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English 1A03

17 March 2016

Usurping the Sonnet to Unsettle Conventions:

Comparing Edna St. Vincent Millay's "I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed" to William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130"

While Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" toys with narration, structure and diction to characterize a physically unappealing woman, Edna St. Vincent Millay's "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed" employs the same tactics to abolish the notion of an emotionally dependent woman in favour a one who submits only to her own sexual desires; as such, both poems challenge the traditional sonnet's portrayal of love in order to disturb the societal conventions imposed upon women in their respective times.

Normally, a sonnet sees a male lover addressing an idealistic object of romantic affection, however both Shakespeare and Millay upset this traditional form by establishing first-person narrators who do not directly speak about or to a lover. In "I, Being born a Woman and Distressed", the speaker is not only a woman, but a woman who primarily addresses the sexual "needs and notions of [her] kind"(Millay, 2). She only acknowledges her lover as a convenient means of her own becoming "undone, possessed"(8) otherwise the lover is almost entirely absent. Thus, the narrator dominates throughout the poem as evidenced for instance by the the

emphasis and placement of the initial "I" (1) in the title and the first line followed by the repetition of personal pronouns throughout. Millay uproots not only sonnet form by using this self-appraising narrator but also acknowledges the female speaker's blunt sexual desires as real, disrupting the conservative attitude of her time. While Shakespeare's narrator is not definitively male or female, he too uses an unconventional narrative voice in his sonnet, which begins "My mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun"(Shakespeare, 1). Immediately there is a divergence from traditional sonnets as Shakespeare's speaker does not address the mistress directly with praise, but rather speaks about her plain appearance to some unknown audience. The object of ridicule then, becomes not the mistress but the readers whom the speaker is addressing, as they are willingly part of a society that holds women to impossibly high standards of beauty that they realistically cannot achieve. Essentially, while Millay's positioning of a female narrator as the speaker and primary subject subverts the internal power dynamics of the sonnet, Shakespeare's narrator immediately projects comments regarding the beloved's appearance away from the her and towards the reader to prove that love is deeper than the unrealistic standards women embody in the traditional sonnets of his time.

Additionally, Shakespeare and Millay engage with the strict structural components of different types of sonnets to distinguish their content from the prevailing societal structures restraining women. In Petrarchan sonnets, the octet is supposed to capture a conflict which is then resolved in the sestet. Millay parodies this formula by having the octet describe an inevitable distress and "certain zest/ To bear [the lover's] body's weight upon [her] breast"(4-5) as a natural consequence of being "born a woman"(1). Also, in the sestet, the speaker does not proceed to resolve her lust as being synonymous with love as society would expect of her

because she is a woman, and instead declares her “plain” (12) indifference and “scorn”(12) towards her lover. Millay separates the shockingly erotic octet from the emotionlessness of the sestet. This demonstrates that by nature, women are undeniably capable of having wild sexual desires completely separate from romantic feeling, which was at the time a distinctly masculine trait. Contrarily, Shakespeare engages with a different form of sonnet with three quatrains denouncing the physicality and desirousness of his mistress and a rhyming couplet which concludes seemingly in opposition of this previous evidence. Instinctively, the disproportionate amount of time Shakespeare spends criticising his mistress seems to indicate that the turn, “And yet, by heaven I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare”(Shakespeare 13-14) must be disregarded. But in actuality, the couplet provides context for all of his previous negative comparisons. Her flaws are but physical, and in his eyes make his mistress all the more deserving of his affection compared to the false women in the typical English sonnets of his day who are praised with unrealistic cliches. The couplet is a tool of delayed gratification that Shakespeare uses to lightheartedly demonstrate his understanding that a sonnet is more than the proportionality of its contents, just as a woman is more than the sum of her physical parts.

Furthermore, both Shakespeare and Millay are able to use precise diction in their dynamic struggle to expose the inaccurate societal conventions women needlessly face. One such instance in Millay’s work is when she rebukes the lover’s potential thought that her attentions to him are “the poor treason / Of my stout blood against my staggering brain” (9-10). Millay juxtaposes the words “stout” and “staggering” intentionally when contrasting the speaker’s anatomical “blood”- referring undoubtedly to her heart- and “brain”- referring to her mind and judgement, as they have such opposite meanings though both sets of words themselves are linked

through alliteration. Millay's choice of words in this instance combats the prevailing notion that in the act of sex a woman must be emotionally connected to a man. Instead the speaker internalizes and connects the sexual drama between her own organs: the speaker is both stout and staggering, both zestful and frenzied, it is almost as though she is embodying both characters in this glorious sensual experience while the lover plays an insignificant part. A particular instance in which Shakespeare similarly employs weighted diction, is in the last negative comparison of the sonnet where he admits, "I grant I never saw a goddess go; / My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground" (11-12). To compare one's beloved to a goddess is the most unbelievable exaggeration love sonnets employ because, as Shakespeare knowingly points out, no man has ever actually seen a goddess. His word choice results in alliteration in the first part of the comparison between "grant", "goddess", and "go" (11) lending that sentence another layer of perfection and beauty compared to the halting, phrase afterwards where the mistress "treads" (12) heavily. Shakespeare is careful in his diction however, to sustain the fact that though flawed, at least his mistress who is treading on the "ground" is real. Both Shakespeare, by lowering his mistress's stature from that of a goddess, and Millay, by heightening the stature of her subject from dependent to autonomously sexual, use diction to construct realistic female characters unlike those in traditional sonnets.

Ultimately, Shakespeare and Millay use shocking narrative voices, structural emphasis, as well as jarring diction to construct unconventional sonnets that shake the pillars of their respective societies by considering women in poetry and in life as capable of embracing their humanity in the face of unrealistic expectations.

Works Cited

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