

Institution: University of St Andrews



Unit of Assessment: 29 - English Language and Literature

Title of case study: Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets in the Digital Age

1. Summary of the impact

While Shakespeare's plays enjoy a strong presence in popular culture (including through film adaptations), the Sonnets have remained relatively less accessible. Practice-led research in the School, conducted by Don Paterson, twice winner of the T. S. Eliot prize for poetry, and informed partly by the historical research of Renaissance colleague Neil Rhodes led to Paterson's *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*, a full-length popular commentary written from the perspective of a practising sonneteer. Subsequently Paterson's research benefitted World Book Night 2012 and involved him in work as consultant and contributor for Faber/Touch Press on their highly successful Shakespeare's Sonnets iPad application. The impact of this research has been that (1) an historically remote and formally challenging body of poetic work has been reinterpreted for a wide non-academic audience; (2) contribution has been made to innovative, entrepreneurial activity in the digital publishing sector, while cultural heritage has simultaneously been 'curated'; (3) economic prosperity in the publishing and software industries has been stimulated. The users of research in this case study are the reading public; a major charitable trust; a relatively new digital publishing company; the print publishing industry.



2. Underpinning research

Since his appointment in the School of English at St Andrews in 2002, Don Paterson has been exploring the sonnet form, both in his own compositions (in the poetry volumes *Landing Light* and *Rain*) and through translation of Rilke's sonnets into English sonnet form (*Orpheus: After Rilke's Sonnette an Orpheus*). [R1; R3; R4] These publications, therefore, present the fruits of practice-based research into the form of the sonnet and what can be done with and through that form in the English language.

In line with the School's policy of pairing newly appointed Creative Writing colleagues with academic mentors, Neil Rhodes, a Renaissance researcher in post throughout the assessment period, was assigned as Paterson's mentor in 2002. Rhodes was then carrying out extensive research into Shakespeare's use of form, including that of the sonnet. In the year immediately preceding Paterson's arrival, Rhodes had organized a public event at the St Andrews Scottish Writing Centre called 'Did Shakespeare Study Creative Writing?'. It was therefore natural that Rhodes and Paterson discussed their shared research interests in poetic form, and the sonnet in particular. Rhodes's work on the Elizabethan *ars poetica* traces the development of a distinctive English poetic voice in the closing years of the sixteenth century by focusing on structure ('framing') and sound ('tuning'). It addresses the controversy over 'rhyme' in its double sense of accentual syllabic verse and what Puttenham calls 'tuneable conceits' and shows how critics such as Daniel argued for a natural alliance between structure and sound in the English iambic pentameter in the period that Shakespeare was composing his Sonnets. Rhodes would later publish his research in his 2004 Oxford University Press monograph *Shakespeare and the Origins of English* (the second chapter of which is called 'Did Shakespeare study creative writing?') and his book chapter 'Framing and Tuning in Renaissance English Verse'. [R2 & R5]

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During the course of this dialogue between poet and Renaissance specialist, it became clear that room existed for a new, full-length commentary on Shakespeare's sonnets, written from the perspective of a practising poet who well understands the constraints and opportunities of the sonnet form, but without the sacrifice of historical perspective. The result of these conversations was Paterson's book *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* (2010), a book aimed not exclusively at academics, but also at poetry readers in general. [R6] *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* then, occupies a double position in this case study, being both a practice-led research output (a full-length study from the perspective of one of the foremost living sonneteers in English), and also a vehicle for impact itself (interpreting Shakespeare's sonnets for a non-specialist audience), arising from the fruit of previous research (Paterson's practice-led investigation of the form and Rhodes's historical scholarship on Shakespeare's use of the form).

3. References to the research

R1) Don Paterson, *Landing Light* (Faber, 2003). Poetry volume. Winner of T. S. Eliot prize and Whitbread Poetry Award.

R2) Neil Rhodes, *Shakespeare and the Origins of English* (Oxford, 2004). Research monograph. Shortlisted for ESSE best book prize 2006.

R3) Don Paterson, *Orpheus: A version of Rilke's Die Sonnette an Orpheus* (Faber, 2006). Volume of verse translations.

R4) Don Paterson, *Rain* (Faber, 2009). Poetry Volume. Winner of Forward Poetry Prize. Output listed at REF 2.

R5) Neil Rhodes, 'Framing and Tuning in Renaissance English Verse' in *Renaissance Transformations: The Making of English Writing 1500-1650*, ed. Margaret and Thomas Healy (Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 32-47. Book chapter.

R6) Don Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Faber, 2010). Book-length critical commentary. Output listed at REF 2.

4. Details of the impact

i1) Informed by historical and practice-led research, Britain's most iconic literary figure is reinterpreted for a wide public by one of Britain's most fêted living poets.

While Shakespeare's plays have continually been interpreted and renewed for non-specialist audiences through adaptation for film and other media, the Sonnets represent a major aspect of the Shakespearean canon that, to date, had not much benefitted from the popular appeal that adaptation into new media can bring. The singularity of the Sonnets within Shakespeare's oeuvre then, is partly due to their remoteness to modern audiences otherwise at ease with Shakespeare. Don Paterson's *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*, based partly on his practice-led research as a sonneteer, and informed by Rhodes' research, made a major contribution to public debate about, and understanding of, Shakespeare's sonnets, as evidenced in the numerous reviews it generated in the non-academic print press, and in online media and blogs: 'a masterclass for the lay reader' (*The Times*); 'one of the finest living poets brings to this a craftsman's insight' (*The Independent*); 'combines highly sensitive attention to detail... with due awareness of historical context' (*The Financial Times*); 'deep knowledge shared at speed' (*The Daily Telegraph*); 'literary criticism was never so amusing' (Lizzy's Literary Life); 'a critical milestone' (Clive James); a restoration job on a masterpiece' (*The Sunday Herald*, which also mentions Rhodes's scholarship as having 'done much' to rid modern academia of its 'jargon-ridden lingo'). [S6]

Print sales of *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* stood at just over 8,500 at the end of the census date. [S1] Retailing at £17.99 (Hb) and £12.99 (Pb), *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* also therefore made a significant economic contribution to Faber's poetry list (most poetry titles do not sell more than around 1,500 copies). See (i3) below for its digital distribution. Paterson further promoted the reach and impact of the research by conducting a series of high-profile, public-facing talks on the Sonnets that included: a reading and talk at the Cheltenham Book Festival 09/10/2010;

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a discussion at the British Library with Ben Crystal, Eric Rasmussen and Jonathan Bate, 02/02/2011; a reading at Cambridge Wordfest 16/04/2011 [S1]; at Hay Book Festival 29/05/2011; a talk, 'For the Love of Shakespeare', at Edinburgh Book Festival 23/08/2011; and at Durham Book Festival 22/10/2011. The Festival Director of Cambridge Wordfest reported: '*audience feedback was excellent. Don Paterson's ability to make the complexities of Shakespeare intelligible to a mixed audience provided a crucial cultural contribution to the festival.*' [S2] Paterson also wrote a [general article on the Sonnets](#) for *The Guardian* on 16/10/2010, generating over 120 comments in which his arguments are debated passionately by members of the public. [S7]

i2) Literary heritage is presented to a wide audience via a UK-wide charitable trust dedicated to promoting literature among non-traditional readers. Public interest in Shakespeare is stimulated.

As a result of the expertise displayed in *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*, and as a further mark of its impact, Paterson, '*as a renowned expert*', was invited by the charitable trust [World Book Night](#) to be the consultant editor for a selection of 25 Shakespeare Sonnets to coincide with Shakespeare's birthday on 23/04/2012. [S3] The mission statement of World Book Night (WBN) is 'To raise the profile of reading through a mass engagement project which works at a grass roots level to inspire those who don't regularly read to do so.' ([What We Do](#)). As part of WBN's collaboration with Paterson, a total of 2.5 million copies of 25 different books from authors as diverse as Jane Austen and Bill Bryson were given away, each with sonnet on the inside back cover, [chosen by Paterson](#) to complement the title. [S8]

According to the WBN 2012 [Evaluation Report](#): almost 2000 libraries and over 500 bookshops participated; with the support of a valuable BBC partnership more than a million people visited the WBN website and millions more were reached via social media. [S9] Of the 2.5 million books distributed, 625,000 were given away by individual volunteers, the rest in association with third-party organisations. The Chief Executive of World Book Night reported that as a result of Paterson's involvement '*we were able to ensure a Shakespeare poem reached 625,000 people who don't regularly read*'. [S3] 54% of WBN's volunteer givers distributed some of their books to youth; 30% to adult learners; 18% to hospital/care staff; 13% to patients; 8% to prison inmates. In addition to books distributed by volunteer givers, WBN committed a further 520,000 copies directly to engage with the hardest to reach givers in prisons, hospitals, care homes, social, sheltered, and supported housing and through a range of charitable partners. Working with partner organisations 111 prisons and young offender institutes (75% of UK prisons) received more than 40,000 books. [S9] As a result of this mass distribution of a variety of both classic and contemporary literary titles, new and diverse audiences were also found for Shakespeare's Sonnets. It is worth noting that according to Google, the highest spike in internet searches for 'Shakespeare's Sonnets' since February 2010 occurred in April 2012 (and more than is usually the case around Shakespeare's birthday). [S10] While correlation does not always indicate cause, it seems plausible that Paterson's activities with WBN prompted public interest in searches to do with Shakespeare's Sonnets.

As a result of this initiative, Paterson was invited onto [Radio 4's Front Row](#) (monthly download figures of over 230,000 in addition to Radio 4's live audience of c. 849,000 listeners weekly) on 23/04/2012 (at 19.59 minutes) to discuss the Sonnets and his selection for World Book Night, further stimulating public awareness and understanding of them. Paterson also appeared in [The Guardian](#) (print circulation c. 200,000) on 20/04/2012, discussing his project in advance of WBN.

i3) Innovation and entrepreneurial activity is supported by contribution to development of a new product in the digital publishing industry. Simultaneously, contribution is made to the economic prosperity of that industry, and Shakespeare is reinterpreted for new audiences.

Paterson's work in *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets* also directly led to his being invited to work as principal consultant and contributor to Faber/Touch Press's Shakespeare's Sonnets iPad App, launched in April 2012. This App features a lightly re-written version of all of Paterson's commentary, as well as him reading several sonnets. In this way Paterson was instrumental in

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translating four hundred year-old poetry from the age of print into a new digital medium, helping to create an innovative new software product and to consolidate the entrepreneurial activity of a relatively new start-up business at the same time. (Touch Press had only released one App before Shakespeare's Sonnets.)

According to the Head of Faber Digital the development budget of the App was [text removed for publication] and Paterson's role as 'literary advisor' was integral to that development process: '*Don was central to the creation of an app that is at once academically rigorous and immediately appealing to a wide and general audience. Many of the reviews of the app specifically recognise the value of Don's contribution.*' [S4] Faber's digital project manager also acknowledged in *The Independent* that Paterson's commentary was central to the App's successful design: '*the notes matter as much as the stellar reciters... We've given them a lot of love and attention. They really do behave in a joined up way.*' [S11] The Sonnets App retails at £9.99 and according to the Senior Producer and Editor at Touch Press, was downloaded [text removed for publication] times in the period to 31 July 2013. [S5] Fifteen months after the App's launch, therefore, Touch Press had not only recovered their development costs, but generated a revenue of over £20,000: a significant sum for a small and relatively young independent business. That '[text removed for publication] of these downloads were specifically via the Education Volume Discount program' [S5], further indicates that the App is beginning to have some educational application.

This new digital version of the Sonnets also prompted media and blogosphere discussion of the Sonnets: it was positively reviewed as '*magnificent*' by U.S. current affairs site [Salon](#) on 24/07/2012 [S12]; tweeted by [David Tennant](#) on 28/06/2012; mentioned with reference to Paterson's commentary on BBC One's [Andrew Marr Show](#) on 08/07/2012 as evidence of the 'relevance of Shakespeare to the 21st Century'; reviewed in [The Guardian](#) on 08/07/2012 ('*Paterson's commentary is the best thing about this app*'); reviewed in [The Independent](#) on 17/07/2012 ('*a digital delight*') [S11]; and shortlisted for the FutureBook Innovation Awards. [S4]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1) Publicist, Faber. Verifies sales figures. [i1]
- S2) Festival Director Cambridge WordFest. Verifies the reception of and effect on understanding of the sonnets. [i1]
- S3) Chief Executive, World Book Night. Verifies benefits from participation in WBN 2012. [i2]
- S4) Head of Faber Digital, Faber. Discusses benefits of iPad App. [i3]
- S5) Senior Producer and Editor, Touch Press. App download figures. [i3]
- S6) Webpages of non-academic reviews and blog postings about *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Demonstrating claim that it was widely praised in the non-academic press [i1] [The Times](#); [The Independent](#); [The Financial Times](#); [The Daily Telegraph](#); [Good Reads Blog](#); [Lizzy's Literary Life](#); [Clive James's Blog](#); [The Sunday Herald](#)
- S7) Webpage of Paterson's [Guardian](#) article 16/10/2010. Demonstrates claim concerning range of 'comments' response from public. [i1]
- S8) WBN webpage for [sonnets used](#) in 2012 event. Corroborates Paterson's contribution. [i2]
- S9) Webpage of World Book Night 2012 [Evaluation Data](#). Source of data about book distribution figures for WBN 2012. [i2]
- S10) Webpage of Google data on [searches for the terms 'Shakespeare' and 'sonnets'](#). To corroborate claim about the spike in internet searches coinciding with Paterson's promotion of the Sonnets during WBN 2012. [i2]
- S11) Reviews of the iPad App in [The Guardian](#) and [The Independent](#). Source for quotations, including from Faber's digital project manager. [i3]
- S12) Webpage of [Salon](#). Corroborates its positive review there. [i3]