

***THE MANY FACES OF LOVE: A (RE)READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS
FOUR CENTURIES LATER***

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*Abstract: Four hundred and five years after the publication of the volume **Shakespeare's Sonnets** (1609), the 154 poems, translated in practically all languages and many dialects, continue to fascinate, intrigue, inspire, animate or disturb. These poems "tease us out of thought", as Keats would say, not only because we can find in them glimpses of the human experience of love, the hopes, dreams, pain or disillusion we have already known or will, sooner or later, but precisely because only a great poet could capture each facet of human love, every nuance of the ecstasy and agony of true love so beautifully, dramatically and eloquently as he did. The paper rereads some of the Shakespearean sonnets with an eye for rhetorical articulations of love-induced inner strife, conflict and paradox, arguing that what continues to make Shakespeare our contemporary is his ability to address readers across geographical, cultural, gender, racial or religious borders.*

Keywords: Shakespeare's Sonnets, love, conflict, Platonism, eroticism.

For four centuries now, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* have been read as a collection of some of the most intense and truthful testimonies to human ability to love and to suffer with equal passion and commitment, to leap into the unknown of another's heart. More than any other sequence written at the time, Shakespeare's displays a sincerity of emotion and a depth of feeling that readers find deeply moving and thought-provoking, not only because they are so recognizably human and so imaginatively phrased, but also because these poems voice the drama of a soul torn between desire and reason, between erotic love of a Platonic kind and conventional eroticism governed by lust, of a man who experiences self-disintegration and yet has the power to regain his selfhood times and times again. The following is a (re)reading, to use Matei Calinescu's term for a second or repeated reading resulting in a revised interpretation of the text¹, of a selection of representative Shakespearean sonnets, exploring the various rhetorical articulations of the idea of conflict, responsible in part for the dramatic and (still) intriguing character of the sonnets. Far from exhausting the topic, however, this study aims to capture at least some of the most important kinds of inner, emotional and moral, conflict that the sonnets encode in the language of poetry so eloquently, that the sonnets can still speak to us at a deeply personal level and offer us aesthetic and intellectual enjoyment.

Shakespeare's Sonnets emerged from the strong tradition of the Petrarchan sonnet, naturalised by other 16th-century English poets like Spenser and Sidney, which Shakespeare appropriated to explore the human drama of love, with its paradoxes, with its emotional, moral and spiritual implications, in lyrics of an intense and inescapably involving nature. In part responsible for the readers' immersion into the world of these sonnets is an awareness that they form a "text" with a "story" of two love affairs involving three characters: the

¹ He distinguishes between a first reading which, for an attentive, committed reader also presupposes a rereading, triggered by the reader's awareness of textual codes or instances of intertextuality, for instance, and subsequent (re)readings which, as hermeneutic revisitations of the text are more reflective, revising, expanding earlier interpretations through a careful reassessment of textual subtleties. See Matei Calinescu, *Rereading*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993, passim.

speaker (or the poet's persona), the young friend and the mistress, which appears as "a single, discursive, deeply felt narrative of the dangers and vicissitudes of one male homosocial adventure."² As G.K. Hunter remarked as early as 1953, "[b]y setting up a system of tensions between forces presented as persons, Shakespeare's sonnets engage the reader's interest in a manner akin to the dramatic."³ What is initially a deep feeling of admiration for a young man's beauty and virtues soon turns into a deeper feeling of love, fueled by the desire to be in the other's presence, to become one with the beloved and make him reciprocate his feelings, in spite of the class and age difference between them. The time of bliss is cut short by the intervention of the speaker's mistress (sonnets 40-42), whose promiscuity and unconventional beauty are the major concern of sonnets 127-152. Twice betrayed and twice hurt, the speaker forgives only the man, the true object of his affections, but he can never forgive his mistress, addressing to her some of the least conventional and unflattering sonnets in the English language, making female critics exclaim – as Eve Sedgwick does – that these sonnets "thematize misogyny and gynephobia".⁴

The very organization of the sonnet sequence – whether authorised by Shakespeare himself or not⁵ - canvasses a fragmented story of a man's erotic experience with a man and with a woman, the situation created by this double amorous involvement being the site of interrelated conflicts of an external and inner nature, which the reader discovers by moving from one poem to another, from the first subsequence to the second. The reality of this story is, as countless interpreters have argued, not so much a question of biographical detail as of human experience, which he captured with the same profoundness and understanding of the complexity as in his plays. How much of the story in the *Sonnets* derives from the poet's personal experience of love is something that we simply cannot know, though it is true that, especially since Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* (1889), not few interpreters have assumed that the poet's biography is discoverable through a close reading of the sonnets.

In the *Sonnets* the most important sites of conflict (< Lat. *conflictus*, meaning "collision", "striking together") are the human heart and soul, as the speaker of sonnet 144 eloquently puts it:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,⁶
 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,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,

² Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 49.

³ "The Dramatic Technique of Shakespeare's Sonnets", *Essays in Criticism* 3 (1953), p. 154.

⁴ Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 33.

⁵ The 1609 edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, with the arrangement of the sonnets in the order that we find in most authoritative editions today, may or may not be based on Shakespeare's manuscript, yet all attempts at changing that order have been repeatedly challenged. The most recent argument in favour of Shakespeare's preparation of the manuscript for publication belongs to Katherine Duncan-Jones (1997/2007). See the "Introduction" to *Shakespeare's Sonnets. The Arden Shakespeare*. Katherine Duncan Jones (ed.), London: Thompson Learning, 2007 (1997), passim.

⁶ Italics mine.

Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
 And whether that my angel be turn'd fiend
 Suspect I may, but not directly tell;
 But *being both from me, both to each friend*,
 I guess one angel in another's hell:
 Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

In this sonnet the opposition and symmetry between the two parts of the sonnet sequence are beautifully captured in allegorical form, placing the speaker – here the soul for which the good and the bad angel fight – in the middle of a power clash which he describes as both inner and external to him. Sonnets 40-42 and 133-134 have already provided a reason for the speaker's state of mind. He has lost his mistress to his friend, and the woman's ensnaring power ("tempteth", "corrupt my saint to be a devil") has rendered the young man her slave, a double treason that for the speaker can only be explained by attributing to her the mysterious and unnatural power to subdue. Here the poet transforms the two objects of his affection ("two loves") into spirits, beings of a supernatural order, representing the opposite forces of good ("the better angel") and evil ("worser spirit"), externalizing an inner clash between two kinds of love: one that the first subsequence describes as a source of inspiration, comfort, admiring exaltation, joy and desire, and another that has brought the speaker on the brink of despair, stirring in him passions and desires that are humiliating, sinful, debasing and incomprehensible. Within the speaker's soul the battle is not only between his objects of desire – the young man and the dark lady – but, more importantly, between his own desires, associated each with one kind of love, and ultimately between the two aspects of his self making the antithetical kinds of love possible.

To some interpreters of the *Sonnets* the nature of the speaker's affection for the young is primarily homoerotic,⁷ and although there is no agreement as to the exact nature of this homoeroticism, contemporary critics can no longer accept that the ways in which the speaker addresses the young man are, as Edward Malone put it, "however indelicate, ... customary in our author's time, and neither imported criminality, nor were esteemed indecorous".⁸ Eve Sedgwick warns the reader against assuming that our knowledge of what was acceptable and what was deemed "unnatural" in Shakespeare's time is complete. In her book *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), she prefers the term "homosocial" to refer to all types of relations of a primarily social nature between men, a word she considers better suited for the situation presented in the *Sonnets* for lack of sufficient information on the nature of same-sex relations in the period.⁹ This position does not entirely exclude the possibility of a sexual relationship between the two men (with the implicit autobiographical

⁷ A revolutionary text of its own kind is Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889), where Wilde suggests that between poet and addressee, actor Willie Hughes, the relationship was of a romantic nature. His stance was later brought to the critics' attention by Joseph Pequigney's *Such Is My Love* (1985), one of the earliest extensive studies of the homoeroticism of the *Sonnets*.

⁸ Quoted in Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets", in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, James Schiffer (ed.), New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000, p. 93.

⁹ Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 35. For a different opinion on the question of Elizabethan moral standards and attitude to homoeroticism, see Bruce R. Smith's *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (1991), which has by now turned into a seminal study for those interested in the social context in which the male-male love of the Sonnets needs to be considered.

character of the sonnets), but it does caution readers and interpreters alike against the liberal use of terms that describe types of relationships which cannot be reduced to what we understand today by same-sex bonding.

Yet how else can we discuss the issues at the core of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* if not from our own contemporary perspective? How are we to make sense of what any reader today perceives as an extraordinarily strong emotional charge that only erotic love can provoke, a vein of hardly dissimulated desire that runs through most of the sonnets in the first subsequence, the thorns of jealousy and the depth of despair of the abandoned lover? No matter how aware a reader may be of the use of the idiom of courtly love in sonnets dedicated to a patron of the arts, as W.H. (most likely William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke) is supposed to have been, and regardless of how much Neoplatonism the reader may read into Shakespeare's lyrics idealizing the young man, there are sonnets that simply refuse to be circumscribed to a line of interpretation that ignores the possibility that the speaker describes a love fueled by desire of an erotic nature, which is a source of continuous inner struggle to reconcile the "unnaturalness" of his desire with the beauty and transfiguring power of this love.

In his introductory study to *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1963), Martin Seymour-Smith was writing that the sonnets provide an insight into "a heterosexual's homosexual experience",¹⁰ qualifying thus the affection of the speaker for the young man as erotic, as a yearning for physical and spiritual communion.¹¹ In his view, this desired bodily union concretised, being the mysterious sinful act alluded to in sonnets 33-36. He argues, not very convincingly, however, that these sonnets betray the speaker's guilt not only for having led the young man astray, but also for endangering his social reputation, as suggested by the lines "Nor though with public kindness honour me/ Unless thou take that honour from thy name" (36). That the speaker is able to overcome the disgrace, grief, the loss, the sorrow and offence inflicted on him by the young man (34), excuse the friend's "ill deeds" (34), his "sensual fault" and "sin" (35) only proves, in my view, his unconditional love and testifies to his inner civil war between love and hate (35), which love wins at the cost of the lover's humble acceptance to share responsibility for what happened, making the beloved's sin his own:

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done: ...
 All men make faults, and even I in this,
 Authorizing 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 -
 And 'gainst myself a lawful plea commence:
 Such civil war is in my love and hate.
That I an accessory needs must be
To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me. (35)

The case does not even stand trial, because love forgives and forgets at the slightest sign of regret. The pangs of jealousy are caused by frustrated desire, by knowledge of how the

¹⁰ "Introduction", in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Oxford: Heineman, 1990, p. 34.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

friend's sensuality was put to use with someone else, yet love is stronger than selfishness or pride, although it is a source of great pain and possibly shameful.

The jealousy sonnets in the first subsequence all hesitate between accusation and excuse, between finding fault with the lover or with himself, displaying a masochism that is hard to accept outside a frame of reference shaped by our knowledge of human love with its paradoxes and contradictory emotional states. A sense of shame makes the speaker's wish to possess the lover's being only half-confessed, often disguised in wordplay and intentional ambiguity, as in sonnet 40:

Take all *my loves*, *my love*, yea, take them all;
 What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?
 No *love*, *my love*, that thou mayst *true love* call;
 All mine was thine before thou hadst this more.
 Then if for *my love* thou *my love* receivest,
 I cannot blame thee for *my love* thou usest;
 But yet be blamed, if thou thyself deceivest
 By wilful taste of what thyself refuseth.
 I do forgive thy robbery, gentle thief,
 Although thou steal thee all my poverty;
 And yet, *love* knows, it is a greater grief
 To bear *love's wrong* than hate's known injury.
Lascivious grace, in whom all ill well shows,
 Kill me with spites; yet we must not be foes. (40)

The poem is a splendid example how ambiguity works to describe a complex situation in no less than fourteen lines, without using proper names, pronouns or even nouns that may suggest the gender of each character in the story, the word "love" referring both to the friend and the mistress, and to the feelings associated with each. The love triangle is thus created primarily by omission, a stylistic device revealing self-restraint, hesitation and a sense of shame caused by his feelings of love for another man. It is not the "use" of the mistress (line 6) that pains the speaker so much as his awareness that this mistress now has something that the young man refuses to him. The verb "use" and the phrase "lascivious grace" betray the speaker's frustrated desire for the young man. The oxymoron "lascivious grace" refers back to earlier descriptions of the young man's graceful beauty, and it also conveys the speaker's sensual and sexual perception of that beauty now. There is an interesting turn from the accusation in the octave to the excuse in the sextet, culminating with the speaker's masochistic acceptance of betrayal in the final four lines. Though a source of grief and pain, the friend is a harmful yet necessary drug, an addiction that will ultimately kill him.

The inner war between what seems and what is constitutes the topic of several sonnets in both subsequences. In the first subsequence the sonneteer is mainly a visual poet. The portrait of the young man, though not revealing more than his fairness and his eyes the colour of the sky, shows the young friend as the embodiment of androgynous beauty, a union of the best qualities of woman and man, as openly stated in sonnets 20 and 53. The speaker is not only a man in love, he is also an aesthete who cannot refrain from allowing beauty and grace to charm and inspire him, to attempt capturing some of that human perfection in an idiom of praise which, as Helen Vendler explains, is only in part the idiom of the sonneteers before

him.¹² Starting perhaps with sonnet 13, where the friend is called “my love” for the first time, the aesthete’s wonder is doubled by a feeling that slowly grows into infatuation, which makes the speaker-poet reinvent the language of praise as a language of love repeating “with a difference” the epideictic tradition of the poetry of praise,¹³ appropriating the Renaissance sonnet models and refashioning them according to his needs. Though the sonnets cannot be read outside the tradition from which they borrow form, idiom and panegyric topoi, they do depart from that common literary practice in turning praise of a young man into an occasion to explore, in an unprecedented convincing manner, the depths of his own soul, of his mind and heart, making the reader partake in a great drama of human love which seems to begin with a look.

The eye is both a friend and a betrayer for the speaker in the sonnets. At first it acts as the medium for aesthetic enjoyment, pleasing the poet with the beautiful shape of the youth, which he then turns into poetic expression. The eye is the gateway for the young man’s beauty to enter the speaker’s heart, and from there, to work on his entire being, superimposing a reality shaped by love on that which was originally perceived as reality. The youth’s beauty is immediately associated with virtue, truthfulness and kindness, features that the eyes see and the heart interprets as natural company for a beauty of this kind. The most Platonic of his sonnets, sonnet 105, reunites that Platonic Triad (Beauty, Goodness, Truth) in the appearance of the beloved who, in spite of the poet’s protestations, appears as an idolised object of the speaker’s affection:

Let not my love be call’d idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show,...
'Fair, kind, and true,' have often lived alone,
Which three till now never kept seat in one. (105)

The poet-lover no longer sees what is, projecting onto the beloved all those qualities that he considers admirable and desirable, turning him into an ideal self.¹⁴ There is always some kind of blindness that such identification with the ideal self entails, a twisting of reality to force the object of identification to comply with the imaginary – specular image, as Lacan would call it – that the self projects onto it. It is a self-imposed blindness which selects – from perceived reality – only that which can form and maintain the specular image as desired, ignoring thus the facts and actions that might endanger the process of self-identification with the other person, the relationship between the two being established as one of sameness, and not difference. There are many poems in which the speaker, describing the friend, implicitly says something about himself, yet sonnet 24 really strikes a chord in drawing the reader’s attention to the speaker’s creation of a mental image of the beloved which seems to be the

¹² See Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 20, passim.

¹³ Fineman, *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye. The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p. 2. This idea is, however, central to Fineman’s text, which sets out to demonstrate how a study of poetics can lead to an exploration of how the speaking voice in the sonnets is born and, ultimately, how the poet’s subjectivity is constructed in the text, arguing that the *Sonnets* are more about that subjectivity than about either the young man or the dark lady.

¹⁴ I owe this line of interpretation to Joel Fineman, the first, to my knowledge, to have approached the sonnets as a whole from a psychoanalytic perspective.

beloved's reflection in the lover's eye, which, in turn, is an image of the beloved in the lover's heart. The bodies and particularly the eyes of lover and beloved cannot be told apart, and the suggestion of union in total identity is carefully contrived by the poet:

Mine eye hath play'd the painter and hath stell'd
 Thy beauty's form in table of my heart...
 Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
 Are windows to my breast, where-through the sun
 Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee;
 Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art;
 They draw but what they see, know not the heart. (24)

The lover's eyes, glazed with the reflection of the beloved's are neither reliable nor distinguishable indeed for those of the beloved. Sonnet 24 is a *mise en abîme* poem playing on the metaphor of perspective in the visual arts to meditate on the artificial, constructed nature of the beloved in the speaker's being, betraying the latter's desire to transfigure reality to quench his thirst for beauty and – through momentary identification with the young man – to become his ideal self. Yet the complete identification is impossible, and representation – mental or artistic – fails to go beyond what is immediately perceptible, leaving room for doubt and insecurity.

In sonnet 62 the attitude of the speaker changes dramatically, his identification with the beloved being shown as unnatural and sinful because it contradicts unbearable reality. The mirror image shows an aging man, not even close to the imagined face of the young and beautiful beloved. When the speaker bitterly remarks “’Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise,/ Painting my age with beauty of thy days”, it becomes clear that the speaker sought in this identification with the object of love and praise a means to love and praise himself, to appease the disquietude of a troubled soul, torn between awareness of the difference between him and the young friend, and the desire for sameness, for identity with an ideal.¹⁵

What surprises the reader, granted that the order of the sonnets is accepted as valid, is the fact that in poems following sonnets 33-36 and 40-42, in which the youth's unfaithfulness destroys the aura of perfection surrounding his person, the poet continues to praise the young man and search for different ways to express his love, yet the mood of the poems has changed. Take sonnets 113 and 114, for instance, in which the eye no longer sees but sees as, distorting reality and causing the lover to wonder what may hide behind angelic beauty and the magic of the alchemy of love:

...Or whether shall I say, mine eye saith true,
 And that your love taught it this alchemy,
To make of monsters and things indigest
Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble,
 Creating every bad a perfect best,
 As fast as objects to his beams assemble?
 O,'tis the first; *'tis flattery in my seeing,*
 And my great mind most kingly drinks it up (114)

¹⁵ See Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, p. 52-3.

Though the mind is alert to the betrayal of perception and the transformative power of love that makes things seem what they are not, it is a cup of poison which the lover will drink against his better judgment, for it is not only the eye, but also his mind that has been corrupted.

Corrupting is also the love he feels for the dark lady of the second subsequence, only here the eye sees what is, while the heart “sees” only what it wishes. The woman described in sonnet 127 as beautiful is not only the very opposite in hue and countenance to the young man of the earlier poems, but she will soon prove to be un-*fair* in actions and in love, turning the sonnets addressed to her into a series of unflattering depictions of the lady’s countenance, heart and behaviour in the form of lyrical outbursts of frustrated desire and self-inflicted pain. The lover of the first subsequence is no longer animated by a tender, inspiring love and admiration, but is caught between reason and an all-consuming desire that brings with it self-degradation and inner turmoil. Acting as a counterpoint for the first subsequence, the Dark Lady sonnets shock at two levels: they transform a conventional object of heterosexual desire and praise into an object of repulsive attractiveness and lust - which the reader perceives as utterly disturbing, paradoxical and difficult to accept -, and they reveal another facet of the lover-poet from the first subsequence. Posed one next to the other, the friend and the lady not only form an antinomial pair in which difference goes beyond outer beauty, but, more importantly, they configure two different speakers which merge into one in the love triangle sonnets, especially in 144. The man ensnared by the Dark Lady is entrapped in his own obsessions and uncertainties, in his thoughtless passion and the swirl of emotions awakened by satisfied or denied carnal desire. The outer conflict is between two wills,¹⁶ the lover’s and the lady’s: one is verbalised yet passive, the other silenced yet exercised through action.¹⁷ The more interesting war is the inner one, between what the speaker knows to be fair, kind and true and what the eye and mind reveal as foul, evil, sinful and debasing. She is the opposite of the young friend; she opposes her femininity – as distorted as the sonnet’s view of femininity may be – to his masculinity, to the maleness in its ideal form with which the speaker is willing to identify, and this is what makes the speaker drawn to her. Fineman presents the paradox of this situation as follows: “The poet-lover of the dark lady this way identifies himself with difference. He identifies himself – but how can this be? – with that which resists, with that which breaks, identification, which is why as lover of the dark lady the poet experiences a twofold – what Troilus calls a “bi-fold” – desire.”¹⁸

That the speaker is aware of the sinfulness of his actions and lust does not change much. In sonnet 129, which John Kerrigan justly sees as the foil to 116 and the epitome for the Dark Lady sonnets,¹⁹ the pervading idea is that a passion of this kind leaves man as an empty shell, devoid of all thought and sense of dignity, ashamed yet unable to resist temptation:

¹⁶ Though it is not in the scope of this paper to comment on the “will” sonnets, it is remarkable how this polysemous word is used in sonnets 135 and 136 to invoke the love triangle, to refer to the speaker’s desire and to suggest copulation, the reader being reminded once more that sexual desire is the life-force of the Dark Lady sonnets.

¹⁷ For more on the lady as silent and active, see Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men*, pp. 30-32.

¹⁸ Fineman, *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye*, p. 22.

¹⁹ “Introduction”, in *Shakespeare. The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*. John Kerrigan (ed.), London/New York: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 56.

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
 Is lust in action; and till action, lust
 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
 Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had
 Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
 Mad in pursuit and in possession so;
 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
 A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
 Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
 All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (129)

The moral problem is enounced here, as in most of these sonnets, but, in the words of Helen Vendler, “Shakespeare’s speaker does not repent. He remains – no matter how perjured – confirmed in his choice, preferring, he defiantly declares, to *err*, to have his heart and eyes transferred to a *false plague*, to *mistake [his] view*, to be *blind*, to be a *tyrant ... against [him]self*, to *give the lie to [his] true sight*, to *betray [his] nobler part to [his] gross body’s treason*, and finally to *swear against the truth of so foul a lie*.”²⁰

The paradox of this amorous relationship is that it causes more pain and suffering than it awards pleasure, even of the baser kind, yet the speaker is unable to cut himself free from such sick love. Lamentations such as: “Only my plague thus far I count my gain,/ That she that makes me sin awards me pain.” (141), or “My love is as a fever longing still/ For that which longer nurseth the disease” (147) point to the speaker’s willingness to watch himself disintegrating, to observe the inner chaos stirred by uncontrolled emotions now lifting, now throwing him into the abyss of his own despair for the sake of the depths of his soul it reveals, for the opportunity to explore the contrary aspects of human existence, and for the poetic material this experience provides. More than the sonnets to the young man, these poems rely on antithesis, polyseme, wordplay, oxymoron and the language of paradox for their full effect, capturing thus that essence of human condition which accounts for its richness of experience and meaningfulness.

No one can know how much of Shakespeare’s own experience is reflected in these sonnets and one may argue that this is not even important for the enjoyment of the lyric treatment of such human drama. The true value of these poems, as Helen Vendler, Katherine Duncan-Jones and especially the literary critics of the middle of the twentieth century (G. K. Hunter, G. Wilson Knight, M.M. Mahood among others) insisted, derives not from Shakespeare’s biographical details, interesting as they may be, but from his craft, the poetic alchemy at work within the fourteen lines of each of these sonnets. The fact that they continue to captivate, intrigue and move readers across the world is also a result of the poet’s ability to touch the readers’ hearts through rhetorical articulations of human ecstasy and agony so

²⁰ *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, p. 625. The italics are Vendler’s and they represent passages from the sonnets on the blindness of love (137, 138, 150 and 152).

powerful that they survive translation, enabling readers to enjoy his poetry regardless of the language in which they are read.²¹

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²¹ A testimony to the global afterlife of the *Sonnets* is the very ambitious anthology of sonnets in translation, edited by Manfred Pfister and Juergen Gutsch, *William Shakespeare's Sonnets. For the First Time Globally Reprinted. A Quatercentenary Anthology 1609-2009*, Edition SIGNAThUR, Dozwil TG Switzerland, 2009.