

The Games Poets Play – Subverting the Conventions of English Love Poetry

Judy Simons explores the paradoxes in love poetry – the tensions between the personal and the public, the formal and the uncontrolled, the ways in which it operates within conventional constraints and tears up the rule book. She takes her examples from the AQA A Literature pre-nineteenth century anthology.

Love poetry is rooted in paradox. It is both intensely personal and unashamedly public. It deals with emotion too powerful to be uttered and then proceeds to express it in highly eloquent terms. It conveys an experience that is unique to each individual yet at the same time is universal. By its very nature, romantic passion is wild and uncontrolled, while the poetics of love contains and formalises feeling. It is these contradictions that make love poetry so intriguing a subject for study.

Thomas Hardy described poetry as

emotion put into measure. The emotion must come by nature but the measure must be acquired by art.

This article considers how love poetry embodies this tension between content and form, between sincerity and artifice, and how poets also question the literary inheritance on which they draw. Indeed, it is part of the paradox that they challenge the legitimacy of poetic conventions at the exact moment they exploit them. Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 116' is a particularly dazzling example of this, a poem which brilliantly manipulates a standard paradigm to expose the incongruities at its heart.

'Whoso list to Hunt' and 'Sonnet 116'

The fourteen-line sonnet, thought to originate in thirteenth-century Sicily, was a staple of Renaissance verse, and it is ironic that its strict rhyming and metrical schema, built around the iambic pentameter line, became a vehicle for conveying emotional excess. These imposed limits made the sonnet less a medium for an outpouring of passion and more of an intellectual exercise, and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, poets took pride in presenting highly-wrought verse to a privileged group of readers as a puzzle to be decoded. Its contrived imagery, tight logical structure and witty finale were transformed into tools for the display of authorial virtuosity.

Not only is the structure of the sonnet predetermined but its subject obeys the conventions of courtly love literature in which a young man adores from afar an aristocratic lady who is forever out of reach, usually because she belongs to another. Thomas Wyatt's 'Whoso list to hunt' plays on this trope

trying to escape capture. Both the lady's purity and her elusiveness were central tenets of the sonnet tradition, as is the case in this poem, supposedly written about Anne Boleyn, her collar 'graven with diamonds' and already promised to King Henry VIII. To a modern reader this phrase takes on a particular poignancy, 'graven', carrying not just its meanings of 'engraved' and 'weighty' but also a tragic foreshadowing of the grave to which the fatal royal union would lead her.

'Sonnet 116' challenges many of the assumptions that underlie Wyatt's work. It is often read at weddings as a tribute to the bridal pair, and the terms 'marriage' and 'impediment' consciously recall the phraseology of the Christian wedding service. Yet the opening also casts doubts on the authenticity of the romantic archetype by incorporating the dual idea of a perfect union and its converse. Is 'the marriage of true minds' really a condition we can or indeed wish to aspire to? If so, then why is the poem so littered with negatives? Note how many times 'not', 'no', 'nor' and 'never' are used in this short text, words which cumulatively undermine the platonic ideal. Throughout the poem, the flawless exemplar is contrasted with what happens in reality, when a relationship is inevitably subject to change. Passion does alter with circumstances, whether they be physical distance or the process of ageing or a change in the appearance of a loved one. Rather than a poem of straightforward celebration, it could just as easily be argued that this sonnet is about mutability and the impossibility of sustaining desire over time. This, after all, is what it means to be human.

The sonnet is part of a series by Shakespeare addressed to a young man and circulated privately. Is this why the focus of the opening is on the marriage of two minds, removing love to an asexual plane and contrasting it with the temporality of heterosexual passion? As so often in Shakespeare's work, a profound irony runs through this sophisticated poem, its additional levels of resonance emerging through a heightened awareness of the context in which it was written and in which it was read. Consider the final couplet,

*If this be error and upon me proved
I never writ nor no man ever loved.*

What exactly is Shakespeare telling his reader? Is it that if he is proved wrong, then no man ever understood love? Or is he saying that if his statement is shown to be false, then he has never loved a man? Given the attention he draws to his position as author in 'I never writ', then logically it should be the latter.

Lovelace – A Modern Sensibility?

Richard Lovelace's 'The Scrutiny' shares Shakespeare's scepticism about love's permanence from a very different perspective. At first sight, this can be quite a difficult poem for twenty-first century readers, given the misogynistic posturing of its self-absorbed, macho protagonist, who delights in gendered power play. Written nearly a century after Shakespeare, 'The Scrutiny' emerges from a tradition of witty seduction poetry, of which Donne's 'The Flea', and Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' are marked examples. All three of these dramatic monologues comment on the relationship between love and desire and between the disparate worlds and expectations of men and women. On the other hand, both technically and in arguing a case for sexual equality, they could be considered to reflect a very modern sensibility.

'The Scrutiny' provides a counterpart to courtly love poetry, which invoked a mistress whose appeal

overturned by the style and ethos of 'The Scrutiny'. Lovelace's work takes its inspiration from the classical philosophy of 'carpe diem' (seize the day) to focus on the present moment. It justifies and values the here and now and the pursuit of pleasure, in part for its very evanescence. In mimicking a normal conversational tone, the poem is the antithesis of the intricate, introspective poetry that preceded it. Yet its playfulness conceals a serious message about the temporality of human existence. When seen in the political climate of the time, it forms not just a renunciation of the romantic model but a fundamental challenge to a Puritan ethical code that outlawed extra-marital sex and believed that sexual continence would claim its heavenly reward in the after-life.

The poem is almost certainly written for a private coterie of male readers, and consequently designed, not so much as a genuine picture of a relationship but as technical bravura, where the metrical discipline is used to give the impression of natural speech. Its first lines plunge the reader into the midst of a lovers' tiff as the young man humorously berates his mistress for accusing him of infidelity, when only the previous night he had sworn everlasting love, presumably to get her into bed. The reader is invited both to admire the poet's technical dexterity and to embrace his values.

Radical Moves in 'The Ruined Maid'

Two hundred years later, Thomas Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid' restores a voice to those women who are voiceless in earlier, male-dominated writing. It is a radical move in a poetic tradition that categorised and stereotyped femininity, and its equally radical focus on impoverished, uneducated young women relegates the iconic status of female chastity to a realistic environment. Romance never enters the equation of sexual exchange depicted here. Instead, the poem forms a satiric comment on high-minded, bourgeois Victorian morality in a society where for the female underclass the sex trade was one of the only escape routes from grinding poverty.

Hardy's poem is remarkable for the bitterness that underlies the comic façade and for the way in which it subverts the traditional literary version of pastoral through its vivid recall of physical detail. The tattered clothing and bare feet of the rural poor, their worn flesh and 'hands like paws', and the 'hag-ridden dream' of a home-life stand in stark opposition to the idyllic country cottage of the poetic imagination. Yet neither is the town life of the fallen woman a sustainable alternative. The extravagant dress, a caricature of gentility so admired by the innocent country girl, will be as transient as the prostitute's youth and beauty, and 'ruin', both physical and material, is almost certainly her unavoidable fate. Both women are victims in this supposedly principled but uncaring society.

'The Ruined Maid' perfectly illustrates the 'measure' that Hardy sees as central to poetry, the artistic control that converts raw feeling into art, even if the feelings here are anger and pity rather than love. The rhyming couplets parody the colloquial dialect of the naïve country bumpkin and the refined speech of the urban sophisticate, while the return to 'ruined' at the end of each stanza gathers increasing levels of irony. This skilful handling of a seemingly artless lyric carries a dark message as Hardy's re-evaluation of feminine purity transmutes the love poem into fierce social commentary.

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This article was first published in emagazine 88, April 2020.

