

SHAKESPEARE'S VIEW OF LOVE: SONNET 116

Gelson Peres da Silva¹

RESUMO

William Shakespeare mostra em sua criação poética intitulada *Sonetos* uma nova visão do Amor, uma noção que preserva o aspecto celestial do Amor mostrado na tradição Medieval cristã anterior à Renascença, unindo a essa visão a racionalização renascentista e suas características seculares e possibilidades exemplificadas pelas necessidades e aspirações carnis. Numa abordagem pessoal em que o eu do poeta e do eu lírico convergem, os imperativos humanos são reforçados pelo desejo físico do eu lírico por seu objeto amado numa relação caracterizada pelo mesmo sexo e suas complexidades de seu tempo.

Palavras chave: Poesia. Tradição medieval. Renascença. Desejo pelo mesmo sexo.

SHAKESPEARE'S VIEW OF LOVE: SONNET 116

ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare shows, through his poetic creation entitled *Sonnets*, a new view of Love; a notion that safeguards the heavenly aspect of love pointed out by the Medieval Christian tradition preceding the Renaissance, and adds, to that view, this period's rationalization and its secular characteristics and possibilities exemplified by carnal needs and aspirations. The human imperatives are reinforced by the physical desire of the lyric self for its object of love in a relation characterized by same sex and the complexities of that specific period.

Keywords: Poetry; Medieval tradition; Renaissance; Same sex desire

1 PhD in English Poetry and Master of Renaissance theater and Cinema from Santa Catarina's Federal University, Graduated in Portuguese and English Letters from Santa Cruz do Sul's University, RS. E-mail: ishra21@yahoo.com.br; rexholy@gmail.com. Link to access this CV: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/8008730310250021>.

Renaissance points etymologically to innovation, or rebirth. In terms of arts, it is marked as a period in History in which artistic prodigy elicited man's ideas and perception of the world as its main characteristic. Such distinction is illustrated by artists that brought to their pieces of art a human view of Nature. Although obvious today, such perspective would cease the way some themes had been previously treated, giving them a new approach, a new fashion, a new image. Slightly deviating from the religious aspect that feelings had had during centuries before and during the Medieval years, William Shakespeare writes about love with another view. He shows it rising inside human flesh and turned to another person, object of desire. In his sonnet known by the number 116, he does not take out the everlasting characteristic through which love was "understood", and introduces now the carnality of it in a man desiring another.

In order to analyse that Shakespearean poem, I regard James Olney's perspective in his *Metaphors of Self. The Meaning of Autobiography*. For him, the final work of a poet expresses and reflects its maker, so we can trace his style, his creative impulse of creation (1972, p.05). In his/her work, there are immeasurable parts of the poet's I in the lyric I. Olney assumes that it is impossible to establish where such parts are and what they are, but it is possible to state that a text is autobiographical in some degree because it carries obligatorily elements that denote the presence of the poet's self as it would be impossible to separate the two selves. Such concept helps us to see Shakespeare's I as the lyric I that exposes his feelings and impressions.

The poem is below:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments, Love is not love
Which alters when alteration finds
Or bends with the remover to remove
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests, and is never shaken
It is the star to every wandering bark
Whose worth's unknown, although its height be taken
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks
But bears it out even to the edge of doom
If this be error, and upon me proved
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.”

Having this in mind, we can see that the poet starts his sonnet by eliciting the word **mind** which evidences the trend of the time, that is, reason: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediments.” (v.i,ii). The first person appears in an objective shape, requesting something in the negative. Such a syntax can give the reader a poetic position before something so imponderable as love. Yet, as reconstructed, the hyperbaton can be read: *I do not wish to admit impediments to the connection of true minds*. The reader can see in this verse that the poet finds no reason to prevent two persons to be connected as they [the persons] have a mutual agreement about something. It is not clear what true minds really mean, but ‘mind’ alludes to thinking, or even, two individuals that think likewise about something [being in harmony], or whatever that can be the point where their judgments converge. Moreover, the poet starts his piece by putting together two different ideas: marriage [a social contract established on two individuals’ consensus] and impediments [something that can annul or set up barriers for a connection]. But again, it is the marriage of true **minds** that should be observed here as something new. In other words, the poet does not say true **hearts**, the organ where feelings used to spring from and lead individuals to union. Thus, marriage is settled down on rational bases rather than emotional ones.

He continues by defining love. Such exercise of mind puts human perception on a level that not only highlights the period, but tries to give some light provided by human reason on something that had been viewed as without definitions: “Love is not love/Which alters when alteration finds” (v.ii, iii). Another moment for mental work is put forth so the reader can think after he [the poet] deliberates that love remains the same even when it is before alterations. It seems a paradox in the beginning, but in a deeper reasoning the reader can see that love reaches a moment when it comes across changes, not in itself, but on its way [development] and roundabouts [temporal conditions within social realities]. Such a confrontation does not

afflict love's character, affirms the poet, who reinforces: "Or bends with the remover to remove" (v.iv). Again, in a repetition, in a replay, the poet shows his reader that love does not even have its shape, its format modified. "O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,/That looks on tempests, and is never shaken" (v.v, vi). In his invocative phrase, the poet waves negatively to his reader and states without doubts that love is there [or has been] from an unknown time and immeasurable steadiness to show its bearer the way. On top of that, love suffers no quakes under furious weather, moods of those who feel it. Such a standpoint can be understood as a guide in time when surrounding vicissitudes come to prevent its existence.

Leaving the earthly ground, the poet gazes up: "It is the star to every wandering bark" (v.vii). Once more the poet gives the idea of love as an icon that can show those who feel it the right direction on dark nights, referring to the navigations the idea of unknown dangers that the seas kept in reality or in scared imaginations. If the bark [mind, reason] is adrift, in doubts, it can follow love and the right track is granted, the poet seems to indicate. "Whose worth's unknown, although its height be taken" (v.viii). Two different ideas put together in this verse to remark love's characteristic: no one can say how much love is worth, since its worth is impossible to be measured in its depth; and on the other hand, love is known as something that can take those who feel it up above as it is experienced.

Returning to human level, the poet takes the time of a human life and puts it beside chronological terms: "Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks/Within his bending sickle's compass come" (v.ix, x). Another aspect of love: it seems to be naïve, ingenuous, childish, adolescent, as it confronts contrarities and adversities. Strangely enough, love is reasonable to know that situations come as time passes and new things are taken, faced by those who feel it. "Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks" (v.xi). Notoriously, love is treated as a person. The poet gives it the status of the possessive pronoun "his", the position of a man, the one who was the bearer of reason and thinking. So, love again does not alter or even have into account the temporal length that time spans attributed to human life is. "But bears it out even to the edge of doom" (v.xii). That is, love remains the same without alterations to an incomprehensible time that is doom. "If this be error, and upon me proved" (v.xiii). The poet seems

to need to exercise some doubt on all this thinking on love's features, but he insists that if error of a simple mind [his], someone will have to prove it to him, and if proved affirmatively the poet leaves no condition to himself and humankind: "I never writ, nor no man ever loved" (v.xiv). He ends his poem by both emphasizing temporal conditions of human existence and deliberating that this exposition cannot be wrong, fruit of a mistaken and an unreasonable mind, because it would be comparable to his most sacred deed: his writing, and human beings' supreme feeling that is love.

All this turns the reader's perception to an uncommon thing. If love had been seen and comprehended as a material that could link God and Men under the Christian preaching, in Renaissance love comes out as the bond that will link two persons as well, bearing its divine aspect. This is one of the novelties brought by the poet's view in his epoch. If love did cause God to move himself as Christian principles used to declare in the Medieval Centuries, now it presents another characteristic: to unite two persons.

Love not only connects two persons, it keeps its main aspect of something that cannot end. We can infer that this must have been preached over and over during ecclesiastical celebrations as the Christian founder was referred as God's personification of love towards humankind. Yet, love does have the possibility to remain in that shape as two persons felt it to each other, the poet indicates. If divine in Jesus Christ's person, love is still godly in its manifestation in human's hearts and minds. This is a little obvious in the text, and what actually is new is that love can keep its characteristics inside two person's relationship.

Distancing love from that traditional perception of things wherein events were considered under the mythic view of religiosity, the poet now observes love from an angle where it can be analyzed, examined by the light of reason. The poet emphasizes this aspect of love as he exalts in Sonnet 147 that "My reason, the physician to my love" (v.v). A cure is implicit here, a remedy for an illness whose solution is found not above in a simple act of belief, but inside the boundaries of human physique, that is, mind, thinking, rationalization, even if such a heal, a force endowed with elements that could oppose desires was contained in the limits of human body. Thus a classical poetic view and order gives place to a Renaissance observation of things. Such a perspective can produce a basis for love that myth, and

religion could not, i.e., the contrarities, the imperfections, the incomprehensibilities held by human nature, here represented by mind and life. In this stance, Shakespeare keeps offering his reader the traditional meaning of love, and adds on it the human mind's ponder as far as it can be probed by human rationality and its continuous search for a minimum coherence.

Also, Shakespeare brings into discussion not only the divine characteristic of love and its immaculate aspect, but now love in the midst of tempests that characterize human relations. From heaven, love descends in its perfection and completion, reaching human needs in order to establish a minimum sensation of safety and, religiously considering, of salvation carried down by a saviour in the person of Jesus Christ. But on earth love must preserve its feature and move in the middle of the turbulences that make human interactions be what they are.

Moreover, love does not change in time and by circumstances. This view is not new since it reclaims the divine quality of love. What can be seen as reflection of the epoch is that this idea opposes the ephemeral and transient aspect of human life. Love thus is superior than human existence, and humankind does not have a comparable time to parallel to love. Love also becomes independent of humankind, able to survive lovers and their comprehension of all that love may come to mean. Love recovers here its status of a god that never suffers the action of time, like the Cupid that remained eternally a little boy with wings freely hitting lovers with his arrow.

Besides these elements that remain as fundamental to characterize love as the supreme feeling that comes down from Heaven, love can bind together two persons of the same sex. This assumption is possible today as we readers are told that Shakespeare wrote most of his sonnets to a young man, object of his love. Such knowledge permits us to see that love does not choose lovers and beloved ones, it touches anyone with its dart. Evidently the poet goes against both legal and ecclesiastical impediments, prohibitions against homosexual love in his time. In doing so, the poet seems to confront the illogic of human laws and traditions of his era. He also shows us that human mind can be incoherent and unfair to something so supreme as love.

This element is new in the 1500s and the beginning of the 1600s, since it goes beyond contemporary concepts of creation and procreation. It becomes the feeling that can grant a connection just like that between

God and Humankind, even if it is between two people of the same sex. As we take for granted that the poetic I takes in itself traces of the poet's I², we can see Shakespeare's voice telling the reader that love can be reconsidered then and whenever under the light of reason in order the lover suffers less due to the help found in reason. Such a suffering would be result of social constraints and impediments to a bond between two same sex persons³.

However, love rises upper, for it transcends physics, or a physical attraction that leads men and women to sex and procreation; it puts lovers above on a level never seen before. Therefore a love that is able to surpass biological needs, as well as social expectations, and is also strong enough to resist adversities is more than human, in a epoch when human issues were central as life was considered. Strangely, the poet's structure of thinking reverts things as he first brings love down to human condition, and finishes his poem taking it back to divine levels.

On a terrain such as that, love can be not only felt but especially accepted. A man can let his heart and mind be captured by the strength of love as he feels it with another man. Such love is far from lascivious desires that denigrate a man's reputation in society, it is above because it comes from celestial regions and unites two persons of the same sex. If prohibited insofar it is seen religiously and legally as dirty, now a relation between two persons of the same sex can love due to its purity as descended from an incorruptible origin.

In regard to this point, Tim Cook, the editor of *The Poems and Sonnets of Shakespeare* points out in his introduction that "the bringer of comfort is probably the young man to whom the first one hundred and twenty six [sonnets] of the sequence are addressed" (1994, p.vi). But Cook apparently tries to soften the problem here as he elicits the fact that the 1609 edition of the *Sonnets* was unauthorized (vi). Even so, he continues, "it is far better to treat the sonnets not as autobiography but simply as a text dramatizing a prolonged meditation on love, only possibly originally inspired by events in the poet's own life" (p.vi). As contradictory as it can appear, the editor forgets that "events in the poet's life" are definitely linked to the poet's I and led the latter to write what as written, since such *events* inspired the poet.

2 See Olney, James.

3 From Henry VIII's reign, sodomy was legally prohibited. Sodomy should be understood as any sort of sex encounter rather than the vaginal and thus procreative.[see Bredbeck, W. G. *Sodometry and Interpretation. Marlowe to Milton*, 1991]

In attaching our attention to the autobiographical aspect of the creation process in the artist, we can see that events did provide the poet sources for his sonnets, after the “meditation on love” that Cook highlights above. This idea reinforces my perspective of analysis on the Sonnet 116. And if we wish, meditating can evaluate a view on something that required a minimum of time towards the theme. Cook points too that the conflict between sex and the needs of the soul was common in Renaissance poets (p.vii). This idea of Renaissance times is elicited by Alan Bray in his *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*. In this work Bray shows readers that homosexual acts were severely punished as the actors were found involved in it. Bray also exemplifies such condemnations as same-sex lovers were hanged for having committed buggery, a pejorative term used that time for homosexual intercourse (p.14). Bray goes beyond as he exposes a demonologic ideology that linked same-sex practices to anti-Christian precepts (p.23). To stress this point, G. W. Bredbeck too shows readers that in Renaissance there was a discriminatory discourse against all that was seen as lower deviant modes in society (p.37), and one of those was homosexual intercourse. To corroborate Jonathan Goldberg denotes that in English Renaissance the term sodomy involved sex with same-sex partners, sex with animals, and opposite sex partners (p.19); in other words, sex that did not envision procreation.

Notwithstanding, we can see in the Sonnet 116 the immeasurable amount of importance relegated to carnal desire that led the poet to find a strategic balance between Christian dogma and human physical needs. Surrounded by a culture that did not see same-sex as honourable, Shakespeare found in the previous notion of love, i.e., its divine Christian aspect, a principle to be followed and brought down to earthly realms in order to sing same-sex love as something elevated and possible between two persons, without opposing social and legal determinations.

REFERÊNCIAS

BRAY, Alan. **Homosexuality in Renaissance England**. London: Gay Men’s Press, 1982.

BREDBECK, G. W. **Sodomy and Interpretation. Marlowe to Milton.** Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991.

GOLDBERG, Jonathan. **Sodometries. Renaissance Texts – Modern Sexualities.** Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1977.

OLNEY, James. **Metaphors of the Self. The Meaning of Autobiography.** Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1972.

SHAKESPEARE, William. **The Poems and Sonnets of William Shakespeare.** London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994. p. v, 6.