

Religious Belief in Sonnet 55 of Shakespeare

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Abstract—In many poems of Renaissance, there is a dominant theme that poetry can overcome time and eternize a person with his virtues. As a Christian, some poems of Shakespeare reflect not only this theme, but also his religious belief. In Sonnet 55, Shakespeare praises the power of poetry over material world, shows the power of love to eternize a person, and hints a challenging belief to his contemporary theme that God is the actual source of eternal life.

Index Terms—Shakespeare, sonnet 55, religious belief, time

In Renaissance England, there is an opinion that poetry can immortalize a person with his virtues, whether the person praised, or the author. Many poems of great poets of this period reflect this theme, such as Sonnet 75 of Spenser, Sonnet 18 and 55 of Shakespeare, etc. With the same theme, different poets have different ways to show their opinions and their attitudes. Philip Martin, in his study of sonnets of Shakespeare and others, concludes three kinds of attitudes: first, most poets says man is immortal in his poem; second, Spenser steps ahead that “you are immortal in my poem, from which our love will reach out to enhance later lives”; third, Shakespeare goes further to say “you are immortal in my poem, and in yourself, and you will live in the poem, in yourself and in the eyes of later lovers.” (qtd. in Hammond, 1981, p. 71) Even in his own poems, the poet shows his different thoughts about the same theme. Some poets try to resolve it with the secular love. Tracing back to Petrarch, Maclean (1993) finds that lovers created by poet “cannot reconcile love for God with sexual longing for the women they love” (p. 639). The conflict between secular love and divine love is hard to resolve. Spenser refers to the Christian liturgy (Maclean, 1993, 639). Shakespeare may hint the love of God.

When Shakespeare wrote sonnets, he tried to reconcile such conflict. He is a Christian. Even in the second line of Sonnet 1 he suggests there is a paradise: “That thereby beauty’s rose might never die” (Vendler, 1997, p. 46). Sonnet 18 and 55 of Shakespeare all discuss the theme of power of poetry, which overcomes time and eternize a person. As Rowse (1984) states, in Sonnet 18, that love will bring the immortality of his verse (p. 39), Shakespeare praises the virtues of a man, and claims he will have an eternal life in the poem. With last two lines, it seems that poet suggests the secular love can prolong the life of the person praised. It says: “So long as man can breathe, and eyes can see.” It means in the poem the fame of a person can last as long as human being. But it does not give an interesting answer: if he can live after human being? For at that time, people still believes in God and the eternal life. Among all immortalizing sonnets, Sonnet 55 is most confident in eternity for six “shall” verbs in it (Hammond, 1981, p. 72). It confirms the power of poetry over time, discusses in what way poetry outlive the material world, overcomes time, shows that secular love can make a man eternal, and hints that only with belief of God one can get a real eternal life. It reflects the religious belief of Shakespeare.

There are 154 sonnets of Shakespeare. The sonnets published in 1609 are most important works with attention next to Hamlet. From the first critic, George Chalmers, to present critics, Auden, etc. those sonnets receive high praises throughout the English literary history. Many critics believe that 1-126 sonnets are addressed to a Fair Young Man (Lowers, 1965, p. 12). The identification of the young man is open to debate. Among them, Sonnet 55 is one of the most famous sonnets in the sequence with the treatment of Time in a tone of solemn dignity (Lowers, 1965, p. 54). It is believed that this young man is actually a young aristocrat (Lowers, 1965, p. 21).

Sonnet 55 is a typical Shakespearean sonnet, with three quatrains and a heroic couplet in iambic pentameter. Vendler (1997) suggests that the keyword in the poem is live, and couplet tie is live and eyes (p. 269). It suggests that in the poem, the theme is life about a person and love of man. In reading the poem, there may be two lives of a person. One is the life of person himself, which is divided into two parts, the physical one and the spiritual one. Another is the fame of the person. It is also divided into two parts, the fame before and after last judgment. Following the above points, each quatrain discusses one topic. Finally, the poem reaches the resolution of eternity for different kinds of life of a person. In the first quatrain, the poem outlives the material world, and the person in the poem will have fame brighter than that of stones. In second quatrain, comparing with statues and the work of masonry, the poem is indestructible to the destructive forces. In third quatrain, the poem overcomes time to the last day in the eyes of posterity, which is the result of human love. The person praised gains a fame in the history of man. In last two lines, the heroic couplet, the person

not only comes back to life with salvation of God, but also has an eternal fame among the people, who follow him to love God, believe in God, and have the eternal life as him. It hints that with belief in God, man can really gain an eternal life, even the fame.

In first quatrain, the poem directly raises the question, and claims that poetry outlives the material world. Vendler (1997) praises the technique of poet connecting the beloved to grandeur and ordinary objects to squalor. The memorial edifices are grand when they are compared to man praised in the verse. But they become "unswept stones" when they are connected to "sluttish time" (p. 268). It is a sharp comparison that gives the reader a shock. When a person died, a monument is erected to memorize him. In natural world, some stones, such as marble, and metals, such as gold, can resist the corrosion of air and water, and last a long time. The "marble" or "gilded monuments" may last one hundred years, or two hundreds years, and still be read by people. It is a good way to record a person. But those monuments are short lived compared with "this powerful rhyme." "This powerful rhyme" represents this poem. It shows the dominant theme in Renaissance England, that poetry can overcome time. Comparing with the poem, the material world has a short duration. Within "these contents," lines in the poem, the person, praised in the poem, has fame over those stone monuments. It is the fame different from those engraved on the stones or monuments. When people read the poem, he is once more praised and refreshed. For the stone monuments stand at a fixed place, and are read by passengers only. In the region of time, they grow dirty. In tradition, time is "personified as a winged old man with an hour-glass or scythe" (Car-Gomm, 1995, p. 211). It often represents the destructive forces. It is interesting that the word time is used seventy-eight times in Sonnets 1-126. It acts as an important theme in them. (Lowers, 1965, p. 30) Here, time is personified as a "sluttish" servant to those monuments. "Sluttish" has the meaning of casual and unrestrained in sexual behavior. It suggests that Time is unfaithful. Its duties are to clean those monuments. But it fails to fulfill its duties. As the daughter of Time is Truth (Car-Gomm, 1995, p. 211), it reveals that, though how brilliant the monuments may be, they will be left "unswept" and grow dirty in the river of time. In another sense, if a man is not faithful in his love, love to man and God, he deserves no fame and will be cursed by others. Though he may use some materials that last long time, his memory is left only in those monuments which are unclean. It cannot compare with the fame of virtue in the memory of people. The virtue praised in the poem is superior to the material world.

In the second quatrain, the poem presents several destructive forces that destroy the material world. Vendler (1997) mentions that the change of earlier "wasteful war" to "war's quick fire" and "broils" to "Mars his sword." The earlier "contents" becomes "living record of your memory" (p. 268). The "wasteful war" will overturn the statues. "Wasteful" means destructive. After a war, there remains the ruined houses, dead people, etc. The statues of past are overthrown in the war. So the war is a force that can destroy everything. And also, in tumults, "the work of masonry," buildings, is destroyed. Those material things, "statues" and "the work of masonry," are generally believed that they are strong enough and can last a long time. But under the destructive force of war and broil, they are frail and easy to be crashed into fragments. Comparing with the frail material world, the poem, "the living record of your memory," is indestructible. Mars is Roman war god, equating with Greek Ares, son of Zeus and Hera. It is believed that under his influence, warrior is merciless. (Powell, 2001, p. 673) So Mars represents the cruel person, or alike. Even facing with such destructive force, the poem can last a long time. In another sense, Mars may also represent the heresy which will cause war. In history, many wars are caused by religious conflicts. The well-known Crusade in the Middle Age is based on the thought of Christian to recover the Holy Land from the Muslims (Peterson, 2002, p. 146). It causes much violence and death. After the religious wars, the temples and statues of gods of other religions are all destroyed. So Mars also resembles the cause of war. In the poem, the "sword" and "fire" represent the merciless destructive forces. In tradition, they are two forces linked together. When God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, he placed the cherubim at the east of the Garden of Eden, "and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3.24). They represent the destructive forces to all things. But such forces can never destroy "the living record of your memory," the virtues of man who is praised. When the sword kills people and fire burns the buildings, they cannot erase the impression the poem gives to all the people who read it. Commenting this poem, Rowse (1984) mentions two fires in London in the history and confirms the eternity of poetry (p. 113). Otherwise all people die; there is none to read the poem anymore.

In the first two quatrains, there remains a question: the person keeps alive in the lines, or only there is a record of him (Vendler, 1997, p. 268). What the real immortality in this world? How to achieve it? In third quatrain, the man praised faces other two destructive forces.

The first one is death. Death brings the dissolution of man's body. To everyone, death is the most terrible that one can imagine. When the first man lives in the Garden of Eden, he is immortal. Having eaten "the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste / Brought death into the world" (Milton, 1975, p. 1.1-2), man is driven out of Eden, and becomes mortal. Since there is death in the world, this conception is very comprehensive. Plato believes that soul is immortal, but Aristotle insists that soul perishes together with body (Stumpf, 1993, p. 97). In views of totemism, death is a process of rebirth of a person (Frazer, 1963, p. 905). In Christianity, death shows Jesus is man, and resurrection shows he is divine (Carmody, 1983, p. 35). The Christian believes that death is the result of sin, "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6.23). Even in Christianity, when talking about death, different theologians have different opinions. Martin Luther, in his Lectures on Roman, says death is two folds, temporal one and eternal one. Temporal death is the separation of body and death. It is much like the concept of Plato. It means perish of body. Eternal death is also two folds. "One is a very great

good. It is the death of sin and the death of death, by which the soul is freed and separated from sin and the body from corruption, and the soul is united by grace and glory with the living God.” “The other death is eternal and a very great evil. It is the death of the damned” (qtd. in Marius, 1999, p. 106-7). As a Christian, in order to get an eternal life, man must fight against his sin and serve God. Man has “been freed from sin and enslaved to God,” and “the end is eternal life” (Rom. 6.22). So it is easy to understand that man cannot avoid the dissolution of physical body. But he can have an eternal spirit. So first he forces against physical death.

Concerning all sonnets of Shakespeare, 1-17 sonnets reserves a major argument drawn from the Biblical “Parable of Talents” (Math. 25.14-30). It is a parable that tells people not to store what God has given him. As he is beautiful, his beauty will disappear if he does not produce children who would preserve his beauty for future generation. (Violi, 1965, p. 11) To pursue beauty and preserve it is to follow what God shows to people. In Renaissance England, Protestants preferred married sexuality above celibacy (MacClean, 1993, p. 638). In Sonnet 4, it keeps this idea: “Nature’s bequest gives nothing but doth lend, / And being frank she lends to those are free” (lines 3-4). From Sonnets 18 to 126, Shakespeare, together with his contemporaries, shows this theme in various ways (Violi, 1965m, p. 12). A man should love and marry a woman, and give birth to a child. It is a way to preserve his beauty and virtues. This way conforms to the will of God. With the descendant, one can be memorized till the last judgment. In this quatrain, “all posterity” suggest the children of the lovers. Through love, man can conquer physical death and preserve his virtues. The love of man is emphasized.

Another destructive force is oblivion. If there is only a record of a man, it is easy to be forgot. Even a man achieves fame, he faces the destructive force of record – oblivion. How can a man overcome the obliviousness? For oblivion is a thing both good and bad. In Hell, Satan intends to let his followers “lie thus astonished on th’oblivious pool” in order to “call them not to share with” them their unhappiness (Milton, 1975, l.266-7). It is good to forget the unhappiness, but it is bad that one will forget the poetry. If all people forget this poem, the virtues of the man disappear. It requires the poem to be read time and time again. With these virtues, the man is praised forever. So he must fight “all oblivious enmity.” In the next sentence, the poem suggests it will be read till the last day, “the ending doom.” No matter, people will praise him forever. For man will “wear this world out to the ending doom.” The continuous life of human being is regeneration. Man and woman love each other and give birth to their descendant. The human society can last as long as possible. Here, the love of man is emphasized again. Anyhow, the fame of man can last long. But there still remains the question: what about after last judgment? For people believes Christianity at that time. What is the possible resolution? The answer is hinted in the final couplet.

In the couplet, the love of man and love of God are repeated. Many critics criticize it weakens what has already been said in the three quatrains (Violi, 1965, p. 63). Instead of weakening, the repetition here gives an emphasis of how the person can achieve an eternal life. Poetry can outlive marble, gilded monuments, war destruction, and death. But the end of time is the last day of human being, “the ending doom.” What will happen after the last day of human life? At the judgment day, “the dead, great and small,” stands up before the book of life and wait for them judgment (Rev. 21.12). The man serving God is saved and has an eternal life. The person praised in the poem will rise also. As he believes God and serves Him, he receives God’s salvation and achieves an eternal life. So it is the eternal life of spirit. The story of this man’s services to God and eternal life is recorded in the poem. The lovers who read it and learn from it to serve God gain the same eternal life. With the eternal life of lovers, the person gains another eternal life – the fame among all people who have an eternal life. The person praised here has two eternal lives: the eternal life of himself, and the eternal fame in all people who are saved.

So there are two eternities. One is the eternity before the last judgment. It is gained through poetry recited by the descendant of man. It is a limited one. Another is the eternity after last judgment. It is the eternity given by God. It is a limitless one. It transcends all. The love of man, or secular love will ensure man to live to the last day. With the life of man, the poetry can last long as the life of human being. The love of God, or faith of God, can give one eternal life. It is the real eternity that can surpass all. In this sense, the couplet in fact enforces the theme of this poem, and gives a hint to the real resolution to the problem. The person praised has defeated Death because he has transformed from his march towards “death and all oblivious enmity” to arising of himself on the Judgment Day. He defeats both physical and spiritual death. Those who memorize him are lovers instead of all posterity. The record of him also changes from physical success to spiritual success. All changes are due to the salvation of God mentioned above. The poet may be conscious of limitation of poetry, and finds that only God can give an eternal life that he cannot.

With above mentioned points, poetry can transcend the material world, destructive force, and death itself. It will make a person immortal. In Sonnet 55, there is no definite answer that man only can get eternal life through love of God. It is more challenging to state such a theme under the dominant theme of the time. But as a Christian, Shakespeare may use words, such as “ending doom,” and “judgment,” to hint the eternal life is only given by God in the case man must serve Him.

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