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## ON THE “STAGEABILITY” OF SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with the question of the “stageability” and dramatism of Shakespeare’s sonnets by reviewing thematic content, genre assumptions, biographical elements, and the historical context from which they emerged. The connection between Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays is maintained, and the performative and social aspects of the sonnets are analyzed together with their interaction and provocativeness, which is cloaked in ideology, eroticism, and politics. The dramatism of the sonnets is demonstrated by addressing questions about narrativity, plot, characters, action, and dialogue. Through analysis of the narrativity of the sequence, the order of which is recognized as deliberate and authentic, structural elements for possible drama are stressed and connected with Shakespeare’s theatrical opus. We also discern the self-reflexive nature of the sonnets as a genre.

**Key words:** sonnets, Shakespeare, stageability, dramatism, drama, performativity, narratability, characterization

## 1. Introduction

When Jelisaveta Milojević, a professor from the English Department at the Faculty of Philology, came upon the idea when translating and researching extant translations of Shakespeare's sonnets to bring them to the boards, which play a vital role in the community, she knocked on the door of several of the more important theatres in the city of our small country in the hilly Balkans. From Nikita Milivojević, then acting as director of the Bitef Theatre, she got the response that the sonnets were not "stageable" and that they "have no action", so were not material for the birth of a new production (Milojević 2012: 19). The assertion of the "stageability" of Shakespeare's sonnets thus found its way into the academic and cultural circles of Belgrade without having been previously rejected by important national institutions, media, and experts – specifically, the impression of their being "unstageable," which was assertively paraded among representatives of the establishment, while questions and research into its possibilities were never probed. Nor was this impression uprooted by the fact that the sonnets seemed "stageable" to the greats of world theatre, such as Bernard Shaw (who found in them inspiration for his one-act play "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," stressing in his preface that he had made no pretense to historical accuracy) and Bob Wilson (whose stage production of Shakespeare's sonnets with the Berliner Ensemble continues to be acclaimed). Thus Professor Milojević, on the threshold of the anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, found herself on the edge of a chasm of disheartenment and only a mystical dedication to the beauty of the words of the "Great *Vila*"<sup>1</sup> and the academic conviction that the most private expression of this poet ought not be far from the theatre, led her to finally bring the sonnets to life before the eyes and ears of the Serbian public ("Šekspir: Soneti," dir. Aleksandar Nikolić, trans. Jelisaveta Milojević, The National Theatre, Belgrade, 27 Feb. 2014). The episode in the above account prompted the writing of this paper, which maintains that the connection between the sonnets and the theatre should be illuminated for the academic circles in our country by drawing on studies and theories from the English-speaking world where this question has been raised, and by no means lightly.

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<sup>1</sup> A play on words, conflating the name for the fairies in Serbian epics, *vila*, with the Serbian translation of Shakespeare's nickname Will, *Vil* – trans.

## 2. Stage, drama, and sonnet

The word "stage" comes from the Greek word "skēnē" – meaning tent or a hut in front of which drama was enacted during festivals honoring Dionysius, i.e., the material structure of the very beginnings of Western European theatre. "Stageable" was therefore an attribute of that which was characteristic of festival performance, something that was predisposed to being staged. So, when we speak of the stageability of the sonnets, we speak of their potential to blend into the theatrical act, into a spectacle: not static but dynamic and emotional, a spectacle that would enable a shift in the perception of social roles. It is somewhat of a clumsy term for the performance potential of given phenomena; even today, after the effects of postmodernism and its "universal multiplicity," the term is all but equated with the term performability (which is an English loan-word in Serbian). Earlier, when disciplines were strictly delineated, "stageable" would designate a concept that was significantly narrower than "performable" (which may be described in Serbian as *izvođačko* instead of *performativno*). Today, when a theatrical stage can be a street, show window, gallery, or anything else, the distinction between the terms becomes significantly subtler and more fluid. Where it is a question of the presence or absence of action in the sonnets, we can speak of their dramatism, of their potential to comprehensively and cathartically portray the actions of certain characters. Drama is a cathartic activity, "a representation of an action that is serious and complete and of a certain magnitude" (Aristotel 2002: 65). Action is therefore not the same as narrative and it is possible to approach it from different angles, to construct and deconstruct it.

The sonnet was the dominant poetic form during the Renaissance comprising fourteen lines to which Francesco Petrarca gave the particular ideological stamp of the age. Petrarca expresses love, above all that of man for man, through whom the love of mankind towards God is also indirectly established. It was irrefutable proof that the aristocracy had seized power and capital; that it had wrested it from prelates and did not intend to relinquish it. Thus the religious fervor of the Middle Ages hybridized with a subjective eros of antiquity in a true expression of emotion and circumstances were reborn through the representative of the Renaissance. It is no longer the libertine with the oversized phallus climbing up the social ladder through the help of the same, nor that God-fearing ascetic hiding among the pious masses in the city square afraid of the all-mighty global

power – the Catholic church. It is an artist in the service of nobility, aware of his eros and tortured by it. Standing beneath a balcony and quietly uttering words that were neither prayer nor the expression of passion (though they could be both one and the other), or concealing amorous glances behind masks at balls, he gives mild preference to decorum (that once reigned supreme) over wishes for an exalted human existence (just placed on the pedestal). It is the wonder of the dominant stratum of society that still shared power, but patiently awaited the moment of its ascendancy. Love for earthly beings demonstrates the victory of earthly values (and their beneficiaries). Love is therefore a postulate of the sonnet as a genre, just as it is also a postulate of comedy as a genre, but in the Renaissance it took upon itself all of the repressed erotic tension of collective prayer and the eschatological scenarios of universal ruin and salvation. Love became myth in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, an empty form open to different content, from the intimate to the economic, political, and religious.

In England, the sonnet gained an English form. Instead of the two lyrical and lovely wholes (*sonetto* means little song) – an octave with a melodic and redundant rhyme scheme (abba, abba) and a sestet (cde, cde or cdc, dcd) – that comprise the Petrarchan sonnet, Shakespeare's consists of three quatrains ending in a pithy couplet, similar to the outline of a thesis with a decisive conclusion (abab, cdcd, efef, gg). Miljoević explains that the Petrarchan sonnet through its binary structure effects exaltation and the construction of an intellectual and emotional state that is resolved in another part of the sonnet, while the Shakespearean sonnet through its more complex form prescribes a different rhythm, rhetorical structure, and argument, and can be a tripartite structure with a thesis (2012: 21). In Sonnets 21 and 130, Shakespeare even mocks the conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet, its descriptiveness and hyperboles of amorous communications of love, and in Sonnet 21 says that it is not the poet's objective to embellish or adorn the person he loves through metaphor:

So is it not with me as with that Muse,  
Stirr'd by a painted beauty to his verse,  
Who heaven itself for ornament doth use  
And every fair with his fair doth rehearse,

while in Sonnet 130 in parodic tone he describes his beloved, an entirely ordinary woman who is not adorned by divine virtues:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

### **3. Shakespeare's sonnets and Shakespearean history**

During Shakespeare's lifetime, the political and social conditions in England were significantly different than those in Italy, so parodies of what would seem to an Englishman to be saccharine, mawkish, and flowery come as no surprise. English aristocracy did not just share rule with the Catholic church, but became completely independent in a violent and bloody clash. Religious and political turmoil took many lives in England. The queen, Elizabeth I, assumed the throne in a cruel battle with her half-sister by her father; Bill Bryson asserts that in the eyes of Catholics, she was a "bastard and usurper" (Bryson 2010: 34). It was a time of espionage and spies, and the ongoing attempt of the Holy See to overthrow the defected Protestant traitress, who was first excommunicated from the Catholic church before it called for regicide. The Catholic contender, Mary Queen of Scots, waited in preparation to take the throne, until she was ultimately beheaded for being implicated in conspiring against Elizabeth in 1587. Because of unceasing feelings of endangerment, Elizabeth lived with a particular form of paranoia. She took great measures to ensure her safety, slept with a sword by her bed, never touched gifts to her skin (it was once rumored that her throne had been befouled), and never married. People were obsessed with the question of succession, but the law at the time prohibited speculation on the topic. In a land where not even the queen was secure, what kind of security could citizens expect? In Shakespeare's time, it was very easy to die (Shakespeare's fellow poet and playwright, the popular Christopher Marlowe, was killed at 29 years of age during a quarrel in the house of widow Eleanor Bull in Deptford. Shortly before the fight he had been summoned by the Privy Council on charges of blasphemy and atheism. He was released with the threat that at the very least his ears would be cut off, if something worse were not to happen to him, and on the condition that he remain within twelve miles of the Queen's Court. This fuelled theories that it was none other than agents of the crown who attacked him and brought him to his death [ibid: 95]). He who

survived religious and political conflict and ruses would be persecuted by the plague or syphilis (Bryson states that at the time of Shakespeare's birth, London had lost approximately one quarter of its inhabitants to the plague, while at the time his name was entered into theatrical annals, an order was issued for all London theatres to be closed because of the severe outbreak of the disease, in effect for almost two years. At that time in London at least ten thousand people died in the course of a year [ibid: 88]). It is absolutely certain that it was not easy to love another person when surrounded by spies who persecuted any eventual lapse into treason or blasphemy (the new religion was fragile) and the threat of sickness that lurked around every corner. Too much sensuality could be proof of impiety and disparagement of the new religion, and platonic adoration again proof of association with retrograde, opposition currents.

It certainly was not easy to divert oneself with love, test its limits and norms, and place within its frame existential crises, the discontent of the debased and persecuted, testimony of social inequities, the absence of virtue among the "higher-ups," permitted and prohibited passions, fears and concern for life, cruelty, betrayal, and allusions to the queen. Shakespeare often did so in his plays, in which love is the cause of misunderstanding in the struggle among different social ranks and for social rank, but also in the sonnets, in which the candor of expression and deep impression of honesty and confession is perplexing. Also baffling is the fact that the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man, a gentle nobleman with golden locks, while the others are addressed to a dark lady who has found herself in an unusual love triangle. Although homosexuality was prohibited and sodomy severely punished, the affection of the poet for the nobleman could be viewed sympathetically from a progressive and revolutionary vantage point in society. We can only conjecture what would have befallen the poet had a servant or an actor or any other ordinary artisan stood in the place of the nobleman. Still, it is certainly strange that proper names, which can be found in the plays, are lacking in the sonnets, which has led theorists to think that the poet intentionally obfuscated his motives out of fear of censure. Because of this, the sonnets link Shakespeare to the biographical and historical context of their origin, according to David Schalkwyk.

As for biographical conjecture, for a long time guesses were made as to who in Shakespeare's life might have been addressed by the sonnets. The claim that the handsome youth was Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton and the Baron of Tichfield, was fuelled by the dedication

to the poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucretia*. In the dedication, Southampton's character is elevated while Shakespeare's is disparaged to such an extent that, to the reader of today, it seems to be a farce. In those sonnets (the only two instances in which Shakespeare addresses readers directly, with his own voice), Shakespeare explains that his work is only valuable insofar as it is met by Southampton's approval, and that everything that he had written and would go on to write is dedicated to him. Further proof of the sonnets being dedicated to Southampton was found in the fact that in the first seventeen sonnets the poet pleads with the young man to marry, and it is known with certainty that Southampton eschewed marriage (Bryson explains that the third Earl of Southampton was particularly effeminate, had been raised at the heart of the Court, and had been left fatherless early, after which he was entrusted to the care of the queen's treasurer William Cecil. When Southampton was seventeen, Cecil betrothed him to his granddaughter Lady Elizabeth de Vere, daughter to the Earl of Oxford. Southampton refused to marry and as a result had to pay dearly. With an appearance that was exceptionally atypical for the time, of long wavy hair and effeminate dress, Southampton drew attention also because of his sexual adventures, among which was a romantic liaison with one of the ladies-in-waiting, Elizabeth Vernon, but also with the queen's marshal, the Earl of Essex [Bryson: 90]). However, it was not uncommon for artists to seek the patronage of a great lord by writing a dedication to him in their works. Because of strict laws regulating the staging of plays in the city of London, Shakespeare had to win the favor of a member of nobility so that he would not end up with the gristle of his ears burned with a hot iron, grievously whipped, or killed. Bill Bryson asserts that it has not even been proved that Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton ever met, and that even more intemperate words were directed at the latter by other writers, like Thomas Nash and Barnaby Barnes. The absence of proper names in the sonnets prevents us from concluding with certainty whether Shakespeare was writing in his own name, whether the subject of his admiration was one man or several, and whether every time it seems to us to be a man or a woman because of the order of the sonnets (which is also uncertain) it is so at all. All that we know with certainty is that the sonnets were published on May 20, 1609 by a certain Thomas Thorpe, but there is no evidence as to whether Shakespeare publicly reacted to their publication.

With regards to the mysterious dark lady, Bryson suggests that it may be Aemilia Bassano, daughter to a royal musician, or Mary Fitton, the

Earl of Pembroke's mistress, although it is certain that neither had dark complexions or grey breasts like the woman in the sonnets. The search for the historical truth definitely seems like a futile, even superfluous, attempt, but it is a fact that it produces an irresistible impression of a private feeling of injustice, sorrow, and an intimate trust.

Take all my loves, my love, yea take them all;  
What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?  
No love, my love, that thou mayst true love call;  
All mine was thine, before thou hadst this more. (Sonnet 40)

When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see,  
For all the day they view things unrespected;  
All days are nights to see till I see thee,  
And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.  
(Sonnet 43)

Against that time, if ever that time come,  
When I shall see thee frown on my defects,  
When as thy love hath cast his utmost sum,  
Called to that audit by advis'd respects; (Sonnet 49)

Against that time do I ensconce me here,  
Within the knowledge of mine own desert, (Sonnet 49)

Being your slave, what should I do but tend  
Upon the hours and times of your desire? (Sonnet 57)

For thee watch I whilst thou dost wake elsewhere,  
From me far off, with others all too near. (Sonnet 61)

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,  
As to behold desert a beggar born,  
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,  
And purest faith unhappily forsworn. (Sonnet 66)  
No longer mourn for me when I am dead  
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell



Give warning to the world that I am fled  
From this vile world with vildest worms to dwell: (Sonnet 71)

#### 4. The "stageability" of the sonnets

David Schalkwyk notes that despite the fact that we cannot decisively conclude to whom the love messages are addressed (or in whose name they are written), we can observe in them the self-consciousness of the lower social status of the author. Schalkwyk points to the use of the sonnets in plays as a possible clue in deciphering their function when they are written as independent texts. In the plays the sonnets clearly indicate the need of characters to change their circumstances and relations. In that respect they are used as performative discourse, as language in action that has a transformative and reconstructive effect on social and individual positions. In Shakespeare's play *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine devotes verse to his chosen one, the daughter of the Duke of Milan imprisoned in a tower:

'My thoughts do harbour with my Silvia nightly,  
And slaves they are to me that send them flying:  
O, could their master come and go as lightly,  
Himself would lodge where senseless they are lying!  
My herald thoughts in thy pure bosom rest them:  
While I, their king, that hither them importune,  
Do curse the grace that with such grace hath bless'd them,  
Because myself do want my servants' fortune:  
I curse myself, for they are sent by me,  
That they should harbour where their lord would be.'  
(*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Act 3, Scene 1)

With that sonnet, he sets off to free and elope with his beloved Silvia, because her cruel father does not want to give her hand to an ordinary gentleman but promises it to the wealthy Thurio. The sonnet announces an attempt to change the social roles in the play, announces a dangerous action with a potentially fateful role in further events. It is unprecedented insolence, an attack on the system and the wishes of its patriarchal representative. It is no surprise that Valentine would become an outlaw following his failure

(*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has even further similarities with the sonnets, among which is the motif of the clash between love and friendship, and there are claims that it is impossible to read this play in any way other than in the light of the sonnets, not only because of the timing of when they both appeared but also because of the unifying soulful mood; Trifun Đukić, footnotes to the drama *The Two Gentlemen from Verona*, *ibid*, 111). Both the play and independent sonnets paint scenes and create mental pictures filled with action and in that respect are performances and not statements. In these spoken acts, language becomes a picture that has an effect in the world, and is not merely a reflection of the world. According to Judith Butler, an act is a self-transforming action through which identity is redefined, because there does not exist an essential self behind the repetition of action (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990). Shakespeare's sonnets are an example of how language becomes an act through which the unequal status between the artist and the possessor – patron – of the object of love hash it out. There is no description, language is not used to establish the situation by saying that things are such or such, not even to invite readers to revolution, or to effect them emotionally, but to change position, to objectify and compare the superimposed, Schalkwyk explains, adding that sonnets, “do so, by deliberately exploiting the formal ambiguities of language which have flummoxed philosophers for so long; that what looks like a statement may in fact be doing something other than stating. Equally, what looks like a merely rhetorical appeal may transform a relationship in its very utterance” (Schalkwyk 2002: 13).

The author's intense self-awareness, his crystalline understanding of social hierarchy, if only through the pen, shames and exposes the objectified young man and as such topples him from his aristocratic armchair.

Being your slave, what should I do but tend  
Upon the hours and times of your desire?  
I have no precious time at all to spend,  
Nor services to do, till you require.  
Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour  
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,  
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour  
When you have bid your servant once adieu;  
Nor dare I question with my jealous thought  
Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,

But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought  
Save, where you are how happy you make those.  
So true a fool is love that in your will,  
Though you do any thing, he thinks no ill. (Sonnet 57)

In these lines, Shakespeare is ironic about his lower social status; mocking himself for his love and jealousy, he even subordinates himself to the one he is addressing, exposing his "harmful deeds". The lines also suggest that it is not the title that exalts the young man but the author's love. Love, therefore, in this instance, serves as a myth of individual freedom, also showing that the degraded possess a singular power. Sonnets 25 and 91 are in this respect even clearer:

Let those who are in favour with their stars,  
Of public honour and proud titles boast,  
Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars,  
Unlook'd for joy in that I honour most.  
(Sonnet 25)

Some glory in their birth, some in their skill,  
Some in their wealth, some in their body's force,  
Some in their garments, though new-fangled ill,  
Some in their hawks and hounds, some in their horse;  
And every humor hath his adjunct pleasure,  
Wherein it finds a joy above the rest.  
But these particulars are not my measure;  
All these I better in one general best.  
(Sonnet 91)

In some sonnets, Shakespeare places himself in the position of presiding over his lustful and sinful thoughts, but in others again being deprived of his cherished love (e.g. Sonnets 20 and 87). Where the dark lady is in question, Shakespeare repeatedly emphasizes that she is not beautiful but that his favor sings her praise:

In the old age black was not counted fair,  
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name; (Sonnet 127)

Yet in good faith some say, that thee behold,  
Thy face hath not the pow'r to make love groan (Sonnet 131)

In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,  
For they in thee a thousand errors note;  
But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise, (Sonnet 141)

thereby placing himself authoritatively over the dark libidinal lady, over that danger to law and order of the white patriarchal male who subjugates both her emotions and body. In the sonnets dedicated to her, there are clear allusions to a close erotic relationship, which further debase her, but as if that were not enough the poet also describes her promiscuity with many men, her tendency to submit herself to anyone who flatters her (which indicates stupidity), and her arrogance and propensity towards licentious entertainment and music. Most interesting in terms of wordplay is Sonnet 135 where Shakespeare puns on the abbreviation of his name (*Will*), which has various connotations, including: wish, desire, choice, intent, willfulness, carnal desire, lust, penis, vagina (cf. the meanings recoded by Evans 1996: 253-4) and depending on the interpretation, the sonnet can take on a very lascivious meaning:

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy *Will* (here, *Will* can mean wish, desire, carnal desire (ibid: 253));

And *Will* to boot, and *Will* in overplus; (this could also be interpreted as the consent of Shakespeare and those like him (ibid));

More than enough am I that vex thee still,  
To thy sweet will making addition thus. (these two lines can even allude to sexual relations and the size of genitalia (ibid));

Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,  
Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine? (this and the following two lines also contain possible coital and phallic connotations (ibid));

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* (the use of the word  
"will" extends the wordplay that alludes to the penis and vagina,  
sexual relations, and the promiscuity of the dark lady (ibid));

One will of mine, to make thy large *Will* more. ("One", both here  
and in line 14, suggests possible phallic connotations (ibid: 254));

Let no unkind no fair beseechers kill; (do not allow an unkind one,  
i.e. the poet's mistress, to [figuratively] kill any gentle suppliants  
who, like the poet, seek her sexual favors (ibid: 254);

Think all but one, and me in that one *Will*. (think of all Will's as a  
single "Will" – combining all the Will/ will meanings).

So, this potentially very lascivious sonnet mocks the sex appeal of the  
dark lady and shames her with the allegation of promiscuity. Because it is  
mentioned that she is the lover of the fair young man, he is on account of  
that again a "fair angel," and as Shakespeare terms him, humiliated:

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 colour'd 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,  
Woing his purity with her foul pride. (Sonnet 144)

We may conclude that the high performativity of Shakespeare's sonnets  
(whether he wrote them in his own name or created the character of the  
author, or both) – which leads to a change in the status of the poet and his  
beloveds and rivals, to a change in social roles: from the subordinate to the  
subordinating, from the watched to the voyeur – contains an excess and not  
a lack of "stageability." The sonnets as an attempt at social action through  
the language of interiority also found in word games do not preclude their

‘public’ or social character. As no heed is paid to the state of mind of the reader or listener, or to that of those engaged in dialogical interaction with the poet, the interaction and even the provocativeness of the sonnets is intensified (the latter could have endangered lives at the time they were written, which is to say not only the poet’s but also those of likely participants in the poet’s amorous adventures). Schalkwyk asserts that Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays share a mutual investment in interaction in that they both provoke a response, but also respond themselves to that provocation through meditated relationships that are erotic, political, and ideological (2002: 5). Even if we approach the sonnets thinking only of the person of the poet, it is clear that these are the sonnets of a playwright, Schalkwyk concludes (*ibid*).

Therefore, as for the question of the “stageability” of the sonnets, it seems that it could serve as a good incentive for the inception of new productions, especially if the aesthetics, characteristics, and ways of thinking in the modern theatre are taken into consideration. And if we consider the lack of elaborate stage apparatus in Elizabethan theatre, which made its appeal through words, even in that context it is difficult to deny the sonnets’ stageability. It remains for us to consider the question of their dramatism, narratability, plot, characters, action, and dialogue.

## **5. The dramatism of the sonnets**

Mark Jay Mirsky explains that the order of the sonnets and question of their authenticity is crucial when we consider the drama of the collection as a whole. Mirsky stresses that the sonnets were probably not randomly placed in the order in which they appear because the existing sequence is a series of secondary events like dramatic constructions in a succession of miniature plots. The impression that every successive sonnet is the continuation of the preceding one suggests the construction of a narrative and the need to look for it, just as tension works to intensify a mystery. We ask ourselves who exactly the poet is enamored with – in one of them, or both; who they are; what the nature of their relationship is; whether they know each other; whether they are attached; who stole who from whom. We find ourselves with an abundance of deceit, jealousy, mystery, passion, lust, longing, sickness, dreams, fears, death, the irrational, recollections...

so, an abundance of life. The mystery does not derive from the ineptitude of the writer, rather, to the contrary, from his ambiguity.

The entire sequence begins with the request for the birth of an heir, and ends with an image of cupid. The child at the beginning and another at the end suggest that the sequence was deliberate. In the first sonnet there is concern for progeny and a warning that it is hardest of all to remain the only reflection of one's actions; that nobility should pay heed to their comportment; that nobility should marry and perpetuate their lineage also in order to fulfill their obligation to their forebears. Beginning from Sonnet 4 are very clear sexual warnings, euphemisms for onanism, seed spilled to no purpose (the furious hand that spills it is mentioned), promiscuity, and even syphilis. Even the dialogues among the sonnets become established as early as in the first part, and so it is that Sonnet 6 is a kind of response to Sonnet 5 because in the fifth summer is mentioned as a symbol of the beauty and youth of the beloved young man, while the sixth begins with a warning:

Then let not Winter's ragged hand deface  
In thee thy summer, ere though be distill'd: (Sonnet 6)

In brief, the story in the collection of sonnets could be: the poet (whose nickname is Will) gives friendly advice to a handsome, pleasure-seeking nobleman not to avoid marriage, to carefully choose a situation for himself and secure for his lineage a worthy heir, because although the young man will remain immortalized in the poet's verses, his beauty will nonetheless fade. Social interactions and parental concern gradually reveal the poet's deeper emotional and erotic attraction to the young man; in teasing the young Apollo, he questions their relationship. He is drawn to love through a strong mental image, and memories stoke the eruption of a magnetic force within him that he is barely able to control (he is even overwhelmed by fury and jealousy). In addition to belonging to the same gender but different classes (Sonnets 23, 23, 29, 110, and 111 point out that the poet was only a miserable, lowly actor, significantly older than the nobleman), emerging as yet another obstacle in their relationship is the young man's infatuation with a dark-complexioned musician and harlot with whom even the poet has spent a night (in the mean time, the young man neglects him for another poet – Sonnets 78 and 101). The three of them – the old poet, the young nobleman, and the whore of an unspecified age – live bound to a complex relationship and to their own identities. To retain

any relations at all with the youth, the poet directs his love towards the dark lady, because she is at least something that is available to both of them, and this connects them. Suffering from illness, ageing, and feelings of transience, the poet abandons the game of love because he realizes that loving each other always comes to the same thing. The farewell to love and beauty, but also to life, begins in Sonnet 87, although it is hinted at in Sonnets 71, 72, and 73. Leaving the young man and dark lady in their bedroom, the poet remains alone and in love with love itself.

In the last section of the sonnet sequence, an idea is suggested that is common to all of Shakespeare's great plays: the path to maturity is a path of loneliness, to outgrow one's own self is to overcome one's close relationships, and as such, Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, and Othello, when the pressures of destiny and life fall on their shoulders most heavily, remain alone, apart from their spouses. The last sonnets also contain a sizable amount of generic self-reflexivity through formal self-criticism – sonnets about themselves – because infatuation and love turn out to be one big illusion invented by poets. The poet becomes aware that love has clouded his reason, and leaves him with mythological beings and the apostate world to which he belongs.

The little Love-god lying once asleep  
Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,  
Whilst many nymphs that vow'd chaste life to keep  
Came tripping by; but in her maiden hand  
The fairest votary took up that fire  
Which many legions of true hearts had warm'd;  
And so the general of hot desire  
Was sleeping by a virgin hand disarm'd.  
This brand she quenched in a cool well by,  
Which from Love's fire took heat perpetual,  
Growing a bath and healthful remedy  
For men diseased; but I, my mistress' thrall,  
Came there for cure, and this by that I prove,  
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love. (Sonnet 154)

So, the dramatism of the sequence of sonnets may be found there where its "stageability" is also found. The action making up the story about intertwined relationships is that of the battle for social standing and



individual power – waged through love, only for the bitter realization to be reached in the end of the impossibility of changing or influencing the social hierarchy. Love or no love, you are where you are, and love can only give you the illusion of change and power over those higher than yourself, Shakespeare learns.

As for characters, Shakespeare as a master of characterization crafted at least three dramatic personae in the sonnets. In doing so, he employed description, particulars he heard, personal impressions, and indications of change in relationships. We know of the “fair angel” that he is as handsome as Apollo, that he is a nobleman with a penchant for merrymaking, that he eschews marriage, that he is obstinate because marriage advice drives him to even greater obduracy, that he is inclined to spend time in taverns with strumpets and does not consider the eventuality of syphilis, that he often mixes with bad company, that he is aware that he attracts attention, but also that he does not care much for other people’s feelings for him. Of the dark lady we know that she is a musician

How oft, when thou, my music, music play’st,  
Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds  
With thy sweet fingers, when thou gently sway’st  
The wiry concord that mine ear confounds, (Sonnet 128),

that she hails from Africa or Asia, that she is promiscuous, that she likes gifts, that she has a rash nature, that she has told the poet several times that she hates him but then repented, that many men are infatuated with her although none think her pretty, rather exotic. Of the poet we know that he works in the theatre,

O for my sake do you with Fortune chide,  
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,  
That did not better for my life provide  
Than public means which public manners breeds. (Sonnet 111)

that he is older than his beloved,

My glass shall not persuade me I am old  
So long as youth and thou are of one date;

But when in thee time's furrows I behold,  
Then look I death my days should expiate. (Sonnet 22)

that he is experienced regarding “easy women” and genital disease, that he has travelled a lot, “I have gone here and there/ And made myself a motley to the view” (Sonnet 110), that he is of inferior social status, that he is infatuated with a handsome nobleman who he cannot win over, that he is inclined to jealousy and rage, that he has a poet-rival – in work, as in love. Mirsky explains that because of the rife autobiographical details and wordplay with the nickname Will we can conclude that Shakespeare also projected his own personality into that of the poet in the sonnets. The story told through the sonnets fascinates readers, developing at moments into a drama filled with passion, jealousy, desperation, envy, and sexuality; at moments into a parody and joke of Shakespeare’s own life and art, as if it were conceived to provoke readers and draw them into a world of personal frustration.

Mirsky explains that the stress in the lines is also such, as if Shakespeare wanted to stop readers’ breath at precise moments, and that not even the use of capital letters is accidental. The standard theatrical conventions of parody during Shakespeare’s time lead to the conclusion that cross-gender casting was not uncommon. Illusion passed into illusion. It would therefore not be strange if Shakespeare when writing the sonnets was also imagining other figures addressing someone or being addressed by him – the weakened and nervous mother of the handsome nobleman, the rival poet and needler, or friends he had not seen in three years (Sonnet 104). But all of the minor characters and their relations are just hinted at, while the three central characters are clearly distinguished in the construction of the plot of this “very radical collection, about a triangle and the strange, ambivalent sexual identity of a man who could become his characters, male and female” (Mirsky 2011: 5). So, it seems that not even dramatism is absent from this collection of Shakespeare’s. It contains a story, a plot, main and minor characters, scenes, relations, and action, whether the latter is defined as a battle in a love triangle or a reassessment of social status or both. On the ideological plane is the reflection on the standing of art and the artist’s own social standing. In any case, it is an erotic and vivid sequence in which only the requisite love motif has been taken from Petrarch. We may conclude that the sequence has potential for dramatization and stage adaptation alike, like a short story or novel.

In the end, as if he himself knew that the strength of his mastery was in words, and that that which is universal is that which is put in verse ("un verset"), Big Will left a message for the future:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme; (Sonnet 55).

## 6. Conclusion

Because we gave ourselves the liberty of reassessing the stageability, dramatism, narratability, and performativity of Shakespeare's sonnets, we conclude this paper with a thesis about their cathartic power. Without going in to the philosophy of catharsis, we shall keep instead to its most literal definition as that which "through pity and fear ... effects relief" (Aristotle). Does language in action, a language that provokes and seeks – in vain – rights that the writer does not have, a language of effrontery at a time when effrontery cost lives, a language of eroticism and lasciviousness, a language of homosexual and heterosexual desires concealed beneath the masks of other identities and the figures of parents and friends, inherently possess and wring from others fear and pity? We realize how dangerous it was to use that kind of language in the form of the sonnet and see too that Shakespeare's intentions were not innocent; we understand his language to be a personal lashing out against everything and a threat to everything hitherto and only just enthroned. In that place there is fear and relief through fear for us, personally. Tragedy confirms the fact that the threat has gone unnoticed. The demand for individual agency is nevertheless unanswered, the poet is nevertheless aware of his insignificance and the inefficacy of his insufficiently deadly weapon. It appears that only money and spears effect change... not art. But there, in that place of our own interiority, pity takes effect: for others and ourselves, time, Shakespeare, history, and mankind. We therefore hope that there will be more stage adaptations of Shakespeare's sonnets in our milieu.

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