

**REWRITING/DECONSTRUCTING SHAKESPEARE:
OUTLINING POSSIBILITIES, SOMETIMES
HUMOUROUS, FOR SONNET 18**

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A somewhat profane travesty of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 in a well-known play by Tom Stoppard draws attention to the way in which context influences interpretation. With Shakespeare, it is common to leapfrog between what scholarly interpretations have said about it and what you think you are reading, with the result that, instead of reading the text, the reader looks for, or imposes a "one-to-one", "this-means-that", significance which may have little to do with the actual experience of reading itself. This sonnet characteristically subjects emotion and desire to the conventions of the sonnet form, although, once released from its given context, or once seen as text, it begins to signify in different ways, even allowing for a bawdier rendering which the poem itself, through its own connotations and associations, legitimates.

A feature of many of Shakespeare's sonnets is a tension inherent in them because of the way in which passion would seem to be repressed and controlled by and within the conventions of the sonnet form itself. We could say that in love poetry in general and in the sonnets in particular, the dionysiac impulses of creation and sometimes of lust and desire are controlled by the medium used to express or represent them. While this may be a fairly conventional commonplace, Shakespeare consciously took advantage of this tradition in order to exploit its possibilities in different contexts and sometimes in an ambiguous manner, which, in turn, provides a degree of depth to the sonnets which leaves room for a variety of interpretations. One way in which this tension can be made more apparent is by "rewriting"

or deconstructing the Shakespearean text in order to foreground certain connotations that may have been attenuated because of the observance of convention. This kind of exercise has already been done but, on this occasion, has been motivated by a peculiar example of deconstruction taken from another source: the play, *Travesties*, by Tom Stoppard.

One of the many comic moments of *Travesties* involves Tristan Tzara, a parodic version of the historical figure of the same name. The real Tzara was, of course, the founder of Dadaism which sought to undermine the principles of art, philosophy and logic in the period during and just after the First World War. In the play, the character of Tzara reshuffles Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 to make the poem his, the result of which is an aleatory travesty of the original. Tzara himself remarks that "[a]ll poetry is a reshuffling of a pack of picture cards, and all poets are cheats. I offer you a Shakespeare sonnet, but it is no longer his" (1975: 53); and while this at first appears to be just one more example of a comic debunking of art from the dadaist viewpoint, combined with the playful travesty of existing texts (which is a feature of the whole play) there are a number of more serious considerations implicit in what he says and does. If we bear in mind what has already been said, the implication is that subject matter and form are all subject to convention and tradition: the poet is obliged to fit a particular matter to form and a common exercise for the working poet is to adapt a particular topic or problem to the sonnet form. While the Shakespearean sonnet itself is original in its stanza form and the way it seeks resolution in the final rhyming couplet, for the rest, the poem might simply be considered as a reworking of traditional commonplaces. However, this also provides a clue which ought to allow a further revision of the text in order to discover further possibilities for interpretation in a poem which lends itself to the purpose.

For example, Stoppard foregrounds the fact that the technique of his play is the cutting out and apparently random reorganisation of existing texts, because of which the play allows us to take Tzara's assertion seriously and consider Shakespeare's sonnet as a product

of a kind of generic intertextuality. Moreover, although it seems that the version Tzara produces is simply a deliberate attempt to highlight the bawdy connotations of some words taken out of context, it can also be considered as a kind of deconstruction of the original. The consequence of this is to show how poetic form and convention in the sonnet bring about a transformation of passion and sexuality making the "summer" indeed more "temperate". This bawdy reshuffling simply highlights an implicit and suppressed erotic tension in the original, just as Stoppard's Gwendolen says, "Whenever people talk to me about the weather I always feel certain that they mean something else" (1975: 55), and this is, in fact, the case: the poem is about something else, in the first place because the weather, or rather the references to the seasons, are metaphorical: they refer probably to the full bloom of youth and, perhaps, of passion, to time itself and the effects it has, not only on the beauty of the loved one, but, as we will more clearly see, on the sexual ardour of (probably) both men and women. Apart from that, in the play, the juxtaposition of the original sonnet with its parody, and given Tzara's comments, highlights even more that the poem itself involves a reordering to suit rhythm, rhyme, conventional topics, conventional imagery and so on. Conversely, however, we might say that Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 is really a reshuffling of the bawdy sentiments themselves, that this is, in fact, what love sonnets do. First, let us consider the original sonnet:

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
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often in his gold complexion dimmed;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd:
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 Nor lose 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.
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Before considering the poem in more detail, we should perhaps consider a few accepted ideas with regard to the sonnets. It is traditionally accepted that Shakespeare's sonnet sequence can be divided into three sections: the first expresses the devotion and admiration of the poetic voice (often associated with that of Shakespeare himself) towards an anonymous young man (this would include Sonnet 18); this is followed by a sequence addressed to the dark lady towards whom the poet is attracted; and finally, there are the sonnets which deal with the young man's attraction towards the same lady. While Sonnet 18 belongs to the first group, the first anomaly to be taken into account becomes clear when we consider the sonnet as text and remove it from its given context, which is precisely what Stoppard's play does. By doing this, it becomes apparent that the language of love and devotion used here to address a member of the same sex is traditionally how we would expect a man to address a woman, which further adds to the tension implicit in the poem. Of course, Shakespeare's sonnets are full of allusions to classical works (of which Ovid's *Metamorphosis* XV is the most prevalent), proverbial expressions and stock situations; he is clearly subject to the traditions and conventions of courtly love as practised by Petrarch, although we might suggest that rather than a continuation of the same themes and conceits, his sonnets are often a response to this tradition. An idealised concept of woman which usually inspires this kind of poetry is substituted here by his admiration for a man; the theme of unrequited love and how earthly love can elevate the human soul are also implicit, although in spite of the idealisation of the fair youth, it is the effects of time and nature that tend to be given greater emphasis, with the result that Shakespeare's sonnets tend to question these Petrarchan concepts, and the Petrarchan conceit or analogy is not made use of readily, but in a doubting tone ("Shall I compare thee...?").

The opening lines of the sonnet play on the proverbial formula "as good as one shall see in a summer's day", meaning "as good as the best there is" (Booth 1977: 161). However, it goes on to refer to the way in which time affects beauty. Summertime alludes to a season which is hot and fertile, the tenor of which is

the possibly ardent and passionate state of the addressee, although the first irony is that the shoe is probably on the other foot, and the voice in the poem admits that this is an inappropriate metaphor. On one level, the sonnet echoes Ovid's *Metamorphosis* XV, which emphasises the relation between the seasons and the different stages of *man's* development:

The yeere from springtime passing fourth to
 summer waxeth strong,
 Becoming lyke a lusty youth. For in our lyfe
 through out
 There is no tyme more plentifull, more lusty,
 whote and stout.
 Then followeth Harvest when the heate of youth
 growes sumwhat cold.
 (228-31, in Booth 1977: 551-52)

The person addressed would seem to be more beautiful, yet less passionate, (than whom, we might ask here?), and the ardour of the speaker (his passion) is what shakes or alters this incipient state of what might be fullness or maturity or perhaps even innocence, as the bud has not yet opened (or been opened). If we free the text from its supposed or imposed context, then we might suggest that violent passion disturbs a newly discovered sexuality (possibly even womanhood), or, it may be, the tranquility, rather ambiguously, of either his or her state, or both. Passion or the release of passion which can be associated with summer, however, like a young man or woman's prime, lasts but a short time, particularly if we compare it to the immortality offered by the poem. *Temperate* embodies this significance of bound by time as well as suggesting moderation and calm. As Stephen Booth explains, "The poem develops into a comparison between things of lasting duration – things that are unchanging– and things of limited duration –things that change" (161). Then, as the sonnet progresses, the complexity deriving from the dislocation of language which Shakespeare uses to force significance from the words themselves, also gives the reader an opportunity to force a variety of interpretations from it. If language is here dislocated to fit the design, then the reader has to make the text signify, and perhaps look for language relations and associations

which are not dependent on immediate contiguity or the same (supposed) context of the sonnet. The (not so) implicit connotations of the following lines are full of allusions to youth, beauty, possession (desire) and possible loss, and the eternal summer might mean continuing passion which will not fade; "possession of that fair thou owest" might refer to the sexual act; more comical readings, taking things still in context, might suggest that love will last though the loved one grows fat in, "When in eternal lines to time thou growest"; and living and breathing are terms easily associated with love and passion. The "this" of the final line, refers perhaps to the lines of the poem itself, but refers more fittingly to the "eternal summer", the love, passion or desire of the speaker, which motivates and permeates the whole poem.

While Shakespeare is clearly working within a particular tradition, he makes use of some of the conventions in an unexpected context. Although his sonnets, including this one, "often ring with passion and sincerity", they also "playfully engage themselves in incidental sexual-verbal trivia" (Booth 1977: 549). As Stephen Booth points out:

The first 126 sonnets are full of incidental and incidentally bawdy sexual innuendo; some references make literal sense in reference to either male or female organs; some are specifically male, some specifically female Shakespeare makes overt rhetorical capital from the fact that the conventions he works in and the purpose for which he uses them do not mesh and from the fact that his beloveds are not what the sonnet conventions presume them to be. (548)

This is precisely the case in Sonnet 18: here we have an idealised concept of man rather than a woman, and the supposed purity of courtly love is continually undermined by the sexual connotations of the text.

Up to now, the intention has been to whet the appetite for perhaps a more bawdy interpretation which would have to be admitted anyway. However, the dadaist reshuffling that Stoppard's *Tristan Tzara* offers pushes the possibilities even further. Here is the travesty:

Shake thou thy gold buds
The untrimmed but short fair shade
Shines -
See, this lovely hot possession growest
So long
By nature's course-
So ... long-heaven!
And declines,
Summer changing, more temperate complexion
(Stoppard 1975: 54)

This, perhaps, exaggerates the way in which poetry itself is a reordering to suit rhythm and rhyme, as well as showing how conventional topics and imagery, due to the connotations that tradition itself has given to them, are a formal manner of representing more passionate sentiments, even a kind of subliminal erotic sub-text. Gwendolen's comment in the play clearly implies the nature of this kind of love-sonnet: the voice which speaks is not talking about the weather, and, in spite of, or even because of, the conventional nature of such imagery about the seasons, it is a straightforward step to propose what is already an accepted attitude towards the love sonnet, that it is an accepted form of representing such passion in an indirect (and sometimes not so indirect manner). Of course, in the case of Sonnet 18, this erotic sub-text at first might appear obscure, particularly given that it is supposedly addressed to a man, but Stoppard's play rather comically points the way towards a less refined, or romantic interpretation. In fact, what we find is a different series of couplings and associations distinct from those determined by contiguity.

The new version breaks completely with the accepted context and significance of the poem, and by removing it from its place within the sonnet sequence draws attention to the ambivalent nature of the emotions expressed, as well as allowing us to reconsider the nature and identity of the person addressed. It even broaches an important aspect of gender studies as it involves a consideration of whether sexuality or gender is intrinsic to discourse itself, and here we find that the sonnet, once the given context is questioned, allows for a broad variety of interpretations. That is, if we

consider the sonnet simply as text, the nature and gender of the interlocutors, as well as the nature of the feelings that are expressed, all become open to question. Moreover, in this respect, we can suggest that Shakespeare's sonnets, and this one in particular, explore the possibilities for emotional expression and here he plays with the tensions inherent in language by drawing attention to the fact that the language traditionally associated with sexual love or amorous affection can be used in a different context. It becomes clear, then, that even those poems which are "*ostensibly* adulatory poems addressed to a young man ought also to be seen as heterogeneous, and occasionally fraught interrogations of the language and perception of love" (Sanders 1994: 143, my italics).

As we have seen, the parodic version has little to do with a conventional interpretation and (now that the context is Stoppard's play) starts with a suggestion that the fair lady shake either her golden hair (probably), perhaps her breasts (less likely) or who knows what else, which inspires, in turn, the sexual arousal of the speaker (an erection), although, this does not last long, as it declines leading this version to what is little more than a change of subject (appropriately enough, given this embarrassing circumstance). The golden buds, or hair, are/is untrimmed (she needs to have her hair done, but it is short anyway); perhaps it is unadorned; or her hair is unruly (untrimmed as without a course in navigating terms), and, given this last circumstance, perhaps her (like his) passion is without course or direction, or even uncontrolled, too. Now, at this point it should be insisted that these associations actually do belong to the poem, and that all this "version" does is to exaggerate the connotations of a few immediate associations which give a slightly different slant to the text; as with *hot* and *possession*, *growing* and *declining*; which effectively suggest a more unexpected interpretation of a summer becoming more temperate in terms of sexual arousal.

Tzara's aleatory dadaist poem is, in fact, an exercise in deconstruction. Just as Derrida rejects the possibility of a determinate or final meaning for the text in favour of the free play of its several elements

and its possible meanings, so Tzara provides an alternative significance for the sonnet by rewriting it, thus foregrounding language relations which are not immediately recognised. Now if language is unstable and its meaning is dependent on its differences with other linguistic elements, then the significance of the text is always deferred and must be sought in the relation with other signifiers or elements of the text. Moreover, the significance of the text is always absent from it and, as it is made up exclusively of signifiers, depends on what is excluded from it (the signified is inevitably absent). However, what the text excludes or represses is implicit in it and the meanings of the text or the significance of Shakespeare's sonnet in this case is dependent on what it *apparently* represses but is inscribed in every word. Here, for example, sexuality is everywhere, suggested by word selection, specific word associations and their connotations, and some implicit and sometimes not so implicit absences. Returning to the *given* context of the sonnet, our awareness of such associations would imply that male admiration for a member of the same gender involves a sexual response, or at least relies on a similar kind of discourse for its expression.

As we have observed, convention determines that the imagery and subject matter of a love sonnet be of a particular kind, given, in this particular case, the traditional theme of art as the giver of immortality, which would later be taken up by the Romantic poets. However, it has already been suggested that Shakespeare puts these conventional conceits to different use, and in fact questions the validity of the initial comparison from the start. Moreover, the kind of chaste admiration of Petrarch for Laura, which is also attributed to *Shakespeare* towards the young man is clearly undermined by the sexual connotations that proliferate here. A conventional interpretation tends to underdetermine the sentiments that motivate the poem, which, whether we consider it as conventional or not, are clearly passion, or to be more explicit, sexual desire or arousal. Tzara's new version of the sonnet alludes much more explicitly to the sexual arousal provoked by the sight of the beloved, although this passion soon wanes. However, even the more traditional interpretation of the

sonnet refers to how summer, and here we can say passion, lasts only a short time; that is, sexual desire, and even beauty last only a short while, although these "lines", art and poetry will last forever.

What appears to be a suppressed erotic tension broadens the possibilities for interpretation here and the apparently random reorganisation of the poem brings about a number of free associations which, while at first they seem to have little to do with the original, are associations which are implicitly there. The reader in interpreting the poem, ought to be conscious of word selection (the choice of certain words and not others), the particular connotations of strong words (incorporating one set of connotations and not others), the setting up of series of oppositions, similarities and associations which, when we are aware of them, as we are now in the poem, provide yet a further possibility for interpretation. As Roland Barthes has argued, "the activity of associations, contiguities, and cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy" (1980: 76). The text achieves the "transparency of language relations" (Barthes 1980: 76), which once we recognise them as thematically significant can influence our understanding of the text. Moreover, this kind of attitude towards language is suggestive, significantly here, of a form of play. This is the point of this step beyond Stoppard's character's rewriting of the sonnet. To highlight how this process works, let us consider word selection which allows us to become aware of particular associations in terms of their connotations, to discover if they belong to the same area of significance, form relations of similarity, opposition and so on. What is effectively a fairly straightforward game helps us to become aware of the way in which the poet and the poem play with words and their associations. Remember, though, that in this game we have to think in terms of how what is said is a way of avoiding saying something else, or at least a way of saying it more decorously.

It has been mentioned that Shakespeare responds to existing traditions and conventions and plays with the possibilities of the given meanings and connotations of certain situations, images and even words. If we begin with the possible significance of summer itself as

associated with a young man, then Ovid has provided us with connotations of strength, *lusty youth*, plenty (fullness, fertility), heat and health (*stout*), although this also suggests thickness, firmness and strength, which, once associated with an amorous context, speak for themselves. There are juxtapositions which give rise to ambiguity: *more lovely* is modified and might be seen as in opposition to *temperate*, which originates a paradox when great beauty is described at once as temporary and moderate, and this in turn is linked to the way in which the *summer's day* and *temperate* are also set up in opposition, allowing the possibilities for interpretation we mentioned already regarding, passion and its control, as well as its passing nature. In the same way, we find the contrast between *Rough winds* and *darling buds* (the vicissitudes of nature threaten incipient beauty or strong emotion might threaten beauty or innocence); the "hot eye of heaven shines" suggests excessive passion but is counterpointed in the antithesis with "And often in his gold complexion dimmed", which suggests the waning of ardour or excitement, or even of beauty, which in turn links up with *fair* and *declines* which also hint at the passing nature of beauty (*fair* in Shakespeare can also refer to the face). The relation of similarity in terms of the connotations of *nature untrimm'd* (nature out of control, or unadorned) and *summer not fade*, (the heat, passion and beauty of youth will continue to be strong) which are in clear opposition to *Death'[s] shade* (the valley of the shadow of death), also fit in with the idea of passion or arousal which will not cease in spite of, or even perhaps because of, the inevitability of death. We also find the term, *grow'st*, which is full of connotations which can be associated with nature, too (the obvious one is that "When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st" refers to a metaphor of grafting a cutting from one plant to the stock of another, with its connotations of physical procreation as well as achieving immortality through verse (see Booth 1977: 161-62), although when associated with passion, desire, sexual arousal and the loved one, it might be interpreted in a different way. The text deliberately juxtaposes a number of words, the connotations of which are readily associated with beauty, strength, fullness and sexual arousal, which are in turned related by

opposition to those parts of the text which suggest temporality and decline. As Ovid's *Metamorphosis* XV reminds us, following the passion of *lusty youth* "the heate of youth growes sumwhat cold", although the sonnet claims to overcome this. Having said this, there are obvious claims for a reading which places greater emphasis on passion and sexual arousal, and the ambivalent nature of the text allows the reader to associate these qualities with both addresser and addressee. In simple terms, the conventional reading is dependent on its opposition to a bawdier possibility which may appear absent but, in fact, informs the whole sonnet.

The basic tension felt by the speaker in addressing the anonymous addressee ought to be apparent: his/her beauty is tempered (and/or temporary), or he is controlling his reaction to it; he/she is a darling but he is rough; there is a contrast between powerful feeling or sexual excitement (*hot, shines*) and its loss (*fair, declines*), although *fair* refers, apparently to that beauty. But the associations in the poem tend to suggest much more than admiration, but a passion that continues, more than a simple testimony to the power of poetry: uncontrolled nature and a summer that will not fade suggest the continuation of physical passion and in the face of death's shadow, this passion grows. Certainly, the basic contrast set up in the poem is between passion, excitement, beauty and strength which fade, with the possibility of their prolongation. In this respect, the funny thing, literally about the Tzara version of Shakespeare is the way in which passion, sexual arousal and an erection are linked, which ought to be fairly clear from the associations we have described. This leads to another possibility, given an obvious circumstance which we have already mentioned in the poem. As, once taken out of its supposed context, the addressee is anonymous, there are a variety of possibilities, each of which changes our interpretation of the poem. It is left to the reader now to reread and reconsider the possible significance of the poem in the light of the following possibilities which are the result of the overtly ambivalent nature of the text: the most obvious is that the addressee is an anonymous loved one, male or female; given the ambivalence of the

opening and the clear allusions to the speaker's passion, the addressee may be the speaker's own desire; a *growing* possibility given the connotations of the comic dadaist parody is, however, that the addressee is the (male) speaker's penis.

Far-fetched as it may seem, this kind of erotic playfulness is a feature of Shakespeare's work in general, as well as of much other Renaissance poetry, and the admirable quality of the sonnet is that it allows such a broad and extravagant variety of possibilities. Although the meaning of the poem is traditionally *given*, a reconsideration of the sonnet as text, which frees us from the imposition of a more conventional interpretation, opens up a wide variety of possibilities. For example, if we return for a moment to the idea that this Shakespeare sonnet, and his sonnets in general refer, as it were through a kind of generic intertextuality, to the Petrarchan tradition albeit in a more doubting and questioning tone, then, in the first place, Sonnet 18 signifies in these terms, and the traditional language of admiration, love and respect belong initially to this context. If again we place the *given* context in the background and consider the sonnet as text, then it signifies in terms of the language of love which, it should be insisted, is directed ambivalently to an *unidentified* addressee; tradition would suggest that the addressee is more appropriately a woman; it also suggests that the feelings expressed are chaste, although the ambivalence created in the poem stems from the way this kind of interpretation is at odds with the connotations of the language used, and the series of associations we have already described highlight the validity of a very different kind of interpretation. For some, the sexual connotations of the sonnets combined with the fact that they are addressed for the most part to another man, are grounds for speculation about Shakespeare's homosexuality, but it should be insisted that the poet is working within a clearly marked tradition; his discourse is conventional; and the apparent sincerity only covers up an underlying playfulness which stretches those conventions by putting them to a different use.

Let us say then that a sonnet of this kind foregrounds many aspects of the nature of language and

discourse which are not always associated with Renaissance literature. On the one hand, the sonnet is typical as it does borrow from tradition: "Traditionally, [even] stories were stolen, as Chaucer stole his; or they were felt to be the common property of a culture or community.... These notable happenings, imagined or real, lay outside language the way history itself is supposed to, in a condition of pure occurrence" (Gass 1985: 147). Shakespeare is clearly indebted to tradition here, but the self-conscious nature of much of his writing, and here we include Sonnet 18, draws attention to how "[t]he frontiers of a book [or any text, for that matter] are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network" (Hutcheon 1988: 127).

Following on from what we have said earlier about Barthes and the emphasis on the text and play, we discover that the gist of such an influence is to show us that the significance of the literary text lies within the history of discourse as such, that the references and cross-references that Barthes refers to also involve intertextuality. Linda Hutcheon has pointed out that our awareness of this kind of form of reference "demands of the reader not only the recognition of the textual traces of the literary and historical past but also the awareness of what has been done -through irony- to those traces". (127). This is what happens to us in reading this sonnet: we become aware of its parodic nature as it places traces of Ovidian and Petrarchan tradition in a different context drawing attention to the poet's links with that tradition but also with obvious differences. The effect is one of irony as we become aware of a variety of comic or indecorous possibilities beneath what appears to be a fairly innocent surface.

Suffice it to say that rereading Shakespeare with what we can also call from this standpoint "poetic" license lends further possibilities to the poem, possibilities which belong fundamentally to the poem itself and which can be found if you look for them. However, these alternative readings exist precisely

because of this tension brought about by subjecting matter to convention. The comic irony of Shakespeare is often the result of showing decorously what otherwise might be considered indecorous, and this sonnet is a case in point. Consider: a good deal of artistic creation of this period which depended on patronage was precisely of this kind.

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