

# O sweet Master Shakespeare!

During Shakespeare's lifetime it was his non-dramatic poetry that sent young contemporaries into raptures. **Katherine Duncan-Jones**, co-editor of a new edition of his poems, explains why.

'Is the greatest writer in the English language primarily a poet or a dramatist?' This question was raised by the distinguished poet Peter Porter in a review-article focussed on the Arden 3 edition of *Shakespeare's Poems* (*Times Literary Supplement* 7 March 2008). But for Elizabethans who commented on Shakespeare's writings in the 1590s there was little doubt that he was first and foremost a non-dramatic poet. His earliest published poem, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) was immediately reprinted, praised, imitated and quoted. Phrases from it were as well known then as 'To be, or not to be' is today. By the end of the 16th century rich gallants who wanted to impress their mistresses paid to have new poems composed in exactly the same style. They hung portraits of the author in their studies, and lost themselves in raptures of uncritical adoration of him:

'O sweet Master Shakespeare!'

One of the features that made *Venus* so popular was its 'sweet' style, with its enchantingly poetic yet naturalistic evocations of twilight, woodland glades and animals, both wild and tame. A further attraction, especially for young readers, was its eroticism. By altering the classical myth of Venus and Adonis, presenting the huntsman Adonis as a sulky boy who is entirely resistant to the blandishments of the Goddess of Love, Shakespeare freed himself to devote half of his long poem to the titillating evocation of Venus. Since her lover is unresponsive, she has repeatedly to draw attention to the attractions of her own naked body, a miniature landscape where the youth can be transformed into a deer ('dear'):

I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;  
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:

Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,  
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.

Explicitly sexy women are rare in Shakespeare's plays, no doubt because their roles had to be performed by boys. Even Cleopatra expresses her sexual charms in distinctly boyish ways, as when she 'hops forty paces' in the street before getting out of breath, or when, like a boy-page, she helps to fasten Antony's battle-armor. Verse narrative gave Shakespeare an opportunity to write about genuinely feminine women.

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That he relished this opportunity is shown in the subject matter he chose for his second narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). Here he took a story from the early history of Rome and explored it almost entirely from the viewpoint of the innocent rape-victim. No female character in the plays could be expected to perform such long soliloquies as those which make up much of this very reflective poem. They are difficult to exemplify in brief quotation, but these lines, opening a section in which Lucrece curses the darkness of Night for giving Tarquin an opportunity for assault, are striking for their theatrical image:

O comfort-killing Night, image of hell,  
Dim register and notary of shame,  
Black stage for tragedies and murders fell...

Overall, this poem is much 'graver' than *Venus*, as Shakespeare had promised to his patron the Earl

of Southampton, and also considerably longer. But it, too, was much admired by Shakespeare's contemporaries, and was frequently reprinted, imitated and quoted.

Sadly, both poems fell out of fashion. The 1623 First Folio is a collection only of plays. Shakespeare soon came to be celebrated exclusively as a playwright,

with his poems banished to the margins and largely ignored. Also, later critics encountered some problems. The sexual explicitness that made *Venus* so popular within Shakespeare's life-time was no longer appreciated. Some 20th-century critics, such as C.S. Lewis, found it frankly disgusting. And for those more accustomed to the fast pace and varied tone of Shakespeare's plays *Lucrece* seemed too slow and too serious. A surprising number of male scholars, including F.T. Prince, whose Arden edition of the *Poems* was published in 1960, seemed to feel that *Lucrece*, with all her long meditations, made altogether too much fuss about having been raped.

Publication of both poems was authorized by Shakespeare himself, and each was carefully printed by his Stratford school contemporary Richard Field. None of the plays enjoyed such a straightforward textual history. Nevertheless, our edition keeps closer to the original printings than any previous one. For instance, we have retained the 'ROMAN'-looking use of capital letters for



'As falcons to the lure,  
away she flies: / The  
grass stoops not, she  
treads on it so light':  
Venus discovering the  
dead Adonis by José de  
Ribera. Courtesy of the  
Corsini Gallery, Rome.  
Topfoto

proper names that is a distinctive feature of *Lucrece*. For 21st-century editors the two greatest challenges were to provide clear and full explanatory notes – ours are fuller than those of any previous edition – and also to persuade a new generation of readers that these are works that they should both read and enjoy. The greatest problem is one of awareness. For many people today 'poems' by Shakespeare are either songs or poetic passages in the plays, or else those celebrated *Sonnets* published in 1609 to which so many mysteries are attached. The chief mystery attached to *Venus* and *Lucrece* is why these brilliant narratives composed by Shakespeare in his prime have been so widely overlooked, and for such a very long time. We should no longer feel either surprised or embarrassed to discover that a writer of genius could compose a piece of soft porn, and nowadays the centrality of a female figure in each poem should constitute a major attraction. In terms of Shakespeare's overall career, his choice of such subject-matter suggests that he would like to have focussed much more fully on female character and consciousness than was possible for him when writing plays to be performed

by all-male acting companies. The poems themselves have some potential for theatrical performance, as was demonstrated by Greg Doran's wonderful adaptation of *Venus* as a 'Masque for Puppets' (RSC 2004).

Our edition also includes all of the shorter poems plausibly attributed to Shakespeare, such as the miscellaneous sonnets and poems published under the title of *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599) and those extraordinary untitled verses now known as 'The Phoenix and Turtle', celebrating a mysterious and rarefied love. From an editorial point of view, many of these short poems were extremely problematic, raising complex questions of authenticity, context and meaning. Some of our approaches here are quite new. But as Peter Porter said at the end of his article, quoting Hamlet, 'Whatever the rest is, it isn't silence'.

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