

Twenty Sonnets to Mary Queen of Scots: Eternity, Death, and Parallels Between Joseph Brodsky and Mary Queen of Scots

By Alessandra Leake

Abstract:

The paper examines the identification that Joseph Brodsky felt with Mary Queen of Scots, which is displayed in his collection of poems *Twenty Sonnets to Mary Queen of Scots*. The connection between the two individuals can be seen through a comparison of their personal lives, as well as through the themes contained within Brodsky's poems. The symbols present within his work are also discussed, linking back to his themes and the Queen. All four translations are used in the analysis, and each language makes a reference to a poem by another individual. These references are examined, resulting in a look at poems by William Cullen Bryant, Alexander Pushkin, and Fyodor Tyutchev.

Keywords: Joseph Brodsky, Mary Queen of Scots, poetry, time, death, immortality, William Cullen Bryant, Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Tyutchev.

Joseph Brodsky, like Mary Queen of Scots, spent a significant amount of his life under the threat of death. In his collection of sonnets, entitled *Twenty Sonnets to Mary Queen of Scots*, the theme of death is prevalent throughout the work. It is also quite obvious that Brodsky identifies with Mary Queen of Scots on a number of levels. Through an analysis of his sonnets, I shall demonstrate the strong connection Brodsky felt to the Queen, as well as the prevalent themes of time and subsequent death. First, we shall look at a brief history of each person involved.

Mary Queen of Scots was known for her kind heart and was said to be the most beautiful princess in Europe (Hanson). She was born in 1542 and became the Queen of Scotland six days after her birth. She was betrothed to Henry VIII's son the future Edward VI, but the Catholics opposed the match and took Mary to Stirling Castle. Henry sent a series of raids to Scotland known as "The Rough Wooing," but this did not change the Scots' minds. Mary was then betrothed to the Dauphin Francis, King Henri II's heir, and sent to be brought up at the French Court. The two were married in 1558, and Mary

became the Queen of Scotland and France in 1559 after King Henri II's death. Her husband the Dauphin died in 1560 of an ear infection, and she returned to Scotland the next year. Scotland had become a Protestant country while Mary was still Catholic, but she reigned uneventfully until her marriage to her second cousin Lord Darnley. Darnley was not well liked and was the cause of Mary's secretary, David Riccio, being murdered in front of her. Shortly after this incident Mary gave birth to her son James, and, in less than a year, Darnley was also killed. People suspected that Mary was involved in the murder and that her third husband, the Earl of Bothwell, was the principal murderer. A few months after her third marriage, her Protestant Lords rose against her, and she was imprisoned in Lochleven Castle, while Bothwell fled and was imprisoned in Scandinavia until his death. Mary managed to escape in 1568 and fled to her cousin Queen Elizabeth I in England. Mary was imprisoned by her cousin for 19 years until she was executed in 1587 after Elizabeth's ministers suspected her of helping with plots to assassinate the queen (The Royal Household). Unfortunately, the executioner missed her neck on the first swing and cut the back of her head. She was heard whispering "Sweet Jesus" before her head was cut off. When the executioner went to pick up her head, it was discovered that she had worn a red wig to cover her gray hair (Hanson).

Joseph Brodsky was born in 1940 in St. Petersburg, which was called Leningrad at the time, to a Jewish family. His father was an officer in the Soviet Navy, and his mother worked as a translator and bookkeeper. Brodsky had a hard time in school due to his Jewish heritage and left at the age of 15. He started writing but was unable to find many opportunities to publish his work, so he shared his work in private gatherings with friends and other poets, establishing himself as a popular underground poet. He refused to

find a state-approved career and was harassed by the government. He was sent to a mental institution twice and eventually put on trial for social parasitism. He was sentenced to five years of hard labour in a work camp near Arkhangelsk (16.5 hours away). He spent his free time studying British and American poetry, and, after the Soviet leader Leonid Ilich Brezhnev lost power, writers and artists managed to campaign for his release. Brodsky started to publish his work abroad but was forced to leave the country a few years later. Israel had offered to have him immigrate to their country, however, he ended up visiting an English poet named W. H. Auden before moving to the United States. He continued to publish his works as well as teach at universities around the country, and he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1987 for his “all-embracing authorship, imbued with clarity of thought and poetic intensity” (Biography.com Editors). He died in 1996 of heart disease, caused by his time in exile doing hard labour (Biography.com Editors), and his love of drink and cigarettes likely did not help.

As we saw in the brief histories of Mary Queen of Scots and Joseph Brodsky above, the two individuals shared a number of similarities in their lives: both individuals were forced to leave their native countries; they were also well educated in literature and poetry; and they were both wrongly persecuted. Mary Queen of Scots was fond of sonnets, and it is surely for this reason that Brodsky chose to write his cycle of poems to her in this form. In his fourth sonnet, he also compares one of his relationships to that of Mary and Bothwell. There are also many allusions to Mary’s sexual activity. The most vivid are contained in the first lines of sonnet V:

The number of your lovers, Mary, went
beyond the figure three, four, twenty, twent-
y-five. (Brodsky 61)

The sonnet ends with the line, “To your compatriots you were a slut” (61). Brodsky was also known for his promiscuity, so it is not surprising that he brings up Mary’s, while at the same time defending it. In sonnet XII lines seven and eight read:

It’s not his business to discuss your quotas:
who had you or who didn’t in a bed. (75)

This defence suggests that he has felt the judgement of others about his own sexual exploits and feels the need to make the point in his poetry that it is no one’s business but his or her own.

Brodsky also seems to feel that he knows Mary’s personal thoughts. In sonnet XV he claims to know the truth:

nor that Elizabeth loved England’s plot
indeed more than you did your Scottish shire
(which is the truth, though some will cry it’s not)
(Brodsky 81)

Knowing how someone feels is the pinnacle of understanding another person and involves a deep knowledge of that person. I would say these lines are the strongest example of Brodsky’s identification with Mary, as it requires an intimate knowledge of her and states that many others have tried and failed to understand her feelings.

Joseph Brodsky has been quoted as saying, “[a]ll my poems are more or less about the same thing—about Time. About what time does to Man” (Biography.com Editors). And time is most definitely brought up in this collection of sonnets, as well as the idea of what happens when we run out of it: death. The first line of sonnet III, “I, who have traveled half my earthly road” (57), suggests to us that he is already halfway through his life, and it also refers to Dante’s famous work *La Divina Comedia*. *La Divina Comedia* predominately takes place in hell, purgatory, and heaven where everyone, other than the narrator, are, of course, dead.

In the middle of the journey of our life,
I came to myself, in a dark wood,
where the direct way was lost.
It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild,
harsh and impenetrable that wood was,
so that thinking of it recreates the fear. (Kline)

It is also interesting to note that *La Divina Comedia* starts in a dark wood, while Brodsky's poem takes place in the Jardin du Luxembourg. Both places are natural areas filled with elements that are capable of scaring their respective narrators. Fear is directly mentioned in the sixth line in *La Divina Comedia*, and the fear of death can be extrapolated for Brodsky in sonnet III.

As you continue reading his sonnets the death imagery becomes more pronounced. In sonnet IX lines five and six read:

And then the corpses lie about like trash,
the endless din of crows' first-come-first-served. (Brodsky
69)

This is a vivid description, providing the reader with images of piles of corpses being picked at by crows, a generally accepted representative of death and horror. In his next sonnet he describes death's unannounced appearance and, in sonnet XI, describes Mary's death:

knocks off our crowns and bridal wreaths at will-
quite indiscriminately. And the heads as well. (73)

On top of describing the method by which Mary Queen of Scots was executed, Brodsky uses the word "our," once again alluding to his identification with her.

Just as there are parallels between Mary Queen of Scots and Joseph Brodsky's lives, there are also connections between Mary's story and the myth of Medusa. Medusa, like Mary, was a beautiful creature. Mary was known for her beauty, and, similarly, Medusa was also an attractive priestess with golden hair until her involvement with

Poseidon. They both entered into marriages that were frowned upon by others and consequently caused issues in their lives, and finally, they both had their heads removed (Medusa). Besides having similarities in their lives, sonnet III also has numerous images of stone. The first appears in the third line, “and contemplate the petrified gray curls” (57). Brodsky uses the adjective “petrified,” as undoubtedly anyone who met Medusa’s gaze would be petrified right before they turned to stone. In the tenth line “in the stone garland of your girl friends – stunned” (57) we find the same imagery of people that have been struck with fear immediately preceding the transformation to stone. Since Brodsky referenced Dante in the first line of the poem, I would argue that he has also taken some inspiration from the Greek myth of Medusa for his third sonnet. As he looks up at Mary Queen of Scots, contemplating the stone described in a way that hints at Medusa, does he also contemplate his own head being cut off? A similar fate was surely to meet him if he returned to Russia.

Continuing with mythology we shall examine the significance of the sparrow. Sonnet III tells us that Mary has a sparrow in her hair, which in Greek mythology is considered a symbol of love. It was considered to symbolize true love and a real connection, not just lust. This is appropriate for Mary, as she was married three times; however, more recent folklore involving sparrows has quite a different meaning. Both Chaucer and Shakespeare used sparrows to “denote lecherous or promiscuous behaviour” (Stone). This could be the reason that Brodsky chose to have a sparrow in Mary’s hair, as he later says in sonnet V, “[t]o your compatriots you were a slut” (61). There are also a few superstitions in Europe that sparrows are an omen of death. One superstition is that if a sparrow flies into a home that someone will die. In Kent, England there is a variation

where whoever catches the sparrow must kill it, or their parents will die. Another variation is that the person who caught the sparrow will die if they do not kill it. Mary seemed to be surrounded by men who died - her first husband, her second husband, her secretary - so perhaps she never killed the sparrow that entered the house, and now it sits proudly on her head.

Just like the history of the sparrow, the Pantheon started out as a positive place of worship and therefore love of God; however, shortly after it was built it became a mausoleum to house the dead from the French Revolution. The Pantheon flipped between church and crypt status, much like how Mary flitted between countries leaving dead bodies behind, until it finally settled on a place to bury brilliant French citizens (Pantheon Paris). This has created a certain immortality for these citizens, as they are forever remembered and visited: “gods” of the literary world. Brodsky certainly dreamed of being buried amongst them, his work living on beside that of his neighbours, a complete death never occurring.

Another element that supports Brodsky’s will to be immortal is his use of rams. Unlike the images of numerous birds, who all ultimately lead to death in his collection of sonnets, the ram, mentioned in sonnets I and XIII, is frequently associated with determination, initiative, renewal, force, virility, protection, and fearlessness (Venefica). “Throughout history, rams have been important to mythological and religious concepts, associated with ancient gods from all over the world. The ram even became a symbol of Christ in ancient times.” One of the most famous accounts is in the Old Testament, when Abraham sacrifices the ram rather than his son after an angel stops him (Dunn). Gods are often considered to be immortal, and Brodsky, like many writers, wishes to find this

immortality. In sonnet I he refers to himself as having “the dull eyes of a decrepit ram” (Brotsky 53). Calling himself a ram, although decrepit and with dull eyes, is still an allusion to the godly connection of the animal and therefore its immortal properties. In sonnet XIII Brotsky writes about Mary’s head being cut off, and he starts the sonnet with the line, “[a] ram shakes out his ringlets, alias fleece” (77). This seems reminiscent of sonnet III where Brotsky is contemplating the petrified curls of the statues. Could this be his way of saying the statues keep their muses alive in stone?

Brotsky fills sonnet I with elements of immortality. In lines four and five he writes about Mary:

a statue, and bring life to city gardens-
the Luxembourg, to be precise? I came (53)

Although Mary’s body has long been buried, her figure remains erect in the Luxembourg, “bring[ing] life” to the city garden, and, as he contemplates her statue, he says, “all the dead past now lives anew in my cold heart”(53). What should have been long gone has been given new life in the Luxembourg and “untiring Mary, stand[s] and stand[s]” (57) in sonnet III. Brotsky gives her an almost living description in this sonnet and makes his desire to be with her clear in the second line: “make my appearance in the Luxembourg” (57). This verse has two meanings. The first is the obvious: he is taking a walk through the park, and the other is the symbolic: he is running out of time and wishes to join Mary and the other royalty in their immortal condition.

Even when Brotsky clearly describes a death in his sonnets, he follows it with an element of immortality. An excellent example of this is found in sonnet VI. Brotsky speaks about shooting himself and considers his options of how to go about it, but he soon brings up Parmenides. “Parmenides' poem began with a poem describing a journey

he figuratively once made to the abode of a goddess [and he] describes how the goddess who dwells there welcomed him upon his arrival” (Palmer):

And the goddess received me kindly, and in her hand she took
my right hand, and she spoke and addressed me thus:
“O young man, accompanied by immortal charioteers
and mares who bear you as you arrive at our abode,
welcome, since a fate by no means ill sent you ahead to travel
this way (for surely it is far from the track of humans),
but Right and Justice.” (Palmer)

This excerpt from Parmenides’ poem clearly states that the charioteers are immortal and suggests that Parmenides is as well, since he is “far from the track of humans.” He is also being welcomed by a goddess who would undoubtedly be immortal herself. The poem starts out with ideas of death and ends with hints at immortality, mirroring the immortality of the statues and those in the Pantheon. Before anyone can become immortal and obtain godly status, they first must surrender to death. According to sonnet XV, Mary Queen of Scots had her death forced upon her:

no, what they killed you for – let’s clear the mire –
was something to which they, in those old days,
could see no end: the beauty of your face. (Brodsky 81)

Even though she succumbed to death, the joke is on her murderers as she lives on, the beauty of her face standing proudly in the Luxembourg, immortality soaked into her porous figure.

In sonnet X Brodsky uses the reverse order of elements. The second line: “Alas, not heading the relentless lyre” (71) presents the instrument of the angels, who are, of course, immortal, although in another realm. The sonnet ends with:

The door may creak: death, having failed to knock,
will stand before you in her moth-holed frock. (71)

Death has silently come to collect, but the angels have beaten her to the punch and are already prepared to provide immortality. It is also interesting to note that Brodsky used the pronoun 'her' for death. Might he be referring to Mary as death, since she is the one he identifies with and seeks to be with? Is his desire for an immortality such as hers so strong that he wishes for her to take him?

After his exile Brodsky settled in New York, and, although it is quite far from the Jardin du Luxembourg, both locations are known for their parks. Parks are the only area in a city where renewal can be easily witnessed. The circle of life is apparent with dead leaves, bugs, and animals returning to the soil in order to create new life such as grass and trees. This shifting of status is described in sonnet XVI. Two lines in particular stand out: "a square, too, gradually becomes a sphere" and "into the humus shade, how little stays" (Brodsky 83). A square into a sphere does not require explanation, however, the word "humus" is not common vocabulary. Humus is "the dark organic material in soils, produced by the decomposition of vegetable or animal matter and essential to the fertility of the earth" (Dictionary.com). All of these images refer to the changing of states and subsequent renewal of life on earth, but Brodsky does not want to find his renewal with earthly matters. He is searching for the highest renewal: that of eternal life. He makes this clear in his last few verses:

The fountain pen now has to stick to those
that failed to head another season's message,
to squeak and echo "Melancholy Days." (83)

The pen is the instrument used by writers to solidify their immortality in the world after their death. The poems referenced in the last line of the sonnet all have the autumn as their theme. And here it depends on which translation you use in order to decipher which poem he is referencing. The English translation ends with "Melancholy Days" which

references a poem by William Cullen Bryant called *The Death of the Flowers*; the Russian and both French translations reference Aleksandr Pushkin's *Autumn*.

The Death of the Flowers by William Cullen Bryant

The MELANCHOLY days have come, the saddest of the year,
Of wailing winds, and naked woods, and meadows brown and sere;
Heaped in the hollows of the grove, the autumn leaves lie dead;
They rustle to the eddying gust, and to the rabbit's tread;
The robin and the wren are flown, and from the shrubs the jay,
And from the wood-top calls the crow through all the gloomy day.
Where are the flowers, the fair young flowers, that lately sprang and stood
In brighter light and softer airs, a beauteous sisterhood?
Alas! they all are in their graves, the gently race of flowers
Are lying in their lowly beds, with the fair and good of ours.
The rain is falling where they lie, but the cold November rain
Calls not from out the gloomy earth the lovely ones again.
The wind-flower and the violet, they perished long ago,
And the brier-rose and the orchids died amid the summer glow;
But on the hill the golden-rod, and the aster in the wood,
And the yellow sun-flower by the brook, in autumn beauty stood,
Till fell the frost from the clear cold heaven, as falls the plague on men,
And the brightness of their smile has gone, from upland, glade, and glen.
And now, when comes the calm mild day, as still such days will come,
To call the squirrel and the bee from out their winter home;
When the sound of dropping nuts is heard, though all the trees are still,
And twinkle in the smoky light the waters of the rill,
The south wind searches for the flowers whose fragrance late he bore,
And sighs to find them in the wood and by the stream no more.
And then I think of one who in her youthful beauty died,
The fair meek blossom that grew up and faded by my side.
In cold moist earth we laid her, when the forest cast the leaf,
And we wept that one so lovely should have a life so brief;
Yet not unmeet it was that one like that young friend of ours,
So gentle and so beautiful, should perish with the flowers. (Bryant)

I believe that Brodsky identifies with this poem not only because he collaborated with the translator, but due to the fact that it is quite similar to his poem: filled with death imagery. Bryant also uses birds, and certainly the crow once again, to invoke the theme of death. It too is set during autumn, and there is a beautiful young woman who is no longer with him. There is no reference to immortality or renewal in this poem unless we

are to look into the future of the poem and assume that the flowers, which perished with the young beauty, will appear once again in the spring, keeping the beautiful woman's memory immortal. I believe this was the closest poem Brodsky and his translator could find that would be a reference for the anglophone audience, but it was certainly not his first choice as his original work referenced Pushkin.

The reference to Pushkin's poem *Autumn* is unmistakable in the last line of sonnet XVI as it includes not only the title of his poem, but also his name. The poem is divided into twelve sections that speak about the seasons, a lover, and finding escape by using a pen. The poem is set in the woods with similar locational descriptions as Brodsky's sonnets. It also takes place during the fall with impending winter. Winter is often used in literature to represent the end of a cycle and the ultimate ending: death. In Pushkin's poem he refers to winter as "her" in the fourth section:

that one thought fills our minds. We miss old winter,
and having seen her off with cakes and wine,
with ice and ice-cream we recall her reign. (France)

He also speaks of "her reign" in reference to winter, however, I would say that Brodsky connects to this poem, envisioning winter as Mary. He longs for her, just as winter is missed in Pushkin's poem, and recalls her reign throughout his collection of sonnets, as Pushkin suggests everyone is doing in the last line of his poem. It is also possible that Brodsky associates Mary with all of the seasons present in Pushkin's poem, as the fifth poem contains very similar ideas to those present in Brodsky's sonnets:

People have harsh words for these days of autumn,
but, reader, they are dear to me, I love
their unassuming light, their quiet beauty.
Autumn attracts me like a neglected girl
among her sisters. (France)

In both collections of poetry there are harsh words present for the muse, in the case of Brodsky this is Mary Queen of Scots, and for Pushkin it is the autumn days. Both poets are in love with their muse and think dearly of them with their “quiet beauty” (France), as Pushkin says, and it is quite clear that Brodsky’s beautiful statue is also silent. The phrase “Autumn attracts me like a neglected girl / among her sisters” (France) is reminiscent of the verse in Brodsky’s sonnet III, “stand and stand, / in the stone garland of your girl friends” (57), and Pushkin’s collection also contains the idea of immortality through the use of a pen in his final three sections. These poems present the idea that the author is able to “forget the world, in blissful peace” (France) only to have poetry awaken another part and “receive a host of guests unseen, / old-time acquaintances, fruits of my dreams” (France). This is very similar to Brodsky who escapes to the Jardin du Luxembourg to meet his long lost love and gain immortality by writing about it. Both collections of poems contain many of the same ideas and, more importantly, sentiments that the authors felt towards their muses, making Brodsky’s reference to Pushkin quite clear.

Many parallels have been drawn between Brodsky and Mary Queen of Scots, both in the history of their personal lives and as seen in the collection of sonnets. Both individuals felt the pains of exile and wrongful persecution. Both were well educated in literature and poetry, and both of them shared a promiscuous lifestyle. Brodsky tells us of his fascination with time in his poetry, and, as we know, time must eventually run out, as it did for Mary Queen of Scots, whom Brodsky clearly identifies with. He seems to have had a connection with Mary’s history, just as her image seems to have parallels with Medusa. Both women suffered the same fate, and the imagery of death continues in the use of birds, particularly the folklore of the sparrow, and the use of the Pantheon in Paris.

However, the Pantheon in Paris serves a dual purpose. It not only speaks to the imagery of death but also to the idea of immortality. Brodsky also uses the Jardin du Luxembourg to serve this twofold idea. Like most writers, he wishes to be immortal and become part of the collection of statuesque figures found in these places. Brodsky even compares himself to a ram, a symbol of immortality, in the first sonnet of his collection. He uses the Pantheon in Paris and the Jardin du Luxembourg, as well as the symbolism of the ram, Parmenides, and Mary, to create his strong link to immortality. He even delves briefly into the idea of renewal when speaking of plants and the autumn season. Though Brodsky did not get to stand with his Queen Mary in the Jardin du Luxembourg, or with the literary gods in the Pantheon in Paris, he will remain immortal through his writing.

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