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A COMPARISON BETWEEN SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 71
AND DONNE'S POEM "THE APPARITION"

William Shakespeare wrote all his sonnets in the 1590's, John Donne's poem was written at the beginning of the 17th century. The main thought in the two poems is the same, and stated already in the first line of both poems: "when I am dead". Both authors are addressing the woman they love, but their angles of approach to this theme, however, are very different.

Shakespeare is directly exhorting his mistress to forget him as soon as he is dead. He loves her so much that he does not want her to be in pain when he is gone, or other people to mock her for her mourning. He does not mention anything about her then being free to fall in love with another man, but if she is to stop loving him when he dies, that is what probably will happen - although it is quite clear that she has loved him dearly while he was alive.

Donne, on the contrary, warns his mistress (or his beloved - since he implies that she has turned him down) that she will never be able to forget him or be free from him. He will come back and haunt her, and he is absolutely sure that he will then find her in bed with another man. He even says that she is the one who is going to kill him, with other words that he will die of a broken heart because she does not love him.

Shakespeare's sonnet 71 is a beautiful, considerate little piece of poetry that must have filled the receiver with sad melancholy and even more love. "The Apparition" is full of terrible threats and accusations, and its purpose is to provoke fear in the receiver. This happens to be a metaphysical poem in a double sense, being about a ghost.

The meter of both poems is the iambic meter. The sonnet is written in iambic pentameter, which means it has ten syllables (five feet) in each line, each foot consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. It has, as all "real" sonnets, 14 lines, here divided into four "thoughts", consisting of 4 + 4 + 4 + 2 lines, rhymed in the Shakespearean pattern of abab cdcd efef gg. The iambic meter of the metaphysical poem is more irregular, the 17 lines having both two, three, four and five feet without any distinguishable pattern, and the rhymes are, equally irregular, abba bcdcdc effe ggg.

Both poems also have alliteration rhymes, the sonnet in 10 of the 14 lines, e.g. (shall)-surly-sullen (line 2), vile world with vilest worms (l. 4), compounded-clay (l. 10), let-love-life (l. 12). Donne's poem has not by far that many, the most conspicuous is the one in line 2; that thou thinkst thee.

The language in Shakespeare's sonnet 71 is innocent, and the sonnet has a very easily understood and straightforward message. It contains only two images, "let your love even with my life decay" (l. 12) and "the surly sullen bell" (l. 2) along with one metonymy, "the wise world should look into your moan" (l. 13). The author is modest enough to use two understatements; "remember not the hand that writ it" (l. 5-6) and "if...you look upon this verse" (l. 9). Surely the receiver will not only remember his hand but his whole person, and not just look upon the verse after the author's death, but more probably reread it.

Donne uses a more figurative and also more coarse language than Shakespeare. In "The Apparition" there is just one innocent simile; "aspen wretch" (l. 11), the rest of Donne's figurative language is more or less coarse allusions on sex: "he whose thou art then, being tired before" (l. 7), i.e. tired from too much sex, "will --- think thou call'st for more" (l. 8-9), i.e. more sex, and "in false sleep will from thee shrink (l. 10) - it is not difficult to figure out which part of her lover's body that will shrink. "A cold quicksilver sweat" (l. 12) is an allusion to venereal disease. To understand the full meaning of the word "vestal", finally, one has to know ancient history. Vestals were virgin priestesses in ancient Rome, but when Donne calls his beloved "feigned vestal" (l. 5) he does not only mean that she is no virgin, but also that she deserves to be severely punished for it: the punishment for a vestal who lost her virginity was to be buried alive.

To sum up, one can say that Shakespeare's sonnet 71 is written according to all the technical rules for an English sonnet, it has an inoffensive language and a straightforward message and can arouse nothing but positive feelings. Donne's poem is irregular in its form, both in meter, feet and rhyme, it has a coarse language full of allusions, and the whole poem is a threat intended to provoke fear.