

The Naked Shakespeare

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Shakespeare, for many in Western society, stands as a prominent symbol of the raw, unbridled potency of the English Language. From his turgid pen has surged pulsing rivers of metaphor, churning oceans of allegory, and explosive, steaming geysers of cultural allusion. His massive body of works has penetrated to the very core of our Anglophonic identity, and so it is a deflating prospect indeed that the Big Bard himself might have been, in fact, far less impressive a member of the literary elite than he has heretofore been presented. Rife with thinly-veiled implications of violence, perversion, and distastefully vulgar sexual innuendo, “Sonnet 18” exposes a William Shakespeare that the world at large may not be prepared to swallow.

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, (Shakespeare, 1-3)

The opening of this work portrays the fractured psyche of a pitiful but dangerous man. As promptly as the first line is presented (and bearing in mind that the collected Sonnets are by and large assumed to be correspondences from the Bard to a specific recipient), we are aware that the “speaker” has to no small extent divorced himself from reality. The absurdity of a contrasting a human being with seasonal fluctuations in climate is as inherently obvious as the helpless introversion he demonstrates by presently answering his own question. In his use of the term “temperate,” the voice of the poem (or hereafter, “Mr. S.”) harbingers a trend of chauvinistic misogyny by attributing to the recipient of his poem a quality of passive, complacent docility. Then, capitalizing on his freshly established “social advantage,” Mr. S beleaguers his poor intended reader with threats of violence, warning that his “rough winds” are fully capable of shaking the recognizably feminine “darling buds of May.” To further this point to its alarming conclusion, the specific mention of “buds” may associate with either the female flower of

virginity or the clitoris, elevating the intention of assault to rape.

And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed; (Shakespeare, 4-6)

Here we experience Mr. S' unpredictable dichotomy firsthand, as we learn that the twisted fellow has combined an embarrassed insecurity with a potentially violent desire for control. On the cusp of his recent allusion to rape, he pathetically confides in the reader either his disappointment with the fleeting nature of "summer's lease,"—the gratification gleaned through the despicable act, or, more graphically, a deep-seated fear of premature ejaculation. He then hastily seeks to recoup any respect lost by his little confession through use of intimidation, warning that his heavenly eye (with connotations of delusions of grandeur, or at least omniscience) has, when necessary, burned those meriting punishment. Indeed, often was the time he was forced to stoop to such a base function as the administration of discipline, dimming his pristine, golden complexion, so "don't think I wouldn't do it!"

And every fair from fair sometimes declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade, (Shakespeare 7-9)

Alas, as is often the tragic conclusion of such instances of uncontrolled assault, the horrible victimization of Mr. S' intended reader has resulted in her death, and the poem takes on a decidedly narrative, desperately rationalizing quality. Shakespeare could be referring either to his physical marring of the recipient's body or her fair self's decline from the fairness of life in

line seven when he excuses himself, “it’s not so bad—everyone dies eventually!” Further, we see that this disastrous turn for the “protagonist” is being attributed to forces outside of his control. Death occurs by accidental chance in this case, else as a function of nature’s unobstructed, transmuting influence: old age. Panic begins to worm its way into the words of speaker as he promises that the eternal summer of her life shall nonetheless not fade. Plummeting through the tiers of denial, not only has Shakespeare rationalized away his responsibility for her death, but lo, she is not capable of being dead at all!

Nor loose 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; (Shakespeare 10-12)

A brief return to Mr. S’ desperately possessive psychological bent lies in line ten of this sonnet, where he once again invokes the beauty of his victim’s life, and exclaims it to be property rightfully belonging to *him*. Not even death herself must cheat Shakespeare of his victim’s debt of debauchery. Coinciding with necrophilia, an always popular topic in the Bard’s writing, is mention of eternal lines which may refer to two parallel lines. Extending eternally but never crossing, always static in relation to each other, the speaker postulates that when unchanging with time his intended reader progresses—“when you no longer age (because you are dead),”—not even *then* shall the grisly shadow of death fall across your features and rob me of their beauty. Formaldehyde can fix that!

At the last, it seems, Shakespeare accepts the horrible consequences of his deed, but even now endeavours to soften the blow of its implications. In declaring “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / so long lives this, and this gives life to thee,” (Shakespeare 13-14), he weakly

pleads that as long as yet lives, through his memory shall live his victim. The situation really isn't as dreadful as it could have been.

The meat of the matter, thus, is that "Sonnet 18" depicts the sordid confession of a manic bout of exacerbation. A self-deluded but self-proclaimed misogynist, rapist, and necrophile, William Shakespeare was, all things considered, a colossal prick.

Word Count: 959

Danny - wow! As predicted, I'm unsure how to respond to this essay. I have accordingly consulted with the other 1105 instructors (who all ~~read~~ read your essay). We have come to an agreement:

1. This essay demonstrates a great deal of talent + promise in its writy. You are clearly a very strong writer yourself + I would ^{strongly} encourage you to take Creative Writy next year.
2. This essay does not fulfill the criteria set out in the assignment (I warned you this might happen). As a result, we'll give you a 50% for this entertaining "misreading" but in all fairness to the other students, nothing more.
3. If you want, you can have the opportunity to rewrite the assignment (seriously this time, please) for a better mark, but we have agreed that this rewrite will be docked a significant "late penalty"

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet 18." The Norton Anthology of Poetry. Ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 1996. 235.