

Sexuality as we know it today was invented in the nineteenth century, when the new fields of sexology and psychoanalysis developed the hetero/homosexual model currently dominant in Euro-American society. This is, of course, not to say that humans were not sexual beings before the Victorian era, but that the experience of sexuality was vastly different—and more fluid—than it is now. Typically, sexuality was considered a set of behaviors rather than a form of social identity, and the most condemned sexual behavior was sodomy, which was punishable by death. For people who felt compelled to this particular act, then, much was at stake; they needed somehow to re-conceive sodomy to maintain a coherent sense of self and defend themselves against persecution. This paper, written for Professor Richard Mallette's and Professor David Spadafora's class Tudor & Stuart England, examines how Shakespeare performed such re-conception in his Sonnets.

The Ever-Fixèd Mark:
Ordering Same-Sex Passion in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

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For nothing this wide universe I call
 Save thou my rose: in it thou art my all.
 —Sonnet 109

In his groundbreaking and much-debated book *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, Alan Bray reconstructs the early modern concept of the sodomite by examining pamphlets, court records, and literary works from the period. He concludes that the sodomite was conceptually located outside the mythos of cosmic order that structured Renaissance English thought:

Homosexuality was not part of [the] law of nature. It was not part of the chain of being, or the harmony of the created world or its universal dance...It was none of these things because it was not conceived of as part of the created order at all; it was part of its dissolution. And as such it was not a sexuality in its own right, but existed as a potential for confusion and disorder.¹

Many commentators have objected to this characterization of the early modern concept of the sodomite on the grounds that it belies the lived experience of individuals who engaged in same-sex eroticism during the time. One such scholar is Claude J. Summers, who, citing Christopher Marlowe as an example, claims that “during the English Renaissance some individuals did develop what we would today recognize as a homosexual consciousness.”² Similarly, Joseph Cady asserts that “the Renaissance [was]

¹ Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men’s Press, 1982), 26. Bray uses the term “homosexuality” specifically to designate same-sex eroticism.

² Claude J. Summers, “Homosexuality and Renaissance Literature, or the Anxieties of Anachronism,” *South Central Review* 9, no. 1 (1992): 5-6.

an era in which a definite awareness and language for a distinct homosexuality existed, at least among those who were willing to face and discuss the subject frankly.”³

Bray’s, Summers’s, and Cady’s positions do not, despite first appearances, contradict one another. Bray’s assertion addresses the dominant discursive field of early modern England, whereas Summers’s and Cady’s contentions address individual experiences in this field. These three arguments thus actually complement each other to suggest a point of conflict—and an important one—for the individual Renaissance sodomite. As Bray notes, same-sex eroticism “was in the Renaissance...a horror, a thing to be unreservedly execrated,”⁴ so the stakes were high in the conflict between same-sex experiences and the worldview that condemned them. How could the individual reconcile the demands of the ideal of order and those of his sexual impulses and actions?

It was incumbent upon the individual sodomite that he somehow do so if he were to maintain a coherent self-concept structured by the early modern ideal of cosmic order. Fortunately for him, it was in fact possible to address the conflict between order and his sexual impulses by way of a process Stephen Greenblatt has termed “self-fashioning,” or the construction of individual identity. “In sixteenth-century England,” Greenblatt famously asserts, “there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned.”⁵ This cultural attitude effectively opened discursive space in which the sodomite could forge his identity in such a way that it defused the troubling discourse surrounding his sexual impulses and, perhaps, actions.

³ Joseph Cady, “‘Masculine Love,’ Renaissance Writing, and the ‘New Invention’ of Homosexuality,” in *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England*, ed. Claude J. Summers (New York: The Haworth Press, Inc., 1992), 12.

⁴ Bray, 61.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1.

In fact, the discursive situation in which the Renaissance sodomite would have found himself corresponds almost exactly to what Greenblatt calls the “governing conditions” of self-fashioning: “we may say,” he notes, “that self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien.”⁶ For the sodomite, the “authority” was the early modern ideal order and the “alien” was his own sodomitic sexuality. By an effort of self-fashioning, he could reconcile these two conceptual entities to produce a sense of self that, as Greenblatt phrases it, partook “of both the authority and the alien that is marked for attack.”⁷

Bray adduces three primary techniques of self-fashioning available to the Renaissance sodomite: denial, appeal to classical ideals, and the refiguring of sodomy as a part of social order by welding the concepts of this order to same-sex eroticism.⁸ The first of these techniques would perhaps have been the most functionally effective, especially since prosecutions for sodomy were extremely rare.⁹ But it could not, of course, really reconcile the conflicting forces in which the sodomite was enmeshed. It was merely a working solution, as distinct from a resolution, and it provided no conceptual framework through which the individual could understand his sexual impulses and thereby integrate them into his self-concept. On the contrary, an identity fashioned through denial functioned precisely through the elision of same-sex eroticism.

An appeal to classical ideals could supply a framework based in, rather than in opposition to, same-sex eroticism, but any support evolved through this technique would have been precarious. As Summers notes, “most of the classical literature of

⁶ Greenblatt, 9.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bray, 58-66.

⁹ Bray, 71.

homosexuality was repeatedly subject to...the tendency to deny or minimize the physical side of Greek love.”¹⁰ Moreover, the humanist movement that made classical models of same-sex passion available to early modern Englishmen did not endorse all elements of Greek and Roman ideas. In *The Education of a Christian Prince*, for instance, Erasmus notes that classical thinkers “approve some things which are by no means to be approved for a Christian.”¹¹ Classical authority was not supreme, could not abnegate the tenets of Christianity, and thus would not have been capable of fully legitimizing same-sex eroticism.

Appropriating the ideals of cosmic order that permeated early modern discourse would have been the most discursively effective method of the three in that it would produce a conception of same-sex eroticism squarely within early modern culture. But it would also have been the most difficult method to enact. It would have required not only a thorough knowledge of early modern ideas of order in themselves, but also a knowledge of the interrelations and *modi operandi* of these ideas, along with considerable rhetorical finesse¹² and, not least, courage. It required, in fact, no less than Shakespeare.

I argue that Shakespeare uses just this technique of appropriation in the *Sonnets* to figure same-sex passion as an orderly—indeed, ordering—force, and to construct an identity inflected by this passion. More specifically, he casts same-sex passion in the molds of various forms of interpersonal relationships that were accepted and promoted by wider early modern cultural discourse as embodying order. In so doing, he suggests that

¹⁰ Summers, 8.

¹¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Lester K. Born (New York: Columbia UP, 1936), 201.

¹² Greenblatt notes that “self-fashioning is always...in language” (8).

same-sex passion does not merely equal but in fact surpasses different-sex passion in orderliness and thus moral integrity, even by the terms of the very discourse of cosmic order that denounced it. Shakespeare achieves this valuation of same-sex passion primarily by proposing that it creates orderly relationships between subjects characterized by it. Finally, he suggests that same-sex passion defeats the onslaught of time and its powers of decay, which E. M. W. Tillyard once called the “great enemy” of order¹³—a victory that is unattainable by different-sex passion (at least as this passion is conceived of in the *Sonnets*).

In making this argument, I take for granted certain assertions about the *Sonnets* that have been contested hotly in the recent past. First, I assume that the beloved to whom sonnets 1-126 are addressed is male and that the speaker of all 154 sonnets is male. Second, I assume that the speaker’s regard for this beloved represents same-sex erotic passion rather than idealized, desexualized friendship.¹⁴ Third, I assume that Shakespeare intended the *Sonnets* to be read as a loose sequence featuring characters with more or less stable identities,¹⁵ the most important of which, for the purposes of my argument, are the (male) beloved and the (male) speaker.

I do not, however, hold that the *Sonnets* are autobiographical, because my argument does not require them to be to remain coherent. The situation necessary for the appropriation described above to take place—a speaker conscious of both his same-sex passion and the early modern ideal of order and interested in reconciling the two—is directly represented in the *Sonnets*. And, whether the speaker is Shakespeare’s

¹³ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Early modern World Picture* (New York: Vintage, 1946), 17.

¹⁴ See Joseph Pequigney, *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹⁵ See Walter Cohen’s textual note to the *Sonnets* in Stephen Greenblatt, et al., ed., *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1921.

mouthpiece or merely an assumed character, he visibly enacts this technique of appropriation within the text itself. This process needs no complementary autobiographical referent external to the text. For my purposes, then, the question of autobiography is beside the point.

II

The first step in investigating Shakespeare's appropriation of orderly relationships to refigure same-sex passion is to identify what types of relationships were considered orderly by his contemporaries. One means of doing so is to consider statements regarding order that were endorsed by the crown and promoted by the church. Perhaps the most obvious work to turn to in this effort is the *Book of Homilies*, and particularly "An Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion":

How horrible a sin against God and man rebellion is cannot possibly be expressed according unto the greatness thereof. For he that nameth rebellion, nameth not a singular, or one only sin...but he nameth the whole puddle and sink of all sins against God and man, against his prince, his country, his countrymen, his parents, his children, his kinfolks, his friends, and against all men universally.¹⁶

The Homily represents rebellion as the *ne plus ultra* of sins, encapsulating all offenses that it is possible to commit. Rebellion constitutes an intentional attack on the all-important cosmic order, and its victims are therefore every embodiment of this order. The Homily moreover adduces a list of six relationships that come under assault by rebellion, a list that, since rebellion constitutes the "whole puddle and sink" of sins, can be

¹⁶ "An Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., ed. George M. Logan, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 556.

considered conclusive of all the types of relationships that were considered orderly by early modern English thought. These relationship types can be characterized as follows:

- i. Divine (God-man)
- ii. Vertically Social (lord-subject)
- iii. Horizontally Social (neighbor-neighbor)
- iv. Familial (parent-child)
- v. Amicable (friend-friend)
- vi. Marital (husband-wife)¹⁷

As I will argue, Shakespeare uses each of these types to refigure same-sex passion as orderly, thereby making his appropriation complete.

In *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Joseph Pequigney traces Shakespeare's use of some of these relationship types throughout the body of the *Sonnets*.¹⁸ Pequigney focuses on simply proving the presence of same-sex passion in the *Sonnets*, not so much examining the functioning of Shakespeare's appropriation of these types as providing an index of the sonnets in which this appropriation appears. His work does, however, serve as a backdrop for the analytical approach I propose, in which the mechanics of Shakespeare's use of orderly relationship types are investigated through the isolation of individual sonnets. Pequigney's book suggests that this approach does not misrepresent the general thrust of the *Sonnets* but rather examines exemplars of techniques used repeatedly in the sequence. With this in mind, I proceed with a fair degree of certainty that my method is viable.

¹⁷ The marital relationship is technically included in "kinfolks," but it is also specifically named later in the Homily (558).

¹⁸ Joseph Pequigney, *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 69-73.

i. Divine (God-man)

Sonnet 106 exemplifies Shakespeare's use of the divine relationship to refigure same-sex passion as orderly. The first quatrain of this poem puts in play several of the forces that are hallmarks of the *Sonnets* as a whole. In the first line, mention is made of "wasted time," and, in the following lines, the destructive and therefore disordering effects of time are presented in the context of "old rhyme" describing figures who have succumbed to these effects: "fairest wights," "ladies dead," and "lovely knights." The speaker also hints at same-sex passion in his description of these figures. The "wights" and "knights"—boys and men—who have been ruined by time are characterized as "fair" and "lovely," whereas the "ladies" who have experienced the same ruination are simply, almost coldly, "dead." The masculine rhyme of lines 2 and 4 moreover suggests a harmony, though a precarious one, of same-sex passion from which the "ladies," appearing in the middle of line 4, are excluded. This quatrain thus functions by a dynamic of same-sex attraction (achieved at the expense of different-sex attraction) that is threatened by the decaying faculties of time.

The second quatrain offers an explanation for the vulnerability of same-sex passion to the ravages of time and, in so doing, introduces the beloved. In lines 7 and 8, the speaker realizes that the beautiful men of the first quatrain were mere "prefigurings" of that which the beloved "master[s] now." Because of this, the same-sex passion that it is suggested these men inspired could not forestall their destruction. Additionally, these lines, with their pun on "master" (which echoes the sequence's dedication to "Mr. W.

H.”),¹⁹ reinforce the masculine gender of the beloved. This in turn reiterates that the speaker’s passion is same-sex in nature.

In the third quatrain and couplet, the speaker’s diction becomes religious, featuring “praises” in lines 9 and 14, “prophecies” in line 9, “divining” in line 11, and “wonder” in line 14. This intensification of diction further elevates the beloved; he ceases to be terrestrial, as were the “fairest wights” and “lovely knights,” and becomes, as Pequigney puts it, “the prophesied and prefigured messiah of beauty, analogized to Christ himself.”²⁰ The speaker’s response to this apotheosis of beauty is a passion that arcs up into the realm of religious rapture; it is, indeed, so intense that the speaker “lack[s] tongues to praise” the beloved.

The issue of time’s destructive power puzzlingly seems to evaporate as the sonnet progresses. This disappearance is explained, however, when the implications of the speaker’s portrayal of the beloved as the “messiah of beauty” are taken into account. This rhetorical device analogizes the beloved’s presence to the second coming of Christ, placing the “present days” of line 13 at Judgment Day. The rapturous passion the speaker feels for the beloved heralds the end of time and, thus, the elimination of time’s power to decay. Because it is perfect, the beloved’s beauty—and therefore the speaker’s passion—overcome time in a way that the figures of “old rhyme” and the implied passion between them could not. This process is moreover replicated rhetorically in the fabric of the sonnet itself by the very disappearance of references to time that invites closer, perhaps surprised scrutiny of the poem’s technical features in the first place.

¹⁹ Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 258.

²⁰ Pequigney, 73.

In this sonnet, then, the beloved assumes the role of messiah and the speaker assumes the role of devout worshiper, a relationship analogous to that between God and humankind. Perhaps unexpectedly, the speaker moreover invites “us” to join in praise of the beloved as well. “We” fill the role of the worshipper, just as the speaker does. The speaker’s attraction to the beloved is thus expressed through a trope that connects this attraction to a state of rapture, a state that is generalized to apply to the wider population (of early modern men). This technique both reconstitutes the speaker’s same-sex passion as a divine force and generalizes this passion to envelop all men. And perhaps most importantly, the beloved’s beauty and the speaker’s (and our) resulting passion stop the destructive progress of time, delivering the *coup de grâce* to order’s arch nemesis.

ii. *Vertically Social (lord-subject)*

What may be Shakespeare’s clearest appropriation of the vertically social relationship occurs in Sonnet 26. The very first phrase of the sonnet, “Lord of my love,” links same-sex passion to the vertically-arranged social relationship of feudal hierarchy. Building on this foundation, the poem establishes a series of metaphors, constructing a conceit: the beloved’s beauty becomes his “merit” (2), the speaker’s passion for the beloved becomes his “duty” (2), and the verse itself becomes a “written embassy” (3) sent to “witness” the speaker’s “duty” (4).

The terms of this conceit are altogether straightforward; more surprising is the speaker’s maligning his own wit and the “embassy” that communicates it. The sonnet itself proves that the speaker is neither “poor” in wit nor “wanting words to show” his “duty,” as he claims he is. His disconcerting assertion is, however, somewhat clarified by the third quatrain and couplet. The speaker herein wishes to be “worthy” of the beloved’s

“sweet respect” so that he may “dare to boast how” he loves him (12-3). Stated in the terms of the sonnet’s central conceit, the speaker shows humility before his social superior by suggesting, against evidence to the contrary, that he, as the feudal subject, lacks literacy and intelligence, qualities associated with gentility. He thus portrays himself as inferior to the beloved, his “lord.”

The speaker’s move here may at first seem troubling, as it appears to link his same-sex passion to insincerity, a trait that, if anything, is disordering. His assumed humility is, however, essential for the feudal trope to function fully: it allows the speaker to imply that mutuality is an attribute of same-sex relationships, just as it was of the feudal ideal. Feudal society was, at least in theory, made stable through the mutual acceptance of a power structure in which subjects obeyed their lords and lords displayed benevolence toward their subjects. Both positions were inspired by a sense of “duty.” By subtly soliciting the beloved’s return affection through humbling himself before him, the speaker suggests that same-sex relationships are similarly made stable through mutual “sweet respect” that is inspired by “love,” or same-sex passion. He thus fulfills one half of the relationship suggested by this analogy, even while articulating it. Hence the epistolary structure of the sonnet: the poem takes a form perhaps uniquely suited to the dual function of expression and execution. Sonnet 26 suggests, then, that same-sex passion motivates orderly same-sex relationships, and moreover dramatizes this process at work.

iii. Horizontally social (neighbor-neighbor)

It is difficult to isolate an individual sonnet to illustrate Shakespeare’s appropriation of the horizontally social relationship because Shakespeare seems almost

uninterested in it. Though the words “lord,” “vassal,” “father,” “child,” “friend,” and “marriage” all appear at least once in the *Sonnets*, the words “countryman” and “neighbour” are entirely absent. This may be because the horizontally social relationship lacks the intensity of the other relationship types appropriated in the *Sonnets*. Shakespeare might therefore have considered it unfit as a model on which to refigure the relationship between the speaker and the beloved.

The horizontally social relationship does, however, appear obliquely in relation to same-sex passion in a few of the *Sonnets*, though not as a pattern for interpersonal relationships. One of these is sonnet 47. The countrymen of this poem are not the speaker and beloved but rather the speaker’s “eye” and “heart” (both portrayed as male), between whom a “league is took.” As a part of this “league,” the speaker’s eye and heart interact in a neighborly fashion, the former sometimes inviting the latter to “banquet” and, at other times, the latter treating the former as a “guest.”

As it is represented here, the relationship between the speaker’s eye and heart corresponds to the early modern ideal of neighborliness that Keith Wrightson discusses in *English Society 1580-1680*. “Neighbourliness,” Wrightson observes, “[was] most visible...in the many practical forms of aid and support rendered to one another by neighbours, services which might often enough be vitally important to people who shared an environment which could be chronically insecure.”²¹ The sonnet represents neighborliness by analogizing the speaker’s heart and eye to neighbors coexisting in the environment of the speaker’s body. Brought together by their common passion for the beloved, they render each other aid in his absence. On a metaphoric level, sonnet 47 thus

²¹ Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988), 51.

suggests that same-sex passion—that experienced by the speaker’s eye and heart—encourages the development of strong horizontal social bonds.

The “horizontal social bonds” that sonnet 47 suggests do not, however, refer to an actual interpersonal relationship but rather act as a trope for the spiritual stability of the speaker. The neighborliness attributed to the speaker’s eye and heart represents a spiritual concord within the speaker himself. The poem thus appropriates the horizontally social relationship type to suggest that same-sex passion can be spiritually salutary for the individual experiencing it. This is, of course, contrary to the early modern belief that this passion was a sin so opprobrious that, as Michael Drayton put it, “the Devil if he saw it sure would fear it.”²² Thus, if sonnet 47 does not provide a refiguring of same-sex passion on the interpersonal level, it nevertheless appropriates the horizontally social relationship to represent same-sex passion as spiritually, if not explicitly socially, ordering.

iv. Familial (parent-child)

Of all the six orderly relationships that Shakespeare appropriates in the *Sonnets*, the familial relationship appears perhaps most frequently.²³ This may be because the dynamics and roles made available for manipulation through the adoption of this relationship are highly flexible. For example: though the speaker often portrays himself as a father, he also assumes the role of a nurse (in a quasi parent-child dynamic) in sonnet 22 and hints at a motherly role in sonnet 97.²⁴ Because Shakespeare employs many of the manifold manifestations of the familial relationship in various sonnets, my isolation of

²² Michael Drayton, *The Moone-Calfe*, in *Works of Michael Drayton*, vol. 3, ed. J. William Hebel (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1932), 170, discussed in Bray, 22.

²³ Pequigney, 69.

²⁴ Pequigney, 69.

one sonnet in particular—sonnet 37—will necessarily flatten out the range of possibilities suggested by the sequence as a whole. Such selectivity may be justified, however, in that sonnet 37 explores the possibilities of familial relationship perhaps more fully than does any of the other sonnets.

The first quatrain establishes an analogy between the father-child relationship and the relationship between the speaker and beloved and also introduces disordering decay. This decay is attributed to two forces: time (suggested by the word “decrepit”) in the first line and, more directly, “fortune” in the third. The quatrain moreover adduces sets of oppositional terms that grammatically cluster around the poles of the speaker-father and beloved-child. Decrepitude, lameness, and spite gather around the former, while activity, worth, and truth gather around the latter. And, most important, the speaker-father is characterized by aged decay, whereas the beloved-child is characterized by youthful vigor.

Notably, the speaker constructs his analogy through a simile, ensuring a degree of figurative space (which would have been foreclosed had metaphor been used) between the non-erotic father-child relationship and the relationship of the speaker and beloved. This allows the speaker to insert same-sex passion into the analogy via his rhapsodic praise of the beloved in the second quatrain. The filial love between father and child is eventually transformed into erotic love by the action the speaker describes in line 8: “I make my love engrafted to this store.” The “decrepit father” to whom the speaker analogizes himself “takes delight / to see” his child’s “deeds of youth;” the emphasis falls on the infinitive “to see,” which both denotatively and grammatically suggests distance. In contrast, the speaker “make[s] [his] love engrafted” to the “store” of the beloved’s

virtues, an act demanding physical contact. Furthermore, the “store” to which the speaker engrafts his love is termed, in a choice of words redolent of the bodily, the beloved’s “parts.” The engrafting the speaker describes thus seems to be sexual intercourse.

In the third quatrain, the speaker finds that his implied coupling with the beloved overthrows the negative qualities associated with him in the first quatrain. He almost miraculously becomes “nor lame, poor, nor despised.” The power of the beloved’s youthful sexuality almost literally saves the speaker’s life, for it is “by a part of all [the beloved’s] glory” that the speaker may “live.” Specifically erotic same-sex passion is thus presented as a force capable of counteracting decay, which is the result of the forward march of disorder. This portrayal of what is technically sodomy is, of course, diametrically opposed to the early modern characterization of same-sex eroticism as not only an index but also a direct cause of disorder.²⁵

v. *Amicable (friend-friend)*

The speaker directly relates his relationship with the beloved to the amicable relationship in sonnet 31. The most salient feature of this poem may be its almost obsessive use of the word “love,” which resounds, in various manifestations, some seven times. The speaker constructs a paradoxical conceit around this highly-charged refrain, calling the beloved “the grave where buried love doth live” (9). In this capacity, the beloved encapsulates “all” the speaker’s “friends” (4). He is thus presented as the apotheosis of these friends, much as he is presented as the apotheosis of beauty in sonnet 106: “that due of many now is thine alone,” the speaker tells him in line 12. In turn, the relationship between the speaker and beloved becomes the apotheosis of all friendship in

²⁵ Bray, 25.

line 13. Same-sex passion is thus represented as friendship tuned to its highest pitch, as the most perfect manifestation of the amicable relationship.

This conceit has another effect as well. It suggests that the beloved resurrects those friends whom the speaker has “supposèd dead,” at least in the sense that he embodies all “their images.” That is, he can in some measure counteract death, the ultimate breakdown of order. But this can only be achieved by the speaker’s “viewing” the beloved; he must, of course, recognize the “trophies of [his] lovers gone” in the beloved for death to be forestalled. The couplet moreover suggests that it is precisely by viewing the beloved in this way that the speaker has come to love him, to have “all the all” of him. Though they do not take the form of a cause-and-effect relationship in this sonnet as they do in others, same-sex passion and the beating back of disorder are thus intimately connected here.

vi. *Marital (husband-wife)*

Shakespeare’s appropriation of the marital relationship is most fully articulated in one of the most famous of the *Sonnets*, sonnet 116. Helen Vendler asserts that this poem is not an exercise in definition, as it at first appears to be, but is rather a “dramatic refutation or rebuttal.”²⁶ In her view, the poem takes the form of an oratorical negative rebuttal (lines 1-4) and positive rebuttal (lines 5-14).²⁷ This portion of her analysis is convincing, and serves as a useful framework within which to analyze the sonnet. Debatable, though, is her contention that the speaker argues against “the fiction of an

²⁶ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press, 1999), 488.

²⁷ Vendler, 499.

anterior utterance” made by the beloved.²⁸ Given the speaker’s diction and what seems to be an overarching project in the sonnets—the refiguring of same-sex passion via the terms set by the early modern discourse of order—it seems more likely that, as Bruce R. Smith suggests, the speaker argues against this discourse itself, against its conception of same-sex passion.²⁹ And this view finds support in the verse itself as well as in the allusions the speaker makes in the course of his argument.

It is frequently noted that the opening quatrain of the poem alludes to *The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony* from the *Book of Common Prayer*. In the service, the priest urges, “I require and charge you...that if either of you do know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, that ye confess it.”³⁰

Assuming that “the marriage of true minds” refers to the speaker’s relationship with the beloved, the speaker’s refusal to admit any such “impediment” to this relationship elevates it to the exalted level to which different-sex relationships are raised in the marriage service. This quatrain thus serves as a negative refutation of the early modern English understanding of same-sex passion as a profoundly odious sin.

The following lines, functioning as a positive refutation, extend the covenant of “the marriage of true minds” beyond the bounds by which marriage is limited in the official service. While different-sex couples only pledge themselves to each other until death in the service,³¹ the speaker claims that same-sex “Love...bears it out even to the edge of doom,” or the end of time. Same-sex passion is thus portrayed as superior to different-sex passion even by the terms set by the institution of marriage, officially the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Smith, 263.

³⁰ *The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony* from *Book of Common Prayer*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., ed. George M. Logan, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 554.

³¹ *The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony*, 555.

highest level of different-sex passionate relationships. In addition, the speaker's assertion that same-sex passion continues past death allows him to assert that "Love's not Time's fool," that same-sex passion continues regardless of the inevitable physical decay perpetrated by time. The sonnet thus suggests that relationships based on same-sex passion overcome the disordering effects of time, a triumph unmatched by different-sex marriage.

Shakespeare thus uses all six of the orderly relationship types adduced in the "Homily on Disobedience" to refigure same-sex passion and relationships by placing them inside early modern culture and its mythos of order. In doing so, he restructures the spiritual and social identity of the sodomite, at least as far as this identity is deployed in social roles and, in sonnet 47, tied to spiritual health. In other words, he dramatizes the speaker's self-fashioning in such a way that the speaker's resultant identity—same-sex passion and all—can be installed firmly within his social and cultural milieu.

III

In 1593, either while or just before Shakespeare was probably writing the *Sonnets*,³² Christopher Marlowe appeared before the Privy Council to answer charges made against him by Richard Baines in a note addressed to the queen.³³ The Baines Note alleged that Marlowe had committed heresy, conspired treasonously, and practiced sodomy. Whether Baines's accusations were accurate or not, they are telling of how the Renaissance English conceived of the sodomite. Heresy and treason transparently

³² Walter Cohen, Textual Note to the *Sonnets*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1921-2.

³³ Constance Brown Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002), xviii, 131.

constituted assaults on order; Baines's linking sodomy to them indicates that Shakespeare's contemporaries viewed same-sex eroticism as yet another technique in the repertoire of the disorderly.

The early modern social environment was thus profoundly dangerous for those who practiced sodomy. A conviction for the crime could, though it usually did not, result in execution.³⁴ And, perhaps more importantly, individuals caught between their criminal sexual desires and the values inculcated into them by early modern English social discourse faced a major conflict of self-conception. A man finding himself attracted to other men and perhaps acting on that attraction had somehow to reconcile his sexual impulses with the discourse of cosmic order that surrounded him.

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* provide a model of how such a resolution could be achieved. In the sequence, Shakespeare refigures same-sex passion and the relationships it inspires by appropriating all six of the types of relationships considered orderly by his contemporaries. He thereby posits a radically reconceived image of the sodomite as a figure located at the center of cosmic order. What's more, he suggests that same-sex passion is capable of counteracting time's incessant powers of decay. The sodomite thus appears in the *Sonnets* as a preserver, rather than a destroyer, of order. Shakespeare's daring ingenuity here cannot be overstressed. Against tremendous odds, he constructed an entirely new model of same-sex passion that meshes this passion with social and spiritual self-concept, a model that may thus represent the first veritably homosexual identity in the modern world.

³⁴ Bray, 14.

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