

The Shakespearean Unseen: Homosexuality and Heterosexuality in Sonnets

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Abstract

The canon of Shakespeare includes 154 sonnets which are emblematic of his passion, sexual urge and need of the mind. The Fair Youth sonnet sequence encompasses the concept of male friendship where at the same time the poet craves for the body of his friend. After first 126 sonnets there is a turn from male friendship to a longing for a woman's body. The lady is often termed as mistress and black in skin tone and her morality. The poet makes a candid confession in spite of the hideous appearance and immorality he loves her and wants to be united both physically and mentally. But she proves to be a female fatal being in love with the friend of the poet.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Homosexuality, Heterosexuality, Fair Youth, Dark Lady, Sonnet- sequence.

Composition of Sonnets

William Shakespeare, an ever-luminous star in the sky of English literature, explicitly exposes the themes of homosexuality and heterosexuality in almost all of his sonnets. It really remains a matter of dispute whether he is homosexual or heterosexual or both. Critical opinions vary regarding the dates of composition of the sonnets, to whom they are addressed, the identity of Mr. W. H. as well as that of the Dark Lady. But most of the critics tend to say that the sonnets are autobiographical in nature and unlock the mystery of Shakespeare's life which still remains a dark cave after a series of research and scholarly study. Most of the critics agree with the fact that the sonnets were written in the early part of Shakespeare's life and published by Thomas Thorpe in 1609 in a quarto edition. Professor Colin Burrow rightly argues, "Several of the sonnets are very likely to have been composed at the start of Shakespeare's career, and the whole sequence should be thought of as something approaching Shakespeare's life's work, receiving touches of the poet's pen until shortly before its publication" (17). Thus, the sonnets become a replica of Shakespeare's early life, his marriage and struggle for establishing himself as a dominant playwright during the Elizabethan period. Joseph Bristow in his book *Sexuality* claims that the bisexuals fall into two categories: conjunctive (who feel a sensual love in double direction) and disjunctive (who experiences only a romantic gentle love for young men). Bristow argues Shakespeare is a disjunctive bisexual:

Regarding the latter, Ulrichs declares: Shakespeare perhaps belongs in this category (Ulrichs 1994: 313-314). No doubt the nineteenth-century critical controversies surrounding Shakespeare's sonnets were on Ulrichs's mind when pondering sexual love

between older and younger men. The final two categories identify female bisexuals and intersexual persons who bear the physical characteristics of both sexes. (24)

Homosexual and Heterosexual Evidences

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets. Out of which first 126 sonnets are addressed to Mr. W. H., the rest of 28 sonnets to the Dark Lady and the last 2 sonnets to a rival-poets. *Shakespeare's Sonnets Never before Imprinted* takes the reader only into disillusionment. The sonnets are addressed to William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke or Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton as well as the patron of Shakespeare. In the Fair Youth Sequence the poet becomes emotionally attached to his friend and seeks to eternize his beauty through the lineage and the verse as his "fair friend, you never can be old,/ For as you were when first your eye I eyed" (sonnet no 104, p. 84). The fragrance of homosexuality pervades the entire sonnet sequence. In the Dark Lady series, the lines "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the Sun;" (sonnet no 130, p. 97) and "When my love swears that she is made of truth," (sonnet no 138, p. 101) exposes that the poet feels crave for the body of the opposite sex. Heterosexual evidences encircle the entire sequence. This paper seeks to emphasize both the elements of homosexuality and heterosexuality in Shakespearean sonnets and bisexual nature of the Bard.

Sexuality

The term sexuality is coined in 1800 as a biological term. It is used for reproductive activity that involves male and female apparatus. Sex, in Ulrichs's view, "was always split into two antithetical but none the less complementary forms. His belief that the Urning embodied an inverted sexual identity is generally thought to mark a decisively new stage in Western conceptions of sex.

We might perhaps label this the psychiatric model of sexuality, since there is an assumed discordance between the sexual mind and the sexual body in Ulrichs's theory of Uranian desire" (Bristow 24). Sexuality does not only mean the sexual appetite on the part of a man. "On primitive ground the satisfaction of the sexual appetite of man seems like that of an animal" (quoted in Bristow 18). Rather sexuality depends upon the code of morality in the society, cultural construction, infantile id and conscious state of the mind. In Foucault's concept sexuality is not naturally given; it is a historical construct. Foucault's claim that sexuality is not a naturally given. Sexuality has a history.

It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (105–6)

Homoeroticism

Homoeroticism is very frequent the Fair Youth Sequence. In the first 17 sonnets the poet urges his friend to be physically united with women and beget children through whose beauty and virtue he will live by. But after that the sonnet sequence turns to the subject of masculine friendship where the poet lusts after the bodily attachment with his friend. The absence of his friend haunts

him in day and at night. In sonnet no 27 “weary with toil” from travelling all day, “I haste me to bed” (p.46) as he transports into a world of romanticism and fantasy where the night “presents thy shadow to my sightless view,/ Which like a jewel (hung in ghastly night)/ Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new”(p.46). The erotic passion on the part of the poet becomes a prominent one through his address to his friend in sonnet 20 as “the master-mistress of my passion” (p.42). His friend has both the features of male and female- with “a woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted/ With shifting change, as is false women’s fashion” (p. 42) and a hue of man, “ all hues in his controlling,/ which steals men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth” (p.42). Shakespeare makes a sportive joke with penis which is meant to give sexual pleasure to women but urges his friend only to be his love: “Mine be thy love, and thy love’s use their treasure” (p. 42). Sonnet no 20 is a celebration of courtly love as well as the flesh. To quote Smith “may be a poem of courtship, but Shakespeare does not stop there. Like Horace, but unlike most Renaissance poets who write about love, Shakespeare goes on to write about what happens when emotional desire becomes physical act” (252). The restlessness of the night continues in sonnet no 28: “when day’s oppression is not eased by night,/ But day by night and night by day oppressed” (p. 46). The physical attraction felt on the part of the poet goes on and stimulates his nerves. Sonnet no 43 records an intense and mature attraction when “the beloved has become so deeply fixed in his unconscious that the lover can relax into a slumber of wish-fulfilling dreams” (p.111): “All days are nights to see till I see thee,/ And nights bright days when dreams do show thee (to) me”(p.54). The nocturnal agitation, the need to fantasize the beloved, the fixation of mind on him and the coveted dreams of him are not a part of masculine friendship but contribute to homoerotic relationship. Weininger claims that there “is no friendship between men that has not an element of sexuality in it” (49). From this perspective every same-sex relationship is always eroticized and there is no escape from the all-consuming perversions of sexual drive. Sonnet no 53 contains the pathetic state of the poet because of all-consuming love where the youth is Adonis and he as Echo. It is the passion of one-sided love destroying poet’s confidence and personality: “In all external grace you have some part, / But you like none, none you, for constant heart.” (sonnet no 53, p.59). Jonathan Bate defines the relationship between the poet and Mr. W. H. in sonnet no 53 in the following way:

Echo and Narcissus belong in the same story because erotic love itself is a projection of one’s own desires and ideals, not an answering to the other. Shakespeare knows that when you look in your lover’s eyes, it is a reflection of yourself that you see. (315)

No Ethos of Christianity

Shakespearean sonnets do not contain the ethos of Christianity which considers sodomy or sex without marriage as a sin. The fragrance of same-sex love is pervading the entire sonnet-sequence. Helen Vendler argues: “the speaker of Shakespeare’s sonnets scorns the consolations of Christianity-an afterlife in heaven for himself, a Christian resurrection of his body after death-as fully as he refuses (except in a few sonnets) the learned adornment of classical references- a staple of the continental sonnet. The sonnets stand as the record of a mind working out positions without the help of any pantheon or any systematic doctrine” (294). Homoerotic desire has become so intense in the life of Shakespeare that he engages himself in a combat against Time and puts himself to the status of vassal. In sonnet no 57 and 58 Shakespeare forsakes his dignity and waits as a page only to enjoy the company of his amorous friend: “Being your slave, what should I do

but tend/ Upon the hours and times of your desire?” (p.61) and “That god forbid, that made me first your slave, /I should in thought control your times of pleasure” (p.61). Sexual jealousy is felt as his friend spends time with others: “Nor dare I question with my jealous thought/ Where you may be, or your affairs suppose, / But like a sad slave stay and think of nought / Save where you are how happy you make those” (sonnet no 57, p. 61). To acquire the love of his friend the poet becomes so eager that Time becomes a monster amid his sexual drive. Sonnet no 64 and 65 incorporate the anxiety of the poet how to protect his friend against the chariot wheel of time. Time defaced the beautiful face of the lover with wrinkle. Even the monuments are broken down in course of Time, so his friend will also meet the same fate, only weeping is left to the poet: “This thought is as a death, which cannot choose/ But weep to have that which it fears to lose” (sonnet no 64, p. 64). Since brass, stone, earth and boundless sea are subject to death and decay, how he could fortify the beauty of his friends against the onslaught of Time. The only solace from this fearful meditation is his reliance upon the miraculously power of verse: “O none, unless this miracle have might, / That in black ink my love may still shine bright” (sonnet no 65, p. 65).

Anguish for His Friend

Sonnet no 85-90 record the profound anguish in the mind of the poet as his friend committed adultery with the same woman whom the poet likes. The love, affection and friendship between two have already declined but Shakespeare willingly wants to heal the bridge between two even compromising with his honour and dignity; “When thou shalt be disposed to set me light/ And place my merit in the eye of scorn, / Upon thy side against myself I’ll fight./ And Prove thee virtuous, though thou art forsworn” (sonnet no 88, p.76). The Master- Mistress of the poet becomes a more complex and symbolic one whose beauty is modelled upon whiteness of the lily and deep vermilion in the rose: “Nor did I wonder at the lily’s white, / Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose; / They were but sweet, but figures of delight, / Drawn after you, you pattern of those” (sonnet no 98, p. 81). The colours red and white are thus “emblematic of eroticism” (Pequigney 116). Shakespeare longs for the bodily pleasure and feels the warmth of the breath: “A third, nor red nor white, had stolen of both, / And to his robb’ry had annexed thy breath” (sonnet no 99, p. 82). Of sonnet no 98 (“From you have I beene absent in the spring”) Booth gallantly tries to establish this:

The language of this sonnet and of sonnet 99 [“The forward violet thus did I chide”] is full of unexploited relevance to sexual love... All these senses remain dormant throughout the poem; they function only to the extent that such a concentration of potentially suggestive terms gives a vague aura of sexuality to the poems... (98-99)

Three Phases

Sonnet no 127-152 evinces a watershed in the attitude of Shakespeare to love and sexuality. The love and passion abruptly shift from his male friend to Dark lady. Though the critics are in dispute regarding the identity of the Dark lady, several names come to the fore. Like the previous sonnet sequence, these 28 sonnets of the Dark Lady series break the myths of sex in Christianity. Shakespeare here “explicitly calls into question the Puritan accusation of lust and the dichotomous concept of man and universe proper to the Christian and Neoplatonic worldview, in order to gradually destroy and overturn these religious cornerstones while presenting a new attitude towards sexual desire and a novel idea of reality and of man” (Caporicci 132). The Dark Lady series records a kind of heterosexual love on the part of a poet for a woman who is not impressive

in respect of her bodily charm and character. Though anti-Petrarchan in tone and style the themes of the sonnets can best be elaborated through Duncan- Jones words:

127-152 offer backhanded praise of a manifestly non-aristocratic woman who is neither young, beautiful, intelligent nor chaste [with] muddy complexion, bad breath and a clumsy walk [...] celebrating her in swaggering terms which are ingeniously offensive both to her and to women in general. (48)

The first 126 sonnets vacillate between *you* and *thou*. But since sonnet no 127 the sonnets stick to *thou*. Probably Shakespeare has made this change to expose the difference between his 'Two loves'. Though Margreta de Grazia speaks for other differences: "sexual difference is only one differential category in these poems, class is another, so is age, reputation, marital status, moral probity, even physical availability. In each of these categories, the poet is more like the mistress than like the youth; love of like would, therefore, incline him more to the mistress than the boy" (271). The physical desire of the poet for the lady and her own sexual need open up new possibilities to poetry, which is now able, for the first time, to describe lust in action. Lust is the brutal and animal part of human nature but in spite of the fact that mankind in general cannot deny the bliss of sexual consummation. Regarding body and bodily pleasure Luther writes, God commands us to hate it, destroy it, and mortify it. Shakespeare's sonnet no 129 is a celebration of flesh and sexual appetite: "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame/ Is lust in action and till action, lust" (p.97). But lust cannot be shunned even when it leads to hell: "All this the world well knows, yet none knows well/ To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell" (p.97). Thus, in sonnet no 129 "despite the final hell, there is no direct equation of lust and sin" (Clark 73).

In England during the medieval and the 16th century there was a condemnation for women's flesh, a symbol of sexual urge. As Martin Luther convinces, "we are the woman because of the flesh, that is, we are carnal, and we are the man because of the spirit... we are at the same time both dead and set free (83). Sonnet no 130 provides a complete opposition of Petrarchan sonnets through the portrayal of the mistress's black hair and dun coloured breasts: "If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; / If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head" (p. 97). But he still cherishes love for her as "I think my love as rare/ As any she belied with false compare" (p. 97). The poet is ultimately been defeated as his black mistress is keeping on sexual relationship with other. She is tyrannous and cruel in deeds though to him she is the fairest and most precious jewel" (sonnet no 131, p 98). Her deeds make difference between fair and black: "In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds, / And thence this slander as I think proceeds" (sonnet no 131, p. 98). The distinction between eye and heart is a conventional image in the genre of the Elizabethan poetry which Shakespeare has used to expose his longing and infatuation for the mistress and her growing infidelity: "In things right true my heart and eyes have erred,/ And to this false plague are they now transferred." (sonnet no 137, p. 101). She is a bay "where all men ride" (sonnet no 137, p. 101). Thus, the women's body is polluted through the sexual intercourse with many men. Shakespeare's mistress deceives him in terms of sex as he also tricks with her in sexual intercourse: "Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,/ And in our faults by lies we flattered be" (sonnet no 138, p. 101). The division between homosexual passion and heterosexual passion can best understood in sonnet no 144: "Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,/ Which like two spirits do suggest me still" (p. 104). The "better angel" or a saint is the "man right fair"; the worse spirit

is the “woman coloured ill” who threatens the purity and innocence of the good angel by corrupting him. The Dark Lady and the Fair Youth probably had sexual intercourse; thus the poet has found him in Woman’s hell, a symbolic representation of her vagina: “Yet this shall I ne’er know, but live in doubt,/Till my bad angel fire my good one out” (p. 104). The essence of sexuality of the sonnets of the Dark Lady Series can best be summed up in the words of Margreta de Grazia:

It is Shakespeare’s gynerastic longings for a black mistress that are perverse and menacing, precisely because they threaten to raze the very distinctions his poems to the fair boy strain to preserve. (276)

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