

Queer Appropriations: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Dickinson's Love Poems

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Abstract

While it is expected that nineteenth-century love poetry would engage with Shakespeare's Sonnets, considering their status and pervasive appeal at the time in Anglo-American culture, this paper puts forward the case for Emily Dickinson's specific borrowings from these poems. More specifically, within the context of their afterlife, it argues that the Sonnets provided the American poet with an authoritative and, at the same time, controversial resource for her construction of love. It examines Dickinson's use of a vocabulary of aristocratic and economic tropes, love triangles, imagery of light and darkness, physical beauty and erotic multiplicity, which she would have identified as Shakespearean. His unconventional sonnets, it will be suggested, offered Dickinson a means of validating the traditionally feminine position of powerlessness within the discourse of love, of representing female desire for a male figure, and of constructing poems that connote same-sex love. Like the Sonnets, Dickinson's love poems are queer: They unsettle repressive categories of gender and sexuality and make possible the signification of same-sex passion. This paper continues current discussion of the queer afterlives of both writers as an antidote to the intrusive and spurious biographical readings of their brief, repetitious, and figurative lyrics.

While scholars have long acknowledged the powerful influence of Shakespeare's writings on Emily Dickinson, they have only recently discussed her appropriation of a specifically Shakespearean vocabulary for the depiction of gender, sexuality, and eroticism (Bennett 1990b; Farr 1992; Hart 1990; Finnerty 1998; Comment 2001). This article considers Dickinson's appropriation of the language of Shakespeare's Sonnets, a language that encourages "alternative and competing constructions of gender" and is especially useful to readers, such as Dickinson, who seek to unsettle the normative limits of sexual desire (Bennett 1993, 95). Although Dickinson's edition of the Sonnets, now at the Houghton Library, Harvard suggests much use, this topic has been relatively unexplored by scholars (Finnerty 2006, 118-19; Richwell 1989, 22-31). Judith Farr notes the similarities between the Sonnets and Dickinson's love poems that address both a male figure associated with "courtesy, loyalty, physical appreciation" and an awe-inspiring

female who is "false, feline, and distant" (Farr 1990, 132, 182). For Farr, the Sonnets are one of Dickinson's models of the expressive lyric, a genre that offers "a personal encounter, a private moment publicized" (Jackson 2004, 10). Yet it seems more likely that Dickinson would have extended to Shakespeare her own disclaimer about the dangers of reading lyric poetry as personal expression: "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse – it does not mean – me – but a supposed person" (L268).¹ From Dickinson's many references to his plays, it seems that Shakespeare's importance to her lay in his powers of multiple identification rather than personal revelation. Like Robert Browning, a writer whose use of dramatic monologue and personae she admired and emulated, Dickinson probably felt that Shakespeare had not "unlocked his heart" in the Sonnets, and that "If [he had done] so, the less Shakespeare he!" (Browning 1996, 1317).

If for Browning and Dickinson the idea that the Sonnets were autobiographical lessened Shakespeare's genius, for other readers it caused the scandal that England's national poet was guilty of sodomy and adultery (De Grazia 1993, 37-49; Stallybrass 1993, 91-103). In Dickinson's edition of Shakespeare, the editor Charles Knight offers an essay on the Sonnets that chronicles the intrusive way these lyrics were being read as privacy made public, and also the concerted assertion by scholars that the Sonnets were highly stylized and conventionalized Renaissance lyrics in which the author's literal presence and personal expressivity were elaborate conceits (Knight 1853, 8:459-60, 479; see also Vendler 1988, 1-12; Rosemarin 1985, 20-37). Knight's essay suggests Dickinson's awareness of a historical alternative to the lyric's position in the post-Romantic period as the genre of "personified identification," and this offered a rationale for what Virginia Jackson regards as Dickinson's interrogation of the "cultural identification of personhood with writing" (Jackson 2004, 197). Other nineteenth-century critics questioned the validity of the sonnet sequence and argued that these so-called revelatory poems, for the most part, obscure the identity, gender, and sexuality of both speaker and addressee (Knight 1853, 8:476; Jameson 1829, 238-41; Hudson 1872, 24-26; Massey 1866, 173-84, 205-24, 228-31; Edmondson and Wells 2004, 30; Dubrow 1996, 291-305). The Sonnets were poems not of exemplary individual disclosure but "multiple eroticism," and, as a result, were probably all the more important for Dickinson's poems in which the gender of the speaker or addressee is treated as an interchangeable alternative (Henneberg 1995, 1-19; see F1396; F1566; F494).²

Of course, for Dickinson the significance of the Sonnets was the fact that they marked a break in a tradition of English love poetry in which a male lover speaks and a female beloved is silent. The Sonnets also offered an authoritative endorsement of the traditionally feminine position of powerlessness, passivity, and longing. Consequently, Dickinson's female contemporaries

recognized the special relationship that existed between women and the "feminine" Shakespeare of the Sonnets; for example, Mary Cowden Clarke noted that the "tenderness, patience, devotion, and constancy worthy of the gentlest womanhood are conspicuous in combination with a strength of passion and fervor of attachment belonging to manliest manhood" (Clarke 1887, 356). Accordingly, the Sonnets were models for Dickinson's unsettling of the naturalness of the male or female position within the lover's discourse (Barthes 1978, 13-15). Shakespeare's poet-speaker likens himself to a mother (S21),³ a tender nurse (S22), a widow (S97), and Philomela (S102); but he also presents himself as the slave (S57, 58) of a powerful male figure, who is his "Lord" (S26), "sovereign" (S57), and "master" (S106). At other times, the Sonnets feminize the young man, using a language traditionally associated with women (Stapleton 2004, 271-96). The speaker is a "deceived husband" (S93), the male beloved a "master-mistress" (S20) who is compared to Helen of Troy (S53), Eve (S93), and a Queen (S96).

While for conservative readers such features made the Sonnets troubling, for Dickinson they were a means of rethinking conventional categories that organize human desire and present gender disjunction. The male homoeroticism of these poems provided her with a language that authorized and ennobled same-sex passion (Edmondson and Wells 2004, 138-39, 148-53; Sinfield 1994, 20); and her susceptibility to such a language is likely, considering her passionate relationship with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, regardless of whether their homoerotic friendship was self-consciously lesbian or not (Faderman 1978, 197-225; Bennett 1990a, 150-80; Smith 1992, 23-30). In the poems to be discussed, Dickinson appropriates the Sonnets, their mercantile and aristocratic imagery, their gender ambiguity, and their concern with time, waste, aging, and beauty to destabilize and complicate categories of gender and sexuality and to question compulsory heterosexuality and the conventional relationship between identity and desire.

Jewel and Pearls

Many critics in Dickinson's day read the Sonnets as a record of an intimate relationship between a rich and handsome nobleman (believed to be the Earl of Southampton or the Earl of Pembroke) and a lowly and reliant poet; their homoeroticism was often explained as a petition to gain and keep the financial support and influence of a wealthy patron (Marotti 1990, 143-73; Kernan 1995). Yet in many of the Sonnets, the gender of the addressee and of the speaker are indeterminate, and what connects the poems is a concern with "metaphorical wealth, profit, worth, value, expense, 'store,' and 'content'" (Greene 1985, 231-32). Using the posture of the impoverished and dependent lover, a posture first employed by Sappho and of great influence on nineteenth-century women writers (see Prins 1999, 227; Bennett 2003, 175), Shakespeare created speakers who are rich while their

beloved is present, but in a state of poverty (emotional and actual destitution) when the beloved is absent. The Sonnets begin by addressing a beautiful figure, "rich in youth," who squanders his beautiful treasure (S15) and makes "famine where abundance lies" (S1). In other sonnets, the vulnerability of the poet-speaker is expressed through jewel-image clusters:

So am I as the rich, whose blessed key,
 Can bring him to his sweet up-locked treasure,
 The which he will not every hour survey,
 For blunting the fine point of seldom pleasure;
 Therefore are feasts so solemn and so rare,
 Since, seldom coming, in that long year set,
 Like stones of worth they thinly placed are,
 Or captain jewels in the carcanet.
 So is the time that keeps you as my chest,
 Or as the wardrobe which the robe doth hide,
 To make some special instant special-blessed
 By new unfolding his imprisoned pride.
 Blessed are you whose worthiness gives scope,
 Being had, to triumph; being lacked, to hope. (S52)

Here, the beloved is the male speaker's "treasure," "stones of worth," and "jewels," who when possessed, gives secret or imprisoned pride and when lost, a feeling of utter emptiness. In other sonnets, the beloved's tears are rich pearls that "ransom all ill deeds" (S34), and the beloved is "time's best jewel" (S65) and Nature's own store and wealth (S67), in comparison to whom all other "jewels" are mere trifles. Even the beloved's faults are graces: "As on the finger of a throned queen / The basest jewel will be well esteemed" (S96). The speaker's "only care" is that his jewel will be stolen in this "filching age," and he hoards the precious stone like a miser who enjoys his treasure sparingly (S48, 75).

Dickinson invokes this vocabulary of eroticized affluence in many poems. For example, in "Your Riches – taught me – Poverty" (F418), a female speaker was a millionaire until she encountered a beloved who teaches her "a different Wealth – / To miss it – beggars so –." This recalls the sonnets in which the beloved is a "sweet thief which sourly robs" (S35) and a "gentle thief" who "steals" "all [the poet's] poverty" (S40). Although this poem was sent to the poet's sister-in-law, as in many of Dickinson's love poems and in Shakespeare's Sonnets, the gender of the addressee is ambiguous; gender seems less important than what the figure represents — a wealth

beyond mines, gems, diadems, jewels, and monarchy. The beloved is the Pearl "That slipped my simple fingers through – / While just a Girl at school." Like Shakespeare's beloved, Dickinson's Jewel/Pearl alters all value systems and economies of worth and impoverishes the speaker eternally by its loss. Similarly, "I held a Jewel in my fingers" (F261), written a year later in 1861, presents the same situation; although here the genders of the speaker and of the addressee are unclear, the theme remains commemoration ("Amethyst remembrance") of the moment of loss. Whereas in the previous poem, simple fingers drop the jewel, here overly trusting, "honest" fingers allow it to be pilfered by a dishonest thief.

The most provocative version of this scenario occurs in "That Malay – took the Pearl," which presents the loss of a Pearl/Jewel from the perspective of a male aristocratic speaker; this poem also brings together many of the motifs present in the Sonnets: the erotic triangle, the Earl figure (Southampton or Pembroke), and the imagery of light and darkness:

That Malay – took the Pearl –
 Not – I – the Earl –
 I – feared the Sea – too much
 Unsanctified – to touch –

Praying that I might be
 Worthy – the Destiny –
 The Swarthy fellow swam –
 And bore my Jewel -- Home –

Home to the Hut! What lot
 Had I – the Jewel – got –
 Borne on a Dusky Breast –
 I had not deemed a Vest
 Of Amber – fit –

The Negro never knew
 I – wooed it – too –
 To gain, or be undone –
 Alike to Him – One – (F451)

As in Dickinson's other Jewel poems, the anxiety of loss is examined in its aftermath (Porter 1981, 9-24). Her Earl is comparable to Shakespeare's sonnet speaker in two key ways: Both are unable

to prevent the loss of that which is most precious to them, and both feel unworthy and inadequate. The sonnet speaker declares, "O how thy worth with manners may I sing, / When thou art all the better part of me" (S39). In the Sonnets, this feeling of unworthiness is emphasized because there are poetic and sexual rivals; the sonnet speaker calls himself "a worthless boat" and the rival poet a "tall building, and of goodly pride" (S80). The Pearl is the "prey of every vulgar thief" (S48), who would steal it away, but not appreciate its value. Dickinson not only appropriates from Shakespeare this central imagery of theft and competition, but her Malay also evokes the sonnet speaker's main rival, "a woman colored ill" (S144) — "black save in thy deeds" (S131), "black as hell, as dark as night" (S147) — who tempts the "man right fair" away (S144). This suggests that Dickinson is not using a "heterosexual discourse for the expression of lesbian love" (Smith 1992, 116), but rather a homoerotic one. Paula Bennett argues that nineteenth-century women writers used classical material with homosexual import to "negotiate a same-sex relationship" and treated the beautiful youth found in such material as if he were a woman (Bennett 2003, 165). Here Dickinson's Pearl on the Malay's sooty bosom is equivalent to Shakespeare's Pearl, which is like the "sea's rich gems" (S21) and which, "like a jewel hung in ghastly night / Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new" (S27). Just as the Malay can take the Pearl, the sexual allure of Shakespeare's Dark Lady can effortlessly woo the beloved from the speaker's side:

For still temptation follows where thou art.
Gentle thou art, and therefore to be won;
Beauteous thou art, therefore to be assailed;
And when a woman woos, what woman's son
Will sourly leave her till she have prevailed? (S41)

Despite the change of sex, Dickinson's Malay and her Pearl become equivalent to Shakespeare's Dark Lady and Pearl/Jewel.

In addition, same-sex passion in Shakespeare's Sonnets is presented as the merging of the identities of the poet-speaker and the young man in and through the body of the woman. For example, the poet speaker is not jealous of the relationship between the young man and the Dark Lady because "here's the joy, my friend and I are one: / Sweet flattery! Then she loves but me alone" (S42). This level of identification within the Sonnets is mirrored in the final lines of Dickinson's poem: "To gain, or be undone – / Alike to Him – One –." Evoking the Sonnets, the final lines connect the Earl with the sexual and sexualized Malay, affirming, and also complicating, the cultural correlation between hypersexuality and darker or "Southern peoples" (Bennett 2003,

165). As in the Sonnets, a desire for the same object unites the rivals beyond notions of difference, whether of class, gender, sexuality, or race.

This poem has been read as one in which Dickinson uses a male persona, the Earl, to express the anguish of watching a less worthy rival steal one's idol (Patterson 1979, 1-29; Pollak 1984, 156). What is visible here, as in other Dickinson poems, is the invisibility of lesbian love and the need for a refraction of same-sex desire through identification that crosses boundaries of sex (Sedgwick 1994, 175; Patterson 1979, 16, 88-89). The Malay represents the male rival who can with natural ease take, rather than merely covet and idealize, the Pearl: heterosexuality and male physical superiority are victorious over a feminized aristocratic masculinity, associated in the nineteenth century with deviant sexuality (Sedgwick 1985, 216-17). Here, Dickinson makes her poet-lover of higher rank than Shakespeare's is, perhaps to reflect emerging stereotypes of male homosexuality, and uses these to figure female same-sex passion. Yet Dickinson's inactive and weak Earl might also be read as representing a female figure, suggesting that Dickinson is not using a male persona or identifying with — or performing — masculinity, but rather playing with gender itself (Finnerty 1998). What is most interesting about Dickinson's use of gendered titles or names is that it does not represent a gendered or sexual identity, but is "the site of a certain crossing, a transfer of gender," staging possible "exchange[s] of gender identifications that the substantiating of gender and sexuality conceal" (Butler 1993, 144-45). The fear, failure, and introspection of the Earl might suggest passivity, reticence, and a socially-constructed reserve associated with Victorian ideals of femininity; thus, the Earl might connote gender and sex rather than sexuality. The suggestion that Dickinson's Earl is a woman is supported by another poem, "No Matter – now – Sweet – but when I am Earl" (F734); here the speaker imagines a future time when she, a powerless girl, will transform into a magnificent Earl with belts, buckles, crests, and ermine robes. Reading these two poems together, Dickinson's Earl complicates the discourse of love and the traditional erotic triangle by making impossible the identification of the sex/gender and sexuality of their protagonists.

If Dickinson's Earl connotes a desiring woman whose object of desire is proscribed, it is easy to read the poem as a coded articulation of same-sex passion; however, in order to read the female Earl as heterosexual we would need to view the Pearl as male, a conceptual move corroborated by the Sonnets. But if the Pearl is male and the Earl female, the poem is about the speaker watching two men together: The Malay takes the Pearl from the "unsanctified" sea, which the Earl fears, and brings it to his hut. The sea imagery and the activity of swimming/driving in the poem have homoerotic connotations and are used in other nineteenth-century poetry (Bennett 2003, 170-73). For example, the twenty-ninth bather in Whitman's "Song of Myself" becomes aroused as she spies on nude male bathers; similarly, Dickinson's female voyeur watches an equivalent

homoerotic scene between the Malay and (male) Pearl. In this poem, Dickinson appropriates the central scene and imagery of Shakespeare's Sonnets, maintaining their fluid and protean eroticism, their validation of gender-blurring figures such as a female Earl and male Pearl, and the permission they grant her to represent (male and female) same-sex passion. Using Shakespeare, Dickinson expands the possibilities of identification, creating triangles of desire that are not, despite the use of gender pronouns and titles, anchored to sex.

Conferring of Titles

Another theme from the Sonnets that Dickinson uses is that of a dependent and inferior lover who must flatter, praise, and love a powerful, aristocratic beloved (Scott 2004, 316; Bennett 2003, 177). Such a submissive and masochistic identification runs throughout her writing, in which speakers frequently address with love, fidelity, and meekness various distant, aloof, and often careless "Master" figures (Griffith 1964, 166-69; St. Armand, 1984, 39-41, 137-51). Yet as in the poems already discussed, Dickinson may have added "masculine pronouns, or 'bearded' pronouns," "an occasional 'sir,' 'signor,' or 'master'" to her declarations of love, thus disguising "affirmations of love for a woman" (Patterson 1951, 8). This would mean that some of Dickinson's heterosexual love poems use the homoerotic sonnets to queer normative sexuality. Dickinson evokes the sonnet speaker and the idea that a lover's unquestioning compliance to and devotion for an aristocratic beloved confers titled status. In Sonnet 91, the speaker declares that

Thy love is better than high birth to me
 Richer than wealth, prouder than garments' cost,
 Of more delight than hawks or horses be;
 And having thee, of all men's pride I boast –
 Wretched in this alone, that thou mayst take
 All this away and me most wretched make. (S91)

In another sonnet, the poet-speaker is "crowned with" the beloved and "drink[s] up the monarch's plague, this flattery" (S114); love allows the speaker to be "engrafted to [the beloved's] store," to transcend physical and social stigma, to share in the beloved's "abundance," and "by a part of all thy glory live" (S37). In yet another Shakespeare sonnet, the speaker notes:

Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
 Like to the lark at break of day arising,
 From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate;
 For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings

That then I scorn to change my state with kings. (S29)

Similarly, Dickinson's speakers become unadorned queens (F280, 353, 347, 575) or aristocratic figures (F194) on whom love confers nobility (Crumbley 1997, 125-38). Yet Dickinson's poems alter the central fear of Shakespeare's poet-speaker, that this status is dependent on his beloved's favors: "Wretched in this alone, that thou mayst take / All this away and me most wretched make" (S91); "To leave poor me, thou hast the strength of laws, / Since why to love, I can allege no cause" (S49). In Shakespeare, the beloved's absence and distance cause the speaker to experience destitution and a range of negative emotions, including frustration, neglect, resentment, fear, and anger (S33-35, 40-42, 57-58, 67, 69); in Dickinson, by contrast, although such emotions are expressed, the loss of love does not imply a loss of rank.

In "The Sun – *just* touched the Morning" (F246), written in 1862, for instance, a male sun touches a female "Morning" with the hope of a life of spring:

The Sun – *just* touched the Morning –
 The *Morning* – Happy thing –
 Supposed that He had come to *dwell* –
 And Life would all be *Spring*!

She felt herself *supremer* –
 A Raised – *Ethereal* Thing!
 Henceforth – for Her – *What* Holiday!
 Meanwhile – Her wheeling King –
 Trailed – slow – along the Orchards –
 His *haughty* – spangled Hems –
 Leaving a *new necessity*!
 The *want* of *Diadems*!

The Morning – fluttered – staggered –
 Felt feebly – for Her Crown –
 Her unanointed forehead –
 Henceforth – Her only One!

The male "Sun" in Dickinson's text is comparable to the morning's "Sovereign's eye," which touches meadows and streams, in Shakespeare's "Full many a glorious morning have I seen" (S33):

Full many a glorious morning have I seen

Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
 Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
 Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy;
 Anon permit the basest clouds to ride
 With ugly rack on his celestial face,
 And from the forlorn world his visage hide,
 Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace:
 Even so my sun one early morn did shine
 With all triumphant splendour on my brow;
 But out, alack! he was but one hour mine;
 The region cloud hath mask'd him from me now.
 Yet him for this my love no whit disdaineth;
 Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth.

The male figure in each of these poems (the sun in Dickinson's and morning in Shakespeare's) touch and alter a grateful and unworthy beloved. Both depict an erotic encounter: In Shakespeare's poem, the "sovereign eye" kisses the landscape and fills the speaker with bliss; a similar ecstasy is experienced by the speaker in Dickinson's poem when the sun rises to make her "*supremer / A Raised – Ethereal Thing*." Yet this joy is short lived because the "haughty" male lovers in each poem regard the beloved as equivalent to the "basest clouds" that must ultimately be left behind, "And from the forlorn world his visage hide, / Stealing unseen to west." Like Dickinson's speaker, the sonnet speaker can only recall when "one early morn did shine / With all triumphant splendour on my brow; / But out, alack, he was but one hour mine." In Dickinson, the nobility conferred is also momentary: morning's "holiday" of "Diadem" ends when "Her wheeling King – / Trailed – slow – along the Orchards" and disappears. In Shakespeare, the "triumphant splendour" of aristocratic status is taken away, for Shakespeare's morning is a "sun of the world" that, like the sun, stains the poet-speaker, reducing his value and worth. Here there is a sense of disappointment and betrayal at the injury and disgrace associated with the encounter ("Suns of the world may stain when heaven's sun staineth") not present in Dickinson's poem. In both poems, there is conflict between the "desire to praise and the fear that the idol has feet of clay" (Jackson 2002, 32); however, Dickinson's speaker suggests that the sun's abandonment leaves "*a new necessity! / The want of Diadems!*" Her crownless and unanointed head becomes an alternative "crown," opening up the sexual possibility and independence that are forestalled by the sun's presence (Henneberg 1996, 4-6). There is a

sense in which the loss of the power-giving sun allows for alternative erotic configurations, what Dickinson describes in another poem as "Night's possibility" (F161).

In a poem from the same year, Dickinson presents another speaker, who like the sonnet speaker, is ever faithful to an absent lover; however, this is not acknowledged or appreciated by her lover (F267). Again, a crown becomes the symbol of the lover's absence rather than his presence: Having been covertly raised in status by love, the speaker wears a crown of "Thorns" by day and only puts on after sunset her "Diadem." The poem begins by suggesting that what this speaker has endured is equivalent to a violent sex change:

Rearrange a "Wife's" Affection!
 When they dislocate my Brain!
 Amputate my freckled Bosom!
 Make me bearded like a man!

Blush, my spirit, in thy Fastness –
 Blush, my unacknowledged clay –
 Seven years of troth have taught thee
 More than Wifehood ever may!

Love that never leaped its socket –
 Trust entrenched in narrow pain –
 Constancy thro' fire – awarded –
 Anguish – bare of anodyne!
 Burden – borne so far triumphant –
 None suspect me of the crown,
 For I wear the "Thorns" till Sunset –
 Then – my Diadem put on.

Big my Secret but it's bandaged –
 It will never get away
 Till the Day its Weary Keeper
 Leads it through the Grave to thee.

This reversal of sex is a visible sign of the speaker's faithfulness, representing all the pain she has suffered, her "Constancy thro' fire"; in addition, she describes her secret love as big and "bandaged," only to be revealed beyond the grave. Dickinson repudiates and, at the same time, impersonates

the role of the conventional woman (Runzo 1996, 350); heterosexual love — albeit, in this case, a proscribed love — turns the woman into something unnatural, freakish, and unrecognizable: She is queer in terms of sex and gender. Love, trust, and fidelity cause her pain, and her endured burden is symbolized as a horrific mutilation. This counters the idea presented in the Sonnets that men are more constant in love and women more changeable. One of the most famous presentations of this notion occurs in the notorious Sonnet 20, a poem which also presents a change of sex, although through a natural process, when Nature doting on "a woman's face" adds to it a male body:

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 woman'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 prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
 Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure. (S20)

Shakespeare's man has "a woman's gentle heart, but [is] not acquainted / With shifting change, as is false woman's fashion"; Dickinson subverts this idea by creating a female speaker who represents her constancy as the violent transformation of a woman's body into a man's. She is made unwomanly in her attempt to keep the secret of their love. Dickinson playfully suggests that there might be another secret behind her bandages: Perhaps this bearded amputee has also been, like Shakespeare's master-mistress, "prick'd" out "for women's pleasure," offering an interesting revenge upon her neglectful male addressee. This appropriation of Shakespeare is all the more provocative, since the word "Wife" is in quotation marks, suggesting that the addressee might be read as female and that Dickinson's speaker is imagining becoming a "male" figure to naturalize and conventionalize female same-sexual passion (Smith 1992, 113-14). If so, Dickinson is evoking the language of Sonnet 20 because its speaker, in a manner similar to hers, needs to conceptualize the

attraction and love for a member of his own sex and does so by making his beloved an androgynous figure of female beauty and male virtues.

To make Me Fairest of the Earth

Perhaps one of the most interesting of these "Master" poems is "Fitter to see Him, I may be" (F834), which is generally interpreted as describing how God's grace transforms the ugliness and decay of human sin into beauty and the speaker's fear that her lover (Christ) will not recognize her after this transformation (Mudge 1979, 153-56; Eberwein 1985, 182). The poem stands out in Dickinson's canon because its form deviates from her usual hymnal meter, presenting what might be viewed as two sonnets, with iambic tetrameter instead of pentameter, back to back. The vocabulary recalls that of the Sonnets: their obsession with beauty and youth and the popular name given to the male beloved of these poems, "the Fair Youth" (MacInnes 2000, 1-26):

Fitter to see Him, I may be
 For the long Hindrance – Grace – to Me –
 With Summers, and with Winters, grow,
 Some passing Year – A trait bestow

To make Me fairest of the Earth –
 The Waiting – then – will seem so worth
 I shall impute with half a pain
 The blame that I was chosen – then –
 Time to anticipate His Gaze –
 It's first – Delight – and then – Surprise –
 The turning o'er and o'er my face
 For Evidence it be the Grace –

He left behind One Day – So less
 He seek Conviction, That – be This –
 I only must not grow so new
 That He'll mistake – and ask for me
 Of me – when first unto the Door
 I go – to Elsewhere go no more–

I only must not change so fair

He'll sigh – "The Other – She – is Where?"

The Love, tho', will array me right

I shall be perfect – in His sight –

If He perceive the other Truth –

Upon an Excellenter Youth –

How sweet I shall not lack in Vain –

But gain – thro' loss – Through Grief – obtain –

The Beauty that reward Him best –

The Beauty of Demand – at Rest –

The poem reverses the oppositions established by Shakespeare's text — young/old, man/woman, aristocratic/common, beautiful/ugly, and grace/disgrace — as Shakespeare's speaker begs the beautiful young man to make a copy of himself, either through procreation and marriage, or to allow the poet to immortalize him in verse. He warns the young man that "forty winters [will] besiege thy brow" (S2), his lease on beauty will end (S13), and perfection leads to decay; the young man will become, as the speaker is now, a man of "forty winters" (S2), with chapped and tanned skin, lame, decrepit, and physically defective (S37):

When hours have drained his blood, and fill'd his brow

With lines and wrinkles; when his youthful morn

Hath travell'd on to age's steepy night,

And all those beauties whereof now he's king

Are vanishing or vanished out of sight,

Stealing away the treasure of his spring;

For such a time do I now fortify

Against confounding age's cruel knife

That he shall never cut from memory

My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life. (S63)

In contrast, Dickinson's speaker imagines metamorphosing into the most beautiful of women, transcending the natural cycle of decay and time (what Shakespeare calls the "never-resting time [that] leads summer on / To hideous winter, and confounds him there") (S5); she will become "the fairest of the Earth," contradicting the basic premise of the Sonnets that "every fair from fair sometimes declines" (S18). At her Master's return, she will be "Fitter to see Him" and rewarded for the painful waiting; however, as in "Rearrange a 'Wife's' Affection!" a radical change in appearance,

caused by her fidelity, makes the speaker unrecognizable to her beloved, despite her being arrayed by love and perfect in his sight.

Whereas association with and distance from the beloved lead to disgrace in the Sonnets, Dickinson's speaker gains grace (Heale 2003, 165-67), and the fear of physical change (decay and waste) in the Sonnets becomes here anxiety about beauty. The fairness makes Dickinson's speaker unidentifiable and unchosen. Upon his return, the Master treats her face as an object to be scrutinized, itemized, and described, in the way that the Dark Lady's features are in Shakespeare's Sonnets (e.g., S130). While the Fair Youth "masters" and perfects older ideas of beauty (S106), the Dark Lady is desired despite her lack of conventional beauty: "For well thou knowest, to my dear dotting heart / Thou art the fairest and most precious jewel" (S131). Like Shakespeare's speaker, Dickinson's male figure ultimately prefers the "Excellenter Youth," Dickinson's version of Shakespeare's "lovely boy." Although the term "Youth" might suggest a person of either sex, the Shakespearean resonance suggests we read the figure as male. If so, following Shakespeare, Dickinson's text unsettles the blazon tradition in which the body of the beautiful female is admired and sought, for as in Shakespeare it is the youth who is "Excellenter," has "sweet beauty's best / Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow," and is chosen (S106). Dickinson's youth, like Shakespeare's, may be a favorite of Nature, who though she "goest onwards, still will pluck thee back, / She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill / May time disgrace and wretched minutes kill" (S126). Perhaps Dickinson's evokes the Sonnets to remind her Master that although this youth has stifled time's destruction of beauty, he is bound to Nature's "audit," which "though delay'd, answer'd must be, / And her quietus is to render thee" (S126). However, it is her Master's choice of the Youth, over and above the newly beautified speaker, that is Shakespearean and homoerotic. Read in light of the other poems discussed, this choice might suggest that the Master is in fact female; if so, perhaps the speaker's beloved chooses the youth to conform to traditional heterosexual roles.

The concluding lines take the "Master's" hypothetical rejection to its logical conclusion in grief; however, this allows the speaker to transcend the cult of beauty and her lover's implicit demand for change and (physical and/or spiritual) perfection. The beauty that will reward this figure best (which might be read as sarcastic, considering the Master's choice of the "Excellenter Youth") is the end of his control over her, "The Beauty of Demand at Rest." This ending, which might signify silence, passivity, and death, could also hint at alternative and un-represented (sexual) possibilities beyond the failed and rejected heterosexuality described in the poem.

Two Queens

Two Dickinson poems attempt to represent such possibilities in the form of female same-sex relationships: "Like Eyes that looked on Wastes" (F693) and "Ourselves were wed one summer dear" (F596). These poems appropriate from the Sonnets their economic and aristocratic terms, and their discourse of sameness and identity (and marriage). At first, the Sonnets associate a same-sex relationship with (literary) creativity and regeneration. The poet-speaker asserts his ability to immortalize the youth: "His beauty shall in these black lines be seen, / And they shall live, and he in them still green" (S63). However, such Sonnets are undercut by others in which only marriage and procreation can prevent shame and waste:

But Beauty's waste hath in the world an end,
And kept unused, the user so destroys it;
No love towards others in that bosom sits
That on himself such murd'rous shame commits. (S9)

In another sonnet, the Youth is advised, "That thou among the wastes of time must go, / Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake, / And die as fast as they see others grow" (S12). As the sonnet sequence progresses, the speaker presents his relationship with the youth as something that causes him scandal and shame (S72, 89, 95). Another poem might be read as expressing the vulnerability of same-sex love to issues of public reputation:

Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our undivided loves are one:
So shall those blots that do with me remain
Without thy help by me be borne alone.
In our two loves there is but one respect,
Though in our lives a separable spite
. . .
I may not evermore acknowledge thee,
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame,
Nor thou with public kindness honour me,
Unless thou take that honour from thy name . . . (S36)

Shakespeare's depiction of a same-sex relationship becomes equivalent to what Dickinson describes as a "compact" of misery, perishability, and hopelessness in "Like Eyes that look on Wastes," where the same-sex relationship is represented as one woman seeing in the other blankness, a "Wilderness" and "Infinities of Nought":

Like Eyes that looked on Wastes –
 Incredulous of Ought
 But Blank – and steady Wilderness –
 Diversified by Night –

Just Infinites of Nought –
 As far as it could see –
 So looked the face I looked upon –
 So looked itself – on Me –

I offered it no Help –
 Because the Cause was Mine –
 The Misery a Compact
 As hopeless – as divine –

Neither – would be absolved –
 Neither would be a Queen
 Without the Other – Therefore –
 We perish – tho' We reign – (F693)

This poem charts a trajectory backwards and forwards between the joy and pleasure of passionate friendship and the painful isolation, shame, suffering, and unhappiness associated with same-sex attraction (Patterson 1951, 227). Of course, the Shakespearean youth's relationship with the Dark Lady also corrupts him (S144) because she is "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame" (S129). Dickinson's "wastes" may reflect the doom and death that awaits non-procreative existence or be the result of an association with a woman similar to Shakespeare's mistress (Farr 1992, 132). The mirroring of dependency in the poem, whereby the speaker and beloved are the same, also summons up many of the Sonnets in which the lovers share one identity: "Even for this let us divided live, / And our dear love lose name of single one" (S39). When the poet-speaker praises and loves the youth, it is represented as a form of narcissism and self-love (S62), since the youth is the "better part" of the old, decrepit speaker (S74). For the sonnet speaker, "My friend and I are one" (S42), and "We two must be twain / Although our undivided loves are one" (S36); any attempted separation ("Let us divided live / And our dear love lose name of single one") is painful self-division and mutual destruction (S39). Whereas rank alters the discourse of sameness in Shakespeare, in Dickinson both women are of the highest status; but this state

of equivalence and unrealizable rank becomes something that defies expression. The lack of dissimilarity between lover and beloved, subject and object, creates a nothingness that cannot be described: It is beyond everyday communication (Homans 1985, 118-23). Neither woman can absolve or actualize monarchy "Without the Other"; their love is in a state of indeterminacy and equivocalness because it cannot be one of togetherness and unity. The poem ends with the paradox that same-sex passion must be renounced (must perish), but cannot be (must reign).

As if following on from this poem, "Ourselves were wed one summer – dear" begins with a state of mutuality and identity: a same-sex marriage, equivalent to its provocative representation in Shakespeare's "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediment" (S116):

Ourselves were wed one summer – dear –
 Your Vision – was in June –
 And when Your little Lifetime failed,
 I wearied – too – of mine –

And overtaken in the Dark –
 Where You had put me down –
 By Some one carrying a Light –
 I – too – received the Sign.

'Tis true – Our Futures different lay –
 Your Cottage – faced the sun –
 While Oceans – and the North must be –
 On every side of mine –

'Tis true, Your Garden led the Bloom,
 For mine in Frosts – was sown –
 And yet, one Summer, we were Queens –
 But You – were crowned in June – (F596)

The syntactical oddity of the opening line suggests a lack of available language to describe this deviant nuptial (Erkkila 1996, 169). As a result, the poem presents the destruction of the initial unity and equality through a discourse of light and darkness, winter and summer, life and death, day and night, procreativity and decay, similar to that used in the Sonnets (S6, 12, 15). One of the women yields to the forces of conventional regenerative marriage; she enjoys creativity ("Bloom") and domesticity (a sun-facing cottage), which places the speaker, in turn, in a realm of darkness,

coldness (a north-facing cottage), and decay (frosts). This recalls the Sonnets, wherein the youth is advised to marry to avoid a desolate and wasteful state:

Who lets so fair a house fall to decay,
Which husbandry in honour might uphold
Against the stormy gust of winter's day
And barren rage of death's eternal cold. (S13)

In Dickinson's poem, by choosing the traditional female role one queen is crowned; the other continually replays the earlier moment of unity, their wedding when they were mutually crowned: "One Summer, we were Queens – / But You – were crowned in June –." However, an erotic triangle is also apparent as "Some one carrying a light" offers the rebellious queen an alternative sign, recalling the imagery of "a man right fair" (S144). Yet this figure is genderless and unidentified, and the vision he/she brings is an alternative future of coldness and frost that signifies the opposite of normative heterosexuality. While in other poems there is a gesturing towards same-sex passion as something not yet expressible and permissible but existing, here the speaker's choice to defy convention allows her to fashion herself as a negative or inverted version of the Queen who actually marries. Yet her reminiscences on an earlier ideal state, their same-sex marriage, might be read as more than mere nostalgia. "One Summer, we were Queens": This is a warning that the married Queen has rejected the very essence of her identity, her sexuality, what Foucault calls "the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness" (Foucault 1979, 69).

Conclusion

Queer theory offers us new ways of viewing identity, gender, and desire in the works of Shakespeare and Dickinson. Judith Butler's idea that the oppressive binaries of sex might be confounded and denaturalized by alternative configurations of bodies and desires is evidenced in Shakespeare's Sonnets, which complicate a twenty-first century reader's taken-for-granted notions of sex and gender (Butler 1990, 149). For readers such as Dickinson, Shakespeare's radical and deviant representation of human love, deriving from Early Modern conceptions of human Eros, unsettle poetic and social conventions as they were understood in the nineteenth-century, allowing her access to a dissonant and oppositional "order of things." Dickinson found in the Sonnets breaks and fissures in the story that her culture told itself about male and female roles within transactions of passion and desire (Sinfield 1994, 9-10). For Dickinson, the Sonnets made visible and expressible that which dared not be seen or spoken about, as is shown by her use of a Shakespearean vocabulary

to represent the possibility of same-sex passion. She opportunistically uses these poems to fashion her own vision in which categories such as male and female multiply into feminized male bodies, masculinized female bodies, or sexless indeterminate bodies; and the assumed sexed bodies of the speaker and the addressee have not the kind of fixed or determined meanings we might expect. With the Sonnets as her guide, Dickinson avoids such simplistic binaries and makes sex — and, by implication, sexuality — a variable (or variant) within the scope of human desire.

Notes

1. References to Dickinson's letters are to *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas Johnson and Theodora Ward (1986). All subsequent references are to this edition, will be included in the body of the text, and will be indicated by the abbreviation L, followed by the letter number.
2. References to Dickinson's poems are to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Variorum Edition, edited by R. W. Franklin (1998). All further references are to this edition, will be included in the body of the text, and will be indicated by the abbreviation F, followed by the poem number.
3. References to Shakespeare's Sonnets are to the *The Comedies, Histories, Tragedies, and Poems of William Shakspeare*, edited by Charles Knight (1853). All subsequent references are to this edition, will be included in the body of the text, and will be indicated by the abbreviation S, followed by the sonnet number.

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