

Anthologizing a Chameleon Poet: An Answer to Roland Weidle

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This response is a contribution to the debate on “Anthologizing Shakespeare’s Sonnets”

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Abstract

Answering to Roland Weidle’s response to my article on the presence of Shakespeare’s sonnets in anthologies, this contribution suggests that, while Jakobson’s model of communication cannot fully account for the complexities of the communicative situations recorded in the sonnets, it makes certain particularities visible, such as the high rate of “I-and-thou” sonnets in which the conative and emotive mode of communication intertwine. It also contends that Weidle’s approach corresponds to mine since we both argue that sonnets were chosen for thematic reasons and not because they are typical or representative. Moreover, I concur with Weidle in stating that Shakespeare’s sonnets deal with a wide variety of topics and emotional states. My point is that anthologies usually do not do justice to this “chameleon”-like character of Shakespeare the poet and do not show an awareness of the sonnets’ function as both mirrors and instruments of courtly interaction.

I thank Roland Weidle for his thoughtful and meticulous critical reading of my article on “Anthologizing Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” and I am particularly pleased about the fact that Weidle, while objecting to some of my theses, does not altogether reject the statistical approach chosen

but rather makes use of it to arrive at a more sophisticated theory on the reasons why certain sonnets have been chosen by anthologists more often than others.

In my article I tried to classify the 154 sonnets with the help of Roman Jakobson's communicative model of language, e.g. identifying sonnets where the emotive, conative, or referential function predominates. My approach was that emotive and referential sonnets have been chosen by anthologists more often than conative ones. Weidle questions both the validity of my statistical evidence and the applicability of Jakobson's model, arguing that the statistical evidence is not substantial enough (Weidle, "For a more comprehensive approach" 293) and that I identify groups of sonnets not covered by Jakobson's model (293-94).

In my answer I should like to begin with two clarifications: first, I do not claim that the communicative functions predominating in the sonnets constitute the only reason why sonnets have been selected to be reprinted in an anthology. As Weidle notices, I also advance other reasons why certain sonnets, like sonnets 20, 73, 116 and 129, are particularly popular with anthologists. Second, I did not choose Jakobson's model because I believed it could tell me the truth about the sonnets, but because it lent itself to my initial observation and hypothesis: that anthologists prefer sonnets which contain the speaker's expressions of self-pity (like sonnets 29 and 30) or convey abstract statements over those in which he addresses his friend (like sonnets 2 and 61). In analysing the sonnets as to their predominant linguistic functions, I attempted to collect some hard evidence to corroborate an intuitive impression. This examination did indeed yield some hard data which I thought confirmed my hypothesis: while only 26 of 154 sonnets focus on the speaker and can thus be classified as predominantly "emotive," and ten are examples of non-personal reasoning and can, according to Jakobson's terminology, be classified as referential, 14 out of 27 sonnets anthologized frequently (ten times or more) are taken from this corpus of 36 (out of 154) sonnets. 51.9% of the sonnets anthologized represent 23.4% of the entire corpus. Weidle's suggestion to look at the 19 sonnets

anthologized not ten but 15 times, only seems to corroborate my statistical data: 11 out of 19 sonnets are predominantly emotive or referential (57.9%). If we add the “metalingual” or self-referential sonnets (sonnets which comment on the writing of sonnets),¹ the imbalance is even more pronounced: I counted 14 metalingual sonnets, four of which are part of Weidle’s list of 19 sonnets anthologized most often. This means that 78.9% of the sonnets anthologized represent 32.5% of the corpus.

I agree that the interpretation of statistical data is tricky, and that there may be other reasons which could account for the statistical imbalances noted. Weidle is certainly right in stating that “[...] most of these 19 sonnets that have appeared most frequently in anthologies [...] are on abstract concepts, poetry, and/or relatable states and experiences, and/or they are characterized by a high degree of formal and stylistic sophistication” (“For a more comprehensive approach” 295). I also agree that “stand alone sonnets” may have been preferred over those which “need the context of neighbouring poems or additional context for readers to fully understand them” (296). I should like to point out, though, that the all-time favourite and “one of the most accomplished sonnets of the sequence” (295, following Paterson 210), sonnet 73, is *not* a stand-alone sonnet: It is part of a diptych and should be read in conjunction with sonnet 74 (like sonnets 5/6, 15/16, 44/45, 46/47, 50/51, 71/72 etc.).² As in other diptychs, the second sonnet offers a way out of the impasse described in the first one. While the speaker of sonnet 73 pities the addressee for soon being obliged to leave the speaker, he tells his friend in sonnet 74 that when he (the speaker) dies, his spirit (“the better part” of him, line 8) will stay with his friend in the shape of his sonnets.³ Those millions of readers who read sonnet 73 without sonnet 74 in an anthology and thus (mis-)interpret it as a stand-alone poem, got/get a truncated message.

I also agree with Roland Weidle’s remarks on the limitations of Jakobson’s model as an analytical tool. In fact, I noticed of these limitations myself when I tried to classify those sonnets in which the conative and emotive modes are intricately mixed, as in sonnet 61. Without my attempt to apply Jakobson’s model, however, I would not have become

aware of the huge group of “I-and-thou sonnets” which constitute the bulk of the Shakespearean corpus (50 sonnets, by my count) and which are obviously unparalleled in the work of other sonneteers of the Renaissance, even though they are largely avoided by anthologists. Jakobson’s model thus served as a stepping-stone to the discovery of a specific feature of Shakespeare’s poetical art which, as far as I know, has not often been commented on by readers.

There is another aspect of Weidle’s theory with regard to the popularity of certain sonnets with anthologists, which, I think, requires further discussion. As Weidle states, it is certain topics which warranted the inclusion of sonnets in anthologies, such as “abstract concepts, poetry, and/or relatable states and experiences” (295). There may also be rhetorical characteristics: “a high degree of formal and stylistic sophistication” (295). Many sonnets were obviously rejected because they are part of a diptych or require an awareness of a certain context to be understood. Sonnets were not chosen because they were typical or “excellent” (whatever this means), but because they for various reasons lend themselves to anthologizing.

In this respect, I find myself in perfect agreement with Roland Weidle’s findings (although we may differ about specifics). Tasked with finding “textual reasons for canonicity” by the organizers of the 2023 *Connotations* Symposium at Ellwangen, I approached my subject with two hypotheses in mind which I consider the outcome of my experiences as a scholar and university teacher:

- first: Literary texts which have been canonized are not necessarily the best or most typical of their author or age; and
- second: Literary works have often been canonized because they corresponded to the expectations and preferences of a later age. They give us what we want to read. This implies that non-canonized works may be more representative of their respective authors and ages and give us a better insight into the specificities and peculiarities of an author’s and/or age’s concerns and world views than canonized ones.

These hypotheses I find amply confirmed by my investigation—and also by Roland Weidle's. While our choices as to which kind of sonnet is "best" may be subjective, both Weidle and myself contend that anthologists prefer sonnets of certain kinds. According to Weidle, sonnets were chosen that display a particularly high degree of "passionate rationality" (296-97). This quality, Weidle finds, is most clearly visible in sonnets which discuss abstract topics, which are self-reflexive or which are relatable. Obviously, the bulk of the 154 sonnets do not belong to these groups and thus display a lower degree of "passionate rationality." We may ask, therefore, if this concept really applies to the sequence as a whole. Do we, perhaps, make anthologizing choices because poems which combine reason and passion constitute what we want to read? May this preference, perhaps, be characteristic of an age which has gone through, and internalized, the tenets and values of both enlightenment and romanticism?

Some of the arguments and images used in non-canonized sonnets may indeed strike contemporary readers as irrational. Many readers will not be able to sympathize with the idea that we cannot leave off thinking of an absent lover because this lover is sending his spirit to us (as in sonnet 61, line 5), that we imagine our "flesh" getting rid of the heavy elements of earth and water (sonnet 44), or that we make use of the two other elements as messengers between us and the beloved person (sonnet 45). To grasp the connotations of these stories and images we need to do some mental work, and perhaps look for background information, but once we have completed this task, we will be enriched by the consciousness of new ways of conceptualizing feelings which by themselves may be quite familiar to us.

I am also worried by the quality of "relatability." If certain sonnets have been preferred by anthologists because they are more relatable than others, this means that sonnets were chosen because they reflect the experiences, interests and attitudes of present-day readers more than other sonnets. This also implies that the sonnets chosen are by no means the most typical or representative ones and perhaps not even "the best." Sonnet 116 is a case in point. According to Stephen Booth (as

quoted by Weidle 296), the particular appeal of this sonnet derives from the fact that the poem confirms what readers already believe: as the notion that true love is, or should be, eternal is obviously deeply engrained in our cultural consciousness, we take particular pleasure in seeing it confirmed. The question which I should like to ask is as follows: is a poem a better poem if it confirms our beliefs and prejudices or if it presents us with new concepts of making sense of the world and the human condition, if it triggers new ideas and widens our horizon? While I will not answer this question, I should like to contend that for scholarly and pedagogical purposes, a text which is strange and disturbing should be preferred over one which confirms what we already know (or think we know, or pretend we know).⁴

The notion that true love is "an ever-fixèd mark / That looks on tempests and is never shaken" (lines 5-6) does not, alas, reflect the real-life experiences of many of us. Apparently, it did not work out for the speaker either. As Weidle notes, the sonnets "deal with a range of intense and contradictory emotions, states, and phenomena, such as love, sex, hate, guilt, blame, jealousy, rivalry, friendship etc." (296). I would like to add changing moods like despair, exultation, anger, hope, resignation, equanimity etc.—both in the speaker and the respective addressees. "Shifting change" is not just "false women's fashion," as the speaker of sonnet 20 exclaims (line 4), but the fashion of the poet himself—and perhaps of lovers generally who find themselves, like the speaker of the sonnets, entangled in asymmetrical relationships. In some of the sonnets the speaker professes that he can understand the addressee's infidelity, or failure to continue to reciprocate his love (sonnets 87, 89, 96). In other sonnets he reproves him for his (sexual?) misconduct (sonnets 54, 69, 95). Sometimes he only indicates suspicions of the young man's infidelity (sonnets 70, 92, 93). Then again he refers to the agonies he undergoes at the prospect of the young man leaving him (or preferring another poet) and his mental strategies of coping with these agonies (sonnets 42, 80, 86, 90). Yet in most cases, it is combinations of these states of mind (sonnets 35, 41, 57, 58 etc.). These shifts may run counter to the concept of passionate rationality, but "what

shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet," as Keats put it (Houghton 134). This chameleon-like quality of Shakespeare's sonnets, however, is regularly glossed over by anthologists.

Weidle contends that "in many sonnets grouped by Kullmann in the emotive or referential group [...] the speaker's struggles in rationalizing his conflicted desires and feelings are more pronounced than in the other sonnets" (296). Yes, indeed. Like St. Augustine, Petrarca, Rousseau, Wordsworth and present-day psychotherapy clients, Shakespeare is perfectly able to eloquently and self-pityingly struggle with, and rationalize, his (or his speaker's) conflicted desires and feelings, as he does in sonnets 29, 30 and 33. What is unique about Shakespeare, though, is that this "emotive" or confessional mode is used rather sparingly. Like (to a certain extent) Sir Philip Sidney, but unlike the other poets and autobiographers mentioned, the speaker of the sonnets is constantly aware that his addressee's desires and feelings matter as much as his own, and that their relationship might concern other persons as well. In most of his sonnets, Shakespeare depicts a love relationship as a continuous give-and-take. The two persons concerned respond to one another's moods and feelings, and their responses are conditioned by the other one's behaviour, by the exchange of signs of love, presumption, hesitancy, and neglect. The sonnets themselves do not just record this exchange; they are part of it, and in the "I-and-thou-"sonnets, neglected by anthologists, this give-and-take is given a particular edge, as in sonnets 45 or 61.

In the context of the sequence as a whole, even sonnet 116 may take on a specific colouring. It appears to belong to a group of late sonnets in which the speaker defends himself against the young man's charge that his (the speaker's) passion has cooled down: sonnets 102, 103, 108-112, 117-120, 122-125.⁵ The speaker himself admits that he has "ranged" (109.5), that he has "gone here and there" (110.1) and tried out other relationships ("worse essays" [110.8], "bitter sauces" [118.6]), that he has indulged in "public manners" (111.4), that he has been with "unknown minds" (117.5) and, most significantly, that he has given away

a precious personal gift presented to him by the young man (122). Sonnet 120 clearly indicates that the tables have turned: the speaker admits that he has trespassed against the young man (line 14) and defends himself by reminding him that he (the young man) had once been “unkind” to the speaker (line 1). The speaker also tries to reassure the young man by invoking the idea of eternal love, as in sonnets 108, 123—and 116. The dialogical quality which informs the “I-and-thou” sonnets obviously also applies to sonnets which we believed to be stand-alone pronouncements.

We should also be aware that the composition and circulation of sonnets was a communal affair. The sonnets were written with a specific circle of recipients in mind and should not be taken as autonomous works of art or the effusions of a solitary poet.⁶ As I argued elsewhere, the community in question was most likely the household of Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke (“Poeticising Emotion” 245-53). The speaker of the sonnets repeatedly refers to this wider circle of friends and relations: Sonnet 3 (line 9) compliments the young man on being his “mother’s glass” (the Countess of Pembroke’s?); he is “beloved of many” (10.3). The speaker is unhappy that he and his friend for some reason cannot “acknowledge” (36.9) one another in public anymore; he accepts that his friend will make others happy (57.12). The young man is “waking,” i.e. taking part in a night-time get-together from which the speaker is excluded (61.13). He warns the young man that “the world’s eye,” while praising his beauty, might take a more critical view of “the beauty of [his] mind” (69.1, 9). The speaker wants (and does not want) “the world” to see the “pleasure” he derives from his relationship with the young man (75.8). He promises not to boast of his “old acquaintance” with him (89.12). Other people make “lascivious comments” on the young man’s “sport” (95.6); the speaker himself is afraid of “vulgar scandal” (112.2) etc.

We see that the sonnets are part and parcel of an ongoing courtly interaction. While it may be difficult for an anthologist to provide this context, we should be aware that prevailing anthologizing practices

convey a biased picture of Shakespeare the poet. As scholars and teachers of English Literature we should take those sonnets under special consideration which have *not* found their way into anthologies—as they are more likely to provide insights into cultural formations than the canonized poems. At the same time, we can state that examining the canonicity of sonnets anthologized has proved a pathway to aspects of Shakespeare's sonneteering practice which have often been overlooked.

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NOTES

¹I differ from Weidle's understanding of what Jakobson means by "poetic" function, and accordingly will not comment on Weidle's distinction between the "metalingual" and "poetic" modes (Weidle, "For a more comprehensive approach" 293). To discuss this issue would require another article.

²Roland Weidle also notices the connection between sonnets 73 and 74, in his *Comprehensive Guide to Shakespeare's Sonnets* (185).

³Helen Vendler draws attention to a pun which connects the two sonnets: "The pun that leads from the wished-for *rest* of 73 to the *fell arrest* of 74 enacts the turn from death resignation to life affirmation" (339).

⁴This does not mean that I do not discuss sonnet 116 with my students. Rather than inviting them to "relate" to this sonnet, however, I try to alert them to the fact that the "truth" it conveys was by no means evident to many of Shakespeare's contemporaries but is obviously indicative of Renaissance humanist discourses on friendship and marriage.

⁵According to Macdonald P. Jackson, statistics of word frequency show that sonnets 104 to 126 were written considerably later than the rest of the sequence (66). See also Weidle, *A Comprehensive Guide* 31 and 43-44.

⁶See Weidle's chapter on "the rival poet and the marketplace," *A Comprehensive Guide* 100-04.

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