An Elizabethan Enigma

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The last thing William Shakespeare wants to be is predictable. Roughly halfway through his published collection of one hundred and fifty-four sonnets, he frets that we may find it dull that he “write[s] . . . all one, ever the same,” producing one fourteen-line poem after another (76.5). He has reason to worry: he rarely allows himself to deviate from a strict iambic pentameter, and holds his verse to a rigid rhyme scheme, three ABAB quatrains and an ending couplet. The sonnets adhere to his characteristic style almost exclusively, in part, he divulges, because the use of an unvarying structure lends his poetry a certain recognizability: “[E]very word doth . . . tell my name” (76.7). In defense of his lack of “variation or quick change,” Shakespeare explains that “the sun is daily new and old, / So is my love, still telling what is told,” conjuring the image of a predictable universe, one in which nature and love carefully keep to cycles (76.2, 13-14). Shakespeare’s sonnet structure reflects that we are bound to paths governed by nature and time. The metaphors and similes he uses reflect our intended places within these cycles: light and dark, young and old, woman and man.

Shakespeare emphasizes the importance of these binary classifications through his two opposing muses, his “better angel” and his “worser spirit” (144.3-4). The former is a beautiful and (usually) kind young man, the honoree of the first one hundred and twenty-six of his poems, and the latter is a “dark,” morally repugnant woman, the subject of the last twenty-eight (147.14). The Bard insists that these opposing lovers play opposing roles in his life, fulfilling his spiritual and sexual needs. Though he is deeply in love with the man, they seem to have a platonic connection. They care equally and totally for one another, but their relationship is not physically consummated. Though the man reciprocates his affection, Shakespeare urges his reluctant young subject to follow the path “natural” to his sex, pair off with a woman, and have children: “[N]ature carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby / Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die” (11.13-14). In Sonnet 20—a sonnet that breaks the mold with an extra eleventh syllable in each line—he
asserts that his lover is “prick’d . . . out for women’s pleasure” only (13-14). To preserve the man’s reputation, Shakespeare decides that the “two must be twain / although [their] undivided lives are one”; they must remain separate, even though they are equal (36.1-2, 11-12). This pragmatic unselfishness stands in direct contrast to Shakespeare’s relationship with his mistress, which seems entirely based on sexual dependence, the “fever” of desire (147.1-8). He cannot stop lusting after her, but every sexual encounter with the dark woman leads to “th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame,” pleasure and disgrace, in a cycle of lust (129.1-5, 13-14). Even though this relationship does not satisfy him as his relationship with the man does, Shakespeare writes that there is no way to escape sex, “the heaven that leads men to this hell” (129.14). He admits to the secret necessity of giving in to bodily urges, another “natural” part of life that we ultimately cannot repress.

Despite dedicating many lines to the fixed qualities of his two contrasting lovers, Shakespeare admits that he cannot judge the character of either. Because he alternates between ignoring and acknowledging their faults, the lovers seem to constantly change: addressing the male, he writes, “your sweet hue, which methinks still doth stand, / hath motion” (104.11-12). As they reveal themselves to be other than what they seem, he indulges in self-deception, “corrupting” himself so that he can avoid the pain of their imperfections and transgressions (35.7). But he always acknowledges his own tricks, and he uses ever more tricks to complicate the figurations that he, and we, have taken to be static. He writes antitheses into the sonnets, conceding that exterior beauty often hides interior ugliness and vice-versa (35.7). He dots the lines with cancellations (“Love is not love . . . O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark” [116.2-5]); repeats words until they become insignificant; and every once in a while, sets loose one of his wry, bawdy quips, puns, or double entendres. Sonnet by sonnet, he reveals that his lovers are just as contradictory as he is. Though he describes her as “tyrannous” and “cruel,” he pretends his dark mistress is “fair” and “bright” to justify their affair (131.1-2; 147.13-14). Elsewhere, he decides that her physical “blackness” is, in fact, beautiful because it is natural, unlike beauty attained through “art’s false borrowed face” (127.6). After cataloguing various desirable qualities which she does not possess in a satiric inversion of a blazon, he admits that she is still “rare” (130.13).

Meanwhile, Shakespeare’s seemingly perfect, unattainable male lover betrays him—something the poet tries to rationalize with the statement, “[A]ll men make faults” (35.5). The man embodies one of the most striking contradictions in Shakespeare’s sonnets: although he is a man, he is described
as having the qualities of both genders because Nature intended him to be a woman and gave him “a woman’s gentle heart” (20.3). Shakespeare names him “the master mistress of [his] passion” (20.10-13, 2). With the element of disguise layered on top of physical characteristics, the concept of fixed gender has deteriorated from two categories into a swirling chaos. Shakespeare’s lover defies his conventional ideas of a man and rejects the proposed path of marriage and childbearing, blurring the lines of “male” and “female.” The poet himself seems confused as to how one might reconcile these extremes in one identity.

In “Burl’s,” Bernard Cooper gives us a series of glimpses into his confusion about gender and sexuality as a child transitioning to adolescence, precipitated by his first sighting of transvestites at a local diner. When one of the transvestites trips, Cooper’s eye unfolds “the shades of maleness that her dress and wig and makeup obscured,” leading him to assume that “[a]ny woman might be a man,” and ask, “How many people and things were not what they seemed?” (693). The artifice that hides physical gender leads Cooper to question his parents’ roles within their marriage, what he refers to as the “solid embodiments of woman and man” (693). Even more personally, the experience brings to light his uncertainty over his own gender and sexuality; he feels that he possesses both male and female characteristics, and eventually realizes that he is gay. Though he “once thought it possible to divide the world into male and female columns . . . [simplifying] matter into compatible pairs,” Cooper comes to understand that, even beyond gender, nothing is ever so easily classified (694). As Cooper experiences the unveiling of disguise, he realizes that deception is universal, pervading every aspect of life. He, too, adapts to present a false face to the world.

Cooper’s reflections on false appearance echo Shakespeare’s implementation of figurative language within the sonnets to show the duplicity in all things. Shakespeare’s dramatically opposed images are meant to woo the readers, appealing to our desire for emotional extremes: in one poem, we might find beautiful spring imagery juxtaposed with dark, raging metaphors for sexual “fever” (147.1). Cooper’s images are dressed to be undressed: he pulls us into clattering diners and sweaty gymnasiums to emphasize that we must wipe off the makeup to expose meaning. Shakespeare might explain beauty’s deceit more explicitly—“Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud / Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun / and loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud” (35.2-4)—but these lines bear striking resemblance to one of Cooper’s scenes: “Wax carnations bloomed at every table. Phony wood paneled the walls. Plastic food sat in a display case: fried eggs, a hamburger sand-
wich, a sundae topped with a garish cherry” (698). Through their extensive use of comparison, Cooper and Shakespeare both demonstrate that every metaphor is a disguise, reflecting the guises of every person.

Unlike the Bard, Cooper is openly gay and able to write freely about his experiences. But Cooper’s fear of his parents’ reactions to his homosexuality, and the lasting psychological effects of their attempt to make him more masculine with gymnastics classes, indicate that he sees little advantage to possessing qualities of both genders at once (695). Cooper affirms that gender and the personal characteristics that synchronize or resist it are left to chance, echoing the “motion” of Shakespeare’s character: “I couldn’t tell what form my waking would take—the body of a boy or the body of a girl. . . . My sex, in other words, didn’t seem to be an absolute fact so much as a pleasant, recurring accident” (Cooper 694). Despite his dismissal of homosexuality, Shakespeare embraces the idea of gender confusion, writing as though having an effeminate lover, a “master mistress” with overlapping qualities, represents the best of both worlds (20.2). He appreciates what Cooper’s parents did not—an “ability to slide back and forth, without the slightest warning, between male and female mannerisms” (Cooper 695). And yet, despite this celebration of gender confusion, Shakespeare’s poems to the young man are washed with wistfulness and longing. He excites the modern reader, presenting his love for a man (radical for the time) in more than 126 of the sonnets, but then retracts that love, maintaining the asexuality of the relationship. The man, he writes, is “too dear for my possessing” (87.1).

Through these evasions and deceptions, Shakespeare himself manages to slip further between the lines, evading our classifications. By emphasizing the idea of pervading artifice, he seems uncertain even of himself, refusing to divulge a clear definition of his own sexuality or typical gender characteristics. Even when writing of his own “self-love,” he retracts his admiration upon seeing the truth of his age in the mirror (62.1). In a series of plosive-heavy lines, he realizes how “beated and chopt” he actually is (62.10). In Sonnet 62, Shakespeare comes to terms with his “self-love” by appreciating his lover rather than himself; the word “self” is used seven times within the sonnet, the repetition indicating both its importance to the poet and its negation. But we continue without a sense of what that “self” is. Shakespeare refuses to present us with a clear-cut character of himself, never bothering to explain his evidently alternative sexuality. Without a clear explanation of his identity, we are left with only layers of deception to sift through.

Michel de Montaigne, who could be considered the Bard’s contemporary, is similarly evasive in describing his best friendship with Etienne de La Boëtie
in the essay “On Affectionate Relationships.” Montaigne romanticizes this relationship to a fault, emphasizing its intangibility to the frustrated reader, explaining that it has “no comparison but itself” (212). By evading descriptive metaphors entirely, he stresses the purity of the relationship, keeping it removed from Cooper’s and Shakespeare’s ideas of universal deception. And yet, despite how consumed he seems by his thoughts of La Boëtie, Montaigne asserts that their connection was wholly platonic, a melding of two people into one, comparable to Shakespeare’s relationship with the male lover: La Boetie’s “will was brought to plunge and lose itself in mine with an equal hunger and emulation . . . we kept nothing back for ourselves: nothing was his or mine” (212). By firmly establishing that it was not a physical bond, Montaigne is even quicker than Shakespeare to draw the line between friendship and romantic love. He strongly opposes homosexuality, “that alternative licence of the Greeks,” and believes that a combined relationship of friendship and sex is not as powerful as friendship alone (210). For Montaigne, relationships “forged and fostered by pleasure or profit or by public or private necessity are so much the less beautiful and noble—and therefore so much the less ‘friendship’” (207). Montaigne discloses that “[f]ar below such perfect friendship those fickle passions also once found a place in me—not to mention La Boëtie,” a vague statement which could be referring either to sexual affairs in general or to a sexual relationship with the other man (209). But “those two emotions came into me, each one aware of the other but never to be compared.” Here, Montaigne demonstrates an even stronger impulse than Shakespeare to classify and separate friendship and sex (209). Whether or not Montaigne is truly undecided about the character of his love for La Boëtie, he strictly marks the relationship, masking his confusion with the essay form. Allowing himself the freedom to wander, to wax enthusiastically on whatever subjects he wants, Montaigne impresses his confidence upon us. The rigidity of his beliefs on the differences between love and friendship and his stern rejection of the body might make us wonder whether or not he is in denial, but the free-flowing essay is a better medium than the sonnet to convince us of his innocence. It allows him to speak at length, to more clearly categorize La Boëtie as “just a friend.”

Shakespeare ultimately does not make so strong a division, but perhaps he chooses the elusive sonnet specifically so that he does not have to. Although the characters of the man and the lady symbolize friendship and sexuality respectively, the concepts ultimately overlap in his affair with the man. Unlike Montaigne, he does not reject sexuality; he goes so far as to say that “my female evil / Tempteth my better angel from my side,” suggesting
that his feelings of romantic love are overpowered by sexual desire (144.5-6). The implication in Sonnet 20 is that, if not for one small fluke of nature, Shakespeare would consummate his relationship with the young man, because they are physically attracted to one another (20.11-12). Other remarks, especially those regarding the young man’s respectability, are particularly telling, indicating that probably something less than “respectable” is happening—even, perhaps, that the gossip circulating about his lover is not entirely unfounded. In both Montaigne and Shakespeare’s cases, however, the writing must make clear that a physical consummation has not occurred. The writers and their male lovers might be closet homosexuals, and the potential for a sexual relationship might be painfully evident between both pairs, but the relationships must be classified as platonic. We can excuse this denial as a product of the era in which they lived. But Shakespeare does not really deny his love. He merely refuses to classify it because by its very nature, it evades classification.

Shakespeare’s categorizations are the ultimate disguise, reflecting the false faces each of us presents to the world. Underneath, we do not easily divide into what Cooper calls “solid embodiments” (695). Montaigne may try to prove distinctions, to prove that platonic friendship is the peak of all relationships, the highest “matter of the mind” (Montaigne 209). But Shakespeare knows that the mind is unpredictable and plays too many tricks to be trusted. The only way to outwit it is to recognize that our minds manipulate us, to protect us or harm us, and false perceptions make us who we are as much as our true identities. When we disclose these perceptions, we can embrace the parts of us that do not fit into stereotypes, rejecting inflexible classifications, explanations that we often fixate on to comply with social patterns. Shakespeare acknowledges society’s categories, but admits room for those who overlap: master mistresses, dark beauties, himself. We will never know what Shakespeare saw in the mirror that showed “me myself indeed”—if it was exaggerated grotesqueness brought on by a lack of confidence; a fairer image that he rejected, assuming his imagination was up to its usual tricks; or his true form (Shakespeare 62.9). And yet, in shielding our eyes from the self we are not admitted to see, he left us with something more permanent and tangible than a decaying earthly being, something comfortingly predictable, something that he knew would escape Time “despite his cruel hand”: a fixed, flowing, and constant fourteen lines (60.14).
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