

The Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets are very different from Shakespeare's plays, but they do contain dramatic elements and an overall sense of story. Each of the poems deals with a highly personal theme, and each can be taken on its own or in relation to the poems around it. The sonnets have the feel of autobiographical poems, but we don't know whether they deal with real events or not, because no one knows enough about Shakespeare's life to say whether or not they deal with real events and feelings, so we tend to refer to the voice of the sonnets as "the speaker"--as though he were a dramatic creation like Hamlet or King Lear. There are certainly a number of intriguing continuities throughout the poems. The first 126 of the sonnets seem to be addressed to an unnamed young nobleman, whom the speaker loves very much; the rest of the poems (except for the last two, which seem generally unconnected to the rest of the sequence) seem to be addressed to a mysterious woman, whom the speaker loves, hates, and lusts for simultaneously. The two addressees of the sonnets are usually referred to as the "young man" and the "dark lady"; in summaries of individual poems, I have also called the young man the "beloved" and the dark lady the "lover," especially in cases where their identity can only be surmised. Within the two mini-sequences, there are a number of other discernible elements of "plot": the speaker urges the young man to have children; he is forced to endure a separation from him; he competes with a rival poet for the young man's patronage and affection. At two points in the sequence, it seems that the young man and the dark lady are actually lovers themselves--a state of affairs with which the speaker is none too happy. But while these continuities give the poems a narrative flow and a helpful frame of reference, they have been frustratingly hard for scholars and biographers to pin down. In Shakespeare's life, who were the young man and the dark lady?

Historical Mysteries

Of all the questions surrounding Shakespeare's life, the sonnets are perhaps the most intriguing. At the time of their publication in 1609 (after having been written most likely in the 1590s and shown only to a small circle of literary admirers), they were dedicated to a "Mr. W.H," who is described as the "onlie begetter" of the poems. Like those of the young man and the dark lady, the identity of this Mr. W.H. remains an alluring mystery. Because he is described as "begetting" the sonnets, and because the young man seems to be the speaker's financial patron, some people have speculated that the young man *is* Mr. W.H. If his initials were reversed, he might even be Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, who has often been linked to Shakespeare in theories of his history. But all of this is simply speculation: ultimately, the circumstances surrounding the sonnets, their cast of characters and their relations to Shakespeare himself, are destined to remain a mystery.

Sonnet 18

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:*

*Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Summary

The speaker opens the poem with a question addressed to the beloved: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" The next eleven lines are devoted to such a comparison. In line 2, the speaker stipulates what mainly differentiates the young man from the summer's day: he is "more lovely and more temperate." Summer's days tend toward extremes: they are shaken by "rough winds"; in them, the sun ("the eye of heaven") often shines "too hot," or too dim. And summer is fleeting: its date is too short, and it leads to the withering of autumn, as "every fair from fair sometime declines." The final quatrain of the sonnet tells how the beloved differs from the summer in that respect: his beauty will last forever ("Thy eternal summer shall not fade...") and never die. In the couplet, the speaker explains how the beloved's beauty will accomplish this feat, and not perish because it is preserved in the poem, which will last forever; it will live "as long as men can breathe or eyes can see."

Commentary

This sonnet is certainly the most famous in the sequence of Shakespeare's sonnets; it may be the most famous lyric poem in English. Among Shakespeare's works, only lines such as "To be or not to be" and "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" are better-known. This is not to say that it is at all the best or most interesting or most beautiful of the sonnets; but the simplicity and loveliness of its praise of the beloved has guaranteed its place. On the surface, the poem is simply a statement of praise about the beauty of the beloved; summer tends to unpleasant extremes of windiness and heat, but the beloved is always mild and temperate. Summer is incidentally personified as the "eye of heaven" with its "gold complexion"; the imagery throughout is simple and unaffected, with the "darling buds of May" giving way to the "eternal summer", which the speaker promises the beloved. The language, too, is comparatively unadorned for the sonnets; it is not heavy with alliteration or assonance, and nearly every line is its own self-contained clause--almost every line ends with some punctuation, which effects a pause.

Sonnet 18 is the first poem in the sonnets not to explicitly encourage the young man to have children. The "procreation" sequence of the first 17 sonnets ended with the speaker's realization that the young man might *not* need children to preserve his beauty; he could also live, the speaker writes at the end of Sonnet 17, "in my rhyme." Sonnet 18, then, is the first "rhyme"--the speaker's first attempt to preserve the young man's beauty for all time. An

important theme of the sonnet (as it is an important theme throughout much of the sequence) is the power of the speaker's poem to defy time and last forever, carrying the beauty of the beloved down to future generations. The beloved's "eternal summer" shall not fade precisely because it is embodied in the sonnet: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see," the speaker writes in the couplet, "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

Sonnet 116

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

Summary

This sonnet attempts to define love, by telling both what it is and is not. In the first quatrain, the speaker says that love--"the marriage of true minds"--is perfect and unchanging; it does not "admit impediments," and it does not change when it find changes in the loved one. In the second quatrain, the speaker tells what love is through a metaphor: a guiding star to lost ships ("wand'ring barks") that is not susceptible to storms (it "looks on tempests and is never shaken"). In the third quatrain, the speaker again describes what love is not: it is not susceptible to time. Though beauty fades in time as rosy lips and cheeks come within "his bending sickle's compass," love does not change with hours and weeks: instead, it "bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom." In the couplet, the speaker attests to his certainty that love is as he says: if his statements can be proved to be error, he declares, he must never have written a word, and no man can ever have been in love.

Commentary

Along with Sonnets 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?") and 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"), Sonnet 116 is one of the most famous poems in the entire sequence. The definition of love that it provides is among the most often quoted and anthologized in the poetic canon. Essentially, this sonnet presents the extreme ideal of romantic love: it never changes, it never fades, it outlasts death and admits no flaw. What is more, it insists that this ideal is the only love that can be called "true"--if love is mortal, changing, or impermanent, the speaker writes, then no man ever loved. The basic division of this poem's argument into the various parts of the sonnet

form is extremely simple: the first quatrain says what love is not (changeable), the second quatrain says what it is (a fixed guiding star unshaken by tempests), the third quatrain says more specifically what it is not ("time's fool"--that is, subject to change in the passage of time), and the couplet announces the speaker's certainty. What gives this poem its rhetorical and emotional power is not its complexity; rather, it is the force of its linguistic and emotional conviction.

The language of Sonnet 116 is not remarkable for its imagery or metaphoric range. In fact, its imagery, particularly in the third quatrain (time wielding a sickle that ravages beauty's rosy lips and cheeks), is rather standard within the sonnets, and its major metaphor (love as a guiding star) is hardly startling in its originality. But the language *is* extraordinary in that it frames its discussion of the passion of love within a very restrained, very intensely disciplined rhetorical structure. With a masterful control of rhythm and variation of tone--the heavy balance of "Love's not time's fool" to open the third quatrain; the declamatory "O no" to begin the second--the speaker makes an almost legalistic argument for the eternal passion of love, and the result is that the passion seems stronger and more urgent for the restraint in the speaker's tone.

Sonnet 130

*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.*

Summary

This sonnet compares the speaker's lover to a number of other beauties--and never in the lover's favor. Her eyes are "nothing like the sun," her lips are less red than coral; compared to white snow, her breasts are dun-colored, and her hairs are like black wires on her head. In the second quatrain, the speaker says he has seen roses separated by color ("damasked") into red and white, but he sees no such roses in his mistress's cheeks; and he says the breath that "reeks" from his mistress is less delightful than perfume. In the third quatrain, he admits that, though he loves her voice, music "hath a far more pleasing sound," and that, though he has never seen a goddess, his mistress--unlike goddesses--walks on the ground. In the couplet, however, the speaker declares that, "by heav'n," he thinks his love as rare and valuable "As any she

belied with false compare"--that is, any love in which false comparisons were invoked to describe the loved one's beauty.

Commentary

This sonnet, one of Shakespeare's most famous, plays an elaborate joke on the conventions of love poetry common to Shakespeare's day, and it is so well-conceived that the joke remains funny today. Most sonnet sequences in Elizabethan England were modeled after that of Petrarch. Petrarch's famous sonnet sequence was written as a series of love poems to an idealized and idolized mistress named Laura. In the sonnets, Petrarch praises her beauty, her worth, and her perfection using an extraordinary variety of metaphors based largely on natural beauties. In Shakespeare's day, these metaphors had already become cliché (as, indeed, they still are today), but they were still the accepted technique for writing love poetry. The result was that poems tended to make highly idealizing comparisons between nature and the poets' lover that were, if taken literally, completely ridiculous. My mistress' eyes are like the sun; her lips are red as coral; her cheeks are like roses, her breasts are white as snow, her voice is like music, she is a goddess. /PARAGRAPH In many ways, Shakespeare's sonnets subvert and reverse the conventions of the Petrarchan love sequence: the idealizing love poems, for instance, are written not to a perfect woman but to an admittedly imperfect man, and the love poems to the dark lady are anything but idealizing ("My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease" is hardly a Petrarchan conceit.) Sonnet 130 mocks the typical Petrarchan metaphors by presenting a speaker who seems to take them at face value, and somewhat bemusedly, decides to tell the truth. Your mistress' eyes are like the sun? That's strange--my mistress' eyes aren't at all like the sun. Your mistress' breath smells like perfume? My mistress' breath reeks compared to perfume. In the couplet, then, the speaker shows his full intent, which is to insist that love does not need these conceits in order to be real; and women do not need to look like flowers or the sun in order to be beautiful.

The rhetorical structure of Sonnet 130 is important to its effect. In the first quatrain, the speaker spends one line on each comparison between his mistress and something else (the sun, coral, snow, and wires--the one positive thing in the whole poem some part of his mistress *is* like. In the second and third quatrains, he expands the descriptions to occupy two lines each, so that roses/cheeks, perfume/breath, music/voice, and goddess/mistress each receive a pair of unrhymed lines. This creates the effect of an expanding and developing argument, and neatly prevents the poem--which does, after all, rely on a single kind of joke for its first twelve lines--from becoming stagnant.

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