

The fair and the unfair:  
Renaissance images and their change  
in William Shakespeare's Sonnets

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INTRODUCTION

Critics haven't missed the existing contrast between the first sonnets addressed to the Friend and the last ones addressed to the Dark Lady. It is not our aim to discourse about the hidden identity of both Mr. W. H. and the Dark Lady. We share Stephen Booth's opinion: "If Shakespeare was talking about real people and events, we have no clue whatsoever as to the woman's identity. Speculation on her identity has ranged from wanton to ludicrous and need not be illustrated." (Booth 1977: 549)

What drew our attention to the Sonnets has been a little topic present on them. It is obvious that the language and the images used by Shakespeare change throughout the Sonnets. In some of them the images are typically Renaissance, following the Petrarchan and Elizabethan traditions. In some others the aforesaid images present different nuances. The Image evolves and the Conception changes. Among the different parts in which criticism has divided William Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, there are two great unities especially interesting as regards the aim of this paper. In this paper we would like to show a few textual evidences to set clear that difference. For that purpose we have chosen a few sonnets from among the first seventeen, opposed to some of the last ones (the so called *Dark Lady Sonnets*).

On the one hand we will analyse those examples taken from the *Procreation Sonnets*, and the character of the images found there. On the other hand we will examine the evidence found in the *Dark Lady Sonnets* to see the differences they hold opposed to the sonnets addressed to the Friend. It is not our aim neither to worry about the ordering of the texts, nor to give a description of the main topics of the *Sonnets*. We simply want to present a brief textual analysis of some sonnets, to collate them so as to see their differences as far as the conception of the images is concerned, and to bring forward textual evidences from other writers to corroborate our analysis.

PROCREATION SONNETS: IMAGES AND TRADITIONAL ELEMENTS

It is obvious that these first seventeen sonnets are intended to convince a young man to marry so that he can be able to perpetuate his beauty. In other words, his child will make him immortal:

Shakespeare induces his Friend to marriage, to abandon his selfishness which, in the end, by not increasing himself would deprive the world of his beauty on his death. (Simon 1986: 281)

From the very first line we find those traditional images which will be criticized later on by Shakespeare. In Sonnet I we find the image of the Rose, which has always stood for the

Neoplatonic idea of Eternal Beauty, an image inherited from Medieval Imagery.<sup>1</sup> The *Rose* appears also as *bud*, showing a kind of contrast between creator/creature:

That Thereby beauty's *Rose* might never die (I.1)<sup>2</sup>  
 Within thine own *bud* buriest thy content (I.11)

This classic element of the Rose, together with many others, is present throughout the sonnets. e.g: Sonnet LIV "The Rose looks *fair*", "Perfumed tincture of the Roses", "Sweet roses do not so". This image of the Rose expressing beauty could be found with the same aim in Quevedo:

La tentación lozana de la Rosa,  
 deidad del campo, estrella del cercado<sup>3</sup>

and in Garcilaso's Sonnet XXIII:

En tanto que de rosa y d'azucena  
 Marchitará la rosa el viento helado<sup>4</sup>

which shows a great parallelism with "beauty's rose might never die". In Shakespeare, that eternal beauty of the Rose is also completed with the idea of eternity and procreation to perpetuate that beauty. Thus, we find some words clearly referring to that: "Increase" → procreation, and "might bear his memory" → Eternity and Immortality.<sup>5</sup>

Another traditional element in Sonnet I is "Spring", which presents a curious parallelism with Garcilaso's Sonnet XXIII:

and only herald to the *gaudy spring*  
 coged de vuestra *alegre primavera*.

In both, the adjective adjoined to "spring" could have the same meaning. "Gaudy" meaning "bright, resplendent, gay" is also found in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour Lost* "The gaudy blossoms of your love" (V.ii.802)- and in *Venus and Adonis* "Under whose brim the gaudy sun would weep." (1088)<sup>6</sup>

Sonnet II presents another typical image: the passing of time, the devastating effects of time upon beauty.

When forty *winters* shall besiege thy brow  
 and dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,  
 thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,  
 will be a tottered weed of small worth held (1-4)

We have found a great deal of examples as regards the image of *winter* because this conception of time is tremendously common:

Coged de vuestra alegre primavera  
 el dulce fruto antes que'l *tiempo airado*

<sup>1</sup> L. Simon 1986: 281. She quotes Seymour-Smith's book *Shakespeare Sonnets* in which this idea is contained.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations in this paper from Shakespeare's Sonnets have been taken from Booth's edition.

<sup>3</sup> Francisco de Quevedo's *Parnaso*, 191 a. Sonnet *Con ejemplos muestra a Flora la brevedad de la hermosura para no malograrla*, number 295, lines 5/6, in Jose Manuel Blecua's edition. In that same sonnet Quevedo uses the semantic field of flowers to support that idea: "en su propia flor nevado", or, "lejos de la flor". All quotations from Quevedo's poems present in this paper have been taken from Blecua ed. 1981, *Francisco de Quevedo: Poesía Original Completa*, Barcelona, Planeta.

<sup>4</sup> Garcilaso de la Vega, Sonnet XXIII, lines 1/12. Taken from Elias L. Rivers ed. 1990. *Poesía Lírica del Siglo de Oro*, Madrid, Cátedra, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> That increase and immortality, of course, is desire from *fairest* creatures. So, the sonnets adressed to the friend will show the "fair", and the *Dark Lady Sonnets* will show what is "not fair", as opposed to that previous conception of fair. e.g. Sonnet LIV "The Rose looks *fair* but *fairer* we it deem" which gives evidence to support our idea.

<sup>6</sup> Different meanings of "gaudy" taken from Onions 1986.

cubra de *nieve* la hermosa cumbre<sup>1</sup>

ntes que lo que hoy es rubio tesoro  
venza a la *blanca nieve* su blancura<sup>2</sup>

Cuando me vuelvo atras a ver los años  
que han *nevado* la edad florida mía<sup>3</sup>

... mas agora,  
la *blanca nieve* del *invierno cano*,  
de todo le desnuda y le desdora.  
Todo lo acaba el tiempo y lo enajena,  
que todo tiene fin si no es mi pena<sup>4</sup>

These texts show that some images (such as *winter*, *nevada*, *nieve*, as a symbol of death, decay, passing of time) were widely spread. In these texts and through the *procreation sonnets*, the element of *carpe diem* is present also as a traditional image. Shakespeare will offer that image of Time as both *carpe diem* and *tempus fugit*, and will use some petrarchan formulæ idealizing the love object, that is, his Friend. All this shows the classical character of the images and conceptions these first sonnets hold. Other examples of that *winter* image in the sonnets are also found in:

To hideous *winter* and confounds him there (V, 6)  
But flowers distilled, though they with *winter* meet (V, 13)  
Then let not *winter's* ragged hand deface (VI, 1).

Against the stormy gusts of *winter's* day  
and barren rage of death's eternal *cold*. (XIII, 11-12)

In Sonnet III we find the image of the glass: "Look at thy glass and tell the face thou viewest", which is subject to parallelism with "Persuadiote el espejo conjetura / de eternidades en la edad serena".<sup>5</sup>

We also come across in line 12 -"thy *golden time*"- the image of Time associated with "golden", which is found in Gongora's Sonnet CLXVI, line 10 - "antes que lo que fue en tu *edad dorada*,"<sup>6</sup>- being both lines similar to Quevedo's Salmo IX -"la *edad florida* mia."<sup>2</sup> These lines also contrast with Garcilaso's "*edad ligera*" in Sonnet XXIII line 12, and with Shakespeare's Sonnet VII, line 10 "*feeble age*", connecting both with the conception of time as "Never resting" in Sonnet V, and "Devouring Time" in Sonnet XIX, which is a clear reference to *Tempus Fugit*.

In fact, the whole Sonnet V conforms Shakespeare's recreation of *Tempus Fugit*, using the imagery of Seasons, Time and Nature in a classical conception:

Those hours that with gentle work did frame  
the lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell  
will play the tyrants to the very same,  
and that unfair which fairly doth excel.

<sup>1</sup>. Garcilaso's Sonnet XXIII in Rivers 1990: 63.

<sup>2</sup>. Gongora's Sonnet CLXV in Rivers 1990: 112.

<sup>3</sup>. From Quevedo's *Las Tres Musas*, 248, a; 21 in Blecua's Edition, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>. From Quevedo's *Las Tres Musas*, 45; 391 in Blecua's Edition, p. 411.

<sup>5</sup>. From Quevedo's *Parnaso*, 217, a; 338 in Blecua's Edition. p.360.

<sup>6</sup>. Rivers 1990: 212.

For never-resting Time leads summer on  
to hideous winter and confounds him there,  
sap checked with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,  
beauty o'ersnowed and bareness everywhere. (V, 1-8)

This could be compared with the elements previously described and that comparison applied to the following texts will show a paralellism as regards that classical topic:

Coged de vuestra alegre primavera  
el dulce fruto antes que'l tiempo airado  
cubra de nieve la hermosa cumbre.  
Marchitará la rosa el viento helado,  
todo lo mudará la edad ligera  
por no hacer mudanza en su costumbre.<sup>1</sup>

Goza cuello, cabello, labio y frente,  
antes que lo que fue en tu edad dorada  
oro, lilio, clavel, cristal luciente,  
no solo en plata o viola troncada  
se vuelva, más tu y ello juntamente  
en tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en nada.

Tu edad se pasará mientras lo dudas;  
de que te habrás de arrepentir mañana.<sup>2</sup>

We think that these examples have revealed the classicism of the *Procreation Sonnets*,<sup>3</sup> classicism as far the imagery is concerned. The different sources we have brought forward support our analysis and our conception of these two parts of the sonnets as an opposition between two imageries: the classical *fair* (sonnets to the Friend) and *unfair* (sonnets to the Dark Lady) conceptions. Even though Shakespeare is original in composing his sonnets with that classical material, that classical conception established his background and source:

La inversión (...) de la fórmula petrarquista, aunque esta resulte parcial, dado que retiene componentes de dicha fórmula.

En relación con estas tradiciones (Petrarquista e Isabelina), los sonetos ofrecen a la vez concomitancias y divergencias.”<sup>4</sup>

To show these *concomitancias* has been our aim in this first analysis:

La belleza suprema de la mujer, su idealización, su casi divinización se ha desplazado aquí hacia un joven, el amigo.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Rivers 1990: 63 and 212.

<sup>2</sup>. From Quevedo's *Parnaso*, 191, a; 295 in Blecua's Edition, p.337.

<sup>3</sup>. A brief list of symbols and images of the described kind could be found in L. Simon 1986: 281-282: "Sonnet 7 is a comparison to the sun's diurnal course with the life of the Friend (...), Sonnet 8 uses throughout the imagery of musical sounds (...), To support that idea of decay Shakespeare makes use of the following traditional imagery in Sonnet 12: the clock that tells the time (...), Sonnet 14 recurs to astronomic and weather images. Sonnet 15 consists of a comparison of man's growth to the increase of plants (...)."

<sup>4</sup>. Abad 1986: 250.

<sup>5</sup>. Pérez 1986: .210.

This movement from lady to boy is one of Shakespeare's originalities, but without any doubt the images, conceptions and symbols he uses to praise his friend are the same used by other Renaissance authors with, more or less, the same aim.

Now, we will try to point out the *divergencias*, his breaking with tradition, and his new images and concepts which will criticize the previous ones. This evolution will also be present in other authors and this fact will reveal that this is a logical evolution through the Renaissance: conceptions change, images vary, the world evolves. The *fair* will become the *unfair*, being that *unfair* the new reality.

#### DARK LADY SONNETS: A DIFFERENT CANON

From now on we are going to find a different concept of beauty and a different kind of images which will contrast with the aforementioned ideas; the traditional idealization of the lady evolves into:

Parodización de la misma: antítesis Dama Morena / Amada Petrarquista o contraste *oscuridad* física y moral de la primera y la belleza clara y pura de la segunda.<sup>1</sup>

This change is found from the very first line of Sonnet CXXVII:

In the old age black was not counted fair,  
or, if it were, it bore no beauty's name (1-2)

That *old age* refers to the past time (previous Petrarchan tradition, perhaps) in which *black* was an unfair image with a negative symbolic meaning. But Shakespeare impose new *fair* meaning upon that condition: "Every tongue says beauty should look so (CXXVII.14)". Now, his canon of beauty changes and we are going to find less degree of idealization and greater deal of earthly feelings and attitudes.

Sonnet CXXVIII perhaps shows a pleasant tone recalling the old fashion but, of course, we find no idealization; it is only a poetic game with musical imagery. Sonnet CXXIX, apart from being one of the most beautiful Shakespeare's sonnets, offers no traditional images. The poet presents love and the pains of it with no idealization, with a direct approach. His being in love is in a way "savage, extreme, rude, cruel", adjectives holding both negative meaning and true reality. This poem in particular is totally opposed to the petrarchan tradition. This realistic and direct vision of the poet's state could have never been written by Sidney or Spenser nor even Garcilaso.

Sonnet CXXX constitutes the best example found in the *Dark Lady Sonnets* to show and support our theory. Here, the change is complete, the movement from one conception to another completely different conception is pretty clear. This sonnet, compared to other poems by Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Garcilaso, Quevedo and Cervantes himself, will make our analysis clearer. To start with, the first quatrain reveals the character of lady who "físicamente contradice todos los cánones de belleza isabelina."<sup>2</sup> and is "una mujer que aparece como un personaje real, exento de la perfección de las heroínas petrarquistas."<sup>3</sup> That lack of perfection is what Shakespeare define this new image with, symbolized by the *unfair black colour*. For him, she is a perfect model of that new conception of beauty, an earthly figure opposed to those *Lauras*, *Dianas* and *Stellas* who were "dechados de perfección a la que se eleva a actitudes celestes u olímpicas, según el criterio que predomine."<sup>4</sup> Sonnet CXXX is a mocking derogation of the poet's mistress,

<sup>1</sup>. Abad 1986: 250.

<sup>2</sup>. That is, "cabellos y ojos negros (127, 130, 132), su personalidad es decididamente indigna (130), es cruel, tirana (131, 133, 149), codiciosa (134), injusta (138), y obscena (134, 137), y su modo de comportarse no concuerda con su naturaleza (131, 147). (Abad 1986: 251)." We think these facts separate this new loving-lady with that traditional and idealized lady, so harmonized with nature.

<sup>3</sup>. Pérez 1986: 210.

<sup>4</sup>. Pérez 1986: .200.

a literary joke making fun of the petrarchan excesses in praise of lady-loves, as for example Spenser's *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, Sonnet IX, which offers a total contrast with Shakespeare's CXXX, presenting some of those images Shakespeare laughs at:

Spenser	Shakespeare
Long-while I sought to what I might compare	My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
those powerfull eyes, which lighten my dark spright,	coral is far more red than her lips red;
yet find I nought on earth to which I dare	if snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
resemble th'yimage of their goodly light.	if hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
Nor to the Sun: for they do shine by night;	I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
nor to the Moone: for they are changed never;	but no such roses see I in her cheeks;
nor to the Starres: for they have purer sight;	and in some perfumes there is more delight
nor to the fire: for they consume not never;	than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
Nor to the lighting: for they still persever;	I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
nor to the Diamond: for they are more tender;	that music hath a far more pleasing sound.
nor unto Christall: for nought may them sever;	I grant I never saw a goddess go:
nor unto glasse: such basenesse mought offend her;	my mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
Then to the Maker selfe they likest be,	And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
whose light doth lighten all that here we see. <sup>1</sup>	as any she belied with false compare.

In Sidney's *Astrophil & Stella*, Sonnet LVIII, we find: "Th'anatomy of all my woes I wrate, / Stella's sweete breath",<sup>2</sup> which also contrast to Shakespeare's CXXX. This element of the lover's breath will be pointed out by Cervantes.

Perhaps, Miguel de Cervantes offers the best example (apart from Shakespeare himself) of this evolution and change from the *fair* to the *unfair*. Analysing the following text we have found the traditional qualities of the Petrarchan lady:

... pues en ella se vienen a hacer verdaderos todos los imposibles y quiméricos atributos de belleza que los poetas dan a sus damas; que sus cabellos son oro, su frente campos eliseos, sus cejas arcos del cielo, sus ojos soles, sus mejillas rosas, sus labios corales, perlas sus dientes, alabastro su cuello, marmol su pecho, marfil sus manos, su blancura nieve, y las partes que a la vista humana encubrió la honestidad son tales, según yo pienso y entiendo, que solo la discreta consideración puede encarecerlas y no compararlas."<sup>3</sup>

Here, Cervantes describes Petrarchan attributes which Shakespeare mocks at: eyes-like the sun, breath-perfume, lips-coral red, hairs-golden wires, etc, etc. The same attributes we have found before in Gongora's Sonnet CLXVI:

Mientras por competir con tu *cabello*,  
oro bruñido al sol relumbra en vano;  
mientras con menosprecio en medio el llano  
mira tu *blanca frente* el *lilio bello*;  
mientras a cada *labio* por cogello,

<sup>1</sup>. González Corugedo, Santiago ed. *Edmund Spenser: Amoretti and Epithalamion*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1983, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup>. Galván, Fernando ed. *Philip Sidney: Astrophil & Stella*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1991, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup>. Allen, John J. ed. *Miguel de Cervantes: Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1989, Part I. XIII, p. 186.

siguen mas ojos que al *clavel temprano*. (1-6).

Garcilaso's Sonnet XXIII,

en tanto que el *cabello*, qu'en la vena  
del *oro* s'escogió con vuelo presto. (5-6).

and Lope de Vega's *Rima Sacra XLVI*, line 3 "tu *cabeza* es de *oro*, y tu *cabello*". But Cervantes' case is far more interesting because only three chapters after that traditional description, he offers (the way Shakespeare has done it) a new image when describing Maritornes:

los cabellos, que en alguna manera tiraban a crines, él los marcó por hebras de lucidísimo oro de arabia (*black wires grow on her head*), cuyo resplandor al del mismo sol escurecía. Y el aliento, que, sin duda alguna, olía a ensalada fiambre y trasnochada (*and in some perfumes there's more delight/ than in the breath than from my mistress reeks*), a él le pareció que arrojaba de su boca un olor suave y aromático (...), ni el aliento, ni otras cosas que traía en sí la buena doncella, no le desengañaban, las cuales pudieran hacer vomitar a otro que no fuese arriero; antes le parecía que tenía entre sus brazos a la diosa de la hermosura.<sup>1</sup>

If we compare this extract with Sonnet CXXX, we see that the traditional images are criticized more or less in the say way. To set this fact even clearer we have put between brackets some lines of Sonnet CXXX expressing the same idea in Cervantes' text.

Let us analyse a few more poems and we will see certain similarities which are also worth commenting. In Quevedo's Sonnet *Aquí que fue Troya de la Hermosura* we can see that ironic aim:

Rostro de blanca nieve, fondo en grajo;  
la tizne, presumida de ser ceja;  
la piel, que está en un tris de ser pelleja;  
la plata, que se trueca ya en cascajo.<sup>2</sup>

Compare now "My mistress eye's are nothing like the sun" to:

Para agotar sus luces la hermosura  
en un ojo no más de vuestra cara,  
grande ejemplar y de belleza rara  
tuvo en el sol, que en una luz se mira.<sup>3</sup>

Quevedo offers again the aforementioned images and comparisons.

With all the textual evidences we have presented in this paper we think it is clear that Shakespeare evolves from that Renaissance tradition offering later "sustitución de la belleza rubia de virtud inaccesible de aquellas tradiciones, por una mujer morena de cualidades físicas y morales dudosas como objeto amoroso femenino."<sup>4</sup>

Now, the relationship between both lovers (poet / Dark Lady) changes as a logical conclusion from the changing of imagery. Even at the end, Shakespeare will state that his conception of love is not idealized and his love relationships are placed in the real world. The lovers don't walk along celestial spheres; they play an earthly game:

But why of two oaths do I accuse thee,  
when I break twenty?. (CLII, 5-6).

At the end of the *Dark Lady Sonnets*, on the very last line of them, we find that the change from the *fair* to the *unfair* has been completed,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, Chap. XVI, pp. 213-214.

<sup>2</sup> From *Parnaso*, 435, a; 251 in Blecua's edition.

<sup>3</sup> From *Parnaso*, 202, 6; 310 in Blecua's edition.

<sup>4</sup> Abad 1986: .242.

For I have sworn thee *fair*, more perjured eye,  
to swear against the truth so foul a lie. (CLII, 13-14)

being these two lines a final joke similar, perhaps, to that poem by Bartolomé L. de Argensola *A una muger que se afeitaba y estaba hermosa* in which the poet shows a great deal of irony, connecting with some of the facts discussed on this paper:

Yo os quiero confesar, Don Juan, primero:  
que aquel blanco y color de Doña Elvira  
no tiene de ella más, si bien se mira,  
que el haberle costado su dinero.

Pero tras eso confesaros quiero  
que es tanta la beldad de su mentira  
que en vano a competir con ella aspira  
belleza igual de rostro verdadero.

Mas, ¿Qué mucho que yo perdido ande  
por un engaño tal, pues que sabemos  
que nos engaña así Naturaleza?.

Porque ese cielo azul que todos vemos  
ni es cielo ni es azul: ¡Lástima grande  
que no sea verdad tanta belleza!<sup>1</sup>

I consider I have brought forward enough textual evidences to support our analysis. This paper has only been a brief approach to point out some facts worth commenting as far as the changing of imagery is concerned. Obviously, a more exhaustive study of the *Sonnets* will reveal more interesting things, as Shakespeare's sonnets are "often so multilayered that they can never be fully fathomed."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>. Bartolomé L. de Argensola, Sonnet I, in Elias L. Rivers ed. 1990, *Poesía Lírica del Siglo de Oro*, Madrid, Cátedra, pp. 199-200.

<sup>2</sup>. Quoted in Pérez 1986: 222 from Hiller's *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.



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