Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Use of Personification

Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 24 January 2017 - 6:00PM

Location: Museum of London
This academic year we’ve been exploring various aspects of rhetoric, briefly, the ‘art of persuasion’, in relation to a number of famous works of English literature. We considered Jane Austen’s use of irony in her last completed novel, *Persuasion*. In the second lecture we explored Dickens’ use of hyperbole, or ‘exaggeration’, in his late novel, *Hard Times*. And tonight we embark on Shakespeare’s sonnets – or at least some of them – in relation to the rhetorical trope of personification or *prosopopoeia*. A prosopopoeia (Greek: προσωποποιία) is a device by means of which a speaker or writer communicates by speaking as another person or an object. The term derives from the Greek prósopon ‘face, person’, and poíein ‘to make, to do’.

But my purpose is not simply to illustrate how certain techniques work, but to suggest that in the hands of the great writers the trope in question is frequently subtly subverted, or extended, or in some way tweaked. Rhetoric never has things completely sorted, nor is it unchanging.

But first a few words about the sonnets and, then, about personification and its history. The first written work bearing Shakespeare’s name was the erotic narrative, *Venus and Adonis* (1593), which draws on a rich vocabulary to explore love, praise of the loved one, sexual desire and the power of rhetoric. The poem was immensely successful so much so that many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries considered him a poet first and foremost, rather than a playwright. Work on *Venus and Adonis* took place in 1592-4, during a period of plague when the theatres were closed. Theatre companies went on tour but Shakespeare stayed behind. It is supposed that he used the two years to write poetry. He started with *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and a few years later the sonnets emerged. And it is likely that later bursts of poetic activity may well also have taken place during periods of plague. So the poetry is very much the product of circumstance – bleak circumstance. Each London plague took the lives of roughly a quarter of the population. That Shakespeare should have ruminated about the passage of time and human mortality is hardly surprising.

There are 154 sonnets and they explore - time passing, love, eroticism, beauty and mortality. All are transient, and so the passage of time is perhaps Shakespeare’s greatest preoccupation in the poetry. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man; the last 28 to a woman. The sonnets to a young man describe a passionate and obsessional love. What has long been debated is the nature of the love expressed – whether it is platonlc, or physical. Sonnets 1-17 are generally referred to as the *procreation sonnets* because they seek to persuade the young man to marry and have children in order to immortalize his beauty, transferring it to the next generation. Others imply criticism of the young man for his interest in a rival poet.

The sonnets of the Dark Lady sequence (sonnets 127-154) contrast with the Fair Youth poems as they are overtly sexual in terms of the figuring of passion. Many critics point to the spiritual love for the *Fair Youth* in contrast to the sexual love for the *Dark Lady*. With both the *Fair Youth* and the *Dark Lady* there have been many attempts to identify them with real historical individuals - and to construe Shakespeare’s sexuality. This isn’t our interest tonight. And one persuasive reading of the sonnets is that they are in part at least pastiches or parodies of the Petrarchan love sonnet. That aspects of the sonnets are biographical is beyond doubt. The extent and detail of possible biographical origins remains fiercely debated.

The critical appreciation of the sonnets has come and gone. During the eighteenth century their reputation was relatively low but with the rise of romanticism interest was renewed and grew greatly during the course of the nineteenth century. Today, *The Sonnets*’ reputation is global. There is no major written language – real or invented - into which the sonnets have not been translated, including Japanese, Turkish, Spanish, Portuguese, Afrikaans, Albanian, Arabic, Hebrew, Welsh, Yiddish, - and even Esperanto!

They undoubtedly constitute one of the great works of world literature.

So why have I chosen to explore this large body of not altogether immediately accessible poems in relation to the rhetorical trope of personification? Personification is a trickier rhetorical figure than one might at first suppose. A basic dictionary definition might be:

- the attribution of a personal nature or human characteristics to something non-human, or the representation of an abstract quality in human form, the Grim Reaper to represent death

or

- a figure intended to represent an abstract quality, for example a rose to represent love.

In the modern period, personification was for a long time equated with allegory. And personification(al allegory, until relatively recently, was considered, ‘wooden, tedious, obvious, simple and juvenile’ (James J. Paxson, *The...*)

But the trope has a very long history. Aristotle describes, and I quote, ‘Homer’s common practice of giving metaphorical life to lifeless things’, but does not actually use the term ‘prosopopoeia’ (Paxson, p.12). The first description of personification, more or less as we understand it today, in Western rhetorical theory occurs in Demetrius of Phalerum’s third century BC treatise On Style. His definition is brief but relatively broad. He writes, ‘Another figure of thought – the so-called prosopopoeia – may be employed to produce energy of style, as in the words, “Imagine that your ancestors, or Hellas, or your native land, assuming a woman’s form, should address such and such a reproach to you”’. (Paxson, p.12)

Quintilian was also a major contributor to the definition of personification. The Institutio Oratoria treats prosopopoeia at great length. As Paxson argues, ‘Quintilian’s final pronouncement on personification in the Institutio displays [a] semiological crux in terms more sociologically loaded for poetics in the 1990s.’ In other words Quintilian already identifies some of the complexities of the trope which have not been fully explored until relatively recently. He quotes Quintilian:

Further, it is not merely true that the variety required in impersonation will be in proportion to the variety presented by the case, for impersonation demands even greater variety, since it involves the portrayal of the emotions of children, women, nations, and even voiceless things, all of which require to be represented in character. (Paxson, p.19)

The sophistication of Quintilian’s understanding of the trope is unsurpassed until the Renaissance when discussion of personification again excited debate.

In 1675, in Bernard Lamy’s De l’art de Parler (‘On the Art of Speech’), a manual for speech-makers and poets, personification is closely associated, for the first time, with strong emotion:

When a passion is violent, it renders them mad in some measure that are possess’d with it. In that case we entertain ourselves with Rocks, and with dead Men, as if they were living, and make them speak as if they had Souls. (Paxson, p.25)

Here the suggestion is that the urge to personify might have a psychotic, delusional, hallucinatory dimension... By the eighteenth century personification has become such a popular subject of discussion that it is impossible to provide any kind of brief overview. And commentators are far from concise. Henry Home, Lord Kames, in his Elements of Criticism, a manual for critics and writers, devotes no fewer than thirteen pages to a discussion of personification! Most of Kames’s examples are taken from Shakespeare or Virgil. As for Lamy, it is highly-charged emotional states that give rise to personification. This leads Kames to propose two types of personification. ‘Passionate’ personification stimulates the invention of characters in discourse. It is superior to the other kind because it originates in sincere strong feeling. ‘Descriptive’ personification, on the other hand, is mere ornament. Kames was, however, no great friend of personification, warning writers against frequent use of a figure which he described as generally of ‘ridiculous appearance’. In a similar vein, he termed Virgil’s over-use of the trope ‘insufferable’. I do enjoy the lack of restraint of many eighteenth-century writers!

The eighteenth-century French tradition of rhetorical discussion of the trope of personification is more theoretically rigorous and reaches its apogee in the writings of Pierre Fontanier, in particular his magisterial, Manuel classique pour l’étude des tropes, ou Éléments de la science du sens des mots (Classical Manual for the Study of Tropes, or Elements of the science of the Meaning of Words, Paris, Belin-Leprieur, 1821). His definition is concise and original in terms of the relationship he proposes between personification and other rhetorical tropes:

Personification involves making an inanimate, non-sentient being, or an abstract and wholly ideal being, a kind of real physical being, endowed with feeling and life, that is, what we would call a person; and this, simply as a function of speech, or by a completely verbal fiction.... It takes place as a function of metonymy, synecdoque, or metaphor. (Cited by Paxson, p.26)

Personification, according to Fontanier, concerns life and non-life, sentence, abstract formlessness, substantial form, the power of speech, etc. He also explores the relationship between personification, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche; metaphor, briefly defined as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable, for example the expression, ‘all the world’s a stage’. Metonymy might be briefly described as the substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant, for example the crown for the monarch. And synecdoche might, crudely, be defined as a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa, as in England lost by six goals (meaning ‘the English football team’).

Recent theorists of rhetoric, Gérard Genette (who, incidentally, edited Fontanier’s Les figures du Discours), and particularly Paul de Man, have made the study of personification central to literary theory. For de Man, personification is ‘the master trope of poetic discourse’. Rhetoric has come a long way from the time when
personification was considered ‘wooden, tedious, obvious, simple and juvenile’!

So how does Shakespeare use personification, or, to put it another way, what does Shakespeare make of the trope? I want to consider four interwoven themes which are prevalent in *The Sonnets*: time, ageing, love, and the art of poetry-making itself.

Let’s begin with sonnet 60, read by Sir John Gielgud.

The sonnet explores the idea of mortality. Only in the final couplet is the loved one mentioned, in the final line, as the one who might be saved from the total oblivion of time’s annihilation. But despite the rebellious tone, the closing couplet hardly rescues the reader from the thought that everything that is mortal must pass away, for the minutes, and our minutes spent remembering, continue to advance, in the same way as the waves, ceaselessly pounding the shore.

So let’s briefly consider the sonnet by line. (My gloss of the sonnet is partly based on the excellent gloss provided @ www.shakespeares-sonnets.org)

1. **Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,**

   Like as, in like manner; make towards = proceed in the direction of (OED 35.b.)

2. **So do our minutes hasten to their end;**

   The imagery is of the dissipation and disappearance of every wave as it breaks on the shore. The sea may seem like a strange simile for our mortality as the sea has a permanence. But the individual waves can be convincingly equated to the disappearance of the minutes.

3. **Each changing place with that which goes before,**

   Waves appear to replace each other.

4. **In sequent toil all forwards do contend.**

   In sequent toil in consecutive laborious movement; toil suggests exhausting labour, and relentless struggle of life. The word toil is often suggestive of the conflict of war (OED n(1).1 & 2). The waves march forward, like troops, to fight, and expire on the shore.

5. **Nativity, once in the main of light,**

   Nativity, birth. A new born child is implied

   the main of light - the full glare of light; the main refers to the sea, and being in the main implies being out in the open sea.

6. **Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown’d,**

   Crawls - as a baby crawls; also implies slowness, as the years of youth seem to pass slowly. The slowness also equates with the crabbedness of age.

   wherewith, with which i.e., maturity.

7. **Crooked eclipses ‘gainst his glory fight,**

   Crooked eclipses malignant eclipses of sun or moon. Eclipses were considered to be harmful. Sudden misfortunes were often attributed to an eclipse, so here, eclipse means a ‘blight caused by bad luck’. An eclipse may also be described in terms of the struggle of darkness against the light; figuratively against the glory of youth and maturity.

8. **And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.**

   his gift; Time's gift is life and everything it brings.

   confound, destroy.

9. **Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth**

   Flourish, time of perfection, the splendour of youth; transfix means to run through, to pierce, with a lance or sword.

10. **And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,**

    delves the parallels, digs the furrows; parallels were defensive ditches used in siege warfare. The lines are also compared with the wrinkles which line the forehead as the human face ages.
11. Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
   
   the rarities of nature's truth - the image is of a rapacious creature feeding on rare things; truth always rhymes with youth in the Sonnets.

12. And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:

   Stands, exists, grows.
   his scythe = Time's scythe. The scythe was used for mowing hay. Time and Death were frequently portrayed as a skeleton carrying a scythe.

13. And yet to times in hope, my verse shall stand

   Stand, exists, but also 'stands up to', 'defies'.

   The repetition of 'stand(s)' is a ploce, a figure of speech in which a word is separated or repeated by way of emphasis.

14. Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand.

   thy worth, although the poem leads up to this, it is the only mention of the youth in the sonnet. The rarities of nature's truth and the flourish set on, are references to the poet's loved one.
   his cruel hand, Time's cruel hand, and the hand of a clock

   Shakespeare is drawing here on Ovid's Metamorphoses:

   But looke
   As every wave dryves other foorth, and that that comes behind
   Bothe thrusteth and is thrust itself: even so the tymes by kind
   Doo fly and follow bothe at once, and evermore renew.
   For that that was before is left, and streyght there doth ensw
   Another that was never erst.


   Ovid brings the movement of the waves into relation with time, and time is personified, 'The Tymes... /Doo fly...'
   But Shakespeare's use of personification is much more layered and complicated. The last of the sixty minutes of the hour are represented by the numbering of the sonnet – 60. Could this be seen as a form of personification as the abstract notion of a unit of time is made 'concrete' in the number 60, and in the 'concrete' existence of the poem? The minutes are personified, 'fastening to their end'. The point about chronological time is that it passes with mathematical precision and cannot speed up, or slow down, except in terms of our subjective experience of it. And the waves, in the first line, 'make towards the pebbled shore', suggesting intentionality, perhaps. And the comparison of the forward movement of the waves and the forward movement of minutes are both described as 'In sequent toil' and 'forwards do contend'. Waves are not animate phenomena, they move as a function of the power provided by the wind. Likewise minutes only move forward in the representation of them on an analogue watch or clock face. 'Nativity', or birth, is then personified, it 'crawls to maturity'. Babies crawl and humans slowly develop from childhood to maturity. Old people might also be described as crawling their way. Further, 'Nativity', 'that which is born', is 'crowned', alluding to Christ's crown of thorns. The 'main of light' refers to the 'open sea' and ties in with the image of the 'pebbled shore', a terminus, a resting place, in the first line. The 'Crooked eclipses... fight', a further personification. Eclipses are both the product of asymmetrical movements by the planets, and crooked in the sense of malign in their effects on humankind. Old people also become 'crooked'. Time is then personified, 'Time, that gave... doth his gift confound'; 'confound' meaning destroy. This line alludes to the Book of Common Prayer, 'Order for the Burial of the Dead', from Job, 1.21, 'The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.' So is there a sense that time has been personified as God? This immediately changes in the next line, 'Time doth transfix...'. In modern English 'transfix' is metaphorical. In Shakespearean English 'transfix' means to 'pierce or impale', suggesting the scythe traditionally associated with time, 'the grim reaper'; however, a counteracting sense of 'transfix', meaning 'fix, imprint' is developed by the following line, which implies that time destroys the lineaments of beauty not by destroying but by caricaturing them. Time also 'delves the parallels', meaning digs parallel lines, another personification. Time also 'feeds' (line11), suggesting a rapacious, destructive appetite which is an animal or human trait, not something obviously associated with time, an abstract. Finally, the poet's 'verse' is personified, 'stand[ing]', rather than being cut down by time's scythe.

Personification has been described as 'a radical tendency of the human psyche, embedded in the very roots of language, basic to every impulse toward dramatic representation' (Bronson, p.166) Sonnet 60 surely bears this out. The relentlessness of time and human mortality are two of the great themes of poetry in general, and the
The Shakespearian sonnet has fourteen lines made up of three quatrains (three groups of four lines) followed by a couplet (two lines). The rhyme scheme of the quatrains is abab cdcd efef. The couplet has the rhyme scheme gg. This structure is called the English sonnet or the Shakespearean sonnet, to distinguish it from the Italian Petrarchan sonnet which has two parts: a rhyming octave (abbaabba) and a rhyming sestet (cdcdcd).

The meter of Shakespeare's sonnets (and many of his plays) is the most common poetic meter in English, the iambic pentameter. ‘Pentameter’ refers to a line that is divided into five sections, or ‘feet’. An ‘iamb’ is made up of two syllables: the first syllable is lightly accented and the second syllable is strongly accented, giving the rhythm ‘daDUM’. A complete poetic line of five iambs sounds like:

daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM daDUM.

Each changing place with that which goes before.

For the sake of effect, some iambs work differently.

The third iamb of this line is a ‘trochee’ (a foot consisting of one long or stressed syllable followed by one short or unstressed syllable). This gives us the following rhythm:

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,

The reversal of the rhythm enacts the movement of the wave, falling back on itself and then running forward mimsics, at the level of the language, the movement of the waves that it describes.

In some sense one might argue that the poem itself is a complex personification of the abstract notion of the conquest of time by the immortality of the poem – a concrete object - itself. I'll say more about this idea later. First we need to consider other poems.

I think one can reasonably propose a not altogether different reading of sonnet 63. As Katherine Duncan-Jones explains in her note to the sonnet, ‘Anticipating a time when the fair youth will be as old and decrepit as he is now, the speaker makes provision against the youth's loss of beauty by preserving it in poetry. It is surely not by chance that this sonnet on the severe changes brought about by the ageing process is positioned as number 63, the ‘grand climacteric’, = 7 x 9, a figure associated with major life changes. Also we are now exactly half way through the ‘fair youth’ sequence, which ends with the imperfect 126’.

Let's hear Gielgud reading sonnet 63:

Against [in preparation for the time when] my love shall be as I am now,

With time's injurious hand crushed and o'erworn;

When hours have drained his blood, and filled [?'filed', carved with lines, defiled] his brow

With lines and wrinkles; when his youthful morn

Hath travailed on to age's steepy [difficult to ascend] night,

And all those beauties whereof now he's king

Are vanishing, or vanished out of sight,

Stealing away the treasure of his spring;

For such a time do I now fortify

Against confounding age's cruel knife,

That he shall never cut from memory

My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life,

His beauty shall in these black lines be seen,

And they shall live, and he in them still green ['keep his memory green'; green, unripe, immature, callous].

Time, in line two is personified, crushing and wearing out the poet's love. And the hours, too, are personified, draining the lover's blood and filling his brow with lines and wrinkles.

And it is not the youth who will 'travail[ed] on' ('travail' here meaning both to labour and to travel), but the
youth’s ‘morn’. And it is the ‘beauties whereof his is king’, which are vanishing or will vanish. And time is again personified as ‘age’s cruel knife’. And the blade has the potential ‘to cut’. Blades only cut when wielded by someone, not an abstraction. And what might be cut is not the poet’s life, but the paper on which the poet has celebrated his love for him. And the lines of the poet are personified, they ‘shall live’ on even after the lover’s death. And the ‘black lines’ referred to here, appropriate the ‘lines’ in line 4. And the literal blackness of the lines contrasts with the metaphorical ‘green[ness]’ of the final line. Green alludes to both the freshness and youthfulness of the young, but also associations of acidity, unripeness which could allude to the youth’s immaturity and callousness. This ambiguity brings the sonnet to an unresolved conclusion as the poet’s attitude to his lover could itself be bitter, as a function of the youth’s callousness, or it could be one of infatuation with his lover’s fresh youth.

The personification of sonnet 60 has been further reinforced in sonnet 63. In both, time is armed with a sharp weapon, but one which celebrates the fact that ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’. Proof of this is the existence of the poems we have here. They personify the immortality of poetry.

There is one further sonnet that I’d like to consider, sonnet 73, (Gielgud reading):

That time of year thou may’st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see’st the twilight of such day,
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by-and-by black night doth take away,
Death’s second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see’st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consum’d with that which it was nourish’d by.

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Again personification abounds and comparisons of all sorts are explored. The poet is like a tree with his decaying, worn out verses being dispersed in the wind. The old man likens himself to a tree in winter, its/his leaves (like the leaves of poems in a book) falling. Images of time, light and fire are all brought into relationship.

And the rhythms of the first line, by its pauses, almost re-creates the blowing away of the last resistant fading leaves by the autumn or winter wind.

An exemplary commentary on line 4 is provided by William Empson in Seven Types of Ambiguity:

The fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once. To take a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety [uncertainty] of feeling in:

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,

but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys suits well with Shakespeare’s feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various sociological and historical reasons (the protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.

W. Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, Ch.I.

Sir William Empson was an English literary critic and poet, widely influential for his practice of closely reading literary works, a practice fundamental to the New Criticism. His best-known work is his first, Seven Types of Ambiguity, published in 1930.

And the ‘richness and heightening of effect’ described by Empson is the effect not just of imagery and what he terms ‘various sociological and historical reasons’, but also of all the poetic techniques which are intertwined, from personification - to rhyme. Rhyme is another of the myriad ways in which poetry, and the rigours of the sonnet form in particular, create associations.
In Sonnet 73, ‘west’ and ‘rest’, ‘fire’ and ‘expire’, ‘strong’ and ‘long’ are all meaningful, in the sense that it is when the sun sets in the ‘west’, that we ‘rest’. Fire causes all manner of things to ‘expire’. The rhyme of the final couplet is the richest of all. The ‘strength of love’ equates with a ‘long-ing’. And the final line takes us back to the beginning of the poem in a sense as the ‘ploce’ ‘leave’, from the verb to leave, echoes the ‘leaves’ of line two. There is a touch of blackmail here as the poet is essentially saying, ‘love me as much as you can – I won’t be here much longer’. And with my departure, so the writing of poems about you and to you, will cease.

These are brilliant poems, best explained, I think, in terms of their myriad associations and attendant ambiguities. Some of these associations are made explicit by the syntax of the poetry; others are more mysterious – even far-fetched, perhaps. I am particularly fond of sonnet 60, and its opening line: ‘Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore’, perhaps because I loved playing in the waves as a small child. I enjoyed the rhythm of trying to jump them, the myriad sounds of the foam and the spray and the wind, whipping up the surface of the water. But there are linguistic reasons too. The syntax, introducing a simile ‘Like as…’, delays meaning. We have to wait for line 2 to hear, ‘So do our minutes hasten to their end’. Just as the waves take time to reach the shore - and break. And the association of time and water is a very ancient one.

A water clock or clepsydra (Greek κλεψύδρα from κλέπτειν, 'to steal'; ὕδωρ hydor, 'water') is any timepiece in which time is measured by the regulated flow of liquid into (inflow type) or out from (outflow type) a vessel where the amount is then measured.

Water clocks are among the oldest time-measuring instruments. Where and when they were first invented is unknown. The bowl-shaped outflow is the simplest form of a water clock and is known to have existed in Babylon and in Egypt around the 16th century BCE.

And later time-pieces were also dependent on the displacement of water.

So for some readers associations of this sort may consciously or unconsciously be part of the reading experience.

Associations, from the obvious to the further-fetched, abound in the sonnets and all Shakespeare’s rhetorical inventiveness is involved. And what seems like an obvious, even childish trope, personification, is re-invented as the major animating force of the language. ‘Black night’ is likened to ‘Death’s second self’ and both are personified, ‘seal[s]/ing up all in rest’. In other words night is personified ‘sealing us up or entombing us in sleep’, just as death, personified, will result in us being sealed up, or entombed.

To finish this lecture I read a great many quotations, some lengthy, some brief, in praise of Shakespeare’s sonnets. The best, in my view, is by his friend and rival, Ben Jonson:

He was not of an age, but for all time!

(Ben Jonson, Preface to the First Folio)

Or dare I tweak Jonson to say, ‘He was both of an age, and for all time!’?

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