HOW MANY HORSES HAS SONNET 51? TEXTUAL AND LITERARY CRITICISM IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

"I have adopted the Roman sentiment, that it is more honourable to save a citizen, than to kill an enemy," said Samuel Johnson in his Shakespeare preface, exalting explication over emendation.[1] But the problem is to distinguish between odder members of the home army and enemy infiltrators. Johnson's analogy begs the question. Editors agree that their task is to explain authorial readings and purge the text of intruders, but differ over how particular words are to be categorized. The drift of twentieth-century Shakespearean scholarship has been towards greater fidelity to original Quarto or Folio. In these post-structuralist days of over-ingenious analysis, few citizens are exposed to danger, and enemies are saved by the dozen.[2] In the case of Shakespeare's Sonnets this inclination to defend the foe is symptomatic of a misunderstanding of the way their poetry works. Or so it seems to me. Consideration of one famous crux in the Sonnets will raise more general issues.

The sole authority for the text of nearly all Shakespeare's Sonnets is the Quarto of 1609, which appears to have been set from a fairly reliable manuscript—possibly Shakespeare's autograph but probably a transcript of it. The Sonnets contain, however, at least thirty-five certain errors, and many editors have emended twice that number of readings. The Quarto was set by two compositors, as I showed fifteen years ago.[3] These two workmen punctuated the text in very different ways, so cannot both have reproduced the accidentals of their manuscript copy; also, "B" tended to misread his copy stupidly and to perpetrate literals, especially by repeating a letter from the immediate context, whereas "A" was more prone to the memorial substitution of one word for another.

The problem with which I am concerned is in Sonnet 51, on a Quarto page set by B. In Sonnet 50, which leads into it, the poet, traveling away from his Friend, forgives his horse for bearing him so slowly: it is as if the animal instinctively adapts his pace to the rider's mood, sympathizing with his reluctance

to be further distant from the object of his love. Sonnet 51 continues:

Thus can my loue excuse the slow offence,
Of my dull bearer, when from thee I speed,
From where thou art, why shoulld I hast me thence,
Till I returne of posting is noe need.
O what excuse will my poore beast then find,
When swift extremity can seeme but slow,
Then should I spurre though mounted on the wind,
In winged speed no motion shall I know,
Then can no horse with my desire keepe pace,
Therefore desire (of perfects loue being made)
Shall naigh noe dull flesh in his fiery race,
But loue, for loue, thus shall excuse my iade,
  Since from thee going he went wilfull slow,
  Towards thee ile run, and giue him leaue to goe.

Nearly all modern editors—Booth, Ingram and Redpath, Seymour-Smith, Kerrigan, Evans in his Riverside Shakespeare—accept Q's "naigh,"[4] modernizing with an "e," punctuating with a dash or comma after the verb or parentheses around "no dull flesh," and explaining that desire "whinnies like a spirited horse in exultation at its ethereal speed."[5]

To me the idea of desire "neighing" is ludicrously inappropriate, bringing a comically incongruous image into an otherwise straightforward enough, if extravagant, line of thought. I believe that "naigh" is either one of Compositor B's stupid misreadings, under the influence of the equestrian context, or, more probably, one of his literals, facilitated by the adjacent "noe"; that, whatever the cause, a simple minim substitution turned Shakespeare's "waigh noe" into "naigh noe"; that the correct verb is "waigh" ("e" replacing "a" in modern spelling).[6]

Sonnet 50 contains the related noun:

The beast that beares me, tired with my woe,
Plods duly on, to beare that waight in me.

(Modernizing editors print "dully" for Q's "duly".) Also relevant are Sonnets 44 and 45. Sonnet 44 begins:

> If the dull substance of my flesh were thought,
> Injurious distance should not stop my way,
> For then dispight of space I would be brought,
> From limits farre remote, where thou doost stay.

This and Sonnet 45 use the notion of the four elements. The poet, parted from his Friend, feels himself to be wholly composed of earth and water, the two heavy elements; the two light ones, air and fire, are with the Friend, air being linked with the poet's "thought," fire with his "desire."

In Sonnet 51 the poet says that although his horse's slowness is easy to excuse on the journey away from his Friend, on the trip back he will be so eager to rejoin him that whatever the horse's speed it will seem far too slow:

> Then can no horse with my desire keepe pace,
> Therefore desire (of perfects loue being made)
> Shall waigh noe dull flesh in his fiery race, . . .

The association of "fire" and "desire," established in Sonnet 45, recurs. Not to "waigh" something means to disregard it, take no account of it, as in Sonnet 108, where the same spelling is used—a spelling that recurs in Hand D of *Sir Thomas More*, in Sonnet 120, and repeatedly in the plays. The poet argues that desire for the Friend's company will ignore physical constraints in his fiery race to rejoin the Friend: his love for his Friend is spiritual, composed of air and fire, and will refuse to be limited by dull flesh, composed of the heavier elements. Since the horse has been firmly associated with the corporeal, desire for his Friend's company will impel him actually to outstrip his horse on the return journey. As no horse can keep pace with his desire, the horse, a dull, fleshly bearer, will simply have to be abandoned.

"Weigh" also fits the argument well if allowed some of its literal sense: the speaker, virtually identified with the love-desire that informs him, will no longer weigh down his dull bearer, burden the dull flesh of the horse, but, being all-loving, will charitably absolve and release the animal, repaying also its sympathy on the outward journey. The phrase "of perfect love being made" not only neutralizes any carnal sugges-

tiveness in the word "desire," but helps explain the forgiving attitude.

In Q as it stands, "naigh," if it means "whinny," virtually creates a second horse—a figurative horse of desire, set in opposition to the actual beast. This too-insistent horsification of desire not only contradicts "Then can no horse with my desire keepe pace," but blurs the central contrast between the ambling jade and the impetuous poet. And it makes for confusion over the poet's relationship to the Pegasus-type superhorse: is the poet, equated with his desire, the superhorse himself (undergoing a metamorphosis from rider to horse), or does he, distinct from his desire, ride it (changing mounts, as it were), or does he follow it (running after superhorse desire while the ordinary horse plods along in the rear)? The final mild joke about running to the Friend and leaving the horse behind is spoilt by the too palpable presence of an alternative horse. Besides, as Arnold Davenport pointed out nearly forty years ago, the overtones of "neigh" are inappropriate to a desire made of perfect love: "To an Elizabethan, a desire that neighed was almost inescapably an unlawful or a brutish lust."[7] The typical context is the biblical Jeremiah's, "They were as fed horses in the morning; every one neighed after his neighbour's wife."

These arguments against "neigh" will not persuade everyone. But I have a trump card. The Quarto verb does not exist. Editors have assumed that "naigh" is simply an Elizabethan spelling variant of "neigh," but this assumption is unwarranted. The word "neigh" occurs twelve times elsewhere in the Shakespeare canon, but never with a medial "a" in Quarto or Folio.[8] *OED* does not recognize "naigh" as a possible sixteenth- or seventeenth-century spelling, and in ten years of casual searching I have never found it.[9] So it seems highly probable that an editor who prints "neigh" is not just modernizing the spelling but emending the text, whether or not he or she alters the punctuation. Substitution of "n" for "w" is in fact much easier to account for than substitution of "a" for "e". Even on purely textual grounds "weigh" has a distinct advantage over "neigh," and of course the absence of punctuation from the Quarto line is entirely appropriate to "weigh."

Why then have nearly all modern editors adopted "neigh"? First, none has thought to check up on the Quarto spelling, so they have misjudged the textual status of "naigh." Nor have they considered the pattern of error in Compositor B's stints. Besides, "neigh" seems to belong in a poem about riding a horse. But typographical accident may throw up readings as attractive to critics as the notorious "soiled fish of the sea," where Herman Melville's fish had been "coiled."[10] Unless a misprint has an air of pertinence *nobody* will defend it. The intruder wearing enemy uniform is quickly killed off. The true troublemakers come in disguise. The equestrian context no more validates "naigh" than the muscial context validates each word in a newspaper ad for a concert of "Bach's Flute Sinatras."

Their other reasons are more various. The Riverside editor does not discuss the passage, but follows his consistently conservative policy of adhering to the primary text wherever possible—or at least that is what he supposes he is doing in this case, since he assumes that "neigh" is an uncontentious modernization of Q's spelling. Seymour-Smith, intent on reading homosexual autobiography into the sequence, welcomes the sexual overtones of "neigh." He has already identified the horse in Sonnet 50—the ordinary horse—with the poet's "unwilling and too-pliable conscience," and in the poet's abandonment of his horse at the end of Sonnet 51 he detects, as I cannot, "a hint that this scuttling of his conscience leaves the way open for his desire, which is no dull flesh . . . , to do what it likes" (137). This editor, pursuing a train of personal associations, accommodates the sonnet to his own private fantasy.

More sophisticated and representative is Stephen Booth's approach. He of course recognizes all the difficulties introduced into the sonnet by "neigh," but embraces them as contributing to the rich complexity of a poem loaded with multiple meanings in every line. In the preface to his indispensable edition he shows himself well aware that to some readers he will seem to be "over-interpreting" the Sonnets: "Some of the puns, allusions, suggestions, and implications I describe are farfetched; . . . but these poems go in . . . for farfetched effects" (xi). His aim, he says, is to "analyze the processes by

which the relevant meanings of Shakespeare's words and phrases and the contexts they bring with them combine, intertwine, fuse, and conflict in the potentially dizzying complexity from which a reader's sense of straightforward simplicity emerges." He suggests that the complexity creates "the magic of the sonnets, the sense they give of effortless control of the uncontrollable" (xiii).

This is well said, and Booth's commentary is crammed with insights, but his idea of the kind of poetry we meet in Shakespeare's Sonnets is different from mine. Ezra Pound once defined poetry as "language charged with meaning" and distinguished three traditional means to the end.[11] He called then phanopoeia, logopoeia, and melopoeia—the creation of visual images for the inner eye, "the dance of intellect among words," and the gift of rhythm and melody. Some poets rely almost exclusively on one of these three instruments. Ernest Dowson's verse, for example, or Paul Verlaine's may be pure melopoeia, while phanopoeia dominates a Japanese haiku. It has always seemed to me that in Shakespeare's Sonnets all these energizing forces cooperate as equals, while an "architectonic" impulse, as Pound called it, makes for coherence and completeness. The effect of Booth's brilliant commentary, with its alertness to the wide range of subsidiary and contradictory senses latent in every word and phrase, is to highlight the logopoeic elements of the Sonnets at the expense of the others—to make them more Donne-like, to stress their punning linguistic density and playful intellectual busyness. My own response tends to be more immediate, emotional, straightforward, more strongly conditioned by the musical properties of the verse, by rhythm, tone, and cadence, by the overt logic of the poem's argument. "Neigh" increases the busyness of Sonnet 51 to the detriment of elements more essential to the pleasure the poems give me. In his admirable introduction to the Signet edition, W. H. Auden singled out as the outstanding stylistic feature of Shakespeare's Sonnets their "cantabile." "They are," he said, "the work of someone whose ear is unerring" and who wants his verse to be "as melodious, in the simplest and most obvious sense, as possible." Auden finds in the Sonnets, even the poorer ones, "scarcely a line . . . which sounds harsh or awkward."[12] What strikes me as most

anomalous about "neigh" is the extent to which it disturbs the poem's musical flow. Booth himself calls "neigh" "the awkward word in line 11 of the Q text, the one least easily assimilated into it," and this awkward word creates awkward syntax, since the words that follow it must be understood as parenthetical, whether or not punctuation is supplied. I could perhaps put Auden's point in another way by saying that the voice of Shakespeare's Sonnets seems always perfectly modulated. *Modulation*: "the modification of the voice or of utterance to express various shades of meaning or emotion." When a Quarto word impedes this fluent movement of the poetic voice, I distrust it, especially if the word creates an incongruous image and occurs in a unique spelling.

Booth does share with me the orthodox assumption that the editor's job is to explain authorial readings and eliminate the non-authorial, to save citizens and kill enemies. But of course this assumption is itself under threat from the new movements in criticism. Thomas M. Greene has, for example, questioned Booth's well-argued repudiation of the Laura Riding-Robert Graves approach to the famous Sonnet 129, "Th'expense of spirit," an approach that cherishes the Q version in all its details; would save the enemy "and" infiltrated by Compositor B into line 11 to dispatch citizen "a" and undermine the poem's structure of antitheses; and is happy (I quote) "to grope for the elusive . . . connection between the third quatrain and the couplet that would justify their separation by a mere comma after line 12," regardless of the fact that Compositor B placed a comma in this position twenty-nine times, whereas A, who preferred a wider range of stops, did so only once. Where Booth welcomed *com*plexity, Greene welcomes *per*plexity. He wants "the actual mysterious artifact history has handed down to us with all its built-in puzzlements and uncertainties."[15] To this I would reply that the Quarto text of Shakespeare's Sonnets is not a material artifact at all, but an abstraction from thirteen similar physical entities widely dispersed and variously blotched and torn, that one of these, the Trinity College Cambridge copy of the Quarto, offers a particularly mysterious text of Sonnet 5, since it lacks the first three lines, that textual criticism must make the distinction, upheld by the Sonnets themselves, between the contingent and the

essential, and sanction only puzzlements built in by the author, and that Ezra Pound's three-line poem "Papyrus"—

Spring .....
Too long .....
Gongula .....

—is best read exactly as he intended it.[14]

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NOTES

[1] *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Volume VIII: Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven and London, 1968) 106. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 1985 MLA Convention in Chicago as a contribution to a session on "Textual Problems in Editing Seventeenth-Century Poetry" chaired by George Walton Williams.

[2] For instance, *Shakespeare Studies* 16 (1983), devotes fifty pages to attacks on two of Theobald's most brilliant recoveries (as most editors have judged them) of Shakespeare's intentions. Gustav Ungerer, pp. 101-33, defends F's "will not coole my nature" (Theobald: "will not curl by nature") in *Twelfth Night*, 1.3.98-9; and R. F. Fleissner, pp. 57-74, defends F's "and a Table of greene fields" (Theobald: "and a' babbled of green fields") in *Henry V*, 2.3.17.

[3] "Punctuation and the Compositors of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, 1609," *The Library*, 5th series, 30 (1975):1-24. Some confirmation of the basic correctness of my division was afforded by John Kerrigan in his Penguin edition of *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1986) 430; and it might be added that Compositor A omits the apostrophe from " 'tis" (5 times), whereas Compositor B includes it (6 times; he omits it once on H2 when the word begins a sonnet and so requires an extra large capital T).

[4] Stephen Booth (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, 1977, 1980); W. G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath (eds.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London, 1964, 1978); Martin Seymour-Smith (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London, 1963), old-spelling edition; John Kerrigan (ed.), *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1986); G. Blakemore Evans (ed.), *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston, 1974).

[5] This is Seymour-Smith's gloss. A few twentieth-century editors have emended: "weigh," for which I argue in this paper, was adopted by Peter Alexander in his Tudor Shakespeare (London, 1951) and by Alfred Harbage and Douglas Bush in their Pelican edition of the Sonnets (Baltimore, 1961); it was first proposed by G. C. Moore Smith in *Modern Language Review* 9 (1914):372-3. Other conjectures include "wait no," "need no," and "neigh to." In line 10 "perfects" may be an error for "perfect," since Shakespeare

uses the phrase "perfect love" four times elsewhere and Compositor B's stints contain other examples of the erroneous omission or addition of a final "-s": "naughts" for "naught" in 44.13, for example. However, the superlative "perfectest" occurs in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Macbeth* ("perfect'st"), and "perfects" may be meant to represent "perfectst," while reducing the uneuphonious final consonantal cluster.

[6] Some possible examples of B's being influenced by sounds or letters in the immediate context are: "beautius treasure" ("beauties treasure") 6.4; "he haue" ("she haue") 41.8; "For thou nor farther" ("For thou no farther") 47.11; "hand chrusht" ("hand crusht") 63.2; "Or . . . or . . . forbid" ("Or . . . of . . . forbid") 65.12; "is bitter" ("is better") 91.9; "not still" ("not skill") 106.12; "wish fortune chide" ("with fortune chide") 111.1; "and proud and" ("and proud a") 129.11.

[7] "Shakespeare's Sonnet 51 Again," *Notes and Queries* 198 (1953):15-16.

[8] Eleven times the spelling is "neigh(e)," with "ney" appearing once in the *Othello* Quarto (1622).

[9] OED does give "nayghe" as a fourteenth-century spelling.

[10] The error and the critical acclaim it provoked are discussed by Fredson Bowers, *Textual and Literary Criticism* (Cambridge, 1959) 29-31.

[11] "How to Read" in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London, 1954) 25.

[12] *William Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, ed. William Burto, with introduction by W. H. Auden (New York and London, 1964) xxvi.

[13] Greene's essay, "Anti-hermeneutics: The Case of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129," is in *Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance*, ed. Maynard Mack and George deForest Lord (New Haven, 1982) 143-61.

[14] The poem can be found in Pound's *Selected Poems* (London, Faber paperback edn., 1959) 116, or *Collected Shorter Poems* (London and Boston, 1984) 112. Since this paper was first written and delivered a new emendation of Q's "naigh" has been proposed. The Oxford *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (Oxford, 1986), reads "rein" in the modern-spelling volume, "raign" in the original-spelling volume; the emendation, suggested by Taylor, is defended by Stanley Wells in "New Readings in Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Elizabethan and Modern Studies Presented to Professor Willem Schrickx on the Occasion of his Retirement*, ed J. P. Vander Motten (Ghent, 1985) 320-1. Wells gives a convincing succinct account of what is wrong with Q's word, and "raign"/"rein" is attractive. Paleographically "raign" is less plausible than "waigh," because "h" in the Elizabethan Secretary hand is not easily misread as "n". But, as Wells says, " 'n' for 'r' is a simple minim error which could have led to misreading of the whole word. 'Raign' was a current spelling of both 'rein' and 'raign' (meaning 'arraign'): both senses are relevant, 'rein' contrasting with 'spur' in line 7: 'Then should I spurre though mounted on the wind', and 'raign' linking with the notion of finding an excuse for the 'jade'." In other words desire (personified and virtually equated with the speaker) (a) will not "govern his horse by means of reins," that is, he will no longer act as its rider; and (b) he will not accuse it. A difficulty is that "rein" normally implies restraint, as Wells seems to acknowledge in his remark that "rein" contrasts with "spur," and yet "shall *restrain* no dull flesh" would not fit

the argument, which requires the speaker to say that his desire will not *be restrained by* "dull flesh," will not make use of it; if he were not to abandon the horse, "desire" would be urging it on, not "reining" it in the usual sense of "bridling" or "curbing" it. However, on the main point—that Q's "naigh" is an error—the Oxford editors and I agree against the vast majority of the other editors. Though "weigh" seems to me the more plausible emendation, "rein" certainly deserves consideration.