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Chapter 12 : 'No cloudy stuff to puzzle the brain': 'Fair Editing' and Censorship in John Benson's Edition of Shakespeare's *Poems* (1640)

Line Cottage

This chapter focuses on the long-maligned 1640 edition of Shakespeare's sonnets by John Benson. The small octavo entitled *Poems: written by Wil. Shake-speare, Gent.* has long been considered as little better than a pirated edition of the Thomas Thorpe 1609 edition. It has been described by Colin Burrow, among others, as a 'partly bowdlerized' edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (Burrow 1998, 18).¹ As is well-known, Benson (or his editor)² changed the sonnets' order, omitting eight, and organized them into loose thematic sections with titles reminiscent of the miscellanies popular in the period ('cruel deceit', 'faithful concord', etc.)—titles which Peter Holland has described as 'jejune' and 'trivial' (Holland 2004). The editor's most decisive interventions concern, apart from the addition of titles, the merging of individual sonnets into larger poems (only thirty-one sonnets are retained as independent fourteen-line poems), and the inclusion of 'A Lover's Complaint', 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', as well as poems from *The Passionate Pilgrime* (1599)—some of which *not* by Shakespeare, although most were believed to be his at the time. Benson also allegedly (and infamously) corrected the gender of the persona's addressee in 'some' of the sonnets to the 'fair youth' (Schoenfeldt 2007, 53)—two, in fact— which, although critics differ as to the exact significance of the revisions, is still interpreted as a sign of active censorship.³ Finally, Benson's collection includes at the end of the volume a selection of poems from early printed miscellanies such as *Englands Helicon* (1600, 1614) and Chester's *Loves Martyr* (1601), from Thomas Heywood's *Troia Britanica* (1609), and finally three elegies to Shakespeare (including John Milton's) borrowed from the Second Folio. The poems from *Troia Britanica* had already featured in the 1612 edition of *The Passionate Pilgrime* which is the edition Benson probably used. In a final section entitled 'An Addition of some Excellent Poems'—

¹ For Wells and Taylor, the Benson edition of the sonnets is a 'mangled hodgepodge' (Wells and Taylor 1997, 38).

² For convenience' sake, this chapter shall refer to the editor of Shakespeare's sonnets as 'Benson' throughout this chapter, irrespective of his real identity.

³ See for instance Atkins 2007, 307.

advertised as a bonus of hitherto unpublished pieces—, Benson includes fifteen pieces by Ben Jonson, Francis Beaumont, William Strode, Robert Herrick and Thomas Carew (among others), which gave a topical spin to the volume (Shrank 2009, 19). This attractive octavo constitutes an excellent case study to interrogate the fine line between what constitutes ‘fair editing’ and censorship in the early modern period. When can an early modern editor be said to exercise a ‘legitimate prerogative’, and when does he/she overstep his/her right to intervene on a text? More fundamentally, to what extent do editorial choices (as an interpretive act) become akin to subtle (or less subtle) forms of censorship? In the absence of clearly defined, objective standards of editing, the line between censoring (i.e. imposing a personal or ideological spin or filter onto a text) and editing is a fine one to tread. But to establish what constitutes a ‘legitimate’ editorial prerogative, it is first necessary to contextualize the edition under scrutiny against historical standards of editing at the time of publication, and this can only be done by looking at other contemporary endeavours. As this chapter shows, Benson’s much maligned edition of Shakespeare’s sonnets might seem biased to us (with our very modern standards) for reasons which we need to question, and perhaps simply because it was at variance with the Thorpe edition which is now taken to be the authoritative copy-text. Yet when seen from the perspective of a seventeenth-century stationer, his enterprise looks very different: it needs to be taken seriously as a piece of ‘fair’ editing—even though Marotti might describe it as ‘aggressive’ (Marotti 1990, 160). If several very recent studies have done much,⁴ in fact, to nuance our understanding of Benson’s agency, the misapprehension is still going strong. It is the story of this fascinating misunderstanding that the following essay intends to retrace, because it poses interesting questions about what critics call ‘censorship’ of early printed texts, and should encourage us to caution: when editorial choices are carefully gauged and historicized against contemporary practices, the issue of censorship can become elusive.

Rarely has an early modern edition of any of Shakespeare’s works attracted such unanimous criticism, to the exception perhaps of the much-reviled ‘bad quartos’. This comparison might in fact be apt, for just as the ‘bad quarto’ theory has fruitfully been questioned, Benson’s edition has also recently been reevaluated by several perceptive studies. According to Shrank, the maligning of Benson probably started with Abraham Cowley, who justified himself for publishing his own poems by blaming ‘the unworthy avarice of some Stationers, who are

⁴ See in particular Margreta de Grazia (1994), Cathy Shrank (2009), Faith Acker (2012), Megan Hefferman (2013), and Mayer (2016).

content to diminish the value of the Author, as they may increase the price of the Book; and like Vintners with sophisticate mixtures, spoil the whole vessel of wine to make it yield more profit' (Cowley 1656, sig. a1v-a2r). Cowley continued: 'This has been the case with Shakespear, Fletcher, Johnson, and many others; part of whose Poems I should take the boldness to prune and lop away, if the care of replanting them in print did belong to me' (ibid., sig. a2r). As Benson had just published two works that meant to capitalize on the literary remains of two luminaries of the previous age, Jonson and Shakespeare (both in the year 1640), with his twin editions of *Q. Horatius Flaccus: His Art of Poetry. Englished by Ben: Jonson* and *Poems: written by Wil. Shake-speare, Gent*, he might have been one of the implied targets here. In the 1944 Variorum edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets, Hyder Rollins famously accused Benson's *Poems* of being no better than a pirated version of Thorpe's 1609 edition, in 'a deliberate, and evidently a successful attempt to deceive readers and to hide the theft' (Shakespeare 1944, 22). This view is still often shared today, including by several editors of the sonnets, such as Blakemore Evans (Blakemore Evans 1997, 283), as also by Carl D. Atkins in a thorough study which is otherwise fairly sympathetic to Benson's endeavour (Atkins 2007, 307). Yet, as Josephine Waters Bennett has established, Benson was considered as a fairly reputable bookseller;⁵ this is confirmed by the rest of his career and evidenced by the fact that he acquired copyright for the fifteen poems by various authors to be included in the appendix of the 1640 *Poems* (Bennett 1968, 237).⁶ He might have felt free to publish the sonnets because Thomas Thorpe died in 1635 (without having transferred his right to the work), causing the copyright to lapse and revert to the Stationers' Company. Moreover, the identity of the printer, Thomas Cotes, who, as the printer of the second Folio of 1632, had stakes in the copyrights of several of Shakespeare's plays, also makes surreptitious printing of the sonnets highly unlikely. Benson, by reprinting sonnets which had fallen out of print since their first and only publication in 1609, was in fact, in Marotti's own words, finally 'making all of Shakespeare's works available to the book-buying public' (Marotti 1990, 159). He was offering a new edition, in an attractive pocket format, of the scattered poems attributed at the time to Shakespeare. In his edition of the sonnets, for Marotti, Benson was simply 'exercising the kind of creative control over acquired texts that collectors, editors, and printers had in the

⁵ Blakemore Evans, however, begs to differ: "Reputable" is not a word that can be applied to Benson' (Blakemore Evans 1997, 283).

⁶ The entry in the Stationers Register 'draws attention to, rather than disguises, their intended publication alongside verses by Shakespeare' (Shrank 2009, 2). The additional poems were entered on 4 November 1639. It is unclear whether this entry would in practice have been understood to cover Shakespeare's poems as well, which is certainly a possibility, given that Benson did not enter the latter. I would like to thank Richard Dutton for his help in this matter.

period', no more, no less (*ibid.*, 158). Just how creative is still what still needs to be established, however.

For all the reshuffling involved, the sonnets are treated with integrity as self-contained units of sense, even in the conflated, longer pieces, in which they become stanzas: they are marked typographically as independent and the final couplet is always indented as in the Thorpe edition, although no blank line is introduced to separate the stanzas. Textually and typographically, Benson's edition follows the Thorpe edition quite scrupulously. It occasionally corrects misprints and obvious errors, as shown by Atkins (Atkins 2007, 308), but also introduces a few variants—and new errors, as is inevitable in any new edition. Atkins has computed that Benson's text introduces 759 small variants in the text, and this excludes the changes made to typography. Benson picked almost all the twenty-seven obvious misprints of Thorpe's sonnets: single-letter substitutions, dittographies and transpositions, such as for instance 'ruin'd' spelt 'm'wd' in Sonnet 73 (Shakespeare 1640, sig. F7r; Shakespeare 1609, sig. E4r) or the word 'stall' for 'shall' in Sonnet 90 (1640, sig. D7r; 1609, sig. F3v).⁷ Benson introduced a few intriguing, more substantial variants, however, which could be errors, such as 'summer's hungry breath' (Shakespeare 1640, sig. A3v) for 'summers hunny breath' in Sonnet 65 (Shakespeare 1609, sig. G2v), or 'unwoo'd' in sonnet 54 (Shakespeare 1609, sig. D4r) which became 'unmoov'd' in Benson (Shakespeare 1640, sig. A4v)—both interpreted by Atkins as memorial lapses (Atkins 2007, 309).⁸

Only in two instances did Benson depart from the Thorpe edition as copy-text, for sonnets 138 ('When my loue swears that she is made of truth', Shakespeare 1640, sig. B1v) and 144 ('Two loues I haue of comfort and dispaire', *ibid.*, sig. B2). Here, Benson followed the alternative versions found in *The Passionate Pilgrime*—a strong editorial choice: Benson might simply have chosen as copy-texts the versions that had been the first to appear in print (as early as 1599) and were subsequently published three times. This fact alone might have given them a stronger authority in his eyes than the Thorpe version which had no more convincing claim to authorial authenticity. In any case, the obvious care with which Benson otherwise read the Thorpe edition and his deliberate interpolation of poems from *The Passionate Pilgrime* point to a careful editorial scheme and to a desire to produce a reliable text. It is consistent with the concern to publish an authoritative text that is also manifest in Benson's other 1640 publications, *Ben: Ionson's execration against Vulcan: VVith divers*

⁷ For clarity's sake, the sonnet numbers refer to those of the Thorpe edition, also used by the editorial tradition. The first lines of sonnets given as indexes are quoted in the Thorpe text, unless otherwise specified.

⁸ 'Unwooded' / 'unmooved' is of course a typical case of turned letter.

epigrams by the same author to severall noble personages in this kingdome. Never published before, and the edition of Jonson's *Art of Poetry* (which included a reprint of the former collection).⁹ The only evidence that contradicts this portrait of Benson as a competent editor concerns the puzzling omission of eight sonnets (Thorpe's Sonnets 18, 19, 43, 56, 75, 76, 96 and 126). While Sonnet 126 ('O You my louely Boy') could have been discarded because it is incomplete, and Sonnet 96 because it repeats the couplet of Sonnet 36, the omission of two pairs of consecutive sonnets (Sonnets 18-19 and Sonnets 75-76) is strange. It seems to point to an infelicitous oversight on the part of the editor—unless he thought these poems repeated themes already abundantly represented in the collection. Sonnets 18-19, for instance, were redundant with sonnets included in the sections entitled 'A living Monument' (Shakespeare 1640, sig. C8r), 'Melancholy Thoughts' (ibid., sig. C1v), 'Life and death' (ibid., sig. F3v), 'A Consideration of death' (ibid., sig. sig. F4), etc. But the omission of Sonnet 18 ('Shall I compare thee to a Summers day?'), one of the 'highlights' of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, might point to an inexplicable negligence rather than a planned omission—given that all the missing poems feature on *verso* pages in the 1609 edition. Yet even these omissions do not invalidate the edition as a whole. It is clear that Benson was an enterprising stationer who hoped to make a profit by collecting the literary remains of two great authors, but Cowley's accusation of ruthless rapaciousness, if indeed aimed at Benson, seems unfair: Benson's edition of the sonnets is by no means the haphazard throwing together of bits and pieces as claimed by some critics who merely glance at the volume.

The second common accusation levelled at Benson, which again originates in Hyder E. Rollins, touches on our modern sensitivity to homoeroticism, which is often at odds with early modern perception of gender issues. It concerns Benson's alleged effacement of the male gender of the beloved in some sonnets to the Fair Youth and the reassignment of others to a woman. This critical commonplace, often rehashed, has been blown out of proportion by critics who no longer look at the evidence of the text itself. Even John Kerrigan, in the introduction to the 1986 Penguin edition, blames Benson for inflicting on the sonnets 'a series of unforgivable injuries', including, surprisingly, 'a single recurring revision', the emendation of 'the masculine pronouns used of the friend in 1 to 126 to "her", "hers", and "she"'.¹⁰ This is usually taken as a reflection of Benson's nervous sensitivity to the homoerotic passion told by the sequence and as an indubitable sign that he was actively censoring the text to turn the sonnets into more conventional (heterosexual) love poems. Paul Hammond thus suggests that

⁹ Shrank 2009, 3 (note 10), and Bennett 168, 245.

¹⁰ Kerrigan 1986, 46, quoted in de Grazia 1994, 35.

Benson's edition may signal that 'the admission of sexual attraction between men was taboo' (Hammond 2002, 104). However, the evidence for censorship is not as straightforward as it might seem, as Margreta de Grazia has shown among others. In fact, Benson changed the gender of the beloved in only two sonnets. In Sonnet 101 alone, three pronouns are emended to feminine in Benson's version (on lines 11 and 14):

Oh truant Muse what shall be thy amends,
For thy neglect of truth in beautie di'd?
But truth and beautie on my love depends:
So dost thou too, and therein dignifi'd:
Make answer Muse, wilt thou not haply say,
Truth needs no collour with his collour fixt,
Beautie no pensell, beauties truth to lay:
But best is best, if never intermixt.
Because he needs no praise, wilt thou be dumbe?
Excuse not silence so, for't lies in thee,
To make her [him] much out-live a gilded tombe:
And to be prais'd of ages yet to be.
Then doe thy office muse, I teach thee how,
To make her [him] seeme long hence, as she [he] showes now.¹¹

It might be argued, however, that Benson was simply striving for syntactic clarity in a difficult poem, and trying to disambiguate between two male referents: truth, which is personified as male on line 6, and the speaker's beloved, who is to be immortalized through poetry. By turning the latter into a woman, the editor clarifies the poem. Finally, in Benson's version of sonnet 108, which is conflated with Sonnet 107 under the title 'A monument to Fame', the phrase 'sweet love' (on l. 5) is substituted for 'sweet boy': 'What's new to speake, what now to register, / That may expresse my love, or thy deare merit? / Nothing sweet-love,¹² but yet like prayers divine, / I must each day say ore the very same' (Shakespeare 1640, sig. F6v). As a result, these two sonnets become gender-neutral, like many others in the sequence, but the addressee is not explicitly turned into a woman. Finally, three out of his seventy-five additional titles imply a change from male to a female beloved in five sonnets,

¹¹ Shakespeare 1640, sig. E1v. Corrections to the 1609 Thorpe edition in square brackets.

¹² Variant: 'sweet boy' (Shakespeare 1609, sig. G3r).

with the text unchanged.¹³ But although these sonnets are part of the Fair Youth sequence in the 1609 edition, none is gender specific: separated from their immediate context, they could therefore easily be read differently. If Benson believed the order of the Thorpe sequence had no particular authority, this was within the limits of fair editing.

These interventions are in fact relatively minor in light of the rest of the evidence, which overwhelmingly pleads against any tampering with the gender politics of the sonnets. Benson does not seem to have shied away from the sonnets that were most explicitly addressed to a male beloved and he left all the other pronouns unchanged. Sasha Roberts even points out that he ‘makes no attempt to censor those sonnets that might imply homoerotic desire’ (Roberts 2003, 162). The Benson edition thus opens with Sonnets 67, 68, 69 conflated into one poem under the title ‘The glory of beautie’, in which the object of the poet’s passionate admiration, albeit already tainted with suspicion, is emphatically male: ‘But why thy odor matcheth not thy show / The soyle is this, that thou doest common grow’ (Shakespeare 1640, sig. A2v). Benson also includes the most explicitly male-to-male sonnets, like Sonnet 20 (in which the speaker describes his beloved as ‘the Master Mistris of [his] passion’), under a titillating title: ‘The Exchange’ (ibid., sig. B4r). He also includes Sonnet 144, which pits the speaker’s two loves the one against the other (‘Two loves I have of comfort and dispaire’), and the most explicitly sexual poems like Sonnets 129 (‘Th’expence of Spirit in a waste of shame’) or 147, as well as the Will Sonnets (Sonnets 135 and 136). If Benson’s reordering of the Thorpe sequence has an impact on the gender politics of the sonnets at all, it is, as already pointed out by Roberts, to dilute and ‘puncture the relentless misogyny’ of the ‘Dark Lady’ section (Roberts 2003, 167) by breaking up the claustrophobic close-up on an abject passion described as laced with self-loathing. Perhaps the result is more conventional, but it is clear that it questions the dramatic, almost dialectical narrative that the Thorpe edition tentatively suggests as an organizing principle for the sequence. I would like to argue in this chapter that this choice might also obey an aesthetic rationale: Benson’s preface, which promises verse that is ‘Seren, cleere and elegantly plaine [...], no intricate or cloudy stuffe to puzzell intellect, but perfect eloquence’ (Shakespeare 1640, sig. *2v), is often overlooked, perhaps because of the modern obsession with the gender politics of the sonnets.

It is thus possible to conclude with de Grazia that the charge of censorship is simply ‘wrong’, and that Benson did not censor the homoerotic element in Shakespeare’s Sonnets (de Grazia

¹³ The three titles concerned are ‘Self-flattery of her beautie’ for Sonnets 113, 114, 115, merged into one long poem; ‘Upon the receipt of a Table Booke from his Mistris’, which introduces Sonnet 122 (a title which incidentally gives a material context for Sonnet 122); and ‘An intreatie for her acceptance’ (Sonnet 125).

1994, 35). Benson's treatment of the Fair Youth sonnets even looks rather benign when contrasted with the efforts of so many annotators and compilers of sonnets in contemporary manuscript miscellanies to change the gender of the beloved in the sonnets they selected or excerpted.¹⁴ Blaming Benson for his censorship of the sonnets might in fact have more to do with modern critics and editors who, since Malone, have relentlessly looked for autobiographical clues about Shakespeare's sexuality in the sonnets. Benson's agenda was markedly different.

The history of the editing of Shakespeare's sonnets is fairly well-known: when, after almost a century of neglect, eighteenth-century editors turned to the sonnets, they went back and forth between the Benson and the Thorpe texts: Benson's edition was used as copy-text for the great majority of editions, i.e. nine in the course of the century, and the latter only by three editions,¹⁵ before Malone definitively established Thorpe as the one and only reliable source (and copy-text) in his 1780 edition. Malone also validated and popularized the narrative behind the sonnet sequence (as we still know it) and its partition between the 'Fair Youth' and the 'Dark Lady' sections by adding notes which pointed to biographical inferences (Burrow 1998, 20). De Grazia uses the case made against Benson to illustrate the modern critics' dogged desire to believe that he (like other re-orderers) dismembered the 1609 sequence to try and conceal some dirty secret about Shakespeare's life and poems; but she paradoxically responds in kind, claiming instead that the 'true scandal' of the sequence is not its homoeroticism but the threat of miscegenation that proceeds from 'Shakespeare's gynerastic longings for a black mistress' (De Grazia 1994, 48)—a racial threat, she believes, that has been blocked out by critics and editors for centuries. It could be argued, however, that this claim proceeds from our very own contemporary obsessions, just like the accusation of anti-homoeroticism levelled at Benson.

The charge of racial prejudice cannot be laid at Benson's door either, however, for he did nothing to conceal the 'black mistress' of Shakespeare's sequence—although the question as to whether this adjective refers at all to race in the early modern period is still open to contention, given the popularity of the trope of the 'black beauty' in neo-Petrarchan poetry all over Europe¹⁶: Benson even highlights the lady's unconventional beauty by adding a title that stresses the lady's 'blackness': 'In prayse of her beautie though black' (Shakespeare 1640, sig. E8r). So what is, then, Benson's agenda in this edition? I argue that it should be described

¹⁴ See Roberts 2003, 172-78 and Mayer 2016, 414-15.

¹⁵ See in particular Roberts 2003, 160-61 and Acker 2012, 161.

¹⁶ See for instance Bettella 2005.

primarily as an aesthetic one. John Kerrigan blames Benson for starting ‘the long-running tiresome game of re-ordering’ (Kerrigan 1986, 46), but if Benson did refashion the 1609 sonnet sequence, it is perhaps because he felt dissatisfied with an old-fashioned genre, the sonnet sequence, that was clearly out of sync with his time, and he might have been unhappy with the order adopted by Thorpe—which posited the often fraught, but nagging presence of an overall narrative. Far from simply playing (*pace* Kerrigan) at jumbling the sonnets,¹⁷ Benson undermines the very concept of the sonnet sequence, conflating many sonnets, or sandwiching them between other, stanzaic poems drawn for instance from the *Passionate Pilgrim*—which introduce some variety into the collection. Because the narrative line is thus denied, the sonnets cannot be read as autobiographical, nor even as speech-acts unified around the same, continuous speaking subject. As a result, it is their nature as poetic, discontinuous exercises, informed by the concept of imitation, that comes to fore. Benson obviously had other poetic models in mind than the sonnet sequence, which he convenes into the volume, with a contemporary readership with more urbane expectations in mind. By adding titles and breaking up the sequence, he is also reflecting reading practices of his own time—for readers used to indexing what they read and selecting commonplaces. Benson thus creates seventy-five clusters with descriptive titles that reflect, in Cathy Shrank’s words, ‘a feature of English printed, and manuscript, miscellanies from Tottel’s *Songes and Sonnetts* onwards’ (Shrank 2009, 11)¹⁸: ‘the glory of beautie’, ‘Injurious Time’, ‘True Admiration’, ‘The force of love’, ‘The beautie of Nature’, ‘Loves crueltie’, ‘Youthfull glory’, ‘Good Admonition’, ‘Quick Prevention’, ‘An Invitation to Marriage’, ‘False Beleefe’, ‘A Temptation’, ‘Fast and loose’, ‘True Content’, ‘A bashfull Love’, ‘Strong Conceit’, ‘A sweet provocation’, etc. What the list of titles immediately makes apparent is the choice of discontinuity and the rejection of any overall narrative: the logic is that of the miscellany rather than the narrative sequence. In his index of literary manuscripts, Peter Beal lists nineteen seventeenth-century manuscript miscellanies including sonnets by Shakespeare that use very similar titles.¹⁹ In at least two copies of Shakespeare’s 1640 *Poems* (now held at the Folger Library), anonymous seventeenth-century readers appropriated the text by adding or changing titles, thus ‘responding creatively to the text in front of them’ (Roberts 2003, 169).²⁰ Benson has often been blamed, since Hyder Rollins, for creating arbitrary, loose categories,

¹⁷ W.H. Auden also describes Benson’s edition as a ‘jumble’ (Auden 1964, xxiii).

¹⁸ For a study of manuscript miscellanies of the period, see Acker 2012, 33-94.

¹⁹ Shrank 2009, 11 (note 42). This is the subject of Acker’s 2012 study.

²⁰ In one copy in particular (Folger STC 22344), the reader obviously thought the titles provided by Benson were inadequate and crossed them out to suggest others. See Mayer 2016, 412.

but many groupings (although not all) are meaningful: from the available evidence, Shrank derives a portrait of the editor Benson as an active reader at work (Shrank 2009, 8-12). It may be surmised that Benson was indexing the sonnets as he was reading them in the Thorpe edition, which would explain the logic of contiguity often at work in the conflated grouping—groupings always concern sonnets that were locally close to one another in Thorpe. He drew together sonnets which followed suit—also excluding the odd ones out as he saw fit. For instance, the section ‘In prayse of her beautie, though black’ includes Sonnets 127 and 130 to 132, but logically leaves out of the sequence constituted by Sonnets 128 (‘How oft when thou my musike musike playst’) and 129 (‘Th’expence of Spirit in a waste of shame’), which are on different subjects (Shrank 9). The titles even sometimes invite a critical reading of the poems: such is the case with ‘Errour in opinion’ (Shakespeare 1640, sig. E6r) for Sonnet 121 (‘Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed’), or ‘Immoderate Lust’ (ibid., sig. E7r) for Sonnet 129.²¹ This goes to show that, for all their fuzziness, Benson’s titles represent a form of creative reading—Benson’s editing can thus be considered as a valid act of interpretation.

But Benson was doing more than just revamping the sonnets—adding material from old miscellanies for good measure to give them a more contemporary garb, as only a cursory look at the contents of the volume might lead us to believe. The miscellaneous final section, which include Milton’s praise of Shakespeare from the second Folio and poems by other poets such as Jonson, Carew and Herrick (presented here anonymously), points to a continuity between Shakespeare’s poetry and the more contemporary ‘gentle straines’ that had become fashionable in the 1620s and 1630s (Shakespeare 1640, sig. *2v). Benson’s volume must be read in the context of the printed single-author poetic miscellanies of the 1630s. That he refashioned the sonnet sequence to make it look like other single-author miscellanies published in and around 1640 has been remarked on by Baker (1998), Shrank (2009), Acker (2012), and Hefferman (2013), but the true significance of this editorial strategy has perhaps not been given all its due.

Benson’s editorial paratext consists of an epistle to the reader and two praises of Shakespeare—one from the first folio by Leonard Digges and the other by John Warren—and of the portrait. This paratext immediately invites comparison with previously-printed single-author miscellanies. The generic title itself, *Poems*, had first been used for the several consecutive editions of Drayton’s poetical works, published in octavo from 1605. It might be worth noting in passing that Drayton’s own sonnet sequence *Idea* introduced additional titles

²¹ See Shrank 2009, 12.

for each sonnet, confirming a long-established practice not reserved to manuscript. As for the oddity of the diaeresis on the word ‘Poëms’ in the running titles in Shakespeare’s *Poems*, it might be a reminiscence of the extremely popular posthumous quarto edition of John Donne’s *Poems* (1633), which was reprinted at least three times before 1640 (in 1633, 1635, 1639) with the same unusual typographical peculiarity, also in the running titles. Intriguingly, like Shakespeare’s *Poems*, the edition of Donne’s *Poems* was published with a portrait of the author, presented as a swashing young gentleman of eighteen with his hand on the pommel of his sword, and engraved by William Marshall, who also did the portrait of Shakespeare. This has led Megan Hefferman to recently argue that Benson had ‘canonized Shakespeare according to the model of Donne’s authorship’ (Hefferman 2013, 75). Earlier, David Baker had similarly claimed that Benson had ‘packaged’ Shakespeare’s *Poems* ‘in the Cavalier mode’ (Baker 1998, 154). For Baker, however, it was as a Jonsonian author that Benson fashioned Shakespeare, by describing his poetry, in the epistle to the reader, as ‘Seren, cleere and elegantly plaine [...], no intricate or cloudy stuffe to puzzell intellect, but perfect eloquence’ (Shakespeare 1640, sig *2v). I would argue, however, that the claims need to be recontextualized and the focus made wider. It is the whole context of single-author poetic miscellanies in the late 1630s, rather than one particular book or author, that needs to be taken into account—although, of course, if Benson chose to invest in Shakespeareana and Jonsoniana in 1640, it was perhaps because he hoped for a similar success to the one met by the edition of Donne’s *Poems* (which was apparently not the case, however, since his edition of Shakespeare’s *Poems* was never reprinted).

The simultaneous publication by Benson in 1640 of Shakespeare’s *Poems* and of the last of Jonson’s works is far from anecdotal, and the comparison fruitful. The Jonson volume is presented primarily as an edition of Jonson’s translation of Horace, *Q. Horatius Flaccus: His Art of Poetry. Englished by Ben: Jonson. With other Workes of the Author, never Printed before*, but with other pieces: it includes three additional works by Jonson, advertised as hitherto unpublished, *Ben: Jonson’s Execrations upon VVulcan, The Masque of Gypsies* and *Epigrams to Severall Noble Personages* (published in that order)—although the claim is misleading since Benson had published the *Execrations* and the *Epigrams* as a separate miscellany a few weeks earlier. The Jonson miscellany and Shakespeare’s *Poems* must be seen as part of the bookseller’s strategy to establish himself as a serious publisher of literature, but they were also business bids into the potentially lucrative market of posthumous last works. The Benson editions of Shakespeare and of Jonson both capitalize on the status of two of the most popular (and already canonical) authors of their age, while tailoring their

works to the tastes of the readership of the day. Both collections thus qualify as ‘exercise[s] in canon building’ (Shrank 2009, 277),²² which Benson acknowledges in his preface of Shakespeare’s *Poems* by claiming he is ‘glad to be serviceable for the continuance of glory to the deserved Author’ (Shakespeare 1640, sig. *2v). It also seems obvious that in the context of 1640, Benson aimed at presenting both the poetry of Shakespeare and Jonson as products of a refined, genteel culture at a time when that culture was coming under increasing threat. This was the period when single-author miscellanies by past and present poets associated with the court, and also volumes masquerading as such, began to appear in quick succession—a moment which Jerome de Groot calls, perhaps with a touch of exaggeration, the royalist ‘rush to print’²³: 1640 alone saw the publication of the poems of the emblematic Caroline court poet Thomas Carew, who had just died (and whose status as ‘Esquire’ and associations with the court are highlighted on the title-page), as well as poetic miscellanies of Francis Beaumont and Thomas Randolph (both also published under the title *Poems*). The Shakespeare and Jonson editions of 1640 must be seen as part of this wider movement.

The Benson edition of Shakespeare’s *Poems* gives a distinctively cavalier twist to the volume, as is apparent in the emphasis on the gentlemanly status of Shakespeare on the title-page (‘*Wil. Shake-speare, Gent*’), the book’s rather elite format (a small octavo, four by six inches), and William Marshall’s frontispiece portrait.²⁴ This portrait, derived from the Droeshout portrait of the First Folio, is made more contemporary by the addition of a Cavalier-style cape. It is also reminiscent of Marshall’s portrait of Donne as a dashing young gentleman, while the bays in Shakespeare’s hands indicate his status as a canonical author. Significantly, however, Shakespeare is not *crowned* with bays, which might have given him a more neoclassical appearance. If we contrast this portrait with that of Jonson in *The Art of Poetry* published by Benson also in 1640, the contrast could not be greater, although it was the same engraver, William Marshall, who was responsible for both.²⁵ The two volumes are similar in size—a duodecimo in the case of the Jonson, a small octavo for the Shakespeare—, which points to forms of leisure reading, and both include a paratext and a portrait. But in the case of the Jonson portrait, the bust of the poet, draped in a toga and crowned with a laurel wreath, is placed in a niche. By emulating a classical sculpture, the portrait suggests that Jonson has become identified with a Classical poet, Horace himself in fact, with whom he

²² See also Roberts 2003, 158.

²³ De Groot describes Humphrey Moseley as instrumental in this move from manuscript to print (de Groot 2004, 67). See also Cottagnies 1997, 224-27.

²⁴ As Helen Pierce remarks, ‘it is difficult to assign particular political sympathies to Marshall on the basis of his output’, although he worked for several prominent royalist patrons (Pierce 2014, 84).

²⁵ See Cottagnies (2018).

shares the inscription underneath. The Jonson volume is clearly the most ‘cavalier’ of the two, with an explicit royalist subtext, as it presents works associated with the court, including a court masque and epigrams to various courtiers. The paratext endorses the political dimension of the collection by including a commendatory poem by a J.C. (James Clayton?) which praises Jonson alongside with the king.²⁶ There is nothing of the sort in Benson’s Shakespeare, in spite of the gentlemanly portrait of Shakespeare and the presentation of his poems as being in tune with contemporary tastes. Shakespeare is presented here as the anti-Jonson (*pace* Baker), as the volume opens with Digges’ famous praise of Shakespeare, originally written for the First Folio, which was particularly unflattering for Jonson.²⁷ In this poem, Shakespeare is singled out as towering above the ‘upstart Writers [...], needy Poetasters of this Age’, whose tedious, ‘though well-laboured *Catalines*’ pale in comparison with his plays (Shakespeare 1640, sig. *3v). A seventeenth-century reader might have recognized here a rebuttal of Greene’s 1598 aspersion on Shakespeare, in which he was notoriously described as ‘an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers’ (Greene 1592, sig. F1); but the poem also echoes the myth of Shakespeare as ‘the happie imitator of nature’, from whom ‘wee haue scarce receiued [...] a blot in his papers’ (Shakespeare 1623, sig. A3r), which originates in the First Folio. In spite of the fact that Ben Jonson’s own tribute to Shakespeare had been given prime of place in the First Folio paratext, Digges’ poem contributed to creating the commonplace of an opposition between a laborious Jonson and Shakespeare as the poet who never borrowed (and blotted) a line. By firmly holding his bays in his left hand rather than being crowned with them, the Shakespeare of the portrait proudly appears to reject the Classical model of authorship in a form of *sprezzatura* that aligns him more closely with the courtly poets of the age, like Thomas Carew perhaps.²⁸ The Marshall frontispiece portrait thus contributes to the fashioning of Shakespeare into a ‘Cavalier’ gentlemanly poet.

There are several reasons to read Shakespeare’s *Poems* as also closely engaging with Carew’s *Poems*, which were published in the same year, 1640, for Thomas Walkley, and again as an octavo. Firstly, because Carew was probably among those who best embodied the contemporary, aristocratic taste for ‘gentle straines as shall recreate and not perplexe your

²⁶ Benson did not particularly specialize in Royalist publications, although he did publish several ostentatiously royalist works, like the translation of Malvezzi’s *Romulus and Tarquin* (1637, and again 1638), dedicated to Charles I. He also published works by parliamentarians, however, and his politics seem to have obeyed opportunistic motivations rather than political motivations.

²⁷ This, incidentally, allowed Benson to adroitly present his volume as a companion piece for the Folio.

²⁸ As Faith Acker has noted, Benson was showing here his acute ‘awareness of current tastes and early marketing methods’ (Acker 2012, 7). For a more nuanced analysis and a presentation of Benson’s Shakespeare’s collection as indebted more to Donne than Jonson, see Hefferman 2013.

braine', as a manuscript poet specializing in light, playful verse. Secondly, because of the identity of the stationer involved, Thomas Walkley. The direct context of 1639-1640 is that of a publishing war between John Benson and Thomas Walkley. Walkley had been working on a second edition of Jonson's folio, which was meant to be published with a volume of additional, hitherto-unpublished works including another version of Jonson's translation of *The Art of Poetry*, whose rights he had secured from Jonson's literary executor, Kenelm Digby—but failing to register them. John Benson, meanwhile, seems to have been working independently from different source texts but had them registered. The tangle of rights was eventually sorted to the satisfaction of Benson, which delayed Walkley's publication of the Jonson second Folio (Burrow 2012, 4; Loewenstein 2002, 209-210). That these two booksellers were rivals involved in a fierce competition is relevant, I think, to the 'coincidental' publication of Shakespeare's and Carew's *Poems* the exact same year, two works 'packaged' in a similar way and targeting a similar readership. What's more, in his final miscellaneous section, Benson includes two poems by Thomas Carew (although the authors' names are not specified), which Walkley did or could not include in his edition of Carew—perhaps because Benson had registered the titles. Although this seems to have gone unnoticed in recent criticism, probably because none of the additional poems is attributed (but their authors might have been immediately identifiable by contemporary, informed readers), Benson is here introducing three poets to print for the first time, whose poetry had only circulated in manuscript until then, but had never been printed before: Carew (two poems included), Herrick (three poems), and William Strode (three poems). That Benson had carefully registered the rights for this new material might be a sign that he was getting ready to move into this hot market of ultra-contemporary poetry, to the annoyance, probably, of more established 'literary' booksellers... Walkley included.

It is clear that Shakespeare's 'poems' could only up to a point pass as 'Cavalier' verse, and it is perhaps to smooth out the jarring 'irregularities' of Shakespeare's style that other, more mellifluous voices (more attuned, perhaps, to the taste of the day) were added as a complement to the collection. But when contextualized, Benson's edition must be acquitted on the charge of censorship: censorship lies mostly in the eye of the contemporary critic—unless we are prepared to accept that all editing implies a measure of censorship. The Benson edition shows fair, if vigorous creative control over its material, and he created 'a poetical anthology that was, in effect, a new literary artifact' (Marotti 1990, 161), designed for a contemporary readership—which was his absolute right as a stationer in a competitive

market. There is no such thing as a 'pure' editor working in his ivory tower for the good of mankind and of text: the Benson brief serves us as a reminder that textual editing is always a complex (impure) negotiation between the sometimes contradictory pulls of economic, aesthetic and intellectual strategies. It is, in turn, an invitation to question our own contemporary editing practices.