

The Impossible Object of Love: Shakespeare, Billy Wilder and Freud

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After killing the old, inept Polonius, the young prince hides the dead body somewhere inside the Elsinore palace. This is a great nuisance to King Claudius, who dispatches his two henchmen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to retrieve the body of the late Lord Chamberlain. Upon being asked where the body was, prince Hamlet delivers a rather cryptic line: “The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body” (*Hamlet*, 4.2.26–27). It is a very well known line, but it is hard to say what exactly to make of it. It seems to be a reference to King Claudius himself more than it is a reference to Polonius. It seems to hint at the doctrine of King’s two bodies, the political theological notion of the separation of the King’s mortal natural body and the King’s immortal political body. Hamlet clearly doesn’t think much of Claudius as he continues: “The King is a thing [...] of nothing” (*Hamlet*, 4.2.27–29).

While there are many interpretations of these words readily available, we shall turn to one in particular, to Jacques Lacan’s, because it will lead us to a series of comic examples whose functioning is at the core of this essay. In *Seminar VI on Desire and its Interpretation*, Lacan quotes Hamlet’s words and presents a perhaps surprisingly simple explanation: “I would ask you simply to replace the word king by the word phallus in order to see that it precisely is what is in question, namely that the body is engaged in this affair of the phallus, and how, but that on the contrary, the phallus, itself, is not engaged in anything, and that it always slips between your fingers” (Lacan 2002, p. 247). To replace the word king with the word phallus may strike one as

a strange suggestion, but in Lacan's theory this makes sense, because phallus is the concept of the convergence of sexuality and (political) power. Hamlet's remark, splitting the King's body in two, becomes in Lacan's reading a general theoretical insight into the nature of human being. The point is not that Claudius is a failed king because he cannot personally measure up to the great political role he has taken on, but that the human body as such is incommensurable with the symbolic or social-political order.

Richard C. McCoy quotes Hamlet's words and writes that with Claudius on the throne, "a conjunction of the king's two bodies is impossible" (McCoy 2003, p. 196). While McCoy is perfectly correct in detecting the reference to political theology, he seems to be assuming that a harmonious conjunction of the two bodies in one person is even possible outside of the theological speculations about the dual nature of Christ. The point is rather that such a union is never (humanly) possible and that the relationship between the body and the phallus is always unilateral. The Lacanian concept of phallus is perhaps nothing but the concept of this fundamental incommensurability, inasmuch as it is through this very function that a subject of the symbolic order is produced. This operation comes, however, at the price of something being irretrievably lost, as if cut off from the body in the instance of entering the symbolic realm, the realm of language.

"One Thing to my Purpose Nothing"

Let us turn now to Hamlet's second phrase, to the idea that "the King is a thing of nothing." In general terms, Hamlet is clearly dismissive of Claudius, but one is tempted to at least try to say a bit more about what exactly he is comparing him to. What could "a thing of nothing" be? Is it simply a clever, witty way of saying that the king is nothing but dust to him, that the king is just like dirt under his nails, simply to be removed "with a bare bodkin" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.76)? Since this is Shakespeare, the reference could

very well involve a sexual allusion; while “nothing” alone usually indicates the female organ, it seems perfectly plausible to assume that “a thing of nothing” refers to the male part.¹ The king is a phallus. Lacan has no doubt about it, and it was this formulation that prompted him to suggest the substitution of words in the first place.

In order to support his interpretation, Lacan quotes from Shakespeare’s sonnet 20 where almost the exact same phrase is deployed in a clear allusion to the male sexual organ: “one thing to my purpose nothing.” Bearing in mind the juridical doctrine of king’s two bodies, as well as the Lacanian concept of the phallus, let us now analyze this beautiful sonnet.

A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;
A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change, as is false women’s fashion;
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created;
Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing:
But since she pricked thee out for women’s pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love’s use their treasure.

The sonnet can be read as an obvious example of “phallocentrism,” even as a hymn to the penis. We can find misogynist tendencies in it, especially in comparing the object to “false women” and praising his eyes as “less false in rolling.”² If we follow the

¹ In his analysis of *Romeo and Juliette*, Stanley Wells writes: “We may recall that ‘nothing’ could be used of both the male and the female sexual organs” (Wells 2010, p. 155).

² This particular sonnet might even be the worst case of this: “This is perhaps the most explicit expression of generalized misogyny in the sonnets” (Edmondson and Wells 2004, p. 74).

interpretation that sonnets are autobiographical, we can understand it even as a pessimistic, bitter turn of a homosexual conformist who renounces the consummation of his love. These conformist readings are based on a rather simple difference between the spiritual love and the physical love and understand the last verse—*mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure*—as a compromise with which the lyrical subject gives up the carnality of the fair youth because it is supposedly tailored to women (“for women’s pleasure”) and is satisfied with his spiritual ideal form of love. This split is implied in the classical Platonic ideal as exemplified in the *Symposium*: the philosophical love of ideas *versus* the procreative love of the bodies.

Shakespeare’s sonnets can be interpreted as embracing the phallogocentric dichotomy between male/spiritual love and female/bodily love, a reading that was perhaps prevalent until the 20th century.³ In the respective couplets, the sonnets that immediately precede the one in question (*Shall I compare thee to a summer’s*

³ Edmondson and Wells (2004, p. 75) write that “the poem ends by imploring the young man still to endow the poet with his love even though the existence of the beloved’s penis, designed to give sexual pleasure to women, means that the physical expression (‘use’) of that love can only enrich women. Or does it? At least since the 1960s reasons have been brought forward to argue that this sonnet does not necessarily deny the possibility of a sexual relationship.” – This is of course mostly because the thought that the National Poet of Great Britain could have praised homosexual bond (“sodomy,” which was a criminal offence) or even practiced it himself, was completely unacceptable to editors and publishers of the 19th century, but also to the romanticists like Coleridge. Bruce R. Smith distinguishes several periods of reception of the sonnets; sonnets 1–126, generally dedicated to a man, and especially sonnets 20 and 106, were historically, from 17th century onward, dealt with in very different ways. Some editors added captions that “heterosexualized” the narrative and praised “friendship”; others deemed the sonnets (morally) worthless. But what is especially worth of note, as Smith points out, is that the various anthologies and selections in which Shakespeare’s sonnets appear, even today (!), tend to produce a selection which excludes the “problematic” black lady sonnets, as well as those which are clearly dedicated to a man. Contrary to Edmondson and Wells, Smith sees the turning point for reception of the sonnets in Oscar Wilde—in the trial of 1895 and in the story “The portrait of Mr. W. H.” (Smith 2003, pp. 20–1).

day and *Devouring Time*) make a very clear point that the lyrical subject understands his poetry in the specifically Platonic sense of procuring eternity of the ideal order. “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see / So long lives this [the sonnets, poetry] and this gives life to thee.” (*Sonnets*, 18.13–14) And: “Yet do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong, / My love shall in my verse ever live young.” (*Sonnets*, 19.13–14) Furthermore, it is precisely young man’s procreation by means of marriage and “breeding” (*Sonnets*, 12.14) which figures as the counterpoint to poet’s conceptual poetic love. One of the early couplets spells this out for us: “But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice, –in it and in my rime” (*Sonnets*, 17.13–14). All of this reminds us of the teachings confided to young Socrates by the priestess Diotima, who says that love is “giving birth in the beautiful, in respect of body and of soul” (Plato 2008, 206b), because “procreation is a kind of everlastingness and immortality for the mortal creature” (Plato 2008, 206d). Reminding us that the etymology of the word poetry is “creation,” Diotima points out that all lovers are poets:

But [there are] those whose pregnancy is of the soul – those who are pregnant in their souls even more than in their bodies, with the kind of offspring which it is fitting for the soul to conceive and bear. What offspring are these? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, of which the poets are all procreators. (Plato 2008, 208d–209a)

All of this proves convincingly that Shakespeare, like so many other sonneteers and poets, purposefully and to great success drew from the Platonic doctrine of love. In fact, one of the formulations which the lyricist uses in insisting that the beautiful youth should marry and reproduce is the idea that nature carved him “for her seal, and meant thereby / Thou shouldst print more” (*Sonnets*, 11.13–14). The metaphor of the seal and its prints is not a bad example for Plato’s theory of ideas and copies in general; whether it was used by Shakespeare as a conscious reference is less important than the overall impression of the Platonic framework at play in the sonnets.

Although it is safe to assume that *Symposium* played a great role in *inspiring* Shakespeare, we should not conclude that the poet was in any way *confined* to the framework of the Platonic concept of love and to the split of the youth into the physical body and the spiritual “body.” In other words, just as it is clear that Shakespeare is borrowing the form of the sonnet while also playing with it and even criticizing some of its clichés, it should also be clear that the poet is using the material from the *Symposium* while reworking it in accordance with his own design. While we clearly see the references to the split between the body and the soul, between the procreational and the spiritual love, we can still detect and analyze the sexual nature of love that the lyrical subject addresses to the man.

That being said, is it not *also* in compliance with the *Symposium* that homosexual love, specifically that between two men, enjoys a somewhat elevated status, at least when compared to procreational love? Is it not true that the same-sex love is in itself already an example of what Diotima is teaching young Socrates, namely an example of love which does not seek immortality merely in reproduction, but already hints at the more sophisticated love, oriented toward virtue, truth, beauty? In his speech, Aristophanes argues that homosexual men are manlier than others, because they are seeking men out of “confidence, courage and manliness, and they embrace that which is like themselves,” adding that such men do not seek to get married, but engage in politics, in the field where they prove their virtue (Plato 2008, 192a). Seeking love in a partner of the same sex seems to imply a predisposition for political matters. Does this suggest that the split between giving birth in body and giving birth in soul presupposes a split between procreational and recreational sexuality? We shall come back to this at a later point.

Our main question regarding the sonnet remains unanswered: can we say with any certainty that the love for the fair youth in Shakespeare’s sonnets is sexual as well as poetical? It all comes down to this: how are we to understand the split, suggested by the

final verse, between “thy love” and “thy love’s use”? I argue that we should not interpret it in Platonic terms as a split between the youth’s poetical body and his natural body. Such a reading relies on a series of unjustified tacit assumptions: Firstly, we must accept that, for the poet, the only “natural” or “possible” physical love is that between a man and a woman; secondly, we have to assume that the sonnet is based on a dogmatic differentiation between the spiritual and the physical side of human beings; and, thirdly, that this differentiation leads to sexual difference, with physicality pertaining to the female and spirituality to the male sex.

The first assumption can be refuted by recalling, for instance, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in which Shakespeare exhibits no qualms about dramatizing Oberon’s jealousy aroused by his wife Titania who refuses to share with him her beautiful attendant, not to even mention Titania’s sexual scene with a donkey (more precisely, with a simpleton that goes by the name of Bottom who carries a donkey’s head on his shoulders). Or, take, for example, *Twelfth Night*, in which Viola who is in love with Duke Orsino disguises herself as a man to serve Orsino as his page and thus win his affection and love, as well as to exact from him a marriage proposal. Lacan considered this to be a rather “peculiar way to promote oneself as a girl” (Lacan 2002, p. 208). Shakespeare’s body of work is full of examples of sexuality without scruples, which makes the assumption that a sexual encounter between two males is something impossible or unnatural quite risky. Shakespeare’s literary love practices are more Boccaccian than Socratic, and it should be added that it is entirely unjustified to expect his literature to conform to today’s primitive views about what is “natural.”

But let us turn to sonnet 20 and its explicit references to nature, which we find in some other sonnets as well. Judging solely from 20.1, “A woman’s face with nature’s own hand painted,” we might think that nature is an instance ensuring that its object is a natural beauty (where natural means immediate, immaculate, unperverted, in contrast to the artificiality of women’s facial

painting).⁴ But there is a shift in the sonnet. 20.10 makes it quite clear that “nature fell a-doting”: it is the nature itself that overdid it by going a step too far; nature exaggerated and endowed our perfect object with one bit too much, one unfortunate addition. As understood in the sonnet, nature seems to be the very agent of the denaturalization of the object, that is to say, the denaturalization from a self-sufficient immediacy into a sexual object.

To refute the remaining two assumptions, that is, the assumption that it is even possible to differentiate between the spiritual and the physical love in the sonnet and inscribe the sexual difference in this split, we only need to read the sonnet itself. In 20.2, the sonnet talks about someone who as a “master mistress” escapes such distinctions (which is reminiscent of the boy-girl Viola from *Twelfth Night*). The young man not only looks like a woman (he has a woman’s face), but is also femininely gentle on the inside (he has a woman’s gentle heart), without one side fighting with the other. And is it really possible to unequivocally attribute the spiritual love to the male sex and the physical love to the female sex? If anything, the sonnet suggests precisely the opposite relation, since the young man attracts the man’s gaze (“which steals men’s eyes”) and the woman’s soul (“women’s souls amazeth”). If sexual difference is indeed inscribed in this distinction, then the physical-empirical or passionate level is ascribed to men, while the spiritual level to women: it is precisely for men that the young man is a physical object, merely a feast for the eyes, while for women he is an object of spiritual love. It seems that the oversimplified distinctions between male and female sexual pleasure, between the natural and the acceptable, between the physical and the spiritual must therefore be attributed to the excessive simplicity of the readers rather than to the sonnet itself.

⁴ Elisabeth D. Harvey writes: “Where women are associated with cosmetic ‘painting’ and the vicissitudes of fashion, the young man is ‘with nature’s own hand painted’” (Harvey 2007, p. 323). She adds, however, that “the bounds that differentiate the sexes are far from stable” and points out that this sonnet is one of only two that use feminine rhymes exclusively, as if subverting in form the primacy of the masculine order.

The sonnet reaches an important dramatic point when the object turns out not to be a woman after all; this information leads to the resolution in the final couplet. But this surprise, which is only a rhetorical surprise, should not be interpreted as producing a resignation on the part of the lyrical subject. Quite to the contrary, it only renders explicit the fact that the subject's admiration is sexual in nature; his love for the object is clearly sexual, for otherwise that little thing would not have been an issue at all. We could hardly say that this complication comes as a surprise; the reader perhaps expects it from the very beginning, recalling the trope from Shakespeare's other sonnets. In fact, there is a phrase in 20.3 that seems to announce this already in advance, as it describes the man as "not acquainted," which is an allusion to the lack of female genitalia (*quaint*).

But what can be said of the resolution in the final couplet, i.e. in the "addition" to the sonnet, often printed with an indent? Does the differentiation between "thy love," on the one hand, and "thy love's use," on the other hand, really imply a Platonic difference between the spirit and the body or at least between spiritual love and a sexual act? I suggest we understand it as an almost Boccaccian resolution, which could be formulated as follows: "I will love you and you will love them," or: "then be a woman for me and a man for them." James M. Bromley makes the case for such a reading in no uncertain terms: "Uninterested in the front side of the addressee's body, the speaker makes use of other available indentations to create pleasure and to give his love to the addressee" (Bromley 2012, p. 69).

In Shakespeare's oeuvre, such a formula of resolution is certainly not unthinkable. Recall the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which two young men, Lysander and Demetrius, fall in love with the beautiful Hermia. They are equals in all respects: in riches, in noble birth and in fair appearance, but Hermia loves Lysander. They function as each other's doubles so that we could even say that the difference between them exists purely on the level of the signifier: the only thing that separates them is that one

is called Lysander and the other Demetrius. The situation is quite different from that of Juliette who believed that names are empty words and that she would love Romeo even if his name were not Romeo.⁵ With the character of Hermia, Shakespeare gives us, perhaps, an example of love for the signifier as such.

Despite this, her father is so favorably disposed towards Demetrius that he is willing to kill his daughter or send her to a convent if she does not do his bidding. This angers Lysander so much that he tells his rival: “You have her father’s love, Demetrius: Let me have Hermia’s; do you marry him” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1.1.93–94). Or, to paraphrase: mine be her love, and you can be her father’s treasure. Of course, this is a line from a light-hearted play and Lysander’s comment is both meant and received as a quip and not as a serious suggestion. But the point is this: could we not read the conclusion of the sonnet as a kind of a quip, as a remark that is indeed witty but nevertheless penetrates the symbolic bond and cuts into the flesh of the matrix in which

⁵ I refer, of course, to these famous lines: “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet; / So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call’d, / Retain that dear perfection which he owes / Without that title.” (*Romeo and Juliette*, 2.2.43–47) While Juliette seems to—*sancta simplicitas*—clearly distinguish between the thing and its name, the Lacanian point is that the name is also a thing, a special kind of thing, “a thing of nothing.” The name is not simply detached from the body; the point is that the name is re-attachable to the body. And specifically, when talking about “that dear perfection which he [Romeo] owes,” i.e. about his essence, his sweet smell, about the thing that pricks him out for her pleasure, it is safe to assume that the thing she has in mind is nothing if not its name. Juliette is the direct opposite of the old sonneteers, and of the old troubadours, who would often love their object specifically or even exclusively for its name, or for the sound of its name, while being quite indifferent to the fact that they never met their object. But Juliette’s words are in contrast even to the everyday experience of people in love, who are able to write the name of their beloved on a piece of paper a thousand times, with an almost religious fervor, or whisper their lover’s name in secret places as if performing some kind of magical ritual. For a more detailed critique of Juliette’s theory of the signifier I must refer the reader to Jure Simoniti’s inspiring analysis (Simoniti 2010).

the possible and impossible couples are arranged? Twelve verses of the sonnet stumble against the impossibility of the situation in which a young man is the perfect object of (male) adoration, the only problem being that he has a piece of perfection too many. I claim that, in the last two verses, this situation is resolved with a punch line that satisfies both sides of the sexual equation. It is only if we understand the young man's role in this way that we can understand it as the unity of man and woman, i.e. as the "master mistress." The latter is not (merely) someone that carries determinations of both sexes, but (also) someone who makes love with both sexes (that loves both and is loved by both). The love that the sonnet evokes is thus not only spiritual, but also physical, while the distinction in the couplet is perhaps a practical matter of an erotic arrangement of bodies, and not an intrusive introduction of a split between the spiritual and the physical.

Nobody's Perfect

In one of the arguably best films of all times, Billy Wilder's comedy *Some Like it Hot* (1959), we follow a story of two musicians on the run from the mafia who dress up as women and join an all-female band on its way to Florida—the place with "more millionaires than you can shake a stick at." Jerry, who assumes the artistic name of Daphne, actually, and against his own will, becomes engaged with one of Florida's millionaires. In the final scene of the film, as they are eloping on the millionaire's speedboat, Jerry, still dressed as Daphne, decides to lay his cards on the table. He cautiously tries to tell the millionaire that marriage may not be the best idea: he is not a natural blond, he smokes, he doesn't have a wedding dress, they will not be able to have children and so on. The millionaire has a response ready for all these reservations; he doesn't care, they will use his mother's dress, they can adopt children etc. Finally, Jerry takes off his wig and says that he is a man, upon which the millionaire utters the immortal punch line of the film: "Well, nobody's perfect."

The story of Daphne and the millionaire is an excellent example of what we could call comic love. What appears as a recipe for disaster for the most part of the film is finally resolved as something entirely contingent. The reason I mention this is that the final gag of the film resembles the dramatic structure of Shakespeare's sonnet. The sonnet belongs to the genre of comic love precisely in that it remains loyal to its object and perceives the external obstacle of love—the object's manhood—not only as giving flight to love, but also as completely inessential when compared to the ethical infinity of love. The contingent way in which, in Shakespeare's love sonnet, the phallus is attached to the penis enables us to define it as an example of comic love. To be sure, Shakespeare's sonnets in general are incredibly witty, full of humor, puns, clever ambiguities and other characteristics that bring them close to comic genres. However, it does not suffice to say that. I would like to propose a more daring theoretical move and suggest that perhaps the resolution of the sonnet—at least sonnet 20, though a similar claim could be made of many of them—should be understood as the punch line of a joke.

The formula of love in sonnet 20 is actually very traditional. Recall what Denis de Rougemont identifies in the European tradition of love as passion: love can emerge only as something forbidden, illegal, only as something that explicitly and radically opposes the official institution of marriage (Rougemont 1983). In a traditional plot the beloved object turns out to be already married or engaged. In sonnet 20, Shakespeare merely provides us with a variation of this classical romantic predicament: the beloved object turns out to be a man. Imagine, if you will, a variation in which the sonnet does not sing praises to someone who is a man, but to someone who is married, and ends along these lines: "my darling, since they married you off with someone else, well, have children with him, and we will love each other spiritually." What do we really get when accepting such an interpretation? We get a Tristan who doesn't risk everything (including his name, his

fortune and his life) for his Iseult, but rather brings her to King Mark's wedding bed and talks to her about the almighty God afterwards. We get a Werther who does not choose (his own) death so as to resolve in the only possible ethical way the unbearable love triangle, but rather marries the beloved object off and reduces her to a poetic object. We get a Socrates who does not drink the poison, but renounces his lifelong mission to search for Truth, boards the awaiting ship and becomes a respectable sophist on a remote island. I think that we can hardly imagine anything ethically shallower and poetically less satisfying; but it is above all clear that nobody in his or her right mind should ever consent to such a monstrous compromise. In such a resolution, everyone is humiliated: the beloved object, which obviously is undeserving of consummation and is not loved to the fullest; the official spouse can only receive physical gratification, while his or her soul is cheated, and is therefore doubly humiliated; and, last but not least, the lyrical subject himself, who degrades his love to an abstract idea and thereby reduces his own ethical demand to that which Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* named the "beautiful soul." If the sonnet's structure is not interpreted as a well-written comedy, which after all the troubles ends with a surplus of enjoyment, with a surplus of couples, and if we do not interpret the resolution of the sonnet in terms of what I propose to be the punch line of a joke, then we are not only denying the sonnet any poetic value, but also any ethical and philosophical value.⁶ The principal claim of the *Symposium*, namely that the

⁶ The idea that sonnets should be placed in an explicit reference to Shakespeare's dramatic works, and particularly to his early comedies, is not new: "It is in relatively early plays, especially the comedies believed to have been written around 1593 to 1595, along with the romantic tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, that we find the closest links with the Sonnets" (Edmondson and Wells 2004, p. 87; see also the entire chapter "The Sonnets as Theatre," pp. 82–104). Comedies often refer to sonnets as a form of wooing, and sonnets themselves use theatrical metaphors to enhance the poetic effect.

profession of philosophy is adequately explained as amorous business, already implies that the true philosopher will always be ready to die for his love, the Truth. The fate of Socrates the lover is thus sealed already in the *Symposium*. If we interpret the resolution of Shakespeare's sonnet 20 as giving up on the full commitment to the object of love, then I think we cannot really claim that we are interpreting it in accordance with the Platonic love of *Symposium*. The reason for this being that in the final analysis the so-called "Platonic love" does not imply the lessening of passion and a disinterested engagement, but on the contrary demands a full commitment of one's being to the object of love, that is, to the truth.

Nobody's Perfect, but Some Are Truly Far from It

Shakespeare's sonnet and Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* merely hint at the answer to the question of comic love: "Well, nobody's perfect." This phrase demands clarification or the introduction of a further distinction. By no means does it refer to the "wisdom" of everyday life according to which partners in love must learn how to forgive each other's small imperfections, occasional affairs and the like, since we all have our faults. The quoted phrase expresses precisely the opposite viewpoint: the trouble with love is not that as finite and imperfect beings we can never reach the high moral ideals of marriage, but that we are actually *all too perfect*. In this regard, it is essential that both Daphne and the object of the sonnet have something too much (and not too little), that they have an excess of perfection, as Shakespeare wrote, and that this piece of excess in the other must not be too hastily reduced to the literal meaning of the penis.

In connection with human imperfection, Freud refers to a Jewish joke in which a man in search of his future wife complains about the candidate suggested to him by the Schadchen, his marriage broker:

The *Schadchen* was defending the girl he had proposed against the young man's protests. "I don't care for the mother-in-law", said the latter. "She's a disagreeable, stupid person." – "But after all you're not marrying the mother-in-law. What you want is her daughter." – "Yes, but she's not young any longer, and she's not precisely a beauty." – "No matter. If she's neither young nor beautiful she'll be all the more faithful to you." – "And she hasn't much money." – "Who's talking about money? Are you marrying money then? After all it's a wife [eine Frau] that you want." – "But she's got a hunchback too." – "Well, what *do* you want? Isn't she to have a single fault?" (Freud 1981, p. 61)

There is no lack of imperfections: the future mother-in-law is horrible, the girl is neither young nor beautiful, she does not have much money, and on top of it, she has a hunchback too (*Buckel*). The logic of the joke corresponds precisely to the exchange of lines at the end of Wilder's film. As if Wilder cited Freud's (cited) joke in the script. After listing all the girl's imperfections, the young man finally arrives at the capital, unbridgeable one: the never-to-be bride has one physical bulge too many. Would I go too far in claiming that the hunchback in the joke is perhaps merely a metonymy of some other imperfection of the girl, of some other bulge, that is to say, of the imperfection of her not even being a woman? May I cautiously suggest that it is not accidental that the reproach about her bulge should appear at the precise point in the joke where the broker claims that he is not offering the young man money, but he will definitely get him a wife (*eine Frau*: a woman)? The spelled-out conclusion of the joke thus reads as follows: "After all it's a woman that you want." – "But she's not a woman at all. She's a man!" – "Well, what *do* you want? Isn't she to have a single fault?" This single fault is the same as the one in Wilder's film and in Shakespeare's sonnet. Wilder's version even somewhat improves the joke since it is now the bride herself that is complaining about her many defects, while the husband assumes the role of his own *Schadchen*, finally accepting that nobody's perfect.

Freud interprets the girl's hunchback as something absolutely unacceptable. According to him, the *Buckel* is "inexcusable": "Clearly the girl had a number of defects—several that might be overlooked and one that it was impossible to disregard; she was unmarriageable" (Freud 1981, p. 62). Therefore, it is all the more unusual that Freud discusses this joke merely within the framework of following the sophist logic, interpreting it in the same way as he does the joke about the broken kettle, failing to mention that the joke might also hinge on a deeper mechanism, where the hunchback is a metonymy of what might be regarded by the prospective husband as a truly unbridgeable obstacle: that the offered girl had an appendix to the body. Freud explains the joke as piling up defects that effectively add up to a terrible marriage proposal. He writes that the *Schadchen* "insisted on treating each defect in isolation and refused to add them up into a total" (Freud 1981, p. 62). To be sure, Freud's analysis is correct, and sufficient in analyzing the joke in the context of Freud's project; however, it doesn't really explain why the *Buckel* specifically functions as the final, unacceptable fault. Why not the lack of money? Why not her bad looks and her old age? Why not her mother? The accumulation of defects does not suffice to make her "inexcusable" or "unmarriageable," as Freud himself asserts. Clearly, the hunchback must indicate an allusion that questions her status as *Frau* as such. The accumulation is therefore not a simple matter of mathematical operation of addition, but rather a very precise dramatic build-up, albeit condensed in a form of a joke.

In pointing to the finale of *Some Like It Hot* and to the joke cited by Freud, I hope to have demonstrated that the bawdy sonnet 20 exhibits a structure that is no stranger to comedies and jokes. Of course, it is perfectly clear that my suggestion has the status of merely one of the possible readings of the sonnet, and makes no claim of being exhaustive. But since the general motif of love is especially abundantly present in Shakespeare's comedies, we may at the very least assume that there is a comic undertone

to this particular love sonnet, an undertone that allows us to discuss it in the context of comic love, rather than submitting it to the “spiritual love” which separates the human being’s eternal element from the mortal human body. Comedy as a genre generally rejects such a split. Comedy enables us to talk about a certain immortality pertaining to the order of the body itself: this is the very moment of the “minimal difference” that Alenka Zupančič points out as being characteristic of both comedy and love.⁷

* * *

Let us turn once more to the idea of “love’s use” from the last line of the sonnet. If we examine the use of the word “use” in other sonnets, it is clear that it denotes something sexual, however, it does not refer to the act itself and certainly not a sexual encounter.⁸ Its meaning is related to banks, profits and accountancy. The most revealing in this regard is sonnet 6, “Unthrifty loveliness,” which understands beauty as a loan given out by nature to be reproduced and multiplied. The youth is scolded for wasting his bounty: “Profitless usurer why dost thou use / So great a sum of sums, yet canst not live?” (*Sonnets*, 6.7–8). “Profitless usurer” is an interesting metaphor: it implies that, quite contrary to financial usury, in matters of beauty one cannot profit by keeping the sum for oneself; one has to invest it. The usurer is the worst kind of (mis)user of beauty; instead of reproducing his (or her?) own wealth—by having children, of course, but also by sharing

⁷ In her book on Nietzsche, Zupančič writes (2003, p. 175): “The other whom we love is neither of the two semblances (the banal and the sublime object); but neither can she be separated from them, since she is nothing other than what results from a successful (or ‘lucky’) montage of the two. In other words, what we are in love with is the *Other as this minimal difference of the same that itself takes the form of an object.*”

⁸ Recall that translating “love’s use” as a physical encounter is the understanding that even contemporary interpreters adhere to (Edmondson and Wells 2004, p. 75).

the pleasure of his beauty with others—he keeps it all for himself and thus enjoys no profit. “For having traffic with thyself alone,” the sonnet continues, quite clearly alluding to a form of sexual activity, “Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive” (*Sonnets*, 6.9–10).⁹ He is cheating himself out of a fortune by keeping his “sweet self” to himself instead of investing it in a woman. The complex metaphorical nest of use and usury indicates that the phrase “love’s use” doesn’t refer simply to intercourse as such; it refers to the gift or the product or the bounty that the youth should not usuriously keep for himself, but rather invest it (“plant it” in a woman) and thus multiply his beauty (by having children).

Therefore, the true split at work in the sonnet is neither the one between the body and the soul, between carnal pleasure and the so-called Platonic love, nor the one between masculine and feminine beauty. Rather, it is a split between the logic of procreation (giving birth in *both* of Diotima’s meanings of the term, i.e. in the sense of natural reproduction and in the sense of the generation of ideas) and the logic of sexuality (sexual enjoyment). In her stunning analysis, Alenka Zupančič demonstrates that the notion of this split can be found even at the heart of Plato’s doctrine of love as formulated in the *Symposium*. Recalling the fascinating myth that Aristophanes recounts to the selected crowd, the myth of the spherical beings with two pairs of legs, two pairs of arms and two faces, Zupančič points out that the story doesn’t end with Zeus deciding to punish the spherical humans by splitting them into two bodies (thus producing what resembles our contemporary physique) so that in life each half is determined to seek “the lost other half.” Zupančič brings to our attention “the second intervention” of Zeus. As it turns out, the spherical humans had their genitals placed on what becomes the backside of the halves. It is only with the second intervention that the genitals were cut off

⁹ Compare to 1.11, another reference (according to Edmondson and Wells 2004, p. 72) to profitless sexual practices: “Within thy own bud buriest thy content”.

to be reattached to the front of the body. Plato has Aristophanes proclaim: “[Zeus] did this in order that when couples encountered one another and embraced, if a man encountered a woman, he might impregnate her and the race might continue, and if a man encountered another man, at any rate they might achieve satisfaction from the union” (Plato 2008, 191c). Zupančič argues that this second split, which clearly enables sexual pleasure independent of the logic of reproduction, introduces a new element into the story, one that “does indeed seem to introduce a supplementary factor into the destiny of splitting, as well as into the perspective of complementarity and the desired fusion of two into One” (Zupančič 2007, p. 189).

This brings us back to the question of political theology and the idea of a union of the political and the natural body in the single person of the King. As was mentioned above, the Lacanian point is that such a union or harmonious fusion in one person is not humanly possible and that the concept of the phallus is one possible way of conceptualizing this impossibility. In fact, Kantorowicz notes that the juridical doctrine produced more than a few practical contradictions. Citing one of his major sources, Willy Maitland, who ridiculed the doctrine, Kantorowicz mentions an occasion on which King George III had to ask for permission to buy some land as a man and not as a king, “since rights not denied to any of His Majesty’s subjects were denied to him” (Kantorowicz 1957, p. 3). And when the civil war broke out between the Parliament and Charles I, the Parliament raised armies “in the name and by the authority of Charles I, King body politic, the armies which were to fight the same Charles I, king body natural” (Kantorowicz 1957, p. 21). Lacan can replace the word king with the word phallus precisely insofar as phallus is the paradoxical signifier of the split on the level of the One itself. The same point can be applied to the splits implied in Plato’s doctrine of love. Zupančič explicitly refers to the notion of love as a seeking of union with the other as our complementary half, but the

argument is just as valid in the context of the split between the body and the soul. The metaphysical (“Platonic”) split obscures the fact that there is a much deeper, much more radical and much more persistent split at work on the level of the One as such. That split is what is addressed with the concept of the phallus.

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