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Redefining Shakespeare's Ambiguous Love

Shakespeare is seen as the epitome of the great Elizabethan sonneteers. However, his poetry is not necessarily representative of the writers he is associated with. In contrast to other sonneteers, he does not go into depth describing his beloved(s); he does this when referencing the “Dark Lady”, one of his muses, yet he is still ambiguous and cryptic. With the “Fair Youth” muse, there is almost no physical description. Some may attribute this gap to Shakespeare's mysterious style of writing or even chance, but given the poet's genius, it is likely Shakespeare intended to allude to something more. Through his own contradictions, a lack of physical details, and the ethereal essence of his poetry, Shakespeare references various ideas when defining his “love”, simultaneously suggesting that his earthly love (or fantasy of earthy love) is divine and expressing a love for abstract concepts such as his connection to readers and the eternality of his writing.

Numerous scholars have speculated about who exactly Shakespeare's muses are. In her article, Buffey touches on a possible identity of the Dark Lady: poet and court musician Aemilia Lanyer.¹ Buffey's mention of this contender for the Dark Lady reveals the convention surrounding Shakespeare's sonnets to assign historical figures to the muses. It is more likely for the Dark Lady to have been inspired by a real person compared to the Fair Youth due to the

¹ Emily Buffey, “The Mask of Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady': Fictional Representations of Aemilia Lanyer in the Twenty-First Century Historical Novel,” in *Early Modern Literary Studies* 21, no. 3 (2020): 1-29, <http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/mask-shakespeares-dark-lady-fictional/docview/2578205282/se-2?accountid=14244>.

inclusion of physical descriptors in sonnets about her. Consequently, the Dark Lady's sonnets can be compared to the Fair Youth's to further prove the notion of Shakespeare's love referring to multiple entities. Shakespeare's lackluster feelings toward the Dark Lady, whether she was representative of an actual woman or not, cannot surmount Shakespeare's love for the Fair Youth, whether he was a person, fantasy, abstract concept, or all of the above. Franssen argues that there is no evidence for the characters in Shakespeare's poetry being actual historical figures, and the sonnets are rather a myth; who the muses are depends on the audience which is reading them.² While Franssen's argument offers a simple solution to Shakespeare's ambiguity, there is still merit in the possibility of Shakespeare drawing inspiration from actual people. Many are quick to assume Shakespeare's love is completely autobiographical or solely myth. Most likely is the prospect that his love is not this clear-cut, that it refers to more than one idea. Closely examining Shakespeare's sonnets sheds light on his vagueness, illuminating the ways in which his love can be interpreted to be various entities.

In Sonnet 18, Shakespeare famously compares his beloved to a summer day and states that he is "more temperate", suggesting that he is more pleasant than the summer weather, which can at times be too extreme. The love described in Shakespeare's sonnets is paradoxical in the way that it is portrayed as both mild and intense; this contradiction is used to demonstrate how special the love is, suggesting that it is so exquisite it defies nature and logic. The beginning of this sonnet already initiates the notion that Shakespeare's love is almost too perfect for this world, revealing the way in which his love can be interpreted to be a divine man or something less concrete. In line three, Shakespeare expresses the weakness of other relationships by explaining how the "rough winds" (hardships, conflict, etc.) "shake the darling buds of May";

² Paul JCM Franssen, "The myth of Shakespeare's sonnets," in *Cashiers Élisabéthains* 90, no. 1 (July 2016): 85-100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0184767816642981>.

other relationships do not last once obstacles arise. The primary obstacle, which is transparently stated in other sonnets, is time. He also speaks on the impermanence of “summer’s lease”; summer is temporary, but as he iterates throughout his sonnets, his love is permanent. The immortality of his love may reference Shakespeare’s memorialization of his beloved through poetry or the potential for his great work to be read for the rest of time. He next compares his love to the sun, claiming that the sun sometimes shines too brightly, and even so, the sun is “dimmed” by the Fair Youth. At first this claim seems to contradict itself; how can outshining something “too” bright be a good thing? The answer is that, assuming Shakespeare is referencing the love of his own poetry in this case, the subtlety of his sonnets will outshine the work of those who are too self-evident or flashy. In lines seven and eight, Shakespeare explains that every beautiful thing falls short of its beauty sometimes, either by chance or the inevitable, constant change of nature which leaves things stripped of their previous beauty. Future readers may not see the beauty in his work due to their lack of understanding of his complexity and the constant changes occurring in society. The shift occurs at line nine, when Shakespeare highlights the major difference between his love and a summer’s day: his love’s “summer” is eternal. The Fair Youth, as stated in lines ten and eleven, has the ability to retain his beauty, and is even above death, meaning that he is divine. Line twelve asserts that his love will be inserted into “eternal lines”, meaning that he will be memorialized in poetry (which will last forever). This phrase reveals Shakespeare’s confidence that his work will never stop being read. The final couplet poses a self-fulfilling prophecy, thus defeating time through poetry. The repetition of “so long” in the last two lines emphasizes the (in other cases impossible) extent to which his love will live on, repeating the idea that his poetry will be read forever. The last word of the sonnet, “thee”,

further illustrates the immortality of Shakespeare's love. Just as it is the final idea in readers' minds, Shakespeare's love will be the final thing in existence.³

Sonnet 20 points out the fact that Shakespeare's love exhibits male qualities, using undesirable female qualities to uplift his love. The first line illustrates the Fair Youth's natural beauty. The image of "Nature" (personified) painting the youth's face emphasizes his beauty by suggesting that special attention and care went into creating him. It also contrasts his natural beauty with that of women who unnaturally "paint" their faces with cosmetics. The phrase "master mistress of my passion" in line two emphasizes the paradoxical nature of his love, both because of the masculine and feminine features he simultaneously embodies (gender is not binary, but Shakespeare depicts men and women as distinctly separate categories, meaning that in this case "masculine" and "feminine" qualities are being contrasted) and because of the mild and intense qualities he exhibits at the same time. Though the Fair Youth is not called mild in this sonnet, he is depicted as both mild and vivid in Sonnet 18, as previously stated. Shakespeare's "passion" in line two illustrates both his intense feelings toward the Fair Youth and the frequent occurrence of him in his sonnets. Lines three and four claim that his love is gentle like a woman, but not fickle like flawed or unfaithful women. Again Shakespeare plays on the subtlety of his poetry compared to others'. The Fair Youth's eyes are also brighter, and "less false in rolling," meaning that his eyes do not wander around looking for other prospects as unfaithful women do. In the same way, Shakespeare is not concerned with the way other sonneteers write.⁴ He does not feel the need to use the techniques of others as Sir Philip Sidney

³ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, pp. 724-725.

⁴ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 20: A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, p. 725.

mentions in Sonnet 1 from *Astrophil and Stella*,⁵ but instead only focuses on his own work. Line six could be referencing the Fair Youth's eye, indicating that anyone receiving his attention is charmed, or it could be referencing the eyes of the "false women", who only temporarily charm others; "gilding" may imply that the gaze of these women is specious and false. The Fair Youth controls the attention of others, as stated in line seven. The line "steals men's eyes" implies that men are entranced by the Fair Youth against their will, as opposed to women who are simply amazed by him. As if exiting a trance, the tone shifts when Shakespeare suggests the youth was "first created" for a woman and that though he, like Nature (and everyone else) was entranced by the youth, he points out his inability to procreate with his love. The final couplet encourages the youth to go out and find a woman to continue his line, since nature "pricked" (a sexual innuendo) him "out for women's pleasure". In a way this ending aligns with Sonnet 18, since it expresses Shakespeare's desire for his love to live on (in this case through his heirs); however, if their love is eternal due to Shakespeare's poetry, he should not need a line of successors in order for his memory to never die. The tension between these opposing ideas manifests Shakespeare's conflicting ideas surrounding his love, which suggests that his love could refer to more than just a physical person, but rather alternate between various ideas of what constitutes his love. There are the moments in which he clearly references the Fair Youth, but he is also expressing a love for something more abstract. This idea is supported by the impossible essence of his love, which is able to defy laws of nature and logic. If Shakespeare's love is not simply another person, but also an abstract idea, then it makes more sense that it would be able to overcome nature, time, etc. The paradoxical qualities of his love would also make more sense because these contradictions are due to the lack of ability humans have to understand something so complex

⁵ Sir Philip Sidney, "Sonnet 1: Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, pp. 586-587.

and divine. Shakespeare's love is the Fair Youth, the immortality of poetry, the interaction between words and readers, his own ability to depict love, and the possibility (and now reality) of readers extracting limitless meaning from his lines.⁶

In Sonnet 55 Shakespeare, unlike his other sonnets which end with this idea, begins with the idea of his poetry (memorializing his love) lasting longer than earthly memorials. Shakespeare adds that not only will his poetry last longer, but it will also "shine more bright". The repetition of the "sh" sound in "shall shine" makes the phrase flow easily, suggesting that it is easy to see how his poetic memorial will shine more brightly than physical monuments. Shakespeare uses demeaning diction such as "unswept", "besmeared" and "sluttish" surrounding the stone monuments, making his poetic memorial seem majestic in comparison. His mention of "sluttish time" reiterates the common theme throughout his sonnets that unlike other memorials, his will not be destroyed by time. To make his memorial seem even stronger, he lists mighty forces of destruction which will overcome physical monuments but not his, such as war, battles, fire, and the sword of Mars. The "living record" of the "memory" of Shakespeare's love will not only defeat intense physical forces, but also the "enmity" of oblivion. In this notion, Shakespeare reveals his pride; he is not worried that people will not read his work because he believes it is powerful enough to be read for the rest of time. Shakespeare emphasizes this idea in the following lines, speaking about how his love will continue to "pace forth" throughout future generations and even until Judgement Day (essentially the end of time). In the final line, the idea of his love living forever in the lines of the poem after he physically dies is repeated, but this time Shakespeare adds that his love will "dwell in lovers' eyes." This addition is notable because it touches on the influence of the writing itself. In this line Shakespeare addresses his subtle, yet potent fascination with the way readers interact with (his) poetry. This meta image demonstrates

⁶ Shakespeare, "Sonnet 20: A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted," 725.

the ability poetry has to create a connection with its readers, leading them to find meaning in it, see themselves and others in it, and even fall in love with its characters. The ambiguity in the final line of Sonnet 55 allows for Shakespeare to allude to his multiple loves, including his fair muse, ethereal lines, and the magical connection between poetry and its readers.⁷

Sonnet 60 expresses the same idea that Shakespeare's poetry will pass the test of time. However, this sonnet can also be characterized by the feeling of being rushed by the antagonism of time. The first two lines compare time to waves, suggesting that it goes by quickly and ends abruptly. The following lines describe the struggle of moving forward. The use of the similar sounding "nativity" and "maturity" emphasizes the sudden transition from beginning and ending. These lines refer to one of Shakespeare's confictions: both his fear of time and confidence that time will not destroy his work. Though Shakespeare admits his doubts at times, he ultimately is sure that his love will be eternal (perhaps he is manifesting that it will be). Shakespeare villainizes time by pointing out its destructive nature, which demolishes the embellishments of youth and beauty and makes every living thing its victim with its "scythe", a reference to the Grim Reaper. Still, Shakespeare claims his poetry "shall stand,/Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand." The final lines continue the allusion to the Grim Reaper, while maintaining the idea that his words are more powerful than any destructive force, as mentioned in his other sonnets as well. He also keeps up the ambiguity surrounding exactly who will remain. His lack of details as to who "thy" is reinforces the concept that Shakespeare's beloved can mean various entities.⁸

Sonnet 65 similarly expresses the destructive nature of time, and once again states that his poetry

⁷ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, pp. 727-728.

⁸ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 60: Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, p. 728.

will live on. Contrary to Sonnet 60, Shakespeare provides a detail about his love, that it “may still shine bright.” This description is reminiscent of Sonnet 18, in which he claims his love outshines the sun. The line “That in black ink my love may still shine bright” suggests that the Fair Youth will be memorialized through his poetry, and also that his abstract loves, such as his love of poetry, his love of the connection between words and readers, etc. will prevail against the test of time. Intriguing is the choice to include the color black in this line, as he typically associates darkness with the Dark Lady. This contradiction adds to the impossibility of mere humans understanding his ethereal love, which seems paradoxical due to its divine essence.⁹

The theory of Shakespeare’s various loves can be further proven when comparing his description of this love to the description of the Dark Lady. While the Dark Lady could also be symbolic of abstract ideas, the inclusion of physical details when describing her makes it more plausible for her to be an actual person than in the case of the Fair Youth. For example, in Sonnet 130 Shakespeare mentions the Dark Lady’s physical characteristics such as her eyes, lips, breasts, hair, cheeks, breath, and voice. Interestingly, Shakespeare contrasts the Dark Lady to his other loves by stating that her “eyes are nothing like the sun”, a comparison which references the light motif brought up in his other sonnets.¹⁰ He similarly contrasts the Dark Lady with his other love(s) in Sonnet 127, in which the word “fair” in the first line can also be interpreted as a reference to the light motif which surrounds depictions of his other muse(s). As opposed to the

⁹ William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 65: Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, pp. 728-729.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 130: My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, p. 736.

sonnets about the Fair Youth that include almost no physical descriptions, Sonnet 127 focuses primarily on physical appearances.¹¹

In the same way Shakespeare's sonnets can be compared to each other to bring clarity to the mystery, his poetry can be compared to other poets' to further clear his ambiguity. Sir Philip Sidney's Sonnets 1 and 74 from *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, create depictions of a muse more tangible than Shakespeare's, highlighting the vagueness of his Fair Youth. Sidney's muse is made more tangible in Sonnet 1 in the final line, which states "'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'" The dialogue in this line helps construct a concrete image of the muse, clearly portraying a person rather than an abstract idea. Additionally, the capitalization of "Muse" personifies his inspiration.¹² In Sonnet 74, Sidney continues to personify his muse when he asserts he is inspired by "Stella's kiss." By placing a name to his muse, he makes it even more clear he is talking about a woman, and the concept that she kisses him further personifies her.¹³ Though it may seem extraneous or excessive to explain the personification of a muse, it is useful to provide a comparison to Shakespeare's ambiguous muse(s), supporting the idea that he may not be simply referencing a man in his love poems.

Clear is the vagueness exhibited in Shakespeare's sonnets. His mysterious words highlight the potential for poetry to be interpreted in many ways. Perhaps Shakespeare was in love with this concept, delighting in the idea of readers pondering, even toiling at deciphering his ambiguous lines. It is feasible that Shakespeare took inspiration from a transcendently ravishing man. It is also possible that Shakespeare was invigorated by the prospect of his work lasting for

¹¹ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 127: In the old age black was not counted fair," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, p. 735.

¹² Sir Philip Sydney, "Sonnet 1: Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show," 586-587.

¹³ Sir Philip Sidney, "Sonnet 74: I never drank of Aganippe well," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century and The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and George M. Logan, Tenth Edition, Norton, 2018, pp. 598-599.

eternity. As his sonnets are still cherished today, he has accomplished his ambition so far. Shakespeare's love lives on, "dwell(ing) in lovers' eyes."¹⁴

¹⁴ Shakespeare, "Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments," 727-728.

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