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SHALL I COMPARE ME?

Self-examination and self-speculation in the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare

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The Latin infinitive speculari, from which we derive the English verb to speculate, has a number of meanings: to spy, to look out and to examine. In the case of the sonnet, it is not simply that such poems look out, examine and conjecture upon an external universe. Rather, sonnets — with their capacity to ‘turn over’ an idea or experience through the tradition of the volta (Fussell 1979, Spiller 1992) — are particularly suited to solipsistic introspection; a speculative investigation of the poet-narrator’s own desires, shortcomings and hopes for the future. This paper examines the relationship between form, meaning and subjective introspection in the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare (Engle 1898, Durbrow 1996, King 2005, Martin 2010). Acknowledging recent interest in the sonnet in the wake of New Formalism (Caplan 2012), it is argued that the work of these master-poets in this genre sets a benchmark for later sonneteers to continue in the tradition of poetic self-speculation.

Keywords: sonnet; Petrarch; Shakespeare; self; speculation

John Keats begins his sonnet ‘On first looking into Chapman’s Homer’ with the lines ‘Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold, / And many goodly states and kingdoms seen’. Keats’ sonnet is a hybrid, in the sense that he uses the Italian or Petrarchan form to tell the story of an English translation of a classical Greek text, all the while comparing the experience of ‘looking into Chapman’s Homer’ as akin to exploring the New World through the eyes of a Spanish Conquistador. While Homer’s epic poem describes the story of Odysseus’ journeys to exciting realms beyond his own home, Keats uses this reference as a springboard to describe his own experience of literary wandering that Chapman’s translation opens up for him. In so doing, Keats builds upon a rich tradition of sonneteering that uses this particular poetic form as a means to explore and investigate the world and — importantly — one’s own place within it.

The Latin infinitive *speculari*, from which we derive the English verb to speculate, has a number of meanings: to spy, to look out and to examine. In the case of the sonnet, it is not simply that such poems look out, examine and conjecture upon an external universe. Rather, sonnets — with their capacity to ‘turn over’ an idea or experience through the tradition of the volta — are particularly suited to solipsistic introspection; a speculative investigation of the poet-narrator’s own desires,

shortcomings and hopes for the future. Taking up the idea of poetic self-speculation, this paper examines the relationship between form, meaning and subjective introspection in the sonnets of Petrarch and Shakespeare. The focus on Petrarch and Shakespeare is deliberate, in so far as so many of their sonnets represent the kind of self-examination noted above. Moreover, as master-practitioners of this poetic form they make an important contribution to its history and development, setting up a tradition of speculative-poetics for other, later sonneteers.

The Sonnet

The sonnet emerged as a poetic form in the early 13th century in the Sicilian court of Frederick II, who by 1220 was titled King of Sicily, King of Germany and Italy and Holy Roman Emperor. Frederick's court was a 'centre of literary, artistic and scientific activity' (Kennedy 2011: 84) where the seeds of the Renaissance were beginning to germinate. Into this environment came the notary Giacomo da Lentini, who is credited with producing the first recognisable examples of this new poetic form. To produce his sonnets, Lentini combined elements from a number of older forms, including Provençal love poetry, the Italian *strombetta* and a number of other song-structures popular in the court at that time (Kennedy 2011, Oppenheimer 1989).

Oppenheimer observes that the notari 'were expected to write, dispute, show a thorough legal knowledge' and 'understand the finer points of philosophy' (1989: 18). The skills of rhetoric, logic and dialogue were highly valued at court, and 'Reason, experiment for the sake of new knowledge about the world, a love of beauty, and a desire to recapture and "make modern" the past guided [Lentini] in everything' (Oppenheimer 1989: 21). In this manner, Lentini's sonnets had their genesis in the speculative reasoning of early Humanism. Oppenheimer describes this new type of writing as silent, introspective, personal self-conscious (1989). Despite the obvious reference to sound in the name 'sonetto', and the influence of the musical compositions of court troubadours thought to have influenced the poetry of the era, Kennedy argues that the name may in fact imply a written or spoken presentation, emphasising the form's propensity towards introspective, dialectic, and meditative monologue (Kennedy 2011: 85).

From its inception the sonnet's form was well-suited to the task of exploring ideas in ways that suited the shift towards reason and contemplation. Michael Spiller describes the history of the sonnet in terms of space, suggesting that as a form it provides 'a stage or arena on which the // of the writer speaks to his or her audience' (1992: 5). Oppenheimer also uses the concept of space to describe the Italian sonnet, suggesting that it functions as an 'architecture' in which an idea is put forward and expanded upon in the 'room' (stanza) of the opening eight lines, with a resolution or alternative viewpoint offered in space taken up by the ensuing six lines (1989: 23).

The transition between these two parts occurs at what is now referred to as the volta, or turn, that in the Italian tradition comes at the beginning of line nine. John Fuller explains that the octet may also be referred to as *piedi* (steps) and the sestet as a series of volte (turns) using closed rhyme and interlaced rhyme respectively. In so doing, Fuller is at pains to point out the different roles ascribed to each of the two main parts of the Italian sonnet:

The essence of the sonnet's form is the unequal relationship between octave and sestet ... This bipartite structure is one of observation and conclusion, or statement and counter-statement. The turn after the octave, sometimes signalled by a white line in the text, is a shift of thought or feeling which develops the subject of the sonnet by surprise or conviction to its conclusion. (1972: 2)

In his treatise on poetic form and metre, Paul Fussell argues that the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet allows for the subject to be projected in the octave, before a 'logical or emotional shift by which the speaker enables himself to take a new or altered or enlarged view of his subject' (1979: 116). Fussell expands upon this idea by suggesting that the Petrarchan sonnet mirrors the build-up and release of physical and emotional 'pressure' in the body:

The octave and sestet conduct actions that are analogous to the actions of inhaling and exhaling, or of the contraction and release of the muscular system. The one builds up the pressure, the other releases it; and the turn is the dramatic and climactic center of the poem, where the intellectual or emotional method of release first becomes clear ... We may even suggest that one of the archetypes of the Petrarchan sonnet structure is the pattern of sexual pressure and release. (1979: 116)

Whereas in the Italian tradition the turn or shift in perspective comes some around the beginning of the sestet, in English the sonnet involves twelve lines — that may include 'three turns of the screw' that develops an initial concept — followed by a couplet (Fuller 1972: 16). Fuller notes several possible reasons for this development, including the differing capacities for rhyme across the two languages as well as the tendency in English towards a final 'encapsulation' (1972: 16-17).

There are obvious formal differences between Italian and English sonnets in terms of rhyme, metre, stanzaic configurations, as well as the position of the *volta* (Spiller 1992). For example, the Italian language more naturally produces feminine rhymes, whereas the English language afforded early English sonneteers such as Spenser and Sidney the capacity to incorporate both feminine and masculine rhymes into their poetry. Metrical changes also occurred. Hurley and O'Neill observe that 'When the sonnet was first adopted into England in the early sixteenth century, the Italian hendecasyllabic metre had first to be adapted: it was naturalised into the English iambic pentameter' (2012: 76).

However, while formal developments occurred, the capacity of the sonnet to be a vehicle for speculation on a central theme was preserved. Despite the position of the *volta* being moved by the time Shakespeare took up the form in earnest, in both the Italian and English traditions the sonnet retained the capacity to present an idea, look at it closely and then re-present from a new or fresh perspective. This, I argue, was the key to the solipsistic writing of Petrarch and the legacy of Humanist self-reflection that we encounter subsequently in Shakespeare's sonnets.

Petrarch

Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) was an Italian cleric, scholar and poet. Petrarch, as he is called in

English, was a prolific writer relative to his era, producing scholarly and poetic works across genres including, but not limited to, biography, lyric and epic poetry, theological meditations, historical writing and, of course, sonnets. Petrarch is often referred to as the Father of Humanism, in so far as his writing often explored his relationship to God, religion and his fellow humans in very personal terms.

Margaret King has observed that ‘whenever Petrarch wrote, he wrote about himself ... he was the subject of all his books’ (2005: 357). While Petrarch’s historical poems might at first glance appear to contradict this rule, being focused on people and events before his time, they too were put in service to Petrarch’s growing fame as a great poet and harbinger of the Renaissance — a rebirth of classical ideas and ideals. For example, his epic poem ‘Africa’, about Scipio Africanus and the Punic War, was used to mark his elevation to the status of Poet Laureate in the ancient capital of Rome in 1341. Petrarch’s engagement with classical antiquity formed part of his desire to be recognised as part of a genealogy of great poets. In his Coronation Oration Petrarch remarked: ‘The honor of the Republic stirs my heart when I recall that it is in this very city of Rome — the capital of the world, as Cicero calls it — in this very Roman capital where we are now gathered, so many and such great poets, having attained to the most illustrious mastery of their art, have received the laurel crown’ (Wilkins 1953: 1245).

Petrarch’s solipsism extended from self-promotion to introspective analysis. This is perhaps most obvious in the *Secretum*, a literary dialogue with St Augustine, inspired by the Saint’s own *Confessions*, published after Petrarch’s death. In it, Petrarch admits his inability to surrender completely to the Christian ideals that his Faith required of him, held back by his humanity — his tendency towards conceit as a decorated poet and his sins of the flesh. This conversational meditation on his own shortcomings, and his willingness to engage in philosophical and theological debate using his own experience as a kind of touchstone, is indicative of his capacity to place the self, and all its flaws, at the centre of his writing.

Petrarch’s sonnets form the major component of the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* (a Latin title referring to the use of vernacular Italian), also known as *Il Canzoniere* (The Songbook) or *Rime Sparse* (Scattered Rhymes). The sonnets are framed by the poet’s love for a mysterious woman, Laura. Written from the perspective of someone looking back into their past, the sonnets are divided into two parts: those that reflect on the period before Laura’s death and those that reflect on the period after she has died. Very little is known about Laura, despite her role in the *Canzoniere*. From an inscription in a copy of Virgil, Petrarch noted that she was a young woman he first saw in church on April 6 (Good Friday) 1327, and who died exactly twenty-one years later. From the sonnets themselves we learn that she had curly blond hair (Sonnet 227), a ‘lovely face’ (Sonnet 267) and an angelic bearing (Sonnet 90). In Sonnet 5 Petrarch plays on Laura’s name by making reference to the Latin derivative *laudare* (to praise) and the ‘eternally green boughs’ of the laurel, used to crown the ‘laureate’.

The use of first-person perspective is prevalent throughout the *Canzoniere*. The words I/me/my/mine dominate the narrative address: ‘Seventeen years the heavens have revolved / since I first burned with fire that rages still; / when I think of the state that I am in / I feel a chill within those flames of mine’ (Sonnet 122). This perspective is indicative of the self-interrogation and introspective analysis

found elsewhere in Petrarch's writing. It is part of his *modus operandi* to analyse his status as a man caught between different roles and allegiances: to God, to desire and love, to poetry. For example, in the octave of Sonnet 1 Petrarch makes an appeal to 'anyone who knows love through its trials', with its 'vain hopes' and 'vain suffering'. At the turn he shifts focus to his status as a famous poet, suggesting that as someone who is 'the talk so long a time of people all around', he now feels shame and repentance, in the knowledge that 'worldly joy is a quick passing dream'. While on one hand the sonnet addresses an objective reader, on the other the poem functions as a space in which the poet addresses his own experiences of love and its consequences.

Brian Stock, writing on the connection between Petrarch's writing and notions of selfhood in Medieval literature, suggests there is a spiritual/religious context for self-examination in the poet's writing, in works such as the *Secretum* and the *Penitential Psalms*, that in turn links back to Petrarch's interest in the Augustine *Confessions* (1995). The confessional nature of Petrarch's sonnets is unmistakable to those of us familiar with the Catholic rites associated with contrition, penitence, penance and the desire for mercy and absolution. Petrarch's Sonnet 62 is a case in point. The poem marks the eleventh anniversary of his first sighting of Laura at Mass on Good Friday, but Petrarch uses the sonnet to beseech God to draw his thoughts back to Christ's crucifixion, subtly implying that the obsession with his beloved is a cross he has borne for too long. The poet begs to be released from the 'abject plight' of earthly love and lifted to a 'nobler place', expanding on the theme of the transformative nature of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Petrarch's meditations on spirituality and secularism are tied to his focus on the self. Mark Musa, in his introduction to *Petrarch: Selections from the Canzoniere and Other Works*, suggests that 'Petrarch loved Petrarch more than anything or anyone else ... The *Canzoniere*, a work of great craftsmanship, genius, and psychoanalytical self-examination, is also instilled with the poet's deep concern for worldly glory' (2008: xiv). Thus, it might be said that while Laura is an inspiration for his sonnets, it is the poet's own experience of love and the desires of the flesh that are the true thematic concerns of these poems. In effect, his writing about Laura, with whom he had little or no direct contact, is primarily a vehicle to explore what it means for the poet to be caught between the secular and sacred. As Musa puts it, the reader of the *Canzoniere* 'is not long into the poems before he or she realizes that Laura is not the main subject of the work. Petrarch himself is its own subject and centre, and the work itself is his own psychoanalytical notebook, an ever-changing portrait of the self' (2008: xvii).

Shakespeare

Like Petrarch, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was a prolific writer, producing some thirty-six plays, a small number of narrative poems and a collection of 154 sonnets (with an additional six sonnets appearing as part of his dramatic works) across a career as a dramatist and poet spanning approximately 25 years. Unlike Petrarch, whose peripatetic life included travel in both Europe and north Africa, Shakespeare's life was contained to movement between Stratford-upon-Avon and London, though the diverse settings for his plays indicate a worldliness beyond this relatively small geo-cultural domain. If Petrarch may be thought of as a key progenitor of Humanism, then

Shakespeare might be considered one of its most important Renaissance proponents, in his capacity to draw upon stories from myth, history and literature to engage audiences with the politics of mortality, power and love — to name just three of his enduring thematic concerns — in a manner that appealed to the popular imaginary of his era, as well as to readers and audiences today.

Shakespeare's sonnets have generated speculation, in so far as they have been studied in relation to representations of race and Otherness (Hall 1999, Hunt 1998) and sexuality (Hammond 1981, Nelles 2009, Schiffer 1999). It is not within the scope of this paper to canvas and engage with the critical speculation around the degree to which Shakespeare's sonnets reveal his attitudes towards race or (homo)sexuality. However, it is worthwhile noting that his sonnets have been parsed for evidence that might suggest something of the poet's own identity and ideology.

This speculation about the connection between Shakespeare's writing and his own attitudes and experiences may arise because, despite Shakespeare being born some 260 years after Petrarch, far less is known about his life than that of his southern European counterpart. Petrarch was a particularly assiduous self-chronicler, even in his creative works, whereas the biographical information we have about Shakespeare comes predominantly from secondary sources, such as church and legal documents, recollections from friends and colleagues and the details of published works. RS White, in a chapter titled 'Where is Shakespeare's autobiography?' observes that 'the author left no autobiography, diary or memoirs', a fact that has allowed 'centuries of writers to write them for him' (2009: 178). That is, the lack of direct autobiographical reflection on his own life may lead others to look for signs of self-reflection in his creative works. Durbrow suggests that we should not assume that the collection of sonnets is entirely autobiographical, but rather that some may reveal a close association between the real poet and the implied author, while others may not. However, Durbrow also admits that while 'the sonnets probably exemplify a wide spectrum of connections to biographical events ... the immediacy and force of many sonnets hint that they are written by someone whose knowledge of their events could only be firsthand' (1996: 295).

As a rule, the majority of Shakespeare's sonnets may be regarded as examples of speculation, in so far as they mirror a set of key concerns that are 'exercised' through poetic writing. In the 'fair youth' sonnets, that make up the bulk of Shakespeare's collection, there are several dominant themes: love, youthfulness, ageing, mortality, procreation and personal legacy. The later 'dark lady' sonnets tend to be concerned with similar ideas, but to them we might add lust, seduction and the perils of love and obsession. Even when dealing with the overarching thematic concerns of love, mortality and posterity, Shakespeare is still prone to drawing the focus back to his own experience. For example, Sonnet 148 meditates on the poet's relationship to love itself: 'O cunning Love! with tears thou keep'st me blind / Lest eyes well-seeing thy foul faults should find'. The sonnet includes the self-oriented lament: 'O me, what eyes hath Love put in my head / Which have no correspondence with true sight!'

The personalised nature of the sonnets often involves the combination of direct address and self-contemplation. The often-quoted Sonnet 18 begins with a question, seemingly aimed at the poet's lover: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' And yet this question appears to be primarily rhetorical, in so far as the rest of the sonnet is a meditation on the poet's own capacity to capture the

youth's transient beauty in writing and thus halt its diminishment by time and nature. Meanwhile, Sonnet 22 includes reference to the poet's age in comparison to that of his young love. It begins with the observation that 'My glass shall not persuade me I am old / So long as youth and thou are of one date' and concludes with a direct address: 'Presume not thy heart when mine is slain / Thou gavest me thine, not to give back again'. Thus, the poet speculates on a period beyond his own death, suggesting that the love he feels is eternal, immutable even in the face of mortality.

Charis Charalampous puts forward the thesis that the numerous references to mirrors (glasses) in Shakespeare's sonnets is linked to the emergence of a modern, individuated subjectivity in the Renaissance era (2018). Charalampous argues that despite both Petrarch and Shakespeare directing their poetry towards love-objects (whether that be Laura in the case of Petrarch, or the 'fair youth' or 'dark lady' in the case of Shakespeare) these personae function as mirrors onto which the poet projects his own identity, thoughts, and concerns. Through writing about these characters, 'the poet went through a journey of self-discovery and learning via mirroring, for what these mirror-sonnets ultimately reflect is the speaker's own self' (Charalampous 2018, n.p.).

Beyond the many examples that refer to mirrors, self and subjectivity remain central to the literary ecosystem of Shakespeare's sonnets. A consistent, first-person perspective is constructed through the regular use of phrases such as 'O me', 'I', 'my' and 'mine', terms which position the reader to connect the identity of the narrator with that of the poet/author. In addition, there is the use of the poet's own name in two of the later poems. In sonnets 135 and 136 Shakespeare makes wordplay from the double-meaning of will/Will: '... thy has thou *Will* / And Will to boot, and *Will* in overplus' (135); '... being rich in *Will*, add to thy *Will* / One will of mine, to make thy large *Will* more' (135); '... I was thy *Will*, / and will, thy soul knows, is admitted there' (136); '*Will* will fulfil the treasure of thy love' (136); '... for my name is *Will*' (136) (italics in the original)[1]. The inclusion of his own name further suggests that Shakespeare positions himself as both enunciator and subject in his sonnets.

One of the most common ideas put forward in the sonnets is the notion that the things we might otherwise view as transient — love, youth, nature, faithfulness — may be preserved in writing, a notion that is canvassed in sonnets 17-19, 54, 55, 60, 63, 65, 81 and 107. I have argued above that Petrarch was fond of self-promotion; in this instance it is Shakespeare who engages in a self-reflexive commentary on his identity as a writer, a kind of 'thinking aloud' about the power of his writing and its capacity to transcend a single lifetime. This reference to the power of poetry to fix things in time and space indicates both a speculation on fame and a kind of solipsistic self-awareness of his identity as a dramatist and poet.

The sonnet — a legacy

Since the time of Lentini, some 750 years ago, many great poets have turned their hands to writing sonnets, including Dante, Milton, Keats, Hopkins, Barrett Browning and others. While it is not possible within the scope of this paper to examine in detail the work of later poets who took up this legacy and expanded upon it, it is worth acknowledging — by way of a small number of examples — the direction speculative sonnets have taken over time. By doing so it is my aim to describe, briefly,

the legacy of the speculative poetic practice I have argued is indicative of Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets.

Fuller argues that Gerard Manly-Hopkins was one of the few ‘important modern poets ... to pay great attention to the legitimate sonnet’ — that is to say, the kind of sonnet that uses the hallmarks of the octave and sestet, the turn, conformity to regular metre, rhyme and so forth (12-13). Fuller gives the example of Hopkins’ ‘The Windhover’, a tour de force of rhythm and rhyme that almost hurtles towards the poem’s ending, as if to mimic the fell swoop of a bird of prey. The poem is dedicated to ‘Christ our Lord’, and yet it is the poet’s own ecstasy that dominates the sonnet. It is Hopkins who has ‘caught this morning morning’s minion’; it is his ‘heart in hiding’. When he cries out ‘O my chevalier!’ he speculates on the presence and power of God made manifest in nature. Hopkins’ poem does not conform strictly to the rhyme scheme we might expect of an Italian sonnet; however, it calls to mind Petrarch’s ability to connect the self with God through an intermediary object.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnet XLIII that begins with the famous line ‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways’ is an obvious example of the introspective meditation on romantic love that is a hallmark of Renaissance sonneteering that was brought to light again in the Victorian era. The phrase ‘I love thee’ is used at the beginning of lines 2, 5, 7-9 and 12, in a mirroring of the kind of list-making declarations used by Shakespeare in sonnets 66 and 91. However, it is Barrett Browning’s preceding sonnet, XLII, that is perhaps even more akin to the kind of self-oriented speculation discussed above. Barrett Browning opens the sonnet with a quotation from one of her earlier poems, setting the scene for her to consider the notion of hopes for the future that were realised in the past. At the turn the poet declares: ‘I seek no copy now for life’s first half’, content instead ‘to write me new my future’s epigraph’ — in acknowledgement and acceptance that her pilgrimage through life draws closer to its end.

Meg Tyler writes that ‘Checked by Modernism, sonnets waned as a genre in the first half of the twentieth century, with a few exceptions. However, as the century progressed, the sonnet staged a comeback’ (2011: 232), in the work of poets such as Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. To that list we might add names such as Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney and others. Tyler puts forward Frank Bidart’s ‘Self Portrait’ as an example of a new approach to the sonnet, that eschews iambic pentameter and incorporates Dickinson-like use of punctuation, but nevertheless preserves the use of the turn, as well as the octave and quatrain with rhyming couplet, in the same vein as Shakespeare. Though a self-portrait, the sonnet is written in third person, allowing Bidart to psychologically assess himself as if from an objective distance: ‘Sick of being decent, he craves another / Crash. What reaches him except disaster?’ (Tyler 2011: 231). In the Australian context, Dorothy Hewett’s ‘The Upside-Down Sonnets’ from *Collected Poems 1940-1995* (2003) are worth mentioning, in so far as Hewett inverts the typical structure of octave and sestet in several of these sonnets, while retaining the self-reflexive questioning of sexual and romantic relationships that is indicative of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets discussed above.

I have written elsewhere about the important influence Petrarch’s introspective writing, and in particular his sonnets, has had on my own poetic practice (Venzo 2015). I have done so in the context of a speculative investigation of questions about identity, belonging and cultural and linguistic

in-between-ness. My own experience with this form and the recent examples of sonneteering I have pointed to above all point towards the continued experimentation with the sonnet form in recent times. David Caplan suggests that in the contemporary era, new formalism has offered poets a set of 'provocations' beyond the replication of older techniques and models, by inspiring 'poets and critics to reassess what form can do' (31). In the specific case of the sonnet, Rajan Barrett argues that it is a malleable poetic form that can be adapted to suit a variety of contexts:

That the self finds the sonnet a form to express itself in and that the sonnet has been popular and is even getting popularity in cultures that are far removed in time and space from the primary roots of the sonnet is a fact that makes me think of the sonnet as a form which caters to the self of many cultures. (2010: 347)

Barrett goes on to note that as post-colonial, feminist and post-feminist, and post-structural movements have progressed, the traditionally self-reflexive modus operandi of the sonnet has come of age, appropriate to a period in which attention is paid to the manner in which subjectivities are represented — especially those that hitherto have been marginalised or rendered voiceless (2010). In this respect, the references I have made to the legacy of Petrarch and Shakespeare offer at least a glimpse into how today's poets might continue to work with the sonnet as a form conducive to speculation, especially as that concerns a critical engagement with self and subjectivity.

Conclusion

This paper began with the notion that poetic speculation is not confined to reflection on an external world. Indeed, Petrarch and Shakespeare employ the form of the sonnet to turn inwards, towards an introspective mode of writing in which the poet-narrator places themselves at the centre of their poetry. Analysis of their work suggests that even when directed at a lover, or in dialogue with time or mortality or indeed God, these two master-sonneteers almost invariably return to their own personas — flawed, longing, troubled, joyful — in ways that infuse their poetry with a Humanist solipsism that found fertile ground in the Renaissance period. The self-awareness present in their sonnets also extends to their understanding of their role as poet-narrators, engaged in the craft of writing that could extend love and fame — to name just two of their common preoccupations — beyond their own lifetimes.

The form of the sonnet has been revealed as a vehicle designed to set up, explore and respond to particular ideas. The volta or turn, in particular, is a device through which Petrarch and Shakespeare step through their dialogic, critical interaction with key themes, using the sestet or couplet, respectively, to come to a new or different position that reimagines what at the outset of a sonnet might seem fixed or immutable. The feminine rhyme schemes employed by Petrarch may be representative of a kind of openness of sound well suited to posing questions that are answered in the final lines of the sonnet. Though Shakespeare used a combination of feminine and masculine rhymes, he nevertheless took up the Elizabethan approach of 'encapsulation' in the use of the rhyming couplet, using that mechanism to deliver what I have proposed is a kind of punchline that switches direction at the last moment.

Though it is now over 750 years old, the sonnet continues to offer poets the opportunity to ‘turn over’ ideas that are important to us, providing us with a rich history of examples upon which to draw. While I have pointed out a degree of egocentrism at play in the work of both Petrarch and Shakespeare, I would conclude by pointing out that self-reflection and self-exploration are hallmarks of contemporary poetic writing, in which questions about identity and subjectivity are caught up in the drive to rethink the power of our own voices. Thus, sonnets continue to encourage us to speculate on our position in the world: not just our relationship to others, but also to ourselves.

[1] Spiller argues that the references to ‘Will’ in this context has a third meaning: ‘135 and 136 are alike in a virtuoso display of bawdiness on the word ‘Will’: if the last line of 136, ‘Think all but one, and me in that one Will’, means ‘Imagine that all your lovers are me, and that I alone am having intercourse with you’, then the first line of 137, ‘If thy soul check thee that I come so near’, probably refers back to ‘in that one will’ — i.e., ‘so near you as to enter your body’; and would suggest that the two sonnets were to be read together’ (1992: 168).

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