

## No Time to Die: Mortality and the Passing of Time in Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets-- perhaps the lesser known of his works, perhaps the lesser appreciated, but perhaps also the place where William Shakespeare presents his readers with something very rare indeed: vulnerability. A glimpse into the mind of arguably the best playwrights and poets of modern time. Among these one-hundred and fifty four sonnets, one can expect to find the poet-speaker contemplating a vast array of themes and ideas that are fundamental to human existence. The poems consider love-- in all of its ugly and misguided forms-- mortality, legacy, desire, lust, beauty, and countless other themes. Here, Shakespeare is given free reign, unbound by the restrictions that playwriting possesses, and instead bound only to the fourteen lines of a traditional sonnet. One would expect that such a limited space of fourteen lines would prove to be more restrictive than longer form writing, but Shakespeare does not waste even one word, and compensates for the short poetic form with an abundance of the poems themselves. In reading and analyzing these sonnets, it is difficult to pinpoint just *one* theme to focus in on-- it can be overwhelming, at times, to experience such an onslaught of unfiltered emotion that feels so genuine in its expression. Though, there is one theme that seems to stand slightly separate from the rest, in that it is something that every single human being must contend with at some point. Not every human being has experienced love, nor has every human being experienced lust, or been overwhelmed with some sort of ethereal beauty. However, at some point in their lives, every human being must come to contend with their end. As Shakespeare so adamantly expresses throughout so many of his sonnets, Time marches forward for us all-- unyielding and without discrimination. For this reason, this theme seems to strike at the very core of the reader. And, not only does Shakespeare poetically illustrate his deep fears at this inevitability, but also issues a call to action, in many cases. There is an intense push within

many of these sonnets to *preserve*-- to look around oneself and grasp at whatever one can in order to fortify against Time itself. Can such a thing ever be done? This question too, perhaps, is answered by Shakespeare in his sonnets.

Shakespeare begins his sonnets in a place of expediency with the procreation sonnets. In short, a selection of poems which all stress the same thing, addressed to the fair youth. These works stress the importance of procreation-- hence their name-- and specifically the importance of legacy as a means to preserve oneself after death. From the outset, the reader can see that Shakespeare deeply feels the inward pressing of Time upon him and his beloved. In Sonnet 2, Shakespeare writes,

How much more praise deserv'd thy beauty's use,  
 If thou couldst answer 'This fair child of mine  
 Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse,'  
 Proving his beauty by succession thine! (2.9-12)

Here, Shakespeare argues for the fair youth to produce a son, and through succession, the fair youth's beauty would come to live on through his son. In fact, not only would his son's beauty become "by succession" the beloved's, but would become more deserving of praise, having been passed on to a new generation. Such wording allows for the implication that to not produce an heir would be to waste the beauty of the fair youth, left to waste away to Time. In her article entitled "Hoarding the Treasure and Squandering the Truth: Giving and Possessing in Shakespeare's Sonnets to the Young Man," Alison Scott discusses the procreation sonnets in their relation to this question of legacy and time. Scott writes, "The poet-speaker urges the young man to reproduce his image on the grounds that failure to do so would constitute the refusal to "use" his beauty correctly, thereby hoarding valuable resources only to waste them," (Scott 319).

This understanding of preservation is an interesting one, implying that one's image can be replicated and passed on through genetics, through reproduction. Though, a reader would be right to argue, "that's not how that works." One's image cannot be perfectly replicated and remade in a son or daughter, but only a piece of oneself can live in another. Scott goes on to write, "The problem with this triumph lies in the copying, for when the young man gives himself, he keeps himself still because his son will be a mere "copy" in the same way that his representation in verse will be a copy of his image. If the economy of the gift is complicated by the economic discourse employed in the Sonnets, the idea of truthful representations is complicated by an ongoing debate dating back to Aristotle's theory of mimesis," (Scott 321). This sentiment resurfaces in Shakespeare's Sonnet 13, where he writes,

Against this coming end you should prepare,  
 And your sweet semblance to some other give:  
 So should that beauty which you hold in lease  
 Find no determination; then you were  
 Yourself again, after yourself's decease,  
 When your sweet issue your sweet form should bear. (13.3-8)

In fact, Shakespeare perhaps goes a step further here, implying that the beloved should "give" his "sweet semblance" to another, being his child. He goes on to refer to the youth's beauty, which he holds "in lease," and that in passing on himself to his child, the fair youth can be, in a sense, reborn-- "yourself again, after yourself's decease." It is interesting to note, within these early sonnets (and also in the ones that follow), the poet-speaker's emphasis on preserving his beloved's "beauty." In reading these 154 sonnets, what one comes to learn of the fair youth extends not far past the fact that he is surely beautiful. One learns nothing of his intellect, his

personality, his soul. This perspective of the fair youth sonnets casts the poet-speaker in a decidedly vain light, over-concerned with keeping his beloved young and beautiful, seemingly unconcerned with preserving his mind or heart. Aaron Kunin writes, “The most valuable part of the young man, the part that should be saved-- in this poem, the speaker does not consider whether poetry may be capable of saving it-- is his beauty. The speaker is asking whether the young man's beauty is subject to time. One possible answer-- which "beauty" does not give, since neither the young man nor any part of him can be shown speaking-- is no,” (Kunin 96).

It is in the procreation sonnets where the poet-speaker invokes a sense of urgency, a sense of pushing the beloved away in a seeming attempt to push him towards life, towards legacy. It is in the later sonnets where Shakespeare’s tone turns less from being dire and more towards being hopeless; it is a deep sense of existential dread that seems to seep into the later sonnets. It is Sonnet 63 where this can perhaps be observed the most, or at the very least, Sonnet 63 is one of the prime examples. Shakespeare refers to Time as having “injurious hands,” used interestingly to “crush.” Shakespeare goes on to write,

When hours have drained his blood and filled his brow  
 With lines and wrinkles; when his youthful morn  
 Hath travelled on to age's steepy night;  
 And all those beauties whereof now he's king  
 Are vanishing, or vanished out of sight,  
 Stealing away the treasure of his spring; (63.3-8)

Here, Time is a thief, “stealing away” the youth’s treasure, causing his beauty and youthfulness to vanish. Line seven is important to note especially, because here, Shakespeare makes an important distinction. Shakespeare writes that his beloved’s beauties, of which he is now king,

are “vanishing, or vanished out of sight.” This is a rare concession on behalf of the poet-speaker, a break in the melancholy and hopeless tone that has dominated many of the sonnets up until now. He concedes that his beloved’s beauties have perhaps not vanished completely, but perhaps have just “vanished out of sight,” transferred maybe from the exterior to the interior. Is it possible that here the poet-speaker grants a small token, a little scrap of praise amongst the existential dread? Such a reading is possible, but difficult to maintain given the following lines and the hopeless tone they return to. In his article entitled “The Drama and Architecture of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” Malvern Van Wyk Smith discusses Sonnet 63 in particular, writing, “In Sonnet 63 he envisages the “lovely boy” in old age, “as I am now”, “when his youthful morn/Hath travailed on to age’s steepy night”, implying that an old age that was unthinkable at an early stage in the conception of the sonnet sequence must now be accepted both as an archetypal process yet also as one to be challenged by the transfigural power of his verse,” (Van Wyk Smith 34). This challenging of Time is a tone that the poet-speaker adopts in many of his sonnets discussing aging, as in Sonnet 19. Referred to as “Devouring Time,” (19.1) aging is presented here as a lion, a prideful and prowling animal which seeks to “devour” that which it can. Interestingly, this sonnet assigns three distinct attributes to Time-- “devouring,” “swift-footed,” and “old.” In most of these sonnets, Time is presented almost as another character, but in Sonnet 19 especially. The poet-speaker paints a portrait of this character, firstly describing him or her as “devouring,” implying that they possess an insatiable hunger that is never satisfied. The attribute of being “swift-footed” lends itself well to the idea that Time is a thief, which is picked up again in Sonnet 63, “Stealing away the treasure of his spring,” (63.8). Describing Time as “old” implies that this character is wizened, not naive enough to be fooled,

having been present since the dawn of mankind. Sonnet 19 sees the poet-speaker go on to address this character, Time, directly-- pleading with them to spare his beloved:

O! carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow,  
 Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen;  
 Him in thy course untainted do allow  
 For beauty's pattern to succeeding men. (19.9-12)

The pleading tone in Sonnet 19 is an admission of weakness, an admission that Time holds the reins and the poet-speaker is just a mere passenger. Though, the poet-speaker does not maintain this attitude, as we see him write about how he plans to attempt to subvert Time and preserve his beloved against it.

This is where Shakespeare seems to issue his call to action, or at the very least, one of them. The poet-speaker makes a decision to effectively take matters into his own hands, given that the fair youth did not heed his advice to seek a wife and have children. Sonnet 63 emphasizes this, where Shakespeare writes,

For such a time do I now fortify  
 Against confounding age's cruel knife,  
 That he shall never cut from memory  
 My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life:  
 His beauty shall in these black lines be seen,  
 And they shall live, and he in them still green. (63.9-14)

One again takes notice of what Shakespeare makes sure to emphasize here, which is his beloved's "beauty." Nonetheless, the tone has shifted from previous sonnets, from a passive understanding of Time to playing an active role against it. Line 9, "For such a time do I now

fortify,” draws a stark contrast to the procreation sonnets, where the emphasis was not on the “I” (as in the poet-speaker) but rather on the “you” (as in the beloved). Shakespeare realizes in these later poems that it is he who possesses the will of wishing to subvert time, and he here takes ownership of that, taking responsibility for accomplishing the task he had previously assigned to the fair youth. In his article entitled, “In War With Time: Temporal Perspectives in Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” David Kaula writes, “It is important to recognize that Shakespeare’s visions of the future in the immortalizing sonnets do not involve a final leap beyond time. Unlike Spenser in the final two stanzas of the Mutabilitie Cantos, Shakespeare does not yearn to escape “this state of life so tickle,” and come to rest “Upon the pillours of the Eternity.” He claims, rather, that the friend’s “eternal summer” will survive in his verse as long as *human* time lasts, as long, that is, as there is a “breathing” human audience to receive his testimony,” (Kaula 51-52). This active posture towards time makes itself explicitly known in the later sonnets, though the sentiment can be traced back through the earlier sonnets and even into the procreation sonnets. It can be observed that this is not a sentiment which Shakespeare adopted later, perhaps a decision he made after considering Time’s thievery, but rather a sentiment which he felt all the while, and only chose to act on once he decided that he had the power to do so. The couplet of Sonnet 19 exemplifies this, where Shakespeare writes, “Yet, do thy worst old Time: despite thy wrong,/ My love shall in my verse ever live young,” (19.13-14). Shakespeare even implies here that not only will his beloved live on through his verse, but will live on as he exists now, preserving both his person *and* his youth.

Understanding this, it is pertinent to then arrive at the question, “can such a thing be done?” As a reader, one is perhaps giving Shakespeare exactly what he hoped for in even reading these sonnets-- giving life to his words, and in doing so, giving new life to his beloved. However,

as has previously been pointed out, what of the fair youth truly lives on in these works? What is one able to glean about the fair youth as he is presented in these poems? The answer, to be sure, is merely a fraction of him. It is his veneer, his outward beauty, the shell in which he resided that lives on in these poems. Now, is this the fault of the writer? Or merely a byproduct of the medium in which he was writing? In her article entitled “Shorthand and Immortality in Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” Lina Perkins Wilder remarks on this very question. She writes, “By shortening the distance between lived experience and tangible record, shorthand character offers the hope that more might be saved of the immediacy of lived experience than words alone—perhaps even “the whole body.” However, such technological interventions bring with them the awareness that, in saving something, we also lose something,” (Perkins Wilder 504). Wilder goes on to write, “Faced with the task of speaking to us and offering a contentious alternative to the “increase” of the first sonnet’s appeal to the young man, Shakespeare’s poet chooses not, on the page, *fullness*, but a shorthand that relies on, distills, risks falsifying, but nonetheless contains the potential for fullness,” (Perkins Wilder 505). Perhaps it is up to each reader individually to decide if these sonnets accomplish their goal of subverting Time and gifting immortality to the fair youth. In attempting it, Shakespeare at least gifts his beloved with the “potential for fullness,” as Wilder asserts. While the argument can be made that the sonnets do not capture the entirety of the beloved-- and in fact, such an argument is important to raise-- the other side of this particular coin seems to be that at the very least, a part of the beloved *does* live on, *does* continue against Time, if not all of him. Where Shakespeare should take some blame is maybe the part of the beloved that was chosen to be represented. While his beauty seems to have been immortalized in beautiful poetry, it is difficult to know if this is the aspect of himself that the beloved would have chosen to transcend Time. Then again, we are all subject to

other's depictions of us, and can't choose what part of us is remembered. A poignant quote that comes to mind is from Broadway musical *Hamilton*, where George Washington sings, "You have no control, who lives, who dies, who tells your story."

If Shakespeare's sonnets are "known" for anything, one would assume that they are known for their language, for their exclamations of adoration, for their use of imagery. And while these aspects of the poems are indeed important, and should be associated with the sonnets, for the poems to become synonymous with the aspects of themselves that are more shallow seems to lose their intention-- their purpose. Shakespeare used these sonnets as a vessel, a mere container in which to house his beloved, in the hopes that he could place the vessel in the river of time and have it ride onward, ever flowing forward and forward and forward. In this way, he has been successful thus far, seeing as these sonnets continue to be read and studied and analyzed. This paper, even, is merely another wind in the sails of Shakespeare's vessel, as it flows down the river, carrying it just a bit farther. Was Shakespeare able to fit the entirety of his fair youth into this little container? Perhaps not. But that the fair youth lives on at all is a testament to Shakespeare's fight.

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