

Humanities Institute.
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Sonnets 1609. Quarto Shakespeare.

OVERVIEW

Tradition. The sonnet tradition was deeply embedded in the late medieval courtly traditions of poetry, chivalry, and neoplatonic philosophy, a blend which was to reach a mature expression by the time of Shakespeare, himself virtually of the 'early modern' period. The tradition in question had, before assuming an English (and an Italian, and a Spanish) form in the sixteenth century, passed through the shaping hands of the formative Renaissance poets: the fourteenth century Italian innovators, Petrarch, Dante, and then, formative for the kind of sonnet Shakespeare would write, the confirmers of the English version of the verse form, Wyatt and Surrey.

Literature Under the widespread and enthusiastic development of this form, many devotees of the 'English sonnet' formed a creative literary context for Shakespeare's own work. What was necessary, to unleash the full richness of Shakespeare's work in the sonnet, was for this man of the stage, the writing desk, and the business world to find the appropriate time for bringing his poetic life to the public. As we can tell, from the sweep of biographical innuendos throughout his sonnets, Shakespeare had long been preoccupied with his poetry, by the time, in 1609, a quarto volume was published which included 154 sonnets plus a long poem, 'The Lover's Complaint,' written in a different format--two stanzas of seven lines each, arranged in *rime royal* form, and expressing in the first stanza of each poem the male viewpoint, in the second the female.

Diligence. This highly charged and brilliant sonnet material made apparent that, during say the years of 1593 to the early sixteen hundreds, Shakespeare had been diligently working on the present collection, and that at a time when, in addition to directing plays, running a theater, pursuing various business deals, he was offering the public dramas like *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, or *Othello*. It may also be worth adding that, in May of 1609, a devastating plague hit London which closed the theatres, drove much of the theater audience out of the city, and left a beautiful vacuum into which Shakespeare could pour much of his editorial energy for poetry perfecting.

The Work.

Sample

Sonnet 18

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimm'd:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,*

*So long as man can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Form. The Shakespearian version of the English version of the sonnet is clear above, in sonnet # 18. The details of form are simple, and repeat themselves consistently throughout Shakespeare's work as a sonnet writer. There are fourteen lines of iambic pentameter—what we used to call short/long, short/long, five times—divided into three quatrains, four line stanzas, with a couplet (called a *volta*, or turn) to wrap up the poem. In the telling, perhaps, this sounds like a methodical and perhaps even mechanical event in words, and yet, as one pages along, through the whole body of these sonnets, there is (I speak for my betters) no trace of the mechanical or routine, although there is unmistakable fidelity to pattern.

Organic. Below, we need to discuss those themes which give their lasting power to this extensive quarto. First, though, we need to look at a more difficult and intangible element of the life process of our sample sonnet. I mean the organic thrust and energy inside which the formal structure of the whole carries the distinctive cachets of Shakespeare's language. 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' The pentameter line is clockwork right on. The tonic beat—stresses on syllables two, four, six, eight, ten—is evenly distributed—except to the extent, and this is the point—that the 'length' of the stressed syllables varies throughout the line, from the relatively protracted 'pare' of syllable four or the 'summ' of syllable eight to the pinpoint 'l' of syllable two. It is the variation in the 'length'—that is, the breath expenditure—of the components of this first line of the sonnet, that guarantees to the line an organic pulse. The same point, writ larger, can be applied to the way the Shakespearean organic of the line characteristically works.

Question. The body of the Shakespearean sonnet reinvents itself in its varieties of self-distribution. On the macro level such organic energy is provided by the overarching strategy of the question, to which the answer is durably resisted, if ultimately given in the *volta*. The appropriate reply, to the question of the first line, is 'sure go ahead, compare me to a summer's day' but then the appropriate response, to that provocation, is to put off the eventual reply—the reply that, unlike a summer's day, 'you' last forever, once transformed into art by my poetry. Before reaching the *volta*, and this is where the organic thrust of the poem persists, we must work through multiple instances of the way—wind, sun, death—nature abrades life, leaving nothing superior to itself but art and love, the latter frozen into the former.

Point. The foregoing are efforts to give meaning to the strategy of this sonnet, to maintain the values of system and rigor—formal structure—while fulfilling a larger, maybe we would say pre thematic, drive of the present sonnet. The pre-thematic, the energy leading up toward the 'theme' of the poem, the idea that overarches, is wrapped up in the *volta*, which universalizes the working through argument of the sonnet.

*So long as man can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

The 'this' is the conceptual immunity zone, where the poem, and the art it embodies, acquires immunity from that abrading time which we have been testing out, in our effort to answer the question of the first line. The birth of the full fledged theme, the idea of the eternity of art, and its identity with the beloved, is at this point almost before our eyes.

Philosophy. We have tried to show the emergence of a point, organically, through a few illustrative stages in the build up of a Shakespearean sonnet. Does anything like an organized system of thought—a philosophy—emerge from the interaction of over a hundred of these sonnet creations? What emerges, one might say, is stances in thought, proposals of attitudes to being in the life situation, with its mortality, its amours, its dreads, its longings for stability. In a sense these sonnets are Shakespeare's philosophy more directly expressed than in his plays, which deploy their investigations so widely—in comedy, tragedy, problem play—over a wide range of personal types and life-reactions.

THEMES

Homoeroticism. The first 126 of Shakespeare's sonnets are love poems written to a young man. For the reader of Shakespeare's plays—*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; *Troilus and Cressida*; even *Hamlet* (Hamlet and Horatio)—the notion of homoerotics is hardly surprising; nor is it in the European Renaissance more broadly. Shakespeare's concentration on this expression of love fits in well with the kinds of ideal he pays tribute to, the pure immaterialities of a neo Platonic tradition, which permeated Renaissance philosophy as deeply as the sonnet tradition did Renaissance art and literature. In homoeroticism the dross of procreation was drained away, and the body made susceptible to pure idealization. Sexuality vanishes in adoration. For such reasons the elaborate quest, among scholars of Shakespeare, to determine the identity of his handsome young man lover, and to pin it on, say, Sir Philip Sidney's nephew, misses the point, that the homoerotic in Shakespeare's sonnets by definition transcends the individual case.

Sexuality. Sonnets 127-52 highlight the Dark Lady, who is a counterpoint opposite to the Young Man Lover with which the whole sequence opens. To this highly sexual 'black' force, an evil and an irresistible draw, Shakespeare is so attracted that he allows her to interrupt his young man love.

*In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slander'd with a bastard shame..*

The new era, of coarse and carnal love, is upon us, and Shakespeare himself stands in the eye of the storm. All that power of blackness, that makes Othello such a figure of power and danger, accumulates around the Dark Lady, who in 127 crashes against the pale youthful beauty of the poet's young male lover (in 126):

*O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power
Dost hold Time's fickle glass, his fickle hour*

The interplay of these two kinds of sexuality makes up a large part of the psychodrama of the sonnets.

Eternity The sonnets are pervaded with the passage of time, the certainty of death played off against the greater certainty of the immortality conferred by art, and the quasi immortality implicit in the beauty of the body at its most radiant. These subtle philosophical themes are heated in the never cooling cauldron of Shakespeare's own private life. The philosophical framework, for this broad view of time, mortality, and beauty is the diffuse Neoplatonism in the air and in the schools of Shakespeare's London milieu.

Jealousy

*When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope...(29)*

This sense, that Shakespeare himself is forever being outshone by another more beautiful, rich, or talented is a frequent motif in the sonnets. (How better to gauge his extremely competitive nature, the driving machine that led him to prolific creation, and an active business life, which included financial interests in the theatres for which he created?)

Writing. Shakespeare is very conscious of being a pen and ink person, and of treasuring the precious intersection of those two vehicles. It is of recurrent interest, to him, that what it is written is temporary, like the sand awaiting the tide which will remove it, but that the written, if equal in quality to the beauty of the beloved, exists also in an unassailable place where it will preserve the beloved's beauty, more splendid and durable than marble.

Parallels in World Literature Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, depends on the guidance of Virgil, until he reaches the region of the underworld which then turns upward toward the sun, which will ultimately be found radiant on the far side of the globe, in all the beauty of God. Beatrice, the poet's lover through the epic, will be the guide of Dante into the regions of ultimate beauty, as he approaches God. Petrarch, in his *Sonnets to Laura*, plays across the same neo Platonic themes—of love, beauty, immortality, and death—which haunt his fellow Renaissance man, Shakespeare. The modern American poet, John Berryman, creates his *Dream Songs* with the same rangy fascination as Shakespeare's, in the restorative but frustrating power of love, to deal with the entropy that seems to lie at the center of human existence.

Illustrative moments

*For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings. (29)*

Shakespeare tirelessly discovers new pathways to celebrating the refreshing beauty of love

*When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past (30)*

Shakespeare excels in portraying the staying power of past events, which can lend a perfection to the present.

*Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time. (55)*

The most durable monuments of the past will crumble before you can fade, having been rendered immortal, in your way, by my language.

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.(73)*

Shakespeare is constantly concerned with his own impending mortality. And by the memory of the spring or summer which preceded, leaving its traces.

*O! never say that I was false of heart,
Though absence seem'd my flame to qualify,
As easy might I from my self depart
As from my soul which in thy breast doth lie (109)*

It would almost seem, at times, as though Shakespeare's lover is in fact himself, so twinned are the two of them.

Discussion questions

Do you see Shakespeare the dramatist in Shakespeare the sonnet writer? Does he use the same talents and ploys in both genres? Do the same themes, which preoccupy his poetry, permeate his plays?

Is Shakespeare a romantic or realist, in his poetry? Does he work on the belief that we have remedies against death, and mortality? Does he believe that art can do the trick? Is Shakespeare 'religious' ?

How does the formal structure of the English sonnet fit with the philosophical points Shakespeare wants to make? Is the *volta* a sharp technical formality, which aids in formulating poetic argument?