

# The myth of Shakespeare's sonnets

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## Abstract

Until recently, Shakespeare's sonnets were read as the autobiographical record of a love triangle between the author, a fair-haired youth and a Dark Lady. Shakespeare's relationship with the man was either seen as an idealizing friendship, or as homoerotic. In my article, I treat this reading of the sonnets as a flexible myth, which allows us to construct a Shakespeare according to our needs. I investigate two aspects of this myth: the addressees' gender and the speaker's sexual orientation. With British, American, Dutch and German examples, I argue that analogous responses to these issues have emerged in various cultures.

## Keywords

Shakespeare, sonnets, gender, sexual orientation, reception

## Résumé

Encore récemment, les sonnets de Shakespeare étaient lus comme une histoire d'amour autobiographique à trois: l'auteur, un jeune homme et une maîtresse. La relation de Shakespeare à cet homme a été tantôt perçue comme une amitié idéalisée tantôt comme étant homo-érotique. Cette lecture apparaît ici comme un mythe flexible, qui permet à chacun de se construire son propre Shakespeare. Deux aspects de ce mythe sont examinés: le genre des destinataires des sonnets et l'orientation sexuelle de la *persona*. À l'aide d'exemples britanniques, américains, hollandais et allemands, on montrera que des réponses analogues ont émergé sur ces questions dans des cultures différentes.

## Mots clés

Shakespeare, sonnets, genre, orientation sexuelle, réception

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Until recently, it was generally assumed that Shakespeare's sonnets tell a clear-cut story of a love triangle, comprising the speaker, identified with Shakespeare himself, a young man dubbed the Fair Friend, and a promiscuous woman called the Dark Lady, who is Shakespeare's lover. In this reading, the sonnets are autobiographical records of Shakespeare's feelings towards the other figures, culminating in his discovery that the Dark Lady and the Fair Friend are having an affair behind his back. One issue over which there was disagreement is the nature of the relationship between Shakespeare and the Fair Friend, which some regarded as an idealizing friendship, others as tinged with homoeroticism.

Over the last decade or so, however, the interpretation of the sonnets as a coherent plot has come to be questioned. As Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells point out in their study *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, there is no evidence whatsoever that the Fair Friend, the Dark Lady and the Rival Poet were based on real historical figures, nor is it clear that they were conceived of as unified characters by Shakespeare himself. Edmondson and Wells deconstruct the notion of Fair Friend, Dark Lady and Rival Poet, arguing that there may have been several addressees, and that many of the sonnets are ambiguous where the addressee's gender is concerned. By their count, 20 poems explicitly address a male – all in the first group of 126; whereas seven clearly address a female – all in the second group.<sup>1</sup> This means that for 127 poems, the addressee's gender is unclear, perhaps deliberately so.

In my argument, therefore, I treat the love triangle involving the Fair Friend and the Dark Lady not as a biographical fact, but as a myth. What I mean by this is that it is a story which, irrespective of its inherent truth, speaks to the needs of a particular culture, and embodies some of the questions it wrestles with. In this case, it allows us to fashion an image of Shakespeare in accordance with our own needs and wishes, as heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual, as misogynous or as a self-effacing martyr for love. It stands to reason, however, that as our views and obsessions change over time, the myth itself changes accordingly. My focus is on two closely related aspects of the myth of the sonnets: changing constructions of the gender of the addressees and of the speaker's sexual orientation.

My argument, therefore, fits into the cultural turn that has shifted our attention from Shakespeare's intended, inherent meaning, to the way his works function in a given culture, and can be seen to reflect aspects of that recipient culture. This cultural turn has opened up new vistas for studying Shakespeare in translation, as a healthy corrective to the traditional Anglocentrism of the Shakespeare industry. Critics such as Dennis Kennedy, Wilhelm Hortmann, Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova, just to mention a few, have reminded us that Shakespeare has a vibrant life, too, without his language.<sup>2</sup> To put it simply: as long as we wish to know above all what Shakespeare meant in a certain text, a translation into a foreign language can at best be studied for its accuracy in rendering as many aspects as possible of that original meaning; but the moment we realize, with Terence Hawkes, that *we* mean *by* Shakespeare – in other words, that we use his works to address our own concerns, in a later period or a different geographical location, or both – a translation becomes an indication of the way in which Shakespeare functions in a given culture.<sup>3</sup> As such, it is no longer derivative (just a

translation) but constitutes new data that reveal some of the manifold constructions that Shakespeare has been subjected to.

In studies of Shakespeare reception in a foreign context, most attention has so far been directed at the plays: the way the Frenchman Ducis rewrote them in accordance with neoclassical standards, the way the Germans saw themselves reflected in Hamlet and the way the Poles and other nations in Central and Eastern Europe staged Shakespeare for subversive purposes under Communism.<sup>4</sup> In this study of cultural transformations, however, the sonnets and the narrative poems have been relatively neglected, with a few exceptions. One of these exceptions is Manfred Pfister's article on sonnet 66, 'Tired with all these', which traces the way this particular sonnet, with its complaints about social injustice and corruption, has been translated into various languages all over continental Europe and, more importantly, been made to speak to various political contexts, from Belgium to Georgia.<sup>5</sup> Pfister is also the editor, along with Jürgen Gutsch, of an anthology of sonnet translations from all over the world, in which various language areas are introduced by local Shakespeareans, each giving a sketch of the history of translations and appropriations of the sonnets in their specific area.<sup>6</sup> In my analysis of the myth of the sonnets, I use English, American, Dutch, Flemish and German examples, drawn from translations, editions, criticism and biographical fictions, to show that, over time, broadly analogous responses to the issues of gender and sexual identity have emerged in various cultures, though not always at the same time.

## Order

First, however, the reason for the ambiguity of the sonnets where gender is concerned needs to be addressed. Throughout the cycle, there are sonnets that clearly reveal the addressee's gender, but most are ambiguous. With the latter, the place in the sequence, sometimes along with the occurrence of typical motifs, is the only clue we have as to the addressee. Some of the so-called breed sonnets, 1–17, for instance, clearly address a male, such as sonnet 3, which says that no woman would 'd disdain the tillage of [the addressee's] husbandry', and sonnet 9, which imagines the addressee dying and leaving a widow behind to mourn her husband. Yet most of the first 17 sonnets are far vaguer: words like 'love', in the sense of beloved person, and pronouns like 'thou' and 'thee' are gender neutral in English. It is therefore because of their proximity to sonnets 3 and 9, and the fact that all 17 sonnets urge the addressee to preserve his/her beauty in his/her children, that traditional readings have allocated these sonnets to the male Fair Friend.

In other words, the way we read the individual sonnets depends largely on the order in which they were printed in Thomas Thorpe's 1609 Quarto edition. Nevertheless, the authority of that edition cannot be taken for granted, as it has been suspected of being a pirated edition. This might mean that its ordering of the sonnets is haphazard.<sup>7</sup> Nor does internal evidence solve this problem. In some places, the sequence appears to be correct, as with sonnets 29 and 30, companion pieces on present and past causes of melancholy, whilst other sonnets make for strange neighbours, such as the heavy meditation on lust, sonnet 129, 'The expense of spirit', followed by the light-hearted praise of the lady, 'My Mistress' Eyes', sonnet 130. It is largely on the basis of this dubious ordering, then, that

the story of the triangle between speaker, Dark Lady and Fair Friend has been (re)constructed.

Although this story has found wide acceptance, at least until recently, there are also arguments that could be mustered against it. For instance, as Andrew Gurr has pointed out, sonnet 145, embedded in the Dark Lady sequence, appears to contain a pun on the maiden name of Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, in the final couplet:

'I hate' from 'hate' away she threw,  
And saved my life, saying 'not you'.<sup>8</sup>

One might explain the pun away as pure coincidence; but as Gurr points out, not just the Hathaway family name is punned on, but 'And' in line 14 would also have sounded like 'Anne', which makes a coincidence less likely. Besides, this good-humoured sonnet follows the bitter dismissal of the Dark Lady as the 'dark angel' of number 144. Gurr's explanation is that an early juvenile attempt at wooing Anne in verse became mixed up with later sonnets about the adulterous affair with the Dark Lady. Yet this theory raises the question whether there are other such sonnets originally intended for someone else than their place in the sequence suggests. As Edmondson and Wells point out:

If the collection could include one poem written early in Shakespeare's career, it could include others written at any point until the volume went to press. In theory, at least, this means that sonnets may have been addressed to more than one young man, and even to more than one "dark lady".<sup>9</sup>

In addition, some sonnets exist in other versions than those of Thorpe, such as the variant on sonnet 106 in a seventeenth-century manuscript, entitled 'On his Mistress' Beauty'.<sup>10</sup> The text, which contains a number of substantial differences from Thorpe's, may have been copied with changes from the printed edition, but it could also be a copy, by some removes, of the 'sugred Sonnets' that, according to Francis Meres, Shakespeare circulated among his friends by 1598, and therefore possibly closer to Shakespeare's original than Thorpe's version, perhaps even in the added title.<sup>11</sup> As the authority of Thorpe's text is dubious, such possibilities cannot be ruled out altogether. Some translators of the sonnets try to reflect this uncertainty: the Swiss Markus Marti, for instance, repeatedly points at the gender ambiguity in his notes and even gives variant renderings for male and female addressees in his German translation of sonnets 105 and 110.<sup>12</sup>

What my argument has shown so far is that the way we interpret the story behind the sonnets, or even behind an individual sonnet, is necessarily based on conjecture. In the absence of firm evidence about a possible autobiographical background, all we can do is construct more or less plausible stories about the sonnets. Nevertheless, for what follows, I will take the ordering of Q1 and the interpretation it has given rise to as the standard account, for lack of a coherent and convincing alternative.

## **Bending gender (I)**

In editions, translations and the imagination of later generations, various attitudes towards the sonnets can be detected, including not just admiration but also

embarrassment at the presence of a male addressee. For all we know, however, this only begins in 1780, with Edmund Malone's edition based on Thorpe's First Quarto. As is well known, John Benson's 1640 edition, which had been standard in the preceding era, had reordered the sonnets, added others and regularized the addressee's gender from male to female in some, though not all, of the first 126 sonnets.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, the outline of a coherent plot revolving around a love triangle was no longer visible. Then Malone restored Thorpe's text, and, moreover, suggested that the sonnets were autobiographical. Understandably, this led to some embarrassment, including George Steevens's well-known 'disgust and indignation' at Shakespeare's 'fulsome panegyrick, addressed to a male object'.<sup>14</sup> Others could not imagine that the Bard, identified with the speaker of the sonnets, might have been involved in a homosexual relationship. Yet the existence of the male addressee, in whatever way the relationship was interpreted, was acknowledged.

On the Continent, Benson's practice of obscuring the homosexual implications by changing the addressee's gender could still be found in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1859, a Dutchman called A. S. Kok celebrated the 250th anniversary of the sonnets by publishing an article about them, along with his translation (the first translation into Dutch) of 12 sonnets.<sup>15</sup> The article presents the poems as autobiographical but completely obscures the fact that some of them are addressed to a man; in so far as the 'beloved' has a gender at all, it is feminine. Besides, this woman is wholly virtuous, even if the speaker, identified as Shakespeare, is sometimes guilty of 'youthful wantonness and lust'.<sup>16</sup> For his translations, Kok makes a selection of some of the more idealizing sonnets from the first 126, and where necessary he changes pronouns from masculine to feminine (sonnet 19) or even adds a feminine pronoun (sonnet 100). The love triangle, the adulterous affair with the Dark Lady and the ambiguous relationship with the Fair Friend are all completely obscured.

## **'Outing' the Bard**

Gradually, the possibility of a gay or bisexual Shakespeare became more widely accepted. As I have argued elsewhere, this is largely due to Oscar Wilde's famous story, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', in which Wilde turned Shakespeare into an idealized version of himself: an older playwright besotted, be it in a platonic way, with his boy actor Willie Hughes.<sup>17</sup> He based this character on puns he believed to be present in the sonnets, on Will (sonnets 135, 143) and on Hues/Hughes (sonnet 20). Originally, Wilde really believed in his theory about the autobiographical basis of the sonnets, but when he became aware of the lack of any hard evidence to back it up, he turned it into a story instead, meant to illustrate the superiority of a beautiful fiction over a prosaic fact, as well as the tendency to project oneself into what one reads. When Wilde was on trial for homosexual practices, however, he abandoned his non-committal attitude to Shakespeare's sexual orientation and defended his own involvement with 'the love that dare not speak its name' by referring to the sonnets, which, Wilde suggested, had described a platonic love affair with the Fair Friend.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the name of Shakespeare carried much weight, and this made him a useful ally in Wilde's personal struggle

against bigotry, as it would later be appropriated by the gay cause in its struggle for emancipation.

Meanwhile, Wilde's friend Frank Harris read the sonnets as the record of a steamy heterosexual affair between Shakespeare and the Femme Fatale, the Dark Lady, whom he identified as a court lady, Mary Fitton. He published his theories as a scholarly study, centring on the sonnets, as well as a play on Shakespeare's life.<sup>19</sup> To Harris, the speaker's involvement with the Fair Friend is merely conventional and not homoerotic at all. The disagreement between Wilde and Harris set off a debate over Shakespeare's sexual orientation that was to last for much of the twentieth century. It was taken for granted by then that the sonnets to the Dark Lady proved that Shakespeare had been an adulterer, but the relationship with the Fair Friend was a different matter. As I have shown, there was a long-standing tendency to ignore or soften the evidence, such as it is, offered by the sonnets, by changing the addressee's gender from male to female. On the other side, gay circles followed Oscar Wilde's lead in adopting Shakespeare as their patron saint. In literary criticism, the clearest and most extreme example is Joseph Pequigney's study *Such Is My Love* (1985), which analyses the sonnets as the autobiographical record of a far-from-Platonic affair between a bisexual Shakespeare and a homosexual Fair Friend.

The gay appropriation of Shakespeare was also taken up in creative responses to the sonnets. British film maker Derek Jarman's *The Angelic Conversation* (1985), for instance, juxtaposes a series of slow-moving, grainy visual images with a reading of 14 of Shakespeare's sonnets – nearly all of them from the first 126 traditionally associated with the Fair Friend.<sup>20</sup> Although Judi Dench's voice-over reading the sonnets suggests a female perspective, the overall effect of the film's exclusive focus on young men is to frame the poems as homoerotic, the more so as some of the later scenes feature two men making love (although this is never so explicit as to become pornographic). Also, the scenes and the sonnets are often matched in terms of contents, as when poems about the Fair Friend's brightness are combined with images of young men carrying torches, or shining mirrors into the camera, or when sonnet 94, 'They that have power to hurt', is juxtaposed with footage of a man enthroned and dressed up as a kind of idol, wearing a supercilious expression, whilst another humbly kisses his knees and arms. Although there is neither dialogue nor plot, and it would be exaggerated to say that the visual images are illustrations of the poems, such juxtapositions do strongly suggest a parallelism between Shakespeare's works and the homoerotic world of Derek Jarman.<sup>21</sup>

Similar ideas underlay the 1994 physical theatre production titled *L.O.V.E.*, based on the sonnets, by the Welsh Volcano Theatre Company. There were three actors, two men and one woman. Rather than calmly delivering Shakespeare's lines, the three shouted out snippets from the sonnets whilst pursuing each other in wild dances, sometimes so violent that it looked like a martial arts display. The two male characters were clearly more than just friends: at the beginning of the performance, they shared a long and intense kiss, and that was just the beginning of their physical encounters, in which male and female seemed to mingle without distinction.<sup>22</sup>

If Jarman and Volcano Theatre Company explored the homoerotic potential of the sonnets, William Boyd made clear the implications of this reading for Shakespeare as a person, in his biopic *Waste of Shame*, subtitled 'The mystery of Shakespeare and his

sonnets', broadcast by BBC4 in 2005.<sup>23</sup> It features Rupert Graves as Shakespeare, who is attracted both to an exotic Dark Lady (Indira Varma) and to an epicene youth (Tom Sturridge), who together inspire the writing of the sonnets. Shakespeare's love for the Fair Friend is never consummated, although in one scene he comes close to making a pass at him. His relationship with the Dark Lady, however, is exclusively erotic, and exploitative. She is a prostitute of French-Moorish descent, and Shakespeare despises her, whilst idealizing the aristocratic Fair Friend. Yet all three are linked by the fact that they have contracted syphilis, a notion that scriptwriter William Boyd based on a reading of the last two, cryptic, sonnets, as references to the mercury-bath treatment of syphilis, which Shakespeare undergoes in this TV film.<sup>24</sup> Rather than accepting the disease as evidence of their common human frailty, when the symptoms return, years afterwards, Shakespeare takes vengeance on the Fair Friend by publishing the sonnets. This Shakespeare may be bisexual, like Wilde's hero; but in his vengeful and misogynous behaviour, he is far less noble.

In the wake of Wilde's trials, the association between Shakespeare and homoeroticism also reached the Netherlands. In 1946, some Dutch homosexual men founded a reading society dubbed the 'Shakespeare club', which gave gay men an opportunity to get to know each other, at a time when homosexuality was far from generally accepted. The name 'Shakespeare club' was based on the conviction that the sonnets spoke of a homosexual relationship.<sup>25</sup> This idea had been spread in Dutch society by some early sonnet translators. Albert Verweij, a major poet in his own right, had a long history of involvement with Shakespeare's sonnets. He wrote an article about them in 1885 and brought out a complete translation in 1933. Verweij also celebrated his own relationship, often thought to have been homoerotic, with fellow poet Willem Kloos in a series of sonnets entitled 'Of the love that is called Friendship', which is clearly indebted to Shakespeare's sequence. The poems were written in the 1880s, but remained unpublished until 1938, whilst some only came out in 1983.<sup>26</sup> More explicit was psychoanalyst Coenraad van Emde Boas, who dedicated his dissertation to a study of Shakespeare's personality by way of the works, the sonnets in particular, and concluded that they contain evidence for Shakespeare's bisexuality.<sup>27</sup> The thesis also included a number of sonnet translations by van Emde Boas himself.

In *Dark Lady*, a performance by Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the homoerotic love between the speaker, tentatively identified with Shakespeare, and the Fair Friend was contrasted with the lustful attraction of the Dark Lady. Surprisingly, the cover of the programme booklet showed a torso, naked but for a ruff around the neck, of a young black male, who did not feature in the performance as such. Under the heading 'The mystery of Shakespeare's Sonnets', the booklet first gives a traditional account of the sonnets, split between the beautiful aristocratic youth, identified with Mr W. H., and the Dark Lady. It goes on to argue that the few sonnets to the Dark Lady have always attracted more attention than the great majority addressed to the Friend – a questionable assertion – because

commentators were unable to overcome their own prejudice and to see that Shakespeare takes up a clearly bisexual perspective in the sonnets. . . . Only now that the attitude towards homosexuality has changed in the West over the last few decades, is there room to look with

greater openness to this important element of those poems that have been known and loved for four hundred years.<sup>28</sup>

The actual performance, however, was less clear about this issue than the programme booklet suggests. For one thing, the roles of speaker, Fair Friend and Dark Lady were all split between several actors/singers. One of the Fair Friend characters, who first inspires the poet, was in fact played by a dark-haired woman. Later incarnations included a bald man and a dark-haired one. The Dark Lady, who recalled the speaker to his dark rumination on lust in 'The Expense of Spirit', had no fewer than five emanations, including women wearing a red and a dark wig, respectively. The chaotic nature of the resulting performance was noted also by reviewers at the time. Perhaps the most plausible reading is that the putative biographical story of Shakespeare's love triangle comes to be seen as symbolic of the archetypal human predicament, torn between idealizing and inspiring love and degrading lust; and, as this can take many forms in different individuals, each of these roles can be played by actors of several colours of skin and hair, and even genders.<sup>29</sup> Almost coincidentally, the resulting picture of a fractured Fair Friend and Dark Lady seems to foreshadow the deconstruction of these characters by Edmondson and Wells. The difference remains, of course, that whereas the latter are primarily concerned with possible autobiographical traces of Shakespeare's life, the drama production treated that life as a universal myth, which could take on an infinite variety of forms in individual lives.

In view of the long-standing acceptance of a homosexual Shakespeare in the Netherlands, it is not so surprising that, in a recent Dutch translation of Shakespeare's sonnets by Hans-Jurgen Schoenmakers, sonnet 126 is made explicitly gay.<sup>30</sup> In the English original, the text contrasts the Fair Friend's eternal youth with his 'lovers withering'. The absence of an apostrophe makes it ambiguous whether 'lovers' is singular genitive, plural genitive or possibly plural nominative. More importantly, the word 'lover' in Jacobean times often carries a far less specific meaning than it does in modern English and often means no more than 'friend'.<sup>31</sup> Schoenmakers, however, translates the phrase as '*je minnaars val*', the fall of your lover(s) – in the modern English sense of sexual partner. The translation thus maintains the ambiguity of lovers where plural or singular is concerned but leaves hardly any room for doubt about the exact relationship between the Fair Friend and the speaker (and, possibly, other lovers). Whether Schoenmakers intended this effect, or simply did not know what lover could mean in Shakespeare's age, is unclear; but the example shows that, in the Netherlands, a gay Shakespeare does not seem a shocking proposition anymore.

## Bending gender (2)

Obviously, much has changed since Benson and Kok felt the need to obscure or change the gender of the addressee of the sonnets. Nevertheless, this practice has not died out altogether, though the reasons for this may differ. Edmondson and Wells mention a 1990s Czech translation of the sonnets 'by a right-wing politician, Miroslav Macek [which] like Benson's of 1640, implicitly censors the poems by changing the gender of



the addressee of some of them from male to female'.<sup>32</sup> Whether changing the addressee's gender is a matter of censorship, however, depends on the framing of the translation. Consider, for instance, the case of singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann, born in East Germany, yet deprived of his citizenship during a visit to the West in 1976. Biermann made a loose translation of 40 sonnets, including number 66. In the original, the couplet reads:

Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,  
Save that to die I leave my love alone.<sup>33</sup>

In Biermann's version:

Von all dem müde, wär ich lieber tot, ließ ich  
In dieser Welt dabei mein Liebchen nicht im Stich.<sup>34</sup>

The term 'Liebchen', translating the neutral 'love', is exclusively used of women.<sup>35</sup> Wolf Biermann is not, however, unaware of the Fair Friend, nor is he trying to censor Shakespeare by adapting the addressee's gender; in his rendering of a number of other sonnets, such as 20 and 22, the addressee is unmistakably male. In the notes to the published edition of his sonnet translations, Biermann mentions the story of the Fair Friend and the Dark Lady, which he regards as a possible reading rather than the gospel truth.<sup>36</sup> In light of a theory which stated that the first 77 sonnets, half the cycle, address the Fair Friend, he comments:

Because the English is often so unclear with regard to gender, I have not simply addressed all of the first seventy-seven sonnets to a man, but preferred a woman addressee in several of them. I cannot do this differently, nor do I wish it otherwise. And I am allowed to, my frivolous alibi being sonnet 20.<sup>37</sup>

Sonnet 66 is one of these. Clearly, Biermann is not so much obscuring the possible homosexual implications, as occasionally adapting the sonnets to his own situation. Besides, sonnet 66 in particular is a special case, as it graces both the first and the last page of the booklet, in the original English and in Biermann's translation respectively, and as the number of notes, pointedly, is precisely 66 as well. As Biermann explains, sonnet 66 was among his earliest sonnet translations, and he at once turned it into a song text for his musical repertoire.<sup>38</sup> The volume includes a setting for voice and guitar at the end of his volume.<sup>39</sup> In a song, of course, the singer often adapts the gender of the addressee to himself or herself. Besides, Manfred Pfister has shown that, like other translations of sonnet 66, Biermann's has overtones of political protest, as when he performed it as a song during a rally in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in December 1989, just after the Berlin Wall had come down. Though Pfister analyses the political implications, he does not note the possible double entendre in the final line, due precisely to the female gender: the *Liebchen* of the end, whom he refuses to leave in the lurch, might stand for the GDR – which is feminine in German.<sup>40</sup> In the context of 1989, when the song was written, it is precisely the dimension of East–West politics, speaking to Biermann's

forced emigration from his native country and his return there, which would have been uppermost in his mind and that of his audience, not the gender politics.

When Flemish author Hugo Claus changes the addressee to a woman in his free renderings of 15 of the sonnets, one presumes it is for analogous reasons: to make Shakespeare's work wholly his own, Claus adapts the sort of love described to his own heterosexuality.<sup>41</sup> As so many other details, too, allude to the modern era, making these sonnets adaptations rather than translations, this seems less like a conscious attempt at misrepresenting or censoring Shakespeare's original than like an intertextual play, bringing out the sonnets' relevance to the modern age in general, the adapter in particular. In his version of sonnet 66, for instance, Claus alludes to the highly contentious deployment of cruise missiles by the Belgian government in the 1980s, whereas other sonnets speak of Einstein and air pollution (1), skiing (9), the cinema and the scattering of the speaker's ashes after cremation (14, based on Shakespeare's 71). Claus presents the sonnets as his own, though their indebtedness to Shakespeare's originals is sometimes very clear. Matters are slightly different with another Flemish poet, Guido de Bruyn, who presents his unrhymed poems as translations of Shakespeare's sonnets. Actually, they are very free adaptations. In his version of sonnet 21, for instance, he uses contemporary diction such as 'clichés' and images such as 'metaphors from the biscuit tin'. Here, too, the addressee is explicitly gendered female.<sup>42</sup> However, this is the only one of the sonnets usually associated with the Fair Friend which has a female addressee; the others are all addressed to a male or ambiguous about gender. Biermann, Claus and de Bruyn all seem to be concerned less with censoring Shakespeare's original intention, insofar as we know what that was, than with adapting the sonnets to their own time and circumstances; one might say with appropriating them. For Biermann and de Bruyn, that also means that the addressee's gender is changed or specified at will, without any attempt at imposing a consistent heteronormative pattern.

Whereas these translators seem to know very well what they are about, there are also cases where a change (or choice) of gender may be due to ignorance. There is a remarkable example on YouTube that shows a clip from a television broadcast of a 2009 Berliner Ensemble production, directed by Robert Wilson, which was based on Shakespeare's sonnets, in which male roles were played by women and the reverse. The clip shows three men in drag wearing heavy make-up, two of whom take turns singing sonnet 29, in the setting by American singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright.<sup>43</sup> As Wainwright is a well-known gay icon, one might suspect that his involvement in this gender-bending project was no coincidence, and that his choice for Shakespeare's sonnets, too, was a conscious decision based on a gay interpretation of the majority of these poems.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere on YouTube, however, an anonymous third person, nicknamed Lyra000, posted the same song, performed by Wainwright himself, combined with footage from a film version of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, showing the budding romance between Elizabeth (Keira Knightley) and Darcy (Matthew Macfadyen).<sup>45</sup> Thus, the gay potential of the sonnet, reinforced by both the songwriter's image and the transvestite video footage, is neutralized and regularized by Lyra000 into heterosexual desire by the images that illustrate it. It may well be that this is due to Lyra000's total ignorance of the Fair Friend rather than a conscious choice. At any rate,

this example suggests that the construction of Shakespeare as gay or bisexual is not yet universally accepted, or perhaps even known.

Changing the gender (or obscuring the ostensible gender), particularly of the male addressee, becomes truly problematic when a sonnet is presented not as a free interpretation of Shakespeare's work but as a text linked to his own life. Then, as in Kok and Benson, it points to a refusal to accept the possibility that the speaker, identified with Shakespeare, may have harboured homoerotic feelings for the Fair Friend. A recent *cause célèbre* was the use of sonnet 18 in the Hollywood blockbuster *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day' is undoubtedly one of the best-known of the sonnets, being frequently anthologized; but it is not always made clear that (for all we know) it was addressed to the Fair Friend. One may assume that an intellectual writer like Tom Stoppard, with his long involvement with Shakespeare, does know this. Yet in his and Marc Norman's screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love*, Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) writes this sonnet for a woman, the beautiful blonde Lady Viola (Gwyneth Paltrow).<sup>46</sup> On one level, the film shows how Shakespeare's talent develops along with his love life, as he moves from an unhappy love affair with an unfaithful brunette named Rosalyne, to a far more mature relationship with fair-haired Viola. The basic contrast between idealized Fair Friend and demonized Dark Lady is, therefore, reflected in the film; nonetheless, the Fair Friend has been replaced by a woman.

This is, of course, not the whole story: briefly after the scenes with the sonnet, there is another famous episode, set in a wherry, where the Shakespeare character receives a kiss from Viola disguised as a boy actor. Unaware that it is her, Shakespeare looks up in confusion, but before the full implications of his attraction to the boy can sink in, the boatman, who witnessed the kiss without blinking an eyelid, tells him that the seeming boy was in fact a woman, Viola.<sup>47</sup> This brief suggestion of homoerotic attraction, which is immediately withdrawn by the revelation that it was a woman after all who had kissed him, obviously was as far as the scriptwriters could go, skirting the limits of danger. It has been observed that the choice of Rupert Everett, an openly gay actor, to play Christopher Marlowe in this film may not have been entirely coincidental either.<sup>48</sup> Before *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) made the topic of male homosexuality acceptable to mainstream American cinema audiences, explicitly representing a gay Shakespeare evidently was not an option; *Shakespeare in Love*, therefore, briefly flirts with the idea of Shakespeare and Marlowe being gay, throwing out hints for those in the know, without wholly committing itself to this still controversial view.

## Conclusion

As I have argued, Shakespeare's sonnets function in a discourse of gender and sexual orientation. Over the course of the centuries, the construction of the story behind the sonnets has gradually changed, along with the image of Shakespeare. In Western Europe, a gay or bisexual Shakespeare is now acceptable; in that respect he has been appropriated successfully by the gay rights movement, although this seems not yet to have impacted the United States to the same extent.

However, just when the idea of a gay or bisexual Shakespeare is beginning to become generally acceptable, at least in part of the Western world, the deconstruction of the figures of the Fair Friend and the Dark Lady gives translators, adaptors and others who lend meaning to cultural products like the sonnets, an opportunity to disregard their transgressive potential, and to adapt the sonnets to their own individual needs, or whims, also where gender is concerned. It is perhaps a measure of the loss of grand narratives in the postmodern world that the myth of the sonnets has been fragmented, so that several variants, each tailor-made for its own niche in the market of culture consumers, are now available side by side.

Gender is, in fact, just one possible axis along which the cultural impact of the sonnets can be measured. As I have argued elsewhere, another dimension that could be taken into account is that of race: increasingly frequently, the Dark Lady is figured as racially other, usually black. In his novel *Black Swan*, British author Farrukh Dhondy plays a variation on anti-Stratfordian conspiracy theories, with surprising implications for the sonnets where gender, sexual preference and race are concerned. The novel's premise is that Shakespeare's works are a co-production between Christopher Marlowe and a freed black slave from the Caribbean variously known as Lazarus or WH. The latter is also Marlowe's lover, and as such the addressee of the sonnets usually associated with the Dark Lady, which are Marlowe's work.<sup>49</sup> Even an identification of the speaker of the sonnets as black, which seems to fly in the face of historical plausibility, is no longer unthinkable. In his *My Rose: A Shakespeare Oratorio*, composer Steve Dobrogosz included a setting of sonnet 57, beginning 'Being your slave . . .', for a bass that sounds very black and bluesy, in the tradition of, say, Gershwin.<sup>50</sup> It is clear that for this composer born and raised in the American South, at least, the image of slavery cannot be disentangled from the African American experience of slavery, and from the Jazz music that goes with it. In the process, Dobrogosz's 2009 *Oratorio* seems to meet Richard Burt's demand, in an article of the same year, for a response to the trope of slavery in Shakespeare's sonnets 57 and 58, in view of the traumatic Afro-American experience, which, he argues, is as yet absent.<sup>51</sup> Dobrogosz is clearly less interested in Shakespeare's supposed intentions than in responding to the text of the sonnets in light of his own cultural context.

For William Wordsworth, the sonnets were the key with which Shakespeare 'unlocked his heart'.<sup>52</sup> For us, who realize that we shall never know the real story behind the sonnets, they are useful keys to unlocking the secrets of the Shakespeare myth as it develops over time, showing what meanings we wish to invest in him.<sup>53</sup> In line with the plays, which in Terence Hawkes's memorable phrase, are inevitably appropriated to 'mean by Shakespeare', the myth of the sonnets, too, has been used in various ways over the centuries to express changing ideas about gender, sexual preference, and even racial identity.

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## Notes

1. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, *Oxford Shakespeare Topics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), 31.
2. Dennis Kennedy, *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004); Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998); Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova, *Painting Shakespeare Red: An East-European Appropriation* (London, Associated University Presses, 2001).
3. Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London, Routledge, 1992).
4. In addition to the books mentioned in note 2 above, there are dozens of articles on these and related issues in volumes such as A. Luis Pujante and Ton Hoenselaars (eds), *Four Hundred Years of Shakespeare in Europe* (Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2003); and Dirk Delabastita, Jozef de Vos and Paul Franssen (eds), *Shakespeare and European Politics* (Cranbury, Associated University Presses, 2008).
5. Manfred Pfister, 'Route 66: The Political Performance of Shakespeare's Sonnet 66 in Germany and Elsewhere', in Pujante and Hoenselaars (eds), *Four Hundred Years* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 70–88.
6. Manfred Pfister and Jürgen Gutsch (eds), *William Shakespeare's Sonnets for the First Time Globally Reprinted: A Quatercentenary Anthology* (Dozwil, Edition SIGNATHUR, 2009).
7. Stephen Booth (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977), says: 'Since most people guess the 1609 Quarto to be unauthorized, we have no strong reason to assume the 1609 order to be either the order of their writing or the order in which Shakespeare would have wanted them read had he published them himself' (545). By contrast, Katherine Duncan-Jones dismisses the accusations against Thorpe as a product of homophobia. In her view, critics reacted to the trial of Oscar Wilde for sodomy by suggesting that Thorpe was responsible for confusing the order of the sonnets, thus hoping to cast doubt on Shakespeare's involvement in a homosexual affair (which to Duncan-Jones is a given). See her edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, *The Arden Shakespeare* (NP, Thomas Nelson, 1997), 32 ff. for her view on the accusations against Thorpe, and 50–2, 77–81 for Shakespeare's homosexuality. Colin Burrow takes a middle position between Booth and Duncan-Jones in his edition of *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, *The Oxford Shakespeare* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), 94ff.
8. Andrew Gurr, 'Shakespeare's First Poem: Sonnet 145', *Essays in Criticism*, 21 (1971), 221–6. Text quoted from Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets . . .*, 407; she mentions Gurr's theory on 28. Stephen Booth discusses this possible pun in *Shakespeare's Sonnets . . .*, 501.
9. Edmondson and Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets . . .*, 23.

10. Stanley Wells (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985, rpt. 2003), 187. Wells believes that this and similar Ms versions may 'represent the poems in genuinely Shakespearian versions' (185). Duncan-Jones argues that the Ms variant, which she dates at approximately 1630, was based on Thorpe's edition (*Shakespeare's Sonnets* . . . , 457).
11. Francis Meres, *Paladis Tamia* (1598), as quoted by Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* . . . , 1.
12. Markus Marti (tr.), *William Shakespeare, Sonette*, available at: <https://shine.unibas.ch/Sonete2.htm> (accessed 8 January 2016).
13. Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* . . . , 42–3, and Burrow, *Complete Sonnets* . . . , 93–4. Margreta de Grazia defends Benson in 'The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets', in Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (eds.), *Shakespeare and Sexuality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 146–67.
14. See for instance Joseph Pequigney, *Such is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 30; Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* . . . , 75ff; and De Grazia, 'Scandal' . . . , *passim*.
15. A. S. Kok, 'Lets Over Shakesperes Sonnetten', *De Gids*, 23:1 (1859), 252–68.
16. Kok, 'lets over' . . . , 255; my translation.
17. 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' (1889), in Ian Small (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: Complete Short Fiction* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1994), 49–79. For a fuller account, see Paul Franssen, *Shakespeare's Literary Lives: The Author as Character in Fiction and Film* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016), 112–16.
18. Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988), 435, 422.
19. Frank Harris, *The Man Shakespeare and his Tragic Life Story* (1909; Teddington, Middlesex, The Echo Library, 2006); and Frank Harris, *Shakespeare and his Love* (London, Palmer, 1910). See also my *Shakespeare's Literary Lives* . . . , 119–22.
20. Derek Jarman (dir.), *The Angelic Conversation* (1985; DVD, Berlin, Edition Salzgeber, 2006).
21. Richard Burt, too, argues that Jarman's film constitutes a gay reading of the sonnets. "'Being your slave" – Not Citing Sonnets 57 and 58 and the "TraUmisSion" of Race in the United States', in Pfister and Gutsch, *William Shakespeare's Sonnets* . . . , 181–92, 181.
22. For a full account, see Paul Franssen, 'The Martial Arts of Shakespeare's Sonnets: Review of *L.O.V.E.*, by Volcano Theatre Company', *Folio* 1:2 (1994), 25–9.
23. John McKay (dir.), *A Waste of Shame*, (DVD, Open University Worldwide, 2005).
24. See for instance Booth (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* . . . , 533–4, and Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* . . . , 153 ff.
25. Marc de Koster, 'Verkante keer', website of the Fryske Akademy, 2003. available at: <https://www.fryske-akademy.nl/nl/fryske-akademy/utjeften/trefwoord/jaargang-2003/verkante-keer/> (accessed 8 January 2016).
26. Albert Verwey, *Oorspronkelijk dichtwerk, eerste deel, 1882–1914* (Amsterdam, Querido, 1938), 34–54, contains 44 poems from *Van de liefde die vriendschap heet*; the others are in Albert Verwey, *Dichtspel: oorspronkelijke en vertaalde gedichten*, ed. Mea Nijland-Verwey (Amsterdam, De Arbeiderspers, 1983), 101–15. For Verwey's imitations and translations of Shakespeare's sonnets, see Cees Koster, 'Poëtische rancune: Albert Verwey en de vertaling van Shakespeares sonnetten', *Neerlandica Extra Muros*, 41:2 (May 2003), 16–28; and, in English, Paul Franssen and Cees Koster, 'Shakespeare's Sonnets into Dutch and Flemish', in Pfister and Gutsch, *Shakespeare's Sonnets Global* . . . , 171–80, 172.

27. Coenraad van Emde Boas, *Shakespeare's Sonnetten en hun Verband met de Travesti-double Spelen: Een Medisch-psychologische Studie*, Diss. Amsterdam 1951 (Amsterdam, Wereldbibliotheek, n.d). I am indebted to Cees Koster for calling my attention to this text.
28. Janine Brogt, *Dark Lady: Shakespeare/Rijnders/Tarenskeen*, programme booklet for the Toneelgroep Amsterdam production, 1999, np. My translation.
29. See Paul Franssen, 'Shakespeare: The Lover and the Poet', *Folio*, 6:1 (1999), 35–43.
30. Hans-Jurgen Schoenmakers (tr.), *De liefdesgedichten van William Shakespeare* (Utrecht, Gopher, 2006), 129.
31. The slipperiness of early modern terminology may appear from Brutus publicly calling Caesar his 'best lover', obviously meaning no more than 'best friend' (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.41), or Menenius demanding access to Coriolanus on the grounds that 'Thy general [Coriolanus] is my lover' (*Coriolanus* 5.2.16).
32. Edmondson and Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets . . .*, 123.
33. Text quoted from Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets . . .*, 243.
34. Wolf Biermann, *Das ist die feinste Liebeskunst: 40 Shakespeare-Sonette* (Cologne, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2004), 45.
35. I am indebted to Sabine Schülting for sharing her native speaker's intuitions about this issue with me.
36. Biermann, *Das ist die feinste Liebeskunst . . .*, 92.
37. Biermann, *Das ist die feinste Liebeskunst . . .*, 101. My translation.
38. Biermann, *Das ist die feinste Liebeskunst . . .*, 97.
39. Biermann, *Das ist die feinste Liebeskunst . . .*, 152 ff.
40. I am indebted to Cees Koster for this suggestion. See also Pfister, 'Route 66 . . .', particularly 81–2.
41. Hugo Claus, *Sonnetten* (Amsterdam, De Bezige Bij, 1987). For a useful list of the Shakespearean equivalents, see Frank Lekens' website dedicated to Dutch translations of the Sonnets, available at: <http://www.xs4all.nl/~fmlekens/Q1609/index.htm> (accessed 8 January 2016).
42. Guido de Bruyn (tr.), *William Shakespeare: Sonnetten* (Leuven, Uitgeverij P., 2006), 19. My back-translation.
43. 'Shakespeare Sonnets at the Berlin Ensemble (Robert Wilson, Rufus Wainwright)', YouTube, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRglpIWwZ2Q> (accessed 8 January 2016).
44. For a review, see Irene Bazinger, 'Sie sind ermüdet von Amerika', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 April 2009, available at: [www.faz.net](http://www.faz.net) (accessed 8 January 2016).
45. 'Shakespeare Sonnet 29', posted by Lyra000, 2007, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6FFtq5CEoM> (accessed 8 January 2016). I am indebted to my student Nienke Fokkema for calling my attention to this example, in her unpublished BA-thesis entitled 'Shakespeare and YouTube', May 2008.
46. Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, *Shakespeare in Love* (London, Faber and Faber, 1999), 58, 61; John Madden (dir.), *Shakespeare in Love*, DVD, Miramax 1998, scene 12, 36.23–33; 38. 45–50.
47. Norman and Stoppard, *Shakespeare in Love*, 67; Madden, *Shakespeare in Love*, scene 13, 43. 32–47. Cf. Courtney Lehmann, 'Shakespeare in Love: Romancing the Author, Mastering the Body', in Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks (eds), *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema* (Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 125–45.
48. Fiona Brideoake, 'From "Nobody" to "The Author": Shakespeare in Love and the Rewriting of History', in Krystyna Kujawinska-Courtney and R. S. White (eds), *Shakespeare's Local Habitations* (Lodz, Lodz University Press, 2007), 229–41, 233; and my *Shakespeare's Literary Lives . . .*, 119.

49. Farrukh Dhondy, *Black Swan* (London, Gollancz, 1992), particularly 113, 183. For a full account, see my *Shakespeare's Literary Lives . . .*, 124–6.
50. Steve Dobrogosz, *My Rose: A Shakespeare Oratorio*, recorded at Heerenveen, the Netherlands, February 2009, by Koorproject Opus, 2 CDs, Aliud, 2009, disc 1, track 7. The singer on the CD, Martijn Sanders, is not in fact black, but his voice is.
51. Richard Burt, “‘*Being your slave*’ . . .”, 181–92.
52. ‘Scorn not the Sonnet’, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 2nd ed., 5 vols, vol. 3 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954), 20–1.
53. Booth famously states that ‘William Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter’ (*Shakespeare's Sonnets . . .*, 548).

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