

**S.I.R.I.R**

**Société Internationale de Recherches  
Interdisciplinaires sur la Renaissance**



# **LE PLAISIR AU TEMPS DE LA RENAISSANCE**



Sous la direction de  
**MARIE-THÉRÈSE JONES-DAVIES**

Textes réunis par  
**MARGARET JONES-DAVIES, FLORENCE MALHOMME,  
MARIE-MADELEINE MARTINET**

**BREPOLS**

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Ce qui semble bien doux, est quelquefois amer.

L'Enfant Amour ayant laissé sa mere  
Un peu bien loing, des Avettes trouvé,  
D'elles il fut fort grievement navré :  
Et se pleignoit de douleur si amere.  
Il pensoit bien qu'il n'y eust que douceur,  
Que tout plaisir, qu'il n'y eust à redire :  
Mais il sentit que le serpent n'est pire,  
Et qu'approcher d'icelles n'estoit seur.

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# Table des matières



Avant-propos <i>Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies</i>	7
Le plaisir et la beauté <i>Marie-Madeleine Martinet</i>	11
Le songe érotique, vrai ou faux plaisir : du commentaire ficinien du <i>Philèbe</i> aux <i>Sonnets pour Hélène</i> <i>Sylviane Bokdam</i>	19
Shakespearean Pleasures of the Senses <i>Leanore Lieblein</i>	39
<i>Delectable shapes</i> : les plaisirs de la taverne dans l'Angleterre de la Renaissance <i>Guillaume Winter</i>	51
<i>Peines d'amour perdues</i> : plaisir perdu, plaisir retrouvé <i>Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies</i>	61
To his Coy Master Mistress : The Pleasures of Homoeroticism and (Pro)creation in Shakespeare's <i>Sonnets</i> <i>Michele Stanco</i>	67
Shakespeare et la cartographie du plaisir <i>François Laroque</i>	99
Épicure, l'épicurisme et la philosophie du plaisir d'après l' <i>Epicureus</i> d'Érasme <i>Jean-Claude Margolin</i>	121



« Le plaisir est des principales espèces du profit » : Montaigne et le plaisir <i>Jean Céard</i>	141
Le plaisir du déplaisir <i>Gisèle Venet</i>	153
At her Majesty's pleasure : Staging the Virgin Queen <i>Richard Wilson</i>	167
Index Nominum	189

## Avant-propos



Marie-Thérèse Jones-Davies

Deux recueils élisabéthains de récits et nouvelles, *Le Palais de plaisir* de William Painter et *Petit palais du plaisir* de George Pettie, impliquent « un univers narratif spatialisé » puisque chaque ouvrage renferme plusieurs récits « comme un palais a de nombreuses salles », ou un poème à plusieurs strophes ou stances selon l'italien *stanza* signifiant « pièce ». L'emboîtement structural des récits dans le recueil explique la métaphore architecturale qui le décrit du point de vue du lecteur, selon le plaisir que celui-ci y découvre. D'autres exemples montreraient le plaisir que peut souligner la multiplicité ou la complexité esthétiques.

Depuis le commentaire du *Philebe* par Marsile Ficin, le vrai ou le faux plaisir sont au cœur de la réflexion au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle. La banalisation du concept de faux plaisir ne doit pas masquer son caractère paradoxal. D'origine platonicienne, et relié à la conception platonicienne du *phantasma*, comme simple effet de ressemblance, le faux plaisir est défini dans le *Philebe* à la fois comme « un plaisir du simulacre et comme un simulacre du plaisir ». Christianisé et fortement condamné par Ficin, qui fait du vrai plaisir un médium entre ce monde et l'autre, le faux plaisir se trouve assimilé dans le pétrarquisme français au songe érotique accompagné de jouissance et sa revalorisation chez Ronsard est étroitement lié à une redéfinition délibérément transgressive des valeurs esthétiques.

Les « plaisirs shakespeariens des sens » sont l'occasion d'observer l'attention que portaient les philosophes, au début du monde moderne, à la physiologie de la sensation et au monde matériel que découvrent les sens, comme moyen d'atteindre le moral et le spirituel. Chez Shakespeare, la hiérarchie des sens est remplacée par l'érotisme des sens où l'amour et le plaisir sensuel sont soutenus par l'imagination. Vénus et Adonis, qui représente un amour indéfiniment différé est toutefois un banquet des sens. Dans *Le Songe d'une nuit*

*d'été*, les amoureux, dont les sens sont d'abord entravés, finissent par les récupérer cependant que l'auditoire est appelé à exprimer son plaisir par le son et le toucher, ses applaudissements.

Dans le contexte des années élisabéthaines de la Renaissance apparaît une réflexion sur les lieux de plaisir. La taverne, par exemple, et sa représentation dans la comédie. Le plaisir y est à la fois ouvertement recherché, mais souvent dissimulé lorsqu'il est défendu ou inavouable. On peut voir en l'ivrognerie un dévoiement du principe du plaisir, perversion de l'épicurisme. Thomas Randolph montre une parodie de la pensée hédoniste dans une pièce de 1630, *Aristippe*. L'idée d'un lieu tout entier dépourvu de plaisir est analysée dans *Peines d'amour perdues* de Shakespeare. C'est la cour du roi de Navarre, où est tentée l'expérience d'une totale absence de plaisir. Ferdinand de Navarre suggère à trois seigneurs de sa suite à renoncer à tous vains plaisirs et à toute rencontre avec des femmes pour s'adonner à la quête du savoir. La philosophie doit remplacer amour et richesse. L'arrivée de la Princesse de France et de ses Dames fait échouer le projet. Le mariage des Seigneurs et Dames d'abord envisagé doit être remis à plus tard, tant il est vrai que la vie intellectuelle ne saurait exister sans l'affectivité dans les rapports humains.

Quant au plaisir dans les *Sonnets* de Shakespeare, il suit les modèles de Platon et d'Aristote. D'une part, l'amour du locuteur pour le beau jeune homme fait écho à la liaison typiquement platonique entre un *erastes* et un *eromenos*. D'autre part, le caractère éphémère de la beauté du jeune homme se rapproche plus de la notion dynamique des formes d'Aristote que des idées d'éternité de Platon. Ainsi le plaisir et *eros* prennent des sens à la fois homosexuel et hétérosexuel. Malgré son amour pour le jeune homme, le locuteur l'invite à céder à l'habitude de l'amour hétérosexuel. Peut-être une solution à ce paradoxe est-elle dans le fait que le jeune homme grandit et donc se masculinise. Comme il est suggéré dans le Sonnet XX, et conformément aux modèles homoérotiques élisabéthains, un jeune garçon ne pouvait être aimé par un homme plus âgé que s'il était assez jeune pour suggérer la féminité. En fait, l'acte créateur du locuteur partage la même fonction que l'acte biologique de la procréation. La versification équivaut à l'enfance du jeune homme (XVII) et le poète lui-même est la contrepartie de l'épouse possible du jeune homme.

Dans la deuxième moitié du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, quand l'engouement pour les cartes géographiques ou chorographiques est évident, et que l'homme de la Renaissance est attiré par les pays imaginaires et les aventures lointaines, se retrouve le système développé d'analogies alors répandu entre les références cartographiques et le corps humain. Jeu de correspondances, dont M. Foucault

parle en montrant « l'analogie de l'animal humain avec la terre qu'il habite ». L'édition originale de *Poly-Olbion* de Drayton représente la figure de Britannia « drapée dans une robe en forme de carte ». Et il y a l'évocation allégorique des saisons dans le Sonnet XIII. Il est jusqu'au sourire de Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*) qui se trouve comparé à la nouvelle carte où sont localisées les Indes (III, 273-274). Si le plaisir apparaît surtout dans les Arcadies et dans les comédies, il n'est pas absent de la catastrophe des enfers et figure aussi dans les sonnets où il arrive qu'il y ait la diabolisation du féminin, d'ordinaire identifié à un terrain vague, une carte sans repères (Sonnet CXXXV). Enfin le théâtre du Globe, the *Wooden O*, avec la localisation du ciel et de l'enfer et la scène projetée jusqu'au milieu du parterre perpendiculairement au plateau arrière, paraît bien correspondre aux cartes primitives en TO, « formant une structure archétypale, sur laquelle venaient s'articuler les images du texte ».

L'épicurisme est l'école gréco-latine la plus décriée au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance. Au X<sup>e</sup> chant de l'Enfer, Dante rangeait Épicure parmi les hérésiarques, avec tous ceux qui enseignent que l'âme meurt avec le corps. Les détracteurs d'Épicure se fondaient sur une assimilation erronée du plaisir à une expérience de sensualité dévoyée. Le dernier Colloque d'Érasme, l'*Épicurien*, publié en 1533, fit scandale car l'auteur poussait l'audace jusqu'à assimiler le Christ lui-même à Épicure... Hédonius résume la théorie épicurienne du plaisir auquel il adhère : « Il n'y a d'authentique épicurien que le chrétien observant la piété ». L'une des maximes clés de l'épicurisme était la recherche de la tranquillité de l'âme. Alors, le Christ était bien l'épicurien suprême.

La reconnaissance de la nécessaire primauté du plaisir ne cesse d'être au centre de la réflexion de Montaigne. Le plaisir demande un règlement de l'âme que Montaigne travaille à définir. Il s'arrête à la proximité paradoxale du plaisir et de la douleur. Les plaisirs doivent obéir à une sorte de règle de convenance. La vanité même n'est pas trop vaine, si elle apporte du plaisir.

Les maniéristes et les baroques finissent par abuser de l'association des contraires. C'est la *coincidentia oppositorum* dont le théoricien, à la suite de Nicolas de Cuse, est Giordano Bruno. Ses *Fureurs héroïques*, véritable traité maniériste, disent l'infinie richesse du paradoxe d'un plaisir qui serait déplaisir dont on trouve l'expression la plus claire dans l'*Expulsion de la bête triomphante* : « Il n'y a pas de délectation qui ne soit mélangée de la tristesse ». La tragédie shakespearienne en donne des exemples : Roméo encore amoureux de Rosalind croit aimer son déplaisir du plaisir d'aimer et avec Juliette la douleur tragique est la forme la plus aboutie d'une *voluptas dolendi*.

Que signifie dans l'Angleterre d'Élisabeth le bon plaisir de la reine ? Shakespeare ne s'associe pas au groupe d'écrivains qui, en 1603, manifestèrent leur douleur à la mort de la souveraine. Si le *Songe d'une nuit d'été* reflète certains aspects du culte de la Reine Vierge, la difficulté d'y présenter la clarté lunaire semble métonymique de la relation angoissée de l'auteur avec l'autorité absolutiste, alors que se devine la démystification brutale de la Reine des Fées et que s'annonce ce que fut Cynthia, dans son effigie funéraire, toute fanée et ridée par l'âge. Les derniers vers de *Titus Andronicus* ne suggèrent-ils pas ce qu'aurait pu être la curieuse oraison funèbre d'un poète critique d'une souveraine qui abusait de son bon plaisir lorsqu'elle envoyait à la torture et à la mort ses victimes catholiques : « Que les oiseaux prennent en pitié celle qui ne connut pas la pitié ».

To his Coy Master Mistress  
The Pleasures of Homoeroticism and  
(Pro)creation in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*\*

—♦—  
Michele Stanco

*But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,  
Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.*

W. Shakespeare, Sonnet XX

[...] *the just pleasure lost* [...]

W. Shakespeare, Sonnet CXXI

**A methodological note : *e pluribus unum*, or from « Shakespeares »  
to « Shakespeare »**

The aim of the present essay is to analyze the notions of *eros* and *pleasure* in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*<sup>1</sup>. However, since Shakespeare criticism has undergone several, profound changes over the last two or three decades, I feel it necessary to premise a brief methodological note before I venture into textual analysis. Needless to say, my preliminary note does not aim to provide any general direction as to how Shakespeare should be read, but much more modestly seeks to clarify my personal line of enquiry.

Traditional historical criticism was essentially based on the attempt to project Shakespeare's text into its own context, in order to reconstruct its cultural alterity. Useful as it was, in some cases this critical approach pro-

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\* This essay is devoted to the memory of professor M.-T. Jones-Davies.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to acknowledge that this introductory note is to a large extent a response to the helpful and stimulating comments made on my paper by Margaret Jones-Davies, Richard Wilson, and Adrian Grafe. I also wish to heartily thank Maria Mansi for her precious linguistic suggestions.

vided only partial historical reconstructions, which were nevertheless presented as far more general ones. A much discussed — and severely criticized — case in point is Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture*. According to Tillyard, Shakespeare's plays supported a metaphysic of order, and were thus perfectly aligned with Tudor political orthodoxy — that is, with the hegemonic values of his own age. However, as has been pointed out by several later critics, Tillyard was himself a lover of those categories — « order », « degree » and « cosmic dance » — which he maintained to be so pervasive in Shakespeare and the Elizabethan world<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, he only considered as representative — and thus worthy of study — those literary works which were closer to the dominant culture of the time. Therefore, in commenting Tillyard's largely unexplained conclusion that Hooker « represents far more truly the background of Elizabethan literature than do the coney-catching pamphlets or the novel of low-life »<sup>3</sup>, Dollimore rightly wondered « whose literature, and whose background » was being historically reconstructed<sup>4</sup>.

As a reaction to traditional or « old » historicism, subsequent critical approaches have tried to promote alternative historical reconstructions, in order to bring to light « the marginalised and the subordinate of Elizabethan and Jacobean culture »<sup>5</sup>. In so doing, they have been inspired by the studies and methods of sociologists and critics like R. Williams<sup>6</sup>, cultural historians like C. Ginzburg<sup>7</sup>, or philosophers like M. Foucault<sup>8</sup>. The (re)discovery of lower and marginal history has thus been a major feature of the new histori-

<sup>2</sup> E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> J. Dollimore, « Introduction. Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism and the New Historicism », in *Political Shakespeare. Essays in Cultural Materialism*, éd. J. Dollimore, A. Sinfield, Manchester, Manchester University Press (1985), 1994, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977 ; *id.*, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London, Verso, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*, London, Routledge, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> M. Foucault, *La Volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, trad. ang. *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1978 ; *L'Usage des plaisirs*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, trad. ang. *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality*, vol. II, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985.



cism and cultural materialism<sup>9</sup>. It has also affected, in different ways and in varying degrees, other more or less closely related critical approaches : from psychoanalytical to feminist, gay/lesbian, and postcolonial studies.

Beside their reconstruction of specific areas of cultural history, another feature uniting all these new historico-cultural enquiries is their intentional politicization of Shakespeare's text. This, in turn, may be said to rest on a further common trait : the sceptical assumption that no critical analysis is politically neutral and, thus, that there is no such thing as one « Shakespeare ». In other words, since all criticism is the result of some cultural convention, it is impossible to grasp the « Bardness » of the Bard. The combination of those critical features has inevitably led to the multiplication of the once *unum* into the now several « Shakespeares »<sup>10</sup>.

From a more general viewpoint, it may be said that new critics have shown a deeper concern with the ideological implications of literary texts and their relation to power strategies.

It is not easy to be impartial when assessing the pros and cons of the so-called old and new historicism, respectively. First of all, the new historicism has often been accused of distorting and manipulating the texts for political reasons. It could however be argued that the old historicism also « used » the texts in a political way, even if less explicitly. In fact, although the old historicism — in its turn — actively « appropriated » the texts, it presented its interpretations as being both truthful and objective<sup>11</sup>.

This leads us to a second group of pros and cons. The new historicism has thrown light on the ideological elements underlying the interpretative act as such, and has thus unmasked the « objectivity » of older approaches as a critical fake. This is no doubt a positive achievement. On the other hand, the radical « relativity » of — at least some of — the newer critical approaches exposes the critical interpretation to the opposite risk. If there is no way of checking the legitimacy of the interpretative act, interpretation ceases to be

<sup>9</sup> Cf. also G. Holderness, *Shakespeare's History*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1984 ; J. Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, (1984), 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. for instance, the collections *Alternative Shakespeares*, éd. J. Drakakis, London, New York, Methuen, 1985, and *Alternative Shakespeares 2*, éd. T. Hawkes, London, New York, Routledge, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Thus, those critics who object to alternative or political « Shakespeares » could be easily answered that the implicitly political outlook of such critics as, say, Tillyard was by far more subtly misleading than Greenblatt's or Dollimore's explicit politicization.

reliable and it becomes virtually possible for anyone to say anything about any text<sup>12</sup>.

The « ground » respectively covered by the old and the new historicism has also changed considerably. The new historicism has centred on such issues as political dissidence, religious heterodoxy, colonialism and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, which had either been ignored or merely tangentially touched upon by earlier criticism. However, in most cases, the critical incorporation of « low » and « peripheral » culture has led to a parallel abandonment of « higher » cultural-historical themes. Such topics as Neoplatonic philosophy and the hermetic corpus, cosmography and macrocosmic-microcosmic relations, (meta)physical hierarchies, the dynastic rule, the king's two bodies, and so on have gradually lost their critical appeal and now almost seem useless objects in an old curiosity shop. Yet, a disproportionate emphasis on one and only one kind of historical reconstruction (either « high » or « low ») inevitably generates a somewhat incomplete cultural panorama.

Although Tillyard was probably wrong in presenting the Elizabethan notion of « order » as part of a shared cultural background (rather than as a world view supported by the Tudors as a form of self-legitimation), his historical reconstructions may still help us to make sense of otherwise obscure literary passages<sup>13</sup>. Thus, instead of discarding them altogether, we could still use them from a different, « anti-Tillyard » perspective, and see — for instance — how they related to « low » cultures and marginal voices. Nearly the same may be said about most other findings of the old historicism: its analyses of the cultural *différence* of the Renaissance can still be illuminating, as long as we filter them through a different political viewpoint<sup>14</sup>.

In conclusion, the study of « high » cultures, far from obscuring « low » ones, can conversely bring to light the ideological strategies through which low voices were controlled, or even silenced, by the hegemonic classes. Critical

<sup>12</sup> Cf. U. Eco's distinction between the (legitimate) « interpretation » and the (illegitimate) « use » of texts in *The Role of the Reader*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1979.

<sup>13</sup> « The objection is not that Tillyard was mistaken in identifying a metaphysic of order in the period [...]. The error, from a materialist perspective, is falsely to unify history and social process in the name of "the collective mind of the people" », J. Dollimore, *op. cit.*, p. 5; E. M. W. Tillyard, *op. cit.*, p. 18. Cf. also L. Tennenhouse, *Power on Display*, New York, London, Methuen, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, knowing the symbolic meaning of the flowers chosen by Ophelia (*Hamlet*, IV. 5. 173-183) is probably no less important than being aware that the association of women with flowers is typical of a patriarchal culture.

reconstructions of the cultural context *as a whole* appear to be especially needed in the analysis of Elizabethan drama, which — as is well known — is characterized by a « mingling » of « kings and clowns »<sup>15</sup>, of main plots and subplots, of « high » and « low » voices. Indeed, a comprehensive analysis of the different components of culture is quite in line with R. Williams's socio-semiotic notion of culture as a relational system<sup>16</sup> — and, thence, with an anti-essentialist notion of the subject. It also seems to be close to M. Bakhtin's notions of « polyphony » and « multiperspectivism »<sup>17</sup>.

As is well known, Bakhtin's theories derived mostly from his analysis of the novel. In the novel, as observed by Bakhtin, polyphony emerges from the interaction of different voices. For instance, in Dostoevsky's work : one « has the impression » that s/he « is dealing not with a *single* author-artist [...] but with a number of philosophical statements by *several* author-thinkers — Raskolnikov, Myshkin, Stavrogin, Ivan Karamazov, the Grand Inquisitor, and others »<sup>18</sup>. Unlike other genres, in the novel the polyphonic and multiperspective effects are greatly enhanced by the fact that the characters' voices are in their turn filtered by — and sometimes merge with — the author's (or the narrator's) voice.

Although the « narrator-character form » which characterizes the novel seems to better lend itself to a polyphonic discourse than any other literary form, even drama and poetry are pervaded by differently structured — yet comparable — pluralities of voices and perspectives<sup>19</sup>. In drama, of course, the author's voice is less recognizable (or completely disappears), yet the very juxtaposition of the characters' voices creates a polyphonic and multiperspec-

<sup>15</sup> See Sidney's observations on tragicomedy in *An Apology for Poetry* (edited by G. Shepherd, revised and expanded by R. W. Maslen, Manchester, New York, Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 112).

<sup>16</sup> R. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 121-27.

<sup>17</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and trans. by C. Emerson, introduction by W. C. Booth, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. A. Serpierti's excellent attempt to extend the analysis of « polyphony » from the novel to other literary genres, and especially to Shakespearean drama, « Polifonia shakespeariana », in *Retorica e immaginario*, Parma, Pratiche, 1986, now expanded and published as a separate volume, *Polifonia shakespeariana*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2002 ; see also *id.*, « Perspectivism and Polyphony in Shakespeare's Dramatic Language », *Textus*, XI, 1998, p. 3-32. I myself have tried to account for Shakespeare's multiperspectivism (especially concerning the dynastic code) in « Le insolubili ambiguità del codice dinastico. *King John* come "problem play" », in « *King John* ». *Dal testo alla scena*, éd. M. Tempera, Bologna, CLUEB, 1993, p. 91-109.

tive whole — much more so since some characters clearly echo, imitate or parody other voices and world-views. In its turn, the lyric voice of poetry incorporates other voices, as well as a diversity of stances (as when, in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the poet imagines the Muse's voice (CI), or parodies the conventional poetic diction (CXXX), or in a very general sense when he shows himself as torn between opposite states of mind — and, thus, articulates opposite discourses).

It would be impossible in such a brief space as this to analyze in any detail the different poetics of polyphony in different literary genres. Therefore, we shall limit ourselves to use Bakhtin's notion of polyphony in a very general sense, and ignore all those particular applications which pertain only to the novel<sup>20</sup>. In the following analysis of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, by « polyphony » we shall thus broadly indicate the simultaneous presence of different cultural models, disparate ideological stances, and various poetic styles. This presence seems to elude any attempt to reconstruct the author's unitarian point of view. As aptly put by C. Burrow, the *Sonnets* are « extraordinarily responsive to areas of language and human conduct which are trespassed by many different discourses and points of view »<sup>21</sup>.

Several « Shakespeares », or several Shakesperean voices, therefore emerge from the textual surface of the *Sonnets*. Peculiar as this may be, it is not too far from the plurality of worlds which — according to Bakhtin's analysis — characterize Dostoevsky's texts. However, the reverse is no less true : having many Shakespeares also means that we have a single Shakespeare, whose text is the polyphonic site of a number of varied and discordant voices<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Although Bakhtin limited his analysis of polyphony to the novel, he nevertheless maintained that the « significance » of this « type of artistic thinking extends far beyond the limits of the novel alone and touches upon several basic principles of European aesthetics », *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> C. Burrow, « Introduction » to his edition of William Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 128. Subsequent references to the *Sonnets*, *A Lover's Complaint* and *Venus and Adonis* will be to this edition ; references to the plays will be to the « Arden » editions.

<sup>22</sup> As observed by R. Wilson, Shakespeare's text may be defined as « a space which is illuminated not by certainty or knowledge, but [...] by multiple sources of light », *Secret Shakespeare. Studies in Theatre, Religion and Resistance*, Manchester, New York, Manchester University Press, 2004, p. 36.

## Hearing and sight : pleasure and the Ficinian hierarchy of the senses

In spite of the rise of puritanism, « pleasure » retained an undisputed importance in late sixteenth-century England. One of the many words of French origin, it was a key-term in aesthetics and poetics.

According to the well-known Horatian formula, poetry was supposed not only to be *utile*, but also *dulce* — that is, to give pleasure. In George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589, probably drafted in 1560s)<sup>23</sup> « pleasantness » is an essential requisite of poetry — indeed, it makes up its very *raison d'être*. Puttenham distinguishes poetry from prose because the rhythm of poetry « cannot but *please* the hearer very well »<sup>24</sup>.

Of course, beside *eliciting* pleasure in its addressees, a text may also *portray* pleasure as one of its themes. It is on « pleasure » as a literary theme, rather than on the « barthesian » pleasantness of literary form<sup>25</sup>, that we shall focus our analysis.

In Shakespeare's *Sonnets* the term « pleasure » occurs eleven times<sup>26</sup>. In four of these occurrences (XX, LII, LXXV, CXXVI) it is associated with « treasure », thus delineating an economy of desire.

Concerning the « use » of pleasure, sonnet CXXI occupies a preeminent position. As G. Melchiori observes, this sonnet proposes « an *ethos* of social behaviour, and more particularly of sexual behaviour »<sup>27</sup>. In it, the poet claims his right to freely enjoy his own pleasures, which are misjudged by « others' false adulterate eyes ». If people regard as « bad » what I am sure is « good » — the poet argues — the fault should be looked for in their « rank thoughts », rather than in my own actions. This sonnet has been usually interpreted in a very general sense ; yet, it might have a much more specific aim — namely, to justify the poet's homoerotic penchant for his lovely boy. Seen from this point of view, it might share the same anxiety about « lawful » and « unlawful » uses of pleasure which characterizes the final couplet of sonnet XX and which was quite common in the Neoplatonic distinction between two main kinds

<sup>23</sup> G. D. Willcock, A. Walker, « Introduction » to their edition of G. Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1936, p. xlvi. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

<sup>24</sup> G. Puttenham, *op. cit.*, p. 8 (my emphasis).

<sup>25</sup> R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Paris, Seuil, 1973.

<sup>26</sup> M. Spevack, *A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare*, Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1969-1970.

<sup>27</sup> G. Melchiori, *L'Uomo e il potere. Indagine sulle strutture profonde dei Sonetti di Shakespeare*, Torino, Einaudi, 1973, p. 81.

of love<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, the poet's distinction between « straight » and « bevel » [e. g., « crooked »]<sup>29</sup> (« I may be straight though they themselves be bevel » : CXXI. 11) suggests that the malevolent opposition between lawful and unlawful pleasures drawn by those who condemn his « sportive blood » should be re-examined, or even reversed. (Incidentally, in the light of the meaning acquired by the term « straight » in the 20<sup>th</sup> century — that is, the one pertaining to one's sexual orientation — it is quite ironical that the poet defines himself as « straight » in a poetic collection where he celebrates his homoerotic desire for a boy). The core of the sonnet lies in the poet's proud vindication of his right to be just the way he is : « I am that I am ».

The distinction between different kinds of love was a main concern in Florentine Neoplatonism. This distinction was mainly based on a double opposition : love between men *vs* love between man and woman, and chastity *vs* sexual fulfilment. As a result of this double opposition, different kinds of love were ranged, from the highest down to the lowest.

To Ficino, as well as to other Italian fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Neoplatonists, the highest form of love emanated from a « desiderio di bellezza »<sup>30</sup>, or a desire to enjoy beauty. This was disconnected from mere sensual enjoyment, and was only to be perceived by means of the intellect and the two nobler bodily senses — hearing and sight<sup>31</sup>. It was thanks to hearing and sight that men could perceive Beauty itself :

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, M. Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, VI, 14, éd. S. R. Jayne, Columbia, University of Missouri, 1944, rééd. Dallas, Spring Publications, 1985.

<sup>29</sup> « Bevel » : as noted by C. Burrow (*op. cit.*, p. 622, n.), Shakespeare's is the first recorded usage of the term (*OED* 2).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. P. Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, III, 6. The same idea is also voiced by the character « Pietro Bembo » in Baldesar Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano*, IV, 51 : cf. the edition by W. Barberis, Torino, Einaudi, 1998, p. 415-420, and Sir T. Hoby's 1561 translation, *The Book of the Courtier*, éd. V. Cox, London, Everyman, 1994, p. 341-345. Plato himself had very similarly connected beauty with affections, and had defined Love as « love for beautiful things » (*Symposium*, 204 d sq.) and as a « desire » for « what is beautiful » (*Phaedrus*, 237 d, ff.) : references to Plato are to the *Complete Works*, éd. J. M. Cooper, Indianapolis, Cambridge, Hackett, 1997.

<sup>31</sup> On the Neoplatonic hierarchy of the senses and its influence on Renaissance poetry see J. Roc, « Italian Neoplatonism and the Poetry of Sidney, Shakespeare, Chapman, and Donne », in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, éd. A. Baldwin, S. Hutton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 100-116. In his analysis of the *Sonnets*, S. Manferlotti observes that they are hierarchically ordered from sight to touch, which is the most neglected sense : « I cinque sensi nei *Sonetti* di Shakespeare », *Belfagor*, XLVIII,

Beauty, therefore, is three-fold : of souls, of bodies, and of sounds. That of souls is known through the intellect ; that of bodies is perceived through the *eyes* ; that of sounds is perceived only through the *ears*. Since, therefore, it is the intellect, seeing, and hearing by which alone we are able to enjoy beauty, and since love is the *desire to enjoy beauty*, love is always satisfied through the intellect, the eyes, or the ears. What need is there for smell ? What need is there for taste, or touch<sup>32</sup> ?

Taking this hierarchy of the senses as a starting point, Ficino contrasted spiritual love between men (or between men and boys) to physical or sensual love between men and women<sup>33</sup>. According to him, the man who follows the « lower » sort of love desires a « beautiful woman » to generate « handsome offspring », whereas the man who yearns after the « higher », heavenly love which elevates the soul, desires the company of « men who are handsome », and whose external appearance is but a reflection of internal virtue<sup>34</sup>. Therefore, « the soul's spiritual ascent to ultimate beauty was fuelled by love between men »<sup>35</sup>. This theory was quite in line with the Platonic notion of *philtia*, and more particularly with the related assumption that the vision of a young man's earthly beauty could remind one of Beauty itself<sup>36</sup>.

On the other hand, Ficino condemned any physical kind of love between men (VI, 14) which, according to him, was neither useful in terms of spiritual elevation (as was chaste male friendship), nor in terms of the eternalization of the species (as was love between man and woman). That the Elizabethans had adopted these love patterns is shown — among other possible exam-

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4, 1993, p. 385-401. On the hierarchy of the senses, cf. also L. Lieblein's contribution in the present volume.

<sup>32</sup> M. Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, I, 3, *op. cit.*, p. 41 (my emphasis).

<sup>33</sup> On this subject cf. J. Kraye, « The Transformation of Platonic Love in the Italian Renaissance », in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, *op. cit.*, p. 76-85 ; J. C. Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love. The Context of Giordano Bruno's Eroici furori*, New York, London, Columbia University Press, (1955), 1958.

<sup>34</sup> M. Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, VI, 14, *op. cit.*, p. 131-132. See also J. Kraye's observations, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> J. Kraye, *op. cit.*, p. 79. About one century later, Giordano Bruno likewise considered female beauty as « a symbol of the allure of the perceptible world », J. Kraye, *op. cit.*, p. 85 ; cf. G. Bruno [*De gli eroici furori*, 1586], *The Heroic Frenzies*, éd. P. E. Memmo, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1964, p. 60-62.

<sup>36</sup> In fact, Plato had maintained that the vision of earthly beauty led the better kind of men to the elevating vision of « Beauty itself », but led the worse kind of men to a search for beastly sexual satisfaction and procreation (*Phaedrus*, 249 d-251 d).



ples — by E. K.'s analogous attempt to distinguish between the chaste, ennobling love between a man and a boy (which he terms *pæderastice*) and the « unlawful fleshliness » between men<sup>37</sup>.

Ficinian ethico-aesthetic principles about love and beauty understandably posed some problems which were not easy to solve. In Ficino's doctrine of love, the tensions between spiritual elevation and physical pleasure, homosexuality and heterosexuality, self-love and love of others, sterility and procreation found a rather fragile equilibrium which could easily be upset. Indeed, ironically enough, the author's very effort to draw boundaries shows how fragile this equilibrium was.

### Sight and touch : the notion of pleasure in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

Shakespeare's sonnet sequence reflects several of the tensions characterizing Renaissance love theories. Understandably enough, the *Sonnets* only managed to dissimulate — rather than solve — those contradictions, which were deeply rooted in the original theories themselves.

The most conspicuous example of the conflicting quality of the *Sonnets* can possibly be found in the much discussed distinction between chaste homosexual « love » and sensual heterosexual « love's use » ending Sonnet XX :

Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

While the relation between the speaker and his beloved is founded on pure affection (« love »), the relation between the lovely boy and the fair sex is pervaded by an openly sexual tone (« love's use »). However, in spite of this explicit distinction, which apparently posits the poet's feelings within the spiritual limits of male friendship, the situation is made rather ambivalent by such elements as the fair youth's androgyny, and the speaker's visual indulgence on his — recently acquired — maleness :

[...] [Nature] pricked thee out for women's pleasure [.]

It may also be noted that one more ambivalence lies in the emphasis on the term « pleasure », which marks a complete semantic turn from the preceding sonnets : here, in fact, sexuality is not merely considered as a life-giving

<sup>37</sup> E. K.'s passage defending Spenser's *January Eclogue* is quoted in W. Kerrigan, « Introduction », in W. Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

act and a means of eternizing beauty, but is shown as a pleasant and pleasure giving activity — that is, as something which can be an end in itself.

More generally, the tensions internal to the Neoplatonic doctrine of love are exemplified by the double erotic situation the fair youth is involved in. Indeed, although the youth elicits homoerotic admiration, he is curiously encouraged to yield to heterosexual pleasures. His much praised beauty may thus be regarded as the semantic centre where the already hinted opposites characterizing Neoplatonism dialogically meet.

On the other hand, however, the narrative frame outlined in the *Sonnets*, as well as the imagery it employs, may also be related to a wider early modern discourse on the body. Elizabethan anatomical and midwifery treatises concerning the reproductive body have been recently shown to have a closer relation to creative literature than previously realized<sup>38</sup>.

The clearest limit of older interpretations of the *Sonnets* is that they bypassed those layers of meaning which were not in line with the then current (mostly homophobic) views on sexuality and pleasure<sup>39</sup>. Thus, far from uncovering the text's hidden or half-hidden homoerotic layers, past critics did their best to conceal them more deeply. Indeed, they went so far as to ignore or minimize even the most explicit ones — such as the theme of androgyny. Their obvious aim was to preserve the dignity of the Bard from any suspicion of « Greek love ». They partially succeeded in doing so, especially because (for evident historical reasons) in Shakespeare's time homosexuality was something different from what it is nowadays, and thus a different vocabulary was deployed to portray it<sup>40</sup>. However, the very fact that early seventeenth-century editions of the *Sonnets* (such as John Benson's) strived to « heterosexualize » them<sup>41</sup> clearly shows that Shakespeare's contemporaries, or

<sup>38</sup> See M. Calbi, *Approximate Bodies : Aspects of the Figuration of Masculinity, Power and the Uncanny in Early Modern Drama and Anatomy*, Salerno, Milano, CEdipus, 2001, and *Discourses on/of the Body*, éd. V. Fortunati, S. Greenblatt, M. Billi, *Textus*, XIII, 2, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, after a subtle and otherwise well-balanced reading of the homoerotic theme in Shakespeare, J. Kerrigan unexpectedly concludes that « the sonnets to the youth grow out of comradely affection in the literature of friendship », « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 55. See also K. Duncan-Jones's comments on Kerrigan and especially on previous critics, « Introduction » to her « Arden » edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, London, Thomson, 1997, p. 77 sq.

<sup>40</sup> J. Kerrigan, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>41</sup> K. Duncan-Jones, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 41 sq. : in Benson's 1640 edition there is « a visible attempt, though not an entirely efficient one, to suggest that the addressee

near-contemporaries, were perfectly aware of the homoerotic implications of the original text.

In conclusion, a balanced reading of the *Sonnets* should both bring to light the historical alterity of classical and Renaissance homosocial eroticism (so as to make it recognizable where it is more obscure and less visible) and underline its continuity with contemporary homosexual discourses and practices. Indeed, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* both look back to Neo-Platonic homoeroticism and forward to more modern homosexual patterns and conduct.

In the following analysis I shall thus be attempting to show how the *Sonnets* consist of — or construct — several levels of meaning.

On a first level, the very relation between an adult lover and a young beloved is undoubtedly reminiscent of Platonic and Neoplatonic love patterns, as is the allegedly purely spiritual character of the older man's affection. Besides, the very distinction between « love » and « love's use » possibly bears one more (Neo-)Platonic echo, particularly in its implication that homoerotic chaste « love » is nobler than heterosexual « love's use ».

However, the relationship between the poet and the youth is also shown from a number of alternative standpoints which at least partially disrupt the Platonic paradigm. For instance, the poet is not only presented as an adult man in love with a boy, but also as an artist addressing a social superior or a patron. Moreover, the plea for procreation and the emphasis on temporality and change are very much in line with Aristotle's ontology. It should also be emphasized that the analysis of sexuality in terms of such economic categories as « use » and « waste » is possibly reminiscent of certain Ovidian associations between eros and economics.

Finally, the Neoplatonic sublimation of love between men is further contradicted by the use of some obscene wordplay and the eroticization of the gaze which, unlike the ennobling Ficinian sight, indulges on the young man's privy parts (as in sonnet XX). More generally, it is the narrative situation as

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throughout is a woman. The "he" pronoun is often, though not quite always, altered to "she", and changes such as "sweet love" for "sweet boy" (108. 5), or the entitling of 122 "Vpon the receipt of a Table Book from his Mistris", reinforce the suggestion that these are conventional, heterosexual love sonnets », *op. cit.*, p. 42 ; « For well over a century, Benson succeeded in muddying the textual waters. It was his edition that was read and edited, almost exclusively, until the superb work of Malone in 1780 », *op. cit.*, p. 43. J. Kerrigan, in his turn, usefully reminds us that in the first edited version of Michelangelo's sonnets to Tommaso de' Cavalieri (1623), Michelangelo's grandnephew similarly changed the masculine pronouns into feminine ones, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 46.

a whole that reveals the profound ambivalence of the speaker's affection. In the *Sonnets*, the conventional plea to a coy virgin to give herself, and eventually beget, before she grows too old is instead made to a male addressee. The ensuing paradox is that in Shakespeare's poetic sequence the lover urges his beloved to yield to a party other than himself. Any critical attempt to completely rationalize this would but impoverish the semantic complexity of the text. Yet, if not all, at least some traits of the poet's affection may be historically explained in the light of sixteenth-century theories on sexuality.

In sum, the non-sexual character of the speaker's involvement is both affirmed via Neoplatonic patterns and denied via the juxtaposition of a number of other standpoints. The *Sonnets* may thus be seen as the textual setting where the *visual* homoerotic longing for male beauty extolled by Neoplatonic doctrines of love polyphonically merges with other cultural models which alternatively emphasize the more earthly pleasures of *touch*.

### Sight. Platonic « forms » and the sublimation of homoerotic pleasure

The narrative situation portrayed in the sonnets to the fair youth (1-126)<sup>42</sup> is rather eccentric if compared to contemporary sonnet sequences, yet it was no complete novelty<sup>43</sup>.

An older man (the poet) admires a young man's beauty. Since beauty is evanescent and subject to the devastating effects of time, he urges him to procreate in order to preserve it.

The admiration of male beauty is also present in other Shakespearean works, more or less contemporary to the *Sonnets*. In *A Lover's Complaint*, for

<sup>42</sup> Much speculation has been made about the « true » identity of the young man, starting from the famous initials — Mr. W. H. — which indicate the addressee in the publisher's dedication. However, of course, there is no evidence that Thomas Thorpe's addressee is the same as the poet's love object. Moreover, any identification of the characters with real people — although it cannot be excluded *a priori* — finds a limit in the fictional character of literature as such.

<sup>43</sup> Barnfield's twenty sonnets to a young boy called Ganymede are the only other known Elizabethan example of a poetic sequence expressing love for a boy (see R. Barnfield, *Cynthia. With Certain Sonnets, and the Legend of Cassandra*, 1595). The Ganymede motif had also already been celebrated by Barnfield himself in *The Affectionate Shepheard* (1594) (cf. the lines « If it be a sin to love a lovely lad ; / Oh, then sin I » : *The Complete Poems*, éd. G. Klawitter, Selinsgrove, London, Toronto, Susquehanna University Press, 1990). See J. Kerrigan, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 48-49 ; K. Duncan-Jones, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 47 ; C. Burrow, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

instance, it is the female lover who utters a detailed description of the beauty of the young man who seduced her (II. 85-140)<sup>44</sup>. In *Venus and Adonis* (1593) Shakespeare had already explored in no less visual detail the charms of the male body as seen by a female beholder. Fewer Elizabethan works dared to explicitly present man's beauty as seen by a male beholder. Among them, Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*<sup>45</sup>, which describes in very vivid and explicit details Neptune's desiring gaze on Leander's naked, androgynous body. It should however be pointed out that, although both in the *Lover's Complaint* and *Venus and Adonis* the celebration of male beauty was voiced by female characters, its main seductiveness was ambivalently attributed to a number of ephebic and womanly traits which were more likely to tease a man's paederastic fantasy<sup>46</sup>.

In the *Sonnets*, the celebration of male beauty is marked by a Platonic note. In fact, the fair youth's beauty goes beyond mere physical attractiveness and is associated with the transcendent Form of the Beautiful, or Beauty itself. In other words, Beauty is shown as « an absolute quality which is conferred from high on other qualities like pleasingness of colour or proportion » but is distinct from them, or from the mere sum of them<sup>47</sup>.

Thus, the youth's beauty evokes a more general beauty's pattern (XIX. 12) or « beauty's form » :

<sup>44</sup> That the *Complaint* should be regarded as a coda to the *Sonnets* was firstly brilliantly shown by Kerrigan, in his above recalled edition. K. Duncan-Jones (p. 431, n.) and C. Burrow (p. 140) aptly remind us that, from at least Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond* (which was appended to *Delia*, 1592), it was customary to add complaints to sonnet sequences.

<sup>45</sup> Marlowe's poem was entered in the Stationers' Register in 1593, but had presumably been composed in the late 1580s.

<sup>46</sup> Cf., for instance, the following lines from *A Lover's Complaint* : « Small show of man was yet upon his chin » ; « maiden-tongued he was » (II. 92, 100). On the themes of androgyny and ambivalent gender relations, see S. Orgel, *Impersonations. The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, especially the chapter on « The eye of the beholder », p. 31-52.

<sup>47</sup> S. Medcalf, « Shakespeare on Beauty, Truth and Transcendence », in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, *op. cit.*, p. 117. Indeed, as Medcalf also observes, a similar Neoplatonic quality also characterizes Adonis' beauty in *Venus and Adonis*. On the classical notions of « ideas » and « forms », cf. E. Panofsky, *Idea. A Concept in Art Theory*, [1924], Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1968 ; A. Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600*, Oxford, Clarendon Press (1962), 1978 ; L. Anceschi, « Comportamento dell'*Idea* nelle poetiche del Seicento », in *Tre studi di estetica*, Milano, Mursia, 1963, p. 11-28.

Mine eye hath played the painter, and hath stelled  
 Thy *beauty's form* in table of my heart ;  
 (sonnet XXIV. 1-2 : my emphasis)<sup>48</sup>.

The metaphoric description of love (and phantasy) as a painter is — in its turn — at least as old as Plato<sup>49</sup>. As the sonnet cycle as a whole suggests, the ideal beauty, or the « beauty's form », of the beloved first impresses itself in the lover's mind, who then externalizes it in his poetic output — that is, the sonnet sequence itself. Therefore, the immortal quality of the poetic line is a result of the poet's acquisition of an immortal idea of beauty: love enables the poet to « see », and thus transpose in his lines, the immortal part — or the « form » — of his beloved.

Even the relation between the poet and the fair youth follows a Platonic-Ficinian pattern. The classical love scheme contemplated in Plato's dialogues may be schematically illustrated as follows :

1. the male couple is made up of an adult man and a youth ; their age difference gives the relation an « asymmetrical » character, in that they perform different affective roles (the older man is the lover or the *erastés*, whereas the young boy is the beloved or the *erómenos* ; thus, the older man brings his wisdom and experience, whereas the boy brings his beauty and youth)<sup>50</sup> ;

2. the relation is supposed to be non-sexual, but mainly paedagogical (in other words, the more mature man teaches and advises the younger one, who is expected to learn from him)<sup>51</sup> ;

<sup>48</sup> « Stelled » — as observed by Burrow — was « a recently introduced term of art from painting, meaning "to portray, delineate" ». It occurs in R. Haydocke's 1598 translation of Lomazzo's *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scultura et architettura*, I, 16 (1584), C. Burrow, *op. cit.*, p. 428). K. Duncan-Jones prefers to read « steeled », that is : « formed a permanent image as if fashioned with or in steel », and suggests that « steel is associated with mirrors as in Gascoigne's *The Steele Glass* (1576) and, possibly, with "styled" = wrote or inscribed », *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>49</sup> On the presence of this image in ancient Greek philosophy and thence in the European tradition, cf. G. Agamben, *Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

<sup>50</sup> This point is also made by Ficino : « Lovers exchange beauty for beauty. A man [*Vir*] enjoys the physical beauty of a youth with his eyes; the youth enjoys the man's beauty with his mind. The youth, who is beautiful in body only, by this practice becomes beautiful also in the soul; the man, who is beautiful in soul only, feasts his eyes upon bodily beauty. Truly this is a wonderful exchange, equally honourable, beneficial and pleasant to both », *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, II, 9.

<sup>51</sup> However, the common assumption that Platonic love is an intensely affectionate, but non-sexual relationship (cf., for instance, G. Reale's otherwise brilliant « Introduzione »

3. due to his green age, the boy's beauty is an androgynous one (this point is made or hinted at in *Phaedrus*, whereas in the *Symposium* androgyny is given a mythological treatment and is shown as a more general trait, shared by all human beings, irrespective of their age and sex).

All the above points find, if not an equivalent, at least a very near parallel in the *Sonnets* :

1. the age difference between the poet and his beloved youth is a main theme throughout the sonnets (« No longer mourn for me » [LXXI]; « That time of year thou mayst in me behold » [LXXIII], *etc.*) ;

2. their relation is seemingly non-sexual, as is suggested in several sonnets (and more explicitly in sonnet XX. 13-14) ;

3. finally, the fair youth is characterized by some androgynous traits not too different from those marking Plato's *erómenoi* : he is a « master mistress » (XX. 2) ; he is his « mother's glass » (III. 9) ; he is both an Adonis and a Helen (that is, he is a paradigm of both male and female beauty [LIII. 4-8]), and so on.

As implied by the sequence as a whole, the age difference within a male couple does not act as a separating but as a uniting factor. Indeed, it stimulates a double narcissistic desire : the older man sees in the youth a mirror image of his younger self, whereas the younger man sees in the older one a projection of his adulthood.

### Platonism, patronage and homoeroticism

However, the homoerotic liaison portrayed in the *Sonnets* cannot be explained exclusively in terms of a (Neo-)Platonic paradigm. In fact, the above outlined love patterns overlap with those typical of a relation between an artist and his patron.

The homoerotic elements in the rhetoric of patronage have hardly ever passed unnoticed. However, earlier criticism minimized their possible emotional and sexual implications by explaining them in terms of an artificial convention. On the other hand, more recent criticism has somehow reversed this position by suggesting that the artificial convention (that is, the language

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to his edition of *Fedro*, Milan, Mondadori, (1998), 2001, p. LI) is a questionable one. Indeed, the definition of the lover as « watered » and « warmed » by the sight of his beloved boy, and the ensuing description of the lover's swelling wings in terms of « pulsing arteries » (*Phaedrus*, 251 c-e) seem to suggest homoerotic excitement.



of patronage) was one of the vehicles through which latent homoerotic desires manifested themselves.

As has been observed by Colin Burrow, the poetry of the 1590s was « frequently homosocial, and frequently [...] written, as *Venus and Adonis* was, by poorer male poets to richer and more powerful male patrons in order to persuade them to provide material support »<sup>52</sup>. Therefore, it is not surprising that the poetics of patronage shared many common features with the poetics of homoeroticism<sup>53</sup>.

In the *Sonnets*, the youth is clearly presented as the poet's patron (XXV, XXVI, CXIV, and so on), and the poet is consequently associated with — although not completely identified with — the « [g]reat princes' favourites » (XXV. 5). The sonnets may thus be *also* considered as an act of homage paid by the poet to his noble protector. This partially overturns a basic element in the « Platonic » scheme, in that in the *Sonnets* it is the older man who seeks protection and rewards from the younger one<sup>54</sup>.

The poet, therefore, appears as both the older Platonic lover teaching and giving advice to his young *protégé*, and the early modern artist looking for his patron's benefits. For much the same reason, the celebration of the fair youth is both a kind of Platonic admiration for a handsome ephebe and a kind of early modern panegyric to a noble patron.

### Touch : Aristotelian « substance » and the plea for procreation

One of the main Shakespearian deviations from a strict Platonic pattern lies in his identification of the Beauty's form with a living person<sup>55</sup>. Indeed, unlike Plato's *erōmenoi*, the fair youth is not one of the many imperfect, earthly imitations of true Beauty, but is, or at least closely resembles, the supreme

<sup>52</sup> C. Burrow, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 22. On this topic Orgel observes that « the love of men for men in this culture appears less threatening than the love of men for women : it had fewer consequences, it was easier to de-sexualize, it figured and reinforced the patronage system », *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>53</sup> A. Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, London, Gay Men's Press (1982, rééd. 1988), new edition with a new afterword and bibliography, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995 ; and *id.*, « Homosexuality and Male Friendship in Elizabethan England », in *Queering the Renaissance*, éd. J. Goldberg, Durham, Duke University Press, 1994, p. 40-61. Cf. also S. Orgel, *op. cit.*, p. 41-42.

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly enough, the roles are somehow reversed in sonnet CXXVI. 9, where it is the fair youth who becomes a favourite (being defined Nature's « minion »).

<sup>55</sup> On this point, see S. Medcalf, *op. cit.*, p. 118, 120.

perfection of Beauty itself — except for the important detail that his beauty is not eternal, and thus needs to regenerate itself. Thus, in the *Sonnets* Beauty is not seen as a self-sufficient, separate form, but rather as materialized in the boy's body and, thence, as capable of duplicating itself in his reproductive process<sup>56</sup>.

Although Shakespeare's association between beauty and increase may be explained in terms of Plato's theory of « reproduction [...] in beauty » in the *Symposium* (206 e), it is probably also reminiscent of Aristotle's notion of increase (*αὐξήσις*) in his biological works (*On the Generation of Animals*, II, 1, 735 a, etc.) — as well as of more or less similar notions formulated in contemporary anatomical treatises.

As is well known, motion, change, and temporality are overruling principles in the Aristotelian ontology. In Aristotle's theory of being, properties do not exist in themselves but only as concretized in real objects. Therefore, according to Aristotle, « substance » (*ousia*) is the result of the dialectical combination of « form » (*idéa, eîdos* or *morphé*) and « matter » (*hýle*). Significantly enough, he associates « idea » or « form » with the masculine, and « matter » with the feminine<sup>57</sup>. Natural things possess within themselves the purpose (*télos*) which guides their process of change, or which continually actualizes their existing potentialities. A somewhat similar dialectical process governs both the generation of new natural beings and artificial products<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> A similar pattern also applies to Adonis' beauty in *Venus and Adonis*, II, 167-170 : « [...] beauty breedeth beauty : / Thou was begot : to get it is thy duty. / Upon the earth's increase why shoulds thou feed, / Unless the earth with thy increase be fed ? ». On these lines see J. Roe, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>57</sup> *Physics*, I, 9, 192 a ; *On the Generation of Animals*, I, 21, 730 b : « the male contributes the principle (*arkhé*) of movement and the female contributes the *material* (*hýle*). This is why on the one hand the female does not generate on its own : it needs some source or *principle* to supply the material with movement and to determine its character » (my emphasis). Cf. also I, 19, 727 b ; I, 20, 729 a ; II, 736 a ; II, 739 b, etc. (Aristotelian quotations are from the « Loeb » editions ; for practical reasons, Greek terms have been transliterated and given in the nominative case). The consequence of Aristotle's ontology, whose patriarchal orientation has been pointed out by feminist philosophers, is that women contribute nothing but matter to their offspring. See C. A. Freeland, « Nourishing Speculation : A Feminist Reading of Aristotelian Science », in *Engendering Origins : Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and Aristotle*, éd. B. A. Bar On, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994 ; and her edition of *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle*, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. Cf. also n. 62, 65, and 66, below.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *On Generation and Corruption* ; *On the Generation of Animals*, and *Metaphysics*, VII, 7, 1032 b.

In Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the fair youth's beauty is shown as a compound of eternal and transient elements, or of a form and its ever changing sensory concretization. The only way for the youth to overcome the destructive effects of time<sup>59</sup> is to transmit his « form » to a female body, and thence originate a new being. Form is thus conceived as a masculine principle which is supposed to fertilize feminine bodily matter :

The world will wail thee like a *makeless wife*.  
 The world will be thy *widow* and still weep,  
 That thou no *form* of thee hast left behind,  
 (sonnet IX. 4-6 : my emphasis).

In those lines, the female body (the world personified as a « makeless wife » or a weeping « widow ») is presented as willing to receive the youth's masculine « form »<sup>60</sup>. Aristotle's gendered ontology, with its sexist assumption that matter desires form as the female desires the male, seems to be a pervasive influence here<sup>61</sup>.

Even the rhetorical question opening sonnet IX, « Is it for fear to wet a widow's eye [?] », if examined within the vaster intratextual theme of the youth's reluctance to procreate, symbolically hints that the boy is afraid « to wet » a woman's womb, and that it is high time for him to overcome such a fear<sup>62</sup> — or, that he should finally let his masculine form substantiate itself into feminine matter. A similar association of the youth's form with a masculine principle is also expressed in sonnet XIII, particularly where it recommends that the boy's « sweet issue [...] should *bear* » his « sweet *form* » (my

<sup>59</sup> On the themes of time and immortality, cf. A. Serpieri, *I sonetti dell'immortalità. Il problema dell'arte e della nominazione in Shakespeare*, Milano, Bompiani, 1975. See also Serpieri's brilliant « Introduzione » to his Italian edition of the *Sonetti*, Milano, Rizzoli, (1991), 1998, p. 9-56.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. also the parallel identification of the « world » with the « mother » in sonnet III : « Thou dost beguile the world, unblesse some mother ».

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Aristotle, « what desires the form is matter, as the female desires the male and the ugly the beautiful », *Physics*, I, 9, 192 a. The fact that the female is supposed to lack « form » also implies that she lacks beauty (cf. n. 52 and 61, above).

<sup>62</sup> That the youth's « form » also has liquid traits (and is thus associated with his semen) is implicitly or explicitly suggested in Sonnet I's reference to the youth's « fuel ». See also Sonnets I, V, VI as well as the possible ambivalence of the « blood » which the fair youth is supposed to « bestow » in Sonnet XI (incidentally, this notion of « form » does not seem too far from our notion of genetic patrimony). As is well known, Aristotle considered « form » as a liquid formative principle and thus identified it with man's semen (*On the Generation of Animals*, II, 2, 736 a). His epistemology and his ontology were thus closely linked together by the dual function (intellectual and organic) of « form ».

emphasis). The verb « bear », although literally associated with the youth's would-be offspring, is also figuratively connected with femininity and pregnancy. Thus, even in this case, the implicit meaning is that feminine matter « should bear » the youth's « sweet », masculine « form ».

Interestingly enough, a similar pattern also informs the parallel theme of the boy's immortalization through poetry. As we shall see in the following paragraphs, the poet's creative mind is implicitly compared to a female womb, and can thus likewise be fertilized by the youth's « form ».

Similar Aristotelian notions, and a similarly male-centred ontology, are no less pervasive in contemporary poetry. For instance, in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* Leander's tactics in convincing Hero to give herself are mainly based on an analogous depreciation of women and their generative principles. The sexual relation of women to men is compared to that of a low metal which is ennobled by the « impression » shaping it into a coin :

Base bullion for the stamp's sake we allow :  
Even so for men's impression do we you ;  
(*Hero and Leander*, II. 265-266)<sup>63</sup>.

Once again, the underlying sense is that chaotic feminine matter should be moulded, given a shape and a *télos* by a masculine form. This notion is strengthened by the subsequent dissociation of women's virginity — and, thus, of femininity — from « form » :

Nor is 't of earth or *mold celestial*,  
Or capable of any *form* at all  
(*Hero and Leander*, II. 273-274 : my emphasis).

Finally, Leander's acknowledgement that his argument derives from « reverend fathers » (I. 267) may be considered as a half-explicit admission of the author's debt to Aristotle and Aristotelianism.

Indeed, the very terminology of the *Sonnets* is in some points distinctly Aristotelian. Not only is the term « form » used in a dynamic sense, but it is also implicitly or explicitly associated with the specifically Aristotelian « substance ». In sonnet I, the youth's « fuel » is defined as « self-substantial ». In sonnets V, XXXVII, XLIV, LIII, the term occurs again<sup>64</sup>, if not in a strictly

<sup>63</sup> References are to C. Marlowe, *Complete Works*, vol. I, éd. R. Gill, Oxford, Clarendon, 1986.

<sup>64</sup> Sonnet V. 14 refers to the flowers' « substance ». Cf. also XXXVII. 10 : « this shadow doth such substance give » ; XLIV. 1 : « the dull substance of my flesh » ; LIII. 1 : « What is your substance [...] ? », etc.

orthodox Aristotelian acceptance, at least in a sense that is broadly compatible with Aristotle's ontology.

Yet, apart from any specific example, it is the overall meaning of the *Sonnets* that is aligned with the dynamic notion of Aristotelian forms. As suggested above, the theme of « increase » (*aúxesis*) was a main concern for Aristotle, who dedicated a large part of his work to the biological analysis of generation, growth, and increase<sup>65</sup>.

In sum, in the *Sonnets* homoeroticism is mainly dealt with from a Platonic standpoint and is delegated to « sight ». On the other hand, heterosexual love — with its emphasis on procreation, and thus on sensual pleasure — combines Platonic perspectives with Aristotelian ones and is focussed on « touch ». However, not only do the two themes ambivalently intersect with each other, but they also cross with a number of other cultural codes. Indeed, the *Sonnets* exhibit no univocal pattern of meaning. Their very mingling of different codes places them at an ironic distance from previous models, and gives life to a new, creatively hybrid discourse.

### Self-love as « beauty's waste », procreation as « beauty's use » : towards an Ovidian economy of desire

The thing I seeke is in my selfe, my *plentie* makes me *poore*.

Golding, *The Fifteen Books of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, 1567  
(III. 587 : my emphasis)

The transient notion of beauty (as part of a reality dominated by motion and change) is aptly suited to the language of temporary economic transactions. Beauty is thus described as something which the youth does not own, but merely holds « in lease » (XIII. 5). In other words, the beauty's form is only temporarily allowed to lodge in the boy's body. Indeed, Nature « gives nothing but doth lend » (IV. 3), and the very existence of the youth is but a loan, whose « quietus » can only be reached at his death (CXXXVI. 14)<sup>66</sup>.

<sup>65</sup> Cf., for instance, *On the Generation of Animals*, II, 1, 735 a : « the part which must of necessity be formed first is the one which possesses the principle of *growth* » (*aúxeseos arkhé* : my emphasis). The *Generation of Animals* was widely known in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, thanks to its many Latin translations (among which, the one begun in 1450 by Theodore of Gaza).

<sup>66</sup> As is well known, a similar economic image also occurs in Hamlet's monologue (III. 1. 75).

Beauty may also be regarded as a « legacy » or « Nature's bequest » (IV. 2-3), in that its « form » is transmitted from one body to another. Therefore, a well used beauty may consistently be defined as an « executor » (IV. 14), in that it preserves one's natural heritage (or what we would call, by means of another economic metaphor, one's genetic patrimony).

From another, parallel viewpoint « unused beauty » (IV. 13) may thus be considered as a « waste » (I. 12 ; IX. 11), and the person who commits such a waste as an « unthrif » (IV. 1 ; IX. 9 ; XIII. 13) or, which is almost the same, a « [p]rofitless usurer » (IV. 7), a « niggard » (I. 12 ; IV. 5), and one who spends upon himself nature's « bounteous largess » (IV. 6)<sup>67</sup>. Indeed, as is made clear in sonnet I, certain kinds of « niggarding » are to be regarded as a « waste ». Even the term « increase » conveys both reproductive and monetary meanings, and thus suggests the « biologico-economical » notion of a *natural patrimony* which should be expanded.

In the *Sonnets*, the very language of affection is associated with the language of economy : in sonnet LXXXVII. 1, the semantic ambivalence of the term « dear » is almost univocally interpreted from an economic viewpoint, and therefore originates a number of subsequent economic images.

Varied and complex as the single economic metaphors are, most of them converge towards one main semantic opposition, between beauty's « use » (II, IV, XX, etc.) and beauty's « waste » (I, IX, etc.)<sup>68</sup>. The overall pattern of meaning generated by this net of metaphors is seemingly quite simple : since beauty is only held by « lease », it would be a « waste » not to « use » it aptly — that is, not to bequeath its « treasure » to future generations.

A similar economic imagery also informs contemporary (or near contemporary) poetic pleas to bashful maids. For instance, in Andrew Marvell's ode *To His Coy Mistress*, the lover declares that he would not love his mistress at a low « rate » (I. 20)<sup>69</sup>. Much more pervasively, in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, Leander's rhetorical strategy to convince Hero to give herself exploits a number of economic images and conceits which depreciate virginity

<sup>67</sup> Although a « niggard » is more or less the opposite of an « unthrifty » person (whereas a « profitless usurer » is something between the two), the affinity among them lies in the fact that both of them make a bad use of money, and thus waste the possible interests deriving from it.

<sup>68</sup> A parallel economic-agricultural opposition is that between « abundance » and « famine » (I. 7). Self-love and the reluctance to procreate are also described as a kind of suicide (VI) or at least of self-cruelty (I).

<sup>69</sup> References are to A. Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, éd. E. Story Donno, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972.

by comparing it to avarice, and conversely extoll love and sexuality as a profitable investment :

[...] treasure is abused  
 When misers keep it ; being put to loan,  
 In time it will return us two for one.  
 (*Hero and Leander*, II. 234-236)<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, Leander's plea to his maid and the poet's plea to his « master mistress » (XX. 2) are in a sense specular. In Leander's rather sexist oration, feminine matter is said to acquire greater economic value if the woman is moulded by a masculine form (II. 265-274). In Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, a masculine form of beauty is likewise supposed to enrich or « treasure » an otherwise base female womb :

[...] treasure thou some place,  
 With beauty's treasure [...].  
 (Sonnet VI. 3-4)

The *Sonnets* thus propose a decidedly male-centred economy of desire and reproduction or, in Laqueur's words, an economy of reproduction « whose *télos* [is] male »<sup>71</sup>.

Indeed, the fair youth's avarice is the other side of his all too evident narcissism. Misers and narcissists share a similar unwillingness to give: they are both self-contracted (I), and are solely inclined to spend upon themselves (IV)<sup>72</sup>. Significantly enough, another dominant image in the *Sonnets* is that of mirrors and glasses.

As has been observed by Burrow, the « yearning to be outside of oneself and to become a mirror image of the object of desire plays a large part in the poetics of the *Sonnets*, from the early allusions to the story of Narcissus to the

<sup>70</sup> Cf. also « richest mine »-« basest mold » (II. 232-233) ; « Rich robes themselves and others do adorn ; / Neither themselves nor others, if not worn » (II. 237-238) ; « this fair gem, sweet in the loss alone, / When you fleet hence can be bequeathed to none » (II. 247-248) ; « legacy » (I. 250) ; « Virginitie, albeit some highly prize it, / Compared with marriage [...], / Differs as much as wine and water » (III. 262-264), etc.

<sup>71</sup> T. Laqueur, *Making Sex. Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. « thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes » (I. 5) ; « why dost thou spend / Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy ? » (IV. 1-2).



later efforts to resemble the beloved »<sup>73</sup>. Not only is the youth invited to « [I]ook in [his] glass » (III. 1), but he is also defined as his « mother's glass » (III. 9) and the older poet's glass of his younger self :

My glass shall not persuade me I am old,  
So long as youth and thou are of one date,  
(sonnet XXII. 1-2)<sup>74</sup>.

While the poet finds in the fair youth an anamnestic trace of his past self, the youth can, in his turn, see in the poet an image of his future self: the poet being the living projection of what the youth will be when « forty winters shall besiege » *his* « brow »<sup>75</sup>. On the other hand, the youth may find a reflex of his former self in his would-be offspring (I. 4 ; III. 2 ; XIII. 8 and so on).

Such a labyrinth of mirrors and gazes generates a condition in which one watches oneself to find the image of another person, or watches another to find himself. Even procreation, rather than an escape from self-love, reveals itself to be a supreme kind of narcissism, in that it responds to one's desire to forge a new specular image of the self. The distinction between « self-love » (III. 8) and « love towards others » (IX. 13) is, thus, far from being a clear-cut one.

Yet, in spite of all these complexities and ambivalences, one main semantic opposition may be said to prevail over the others : the sterility and waste of narcissism is contrasted to the fertility and usefulness of heterosexual procreation.

Interestingly enough, the mirrors in which the fair youth is supposed to look at himself find an almost perfect counterpart in the spring in which Narcissus contemplates his own image (in the third book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), all the more so since Narcissus' definition of his self-love is

<sup>73</sup> Cf. for instance the sonnet « Against my love shall be as I am now » (LXIII). See also C. Burrow, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>74</sup> See also sonnet XXXVII : « As a decrepit father [...] ».

<sup>75</sup> In sonnet II the youth is invited to imagine his older self (« When forty winters shall besiege thy brow, [...] ») ; this older self is implicitly provided by the poet and his ageing body (LXXIII : « That time of year », *etc.*). The situation described in the *Sonnets* shares some affinities with Dorian Gray's : Dorian's eternal youth is a symbol of the young masculine beauty he is fond of. In other words, the boys cherished by Dorian, as well as his ambivalent relation with his ageing portrait, symbolize the younger, more beautiful self which is the object of Dorian's erotic quest. More generally, it is the indissoluble link between narcissism, homoeroticism, and immortalization in the novel which closely relates it to Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.



similarly expressed in terms of contrasting economic metaphors — such as « poverty » and « plenty » :

Quod cupio mecum est : *inopem me copia fecit* (my emphasis)

or, in the words of Golding's 1567 translation :

The thing I seeke is in my selfe, my *plentie* makes me *poore* (my emphasis)<sup>76</sup>.

It is difficult to establish whether the use of an economic language to represent sexuality and procreation in Ovid (Golding), Marlowe and Shakespeare implies any direct link among their works — especially since such a convention is part of a much more general pattern whose ultimate heritage may still be observed nowadays<sup>77</sup>. No doubt, both Marlowe and Shakespeare were very familiar with Ovid (and in *Hero and Leander* there is more than a hint to Ovid's tale of Narcissus : II. 73-76), no less than with each other. As shown above, the *Sonnets* share many common traits with *Hero and Leander*, yet the situation they portray is also similar to the one recounted by Ovid. Shakespeare's youth, who « wastes » his « treasure » by resisting marriage, is akin to Ovid's Narcissus who misuses his « plentie » and, by refusing Echo's wooing, makes himself « poore ».

### From homoerotic apprenticeship to heterosexual pleasures

As observed above, the narrative frame of the *Sonnets* is rather eccentric. In Shakespeare's text, the conventional appeal by which a lover invites a coy maid to beget is curiously addressed to a young boy. The beloved is, in fact, invited by his male admirer to give himself to a third, female party. This situation may be hard to understand for a twenty-first century reader. Why should a lover invite his beloved to be unfaithful to him ? A possible answer may be provided by sixteenth-century sexual ethics and gender theories.

A number of Elizabethan literary examples (such as, most preeminently, Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*) suggest that a young boy could be loved by

<sup>76</sup> A. Golding, *The Fifteen Books of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, 1567 (III. 587 : my emphasis). Shakespeare might also have read the Latin original, whose edition by T. Vautrollier was reprinted by R. Field — that is, the printer of Shakespeare's Ovidian poem *Venus and Adonis* — in 1589 (see E. Arber's transcript of *SR 1554-1640*, London, 1875-1894 : I. 144).

<sup>77</sup> For instance, it is still common to define a handsome young man's or a beautiful girl's reluctance to get married as a « waste ».

another, older man only until he reached his full sexual maturity. Once the boy had grown into a man, his homoerotic apprenticeship was supposed to come to an end, and he was expected to turn to heterosexual pleasures. In Shakespeare's poetic sequence, several textual clues — especially in sonnet XX — suggest that the fair youth has reached the age when a young man is expected to part from his older male lover, and find himself a female love-object.

From an alternative viewpoint, the poet's reiterated appeals to procreation may also be read as a kind of « substitution fancy ». Since the boy has grown old enough to devote his attention to the fair sex, the only pleasure which the poet can take from him is to imaginatively share the women's « treasure » of the boy's « love's use ».

For all his similarity with Plato's *erómenoi*, the fair youth is slightly older than them, a fact which inevitably affects his relationships, both with his older male admirer and the opposite sex.

Sonnet XX is emblematic in this respect. Its beginning emphasizes the femininity of the boy's face, which is defined as a « woman's face ». We are then informed that, although a « man in hue »<sup>78</sup>, the youth is an androgynous creature (a « master mistress ») who attracts the interest of both sexes (he « steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth »). The boy's gradual getting near to full masculinity reaches its acme in the third quatrain, which is a celebration of his puberty: « for a woman » was he « first created, till Nature » added... something. By the end of the sonnet — as Burrow observes — the youth has « clearly become a male »<sup>79</sup>. As a consequence of this final transformation, he is no longer supposed to appeal to both sexes, but to give sexual pleasure only to women. The poet must therefore content himself with purely spiritual affection — that is, with « love », rather than « love's use ».

<sup>78</sup> The most general meaning of the expression is « a man whose beauty enthalls all others » (Burrow's comment, *op. cit.*, p. 420). It is however impossible to find a single satisfactory interpretation of this « haunting, complex line » (Kerrigan's comment, *op. cit.*, p. 200). Baldwin, as observed by Burrow, pointed out that in Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1561) « hue » also meant a certain grace: « "hue" in the sixteenth century could be used to evoke an elegant *je ne sais quoi*, the equivalent of Castiglione's notoriously untranslatable *sprezzatura* » (T. W. Baldwin, *On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1950, p. 165; C. Burrow, *op. cit.*, p. 420).

<sup>79</sup> C. Burrow, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 130.

In other words, the poet's disavowal of sexual interest in the youth is shown to be consequence of the youth's newly acquired masculinity. Thus, while disclaiming any present homoerotic liaison with the young *man*, the poet nostalgically hints at a past involvement with the *boy* (who was the « master mistress » of his « passion »). This lasted until Nature added « one thing » to him — that is, until when the youth was still an androgynous person.

From this perspective, the conjunction « since » in « since [Nature] pricked thee out for women's pleasure » may not only be attributed a *causal*, but also a *temporal* meaning: it does not only mean « because », but also « from the time when » Nature equipped the boy with a « prick ». It thus repeats the temporal partition between a pre- and a post-puberal phase already marked by the conjunction « till » in the third quatrain.

The interpretation of sonnet XX as a « farewell » sonnet, or as one where the lover says adieu to his all too rapidly grown up boy, is contextually corroborated by the Elizabethans' view of the sexuality of male adolescents. As recalled by many critics, the term « homosexuality » did not exist<sup>80</sup>, yet a language did exist for designating same-sex relations which was « richest in epithets for passive, and usually by implication junior, partners »<sup>81</sup>.

As observed by S. Orgel, in Shakespeare's England boys were thought to have something « in common » with women. This « something » distinguished both boys and women from men, and thus rendered them both « objects of desire for men »<sup>82</sup>. As also shown by sonnet XX, with its emphasis on Nature's late « addition », a young boy might be seen as a kind of woman lacking « one thing ». The attractiveness of boys thus depended on their tension-filled mixture of actual femininity and potential masculinity. The fact that before he entered puberty a boy was not yet a « man » made an adult male's interest in him much more acceptable. In a sense, this kind of relation-

<sup>80</sup> J. Kerrigan, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 47. Indeed, the term « homosexual » « only entered English in medical contexts in the late 1890s; [...] no one in the period would have sought to define their identity by their sexual activity » (C. Burrow, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 125). See also J. Dollimore, « Shakespeare Understudies: The Sodomite, the Prostitute, the Transvestite and Their Critics », in *Political Shakespeare*, *op. cit.*, p. 131; A. Bray, *op. cit.*, p. 16; B. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England. A Cultural Poetics*, Chicago, London, Chicago University Press, 1991, p. 10 sq; M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: *An Introduction* (1978), New York, Vintage Books, 1980.

<sup>81</sup> C. Burrow, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>82</sup> S. Orgel, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

ship was not « unnatural » ; indeed, because of the boy's still incomplete masculinity, it was not even a same-sex relation *stricto sensu*.

Similar sexual notions underlie contemporary poetry as well as theatrical performances — more particularly, the practice of cross-dressing. As all evidence suggests, a boy was held to be eligible for a homoerotic relation as long as « he » was young enough to *impersonate* a « she »<sup>83</sup>.

Once again, many common features may be found between Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* and the *Sonnets*<sup>84</sup>. As an androgynous being, Leander aroused the sexual appetite of both men and women<sup>85</sup> (yet, like the fair youth, he was especially in love with himself). However, his sexual identity and his sexual role change as he gets older : his falling for Hero and his contemporary rejection of Neptune's wooing hint that he has grown manly enough to finally devote his attention to the fair sex. In driving back Neptune's too tight sea embrace, Leander significantly explains to the enamoured god :

You are deceived, I am no woman, I (I. 676).

The « acquisition » of a more virile aspect, symbolically portrayed by his very nakedness, legitimates Leander's rejection of the god. In other words, Leander will finally adopt the manly sexual behaviour which the fair youth is invited to adopt in the *Sonnets* : Leander will only reciprocate in a chaste way an older man's « love » (for instance, by sharing his compassion for Neptune), while reserving his « love's use » only to women (that is, to his beloved Hero).

Seen from this perspective, the *Sonnets*' anxiety about « devouring time » acquires further meanings. The passing of time does not only mar an archetype of youthful beauty, but also signals the transition from adolescence to adulthood and, in a sense, from femininity to masculinity. The passing of time thus also marks the ending of a homoerotic apprenticeship, whose different phases are in a few cases quite explicitly recalled (« Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing, / [...] Thyself thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing » LXXXVII. 1, 9). In synthesis, time impairs the *aesthetic ideal of androgyny*:

<sup>83</sup> S. Orgel, *op. cit.*, especially p. 31-82.

<sup>84</sup> The very description of a personified Nature endowing Hero with a « treasure » (even if, in Marlowe's poem, the beauty's « treasure » is given to a young woman, not to a boy : II. 45-50) might have inspired Shakespeare's treatment of this theme sonnet XX.

<sup>85</sup> As a boy evoking « a maid in man's attire » (I, 83), Leander may be regarded as the poetic equivalent of a boy actor performing the role of a woman disguised as a man: in other words, he is something like the boy actor performing Viola-Cesario in *Twelfth Night* or the one performing Rosalind-Ganymede in *As You Like It*.

*nous beauty* which was the very *raison d'être* of the relation between the adult and the boy.

Sonnet CIV, « To me, fair friend, you never can be old », clearly illustrates the poet's feelings about the effects of time on the youth's adolescent beauty. The three years which have passed since the poet first saw the boy are a very short time if considered in the terms of a person's much longer ageing process, yet they are time enough if considered in the more specific terms of the completion of a boy's sexual maturity. The concluding complaint about the death of « beauty's summer » may thus be taken to also mean the end of the boy's pre-puberal beauty.

Such an interpretation is backed up by the description of the boy's sexual development in sonnet XX. As the sonnet finally suggests, the youth's masculinization (as a result of Nature's recent « addition ») makes his beauty less desirable to his older male lover (« me of thee defeated » : XX. 11). The definition of the youth as « a man in *hue* » in sonnet XX. 7 matches the observation in sonnet CIV. 11-12 that, in spite of all appearances, the boy's « sweet *hue* [...] / Hath motion » (my emphasis). Thus, the two sonnets seem to jointly hint that the « motion » of time is turning the boy's « sweet » (and, by implication, feminine) « hue » into a more masculine « hue ».

From this perspective, the recurrent motif, in Elizabethan narrative poetry, of *the untimely death of a beautiful male adolescent* may be interpreted in a figurative way. In other words, « lovely boys » symbolically die — that is, cease to be love-objects — for their mature male lovers when they, in their turn, become adult. Leander's or Adonis' lamentable deaths may thus be said to evoke their passage to manhood, and suggest the grief experienced by a paederastic culture for such a loss of « beauty's summer ».

Therefore, the « to-me-fair-friend-you-never-can-be-old » theme does not only manifest the poet's wish to immobilize time, but also suggests the closely related desire not to part from his beloved. Nostalgia is one of the prevailing moods in sonnet CIV, as it is in sonnet LXXXVII, where the « farewell » theme is even more explicit. Yet, time inevitably moves on, and the poet cannot but accept the fact that his former possession of the youth (LXXXVII. 1) has eventually turned into a flattering « dream » or a bitter-sweet memory (LXXXVII. 13-14)<sup>86</sup>.

<sup>86</sup> On the melancholy mood in the *Sonnets*, see A. Deidda, *Icone della malinconia. I Sonetti di William Shakespeare*, Cagliari, CUEC, 1996.

The *Sonnets* thus express a network of contrasting moods and meanings. On the one hand, the poet acknowledges that the youth has grown old enough to part from him and start a new life as a married man and a father, and repeatedly urges him to do so. On the other hand, he manifests the impossible desire to stop the motion of time and keep his beloved close to him.

### Homoerotic pleasure as a substitution fancy. Polyphonic discourse and polymorphic desire

The poet's plea that his fair friend should procreate marks an inevitable change in their relation, and a fresh start for the boy. However, the very representation of the youth's sexual maturation and of his future display of manhood (particularly in sonnet XX) reflects a kind of « substitution fancy », and a dislocation of desire. The poet hints that he loves the love the youth will give to women.

As is paradoxically suggested by sonnet XLII. 6, the youth's love for a woman loved by the poet may be taken as a proof of his love for the poet himself:

Thou dost love her because thou know'st I love her<sup>87</sup>

Sharing the same love-object not only reinforces the fusion between the two lovers (« here's the joy : my friend and I are one » : XLII. 13) but also blurs any rigid distinction between lovers and love-objects.

As is suggested by several other sonnets, the poet projects himself into the woman who is loved — or will be loved — by the fair youth. In sonnet XX. 9-11, the Pygmalion-image of Nature who forges the boy, is besotted by him and finally adds something to him in order to complete her work, evokes the parallel image of the poet who *creates* the youth, falls in love with him and eventually adds « one thing » to his creation. The implication of such an analogy is that the final « addition », besides serving Nature's also serves the poet's own imaginative « purpose ».

Yet, the most pervasive, and puzzling, analogy is the one between the poet and the women that the youth is invited to love<sup>88</sup>. Like them, the poet is ex-

<sup>87</sup> It was Professor Marina Giaveri who brought my attention to the ambivalent psychological mechanisms embedded in this sonnet.

<sup>88</sup> The women the youth is invited to love are, in their turn, individual incarnations of a « world » personified as a « she » (see, for instance, sonnet IX).

pected to eternize the boy's beauty. The youth's beauty is supposed to « live twice », in some « child » of his and in the poet's « rhyme » (XVII. 13-14). The poet's creative mind thus performs the same function as a woman's womb. As observed by Duncan-Jones, similar metaphors occur in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (L), not to mention the term « begetter » in Thorpe's dedication. In the *Sonnets* — as Duncan-Jones further observes — the « poet's brain is the womb made fertile by his noble subject-matter, which brings forth sonnets as the subject's babies »<sup>89</sup>. Indeed, from the philosophical perspective sketched out above, we may conclude that the poet's brain is made fertile by the youth's « form »<sup>90</sup>. A parallel metaphoric use of « womb » also occurs in the very coda to the *Sonnets* (*A Lover's Complaint*, 1), where a hill's « womb » — which stands for the author's mind — is presented as the teller of a « plaintful story », and therefore of the ensuing poetic text. The association of the two roles, that of the poet and of the women, gives life to a metamorphic tableau where neither one's sexual identity nor his/her sexual role may be taken for granted. That the metamorphic quality of desire in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* was no mere literary convention, but was part of a vaster Elizabethan cultural framework is further shown by their substantial affinity with contemporary homoerotic discourse and, more particularly, with some passages in King James's correspondence with his beloved Buckingham<sup>91</sup>. In it, the king defines his young favourite as his « sweet child and wife », and thus himself as Buckingham's « dad and husband ». He also imagines himself as Buckingham's « sorrowful widow », in case he were forced to live without him. While King James's definition of the boy as his « child and wife » may be easily understood in terms of the Elizabethan association of boyhood with femininity, his self-definition as the young man's « widow » seems rather contradictory and is somewhat harder to understand. Yet, as other (both literary and historical) examples show, although paederasty was the prevailing model for homoerotic relations, it did not exhaust all the nuances of homoerotic desire. The chaotic proliferation of terms of kinship in the king's letter may thus be said to express in a nutshell the multifaceted character of homoeroticism in the English Renaissance.

<sup>89</sup> K. Duncan-Jones, « Introduction », *op. cit.*, p. 56-57.

<sup>90</sup> To Aristotle, « forms » can combine themselves with feminine matter, as well as graft themselves into an artist's brain (who eventually transfuses them in his work).

<sup>91</sup> The definition, as well as the ensuing quotations from the king's letter are in S. Orgel, *op. cit.*, p. 41-42 (King James, letter to George Villiers, Marquis and Duke of Buckingham, in *Letters of King James VI & I*, éd. G. P. V. Akrigg, Berkeley, 1984, p. 431).



The love relation between the poet and the fair youth is described by means of similar words of affection. As the older man in the couple, the poet presents himself as the youth's « father » (XXXVII. 1). As the more masculine of the two, he also — at least implicitly — presents himself as the boy's husband. Moreover, as remarked above, he imaginatively projects himself into the wife generating the youth's children, as well as into the inconsolable « world-widow » who weeps for a husband that she has never had, or for one that she has recently lost (sonnet IX).

Thus, on the one hand, the love pattern proposed in the *Sonnets* conforms to the Platonic one which distinguishes an older from a younger man's role in terms of the parallel oppositions between *father* and *son*, and *man* and *woman*. On the other hand (as in King James's letter), the « feminization » of the older man in the couple disrupts any pre-defined affective and sexual role, and creates an open scenario where each individual can *impersonate* the parent or the child, the man or the woman, and where the polyphonic character of discourse is the counterpart of the multifaceted character of desire.



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Le Plaisir est-il le Bien ? La Renaissance reprend à son compte cette question débattue depuis le *Philèbe* et le livre X de l'*Éthique à Nicomaque*. Au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, Lorenzo Valla, dans son dialogue *Sur le Plaisir* (1430), tranche dans le sens d'une identification entre le plaisir et le Bien. Il est suivi un siècle plus tard par Érasme qui n'hésite pas, dans l'*Épicurien* (1533), à assimiler le Christ à Épicure. Et Montaigne, dans sa critique du stoïcisme, stigmatise le danger des vertus immodérées qui excluent le plaisir. Le problème que posait Platon de la possibilité d'un faux plaisir fascine à nouveau les esprits. Et si le plaisir pensé, imaginé, rêvé, pouvait réveiller les sens, toucher le corps ? Et si les barrières s'effaçaient entre le corps et l'âme ? Réhabiliter le plaisir, c'est pouvoir assumer sa part d'ombre, le déplaisir, refuser l'abstraction de leur dissociation. Accepter le plaisir, c'est accepter la mort. C'est l'une des leçons paradoxales de *Peines d'amour perdues* de Shakespeare, que la pensée baroque ne cessera d'illustrer. La Renaissance reste vigilante, comme l'avaient été les périodes précédentes, car il est un plaisir auquel il ne convient pas de laisser libre cours : le bon plaisir du monarque absolutiste.

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