# *"Fearful Meditations": Pondering Posterity in Shakespeare's Sonnets*

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In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson calls attention to the way in which reading Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, with the destruction of England's pre-Reformation monuments in mind, enhances our ability to experience the pathos the poem generates. As a result of the work of mid sixteenth-century iconoclasts, Empson observes, the trees without leaves, or "the bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang" of the opening quatrain appeared to passersby as ruined monasteries. While the line is "still good" if the reader neglects to consider the allusion, he continues, "the effect of the poetry is heightened" if we "think back to its historical setting." Indeed, applying Empson's insight to earlier sonnets in the sequence reveals that many of them bring us into even closer contact with England's iconoclastic past. Sonnet 64, for example, provides a more direct portrait of the shaping power the sight of destroyed religious structures had on those subjects confronted by them. Shakespeare's speaker has seen the "lofty towers" and "brass eternal" built by prior generations decayed by time and subjected to "mortal rage," and the experience has left him skeptical that manmade achievements are capable of withstanding the test of time (3-4):

> Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate.
> That time will come and take my love away.
> This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
> But weep to have that which it fears to lose. (11-14)

Instead of restoring the speaker's faith in the ability of memory to survive beyond death, the sight of the "ruin" or "ruins" surrounding him have "taught" him to conclude that the desire to immortalize love only ensures its temporality. The reality that "time will come" and take his "love away" renders both the experience of the present

and the thought of the future "as a death." The creation of a monument in this setting guarantees destruction rather than preservation. This concern recurs in Sonnet 65, where neither the strength of "brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea" can "o'ersway" the "power" of "sad mortality" (1-2). The "fearful meditations" (9) the sonnet describes stem from the fact that the speaker cannot imagine a future in which the poetic monument he has constructed will be safe from the ravages of time and, more specifically, the sadness and rage of the future mortals who will see it. Shakespeare, in this way, undercuts the hope of enduring for posterity that characterizes most sonnets with a worldly skepticism that calls his own immortalizing project into doubt.

Despite this lack of confidence regarding their ability to endure, Shakespeare's sonnets have "survived" to become monuments not only to their author's achievement but also to the immortalizing hopes that are thought to motivate all poets aiming to write for posterity. "The fantasy that poems, although not living things, preserve human life," Aaron Kunin has recently written, "derives significantly from Shakespeare and receives its definitive statement in his 1609 sequence of sonnets." Shakespeare's sonnet sequence represents his most direct effort to participate in a genre that normally takes its relationship to posterity as both its subject matter and a primary concern. In many of the sonnets, however, the idea that poems can not only "preserve human life" but also represent the individual qualities of that life for future generations seems to trouble as much as inspire Shakespeare's speaker. In the first 126 poems of the sequence, a sampling of which I will be focusing on in what follows, the questions of whether the speaker has the capacity to immortalize his subject, and whether doing so would be a desirable outcome for either party, are highly complex. Unlike previous sonneteers, for whom the ability of poetry to transcend death is not in question, the ambivalent attitude toward poetic commemoration that Shakespeare's sonnets disclose distances them from the eternizing claims they seem to advance.

Shakespeare's lack of certitude that poetry alone can provide a sufficient means of preserving memory, I suggest, is less surprising when we consider that he was writing in a culture where the question of what happens to one's identity after death had recently become a significantly more complicated matter. In addition to other cultural transformations it inspired, the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism in post-Reformation England radically altered the manner in which the living understood their relationship to the dead. Unlike in Catholicism, where prayers are believed both to secure contact with the dead and to aid them in their pursuit of heavenly salvation, Protestantism insists that the decision of whether the soul will ascend to heaven is



predetermined, and that prayers intent on influencing this decision are futile and in fact contrary to the will of God. Prayers to the dead were permitted in Protestantism only with the understanding that such prayers could not improve their status in the afterlife. The abolishment of Purgatory in particular put a stop to a thriving business of intercessions in which both common people and kings attempted to hasten their passage from Purgatory to heavenly bliss. Before their deaths, both Henry VII and Henry VIII took extravagant steps to ensure that they would not linger in Purgatorial fires any longer than necessary. In addition to establishing almshouses and hospitals designed to promote suffrages, Henry VII went so far as to arrange for ten thousand masses to be said soon after his death for the salvation of his soul. After the Reformation, however, regardless of their station in life, the deceased, in the words of John Calvin, were beyond our help: "there is nothing more we can add or take away."

This loss of assurance concerning the afterlife inspired citizens of early modern England to take a more active interest in how they would be represented on earth after they left it. A popular method of achieving this goal, and one of particular interest to this essay, was the growing trend among early modern citizens of commissioning and constructing funeral monuments to memorialize themselves while they were still alive and able to inspect them. Constructing one's monument prior to death afforded the living the opportunity to ensure that they were commemorated in the fashion they saw fit. "Since attendance at church was compulsory," Nigel Llewellyn observes, "many tomb patrons must have attended worship in the local church for years on end in full view of their own effigial portraits." Rather than imagining an afterlife that levels distinctions between men, such people took comfort in the hope that life after death would replicate precisely the status they enjoyed on earth. The potential advantages of preemptively managing one's own commemoration – in both literary and statuary form – were clearer to no one than to James I, who replaced Elizabeth on the English throne in 1603. In the first edition of his *Basilikon Doron* (1599), James explored the literary dimensions of commemorating himself as the ideal monarch not only prior to his death but even before he became king of England. As Jonathan Goldberg has pointed out, James's preface is written as if " from the grave, declaring that his book was his last will and testament." Dedicated to Prince Henry, his "dearest sonne and natural successor," the book seeks to instruct the "first fruits" of his "posterity" in the finer points of being a prince, as if he had mastered the craft before even beginning the job.

As perspectives toward commemorative monuments changed in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, I suggest, attitudes towards the commemorative abilities of

poetry changed as well. Shakespeare's sonnets demonstrate an acute awareness of the needs that motivate the enterprise of pre-emptive commemoration, as well as the self-conscious distortion it entails. Unlike Edmund Spenser in his "Epithalamium," Shakespeare rarely straightforwardly declares his sonnets "endless monuments." In this essay, I will consider some examples of how the monument topos appears in the sonnets, and explore the ways in which considering these poems within the historical context they were written complicates our appreciation of their thematic preoccupations. In particular, I will suggest that Shakespeare challenges the notion that securing one's posthumous reputation prior to death is a positive and productive impulse. Rather than a mutually beneficial relationship that perpetuates and sustains a connection beyond death, in the sonnets the attempt to memorialize obliges both the commemorator and commemorated to simulate complex and potentially damaging psychological situations.

## Vanish'd Sights

In a passage that was, according to Stephen Booth, "so regularly echoed in the Renaissance that it is impossible and unnecessary to guess whether a poet who uses them had them at first hand or not," Horace confidently announces that he has earned a position in poetic immortality:

> I have finished a monument more lasting
> than bronze and loftier than the Pyramid's
> royal pile, one that no wasting rain, no furious
> north wind can destroy, or the countless
> chain of years and the ages' flight, I shall not
> altogether die, but a mighty part of me shall
> escape the death-goddess. On and on shall I
> grow, ever fresh with the glory of after time.
> (Horace, *Odes* III. xxx, 1-8)

The pathos of the monument trope that Horace employs here normally derives from the admission that poems cannot replace people. While texts stand in for persons who have died, they are not equivalent to them, and they therefore cannot fully compensate for the loss their absence creates. The deal that Horace strikes with posterity, however, reverses this process. The poetic monument that Horace leaves behind not only compensates for the absence of the poet, but the absence created by that loss



becomes a necessary prerequisite for the unlimited fame that posterity will confer on him. The "mighty part" of Horace that will "escape the death-goddess" deflects attention away from the mortal person in favor of the immortal poem. The point is not that the creation of poetry prolongs or sustains the life of the writer but that it performs the superior function of preserving those elements of his identity that the poem represents; the goal of the poet is not to live forever but rather to not "altogether" die. Far from obscuring his achievement, death becomes a career move that benefits the writer endlessly.

In stark contrast to both Horace's objectives and the sonnet sequences with which he must have been familiar, there is a clear tension between the interest Shakespeare's sonnets show in poetic immortality and the ambivalence they convey toward its possibility and use value. To establish this difference, Shakespeare initiates his sequence not with a poem that announces his quest to immortalize poetically an unattainable mistress, but with a sonnet that attempts to convince a young man of the virtues of reproducing without the aid of verse. The reassuring notion that producing heirs guarantees immortality frequently appears in the commemorative statues of the period. "Children," Peter Sherlock observes, "even more than monuments, could be presented as the true memorials of the dead, for they were the literal, physical evidence of marriage and bodily reproduction." The opening quatrain of Sonnet 1 encourages its dedicatee to consider this possibility:

> From fairest creatures we desire increase,
> That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
> But as the riper should by time decease,
> His tender heir might bear his memory. (1-4)

In a strikingly original move, the opening lines deflect the immortalizing duties away from the poet and towards the beloved himself. He is currently "beauty's rose," but his only hope of memorializing this beauty, according to the speaker, is to reproduce himself in the form of an heir. The "living monument" in this arrangement is not the poem but rather the unborn son the poem encourages its dedicatee to produce. The idea that children exist solely to extend the memories of their parents, of course, runs the risk of reducing the motivation for producing them into a purely narcissistic enterprise. The poet, after all, never once argues that the young man should produce an heir in the interest of passing on his family's name, his essence, or any moral qualities that he might possess. The prospective child in this arrangement functions as a human mirror

that will allow him to continue to appreciate his beauty in the form of another person after his own has faded. Reproduction, in this argument, rather than an expression of selfless devotion to the future, places posterity at the service of a self-hoarding love, which, the speaker tells us, makes "a famine where abundance lies." The responsibility to reproduce more offspring transfers to the heir as a burden to bear rather than as an honor to embrace. The poetic resolution at which Horace arrives so triumphantly – to accept mortality in exchange for the immortal monument his poetry represents – seems a deal that Shakespeare is far less interested in or capable of striking.

Even when monuments do not explicitly appear in the sonnets, the complex question of how the poems will be received and understood by posterity informs Shakespeare's compositional approach. The first seventeen sonnets in the sequence, which are commonly known as the "procreation" sonnets, largely follow the pattern set by Sonnet 1 in that they present monuments, or the urge to monumentalize, in metaphorical terms that allow Shakespeare's speaker to demonstrate his ambivalence toward the immortalizing powers of poetry. As the sequence continues, however, and the poems begin to explore these immortalizing capabilities more thoroughly, the monumental imagery hinted at early on appears more explicitly. Sonnet 17 questions the efficacy of the entire poetic enterprise by likening the process of creating a sonnet to that of erecting a tomb. So overwhelming are his subject's virtues, the speaker laments, that to do them justice would efface rather than sustain them:

> Who will believe my verse in time to come
> If it were filled with your most high deserts?
> Though yet heav'n knows it is but as a tomb
> Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts. (1-4)

Once again, the question of how the young man will be represented in "time to come" is at issue. Poetry, however, remains an insufficient means of preserving memory. The speaker initially implies that even if he could describe the young man's virtues accurately, doing so would only increase the likelihood that those who read it would react with incredulity rather than admiration. The shift from the subjunctive to the present tense in line three reinforces this fear by altering the speaker's perspective from that of the potential builder of the young man's poetic tomb to one of the disbelieving viewers he describes in the sonnet's opening lines. In this Sonnet, moreover, the speaker begins to comprehend the implications that the immortalizing project he has undertaken will have on his own identity. In the second quatrain, he imagines



himself facing his failure, hearing the doubtful voices of "the age to come" responding to the work he has created. "This poet lies," they claim, "Such heav'nly touches ne'er touched earthly faces" (7-8). Tombs, from this perspective, not only fail to keep alive the memory of those within them, they also inadvertently conceal the most memorable traits that their inhabitants possessed. Hence the attempt, or the obligation, to construct one while the subject is still alive places an even greater burden on the builder.

Despite his initial uneasiness with the task of commemorating his subject, as the sequence continues the speaker appears to fall victim to the urge the procreation sonnets attempt to instill within the young man. In the many poems of the sequence that deal with memory, the task of commemorating the young man inevitably causes the speaker to reflect on his own mortality. The result exposes the similarities between the desire to secure a fixed representation of oneself for posterity and a compulsion to control and distance the past by fictionalizing it. Rather than simplifying matters, the topic of memorialization becomes more problematic. Despite the speaker's apparent devotion to him, the young man remains an empty vessel. In Sonnet 30, which famously documents the attempt to "summon up remembrance of things past," the speaker therefore conflates poignant memories with present woes in order to re-experience the past in a context that produces a cathartic effect:

> Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
> For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
> And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
> And moan th' expense of many a vanish'd sight. (5-8)

Taking these lines in their cultural context, we might interpret the speaker as attempting to form a relationship to the dead denied to him by the prevailing religious perspectives of the day. The challenge of summoning up "remembrance of things past" becomes tantamount to converting the speaker's past loves into "living" memories; to merge their "vanish'd sights" with present reality so that it becomes possible to think of them in a way conducive to the purposes of the ambivalent poetic context the speaker places them in. Compared to the "precious friends hid in death's dateless night," the young man's role in the restorative process the poem describes is decidedly passive. He is essentially an absence, and as such he inspires painful memories of loss, memories of the absent dead. The restoration of loss that the poem speaks of can therefore be read as a reawakening of the loss the speaker feels for those he no longer has access to.

Sonnet 31 integrates the young man more fully into the process that Sonnet 30 describes. The result is that he becomes a repository of the speaker's past loves, and thus takes on a ghost-like presence in his present. Rather than a restorative purpose, assimilating the identity of the young man with the absence of his former lover's causes the speaker to confuse the boundaries that separate the two:

> Thy bosom is endeared with all hearts,
> Which I by lacking have supposed dead;
> And there reigns Love, and all Love's loving parts,
> And all those friends which I thought buried. (1-4)

Whereas in the previous poem the sight of the young man at least serves ostensibly to compensate for the vanished sight of former lovers, here their re-emergence fragments the speaker's sense of his memory. The young man's "bosom" becomes a tomb that contains "all hearts" which the speaker "supposed dead." This sight intensifies rather than mitigates the sense of loss he feels. Far from filling the void of these absent lovers, the sight of the young man conflates them into one:

> Thou art the grave where buried love doth live,
> Hung with the trophies of my lover's gone,
> Who all their parts of me to thee did give;
> That due of many now is thine alone.
> Their images I loved I view in thee.
> And thou, all they, hast the all of me. (9-14)

The speaker's dead lovers, in this account, are buried alive within the bosom of the young man. As the "grave where buried love doth live," he simultaneously revivifies them and encompasses them. "Trophy," Booth informs us, could refer in Shakespeare's time to "both a funeral monument or anything hung on such a monument to honor the dead person." The young man, then, enacts the "living" monument topos for the speaker, but the sight of him seems more of a denial than a confirmation of his transcendence. The effect of the poem, as Joel Fineman puts it, is "not that the young man brings the dead to life, but rather, that what the poet sees in the young man is a kind of death in life." He is, to take a dramatic example, what Hermione as statue was later to become to Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*: a "present absence" in which memory lives more intensely than in presence itself. The consequences of erecting such a monument for the sake of the young man's posthumous future evacuates the speaker's past



of its prior meaning. The speaker, in this way, loses ownership of his own memories; he can only see them in terms of how they relate to his present quest to memorialize the young man.

The speaker's attempt to reconcile the loss of the past with the uncertainty of the future becomes no less complex when he adopts an approach more in keeping with Horace's strategy. In Sonnet 55, which features the monument topos more prominently than any other in the sequence, the speaker famously argues that the poetic monuments he creates will outlast the statuary representations built to honor princes. The opening lines declare their eternizing purpose with a confidence that suggests the formerly hesitant speaker has come into his own as a sonneteer:

> Not marble nor the gilded monuments
> Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme,
> But you shall shine more bright in these contents
> Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time. (1-4)

While adopting the stance that literary monuments provide a superior form of commemoration than statuary ones was, as we saw in Horace, a poetic commonplace dating back to antiquity, the manner in which Shakespeare employs it provides a point of departure from the earlier poems in his sequence and resonates suggestively with contemporary discussions of monuments. Although the opening quatrain endorses a perspective similar to Horace's, in the lines that follow the speaker brings us closer to the poem's historical context and, in so doing, calls the memorializing project of the poem into question:

> When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
> And broils root out the work of masonry,
> Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn
> The living record of your memory. (5-8)

These lines remind us once again that Shakespeare was raised in a time when both monuments and books were subject to the wrath of Tudor reforming efforts. As a member of this generation, he would have seen "statues overturned," as well as relics and occasionally their owners subjected to "war's quick fire." The future of which these lines speak, in which monuments are the targets of the destructive acts of humans, therefore recreates events of the very recent past. The allusion, moreover, imbues the

claim that poetry can preserve its subject "Gainst death and all oblivious enmity," "Ev'n in the eyes of all posterity" with added pathos; the poem's vision of the future relates closely to a present that compromises claims of permanence. The awkwardness of making "sword," as well as "fire," the subject of burn, Katherine Duncan-Jones points out, underscores the fact that the paper on which the sonnet was written would fall victim to "quick fire" even more quickly than statues and stone buildings. The only circumstances in which the poet can imagine his sonnet enduring are in a world commemorative structures are periodically destroyed by war. Even in this seemingly straightforward endorsement of the transcendent power of poetry, the emphasis falls on the inevitability of destruction rather than the possibility of endurance.

Elsewhere in the sequence, Shakespeare's speaker shifts his emphasis from constructing a poetic monument to the possibility that his poem could provide the inscription for a monument. Sonnet 81, for example, sheds similar doubt on the prospect of creating immortal poetry by comparing the task of being a sonneteer to the job of an epitaph writer. The responsibility of securing the posthumous representation of another person as the speaker presents it in the opening quatrain seems a rather unrewarding burden:

> Or I shall live your epitaph to make,
> Or you survive when I in earth am rotten,
> From hence your memory death cannot take,
> Although in me each part will be forgotten. (1-4)

Whether the speaker completes the task of composing an epitaph in honor of the young man or his subject pre-deceases him is irrelevant; the memory of the latter will endure while the former will be consigned to oblivion. The poem itself, then, serves as a memorializing gesture rather than an epitaph itself: its purpose is to provide reassurance that the young man requires no epitaph to sustain his memory. The earth "can yield" the speaker "but a common grave," whereas the young man will lie "entombed in men's eyes" (7-8). The sestet, however, attempts to retreat from the gloom with which the poem begins by asserting the speaker's worth more forcefully:

> Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
> Which eyes yet uncreated shall o'er-read,
> And tongues to be your being shall rehearse,
> When all the breathers of this world are dead,
> You still shall live – such virtue hath my pen –
> Where breath most breathes, ev'n in the mouths of men. (9-14)



These concluding lines are difficult to reconcile with the sentiments conveyed in the opening quatrain. Here the speaker imagines his words as not only giving life to the monument on which they are inscribed, but also "breathing" life into those who read and speak them. The miraculous powers of this "virtuous" pen, however, do not extend to the poet himself, who remains "rotten" in his "common grave." The reader cannot take comfort in the immortal status the Sonnet confers on its subject without recalling the mortality of the speaker himself.

At his most vehement, the speaker states his case forcefully against the efficacy of commemorative monuments and the mental torpor they induce in their builders and viewers. The opening quatrain of Sonnet 123 confronts the paradoxes endemic to monument building in order to expose them definitively:

> No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change.
> Thy pyramids built up with newer might
> To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;
> They are but dressings of a former sight. (1-4)

Although they appear "novel," and "strange" structures to succeeding generations, who rebuild them imaginatively with "newer might," the pyramids are merely evidence of how prior humans convinced themselves that products of human endeavor could withstand and overcome the inevitable passage of time. In addition to Egypt's pyramids, these lines may make reference to obelisks constructed to welcome James during his procession into London on March 15, 1603. The speaker relegates both structures to the status of "dressings of a former sight," or re-imaginings of prior achievements devoid of their original meanings. The cruel trick that time encourages us to play on ourselves dictates that we experience that which came before us as confirmation that our memories will remain alive and relevant to those on earth after we have died. "Our dates are brief," and so we fantasize that the marker's of the past are "born to our desires." As the poem reaches its climax, the speaker attempts to create a space for himself outside of these harmful tendencies:

> Thy registers and thee I both defy,
> Not wond'ring at the present, nor the past:
> For thy records, and what we see, doth lie,
> Made more or less by thy continual haste. (9-12)

Rather than preoccupying himself with the present or the past, the speaker prefers not to consider his relationship to time at all. And yet the sonnet cannot express this wish

without thinking in terms of the traditional markers of time that it seeks to reject. The pyramids that he imagines in the sonnet's opening lines produce the same effect in him as the ruins that cause him to "ruminate" earlier in the sequence. The fact that they have not been destroyed, as the monuments that surround the speaker have, only intensifies the sense of loss he feels when he considers their relevance to human life. Such structures symbolize a form of permanence to which their builders do not have access; the effort to create them merely testifies to their inefficacy. Necessarily, when it comes to monuments, the speaker insists, "What we see, doth lie."

The irony to which Shakespeare did not have access, of course, is that his sonnets would endure, while the identity of whom they commemorate remains a matter of scholarly conjecture. As works produced in a culture that made no guarantees of a heavenly afterlife, the sonnets do not take their endurance for granted. Although they ponder immortality, the set of concerns Shakespeare elaborates in these poems focuses squarely on the realm of the human. The perspective that they frequently employ – on the threshold between the present and an uncertain future – creates a poetic space that empathizes with human concerns instead of projecting itself beyond them. That Shakespeare's sonnets respond with such sensitivity to the concerns and anxieties of their own era provides one reason why they continue to speak so profoundly to succeeding ones.



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