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# The Sonnets of Shakespeare\*

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## Abstract / Resumen / Résumé

The presentation of Shakespeare's sonnets requires brief analysis of the tradition of sonnet collections, the unique text of Shakespeare's version, the poetic form itself, and the major themes, both historical and original, of his version. The tradition of idealizing a courtly mistress descended from the oral performances of the Troubadours, rarified by the written works of Dante, and made fashionable throughout Europe by the *Canzoniere* of Petrarch. To 'Petrarchize' was in vogue on the continent from the early sixteenth century, but did not arrive in England until the last decade of it. By the time Shakespeare's sonnets were printed in 1609, the fashion had expired, and had long been the subject of satire (indulged by the poet himself on the stage, for example, in *As You Like It*). The postures and metaphors had become trite and easily mockable. But the serious examination of the personal emotion that would later be called the 'self' remained in the tradition, philosophized by the great Italians, and available for development. Shakespeare developed it very casually, circulating some sonnets in manuscripts and paying no attention to their printed form (unlike his careful attention to the printing of his narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*). The sonnets were collected by an enterprising publisher and never reached a second edition (the vogue had indeed passed) until 1640. But the mastery of their form and different possible structural variations—both syntactic and prosodic—suggests attitudes far from casual. The inversion of the usual major themes suggests the same thing: the first 125 poems are addressed, not to a courtly dame, but to a young aristocratic man. The earliest poems are arguments that he reproduce—not the usual plea of seduction. The later poems are addressed to a woman, and concern the most brutal realities of sexual pleasure and betrayal. It seems clear that Shakespeare is deliberately playing with all the clichéd expectations of his literate audience—the lawyers and courtiers who flocked to and patronized his theatre. What he promises to the young man—never to the woman—is an original version of what Horace and Ovid promised to themselves: literary immortality, the power of spoken language to outlast time. This is his greatest subject, along with the examination of what the whole tradition provided: the moral psychology of love—of which Shakespeare remains our greatest analyst before, and maybe after, Freud.

La presentación de los sonetos de Shakespeare exige un breve análisis de cuatro temas: la tradición de colecciones de sonetos; el texto único de la versión de Shakespeare; la propia forma poética; los temas principales, históricos y originales de su versión. La tradición de idealizar una amante refinada provenía de las representaciones musicales y orales de los trovadores, ratificadas por los escritos de Dante y puestas de moda

en toda Europa por el *Cancionero* de Petrarca. La imitación del maestro era muy habitual en todo el continente desde principios del siglo XVI. Sin embargo, su llegada a Inglaterra no fue hasta finales de dicho siglo. Cuando se imprimieron los sonetos de Shakespeare en 1609, la moda ya se había extendido e incluso había sido objeto de sátira. Las posturas y las metáforas se habían vuelto banales, eran objeto de burla. Pero el examen serio de la emoción personal, que sería más tarde reconocido como el "ser", quedó en la tradición, enriquecido por autores italianos y preparado para su desarrollo. Shakespeare lo desarrolló con indolencia, haciendo circular algunas poemas manuscritos, sin prestar atención a que fuesen impresos (actitud contraria a su meticulosidad con la impresión de sus poemas narrativos, *Venus and Adonis* y *The Rape of Lucrece*). Los sonetos fueron recopilados por un editor emprendedor, y no tuvieron una reimpresión (puesto que la moda se había pasado ya) hasta 1640. No obstante, el dominio de su forma y de sus diferentes posibilidades estructurales—sintácticas y prosódicas—demuestra una intención deliberada, poco indolente. Además, esta idea se refuerza por la inversión de los temas usuales: los primeros 125 poemas se dirigen no a una cortesana, sino a un joven aristócrata. La primera docena y media de sonetos argumentan a favor de la reproducción, en lugar de hacia la habitual defensa de la seducción. Las últimas dos docenas de sonetos se dirigen a una mujer, y tratan la pura y cruda realidad de los placeres y de las traiciones sexuales. Parece evidente que Shakespeare juega expresamente con las expectativas estereotipadas de sus lectores cultivados: los abogados y los corredores que eran los auditores y los patrones de su teatro. Lo que el poeta prometía al muchacho—nunca a la mujer—es una versión de lo que Horacio y Ovidio se prometieron a ellos mismos: la inmortalidad literaria, el poder de la lengua hablada como desafío a la muerte. Este es su tema más importante, así como el examen proporcionado por toda la tradición: la psicología moral del amor, de la que Shakespeare sigue siendo nuestro mayor analista antes, e incluso después, de Freud.

La présentation des sonnets de Shakespeare exige l'analyse brève de quatre sujets: la tradition des collections de sonnets; le text unique de la version de Shakespeare; la forme poetique elle-même; les thèmes majeurs, et historiques et originales, de sa version. La tradition d'idéaliser

\* El presente texto fue escrito como *Introducción* a la edición crítica bilingüe de los *Sonetos* de William Shakespeare (Edición para la Fundación Instituto Shakespeare de Jenaro Talens y Richard Waswo, Madrid, Ediciones Cátedra, 2014), con motivo del 450 aniversario de su nacimiento. El volumen español lo incluyó en versión castellana de Manuel Talens. *EU-topías* agradece a Ediciones Cátedra el permiso para reproducir el texto original en este número.

une maîtresse courtoise descendait des performances musicales et orales des Troubadours, rarifiée par les écritures de Dante, et devenue à la mode en toute Europe par les *Canzoniere* de Petrarque. L'imitation du maître était de rigueur partout sur le continent dès le début du 16<sup>ème</sup> siècle, mais n'est arrivée en Angleterre qu'à la fin de celui-ci. Quand les sonnets de Shakespeare furent imprimés en 1609, la mode était datée, et avait déjà fait l'objet de la satire. Les postures et les métaphores étaient devenues banales, sujettes aux moqueries. Mais l'examen sérieux de l'émotion personnelle, qui plus tard serait reconnu comme le 'soi', est resté dans la tradition, enrichi par les grands auteurs italiens, et prêt à être développé. Shakespeare l'a développé avec nonchalance, faisant circuler quelques poèmes en manuscrits, et ne portant aucune attention à les faire imprimer (contrairement à sa méticulosité envers l'imprimerie de ses poèmes narratifs, *Venus and Adonis* et *The Rape of Lucrece*). Les sonnets furent collectés par un éditeur entreprenant, et ne furent pas réimprimés (la vogue avait bien expirée) jusqu'en 1640. Cependant la maîtrise de leur forme et de leurs différentes possibilités structurales –et syntactiques et prosodiques– démontre une intention délibérée, peu nonchalante. Le renversement des thèmes usuels démontre la même chose: les premiers 125 poèmes sont adressés, non pas à une dame courtoise, mais à un jeune aristocrate. La première douzaine-et-demie sonnets argument en faveur de la reproduction –non pas le plaidoyer usuel de la séduction. Les dernières deux douzaines sonnets sont adressés à une femme, et traitent la réalité pure et dure des plaisirs et des trahisons sexuels. Il paraît clair que Shakespeare joue expressément avec toutes les attentes stéréotypées de ses lecteurs littérés– les avocats et courtiers qui étaient les auditeurs et patrons de son théâtre. Ce que le poète promis au jeune homme –jamais à la femme– est une version de ce que Horace et Ovide se sont promis à eux-mêmes: l'immortalité littéraire, soit le pouvoir de la langue parlée à défier la mort. Ceci est son plus grand sujet, ainsi que l'examen fourni par la tradition entière: la psychologie morale de l'amour –de laquelle Shakespeare reste notre plus grand analyste avant, et peut-être aussi après, Freud.

### Key Words / Palabras clave / Mots-clés

Shakespeare's Sonnets, Petrarchist Tradition, Elizabethan Poetry

Sonetos de Shakespeare. tradición petrarquista, poesía isabelina

Sonnets de Shakespeare, tradition petrarquiste, poésie élisabéthaine

### The tradition

It would have been unthinkable for a European wishing to acquire a reputation as a poet in the sixteenth century not to have written sonnets, and if he or she were ambitious enough, preferably a whole sequence of them. Writing, however, during this first century of the new technology of printing, did not necessarily entail publication. The 'little songs,' still in process of being codified into the 'true' fourteen-line form perfected by Dante and Petrarch, and

modified by Shakespeare's predecessors, had been circulating in manuscripts since their initial appearance in that form in early thirteenth-century Italy. This practice long continued, as the example of the great Italians gradually imposed itself over the Alps, across the Mediterranean and the Channel, to arrive toward the beginning of the sixteenth century in Spain and Portugal, a bit later in France and England. For the latter island in the North Atlantic, the prestige of the *trecento* masters provided access to the entire and complex sensibility that had developed in the secular medieval lyric verse of the troubadours and *Minnesänger* during the previous two centuries.<sup>1</sup> It is the elaborated ethos of courtly love with its worshipful idealizing of the mistress, its willingly embraced though unrewarded suffering in her service, its hyperbolic politesse of gallant compliment and boastful complexity of meter and rime, that the Italian masters inherit and bequeath, with additions to all European posterity. This idealization of love was, of course, largely defined by its opposition to the rapacious sexual appetite, which produced a continual dialectic performed in song before an audience.<sup>2</sup>

Thus enacted as a sophisticated social game in feudal courts, beginning in Provence and spreading throughout the continent, from Flanders to Sicily, Brandenburg to Vienna, this tradition got recorded and transmitted in manuscript collections that came to resemble the anthologies we know today, and that ultimately took the kind of form that Dante adapted for *La Vita Nuova* (1295). The selected poems were introduced by some account of the poet's life, and followed by some sort of commentary or analysis. Dante's innovation, of course, was to do all this for and by himself-providing in prose a kind of emotional autobiography as well as newly philosophical and allegorical interpretations of his poems (25 of 31 are 'true' sonnets), presenting the figure of Beatrice as she who will lead the poet from carnal to divine love. Writing that heretofore

<sup>1</sup> Neither the poetic tradition nor the social conditions for its performance existed in medieval England; this absence is recorded in the fullest surviving collection of Middle English poetry—*The Harley Lyrics*, ed. G. L. Brook (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1948)—and observed by Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of the European Love-Lyric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), I, 112.

<sup>2</sup> I have analyzed this opposition in "The Petrarchan Tradition as a Dialectic of Limits," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 11 (1978), 1-16.

recorded kinds of social performance now gets internalized, individualized, and theologized. Dante's 'new life,' born from the first glimpse of the eight-year-old beauty, is a perfect symbolic herald of another 'rebirth,' the Renaissance itself.

Both of these 'rebirths' constitute the entire, and historically ironic, career of Petrarch. He too compiled, and endlessly revised, a collection of his own lyric poems (317 of 366 are sonnets), mostly to Laura, who will try (but fail) to lead the poet to heavenly love. But whereas Dante used the vernacular in order to dignify it with philosophical erudition, Petrarch eschewed prose commentary, and publicly treated his vernacular work with casual negligence—calling his collection 'shards of vulgar things' (*Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*)—and cultivated above all his reputation as the Latin poet laureate of Italy (crowned as such in Rome in 1341). As one of the very first humanist scholars, Petrarch promoted the rebirth of classical Latin (and encouraged the revival of ancient Greek), imitating his favorite authors, Virgil, Seneca, and Cicero, by writing eclogues, an epic poem (*Africa*), hundreds of letters (which he carefully arranged in volumes to be copied), moral biographies and philosophical essays on various subjects. It was this large body of work in Latin that constituted his chief claim to fame. But the rebirth of ancient culture imagined by the humanists was destined to be eclipsed by the emergence of modern vernacular literatures, so that Petrarch became and remains better known for his devotion to Laura than for his celebration of Scipio Africanus. Despite referring to his vulgar poems as 'trifles' (*nugae*), however, Petrarch expended great care in compiling and rewriting them throughout his professional life of almost fifty years. He arranged for the copying and release of three separate, and ever larger, versions of the collection from 1358 to 1373, keeping the complete version (the ms. is in the Vatican Library) for himself.<sup>3</sup> The latter is the text called *Rime* or *Canzoniere* that we read today, that exploded all over Europe beginning with the earliest printing presses in Italy in 1470,<sup>4</sup> and that made Petrarch what Lord Byron wittily called 'the Platonic pimp of all posterity' (*Don Juan* 5.1).

Until that explosion of print, however, and even after it, this influence was exercised through the more casual circulation of manuscripts. One reason for this was that most of the poets were aristocrats, for whom the new technology

was rather *déclassé*, the province of bookish pedants and poor intellectuals. For example, it is surely significant that in the early sixteenth century in both England and Spain, the first translators and imitators of Petrarch were pairs of active and well-traveled courtiers. The Catalan Boscán Almogáver and the Castilian Garcilaso de la Vega were the first to introduce the Italian sonnet form and naturalize its hendecasyllabic line in Spanish; their work was printed in 1543, after both were dead. Similarly, at the court of Henry 8, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, translated and imitated various sonnets of Petrarch, naturalizing the pentameter line in modern English.<sup>5</sup> A few of these found their way into contemporary mss., but the bulk of their work awaited the efforts of an enterprising printer in 1557, a decade after both had died. That Petrarch was first usable to other languages in *courts* suggests that his primary function was as a conduit through which the social game of love, and with it the serious exploration of personal emotion, refined by centuries of troubadour performance, could flow into new vernacular currents.

This inference is strengthened by the particular situation of England, where there was a gap of about sixty years between the casual productions of Wyatt and Surrey and the explosion of popular sonnet sequences in the 1580s. This hiatus is curious, since Petrarchizing of all sorts was continuous elsewhere in Europe. In France, the two aristocratic founders of the Pléiade, Joachim du Bellay and Pierre de Ronsard, made the sequence of sonnets, and its publication, a key part of their program to dignify the vernacular (adapting the Italian line into the dodecasyllabic alexandrine), each producing no fewer than three sonnet sequences between 1549 and 1578. In England, however,

<sup>3</sup> Ernest H. Wilkins, "On the Circulation of Petrarch's Italian Lyrics during his Lifetime," *Modern Philology* 46 (1948), 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> The most recent census takes over three hundred pages to list extant editions, translations and commentaries printed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries alone: Klaus Ley, Christine Mundt-Espin, Charlotte Krauss, *Die Drucke von Petrarca's Rime 1470-2000* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> They were not, though, the first: during Petrarch's lifetime, the diplomat Geoffrey Chaucer made a few trips to Italy, and embedded a translation of one sonnet (*Rime* 132) in his narrative poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*. But Chaucer wrote in middle English, the pronunciation of which was no longer decipherable in the sixteenth century, during which poets had therefore to repeat his whole metrical achievement.

the mid-century was riven with the social and political upheavals of the Reformation, begun when Henry 8 declared himself the head of the English Church in 1534. When he died in 1547, the succession of power in church and state bounced among his progeny from Protestant to Catholic and back again. Only after Elizabeth 1 had spent years crafting the compromises that assured stability could she create a court that rivalled her father's in the cynicism of its realities and surpassed it in the idealism of its aspirations, where her poets could resume the efforts of Wyatt and Surrey to catch England up culturally with the rest of Europe in part by playing the roles and examining the implications of 'courtly' love.

## The Text

By then, printing and Protestant education had enlarged the whole field of literary production: there was a growing number of enterprising printers and booksellers, along with an even larger number of university-educated commoners. Writing of all kinds was becoming professionalized; popular journalism was beginning to be born. In the 20-odd years between the early 1580s and the middle of the first decade of the next century, more than two dozen sonnet sequences were published in London, only one of them by an aristocrat (the renowned Sir Philip Sidney), already deceased.<sup>6</sup> Courtiers, however, still preferred discreet circulation in ms. –and were imitated in this by William Shakespeare.

The glover's son from Stratford, who became a shareholder in both his acting company and its theaters, obviously had nothing against publication (almost half his plays saw print during his lifetime), which brought income to his company. But with respect to his poems, his attitude varied greatly: he attended carefully to the publication of the narrative poems (*Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*—both popular and often reprinted) that he dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, but had nothing to do, so far as we know, with collecting and publishing the sonnets. The distinction between these attitudes was observed by a surveyor of the literary scene in 1598: comparing English poets with their antique models, he observes that 'the sweet and witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare, witness his *Venus and Adonis*, his *Lucrece*,

his sugared sonnets among his private friends.'<sup>7</sup> This notice, and the two sonnets that strayed into a 1599 collection (*The Passionate Pilgrim*, falsely attributed to Shakespeare on the title page) are the sole evidence that at least some of the 154 sonnets in the published sequence were circulating by that date. It seems that Shakespeare was as casual and negligent about his shorter lyrics as the gentry were, and was doing the expected thing by circulating them during the 1590s, when the fashion for them was in full swing. His sonnets, at any rate, were printed only in 1609, when they were already out of fashion, by Thomas Thorpe with an ambiguous dedication to a 'Mr. W.H.' who has never been convincingly identified. Thorpe was a well-known publisher, but we do not know how or in what form he acquired copies of the poems, or who was responsible for the order of their arrangement. Their attribution to Shakespeare, however (despite false claims on other title-pages seeking to profit from his popularity), has never been seriously questioned. The power, beauty and brilliance of the language, the complexity of the syntax and subtlety of the rhythms –along with some occasionally repetitious and careless composition— all seem completely consistent with the stylistic variety of the greatest poetry in the plays.

The total obscurity, however, of the circumstances that brought them to print, as well as the oddity –as we'll soon see— of the figures they habitually address and the narratives to which they allude, have given rise, at least since their second edition by John Benson (1640), to both endless speculation about the identities of the presumed actual persons and events alluded to, and efforts to rearrange the sequence in some other order more pleasing to whatever particular reader. The heyday of such speculation was the Romantic age, when the autobiography of authors was what readers wished to find in their works. Today, it is dismissed as irrelevant by most scholars. We are content with the text, amply rich as it is, and as it appeared in Shakespeare's lifetime, having unearthed no form of evidence that can justify any identification of persons or any other arrangement than that in Thorpe's quarto.

<sup>6</sup> There is a (not quite) complete list at [www.sonnets.org/erskine](http://www.sonnets.org/erskine)

<sup>7</sup> Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia: Wit's Treasury* (London: P. Short, 1598), p. 282.





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.  
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day  
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
 Which by and by black night doth take away,  
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.  
 In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire  
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
 As the death-bed whereon it must expire,  
 Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Each quatrain attributes to the beloved a perception of the speaker's age in terms of three obvious, but richly developed metaphors: autumn, twilight, and a dying fire. The couplet draws the conclusion that the perception of diminishing life only strengthens our attachment to it. Within this lucid and simple structure, the images evoke complex associations in very economical ways. The 'autumn' of life, evoked by falling leaves (and hair) from 'boughs which *shake* against the cold' (with a pun on the poet's name) powerfully evokes the body of an aging man: the boughs of trees shake not from the temperature, but from the wind; only human limbs tremble from cold. This body then becomes, in an appositional phrase continuing the metaphor of trees, 'Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.' The choirs are both the carved wooden seats in the chancel of a church and the people who sing in them. As the birds have deserted the trees in autumn, most modern commentators find in this metaphor both political and personal allusions: to the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry 8, and to the feeling that inspiration is deserting the head of the poet. The line is as audibly rich in alliterative echoes (the sounds of 'b' and 's') as in semantic possibilities. Such compressed and haunting suggestiveness is the hallmark of Shakespeare—and must detain us no longer, save to remark his original contribution to the image of the glowing embers, which is the observation that (as ashes suffocate flames) life is ended by living, by its own spent fuel.

Within these two basic kinds of structural division, in which syntax corresponds closely to the rime-scheme, there are many possible variations, in addition to those in

which the syntax and pattern of rime do not closely correspond. Shakespeare can make the poem's formal parts work together, or separately, or even against each other. The complexities are too numerous to describe, but are there to enrich each reader's experience of each poem—and all in the identical 7-rime pattern in fourteen pentameter lines. There are only three poems in the sequence not in this form: 99, which has an extra line (of *a* rime in the first quatrain); 126, which consists of six couplets; and 145, in tetrameters.

## The Major Themes

By the turn of the seventeenth century, enough English poets had sufficiently repeated the traditional declarations in the whole dialectic of courtly love—compliment, devotion, suffering—to have made them subjects of derision and irony (as Shakespeare himself treated them in *As You Like It*). Merely satirizing them had become easy, so the challenge became to explore them somehow differently. Shakespeare's solution seems to be twofold: first, to employ them in different contexts; second, to invert them, violating in as many ways as possible the expectations that the genre had long created.

The first strategy is apparent in the first 17 sonnets of the sequence, indeed, from its first line: 'From fairest creatures we desire increase': the first two poems begin an argument for procreation that continues uninterrupted until sonnet 18. The beloved's beauty is complimented by insisting that it deserves replication; a child, when the lover's own beauty has passed, would justify its present praise (2). This is arresting, and rather odd, since persuasions to reproduce were far from the usual concerns of either seduction or moral restraint. And it gets odder in the very next poem, with the largest implementation of the second strategy: the identification of the beloved as a man. Failing to reproduce, he would 'unbless some mother, / For where is she so fair whose unneared womb / Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?' (3). The succeeding sonnets go resolutely on, marshaling metaphors from commerce and book-keeping (4), distillation (5), loaning at interest (6), printing (11), managing property (13), drawing (16)—all to persuade the young man to beget a child. The oddity of this argument



was observed by a great critic who found it hard to imagine ‘any real situation,’ including ordinary friendship and homosexual love, that would make any ‘man in the whole world’ care ‘whether any other man gets married.’<sup>9</sup> If, however, there ever was such a ‘real’ situation, we do not know it; but we do know the poetic tradition, the language of compliment to the lady’s beauty, and so can readily appreciate the originality of employing it in this gender-inverted context.<sup>10</sup>

The context, moreover, as well as the argument combine to introduce perhaps the primary theme of the entire sequence: what the ancient Romans called *tempus edax*, ‘Devouring time,’ as Shakespeare addresses it (19). The ‘wastes of time’ as the inevitable death of all mortal beauty are beautifully and alliteratively evoked in sonnet 12, which concludes: ‘And nothing ‘gainst Time’s scythe can make defence / Save breed to brave him when he takes thee hence.’ Not quite ‘nothing’: ‘breed’ soon acquires an ally in the poet: ‘And all in war with Time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new’ (15). But, the next sonnets continue, ‘breed’ is still ‘mightier’ than the poet’s ‘barren rhyme’ (16), for which a child would provide empirical proof to posterity that the poet’s praise was true: ‘But were some child of yours alive that time / You should live twice, in it and in my rhyme’ (17).

Which brings us to sonnet 18 (quoted above), in which the argument to ‘breed’ is definitively dropped, and all that remains to secure immortality is writing –writing, however, whose reception has been physically evoked: as the graft of a plant, as the sound of ‘rhyme,’ as requiring breath and sight. What gets chewed up by time and swallowed by death will live on in the mouths, eyes, and ears of future readers. This insistence on the physical is Shakespeare’s greatest (and almost obsessive) contribution to the oldest of literary purposes and promises. He is following –with one crucial difference– Ovid and Horace, who promised for themselves and their songs what the oral epic was created to provide for its heroes: eternal life in human memory. What the epic singers did for heroic deeds will now be done by written lyrics for the poets themselves. Horace brags (in lines that Shakespeare will adapt and reapply in sonnet 55), ‘exegi monumentum aere perennius’ (*Carmina* 3.30), that he has built himself a monument more lasting than bronze, higher

than the pyramids. The crucial difference, of course, is that Shakespeare claims literary immortality not for himself, but for the beloved who ‘shall in my verse ever live young’ (19).

And the next poem seems designed to silence all gossip about the inverted gender:

A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted  
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;  
A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted  
With shifting change, as is false women’s fashion;  
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,  
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;  
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,  
Which steals men’s eyes and women’s souls  
[amazeth.

And for a woman wert thou first created;  
Till nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,  
And by addition me of thee defeated,  
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.  
But since she prick’d thee out for women’s  
[pleasure,  
Mine be thy love and thy love’s use their  
[treasure.

Considering the explicit concluding disavowal of (homo) sexual activity, it is amusing to observe that this poem was (paradoxically) omitted from Benson’s second edition in 1640, which rearranged and even rewrote some of the poems so as to suggest that they were written to a woman. Benson thus registered what became the standard evasion (or, later, salacious celebration) of just the possibility of a bisexuality that was both practiced and joked about in the courts of Renaissance Europe. But the actual practice is not, of course, the point; the point is the analysis of the emotional attitudes as these had long found expression in the performance of the troubadour lyrics that fueled the philosophical excursions of Dante and Petrarch.

<sup>9</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: OUP, 1954), p. 503.

<sup>10</sup> By itself, the inversion was not original, though: Richard Barnfield had addressed twenty fulsome sonnets to a boy ‘Ganymede’ in *Cynthia, with Certain Sonnets and the Legend of Cassandra* (London: H. Lownes, 1595). But all he does with it is to repeat the clichés of the mythological, the pastoral, and the blazon.

These attitudes, assumed in a relation with a man, are what Shakespeare's strategy of varying the context most fully explores. The very label of 'master-mistress' (the only name the poet gave him) encapsulates the primary traditional function of this figural personage (of either sex): he/she is an engine for producing poetry –the 'mistress' ever wooed, never possessed; the 'master' requiring constant service and obedience. Except that now, the feudal source of these attitudes is enlarged, even beyond the Platonized Christian dimension of the Italians, to include the varied activities of a rising bourgeois society (frequent metaphors of financial and legal transactions) in the celebration of love's triumphs and the unremitting experience of its betrayals. Both of these begin directly after the disappearance of the argument to reproduce. The speaker's devotion to his 'dear friend' (30) is total and absolute; their mutual love is sufficient compensation for all the gifts of fortune that the poet doesn't have (25). But, as a morning sun can be masked by afternoon clouds, so has the master-mistress withdrawn his favor or presence from the speaker (33-34). The very metaphor that evokes some implied (and unspecified) betrayal also excuses it in advance –a brilliant inversion of the usual complaints of infidelity. The sun is but a force of nature; and the rain that follows are tears of pearl that 'ransom all ill deeds' (34). But no sooner has he offered the excuse than he brings himself to trial for having done so: 'Authorising thy trespass with compare, / Myself corrupting salving thy amiss ... / And 'gainst myself a lawful plea commence ... / That I an accessory needs must be / To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me' (35). Never were poetic gestures more self-conscious and self-critical: the rhetorical act in one poem becomes the subject of criticism in the next. Shakespeare is a self-referring and deconstructive postmodern long before his time –as could be demonstrated throughout the sequence.

But here we must be limited merely to a few glimpses of the incredible range and variety of attitudes explored and judgments passed in the experience of love. The master-mistress's infidelity with a girlfriend is rationalized (41) and both are forgiven (42). The speaker imagines that the master-mistress will abandon him, and excuses him in advance in a metaphor of exact accounting –his own 'defects' aren't worth it (49). In the extension of the Horatian boast, the master-mistress will shine brightly in 'this pow'rful rhyme' until the Day of Judgment (55). From this elevated convic-

tion, the next poem compares with cool connoisseurship the ebbing and flowing of love to that of physical appetite, urging that it not be continually satisfied so that it may be more appreciated (56). The speaker sins by self-love, but only by projecting the beauty of the young man (his other 'self') onto his own mirror image (62). There are many such projections and exchanges of 'self' in the sequence, which will not be conceptualized until Freud. And the use of the very word as a independent noun –unmoored from its grammatical origin as a compound reflexive pronoun or an adjective meaning 'same' –is pioneered by Shakespeare, though not recognized by the OED. The great dictionary of historical usage, defining the distinctly modern and 'philosophical' use of 'self' as noun (what one really *is*; a 'permanent subject' of differing states of consciousness: *sub* n. C.I.3) cites its first use in 1674. But by my count, just such a use occurs in at least twelve of the sonnets,<sup>11</sup> as they continuously probe the various and vexed states of mood and mind in the social formation of the modern individual.

Celebrations and betrayals continue to alternate; among the former are the insistent notes of the earlier theme of the (physical) power of language to transcend time: even though the master-mistress will grow as wrinkled and old as the poet, 'His beauty will in these black lines be seen, / And they shall live and he in them still green' (63). Given the omnipotence of time to destroy, the poet prays that 'this miracle have might, / That in black ink my love may still shine bright' (65). After the sonnet describing his own failing age (73 above), the next poem envisions the speaker's death, and consoles the master-mistress in advance by assuring him that he will have lost only the body, 'The prey of worms,' but will keep the 'better part' of his life, his 'spirit,' as preserved here –'in this line,' this 'memorial,' this writing (74). The most extravagant and explicit promise of immortality is made in sonnet 81:

Or I shall live your epitaph to make,  
Or you survive when I in earth am rotten,  
From hence your memory death cannot take,  
Although in me each part will be forgotten.  
Your name from hence immortal life shall have,  
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die;  
The earth can yield me but a common grave,

<sup>11</sup> Sons. 4, 10, 13, 14, 39, 40, 62, 73, 87, 89, 109, 133.

When you entombèd in men's eyes shall lie:  
 Your monument shall be my gentle verse,  
 Which eyes not yet created shall o'er-read,  
 And tongues to be your being shall rehearse  
 When all the breathers of this world are dead:  
 You still shall live—such virtue hath my pen—  
 Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths  
 [of men.]

Eyes not yet born will use their tongues and mouths to speak this printed text when all who now draw breath are dead. Shakespeare is evoking not just writing, but a community of speakers that can pronounce the words that will constitute the continued existence of the master-mistress. If he will owe his being to the poet's words as long as they are spoken, then he is in all possible senses an effect of language, a creation of poetry. This is a wonderful variation on the troubadours' (and in the next generation the Cavalier poets') reminding their ladies that it's the poets' words that create the glory of their beauties. In other words, language does not reflect a prior ontology, but manufactures one.

There are, however, two problems with the evocation of this supreme power, the 'virtue' of his pen—one explicit and one implicit. The first arises when the poet contrasts his oblivion to what he provides for the master-mistress: 'Your name from hence immortal life shall have, / Though I (once gone) to all the world must die.' Whether by negligence (given the casual circulation of the poems in ms.) or design, the irony is unmistakable: not only is the poet still immortal four hundred years later, and not only is the master-mistress never named, but the poet 'will' later pun remorselessly on his own nickname in its specific sense of the sexual desire of the dark lady (135-36, 143). The implied problem also arises from the futurity of the promise, which necessarily assumes the survival of the spoken vernacular. English poets from the mid-sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries (Sidney to Alexander Pope) were haunted by the fate of Chaucer—a great poet whose sounds and rhythms they could not pronounce, the perfect example of the lightning force of time on the instability of vernaculars. But Shakespeare seems far from sharing their anxieties about lacking future 'breathers,' and we may hope he was right. Despite the age and difficulty of his language—every passing year makes it more archaic and less comprehensible to contemporary students (not to mention actors)—it may continue to

float along on the global domination of the planet's current *lingua franca*. And we can recall that nineteenth-century scholarship restored our ability to pronounce Chaucer, and that even Horace can be recited (by a minority of experts) in his native tongue today, long after the demise of the empire he thought would guarantee his immortality.

To conclude, we return to brief glances at the widely different forms of passionate commitment embraced and refused in the remainder of the sequence. After a series of poems that both criticize and excuse the master-mistress for permitting himself to be praised by other poets, the speaker bids him farewell, as being 'too dear for my possessing, / And like enough thou know'st thy estimate.' The ascription of a sense of superior worth continues in a dense series of legal and financial transactions: the grant of a 'charter,' the debt (and at the same time emotional tie) of 'bonds,' the holding of a 'patent' (87). Here the blaming and excusing are again simultaneous: the master-mistress has a calculating sense of superiority inappropriate to the relationship, but has also all those legal forms of 'right' on his side. The speaker goes on to affirm his total commitment to and fear to lose the master-mistress (91-92), rededicates his 'Muse' 'To make him much outlive a gilded tomb' (101), praises his beauty (103-06), and then, just this once, joins him in the triumph over Death, 'Since spite of him I'll live in this poor rhyme, . . . / And thou in this shalt find thy monument, / When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent' (107). The speaker protests unchanging fidelity in love (116, 123-24), and admits a 'transgression' for which he claims pardon in another kind of exchange: 'your trespass now becomes a fee; / Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me' (120). But in the final poem to the 'lovely boy,' he is warned that Time will finally claim him; in order to balance the account ('audit') of Nature, she must give him up (126)—death being nature's price for life.

Thus reentering mortal time that so many poems have tried to transcend, the sequence here remains. But now the addressee is a woman, and the tones and moods alter completely—there is no further mention of transcendence; there is satire and sex. Two sonnets (127 and the witty 130) are inverted blazons, denying that the dark lady possesses any of the standard physical attributes—'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun.' The rapacious power of sexual lust

is enacted and made audible by the single 12-line sentence of the famous sonnet 129, a relentless series of adjectival and adverbial phrases in apposition. Not just the lady's eyes are black, but so is her character (131-32), which the speaker can't help loving even though she betrays him (133-34); they deserve each other: 'If thy unworthiness raised love in me, / More worthy I to be beloved of thee' (150). The poet blames himself for false seeing (137, 141) and false speaking (147, 152), and admonishes his soul, in a traditional renunciation poem, to forget its 'fading mansion' of flesh (146).

The perfect expression of these altered moods is the crystalline cynicism of sonnet 138:

When my love swears that she is made of truth  
 I do believe her, though I know she lies,  
 That she might think me some untutor'd youth  
 Unlearnèd in the world's false subtleties.  
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,  
 Although she knows my days are past the best,  
 Simply I credit her false speaking tongue:  
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd.  
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?  
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?  
 O love's best habit is in seeming trust,  
 And age in love loves not to have years told.  
 Therefore I lie with her and she with me,  
 And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.

In the grimmest of Shakespeare's puns, it is their lies that enable them to lie together. What is striking here is the lucidity of the judgment: the language is purely declarative and inferential; there is no image, no metaphor, no hyperbole—there is only truth and its opposite, the falsehood that assures their sexual complicity. In the entire last section of 27 poems, the power of language is never invoked to eternize and never used to idealize; instead of hinting rich suggestiveness, it stridently complains; instead of affirming commitment, it reveals duplicity; it seldom makes a choice, but more often labors under compulsions; it never celebrates any form of worth, but ironically un-masks unworthiness. And it is used, above all, to tell lies, to undercut all oaths sworn as truth, especially those of the speaking poet: he himself is 'perjured most' (152).

I trust it will be clear that Shakespeare in his sonnets is an emotional *gourmet*, parading before us dishes (all delicious) of the greatest subtlety –and crudity–of taste and texture. He, drawing upon five centuries of lyric verse, is the theorist and analyst of love before Freud. It makes no difference whatever if the poems are (or are not) about real people, because they're certainly about real experiences. We know because we still recognize them after four hundred years as our own—our deeds and disappointments, and how far short they fall of our dreams and desires.