The magic of Shakespeare’s sonnets

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All readers of Renaissance poetry are unanimous in regarding the sonnets of Shakespeare as constituting the greatest love poetry in the language. Elegant, moving tributes to Shakespeare’s handling of the themes of love and time, clever and often sensational investigations of the possible identities of the friend and the dark lady, scholarly and intelligent debates regarding the dates of composition and possible sequence of the sonnets fill many library shelves. This paper seeks not to offer any fresh insights on dating or identities but to draw attention to one dimension of the predominant themes of love and time in the sonnets that, to my knowledge, has never been examined. It is my submission that one of the most fascinating areas of Renaissance thought, occult philosophy or magic, provides a context within which the sonnets need to be read and that such a reading would simplify and organize our perception of the activity of meaning within the sonnet sequence by providing us with a graph to help us map the implications of thoughts and images in the sonnets. Simultaneously, it would add new dimensions of meaning to familiar passages and enhance our awareness of the richness and complexity of the sonnets.

Renaissance magic\(^1\) was made up of various strands, including cabalism and hermeticism. The great flowering of occult philosophy in the Italian Renaissance was the result of the work of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, later to be systematized and tabulated by Henry Cornelius Agrippa.\(^2\) Many of these ideas were imported into Britain by Giordano Bruno in the 1580s and were assimilated and popularized by England’s own magus John Dee, who may have been the model for Shakespeare’s Prospero.\(^3\) There were two characteristics fundamental to the various kinds of magic: first, a belief in the correspondence between the different cosmic levels of the natural, the celestial, and the supercelestial, and secondly, a belief in the possibility of manipulating one of the higher worlds in order to bring down influences or enlightenment to the lower. Magic or occult philosophy, therefore, was a philosophy of power.

\(^1\) There is by now fairly extensive scholarly work on Renaissance magic. Particular reference should be made, however, to the many books by Frances A. Yates, especially Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition (London, 1964) and The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age (London, 1979).


Although Shakespeare's interest in magic and occult philosophy is generally admitted, with the exception of Frances Yates too often has this been discussed simply with reference to the ghosts, fairies, and witches that people Shakespeare's plays. Yet Shakespeare's interest in magic went far deeper than this and in play after play he explored the question of the relation of power to magic. Nowhere is the power of magic so apparent as in A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest: both are plays which, for many, end with uneasy questions about the effects of magic. In the graph of Shakespeare's changing perceptions of the power of magic, an early instance might be Love's Labour's Lost, with its possible sceptical reference to occult philosophy as 'the school of night'. But A Midsummer Night's Dream, possibly written around 1595–6, and thus probably immediately after the sonnets, marks a new belief in the efficacy of magic. The play's ending may seem unsatisfactory, with Demetrius in love with Helena only as a result of the external application of the juice of the magical flower in his eyes. Yet Shakespeare probably intended to indicate that magic has transformed the very essence of Demetrius's character. In sharp contrast, in The Tempest Shakespeare rejects magic, with Prospero renouncing magic at the end, precisely because he feels that magic can affect appearances but cannot substantially alter the essence of things. His magic is quite unable to bring about any change in the character of his brother Antonio. It is this debate about the power of magic in Shakespeare that provides a frame of reference for the sonnets, and the polarities and obsessions of the sonnets become clear once they are placed in the context of Shakespeare's overall interest in magic.

Any enquiry into the presence of magic in the sonnets must begin with an examination of the relationship between love and magic in the Renaissance. This is indeed a vast subject but it is essential to consider briefly some of its main features. In the Platonic philosophy of love, the tremendous emotional power of Eros is manifested through the ability of Eros to be a link between the existence and the essence of beings. Even profane (i.e. psycho-physical) love is a step towards intellectual contemplation. Love, in a sense, involves the same hierarchized ascent that is fundamental to magic. Indeed, the concept of spiritus that is central to Ficino's occult philosophy is also a major factor in the philosophy of love since love, as in Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium, involves a radiation of energy through the eyes which transforms the object and, interacting with the spiritus, creates an image or impression of the beloved on the mind of the lover. That is why – in the context of the notion of love being both mortal (i.e. changeable)

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4 For detailed discussions of this aspect of the play and its background see M. C. Bradbrook, The School of Night: A Study in the Literary Relationships of Sir Walter Raleigh (Cambridge, 1936) and Frances A. Yates, A Study of 'Love's Labour's Lost' (Cambridge, 1936).

5 On this aspect of magic, see Paul Stevens, 'Magic structures: Comus and the illusions of fancy', Milton Quarterly, 17/3 (1983), 84–90.

and immortal (i.e. never extinguished) – Ficino brings together love and memory in an equation that is echoed in a number of Shakespeare sonnets:

Whenever we meet that person whom we formerly loved, we are shaken, our hearts jump or quiver, or our livers melt and our eyes tremble, and our faces turn many colours (like the rainbow when the sun shines opposite the misty air). For his presence suggests to the eyes of the soul in his presence, the form lying dormant in the mind, as though rousing the fire slumbering under the ashes by blowing on it.7

Repeatedly, in Ficino, love is presented as magic or enchantment.

In love there is all the power of enchantment. The work of enchantment is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain similarity of their nature.8

Love is an enchanter and ‘the work of love is effected by bewitchment, magic spells and potions’.

Giordano Bruno extended the Ficinian concept of love as magic from its essentially philosophical and physiological bias to a more practical psychological theory of magic. In Eros and Magic in the Renaissance,9 Ioan P. Couliano has analysed Bruno’s De vinculis in genere, ‘Of Enchantment in General’, as an important and entire thesis on erotic magic which carries to its logical conclusion the Ficinian position on the subject showing erotic magic to be a method that the accomplished magus can use to manipulate not only another individual but entire masses.

In spite of this obvious line of development, there is one very major difference between Ficino and Bruno – one which has a direct bearing on the treatment of love in Shakespeare’s sonnets. In the Eroici Furori Bruno distinguishes between the heroic Eros whose object is God and the natural Eros whose object is a woman. In a bitter attack on Petrarch, whom he calls ‘this vernacular poet who sighed for a girl of Valchiusa . . . lacking the intelligence to apply himself to better things’, he exclaims

Here we find, written down, bound in books, displayed to the eyes, intoned to the ears, a noise, a bawling, a buzzing of charades, of tales, of puns, insinuations, epistles, sonnets, epigrams, books, prolix documents, violent sweats, lives wasted away with gashings of teeth to deafen the stars, lamentations resounding in the caverns of hell, woes that stun the souls of the living, sighs to cause the merciful gods to faint, all that for the sake of these eyes, these ears, this blush, . . . this sun in eclipse, this crazy person, this slut . . . which, by means of a superficial appearance, a shadow, a phantasm, a dream, a Circe-like charm in the service of procreation, deceives us by taking the form of beauty.10

In Bruno, this undeserving woman is replaced by a divine being, goddess-like, identified with Diana and often interpreted as Queen Elizabeth herself.

7 Ibid. p. 201.
8 Ibid. p. 199.
9 Ioan P. Couliano, Eros and Magic in the Renaissance (Chicago, 1987).
10 Ibid. p. 68.
But, in general terms, this anti-Petrarchism and denigration of woman is strikingly reminiscent of Shakespeare’s dark lady sonnets.

Shakespeare’s sonnets are predominantly poems about power – the power of love and the power of time. Reading them as love poems, one is struck by their passionate intensity – the searing experience of guilty, revulsion, shame, self-analysis, and despair, combined with desire, pride, joy, comfort, and triumph – that make them such compelling reading. Perhaps the one feeling that is wholly absent in the sonnets is any sense of peace. The speaker of the sonnets is on a continuous ‘high’, whether the feeling be one of frustration and despair or of buoyancy and triumph. In Shakespeare’s relationship with both the friend and the dark lady there is a continuous sense of tension and urgency generated by his perception of the power of time in the sonnets to the young friend and his consciousness of the power of a unique experience of love in the dark lady sonnets.

Shakespeare’s sonnets are addressed to two persons: a young man who is fair and socially and morally superior, and a woman who is dark, dishonest, and downright damnable. Both these persons exercise an emotional power over him. The essence of these two relationships is summed up in Sonnet CXLIV (‘Two loves I have, of comfort and despair’11) which, with its paradigm of angel and devil, invites us to relate it to Renaissance occult philosophy, a philosophy of power. At first sight, the basic situation appears to be that of everyman with two spirits, a good angel and a devil, fighting for his soul. On closer scrutiny the position turns out to be more complex. True, the ‘man right fair’ is a ‘better angel’, a ‘saint’, and the ‘woman coloured ill’ ‘the worser spirit’, a ‘female evil’, the man’s purity contrasting with the woman’s ‘foul pride’. The difference from the everyman situation is that the two spirits are not fighting for possession of the poet’s soul. They are, in fact, supremely uninterested in him and are engaged in a relationship of their own which causes him obvious anxiety.

This situation is not unique to this sonnet, for what is evident in the entire sonnet sequence is the poet’s vulnerability and his sense of bondage to both the young man and the dark lady. They are like spirits who exercise their power and full control over him. But, given this obvious common denominator, there is a fundamental difference in Shakespeare’s relationship to the two characters. If the nature of the two relationships is best explained with reference to the framework of magic, then the relationship with the dark lady is a relationship of enchantment and enchainment of a soul-destroying intensity that is a form of black magic and the relationship with the friend expectedly demonstrates signs of white magic. This is not an oversimplification, as a closer examination reveals.

Sonnets CXXVII to CLI are generally regarded as the sonnets to the dark lady. These sonnets present her as ‘black as hell’ (CXLVII), with black eyes and brow (CXXXII), and ‘black wires’ (CXXX) in place of hair on her head.

11 All quotations from Shakespeare’s sonnets are from *Shakespeare, Complete Works*, ed. W. J. Craig (London, 1905).
Yet this dark colouring is insignificant in comparison with the blackness within her, for in nothing is she as black as in her deeds (CXXXI). Even her playing the virginals has a diabolical effect as it makes 'dead wood more blest than living lips' (CXXVIII). Her heart is full of hatred and lies, and yet the torment of it is that both the friend and the poet are prisoners of this dark lady (CXXXIII). If the bond between this woman and the poet is love, then this is a kind of love whose natural comparisons are with fever (CXLVII), plague (CXXXVII, CXL), and madness (CXL).

The sense of despair and bondage that characterizes this relationship results in one of the most violent sonnets of the entire sonnet sequence, Sonnet CXXIX, 'The expense of spirit in a waste of shame'. Its images of war, murder, savagery, cruelty, hunting, and baiting, all culminate in the hopelessness of the concluding lines

All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

The mesmerizing, enslaving, corrupting power of the dark lady is indeed acknowledged in sonnet after sonnet. One such example is Sonnet CXLVII ('My love is as a fever, longing still'), which ends a contemplation of its own sickness and absence of sanity with the admission

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

Shakespeare's dark lady appears to be the archetypal 'belle dame sans merci', the literary precursor of Keat's 'Belle Dame' and Coleridge's Geraldine, with power to captivate and to corrupt.

This throws further light on Sonnets CXXXV and CXXXVI, with their play on 'will'. The erotic implications of 'will' in these sonnets have often been pointed out and are undeniably there. In fact their presence is quite consistent with the sonnets' involvement with magic, as sexuality was a common adjunct of Renaissance magic. But the play on 'will', the subjugation or absorption of the poet's will – in its straightforward sense – by the dark lady, also implies the domination of any power of volition of the poet's by the powerful evil spirit who now rules over him.

Power, indeed, is a concept that is recurrent in the dark lady sonnets, culminating in Sonnet CL:

O! from what power hast thou this powerful might
With insufficiency my heart to sway?
To make me give the lie to my true sight
And swear that brightness doth not grace the day?
Whence hast thou this becoming of things ill,
That in the very refuse of thy deeds
There is such strength and warrantise of skill
That in my mind thy worst all best exceeds?
The sonnets explore the concept of magic as power and the dark lady sonnets present a Brunian woman who, in a typical instance of magic gone awry, assumes total control over the poet rather than appearing as a spirit over whom the poet-magus can exercise control and give commands.

That there is nothing trivial or frivolous about such a situation is clear from the suffering, despair, and violence expressed in the sonnets together with an admission of obsession. Repeatedly this love is seen as disfiguring and defiling. At one level we are back at the medieval world of demons and witches, and the dark lady is the natural companion of the witches of Macbeth or of Sycorax in The Tempest.

In the sonnets addressed to the friend the situation is very different. The young man is not only fair without but also inwardly fair. As sonnet LIV records:

O! how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
By that sweet ornament that truth doth give:
The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
For that sweet odour which doth in it live.

The sonnets to the friend begin with an impassioned plea to the young man to marry and replicate his beauty. Later, Shakespeare takes it upon himself to preserve that beauty in his sonnets. Conscious of the destructiveness of time, he declares

And all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you I engrat you new.

There are distinct metaphors that Shakespeare uses in his quest for immortalization. These range from the metaphor of grafting to distilling essences to the creation of a memorial in verse. Like the Pyramids or the Taj Mahal, the verbal construct, Shakespeare’s sonnets, will immortalize his friend. This theme of immortalization has, however, two curious facets. First, the eternity of the sonnets is itself earth-bound and time-bound

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

In these entirely secular poems there is no consciousness of the eternity of heaven as, for instance, in Donne’s ‘The Anniversary’ which speaks of ‘this or a love increased there above’. Secondly, repeatedly Shakespeare refers to the creation of a memory image of his friend in language that is strongly suggestive of another aspect of Renaissance magic, the art of memory.

The art of memory was a technique for exploiting the imagistic nature of that faculty by associating ideas to images systematically ordered for ease of recall. This was originally a mnemotechnical classical art referred to by Cicero and Quintilian which consisted of the technique whereby Roman orators associated different images with different parts of a building and stored these associations in the memory. They would be thus accessible to
recall as soon as the eye passed over these places. This art was recommended in the Middle Ages by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas. This mnemo-technical system was incorporated in the Renaissance into its occult philosophy. Renaissance Neoplatonism, with its Hermetic core, transformed the art of memory into a branch of magic. Frances Yates, in her book The Art of Memory, has discussed in detail the memory theatre of Giulio Camillo and the much later memory theatre of Robert Fludd, and has suggested connections with the Globe Theatre. But there is also another aspect of the art of memory that Yates has discussed – memory as a magical system of reform.

Central to the Renaissance art of memory was its creation of ideal figures and images which, when impressed upon the memory, would reform, renovate, inspire, and instil good influences into the whole being of the person receiving these impressions. Such was the influence of Ficino’s figura mundi, or image of the world, Giulio Camillo’s memory theatre, or the magic circles of Bruno’s memory treatises. In De vita coelitus comparanda, Ficino speaks of a figure of the world which could be a painting on the ceiling of one’s bedroom, or a pendent or other piece of jewellery to be worn, which had places associated with good magical or astral influences and which, when memorized, would renovate the individual, making him a better adjusted person able to receive good influences and protect him from harmful ones. This magical art of memory provides a frame of reference for an understanding of the full implications of the sonnets immortalizing the young man.

While the dark lady sonnets explore the darker side of magic as power, the sonnets to the young man examine the power of magical memory. In its handling of the theme of immortalization, the sequence presents remarkable instances of the creation of memory images. Such figures or constructs are distinct from a dwelling on remembrance of things past, as in Sonnet XXX (‘When to the sessions of sweet silent thought’), where memory is random and unorganized while the creation of memory images involves a deliberate act of judicious selection and a careful imprinting of image. One example of this is Sonnet XXIV:

Mine hath play’d the painter and hath stell’d
Thy beauty’s form in table of my heart;
My body is the frame wherein ’tis held,
And perspective it is best painter’s art –
For through the painter must you see his skill
To find where your true image pictur’d lies,
Which in my bosom’s shop is hanging still,
That hath his windows glazed with mine eyes:
Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
Are windows to my breast, where-through the sun

Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee:
Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art,
They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

Not only the depiction of the friend’s ‘beauty’s form’ on the tablet of his heart, the recreation of the ‘true image’ of his friend, but, even more important, the ability of that image to draw down the good influence of the sun indicates a clear relationship with Renaissance magical memory. The final couplet’s distinction between an actual painting drawn by a painter and this memory image in the heart completes a conceit that gradually evolves through the sonnets which ultimately depicts the text itself as such a tablet or ornament that serves as a memory image.

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rime;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents . . .
Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.

(LV)

Image, form, shape – these are recurrent terms in the sonnets to the friend in their repeated attempts to anchor the young man’s worth in the mind of the poet. The text is the externalization of that mental image. In Sonnet CXXII he writes

Thy gift, thy tables, are within my brain
Full character’d with lasting memory,
Which shall above that idle rank remain,
Beyond all date even to eternity:
Or at the least so long as brain and heart
Have faculty by nature to subsist;
Till each to raz’d oblivion yield his part
Of thee, thy record never can be miss’d.
That poor retention could not so much hold,
Nor need I tallies thy dear love to score;
Therefore to give them from me was I bold,
To trust those tables that receive thee more:
To keep an adjunct to remember thee
Were to import forgetfulness in me.

The young man’s memory image has been imprinted on the poet’s mind, and the depth and corresponding value of this impression is much greater than any external record can be.

It is remarkable with what consistency the sonnet sequence presents two concurrent sets of metaphors. In one, the friend’s immortality is ensured through a memory image inscribed or painted in the poet’s heart. In the other, the friend’s image is preserved in the sonnet (LX, LXIII, LXV), where, like a jewel, it shines bright. There is a striking resemblance in this to Ficino’s magical memory images – a painting on the ceiling or a pendent or jewel. For the poet, the friend’s memory image, like a Ficinian painting or a
Brunian seal, has been absorbed and impressed on his heart. Renovated by
the effect of such absorption, he has created for the world at large and for
all lovers in particular a jewel in black ink, the sonnet sequence.

Taken as a whole, the sequence of Shakespeare’s sonnets can be seen to
explore two vital areas of magic, erotic magic and the art of memory.
Shakespeare’s sonnets are unique in having two different persons holding
centre stage, a man and a woman, although the sequence is dedicated to one
‘onlie begetter’. It has of course been traditional to regard woman as nature
and man as culture, and this could to an extent explain Shakespeare’s attitude
to his two loves. But in an age which saw the humble adoration of poets to
an assortment of Stellas, Delias, even Ideas, let alone the full flowering of
the cult of the Queen, the extent of Shakespeare’s anti-Petrarchist attitude
to woman in the dark lady sonnets can be explained only with reference
to a Brunian view of erotic magic. Since, although recognized as inferior,
she still remains powerful and irresistible, she is seen also as a demon, a devil.
She needs to be exorcized and it is precisely that awareness that fills the
tortured sonnets that follow Sonnet CXLIV.

The friend, on the other hand, as recognizably handsome, good, and vir-
tuous, is presented in configurations strongly reminiscent of good white
magic. The repeated solar imagery in the sonnets to the friend, the constant
interplay on the ‘eye of heaven’, the sun, and the young man’s eyes\(^15\) – such
strategies are strongly reminiscent of Ficinian magic. That this is so is clear
from Sonnet XIV, which declares

\[ \begin{align*}
& \text{But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,} \\
& \text{And, constant stars, in them I read such art} \\
& \text{As truth and beauty shall together thrive,} \\
& \text{If from thy self to store thou would’st convert;} \\
\end{align*} \]

In the sonnets magic does not merely provide metaphors and conceits. It
dominates the three central characters – the poet, the young man, and the
dark lady – and conditions their relationships. It is also true to say, I think,
that the intertexture of magic thrives on the anonymity of the young man
and the dark lady, making the sonnets explorations of the Renaissance mind.
Fixing of identities would have led to debate and provoked interest of a more
specifically biographical nature. The anonymity of the young man and the
dark lady, on the other hand, permits a more open approach and sustains
the philosophical dimensions of these poems.

Finally, the magic of the sonnets is ultimately related to Shakespeare’s
sustained exploration of magic in his plays, including Love’s Labour’s Lost,
A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Hamlet, The Tempest, and A Winter’s Tale.
Shakespeare’s view of magic in these plays spans the polarities of magic as
an evil corrupting power, and magic as good and renovative. The known
dichotomies of the two romances The Tempest and A Winter’s Tale include

\(^15\) See, for example, Sonnets VII, XVIII, XXIV, XXXIII.
the dichotomy of the two kinds of magic – *A Winter’s Tale* ends with an assertion of the possibilities of good magic while Shakespeare’s questioning of the power of magic in *The Tempest* includes not only Sycorax but also Prospero, who ultimately renounces magic. These deeply troubling polarities of magic provide a frame of reference for Shakespeare’s exploration of magic in relation to the themes of love and time in his sonnets.

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