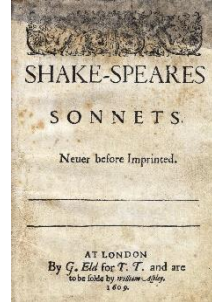
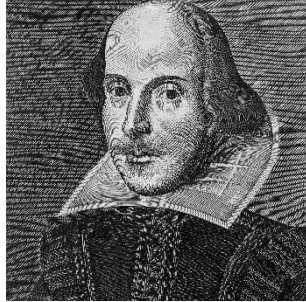


Word Art: Love Poetry, Part A

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“All you need is love / All you need is love / All you need is love, love / Love is all you need.” (The Beatles)

The subject of love is the most common theme in poetry (and probably in music as well). Whether between human beings, or between humans and their Gods, or between humans and the natural and material world, love has been explored in literature since the earliest writings to the present day. In this first blog I look at two poets who wrote highly admired poetry about love.



William Shakespeare was baptised on 26 April 1564 and died on 23 April 1616 at Stratford-upon-Avon in England. Apart from 38 fabulous plays which continue to be performed today all over the world, he wrote a series of 154 interconnected sonnets (14-line poems of a fixed structure). About half of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed to a 'dark lady' (meaning a woman of dark hair) and the other half offer advice about love to a 'fair youth'; Sonnet 116 is addressed to the 'fair youth'. In this, the most famous and well-known of the series, Shakespeare says that true love must be permanent and steadfast. He begins by saying: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments". Here, Shakespeare refers to the marriage ceremony as described in *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Anglican Church. The celebrant says to the bride and groom: "I require and charge you both... that if either of you know any impediment, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, ye do now confess it." The poet then advises that "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds, / Or bends with the remover to remove..." That is by definition true love never alters or changes, and resists anyone trying to remove it. In fact, even "tempests" (that is traumatic life events) cannot disrupt true love, or distract it from its 'fixed mark', that is the emotional interrelationship of the lovers. Love is like the North Star which is used by sailing ships to find their true course and is thus of immeasurable 'worth'. Though the body will age and decay true love is no fool and remains constant, even when Time's 'bending sickle' brings death. The speaker's intense belief in the permanence of love is reinforced in the last two lines when he maintains that if what he has written isn't true, or if he himself can't live up to this standard, then true love can't exist.

Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.



Philip Larkin (1922 – 1985) was an English poet, novelist, and librarian. His most famous book of poetry was *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), which includes “An Arundel Tomb” regarded as his finest poem. In January 1956, Larkin visited Chichester Cathedral with his lover Monica Jones, where he said he was “very moved” by a monument of Richard FitzAlan, 10th Earl of Arundel (d. 1376) and his second wife, Eleanor of Lancaster (d. 1372). The Earl wears armour, while his wife wears a veil, wimple, a long gown and a mantle. What struck Larkin was that the Earl’s hand is ungloved, and his wife’s hand rests on his, and although this was probably meant to signify the formal, legal, and sacramental bonds of matrimony, Larkin saw this as a humanizing symbol of their love for each other. This led him to think about time, mortality, fidelity and the nature of earthly love. Fellow poet Andrew Motion describes Larkin “using the detail of the hands as the focus for one of his most moving evocations of the struggle between time and human tenderness”. The final line suggests that love endures beyond the grave; however the poem as a whole resists the altruistic idea as expressed in Shakespeare’s sonnet—that love is everlasting. In the modern age, we are likely to be more sceptical about romantic notions of love, familiar as we are with increasing interpersonal conflict, aggression against women, divorce, and disorienting social and moral change. “An Arundel Tomb” challenges romantic notions, but it does concede that *this is what we would like to believe—that we entertain an instinctual hope in the endurance of love*. Larkin himself wrote at the end of the manuscript draft of the poem: “Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for six hundred years.” But he later commented in an interview: “I think what survives of us is love, whether in the simple biological sense or just in terms of responding to life, making it happier, even if it's only making a joke.” The poem was read at Larkin's memorial service in Westminster Abbey in February 1986, and its two final lines are inscribed on the memorial stone to Larkin unveiled in December 2016 in Poets' Corner in the Abbey.

“An Arundel Tomb” by Philip Larkin (1956)

Side by side, their faces blurred,
The earl and countess lie in stone,
Their proper habits vaguely shown
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,
And that faint hint of the absurd—
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque
Hardly involves the eye, until
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still
Clasped empty in the other; and
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

They would not think to lie so long.
Such faithfulness in effigy
Was just a detail friends would see:
A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace
Thrown off in helping to prolong
The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in
Their supine stationary voyage
The air would change to soundless damage,
Turn the old tenantry away;
How soon succeeding eyes begin
To look, not read. Rigidly they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.
Now, helpless in the hollow of
An unarmorial age, a trough
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins
Above their scrap of history,
Only an attitude remains:

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.