

THE CONSTITUENT OF LOVE IN THE SONNETS OF SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract

Love is one of the basic instincts of the human heart. Since times immemorial poets have sung of its joys and sorrows, pleasures and frustrations, and its ecstasies and dejections. Sexual or quixotic obsession can be very well expressed in Love poetry during the Renaissance period, however it could also dole out a range of political, social and religious ends. The present paper explores the origins and development of love element in the Shakespeare's Sonnets.

Shakespeare has made the element of love as the staple of his poetry and plays. In the sonnets he speaks about the various aspects of love. These aspects can be observed in this succinct aphorism of Bacon : "Nuptial love maketh mankind, friendly love perfecteth it; but wanton love corrupteth and ambaseth it." In his sonnets Shakespeare speaks about various aspects of love.

Keywords: Admiration, creative gesture, desirability, nuptial love, platonic philosophy, poetic tradition.

Love and the Renaissance Tradition

Shakespeare's treatment of love was largely inspired by the Renaissance poetic tradition. In this tradition the lover-poet considers the object of his love as the archetypal of all beauty and excellence. The lover, then, was usually spurned by the beloved. The storm-tossed lover who is rejected by the object of his adoration is a common sight in Renaissance love poetry. This tradition of love stemmed mainly from Patriarch who employed a conventional pattern of metaphors, images and formal metrical rhythmical devices. Sonnet 43 'is such a faultless sonnet of absence in presence, presence in absence', Dharker says of Shakespeare's verse;

'The poem plays tricks on the mind with light and shade, with words that look and sound the same but make cunning grammatical shifts.'

"The Trick

*In a wasted time, it's only when I sleep
that all my senses come awake. In the wake
of you, let day not break. Let me keep
the scent, the weight, the bright of you, take
the countless hours and count them all night through
till that time comes when you come to the door
of dreams, carrying oranges that cast a glow
up into your face. Greedy for more
than the gift of seeing you, I lean in to taste
the colour, kiss it off your offered mouth.*

*For this, for this, I fall asleep in haste,
willing to fall for the trick that tells the truth
that even your shade makes darkest absence bright,
that shadows live wherever there is light.”*

Devotion to the Friend

The first one hundred and twenty-five sonnets of Shakespeare have been devoted to the Friend, while the latter twenty-five concern the Dark Lady. In the sonnets about the Friend, Shakespeare speaks about Southampton. Shakespeare was not the only poet to express his admiration for his Patron in terms of love. It was a well-laid tradition of the times. Tasso also burned with devotion to his Lord and Patron as much as any man burned for his beloved. In this sequence Shakespeare makes use of the imagery connected with the traditional conception of the union between the lover and the object of desire. This union, when consummated, should find expression in terms of natural increase. The opening sequence, mainly the first sixteen sonnets, addressed to Southampton, urges upon him the desirability of marriage. In these sonnets the images of planting and husbandry abound. For example :

*For where is she so fair whose unheard womb
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry.*

The poet asks his patron to reconsider his decision to live alone. The opening sonnet reproaches him for self-centeredness, for refusing to make the creative gesture which ensures the continuity of life. In the absence of this creative gesture life itself ends in sterile self-contemplation:

*But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lives,
Thyself thy foe, to they sweet self too cruel.*

The same idea is repeated in fourth sonnet :

*For having traffic with thyself alone,
Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive.
Then how, whom nature calls thee to be gone,
What acceptable audit canst thou leave ?*

Shakespeare condemns the self-centeredness of his patron, and asks him to be generous. In sonnet thirteen, the poet addresses his Patron as “love” and exhorts him to be generous :

*So should that beauty which you hold in lease
Find no determination ; than you were
Yourself again after your self's decease,
When your sweet issue your sweet form should bear.*

The poet, however, is keen to add that his love towards the patron should not be deemed as idolatry: “Let not my love be called idolatry.” In fact, Shakespeare had travelled beyond idolatry towards that abiding relationship which can subsist between two friends. The poet is distressed by the Friend’s betrayal who does not hesitate from seducing his mistress. But the poet is restored to the affections of the Friend. Thus Shakespeare speaks about the unassailability of love and friendship discovered through many trials and tribulations.

The poet speaks about the fact that his life depends upon the love of his Patron and friend;

***But do thy worst to steal thyself away,
For term of life thou art assured mine;
And life no longer than the love will stay,
For it depends upon that love of thine.***

The love of the poet for the Friend is, to say the least, undemanding. Instead of being intruistic it is altruistic. The poet comes to this understanding through stages of tortuous experience – the pain of separation, and the agony of betrayal. The Friend gives his attention to the poet’s mistress and his patronage to the rival poet. Yet the poet remains other regarding and undemanding. He completely effaces himself so that his love towards the Friend may remain intact. The poet feels that love is immortal and the loved one, though mortal, can attain immortality in his progeny and in the poet’s verse.

The poet finds love as the deifier of time. The sense of the hostility of time was associated with the Platonic philosophy of the court poets. Shakespeare says:

***Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty’s brow.***

But time, which is the destroyer of beauty and youth can be conquered. The essence of love consists not in succumbing to Time’s tyranny, but conquering tyranny through love’s gentle power. Shakespeare is in search of something that would perpetuate his Friend’s youth and beauty in defiance of time. First he thinks of marriage and the resulting progeny; then he thinks of “eternizing verse.” But he, in the end, feels that his Friend’s youth and beauty can be perpetuated in the indestructibility of love itself :

***Love is not time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.***

This conviction is capped by the assertion that if what he says comes to be false he would stop writing poetry :

***If this be error, and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.***

Devotion to the Mistress

The other love of which Shakespeare speaks in the sonnets is related to the Dark Lady, the poet's mistress. Although there is much structural disorganization, still a thread of logic can be seen running through this sequence which takes up the last twenty-five sonnets of the sequence. The story begins with the sense of infatuation of the poet. The lover uncritically adores towards a mistress who, although unfashionably dark, is quite certainly beautiful. He defends the dark complexion of his beloved through an ingenuous argument. He says that true beauty has been discredited by the widespread use of cosmetics so black has inherited the title and become the standard of beauty. Later the poet comes to realize the beloved's unattractive appearance yet the infatuation continues. His attitude towards the Dark Lady is summed up in the statement:

They black is fairest in my Judgment's place.

At a later stage we find the poet becoming totally disenchanted with his beloved. The poet speaks about his infatuation and the defects in his beloved:

***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.***

The lover accepts the false-speaking tongue without protest, cynically adapting himself to a situation in which each pretends to be deceived by the other, and drawing comfort from a charade which deludes neither of them:

***When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies;
That she might think me some untutored youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.***

Thus the lover is caught in the web of illusion and reality.

Conclusion

In one of the sonnets (144) Shakespeare speaks of his two loves :

***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 worse spirit a woman colour'd ill.***

Here Shakespeare sums up the main imaginative concern of the sonnets. The "man right fair" is the friend of the first sequence; the mistress "colour's ill" is the Dark Lady. The mistress steals from him the splendid Friend in whom he sees beauty and truth incorporate. Although friendship had been glorified in Renaissance literature, yet the situation presented in the sonnets is unique. It was this, which led C.S. Lewis to remark : "In certain senses of the word 'love' Shakespeare is not so much our best as our only love poet."

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