

The Importance of Being Self-effacing

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MALVOLIO: ... *be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em.*
(Shakespeare, *Twelfth-Night*, II.v.120-121)

Never have I tried to see whether the bard of Avon was behind every word he wrote of the sonnets. In fact, the voice is more important than a name. However, when the name of the designer of the Modern English language is uttered, it is impossible not to think of William Shakespeare.

The Sonnets appeared for the first time in 1609. Little is known about their conception. Little is known about the speaker. Little is known about the addressee. But, from them, a whole universe can be created in which the persona, the fair youth, the rival poet, and the dark lady interact with one another giving life to a complete spectrum of human relationships. Whether they are examples of real experiences or just artistic invention does not matter at this stage of our existence.

The language used shows Shakespeare as a magician who, with the proper combination of words, portrays each of these lyrical clusters acting together, awaking storms, passions, laughter, disturbances... It is hard to tell whether the order in which the sonnets were published was the one intended by the

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poet, but they were published following a sequence that, at least, makes sense today.

The sonnets are structured as follows: from sonnet 1 to 126 (although the latter is not a sonnet but six couplets plus two bracketed blank verses), they are known as the **Fair Youth Series**; from sonnet 127 to 152, they are known as the **Dark Lady Series**; and there are two final **allegorical sonnets** (153 and 154). When concentrating on the Fair Youth Series, two groups can clearly be identified: from sonnet 1 to 17, they are known as the **Procreation Sonnets**; and from sonnet 78 to 86, the **Rival Poet Series**. It is on this last section that I am going to occupy my thoughts. Brown and Spencer (1992) describe this series as the one in which the rival poet enjoys the handsome young man's friendship and is full of admiration, promising to bestow immortality on the young man by means of the poems he writes in his honour.

There are many conjectures on the identity of the rival poet: *Christopher Marlowe* (c.1564-1593), *George Chapman* (c.1559-1634)... or, Perhaps, an amalgam of several of Shakespeare's contemporaries. Regardless of the name, what really matters here is the position of the voice facing the multiple poets intermingled in the figure of the "better spirit." In *Sonnet 80* the persona begins by stating the conflict in search of a possible answer:

*O, how I faint when I of you do write,
Knowing a better spirit doth use your name,
And in the praise thereof spends all his might,
To make me tongue-tied, speaking of your fame.*

The power of the emotions invades the souls of the readers since the persona admits feeling discouraged when the right moment comes to write about his muse. Being aware of the existence of the rival poet by invoking his name, the voice recognises his inferiority or lack of craft, which places him in an awkward position. The rival poet uses all his might to end up by leaving the voice "tongue-tied."

An extended maritime metaphor follows to show how inferior he feels in comparison to the skills of the rival poet:

*But since your worth (wide as the ocean is)
The humble as the proudest sail doth bear,
My saucy bark (inferior far to his)
On your broad main doth wilfully appear.*

The ocean depicts the immensity and grandeur of his source of inspiration. At sea, two boats: a humble boat or “saucy bark” and “the proudest sail.” There is enough room for both, though. It looks as if he were not terrorised despite the awareness of his own smallness. It is clear here how an image people in England were so much familiar with is unveiled, the English ships and the Spanish Armada being protagonists of one of the most glorious moments in British history. Moreover, the second part of the extended metaphor continues with a clear description of what has been anticipated:

*Your shallowest help will hold me up afloat,
Whilst he upon your soundless deep doth ride,
Or (being wrecked) I am a worthless boat,
He of tall building and of goodly pride.*

If the fair youth helps him with the slightest favour, he will be held “up afloat” while the other poet will sail in deep areas graciously. If the humble boat gets damaged by losing the muse’s favour, he can only conclude that his skills are worthless while the rival poet’s skills remain mighty and full of pride.

When all is said and done, the voice states that the admiration he feels for the fair youth will be the cause of his own downfall if he is ignored.

*Then if he thrive and I be cast away,
The worst was this: my love was my decay.*

To the best of my knowledge and belief, I reckon that the persona, at the end of the day, is fearless.

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