

Introduction

All the Sonnets of Shakespeare?

For most people the phrase ‘Shakespeare’s Sonnets’ refers to the 154 poems published in 1609 under the title *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Never before Imprinted*.¹ These have since appeared in numerous editions in print and on-line, ranging from plain-text reproductions through illustrated gift-books to collections with varying amounts of editorial material. *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (1609) have been translated into most of the world’s languages, anthologised, modernised, and set to music; they have inspired other works of art including plays, novels, other poetry, songs, ballets, and films; and they have been performed and recorded in a variety of media.

But the sonnets that appeared first in 1609 represent only a limited proportion of Shakespeare’s uses of sonnet form. Shakespeare includes sonnets in his plays at many points in his career to change, vary, and heighten the dramatic mood. The manner in which he does so resembles that in which other writers of his time, such as Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86) and Robert Greene (1558–92), interspersed their prose fictions with poems, some elaborate in form, and in which dramatists, including John Lyly (1553–1606) and Shakespeare himself, dotted their plays with song lyrics. Martin Wiggins’s and Catherine Richardson’s multi-volumed *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue* (from 2011) shows that even before Shakespeare wrote, writers of pageants and entertainments used sonnet form for set pieces such as prologues and addresses to the monarch. Shakespeare seems, on the surviving evidence, to be a pioneer in broadening the stylistic range of drama by using sonnet form for spoken dialogue in the linguistic fabric of plays.

1 Images of the 1609 quarto’s title page: *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS. Neuer before Imprinted* (London: G. Eld for T.T., 1609) are easily viewable on-line. Search for ‘Shakespeare’s Sonnets title page’ in Google, and click ‘images’.

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Sonnets alter the verbal and aural textures of the drama. In hearing them, his audiences may be set momentarily at a critical distance from the action, character, and story. Sometimes they can be highly comic, as in *Love's Labour's Lost*, when the King of Navarre and his Lords speak rather laboured poems of their own composition (pp. 83–8, this volume). Sonnets are used for moments of personal revelation within passages of dialogue, as in Valentine's sonnet-like letter in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (p. 50) and in *The Comedy of Errors* when the form reflects the inescapably transfixed and confused state of mind of Antipholus of Syracuse (p. 82). Sonnets served Shakespeare as the structure for prologues, as in *Romeo and Juliet* (pp. 89 and 91), and for epilogues, as in *Henry V* (p. 198) and the co-authored *All Is True* (*Henry VIII*) (p. 230). Romeo and Juliet famously share the speaking of a sonnet when they simultaneously fall in love at first sight (p. 90). In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helen speaks a sonnet and writes a confessional letter to her mother-in-law, the Countess, which Shakespeare casts into the form of a sonnet (pp. 224–5). As his style of versification developed, moving away from the relative formality of his earlier work to the stylistic and rhythmic freedom of his later plays, he found less use for the sonnet structure, but even so it is present in later plays as well. The prophecies of the goddess Diana in *Pericles* (p. 227) and the god Jupiter in *Cymbeline* (p. 228) emphasise their other-worldliness through their use of the sonnet form.

This volume contains all the surviving sonnets of Shakespeare. It includes the 154 collected together and published in 1609 as *Shakespeare's Sonnets*; alternative versions of 2 of them, as well as 3 of uncertain authorship but attributed to him in the unauthorised collection published as *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599); and 23 that he incorporated into the plays, making a total of 182 sonnets. For the first time in their history, we endeavour to arrange them, so far as current scholarship allows, in the order in which they were written.

When Did Shakespeare Start Writing Sonnets?

In the opening scene of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the lovelorn Abraham Slender, seeking inspiration for his wooing of Mistress Anne

Page, says 'I had rather than forty shillings I had my book of songs and sonnets here' (1.1.181–2). He is speaking of the book published by Richard Tottel in 1557 – over forty years before the play was first staged – as *Songes and Sonnettes written by the right honorable Lorde Henry Haward late Earl of Surrey, and other*. The word *sonnet* comes from the Italian *sonnetto*, meaning 'a little sound' or 'song'. The first sonnets in the now familiar fourteen-line form were written by Italian poets including Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and Francesco Petrarch (1304–74). In early English usage the word could refer to any brief piece of lyric verse, and this meaning survived even after the fourteen-line form was introduced into English. *Songs and Sonnets* – often referred to as Tottel's *Miscellany* – the first-ever published anthology of English verse – introduced to the English reading public both the word *sonnet* and the poetic forms to which it can be applied. It includes translations of sonnets by Francesco Petrarch and other writers. Frequently revised, Tottel's *Miscellany* appeared in eight subsequent editions up to 1587 (when Shakespeare was twenty-three years old) and is one of the very few books written during Shakespeare's era to be mentioned in his writings.²

Most early sonnets are secular love poems, but they could also be religious in tone and subject matter. In fact the first English sonnet sequence is Anne Locke's *A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner*, published as early as 1560. In 1575 the soldier-poet George Gascoigne (1535–77) wrote: 'some think that all poems being short may be called sonnets', and John Donne's (1572–1631) *Songs and Sonnets*, printed posthumously as late as 1633, contains no poems written in regular sonnet form. Nevertheless, Gascoigne went on to write: 'I can best allow to call those sonnets which are of fourteen lines containing ten syllables. The first twelve do rhyme in staves of four lines by cross metre, and the last two, rhyming together, do conclude the whole.'³ Two standard sonnet structures were, however, in common

2 Another example is Beatrice's mention of *The Hundred Merry Tales* in *Much Ado About Nothing* (2.1.120).

3 George Gascoigne, *Certain Notes of Instruction* (1575), in Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 237–47 (p. 245).

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use in Shakespeare's time. Both are composed of fourteen iambic pentameter lines – that is, lines having (like regular blank verse) ten syllables with five stresses. The difference between the two structures lies in the rhyme scheme. The less common form, known as the Spenserian Sonnet, because of its use by Sir Edmund Spenser (1552–99), rhymes *abab-bcbc-cdcd-ee*. More usually, an English poet would structure a sonnet around fourteen lines made up of three quatrains (four-line units) followed by a couplet, rhyming: *abab-cd-cd-efef-gg*. This has become known as the Shakespearian Sonnet and is exemplified by Shakespeare's regular use of it.

Though Tottel's *Miscellany* is not likely to have formed part of the classics-based Stratford grammar school curriculum, the teenage Shakespeare must surely have owned a copy. And it seems likely that, aged around seventeen, he attempted to further his courtship by imitating its use of sonnet form, writing for a real-life Anne – Anne Hathaway – the sonnet printed in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* as Sonnet 145.⁴ It ends with a pun on her surname:

‘I hate’ from hate away she threw,
And saved my life, saying – ‘not you’.

Simple in diction and in syntax, it is untypical in its line length among his wider sonnet collection. We place this sonnet early in our chronologically ordered edition.

It is possible, however, that Shakespeare had written sonnets even earlier, when he was a schoolboy. Sonnets 153 and 154, printed last in the 1609 volume, are anomalous in several respects. They bear no clear relationship to the rest of the collection. Far from being intimate love poems, like some (though by no means all) of the other sonnets, they are impersonal narratives, and each tells the same story though in different form. Both are translations of the same six-line Greek narrative (often referred to as an epigram) by one Marianus Scholasticus (fifth to sixth centuries AD), which circulated in

4 This connection was not made until A. J. Gurr's 'Shakespeare's First Poem: Sonnet 145', *Essays in Criticism*, 21 (1971), 221–6.

manuscript and was first printed in Florence in 1494, and published in Latin in 1603. No one knows where Shakespeare found this widely disseminated Greek text, or whether he knew it in the original Greek or in Latin. It seems reasonable to suggest that it formed part of his early classical education, in the course of which he acquired what Ben Jonson (1572–1637) was to describe (in his memorial poem at the front of the 1623 Folio of Shakespeare's works) as 'small Latin and less Greek'. The existence of two separate versions of the same poem savours strongly of an academic exercise. May the books of exercises prescribed for the pupils of the King's School, Stratford-upon-Avon have included one in which the Greek text was set as a translation exercise?⁵ And is it possible that Shakespeare exercised his budding talent for poetic composition first by translating these lines and then, dissatisfied by his first attempt – perhaps as the result of criticism from his teacher – producing a more coherent version? Rendered simply into modern prose, the Greek reads:

Beneath these plane trees, detained by gentle slumber, Love slept, having put his torch in the care of the Nymphs; but the Nymphs said to one another 'Why wait? Would that together with this we could quench the fire in the hearts of men.' But the torch set fire even to the water, and with hot water thenceforth the Love-Nymphs fill the bath.⁶

Critics and editors – some of them apparently unaware of the classical source – have often related the poems to Shakespeare's sex life, suggesting that they tell of his personal search for medicinal baths, possibly in the city of Bath, to treat a venereal disease. But the closeness of the story told in both poems to the text of its original source surely suggests, rather, that it is an academic exercise in translation, and this impression is heightened by the fact that Sonnet 154 is clearly the earlier version, clarified and improved in Sonnet

5 'He may even have seen the Greek at school', writes David West, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: With a New Commentary* (London: Duckworth, 2007), p. 468.

6 Colin Burrow (ed.), *The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 686.

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153 – in other words, Shakespeare wrote a complete sonnet based on a Greek text, and later – but probably not much later – realised that he could do better and composed Sonnet 153, while retaining both the revised and the unrevised version among his papers.⁷ Thus the two poems give us a rare (if relatively trivial) insight into his creative processes, most closely paralleled perhaps by the accidental survival in print of two versions of lines spoken by Biron in *Love's Labour's Lost* (4.3 from line 294). Their placing as the final poems in the 1609 collection acknowledges their distinctiveness.

In either late 1598 or 1599, there appeared a slim volume of twenty poems called *The Passionate Pilgrim*, said on its title page to be by William Shakespeare and published by William Jaggard – later one of the publishers of the Shakespeare First Folio of 1623. It is a catchpenny volume, clearly put together by the publisher with no input from Shakespeare; nevertheless, it sold well enough for a reprint to appear soon after the first edition. The first two poems are versions of Shakespeare's Sonnets 138 and 144. These poems used to be regarded as debased versions of the later-printed poems, but it is now thought that they are early versions of poems that Shakespeare later revised into the form in which they appeared in 1609. We include them in our edition as independent poems, earlier versions.

The Passionate Pilgrim also includes versions of passages from *Love's Labour's Lost*, which had appeared in print the previous year. We include only the later versions published in 1609 but collate the differences to be found in the 1599 texts. The remaining fifteen poems in *The Passionate Pilgrim* include some that are known to be by other writers, including Richard Barnfield, Bartholomew Griffin, and Christopher Marlowe – a version of his popular lyric 'Come live with me and be my love', to which Shakespeare refers in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (3.1.16–20 and 22–5). There are also four poems on the theme of Venus and Adonis, one of which appears to have been written by Bartholomew Griffin be-

⁷ James Hutton, 'Analogues of Shakespeare's Sonnets 153–4', *Modern Philology*, 38 (1941), 385–403.

cause it appears in his *Fidessa* (1596). The remaining three are usually dismissed as imitations of Shakespeare rather than as examples of his work. But in a well-argued though neglected article published in 1975, C. H. Hobday⁸ revived and reinforced a suggestion by Edmond Malone (1741–1812), later supported by John Masefield (1878–1967) and John Middleton Murry (1889–1957), that Shakespeare wrote the three poems as early sketches for *Venus and Adonis* (published in 1593). Finding this plausible, we place them early in our chronological ordering.

It was not until 1609, long after Shakespeare composed his first sonnets, that his non-dramatic ones appeared in print, as *Shakespeare's Sonnets* 'never before imprinted', clearly advertising itself as a retrospective publication, and with a suggestion that they were eagerly awaited – a bit of a publishing coup. By then the vogue for sonnet sequences had long passed. After the sonnets themselves appeared, 'A Lover's Complaint', a narrative poem of 329 lines which is sometimes read as being thematically connected to the sonnets.⁹ The book was published by Thomas Thorpe, a reputable publisher with no other known connection to Shakespeare. Not reprinted until 1640, it had nothing like the success of *Venus and Adonis*, which went through at least ten editions during his lifetime. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's mastery of the sonnet form warranted international comparison by 1613. His friend Leonard Digges (who wrote one of the memorial poems for the First Folio of 1623) remarked that the sonnets of the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega (1562–1635) were thought of in Spain 'as in England we should our William Shakespeare'.¹⁰

8 C. H. Hobday, 'Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* Sonnets', in *Shakespeare Survey* 26, ed. Kenneth Muir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 103–9.

9 John Kerrigan was influential in discerning a significant literary relationship between the Sonnets and 'A Lover's Complaint' in his edition: *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, The Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 13–18. Shakespeare's authorship of 'A Lover's Complaint' has been disputed.

10 Paul Morgan, 'Our Will Shakespeare and Lope de Vega: An Unrecorded Contemporary Document', in *Shakespeare Survey* 16, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 118–20 (p. 118).

Writing Sonnets in the Plays

Abraham Slender is not the only character in a Shakespeare play to wish he could write a sonnet. In what is probably Shakespeare's first single-authored play, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, written possibly before 1591, when the sonnet vogue began, Proteus, enjoined by the Duke to persuade Silvia to fall in love with the foolish Thurio, advises Thurio to

lay lime to tangle her desires
By wailful sonnets, whose composèd rhymes
Should be full-fraught with serviceable vows.
(3.2.68–70)

The Duke agrees that this might help: 'much is the force of heaven-bred poesy'; and Proteus provides Thurio with a template for the content of a conventional love sonnet along with an account of the frame of mind that will be conducive to its composition:

Say that upon the altar of her beauty
You sacrifice your tears, your sighs, your heart.
Write till your ink be dry, and with your tears
Moist it again, and frame some feeling line
That may discover such integrity.
For Orpheus' lute was strung with poets' sinews,
Whose golden touch could soften steel and stones,
Make tigers tame, and huge leviathans
Forsake unsounded deeps to dance on sands.
(3.2.72–80)

The implication is that the writer must personally feel the emotion that he wishes to express in verse. Thurio agrees that this is good advice, and, saying 'I have a sonnet that will serve the turn', says he will go off to seek out 'some gentlemen well skilled in music' to accompany him. (This may suggest that he is thinking of a 'sonnet' in the sense of a love lyric to be set to music.) When, however, Proteus serenades Silvia it is on his own behalf, not Thurio's, and the words of his song, 'Who is Silvia?', do not fall into conventional sonnet form.

Fascinatingly, we also have a little-known scene in which Shakespeare actually shows someone trying – but failing – to write a love sonnet. This comes in a joint-authored play, *Edward III*, composed some time between 1588 and 1594. The play has only come to be included in mainstream editions of Shakespeare's works since Giorgio Melchiori's Cambridge University Press edition of 1998, and the identity of its other author or authors is unknown, but the sonnet-writing scene is now recognised as being by Shakespeare.

In it, King Edward III (who is married) falls madly in love while on a Scottish campaign with the virtuous (and also married) Countess of Salisbury as soon as he sees her, and before long is so visibly besotted that his servant Lodowick says

Then Scottish wars, farewell. I fear, 'twill prove
A ling'ring English siege of peevish love.

(2.188–9)

Seeking to seduce the Countess, Edward calls for Lodowick, who he says is 'well read in poetry' (a phrase that also occurs in *The Taming of the Shrew*, 1.2.168), instructing him to bring pen, ink, and paper and to make sure that they can 'walk and meditate alone'. Privacy, it seems, is desirable for poetic composition. The King, lacking confidence in his poetical powers, says he will 'acquaint' Lodowick 'with' his 'passion, / Which he shall shadow with a veil of lawn' – a fanciful way of saying 'turn into verse' – 'Through which the queen of beauty's queen shall see / Herself the ground of my infirmity' (2.221–4). He retires with Lodowick to a 'summer arbour', then instructs him to

invoke some golden muse
To bring thee hither an enchanted pen
That may for sighs set down true sighs indeed,
Talking of grief, to make thee ready groan,
And when thou writ'st of tears, encouch the word
Before and after with such sweet laments
That it may raise drops in a Tartar's eye,
And make a flint-heart Scythian pitiful –
For so much moving hath a poet's pen.

(2.231–9)

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(This is interestingly analogous to lines spoken by Biron in *Love's Labour's Lost*:

Never durst poet touch a pen to write
Until his ink were tempered with love's sighs;
O, then his lines would ravish savage ears,
And plant in tyrants mild humility.

(4.3.322–5))

King Edward praises the Countess in extravagant, even comically hyperbolic terms, instructing Lodowick to call her 'Better than beautiful' (2.250), to 'Devise for fair a better word than fair' (2.251), saying that anything Lodowick may write is exceeded 'Ten times ten thousand more' by the value of the woman he is praising (2.256). Faced with such hyperbole, Lodowick bemusedly enquires 'Write I to a woman?', to which the King replies in exasperation 'What think'st thou I did bid thee praise? A horse?' (2.264).

Poor Lodowick says he needs more information about the woman's 'condition or state' before he can do as the King wishes, and the King embarks upon a further extended encomium of his beloved's beauty and virtue. The hapless servant gets no further with his sonnet than 'More fair and chaste than is the queen of shades' (2.307) – presumably referring to Diana, goddess of the moon and of chastity – before the King stops him, objecting both to the comparison with the moon and to praise of the Countess as chaste – common in Petrarchan love poetry – whereas he (rather crudely) says he 'had rather have her chased than chaste' (2.320). Then, in seeking to give Lodowick a sense of the kind of sonnet he wants him to write, he rhapsodises at length about the Countess, and, while so doing, speaks a foreshortened sonnet, eleven lines long (see p. 54). At last, the King permits Lodowick to start the second line of his suspended sonnet, 'More bold in constancy' (2.335), before interrupting him again – he does not wish her to be 'constant' to her husband – and finally saying he will take over the composition of the sonnet himself. He is interrupted, however, by the entrance of the Countess and pretends that he and his servant have been drawing up battle plans.