

Shakespeare's lovely and mysterious sonnets, as they were first published during his lifetime

William Shakespeare, *Sonnets*. London: Thomas Thorpe, 1609. 6 7/8 inches x 4 3/4 inches (175 x 121 mm), 80 pages.

To read Shakespeare's sonnets as originally published in 1609 is to encounter a rather different book from the sonnets of the collected works. Here they stand alone as the verse of an Elizabethan poet, as a fresh and consistent body of writing, rather than as a playwright's incidental effusions. The 1609 *Sonnets* has been studied for centuries, but it is still wrapped in mystery. The precise circumstances of publication will likely never be known: it is uncertain when the poems were written and to whom, whether the text was revised for publication or even authorized, and whether its appearance was designed to tantalize a knowing coterie or delight the wider world. Some faint clues exist in this quarto, which presents significant peculiarities lost in later editions, such as the lapidary dedication in capital letters and the curious page breaks in some of the sonnets.

Many details in the sonnets are unmistakably autobiographical. There is no good reason — given the traditional purpose of the sonnet, similar sequences by Shakespeare's contemporaries, and the restricted circulation of his sonnets during the period of their personal relevance — to regard these as purely dramatic exercises. The figures unnamed but evoked in the *Sonnets*, apart from the speaking poet himself, are traditionally described as the Friend (or Fair Young Man), the Mistress (or Dark Lady), and the Rival Poet. It may be rash to assume that the Friend and Mistress are always the same man and woman, but Shakespeare writes several times of his unswerving devotion to the first, and the search for historical equivalents, by now the most voluminously documented of all problems in secular biography, has usually adopted that notion.

“A Lover's Complaint,” the 329-line narrative poem that concludes this volume, forms a curious coda. Incorporating deliberate archaisms, its authorship has long been considered doubtful, but following renewed analysis in the 1960s, it appears to be almost secure. Yet skeptics continue to

wonder if the book was merely eked out with a non-Shakespearean poem on a dramatically similar theme, featuring an old man, a young woman, and a gifted youth.

This exceptional copy from the British Library, one of only thirteen to survive, is bound in nineteenth-century English brown leather, probably sheep, with wide turn-ins, all tooled in gold. Both covers and pastedowns have Thomas Grenville's coat of arms. The spine includes the title and imprint in the second and third compartments: "shake- | speares | sonnets," "london | 1609." The edges of the text block are gilt and tooled.

When the Hon. Thomas Grenville M.P. (1755–1846) acquired this copy, it was standard practice among book collectors of means to have choice volumes uniformly rebound. This copy of the *Sonnets* therefore entered Grenville's library in this elegant rebinding of brown leather, bulked out to double its size with 40-odd blank leaves, enabling the title to be lettered across, rather than along, the spine. All knowledge of the early history of this copy of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* was thus obscured until recently. A faint trace of the long-obliterated signature of "Reynard William[s]" (possibly contemporary with Shakespeare) has now been recovered on the recto of the dedication leaf, though no further information has yet come to light regarding this early autograph.

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