

*“Sweets with sweets war not”:*  
Examining Shakespeare’s Use of Musicality  
in Sonnet VIII

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The ability of William Shakespeare’s sonnets to convey meaning is contingent on the intrinsically musical language he employs throughout the lines. Shakespeare’s Sonnet VIII may give clear meaning through words alone, but once his musical lexicon is taken into account, nuances in meaning become all the more coherent to connect the reader with the urgent wish Shakespeare imposes upon a bachelor annoyed by music. I argue that Shakespeare attempts to convince the youth to marry rather than spend his life alone through the musical language and stylistic figures present in the sonnet. I believe that Shakespeare likens marriage to music and creates contrast between bachelorhood and marriage within the lines through his utilization of music as a uniting factor between two people. The music in the sonnet is either harmonious or clashes in order to demonstrate two opposing sides: Shakespeare’s pleas and the youth’s rejection of marriage and unity. The music unwinds towards the end as the youth ultimately rejects it for solitude instead of creating harmony with another individual. Music is not only present in the lines, but is spoken of as a mechanism for human connection that takes on different forms including its aural effect, strings themselves, and content. An analysis of this

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sonnet's musicality serves to reinforce the demeanor of both Shakespeare and the bachelor and illuminates the concept of love and connection through love and music.

In Sonnet VII, Shakespeare's speaker argues that the youth he is speaking to will become nobody if he remains without a wife and family. The speaker cannot understand why this man would choose to live a life in solitude instead of relishing the sweet beauty of music and harmonious connection. At the start of the sonnet, Shakespeare tries to sway the man by speaking in musical rhymes to emphasize the beauty he is missing from his life in solitude, but towards the end of the sonnet the man continues to reject the possibility of finding love, denouncing the effects of the music in the process. Eminent Shakespeare scholar Helen Vendler states that the musical metaphor "is made the more fantastic by being elaborated not in solitary meditation or sustained public oratorical argument, but rather in the intimate address of one person to another" (Vendler 79). Shakespeare's sonnet arrives at the conclusion that no song can be played as a solo – something the youth fails to grasp.

At the start of the sonnet, Shakespeare's speaker directly asks the bachelor "why hear'st thou music sadly?" when there is plenty "music to hear" (1). In describing the music they both hear, the speaker revels in the fact that "sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy," creating happiness for all who listen (2). These "sweets" he depicts cannot ever war because they are harmonious with one another, reflected by these two beginning lines being melodious with one another, like the pairing of the "sweets." The repetition of "music," "hear," "sweets," and "joy" come in pairings of two to emphasize that there must be a pairing to create harmony, while possibly hinting at the effects of marriage to create a singular union. The spondees of "sweets war not" only exemplify the peaceful meaning of the words, for

the three words are read as being smooth and gliding effortlessly off the tongue, as if they are meant to be paired together. These mellifluous lines contrast starkly with the next lines of the sonnet, where Shakespeare's speaker asks of the youth "why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly, / or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy?" (3-4). The exact rhymes at the end of these four beginning lines of "sadly/gladly" and "joy/annoy" connect these couplets with one another, albeit with opposing meaning—the sense of these ending words contrast within themselves to exemplify how the music causes this man to be embittered. Vendler explains that "the metrical and phonetic disequilibrium is meant to enact the dis-ease of bachelorhood" that the youth suffers (79). Whereas in the past he once enjoyed music, it now only serves as a reminder that he is alone. The half-lines present in the quatrain arise from the imbalance of syllables, split by a pause. For example, "music to hear" and "why hear'st thou music sadly" contain four and seven syllables respectively, while the latter "or else receiv'st with pleasure" and "thine annoy?" have seven and three syllables. This disequilibrium epitomizes imbalance in the youth's life, for the music of these lines do not come out as even, instead there is an intrinsic sense of something being wrong in the way the lines are constructed themselves.

Shakespeare's speaker now is explaining to the youth why he finds music so unbearable and encapsulates the aural effect of music in the next quatrain:

If the true concord of well-tuned sounds  
By unions married do offend thine ear,  
They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds  
In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear. (5-8)

The harmony of music's "well-tuned sounds" annoy the bachelor at his own fault for refusing to create a harmony in his own life. The "sounds" are personification of a married couple, as if music has the human motive of annoying the man until he decides to acquiesce to the speaker's and the music's wishes. They continue to "chide" him for insisting on being single. Shakespeare's use of the word "parts" has a double connotation: not only should the youth marry and play the part of a husband and father, but the youth refuses to use his sexual "parts" to bear children. Shakespeare, in addition, plays with the words "well-tuned" and "union," utilizing them as puns due to their shared "oon" sound. The way that these two words match perfectly in sound illustrates the way in which the youth could match perfectly with a lover and be complete. The similarity of these words also exemplifies the "well-tuned sounds" to the extent that the words are so synchronous they take on the characteristics of one another. The unification of sounds is directly parallel to the unification of souls in marriage—a unification which the youth destroys by creating discord in the harmony of music and by not playing his "part" to be unified with music. The "union" the sonnet depicts can be interpreted as being unison, a musical term for when two instruments are playing the same note at the same time. Just as the lines of the sonnet present words as being pairs, the intrinsic music of those words link them within pairings that depend entirely upon their musicality, such as with "well-tuned" and "union."

Shakespeare likens marriage to the strings of a musical instrument in the next quatrain to examine another aspect in which music is synonymous with marriage. This instrument is probably a lute, for they were popular in Shakespeare's time and its strings are strung in pairs, deepening the meaning of the sonnet. Shakespeare personifies the strings as he urges the youth

to “mark how one string, sweet husband to another, / strikes each in each by mutual ordering” (9-10). One string cannot be played without reverberating with another in the pair—resembling the functioning of a marriage between husband and wife. Even though the string is single or “one,” in reality it reverberates in harmony with the other string in its course. Shakespeare claims that the personified string is a husband who through “mutual ordering” responds to his wife and creates balance in their relationship. The emphasis on “each in each” phonetically mimics the plucking sound of the lute’s strings. The trochees on “each” are when the string is released and vibrates alongside the other one—and it is only fair to notice that “each” appears twice to verbally symbolize the married pair. The strings resemble “sire, and child, and happy mother, / who all in one, one pleasing note do sing” (11-12). The harmony between the strings is a metaphor for a harmonious family that the youth repudiates. Even though each member of the family is an individual, they come together to sing “one pleasing note,” a unison created from a chorus of voices. Phonetically, the twelfth line of the sonnet is made up of words that convey a smoothness as they roll off the tongue, mimicking the pleasure the family receives from being united together. Shakespeare’s metaphor of the word “note” symbolizes the family’s ability to sing together and create the music that is annoying the youth. Even though the music is not physically hurting the youth, he has adopted a mentality in his imagination where the music is playing to taunt him where it otherwise leaves others alone, since they are in harmony with other individuals. Concerning this quatrain, Vendler asserts that “as sounds, the ingredients of music are simply *married*. As strings, one first becomes *sweet husband to another* and, as another instrument is added, they resemble *sire,*

*and child, and happy mother*” and cannot be considered as separate due to their intrinsic harmony (80).

Shakespeare’s speaker gives up on convincing the youth of the joys of marriage, which becomes evident in the ending couplet of the sonnet. Rather than imitating the lute’s “speechless song being many, seeming one,” the youth plugs up his ears and lets the music continue to reverberate discordantly in his ears (13). Shakespeare personifies the “speechless song” to illustrate that the bond of love is an unspoken connection between two or more individuals that amplifies happiness through their mutual “song.” The last line of the sonnet carries finality, as the song “sings this to thee, ‘Thou single wilt prove none,’” arriving at the conclusion that the man will not change his mind about marriage and will end up alone (14). Shakespeare utilizes the word “one” multiple times throughout the sonnet, but ends the sonnet on “none” to illustrate himself giving up on creating desire in the man and resorting to acceptance of the fact that there will be no harmonious song for this single youth. He will amount to nothing because his line will die with him, instead of having children with a wife. Throughout the sonnet, there is a “monodic pun on single and sing (singleness, do sing, song, sings, single). A fundamental appeal wants to turn the young man’s not (line 2) to a note (line 12),” a direct reflection of the music yearning to create harmony for the youth (Vendler 79). Unfortunately, the youth does not succumb to sweet music and chooses to remain solitary.

In my dramatic reading of this sonnet, I emphasized certain stylistic elements that create contrast in the sonnet and read words in different ways to strategically highlight the effects Shakespeare sought to convey. For example, I read the first two lines more smoothly than I otherwise would in order to make sure the listener could hear the contrast between those two lines

and the proceeding ones, with the harsh sounds in line three coming out more clearly. Moving on, I read “well-tuned” and “union” with the same tone and stretched them out to make them stick out as being a pair, albeit in different lines. In addition, I emphasized “each in each” to increase the separation between the words as an imitation of the lute strings being plucked. I tried to read the whole sonnet by putting myself in Shakespeare’s perspective and sounding as if I were pleading and confused at the youth’s distaste of harmonious love at the start of the sonnet, but then I changed my tone into one of adamant certainty that the youth has created his own path into oblivion by refusing to love. Shakespeare attests that music is timeless and lives on after those who have created it have all disappeared or passed, and love functions in the same way. The memories created between two people last a lifetime, and even if some of the lyrics are forgotten, the melody remains etched into the mind. Without music, people would not know the stories of others who came before them who shared the same emotions. Love remains timeless through bearing children and having a literal part of yourself live to carry on your memory, just like the function of music. Music is made by humans to express emotions that cannot be expressed by words alone, often encompassing love as a main theme. Writing a sonnet through words alone was not enough for Shakespeare, for he had to convey the nuances of his words and form deep connections through the music within the lines. It can be said that one evolved from the other – without love and companionship there would be “none.”

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