Victoria Thompson

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Dr. Smith

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Fatherhood in Sonnet 8

Music to hear, why hear’st thou music sadly?

Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy.

Why lov’st thou that which thou receiv’st not gladly,

Or else receiv’st with pleasure thine annoy?

If the true concord of well-tuned sounds,

By unions married, do offend thine ear,

They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds

In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear.

Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,

Strikes each in each by mutual ordering,

Resembling sire and child and happy mother,

Who all in one one pleasing note do sing;

Whose speechless song (being many, seeming one)

Sings this to thee: “Thou single wilt prove none.”

Shakespeare’s Sonnet 8 falls under the category of pro-creation sonnets since the speaker proceeds to tell the reader to redefine their life’s purpose and secure their own immortality with fatherhood, lest they suffer in the loneliness of being single and remain in mortality without a family heir. Throughout the poem, the speaker equates the concept of fatherhood with joy using musical language and imagery while providing a contrasting sense of sadness if the reader remains single and childless. The poem takes this idea further by ending with a clear statement to emphasize the reader’s mortality: “Thou single wilt prove none.” This sonnet primarily utilizes musical language through poetic tools like imagery, syntax, and diction to declare specifically to male readers that there is an immense loneliness and lost chance of individual immortality in the absence of fatherhood.

The opening line presents an immediate example of musical imagery by questioning the sorrow of the reader. By asking, “Music to hear, why hear’st thou music sadly?” (1), the poet invites the reader to not only inquire their emotional state through hearing one’s own voice, but also hints that there is a beauty to their being by describing their voice as music, rather than reducing the distinction of the poet’s language by using the word voice. Later in the sonnet, the speaker initiates a comparison of husbands and physical strings of an instrument within the same line that emphasizes the enriching prospects of being a married family man instead of focusing solely on the gloom and dread of being single. The mention of strings signals an idea of communal understanding among fathers which thus develops the main argument of the poem by presenting one of the various benefits that result from fatherhood that single men are missing out on. The next to last line of the poem addresses the intricacy of family by combining the previous elements of music into one piece of imagery that finalizes the objective of the poem. The poet describes a family united: “Whose speechless song (being many, seeming one)” (13). Although this line indicates that fatherhood and married life offer some of the greatest complexities of life, the speaker concludes with the notion that being alone is still less rewarding in the longevity of human beings.

Furthermore, the speaker also establishes a dominant force of loneliness in being unmarried with no children in addition to isolation from a man’s chance at an infinite family legacy with syntax. For instance, Shakespeare’s arrangement of some verbs appearing towards the end of certain phrases allows the reader to absorb the importance of the subject of a phrase. The verb usage in “Sweets with sweets war not” implies that objects of happiness have no need to wrestle with other objects of happiness because they are content with one another. If the speaker had placed the words ‘war not’ in front of ‘with sweets’, the reader’s attention would be drawn more to the verb’s meaning of fighting with feelings instead of focusing more on the possibility that breeds from familial glee. Since this is the second line of the sonnet, Shakespeare is providing an introductory emotion of bliss to set up what happiness and sadness are defined as by the poem’s speaker further down the lines. The speaker also unites one metaphorical principle with several phrases separated only by commas in lines 9-11. The poet says, “Mark how one string, sweet husband to another, / Strikes each in each by mutual ordering, / Resembling sire and child and happy mother,” (9-11). Even though each of these lines have an individual purpose on their own, the speaker bonds them together with the poem’s emotional turning point of being connected with family life. Lines 9 and 10 have three phrases all together that play with musical strings that allow men to fortify a significant union as husbands and fathers. Line 11 fully captures the family element by mentioning the child and mother that fuel the peace and prosperity of the father, thereby unifying both the physical words as well as the overall message of fatherhood in the poem.

Diction plays a vital role in the construction of the sonnet itself because the particular word choices and varying definitions of those words affect and promote how fatherhood leads to life fulfillment and the lack of parenting leads to mortal downfall. The word ‘chides’ (7) has three definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: the first one mentions, “Contend loudly, brawl, wrangle; quarrel or dispute angrily with” (OED-M19). The second alludes to similar wording: “Rail at, scold; rebuke…” (OED); meanwhile the third takes a less violent approach in description: “Drive, impel, or compel by chiding…into or out of a state…” (OED L16). As each definition gradually becomes less angry, it is important to note how each definition can change the strength of meaning of the word in the sonnet, leaving room for ambiguity when attempting to figure out which meaning Shakespeare intended. With the first, line 7 would have the strongest emphasis of emotion by having an angry verb, yet it makes little sense following musical lines that suggest offense and annoyance by reasons for family rather than angry fury. The second definition seems slightly more plausible when it comes to imagining the words used in the actual line in place of ‘chides’. However, the third definition bears the most significance in relation to the sonnet because it speaks about moving through a position. Since the persuasive reasoning of fatherhood equaling greatness and the lack of that institution leaving no room for a man’s legacy is the speaker’s main argument, this definition holds the most probability of meaning for the poem’s sake, since no one living knows for sure what Shakespeare may have intended. Moreover, word choice makes its mark by having the speaker exert unique words like ‘singleness’ in line 8. The word itself immediately evokes the thought of another more traditional word like solitude that most people refer to when they discuss someone being alone or lonely. While solitude would come across as similar to singleness, the speaker utilizes the latter rather than the former because singleness is the grand concept that contrasts heavily with being married and raising up a family which is invested with the general argument the speaker tries to convey throughout the sonnet.

Sonnet 8 arguably targets a male audience with the usage of syntax, diction, and musical imagery to present how fatherhood rewards men with an enriching life ignited by immortality of family name and legacy and to live as a single man provides an opposing loneliness to this ideal. Shakespeare captures the essence of this with musical language, verb arrangement, phrase connection, and word choice that affects every little detail of the poem’s meaning. In conclusion, this sonnet defines the loneliness of remaining single to emphasize the greatness of fatherhood.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 3rd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016.