

# Verse as Monument of Immortality: War, Class, and Prophecy in the *Sonnets*

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*WRITER'S COMMENT:* While I am convinced that the reader's awareness of the author's intention does not contribute essential information necessary for an understanding of a given text, for what it is worth: I wrote this paper to give literary form to a presentation I gave on a selection of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. Following the use of the word "monument" throughout the first 126 sonnets, this essay explores the leitmotif of immortality through the intertwining themes of war, class, and prophecy. Although familiarity with the *Sonnets* would help to orient the reader, my hope is that the argument presented in this essay is understandable to a general audience. My intended purpose was to demonstrate the potentially immortalizing power of language, and to show Shakespeare's awareness of such power, memorializing himself, as he does, "in a life-preserving tomb, a written record, a work of literature portending his own immortality in a monument of verse." It is up to the critical reader to determine whether or not I succeeded.



—Jacob Israel Chilton

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT:* Jacob's essay is the last in the series of essays he wrote in a senior seminar on Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. The assignment asked students to focus on a limited number of sonnets while drawing significant conclusions about the *Sonnets* as a whole. Jacob selects sonnets that in subtle and varied ways address the immortalizing power of verse. The speaker—Jacob associates him with Shakespeare himself—feels that his poetry can bestow an immortality that will elude the social and political elite of his day. Initially the speaker's primary desire is to achieve this immortality for his friend. Later, he desires his own immortality and is confident his poetry will achieve it. Jacob's prose is clear and graceful—and packed with meaning.

—Richard Levin, English Department



*“Exegi monumentum aere perennius”*

—Horace, *Odes*<sup>1</sup>

THE WORD “MONUMENT” APPEARS ONLY THREE TIMES in William Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. Each time it appears, it does so in highly specific contexts in which the poet equates his verse with a monument that will ensure an immortal remembrance of the fair young man to whom the first 126 sonnets are addressed. Each of the sonnets that contain references to monuments—55, 81, and 107—emphasizes death, which the poet presents as the condition that makes necessary such a monument; it exists to immortalize that which is inescapably mortal. In order to prevent such permanent erasure, the poet offers his “verse” (81.9) or “rime” (55.1, 107.11) to the young man as a “living record of your memory” (55.8). The sonnets to the fair young man are thus conceived as an individual monument, a monolithic, explicitly singular group of verses used “Gainst death” (55.9), that is until the end of the fair young man [FYM] sequence. I argue that in the final FYM Sonnets—122 through 126—the poet threatens to revoke or withhold the immortalizing properties of his poetry from his primary poetic object, the fair young man.

The multivalent “monument” is the single entity in which several disparate meanings unite. Derived from the Latin *monere*—“to remind”—the multiple meanings of “monument” include: “reminder” (*OED* 4c), “memorial” (*OED* 4a), “tomb” (*OED* 1), “record” (*OED* 3a), “work of literature” (*OED* 4d), and “portent” (*OED* 5b). Each of these meanings informs and enriches the poet’s sparing use of the word throughout his project: Shakespeare’s speaker is building a memorializing “tomb” (17.3, 81.8, and arguably 86.4) in which the “living record” of the fair young man will be kept, a work of literature written to remind “all posterity” (55.9) of the unbelievable beauty of the “boy,”<sup>2</sup> exclaiming, as he predicts they will, “heavenly touches nere toucht earthly faces” (17.8). This unified semantic disparity contained in the word “monument” can be seen as a metaphor for the collection of sonnets itself, bringing together as it

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<sup>1</sup>“I have finished a monument more lasting than bronze . . .” (translation qtd. in Evans 120).

<sup>2</sup>The fair young man is diminutively called “boy” only in later sonnets (e.g., 108.5, 126.1).

does so many varied themes into a work that some critics view as complete, ordered, and singular.

The word “monuments” first appears in the first line of 55, establishing the tone for the speaker’s subsequent uses of the word by setting it in a thematic context comprised of class distinctions, images of war, and prophetic declarations about posterity. The poet evokes “the gilded monuments / Of Princes” (55.1–2) to draw our attention to the types of marble and stone statues that will not outlive his verse. This reference to royalty, however, does more than identify people to whom statues might plausibly be dedicated: princes not only represent the position in the social hierarchy opposite of that inhabited by Shakespeare and his self-similar narrator, they also are the wagers of “wastefull warre” (55.5). The octet of Sonnet 55 presents the “gilded monuments,” “Princes,” and “warres” that the poet distinguishes from himself and his project: he asserts that present-day memorial constructions will not “out-live this powrefull rime” (55.2); he announces that, after all of the glorified princes of the world go to their ornate tombs—and he goes to his “common grave” (81.7)—his “praise [of the young man] shall stil finde roome, / Even in the eyes of all posterity” (55.10–11); finally, he prophesies, “Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity / Shall you pace forth” (55.9–10), which, given the context, is an unmistakable reference to war. However, this is a noble war, a war of preservation, a war to win immortality, not a “wastefull warre” orchestrated by a socially isolated sovereign to gain temporary glory. In later sonnets, the poet returns to these established themes repeatedly, declaring as his purpose regarding the boy “To make him much outlive a gilded tomb / And to be praised of ages yet to be” (101.11–12).

In Sonnet 81 the themes of death, commemoration, and class come into play, beginning with a refutation of Death’s power over the fair young man, identifying the social status of the poet in the middle, and ending with a prophecy of immortality. The speaker proclaims, “From hence your memory death cannot take” (81.3). From whence? Because the young man has been memorialized in the poet’s text, it is specifically *from the verse* that Death cannot take the young man. The poetic object has been monumentalized, buried, as it were, in the protective power of a life-giving tomb, the tomb that is so often associated with the womb.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The only three uses of the word “womb” (3.5, 86.4, and 97.8) appear in context with Death in general, and two of them are paired with the word “tomb.”

The poet himself resigns his own fate to the “common grave” befitting the lower class, but seems to take contentment from the prophetic awareness he possesses:

you intombed in mens eyes shall lye,  
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,  
Which eyes not yet created shall ore-read,  
And tongs to be, your beeing shall rehearse” (81.8–11)

He not only stipulates that the *Sonnets* will outlive all the “breathers of this world” (81.12), but that the young man “*still* shall live” (81.13; my emphasis)—that is, “continually, constantly . . . always”<sup>4</sup>—“in the mouths of men” (81.14). The poet knows that, regardless of his own fate, his monumental text will continually place the young man and Death in dramatic conflict, a productive war that will last until we cease reading the living record that is *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*.

Another peculiar aspect of this “monument” is its singularity. In the Quarto, all three uses of the word are singular. In edited editions, the word appears in plural form only once,<sup>5</sup> and only then in contrast, identifying those temporal statues that will not live as long as his verse (much like the statue of Ozymandias, monumentalized by Shelley’s sonnet of the same name). Here, the poet explicitly singularizes—that is, declares as unified—the poetic work he is writing for the fair young man, a detail that supports the critical reading of the *Sonnets* as a carefully orchestrated, integrated whole, as opposed to a collection of poems only grouped together by virtue of its consistent form or individual authorship. This singleness, expressly announced in Sonnet 81, also stands out here due to the monumental singularity of the sonnet in which it appears: Sonnet 81 is out of character for the “Rival Poet” sequence (Sonnets 78–86) being the only poem in the sequence not to mention the rival and/or the feelings of inadequacy found in association with the rivalry.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the poet is trying to convince himself that he has regained some measure of confidence in his artistic prowess. Or, perhaps the projected bravura

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<sup>4</sup>*OED* s.v. “still, *adv.*” 3a. This entry cites Shakespeare’s Sonnet 126 as an exemplar of proper usage.

<sup>5</sup>Editors have traditionally changed this “monument” to the plural to complete the rhyme with line 3 (see Evans 55.1n.)—an editorial decision that supports my reading.

<sup>6</sup>Evans notes that in 81 the poet’s bravado is similar to that of 18, another poem on immortalizing verse.

characteristic of this sonnet is based on prophecy, the knowledge that he will outlive his contemporary rivals in the projected future: the fair young man is “to be praised of ages yet to be” (101.12).

The couplets of Sonnets 81 and 101 locate this power to immortalize in the poet himself:<sup>7</sup> the speaker tells the young man, “You still shall live (such vertue hath *my* Pen) / Where breath most breaths, even in the mouths of men” (81.13–14; my emphasis); to his Muse the speaker says, “*I* teach thee how / To make him seeme long hence as he showes now” (101.13–14; my emphasis). Aside from a momentary lapse in trust for the Muse (Sonnet 103), the poet’s apparent self-assurance evinced in the lines above does not flag, and arguably even grows until he makes this monumental statement in 107: “Death to me subscribes, / Since spight of him Ile live in this poor rime” (lines 10–11). The poet has convinced himself that he has the power to immortalize, a power that he earlier says can only render the youth eternal and with which—as he now sees—he can eternalize himself, and a power he will withhold from the young friend in the final poems of the FYM sequence. This awareness of his own immortality via the *Sonnets* contradicts (or, perhaps, corrects) the speaker’s earlier predictions of his inevitable anonymity in future times: “My name be buried where my body is, / And live no more to shame nor me, nor you” (72.11–12).

Though he will still not escape the commoner’s grave, and though his body will not be buried in a gilded monument, the textual monument of his verse will elevate him to an immortal class that “still shall live . . . / . . . in the mouths of men” (81.13–14), a class higher—because more divine—than all mortal monarchs.<sup>8</sup> This prophesied immortality possessed by the speaker and bestowed upon his young friend is stirringly summed up in the sonnet’s couplet: “And thou in this shalt finde thy monument, / When tyrants crests and tombs of brasse are spent.” With yet another reminder of “Ozymandias” in these lines, it is entertaining to imagine Shelley’s famous sonnet as the fulfillment of this prophecy, proof that no “worke of masonry” (55.6) can outlive the power of disseminated language, evidenced here in the monumental text of *Shake-speares Sonnets*.

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<sup>7</sup>Proclamations of the poet’s powers appear elsewhere in this late–middle portion of the FYM Sonnets (e.g., 100.7–8).

<sup>8</sup>It is interesting to note that monarchical mortality is considered the primary subject matter of Sonnet 107 in many critical readings.

The final mention of the life-giving “monument” of verse comes nearly twenty poems before the end of the FYM sequence. Nevertheless, the multiple meanings united in “monument” become the themes of the final sonnets to the young man: memory and written works are the subjects of 122; in 123 the poet is preoccupied by written records and a noble, warlike defiance of Time; 124 dwells on the subject of social status and a constant love that “was buylded far from accident” (line 5), which, when taken as a metaphor for the meticulously constructed monument of the *Sonnets*, shows the immortalizing verse again situated hierarchically above the pettiness of politics and courtly society; in the following sonnet, the futility of laying “great bases for eternity” (125.3) is a reminder of the “guilded monuments” denounced in earlier sonnets; finally, Sonnet 126 prophesies the death of the “lovely Boy” (line 1) without reassuring the reader of his immortal place in the womb-like tomb of the poet’s verse. In this, the final sonnet in the FYM sequence, the prophetic poet gives no hint that the boy will live on in history. Such a monumental omission possibly explains the omission of concluding couplet in the peculiar structure of 126. G. Blakemore Evans notes a “perhaps intentionally graduated ‘No’ pattern which links 123–125” (222, note on 123.1) in which the word “No” begins the first quatrain in 123, the second in 124, and the third in 125; Evans, however, does not speculate on any possible connection with 126. But can we not see another “No” in the absence of a final couplet in the last of the sonnets expressly written to the fair young man? Is not this refusal of poetic closure a denial of relational resolution? Can we see the revocation of immortality in the haunting omission of lines 13–14? After all, as Evans reports, John Kerrigan has found that 126 “treats a number of the dominant themes in the series (love, mortal beauty, treasure, finance and its growth, Time and its inexorable destruction, death). . . . [But o]ne theme is notably absent—there is no hint of the immortality that the poet has earlier (e.g., in 63, 65) promised to bestow on the boy” (226–7, headnote to 126).

In this reading, then, the “No” that is not there in the ultimate couplet of the FYM sequence becomes another prophecy, one that tells of the immortality of the poet and the nameless obscurity of the fair young man remembered now only under the ominous heading of *Shakespeare*, whether in a college course or in the monumental poetic sequence *Shakespeares Sonnets*. Having proved victorious in his noble war against Time and Death, the poet finds himself in a universal, almost godlike class above

the mortal royalty of his contemporaries, remembered, memorialized in a life-preserving tomb, a written record, a work of literature portending his own immortality in a monument of verse.



### **Works Cited**

Evans, G. Blakemore, ed. *The Sonnets*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006.