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The Unknown and Unknowable Shakespeare

A sense of mystery fills Shakespeare's sonnets, mysteries that coax us into exploring dead ends, much like a Siren lures sailors to their rapturous, albeit vicious, deaths. A few of these tantalizing mysteries are: who stands on the other side of the 154 purported "sonnets of Shakespeare," transmitting the poems to us? Did Shakespeare actually write these sonnets? What role, if any, did Shakespeare play in the production of these sonnets? The first question remains viable, especially considering print history and culture; the second and third questions, however, represent the lunacy of a parasitic, yet cherished, cultural bias: the need for certainty and singular answers. Given what little we know about Shakespeare and the fact that we possess no handwritten manuscripts of his works, any attempt to answer the latter questions—particularly the second one—is futile. Instead of perpetuating this fruitless game of "uncovering the unknowable," we should accept the picture that posterity provides to us in Thomas Thorpe's 1609 *Quarto*, John Benson's 1640 *Poems: Written by Wil. Shake-speare. Gent.*, and Stephen Booth's 1977 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*: namely, that due to the influence and motives of the printers throughout the history of Shakespeare's sonnets, Shakespeare, at least as we know him, exists as much as a mythological construction as he did a real and successful playwright. Thus, the "answers" to his identity and authorship remain unknowable and not worth seeking.

I. What Thorpe's 1609 *Quarto* Reveals about Shakespeare

One profound problem that completely undermines any attempt at establishing a “real” Shakespeare in relation to the sonnets is the mysterious nature of Thomas Thorpe's 1609 *Quarto*, which is the first edition of *Sonnets* ever printed. (As a whole, that is. A few of the sonnets circulated in the 1590s, but the first complete collection of “Shakespeare's sonnets” came in Thorpe's *Quarto*. The 1590s renditions are also so variegated that it makes determining the authorship or “true” sonnet practically impossible.) Whether or not Thorpe's publication was authorized by Shakespeare and the layout and design of the book, in particular, are both primary areas of concern. The answers—if any exist—to these mysteries about Shakespeare's authorship and the *Quarto*'s authorization (or lack thereof) will help illustrate how traditional debates have been distracted by pointless queries while the simplest and most direct answer constantly appears before scholars like an unwanted apparition. In other words, I think these “mysteries” are only “mysteries” because we are asking the wrong questions and refuse to abandon fruitless inquiries. There is an answer, a simple one, in fact, but it is not the answer that many people seek. The answer, as I stated earlier, is to accept the presentation that posterity has given us. However, for now, let's examine the questions of authorization and design concerning Thorpe's *Quarto* and come back to my claim later.

The question of authorization plays an important role in shaping our “understanding” of Shakespeare's sonnets. If Thorpe's *Quarto* was authorized, then the authorization would slightly dim the prospect of my solution to the problem of understanding Shakespeare; if, however, the *Quarto* turns out to have not been authorized—or if the answer is indeterminate—then the project of “discovering the real Shakespeare” will already look hopeless and confused. So, was the *Quarto* authorized? Traditionally, scholars have considered Thorpe's publication to have been unauthorized and suppressed (Duncan-Jones 151). Thorpe was charged with “sharp practice, predatory procurement of copy, bombast, and obsequiousness” about midway through his career, after all (Martin

and Finnis 3). Leona Rostenberg, for example, thought the *Quarto* could not have been authorized because Thorpe published the *Sonnets* “out of malice for Shakespeare” (37). The only problem with Rostenberg’s argument is that it presupposes that the original order of the sonnets was somehow detrimental to Shakespeare’s reputation—but, the truth is, no one can actually say whether or not that presupposition rings true.

On the other hand, some critics, such as Katherine Duncan-Jones, claim that “there is little evidence of the text being suppressed” (151) and “no real reason [exists as to] why Shakespeare could not himself have sold the manuscript of the *Sonnets* and *A Lover’s Complaint* to Thorpe” (165). Duncan-Jones’ argument, though, also remains completely conjectural: she sees no reason as to why Shakespeare “could not himself have sold the manuscript,” but that supposed objection is framed in counterfactual terms. The evidence to support this claim is supposed to be that Shakespeare must have at least known of Thorpe, since they both had connections in the court (Duncan-Jones 164-165), but the connection remains merely possible. There is no necessity to “Shakespeare’s having sold his manuscript to Thorpe.” If Duncan-Jones sees no reason as to why Thorpe’s *Quarto* could not have been authorized, then perhaps another scholar sees no reason as to why two or three people could not have written the sonnets together under the name “William Shakespeare.” In short, no one can definitively say whether or not the *Quarto* was authorized. Essentially, then, this type of reasoning collapses into an endless circle of claims that cannot be substantiated beyond mere “possibility” (i.e. we are likely to never find answers along these lines of inquiry).

The next pertinent issue to examine is the design and layout of the *Quarto*. The Stationers’ Register for the shop where Thorpe worked contains an entry for “a booke called SHAKESPEARES sonnettes,” dated May 20, 1609, but all the entry really says “about the manuscript Thorpe was handling is that, unlike any other Elizabethan sonnet sequence, this collection had no identifying title or names of participants” (Duncan-Jones 171). However, the printed version of the sonnets contained a portrait of Shakespeare, a dedication page to

the mysterious “W.H., the only begetter of the sonnets,” and did not have many embellishments. The presentation of the sonnets was also rather plain: each sonnet received a number (from Thorpe) and very little space was provided between each sonnet. An interesting aspect of the *Quarto*, though, is that Thorpe changed some of the sonnets and even combined others, thereby “perverting” the original text. Also, the couplet of Sonnet 36 is repeated at the end of Sonnet 96, but this duplication does not make sense with the Sonnet—which makes the repetition seem like a printer’s mistake and not the mistake of Shakespeare.

So, even the “original” version of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* is not as tidy or easily identifiable as many want it to be. We do not know how Thorpe obtained the manuscript nor what that manuscript looked like. Despite this, Thorpe’s 1609 edition of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* is the best we have and it stands as “the only [practical] text on which any edition of *Sonnets* can be based” (Duncan-Jones 151). Thus, whether or not Shakespeare actually wrote the sonnets as they appear in the *Quarto* is irrelevant. We must accept the information the earliest edition provides and not speculate beyond it.

II. The Impact of John Benson’s 1640 *Poems* on Shakespeare’s Identity

The next important edition of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* was printed by John Benson in 1640. (It might be worth noting that this publication was after Shakespeare’s death.) Benson, unlike many other authors of the time, played an active role in determining how his works were portrayed in the printing. Benson carried this direct and intentional presentation over to his edition of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, which he titled *Poems: Written by Wil. Shake-speare. Gent.* He even “advertise[d] the Poems in a way that recall[ed] the kinds of poetry on which [he] had left his own distinctive mark” (Baker 155). Unlike Thorpe’s edition, though, Benson’s edition was undoubtedly pirated. In fact, Benson’s edition was basically plagiarized from “William Jaggard’s third edition of *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1612), Thomas Thorpe’s 1609 *Quarto* of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* and *A Lovers Complaint*, and *The Phoenix and the Turtle* (1601)” (Atkins 306).

Compared to Thorpe's *Quarto*, Benson essentially treated the sonnets like a deck of cards: he gave the sonnets titles and combined some of them to form large poems which he numbered instead of titling (Baker 159). Benson also changed all the "he" pronouns to "she," which many scholars have thought was to avoid the discomfiting fact that most of the sonnets were addressed to a male. Carl Atkins, however, claims that "Benson [changed the pronouns because he] needed to hide both the fact that his text was pirated and that the majority of the poems were part of a sonnet sequence" (307).

The most significant aspect of Benson's edition is the fact that he clearly had a specific mission: to extol and "memorialize" Shakespeare. The first distinct way Benson accomplished this goal was by including a different kind of portrait of Shakespeare in the *Poems*. Unlike the portrait in the *Quarto*, the portrait included in the *Poems* depicts Shakespeare leaning on a table or desk while wearing Jonsonian laurels. Based on the reception of Benson's edition, it seems like the portrait "[reaffirms] Shakespeare's status as the 'wonder of the stage'" (166). Another method Benson used to commemorate Shakespeare was to incorporate several elegies and other poems dedicated to him. For example, the poem accompanying Shakespeare's portrait asserts that the "learned will Confess, [Shakespeare's] works are such, / As neither man, nor Muse, can prayse to much." (166). Another poem, written by John Warren, explains that "Shakespeare [needed to be] revived" (Benson 5). The elegies, which Benson placed right after the sonnets, rave about Shakespeare's talents (84-86). After the elegies, Benson decided to include "An Addition of Some Excellent Poems, to those precedent, of renowned Shakespeare, by other gentlemen," which also spoke highly of Shakespeare (87).

Given Benson's personality and the deliberate changes he made to both the original content and presentation of the sonnets, it is clear that he wanted to cast "Shakespeare's poetry in the mold of the Jonsonian epigram" (Baker 155-156). In other words, Benson actively tried to construct an identity for Shakespeare. Shakespeare was not a cavalier lyric poet and he did not write in the style of Jonsonian epigrams. So, if Benson "molded" Shakespeare's poetry, then that

means that he deliberately changed Shakespeare's appearance to the general public, thereby changing the general public's reception of Shakespeare. By changing and "evolving" Shakespeare, Benson created a new identity for him, an identity that the general public would identify with, since Benson was very popular. In other words, he made Shakespeare something that he was not in order to try to make the "poet of Shakespeare" something that posterity would remember. And, based upon the reception of Benson's text, "[his] construction of Shakespeare as a cavalier lyric poet [was a success]" (Baker 169). The fact that Benson and his friends felt Shakespeare's poems needed "to be revived" may show that Shakespeare's sonnets were not received well originally. Benson's motivation for this project was to make money, but he was also motivated by a much larger concern for English history. After Shakespeare's death, a consensus developed that his works—specifically his plays—constituted the greatest achievement in English literature (Black et al. 794). Benson, apparently, did not want the world to forget about Shakespeare as a poet.

III. Stephen Booth's Rejection of Contemporary Shakespearean Scholarship

Despite Benson's efforts, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* didn't receive much scholarly attention until the past fifty to sixty years (Black et al. 795). In 1977, literary critic Stephen Booth decided to "save" Shakespeare's poems from what he perceived to be an awful analytical trend that plagued scholarship. Although his edition of the *Sonnets* received much attention for his erotic and sexual interpretations, he claims that the primary purpose of his work was only to provide a "modern reader [with] as much as [he] [could] resurrect of a Renaissance reader's experience of the 1609 *Quarto*" (ix). For this reason, he also included the 1609 *Quarto* in his edition. As Philip C. McGuire noted ten years later, though, "We cannot be certain how Shakespeare's sonnets were spoken and heard by his contemporaries" (footnote 7, 306). So, really, this task is almost a hopeless endeavor as well. At best, we can only point out inconsistencies with the dominant

scholarly definition and hope to open the door to more interesting and pertinent discussions.

The various notes in Booth's edition are supposed to "help a reader with the poem, not...substitute for [the actual words of the poems]" (x). A secondary self-proclaimed purpose of the edition is to "campaign for analytic criticism that does not sacrifice—or at least tries not to sacrifice—any work of literature to logical convenience or even to common sense" (x). Booth's edition marked a significant break from the traditional and, all too often, fantastic perception of Shakespeare and his poems.

One of the best aspects of Booth's edition is the appendixes he provides. In Appendix 1, he summarizes the basic print history of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. He asserts that Thorpe's edition may or may not have been authorized (and seems to have felt that the enterprise of resolving that question and the authorship of Shakespeare remained a pointless task). Booth made a more interesting claim, though, about Benson's 1640 edition. Booth writes, "[Benson's *Poems* are a] carelessly executed attempt to make money on forgotten poems to which he did not have the publishing rights" that "can be dismissed as irrelevant to the study of the sonnets" (543). His dismissal of Benson's work, though, does not account for the fact that Benson drastically helped cultivate an identity and an image for Shakespeare. Essentially, Benson served as an envoy to the next generation; he heralded the mystification of a past historical writer and further solidified Shakespeare's place in history (even if his *Poems* were completely pirated).

Furthermore, I disagree with Booth because, as Atkins argues, Benson's text is important for two reasons: 1. Because it was the basis for later editions of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (e.g. from Charles Gildon's in 1710 to Thomas Evans's in 1775); and 2. Because "knowing the copy-texts on which it [was] based allows us to examine in detail the extent to which the compositor affected the transmission of the text, from which we may make some cautious generalizations about early seventeenth-century composition" (307).

More importantly, though, I wish to draw from Booth's comments about literary analysis and criticism concerning

Shakespeare's sonnets. In particular, Booth argues that the theories about Shakespeare's sonnets are "so many, so foolish" (543). Except for a select few, many of these theories are completely conjectural and advance suppositions which stretch far beyond what any established facts warrant. Instead of taking Shakespeare's works as they have been given to us, we often look for a "grander" or even "nobler" answer to the many questions posed by Shakespeare's works. But this search for the "grand" answer hinders our ability to look at the information fairly. As Philip C. McGuire puts it, "the problem with this consensus of desire is that it shapes our acts of analysis and thus to a large extent determines their outcomes" (304). In other words, we always find what we are searching for. In this case, as Booth pointed out, it is not always a good thing that we "find what we want to find." As Booth says, "Scholarly glosses, particularly those for the sonnets, have commonly done a disservice both to readers and the poems by ignoring the obvious fact that verse exists in time, that one reads one word and then another" (x). Many previous attempts at analyzing the sonnets have imposed meaning and purpose on them instead of letting them speak for themselves.

Perhaps one reason for this imposition is the question of authorship. However, as I mentioned earlier, we cannot say that Thorpe's edition was authorized, which means we really do not stand to gain anything by debating whether or not Shakespeare really wrote the sonnets. All we have are several editions throughout history that claim to present the works of Shakespeare, many of which are based on the 1609 *Quarto*. So, since we only have tenuous connections at best, we should accept these works and analyze them without imposing a certain character or ideological prejudice on them.

If the best we have to offer are "so many [and] so foolish" theories concerning Shakespeare's sonnets, though, then perhaps it is time that we abandon the principle that enables these theories to continue: a stable conceptual framework that provides certainty. The motivation behind seeking out the "grander and nobler" answers is quite natural. However, pursuing those answers any longer, especially in light of recent evidence, is merely a flight of fancy. After all, "Shakespeare is...always re-invented, a constantly changing target...

always the same, always different” (Fedderson and Richardson 6). Even though some scholars, such as A.W. Pollard, have devised a system where “Shakespeare comes to receive the sole credit for all that is in a ‘good’ quarto (except ‘obvious errors’)” (Werstine 65), this system represents everything that is wrong with our current attempts to “understand” Shakespeare. Pollard’s system was for determining “good” and “bad” quartos of Shakespeare’s various works. As Werstine points out, though, this system is completely arbitrary and actually does much more damage than good when it comes to properly assessing the merits of printed editions (65). Thus, the truth is, questions about Shakespeare’s authorship and identity are fruitless questions, especially considering what little access we have to biographical information and “real” manuscripts. And “no matter how deeply we dig, we never can get to the bottom of this bottomless dream” of uncovering the “real” Shakespeare (Fedderson and Richardson 3).

So, how do we understand Shakespeare’s sonnets as a *corpus*? We do not. We must simply accept the versions that history has bequeathed to us. Thorpe provided us with a dubious and mysterious copy of Shakespeare’s sonnets; Benson cultivated a powerful image and, essentially, resurrected the sonnets at the cost of accurately portraying Shakespeare’s works; and, finally, Booth attempted to undo all the damage of contemporary scholarship by stripping away pointless analyses that do not look at the poet’s words, but rather at what the analyzer wishes he were reading. As Fedderson and Richardson put it, “Western culture is quite attached to its Shakespeare myths, these historically evolving artifacts” (3-4), but the easiest and best solution to the problem is to quit searching for the unknown and unknowable Shakespeare.

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