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Savouring the Shakespearean sonnets

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Re-reading Shakespeare's sonnets, Tim Casey feels as if he has stumbled across a collection of private letters written in code, but with some clues thrown in

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Thus begins Shakespeare's most famous sonnet with a rhetorical question. "Thou art more lovely and more temperate." The comparison has begun. Temperate. The word stands out. What does it mean? The opposite of intemperate? Temperate climes? "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May." Aha! Temperate climes, the line affirms it. "The darling buds of May." We've all been saddened by the cherry blossoms scattered on the ground. Linger on that line a little longer and the buds become people, favourites at the court to be discarded when the wind changes.

"And summer's lease hath all too short a date." Lease? A lease is temporary, there's no permanence here. "All too short a date." What a perfect expression of finality. The sounds of the words. Two long vowels and then: rat-a-tat! Summer's over. And so one goes on, unpacking meaning, relishing the language, listening to the sounds, feeling the rhythms, experiencing the poem.

Many of us learnt that a Shakespearean sonnet has 14 lines made up of three quatrains and a couplet; that the rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef; and that each line is made up of iambic pentameters (ba-BAM ba-BAM ba-BAM ba-BAM). This nugget of rhythmic information would have raised questions in our inquiring minds: surely "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" cannot be right we would have thought, concluding perhaps that iambic pentameters were all very well in theory but not in practice. We would have known that some of the sonnets were addressed to a

"young man", some to a "dark lady". We may have studied a few sonnets, perhaps learnt a few lines by heart, and perhaps some of those lines still randomly come to mind at unexpected moments: "Like as the lark, at break of day arising", "Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing".

Shakespeare's sonnets were published as a collection in 1609; there are 154 poems in total and they are divided into two sections. The first 126 are addressed to or concern the young man while the smaller section is addressed to or concerns the dark lady.

Reading the complete sequence through is a daunting yet rewarding experience. One feels as though one has stumbled across a collection of enigmatically fascinating private letters written in a code immediately accessible only to the poet and the addressee yet providing enough clues to allow a certain level of understanding on the part of the general reader, and written in such an interesting way that one cannot resist the temptation to explore further.

The speaker of the poems seems to me to be the writer and not a fictitious creation. The people he is addressing and the emotional entanglements are real and the picture that we end up with of the poet is quite unflattering and ruthlessly honest. He is, of course, a master of language capable of stunning turns of phrase, but in the process reveals himself in all his moods, whether it be joyful, sarcastic, despairing, lustful or cynical.

The poet begins by urging the young man to marry and produce offspring. The young man is "the lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell" but his beauty cannot last: "And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe

can make defence/Save breed to brave him, when he takes thee hence".

The procreation theme disappears after sonnet 17 and we see that the poet has become besotted by the young man's beauty. The destructive power of time is a theme that constantly recurs, the poet helpless: "This thought is as a death which cannot choose/But weep to have that which it fears to lose"; or defiant: "Yet do thy worst old Time: despite thy wrong,/My love shall in my verse ever live young." The tone becomes darker from sonnet 33. The poet describes how the sun, "the sovereign eye", becomes hidden by "basest clouds". He then refers to his own sun (the young man) in what is a perfect example of the coded language of the sonnets:

Even so my sun one early morn did shine
With all triumphant splendour on my brow;
But out alack, he was but one hour mine,
The region cloud hath masked him from me now.

The young man, we soon learn, has betrayed the poet with the poet's mistress and when we later realise that the mistress is none other than the dark lady.

We are on a rollercoaster of shifting emotions as we read on. Nothing is constant except the poet's obsession with the young man. We are "in the mind" of the poet as he grapples with his situation. Rival poets threaten his favoured position with his patron. Powerful emotions threaten to engulf the necessary social conventions and out of the tension, poems of stunning beauty and force are created.

Again, the "dark lady" poems go from light to dark (although the ordering of the "dark lady" sonnets

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seems more haphazard). The poet delights in his affair with this unconventional beauty, enjoying their mutual deception:

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
untutored youth
Unlearned in the world's false sub-
tleties

But when he learns of her betrayal with his friend the mood turns to enraged disgust and bitterness: "For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright/ Who art as black as hell, as dark as night".

There is a beautiful, quietly dramatic moment towards the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* after the magical mayhem has befallen the young lovers of the play and been happily resolved when Theseus, Duke of Athens, speaks.

One can be in no doubt that it is also the voice of William Shakespeare, poet and playwright, ringing clear and true.

Lovers and madmen have such
seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.

Reading, speaking, listening to the sonnets one is aware of a master craftsman at work, as the carpenter uses his lathe, a poet who knows what it is to be a lunatic and a lover; a writer who can speak to us through the centuries using the music of language as alive today as it was 400 years ago.

Sonnets and Sonatas: Emily Thyne (violin) and Tim Casey perform Bach solo violin pieces and Shakespeare sonnets, Thursday and Friday, Dec 1 and 2 at 8.30pm in the Cobalt Cafe, North Great George's Street, Dublin (€12/€10, including mulled wine). Booking 01-3-832 7625