

Dedications of Shakespeare's verses

Raji. T*

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. College for Women, Affiliated to the University of Kerala, Trivandrum - 695 014, Email: rt1206307@gmail.com

Abstract

Shakespeare's verses can be counted as wonderful poems in the English language. It makes us feel that his sonnets are more or less autobiographical but still uncertain. No critics could evaluate these verses 's genuine spirit. So, it remains quite mythical and superstitious. One can even place them in dramatic contexts too. It seems complicated and confusing learners can even say his verses are cryptograms

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Introduction

William Shakespeare, the national bard of England and the greatest name in English drama and literature has left us a corpus of invaluable work providing something to ponder for every generation. This finesse of Shakespeare has famously prompted Ben Jonson to comment in his famous poem 'To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare' that "He was not of an age, but for all time". Apart from his plays, Shakespeare has also written verse works namely: The Rape of Lucrece (1594) and Venus and Adonis (1593). Equally enthralling is the great dramatist's collection of some 154 poems published by Thomas Thorpe in a quarto in 1609. Following the tradition of Petrarchan and English sonnets to an extent, Shakespeare introduced the Shakespearean variety of sonnets differing slightly in form and significantly in content. Equally interesting is the field of inquiry into the dedications Shakespeare makes in his verse works to his begetters, which shall be examined in this paper.

One of the most enigmatic dedicatory lines in English literary history is found in Thorpe's initial publication of Shakespearean sonnets in 1609. Shakespeare's Sonnets Never Before Imprinted (1609) contains sonnets dedicated to a fair young man and a dark lady (both unnamed in the works) and dealt with unconventional shades of desire within the broader framework of love common in sonnet constructions. It became famous (sometimes baffled future editors) for references to possible homoeroticism, betrayal, lust, infidelity, etc. Critics are of differing opinions whether it was a dedication produced entirely by Thorpe or was it inspired partially or entirely by Shakespeare himself. The study of this particular dedication is a thriving area of interest for many academicians, involving even experts from outside the field of literature, like mathematicians.

The beautiful sonnets in this collection address two different personalities, both enigmatic in identity. Sonnets 1 to 126 are dedicated to a fair youth. The Fair Youth is described as an extremely handsome young man, reluctant to marry and procreate and is thus 'selfish'. For example, in Sonnet 18, the poet compares the Fair Youth to a summer's day, but the transience of the summer is contrasted with the timeless beauty of youth ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate"). Sonnet 104 describes how beauty seems to steal from the fair youth's figure. ("Ah! yet doth beauty, like a dial-hand, Steal from his figure and no pace perceived"). In the Procreation sonnets like sonnet 17, the poet urges the youth to have children and preserve his beauty for posterity 'twice',

as his handsomeness will live on in the poet's lyrics. (*But were some child of yours alive that time, You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme.*)

The admiration the poet has for the fair youth (which also signals at least a homosocial adoration) seems to be in contrast with the sonnets addressed to the dark lady whose heart is considered to be filled with notions of betrayal. (*For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.* - sonnet 147). Sonnets addressed to the dark lady range from Sonnet 127 to Sonnet 152. Her persona is sexualised and is referred to in terms of overtly carnal aspects of desire in contrast to the delicate passion expressed towards the fair youth. It is in the dark lady sonnets that Shakespeare employs anti-petrarchism to its greatest extent, where the attributes (the internal ones) of the dark lady are listed with contempt or hatred arising out of romantic jealousy or bitter betrayal rather than love. For example "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (#130), and famously in #134, Shakespeare portrays the dark lady as an immoral seductress waging love not as a spiritual endeavour but as a sordid transaction. Margreta de Grazia in her essay 'The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets' (1993) comments that the relation the poet has with the dark lady must have been considered more deviant than with the fair youth during its time: in terms of the violation of the purified nature of sex, morality, and possible class and racial distinctions. Sonnet 144 has instances which support this argument:

*"Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
which like two spirits do suggest to me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worse spirit a woman coloured ill."*

Although both Fair Youth and The Dark Lady are addressed profusely in the sonnets, their actual identities are a bone of contention for literary enthusiasts worldwide. Some consider the Fair Youth to be Henry Wriothsley, Earl of Southampton, who was a patron of the Bard and fits the descriptions of the Fair Youth in the sonnet. Oscar Wilde in the story "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.", famously proclaimed the Fair Youth to be a boy actor who worked with Shakespeare called William Hughes.

Dedications to the sonnets

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The dedication to the sonnets is a riddle of sphinx for Shakespeare scholars. Taking a casual look at the dedication printed by Thomas Thorpe, we notice a difference from other dedications printed by the same publisher. Printed in capital letters and with full stops after every word, the dedication looks more like an ancient Roman tablet inscription than a Renaissance English dedication printed on paper. This may have been done to culturally place Shakespeare on par with the great Roman poet Petrarch, in the annals of classical tradition. It may also have been chosen to be printed in this fashion to help the unconventional subject treatment of the sonnets in the collection establish itself as a marker of a new era in sonnet tradition.

In a sense, the Fair Youth is no different from a tragic hero of Shakespeare. Canadian Literary Northope Frye refers to Shakespearean heroes as 'fools of time' partly because of their passive ignorance of the inevitable passing of Time and the ultimate obliteration of present concerns. The Fair Youth too is portrayed as passive and ignorant towards the flow of time, and the inevitable obliteration of his physical beauty with time (with him giving no effort to preserve his youthfulness for prosperity to celebrate by procreating). But unlike his treatment towards his tragic heroes, Shakespeare challenges time and rebels against it by memorialising the Fair Youth's beauty in the Sonnets. This deliberate attempt to erect a lyrical monument for the young man is evident through sonnets 55,81,107, etc (where the speaker explicitly mentions the purpose of memorialising). In this context, a dedication structured like a memorial inscription, (rock cut or metal inscriptions promise eternal

remembrance better than books made of paper) would only be highlighting the purpose of the sonnets: to present the lyrics in the volume as a monument for eternal remembrance of love and beauty.

The earliest investigations into the dedication of the Shakespearean sonnets revolved around the identity of Mr W. H. mentioned in the dedication. The most accepted 'begetter' is Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton who is also considered the Fair Youth mentioned in the sonnets. Adding strength to this argument is that Shakespeare's two other poems, *Rape of Lucrece* and *Venus and Adonis* were explicitly dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. The reversal of initials from H.W. to W.H. could have been a cryptic element added into the dedication, maybe as a translucent veil, considering the 'sugared' nature of the sonnets addressed to a young man by an older male poet.

Some others consider Mr W.H. to be William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke to whom the first folio of Shakespeare's plays (1623) was dedicated. Yet, some scholars think that the usage of 'Mr' to refer to a lord seems inappropriate according to contemporary social etiquette.

We have the Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde and English scholar Thomas Tyrwhitt attributing the dedication to William Hughes, a boy actor in Shakespeare's acting company. Sonnet 20 has a wordplay (*A man in hue all hues in his controlling,*), the same sonnet which has the lines "*the master mistress of my passion*"

In recent history, Leslie Hoston in his book, "Mr W. H." proposed the dedicatee be William Hatcliffe, a law student elected as Prince of Pupoole (a role akin to Lord of Misrule) during the Christmas season. This position of Hatcliffe, at a crossroads of being a royal 'Prince' and being a commoner, helped Hoston to reconcile the heavily royal imagery in the sonnets with the salutation 'Mr.' in the dedication.

Yet one particular argument by Hoston gained wider attention. Hoston managed to claim with some success that this enigmatic dedication was indeed meant to be a real enigma, i.e., a cryptogram. He opined that Hatcliffe's name is encoded in the dedication if we combine some words in line 4 and line 7 together forming 'HATLIV'. This realisation that the dedication could be a cryptogram led many academicians, especially mathematicians to peer into the subject in detail. Prominent names among them are John M. Rollett, a mathematician and Jonathan Bond, a Shakespearean actor and the writer of the book "The De Vere Code". Employing techniques which were in vogue in Elizabethan cryptography, Rollett and Bond in separate studies came up with interesting observations: that the dedication encrypted the name of the real author of the sonnets:

not Shakespeare but Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.

Yet, there does not exist solid evidence to decode Shakespeare's sonnet beyond doubt.

Thus, it is likely even more interpretations of this dedication may spring up as long as Shakespeare is in vogue. The sexual ambidexterity of Shakespearean sonnets makes the encoding of the dedications even more interesting for literary enthusiasts trying to find cracks through which light can fall upon the Bard's personal life remains largely a mystery.

Dedication of *Rape of Lucrece* and *Venus and Adonis*

Venus and Adonis (1593) and *Rape of Lucrece* (1594) are dedicated to Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, who was Shakespearean patron and who is believed widely to be in a relation of deep adoration (giving hints to a homoerotic relation) with Shakespeare.

The "Rape of Lucrece" (1594) includes a prose dedication to Henry Wriothesley, and the poem itself can be viewed as fulfilling a promise made in the dedicatory letter to the earl in "Venus and Adonis" – the promise of a "greater labour" or a poem with a more serious tone. In fact, "Rape of Lucrece" is a poem that exudes a somber atmosphere.

The poem "Venus and Adonis," published in 1593, draws inspiration from a section in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Ovid's chef d'oeuvre, Orpheus recounts the tale of Venus and Adonis after the tragic loss of Eurydice. Orpheus turns to male company following the loss of Eurydice. Moreover what torments Orpheus most after Eurydice's demise is his own coming to terms with his life as a sexual being, eventually getting himself killed mixed up in sexual contentions. By choosing to retell a story narrated by Orpheus, who is considered one of the greatest poets of love in literary history,

Shakespeare appears to be delving into the theme of complex sexual reconciliation that has always intrigued him.

Shakespeare provides a Latin epigraph for *Venus and Adonis* extracted from Ovid's *Amores*, where he attenuates his expressions of love. The epigraph is an invocation to the Greek God Apollo, the God of music, poetry and art. Through these lines, Shakespeare tries to draw a parallel between himself and Ovid, as poets of desire and passionate love.

Vilia miretur vulgus: mihi flavus Apollo Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua.

Apollo can be considered the first pansexual god in Greek mythology, having had romantic relationships with handsome men such as Hyacinthus, Cyparissus, and Adonis, yet we don't come across Apollo (in a modern reading) as a character concerned much with gender-based compartmentalisation when it comes to attraction. In Shakespeare's works, the fluidity of attraction is explored through the characters of Apollo, Venus, Cesario, Antonio, and the Fair Youth. It is worthwhile to consider the epigraph, dedication, and content of *Venus and Adonis* as an interconnected whole, rather than separate components of a printed book. A closer examination of the dedication to the Earl of Southampton, written in a language suggesting a very close companionship, may support an interpretation that aligns with the concept of fluidity in attraction and at least a homosocial bond between the poet and the patron. Alternatively, from a socio-economic perspective, the dedication could simply be an attempt to flatter a patron to gain economic benefits.

Contributions by the 'Sweet Swan of Avon' to the art of poetry become interesting not just because of the quality of verse, but also because of the ambiguous questions (or answers) it puts forward, which may interest followers of biographical criticism more. With no solid evidence to support any particular claim, the mystery of its dedications, addresses and inner connotations is possible to remain unsolved. Yet, discourses surrounding such speculations are likely to stay in vogue as long as Shakespeare is celebrated and his 'sugared' sonnets actively pursued.

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