

APOLLONIAN VERSUS DIONYSIAN LOVE IN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

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Abstract

Two loves are thus contrasted in the sonnets, a Platonic, idealized, immortal and inspiring love Shakespeare experiences for the fair youth and a degrading, sensual, sinful and debaucherous love he experiences for the dark mistress in which Shakespeare does not idealize her or put her on a pedestal and recognizes that she is mortal and no goddess but nonetheless he appreciates her fully with all her deficiencies and defects. Shakespeare thus makes an unusual ode to love in its multifaceted and varied forms, platonic and sensual, idealized and mundane.

Keywords: Shakespeare, love, Platonic, Sensual. Apollonian, Dionysian

In Shakespeare's sonnets, an apollonian love and platonic admiration for a fair youth or fair friend is contrasted with a Dionysian love and lust for the poet's dark mistress. The platonic love for the fair youth is described as a love which enriches and inspires him, love being a ladder which he ascends in improvement by meditating on the youth's beauty, while the lust he experiences for the dark mistress is a degrading passion which exhausts him and leaves him bereft of dignity and steeped in shame. Hence sonnet 144:

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair
Which, like two spirits, do suggest me still
The better angel is a man right fair
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride,
And whether that my angel be turned fiend
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell
But being both from me both to each friend
I guess one angel in another's hell
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt
Till my bad angel fire my good one out

The Dionysian love for the dark mistress is described as an evil and she is described as 'foul' and wanton, tempting the better angel, the fair youth from his side. Her female private parts are described pejoratively as a hell (I guess one angel in another's hell) and their lustful

sensuous relations between Shakespeare as a hell (To win me soon to hell my female evil) and hence the relations with this dark mistress are described as sinful, degrading and shaming. This is seen in another sonnet 129:

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
 Is lust in action, and till action, lust
 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel not to trust
 Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
 Past reason hated as a swallowed bait,
 On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
 Mad in pursuit, and in possession so
 Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme
 A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe
 Before, a joy proposed; behind a dream
 All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
 To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell

The passion and lust for the dark mistress are thus described in degrading and negative terms as lust, perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame, and described as an expense of spirit in a waste of shame, the opposite of the improving, spiritual, inspiring Platonic love that Shakespeare experiences for the fair youth. Again a woman's private parts are described pejoratively as a hell that shuns heaven and an entrapment, the love for the dark mistress is thus described as degrading, foul, lust, destined for hell as opposed to the heaven he experiences with the fair youth. The lust he experiences for the dark mistress is thus a damning one in which he does not experience spiritual edification as he does with the youth but damnation and degradation. The lustful and degrading nature of the sensual relations between Shakespeare and the dark mistress are contrasted with the improving, Platonic love for the fair youth in in 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-fixed 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 hour 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.

The Platonic love with the fair youth is thus described as a marriage of true minds, a mental and spiritual connection and a marriage of intellect and soul rather than bodily degradation, a foul and degrading lust with the dark mistress, it is abiding as an ever fixed mark and thus lasts much longer than the temporal satiation of lust Shakespeare experiences with the

dark mistress and this is seen again when he states that Love is not time's fool though rosy lips and cheeks within Time's sickle come, the love for the fair youth is thus depicted as Platonic and eternal contrasted with the temporary satiation of degrading lust as rosy lips and cheeks Shakespeare experiences with the dark mistress. The love for the fair youth is thus Platonic, eternal, unshakeable and somewhat immortal as well as pure compared with the degrading lust and sensual passion Shakespeare experiences with the dark mistress. The love for the fair youth is also described as a form of self-love in sonnet 62

Sin of self- love possesseth all mine eye
 And all my soul, and all my every part
 And for this sin there is no remedy
 It is grounded inward in my heart
 Methinks no face so gracious as mine
 No shape so true, no truth of such account,
 And for myself mine own worth do define
 As I all other in all worth's surmount
 But when my glass shows me myself indeed,
 Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity
 Mine own self-love quite contrary I read
 Self, so self-loving, were iniquity
 'Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise
 Painting my age with the beauty of thy days

The love for the fair youth is thus described as a self-love, an idealization of the youth as a younger version of himself as Shakespeare 'paints' his 'age with the beauty of thy days'. Again, we see that the love for the fair youth is an idealized one in which he identifies a younger version of himself in the youth and thus experiences a self-love which he transfers as affection to the youth. Indeed, Shakespeare's ideal love is a form of self-love since he loves none better than himself, in contrast the sexual difference with the dark mistress proves to be not love but lust in an expense of spirit that degrades him sensually rather than improving him and inspiring him spiritually. In contrast to this Platonic, idealized and improving love the love for the dark mistress is not idealized at all but experienced as ordinary and mundane in sonnet 130:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
 Coral is far more red than her lip's red,
 If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun
 If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head
 I have seen roses damasked, red and white
 But no roses see I in her cheeks;
 Again in some perfumes is there more delight
 Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks
 I love to hear her speak yet well I know
 That music hath a far more pleasing sound,
 I grant I never saw a goddess go,
 My mistress when she walks treads on the ground
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare

Shakespeare does not idealize the mistress hence or put her on a pedestal, he recognizes that she is of no spectacular or extraordinary beauty, her eyes are nothing like the sun and her

lips are not bright red, her hairs are stiff like wires and her cheeks are pale rather than rosy, aside from that she has body odour and her voice is not in the least musical, she is no goddess and she is a mere mortal who treads the ground. And yet Shakespeare experiences a love that is rarer than any belied with false compare, his love for her is exquisite and unique rather than tainted with false glamorizing and glorification of her, it is a love for the very ordinary and mundane nature of his mistress that he experiences rather than the idealized immortal love he experiences for the fair youth.

Two loves are thus contrasted in the sonnets, a Platonic, idealized, immortal and inspiring love Shakespeare experiences for the fair youth and a degrading, sensual, sinful and debaucherous love he experiences for the dark mistress in which Shakespeare does not idealize her or put her on a pedestal and recognizes that she is mortal and no goddess but nonetheless he appreciates her fully with all her deficiencies and defects. Shakespeare thus makes an unusual ode to love in its multifaceted and varied forms, platonic and sensual, idealized and mundane.

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