

Early Modern Literary Studies

Paul Hammond, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Original-Spelling Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 504pp. ISBN 978 0 1996 4207 6

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As editor of the original 1609 edition of Shakespeare's poems, Paul Hammond, a distinguished scholar in the field of early modern studies, tackles head on the crucial question of how to update early modern texts for the twenty-first century reader. Balancing ease of access against fidelity to the original work is a hazardous enterprise, and consonant with the intricacies of translation. Indeed, it could be argued that any current edition of a work published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is in essence a translation. For example, changes in publishing frequently necessitate the modernisation of spelling, standardisation of typography, and amendments to pagination. And that is not including the natural evolution in language that occurs over generations. Thus two editions of the same work, if separated by nearly five centuries, are often radically different when set side by side. A number of issues then arise: does the editor attempt fidelity to form by direct translation, regardless of over-complication and abstruseness? Or do they attempt to project their own interpretation of meaning while ignoring form and structure, key constituents of language in general, and lyrical mediums in particular? Famously, Jorge Luis Borges contrasted such paradoxes with the problems of 'direct writing' observing with typical eloquence that '[n]o problem is as consubstantial to literature and its modest mystery as the one posed by translation'.¹

Borges goes on: 'To assume that a recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original form is to assume that draft nine is necessarily inferior to draft H – for there can be only drafts'.² This warning against qualitative comparison suggests the reader consider not fidelity or 'accuracy' but rather what the new edition or translation does with the original work. And by those standards, Hammond's treatment of Shakespeare's poetry is a triumph of editing, producing an invaluable text both for the first-time reader

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger, trans. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 69.

² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

of these extraordinary poems, and also for the expert. *Shakespeare's Sonnets: An Original-Spelling Text* is evidently not a direct reproduction of the book published by Thomas Thorpe, printed by George Eld and sold by William Aspley in the first decade of the seventeenth century. However, containing a vast array of substantial and substantive editorial apparatus, it serves as not only a new edition of the poems, but also an introduction to the world of early seventeenth century English sonnet poetry, Renaissance literary rhetoric and the complex *ménage à trois* of the Bard, his Boy and his Mistresse.

An extensive introduction serves initially to contextualize the *Sonnets* within the readership, reading practices and poetic tradition of the late sixteenth- and early-seventeenth centuries. Thus, Hammond sets out the publishing history of the poems both in Shakespeare's lifetime and after his death, and also discusses some of the key debates around the publication of the 1609 edition. Touching upon the question as to whether Shakespeare participated actively in Thorpe's edition, Hammond convincingly argues that the high status of the printer and publisher suggests publication was not a 'pirated or surreptitious affair' (p. 11), even if the misprints suggest that 'Shakespeare is unlikely to have proofread the volume' (p. 12).

In addition to this practical history of the text, the editor also provides some useful literary background, emphasising the relationship of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* to the developing late sixteenth-century conventions of the sonnet sequence. This tradition, Hammond informs us, found its most accomplished English exponents in the works of Philip Sidney (*Astrophil and Stella*), Samuel Daniel (*Delia*), Michael Drayton (*Idea*) and Edmund Spenser (*Amoretti*), as the sonnet form, reflecting the influence on Renaissance poetry of Petrarch's *Canonzieri*, represented the 'preferred medium for reflections on love' (p. 28). Drawing out the interactions and tensions of the Shakespearean sonnet sequence in this (by the turn of the seventeenth century) rigidly codified literary tradition, Hammond argues persuasively that the fact that many of the most popular sonnet sequences in English were composed a generation before Shakespeare's own meant that while Shakespeare often directly lifted ideas and lines from his predecessors, he also at the same time challenged many of the well-worn conventions of the literary form. In a series of comparative readings with selected poems from Thomas Wyatt's anglicised *Canonzieri* in *Songes and Sonnettes* (1557) and Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, Hammond contrasts the 'analogues in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*' with works such as Wyatt's 'The Louer forsaketh his vnkinde loue' to show how the later poet invigorates conventional poetic tropes, 'using images, paradoxes, and scenarios from the Petrarchan tradition, but [also] frequently breaking open a static situation so that it forms part of a dynamic narrative (often an inner, psychological

drama rather than one played out in public)' (p. 36). While Shakespeare's ambivalent relationship with poetic convention is one of the key aspects of his work – the confounding of Petrarchan tropes in sonnet 130 ('My Mistres eyes are nothing like the Sunne') being a famous example – Hammond nonetheless brings a fresh perspective to the poet's complex interaction with both major (Sidney) and relatively minor (the Staffordshire sonneteer Richard Barnfield) literary forebears. 'Compared with Sidney's sonnets', Hammond observes, 'Shakespeare's are less direct in voicing desire, and less idealizing in their portrait of the beloved' (p. 43).

The most considerable feature of this introduction is Hammond's interpretive analysis of the *Sonnets* (pp. 49-88). Taking up almost half of the editorial introduction, this extensive essay represents a fascinating discussion of arguably Shakespeare's most intensive meditation on the complexities, conflicts and desires of human amatory relations. In particular, Hammond draws on his background in queer studies and the literature of homosexual relations in his exploration of the profound homoeroticism of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence.

Furthermore, littered throughout Hammond's edition are key pointers regarding different aspects of early modern bibliography and typography, such as the interchangeability of the letters u and v in Shakespeare's time (p. 98), and in the footnote on p. 9 where he sets out the categorisation of books by page size. This sort of information may be so straightforward as to appear superfluous for bibliophiles or those familiar with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century textual conventions. However, by lucidly glossing terms such as 'quarto', 'folio' and 'octavo' Hammond reveals the admirable breadth of the intended readership for which this edition is tailored.

There are many other useful features of Hammond's editing, such as a guide to reading an original spelling text (an invaluable aid to the uninitiated in particular) (pp. 98-102), an extensive summary of Shakespeare's rhetorical figures (pp. 425-435) and an analysis of Sonnet 129 where this summary is implemented to show the richness of Shakespeare's rhetoric (pp. 436-438). As such addenda demonstrate, this edition not only recuperates the original spelling of *Sonnets* for the modern scholar. It also elucidates the many fascinating complexities, vagaries and riches of Shakespeare's poetry and early seventeenth-century bibliography, while contextualising this much-pondered sequence within the bristling intellectual and literary culture of its age.

Work Cited

- Borges, Jorge Luis, *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922-1986*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger, trans. by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin, 1977).