
REVIEWS

Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Oxford Shakespeare Topics. Ed. Peter Holland and Stanley Wells. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 194p.

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One of many witnesses to the power of Shakespeare's sonnets on the imagination is their translation into Latin elegiac verse by a Fellow and Tutor of Pembroke College, Oxford (A[lfred] T[homas] Barton, *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare, with a Latin Translation*. 1913. Rpt. London: Hopkinson, 1923). That lovely but obscure homage to the *Sonnets* is one of the few things that Edmondson and Wells do not include in their relatively brief but compendious review of their subject: in Part I, the composition and publication of the sonnets, their form and content, their relationship to Shakespeare's life and the theater; and in Part II, the subsequent life of the *Sonnets* in publication, in reputation, and in their influence on literature and other arts. The text reproduces, among other things, facsimile illustrations of six pages from the 1609 Quarto but does not include a complete text of the 154 sonnets. Speaking throughout in the first-person plural, Edmondson and Wells promise "to avoid the jargon of theoretical criticism along with over-technical discussion of rhetoric and prosody" (xiv) as they provide a forum for "open" readings. And they are true to their word.

Part I reveals that, although primarily free from jargon and the overly technical, Edmondson and Wells work within the tradition of historical and formalist critics. Some chapters, such as "The Early Publication of the Sonnets" (3-12) and "The History and Emergence of the Sonnet as a Literary Form" (13-21) are factual, chronological summaries interspersed with occasional critical judgments: e.g., "Like all his [Shakespeare's] work, they [the sonnets] reflect his reading" (20). Edmondson and Wells often cite other scholars, sometimes agreeing with them, sometimes not. With respect to the question of how the sonnets might reflect Shakespeare's own life, Edmondson and Wells repeatedly dismiss the numerous and varied attempts to identify the young man, the dark lady, or the rival poet, concluding that "[t]he case will always remain open" (26). In their discussion of readings of the sonnets they provide succinct, original tables that list the possible/probable addressees (Table 1), the themes that link groups of sonnets within the collection (Table 2), and the variable position of the reader with respect to the text as a single poem or part of the whole

and the text as “literary exercise” or “autobiographical experience” (Table 3).

Edmondson and Wells also can be witty. For example, their own dedication mirrors the dedication of the 1609 Quarto (Fig. 4) in its content, style, word choice, punctuation, and font. Or, as another example, after a discussion of the punning use of the word *will* in Sonnets 135, 136, and 143 as it relates to the identification of the author or persons addressed or mentioned in the poems (41, 43-45), they conclude, “To insist on one story alone is to misread the Sonnets and to ignore their *will* [italics added] to plurality, to promiscuity” (47). This quotation also illustrates the authors’ habit of concluding that we cannot know, for sure, definitive answers either to any number of internal questions raised by the sonnets themselves or to external questions concerning their time of and reason for composition. Part I ends with a chapter discussing “A Lover’s Complaint.” Despite recent challenges to its authenticity—and Edmondson and Wells admit a rare difference of opinion on this subject (107)—the two authors argue that consideration of this poem “enriches a reading of the Sonnets” and follows recent editorial practice of including the 329-line poem in scholarly editions of the *Sonnets* (107).

Part II begins with an overview of editions of the *Sonnets*, among them John Benson’s “deliberately fraudulent volume” of 1639 (118), a scholarly 1780 text by the “great editor” Edmond Malone, and numerous (and varyingly successful) nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reprints in collections (120-21), in illustrated volumes (122), and in translations (123). After commending the 1944 New Variorum edition as “a wonderful and heroic digest” (124), the authors spend more time with six recent annotated editions: Stephen Booth’s “idiosyncratic” commentary of 1977 (124-25); Helen Vendler’s “no less idiosyncratic” edition of 1997 (125-27); John Kerrigan’s New Penguin of 1986 with a “critically acute introduction” (127); G. Blakemore Evans’ New Cambridge of 1997, which “lacks unity” (127-28); Katherine Duncan-Jones’ Arden of 1997, “a largely biographical approach” (128-29); and Colin Burrow’s Oxford *Complete Sonnets and Poems* of 2002, which disagrees with Duncan-Jones’ view that the sonnets can be read as a “sequence” (129-30). Missing is the new edition by Paul Werstine and Barbara A. Mowat for the Folger Shakespeare Library Series, published in January 2004, about six months before the hardback version of this book; also missing is the earlier Folger edition by Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar (New York: Washington Square, 1967, 1988). Part II concludes with chapters on how the sonnets continue to inspire not only performance but also creative work in drama, literature, and other arts. Occasional and delightful odd details abound throughout, such as the fact that Samuel Butler, Helen Vendler, and William Sutton each learned all of the sonnets by heart (126, 171).

The volume concludes with a modest number of endnotes (178-81), a helpful annotated bibliography with entries published anywhere from 1930 to 2004 (182-85), and a complete—although not flawless (it is missing F. J. Furnival and Georg Brandes)—index (187-94). The index would be particularly useful for a reader whose interest is limited to the reading of a single sonnet. So, for example, it directs the reader to eleven different references to Sonnet 144 (“Two loves I have, of comfort and despair”), which discuss everything from how the 1609 text differs from its 1599 version (4) to how Swinburne reimagines a similar love triangle in one of his own sonnets (151).

I cannot imagine any other single secondary source that could be as useful as this slender volume. While not everyone would agree with Edmondson and Wells that the *Sonnets* may be “the most difficult and complicated part of the Shakespearian canon to read and discuss” (50), no one would question the value of their presentation of that case. ✱