

The Hell of Sexual Desires: Shakespeare's Sonnet 129

性欲の地獄：シェイクスピアのソネット129番

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(レジュメ)

シェイクスピアの『ソネット集』には154篇のソネットが含まれている。その中でもソネット129番は最もよく知られたもののひとつであり、「最も優れたソネットである」と評価する批評家もいる。これまで数多くの批評家が様々な角度からこのソネットを分析してきた。このソネットにはいろいろな特色が認められる。まず何よりも、このソネット129番は、ある批評家の言葉を借りれば、「シェイクスピアのソネットのうちでもっとも非個人的なもの」である。ソネットの中の話者は、極めて客観的な態度で、性欲のあり方を分析している。一方で、このソネットには、極めて強力な感情のほとばしりが見られる。客観的な分析であると同時に、押さえることの出来ない感情の吐露となっているところがこのソネットの優れた点の一つである。

構成の面では、多くの批評家が、始めから最後まで止まることなく一気に読ませてしまう、「前へ出る動き」を強調した読み方をしている。一方で、性欲に対する話者の態度が段階的に変化することに注目した批評家もいる。また、「完全に均整の取れた構成」を有していると誉めちぎった批評もある。それに対し、テーマは当時としてはありふれたもので、技巧に走りすぎている、という批判的な批評もなされている。

このソネットにおいては、性行為の前、最中、後、という3段階に分けて性欲のあり方が描かれている。話者はこの性欲の3つの段階を繰り返し経験しつづけ、その循環から抜け出すことが出来ない。この脱出不可能な性欲の循環地獄のなかで話者は狂気に陥る。ソネット146番で、話者はこの地獄からの救済を願う。話者が救われたのかどうかについて、はっきりとした回答はない。しかしソネット147番を読めば、話者が「黒婦人」の

魅力から逃れられなかったことが伺われる。

逃れようとしても逃れることの出来ない性欲の地獄。シェイクスピアのソネット129番は、その中でもがき喘ぐ話者自身の姿を見事な技巧で表現している。シェイクスピアのソネットの中でも最も優れた作品のひとつであることに疑いはない。

Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 can be regarded, as Martin says, as "the greatest poem in the whole group." (55) Levin says that it "is surely one of the most admired and most frequently anthologized of Shakespeare's poems." (175) The sonnet shows us, as Winny writes, a vivid "contrast between the excited impatience of lust and the disgust that follows gratification." (133)

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme,
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe,
Before, a joy proposed, behind, a very woe,
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heav'n that leads men to this hell

One of the features of this sonnet that makes it distinct from the others is that it is, as Melchiori says, "the most 'depersonalized' among Shakespeare's Sonnets." (132) There appears no pronoun that indicates a certain person. In the couplet, we find the word, "men." But it refers to the general public instead of a certain person, and therefore can be identified with "the world" in the previous line. In this depersonalized manner, the poet discusses the problem of sexual lust. Indeed, this is the only poem in the

sequence in which the word "lust" appears. Throughout the latter part of the sequence, namely, the sonnets to the dark lady, the theme of sexual desire remains an underlying note. In this sonnet, however, the poet "states his theme directly but uses an impersonal and indirect point of view." (Wiser 144)

So it is true that the sonnet is detached in attitude. Yet, as Winny says, "it is certainly not detached in feeling. To the contrary, it is a fully committed statement in which the issues of man's sexuality are faced with something akin to masochistic frankness." (114) Such frankness works to enhance the effect of the sonnet upon the reader's mind. The detached way of speaking serves to make the particular experience of the poet universal. The reader can feel the plight of the poet as his own. And it is partly because of this frankness that we feel a certain impact of the experience when we read this poem. As Weiser says, "It is this combination of plain speaking and uncertain perspective that has so stimulated the commentators." (144)

Another factor that makes this sonnet impressive is "the forward motion" we find in it. Beeching has reportedly pointed out that "66 and 129 unlike the rest of the sonnets are not written in quatrains, though the rhymes are so arranged." (Wilson 247) As Booth says, "the poem does not come to a satisfyingly complete rhythmic stop until it is over." (1969, 149) Philip Martin also says that "to create a sense of urgency the poem develops a powerful momentum of rhythm and syntax, driving over the line-endings and the quatrain-divisions in one long inexorable sentence where word is piled on word and phrase tramples phrase." (57)

Recently, Helen Vendler suggested the reading emphasising the contrasts among the quatrains. According to Vendler, "Shakespeare chose as his aesthetic problem the representation of one's changing responses to lust, and decided to enact the changes by showing three different sorts of retrospection: personal-judgemental, personal-chronological, and universal-analytic." She further argues:

Reading along an axis of similarity, as most critics have done, one can see similarity displayed in the persistence, throughout the three

quatrains, of the definitional syntactic matrix “Lust is X,” from *expense of spirit to joy and dream*. Reading for difference, however, we note the contrasts among the quatrain-definitions of lust, and therefore see the position of the speaker as one that changes over time. The wish to define — represented by the syntax — does not change. The substance of the definition, however, *does* change — from disgusting act to dream.... The aim of this sonnet has been to solve the problem of representing the various mental phases aesthetically deployed here: judgemental disgust, affective memory, and the ironic totalising of both. We value Shakespeare’s success in representing each, and we admire as well the successive motivations by which each believably replaces its predecessor stage(s).... An account of 129 that never asks why its initial contained scholastic and individual definition hurtles into a spate of adjectives of social trespass; or why the initial nouns and adjectives suddenly are displaced by a pointed return to four nouns (*bliss, woe, joy, dream*) refuting the opening’s four nouns (*expense, spirit, waste, and shame*) — an account not following the conspicuous signals afforded by the poem concerning its own phases of difference — will never see the functional aesthetic dynamic of the poem. (550-554)

Indeed, as Vendler asserts, it is necessary to read the sonnet at once “along an axis of similarity” as well as “for difference” to fully appreciate “the functional aesthetic dynamic of the poem.”

Mainly in terms of sound-pattern, Booth analyses the sonnet in more detail.

Sonnet 129, whose subject is unstoppable energy, is itself unstoppable....The forward motion of sonnet 129 is partly achieved in its sound. In the first quatrain the convoluted and contorted relationships of the nouns to one another are vouched for by a succession of s sounds pattern in *sp* and st sounds in *expense, spirit,* and *waste* in line 1 is picked up in *lust* in line 2....the pattern in s plus consonant continues in *Is perjured* and *murd’rous, bloody*. A pattern in

rd , holds *perjured* and *murd'rous* together; the *d* reappears in *bloody*, which in turn begins a new yoking pattern in *b* and *l* in *bloody full of blame*. Such interlinked sound patterns and repeated words and sense of pause, and their principal effect is to carry the reader forward with power similar in intensity to that described by the poem.(1969, 148-49)

Such use of consonants as Booth analyses carries us to the end almost without a breath. The result is the sense of speed or urgency. The consonants are indeed effectively arranged in showing the intensity and hastiness of the lust described here. It can be said that Sonnet 129 is one of the best examples that show Shakespeare's excellent artistry in choosing and arranging words in terms of their sound-effect as well as their meanings.

Shakespeare's artistry shown in Sonnet 129 is most thoroughly investigated by Roman Jakobson and Lawrence G. Jones in their pamphlet, *Shakespeare's Verbal Art in Th' Expence Of Spirit*, which was reviewed and praised by I.A. Richards in his article, "Jakobson's Shakespeare: The subliminal structures of a sonnet" (589-90). Jakobson and Jones's effort was, to use the words of Richards, "a landmark in the long-awaited approach of descriptive linguistics to the account of poetry."(589) They "spend a tremendous amount of ingenuity to show, in order to defend Sonnet 129 from the accusation of formlessness, that it has a perfectly symmetrical structure".(Melchiori 128) Their elaborate discussion and analysis cannot be repeated here. But, in the end, their attempt seems to have succeeded. They come to the conclusion that "An objective scrutiny of Shakespeare's language and verbal art, with particular reference to this poem, reveals a cogent and mandatory unity of its thematic and compositional framework."(Jakobson and Lawrence 32) Indeed, it is in this "cogent and mandatory unity" that we find still another element that confirms the value of this sonnet.

This perfection of symmetrical structure in the sonnet has led a critic to suspect that, in this sonnet, "Shakespeare was perhaps more interested in the assiduous cultivation of certain modes of sentence and word variation

than he was in what constituted a commonplace theme throughout the literature of the Renaissance”, namely, the theme of “the enslavement of reason and will by lust”.(Peterson 381) The critic, Douglas L. Peterson, further argues:

That the sonnet displays unmistakable signs of Shakespeare’s technical mastery cannot be questioned; but it offers little that is actually original. It is comprised of aphorism for which numerous parallels can be cited from the works of his contemporaries, and it employs in several instances a kind of amplification which can be justified only in terms of rhetorical effect. In short, there is good reason to suspect that the sonnet is the embodiment of an intention expressly rhetorical and that Shakespeare’s interest in the theme was subordinate to that intention.(381)

Then he tries to show that the sonnet has its source in Thomas Wilson’s *Arte of Rhetorique* (1560), from which he quotes several passages and compares them with the corresponding lines in the sonnet. G. Blakemore Evans also suggests three other possible non-Shakespearean influences on this sonnet: 1) two lines from a short poem ascribed to Petronius; 2) a sonnet of Sidney’s (no. 31 in *Certain Sonnets*), first published in 1598; 3) an eclogue in Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde* (1590), the direct source of *As You Like It*.(246) Yvor Winters seems to have accepted Peterson’s argument and expresses a negative view of the sonnet, saying that Sonnet 129 “is powerful in phrasing, but repetitious in structure.”(161)

But such a line of argument cannot be justified. The fact that the grammatical, structural, and thematic schemes employed in the sonnet can be traced in a contemporary textbook of rhetoric can hardly be evidence that the sonnet lacks originality or personal feeling. Nor does it detract from the beautiful symmetry which is observed in the sonnet. The orderly structure of it should be described as “parallel” rather than “repetitious” that connotes a negative sense. As for Peterson’s assertion, it may well be discredited as, to use Melchiori’s words, “a disingenuous oversimplification”.(129) Shakespeare may have read the textbook and used the technique shown in it.

It is obvious, however, that he did not stay there. He did not use the technique for its own sake. But he used it in order to produce his poetry, and to express his strong personal feeling in his poem. If we read the sonnet in the context of the sequence, it is evident that it is not a mere exercise of a theory of rhetoric, but that it is an outburst of the poet's own bitter feeling, which suggests the existence of some real and harsh experience behind it. And the result is a success. Sonnet 129 still conveys the poet's strong feeling to the reader, after several hundred years since its composition.

In reading Sonnet 129 as an account of lust, we easily find that here lust is described in its three different temporal stages, as Pequigney defines: "(A) carnal desire, or lust 'till action'; (B) consummation, or 'lust in action'; (C) the aftermath." (157) These three stages of lust are interwoven throughout the sonnet. So, as Booth says, "The whole poem" becomes "perversely vigorous", since "As the reader rushes through it, he is put on a whirligig of time." (1969, 150-51) It is in the third quatrain that these rapid changes of time are most apparent. Booth calls it "a chronological maze in which time changes nine times in rapid and irrational sequence". (1969, 151) Especially, in line 10, "Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme," all the three stages appear in rapid succession. This line explains, according to Graves and Riding:

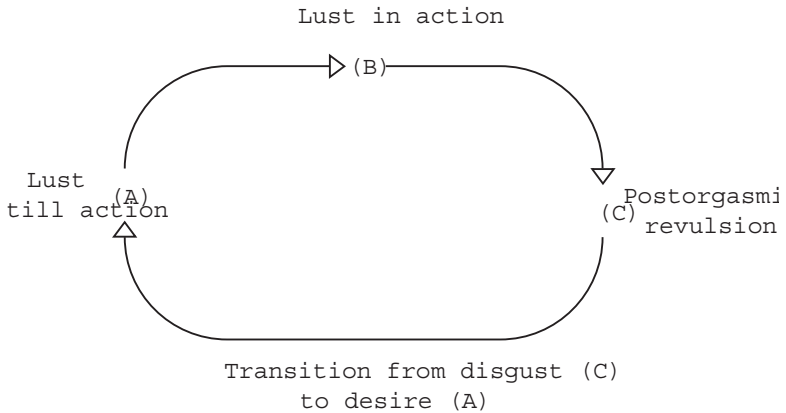
that lust comprises all the stages of lust: the after-lust period (*Had*), the actual experience of lust (*having*), and the anticipation of lust (*in quest*); and that the extremes of lust are felt in all these stages (*to have extreme* — i.e. to have in extreme degree)...Further, one stage in lust is like the others, is as extreme as the others. All the distinctions made in the poem between *lust in action* and *till action lust*, between *lust in pursuit* and *lust in possession* are made to show that in the end there are no real distinctions...that lust is all things at all times. (67-68)

The poet is trying to say that lust is always "extreme". In other words, he is always made "mad" throughout the three stages of lust. And the couplet confirms that he cannot escape from this hell of madness.

All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
 To shun the heav'n that leads men to this hell.

The three stages of lust will continue to be experienced for ever as long as men live.

J. Pequigney says that “The process is circular because, as the phases follow, one upon the other, the third mutates into the first,” and he illustrates the situation by a diagram as follows:(162)



This diagram well shows the inescapability of this hell, and, to borrow the phrase of Richard Levin, “the insidious power of sexual desire and the speaker’s weakness with respect to it.”(179) The rapid succession of these three stages of lust found in the poem helps to impress the reader with this circular structure of the situation in which the poet is trapped, and consequently, the intensity of madness from which he suffers.

Towards the end of the sequence, in Sonnet 146, the poet expresses his longing for salvation from this hell.

Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth,
these rebel pow’rs that thee array
 Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,

Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?
Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss
And let that pine to aggravate thy store:
Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
Within be fed, without be rich no more.

So shall thou feed on death, that feeds on men,
And death once dead, there's no more dying then.

Is his longing attained? The answer is uncertain. Yet, at least, if we follow the order of the sequence in the 1609 Quarto, the next sonnet, that is, 147, seems to testify that the poet cannot escape from the attraction of the dark lady.

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
Th'uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desp'rate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic mad with evermore unrest
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
At random from the truth vainly expressed;
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

In this poem, we find the echoes of both Sonnet 129 and Sonnet 146. "My love" here primarily means, as Booth notes, "my infatuation, the passion I feel", (1977, 517) therefore, it can be identified with "lust" in Sonnet 129.

Line 9 of Sonnet 147, “Past cure I am, now reason is past care,” recalls lines 6-7 of 129, “Past reason.. .Past reason...”. “Past cure past care” is proverbial.(Tilley 135) But here, as Ingram and Redpath point out, Shakespeare is “not merely reproducing the proverb.. .but playing with it, for...he has here inverted it. The case is past cure, because the physician has ceased to care.”(340) And in line 10 of Sonnet 147, the poet becomes “frantic mad with evermore unrest”. The line reminds us of the madness and urgency of the lust described in the former sonnet. Finally, in the next line, line 11 of Sonnet 147, the poet’s “thoughts” and “discourse” are compared to “madmen’s”. Sonnet 129 itself can, however, be regarded as a description of the psychology of a madman by himself, who has become mad by the force of sexual desire. Sonnet 129 can be regarded as a “discourse” by a madman on his own “thoughts”. Thus line 11 of Sonnet 147 clearly echoes the poets plight described in Sonnet 129.

As for the echoes of Sonnet 146 in 147, Pequigney says as follows:

In Sonnet 147 the conflict between body and soul in Sonnet 146 is reenacted, but with the opposite outcome. There soul was instructed, and expected, to subjugate the flesh; here soul’s reason retires and fleshly appetite prevails. Some of the diction of Sonnet 146 is redeployed. There the soul can be “fed within” and can “feed on death” by restraining desire, while here carnal love does the “feeding,” on its female object, whether by enjoying her or by anticipating enjoying her, and sensual “desire” is spiritual “death.”(174)

In Sonnet 147, the words “Feeding on” carry on the feeding imagery of the previous sonnet. And the poet’s “reason”, that is “the physician” to his desire, namely, the madness, may be identified with the speaker in Sonnet 146, who admonishes his soul to get away from a carnal desire and live an ascetic life. Yet, it is revealed in the latter sonnet that this admonition of the speaker is not carried out.

My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,

Hath left me, and I desp'rate now approve

Desire is death, which physic did except.

The poet well knows that "Desire is death," yet he cannot help desiring what he wants, namely, the lady. He is not able to "shun the heav'n that leads men to this hell" of sexual desire. So he is growing mad. And we can partly observe his madness in the couplet.

For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,

Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

He knows quite well that the lady is "as black as hell" and as "dark as night", therefore is not worth loving. And still, he has sworn that she is "fair" and thinks she is "bright". He is consciously lying or compelled to lie to himself for the sake of attaining his strong desire for the dark lady. Such conscious and continuous lying naturally leads the poet to madness.

The poet, being caught in the hell of sexual desires, longs for salvation. While he is well aware of his own madness, he cannot escape from this plight. This situation itself is the hell that he refers to in Sonnet 129. His warning in the couplet of Sonnet 129 may have come out of the poet's own bitter experience. Yet, in effect, the contents of its warning is disconcertingly universal. It has the power to knock the heart of the reader. On the other hand, the sonnet describes the nature of the sexual desires in a highly analytical manner. Sonnet 129 succeeded in being emotionally striking, while retaining a calmer analytical attitude at the same time. This dual aspect makes this sonnet undoubtedly the one of the greatest in the whole sequence.

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