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Shakespeare's Staging and the Self in the Sonnets

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People observe, and people say. They find different ways to say — to bring out what one sees that stays within oneself and to transform and express it into a consensual idea that is understandable for others. When faced with abstract ideas and human emotions, saying it directly becomes difficult, sometimes even impossible. Genres of literature are experiments that explore different ways of expressing the inexpressible. Shakespeare explores the various possibilities of saying human experiences on beauty, time and love in his sonnets. On a micro level, he frames each individual sonnet within the young man sonnets as a stage, where each specific setting and scenario allows dramatic tension to arise between the characters on stage, and from there abstract ideas and emotions are naturally presented without being directly stated; on the macro level, the entire young-man sonnet sub-sequence—being in love with a beautiful young man — itself is used as a stage. Using this stage, the speaker praises the young man, which reflexively praises Shakespeare the poet who creates such beauty, and eventually reveals Shakespeare's poetic self consciousness and anxiety as a poet.

In Sonnet 5, Shakespeare's first impersonal sonnet in the sequence, contains "actors" that interact on the stage even without any human characters. Shakespeare makes Time concrete by assigning it the role to frame beauty: "Those hours that with gentle work did frame/ The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell" (1-2). The role of time can be defined as the rhetorical device of personification, though what this device actually does, is to give lifeless abstract concepts lives and actions so they can interact with others on the "stage." Immediately, Shakespeare assigns another role to Time: "Will play the tyrants to the very same" (3). Not only is Time the tyrant, it also is "never-resting" and "lead[ing] summer on" (5). "Never-resting" is a direct and neutral adjective that describes the quality of Time, for it is in constant movement from humans' point of view. However, because of the virtual stage the sonnet contains, "never-resting" as a quality of the Tyrant is framed into a

negative persona along with the implied seductive nature of “leading summer on”. The first couple lines are used to create the scene, where the audience will naturally expect an upcoming conflict with the “tyrant” — he leads summer to “hideous winter and confounds him there,” where beauty “o’ersnowed and bareness every where” (6-8). Shakespeare frames Time and its changing seasons from an abstract linear progression into a visual confinement on stage, for summer is confounded and trapped in winter. Then, the dramatic resolution for preserving time and its framed beauty is “summer’s distillation” — “a liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass” (9-10). Confinement after confinement. The imagery of a “liquid prisoner” in glass forces the audience’s imagination to stay in the visual and concrete realm. Beauty, “the lovely gaze,” now has changed into the costume of a liquid prisoner and the scene changes to walls of glass. Only in this way of framing a virtual stage that Beauty and its temporal and confounded condition become visual and tangible like a “liquid prisoner”, which gives the abstract line “Beauty’s effect with beauty were bereft” some concrete grounding for imagination and thinking. The central theme and idea are revealed in the final couplet: “But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet, / Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet” (13-14). Now, after beauty has played the role of “summer’s distillation,” it is assigned to another role of the “flowers,” for the purpose of expressing the compromising idea that distillation sacrifices beauty’s “show,” but preserves “their substance” (14). Sonnet thus ends in this conclusion.

However, there is another actor that is on the stage throughout the whole scene but never notifies his existence: the speaker himself. The speaker plays a crucial role of a narration, a monologue, which makes the audience wonder why the speaker is in such a scene that seems irrelevant with the rest of the sonnet sequence. As Helen Vendler predicts in *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, there is an implied vocative ending of this sonnet addressing the young man: “so you too, must be distilled before your winter comes” (66). This sonnet, like most ones in the young-man sequence, explores ways to fight against the tyranny of time on account of beauty, which directly translates to “you should continue your beauty by having a child before you die.” However, the concept of Time and Beauty themselves are abstract terms that are otherwise impossible to express if not because of the virtue stage that is set up by Shakespeare for the speaker to make a monologue, where Time and Beauty serve as actors to carry out the central idea with concrete interactions and scenes.

Above is a close demonstration of how Shakespeare forms a virtual dramatic stage to express the central idea—the urgency of beauty faced with time—of

his individual sonnet, even when he is not writing a play. In Sonnet 15, he frames another, more grand stage to repetitively address the same concern of beauty, time and decay, though this one creates more distance between the actors and the audience, for there is less immediate action and therefore less dramatic. This sonnet would be a “dramatic meditation” of the speaker, as Giorgio Melchiori defines in his *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Meditations*, where the meditation “implies a transcendence of the particular case, the private persons, and the specific circumstances, in order to reach out towards first principles, to the roots of human motivations” (63). The speaker begins the sonnet by meditating, “When I consider every thing that grows” (1). When he says he “considers,” he is inviting all the audience to consider. Therefore, this is not only an individual meditation, but rather a hortatory one for everyone viewing the “show.” When considering “every thing that grows,” the span of the scene widens to the entire world. From there, the speaker summarizes the consensual universal pattern: “Every thing that grows/ Holds in perfection but a little moment”(1-2). This universal truth is what Melchiori calls the “first principles, the root of human motivation” that “transcends” this little stage of the sonnet. Then, the speaker explicitly points out “this huge stage presenteth nought but shows,” constantly reminding the audience of the stage itself (3). The speaker then narrows the focus from “every thing that grows” to “men,” and from there, another universal truth: every thing and every man “at height decrease,” all but an “inconstant stay” (7). The idea of an “inconstant stay” is presented visually in the sonnet, due to its repetitive use in the poem. “*In*” as into some state, *in* existence yet *in*constant. “*In*” never stays at one place; it jumps around the whole sonnet. Such repetition of “in,” almost seems to say that by writing it, he attempts to carve these lines *into* memory, time, and history. At the same time he feels insecure, so he keeps repeating it:

When I consider every **thing** that grows

Holds **in** perfection but a little moment,

That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows

Whereon the stars **in** secret **in**fluence comment;

When I perceive that men as plants **in**crease,

Cheered and checked even by the selfsame sky,

Vaunt **in** their youthful sap, at height decrease,

And wear their brave state out of memory:

Then the conceit of this **in**constant stay

Sets you most rich **in** youth before my sight,

Where wasteful Time debateth with Decay

To change your day of youth to sullied night,

And all **in** war with Time for love of you,

As he takes from you, I **ingraft** you new.

Towards the end, it returns to the central topic of the sequence, that “wasteful Time debateth with Decay” and “all in war with Time for love of you” (11, 13). This time, with the previously framed concrete role of Time in other sonnets, it is easier to express the idea of time’s tension with decay, for each sonnet in the sequence serves to set up the stage, creating concrete roles. Additionally, these concrete roles formed in one sonnet is used in other sonnets, interacting between sonnets. The speaker, referring to Time’s concrete role developed in Sonnet 5, offers a solution to fight with Time and his consequences: “As he takes from you, I ingraft you new” (14). The line “I ingraft you new” suddenly shortens the gap between the speaker-actor on stage and Shakespeare the poet, for what Shakespeare does is also “ingrafting” while the sonnet sequence is written about continuing the existence of the things that might be taken away by time.

In the young-man sonnet sequence, the idea of framing and staging is somehow explicitly indicated in several sonnets; for example, in the previous Sonnet 5, “gentle work did frame,” “will play the tyrants,” and in Sonnet 15, “this huge stage presenteth nought but shows”; in Sonnet 23, “as an unperfect

actor on the stage”; “mine eye hath played the painter” in Sonnet 24. In these explicit hints, the conflict between the speaker and Shakespeare the poet arises. On the one hand, the words of staging constantly remind the audience of the show, thus creating a conscious distance between the audience, actors, and the playwright. On the other hand, in lines such as “I ingraft you new,” the distance between the two almost closes up, thus “breaks” the stage occasionally, allowing both the readers to see Shakespeare’s poetic self and Shakespeare himself to have some personal space in the sonnets. Regarding this distance between Shakespeare and his speaker, Michael Cameron Andrews explains in his essay “Sincerity and Subterfuge in Three Shakespearean Sonnet Groups” that poets do not write autobiographical sonnets, even when the sonnets reflect their lives; Shakespeare’s “poetic presentation of the self is in some measure the freeing of the self, the translation of life to art. One becomes a character in a poem, and Shakespeare, dramatist as well as poet, is native and induced to this kind of imaginative activity” (315). However, even if Shakespeare does attempt to turn himself into a role and his life to art in order to have some freedom, why is it that the self is still inevitable and unavoidable in a poet’s writing, regardless of how hard one attempts to hide and stage it?

One possible explanation of the question raised is that Shakespeare’s self is naturally revealed in the speaker’s praise of the young man. The overarching purpose of this sonnet sub-sequence is to praise, from the speaker praising the young lover, to praising his youth and beauty, to beauty itself, and to his own writing which continues such beauty. Just as Joel Fineman summarizes in his book *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye*, “praise, poetical or rhetorical, is what happens when mimesis and metaphor meet” (3). Mimesis as resemblance and imitation of reality, just like an actor acting by imitating someone else; metaphor as “the likeness of figural comparison and similitude;” praise “joins the two likenesses together as though the likeness of one were confirmation of the likeness of the other,” just like when the speaker praises the young man, he confirms the young man’s beauty by describing him, even if the young man is not inherently beautiful (3). The praising carried out by writing confirms and assigns beauty to him. According to Fineman, as early as Aristotle, “it is recognized that the rhetorical magnification praise accords its object also rebounds back upon itself, drawing attention to itself and to its own rhetorical procedure” (9). Applying this idea to Shakespeare’s sonnets, even though the object of the speaker’s praise is the young man, the “itself” that rebounds back from the object, would be the praise itself and the medium through which this praise is

carried — the art of sonnet-writing. “Its own rhetorical procedure” eventually comes down to Shakespeare the poet, for he is the agent of the writing. Both Sonnet 62 and 39 point out the rebound of the praised object being from “thee” to “me”: “’tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise, / Painting my age with beauty of thy days”; “What can mine own praise to mine own self bring? / And what is’t but mine own when I praise thee?” In this logic, the speaker confirms not only the young man’s beauty when he praises him, but also Shakespeare’s writing itself. This is where Shakespeare the poet meets the speaker of the sonnets: Shakespeare’s own creation turns towards him and compliments his writing. Such interaction can be read as Shakespeare’s poetic self-consciousness, for the speaker simply does not exist without Shakespeare creating him.

The nature of praising, switching from the praise of “thee” to the praise of “me,” explains the necessary and inevitable enclosure of the distance between the speaker and Shakespeare the poet in the sonnets. However, in order for the praising to happen, a bigger stage is needed. One cannot praise anything out of nowhere. For Shakespeare, the entire sonnet sub-sequence forms such stage, where the speaker and the young man are actors in the scene of being in love in the midst of the fleeing time. On the macro stage, the praise re-focuses Shakespeare to his poetic self-consciousness and leads the audience’s attention to writing itself. Then, through the lines, Shakespeare’s poetic self-consciousness and anxiety are naturally revealed.

In Sonnet 59, the speaker looks at the young man and the beauty he has as: “If there be nothing new, but that which is/ Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled” (1-2). When the first line is read at the first line break without the second line — “If there be nothing new, but that which is” — the speaker pessimistically imagines the future beauty as “if there is nothing new in the future, but only inventions that are currently invented and existing now.” The beauty created by people of the present would be a disappointment for the future creators, just as how the beauty recorded by the past has disappointed the present, because there is “nothing new, but that which is/ hath been before.” This line implies the speaker’s concern for lack of creativity of portraying beauty, or just originality in general, for what he labors now has been already labored in the past — “bear amiss/ The second burthen of a former child”(4)! This metaphor of bearing a former child suggests both the illusional joy of a newborn, and the pain that goes along with the labor. Useless pain exchanged with no gain.

Even though the sonnet is still addressing the young man on the topic of portraying his image, the topic has been reduced to simply an excuse, a

reason, a stage that provides a scenario for Shakespeare to think about his sonnet writing itself retrospectively, through the “five hundred courses of the sun” (6). Is what he is writing currently just bearing “the second burthen of a former child?” For this reason, he is curious about “what the old world could say/ To this composed wonder of your frame” (10). However, he does not refer to the young man with his natural beauty, but rather as “composed wonder of your frame.” “Composed,” a passive participle that modifies the “wonder,” which does not attribute the wonder to “your frame,” but rather the active agent that composes “your frame,” namely, Shakespeare himself. “Your frame” can be the image, the external which holds the image, the beauty, but it can also indicate a sort of intricate planning: without the framing, there is no you, no wonder, no beauty. Therefore, “composed wonder of your frame” essentially is referring to the writer that frames and composes such wonder: what “I” am curious about is what the past writers and judges would say about “my” writing. At this point, the young man is no longer significant for the grander show, for he and the speaker’s admiration for him have been used for Shakespeare to have this reflection, from which his poetic anxiety arises: “Whether we are mended, or whe’er better they, / Or whether revolution be the same” (11-12). Interestingly, the first-person plural form and the first person singular form are both used in this sonnet: “how are *our* brains beguiled” and “whether *we* are mended,” comparing to “that *I* might see what the old world would say” and “O sure *I* am the wits of former days” (2, 11, 9, 3). Ambiguity doubles, and characters complicate. In *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, Helen Vendler reads the first-person plural as “steady-state intellectual portions,” whereas the first person singular represents the “infatuated self” who refuses to “credit himself as one of a transhistorical band of writers,” for “speaking as *we*, he is a mind; speaking as *I*, he is a lover” (282). Such reading is reasonable in the context of the sonnet; however, its interpretation only remains on the surface level of the show on the stage with the speaker and the lover as actors — drawing a distinction between the speaker himself and the literary background of “us” writers from the speaker’s point of view—but neglects another layer of the “self” revealed by Shakespeare the poet. I read the “we” as a subtle way for Shakespeare to reveal his own poetic self-consciousness and anxiety: by saying it in the name of “we,” the attention is drawn away from his individual anxiety, but rather a shared one. Another possibility is that he might have used the “we” to refer to himself and the speaker he creates as a union, instead of other writers of his age. In this case, the “we” becomes a clue of such interaction and conversation mentioned previously between Shakespeare the creator and the speaker creation. In both cases, Shakespeare leaks his “self,” allowing the audience to peek inside of his

mind for a short moment.

Even though the sonnet ends with the couplet that goes back to indirectly praising the young man with the voice of an ancient writer: “O sure I am the wits of former days/ To subjects worse have given admiring praise,” the two lines sound rather insincere and forced, because the speaker speaking on behalf of the past poets is simply unconvincing: no poet would be willing to admit that their praised subject is worse than someone else’s (13-14). Although the final couplet seems to conclude the sonnet and the concern that it raises by affirming the young man’s beauty again, “to subjects worse have given admiring praise,” Shakespeare the poet’s poetic anxiety is not resolved (14). The only compromised resolution Shakespeare has, is to continuously write about such anxiety, though not directly, but with the covering of staging in a completely “irrelevant” setting of the speaker falling in love with a beautiful young man. Slightly revealing his self-consciousness behind the “stage”, Shakespeare shows his genuine vulnerability. When the speaker describes the anxiety and insecurity that a writer faces, the voice is genuine; whenever the speaker offers the perfect solution that disappears all of these pains and concerns at the end that fits the plot of the show — like the ending couplet, the voice becomes ingenuine and unconvincing. With the pursuit of the young man as a stage, Shakespeare is able to have some personal space to express his anxiety as a writer through the actor speaker, facing the competition from the past and the judgment in the future, which maintains his dignity.

All the 127 sonnets in the young-man sequence attempt to describe one condition — love in war with time for the sake of beauty — but explores different ways to reveal such a condition. Shakespeare speaks those inexpressible abstractions and the consensual human conditions. He does so by framing a stage for each sonnet, where the speaking is implied in the show. Shakespeare speaks himself, regardless of how much he attempts to hide it. He tries to hide any signs of himself in the sonnets by using the speaker’s framed love for the framed young man as a stage, though his self-consciousness still shows through, because he cares about his writing, his creations. If he knew that years and generations later, there is still a constant audience for his shows on the “huge stage,” his anxiety might ease. Peeking through the curtains of his backstage and seeing Shakespeare’s anxious self makes his life vivid and him human.

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