

Jonty Stewart's thoughts on the sonnets (from the Stewart family archive)

I do love a sonnet, so am delighted to share my love for number 29 today. The Bard's collected sonnets are not only a pleasure to read individually but taken in sequence present a story whose main characters are the beautiful young man, the dark lady and old Will Shakespeare himself (along with a supporting cast including the young man's mother and the lady's suitors). It's the early part of this story I'd like to consider.

Let's start by confirming that the first batch of sonnets are all directed at a man, despite the nonsense that some critics have spouted. By all means borrow "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day" to flatter your young lady, but never forget the beauty which was more lovely and more temperate was a *masculine* one. The identity of the man need not bother us here. I'm sure it's William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, although my Orlando, of course, would like him to be the Earl of Southampton, whom he reckons looks a bit like me.

The first seventeen sonnets are all along the lines of, "You are so gorgeous, get married and have children for pity's sake and then everyone will be happy!" The last of these has the wonderful lines "If I could write the beauty of your eyes and in fresh numbers number all your graces" which rather set the tone for what's coming next. (Incidentally, Orlando thinks that those fresh numbers are undiscovered ordinal ones. I haven't the heart to tell him that they're poems.)

Things change in the story at Sonnet 18 (the "summer's day" one, which might be the Bard taking micky out of the traditional love poem), where it seems Will has forgotten he's supposed to be persuading the man to reproduce himself and just praises his beauty and how much the man's love means to him. That makes it all the more poignant when we get to Sonnet 33 where we find out that the young man has betrayed him in some way, but old Will is still besotted and forgives him. Again, let's not bother with what that offence was – I'd like to look at Shakespeare's emotions and what might have happened to his relationship with his "Onlie Begetter".

Was Shakespeare that clichéd character, the artist who falls for his model? Or maybe a Pygmalion type figure who becomes besotted with his creation, by which I mean this marvellous man depicted in the verses who seems a touch too good to be true? Or had he always harboured feelings for his subject that were more than friendship and he couldn't help letting them shine through his words? Or could it simply be the prosaic explanation that he was telling a story, as he told it in his plays, that may have had little relation to reality? We can guess but we can never know.

I'd like to leave you with a thought or two. The Bard wasn't above writing himself into his plays – the rather dim Will in "As You Like It" is surely a humorous take on the play's author. He also features in his plays two clearly gay (as you'd call it in your times) characters, both called Antonio, in two separate plays, Twelfth Night and The Merchant of Venice. These are both older men in love with a younger chap for whom they risk their lives, only to see said young men go off with women. That bit about being in love isn't me seeing through the eyes of my relationship with Orlando; they both use that word to describe their feelings. Both men also risk their lives for the objects of their affection and tolerate the fact that affection doesn't seem to be returned.

Is there some link between Antonio and his situation and Will and his? And how will we ever know for sure?