

Shakespeare's Poetry in the context of *mimesis* and *imitatio* in Elizabethan Poetics

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ABSTRACT

The study deals with Elizabethan considerations of the classical concept of mimesis, particularly that of Aristotle and Horace. Shakespeare's poetics will be examined on the basis of chosen aspects of his poems including a number of his sonnets, Venus and Adonis, Lucrece and The Phoenix and the Turtle. Other Elizabethan considerations of poetics, especially by Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser will be compared. Unlike Sidney or Spenser, Shakespeare did not compose any theoretic work; nevertheless his poetics can be explored through readings of his poetry. First of all it is obvious that Shakespeare does not surrender to classical aesthetic rules, yet then again Elizabethan poetics in general is not overly rigid and resists "slavish imitatio" of classical examples. In this context we see Shakespeare not as solitary or an anarchist, but as a practical dramatist: an astute observer of the passions and interests of his time working within established rules and themes, yet not endorsing pompous eloquence or quasi-knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare, William; Elizabethan Poetics; *mimesis*; imitation; sonnets; Renaissance; Poetics; Literary Theory; Hermeneutics

I.

And all in war with time for love of you
As he takes from you, I engraft you new.¹

Around the year 1591, William Shakespeare already had a good reputation among theatrical circles in London and his first plays (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Titus Andronicus*) had been staged.² The third earl of Southampton Henry Wriothesley was at that time a wealthy, educated and spoiled young man, albeit, in a difficult family situation at the time. His guardian was Lord Treasurer and Master of the Wards, Lord Burghley, one of the most powerful men at Elizabeth's court and in English politics, one who did not hesitate to use his right to arrange a marriage for his ward.³ These circumstances, as well as Southampton's delight in theatre and poetry (quite common among university students), and the later dedication of *Venus and Adonis* (1592-93) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594-94) to Southampton⁴ allow us to assume a relationship

1 William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 15" in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 1951.

2 For a chronology of the plays see Zdeněk Stříbrný, *Dějiny anglické literatury* [A History of English Literature] (Praha: Academia, 1987), 168 or *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3322-3326.

3 Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 228.

4 *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3322-3326 and William Shakespeare, *Dilo* (Praha: Academia, 2011), 1541, 1559.

between these two men and to identify the handsome youth from Shakespeare's opening sonnets as Southampton. Moreover, some authors surmise that it is possible that Southampton's family, frightened of a potential loss in income, could have hired Shakespeare to inspire Southampton, with poetry's helping hand, to get married.⁵

Issues of poetry and poetics⁶ are fundamental elements of Elizabethan theoretic discourse, particularly in the context of the revision of classical aesthetic standards and concepts, especially the idea of imitation (*mimesis* or the mimetic concept). The history of poetics seems to be a history of apology.⁷ Poetry then is not defended by natural sciences but its purpose and benefits are defined in its exact relations with philosophy and history. Thus, poetry's purpose emerges in the context of "the creation of clear rhetorical images of moral truth";⁸ it can (or rather, should) act as "a force for moral and social good", since its connection with politics admits social responsibilities.⁹ This concept owes itself primarily to the contribution of Philip Sidney, whose poetics will be analysed shortly. According to Nandra Perry, the early modern concept of imitation has its roots in certain epistemological anxieties in the critical discourse of the period. This is related to questions concerning the correct interpretation of texts, regarded as a "devilishly tricky business, contingent upon the always more or less incomplete recovery of a remote context, language, and history."¹⁰ So *imitatio* becomes the very strategy for accommodating time and distance, in their separation from the classical tradition. Thus, according to Perry, the early modern *imitatio* becomes a method for "constructing original, but broadly meaningful, systems of signification from the remnants of an authoritative but irrecoverable past."¹¹

The idea of *mimesis* is defined primarily as a representation or imitation of life, and is expressed in the influence of one author on the other, e.g. in the case of Sidney, he is inspired by Petrarch.¹² However, it is important to point out that the notion of imitation as used today includes several interpretations intertwined in early modern considerations of poetics. Gavin Alexander frames imitation firstly as a representation (*mimesis*), secondly in the context of literary models (*imitatio*) and thirdly around a readerly, behavioural imitation, which he calls *emulation*.¹³ Obviously these concepts are blended into each other and all represent sources ranging from Plato's *second nature* to Aristotle's educative role of art.¹⁴

5 Stephen Greenblatt makes this assumption (*Will in the World*, 229-230), which will be discussed later. Southampton is just one of the possibilities, although the most probable, for the youth depicted in Shakespeare's sonnets (one of the other contenders being the mysterious "Mr. W. H.," William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke).

6 Poetics is conceived here in its broadest sense, as an art of word-creation inspired by classical concepts.

7 Joseph Campana, "On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect 2005," *PMLA* 120.1 (2005): 33, accessed July 8, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486143>, 33.

8 Campana, *On Not Defending Poetry*, 33.

9 Gavin Alexander, Introduction to *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 2004), xvii-lxxxv.

10 Nandra Perry, "Imitatio and Identity: Thomas Rogers, Philip Sidney, and the Protestant Self," *English Literary Renaissance* 35 (2005): 369.

11 Perry, "Imitatio and Identity," 369.

12 Alexander, Introduction to *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, xxx.

13 Alexander, Introduction to *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, xxxiv.

14 Alexander, Introduction to *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, xxxii.

The idea a "second nature"¹⁵ originates more in negative readings of platonic *mimesis* – that is to say, 'art as mimetical' has no direct relation to reality (the world of ideas), i.e. art merely represents ideas,¹⁶ unlike Aristotle's poetics in which the acceptance of art's mimetic role emerges. Poetry, according to Aristotle, arises from natural causes and distinguishes man from other creatures, as man is born with the ability to imitate through melody and rhythm; moreover, mankind possesses the ability to learn and derive pleasure from imitation.¹⁷ In contrast to Plato, Aristotle's *Poetics* is quite rigid in prescribing rules of imitation and defining the distinction between tragedy and comedy.¹⁸

Nonetheless, the English mimetic concept lacks the rigidity and formalism of some of its earlier manifestations. Although the imitation of classical aesthetic models remained the cornerstone of English poetics, in its realization authors were quite moderate as a consequence of their future inspirations, especially in their acceptance of the educative role of *mimesis* (Aristotle), the importance of the spectator and reader success, and the ethical appeal of texts (Horace). Thus, "reasonable" imitation is preferred to "slavish *imitatio*."¹⁹

Gavin Alexander enumerates five fundamental forms of English Renaissance literary criticism and poetics; first, translations of classical works (e.g. Jonson's translation of Horace), second, treatises on the model of classical works (e.g. Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*), third, imitation of classical oration in the form of the praise or defence of literature in general (the famous *Defence of Poesy* by Sidney), fourth, works on a particular issue (e.g. Daniel's *Defence of Rhyme*), and fifth, combinations of all sorts.²⁰ In general, Renaissance poetics focuses on literary theory more than on specific features of works and authors. Classical rhetoric dominates; imitation is appreciated more than originality (as mentioned above), and specific rules and conventions are understood as the fundamental conditions of any writing.²¹

On the other hand, Stephen Greenblatt considers the effort to create a separate identity (which he called *self-fashioning*) as the fundamental aspect of the period culture, evident in the ideas and works of various poets, thinkers and dramatists.²² He compares the two trios of More, Tyndale and Wyatt, and Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare. For the latter, the formation of their own identity via their professional (artistic) identity is

15 Harold Bloom uses the notion of the so-called *third realm* (i.e. the world of free imagination) in the context of Shakespeare's plays. See Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Trade, 1998), 727.

16 Plato, *Ústava* [Republic], trans. František Novotný (Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2003), 305-314.

17 Aristoteles, *Poetika* [Poetics], trans. František Groh (Praha: GRYP, 1993), 9-10.

18 Aristoteles, *Poetika*.

19 Perry, "Imitatio and Identity," 371-2. "Slavish *imitatio*" is criticized, for example, in Sidney's *Defence* (see the next part of the study), most likely as a result of his being inspired by Horace.

20 Alexander, Introduction to *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, xxiii.

21 Alexander, Introduction to *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, xxiv. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that this brief enumeration is a schematic one and that the idea of imitation should not be perceived in too "slavish" a way. Relations between imitation and originality are more complex, as can be seen in poetry itself more than in poetics. Although Shakespeare's works (as will be shown later) are often very original in language, images and themes, they also display their brilliance in imitating earlier examples and demonstrating the poet's superiority over the models he imitates.

22 More in Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

crucial.²³ Thus, imitation is clearly mingled with other aspects which are equally important in approaching a final image and understanding of Elizabethan poetics.

II.

The noble Sidney with this last arose,
That heroë for numbers and for prose,
That throughly paced our language, as to show
The plenteous English hand in hand might go
With Greek and Latin [...].²⁴

As mentioned above, Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* (1580, printed in 1595), written effectively in response to Gosson's *The School of Abuse* (which accused poetry of being immoral), played an important part in constituting English poetics by establishing imaginative writing (i.e. poetry) as a unique form of imitation.²⁵ Hailing from an important aristocratic family in service to the queen, Philip Sidney was the ideal Renaissance aristocrat – poet, courtier, soldier, and envoy. During his life Sidney's works circulated among his friends and admirers in manuscript form and were published after his death by his family and other supporters.²⁶

The Defence of Poesy represents a fundamental step in establishing poetry as the creator of its own world, its so-called *second nature* (inspired by Aristotle's concept of *poiesis*). Here he sees the essential importance of poetry: where other forms of learning rely on *nature*, poetry can surpass it; where philosophy provides propositions and precepts, poetry explains them and, moreover, provides a "lifelike instance of the beautiful and the good."²⁷ Philosophers in Sidney's *Defence* "durst not a long time appear to the world but under the masks of poets" and wrote their works in verse, with even historiographers borrowing from poetry both in form and content.²⁸ Thus Sidney defines poetry as relying on "ideal rather than material or historical models."²⁹ Sidney returns to the platonic concept of *second nature* as well, giving "right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker [i.e. artist, poet], who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of second nature."³⁰ Thus, an imitation plays a sacred role in restoring the relationship between "maker" (man) and "maker of that maker" (God).³¹ The concept of imitation (*mimesis*) is here and in Elizabethan poetics generally inspired not only by Plato and Aristotle, but also by Horace, i.e. a poet's representations should

23 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 169.

24 Michael Drayton, in *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 293-294.

25 Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," in *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 1; Perry, *Imitatio and Identity*, 391.

26 About Sidney's life see Alois Bejblík, "Astrofel a Stella," in *Astrofel a Stella*, by Philip Sidney, trans. Alois Bejblík and Gustav Franc (Praha: Odeon, 1987), 147-163; Stříbrný, *Dějiny anglické literatury*, 134-136; Alexander, Introduction to *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, liii, liv.

27 Alexander, Introduction to *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, lix, lx.

28 Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," in *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 5.

29 Perry, "Imitatio and Identity," 391.

30 Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," 9.

31 Perry, "Imitatio and Identity," 392-393.

be lifelike, deriving from a poet's own recognisable life and world: a poet has to learn from life and imitate it authentically.³²

The poet's imagination in Sidney's concept, as we have seen, must surpass the law of nature.³³ The task of poetry in creating imaginative worlds brings us to Shakespeare, as for example in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where Hippolyta sneers at the excessive imagination of poets, fools and lovers (the company of poets is a characteristic one here); nevertheless, we can read a certain admiration for the imaginative power of poetry in these mocking lines:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.³⁴

Such a statement corresponds with Shakespeare's view of poetry and his own poetic techniques. Shakespeare's plays show both an exclusive insight into the existences and roles of others and the ability to articulate them. Likewise Greenblatt sees Shakespeare's exceptionality in his limitless talent "for entering into the consciousness of another, perceiving its deepest structures as a manipulable fiction, reinscribing it into his own narrative form."³⁵ Such an understanding of Shakespeare's talents is not a new one. Although Dryden mentions the poet's lack of concern for aesthetic rules, he declared Shakespeare to be a man "of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, [with] the largest and most comprehensive soul."³⁶ Regarding the issue of creating imaginative worlds and transcending nature Dryden remarked: "All the images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily; when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too."³⁷

Sidney turns his attention to poetry's ability to create figures and imitate reality, factors which create "clear rhetorical images of moral truth."³⁸ Thus the main value of poetry lies in its "unique ability to redirect the fallen will toward godliness."³⁹ The poetic discourse of Sidney, with its moral, almost sacred appeal, differs from that of other Elizabethans, particularly Spenser, although Sidney was Spenser's patron. In Joseph Campana's opinion, Spenser's contribution consists primarily in the fact that he gives poetry both "its feeling of reality and its capacity to move."⁴⁰ Campana's interpretation of Spenser's poetics through *The Faerie Queene* is based on his preference for Spenser over the more formal and emotionally colder Sidney. According to Campana, Spenser sees the value of poetry in its ability to "convey the vitality of bodies endowed with pain,

32 Horace, *O umění básnickém* [Ars Poetica], trans. Dana Svobodová (Praha: Academia, 2002), 43.

33 Perry, "Imitatio and Identity," 391.

34 William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 886.

35 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 252.

36 John Dryden, "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 1, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 1840-1.

37 John Dryden, "An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," 1840-1.

38 Campana, *On Not Defending Poetry*, 33.

39 Perry, "Imitatio and Identity," 395.

40 Campana, *On Not Defending Poetry*, 34.

affect, a vulnerability to change, and a capacity for motion"⁴¹. Thus Sidney's visuality deriving from the Aristotelian tradition of moral clarity, i.e. *éthos*, is confronted with Spenser's vitality and energy, i.e. *pathos*. A strategy of defence has become a strategy of redefinition.⁴² Nevertheless, Spenser strictly sets the boundaries between the imaginary and the real – in *The Faerie Queene* reality lies safely outside the poem. Apart from some allusions, reality is safeguarded by ideology, a constant authority "outside the bounds of art." According to Greenblatt, this is the crucial difference between Spenser and Shakespeare or Marlowe.⁴³ Spenser was not a revolutionary poet or risk-taker; his personal and poetic identity consisted in his service to an adored authority (royal) and in his binds to God and state.⁴⁴ Thus the loyal court poet Spenser can be contrasted to Marlowe, the latter of which sees the crucial moment in terms of surpassing order, breaking rules and revolting against authority.

Sidney's formality is no more than a shallow misunderstanding in this context. Moreover, Perry points out that Sidney does not rely on a rigorous ("slavish") imitation of nature, instead placing value on "plumbing the depths of his own imagination."⁴⁵ And despite his adherence to classical models in *The Defence of Poesy* and his criticism of tragicomedy (the absurdity of "mingling kings and clowns"⁴⁶), on the contrary Sidney in his own poetic work (e.g. *Astrophel and Stella* or *Arcadia*) criticizes the artificiality and opacity of poetry and favours more authentic emotions:

But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
Invention, nature's child, fled step-dame study's blows;
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.
Thus great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
'Fool,' said my muse to me; 'look in thy heart, and write.'⁴⁷

III.

Sidney's collection of essays *Astrophel and Stella* articulates not only his supreme ability to "plumb the depths of his own imagination," but also his poetic candour deriving from his own life experiences. *Astrophel* represents the poet himself and *Stella* a lady in real life – the famed beauty Penelope Devereux, later Lady Rich, the sister of Lord Essex and subject of a divorce scandal. Spenser is very explicit here, since he refers to "Lady Rich" (with the connotation of wealth as well) in precise terms.⁴⁸

Sidney's and Shakespeare's sonnets have a certain subjectivity and poetic sincerity in common, although Shakespeare's subjectivity assumes different forms - allegorical, disguised, only visible 'behind the curtain' to a select inner circle. Moreover, the effect

41 Campana, *On Not Defending Poetry*, 38.

42 Campana, *On Not Defending Poetry*, 36-38.

43 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 192.

44 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 221.

45 Perry, *Imitatio and Identity*, 396.

46 Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," 46.

47 Philip Sidney, "Astrophil and Stella," in *The Major Works*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 153.

48 Bejblík, "Astrofel a Stella," 153-157.

of an affected revealing of the poet's inner feelings is part of Shakespeare's strategy. The sonnets are unique in their treatment of atypical topics and metaphors, as seen in the appeal to a handsome youth to procreate:

Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
Now is the time that face should form another.⁴⁹

It is typical for Shakespeare's works to go beyond conventional themes and experiment with received poetic and theatrical techniques; however, in the case of his poetry, and the sonnets particularly, the unconventional topic of procreation probably derives from his particular personal situation and life experience. Greenblatt assumes that the family of the young Lord Southampton, unsettled by Southampton's stubborn refusal to the agreed marriage with Burghley's granddaughter (cunningly, he did not refuse the bride but marriage itself) might have employed more persuasive tactics than simply the threat of losing money.⁵⁰ In 1591, John Clapham (one of Burghley's secretaries) dedicated his poem, *Narcissus* (based on the classical myth and warning of the danger of self-love) to Southampton.⁵¹ It is probably no coincidence that Shakespeare uses a similar warning in a poem from 1592, also dedicated to Southampton:

'Is thine own heart to thine own face affected?
Can thy right hand seize love upon thy left?
Then woo thyself, be of thyself rejected;
Steal thine own freedom and complain on theft.
Narcissus so himself forsook,
And died to kiss his shadow in the brook.⁵²

Shakespeare's sonnets – possibly composed according to the Southampton family's requests – adopt a more ingenious strategy than the accusation of excessive self-love.⁵³ On the contrary, Shakespeare claims the youth lacks in self-love because he wants to die without an heir, without a child bearing his father's beauty for following generations:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripener should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory;
[...]Pity the world, or else this glutton be:
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.⁵⁴

As Greenblatt points out, if the choice of female does not matter (the function of woman lying entirely in giving birth to the youth's mirror-child), why not simply accept

49 Shakespeare, Sonnet 3 in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1947.

50 Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 228-229.

51 Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 229.

52 William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 639.

53 Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 230-231.

54 Shakespeare, Sonnet 1 in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1946.

an arranged marriage?⁵⁵ Thus, Shakespeare persuades through clever flattery and by literally enumerating the benefits of having a child:

Ten times thyself were happier than thou art,
If ten of thine ten times refigured thee.
Then what could death do if thou shouldst depart,
Leaving thee living in posterity?⁵⁶

The identity of the young man addressed in Shakespeare's opening sonnets is still not entirely certain; the dedication in his poem *Venus and Adonis*, however, is clear and explicit: "To the Right Honourable Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, and Baron of Titchfield."⁵⁷

The verses of *Venus and Adonis* echo the sonnets' argument in favour of procreation, now figuring Venus' wooing of Adonis, who is indifferent to her beauty and desire:

Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty breedeth beauty:
Thou wast begot; to get it is thy duty.
'Upon the earth's increase why shouldst thou feed
Unless the earth with thy increase be fed?
By law of nature thou art bound to breed,
That thine may live when thou thyself art dead;
And so in spite of death thou dost survive,
In that thy likeness still is left alive.⁵⁸

Whereas the poet in the sonnets is more careful and makes an appeal to the young man's vanity, *Venus and Adonis* postulates that the act of procreation is a duty every man has to perform, nature's law. Adonis' fate warns against emotional coldness and rejecting physical love: he leaves the yearning Venus for the hunt and is consequently killed by a wild boar, leaving Venus to curse love:

Since thou art dead, lo, here I prophesy
Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend.
It shall be waited on with jealousy,
Find sweet beginning, but unsavoury end.⁵⁹

This is typical of Shakespeare's work: he draws on traditional (frequently classical) subjects, but revises them through his actual thoughts; thus he creates a resourceful mixture in which neither the boundaries of public and private nor fictional and real are clearly marked. *Venus and Adonis* represents Shakespeare's initial efforts at engaging his readers and aristocratic patron with a heightened sensitivity and sensuality, intertwining

55 Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 231.

56 Shakespeare, Sonnet 6 in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1948.

57 Shakespeare continues: "Right Honourable, I know not how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolished lines to your lordship, nor how the world censure me for choosing so strong a prop to support so weak a burden." (Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 635.)

58 Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 639.

59 Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 661.

the energy of the natural and human world. Moreover, it is a message to the young aristocrat: Adonis does not refuse marriage but physical love, and this refusal is lethal.

Shortly after the success of Shakespeare's first poem dedicated to Southampton he composed the second, *The Rape of Lucrece*. Written around 1593-1594 (it appears in the quarto edition from 1594),⁶⁰ the dedication reveals Shakespeare's sincere affections for his patron: "The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end. [...] What I have done is yours; what I have to do is yours, being part in all I have."⁶¹

While *Venus and Adonis* depicts the tragic consequences of refusing the law of nature and physical love, *Lucrece* warns against the opposite, succumbing to temptation. Tarquin yields to temptation, but the rape of Lucrece and her consequent suicide results in the fall of Tarquin and the Roman republic. This resemblance between *Lucrece* and the sonnet is clearly not coincidental, but indicates a potential shift in the poet's feelings and in his relationship with Southampton. Shakespeare describes Tarquin's struggle in the face of temptation:

Those that much covet are with gain so fond
That what they have not, that which they possess,
They scatter and unloose it from their bond,
And so by hoping more they have but less,
Or, gaining more, the profit of excess
Is but to surfeit and such griefs sustain,
That they prove bankrupt in this poor-rich gain.⁶²

Sonnet 129 is strikingly analogous:

Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; [...]
Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.⁶³

Temptation of the flesh is no longer a gift of nature and a part of the natural order; it becomes a cruel game, a consequence of the curse of Venus. Both Shakespeare's ardent admiration for youth and his disillusionment with youth's betrayal are apparent. Thus, sonnet 20 depicts an ideal image of "master-mistress," a youth who is as beautiful and gentle as a woman, but without women's obscenity or falseness. He offers the perfect apology for his potentially scandalous feelings towards the man:

A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change as is false women's fashion; [...]
And for a woman wert thou first created,

60 More in Katharine Eisaman Maus, "The Rape of Lucrece," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 663-668.

61 William Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 669.

62 Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 673.

63 Shakespeare, Sonnet 129 in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1990.

Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
 And by addition me of thee defeated
 By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
 But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
 Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the subject of procreation characteristic of the early sonnets was not only an issue regarding the Southampton-Shakespeare relationship. The question of an heir to the throne was crucial in those days concerning the political fate of the state.⁶⁵ The ideal of the virgin queen married only to her country, a construct of Elizabethan counsellors and the Cult of Elizabeth, was similarly maintained and supported by Elizabethan artists and poets – Raleigh allegedly wooed her and she was a model for Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. In *Henry VIII*, Thomas Cranmer proclaims her birth as the beginning of the golden age:

She shall be – [...]
 A pattern to all princes living with her, [...]
 Good grows with her:
 In her days, every man shall eat in safety
 Under his own vine, what he plants; and sing
 The merry songs of peace to all his neighbours:
 God shall be truly known⁶⁶; and those about her
 From her shall read the perfect ways of honour,
 And by those claim their greatness, not by blood.⁶⁷

Cranmer also remarks upon the future virginal status of the queen:

But she must die:
 She must; the saints must have her: yet a virgin,
 A most unspotted lily shall she pass
 To th' ground, and all the world shall mourn her.⁶⁸

It is worth noting *Henry VIII* (or *All Is True*) was written around 1613 during James' reign almost ten years after Elizabeth's death. The play provides a keen example of the influence of the Cult of Elizabeth.

It is possible to find an allusion to the problem of succession in Shakespeare's allegoric poem *The Phoenix and Turtle* from 1601, a text traditionally interpreted as Shakespeare's appeal to Elizabeth for her marry Essex and have a child.⁶⁹ Essex's close relationship to Shakespeare's patron Southampton seemingly supports this assumption; however, this is disproved on two practical counts: Elizabeth's age at that time and the

64 Shakespeare, Sonnet 20 in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1953.

65 Frank Kermode, *The Age of Shakespeare* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 11.

66 Shakespeare cleverly supports the state's religious politics here too.

67 Cranmer also declares the legitimacy of Elizabeth's claim to the throne. *All Is True*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3199-3200.

68 Shakespeare, *All Is True*, in *The Norton Shakespeare* 3200.

69 Martin Hilský, "Fénix a hrdlička," in *Dílo*, by William Shakespeare, 1585.

execution of Essex in 1601.⁷⁰ Thus, the above interpretation seems to be as a result of an interesting and widespread rumour based on the symbolic status of the queen. The motif of 'Elizabeth as phoenix' appears also in *Henry VIII*:

[...] but as when
The bird of wonder dies, the maiden phoenix,
Her ashes new create another heir
As great in admiration as herself;
So shall she leave her bless'dness to one,
When heaven shall call her from this cloud of darkness,
Who from the sacred ashes of her honour
Shall star-like rise, as great in fame as she was,
And so stand fix'd.⁷¹

Nevertheless, at the end of *The Phoenix and Turtle* no mythical creature rises from the ashes; merged into one the souls burn and it is not certain whether something more perfect will emerge. Shakespeare probably wrote this poem at the same time as his later sonnets depicting the betrayal of love, not just a message to the queen, but a record of the disillusionment of love:

True may seem, but cannot be;
Beauty brag, but 'tis not she;
Truth and beauty buried be.
To this urn let those repair
That are either true or fair;
For these dead birds sigh a prayer.⁷²

It is possible to reconstruct a specific story about a poet and an aristocrat from Shakespeare's sonnets and poems. We can only surmise to what extent the story corresponds with real life and the historic situation. It is legitimate to presume Southampton is the real youth from the sonnets; nevertheless, the relationship between him and the poet and the poet's feelings may be a partial fantasy, representation of Shakespeare's inwardness. This account also acts as an enterprising fiction constructed to awaken interest in the spectator. Characteristically for Shakespeare we can find a part of both. Everydayness is a great source for his imagination, representations from which do not distinguish strictly between real representation, fiction, personal thoughts or the feelings of others. Rather it is all part of one huge imagination, brilliantly articulated by a rich repository of words.

Unlike Sidney or Spenser, Shakespeare did not write any theoretic work; nevertheless it is possible to conclude with the help of his poetry. First of all it is obvious he does not surrender to classical aesthetic rules. On the other hand, Elizabethan poetics is not overly rigid and resists slavish imitation of classical examples. In this context we see Shakespeare not as solitary figure or anarchist, but as dramatist, a fine observer of

70 In 1599, as a result of Essex returning to London from his failed Irish expedition without the queen's permission, Elizabeth punished him with house arrest. Essex, offended by falling into disfavour, attempted to stage an armed putsch with the official purpose of "defending his life and saving the queen from her evil counsellors, Cecil and Raleigh." (See Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 308.)

71 Shakespeare, *All Is True*, 3200.

72 William Shakespeare, *The Phoenix and Turtle*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2025-6.

the passions and interests of his time, a poet unafraid to experiment with established rules and subjects. Moreover, his works do not endorse pompous eloquence or quasi-knowledge.

A fitting example of this stance toward pomposity is borne out in the figure of Don Adrian de Armado from Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* (a mocked character intentionally chosen as a Spaniard), who is "besieged with sable-coloured melancholy,"⁷³ the typical demeanour of an Elizabethan intellectual. Some allusions in the play are interpreted as having an association with The School of Night, a cabal centred around Walter Raleigh and Christopher Marlowe. This particular allusion is intended as a universal parody of excessive eloquence. Shakespeare also uses irony to criticize the fashion of poetic eloquence in love and courtship, e.g. via the character of Benedick from *Much Ado About Nothing*:

The god of love
That sits above,
And knows me, and knows me,
How pitiful I deserve, –
I mean in my singing; but in loving, Leander the good swimmer,
Troilus the first employer of panders, and a whole bookful
of these quondam carpet-mongers whose names yet run
smoothly in the even road of a blank verse.⁷⁴

It is typical of Shakespeare to make fun of an imitation of classical models by recycling them ingeniously, and to mock a lover's eloquence by mastering it.

To conclude, Shakespeare differs from his contemporaries, especially in his mastery of so-called "original imitation." What does this seemingly contrasting connection of words mean? Shakespeare does not concern himself with aesthetic rules; instead, he dares to experiment with established practice. On one hand, he draws inspiration from classical examples and contemporary works, as he is all too aware of the audience's desires and his respect for what is in fashion. But in his work he also manifests the ability to be highly original in imitating former, classical motifs; he shows his ability to depict imitated images that exhibit a finer rhetorical and aesthetic effect than that of his predecessors.

Shakespeare does not explicitly mention the concept of *mimesis* in his work; however, he uses it in the sense of imitation as a reference to the classical models and also in imitation of theme and plot. This is probably not a reaction to Elizabethan poetics, but more likely his ability to adroitly recognise what is in fashion. Nonetheless, fashion does not limit his attentions; although he is factually accurate in copying former sources, he transforms them in to different forms. According to Peter Mack, Shakespeare is most emotive in moments where he is independent of his inspirational sources.⁷⁵ I agree, but it is important to remember that Shakespeare created fully original, authentic representations in those moments where he wholly copies a plot from its former source. We have seen how Shakespeare's idea of *mimesis* represents the everyday, the heights

73 William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 782.

74 William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1465.

75 Peter Mack, *Reading and Rhetoric in Montaigne and Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 173.

and depths of the human condition, a canvas on which he paints so effortlessly, shading into each other – like in real life.

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