

October 2015

Genre-Savvy Sonnets: Shakespeare's Subversion of Problematic Conventions of Courtly Love

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Recommended Citations

MLA:

Kramer, Kelly "Genre-Savvy Sonnets: Shakespeare's Subversion of Problematic Conventions of Courtly Love," *The Kabod* 2. 1 (2015) Article 4.

Liberty University Digital Commons. Web. [xx Month xxxx].

APA:

Kramer, Kelly (2015) "Genre-Savvy Sonnets: Shakespeare's Subversion of Problematic Conventions of Courtly Love" *The Kabod* 2(1 (2015)), Article 4. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabod/vol2/iss1/4>

Turabian:

Kramer, Kelly "Genre-Savvy Sonnets: Shakespeare's Subversion of Problematic Conventions of Courtly Love" *The Kabod* 2 , no. 1 2015 (2015) Accessed [Month x, xxxx]. *Liberty University Digital Commons*.

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ENGL 215

Critical Analysis Paper

December 2, 2014

Genre-Savvy Sonnets

Shakespeare's Subversion of Problematic Conventions of Courtly Love

In Shakespeare's 130th sonnet, the speaker points out how his lover does not conform to conventional standards for beauty. He mentions that her eyes are "nothing like the sun," and points out how neither her lips, cheeks, or breasts are the normal color (1). He even mentions that she apparently suffers from halitosis (7-8). All in all, he does not paint a very flattering or appealing picture of his beloved. However, the general tone of this poem is not intentionally offensive; at the end, he admits that he certainly does love her, ugly as she may be. In this sonnet, Shakespeare intentionally subverts the courtly love tradition of the past in order to describe the proper way to love someone.

Shakespeare very intentionally makes use of the traditional language and tropes of courtly love with his language choices. For example, he compares his lover to lofty natural beauty, such as her eyes to "the sun" and her cheeks to "roses" (1, 6). However, instead of writing that his lover's eyes are like the sun, he denies the traditional comparison and later says that there are "no...roses" in her cheeks (6). He uses the traditional metaphors for physical beauty that derive from the ideals of courtly love, but only in order to make a point about how this lady is not like theirs. Likewise, he makes other conventional comparisons, like her voice to music and her breath to perfume, but only to highlight how his beloved breaks them. Referencing this tradition's highest possible praise, he compares her to a "goddess," but again, this

comparison is negative (11). It only emphasizes her humanity. Thus, while Shakespeare is obviously extremely familiar with the poetic traditions of courtly love, he innovatively misuses them.

To begin with, why does the speaker carefully describe her physical beauty, if only to point out that they are inadequate? At first glance, this poem is shocking; no woman would appreciate having her unattractive qualities pointed out and immortalized in a sonnet. It is possible that the speaker is observing that he merely has different tastes in physical beauty than the rest of his culture. For instance, he does not actually say that he finds her breasts unattractive, but only that they are “dun,” or tan (3). Perhaps he just prefers his women a little darker than the norms of courtly love poetry, which dictate that a woman should have pale skin and red lips and cheeks. However, given some other descriptions of her, this claim is hard to support. While it is possible to prefer a woman with darker skin or darker hair, it is hard to imagine one could love a woman specifically because she has bad breath and a harsh voice. Thus, one must conclude that not only is the lady of the poem radically different from traditional beauty conventions, but also that she must be loved for non-physical reasons.

Especially given that the courtly love tradition dictates that the beloved be praised in exalted language for her physical beauty, it is extremely odd that the speaker would focus on the many flaws of his lover. However, the emphasis is not that they are actually repugnant to him, just different from society’s expectations. Clearly, given the ending of the poem, “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / as any she belied with false compare,” he does genuinely love this woman, and want to praise her (13-14). He does not praise her for some exalted, unrealistic standard of beauty, but chooses to stress that he loves her for, not in spite of, her uniqueness. By doing so, he offers a rather harsh critique of courtly love’s conventional insistence that the

beloved must be physically beautiful, which the society narrowly defined as fair-haired, white-skinned, and rosy-cheeked. The purpose of cataloguing all the areas in which she does not conform is not to point out that she is a failure, but rather to point out that he deliberately disregards some of the shallower components of traditional love.

In addition to describing how she does possess the conventional beauty for a lady worthy of courtly love, the speaker also emphasizes her plain, unadorned humanity. He writes, "I grant I never saw a goddess go / My mistress when she walks treads on the ground" (11-12). Again, from the standpoint of the courtly love tradition, this is almost on the level of an insult. One of the main foundations of this poetic tradition is the cold, disdainful lady who is far above her wooer in terms of beauty, social status, and virtue. He must attempt to become worthy of her, usually by committing some heroic feat. Here, however, the speaker is comfortable with admitting her humanity. She walks on the earth, on his level, not as some divine, unattainable being. These two lines convey that his love for her is not some elaborate, lofty, courtly ritual, but rather a normal human affection for a real person he knows and values for characteristics other than her appearance. The speaker is presenting a counter-cultural way of love, one that does not consider a woman's physical appearance her most important quality.

In the closing couplet of the poem, the speaker blatantly subverts traditional notions of love, calling these lofty descriptions of ladies "belied with false compare," or mis-represented with false, ridiculous comparisons (14). If his lady does not have eyes that shine like the sun, it is not necessarily because she is inferior, but merely because no lady actually does. Unlike other poets, he recognizes and accepts this fact. In fact, this entire poem has been a criticism of the false comparisons created by overzealous poets that, in a desire to praise their ladies, publish lies about them. In one key respect here, the speaker's description of his lady does conform to the

expectation of the courtly love tradition: the assertion that his relationship is the best and greatest love. However, while most poets would proclaim that their love is the greatest because of the fairness of the lady or the devotion of the lover, the speaker argues that his love is the best because it is the most honest, accepting that the both of them are merely human. Their love is the highest because he realizes how ordinary and human is the experience of being in love.

Thus, in this sonnet, Shakespeare aggressively critiques the poetry conventions stemming from the courtly love tradition. He argues that physical appearance, even if unconventional or downright unattractive, is no requirement for true love, specifically by denying all the standards for beauty created by society. The misfortune is not in recognizing one's beloved as merely human, but rather in continuing to romanticize a false picture of her as a goddess, which will inevitably disappoint. One can only maintain this rosy-colored picture of the lady at a distance, while observing her at court and writing her elaborate poetry. Once you actually have to live with her, one will have to face the reality that she is human, bad breath and all. Unlike other poets in the courtly love tradition, he is not afraid of comparisons between his love and theirs. No matter how much they over-inflate the praise of their beloved, he knows that his love is superior. According to Shakespeare, this is the proper way to love another: actually knowing someone with all of her flaws and oddities, and loving her anyways. In fact, the entire premise of the courtly love tradition is harmful and misleading, teaching people to value the wrong thing in their lovers. It may be good in poetry, but destructive in practice.

Work Cited

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