Shakespeare's Sonnets
Critical Essays

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Editing as Cultural Formation
The Sexing of Shakespeare’s Sonnets

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I have recently been trying to understand the work of bibliographers and editors. I undertook this “retraining” for two contradictory but related reasons. The first was that as I became increasingly engaged in the teaching and organization of Cultural Studies courses, I began to wonder what the strengths of specific disciplinary trainings might be. That is, one of the obvious dangers of interdisciplinary work is that one ends up doing history, anthropology, economics—badly. It is hard to gather the technical skills of another discipline on the side: the historical skills, for instance, of finding sources, let alone knowing how to read them. I began to wonder what exactly the technical skills of someone teaching in a department of English might be. Whatever they were, I didn’t seem to know about them, or have them. (By contrast, I did have at least the rudiments of an historical training through having worked with various historians in England.) I found that the librarians at the University of Pennsylvania had an extraordinary range of skills which, as someone who worked on and with books, I felt I should know. The second reason for my turn to editing and bibliography was that I came to believe that the material culture of books was central to any cultural analysis of “literature” and therefore to one aspect of Cultural Studies.1 Questions of, for instance, the formation of

nationalism (and national languages), of the construction of the individual, of the making of genders and sexualities are materially embedded in the historical production and reproduction of texts.

A further reason for attending to the production and reproduction of books was to interrogate a notion of historicity which emphasized the punctual emergence of its objects of study. That is, a course on the seventeenth century would be about writers who wrote (“on time”) in the period one was studying (Milton, Donne, Behn, for instance). In such a course, one might incorporate “precursors” or earlier writing as “background,” but that only reproduces the notion of a series of punctual moments which can be related chronologically through their dates of originat. It is precisely this view which Margreta de Grazia powerfully challenges in Shakespeare Verbatim. She argues that the “Shakespeare” which we still study is the construction of the late eighteenth century and, above all, of the editorial labors of Malone. In other words, “our” Shakespeare is (or at least was until recently) the contemporary of the French Revolution rather than of the Armada. What I attempt to do here is to give a working example of the implications of such a proposition. I argue that there is an important sense in which, if we take seriously the labor of production (editorial work, theatrical stagings, critical commentary, the production and distribution of books on a global scale, the incorporation of texts into the educational apparatus), Shakespeare is a central nineteenth-century author. But what is being authored remains a question. In the case of the Sonnets, which I shall be examining, I think that we can read the inscription of a new history of sexuality and of “character.” But that new history emerges unpunctually, dislocated by its need to write itself over the culturally valued but culturally disturbing body of the Sonnets.

Until Edmond Malone’s 1780 edition, the history of the publication of the Sonnets was that of the reproduction of John Benson’s edition of 1640, in which Benson had radically reordered the sonnets, given titles to individual sonnets, conflated sonnets to create longer poems, changed at least some pronouns so as to render the beloved female rather than male, and added many other poems that modern editors do not regard as Shakespearean. In returning to the 1609 quarto of the Sonnets, Malone was intent upon rescoping Shakespeare’s poems to show the contours of the man behind them. That is, Malone was inventing the character “Shakespeare” as he is still now visible to us. And in inventing this character he turned above all, as de Grazia has argued, to the Sonnets, which he believed gave a crucial key to Shakespeare’s inner life. And now, much to Malone’s credit, the “boy,” the “friend,” “he” appear as central figures. But they do so as what can only be described as the site of moral panic. Having created the “authentic” character of Shakespeare, that character steps into the spotlight as a potential sodomite.

The 1821 edition of Malone prints the Sonnets together with the remarks of John Boswell Jr., who presents the characters of Malone’s new edition (Shakespeare, the young man, the rival poet, the dark lady) and the panic that attends their presentation. Boswell seems appalled at the prospect of what the reader will make of Malone’s Shakespeare: the Bard has been given a newly rich interiority but at the cost of having impugned his character. The final page of Boswell’s introductory remarks on the Sonnets are dedicated to proving that Shakespeare was not a pederast. In the process he produces, as hysterical symptom, the lines of defence that have governed nearly all subsequent readings of the Sonnets:

1) In the Renaissance, male/male friendship was expressed through the rhetoric of amorous love.
2) Shakespeare didn’t love the young man anyway, because he was his patron, and the poems are therefore written in pursuit of patronage.
3) The poems are not really about love or friendship because sonnets are conventional. The Sonnets are, then, less about a young man or a dark lady than about Petrarch, Ronsard, Sidney etc. (A boy’s club but not that kind of boy’s club.)
4) Malone was wrong, and the Sonnets are, after all, a miscellany. They “had neither the poet himself nor any individual in view; but were merely the effusions of his fancy, written upon various topics for the amusement of a private circle.”

Now there is nothing necessarily wrong with any of these readings. I’m not concerned here with their “truth” or their scholarly credentials but with how they emerge as attempted solutions to a crisis. As these critical readings get established, the crisis which produced those readings gets progressively buried, only to re-emerge at junctures like the trial of Oscar Wilde in the 1890s.

At the moment of the formation of “Shakespeare” through a reading of the Sonnets in the 1780s and 1790s, it is striking how
nakedly the issues are presented. Malone, for instance, prints his commentary at the bottom of the page, but his own remarks are frequently framed as a response to the criticisms of George Steevens, who thought that the Sonnets should not be published at all. Malone’s footnote to sonnet 20, for instance, beginning with a long quote from Steevens, reads as follows:

—the MASTER-MISTRESS of my passion[,] It is impossible to read this fulsome panegyrick, addressed to a male object, without an equal mixture of disgust and indignation. We may remark also, that the same phrase employed by Shakespeare to denote the height of encomium, is used by Dryden to express the extreme of reproach:

“That woman, but more daub’d; or, if a man,
“Corrupted to a woman; thy man-mistress.”

Don Sebastian.

Let me be just, however, to our author, who has made a proper use of the term male varlet, in Troilus and Cressida. See that play, Act V. Sc. 1. STEEVENS.

Some part of this indignation might perhaps have been abated, if it had been considered that such addresses to men, however indecent, were customary in our author’s time, and neither imported criminality, nor were esteemed indecorous. See a note on the words—"tho deceased lover," in the 32d Sonnet. To regulate our judgement of Shakespeare’s poems by the modes of modern times, is surely as unreasonable as to try his plays by the rules of Aristotle.

Master-mistress does not perhaps mean man-mistress, but sovereign mistress. See Mr. Tyrwhitt’s note on the 165th verse of the Canterbury Tales, vol. iv. p. 197. MALONE.7

In the most literal sense, character assassination precedes the construction of character: Malone’s justification of Shakespeare comes after (both temporally and upon the printed page) Steevens’s assault.

Nor did Malone’s response satisfy Steevens, who, in his 1793 edition of Shakespeare wrote:

We have not reprinted the Sonnets etc. of Shakespeare, because the strongest act of Parliament that could be framed, would fail to compel readers into their service, notwithstanding these miscellaneous Poems have derived every possible advantage from the literature and

judgement of their only intelligent editor, Mr. Malone, whose implements of criticism, like the ivory rake and golden spade in Prudentius, are on this occasion disgraced by the objects of their culture.9

The passage is a paradoxical mixture of the direct and indirect: the word “sodomy” nowhere appears and yet it everywhere underpins the argument in a curiously inverted form. The acts of Parliament by which sodomites were persecuted and punished are here magically displaced by imaginary decrees which, however strong, will have no force to make the reader turn to Shakespeare’s Sonnets. The reader cannot be “compel[ed]” to the “service” of these poems: that is, the reader will refuse to be seduced, corrupted, sodomized. As Jonathan Dollimore has argued elsewhere, this is the familiar strategy by which the coercions of the state apparatus are displaced by an imaginary scenario in which the state’s victims are represented as the agents of oppression.9 But Steevens limits the danger of those demonic agents by transforming them into the “objects of culture,” by which Steevens surely means excrement, the excrement which contaminates even that distinguished “culture-critic,” Edmond Malone, despite the long handles of his ivory rake and golden spade.

Culture as contamination. The gentle Shakespeare as contaminator and corrupter of youth. But if this character is reiterated throughout the nineteenth century, it is above all as a character that is denied. Critics, in other words, worked from what they imagined as character assassination (e.g., Shakespeare as pederast) to character. But how many character assassinators are there to be reproduced and ritually denounced? In the nineteenth century, as for Malone at the end of the eighteenth, Steevens is virtually alone as the assassinator who must be endlessly named, denounced, put straight. From this distance, the repeated act of putting straight appears as a form of cultural hysteria, but its excesses inscribe a crisis in the attempt to form a normative character and sexuality through Malone’s Shakespeare.

One of the most drastic responses to Malone’s edition of the Sonnets was the forgery by William Henry Ireland of a letter purporting to be from Elizabeth I to Shakespeare, thanking him for his sonnets.10 The Sonnets, in other words, were addressed neither to a male beloved nor to a common woman but to the monarch herself. The forgery was only one of several by Ireland, so what is perhaps more remarkable is that the supposition that Shakespeare’s beloved was Elizabeth I was
justified at great length (and with considerable learning) in two books by George Chalmers. In the latter, *A Supplemental Apology* (1799), Chalmers marvels at the assumption of Steevens and Malone that "Shakespeare, a husband, a father, a moral man, addressed a hundred and twenty six *Amorous* Sonnets to a male object" (p. 55). Chalmers, rightly noting that Malone was the first editor to posit a male beloved, sets out to erase that supposed defamation:

"every fair construction ought to be made, rather than consider Shakespeare as a miscreant, who could address amatory Verses to a man, "with a romantic platonism of affection." But I have freed him, I trust, from that stain, in opposition to his commentators, by shewing, distinctly, his real object. This object, being once known, darkness brightens into light, order springs out of confusion, and contradiction settles into sense. (pp. 73-74)

If Chalmers's position gained little support, the structure of Chalmers's argument was endlessly repeatable. First, the claim that Shakespeare is heterosexual is always supplementary. Indeed, heterosexuality is itself constructed as a back-formation from the prior imagination of pederasty and sodomy. Secondly, it is simply assumed that the taint of male/male love will destroy the character of the national bard. So just as heterosexuality is the belated defence against sodomy, so "character" is the belated defence against an imagined character-assassination that has preceded it. The Sonnets thus produce in the nineteenth century a formidable apparatus to invent a new self: the interiorized heterosexual, projected back onto (or formed in opposition to) Shakespeare.

That apparatus can be seen at its most spectacularly troubled in the writing of Coleridge. On "Wed. morning, half past three, Nov. 2, 1803," Coleridge picked up a volume of Wordsworth's set of Anderson's *British Poets*. The volume contained Shakespeare's Sonnets, and in the margin he found a pencil note by Wordsworth, objecting to the later sonnets (that is, to the sonnets addressed, according to Malone, to the dark lady and thus "heterosexual"). Coleridge wrote:

I can by no means subscribe to the above pencil mark of W. Wordsworth; which, however, it is my wish should never be erased. It is *his*: and grievously am I mistaken, and deplorably will Englishmen have degenerated if the being *his* will not in time give it a value, as of a little reverential relic—the rude mark of his hand left by the sweat of haste in a St. Veronica handkerchief.

Wordsworth is wrong about Shakespeare; but his error is encoded in the enduring, sexualized mark of his hand, a mark that Coleridge reveres as a "relic" that preserves the physical presence of his friend (a "rude mark," capturing the "sweat of haste," so that the paper on which he writes becomes the handkerchief which, like St. Veronica's, immortalizes his physical being). Writing as masturbation with eternal effects. In response to Wordsworth's comments on the later sonnets, then, Coleridge fetishizes the material trace which homoerotically binds him to his friend.

But it is as if, at this point, Coleridge forgets that Wordsworth is writing about the *later* poems—as if what names his relation to Wordsworth is the name that Steevens silently attributes to the *earlier* sonnets and to the relation between Shakespeare and the young man. Abruptly, Coleridge veers from his meditations upon his friend to an apostrophe to his own son, Hartley, who is being christened that very day:

These sonnets thou, I trust, if God preserve thy life, Hartley! thou wilt read with a deep interest... To thee, I trust, they will help to explain the mind of Shakespeare, and if thou wouldst understand these sonnets, thou must read the chapter in Potter's *Antiquities* on the Greek lovers—of whom were that Theban band of brothers over whom Phyllis, their victor, stood weeping; and surveying their dead bodies, each with his shield over the body of his friend, all dead in the place where they fought, solemnly cursed those whose base, fleshly, and most calamitous fancies had suspected their love of desire against nature. This pure love Shakespeare appears to have felt—to have been in no way ashamed of it—or even to have suspected that others could have suspected it. Yet at the same time he knew that so strong a love would have been more completely a thing of permanence and reality, and have been more blessed by nature and taken under her more especial protection, if this object of his love had been at the same time a possible object of desire—for nature is not soul only. In this feeling he must have written the twentieth sonnet; but its possibility seems never to have entered even his imagination... O my son! I pray that thou mayst know inwardly...
Wordsworth writes about the late sonnets; Coleridge responds by writing about the early sonnets, and, moreover, the early sonnets as they had been read by Steevens and Malone. And Coleridge’s reading is a tortuous and tortured reading of the possibly/impossibility of a sexual relation between men. But it is as if every move by which he attempts to erase the specter of sodomy conjures it up. To set one’s mind at rest, one needs, of all things, to read a commentary on the Greeks (a commentary by no less a person than the Archbishop of Canterbury, and this despite Coleridge’s denunciation of Christening in the same note as “unchristian . . . foolery”), as if the “purity” of the Greeks were sufficiently secure to secure the “purity” of Shakespeare. Even more strange is Coleridge’s attempt to deny the function of the “imagination” to the poet to whom he attributed it in the highest degree. The possibility of sodomy “seems never to have entered even his imagination”; he could not “have suspected that others could have suspected” his love.

Which makes it the more remarkable that later, in a note of May 14, 1833 (published in Table Talk [1835]), Coleridge decided not only that all the Sonnets were written to a woman but also (more strangely still) that Shakespeare inserted the twentieth sonnet to obscure his heterosexuality (and thus to raise, seemingly unnecessarily, the thought of pederasty, which before he could not “have suspected that others could have suspected”). Again, the movement of Coleridge’s thinking is revealing. His note in 1833 begins with the reflection that “it is possible that a man may under certain states of the moral feeling, entertain something deserving the name of love towards a male object—an affection beyond friendship and wholly afoam from appetite.”13 When he turns to the friendship between Musidorus and Pyrocles in Sidney’s Arcadia, it looks as if he is preparing his way for a restatement of Malone’s position on the Sonnets. “In Elizabeth’s and James’s time,” Coleridge remarks, “it seems to have been almost fashionable to cherish such a feeling” (p. 178). But Malone’s “defence” of Shakespeare is no longer adequate as a defence for Coleridge. Shakespeare must be purified even of the “rhetorical” male/male love which is said to characterize his age. To the extent that Shakespeare’s Sonnets are “sincere,” they must be heterosexual: “It seems to me that the sonnets could only have come from a man deeply in love, and in love with a woman; and there is one sonnet which from its incongruity, I take to be a purposed blind” (pp. 180-81). Shakespeare, in other words, disguises himself as a pederast as a ruse to avoid detection as a man “deeply in love” with a woman.

If Coleridge’s later interpretation of the Sonnets seems incredible, it testifies to the formidable obstacle that those poems formed in the smooth reproduction of the national bard. That there should be such a smooth reproduction was, of course, increasingly important as Shakespeare was inscribed within a national and colonial pedagogy. If strategies as desperate as Coleridge’s could not command assent, what could one do with the Sonnets? Steevens had a rare follower. Henry Hallam, in his Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries, described Coleridge’s “heterosexualizing” of the Sonnets as “absolutely untenable.”14 But Hallam, like Steevens, consequently finds the “frequent beauties” of the Sonnets “greatly diminished” by the supposed “circumstances” of their production. “It is impossible,” Hallam concludes, “not to wish that Shakespeare had never written them” (p. 264).

What Hallam and other nineteenth century critics wanted to unwrite was the primal scene in the modern production of Shakespeare: the scene conjured up by Steevens’s denunciation. Strangely, Steevens’s denunciation, which was directed not at Benson’s edition but at the Quarto and at Malone’s edition, came to color even the Benson edition, which continued to be reprinted in the early nineteenth century. In 1808, there appeared an edition of Love Poems by “William Shakspere” (the spelling of the author’s name itself testifying to the influence of Malone).15 The second volume of the poems included Benson’s edition of the Sonnets, but many of the notes of Steevens and Malone were incongruously affixed to these significantly different poems. Even stranger perhaps is the case of Dr. Sherwin of Bath who, sometime after 1818, wrote a series of marginal comments in his 1774 copy of the Poems (i.e., the Sonnets in their pre-Malone, Benson form).16 Dr. Sherwin, in other words, was reading an edition of the Sonnets from which it would have been impossible to abstract the story of Shakespeare, the young man, the rival poet, and the dark lady, since the Sonnets had been totally reordered, sometimes run together so that two or more sonnets were made into a single poem, and given titles that pointed in quite other directions, as well as occasionally having had their pronouns changed. Moreover, the poems Sherwin read in his copy were explicitly entitled “Poems on Several Occasions.”
Yet what Sherwin responded to was not the text before him but the mode of interpretation which Steevens and Malone had instituted. He responds, that is, to what he calls "the unaccountable Prejudices of the late Mr. Steevens":

When Mr. Steevens compliments his Brother-Commentator [Malone] at the Expence of the Poet, when he tells us, that his Implements of Criticism are on this Occasion disgraced by the objects of their Culture, who can avoid a mingled Emotion of Wonder and Disgust? Who can, in short forbear a Smile of Derision and Contempt at the folly of such a declaration?17

Steevens and Malone between them had constructed and passed down an impossible legacy: a legacy from Malone of the Sonnets as crucial documents of the interior life of the national bard; a legacy from Steevens of that interior life as one that would destroy the life of the nation. The effects of this impossible legacy were complex. David Lester Richardson, for instance, publishing his Literary Leaves in Calcutta in 1840, blamed the "flippant insolence of Steevens" for the neglect of the Sonnets (which Richardson still refers to as "a volume of Miscellaneous Poems").18 Yet even as he promoted the Sonnets, he was embarrassed by them. A registering of the beauty of the poems is, he writes, "accompanied by [a] disagreeable feeling, bordering on disgust" at the "indelicate" expressions of love between man and man (p. 26). And he writes of sonnet 20 that it is

one of the most painful and perplexing I ever read. It is a truly disagreeable enigma. If I have caught any glimpse of the real meaning, I could heartily wish that Shakespeare had never written it. (p. 38)

A hundred years later, it was this same sonnet which, according to Walter Thomson, "threatened to mislead us and sent us searching for almost twelve months," until he could reassure himself that the word "passion" in the sonnet meant "emotional poem" rather than "amarous desire":

"Passion" is the crucial word, the foundation whereon the fantastic edifice is built in which it is alleged that Shakespeare was perverse in his morals. No more subversive mis-statement could be disseminated about any author or man, and not its least pernicious feature is that it places in the minds and mouths of the perverse a defence of their perversities. . . . We have it from a doctor of wide experience that it is no uncommon thing for perverse persons to cite Shakespeare as their exemplar.19

Thomson's last claim is not, I think, as wild as it may first appear. For as Alan Sinfield has argued, one of the effects of the Oscar Wilde trial was to help to constitute a gay subculture with its own privileged texts and modes of reading.20

What particularly frightens Thomson is the connection between that new subculture and the uses of Shakespeare as a colonial text. In 1840, Richardson could write from Calcutta of the Sonnets as an unread text,21 but the educational apparatus of imperialism transformed that. The Sonnets by the late nineteenth century were being reproduced in school editions which quoted Dowden as saying that "in the Renascence epoch, among natural products of a time when life ran swift and free, touching with its current high and difficult places, the ardent friendship of man with man was one."22 It was precisely such an interpretation of the Sonnets which Thomson found unacceptable. "We have information," Thomson complains, "which justifies the statement that about 40 per cent of the people who buy and read Shakespeare entertain the belief that he was a moral pervert" (p. 9). "The supreme literary ornament of our race" (p. 12) had become a contaminated source that subverted the colonial project:

what, for instance, of the many tens of thousands of students who, since Lord Macaulay's day, have come to our universities from India? They are frequently of literary bent and Shakespeare strongly attracts them. How many of them must return to India with these fallacies planted in their minds? (p. 7)

But it is, of course, the "fallacy" of "perversity" which drives the writing of Thomson (as of Malone and Chalmers before him). The justification of Shakespeare is always subsequent to the charge of deviation—just as the concept of the "heterosexual" is a belated response to the prior concept of the "homosexual."

The Sonnets, I believe, played a central role in the constitution of a new "history of sexuality." Since Foucault, we have been accustomed to trace such a history through religious confessions, through medical
discourse, through architecture. But the post-Enlightenment formation of “literature” was itself a primary site in the formation of sexualities. If the Sonnets were themselves crucial to that new formation of “literature,” in their post-Steevens-and-Malone form they lent themselves to intense critical and editorial labors that produced narratives of “normal” and “deviant” sexualities. The two great spurs to such narratives were the Steevens-Malone debate (and the Malone edition) at the end of the eighteenth century and Oscar Wilde’s “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” and his trial at the end of the nineteenth century. Wilde published his “Portrait” in Blackwood’s in 1889 after Frank Harris’s Fortnightly Review had rejected the piece. As Harris notes in his biography of Wilde:

“The Portrait of Mr. W. H.” did Oscar incalculable injury. It gave his enemies for the first time the very weapon they wanted, and they used it unscrupulously and unctiringly with the fierce delight of hatred.23

Balfour and Asquith, to whom Wilde sent the story, advised against publication on the grounds that it would corrupt English homes.24 Wilde created a specter which produced, by reactionary backformation, not only the “normal” Shakespeare but “normality” itself.

That “normality,” I have been arguing, was itself an hysterical symptom which accompanied Malone’s construction of a unified character attributable to Shakespeare (and to the “characters” in his writing). But the narrative of characterological unity which Malone produced was ideologically fruitful. That is, it did not merely erase the prior text of the Sonnets, but constructed the site of a new kind of struggle. For the drive towards unity of character (Shakespeare’s character, the characters of the Sonnets) produced more and more dramatic consequences at the level of sexual identity. The Sonnets, previously a marginal aspect of Shakespeare’s corpus, became a crucial site on which “sexual identity” was invented and contested. If we need now to reconstruct the cultural history of Shakespeare, it is to understand how the imaginary terrain of our own bodies came into being.

NOTES

1. Formative work in this field has been done by Roger Chartier, Jerome J. McGann, and Donald F. McKenzie. See, for instance, Chartier, The Cultural

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I am also indebted to conversations with her and to her “The Scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” Shakespeare Survey 46 (1994), pp. 35-49, which is also reprinted in this volume.


5. De Grazia, pp. 132-76.


14. p. 263n.