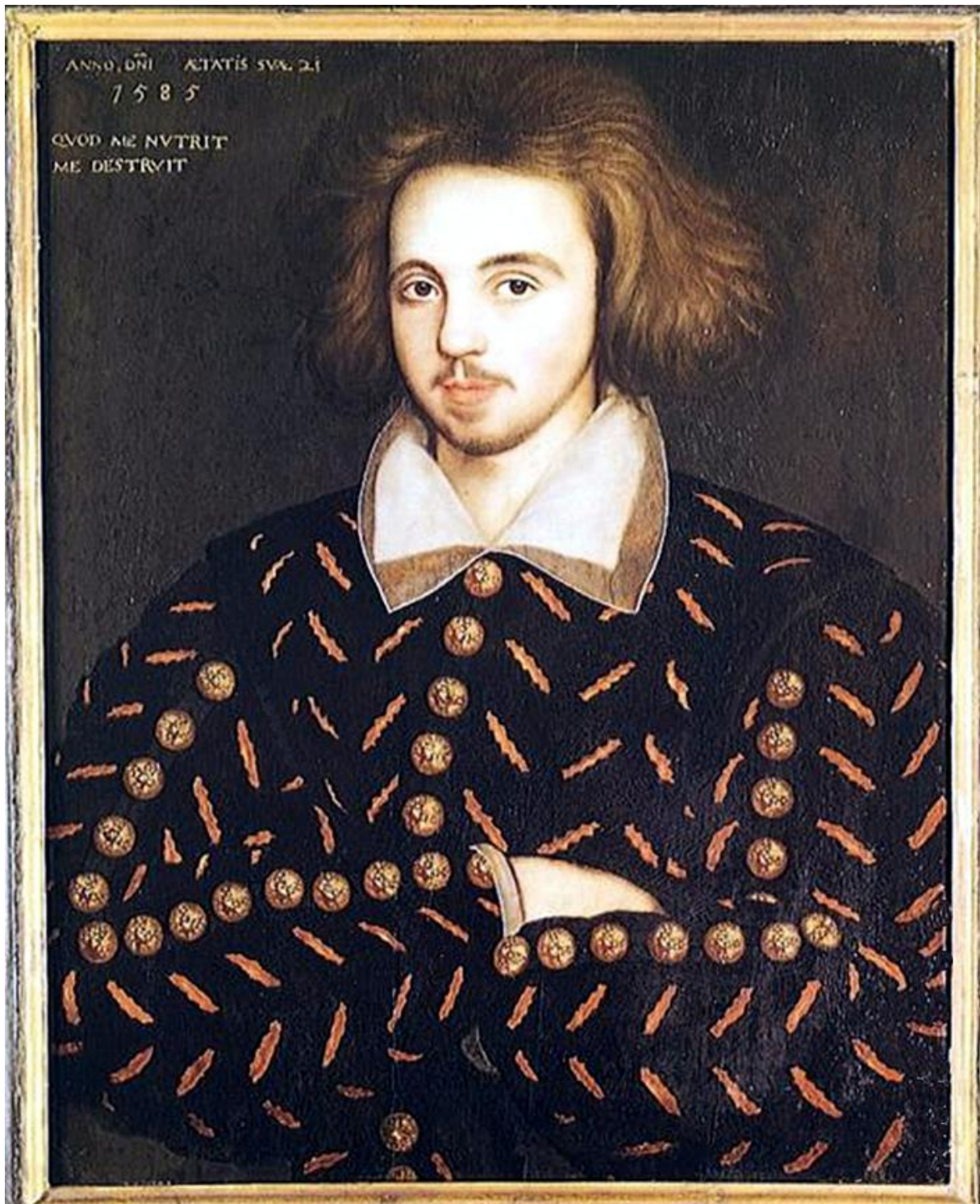


MARLOWE'S SONNET 73?



Sonnet LXXIII.

“That time of year thou mayst in me behold”

THAT time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 (or Marlowe's?) is a poem, which has continued to fascinate me over the years. In this essay, I make no claims for any originality or new discoveries – this is a poem, which has long been picked over by the critics; rather, I wish to trace what I personally find remarkable and problematic about this poem and why it continues to hold my attention.

It is, first of all, a poem all about seeing and viewing. The three quatrains each develop a picture or view, which the poet is commanding “thou” – which we could assume to be his lover, though it may equally well be the reader (us) - to consider. Four times “thou” or the reader is reminded that (s)he is being shown something important: “thou mayst behold”, “thou see'st”, “thou see'st” and lastly “thou perceiv'st”. We notice that the view each time shrinks; we start by considering a picture of a season – autumn; we then move to a view of a sunset – the ending of just a day; lastly, we are reduced to the sight of a fire burning in a hearth. The concluding couplet, in a very ambiguous way, asks that the reader considers the implications of these three “images”, which have been so *artfully* developed by the poet. Let us now carefully review each of these “pictures”.

The poem starts with a reversal of subject and object, which gives great emphasis to the season, something the poet wants us particularly to consider: autumn, a time of beauty, when the leaves are “yellow”, but also a time of poignancy, as there are few leaves and the trees are left “bare” and

vulnerable to the advancing “cold”. The branches are described as “bare, ruin’d choirs”, which leads us to think about the desolation of the dissolved monasteries and the ruined shells of churches which littered the country long after the Reformation of the 1530s. The poet seems to be using this scene to describe his own emotional state. He may not be physically old, but, emotionally, the poetic voice feels he is past his prime and, if we equate the birds’ song with poetic inspiration, the persona may be suggesting that his artistic inspiration has left him (something which the poem itself works against, in fact). The poet could have used the word “trees”, which fits metrically, but goes rather for “boughs”, which adds to the list of words beginning with the plangent (boo-hooing) “b” sound (“behold”, “bare” and “birds”). The phrase “where late the sweet birds sang”, not only creates the musicality of the rhyme “sang” after “hang”, but it uses also the alliteration of the “s” sound to register further harmonies.

There is a subtle change of emphasis in the second quatrain; instead of “thou mayst behold” (in other words, “you may be able to behold” or “you may be allowed to behold” – there’s an ambiguity in the sense of the word “may”), the poet now asserts: “In me thou see’st...”, as if this is now an *actual* occurrence, happening now, and possibly not for the first time as well, since the present tense can infer a habit also. As in the first quatrain, we are offered a scene, which is full of natural beauty, but where increasingly negative words begin to accrue (“fadeth”, “taketh away”, “black night” and “seals”). The negative effects are reversed at the end by the positive word “rest” but the overall emotional effect is ominous, and “rest” might also imply death. Life, though beautiful, is fading towards extinction, however pleasant that “rest” might turn out to be.

So far, we have had a season and an evening sunset; now we turn indoors, and the focus becomes even narrower: we are in front of a homely, comfortable, “glowing” fire. Like elderly people, we are seated by that most central of human needs, a warm hearth. It is, however, a fire which is going out. The fundamental irony in this image is that the fire is being extinguished by the ashes of its “youth”. Instead of youth feeding and inspiring old age, it is paradoxically choking off its life. We shall come back to this idea later, when we consider the implications of the poem for the reader (us and/or the poet’s lover). This irony, it is worth noting, is also to be found in the supposed portrait (above) of Christopher Marlowe in Trinity College, which has the words “Quod me nutrit me destruit” inscribed on the left. Whether it indicates a real link between Marlowe and Shakespeare (read Wraight, particularly, on the supposition that Marlowe “fixed” his own death and later collaborated with the actor Shakespeare to continue writing what would become known as “Shakespeare’s” plays – and poetry), or

whether it is a more common phrase both writers picked on, the irony stays the same. If we equate “glowing” fire with love and passion, the hint here is that the fires of passionate youth bring about the destructive lack of vitality in age. And it is clear that the “poet” is feeling this cold lack of inner fire.

What tone of voice should we give to this second formulation, the now repeated: “In me thou see’st...”? Is it a rebuke? Is it an impassive, neutral declaration? Is it a tender and concerned reflection about what we/the lover are seeing? In addressing this question, what we need to remember is that we see just what the poet lets us see, so the assertion “In me thou see’st” is utterly disingenuous. We see, each time, because the poet *shows*. We could also note that the word “In” is accentuated by its place at the beginning of the line. We are looking into the poet, rather than “at” the poet. It is as if the poet were carefully pulling back a curtain which allows us access to his inner being. We are, therefore, highly privileged spectators, even if, ultimately, we are also being highly manipulated.

There is further refinement of this “manipulation” in the final two lines: “This thou perceiv’st...”. What we see is one thing; what we perceive, however, is what we understand through our vision. Yet, the poet has the presumption, now, to tell us exactly what it is that we understand as we study “him”. “To love that well” implies that the reader (the poet’s lover?) now understands that he must “love” his own youth, his passion, his inner fire and enjoy it while it lasts, since it will not last forever. On this level, the poem requires a “carpe diem” reading of the situation. “Look at my decline and note it carefully, so that you can better appreciate your own youth, your love, your life”.

However, when we look carefully, the poem slides away from this reading. After all, just how does the poet *know* that this knowledge “makes thy love more strong”? And, does the word “that” refer to just the reader’s own “youth”, or does “that” also imply the poet, to some extent? In other words, is the poet searching in some way to gain sympathy from the “lover” for his decrepit state, which he feels will ultimately drive away the younger lover? In this reading, the last two lines become less of a description or assertion, and more of a plea. “Love me here and now, old as I feel, because I shall not last and you will eventually leave me...”

In fact, don’t all three images create seductively beautiful “scenes”, designed to beguile the reader/lover and lull him into thinking positively about the persona who has prompted these reflections? Under the guise of a “carpe diem”- memento mori sort of reflection, the poet is engaged, perhaps, in a more complex game of garnering sympathy and rekindling

love through a delicate sort of emotional blackmail. If the lover is younger, as seems to be the case, then isn't there some sort of an equation between the dying "fire" of the poet, which is being choked by the ashes of its youth, and the lover. If the youth of the poet included the passion inspired by the lover, there could be some sort of implicit rebuke: "it is you who have brought me to this, by causing me to burn so intensely in my youth ...!"

The tone of the poem generally, for me, stays lofty and magisterial, detached, even; yet underneath the surface, there are anxieties, ambiguous second-guessing and a hint, even, of pleading. The very assured sweep of the poem, its elegantly formal structuring and its sense of visual stage management, all belie the deep unease that is really at the heart of this poem. The paradox, "Consum'd with that which it was nourished by", indeed, opens up the deeper ironies against which this poem is set: does the language in this poem describe, or does it invoke, command, plead, cajole – in other words, manipulate? And how, and on what terms?

Each time I read this poem, I am forced to reassess and re-evaluate the way I (and by inference the supposed lover) am being worked upon. This is never going to be a simple or ingenuous exposition of three scenes, to be contemplated innocently, as "artistic creations", - to be enjoyed and interpreted on a straightforward level.

What You See (then) Is What You (don't quite) Get!

P.S. And Marlowe? Shakespeare?

See A.D. Wraight "Shakespeare New Evidence" 1996 for the compelling - but not entirely convincing - story. See also 'The Reckoning: The Story of the Murder of Christopher Marlowe' by Charles Nicholl (1992). Did Marlowe counterfeit his death? Did he continue to write under the name of the well-known actor, Shakespeare? Hmm! There would have to have been a lot of people in the conspiracy. I think, however, that Shakespeare (from his writing) was a dog lover (probably a spaniel lover) and that Marlowe (whose writing is far less interested in dogs) wasn't. QED. Look at the Shakespeare Concordance.

For further discussion, see the next section on whether Shakespeare owned a dog...!