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The Sonnets

The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare

VOLUME 31

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON

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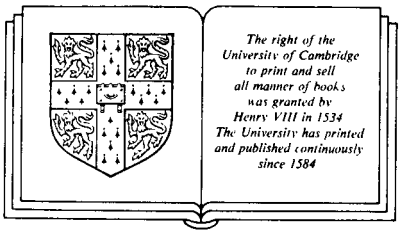
EDITED FOR THE SYNDICS OF THE
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BY

JOHN DOVER WILSON

THE SONNETS



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PREFACE

I began this edition of the finest love poetry in the world in what I think must be the loveliest garden on earth. It lies in a level upland glade shut in by dark forests stretching up to jagged mountain tops, but itself containing a luxuriant orchard and stately trees dotted about it here and there, while it fearlessly exposes its grassy slopes to the midsummer heat of the southern hemisphere, being watered and cooled by running streams and deep dark pools that give teeming life to birds and flowers of many kinds and colours, while to crown all extend the sweeping curves of a stately house, dwelling-place of a great lady. Shakespeare, I fancy, had imagined just such a home of peace and delight as his Belmont. Or he may even have seen one not unlike it at Wilton. Certainly it was a happy fortune that placed me amid such surroundings when I had to set hand to my last volume in the *New Cambridge Shakespeare*, begun forty years ago. For all the plays in the canon being now published, the *Poems* and the *Sonnets* remained, the former for Professor Maxwell, the latter for myself, and I was here in South Africa sitting one morning early in 1962 under the shade of a deodar tree, with a copy of the *Sonnets* in my hand to begin what after four years would become the volume the reader has before him. In the soil I have described the work took root at once and went on steadily growing, despite unforeseen difficulties after my return to Scotland, until, when still in 1962 a second midsummer came round for me, I had already made up my mind what I wanted to say and was able before the end of the year to submit a draft introduction for approval and criticism to my friend, Mr Richard David, now also my publisher, since

he had recently been appointed Secretary to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press.

A few months later, however, my plans were suddenly complicated by a letter dated 11 June 1963 from an Oxford historian whom I had made friends with some years back when staying at All Souls. He wrote in some excitement, and no wonder, inasmuch as, he informed me, he had just completed a new Life of Shakespeare, proving all the 'literary' scholars to have misconceived the facts and giving special attention to the *Sonnets* in which he claimed to have solved all the problems. I replied that I happened at the moment to be working on the *Sonnets* myself, was intending to offer solutions to some of the problems, and sent him a typescript copy of the draft Introduction, so that he could see the lines I was following. At this in turn he courteously ordered his publisher to send me an advance copy of his book.

All this placed me, as things were, in a very awkward predicament. Like most old men I was suffering from cataract and my sight grew worse as the years went on; an unsuccessful operation early in 1963 only made matters worse. The result was that I found reading and writing increasingly difficult. I could still dictate but if I was to finish my task at all, I felt obliged to restrict my reading severely to the business of the commentary.

I told him therefore that it was impossible for me to read his book; and that unless I could read it carefully and follow the argument step by step I could not tell how far I agreed with it, if at all. It was a quandary. Yet in the end I was luckily able to effect an escape owing to an action on his part. For, some months before his biography was announced to appear, he issued a series of newspaper articles giving the gist of his case.

One of these dealt with the *Sonnets*; I had it read aloud to me; and I at once realized that I need trouble myself no more about the matter. For his conclusions differed so fundamentally from those I had come to myself that one of us must be wrong, while it was out of the question for one hampered as I was to think of answering him, still less to enter into a controversy, since a blind man is virtually cut off from access to his authorities. My only course therefore was to go forward as speedily as I could, ignoring him and letting the world judge between us when the Cambridge University Press produced my book a year or two thence.

Its Secretary, however, took a slightly different view: Let us publish the draft Introduction at once, so that the world will be able to judge, if it wishes, between the two points of view without delay. I agreed and thus it came about that when his Cornish privateer of tall building and of goodly pride put forth into the perilous main of publicity, full of 'literary' submarines, my saucy bark, dressed overall in Cambridge blue and with pennon flying inscribed *For historians and others*, was there riding alongside.

That happened towards the end of 1963; and for the next year, working with such means and such speed as a purblind man can command, I pressed forward with the preparation of a line-by-line commentary and notes. All this was based upon a thorough re-examination of the text which, I was encouraged to find, so far from leading to conclusions in conflict with those arrived at in the provisional findings of 1963, not only confirmed them in all important respects but greatly developed them.

But the issues raised by the *Sonnets* are too many and too diverse in character to be compassed by one man in a single lifetime; and being allowed but a few years, if

that, by all-devouring time, I decided to limit myself to establishing if possible two matters of fact: (1) the order, and (2) the date, of the *Sonnets*, since until those two results are attained editors have no firm ground to work upon.

How true that is a glance through the documented history of *Sonnets*-criticism since the time of Malone down to 1944 is enough to show and is now shown in the monumental Variorum edition by H. E. Rollins. Without that edition, indeed, my task could not have been accomplished, for its notes comprise those of all previous editors and from these an editor of today is at liberty to select all the glosses and comments that appeal to his judgement. How salutary moreover is his Johnsonian commonsense in dealing with specious absurdities or when summing up the discussion of vexed problems that lend themselves to divergent opinions!

Apart from Rollins's, the edition from which I have learnt most is H. C. Beeching's, which is almost unknown in this country because his little book, published in America in 1904, is so rare that I know of only two copies, one at the Cambridge University Library and the other owned by Blair Leishman, who lent it me not long before his death, and which I now cherish as a bequest both for its own sake and in memory of its owner. This copy, too, reveals pencil notes here and there, in his difficult hand, many of which my secretary has been able to decipher and read for me. Beeching's outstanding value as an editor is twofold; he holds no brief for the identification of Shakespeare's Friend and his exegesis is informed with a rigid adherence to the language Shakespeare uses, or had used elsewhere, together with an unusually acute awareness of the grammar, syntax and rhetoric involved. In this respect

he often has the better of the scarcely less valuable Dowden, and I found either of them useful as a check upon the other. After them I have most often availed myself of the interpretations of Tucker and Knox Pooler. What I found most interesting in Pooler was his indication of affinities between sonnets at different points of the 1609 text, which often suggested possibilities of misplacements. I cannot always agree, but at times when I do they seem to lead on to important consequences. Nor must I omit to record my debt to Martin Seymour-Smith. His thoughtful and scholarly edition appeared in 1963, too late for me to benefit from it as much as I could have wished. But it was his example which gave me courage to follow the original punctuation and if I find his commentary less pedestrian than my own, that is probably because he is a modern and I am an octogenarian. Unless, however, I am mistaken he has more still to contribute to Elizabethan and Shakespearian scholarship.

Yet when all is said the prince of Sonnet editors and commentators is one of the earliest, the great Edmund Malone. All our texts go back to his, and though an American scholar has recently called some of his readings in question, let H. E. Rollins, another American and the twentieth-century editor best qualified to judge, speak the final word:

> His effect on the text was immense: for the majority of editors before 1864[1] he left little to do except to insert (or omit) an occasional hyphen, to change a period or a comma here and there, to modernize some archaic spelling. No nineteenth-century or twentieth-century editor has done textual work at all comparable in importance to Malone's; few have surpassed him as an annotator; and dozens have

[1] The first edition of the *Cambridge Shakespeare* was published in 1863.

taken credit for details borrowed from him without acknowledgement. Truly, one knows not whether to marvel more that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this supposedly clear age walk so stumblingly after him. He will be praised of ages yet to come.[1]

J.D.W.
23 *December* 1964

[1] H. E. Rollins, *The Sonnets* (Variorum Shakespeare, 1944) II, 39.

POSTSCRIPT

The copy for this volume was sent to the printers shortly after the above date, but its printing and final preparation for the press was delayed by various causes for over a year: the chief cause being that by the time the first proofs were received the Editor could no longer see a line of print.

J.D.W.

SECOND EDITION 1967

I have added a table at the end of the volume, showing the order in which I conjecture the Sonnets were written; and during the interval I have found time to make a thorough revision of the notes, mostly in the form of clarification and compression.

J.D.W.

INTRODUCTION

I. The Cave and the Sun

Sir Walter Raleigh, who wrote the most human short life of William Shakespeare that we possess, began his section on the *Sonnets* as follows: 'There are many footprints around the cave of this mystery, none of them pointing in the outward direction. No one has ever attempted a solution of the problem without leaving a book behind him; and the shrine of Shakespeare is thickly hung with these votive offerings, all withered and dusty.'[1] Raleigh's cave of mystery calls another to mind, Plato's cave of illusion, in which the human race sit chained with their backs to the sun without, and are condemned to accept the passing shadows on the wall before them for the truth—the real truth being only revealed to the few who are able to break their bonds and turn to face the light of day.[2] Absorbed in our own attempts to solve the biographical puzzles that the individual sonnets offer us, we remain blind to the sun that casts these shadows but gives meaning to the whole. Begin by seeing that meaning and recognizing the whole as the greatest love-poem in the language, and the mystery of the detail becomes so unimportant as to fade away.

That this is the right approach to an understanding, apparently so obvious and so natural, has in point of fact only quite recently been realized; and realized independently and almost simultaneously by two critics, both driven by a wide study of the love-poetry of the Renaissance to admit the uniqueness of Shakespeare's.

[1] Walter Raleigh, *Shakespeare* (1907), p. 86.
[2] *The Republic*, Book VII, §§ 514–18.

'There is no parallel', writes J. W. Lever in a sensitive and learned book on *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet*, 'in the whole corpus of Renaissance poetry to Shakespeare's sustained exploration of the theme of friendship through more than 120 sonnets'.[1] More significant still is what he calls the Poet's 'extreme capacity for self-effacement' and emphasizes as not just an echo of the conventional sonnet lover's avowed humility. As he writes:

> Sidney had always his Protestant conscience and the dignity of his rank for ultimate solace; Spenser, regarding courtship as a preliminary to the sacrament of marriage and the subordination of wife to husband, had stooped to conquer. Even Petrarch had sacrificed himself on the altar of love with a certain hauteur—*E voglio anzi un sepolcro bello e bianco*. But the self-effacement of Shakespeare as poet of the sonnets is total and unreserved. He has no place in nature or society save that accorded him by the Friend. He is in the autumn of his years, 'lame, poor, and despised', 'in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes'... he envies this man's art and that man's scope. Far from planning, like Petrarch, a memorial of white marble to commemorate his love, he pleads to be left forgotten and unmourned, lest the world should mock the man who once befriended him:
>
> No longer mourn for me when I am dead,
> Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
> Give warning to the world that I am fled
> From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell:
> Nay if you read this line, remember not,
> The hand that writ it... (71)[2]

C. S. Lewis, the other critic I must quote, proclaims the *Sonnets* not only as unique in the period of the Renaissance but as the supreme love-poetry of the world.

[1] J. W. Lever, *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet* (1956). p. 165. [2] *Ibid.* pp. 185–6.

He begins by disposing of the 'cave of mystery' in these terms:

> The difficulty which faces us if we try to read the sequence like a novel is that the precise mode of love which the poet declares for the Man remains obscure. His language is too lover-like for that of ordinary male friendship; and though the claims of friendship are sometimes put very high in, say, the *Arcadia*, I have found no real parallel to such language between friends in sixteenth-century literature. Yet, on the other hand, this does not seem to be the poetry of full-blown pederasty. Shakespeare, and indeed Shakespeare's age, did nothing by halves. If he had intended in these sonnets to be the poet of pederasty, I think he would have left us in no doubt; the lovely παιδικά, attended by a whole train of mythological perversities, would have blazed across the page. The incessant demand that the Man should marry and found a family would seem to be inconsistent (or so I suppose—it is a question for psychologists) with a real homosexual passion. It is not even very obviously consistent with normal friendship. It is indeed hard to think of any real situation in which it would be natural. What man in the whole world, except a father or a potential father-in-law, cares whether any other man gets married? Thus the emotion expressed in the *Sonnets* refuses to fit into our pigeon-holes....
>
> Such is the effect of individual sonnets. But when we read the whole sequence through at a sitting (as we ought sometimes to do) we have a different experience. From its total plot, however ambiguous, however particular, there emerges something not indeed common or general like the love expressed in many individual sonnets, but yet, in a higher way, universal. The main contrast in the *Sonnets* is between the two loves, that 'of comfort' and that 'of despair'. The love 'of despair' demands all; the love 'of comfort' asks, and perhaps receives, nothing. Thus the whole sequence becomes an expanded version of Blake's 'The Clod and the Pebble'. And so it comes about that, however the whole thing began—in perversion, in convention,

even (who knows?) in fiction—Shakespeare, celebrating the 'Clod' as no man has celebrated it before or since, ends by expressing simply love, the quintessence of all loves whether erotic, parental, filial, amicable, or feudal. Thus from extreme particularity there is a road to the highest universality. The love is, in the end, so simply and entirely love that our *cadres* are thrown away and we cease to ask what kind. However it may have been with Shakespeare in his daily life, the greatest of the sonnets are written from a region in which love abandons all claims and flowers into charity: after that it makes little odds what the root was like. They open a new world of love poetry; as new as Dante's and Petrarch's had been in their day. These had of course expressed humility, but it had been the humility of Eros, hungry to receive; kneeling, but kneeling to ask. They and their great successor Patmore sing a dutiful and submissive, but hardly a giving, love. They could have written, almost too easily, 'Being your slave, what should I do but tend?': they could hardly have written, 'I may not evermore acknowledge thee', or 'No longer mourn', or 'Although thou steal thee all my poverty'. The self-abnegation the 'naughting', in the *Sonnets* never rings false. This patience, this anxiety (more like a parent's than a lover's) to find excuses for the beloved, this clear-sighted and wholly unembittered resignation, this transference of the whole self into another self without the demand for a return, have hardly a precedent in profane literature. In certain senses of the word 'love', Shakespeare is not so much our best as our only love poet.[1]

There is nothing a mere editor can add to that except to quote what Keats tells us about the poet.

A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually informing[2] and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men

[1] C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954), pp. 503–5.
[2] 'Informing'—conjectural completion of 'in for—'.

and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures.[1]

As a dramatic poet, Shakespeare has no identity; as a man and a lover he is as selfless and humble as the clod in Blake's poem 'trodden with the cattle's feet'. Thus the *Sonnets* are for all time.

Yet their poet, being human, was of an age, and in order that the modern reader may not misunderstand the homage offered, I shall have to remind him, at times in many of the observations that follow, of certain Elizabethan conventions and modes of expression. There is, however, one important convention of sonnet-writers which must be set down here. To quote T. G. Tucker, one of the better editors of the *Sonnets*:

> Shakespeare was the poet in 'service' or 'vassalage' to his 'lord', and in the recognized manner of sonneteers, supposed himself bound to write piece after piece to the beloved with a certain continuity of production and with as much variety of 'invention' as possible upon his adopted theme. Any intermission of greater length than usual, any omission to keep up the regular supply of offerings at the altar, would call for self-reproach and apology; it would even supply the poet with matter for the next effort.[2]

And there readers who have, like Lewis, chosen the better part of enjoying the *Sonnets* as the greatest love-poetry in the world and asking no further questions, may well leave this introduction and pass directly on to Shakespeare himself.

[1] *The Letters of John Keats*, edited by M. Buxton Forman (2nd ed., 1936), p. 228. Quoted also by Lever, *op. cit.* p. 186.

[2] *The Sonnets of Shakespeare*, edited by T. G. Tucker (1924), p. xlviii.

II. The Origin and Quality of the Received Text

But there will be some whom curiosity draws back to the cave to see what, if anything, can be made of the shadows, and who would feel an editor had failed in his duty did he not hang a votive offering in the shrine. Such readers must first of all, however, pass three stationers: William Jaggard, who published two of the sonnets in 1599; Thomas Thorpe, who stands at the very threshold of the cave, since but for his enterprise the rest of the sonnets would never have been printed at all; and the later publisher John Benson, whose spurious edition held the field until the time of Wordsworth.

What was known of the 'Sonnets' before and after 1609

As far as our records go, the first public intimation that Shakespeare had written sonnets appeared in a book called *Palladis Tamia: Wits Treasury*, published in 1598 and compiled by one Francis Meres, evidently one of Shakespeare's admirers who, in a sort of comparative catalogue of English writers of his day and their Latin or Greek parallels, gives a list of Shakespeare's plays so far produced and speaks in these terms about him as a poet:

> The sweete wittie soul of *Ovid* lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare, witnes his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his private friends,

and a little later names Shakespeare with other sonnet-writers as one

> most passionate among us to bewaile and bemoane the perplexities of Love.[1]

[1] See E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, II, 194–5.

Only a certain number of the sonnets now extant can here be referred to by Meres, inasmuch as some of them were in all probability composed after 1598, while others, as we shall see, are of too intimate a nature for their author to have allowed their inclusion in any selection that Meres can have heard of. But quite a large proportion of these might have been read by anyone, and from among them it would have been easy for Shakespeare or one of his 'private friends' to make a selection for private circulation, as was done with the work of other poets of the time.[1] The sonnets, however, that first appeared in print were numbers 138 and 144, and they belong to just that section of the whole collection which Shakespeare, I believe, would have been most reluctant to see published.

The name of Jaggard (William and Isaac) is famous today as that of the printers and part publishers of the First Folio. It is not generally remembered that the Jaggards had twice before dabbled in Shakespearean copy, after a rather shady fashion—though not one technically dishonest from the stationers' standpoint.[2] Four years, for example, before they published the Folio, though only a year before they began operations on the great work,[3] they had been issuing faked reprints of ten plays as Shakespeare's, only three of which were actually good texts of his.[4] And in 1598 or 1599 William Jaggard had been responsible for a little octavo book entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim by William Shake-*

[1] See Percy Simpson, *Studies in Elizabethan Drama*, pp. 184–5.

[2] Provided the 'copy' had been all read by the censor, the Stationers' Company usually accepted it without question.

[3] See W. W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio* (1955), pp. 3–4.

[4] *Ibid.* pp. 9–12.

speare, containing some twenty lyrics, all, according to the title-page, ostensibly Shakespeare's but fifteen of them by other poets: and even of the five really his, three having been lifted from Act 4 of *Love's Labour's Lost* without any indication of the fact. Thus the only new and genuine Shakespearean poems in the volume were the two sonnets just mentioned, viz. 138 and 144; and it is characteristic of Jaggard's duplicity that these are placed first and second in the volume so as to lend an air of Shakespearean novelty to the rest. The text of neither sonnet tallies exactly with its parallel in the received text: that of number 144 has several unimportant variants and 138 seems to be a slightly different version. From whom had he got them? Clearly someone intimate with the author.

Two further points of interest to students of the *Sonnets* arise out of these petty fraudulences of Jaggard. First of all, while the publication by various pirates of bad Shakespearean quartos since the early nineties shows the existence of a public ever ready to purchase plays performed by his company, Jaggard's proceedings prove that before the end of the century the name of Shakespeare himself had become so well known and generally attractive that a stationer would make it his business to palm off spurious copy as his. And in the second place, what followed from the publication of *The Passionate Pilgrim* gives us what I believe is the only instance on record of Shakespeare, who seemed otherwise completely indifferent to the circulation of unauthorized, corrupt, and spurious editions of his writings, displaying anger with one of the pirates who preyed upon his productions. And even so the instance would probably not have been recorded had not another author, wronged at the same time, issued a public protest.

Jaggard seems to have done so well with the first two editions of *The Passionate Pilgrim* that he thought it worth while to issue a third in 1612. This he now printed under his own name, and in order to give the impression that he had secured more Shakespearean copy meanwhile he revised the title-page and added to the text eight new pieces of verse, this time extracted from Thomas Heywood's *Troia Britanica*, which he had himself printed in 1609. At this barefaced attempt to pass off more than half a dozen of his poems as another man's work, Heywood protested in his *Apology for Actors* which was printed by Nicholas Okes; at the same time informing the world that Shakespeare, of whom he speaks in terms of noticeable deference, was 'much offended with M. Jaggard that (altogether unknowne to him) presumed to make so bold with his name'. Shakespeare had probably never seen *The Passionate Pilgrim* until Heywood drew his attention to it. But once the book was in his hand he could not help seeing his two sonnets at the beginning. His displeasure therefore may well have been partly due to their publication, and it looks as if Jaggard had the displeasure conveyed directly to him, since he printed a cancel of the title-page from which the name Shakespeare had been removed.[1] It was surely some motive more compelling than a sense of decency or a desire to conciliate Heywood that induced Jaggard to rob his volume of its chief attraction, the attribution to Shakespeare. Further light on these matters is best sought in connexion with an inquiry into the origin and character of the publication of the complete text of the *Sonnets* in 1609, a publication which must have displeased Shakespeare far more.

[1] See Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, I, 547–48, II, 218–19; Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio*, pp. 9–10.

But before actually coming to that, it will be convenient to go forward a generation and take a look at an edition that appeared in 1640 and carries on the story of the piratical treatment of the *Sonnets* begun by Jaggard. Why was it that its editor, while helping himself freely to Thorpe's collection, should have spared no pains to conceal both all knowledge of it and any connexion with it, so that he succeeded in so totally eclipsing its memory that it was not until Malone published his edition of the 1609 text in 1780 that Thorpe's production took its rightful place in the Shakespeare canon?

The 1640 edition which was published late in 1639 or early in 1640 bears the following title:

Poems: written by Wil. Shakespeare Gent.
Printed at London by Tho. Cotes, and are to be sold
by Iohn Benson, dwelling in St Dunstan's
Church-yard. 1640.[1]

Apart from a few pages of preliminaries, the volume contains all but eight of the *Sonnets*, a couple of songs from Shakespeare's plays, everything that Jaggard had published in his second edition of *The Passionate Pilgrim* of 1612, a reprint of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, and a heterogeneous collection of poems by other poets including Milton, Ben Jonson, Herrick, and anyone else from whom the editor thought he could pilfer without infringing copyright. That of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* being still operative, he was not able to include them. And it is commonly assumed, perhaps rightly, that it was fear of infringing Thorpe's copyright that led him to disguise his wholesale borrowing from that collection, although Thorpe's copyright cannot have been very active as he published nothing after 1625. In any case, the work Benson put into the pre-

[1] See Rollins, II, 18–36, for a full account of this edition.

paration of the volume seems in excess of anything such fears demanded. He laid hands upon most of the sonnets of 1609 but he rearranged them under various headings and in other respects took elaborate pains to cover up his traces. It is sometimes stated that he altered the sex of the Friend. Blair Leishman told me he made a careful check of the text throughout some years ago but beyond one or two changes of personal pronouns, possibly misprints, he found no evidence of deliberate falsification of this sort.

There is something very odd about the make-up of Benson's volume. It is printed, as it were, like two books, each with a title-page identical in layout and obviously struck off from the same forme, the only difference being that the one standing first bears the date 1640. Yet this first part contains not more than five leaves and consists of preliminaries only, while it is clear from the printer's signatures that it was printed after the rest of the volume, which runs to ninety-two leaves and contains the material detailed above. It seems pretty clear therefore that the material in the first or preliminary part must have come to the publisher's hands after the main book was already in print. Nor is it difficult to see that this first material was a long commendatory poem of sixty-eight lines by Leonard Digges, a poem which was itself merely a longer version of the poem twenty-two lines in length which he contributed to the First Folio; both versions, indeed, refer to the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius in *Julius Caesar* as a 'half-sword parley'. And, this being so, it seems probable that the longer version had been originally intended for the First Folio but was found excessive when it came to press. Anyhow, as it deals exclusively with the plays and never mentions Shakespeare's poems at all, it was quite inappropriate to the 1640 volume. Yet Benson

the publisher does his best to make it *seem* appropriate by giving it the following heading:

Upon Master William Shakespeare, the Deceased Authour, and his Poems.

Furthermore, he fills up one of the blank pages with an 'Address to the Reader' which begins thus:

I here presume (under favour) to present to your view, some excellent and sweetely composed Poems, of Master William Shakespeare, Which in themselves appeare of the same purity, the Authour himselfe then living avouched; they had not the fortune by reason of their Infancie in his death, to have the due accommodation of proportionable glory, with the rest of his everliving Workes, yet the lines of themselves will afford you a more authentick approbation than my assurance any way can, to invite your allowance....[1]

This rigmarole suggests to the reader that the following volume was being prepared for publication by Shakespeare himself just before he died and that he had been able to guarantee the purity of the text it contains while he was still living. Considering that what it contains included the whole of Jaggard's spurious collection of 1612, together with a number of other pseudo-Shakespearean poems, this Address is nothing but fraudulent blurb, and what the writer has to say about Shakespeare's avouching the purity of the verse—the most shameless part of it—was precisely what Master Benson was chiefly anxious to impress upon his public. And the long poem by Digges falling into his hands, we must suppose by chance, he seized it as an opportunity of publishing a collection of Shakespearean verse complementary to the Folio collection of his plays. For he engaged a skilful engraver to make a reproduction of the Droeshout

[1] Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, I, 557.

portrait of the First Folio as a frontispiece to face the title-page, printing scraps of Ben Jonson's verse from the same volume to stand beneath the portrait in the lower half of the plate, and introduced other minor features to the same end, so that the whole when rounded off with this additional preliminary matter made a very pretty little book. 'I have beene somewhat solicitus', says Benson towards the end of his Address, 'to bring this forth to the perfect view of all men.' He had indeed! And the enterprise was so successful that his edition of the *Sonnets* was accepted as authentic throughout the eighteenth century, perhaps even by Wordsworth himself, while as recently as 1944 Edmund Chambers was sufficiently impressed by Benson's declaration that Shakespeare had vouched for the purity of the *Poems* to observe that 'it is at least possible that Benson knew of some statement by Shakespeare, which has not come down to us'.[1] Nothing, however, that Benson says deserves any credence. His game, apart from selling his book, was to conceal its connexion with Thorpe's publication thirty years before, to a consideration of which we must now turn.

The order of the sonnets in Thorpe's text of 1609

The copy for the 1609 sonnets was entered in the Stationers' Register for Thomas Thorpe on 20 May. According to Rollins eleven copies survive, their title-pages all beginning:

SHAKE-SPEARES
SONNETS
Neuer before Imprinted.
AT LONDON
By *G. Eld* for *T. T.* and are

[1] *Shakespearean Gleanings* (1944), p. 111.

seven of them concluding

to be solde by *Iohn Wright*, dwelling
at Christ Church gate.
1609

while the other four end simply

to be sold by William Aspley. 1609

—the difference implying that Thorpe or Eld had engaged two booksellers to distribute the copies to the public.[1]

No serious student now questions the authorship of the *Sonnets*. But the authenticity of the text, that is to say how far the author was himself responsible for the copy then printed, is a different matter and one upon which critical opinion has been sharply divided; though I think most scholars would nowadays agree that the edition of 1640 has no prior claim at all, and that if we were speaking of a dramatic text the 1609 publication would be classed as a Good Quarto, which means that the copy Thorpe handed to the printer, if not Shakespeare's autograph, was a transcript, perhaps in his own hand; and there is no reason why it should not have been, since it is commonsense to suppose that Shakespeare kept copies of a sonnet before sending them on to his Friend. Anyhow, if not an autograph it must have been a tolerably competent transcript, perhaps copied out by more than one transcriber. This contingency has seemed likely to many because of the error of *their* for *thy*, first noticed by Malone, which occurs fourteen times between sonnets 26 and 70 and only once later, in 128. Wyndham lists these among the corruptions of the 1609 text. But Beeching notes that they only go to show that Shakespeare did not correct his proofs since,

[1] See Lee, Facsimile of the *Sonnets*, pp. 31–4.

while the two words are much alike in script, they would look very different in print (p. lx Introduction); and I am reminded by Professor Kenneth Muir that an author might commit an error like this when copying out his own composition, as might any other copyist.

Apart from this, the text offers one criterion of authenticity normally absent from books of playhouse origin. Consisting as it does of 154 sonnets, that is to say of a series of separate poems, or stanzas, on the same or related themes, our decision as to its proximity to Shakespeare's manuscript or manuscripts must be influenced by the order in which the sonnets appear. In other words, if upon examination of their contents we come to the conclusion that certain sonnets or groups of sonnets are in what obviously or probably is their wrong order or their wrong place in the whole collection, we are bound to assume that Thorpe or some other person had originally procured them on separate leaves or in separate bundles which he was unable to sort out correctly; unless, indeed, Shakespeare himself had disarranged them deliberately for purposes of concealment. Most readers, however, will not be disposed to deny authority to one feature of Thorpe's arrangement, namely its division into two sections, the first (numbers 1–126) being written to or about a young man, and most of those in the second (numbers 127–54) being written to or about a dark woman. It is obvious, also, that numbers 1–17 were written to persuade the young man to marry and beget heirs, while many readers would agree further to regard the twelve-line sonnet 126, which brings Thorpe's first section to an end, as an Envoy intended as its conclusion. Thus there seems to be at least the elements of arrangement in the printed text of Section 1, concerned with the young man. The same cannot, however, be said of the sonnets which

follow in Section II. No one, in fact, had been able to detect any order in this second section, which Mackail described as 'a miscellaneous and disorderly appendix'[1] —until an article by Professor Brents Stirling[2] revealed not only that they were originally well-arranged but also a bibliographical reason to account for the printers going astray (see my Notes on Section II). Further, I shall assume, what is sometimes questioned, that the woman to whom they are mainly addressed is the same as the woman referred to in Section I, as having had an intrigue with the young man; just as I shall assume that practically all the sonnets of Section I were written to the same young man. The problem of sequence here, then, is that of Section I.

Now, that some sonnets in this section are not in their right order is, I believe, certain, though it is often doubted. Dowden, for example, made a brave attempt[3] to justify the 1609 order by claiming to discover points of connexion between successive sonnets, often with illuminating results; and though at times misguided even then he may be instructive. But Sidney Lee was able to demonstrate without difficulty the over-subtlety[4] of many of these links; and Dowden himself admitted that they may have been pressed too far. On the other hand, Lee while allowing the existence of certain well-marked sequences in the 1609 collection

[1] J. W. Mackail, *The Approach to Shakespeare* (1930), p. 116.

[2] *Shakespeare 1564–1964*, ed. E. A. Bloom (1964); see below, pp. 242 ff.

[3] *The Sonnets of Shakespeare*, edited by Edward Dowden (1883).

[4] Sir Sidney Lee, *Life of William Shakespeare* (1916), pp. 105 ff.