

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sonnets, madrigals

Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti. 1475-1564

Poetry and visual art Hundreds of sonnets and madrigals, verbal out-pourings of love, dread of death, religious faith, passion, hope (for salvation) were among the vast ranges of Michelangelo's literary opus: yet these distinguished poems, which flowed from his pen in later life, have been little remembered in the massive achievements of the artist's life work as a painter, sculptor, architect. Shall we say that this artist, who was prematurely gifted in painting, sculpture, and architecture, was preeminently blessed with certain senses—tactile, visual, neurally empathetic?—more than others—aural, symbolic? If we follow that path, of explanation of Michelangelo's achievement, we will oversimplify the power of his actual poetry. That poetry shares the intensity of Michelangelo's sense of immediacy and existence which are tense as springs in this visual creator's native mark.

The sources of Michelangelo's creation

Vittoria Colonna Though Michelangelos took great pride in his visual artwork—which was recognized for its greatness from youth on-- he had a much more humble view of his poetry, calling it, "something foolish." But this something foolish contained consistent themes and was worked through with high skill. Michelangelo wrote over 300 poems. Many of his most impressive sonnets were written to close friends, notably to his beloved Vittoria Colonna, a distinguished and creative widow whom he had met in Rome in 1536, and with whom, until her death, he exchanged passionate—and philosophically intricate-- sonnets.

Cecchino dei Bracci In 1542 Michelangelo met Cecchino dei Bracci, upon whose death, a year after their meeting, Michelangelo wrote forty eight funeral epigrams. The most intense love sonnets Michelangelo wrote were directed to Tommaso dei Cavalieri', and constituted the first long love poetry sequence addressed by one man to another, predating by fifty years Shakespeare's sonnets to his mysterious beloved. Whether this verbal tribute to the handsome youngster was intertwined with erotic love—whether Michelangelo was gay—is impossible to judge, though our own sensitivities to this issue may well make a judgment on the matter impossible. So reluctant to accept this gayness were earlier scholars of the Renaissance, that until the brilliant translation work of John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) the pronouns used for the beloved, in Michelangelo's sonnets, were all translated to the female gender form, despite the evident choice of the masculine, in the original.

Tommaso dei Cavalieri Tommaso was an aristocratic young man of exquisite manners, style, and of a physical beauty which Michelangelo gave his best to celebrate in poetry. Michelangelo's verbal intoxication with this handsome young man—Tommaso was twenty three, when Michelangelo first met him, at the age of fifty seven, and whether their love was physical or not we don't know. (What we do know is that Michelangelo made every effort to teach Tommaso to draw, and in the course of this instruction created many of his own most masterful drawings. We also know, from Tommaso's response to Michelangelo, that at least the two men's statements of love were in sync: Tommaso: 'I swear to return your love. Never have I loved a man more than I love you, never have I wished for a friendship more than I wish for yours.') To read Michelangelo's love poetry and his beloved's responses to it, is to read through the lens of that Neoplatonic exaltation with which the late fifteenth century Italian philosophers. Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, were so generous. Like other Neoplatonists Michelangelo courts through the stylized rhetoric of the romantic elegants of his time

Love's Justification by: Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)

Yes! hope may with my strong desire keep pace,
And I be undeluded, unbetrayed:
For if of our affections none find grace
In sight of Heaven, then wherefore hath God made
The world which we inhabit? Better plea
Love cannot have, than that in loving thee
Glory to that eternal peace is paid,
Who such divinity to thee imparts
As hallows and makes pure all gentle hearts.
His hope is treacherous only whose love dies
With beauty, which is varying every hour;
But, in chaste hearts uninfluenced by the power
Of outward change, there blooms a deathless flower,
That breathes on earth the air of paradise.

Translation of "Love's Justification" was composed by William Wordsworth (1770-1850).

What is the core concept of this poem? Fortified by a robust rhyme scheme, Michelangelo establishes a few main points:

Love is inherent to the universe

- 1 He has hope in hope; especially for the purity of his beloved's affection
- 2 If love is hopeless in the world god made, why did God make it so?

Love proves God's approval of love

3. The existence and validity of love is proof enough that God puts his stamp of approval on the love in the world.
- 4The very existence of love is proof that the world responds in kind to the trust we put in love.
5. Love is immortal.
6. Unless it is deceptive or faithless—not believing in its own eternity—love is eternal,
7. and breathes on earth the air of paradise.

Love's justification, to return to the sonnet's title, is that without love the universe is without meaning. (This point resembles the sheological argument, born during the late Middle Ages, that for anything at all to exist it must be good. Existence is good. What justification could there be for the existence of the bad?) The sonnet in question celebrates the reasonable proposition that my love for my beloved would not exist without the implicit approval of the divine creator of the universe.

Joy may kill by: Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564)

Too much good luck no less than misery
May kill a man condemned to mortal pain,
If, lost to hope and chilled in every vein,
A sudden pardon comes to set him free.
Thus thy unwonted kindness shown to me
Amid the gloom where only sad thoughts reign,
With too much rapture bringing light again,
Threatens my life more than that agony.
Good news and bad may bear the self-same knife;
And death may follow both upon their flight;
For hearts that shrink or swell, alike will break.
Let then thy beauty, to preserve my life,
Temper the source of this supreme delight,
Lest joy so poignant slay a soul so weak.

The translation of "Joy May Kill" was composed by John Addington Symonds (1840-1893)

The Renaissance Love Sonnet The Renaissance love sonnet, as we know from the innovating Englishmen Wyatt and Surrey, from Sir Philip Sidney or from Michelangelo, is not a bleeding heart and unashamed statement, a confession of hopeless love, though it is normally about love. (The fourteenth century Italian poet, Petrarch, built the first sonnets out of courtly romance, out of what might have been the cultural amusement of ears like those of Castiglione's Courtier.) Rather the first sonnet takes wing as a highly disciplined word package—the sentiments of Shakespeare or Petrarch in their sonnet forms are subjects of intense subtlety and concentration—and the love expressed within is typically subject to God's approval, without which it is hollow.

Spiritual and Geometric form The sonnet's dependence on formalized rhyme and metrical schemes, and the interplay of perspectives, resulting from these diverse forms, is frequently heightened by the ironies of the themes—the dependence of love on despair-generated hope, in the former sonnet above, the painful susceptibility of the lover to the shock of being restored by the beloved. (These two sonnets, typically of the Renaissance form, eschew distinctive portraits, and philosophize wittily on the anomalies of the human condition.) Rhyme, as we note in our two examples, is of the essence of the track we follow, for rhyme is wrap-up, closure, and fights a fascinating battle with paradox, which pervades the two typical sonnets we have analyzed, and which has everything to do with freedom, escape from enclosedness.

Sparse discipline Given the themes of such Renaissance sonnets as Michelangelo's—mortality, time, and love recur constantly—the relation of rhyme scheme and prosody to the point of such sonnets as Michelangelo's is startling, and goes far to define the unique character of such poetry. In the instance of 'Joy may Kill' we look at a rhyme scheme which patterns out to abba/ cddc/ efg/ efg, a code familiar to Michelangelo, and to the traditional Italian Petrarchan sonnet. The connection among time, mortality, and love—three tightly interwound foregrounds of the human experience—and the sparsely disciplined word-geometry of the Italian sonnet form—constitutes a uniquely intense binding of thought to music.

Study Guides

Best known for his bewildering visual imagination, and the blend of power and grace which he imparts to his sculpture and paintings, Michelangelo nonetheless created many fine poems, especially sonnets in which he gave free vent to his homoeroticism, exquisite ear, and fidelity to that strand of Neoplatonism which we have seen dominant in the work of earlier Italians, Ficino and Pico, and which shares so much with Renaissance Italian painting, perfused as it is with love for love and milky divine hues. What do you make of the rich intertwining of the visual with the aural in Michelangelo's life work. Can you name other poet/artist combinations? Do Michelangelo's poems, for that matter, seem to you to reflect a visual insight or are they predominately poems of the ear?

How do you explain the long lasting interest in the sonnet—Michelangelo's preferred form—in Renaissance literature? The origins of the sonnet form go back to the pre modern imagination of Petrarch, whose sonnets to Laura established the genre decisively, stamping it with romance and formality conjoined. And why was the sonnet rooted in Western Europe and Italy? Is it a western form? Are there sonnet traditions in other parts of the world? What about the Arabic ghazals?

We are working on the making of the modern western mind. What form is that historical portraiture entitled to assume? Say we continue to align significant creators from the two centuries separating Ficino from Dryden. Are there a number of points at which we will want to say that a landmarking is being encountered? Will those landmarks be established by certain authors—eminently great ones? Eminently controversial or direction-setting? If the latter, what velleities of literary or cultural history have shaped the choice of landmark events or people? Is proximity of birthdates a significant explanation of placing together of the memories of two individuals?

The 'making of the modern mind,' our theme, will be viewed differently at different moments in the cultural spectrum. In certain instances, however, 'universal' minds surge from the continuum, and seem to grow exempt from the ordinary caviling of cultural historians? What do you think of that kind of 'putting on a pedestal'? The kind of hallowed space we put up around Sophocles, or Shakespeare, or Michelangelo? Is that action of pedestalling a commendable instance of our willingness to feel awe, or is it a freezing of our critical capacities, which makes it difficult to see things as they are?