

## CHAPTER 2: WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH



SONNETS 116, 18, 19, 55, 107, 123, 124, 106, 15, 22, 115,  
60, 63, 64, 65, 67, 68, 66, 74, 71, 73, 126, 146



**I**n the previous chapter we discussed four sonnets that we felt, taken together, opened a window into the ways in which the Poet of the Sonnets loves and the conflicts with which he struggles. What we gleaned in the previous chapter, particularly his hatred of his own aging as expressed in Sonnet 62 and his dread of his lover aging as expressed in Sonnet 104, makes it understandable that the Poet would have a particularly powerful fear of aging and death.

Because of some unusual mutations, our species is the only one to know that death is inevitable, but this knowledge is difficult to bear and we go to great lengths to undo this knowledge. While the fear of death is

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

nearly universal, the role of that fear in individual life varies a great deal. In the work of the Poet of the Sonnets the fear of death is central and that is the reason why this chapter is the longest in the book. We will show in Chapter 9 that Shakespeare the playwright had a much richer and more nuanced attitude towards death than the Poet of the Sonnets did, another reason to regard the Poet of the Sonnets as a character created by Shakespeare rather than as Shakespeare himself.

Great poems at the crossroads between love and death have been written by many. We need only think of Andrew Marvel's poem to his coy mistress. But we know of no sustained body of love poetry in which death plays as central a role as it does in Shakespeare's sonnets. The two lovers are never alone: subtly, the fear of death transforms the dyad into a triad.

Nothing represents the harshness of this reality more than time. We have no power over it and cannot prevent its passage. We are all slaves to time; time injures our sense of sovereignty and our self-love. The Poet's indignation over the passage of time may be more pronounced than our own, but we need no empathy to appreciate these poems; our own narcissism makes us sympathetic to the Poet's war on time.

LOVE TRIUMPHANT OVER TIME AND DEATH



SONNET 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments, love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever-fixèd mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his 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.

To our knowledge, no sonnet has undergone so powerful a re-evaluation as Sonnet 116. Wordsworth called it “Shakespeare’s best.” It is Shakespeare’s best-known sonnet, frequently cited during marriage ceremonies and anniversaries; one cannot imagine any anthology not including it. In 1966, Dover Wilson could still write of its perfection:

Seventy-five percent of the words are monosyllables; only three contain more syllables than two; none belong in any degree to the vocabulary of “poetic” diction. There is nothing recondite, exotic, or metaphysical in the thought... The Poet has employed one hundred and ten of the simplest words in the language and the two simplest rhyme-schemes to produce a poem which has about it no strangeness whatever except the strangeness of perfection.

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

Steven Booth, writing in 1977, has a very different evaluation:

Sonnet 116 is one of the most universally admired of Shakespeare's sonnets. Its virtues, however, are more than usually susceptible to dehydration in critical comment. The more one thinks about this grand, noble, absolute, convincing, and moving gesture, the less there seems to be to it. One could demonstrate that it is just so much bombast, but, having done so, one would have only to reread the poem to be again moved by it and convinced of its greatness.

A major problem about literary art is that abstract general assertions do not feel any truer than their readers already believe them to be; they carry no evidence of their truth and very little of the life (p. 387).

Helen Vendler, writing in 1997, is equally harsh:

The Young Man even though concealing his motives behind his euphemizing vagueness, has been exposed (by his unpacking-by-reiteration of his very words *alter* and *bends*) as a man in thrall to the sensual bloom of youth; when he sees the sickly bend, he must, he has said, bend with it, remove himself when he sees beauty removed, and find another as-yet-unreaped beauty (p. 490) .

We regard Sonnet 116 as a kind of secular prayer, an expression of what the Poet would like to attain, but cannot. There are many men and women who have not succeeded in loving beyond a short duration, but who nevertheless harbor the wishes expressed in this sonnet.

The first line, "let me not" invokes the language of prayer. An example can be found in Psalm 31:17-18: "Let me not be confounded oh Lord." The word impediments also invokes the marriage ceremony—"if either of you know any impediment why you may not be lawfully joined in matrimony then ye confess it." The term "marriage of true minds" makes explicit the reference to the marriage ceremony, "for better or for worse until death do us part." The marriage of true minds is a far nobler undertaking

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

than carnal marriage, and we read this nobility in Sonnet 116 a little differently after our study of Sonnet 20 in the previous chapter.

The fourth line, “Or bends with the remover to remove” is not easy to interpret. To bend must imply some changing, some lowering in the Poet’s fixed love (in erotic terms the losing of an erection), but who is the remover? The object of the Poet’s love, in which case he is declaring that he will go on loving unrequited if his lover loses interest? Is “the remover” Death, in which case the Poet is promising love even beyond the grave? Vendler interprets “remove himself when he sees beauty removed,” so the Poet is promising to go on loving the Young Man after Time has taken his beauty away. Time is the culprit in any case, whether because with the passage of time love will wane or the beloved’s beauty will fade, and Time appears explicitly in the third quatrain of this poem. Continuing the metaphor of the navigating ship, the Poet avers that true love looks on tempests, but is never shaken. In the next line, the true lover is compared to the “ever-fixèd mark,” a reference to the north star, a metaphor for everlasting constancy, a star that never changes course. If the “wandering bark” is a lover whose interest may be straying, then true love is the star by which he can find his way again. Line 8 also deals with the same celestial body; “whose worth’s unknown,” should be interpreted as worthy beyond any measure, while “Although his height be taken,” refers to the process of determining a ship’s position by the height of the star from the horizon.

The third quatrain highlights the paradoxical relationship between love and time. Love, we are told, is “not Time’s fool,” meaning it is not subject to time’s power, even though time can affect “rosy lips and cheeks” and lovers come “within his bending sickle.” The bending sickle is a metonym for death which makes the lovers into a crop that must be harvested. Line 10 affirms the power of Time to bring death but line 11 asserts the opposite; it is a ringing declaration that “love alters not with his brief hours and weeks.” Line 12—“bears it out even to the edge of doom”—is an enigmatic and powerful line. Interpreters have tended to translate “doom” as a reference to the Last Judgment and “bears” as synonymous with endures. For us “bears” introduces the theme of bearing witness, so central to the end of the poem. The phrase “the edge of doom” is very powerful, whether it refers to the Last Judgment, as it does more clearly in Sonnet 55, or to some other major unspecified catastrophe that inevitably lies ahead.


## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

Thus line 12 gives the whole poem an ominous character. We believe that at least preconsciously this line affects the reader in a direction opposite from the conscious reading and that it has contributed significantly to the special appeal of this sonnet. The couplet brings in the Poet's surest weapon against time, the immortality of his writing, but the declaration, though it should be ringing and confident, somehow conveys doubt even though no doubt is in the words. Perhaps the seed of doubt is sewn by "if this be error" for even the admission of the possibility of error is in stark contrast to the assertive tone the Poet strives for. We recall that Shakespeare is the author of the line (and the first conceptualizer of the idea) that we still use to indicate our suspicion of too-forceful an assertion: Gertrude in *Hamlet* saying "the lady doth protest too much methinks." Even if the sonnet is read as affirmation, the enumeration of what it is not sounds suspicious in an age influenced by Freud's thinking on the power of denial.

Sonnet 116, read carefully, must be felt in two ways, as a grand affirmation *and* as a confession of what the Poet wished but doubted he could reach. The Poet knows but wishes to deny that love alters, that love bends, that it is shaken by tempest, that love is "time's fool" and succumbs to the "bending sickle" of death as it alters with "brief hours and weeks" and he is willing to stake all of mankind's love and all of his writing on his denial.

WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

SONNET 18



Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed:  
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,  
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,  
    So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
    So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The Poet compares his lover to a summer's day, and finds more constancy in the lover than the summer day can offer. Nothing in nature is permanent, nor can nature boast being the lover's equal. Calling the buds of May "darling" animates nature, a beautiful example of a phenomenon we shall see over and over again in these poems: however complicated the Poet's love for his lovers may be, his love for nature is simple, pure and complete.

The business of real estate is not usually called up to supply the metaphors for love poetry, but a lease as a metaphor for life's or love's duration was a favorite term of the Poet; Sonnet 146 contains the line "why so large cost, having so short a lease." And Juliet, impatiently awaiting her tryst with Romeo cries out "O I have bought the mansion of a love but not possessed it."

In the second quatrain of Sonnet 18 the sun, called "the eye of heaven," can be too hot and conversely is often in "his gold complexion dimmed" a reference to clouds that cover the sun. We know that the eye had a special meaning to the Poet of the Sonnets. When nature is anthropomorphized the sun becomes heaven's eye. Line 7 summarizes the Poet's complaint

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

about transience; nothing is permanent and “every fair from fair sometime declines.”

The decay can set in by chance, through accidents, or by the inevitable change that seasons bring, referred to in line 8 as “nature’s changing course.” “Untrimmed” refers to sails that are not trimmed in proper navigation, reminding us of the metaphor of the “wandring bark” from Sonnet 116. By the addition of “untrimmed,” nature’s changing course seems suddenly more navigable, more influenced by what man can do and therefore nature’s changing course becomes not just a metaphor for the progression of the seasons but a metaphor for the fading of love in response to the passage of time. This shadow passes over the poem to be pushed away in line 9 when the Poet exclaims triumphantly, “thy eternal summer shall not fade:” the loved young man’s “summer,” meaning youthful beauty, will never be supplanted by age. The concept of fading had a special appeal to the Poet, for in Sonnet 19 we find “fading sweets” and in Sonnet 146 the Poet’s body is described as a “fading mansion.” In line 10, the Poet assures us that the beauty of the young man will never fade, expressed as “Nor lose possession of that fair.” The beauty “thou ow’st,” condenses a complicated idea in a couple of syllables. The Young Man owns his beauty but owes it as a debt to nature that nature will inevitably collect, harvesting that beauty, meaning that the Young Man must age and lose his beauty. Since what is harvested is usually to be devoured there is a distant but unmistakable attribution of oral aggression to nature when she will come to harvesting the Young Man’s beauty. The Poet’s intervention will enable the Young Man to keep the beauty he owes. In the eleventh line the Poet challenges death directly: “nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade.” The Poet is confident death will be cheated by the immortality of his lines. Line 12 is even bolder; the Poet feels confident that not only will death be unable to brag that the young man wandered in death’s shade, the Young Man will even continue to grow in the Poet’s “eternal lines.” Time therefore will be unable to destroy the Poet’s lover; on the contrary, time’s effect will be to make him grow in beauty and fame. There is probably no other moment in the sonnets to rival this one for the Poet’s confidence that he will not only defeat time but force time to do his bidding.

When death is introduced, a triangle is established. The Poet selects death as his rival. The Poet feels victorious over death and, in the last three

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

lines, celebrate his triumph. In the couplet the Poet is confident that “so long as man can breathe or eyes can see,” the lines of the Poet will bestow immortality on the Young Man. So far the Poet’s boast has proven true, though whether the immortality is conferred upon the Young Man or the Poet himself is more of a question. We can glean nothing about the Young Man from the sonnets. Was he tall? Was his eye blue? Did he limp? What sort of voice did he have? Nothing so particular is important enough to make its way into the sonnets. Shakespeare must have known, as we all do, that it will be the Poet, not the object of his love, who gains immortality. Had Dante not met Beatrice and Petrarch not met Laura, other women would have fulfilled the same function.

Upon first reading, the poem is in praise of love as more permanent than the summer. But as we look more deeply, the power of death grows in our awareness. Death is not directly mentioned in the first quatrain, but its presence can be felt. Death is the power behind the “rough winds [that] do shake the darling buds of May,” and death is also implied in “summer’s lease hath all too short a date.” As the sonnet progresses, the Poet’s struggle with time and death, and his challenge to death, move into a central position. Until the couplet, the melancholy atmosphere where everything succumbs to transience prevails.

The poem contains an interesting compromise with the young man’s self love. The poem is about his beauty, but what is the young man really asked to love but the fact that the Poet has immortalized him. The Poet’s efforts, therefore, are directed towards the young lover’s own narcissism. The Poet does not ask to be loved by the young man but merely appeals to the lover’s self-love. Even if the Poet were to succeed and the lover were persuaded that he will gain immortality through the Poet’s sonnets, how much love would the Poet reap? Strictly speaking, this is not a love poem but a poem in which the Poet tries to make his lover experience the Poet’s self-love. Incapable of loving, the Poet gives or at least loans his own self-love to the young man. The strength of self-love that we stressed in the previous chapter is palpable in this sonnet.


In the so-called “procreation sonnets” (discussed in Chapter 3) the Poet makes it clear that the main reason for the Young Man to have a sexual relationship with a woman is to defeat the destructive power of time by begetting a child who will carry his beauty forward as he ages. Thus

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

when the Poet speaks of immortalizing the Young Man's beauty in his verse he is setting his ability as a poet in competition with the ability of women to bear the Young Man's children.

Sonnet 18 is one of the best known of Shakespeare's sonnets and five of the six anthologies included it. We conclude that the assertion that love is more permanent than nature's seasons, and the triumph over death as a rival, evoked a powerful positive response in readers that makes this sonnet among the best-known poems by Shakespeare. If the printed sequence of the sonnets is to be trusted, Sonnet 18, coming right after the procreation sonnets, may be interpreted as the Poet overcoming his jealousy of women, which unconsciously haunted many of the 17 procreation sonnets. The Poet now feels that his poetry is equal or perhaps even superior to the capacity of women to grant men immortality by reproduction. Having overcome the envy of women, the Poet feels that his poetry offers a more permanent immortality than progeny.

### SONNET 19



Devouring time, blunt thou the lion's paws,  
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;  
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger's jaws,  
And burn the long-lived Phoenix in her blood;  
Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,  
And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed time,  
To the wide world and all her fading sweets:  
But I forbid thee one most heinous crime,  
O carve not with thy hours my love's fair brow,  
Nor draw no lines there with thine antique pen;  
Him in thy course untainted do allow  
For beauty's pattern to succeeding men.  
    Yet do thy worst, old Time, despite thy wrong,  
    My love shall in my verse ever live young.

Edith Sitwell, in her *Poet's Notebook* (1943), praises this sonnet as, "in all probability, the greatest sonnet in the English language with its tremendous first lines." She singled out for praise the majestic double vowels in

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

“devouring” and “lions” in the first line. She speaks of the “gigantic system of stretching double vowels, long single vowels, muffled by the word ‘earth’ in the second line.” In line 4, the alliterative “B” in “burn” and “blood” is noteworthy. In a similar vein, Vendler speaks of the “murderous vitality” of the first quatrain. Challenging death to a kind of duel over who will own the young man, the sentiment that animated Sonnet 18, gives way to awe before the destructive power of time. The term “devouring time” was taken from Ovid, who called time the devourer of things. Death is not only animated but becomes alive with oral aggression; insatiable hunger is attributed to time. Time transforms the earth into a cannibal, into a mother eating “her own sweet brood.” Because people are buried in the earth after they die, the Poet sees earth as a cannibalistic mother devouring her children. Behind the cannibalistic mother is a more destructive father figure called “devouring time.” Time can even pluck the teeth from the “fierce tiger’s jaws.” Tiger’s teeth are themselves a symbol of oral aggression, but devouring time is endowed with so much hostility that it can pluck out the very symbol of oral aggression. The implicit double orality may not become conscious to the reader, but it impresses itself on our preconscious. That a father can eat his children is horrible enough,—we think of Goya’s painting of Saturn in the Prado Museum—but a mother “devouring her sweet brood” is even more difficult to contemplate. From a psychoanalytic perspective the first two quatrains express in magnificent imagery an early state of oral anxiety when both parents are experienced as ready and willing to devour the child.

In the second quatrain, fleeting time creates the glad seasons (spring and summer) and the sorry seasons (autumn and winter). Time is not only fleeting but also swift-footed, having dominion over “the wide world and all her fading sweets.” “Fading” emphasizes the declining aspect of the cycle of nature. “Sweets” refers back to line 2: “sweet brood.”

What impressed commentators in Sonnet 19, is the contrast between the sweeping all-conquering majesty of the first two quatrains assigned to the destructive power of “swift-footed time” which nothing can withstand and the third, a quatrain of defiance wherein the Poet forbids time a “most heinous crime.”

The Poet steps in with his prohibition in line 8, the last line of the second quatrain. Thus he does not allow the power of Time two full qua-

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

trains, but steps in, more boldly than if his assertions had begin in the third quatrain. By so doing the Poet obtains mastery over time, that had been so powerful and frightening in the first eight lines.


And what is this heinous crime? Carving the beloved young man's brow with time's hours, an everyday occurrence that happens to every man and every woman. If we keep Sonnets 62 and 104 in mind, the reason why the "crime" of aging is experienced as heinous becomes understandable and "old" in line 13 is a horrible insult. In line 10, time is described as using his "antique pen" to draw lines on the Young Man's brow, a striking metaphor. The term pen was used in the sonnets 10 times, and the term "antique pen" appears in this sonnet and in Sonnet 106, where "I see their antique pen would have expressed" appears in line 7. Since any pen must be the Poet's, giving Time a pen implies a certain identification with Time, and calling the pen "antique" perhaps evokes the Poet's former loves which were more subject to the passage of time. This is the love, after all, which the Poet thinks will be different. This is the love which will endure. Thus the Young Man's beauty should remain inviolate to represent ideal beauty for later generations of ideal beauty, expressed as "for beauty's pattern to succeeding men." In the couplet, the Poet changes course. He will allow time his destructive work because the Poet's verse is beyond time's power to destroy.

That aging should be so heinous a crime to the Poet lends support to our interpretation in the previous chapter that the Poet was compelled to stop loving when the first signs of aging or perhaps even the first signs of maturity appeared in the boy he loved. The Poet's love, which animates his skill in writing, triumphs over the destructive powers of time in the couplet, but not until he gives up fighting to preserve the youthful beauty in the actual physical body of his beloved. This is a great truth about love: it must endure beyond the initial physical attraction if it is to last a long time. In Sonnet 19 the Poet gives up the physical preservation of the Young Man's beauty the way he gave up any sexual desire for him in the couplet of Sonnet 20. He moves on to the purer, or at least less physical love represented by a timeless love poem. To our ear the defiance in the third quatrain and the "happy ending" in the couplet do little to dispel horror evoked by the first two quatrains. If psychoanalytic experience is any guide, the happy ending of a fairy tale is usually forgotten, while the horror remains alive.

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

The fact that both sonnets 18 and 19 were selected by five of the six anthologies suggests to us that the relationship between time and love evokes a strong interest, regardless of whether the supremacy is granted to time or to the Poet's work.

### SONNET 55



Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn:  
The living record of your memory.  
'Gainst death, and all-oblivious enmity,  
Shall you pace forth, your praise shall still find room,  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
    So till the judgment that your self arise,  
    You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

The sonnet opens on a note of triumph; the Poet's powerful rhyme is stronger than "marble and gilded monuments" that rulers erect in their quest for immortality. His lover will outshine all of them in the "contents" of the lines of the Poet. In line 4, "unswept stone" refers to dust on grave-stones, neglected because all the people who loved the person who was buried there have died, so the memorial inscription has become illegible by the work of "sluttish time," which has "besmeared" it. Time is promiscuous because it destroys everything equally. Combining "sluttish" with "besmeared" lends a strong anti-sexual feeling to the line. Wasteful war can overturn statues, but poems do not perish. "Broils" in line 6 refers to internal disturbances within the country, as distinguished from external wars. Civil wars, like external wars, root out the works of masonry, but are powerless to destroy poetry. "Oblivious enmity" in line 9 refers to hostilities that create oblivion by destroying monuments. But the young man

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

will “pace forth,” or march on, and his praise will “find room” in immortal poetry. In this sonnet, as in many others, what endures is the Poet’s praise of the man he loves. Once more we note the narcissistic nature of this love relationship. The Poet does not believe he will be loved because he has won the young man’s love, but because he has made him immortal. On the other hand his joy in the power of his poems is palpable.

The sonnet ends with a reference to the Day of Judgment and the expected resurrection. The ending, however, is ambiguous. Line 11 is still secular: The lover will live in “the eyes of all posterity.” Line 12, “That wear this world out to the ending doom,” is similar to line 12 in Sonnet 116, “But bears it out even to the edge of doom.” It is again a surprising concept because the Last Judgment does not typically belong to love poetry. The line has a strange and powerful beauty to it. In the couplet, both the Day of Judgment and the Young Man’s resurrection are affirmed. But until that day, the last line tells us the lover lives in the Poet’s lines and in all “lovers’ eyes.” Resurrection is the ultimate immortality, but until that time, a secular immortality will be the Young Man’s lot, in the eyes which lovers use to read the poem, perhaps to each other.

Given the ubiquity of sly Elizabethan puns, we note the undertone of a secular reading of the couplet in which the “judgment” is whatever the Young Man would have to think to “arise” that is to get an erection. In this meaning, the poem serves as the asexual love-alternative to the Young Man’s sexual relationship until he develops one. This use of “rise” is explicit in other sonnets as we shall see, particularly in the heterosexual Chapter 7.

Vendler has drawn attention to the strategic placement of the word “live.” The sonnet as a whole is a defiance of death. Hence, the emphasis on “live.” There is “outlive” in line 2, “living” in line 8, and “oblivion” in line 9. Finally the word “live” appears in the very last line.

Dover Wilson pointed out that Sonnet 55 is rooted in Ovid’s famous epilogue to his *Metamorphoses*. We cite from Humphries’s translation:

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

Now I have done my work. It will endure,  
I trust, beyond Jove's anger, fire, and sword,  
Beyond Times' hunger. The day will come, I know,  
So let it come, that day which has no power  
Save over my body, to end my span of life  
Whatever it may be. Still, part of me,  
The better part, immortal, will be borne  
Above the stars; my name will be remembered  
Wherever Roman power rules conquered lands,  
I shall be read, and through all centuries,  
If prophecies of bards are ever truthful,  
I shall be living, always.

Ovid has not been mistaken about his immortality. We would like to compare the Ovid translation familiar to us with the Golding translation that Shakespeare drew upon:

Now have I brought a work to end which neither Joves feerce wrath,  
Nor sword, nor fyre, nor freating age with all the force it hath  
Are able to abolish quyght. Let comme that fatall howre  
Which (saving of this brittle flesh) hath over mee no power,  
And at his pleasure make an end of myne uncerteyne tyme.  
Yit shall the better part of mee assured bee to clyme  
Aloft above the starry skye. And all the world shall never  
Be able for to quench my name. For looke how farre so ever  
The Romane Empyre by the right of conquest shall extend,  
So farre shall all folke reade this work. And tyme without all end  
(If Poets as by prophesie about the truth may ame)  
My lyfe shall everlastingly bee lengthened still by fame.

This concern with personal immortality is foreign to classical Greek culture, as it would also be to the authors of the Bible. It seems to have appeared for the first time in Horace who said of his poems *aedificavi monumentum aere perennius*, "I have built a monument more lasting than bronze." Ovid developed this theme more fully and it passed on from him to the Poet of the Sonnets.

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

Ovid clearly states that his poetry will assure his own immortality. Shakespeare transformed the idea to celebrate the immortality of the man he loved, a significant borrowing across centuries, but also a creative transformation. Ovid brags that his creation is beyond the reach of Jupiter's anger, his fire and sword. He experiences time as hungry and Shakespeare took the metaphor of "hungry time," so basic to the sonnets, from Ovid. But Ovid makes a peaceful division between himself and time. Time will get his body at the end of his span of life, but the better part of him will gain immortality. Unlike Shakespeare he is not at war with time or death. A similar transformation occurs in Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis*. In Ovid's version of the tale, Cupid was playing with his mother, Venus, quiver on his shoulder, when a barb grazed her breast, and that is why she fell in love with the mortal Adonis. She warned Adonis not to hunt for dangerous animals but he paid no attention and was gored by a boar. Adonis as a reluctant lover was Shakespeare's invention. He gave the legend a distinct homosexual connotation of a beautiful youth struggling against a seductive older woman.

In the previous chapter we discussed the enmity between the three types of love: heterosexual, homosexual and narcissistic. Judged from this point of view, Sonnet 55 is predominantly a narcissistic sonnet. The Young Man is praised but there is little doubt that the Poet is most impressed with the power of his pen to give the man he loves the immortality the Poet believes his lover so ardently desires. Sonnet 55 is one of Shakespeare's most popular sonnets, having been selected by all six anthologies.

WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

SONNET 107

Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul  
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come,  
Can yet the lease of my true love control,  
Suppos'd as forfeit to a confin'd doom.  
The mortal moon hath her eclipse endur'd,  
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;  
Incertainties now crown themselves assur'd,  
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.  
Now with the drops of this most balmy time  
My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,  
Since, spite of him, I'll live in this poor rime,  
While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes:  
And thou in this shalt find thy monument,  
When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.

We mentioned, in connection with the previous sonnet that the Poet claimed he was conferring immortality upon his lover but likely knew that he was conferring it upon himself instead. But reading Sonnet 107 makes us accept as sincere the intention of Sonnet 55, for in this sonnet the Poet grants himself the immortality of his verse and the poem has far less energy and enduring power than we find in the ones which seek to keep the Young Man young and alive. In fact if Shakespeare's immortality had rested solely on this sonnet it might not have been assured. However narcissistic the Poet's love may have been, his love for the Young Man and his need to keep him young provided the Poet with a powerful muse whom we miss in this poem.

Duncan-Jones connects this sonnet's first two lines and the emphasis on balmy days as alluding to the year 1603, which saw the peaceful accession of James I, upon which Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton, was freed from imprisonment in the Tower and the fortunes of William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, also improved.

Vendler has emphasized the various "puns" and similarities among the words "prophetic" and "proclaim," "supposed" and "subscribed," "control"

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

and “confined,” “confined” and “final,” “endured” and “endless,” “olives” and “I’ll live,” “incertainties” and “assur’d.”


The first line is very strange in that the Poet thinks that the world as a whole is watching the outcome of his love. The eclipse of “the mortal moon” has been interpreted as a reference to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in a battle the prospect of which frightened the British very much. The pessimists, here called “sad augurs,” “mock their own presage,” implying that a widely held prediction did not come true. The Poet celebrates the new age of certainty’s victory over a previous age of anxiety, which has brought “balmy time.” The word balmy means healing and was used by Shakespeare only three times, here and twice in *Othello*: “To have their balmy slumbers wak’d with strife” (II.iii.258) and “O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade” (V.ii.16), but the combination of balmy and time is unique to this sonnet.

Lines 9 and 10, “My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,/ Since, spite of him, I’ll live in this poor rime,” imply that the Poet himself has won a victory over death. Death can only insult by his victory “o’er dull and speechless tribes,” that is, those who, unlike the Poet, cannot speak. The couplet is the by now familiar assertion that in his poems a monument was built by the Poet for the lover more durable than brass, though there is something melancholy in the Poet’s comparison of his poem to a tomb.

Sonnet 107 celebrates the Poet’s victory over death; two anthologizers have included this poem.

WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

SONNET 123



No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change,  
Thy pyramids built up with newer might  
To me are nothing novel, nothing strange,  
They are but dressings of a former sight:  
Our dates are brief, and therefore we admire,  
What thou dost foist upon us that is old,  
And rather make them born to our desire,  
Than think that we before have heard them told:  
Thy registers and thee I both defy,  
Not wond'ring at the present, nor the past,  
For thy records, and what we see doth lie,  
Made more or less by thy continual haste:  
    This I do vow and this shall ever be,  
    I will be true despite thy scythe and thee.

In this sonnet it is the Poet himself, not his beloved, who is threatened by Time's destructive power. This sonnet, like many before, declares war against time, and like many of its predecessors it is a poem of defiance. The sonnet opens with a powerful "No!" Time is personified and boasts that the Poet has changed,—we might first think aged—and therefore under time's dominion. The Poet refuses to be impressed by time's power, and even the pyramids that to many seem to successfully defy time do not impress the Poet, nor is he impressed with what one might call time's body of work, "his registers and records." The line "They are but dressings of a former sight" is difficult to decipher, since the Poet doesn't specify what he means by "a former sight" but we may speculate that behind the manifest meaning, leftovers of something that was once worth looking at, he is referring to a love felt for someone in the past.

The second quatrain opens with the insight that because "our dates are brief" we admire structures that defy time. The Poet feels that time has foisted these architectural miracles upon us. In Line 8 the Poet introduces his own medium, writing, when he says "Than think that we before have heard them told." The Poet refuses to admire anything in the present or in the past because time is not telling the truth, expressed in line 11 as,


## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

“For thy records, and what we see doth lie.” The Poet feels that the end of his ability to love is fast approaching and he projects this feeling onto time experienced as “thy continual haste.” In the couplet the Poet reveals what the change is that time is attempting to induce in him: the fading of his love, expressed as his promise to “remain true.” The Poet’s truth is thus contrasted to the lies of time in line 11.

Time, for the Poet, induces infidelity. Thus, two wars are joined: the war against time and the inner conflict over infidelity. The Poet promises to remain true in spite of time and death, represented as a metonym by the scythe. In Shakespeare’s preconscious, time, the universal destroyer, became equated with infidelity. In general we expect that, when a lover falls out of love and is unfaithful with someone else, that a new relationship is forming. But if we read this sonnet together with Sonnet 32 (in Chapter 3) we can surmise that the threat comes from the Poet’s reawakened love of former lovers. The pyramids then stand in for the souvenirs of the Poet’s previous love relationships which he is striving to keep—like the Pharaohs—entombed.

Two anthologies included this sonnet.

### SONNET 124



If my dear love were but the child of state  
It might, for fortune’s bastard, be unfathered,  
As subject to time’s love or to time’s hate,  
Weeds among weeds, or flowers with flowers gathered.  
No, it was builded far from accident;  
It suffers not in smiling pomp, nor falls  
Under the blow of thrall’d discontent,  
Whereto th’inviting time our fashion calls:  
It fears not policy, that heretic,  
Which works on leases of short-numbered hours,  
But all alone stands hugely politic,  
That it nor grows with heat, nor drowns with showers.  
To this I witness call the fools of time,  
Which die for goodness, who have lived for crime.

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

The imagery is taken from the political world of Shakespeare's time. The sonnet opens with a declaration that if the Poet's love had been the "child of state," it would have been in danger of being born unfathered, lacking the constancy a father is supposed to give to the child and therefore subject to changes brought about by fortune, or, in the language of this chapter, time's love and time's hate.

For us, living in a relatively safe bureaucracy, to be a "child of state" may have a positive connotation of permanence and social security. But for a poet living in the Elizabethan era, living as a child of state meant to rise and fall at the whim of a monarch or nobleman, to be inherently unstable, to remain insecure and fatherless, the very opposite of true love.

Such love would be no more than "weeds among weeds," (plants that grow unwanted) or "flowers with flowers gathered," ("gathered" means that these desirable flowers that are cut and killed because they are desirable) another metaphor for lack of permanence. The echo of the other meaning of "state," the condition that something is in at any given moment, furthers the theme of whether or not the Poet's love is changeable.

The second and third quatrains proclaim the constancy of the Poet's love. Since it is not a "child of state" it need not suffer from the two conditions that are so destructive to a monarch, "smiling pomp" and "thrilled discontent." These two monarchial plagues also have their analogue in issues that concern the Poet very deeply when he considers his love. The Poet of the Sonnets is much concerned with the ability of flattery to deceive a lover and "thrilled discontent," a magnificently condensed phrase that means the unhappiness of those who are enslaved is a serious matter for a lover who is unhappy in his love but unable or unwilling to be free of it, a condition that appears often in the sonnets.

"Policy" in line 9 is the expedience that causes public actions (but also love) to remain constant for only such short periods of time. The word "leases," a favorite in the sonnets ("summer's lease hath all too short a date"), is an image of a legal commitment, though one of short duration. "Heretic" in line 9 is used because the Poet wants his love to be understood as a matter of unassailable belief that will not alter or admit any dangerously contrary ideas.

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

The sonnet is not easy to decipher, but the phrase “was builded far from accident” may imply that “accident” refers to the sexual event which causes the begetting of an unwanted child. There is certainly a punning reference to the penis in “neither grows with heat nor drowns with showers.” The Poet may be suggesting that his love is the more constant because it is asexual.

As in Sonnet 116, the Poet tries to impress upon us the constancy of love, even though the bulk of the sonnets deal with betrayal and infidelity. The Poet implies that his love is steady and free from wide fluctuations. The extensive use of political vocabulary in this sonnet suggests a reference to the effects (explicit in other sonnets) that differences in rank played in the Poet’s love for the more noble Young Man. Booth has suggested that the key to the poem’s power may be in the word “it,” which, like all pronouns, is specific, hard, concrete, and yet imprecise and general—able to include anything or nothing. In this sonnet the word “it” appears close to the beginning of line 2, line 5, line 6, line 9 and line 12, contributing to the power of the poem. The word always refers to love.

In the last line the “fools of time,” those who fear time and obey the power of time “die for goodness” while they “lived for crime.” The line is enigmatic. Burrow believes it has a political meaning, referring to virtuous martyrs who died “for goodness” but earlier “lived for crime.” Blackmore Evans believes the line refers to those who made deathbed repentance for crimes done in their “days of nature” (*Hamlet* I.v.12). It is not out of the question that Shakespeare would refer to repentant sinners as “fools of time,” but in this case the last line would be out of place in the poem because it would no longer refer to love.

We do not know whether those sonnets that affirm the permanence of love against the destructive power of time correspond to a period of stability in the Poet’s life, or whether they testify to his fluctuating moods. Only one anthology included this puzzling sonnet.

Sonnet 116 and Sonnet 124 have the same aim—to affirm the permanent quality of the Poet’s love—but the difference is great. With all the reservations of Sonnet 116, it has a profound emotional appeal, while Sonnet 124 is confined by specific references that we can no longer decipher.

SONNET 106

When in the chronicle of wasted time  
 I see descriptions of the fairest wights,  
 And beauty making beautiful old rhyme,  
 In praise of ladies dead, and lovely knights;  
 Then in the blazon of sweet beauties best,  
 Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,  
 I see their antique pen would have expressed  
 Even such a beauty as you master now:  
 So all their praises are but prophecies  
 Of this our time, all you prefiguring;  
 And for they looked but with divining eyes  
 They had not skill enough your worth to sing;  
     For we which now behold these present days  
     Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise.

Prefiguration became an integral part of Christian theology when the Church decided to keep as holy scripture both the Old and the New Testaments. Thus, the unconsummated sacrifice of Isaac was seen as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ, and the prophets of the Old Testament were seen as prefiguring the coming of Christ. In Sonnet 106, the Poet took the Christian idea of prefiguration and secularized it by claiming that all former beauties of antiquity only prefigured the man he loves. This transformation into the secular could have had a blasphemous connotation, but because the metaphor appears only in lines 9 and 10 the impact is softened.

“Wasted time” means time which has passed and is therefore no longer of any value: it has become waste. It does not quite have as its principal meaning the sense in which we now use it: as time misspent or spent unprofitably, but that meaning is clearly present as an echo. It is possible that the now-common phrase “wasted time” appears for the first time in this sonnet (the *Oxford English Dictionary* has no earlier citation for the phrase and cites the first use of it in the contemporary sense as having occurred in 1741). Here the Poet uses the word “waste” as meaning ruin, and because time is such a destroyer the past is equated with having been ruined by time.

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

Historians are in the habit of writing the chronicle of significant events, so the very idea that there exists a “chronicle of wasted time” comes as a surprise. Being a mock historian, the Poet finds in the “chronicle of wasted time” descriptions of fair enough to enable earlier poets to make beautiful old rhymes. In the fourth line, the Poet differentiates between “ladies dead” and “lovely knights,” where usually one would refer to ladies as lovely, and knights as brave, showing a preference for men over women.

The second quatrain makes heavier demands on the reader because the “fairest wights” from the first quatrain are broken up into anatomical parts: hands, foot, lip, eye and brow. What the Poet hints at is that time ruins the beauties of the past by dismemberment. The various parts of these long dead beauties—their hands, feet, lips, eyes, and brows—are now used to create a kind of coat of arms (“blazon”) to serve as a monument to beauty gone. In Line 7 the Poet sees that the antique pen, meaning older poets, would have expressed “beauty as you master now,” though cataloguing the specific beauties of the Young Man is one poetic convention to which the Poet steadfastly refuses to participate in. In the sonnets to the Dark Lady the Poet mockingly describes parts of her which he finds unattractive, but a praising description of the Young Man’s beautiful parts will not be found in the sonnets. The Poet offers us his explanation: the Poets of old couldn’t do it because they had no such beauty to inspire them and we who are alive today, though we can see the beauty lack the “tongue” to praise. Whether that means the skill or whether that means that the Poet is struck dumb by the beauty is left to the reader to decide.

We are asked to believe that in his young man beauty reached its highest level in all history. This will strike many as an example of what Shakespeare elsewhere called “the Poet’s rage.” Nevertheless the sonnet was included by three of the six anthologies, bestowing upon this sonnet greater praise than we would have considered its due.

SONNETS OF INNER CONFLICT

One of the discoveries of psychoanalysis is the significance of ambivalence in psychic life. In this section we assembled sonnets in which ambivalence towards a lover found expression.

SONNET 15

When I consider every thing that grows  
Holds in perfection but a little moment,  
That this huge stage presenteth nought but shows  
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;  
When I perceive that men as plants increase,  
Cheered and checked even by the self-same sky,  
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,  
And wear their brave state out of memory;  
Then the conceit of this inconstant stay  
Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,  
Where wasteful time debateth with decay  
To change your day of youth to sullied night,  
    And all in war with time for love of you,  
    As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

This very beautiful sonnet can profitably be read together with Freud's short essay on transience (1915). In that essay, Freud described a summer walk through the countryside with a young and already famous poet (Rilke). The poet could experience no joy on this walk because "All this beauty is fated to extinction." Freud interpreted this state of the poet to mean that transience gave him a foretaste of mourning over his own death. This foretaste of transience, as Freud called it, was painful and it inhibited enjoyment of the beautiful day. It would have been interesting to know how Freud would have reacted to Sonnet 15, where another great poet experienced the same sense of transience. The Poet of the sonnets here differs

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

from Freud's companion because he is led to associate that life is like a play, obliterating the difference between life and theater.

In the first two lines the Poet remembers that everything that grows can hold perfection only for a moment. From there he is led to the idea that the world is a huge stage. The idea that life itself is nothing but a show recalls *As You Like It*.

All the world's a stage  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts (Act II, Scene VII)

And *Macbeth*:

Life's but a walking shadow a poor player  
that struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
and then is heard no more (Act ,V Scene 5).

Shakespeare was an actor and a playwright who meditated deeply on the nature of life. To obliterate the difference between real life and "shows" and look upon one's own life as a stage requires a degree of de-realization of one's own life that may enhance one's creativity but is costly in terms of experiencing one's own life as real.

The fourth line brings in astrology. It has caused Shakespeare's commentators some difficulty. If we believe in astrology, the word "comment" is too weak. But if Shakespeare neither fully believed in astrology nor totally disbelieved it, then the word "comment" would mirror his ambivalence: the effect of the stars is not known to men, and therefore remains secret. The Poet of the sonnets is not obliged to have a scientific position on astrology; he is writing to record his feelings. To include the word "secret" in "in secret influence comment," gives a conspiratorial hue or a paranoid connotation to astrology. The possible power of the stars increases the Poet's helplessness.

In the second quatrain, a radical change in the basic metaphor takes place: the Poet perceives man as a plant. The sky is experienced as cheering and encouraging the plant to grow up to a certain point until time turns adversary and is checking this growth. "Cheered and checked" is a wonderful way to express ambivalence when that term was not yet coined. The

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

comparison between men and trees makes it possible for the Poet to speak, in line 7, of “youthful sap.” The inclusion of the word “vaunt,” meaning to exult or rejoice, suggests that the young men feel victorious as long as they feel the youthful sap running in their veins. The quatrain is pessimistic; “wear their brave state out of memory” suggests that the youthful feeling of being “cheered” by the sky will not always be a sustaining memory.

The third quatrain changes the metaphor once more to bring us back to the idea that life is a show. The word “conceit” in line 9 means that which is conceived in the mind and therefore the thought of life as an “inconstant stay.” The Poet’s lover is “most rich in youth,” but even as the lover still seems youthful he is already subject to a dispute between “wasteful time” and decay as to which one of the two will destroy him, with each one demanding the right “to change your day of youth to sullied night.” The Poet of the sonnets often used hideous night as the enemy of the brave day, but now night is sullied, that is, the darkness is dirty.

“Nought but shows” is a complex idea, because if we denigrate what happens in the theater because it isn’t real or significant, that judgment comes when we compare what happens on the stage to real life. If real life is no more important than a play then we are left without anything at all that *is* important. A theologically inclined man of the Middle Ages might take this position to argue that only what happens in heaven is solid and important, but in Shakespeare there is no hint of anything more important than life and beauty. Today we conceptualize the state that the Poet evokes as “depressed.” Shakespeare didn’t have the verbalized concept but he created magnificent descriptions of depression in *Hamlet* and elsewhere in the sonnets as we shall see. In sonnet 15 the Poet celebrates his active war against Time on behalf of the Young Man as an antidote to depression. The poem is a strong one and three of the six anthologies included this sonnet.

WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

SONNET 22

My glass shall not persuade me I am old  
So long as youth and thou are of one date;  
But when in thee time's furrows I behold,  
Then look I death my days should expiate:  
For all that beauty that doth cover thee  
Is but the seemly raiment of my heart,  
Which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me;  
How can I then be elder than thou art?  
O therefore love be of thyself so wary  
As I not for myself, but for thee will,  
Bearing thy heart, which I will keep so chary  
As tender nurse her babe from faring ill:

Presume not on thy heart when mine is slain;  
Thou gav'st me thine not to give back again.

The mirror cannot persuade the Poet that he is aging as long as his lover is young expressed as “youth and thou are of one date;” but when he detects “time's furrows” on the young man's brow he will want to die. This sonnet sheds some light on why drawing furrows on the Young Man's brow was seen as such a heinous crime in Sonnet 19.


In the second quatrain, the Poet tells us that the lover's beauty is only a “seemly raiment,” meaning a handsome cloth or dress to cover the Poet's heart, an unusual way to express the fact that the Young Man's youth is a precondition for the Poet's love. The poem goes on to make use of the familiar Renaissance metaphor that lovers exchange hearts. The idea is used to support the claim that if they exchange hearts, they thereby become one. Then the Poet goes on to explain how each must take care of the other's heart. The Young Man must take care of the Poet's heart by remaining young. If he doesn't, the Poet will die and the Young Man will die too, because it is the Young Man who has—and is living on—the Poet's heart. In the couplet the Poet says that the Young man should not look to get his own heart back again if the Poet's heart dies because the Young Man ages. Stripped of its metaphorical language, the Poet is telling the Young Man not to expect to recover when he loses the Poet's love by aging.

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

The Poet in his turn promises to take care of the Young Man's heart as if it were a baby he is nursing. A feminine identification is thus introduced. The Poet alludes to the regression to the helplessness of infancy that is part of the emotional essence of falling in love.

Two kinds of battle against time are in play here: the regression to infancy that is part of normal falling in love and the Poet's own unique need for his lover to stay young. The Poet has used the convention of the lovers' exchange of hearts to describe the unique situation in the Sonnets in metaphoric language that is difficult to decipher because the ideas themselves are difficult, and only one anthologizer selected this sonnet. But while the fate of such a love is necessarily tragic we cannot help but stand in awe of what the Poet has revealed to us about the nature of his love.

### SONNET 115



Those lines that I before have writ do lie,  
Even those that said I could not love you dearer;  
Yet then my judgement knew no reason why  
My most full flame should afterwards burn clearer.  
But reckoning Time, whose millioned accidents  
Creep in 'twixt vows, and change decrees of kings,  
Tan sacred beauty, blunt the sharp'st intents,  
Divert strong minds to th'course of alt'ring things—  
Alas, why, fearing of Time's tyranny,  
Might I not then say "Now I love you best,"  
When I was certain o'er uncertainty,  
Crowning the present, doubting of the rest?  
Love is a babe: then might I not say so,  
To give full growth to that which still doth grow.

Sonnet 115 is full of the Poet's happy surprise that his love, which he had previously thought to be as great as possible, has nevertheless grown.

We know the Poet well enough now to be surprised by the second quatrain and what follows. In the second quatrain the Poet once again pays homage to the power of "reckoning time" and tells us that he did not take time into consideration when declaring his love. He also tells us in lines

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

10-12 that he declared his love to be at its zenith because he feared the destructive power of time. Nevertheless, in this poem the surprise that Time dealt the Poet was an increase in his love, not the expected decay.

Line 12 is of particular interest because the overcoming of ambivalence is called “crowning the present.” The moment in which love has overcome all misgivings—“certain o’er uncertainty” is the moment that love should be crowned. However, the Poet is aware of the fact that both past and future are clouded by ambivalence, expressed as “doubting of the rest.” The last line is an optimistic one. The Poet expresses the wish “to give full growth” to that which is still growing within him. The conflict over the perfection of love and love as a continuously developing process is resolved in favor of development.


A number of commentators have noticed that this sonnet is indebted to a poem by John Donne:

I Scarce believe my love to be so pure  
As I had thought it was,  
Because it doth endure  
Vicissitude, and season, as the grasse;  
Me thinkes I lyed all winter, when I swore,  
My love was infinite, if spring make it more.

In the couplet, love is called a babe. This has generally been interpreted as Amor, the god of love, being portrayed as an infant. The Greek and Roman view of Amor as a babe also contains a piece of psychic truth, a dim presentiment that love has something to do with infancy. If we compare Sonnet 115 to Sonnet 22 we find the Poet calling his own love, rather than his beloved’s, “a babe.” In the language we have been developing here we would say that the Poet understood that love based on the lover’s unconscious regression into infancy can grow, whereas love based only upon the narcissistic need to remain young can only decline with time.

WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

SONNET 60



Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,  
So do our minutes hasten to their end,  
Each changing place with that which goes before,  
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.  
Nativity once in the main of light,  
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned,  
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,  
And Time that gave, doth now his gift confound.  
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,  
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,  
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,  
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.

And yet to times in hope, my verse shall stand  
Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

The first two lines in this sonnet are lines of rare beauty. The striking image in Sonnet 60, where minutes like waves exhaust themselves against a pebbled beach in lines 1-4, was conveyed to Shakespeare by Ovid. The comparison is made between breaking waves and minutes that presumably “hasten” to their end. We know that minutes move at a steady pace—unlike people, they can neither hasten nor tarry—but to the Poet, deeply concerned about the aging of his young lover, they seem to hasten. It is as if the wave carried within it its own suicidal intent.

We have an opportunity to observe the borrowing of one great poet from another. Shakespeare took the analogy between time and tide and even the simile of one wave driving the other forward from Ovid, but unlike Ovid, Shakespeare endowed the waves with a suicidal tendency, in the phrase “hasten to their end.”

In *Metamorphoses*, Book 15, Ovid summarizes the teachings of the Greek philosopher Pythagoras. The relevant passage reads:

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

Things eb and flow: and every shape is made to passe away.  
The tyme itself continually is fleeting like a brooke.  
For neyther brooke nor lyghtsomme tyme can tarrye still. But looke  
As every wave drives other foorth, and that that commes behind  
Bothe thrusteth and is thrust itself: even so the tymes by kind  
Doo fly and follow bothe at once, and evermore renew.  
For that that was before is left, and streyght there dooth ensew  
Anoother that was never erst. Eche twinkling of an eye  
Dooth change (Ovid, Golding translation, Book 15, lines 198-206).

From that tyme growing strong and swift, he passeth foorth the space  
of youth: and also wearing out his middle age apace,  
Through drooping ages steepy path he ronnet out his race.  
This age dooth undermine the strength of former yeares, and throwes  
It downe (Golding translation, lines 247-250).

The second quatrain turns from nature to human destiny. Once born into the light from the womb Nature leads man to “crawl to maturity.” Once maturity is reached he is crowned, and begins to decline. The crowning in Sonnet 115 which marks the moment the Poet overcame his ambivalence is used here to mark the moment when, as in Sonnet 15 man is “checked” and begins to “decrease.” Reading the poems together suggests that the Poet experienced love as something that would rise and fall much as a man reaches maturity and then declines into old age and death. This is particularly true when the Poet loves the Young Man but fears he won’t be able to go on loving him once the Young Man matures.

Crawling is the opposite of what the minutes do when they hasten to their end. After this decisive entrance into life, time moves more slowly. Whether childhood rushes or crawls to maturity depends on how happy childhood is. That it seemed to the Poet to crawl is an intuitive understanding of childhood unhappiness, which for him repeats itself in love.


Shakespeare often used crawling to designate the passage of time in reverse when men refuse to go on being mature men, often under the pressure of advancing age. Examples include the famous line by King Lear after he divided his kingdom is “while we/Unburden’d crawl toward death” (I.i.40-41) and Hamlet’s savage self-accusation in Act III, scene I (beginning on line 121), where Hamlet advises Ophelia, “Get thee to a nunnery:

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners?" ends by saying, "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?"

"Crooked eclipses" in line 7 is a reference to the malignant influence of the stars. The eclipse as darkening the power of the sun must have greatly impressed Shakespeare, for it is a favorite image to describe the loss of happiness and good fortune. In the third quatrain, time which from nativity to manhood was on the side of the struggling man now confounds, or overcomes the man. What it gave him during his youth it now takes back again. The Poet experiences time as changing sides. As so often in the sonnets, time is experienced in oral terms as a devourer. In this sonnet time "Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth." Time is felt as particularly desirous of eating that which is rare, in this case an especially beautiful young man. Time's mowing scythe is all-powerful. And yet the couplet affirms the Poet's hope that his verse and praise of his lover will stand in spite of time's "cruel hand."

### SONNET 63



Against my love shall be as I am now  
With Time's injurious hand crushed and o'erworn,  
When hours have drained his blood and filled his brow  
With lines and wrinkles, when his youthful morn  
Hath traveled on to age's steepy night,  
And all those beauties whereof now he's king  
Are vanishing, or vanished out of sight,  
Stealing away the treasure of his spring;  
For such a time do I now fortify  
Against confounding age's cruel knife,  
That he shall never cut from memory  
My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life.  
His beauty shall in these black lines be seen,  
And they shall live, and he in them still green.

In Sonnet 63 the Poet visualizes the day the Young Man will reach the age the Poet is now (and hates). The ideas in it are familiar to us by now,

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

but this beautiful sonnet is remarkable for the detail in which the Poet imagines the horror that is to come. In this poem he seems confident in the power of his verses to preserve the Young Man's beauty, and the poem gains much of its power from the tension between the image of the Poet busily writing away to preserve his memories of his lover's beauty and the actual content of the poem which is taken up with imagining and describing the horrors of his lover's ageing.

The structure of the poem conveys the rhythm of the Poet's thought. The first word "Against..." needs the couplet to complete the thought which is, in its entirety:

Against my love shall be as I am now  
His beauty shall in these black lines be seen,  
And they shall live, and he in them still green.

The Poet cannot, however, say this without getting distracted by the horrors he is working against, which occupy the next 7 lines. In line 9 the Poet tries again with:

For such a time do I now fortify

But he becomes distracted again, this time sending the Young Man not merely into old age but into death itself. "Steepy night" in line 5 is a metaphor for death but it does not yet quite mean the Young Man will die; that thought becomes explicit in line 12. The couplet envisions the Poet reading the poems to preserve his memory of someone who has died. The death of love which the Poet fears will be brought on by the Young Man's ageing has become conflated with death itself. There is a sort of "medical theory" in lines 3-4 that wrinkles occur because the blood is drained out which makes actual death begin to hover over the poem. The term "steepy" appears in Golding's translation of Ovid: "Through drooping ages steepye path he ronnet out his race (book 15, line 249)."

In the third quatrain the Poet makes another connection: the wrinkles are cut with a cruel knife (not with an antique pen as they were in Sonnet 19) and that knife murders the Young Man from whom Time has stolen his youth, expressed as "Stealing away the treasure of his spring." The thought process that the Poet has condensed here implies that the Young Man's youth is a treasure and because it is a treasure it can be stolen.


## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

Therefore time is seen as a thief, not just as a destroyer. “Treasure,” as we have noted, can, in Shakespeare, be a pun on the male orgasm, as when Emilia in *Othello* speaks of unfaithful husbands as “pouring our treasure into foreign laps.”

The Poet writes as if he is trying to paint us a picture of himself busily at work creating protective verses which will stand up to the ravages of time the way farmers prepare their homes and lands for the ravages of winter. Instead, the Poet writes not about what he says he’s writing about, which would be a loving description of his lover’s beauty but about the horrors to come. The reason for this is given in the first line: the Poet has given us a picture of himself trying to write about the Young Man but writing, instead, about himself.

We find this sonnet a beautiful poem and a moving evocation of the Poet struggling, although it evoked no similar response in the anthologizers, who did not include it.

### SONNET 64



When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced  
The rich-proud cost of outworn buried age,  
When sometime lofty towers I see down-rased,  
And brass eternal slave to mortal rage.  
When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,  
And the firm soil win of the watery main,  
Increasing store with loss, and loss with store.  
When I have seen such interchange of state,  
Of state it self confounded, to decay,  
Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminat  
That Time will come and take my love away.  
    This thought is as a death which cannot choose  
    But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

Like Sonnet 60, this sonnet was inspired by Ovid. Each quatrain opens with “when I have seen,” once again stressing sight and the role of the eyes.

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

The corresponding lines in Ovid read:

For I have seene it sea which was substantial ground a late  
again where sea was, I have seene the same become dry land  
(book 15, line 288-289)

Even the metaphor of time as a cannibal is found in Ovid: “Thou tyme the eater up of things” (line 258).


Helen Vendler has commented on this sonnet:

The ruin of the three quatrains pertains to the inanimate world; the couplet departs from this to the true concern of the speaker: the death of his living beloved. In retrospect, we can see the first twelve lines as a long defense—by thinking about the end of inanimate things—against thinking about the death of a living person (p. 301).

In Vendler’s view, the sonnet represents a state of mourning before the fact, a kind of anticipatory mourning. We see the animation of the inanimate world as a special characteristic of Shakespeare’s sonnets. We are deeply impressed by the Poet’s capacity to see the ocean as hungry and to experience the same ocean as gaining advantage on the kingdom of the shore as if the two were armies in mortal combat. Also magnificent is the Poet’s capacity to see brass as “eternal slave to mortal rage.” The very idea that slavery can be eternal while the rage that destroys it is mortal is a staggering combination. To bring life to inanimate nature reduces the Poet’s loneliness allowing him to feel in tune with nature’s cycles. Two anthologies have included this sonnet.

Sonnet 65 is similar in mood and imagery to Sonnet 64.

SONNET 65



Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,  
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?  
O how shall summer's honey breath hold out,  
Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,  
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,  
Nor gates of steel so strong but time decays?  
O fearful meditation, where alack,  
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?  
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back,  
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?  
O none, unless this miracle have might  
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

Sonnet 64 ended with the victory of time, with the Poet weeping over what he fears to lose; in Sonnet 65 he takes up the battle against time once more. This time he is less despairing and all of time's destructive powers are listed as questions. Though the Poet regards it as a miracle if the his verses have enough power to protect against time, he nevertheless considers the possibility. In this poem the Poet cedes ownership of the Young Man's beauty to time by calling it "time's best jewel." Time attacks life like an army besieging a fortified town. Hence, the "wrackful siege of batt'ring days." The days are experienced as the destructive machines employed by time against walls of the fortress of life.

WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

SONNET 67

Ah wherefore with infection should he live,  
And with his presence grace impiety,  
That sin by him advantage should achieve,  
And lace itself with his society?  
Why should false painting imitate his cheek,  
And steal dead seeming of his living hue?  
Why should poor beauty indirectly seek,  
Roses of shadow, since his rose is true?  
Why should he live, now nature bankrupt is,  
Beggared of blood to blush through lively veins,  
For she hath no exchequer now but his,  
And proud of many, lives upon his gains?  
O him she stores, to show what wealth she had,  
In days long since, before these last so bad.

This beautiful but enigmatic sonnet can begin to be understood if we assume that the state of affairs described in Sonnet 63 has worsened. If we take the word “infection” to be the Poet’s disgusted reference to himself, the first quatrain declares in the most brutal terms that the Young Man should not spend time with the Poet. The “false painting” in line 5, which is Shakespeare normally refers to the application of makeup by women, in this case refers to the Poet’s “covering himself” with the Young Man’s beauty so he won’t have to experience his own horrid old age. He refers to his own love as “Roses of shadow” and sees no reason why the Young Man would want it. This original and wonderful phrase makes use of Plato’s metaphor of the cave.

Having begun to talk in terms of nature, the Poet continues and assigns to the lover a central place in the world, in which Nature uses the young man in order to deny how bad things are. Because the Poet’s love for the Young Man is fading, the world is experienced as dying; lacking inner life of its own to keep alive. Except for the young man the Poet loves, nothing is alive in the world. The memory of his love is now only an obstacle to an all-enveloping melancholia.

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

The idea of theft in line 6 shifts the atmosphere from a predominantly depressed one to something close to paranoia. We see with some amazement that the Poet hovers between a melancholic and a paranoid outlook. That infection is rampant and that the presence of the loved man graces impiety are depressive thoughts. That sin obtains an advantage through him, stealing his living hue, represents paranoid trends of thought. The idea that someone (Nature, the Poet) close to death wishes to steal the living hue of the Poet's lover is an example of paranoia transformed into poetry. (Paranoid ideas are among the most resistant to transformation into art.) "Roses of shadow," evokes roses of the world of the dead, and they envy his living rose.

In the third quatrain the Poet tells us that nature is bankrupt, so why should his lover continue to live? Anemia has set in; nature is experienced as "beggared of blood" and therefore not strong enough to create blushes, and nature envies the blood running in the young man's veins. We remember that when time was to carve furrows in the Young Man's brow in Sonnet 63 it was because all the blood had drained from his face. Line 11 continues the metaphor of bankruptcy. Nature's treasure, here called "exchequer," is empty, except for her possession of the Young Man. She keeps him only as a relic to show how wealthy she was at some previous time, which we surmise was the time when the Poet really loved the Young Man. Nature, once privileged ("proud of many") now can exist only by feeding on the young man's life. In the couplet nature keeps the Young Man from ageing to remind herself of the wealth she once possessed in days long ago. The Poet is projecting onto nature exactly what he has told us he does in Sonnet 62.

What happened that so darkened the outlook of the Poet is left unexplained, but a psychic catastrophe must have taken place. For reasons not revealed, the Poet's hostility towards his young lover greatly increased. The hostility gave rise to death wishes against the young man. These death wishes were intolerable to the Poet and were projected by the Poet onto nature. Because the Poet withdrew his interest from the outside world, the world was experienced as empty and dying. (In psychoanalytic language this is called withdrawal of libido from the outside world.) As long as the Poet was able to experience his lover's youth and beauty as his own he was protected from feelings of envy. Now his envy of the Young Man breaks

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

through and is projected onto nature, which is experienced as jealous as well as envious.

We surmise that the Poet felt that he was trying to live by draining the life of the Young Man. To experience his love as draining life out of the man he loved combines paranoia and melancholia. One can imagine that the idea that the Poet's inner life had come to an end and that he then tried to live off the young man's vitality was most painful to the Poet. The resulting melancholia was then projected onto nature.

The combination of high praise and death wishes creates an atmosphere of oppressive beauty. As the Poet loves the Young Man less, nature herself is experienced as a shadow of what she once was. We are accustomed to the opposite, that a state of being in love enhances and strengthens the sense of reality. This feeling is frequently reported by lovers when they say that the sunset in the presence of the beloved is infinitely more beautiful than when viewed alone. What we find remarkable in this sonnet is the Poet's capacity to project his dying love for the Young Man onto nature, conveying to his readers the horror of nature's bankruptcy. Shakespeare's love for the young man was receding, but his capacity to find bold and creative metaphors for this state of feeling was, if anything, heightened.

The savage, cannibalistic depression that we find to be at the core of this sonnet has not been noted by academic commentators. Vendler comments: "The beloved has outlived the Golden age, his era; he is a museum piece, a living relic, maintained alive by nature as her exhibit of what beauty and truth were (p. 313)."

True, but the depression that produced these lines has gone unnoticed. Other commentators sought refuge in the social realm, emphasizing the corruption in society. Burrow finds the sonnet overwritten, with abstract concerns (p. 514).


We notice also that the same theme of stealing beauty is the subject matter of Sonnet 99, but there it is treated with humor and kindness. That such disturbing emotions could be transformed into a poem is admirable. The anthologizers must have experienced difficulty in responding to this very depressed sonnet, for none of them included it. The mood of this sonnet recalls Hamlet's description of his illness to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust (II.ii.307-321)?

That the energy behind all these destructive emotions could be channeled into a poem of great beauty inspires awe before the Poet's genius.

### SONNET 68



Thus is his cheek the map of days outworn,  
When beauty lived and died as flowers do now,  
Before these bastard signs of fair were born,  
Or durst inhabit on a living brow;  
Before the golden tresses of the dead,  
The right of sepulchres, were shorn away,  
To live a second life on second head,  
Ere beauty's dead fleece made another gay:  
In him those holy antique hours are seen,  
Without all ornament, it self and true,  
Making no summer of another's green,  
Robbing no old to dress his beauty new,  
And him as for a map doth Nature store,  
To show false art what beauty was of yore.

The melancholia of Sonnet 63 and Sonnet 67 continues in this astonishing sonnet in which the Poet has expertly fused the celebration of the Young Man's beauty with his lament for his own old age. The explicitness

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

of Sonnet 62 is a great help in understanding this poem. The Young Man's cheek is a reminder of the Poet's youthful cheek, expressed as a "map of days outworn," to look at his cheek is to see how beautiful the Poet used to be. Therefore the Young Man is still young, still beautiful. The phrase "bastard signs of fair" is not easy to interpret but it seems to suggest that the Young Man's beauty is an illegitimate offspring of the Poet's own. And yet the Poet goes on to assert his lover's legitimacy at the expense of his own, when he says that the Young Man is "making no Summer of another's Green," a poetic way of chiding himself for what he is doing with his love of the Young Man.

Lines 3-4 suggest that erstwhile beauty had already died when beauty first touched the Young Man. These lines contain the insight that the Poet had to overcome his self love before he could respond to the Young Man's beauty, and also strengthen the sense that we got from Sonnet 104 that the Young Man may be very young indeed.

The Poet has an even more melancholy comparison in store in the next quatrain in which he offers a new and powerful metaphor. Its power is derived from the dread most people feel when corpses are violated. In Shakespeare's time it was customary to use the hair of the dead for wigs. The inherent horror of this custom is alive for the Poet, because he calls it a violation of "the right of sepulchers." A greater horror took place during the Holocaust, when the used body parts of their victims for commercial purposes. Because of the melancholic tone of the poem and some ideas that the Poet makes explicit elsewhere, particularly in Sonnet 31, it is possible to read additional relevance into the tresses metaphor if we have the courage to accept the idea that the Poet is already thinking of a transfer of his love from the young man to some future lover. The idea, however, is abhorrent to another part of the Poet's unconscious, and that is the reason why he is horrified by the violation of the "right of sepulchers."

To live a second life on second head,  
Ere beauty's dead fleece made another gay

Line 8 continues the metaphor, but the hair has been replaced by "fleece," the wool of sheep. It will now falsely decorate another head and make another man happy ("gay"). It is not easy for us, the Poet's readers, to accept what the Poet has dared to tell us, for he has compared signs of

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH


aging with death itself, and then added that just as the tresses of the dead can be used to decorate another head, so the Poet will take some part from the young man and transfer it to some future lover.

In the couplet Nature, and not the Poet's verses, is keeping the Young Man young, as a souvenir of what beauty she used to have at her disposal. In Sonnet 62 the Poet told us that he is using the Young Man's youth as a way to keep himself young. The couplet of this poem is a beautiful, metaphorical way to express this idea. In other poems the Poet will add the warning that but for Nature's desire to keep the Young Man beautiful as an aide-memoire the Young Man would age and die, meaning that when the Poet ceases to love the Young Man he will hurtle toward the fate that awaits us all. This poem makes use of the same ideas as several others but the tone is deeply melancholic. We may construct a narrative: that first the Poet was happily in love and now his love is waning, but that would be to impose our construction on the poems. What is certain is that the Poet has left us a dramatic range of different moods as he works the same material over and over again, like the waves upon the pebbled shore.

The sonnet is emotionally difficult to accept and no anthology selected it. From a psychoanalytic perspective there is much to admire in this sonnet, for the Poet dared view and put into words thoughts that are frequently repressed.

WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

SONNET 66



Tired with all these for restful death I cry,  
As to behold desert a beggar born,  
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,  
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,  
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,  
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,  
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,  
And strength by limping sway disabled,  
And art made tongue-tied by authority,  
And folly (doctor-like) controlling skill,  
And simple truth miscalled simplicity,  
And captive good attending captain ill.

Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,  
Save that to die, I leave my love alone.

“Tired with all these,” the Poet tells us in the first line, he cries for “restful death.” The long battle against death that animated so many earlier sonnets has here been given up. When the Poet’s mood was determined by aggressive orality, death was experienced cannibalistically, being eaten by hungry time, but Death is now welcome as restful. The usual vitality of the sonnets, based on a lively relationship between three quatrains and a couplet, is here submerged behind ten identically constructed lines, each beginning with the word “and;” they convey the impression that we are walking in a slow funeral procession. This sonnet was anthologized by four of the six anthologies, to us an unexpectedly high evaluation, suggesting that its unique poetic structure and the bitter depressive content, contributed to making this sonnet memorable.

SONNET 74

But be contented when that fell arrest  
 Without all bail shall carry me away;  
 My life hath in this line some interest,  
 Which for memorial still with thee shall stay.  
 When thou reviewest this, thou dost review  
 The very part was consecrate to thee;  
 The earth can have but earth, which is his due,  
 My spirit is thine, the better part of me;  
 So then thou hast but lost the dregs of life,  
 The prey of worms, my body being dead,  
 The coward conquest of a wretch's knife,  
 Too base of thee to be remembered:

The worth of that, is that which it contains,  
 And that is this, and this with thee remains.

In this sonnet the Poet has moved from resisting his death to imagining himself dead. We find him musing over his lover reading the sonnets after his death. A variation on the repeated “and” in Sonnet 66, the rhythm of this one is carried by the repetitive “th”: “that” in the first line, “without” in the second, “this” in the third, “thee” in the fourth, “thou” twice and “this” in the fifth, “the” and “thee” in the sixth, “the” and “earth” twice in line 7, and “thine” and “the” in the eighth line, “then,” “thou” and “the” in the ninth. The final line has “that,” “thee” and “this” twice.

The poem opens with the words “But be contented,” a strange opening, as if we have entered into an ongoing conversation between Poet and lover, with the Poet asking the lover to be contented, after the Poet’s death, with the poems left behind. “Fell arrest” is a metaphor for death. Literally the term is used to describe an arrest without a chance of posting bail, equivalent to “the country from which no traveler returns.” Shakespeare has used the same metaphor in *Hamlet*: “As this fell sergeant death/is strict in his arrest” (V.ii.347-48). The fell arrest will carry the Poet away, but because of “this line,” meaning the current sonnet, the life of the Poet retains “some interest.” It will stay with the lover as a memorial for the Poet; when the lover will read the sonnet he will realize the “very part,” meaning the

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

very sonnet, is “consecrate to thee,” a linguistic statement that recalls the marriage commitment.

In the seventh line the Poet reiterates an idea that meant a great deal to Shakespeare: “The earth can have but earth, which is his due.” In Genesis, when God created Adam he created him out of earth and therefore the body must return to earth, or be “due” to earth, while the spirit of the Poet, embodied in the poem, will remain with his lover. This spirit is “the better part” of the Poet. In the language of Sonnet 20, the compromise of asexual love has been realized permanently. A “part,” in Elizabethan English, can have a connotation of referring to a penis and so the Poet calls his verses his spirit, “the better part” of himself. In traditional religious terms the spirit returns to God, but in the Poet’s mind the “better part” will survive him and will remain with the lover. The passage brings to mind the famous exchange between Prince Hal and Falstaff.

*Hal:* Why thou owest God a death.


*Falstaff:* Tis not due yet: I would be loath to pay him before his day. What need I be so forward with him that calls not on me. (*Henry IV, Part I, V.i.126-129*).

In the *Book of Common Prayer* this idea is expressed as “I commend thy soul to God the father almighty and the body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” In the poem the lover has replaced God. The religious distinction between body and spirit is retained but subverted into the continuation of the love relationship after the Poet’s death, rather than “life everlasting” in heaven.

The last quatrain is Medieval in tone. The body is referred to as “the dregs of life” and “prey of worms.” The body is “too base” to be worth remembering. In line 11 death is maligned as “The coward conquest of a wretch’s knife;” wretch here literally means a worthless person, such as might kill someone in a robbery, but we also know that knife from the other poems as belonging to Time. The mood in which this sonnet was written is in opposition to what the Poet expresses in Sonnet 71, to which we turn next. Of the two, the anthologies preferred 71. Sonnet 74 is a powerful but depressing poem. Only one anthology included this poem.

WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

SONNET 71



No longer mourn for me when I am dead,  
Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell  
Give warning to the world that I am fled  
From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell:  
Nay if you read this line, remember not,  
The hand that writ it, for I love you so,  
That I in your sweet thoughts would be forgot,  
If thinking on me then should make you woe.  
O if (I say) you look upon this verse,  
When I (perhaps) compounded am with clay,  
Do not so much as my poor name rehearse;  
But let your love even with my life decay.  
Lest the wise world should look into your moan,  
And mock you with me after I am gone.

The Poetic structure of this sonnet is built around the sounds we associate with the letters W and V, alternating with the sound of the letter S. We have “when” in the first line, “warning” and “world” in the third, and “vile,” “world,” “vilest,” “worms” and “dwell” in the fourth. In the sixth line we find “love,” and “sweet” and “would” in line 7. Line 8 contains “woe,” line 9 “verse,” and line 10 “when” and “with.” Finally, the Poet uses “love” and “with” in line 12, “wise” and “world” in line 13, and “with” in line 14.

As to the S sound, there are “surly” and “sullen” in line 2, “this,” “vilest” and “worms” in the fourth line, “this” in line 5, “so” in line 6, “sweet” and “thoughts” in line 8, “say” “this” and “verse” in line 9, and “perhaps” in line 10. The last S sounds in the sonnet are “so” and “rehearse” in line 11, and “lest” and “wise” in line 13.

Ostensibly what the Poet tries to do is to persuade his lover not to mourn for him after his death. By itself this is a strange request because the “work of mourning,” as Freud called it, is necessary in order to obtain liberation from the lost lover. Since the publication in 1917 of Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” psychoanalysts tend to believe, contrary to the Poet’s view in this sonnet, that those who cannot mourn the loss of

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

an old love will have greater difficulty finding a new love than those who have mourned and finished the work of mourning. Depression, conscious or unconscious, will befall anyone who cannot mourn the loss of a loved one. It is strange that so profound a psychologist as Shakespeare should so proposterously err in this sonnet. To sympathize with the Poet in this sonnet we must assume that the Poet feared mourning.

The official reason given for this prohibition of mourning emerges in the couplet. We are asked to believe that the world will mock the young man if he shows signs of mourning. The reason for the Poet's fear that he will be mocked is not stated. It has been assumed that this was an allusion to the difference in social rank between them, but it could also reflect the Poet's depression and his conviction that he does not deserve to be mourned.

Depression is the significant theme in this sonnet, as indicated by the main metaphors chosen. The Poet did not die; he "fled/From this vile world," not into a better world in the hereafter, but in order to dwell "with the vilest worms."

The first quatrain is written as a kind of will or testament. For a fee, the heirs of a dead person could get the church bell to toll once for every year the deceased had lived. The Poet of the sonnet asks that this custom not be used at his funeral. The Poet forbids mourning for him once the bell announcing his death has tolled. Mourning should not last longer than the sound of the bell. The bell is experienced as "surly" and "sullen." The word "surly" implies stern, haughty, arrogant, or imperious behavior, while "sullen" suggests gloom or melancholia. Associating the two words with the sound of the bell sends a double message, a prohibition on mourning, combined with a sense of gloom. Death is experienced in hostile, oral terms, as being eaten by the "vilest worms."

There is something hostile in this insistence that the Poet not be mourned, hiding behind the innocuous wish to cause no woe to the lover. In line 9, the idea is repeated; even if the lover will look upon "this verse" at a time when the author is already "compounded with clay" he should refrain from rehearsing the Poet's name.


The Poet twice instructs his lover not to remember him, both times when he is reading this very poem, thus advocating the suppression of mourning. The fact that three of the six anthologizers included this sonnet

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

suggests that many readers respond strongly to the Poet's wishes to spare his lover the need to mourn him. The post-Freudian notion that mourning is both necessary and a psychically healing response, and conversely, that the inability to mourn is conducive to mental illness, was not within the orbit of Shakespeare's thinking or the thinking of all those who celebrate this sonnet.

In our view, since no one can love and not mourn the loss of the person loved, the injunction against mourning amounts to a prohibition on loving.

### SONNET 73



That time of year thou mayst in me behold,  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.  
In me thou seest the twilight of such day,  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.  
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,  
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,  
As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,  
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.  
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

In sonnet 73 the Poet's age has become the very reason for his lover's love. And because the Poet perceives himself as loved *because* of his old age he can write about himself with the love and tenderness he reserves for descriptions of nature. In sharp contrast to Sonnet 71, here the Poet expresses his full capacity for self-mourning.

Sonnet 73 is among Shakespeare's best-known sonnets, selected by all anthologies.

In the first line the Poet boldly states that the Young Man (or an unknown onlooker, and by implication, we his readers), sees him in old age

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

expressed as at that season of the year “when yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang.” The logical sequence of the seasons has deliberately been changed when a “none” precedes “a few.” The seasons of nature are highly regular, but the moods of the Poet are not. In his inner life, winter can come before autumn. The scene that in the first two lines was static becomes full of movement in the third line, when the wind, not directly referred to, makes the boughs shake against the cold. For the Poet nature has become animated; the trees shake as human beings do, especially older people, when exposed to inclement weather. The new metaphor introduced in the fourth line is darker. Preconsciously we know that barren boughs will become green again in the next season, but the addition of “ruined” to “bare ruined choirs” eliminates the hope of renewal. Blackmore Evans has suggested that several levels of meaning are implied. Picturesquely we see the ruined remains of a church choir. The arches, like branches, are open to the elements. Historically this may be a reference to the destruction of the monasteries carried out under Henry VIII. Some commentators even suspect that Shakespeare was referring to choirboys. What seems significant to us is that, as in other sonnets, the Poet excels in creating images that describe the desolation of old age while simultaneously evoking the time past of youthful beauty, here the time when sweet birds sang there. The next line, “in me thou seest the twilight of such a day,” is so powerful because the Poet himself has merged with the twilight: he and nature have become one. He is also the day that “after sunset fadeth in the west.” Black night appears in line 7; it is animated and endowed with a capacity to take away the previous day. The Poet’s invocation of sleep, described as “death’s second self that seals up all in rest,” rather than death itself, adds an element of healing that mitigates the bleak picture and lends sweetness to the poem.

Perhaps the mitigation of sleep has had an encouraging effect on the Poet, because, not being dead yet, he compares himself to embers in the third quatrain, comparing his love to the hottest kind of fire. Alas the fire burns upon “the ashes of his youth.” Burning on top of ashes, the fire must soon expire. In the twelfth line the Poet points out that and fire consumes the very matter that it is nourished by, adding a cannibalistic note to this very bleak picture. We recall the cannibalistic metaphor in Sonnet 19, “make the earth devour her own sweet brood.”

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

This sonnet contains one of the most pessimistic appraisals of love found in Shakespeare, more pessimistic than the one we found in *Venus and Adonis*. Love is a fire that burns more strongly when one is young. The early love turns into ashes, and these ashes threatened to suffocate the love of maturity. We may go so far as to suspect that deeply in his unconscious the Poet attributes to love the same suicidal quality he attributed to fire. This is reminiscent of the line in *Hamlet*: “There lies within the very flame of love a kind of wick or snuff that will abate it” (IV.vii.114-115).

It seems likely that Sonnet 73 was in Edna St. Vincent Millay’s mind when she wrote one of her famous sonnets. The same tree that (in Millay’s words) does not know what “birds have vanished one by one” and “yet knows that its boughs are more silent than before” appears in both Millay’s sonnet and Sonnet 73.

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,  
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain  
Under my head till morning; but the rain  
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh  
Upon the glass and listen for reply,  
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain  
For unremembered lads that not again  
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.  
Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,  
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,  
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:  
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,  
I only know that summer sang in me  
A little while, that in me sings no more.

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

### SONNET 126

The sonnet contains a well-known anomaly; it has only twelve lines instead of the customary fourteen. We have no way of knowing whether it was purposely shortened by the author or whether discretion made the publisher omit two lines. In the printed sequence it is the last of the sonnets addressed to the Young Man. One senses that the relationship—or at least this particular way of viewing and thinking of the Young Man—has come to an end and in this poem the Poet comes to terms, in a sad but also humorous acceptance, with the end. We re-encounter in this sonnet the myth created by Shakespeare and familiar to us from Sonnet 20, that nature herself fell a-doting on the Poet's lover, as well as the idea that she is keeping him young for her own purposes in her war against time.

Oh thou my lovely boy who in thy power,  
Dost hold Time's fickle glass his sickle hour:  
Who hast by waning grown, and therein show'st,  
Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self grow'st.  
If Nature (sovereign mistress over wrack)  
As thou goest onwards still will pluck thee back,  
She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill  
May time disgrace, and wretched minutes kill.  
Yet fear her O thou minion of her pleasure,  
She may detain, but not still keep her treasure!  
Her audit (though delayed) answered must be,  
And her quietus is to render thee.

“Oh thou my lovely boy” as a form of address is found only in this sonnet, according to Burrow. It is a more directly homosexual address than we have yet seen. If the sequence of the sonnets is to be trusted, then in the last sonnet to the Young Man Shakespeare expressed homosexual wishes more overtly, perhaps because he was saying farewell. This sonnet combines the theme of the Young Man keeping the Poet young with his youth with the theme of time coming to destroy the Young Man. In the opening two lines the young man is given extraordinary power to “hold,” or stop, “Time's fickle glass,” a reference to the hourglass in which the sand, signifying the passage of time, is running. The “sickle hour” refers to the hour of

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

(the Poet's) death which the Young Man can also prevent. In the first two lines, the lovely boy is victorious over aging as well as death: fickle glass and sickle hour form a striking poetic pair. In the third line death has become night as the moon is invoked by "waning" which here is used to mean here symbolizes growing older; unlike the Poet, the Young Man has become more beautiful as time passed on, while the Poet (and the lovely boy's other lovers) have only withered as they've grown older.

The second quatrain introduces the legend with which we are already familiar. The Young Man is seen as the battleground between nature and time. He has not aged because nature "plucked him back" from aging, being herself mistress over destruction or "wreck." Her aim is to confound time, to win victory over time, and to kill the "wretched minutes" that do time's bidding. The whole idea that nature and time are at war with each other over who has dominion over the young man suggests nature as a feminine and maternal figure at war with the masculine and paternal figure of time. A similar battle over an Arabian boy gives rise to a disagreement between Oberon and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was a theme that seemed of particular interest to the Poet. In psychoanalysis such a battle over a child represents a consolation over the loneliness of the child excluded from the sexual experience of the parents, for in this consolation the parents do not desire each other but fight over the boy. The Poet did not claim this coveted position for himself but assigned it to the young man he loves. The Poet thus created an imaginary triangle in which time and nature fight over who will possess the young man. This triangle anticipates the triangle of the dark lady sonnets. Victory, the Poet predicts, will go to time.


However, nature in Sonnet 126, unlike nature in Sonnet 20, has not herself fallen in love with the young man; the young man is only a "minion of her pleasure." Minion here means favorite or darling and the original phrase "minion of her pleasure" is a highly original way of describing narcissistic love. Nature is using the young man to show her skill and her ability to compete with time. The Poet projects onto nature exactly what he said he was doing himself in Sonnet 62. In the last quatrain, the young man is urged not to trust nature, for she merely exploits him as her minion, serving to give her pleasure. Since nature is a woman, there is no love between nature and the lovely boy, his being only her toy to play with. Ultimately,

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

nature will prove powerless against time. She can detain the boy, that is, keep him from aging, but in the end all she can do is delay his aging. In the last line, the verdict is issued: the lovely boy will become her “quietus,” a technical term indicating the settling of a debt. The word “quietus” according to the O.E.D. originally meant “a receipt given on payment,” like audit; “quietus” is another metaphor for death, made explicit in the line from Hamlet’s most famous soliloquy where Hamlet refers to suicide as “when he could his quietus make with a bare bodikin.” Nature can no more keep him from (ageing and) dying than Venus could have prevented the death of Adonis.

Only one anthology included this sonnet, but for us it summarizes the conflict of the Poet of the sonnets in an original way. The elevation of the Young Man to a cosmic significance as the battleground between two narcissistic divinities, each fighting to possess him but neither loving him but merely exploiting him. It should, in our opinion, be understood as a mythological extension of Sonnet 104, described in the previous chapter.

### SONNET 146



Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth,  
Feeding these rebel powers that thee array,  
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,  
Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?  
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,  
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?  
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,  
Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body’s end?  
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant’s loss,  
And let that pine to aggravate thy store;  
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;  
Within be fed, without be rich no more:  
    So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,  
    And Death once dead there’s no more dying then.

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

Commentators have apparently found this a difficult sonnet to decipher. Booth needed 16 pages to explain it, while the adjacent sonnets required only one or two pages. Vendler needed six pages while adjacent sonnets required only two.

Sonnet 146 is surprising because we have become accustomed to seeing Shakespeare as representing the man of the Renaissance and in this sonnet he speaks to us in the language of the Middle Ages, in which, traditionally, a debate between soul and body takes place. This sonnet reminds us of some of the religious poetry written by John Donne. It has been called Shakespeare's Christian sonnet and is the one sonnet to which the word "religious" applies; it could almost be called a sermon. Barrow compared this sonnet to those that explored a dialogue between body and soul. But this is hardly the case, for neither body nor soul speak; we hear a voice criticizing and admonishing, but we do not find out who "the speaker" is. Instead, the speaker is an inner voice of the Poet that has become detached from the feelings of the Poet and addresses the soul of the Poet as if it were a foreign voice. It is a voice we recognize, which often speaks to Hamlet, and a voice Freud would describe as the voice of the superego.

To us the poem reveals the Poet's feelings absent his relationship with the Young Man, either before he fell in love as described in Sonnet 62 or after he freed himself from this love. He is left alone with his disparaged ageing body, exhorting himself to nourish his spirit upon his body's decay rather than to nourish his heart by rejoicing in his love for his younger self. It's a beautiful poem but rather traditional and familiar in content: an ageing man urges himself to turn away from investing his libido (that is, his loving energy) in his vanity and turn to the nourishment of the spirit instead. Reading this poem is such a jolting return to territory familiar from the writings of other authors that we can't help missing the (admittedly frequently disturbing) relationship with the Young Man for the richness of invention that love inspired in the Poet.

Many critics have looked upon this sonnet as revealing Shakespeare's personal attitude toward death. Caroline Spurgeon, in *Shakespeare's Imagery*, expresses this point of view.

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

Only once does Shakespeare in his own person seem to tell us directly what he himself thinks about death, and that is in the grave 146<sup>th</sup> sonnet, addressed to the soul of man. Here we see the medieval picture reversed, and the greedy feaster on the flesh of men subdued and annihilated in his turn by the spirit of man grown strong, and here Shakespeare points out to us the way of life, and so of the defeat of death (p. 185).

Since we have taken the position that the Poet of the Sonnets is only one of the characters created by Shakespeare, we see no reason to believe this sonnet is more personal to Shakespeare than Hamlet's famous soliloquy and Claudio's terror of death in *Measure for Measure*.

This sonnet echoes some Pauline passages from the New Testament: "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man. But I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin that is in my members" (Romans 7:23-24). In line 11 we are told that by starving the body it will "Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross." Dross refers to what is left over from metals in smelting, with the further implication of impurity in general. The term dross appears in Shakespeare's work five times, always metaphorically: "my love admits no qualifying dross (*Troilus and Cressida* IV.iv.9)" or "A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross (*The Merchant of Venice* II.vii.20)."

However, in this sonnet there are no references to any specific Christian themes, such as the resurrection and salvation. A Pagan stoic philosopher could almost have written the sonnet. There is no reference in this sonnet to love or to any human relationship. In significant ways this sonnet is similar to Sonnet 129, where lust was denounced with similar vehemence.

The couplet:

So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,  
And Death once dead there's no more dying then.

Is like this couplet in Donne's "Death be not proud:"

One short sleep past, we wake eternally  
And death shall be no more: death thou shall die.

## WHEN LOVE IS AT WAR WITH TIME AND DEATH

Or from Donne's "Divine meditation:"

I run from death and death meets me fast  
And all my pleasures are like yesterday

As different as this sonnet is from the rest, we recognize many familiar images and themes. The mansion is here again, though this time it is the ageing body and not a metaphor for love. The lease is here again with its short date but this time, without the Young Man for inspiration, it isn't "summer's lease." The Poet's "poor soul" is the center of "his sinful earth," evoking the Poet's opposition to the feminine and the sexual. In the other sonnets considered in this chapter, the Poet regards it as natural that he should react so badly to his ageing body. Only here does he admonish himself to turn away from "painting" and other vanity, and seek to overcome death by feeding upon his own decay. It is not clear exactly what he means by this but the cannibalism that has appeared before has become explicit. Worms, in the second quatrain, will get to eat the body in any case. What a contrast to Rosalind in *As You Like It*, who declares "men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them but not for love." A worm can also symbolize a penis, as in *The Rape of Lucrece*, "why should the worm intrude the maiden's bed" (848). Oral hunger runs through the whole poem. The word "feeding" opens the second line, and in lines 7 and 8 again the hungry worms are central. The word "fed" appears in line 12 and appears twice in line 13. Death, to the Poet is always hungry, but in this poem it is implied, although not directly stated, that the purified soul has devoured death itself.

This chapter illustrates that the Poet of the sonnets, unlike a philosopher like Socrates, does not have a permanent, stable attitude toward death. His feelings fluctuate; triumph contends with defeat, hope with despair, but in all moods he carries us with him by the magic of his words and metaphors. The seven sonnets that describe the defeat of love by time are in the minority, seven out of 24. The preponderance of the Poet's feelings in this chapter implies that love is no match against aging and death; its strength is only the strength of a flower. Collecting these poems in one chapter transmits a sense of depression.

The sonnets we have discussed in this chapter are very beautiful, and yet this chapter was not easy for us to write and it may not have been easy

## WHAT SILENT LOVE HATH WRIT

for many readers, for we all wage the same battle against time and death. The ferocity with which the Poet of the Sonnets described this battle and the feelings he admits to himself and shares with us are sometimes almost too difficult to bear, yet the beauty of these sonnets brings undoubted joy. And as we promised in the Introduction, we are beginning to get the sense that we know him.