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Identity and Experience: The Binaries of The Sonnets

Prior questions of sexuality have been raised in regard to Shakespeare's collection of sonnets. The definitions of passion and identity within an Elizabethan context provide a framework for the prescribed roles that the individuals within The Sonnets purposefully do not occupy, and these definitions lead Shakespeare's reader to believe that there is a central figure behind the dynamics of the collection's triangular relationship. If viewed as an early representation of fluidity, the poetic voice within The Sonnets, Shakespeare's speaker, becomes a vehicle for gender exploration as well. Observing the triangular relationship between the speaker, the Dark Lady, and the Young Man, the reader can see a deconstruction of the gender binary. I propose that the relationships within the selected sonnets do not ascribe to the traditional male and female binary, and, because of this nonconformity, the speaker of The Sonnets obtains a freedom within their own experience of gender. With this assertion, I plan to explore the bounds of the Dark Lady and the Young Man's counter expressions of gender, and how those expressions frame the experience of passion for the speaker. It is infatuation that allows Shakespeare's speaker to occupy an alternating masculine and feminine role. This spectrum of experience pushes back against expected roles within passion and brings Shakespeare's speaker into a modern scope of gender and sexuality.

Within this paper, I first plan to explore the binary as it relates to the descriptions of the Dark Lady of The Sonnets. Using the language within Sonnet 130, I will show how attributes of the Dark Lady align with a masculine presence which, in turn, places the speaker within a feminized role. Contrasting this, I will then use Sonnet 20 to explore how descriptions of the Young Man break the ascribed binary, and how this affair allows the speaker to assume a masculine position. Rather than isolating the masculine and the feminine, this shifting experience

reconciles the speaker's passion. My proposal then does not insist that the passion is binary. Rather, the passion within the triangular relationship of *The Sonnets* emphasizes how traditional male and female roles ultimately break down as identity gives way to infatuation.

The *Sonnets'* speaker is first drawn, seemingly without any distinct control on his part, to the Dark Lady and Young Man's disruptive identities. The speaker describes himself as a madman as he attempts to transverse both this overwhelming inclination toward passion as well as the nonstandard identities of whom he is attracted to. Within the context of Sonnet 130 and Sonnet 20, however, we can see how the speaker begins to shift his expression of both feminine and masculine attributes. Certainly, it feels as though the speaker journeys into an understanding that the exploration of his passion under these new terms depends on his individual perception. Once the speaker establishes that his attraction to a nonstandard presentation of gender is, in fact, not madness, he is able to occupy a position within these relationships that dismantles his own traditional binary. Furthermore, the speaker's individual transition better communicates how the Dark Lady and Young Man both disrupt the expectations of their gendered roles.

Within this new understanding, the speaker describes how The Dark Lady of *The Sonnets* breaks free of a traditionally feminine role. Both the Dark Lady's appearance as well as her actions place her outside of this prescribed norm. Within Sonnet 130, Shakespeare's speaker describes the Dark Lady in a fashion that purposefully twists the concept of an ideal or proper feminine love interest:

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.

I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare. (S130)

By describing his love as unlike the typical feminine object of desire, the speaker exemplifies how she deconstructs her binary role. Shakespeare crafts a love poem that does not dote on the feminine attributes of the woman. The Dark Lady is not fair nor rosy, but, rather, Shakespeare uses coarse language that forces the reader to understand the nontraditional roughness of her character. The Dark Lady does not demure or flatter. Her presence demands attention in the way a traditionally masculine figure would. This presentation does not inherently suggest that the Dark Lady cannot be categorized as a woman, but, instead, this presentation demonstrates how the speaker sees the Lady outside of the standard or tradition. Discussing the exploration of gender, Butler suggests, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false" (Butler 10). The Dark Lady then, through the perception of the speaker, does not deny her identity but rather expands past the boundary of that traditional identity. Even as the speaker describes the lady as particularly unladylike, she is still afforded the assignment of her

womanhood. The Dark Lady is not less than the other women that surround her in this society. In fact, due to the deconstruction of this binary, the speaker of *The Sonnets* would see her as beyond comparison. This expression of gender sets the Dark Lady apart from the traditional but nonetheless makes her worthy of the speaker's intense infatuation with her.

The expression of the Dark Lady's gender becomes a means to access the passion the speaker feels. Smith claims, "In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries erotic desire itself was felt to be effeminating, regardless of the sex of the bodies a man might desire" (Smith 214) and this link between passion and the feminine comes through the strongest within the sonnets referencing the Dark Lady. Within this affair, the Dark Lady is often painted as a figure that holds power over the speaker. Garrison quotes Sanchez as they propose that the Dark Lady's desire takes on a masculine position as well, "Sanchez argues that 'Shakespeare's poetic language makes legible the cultural work of the stigma attached to women who desire non-monogamous sex—women who, as it were, desire like men'" (Quoted in Garrison 57). If the Dark Lady experiences her desire with masculine categorization, then the comparison presents even more stark as the speaker assumes a feminine role within this pursuit of a relationship. Within Sonnet 130, the speaker brings the Dark Lady down, literally, to the same ground he walks. Rather than his desire culminating as an inaccessible, whimsical fancy, the Dark Lady is solid, present, and the speaker nearly feels pursued by her. By flipping the roles of the affair, where the speaker takes on the feminine position and the Dark Lady acts as his pursuer, the sonnets tie nonconforming gender expression to passion.

The Dark Lady and Young Man share in their perceived need to dismantle their respective expected binaries. Fradenburg describes *The Dark Lady* as a "disturbance" (Fradenburg 326) to the sonnets that regard the Young Man. However, the Dark Lady's presence

does not detract from the prior passion between the speaker and the Young Man. Similarly, this passion is accessed through the alternative experiences of gender and the deconstruction of the male and female binary. The Young Man's presence is not disturbed by the Dark Lady, but rather his gender expression mirrors the attributes later enacted by the Dark Lady. Within Sonnet 20, the reader can observe how Shakespeare's speaker grapples with a man that aligns with a traditionally feminine expression:

A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted
 Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion,
 A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
 With shifting change, as is false woman's fashion,
 An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
 Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth,
 A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
 Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.
 And for a woman wert thou first created,
 Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,
 And by addition me of thee defeated,
 By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
 But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
 Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure. (S20)

Much like the Dark Lady, the speaker outlines the ways the Young Man presses the binds of his gender. The Young Man's expression is seemingly even more stark as the speaker even qualifies him as some blend of "master-mistress." These attributes feminize the Young Man, but, like the

Dark Lady, he never is disqualified from his designated gender. Rather he occupies the role of man while he accesses the feminine aspects of his nature. Finnerty claims that The Sonnets possess “a language that encourages ‘alternative and competing constructions of gender’” (Finnerty 1) and later claims, “The Sonnets feminize the young man, using a language traditionally associated with women” (Finnerty 4). This feminized language assists in the deconstruction of the Young Man’s gender binary. The Young Man’s gender expression affords him the feminine comparisons that the Dark Lady never obtains. Finnerty displays this merging of masculine and feminine within the Young Man’s expression of identity as he quotes Clarke, “Mary Cowden Clarke noted that the ‘tenderness, patience, devotion, and constancy worthy of the gentlest womanhood are conspicuous in combination with a strength of passion and fervor of attachment belonging to manliest manhood’” (Quoted in Finnerty 3). Within Sonnet 20, the Young Man is attuned with nature and possesses the soft lushness that a female object of desire traditionally would. The speaker even expands past the traditional role of the female subject and describes the Young Man as set apart or better in these aspects when compared to his female counterparts. The Young Man is, in effect, performing the feminized gender to a further extent than a woman that ascribes only to her prescribed gender binary. This performance merges with the passion of Sonnet 20 to emphasize the vivid displays of the feminine and the masculine. Where the Dark Lady does not submit to the idealized binary of her sex, the Young Man dominates his feminization as he attracts a passion befitting his retained masculinity.

While the speaker takes on a subordinate and more traditionally feminine role during his affair with the Dark Lady, the affair with the Young Man places the speaker in a more dominant, masculine position. Garrison notes that there is a certain competition or showmanship within the speaker’s desire while referencing, “the Young Man’s status as an object desired by many”

(Garrison 71). The speaker's use of "mine" in the final line of Sonnet 20 commands the Young Man's affection. Despite acknowledging that both the speaker's own passion as well as the Young Man's passion should be targeted toward the women that surround them, the speaker still pursues this relationship with the Young Man. The speaker makes the dominate decision to subvert the norm and chooses to enact his masculine position to pursue his affection with this Young Man. This subversion, even as the speaker takes on his expected masculine role, still works to break apart this binary of gender. Butler discusses this intersection between prescribed binary and performed gender:

If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction." (Butler 14)

The relationship among the speaker, the Young Man, and the Dark Lady is intrinsically linked with this performance of gender. When both the Dark Lady and the Young Man break the binary norms of their gender, the speaker is allowed to play with performance as well. Taking on shifting masculine and feminine roles, the speaker's passion exists on a less definable spectrum and ultimately allows the speaker to embark on an exploration of the binary. These exhibitions of passion allow the speaker within the sonnets to explore a more expansive experience. Not limiting himself to the binaries of traditional relationships, the speaker orchestrates a triangulation wherein each party is free to explore their individuality and identity even as they frame their experience around their relationship to one another. Both the Dark Lady and the Young Man break apart their respective traditional binaries, but as this combines with the

passion shared within the triangular relationship it is the speaker that is responsible for the perception of their nonconforming identities.

The speaker is then integral to the passion shared within this triangular relationship, certainly. Additionally, however, the speaker is integral to the Young Man and Dark Lady's attempts to dismantle their binaries. The Sonnets demand a focus on how the speaker receives and processes the objects of his passion as they fit alternative descriptions. The triangular relationship within The Sonnets depends on the speaker's perception of the disrupted standard, and therefore require the speaker to willingly depart on an exploration that abides by the new lack of standard. The Dark Lady could take on a masculine presence or the Young Man could be inclined toward a more feminine experience respectively. However, The Sonnets depend on the affirmation that the speaker sees these individuals as not only valid in their expression but desirable because of those nontraditional aspects of their identities. The sense of merging identities, then, contributes toward the blur of binary and shared passion within The Sonnets. Garrison suggests Shakespeare's sonnets require "desire to be fluid" (Garrison 53) and this fluidity reflects back upon the speaker's point of view. Desire and passion become something the speaker may experiment and play with as the Dark Lady and Young Man, as well as their embrace of nontraditional expressions of gender, respond to this infatuation.

As this shared passion and deconstructed binaries are so intertwined, I propose that the individuals within The Sonnets experience passion because of their ability to explore outside the scope of their prescribed binary. The triangular relationship depends on this initial deconstruction of the male and female binary. Even as this relationship develops along different variations of seduction and temptation, the speaker, Young Man, and Dark Lady all return to the perception of their identity as well as their individuality.

The Sonnets, then, communicate a reconstructed standard, in fact a lack of required standard, and Shakespeare's collection stands as testament to these alternative explorations. It is the Dark Lady who does not limit herself by the basis of her gender and allows her masculinity to flourish. It is the Young Man who is desired because of his femininity rather than despite it. And it is the speaker strategically shifting with the new definitions of these relationships. Each individual within the triangular relationship of The Sonnets pushes the bounds of their gender binary and the effect this dismantled lack of limit has on the passion experienced in their relationships. All figures within The Sonnets, the speaker, Young Man, and Dark Lady blur the lines of the binary and, through this, emerge with the experience of their passion.

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