Shakespeare’s SONNET 29

When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes
I all alone beweep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featur’d like him, like him with friends possess’d,
Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee,—and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
    For thy sweet love remember’d such wealth brings
    That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

If “When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes” is one of the best known, most often recited of Shakespeare’s sonnets, it is not difficult to see why. The octave describes a state of mind we may, at first glance, identify with, and the sestet, with its lovely lark image, offers a Hallmark card wishful panacea. On the surface, then, this appears to be a very simple sonnet. What led me to examine it more closely, however, is a minor anomaly within the sestet:

[. . .] and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate; (emphasis added)

The grammatical structure of these lines makes it clear that the actual singing (or rejoicing) is not necessarily equated with that of the lark. Rather it is the bird’s upward sweep from “sullen earth” that depicts the speaker’s sharp mood swing in this oddly truncated simile. The actual singing is done by “my state,” and a singing state requires some further study.

The meaning of the word “state,” which appears three times, metamorphoses with each new occurrence: in line 2, the significance of “my outcast state,” is defined for us—it is the condition the speaker sees himself in: deprived of both luck and social status. As a repetition of the same rhyme-word, in line 10, the singing “state” refers to the speaker’s mindset. The third time “my state” acts as a parallel to a monarch’s state or kingdom. The poet’s outcast state, within this royal image, comes to signify exile, which he nevertheless prefers.

Now two key parallels surface: “deaf heaven” / singing hymns at “heaven’s gate” and “myself almost despising” / the “scorn” of kingdoms. Their polarities accentuate the wild mood swing of the speaker whenever he thinks of the loved one. Yet, realistically viewed, nothing has changed in the speaker’s cir-
cumstances except his attitude. Since he is still "singing in the rain," as it were, the radical movement from despair to euphoria must put us on alert. It becomes apparent that whereas the first three lines of the poem may depict a factual loss and social ostracism, everything that follows is a mental rampage into deep depression: a sense of hopelessness, an imagined lack of good looks, talent, and range. Most significantly, the line "With what I most enjoy contented least" informs us that, rather than having it imposed on him by outside circumstances, the speaker wills his misery. He tears himself and his life apart with great zeal and rebounds with equal zeal by using the equivalent of an antidepressant drug. Here manic depression raises its dire flag. Once he has shredded himself mercilessly, the speaker adds, "myself almost despising." Almost? How much further could he go? The phrase suggests that he is not cognizant of his prognosis.

Now even the first three lines become suspect. Moving in reverse, line 3 assumes a "deaf heaven," yet heaven (there is no mention made of God) is neither deaf nor listening to hymns. Even while the speaker's psychosis attributes the deafness to heaven, he persists in uttering cries he assumes to be "bootless" or useless. Line 2 is the clincher: If "thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings," why does the speaker mourn his misfortune "all alone"? Where is that marvelous loved one? Why isn't he confided in? Here the entire presumed relationship is put in doubt, for it is not heaven but the loved one who appears to be deaf. Ironically, a single phrase change, from "Haply I think on thee" to "Haply I come to thee" could have restored our credulity. As it stands, we must ask ourselves whether the loved one is even aware of his admirer's existence.

Having lost all faith in the speaker's veracity and powers of self-analysis, we cannot help but distrust the first line as well. Being nonspecific as to either time or event, it may simply refer to the downturns in the continuous mood swings of the manic-depressive cycle.

If we identify the speaker in this sonnet (as we do in all the others) with Shakespeare himself, we must wonder whether he was presenting us with a case history of manic depression, or had perhaps suffered from it himself. At any rate, his depiction of the malady goes a long way toward explaining the bard's grasp of the volatile, self-destructive natures of his tragic heroes and heroines.

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