

PRE-LAPSARIAN MAN: AN ONTOLOGICAL READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 129

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Abstract

This study approaches Shakespeare's sonnet 129 as an independent entity, finding in it a contradictory view to the dominant one adopted by most Western critics who link it to other sonnets addressed to a "dark lady" where the theological and ethical judgments are based on the ideas common during the Elizabethan period. It will show how the ontology of this work, through highlighting the common ideas of the time, represents a contradiction to most views held by, and expressed in sonnets of that age.

Key words: Literature; poetry; Sonnets: Shakespeare's Sonnets; Shakespeare; Renaissance literature; Elizabethan age; Hermeneutics; Reader-Response criticism.

1. Introduction

This sonnet is one of the most anthologized poems in English. It has an attraction to readers who usually find something special when reading it. At first it appears to be simple, direct in its theme, and straightforward in its argument. This is probably the result of its appeal to the minds that are grounded in a culture whose theological and ethical norms seem to be met, and therefore offers a sense of gratification and satisfaction. At a closer examination, however, one starts to see aspects that were not previously visible because of the theological and moral strictures that dominate our culture and bind us firmly to their perspective. It is true that, as Stanley Fish argues, we cannot free ourselves from the ideas we believe in, and when we do, we think that we have made progress (qtd in Latimer, 1989: 463). Therefore, it is not possible to come up with an interpretation that puts an end to doubt once and for all. As Gadamer argues, there is no "aperspectival" reading of a text, for each reader is the prisoner of his tradition, prejudices and presuppositions; and to attempt to free oneself from these is to "jerk the rug" from under one's "own reason" (1975: 252).

This leads us to believe that there cannot be one correct interpretation of a text, but many interpretations and readings. Yet a question poses itself concerning sonnet 129: What is the real attraction in this sonnet? Is it the virtuosity of its artistic fabric? Or is it the power of its rhetoricity which makes it so close to the minds and feelings of so many readers? Or could it be something far more profound that the shell of language encases and conceals so intelligently, causing the reader to interact unconsciously with its latent message? In this paper we shall attempt to answer some of these questions and shed light on the perspective we hold to be adequately convincing.

2. Discussion

What makes our perception of a given work of art what it is comes from our belief that a text has a meaning embedded in its language, and from our ability to understand this language we are given the privilege of interpreting it. The first challenge to this belief comes through the medium of expression in which the work is written. Language, as Steven Casey notes, is always focusing our attention on what it is, and, when what it is an "opaque substance" and indeterminate (1990: 14), it becomes more difficult to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation acceptable to everyone. Moreover, the literary work in itself as a concept defies exact definition, although it is always the subject of our discussions. As Roman Ingarden puts it, "if someone puts the question to us what a literary work actually is, then we must admit with a certain astonishment that we have no correct and satisfactory answer (1973: 3).

Thus in this paper, we will present our own reading of this sonnet as an independent entity, an aesthetic object that deserves study in its own right. In his introduction to Penguin Classics: *The Sonnets and a Lover's Complaint*, John Kerrigan follows the traditional view by classifying Sonnet 129 as part of the group of sonnets about a "dark lady". Similarly, Helen Vendler, Katherine Duncan-Jones and Stephen Booth all adopt this classification of the sonnet. They all accept the order in which the sonnet first appeared in the 1609 edition. In our view, the danger in such an acceptance lies in the interpretation of the sonnet in relation to the ones before and after it. Thus reading in it a commentary on the relationship between Shakespeare and his mistress. This interpretation, moreover, establishes a biographical link which they themselves are aware of its tentativeness and the absence of any firm evidence to support it. The question of interpretation in this case, rests on prejudices, preconceived ideas, and bias against the "other" who is in this instance "the dark lady" as contrasted with the Petrarchan image of beauty.

The biographical perspective by which the sonnet is viewed in this case runs, perhaps, counter to what most of these critics contend about "the death of the author", to borrow Roland Barthes's words, or, as the followers of the intrinsic approach would call it, "the autonomy of a work of art". It is true that a work of art is the product of its age, that it has its origins in the culture out of which it grew, but to interpret a work of art does not necessarily require us to reconstruct the historical context out of which it cropped, but rather try to see it in a new light, where we can rediscover its value and redefine its meaning. Otherwise, the whole hermeneutic process comes to a halt with the appearance of the first interpretation that contextualizes it both culturally and historically. Hans-Georg Gadamer in his essay, "Schleiermacher, Hegel, and the Hermeneutical Task," observes, that attempts at "the reconstruction of the original would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning" (qtd Latimer, 1989: 390). Thus we will argue that this sonnet is not a biographical document, nor is it about the "dark lady", or "the young man". It gives expression to orthodox views in a context that is meant to undermine the beliefs common among Shakespeare's contemporaries by offering a more humane perspective to a human propensity explicitly condemned by society, though inescapable by nature.

It occupies a terrain in both religion and ethics hitherto unexplored by poets and theologians of his time. In order to elucidate our point, we present some common views on the subject of sonnet 129, "lust", during Shakespeare's time, and try to relate those views to the ideas adumbrated in the sonnet, revealing the way Shakespeare employs them only to comment ironically upon them, if not refute them.

Perhaps a common ethical judgment on "lust" during the Elizabethan period appears in Ben Jonson's translation of a Latin saying by Petronius:

Doing a filthy pleasure is, and short,
And done, we straight repent us of the sport.¹

The first of the two epithets that appear in this translation passes an ethical condemnation of the "thing" making it morally reprehensible; while the second epithet confirms the evanescent nature of the "thing". It also affirms the immediacy of the realization of its evil nature by repenting the undertaking of that action. This standpoint, in our view, However, is only present within the argument of sonnet 129 to be revoked, if not reversed by the sonnet's concluding couplet.

Similarly, in Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet 31, "desire" becomes the central issue: it is the "snare" unwittingly created by "fools" only to fall "blindly" into it, paying a high price for the whole experience:

Thou blind man's mark, thou fool's self-chosen snare,
Fond fancy's scum and dregs of scattered thought,
Band of all evils, cradle of causeless care,
Thou web of will, whose end is never wrought;
Desire, desire I have too dearly bought,
With price of mangled mind thy worthless ware...
(Certain Sonnets).

Here emphasis is probably placed on the futility of desire, its evil nature, and the intricacies that enmesh man as a result of entering into that experience. In this sonnet, the moral and theological verdicts are unequivocally expressed. The experiencing "I" expresses anguish and remorse, contrasting sharply with what we find in Shakespeare's sonnet. It is striking, though, to find the entrapment idea in both sonnets, but it would be possible to see them in different lights.

Richard Levin in his essay, "ON THE EVOLUTION OF EMOTION IN SONNET 129," in *Bloom's Major Poets: Shakespeare's Poems & Sonnets*, contends that in this sonnet, there is a form of dynamism that leads to the repetition of the experience, in spite of the realization that it had been "an expense of spirit," because eventually it led to "an expense of his disgust, and so there is now nothing more to keep this "after" stage from fading into the next "before" stage" (Bloom, 1999: 68). Levin argues that Shakespeare's sonnet runs counter to Sidney's poem in its experiential nature, and goes on to say,

It is this complex reversal that most clearly distinguishes Sonnet CXXIX from the two poems with which it is most frequently compared, Sidney's "Thou blind man's mark, thou fool's self-chosen snare" and Donne's "Farewell to love", for although both of these deal with the same subject, their treatment of it is essentially static (in that the speaker himself is not undergoing an experience in the poem, but is only developing a conclusion he has already reached) (Bloom, 1999: 68).

A final example of sonnets that deal with such ideas presented in Shakespeare's sonnet 129 and that were common to the Elizabethans is Thomas Watson's sonnet VIII in Tears of Fancie:

O what a life is it that lovers joy,
Wherein both pain and pleasure shrouded is:
Both heavenly pleasures and eke hells annoy,
Hell's fowle annoyance and eke heavenly bliss.
Wherein vain hope doth feed the lover's heart,
And brittle joy sustain a pining thought:
When black despair renews a lover's smart,
And quite extirps what first content had wrought.
Where fair resemblance eke the mind allureth,
To wanton lewd lust giving pleasure scope:
And late repentance endless pains procureth,
But none of these afflict me save vain hope.
And sad despair, despair and hope perplexing,
Vaine hope, my heart, despair my fancie vexing

In this sonnet, many of the ideas that appear are echoed in sonnet 129. Ideas such as pleasure and suffering, allurement and hunting, quest and repentance, all such ideas are expressed in Watson's sonnet, but with a strong lyrical tone of subjectivity that expresses strongly a personal experience that resulted in a sense of despair and repentance. An important point emphasized in the above examples that has no place in Shakespeare's sonnet is despair, which, in our view is always associated with the state of Satan. Satan can never find hope, and therefore despair remains the qualifying principle of his behaviour. In Shakespeare's sonnet, the idea of despair is not proposed, unless if we extend this concept to incorporate the inability to free oneself from the regeneration of lust; but at least, it cannot be the guiding force behind the formation of the sonnet.

In his article, "Sources For Shakespeare'S Sonnets 87 And 129 In Tottel'S Miscellany And Puttenham'S The Arte Of English Poesie," Paul Hammond finds great affinity between Sonnet 129 and Thomas Lord Vaux's poem on the "fatal attractions of love", and argues that the poem might have been present in front of Shakespeare during the composition of this sonnet (2003: 408). Similarities in the ideas, however, though quite obvious, do not confirm this view, although both poems deal with the same subject. These examples are just a few of many that can be found by poets contemporaries of Shakespeare² And probably Shakespeare knew all these works and many more. The idea that Shakespeare would copy the ideas from these works and consider them expressive of his own, without leaving his own imprint on them seems naïve, since Shakespeare always took from sources, only to remould the subject and recast it in a new perspective that is peculiarly Shakespearean. The ideas expressed in the examples cited above reappear vigorously and even more emphatically in the body of sonnet 129. In fact, the opening quatrain pronounces an ethical and moral verdict which is given more emphasis through the employment of a chiasitic structure and a torrent of asyndetic phrases:

Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame,
Is lust in action, and till action lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel not to trust.
Commenting on these lines, Levin remarks:

The first clause is a sudden outburst of disgust, an unqualified condemnation of the entire act of lust that the speaker now looks back upon, which is made especially emphatic by the piling up of explosive, almost spitting consonantal combinations, and by the reversal of normal syntax, starting with the predicate that carries the actual impact of the speaker's emotion (as if it were too overpowering to await its place in a "logically" thought out proposition), and delaying the subject just long enough to hold the reader in suspense and draw him immediately into the action which seems to unfold in medias res. Then, turning rapidly upon "and" as a fulcrum, the remainder of the quatrain attacks the anticipatory stage of lust, the stage that seems most repulsive to this man, now physically sated, when he remembers all that has been done for the sake of his empty fulfillment. Here his self-laceration finds expression in a series of adjectives that come tumbling out (in marked contrast to the unbroken sweep of the first clause) in a jerky, staccato rhythm, like a barrage of verbal blows, suggesting at once the extremity of his rage and also, indirectly, its impotence, since it can only strike out at its object in this way (Bloom, 1999: 65).

This harsh censure, it is true, bears the stamp of theological and ethical condemnation for the stage following the fulfillment of lust, and a sense of helplessness that overpowers its victim. Nonetheless, a close examination of the poem reveals an underlying current that remains suppressed through a grammatical trick which, when one ponders over finds out something more than just the reiteration of common ideas. The 1st quatrain adopts the active voice, while the 2nd and 3rd quatrains assume the passive, only to return to the active in the final couplet. Moreover, in the passive voice the main agent of the structure, that is, the verb to be, does not surface, thus posing a question for contemplation. Why doesn't the poet use a structure that accommodates the verb in an explicit manner? A poet with such ability as Shakespeare, one who provided the English language with additional vocabulary that runs twice as that of Milton's, cannot lack the means of expression, but rather employs his talent for specific purposes. This omission, in our view, poses an ontological question that perhaps has to do with the ideas expressed and their relationship to existence. The issue of existence is strongly linked to the creator, and there is no being in the absence of a creator; and since the author is a master of his medium, one should take any linguistic phenomenon present in the text very seriously.

As Heidegger puts it in his definition of language that it is not simply a means of communication, of transmitting messages. It is something that "brings Being as Being first of all into the open." (1950: 60). John Macquarrie, the Anglican theologian, and the translator of Heidegger's work, *Being and Time*, believes that Heidegger's thought is a form of theology where "Being" is synonymous with God (1966: 105). Thus the suppression of the verb "to be" in the body of the text probably expresses a theological message that is likewise undisclosed, or, probably a poetic vision related to the omnipresence of the divine, even when that divine is concealed. On a similar plain, we can note the absence of a speaking persona and the only indication of such a persona is the text itself. Thus the creator of the work itself and God remain tacit, though we are all the time aware of their unobtrusive presence.

The 2nd and the 3rd quatrains through the foregrounding of the Epicurean aspects, rearing the negatives, employing a variety of rhetorical devices, such as anaphora, anadiplosis, polyptoton, and antithesis, present a dichotomy of spontaneity and discovery respectively. The antithetical structures which couple enjoyment with despise, hunting and detestation, bliss and woe, joy and dream, persuaded many critics that this sonnet is a disapproval, or perhaps a strong condemnation of lust in-itself.³ It is possible, however, to note that beneath this wealth of rhetoricity lies a profound sense of dissatisfaction, and a tone of complaint that may erupt at any moment. The crescendo experienced in the 3 quatrains dies out in the final couplet, and is displaced by a disquieting decrescendo, where the tone becomes solemn, collected and more akin to a Joycean epiphany. Reverting to the active voice, the concluding couplet anchors itself in a different worldview, a view implicitly contradicting all the verdicts and judgments passed on lust in the lines preceding it. It firmly states the pre-knowledge of the whole world of all the catalogued qualities of lust before, during and after its satisfaction; the dilemma then remains the same: if such a knowledge and awareness of the negativity of lust, why is it then that none can fully evade it?

Thus the irony of the whole previous arguments is revealed, and the negative qualities ascribed to lust with all their ethical verdicts are undermined. A juxtaposition of a chiasmic structure to the opening one reveals perhaps a tendency on the part of the poet to not only undermine, but to invalidate the decree in its entirety stated in the first couplet by a counterstrike of equal rigor.

This ironic view which we find in the sonnet is probably reinvigorated by the detachment with which it is presented. In almost all lyrical poetry one finds a persona speaking, the “I” of the subject, or the “me” of the object, expressing emotions, passions and feelings, observations, remarks, or judgments. This is true of all Shakespeare’s other sonnets, with a slight exception, perhaps, in sonnet 94, where we can find a sonnet whose persona is relatively concealed; yet even in that sonnet, the persona talks about a type of people, “They that have power to hurt, and will do none,” (94: 1). In sonnet 129, however, there is no such a persona speaking about a group of people, or about humanity at large. In fact, there are no pronouns at all in the whole sonnet, except, perhaps for the demonstrative pronoun, “this”, that refers to the whole catalogue of adjectives, and the quantifier “None” which negates the ability of anybody. Similarly, and in the absence of an addresser and an addressee, the whole text becomes a culmination of irony. Or, with a different perspective, a detached, proselytizing text, meant to present an orthodox view, addressed to all mankind. This latter perspective is undermined by the concluding couplet that annuls the value of preaching, and probes human nature to reveal a more significant conclusion: Knowledge of all those qualities had been acquired by the whole world, and therefore stating them is simply redundant; the problem rests in the means to avoid lust and its temptation, and that would be the real issue.

The introduction of the concepts “Heaven” and “Hell” bears a unique significance in this context. The placement of Heaven first links it to the Epicurean ideas in the previous lines, and Hell is linked to the aftermaths. It is possible, therefore to think of Man in his quest to “lust” as Adam and Eve, lacking experience in Paradise exposed to the temptation; in that pre-lapsarian state of humanity, innocence is coupled with ignorance. On the other hand, the Fall of mankind is linked to experience, knowledge, anguish and Hell.

3. Conclusion

In her attempt to establish a line of interpretation for Shakespeare’s sonnet 1, Helen Vendler resorts to the book of Genesis:

When God saw his creatures, he commanded them to increase and multiply. Shakespeare, in this first sonnet of the sequence, suggests we have internalized the Paradisal command in an aestheticized form” (1997: 13).

This remark on sonnet 1 can be illuminating in this context, particularly on the last couplet which is, perhaps, the poet’s commentary on the ideas of his age. Pre-lapsarian man had no sense of guilt, shame or any moral prejudices. Purjury, blood-shedding, blame and murder are all the outcome of the fall. This is evident in Genesis where we have, “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (2:5); and this essential perception of “shame” came only with the fall, with the act of disobedience, the same act that brought knowledge and experience. Disobeying God, therefore, opened their eyes offering knowledge and shame.⁴

Rational thinking coupled with knowledge of what is right and what is wrong, then, are acquired properties of human beings with a strong tie to disobedience; and the ideal state governing the ethical question expressed in the final couplet bears the imprint of the original sin. The ontology of Man within whom the Paradisal command is embedded, runs counter to the post-lapsarian state, with its ethical restrictions and prohibitions; its theology transcends the lapsarian ontology, firmly cemented to the pre-lapsarian state. Man’s unconscious yearns towards the Paradisal state, and the fulfillment of that yearning in the post-lapsarian condition implies experience which, in turn holds a condemnation. It is, as though Shakespeare presents a drama of the pre-lapsarian man, exposed to Satan’s temptation, falling and learning a moral lesson, but too late to revoke. Shakespeare’s presentation of the ideas of his time in three quatrains of his sonnet does not necessarily mean that he endorsed those ideas, but rather to show that they run counter to Man’s innate being. Thus the inference one may make after reading the final lines is that Shakespeare believed that lust is neither the expence of spirit in a waste of shame, nor all this catalogue of qualities with which it is described, since the craving and its practice arise from a divinely given inclination, an amoral sense, in the pre-lapsarian stage, born with our mortal existence, even after the fall, spurring our souls to their immortal life.

Notes

¹ “Foeda est in coitu et brevis voluptas
Et taedet veneris statim peractae.

² See, for example, Thomas Lodge “Rosalynde,” (1590), *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), and Robert Southwell’s “Loves servile lot,” and “Lewd Love is Losse,” and his description of sin “St. Peter’s Complaint,” (1595) lines 637 ff.

³ See, for example, John Kerrigan's introduction p.56. Even translators of Shakespeare's Sonnets to Arabic maintained this view. See, for example, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Selections and Critical Illuminations* explication by Dr. Ahmed Abdel Majid Alamiddin (Amman: Dar Imad gig-Tawzi' wal-Nashr, 2002), p.195 ff.

⁴ In the book of Genesis Chapter 3 verses 7-8:

“7: Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed aprons.

8: And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”

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