

Weaving together wit:
striking similarities in
"the canonization"
and sonnet 55



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William Shakespeare's 55th Sonnet and John Donne's "The Canonization" are both poems that possess the same themes, anxieties, and cultural practices, thus illuminating the two poets' experiences in early modern Britain. According to Sasha Roberts, "'wit' in the early modern period denoted ingenuity, intelligence, imagination, and verbal prowess and was arguably the most highly valued in literary faculty—more so than originality or authenticity. Shakespeare's Sonnets demonstrate wit in abundance, not least in [their] deft use of paradox, conceit (an ingenious comparison often turning on unexpected or contrary states), imagery, and wordplay" (Roberts 179). Through their musings about love and artistic identity, these two poets used paradox, conceit, imagery, and wordplay to create provocative poems that ask profound questions - only to show the ridiculousness of (or lack of) any answer. Sonnet 55 is a famous Shakespearean poem that considers artistic identity, love, and passing time as it seeks answers that only lead to paradoxical conclusions and more questions. The surface narrative of the poem suggests that the speaker simply wants to immortalize his beloved friend in verse, instead of immortalizing himself as a poet (which is common in poems of this nature). Upon closer examination, however, there is more to the poem than this surface narrative. According to the last couplet, which in a sonnet is responsible for concluding a poem, the subject will live on through the lovers who will read the poem for ages to come. The poem claims to preserve the subject's living memory but does not actually explain what it is about the subject that is worth immortalizing. The imagery in the poem has nothing to do with describing the physicality of its subject. Instead, the images in this sonnet invoke destruction, war, and impending doom. The speaker asserts that even when war is raging, even if Mars, the God of War, <https://assignbuster.com/weaving-together-wit-striking-similarities-in-the-canonization-and-sonnet-55/>

shakes his sword, nothing can destroy the memory of the subject. The 14-line poem also explores notions of class and wealth. Shakespeare juxtaposes “gilded monuments of princes” with the “powerful rhyme”, which refers to the poem itself. The speaker posits war, fought by kings, as wasteful, but considers his poem to be a “living record” of memory. Instead of immortalizing the poet or his beloved subject, this sonnet immortalizes poetry above all. There is no mention of the speaker’s part in the creative process; what is important in this poem is the idea of poetry itself. Similar to the way in which the speaker struggles against time and cultural convention to preserve the memory of his beloved friend, the poem itself could be viewed as destructive. Time seeks to besmear the subject of the poem, but because it is written word, it will be preserved better than any man-made monument, so that when future generations are able to read about the subject of the poem, they will keep him alive and well. Upon a close reading of the poem, some word play sheds light on the gender dynamics present in this sonnet. The words “besmeared” and “sluttish” both imply that devouring Time is feminine. While besmeared can mean to sully or dirty, it can also mean to defile or pollute. The double meanings continue with the word “sluttish”, which could mean messy and untidy, insinuating that Time cannot keep the world a neatly organized place, and also connoting immoral and whorish undertones, that are normally used to describe a fallen woman. Even though the speaker claims to be immortalizing his beloved through his verse, it seems like he is really immortalizing his verse through his verse, because the poem does not give the reader any indication of the subject’s identity. What does live on in this sonnet is the witty and

compelling tone of the speaker and the idea that poetry can protect humans
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from the ever malignant hands of time, even if Shakespeare (ironically) does not really accomplish that for the subject as much as he does for his own craft. “The Canonization” addresses the same issues as Sonnet 55 and also relies heavily on the devices that Roberts uses to denote wit, but Donne makes a few small developments on Shakespeare’s new habit of “infusing [his poetry] with unexpected skepticism and satire, bawdiness, and bitterness” (Roberts 172). The titles of Donne’s poems are often just as important to understanding the poems as the lines of verse themselves. “The Canonization” is not only the title of the poem, but also the overarching conceit that drives the poem forward to its climactic invocation of the lovers as saints and muses of lovers everywhere. Not only are the lovers in the poem literally canonized, or turned into saints of love, but they are canonized in the sense of the word “canon” as a law or decree, a general rule, or a fundamental principle (they are the law of love—the example for how to love the right way). The form of the poem itself is rendered with close attention to the conceit of the canon. The poem consists of 5 stanzas, whose every first and last line end in the word “love.” The uniformity present in the rhyme scheme (ABBACCCDD) and the hymn like repetitions at the beginning and end of each stanza make this poem a canonization in itself because of its list-like quality, dating back to the religious lists or canonizations of saints. Because the lovers have been sainted in love, they are an example and inspiration to God to champion other couples to fall in love. Through the imagery and wordplay in the poem, it is clear that the gender dynamics in “The Canonization” are very different than Sonnet 55 and Donne’s other poetry. The poem begins in a declarative way, with the speaker scolding his adversary for interfering with true love. He offers a handful of other qualities

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for his companion to comment upon, consisting of ironically repugnant things —his ruined fortune, his five grey hairs (which could allude to the five stanzas in the poem), and his palsy or gout. In the fourth line, Donne begins to differentiate the speaker from his fellow men and the rest of society, a trope that will continue throughout the entire poem. He lists a handful of worthless things that his wealthy friends would be better off doing than worrying about his love, which could allude to Donne's bitterness about his own lost fortune and fall from social status. In the second stanza, the speaker seems to become rather defensive. He justifies his own relationship to himself and to his adversary, coming to the logical conclusion that even when he and his beloved are madly in love in a rapturous world of their own, the rest of the universe continues to spin and carry on with its daily business. The third and fourth stanzas of the poem are brimming with puns and images that continue to separate the speaker from his society and also begin to include his beloved in that distinction as well. The speaker asks his critic to "call [them] what [he] will" because they are defined by their love, not by the values that exist in normal everyday life. The line, "call her one, me another fly" could allude to some sort of bird or bug, but according to the OED, "fly" could also be understood to mean something insignificant, which meshes well with the rest of the situations in which the speaker uses class to differentiate himself and his lover from the world. However, class is not the only thing that sets them apart, because their love is what makes them so important and worth writing about. Donne depicts the couple as candles, burning themselves into oblivion, and as "the eagle and the dove."

According to Richard Kennedy, this may be an allusion to a long held

tradition stating that those two specific birds have such a strong aversion to <https://assignbuster.com/weaving-together-wit-striking-similarities-in-the-canonization-and-sonnet-55/>

each other that if their feathers combine, they “consume of themselves.” (Kennedy 13). This line of reasoning illuminates the meaning of the following line about the phoenix. The legend of the phoenix associates the bird with immortality because of its ability to regenerate from its own ashes, connects to the meaning behind the images of the eagle and the dove. Although scholars often paint Donne as a misogynist, this stanza shows him placing women on the exact same footing as men when it comes to love. Both are beings that “die and rise the same, and prove mysterious by this love.” The fourth stanza of “The Canonization” shows the two lovers being cut off from society completely. If they cannot live by love (because they are always being pestered about it or because it is not accepted), they can die by it. But even in death they are set apart from regular humans. Their legend is unfit for a tomb or hearse because, as is indicated throughout the entire poem, the couple enjoys a transcendent and inexplicable connection that most people cannot understand, and which constantly leaves them on the outskirts of society. Even though they will not be fit for tombs or hearses, because they have not subscribed to the material connections with the earth, their love is worthy of verse. The wordplay with the term “chronicle” begs even more meaning out of the fourth stanza. While a chronicle could refer to a detailed register, list of events or a historical record with no literary style, according to the OED it could also be an Elizabethan descriptive title for plays based on historical matter. Since the couple in the poem probably will not have any historical significance in their worldly life, where they don’t belong anyway, they decide to build sonnets in pretty rooms (i. e. a pun on the Italian word for stanza) and create poetry that will suffice to prove their love and its worth. As a result, their love will be preserved throughout time, <https://assignbuster.com/weaving-together-wit-striking-similarities-in-the-canonization-and-sonnet-55/>

even though their passion is all consuming and so is Time. The imagery, conceit, and wordplay in this poem support the speaker's hope that their love will offer them a form of immortality. "The Canonization" offers another commentary on the same issues that Shakespeare grapples with in Sonnet 55. While Shakespeare's poem focuses mostly on the act of writing as the key to immortalization, Donne complicates matters by introducing the idea that to be immortalized, a couple must be one being split into two. Donne borders on blasphemy by using a religious metaphor to describe passion and intense love, and with more space in which to ponder, he takes the form that Shakespeare foregrounded and refines it to create a multi-faceted piece of poetry that evades understanding while luring the reader in with direct address and clever musings. Shakespeare and Donne both adopted traditional literary tropes but developed them in complex and intuitive ways, infusing their poetry with unparalleled wit in order to showcase their unique opinions about love and its function in relation to society, literature, and the inevitable passing of time. Through their satirical word games and puzzling stanzas, both poems show that there is more to be understood than there seems to be upon initial consultation. It is possible that this "wit" is what has made these poems last the times so gracefully, and viewing both poems together through a similar critical lens allows for expanded meaning and understanding that might not have been possible otherwise.

Works Cited
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