

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare the poet

In his own time, Shakespeare was much better known to the reading public as a poet than as a playwright. Indeed, during his life, his best seller by a wide margin, far outstripping the modern blockbusters *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, was *Venus and Adonis*. This went through ten editions before his death in 1616, and another six before 1640. His other long narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* was less popular, but it too circulated far more widely than any of the plays, appearing in six editions during his life, and in two more by 1640. The most popular of the plays for Elizabethan and Jacobean readers were *Richard III* and *Richard II*, each of which went through five editions before 1616. *Romeo and Juliet* went through four; *Hamlet* appeared in three.

For readers since the eighteenth century, however, the narrative poems have been at best marginal to the Shakespeare canon. The Sonnets, on the other hand, which were the least known of his non-dramatic poems until the end of the eighteenth century, had by the twentieth century become essential to the construction of the canonical Shakespeare. They have seemed increasingly enlightening, fragments of life, or perhaps of a fantasy life; but in either case offering tantalising clues to the sources of the poet's dramatic imagination. The biography, which is ample by the standards of the time – we have more hard information about Shakespeare's life than about that of any of his contemporary playwrights with the possible exception of Jonson – offers nothing so richly passionate and emotionally ambiguous.

This transformation, to be sure, involved a good deal of revision, emendation, and especially elucidation, for which the eighteenth-century editor Edmond Malone, who did more to define what we mean by Shakespeare than anyone since the editors of the First Folio, is chiefly responsible. Malone's versions of the most problematic of these poems vary significantly from the original texts, but they have essentially replaced the originals in the modern Shakespeare.

The canonical Shakespeare, however, has, since the publication of the First Folio in 1623, been Shakespeare the playwright; and it is interesting to consider how Shakespeare would appear to us had his poems been included in the Folio – had the Folio been a volume of Complete Works, rather than Complete Plays. We are always told that the model for the First Folio was the first folio of Ben Jonson's *Works*, published in 1616. But this is, in a crucial way, incorrect: Jonson's folio comprised not only plays but poems, masques, entertainments, and even some prose commentary. Indeed, it was his epigrams that Jonson designated 'the ripest of my studies', and he endured a certain amount of scorn for presuming to include the plays at all, for claiming the status of Works for scripts from the popular theatre. The Shakespeare Folio is evidence enough that by 1623 Jonson had made his point, and in that sense Jonson's *Works* were indeed

an enabling precedent. Still, Jonson is for literary history as much a poet as a playwright, and his involvement in the world of aristocratic patronage and connoisseurship, amply revealed in his poems and masques, is an essential element in our sense of his career. Had Shakespeare's poems been, from the outset, part of the canon, we might at the very least take seriously his involvement in that same social world of patronage, erudite readers, and aristocratic admirers. Certainly the dedications to his two long narrative poems, and the care with which they were prepared for and seen through the press, make clear that his ambitions extended beyond the stage.

Why were they not included in the First Folio? Probably for simple, practical reasons. The volume was put together by the King's Men, the acting company of which Shakespeare had been a principal shareholder, playwright, and performer, as a memorial to their most admired colleague. What they owned the rights to – and what chiefly concerned them – was the plays. Since the narrative poems were still selling well in 1623, to have acquired the rights to reprint them would have been difficult, if not impossible. As for the Sonnets, who knows? The quarto volume published in 1609 was the only edition in Shakespeare's lifetime, and it seems to have generated little interest – so little, in fact, that a second edition, published in 1640, could imply that the poems had never been printed before. Perhaps the Sonnets were simply not considered worth including.

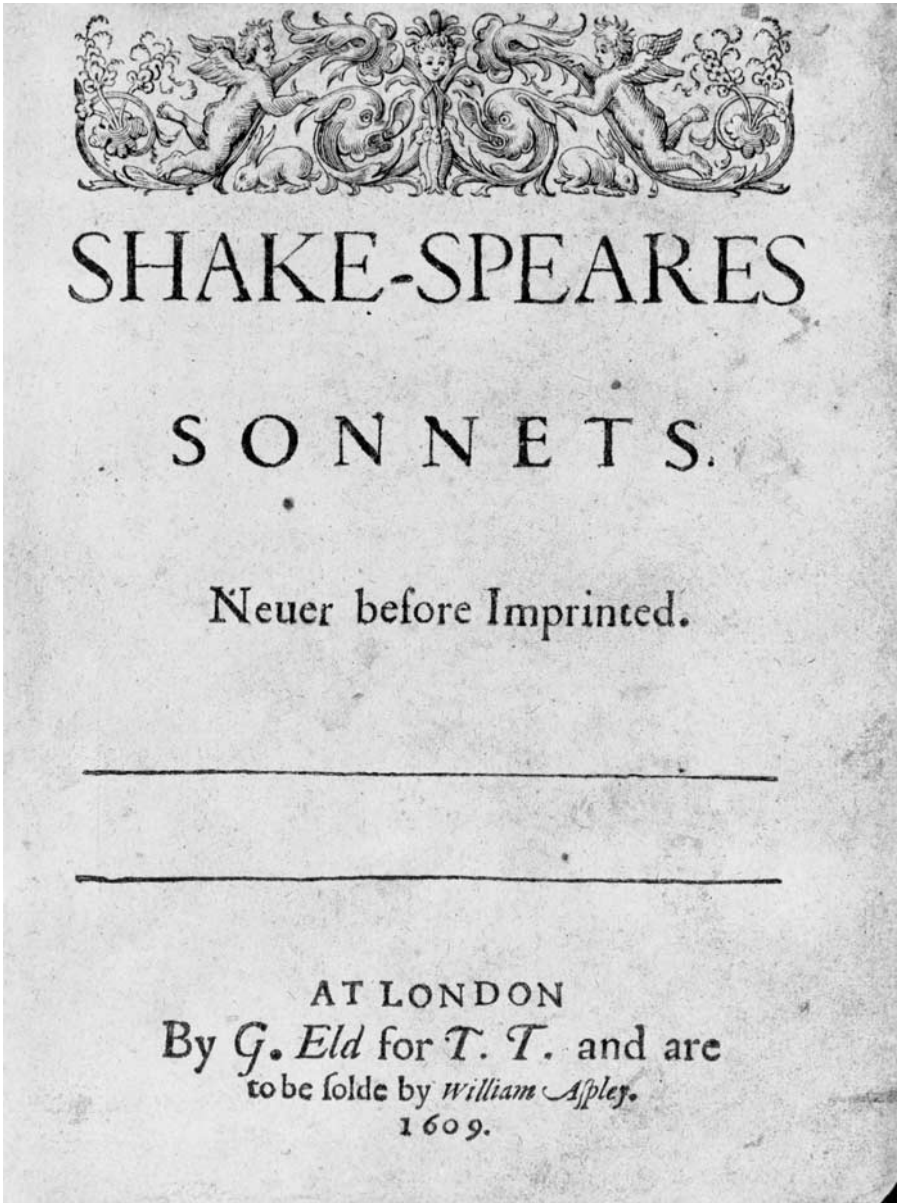
Editorial history

The editorial history of Shakespeare's poems is an index to how complex and conflicted our sense of Shakespeare the poet has been. The first quartos of *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *Lucrece* (1594) are well-printed, elegant little books. They addressed an audience of readers who knew the classics, both Latin and English; they recall, in both their physical presentation and versification, recent editions of Ovid, Spenser, Sidney. Both poems include fulsome dedications to the Earl of Southampton, a glamorous young aristocrat (he was nineteen when *Venus and Adonis* appeared) who was, moreover, the ward of William Cecil, Lord Burghley. This is how ambitious Elizabethan poets got on in the world: by finding a generous aristocratic patron, whose taste, praised in a lavish dedication, in turn constituted a marketable endorsement. That it worked for Shakespeare, at least initially, is indicated by the fact that the *Lucrece* dedication is significantly warmer than that for *Venus and Adonis*; conversely, the fact that there are no further dedications to Southampton implies that it ultimately failed to pay off. For though Southampton was liberally endowed with taste and charm, when at the age of twenty-one he finally came into his inheritance, it turned out to be nothing: what he inherited was debts, and artistic patronage does not live by taste alone.

The aura of aristocratic patronage was not, however, the only attraction of Shakespeare's first published poetry. *Venus and Adonis* was witty, inventive, and stylish; it was also daring, erotically explicit, even amoral. Though it seems to us sexually more comic than pornographic, its immense popularity is cited frequently in Shakespeare's own time as an index to the decline of morals among the young, or the literate classes, or – in an extraordinary example – the Roman Catholic Church. Thomas Robinson, a

lapsed friar, in a pamphlet published in 1622 called *The Anatomy of the English Nunnery at Lisbon*, described the comfortable life of a father confessor to the nuns there: ‘Then after supper it is usual for him to read a little of *Venus and Adonis*, the jests of George Peele, or some such scurrilous book: for there are few idle pamphlets printed in England which he hath not in the house.’ *Lucrece* is less obviously licentious (and certainly much less fun), but for all its moralising, it lingers provocatively over the way Tarquin’s rising lust is heightened by the chaste Lucrece’s fears and pleas – there is a good deal here to feed the Renaissance erotic and sadistic imagination. Moreover, the elements that we find tiresome in these two poems, their formality, dilation, extensive description, and digression – in short, the sheer undramatic quality of these narratives by our greatest dramatist – would have been a good part of what contemporary readers admired: these qualities were what put Shakespeare, as a poet, in the league of Spenser and Marlowe.

The Sonnets are, editorially and bibliographically, another matter entirely. They were, to begin with, not a book. At least some of them circulated initially in manuscript, and the fact that these poems were first conceived as coterie literature is essential to our understanding of the nature of the book that finally materialised as *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. Our evidence for their circulation in manuscript – it should be emphasised that it is our only evidence – comes from the miscellaneous writer Francis Meres, who in 1598, in *Palladis Tamia* (Athena’s Thames), a volume comparing London’s literary scene with that of ancient Athens, praises Shakespeare’s ‘sugred Sonnets among his private friends’; and while it is difficult to imagine ‘sugred’ applying to poems like ‘They that have pow’r to hurt and will do none’ (94) or ‘Th’expense of spirit in a waste of shame’ (129), the adjective certainly describes many of the sonnets written to the beloved young man. There was nothing secretive about this mode of publication; manuscript circulation was a normal mode of transmission for much lyric poetry in the period. Even such monuments of Elizabethan verse as Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*, Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, and Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets* were initially conceived as coterie literature, and presumed a relatively small readership of uniform tastes: the poet was writing for an audience he knew. In fact, Donne refused to allow his lyric poetry to be published in his lifetime because he said he would then have no control over who read it. The Shakespeare of the ‘sugred sonnets’ is very much the Shakespeare of the social and cultural world implied by the dedications to *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*; but, as Meres’s reference to an audience of ‘private friends’ suggests, precisely because the Sonnets circulated only in manuscript, their poet is far more deeply embedded in that world than Shakespeare the narrative poet is. The subtext of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* may be the search for a noble patron; but the Sonnets imply a literary circle of taste and wit in which Shakespeare moves with ease. Patronage is still an issue in these poems, with the poet promising immortality to the aristocratic youth, and another poet competing for his attention; but the patronage relationship is no longer simply a matter of dedications: it is here the subject of the poems, and is intense, intimate, and even at times explicitly erotic. That sense of intimacy was shared, too, by the ‘private friends’; the social world in which the Sonnets circulated was correspondingly complex and sophisticated.



1 The title page of the 1609 quarto

It is disappointing, therefore, that none of the ‘sugred Sonnets’ have been found in commonplace books of the 1590s – a small number of the poems appear in manuscript compilations, but all date from after the publication of Thorpe’s 1609 quarto. Manuscript circulation typically involved a reciprocity between author and recipient, in the sense that the reception of manuscript poems was not passive. The gift of a poem really was a gift, its text often specifically reworked to appeal to a particular recipient; and the recipient treated it as a valued possession, copying it out – or more often having it copied by a professional scribe – into personal collections of favourite poems, bits of wisdom, and selections from his or her reading. Often the transcribed versions of the poems would include the recipient’s own revisions, so that the poem became even more definitively the owner’s, not the author’s; and often as not the author’s name would be indicated only by initials, or not at all. Such compilations give us a striking sense of how ambiguous the notion of literary property was in the period (whose poems are these, the author’s or the recipient’s?), and – especially important to emphasise – how little the circulation of literature, as opposed to its preservation, depended on the printing press.

What does it mean, then, that Shakespeare’s ‘private friends’ survive only in Meres’s report? Probably very little – certainly not that Meres was misinformed, or that none of them thought Shakespeare’s poetic gifts worth preserving. The survival rate of private papers from the age is low, and Meres’s claim is not in doubt. The fact that some of the poems were in fact in circulation is demonstrable from the appearance of two of the sonnets, in versions different from those of Thorpe’s 1609 quarto, in a miscellaneous collection of twenty poems called *The Passionate Pilgrim* published by William Jaggard in 1599. The whole volume is ascribed to Shakespeare on its title page,¹ though only five of the poems included, the two sonnets and three more excerpted from *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, are Shakespearean – the play had been published in 1598 with Shakespeare’s name on the title page. Four other sonnets, on the subject of Venus and Adonis but obviously not by Shakespeare, nevertheless enabled Jaggard to trade on the poet’s name by evoking his best-known poem. Shakespeare clearly had nothing to do with the book’s publication, though there is no reason to consider it piratical: Jaggard was publishing a manuscript that he had acquired, or more probably assembled, perfectly legally; though the ascription of the whole volume to Shakespeare is undoubtedly a misrepresentation.

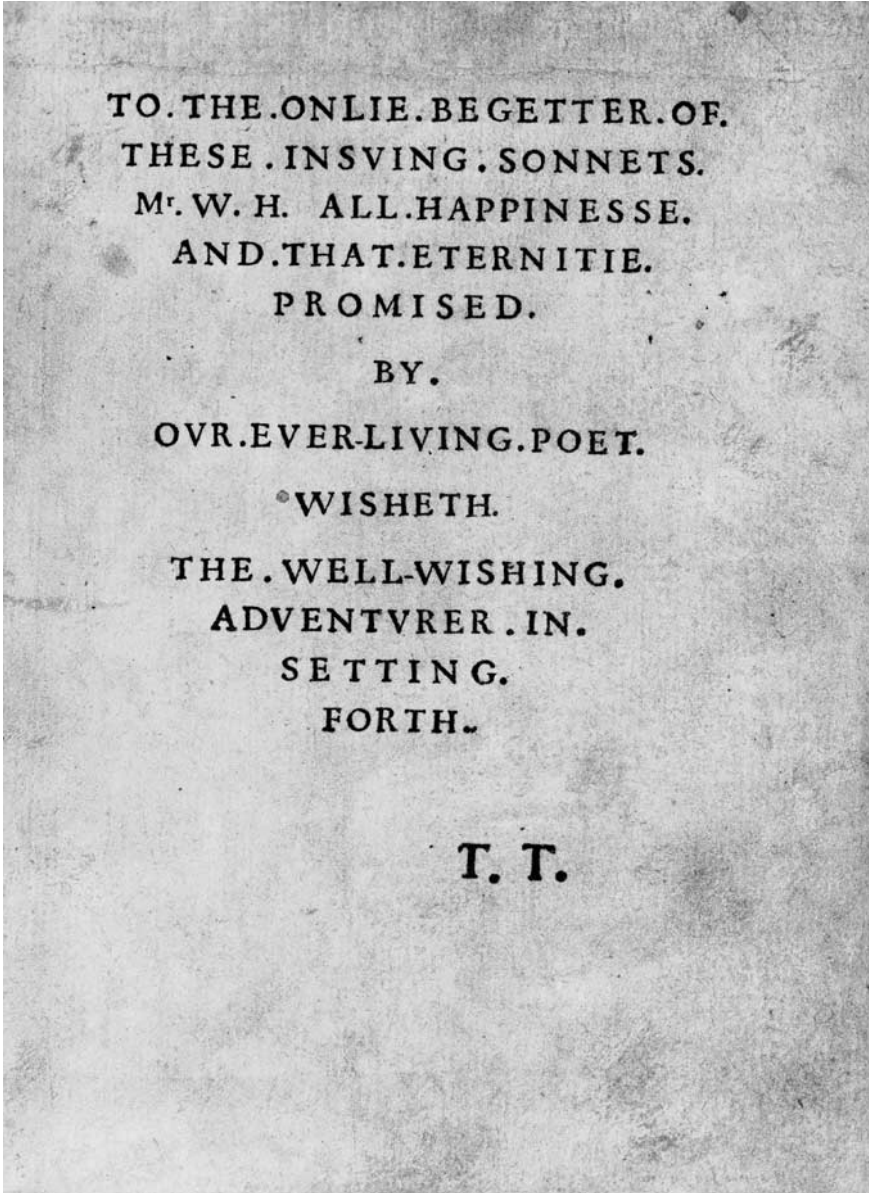
The two sonnets, versions of Thorpe’s 138 and 144, have generally been treated as earlier states of the texts, and have therefore been used as evidence – once again, the only evidence we have – of Shakespeare the lyric poet in the process of revision. This is a reasonable but not inevitable assumption: Thorpe’s copies certainly did not come from Shakespeare, any more than Jaggard’s did, and there is no way of knowing how many intermediate versions lay between the holographs and the printer’s copy. Some of the differences between Jaggard’s and Thorpe’s versions may instead reveal the tastes of one or two of the ‘private friends’, revising to suit their own sense of prosody and poetic language, or even to simplify poems they found too complex.

¹ The title page to the first edition, published probably in 1599 but possibly as early as September 1598, does not survive, but the book was quickly reprinted, and a small number of complete copies of the second edition of 1599 are extant.

How Thomas Thorpe's edition of the Sonnets got into print is unclear, but there is no reason to believe that the 1609 quarto was surreptitious. Thorpe had published play quartos, including Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *Sejanus*, and Shakespeare certainly might have given him a manuscript of sonnets to publish. The volume is, however, provided with a dedication by the publisher, not by the author, which suggests that Shakespeare was not involved in the matter. The dedication, 'to the only begetter of these ensuing Sonnets Mr. W. H.', has been the source of endless dispute and speculation, which is summarised in the Commentary to this edition. Suffice it to say here that if one thing is clear about the dedication, it is that Thorpe intended it to be teasingly obscure, and that if there is in fact a name behind the initials W. H., it is not one that any amount of close reading will extract. It is perhaps best to read W. H. as standing for 'Whoever He (may be)' – and therefore as an acknowledgement that Thorpe knew no more about the 'begetter' of the sonnets than we do. The manuscript, moreover, was not prepared with the sort of care evident in the texts of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. It seems likely that Thorpe had some source other than the author for his copy, which also would not necessarily have been in Shakespeare's hand. Whether Shakespeare approved of the publication or not is unknowable, but the issue would not have been a significant one: intellectual property is largely a modern concept, and the rights to the poems would have belonged to whoever owned the manuscript. Though there are occasional muddles in the book, Thorpe's copy must have been clear enough, because the text is on the whole a satisfactory one. Its editorial problems are undeniable, but they are not, for the most part, the fault of the printer.

The volume concludes with a long Spenserian lament called *A Lover's Complaint*, not included in this edition (see *The Poems*, edited by John Roe, 2006). Its text has fewer muddles, and its presence in the volume remains a puzzle. Thorpe obviously considered it an appropriate way of concluding the book, but whether Shakespeare did, or whether it was part of the same manuscript, or whether Shakespeare wrote it at all, are impossible to say with any certainty. Thorpe believed that he had done so, explicitly including Shakespeare's name after the title – there is no reason to suspect any misrepresentation in this; Thorpe was a perfectly reputable publisher. But in cases where the author is not involved in a book's publication, the ascription of even a reputable publisher in the period has only limited value.

To conclude a volume of Sonnets with a long poem was not unusual: Spenser's *Amoretti* concludes with the *Epithalamion*, Drayton's *Delia* with *The Complaint of Rosamond*. As for the question of authorship, critics remained dubious about the matter until the 1960s. The poem is in the same stanza form as *Lucrece*, but includes a number of archaisms uncharacteristic of Shakespeare, and forty-nine words or forms found nowhere else in his works. This vocabulary evidence against Shakespeare's authorship has been countered by the argument that plays that are unquestionably Shakespearean often employ new vocabulary, and include new verbs made from nouns and newly invented compound adjectives, and that therefore the unusual and unique usages indicate, on the contrary, that the poem is in fact by Shakespeare. This argument may, of course, primarily constitute evidence of how manipulable stylistometric analysis can be. In the past two decades, several impressive critical readings of the poem have insisted



2 Thomas Thorpe's so-called 'Dedication' prefaced to the 1609 quarto

that it is both authentically Shakespearean and has an integral place among the Sonnets.¹ Colin Burrow, in the most authoritative recent essay on Shakespeare's poems, declares discussion about the poem's attribution 'definitively ended'.² But consensus remains elusive: Brian Vickers, shortly after the declaration of the definitive end of discussion, ascribed the poem to John Davies of Hereford.³ All one can say with absolute confidence is that to read the Sonnets as the readers of Thorpe's quarto did – which is to say, as Shakespeare's contemporaries did – one must take *A Lover's Complaint* into account.

Why, given the continuing success of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, the Sonnets were not popular in 1609 is difficult to say, but it should make us take with a grain of salt the claim that Shakespeare's name on a title page was enough to guarantee a publisher's profit. The tantalising evidence of emotional turmoil and non-vanilla sex that makes them irresistible to us apparently was not a big selling point for Shakespeare's contemporaries: it was in Sidney's sonnets (which strike us as relentlessly literary) that early readers found the satisfactions of autobiography and erotic revelation. The usual explanation for the Shakespeare Sonnets' neglect is that the vogue for sonnets was past; but in 1609 the vogue for Shakespeare certainly was not. The Sonnets in print remained what they had originally been: coterie literature, experimental and daring both linguistically and erotically, and seriously playful. The fact that their attractiveness to a coterie audience did continue is clear from the number of these sonnets that reappear in Jacobean and Caroline commonplace books: even after publication, people continued to copy the ones they liked, circulate them, make them their own. The number is admittedly small – there are twenty-five manuscript versions of only twelve sonnets out of the hundred and fifty-four – and this may suggest that the coterie had diminished significantly as well.⁴

Refashioning the Sonnets

There was no second edition of the Sonnets until 1640, twenty-four years after Shakespeare's death. That edition, however, involved wholesale revision. The publisher John Benson, capitalising on the undiminished sales of *Venus and Adonis*, produced a volume of what looked to be not old-fashioned sonnets but new Shakespeare love poems. The transformation involved both format and erotics: many of the sonnets are run together, making them 28-line poems, and all are given titles, such as 'True Admiration', 'Self-Flattery of her Beauty', 'An Entreaty for Her Acceptance' – as the latter two indicate, most of the love poems addressed to the young man are now addressed to a woman. To

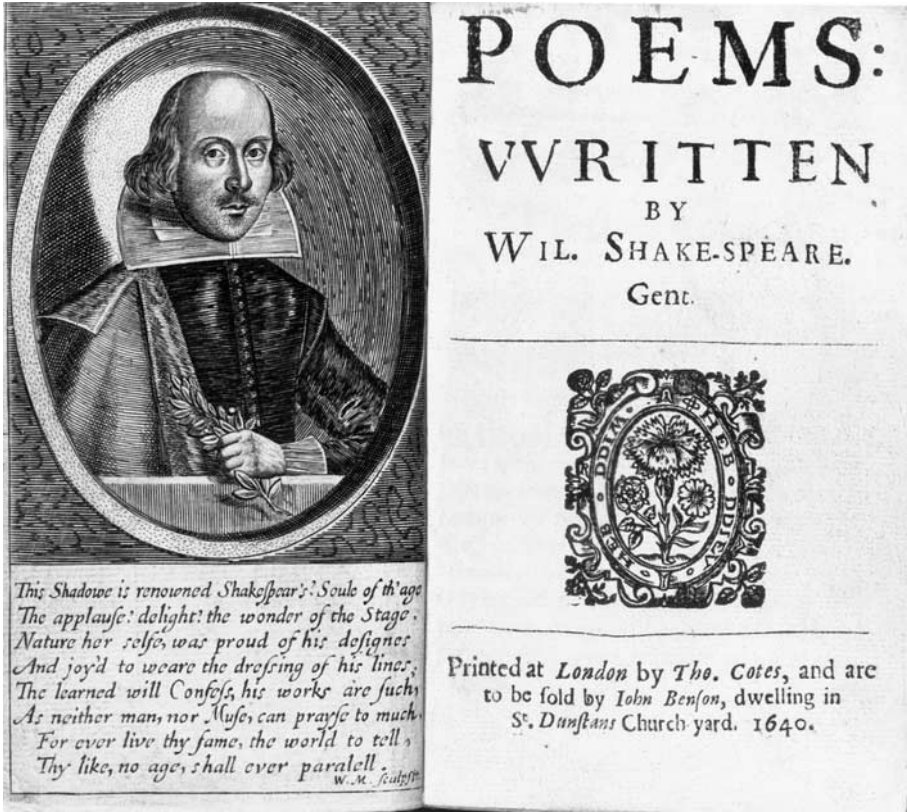
¹ See especially John Kerrigan's Introduction to the New Penguin *Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (revised edn, 1995), pp. 15–18.

² Introduction, William Shakespeare, *Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford, 2002), p. 139.

³ 'A rum "do"'. The likely authorship of "A Lover's Complaint", *TLJ*, 5 December 2003, pp. 13–15.

⁴ It has been argued, most persuasively by Gary Taylor and Jeremy Maule, that two of the manuscript versions, late as they are, nevertheless preserve earlier readings than those of Thorpe's quarto. See Gary Taylor, 'Some manuscripts of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 68 (1985), 210–46, and the excellent summary by John Kerrigan in the New Penguin *Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (revised edn, 1995), 428, 441–53.

Cambridge University Press
 0521861187 - The Sonnets, Updated Edition
 Edited by G. Blakemore Evans
 Excerpt
[More information](#)



3 The title page and facing portrait of the 1640 *Poems*

effect this, it was necessary only to change three masculine pronouns within the poems to feminine ones and supply a few gendered titles, but since the sonnets to the young man, as they are arranged in the volume, imply a fairly consistent narrative, the pronoun changes were sufficient to change the story. Benson's motive for these revisions was probably less any nervousness about Shakespeare's sexuality than a publisher's desire to bring the poems up to date, and transform the book from an Elizabethan sonnet sequence to a volume of Cavalier love lyrics. As a marketing strategy, this was an old one: almost a century earlier, the publisher Richard Tottel had effected a similar transformation in Thomas Wyatt's sonnets and lyrics, regularising the manuscript versions that came to his hand, and giving them sentimental titles when he published them in *Songs and Sonnets* ("Tottel's Miscellany") in 1559.

Benson's volume was not a great success, and there was no subsequent edition until 1710, when a supplementary volume to Nicholas Rowe's Shakespeare, edited by Charles Gildon and published by Jacob Tonson, reprinted Benson's text. In the next year Bernard Lintot produced a competing edition that returned to the 1609

quarto, probably not through any devotion to authenticity, but merely as a way of circumventing Tonson's copyright. Nevertheless, Benson's revision remained the text of the Shakespeare Sonnets until late in the eighteenth century; and indeed, these versions of the poems were still being reprinted in the nineteenth century. The definitive return to the 1609 quarto was the work of Edmond Malone, who in 1780 produced an edition that finally brought the editing of the poems in line with the editing of the plays by taking the first published texts into account. It rationalised Thorpe's text, certainly, but its clarifications have on the whole stood the test of time. In a few critical instances, however, Malone undertook wholesale rewriting to produce the kind of sense the eighteenth-century Shakespeare seemed to demand. The most famous of these involves a crux in Sonnet 129, 'Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame'. Here 'lust in action' is described, in the 1609 quarto, as 'A blisse in prooffe and proud and very wo'. The line continued to read this way, with minor adjustments to modernise spelling and punctuation, throughout the next century – through John Benson's 1640 edition, Charles Gildon's in 1710, and the numerous popular editions throughout the eighteenth century, until Malone's, in which the line became 'A bliss in proof, and prov'd, a very woe'. Thereafter, with very few demurrals, this became the line: Malone was acknowledged to have restored Shakespeare's original.

Orthographically, the quarto's 'proud' could in 1609 be read as either 'proud' or 'provd' – though for the latter, considering the compositor's practice in the rest of the volume, 'prou'd' would have been the expected form – but, as with 'travaill' meaning both travail and travel in Shakespeare's English, the reader of 1609 who saw 'proved' in the word would not have seen only that, and would have read it as both: *provd* retained the sense of *proud*. It is a sense, in fact, that we should certainly not edit out of the poem: 'pride', says the Bible, is what 'goeth before . . . a fall' (Proverbs 16:18) – before the sonnet's 'very woe', before 'this hell', in which the poem ends. *Proud* also means erect, or tumescent (as in Sonnet 151, line 10), a usage still current today in the medical term 'proud flesh'. Therefore, whatever Shakespeare intended, the most we may reasonably argue is that both readings are possible; or to put it more strongly, that the two readings are not separable. It should be emphasised, however, that there is no published evidence that anyone before 1780 ever read the word as anything but 'proud'.¹ Simply to eliminate one of the word's senses, as Malone's emendation does, is both to falsify the text and abolish its history.

But the transformation of 'proud' to 'proved' required Malone to make another revision in the line, less noticeable, though arguably even more radical: the change of the second 'and' to 'a', so that the clause reads not 'and proud and very wo' but 'and prov'd, a very woe.' This emendation transforms the view of sex from a tripartite act – a bliss both during action and when completed, and also true woe – to a simple before and after contrast, bliss in action, woe afterwards. There is no room for 'proud' in this neatly balanced pair. If the 1609 quarto (or, for that matter, Benson's 1640 volume) was the

¹ Edward Capell's unpublished draft edition of the Sonnets, now in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, and probably seen by Malone, first proposed this reading; see, e.g., W. G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath, eds., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1964), pp. xxi–xxii.