



THE PHENOMENON OF AGEISM AND SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS

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Abstract:

The World Health Organisation defines ageism as prejudice or discrimination against people based on their age. It is not restricted to the elderly population only but can impact the lives of the young too. As ageism is contributing to a form of discrimination it is bound to have a negative impact on physical and mental health of the affected and can seriously jeopardise the quality of life and hasten death even. William Shakespeare's plays have often been read from the perspective of Disability Studies and conjecture has been made how the Bard is guilty of promoting discrimination against the disabled, which can be referred to as handicapism. My paper here aims to analyse Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609) as a text that presents a distinct and thought-provoking perspective on the topic of ageing. Shakespeare, who himself experienced the transition from youth to old age, offers an exceptional and fascinating account of the process of ageing and its impact on the individual caught in a dialectic with the ableist society privileging ability, functionality and productivity all to be experienced at the prime of youth. Ableism, we argue, is at the core of this ageism.

Keywords: Ageism, Sonnets, Disability, Impairment, Fair Friend, Handicapism.

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Analysis:

The paper explores the field of Old Age Studies, and applies its theories to Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609), examining how they negatively portray the process of ageing. Shakespeare portrays the different stages of human life in a concrete manner, from beginning to near end, as time passes and changes occur. The paper would not only seek to establish how early European society perceived of physical ability, prowess but also the way the ageing population was marginalised. A vital connection between literature/humanities and science would also be established in the course of this discourse which is fundamental to today's critical thinking. Martha Holstein disparages the fact that how there is a dearth of literary insights to the socio-cultural and scientific domain of gerontological research. How "the study of literature has not been integrated into gerontological research and education."¹ Likewise, literature might be augmented by gaining knowledge about biological or sociological phenomena involved in the process of ageing.

In the first group of sonnets from 1-126 an obvious difference is manifest. There's a marked difference between the 'fair friend' and the poet-speaker not on the obvious basis of their relationship of dependence, class and privilege (through the patron-poet dynamics), but on the basis of physical and cultural aspects of ageing that separate the two. The major difference can be ascertained to exist on the question of age, one is in possession of 'fair youth' and the other in the grip of 'feeble age'. This contrast is projected by the poet-speaker not only to enhance the sense of his own reduced status as an ageing individual but to substantiate the social image of the old, the decrepit as one whose life is in eclipse.

Social scientists like Joel T Rosenthal suggests the varying age range that was considered old age in Western societies during Shakespeare's time. While some believed it began as early as 30 or 35, few argued that it should be postponed until 50 or later. This perspective, influenced by societal norms and literature, often led individuals to adjust their self-perception accordingly. We may fall back on recent stylometric inquiries and findings to infer that Shakespeare would have been roughly 40 years old when he wrote the *fair youth* sonnets excluding the ones on procreation. The sonnets from 1 to 17 contain a subtle indication of the poet's anxiety regarding the number 40 and its symbolic representation of the beginning of old age. This is evident in sonnet no. 2, where the poet describes how the passage of forty winters will age and diminish the beauty and youthfulness of the subject. Throughout the *Sonnets*, there are many

and frequent references to the fact that the poet-speaker finds himself crumpled and worn down by the destructive and overwhelming impact of Time. The underlying idea is that Time has the ability to take back the gifts of youth and beauty (the ideas revolving around *carpe diem* and *carpe florem*) after a certain period of time, leaving the poet-speaker stripped of these qualities that now belong to his friend-patron, the fair youth.

The projection of the self of the forty-year-old poet-speaker in opposition to the young 'fair friend' is through a physical body embittered and embattered by the tyranny of time. For disability theorists like Richard Jenkins, impairment, that is, "the absence or defect of a limb, organ or bodily mechanism has three categories: "1. those people whose impairment occurred or was diagnosed at birth, or during early childhood, 2. those whose impairment resulted from subsequent illness or injury and, 3. the largest proportion of the disabled population, those whose impairment is part of the 'normal' ageing process 2." Disablement or disability would be then the "reduction or loss of function or ability consequent upon impairment 3." And fascinatingly enough, Shakespeare is preceding such socio-cultural theorizations, when he invokes this particular category of impairment brought on by age, and consequently rendering the poet-speaker 'disabled'- "and strength by limping Sway disabled 4." The sonneteer subsequently goes on to validate the society's devaluation of the ageing and the aged through negative visual and verbal imageries. The poet-speaker in his advanced age is typically one with "deep sunken eyes", "blood gone cold", "of wrinkles", "sable curls all silver'd o'er with white", and at a stage "when body's work's expired 5."

However, it is important to note that this portrayal of ageing records a diminished status in society. The marginalisation of older individuals is a direct result of the dominant culture's practicing of ableism with the concomitant prioritisation of youth, beauty, independence, self-discipline, and productivity, both in biological and social terms. Prospero at one point in *The Tempest* grumbles how his brain is troubled due to his advanced age: "... I am vexed;/ Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled: /Be not disturb'd with my infirmity 6." Similarly, the poet-speaker cannot overlook his wrinkled appearance, white hair, sunken eyes, and a limp. These obvious manifestations of age, are grasped by society as signs of reduced 'abilities' of the ageing individual, thus rendering him to the margins of human existence.

Prior to these theoretical developments in the science of gerontology, the Bard presents literary illustrations of the process of ageing compounded by ableist attitudes of society and its psychological

effects on individuals, both in his contemporary era and for future generations. Shakespeare also incorporates the personal perspective of ageing with the collective comprehension of this specific phenomenon and connects it to the concept of stigma and humiliation, which encompasses notions of seclusion and shame. The sonnets contain numerous images that convey the profound sense of isolation and disgrace felt by the poet-speaker as an ageing individual. These images primarily revolve around the diminishing warmth and light, as exemplified by the mention of late autumn. Dying fire and twilight period are metaphors used to describe the poet's current state. He compares himself to the twilight after sunset, symbolising the end of a day. Just as a man's youthful morning transitions into the steep decline of old age, the poet feels that the vitality of his youth has been taken away. Old age is often associated with winter due to its cold and barren nature. The poet expresses a sense of physical decay and decline by comparing himself to autumn or early winter. He describes himself as a tree with few or no leaves left, shivering in the cold, and a once vibrant choir of birds that has fallen silent. Summer, in contrast to autumn/winter, represents youth and is completely different in nature. It is a time of transition from summer to winter, where the vitality of nature is diminished by frost and the leaves fall. The beauty and flourish of summer is replaced by a barren landscape. The 'fair friend' unlike the poet-speaker, is a symbol of the world's freshness and the anticipation of spring. He enjoys the warmth and joy of summer. Previously, the poet-speaker had described his life as being like autumn. In addition, the sweet boy, the lovely boy; who is referred to as the 'fair friend' embodies the epitome of beauty. The poet-speaker represents a diminished version of his former self, serving as a stark contrast to the idealised existence that can only be achieved in youth and beauty. The *Sonnets* chronicle the individual's struggle against society's lack of empathy and disgust towards the elderly, while simultaneously idolising and admiring the young and beautiful.

Where does this leave the ageing man when it comes to performing in the domain of sex? Do the ageing deserve to fulfil a fundamental biological drive, or are they to beat a hasty and undignified retreat from the social and performative world of sex? The poet-speaker, we find in the latter group of sonnets, is supplanted by the 'fair friend' in the amorous and sexual relationship involving the 'dark lady'. The diabolic woman is successful in tempting and luring the youthful friend into a sexual vortex and the two consequently are like two

amorous birds of prey devouring each other in a sexual frenzy.

The poet-speaker is reduced to mere philosophical speculations: "... lust / is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust 7". The sexual rejection of the poet-speaker leaves him in a state of absolute dejection, depression and fuelled with a desperate desire for acceptance and inclusion: "So will I pray that thou mayst have thy Will, / If thou turn back, and my loud crying still 8." Researchers on geriatrics have identified subjugation, subjection to humiliation, social isolation, depression, sexual supplantation, functional disability and cognitive impairment as some of the aspects of old age. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* are thus a powerful literary document mapping the experiences of the elderly in the sixteenth century as they were witnessing almost always a painful succession. How then, we may understand the ways in which the Renaissance men and women expected, hoped for or strived towards happiness, when they went beyond and against the social decree that put a premium on youth, vitality and beauty?

Shakespeare skilfully captures the various nuances and complexities of such an existence and raises the question of whether older individuals have a rightful place in the public sphere and, if so, on what basis. The world's response to the presence of ageing individuals and their roles has ranged from disdain and impatience to acts of charity, retirement benefits, pensions, reverence, and respect. Effort is being made by our poet as a representative thinker to see things as they really were and the position credited to the ageing needed an urgent reappraisal. There is possibly a certain autobiographical impetus behind this desire to seek a redemptive and integrative role for the ageing in society.

Conclusion: All, irrespective of age, are equally doomed to die. Why then this over privileging of the physical body which is bound to be destroyed by time? Why praise and promote that which cannot hold out for long against time and whose perfections are only temporal? 'The Not Dead Yet' was the catchphrase coined by the late Harriet Mc Bryde Johnson to promote the rights of the so-called 'disabled' population, their right to live with dignity in a society that favours able-bodied individuals. It is unjust to exclude a group of people simply because they do not conform to the dominant culture's narrow definition of ability and performance. Should the elderly and ageing population be seen as a burden? Why can't they be perceived as valuable members of society? While they may encounter physical restrictions and limitations, they are still deserving of being treated

with dignity and acceptance. At a time when our own country is witnessing a demographic revolution, with a considerable proportion of elderly people in the population, it is paramount that we interrogate the constricting social paradigms that shape the lives of them who are definitely 'not dead yet'.

Endnotes:

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2. Jenkins, Richard. (1991). *Disability and Social Stratification*. In *The British Journal of Sociology*. No. 42.4. Dec. pp. 557-580. p. 562.
3. Kuper, Adam and Jessica Kuper (Eds.). (2005). *The Social Science Encyclopedia*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 234.
4. Cook, Tim (Ed.). (1994). *The Poems and Sonnets of William Shakespeare*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Edition Ltd, p. 35.
5. Ibid, p. 3, 4, 8, 16.
6. Staunton, Howard (Ed.). (1860). *The Globe Illustrated Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. New York: Gramercy Books, p.1563.
7. Cook, Tim (Ed.). (1994). *The Poems and Sonnets of William Shakespeare*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Edition Ltd, p. 67.
8. Ibid, p. 74.