

POWER TO HURT

adapted from David Basch's

The Shakespeare Codes: The Sonnets Deciphered

There can be no doubt that Shakespeare was familiar with Jewish teachings. This he makes evident in the content and encoding in some of the 154 poems of his majestic *SONNETS*. One of these, *Sonnet 94*, presents the teachings of two *Talmudic* sages. The following analysis of this poem illustrates this point, revealing not only the Poet's great artistry but some of his methods for conveying his thoughts. Below is the full sonnet, presented in the words, spelling, and approximate layout of its original 1609 publication. A facsimile of the original appears on the last page.

As will be evident, *Sonnet 94*, with its dramatic opening — “*They that have powre to hurt, and will doe none*” — is one of the most powerful of the sonnets in its serious tone and oracular import. Yet, the sonnet

remains puzzling and an odd fit in the context of the other sonnet poems.

First, there is the problem of who is being addressed. If it is the Poet's young friend that is called on for restraint — the young man conventionally thought to be the central focus of the *SONNETS* — he is painted as someone powerful indeed. In fact, this is of a degree far greater than his likely capability as someone from a merely socially prominent family, a lineage suggested on the dedication page of the *SONNETS* by the title “*Mr.*” before his unidentified initials, “*W. H.*” The poem seems more appropriate as an address to a very high aristocrat with real influence over life and death, as many commentators have found themselves forced to conclude by the scale of power described.

Sonnet 94

They that haue powre to hurt, and will doe none,
That doe not do the thing, they most do shoue,
Who mouing others, are themselues as stone, *
Vnmoued, could, and to temptation slow:
They rightly do inherit heauens graces, _ 5
And husband natures ritches from expence,
They are the Lords and owners of their faces,
Others, but stewards of their excellence:
The sommers flowre is to the sommer sweet,
Though to it selfe, it onely liue and die, _10
But if that flowre with base infection meete,
The basest weed out-braues his dignity:
For sweetest things turne sowrest by their deedes,
Lillies that fester, smell far worse then weeds.

But, even then, the poem's elevated language about power and "heaven's graces" appears to greatly outstrip and transcend an application to any particular person or any conflict that would have personally engaged the poet. Rather, it suggests the poem has a broader meaning as a deep, general meditation on the human condition. So why would such a poem be intruded among the others that discuss more personal themes?

Commentators have observed the great poetic artistry of this sonnet, the lines of which enact its themes within the human realm as "power" and within the metaphor of nature's vegetative realm as "flower," noting how these separated, rhyming realms are artfully brought together in the closing two line couplet. However, the same commentators seem to miss the mark when they would attempt to contain the seriousness of the sonnet's convictions within the confines of a hypothetical personal relationship that has failed the Poet.

The mysteries of the sonnet's meaning and intent become abundantly clear when it is read as the poet's intended companion to the *Bible's Psalm 94*. This psalm begins with a ringing cry to the L-rd, calling on Him in His attribute as "G-d of vengeance." The psalm is a passionate appeal to G-d to avenge the wrongdoing of the powerful against powerless victims — "widows," "orphans," "strangers," and "Your nation," a besieged Israel. Seen in this context, Shakespeare's poem is not at all about a personal affair of the heart, but is directed at persons whose great power could make them ruthless oppressors on a grand scale hardly applicable to a personal friend of the poet, however sinful.

Interestingly, Shakespeare's sonnet focuses on the impact of power *righteously used*, the

very *opposite side* of the power wielded for ruthlessness and evil that was described in the psalm. The poet pays tribute to those mighty ones who curb the temptation to misuse their great power. He describes such persons as masters of "their faces" — masters of how they show themselves to the world. These are persons who "husband nature's riches" from being squandered in wasteful, evil pursuits. The "others" mentioned in lines 3 and 8, who serve the mighty ones, are merely "stewards" of the "excellence" of the noble policies of their powerful masters since it is the masters who make the servants' good deeds possible by setting the proper moral environment. Hence, to the poet, it is the self-restrained, powerful persons, commanding with high purpose and seeing to it that nature's bounty is used wisely and for the good, that are to be regarded as among the most admirable of men.

What is striking about the poet's ideal of restraint presented is that it is a fine illustration of the *Talmud's* teaching given by the sage, *ben (or ven) Zoma*, in *Pirke Avot 4.1*. Quoting *Proverbs 16:32*, *ben Zoma* said, "Who is mighty! He who subdues his passions, as it is said, 'he that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he that ruleth over his spirit than he that taketh a city.'"

It is notable therefore that transliterations of this sage's name as *ben* and *ven Zoma* show up in this sonnet. *Zoma* appears twice as "som'me" in the repetitions in line 9 of the word "sommer" (summer) and as sounded through the letters "sme" in the words "smell" (line 14) and the letters "smeh" (line 3), read right to left in "themselves." In these readings, vowels are assumed to link consonants (*S[o]'ME, S[o]'MEH*), as is characteristic of written Hebrew, in which consonants are

written and vowels are not, but understood. The sage's name is read at least six more times in combination horizontal/vertical alignments, running upward as "*s-a-m-me*" and "*so-m e*," and downward as "*sm-m-a*," "*so-e-me*," "*som-a*," and "*s-m-a*."

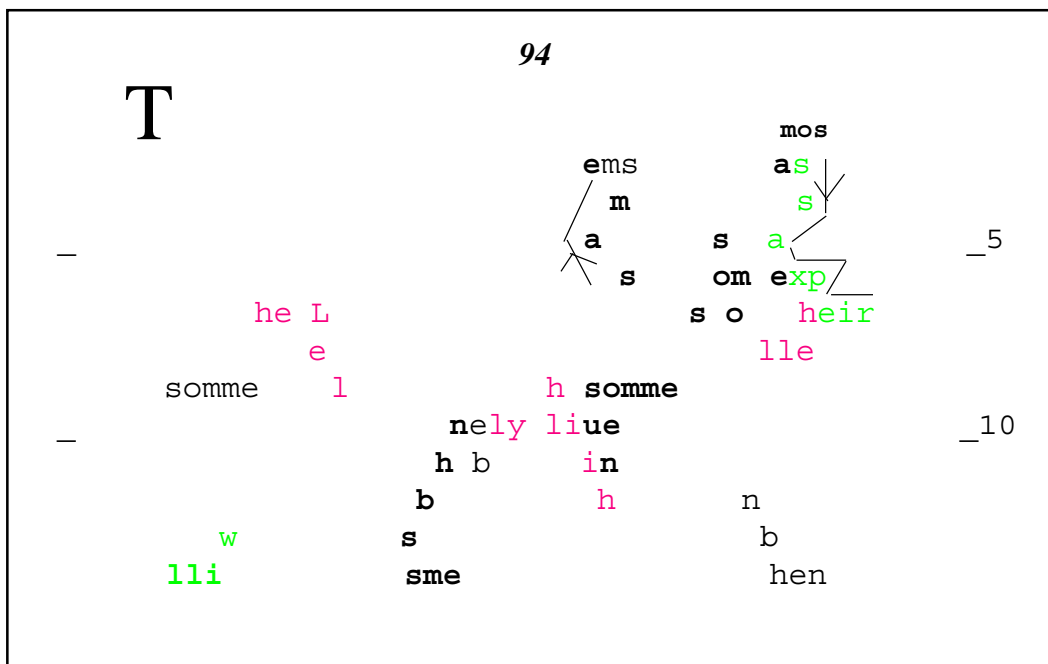
The part of the sages name as *ben* or *ven*, meaning "*son of*," also appears in the text in various transliterated forms. It is sounded as "*b-n*" and "*b-h-n*" in vertical alignments — the latter connecting to "*sme*" below — and in combination, horizontal/vertical instances as "*bhen*," "*b-en*," and "*u-en*" — the latter occurring just below "*somme*." The repetitions make these most credible.

In other lines, Shakespeare goes on to suggest the personal penalty of failing to heed the teaching of *ben Zoma*. Not only is such a person reduced in moral stature to a creature of self absorption who is to be compared with a flower that "*to it selfe, it onely liue and die*," but this person, even if high born, becomes even less than the least. Though he be like a

glorious flower among the beautiful "*Lillies*," he is diminished below the lowly "*weeds*," to be abhorred to a degree far greater than were he of lesser social rank. The implication is that even ordinary persons who restrain their limited power are thereby ennobled and may "*out-brave*," exceed in courage, the so-called great ones when these latter fail.

In the above discussion, the poet has introduced another famous teaching of the *Talmud*. Thus, in *Pirke Avot 1.14*, the sage *Hillel* questioned the moral status of selfish persons who live only for themselves — "*He used to say, If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And being solely for my own self, what am I?*" Note that the sense of the latter part of *Hillel's* saying is applied in Shakespeare's words — "*to it selfe, it onely live and die*."

This reference is given further support by the fact that *Hillel's* name is also transliterated within the sonnet. This occurs at least four times in combination, horizontal/vertical devices as "*he L-e-l*," "*h-i-i-lyl*," "*h-lyl*," and



SHAKE-SPEARES

94

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The above facsimile of *Sonnet 94* as it appears in the original 1609 quarto printing shows the actual alignments of the various embedments. Note the Elizabethan use of the letter “u” for the “v” at mid word and the use of “the long ‘s’ ” at the beginning and at mid word — a letter resembling the letter “f” but without the horizontal line fully crossing at its center.

“*h-ell.*” The latter instance is read as “*He’L[e]L*” with a vowel again assumed in the Hebrew manner. The embedded transliterations noted are shown on the previous page extracted from the surrounding text. Note the vertical representation of the poet’s surname “*s-s-a-xp-eir*” beginning on line 3 (“*s-s*” sounded as “*sh*” as in “*mission*”) and “*w-ill*” beginning on line 13.

What make these readings most persuasive is that the teachings of these sages are presented in conjunction with numerous transliterations of

their names — a complex orchestration that must challenge the idea that this could occur by chance. Similar readings in others of the sonnets indicate that this is part of a well defined system of hidden communications revealing new dimensions of the poems of the *SONNETS* and their poet.

The great range of these communications are presented in *THE SHAKESPEARE CODES*, a book devoted to revealing and exploring the meaning of these findings. •

For more information, check the internet on the topics
“*Shakespeare Codes*” and “*The Hidden Shakespeare*” or
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