

CLASSICS BEYOND ANTIQUITY SERIES

Classical Combos



PLATO

AND

SHAKESPEARE

Love through the Ages



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

CASE STUDY: CLASSICISING SHAKESPEARE AND 'LOVE THROUGH THE AGES'

Aim: By showing how the cultural language of Platonic love informs Shakespeare's sonnets, this material aims to introduce students to the pervasiveness of the language of Classics, and to enrich study of the module, 'Love through the Ages', component of OCR English A level.

The aim is to show that Shakespeare employs and subverts a Platonic lexicon of desire throughout the Sonnets. Though Shakespeare had no direct access to reading Plato in Greek, he did have some Latin and Ficino's translations and adaptations of Plato were in wide circulation at this time. Ben Jonson, with whom Shakespeare collaborated in the volume *Loves Martyr* knew Plato well and had a copy of the text.

A. MODELS OF LOVE



Sonnets 1-126 are replete with homoerotic undertones and address an unnamed 'young man'. None of the sexual relationships depicted are marital, not all of them are conventionally heterosexual. Shakespeare envisages love through a variety of potentially transgressive scenarios; he pushes at the boundaries of what it means to love, to perceive beauty, and what love and beauty do to both lover and beloved – and he uses the language of Plato to do so.

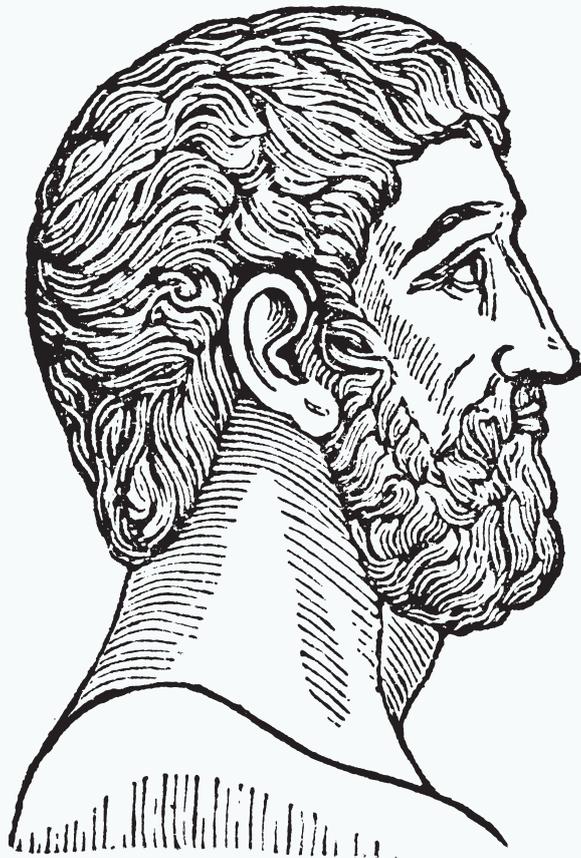
Questions to consider

Does Shakespeare indicate an interest in 'Greek love' with these homoerotic undertones?

What were the hallmarks and supposed benefits of homoerotic love in Classical Greece?

Passage for Discussion

"I cannot say what greater good there is for a young boy than a gentle lover, or for a lover than a boy to love. There is a certain guidance each person needs throughout life if he is to live well, and nothing imparts this guidance as well as love? What sort of guidance do I mean? I mean a sense of shame at acting shamefully and a sense of pride in acting well. Without these nothing great or fine can be accomplished in public or private...If there was a way to start a city or an army made up of lovers and the boys they love! Theirs would be the best possible system of society, for they would hold back from all that is shameful and seek honour in each other's eyes" (Symposium, 178c-d).



B. GOOD AND BAD LOVE

The opening sonnets and the so-called dark-lady sonnets (127-154) seem to operate with an opposition between 'good' and 'bad' love. The external beauty of the young woman is evident to the poet through his senses, but her inner nature is not to be trusted, leading him to mistrust the senses. Whilst the fair youth is praised for both inner goodness and outer beauty, the outward allure of the dark lady covers an inner wickedness. "The better angel is a man right fair;/The worser spirit a woman coloured ill" (144. 3-4). The dark lady sequence introduces a baser form of love. Just as the Platonic ideal of beauty can be perceived in the physical world, but only as an inferior copy of an original, so here physical attraction is only a shadow of true, Platonic love. This is the subject of Sonnet 129, which describes lust, an inferior species of love that does not ennoble a lover, but causes him to be hateful and mad. We see here the deployment of that central contrast between a vulgar and a heavenly love, so central to the Symposium and transmitted forcefully via the Neo-Platonists and Renaissance philosophers. True love is given Platonic form, immortalised in Sonnet 116: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments"; the phrase 'a marriage of true minds' suggests the Platonic union of souls.

Passage for Discussion:

"There are two kinds of love, a common as well as a heavenly love....love is not itself noble and worthy of praise; that depends on whether the sentiments produced in us are themselves noble. The common Aphrodite's love is himself truly common. As such it strikes whenever it gets the chance. This, of course, is the love felt by the 'vulgar', who are attached to women no less than to boys, to the body more than to the soul, and to the least intelligent partners, since all they care about is completing the sexual act... Contrast this with the love of heavenly Aphrodite. This goddess, whose descent is purely male (hence this love is for boys), is considerably older and therefore free from the lewdness of youth. That's why those who are inspired by her love are attracted to the male; they find pleasure in what is by nature stronger and more intelligent....a man who falls in love with a young man is generally prepared to share everything with the one he loves- he is eager, in fact, to spend the rest of his life with him"

"What counts as base love in this context? I'll tell you: it is the common, vulgar lover, who loves the body rather than the soul, the man whose love is bound to be inconstant since he loves what is itself mutable and unstable. The moment the body is no longer in bloom he flies off and away, his promises and vows in tatters behind him. How different from this is the man who loves the right sort of character, and who remains its lover for life, attached as he is to something that is permanent" (Symposium 180d-181c; 183e-184a).

Questions to consider

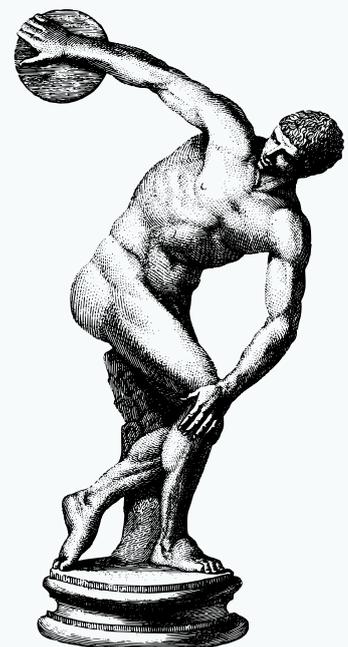
Why do thinkers such as Plato and Shakespeare suppose sensual love to be an inferior form of love?

What is 'a marriage of true minds' and how does a Platonic subtext help us to understand this concept?

How can the misleading potential of beauty can be thwarted? Despite the disdain for women expressed in the passage, Plato gives the highest insights on love to a woman in this work – Diotima. Why do you think Plato uses a female character to discuss homoerotic desire?

C. BEAUTY AND DESIRE

Plato elevates homoerotic desire into a transcendental aesthetic force, and here beauty plays the central role. The Sonnets give a privileged role to beauty – and to its effects on a lover (e.g. Sonnet 29):



“Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate”

The experience of lack is crucial and nowhere is this felt more acutely than in the presence of the beloved whom the speaker has invested with perfection. Herein lies their service to the lover: the presence of the beautiful beloved in the fullness of their being arouses a sense of defectiveness in the lover ('myself almost despising'), coupled with a desire to capture that beauty that resides outside oneself ('and then my state... arising'). The lover then makes a resourceful gesture to capture the beauty of the beloved and fashion himself in the other's beautiful image 'as singer of hymns'. In one's reach towards beauty's ideal, a creative potential in the self is unleashed, so that, as if in a mirror, one is seeing one's own reflection in the beauty of the other – one's creative, beautiful, self. So, Shakespeare writes 'but here's the joy, my friend and I are one' XLII; 'Thou are all the better part of me' XXXIV.



Passages for discussion on the experience of desire/difference between lover and beloved:

“At the time at which someone desires and loves something, do they actually have what they desire and love at that time? No one is in need of those things they already have” (Symposium, 200a-b).

“What is beautiful and graceful deserves to be loved, and this is perfect and highly blessed; but being a lover takes a different form, which I have just described’ [i.e. deficient and in need]. (Symposium, 204c).

*“The lover of beautiful things has a desire; what does he desire?
That they become his own.*

But that answer calls for still another question: ‘what will this person have when the beautiful things they want become their own?...Suppose someone changes the question and asks you this: a lover of good things has a desire; what does he desire?

That they become their own.

And what will they have when the good things they want become their own?

This time it’s easier to answer: they will have happiness” (Symposium, 204e-205a)

“This, then, is the aim of love. In view of that, how do people pursue it if they are truly in love? What do they do with the zeal and eagerness we call love....it is giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul” (Symposium 206b-206c).

Questions to consider

How is the experience of desire figured in the Sonnet and by Plato?

What does this Sonnet begin to reveal about the relationship between beauty and creativity?

Why does the experience of beauty issue in creative expression?

D. LOVE, BEAUTY AND PROCREATION

Sonnets 1-126 emphasize the themes of beauty, love, reproduction and immortality. The first sonnet takes it as given that “From fairest creatures we desire increase”—that is, that we desire beautiful creatures to multiply, in order to preserve their “beauty’s rose” for the world. When the parent dies (“as the riper should by time decease”), the child might continue their beauty (“His tender heir might bear his memory”). The central premise of Sonnet 1 is that beauty should strive to propagate itself.

The young man violates the norm that “by law of nature thy out bound to breed”, by wasting beauty on himself; he will bury his “content” within his flower’s own bud (that is, he will not pass his beauty on). The image of the young man “contracted” to his own “bright eyes”, feeding his “light’s flame” with “self-substantial fuel,” is an image of self-absorption. This is followed by an injunction to change his ways lest beauty withers and disappears; and the couplet summarizes the argument with a new exhortation to “pity the world” and father a child.



Passages for Discussion:

“All human beings are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul, and as soon as we reach a certain age we desire to give birth. No one can give birth in what is ugly; only in something beautiful. When a man and a woman come together to give birth, this is a godly affair. Pregnancy and reproduction – that is an immortal thing for a mortal animal to do and it cannot occur in anything that is out of harmony with all that is godly. Beauty, however, is in harmony with the divine...whenever pregnant animals or persons draw near to beauty, they become gently and joyfully disposed and give birth and reproduce; but near ugliness they are foul-faced and draw back in pain; they turn away and shrink back and do not reproduce because they hold on to what they carry inside them the labour is painful. This is the source of the great excitement about beauty that comes to anyone who is already pregnant and teeming with life: beauty releases them from their great pain. You see what love wants is not beauty, but reproduction and birth in beauty”, (Symposium 206d-e).

Questions to consider

Why does beauty arouse a creative impulse?

Why does the young man's happiness seem to depend on this transmission of beauty?

E. LOVE, LOSS AND TIME

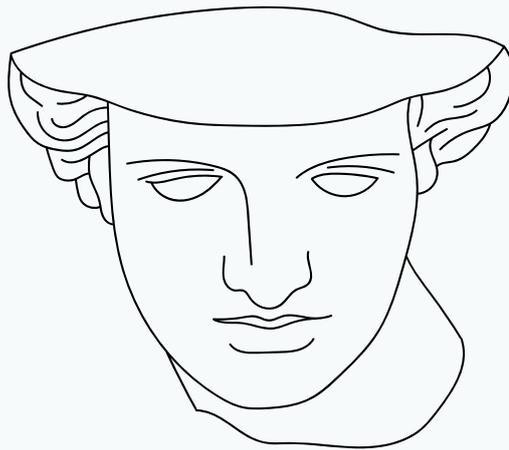
Another dominant theme in the first 19 sonnets is concern with the loss of beauty. We encounter beauty with the senses and see that it is transient. Sonnet 1 hopes that "beauty's rose might never die" and Sonnet 2 picks up this theme warning that the ravages of time will wreak havoc on the youth's beauty. Procreation is presented as a means to thwart this loss – and yet, neither humans nor anything material they create are immune to the ravages of time:



Sonnet 55 asserts that even monuments of stone and marble are subject to the destructive powers of time: "wasteful war shall statues overturn, / And broils root out the work of masonry." Sonnet 60 bemoans the fact that "our minutes hasten to their end" and that "Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth / And delves the parallels in beauty's brow." Sonnet 65 asks, "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?"

Passages for discussion:

"In this way everything mortal is preserved, not like the divine by always being the same in every way, but because what is departing and aging leaves behind something new, something such as it had been. By this device, the mortal shares in immortality, whether it is a body or anything else, while the immortal has another way. So don't be surprised if everything naturally values its own offspring, because it is for the sake of immortality that everything shows this zeal, which is love", (Symposium 208b-c).



Questions to consider

What actions does the awareness of beauty's transience prompt in a lover?

How does procreation thwart this transience if everything material will be destroyed by the march of time?

F. THE POETICS OF REPRODUCTION



In Sonnet 15, there is a new idea:
*“And all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you, I engraft you new”*

Shakespeare is here re-grafting the beautiful beloved, as a rose, with his poetry. Sonnet 17:

*“But were some childe of yours alive that time,
You should live twice, in it and in my rime”* Death will not conquer the youth (Sonnet 18), *“When in eternall lines to time thou grow’st”*

The “procreation” sequence of the first 17 sonnets ended with the speaker’s realization that the young man might not need children to preserve his beauty; he could also live, the speaker writes at the end of Sonnet 17, “in my rhyme.” The emphasis is not on promoting the family lineage, but to make sure that beauty prevails against the ravages of time. (Marriage, as opposed to procreation, for example, is not mentioned; the aim is that ‘beauty’s rose might never die’). Shakespeare’s own poetic lines become the privileged model of lineage: he grow’st in ‘eternall lines’. Sonnet 18, is the first “rhyme”—the speaker’s first attempt to preserve the young man’s beauty for all time.

An important theme of the sonnet (as it is an important theme throughout much of the sequence) is the power of the speaker's poem to defy time and last forever, carrying the beauty of the beloved down to future generations. The beloved's "eternal summer" shall not fade precisely because it is embodied in the sonnet: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see," the speaker writes in the couplet, "So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." Shakespeare's poetics transform and regenerate: "your monument shall be my gentle verse" sonnet 81. Sonnet 65 repeats the sentiment, insisting that unlike "marble [and] the gilded monuments / Of princes," this sonnet will live until Doomsday:

Passages for Discussion:

"Some people are pregnant in body and for this reason turn more to women and pursue love in that way, providing themselves through childbirth with immortality and remembrance and happiness, as they think, for all time to come; while others are pregnant in soul – because there surely are those who are even more pregnant in their souls than in their bodies, and these are pregnant with what it is fitting for a soul to bear and bring to birth. And what is fitting? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, which all poets beget, as well as all the craftsmen who are said to be creative...[These children] are more beautiful and more immortal. Everyone would rather have such children than human ones and would look up to Homer, Hesiod and the other good poets with envy and admiration for the offspring they have left behind – offspring which, because they are immortal themselves, provide their parents with immortal glory and remembrance", (Symposium, 209a-d).

Notice, too that not only (in Sonnet 16, for example) is the language of sexual reproduction dramatically re-crafted to turn poetry into a vehicle for the re-production of the beloved's image, but the poet imagines himself as the desiring lover whose words capture the object and are used to reflect upon his own powers. There is a collapse of speaker and beloved, of self and other, as the speaker appropriates the beloved's beauty for himself: "Tis thee (my self) that for myself I praise, / Painting my age with beauty of thy days' (62.13–14). The desire to possess the beloved translates into a desire to control his image, to fuse desire and poetry together to represent a beauty that transcends time, death, decay: "to times in hope my verse shall stand, / Praising thy worth, despite [time's] cruel hand", Sonnet 60. Shakespeare not only elevates the beauty and desirability of the beloved, but his own skill at depicting these. Poetry becomes a prophylactic against the decay of beauty, in this ideal of poetic immortality, which is perpetuated by future readers: 'His beauty shall in these black lines be seen, / And they shall live, and he in them still green' (63.13–14). The subtext of all of these expressions of hope and confidence is the belief that these poems preserve an example of unchanging, ideal beauty. And as well as praising his subject, the poems seem to flatter the speaker himself, implying that his talent surpasses all of his subjects' beauty and that he should be praised as much if not more than the objects of his adoration. Shakespeare asserts his poetic superiority: "Be most proud of that which I compile/whose influence is thine and born of thee' (78.9-10).

Questions to consider

Why does Shakespeare reinscribe the language of sexual reproduction into his own poetic reproduction?

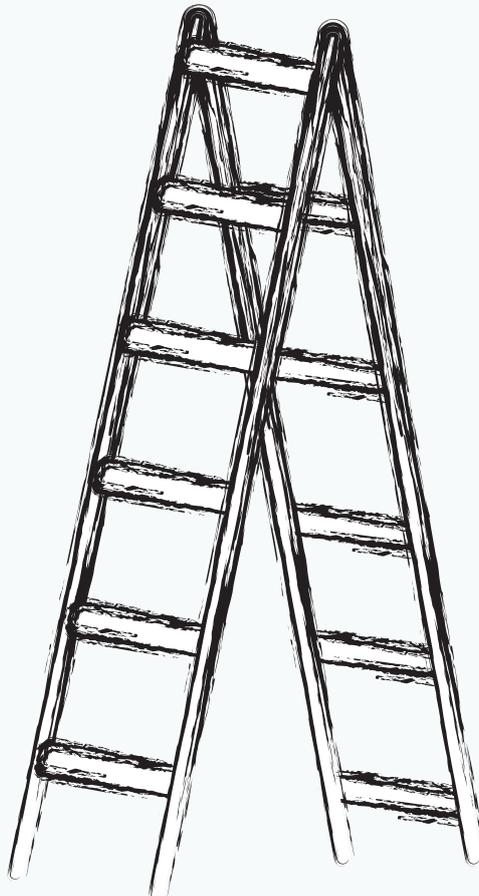
in what ways is poetic reproduction superior to physical reproduction?

To what extent does Shakespeare use a Platonic resonance to make this transition from physical to poetic reproduction?

G. SUBVERTING PLATONISM

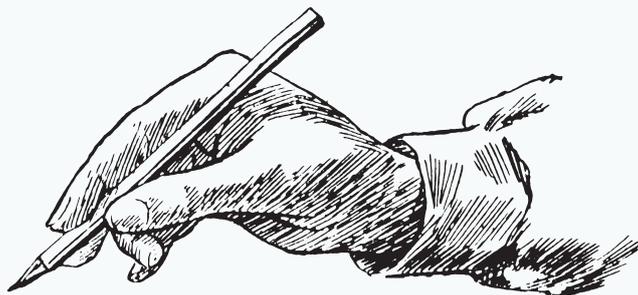
Shakespeare is not only invoking Platonic motifs, he is also subverting them. For in the Platonic narrative of the erotic, the celestial ladder takes pride of place and true creativity is found only in the creative environment of the divine. If we return to Text I from the Symposium, where the aim was someone “who loves the right sort of character, and who remains its lover for life, attached as he is to something that is permanent” (Symposium 180d-181c; 183e-184a), akin to Shakespeare’s ‘marriage of true minds’, then for Plato, this permanent attachment is found only in the divine form of beauty,

“[The Form of Beauty] neither waxes, nor wanes, nor comes to be nor perishes. It is not beautiful in this way ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, not beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another, nor is it beautiful here, but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body. It will not appear to him as one idea, or one kind of knowledge. It is not anywhere in another thing, but itself by itself with itself, it is always one in form, and all other beautiful things share in that in such a way that when these others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit greater or smaller, or suffer any change....there if anywhere should a person live their life, beholding that beauty”, (Symposium 211a-d; with omissions).



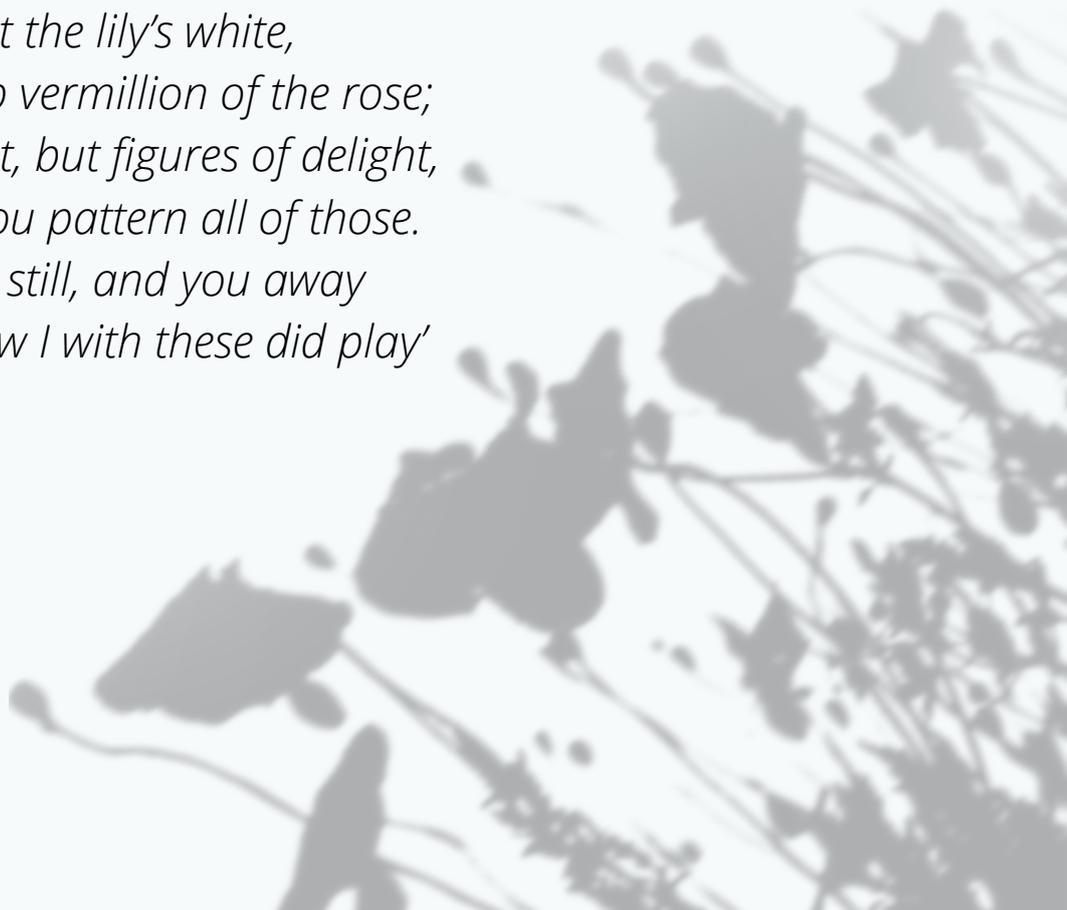
The poets of whom he speaks as begetters of beautiful and immortal children, are superseded by the philosopher who alone has access to the divine form through a cognitive practice that has detached from the bodily senses. So, what does Shakespeare do with this? To re-throne poetics, he must dethrone Plato's metaphysics, which is precisely the task at work in Sonnet 53. Sonnet 53 uses Platonic concepts of shadow and substance, at work in the Symposium, but forcefully articulated in Plato's image of the Cave in Republic VII.

*What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you;
On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set,
And you in Grecian tires are painted new.
Speak of the spring and foison of the year:
The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
The other as your bounty doth appear;
And you in every blessed shape we know.
In all external grace you have some part,
But you like none, none you, for constant heart.*



The young man is presented as a paradigm of male beauty, with Helen the paradigm of female beauty; he is addressed as the beautiful itself – generating others as his “bounty” – the good product of that beauty. The image of strange shadows recalls Plato’s account, as does the mention of ‘imitation’ and ‘participation’ – ‘in all external grace you have some part’. These are central to the way that Plato describes how particular things embody forms, but they are here used to disrupt that metaphysical hierarchy, with the individual casting the shadows ‘in every blessed shape we know’. Though for Plato an individual is subject to transience, here they remain ‘constant’. Shakespeare subverts the Platonic theory to re-thrones the centrality of the beloved; instead of beholding in his friend the medium through which he can catch a vision of ideal beauty, he sees no further than the human form, which in itself is beauty’s complete revelation. The friend is not modelled after the idea but is himself the embodiment of it. Consider Sonnet 98:

*‘Nor did I wonder at the lily’s white,
Nor praise the deep vermilion of the rose;
They were but sweet, but figures of delight,
Drawn after you, you pattern all of those.
Yet seem’d it winter still, and you away
As with your shadow I with these did play’*



The beloved casts the shadows, as if it were the Platonic form of beauty itself, and is the very pattern nature imitates. Nature's patterns are the 'figures of delight', reduced by the Platonist to mere images, and the boy becomes their source. Shakespeare's love, like Plato's, is not "Time's foole" (116.9), and exists away from accidentals, revealing an essential nature that captures 'an everlasting loveliness', a world outside the shadows, an 'ever-fixed marke' (116.9).



Questions to consider

What are the benefits of reading the Sonnets closely with this pervasive Platonic subtext?

Where is the familiarity and the variation from Plato?

Is Shakespeare rescripting the Platonic lexicon of love and desire? If so, why and to what ends?