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Triche Roberson

*University of New Orleans*

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“The conceit of this inconstant stay”: Shakespeare’s Philosophical Conquest of  
Time Through Personification

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

Triche Maria Roberson

B.A. Loyola University New Orleans, 2003

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## **Abstract**

Throughout the procreation sonnets and those numerous sonnets that promise immortality through verse for Shakespeare's beloved young man, the poet personifies time as an agent of relentlessly destructive change. Yet Shakespeare's approach to the personification of time, as well as his reactions to time, changes over the course of the sequence. He transforms his fear of and obsession with time as a destroyer typical of most sonnets to an attitude of mastery over the once ominous force. The act of contemplating time's power by personification provides the speaker with a deeper awareness of time, love, and mutability that allows him to form several new philosophies which resolve his fear. By the end of the sequence, the poet no longer fortifies himself and the beloved against time's devastation because his new outlook fosters an acceptance of time that opposes and thus negates his previous contention with this force.

## **Keywords**

Shakespeare, sonnets, time, personification of time, personification in the sonnets, love, philosophy of time, agricultural imagery in the sonnets, sonnet narrativity, Sonnet 15, Sonnet 64, Sonnet 123, Sonnet 125

## Introduction

If love is the dominant topic in Shakespeare's first one hundred and twenty-six sonnets, those written to his beloved young friend, time's devastation certainly rivals its pervasiveness and import. Time, with its swift passage, its numerous abilities, its havoc-wreaking, non-discriminatory style, and its unflinching power, reigns as the primary source of worry and tension plaguing the speaker's relationship with his beloved. As L. C. Knights notes, "In the sonnets Shakespeare's interest in the passage of time and the allied themes of death and mutability is sufficiently obvious. Not only does it provide the main theme of many of the more important sonnets, it continually encroaches on other interests and overshadows them" (294). Similarly, Dayton Haskin, in a 1972 analysis of the sonnets, asserts that time, as well as the desire to wage war against it, not only "informs" the sonnets but also "in a real sense motivates" Shakespeare's creation of them, as the topic which "chiefly occupies the poet" (27-8). Time, in the sonnets, serves as "the dominant and most persistent of all the issues the speaker has on his mind" (147), as Robert Montgomery points out.

Several scholars have examined those poets who influenced Shakespeare and how these older poets' portrayals of time differ from his depictions. J.B. Leishman highlights the absence of the motifs of "*carpe diem* and *carpe florem*" (100) in the sonnets despite the prevalence of these topics in Shakespeare's sources, the poems of Horace and Ovid. Shakespeare wishes to examine methods of conquering or fighting against time in his sonnets, rather than to urge in verse the need to "seize Time, to make the best use of Time, to be (in every sense) *in time*" (100). The poet, unlike his predecessors, seeks to be free from "co-operation with Time" and "submission to the conditions it imposes" (101). David Kaula, on the other hand, argues that Shakespeare portrays time in the sonnets using terms and ideas both traditional and original.

Opposing the traditional, “stock” (45) depictions of time in love sonnets as a destroyer that operates by means of “natural processes” (46), the poet’s new approach to time affords the poet the opportunity to explore the variations in interpersonal relationships and certain aspects of those relationships specific to the persons involved in them. The poet addresses such interpersonal issues as “estrangement and reconciliation” and how the relationship functions opposing a version of time “associated...with social activities of the modish or opportunistic kind” (46). Although the poet does call upon these older and “familiar allegorical guises” of time in some of the procreation and “immortalizing” sonnets (e.g, “thief, tyrant, devourer, and harvester”), he also modernizes this tradition by expressing the value of beauty, youth, and benevolence, and, in other sonnets, by emphasizing more personal, idiosyncratic concepts of time (perceptions of time involving the specific present and past of the relationship), which Kaula calls, “those subtle properties which time assumes when it is seen as an aspect of subjective experience” (45).

Montgomery also examines how Shakespeare surpasses the conventional portrayals of time in works by his predecessors. He argues that the poet provides an added “depth and intensity” (148) to his poetic exploration of time and its effects on human experience, noting a charge of emotion not characteristic of the earlier models that delve into temporality. This emotional intensity, for Montgomery, exists in the sonnets for two reasons. First, the poet uses the subject of time to express “his temperament and...mood, ultimately a profound shift in mood” (148), characterized by shifting feelings of intense emotion, negativity, and defiance. Second, the poet places an “urgent, emotional” (148) importance on the “unstable” (149), constantly threatened present because of his belief that the future holds an emptiness, which will result from the loss of the young friend’s beauty and youthfulness, or from the loss of the young

friend himself. Montgomery further argues that Spenser's *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* contain a hopefulness and a possibility for "transcendence" (150) over time in opposition to Shakespeare's more fervently "negative" (149) vision of time as being inescapable, typical of most of his sonnets. The present, then, though it offers the joys of love, is also consistently tainted by the poet's abiding anxiety about the bleak future he believes is awaiting him; "present possession is sharply qualified by the possibility of future loss" (153), as Montgomery remarks.

In a more recent essay, Dymphna Callaghan notes the influences of both Petrarch and the developments in Renaissance society on Shakespeare's perceptions of time. She comments on the poet's "accelerated sonnet temporality" (104), or the fast-paced speed with which Shakespeare presents the passage of time in the sonnets, arguing that this sense of "agitated urgency" (104) reflects the flurry characteristic of the emerging commercialism of Renaissance society. Opposing Petrarch's introspective representation of time as a slow, "eternal cycle," of "waiting" (105), Shakespeare changes "the pace and therefore the nature of desire itself" (104).

Other scholars have discussed the poet's philosophical or theoretical ideas concerning time. G. Wilson Knight, for instance, refers to the sonnets as "a poetic war with time" (74) and to time in the sonnets as the force that draws out and destroys the perfection in youthful beauty that the beloved holds. Its workings are "subtle and silent" (73), and it exhibits paradoxical traits such as "slowness" (73) and swiftness (though always without rest) as well as creation and destruction. He notes that the speaker frequently asserts his will "to conquer Time" (76), and Knight constructs three categories by which he arranges the methods the speaker uses in this battle to overcome time: "(i) biological; (ii) artistic; and (iii) religious" (78). These headings refer to procreation, poetic immortality, and "eternity," "infinite time," or "timelessness," respectively (96). In contrast, Haskin observes a more psychological relationship between the



poet and time. He claims that only those sonnets about the speaker's relationship with the beloved portray "love as an experience which aids men in overcoming temporal finitude" (27). The speaker hopes to overcome these limitations of time through his dedication to pardoning the beloved, or allowing and accepting any and all of the beloved's hurtful actions and indiscretions. This act of "pardon, or forgiveness" (28) means self-denial for the speaker and complete immersion of his reality or "existence" (27) into the beloved's world. The speaker's goal, according to Haskin, is to ensure that his relationship with the beloved "endure[s] through time" (28), and his unconditional forgiveness helps him to maintain the relationship (28). Elsewhere, Northrop Frye comments on the poet's philosophical perspectives on time, death, and life. He addresses time in the sonnets as a force that "carries all created things...away into itself" (43). He argues that death is an extension of time, a tool with which the powerful force operates in its obliteration of all things. Though nature promotes life, it can only resist time temporarily, when its cycle brings renewal and beauty: during the height of the sun's exposure, during the fruitful seasons, and during the prime of the human lifespan. Time, therefore, ultimately controls nature because nature's resistance to time is "time-bound" (44).

Whether the speaker refers to time overtly by direct address or calls upon certain manifestations of the concept of time as understood by human beings, the pressure time inflicts upon the beloved, his beauty, and the poet's loose grasp on the two is palpable. As Leishman notes, the poet offers in the sonnets "an ever-changing series of variations upon, personifications, metaphorisations and (one might almost say) dramatisations of, the great single theme of transience" (101). When the speaker does refer to time indirectly, he does so by creating metaphors for time, most of which are related to temporal concepts. For instance, the speaker examines the effects that forty years of time's passage and the ensuing aging will have on the

beloved's beauty in sonnet 2 by presenting temporality as the season of winter: "When forty winters shall besiege thy brow" (1). Similarly in sonnet 3, a calendar month and the season it accompanies (spring) represent the temporal concept of the past, specifically the beloved's mother's past, youth, or her "height of perfection" (Booth 139) or beauty, evident in the phrase, "the lovely April of her prime" (10). Further, time exhibits itself in a mechanical sense in sonnet 5; the speaker refers to time as hours measured by a clock: "Those hours that with gentle work did frame / The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell" (1-2). Through the phrase, "sweet hours" (8), the speaker represents time metaphorically as hours once again in sonnet 36. He laments the potential time that he could be joyfully spending with his beloved if only they did not have to live separately because of a "separable spite" (6) that "doth...steal sweet hours from love's delight" (8). The temporal unit of a single day also stands as a conceit for the time of a human lifespan in sonnet 7: the rising and setting of the sun mimics the life (birth, prime, and decline) of a man.

Because the sonnets to the beloved can be grouped by the individual topics the speaker examines within the subsets in the series, the reader can sense a sketchy narrative unfolding about the speaker and beloved's relationship. Examples of these topics include: procreation, immortality through verse, the shortcomings of the speaker's verse, the beloved's betrayal with the poet's mistress, the unity of the speaker and the beloved, the argument that the beloved and the speaker should live separately, distance and absence, the poet's self-denial and refusal to blame the beloved for any faults, concerns over reputation, the beloved's inner beauty, other poets' verses about the beloved, the poet's betrayal of the beloved, the poet's reasons for writing less frequently about the beloved, pleas to the poet's muse, the poet's new definition of love, and power over time. Although some of the topics reappear after their introductions, each shift in

topic introduces a new development in the relationship, and these evolving stages in themselves give the relationship a chronological temporality, as opposed to mere static observation of some event or situation only in the past or in the present. The sonnets, therefore, are like windows into the relationship at and through various stages of its temporal progress.

The variety of metaphorical extensions of the speaker's idea of time, as well as the forward-moving impression that the shifting subject matters of the sonnets provide, enriches the sequence poetically, and these features reflect and enhance the speaker's preoccupation with time. Still, those sonnets in which the speaker personifies and directly addresses time as a universal force that exerts control over the natural world and its inhabitants are arguably the most strikingly memorable, emotionally charged, even frightening sonnets in the entire sequence. As Knight explains, time personified in these sonnets exists in the sense of "sequential time" (74) (as opposed to the present) and he characterizes this manifestation of time, as represented in various sonnets, as "a besieging force,...a powerful foe,...a ruthless conqueror,...a beast with insatiable hunger" (74-5) or, in a more human sense, a thing "criminal...perverted...underhanded[ed]...[and] mean" (75).<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, these impassioned sonnets where time is personified are those that prompted Frye to describe time in the sequence overall as "the enemy of all things...the universal devourer that reduces everything to nonexistence" (43), when he also claims that "what is really terrifying about time is its capacity for annihilation" (44).<sup>2</sup> In addition

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<sup>1</sup> Knight distinguishes between two meanings of the word "time" in the sonnets: in one context the word refers to the present, or the beloved's youthful prime, and the second refers to the passage of time. He explains, "The word 'time' may accordingly be used for the immediate, and in one sense timeless, excellence whose transience raises all our problems. So the youth is said to be at 'this thy golden time' (3), and standing on top of happy hours' (16)...The contrast is between the 'now'—Shakespeare's thought does not call it, though it may suggest, an 'eternal now'—and the temporal sequence. He is concerned with the simple actuality of 'all those beauties whereof *now* he's king' (63), as against the inevitable future; with time as now, and time as sequence" (74).

<sup>2</sup> Frye is interested specifically in those sonnets which depict time as an enemy who devours all things in a literal sense. He calls attention to time appearing in association with "a great variety of eating metaphors" and cites "the canker eating the rose, the festering lily, [and] the earth devouring its brood" as examples. Though these metaphors

to their striking and often ominous poses, these particular sonnets offer insight into the speaker's reaction to time; his emotional, philosophical, and psychological perceptions of time; his personal struggle with time; and his efforts to come to terms with the passage of time as well as the mutability and eventual death it causes. For instance, in sonnet 12, time is a reaper holding a scythe, cutting away the agricultural growth that summer allows. Time makes full use of an "injurious hand" (2) in sonnet 63 that can drain the beloved's blood and create "lines and wrinkles" (4) on his face. The speaker even attributes human emotions to time in sonnet 124, claiming that his personal affection for the beloved, unlike lesser, false types of love, thrives outside the scope of "time's love" and "time's hate" (3).

Shakespeare both directly addresses time by its name and personifies it in twenty-three of the one hundred and twenty-six sonnets addressed to the beloved. These sonnets extend across the sequence and vary in topic based upon their placement within the various subsets concerning different subjects in the sequence. For example, the poet personifies time in one sonnet concerning the unity of the poet and the beloved (and the reasons they have to live separately). But in another sonnet he personifies time when he laments the distance between himself and the beloved (as well as his frustration over being composed of the elements earth and water). He again personifies time in other sonnets concerning reputation and slander, a rival poet's verse, and the need for his muse's return. But more notable than these individual sonnets featuring time personified are those sonnets that seem to coalesce as units within the sequence because of their harmony of location in the sequence, subject matter, and explicit personification of time. The poet personifies time in four of the procreation sonnets, in six sonnets about immortality through verse, in three sonnets that express his new definition of love as an eternal, steadily

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are not expressed as personifications of time in the sonnets in which they appear, the notions of time as "enemy" and "devourer" are conceptually related to time's personification (43).

growing emotion, and in each of the last four sonnets in the sequence, all of which declare various forms of power over time.

Across the sonnets, the manner by which the speaker personifies time changes as the poet's opinions about time and its influence over his beloved and their relationship shift within the loosely narrative framework. In the procreation sonnets, personified time exhibits very few abilities. The speaker's tone is one of reflection and caution as he ponders the bleak future of destruction and passively urges the beloved to have children. After this section of the sequence, the speaker begins to examine the capability of his own verse to preserve the beloved's beauty and vitality. Unsure of the power his verse has to sustain the beloved, the speaker imputes many more attributes to an all-consuming version of time and portrays time as a source of intimidation in this expansive section of sonnets. He is pensive once again in this middle section, and his uncertainty and assertiveness fluctuate. Later in the sequence, the poet explores a new philosophical barrier between himself and time that allows him to resist time because of newly formed philosophies about time's power and the eternal nature of love. As these new perspectives emerge, the poet becomes more assured that time's destructive power, which threatens beauty, vigor, and life, can be controlled. The speaker begins to exhibit a more assertive (as opposed to contemplative) role in these later sonnets, and he allots fewer attributes to time. Therefore, the speaker's personification of time and his strategic counteraction of time's devastation throughout the sequence provide him with a deeper awareness of time's power at the end of the sequence than in the earlier sonnets, an understanding that emerges within the framework of the subtle narrative of the sonnets. Essentially, after attempting to combat time through the beloved's potential offspring and the speaker's own verse, the poet eventually decides that he need not defy time at all. Time, he discovers, is finally less powerful than he

claims in the early and middle sonnets; time's power, in fact, is mostly an illusion. He also asserts that love outlasts time and that he and the beloved possess freedom from mutability in terms of their emotions and personal characters. This gradual change in perception allows him to overcome, even conquer, his fear of time's passage and the ensuing destruction of beauty and eradication of life by the end of the sonnets addressed to the beloved.

### **Time Versus Procreation**

Early in the sonnets, the speaker is certainly concerned with the problem of time's devastation and its removal of his beloved's beauty, youth, and vitality, but he only personifies time and addresses it directly in four of the initial seventeen procreation sonnets. In this section he primarily explores the realms of nature and husbandry figuratively to address time's presence in the world, even in those sonnets in which he personifies it. Within these procreation sonnets, the speaker depicts time as destroyer of the beloved's beauty (or life) and nature exclusively, and only occasionally does he devote more than a line or two in any one sonnet to describe time's abilities straightforwardly. In sonnet 5, for instance, the speaker claims that "never-resting time" (5) operates on the changing seasons in the same manner that he predicts it will act upon the beloved's beauty. The speaker blames time for the forward movement of summer that turns this season into "hideous winter" (6) as well as the advancing movement of the beloved's life that will "unfair" (4) his beauty. Time "lead[s]" (5) or, as Booth states, it "directs the forward progress of" or even "lures" (141) summer on to winter, destroying all its beauty, but the rest of the poem focuses on an account of winter through the distillation metaphor. The speaker allots to time, personified, no further attributes.

Similarly, sonnet 12 begins with a bleak description of natural change: a dead "violet" that was once in its "prime" (3), black hair turned silver and "white" (4), "trees" (5) grown bare

from winter. This description leads to the husbandry imagery of the second quatrain which depicts the once growing, thriving plants, or “green” of summer suddenly reaped and tied up “in sheaves” (7), ready to be carried away. The speaker hints that these changes are the result of time’s passage, since from the first line of the poem, he is counting “the clock that tells the time” (1) and observing day passing into night. Yet he does not grant time direct power through personification until the last quatrain, where he laments that the beloved’s beauty will too undergo destructive change and become one of the many “wastes of time” (10) he has noticed in the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Then, in the couplet, personified time has a “scythe” (13) (the first of several instances of this metaphor in the sonnets) and the ability to remove the beloved through death. Time’s scythe enhances time’s power because it reveals that time’s destruction includes the death of the beloved, but the speaker, adhering to his agricultural imagery, doesn’t expand time’s scope any further. In sonnet 16 time is further personified as a “bloody tyrant” (2), but this phrase in the poem, though striking, does not refer to any new levels of time’s control; as in sonnets 5 and 12, time still only inflicts destruction upon and control over the beloved’s beautiful appearance in this sonnet. The speaker gives time a “pencil” (10) (meaning “painter’s brush” (159), according to Booth) in the last quatrain of this sonnet, thereby personifying time as a painter who will draw the beloved a withered, less beautiful appearance in his old age, but this metaphor is also an extension of the speaker’s primary premise about time in the procreation sonnets: Time remains the destroyer of the beloved’s beauty.

But it is in sonnet 15, however, where the speaker’s personification of time, although it spans only the last four lines of the poem and again depicts time as the destructive agent over

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<sup>3</sup> Booth notes that the meaning of the phrase “wastes of time,” is “complicated” by two further extensions of meaning. The first is the “echo of the stock phrase ‘waste of time,’ meaning ‘frivolous expense of time,’” and the second level of understanding results from “overtones inherent in the verb ‘go’ of ‘must travel’ either ‘in the wastelands made by time’ or—taking of as it is used in ‘deserts of Arabia’—‘in the deserts of Time’” (152).

nature and the beloved's beauty, conveys a change in Shakespeare's attitude toward time and its impact. Not only does the poet reveal his larger concern that time's destruction is universal, but he also proposes a personal call to action, or a plan to follow in the future, for himself.

Pronouncing a method to combat time, as opposed to his earlier technique of constantly urging the beloved to marry and have children, the speaker plays a more direct role in defying time, even if that defiance seeks to preserve only the microcosm of the beloved.

Despite the speaker's pivotal declaration in his battle against time and his reconception of time on broader scale in sonnet 15, the poem is still in keeping with his perception of time and his technique of expressing that perception typical of the procreation sonnets. The speaker does assume his usual pensive role throughout, but, in addition to lamenting time's destruction of nature and the beloved's beauty, here the speaker contemplates the universal, comprehensive destruction time inflicts upon all human beings. The sonnet, like sonnet 12, opens in this reflective tone as the speaker introduces a fact about himself: that he sometimes contemplates the mutability of every living thing, or "everything that grows" (1). Specifically, he claims that all living things are in their prime or the height of their perfection for a very short period, a fleeting but momentous period articulated by the speaker as "but a little moment" (2). The metrical variation in line 2 emphasizes just how brief this moment is: Line 1 is in perfect iambic pentameter, and the perfection of the line ceases as soon as line 2 begins, with its eleven syllables and trochaic substitution in the first foot. The speaker elaborates on this argument by stipulating that fate controls earthly affairs and those concerned with earthly affairs, human beings. The speaker then calls upon the metaphor of the world as a "huge stage" (3) to convey this idea and portrays "the stars," meaning fate, as having "secret influence" (4) over the events on this stage: Fate decides what will happen in the world and executes those decisions, the



details of which are unknown to those whom it controls, or the actors on the stage. The stage “presenteth” only “shows” (3) or productions of this nature; the only events that occur in the world are those designated by fate. This metaphor implies that free will is inconsequential and that people have little control over what happens to them because fate determines the plots of their lives. Line four contains an extra foot; furthermore, the fifth foot is a pyrrhic while the final foot is a spondee (“WhereON / the STARS / in SE / cret IN / fluence / COMMÉNT”). This variation conveys the random nature of this influence that the stars have over human beings. Fate’s interference can sometimes be positive and light, but it can also be negative and heavy; in either case, the stars always alter our normalcy and ephemeral state of perfection.

In the next quatrain, the speaker continues to reflect, again presenting the next argument of the sonnet explicitly as a fragment of his own contemplation. He “perceive[s]” on occasion that human beings “increase,” meaning grow and develop, just as “plants” (5) do and that both people and plants are continuously “encouraged” and “repressed” (Booth 156) by the same force, depicted in this line as the “sky” (6), but obviously referring again to the stars, and thus to fate. Here, as he does metrically in line 4, the speaker literally refers to fate’s tendency to exert, according to its own whims, either a positive or a negative influence on the world. The alliteration of the “p,” “s,” and “ch” consonant sounds (“When I perceive that men as plants increase, / Cheered and checked ev’n by the selfsame sky”) brings a unity to lines 5 and 6 that reinforces the speaker’s argument about the similarity between plants and men: that they are both players on the stage controlled by the same force, fate. The remainder of the quatrain argues that people “exult in the fact that they possess youthful sap” or “exult during the time of their youthful vitality” (Booth 156) but begin to diminish in beauty after reaching their prime, “height” (7), or moment of perfection. After this “decrease” (7) occurs, people continue to

behave or “wear their brave state” (8) as they did when they were young and attractive, using memory to guide them in this affectation.<sup>4</sup> The irregular stresses in line 8 (“And WEAR their BRAVE STATE OUT of MEemory”) and the double meaning of “out” illuminate the speaker’s opinion of this pose or forced youthful behavior. The adjacent words, “brave,” “state,” and “out” are all stressed, and this anomaly forces the reader to attend to the vehement phrase “wear their brave state out” more than the quiet pyrrhic that ends “of memory” (8). Therefore, the speaker suggests through the meter and double meaning that people not only behave youthfully “from” their memory but also “wear out” or exhaust their youthful essence in old age and hold on to their youth longer than it becomes them.

Finally, time is personified in the final quatrain and in the couplet. The speaker syntactically completes the phrases “When I consider” (1) and “When I perceive” (5) with the phrases beginning with “Then” in line 9 and explains that when he ponders these ideas, the “thought” of “mutability” (Booth 157)—or “the conceit of this inconstant stay” (9), the temporary time when perfection is present in things—causes the beloved to be “most rich in youth” (10) in the speaker’s eyes. In fact, the wordplay between the three critical words in these lines, “perceive,” “conceive,” and “conceit,” emphasizes the idea that the speaker’s pensiveness leads to yet more pensiveness: As Helen Vendler notes, “The octave’s two introductory verbs, *When I con-sider*...and *When I per-ceive*, together give birth (by combination of their respective first and second syllables) to the sestet’s hybrid *con-ceit*” (108). These troublesome thoughts of mutability “evoke [the beloved’s] image” (Booth 157) and force the speaker to be aware that the beloved is of the utmost value during the time of his youth. Yet even at his prime, as the speaker views his beloved “before [his] sight” (10), “wasteful” time already works in accordance with or

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<sup>4</sup> Booth argues that “out of” in line 8 means “beyond,” and glosses the line as: “And wear their splendid finery (*brave state*) beyond the time when anyone remembers them or the outdated fashions they wear.” See his gloss on Sonnet 15, specifically on lines 7 and 8, for a full explanation of allusions to clothing and actors. (156-7).

“debateth with decay” (11) in order to deprive the beloved of his beauty, thereby transforming his “day of youth to sullied night” (12). Line 11 formally promotes this togetherness between time and decay with the alliteration of “w” and “d” sounds (“Where wasteful time debateth with decay”). Further, the portrayal of time in discourse with decay marks the first and only additional attribute the speaker gives to time in the sonnet. Nevertheless, this new attribute only adds a new dimension to the idea that time will steal the beloved’s beauty; now time has assistance from another force (decay) in pursuing the same vicious objective.

Then, the speaker’s solution to this impending doom of mutability emerges in the promise of the couplet. Here the speaker suddenly declares “all in war with time” (13) because of his love for the beloved, and this “all” could refer to all of the speaker’s being and energy or to all of his verse. The structure of the line, which is metrically regular but consists of exclusively monosyllabic words, enhances the speaker’s newly emphatic voice. His voice sounds as steady and regular as the ticking clock itself (depicted in the opening of sonnet 12) and thus quite capable to take a stand against time.

Line 14 suggests that as time takes things, namely beauty and vitality, from the beloved, the speaker himself will replenish the losses. However, according to Booth, the speaker could be claiming to provide the beloved with new life by putting into action one of two different strategies, each implied by the word “engraft” in line 14. First, the word refers to “the practice of replacing the wasted limbs of old trees with slips [or scions] that grow to be new boughs” (158). This meaning and its sexual undertones allow the speaker to refer metaphorically to marriage and to give the line a more precise meaning: ““As time withers you, I renew you by joining you to a wife”” (158). Second, the word subtly indicates the speaker’s first mention of the immortality that his verse can provide the beloved because of the word’s associations with

writing terms. The speaker puns on the variations of meaning inherent in the word because it calls attention to both its “Greek root *graphein*, ‘to write,’ and...some likeness between a stylus (*graphis*) and a scion” (158). Moreover, the first quatrain of sonnet 16, when read as a continuation of the argument in the last lines of sonnet 15<sup>5</sup>, illuminates the idea of the speaker’s verse as renewal. In sonnet 16 the speaker urges the beloved to “Make war” (2) with time in “a mightier way” (1) than with the means of fortification he promises to provide at the end of sonnet 15 and also to defend himself “with means more blessed than [his] barren rhyme” (4). Therefore, line 14 of sonnet 15 can also be read as ““As time withers you, I give you new life (by writing about you)”” (Booth 158). In any case, the line begins with metrical irregularity (a pyrrhic, then a trochee, and then a spondee) in the introductory clause that is restored to regularity in the independent clause (As he / TAKES from / YOU I / enGRAFT / you NEW), a formal pattern precisely imitative of the speaker’s promise of restoration.

Whether the promise to engraft the beloved new suggests that the speaker will join the beloved with a woman or that he will preserve his beloved in verse, the poet places himself in control of combating time’s impact. Moreover, his declaration of war against time opposes time more ardently than do any of his prior pleas to the beloved. The speaker, by expanding his personification of time as a force that destroys only nature and the beloved’s beauty to a depiction of time as a force that invokes devastation on all human beings, discerns for the first

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<sup>5</sup> According to Booth, sonnet 16 continues from sonnet 15 as evident by the word “But,” which begins the sonnet and marks a contrast in thought to the ideas presented before it in sonnet 15 (1). He notes that the reader would have no reason to interpret the last line of sonnet 15 as a reference to immortality through verse because this concept had not been previously introduced in the procreation sonnets. The opening of sonnet 16, however, alerts the reader to this additional meaning of “engraft you new” (compose verse about you that will remain always) and the foreshadowing present in the last line of sonnet 15 (14). Booth explains in his gloss of sonnet 15, “...despite some likeness between a stylus (*graphis*) and a scion, a reader presumably does not recognize this first of several traditional claims for the immortalizing power of verse...until the line is glossed by the first quatrain of sonnet 16, which is both logically and syntactically linked with this one” (158). Sonnets 16 and 17 mention the poet’s verse but only as a lesser form of preservation than procreation, and sonnet 18 marks the first instance of the speaker’s confident defiance of time based upon the idea of immortality through verse without reference to procreation.

time that the problem of time's destruction exists on a larger scale. Therefore, he exerts a stronger presence in sonnet 15 and decides to take the problem of time's devastation into his own hands. Nonetheless, this new plan of action that the speaker proposes, his war and his promise to engraft the beloved new, does not offer any means of defying time directly but only aims to preserve the memory of the beloved's beauty *after* time inflicts his power of destruction upon it. The speaker and the beloved are still ultimately subjugated to time in sonnet 15 just as they were throughout the procreation sonnets. And they will remain under time's hand in the sonnets to follow, where the poet hopes to mitigate time's devastation through the promise of immortality through verse.

### **Time Expanded and Verse as Preservation**

After the final procreation sonnet, sonnet 17, the sequence becomes less succinct as Shakespeare's speaker introduces many new topics and images. As a result, the sequence loses the cohesiveness and unity characteristic of the procreation sonnets. Despite this variation and discord in the remainder of the sequence, certain topics do extend over small chunks of sonnets, typically over only three or four consecutive sonnets. Adding to this semi-narrative effect are the many topics that reappear later in the sequence after their introductions.

Within the context of these sundry topics, arguments, and situations, the speaker continues to struggle with the problem of time's passage. His musings about time do change in several key ways once he ceases to urge the beloved to marry and reproduce. Building on the expanding perspective about time's function in the universe which he explores in sonnet 15, the speaker begins to examine certain topics concerning his relationship with the beloved that exist beyond the limited scope of their personal relationship and his individual reactions to the beloved (such as admiration and strong feelings of affection). He, in essence, opens the door to what

Donne would call the “one little room [that is] an everywhere” (11) of their relationship and peers out, thereby shifting his attention to and offering the reader glimpses into the broader context of the relationship. Specifically, he widens the perspective of his sonnets by presenting commentary about matters involving his and the beloved’s relationship in addition to concerns about their relationship as it exists publicly, under the influences of other people.

In terms of time, this expansion of the speaker’s scope coincides with his expansion of time’s capabilities. The speaker begins to explore time’s destruction of the entire world around him, rather than only examining its devastation of the beloved’s beauty and the beauty of the natural world. Because of this extended outlook, the speaker is able to include under the umbrella of time’s destruction more and more damaging deeds. He stretches the realm of time’s power as he opens the sonnets to new topics and as he broadens their point of view. Yet, as he laments this greater devastation that time inflicts upon the world and the beloved in these numerous middle sonnets, he only offers one method for checking time’s power, namely, immortality through verse.

For example, in the second sonnet to follow the procreation unit, sonnet 19, time claims many more abilities than it has prior to the appearance of the poet’s argument that the beloved will live eternally in his verse. Time is able to devour various pleasantries and wonders (“sweets”) in “the wide world” (7), inflicting several specific new forms of destruction. Time can weaken, through the effects of aging, several of the mightiest, most dangerous, or most feared creatures in the world; he can “blunt...the lion’s paws” (1), “pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger’s jaws” (3), and “burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood” (4). Line five places time in control not only of the seasons but also their fruitfulness (or lack thereof) and humanity’s emotional responses to them as he “Make[s] glad and sorry seasons” (5). Time can even make

the earth consume humanity or make the world crumble so that it destroys mankind: “make the earth devour her own sweet brood” (2). In addition to the overtly human or animal attribute of devouring, time also boasts the ability to “fleet’st” (5) using quickly moving feet, evident in the phrase “swift-footed time” (6).

The speaker devotes the octave to urging time to commit all these evils and to “do whate’er” (6) it desires “to the wide world” (7); then, in the third quatrain, by using the forceful word “forbid” (8), he restricts time from destroying his beloved’s beauty. The speaker then personifies time further through a drawing metaphor similar to that of sonnet 15: he begs time not to “carve” the beloved’s brow with his “hours” (9) and to refrain from “draw[ing] lines there with [his] antique pen” (10). With this bold demand that time preserve the beloved’s beauty, the speaker essentially offers up the world to time in exchange, and he then follows this one brave move with another in the couplet. The word “yet” signals the speaker’s change of mind, and he retracts his former command by challenging, even daring “old time” to go ahead and damage the beloved’s appearance as much as possible because he is confident, after all, that his beloved will remain forever young and beautiful through his verse “despite” (13) time’s devastation: “My love shall in my verse ever live young” (14).

After sonnet 19 the speaker refers to time, in any of its manifestations, very infrequently until sonnet 44, when he reinvokes personified time. After sonnet 44, he refrains from personifying time again until sonnet 55. In this interval the speaker begins to concentrate often on practical, less philosophical topics concerning occurrences in his relationship with the beloved in a public context. For instance, sonnets 33-35 treat some murkily defined act of betrayal the beloved has committed against the speaker and how the speaker chooses to forgive him because of his own devotion. Sonnets 40-42 refer to a more specific act of betrayal

involving a love triangle between the beloved, the speaker, and the speaker's mistress in which the speaker again selflessly forgives the beloved's indiscretions. In other sonnets such as 44<sup>6</sup>-45 and 50-51, the speaker shares the sorrow over the physical distance between the beloved and him, which causes him to miss yet also to doubt the beloved's constancy.

Other sonnets in this middle section are more personal declarations of admiration and devotion, and some more explicitly address the speaker's desire to capture and preserve the beloved accurately in his verse. In sonnet 21 the speaker hopes to write truly and faithfully of the beloved so that others will believe his testament, instead of writing like most poets who make trite comparisons typical of the current fashion. Sonnet 22 depicts the speaker so overwhelmed with passion that he is only capable of expression through verse. In sonnet 26 the speaker laments the notion that his poor verse is not yet sufficiently worthy to praise the beloved. Moreover, in sonnet 32 the speaker looks to the future after his own death and urges the beloved to value his verse then, even if it seems inferior to other verse, for its genuine expression of love rather than its poetic prowess. In sonnet 38 the speaker claims that since the beloved incessantly provides him with poetic inspiration, he should be "the tenth muse" (9). Sonnets 53 and 54 celebrate the beloved's inner beauty, and sonnet 54 is a pledge to preserve this internal goodness through verse. Though the speaker clearly remains concerned with preservation of the beloved through verse, he is not concerned specifically with time as a direct threat to the beloved in this short section but instead with other issues related to his writing as well as to sustaining his bond with the beloved.

When the problems of time's passage, destruction, and elimination do arise again in the sequence, beginning at sonnet 55, the speaker continues to explore the potential of his verse as a

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<sup>6</sup> In sonnet 44, the only poem in this section featuring an added attribute for personified time, time has the ability to take his own "leisure," passing by slowly in such a way that disturbs the speaker because time and distance keep him from the beloved. The speaker laments, "I must attend time's leisure with my moan" (12).



means to preserve the beloved and to defy time and its ravages. Moreover, as in the sonnets preceding 55, the speaker seems to be conflicted about the reliability and effectiveness of this strategy for preservation as he frequently exhibits a striking lack of confidence in his poetic prowess. He often expresses doubt in these sonnets about the suitability of his verse to represent his prized beloved. Still, in other sonnets, the speaker seems not only content that the immortality his verse can secure the beloved will successfully defy time, but also equally confident in the artistry and quality of his verse. In these poems the speaker is sure that his verse can depict the beloved genuinely so that future generations will appreciate him and his beauty. The speaker's ambivalence about his own poetic skill is apparent throughout the remaining sonnets that personify time and also explore immortality through verse: Sonnets 55, 60, and 63 assert confidence while 64 and 65 convey uncertainty.

In sonnet 55 the speaker assigns to time the human character trait "sluttish" (4), which can mean "dirty, careless, and slovenly" (228) according to Booth, in addition to the more modern meaning, lascivious. Time is the force that dirties, or "besmear[s]" "unswept stone" (4), which is described throughout the octave primarily as man-made "monuments" (1) such as "statues" (5) and "the work of masonry" (6). Time is lascivious in the sense that it does not differentiate in its destruction; time taints all types of man-made monuments including those created during centuries past and those that may be created in the future, until "the ending doom" (12). Nonetheless, the speaker is resigned to preserving the beloved through his verse in the second half of the sonnet. The beloved will overcome the devastation caused not only by time, but also by "war" (7), "broils" (6), "death," and "enmity" (9) with the power of his memory, which will remain ever-present in the minds of future generations, particularly lovers, because of the speaker's verse. In addition to subjugating time to his verse, the speaker intimates that time

is dominated even further in line 12 when he refers to “the ending doom” (12). This line suggests that time itself is bound to a limit, the Christian Last Judgment or the end of days when even time’s passage will cease.

The speaker again displays confidence in his verse’s ability to defy time and depicts personified time’s expanded power in sonnets 60 and 63. In the former, the sestet belongs to personified time, who now both gives and eradicates beauty and life. As it has in numerous preceding sonnets, the passage of time causes the destruction of beauty and leads to death in this sonnet, or “confound[s]” (8) the people created in his wake, “transfix[es] the flourish set on youth” (9), and “delves parallels in beauty’s brow” (10). Time also destroys by “mow[ing]” with “his scythe” as he does in sonnet 12, but here, time destroys all things (rather than only the beloved and the natural world) since “nothing stands but for his scythe to mow” (12). Yet in this sonnet time also gives life in the sense that new people are steadily born as time passes, and this concept explains why the speaker identifies time as “time that gave” (8). In addition to this creative trait, the speaker allocates the task of “Feed[ing] on the rarities of nature’s truth” (11) to time in reference to the lovely elements of the natural world that time consumes. These elements comprise the “truth” or “genuineness” (Booth 241) that nature promotes in the world, and this word choice implies that time preys upon this goodness in nature because of an inherent lack of these virtues within itself. Then, in comparison to nature, time promotes vices such as selfishness, dishonesty, or greed, rather than virtues, and thereby the sonnet elaborates upon the speaker’s version of time’s destruction of the natural world in the procreation sonnets. Also, the speaker is confident again with his verse as a means of counteraction; he offers his verse in the couplet to preserve the beloved “despite” the ravages of time, personified in line 14 by “his cruel hand” (14).

Similarly, in sonnet 63 time has an “injurious hand” that has already “crushed and o’erworn” (2) the speaker’s appearance and will inflict the same punishment on the beloved’s appearance in the future. Also, time’s “hours” (3) will, as usual, make the beloved look old by “fill[ing] his brow / With lines and wrinkles” (3-4), but the speaker grants them the additional ability to “drain his blood” (4), an action and image suggesting that time will cause for the beloved a prolonged period of sickness or frailty that will lead eventually to death. Further, the speaker also personifies time as a thief in line 8 who will pilfer the “beauties” (6) which the beloved enjoys in his youthful prime by “Stealing away the treasure of his spring” (8). In the couplet the speaker again assertively proclaims the power of his verse to sustain the beloved’s beauty after time has taken a toll on it (though he cannot prevent “confounding age” [10]) from removing the beloved’s life). The poet’s “black lines” (13) will “live” (14) and display the beloved’s “beauty” (13), and the beloved will be always youthful or “green” (14) in the speaker’s verse.

### **The Speaker’s Peak of Fear**

Time clearly gains additional attributes in many sonnets concerned with the prospect of immortality through verse, but in sonnet 64 the speaker’s mounting obsession with and fear of time culminates in a poem featuring twelve lines that outline developments in personified time’s devastation. The speaker presents the humanized image “time’s fell hand” (1) in the first line, and time’s hand commits the action of the poem in its entirety (excluding the thought processes of the speaker himself). Time’s hand is certainly not gentle; according to Booth, “fell” can mean, “cruel, painful, ruthless, [or] deadly” (260), and the spondee that these words form reinforces the ominous force and maliciousness (When I / have SEEN / by TIME’S / FELL HAND / defaced). The speaker’s tone is pensive and reflective once again: He uses each

quatrain to recount the numerous natural and man-made wonders he has “seen” time devastate and proclaims in line 11 that witnessing this destruction and “ruin” has “taught” him to “ruminate” (11). The speaker consistently qualifies time’s multiple actions by referring back thoughtfully to the moments when he has seen them occur, repeating the phrase, “When I have seen” (1, 5, 9). He characterizes the first of these types of wreckage as “the rich proud cost of outworn buried age” (2), meaning the now obsolete but admirable efforts and creations of the distant past, or the “splendid...expenses [of]...obliterated...antiquity,” as Booth explains (245). Another spondee appears in the second foot of this line in “proud cost,” and this variation emphasizes the value of these creations (The RICH / PROUD COST / of OUT / worn BU / ried AGE). The spondee also creates three consecutive stresses in “rich proud cost,” and this phrase balances the three stressed words in line 1, “time’s fell hand.” This structure suggests that time’s power is so great that it matches the significance of these creations yet is still the culprit in their destruction. The quatrain continues with examples of man-made objects the speaker has witnessed falling prey to time’s devastation. He has observed “towers,” once “lofty,” tall, and impressive, torn or “razed” (3) to the ground by time. Time’s “rage” has also caused the durable metal alloy of “brass” to succumb helplessly to destruction and thereby to become personified as a “slave” subject to “mortal rage” (4).<sup>7</sup> Brass (and these other man-made objects), lacking the abilities to act and think that the speaker, as a human being, possesses, cannot even try to defy time, and therefore are his slaves, most subservient to his control.

The speaker devotes the second quatrain to a series of military metaphors that depict the ocean’s movement, specifically as it invades and eats away at the shore over time. As its waves

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<sup>7</sup> According to Booth, the placement of the adjective “eternal” between the nouns “brass” and “slave” allows the adjective to modify both nouns, resulting in a possible reading of the first half of line 4 as, “ever-enduring brass is forever the slave...” (245). This line, therefore, suggests that time has immortality as opposed to the finite limit of “the ending doom” in sonnet 55, and this discrepancy furthers the speaker’s equivocation characteristic of these middle sonnets.

crash over the shoreline, the “hungry ocean gain[s] / advantage on the kingdom of the shore” (5-6), conquering some of the “firm soil” of which the shore is composed as its “win” (7). Line 8 insightfully recaps the whole process with its wavelike rhythm: “Increasing store with loss, and loss with store” (8). Here, the speaker muses that the ocean increases its store of soil by taking soil away from the shore and into itself, thus creating a loss of soil for the shore. And even more precisely, the shore simultaneously augments its loss of soil as the ocean steals its soil away. Both loss and store seem paradoxically to increase at the same time, but the paradox is only on the surface: One element exclusively loses while the other exclusively gains, and the shore’s loss itself is the ocean’s “gain” (5). Because the progression of the tide can only occur slowly as time passes, the speaker insinuates that time is responsible for this erosion of the shore. Further, the whole process of the tide metaphorically represents time, as a destroyer of not just beauty but also life, since time takes human beings away from the world through death. The world loses people as time gains them and increases his store of people (just as the shore loses soil as the ocean gains it), and time’s gain is the world’s loss. Also pointing to the speaker’s implication that time is the perpetrator of this natural erosion is another spondee in line 7 that creates three more consecutive stresses: “firm soil win” (And the / FIRM SOIL / WIN of / the WAT / ery MAIN) (7). Just as time’s fell hand destroys the rich, proud creations of antiquity, time also causes erosion of the shore.

In the final quatrain, the speaker observes time wreck one final realm, the “state” (9-10). Booth argues that state means “condition” in line 9 and “the pomp and splendor of power and rank” (246) in line 10. Line 9 therefore refers back to the second quatrain, and “interchange of state” (9) becomes an additional comment on the ocean’s contention with the shore. The ocean and shore both experience a change in condition as the tides move, here aptly described as an

“interchange” because the change occurs concurrently and because each change is dependent on the other. But then, another victim falls under time’s hand in line 10: As time passes, those who enjoy the power of status often lose that power, or at least the pleasure that it supplies. The speaker claims here that time even meddles in the political realm of human affairs. Next, the speaker condenses all time’s preceding actions into one word in line 11, “ruin” (11), and emphasizes this summation effect through the trochee that the word creates. The speaker then claims that time’s ruining of the world around him has compelled, or “taught” (11), him to worry “that time will come and take [his] love away” (12).

At this stage in the poem’s argument, the speaker is aware that time buries all that is historically prominent; it lowers tall buildings; it decays impenetrable metals; it erodes the shoreline; it removes power from people; and most significantly to the speaker, it will annihilate his beloved. Yet the similarity in sound between “ruin” and “ruminate” suggests that the speaker’s rumination is another form of ruin: self-decay. Further, the monosyllabic, childlike language in line 12, or “naked childlikeness” (300) as Vendler calls it, implies the speaker’s self-degeneration and vulnerability. His negative thoughts, namely about time, lead to his own sorrow and weakness and are, as line 13 suggests, “a death” (13) to him. The couplet further explains why this frightening “thought” is like “a death” (13) to the speaker; the worry makes his current life miserable. Just as the shore is powerless to protect its soil, constantly attacked by the ocean and time, the speaker seems helplessly sorrowful that he possesses the very thing (the beloved) that he constantly fears losing or that he must always be sorrowful “in order to have” (Booth 246) the beloved because he is always afraid of losing him. Yet another spondee in line 14 yields one other instance of three consecutive stresses in the words, “have that which” (But WEEP / to HAVE / THAT WHICH / it FEARS / to LOSE) (14). “That” (14), of course, refers

to the beloved who is the final victim of time's cruelty in the sonnet. This repetition of three-word stress variations emphasizes the speaker's impression of the enormity of time's power by creating the sense that time has a "hand" in all the levels of destruction described throughout the poem.

Unlike in sonnet 15, the speaker offers no method of resisting time's removal of his beloved in sonnet 64 because he places the solution in the couplet of sonnet 65, which is a continuation of sonnet 64. Before the speaker proposes this solution, he explores even more avenues of personification. Time's "days" are "batt'ring" and destructive, and they engage in a "wrackful siege" (6) on beauty. Also, in lines 7 and 8, the speaker reinforces time's destruction of man-made objects and strong, solid materials depicted in sonnet 64: "When rocks impregnable are not so stout, / Nor gates of steel so strong but time decays" (7-8). Time also owns the beloved as his "best jewel" and has a "chest" (10) with which to keep such treasures. Lastly, in line 11 time gains a "swift foot" (11) to assist his cruel hand, and this metaphor echoes the image of "swift-footed time" in sonnet 19. Furthermore, the speaker is straightforward once again about his contemplative mode in line 9 when he calls upon "fearful meditation" (9) directly, asking it to provide him with clarity and advice concerning how to defy time and its devastation. And in accordance with the other sonnets in this unit, the chosen method for resisting time's effects in sonnet 65 is once again bestowing immortality upon the beloved through verse: "in black ink my love may still shine bright" (14). Again, the speaker takes action, but he is merely hopeful that this strategy will be sufficient. He does not confidently claim that his verse will give the beloved eternal life; instead, he can only hope that his verse "may" (14) "forbid" time's "spoil" (12) and ruin: "unless this miracle have might" (13). The utter helplessness underlying the speaker's presence in the last four lines of sonnet 64, coupled with this uncertainty closing

sonnet 65, portrays the speaker as active in the task of preserving the beloved, but he is by no means confident in his actual ability to do so, nor is he satisfied with the resources he possesses to oppose time's effects.

Still, the speaker readily offers the immortalizing power of verse as a strategy for combating time's erasure of the beloved's beauty and life in many sonnets after 65, but his ambivalence also pervades these sonnets. For example, after arguing the inferiority of rival poets as well as his own poetic shortcomings in sonnets 78-80, the speaker, in sonnet 81, is unequivocal about his verse's ability to preserve the beloved: He claims, "such virtue hath my pen" (13). Also, he boasts in reference to the beloved, "Your name from hence immortal life shall have" (5) and proclaims assuredly that the beloved's "monument shall be [Shakespeare's] gentle verse" (9). On the other hand, in sonnet 82 the speaker is confident that he can more genuinely capture and preserve the beloved's essence than other poets who indulge in extravagance, "strained touches" (10), and "gross painting" (13), yet he still fears that even his own honest verse, written "in true plain words" (12) and based on first hand experience, is not worthy to praise the beloved, who is "a limit past [his] praise" (6). Here, the speaker is so unsettled that he conveys both confidence and insecurity within the confines of an individual sonnet. Later, in sonnet 100, the speaker, lacking self-reliance and poetic inspiration, urges his muse to assist him in writing verse that can use "skill and argument" (8) to provide the beloved with "fame faster than time wastes life" (13) and "make time's spoils despised everywhere" (12).

This display, in which the speaker constantly alternates between confidence and insecurity about his verse, ultimately suggests that he is unsettled with it as a means with which to defy time. These interchanges in tone, from decisive to dubious, extending across most of the sonnets, poetically exhibit the speaker's internal irresoluteness about the effectiveness of his



verse as preservation. This demonstration of uncertainty further explains why the speaker imputes time with so many abilities after the procreation sonnets. The speaker expands his personification of time not only because he enlarges the viewpoint of his relationship, but also because he is intimidated by time's relentless power. The speaker attempts to be brave and self-assured, but he is ultimately too fearful that his verse is not artful enough to combat time's devastation. These sonnets that list time's numerous abilities, where the speaker documents them as if the sonnets are a means to release his incessant worry, impart the speaker's obsession with time's destruction. Overall, in their preoccupation with time, they portray a speaker characterized by fear, helplessness, and incessant rumination and who possesses no certain weapon with which to combat time's fury.

### **Philosophical Power over Time**

Because of (or despite) his uncertainty and unease about his verse's quality and efficacy, the speaker turns away from explorations of the value of his verse in later sonnets that personify time. As he begins to dwell less and less on his verse, he adjusts his contemplative tone to one more philosophical and astute than it was earlier. He introduces new ideas that indicate a new outlook about love, time, and mutability. Once the speaker's opinions about time and love change, his new perspective seems to ameliorate his fear of time's wrath and his obsessive need to preserve the beloved. Time cannot ultimately harm the beloved if the speaker no longer believes in its power. And because this new changed perspective serves as a more steadfast means with which to cope with time's passage than do his earlier urges to the beloved to procreate or his invocations of the power of verse, it provides him with greater confidence and assertiveness in relation to time. He ceases his cycle of contemplation, which has only led to a state of personal ruin and hopelessness, and begins simply to state what he knows about time.

He does ascribe several further attributes to personified time in these remaining sonnets, but he will no longer allow listings of time's abilities to comprise any sonnet. The speaker begins to devote fewer lines to descriptions of time's attributes as he balances his descriptions of time with his new beliefs and his declarations of dominance over time. In fact, in sonnet 123 and the remaining sonnets in the sequence addressed to the beloved, the speaker offers several reasons why time's influence is actually not as substantial as he had claimed earlier in the sequence.

As he does with the descriptions of time's destructive hand and all that it touches in sonnet 64, the speaker again exhibits personified time's abilities to destroy throughout sonnets 123 through 126. These actions do augment the tally of personified time's attributes, but they are not as numerous and overwhelming as those attributes presented in many of the sonnets about immortality through verse, sonnets in which the speaker is more pensive and less vocal. Here the speaker resists time's blows as he draws them, rather than pensively and fearfully bearing witness to them or making vacillating claims that his verse will keep his beloved's memory alive. In these final sonnets, the speaker does not allow descriptions of time's devastation to consume most of his lines; instead, he balances time's actions against actions of his own. The speaker's voice, attitude, and resignation are forceful and secure as he asserts his own authority over time.

In sonnet 123, the speaker negates time's action immediately and calls time by name. The sonnet addresses time directly, beginning with a forceful and defiant "No!," followed by a call to attention by name and a clear statement of exactly what the speaker will not allow time to do: "boast that [he does] change" (1). In this opening line, the speaker already asserts his intolerance for and refusal of time's power, and, in particular, he will not stand for his own personal change being attributed to time. The meter of the line reflects his fortitude: The first

and third feet are spondaic, and the particularly defiant words “shalt not boast” are each stressed (NO TIME / thou SHALT / NOT BOAST / that I / do CHANGE) (1). The speaker then mentions time’s “pyramids built up with newer might” (2) which refer to natural or man-made objects that are sturdy and seem to be non-changing and ever-lasting because they “have evolved with the passage of time” (Booth 416). These objects have “newer might” since they have been made recently, and due to modern advancements in construction, they have more strength than older objects. Despite their apparent modernity, time’s pyramids fail to impress the speaker as evidence of great power that time might be accruing because they are merely “dressings of a former sight” (4), or somewhat altered imitations or “reworkings” (Booth 416) of creations from the past. He instructs the reader how properly to interpret time’s pyramids; though they appear to be “newer,” stronger, and different, these monuments are “nothing novel, nothing strange” (3), in the speaker’s opinion. The speaker’s therefore has altered his impression of these sort of monuments since sonnets 55, 64, and 65 where he notes time’s destruction of these great monuments as a means to express time’s abundant power. Now he devalues these monuments to subordinate time’s power.

In the second quatrain, the speaker continues to profess his altered perceptions of time through an explanation of why most people do not share his lack of enthusiasm for time’s creations. Because people don’t live for very long or because their lives seem to pass quickly, they mindlessly “admire” (5) these imitative, “old” creations that time “foist[s] upon” (6) them, just as the speaker does in sonnets 55, 64, and 65. The human lifespan, limited in duration, causes people to want to believe that their time on earth is significant and that past monuments were built specifically for them, suited to the particular needs and exhibiting the architectural advancements of their generation. They falsely believe that the monuments built during their

lifetime are perfectly suited to their generation's specific interests, or "born to [their] desire" (7). Therefore, the speaker claims, people marvel over the creations time provides, but in doing so, they fail to realize that the creations are mere replicas of past creations that they "have heard" (8) about or even seen before. Therefore, there exists, according to the speaker, a degree of folly in people's perception of time as well as the heightened significance they claim for their own time.

The speaker, on the other hand, now seems more enlightened than most. He is determined to "defy" "both" time and his "registers" (9), the creations time fosters as well as the havoc time wreaks. He will not blindly respect time's influences on the world, neither those of "the present" nor "the past" (10), because they both "lie" (11), or are not as they seem. The speaker knows that time's creations are merely repetitions of the same and are simply "built up and worn down" (Booth 417), or altered only on the surface as time passes quickly and "continual[ly]" (12) onward. In fact, lines 2-12, which describe time's repetitiveness and lack of ingenuity, are, like time itself, "nothing novel, nothing strange" since they are all composed in regular iambic pentameter without variation. Then, in the couplet, the speaker offers another firm statement reminiscent of line 1 when he makes an eternal "vow" (13) always to "be true despite" (14) time and the obliteration it inflicts upon people. In line 13 the meter is varied again as it was in line 1, and these alterations, compared to the regularity of the bulk of the sonnet, emphasize the speaker's originality and command, as opposed to time's staleness and limitation, in a poetic enactment of the speaker's power over time (THIS I / DO VOW / and THIS / shall EV / er BE) (13). The speaker vows to scorn time while maintaining personal integrity. He declares that he will never change, like the monuments of the world and the world itself, even as time alters his appearance as he ages.

In the sonnets that follow 123, the speaker depicts time as subjugated to even more

forces—in addition to the speaker himself—as he incorporates only a small number of additional features to his definition of time as a personified force. The speaker also remains aggressive, confident, and impassioned in these final testaments about an inhibited version of personified time and the narrow scope of its control. Very conspicuous in these sonnets are the speaker’s newfound expressions of power, assertiveness, and acumen that accompany several other philosophical revelations.

Sonnet 124 celebrates the independent and pure nature of the true love the speaker feels for the beloved and his love’s freedom from time’s dominance. His love is not “fortune’s bastard” (2) nor a pawn in the game of fortune with no definite, pre-destined plan or end result, nor is it haphazardly subject to circumstance as “the child of state” (1). Further, his love is not self-serving, motivated by selfish concerns such as “pomp” (6), vanity, power, and recognition from others. As such, the speaker’s love is in no way vulnerable to time’s power and control, whether such control would operate in favor of the speaker’s emotions or seek to foment any negativity that might taint the speaker’s affection. Only lines 3 and 13 contain explanations of time’s attributes. The speaker portrays time as a force able to feel the human emotions “love” and “hate” in order to express these opposing positive and negative effects that time may have on lesser forms of love than the speaker’s own; those inferior, self-serving loves are “subject to time’s love, or to time’s hate” (3), but the speaker’s love operates on its own terms and “all alone stands hugely politic” (11). Time also possesses its own “fools” (13) in line 13, which are these false forms of love, subservient to his control and desires, or those people who thoughtlessly experience love in this limited, trivial way. Still, the speaker himself deems these “fools of time” (13) as such. He stands apart from them because of his genuine love and his awareness of time’s true nature, which allow him confidently to “call” all these inferior forms of love foolish: “To

this I witness call the fools of time” (13). Line 14 summarizes the demise of these fools: they “die for goodness” because they believed they were living for the benevolence of love throughout their lives, but, in submitting to inferior love, they actually “lived for crime” (14) since they were steadily serving the false force of time.

In sonnet 125 the speaker clarifies the ideas presented in sonnet 123 concerning his enlightenment about the illusion and insignificance of outward appearance and elaborates upon his discussion of true love from sonnet 124. He claims that neither wearing a “canopy” (1), which refers to “a cloth covering, carried tent-like over the head of a dignitary in a ceremonial procession” (Booth 246), and thereby honoring the artificial quality of nobility through external, “outward” (2) show, nor constructing strong monuments (or perhaps revered poems) and intending for them to last forever would be of any value to him. The problems inherent in these acts of external show are apparent to the speaker: first, he knows that nothing artificial or physical really lasts forever since eternity “proves to be more short than waste or ruining” (4), and second, he believes those who focus their attention on outward show, external appearance, or “form and favor,” “[l]ose” (6) all their energy and being to the cause while gaining nothing in return. The only worthwhile object of desire for the speaker is the beloved’s spirit and the emotional connection that true love yields; therefore, he vows to “be obsequious in [the beloved’s] heart” (9) and to dedicate himself to serving the beloved’s inner character and his love, rather than worshipping, as he did in earlier sonnets, his physical beauty or a combination of both the beloved’s external appearance and inner self. Thus, the speaker urges the beloved in the third quatrain to accept his simple, “poor” (10) offerings of true love and his own inner quality and to know that he expects nothing further than the beloved’s love and inner self in return. This “render” (12), based upon only true, pure love, will free the speaker and the beloved

from concerns of external appearance (and therefore from inferior love) because it is “not mixed with seconds,” or tarnished by immature motivations and desires involving physicality, and “knows no art” (11) or “artificiality” (Booth 428).

After the speaker presents this argument about the emptiness of seeking the pleasures of the external and vows to remain invested in purely emotional love with the beloved, he, in a particularly jarring shift in tone, directly addresses some “suborned informer” and commands him “Hence” (11) in the first line of the couplet. Though many critics interpret the phrase as a reference to the beloved himself or some unnamed third party,<sup>8</sup> certain features that provide internal consistency to the four sonnets in this final section about power over time also suggest that this informer is yet another extension of the speaker’s consistent personification of time. One, the commanding, dominant tone of line 14 in sonnet 125 is akin to that of the opening line of sonnet 123 in which the speaker demands that time will not take credit for changing him since his essence will remain unadulterated: “No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change” (1). Furthermore, these two lines are arguably the most passionately aggressive in the entire sequence about the beloved. Both statements make a direct command; both contain language indicative of anger and independence; and both begin with stressed, single syllable words that alone comprise commands. Also, each couplet in these final poems about power over time (excluding sonnet 126 which lacks a couplet) addresses time as the speaker seeks to thwart time; accordingly, that the couplet of 125 should operate comparably is likely. More specifically, Booth notes that the couplet of 125 “is the third of three successive couplets that pertain to solemn oaths and do not

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<sup>8</sup> Booth claims that “the *informer* would seem to be a straw man addressed in the character of a self-serving toady who has accused the speaker of some breach of the beloved’s faith; however, since *thy* and *thee* in quatrain 3 indicate that the poem addresses the beloved, the couplet can also seem to be addressed to the beloved” (429). Heather Dubrow Ousby, examining different Renaissance meanings of “suborn” and “inform,” attests that the informer is the beloved, from whom the speaker once received inspiration. She suggests that the speaker is exerting independence from the beloved because of a betrayal (23). Combellack disagrees: “There are four persons involved...the Friend; a Suborner, who for some reason procured an Informer to make to the Friend false accusations against Shakespeare; the Informer, whomever the Informer was; and Shakespeare” (25).

immediately pertain to the sonnets they conclude” (429). These vows, arriving at the end of each of these three sonnets, are mismatched because of the abrupt shifts in tone and subject matter they create, so the unexpected appearance of personified time following three quatrains in which time is seemingly absent would follow in this pattern of discord.

But of even greater significance is the claim that a reading of time as the informer, despite apparent dissonance, does follow logically with the ideas in sonnet 125 and the arguments about time within this unit of poems featuring personified time. In sonnet 123 the speaker depicts time as a liar who promotes the illusion that things change fundamentally, while it actually only inflicts change on the external and never the internal essence of things or people. Then, in sonnet 124 the speaker claims that time exerts control over love felt by those who are less concerned with the emotional rewards of love and who therefore experience a limited, inferior type of love contaminated with selfish concerns. Sonnet 125 then focuses on another type of love also blemished by a different superficial motivation: concern with external appearance, or “form and favor” (5). And if time, as the speaker establishes in sonnets 123 and 124, has control over the external as well as false love fueled by selfishness, then it follows logically that time would also reign over the type of false love the speaker explores in sonnet 125: that love which is tainted by obsession with the physical. Therefore, the speaker addresses time, the same force that has driven the preceding couplets, in the couplet of sonnet 125 in order to distinguish once again false love from the pure, true, and eternal love he experiences. The speaker and any other “true soul[s]” (13) like him who experience genuine love, “mixed with [no] seconds” (11), whether those adulterations involve physical or self-serving desires, “stand least in...[the] control” (14) of time, this “suborned informer.”

Time is a “suborned informer” because he is a liar “paid to bear false witness” (Booth



428), not only for the reason sonnet 123 purports, but also because he fools people into believing that giving in to the base desires discussed in 124 and 125 will be rewarding. He falsely informs people that the world is constantly changing through the illusion he creates of external change. And, as the speaker notes in sonnet 125, these people in turn figuratively pay time, who fosters the illusions obstructing true love, “too much rent” (6) by seeking gratification of the base desires: “form and favor” and “compound sweet.” They dwell on physical beauty and chase after what is beautiful, instead of what is true, because time steals beauty away constantly. These distractions lead them to “lose all or more” (6), to become wasted, or physically and even sexually exhausted, by focusing only on what they can see, and to become “in their gazing spent” (8). And the speaker and others like him, the “true soul[s]” (13), do not fall for time’s tricks since they are content in their pure love characterized by emotional rewards, which is beyond time’s control and is never in flux (13). Even though they, like all mortals, remain “most impeached” by time and therefore still vulnerable to the physical decay and disintegration he causes, they “stand...least in [his] control” (14) because of both their awareness of time’s falsehood and their personal commitments to true and genuine love.

Furthermore, Booth contends that the speaker could have intended to create a pun with the word “informer” since the word conveys the secondary meaning of, “‘a dweller on form’—‘an in-form-er’” (429). He then glosses the word, as a pun, to mean “‘one who cares that things be done in proper form’” (429), but in the context of time as the informer, this potential pun gains additional significance and acts as supplemental evidence that the informer could in fact refer to time. The speaker has already established in sonnet 123 that time does have power over external appearance and that the physical is actually the only aspect of the world which time can distort and over which time rules; thus, time described as “a dweller on form” is in accordance

with the speaker's premises. Time dwells on external appearance because he cannot alter the inner essence of things, and his illusion of destructive change depends on external change to be apparent.

As the speaker further checks time's power in sonnet 126, he makes several startling declarations about time and the beloved in a poem that is a formal deviation itself, consisting of only twelve lines in rhyming couplets. The sonnet is a warning to the beloved that, although he may have aged well, may still be beautiful, and may seem to be becoming more and more beautiful or "sweet" (4) as time passes, he should still remain wary of the effects that time will have on his appearance. The speaker concludes in the opening that the beloved must have control over time to have been able to avoid the damaging effects of time on his appearance and notes that his beloved has "pow'r" (1) over time and "holds Time's fickle glass, his sickle, hour" (2). The beloved, despite all the predictions the speaker made in the previous sonnets otherwise, has amazingly "by waning grown" (3), or become more beautiful as he has aged over time, while the poet himself has been "withering" (4) in appearance as this growth in the beloved's beauty has occurred (4).

Next, in line 5 the speaker gives a very specific definition of nature as a "sovereign mistress over wrack" (5). Suddenly, the speaker claims that natural forces control all acts of destruction, and he implies in this line that nature in turn controls the primary agent of that destruction, time. Lines 6 through 8 elaborate upon this control that the speaker assigns to nature, as he explains that the beloved's ability to defy the physical signs of aging has less to do with the beloved's seeming control of time and more to do with the power and will of nature. Nature has "plucked" the beloved "back" from appearing old as he "goest onwards" (6) in his life span. Nature, it seems, has a specific purpose for maintaining the beloved this way: to

“disgrace” “Time” and “kill” the only force time has over creation, his “wretched minute” (8).

The poet now seems to suggest that time has very little power after all and that nature is the controlling force, which has only chosen to keep the beloved beautiful as her “minion” in order to flaunt or assert her power over the world and time.

However, the last four lines of this pivotal sonnet explain that although nature has disgraced time and has prevented it from damaging the beloved’s appearance for some time, her meddling will not continue forever. In the poet’s final warning to the beloved, he urges the beloved to “fear her” (9), meaning Nature, because although she has kept him beautiful for most of his life, or “detain[ed]” (10) him, she must eventually and inevitably submit her “minion” to time: She “may detain but not still keep her treasure” (10). Time, as the speaker argues in the final four sonnets, tarnishes outward appearance, and once nature can no longer “detain” the beloved’s beauty, time will certainly wreak its ravaging effects on him. In other words, nature, as Booth claims, “holds ruin in submission and so can check its course” (432), but she may only “delay” (11) ruin; time will destroy the beloved’s appearance at a later date. Nature will have to “answer” “her audit,” or pay the bill for which she has gotten an extension or “delay” (11) for a long time. The payment, naturally, will be the beauty that nature owes to time, the beauty she has allowed the beloved to keep as he aged. She will offer “her quietus” (12) or settlement, to time, the force that changes the external. She will have to “render” (12), or give over, the beloved and his beauty to time, and time will in turn melt down his physical appearance by removing that beauty. Therefore, time’s power is slightly limited since nature can postpone his destruction if she chooses, but time will inevitably wreak his havoc even when she interferes.

The missing couplet ominously imitates nature’s payment; the beloved will one day lack beauty, and she will one day lack “her treasure” (10), just as this sonnet lacks a couplet. And

since he consistently places solutions to the problems he discusses in the couplets, the speaker asserts with the lack of couplet in this sonnet that he has finished seeking solutions. The primary problem of the sonnets, the question of how to combat time's destruction, is no longer a matter of concern. Because he has altered his philosophies about love, the speaker no longer values the physical. And since time's power is defined by external change, the speaker has resolved his fear of time's passage. The problem presented in sonnet 126 is the beloved's; the speaker has attained acceptance of time's passage because he decides its effects are actually minimal.

### **Freedom from Time**

This final sonnet in the sequence addressed to the beloved not only marks the ending of a unit of poems that personify time but also designates the final comment the poet expresses concerning the effects of time. At the start of the sequence, the speaker tests the waters as he begins to explore the problem of time's destruction and to personify time. He imputes only a small number of attributes to personified time because he is in this state of exploration. As he continues to write about time throughout the sequence, he studies more of time's effects through further personification. He simultaneously takes a stance against time by claiming that his verse will preserve the beloved, but his lack of confidence leaves him hesitant. He begins to allot more and more attributes to personified time throughout the middle of the sequence, and these extended descriptions of time reflect his growing intimidation. Dissatisfied with this means of preservation, the poet ceases to write of immortalizing the beloved through verse in the later sonnets and instead expresses an altered attitude of mastery over time, which coincides with a stronger, more confident presence. Once his ideas change, he no longer personifies time on numerous levels because he realizes its power is small, even illusory, and thus no longer fears it. The very act of personification provides clarity for the poet not only because it helps him to learn

about and eventually to understand his subject but also because treating time like a person makes the non-human force easier for a human being to comprehend. Personifying time allows the speaker to conceptually fight it as he would a person, and in thinking about time this way, he learns so much that he exposes time for what it really is—an illusion of change that only really changes the external. Personifying time leads the speaker's voice out; writing about time as a person helps him to face it and enables him to interact with it on his own level.

Furthermore, the speaker's personification of time throughout the sequence illuminates several significant insights. By the end of the sequence, the poet confidently claims that time will not fundamentally change him, the love he feels for the beloved, nor the beloved himself. He decides that because their love is genuine, the beloved and he are invincible to time's fury, which can only destroy and change outward appearances, not their fundamental essences nor their love. Further, he seems to realize the beloved's character is more important than the beloved's physical beauty, and this realization leads to a celebration of the speaker's genuine emotions. And because these emotions are not superficial, the speaker is emotionally safe from time's devastation. His final resolutions to remain true and to cease his ruminations about time are philosophical, rather than active, but this newfound resolve absolves him of the need to take action. He no longer needs to fortify himself and the beloved against the future damage time will inflict upon them because he has changed his very definition of time. His resistance to time now takes the form of his assertion that time cannot change the fundamental nature of the world, but can only change outward appearance. In essence, the speaker's conquest of time results from his contemplation and subsequent personification of time, contemplation that the speaker claims as the source of self-decay in the middle sonnets but that eventually leads to the new philosophies that resolve his fears.

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## **Vita**

Triche Roberson was born in Metairie, Louisiana. She later received her Bachelor of Arts in psychology with a minor in English literature from Loyola University New Orleans in 2003. After working diligently as a psychometrist for four years, she decided to pursue her dream of becoming a scholar of poetry. She received her Master of Arts in English with concentrations in early English literature and technical writing from the University of New Orleans in 2010. This thesis interlaces her interests in 17<sup>th</sup> Century English literature, poetry, poetic form, and human love.