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LAURA, VERSUS THE DARK LADY, A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE AND PETRARCH'S SONNETS

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Abstract

One was from Italy, and one was from England, and they had a roughly two hundred years' time span between them. Nevertheless, Both Shakespeare and Petrarch were among the most magnificent sonneteers of Europe and both of them talked about love, and death in their sonnets. Shakespeare urges another, a young man to find love and marry, while Petrarch talks about his own love toward Laura. Shakespeare talks about a dark lady, who hurts the lover (a person other than Shakespeare). Petrarch's discussions are about his Laura who does not heed his love. Shakespeare talks about death, to frighten and motivate the fair youth to marry, but Petrarch talks about death to show his sadness for the shortness of his time to pursue his lovely Laura. Through a comparative study, this article endeavours to compare the poetical works of two of the most celebrated sonneteers of all times through the aspects of love, hurt and death and tries to show their different worldviews.

Keywords

Shakespeare, Petrarch, Comparative Study, Sonnet, Love Motifs

1. Introduction

Dedicated to an unknown begetter, (who might be William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, or Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton) Shakespeare's sonnets are about a young man's need to find love so that he could marry and bring heirs to this world; and are about a "dark lady" who

is the third part of the love triangle. His poetry sometimes gets an erotic sense, as he is continuously applauding the man to marry, and admonishing the woman. (Ferguson 257)

On the other hand of the comparison, Petrarch talks about his Laura, who is a virtuous person (Petrarch first met Laura when it was already too late as she was a married woman. She never gave in to Petrarch's wishes for this reason, and none of Petrarch's seductions worked on her). For him, Laura is the humanistic ideal, and it is within her that Petrarch wishes to solve the contrast between the spirit and the flesh. Because of his love for her, Petrarch tried to show Laura much bigger than her true image in his works. (Bernardo preface)

The selected approach for this article is that of comparative study. According to Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas, a comparative study is the study of literature through an interdisciplinary glass and in a postnational scale. (Behdad, Thomas Introduction) It could mean that difference between language, linguistic formats, disciplines, countries, and so many other factors are not important. Therefore, as these two poets were a few centuries apart and in two different countries, the best approach is a comparative one.

The works which are chosen for this paper are from Shakespeare's Sonnets of William Shakespeare and Canzoniere of Petrarch. There are 154 sonnets from Shakespeare in Shakespeare's Sonnets. The first 17 poems of the book are about the young man, and the other sonnets are in different subject matters. (Ferguson 257) Petrarch's Canzoniere is made of around 366 poems. The first 264 poems which are known as In vita di Madonna Laura were dedicated to Laura when she was alive and the next 102 poems which are known as In Morte di Madonna Laura are poems which were dedicated to her when she had already passed away. (Kirkham 34)

The purpose of this study is to compare these two great authors in the means of their understanding and depiction of love and death. Both of these prolific sonneteers passed away more than five centuries ago, and now that they are not present anymore, one of the best ways to examine the reality of their individualities is from their works. Through a comparative study of their sonnets, I shall try to find similarities and differences between the understandings of these two poets from life.

2. Methodology

Although comparative Literature was historically used with a focus on literature which was written in any of the European languages, it has been added to its borders within the previous years and is now used to compare and study any kind of text in any language. (Tötösy

13) Today, comparative literature is “a discipline which defines itself as an inter-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and trans-national endeavor” (Behdad and Thomas 1). As Tötösy says, comparative literature is a method to study literature in two ways. The first way according to him is the study of literature through mastery of two or more languages, or through the mastery of one or more branches of science (besides literature) and studying the literature with their help. And the second way is by the inclusion of the body of literature within itself. This means one can use any kind of literary text and include it in comparison with a specific text. (13) According to him, the importance of comparative literature lies in “its global and international nature, its interdisciplinarity, its flexibility, and its objective as well as ability to translate one culture into another by the exercise and love of dialogue between cultures.” (15) It is a very used and a well-known method which helps all branches of humanities and social sciences to connect together easily and enables the researcher of humanistic fields to do valid research. It is a very robust and plural field which is continually evolving. Its practitioners break all the limitations there are and compare two or more works which are different in their time-span, countries, linguistic norms, languages, genres, and even branches of academia (Lernout 37). It is for these reasons that comparative literature has been chosen as the method of this study.

As it is evident in the texts of the writers, the languages of the sonneteers are different as Shakespeare writes in his mother tongue which was English, and Petrarch writes in his own mother tongue which was Italian. Also, related to the previous reason, it is apparent that they were from different countries. This, besides being from different geographical borders; brings into account the factor of difference in their cultural status too. Another reason is that the time span between the death of one poet and birth of the other one is almost two hundred years. Petrarch passed away in 1374 AD, and Shakespeare was born in 1564. These were the differences between them which make the study possible only through comparative literature; however, the similar axis of the comparison between the two could be their genre. They were both sonneteers and therefore the axis through which the comparison is made, is through their poems.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Petrarch

Francesco Petrarca, mostly known to the literary world as simply Petrarch was born on July 20, 1304, in Arezzo Italy. The most notable incident of his childhood might have been

meeting with Dante. He studied Law at the University of Montpellier in his youth, and once his studies were over, he roamed around Italy for a few years under the patronage of some of his friends. It is at this time that he meets his beloved Laura for the first time. Later, in his career, he takes on different posts from the church, from running canonry to the ambassador for stopping King of Hungary's invasion. It is in these years that he also pursues and continues his writings and even refuses a papal secretary post to do so (Kirkham XV).

His sonnets are made of two parts, an Octave which rhymes abba abba, and a Sestet which rhymes cdecde. The main course of narrative in his sonnets is about the pain of the male lover, the stone-heartedness of his beloved, and shortness of his time in this world to pursue his beloved (Abrams 336). Petrarch's depiction of his beloved Laura in his work could be counted as some of the best works of art to be delivered, and he does it masterfully. As Petrarch, himself, says in his letters to Giovanni Boccaccio, he believes his seat in the "Three Crown of Florence" is second to none but Dante Alighieri, and he outranks Boccaccio who is the third person of the three crowns (Kirkham 1). Although it was not just his love poems which gave Petrarch his seat, it is for these poems that he is known to the public. For centuries, people have read, or listened and enjoyed his love poetry which is divided between Laura's lifetime and Laura's death (Kirkham 4).

3.1.1. Petrarch and Laura

"She moved not like a mortal, but as though/
she bore an angel's form, her words had then/
a sound that simple human voices lack" (Sonnet 90)

Petrarch first saw and fell in love with Lady Laura in the church of St. Claire, Avignon on 6th of April 1327 (Kirkham xv). Alas, it was so late for she was already married. He last saw her on the same day, twenty-one years later when she passed away from the Black Death. Her death raises a set of raging emotion which he shows in his *Contra medicum* where his poetry is filled with rage and anger. His sense of "Personal helplessness" is well seen within his poetry in this book (Kirkham 18).

However, this number 6, which starts and ends everything with Laura holds a very significant meaning for him. It is the number of a sestina. There are six *Triumph*. The total number of his *Epystole* is Sixty-six (Kirkham 23). Also, it is good to know that the numerical worth of the day they met was not the only thing which affected his works. Another thing which

influenced his poetry was the fact of her death, which divided his works to “In vita di Madonna Laura” and “In morte di Madonna Laura” which mean “In life of Madonna Laura” and “In death of Madonna Laura.”

He first saw her on April 6th, 1327. It is a very exact date which could be surprising considering the fact that not so much is known about Laura. However, we could be precise about the time for Petrarch himself in his sonnet 211, *Voglia mi sprona* declares:

“Mille trecento ventisette, a punto /
su l’ora prima, il dì sesto d’aprile, /
nel laberinto entrai, né veggio ond’esca”

Moreover, the date they last saw each other can be said to happen exactly on the same day as he declares in his sonnet 336, *Tornami a mente* that it was so (Kirkham 34).

3.1.2. Petrarch and a chaste Laura

While Laura was alive, Petrarch attempts and reattempts at any given chance to seduce her, but it was to no avail. The fact was that Laura was virtuous to such extent that her traits are usually described as a “fierce chastity” (Kirkham 35). This chastity of Laura, according to Kirkham is the way which “Petrarch uses to dramatize and explore his own psyche, nuancing and psychologizing the narcissism and self-projection that typify the courtly tradition” (35). Petrarch however, never reaches her the way he wants.

3.1.3. Petrarch and death

Laura dies twenty-one years after they first meet and from then on Petrarch starts imagining her in his dreams. The effect of her death was so much that when one reads his poems after her, the reader can see his grief is not only for the death of her, but for the death of all the worldly disenchantments and all the passions. The grief Petrarch feels after her death is not a tragic one, but an elegiac one. He is not angry, he does not make rebellions, but he feels lamentations and sadness beyond he could carry (Bernardo 4). To his eyes, death is something which steals from him the opportunity to be with his Laura.

3.2. Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon and passed away almost 52 years later in the same place. Within the half a century he lived, he managed to become the greatest dramatist of the history of humanity and received the title of “Bard of

Avon." In his lifespan, he managed to write 38 plays and 154 sonnets. Although his plays were so great that William Hazlitt, the romantic critic, defines Shakespeare's character making as being able to multiply himself (Greenblatt 1060), it is the latter part of his works which shall be studied in this article. Although Shakespeare was already a well-known sonneteer after he acquired patronage from Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton for his *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, it was with the manuscript circulation of his sonnets (apparently without his supervision or consent) that he became a monarch of the art (Greenblatt 1061). His sonnets are made of three quatrains, which are followed by a couplet, and his rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg (Abrams 336). His sonnets were unlike the traditional sonnets of his time, for they were in admiration of a good-looking young man, and they were also portraying a dark lady who was sexually promiscuous.

3.2.1. Shakespeare, the fair youth, and the dark lady

In Elizabethan Era, aristocratic patronage was a dreamlike privilege for a professional writer. Not only it would bring money with itself, but it would also provide protection and prestige for the writer. William Shakespeare was no deviance from this fact. It was in the path of the quest for acquiring patronage that he dedicated his narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, to the young nobleman Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. He might have received a handsome profit for the dedication of these poems to him, but like most of his life, it is hard to know what exactly the benefit was. However, it could be said with accuracy that after these poems, he became one of the towers of poetry in his time (Greenblatt 1060).

Shakespeare's works differ from those of his contemporaries mostly through two distinct characteristics. First is that unlike all the people before him, he chose a young man as the subject of his love, praise, and devotion. The second difference is that he chose a lady with dark hair, who is extremely active in her sexual life. All the people before him would bring a blonde lady who was exceptionally chaste (Greenblatt 1061).

The first 17 poems of his folio are in praise of the beauty of a young man and urging him in getting married and bringing offspring to the world so that his beautiful image remain on earth once he is gone. The sum of everything he says can be seen within the opening lines of his first sonnet as he says:

"From fairest creatures we desire increase/
That thereby beauty's rose might never die, /

But as the ripper should by time decease/
His tender heir might bear his memory” (Sonnet 1)

Poems 18 to 126 focus on the fact that time shall destroy his beloved’s beautiful face and it is only through love and poetry that his face could become immortal. As it can be seen in his sonnet 18’s ending lines, he promises the fair youth that his beauty shall not be touched by time, as long as it is written by his verses and is kept./

“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, /
Then 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” (Sonnet 18)

3.2.2. Dark Lady

The poems which come after poem 126 are about the Dark lady who Shakespeare usually describes as a degrading object of love. She is promiscuous, she is stone-hearted and most important than anything she is sharing the fair youth’s love with Shakespeare, and as she is a woman, she wins over Shakespeare in this contest most of the time (Greenblatt 1061). Although he does not always hate the dark lady, his abhorrence for her presence in the love triangle could be best seen in his sonnet 130 where he is describing her.

“My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; /
Coral is far more red than her lips' red; /
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; /
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head” (Sonnet 130)

It is poems like Sonnet 144 which are the best samples of a Shakespearean love triangle between him, the young man, and the dark lady whom he resent for stealing the young man from him.

“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 colored ill” (Sonnet 144)

3.2.3. Shakespeare and Death

Shakespeare’s method of using death is also of importance for he uses it as a kind of motivation. He first tries to show the terribleness of the death and the fact that it happens to everyone. Then he tries to motivate his love (the fair youth) to make haste and do what he has to do, which is making heirs most of the times, as fast as possible. /

“This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong, /
To love that well which thou must leave ere long” (Sonnet 73)

Unlike that of Petrarch which laments death for stealing his beloved away, and chastitates it, Shakespeare uses death as a threat which he can use to make the fair youth make haste.

4. Conclusion

Although both poets use sonnets as the means to describe concepts like love, life, and death; their definitions were different. Petrarch’s love is more of an idealistic one, toward a chaste woman who will not accept his approaches. While Shakespeare’s love is firstly towards a young male, and secondly towards a promiscuous woman with dark hair. Petrarch’s view of life and time is that of loss and shortness. On the other hand, Shakespeare says that shortness of time and life can be overlooked by love and it is poetry which immortalizes man. And lastly, death for Petrarch is nothing but grief and lamentation, while for Shakespeare it is a sense of motivation to make haste.

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