

Glitches and Green Worlds

Note: This is the unedited text of a talk written for the Shakespeare Association of America's NextGenPlen on April 2, 2015. A less compressed version with a fuller argument and less compressed quotations is forthcoming. You can find the slides online at <http://www.slideshare.net/matthewharrison9655/glitches-and-green-worlds-46542862>.

In his edition of the Sonnets, David West writes that the “key” to Shakespeare’s sonnet 32 is “that it is totally insincere.” In that poem, you’ll remember, the speaker imagines a moment after his death when his beloved comes across his poems. They haven’t aged well: whether by the vicissitudes of taste or the steady development of poetic technique, they now seem “outstripped by every pen,” “exceeded by the height of happier men.” The solution, offered twice, is to read “for... love” rather than for “rhyme” or “style.”

West’s point echoes through the criticism, not only of this moment but of the many similar moments in which Renaissance poetic speakers malign their own poems. We read failure as insincere mastery. Thus West refers this instance to “the convention of an ironic personal depreciation or mock modesty in the sonnet tradition.” Likewise, Rollins reminds us of “the Elizabethan convention of pretended humility,” Atkins of the reader’s “difficulty accepting the humility as genuine,” and Vendler of the “modesty topos.” But notice that these four accounts (of irony, convention, disbelief, and topos) all locate the problem slightly differently: in the sonnet tradition, in Elizabethan culture, in readerly reaction, or in that long tradition of writerly self-deprecation. Even in calling the sonnet’s sense of its own failures conventional, we disagree on what convention is being invoked.

I want to suggest that insincerity is this poem’s key without being its claim. That this is a poem we’re locked out of & insincerity is one way of getting in. We *can’t* read the poem the way it asks to be read, for “my love”. (Note, by the way, how that phrase oscillates between “for love of me” & “in remembrance of my love of you.” And how painful the gap between those two can

be in the *Sonnets*.) Either way, the poem begs for an intimate, specific, embodied love that we, separated by time and so much else from speaker and beloved, cannot offer.

So we take the readings our instruments allow, not only here but throughout the literary tradition. We systematically decode moments of doubt, confusion, relinquishment, and failure into mastery over stylistic traditions. In the brief time I have, I want to think through another way into such poems. And I want to do so by thinking about failure.

So: one mode of thinking failure is what I'll call "comic failure." We find this kind of failure laid out in self-help books and entrepreneurial culture, in the advice to "fail better," "fail faster," "fail forward," and so on. Comic failure recuperates unpleasant feelings by incorporating them into narratives that (allegedly) move towards success. Such accounts are ideologically potent: they turn moments of abjection, rejection, dismay, or bad luck into reaffirmations of dominant values.

I call this comic failure because it is the movement of so much comedy: a structural blockage becomes a series of personal mistakes—misconceptions, misrecognitions, blunders—that lead into a reaffirmation of a more-or-less existing order. At least for certain members of the cast. (We might think, for instance, about how *As You Like It* turns problems of capital—inheritance—into problems of *cultural* capital that can be resolved with a little education, a show of valor, and a friendship with the Duke.)

The Sidneian sonnet, in particular, often deploys this kind of comic failure. A structural problem (Stella's refusal, the conflict between virtue and desire) turns psychological and is then revised through wit. The sonnet "Grammar Rules" is exemplary for the ways wit reinterprets rejection as acceptance: two no's, he asserts, make a yes. We often read sonnets of self-

deprecation, loss, and despair in exactly this way: the speaker's "rudeness" becomes, through the magic of sprezzatura, evidence of his mastery.

But, of course, the key to *this* sonnet is that it is totally insincere. Neither grammar rules, nor displays of wit, nor testaments of suffering entitle Astrophil to love. And the genre itself precludes external resolution. The next poem picks up not where the last one left off but just about where it began. Even the *Amoretti*, you'll remember, headed towards the beautiful *Epithalamion*, stop short, amidst absence and despair. If variation happens in a sequence, it comes from a slow evolution of perspective, from ringing the changes on a particular idea, or from a slow accumulation of images and metaphors.

For Elizabethan writers, sonnets are failure machines: all the weaponry of rhetoric takes aim and the beloved remains unscathed. The momentary mastery of a closing couplet collapses into contradiction, into a new poem that knows that nothing has been resolved. Many sequences dramatize precisely this effect, likening it to the self-exhausting wit of the sonneteer (Sidney), the self-lacerating attempts to justify the beloved's cruelty (Shakespeare), the repetitive shape of female perfidy (Greville), the shifting humors of the poet (Drayton's revisions), the cruel implacability of the sonnet mistress or the wastefulness of earthly love. Failure, I think, lends itself to allegory.

But we have another contemporary way to understand failure. The outcast. The loser, the slacker, the misfit, the punk, recently the queer, as in Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*. What these approaches have in common is that they opt out of dominant values: failure becomes a site of resistance rather than restoration. Now I want to take up this second model of failure, which I'll call the glitch. In the "Glitch Studies Manifesto," Rosa Menkman writes:

[T]he spectator is forced to acknowledge that the use of the computer is based on a genealogy of conventions, while in reality the computer is a machine that can be

bent or used in many different ways. With the creation of breaks within politics and social and economical conventions, the audience may become aware of the preprogrammed patterns. In this way, a distributed awareness of a new interaction gestalt can take form.

Glitches confound data and code. The procedures that smoothly convert data structures into meaning fail, rendering themselves on screen as new, alien patterns that intersect and combine with the original. (Often this is quite literal: this glitch in the 80's video game *Yar's Revenge*, for instance, is the code of the game itself, processed just beyond recognition.)

So what happens if we read sonnets as glitch? Not as a way of recapturing ugly feelings in service of mastery but a break that calls those conventions to account. Or rather, if we accept that the failure of own procedures—our own proclivity to unite “love” and “style” but to separate “sincerity” and “skill”—is part of what the sonnet renders, at least on our screens.

Note the recurring backdrop in the *Sonnets* in which poetic evaluation is imagined as a deeply social activity. In the speaker's self-reproach and his remarks on other poets, we feel the pressure of a newly-forming community of tastes. The ‘conventional’ tropes of poetic humility, in turn, repeatedly serve to opt out of that community:

Let them say more that like of heare-say well,
I will not prayse that purpose not to sell. (21.13-14)

Why with the time do I not glance aside
To new found methods, and to compounds strange? (76.3-4)

And therefore [thou] art inforc'd to seeke anew,
Some fresher stampe of the time bettering dayes. (82.7-8)

I think good thoughts, whilst others write good wordes (85.5)

Resisting the pressures of the “good,” the “fresh,” the “new,” and the “modern,” these poems assert values of “truth” and “love”: keywords on which the *Sonnets* ring the changes.

But, I insist, neither of these terms articulates a positive poetic program. As the shifting

valences of words like “beauty,” “painting,” and “ornament” make clear, Shakespeare does not offer a consistent stylistic critique of contemporary practice. Rather, the tropes of badness imagine an escape from one set of values—the public performance of wit and skill—in favor of a quieter, less steady connection between reader and writer. Take, for example, the rival poet series. Far more than they critique stylistic excesses, these poems repeatedly personify the discord between these two value systems, presenting the rival as a full and successful participant in a social world of lyric, writing “dedicated words” that “disperse” (78.4) and circulate broadly, while the speaker links his silence, his febleness, and his truth.

Wrongly or rightly, we can’t take these poems as sincere. Neither love nor truth are categories the sonnets give us access to. Rather, the sequence reflects upon and dramatizes this deep incommensurability between what poems say and what they mean, between craft and desire, skill and love. To read as glitch is to insist that we cannot evade this problem through a more subtle reckoning of skill. It is to imagine the sonnet not—or rather, *not only*—as a parade of ingenious platitudes, but also as a hitch, a failure, in that relentless allegorical process that harnesses ugly feelings for the glib narratives of mastery, of domination, of self.

Glitch teaches us that convention is a procedure rather than a form, a key rather than a lock. And Renaissance artists, I would argue, are fascinated by the *limits* of such procedures—the distortions of modesty, the awkward failures of sprezzatura. To understand the prehistory of modern notions of aesthetic independence, we need to attend more carefully to accounts of failure: Shakespeare’s imagined faults, Spenser’s “rudeness,” Sidney’s endless “bates.” Such moments never quite manage to undo the whole tragic enterprise of comic failure, never quite manage to unravel the conventions within which they are interwoven. But in their frustrations,

their ugliness, their distortions, they offer something which can't be recuperated but can be lived within. An opting out, an escape, a stop.