
A GRAVE MATTER

Shakespeare and Gray on the subject of poetic immortality

The picture that Thomas Gray presents his readers with in his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* could not be more different from the one painted by William Shakespeare at the beginning of 'Sonnet 18'. Gray takes his readers to the countryside, where a death knell can be heard and darkness is almost immediately cast. Shakespeare, conversely, reminds his readers of summer. Although Shakespeare and Gray both confront readers with the same theme – mortality – the mood with which both poets commence is a good indication of the difference in their conclusions on the matter.

In this essay the passage of time in 'Sonnet 18' by William Shakespeare will be discussed and compared to the passage of time in Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* and describes the way both poets cope with the inevitable consequence of this passing, namely death. In Shakespeare's day and age, the bubonic plague, or Black Death, was ubiquitous. This might have caused a heightened awareness of death. In fact, the themes of mortality and the ephemerality of life recur in quite a few of Shakespeare's plays.¹ In Gray's days, at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, England was going through rapid changes: peasants were moving away from the countryside to the cities. Most of these people were analphabetic and once dead, they often left no proof (except maybe for progeny) that they had existed. In *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* Gray writes about this anonymity and links it to the anonymity of obscure poets.

Shakespeare's 154 sonnets and *A Lover's Complaint* were first published in quarto in 1609. The first 127 sonnets centre on a young man, while the remainder of the sonnets are about a dark lady. The sonnets were prefaced by a widely debated address.² In line with the subject of

¹ Christopher Thurman, 'Love's Usury, Poet's Debt: Borrowing and Mimesis in Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Literature Compass* 4 (2007), pp. 809-819.

² James Boaden, *On the sonnets of Shakespeare: Identifying the person to whom they were addressed; and elucidating several points in the poet's history* (London: T. Rodd, 1853)
<http://books.google.nl/books?id=Fj8sAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=nl&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 31 May 2012] p.2.

this essay, the address does deserve some attention, since Shakespeare is described as ‘[an] ever-living poet’ and ‘eternite’ is promised to ‘the onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets’, hinting at the theme of mortality.³ There is no dedication prefacing *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* and the poem itself does not seem to be directed toward anyone in particular, but was seemingly inspired by the death of his friend and fellow-poet Richard West.⁴

The structure of ‘Sonnet 18’ can be seen as the structure of a typical Shakespearean sonnet with three stanzas consisting of four lines, which are called quatrains, and at the end a couplet. In the first two quatrains a problem is introduced, namely that when comparing the young man to a summer’s day the poet comes to the conclusion that summers end and so will the life of the young man. At the start of the last quatrain the poet usually experiences an epiphany or has a revelation. This is called the volta. At the volta the speaker realizes that the young man is now captured in this poem and that he will live on forever in those lines. Trying to make a person immortal through verse is known as the eternizing conceit which Shakespeare uses in quite a few of his sonnets.⁵

Gray’s elegy is different in structure from Shakespeare’s sonnet. It consists of 29 quatrains and an epitaph consisting of four quatrains. The nature of an elegy is such that it is usually written to lament a loved one’s death. Instead, in his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Gray laments the deaths of ‘the unhonored dead’ (l. 93).⁶ Contrary to most elegies, this one puts forth an argument. Gray argues that it does not matter whether a person is born a common man or a nobleman, because everyone meets the same end. However, whereas the nobleman gets a nice grave or urn with personal texts and is usually remembered for his life’s work, the common man has to make do with impersonal texts. If the nobleman is remembered as an individual, the common man is soon replaced and forgotten.

³ William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, ed. by John Kerrigan (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 168.

⁴ M.H. Abrams et al., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Vol. 1*, 8th edition (New York: W W Norton & Co Inc, 2006), p. 2863.

⁵ Ernest Bates, ‘The sincerity of Shakespeare’s sonnets’, *Modern Philology* 8 (1910), p. 15.

⁶ Thomas Gray, ‘Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard’, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature Vol. 1* ed. by Abrams et al., 8th edition (New York: W W Norton & Co Inc, 2006), pp. 2867-870. All further line references in the text are to this edition.

Right from the beginning the poet identifies himself with the anonymity of the common man, yet, and is unhappy with this fate. This becomes clear in the first four stanzas of the elegy. He is the only poet in a country village; he is the only living person in the churchyard; he is alone in the dark.⁷ Contrary to this, Gray had expressed a dismissive attitude towards writers who could live off their writings in his correspondence to Walpole. He wrote, 'When you first commenced an author, you exposed yourself to pit, box and gallery. Any coxcomb in the world may come in and hiss, if he pleases; aye, and (what is almost as bad) clap too, and you cannot hinder him.'⁸ It may be argued that Gray himself was torn about this subject. On the one hand, he expresses worry about anonymity in his *Elegy* while on a personal level he turns up his nose to people who seek the spot light.

Gray uses natural imagery to illustrate the wasted potential in the common man, rendering them anonymous:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.
(ll. 53-56)

Essentially, Gray means to say that a person might be gifted, but his talents are wasted because of his unfavourable circumstances. Among the hard-working men in the countryside may have been 'Some mute inglorious Milton' (l. 59) or 'some Cromwell' (l. 60), but because they were common men 'Their sober wishes never learned to stray' (l. 74). Although these peasants were the backbone of society at that time, they would not leave a permanent mark on the country's history and their names would not be remembered by everyone. Their graves would only bear 'Their name, their years; spelt by the unlettered Muse' (l. 79).

Forces of nature also play a big part in illustrating mortality in Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 18'. He uses summer and the sun to compare the subject of the speaker's affections to, as explicitly

⁷ Howard D. Weinbrot, 'Gray's *Elegy*: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 18 (3) (1978), p. 539.

⁸ Linda Zionkowski, 'Bridging the Gulf Between: The Poet and the Audience in the Work of Gray', *ELH*, 58 (2) (1991), p. 332.

seen in the first line of 'Sonnet 18': 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' (l. 1).⁹ Seasons, and in this sonnet the summer in particular, can be seen as a metaphor for mortality since seasons are transient; they are not eternal. The 'Rough winds' (l. 3) the addresser speaks of could mean the things that happen to you in life that shake and change you like they 'shake the darling buds of May' (l. 3). Hence, people are condemned to get older and change. Shakespeare points out the same thing in 'Sonnet 15' when he writes that men 'at height decrease' (l. 7) and 'wasteful Time debateth with Decay' (l. 11).

There occurs a slight, but significant, shift in Gray's elegy in the 23rd stanza. Where before the speaker in the poem has referred to the common men in the third person plural, the speaker now uses the word 'our' thereby suddenly including himself in the group of common men.¹⁰ This shift is necessary because a second speaker is introduced in the 24th stanza, who talks about the first speaker as if he is no longer living, leading up to the epitaph. The poet in the *Elegy* now rests among the anonymous as 'A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown' (l. 118). The epitaph will be the only thing that the poet has left behind, which could only mean that he considered the elegy in itself of little significance and that the poem will do nothing to immortalize him as a poet.

This is exactly the opposite of what Shakespeare tries to convey. He is of the opinion that poems can eternize a person. He considers this for the first time in the couplet of 'Sonnet 15' in which he writes, 'And all in war with Time and Love of you / As he takes from you I engraft you new' (ll. 13-14). An engrafter is someone who puts a graft onto another plant so it can form a new growth there. The poet tries to do the same for the young man in his verse. He reconsiders this plan in 'Sonnet 16' where he again encourages the young man to try and have children to ensure he will live on rather than in the poet's 'barren rhyme' (l. 4). 'Sonnet 17' is widely believed to be the last of the procreation sonnets and Shakespeare combines the two possible ways to eternize the young man, through progeny and poetry, as he writes in the couplet of 'Sonnet 17': 'But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice, in it and in my rhyme' (ll.13-14). In 'Sonnet 18' the poet is convinced that 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee' (ll. 13-14).

⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. By John Kerrigan (London: Penguin Books, 1999). All further line references in the text are to this edition.

¹⁰ Howard D. Weinbrot, 'Gray's *Elegy*: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 18 (3) (1978), p. 544.

Although, when looking at the couplet, the preceding 'eternal lines' (l. 12) that the poet speaks of are probably meant as the lines of the poem, they could also be taken to mean bloodlines when the reader considers the previous sonnets. Apparently, Shakespeare is confident enough that his verses will be read for ages to come and that he believes he can immortalize the male youth through them.

However, it might not be people that both Gray and Shakespeare are trying to eternize. Since Shakespeare tells his readers that 'Sonnet 18' will be read as long as there are people around to do so, he inherently expects they would always want to read his sonnet. Even the gloomy Gray expects at least the epitaph of the poet in his *Elegy* to be read. Hence, the poets might not be writing about immortalizing a person, but rather immortalizing their poetry.

In conclusion, both Shakespeare and Gray deal with living on even after death. The different atmospheres of both works fit the poets' stances. Where Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 18' takes its readers to a summer's day, Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* takes its readers to a graveyard in the dark. Hence, Shakespeare is convinced that a person can be captured in the lines of a verse and will live on through the eyes and ears of the readers of the poem. Consequently, Shakespeare seems to have been pretty sure about the survival of his work throughout the ages. Gray's outlook is gloomier, thinking that if a person was born a common man his work – safe for his epitaph – would never be read and he would not be remembered after his death. Since both poets have their place in the current canon of English literature, can Shakespeare be considered right and Gray wrong? The reader can never be certain, because it is unknown how much a poet's work is purely fictitious and how much of it, if any, is autobiographical.

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