

Egotism and Ersatz Love in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 42"

William Shakespeare's sonnets deal with two very distinct individuals: the blond young man and the mysterious dark-haired woman. The young man is the focus of the earlier numbered sonnets while the latter ones deal primarily with the dark-haired woman. The character of the young man and a seductive mistress are brought together under passionate circumstances in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 42." The sexual prowess of the mistress entangles both Shakespeare and the young man in her web of flesh. This triangular sonnet brings out Shakespeare's affection for both individuals. His narcissistic ideal of delusional love for the young man is shown through diction and imagery, metrical variation and voice, contained in three quatrains and one couplet.

The first quatrain introduces the surreal relationship between the young man and the poet in the choice of diction that is used. The first line of the sonnet "That thou hast her," uses strong alliterative qualities in the stressed first syllables of each word. In doing so, the imagery that is created is one of conceit and arrogance on the behalf of Shakespeare. Generally, a man who has been cuckold by the infidelities of his mistress is not so swift to forgive his betrayer. Instead, he narcissistically tells the friend that the affair is "not all [his] grief" (1). Likewise, Shakespeare alternately uses hypermetric and iambic lines in the first quatrain. Lines one and three are regular iambic pentameter but lines two and four are hypermetrical iambic pentameter. When referring to the young man and the pseudo-importance of their relationship, Shakespeare implements regular iambic pentameter, trying to convince the reader that it is in fact of great importance to him. Yet, when referring to the mistress in line two and his hurt ego in line four, the variation in meter is used, as if to say that both things are not of particular importance. Iambic pentameter is used to drive home the illusion of a strong union between the young man and himself. Medial caesurae are used on lines one and three, where the regular meter occurs, further creating the sense of a chimera in their friendship. When alluding to the young man, Shakespeare refers to him as "thou" (1) and "thee" (3) indicating a second person relationship. However, when alluding to the mistress, he uses "her" (1-2) and "she" (3) indicating a third person relationship. Through the establishment of a strong voice,

when referring to the friend, one is led to believe that there is a greater bond between himself and the friend than between himself and the mistress.

The second quatrain of the sonnet discusses Shakespeare's personal feelings on the betrayal of his fictional comradery. The quatrain begins with the oxymoron "Loving offenders" (5). Placing two opposite words next to one another indicates an unnatural relationship between himself and the friend. An individual, whom one loves with affection, should not bring discomfort and pain to the relationship, let alone be "excused" (5) for his actions. Shakespeare's egotistical attitude is further portrayed in line six where he tells his friend that the only reason he has pursued the mistress is because "thou know'st I love her" (6). Moreover, the pentameter in this quatrain is hypermetrical, containing an extra syllable at the end of each line. Each hypermetric line begins with an initial trochee implying that these four lines are a new tone of voice (Shakespeare's personal view on the affair) and also an intensification of what points the poet is trying to convey, namely that the friend is not responsible for the betrayal. He subjectively pushes the blame onto the overbearing mistress. She will not fully disclose her relationship with the friend to Shakespeare, and in doing so "[abuses him]" (7). The poet waits patiently for his friend to "approve her" (8) or test her out sexually, which is a fictional approach to dealing with adultery. This is yet another indicator of their ersatz relationship. Line two, as well as lines four through eight ends in an unstressed syllable creating a feminine rhyme for most of this quatrain. This rhyme pattern contains an extra syllable at the end of each line and is used very subtly in depicting the liaison that is taking place between the mistress, the friend and Shakespeare. Like a love triangle with a deceitful additional lover, this quatrain's added foot changes the conventional qualities of this Shakespearean sonnet.

The third quatrain discusses Shakespeare's feelings on the affair. This quatrain never mentions the word love as do the other quatrains. The three words that are repetitive in nature throughout the quatrain are "losing" (10) "loss" (9, 10) and "lose" (9, 11). Shakespeare's feelings of loss are evident in this section of the poem. He describes different scenarios using these terms, of which he is always the odd man out. Yet, he believes that for his sake they "lay on [him] this cross" (12) as if this cuckoldry is in some way a service

to his manhood. After line nine, the young man is no longer addressed in the second person, but rather referred to in the third person, (the same reference that is used for the mistress.) Shakespeare demonstrates that he is no longer in a "thou" relationship with the young man. By putting the mistress and young man in third person voice, the poet (Shakespeare) shows their intimate relationship. The mistress potentially takes the young man away from the poet into her third person relationship. Likewise, the third quatrain of the sonnet mimics the first and third lines of the first quatrain by returning to a regular iambic pentameter, referring back to the triangular relationship that is being discussed in greater detail in this quatrain. Pyrrhic feet can be found in "other and "(11) and "lay on" (12) creating a feeling of rapidity or lightness when discussing the relationship between the young man and the mistress. Yet, spondee's are found at the end of "both twain" (11) and "my sake" (12) suggesting a feeling of difficulty and sadness when addressing himself and his feelings. The trivial nature attached to the relationship of the mistress and the young man further demonstrates Shakespeare's pompous gullibility concerning the relationship between the young man and himself.

The couplet additionally annotates the false consanguinity between Shakespeare and the young man. Beginning the couplet with 'but' indicates that there is going to be a paradox of thought in the next two lines. He goes on to say that "[his] friend and [he] are one" (13) which is a contradiction of the last quatrain in which he describes the loss he is going to suffer if his friend truly betrays him. He tricks himself into believing that he and his friend are such kindred spirits that they are truly one in mind, body and spirit, when in fact, they are not. The final line of the sonnet begins with an initial spondee, "Sweet flattery" (14) in which Shakespeare himself is admitting how sweet delusion really is, and ends in a terminal spondee, "me alone" (14) showing that the young man and Shakespeare were really never more than acquaintances that loved the same woman. Through a figment of his imagination, he developed a mythical relationship with the young man when in fact, the only really loving relationship he had was with his own pretentious subconscious.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William, "Sonnet 42." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Eds. M.H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt. 7th ed. 2 vols. New York: Norton, 2000. 1:1033.