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Shakespeare Shakes Free

Literature is an accord between author and audience. The author creates the work within a given genre, aware of audience expectations; the audience reads that work with expectations based upon the genre and register of the piece (Curzan and Adams, 278). With a sonnet, we--as the implicit audience--have certain formal presuppositions as to length, rhyme scheme, and meter; we also expect the style to conform to our previous experience of romantic poetry. Genius, however, may not be satisfied with such a simple transaction. William Shakespeare composed a cycle of 154 sonnets; at some point, he was bound to become bored with mere generic competence and stylistic adequacy. In sonnets 18, 130, and 135, we find a poet toying with the concepts of both cohesion and explicit audience, playing with the poetics of recurrent structures and internal contrasts of content and presentation, and running roughshod through the intersection of diction and semantics.

As an implicit audience, we read sonnets with certain formal presuppositions. The poems will be fourteen lines of iambic pentameter. Their rhyme scheme will be dictated by the source: the Italian or Petrarchan style has an *abba abba cdecde* scheme; the Elizabethan or Shakespearean *abab cdcd efef gg* (Mabillard, "Sonnet Basics"). The recurrent rhyme structure, of course, has an impact on the thematic structure, with most Shakespearean sonnets broken up into either three quatrains followed by a couplet (wherein the three quatrains build an argument that is concluded in the couplet), or an octet (with the first two quatrains setting up the situation or problem) and a sestet (in which the third quatrain resolves the situation, and the final couplet concludes the exploration of the subject). By convention, we also expect those themes to be of love and romance.

For Shakespearean sonnets, there are additional presuppositions. Of the 154 numbered poems, it is widely accepted that the first 126 are addressed to a male "Fair Youth" while the final 28 are directed to "the Dark Lady" (Mabillard, "Introduction"). These explicit audiences

have an effect on how we—as internal audiences—interpret the poem as readers, since Curzan and Adams warn that our interpretation of words is more based on the context, the narrator’s intention, and our reaction as readers, than simply the denotative definitions of the individual words (214). Thus, as Shakespeare complements and confounds our conventional presuppositions, he allows us to devise alternative readings.

Sonnet 18 belongs to the group of poems addressed to the Fair Youth, in the subset of poems that pay tribute to him and his beauty (Delahoyde). The invocation in the poem’s opening line of the concept of “summer”—peak of the annual life-cycle of nature—creates a reference that gives the overall poem its sense of cohesion. In what appears to be a more Petrarchan use of structure, the octet sets up the transient state of summer (Jungman, 18). In the sestet, the narrator then contrasts ever-changing nature with the poetic object’s unfading beauty, both externally in physical appearance and internally in temperament (Ray, 10). Shakespeare’s use of internal contrasts of sentence type and length add to this recurrent structure: the sonnet opens with a single-line question that sets up the octet, which is then composed of increasingly lengthening sentences—one line, then two, then four. The clue the sestet that follows will contrast all that preceded it is two-fold: first, the opening word of the sestet “But,” and more importantly, the enjambed first two lines of the sestet. All fourteen lines are end-stopped save for these two; here, with “But thy eternal summer shall not fade // Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st” (Sonnet 18 [Folger], 9-10), we’re on to something new in something *not* changing: the beauty of the Fair Youth.

All this feels contemporary and conventional, adding to what is the expected idealization of the addressee. However, the use of pronouns throughout the sonnet is noteworthy. From the opening line’s use of both “I” and “thee,” the sense of audience is compromised. As readers, we know we are not the “thee” of the poem (we are not the Fair Youth); if we read the poem aloud, though, we become the poet. And our emotional connection to the addressee? Most decidedly *not* conventional. In the sestet, no “thou” or “thee” falls onto a stressed syllable of the meter, subliminally marginalizing the subject (the argument could be made—though not as easily—for the octet’s appearances as well). Of further note is Crystal and Crystal’s contention, in *Shakespeare’s Words*, regarding the Elizabethan connotation of “thee”/“thou” vs. “you”:

"thee"/"thou" was primarily used by superiors to their inferiors (450). Nowhere in the poem is the second-person pronoun "you"; it's always "thou" or "thee." Taking this into account, the final couplet ("So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, // So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" [Sonnet 18 (Folger), 13-14]) can be read "As long as there are men who are alive to read poetry // I will give you immortality in these eternal lines." Here, the narrator takes on a more superior, less (and less stereotypically) lovelorn position, thus confounding contemporary poetic convention and playing with our presuppositions of an idealized addressee.

Shakespeare takes convention-confounding to another level in Sonnet 130, one of the Dark Lady poems. As the narrator's relationship to this addressee is more tortured in these poems, the object of his poetic prowess is less idealized (Mabillard, "Introduction"). The relationship is so tortured that there's not a single second-person pronoun, not a "you," "thee," or "thou," in sight. Instead, we find a mocking of "nearly every Petrarchan conceit about feminine beauty employed by [Shakespeare's] fellow English sonneteers" (Steele, 133). As in Sonnet 18, our narrator uses a word in the opening line—here, "mistress"—that is then referenced throughout the sonnet to give it cohesion. In this poem, however, it's used in a more meronymous fashion, breaking her down to a mere catalog of parts or aspects. In the twelve lines that comprise the three structural quatrains, the narrator refers to his love's dull eyes, pale lips, dingy brown skin, black hair, lifeless cheeks, foul breath, annoying voice, and trampling walk. At this point, we begin to wonder, "And *this* is a love poem?" The internal contrasts of end-stopped and enjambed lines through these three quatrains support the tone of rational thought trumping emotional feeling. The first six end-stopped lines all deal with the sense of sight ("red," "white," "black," "see"), but the enjambed lines 7 and 8 focus on the olfactory sense ("perfumes," "breath"), and the enjambed ninth and tenth lines are about auditory cues ("speak," "music"); with the end-stopped final two lines of the quatrains, we're back to sight ("saw"). In the final couplet, however, we move beyond mere sense to thought: "And yet, by heaven, I *think* my love as rare // As any she belied with false compare" (Sonnet 130 [Folger], 13-14; emphasis mine).

Here, too, as in Sonnet 18, Shakespeare's narrator plays with synonymy and meaning: the conventional interpretation reads "And yet, by heaven, I think my mistress is as uncommonly

fine // As any comparisons she has heard from any lying poets,” in which “rare” is “Unusually good, fine, or worthy” (*OED Online*, A.5.a), while to “belie” is to “To give a false representation or account of, to misrepresent” (*OED Online*, v2:1.3.b), and “compare” is “Comparison” (*OED Online*, n.2). Since the first twelve lines of the sonnet insult rather than praise, our expectation (or maybe hope) is that the resolution of the poem will be more conventional than the preceding twelve lines, overriding the insults and giving us our desired romantic ending. If the narrator has already turned the romantic expectation of the sonnet on its head, however, there’s nothing to stop him from using the final couplet to complete this subversion: “And yet, I swear, I think the feeling I have for my love is as subtle and complex // As the feeling of any of my rivals she has slept with (because of their lies).” Here, the “love” is not the object of emotion but the emotion itself, and its “rare” aspect the quality of being “with reference to the workings of the mind: refined, subtle, rarefied” (*OED Online*, A.1.a). In Shakespeare’s day, “belie” also had the meaning “To have sexual intercourse with” (*OED Online*, v.1:3), and “compare” was “an equal, rival, compeer” (*OED Online*, n.1:1.a). In this alternate interpretation, the narrator struggles with the disconnect between *his* expectation and the reality of the situation. That conflict ultimately makes his poem as subtle and rarefied as his emotions. Again, the narrator uses the alternate meaning in Sonnet 130 to retake a little of the dignity lost by being the romantic pursuer, continuing his confounding of generic convention and *our* expectation, and creating something so much greater than “a winsome trifle” (Booth, 452).

Sonnet 135--another of the Dark Lady poems--begins the so-called “will” sequence of sonnets (Delahoyde), in which Shakespeare’s narrator begins to play so intensely with the word that contemporary conventions and audience expectations are not just confounded, but discarded or destroyed. The word “will” appears thirteen times in the sonnet’s fourteen lines, creating lexical cohesion and allowing for “festivals of verbal ingenuity” extending through “will”’s many meanings of the day, including the concept of volition, the idea of what is to come, and straightforward desire, as well (Booth, 466). While much has been made of the more bawdy shadings of the word, since over half of the occurrences of “will” are capitalized and italicized in the original Quarto text of 1609 (Sonnet 135 [Internet Shakespeare Editions]), there is also some use of “Will” as the poet’s name.

The poetic structure of Sonnet 135, too, seems to be at odds with generic convention as well as the concept of explicit audience: instead of three quatrains and a couplet, or even an octet and a sestet, we find in this poem a quatrain followed by ten-line stanza, divided into two quatrains and a couplet. Despite the Dark Lady designation, the opening quatrain can be read as being addressed to one of her other lovers, the narrator's romantic or sexual competition. When "thou," the rival, has the Dark Lady's "wish" or desire, he also has "Will" the poet (as competition) as well, in fact more "Will" than the rival can handle; thus, the poet continues to "vex" his rival by remaining in competition to the rival's "sweet will" or sexual desire (Sonnet 135 [Folger], 1-4). At this point, there is an abrupt shift in explicit audience, and the remainder of the sonnet is most assuredly addressed to the the lady-love.

While the opening (rival) quatrain is comprised of two two-line sentences, the shift to the lady audience is signaled by the shift to interrogatives, two two-line questions. In the first, more playful, question, the narrator employs both the volitional meaning of "will" as well as both the female and male genitalia meanings, respectively (Sonnet 135 [Folger], 5-6; Booth, 466). In the second, more plaintive, question, he uses "will" more conventionally as desire, and asks whether the Dark Lady will accept his desire as readily as she does that of his rival (Sonnet 135 [Folger], 7-8). At this point, the third quatrain of the poem arrives, and with the only enjambment in the entire poem, our focus is drawn by this internal contrast in the last two pre-couplet lines to the crux of poem: "So thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will // One will of mine to make thy large Will more" (Sonnet 135 [Folger], 11-12). The narrator uses a mixture of both capitalized and lower-case "will"s in these two lines, which can be read as:

So you so rich in my affection, add to that amount of my love

One act of desire from me to make your large store of "William" even more.

Here, the narrator still uses the sea/water/rain metaphor to describe how his affection is added to the affection he had already shown her, to make her "store" of his love even larger. However, if we take into account "Will" Shakespeare's willingness to get bawdy (Kiernan, 53), an alternate reading of the quatrain is:

The terrifying sea is comprised of water, but it still receives rain

And grows larger by this

So you--so rich with other men's cocks--add to that amount my cock and
 One fucking from me will make your already swollen pussy even more so.

Here, the sea/water/rain metaphor turns frightful--rain at sea is not a good thing in Shakespeare (see *Twelfth Night*, *Pericles*, *The Comedy of Errors* and more)--which exposes the narrator's fear of both the lady's carnal experience and his sexual rivals. In the last two lines of the quatrain, the narrator's repeated capitalizing of "Will" points to the more personalized, more sexualized reading. The narrator may want to present a carefree and cocky (pun totally intended) facade, but, in a contrast to sonnets 18 and 130, these verse lines belie a sexual insecurity that makes Sonnet 135 more complex thematically. So much more complex that the poem "creates an interesting quandary for readers" (Zilleruelo, 68).

An "interesting quandary" is one way of putting it. Another would be that such a total confounding of generic convention breaches the contract between author and his contemporary and future reader. This type of accord--and its attendant conventions--however, is really just a matter of technical proficiency. Such proficiency is fine; it helps to create the presuppositions we (as a society of readers) have regarding genre, but it is the shaking free from these presuppositions, the crushing of such accords, the confounding of those conventions, that is the mark of genius. Simple transactions are mundane, they are the ones that we forget; the more problematic agreements, the ones that force us to reconsider what we bring to the deal and what we expect from it in return, are the ones that we remember, the ones that stand the test of time. Ben Jonson once said of Shakespeare, "He was not of an age, but for all time!" Shakespeare didn't transcend time by simply writing good, conventional poetry for his contemporary audience; as seen in Sonnets 18, 130 and 135, Shakespeare did it by shaking free from the sonnet's generic constraints, toppling the heretofore rigid register of romantic poetry.

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