of investigation that added to the knowledge of them.

The very manner in which these new devices unfold contribute to an understanding of their peculiar mode of communicating. Hence, the recapitulation of this discovery process does much to authenticate their presence. Not only does this unfolding inform about the *code devices*, but it provides the bonus of enabling the reader to share in the considerable surprise and excitement generated as it gradually becomes evident that there was here something *new and striking*.

Having established in *Chapter 2* that the Poet indeed embedded *codes* in the *Sonnets*, the next problems concern their extent and significance. *Were these limited to a few unique instances? Were there variations in them that extended their application? What were these devices telling?* These questions are undertaken in *Chapter 3*, "*Meaning*." Once again, the findings emerge step by step. As each new instance is uncovered, it leads on to further discoveries. The chapter closes with a first assessment of the findings.

The explorations are continued in *Chapter 4*, "*The Sonnets Unfold*." The *devices* having shown themselves to be more elaborate and extensive than could have been imagined now begin to tell their own story. It is in this chapter that the true character of the *Sonnets* makes its first appearance. The chapter astounds by showing that there was more than one "*friend*" addressed and brings some major revelations in its wake. This decisively

THE SHAKESPEARE CODES

changes the meaning of the poems and earlier conceptions of the *Sonnets*. The chapter ends with a surprising interpretation of the *cryptic epigraph* statement that appeared on the original dedication page of the *Sonnets*. While the work of earlier scholars played a part in this unravelling, this is an interpretation that could only have been arrived at through having been informed by the new discoveries of this book.

Chapter 5, "Friends Indeed," continues the revelations. We learn still more about the *friends* addressed as well as about *the Poet's "rivals."* Here again we learn that there was more than one such *feared "rival."* In this chapter an overview is completed of the first 126 poems of the *Sonnets*. However, this is a scheme that remains partial and must look ahead for completion to the remaining 28 *Dark Lady* poems.

The final integration of all the poems is arrived at in *Chapter 6, "The Dark Lady."* This deals with the elusive *Dark Lady* addressed by the Poet with such pain and anguish. The chapter explodes the view that this portion of the *Sonnets* was merely tacked on to the rest. It is found that these poems do have an organic connection with the rest and with the *friends* that appeared earlier. With these connections made apparent, the investigation of the *Sonnets* is concluded as the ultimate message and purpose of the *Sonnets* are revealed.

Chapter 7, "Fresh Numbers," is the final chapter of **Part 1**. This chapter discusses another *code* not treated earlier. As if this were still needed as proof, the chapter again provides confirmation of the astounding skill and breadth of the Poet who could write glorious and memorable poems at the same time he overlays and encodes them in enormously complex ways — *truly the work of an unparalleled literary genius.*

Part 2 of *The Shakespeare Codes* augments the first. Since in exploring the main themes of the *Sonnets* only a fraction of the poems were actually discussed and analyzed, this section is comprised of a sonnet by sonnet

INTRODUCTION

commentary on all of the 154 poems and provides a copy of each of them in the words and spelling of the 1609 Quarto edition. The discussions in *The Commentary* make use for the first time ever of the grand scheme and the new understanding that has been gained. *This part of the book is hardly anticlimactic since it contains its share of dramatic and revolutionary findings on these poems as more of the Poet's intentions and genius are revealed.*

Happily for some readers and as always happens in treatments of a complex work of a major poet, there doubtless remain additional themes, mysteries, details, and nuances to be further explored. There will surely be readers that will be delighted to learn that there is ample scope and opportunity for them to ply their own talents and ingenuity in original ways to Shakespeare's magnificent work.

As the reader is about to embark on this new voyage of discovery, it is to be noted that those who have read the previous Revelatory Press books on the personal William Shakespeare — *The Hidden Shakespeare (1994)*; *Shakespeare's Judaica and Devices (1996)* — already know that the poet is a man who swims in a sea of multiple cultures. It was only with the advent of the Revelatory Press books that it was learned that, beyond the milieu of small town Stratford and his nation, *the Poet was also the product of an illustrious Judaic culture. (Whatever the superficial historic records supposedly show about the Poet's lineage — Catholic wills, baptisms, formal religious declarations, lineage, and the like — some of these were obviously developed by the Poet's family to disguise the truth from hostile authorities.)* This Judaic culture had an extensive Hebrew literature that embodied a universality in wisdom, insight, and ethical vision of a scope scarcely suspected by the world surrounding the Poet. It had been shown that one of the Poet's unique literary characteristics was that he had interlaced the wealth of this Judaic culture with that of the others to create *a new literary hybrid with a dramatic power and moral credibility scarcely*

THE SHAKESPEARE CODES

before achieved. Some of the Poet's plays can be seen to be of a literary type that are in Hebrew called *medrashes*. These are commentaries on books and passages of the Bible that restate, explain, and see them in new contexts. For example, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are in this view *medrashes*, respectively, on the books of *Ecclesiastes* and *Job*.

Within the seamless whole of his work, the Poet's audiences would rest oblivious to its sources. Had these sources not been hidden, it is likely the Poet would have been in grave danger in the hostile climate of his time that was not tolerant of deviant religious beliefs. But that was a time of extremes long ago that, thankfully, has passed. It has been the task of the *Revelatory Press book series* to recover and reveal the hidden sources and dimensions of the Poet's work and to open the way for the full recovery of the great treasures that the Poet brought to the world.

William Shakespeare showed himself to be a man proud of his Jewish heritage and its majestic, universal teachings, particularly as these were expressed in the *Talmud*, a compendium of this teaching and wisdom. As a representative of his people in its mission of ushering in the conditions of the Messianic era, the Poet in communicating this rich cultural heritage was indeed a *one man "light unto the nations."* He is described as having graced the world by creating "*the modern consciousness*," one that truly encompasses the complexity of being and thought. The Poet had enriched this with the sense of a moral conscience that reaches toward the ethical loftiness of the biblical Prophets. In this context, then, it should not at all be surprising to learn that the *Sonnets* is not an exception to the philosophical and moral heights that exist among the Poet's other works.

The *Sonnets*, long considered one of the most baffling of the Poet's works, has been so due to the fact that the keys to its understanding had been obscured. They had awaited discovery in a time more ripe to receive them. With publication of *The Shakespeare Codes*, it is evident that this time of ripeness is to be now.