

Psalm and Sonnet: A Comparative Look at One Ancient Hebrew and One English Renaissance Poem

Although composed approximately 2,600 years apart, the Psalms of the Bible and the sonnets of Shakespeare have many features in common. The Psalms are Hebrew lyric poetry with many sub-genres, such as praise psalms, royal psalms, lament psalms, and penitential psalms. C.S. Lewis writes, “Most emphatically, the Psalms must be read as poems [as opposed to sermons or histories]; as lyrics, with all the licences [sic] and hyperbole, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry” (Lewis 3). The sonnets are, by definition, lyrics as well, expressing feeling and exploring ideas, rather than telling stories. Helen Vendler, in writing of the sonnets as lyrics, says that each poem expresses both the heart and the mind. The quatrains are emotional expressions; the couplet is more analytical.

The distance from one’s own experience necessitated by an analytic stance is symbolized most fully by the couplet, whereas the empathetic perception necessary to display one’s state of mind is symbolized by the quatrains (25).

In looking at the sonnets as dramas with a cast of characters, Vendler pushes back against critics who try to recreate stories and the real people in Shakespeare’s life. Instead, she says, it is the words that are the actors in the sonnets (3). Shakespeare has not provided background stories or occasions for us.

The Bible does record, however, with certain individual psalms, occasions that inspired the psalmists’ poetic responses. David, the second Hebrew king, wrote seventy-three psalms, Asaph, twelve. Twelve were written by the children of Korah, a Levitical family in King David’s court, and two were written by Solomon, David’s son. Two are believed to have been written by the music masters known as Heman and Ethan, who were probably employed by David and/or Solomon (Bonhoeffer 17). The Psalms were composed around 1,000 B.C. and the Shakespearean sonnets before 1600 A.D.

Leland Ryken lists the inferred intentions of the Psalms, and most of these intentions could have been written about Shakespeare’s sonnets. Ryken says that the Psalms:

1. Express truth by means of images and figures of speech.
2. Package the content of highly artistic poetry, so that the beauty of expression is an important part of the total effect.
3. Are truthful to human experience and portray its nuances accurately.
4. Showcase literary beauty.
5. Provide the materials for private and public worship (including worship in song).
6. Give expression to the emotional and reflective side of religious experience.
7. Record human response to God and the experiences of life. (Ryken 746-747).

Numbers 1-5 could have been written about Shakespeare’s sonnets, and, if Shakespeare is one’s religion, all apply.

Another thing the Psalms and sonnets have in common is the poetic forms and devices that were the conventions of their time. The Psalms didn't have rhyme as a value, but they had as a main feature, parallelism, whereby one line of poetry is restated in the next for emphasis. A simple example of this is found in Psalm 27: "The Lord is my light and my salvation/ whom shall I fear?/ The Lord is the stronghold of my life/ of whom shall I be afraid?" In these two lines we see that both begin with the word "Lord". The idea of light and salvation is repeated in the word "stronghold". The phrase "whom shall I fear?" is repeated in line two's "of whom shall I be afraid?" Shakespeare's sonnets, on the other hand, have uniform rhyme scheme (ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG) and meter (iambic pentameter), and, so, in terms of poetic device, they are vastly different, but the point is that they both follow the conventions of their day, and as we read them side by side, the centuries that separate them disappear, because they both concern the immutable human heart, as a close look at Psalm 51 and Sonnet 111 will illustrate. Indeed, Sonnet 111 can even be seen as a secular version of Psalm 51.

Psalm 51 was composed by David on the occasion of prophet Nathan confronting him after he had sinned (committed adultery) with Bathsheba and had her husband murdered. Ryken states that Psalm 51 is the greatest example of a penitential psalm in the psalter (802). The characteristics of a penitential psalm are 1. Confession of sin, 2. Expression of sorrow for sin, and 3. An expression of the effects of guilt, petitions to God for forgiveness of sin and/or celebration of God's forgiveness (1894). Psalm 51 opens up with "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness" (1). The opening shows David's vulnerability and dependence on God. This vulnerability also is present in Sonnet 111 as the speaker writes of his meanness and need for pity. David continues, "according to the multitude of thy compassions, put away mine iniquities" (2). David then asks God to cleanse him from his sin, in verses 2 and in verse 7: "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from mine sin...purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be white as snow." Hyssop was used in biblical times for ceremonial cleansing of the temple and other holy places. David longs to have the temple that is his body and his soul cleansed with the hyssop of God's forgiveness.

David then lists several petitions as imperative statements in rapid-fire succession:

Make me hear joy and gladness (8), hide thy face from my sins (9), create in me a clean heart...renew a right spirit within me (10), cast me not away from your presence...take not thy holy spirit from me...restore to me the joy of thy salvation (11), and establish me with thy free spirit (12).

These impassioned pleas reveal a desperate heart, truly repentant and longing to be forgiven and restored.

The last half of the psalm shows David imagining what life would be like, fully forgiven, fully restored. "My tongue shall show forth thy praise" (14). The psalmist knows that when his soul is healed, his tongue will be full of praise. The psalm ends with David declaring that God does not delight in blood sacrifice but only in the sacrifice of a "contrite spirit" and "broken heart" (17). In Psalm 51 David has shown that he has both.

The speaker in Sonnet 111 writes of Fortune, Lady Fortuna of classical mythology who has remained an important presence in literature, throughout the ages, making timelessly making appearances in Homer, Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and in modern works as a concept that can be reversed in the definition of tragedy. Fortuna was the goddess of capricious luck as well as fate. In 111 she is a "guilty goddess," and her appearance in this sonnet makes it secular. There is no Judeo-Christian language, biblical imagery, or allusions as there is in many of the sonnets (e.g. 17, 21, 29, 33, 42, 62, 84, 93 and 108). Helen Vendler summarizes it like this:

The cure for the speaker's state seems at first to lie in a hope that Fortuna will reverse for him the motion of her wheel. He himself has had no luck in chiding Fortune; perhaps the friend will encounter better success and relent from chiding the speaker in favor of chiding Fortune (470).

In sonnet 111 the speaker writes of his "harmful deeds." It seems that Fortuna has arranged things so that the speaker is condemned to be a part of the life that breeds "public manners", such as, perhaps, coarse jesting, crude language, scratching and belching. His name has received a "brand": he is branded as common, his reputation is ruined, perhaps by consorting with low characters from the public houses and brothels--and partaking of life with them. As someone who works in inks, as a playwright or poet would, has stained hands, so is the speaker's nature "Subdued to what it works in" (6-7). The metaphor of stained hands representing a stained life is powerful here.

It is here that the speaker makes a break, a change of direction. This comes after line 8, making the division more like an Italian sonnet with octet followed by sestet, rather than three quatrains followed by a couplet. The octet focused on explaining his complaint in detail. The sestet begins with an entreaty, a petition: "Pity me" (9). The speaker seems to feel that he is a victim of Fortuna's caprice, and therefore the friend must pity him and not hold him accountable. The speaker wishes to wash away the stain of bad company and a common, public life.

He is willing to drink eisell: vinegar, which, Stephen Orgel says, was used as a medicine to cure or prevent the plague and connects to biblical crucifixions. Bible commentator William Lane writes,

According to an old tradition, respected women of Jerusalem provided a narcotic drink [a mixture of vinegar and wine] to those condemned to death in order to decrease their sensitivity to excruciating pain (564).

For the speaker in 111 his fault is a disease, like black plague, and the metaphor of black ink staining his hands supports this. In order to be clean of his life style's effect on him, the speaker is willing to drink eisell. His fault pains him, in a similar way that the criminals of ancient Jerusalem felt the agony of their crimes while they died on penitential crosses. The speaker wishes to be renewed and is willing to drink eisell against his "strong infection" (10).

He is willing to be cleansed in a conventional, medicinal way, but he begins the couplet by repeating the plea, "Pity me" (13), and ends the sonnet stating that his friend's pity "is enough to cure me" (14). Pity is the theme of the sonnet, and the word is placed strongly at the beginning

of the sestet as well as at the beginning and the end of the couplet. “Harmful deeds,” “public manners,” the branding of the speaker’s name, and his “strong infection” can all be “cured” by his friend’s pity.

The progression of sonnet 111 is similar to Psalm 51. The movement of each goes from complaint and confession, to a desire to be cleansed (hyssop and eisell) and finally to hope, although David’s hope, his confidence in God, is stronger than the speaker’s is in 111. Looking at the two poems side by side we see that the deity in the sonnet is Fortuna, while in David’s psalm it is the God of the Hebrews. Shakespeare addresses his sonnet to his friend, whom some call “the youth”, and David addresses his psalm to God himself. Both poems have a medicinal drink, one eisell, one hyssop, both are a type of cleansing vinegar. In both poems, the speaker is seeking forgiveness and redemption. In the sonnet, it is the friend’s pity that will bring the cure; in the psalm, it is the penitent heart that will evoke forgiveness from God.

It is futile, of course, to ask if Shakespeare had Psalm 51 in mind when he composed 111, but his thorough knowledge of the Bible is irrefutable. The fingerprint impressions of the Bible are all over Shakespeare’s writings, and while we cannot positively say that Psalm 51 inspired the sonnet, we can read 111 as a secular version of David’s psalm.

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