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| Shakespeare’s Sonnet Sequence: Time, Love, and the Poetic Persona |

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Shakespeare’s Sonnet Sequence: Time, Love, and the Poetic Persona

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**Abstract**

Some of the best love poems of Shakespeare are addressed to the “fair youth,” but who is this man “more temperate than a summer’s day” that inspired over two-thirds of Shakespeare’s sonnets? The most popular theory concerning the identity of the poet’s muse points to Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton. As one of Shakespeare’s patrons, Wriothesley helped Shakespeare, financially, to produce some of his works in the 1590s. Though not rejecting such a literal connection, I lean more towards the viewpoint that poets happily create a poetic persona, artificial and distinct from themselves. Instead of inquiring into the identity of the mysterious figure, this paper aims to explore the relationship between the *poetic persona* (rather than Shakespeare the poet) and the young man through the metaphors of time, love and beauty. I want to suggest that there is drama in the sonnet sequence: four figures emerged from the poetic scenario—the poet, the fair youth (the Friend), the Dark Lady, and the rival poet. The failure of the project, as seen in the first seventeen poems, to persuade the young man to marry has crucial consequences for the relationship between him and the poetic persona. The relationship between the older poet and the young Friend was one of profound and at times agitated friendship, which involved a certain physical and quasi-sexual fascination emanating from the Friend and enveloping the older poet, but did not necessarily include sexual activity in any shocking or sensational sense. I shall argue that the project of the “young man sonnets” becomes an attempt to define him anew, and in keeping with the impetus of the first 17, this will be done in a personal manner. From sonnets 18-126, the poet’s attitude toward the friend is one of love mingled with bitterness. The nature of the platonic love of a man for another man revealed in this group of sonnets has become an intriguing subject for investigation. Several sonnets addressed to the friend refer to another poet who is a rival for the friend’s esteem. The issue is further complicated by the sonnets numbered 127-152 which involves a mysterious “Dark Lady.” Through the lens of the poetic persona, however, we may attempt to describe Shakespeare’s feeling for love, different kinds of self-love, different kinds of love for another person, and finally, his claim that art as a form of love, or more specifically sonneteering as an act of love, transcends change and temporality.

**Keywords:** sonnet sequence, poetic persona, experience of love, temporality

Introduction

Some of the best love poems of Shakespeare are addressed to the “fair youth,” but who is this muse that inspired over two-thirds of Shakespeare’s sonnets? The most popular theory concerning the identity of the fair youth points to Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton.[[1]](#footnote-1) As one of Shakespeare’s patrons, Wriothesley helped Shakespeare, financially, to produce some of his works in the 1590s. Though not explicitly rejecting such a literal connection, I lean more towards the viewpoint that poets happily create a poetic persona, artificial and distinct from themselves (Payne 500). Instead of inquiring into the identity of the mysterious figure, this paper aims to explore the relationship between the *poetic persona* (rather than Shakespeare the poet) and the young man through the metaphors of time, love and beauty.

Next to the puzzle over the identity of the beloved young Friend is the one over the order of the 154 sonnets, namely, is the 1609 Quarto text a continuous sequence? Is the arrangement of order a convincing one? Attempts by various editors to rearrange them, however, have failed to convince others, and the original order is therefore followed in most modern editions. This puzzle has caught the eye of scholarly puzzle-solvers such as S.C. Campell, who has pieced together a puzzle-work that fits into his logic scheme.[[2]](#footnote-2) I find his re-paged version intriguing, which tells a moving and sad story of the other side of the poet’s life. However, I have to bypass this thorny subject. For the most part, I simply rely on the Quarto sequence order which is followed by most researchers.

I want to suggest that the failure of the project (specifically in the first seventeen poems) to persuade the young man to marry has crucial consequences for the relationship between him and the poetic persona. The relationship between the older poet and the young Friend was one of profound and at times agitated friendship, which involved a certain physical and quasi-sexual fascination emanating from the Friend and enveloping the older poet, but did not necessarily include sexual activity in any shocking or sensational sense. I shall argue that the project of the “young man sonnets” becomes an attempt to define him anew, and in keeping with the impetus of the first 17, this will be done in a personal manner. From sonnets 18-126, the poet’s attitude toward the friend is one of love mingled with bitterness. The nature of the platonic love of a man for another man revealed in this group of sonnets has become an intriguing subject for investigation. Several sonnets addressed to the friend refer to another poet who is a rival for the friend’s esteem. The issue is further complicated by the sonnets numbered 127-152 which involves a mysterious “Dark Lady.” Through the lens of the poetic persona, however, we may attempt to describe rather than explain Shakespeare’s feeling for love, different kinds of self-love, different kinds of love for another person, and finally, his claim that art as a form of love, or more specifically sonneteering as an act of love, transcends change and temporality.

I. Sonnet Tradition: Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences

The Elizabethan sonnet is the most famous of all verse forms, but its vogue was very short-lived. The sonnet form had first been introduced into English through the translation from the Italian model Petrarch by Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, in the 1530’s. The popularity of the form was directly due to Sir Philip Sidney, whose publication of *Astroophil and Stella* (“Starlover and Star”; 1591) is taken to be the sonnet sequence that most closely identified courtly code with the sonnet form (Warley 44). Sidney’s first sonnet, written in hexameters, sets the tone for the rest of the sequence:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,

That she (dear she) might take pleasure of my pain;

Pleasure might cause her to reade, reading might make her know,

Knowledge might pity won, and pity grace obtain;

[. . . . . . . . . . . . .]

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,

‘Fool,’ said my muse to me; look in thy heart, and write.

Conventionally, this sonnet depicts the lady as the unavailable woman who causes the lover pain. So too, the hope that she will read the sonnets ‘addressed’ to her and that will make her relent and pity the poet, is also a conventional rhetorical pose. This series of sonnets was at times “so personal and sincere that it revealed to English poets possibilities hitherto unrealized” (Harrison 1593). Love, or rather, courtly love, is a constant theme underlies the Elizabethan sonnets.

Aristocratic poets such as Wyatt, Surrey, and Sidney, by their lives and character, seem to approach nearest the contemporary ideal of the scholar-courtier. Some have suggested that the love represented in the sequence may be a literal one. Famous or infamous examples are Wyatt’s probably affair with Anne Boleyn—queen to Henry VIII, and Sidney’s liaison with Lady Panelope Rich, a married woman (Innes 19). Elizabeth I’s encouragement of courtly love, however, could be seen to mask a logical recognition on her part that the courtly code could help displace the tensions created by a woman in power (Warley 37). The vogue for writing love-poetry in sonnet was at its height in the mid-1590s in England, and the most important collections of Elizabethan sonnets—Daniel’s *Delia,* Lodge’s *Phyllis,* Constable’s *Diana,* Drayton’s *Idea,* and last but not least, Spencer’s *Amoretti*—all appeared during this vogue. Likewise, most of Shakespeare’s sonnets were composed at around that time (from 1592 to1595 or 1596).

“Shakespeare’s sonnets are hard to think about. They are hard to think about individually and they are hard to think about collectively” (Booth 1). Half a century ago, Stephen Booth expressed his puzzle over the Bard’s sonnets, be it an individual sonnet or the whole cycle. His feeling is echoed by many critics. Philip Martin, for one, states clear that he shall not attempt to “give a comprehensive picture of the whole sequence,” but rather to “consider the Sonnets in their immediate context,” by which he refers to the tradition of Elizabethan sonnets (1). Regarding the debate over whether Shakespeare’s sonnets are personal or private, most critics tend to join one of two parties: those who believe that Shakespeare was an inscrutable sphinx about whose personality we hardly know anything; those who believe that “Shakespeare has laid bare his heart” in his sonnets (Harrison 1592). Despite the difference, all researchers share the notion that the sonnets are already partly shaped by the conventions of sonnet sequences (Warley 3-5), and our analysis should take into account “how they depart from these conventions” (Innes 140).

The order in which Shakespeare’s 154 sonnets were printed in Thomas Thorpe’s 1609 edition cannot be said to have the authority of Shakespeare himself.[[3]](#footnote-3) Attempts by various editors to rearrange them, however, have failed to convince others, and the original order is therefore followed in most modern editions.

II. Sonnet Speaker as the Poetic Persona

In the following discussion, I will see the speaker in the sonnet sequence as a poetic persona in distinction with Shakespeare himself. To avoid re-inscribing authorial presence in the poems is also the stance many researchers adopt. Paul Innes, for one, distinguishes the historical personage Shakespeare, and the subject position occupied by the addressor in the sonnets. He expostulates, “what I will be looking at is the way in which the *persona* is socially constructed, through associations with other sonnet speakers, and of course by means of the homosocial structure” (138; italics mine). In this regard, we shall be reminded that the word “persona” in its Greek origin refers to the face mask worn by a character on stage, the most renowned one being the mask with sorrowful sunken eyes worn by Oedipus throughout Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. “Persona” and its plural form “personae” are therefore equivalents for character(s). That being said, my basic premise is that the speaking subject (the speaking I) in the sonnet sequence, however closely or remotely related to Shakespeare the author, is already in a mask and therefore dramatized. Nevertheless, amused by S. C. Campell belief that “Shakespeare’s sonnets tell a true story which has both drama and tragedy” about the poet himself (vii), I am open to any alternative reading. As a playwright, Shakespeare might have jotted down his thoughts in a notebook with empty pages at around 1590s. He might have recorded his more private feelings in the assumed notebook (Campell xii-xiii) as well. And this is how far I could go with Campell’s assumption.

In style, Shakespeare’s sonnets are akin rather to some of his earlier plays. A glimpse at how Shakespeare hides sonnets in his drama may reveal the linguistic similarities between sonnets and characters’ speeches. The most famous dramatic sonnet is that mutually spoken between Romeo and Juliet when they first meet, before their first kiss, known as the lovers’ duet (1.5)[[4]](#footnote-4). These fourteen lines make up a shared sonnet, with a rhyme scheme of ababcdcdefefgg, exactly the one found in the sonnet sequence. I will insert brackets in the following quotation to highlight the sonnet form buried in the lovers’ dialogue.

Romeo:  
If I profane with my unworthiest hand   
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.  
*[1st quatrain]*

Juliet:  
Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;  
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,  
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

*[2nd quatrain]*

Romeo:  
Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?  
Juliet:  
Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.  
Romeo:  
O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do;  
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

*[3rd quatrain]*

Juliet:  
Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.  
Romeo:  
Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.

*[ending couplet]*

Stage direction is a very late development, unknown to Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights. The ending couplet thus serves as a cue for the action of kissing. In *Romeo and Juliet,* Prologue to the play and Prologue to Act II are also in the sonnet form. Other sonnets in plays include Chorus in the Epilogue to *Henry V*; Helena’s letter to the Countess in *All’s Well that Ends Well*: Beatrice and Benedick each write a sonnet in *Much Ado About Nothing*; the sonnet in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (4.3). There are still numerous instances of the half-sonnet (a quatrain plus a couplet) hidden in the plays.

There are sonnets hidden in Shakespeare’s drama, and drama was and is meant for the public. However, Shakespeare’s sonnets, as poetry, are perhaps rather for private reading than public discussion, for they “touch sensitive readers in secret ways” (Harrison 1594). Normally in Shakespeare’s sonnets we find a truly dramatic dialogue between two characters: the persona of the poet himself (the speaking I) and the addressee “you”. Surprisingly but truly, there is much drama in his sonnet sequence: four figures emerged from the poetic scenario—the poet, the fair youth (the Friend), the Dark Lady, and the rival poet. In the context of the dramatic scenario, “you” is an actor playing the role of a lovely boy, a worthy or unworthy mistress, and possibly a rival poet. The poems are dramatic in so much as the speaker and his interlocutors act out a drama.

In sonnet sequences such as those of Sidney and Spencer the individual sonnets contribute neatly to the narrative of a love affair that unfolds sequentially in a form easily recognized by its fidelity to assumed sonnets conventions. Nevertheless, in Shakespeare’s sonnet cycle we cannot find a smooth narrative of a love journey. Far from it, the gap between the courtly love discourse and the social origins of the sonneteer is much wider in Shakespeare’s sonnets, so much so that the outcome is, as Paul Innes notes, “a crisis in representation” (Innes 139). What differentiates Shakespeare’s sonnets from those of other writers is that the dramatic elements change from a relationship between only the poet and the mistress, to a much more open dynamitic interaction between at least two men and a woman with whom they may or may not both have a relationship, possibly at the same time.

Among all the interplays, the relationship between the poet and the Friend was one of profound and at times agitated friendship, which involved a certain physical and quasi-sexual fascination emanating from the young Friend and enveloping the older poet, but did not necessarily include sexual activity in any shocking or sensational sense. The nature of the platonic love of a man for another man revealed in this group of sonnets has become an intriguing subject for investigation.

The first seventeen sonnets portray how the poet urges a noble young man to marry and beget children. This persuasion motif is set at the very beginning of the sonnet sequence, as can be seen in sonnet 1:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,

That thereby beauty’s *rose* might never die,

But as the riper should by time decease,

His tender *heir* might *bear* his memory; [italics mine]

The tone of persuasion permeates through the first sonnet. Nevertheless, the fair youth is too wrapped up in himself, and so is not doing what he should, which is to bear an heir. This is directly complicit with the patriarchal nature of the aristocratic family, reinforced by words such as “rose”, “heir” and “bear” that have connotations of aristocratic lineage and procreation.

But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,

Feed’st thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel,

Making a famine where abundance lies,

Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.

The Sonnets present a male love that, like the love of the Greeks, is set firmly within a structure of institutionalized social relations that are carried out via women: marriage, name, family, loyalty to progenitors and to posterity, all depend on the youth’s making a particular use of women, that is not, in the abstract, seen as opposing, denying or detracting from his bond to the speaker (Segewick 35). Noteworthy is that homosocial does not equal to homosexual: the former refers to social interaction between members of the same sex, typically men, with or without the implication of sexual innuendo. We are in the presence of male heterosexual desire, in the form of a desire to consolidate partnership with authoritative males in and through the bodies of females (38). Her characterization of the homosocial will allow me to place the first 17 sonnets in exactly the structuration she detects: heterosexual desire, marriage and lineage.

The project of the young man sonnets becomes an attempt to define him anew, and in keeping with the impetus of the first 17, this will be done in a personal manner. From sonnets 18-126, the poet’s attitude toward the friend is one of love and admiration, mingled with bitterness, suspicion, and resistance. The nature of the platonic love of a man for another man revealed in this group of sonnets has become an intriguing subject for investigation. Several sonnets addressed to the friend refer to another poet who is a rival for the friend’s esteem. The question is further complicated by the sonnets numbered 127-152 which involves a mysterious “Dark Lady,” a mistress of the poet’s, who is sensual, promiscuous, but irresistible.

III. *A Shame of Waste*: A Drama of the Poet’s Life?

Related to persona/character discussed above is an intriguing concept which [Stephen Greenblatt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Greenblatt) expostulates in his [*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*](http://sixteenthcentury.pbworks.com/f/Greenblatt.pdf)*.* He begins his project by inquiring into “the role of human autonomy in the construction of identity.” However, he ends up contending that “identity is a product of the relations of power in a particular society” (256). His idea of “outwardly projected image” I take to be the construction of a public persona. During the Renaissance it was trendy for the upper class to practice self-fashioning. Greenblatt uses the term “self-fashioning” to describe the process of constructing one’s identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards, and the conscious effort to strive to imitate a praised model in society. He examines the structure of selfhood as evidenced in major literary figures of the English Renaissance including Sir Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, and Shakespeare, and observes that in the early modern period, questions surrounding the nature of identity heavily influenced the literature of the era. Challenging the conservative critical views on Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre based on aesthetics and the creative genius of the playwrights; instead Greenblatt suggests looking at the text as a product of the immediate social, political and cultural conditions of its production and interpretation.

Such a concern for or obsession with one’s outwardly projected image was, as Greenblatt observes, reflected in the portraits of the big names. Prescribed attire and behavior was created for the noblemen and women, and was represented through portraits. Noble men were instructed to dress in the finest clothing they could afford, to be well-versed and educated in art, literature, sports, and other culturally determined noble exercises, and to generally compose themselves in a carefully intended manner.

What if a Renaissance sonnet sequence was a sort of self-portrait, an “outwardly projected image,” a poet presented himself to the public? Both Sidney’s *Astroophil and Stella* and Spencer’s *Amoretti* reproduce many standard elements of the conventional rhetoric of the sonnet, but as with Romance and courtly love in *The Faerie Queene*, they do so in terms of an appropriation of aristocratic discourse from a position of social inferiority.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this sense, the sonnet can register that the figures of the beloved and of the poet are, precisely, falsehoods (Innes 71). And the construction both of femininity and of the poetic persona in sonnets is not so coherent a project as one might think.

However, the “love-triangle” in Shakespeare’s sonnet cycle has been a fascinating puzzle. One cannot resist the temptation to map out the circumstances surrounding Shakespeare’s composition of his sonnets. At the suggestion of BBC and with the proposition to foreground the “love-triangle”, the novelist and screenwriter William Boyd wrote out *A Waste of Shame: The Mystery of Shakespeare and His Sonnets*. It is a drama of the imagined Shakespeare with his lovers. Based on the drama text, a 90-minute television drama was made, directed by John McKay, first broadcast on BBC Four in 2005. Taken its title from the first line of sonnet 129, the drama turns out to be a highly personalized and dramatized presentation of Shakespeare through the selected sonnets threaded to be a life filled with guilt and repentance. As a free adaptation of Shakespeare's life, the BBC TV drama dramatizes the Sonnet's love triangle in an inspiring way, with three characters at the core-- Shakespeare, William Herbert (Shakespeare’s nephew and heir, one of the proposed candidate’s for the “fair youth”) and Lucie (a name given to the Dark Lady).

Another attempt to untangle the myths surrounding the sonnet sequence was made within the academia. S.C. Campell’s alternative text is a version based on mases of research, which similarly emphasizes the Sonnets’ triangle love. He identifies the “fair youth” with Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton. The historical Southampton was well educated—St John’s Cambridge and Gray’s In--cultured, a patron of all arts. He had a large library. In short, he was every inch an aristocrat, the most contested match for the young Friend of the poetic persona . In Campell’s re-paged version, the plot ends in reconciliation. But it seems clear that “mutual forgiveness did not happen in the social relationship,” as Campell asserts (xx).

Shakespeare’s sonnet cycle has its roots in the same soil as his plays. But the two modes of writing reveal the difference in their intended viewers—a wide audience for drama vs. a small circle for the private reading of poems. Sticking to the idea of “persona” who occupies the speaking position in the sonnets, I tend to read the sequence as the poet’s struggle to resolve his own inner conflicts. Writing sonnets might very likely help the poet “loosen those conundrums of the mind” (Krims xi) that would otherwise bobble him. The sonnets are forced to articulate and work on the troubled mind. Now it has come full circle, as readers and researchers use the sonnets line by line to analyze the poet’s emotional life as if it were true. In closing, I quote sonnet 129, where the BBC TV drama derive its title from its first line.

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame

Is lust in action; and till action, lust

Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,

Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,

Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight,

Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had

Past reason hated as a swallowed bait

On purpose laid to make the taker mad;

Mad in pursuit and in possession so,

Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;

A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;

Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.

    All this the world well knows; yet none knows well

    To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Sonnet 129, the so-called “Lust Sonnet,” stands apart from other sonnets in that it does not address their frequent theme: the complex and often entangled relations between the poetic persona and the two lovers, the young Friend and the Dark Lady. Instead, it focuses on the impetus drive that often causes their difficulties. The psychoanalyst Marvin Bennet Krims reads the sonnet as defining lust in a very special situation: “lust stripped away from its interpersonal context” (118). It is a treatise on lust—the conflicting feelings and imagery associated with the pursuit and satisfaction of lust. The entire sonnet states and restates this paradox: Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame/Is lust in action.

What remains at the center of the sonnet sequence is an enigma. It could be the conflicts surrounding different forms and experiences of love and lust. The recognition of the Friend’s duplicity arouses sorrow and grief in the persona. “One cannot know enough to do justice to a life, but a work of art speaks for itself” (Campell x), to which I cannot agree more.

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1. Other candidates include Shakespeare’s nephew, William Hart, the first son of Shakespeare’s sister; William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Campell states, “The case for the validity of this text has been radically reexamined and is submitted to the judgment of the general as well as the academic reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the argument that the 1609 Quarto is a wrongly paged text, refer to S.C. Campell (i-xxiv). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. All citations from Shakespeare’s sonnets are to the 1609 Quarto text reprinted in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, cited parenthetically. Quarto numbers are used followed by line numbers. All citations from Shakespeare’s plays also refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A similar aristocratic discourse is found in *The Sorrow of Parting* (*Li Sao*離騷), attributed to the Chinese poet Qu Yuan (屈原) , where metaphors of fragrant herbs and the beloved beauties are appropriated for allusion to the king the poet-courtier served. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)