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Deception and Self-Deception in the Dark Lady Sonnets

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Abstract: Shakespeare's sonnets, especially those addressed to the 'Dark Lady', reveal the dilemmas of a male character, trapped in the conventions of the time and his own inner instincts of sexual gratification. This paper analyses this aspect of the poet-narrator, both from the empowered position of the dark lady and as the conflict between the eternal opposites of the psyche, the conflict of the ego and the id, the Elizabethan convention of treating women as an equal and the male desire for sexual gratification.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Sonnet-sequence, dark lady, Elizabethan convention, female subjectivity, distortion, abjection, sexuality, Christianity, Neoplatonism

The sonnets 127-152 are addressed to an older woman who provokes love and revulsion simultaneously in the poet. Shakespeare's poetry dramatizes the power of stigmatizing discourse of promiscuity to distort female subjectivity, revealing in the process the contradictions of the logic on which this distortion rests.

It is the evacuation of subjectivity that the dark lady refuses when she presumes to occupy the male province of carnal desire. However, contrary to critical consensus, it is not her promiscuity as such that so disturbs the speaker of the Sonnets. Rather, it is her assertion of

sexual subjectivity; of agency and choice, which threatens the male prerogative he claims – the dark lady wants some men (may be many men) but she does not want *all* of them. Kathryn Schwarz has brilliantly shown how the poet's attack on female 'will' exposes the contradictions within misogyny. Schwarz focuses, however, only on the dark lady's will to say yes, whereas I am more interested in the poet's responses to her will to say *no*. Sonnets 135 and 136 dramatizes the misogynistic attempt to deny female sexual choice by insisting that if a woman once says 'yes', she forever gives up the right to say 'no'

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,
And Will to boot, and Will in over-plus;
More than enough am I that vexed thee still,
To thy sweet will making addition thus.
Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,
Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?
Shall will in others seem right gracious,
And in my will no fair acceptance shine?
The sea, all water, yet receives rain still,
And in abundance addeth to his store;
So thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will
One will of mine, to make thy large will more.
Let no unkind, no fair beseechers kill;
Think all but one, and me in that one Will. (135)

If thy soul check thee that I come so near,
Swear to thy blind soul that I was thy Will,
And will, thy soul knows, is admitted there;
Thus far for love, my love-suit, sweet, fulfil.
Will, will fulfil the treasure of thy love,
Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one.
In things of great receipt with ease we prove
Among a number one is reckoned none:
Then in the number let me pass untold,
Though in thy store's account I one must be;
For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold
That nothing me, a something sweet to thee:
Make but my name thy love, and love that still,
And then thou lovest me for my name is 'Will.' (136)

With all of the punning on the word 'will' in the two poems, it is easy to miss the fact that both are premised on the belief that by indulging or using her will in the past (in the sense of carnal desire and sex orgasms) the dark lady has forever relinquished the claim to a will of her own (in

the sense of choice or agency). In the rhetorical situation on which the poem is premised, in which she has indeed said 'no' to our poet, such refusal appears perverse and unreasonable. In her 'large and spacious' 'will', the speaker claims, his own 'will' can hardly register; amidst 'the number' of her partners he can 'pass untold'. Curiously, however, in attributing to the dark lady an uncontrolled, indiscriminate appetite, the poet also struggles to deny her active desire, indeed any feeling at all, for him or for anyone. So even as he claims that she has 'Will to boot, and Will in overplus', this excess depersonalizes sex, makes her indifferent to the speaker or any other man.

Will's self-excoriation underlies virtually every sonnet in the sub-sequence. Even when he wanes into his darkest phase in sonnet 129, that diatribe, which bristles with almost forty hissing sibilants, the poem clearly criticizes his ungovernable appetite.

Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.

Wedged between the musical sonnet 128 and the gentle parody of quasi-Petrarchan conventions, sonnet 130, Will meditates upon his ungovernable lust, but not the dark lady. The line above illustrates the nature of his sexual drive; lust serves as the subject of these verbs and those that precede them. It also reveals his conventional male psychology. As S.C. Boorman notes in *Human Conflicts in Shakespeare*:

This [Sonnets]... can be seen as the result of the writer's urge to express to other human beings, directly or indirectly, and by means of verbal skills, his or her awareness of the business of living and of dying, as the writer experiences or conceives that awareness. The simultaneous interaction of the poet with the lady and the young man reveals a kind of tension that is found to be developing in the poet as he fails to attain fulfillment in sustaining relationships both with the lady and the young man. On the other hand, the poet might have been developing a sense of jealousy at his inability to attain what the lady has successfully attained, viz, the affection of the young man.

He further points out that the general Elizabethan point of view was that of, for example, William Averell, a London schoolmaster, in 1584:

[concerning the treatment of a wife]...she was not made of the head not of the foote [of Adam], but of the ryb and side of man, which sheweth, that as she may not be a mystresse, so must she be no maide, as no soueragne, so no sereuant, but an equall companion, and a friendly fellow [partner], to participate with thee of euery fortune.

The Elizabethan man, however, he might accept this role for Woman as wife, still had to cope with his inner discords as a man in relation to women. His sexual desire might drive him to use women solely for physical satisfaction, which was of course, to reduce women, to the rank of beasts; but the popular tradition of the 'romantic' love-story, and the Petrarchan love-sonnet fashion of the later sixteenth century, stressed love rather than passion as the bond and attraction between the sexes, and love implied the man's devotion to the woman, not physical exploitation by him. Moreover, we must remember that love was considered to be as remote from reason as lust – both love and lust were seen as characteristically irrational. Thus, an Elizabethan found himself in the midst of some most urgent and unavoidable dilemmas, subject to the conflicting pressures of reason and lust, reason and love, and lust and love. Of all Man's inner conflicts, these were the most complex, most directly and widely affecting everyday life in the Elizabethan world.

Sonnet 129 remains one of the most popular poems in the sequence due to its moral implications.

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;
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight;
Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallowed 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)

It speaks out against random acts of lust, and leaves the reader with a very strong impression of the negative feelings involved after the act has been committed. The vivid imagery created by this sonnet is nothing short of profound. As the reader, we are immediately confronted with the famous opening line: The expense of spirit in a waste of shame/ Is lust in action, which expresses the idea held during Shakespeare's time that an orgasm, especially one caused by an emotionless act of lust, shorten the lives of men. There are many ideas expressed that indicate the emotions of the poet afterward. He feels ashamed, dirty, violated and guilt-ridden. It indicates that the joy involved in the act does not out-weigh the cost felt inside us once it is over.

This sonnet voice clearly what Boorman refers to as the common feature of the Elizabethan times, in the conflict indicated in the concluding couplet which, in Freudian terms, might be regarded as a conflict between the ego and the id. The lady, who is the object of sexual desire, represents the id of the poet. He is torn between his desire to have sexual gratification from the lady and the established social conventions that clearly find it being voiced in the sonnet.

Sonnet 140 is another sonnet in the 'Dark Lady' collection that deals with the speaker feeling a sense of unrequited love.

Be wise as thou art cruel; do not press
My tongue-tied patience with too much disdain;
Lest sorrow lend me words, and words express
The manner of my pity-wanting pain.
If I might teach thee wit, better it were,
Though not to love, yet, love to tell me so;
As testy sick men, when their deaths be near,
No news but health from their physicians know;
For, if I should despair, I should grow mad,
And in my madness might speak ill of thee;
Now this ill-wresting world is grown so bad,
Mad slanderers by mad ears believed be.
That I may not be so, nor thou belied,
Bear thine eyes straight, though thy proud heart go wide.(140).

He begs the woman to be mindful of her words while speaking to him. He fears that if the wrong things are said, his opinion of her will be diminished. The opening lines of the sonnet give the woman warning not to say or do anything that will cause the poet to speak ill, or write harshly of her: 'Be wise as thou art cruel, do not press my tongue-tied patience with too much disdain'. He encourages her to pretend that she loves him, even if she does not. He fears that he will be driven mad if he finds out that his efforts to gain and/or keep her affections have all been in vain. His sense of inner torture is made abundantly clear. However, the speaker implies that the woman is not the one to blame. As difficult and painful as the truth might be for him to accept, he wants to maintain his respect and admiration for her, and therefore would rather continue to live a self-destructive lie.

The first lines of sonnet 144, which appear to affirm the Christian and Neoplatonic worldview, are followed by a gradual mise en question and a final subversion of the concepts expressed in the first quatrain.

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 worser spirit a woman coloured 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,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And whether that my angel be turned fiend,
Suspect I may, yet 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. (144)

This sonnet makes use of a clearly Christian and Neoplatonic terminology: the 'better angel' at the side of the poet refers to the guardian angel, an association strengthened by the elements of luminosity, and sanctity attributed to him ("right fair", "my saint", "his purity"). This figure is opposed to a "worser spirit" that resembles the traditional image of a demon: a 'devil', a "female evil" that is distinctly characterised as "coloured ill" and endowed with "foul pride", which reminds us of both Lucifer and Eve's fall. Moreover, the situation in the first quatrain is clearly reminiscent of the medieval psychomachia, where a good angel and a demon fought for a man's soul. On the other hand, the reference to 'two loves' is very significant as it refers to both the Augustinian and Petrarchan distinction between love for the Creator and love for the creature, and to the Neoplatonic 'two Venuses', the one celestial and spiritual, the other earthly, representing sexual desire. This sharp opposition appears to confirm the Christian and Neoplatonic antithesis between good and evil, spirit and matter, thus affirming a dichotomous and hierarchical concept of creation. In this way, Shakespeare immediately makes clear his religious and philosophical starting point.

The sonnet's movement from orthodoxy to subversion is also expressed in terms of colours. The chromatic imagery of the first quatrain appears to be consistent with the canonical Renaissance colour paradigm, which was essentially based on the symbolism of Christian theology. According to this paradigm, as Michael Pastoureau writes, white and black formed a pair of opposites and often represented the coloured expression of Good and Evil. This strong chromatic basis acquired even more importance during the Renaissance. The moral and mystical values attributed to white and black, light and darkness, were strengthened by Platonism's rebirth in the Christianised form elaborated by Ficino's Florentine Academia, according to which light is the main element of true Beauty and the most perfect expression of the Good. The two lover, amor celeste and amor volgare, were thus particularly inclined to assume the colours of white and black, not only in regard to the loved object, but also because of their different natures.

Neoplatonic true love is always guided by the intellect's light, which permits man to climb the Neoplatonic scale, the lowest level of which is occupied by the shadow of sensual beauty up to the divine Beauty's light. On the contrary, sensual desire proceeds from complete blindness, which destroys reason and intellect, and plunges man into the darkness of irrational and immoral passions.

Sonnet 144 opens by presenting the orthodox dichotomy of the white and spiritual *Amore celeste* – 'a man right fair', 'the better angel', 'my saint' – and the dark, carnal and infernal *Amore volgare* – 'a woman coloured ill', 'the worser spirit', 'a devil'. However, the failure of this rigid opposition is soon revealed when the woman begins to seduce the youth. As a result, his fairness starts blending with lust's blackness, his white purity stained by the woman's 'foul pride'. The two colours, initially arranged according to a precise oppositional schema, each eventually invade the space of the other. Once again, through the collapse of the boundary between light and darkness, the complexity of a universe in which black and white – good and evil – perpetually spring one from other is expressed. After having called traditional Christian thought into question, Shakespeare tears down its fundamental dichotomous postulate, presenting the reader with a novel, revolutionary worldview.

Joel Fineman, in his book *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* argues that the novelty of Shakespeare's sonneteering desire can be recognized in contrast to an impersonal (orthodox) desire, "and this because Shakespearean desire thinks itself through, presents itself as, its difference from such erotic orthodoxy." He argues that the desire associated with and elicited by, the dark lady operates, quite otherwise, most obviously, because the lady is not ideal. "Moreover, so forceful is this novel and untraditional desire, so peculiar, in its object and so summary in its effect - "Desire is death' (147) – that it leads the poet-lover of the lady explicitly to pose the question of desire, which is to say the question of its origin, which at the same time is the question of its force."

O! from what power hast thou this powerful might,
With insufficiency my heart to sway?
To make me give the lie to my true sight,
And swear that brightness doth not grace the day? (150)

The posing of this very question is a challenge to the 'hegemonic totality of traditional desire'. For, as Freeman puts it, 'it is by virtue of her insufficiency that the lady provokes in the poet a desire that lying against sight, is genuinely inexplicable in terms of a visual identification with an 'all in all sufficient ideal'.

From whatever tiny bits of picture we can construct from the sonnets, the hypothesis stated above fits well in it. As a matter of fact, this struggle between the ego and the id may be

considered as the central motif of the composition of the sonnets. The poet-narrator, from the very beginning of the sequence, has been voicing his pleasure-seeking urges, driven by the id. However, the complexity which is produced by the idea of word-play, and which makes us hesitate to draw a final conclusion about the sonnets, is the result of the repression of these urges, by the ego, which is, according to Freud, responsible for the deals between the inner and the outer worlds. As an act of sublimation, therefore, the sonnets are composed, which act as a medium of expression of his inner drives. The self-deception that comes out in this regard is a sense of 'forgive and forget', as Lear asks his daughter Cordelia to do towards the end of the play. This theme is also to be found in the urge of the poet to get reconciled with the lady in spite of all her faithlessness. Sonnet 139, set much in the traditional Petrarchan tone, seeking to justify the beloved's cruelty to him, seems to be based on the idea of abjection, as proposed by Kristeva. As Kristeva points it out:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable.

In conclusion, there are many different themes to be found within the sonnets. The elements of sorrow, betrayal, grief and love-loss abound them. It seems as though these feelings ran so deeply for Shakespeare that they have become a timeless monument of his struggles. These poems allow him to still speak to us centuries after the fact, and will continue to do so for many centuries to come. The more one reads them, the deeper the understanding one gains of how masterful Shakespeare's control over the entire poetic form was. His extraordinary use of metaphors, symbolism and vivid imagery allow these poems to be cherished for their unquestionable everlasting value. These sonnets also serve as a testament to the brilliant mind of a tortured genius, and serve as an example of some of the finest poetry ever penned in the English language.

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