Reading Shakespeare's Poetry

Dympna Callaghan

WILEY Blackwell

Reading Shakespeare's Poetry

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For R.S. White and in memory of Maria Thomas

Contents

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*

It was my immense good fortune to have been introduced to early modern poetry in my first year at university by the magnificent Shakespeare and Romantics' scholar, R.S. White. Had he not been my tutor all those years ago, this book might never have been written. I was fortunate also in my tutorial partner at that time, Maria Thomas, who modelled an intellectual voracity and commitment that inspired my own. She remained a kind, learned, and wonderful friend until her untimely death as I was completing this book, which I dedicate, with immense gratitude, to our tutor, Bob, and to her memory.

Introduction

When Shakespeare published *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 under the patronage of the Earl of Southampton, he made what was undoubtedly the greatest single leap of his career. No longer just an "upstart crow," which was the derisive moniker accorded to him only a year before in *Greene's Groats-worth of Wit* (1592), ostensibly by Robert Greene, he had now made a claim for himself as a poet worthy of consideration along with the greatest classical authors of the ancient world. *Venus and Adonis* was a runaway success. It was reprinted no fewer than sixteen times before 1640, and because it was quite literally read to pieces, few copies of those early printings now survive.

The aim of this volume is to attain an understanding of Shakespeare's poems, namely *Venus and Adonis*, *Lucrece*, *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, and the *Sonnets*, together with the poem appended to the first printing of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* in 1609, albeit one that may not have been written by Shakespeare, namely *A Lover's Complaint*. While his plays were for the most part written in blank verse – that is, in unrhymed iambic pentameter with its five strong beats to a line – that use of verse, although it is *poetry*, does not actually constitute *a poem*. However, Shakespeare's dramatic verse also includes lines that are set apart and designated specifically as songs, poems, and sonnets. Berowne's sonnet in *Love's Labour's Lost* is described in a series of synonyms as a "staff," (that is, a stave in the musical sense), a "stanza," a word that had only recently entered the English Language,[1] and as a "verse": "Let me hear a staff, a stanza, a verse," (4.2.124). Poems which mark their boundaries in such definitive terms and explicitly measure out their distance from the rest of the play

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in which they appear also work to offer an implicit commentary on the social and cultural function of poetry. Indeed, throughout this book, we will pay particular attention to how Shakespeare's poetry marks its borders and boundaries, or, conversely strives to erase them. For this reason, we will address some of these embedded poems below because they also serve to illuminate the ways in which verse manifested in the cultural context in which Shakespeare wrote.

A World of Verse

One of the least noticed but most significant differences between Shakespeare's era and our own is that we inhabit a world dominated by prose while he lived in a world where poetry was far from being the marginal, more specialized form of cultural expression that it has now become. Prose is where we live and how we speak; poetry is another country with another language. We tend to feel that we know where we are with prose because it is typically regarded as particularly suited to rational, logical argument and explanation, and to the straightforward communication of information, whereas we may perceive much more difficulty in orienting ourselves in relation to verse. Despite the ways in which poetry is necessarily distinct from ordinary prose communication, in the early modern period, verse was also often deployed in the service of very ordinary, everyday affairs. Indeed, what was probably the best-selling book of verse in Elizabethan England (one which was *not* written by Shakespeare) provided instructions about how to run a farm. That book was Thomas Tusser's *A Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie*, first printed in 1557,[2] which, in its much-expanded printing of 1562, was augmented with "A Hundred Good Poyntes of Huswifery." In its multiple editions and iterations between 1557 and 1599, Tusser's rhymes directed his readers as to what labors should be undertaken in different months of the year. The form, or rather formula of the poem, was a series of simple *aabb* four-line stanzas; a quatrain, with a jog-trot rhythm that made no pretense of rhetorical sophistication:

> In March and in April, from morning to night,
> in sowing and setting good huswives delight.
> To have in their Garden or other like plot,
> to trim up their house, and to furnish their pot.
> (1570, sig. E.ii)

Tusser's directions to the housewife to plant her kitchen garden in the spring demonstrates little in the way of literary and aesthetic merit – for that is not its purpose, which is rather to give advice about how to operate a farm resourcefully and how to run a household efficiently. Rhyme also helps to commit the instructions to memory. In fact, Tusser's rhymes about spring planting share thematic territory with the most elevated literary poetry of the era in that one of the most ancient forms of lyrical expression was the transformation of the seasons. Crucially, the coming of springtime, the vernal equinox, was in particular a long-standing lyrical theme, and is a preoccupation, for example, of many of Shakespeare's sonnets. For instance, nature's decorative flowers and greenery are represented in Shakespeare's Sonnet 98 in the personified figure of "proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim" (98.2), and while in terms of aesthetic finesse Shakespeare's lyric is a world away from Tusser's rhyme, there is, nonetheless, a certain continuity between the latter's stylistically crude, though nonetheless engaging, popular verse and even the most refined lyrical writing of the Elizabethan and Jacobean age, of which Sonnet 98 is an excellent example.

That *A Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie* out-sold Shakespeare, even and especially his immensely popular pamphlet, *Venus and Adonis* (1593), is in itself remarkable, but it also provides us with an important sense of the milieu in which Shakespeare's poetry was written. Verse was ubiquitous, and sometimes, as in the case of Shakespeare and the most illustrious of his contemporaries, it rose to an exalted level of eloquence. Such carefully-wrought, ineluctably literary "poetry," though it was set farther apart from ordinary language usage than less accomplished verse and common speech (also known by the Latin term, *usus loquendi*), still maintained clear connections with them. Indeed, English as a language had been given a particular boost by the Protestant Reformation. Hitherto, the classical languages of Latin and Ancient Greek, which were the province of only a tiny elite minority of highly educated men, were the languages of scripture and poetry. Beginning in the 1530s, Protestantism advanced the then novel belief that God's Word should be available to every English man and woman in his or her own tongue, which led to the translation of the Bible into English.[3] A specifically literary development ran alongside this religious shift since the struggle for poetry up until the late sixteenth century had been to make English, the vernacular language, an appropriate vehicle for poetic expression. This was a feat accomplished primarily by metrical innovation, and especially by the adoption of iambic pentameter, which was arguably more suited to the natural rhythms of

English speech than the four-stress line of earlier native English verse, and certainly an improvement on the nonetheless worthy though ultimately unsuccessful attempts to imitate the meters deployed in classical poetry. This larger historical environment of linguistic and poetic innovation[4] meant that, as Russ McDonald has explained:

> Shakespeare was born at the right time. In a fortunate intersection of individual talent and cultural context, his unmatched sensitivity to words combines with the range and plasticity of the English language at this moment in its development.[5]

This does not mean, however, that Shakespeare wrote only at the high-end of the spectrum of early modern verse. His dramatic poetry, that is, the blank verse of his plays, conveys a wonderfully rich picture of early modern life and language along the entire gamut of the social spectrum. In addition, however, the following verse was attributed to Shakespeare and its purpose was practical rather than purely aesthetic or literary. It is what early moderns would have called a "posy," a syncopated form of the word "poesie," which is to say, "posy" records the loss of the "e" sound in the middle of the word. A posy then is a short motto or verse fragment, which in the instance below served as the note to accompany the gift of a pair of gloves.

The gift is small
The will is all
Alexander Aspinall

The historical evidence for Shakespeare's authorship of this tiny verse appears in the form of an annotation in a manuscript miscellany compiled around 1629 by Sir Francis Fane (1611–80): "Shakxpaire upon a peaire of gloves that master sent to his mistris." Shakespeare died in 1616 when Fane was only four years old, so since this authorial attribution was not recorded in Shakespeare's lifetime, we cannot be absolutely certain that the posy was indeed written by Shakespeare. However, Fane's note merits some serious consideration on the grounds that as an early seventeenth-century attribution it is more likely to be correct than, say, a claim for Shakespearean authorship made in a subsequent century. The annotation suggests that Shakespeare composed this posy on behalf of his friend who was a master at the Stratford grammar school, Alexander Aspinall, to

accompany the presentation of a gift of gloves to Anne Shaw, the widow Aspinall was courting.

Gloves were a conventional and rather intimate love token in the rituals of courtship in Shakespeare's day, and indeed, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, Katherine, one of the ladies of France who is a visitor at the court of Navarre, receives a pair from the courtier, Dumaine. These are also accompanied by a quantity of what she claims is very bad poetry, which conveys only hackneyed expressions of love and fidelity:

> **PRINCESS** …But, Katherine, what was sent to you
> From fair Dumaine?
> **KATHERINE**
> Madam, this glove. *She shows the glove.*
> **PRINCESS** Did he not send you twain?
> **KATHERINE** Yes, madam, and moreover,
> Some thousand verses of a faithful lover,
> A huge translation of hypocrisy,
> Vilely compiled, profound simplicity.
> *Love's Labors' Lost* (5.2.50–7)

Katherine values neither the material gift she has received nor the verses. Indeed, she is bluntly disparaging about Dumaine's poem in a fashion that conveys a pithily trenchant critique of love poetry as a genre. Indeed, Shakespeare himself concurs with this assessment at various moments in his *Sonnets* (1609), for example, in Sonnet 17, "Who will believe my verse in time to come," where he confronts the resistance of poetry as a medium to original expression or what he calls "fresh numbers" (17.6). Katherine's withering appraisal of the artifice of poetry implies that it is too-often merely a patchwork of conventional lyrical phrases – perhaps especially, since she uses the word "translation," a hackneyed imitation of sentiments expressed in other languages – which thus makes verse incapable of conveying genuine emotion or the extraordinary reality of love and beauty. Worse still, she implies, such poetry is untruthful in its deviation from real emotion and genuine, authentic expression.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Egeus, the irate father of Hermia, indignantly accuses Lysander of trying to seduce his daughter with poetry. Like Katherine, his main complaint is that poetry is fake, that it is just a surreptitious means of grooming a woman for dishonorable sexual ends. However, Egeus construes this primarily as an act of theft, claiming that Lysander has stolen Hermia from him by stealing her heart:

> Thou, thou, Lysander, thou hast given her rhymes
> And interchanged love tokens with my child.
> Thou hast by moonlight at her window sung
> With feigning voice verses of feigning love
> And stol'n the impression of her fantasy
> With bracelets of thy hair, rings, gauds, conceits,
> Knacks, trifles, nosegays, sweetmeats—messengers
> Of strong prevailment in unhardened youth.
> With cunning hast thou filched my daughter's heart.
> *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1.1.29–37)

Crucially, here the "rhymes" and songs are accompanied by an array of material gifts, including locks of hair, rings, ornaments and other jewelry, knick-knacks, bouquets of flowers, and candy. Poetry, then, was not delivered on its own; rather, it was but one element in the elaborate social exchanges of the courtship ritual. For Egeus, love poetry is simply an act of deception performed with "feigning [counterfeit] voice verses of feigning love" (1.1.132). This is significant because here Egeus articulates one of the most prevalent objections to literature, and especially to poetry, in the early modern period, namely that it was simply an act of untruth, a cunning deception perpetrated upon unsuspecting readers and listeners, and that, further, any aesthetic accomplishments such verse might demonstrate were merely ways of making its lies more palatable; a spoonful of sugar, so to speak that made the poisonous duplicity go down all the more easily. Indeed, the word "feigning" is frequently used in conjunction with ideas about poetry, in part because as Patrick Cheney argues: "The word 'feigning' can mean both *imaginative* and *deceptive*."[6] The logic behind this notion is that if something is imagined, it is simply unreal, and therefore, by the lights of many denizens of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, constituted nothing short of a lie. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare's clever irony is to offer an exquisitely lyrical account of the nature of poetry in a speech that professes profound skepticism about its morals and its merits:

> I never may believe
> These antique fables nor these fairy toys.
> Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends.
> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet

> Are of imagination all compact.
> One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
> That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
> Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
> The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven,
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.
>
> *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.2–18)

Of course, the poet both represents and invents, but in this speech, Theseus, himself a figure plucked from mythology, nonetheless refuses to give credence to it even as he so poetically enunciates the poet's investment in both the terrestrial and celestial aspects of being, and the sheer power of imagination that unites the lover and the lunatic with the poet. As we discover in the *Sonnets*, the poet does see indeed "Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt" when he falls in love with the Black woman, whose beauty is unconventional by early modern English standards. While her precise ethnicity is never specified, she is described as "black" no fewer than nine times – so let us take the poet at his word. And like Thesesus's "frantic lover" (5.1.10), the poet's passion for her drives him to frenzied distraction. While the poet can represent earthly reality with various degrees of mimetic exactitude and abstraction, s/he also represents things that do not exist at all and that indeed, have never existed, in observed reality.

This is an idea that the clown, Touchstone, in *As You Like It* jokes about when he says: "[T]he truest poetry is the most feigning" (3.3.18), in other words, the best and most sound poetry is the most imaginative *and therefore* the most fraudulent because, to put its merits in pejorative terms, it is fanciful and illusory. Touchstone adds that "lovers" (by which he means male poet-lovers who are wooing women) are particularly prone to such deceptions because they use poetry as an instrument of seduction: "[L]overs are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign" (3.3.18–21).

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Egeus too is convinced that his daughter has been the victim of a malicious deception. For him, Hermia is possessed of neither the agency which would allow her to refuse

Lysander's overtures, nor of the capacity to actually desire him as her lover. She is rather positioned by her father as an inert, malleable surface for Lysander's sexual aims rather than someone fully capable of sexual or even social discernment. There are, of course, no father figures supervising the courtships of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Yet all the ladies rebuff their suitors, not on grounds of, say, a vow of chastity such as the one with which Rosaline rejects Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*, but simply because they see through the superficial and hyperbolic claims made by the poems their would-be lovers have written to accompany the gifts conventional to early modern courtship. On these grounds, Katherine has retained only one of the gloves she has been sent by Dumaine, which is why the Princess is compelled to ask whether she received a pair rather than a useless single one: "Did he not send you twain?" (5.2.50).

Since Alexander Aspinall married Ann Shaw in 1594, we must assume that his gift was more favorably received. If the posy intended for Anne Shaw is indeed Shakespeare's, Aspinall probably purchased the gloves from John Shakespeare, Shakespeare's father, who was a glover, that is, one who prepared or "tawed" the leathers and utilized them in the manufacture of gloves. Anne's deceased husband's family were near neighbors of Shakespeare, so there is a double personal connection between Shakespeare and the soon-to-be-betrothed couple. Essentially the poem says, this is a very small token but the thought, the intention behind it is everything. In other words, "It's the thought that counts." That the "thought" here is the "will" or aspiration of the poem, a pun on Shakespeare's name, indeed, supports the claim that he was its author. If we assume this is the case, we can adduce an additional meaning, namely that in this matter of courtship, betrothal, and impending marriage, Shakespeare, the writer, and indeed the poem itself, is everything, and far surpasses the value and significance of the actual gloves: "The **Will** is all." Even though the attribution must remain uncertain, what further bolsters the possibility that Shakespeare is truly the author of this simple but delightful posy is that in the *Sonnets*, Shakespeare repeatedly puns on his own name, "Will."

In the *Sonnets*, Shakespeare's "Will" is charged with eroticism since "will" connotes sexual desire and is also early modern slang for "penis," and alternatively, for "vagina." For example, in Sonnet 135 the word "will" occurs thirteen times in the space of the fourteen lines of the poem:

> Who euer hath her wish, thou hast thy *Will*,
> And *Will* too boote, and *Will* in ouer-plus.
> (Q1, Sonnet 135.1–2)

> Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy will,
> And will to boot, and will in overplus.
> (Sonnet 135.1–2,
> edited by Stephen Booth)[7]

In these very first two lines, "Will" appears three times, and not only is it capitalized in the 1609 Quarto ["Q1"], that is the first printing of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, it is also italicized for added emphasis. Further, Shakespeare's initial, the letter "W" occurs five times, most conspicuously as the first enlarged character of the sonnet. Most modern editors choose to omit the italicization, and some, for example, Stephen Booth, also eschew the capitalizations on the grounds that they make the poem seem "archly precious." Booth believes that the speaker of the sonnet goes to "grotesque lengths" to make "a maximum number and concentration of puns on *Will*," and that nowadays readers are overly susceptible to typeface variations, that is to orthographical signals such as italics and capitals. Additionally, he worries that "a modern reader may also incline toward the folly of trying to dredge meaning from Q's selectivity in singling out some *will's* typographically and printing others in ordinary roman."[8] In other words, Booth fears readers these days will over-read the significance of "*Will*" and "dredge" up meanings from the poem that simply do not exist. However, if we read Sonnet 135 in conjunction with the above posy ascribed to Shakespeare, we may arrive at a very different conclusion.

Contra Booth, it is arguably the case that early moderns were *even more* susceptible than we are to variations in typography. Juliet Fleming has argued that "the Elizabethans understood reading and writing differently" from us, and suggests that the period's fondness for posies, such as the one above, reveals precisely the nature of that difference. Writing, she shows, was invariably understood to have a physical extension, such as, in the case of Shakespeare's Aspinall posy, in the form of the gift it accompanied, though such verses were also inscribed on knives, the inside of rings, and painted on platters and other household ornaments. This sense of the physicality of posy also held true for other poetry in the form of the ink in which it was printed, and the paper marked by the ink. Consider, for example, among Shakespeare's numerous references to paper, pen, and ink, the physical implements of writing, the poet's hope in Sonnet

65 "That in black ink my love may still shine bright" (65.14). While later historical eras began to recognize the "content" of writing, the ideas it articulated, as somehow unmoored from the material conditions of its expression, in the early modern period writing was not understood to exist in that fashion, in the abstract; untethered from the physical form of its existence. Rather, writing, whether in manuscript or in print, had a solidly substantive material dimension. This historicized understanding of writing and its cultural function suggests that the visually conspicuous aspects of printed verse were, just like the ornamental motto or posy itself, also designed "to catch the eye or memory."[9] If we accept this to be the case, the capitalizations and italicizations of *Will* in Sonnet 135 in fact should not be downplayed in roman type. Further, since the 1609 edition is the only version of the *Sonnets* (save for two poems printed earlier), there seems no logical reason to doubt that "will" was given typographical emphasis for a very good, onomastic reason – specifically that it was intended to draw the reader's attention both to the poem's verbal, albeit somewhat ribald, ingenuity, and, likewise, to the name of its author.

The sense that knowing how to read and understand a posy can help us to read and understand the *Sonnets* is instructive. Notably, if those first two lines from Sonnet 135 were to be extracted from the remaining twelve of the sonnet, they would also constitute a posy, albeit a sexually suggestive one. One could, at any rate, imagine these lines engraved on a bracelet:

> Who euer hath her wish, thou hast thy *Will*,
> And *Will* too boote, and *Will* in ouer-plus.
> (Q1, Sonnet 135.1–2)

The more decorous lines that accompanied the gloves delivered to Anne Shaw are also variants on the mottos that were often inscribed on the inside of rings, such as, "The gift is small, the love is all."[10] In *Hamlet*, for example, the play that Prince Hamlet has contrived to have staged in order to establish Claudius's guilt in the murder of his father, *The Murder of Gonzago*, is prefaced by the Player's prologue, which is but three, rhymed lines long:

> For us and for our tragedy,
> Here stooping to your clemency,
> We beg your hearing patiently.
> *Hamlet* (3.2.73)

"Tragedy," "clemency," and "patiently" are all unstressed endings and rhyme somewhat awkwardly, but they are effective in context in so far as these endings assert nothing but rather request something of the audience, namely their kind and uncritical disposition towards the production that is to follow. The brevity of the prologue leads Hamlet to pose the rhetorical question: "Is this the prologue or the posy of a ring" (3.2.173).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Nerissa has given her husband, Gratiano, precisely such a ring, "Which I did make him swear to keep forever," (4.2.18) but he has, as he believes, parted with the keepsake to a young law clerk, who, unbeknownst to him, is none other than his wife in disguise. When Nerissa demands to know what became of the ring, her husband attempts to diminish its significance and thus make light of his own transgression:

> **GRATIANO**
> …, a hoop of gold, a paltry ring
> That she did give me, whose posy was
> For all the world like cutler's poetry
> Upon a knife, "Love me, and leave me not."
> **NERISSA**
> What talk you of the posy or the value?
> You swore to me when I did give it you
> That you would wear it till your hour of death,
> And that it should lie with you in your grave.
> (5.1.160–67)

"Cutler's poetry" is Gratiano's disparaging assessment of the value of the posy; in other words, something that was composed with all the deficient ingenuity of a knife maker who might inscribe his blades with some inane, clichéd saying; an old motto, or a too well-worn proverb. With increased access to literacy, even such manual laborers as the cutler might indeed take to verse composition. This is perhaps why in the text known as the Bad Quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), the dying Mercutio says "some peasantly rogue, some Sexton, some base slave shall write my Epitaph."[11] In this instance, presumably Mercutio's premature demise would necessitate urgent composition, and anyone with even rudimentary literacy skills might be pressed into the service of engraving a hastily-composed and unoriginal epitaph for his tombstone. This is a society in which crude or simple verse expression – and the manual labor often required to articulate and present it – sits alongside the most refined and sophisticated poetry wrought with a quill on paper or parchment. However, albeit

executed without literary accomplishment, even a clumsily-composed posy may be freighted with the gravity of a matrimonial oath as in *The Merchant of Venice*, or the grief at a burial as in the Bad Quarto of *Romeo and Juliet*. Alternatively, like Tusser's printed rhymes, verse may simply be replete with indispensable practical information. Notably, Tusser included in his book a section on "Husbandly [household] Poesies," which served decorative and ornamental functions and were intended to be copied out onto household objects so that their significance framed and consolidated what they were inscribed upon.[12] Gratiano above defensively contends that the value of a posy resides in how well it is executed as purely an act of language, with no consideration of the material form of its expression. However, Tusser's chapter on how to copy out poesies as household ornaments suggests that, on the contrary, "the value" of a posy or a poem might not be aesthetic in the irreducibly literary sense at all.

Engaging with Petrarch

Shakespeare's embedded poems, deliberately situated at key moments in the plays in which they appear, were a means of exploring and experimenting with how poems might function in both comic and tragic situations.[13] In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Berowne is one of the would-be poets among the lords at the court of Navarre whose sonneteering becomes evidence that the men have contravened the solemn oath they took at the start of the play to commit to become scholarly, celibate recluses and to abjure the company of women. Of course, the jig is up when they are found out to have been composing their lyrics in an endeavor to woo the Princess of France and her ladies. That Berowne's poem is a sonnet that takes a very circuitous route to its intended recipient in *Love's Labour's Lost* intensifies the comic impact of a poem that in other circumstances would be read very differently, and much more seriously. Indeed, we know this is the case because this sonnet was one of the three poems from this play that appeared, along with versions of Sonnets 138 and 144, in a volume printed in 1599 by William Jaggard called *The Passionate Pilgrim*, and which bore Shakespeare's name on its title page even though the book contained only five of his poems. In the play, however, Berowne's sonnet is read aloud, not by its aristocratic author but by someone decidedly much further down the social scale, the church curate, Nathaniel, and before the uncourtly audience of the pedantic schoolmaster, Holofernes, and the illiterate, rustic wench, Jaquenetta. The latter's presence in particular

marks the veritable chasm between the ideals of femininity expressed in love poetry and the unembellished reality of lower-class womanhood. In fact, Jacquenetta's presence makes her the impromptu substitute for Rosaline, the poem's intended addressee, who fulfills the much more conventional role of the aristocratic court lady. Thus, Jaquenetta is the comic stand-in not just for a specific woman, namely Rosaline, but also for the generalized, abstract figure of the "sonnet lady" in the sonnet tradition that derived from the Italian poet, Francesco Petrarch (1304–74). Petrarch's vernacular sonnets, the *Canzoniere* (*Songs*, which in Petrarch's case, were actually composed with a lyre), related his love for the quasi-fictional, intensely idealized, Laura. This was the most famous sonnet sequence in Europe and, albeit belatedly, in England in the 1590s, it generated a host of imitations, translations, appropriations, and a myriad of verse responses that endeavored to engage with Petrarchan ideas, sometimes by overturning or reversing them. In the 1590s, that is, in the decade of *Love's Labour's* composition, the vogue for Petrarch's poetry gave rise to the English sonnet craze – a veritable frenzy of sonnet composition of which Shakespeare's poems, already in manuscript circulation at that time, were but a part.

Petrarch begins the *Canzoniere* recalling his first encounter with Laura on Good Friday, 6 April 1327. Importantly, though this is the date he saw her, it is far from clear that she is someone he ever actually met or knew. Good Friday was a fateful date, not only because it was the day which commemorates Christ's crucifixion, but also because meeting Laura led not to happiness for Petrarch but to the perpetual suffering and despair occasioned by unrequited love. This misery, however, was also the impetus for his exquisite lyrics. The underlying mythological narrative of this doomed love affair is described by Petrarch in terms of a kind of cosmic injustice because, given the sacredness of the day, he had gone about unarmed, whereupon Cupid shot and grievously wounded him with an arrow. In contrast, Laura was not only very well armed and thus would have been impervious to Love's wounds, but Cupid, most unfairly, according to Petrarch, simply never considered her as one of his targets. It is especially this asymmetry of desire that fuels the erotic dynamism of Petrarchan poetry and the masculine melancholy that was so productive of verse expression. Thus, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio declares that love-struck Romeo, who pines for the unattainable Rosaline, must, inevitably, be adept in the technical requirements, that is, the metrical counting, "the numbers" of poetry: "Now is he for the numbers that Petrarch *flowed* in" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.36–7; my italics).

Petrarch's influence on the development of European poetry, and on Shakespeare cannot be overestimated, and crucially the belated heyday of the sonnet in England meant that Petrarchan tropes and themes were not merely available for imitation, but were also subject to satirical treatment as clichés of the sonnet genre. Within the fiction of the Petrarchan tradition, the conventional fair, cruel beloved holds tyrannical power over the poet because she can redeem or damn him at will, depending on her response to his amorous overtures. As Jaquenetta, the boy actress in *Love's Labour's Lost* stands on stage listening to the recitation of the sonnet intended for Rosaline, she serves to represent all those real, historical women who could never even approach the possession of such power. However, even the most aristocratic ladies were devoid of the overwhelming, destructive capacity that belonged to Jove, the chief deity of Roman mythology as well as its most notorious and most habitual rapist. For all that, Berowne attributes precisely Jove's power to Rosaline in the final quatrain of his sonnet:

> Thy eye Jove's lightning bears, thy voice his dreadful thunder,
> Which, not to anger bent, is music and sweet fire.
> Celestial as thou art, O, pardon love this wrong,
> That sings heaven's praise with such an earthly tongue.
> (4.2.139–42)

The lady's voice, according to Berowne, can annihilate him, even though when she is not enraged, her voice sounds like angelic music. This disjunction between the decidedly terrestrial, embodied rustic wench, Jaquenetta, and Berowne's deification of female authority as well as the association of the beloved with divine beauty, is Shakespeare's joke on the often-risible, orthodox hyperboles of the sonnet tradition. He interrogated Petrarchan conventions repeatedly and perhaps most famously when in the anti-Petrarchan Sonnet 130, he countered the idea of the lady who is so idealized, venerated, divinized, and "celestial" that she is virtually air-borne, with the line: "My Mistress when she walks treads on the ground" (Sonnet 130.12).

Because Shakespeare is interested in how poetry functions in his society, and about who gets to compose it and to what end, the poems in the plays often do not function as the characters who are their authors hope they will, and that remains the case whether the fictional writer is proficient in the art of poetry or markedly deficient in it. Interestingly, Shakespeare

deliberately creates some bad poetry, and indeed, the plays contain their share of ham-fisted versifiers. It is sometimes, paradoxically, their very commitment to poetic convention and their attempts to imitate great poetry that leads Shakespeare's fictional authors only to the most unoriginal and clichéd forms of expression. One of Shakespeare's most inept poets is the love-struck Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Tricked into acknowledging his love for Beatrice, he seeks a legitimate resolution in marriage both to his conflict with her and his desire for her. Benedick tries to do what was almost a cultural requirement of all literate, aristocratic lovers of the 1590s, namely to compose a song to his lady, or as Proteus puts it in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

> You must lay lime to tangle her desires
> By wailful sonnets, whose composèd rhymes
> Should be full-fraught with serviceable vows.
> (3.2.68–70)

Proteus's rather sinister suggestion, via the image of the lime (a viscous, sticky substance derived from holly bark which was used to trap birds), is that women must be enticed and ensnared by potentially deceptive poetry and insincere oaths. This is what he thinks poetry is for. In contrast, Benedick is genuinely searching for the right words to express a long-suppressed but utterly-sincere love. Alas, he finds himself defeated of lyrical inspiration after only four lines of verse, and his attempt devolves into exasperated prose:

> *The god of love*
> *That sits above*,
> *And knows me, and knows me*
> *How pitiful I deserve—*

The lines of Benedick's verse convey only that Cupid is a celestial figure, and "love" and "above" are his rudimentary rhymes, while the third line rehearses the clichéd lament that the lover is hard done by his mistress. At that point, Benedick's powers of lyrical invention peter out, and bereft of further ideas, he enters into an energetic prose declaration on the difficulties of love poetry:

> I mean in singing. But in loving… . Marry,
> I cannot show it in rhyme. I have tried. I can find out
> no rhyme to "lady" but "baby"—an innocent

> rhyme; for "scorn," "horn"—a hard rhyme; for
> "school," "fool"—a babbling rhyme; very ominous
> endings. No, I was not born under a rhyming
> planet, nor I cannot woo in festival terms.
> *Much Ado About Nothing* (5.2.26–41)[14]

For all his ineptitude, Benedick is particularly cognizant of the unfortunate suggestions that may arise in linking words with one another through rhyme. "Baby" infantilizes "lady" and may even remind the intended recipient of the poem of the potential consequences of acceding to the lover's desires, especially before their union is solemnized in marriage. However, as Benedick claims, that rhyme is more "innocent" than "scorn" and "horn," which suggests not only that the lover has been repulsed by the lady but also cuckoldry because a husband who was cheated on was thought to sprout horns, of which he alone was unaware. The predictive power of such rhymes, the "ominous endings" not only of the lines of verse, but also of the relationship to Shakespeare's own non-dramatic poems, are decidedly spoken rather than sung and require verbal enunciation, whether in the mind of the reader or out loud. They do not require you to pick up your cittern (an early modern version of the guitar) for a sing-along. Benedick's reference to "Song," however, may mean actual singing, that is lyrics to be sung, often with musical accompaniment. As in Petrarch's title, *Canzoniere*, which is the Italian world for "song," song was also a synonym for poetry itself because poetry had its mythic origins in the songs of Orpheus, who played upon his lyre.

Shakespeare was *not*, in fact, the author of Benedick's lyric, "*The god of* love," but nor, however, was he just trying to pass off the borrowed verse as his own invention. Rather he was incorporating a popular song of the time into his play, and the audience would have easily recognized the lyrics from the widely-known and much imitated ballad: "God of Love." That song, despite its trite rhymes – or perhaps even because of them – was a commercial success and had been in print since as early as 1562, two years before Shakespeare's birth. The song's composer was William Elderton whose reputation was that of "a drunken rhymester" rather than that of an accomplished musician and lyricist.[15] In fact, the practice of borrowing verse to suit the occasion was culturally widespread, and Shakespeare again makes comic sport out of it in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* where Abraham Slender, who clearly cannot rely on his memory in his pursuit of the attractive young Anne Page, wishes:

> I had rather than forty shillings I had my
> book of *Songs and Sonnets* here!
> *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1.1.193–4)

Slender is referring to a volume widely known as *Tottel's* Miscellany, which was first published in 1557 during the reign of Mary Tudor, and which was the major literary accomplishment of her reign. The book was an anthology of English poetry compiled by the printer, Richard Tottel. Tottel was responsible for making available the court poetry composed during the reign of Henry VIII to a much wider audience. Most importantly, Tottel's was the first printing of the Petrarchan lyrics of the great Henrican court poets, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, and Sir Thomas Wyatt. These works were the literary fruits of their diplomatic embassies in Italy, and prior to Tottel's printing, had hitherto existed only in manuscript form and therefore had achieved only a circumscribed readership. That an undistinguished denizen of the town of Windsor now has access to one of the most elite literary productions of the age via the technology of print, suggests the vastly increased reach of poetry in early modern England. Slender belongs to the newly literate class of early modern readers. Members of this group were also among the readers of Shakespeare's poems. Importantly, Slender does not just enjoy or appreciate poetry, he sees in it something he can use to pursue women. Slender's desire to thus utilize the poetry written by others achieves a more sympathetic gloss than, say, the malign intentions exhibited, as we saw above, by Proteus in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, or indeed those Egeus attributes to Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in the light of an episode from the 1994 Italian movie, *Il Postino*. In that film, the postman of the title has been using the poetry of Pablo Neruda to woo his beloved. Certain that the use to which he has put Neruda's lines is neither plagiarism nor misuse, he boldly asserts: "Poetry doesn't belong to those who write it, but those who need it." Early modern readers were also of this opinion.

Benedick's failure at verse composition in *Much Ado About Nothing*, then, may not be that of composition but of memory. This is because he may be merely imperfectly reciting Elderton's old ballad. If it is indeed the case that he can only recall four lines of an old song and if he hopes to repurpose the fragment taken from his very defective recollection of it in the wooing of Beatrice, then that would seem a failure so profound that it would utterly doom his chances at romantic success. Yet, for all his failure, whether of memory or as a poet in the abortive throes of creative composition, Benedick