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The Prince in Ambiguity: A Machiavellian Reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet Sequence

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Shakespeare's sonnets cannot be dissociated from the ordering of the individual sonnets or from the author's intentions as a poet. In keeping with his primary aims, Shakespeare used the sonnets to guide the reader on a journey toward achieving self-actualization. Along this way, Shakespeare's very personal poetry illuminates the dichotomy between good and evil, the paradox of hate and love and the need for man to moderate reason and desire.

The traditional, and the most widely accepted ordering of Shakespeare's sonnets is that of Thomas Thorpe, whose 1609 Quarto bifurcates the entire sonnet sequence into two broad parts; namely the first 126 sonnets being addressed to 'fair young man' and the remaining sonnets addressed to a 'dark lady'. However, there are some sonnets such as number 35 and 144, which gives us a glimpse of the simultaneous presence of the dark lady even in the sonnets addressed to the 'fair young man'.

While the other sonnet sequences of the period all deal with the love for a woman of great virtue and beauty and celebrate her with the hyperbolic imagery learned from Petrarch, Shakespeare's sequence deals with the passion of the speaker in the poems for a young man of great beauty and charm but of little virtue. The speaker also loves a lady all dark and sensual who subjects him to the slavery of sensuality from which he has not the power to free himself. This situation is further complicated by the fact that the young man whom the speaker admires and loves steals the speaker's mistress, and a rival poet tries to endear himself to the young man. The triangle is an exceptional one indeed, as sonnet 144 shows:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,...

The traditional "eternal triangle" (one person being the object of two other persons' love) becomes, in this sequence, a kind of "perverted parallelogram":



Shakespeare's sonnet-sequence, structurally belonging to the English sonnet sequence, bears a marked similarity with those of other sonneteers. As Carol Thomas Neely points it out: "Most of the English sequences conclude with their goals unachieved, their conflicts unresolved, but all makes gestures toward closure: abrupt stops which freeze lover and beloved in their

impasse, formal detachment which diffuses the conflicts into other poetic modes, or occasionally, a denouement which resolves the plot.” Such conclusions of the sequence and the fact that the form of the sonnet itself allows new readings under contexts provides the key to which Shakespeare’s sonnet-sequence can be attributed to.

Poetry and other forms of literature had flourished during the Elizabethan Age due to the system of patronage that prevailed during the time. The patrons used to provide these poets the financial support and in return the poets were expected to compose poems and songs in praise of their patrons. There are however many critics who uphold the view that Shakespeare was a gay person. Such views have been upheld by the recent queer theorists. However, the extent to which the poet shows devotion to the young man in the first 126 sonnets of the sequence, leads one to believe that the poet was financially dependent upon the young man. Hence, the justification that the young man is a patron figure. The young man of the sonnet, to whom the first 126 sonnets are addressed to, is, beyond any doubt, such a patron-figure. The relationship is, to say the least, ambiguous. In sonnet 20, the speaker calls the young man "the master-mistress of my passion" but ends the poem with a crude denial of physical contact: "But since she (Nature) pricked thee out for women's pleasure,/Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure." In this poem, the poet gives the youth many of the attributes that the popular sequences of those days gave to the untouchable lady love. The moral torture of the persona of the sequence seems to come from an over-whelming passion for a person that finds no relief in the flesh. In any case, the sequence makes clear that what attracts the persona to the young man is his feminine beauty without the moral defects of women and that what is craved for is a "marriage of true minds." The sexual playfulness, which the poet-narrator merely dismisses as fault of youth, becomes a grave offence and the relationship between the poet and the young man seems to deteriorate as soon as the presence of the dark lady is detected in sonnet 35. But, the dismissal of the sexual playfulness of the youth as mere fault of youth conforms to the Petrarchan tradition where the lover’s faults are acknowledged but they are made virtues. It is obvious that as long as the fault concerns dealings in public, they could be tolerated. But establishing a kind of sexual inclination to the poet’s own mistress is a severe offence, as is evident in the steady decline in the relationship between the poet and the young man. Moreover, it is an intrusion into the poet’s personal life and honour and honour meant much more to the Elizabethan man than the worldly concerns.

Surrendering his honour for the patron is something out of place in the Renaissance scheme of things. This can only be accounted for by means of a greater urgency for financial stability than honour or anything else. As a matter of fact, during the Elizabethan Age, a poet devoid of the support of a patron, or one who had lost it, found it very difficult to survive. Under such circumstances, the only option left to Shakespeare was to adopt a kind of Machiavellian track, by means of which he sought to maintain both his personal love-life and his privileges from the patron.

The Petrarchan tone of the sonnets in the dark world of Shakespeare’s sonnet-sequence seems out of harmony. The tone in the first 126 sonnets, which are in the praise of the young man, can be explained only if we explain the poet’s dilemma in Machiavellian terms: “...you cannot satisfy them in the way they had taken for granted, yet you cannot use strong medicine on them, as you are in their debt.” It is this kind of ambiguity that the title of my paper refers to. On

the one hand, the poet rebukes the young man for intruding into his personal life, by showing sexual inclinations for his mistress:

“No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud,
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.
All men make faults, and even I in this,
Authorising thy trespass with compare,
Myself corrupting salving thy amiss,
Excusing thy sins more than their sins are;
For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense-
Thy adverse party is thy advocate-...” [Sonnet – 35]

It is important to note that the tone of rebuke in the above-quoted sonnet is not harsh, because, following Machiavelli, the poet is well aware of the extent of his dependence on the young man.

“Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair;
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.” [Sonnet – 144]

The above lines from sonnet 144 stands in complementary relationship to those quoted above from sonnet 35. It appears that line 3 of sonnet 144 seeks to rectify the offence caused by the note of rebuke in sonnet 35. However, the fourth line of sonnet 144 introduces a kind of dilemma into the reading.

Following the convention, it might be said with justification enough that the sonnets were all intended to be read by the patron. In other words, the patron is the intended audience. In view of the above, the fourth line of the sonnet 144 seems to be a double act. The lines quoted above can be read as much as an accusation to the dark lady as a praise for the young man as much as a plea to the young man to be away from the lady. This is done by bringing out the darker aspects of the lady. Linda Bamber, who found a cohering principle in Shakespeare’s recognition of women as ‘other’ which “amounts to sexism only if the writer fails to attribute to opposite sex characters the privileges of the other.” She goes on to state that the attacks which are made on the women in Shakespeare’s tragedies are the product of male resentment at this strength – ‘misogyny and sex nausea are born of failure and self-doubt’. The plea to the young man is based on the short-comings in the lady herself as mentioned in the sonnet.

Shakespeare, in thus deviating from the conventional Petrarchan tradition of raising the lady to great heights of beauty and chastity, conforms to the Machiavellian dictum: “...because there is such a great distance between how people live and how they ought to live, anyone who gives up doing what people in general do in favour of doing what they ought to do will find that he ruins rather than preserves himself”. The materialist aspects of Shakespeare’s plots have been well-defined in his plays as well, most notably in his comedies. “Measure for Measure” and “As You Like It” provide us with aspects of stark realities of life. What Machiavelli calls necessary

for a prince to rule a state successfully, Shakespeare, in his sonnets illustrates them in the microcosm. Machiavelli says that “You will ... recognize that you have good reason to avoid the supposed virtue of liberality...you cannot escape being called cruel...it is much safer for a prince to be feared than loved...we see from experience in our own times that those princes who have done great things have been those who have set little store by the keeping of faith.” These qualities may indeed be vices; but they are “the vices by which you are able to rule.”

According to Machiavelli, then, the truly “virtuoso” prince is characterized, neither by his willingness to follow the traditional requirements of just government at all times nor by his willingness to discount those requirements altogether. He is characterized by an unerring sense of when to acknowledge the dictates of justice and when to ignore them.

As in his plays, especially those dealing with the Roman histories, so in his sonnets, Shakespeare illustrates the flexibility that will help him in retaining both the lady and the patron. The apparent diversions from the Petrarchan tradition of courting the lady and his use of flattering language in respect to the young man are an illustration of his Machiavellian quality. Let us consider the following sonnets in this regard:

“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 dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed:
But the eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,
Nor shall Death brag thou wand’rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st.
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”.[Sonnet- 18]

“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 damasked, 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.[Sonnet – 130]

In the sequence prepared by Thomas Thorpe, the above-quoted sonnets are placed in two different groups. The former belong to those addressed to the young man while the latter belong to the dark lady group. But when they come together, as I intend them to come and to be read, they readily give the impression that they tend to achieve a dual purpose – (1) to remove the young man from the attractions of the dark lady, who is the mistress to the poet, and (2) to retain the young man as his patron. This is achieved by a sheer exhibition of the Machiavellian dictum. For instance, in sonnet-18, quoted above, the first 12 lines obviously refer to the beauty of the young man, and the comparisons are made in highly eccentric terms. But the concluding couplet seems to counter the 12 lines. Presuming that the adjective ‘this’ in the last line of the sonnet refers to the poem itself, the sonnet then expresses as much the temporary phase of beauty of the youth as the power of the poet and in turn the dependence of the young man on the poet for immortalizing his youth and beauty. The making out of this dependence of the young man on the poet is a statement of power which the poet seems to be making, but not explicitly, lest he lose his patron and consequently his financial stability.

The same trend continues with sonnet 130 as well. The lady in the sonnet is described in extremely crude worldly terms. In fact “When Shakespeare claimed that his lady’s fairness needed no fictions to enhance it, he pinpointed an attitude to women which was symptomatic of its time. Poets should portray women as they are, recognizable in nature, not as the gods and devils of literary mythology.” However, this conformation with the conventions of the time, which is also a departure from the traditional Petrarchan theme, has its own use as well. The poet has, in numerous sonnets like the sonnet 18 quoted above, praised the youth and beauty of the young man. In sonnet 130 under consideration, the description of the lady stands in stark contrast to the beauty and youth of the young man. When these two sonnets are read together, they give the impression that the poet wants to divert attention of the young man from the lady for two reasons: (1) because the lady is not beautiful enough in comparison to the youth and beauty of the young man This is very clearly stated in sonnet 127: “In old age black was not counted fair;”, (The patrons in the Elizabethan Age were often aristocrats who had a long family history. It can be expected, therefore, given the young man’s playful sexual inclinations toward young women, as is evident in the procreation sonnets that the value-system of these families also conformed to the traditional conventions. Hence, the use of the past-tense ‘was’ in the lines quoted above) and (2) because the lady in consideration is the poet’s mistress as well, whom the poet loves very much. There is, in fact a touch of the Petrarchan elevation of the idea of love in the concluding couplet of sonnet 130, which is, otherwise very much anti-Petrarchan. The force of the concluding couplet can be very much compared to the effects of love upon the poet of La Vita Nuova of Dante.

“Self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien [and] what is produced in this encounter partakes of both...and hence...any achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss.” It is worth noting that the definition of the idea of self-fashioning, as given by Greenblatt, is very much applicable to the world of Shakespeare’s sonnet-sequence. Greenblatt’s New-Historicist project seeks to identify any work of art in the socio-historical-economic-political agendas of the period. This is very unlike the formalist project which studies any work of art as art only, devoid of any background. Moreover, in the New-Historicist approach to literature the human self is nothing but a fiction. Although I find Greenblatt’s model useful to enforce my argument, especially that of the

economic dependence of the poet upon the patron and the consequent construction of a 'fictitious' flattering self, the basis of Greenblatt's argument are not coherent. On the one hand, their analytical strategies tend to view, the formation of the Renaissance self from within a synchronic framework, one frozen in time, with little sense of operation of more slowly developing historical – or diachronic- forces on the process of what has come to be called "Renaissance self-fashioning". On the other hand, the analyses of the Renaissance texts also tend to be based on a totalizing view of politics and power in the Renaissance world – a view that leaves little room for oppositional or dissenting voices.

Inordinate in their chronology, destabilized by their textual cruxes, and opaque in much of their language, Shakespeare's sonnets have nonetheless attracted curiously positivistic claims. The general assumption that the sonnet-sequence of Shakespeare is divided into two parts has been severely challenged. As Heather Dubrow points out: "The division at sonnet 126 ["O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power"] was established by Malone, whose work on Shakespeare's lyrics has been challenged from many perspectives during the final decades of the twentieth century." Moreover, the most obvious evidence on which to base claims about direction of address – gendered pronouns or other clear referents – is scanty; Margreta de Grazia rightly points out that about five sixths of the first 126 sonnets and a slightly smaller proportion of the entire collection do not specify an addressee through a gendered pronoun.

However, the general consensus remains that the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man, and subsequent lyrics concern the Dark Lady and this gives rise to the awareness of the presence of a linear plot: poet meets Friend, and they enjoy a period of happiness; their joy is, however shadowed by a period of absence and by the fault alluded to in Sonnet 35 and elsewhere. The entrance of the Dark Lady, who is as untrustworthy as she is attractive, disrupts the idyll celebrated in the joyous sonnets. She, the poet and the Friend become embroiled in a triangle of jealousy and deceit. Many critics disagree on the details of the plot, such as the exact nature of the 'sensual fault' alluded to in sonnet 35, 9. And many students of these poems admit that their narrative line is sometimes obscure or submerged. The obscurity of these poems can be clarified if the poems are read together in pairs as has been illustrated above with reference to sonnets 18 and 130. Some more examples follow:

For shame deny that thou bear'st love to any,
Who for thyself art so unprovident.
Grant, if thou wilt, thou art beloved of many,
But that thou none lov'st is most evident;
For thou art so possessed with murd'rous hate,
That 'gainst thyself thou stick'st not to conspire,
Seeking that beauteous roof to ruinate
Which to repair should be thy chief desire:
O change thy thought, that I may change my mind!
Shall hate be fairer lodged than gentle love?
Be as thy presence is, gracious and kind,
Or to thyself at least kind-hearted prove:
Make thee another self for love of me,
That beauty still may live in thine or thee. [Sonnet-10]

Compared with sonnet 141, this sonnet, often referred to as one of the procreation sonnets, give surprising results:

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,
For they in thee a thousand errors note,
But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,
Who in despite of view is pleased to dote.
Nor are mine ears with thy tongue's tune delighted,
Nor tender feeling to base touches prone,
Nor taste, nor smell, desired to be invited
To any sensual feast with thee alone;
But my five wits nor my five senses can
Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee,
Who leaves unswayed the likeness of a man,
Thy proud heart's slave and vassal wretch to be.
 Only my plague thus far I count my gain,
 That she that makes me sin awards me pain.[Sonnet – 141]

Although sonnet 141 is traditionally believed to be addressed to the dark lady, there is no gendered pronoun to confirm this belief. There is only one feminine pronoun at the last line, but it only refers to a lady, for whom the poet feels tormented. It is the torment, which is a matter of concern here. Sonnet 10 has established the young man's desire to have relations without the element of love for any woman, and if we conform to the belief that the subject of concern in sonnet 141 is the lady, we may say that the first 12 lines of the sonnet can be taken to refer to the young man and that the concluding couplet is the poet's helpless utterance at having failed to dissuade the lady in seeing through the nature of the young man's sexual licentiousness which has been described in sonnet 10. What is important here is the fact, that in spite of a note of crude reality in the sonnets, they are never harsh. The same trend continues with the following pair as well:

Thus can my love excuse the slow offence
Of my dull bearer, when from thee I speed:
From where thou art, why should I haste me thence?
Till I return, of posting is no need.
O what excuse will my poor beast then find,
When swift extremity can seem but slow?
Then should I spur though mounted on the wind,
In winged speed no motion shall I know:
Then can no horse with my desire keep pace;
Therefore desire (of perfect'st love being made)
Shall neigh (no dull flesh) in his fiery race,
But love, for love, thus shall excuse my jade:
 Since from thee going he went willful slow,
 Towards thee I'll run and give him leave to go.[Sonnet – 51]

Compared with sonnet 139, this pair again gives a sense of Machiavellian politics at work in the narrative:

O call not me to justify the wrong
That thy unkindness lays upon my heart;
Wound me not with thine eye but with thy tongue;
Use power with power, and slay me not by art.
Tell me thou lov'st elsewhere; but in my sight,
Dear heart, forbear to glance thine eye aside;
What need'st thou wound with cunning when thy might
Is more than my o'erpressed defence can bide?
Let me excuse thee: 'Ah, my love well knows
Her pretty looks have been mine enemies,
And therefore from my face she turns my foes,
That they elsewhere might dart their injuries.'
Yet do not so, but since I am near slain,
Kill me outright with looks, and rid my pain.[Sonnet – 139]

Sonnet 51 mentions of a period of separation, from which the poet and the friend (the young man) meet after a long time. The change has occurred during this period of separation. The young man, the patron figure for the poet has begun to take some interest in the poet's mistress during the separation, and there are evidences in the sonnet 51 itself that the poet, as soon as he comes to realize this, seeks to be back to his mistress. Lines 7 -12 of sonnet 51 seems to express this emotion of the poet and the sonnet 139 begins with the mention of the wrong done to him. The wrong is obviously the one alluded to in sonnet 35 quoted above. The first couple of lines are obviously addressed to the young man, who seeks to argue a case for his inclination to the poet's mistress. But the Petrarchan tone of surrender by the poet for the mistress is quite remarkable, as it is surprising. Under normal circumstances, as the poet has shown himself to be capable of, the poet should have rebuked the lady as well. The Petrarchan tone is intended to make the young man aware of his deep love for the lady with the hope that having realized the love of the poet for the lady, the young man might give up his advances to the lady.

In all the pairs of sonnets cited above, the sonnets in the pair counter each other in a manner as to nullify the effects of each other and tend to achieve a stable state of being that is characteristic of the English sonnet sequence. Nevertheless, the tension persists.

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