

A LACANIAN APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS: LOVE, DESIRE AND PHANTASY

Elif Derya Senduran*

Abstract: *Jouissance* and desire are inseparable in Lacan's terminology although some critics call *jouissance* as "the opposite pole of desire" (Braunstein 102). *Jouissance* is an ontological concept for Lacan. On the other hand, Lacan depicts desire as "lack of being", "interpretation", "desire is the desire of the Other", "desire is the metonymy of being" (qtd. in Braunstein 102-103). *Jouissance* is not just pleasure or joy for Lacan although *jouir* means enjoy. Desire is the lack in being whereas *jouissance* is something experienced by the body when pleasure is not pleasure anymore. Thus, *Jouissance* is beyond pleasure. Love, desire, phantasy, regarding *jouissance* are outstanding Lacanian aspects to analyse Shakespeare's sonnets. Shakespeare's a hundred and fifty-four sonnets signal variations in theme: sonnets from one to a hundred and twenty-six are written for a young man and the remaining sonnets are addressed to the Dark Lady. The sonnets, addressed to the young man praise an upper-class patron, yet obscene language evokes unconventional associations of feelings which can be related to Lacan because according to Lacan people cannot show what they want in language and desire has a relationship with language (Sarup 13). In the case of the sonnets, the reader may obtain that it is the young man, the speaker favours, so the young man is reduced by the speaker to an object which is the Dark Lady because the speaker wants to possess the

beloved, the young man. However, the freedom of the loved one cannot be possessed. Lacan calls love a sense between sadism and masochism (Sarup 36). Thus, the speaker goes through experiences of extraordinary feelings, which are beyond conventions of Petrarchan discourse. The speaker's desire exceeds demand and cannot be fulfilled. Desire is a way of recognition for Lacan (Sarup 32). That is why the speaker in the sonnets desires to be recognized by the Dark Lady and the Fair Youth in a variation of emotions to approach love. Thus, the speaker fantasizes and expresses the love triangle among the three through his mind's eye. In this study, sonnets 20, 138, 144, 147 will be analysed with respect to Lacanian philosophy and terms such as desire, love, phantasy and *jouissance*.

Keywords: Shakespeare, sonnets, Lacan, desire, phantasy *jouissance*.

Sonnet 20

Lacan differentiates *jouissance* from desire clearly in his own words: "...*jouissance* appears not purely and simply as the satisfaction of a need, but as the satisfaction of a drive" (Braunstein 104). Lacan further illustrates on the drive as the "death drive" (104). Since *jouissance* is the satisfaction of the death drive, the passion for the false woman in Shakespeare's

Sonnet 20 indicates that the speaker is going through a feeling of *jouissance*. Shakespeare equates his disappointment at the subversion of the gender roles to *jouissance*.

A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted
Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;
(Sonnet 20, 1-2)

These two lines of the sonnet indicate that the person looks like a woman rather than man. He does not need any cosmetics to make him beautiful. The speaker likes him for being natural. He is not masculine so the speaker likes him more. He attracts the speaker due to his androgyny. The speaker loves him like a man who loves a woman with passion. The femininity of the loved one is emphasized with the implication of mistress. The speaker elevates the loved one above females because:

A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;
(Sonnet 20, 3-4)

These misogynistic lines reflect speaker's previous disappointment with the females so he thinks that females are false and changing. Thus, the concept of *jouissance* can be traced in the brightness of the loved one's eyes transforming a similar quality on the object of its gaze (Edmondson & Wells 73-74):

An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all 'hues' in his controlling,
Much steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.
(Sonnet 20 lines: 5- 8)

For Lacan the drive is for the lost object, the object of desire. In Sonnet 20 the object of desire is the male loved one who is elevated above the female due to her falsity. The falsity of the female triggers the death drive *jouissance* for the male love.

The frustration leads to fantasy of changing to male when Nature falls in love with the female and repeats it in male. Love spreads to “the emotional and erotic imaginative life” (Vendler 129). Thus, the desire felt for the beloved one turns into *jouissance* because the physically love can only enrich female pleasure:

And for a woman wert thou first created;
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell adotinge,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.
(Sonnet 20 9-14)

Sonnet 20 makes an effort to create a “sublime scene of creation” (Halpern 34) instead of hiding it. Richard Halpern suggests the sonnet evokes the unusual and unconventional because the woman is half finished, due to her lack compared to

male. Nature recalls this idea and also defends it from attack. (34). Sonnet 20 avoids the warning against this unusual feeling. In Lacanian terms, sonnet 20 brings out a hindrance for a symbolic prohibition. The speaker's impulses are blocked. The young man pacifies the speaker's desire like an art object in other words, the object of the sonnet. Sonnet 20 evokes a threat of extraordinary feelings of love in order to foreclose it. It also evokes sublimity to reject the unusual feelings and favour the beautiful. The young man does not reach the idealized loftiness of the Petrarchan mistress (Halpern 35). When Shakespeare's sonnet is compared to the Petrarchan tradition, it can easily be observed that Shakespeare goes beyond all the conventions of Petrarchan tradition in his sonnets. In Petrarch's *Il Canzoniere*, the beloved female Laura's physical beauty is praised, and the speaker is in pain as he suffers after her death.

Petrarchan tradition brings out male desire for the chaste Lady. The female desiring subject in the western culture articulates the difference of gender (Distiller 5). Petrarchan symbolic supports male superiority (81) similar to the phallic law which focuses on the inequality of the sexes. Lacanian terminology for subjectivity, psychoanalysis focuses on the construction of language. In the Petrarchan sonnets, the identity is formed through Petrarchan discourse

in which the difference of gender is interpreted through the body. The gendered being is created apart from society and culture through its own language of Petrarchan discourse. Disteller also states that gender is fluid, and this aspect of gender enables different sexual identities to form and live in the same body (8). In Lacanian terms, the Lady is barred, and in courtly love tradition she is an unattainable object. Shakespeare goes beyond this Petrarchan discourse and brings the extraordinary feelings and sublime together in his sonnet because the love triangle among the speaker, the fair youth and the Dark Lady suggests an unvoiced desire in human beings.

On the other hand, with respect to Lacan's theory, sonnet 20 has similar associations with the term phantasy: That is "an imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfilment of a wish" (Sarup 70). In sonnet 20, the speaker's wish is the change of gender roles. He wishes Fair Youth, the young man were a woman, and the Dark Lady were a man. The "ph" spelling of the word phantasy indicates that it is unconscious. Phantasy is possible because it is imaginary, yet it is necessary for the subject. The desire of the object is played out in phantasy, but the

relationship is impossible in the real (Sarup 70). Although the speaker's relationship with the young man may seem to be impossible, it is in his phantasy.

Sonnet 138

Sonnet 138, loaded with sexual wordplay, unveils a bottomless truth.

When my love swears that she is made of truth
 I do believe her, though I know she lies,
 That she might think me some untutor'd youth,
 Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
 Thus, vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
 Although she knows my days are past the best,
 Simply I credit her false speaking tongue:
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd.
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?
 O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
 And age in love loves not to have years told:
 Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
 And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.
 (Sonnet 138, 1-14)

The puns of lie and swear bring out the promiscuity of the Dark Lady. In Lacanian terms, truth is a relationship between a subject and the unconscious. There is nothing certain in the unconscious (Sarup 41). Therefore, the speaker in his unconscious is not sure whether his love is telling the truth or not. The Dark Lady may be with him, but they are

not truthful to each other. With lying the meaning becomes uncertain and the truth can be discovered in an inverted form. Lying has the implication of his being a person of his own right (Sarup 56). The subject constructs a truth with his speech, which he does not know. Truth belongs to the space between one signifier and another (Sarup 91). As Lacan indicates in his discourse, similarly in sonnet 138, the speaker, and his love the Dark Lady both have faults and lies. Their discourses make them people of their own rights, and they flatter themselves in the uncertainty of telling lies, because they are slaves to their desires. For instance, as long as the lover is not sure about her partner's age, there is no problem in their relationship. The uncertainty implied by Lacan leads to what they experience happily.

While Shakespeare goes beyond Petrarchan conventions, he depicts the contamination of manhood (Mcintosh 113-114) regarding the relationship among the people in his sonnet.

Sonnet 144

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman colour'd ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,

Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
(Sonnet 144, 1-8)

The speaker talks about his two loves: The Dark Lady and the young man. In sonnet 144, the speaker favours the young man as a lover. The male lover is the speaker's better angel, and he calls the female as evil. Lacan suggests that demand is for an object and desire is for a lack. With respect to the speaker's situation in sonnet 144, in Lacanian terms the Dark Lady is a demand, *objet petit a* whereas the male lover is probably the desired one because there will always be a lack of unity. The desire felt for the fair youth subverts the position of Petrarchan chaste lady. According to Lacan the object of human desire is always the desire of the other (Sarup 69). The other, the Dark Lady in sonnet 144, is the one who desires love in order to fill in the gap. She is the *objet petit a* unleashing the desire in the speaker. According to Lacan, "love is the self-image in which you are wrapped by the other, and which leaves you when it is stolen away..." (Sarup 70).

Smith further illustrates on sonnet 144 and suggests that the sonnet threatened the social order of long lasting gender roles by refuting female love and choosing the male one (24). Being against the Petrarchan courtly love conventions, sonnet 144 once more demonstrates a love triangle among the three.

And whether that my angel be turn'd fiend
Suspect I may, but not directly tell;
But being both from me, both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell:
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.
(Sonnet 144, 9-14)

For Lacan, desire is a function of language. When the child enters in the language or for Lacan the symbolic order, the wholeness of the world disillusiones the child. This lack of wholeness constructs the desire to fill in this gap. In sonnet 144, there is a tension of the visual and verbal constitutes. That is to say, the man's being right, fair and the lady's being as coloured ill lessens the effectiveness of the speaker's idea, also his language becomes inadequate (Smith 24). The Dark Lady is materialized through an immaterial phantasy. The thoughts of the speaker and his words are at stake (Smith 24) similar to the child entering in the symbolic order the lack seems to come out. The line "suspect I may, but not I directly tell" suggests the lack.

Sonnet 147

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
The uncertain sickly appetite to please.

My reason, the physician to my love,
 Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
 Hath left me, and I desperate now approve.
 (Sonnet 147, 1-7)

In this sonnet, the speaker calls love as sickness due to his lover's infidelity. The speaker is struggling to cope with her unfaithfulness and calls love as a disease. However, he still demands to be with the Lady since as Lacan indicates, the Dark Lady is the *objet petit a*. Although desire is insatiable in Lacanian theory, the speaker longs to fulfil the insatiability.

Desire is death, which physic did except.
 Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
 And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
 My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
 At random from the truth vainly express'd;
 For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,
 Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.
 (Sonnet 147, 8-14)

When the speaker calls death as desire it is clear that he feels *jouissance* for the dark lady because the lady with the implications of darkness leads him to madness. As the speaker cannot cope with the idea of being betrayed and the thirst for his lover, he calls desire as death which is also associated with the death drive *jouissance*. Thus, these fantasies in the speaker's mind goes hand in hand with Lacan comments on fantasy:

The fantasy is located at the extreme tip, the endpoint of the subject's question, as if it were its buttress, just as the subject tries to get control of himself in the fantasy, in the space beyond the demand. This is because he must find again in the very discourse of the Other what was lost for him, the subject, the moment he entered into this discourse. What ultimately matters is not the truth but the hour (Lacan 16).

As Lacan states, the time is crucial for being frantic or mad for the lost one. The subject tries to find his time in the object but the obsessive, neurotic repeats the trauma (Lacan 17). The speaker is similar to Hamlet in this sense as both mourn for the lost, but previously both of them did not seem to care about their interest and love. After Ophelia dies, Hamlet also would like to be buried with her. The betrayed speaker also associates desire with death as his *jouissance* for the Dark Lady seem to be insatiable.

Shakespeare's sonnets are a general thematics of vision and a general thematics of voice, They bear striking similarities to Jacques Lacan's account of the constitution of subject through the capture of what he calls an imaginary register -which Lacan figures through visionary motifs - by what he calls a symbolic register - which Lacan figures through motifs of spoken speech... the Lacanian subject in particular, and the psychoanalytic subject in general, were epiphenomenal consequences of the Renaissance invention of the literary subject... (8)

To conclude, in terms of Lacan's interpretation of desire, *jouissance*, and love Shakespeare's sonnets stand out in the sixteenth century as a literary form with the unconventional attitude to the themes of desire and phantasy. Shakespeare's sonnets challenge Petrarchan sonnet tradition in many aspects and manifest a new way to be approached with respect to psychoanalysis.

Notes

* Elif Derya Senduran is a graduate of English Language and Literature Department of Ankara University. She also holds an m.a. in English Language and Literature from Hacettepe University. At the moment she is a phd student in English Literature at Middle East Technical University.

References

Braunstein, Nestor. *Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan: Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. Ed. Jean-Michel Rabate. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 2003. 102-115 p.

Distiller, Natasha. *Desire Gender in the Sonnet Tradition*. Houndmills: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Leitura Flutuante, n. 4, pp. 171-185, 2012.

Edmondson, Paul- Wells, Stanley. *Oxford Shakespeare Topics: Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.

Fineman, Joel. *Shakespeare's Ear*. University of California Press, 1989. No. 28, pp. 6-13 22.01.2012. <<http://www.jstor/stable/2928581>>.

Halpern, Richard. *Shakespeare's Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in Shakespeare, Wilde, Freud and Lacan*. Pensilvania: University of Pensilvania Press,2002.

Lacan, Jacques. *Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet*. "Yale French Studies", No. 55/56, "Literature and Psychoanalysis." (1977). 22.01.2011 Pp. 11-51 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930434>>.

Mcintosh, Hugh. *The Social Masochism of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. 2010 pp.109-125 22.01.2012. < <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/>>.

Sarup, Madan. *Jacques Lacan*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Smith, Bruce. *Shakespeare's Sonnets and the History of Sexuality: A Reception of History*. <www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/BPL/Images/Content.../001.pdf>

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. Oxford: Wordsworth, 1996.

Vendler, Helen. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Cambridge: Harvard UP., 1997.