

The Theme of Immortality in Shakespeare's Sonnets

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'efiance of Time, and D the boast of the immortality verse alone can confer have been a frequent theme of poets since classical times,'¹ as Ingram Redpath pointed out. They found it in the French and English sonneteers alike. Ovid and Horace are the most celebrated classical exemplars.

The Elizabethan sonnets as a whole were written to a convention and also extremely imitative of classical and Italian models. This general theory is applied to Shakespeare's. Even if the sonnets were 'literary exercises', they would reflect facets of Shakespeare's own experience.

The sonnets, as Barber declares 'are only Shakespeare at certain times in certain kinds of relations, with a young man (1-127) or several young men, with a dark complexioned married woman of loose morals (127-152).'² The young man, as Huber points out 'is handsome, of good family, and at least in the beginning, the possessor of boundless virtues. He is told that youth and beauty are brief, that fatherhood is a duty to himself and the world; and that his qualities must be preserved in the immortality which children can bestow.'³ Shakespeare then promises to immortalize this young man in verses which will never die. He has great confidence in the immortality of his verse. In his essay, "Shakespeare at Sonnets' Ransom remarks 'the immortality of rime, and of the beloved preserved in it is a classical, or typical, as anything in European sonnets; but its specific development is not.'⁴

If we read Sonnet (15) we notice that Shakespeare had promised to embody the young man's beauty in his verse. As his physical beauty fades, it will blossom and flower again in the poet's verses. As time withers his friend's features, the poet assures to give him new life by his verse :

And all in war with time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I ingraft you new.⁵

The poet is sure that his verse has the power to give his love what Time takes from him. This sonnet as Rowse declares 'marks a further stage in the progress of Shakespeare's affection.'⁶ The Last couplet Rowse says 'is the first adumbration of the theme of immortality they poet will confer on the young man – as he did – by his verse.'⁷ It is the poet's first reference to this theme, and he also refers to the world as a stage whose shows the stars exert their influence secretly :

That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment.⁸

Stephen Spender remarks 'The poet offers two means to perpetuate his friend's beauty exactly as it now is: one is fathering a child, and the other, which plays an even more persistent part in the sequence, is the poetry.'⁹

But were some child of yours alive that time,
You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme.¹⁰

The poet uses poetry to urge the friend to marriage, his verse achieves the same result as a son might do (to immortalize the friend). Both child and poetry as Spender declares, 'are mirrors of the young man's own face.'¹¹ This means that the sonnet offers both immortalities, the child and the rhyme.

Shakespeare always asserts that his verse will confer immortality upon his friend. Sonnet (18) is a good example. The poet in the last couplet says :

So long as men can breathe and eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.¹²

This means as long as times lasts, his verse lives and the friend will last. This boast has been traditional since, at least, the time of Horace and Shakespeare repeats it in sonnets (19), (54), (55), (60), (63), (65), (74), and (81). The inspired nature of sonnet (18) as Rowse finds 'is the certainty of love, that brings with it Shakespeare's confidence in the immortality of his verse.'¹³

Shakespeare believes that time has the power to do everything as it is illustrated in sonnet (19). He says that time devours all, blunts the lions' paws, and causes the earth-reabsorb the creatures which spring from her, takes away the tigers' sharp tooth and lets the phoenix be burned alive in her ashes. The idea is that time kills every beautiful thing. Time makes happy or sad seasons as he flies and does what will to the world and all its fading things of beauty. Shakespeare then forbids time one crime – not to mark his love's fair brow with its traces, nor draw his lines upon it with his antique pen, but to allow his love to go untouched and uninjured; for a pattern of beauty to succeeding generation or in other words to let him in his passage remain unsullied in beauty. The in his final couplet he says:

yet do thy worst, Old Time: despite thy wrong
My love shall in my verse ever live young.¹⁴

Despite time's wrong and injury, Shakespeare assures that his love shall live ever young in his verse. The poet's concern with time, as a destroyer of youth and beauty as Rowse points out, 'is a fundamental theme of the Southampton sonnets.'¹⁵ But time can not destroy his verse. His verse lives for ever and makes his love live ever young in it.

Shakespeare again promises his patron in sonnet (54) to immortalize him in his verse. He says beauty is much admirable when the quality of truth is added to it. The rose for example looks fair, but we think more highly of it for 'the sweet odour' it

has. The poet declares his idea by showing the difference between scentless wild roses and scented roses. The first ones have as good a colour as the scented rose, flower on such thorns, and play as prettily in the summer breeze that opens their buds. But because their only merit is their show, no one pays attention to them, and they fade unregarded; unrespected and die on their own. Scented roses are not so: they perish to create sweet essence. Then Shakespeare says:

And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth,
When that shall fade, by verse distils your truth.¹⁶

The idea is when his beauty vanishes his constancy will distil (like the dew) through verses, or verse will distil his quality.

In sonnet (55) Shakespeare does not only use and develop the immortality of the rime and of the beloved inhabiting it but points to the mortality of the marble and golden monuments of the princes. They cannot live longer than his powerful rhyme:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes, shall outlive his powerful rhyme.¹⁷

The poet is acclaiming the power of his verse. His love 'shall shine more bright' in his poem than these monuments 'besmear'd' with sluttish time. As time passes on, all these tombs and monuments will be covered but dust but time has no power over his verse, that is why his love 'shall shine more bright'. Shakespeare is not wrong: wars have come and gone, London been twice burnt down by the fire of war, yet his friend goes on –immortality in his verse, as the poet assures him :

So, till the judgement that yourself arise'
You live in this , and dwell in lovers' eyes.¹⁸

His friend will live on in verse and his habitation will be in the eyes of lovers, in the eyes of those who will love him when they read of his glory.

All that one can say about his famous sonnet as Rowse remarks ' is to notice the outburst of confidence in his verse on the part of the poet, hitherto so modest.'¹⁹

Time again is used in sonnet (60), Shakespeare says : just as the waves towards the pebbly shore, so our minutes hasten onwards to their end; each following the one before, they moved forward in sequence. The idea is time has the power to destroy everything, nothing stands in front of time. It destroys the bloom of youth and draws in the brow, feeds on nature's rarities, and

Nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.²⁰

But Shakespeare's verse is praise of him shall stand to future times, in spite of time's cruel hand. This proves that time has no power to destroy his verse.

In sonnet (63) Shakespeare says : against time when his love shall be old as he is now, worn by time, when he loses all his beauty; for such a time he takes measures against the cruel edge of age, that it may never out from memory his love's beauty, thought it may be his lover's life (the poet himself). This means the beauty of him whom Shakespeare loves will never be forgotten, though he will no longer live to love him. His beauty shall live on in these black lines (rhyme) and they will keep his memory green. His beauty and freshness will be preserved in his rhyme:

His beauty shall in these black lines be seen
And they shall live, and he in them still green.²¹

Shakespeare's emphasis on his age as Rowse points out 'is an implied compliment to the youth of his patron.'²²

If we read sonnet (65) we notice how conscious Shakespeare is of the image of a jewel in a chest :

O fearful meditation ! Where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie
hid ?²³

The poet means that beauty is lent by time for us to enjoy for a period, which we are anxious to hide from time, who will take it back and lock it in his treasure-chest. The chest also means, the coffin and the grave. Shakespeare is sure that beauty is not so strong to stand against time, its strength is no greater than a flower's, time decays it. Then at the end of the sonnet the poet says unless he can live poetically and truthfully up to the occasion, that his love may ever shine bright out of this blank ink (his verse) :

O, none, unless this miracle have might

That in black ink my love may still shine bright.²⁴

The theme of the preservation of the poet's love in his verse (in black ink which is the familiar allusion to the power of verse to immortalize) as Seymour-Smith points out 'is not a mere vulgar evocation of posterity, but a vindication of the truthfulness of poetry against all odds, including time and those who, by striving only for their pleasure and material gain, are its slaves.'²⁵

Once again Shakespeare shows his confidence in himself as a poet and in the immortality of his verse, and sonnet (74) illustrates this. In this sonnet the poet urges the young man not to mourn his death, because these sonnets continue, after the death of his body to express his spirit 'The better part of me' embodied in his poetry. This will always remain with the address as a memorial of him. Then in the final couplet he says :

The worth of that is that which it contains,

And that is this, and this with thee remains.²⁶

The value of the living body lies in the spirit which animates it, and in the poet's case, the spirit is one and the same as his poetry, which will live on with his friend. Even when Shakespeare dies he remains with his friend through his verse. Seymour-Smith's comment on this is that "Shakespeare believed in the immortality of poetry on the grounds of its enduring

truthfulness rather than the fact that it would be 'on lips' of living men."²⁷

The situation in sonnet (81) summons up Shakespeare's confidence in his verse, whatever difference he may feel about himself. The poet asserts that death cannot take his friend's memory away from his verse, though everything of him will be forgotten. From his verse the name of his friend will have immortal life, though once he is gone he will be dead to all the world; for the poet there is only undistinguished grave, while his friend lies recognizable in man's eyes and he will have an honorific tomb:

When you entombed in men's eyes shall lie,
Your monument shall be my gentle verse.²⁸

Here, by a sudden turn of wit at the start of the sestet, the poet reveals that the 'monument' implied in line (8) is neither marble nor golden Sepulchre but his verses, which eyes not yet created shall read over; and tongues to-be shall tell of his being. When all the people are dead the poet's pen has such a power that he will live, where breath most breathes, even in men's mouth:

When all the breathers of this world are dead:
You still live (such virtue hath my pen)
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of
men.²⁹

To conclude this paper I can say that the preservation of Shakespeare's love in his verse is due to his great confidence in himself as a poet and to his confidence in the immortality of his verse.

NOTES

1. W.G. Ingram & Theodore Redpath, eds. Shakespeare's Sonnets, 1964, p. 128.
2. Paul J. Alpers, ed. Elizabethan Poetry, London: 1967, p. 299.
3. Edward Hubler, ed. Shakespeare's Songs and Poems, New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1959, pp. xxxix-xl.
4. John Crowe Ransom, "Shakespeare at Sonnets" in Gerlad Willen and Victor B. Reed, ed., A Case Book on Shakespeare's Sonnets, 1964, p. 109.
5. Hubler, p. 19.
6. A.L. Rowse, ed. Shakespeare's Sonnets, London: 1973, p. 33.
7. Ibid.
8. Hubler, p.19.
9. Stephen Spender, "The Alike and The Other" in Edward Hubler, ed. The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets, New York: 1962, p. 121.
10. Hubler, p.21
11. Hubler, The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets, p. 121.
12. Hubler, p.21.
13. Rowse, p. 39.
14. Ibid., p.25.
15. Ibid., p.41.
16. Hubler, p. 59.
17. Ibid., p. 60.
18. Ibid.,

19. Rowse, p. 113.
20. Hubler, p. 67.
21. Ibid., p. 71.
22. Rowse, p. 129.
23. Hubler, p. 129.
24. Ibid.
25. Martin Seymour-Smith, ed., Shakespeare's Sonnets,
London: 1963, p. 145.
26. Hubler, p. 81.
27. Seymour-Smith, p. 150.
28. Hubler, p. 89.
29. Ibid.

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