

Ageing, Husbandry and Distillation

—A Reading of Shakespeare's Procreation Sonnets

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ABSTRACT

Time is a tyrant whose crime against the fair youth can be halted only through husbandry and distillation, which, Shakespeare believes, can help produce another self that bear the fair youth's form and memory so that the equilibrium of giving and taking can be maintained to achieve certain sense of immortality. This paper attempts to make a re-assessment of the procreation sonnets to find out how such husbandry and distillation could help Shakespeare conquer his fear of ageing.

Keywords: Ageing, husbandry, distillation, procreation sonnets

1. AGEING AND DEATH

An ideology of ageism or gerontophobia, i.e., "the fear of ageing, death, and ugliness through the dismal treatment of the elderly," is prevalent during the period of Renaissance.[1] Though the longevity of Elizabeth I, who died at the age of 70 while the average life expectancy at the time was about 35, as noted by Tim Lambert, provided a long period of stability that helped forge a strong sense of nationalism for England, her prolonged rule, especially at a later stage, led nevertheless to a wide-spread resentment both among the public, because of the burden of taxes and the difficulties of economy after the defeat of Armada, and most prominently among the nobles eager to set an heir to the queen, whose irresponsibility and dotage, however, caused great domestic disquietude and even some cases of insurgence.[2]

The caprice of senility and senescence is most disastrously acted out by Shakespeare's dramatic character King Lear, whose irresponsibility brings about not only the collapse of a nation but also the downfall of several royal or noble households, setting children against their fathers and fathers against their children, condemning the loyal while praising the devilish, and throwing his country into wars with another country. Therefore, "age is unnecessary [the elderly have no worth]," [3] and "to grow old...is both to suffer and ultimately to become one of the 'wastes of time'." [4]

However, the fear of the elderly and death during the Renaissance, according to Shakiva Snipes, was "not because of physical or mental strength but because of the English fear of death." [5] This sounds quite reasonable at first thought, but such an explanation can't bring any fruitful resolution to the problems related either to the fear of the elderly or the fear of death during the period of Renaissance, especially considering the fact that Elizabeth I was heirless as a virgin and unable to reach an agreement with the parliament about the nomination of an heir before her death. What worried the Elizabethans most was not death itself but rather a channel to connect the living with the dead, with which it is likely to reconcile the young with old age. Though the "sleep of death" might help "end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks/That flesh is heir to", as Hamlet realizes,

"the dread of something after death,

The undiscovered country, from whose bourn

No traveller returns, puzzles the will." [6]

With no one to tell him what death or the afterworld would be like, Hamlet prefers repeated delays in carrying out his plan to take revenge on his uncle to immediate death through suicide. If Elizabeth I had nominated an heir long before her death, the Elizabethans might not have harboured a hatred towards the queen. Nor might there have been any generational conflicts between the ageing Elizabeth I and the potential young successor(s)

to her throne. Therefore, according to Rosemary Sgroi, finding an heir for the childless queen had been a major political factor during much of Elizabeth I's reign.[7] Excited by the "political concerns surrounding England's ageing Queen Elizabeth," the most creative literary talents, among others, William Shakespeare, were prompted to rethink the ways "that we individuals experience and regard our own aging bodies." [8] Given this political and artistic predilection, it would be just much easier to understand why William Shakespeare is trying hard to persuade the fair youth in his procreation sonnets to create an heir. Maurice Charney has been most pertinent to note that "It seems to me now that "Shakespeare was preoccupied with issues of aging that must have had an acute relation to his own sense of growing old." [9] After all, as Shakespeare has realized, beauty preserved through the line of succession can make "thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold." [10]

2. PROCREATION AND SELF SUBSTANTIAL FUEL

Shakespeare's procreation sonnets prescribe two types of ageing. An individual of the first type tends to burn himself out without leaving any trace of his existence through succession while an individual of the second type produces a "tender heir [that] might bear his memory." [11] These two types fit in well with the models of ageing delineated by Herbert S. Donow in his studies of the ageing characters in Shakespeare's plays and they belong to the two categories distinguished by gerontologists, namely the normal or successful ageing and anomalous ageing, with the first category of agers conforming to expectations and fitting preconceptions while the second deviating from socially determined norms. As has been pointed out by Donow, King Lear, showing "no signs of feebleness, thundering against those who oppose him", enjoying hunting and killing Cordelia's hangman at the play's end, is an example of anomalous aging, and Adam in *As You Like It* and Gonzalo in *The Tempest*, on the other hand, are characters of positive ageing who, like Gloucester and Kent in *King Lear*, are "distinguished for their penchant for self-sacrifice and loyalty, embracing old-fashioned values and serving as the standard by which others are measured." [12]

In his procreation sonnets, Shakespeare is strongly opposed to the anomalous model of ageing practiced by the fair youth who is addicted to "making a famine where abundance lies" because such a youth is:

"contracted to thine own bright eyes

Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel."

[13]

Rather than showing a "penchant for self-sacrifice", the fair youth, should he refuse to increase and follow

the normal process of ageing where "the riper should by time decrease", will only "eat the world's due, by the grave and thee," which, as a result, would "pity the world." [13] An individual following such a way of life can't survive the passage of time because his youth, which "art now the world's fresh ornament," is "only herald to the gaudy spring." [13] Like Narcissus in the Greek mythology who drowns himself while observing his own image for so long a time, the fair youth, if "within thine own bud buriest thy content," will soon consume his life and be forgotten by people. In order that "beauty's rose might never die," Shakespeare demands that we should "from fairest creatures we desire increase" because procreation, rather than combustion based on "self-substantial fuel," is the only effective means to halt the process of ageing. [13]

The positive model of ageing envisioned by Shakespeare is one of active engagement in the nurturance of a child. Though old age will be like "a tattered weed of small worth", which may express very well people's fear of the elderly, it is not to be regretted because:

"this fair child of mine

Shall sum my count and make my old excuse

Proving his beauty by succession of thine!" [10]

It is true time "shall besiege thy brow/And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field," such signs of ageing deserve "more praise" because "beauty by succession" preserved can not only "sum my count and make my old excuse," but also "see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold." [10] By keeping the blood line through succession and constituting a storyline about the family history of the "beauty's field", procreation is then quite successful to cancel out the effects of death upon life and the effects of ageing upon human bodies. At the same time, by making the "fair child of mine" summing up the (ac)count of my life, Shakespeare seems to suggest that storytelling is also capable of defeating the ravage of time. The emphasis laid upon the function of storytelling foreshadows the transition later in Shakespeare's sonnets from the argument of procreation to the promotion of poetic beauty, which, like procreation, can endower "beauty's rose" with a touch of immortality. As argued in Sonnet 16, Shakespeare's rhyme, which is but "time's pencil, or my pupil pen", can "make you live yourself in eyes of men" either in "inward worth" or in "outward fair" because it can repair "the lines of life", if left out of care, would be destroyed by "this bloody tyrant, Time." [14]

3. HUSBANDRY AND DISTILLATION

Procreation and poetry can "fortify yourself in your decay" while narcissistic self-substantial fuel "not made

for store” should “barrenly perish,” therefore, the best strategy to stop the “cold decay” is that “Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die” because nature:

“whom she best endowed she gave the more

Which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish.”[15]

Clearly, Shakespeare’s model of positive ageing also expresses the eco-awareness to protect the equilibrium of giving and taking. Nature gives the faire youth “bounteous gift” for the purpose that the youth should “in bounty cherish” and increase. The procedure of increase for Shakespeare is like husbandry where “men as plants increase” when “vaunt in their youthful sap.” [16] Life is a process of giving and taking, the equilibrium of which, once broken, would lead to the barrenness of those youth who refuse to cherish the bounteous gifts given to them by nature. Mother nature will only protect and prosper “those are free” to share “the bounteous largess given to thee to give.” If the fair youth only “having traffic with thyself alone/Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive,” then “thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee” when nature “calls thee to be gone.” Sweet self not preserved and shared with posterity will lead to total destruction where no “acceptable audit” can be left behind. [17]

Understood in this manner, Shakespeare’s sense of procreation is a process of sharing with posterity the gifts given by nature. If the fair youth can give out the beauteous form lent to him by the kind nature to a child bearing his form and memory, he can then survive the process of ageing and pass onto eternity. If the fair youth is but too selfish, he will not only deceive himself of the “sweet self” but also

“beguile the world, unblesse some mother

For where is she so fair whose unneared womb

Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?” [18]

The idea of preserving “sweet self” by impregnating the womb of some fair mother through “the tillage of thy husbandry” bespeaks the very idea of eugenics practiced by farmers who desire increase “from fairest creatures.” [11] To breed domestic animals that promise bounteous abundance, farmers always select the “fairest creatures” carrying the best bloodline as the donators or receivers of the “beauty’s rose”, to be exact, the seeds of life. In the human husbandry, Shakespeare believes, the same practice should be adopted. The process of human evolution through the fair youth should be carried out through the process of “distillation” as we understand in the wine industry where, after the removal of “unfair” of dregs, “liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass.” [19] In the preservation of fair youth, “beauty’s effect with beauty were bereft/Nor it, nor no remembrance what it was”, Shakespeare maintains, “were not summer’s distillation left” because “flowers distilled, though they with winter

meet/Lose but their show; their substance still live sweet.” (Shakespeare “Sonnet 5” line 9-14) The show of beauty may be quite important to human husbandry, but the preservation of “substance [that] still live sweet” accounts more for the increase of human species because it is only this sweet substance that can

“against Time’s scythe make defence

Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.”

[20]

Shakespeare believes that posterity bearing the substance of the fair youth is the strongest to challenge the tyrant of Time and, therefore, is able to save the human breed, as is always the case in husbandry.

4. CONCLUSION

Ageing is inevitable but human beings can join the eternal race with time by enforcing the equilibrium of giving and taking started by nature through procreation. Images of nature and environment, as noted by Animesh Roy, figure importantly in Shakespeare’s normal model of ageing proposed in his procreation sonnets in which human bodies are shepherded into husbandry and distillation. [21] Symptoms of decrepitude may appear repulsive, but life spent on the nurturance of responsible posterity should never be regretted and grieved because such “husbandry in honour might uphold/Against the stormy gusts of winter’s day/And barren rage of death’s eternal cold.” [22]

It is true that Shakespeare may have harboured some fear towards the elderly, his attitude towards ageing is distinct from ageism noticed by Gullette in *King Lear*. [23] What he argues against is simply the irresponsible type of anomalous ageing endorsed by King Lear, who, though having three daughters, because of his wish to enjoy his old life in retirement while dividing his kingdom regardless of the unity and happiness of his nation, is deceived into words of false love professed by his two elder daughters in his dotage. Through the publication of the procreation sonnets, Shakespeare hopes to promote a positive type of ageing that lays tremendous importance on the balance of giving and taking, rather than the tipped scale of giving and taking in the case of King Lear, by drawing inspirations and images from nature and farming industry.

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

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