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A Shift in Perspective: The Sonnet as a Poetic Caricature

The sonnet has traditionally been perceived as a symbol of classic splendor, particularly with its rhythmic iambic pentameter and romantic content. Some poets are revered for their ability to write within the form's traditional guidelines. Since its creation, the sonnet has also been viewed across time as one of the most restrictive and demanding poetic forms.

Closer inspection reveals that such formal restrictions may not be as cruel as they seem. By including these formal guidelines, the sonnet encourages poets to examine their subjects more closely and write about their defining elements in innovative ways. This creative liberty is found when the poet shifts his or her "gaze," a move demonstrated in contemporary female poets who experiment with their own perspective and challenge the guidelines of traditional sonnets. In this essay, I will argue that the defining factors of the traditional Shakespearean sonnet are not necessarily confining; rather, they are guidelines that force the poet to analyze and evaluate the subject more closely. Contemporary women poets, such as Sonnet L'Abbé and Jen Bervin, challenge the form with erasure and expansion; in doing so, L'Abbe and Bervin still coordinate with the sonnet's original elements while shifting their poetic gaze.

First and foremost, the cultural opinion of the sonnet over time must be addressed. Robert Hass provides a look into the sonnet in his work, *A Little Book on Form*. Hass demonstrates the traditional reverence of the sonnet when he introduces the poetic form as follows:

The sonnet is the one durable, widely used form in English poetry in the last five hundred years. It came into English in the early sixteenth century through the translation of Petrarch. Its content was psychological and erotic, it brought

Italianate extended metaphor into English, and it had philosophical roots in the Neoplatonic tradition of courtly love. (Hass 121)

Hass' remark on the sonnet's popularity proves true when merely discussing the poetic form. Most people associate the sonnet with Shakespeare's work, although Petrarch is also known for using his own version of the form. Hass illustrates the sonnet in its initial glory and popularity as he describes its classical roots from several outlets of tradition. Since its creation, the sonnet has been viewed as one of the more formal and respected poetic forms.

Hass' use of the term "durable" in his explanation of the sonnet even provides a multifaceted view on the form (Hass 121). The sonnet is indeed durable in many ways. First, the works produced in the original practice of writing sonnets are still relatively widely read today. Many readers and consumers exposed to literature and media have most likely been exposed to references to at least one of Shakespeare's sonnets. Additionally, the sonnet form is still being used today, both in the traditional and more innovative contemporary senses.

Despite its positive reception in early years, along with those who still enjoy writing in the form, the sonnet has been challenged in more recent poetic movements. Dr. Slawomir Wacior expounds on the contemporary reception of sonnets in his paper "Super Size Me: Experiments with the Shape and Size of Contemporary Sonnets in English." Wacior writes, "The sonnet is a verbal cage which challenges the poet to fill in the box with a finite number of rhythmically ordered words, no more no less, and teases the reader into opening it of its meaning and connotations" (Wacior 214). Wacior thus introduces the opinions of those who disapprove of the sonnet, viewing it as a restricting and challenging form. Besides this blatant description, Wacior explains that poets throughout time have engaged in war over sonnets (Wacior 214). Wacior divides poets into two parties: "those who feel comfortable within the confines of the fourteen-

line iambic pentameter verbal cage and those who have always felt a need to explode the structure by means of experimentation with its sound, shape and size” (Wacior 214).

Hass and Wacior seem to illustrate these two parties with their own descriptions of the sonnet. Even though these scholars do not illustrate explicit bias regarding their own opinions towards the sonnet, they do both open the door for discussing the opposing stances towards sonnets by providing ample description of either side. Hass depicts the sonnet as “durable” with a “psychological and erotic” content (Hass 121). Wacior takes the opposing side as he describes the sonnet as “a verbal cage . . . no more no less” (Wacior 214). Simply stated, Hass celebrates the form’s rules as respectable guidelines while Wacior criticizes them for being too limiting.

Even with this debate in mind, the sonnet’s contemporarily controversial format may be the very thing that increases its effectivity in the field of poetry. Hass moves on to explain a key comparison from Peter Sacks. According to Hass, “Sacks writes, the sonnet originates as a kind of staring into the eyes of the beloved. So it suggests one formal energy of the sonnet: it can be thought of as an intense gaze at a subject” (Hass 122-23). The sonnet may then be interpreted as a medium to explore important aspects of the poet’s subject by using its list of formal requirements to make the poet ask, “What is so notable about my subject? What is the best way to explain this feature?”

This poetic gaze has traditionally been dominated by male poets such as Shakespeare and Petrarch, who were mentioned earlier. From this idea, it may be argued that the sonnet is a challenging form to write if female poets attempt to replicate the male poetic gaze when female poets have their own unique perspective to offer. Renovating the sonnet form allows poets to present their own contribution, and even their responses, to the traditional sonnet form.

Contemporary female poets have especially noticed the traditional male domination of the poetic gaze in the sonnet's history, particularly with Shakespeare's forms. Some of these contemporary female poets decided to take matters into their own hands and present their gaze through more modern poetic practice. One such way to reclaim the sonnet form for a renewed rendition is the poetic practice of erasure, which is deleting or removing some of the text of the original poem to create a second poem in its wake. Erasure poems usually carry their own meaning separate from that of the original piece.

For example, Sonnet L'Abbe is notable for her 2019 collection of *Sonnet's Shakespeare*, in which she "colonizes" all of Shakespeare's sonnets with an "erasure-by-crowding" ("Sonnet's Shakespeare" 1). L'Abbe expands Shakespeare's sonnets into her own by surrounding them with her words. In doing so, L'Abbe changes the sonnets' original meanings altogether and turns them into something of her own creation.

Another notable contemporary female poet, Jen Bervin, experiments with Shakespeare's sonnets until they represent her own poetic gaze. Bervin revises Shakespeare's sonnets for her poetic gaze by practicing a form of erasure more common to the literal interpretation. Bervin lightens the text of the original sonnet as she "erases," leaving the words she wishes to recycle in black ink for reading. For example, Bervin writes "2" as follows: "a / weed of small worth / asked / to be new made" (Bervin 4). Shakespeare's original sonnets are still visible within Bervin's pieces; however, her newly revised poetry still stands out with its own perspective.

L'Abbe and Bervin's erasure experiments with Shakespearean sonnets may be seen as controversial in poetic discourse, particularly in the circles Wacior describes as "those who feel comfortable within the confines of the fourteen-line iambic pentameter verbal cage" (Wacior

214). On the contrary, L'Abbe and Bervin's experiments may be proving the fluid nature of the sonnet's form. How is this possible?

In her article "Sonnet as Closed Form and Open Process," Rebekka Lotman weighs the argument of the sonnet as a closed or open form. Lotman refers to sonneteers Paul Muldoon and Jef Hilson to explain the irony of arguing that the sonnet is a closed form. More specifically, Lotman writes, "Jeff Hilson suggests . . . 'So-called 'open-form' poetry also requires closed operations within it for it to work and to be perceived as open. A truly 'open' poetry could not exist'" (Lotman 318). In other words, all poetry requires some semblance of form and guideline in order for that poetry to exist. Rhyme, meter, and stanzaic structure are all necessary to define and build on poetic forms.

If formal poetry writing requires these standards, then how can more recent innovations of these poetic forms still claim the same title as their ancestors? More specifically, how can L'Abbe and Bervin claim to be writing sonnets in erasure when they adjust the original form so drastically? Lotman continues to answer this question with Hilson. More specifically, Lotman comes to contemporary poets' defense by explaining *how* poets can expand traditional forms, quoting Hilson as she writes, "'One method is to disrupt those aspects of the poem that are perceived as closing it off, its signifiers if you like, such as structure, shape, rhyme scheme, metre, as well as content'" (Lotman 318).

Contemporary poets, according to Lotman's example, are free to practice within any poetic form as an open form when they adjust one or more aspects of that poem's form. L'Abbe and Bervin follow this idea by modifying most of the sonnet's traditional formal expectations. For example, L'Abbe keeps the original content from Shakespeare's sonnets while removing all other aspects of structure, shape, and rhyme from the original work. Bervin, on the other hand,

displays a more explicit demonstration. She keeps the format of the traditional sonnets present alongside her erasure poems instead of simply removing the text. In doing so, Bervin allows readers to view the original sonnets while highlighting the differences in her own.

When writing these erasure sonnets, why would contemporary female poets keep so much of Shakespeare's original sonnets intact alongside their own messages? The answer may be found by viewing L'Abbe and Bervin's poetry as a response to Shakespeare's original work. As mentioned in an earlier reference to Hass, the sonnet allows poets to exercise an intense poetic gaze towards their subject. The results of this gaze help the poets better illustrate the person, place, or thing they chose to discuss. L'Abbe directly describes her goal to "colonize" Shakespeare's work, thereby answering to his original writing with her own opinions and reclaiming his words for her message (Sonnet's Shakespeare 1).

Bervin may seek to further discuss Shakespeare's sonnets by having them more readily available for readers to see when viewing her erasure poems. By keeping the originals so directly intertwined with her erasures, Bervin practically asks readers to compare both versions and notice a discussion between them.

L'Abbe and Bervin open the discussion for presenting their poetic responses by operating in a form of poetic caricature. The Oxford English Dictionary defines caricature as a "grotesque or ludicrous representation of persons or things by exaggeration of their most characteristic and striking features" ("Caricature" 1). Thus, L'Abbe and Bervin create poetic caricatures *about* the Shakespearean sonnet by *using* Shakespearean sonnets and erasure to present their own commentary, exercising a shift in the poetic gaze to accommodate the female perspective.

In conclusion, the sonnet is a widely used traditional form that has sparked both admiration and controversy over the years. Poets tend to split into two camps regarding the

sonnet as a poetic form: those who love sonnets, and those who do not. However, this overgeneralization quickly becomes complicated, especially when ignoring the group of poets who challenge the sonnet form. By challenging this form, contemporary poets actually continue to demonstrate the open nature of the sonnet by practicing erasure while keeping some of the traditional sonnet expectations intact.

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