

The Crisscrossing of Time in Spenser's Amoretti LXXV and Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII

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ABSTRACT

Time is a prevalent motif in Elizabethan love sonnets, presenting itself not only as natural force to be reckoned, but also as an oppositional element in humanity's constant search for immortality. Through the analysis of both Edmund Spenser's Amoretti LXXV and William Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII I intend to explore, compare and contrast the representations of Time in their verses as well as the poets' promises of immortality through their own writings. Drawing from Horace's Odes and Ovid's Metamorphoses as referential works in the discussion of Time in poetry, I will highlight how the struggle to survive the natural passage of time and its corrosive effects while having art as medium may have inspired both Spenser and Shakespeare's efforts into building their own metonymical pieces of art. Through this work I hope to delve further into the motif of Time as a force that opposes the logic of stability and immutability often proposed by an art that promises the immortalization of one's love interest.

Keywords: English poetry, Edmund Spenser, Sonnet, time, William Shakespeare

INTRODUCTION

The corrosive effects of Time in one's object of desire is a pervading theme found in many Elizabethan Era circles of love poetry. Often in the guise of a tyrant, a thief, a devourer and even as a harvester (Kaula, 1963), Time not only is the theme of at least 22 sonnets, out of the widely-known 126 pieces written by William Shakespeare and dedicated to the Fair Youth, but it is also one of the motifs that inspired many of Edmund Spenser's pieces in Amoretti, a collection of love sonnets, similarly written in the 16th century, which describes the process of courting and, eventually, marrying Elizabeth Boyle.

If not as "a threat to beauty and to love, and potentially to everything that gives life value" (Fuller, 2011, p.60), Time, in Elizabethan sonnets, is often presented as one of nature's forces possible to be challenged either through human reproduction or through the metonymical effect of an art that immortalizes objects and subjects in and through itself. The juxtaposition of both Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII and Spenser's Amoretti LXXV as contemporary pieces of poetry may allow us to further delve into the motif of Time as an oppositional force to the court of love in the Elizabethan era.

The poetic form that inspired both bards, as introduced by Lever (1956), came to be through elements of the Provençal lyric and the Tuscan sonnet that were appropriated by Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, 1304–1374) in his own love sonnets. His popular sonnet form introduced a fourteen-line piece with a break after the eight line, having this first part broken into two stanzas of four lines each and a rhyme scheme of ABBA, while the last six lines were divided into two stanzas of three lines each under the rhyme scheme of CBC. This structure "proved remarkably flexible, allowing poets to express themselves in a compact and striking manner" (Punchner et. al, 2012, p.166), favoring the creative use of metaphors, similes, synecdoche, blazons and symbols as well as themes such as the unattainability of love, the passage of time, self-introspection and the idealization of the feminine figure.

Time, as found in Petrarch's lyric sequences, presents a recurrent metaphysical concern (Baroloni, 2009) that brings out not only instability, but also the problematic of change, of unity and of identity – themes that, as we will later discuss, defy the expectations of a love that should be not only eternal, but also unfazed by the passage of time and its materialization through the forces of nature.

In order to analyze the crisscrossing of Time in both Spenser's and Shakespeare's sonnets we departed not only from central publications in the field of English Literature, such as Lever's "The Elizabethan Love Sonnet" (1956) and the widely-referenced "The Norton anthology of World Literature" (2012), but also from more recent works that specifically focused on Time as a motif in poetic works such as Kunin's "Shakespeare's Preservation Fantasy." (2009), Belour's "Time and Immortality in William Shakespeare's Sonnets" (2017) and Perkin's "Reserved Character: Shorthand and the Immortality Topos in Shakespeare's Sonnets" (2019) in hopes that this kind of approach would bring new perspectives to the reading of Elizabethan sonnets and the representation of Time. The first part of this paper, then, introduces the differences between the sonnet form adopted by both Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare according to Gillespie (2009) and Branan (2017), only to further explore the motif of Time in Elizabethan Sonnets as proposed by Callaghan (2007) and Kunin (2009). The following part, then, introduces the chosen sonnets and evaluates them from a close reading perspective.

Spenser's Amoretti LXXV is introduced as part of the Amoretti sonnet sequence, which went through different readings, being both examined as a biographical collection (Martz, 1961; Blick, 2008; Oram, 2020) that depicted the process of courtship of Elizabeth Boyle by Edmund Spenser himself, or as a fictional piece that had no actual ties to the life experiences of the real Edmund Spenser (Kellogg, 1968). Some authors, however, tend to point out the irrelevance of such a discussion to the study of his works (Lever, 1956), favoring an approach that focuses on the poetic form and its elements instead. Thus, for this paper, we will refrain from theorizing over the factuality of Spenser's sonnets, focusing, instead, on the close reading of its lines and the possible references to Time found through them.

Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII, likewise, is first presented and scrutinized as a self-contained piece of work. For this reading we depart from Vendler's (1997) examination of the interplay between temporality and eternity materialized in the lines of the sonnet as well as the considerations of Wilder (2019) on possible readings of the sense of immortality proposed by the closing lines of this sonnet.

When putting both pieces, Spenser's and Shakespeare's, side by side it is possible to recognize similarities in the treatment of Time and in the desire of challenging it through art as a means of attaining the so-desired immortality. Therefore, the last section of this paper presents the possibility of intertextual reading between not only the two pieces of poetry, but also between Horace's and Ovid's referential works: the "Odes" (23 BC) and the "Metamorphoses" (8 AD). We hope that this paper may allow readers to further explore the effects of Time in Elizabethan sonnets both as a corrosive force that manifests itself through nature and as a challengeable element that may find in art its unrivaled opposition.

METHOD

The first step in this research comprised the systematic review of publications that dealt with readings of Elizabethan sonnets from the perspective of time and its uses in the construction of different poetic works. The reading of the selected bibliography, then, anchored the process of close reading, defined as "examining closely the language of a literary work or a section of it" (Culler, 2010, p.20), adapted from the first proposals of Anglo-American New Criticism, of both William Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 and Edmund Spenser's Amoretti 75. Such methodology ensured that I could approach, at first, both works of literature as self-contained,

self-referential aesthetic objects, paying special “attention to how meaning is produced or conveyed, to what sorts of literary and rhetorical strategies and techniques are deployed” (Cullen, 2010, p.22) in each piece in order to formulate their main argument. It was only after this primary analysis that I decided to establish the connections between both pieces, going beyond their structural limitations to evaluate possible intertextualities in the representation of Time and through the use of art as a means for immortalization.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: READING TIME IN THE SONNETS

Following Petrarch’s influence on the popularization of the sonnet form, it was only by the end of the 16th century that the enthusiasm for this specific type of poetry peaked in England’s literary circles (Branam, 2017). Albeit with particular differences on the organization of the rhymes, both Spenser and Shakespeare dedicated their lives as poets to mastering the English form of the sonnet: fourteen lines often organized in iambic pentameters and distributed through three quatrains and one final couplet. While Spenser did retain more aspects of the traditional Petrarchan form, Shakespeare took more liberties in its composition: Spenser’s rhyming scheme mostly followed ABAB BCBC CDCD EE organization with less variation than Shakespeare, who usually followed the scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Spenser’s sonnets, according to Gillespie (2009), had the quality of diluting the “effect of the final couplet by introducing two internal couplets prior to the final couplet”, something we would rarely see on Shakespeare, who would frequently favor the use of the final couplet as a means of achieving “a sort of climax or denouement to the form” (Gillespie, 2009).

The motif of Time in the Elizabethan sonnets, following Dymrna Callaghan’s (2007) reasoning, was not as “stately and orderly as in classical and medieval models of time, but careening, so that youth and beauty come crashing into oblivion” (p.108). However, this idea that art may, in itself, allow for the immortality of one’s life while defying the natural course of time did not start either with Spenser or with Shakespeare. According to Kunin (2009), there’s at least one significant prior statement that should be mentioned whenever tracing back the use of poetry as means of immortalization. Horace’s last poem in his third book of Odes (23 BC), “*exegi monumentum aere perennius*”, introduces this possibility of escaping “the death-goddess” (Ode 30, line 7) and growing “ever fresh with the glory of aftertime.” (Ode 30, line 8) through his composition, which, still according to Kunin (2009, p.93), was not subject to either time or nature’s forces. This interpretation is easily understood through the poem’s first lines: “I have finished a monument more lasting than bronze and loftier than the Pyramid’s royal pile, one that no wasting rain, no furious north wind can destroy, or the countless chain of years and the ages’ flight.” (Ode 30, lines 1-5). This same logic of having art as a medium for eternal life, and nature’s force (being it through the reference of Time, water or wind) as an obstacle, is also found through both Spenser’s Amoretti LXXV and Shakespeare’s sonnet XVIII.

Nature as the oppositional force in Amoretti LXXV

As Larsen (1997) points out, Amoretti LXXV was supposed to be the last sonnet of its sequence as it establishes a parallel with the Sunday that also ends the Easter festivities of the Christian tradition. Although not literal in this reference, Spenser evokes “baptismal associations of the day with its topoi of water, washing, naming and eternal life” (Larsen, 1997, p.10) present in at least 9 out of the 14 lines of the sonnet, as we will see below.

Amoretti LXXV, or “One day I wrote her Name”, presents itself through three interlocked quatrains and a couplet, following an ABAB BCBC CDCD EE rhyme scheme in iambic pentameters. The sonnet starts with a clear reference to water as one of nature’s forces that, alongside Time, will prove a challenge to one’s desire to preserve the loved being, as seen:

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
 But came the waves and washed it away:
 Again I wrote it with a second hand,
 But came the tide, and made my pains his prey. (75: 1-4).

In this first quatrain we witness the poetic persona's struggle to first register one's name in the strand, which, as expected, does not last, as waves and tides, through its natural movement, insist on erasing it. The tide, albeit an element of nature, is personified in these lines when being referred to in the third-person possessive determiner "his" as in "made my pains his prey", imposing the role of a sentient predator to this natural force.

The second opposition to the poetic persona's desire of immortalization comes in the second quatrain through the figure of the very woman he aims to immortalize:

"Vain man," said she, "that dost in vain assay,
 A mortal thing so to immortalize;
 For I myself shall like to this decay,
 And eke my name be wiped out likewise". (75: 5-8).

Reading these verses, we notice that the poetic persona's addressee does not believe in the possibility of surpassing nature's unchanging course of life, but, rather, that this decay of hers, that the poetic persona tries to overcome, is something expected and vain to be fought against. The use of "likewise" at the end of the eight line points out to her understanding of the transience of her mortal being, which matches the way her own name was wiped out from the sand, as seen in the opening lines of this sonnet. Paraphrasing these sentences, as suggested by Pavel (1978), helps us organize meaning as a means of better assessing the poem and of organizing our own reading of it.

Another relevant remark about this second quatrain is that here the poetic persona not only includes his beloved, but he also gives her voice in his writings through the quotation marks that appear from line 5 up to line 8. The result is that this sonnet is not only about his beloved, as it was usual in most sonnets from that time (Oram, 2020), but it also invites the Lady's voice to be part of the composition of this piece.

Finally, the poet's promise of immortalization appears at the end of his third quatrain:

To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
 My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
 And in the heavens write your glorious name: (75: lines 10-12).

Here the poetic persona challenges the natural life cycle found in the Ecclesiastes book where "all come from dust, and all return to dust." (3:20), promising that his verses shall not only eternize the virtues of his addressee, but also have her name written in the heavens. While the last couplet of this sonnet may allow for the interpretation that this process of becoming immortal desired by the poet involves the logic of marriage or procreation, it may also, just like Horace's poem shown before, allow us to read into the features of the written poetry as a means of overcoming death and finding glory in the afterlife:

Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,
 Our love shall live, and later life renew. (75: 13-14)

This possibility of renewal of one's life, when thought of as contained inside a poem, could be understood in the multiple possibilities of reinterpretation, readaptation, and

expansion that every piece of art may be subject to through time. So, just like Horace's poem first introduced, we may read Amoretti LXXV as this attempt of the poet to fight against nature (here represented as Time, tides, waves and as the woman herself as a flesh-being) in order to achieve this desire for immortality. I agree with Blick's (2008) reading that Spenser has, in fact, fulfilled his promise: since its publication back in 1595 we, up until this very moment, keep on reviving the existence of both lovers through the constant re-reading of his sonnets. Thanks to his artistic endeavor Elizabeth Boyle, as well as Edmund Spenser, are very much alive in our imagination.

Time as a corrosive force in Sonnet XVIII

While the first seventeen sonnets in Shakespeare's collections urged his addressee to resort to procreation as means of guaranteeing the continuity of life, Sonnet XVIII brings a new solution to the problematic of Time: art. As Hentschell (2017) points out, "while breeding children can guarantee one generation further, poetry has the power to live eternally" (p.1620). This sonnet is, according to Vendler (1997), mostly constructed on the contrast between "the temporality of physical existence and the eternity of verse" (p.120), which we may notice to also work as a clash between Time, as a natural force, and art itself.

The opening lines of Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII, then, introduce not only the question that will guide the reading of the poem, but also a set of natural elements that will be used throughout the poem in opposition to the addressee's features:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate: (18: 1-2)

In these first verses we have the introduction of three agents in this sonnet: the poetic persona through the subject pronoun "I", the addressee through the object pronoun "thee" and the "Summer's Day", a synecdochic reference to the summer season. The poetic persona starts by comparing the addressee to a summer day, highlighting the latter's negative aspects as means of elevating the former:

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, (18: 3-6)

Summer, here, is introduced as having a set of flaws not shared by the poem's addressee: it brings rough winds (which were also mentioned in Horace's poem as a natural force responsible for the degradation of material things), it's too short (so Time does act upon it, it is not eternal) and the sun, introduced through the metaphor of "eye of heaven", may be either too hot, or completely dimmed, meaning that it's not stable nor perennial. For Bellour (2017), these starting lines also introduce the extremes of summer as a contrasting idea to the addressee's stability, which may, in turn, relate to the logic of immortality as something that is unaffected by Time. The following lines, then, introduce the logic of degradation just mentioned:

And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed: (18: 7-8)

We may notice that, through either nature's natural cycle, fueled by Time, or even by accident, the decline of any living thing, be it in regards to one's beauty, be it in regards to

one's vitality, is something that is bound to happen. The imagery of the sun, as well, may repeat here when we think about decline: a sunset, the announcement of the end of the day – of a cycle. Instability, as an intrinsic characteristic of nature, appears again in these two lines, following the lack of precise patterns on the decline of fairness — it's either by chance or by nature's undeterred natural course. This very logic of Time being conveyed through a variety of natural representations gives it "a cosmic power which operates on all levels of creation and keeps them in constant flux, relentlessly destroying everything it produces" (Kaula, 1963, p.45-46). Resisting this seemingly unstoppable force may sound impossible at first, and the promise of immortality evoked in the last quatrain may be even questioned, as done by Spenser's addressee in Amoretti LXXV, when it is read by itself:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st: (18: 9-12).

Here the poetic persona claims that the addressee may not only not decay, but also never need to ever come close to the death's shadow, as also seen in the Psalm of David — "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4). Death is, as pointed out by Vendler (1997), the last element of a set of alliterative words that mark the gradual passage of time in the sonnet: day (18:1), dimm'd (18:6), declines (18:7) and death (18:11), giving, then, space to the promise made in the last line before the couplet that ends this sonnet. But, before that, the reference to an eternal summer evokes not only the opening lines of the sonnet, but also, as suggested by Lever (1965), the traditional notion of an "earthly paradise" (p.201) that parallels the "Eternal lines" proposed at the end of this quatrain. These, then, could be a direct reference to the poem's lines, to one's lineage or even to "the threads of life spun by the Fates" (Duncan-Jones, 2001, p.148). Finally, immortality, in Shakespeare's sonnet XVIII, comes with a condition in its last couplet:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (18: 13-14)

As opposed to Spenser's poem, where immortality was something given through the existence of his verses, Shakespeare's sonnet claims that this perennial state one may attain is conditioned to the continued existence of living men as well as eyes that are able to see and, maybe, to read the lines written, which, in turn, will continually give the addressee life. Wilder (2019) also suggests that the addressee's immortality, in sonnet XVIII, may be actually relocated to "the bodies of future readers" (p.503), as if this immortality may not reside in the lines, per se, but reenacted every time one might interact with the sonnet.

In this specific sonnet, then, we witness this clash between immortality and nature's force, with the latter being represented first, just like Spenser's Amoretti LXXV, through Time. The wavering sun, the hot temperature, and the rough wind appear as negative natural aspects of a summer that is neither stable, nor eternal when opposing the poetic persona's addressee. Time, again, is the element responsible for, like in Horace's poem, the degradation of all things material.

Intertextualities of Time

Even if both Shakespeare and Spenser, as suggested by Stoll (1967), seemed to "have preferred Virgil to Ovid", it is very hard to neglect the possible intertextuality the sonnets here

analyzed establish with the Roman poet Ovid and the closing lines of his magnum opus: the “Metamorphoses” (8AD):

My task is now complete. Here I end my work,
which neither Jupiter’s rage, nor fire, nor sword,
nor gnawing time can ever wipe away.
Let that day which brings my tenuous life
to its allotted end come when it will,
its power will only kill my body.
The finer part of me will be borne up,
as an immortal, beyond the lofty stars,
and my name will never be forgotten.
Wherever the power of Rome extends
throughout the nations it has overcome,
I will be read. Men will celebrate my fame
for all the ages, and, if there is truth
in poet’s prophecies, I will live on. (Metamorphoses.1327-1340)

Through this last part we may not only understand the basis to Larsen’s (1997) suggestion that Amoretti LXXV was supposed to be, mirroring the effect of these closing lines, the final poem in Amoretti’s collection, but also consider how defiance to Time’s ravages may be ingrained into our own understanding of its ruthlessness. Going back to Horace’s Ode 3.30 we are able to glimpse at the poetic persona certainty that he will live on, at least in part, due to his own fame. In parallel, Ovid’s Metamorphoses mimic this very logic through the possibility of living on through the written word.

I shall not wholly die: large residue
Shall 'scape the queen of funerals. Ever new
My after fame shall grow, while pontiffs climb
(Horace, Ode 3.30. 6-8)

I will be read. Men will celebrate my fame
for all the ages, and, if there is truth
in poet’s prophecies, I will live on.
(Ovid, Metamorphoses. 1337-1340)

Accordingly, the sonnets that I proposed to analyze reproduce this particular logic of immortality, as previously explained, in similar fashion: through either verses, lines and art, in itself.

To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name:
(Spenser, Amoretti LXXV. 10-12)

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.
(Shakespeare, Sonnet XVIII. 12-14)

Bate’s analysis of Shakespeare and Ovid (1993) brings an alternative companion to Sonnet XVIII’s closing lines, suggesting that it may, in fact, mirror the structure of repetition found at the end of “Tristia” (8 AD): “As long as I am read, thy fame shall be read along with me” (Tristia, v. xiv. 1-5, with Loeb trans., as cited in Bate, 1993, p.95), which surely bears a striking resemblance to “as long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” (Shakespeare, Sonnet XVIII. 13-14) that we may also consider when thinking about the challenging of Time and the process of immortalization through art.

Finally, Lever (1956) points out that the representation of Time, especially in the guise of either a conqueror or of a devourer, appears in Shakespearean sonnets as an influence of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, being mostly visible through his Fair Youth sequence, whereas in Spenser’s

works, as noted by Bate (1993), would bring out the endeavor of replicating and rewriting Ovid's work but from a more Christian way (p.47). When putting Spenser's and Shakespeare's sonnets together, Kuning (2009), as we have already seen through the analysis of each piece, argues that in both "the speaker presents the fantasy that poetry preserves human life as a project for this poem that will be initiated by the act of writing and fulfilled by the act of reading" (p.98), which, in turn, seems to occur in opposition to one, or more, natural forces.

CONCLUSION

The register of time in both sonnets do not evoke any specific reference to the mechanical counting of minutes or hours, nor the numerical arrangement of years, months or days commonly seen in calendars. It does, however, appear through the very elements of nature that seem to materialize time's duty in eroding and transforming reality. Through waves, tides, rough winds, the either scorching or dimmed sun and through the passage of the seasons we witness Time and its ruthless effect on either beauty, life and youth. Being able to come into contact with these pieces of poetry, in the year of 2022, is material proof that, although not in the sense of the mortal flesh, poets may have found a way to challenge Time's corroding effects. Art, as a perennial existence, is able to resist Time's degradation, allowing, as these poets' prophecies did indeed prove true, artists' names as well as their objects of affection to live on.

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