

The Personae of the Muse in the Fair Youth Sonnets

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Abstract: The figure of the Muse in Shakespeare's sonnets, seemingly inconstant in its depiction, on a closer inspection, is revealed to be the signifier of a number of different entities, ones that are somewhat removed from concepts usually associated with the nine mythical Muses of Classical antiquity. These "personae," or in other words, various manifestations or appearances of the Muse function in markedly different ways from each other and reveal the workings or the modus operandi of the Poet with regard to his endeavour of eternalising the Fair Youth's beauty. The words of the Muse in sonnet 101 raise questions about the representational powers of pen vs. pencil, invoking the Renaissance paragone of poetry and painting, which leads to a number of enquiries concerning mimesis, invention, style, and Platonic realism. In my paper, I shall examine the forces and circumstances that shape the figure of the Muse, as well as what those forms could represent, in hopes of illuminating the poetic process of eternalisation in verse.

When reading the sonnets of Shakespeare, one might feel that there is an inconsistency in the way the figure of the Muse is presented in these poems. After all, the Muse denotes different people and concepts in different pieces. In several sonnets, it appears to be feminine while it also has an unequivocally masculine form. At certain points, we see it depicted as the epitome of what a Muse is supposed to be—an endless source of inspiration—but there are instances where it is silent and insufficient. Moreover, the hierarchical relationship between the Poet and the Muse seems to be shifting throughout the sequence as well. The one thing that the various appearances of the Muse have in common is that they are all a desacralised version of a mythical or archetypal figure. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on the forces and circumstances that shape the figure of the Muse, and to identify the various personae, or in other words, the various forms or appearances

of the Muse, as well as what those forms could represent. In doing so, we might reach a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's view of the process of poetic creation, especially with regard to the eternalisation of the Fair Youth's beauty.

There are altogether ten *Muse sonnets* which are relevant to the subject matter of this essay. If we read the sequence in a linear fashion, the first poem that we ought to mention is sonnet 21, where the Muse denotes another poet who is "stirred by a painted beauty to his verse."¹ In the following lines, the speaker objects to both the rival's choice of subject but also to his manner of writing that entails "using something potentially sacred as a mere rhetorical ornament," which is deemed to be superfluous and untruthful by the Poet (Burrow 422). We also encounter instances where the Muse refers to the Poet's body of work as in the first line of sonnet 82 ("I grant thou wert not married to my Muse"), and alternatively his skill or purported lack thereof as in sonnet 32: "Had my friend's Muse grown with his growing age, / A dearer birth than this his love had brought, / To march in ranks of better equipage"

The figure of the Muse becomes considerably more intricate in sonnet 38:

How can my Muse want subject to invent,
While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse
Thine own sweet argument, too excellent
For every vulgar paper to rehearse?
O give thyself the thanks, if aught in me
Worthy perusal stand against thy sight,
For who's so dumb that cannot write to thee,
When thou thyself dost give invention light?
Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth
Than those old nine which rhymers invoke;
And he that calls on thee, let him bring forth
Eternal numbers to outlive long date.

If my slight Muse do please these curious days,
The pain be mine, but thine shall be the praise.

The complexity of the poem, Helen Vendler claims, is a result of the fact that "the concept" of the Muse is "immediately made problematic by being doubled" (198). The two figures are "my Muse," appearing in the opening line, and the "tenth Muse" in line 9. The Poet's disparaging attitude towards the Muse of the first line

1 Unless otherwise indicated all quotations from the Sonnets are from Burrow.

and of the nine mythical Muses is quite palpable in the poem, as well as a criticism of those *rhymers* who call upon their aid. The nine Muses originating from classical antiquity and, more precisely, from Greek mythology are sister goddesses, each of them being a representative of a particular branch of art, but their importance and how they function may vary in respective pieces. For instance, William Franke notes that the bard seems markedly more autonomous in Homer's *Odyssey* than in the *Iliad* where he exhibits a "total dependence" upon the Muse (2). Yet, despite such variations, traditionally, the Muse is a source of inspiration, one that provides information upon the subject which is treated by the poet, and it is also "what we would understand to be [the poet's] own imagination," but in a way that is interlaced with a sense of divine revelation (Franke 3).

Interestingly, in subsequent sonnets the Muse appearing in the opening line of sonnet 38 will stand for notions that are similar to those that the mythical Muses usually stand for, and at certain points she will also be distinctly feminine. However, she is considered to be insufficient or inappropriate by the Poet for wanting to *invent* a *subject* other than the Fair Youth himself. Thus, she and the mythical muses are superseded by the addressee of the poem, the young friend, who "give[s] invention light" and is, therefore, established as the *tenth Muse*. Consequently, the Muse transforms into a masculine figure. Parallel to this transformation, another one seems to begin, which might be even more pivotal than its counterpart: the *tenth Muse* does not refer to the "spirit of inspiration within [the Poet]," as it is put by Vendler, but "the Muse is externalised and named as the friend" (199). By that, the Poet "locat[es] aesthetic worth, *and* poetic essence, in the object itself" (Vendler 200). One might expect the female Muse after its denunciation by the Poet to simply disappear not only from this particular poem but also from the entire sequence. Yet, her reappearance in the couplet as "my slight Muse" suggests a more profound link between her and the Poet than one which could be so readily dissolved. The question arises: Where does the inspiration come from? If it comes from the Fair Youth, then what is the function of the Muse in the first line of sonnet 38? If the creative spark derives from the masculine Muse, then why do we see the feminine Muse re-emerge later only to be dragged down? Furthermore, how is the feminine Muse different from the mythical Muses, and what is it that calls for such a distinction?

In order to find answers to these questions, we must work with a wider scope. The following sonnet in the sequence, where the Muse makes an appearance in some shape or form, is sonnet 78. The opening lines of the poem elaborate on the ideas

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which were introduced in sonnet 38 when the Muse manifests itself in the Fair Youth (“So oft have I invoked thee for my Muse / And found such fair assistance in my verse”). His *fair assistance* makes up for the deficiencies of the feminine persona that appeared in the sonnet previously discussed, so much so that by the time we reach the couplet, the idea of “thou art all my art” emerges with full force. This phrase (and what it suggests) is analogous with the idea that the Poet is in need of an external source of inspiration in order to create. Moreover, the poem juxtaposes the speaker with the rival poet(s) whose “style” is merely “mended” by the Youth’s influence, while the Poet is indebted to the friend for his advancement from “heavy ignorance” to “learning,” which enables him to write in the first place. Burrow draws our attention to the fact that both of these words “had wider and stronger senses in the sixteenth century than they do now: *learning* implies achieved mastery in all the arts and in what we now call sciences; *ignorance* connotes not simple lack of knowledge but lack of all cultivation” (536). Thus, a certain dependence is implied.

The same idea is expressed in the middle of the second quatrain of sonnet 79 but with a fascinating twist:

Yet what of thee thy poet doth invent
He robs thee of, and pays it thee again.
He lends thee virtue, and he stole that word
From thy behaviour; beauty doth he give
And found it in thy cheek; he can afford
No praise to thee but what in thee doth live.

Although, in the context of the whole sonnet the excerpt above seems to refer to the rival who is presented as more eloquent, and for whom the “sick Muse” i.e. the friend abandons the speaker, the passage seems to be applicable to the Poet as well, as we will see in later sonnets (“The argument all bare is of more worth / Than when it hath my added praise beside” [Sonnet 103]). The conceit of theft in the poem reinforces the idea that inspiration and artistic merit comes from something or someone other than the Poet himself. What makes this imagery stand out is its dynamics. The theft here is not a linear action but a circular one that, in its cyclicity, captures a property that might be said to be inherent to the nature of all arts. But what does it tell us about the art of the Poet? All we know at the moment is that the Poet takes something from the Fair Youth, then does something to what was taken away (essentially a poem is written), and then gives something back.

But what are those *some things*? We must identify the figures of the participants and of the elements of this exchange, be they passive, active, or abstract if we aim to understand the Poet's *modus operandi*.

Yet this *modus operandi* is apparently derailed when in sonnet 85 we read: "My tongue-tied Muse in manners holds her still." With this poem, the Fair Youth as the Muse vanishes from our sight, and he is ostensibly replaced by the feminine Muse. This is the first sonnet in the sequence that explicitly refers to this persona as a female entity (although one might consider the first line of sonnet 82 as indicative of the Muse's gender as well), and it is also the first poem to introduce the theme of the silent Muse, which will be a leitmotif later on. Silence and passivity will be associated with the feminine form of the Muse—and on a closer inspection with the poet himself—as opposed to the masculine persona who assumes a more agentive behaviour. However, it is important to point out that silence here does not yet have a negative connotation ("Then others for the breath of words respect; / Me for my dumb thoughts, speaking in effect" [Sonnet 85]).

Sonnets 100, 101, and 103 form an interesting triad and bring a distinct change in tone. The Muse is depicted as a figure that is seemingly oppressed, insufficient, silent, and passive. In sonnet 100, she is described with adjectives such as "forgetful" and "resty," and she is asked to give an account of why she will not speak, as illustrated by the first two lines of the poem: "Where art thou, Muse, that thou forget'st so long / To speak of that which gives thee all thy might?." These two lines also imply that the feminine Muse is dependent on the Fair Youth, just the way the Poet was dependent on him in sonnets 78 and 79.

The poem also suggests that the Muse would be capable of being agentive. Vendler calls our attention to the fact that the Muse "can *speak* of a subject; *sing* to an audience; *survey* a visual object; *be a satire* to a disagreeable event; and *give fame*" (426). Additionally, words like *might*, *fury*, and *power*, complemented by what we see in the third quatrain and the closing couplet, show the Muse as a figure that has the potential to be an appropriate opponent of Time, the ultimate antagonist in the entirety of the sequence ("Give my love fame faster than Time wastes life, / So thou prevent'st his scythe and crooked knife" [Sonnet 100]). This detail has great significance, since it seems that the Poet's main objective in the sonnets is to secure some sort of enduring form for the Youth, to find a way of eternalizing his beauty. Hence, it is not just the Poet and the feminine Muse who are dependent on the Fair Youth, but the Youth himself also depends on the feminine Muse.

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The Muse and the Fair Youth are “locked in a mutual deal: either she ‘lends light’ to ‘that which gives thee all thy might,’ or she and her subject both fall into obscurity” (Roessner 366).

This element of dependence is further amplified in sonnet 101. In this poem “not only the Muse” but also abstract ideas, such as “‘truth and beauty’ as well, depend upon the friend,” writes Roessner (366). In the second quatrain of the sonnet, the Poet demands the Muse—who was thus far silent—to answer him in the following lines:

Make answer, Muse, wilt thou not haply say
‘Truth needs no colour with his colour fixed,
Beauty no pencil beauty’s truth to lay,
But best is best if never intermixed?’ (Sonnet 101)

On closer inspection, however, we might notice that it is not the Muse who answers the Poet’s question but the Poet himself, imagining what she would say. Her words seem to constitute a mere hypothetical utterance. The Poet’s overbearing behaviour culminates in the closing couplet: “Then do thy office, Muse, I teach thee how, / To make him seem long hence, as he shows now” (Sonnet 101). This is the complete reversal of the conventional invocation-scenario.

The roles and identity of the Muse and the Poet are completely blurred by this point. The Poet hinting at his own silence in sonnet 102 (“Therefore, like her, I sometime hold my tongue”—although here the feminine pronoun signifies Philomel, not the Muse) and his desperate exclamation of inexpressibility in sonnet 103 (“O, blame me not if I no more can write!”) are analogous to the inadequacy and silence of the Muse in the previous poems. The difference is that it is the Poet who is scolded now, and he is scolded by the Youth, thus the power relations change to their polar opposite (the Youth being a Muse himself).

We have examined these poems in order to delineate the personae of the Muse. To conclude what we have established so far, we can claim that it is possible to interpret the feminine Muse as the personification of the internal struggle or strife of the artist, a certain kind of self-doubt of the Poet, which fits the modesty *topos* that is present in a number of sonnets. This would also legitimise the feminine Muse’s existence and explain the necessity of a clear distinction between the mythical muses (who are in a sense both an internal and an external source of inspiration) and the Poet’s feminine Muse. The idea that this persona is an integral part of the Poet is supported by the words of sonnet 100, where *pen* and *skills* belong to her,

rather than to him (“Sing to the ear that doth thy lays esteem, / And gives thy pen both skill and argument”). By contrast, the masculine Muse (or the Fair Youth) denotes a purely external source of inspiration.

Despite the fact that the consistency in the capabilities of these two personae according to their gender is quite striking, and that there is an obvious preference for the male Muse throughout the sequence, we must note that this preference is not gender based. The feminine Muse is deemed insufficient not because of her sex but because she represents something that the Poet does not believe in. The Poet simply regards the external Muse as superior to the internal Muse, who happens to be feminine as a result of the prevalent literary conventions of Muse portrayals. This *dis/belief* in an internal source of inspiration is the organising force which shapes the figures of the two personae of the Muse. The question that ensues is the following: What does all of this tell us about the process of poetic creation and the eternalisation of the Youth’s beauty?

Turning back to sonnet 101, with special attention to the *words of the Muse* (which, as we have demonstrated, are a part of the Poet’s inner monologue) could be the key to the issue at hand. These are the lines to reconsider:

‘Truth needs no colour with his colour fixed
Beauty no pencil beauty’s truth to lay;
But best is best if never intermixed?’

At first glance, the Muse’s imagined utterance might be quite perplexing because it purports to contradict everything that the sonnet sequence stands for. The beauty of the Fair Youth is praised in almost every poem and the Poet is driven by a “preservation fantasy,” as put by Aaron Kunin (99). But the devil is in the detail, of course. The word to focus on is “pencil.” As Burrow notes, “*Pencil* and *pen* are traditionally opposed as representatives of fine art and poetry respectively in a formalised debate about the rival merits of the sister arts known in the Renaissance as a ‘paragone’” (412). He also adds that the basis of such an opposition is that the *pen* is considered to describe the “inward,” while the *pencil* “depicts the outward” (412).

The Poet’s critical attitude towards the sister arts, particularly his stance regarding the art of painting, is a recurring theme in the sonnets. The first poem which illustrates this phenomenon is sonnet 16:

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Now stand you on the top of happy hours,
And many maiden gardens, yet unset,
With virtuous wish would bear your living flowers,
Much liker than your painted counterfeit . . .

Here the painted counterfeit refers to the Poet's writing rather than painting *per se*; however, he does not completely discourage the poetic representation of the friend. In sonnet 101, following the words of the Muse, he expresses quite the opposite: "Because he needs no praise, wilt thou be dumb? / Excuse not silence so, for 't lies in thee / To make him much outlive a gilded tomb." What he seems to criticise, based on what we see above, is the ineffectiveness of mimetic poetry, especially when it is set against the only genuine mimesis fashioned by Nature: procreation ("And you must live drawn by you own sweet skill" [Sonnet 16]).

The issue is later revisited during the course of the rival poet sonnets. The Poet criticises his rivals in the closing couplet of sonnet 82 with the words: "And their gross painting might be better used / Where cheeks need blood: in thee it is abused." He is eager to distinguish himself from them in the first two lines of the following poem: "I never saw that you did painting need, / And therefore to you fair no painting set" (Sonnet 83). Painting here primarily refers to an excessive use of linguistic ornaments (or makeup, thus signifying false beauty), but the fact that the Poet expresses his views in these terms is quite revealing. Thus, the word *painting* in the sonnets will bear a negative connotation in most cases. However, if one is unable to effectively preserve the Youth's beauty through mimesis, in descriptive poetry, but should also keep to "plain words" (Sonnet 82) when treating the friend as the subject of a poem, then what is it that one ought to do? Sonnet 84 might answer our question:

Let him but copy what in you is writ
Not making worse what nature made so clear,
And such a counterpart shall fame his wit,
Making his style admired everywhere.

Although the Poet characterises the poetic process as *copying*, what he copies is not visual nor something that is external—an imagery that echoes what we read in sonnet 79.

The reason behind this phenomenon has possibly much to do with the Poet's urge to eternalise the Fair Youth's beauty. What makes that an exceptionally difficult task is that it is not just the Fair Youth and his body which is transitory and mutable in its character but also beauty as a concept. What we perceive as aesthetically pleasing or beautiful shifts not only along on a diachronic and a spatial axis but also varies from one individual to another.

However, it is intrinsic to paintings that they have an already materialised form, one that the spectators cannot alter. For instance, Sandro Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus*—not unlike the sonnets—intends to capture something or someone that is supposedly eternally beautiful. Yet Venus's beauty in Botticelli's painting might be regarded as quite fragile, because what we get is a definition of beauty, with which we might not agree. Therefore, the *pencil* has the potential to capture beauty, but it is the *pen* that is capable of disclosing its essence (“beauty's truth to lay” [Sonnet 101]). Though the sonnets addressed to the friend do not express an anxiety concerning changing standards of beauty, the very first Dark Lady sonnet does: “In the old age black was not counted fair, / Or if it were it bore no beauty's name; / But now is black beauty's successive heir” (Sonnet 127).

Consequently, representing a particular materialisation or instance of beauty by painting or mimetic poetry is inadequate when one's aim is to make the Fair Youth “much outlive a gilded tomb” (Sonnet 101). Also, from what we have ascertained, it seems that only an abstract idea can be truly eternal; therefore, the Poet has no choice but to recreate the Fair Youth according to that. Caporicci draws our attention to the fact that the “poet's scepticism towards the mimetic possibilities of a verbal representation based on a visual approach to reality, leads, if not to a general rejection of the Petrarchan kind of praise, at least to a limited presence of actual physical descriptions” (6). This would explain the lack of blazons when it comes to the entirety of the sequence. The blazon which was “one of the standard elements in sonnet sequences in the 1590s” served as a visual catalogue of the beloved's beauty, often verbally dissecting his/her body, and focusing on its parts separately (Burrow 592). If we, again, expand our scope and take into account the Dark Lady sonnets as well, we will see that sonnet 130 is a *contre blason*. The only blazon-like poem among the Fair Youth sonnets is sonnet 99, but the description that is present in the poem regarding the features of the friend is quite vague and dubious. Even if we examine all 126 sonnets, it is rather challenging to find any physical attributes which would distinctly belong to the friend. We never get to know anything about the colour of his

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eyes or the shape of his lips. The fact that he is continuously called fair in the sonnets might imply that his hair is blonde, but there are passages which could contradict even that (“And sable curls all silvered o’er with white” [Sonnet 12]).

We find similar arguments in Sir Philip Sidney’s theoretical work *The Defense of Poesy*: “Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature . . .” (par. 10). Sidney also argues that poets “to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be” (par. 16). The emphasis here is on poetic invention and the power of verse to recreate the object, rather than just reflecting on it. But how does the Poet take the beauty of the Fair Youth and make it *anew*, into *forms such as never were in nature*, forms that *may be* and *should be*?

The answer lies in sonnets 68 and 106. Sonnet 68 opens with the lines: “Thus is his cheek the map of days outworn, / When beauty lived and died as flowers do now.” Kaula points out that the young friend’s “symbolic status is further enlarged through his being identified metaphorically not only with the objects of highest prestige in the corresponding planes of being, such as the rose, gold, jewel, sun, and kingship, but also with time values of the mythic variety” (46–47). The friend is juxtaposed with the fleeting beauty that simply “lived and died,” which implies that the Youth might be able to defy death, and with death, also time. We see the same theme from the second quatrain onwards in sonnet 106:

Then in the blazon of sweet beauty’s best,
Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
I see their antique pen would have expressed
Even such a beauty as you master now.
So all their praises are but prophecies
Of this our time, all you prefiguring . . .

John D. Bernard notes that the “friend is defined as the archetype” of “divine beauty” (81). He is a figure who in a way always existed and always will exist. Similarly, Schalkwyk states that the Poet introduces the Fair Youth as the “. . . standard by which we measure what beauty is, by which beauty gets its name” (261).

Following that line of thought, it is clear that to “praise the young man by a standard of beauty taken from some other paradigm or standard of reference is either

to empty the words of all meaning . . . or, by subordinating the young man to a higher standard, to diminish his status, to insult him” (Schalkwyk 261). Sonnet 18 embodies Schalkwyk’s theory perfectly. To the question in the first line (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”), the answer is ultimately no. In a way, such a comparison would degrade the Fair Youth. He never appears through similes being like the rose or like the Sun. He is the rose, he is the Sun. The Youth seems to have an omnipotent presence that transfuses anything and everything that is beautiful, because he is Beauty itself. The question could only ever be answered with a yes if it were rewritten as “Shall I compare a summer’s day to thee?”, but then we would not be reading Shakespeare, would we?

The conceptualisation of the Youth’s beauty in such a manner recalls notions of Platonic realism, i.e., a belief in the existence of universals or, more specifically, ideal forms (as opposed to nominalism, which is the doctrine of particulars). Thus, the friend is presented in the poems as the ideal form of Beauty. Intriguingly, the rare occasions when painting or drawing receives a positive connotation or, at least, remains neutral, often coincide with instances where the painted picture functions as a particular exemplifying the friend as the Platonic ideal. The following lines of sonnet 98 illustrate the idea well: “They were but sweet, but figures of delight / Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.” The same idea is elaborated in sonnet 53:

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you.
On Helen’s cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new.

John W. Velz in his monumental work *Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition* refers to a paper by Sidney Lee in which Lee concludes that the “references to [the Fair Youth’s] beauty as a ‘shadow’ show that Shakespeare knew the Platonic belief that the phenomenal world is only a reflection of ideal reality” (360).

The friend’s status as an abstraction and an archetype is reinforced by the textual idiosyncrasies present in the sequence. Certain words and expressions are used to such an extent in order to “describe” the Youth that they function much like

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epithets in the poems, denoting him. The three most common ones are *fair*, *sweet*, and various forms of the word *beauty*. If we only count the instances in which these words refer to the Youth, then *fair* appears 29 times, while *sweet* has 41 occurrences, and *beauty* has 54 altogether. Moreover, out of these three words two are synonymous with each other, namely *beauty* (or *beauteous*) and *fair*. This sense of underlying repetitiveness is acknowledged in sonnet 105 by the Poet as well, in a poem that appears to be reminiscent of an *ars poetica*:

Therefore my verse, to constancy confined,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
'Fair, kind, true' is all my argument,
'Fair, kind, true' varying to other words;
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.

Bernard argues that the Poet “is engaged in a search not merely for the moral truth of his friend, a search doomed to failure, but for a style that may attain a constancy beyond the material and moral vicissitudes of human existence” (77). The relevant rhetorical concept which thus far remained undiscussed, but might be linked to the style hinted at by Bernard, is invention. The first appearance of the word in the sequence is in sonnet 38 (“How can my Muse want subject to invent”), where invention adheres to “its usual sense in sixteenth-century rhetoric,” meaning “to find out (pre-existing) matter for a poem” (Burrow 456) and “topics to be treated, or arguments to be used” (Burrow 456). In later sonnets, on the other hand, the emergent sense of the word “to compose as a work of imagination or literary art” tends to intermingle with the word’s primary connotation, often superseding it. This is what we see happening, for instance, in sonnet 76, which is, in many ways, analogous to sonnet 105:

Why write I still all one, ever the same,
And keep invention in a noted weed,
That every word doth almost tell my name,
Showing their birth, and where they did proceed?
O know, sweet love, I always write of you,
And you and love are still my argument;
So all my best is dressing old words new,
Spending again what is already spent . . . (Sonnet 76)

Since the Poet keeps returning to the same argument or subject—the Fair Youth—the primary connotation of invention gradually loses its significance by becoming redundant. Thus, invention comes to be associated with a different type of creativity, one that is concerned with “dressing old words new,” which leads to the genesis of the Poet’s personal, recognisable style—indicative of both him and the Youth.

To conclude, we ought to revisit the imagery of sonnet 79. As we have established, the two participants of the exchange that materialises in the poem as a conceit of theft are the Fair Youth and the Poet. The Fair Youth, who also happens to be the masculine/external Muse, acts much like a catalyst in a chemical reaction. The potential is in the Poet, but he declares that some sort of input is essential. This is the very root of his self-doubt or dis/belief that is personified in the figure of the feminine/internal Muse. However, this dependence is mutual, since it is only the Poet who is capable of eternalising the friend’s beauty. We have also shown that mimetic or descriptive poetry is incompatible with the Poet’s pursuits. Instead of reflecting the friend’s beauty, the Poet abstracts it. This is one of the elements that contribute to the Youth’s enigmatic quality.

Consequently, the Youth being represented as an Idea/I is deprived of individuality, and thus becomes a template of beauty. This might also lead us to a reading of the sonnets in which he is not recreated after one particular person but could be seen as an “amalgam of more than one man,” or, alternatively, might stand for anyone or anything that has ever been close to the heart of the Poet (Muir 122). This is well illustrated in the following extract:

Thou art the grave where buried love doth live,
Hung with the trophies of my lovers gone,
Who all their parts of me to thee did give;
That due of many, now is thine alone.
 Their image I loved I view in thee,
 And thou (all they) hast all the all of me. (Sonnet 31)

The focus is not necessarily on who is loved but rather on the fact that the Poet loves. If we look at it this way, then the Poet’s main objective is not the eternalisation of someone or someone’s beauty. In this case, his aim is to capture something that is eternal in its own right—*Beauty*—and to exhibit his admiration of it.

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It might seem to be slightly problematic to associate these poems with the art of painting after everything that has been said. The sonnets in their essence are nothing like paintings after all. Yet reading them is much like painting a picture. The minds of the readers are like canvases and as readers we are prompted by the abstractions which are offered to create our own images—our own particulars. We are never given a definition of beauty, only the idea of it is ever presented. The “worth” of the Fair Youth “inheres not in the accidents of age or sin but in a metaphysical essence accessible to the loving imagination alone” (Bernard 77). This is the reason why the Youth, the Poet, and the sonnets are eternal, because the poems do not limit the loving imagination of the audience.

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