

baffles many readers in this sonnet, however, is the fact that the bird seems to change its sex from female to male within a single sentence, and switches it again back to female two lines later: 'As Philomel in summer's front doth sing, / And stops *his* pipe in growth of riper days' (ll.7-8), 'Than when *her* mournful hymns did hush the night' (l.10).³

Philomela (Philomel) is a mythological name for the nightingale. In the Greek myth, Philomela was, in most versions of this legend, the name of a girl who was raped and had her tongue cut out, and who finally turned into a bird. The major Elizabethan source for this myth was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁴ In this tradition, Philomela was almost constantly represented as a female bird, so most editors of Shakespeare's text tended to assume the 'his' (l.8) of this sonnet to be a compositor's error, and to emend it to 'her.'⁵ Several recent editors, however, have been more willing to retain the original reading of 'his,' thinking of the error as a kind of poet's unconscious 'slip' rather than as that of a compositor.⁶

Basically siding with these recent editors who keep Q₁'s reading of 'his,' the present paper will examine the literary and social implications of this bird's 'sex change' in Shakespeare's poetic language, and contend that the poet is creating here a quite new *aitia*, or etiological myth, of the songbird in a manner more suitable for early modern sensibilities.

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One of the earliest poetic references to the songbird's unstable position in the history of Western literature is found in a simile that Penelope uses in her conversation with Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. After his return to Ithaca, Odysseus is still disguised as a stranger, and Penelope does not know the fact of her husband's presence in front of her. She tells him that too many cares prevent her from sleeping at night, and likens her uneasy, wavering mind to the movement of a nightingale that keeps quickly switching its position in the woods as it warbles in spring.

At postquam nox venit, cepitque somnus omnes,
Iaceo in lecto, densae autem mihi circa valde cor
Acutae cogitationes lugentem destruunt.
Sicut autem quando Pandarei filia floridula luscinia
Bene canit vere recens stante novo
Arborum in foliis sedens densis,
Quae *frequenter versans fundit personantem vocem*,
Filium autem lugens Itylum dilectum, quem quondam ferro
Interfecit per insanias, filium Zethi regis:
Sic & *mibi bifariam animus movetur huc et illuc*.
[Sleep seizes everyone as night comes,
But as I lie in my bed, intense and acute cares
Torment me around my very heart that is mourning.

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Just as Pandareus' daughter, a little blooming nightingale,
Sings beautifully while spring remains fresh and new,
Sitting in dense foliage of woods,
And *frequently turning round, pours out her resounding voice*,
For she laments her beloved son, Itylus, son of King Zethus,
Whom she killed with iron because of madness,
So my soul is moved in two ways, hither and thither.] (Odyssea, XIX. 515-524)⁷

Here, Penelope says she is wondering whether she should keep on rejecting her powerful suitors and wait for her husband's return or whether she should yield and get remarried to one of them since her son Telemachus is grown up and can be independent.

The above is an interesting classical example since the poetic imageries of the nightingale's resounding warbles and its quick bodily movement are used figuratively to represent the speaking woman's mind and also her social concern related to her possible remarriage. The issue of the voice of the songbird has been both poetical and political since Homeric times. This Homeric version of the nightingale myth is slightly different from the Ovidian version since it is Progne, mother of Itylus, and not Philomela that is metamorphosed into the nightingale. And we should also pay attention to the fact that there were several different Latin versions of Homer's poems circulating widely in England in the late sixteenth century.

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When Renaissance poets confronted the ancient world and found some unbridgeable disjuncture, not a few of them sought to create 'new etiological myths' which could 'contain the facts of loss and of anachronism.'⁸ Renaissance poets' imitations of classical precedents were, in one way, the act of creating new myths, whether successful or not. Shakespeare's representation of the songbird, too, has something to do with such 'creative anachronism.' But before I discuss Shakespeare's Philomela, I would like to look first at a couple of Elizabethan poems that also deal with the Philomela legend.

George Gascoigne's poem, *The Complaynt of Philomene* (1576), which was dedicated to Lord Gray of Wilton, Knight of the Order of the Garter, is mostly based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but it has a moralizing narrative frame. The poet falls asleep while he is listening to a nightingale's warbling. A nymph appears in his dream and tells him the story of Philomela (Philomene).

The poet is curious about several notes that he finds in the nightingale's song. They sound like 'Tereu, Tereu,' 'fy, fy, fy, fy, fy,' and '*Nemesis, Nemesis.*' After he listens to the nymph's story of Philomela, he learns what these notes stand for. What is apparent in Gascoigne's version is that it is moralizing the Ovidian story. At the end of the poem, the nymph turns out to be the goddess *Nemesis*, and she narrates her revenge on the perpetrator, Tereus, who is metamorphosed into a male lapwing.

She calles on *Nemesis*
And *Nemesis* am I,
The Goddessse of just revenge,
Who let no blame go by.

[.....]

And though hir foe be fledde,
But whither knows not she,
And like hir selfe transformed eke
A selly byrde to bee:

On him this sharpe revenge
The Gods and I did take,
He neither can beholde his brats,
Nor is belovde of make.

[.....]

As sone as she hath hatcht,
Hir little yong ones runne,
For feare their dame should serve them efte,
As *Progne* had begonne.

And rounde about the fields
The furious father flies,
To seke his sonne, and filles the ayre
With loude lamenting cries.

This lothsome life he leads
By our almightie dome,
And thus sings she, where company
But very seldome come. (pp.114-116)⁹

While Gascoigne moralizes the Philomela legend following the medieval tradition of the moralized Ovid,¹⁰ the effect of the revenge on Tereus, who is now metamorphosed into the lapwing, is anything but tragic. What strikes the reader is an awkward picture of the lapwing father who is comically alienated from his family. His desperate 'loud lamenting cries' are not heard by his young ones.

The Complaynt of Philomene is concluded by the poet, who has been awakened from his dream:

Bearre with me (Lord) my lusting dayes are done,
Fayre *Phylomene* forbad me fayre and flat

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To like such love, as is with lust begonne.
The lawful love is best, and I like that.
Then if you see, that (Lapwinglike) I chaunce,
(I take hard taske) or but to give a glance,
At bewties blase: for such a willful breache,
Of promise made, my Lord shall do no wrong,
To say (George) thinke on *Philomelâes* song. (pp,118-119)

The tone of self-mockery here reminds us of the fact that, although the poet is supposed to sing of Philomela's tragic experience, he fails to understand or represent correctly the suffering voice of the victimized woman. Instead, Gascoigne's poem tends towards the self-referential and meta-poetic to some degree since the representation of female voice is framed within the poet's narrative.

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Dealing with the same Philomela legend, the poet's self-interest is more outspoken in poem 4 of Sir Philip Sidney's *Certain Sonnets* (c.1577-c.1581).

The nightingale, as soon as April bringeth
Unto her rested sense a perfect waking,
While late bare earth, proud of new clothing, springeth,
Sings out her woes, a thorn her song-book making,
And mournfully bewailing
Her throate in tunes expresseth
What grieffe her breast oppresseth
For Tereus' force on her chaste will prevailing.
O Philomela fair, O take some gladness,
That here is juster cause of plaintful sadness: 10
Thine earth now springs, mine fadeth;
Thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth.

Alas, *she hath no other cause of anguish*

But Tereus' love, on her by strong hand wroken;
Wherein she suffering all her spirits' languish,
Full woman-like, complains her will was broken.

But I, who daily craving

Cannot have to content me,

Have more cause to lament me,

Since wanting is more woe than too much having. 20

O Philomela fair, O take some gladness,

That here is juster cause of plaintful sadness;
Thine earth now springs, mine fadeth;
Thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth.¹¹

Here the poet obviously fails to represent the victimized woman's suffering. He claims that the poet has more cause to lament himself than Philomel has to lament her suffering.

Since such misogynic self-centeredness is one characteristic of the Petrarchan tradition, Sidney's case in the above sonnet is not necessarily a rare exception. I would like to draw attention, however, to the fact that in Sidney, as well as in Gascoigne, greater anxiety is to be found on the part of the narrator-poet than on the part of the woman who is the victim of violence. What is at issue here is the question of whether the poet's discourse can represent women's voice. Although it is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss how misogynic early modern English poets were, we should note here that they were at least conscious of the limitations of their poetic language concerning certain issues.

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The present paper contends that Shakespeare was more frank in admitting this kind of discursive limitation than Gascoigne or Sidney. But, before we discuss Shakespeare's stance on this issue, let us examine his peculiar way of re-writing traditional subtexts and creating new etiological myths.

The way Shakespeare rewrites traditions is often anachronistic. One of his techniques is to reverse the sequential narrative order of the subtext, as we find in sonnet 99:

The forward violet thus did I chide:
'Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,
If not from my love's breath? The purple pride
Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells
In my love's veins thou hast too grossly dyed.' (1-5)

The subtexts here are certain conventional similes and metaphors that compare a woman's physical features to flowers. We know of course that violets have existed and been what they look like now since ancient times and that poets liken the colour and odour of their mistresses to those of the violet. Shakespeare, however, reverses this process and creates an etiological myth of the violet with its sweet colour and odour. This etiology is psychologically interesting since those lovers who are reminded of their beloved by looking at violets should feel far more severe pains than those who are reminded of violets by looking at their beloved. These tricks of creative anachronism and psychoanalytical etiology are characteristic of our poet's style, and occur frequently in his sonnets.

Among many examples of Shakespeare's anachronistic rewriting of classical precedents, I would like to pay attention especially to those that involve the question of the validity of poetic discourse. In

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sonnet 106, the poet goes over many ancient writings looking for any descriptions of beautiful persons:

When in the chronicle of wasted time
I see descriptions of the fairest wights,
And beauty making beautiful old rhyme
[.....]
So all their praises are but prophecies
Of *this our time*, all you prefiguring,
And for they looked but with divining eyes
They had not skill enough your worth to sing:
For we, which now behold *these present days*,
Have eyes to wonder, but *lack tongues* to praise.

(1-3, 9-14)¹²

Using the same trick of anachronism again, Shakespeare insists that his beloved youth is the most beautiful creature in history and that all literature in the past was nothing but insufficient divination of his present worth. While ancient poets' 'skill' was limited because they could not see his beloved youth but only divine his beautiful image, poets of Shakespeare's times can actually witness the youth's beauty but 'lack tongues to praise,' just like Shakespeare's mythical songbird, Philomela. This example of his anachronistic rhetoric is quite significant to us because it suggests that poets of Shakespeare's times are witnessing greater wonders and feeling stronger anxiety at the same time than ancient poets did about the insufficiency of their language for the purpose of describing those wonders. Shakespeare's etiological myth of beauty concerns something that is being born or taking place in his own times. His concern, in other words, is social and cultural as well as personal.

In sonnet 107, which comes after the above sonnet in the Q₁ edition, the poet's social concern becomes stronger:

The mortal moon hath eclipse endured,
And the sad augurs *mock their own presage*.
Uncertainties now crown themselves assured,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
Now with the drops of this most balmy time
My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,
Since spite of him *I'll live in this poor rhyme*,
While he insults o'er *dull and speechless tribes*. (5-12)¹³

The interpretation of the sonnet above is highly controversial, and especially the line, 'mortal moon hath eclipse endured,' has been variously interpreted. This might refer to Elizabeth I's death, as John Kerrigan and other critics maintain.¹⁴ And the lines that follow might refer to James I's succession. Yet, although it is impossible to say anything decisive about the precise

historical background of this sonnet, what *is* apparent here is the general atmosphere of some immense social change and the sense of anxiety and relief that the lines reveal.

In the present study, however, I would like to draw attention to the sonnet's context of being the poet professing his recovery of poetic resourcefulness. He boasts that he will live forever in his poems, following the Horatian and Ovidian traditions. On the other hand, 'Death' is associated with 'dull and speechless tribes.' In Shakespeare's love sonnets, the question of the poets' loss and recovery of their 'tongues' is closely related to the social fluctuations and anxieties of his times. The silent Philomela or the poet, however, is hopeful of discovering a new language that will be appropriate for her/his times.

CONCLUSION

Now I would like to return to the textual question of sonnet 102. In that sonnet, the poet likens himself to the nightingale, or Philomela, and the bird seemingly switches its sex from female to male, and back to female again. Most editors preferred to emend 'his' (Q₁) to 'her' because Philomela was constantly represented as female in poetic tradition, but recent editors, like Kerrigan, Evans, and Burrow, choose to retain Q₁'s reading of 'his,' since they think of 'the slip' as being the poet's rather than a compositor's. If this was the case then the poet's slip may have been of a literary or psychological nature. I think both are likely, but we should also pay attention to the fact that the poet who likened himself to Philomela was immensely aware of the limitations of the poetic language of his times, and that his anxiety about poetic language seems to have been closely associated with his anxiety about the social changes of his times.

The strange sex change of the songbird that we witness in sonnet 102 (Q₁) is likely to have been a slip on the poet's part, but it seems *unlikely* that it can have been solely due to some personal psychological or sexual trait. It, rather, would seem to be an example of Shakespeare's tendency towards etiological myth-making, as mentioned above.

Reading the slip in this way, the poet, who was anxious about the limitations of the poetic language of his time, was especially aware of its limitations in representing the female voice. The male songbird, or the poet, who assumes a female voice sometimes fails to maintain that performance, and reveals that he is no more than a male bird. The reason that the poet was acutely aware of these limitations was, on the one hand, probably due to some personal experiences of the poet himself, but on the other, due to the immense social changes that were taking place in his times.

The etiological myth of the sexually unstable songbird is, thus, a kind of *metonymy*, as Roman Jakobson defines the term,¹⁵ both for the poet and for his contemporary society of early modern England with its anxiety at a time of great social changes encompassing the death of the queen and the succession of the Scottish king.

Shakespeare was frank, and indeed honest, in admitting the limitations of male language as we see in his 'Dark Lady' sonnets.¹⁶ To him, the language that the poets of his times used was undeniably misogynic. When the disguised heroine of *Twelfth Night* laments the difficulty for her

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in playing a man's role assuming a male voice, the play is hiding the fact that it is the poet himself who finds difficulty in representing the female voice. In other words, our poet was seeking a new language or etiology that would be suitable for his Philomela in early modern England.

As I am man,
My state is desperate for my master's love;
As I am woman — now alas the day! —
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!
O time, thou must untangle this, not I; (2.2.33-37)^{17 · 18}

Notes

- 1 For Shakespeare's sonnets, all references are to G. B. Evans, ed., *The Sonnets*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 2 E.g. George Gascoigne, *The Complaynt of Philomene* (1576), Sir Philip Sidney, Poem 4, *Certain Sonnets* (c.1577-c.1581), and Walter Raleigh, 'The Nymph's Reply' (1600). See notes 9 and 11 below.
- 3 My italics.
- 4 *Metamorphoses*, vi.438-674.
- 5 See Evans, pp.198f.
- 6 John Kerrigan, ed., *William Shakespeare The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (1986; London: Penguin Books, 1999), Evans (1996), and Colin Burrow, ed., *William Shakespeare The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) keep Q₁'s 'his.'
- 7 The reference is to *HOMERI ODYSSEA, ID EST, DE REBUS AB ULYSSE Batrachmyomachia, & Hymni*, Greek-Latin bilingual, third edition (Geneva: E. Vignon, 1586). The second edition was published in 1572. The Greek text was translated into Latin probably by Franciscus Portus. My English translation and italics. For these editions, see Tetsuro Shimizu, 'Making "blind Homer sing to me" : 16th-Century Student Editions of Greek Poems and Marlowe's Art of Imitation,' *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol.50 (2012), pp.16-36. See also Gregory Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.7-9.
- 8 Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), pp.30f: "In the literature of the Renaissance, intertextuality has to be analyzed as an interplay between stabilizing etiologies and a destabilizing perception of disjuncture. New etiological myths had to be produced which could contain the facts of loss and of anachronism, myths which could no longer assert the universal unity for which Dante fought and wrote. The Renaissance did produce such a myth or cluster of myths in its pervasive imagery of resurrection and rebirth, imagery still reflected in our period term. [...] The discovery of the ancient world imposed enormous anxiety upon the humanist Renaissance, but its living poetry represents a series of victories over anxiety, based upon a courage that confronts the model without neurotic paralysis and uses anxiety to discover selfhood. The relationship to the subtext is deliberately and lucidly written into the poem as a visible and acknowledged construct."
- 9 George Gascoigne, *Certaine Notes of Instruction in English Verse. 1575: The Steele Glas ... 1576.*

- The Complaynt of Philomene ... 1576*, English Reprints. Web. <https://books.google.co.jp/books?id=OCLC03857794&id=ZV0LAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&hl=ja#v=onepage&q&f=false>.
- 10 E. g. *L'Ovide moralisé*. For editions of *L'Ovide moralisé*, see http://www.arlima.net/mp/ovide_moralise.html.
- 11 Katherine Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sir Philip Sidney The Major Works*, Oxford World Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.15f. My italics.
- 12 My italics.
- 13 My italics.
- 14 Kerrigan, pp.313-320.
- 15 Roman Jakobson, 'The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles,' in David Lodge and Nigel Wood, eds., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, third and Kindle edition (2008; Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp.164-168.
- 16 C. L. Barber, 'An Essay on the Sonnets,' in Paul J. Alpers, ed., *Elizabethan Poetry: Modern Essays in Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp.299-320 (esp. 317ff.).
- 17 The reference is to William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). My italics.
- 18 The author is grateful to Dr. Andrew Rayment for helping him to correct errors in English in the draft of this article, although whatever errors that may be found here are solely the author's. This article is part of the results of the project 'Small-Size Editions of Classical Literature: Their Circulation and Influence on the English Literature of 1580s,' which was supported by the Japanese government's Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (2010-14: Tetsuro Shimizu: Project No.22520232).