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Shakespeare's Christian Sonnet? Number 146

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Poore soule the center of my sinfull earth,
My sinfull earth these rebbell powrers that thee array,
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth
Painting thy outward wall so costlie gay?
Why so large cost having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
Shall wormes inheritors of this excesse
Eate up thy charge? Is this thy bodies end?
Then soule live thou upon thy servants losse,
And let that pine to aggravat thy store;
Buy tearmes divine in selling houres of drosse:
Within be fed, without be rich no more,
So shalt thou feed on death, that feeds on men,
And death once dead, ther's no more dying then.

Thirty years ago Graves and Riding, in *Modernist Poetry,* performed on Sonnet 129 an exegetical analysis to demonstrate the wealth of meaning which modern editors had denied the poem by imposing on it twentieth-century spelling and punctuation. A few years later William Empson, following the general method of Graves and Riding, offered a detailed reading of Sonnet 94 in *Some Versions of Pastoral.* And since these pioneer works in close analysis, many other of the sonnets have been treated in such detail, with a general tendency to study those whose ambiguities and richness of content are most amenable to the techniques of explication. Perhaps it is because Sonnet 146 does not offer the ground for a virtuoso performance in interpretation that it has received little attention. Line two, its 1609 Q reading thought corrupt, has always been a prominent crux, and in the course of time has gathered thirty of more variant readings. Thus the poem as whole has been consigned to the textual, rather than to the interpretative critics, and its meaning has never been in question. (I do not propose to discuss these variants. The Q reading must be highly suspect; perhaps the last three words of line one became transposed. Whatever emendation we adopt-- "Bearing", "Feeding", "Fooled by" etc.- the sense of this single line does not modify that of the whole poem).

This sonnet is generally accepted as a statement of Shakespeare's sympathetic attitude towards a commonplace of Christian doctrine. The theme is understood to be a combination of "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection" (I Cor.9.27.) and "O death, where is thy

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sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (I Cor.15.55.), and the commentary and criticism on the poem reveal an impressive unanimity: Shakespeare's Christian sentiments are applauded; the clarity of expression and the absence of ambiguity are noted and it is allowed a place among the greatest of the sequence. W. F. Schirmer (*Anglia,* 1925, XLIX) reads the poem as a comforting conclusion to the whole cycle, which laments melodiously the inevitable progress of time. Indeed, some editors, sharing this view and departing from Thorpe's order, elevate it to the position of number 154. J. M. Robertson (*The Problems of the Shakespeare Sonnets)* records that "154 stands out as creating no critical or spiritual discomfort in the sympathetic reader." Among more recent critics E. Hubler (*The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets)* enforces the traditional reading; he appeals, "…surely it should be apparent to all men in their senses …that the poem is Christian, and that Shakespeare presents the Christianity without apology." Even G. Wilson Knight (*The Mutual Flame)* has nothing new to say. He sees this "famous and valuable sonnet" to repeat and interpret for us "our other thoughts on the universal principle of interaction and balance, loss and gain … Here, in our religious sonnet, the great thing is firmly said, because an adequate thought-mould, in terms of a religious tradition, is being used." Critics agree that it is remarkable in the canon as the only direct evidence of Shakespeare's subscription to Christian tenets. This reading has encouraged a confusion of values, for its *importance* as a unique statement of belief has been assumed to confer upon it *greatnes*s as a work of art. The status of the poem has been further dignified in the eyes of the common reader by the frequency of its appearance in popular anthologies, and it stands on equal terms with the acknowledged master-sonnets in such influential collections as the *Oxford Book of English Verse,* and Auden and Pearson's *Poets of the English Language.* Perhaps the most striking testimony to the specifically religious appeal of this sonnet is that it is sung as a hymn in English churches.

Both scholar and ordinary reader concur. They find that Shakespeare endorses bodily subjugation as a means to spiritual health, and thereby, to a conquest of death. The sonnet is hailed as an unqualified statement of orthodox Christian belief and, as such, a unique document in the Shakespeare canon. Only once have I seen it suggested that this reading may not necessarily be definitive. In *The American Scholar,* Vol. XII, under the title "Critical Principles and a Sonnet", D. S. Stauffer records a discussion between five critics which centered upon Sonnet 146. During the course of discussion John Crowe Ransom remarked: "I am struck by the fact that the divine terms which the soul buys are not particularly Christian: there are few words in the poem that would directly indicate conventional religious dogma. Rather, in the notion that the soul is a mere tenant of the body, a prince who has fallen to the condition of a sentinel in the world's garrison, a stranger coming from another realm, the sonnet seems in spirit to be Platonic." This comment was not amplified by Ransom, nor did his companions take it up, and although I am not able to agree with him in particulars of his criticism his overall impression that the sonnet is not merely an endorsement of Christian ascetism hints that a more penetrating reading is possible.

The structure of the poem follows the usual Shakespearean sonnet pattern, The thought being developed within the unit of the quatrain, with a shift at line nine, and the final couplet serving as a conclusion. The octave is composed of a series of rhetorical questions directed at the soul and, arising from these questions, the sestet offers Shakespeare's advice. In the first quatrain four situations are used to figure the body-soul relationship: the soul as center of the earth, that is as a ruler imprisoned by a sinful world; the soul as the ruler of a land troubled by rebellion; the soul as ascetic, enduring self-privation; the soul as house-owner, decorating the outside walls. The soul's predicament is established in these four parallel statements, and the

development of the figures is to heighten the suggestion that the soul is itself responsible for its fortune. In the first two lines the soul seems compelled to suffer; in line three, it is enduring hardship and the hint of resignation about its plight is countered as we are led through to line four, where its subordination to the body is made to seem an act of will, not the force of fate, circumstances, or the body's more forceful claims. My analysis of these lines has been conducted to draw out the main development of the poem in its thought and feeling. Of course, the complexity and richness with which these elements are presented by Shakespeare have been severely reduced in my version of the opening quatrain. But I shall select "array" from line two as a single example of the close verbal texture, an example which will also show how intimately the figures are associated. In Shakespearian usage the word has a wide range of meaning. In a semi-technical sense, given the military context of line two, it could mean "marshal for battle": thus the physical being ("these rebbell powers") mobilizes and exploits the soul, who should rule, to its own ends. As we come on to line three this meaning would give way to the second sense – "to ill-treat, to bring to a lowly condition". While, with the house-decoration of line four, "array" could be understood as meaning "to dress, to decorate". Not one of these meanings is exclusive and they all operate to amplify the situation in obedience to the varying associations which the neighbouring lines suggest. The predominant tone of this first quatrain is that of pitying indignation, which stresses the paradoxical situation – the soul, the rightful ruler, subservient to the body – which is calculated to incite the soul to action. Pity is uppermost, but we should remember that the soul, an innocent victim in line one, is presented in line four almost as if it were a guilty accomplice.

The next quatrain may be conveniently studied in two parts. In the first two lines the house-decoration figure initiated in line four is developed, now with more technical reference to legal terminology, and the argument proceeds upon overtly practical grounds: why lavish care upon the body, when it will die so soon? The note of warning is deepened at the close of the octave with the urgent rhetorical questions reminding the soul that when life is gone the worms will consume the body, upon which such an excess of attention has been lavished, and that they will be the "inheritors" of the soul's "charge". Thus, at the turn of the poem, it has so far been argued that the soul, suffering that the body may thrive, is acting foolishly because the body, inferior and worthless object, is anyway fated to the ignoble end of providing carrion for the worms. The feeling, thought, and expression, are in perfect harmony. The technical imagery, derived from the fields of law, real estate, and architecture, creates a curiously cold, analytic air, foreign perhaps to the note of concerned pity to which the poem opens, but complementary to the indignation we can detect at the close of the octave. The soul becomes worthy more of condemnation than sympathy for its predicament.

The imperative opening to the sester is in contrast to the easier movement and lower emotional intensity of the first part of the poem. Line nine is instinct not so much with indignation as with the harsh violence of revenge. At one level war are not altogether shocked at this tone, for the rather mundane and commercial nature of the earlier figures hinted that the values of this poem are perhaps as much related to the worldliness of Elizabethan commercial prosperity as to the gentleness of Christian charity. Now the "poore soule" of line one is urged to reverse the initial situation; having once been exploited, it is now, in its own turn, to exploit the body. This is a Biblical sentiment, and the relationship of master to servant is archetypal; it figures that of God to Mankind. Yet the logic and persuasion with which Shakespeare advances this line of thought is devilish in its conclusion; the relationship is here perverted. Christian sentiment would have the master succor the servant, but here the soul-master is not to cherish the body-servant, for it is to profit by the other's decline. Just as the soul, in line three, pined

within the body, so in revenge is the soul advised in line ten to let the body pine "to aggravat thy store". And it is at this point particularly that we can see how equivocal is the advice offered. Editors usually comment that the word "aggravat" means "to increase, to strengthen, to add weight to". Assuming this related set of meanings to be satisfactory, it would be reasonable to suppose that "store" in line ten refers to the accumulation of blessings awaiting the soul of the ascetic in heaven. However, the use of "aggravat" elsewhere in Shakespeare shows that the word was heavily toned; in fact, that it carried for him, as it does for us today, the sense of "to increase the seriousness, to make more grievous, to make worse". I have noted four instances where the word is used in the plays, and in every case it bears strongly critical overtones. For example, in *The Merry Wives* (The Oxford Shakespeare, II.ii.301), Falstaff promises Brook that he shall lie with Ford's wife and "aggravate his style" – "style", his name as cuckold. In *Richard II,* I.i.43, Bolingbroke cries at Mowbray,.

> Once more, the more to aggravate the note,
> With foul traitor's name I stuff thy throat.

In *2 Henry IV,* II.iv.175, Mistress Quickly's malapropism is to beseech Pistol to "aggravate your choler", while we find Bottom *(Midsummer Night's Dream* I.ii.84) misusing this same word in a significant manner; "but I will aggravate my voice so that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove…." It is disregarding Shakespeare's use of the word if we ascribe to it here only the neutral force of its etymological root, *aggravare.* Shakespeare uses it with pejorative force, and it asserts the critical movement of the thought. "Store" does not refer to the waiting joys of heaven but to the punishments in hell (or conscience) which are being prepared for a master who has acted in such an un-Christianlike way towards his servant.

In line II the soul is urged to a transaction that is starkly simonious. The eternity of life in heaven is the reward for bodily privation on earth, and this denial and recompense is conceived of as a spiritual bargain concluded in grossly commercial terms, where the antithesis of "tearmes divine" and "houres of drosse" impresses the inequality of the deal. This, certainly, would attract a reading public which might have forgotten *Beatitudo non est virtutis praemium, sed ipsa virtus*. That is the Christian ethic, and by now we can see the irony of Shakespeare's seemingly orthodox advice. The persuasion to win an access of grace by such means can now be expressed in the laconic phrase of line twelve, "Within be fed", and we begin to wonder, was not the soul that pined and suffered in line three enjoying better spiritual health than this calculating cheat? The final couplet gains a great deal of point in the light of this reading. It is more than a heroic gesture; not just a poor imitation of the scriptures that is lame beside the vehement exultation of Donne's tenth Holy Sonnet; but a conclusion which is a logical end to all that has gone before. The word "So", beginning line thirteen, points verbally to the progression of the theme: "in this way, following the advice offered so far in the sestet, the soul will feed on Death". Yes, it is not the Biblical conquest *of* Death by entry into eternal life. It is a conquest *by* Death, for such conduct will lead to spiritual death, beyond which, as the final line reminds us, there can be no further end. The soul has taken upon itself the identity of the worms in line seven, who themselves lived upon the body, just as it has been advised to do now.

Luce[1] calls the sonnet "an exact epitome of the Biblical yet lofty morality of Shakespeare's time." There are, true enough, a number of Biblical echoes which superficially run the poem along a conventional course, and the values of the poem seem to be those of the prosperous Elizabethan world. But it is Shakespeare the humanist speaking, pleading for the life of the body as against the vitality and richness of sensuous experience. Neither spiritual nor bodily life can be fulfilled at the other's cost, for the whole man, body and spirit indivisible,

will suffer thereby. We can see how very much higher is the charity which motivates his sonnet than the type of Christianity which moves on the surface of the poem, and at which the irony is directed.

Notes

[1] *Shakespeare The Man and his Work* (Bristol and Lindon, 1913). P.90.