

Sonnet 55: Not marble nor the gilded monuments

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all-oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Sonnet 55 is one of Shakespeare's most famous works and a noticeable deviation from other sonnets in which he appears insecure about his relationships and his own self-worth. Here we find an impassioned burst of confidence as the poet claims to have the power to keep his friend's memory alive evermore.

Some critics argue that Shakespeare's sudden swell of pride in his poetry was strictly artificial - a blatant attempt to mimic the style of the classical poets. "It is difficult on any other hypothesis to reconcile the inflated egotism of such a one as 55 with the unassuming dedications to the Venus and Lucrece, 1593 and 1594, or with the expressions of humility found in the sonnets themselves, e.g. 32 and 38" (Halliwell-Phillipps, 304).

However, many believe that such an analysis ignores Shakespeare's paramount desire to immortalize his friend in verse, and not himself (as was the motive of most classical poets). "The Romans say: Because of my poem I will never die. Shakespeare says: Because of my poem you will never die....What distinguishes Shakespeare is that he values the identity of the

beloved; he recognizes that the beloved has his own personal immortality, in no way dependent on poetry" (Martin, 158).

By focusing on the word *live*, Shakespeare uses the language itself to emphasize his authorial intentions. Notice the word choices of *outlive* (2), *living* (8), *oblivious* (9), and *live* (14).

Despite its tremendous popularity, Sonnet 55 has its detractors. One of the most interesting attacks on the sonnet came from a critic named H. T. S. Forrest, who despised the poem and, in particular, lines 10-14. These lines, he wrote, are slovenly, far-fetched, and tautologous verses which would be mercilessly criticized if they appeared as the handiwork of the minutest of the minor poets of today. Why "even"? To talk of printed matter "finding room" in people's eyes is not a little ridiculous. In line 11 the poet's verses are going to be looked upon by the whole of posterity, but in line 14 only by the 'lovers' section thereof. And line 13 is hopelessly ungrammatical, even if we accept Beeching's explanation that *that* = *when* (Forrest, 44).