

Mimetic Drama in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Byron's Historicizing Lyricism

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The influence of Shakespeare's lyricism on the work of Lord Byron is undeniable, yet among the Romantic poets there is perhaps no author so derisive of his literary forbear than the author of *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*. Byron's famous claim that he was born for opposition (*Don Juan* 15.22) highlights the antagonistic mimeticism that animates his ambition for literary greatness and significance as an early literary celebrity. However, Byron's celebration of his vocation for contrarian opinion and action is not without irony or self-criticism. Indeed, in his engagement with Shakespeare, Byron struggles to articulate the process of desire that alternately causes him to appropriate and repudiate the lyricism of his famous predecessor. As Jonathan Bate has argued, Byron's public derogations of Shakespeare are a pose that hides the respect he had for the playwright's powerful poetic vision, a regard which is recorded most comprehensively in the Shakespearean references of *Don Juan* (Bate 230-231). As Girard demonstrates in *A Theatre of Envy*, Shakespeare recognizes the emulous nature of desire and uses his plays and lyric poems to expose its machinations. Shakespeare's exposition of mimeticism as the true source of sacril violence is part of the wider modern shift away from ritual society, wherein religious means of mitigating desire's potentially inimical movements are supplemented with an increased reliance on market society to defer the effects of emulation and resentment. With his widely remarked upon knowledge of Shakespeare,⁽¹⁾ Byron's poetic vision—in its observations on the contagious nature of desire—bears traces of Shakespeare's own vivid representations of imitation as a conduit for his characters' lusts, cupidity, ambitions, and violence. Though *Don Juan* contains the bulk of Byron's allusions to Shakespeare's plays, in his lyric poems Byron's speakers echo conceptions of desire's interdividuality that resemble those of Shakespeare's most famous lyrics: the Sonnets.

Unlike drama, the lyric poem is typically understood as referring primarily to the

individual speaker's affective and personal experience. However, the boundary between the dramatic and lyric genres is not impermeable, as both Shakespeare's Sonnets and Byron's lyrics demonstrate. While lyric poems typically present the reader with a single speaker, they often refer to other figures, who relate to the speaker along lines of reciprocal desire. Shakespeare's Sonnets figure the imitative quality of this mimetic reciprocity, as it manifests in the complex relationships between the figures of the poets, the young man, and dark lady. Helen Vendler, Eve Sedgwick, and René Girard all note the compelling nature of the drama that the Sonnets' speaker obliquely refers to in his addresses and reflections. By focusing on this drama, Sedgwick and Girard extrapolate sociopsychological insights, which are sharpened by examining the speaker's nuanced subjective analysis of his situation relative to the other figures. Simon Palfry and Tiffany Stern's recent research into the early modern practice of dividing a play into materially distinct, individual parts illuminates the continuity between the lyric and the dramatic by pointing up how Shakespeare, as a playwright and an actor, understood each role as provisionally separable from the drama as a whole. Practically speaking, these parts function as atomized lyrical reflections on a larger drama in a mode similar to both the Sonnets' and Byron's lyrics. Byron's poems echo the Sonnets' dramatization of a particular subject's intimate mimetic relationships, emotions, and thoughts as they pertain to the socius as it changes through time. Byron's refiguring of the mimetic dynamics in the Sonnets serves to tragically dramatize his own life, as it engages flows of desire operating beyond the traditional subjectivity of lyric poetry and touches the passions driving the social and political events of his day, which he understood as having world-historical import.

In Shakespeare's oeuvre there is perhaps no more explicit and concise a rendering of mimetic desire than that found in Sonnet 42:

That thou hast her, is not all my grief,
And yet it may be said I loved her dearly;
That she hath thee is of my wailing chief,
A loss in love that touches me more nearly.
Loving offenders, thus I will excuse ye:
Thou dost love her because thou know'st I love her,
And for my sake even so doth she abuse me,
Suff'ring my friend for my sake to approve her.
If I lose thee, my loss is my love's gain,
And losing her, my friend hath found that loss:
Both find each other, and I lose both twain,
And both for my sake lay on me this cross.
But here's the joy: my friend and I are one.
Sweet flattery! Then she loves but me alone. Here, the imitative nature of desire

appears in the context of a familiar triangle of sexual rivalry. The poet speaks to his young male lover regarding his longing, which is directed towards both the poem's intended auditor and the dark lady of whom it speaks. The pair have formed a bond that excludes the speaker, but—because of the imitated desire that links him to both figures—he forgives their betrayal. The young man “dost love her because [he] know'st I love her,” while she accepts the young man's favour “for my sake,” or—in other words—because she knows how strong the poet's desire for the young man is. Thus, desire circulates between the three figures by way of their reciprocal imitation. This realization is the sonnet's concluding claim, towards which the poet moves over the course of the lyric as he discards unacceptable notions of his and his two lovers' autonomous desire. The differences between the three figures are effaced in the final couplet, which nevertheless—in its use of the personal pronoun and assertion of singularity—hints at the maudlin instability of the poet's self-consoling resolution. The resolution is provisional however, as the mimetic drama of this love triangle—which in the Sonnets is only described by one unanswered voice at a time—cannot ultimately have a conclusion, as the imitative desire the lyrics describe circulates endlessly.

The Sonnets' reflections on the nature of mimetic desire are manifold and showcase the multiplicity of the phenomenon's emotional and symbolic effects. For example, sonnets 1-17 urge the young man to mirror his beauty in the production of a child—or an act of biological mimesis—a possibility that the poet sees threatened by the advance of time. Other examples are found in the discussion of symbolic thought's capacity to represent through imaginative mimesis the image of the desired lover (see Sonnets 44-47). Sonnet 77 typifies the poet's fascination with representation—be it in verse, mirrors, or merely in the poet's mind—as a function of desire, the pains and pleasures of which are ultimately represented as subject to the necessity of death as a result of time's movement. Along with the broader reflections on mimesis, the triangular configuration of desire between the three figures persists into the later sonnets. Take for example the opening conceit of 134:

So, now I have confessed that he is thine,
And I myself am mortgaged to thy will,
Myself I'll forfeit, so that other mine
Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still: . . .

The poet again admits he will imitate the desire of the dark lady for the young man. Thus, the mimetic logic of the Sonnets recursively asserts itself, as Shakespeare elaborates the intractability of the interdividual relationship that dominates his lyric imagination. In his final two sonnets, he turns to Greek myth and the Ovidian figure

of Cupid to situate the mimetic scenario his verses elaborate as a timeless and enduring configuration of desire. In these poems, Cupid's arrow of love, or symbol of desire, is appropriated by a woman who uses it to contaminate a well that might have liberated the speaker from the "disease" of desire; when he immerses himself in the desire-contaminated water, the speaker's amorous feelings are predictably all the more inflamed.

The sociopsychological insights Shakespeare's sonnets contain are often noted by critics. Wishing to return scholarship of the Sonnets to primarily literary concerns, Helen Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1997) criticizes Eve Sedgwick's sociological reading of the poems by denominating it the result of a widespread, "persistent wish to turn the [sonnet] sequence into a novel (or a drama) [, which] speaks to the interests of the sociopsychological critic, whose aim is less to inquire into the successful carrying-out of a literary project than to investigate the representation of gender relations" (2). In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Sedgwick examines the triangular configuration of the Sonnets' characters in terms of gender and the asymmetry of power that such relations necessarily involve. Vendler admits that the sonnets lend themselves to such a project, if only because the lyric form allows for virtually any reader to identify with the speaker: "Because lyric is intended to be voiceable by anyone reading it, in its normative form it deliberately strips away most social specification (age, regional location, sex, class, even race)" (2). The power of the Sonnets' lyric form derives from this capacity to allow its reader to inhabit a given narrative position along with all of his or her unique experiences and assumptions, personal elements which complicate the poem's reception and allow the reader to reflect on the point of view the work provides.

In her gendered reading of the Sonnets, Sedgwick takes up Girard's identification of triangular desire in the nineteenth-century novel to demonstrate that he (like other European male voices) assumes that the symmetrical relationships in the poems illustrate gender equality in terms of power distribution within sexual relations between men and women. Sedgwick's aim is to expose the transhistorical affirmation of male privilege accomplished via Girard's and Shakespeare's disregard for the inequality inherent to gendered power relations, which systematically disadvantage women. Sedgwick argues that both Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and Shakespeare's Sonnets propagate the myth of equality between the sexes by emphasizing the image of the symmetrical balance supposed by the geometric figure of the triangle:

Girard's reading presents itself as one whose symmetry is undisturbed by such differences as gender; although the triangles that most shape his view tend, in the European tradition, to involve bonds of 'rivalry' between males 'over' a woman, in

his view *any* relation of rivalry is structured by the same play of emulation and identification. (*Between Men* 22) When undertaking a reading of Sonnet 42, which begins her more general engagement with the poems, Sedgwick observes “[t]he Girardian point that the speaker cares as much about the fair youth as about the dark lady,” with whom he is a rival, is also “Shakespeare’s point, and no critic is likely to be more obsessive about the orderliness of the symmetry than the poet himself” (29). Sedgwick’s task is to demonstrate that the bond of rivalry joining the speaker and the dark lady is, in reality, unbalanced by the stronger homosocial bond already existing between the poet and the young man, a bond of male complicity which is always smuggled into relations between the sexes. While she is effective in seeking a more sophisticated rendering of the movements of desire operating in both the triangles of the European novel and those of the Sonnets, Sedgwick’s analysis disregards the dynamically imitative nature of the desire that first establishes the triangles. These relations of imitative desire must necessarily shift the configuration’s geometric alignments as the dramatic movements of the works unfold.

While differences in the relative social power of the subjects are an important part of understanding the poems, they do not diminish the importance of imitation as an impetus for desire. As they are intimately related, gendered power relations must be considered alongside the mimetic motivations that drive action. Sedgwick does not challenge Girard or Shakespeare’s observations regarding the imitative nature of desire in his speaker’s choice of objects; indeed, she hardly mentions imitation at all. In *A Theatre of Envy*, which appeared six years after Sedgwick’s *Between Men*, Girard would examine the mimetic triangles of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 42 and note the intuitive quality of mimetic theory for all readers by observing that “[w]ithout mimetic theory we cannot even summarize this poem competently” (*A Theatre of Envy* 298). In his reading of the poem, Girard’s focus is on demonstrating that the Sonnets’ characters are always implied to stand in some type of mimetic relation, wherein power shifts as the subjects’ desires shift in varying intensity between multiple mediators (300-01).

In making this argument, Girard gestures towards the generic question of how the lyric poem, as a rendering of an individual perspective, assumes and sets up a wider implied world, which—for the poem to be interesting to the greatest number of readers—must reflect a broad set of social circumstances or experiences. Jealousy is a dominant theme in the Sonnets for this reason, as, in Sonnet 42, the speaker attempts to resign himself to the outcome of his unsuccessful contest with his model; or when (as Girard observes of Sonnet 144) one figure experiences the angst of doubt in his potential exclusion from the relationship he supposes to exist between his “[t]wo loves.” The broader social context suggested by this “[a]cute jealousy could be,” Girard states, “the intellectual ferment out of which the idea of

such [Shakespearean] characters as Phebe, Silvius, Orsino, Pandarus, Claudio, Othello, Leontes, and many others arose” (306). Girard’s argument that the lyric form of a given sonnet is a fragment of a larger dramatic narrative, or scene, interior to author and reader gains further credence in light of the material circumstances of the early modern dramatic production that Shakespeare’s lyrics and dramas emerge from.

Recent Shakespeare scholarship has taken an interest in the interindividual forces that shaped the dramas of the early modern period, and this interest points again to the mimetic desire represented in Shakespeare’s works, which depend on a sharp awareness of how the lyric subjectivity expressed in a particular player’s part reflects upon and feeds back into larger intersubjective movements of desire. Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern’s *Shakespeare in Parts* (2007) explores the connection of the play’s atomized roles to the rest of the drama, its creators, and characters. Their study proceeds by examining how Shakespeare’s early modern players’ individually transcribed parts—as distinct text detached from the complete draft of the play— “lead to remarkable innovations in creating subjectivity and engineering dramatic affect, producing on-stage drama of unprecedented immediacy” (12). The study concerns itself with the reciprocity between players and playwright by reading its movement in the structure of the players’ individual parts. Palfrey and Stern dramatize the collaborative process of playwriting: “Even as [Shakespeare] was meditating upon some brand new work, deep within the fabled smithy of his imagination, part of the metal must have been his mates, their jokes or aura or expectations, the voices from the previous day’s playing or the night’s carousing” (4). They do this in order to gesture towards a theory of influence, the basis of which is left in vaguely social terms:

What matters are the years and years of experience, of working in each others’ pockets, that ensures both repetition and difference; what matters is the individual actor working with the part by himself, picking up everything, identifying with everything, remembering and anticipating everything. (6) Thus, the individual parts of the actors Shakespeare worked with for so many years become reciprocal—often repetitively imitative or rivalrously different—responses to their collaborator’s desires, in which real social relationships are written into the individual parts of the play. Of course, the detailed milieu that forms the backdrop for these part-cum-poems necessarily remains largely irretrievable, as the necessity of the plots and characters of the plays themselves apply formative pressure to the parts’ lyrical expressions of subjective desires. Nevertheless, by atomizing the play into a series of discrete parts, Palfrey and Stern open another way to valorize the social import of subjective lyric expression in the Sonnets, which similarly present the reader with a solitary individual’s perspective on the larger drama that occasions his verse. “We cannot grasp the part,” they write of the plays’ fragmented elements, “without first

sensing the whole; but equally, we will not know the whole without first rethinking the part” (10). The same could be said of the various imagined narratives uniting the fractured dramatic “parts” known as the Sonnets. In both Shakespeare’s Sonnets and plays, a combined multiplicity of subjective voices illustrate the role of imitation in shaping behaviour and plot, and thereby provide a glimpse of the common human experience of desire. Thus from the mimetically impelled wishes of the individual lyrical speakers in Shakespeare’s fragmented dramas and poems, multiple histories of desire contribute to a more general theorization of desire’s imitative nature.

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In its ventriloquism of the multiplicity of subjectivities animated to ceaseless conflict via the imitative exchanges that constitute history, Byron’s lyric poetry represents an experience of desire that mirrors in macrocosmic dimensions the effects of mimetic desire figured by Shakespeare’s speaker in the Sonnets. According to Jerome McGann, Byron’s lyric voice depicts the determinism that drives the subject ineluctably into a desolate future, providing a vision which is often troubled by its apprehension of the personal pain wrought by mimetic entanglements. Reflecting on Byron’s lyricism—especially as it is exemplified in “The Prophecy of Dante,” wherein Byron theatrically adopts the Florentine’s persona—McGann states that Byron’s version of the “poet literally tells the tale of his own damnation, including the damnation of his poetry,” and notes that “[w]hat is worse (from any normative moral and aesthetic point of view), the poet does not ask his readers to transvalue the values by which it will be condemned” since “[a]ll is cursed” (220). McGann’s reading aptly characterizes the following lines from the poem, which also betray Byron’s awareness of the collective mimetic forces driving his own and Dante’s elevation to both ignominious exile and acclaimed positions in cultural history:

“What have I done to thee, my People?” Stern
Are all thy dealings, but in this they pass
The limits of Man’s common malice, for
All that a citizen could be I was—
Raised by thy will, all thine in peace or war—
And for this thou hast warred with me.—’Tis done:
I may not overleap the eternal bar
Built up between us, and will die alone,
Beholding with the dark eye of a Seer
The evil days to gifted souls foreshown,
Foretelling them to those who will not hear;
As in the old time, till the hour be come

When Truth shall strike their eyes through many a tear,
And make them own the Prophet in his tomb. (4.141-51)

These lines, which come near the end of the poem, echo in more desolate terms the closing sentiment of Shakespeare's Sonnet 42. Like Shakespeare's speaker, Byron's Dante has endeavoured to give himself wholly to a beloved other: his erstwhile Florentine fellows. As in Sonnet 42, the speaker is not free to pursue autonomously chosen ends, but is "raised by thy will, all thine in peace or war." Though the two poems' speakers are subject to a radically mimetic sympathy, Shakespeare's speaker (at least in Sonnet 42) is able to fashion a more definitive conclusion than is Byron's Dante. Where Shakespeare rhetorically figures the continuity in desire between his lovers and himself as a symbolic consummation, Dante articulates the pain of a separation from the collective, a pain which gestures towards the cold comfort of lyrical representation in imagining "[w]hen Truth shall strike their eyes / ... [a]nd make them own the Prophet in his tomb." The optimism that characterizes Sonnet 42's final couplet ("But here's the joy: my friend and I are one. / Sweet flattery! Then she loves but me alone") contrasts with the resentful despondency of Byron's final conceit. Having been borne aloft by the imitative desire of his countrymen—just as the sonneteer's desire is transmuted and inevitably reciprocated in the mimeticism of the singularity of the three passions—Dante, unlike Shakespeare's speaker, is finally alone and "may not overleap the eternal bar." Byron's lyric confronts in bleak terms the harrowing movement of collective mimetic desire as it impacts the speaker as a historicized memory, while imagining a future where the poet-prophet is symbolically reconciled to his beloved people. Thus, the difference between Byron's lyricism and the lyricism of Shakespeare's Sonnets, as it pertains to mimetic desire, rests primarily in the affective tone accompanying the representation of desire's alternately elevating and alienating effects; where Shakespeare is variously detached and optimistic about the power of his imagination (often self-referentially expressed as the Sonnets themselves) to provide a positive outcome to desire's sometimes painful machinations, Byron, as McGann notes, imagines the poet-subject damned, while his readership benefits from his prophetic perspicacity regarding the nature and import of desire (215).

Both Byron and Shakespeare register that the mimetic flow of affect in personal romantic relationships transmutes itself to the wider field of human history. Before comparing Sonnet 55's subject matter to that of Byron's *On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year*, G. Wilson Knight notes that Shakespeare's poem transfers the speaker's desire for the young man to the enduring social realm of symbolic representation by consigning it to a finely wrought lyrical form (68-69):

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time. (Sonnet 55.1-4)

This appeal to history positions the poetic expression of desire as a transhistorical monument open to future readers' subjective inspection and identification: "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme" (13-14). In a way similar to Shakespeare, Byron understands his personal experience of interindividual desire as potentially communicable to multitudes of future politicized readers. In the poem's final lines, Byron charges himself and these future readers to "Seek out ... / A soldier's grave" in pursuit of a worthy political cause (37-38). Registering the intersection of the political and private, Knight's appraisal of *On this Day* intimates the similarity between the two poets' lyrics when it suggests that Byron "describes a move from personal love to public service, and death" similar to Shakespeare's (69). However, Byron's identification with Shakespeare's lyric voice as an element in a larger drama of mimetic reciprocity is not a "transcendence of personal passion" (71), as Knight suggests; rather, the poem accepts the inextricable, but painful, integration of his individual experience of passion with a larger, collective matrix of desire that endures through history:

'Tis time this heart should be unmov'd,
Since others it hath ceas'd to move:
Yet, though I cannot be beloved,
Still let me love!
My days are in the yellow leaf;
The flowers and fruits of Love are gone;
The worm, the canker, and the grief
Are mine alone! (1-8)

While distinctly echoing the sentiments regarding aging time that appear in Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold / When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang" [1-2]), the tragic tone of Byron's lyric on his role in the historical drama of Greek nationalism exceeds in intensity the note of despair in Shakespeare's poem, which ends warmly with the grateful apprehension of his lover's faithfulness: "This [my aging decline] thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong, / To love that well which thou must leave ere long" (13-14). Taking a slightly different course, Byron's *On this Day* repeats Sonnet 55's monumentalization of individual passion by mediating his desire through the memory of former lovers—who, having reciprocated his desire in the past, are now

unmoved by their shared desire—towards a politicized act of love that will expiate his desire's force in a self-sacrificial, martial gesture undertaken in the theatre of Greek history. Unlike the shadowy figures of the Sonnets, the "others" he refers to are easily identified via the explicitly autobiographical nature of his oeuvre. These may be his estranged wife, or even the lost readership of his later career. These relationships are mimetic in nature. Thus, a triangular configuration between Byron, Annabella, and his readership constitutes the dramatic system of mimetic reciprocity which Byron feels desire no longer circulates in. Still charged with the force of desire communicated by these others, Byron lyrically channels his ambition through such remembered mediators into the political theatre of the struggle for Greek independence.

In his lyric echoing of Shakespeare's Sonnets, Byron makes a Shakespearean tragedy of his own life. Characterizing Byron's poetry as forging a link between personal and socio-political history, McGann points to *On this Day* as exemplary of Byron's style, before asserting:

'The personal is the political.' That widely circulated current idea was never more fully realized than in the case of Byron. . . . Byron's lyrical procedures . . . regularly draw upon a complex set of political, social, and world-historical meditations. Byron identifies himself with whole nations . . . and with their national heroes (political as well as artistic). Those identifications produce in turn a series of further equations between Byron's personal life and the 'lives' of these nations and their leading figures. (211). Thus, Byron expands upon the Sonnets' association of microcosmic interindividual desires with the general macrocosmic progress of time in monuments and "wasteful war" (55.5) by tracing the continuity of his personal, intersubjective desire to the desires animating a specific political cause. In this expansion, Byron abandons the reassuring resolutions of Shakespeare's Sonnets for the catharsis of his tragic dramas:

If thou regret'st thy youth, *why live?*

The land of honourable death

Is here:—up to the field, and give

Away thy breath! (64-68)

The observation and question on aged wisdom's regret recalls the poem's title and opening lines, which make this stanza a candid confession of regret over "The hope, the fear, the jealous care, / The exalted portion of the pain / And power of love," which belong to the past personal relationships he can no longer participate in despite feeling their influence on his desire as a "chain" (13-16). Accordingly, the regretted passions of his youth force him to the tragic question, which is reminiscent of Hamlet's "to be or not to be?": "*why live?*" In this way, one of Byron's best known and most mature lyric poems echoes Shakespeare's drama in parts—otherwise known as the Sonnets—as they are

animated by triangular mimetic rivalry, a rivalry which lurks behind Shakespeare's lyrics and appears fully developed in the plot and characterization of his tragedies.

It is well known that Byron died while engaged in the cause of Greek independence only months after composing *On this Day*. This poem, among Byron's other lyrics, reflects Shakespeare's dramatization of mimetic desire through the voice of a lone speaker, but—in the emphasis it places on the tragic intensity of his life and correctly forecast death—Byron amplifies the Sonnets' tragic tone. This tone derives primarily from the Sonnets' fascination with the conflicts produced by imitative desire and the passage of time, which causes the Sonnets to resemble parts of a larger drama. For Byron, the larger drama behind his lyrics not only included his personal and literary life, but the course of European history as a whole. Recognizing his experience of desire as continuous with the desires of others, Byron repeats Shakespeare's insight at the end of Sonnet 42, while—in his pained tone—indicating that the continuity of subjectivities created by the recognition of mimetic desire's effects may not always serve as the consolation that Shakespeare's "my friend and I are one" (42.13) would have it to be.

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Notes

1. Both Lady Blessington and Thomas Medwin noted Byron's capacious memory of Shakespeare's works and his hostility towards the Bardolatry of his day (Blessington 358-59, Medwin 93-94). ([back](#))