

Gilson, D., ed. *Out of Sequence: The Sonnets*

*Remixed*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2015.

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The premise for *Out of Sequence: The Sonnets Remixed* (2015) is strikingly ambitious: Shakespeare's one hundred and fifty-four sonnets reconceived by an equal number of poets, playwrights, visual artists, composers, and scholars. The result is an anthology of heroic proportions, chronologically loyal to Shakespeare's sequence while daringly unhindered by convention.

How such a range of replies work with and against their counterparts from the original is crucial to any assessment. Though a full accounting of methodologies undertaken by the volume's contributors is beyond the scope of this review, it is worth noting a few of the approaches held in common, beginning with those that engage Shakespeare's verse most directly. The techniques at work within these imaginative exchanges range from the outright musical, as in "Nature's Bequest: A Two-Part Canon," in which Claudia Gary simply scores lines 3 and 4 of Sonnet 4, to something closer to a literary (and cultural) mash-up: in Ari Friedlander's "The Paul Simon Annotation, or, You Can Call Me Sonnet 110," lines from Shakespeare and Simon's respective verses are set side by side in an incongruously amusing dialogue. Other writers seek out a more personal route. In "Reverence from an Irreverent Catholic," Michael Slattery juxtaposes four lines from Sonnet 31 against brief prose passages concerning his rocky emotional history with the Catholic Church. Likewise, Wendy Bashant's touching "Hospital Visit" balances a speaker's free-verse reminiscence of a dying loved one with out-of-order sequences from Sonnet 71.

Other poems in the volume not only rescore or recontextualize Shakespeare's verse but also translate it into another language altogether. Jonathan Hsy defines "The Poem That Should Not Exist," a remix of Sonnet 87, as a "retro-translation" into Middle English using only words "attested before 1400." John T. Trause's "Remorse Re-Morsed" gives readers a text rendered entirely into dots and dashes, while the method behind Angelo Pastormerlo's "Prison Moan and Mistranslation" is best explained by its accompanying footnote: "Using Google Translator, Pastormerlo translated Sonnet 133 multiple times through languages that spell out the name Shakespeare, with the exception of K: Spanish, Hungarian, Albanian, Esperanto, Serbian, Portuguese, Estonian, Afrikaans, Russian, and English."

Then there are the images, which span a range of visual vocabularies. In Adam W. Clifton's arresting "Single," for instance, a blond man, shirtless and in shorts, stands within the fenced confines of an outdoor kennel cage. Arrogantly contemplating the camera, he is, for a moment, the very embodiment of line twelve from Sonnet 3: "Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time." As for the warning that follows it — "But if thou live, remembered not to be, / Die single and thine image dies with thee" (Shakespeare 34) — the subject of the photo appears more than a little indifferent. Similarly wry is Cameron's Hunt McNabb's "Heart Swap Ward," in which Shakespeare, lounging in a hospital bed, addresses another bedbound figure, obscured by a curtain. Deftly dramatizing the final couplet of Sonnet 22 — "Presume not on thy heart when mine is slain, / Thou gav'st me thine not to give back again" (Shakespeare 43) — Shakespeare asks, "Isn't it Romantic?" When his unseen companion fails to reply, he adds: "Remember, no take backs."

Yet far from every entry in *Out of Sequence* depends upon a memorable formal conceit. Indeed, several of the most famous sonnets are approached through measured free verse alone. In "Beginning Without Question," Susan Grimm's response to Sonnet 18, one is immersed into a world of finely-tuned images: "When I pinned your blue eye. When I collected / my sweat in a jar. When I fingered the scabs / of my knees like a phrenologist." One finds a similarly glancing take on Shakespeare's original in "Waste Then," Robert Whitehead's six line deconstruction of Sonnet 30. Here we find Shakespeare's "sessions of sweet silent thought" (Shakespeare 47) transformed into an "unmovable violet in the wet electric eye" where "is everything springlike" and yet "No love invincible." Others poems in the sequence, such as Beth Gyls's "Dark as Light" (Sonnet 43) and Tom La Farge's "Perfect-Perverse" (Sonnet 74), rely on a more conventional verse structure, playfully taking up Shakespeare's original sonnet form for probing takes on sex and gender.

It is a dizzying array of responses. One might even say an incoherent one. But while *Out of Sequence*'s one hundred and fifty-four authors fail to deliver a unified progression, it nevertheless maintains and enlivens crucial figures and themes from the original. Most prominent among the figures, not surprisingly, is Shakespeare's "Faith Youth," a figure who, in *Out of Sequence*, takes on a variety of roles. Many speakers, such as those in "Beth Ayer's "For Fear" (Sonnet 104) and Paul Strohm's "Rorschach Keeps Watch" (Sonnet 109), address lovers or loved ones, while others take a tack much stranger. John Strause, in his response to Sonnet 20, "Upon Finding Online a '.jpg' Copy of the Newly Authenticated Portrait of Shakespeare by John Sanders," frames the "Fair Youth" as Shakespeare himself: "I still can't see his face that nature painted, / for how may oils master, express his passion?"

Equally thought-provoking are the various treatment of the "Dark Lady." In Jennifer Perrine's "Dark Ladies at the Magazine Stand" (Sonnet 127), Shakespeare's assertion that "[i]n the old age

black was not counted fair" (Shakespeare 96) is reframed by a speaker who finds herself confronted by a "half a dozen black actors" on a cover of *Vanity Fair*. Though obviously pleased — "every dark face / on this foldout sends sharp hope to jab our/ twisted notions of who merits this grace" — she concludes her sonnet uneasily: "Even as we celebrate this team / whose tales sing we have overcome our woe, / still our tongues wonder when it *shall* be so." Antonio Vollone, by comparison, in "1:30 am, Spoken in the Backseat of a Souped-up Sunbird" (Sonnet 130) installs the mistress from one of Shakespeare's most famous sonnets into the backseat of a high schooler's car: "Your eyes, Misty, are nothing like the sum / of days we'll be corralled by our parents / for coming home late." What follows is nothing less than a young man's plea for sex. As the speaker puts it, "Don't deny me this heaven."

If *Out of Sequence*'s "Dark Lady" sonnets roughly follow the topical shift in Shakespeare's original, from immortalized love to something closer to frenzied passion, the shift from "youth" to "mistress," at least in terms of gender, is not so clear-cut. Given the great range of contributors to *Out of Sequence*, the gender of both writer/artist and her respective subject is unstable from the outset. It's nevertheless worth noting that gay writers, perhaps inspired by the poet's attraction to the "Fair Youth," feel especially at home in *Out of Sequence*, from Stephen S. Mill's "A Gay Man Ponders Having Children" (Sonnet 8) to Tom Merrill's "Haiku for the Pianist" (Sonnet 128). Their presences help to render the division between "youth" and "mistress," male and female, charmingly and refreshingly irrelevant.

Perhaps the most unfavorable critique one can make of *Out of Sequence* is that conceptually, it covers little new ground. The appearance, in 2012, of *The Sonnets: Translating and Rewriting Shakespeare* gave readers the Sonnets similarly deconstructed by a prodigious range of writers and visual artists. In that volume's introduction, editors Sharmila Cohen and Paul Legault articulated their hope that "contributors would approach the original texts from their multitude of vantage points, that they would board the ship, loot and pillage, break things down, and reconstruct it all in a fashion that would allow us to view multiple dimensions of the original work in a new light, as a new structure" (Cohen 2012, i). D. Gilson's mission statement in his introduction to *Out of Sequence* is not quite so explicit. "How," he asks, "might we be un- and redone by the conscious act of responding to (or through) these seventeenth century verses?" Still, the final result is very much the same: a revealing and mystifying sequence in Shakespeare's thrall.

In the end, however, this doubled vision little diminishes the worth of *Out of Sequence*; its linguistic and visual settings are no less inventive or compelling for their predecessors in *The Sonnets: Translating and Rewriting Shakespeare*. If anything, *Out of Sequence* becomes more intriguing in relationship to its rival. Both works represent contrasting, multi-part acts of

constrained writing, not only giving readers the chance to see each individual sonnet reviewed through the lens twenty-first century art and culture, but the sequence as a whole. As D. Gilson asserts in his introduction, *Out of Sequence* exists as a "type of queer utopia, a place where things and people touch, though they are too often taught not to." It feels fitting that one utopia should have the chance to make contact with another.

### References

- Cohen, Sharmila, and Paul Legault, eds. 2012. *The Sonnets: Translating and Rewriting Shakespeare*. Brooklyn: Telephone Books.
- Gilson, D., ed. 2015. *Out of Sequence: The Sonnets Remixed*. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.
- Shakespeare, William, 1996. *The Sonnets*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans and Anthony Hecht. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.