



**'The 'I' experiences both the negative state of not having something and the positive state of yearning for that thing at one and the same time: the two senses that the modern English usage of the word 'want' conveniently holds side by side' [Catherine Bates]. Is loss the dominant feeling of lyric?**

**Alice Reading**

In Sonnet 31 of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (1591), Sonnet 147 of William Shakespeare's *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1609), and Sonnet 14 of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* (1633), a dominant feeling of lack, rather than loss, is presented. Depicting a lack of amatory and divine love, these sonnets corroborate and complicate Catherine Bates' three figurations of lack: as an anticipatory space, as a state of privation, and as a physical wound.<sup>1</sup> Written around 1582, Sidney's sequence of songs and sonnets describing Astrophil's love for Stella seem to be inspired by Sidney's own unrequited love for Lady Penelope Devereux, while Shakespeare's sonnets, written sometime between 1590 and 1605, seem addressed to a young man and The Dark Lady. Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, many of which are thought to be composed around 1609, uses the same model of Petrarchan lovers to present spiritual desires – a lack of connection not with the individual but with the divine. Sidney's sonnet, beginning 'With how sad steps, O Moon', displays Astrophil's lack of love through a dialogue with the personified moon onto which he projects his loneliness. Opening with an image of isolation, the moon is seen alone in 'the skies'.<sup>2</sup> Retreating with 'sad steps', the moon moves further into the empty skies in a way that reflects Bates' first figuration of lack as 'an anticipatory or pregnant space, waiting to be filled [...] often featured as an existential emptiness'.<sup>3</sup> Moving into an empty space, the moon reflects the unrequited lover's move into an emotional emptiness (a space void of intimacy). After the volta, Sidney's poem turns to question the moon: 'Is constant love deem'd there but want of wit? / Are beauties there as proud as here' (Sonnet 31, ll. 10, 11)? Further distanced by the spatial deixis 'there' (Sonnet 31, ll. 10, 11), the moon, like the narrator's lover, appears too far away to respond. Heather Dubrow draws attention to the conversational and 'dialogic' nature of *Astrophil and Stella*, yet Sonnet 31 is comparatively monologic.<sup>4</sup> Although personified with 'face', 'eyes', and 'looks' (Sonnet 31, ll. 2, 5, 7), the moon has no voice, leaving Astrophil asking questions into the silent unresponsive night. Ending the poem with four unanswered interrogatives, Sidney creates the 'anticipatory or pregnant space, waiting to be filled' that Bates proposes. Astrophil implores, 'O Moon, tell me' (Sonnet 31, l. 9), yet the parameters of the Petrarchan sonnet are reached before the moon gets space to respond. In Sidney's sonnet, the object desired to fill that gap is Stella. Just as the moon does not produce its own light but reflects that of the sun, the unrequited love of the moon reflects that of its narrator. Astrophil looks into the mirror of the moon and cries, 'how wan a face' (Sonnet 31, l. 2). As well as a pun on the waning moon, the adjective 'wan' is defined by the OED as 1. 'Lacking light, or lustre', 2. 'Sad, dismal', 3. 'Of an unhealthy, unwholesome colour', and 4. 'Pallid, faded, sickly'.<sup>5</sup> In all

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody: the Love Sonnet in Early Modern England', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella*, Sonnet 31, in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 165. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number. See appendix for full text.

<sup>3</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Dubrow, 'The Sonnet and the Lyric Mode', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> 'Wan' in Oxford English Dictionary [online],

<<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/225416?rskey=5xXsH5&result=4#eid>> [accessed 5 January 2020].

**'The 'I' experiences both the negative state of not having something and the positive state of yearning for that thing at one and the same time: the two senses that the modern English usage of the word 'want' conveniently holds side by side' [Catherine Bates]. Is loss the dominant feeling of lyric?**

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of these senses, the moon (and therefore Astrophil) is lacking something (light, happiness, colour, health) that, the poem implies, reciprocated love would provide. Astrophil therefore does not qualify for Bates' second formation of lack as a 'state of privation or loss – [...] the vacated field left behind by an object that was once possessed but has since been lost'.<sup>6</sup> Stella has not yet been possessed and then lost to Astrophil: his lack remains anticipatory as he waits to be loved.

It is this secondary formation of lack that is present in Shakespeare's Sonnet 147, 'My love is as a fever'. Unlike Astrophil, the narrator's lack is not just an empty space but an *emptied* space. Yet what is lost is not love but his reason. The subject which begins the poem, 'My love', does not refer to the object of the narrator's desires, but to the feelings of the narrator himself.<sup>7</sup> The following three quatrains continue this opening first-person orientation ('My reason', 'I am', 'For I') (Sonnet 147, ll. 5, 9, 13) – as Bates describes of English Renaissance sonnets, 'the focus of interest is not the desired object but the desiring subject'.<sup>8</sup> The desired object is not introduced in Shakespeare's sonnet until the closing couplet: 'For I have sworn thee fair' (Sonnet 147, l. 13); the previous three quatrains focus not on 'thee' but on 'me' (Sonnet 147, ll. 13, 7). In Shakespeare's second quatrain, the narrator laments, 'My reason, the physician to my love [...] Hath left me' (Sonnet 147, ll. 5-7). The medical metaphor situates reason as a figure of trust, respect, and rational thought, and the possessive 'My' (Sonnet 147, l. 1) places this as Bates' 'object that was once possessed'.<sup>9</sup> In Shakespeare's sonnet, unreciprocated love not only leaves a man lacking affection but losing the rational, trustworthy, and respectful side of himself. With reason lost, the narrator's sick mind becomes the 'vacated field left behind' as stipulated by Bates.<sup>10</sup>

Where Sidney's poem presents lovesickness as a 'languish'd grace' (Sonnet 31, l. 7), there is nothing graceful about the narrator's sickness in Shakespeare's sonnet: 'And frantic-mad with evermore unrest; / My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are' (Sonnet 147, ll. 10, 11). The contained pentameter juxtaposes the proposed 'madmen's' (Sonnet 147, l. 11) discourse, yet these very contradictions fuel the dis-ease of someone 'mad' (Sonnet 147, l. 10). The sonnet itself is riddled with a plague of linguistic ill-health ('fever', 'disease', 'ill', 'sickly', 'death') (Sonnet 147, ll. 1, 2, 3, 4, 8) that confirms Michael Schoenfeldt's conclusion that love 'entails an invariably torturous experience' in Sonnet 147.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Shakespeare's sonnet merges into Bates' third figuration of lack as a 'physical wound' as the narrator is diseased from the torturous pain of loving.<sup>12</sup> In Sidney's sonnet, this wounding is seen in the 'sharp' (Sonnet 31, l. 4) pain of Cupid's arrow; in Shakespeare's, it is not the Roman god of love but someone who is 'as black as hell, as dark as night' (Sonnet 147, l. 14) who hurts the narrator. 'Anger' (Sonnet 147, l. 6) may be ascribed to the physician in this sonnet, yet the spitting monosyllabic plosives of the closing line ('art', 'black', 'dark', 'night') (Sonnet 147, l. 14) charge anger to the narrator himself. Sonnet 147 becomes an expression of the narrator's pain at desiring what he does not have. As Billy Ocean says, love really does hurt.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, Sonnet 147, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Arden, 1997), p. 411. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number. See appendix for full text.

<sup>8</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

<sup>10</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Schoenfeldt, 'Introduction', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

<sup>13</sup> Billy Ocean, *Love Really Hurts Without You* (Metropolis Studios: Song Music CG, 1976) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5uMOOQ6MV0>> [accessed 6 January 2020].

Or rather, lust really hurts. For although the narrator explains that 'My love is as a fever, longing still' (Sonnet 147, l. 1), the hot burning passion of such a 'fever' (Sonnet 147, l. 1) implies it is his sexual desire, rather than a courtly affection, that is unrequited. The food imagery that Bates uses to describe her first configuration of lack as a not only 'existential emptiness' but also 'physical starvation – as a gnawing hunger' becomes relevant here.<sup>14</sup> As outlined by Susan Bordo, hunger is often employed as a metaphor for sexual appetite, hence, the narrator's 'longing', 'Feeding', and 'sickly appetite' (Sonnet 147, ll. 1, 3, 4) can be seen to express his unfulfilled sexual desire.<sup>15</sup> Where Sidney, according to Diana E. Henderson, 'played artfully with the gaps and doubleness allowed by adopting a named persona, Astrophil, who is and is not identifiable with the poet Sidney', Shakespeare creates gaps and narrative distance through simile and extended metaphor: sickness and hunger stand in for uncontrolled desire. The two verbs attached to the 'fever' of the narrator's love, 'longing' and 'Feeding' (Sonnet 147, ll. 1-3), consolidate the sexual and carnal hungers carried by this simile. Bates' conflation of lack, want, and desire thus comes to the surface of Shakespeare's Sonnet 147 through the narrator's wanting and lacking reciprocated sexual desire.

In both Sidney's and Shakespeare's sonnets, the narrator is not lacking love – he himself has too much of it ('longing still' and in 'constant love') (Sonnet 147, l. 1) (Sonnet 31, l. 10) – they are lacking being loved. The same is true for Donne's Sonnet 14, 'Batter my heart'. Although Donne appears distanced from the overt descriptions of physical desire in Shakespeare's Sonnet 147, critics such as Helen Wilcox and Margret Fetzer seek to correct such misconceptions.<sup>16</sup> It is an oversimplification to see the Elizabethan sonnet sequence as turning away from the physical desires of Petrarchan lovers – as seen in Sidney and Shakespeare – to the spiritual desires of religious sonnets – as seen in Donne's *Holy Sonnets*. The Petrarchan tropes of unrequited and unconsummated love prevail in Donne's sonnet too. The sonnet's desired object is addressed through the second person nine times, yet the narrator's declarations ('I love you') and commands ('Take me to you') are unanswered.<sup>17</sup> In an 'existential emptiness' characteristic of Bates' first definition of lack, the narrator, like Sidney's Astrophil, preaches to the empty skies.<sup>18</sup>

Although both Sidney and Donne present a lack of connection with heavenly beings, where Sidney portrays human love as divine, Donne depicts divine love as human. With his closing series of inconsistent questions, ('Do they above love to be lov'd, and yet / Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?') (Sonnet 31, ll. 12-13), Sidney not only suggests that these the objects of affection, these 'beauties', are ineffable, but that they are so powerful that the admirer is 'possess[ed]'. This powerful possession is carried through to Donne, but, in Sonnet 14, the object of affection is given not divine but earthly desires: God can 'ravish' (Sonnet 14, l. 14) the narrator, who's desires are frustrated: 'I, like an usurped town, to'another due, / Labour to'admit You, but O, to no end' (Sonnet 14, ll. 5-6). Distinct from Sidney and Shakespeare, Donne introduces a third-party, 'another' (Sonnet 14, l. 5), to whom the narrator is ensnared. Described as God's 'enemy' (Sonnet 14, l. 10), a Satanic or devilish figure absolves the narrator of corporeal responsibility. The verbs 'Labour' and 'admit' (Sonnet 14, l. 6) are redundant as the narrator is 'usurped', 'captived', and 'betrothed' (Sonnet 14, ll. 5, 8, 10). The narrator's desires are restrained, acting 'to no end' (Sonnet 14,

<sup>14</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edn (London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> Helen Wilcox, 'Sacred Desire, Forms of Belief: the Religious Sonnet in Early Modern Britain', in *the Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 146; Margret Fetzer, *John Donne's Performances: Sermons, Poems, Letters and Devotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 138.

<sup>17</sup> John Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, Sonnet 14, in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), p. 320. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number. See appendix for full text.

<sup>18</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

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l. 6). Instead, the narrator desires to be acted upon: 'Batter my heart' the narrator commands, 'o'rethrow mee, and bend / Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new' (Sonnet 31, ll. 1-3). Compared with the only imperative shared between the previous two poems (Sidney's gentle, 'O Moon, tell me') (Sonnet 31, l. 9), Donne's surge of violent imperatives reveals a powerful desire to be overthrown and a new understanding of Bates' first definition of lack as an 'anticipatory' space: rather than waiting to be loved, Donne's narrator is waiting to be dominated.<sup>19</sup>

The sexual connotations in Donne's poems have been noted: Fetzer says that Donne's *Holy Sonnets* 'strongly rely on erotic imagery'; Achsah Guibbory argues that Donne represents 'erotic love as a spiritual experience'.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore unsurprising to find the sexual connotations of Bates' first figuration of lack as an 'emptiness or physical starvation – as a gnawing hunger', as seen in Shakespeare's sonnet, shared by Donne: 'Take me to you, imprison me, for I, / Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me' (Sonnet 13, ll. 12-14). But Donne has no use for the indirect sexual metaphors utilised by Shakespeare. Desire, disguised as a 'fever' and 'appetite' (Sonnet 147, ll. 1, 4) in Sonnet 147, is unashamedly declared in Donne's sonnet: 'enthrall me [...] ravish me' (Sonnet 147, ll. 13-14). The narrator's desperate desires for connection, security, and pleasure, imply their current absence. The urgent passion in the repeated rhymes and untamed iambic feet of the last three lines, 'Take me to you, imprison me [...] enthrall me [...] ravish me' (Sonnet 14, ll. 12-14), reveal what the narrator is lacking. As Fetzer describes, 'Passion does not denote a state of fulfilment here, but rather desire, the absence of sexual gratification'.<sup>21</sup> Again, this links to Bates' first definition of lack as 'an anticipatory or pregnant space, waiting to be filled'.<sup>22</sup> Where in Sidney's sonnet this space is wanting Stella, Donne's takes the shape of the divine.

All three of these sonnets portrays absences and their narrator's quests to fill them. Astrophil is 'scorn[ed]' (Sonnet 31, l. 13) by Stella; Shakespeare's narrator was 'fair' and 'bright' but is now 'black' and 'dark' (Sonnet 147, ll. 13-14); and Donne's narrator wants to be broken, blown, and burnt, but God only 'knock[s], breathe[s], shine[s]' (Sonnet 14, ll. 2-4). They all have desires that are not met; they all feel the absence of affection from the ones they love. In attempts to fill their absences, both Shakespeare and Donne address their sonnets to the objects of desire. Although Shakespeare only reveals this in the closing couplet, Donne's recipient is immediately transparent, 'Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You / As yet but knock' (Sonnet 14, ll. 1-2). Even though both sonnets address 'thee'/'you' (Sonnet 147, l. 13) (Sonnet 14, l. 1), the prevalence of the first-person reflects, as Bates suggested earlier, that these poems are not about the lacking object but rather the lacking subject.<sup>23</sup> When describing his alliance with Satan, Donne's narrator argues that 'Reason Your viceroy in me, me should defend' (Sonnet 14, l. 7). As alluded to by the repeated first-person pronoun, the narrator attempts to fill his absences by introspection – filling their lack by thinking about themselves. Sidney's narrator achieves the same ends by different means; the moon operates as a mirror for the narrator's feelings. Astrophil muses, 'I read it in thy looks; thy languish'd grace / To me, that feel the like, thy state descries' (Sonnet 31, ll. 6-8). The mirrored iambic meter between lines seven and eight reflects the likeness Astrophil sees between himself and the moon, as he desires confirmation that he is not alone in his loneliness. Astrophil too thus fills an absence by thinking about himself, but in a way more indirect than Sidney's narrator. As Astrophil desires empathy, Shakespeare's narrator

<sup>19</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

<sup>20</sup> Fetzer, *John Donne's Performances*, p. 128; Achsah Guibbory, 'Erotic Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. by Achsah Guibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 142.

<sup>21</sup> Fetzer, *John Donne's Performances*, p. 138.

<sup>22</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 107.

demands attention, and Donne's narrator desires devotion. Bates argues that this endless search for meaning 'is nothing other than the human condition': they all desire connection.<sup>24</sup> The sonnets of Sidney, Shakespeare, and Donne demonstrates that if, as Bates states, the English Renaissance sonnet sequences 'are about desire', then it is the lack of, rather than the loss of, this desire that dominates the feeling of these sonnets. Whereas loss implies having had, lack, as Bates outlines, can exist in an anticipatory, vacated, and wounded space.<sup>25</sup> Lack operates in both directions: to lack in oneself and to lack from others. Sidney's Sonnet 31, Shakespeare's Sonnet 147, and Donne's Sonnet 14 present lack of reciprocated love and the human desire for connection.

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<sup>24</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 116.

<sup>25</sup> Bates, 'Desire, Discontent, Parody', p. 106.

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**Appendix**

## Sir Philip Sidney, Sonnet 31

1 With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climb'st the skies!  
 2 How silently, and with how wan a face!  
 3 What, may it be that even in heav'nly place  
 4 That busy archer his sharp arrows tries!  
 5 Sure, if that long-with love-acquainted eyes  
 6 Can judge of love, thou feel'st a lover's case,  
 7 I read it in thy looks; thy languish'd grace  
 8 To me, that feel the like, thy state descries.  
 9 Then, ev'n of fellowship, O Moon, tell me,  
 10 Is constant love deem'd there but want of wit?  
 11 Are beauties there as proud as here they be?  
 12 Do they above love to be lov'd, and yet  
 13 Those lovers scorn whom that love doth possess?  
 14 Do they call virtue there ungratefulness?

## William Shakespeare, Sonnet 147

1 My love is as a fever, longing still  
 2 For that which longer nurseth the disease,  
 3 Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,  
 4 Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.  
 5 My reason, the physician to my love,  
 6 Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,  
 7 Hath left me, and I desperate now approve  
 8 Desire is death, which physic did except.  
 9 Past cure I am, now reason is past care,  
 10 And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;  
 11 My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,  
 12 At random from the truth vainly expressed:  
 13 For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,  
 14 Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

## John Donne, Sonnet 14

1 Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You  
 2 As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
 3 That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
 4 Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
 5 I, like an usurped town, to'another due,  
 6 Labor to'admit You, but O, to no end;  
 7 Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
 8 But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.  
 9 Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,  
 10 But am betrothed unto your enemy.  
 11 Divorce me, 'untie or break that knot again;  
 12 Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
 13 Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free,  
 14 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.