

A portrait of William Shakespeare, showing him with a beard and a white ruff collar.

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'And even if we insist on regarding the sonnets, wholly or in part, as a kind of long-term dramatic narrative ... why on earth would Shakespeare choose so often to impersonate a pathetically ageing, balding, lame and vulnerable bisexual suitor, abjectly whingeing about rejection and betrayal — unless the self-humiliation that surfaces again and again through these particulars were both genuine and cathartic?'

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Mr Vickers responded by saying he could not stop people from speculating, adding: 'Thought is free.

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'But if you fix these codes and then say that his 126 poems are like this, then people stop reading them as poems. They read them as biographical documents, looking for imputed sexuality.'

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Although there are few references to anything other than noble love, some sonnets appear more explicit than others.

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Sonnet 20 is largely interpreted as being dedicated to a man, declaring: 'A woman's face with nature's own hand painted / Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion.'

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In 2012, Shakespearean actor Sir Ian McKellen boldly announced that there was absolutely 'no doubt' the bard was bisexual.

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The 75-year-old thespian said he came to his conclusion after studying the English poet's work.

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At the time, he said: 'I'd say Shakespeare slept with men.

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'The Merchant of Venice, centering on how the world treats gays as well as Jews, has a love triangle between an older man, younger man and a woman.

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