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Literary Research Paper

REPRESENTATION OF MASCULINE PERFECTION IN THE SONNETS OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract

William Shakespeare is a perfectionist in his thought with a fair mind to create the art of gender-based culture where masculinity is the best thing to practice in the conventional society. Major works of his sonnets implicitly evolve around the concept of male perfectionism that is taint for feminine thought. Fairness or the idea of white beauty of men has terminated the beauty of women; primarily, the young male body has been represented as superior and pleasant in his sonnets. This paper will reveal the shell of true patriarchy by analysing various Shakespearean sonnets representing the dominant features of male perfectionism in contrast to feminine aspects.

Keywords: Gender, Perfection, Superiority, Sonnet

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare's sonnets are his most famous literary works reflecting many strong themes. In most of his sonnets, there is an attempt to find several visions of the male perspective representing masculine perfection. Among other themes, love and beauty draw an identical motive to express male perfection implicitly. He presents this aspect in his unique fashion which becomes noticeable not through the fair lady but through the super young who is like sunshine. No one can avoid this sort of masculine thinking while studying his sonnets. He painted beauty on his own, mostly through an unconventional male eye.

Shakespeare made his imagination realistic like a perfectionist in the mind that is portrayed in his sonnets. Where it is common to blame oneself for one's unrealistic expectations, Shakespeare's sonnets are different as they condemn the female counterpart or beloved for his imperfect thought. It is natural to spare the beloved any anguish of guilt that is brought about by an unequivocal taint. Blaming oneself may terminate this natural tone. Convicting the beloved and still loving him/her leads to unconditional love to the beloved which may end in the purity of profound love. In 'Sonnet 35', Shakespeare sings—

> No more be grieved at that which thou hast done
> Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud,
> Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
> And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud. (Shakespeare, 1997, L. 1-4)

Addressing the Fair Youth, Shakespeare here consoles the young man that he shouldn't regret anymore for what he has done. Nothing is perfect: even beautiful roses have thorns, and lovely fountains contain dirt and mud; pretty flowers contain disease, or cankers. Indeed, Shakespeare validates or excuses the young man's sins, in a sense.

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2. Gender in Shakespeare's Sonnets

It is a much-discussed fact that the beloved in Shakespeare's sonnets is a young man. From a historical point of view, remarkable questions have been raised regarding the nature of Shakespeare's relationship to the young man who inspired these sonnets. In consideration with the censorious attitudes of the 16th century England towards homosexuality, one might find it surprising that Shakespeare's beloved is male. However, if we take into consideration the conventions of love poetry in which courtly love is idealised, his beloved's being male or female will make surprisingly little difference; to put the matter more strongly, in some ways his having a male beloved makes more sense. A few implications are apparent in the sonnets where Shakespeare idealises his beloved with some hyperbolic attributes, such as "more lovely and more temperate ('Sonnet 18', L. 2)" than a summer's day; the sun that shines "with all triumphant splendor ('Sonnet 33', L. 10);" "the tenth Muse ('Sonnet 38', L. 9);" "Fair, 'kind' 'true' ('Sonnet 105', L. 9)". This idealisation of the loved one is perhaps the most common and traditional feature of love poetry. The idealisation of the beloved implies attributing certain characteristics to him/her. The ideal one must be perfect, self-sufficient, unified, and complete. It does not need anything. That is why, the consistent, static and homogeneous sun is ideal; whereas, the changeable, inconsistent moon is not.

There is, for Shakespeare, a battle between his eye and heart. "Mine eye and heart are at a mortal war/How to divide the conquest of thy sight ('Sonnet 46', L. 1-2)"—but they are not disagreeing about value: "…mine eye's due is thy outward part, /And my heart's right thy inward love of heart ('Sonnet 46', L. 13-14)." The Inward and the Outward play a harmonious role in praising the beauty and goodness of his beloved. This could create a problem, since the beloved eventually is going to grow old and ugly and then die and be food for worms. There is in the sonnets definitely a concern with the ravage of "Time's scythe". And, Shakespeare does not say, "I'll love you when you are old and ugly."

William Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 130' demonstrates an excess that is typical of evocation of perfectionism in the time and thus is a vivid reminder that superiority complex is a notable facet of that gender-based culture. Through excessive comparisons the poet strains to find a 'perfect' that fulfills his poetic needs and desires as much as he anticipates that his beloved's body will not. The view of fairness does not have to rely on any particular narrative sequence of reading, although it does depend on certain gender assumptions (Hall, 1995).

Jonathan Goldberg (1994) advocates that the necessary masculinity of male beauty 'the young man who seems to have a patent on beauty that the sonneteer cannot imagine located anywhere but in him and a progeny of him who will duplicate and keep forever in circulation his unmatchable beauty' (p. 224).

Another interesting observation given by Grieco (1993) is that fairness or perfection is generally noted on the bodies of super woman. She utters that in renaissance art and paintings males were given priority as more 'darker' visual sight or "virile" complexion; on the other hand, white was more feminine, more aristocratic as a symbol of fair and beauty. Dark was a symbol of masculine, more robust. In this regard, Grieco (1993) is opposite to Shakespeare's sonnets for marking fair and the concept of beauty in the male body. That creates a gender ambiguity between male and female. Here in "Sonnet 130", the sonneteer mentioned and tactfully more carefully about male perfectionism in creating fair culture within his poetry (Grieco, 1993).

Male fairness may also be consistent with the necessity for the aristocracy to reproduce itself; the idea of the young man's self-reproduction evokes the logical outmoded but still ideologically useful Aristotelian trope of reproduction in which men transmit the most important heritable characteristics, including fairness/skin color; and women's uncared wombs, are merely vessels for male seed. In the sonnets, this dynamic comes close to what Lynda Boose (1993) has described as 'patriarchal fantasy of male parthenogenesis'. Such a view of procreation requires 'perfect' male and suggests that perfection in the sonnets is a desirable and transmissible characteristic (Boose, 1993). Stephen Booth (1977)

presages that the young man has the power over other complexions in that he causes people to flush or grow pale. Both blushing and turning pale can be found as the property of fairness (Booth, 1977).

3. Masculine Perfection in Shakespeare's Sonnets

Perfectionism implies people to be concerned with achieving unattainable ideals or unrealistic goals and perfectionists measure their self worth by productivity and accomplishment. Sometimes it can be found that they tend to be harsh critics of themselves when they fail to meet their expectation or want to fulfill their desires by sketching an imaginatory world. In this regard, Thomas Greene (1985) mentioned "an adhoc meaning 'marriage' joins the traditional meaning of 'thrift' and 'estate management' in the word husband and again when the word is picked up in "Sonnet 13", 'who lets so fair a house fall to decay/ Which husbandry in honour might uphold.'" (Greene, 1985, p. 22). In both of these poems sonnet 13 and 27 the accusation of a dereliction of those responsibilities incumbent on the landowning class; is accomplished with the joining of 'fair' with management/marriage. Thus, 'fair house' refers to a young man's body and his family line, which must be perpetuated in a kind of masculine perfection (Greene, 1985; de Grazia, 1993).

In "Sonnet 20", there is a striking object about male fairness which eventually comes out as male perfection where female fairness is mere an idea of false imagination. This deliberate concept of male whiteness is the indicator of darkness which lies in the sonnet. It is the obvious matter of fact that threatens the power on gender basis. Most of the sonnets along with "Sonnet 20" emphasise the uniqueness of young man's beauty and fairness which is superior to female body. Here by analysing this sonnet that creates the young man's perfection as aristocratic as natural and also praiseworthy for all the time. On the contrary, female beauty is as shattered or fragmented as pale or shabby which is artificial and also painted through cosmetics. That clearly evokes the extreme gender complexity. This powerful poetry tool is used to cultivate the superior or mostly patriarchal culture.

According to Kim F. Hall (1994), "The instability of fairness becomes in Sonnet 20 linked to the duplicity of femininity, a duplicity which is the cornerstone of the dark lady sonnets. The sexual pun in the lines 'A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted-/With shifting change, as is false women's fashion' (p. 4). In contrast with the chaos suggested by women, the young man evokes mastery: he is 'A man in hue all hues in his controlling' (p. 20). The double use of 'hue' suggests a homology of form and color. The line would seem to imply that men–or at least this particular man–has a power over both forms of bodies and color; it gives his fairness a stability and power specifically not accorded it in other arenas (a power that women are likely to gain only with the help of cosmetics).

4. Conclusion

William Shakespeare's internal feelings drive the struggle between conventional acceptance and an individual's aspiration that creates an acute torment and is expressed as a superiority complex towards the time. The passage of ageing includes more gender ambiguity throughout the sonnets. Concepts of feminine beauty have come to an end which is depressible for his existence. Physical identity and value are more perfect to his powerful, young, thoughtful eyes. That proves masculine fulfilled, where lies his genuine feelings over time. His sonnets explore the aspect of masculine, profound love for a patriarchal society. Self-esteem is constant in most of his sonnets which is not like the weather or seasons, and it is natural and true to him to reveal his poetic thoughts. Life is pleasant and possessed by the beauty of this sonneteer's mind as he firmly believes in masculine perfection. In this sense, his sonnets can show the rays of uniqueness.

The description of male perfectionism is a key quality of Shakespeare's sonnets and a significant factor in foretelling individualism, specifically male based identity. According to him, the idea of beauty is far different from male to female perspective which is found in 'Sonnet 144' where he uttered "He is a better angel" and 'a saint'. Both physically and spiritually, to the sonneteer, the male version of gender is a more extraordinary being; on the contrary, the female might not be mighty enough on the eyes of patriarchal society.

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