

The Cultural Positioning and Repositioning of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* : Criticism Directing Readership

Adam Hailes

A study of the reception of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* throughout the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries reveals the poems to have moved in and out of the consciousness of the literary public according to persuasive critical attention and editorial decisions. It is a turbulent tale incorporating such diverse factors as antipathy towards the moral content of many of the poems, dissatisfaction with the sonnet itself as a poetic form, considerable biographical interest, assessment of the body of work as an example of poetic genius and, most recently, a reassessment of the collection as literary output uncompromised by the parameters set by the financial and artistic demands of Elizabethan theatre. It is highly possible, therefore, that the identity of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, as perceived by the reading public, has been moulded and translated by the decisions and interpretations of prominent editors and critics. It is also possible that a reaction to this cultural hijacking of the poems is found in current critical attempts to direct the *Sonnets* back to an Elizabethan context.

The *Sonnets* were not firmly locked into the Shakespearean Canon until almost two centuries after their composition.¹ Malone's 1780 edition of the *Sonnets*, issued as a supplement to the Johnson and Steevens 1778 edition of the plays, is not only a key-stage in their textual history, but also denotes the first stages of a critical debate that would continue through the nineteenth century and, indeed, is still alive today. Malone added a commentary to his 1780 edition and invited Steevens to supply elucidatory notes. A close look at the critical sway of many of Steevens's notes suggests possible reasons for the want of attention that the *Sonnets* suffered from throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and highlights literary and moral complaints against the poems that would encourage subsequent critical argument.

Steevens's most vibrant attack on the *Sonnets* is fuelled by his apparent disgust at what he comprehends as evidence of immorality. The implications of homosexuality that surface in *Sonnet 20* ('A woman's face with nature's own hand painted / Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion') elicit the following response:

It is impossible to read this fulsome panegyrick, addressed to a male object, without an equal mixture of disgust and indignation.²

Coleridge's assessment of the relationship between the addresser and the addressed of many of the *Sonnets*, and in particular *Sonnet 20*, is not as persecutive as

¹ For a textual history of the *Sonnets* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries see Margaret de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.162-176.

² Steevens's note to *Sonnet 20* in *Supplement* edited by Edmund Malone (1780). See Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage 1774-1801*, Volume 6 (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1974), p. 288.

The Cultural Positioning and Repositioning of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:
Criticism Directing Readership

it stresses his belief that socio-historical awareness must be an element within responsible literary criticism:

I believe it is possible that a man may, under certain states of moral feeling, entertain something deserving the name of love towards a male object - an affection beyond friendship, and wholly aloof from appetite. In Elizabeth's and James's time it seems to have been almost fashionable to cherish such a feeling.³

A similar, albeit less forgiving, attitude is expressed in R. F. Housman's comments on his *Collection*, an 1835 anthology of poetry in which twenty six of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are included:⁴

Many of the Sonnets, unfortunately, are degraded by allusions and expressions which, however unexceptionable they were considered in the sixteenth century, could scarcely fail to encounter censure by the more fastidious taste of the nineteenth.⁵

It should be noted, however, that not all attacks on the sexual content of the *Sonnets* focused specifically on homoeroticism. John Benson's 1640 edition of *Poems*:

³ Coleridge, S. T., *Table Talk* (1833). See Terence Hawkes, *Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare: A Selection of Essays, Notes and Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the Poems and Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), p. 71.

⁴ The twenty six sonnets printed are 15, 25, 27, 29, 30, 54, 55, 64, 71, 73, 89-91, 95, 97, 98, 102, 104-9, 111, 116 and 129.

⁵ Housman, R. F., *Collection* (1835), p. 312. See Hyder E. Rollins, 'The Vogue of the Sonnets' in Hyder E. Rollins, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, 2 Vols (London: Lippincot & Co., 1944), II, pp.326-367 (p. 357).

Written by Wil Shake-speare. Gent. avoided the theme of homosexuality by transforming masculine pronouns into feminine pronouns. It should be noted, however, that in a study entitled ‘The Scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’ Margaret de Grazia rejects this argument and suggests that Benson’s emendations were ‘made to avoid solecism rather than homoeroticism’.⁶ These emendations were accepted by a series of eighteenth century editors, including Francis Gentleman. Somewhat remarkably, Gentleman produced his 1774 edition of Shakespeare for J. Bell despite stating that the poems were victim to ‘too great a degree of licentiousness’ and asking ‘why pieces, confessedly censurable, should be republished.’⁷

Gentleman’s reasons for publishing the *Sonnets*, despite his distaste for them, denote a fascinating aspect in their progression through literary history. At this point, it should be noted that Gentleman employed Benson’s emendations to pronouns and, consequently, a surface homoerotic reading of the Gentleman edition is not feasible. Even in the context of this adoption of Benson’s censorial editing, Gentleman expresses his distaste for the poems as he, somewhat remarkably, excuses himself for publishing works which he considers to be unworthy of their author with the following statement:

A desire of gratifying the admirers of our Author with an entire edition of his works, has induced us to suffer some passages to remain, which we are ourselves as far from approving, as the most scrupulous of our Readers.⁸

⁶ See Margaret de Grazia, ‘The Scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’ in *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespeare Studies and Performance*, 46, edited by Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 35-49 (p. 35).

⁷ Gentleman’s comment in his 1774 edition of *Shakespeare* for J. Bell, (sig. C6v). See Rollins, pp. 335-336.

⁸ Ibid.

The Cultural Positioning and Repositioning of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:
Criticism Directing Readership

It becomes apparent that the readership's idolatry of the author has become a more powerful force than critical assessment and judgement of the little known poems. The *Sonnets* are, therefore, included in the 1774 Bell edition not because they are considered to be of great 'poetic' value, but simply because they are known to have flowed from the quill of Mr. William Shakespeare. The journey from here to a critical reading of the *Sonnets* not as poetry alone, but also as a series of clues from which a limited biography of the Bard himself may be created is a short one.

At this point it is necessary to return to the words of 'the villain of the sonnets', George Steevens.⁹ Steevens not only condemned the morality of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* but also savagely attacked the form of the sonnet itself:

[The sonnet is] composed in the highest strain of affectation, pedantry, circumlocution and nonsense. [It is] a species of composition which has reduced the most exalted poets to a level with the meanest rhimers; has almost cut down Milton and Shakespeare to the standards of Pomfret... perhaps the lowest in the scale of English versifiers.¹⁰

Steevens is clearly focusing his tirade more on the sonnet as a framework for poetry and less on the literary talents of Shakespeare himself. Such a lack of popularity of the sonnet throughout the eighteenth century did, however, influence the speed at which the reclamation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* took place. Brian Vickers suggests

⁹ See Rollins, p. 336.

¹⁰ Steevens's comment in *Supplement* (1780), p. 684. See Rollins, p. 336.

that ‘the dominant attitude to the sonnet in the eighteenth century was dislike’.¹¹ Precisely this attitude is expressed by Charles Gildon in his *Complete Art of Poetry* of 1718. Despite considerable praise for Shakespeare as a poet, Gildon severely attacks the sonnet as a poetic form:

Petrarch began this abominable *Manner*, and has been follow’d by Writers of most Nations, but most by our *English*.¹²

Much of the critical attack on the sonnet during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries focuses on an aversion to the strict rigidity of form. The foundation of this aversion was the belief that the framework of the sonnet as a construct translates a truth into a contrivance. Furthermore, in considering the sonnet, critics of the time proposed that what was possible in Italian could never be possible in English despite the presence of considerable genius. Dr. Johnson’s declamation that ‘the fabric of a sonnet, however adapted to the Italian language, has never succeeded in ours’, is typical of the period.¹³ It is interesting to note that arguably the most popular sonneteer of the period was Charlotte Smith, the majority of whose sonnets might be described as less rigid and more irregular than those of Shakespeare, Petrarch and Spenser.¹⁴

Objections to the sonnet abounded, and were given further strength by the arguments of poets themselves. Some twenty-four years prior to the composition of ‘Scorn Not The Sonnet’ Wordsworth was extremely severe in his criticism:

¹² Gildon’s comment in his *Complete Art of Poetry* (1718), (I, 149). See Rollins, p. 333.

¹³ Dr. Johnson’s comment is from *Life of Milton* (1779), edited by C. H. Firth, 1907, p. 63. See Rollins, p. 339.

¹⁴ ‘The commonplace and irregular sonnets of CHARLOTTE SMITH were generally regarded as superior to Sh.’s’. See Rollins, p. 339.

The Cultural Positioning and Repositioning of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:
Criticism Directing Readership

Their [Shakespeare's *Sonnets*] chief faults - and heavy ones they are - are sameness, tediousness, quaintness, and elaborate obscurity.¹⁵

This comment of Wordsworth's recalls Malone's suggestion that the *Sonnets* suffer from 'a want of variety' and the inclusion of 'far-fetched conceits'.¹⁶ Steevens discovered similar faults in the poetry and complained that there is 'more conceit in any thirty six of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* than in the same number of his Plays'.¹⁷ There clearly existed a firm belief that the English sonnet could only be a contrivance, or a word-game, in which any sense of poetic truth would be negated by conceit. Byron was outspoken on the subject:

They are the most puling, petrifying, stupidly platonic compositions. I detest the Petrarch so much, that I would not be the man even to have obtained his Laura, which the metaphysical, whining dotard never could.¹⁸

Throughout the 1700s and early 1800s it was then, perhaps, the unpopularity of the sonnet as a poetic type that ensured relative obscurity for Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, despite the popularity of the author. With the reclamation of the poems at the close of the eighteenth century came the need to reassess their value. As has already been mentioned, many critics valued the *Sonnets* as a means to uncover biographical details concerning the poet himself. Wordsworth adjusted his reading of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and, twenty four years after damning them, sought to plead for critics to reassess their literary merit:

¹⁵ Wordsworth's comment is from 'Marginalia' in Robert Anderson's *Poets of Great Britain* (13 vols., 1793-1807). See Peter Jones, *Shakespeare: The Sonnets* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1977), p. 42.

¹⁶ Malone's comment is from *Supplement* (1780), p. 684. See Rollins, p. 337.

¹⁷ Steevens's comment is from *Supplement* (1780), p. 685. See Rollins, p. 336.

¹⁸ Byron's comment is from *Letters and Journals*, Vol. 2, edited by R. E. Prothero (1922), p. 379. See Rollins, p.341.

SCORN not the sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,
Mindless of its just honours; with this key
Shakspeare unlocked his heart.¹⁹

It should be noted that once again the critic, in this instance Wordsworth, focuses on the actual existence of Shakespeare himself, proposing that the *Sonnets* provide critical insights into the emotional existence of their author with a far greater degree of penetration than is permitted by the plays and narrative poems. The suggestion is that despite the lack of popularity of the sonnet as a poetic form, it is of value to read Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as they contain crucial information regarding the man himself. There is clearly a link to be drawn between Wordsworth's desire to unravel the emotional make-up of Shakespeare via the *Sonnets* and Gentleman's reasons for allowing the poems to enter Bell's 1774 edition of Shakespeare. This developing trend of attempting to glean biographical details concerning 'the dark woman' and 'the friend' from the sequence of poems is also related to the role of the *Sonnets* in the growth of bardolatry. To reiterate - the creator is of more interest than his creation.

It is perhaps remarkable to note that of all the great poets that produced critical comment on Shakespeare's *Sonnets* only Coleridge suggested that a unity of personal emotion and poetic form had been achieved:

These extraordinary sonnets form, in fact, a poem of so many stanzas of fourteen lines each; and, like the passion which inspired them, the sonnets are always

¹⁹ See *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by John Morley (London: Macmillan & Co., 1900), p. 655.

The Cultural Positioning and Repositioning of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:
Criticism Directing Readership

the same, with a variety of expression, - continuous, if you regard the lover's soul - distinct, if you listen to him, as he heaves them sigh after sigh.²⁰

Coleridge's reading of the *Sonnets* as being a 'poem of so many stanzas of fourteen lines each' whilst unconventional, goes some way to negate previous conceptions of the sonnet as being a rigid construct which inherently encourages contrivance and conceit. For Coleridge, each sonnet is a sigh and each sigh is an effusion of passion. His criticism of the *Sonnets* then is wholly incompatible with any sense of the poems being a mere exercise in wordplay.

It is perhaps unfortunate that in 1837, only four years after Coleridge had communicated his understanding of the *Sonnets* as poetry, James Boaden announced the discovery of 'Mr. W. H.' as Pembroke.²¹ This discovery re-emphasised the bibliographical interest in the poems and the search for Shakespeare the man was rejuvenated whilst the 'poetry' was neglected. In 1838 C. A. Brown published *Shakespeare's Autobiographical Poems* and the *Sonnets* were translated from poetry into biography.²² David Masson's comment (a reiteration of Ulrici's criticism) is typical of the mid-nineteenth century:

The *Sonnets* of Shakespeare are, and can possibly be, nothing else than a poetical record of his own feelings and experience - a connected series of entries, as it were, in his own diary - during a certain period of his London life. This, we say, is conclusively determined and agreed upon; and whoever

²⁰ Coleridge, S. T., *Table Talk*, (1833). See Hawkes, p. 71.

²¹ See Rollins, p. 358.

²² Ibid.

does not, to some extent, hold this view, knows nothing about the subject.²³

It appears then that throughout the two hundred years following Malone's publication of his *Supplement* the *Sonnets* have been the centre of considerable critical debate, but much of this debate has been 'extratextual', i.e. either concerned with the sonnet as a form or employing the *Sonnets* as a source of clues to be decoded by 'the critic possessed of the biographical mind'.²⁴ The reclamation of the *Sonnets* and the ensuing critical attention that focused upon them thus denotes a fascinating literary phenomenon. The first genuine critical editor of the *Sonnets*, Malone himself, was little more than lukewarm in his praise for the 'poetry', suggesting that it suffered from 'a want of variety' and copious 'far-fetched conceits' whilst bestowing equivocal praise by stating that 'some of them are written with perspicuity and energy'.²⁵ Malone was, however, eager to expound upon the possibility that the poems might contain biographical insights by drawing conclusions regarding Shakespeare's private life from extracts taken from the texts.²⁶ In contrast, Shelley and Keats wallowed in the poetics of the verse. Shelley spoke of the 'intense poetry and passion' of *Sonnet 111*,²⁷ whilst Keats famously wrote that he 'never found so many beauties in the Sonnets', adding that 'they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally - in the intensity of working out conceits'.²⁸ Here the focus is clearly directed towards the poesy with little or no regard for things

²³ See David Masson, *Essays Biographical and Critical: Chiefly on English Poets* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1856), p. 12.

²⁴ See T. W. H. Crosland, *The English Sonnet* (London: Martin Seeker, 1917), p. 196.

²⁵ For a discussion on the comments made by Malone in his *Supplement* (1780), see Rollins, p. 337.

²⁶ In his *Supplement* (1780), Malone suggests that some phrases from the texts encourage speculation as to the nature of the author's marriage and private life. See Vickers, p. 5.

²⁷ See 'Note on the Hundred and Eleventh Sonnet of Shakespeare', cited by Jones in *Shakespeare: The Sonnets* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1977), pp. 46-7.

²⁸ Comments come from a letter written to Reynolds in 1817. See Spurgeon, *Keats's Shakespeare: A Descriptive Study*, reprinted lithographically in 1966 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 38.

The Cultural Positioning and Repositioning of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:
Criticism Directing Readership

biographical. Thus, it has become impossible to decipher whether the reason for the considerable critical attention that has been granted to the *Sonnets* is primarily due to their art or their artist. It is ironic that George Steevens, in many respects the catalyst of an abundance of critical debate on the *Sonnets* throughout the last three centuries, expressed vociferous opposition to their reclamation. In the preface to his 1793 edition of the *Plays* his editorial decision concerning the *Sonnets* is frankly explained:

We have not reprinted the Sonnets, &c. of Shakspeare, because the strongest act of Parliament that could be framed, would fail to compel readers into their service.²⁹

To conclude, brief reference to the current status of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* should be made. It is interesting to note that two of the best-selling critical publications on Shakespeare over the most recent five years, stretching from 2005 to 2009, seek to re-categorize the poems as Elizabethan products of an Elizabethan situation. In *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, James Shapiro suggests that the sonnets of Shakespeare present the reader with Shakespearean poetry free from the restrictive nature of the creation of popular theatre:

Unlike his sonnet-writing, his play-writing was constrained by the needs of his fellow players as well as the expectations of audiences both at the public playhouse and at court - demands that often pulled him in opposite directions.³⁰

²⁹ Steevens's comment is from his preface to *Plays* (1793). See Rollins, p. 337.

³⁰ See Shapiro, James, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p.8.

This placing of the *Sonnets* in a socio-historical context is, in many ways, the parallel opposite to Benson's censorship and Gentleman's disdain. Shapiro suggests that these poems are examples of Shakespeare's literary prowess within an artistic spectrum less binding than the field of Elizabethan theatre production. The intimation is that no estimation of the qualities of Shakespeare's art can be complete without reference to his *Sonnets*. The poems are, once again, placed at the centre of the stage.

In his 2008 publication *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare*, Jonathan Bate, in league with Shapiro, places the *Sonnets* within a firmly Elizabethan context:

What was the point of writing sonnets? To circulate them among your private friends, whom you could be sure would know enough other sonnets to admire yours for being the sweetest.³¹

This statement does not, of course, imply a freedom of expression as is the case within Shapiro's assessment. (A sonnet, by its very nature, must submit to the formulaic rules of its poetic form. If, as Bate suggests, a form of competitive comparison with other sonneteers was the goal of the poet it is not unreasonable to suggest that these formulaic rules had to be embraced to some degree so as to render comparison feasible.) The *Sonnets* here are, however, removed from current critical debate and re-positioned in a society contemporary to their creation. It is possible, then, that current critical trends, guided by the ideology behind New Historicism, are striving to return the *Sonnets* to the context of the societal conditions that surrounded their very creation. The attempt, for the time being at least, is to return Shakespeare's *Sonnets* to their Elizabethan beginnings.

³¹ See Bate, Jonathan, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 200.

The Cultural Positioning and Repositioning of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:
Criticism Directing Readership

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Shakespeare, William, *Sonnets* in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. by Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1988), pp. 749-775

Hawkes, Terence *Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare: A Selection of Essays, Notes and Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge on the Poems and Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959)

Masson, David, *Essays Biographical and Critical: Chiefly on English Poets* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1856)

Vickers, Brian, *Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage 1774-1801* Volume 6 (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1974)

Wordsworth, William, *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by John Morley (London: Macmillan & Co., 1900)

Secondary Sources

Bate, Jonathan, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London: Viking, 2008)

Crosland, T. W. H., *The English Sonnet* (London: Martin Seeker, 1917)
de Grazia, Margaret, *Shakespeare Verbatim: The Reproduction of Authenticity and the 1790 Apparatus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991)

Adam Hailes

- de Grazia, Margaret, 'The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets' in *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespeare Studies and Production*, 46, ed. by Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 35-49
- Jones, Peter, *Shakespeare: The Sonnets* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1977)
- Rollins, Hyder E., 'The Vogue of the Sonnets' in Hyder E. Rollins, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, 2 Vols. (London: Lippincot & Co., 1944), II, pp. 326-367
- Shapiro, James, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005)
- Spurgeon, Caroline, *Keats's Shakespeare: A Descriptive Study*, reprinted lithographically in 1966 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928)