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Engl 489
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5/13/2015

Breaking the Boundaries of Petrarchan Gender Identity:
A Critical Analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnets

During the 1500-1600's, the limited number of female writers produced a limited set of archetypes for female characters to follow. One of the archetypes Renaissance writers frequently repeated is based off of the Petrarchan trope. In the Petrarchan trope, the female protagonist is generally depicted as a fair skinned, blonde haired, blue eyed and beautiful, yet unattainable, young woman whose entire worth is wrapped up in her virtue and virginity. These female characters, modeled after Petrarch's character Laura, have a strict moral code that they must abide by. The typical male protagonist in the Petrarchan trope is quite the opposite. He is the hunter, filled with sexual desire and an obsession for the Petrarchan woman he cannot have.

In Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, we see a clear shift away from this typical Petrarchan model of poetry and instead towards a model that explores women's sexuality and liberation from gender stereotypes. This is important because by breaking away from Petrarch's traditional model, Shakespeare begins to rescribe the cultural boundaries of gender and the body, which in turn, challenges the heterosexual male hierarchy and creates a new space for gender identities to flourish and co-exist.

Throughout this essay I will explore the similarities and differences between Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, demonstrating that although

Shakespeare had a clear understanding of how to use the Petrarchan trope, he deliberately inverts this tradition in order to push the boundaries of both character and gender development. While Shakespeare alters the Petrarchan trope in a number of ways, this essay will specifically focus on the social implications that Shakespeare's inverted characters had by contrasting Shakespeare's Dark Lady with Petrarch's Laura and comparing Shakespeare's Fair Youth with Petrarch's Laura.

This essay will draw largely on Judith Butler's work in gender studies, borrowing her framework of ideas to further explore Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*. In order to fully engage with the critical discussion of gender within these texts, we must begin by making sure that we have a clear understanding of the theories found in Butler's book, *Gender Trouble,* as they will prove to be fundamental tools for understanding gender.

To start, let's discuss the definition of gender. Socially and culturally regarded as the "state of being either male or female" (Oxford Dictionaries), Butler claims that the need to define and categorize gender into specific sexualities has become a "stable point of reference" for us today (Butler, 2490). These attempts to place gender into organized and easy to understand categories signifies our desire for coherence, but what happens when a new gender identity appears that does not fit neatly into the confines of the previously mentioned definition? Butler writes that even "contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism" (Butler, 2488). With

gender coloring the way we engage socially, culturally, and even politically, how we think about gender identity really does matter.

So what if we stopped trying to define gender? In *Gender Trouble*, Butler proposes the idea that gender is merely "a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler, 2489). She goes on to state: "the binary of sex, gender, and the body are productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable" (Butler, 2489). This raises the obvious question: If Butler's theory is correct and gender is actually a fictional concept, how is it that we have come to accept gender as a natural and inevitable part of our lives?

At its roots, the answer is more simplistic than one would think. According to Butler, the concept of gender developed over time through repetition and thrives on a series of cultural rewards and punishments. To further explain, "history is the creation of values and meanings" (Butler, 2491), some of which, such as gender, become integrated into our culture long term "through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 2501). These repeated acts become the societal norm and are reinforced by "codes of cultural coherence" which are responsible for "naturalizing certain taboos regarding appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange" (Butler, 2492). These limits are held in place through cultural and social forms of reward and punishment, inclusion and exclusion.

Relating these concepts of time, repetition, and codes of cultural coherence back to gender, Butler poses the idea that "the 'body' often appears to be a passive medium that is signified by an inscription from a cultural source" (Butler, 2491). In other words, the body

is inscribed with the culturally constructed meaning of gender, which is a fictional concept but culturally accepted as being true, right, and natural.

Now that we've established that gender is a constructed concept, let's focus on the implications and "political possibilities" that are the consequence of narrowly categorizing gender identity. Through the use of genealogy, Butler proposes that we question and investigate the political stakes related to the belief that this categorization of gender is natural, when, in fact, it is "the effects of institutions, practices, and discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (Butler 2490). She emphasizes that this view of gender identity "conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within hereosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts" (Butler 2497), eliminating space for these "other" genders to exist and be fully realized.

So how do we challenge the socially and culturally held belief that these gender categories are natural and necessary? This is where the title of Butler's book, *Gender Trouble*, comes into play as she encourages others to confuse, blur, and push the boundaries of gender identity -- or in other words to "trouble" them. Butler follows up this idea by asking the questions: "How can an epistemic / ontological regime be brought into question?" and "What best way to trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality?" (Butler, 2489).

Butler encourages us to break the gender binary which acts as "a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control" (Butler 2495) and disrupt the "fiction of heterosexual coherence" (Butler 2497). In doing so, Butler

believes that the culturally held ideals of gender will fall apart as they struggle with the inability to regulate new gender identities. Two of the ways in which Butler suggests we attempt to break the gender binary are through the use of the female gaze and through expulsion from societal norms, both of which will be discussed later on in this essay.

Furthermore, this essay will draw off of Butler's examples of homosexuality and dressing in drag to discuss how we can "reinscribe the boundaries of the body along new cultural lines" (Butler 2494). She claims the gender transformation can be achieved in a number of ways, including through "the possibility of failure to repeat" and through "parodic repetition" of a cultural tradition as we will see evident in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* later on.

Now that a critical understanding of Butler's *Gender Trouble* has been established, we can begin to apply these concepts to Petrarch's work. First, let's analyze how the Petrarchan trope developed into a set of gender and character values that were accepted as natural and inevitable during the 1500-1600's. If Butler claims that the gender categories we are familiar with today were naturalized historically over a period of time, "through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 2501), and reinforced through codes of cultural coherence, then the same should prove true for the Petrarchan trope.

Although Petrarch is commonly referred to as the "father of modern European discourse on love," (Kambasković-Sawers, 377) it is important to note that he was not creating a completely new set of gender values when he wrote *Rime Sparse.* Rather, he was imitating and remodelling the world he saw around him, capturing "watersheds of culture"

in his sonnet sequences (Kambasković-Sawers, 377). In other words, the gender values and meanings typically referred to as Petrarchan had already developed over time and throughout history.

Through his imitation of these values, Petrarch is able to not only give his work cultural context and make the gender roles found in *Rime Sparse* believable, but also perpetuate these ideals for poets such as Dante, Sidney, and Spenser to continue to draw off of in the future. Kambasković-Sawers touches on this briefly, saying that the Petrarchan trope's "popularity and longevity… give the sonnet sequence a unique position amongst the medieval first-person genres" (Kambasković-Sawers, 379). In the same way that gender requires a repeated performance, this repetition of the Petrarchan trope by other poets "is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (Butler 2500).

So far, we've established that the Petrarchan trope is indeed a repeated performance developed over a historic period of time, but is it also reinforced by the code of cultural coherence as Butler suggests gender is? In order to answer this question, we must be able to clearly define what Petrarchan social gender norms one would be rewarded for adhering to and punished for living outside of.

The gender values Petrarch captures in his work reflect an axiomatic male preference for women who were fair skinned and blonde haired through the presence of Laura, who we meet as a "youthful lady under a green laurel" with "golden locks," a complexion "whiter and colder than snow," and eyes that could "melt me as the sun"

(Petrarch, 30:6-24). Similar imagery saturates the rest of *Rime Sparse* as Petrarch continues to idolize Laura for her physical beauty and virtuous nature, both of which allow her to fit neatly into the category of the "ideal woman" during this time period.

Furthermore, Petrarch replicates the tradition of courtly love by making Laura an unattainable object of obsessive affection. As the male protagonist, Petrarch falls perfectly into the role of the male hunter, who despite being unsuccessful, aims to enthrall the beautiful Laura with his love and admiration for her.

The gender binary found in the Petrarchan trope is easy to pick out, although troubling in its paradoxical nature. Women were meant to be beautiful, passive, virtuous, and virginal. A woman's worth stemmed from her ability to stay pure, often creating a distance between herself and her male suitors. Men, on the other hand, were expected to be dominant, aggressive, and filled with passion. The problem here is that if either gender compromises for the sake of the other or simply does not fit within these strict gender guidelines, they then fall short of society's ideal standard for them. If the woman allows herself to love the man, she becomes tainted and impure. If the man ceases to pursue his fantasized lover, he becomes passive and powerless. Butler's codes of cultural coherence work hard to set appropriate gender limits and keep men and women fixated within their specific gender identities by threatening to exclude and devalue them if they stray outside of the neatly created categories of male and female.

Now that we've established that the Petrarchan gender trope is a repeated performance that embraces pre-existing cultural norms upheld by codes of cultural

coherence, it's time to focus on what political stakes are at hand. By narrowly categorizing the gender identities of its characters, the Petrarchan trope conceals potential gender discontinuities that readers may be able to relate to, much in the way that Butler claims our culture's view of gender identity does the same thing. By continuing to repeat these same gendered character archetypes over and over again, the Petrarchan trope is setting an unrealistic standard for what the ideal man and the ideal woman should be during the 1500-1600's. This forces men and women alike to strive to live up to standards that they cannot ever meet.

The Petrarchan trope also reinforces the male hierarchy by establishing man as the dominant force and woman as the passive object of desire. Throughout this poetic tradition women are given little to no agency. They remain one dimensional characters who merely act as a prop or a muse for the male protagonist to amorously obsess over. By taking away the female voice poetically, the Petrarchan tradition mimics and perpetuates the lack of power women were granted during the 15-16th centuries and naturalizes their place as subjects to male dominance.

Now that we understand that the Petrarchan trope conceals potential gender discontinuities and enforces the male hierarchy, the next step is to figure out how to "trouble" and destabilize the gender binary created by the Petrarchan trope. Troubling the social boundaries of his time period was something Shakespeare was apt to do as his "remarkably sustained popularity owes much to his capacity to generate excitement and controversy… to deliberately raise provocative sexual and ethnic issues" (Richmond, 91).

Shakespeare troubles the Petrarchan trope throughout his *Sonnets* in two ways. First, he creates characters that do not specifically adhere to one set of gender expectations, expelling them from societal norms just as Butler suggests. Second he gives his female protagonist, the Dark Lady. a sense of agency by making her the sexual aggressor and giving her the power of the female gaze.

In Shakespeare's *Sonnets,* he places his characters outside of the confines of their set gender expectations by inverting the typical Petrarchan gender stereotypes. He makes his female protagonist, the Dark Lady, the seductive aggressor and his male protagonist, the Fair Youth, the passive and virtuous object of her affection.

First, Shakespeare characterizes the Fair Youth as having overtly feminine physical qualities in order to further confuse the gender binary between the two Petrarchan sexes. The Fair Youth has a light complexion, golden hair, and a "woman's face with nature's own hand painted" that "steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth" (Shakespeare, 20). Modeled after Petrarch's love interest, the Fair Youth appears to be, at times, an even better version of Laura than herself. His eyes are brighter and "less false in rolling" than any woman's and he is described as having a "woman's gentle heart" without being subject to her falsity (Shakespeare 20). It is with these descriptions that the Fair Youth is not only portrayed as being effeminate, but as actually being more effeminate than women themselves.

By over exaggerating the Fair Youth's feminine qualities and idolizing him in the same way Petrarch idolizes Laura, Shakespeare creates a parody of the traditional Petrarchan

woman. Through this parody of gender, Shakespeare raises the question of whether gender is natural or merely a production. In Butler's work, she discusses the similar phenomenon of dressing in drag, claiming that "gender practices within gay and lesbian cultures often thematize 'the natural' in parodic contexts that bring into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex" (Butler, 2489). In the same way that the Fair Youth blurs the lines of the Petrarchan gender binary by being characterized as having overtly feminine qualities, "the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and gender that is being performed" (Butler, 2498) causing the audience to question the authenticity of gender itself.

Through both the characterization of the Fair Youth and the performance of drag, a perpetual displacement appears in which one gender takes on the role of the other in a way that confuses and troubles the cultural gender boundaries previously set in place. This displacement "constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggest an openness to resignification and recontextualization" (Butler, 2498), creating a new space for gender identities that differ from the norm to flourish, transform, and co-exist.

Although Shakespeare's use of parodic repetition of the Petrarchan woman stands out quite clearly, it is through the Dark Lady that we get a better sense of Butler's theory of social expulsion. The theory behind social expulsion is that when a gender identity is realized that exists outside of social norms, it will be expelled from that society and reprimanded through codes of cultural coherence. Through the mere existence and recognition of these "other" gender, however, social transformation of values becomes a

possibility. Not only is social expulsion the model that disenfranchises the "other," it is also "the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished" (Butler, 2495).

In terms of Petrarchan gender expectations, the Dark Lady, who acts as the complete opposite of Petrarch's Laura, would fall directly into the category of "other." Unlike the Fair Youth who matches Laura's physical description astounding well, the Dark Lady's "breasts are dun" colored, she has "black wires" of hair, and her "eyes are nothing like the sun" (Shakespeare, 30). During a time period when the axiomatic male preference was fair skinned, blonde haired women, one would assume that the Dark Lady would be considered the opposite of desirable, but Shakespeare takes this a step further. Not only does the Dark Lady fail to fit the physical description of the ideal Petrarchan woman, she has plenty of other limitations as well. From bad breath to dishonesty and promiscuity, Shakespeare reveals each of the Dark Lady's short comings.

The paradox, however, is in "the poet's expression of intense affection for a woman who is deeply fallible, in contrast to the rigorously virtuous mistresses of many influential earlier poets, such as Dante's Beatrice, or Petrarch's Laura, or Spenser's Elizabeth Boyle" (Richmond, 92). Before Shakespeare's poet fully grapples with the fact that the Dark Lady is having an affair with the Fair Youth, he speaks of her a being just as desirable as any of the ideal Petrarchan style women who were upheld and praised by society. He writes:

"In the old age black was not counted fair,

Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;

But now is black beauty's successive heir,

And beauty slandered with a bastard shame;

For since each hand hath put on nature's power,

Fairing the foul with art's false borrowed face,

Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,

But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.

Therefore, my mistress' eyes are raven-black,

Her brow so suited, and they mourners seem

At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,

Sland'ring creation with false esteem.

Yet so they mourh, becoming of their woe,

The every tongue says beauty should look so." (Shakespeare, 127:1-14)

Not only is Shakespeare praising the Dark Lady for being beautiful despite her "raven-black" eyes and dark complexion, he is criticizing the Petrarchan standard of ideal female beauty. He claims that "sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower," that cannot conform to one set of cultural standards. Shakespeare's description of the Dark Lady brings the social standards of the 15-16th centuries into question by placing the inversion of these standards on a pedestal. Not only does this praise for a fallible female figure reflect "an acceptance of female parity with the male" (Richmond, 104), it also bring "the criteria of

conventional female excellence… openly into question as such reversals encourage rejection of routine judgements" (Richmond, 98).

The Dark Lady is characterized as "other" for more than just her physical appearance though. Instead of taking after the virginal, pure, and virtuous Laura, Shakespeare characterizes the Dark Lady as being the sexual aggressor in not one, but two, relationships, first with the narrator and then with the Fair Youth. This is where we see the expulsion of the Dark Lady begin to take place. Expulsion typically stems from a "symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate" (Douglas, 113). Here, we see the Dark Lady joining together in consensual, sexual intercourse with not one, but with two men. Through this act, the Dark Lady loses her virtue and her virginity, turning her into what Mary Douglas calls a "polluted person." Douglas further explains this concept by stating:

> "A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed over some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashed danger for someone" (Douglas, 113).

One commonly referred to example of what society perceives a "polluted person" to be exists within the spectrum of the LGBTQ community. Butler explains that "homosexuality is almost always conceived within the homophobic signifying economy as both uncivilized and unnatural" (Butler, 2494) because it strays outside of the culturally constructed gender categories. The expulsion of members of the LGBTQ community as "other" is similar to the Dark Lady's expulsion from society for choosing to be sexually

active. After Shakespeare's poet finally comes to terms with the fact that the Dark Lady is having an affair with the Fair Youth, his attitude towards her shifts from praise to disdain. He refers to her as the "worser spirit a woman coloured ill"(Shakespeare, 144:4) and the "female evil," (Shakespeare, 144:5) while continuously blaming her for corrupting the Fair Youth and causing him so much turmoil. By painting the Dark Lady as the villainous seductress capable of "wooing [the Fair Youth's] purity with her foul pride" (Shakespeare, 144:8), Shakspeare accurately mimics and parodies society's distaste for her and other polluted women like her.

Despite the poet's clear disapproval of the Dark Lady's actions, Shakespeare also uses the expulsion of her character to create a new form of "identity-identification" by developing a female character archetype that differs drastically from the Petrarchan trope. Through the Dark Lady, Shakespeare created space for "black-hearted brunettes who can command passion, and for many other realistic and witty ladies who defy sentimental Petrarchan hyperboles" (Richmond, 97). Hugh Richmond writes:

> "One might also add that acceptance of this more realistic female psychology in one's object of love not only enhances the authenticity of women's roles in literature, it enriches their range and sophistication, as we see in such wry heroines as Rosalind, Beatrice, and Cleopatra, all of whom are loved in spite of the axiomatic inadequacies of women which they display, not because of the feigned virtues affected by traditional ideal women" (Richmond, 102).

Although Shakespeare's poet expels the Dark Lady as his lover at the end of the *Sonnets,* she is still remains a desirable, although fallible, character who finds romance with the Fair Youth despite not being able to live up to the traditional Petrarchan gender stereotypes. Presenting a character such as gives female readers a new type of female archetype to relate to, one that is much more fully developed than Laura.

In addition to breaking the gender binary through the expulsion of characters from the Petrarchan societal norms, Shakespeare gives the Dark Lady the power of the female gaze. In a society where the male was expected to be the dominant aggressor, the Dark Lady seduces not one, but two men. Butler discusses the female gaze in *Gender Trouble* by saying:

> "This "unanticipated agency, of a female 'object' who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position. The radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female 'other' suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory" (Butler 2489).

This reversal of power depicts both the poet and the Fair Youth as objects of the Dark Lady's passion while giving her the agency to act on her sexual desires, something that Laura was never able to do. Even more so, however, this reversal questions and destabilizes the male hierarchy by parodying it with its opposite and showing the female as the dominant source of power.

Thus, the Dark Lady is "expelled" socially, but creates a new, "other" character archetype and a new form of identity-differentiation ready to challenge the male hierarchy.

Likewise, although the Fair Youth is not expelled by Shakespeare's poet in the drastic way that the Dark Lady is, he creates a new type of identity-differentiation by parodying the ideal Petrarchan woman, Laura.

Shakespeare's sonnets both invert and parody the Petrarchan trope by creating characters that do not specifically adhere to one set of gender expectations, expelling them from societal norms, and giving his female protagonist, the Dark Lady, a sense of agency and power of the female gaze. Through these techniques he makes his characters open to resignification and recontextualization, providing a "climax to drastic changes in the literary and social conventions of courtship in the sixteenth century" (Richmond, 2). Shakespeare's *Sonnets* trouble the gender binary, reinscribe the cultural boundaries of gender and the body, challenge the heterosexual male hierarchy, and continue to create a new space for gender identities to transform.

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