ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: LAUDING AND LOATHING IN THE WORKS OF
                           SHAKESPEARE: EPIDEICTIC SKEPTICISM AND
                           THE ETHICS OF PRAISE

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My dissertation argues that Shakespeare transforms Aristotelian *epideixis* (the
rhetorical mode comprising praise and blame) into a skeptical mode by laying bare its
embedded ethical and epistemological problems. Shakespeare, that is, uses the evaluative
procedures inherent within epideictic poetry to scrutinize its own principles of
representation, transforming a poetics of praise into a poetics of appraisal. His
innovations in the Petrarchan sonnet form stand at the center of my project, but I also
illuminate how Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism underlies his experimentation with
tragedy and comedy. In a broader perspective, my project shows how an intimacy
between philosophical skepticism and the practice of praise had its roots in the cultural
and religious upheavals of the sixteenth century.

The cornerstone of my project is Shakespeare's young-man sonnets, which
provide a unique angle from which to understand the dark-lady poems and some key
Shakespearean plays. I show that while the first sequence (1-126) investigates the
epistemology of praise, the second (127-52) describes the dramatic interactions between
lovers who have advanced beyond epideictic poetry and its accompanying skepticism.

Chapter 1, primarily an introduction to my study, considers the religious and
cultural background for Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism, reviews classical and

Renaissance theories of praise, and closely reads poems by Shakespeare and Petrarch. Chapter 2 explores the canker as the central symbol of Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism and as a threat to the rose of beauty and praise. Tracing the poet's struggle with this persistent figure of satire and blame, I contend that the canker is inherent in the practice of praise. My third chapter maps my interpretation of the canker and the rose onto a new reading of *Hamlet*. I argue that the young-man sonnets provide a paradigm for understanding Hamlet's relationship with his two fathers, his misogyny and verbal abuse, and the tragic path to which he finally commits himself. Chapter 4 offers a comic resolution to the rhetorical problems emphasized in the previous three chapters. Here, finally, I turn to the sonnets devoted to the notoriously rebellious dark mistress, exploring their relationship to Shakespearean comedy generally and to *The Taming of the Shrew* particularly.

**LAUDING AND LOATHING IN THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE:
EPIDEICTIC SKEPTICISM AND THE ETHICS OF PRAISE**

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2010

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Preface

The publication of Stanley Cavell's *Disowning Knowledge* in 1987 has stimulated

a steady interest in Shakespeare's skepticism.[1] It is not hard to see why. Religious

doubt, epistemological uncertainty, and subjective awareness and isolation rest at the

heart of Shakespeare's tragedies.[2] Scholars studying *King Lear* and *Macbeth* have found

that skepticism provides an analytical structure, a cultural context, even a vocabulary for

dealing with Lear's bewilderment on the heath and Macbeth's confused sense of reality.

In our own culture of doubt, studying Shakespeare's curiosity and his moral ambivalence

deepens our sense of his relevance, convincing us that he could just as easily have traded

ideas with Friedrich Nietzsche as with Ben Jonson.

Indeed, an overwhelming interest in Shakespeare's play of ideas has led scholars

such as David Bevington and A.D. Nuttall to consider his skepticism more as intellectual

recreation than epistemological doubt.[3] Benjamin Bertram, in contrast, examines

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[1] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[2] For a discussion of how skepticism found an outlet in Renaissance tragedy generally, see William M. Hamlin, *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare's England* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

[3] See David Bevington, *Shakespeare's Ideas* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) and A.D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Bevington explores the plays' mixed attitudes toward classical philosophy, religion, and politics. A.D. Nuttall devotes an entire book to Shakespeare's intellections, covering everything from philosophical nominalism and ontology to stoicism and nihilism. He contends that Shakespeare "shares with…[men like Hume] a knack for asking fundamental (sometimes very simple) questions" (378). Although Nuttall studiously avoids calling such a process *skepticism* (he prefers to treat doubt locally in *Troilus and Cressida*), his book about Shakespeare the thinker-inquirer is really about Shakespeare the skeptic. In many ways, Nuttall's exploration of Shakespeare parallels the work of Harold Bloom, who claims that Shakespeare "invented the human" when he created characters that develop rather than unfold; that is, he gave us so authentic a "representation of character" that we are revealed in each one of them [*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 17]. In Bloom's estimation, however, Hamlet and Falstaff tower over Shakespeare's other characters because of their superior intelligence, their creative autonomy, and, in Hamlet's case, his doubt. Bloom remarks that Hamlet's skepticism "does not merely exceed its possible origin in Montaigne but passes into something rich and strange in Act V, something for which we have no name" (391).

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Shakespeare's doubt in terms of specific political and social developments.[4] Still other

scholars turn to skeptical tenets to advance arguments about Shakespeare's religion, his

knowledge of Montaigne, his associations with contemporaries like Marlowe and Donne,

his mixed allegiance to various classical and medieval sources, and his experimentation

with literary forms. Robert Brustein, responding to Stephen Greenblatt's assertion that

Shakespeare "seems at once Catholic, Protestant, and deeply skeptical of both," argues

that Shakespeare eventually ends up in a "very dark place [in his plays] characterized by

dawning disbelief in all religions and driven by serious doubts about the existence of a

benevolent God."[5] John D. Cox moves in the opposite direction from Brustein,

maintaining that Shakespeare's skepticism is underwritten by a deep-seated faith in a

divine power.[6] The alliance between faith and doubt is the hallmark of sixteenth-century

Catholic Pyrrhonism, but Cox refrains from calling Shakespeare either Catholic or

Protestant since his plays are doctrinally equivocal. These fundamental ambiguities,

however, have not stopped other critics from testifying to Shakespeare's recusancy.

Richard Wilson, for instance, contends that Shakespeare's skepticism, and his familiarity

with Montaigne's *Essays*, provides some evidence for his Catholicism.[7]

     In my view, however, the most valuable studies of Shakespeare's skepticism also

look at how his works deploy specific skeptical strategies. Millicent Bell, for example,

draws connections between Montaigne and Shakespeare, but her book is really about the

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[4] See Benjamin Bertram, *The Time is Out of Joint: Skepticism in Shakespeare's England* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

[5] See Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 103; Robert Brustein, *The Tainted Muse: Prejudice and Presumption in Shakespeare and his Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 204-05.

[6] John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007).

[7] Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in Theatre, Religion, and Resistance* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2004).

problem of causality in Shakespeare's tragedies – not his Montaignesque Catholicism.[8]

As Bell maintains, Shakespeare's tragedies "flout traditional ideas about human selfhood as a known and consistent quality by which a man or a woman is identified" (x) and so reflect a "potent philosophical skepticism verging on nihilism" (2).[9] The way Shakespeare's "chief personages often seem to lack clearly defined and consistent characters and motives" shows evidence of this dark philosophy, as does the way in which the "sequence of events in the plays sometimes fails to compose a logical story in which one thing leads to another" (22).[10] While Bell, then, roots her exploration of nihilism and causality in Montaigne, these philosophical dilemmas ultimately transcend him.

Indeed, Cavell deliberately avoids Montaigne, staunchly declaring that he will not read Shakespeare's plays as philosophy or even, really, in their historical context. "The burden of my story," he maintains, "in spinning the interplay of philosophy with literature is not that of applying philosophy to literature, where so-called literary works would become kinds of illustrations of matters already independently known."[11] Cavell argues that Shakespeare has more in common with the religious explorations of Descartes

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[8] Millicent Bell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

[9] Bell, x. I, along with Bell, am working from the assumption that Shakespeare had either read Montaigne in French before the Florio translation of *The Essays* in 1603 or at least read parts of it in manuscript (17-18). For a discussion corroborating this point of view, see James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of Shakespeare* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005). Shapiro reminds us that the "first two volumes of Montaigne's *Essays* were published in France in 1580" and that Shakespeare's French was "good enough to read Montaigne in the original" (293).

[10] Shakespeare's skepticism about cause culminates, for Bell, in *Macbeth*, wherein "Shakespeare offers a version of the Macbeth story more disturbing to our deepest sense of the quality of being human by throwing out the logic that gives us assurance that we understand why we act as we do" (206). Drawing on Montaigne's disavowal of the "constancy of human character," Bell goes on to say that in Macbeth, "the presence of witchcraft's riddling prophesy – which seems to reveal the inaccessible truth but really misleads – is a way of exposing the human delusion that one can understand what will happen and who we are" (206-207). Implied in this observation is also the question of whether we can ever truly understand why we do what we do.

[11] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 179.

than the secular pragmatism of Montaigne and Machiavelli. Like Descartes, Shakespeare

seems less interested in "how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world" than "how to

live at all in a groundless world" (3). Unlike Descartes, however, who sees God as a

substitute for that lost ground, Shakespeare is not so self-assured; thus, his plays seem to

anticipate the *cogito* in order to explore what happens when it is challenged.[12] In this

respect, Cavell's interpretation of Shakespeare seems depressingly nihilistic, but his

reluctance to accept that Shakespeare wrote merely "secular scripture" mitigates some of

the pessimism. As Cavell affirms, applying the word *secular* often means omitting the

"aspiration, and achievement, of some mode of transcendence" that characterizes the

works of both Shakespeare and Thoreau (18). Instead, Cavell, contending that the

"Shakespearean corpus" vies with religion, seems as interested in the possibilities opened

up by skepticism as by its dark, cramped corners. [13]

 Similar to Cavell, Graham Bradshaw is concerned "not with a body of ideas

which supposedly correspond with" Shakespeare's skepticism but with the "processes of

the plays' poetic-dramatic thinking," or how the works undertake a skeptical procedure

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[12] For example, Cavell argues that the "pivot of *Othello*'s interpretation of skepticism is Othello's placing of a finite woman in the place made and left by Descartes for God" (35).

[13] Cavell explores how disowning knowledge in Shakespeare's plays contributes to skepticism and helps give the works a common structure. *Hamlet*, for example, shows how revenge demolishes "individual identity" because the prince is never allowed to mourn his father and let him pass (188). The skeptical structure of this play is set in motion by Hamlet's agreement to "wipe away all fond memories" and erase himself in the process. *King Lear* reveals a similar dramatic shape when the king willfully and knowingly denies the truth of Cordelia's love and, in so doing, avoids the revelatory self-knowledge that he fears will shame him (59). Unlike Bell, Cavell maintains that Lear is well aware that Cordelia loves him best, but he is terrified of that love, "of being loved, of needing love" (62). Cordelia is "alarming," Cavell contends, "because he *knows* she is offering the real thing" and "putting a claim on him that he cannot face" (62). On one level, then, Lear banishes Cordelia to conceal a part of himself from himself. On a broader level, Lear's banishment of Cordelia reflects "skepticism's banishment of the world" (5). Cavell takes an inductive approach, reading Shakespeare's plays from the bottom up. In keeping with the nature of skepticism, Cavell's interpretations are nothing short of unorthodox. Thus, even as he ties his interpretation to the so-called big picture, that picture of skepticism is unstable, always shifting, never quite clarified. Firmer than Cavell's delineations of Shakespeare's skepticism, therefore, are his interpretations of the plays themselves.

on their own. [14] Taking as his departure point Shakespeare's "preoccupation with the act

of valuing" (3), Bradshaw examines the plays' tendencies to shift between (or in some

cases to juxtapose) an inherent perspective and an imposed perspective of the world. The

inherent perspective corresponds with a "humanistic view of Nature" in which values

arise from and so are ratified by the outside world (5). The latter perspective, in contrast,

can be construed in terms of an "under-nature" where values are imposed on the world

and where a person, "exposed" to Nature's "terrors," is left decisively

"unaccommodated." In a society of imposed standards, Nature does not reflect some

consistent notion of value; it rather reveals the chaotic "clashing" of "opposed accounts

of value" and multiple perspectives (4-5). Bradshaw goes on to explore the relationship

between these two views of nature in order to argue that Shakespeare was a radical

skeptic, "weigh[ing] the human need to affirm values against the inherently problematic

nature of all acts of valuing" (39).

Continuing this attention to Shakespeare's "skeptical procedures" is Anita's

Sherman's rigorous examination of how the author's "skeptical aesthetic" helps "forge a

new and distinctive idiom for memory."[15] In her "literary study of skeptical tropes"

(xiv), Sherman identifies "formal features" that induce skepticism about the past,

including opposing points of view, frames of reference, countermonuments [or memorials

"oppos[ing] conventional ideas of monumentality" (18)], and disnarration [accounts that

"suppress information" and speculate about non-events (25)].[16] Sherman also explores

how features reflecting "collective memory" – such as pastoral and typology – work to

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[14] Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987), xi.
[15] Anita Gilman Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), xii, ix.
[16] Sherman explains that countermonuments tend to "eschew sentimentality" (20) and/or often dismiss the "fantasy of total knowledge" when they provide only partial or temporary revelation (76).

quell "anxieties" that some "rhetorical strategies, narrative techniques, and countermonumental iconography" coax "to the surface" (25).

Taking my cue from scholars who have investigated a "skeptical aesthetic" but shown fidelity to the study of literature as literature, I argue that Shakespeare transforms Aristotelian *epideixis* (the rhetorical mode comprising praise and blame) into a skeptical mode by laying bare its embedded ethical and epistemological problems. Shakespeare, that is, uses the evaluative procedures inherent within epideictic poetry to scrutinize its own principles of representation, transforming a poetics of praise into a poetics of appraisal. His innovations in the Petrarchan sonnet form stand at the center of my project, but I also illuminate how Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism underlies his experimentation with tragedy and comedy. In a broader perspective, my project shows how an intimacy between philosophical skepticism and the practice of praise had its roots in the cultural and religious upheavals of the sixteenth century.

Although a few scholars have acknowledged the epistemological dimensions of praise and recognized a connection between praise and doubt, a full-scale study of that relationship has not been done.[17] More often than not, critics have treated praise as a rhetorical flourish, a bit of literary coloring that lightens or darkens a work or a praise object depending on the situation described and on the artist's underlying motives.[18] At best, praise has been appreciated for its connection to paradox and satire when the praise

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[17] Joel Fineman's *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*: *The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) of course touches on these issues. Anita Sherman treats praise (or *exemplarity*, as she puts it) as a form which inspires and consoles, but she also acknowledges that it is "in crisis during the late Renaissance" and suggests that sixteenth-century skepticism is one of the reasons (*Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne*, 38). And David Schalkwyk, who builds a case for the performative dimension of Shakespeare's Sonnets, argues against the epistemology of praise. See "What Words May Do? The Performative of Praise in Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49.3 (1998), 251-68.

[18] For a discussion of the classical praise tradition and its effect on Renaissance poetry and theory, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

object is mocked, or for its power to stimulate intimacy with, or admiration for, another person when the praise object is treated seriously.[19] Scholars assessing the rhetorical features of praise have tended to limit their arguments to the sixteenth-century patronage system, hence to political and social advancement.[20] No critic has yet explored how an author's engagement with epideictic rhetoric formally generates skepticism about that very mode, nor have they considered the generic and ethical consequences of such an engagement. To dwell as I do on *epideictic skepticism* is to emphasize Shakespeare's skepticism *about* the tradition of praise and blame, as well as skepticism arising inevitably *from within* that tradition (ie. skeptical epideixis).

For skepticism does not simply require doubt or a suspension of judgment. A skeptic is also "inquiring" and "reflective," carefully "consider[ing]" nuances and problems, and weighing different points of view and multiple perspectives.[21] A "look out" and a "watchman," a skeptic may doubt the possibility of achieving full knowledge

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[19] See, for example, Timothy Hampton's *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990). Examining the "crisis in the representation of exemplarity in the late Renaissance," Hampton argues that "ideological anxiety and epistemological scepticism [led] to an erosion of the authority of exemplary figures" (x) and thus to a new way of perceiving history and the self. Although Hampton points to a connection between skepticism and praise (or in Hampton's case exemplarity), his emphasis is historical and cultural. Rather than consider the problems within epideixis, Hampton focuses on how "posthumanist" skepticism "toward the representation of antiquity in literature" (x) reflected a shift in how classical epideictic literature was received. As Hampton contends, the Renaissance period grew skeptical about humanism and the "rhetoric of heroism" (7). "Exemplary figures from antiquity," he later asserts, began to be "seen as dangerously ambiguous" (28). Like Hampton, I focus on how epideixis could be exploited to yield ambiguous results. For another précis of Hampton's argument, see Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne*, 28.

[20] For arguments emphasizing the relationship between poetry and patronage, see Robert Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Literary Theory in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and David Bevington and Milla Riggio, "'What Revels Are in Hand?' Marriage Celebrations and Patronage of the Arts in Renaissance England," in *Shakespeare and Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England*, eds. Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne Westfall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 125-49. For books that touch on the patronage system with regard to Shakespeare's Sonnets in particular, see Robert Matz, *The World of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York: McFarland, 2007); Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007); and Sasha Roberts, "Shakespeare *Sonnets* and English Sonnet Sequences," in *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*, ed. Patrick Cheney et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 172-83.

[21] "skepticism, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 6 September 2009 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50215184>.

but remains intellectually active and engaged.[22] Conceptually related to *skepticism*, the

word *praise* easily surpasses its traditional association with extolling virtues and

cataloguing good deeds. From the Old French word *proisier*, *praise* means, among other

things, "to make a valuation of," "to attach importance to," and "to prize."[23] *Praise* also

derives from the Latin word *pretiare*, which means to "appraise" as well as to "value."[24]

Thus, *praise* both denotes and connotes evaluation of and inquiry into the praise object.

Although Joel Fineman does not explore the relationship between praise and

skepticism per se, he rightly shows that epideixis is insistently self-conscious and so

prone to speak about itself. It is for this reason, he argues, that praise is the

"paradigmatic genre of poetical or literary language."[25] Praise, in other words, focuses as

much on itself as a method of representation as on the person or thing that it is praising.

Why not, therefore, go further and say that if praise points to itself, then it also appraises

itself – dwelling on *value* even as it *evaluates* how to represent those values? Doing so

shows praise to be the "paradigmatic genre" of literary skepticism and thus key to

understanding an author's expressions of doubt. To focus, then, on Shakespeare's

epideictic skepticism is to insist not only that praise is inevitably – and not just

occasionally – a skeptical exercise, but also that an author's skepticism in some way

relates to praise.

Of course, my claim for an intrinsic relationship between praise and doubt may

seem to undermine the historical urgency of my project, but I should add that "intrinsic"

by definition suggests that doubt was not always an explicit counterforce within praise.

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[22] Ibid.
[23] "praise, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 6
September 2009 < http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50186112>.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, 6.

Indeed, this relationship takes on new significance in the Renaissance period for several reasons. Most obviously, classical (as in radical or Pyrrhonist) skepticism was revived after Henri Estienne translated Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines* in 1562. Proponents of Pyrrhonism doubt every received truth. In any debate, they are the consummate "devil's advocates," offering contrasting points of view but refusing to come to a consensus about anything. Sextus defines and advocates the Pyrrhonist method in his *Outlines*, explaining that "'opposed accounts'" are held in "'equipollence,'" which "mean[s] equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing: none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing. Suspension of intellect is a standstill of the intellect, owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything."[26] There is no third or middle solution in Pyrrhonism because, as Alan Levine explains, these skeptics believe that "we cannot know whether we can know anything or not."[27] Fulke Greville, Sir Walter Raleigh, and, Montaigne all wrote treatises or essays responding to this emergent philosophy; through Montaigne in particular, skepticism was absorbed into the literature of writers like Shakespeare and Donne.[28]

Another development that points to an intimacy between praise and doubt is the expansion of Academic skepticism, which was already helping to mold the educational system in England prior to 1562.[29] Indeed, Erasmus himself supported this philosophy

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[26] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), I.4.10.

[27] Alan Levine, "Introduction: The Prehistory of Toleration and Varieties of Skepticism," in *Early Modern Skepticism and the Origins of Toleration*, ed. Alan Levine (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 1999), 11.

[28] See Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald M. Frame (New York: Everyman's Library, 2003); Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, *Treatie of Humane Learning*, in *The Works in Verse and Prose Complete*, 4 vols., ed. Alexander B. Grosart (St. George's, Blackburn, Lancashire, 1870), vol. 2; and Sir Walter Raleigh, "The Sceptic," in *The Works of Sir Walter Ralegh*, 8 vols., ed. William Oldys and Thomas Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1829), 8:548-56.

[29] Before Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* alighted on the intellectual scene in 1562, Academic skepticism had officially entered England by way of the moderate thinker, Cicero, and indirectly through Platonism.

early in the sixteenth century, insisting in his playful satire, *Praise of Folly*, that

"[h]uman affairs are so complex and obscure that nothing can be known of them for

certain, as has been rightly stated by my Academicians [skeptics], the least assuming of

the philosophers."[30] Rhetorical techniques honed during the early Tudor period involved

learning to argue both sides of an issue, participating in Ciceronian debate, tracing the

many permutations of a question, and testing hypotheses.[31] The practice of "rul[ing] out

the possibility of certain knowledge" and considering all sides of an issue in order to

achieve a kind of "practical certainty" defined the period's pedagogical methods.[32] These

techniques also reveal an incipient empiricism that later blossomed into seventeenth-

century Baconian science.

Finally, epideictic skepticism was shaped and fueled by religious and intellectual

changes. Many scholars, including Stanley Cavell and Julie Solomon, have written about

a shift during the Renaissance in the way people viewed themselves and the world, or, as

Solomon puts it, the "new sensitivity to cognitive relativism."[33] This transformation in

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For a discussion of the popularity of Cicero's *Academica* and the mixed reaction in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to Plato's connection to Academic skepticism, see Charles B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus: A Study of the Influence of the* Academia *in the Renaissance* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972). As Schmitt observes, not everybody felt that the "critical, quasi-sceptical, and probabilistic elements of the teachings of Socrates and Plato" were "integral to the tradition" (51). Augustine rejected this side of Plato's philosophies, Schmitt shows, in favor of "dogmatic Neoplatonism" (32).

[30] Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice (1971; rpt. London, England: Penguin Books, 1993), 70-71.

[31] For a discussion of the way these rhetorical techniques were brought to life in early Tudor drama, fiction, and poetry, see Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). William Hamlin acknowledges Altman's insistence on the relationship between rhetoric and skepticism, but Hamlin favors "serious drama," which offers a "perfect vehicle" for skepticism (*Tragedy and Skepticism in Shakespeare's England*, 2-3).

[32] Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 241. Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 20. See also Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979),18-19.

[33] Julie Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making: Francis Bacon and the Politics of Inquiry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 38. Cavell takes a similar approach in his interpretation of the anachronistically Christian play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, which asks us to consider "whether anything short of a new civilization will 'satisfy' our yet again increased subjectivity" (*Disowning Knowledge*, 27). For

worldview both influenced and was influenced by the Protestant Reformation. For

despite Martin Luther's insistence on subjective truth – and his contention that a true

Christian could not be a skeptic – he likely did as much to advance epistemological doubt

as his opponents did.[34] With his legacy of *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*, in which the

individual had the *obligation to interpret* the Bible on her own and faithfully believe that

her interpretation was correct, Luther made religious insecurity a very real possibility.

As Richard Popkin writes, "the Reformers' challenges of the accepted criteria of religious

knowledge raised a most fundamental question: How does one justify the basis for one's

knowledge?"[35]

   The search not only for brave new worlds of thought but also for ways of

justifying knowledge characterizes the sixteenth century. Writers themselves sought

aesthetic justification in forms inherited from antiquity and the Middle Ages. To this

end, Joel Altman and Victoria Kahn discuss how the Renaissance is marked by a

transition away from didactic writing toward a literature of inquiry, exploration, and

wonder.[36] While this change is arguably for the better, both scholars suggest that

exploratory, skeptical writing often leads to confusion or failed consensus and that early

Cavell, this play reveals that "satisfaction is no longer imaginable within what we understand as religion, that the increasing velocity of the split between subjectivity and objectivity, or between the private and the presentable, no longer permits the common imagination of a significant conclusion" (27). Cavell attributes sixteenth-century changes in perception and worldview to "the rise of Protestantism" particularly and to religion generally (27).

[34] See Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Discourse on Free Will*, ed. and trans. Ernst F. Winter (1961; rpt. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2004). Attacking Erasmus's defense of free will, Luther famously contends that "the Holy Spirit is no skeptic, and what He has written into our hearts are no doubts or opinions, but assertions, more certain and more firm than all human experience and life itself" (103).

[35] Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, 15-16.

[36] Joel B. Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind*. Victoria Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*. See also Chapter 1 of this dissertation, which explores Renaissance wonder in depth and considers such works as Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Peter Platt, *Reason Diminished: Shakespeare and the Marvelous* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); T.G. Bishop, *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 2001).

modern literature betrays as many doubts and self-criticisms as universal truths. With

this rich context in mind, it is not difficult to imagine that epidexis grew to embrace –

more fully than it had in previous centuries – a poetics of discovery and wonder, of

skepticism and satire. Transcending hackneyed exercises in lauding and criticizing,

poetry of praise and poetry of blame developed into a poetics of appraisal, a poetics

compelled to investigate the praiser, the praised, and the praise.

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With such a broadly constructed thesis, a project on Shakespeare hardly seems

sufficient to clarify the nuances of a period's epideictic skepticism. Despite, however,

what appears to be a deductive argument, I instead proceed inductively. Thus, I test my

thesis that skepticism is generated through the practice of praise by means of a

comprehensive analysis of a single author's works. The cornerstone of my project is

Shakespeare's sonnets to the young man, which provide a unique angle from which to

understand the dark-lady poems and some key Shakespearean plays. I will show that

while the first sequence (1-126) investigates the epistemology of praise, the second (127-

52) describes the dramatic interactions between lovers who have advanced beyond

epideictic poetry and its accompanying skepticism.[37] And so, while my first three

chapters focus directly or indirectly on the rhetorical preoccupations in the young-man

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[37] Heather Dubrow objects to distinguishing the dark-lady poems from the young-man poems in her essay, "Incertainties now crown themselves assur'd," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Routledge, 2000), 113-133. However, Dubrow seems to be in the minority. I, along with critics ranging from Joel Fineman and David Schalkwyk to Helen Vendler and Margreta de Grazia, interpret the poems according to the generally accepted division at sonnet 127, which provides a fairly explicit break. Although some sonnets in the young-man sequence could well have been written to a woman, never once does any sonnet provide proof of that; the pronouns and explicitly gendered poems always match the putative addressee.

poems, my final chapter concentrates on the sonnets to the dark lady, reading them as a comic epilogue and a dramatic coda to a much longer first sequence.[38]

Primarily an introduction to my study, Chapter 1 ("Shakespeare's Epideictic Skepticism: Context and Features") considers the religious and cultural background for Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism, exploring intersections between skepticism and sixteenth-century religious reform, reviewing classical and Renaissance theories of praise, and closely reading poems by Shakespeare and Petrarch. In this chapter, I describe Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism in terms of three interlocking characteristics: (1) the poet's anxieties about authority (Shakespeare's response to Petrarchan praise and his manipulation of one of its central components, the blazon); (2) the poet's epistemological isolation (Shakespeare's, as opposed to Petrarch's, attitude toward the external world, his understanding of his beloved, and his perception of himself); and (3) the poet's obligation to interpret (Shakespeare's transformation of a poetics of wonder and praise into a poetics of wonder and doubt). Putting these three features together, I argue that Shakespeare is not simply praising the young man; he is actively seeking answers, inquiring into the nature of his beloved and, more importantly, into the practice of praise.

If the first chapter grounds Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism in a post-Reformation, post-humanist, world, then the remaining chapters undertake specific readings of his poems and plays. Chapter 2, "'A Canker in the Fragrant Rose': Satirical

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[38] While there is some evidence suggesting that the dark-lady sonnets were drafted before the young-man poems, this does not mean that they were completed first. [See, for example, Colin Burrow, ed., *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, by Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 103-11.] Even if the poems to the dark mistress were, as Burrow suggests, written first, theses and conclusions are often drafted before the body of an argument; Shakespeare's concluding thoughts about praise (in the dark-lady poems), in other words, could precede his rhetorical explorations in the young-man subsequence. Thus I subscribe to the notion that the poems were not put together randomly; someone (perhaps Shakespeare himself) decided to place the dark-lady sonnets last, thus giving us an ordering in literary history that should not be ignored.

Inquiry and Tragic Form in Shakespeare's Poems to the Young Man," begins with a general discussion of the rose and the canker. One of the central figures of Petrarchan praise, the rose was also for Dante a symbol of heaven and for medieval Catholicism in general an emblem for the Virgin Mary. This hapless rose, however, found itself besieged during the sixteenth century – transformed in virtually every Elizabethan sonnet sequence from an image of divine perfection to a figure of lost or ephemeral beauty, of inferior physical splendor, and even of death. That Shakespeare, however, is the only major Elizabethan or Jacobean sonneteer to write about a canker in Petrarch's Catholic rose demands the sort of attention that critics have not yet shown. In tracking the recurring figure of the canker across Shakespeare's first sequence, I show how it represents the hidden infection within beauty and virtue as well as the epistemological investigation of beauty. As the central symbol of Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism, and a subverter of rhetoric and genre, the canker opens up a space in Shakespeare's poetics capable of admitting questions about intrinsic value, slander, and empirical inquiry. In the process of lauding and loathing his beloved, Shakespeare's poet ultimately learns that the canker rests not only in his beloved and his poetics, but also in himself. The canker of doubt, the poet discovers, is inherent in the rose of praise.

My third chapter, "The Wonder-Wounded Hearers in *Hamlet*," maps my interpretation of the canker and the rose onto a new reading of one of Shakespeare's most skeptical plays. I argue that the young-man sonnets provide a paradigm for understanding Hamlet's relationship with his two fathers, his misogyny and verbal abuse, and the tragic path to which he finally commits himself. Common to both the Sonnets and this play are the ways in which the poet/protagonist comes to terms with himself,

negotiates the impulses to blame, redefines himself in relation to the past, and reforms praise in response to these recognitions. In this chapter, I also show how the young-man poems illuminate the tragic development in *Hamlet* and how *Hamlet* helps to expose the young-man sequence's intrinsically tragic shape. In exploring the uncanny similarities between the poet's ethical dilemma in the poems and Hamlet's ethical predicament as a tragic hero, this chapter fills a critical gap in studies of both *Hamlet* and the Sonnets.

Chapter 4, "Playing Shakespeare's Will: Theater and Sexuality in the Dark-Lady Sonnets and *The Taming of the Shrew*," offers a comic resolution to the rhetorical problems emphasized in the previous three chapters. Here I turn to the sonnets devoted to the notoriously rebellious dark mistress, exploring their relationship to Shakespearean comedy generally and to *The Taming of the Shrew* particularly. This means that instead of stressing only the mistress's infidelity, dark deeds, and duplicity, I explore her dynamic power, her theatrical intractability, and the sexual energy ignited between her and her poet. I look, in other words, beyond the qualities that inspired Joel Fineman to describe her in terms of "praise paradox" and beyond the epistemological concerns of the previous three chapters. Tracing the poet's obsession with representation and role-playing – and his dramatic negotiations with the dark lady – I argue that Shakespeare is redefining the boundaries of a poet's artistic power, privileging theater over rhetoric, being over becoming, and action over knowledge. At the conclusion of this chapter, I consider connections between the poet and Petruchio, and between the dark lady and Kate, arguing that our interpretation of Kate's infamous submission speech must take into account the rhetorical stratagems that Petruchio uses to tame her.

Exploring Petruchio's connection to the mock Petrarchan sonneteer, and Kate's to the intractable mistress, paves the way for my afterword, where I briefly consider how Shakespeare's most famous dark lady, Cleopatra, rewrites praise under the dominion of the female. *Antony and Cleopatra* shows how Shakespeare discovers in his canker of inquiry, skepticism, and blame a self-satisfied, if self-deluded, joy.

Chapter 1

Shakespeare's Epideictic Skepticism: Context and Features

The longstanding debate over the mysterious dedicatee, the "ONLIE BEGETTER

OF THESE INSUING SONNETS. Mr. W.H.," frequently and notoriously leads to

questions about the young man's identity.[1] We may never know, however, whether

Shakespeare even authorized the Sonnets for the 1609 printing; whether the dedicatee is

Southampton, Pembroke, or someone else; and whether the young man (and, for that

matter, dark lady) are inspired by real life or by Shakespeare's imagination. What we

have is a collection of poems whose fictionality entails its own kind of power. In my

effort to make the most of that power, I focus in this chapter and the next on the lesser-

acknowledged poetic innovations in the young-man sonnets. The male beloved's gender

has, of course, attracted notice. Equally compelling, however, is the fact that this

sequence undertakes what the sonnets to the dark lady do not: an epistemological

investigation of epideictic poetry. Confirming this differentiating feature is the fact that

the words *praise*, *praised*, *praising*, or *praises* appear in 24 of the young-man sonnets –

and never once in the dark-lady poems.[2] Taken together, these 24 poems allow us to

track the poet's evolving perspective of praise – from celebratory to meditative – and thus

to see evidence of what I call Shakespeare's *epideictic skepticism*. By this, I mean to say

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[1] Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1997; rpt. London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2003), 45-69. Duncan-Jones' case for William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, rather than Henry Wriothsley, Earl of Southampton, encourages us not only to imagine Shakespeare's relationships with potential patrons, but also to revise the way that we perceive and interpret the male addressee.

[2] See Herbert S. Donow, *A Concordance to the Sonnet Sequences of Daniel, Drayton, Shakespeare, Sidney, and Spenser* (Carnondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969). Shakespeare names *praise* far more often than his contemporaries did. According to Donow, Drayton makes references to praise in 17 poems in his sequence; Sidney, 11 poems; Daniel, only 7 poems; and Spenser, 13 poems. Although he is not included in this concordance, Greville refers directly to praise only about 7 times as well.

that the poet is not simply skeptical about praise; the *practice* of praise generates

skepticism about a beloved who is supposed to be beautiful and virtuous, and about a

poetics devoted to admiring and celebrating that beloved.

The first third of the sequence begins in a comparatively conventional way, with

the poet clarifying that the "purpose" of his praise is "not to sell" but to "truly write"

(21).[3] For a while, the poet seems defensively sanguine about such abilities and about the

young man's worth, confidently insisting that while the beloved "dost breathe," his

"Muse" cannot "want subject to invent" (38). In sonnet 55, the poet even affirms that the

fair youth's "praise shall still find room / Even in the eyes of all posterity." Still, one

wonders if what we are hearing is the poet's willed confidence, manufactured to drown

out the doubt that has been humming since the sequence began. For as early as sonnet

59, the poet's conception of epideixis has soured: "If there be nothing new, but that

which is / Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled, / Which, laboring for invention,

bear amiss / The second burden of a former child?" Bemoaning his lack of inventiveness,

the poet laments that "the wits of former days" "have [surely] given admiring praise" to

objects inferior to his own. Sonnet 60 finds the poet wishing rather than declaring that

his praise has lasting authority: "And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand, / Praising

thy worth, despite his [Time's] cruel hand." And, only two poems later, the poet admits

that the purpose of praise is not simply to publish the beloved's virtues, but to eternize

himself as poet: "'Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise, / Painting my age with

beauty of thy days" (62).

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[3] All quotations are taken from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones.

When the poet next names *praise* in sonnet 69, he confronts both its superficiality and its skeptical potential. Here the poet allows that praise may be spurious, even inciting the kind of curiosity that could lead to a negative depiction of the praise object:

> Those parts of thee that the world's eye doth view
> Want nothing that the thought of hearts can mend;
> All tongues, the voice of souls, give thee that due,
> Utt'ring bare truth, even so as foes commend:
> Thy outward thus with outward praise is crowned.
> But those same tongues that give thee so thine own
> In other accents do this praise confound,
> By seeing further than the eye hath shown;
> They look into the beauty of thy mind,
> And that in guess they measure by thy deeds;
> Then churls their thoughts (although their eyes were kind)
> To thy fair flower add the rank smell of weeds.
>   But why thy odour matcheth not thy show,
>   The soil is this, that thou dost common grow.

In this sonnet, the poet explores how the need for "bare truth" can result in inaccurate, even damaging, guesswork; "seeing further than the eye hath shown" can draw us into terrain that never *could* be seen because it never existed. Articulating how easily the "rank smell of weeds" can emerge in a poem meant to celebrate a "fair flower," the poet fears that he who bestows praise may create rather than uncover truths about his beloved, and so shift from lauding to loathing.

These potentially injurious evaluative procedures carry over into the next sonnet, where the poet explores the dangers of epideixis, noting that it not only threatens to undo itself by discovering too much or, alternately, by distorting the truth, but that it often provokes envy and slander: "Thou hast passed by the ambush of young days, / Either not assailed, or victor, being charged; / Yet this thy praise cannot be so thy praise, / To tie up envy, evermore enlarged" (70). Responding, it seems, to his own impulse to question and assail, the poet subsequently entertains the possibility that the beloved could well deserve

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these charges, equivocally maintaining in the couplet, "If some suspect of ill masked not thy show / Then thou alone kingdoms of hearts shouldst owe." On the one hand, the poet clings devotedly to a beloved who, merely "masked" by a "suspect of ill," has already claimed the poet's own heart. On the other hand, that "suspect of ill" is suggestively a sign of some deeper flaw or indelible error, and a reminder to the poet that he has, as Helen Vendler observes, "a less-than-perfect knowledge of the young man's past, and therefore an insecure base for his praise."[4] However we read this couplet, the poet has written his way far beyond the easy optimism of sonnets 38 and 55: still to insist on the beloved's truth and to meditate on his interiority, all the while contemplating that "suspect of ill," could spell the end of his poetry altogether.

The poet tries various ways of diverting his (and our) attention from the beloved's potentially corrupt interiority, which produces only mixed results. In 72, for instance, he turns his gaze back on himself, telling the beloved to "forget me quite, / For you in me can nothing worthy prove; / Unless you would devise some virtuous lie / To do more for me than mine own desert, / And hang more praise upon deceased I / Than niggard truth would willingly impart." In this sonnet, the poet presumably blames himself for putting the young man in an unfavorable light, proclaiming in the couplet, "For I am shamed by that which I bring forth, / And so should you, to love things nothing worth." A closer look at this poem, however, makes one wonder whether the poet's self-blame really succeeds in taking our eyes off the beloved. On the one hand, the poet is merely demeaning his work, ashamed of what he has produced; on the other hand, the poet ties the beloved's shame to his own, suggesting that the young man's imperfections – his

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[4] Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belkap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 325.

infidelity, his conceit, his poor judgment – are sadly and undeniably true. The beloved, for one, loves an unworthy poet.

The second and more prolonged diversion following sonnet 72 is the so-called rival poet sequence (sonnets 78-86), which may or may not indicate any actual experience of Shakespeare's with a contemporary competitor.[5] Whatever their biographical authenticity, these sonnets not only allow Shakespeare to revisit some of the problems he has already wrestled with concerning the poetics of praise, but to push, unwittingly perhaps, into territory that he had shunned only a dozen poems earlier. The rival poet sequence comprises the largest cluster of poems explicitly about praise (as opposed to acts of praising) in the young man sequence: six of the nine poems mention praise directly.

The first of these references appears in sonnet 79, where the poet casts a forlorn, skeptical shadow over 38's celebration of the unity of beloved and poem. In this later sonnet, the poet proclaims that "what of thee thy [rival] poet doth invent / He robs thee of, and pays it thee again; / He lends thee virtue, and he stole that word / From thy behavior; beauty doth he give, / And found it in thy cheek." The poet goes on to declare that his rival "can afford / No praise to thee, but what in thee doth live." To resolve the potential conflict between the words *invent* and *found*, one need only consider the fact that *invent* had two meanings in the sixteenth century, "to produce" as well as to

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[5] Critics have argued in favor of several of Shakespeare's contemporaries. For a discussion of why the rival poet could be Marlowe, see Richard Levin, "Another Possible Clue to the Identity of the Rival Poet," in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36.2 (1985), 213-4. Jonathan Bate suggests that the rival is either Marlowe or Chapman (or both) in *The Genius of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 130-1. In *Such is My Love*, Joseph Pequigney makes another case for Jonson but throws Donne into the mix as well; he also proposes more than one rival (123-4). And E.A.J. Honigmann prefers Ben Jonson, making his case in "The First Performances of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*," in *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R.A. Foakes*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 139-40.

"discover."[6] The latter denotation is more evident in sonnet 79 than 38, where the

beloved is depicted as "pour[ing]" himself willingly into the poet's verse. In 79,

however, the poet suggests that if the rival wants to write a successful praise poem, he

must "invent," which is to say look for or find that evidence within the beloved.

　　　As becomes increasingly clear in subsequent poems in the rival sequence,

although the poet views *invention* as a form of robbery, it also underlies his notion of

authentic praise: real praise lovingly steals the truth from its object; real praise must

embrace the fact that it "can afford" only evidence that "doth live" in the "behavior" and

"cheek" of its beloved (79); and real praise derives from a close connection with the

object of admiration. As the poet suggests elsewhere in the sequence, the rival has

produced praise that is simply too good to be true and so has failed to *invent* anything at

all. Thus, the poet, satisfied that his adversary does not understand and appreciate the

beloved, can insist that *he* has the only legitimate contact, making a show of his

limitations in order to distinguish his work as authentic and superior. Conceding,

furthermore, that the beloved is "past" even his own "praise" allows the poet to separate

his work from his competitor's "strained touches" of "rhetoric" and so declare, "Thou,

truly fair, wert truly sympathized / In true plain words, by thy truth-telling friend" (82).

　　　But what do those "true plain words" consist of? Sonnet 84 provides two

answers:

> Who is it that says most? Which can say more,
> Than this rich praise: that you alone are you,
> In whose confine immured is the store
> Which should example where your equal grew?
> Lean penury within that pen doth dwell

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[6] "invent, v." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 19
September 2009 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50120488>. See also Shakespeare, *Complete Sonnets
and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 538.

> That to his subject lends not some small glory;
> But he that writes of you, if he can tell
> That you are you, so dignifies his story.
> Let him copy what in you is writ,
> Not making worse what nature made so clear,
> And such a counterpart shall fame his wit,
> Making his style admired everywhere.
>> You to your beauteous blessings add a curse,
>> Being fond on praise, which makes your praises worse.

The poet moves in a surprising direction in the octave, defining "true plain words" not in terms of nuanced exploration and detailed character assessment but in terms of copying and tautology ("you alone are you"). A few reasons for this clever maneuver present themselves. Most obvious is the poet's awareness of the limitations of Petrarchan praise. More than once in the sequence the poet criticizes praise poetry's epideictic conceits, suggesting that they are insufficient when it comes to representing virtue or lauding the beloved. The poet's tautological assertions speak to those problems, intimating that those who wish to praise the young man must accept the fact that he can be understood only on his own terms. A real paragon – a real exemplar – simply cannot be represented. Through tautology, the poet seems to differentiate himself from his rival.

Nevertheless, just because a poet cannot recreate an exemplar in his text does not preclude his exploration of the exemplar's character, nor his hitting occasionally on an accurate description of that beloved. Even though language is incapable of reproducing another person's likeness exactly, language can bring us to a greater understanding of that person. If these assumptions are at work in the Sonnets, then the deficiencies of praise only partially explain the poet's reliance on tautology; the poet also resorts to circular logic because he has stripped his poetry and his beloved of rhetorical trappings and suddenly found himself uncomfortable with the possibility of imperfection. For even as

tautology on one level seems to satisfy the poet's need for a true representation of his beloved, on another level it shows the poet's temporary *retreat* from invention, from genuine discovery – from all the things that he claims distinguishes his poems from his rivals'.

Indeed, behind 84's tautology – behind the poet's self-righteous assertions that poetry cannot capture the beloved's essence – are genuine concerns about whether the poet is a failure, whether his beloved is too flawed to be praised, and whether the poet himself simply lacks the empirical resources to tell the difference. We are largely made aware of such concerns in the sestet, when the tautologies do not stick, when the poet's desire for authentic poetry means doffing tautology's defensive cloak. Indeed, the poem's sestet constitutes a complete revision of the octave when it exposes at once the limits of tautology and the natural drive within praise to appraise, to develop (however misguided) a fuller representation of its object. As the poet discovers, insisting that "you alone are you" is not enough to "dignify" his lyric at all, for the poet must continue to write; his sonnet, quite literally, needs six more lines. These lines at first glance suggest that the poet has found yet another way to avoid confronting the beloved, replacing a legitimate character description with ostensibly self-evident truths. But these lines also show that the poet has moved beyond the protective realm of tautology. The phrase, "Let him but copy what in you is writ," is a call to discovery – to invention – reminiscent of sonnet 21's "O let me true in love but truly write." Heeding his own plea to "copy" what lies inside his beloved, the poet begins contemplating the "withinness" of things and so uncovers what tautology is designed to conceal: a "curse" lurking beneath the beloved's "beauteous blessings."

The fact that the couplet invites two different interpretations shows the poet's contradictory impulse to insist on his beloved's goodness and beauty and to commit himself to a poetics of brutal honesty. From one perspective, the poet suggests that the young man's fondness for praise attracts the wrong sort of poet (such as the rival) and thus elicits the wrong kind of poetry – poetry that cannot possibly provide "in true plain words" "what nature made so clear." Thus, the line constitutes a gentle warning: the poet wants his beloved to resist flowery praise and attach himself to a "truth-telling" artist capable of providing an accurate representation. From another perspective, the poet is blaming (and not just warning) the young man, intimating that the beloved's flaws – his vanity, his selfishness, his bad judgment – will reveal themselves in a poem designed to praise, thereby corrupting that poem. Although the content of the sonnet supports the first reading as much as the second, the organization of ideas within the poem overwhelmingly emphasizes the latter perspective. As the sonnet itself actively demonstrates, praise itself will inevitably discover the "curse" no matter how assiduously it tries to obscure the beloved with tautology ("you alone are you").

One could argue, then, that the poem proceeds as it does not simply because tautology is insufficient, but because tautology points to and thus commands an articulation of what it does not say: namely, that the poet's praise is ultimately inadequate (perhaps as inadequate as the rival's) and that the beloved's layered, complex interiority contains as many vices (in this case, vain fondness for praise) as virtues. Whether, however, the poet's specific discoveries about himself and his beloved in the act of praising are misguided and consequently misrepresented is not the point; the point is that the poet cannot prevent those questions and concerns from bleeding into his praise, and

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the more he tries to conceal corruption – for example, to play tautological games to bury it – the more likely the "curse" will emerge with greater force than before. When it comes to vanity, the poet is as culpable as the beloved.

Sonnet 95 arguably marks the poet's most searching exploration of epideixis. Surpassing even sonnets 69 and 70 in its darkness, 95 verges on sarcasm and satire, with the poet contemplating the beloved's "enclose[d]" vices and his exposed "shame" and lamenting an artist's inability to "dispraise" anyone so physically stunning: "That tongue that tells the story of thy days, / Making lascivious comments on thy sport, / Cannot dispraise; but in a kind of praise, / Naming thy name blesses an ill report." Cautioning the young man to "take heed" of beauty's "privilege," the poet reminds him in closing that the "hardest knife ill used doth lose his edge." Implicit in such a warning is not simply that the beloved's keen beauty will dull, but that the beloved could become vulnerable to the poet's razor-sharp pen, a pen that is already discovering how to dispraise.

One expects that the poet could hardly recover his sequence after this point, but he does. Perhaps it is sonnet 95's cutting frankness that helps carve out a passageway to some of the most complex, introspective praise poems in the sequence, poems that reinforce the degree to which epideictic skepticism inevitably meditates on the praising self. Thus, in sonnet 112, the final appearance of *praise*, the poet expresses his desire to "know" his "shames and praises" from the beloved's "tongue." A more emphatic demonstration of the poet's complicity and vulnerability does not exist in the sequence. For the poet to invite the beloved to take his place as praise poet – and offer himself as the new object to be scrutinized, celebrated, even disgraced – encourages us to reassess

what the poet meant by his avowal in sonnet 21 to "truly write." Indeed, the poet's

commitment to true praise suggests that his ensuing skepticism about his project emerges

ineluctably; and he learns to confront the fact that when he reflects honestly on his

beloved's humanity as well as his exemplarity, he will always discover dark spots – not

simply within the beloved but also within himself.

While the poet's final reference to praise reveals a great deal about what he has

learned about himself, the penultimate *praise* poem foregrounds key aspects of

Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism:

> When in the chronicle of wasted time
> I see descriptions of the fairest wights,
> And beauty making beautiful old rhyme,
> In praise of ladies dead, and lovely knights;
> Then in the blazon of sweet beauties best,
> Of hand, of foot, of lip, of eye, of brow,
> I see their antique pen would have expressed
> Even such a beauty as you master now:
> So all their praises are but prophecies
> Of this our time, all you prefiguring;
> And for they looked but with divining eyes
> They had not s[t]ill enough your worth to sing;
>   For we which now behold these present days
>   Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise. (106)

Even though this sonnet contains little of the doubt directed at the young man in sonnet

95 and elsewhere, it does something else: it roots Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism in a

historical context and emphasizes that these "present days" have made it impossible to

celebrate those "fairest wights" and "lovely knights," even when we encounter a beloved

who merits that celebration. For the poet suggests that the degradation of praise has as

much to do with cultural changes – with the poets themselves – as with a young man who

seems occasionally to show a few flaws. After all, what do the sonnets teach us about the

beloved youth? Whether real or hypostasized, the beloved, we learn, is young, vain,

stubborn, unfaithful, and easily bored. Hot and cold, he does not always keep his promises to the poet and is susceptible to flattery (as we see in the rival poet sequence). The beloved's attempt to strike up a relationship (in sonnets 40-42) with the dark lady creates resentment in the poet but also reinforces his devotion and love.[7] We also know that the beloved is mysterious and opaque, prompting questions and doubts about his character and inciting in the poet deep fears about whether he will discover the hidden kernel (which I will later identify as the canker) that destroys his praise.[8]

Still, the poet recognizes that this inherently imperfect beloved is also immortalized in an inherently imperfect poetics. Forced to come to terms with these imperfections, the poet scrutinizes his own aesthetic principles and assumptions, and limitations in perception; and he explores the ethical and epistemological potential of praise. To provide a more detailed account of these issues than I have provided so far, I divide Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism into three major features that I root in Protestant culture. First, I take up his Petrarchism, a tradition that constrains and alienates, that invigorates and fatigues.

Anxiety about Authority – Classical Praise and the Petrarchan Tradition

Cultures are formed – and achieve their singularity – by rebelling against previous cultures. In this respect, it would be a mistake for scholars to affirm that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were the first authors to challenge tradition; surely, Virgil and Ovid did the same thing. Given, however, that the concept of the modern author was

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[7] Admittedly, my argument that sonnets 40-42 include the dark lady can only be determined retrospectively, after reading Shakespeare's Sonnets in full. I will argue, however, that the integrity of the sequence hinges on our willingness to identify the woman in sonnets 40-42 as the dark lady.
[8] For a full discussion of this dualism, see chapter 2, which argues that this kernel – this canker – is embedded in the beloved himself as well as in the practice of praise.

developing in the sixteenth century, and given the enormous changes reflected in (and caused by) Luther's insistence that the individual must become his own authority, we can indeed perceive something unique about the humanist revival of and skeptical struggle with classical and medieval texts. Exploring the impact of the Reformation on Shakespeare's Sonnets in particular, Sean Keilen contends that his poems "are the creation of a doubting age" – an age skeptical "about the traditions of the Roman Church."[9]

While Keilen, then, shares my general contention that Shakespeare's Sonnets reflect a post-Reformation skepticism, David Quint – who does not have anything to say about the Sonnets – actually provides a better way of understanding Shakespeare's challenge to Petrarchan praise. Exploring the period's "skeptical attitudes toward literary authority," Quint shows how the humanist culture of translating and imitating classical texts was met by a deeper need to transcend those classical origins and create original works of art.[10] Paradoxically, however, Renaissance writers could only achieve individual greatness because their society "had gained a new historical awareness" (x). As Quint observes, innovation comes with a price: history must replace allegory. Writers must forgo transcendent truth in favor of an "individuality that can only be fully defined in historical terms" (24). This is because "allegory locates the text's value in a source of truth and authority that lies outside the text itself – normally in an earlier text or series of texts that have been granted an authoritative or sacred status" (22). A historically-grounded text, however, is a uniquely "human counterfeit," with no pretensions to hearkening back to some "divine original" (24) or "absolute standard" (4). While one

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[9] Sean Keilen, "The Tradition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*," *Shakespeare* 5.3 (2009), 237 and 242.

[10] David Quint, *Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature: Versions of the Source* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 21.

could argue that authors like Shakespeare and Donne were effectively creating new standards in their poetry and plays, Quint also stipulates that the "originality of the Renaissance artist was to be measured not only against the past but also the future" and that the "tradition's historicity becomes its inimitability" (4). "Originality," Quint maintains, "becomes virtually identical to the intrinsic strengths of the work of art" – strengths that cannot be imitated (5). Thus, Quint suggests that our sense of Shakespeare's inventiveness depends on his ability to create works that succeeding generations cannot copy.

Still, Quint suggests that no author can forget his origins. Shakespeare himself does not break altogether from the Petrarchan tradition but rather remains faithful to some of its basic tenets, thus exposing flaws within praise even as he uncovers his own originality. In many ways, Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism provides a solution to the problems explored in sonnets 59 and 76, where he questions his inventiveness:

> If there be nothing new, but that which is
> Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,
> Which, labouring for invention, bear amiss
> The second burden of a former child?
> O that record could with a backward look,
> Even of five hundred courses of the sun
> Show me your image in some antique book,
> Since mind at first in character was done,
> That I might see what the old world could say
> To this composed wonder of your frame;
> Whether we are mended, or whe'r better they,
> Or whether revolution be the same.
>   O sure I am, the wits of former days
>   To subjects worse have given admiring praise. (59)

> Why is my verse so barren of new pride,
> So far from variation or quick change?
> Why with the time do I not glance aside
> To new-found methods and to compounds strange?

> Why write I still all one, ever the same,
> And keep invention in a noted weed,
> That every word doth almost tell my name,
> Showing their birth, and where they did proceed?
> O know, sweet love, I always write of you,
> And you and love are still my argument:
> So all my best is dressing old words new,
> Spending again what is already spent:
>> For as the sun is daily new and old,
>> So is my love still telling what is told. (76)

Stephen Booth observes that sonnet 76 shows only quirky, jerky ingenuity.[11] Helen Vendler is a bit kinder about this sonnet, arguing that it is one of Shakespeare's "astonishingly inventive poems" stylistically.[12] Considering Quint's general remarks about sixteenth-century literature, I will argue that these sonnets show a tension between the quotidian and the original. On the one hand, the speaker blames the beloved for his failure to produce original work. On the other hand, the poet's personal lamentations seem very much grounded in a historical context – the end of a long tradition of sonneteering; thus, it is his story (and not the beloved) that exudes originality.

The poet, however, actually capitalizes on this tension. Even as the beloved represents an enduring monument and absolute standard, he occasions the poet's meditations *about* historical time and fuels his present experiences; through the beloved, the poet can dream about travelling to the "antique" past and exploring an old society that is different from his own. He can hope to discover how the "old world" illuminates or defamiliarizes the new. In both of these sonnets, moreover, the poet manages to be inventive simply by complaining that he cannot invent. Insistently metapoetical, the poems direct our gaze away from the supposedly transcendent young man toward an

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[11] Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1977; rpt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). "Although the speaker protests," Booth explains, "that his verse lacks the virtues of witty substantive variation, his verse…is capable of the vices of one kind of quick change": "syntax" that "glances aside spastically" (265).
[12] Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 344.

historically grounded act: the poet at his desk, quill in hand perhaps, fashioning sonnets.

Even though the poet, then, seems to overcome his anxieties about authority, these sonnets reveal in miniature what pervades the entire sequence and lies behind Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism. After all, how many times can a poet ignore his praise object or insist on his transcendence and superiority? How many times can a poem which laments a poet's lack of invention be considered original? And how can a poet compose a collection of sonnets that do not eventually (and despite his best efforts) grow small under the "authority" of the Petrarchan praise tradition – a tradition already populated by Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney, Spenser, Daniel, Donne, and Greville? But the problem goes deeper than Shakespeare's "anxiety of influence." In the above sonnets, the poet is not bothered by the Petrarchan tradition per se but rather by the conventional language of praise. As a rhetorical form, praise militates against originality because it traditionally involved using stock attributes and persuading others to right action, inspiring an audience to emulate the esteemed object. If such a person seemed superior, he was not inimitable, for that would undermine the purpose of praise.

The problem actually begins in ancient Greece. Praise (along with blame) belongs to Aristotle's third rhetorical category, "epideictic oratory." From the Greek word meaning "to show" or "display," *epideixis* is distinguishable from political and legal persuasion because it is first and foremost demonstrative and "ceremonial," concerned with the amplified display of virtues or vices (I.3.25).[13] As Aristotle maintained, Cicero and Horace demonstrated, and Renaissance theorists confirmed,

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[13] *The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (1954; rpt. New York: Random House, Inc., 1984), I.3.25.

"virtually all poetry was regarded as a subdivision of epideictic."[14] This is perhaps

because praise and blame comprise the rawest and simplest of human emotions found in

all literature – love and hate. O.B. Hardison accordingly observes that "the first

poetry…was encomium and vituperation, from which arose the two basic 'genres' of

poetry" and that the "truest poetry is the poetry of praise."[15]

That praise has always been associated with "truth" reflects its long-standing

alliance with ethics. Aristotle accordingly argues in his *Rhetoric* that *epideixis* frequently

comprises persuasion and deliberation, ranging beyond demonstrative rhetoric when it

"urge[s] a course of action" (I.9.1). Inherently didactic, praise does not simply display

virtue; it can also teach others about it or encourage ethical behavior.[16] "The epideictic

oration based on praise," Hardison maintains, "selects an inherently noble man" and

"creates a pattern of virtue made particularly attractive through the use of the [amplified]

ceremonial style" (52).

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[14] George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 153.
See also Brian Vickers, "Epideictic and Epic in the Renaissance," *New Literary History* 14.3 (1983), 501.
[15] O.B. Hardison, Jr., *The Enduring Monument: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Theory and
Practice* (1962; rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973), 37-38.
[16] See Averroes, *The Middle Commentary of Aristotle's* Poetics, in *Classical and Medieval Literary
Criticism*, eds. Alex Preminger, Leon Golden, O.B. Hardison, and Kevin Kerrane (New York: Frederick
Ungar Publishing Co., 1974), 341-82. Aristotle was originally transmitted into medieval and Renaissance
culture via the Islamic philosopher known as Averroes, who in the tenth century translated and commented
on Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, applying to his loose interpretation a wider knowledge of the rhetorical
tradition set firmly in place by Cicero and others. This rhetorical tradition had already bonded rather
quickly and easily with ethics – since praise and blame, and virtue and vice, became the backbone of
classical literature. From ode to tragedy on the one hand and from satire to comedy on the other, all literary
forms fit within the praise/blame configuration. Averroes, then, could easily reaffirm all that he knew
about poetry's moral function and exaggerate, perhaps, the ethical dimension of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Thus
when sixteenth-century Italian and English poets and theorists like Torquato Tasso, John Harington,
George Puttenham, and Robert Gascoigne read Hermannus Alemannus' thirteenth-century Latin translation
of the Arabic commentaries, they read not only that "every poem and all poetry are either praise and
blame" (349) and "all action and character are concerned with…virtue and vice" (351), but also that "good
and virtuous men represented only virtues and virtuous men" and that representation itself "aims at nothing
but the encouragement of what is proper and the rejection of what is base" (351). And where Aristotle
argues that demonstrative rhetoric was often tantamount to "urging a course of action," Averroes intensifies
the ethical dimension: "'deliberation' is the demonstration of the rightness of the belief which makes a man
praiseworthy" (355).

Hardison's observation, however, is not entirely accurate. Although an orator traditionally fashioned his praise object into a "pattern of virtue," he did not always have to choose "an inherently noble man." Aristotle is quite clear about this when he suggests that an orator could laud or excoriate any object and that he need only "know on what grounds to argue" (*Rhetoric* I.8.30). Aristotle proceeds to lay down those "grounds," which are the same virtues listed in the *Nicomachean Ethics – justice*, *courage*, *temperance*, *magnanimity*, *liberality*, *magnificence*, and *prudence* (I.8.1-20). How we deploy these virtues depends more on "the nature of our particular audience" (I.9.5) than on the character of the praise object. Preferring true virtues to the true person, Aristotle's *epideictic* procedure presupposes a sound, unwavering knowledge of ethical behavior and how to demonstrate it persuasively; it suggests that the stock virtues comprise all that is laudable in men and women, and that the orator does not even have to know that much about the person whom he praises or excoriates.

Aristotle's account of epideictic oratory – from amplification to the stock attributes – suggests that he was responding to, among other sources, Isocrates' major works of praise: *Evagoras*, *Helen*, and *Busiris*.[17] In *Evagoras*, Isocrates praises the Cyprian king's "beauty, bodily strength, and modesty" (3.15) before celebrating his valor, great deeds, piety, and justice (21-24). Having proceeded methodically through Evagoras' praiseworthy qualities, Isocrates declares at the end of his oratory that "while no one can make the bodily nature resemble moulded statues and portraits in painting, yet…it is easy to imitate the character of their fellow-men and their thoughts and

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[17] Aristotle also relied on the panegyric displays in Pindar's *Odes* and the *Homeric Hymns*. For a full discussion of Aristotle's influences, see George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*, and *Classical and Medieval Literary Criticism*, eds. Alex Preminger, O.B. Hardison, and Kevin Kerrane (New York: Ungar Publishing Company, 1974).

purposes – those, I mean, that are embodied in the spoken word" (47). Thus, although

Isocrates claims that the "spoken word should immortalize the virtues" (7), those words

of praise should also "teach others to adopt the same pursuits" (47).[18] And because a

poet is "duty bound to praise men," any attempt to immortalize another person is entirely

subsumed by the poet's didactic and ethical preoccupations, his moral obligation to teach

others about virtue.

Such obligations easily accommodate the rhetorical device of amplification, in

which a poet has freedom to embellish on virtues that the praise object might lack.

Celebrating that which is missing in a praise object betrays the fine line between

amplified praise and parody, between serious encomium and mock encomium (which

Aristotle alludes to in his *Rhetoric*). Isocrates' own works cross that line, revealing how

amplification can be used in the service of illegitimate (*Helen* and *Busiris*) as well as

legitimate (*Evagoras*) praise. In his attempt humorously to exculpate Helen, for instance,

Isocates amplifies her beauty in order to obscure or palliate her vices. In *Busiris*,

Isocrates explains that "everyone knows that those who wish to praise a person must

attribute to him a larger number of good qualities than he really possesses" (3.105).

Isocrates therefore explores in parody what he and other poets also found useful in

serious praise: how amplification helps a poet meet his ethical obligations to be faithful to

virtue and write effective panegyric thanks, in part, to the ready-made repository of stock

attributes at the poet's disposal. Praise, then, is true only insofar as it teaches others

about the universal virtues, not about particular people.

Praise poetry's power to edify is precisely what inspired Plato to retain praise

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[18] See *Evagoras*, *Helen*, and *Busiris*, in *Isocrates: Works*, trans. Larue Van Hook, 3 vols. [Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1945).

poets in his commonwealth even though he banished all other lyricists.[19] In Book X of

The Republic, for example, Plato dismisses artists in general as mere "imitators of images

of goodness and the other things they create, without having any grasp of the truth" and

so argues that "imitative poetry is the last thing we should allow."[20] But at the end of *The*

Republic, Plato makes an exception for those poets who write "hymns to the gods and

verses in praise of good men," arguably because their language tends to be so formulaic

toward their object of praise (607a). Moreover, a praise poet, inspired or not, can

typically distinguish a virtue from a vice. Even in the *Laws*, when the Athenian stranger

worries about a poet's moral knowledge – wondering whether "the race of poets is not

entirely capable of understanding well what things are good and what things not?" – he

quickly emends this problem, declaring that "the poet is to create nothing that differs

from the city's conventional and just version of the beautiful or good things; he may

show none of his creations to any of the nonexperts before he has shown them to the

judges appointed in these matters…."[21] The fact that praise poetry is regulated in Plato's

imaginary commonwealths makes the problem of divine inspiration (discussed in *Ion*)

irrelevant and ensures that there will be no ironic or misdirected praise (discussed in

Aristotle's *Rhetoric*). According to Plato, praise poets need only know ideas of the good;

their praise objects are presumably selected for them before they begin, and their own

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[19] See Gordon Teskey, "The Ethics of Inspiration," in *Reading Renaissance Ethics*. Plumbing some of the deeper reasons for their banishment from the commonwealth, Teskey suggests that poets (as Plato imagines them) may promulgate ethical behavior, but they quite literally lack the "ethical integrity" necessary for assimilation into the new society (194-202). Beyond a general lack of knowledge, the poet – "possessed" by the Muses – is never quite himself and never fully whole.   As Teskey explains, *ethics* suggests literally a "binding of the self from within" (194). Thus the poet, physiologically speaking, does not possess ethical integrity.

[20] Plato, *The Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 595b, 601.

[21] Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980), 801c-d.

words must pass close scrutiny before they may publicize their poems.[22]

By distinguishing praise poets for their ethical *function* – and not for their moral knowledge or their ability to dazzle audiences and stimulate the emotions – Plato exploits the weakness at the heart of praise. Formulaic, easily controlled, and prone to bland didacticism, praise discourages innovation. The fact that demonstrative oratory was further codified by Cicero and Quintilian – and then adopted wholesale by English theorists like Thomas Wilson and George Puttenham – underscores how easily praise can become perfunctory and predictable. Cicero, for instance, claims that laudatory rhetoric is the least essential of the three types, for "even if there is no one to teach them, surely everybody knows what qualities are praiseworthy in a human being."[23] Cicero saw the pedagogical potential in demonstrative oratory but no real practical value, contending somewhat reluctantly that laudatory speeches "belong to the orator's *duties*" (2.238, my emphasis). Quintilian is a bit more generous than Cicero and insists on demonstrative oratory's "function in practical business," but he, too, argues that the "proper function of the Encomium is [ultimately] to amplify and embellish."[24] Establishing strict guidelines for such praise, Quintilian divides the encomium into three major topics: praise of ancestry and parents; "praise of the man himself…based on mind, body, and external circumstances"; and, if available, "report" of "divine honours, decrees, and statues erected at public expense" (3.7.107-111). While Quintilian argues that the "praise of the

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[22] So why, then, does Plato even bother with poets at all? Presumably, he believes that, if they cannot legitimately teach others about virtue, then their poems can inspire moral behavior. The question of whether one can even educate others in virtue is tackled in another dialogue, *Protagoras*, and Plato seems to be ambiguous about it. In a series of tentative attempts by Socrates to contend with the sophist Protagoras that virtue is not teachable, Socrates finally entertains the idea that because virtue, like other things, is knowledge, one might be able to teach it.

[23] Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.45.

[24] Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.7.103-5.

mind is always real praise," his direction for "handling" this topic is mechanical and impersonal: cataloguing the praise object's "education," "natural abilities," and "good deeds" or "splitting up the encomium into the various [stock] virtues" hardly helps us understand the person himself (3.7.109). Cicero and Quintilian make clear that demonstrative orators typically did not acquaint audiences with the praise object; if anything, the topics were designed to inspire audiences by creating distance between them and the person praised. Theodore Burgess rightly argues that "the ideal for the encomium of a person, both in theory and practice, was remarkably uniform."[25]

The need to treat praise so uniformly explains how classical guidelines, along with the stock attributes, could so easily pass into Renaissance culture. As Brian Vickers points out, when poetry "had aligned itself with philosophy, especially with ethics," the poet became just like the orator: "the propagator of *accepted* moral systems."[26] Thus Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*, the most popular manual in the mid- to late-sixteenth century, follows Quintilian's rubric rather precisely, emphasizing the importance of amplification.[27] Somewhat akin to a grammar school primer, Wilson's book provides a "rehersall of vertues" as well as examples of various demonstrative oratories.[28] Some of this information also appears in Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*. Although Puttenham has an entertaining style; offers a diverting, aphoristic "history" of poetry and poets; and explores poetics in a way markedly different from Wilson, he also

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[25] Theodore C. Burgess, *Epideictic Literature* (1902; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987), 119.
[26] Brian Vickers, "Epideictic and Epic in the Renaissance," 502, my emphasis.
[27] See Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Mack points out that Wilson's *Art of Rhetoric* "was printed eight times between 1553 and 1585," while Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy*, "upon which so many theories of Elizabethan culture have been erected, was printed only once in 1589" (76). Of course, Puttenham may in some ways be just as appropriate to the poetry of the 1590s or more so, given that Wilson's book saw no more printings beyond 1585.
[28] Thomas Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique*, ed. Thomas J. Derrick (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1982), 43.

divides poetry into the "praise of virtue" and the "reproof of vice."[29] As if to emphasize

the artificial character of praise, Puttenham reminds us how social status determines the

degree to which a virtuous person is publicly recognized. Superior men, Puttenham

explains, have always merited ostentatious praise poems while "inferior persons with

their inferior virtues have a certain inferior praise to guerdon their good with and to

comfort them to continue a laudable course in the modest and honest life and behavior.

But this lieth not in written lauds…" (132). In the end, the regulatory stipulations

mentioned in many of these Greek, Roman, and English treatises have portrayed praise

poetry more as the stuff of the Platonic commonwealth than the ethical investigations

undertaken by the most sophisticated sixteenth-century praise poets.

Small wonder, then, that some of the earliest encomia – such as Isocrates' *Helen*

and *Busiris* – parodied demonstrative oratory by embellishing the virtues of praise objects

that deserve no commendation at all. Indeed, that Isocrates' mock panegyrics precede

most of the codified studies of praise indicates that poets were always uncomfortable

relying on stock attributes, always suspicious of amplification, and always inclined to

balk at imposed ethical standards and moral expectations. Writers of the sixteenth

century certainly did. From Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* and Sir John Davies' *Gulling*

Sonnets to Thomas Nashe's *Lenten Stuffe* and some of Donne's playful anti-Petrarchan

love lyrics, the period is filled with a rich collection of mock encomia. Puttenham

himself seems torn between disparaging and enjoying this derisive practice. On the one

hand, he warns that "poesy ought not to be abashed and employed upon unworthy matter

and subject, nor used to vain purposes, which is nevertheless daily seen" (113). On the

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[29] George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, eds. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 114.

other hand, Puttenham admits that such poetry "may be well allowed" in "merry matters" or for "man's solace and recreation," which shows a need to add some flexibility to such a stilted form. Indeed, the effort to codify praise in the first place arguably stemmed from an awareness that praise often leads to misrepresentation and hyperbole. Protecting the form from imploding, theorists turned its greatest weakness – its superficiality – into its defining feature, for if praise is controlled to the point of being merely didactic, one can overlook the fact that the praise object might contain unflattering characteristics poised to undermine the poet's work; and one can ignore how praise itself is ultimately deficient in capturing real virtue.

While it seems, then, that doubt always in some form governed the practice and even theory of praise, "epideictic cynicism" is actually better suited to the traditional mock encomium, which does not accommodate the empirically-driven skepticism that blossomed in the sixteenth century.[30] The mock encomium merely bestows praise on objects more worthy of invective than admiration; even if a poet misapplies or exaggerates attributes and provokes our inquiry in the process, investigation is still not part of the artistic machinery of the poem. The sonnet sequence, however, *does* possess that machinery. Intense, probing, single-focused, personal, and long, the sonnet sequence is not a strict encomium, but it derives its life from a certain kind of praise object: usually a beautiful, virtuous woman. Typically, the woman's only flaws are vanity and pride, although usually the poet's idolatrous obsession with the mistress leads him to project those negative attributes on to her. As in most panegyrics, however, the poet tends to place less emphasis on the praise object than on universal virtues and himself. In these

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[30] Here I mean to emphasize Isocrates, Nashe, and Davies. Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* possesses such epistemological depth that Erasmus may even be considered the father of epideictic skepticism and Donne, along with Shakespeare, among his "children."

sonnets, we are made privy to the praise poet's inner experiences as he contemplates his object of praise from a distance but the art of praise itself up close.

Petrarch was not the first poet to write lyrics about unrequited love, but he developed and perfected the form, planting the seeds from which would later spring the sonnet sequences of England's "golden age." Many Renaissance poets responded to Petrarch – mocking him, imitating him, corrupting him, improving on him, and in Shakespeare's case, investigating the epistemological implications of the form. Although Petrarch was the original source for sixteenth-century poets, he was not immune to authority struggles himself. Petrarch, for one, had to contend with predecessors from the 13th-century Dolce Stil Novo – Guido Guinizelli, Guido Cavalcanti, and, of course, Dante – whose works had already set a new standard for Italian vernacular poetry focused on the "angelic lady," on "spiritual values," and on the "psychology of love."[31] Indeed, Petrarch must have known that his Laura would forever be measured against the famous Beatrice, who appears in Dante's *La Vita Nuova* and his *Divine Comedy*.[32] Years before Petrarch commenced what would be a forty-year literary project devoted to Laura, Dante had already (to borrow Horace) decided to "look to human life and character for his models, and from them derive a language that is true to life."[33] Dante, in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, calls this true-to-life language the "illustrious vernacular," which is at once

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[31] See *The Poetry of Guido Guinizelli*, ed. and trans. Robert Edwards (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), xxi. Edwards argues, however, that "Guinizelli stands at the head of a school of poets who redefine the rhetoric and thematic emphases in the medieval Italian," which is to say that Guinizelli is modifying a still older form adapted from the French troubadours and Sicilian poets (xxiii). For a discussion of how Cavalcanti differs slightly from his contemporaries and predecessors, see *Guido Cavalcanti: The Complete Poems*, trans. Marc A. Cirigliano (New York: Italica Press, 1992). According to Cirigliano, Cavalcanti's poetry reflects the rationalist, secular philosophy of Averroes and Aristotle and not the Platonic, transcendent philosophy perpetuated by Thomas Aquinas. Thus, Cavalcanti's love, unlike Dante's, does not "end in spiritual fulfillment" but rather in the "'death' of reason" (xxv).

[32] See *The Portable Dante*, ed. and trans. Mark Musa (1995; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 2003).

[33] Horace, *On the Art of Poetry*, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T.S. Dorsch (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 90.

more "natural" than "artificial" Latin and yet flexible enough to accommodate poetic

"embellish[ments]" and "splendid … ornament[ation]."[34]

Written after such a powerful tradition was well underway, Petrarch's *Il Canzoniere* shows discomfort with the conventions of praise poetry. For Petrarch, knowing that his work was ineluctably subject to the tension between "origin" and "originality," often strives to formulate a new mode of expression answerable to his inner turmoil, but the language of praise and worship binds him to convention. One poem in particular reveals how the sources of tension within his sequence include not only the beloved's coy cruelty, but the poet's bondage to praise:

> Ahi bella libertà, come tua m'ài,
> partendoti da me, mostrato quale
> era 'l mio stato quando il primo strale
> fece la piaga ond' io non guerrò mai!
>
> ………………………………………
>
> Amor in altra parte non mi sprona,
> né i pie' sanno altra via, né le man come,
> lodar si possa in carte altra persona. (97)
>
> [Ah, liberty, sweet freedom, how you've shown,
> by leaving me, my former situation
> when that fell arrow made the first great wound
> from which I cannot ever hope to heal!
> …………………………………………….
> Love doesn't send me elsewhere, and my feet
> do not know any other road; my hands
> can use a paper only for her praise.[35]]

Petrarch's compulsion to praise might be viewed in a positive light and reflect a natural

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[34] Dante, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3, 47.

[35] The Italian version of these poems is from *Petrarch's Lyric Poems*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976). The English translation is from *The Poetry of Petrarch*, trans. David Young (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004). I use this translation, as opposed to Durling's now standard prose translation, because Young preserves the original line breaks (making it easier to compare the translation and the original) and emphasizes in his translation the connections between Petrarch and the Elizabethan and Jacobean sonneteers.

spontaneity, a reflex action akin to how Milton describes the pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve, praising God with "prompt eloquence."[36] Nevertheless, the obligation to admire could easily and quickly squelch ingenuity. This anxiety about inventiveness is articulated fairly early in his sequence, when Petrarch writes, "Io son già stanco di pensar sì come / i miei pensier in voi stanchi non sono" ["I'm weary now of thinking how my thoughts / of you are always weariless" (74)]. To those who might wonder "et onde vien l'enchiostro" ["where the ink comes from"], Petrarch explains in this same poem that "la carte / ch' i' vo empiendo di voi (se 'n ciò fallassi, / colpa d'Amor, non già defetto d'arte)" ["the pages / I fill with words of you (if I offend, / the blame is Love's, not a defect of art)".] Shakespeare, like Petrarch, moves in a similar direction after his own response to the imagined question, "Why write I still all one, ever the same": "O know, sweet love, I always write of you, / And you and love are still my argument" (76). Reading this sonnet against the backdrop of Petrarchan poetry reinforces how the problems that Shakespeare encounters have less to do with the Petrarchan tradition than with praise itself. For both Petrarch and Shakespeare had difficulty keeping their poems original, or as Horace maintains, turning a "familiar" "theme" into "your own property as long as you do not waste your time on a hackneyed treatment."[37]

Despite their similar challenges, Petrarch and Shakespeare ultimately respond differently to praise's ethical and aesthetic impositions. Petrarch explores the self. He does not attempt to investigate praise, or scrutinize Laura's virtues or other nuances of her character. Scholars have widely acknowledged that Petrarch's presence in the poems frequently eclipses Laura's. Sara Sturm-Maddox, for example, argues that "while later

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[36] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin Books, 2000), V.149.
[37] Horace, *On the Art of Poetry*, 83.

generations were to read the *Rime* [*Canzoniere*] for the story of Petrarch's love for Laura, the poet who records that love is less elusive than the lady celebrated in his verse."[38] Also remarking on Petrarch's disregard of Laura in favor of his own laurels is Giuseppe Mazzotta, who accepts the common belief that the "poetic text is the ground for the constitution of the self" (though he does question the "centrality" of that "self").[39]

When Petrarch does turn his attentions to Laura, he most often employs the *blazon*, which came to be associated with the practice of applying flattering comparisons (such as roses, cream, flaxen, and gold) to each part of a woman's body. The method can be traced back to Ovid and the *The Song of Solomon*, but it originally did not have a formal name. While Petrarch was blazoning Laura in the fourteenth century, he and his contemporaries understood *blazon* only as the French word for "shield." Gradually, the word came to signify the coat-of-arms "blazed" across that shield, or the description of that coat-of-arms.[40] It was not until the sixteenth century that *blazon* referred to the rhetorical practice of praising women.[41] The name actually fits well. Associated with chivalry, honor, and personal fame, *blazon* perfectly complements a poetics aimed at publicizing a woman across a series of poems.

For a woman, though, publicity exacts a price. The blazon reinforces feminine stereotypes, making this epideictic method no different from that explored in Aristotle and Quintilian, who similarly promoted the use of stock attributes. For Petrarch to persist in using this rhetorical method despite his misgivings about praise suggests other motives. Here is just one of many examples in the *Canzoniere*:

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[38] Sara Sturm-Maddox, *Petrarch's Laurels* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 280.
[39] Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), 59.
[40] "blazon, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 14 September 2009 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50023335>.
[41] Ibid.

Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi
che 'n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea,
e 'l vago lume oltra misura ardea
di quei begli occhi, ch' or ne son sì scarsi;

e 'l viso di pietosi color farsi
(non so se vero o falso) mi parea:
i' che l'esca amorosa al petto avea,
qual meraviglia se di subito arsi?

Non era l'andar suo cosa mortale
ma d'angelica forma, et le parole
sonavan altro che pur voce umana:

uno spirto celeste, un vivo sole
fu quel ch' i' vidi, et se non fosse or tale,
piaga per allenter d'arco non sana. (90)

[Her golden hair was loosened to the breeze
that twined it in a thousand lovely knots;
a bright light burned unmeasured in her eyes
that are so sparse and grudging of it now;

it seemed to me (I'm not sure if she meant it)
her face showed pity, coloring a bit;
and I, who had love's tinder in my breast,
is it surprising I went up in flames?

Her walk was not a mortal being's walk,
it had an angel's form, and her words too
were different from a merely human voice:

a spirit all celestial, a living sun
was what I saw; and if she's not so now,
a wound's not healed because a bowstring's loosened.]

This sonnet is consistent with the Platonic emphasis on beauty as a reflection of virtue.

Here and elsewhere in the sequence, the poet delights in praising the lady's bright face

(18), or her "begli occhi" ["fair eyes"], which seem to offer a glimpse of her "mente

altera" ["elevated mind"] (21). Petrarch's style is undoubtedly sophisticated, but he

remains married to conventional praise. While the blazon is full and beautiful and

stylistically complex, the praise object herself is small and one-dimensional.[42]

Nancy Vickers, writing on the tension embedded in Petrarch's "particularizing descriptive strategy," argues that the blazon does not merely reflect the poet's defense (and validation) of convention; it reflects his defense against the woman herself, a "forbidden, distant goddess" (the etymological connection between *blazon* and *shield* is especially significant to her argument).[43] As Vickers explains, the blazon is the poet's only form of protection against becoming another Actaeon, whose myth is mentioned explicitly in many Petrarchan sequences, including the *Canzoniere*. In the Ovidian story, the huntsman Actaeon discovers Diana, the virgin goddess, bathing; startled and enraged that a man has seen her naked, Diana transforms Actaeon into a stag. Acteon is pursued by his own hounds and torn to pieces. According to Vickers, the Petrarchan poet "*is* Actaeon, but, more important, he is a self-conscious Actaeon: he knows his own story; he has read his own text; he is defined by it and even echoes it in articulating his suffering. What awaits him is annihilation through dismemberment" – unless of course he manages to dismember his beloved goddess, his chaste Diana, before she discovers him (99). Scattering the woman across and within his poems is the only way for Petrarch to remain whole, in control, and dominant over his praise object.

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[42] The fact that Petrarch uses the same language to describe Charles of Luxembourg and to describe Laura reinforces the stock quality of the blazon:

> Real natura, angelico intelletto,
> chiara alma, pronte vista, occhio cerviero,
> providenzia veloce, alto pensero
> et veramente degno di quel petto! (238)

> [A royal nature, intellect angelic,
> bright soul, a ready gaze, eyes of a lynx,
> a rapid foresight, elevated thoughts
> well worth of their dwelling in his breast.]

[43] Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 102, 104.

Shakespeare dramatizes (in order to mock) the tension between the beloved as hart/heart and the poet as hart/stag in his Petrarchan comedy, *Twelfth Night*.[44] In the opening scene, Orsino emerges lovesick for his mistress Olivia. When the gentleman Curio teases Orsino, asking him if he plans to "hunt" his "hart," Orsino replies, "Why, so I do, the noblest that I have. / O, when mine eyes did see Olivia first, / Methought she purged the air of pestilence, / That instant was I turned into a hart, / And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds, / E'er since pursue me" (1.1.16-24).[45] In addition to reinforcing the ensuing gender confusion, Orsino's comparison of himself to the hunted hart paves the way for Shakespeare's creative use of the blazon within the action of the story (and not just in Orsino's poetry, of which we know little). Orsino, for example, responds to the threat of emotional dismemberment by sending the disguised Viola to spy on Olivia and to be, in short, the embodiment of Orsino's love poems. That Viola ends up wreaking such havoc in Olivia's household dramatizes the psychological impact of the blazon in Petrarchan poetry: unsettling Olivia and her servants perversely benefits Orsino, who, though moved to hunt down Olivia in the last act of the play, is undoubtedly relieved to discover that she is betrothed. Ironically, Orsino's betrothal to Viola stays faithful to Petrarchan practice as well: instead of wedding the remote, "forbidden goddess" Olivia, Orsino promises to marry the orator of his love poetry; that Viola stays clothed in her male garb at the end of the play emphasizes their intimate connection. From one perspective, therefore, the narcissistic Orsino marries himself, just as a Petrarchan lover finds solace only in his verse and his own suffering.

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[44] Other plays, including *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *As You Like It*, and *Romeo and Juliet* (especially the first act), explore Petrarchan conventions.

[45] Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993).

It is a truism that Petrarchan poets are happiest when melancholy. As Petrarch

himself articulates at the end of his poems, "io il nido di penseri eletti, / posi in quell'alma

pianta, e 'n foco e 'n gielo / tremando, ardendo, assai felice fui" ["I made a nest of all my

truest thoughts / in that rich [laurel] tree, and though in ice and fire, / freezing and

burning, I was truly happy"] (337). Sidney's Astrophil, too, in the final couplet of his

sonnet sequence affirms, "That in my woes for thee thou art my joy, / And in my joys for

thee my only annoy."[46] But such sentiments have an epistemological dimension that goes

deeper than the emotional satisfaction experienced in their melancholy. Astrophil and

Petrarch find joy contemplating their mistresses precisely because they may do so from a

distance and so preserve their ideal image of her. Although some critics might argue that

the blazon's "particularizing" dimension undermines such a fantasy, this practice actually

feeds the poet's imagination. Shielding the poet from what he would rather not see, the

blazon protects him from discovering what the speaker of Shakespeare's Sonnets will

discover – a canker in the rose – and what Jonathan Swift's Strephon finds out: that

"Celia, Celia, Celia shits." Instead of confronting the woman's humanity, the Petrarchan

poet creates the illusion of proximity by dividing up his mistress and juxtaposing each

part with another metaphor.

Paradoxically, then, even as the blazon shows Petrarch capitulating to convention

– to the impositions of the classical praise tradition – it also provides a strategy by which

he can subdue his mistress, elevate himself and his work, and steer clear of

epistemological doubt. Recalling Quint's discussion, one could argue that the blazon

(and Laura herself) is allegorical, reaching back to *a priori* truths instead of dwelling in

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[46] All quotations are taken from *Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (1989; rpt. Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 1990).

history. And yet (as we saw in Shakespeare's sonnets 59 and even 76), allegory can

occasion history or self-history. Petrarch, that is, uses the blazon to build private,

historically-inflected meditations about himself – his work's "intrinsic strengths"[47] lying

less in the praise object herself than in the poet's exploitation of stock attributes designed

to enhance *his* experience with that praise object.

Bridging Petrarch's blazons and Shakespeare's eventual repudiation of them is

Sidney's ambiguous methodology:

> Those looks, whose beams be joy, whose motion is delight;
> That face, whose lecture shows what perfect beauty is;
> That presence, which doth give dark hearts a living light;
> That grace, which Venus weeps that she herself doth miss;
>
> That hand, which without touch holds more than Atlas' might;
> Those lips, which make death's pay a mean price for a kiss;
> That skin, whose pass-praise hue scorns this poor term of 'white';
> Those words, which do sublime the quintessence of bliss;
>
> That voice, which makes the soul plant himself in the ears;
> That conversation sweet, where such high comforts be,
> As construed in true speech, the name of heaven it bears,
> Makes me in my best thoughts and quiet'st judgment see
>   That in no more but these I might be fully blessed:
>   Yet ah, my maiden muse doth blush to tell the rest.   (77)

More formulaic than Petrarch's sonnet 90, Sidney's poem makes use of the Alexandrine

sonnet's strict line divisions and meter: after every twelve syllables, the poet meditates on

another feature, proceeding with discipline and confidence across Stella's body. Hence,

in addition to its structural rigidity, Sidney's sonnet evinces a level of urgency reflected

in the poem's insistently regular rhythms; and, despite the poet's continued attempts to

connect Stella's physical body with the ethereal beyond, the poem seems remarkably

grounded in reality. This is in part owing to the fact that Stella exudes virtue and

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[47] Quint, *Origin and Originality*, 5.

goodness but is not pure. Intimations of her sexuality and infidelity, in addition to her

pride and vanity, add color and character to Sidney's sequence; the implicit humor in

sonnet 77 makes this poem no exception. For while Petrarch meditates in sonnet 90 on

Laura's hair, eyes, and face before contemplating her immortal walk and her "spirto

celeste," Sidney's poet seems interested more in providing as meticulous a rendering as

possible, and in competing with Petrarch, than in truly worshipping his ambiguous

mistress. Thus, even though Sir Walter Raleigh for good reason considered Sidney to be

"the English Petrarch," Sidney, unlike his predecessor, exploits the blazon's natural

voyeurism, inviting readers to complete in their heads what his muse "blush[es] to tell."

But what is Sidney's muse really concealing? The reference to the blush on one

level points to something serious rather than humorous, to the poet's feeling of forbidden

sexual desire, perhaps, that pervades Sidney's entire sequence and awakens, Lisa Klein

maintains, remorse in the concluding poems. Attributing Sidney's equivocal Petrarchan

attitude to his Protestantism and his belief in the "depravity of the human mind and will,"

Klein argues that "while the skill of his sonnets testifies to Sidney's erected wit, on a

metapoetic level, Astrophil's failure to love Stella virtuously manifests Sidney's belief in

man's infected nature." [48] A closer look at sonnet 77, however, suggests that Sidney's

"Protestant poetics" does not merely reveal sin and criticize sexual desire. His work

disparages Petrarchan idolatry, embracing a post-Reformation poetics that is sensitive to

authority and skeptical about praise. For Sidney, this skepticism is manifested in the way

he recoils from knowledge. The muse/poet, that is, blushes to go further with the blazon

for fear that the poet will start meditating on features that would undermine his praise (or,

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[48] Lisa M. Klein, *The Exemplary Sidney and the Elizabethan Sonneteer* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 30, 96.

as Shakespeare has it, on the canker in the rose). Sidney's readers would have known

that Stella (or Penelope Rich) was no Petrarchan goddess. Whether in seriousness or in

jest, Sidney concludes his blazon at the moment he feels he has taken in too much of his

beloved.

      If Sidney's poet stops short of turning the blazon into a mode of discovery,

Shakespeare's poet seems to feel that it does not discover enough and so repudiates it

altogether in sonnets 21 and 130. But first we encounter the astonishing blazon of sonnet

20:

> A woman's face with nature's own hand painted
> Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;
> A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
> With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;
> An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
> Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
> A man in hue, all hues in his controlling,
> Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth;
> And for a woman wert thou first created,
> Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
> And by addition me of thee defeated,
> By adding one thing to my purpose nothing:
>   But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,
>   Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.   (20)

This sonnet boldly uses Petrarchan form to blazon a male beloved. In doing so, the poet

tries paradoxically to convince us that his sexual desire should not be a problem, for

Mother Nature, having fallen in love with the beloved's feminine praise object and then

provided her with a "prick," puts in place an insurmountable obstacle. Perhaps the poet's

disclosure, then, is intended to preserve the physical distance between the poet and his

object of praise and justify his peculiar choice for a beloved, who apparently still looks a

bit like a Petrarchan mistress. Nevertheless, the poet's remarkably personal couplet also

means that even if we accept that the poet has the beloved's love but not his "love's use,"

the poet still points (literally and figuratively) to a level of intimacy unheard of in

Petrarch's *Il Canzoniere*.[49] Moreover, if we convert "love's use" to a noun and a verb,

then the poet is not resigning his beloved to other women at all; he remains among the

lovers who *use* the beloved's treasure.

As critics have frequently acknowledged, this challenging sonnet is illuminated

by *Twelfth Night*, where the bond between Orsino and Viola/Cesario parallels that

between the poet and young man.[50] Evidence of Orsino's regard emerges as early as the

first act when he with loving mockery describes Viola/Cesario as possessing a "smooth

and rubious" lip and a "small pipe" just like a "maiden's organ, shrill and sound" (1.4.33-

6). Orsino notices right away that Viola is a kind of master mistress in whom "all is

semblative a woman's part" but whom nature undoubtedly became enamoured of and

pricked out for her pleasure (1.4.37). At the same time that Orsino's blazon is a

revelation of his sexual interest in Viola/Cesario, it functions as a form of evasion (much

as Vickers describes the *blazon* in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*). By "dismembering" Viola,

Orsino can control her and ensure that she does his bidding. By sending her away to woo

Olivia, moreover, Orsino protects himself from his homoerotic passion – a passion

explored only implicitly in Shakespeare's works, never explicitly.

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[49] Sonnet 20 has accordingly been interpreted as a poem that either reinforces or obviates illicit sexuality. For a discussion of homoerotic passion in this sonnet and elsewhere in the young man sequence, see Joseph Pequigney, *Such is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, esp. 30-41. For a counter-argument, see Martin B. Friedman, "Shakespeare's 'Master Mistris': Imagine and Tone in Sonnet 20, in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22.2 (1971), 189-91. According to Friedman, the "word-play" used at the end of the poem is "nearer to being a metaphysical compliment than a confession of sexual frustration. Indignant and apologetic commentators have both missed the point because they have falsified the tone" (191). For Friedman, the tone is merely "'sportive'" and not sexual (191).

[50] See, for example, David Schalkwyk, "'She Never Told Her Love': Embodiment, Textuality, and Silence in Shakespeare's Plays," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.4 (1994), 381-407. As Schalkwyk observes, "the particular performing practice of the Elizabethan stage [cross-dressing] allows the androgynous beauty of sonnet 20 to be embodied in the doubly crossdressed figured of a boy actor playing Viola playing the boy Cesario" (399). Schalkwyk then proceeds to examine many of the same lines that I do here (400). For another discussion of the relationship between sonnet 20 and *Twelfth Night*, see Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* (1995: rpt. London: Routledge, 1996), 201-2.

In contrast, sonnet 20 intimates what Orsino must have felt about Viola when she first arrived but what he managed through manipulation to overcome. As the sonnet reveals, the poet does not "dismember" the young man's body to gain authority and control over his praise object (as Orsino does Viola); the poet instead breaks apart his androgynous beloved only to establish his complex androgyny before "re-membering" him as a man. Rather than gain power through the blazon, the poet seems (like Actaeon) weakened by it. Instead of mastering his mistress, the poet has found a master mistress capable of holding her/his own. Unfortunately for the poet, the young man's origin does not prove a mere fantasy, as it happily does for Orsino; while Cesario eventually transforms from a master mistress to her "*master's* mistress" (5.1.343, my emphasis), no such possibility emerges for the poet of the Sonnets.

But the poet's loss is also his poetry's gain. For while Petrarch uses the blazon to empower himself and his poetry and Sidney exploits its bawdy potential to point to more body (perhaps) than decorum will allow, Shakespeare gains authority by praising a male object who cannot physiologically hide anything at all. Ultimately, Shakespeare's extraordinary blazon opens up a space for a raw, honest, skeptically-inflected poetics that, with Sidney, no longer imagines the beloved as some ethereal embodiment. Having transformed the blazon, Shakespeare can subsequently reject it – once in his poems to the young man and then again in his sonnets to the dark lady:

> So is it not with me as with that Muse,
> Stirred by a painted beauty to his verse,
> Who heaven itself for ornament doth use,
> And every fair with his fair doth rehearse,
> Making a couplement of proud compare
> With sun and moon, with earth and sea's rich gems;
> With April's first-born flowers and all things rare
> That heaven's air in this huge rondure hems;

O let me true in love but truly write,
And then believe me: my love is as fair
As any mother's child, thought not so bright
As those gold candles fixed in heaven's air:
    Let them say more that like of hearsay well,
    I will not praise, that purpose not to sell. (21)

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head;
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
    And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
    As any she belied with false compare. (130)

If we set aside the first 17 "procreation" poems in the young man sequence and begin counting up from 18, sonnets 21 and 130 are the fourth poem of each subsequence; no surprise, then, that they have more in common with each other than with any other sonnet in the collection. Although the poet does not always avoid "making couplement of proud compare," sonnets 21 and 130 give the reader some sense of Shakespeare's artistic project and the method underlying his epideictic skepticism: "true in love" but ever skeptical of praise, the poet wants (as Sidney does) to "truly write."

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In sum, Shakespeare evaluates, criticizes, challenges, reforms, but does not altogether repudiate Petrarchan praise. Even in *Twelfth Night*, when Viola undermines (as many critics have pointed out) Petrarchan conventions by discovering subtle ways of literally breaking from the "text" nestled in "Orsino's bosom," she also reforms in order

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to reinforce some of those same conventions (such as unrequited love, holy adoration, obsessive desire) when she converts Petrarch's laurel into a weeping "willow":

> Make me a willow cabin at your gate
> And call upon my soul within the house,
> Write loyal cantons of contemnèd love
> And sing them loud even in the dead of night,
> Hallow your name to the reverberate hills
> And make the babbling gossip of the air
> Cry out "Olivia!" O, you should not rest
> Between the elements of air and earth
> But you should pity me. (1.5.271-79)

Satisfying Olivia's desire to hear a hypothetical description of her lovesickness, Viola's praise is at once playfully self-mocking and aesthetically serious. For her poetry is and is not Petrarchan. As Jami Ake observes, even though Viola's language suggests the convention of unrequited love, she also transforms the silent, text-bound, male-dominant Petrarchan poetry into a social, feminine love song whose words eventually find their way to the beloved's ears.[51] Viola's attempt to invent a poetics in which the beloved remains "whole, identified, and present" suggests that while she does not truly love Olivia, she seems to respect the poetry, even getting caught up in the romantic language herself – and such language ends up intensifying Olivia's love for Cesario.[52]

Olivia's attitude toward Petrarchan poetics is also ambiguous, for in this same scene she plays the combined role of beloved, critic, and female love poet. We saw

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[51] See Jami Ake, "Glimpsing a 'Lesbian' Poetics in *Twelfth Night*," *Studies in English Literature* 43.2 (2003), 384. As her title suggests, Ake looks at how the dialogue between Cesario and Olivia "offers an often overlooked opportunity to witness the dynamics by which a language of female-female desire emerges from the materials of conventional heteroerotic discourses already in circulation" (375). Nonetheless, Ake's discussion of the willow in the context of her central argument seems a bit strained. Although in a footnote she explicitly ties the "willow" to "unrequited love" (392), in her main argument she suggests that Viola's "pastoral poetics [her reference to the willow]…evokes a realm where neither Petrarchan conventions nor their social objectives mean much at all" (381). Inasmuch, however, as Viola is using Petrarchan conventions partly to challenge, partly to reform, and partly to reinforce, it is hardly true that such conventions become entirely meaningless. Indeed, even Ake's thesis suggests that "female-female desire emerges from" and thus is tied to "conventional" heterosexual "discourses."
[52] Ibid., 381.

earlier the partial blazon that Orsino delivers to Viola/Cesario in 1.3, but Olivia speaks

two of her own in 1.5. The first one is in prose and aims to stop Viola from proceeding

with her own blazon:

> O, sir, I will not be so hard-hearted! I will give out divers schedules of my
> beauty. It shall be inventoried and every particle and utensil labeled to my
> will: as *item*, two lips indifferent red; *item*, two gray eyes, with lids to
> them; *item*, one neck, one chin, and so forth. Were you sent hither to
> praise me? (243-49)

Presenting herself as a commodity, Olivia reinforces the stale, prosaic blandness of the

conventional blazon, which is so impersonal, she suggests, that it does little more than

inventory body parts. Interestingly, her criticism of this epideictic form is followed by

the question, "Were you sent hither to praise me?" In her mockery of the blazon, Olivia

seems suddenly aware of the fact that Viola, too, may be using praise as a method of

appraisal, composing spontaneous love poems in order to gather information for Orsino

(and not simply to woo).[53]

After Cesario exits the scene, however, Olivia delivers a second (partial) blazon –

this time in earnest. Contemplating her new love object, Olivia remarks, "Thy tongue,

thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit / Do give thee five-fold blazon" (297-8). Olivia

goes no further, which could lend support to her earlier criticism that the form cannot

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[53] Commenting on Olivia's mock blazon, Ake argues that Olivia "defies the fragmentation of female speech and bodies upon which such Petrarchan poetic subjectivity relies" and "dismembers the Petrarchan rhetoric in prose before it can dismember her in verse" (379). Ake relies on Schalkwyk for support. See Schalkwyk, "'She Never Told Her Love': Embodiment, Textuality, and Silence in Shakespeare's Plays," 389. Sawday, too, argues that Olivia, "[r]ather than submit to the rich adjectival partitioning of her body…counter-attacks by reducing the blazon to its essential components" (*The Body Emblazoned*, 202). The observations made by Ake, Schalkwyk, and Sawday are certainly accurate, but I am also suggesting that this passage emphasizes not only the psychological impact of Petrarchan praise on its listener but also the epistemological dimension of epideixis; Olivia feels threatened because Viola's language does not simply disempower and dismember her; it could also potentially cull information from Olivia (about her emotional state, about her private self) that she would rather conceal.

capture a person's character.[54]

The fact that she mentions the rhetorical method at all, however, signals a departure from convention, not only because the blazon is directed toward a "man," but because it is delivered by a woman. Emphasizing this entire scene's mixed attitude toward Petrarchan convention is the fact that Olivia, the love poet, ends up marrying Sebastian, the man she thinks is her praise object. In reality, however, Olivia remains forever divided from her true love "Cesario," just as Orsino remains eternally separated from his. In the end, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* shows us how the preservation of Petrarchan tenets enables their manipulation, as well as an exploration and evaluation of praise. Thus, Shakespeare's response to the "authority" of the Petrarchan praise tradition – and to praise generally – is not combative but rather rationally inquisitive: a studied reflection on the form by working within the tradition itself.

Epistemological Isolation – The Praising Subject and his Object of Praise

Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism involves more than a defensive reaction against the Petrarchan tradition. In the Sonnets, Shakespeare is trying to coax originality out of a rhetorical form that undermines innovation. He succeeds because he learns to exploit the formulaic character of classical epideixis, exposing its latent skepticism. Shakespeare shows how, in the hands of a capable, innovative writer, praise can evolve into appraisal. His appraisal, however, includes not simply his manipulation of formal principles but his epistemological exploration of poet and beloved. In my discussion of

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[54] Ake argues that this passage is indeed complete and simply shows Olivia "refus[ing] to enact poetically the ritual dismemberment of the beloved's body in verse, attempting instead to encompass the very aspects of Viola/Cesario's identity that elude the most conventional Petrarchan prescriptions" on the grounds that Olivia focuses on the "beloved's speech" before considering her "'actions' and 'spirit'" (385). However, Petrarch himself considers these aspects, as do the Elizabethan sonneteers.

this feature, I shall focus on the praise poet's psychological isolation and his anxieties about how to understand and represent his object of praise. As we will see, Shakespeare's beloved youth is inspected for his specific qualities, not merely admired for his general virtues. By becoming more particular than his predecessors with his praise, or lamenting his failure to do so, Shakespeare spurns a tradition aimed at showing how *any* object can be admired or criticized. And yet, from a cultural perspective the direction that Shakespeare's poems have taken is hardly remarkable at all. He was, after all, writing in an environment which privileged the individual as a seeker of truth, showed respect for different points of view, and valued empirical inquiry.

To date, the most nuanced exploration of the poetic subject and his object of praise is Fineman's *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets*, which traces the changing relationship between poet and beloved across the sonnets tradition in order to emphasize that Shakespeare's poems mark a dramatic shift in the way the poet represents himself, his praise, and his beloved. Fineman contends that praise poetry prior to Shakespeare was rooted in a Platonic tradition that insists on the visibility of goodness and truth. According to Fineman, conventional praise has always been a "visionary praise" (135) that "*simulates* the ideal such language speaks about" and that effectively "becom[es] the demonstration" – or picture – "of the thing it speaks" (13, my emphasis). In this visually-dominant poetry, the poet embraces a language of homogeneity, "light and likeness" (145); he typically discovers and celebrates visual signifiers of the ideal beloved, avows the truth of those images, and so displays his work as the mirror reflection of the thing it praises. It is no coincidence, Fineman affirms, that the etymology of *ideal/idea* is *idein*, "to see" (12).

Inherently tautological, traditional praise poems are ideal because they make themselves so. Petrarch, for example, praises a woman whose name means "praise"; thus to praise Laura is to also to praise *praise*. Still, one might argue that the emphasis of the sonnets tradition on unrequited love tempers, if not undermines, its celebratory tautologies. No matter how satisfying Petrarch's praise of Laura, he cannot have her and he suffers in her absence. How can his experience be ideal? Fineman responds that while the poet longs for his beloved, his desire is largely satisfied through the act of writing praise poems that typically embody both the beloved and the poet. "As a medium of admiration," Fineman explains, "praise is both the mirror and the lamp of both its object and itself" and so "reciprocally defines the poet's object and his subject" (168). Through praise poetry, poet and beloved can achieve the unity that they cannot enjoy in life.

According to Fineman, the real enemies of this ideal praise – and thus the major threat to the happy union of poet and beloved – are time and literary repetition, not unrequited love. He persuasively argues that participation in any long-established genre will inevitably discover differences among the accumulating exemplars, producing noticeable problems with the form. The problem becomes especially visible in Shakespeare's poems, which appear at the end of a "belated," "exhausted," or "bankrupt" tradition of sonneteering.[55] Fineman cleverly uses the word *re-vision* to describe the

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[55] Fineman argues that "Shakespeare's sonnets understand themselves to inherit the debts of a bankrupt poetic tradition…" (42) and builds his argument around the "burden of a belated literariness" (48). See also Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Helgerson contends that the depletion of the forms happens over the course of only a couple decades during the Renaissance: "Where Sidney and Spenser had begun in a near void, at least so far as English models of a laureate career were concerned, men born two decades later discovered a surplus. The pastoral, the sonnet sequence, the chivalric, Arcadian, and amorous romance, the long nationalistic poem, perhaps even the epic had been exhausted, and with them the mellifluous, ornamented style and the aureate attitudes that had been their body and soul" (104-5). See also

internal changes that occur in Shakespeare's sonnets when the poet's epideictic

experiment leads him to discover that the "old gold of poetic admiration has lost its

glister from being rubbed too often by the tradition of Petrarchan praise" (145) and that

Shakespeare's poet has become a kind of "bleached Dante" (149). Instead of perceiving

the beloved as his ideal exemplar, the poet begins to see "the object of his admiration

only very indirectly, by looking backward to and through a literary image of what is

retrospective and past" (146). The poet's desire to particularize his praise, in other

words, is undermined by his constant need to dwell not on what is but on what *has been*.

The cornerstone of Fineman's study is thus Shakespeare's awareness of his belatedness

and the consequences of his failure to perceive and present the beloved as he really is.

Fineman goes on to observe that Shakespeare's sonnets become increasingly artificial

and self-conscious, and increasingly prone to speak about and, ultimately, against

themselves. In the dark lady poems, especially, the poet not only affirms "that vision is

false," but he connects "that [false] vision with false language" (163). Fineman has in

mind passages such as:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth,
> I do believe her, though I know she lies,
> That she might think me some untutored youth
> Unlearned in the world's false subtleties. (138)
>
> In faith, I do not love thee with mine eyes,
> For they in thee a thousand errors note;
> But 'tis my heart that loves what they despise,
> Who in despite of view is pleased to dote. (141)
>
> For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,

Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Duncan-Jones argues that Shakespeare's sequence was "in part written after 1600" (52). Indeed, even if the poems were all written in the 1590s, Shakespeare could well have revised them in the first decade of the seventeenth century. The fact that the 1609 Quarto and *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599) contain different versions of the same poems suggests that Shakespeare's sonnet-writing was a protracted process.

Who art as black as hell, as dark as night. (147)

O me! What eyes hath love put in my head,
Which have no correspondence with true sight? (148)

For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,
Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,
And to enlighten thee gave eyes to blindness,
Or made them swear against the thing they see:
    For I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye,
    To swear against the truth so foul a lie. (152)

Instead of embracing a poetics of visual truth, the poet of the dark lady sequence focuses on verbal duplicity, and on words that have failed to capture a beloved who has long since receded from his frame of reference.

Fineman goes on to show how two things happen in Shakespeare's sequence that distinguish his work from that of his contemporaries: praise migrates into praise paradox; and the poetic subject, no longer capable of satisfying his desire through idealizing verse, invents a new kind of subjectivity capable of accommodating the internal division between the praising poet and his literary self. Fineman calls this invention *poetic subjectivity*. Putting these two components together, he maintains that "Shakespeare rewrites praise through the medium of epideictic paradox and in this way invents, which is to say comes upon, the only kind of subjectivity that survives in the literature successive to the poetry of praise" (2).

Both praise paradox and poetic subjectivity are embedded in the practice of praise. As we know, praise paradox traditionally bestows ironic and excessive adulation on a person who really deserves censure; thus the method deliberately separates a praise object and his praise. Fineman suggests that Shakespeare makes use of this renegade sub-genre for a couple reasons. The most obvious is that praise paradox presents

aesthetic challenges which Shakespeare and his contemporaries enjoyed tackling. As

Rosalie Colie succinctly puts it, the "paradoxical encomium raises a question in logic

which is of the most profound importance: can a thing unpraisable in fact be praised?"[56]

Shakespeare's occasional employment of the mock encomium in his sonnet sequence

represents such an attempt to defy logical impossibility and to add sparkle to the form.

Fineman argues, however, that Shakespeare must contend not only with the sonneteering

tradition of which he is a part, but also with the poetics of metaphor distinguishing that

tradition. For Shakespeare to compare his beloved to a rose, in other words, is for him to

compare his beloved to Sidney's Stella, Dante's Beatrice, and Petrarch's Laura. Praise

paradox is thus a generic mutation, an inevitable consequence for a poet weighed down

by the burden of literary history. After all, praise paradox is not always a matter of

appending flattering language to a random, inferior praise object; it can arise when a

poet's amplified language becomes so excessive that it turns into hyperbole, mockery,

and artificial encomium. And Fineman suggests that by the time Shakespeare began

composing his poems, to praise at all was already to praise too much.

Embedded within epideixis, praise paradox is what happens when a poet starts

noticing his own praise. Similarly, poetic subjectivity happens when the poet starts

noticing himself as he is praising the beloved – to the point where he starts to see his

praising self as distinct from the poet-character embedded in his verse. Despite insisting

on Shakespeare's uniqueness, Fineman shows how this self-consciousness is inherent in

the form. Rooting his observations in the etymology of *epideixis*, Fineman suggests that

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[56] Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 5. Colie goes on cheekily to respond, "If it can, then it is not unpraisable; if it cannot, then a vast number of pieces of paradoxical prose do not exist" (5). Colie's argument here has precedent in Shakespeare's sonnet 116, which famously concludes: "If this be error, and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved."

the excessive ("epi") pointing ("deixis") built into the word reflects a predisposition within the genre to undermine itself, to point to the description and the describer more than the described. [57] In conventional praise, however, the problems of epideixis do not reveal themselves and so remain undetected. If the beloved and the poet are a homogeneous unit, then it does not matter at whom the poet points: if he points to himself and his poetry, then he is also pointing to his beloved, for poet and praise object are inseparable and indistinct. However, once the poet begins to doubt his object of praise, his poetry, or himself – and once his poetry becomes increasingly artificial or self-consciously literary – then the problem cannot be concealed and the poet's distinct presence will threaten to eclipse the ideal copy. That is, the praising poet will inevitably be drawn into a sea of artificiality only to surface as a "poetic persona" exiled not only from his object of praise, but also from himself (218).[58]

But what of the sonnets in and of themselves? What of the fair male and the

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[57] Fineman seizes upon the idea of excess suggested in the "epi" to argue that this "prepositionally diffuse" prefix "is precisely the rhetorical surplus that praise as a rhetorical practice adds to ordinary verbal indication" (5). He then ties this idea of "surplus" into his thesis that Shakespeare, coming at the end of a long and exhausted praise tradition, deviates from a tradition that was inherently prone to this deviation.

[58] For Fineman, the two poems in which Shakespeare refers to himself as *Will* (sonnets 135 and 136) are important in the history of the sonnet sequence because they mark the first time a poet names himself in his verse at almost the same moment he declares language to be artificial – a lie. However, just as praise paradox can arise from repetitive, amplified praise, so subjectivity, Fineman argues, is "immanent in the poetry of praise" (215). The poems of Sidney, Petrarch, and Dante, which to some degree already exhibit the poet at the expense of the idealized beloved, have embedded in the lines of their verse the seed of division and the potential for poetic subjectivity, but they manage to subjugate those aspects. Critics such as Gordon Braden who have criticized Fineman for failing to read Petrarchan verse closely enough miss Fineman's point: the dark lady sonnets merely *invent*, that is to say "they come upon" or "discover," poetic subjectivity; they make explicit what was always implicit in the poetics of praise. See also Gordon Braden, "Shakespeare's Petrarchism," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, 163-84. In this essay, Braden acknowledges the distinctions Fineman makes between implicit and explicit difference, and he seems to agree on the whole with Fineman's reading of the poems in themselves, but he grows critical when Fineman tries to situate Shakespeare's Sonnets in a Petrarchan context. Maintaining that the "'languageness of language'…category…does not inspire confidence" and that "the last several decades of critical practice have shown that pretty much any textual specimen can be so characterized," Braden does not acknowledge how Fineman is aligning this point with three others: (1) Fineman is looking at the contrast in emphasis between visual language and linguistically-focused language, not at two mutually exclusive categories; (2) Shakespeare's poet explicitly declares that his poem "lies" and says that he has perjured himself; he does not simply suggest it; and (3) the poet of the dark lady sequence names himself (and his authorial self), "Will," at a critical juncture in the poems.

notoriously crafty dark lady? While Shakespeare's two beloveds are absolutely essential

to Fineman's argument, they are more expressions of what is happening to praise poetry

than actual people. A reflection of conventional epideixis, the young man is a figure of

sameness and homogeneity; fair and bright and true, he elicits from the poet a visually-

oriented, Platonic praise. Although Shakespeare's male beloved noticeably diverges

from a tradition that idealizes women, Fineman argues that this male is "[p]resented…as

though homosexuality were the secret truth of all ideal and idealizing desire from Dante

onwards" (256); the young man underscores the praise poet's natural impulses to identify

with his beloved, to see himself in his other. Unlike Pequigney, Fineman insists on the

non-erotic quality of the young-man sequence, thus preserving the sexual purity essential

to idealizing praise.[59] If the young man is the "*picture* of his poet's admiration," then the

dark lady is the "*discourse* of her poet's lust" (160). Seductive, dark, and cunning, the

black mistress is the figure of praise paradox, heterogeneity, difference, sexual desire,

and misogyny. In the poems addressed to her, the poet hardly praises at all, instead

lamenting that he has been blind, that his language is false, and that his dark lady is not

true. It is in the dark-lady sonnets that the poet names himself, explicitly articulating the

separation he feels between himself and his beloved as well as within himself.

     Although Fineman's formalist argument is rigid and intentionally repetitive, he

does build into his interpretation three major sources of flexibility that accommodate my

own reading. He argues, for example, that while the "young man's golden praise

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[59] On the first page of *Such is My Love*, Pequigney suggests that the poet and young man have a sexual
relationship, though he admits that the "stand" he "take[s] on the question of eroticism is hardly one of
conformity" (1). And, unlike Fineman, Pequigney later argues that the dark lady and the young man "do
not have carnal relations" (147). Both of these arguments seem to undermine Fineman's interpretation,
although Pequigney's claims are far from irrefutable. As far as the poet's physical relationship with the
young man, the poems contain some sexual innuendo, but there is no way to prove more than sexual desire;
as for the young man's sexual relationship with the dark lady, sonnet 144 overwhelmingly substantiates a
physical connection – as do sonnets 40-42.

presents itself *as* that which it admires," these same sonnets also implicitly point to a crisis of epideixis by complaining how repetitive such praise has become (177-88). Fineman, who makes much ado of two of the sonnets I discuss in the previous section (59 and 76), asserts that in the young man sequence, the poet "introduces a new kind of literary self-consciousness into the already highly self-conscious tradition of the Renaissance sonnet" and that he "identifies himself with his own literariness," both of which feed into the sequence's "invention" of poetic subjectivity (149). As I have already mentioned in my "Quintian" interpretation of these poems, sonnets 59 and 76 are original in the way they historically ground the poet's experiences with the beloved. Similarly, Fineman contends that these two poems "work practically to make a *personal* issue out of their self-remarked literary belatedness, regularly associating what they themselves characterize as their old-fashioned matter and manner with their poet's sense of senescence" (148).

In addition to highlighting the poet's literary self-consciousness in a sequence that is supposed to be idealizing the beloved, Fineman suggests that the poet is divided from the beloved as early as the procreation sonnets, where the poet sometimes identifies himself and his work with the young man's progeny instead of with the young man himself (211). Thus, on the one hand, the young-man sonnets insist on the ideal identification among poet, poem, and beloved, asserting, for example, "'Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise / Painting my age with beauty of thy days" (62). On the other hand, several of the young man "sonnets seem repeatedly to dwell on…the *difference* between a subject and his object, between the real and the ideal, or between the original and its copy" (216).

The third source of flexibility involves Fineman's treatment of the mock encomium. He claims that while the young man sonnets exhibit conventional praise, the dark-lady poems emphasize praise paradox. But, other than sonnets 130, 131, and (to some extent) 138, the second sequence hardly praises at all; most of the time, the poet is cajoling, lamenting, or blaming the dark lady. Fineman explains that though these sonnets constitute a *praise of* paradox and embrace a paradoxical reality, they surpass even the mock encomium. Quoting sonnet 147, he builds his interpretation upon the fact that the poet has "sworn" the dark lady "fair" but has since discovered that she is as "black as hell, as dark as night." As Fineman argues, this second sequence is "written as though by a poet who has already essayed the paradox of praise, who has tried it out in misplaced earnest" (29). Where, then, are the paradoxical poems that the poet has "tried…out in misplaced earnest" (29)? Where are the mock encomia? If we read Shakespeare's sequence in the order of the 1609 printing and take seriously Fineman's insistence on the intimate connection between the two subsequences, one senses that what the poet is complaining about in the dark-lady sonnets is what he has already *demonstrated* in the young-man poems: amplified praise directed at a dubious beloved.

If Fineman's investigation of the young-man poems produces a complex, but ultimately loosely woven pattern, I intend to tug on those threads a bit more than most critics have done in the last twenty years. Common to both of our arguments, after all, are some general observations regarding the status of sixteenth-century praise poetry and the fact that changes within epideixis are inherent in the practice. Moreover, even though Fineman similarly claims that Shakespeare's poems have characteristics that make them exemplary, he also rightly notices a large-scale darkening of epideixis across the

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Renaissance literary spectrum (156). Perhaps what is most significant, though, for my own study is Fineman's analysis of poetic subjectivity – as much for what he leaves out as for what he discusses. Fineman, for example, maintains that "as the sonnet evolves from Dante to Shakespeare" and becomes increasingly self-conscious and artificial, "there is a transition from an epideictic ontology to an epideictic psychology…" (217). As he affirms elsewhere, "poetic introspection" – and emphasis on being in the present – gives way to an obsession with the "retrospective" and the obsolete (149). While compelling, his argument leaves gaps in the story of how Shakespeare's poems evolved. We can address one of those gaps by acknowledging that an introspective poetics that suddenly starts meditating on its beloved in relation to past praise objects is not just being "retrospective" but also *inspective*. Another (related) elephant in the room is the epistemological dimension of praise, which could help account for the shift from ontology to psychology. Taking up these and other issues produces another question that this chapter seeks to answer: How might we extend Fineman's assertion that poetic subjectivity arises from literary repetition to include cultural markers such as the Reformation, the rise of scientific empiricism, and the revival of skeptical texts?

Fineman's argument, after all, is directly relevant to a post-Reformation society ready to assert the primacy of the Word (*sola scriptura*) but prone to doubt whether language can convey truth. His discussion of the praising subject and his object of praise, moreover, relates to a general shift in the Renaissance in the way people viewed themselves and the world – to a marked transformation, that is, away from medieval ontology (focused on essence as knowledge) to Renaissance epistemology (focused on experiment and observation). Scholars like Julie Solomon, Walter Ong, and Ernst

Cassirer agree that prior to Shakespeare, individuals could psychologically integrate themselves into their world; their natural setting, though often strange and unfamiliar, was still a projection of the self; and reality involved subjugating the world of things to a world of ideas and essences. In the epistemologically-driven Renaissance, however, people began to dwell on the implications of their separateness from the world and from each other.[60]

Solomon and Ong, exploring the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, therefore offer a way to widen Fineman's emphasis on ontology and psychology to incorporate issues related to Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism – from the poet's isolation and self-doubt to his impulse to inquire into the nature of his beloved and his poetics. Solomon begins by insisting that "we would have no new…rise of the early modern subject without the capacity to view the subject in contradistinction to an external world of objects, considered objectively."[61] She explains that the birth of scientific empiricism and disinterestedness, the increased appreciation for subjective

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[60] To explain this growing emphasis on epistemology and, in many cases, to account for the rise of skepticism, other scholars cite the Reformation. Popkin, for example, reminds us that the religious "[r]eformers were continually occupied with trying to justify their own type of subjective, individual criterion, and at the same time were using this criterion as an objective measure by means of which they condemned as heresies their opponents' appeals to conscience" (*The History of Scepticism*, 5). Similarly, Katharine Maus explores the influence of "Renaissance religious culture" on subjectivity and skepticism in theater [(*Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11]. Focused on theater's response to the "anxiety about the epistemology of inwardness," Maus argues that "the English Renaissance stage seems deliberately to foster theatergoers' capacity to use partial and limited presentations as a basis for conjecture about what is undisplayed or undisplayable. Its spectacles are understood to depend upon and indicate the shapes of things unseen" (31-32). For Maus, these innovations in theater are made possible, in part, by an increasingly self-conscious religious culture that habitually reflected on the "disparity between what a limited, fallible human observer can see and what is available" to God, "the hypostasized observer" (11). In both of their studies, Fineman and Maus observe how our experience of subjectivity (in literature or real life) is predicated as much on what we cannot know – on our limited perspectives – as what we can; thus both scholars implicitly tie subjectivity to the emergence of skepticism. Maus, by exploring the boundaries within and between people, emphasizes the fact that every individual emanates a mysterious interiority – a subjective, private self – that will always elude and thus divide us.
[61] Julie Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making: Francis Bacon and the Politics of Inquiry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), xiii.

points of view, and the emergence of skepticism about the observable world all arose

from the "dissolution of an ontologistic episteme," or, more simply, from a

transformation in subject and object (38).[62]   Rooting these changes in shifting economic

and political power structures, Solomon explores how alterations in sixteenth-century

cognition led to the drive to uncover empirical evidence that would assuage a person's

skepticism and lead to a consensus of interpretation.

Solomon elaborates on many of the observations made by Ong, who claims that

the period's major changes – epistemological, religious, and scientific – were subordinate

to a shift from an oral-aural culture to a culture of the written word.[63] As Ong argues, the

printing press transformed the use of language and thus the individual's conception of the

world. While words known only for their "native sound…retain a permanent

inwardness," "writing," Ong explains, "externalizes words themselves, giving them a

curious thing-like permanence as marks on a surface" (229). Ong argues that literate

societies therefore tend to be epistemological – interested in a world of things where

"[p]ersons and the consciousness they exhibit are unaccountable intrusions, foreign to

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[62] Solomon's discussion of the subject/object split does come with a caveat. In her prologue and elsewhere, she admits to the anachronistic use of the word "objectivity" (xix). To clarify what she means by this split, Solomon argues that prior to the early modern period, human beings did not distinguish ontology from epistemology, and that to know was also to be (28-29). That is, the external world in medieval philosophy was subordinate to the "knowing subject" (xii) and her world of objective essences (like Plato's forms); although human beings used their senses to observe the world, those details did not constitute "objects" of knowledge. As Solomon explains, "once the mind abstracts a thing's subjective essence from sense-data, the subjective essence attains objective mental existence" (29). Subjectivity and objectivity became two separate entities only after the medieval object was, according to Solomon, "'thrown from the mind,'" or perceived as having an existence independent of human thinking (37).

[63] Walter J. Ong, S.J., *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 231. As Ong suggests, Luther himself would not have succeeded in convincing people that they had the power of religious interpretation were it not for the printing press, which not only allowed Luther to publicize his ideas but made reading the Bible a viable option for anyone who was literate. According to Ong, in preliterate cultures, the world was not perceived as objective and "indifferent" (223). "So long as culture was dominantly oral-aural," he goes on to say, "attempts at neutral objectivity would be under constant danger of distortion" (225). He explains that "in such a society, knowledge is a tribal possession" and a product of "what others say" – "not a matter of individual speculation" (231). Preliterate cultures were also marked by "authoritarian structures" in which the "objective world" was "still…relatively inaccessible to the world" and where "observation," though not "eliminated," was nonetheless "minimized" (232-4).

objective reality, which is voiceless and normally passive" (228). Thus, the modern

individual will typically find his environment at once more knowable and less knowable,

and himself bound to observe a world from which he is eternally isolated.

Ong's argument that people were consequently starting "to be thought of

somehow as objects" in a universe filled with a "mass of things" (228) is especially

pertinent to Shakespeare's Sonnets: just as inquiring into a person's nature and

speculating about her interiority turns her into an *object* of inspection, so the poet's

insistent questioning and doubt reflects the fact that the beloved is no longer a static ideal

paragon yoked to the poet but a shifting, unknowable object inviting speculation.

Cassirer, along these lines, eloquently writes that "[t]he true independence of the world of

experience was really first won by the Renaissance…. The empirical is no longer to be

resolved in the ideal, therewith to be stripped of its specific character. On the contrary,

the ideal can only be genuinely fulfilled in the empirical, where it is tested and

justified."[64] Cassirer's observations resonate powerfully in the Sonnets, where the poet

meditates on his isolation, on the idiosyncrasies of eye and mind, on the practice of

interpretation and evaluation, and on the limitations of human knowledge.

Sonnet 24 exemplifies the poet's psychological isolation from the beloved,

despite their physical proximity:

> Mine eye hath played the painter, and hath steeled
> Thy beauty's form in table of my heart;
> My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
> And perspective it is best painter's art;
> For through the painter must you see his skill,
> To find where your true image pictured lies,
> Which in my bosom's shop is hanging still,
> That hath his windows glazed with thine eyes:

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[64] Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), 172.

Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
Are windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun
Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee;
    Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art:
    They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

Notwithstanding the poet's description of a shared experience with the beloved, Vendler

maintains that it "is one of the many sonnets of asymmetry" in the sequence and is

unusual for a praise sequence that is supposed to celebrate unity.[65] This is because the

beloved looks into the poet's eyes to see himself "steeled" in the "table" of his "heart,"

while the young man does not offer his poet the same privilege. The poet is not engraved

in the young man's heart; he merely watches the youth, whose own eyes become

windows through which the poet may see the youth's image inside himself. Effectively

peering in the same direction (the beloved at the poet, the poet through the youth at the

youth within himself), they seem to share the same *perspective*.

But the problems with this poem have to do not only with a general lack of

symmetry, but also with a failure in perception.[66] Ultimately, neither the beloved nor the

poet can fully perceive the other person. The poet knows that eyes are not really

windows and so do not allow a person to penetrate the heart of another. Thus, the poem

culminates in the poet's revelation that artists "draw *but what* they see, know not the

heart." The structure of sonnet 24 accordingly traces the way the beloved gradually

recedes from the poet's understanding. Promising at the start, the first quatrain embraces

Plato's essences, insisting that "beauty's form" – and thus the young man's essential

being – is carved into the poet's heart. Soon giving up this ideal world of Platonic forms,

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[65] Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 142.
[66] See, for example, Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 143; Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1977; rpt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 172-4; and Colin Burrow, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 428.

however, the poet by the second quatrain affirms merely that the beloved's "true image" exists within the poet. By the third quatrain, the poet employs neither *form* nor *true image* to describe the beloved's picture, but rather the prosaic and indistinct word *shape*. Having lost hope of capturing the beloved's essence, the poet realizes that all he has is a nebulous outline that he cannot claim is complete and that is sure to change depending on the poet's perspective – on his frame of reference.

If, then, we agree that "perspective" is indeed "best painter's art" in that it seems to ensure accuracy of representation, one should also remember that an object's representation depends on the angle from which it is viewed. In the sixteenth century, writers already understood that the word *perspective* could, on the one hand, mean "vision and light" and "optical instrument for looking through" and, on the other hand, refer to an anamorphic picture "designed to appear distorted and confused" – like Cleopatra's reflection of Antony "painted one way like a Gorgon, / The other way[] a Mars."[67] Skeptics such as Montaigne, Greville, and Sir Walter Raleigh all cite problems of perspective to justify their philosophy. Reinforcing this dimension of skepticism, Shakespeare not only affirms in sonnet 24 that people and things look different depending on their frame of reference, but he also implies that idiosyncrasies and flaws in human physiology (such as near-sightedness) can distort just about any image.

The poet's skepticism regarding the beloved's representability is matched by growing concern about his own self-knowledge. As the sonnet reveals, the poet wants the beloved to look into his eyes to see his own picture of that beloved, but the image is imperfect, incomplete, superficial, and even, perhaps, false. Similarly, the poet gazes

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[67] "perspective, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 25 September 2009 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50176270>. See also *Antony and Cleopatra*, in *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), 2.5.118-19.

into the beloved's eyes only to see himself looking back at himself. Not just alienated

from the world, the poet is also alienated from himself. If the poet can only see his

beloved perspectively, then the same goes for his attempt to see his own image. In a way,

then, this poem can be read as a metaphor for how people but slenderly know themselves.

Thus, sonnet 24 represents one of the sequence's first efforts to unite the poet's

epistemological limitations and self-doubt with anxieties about his isolation. Sonnet 113,

one of the last of such poems in the young-man sequence, deepens the eye/mind

questions broached in 24:

> Since I left you, mine eye is in my mind,
> And that which governs me to go about
> Doth part his function, and is partly blind;
> Seems seeing, but effectually is out:
> For it no form delivers to the heart
> Of bird, of flower, or shape which it doth lack;
> Of his quick objects hath the mind no part,
> Nor his own vision holds what it doth catch:
> For if it see the rud'st or gentlest sight,
> The most sweet-favoured or deformed'st creature,
> The mountain, or the sea, the day, or night,
> The crow, or dove, it shapes them to your feature.
>   Incapable of more, replete with you,
>   My most true mind thus maketh mine [eye][68] untrue.

Readers will notice how words in this poem morph into other words: *I* becomes *eye*; *mine*

turns into *eye* and *mind*; *part* transmutes into *partly*; *seems* changes into *seeing* and then

see; *form* finds its way to *deformed'st*; and *shape* later reappears as *shapes*. These subtle

and not-so-subtle linguistic adjustments reflect the fact that the poet, separated from the

beloved, discovers that every "form" he sees is "shape[d]" into his "feature." Everything

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[68] Stephen Orgel, Helen Vendler, Colin Burrow have added the word *eye* to the final line. Stephen Booth makes explicit the implicit pun in the word *mine* by emending "mine" to "m'eyne" (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 99). Duncan-Jones defends her decision to follow Malone and the 1609 Quarto and thus to leave the poem alone, arguing that "Malone is surely correct in saying '*Untrue* is used as a substantive. *The sincerity of my affection is the cause of my untruth*; i.e. of my not seeing objects truly, such as they appear to the rest of mankind'" (336). See also Stephen Orgel, *The Sonnets* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

real or essentially and Platonically true, in other words, becomes "untrue" in the poet's mind and, as in sonnet 24, degenerates into mere "shapes."

Sonnet 113, which directly follows the poet's request to "know" his "shames and praises" from the beloved's "tongue" (112), is not a classic love poem; the poet is not celebrating the fact that he perceives the beloved everywhere he looks, nor is he spending the whole time bewailing the young man's absence (remember, the poet has temporarily deserted his artistic post in 112 and here reasserts that he has left the young man). Rather, the poet laments the fact that his mind is playing tricks on him, proving his eye "untrue" or, depending on which edition of the Sonnets we use, threatening to undercut the poet's powers of perception.[69] Sonnet 113 digs deeper than 24 into what Solomon considers to be the "underlying crisis" feeding sixteenth-century skepticism.[70] Solomon contends that "skepticism arose in response to a new social sensitivity to cognitive relativism and a new awareness of contending epistemologies" (38). Nonetheless, these "cognitive" differences could no longer be ascribed merely to "sensory abnormality," but also to an "intellect" that is "susceptible to idiosyncrasy" (38). In sonnet 113, the poet knows that his eye is seeing birds, flowers, mountains, and ocean, but his mind (which is "most true" to his beloved's memory) is converting these accurate images into something false.

"Replete" with that absent beloved, the poet insists that his mind has betrayed him, creating illusory images that are too perplexing and too consuming to offer comfort. This skeptical perspective, I argue, distinctly contrasts the optimism expressed by Petrarch, who in his *Canzoniere* celebrates the capacity to find solace in an environment

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[69] See previous note.
[70] Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making*, 38.

that he can actively shape to his liking:

> Ove porge ombra un pino alto od un colle
> talor m'arresto, et pur nel primo sasso
> disegno co la mente il suo bel viso.
> Poi ch' a me torno, trovo il pette molle
> de la pietate, et alor dico: "Ahi lasso,
> dove se' guinto? et onde se' diviso?"
> Ma mentre tener fiso
> posso al primo pensier la mente vaga,
> et mirar lei et obliar me stesso,
> sento Amor sì da presso
> che del suo proprio error l'alma s'appaga;
> in tante parti et sì bella la veggio
> che se l'error durasse, altro non cheggio. (129)

> [Where some tall pine or hillside makes for shade
> I often stop, and staring at a stone
> I try to call her lovely face to mind.
> Then coming to my senses once again
> I find my breast awash with pity, saying:
> "Alas, how came you here? How far she is!"
> But while I can stay fixed,
> my yearning mind on that first thought, and gaze
> at her, and let myself forget myself,
> I feel Love close at hand
> and do not mind the error of my soul;
> she's all around me, she's everything,
> and all I ask is that illusion last.]

In Shakespeare's poem, the poet's eye resides in a mind that severs and isolates him from an alienating world. In Petrarch's sonnet, the poet's longing only intensifies his intimacy with his surroundings. Rather than indiscriminately converting even "deformed'st" and "rud'st" things into images of Laura, Petrarch shows choice and control. Not mastered by his environment, he learns how to embrace illusion and manipulate the natural world.

This freedom to transform one's surroundings, Cassirer suggests, precedes what happens in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in which the "task" involved "making the concept of nature independent and securing for it a strong, strictly 'objective' character"

(145). To illuminate what he means by an "independent" and "objective" nature,

Cassirer observes of Petrarch's poetry:

> The lyrical mood does not see in nature the opposite of psychical reality;
> rather it feels everywhere in nature the traces and the echo of the soul. For
> Petrarch, landscape becomes the living mirror of the Ego. To be sure, we
> have here not only a liberation but, at the same time, a limitation to the
> feeling for nature; for precisely in this function of reflecting the soul,
> nature itself possesses only a mediate and, as it were, reflected reality.
> Nature is not sought and represented for its own sake; rather, its value lies
> in its service to modern man as a new *means of expression* for himself, for
> the liveliness and the infinite polymorphism of his inner life….Petrarch
> feels about nature the same way he feels about worldly life and fame,
> which for him is the essence of all worldly life; although he feels
> passionately and irresistibly drawn to them, he is unable to devote himself
> to them easily and with good conscience. This is not a 'naïve', but a
> completely 'sentimental' relationship to nature. Nature cannot be
> understood, felt, and enjoyed *per se*, but only as a dark or light
> background for the Ego. (143-5)

If, for Petrarch, nature is at once a willed illusion and a "living mirror of the Ego" and the

"soul," then it is also functions as heaven's handmaiden. In sonnet 159 of the

Canzoniere, for example, we find a marked contrast to sonnet 20's jealous, lusty Nature,

which "fell a-doting" and "pricked" the poet's beloved out for female – and thus her own

– "pleasure." Petrarch, on the contrary, asks, "In qual parte del Ciel, in quale Idea / era

l'esempio onde Natura tolse / quell bel viso leggiadro in ch' ella volse / mostrar qua già

quanto lassù potea?" ["What part of Heaven was it, what Idea, / where Nature found the

pattern of that face, / that lovely visage that she brought down here / to show the

capabilities up there?"]. For Petrarch, Nature has a holy, selfless purpose, producing a

pattern (Laura) intended to teach the world about the beauty of heaven.

Despite having such an important function, Nature is sometimes personified

independently of heaven in order to reinforce its psychological connection to Petrarch.

For example, he affirms early in his sequence, "Sì ch' io mi credo omai che monti et

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piagge / et fiumi et selve sappian di che tempre / sia la mia vita, ch' è celata altrui" (35)

["So I believe the mountains and the shores, / rivers and forests too, all know by now /

the sort of life I lead, concealed from people"]. Later in his poems, Petrarch builds more

than merely a sympathetic connection between himself and the outside world; he invests

Nature with the same romantic enthusiasm that he feels for Laura:

> Lieti fiori et felici, et ben nate erbe
> che Madonna pensando premer sòle,
> piaggia ch' ascolti sue dolci parole
> et del bel piede alcun vestigio serbe,
>
> schietti arboscelli et verdi frondi acerbe,
> amorosette et pallide viole,
> ombrose selve ove percote il sole
> che vi fa co' suoi raggi alte et superbe,
>
> o suave contrada, o puro fiume
> che bagni il suo bel viso et gli occhi chiari
> et prendi qualità dal vivo lume:
>
> quanto v'invidio gli atti onesti et cari!
> Non fia in voi scoglio omai che per costume
> d'arder co la mia fiamma non impari. (162)
>
> [Lucky, happy flowers, and well-born grass
> whereon my lady's apt to walk in thought,
> and shore, that listens to her sweet words spoken
> and keeps some imprint of her lovely foot,
>
> and slender trees, green leaves on unripe branches,
> delicate violets, pale in forest light,
> the shady woods where sunlight filters through
> and helps the sapling grow into tall trees,
>
> oh, gentle countryside, and river pure,
> bathing her lovely face and brilliant eyes,
> taking your worth from their illumination;
>
> how much I envy you your dear, chaste contact!
> By now there's probably no stone among you
> that hasn't learned to burn with my same passion.]

Although Petrarch seems to be competing with Nature, in reality he is imagining an external world that reflects his inner turmoil. In another poem, Petrarch even enjoins the sun to provide a longer day so he can continue "mirarla" ["to gaze"] on his Laura (188). As he apostrophizes, "Almo sol, quella fronde ch' io sola amo / tu prima amasti" ["Life-giving sun, you loved that branch [the laurel] at first / which I love now"].

The fact that Laura's name is associated with both praise (*laus*) and nature (*laurel*) creates the sort of organic union among beloved, poem, and poet that is absent in Shakespeare's sequence. Indeed, in the Sonnets, the poet discovers that his beloved reflects darker aspects of *human* nature that elude him, that he cannot control; he discovers flaws and limitations in the practice of praise that threaten to derail his purpose; and he recognizes that the natural world is not a mirror for the Ego but a reminder of all that is alien and unfamiliar to him, all that he cannot possibly understand. In the *Canzoniere*, Petrarch is not consumed by what he cannot understand, nor does he feel driven to ask questions about his beloved. Laura is instead the sorcerer's stone in his poetic alchemy, a beloved who can transform the unfamiliar into the familiar. Though purportedly "past nature," Laura has power to "renew" and naturalize her surroundings:

> Come 'l candido pie' per l'erba fresca
> i dolci passi onestamente move,
> vertù che 'ntorno i fiori apra et rinove
> de le tenere piante sue par ch' esca. (165)

> [As her white foot moves forward through the cool grass,
> her sweet and quiet walking starts to spread
> a power, emanating from her soles,
> that acts to open and renew the flowers.]

> Stiamo, Amor, a veder la gloria nostra,
> cose sopra Natura altere et nove.
> Vedi ben quanta in lei dolcezza piove,
> vedi lume che 'l Cielo in terra mostra;

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vedi quant'arte dora e 'mperla e 'nostra
l'abito eletto et mai non visto altrove,
che dolcemente i piedi et gli occhi move
per questa di bei colli ombrosa chiostra!

L'erbetta verde e i fior di color mille
sparsi sotto quell'elce antiqua et negra
pregan pur che 'l bel pe' li prema o tocchi,

e 'l ciel di vaghe et lucide faville
s'accende intorno e 'n vista si rallegra
d'esser fatto seren da sì belli occhi. (192)

[Love, let us pause to contemplate our glory
and see things high and strange, past Nature.
See sweetness that rains down upon her here,
see light that shows us Heaven come to earth;

see how much skill has gilded and made pearly
and ruddy-hued that body, surely matchless,
which moves sweet feet and lively eyes throughout
the shady cloister of these lovely hills!

Green grass and flowers of a thousand colors
scattered beneath that black and ancient oak
entreat her lovely foot to step on them;

the sky's aswarm with sparks, with shining fire,
and seems to be rejoicing everywhere
at being made so clear by eyes so fair.]

One is reminded of Cassirer's observation that nature in Petrarch "is not sought and represented for its own sake; rather, its value lies in its service to modern man as a new *means of expression* for himself, for the liveliness and the infinite polymorphism of his inner life." In all of these excerpts from the *Canzoniere*, we are privy to a private, subjective view of the natural world – a world that Petrarch himself can creatively *shape*, not a world (as in Shakespeare's sonnet 113) replete with elusive, diaphanous *shapes* ready to destroy the speaker's equanimity.

Despite this power to refashion the environment, Petrarch actually represents a halfway point in the march toward empiricism. As Solomon observes, the emerging appreciation for objectivity partly involves the "Neoplatonic construct of mental making," or the idea that knowledge constitutes the "*product* of mental operations."[71] In a way, Petrarch's subjective perspective on the world comprises a degree of objectivity, inasmuch as the natural world becomes for him an "object" of knowledge that he can manipulate. But Solomon also points out that this epistemological self-fashioning developed alongside the "empirical pursuit" of objects (37). "We attain knowledge," she argues, "when the mind, in various combinations, seeks after" as well as "produces, or disciplines," "material appearances." Like Montaigne, the poet of Shakespeare's Sonnets recognizes that the mind naturally "seeks after" truth, but he is suspicious of intellectual manipulations, wondering whether the mind produces real knowledge or wildly spurious residue. He also doubts the Neoplatonic optimism expressed in Petrarch, which insists on one's ability to apprehend forms and essences, and so he suffers alone for feeling such uncertainty.

And yet, because the speaker insists on writing poetry devoted to the beloved's humanness, he cannot prevent himself from searching for what makes him uncomfortable, from occasionally uncovering imperfections. The poet, in short, cannot help but convert his praise poetics into a poetics of appraisal centered, in part, on the question articulated in sonnet 53: "What is your substance, whereof are you made, / That millions of strange shadows on you tend?" In the next section, I elaborate on the emotional significance of these impulses within the poet and develop Cassirer's insight that in Renaissance lyric poetry, the "empirical is no longer to be resolved in the ideal,

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[71] Julie Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making*, 37.

therewith to be stripped of its specific character. On the contrary, the ideal can only be genuinely fulfilled in the empirical, where it is tested and justified."

The Obligation to Interpret: Wonder and Empirical Inquiry in the Renaissance Sonnet

A third feature of Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism – the obligation to interpret – is intimately tied to the poet's epistemological isolation and leads Shakespeare to transform a poetics of praise and wonder into a poetics of wonder and doubt. In this respect, Petrarch and Shakespeare approach the concept of wonder in two distinct, but interrelated, ways. If Petrarch sees wonder as purely emotional transport, admiration, and awe, Shakespeare exploits the potential for these experiences to give way to skeptical wonderment, thus demonstrating the tendency for praise to become appraisal and – as I will explore in my next chapter – for a rose to contain a canker.

From its very beginning, Petrarchan praise poetry has relied on the multifaceted character of *wonder* to generate its most powerful effects. For Dante, Beatrice is described as a wonder in which the poet himself lies "wrapt."[72] Petrarch, similarly, refers to Laura as a "de le donne altero er raro mostro" ["wonder among ladies, high and rare"] (347), while Henry Constable calls his Diana the "fair wonder of our time's admiring eye."[73] Samuel Daniel's perspective is no different, describing Delia as the "wonder of all eyes that look upon her."[74] Like their Italian predecessors, Renaissance poets recognized the close relationship between the act of *wondering* and the practice of

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[72] Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, in *The Portable Dante*, 44.
[73] Henry Constable, *Diana*, in *Elizabethan Sonnet Cycles*, ed. Martha Foote Crow (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1896), 8:2.
[74] Daniel, *Delia*, in *Sixteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. Gordon Braden (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 6.

lauding; indeed, as a verb form, *wonder* is interchangeable with "admire" and "praise."[75]

Wonder thus sits at the core of epideixis, characterizing not only the quality of the beloved, but also the experience of the praise poet (who is filled with "wonder").

Beyond reflecting admiration or praise, however, *wonder* evokes a spectrum of literary prototypes, from the curious but fearless Odyssean adventurer, uncovering rich and strange lands on his journey homeward, to the quiet scholar feeling wonder during one of his spiritual musings in a shady glen. The setting within which wonder is evoked in the reader or experienced by the protagonist is as varied as literature itself. Thus to talk about wonder is to discuss one's curiosity, surprise, and amazement as well as admiration and praise; wonder describes the visceral reaction to something unique or unknown, or the spiritual elation that attends prayer. Embracing the active and the contemplative, the poetic and the prosaic, the sacred and the secular, wonder could be said to underlie most works of art, for wonder is not only the mechanism that sets a piece of literature moving but it is also its chief goal.

Because wonder represents an emotional experience as well as an intellectual condition, it possesses two, potentially conflicting characteristics: not just an affect, wonder is also an impulse to inquire and often a drive to possess. This means that even the most welcome feelings of wonder shuttle uncomfortably between the desire to feel that wonder and the need to satisfy those feelings with knowledge and reason, thereby dissipating it. Plato and Aristotle regard wonder as a prelude to knowledge. In *Theatetus*, Socrates affirms that "wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy

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[75] "wonder, v." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 29 September 2009 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50286808>.

begins in wonder."[76] The association of *wonder* and philosophy reappears in Aristotle's

Metaphysics: "It is from a feeling of wonder that men start now, and did start in earliest

times, to practice philosophy."[77] In his *Rhetoric*, however, Aristotle addresses wonder's

emotional complexities, dividing it between a yearning for knowledge and a longing for

the object evoking wonder: "wonder implies the desire of learning, so that the object of

wonder is an object of desire."[78] This view anticipates the direction wonder will take in

Petrarchan love poetry, which is driven by the speaker's desire for his praise object.

Aristotle's discussion also gestures toward a valence of wonder and desire

explored in Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions*, so named for its study of

Renaissance colonial practices in the New World. Greenblatt sees "Renaissance wonder

as an agent of appropriation," or feeling of "astonishment" at an object that is eventually

"touched, catalogued, inventoried, possessed."[79] For Greenblatt, Europeans' literary

records of their experiences in America typify (even helped mold) the Renaissance

understanding of the word. A "central figure in the European response to the New

World," *wonder*, he argues, is the "decisive emotional and intellectual experience in the

presence of radical difference" and the "quintessential human response to what Descartes

calls a 'first encounter'" (14-20). Greenblatt claims that this "first encounter" typically

occurs within the observing subject (much as Kant describes the experience of the

sublime), but the experience is hardly private. He suggests how quickly such

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[76] Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Rockville, Maryland: Serenity Publishers, 2009), 104. The Greek word for "wonder" is *thauma*, which suggests magic as well as marvel. See "thaumaturgy, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 24 April 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50250377>.

[77] *The Philosophy of Aristotle*, ed. Renford Bambrough, trans. J.L. Creed and A.E. Wardman (New York: Signet, 2003), 19.

[78] Aristotle, *Rhetoric and Poetics*, I.11.1.

[79] Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 22-24.

wonderment can transform into a violent rapacity in the face of the observed object. Through Greenblatt, we come to appreciate the emotional upheavals induced by wonder.

While Greenblatt largely balances the intellectual and emotional components of wonder, he still emphasizes its emotional force. As Greenblatt explains, the "overriding interest" of the Europeans with regard to the American natives was not "knowledge of the other but practice on the other," and the "principal faculty involved in generating these representations [in writing about the natives] was not reason but imagination" (12-13). For T.G. Bishop and Peter Platt as well, demonstrating how wonder is preserved, even celebrated, in Shakespearean drama also means distinguishing Renaissance wonder from the knowledge-driven wonder in classical philosophy.[80] Bishop, for example, highlights the way that "Shakespeare's dramas of wonder evoke … a therapeutic magic against the freezing of the world" (16) and Platt's anti-Aristotelian exploration begins with the assertion that "wonder can diminish reason" rather than increase it.[81] Ultimately, however, Bishop and Platt, in their effort to reclaim the emotional experience of wonder, move beyond the boundaries established at the beginning of their books to consider

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[80] For an example of an attempt to unify Aristotle with wonder's antirational character, see J.V. Cunningham's *Woe or Wonder* (Denver, Colorado: University of Denver Press, 1951). Cunningham sets wonder alongside the experience of pity and fear, arguing that these emotions must be purged in order to achieve catharsis. Focusing on Renaissance tragedy, Cunningham argues that the "emotional effect of the tragic catastrophe" in *Hamlet* – "fear, sorrow, and wonder" (14) – was introduced by Aristotle himself (61). By marshalling evidence from the rubric set down in the *Poetics*, Cunningham can uphold the less rational aspects of Aristotle's theories. Cunningham finds enough evidence in the *Poetics* to argue that Aristotle sought to identify wonder (or *admiratio*) as an emotional, and not logical or epistemological, end of tragedy. Cunningham implies, then, that Aristotle differentiates the type of wonder produced by poetry from that which induces philosophical inquiry. In poetry, wonder is an end, in philosophy, a beginning. While Cunningham turns to Aristotle's *Poetics* to show how drama preserves the emotional quality of wonder, Bishop argues that wonder even in the *Poetics* is a mere vehicle for knowledge and tries to distance himself further from Aristotle in his book, *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). As Bishop observes, for all his mention of wonder as a tragic effect, Aristotle still makes theater a "species of knowledge" or "branch of logic" (40). Unlike Cunningham, Bishop sees in Aristotle's *Poetics* a conflict between "wonder as a force and wonder as thought" and argues that Aristotle ultimately (and even in his discussion of tragedy) expects his audience to suppress wonder when it achieves "rational" understanding (20).

[81] Peter Platt, *Reason Diminished: Shakespeare and the Marvelous* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 18.

connections between wonder and rational inquiry. They discover that for all its

association with emotion, wonder in Shakespeare (and in the period generally) is not just

about feelings.[82]

Platt, however, comes nearer than Bishop or Greenblatt to forging a link between

wonder (*admiratio*) and skepticism. By arguing that wonder can trump logical thought,

Platt suggests that the failure to achieve adequate knowledge also means that wonder

never disappears. Platt examines the tendency during the Renaissance period for science

and wonder to intermix, arguably because people became increasingly aware of scientific

possibilities before they acquired the means of testing their theories. Exploring Bacon's

works, Platt shows that even though wonder is an indication of doubt, such doubt can be

indispensible to empirical science. In *The Advancement of Learning*, for example, Bacon

famously calls wonder "broken knowledge" to distinguish our limited understanding of

the marvelous divinity from "knowledge" that arises from the "contemplation of God's

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[82] As Bishop admits, it is "hardly true of his [Shakespeare's] work to say that it is uninterested in drama as a species of knowledge, or that it neglects questions of cognition for those of emotion" (41). "On the contrary," he adds, "the complex and manifold interrelations between knowledge and feeling are his chiefest subjects." Such an observation, I think, captures the main point of Bishop's argument, which resides in his definition of wonder's "between-ness": "Wonder peculiarly raises the question of the theatre's interest in the emotions it generates through its characteristic creation of a dynamic space of flux and intermediacy – between stage and audience, between the real and the impossible, between belief and skepticism, between reason and feeling" (3). To this list of wonder's "between" qualities, Bishop later appends the "complex modulation of identification and detachment" (41), an experience that takes into account both the feeling of wonder and the recognition of that feeling. Indeed, Bishop's juxtaposition of the emotional experience (through "identification") with our analysis of emotion as an experience (through "detachment") attests to the exploratory, reflective, and "cognitive" qualities of wonder (19). What Bishop alights on in his study, I feel, is how wonder in Shakespeare modulates into skepticism. Never in Shakespeare's plays, Bishop ultimately affirms, does the emotional experience outstrip the boundless, inquiring intellect (177). According to Bishop, Shakespeare's "aim is not rebuke, instruction, and redress" – the likes of which we see in morality and mystery plays as well as in court masques – but rather "interrogation and, perhaps, recompense" (177). Interrogation and inquiry approach the Aristotelian and Platonic conceptions of wonder, certainly, but include a skeptical, early modern spin. And Greenblatt, too, despite assiduously dividing wonder from skepticism by saying that such feelings of doubt must be "suspended" (21), ends up admitting – when he outlines his plan for the book – that he will "try to show…[how] the experience of wonder continually reminds us that our grasp of the world is incomplete" (24). For both of these scholars, to talk about wonder is to confront, if tangentially, the reality of skepticism.

creatures and works."[83] However, in the *New Organon*, Bacon explores wonder's place

in science: "by rare and extraordinary works of nature the understanding is excited and

raised to investigation and discovery of Forms capable of including them."[84] As Platt

shows, "wonder takes an important central position in the [Bacon's] intellectual attempt

to come to terms with the increasing complexity of the world" and helps to "push back

the boundaries of knowledge."[85]

Platt shows convincingly how Montaigne shares Bacon's view. Drawing on an

argument by Françoise Charpentier, Platt observes that Montaigne "seems to reject the

marvelous tradition in order eventually to perform a revaluation and redefinition of

wonder," replacing the dubious cult of miracles with the pragmatic state of "curiosity"

(36-37).[86] For Platt, Montaigne's "Of Cripples" – centered on the apocryphal story of a

cripple who "by the power of his imagination persuaded his legs and put them to sleep for

a few hours" so he could travel to a priest capable of performing "marvelous operations"

– contains the best expression of this attempt to "rehabilitate curiosity."[87] In this essay,

Montaigne uses the example of this false miracle as a means of exploring credible

wonders, thus identifying a middle ground between those philosophers or miracle-

mongers who "attributed to the human mind a capacity for all things" and those who,

affected by "spite and emulation," formed the "opinion that it [the mind] is capable of

nothing" (964). By calling himself a "sluggish" creature who "tend[s] to the solid and the

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[83] Francis Bacon, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (1996; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 125.

[84] Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings*, ed. Fulton H. Anderson (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1960), 2:1.180. This passage is also quoted in Platt, *Reason Diminished*, 37.

[85] Ibid., 37-9.

[86] Platt cites Charpentier's "Les Essais de Montaigne," 37.

[87] Platt, *Reason Diminished*, 21. (Platt borrows the word *rehabilitate* from Charpentier.) See also Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald M. Frame (1943; rpt. New York: Everyman's Library, 2003), 957.

probable," Montaigne can sustain his sense of wonder without entirely suspending his disbelief (960). He can discredit the miracle of the disabled traveler while advocating a kind of wonder or "marvel" that confesses "ignorance its end" and makes "inquiry its progress" (959).

Most important for Montaigne, however, is how wonder is tied to explorations of (and skepticism about) the self. In "Of Cripples," Montaigne confesses that even though "[we] become more habituated to anything strange by use and time…the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself" (958). For Montaigne, wonder is less about universal attributes than concrete particulars, less about "supercelestial thoughts" than human experiences (1043). Montaigne thus points to an inextricable bond between the questing intellect full of wonder and the needs of the body. Insisting that we can find wonders enough "without miracle and without eccentricity," Montaigne, in "Of Experience," compares real wonder to the "food" which nourishes us on our "hunt for knowledge" (996-1044). For Montaigne, wonder is like *food* because it not only fuels the search but demands that we taste it as well.[88]

Exploring how "wonder and curiosity interlocked" during the Renaissance, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park consider "wonder" a "cognitive passion, as much about knowing as about feeling."[89] However, they also stress that wonder incited curiosity about unique "particulars" more than universal ideas – not just in natural philosophy, but also in "Renaissance poetry," which "aimed to evoke the same gasp of

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[88] For more on Montaigne, see Platt, who looks at these particular essays (especially pp. 36-39) Although Platt considers Montaigne a forerunner of the shift away from the marvelous toward the scientific (see also p. 49), he does not spend as much time considering explicitly how Montaigne indeed addresses the mechanics of "wonder."

[89] Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 14, 303.

admiration and surprise by enlisting the rare, the singular, and the richly various" (311-314). Indirectly, Daston and Park are also talking about the sonnet tradition, which favored a "rare" and "singular" love object and whose writers by the time of Shakespeare began blending claims of universality with concrete, historically-grounded particulars. By arguing that wonder unites a love of the "rare" with empirical science, moreover, Daston and Park help us appreciate how the skeptical dimension in Petrarchan praise is wedded to strong emotion. As they argue, the sixteenth century "privileged certain things above others as objects of scientific investigation" not simply because those things were "new, rare, unusual, or secret," but also because they ignited the "passions of wonder" (315). We have already begun to see that in Shakespeare's Sonnets, to wonder at his beloved is to feel obligated to interpret him. In other words, *because* the poet feels such passion for his beloved and his art, he is moved to inquire, to fret that he has inquired, and then to inquire again. As long as the poet loves an object that he insists is "unusual" and "rare," he cannot help himself. Thus, Shakespeare's poems do not let us distinguish between emotion and cognition just as they do not always allow us to separate the wonder of praise from the wonder of appraisal.

Shakespeare's first reference to *wonder* appears in sonnet 59, which I have already mentioned marks a turning point in the poet's exploration of praise. Lamenting in this poem that "nothing" is "new," the poet also refers to the beloved's "frame" as a "composed wonder." Although this sonnet defines *wonder* in terms of admiration, the sequence as a whole shows this beloved "wonder" prompting skepticism as well. As we have seen, the practice of praise naturally induces questions about the beloved's interiority and substance (sonnet 53), evaluations of his own procedures in ascertaining

that "truth" (sonnets 69 and 70), and complicated assessments on the nature of perspective (sonnets 24 and 113). These and many other sonnets in Shakespeare's sequence show the poet wondering about his beloved – negotiating, that is, the impulses to admire and the impulses to appraise.

Set in context, then, 59 is a fine prelude to what happens next in the sequence, when the bleakness and skepticism of sonnets such as 69, 70, and 95 initiate not only a flurry of conventional (and therefore self-protective) praise poems, but also poems evaluating the relationship between wonder and praise. In sonnet 106, for example, which contains the penultimate references to both of these terms, the poet suggests that if wonder and praise complemented one another in the old days, it is no longer the case in his own time: "For we which now behold these present days / Have eyes to wonder [at the young man] but lack tongues to praise." Elsewhere in the poem, the poet says that his literary coevals do not have the skill to praise, only to admire and wonder. On another level, however – and as several of the previous sonnets reveal – the poet intimates that skeptical wondering can frequently obviate or demolish the will to admire. Does the poet himself also lack a tongue to praise because he has wondered? Is the beloved, too, merely a product of "these present days?"

We can read the poet's final reference to *wonder* in terms of sonnets 59 and 106:

> No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change;
> Thy pyramids, built up with newer might,
> To me are nothing novel, nothing strange;
> They are but dressings of a former sight:
> Our dates are brief, and therefore we admire
> What thou dost foist upon us that is old,
> And rather make them born to our desire
> Than think that we before have heard them told:
> Thy registers and thee I both defy,
> Not wond'ring at the present, nor the past,

89

> For thy records, and what we see doth lie,
> Made more or less by thy continual haste:
>> This I do vow, and this shall ever be,
>> I will be true despite thy scythe and thee. (123)

Deceptively straightforward, the sonnet opposes the mutability of the physical world to the permanence of the poet's love and commitment. Vendler observes that the "poem is a contest to decide which speech-act will win – Time's *boast* that the speaker, like everything else in Time's registers, undergoes change" or the poet's "performative *vow*, which as a speech-act and promise, inhabits that virtual realm where the scythe of material ruin has no power."[90] The poet avers that he will remain "true" despite Time's scythe – but true to whom? To the beloved? To his poetic project? To himself? The beloved's conspicuous absence is joined by other nagging ambiguities and unsettling features, including the poet's arch dismissal of a past that previously enthralled him (in sonnets 59 and 106), his insistence that innovation is merely illusion, his skepticism about the visible world, and his assessment of perspectivism. By emphasizing the poem's ethical "claim that time distorts relative value," Colin Burrow also calls our attention to the way the poet seems to be scrutinizing his own evaluative procedures as much as criticizing the material world.[91] The poet accordingly dismisses (only three poems before the end of the young-man sequence) his own epideictic project. For even though the poet vows to be true, he also refuses to wonder at the "present, nor the past" and scoffs at those who admire what Time "foist[s] upon us" and what is "born to our desire." A profound revelation of his epideictic skepticism, this poem shows how praise and wonder are bound up with doubt and inquiry, time and decay.

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[90] Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 524.
[91] Colin Burrow, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 626.

If, for Shakespeare, wonder and praise give rise to wonder and doubt, then his sequence distinctly contrasts Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, in which poet's admiration does not fall prey to curiosity and skepticism. Indeed, Daston and Park's description of wonder prior and subsequent to the Renaissance period explains Petrarch's reluctance to explore Laura's character. "Wonder," they affirm, was not a "goad to curiosity, but to praise, for its ultimate object was in principle not a concrete individual in all its particularity but mind-numbing God in all his perfections" (322-2). Considered a "de le donne altero et raro mostro" ["wonder among ladies, high and rare"] (347), Laura is Petrarch's passage to Heaven (72) and his inspiration to climb "al sommo ben" ["toward the highest good"] (13). Early in his sequence, he compares God's gift of Christ to Nature's bequest to "al mondo" ["the world"] of his "bella donna" (4). Exploring this analogy again later in his poems, Petrarch affirms that "Sì come eterna vita è veder Dio / né più si brama né brama più lice, / così me, Donna, il voi veder felice / fa in questo breve et fraile viver mio" ["Just as eternal life means seeing God / and wanting nothing else (nor could one want to), / so, Lady, seeing you can make me happy / in this my very brief and happy life"] (191). Petrarch's praise is not simply idolatrous love; his poetry reaffirms his religion, simulating praise so as to enhance his relationship with God. Why, then, would he tamper with his experience by investigating his mistress' character? In Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, too, the poet does not question his choice for a praise object; he seeks solace in the language of praise: "'Since there is so much bliss in words that praise my lady, why have I written in any other way?'"[92]

Dante's and Petrarch's poems about goodness and virtue are rooted in *The Song of Solomon* and especially the Psalms. For David, the Psalms' legendary author, praising

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[92] Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, in *The Portable Dante*, 610.

God meant emotional celebration and guileless, unquestioning wonder – clapping hands, shouting with a loud voice, making a joyful noise – which the poet commingles with numerous poems of supplication and penitence. Like Petrarch, David seems more interested in declaring how and where he would praise than what precisely he would say; indeed, the content of his praise is simple and tautological: God receives praise for being wholly good, just as Petrarch's Laura inspires praise partly because she embodies the word.

In addition to writing praise poems to Laura, Petrarch (not surprisingly) composed Latin versions of psalms that were later translated into English. And Petrarch was not alone. Hannibal Hamlin argues that Petrarch is one among a host of Renaissance writers (including the Elizabethan sonneteers) steeped in "psalm culture" – whether it was singing, memorizing, translating, paraphrasing, reciting, or imitating the sacred songs.[93] As Hamlin contends, authors especially revered the Psalms because "they were the oldest poetry known at the time," "were written under direct inspiration from God," and "included poems in an almost exhaustive variety of lyric modes and – so it was supposed – meters" (85). Accordingly, Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* contains echoes of psalm 104 (257), and even Shakespeare's works occasionally allude to some of the holy songs as well. Sidney, however, was probably the most committed of all the sonneteers, translating some 43 psalms in the 1580s (119). Even though Sidney's sequence does not possess the psalm-like quality of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, at least one of his poems inspired his sister Mary (Sidney) Herbert's paraphrase of Psalm 73 (126).

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[93] Hannibal Hamlin, *Psalm Culture and Early Modern English Literature* (2004; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Despite this enthusiasm for the Psalms, the Protestant Reformation divides

Petrarch from the English sonneteers, helping to pave the way for Shakespeare's

development of a language of wonder and doubt. Emphasizing this disjuncture between

Petrarch and his successors is the fact that the first sonnet sequence in English was not

Sidney's Petrarchan poems to Stella but Anne Locke's Calvinist paraphrase of Psalm 51,

which she gathered into a collection of poems entitled, *A Meditation of a Penitent

Sinner*.[94] Published in 1560, Locke's sequence is composed of 26 "Shakespearean"

sonnets.[95] The first five are prefatory meditations, where Locke records her personal

experiences; the remaining 21 poems are an expanded paraphrase of Psalm 51. Although

Locke's sonnets lift several lines almost verbatim from the psalm, her embellishments

reinforce the non-skeptical quality of conventional praise. Sonnet 16 in her sequence, for

example, stresses that praise arises from God's willingness to forgive and forget the

speaker's sins: "Upon my bloud and soule extende not, Lorde, / Vengeance for bloud, but

mercy let me finde, / And strike me not with thy revengyng sworde. / So, Lord, my

joying tong shall talke thy praise, / Thy name my mouth shall utter in delight…."[96] As

Locke emphasizes, praising God is not appraising God; moreover, holy praise depends on

God's willingness to disown knowledge (to borrow Cavell's phrase) of her sins. While

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[94] For an extended discussion of the popularity of Psalm 51, see Hamlin, 173-217. Hamlin reminds us that Petrarch includes this poem in his collection as well.

[95] For the complete version of Locke's *Meditation of a Penitent Sinner* and a discussion of her relationship with John Calvin and his theology, see ed. Kel Morin-Parsons (Waterloo, Ontario: North Waterloo Academic Press, 1997).

[96] For a discussion of Locke's probable translation of the verses appearing above each each sonnet, see Kel Morin-Parsons, 37.

Petrarch's *Il Canzoniere* does not correspond precisely to this logic, a love based on repudiated or unobserved knowledge of the other characterizes both types of works.[97]

Hence, while Petrarch – like David and any poet working within the psalm tradition – wonders *at* his praise object's goodness and beauty, Shakespeare's poet spends as much time wondering *about* his beloved. This is in part owing to that fact that, in Shakespeare's Protestant world, Petrarchan poets became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea that secular love could migrate up the Platonic ladder to holy adoration. As we will see, Spenser, Sidney, and Greville all register skepticism about this potentially unholy alliance between the sacred and the secular by directly or indirectly attacking one of the central symbols of Petrarchan praise: the rose. For Shakespeare especially, however, skepticism about praise leads to the exposure of a canker in that rose.

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[97] For a discussion of how Locke's meditation is unconventional and subversive in other ways, see Kimberly Anne Coles, *Religion, Reform, and Women's Writing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Chapter 2

"A Canker in the Fragrant Rose": Satirical Inquiry and Tragic Form in Shakespeare's Poems to the Young Man

> *O Rose, thou art sick!*
> *The invisible worm*
> *That flies in the night,*
> *In the howling storm,*
> *Has found out thy bed*
> *Of crimson joy:*
> *And his dark secret love*
> *Does thy life destroy.*
>
> *William Blake*

All of the features of Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism – his struggles with innovation, his isolating doubt, and his impulse to inquire – meet in the dual figures of the rose and the canker. The rose has long been a symbol of eternal beauty, love, praise, and divine perfection. Despite its prominence in western literature, however, the rose appears only twice in the Bible. In *The Song of Solomon*, when the beloved compares herself to a mere "rose of the field" and "lily of the valley," the speaker assures her, saying, "Like a lily among the thorns, so is my love among the daughters" (2:1-2).[1] The second reference is found in *Isaiah*, where the personified landscape praises the return of the Lord: "The desert and the wilderness shall rejoice: and the waste ground shall be glad and flourish as the rose" (35:1).[2] Although these passages are consistent with how the rose's symbolism developed in the medieval and Renaissance periods, they do not fully account for the flower's popularity among everyone from sonneteers to Christian mystics, nor for its subsequent decline into cliché. The rose surely had something to do with its

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[1] *The Geneva Bible*, 1599.
[2] Ibid.

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own fame and, as it were, deterioration. Beautiful, aromatic, hardy, and astonishing in its

symmetry, the rose was Dante's choice for representing his Empyrean, the final vision on

his ascent from hell to heaven. In the concluding cantos of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice leads

the pilgrim "[i]nto the gold" of that "Eternal Rose, / whose ranks of petals fragrantly

unfold / praise to the Sun of everlasting spring."[3] Transfixed by this enormous flower,

the pilgrim does not even notice that his beloved Beatrice has taken her seat amid the

petals and been replaced by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who begins the final canto singing

praise to the Virgin Mary, his "passion's passion" (XXXI.140). Bernard, along with

other Catholic saints, compared Mary to a white rose; and, of course, the string of prayer

beads known as the *rosary* means "coronet," or crown of roses, as well as "rose-bush" or

"rose-tree."[4] Interestingly, however, because the rosary was originally associated not

with Mary but with the recitation of the Psalms, it characterizes both the Petrarchan

adoration of the virginal beloved and the psalm-like devotionals written in her honor.[5]

An important figure in Petrarch's *Il Canzoniere*, the rose emerges in intimate

blazons, in the poet's introspective meditations about himself, and in metaphors elevating

Laura as a rose. In sonnet 146, for example, Petrarch compares his beloved to "rose

sparse in dolce falda / di viva neve in ch' io mi specchio et tergo, / o piacer onde l'ali bel

viso ergo / che luce sovra quanti il sol ne scalda" ["roses spread on a sweet drift / of

living snow, whose mirror makes me better, / whose pleasure makes me raise my wings

to fly / up to that lovely face, brighter than sunlight"]. The rose also assists Petrarch in

painting elaborate descriptions of Laura's appearance: "Purpurea vesta d'un ceruleo

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[3] Dante, *Paradiso*, in *The Portable Dante*, XXX.124-6.
[4] "rosary, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 30 October 2009 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50208854 >.
[5] For one discussion on the history of this connection, see Gary Wills, *The Rosary* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

lembo / sparso di rose i belli omeri vela, / novo abito et bellezza unica et sola!" ["A scarlet dress, hemmed with cerulean / and scattered roses, veils her lovely shoulders: / new garment for a beauty without equal!"] (185). One is reminded in this poem of the innocent Perdita, covered in flowers like "Flora / Peering in April's front."[6]

Laura, however, is not always disembodied or, like Perdita, obscured. Sonnet 199 is remarkably intimate and sensual, with Petrarch attempting to remove Laura's "[c]andido leggiadretto et caro guanto" ["[w]hite, delicate, and precious little glove"] in order to expose to the world her "spoglie" ["spoils"]: "che copria netto avorio et fresche rose" [the "flawless ivory and fresh roses"]. Although Laura's subsequent embarrassment compels Petrarch to shift his gaze, he maintains the same level of intimacy when he focuses his attention on a "bocca…di perle / piena et di rose, et di dolci parole / che fanno altrui tremar di meraviglia" ["mouth that's full of pearls / as well as blooming roses and sweet words / that make one shake with wonder, marveling"] (200). Emphasizing the connection between roses and divine wonder, Petrarch also (here and in sonnet 157) finds a way to tie the rose's aesthetic beauty to Laura's virtue:

> La testa or fino, et calda neve il volto,
> ebeno i cigli, et gli occhi eran due stelle
> onde Amor l'arco non tendeva in fallo;
>
> perle et rose vermiglie ove l'accolto
> dolor formava ardenti voci et belle,
> fiamma i sospir, le lagrime cristallo. (157)
>
> [Her head was finest gold, her face warm snow,
> her eyebrows ebony, her eyes two stars
> where Love has never bent his bow in vain;
>
> pearls and crimson roses formed the words
> that gathered her exquisite sorrow up,

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[6] Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Frances E. Dolan (1956; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 4.4.2-3.

her sighs were flames, her tears were precious crystal.]

Not merely some decorative feature, Laura's rosy mouth releases the sorrowful words "gathered" up from her inner self. Here we see Petrarch giving shape, texture, and depth to a rose that begins to mirror Dante's Rose at the end of the *Paradiso*. The development is complete in the last third of the *Canzoniere* when the rose no longer symbolizes Laura's mouth or clothing, but her entire being: "Candida rosa nata in dure spine, / quando fia chi sua pari al mondo trove? / Gloria di nostrea etate!" ["A white rose among cruel thorns; / who could discover here on earth her equal? / The glory of our time!"] (246). And, only a few sonnets later, Petrarch declares, "I' la riveggio starsi umilemente / tra belle donne, a guisa d'una rosa / tra minor fior" ["Again, I see her, standing humbly there / among the lovely ladies, like a rose / among some lesser blooms"] (249). A woman of unparalleled beauty, Laura's identity as a white rose starts to blend with the Virgin Mary's until Petrarch, at the very end of the *Canzoniere*, composes a sonnet to his "Ciel regina" ["queen of Heaven"] (366), a farewell praise poem reminiscent of St. Bernard's hymn to the "Virgin Mother" at the end of the *Paradiso* (XXXIII.1). Despite the fact that Dante's and Petrarch's beloveds find themselves eclipsed by the Virgin Mary, one wonders if there was really much of a difference among these women – these three blooming roses – after all. For the poets seem at times to suggest that their beloveds, like Mary, were immaculately conceived and so born without the stain of original sin.

This confusion posed a problem to post-Reformation poets, who responded with some hesitation and circumspection to Petrarch's Catholic rose and his adoration of another Mary. Samuel Daniel, less creative in some respects than the other Elizabethan

sonneteers, warns his beloved Delia how roses "decline" and "fade" almost the moment

they bloom (36), remarking later that "[s]hort is the glory of the blushing rose" (47).[7] In

Idea, Michael Drayton expands on this notion of the fading rose – with laughable results:

> There's nothing grieves me, but that Age should haste,
> That in my dayes I may not see thee old,
> That where those two cleare sparkling Eyes are plac'd,
> Onely two Loope-holes, then I might behold.
> That lovely, arched, yvorie, pollish'd Brow,
> Defac'd with Wrinkles, that I might but see;
> Thy daintie Hayre, so curl'd, and crisped now,
> Like grizzled Mosse upon some aged Tree;
> Thy Cheeke, now flush with Roses, sunke, and leane,
> Thy Lips, with age, as any Wafer thinne,
> Thy Pearly Teeth out of thy Head so cleane,
> That when thou feed'st, thy Nose shall touch thy Chinne:
> These Lines that now thou scorn'st, which should delight thee,
> Then would I make thee read, but to despight thee. (8)[8]

The sonnet's mock blazon promotes its central message of carpe diem, but the poet also

contemplates using this poem later in life to punish his mistress for refusing (among other

things) a "Cheeke" that was once "flush with Roses" but is now "sunke" and "leane."

Callous, unforgiving, and admittedly spiteful, the poet turns his beloved into a veritable

Duessa, the Catholic femme fatale exposed in all her ugliness at the end of Book 1 of

Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.

    The sequences of Sidney and Spenser show a more thoughtful and complex

response to the rose than *Delia* and *Idea*. Early in *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney imagines

Stella blazed on Cupid's shield, her rosy cheeks set against a "silver field" (13). By the

end of the sequence and in his last reference to the rose, however, Sidney's perspective

has darkened:

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[7] Samuel Daniel, *Delia*, in *Sixteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. Gordon Braden (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

[8] Michael Drayton, *Complete Works*, 5 vols., ed. William Hebel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 3:8.

> Where be those roses gone, which sweetened so our eyes?
>   Where those red cheeks, which oft with fair increase did frame
>   The height of honour in the kindly badge of shame?
> Who hath the crimson weeds stolen from my morning skies?
> How doth the colour vade of those vermilion dyes,
>   Which nature's self did make, and self engrained the same?
>   I would know by what right this paleness overcame
> That hue, whose force my heart still unto thraldom ties?
>   Galen's adoptive sons, who by a beaten way
>   Their judgments hackney on, the fault on sickness lay;
> But feeling proof makes me say they mistake it far:
>   It is but love, which makes his paper perfect white
>   To write therein more fresh the story of delight,
> While beauty's reddest ink Venus for him doth stir. (102)

The roses evoked at the beginning of the poem constitute a ghost image, a vivid picture recalled only to highlight what is really present: a beloved, pale and febrile, and the blazoned shield, empty of all its honors. But the poem is equally macabre in the way it shifts from red roses in the octave to red ink in the sestet, thus giving the impression of color bleeding or draining from the poem's core and pooling at its base. Even though the poet tries to imagine in this moment of sickly whiteness a "fresh" start – arguing that "love…makes his paper perfect white" in order to coax superior poetry out of "beauty's reddest ink" – the remaining six poems are remarkably claustrophobic and dark. Hardly refreshed at all, the rest of the sequence reenacts sonnet 102's withering energy and imminent collapse. Rather than rejuvenate his poetry – or reinvent his project as Petrarch does – Sidney's poet retreats further into himself until the blood-red ink of sonnet 102 becomes in his final poem liquefied "sorrow" coursing through the "dark furnace" of his "boiling breast" (108).

Commenting on the pervasive darkness in these final poems, Klein compares them to the penitential psalms of David, whose "alienation," "imprisonment," and

"captivity" characterizes Astrophil's plight as well.[9] Klein, however, also stipulates that

David is only *like* Astrophil, who also "remains in the prisonhouse of Petrarchan

language," writing an "amorous sonnet sequence, not divine poetry" (101). Even in his

final poems, Astrophil continues to meditate on his self-absorption and pain, to declare

his undying devotion to the beloved, and to rely on paradox ("That in my woes for thee

thou art my joy, / And in my joys for thee my only annoy" (108)). At the same time,

however, *Astrophil and Stella* is strikingly different from the *Canzoniere*. Petrarch finds

solace in the Virgin Mary, his beloved rose having helped him finally to celebrate the

Rose of all roses. Sidney, in contrast, loses his roses in sonnet 102 and never recovers

them. Deeply conflicted and incapable of achieving closure, Astrophil is at a crossroads

but refuses to take the next step – neither repudiating his "idol," merging her with the

mother of God, nor finding a new object of devotion.

Spenser, Greville, and, of course, Shakespeare do take the next step. While

Sidney transforms the rose into a figure of confusion and pain, Spenser condescends to

include the rose in his sequence in order to highlight its deficiencies and then subtly leave

it behind. In his *Amoretti*, Spenser begins rather tamely, using the rose in a blazon

praising his beloved Elizabeth, whose "lips…smell lyke Gillyflowers" and whose "ruddy

cheekes [are] lyke unto Roses red" (LXIIII).[10] While in his last reference to the rose,

Spenser still acknowledges the rose's beauty, he also emphasizes its insufficiency in

representing inner virtue:

> Fayre is my love, when her fayre golden heares,
>   with the loose wynd ye waving chance to marke:
>   fayre when the rose in her red cheekes appeares,

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[9] Lisa Klein, *The Exemplary Sidney and the Elizabethan Sonneteer*, 98-102.

[10] Edmund Spenser, *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems*, eds. William A. Oram et al (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

> or in her eyes the fyre of love does sparke.
> Fayre when her brest lyke a rich laden barke,
>   with pretious merchandize she forth doth lay:
>   fayre when that cloud of pryde, which oft doth dark
>   her goodly light with smiles she drives away.
> But fayrest she, when so she doth display
>   the gate with pearles and rubyes richly dight:
>   throgh which her words so wise do make their way
>   to beare the message of her gentle spright.
> The rest be works of natures wonderment,
>   but this the worke of harts astonishment. (LXXXI)

Reading this ingeniously understated poem, one is reminded of Petrarch's sonnet 157, which describes how Laura's "perle et rose vermiglie ove l'accolto / dolor formava ardent voci et belle" ["pearls and crimson roses formed the words / that gathered her exquisite sorrow up"]. Here Spenser's poet conveys virtually the same idea but replaces "crimson roses" with "rubyes richly dight," relegating the rose to an earlier part of the poem where he focuses merely on his beloved's *physical* "wonderment." Distinguishing his poem from Petrarch's, Spenser refuses to let his rose grow, or allow it eventually to transcend the blazon as it does in the *Canzoniere*. Spenser could hardly elevate a rhetorical symbol whose connection to Petrarch, the Virgin Mary, and Catholicism undermines his own poetic project, which looks forward to requited – and consummated – married love.

If Spenser plants the rose of virginal perfection in the back corner of a sequence that anticipates Protestant marital bliss, Greville's rose is eventually buried beneath his misogyny, cynicism, and dissatisfaction with the world. Called *Caelica*, Greville's highly unorthodox sonnet cycle contains only one reference to the rose – in a poem about youth and love:

> The nurse-life wheat within his green husk growing,
> Flatters our hope and tickles our desire,
> Nature's true riches in sweet beauties showing,
> Which set all hearts, with labour's love, on fire.

No less fair is the wheat when golden ear
Shows unto hope the joys of near enjoying:
Fair and sweet is the bud, more sweet and fair
The rose, which proves that time is not destroying.

Caelica, your youth, the morning of delight,
Enamel'd o'er with beauties white and red,
All sense and thoughts did to belief invite,
That love and glory there are brought to bed;
    And your ripe year's love-noon (he goes no higher)
    Turns all the spirits of man into desire. (XL)[11]

The speaker seems to celebrate beauty and a perpetual harvest, but the final lines suggest

sexual fulfillment and subsequent decline, beauty's wax and beauty's wane. And indeed

in the sequence, the celebration does not last. Greville's dogmatic, Calvinistic emphasis

in the second half of his sequence eclipses all beauty. Caelica, and women in general, are

eventually demoted to whores of Babylon when the poet meditates on "man's

degeneration" and his own soul's "dark desolation" (XCVIII). Greville presents "female

power as a sexual threat" and Caelica herself as a "false heaven."[12] Transforming

Petrarchan desire and "exile" into the "torment of a sinner separated from God," Greville

makes his sequence utterly inhospitable to the rose.[13]

Shakespeare, too, casts doubt on the immaculate rose of praise, but his skepticism

is nuanced and exploratory. Appearing in the very first sonnet of his sequence, the rose is

also the first metaphor mentioned:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the riper should by time decease
His tender heir might bear his memory:
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,

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[11] Quotations are taken from Fulke Greville, *Selected Poems*, ed. Thom Gunn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

[12] Klein, *The Exemplary Sidney and the Elizabethan Sonneteer*, 129.

[13] Ibid., 132.

> Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
> Making a famine where abundance lies,
> Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.
> Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament,
> And only herald to the gaudy spring,
> Within thine own bud buriest thy content,
> And, tender churl, mak'st waste in niggarding.
>> Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
>> To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee. (1)

The poet starts by comparing the young man to a rose, but we soon learn that the beloved

is dangerously close to destroying that connection because he wants to keep his "content"

buried within his own bud, a bud that left to its own devices will inevitably decay. As if

assenting to this possibility, the poem shows beauty's rose beginning to die, along with

its unqualified praise, after the second quatrain's "but" – "But thou, contracted to thine

own bright eyes" – since the poet orients us away from the beloved's present beauty

toward a future unable to sustain it. The poet presents a very clear picture of this future:

wasteful niggarding and gluttony will lead to famine, and self-substantiality will produce

only self-consumption. Implicitly, the poet suggests that the rose of praise and beauty

will fall prey to the cankerworm.[14]

   For Shakespeare to discover even one canker in the rose of Petrarch and Dante is

enough to distinguish him from the other major sonneteers of the period.[15] Shakespeare's

poems contain five, each of which reflects a moment of significant ethical and artistic

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[14] To my knowledge, the only other full-length discussion of the rose and the canker in Shakespeare is Lisa Freinkel's important book, *Reading Shakespeare's Will* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). In her analysis of sonnet 1, Freinkel argues that "this *Rose* of beauty had for all intents and purposes already died….No vivifying content can bring this dead letter back to life. And so, paradoxically, the *Rose* awakens our desire: the *Rose* is dead, long live the rose" (196).

[15] The canker is not mentioned at all in Spenser's *Amoretti*, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, Daniel's *Delia*, or Greville's *Caelica* – though they all refer to the rose. The canker does emerge at least once in Drayton's *Idea*; Gascoigne's *A Hundred Sundry Flowers*; Henry Constable's *Diana*; Barnaby Googe's *Eclogue, Epitaphs, and Sonnets*; Henry Lok's collections of sonnets inspired by *Ecclesiastes*; John Davies' (of Hereford) *Wit's Pilgrimage*; and George Turberville's *Epitaphs, Epigrams, Songs, and Sonnets*. However, none of these authors uses the canker together with the rose. For them, the canker is used as a general figure of decay (canker of envy, canker of woe, etc.) or in reference to the well-known biblical passage from the Geneva version of *Matthew* (6:19).

crisis. In sonnet 35, for example, the poet vents his feelings of betrayal by contemplating

the "loathsome canker" in the beloved's "sweetest bud"; sonnet 70 sustains an equivocal

perspective of the youth by asserting that "canker vice the sweetest buds doth love"; and,

in 95, the most caustic of all the young-man sonnets, the poet meditates on the

cankerworm that "doth spot the beauty" of the beloved's "budding name." The canker

first surfaces even before the poet specifically addresses the problem of *praise* (beginning

with sonnet 59) only eventually to merge with that cluster of poems in 70 and 95.

In this chapter, I explore the canker as the controlling metaphor of Shakespeare's

Sonnets and the central symbol of his epideictic skepticism. By *controlling*, I do not

intend to suggest that the canker is the most common trope in the sequence: alchemy,

painting, grafting, writing, and usury also pervade the poems. The canker is, however,

more significant than these other rhetorical figures because it is positioned alongside,

opposite, and within the rose of praise. In the Sonnets, the canker is understood in two

ways. In sonnets 35, 70, 95, and 99, it signifies the "cankerworm," "caterpillar," or

"insect larva" that "attacks" the buds of a hapless plant, making its way into the interior

and eating the buds from the inside out.[16] In sonnets 54 and 99, *canker* is used

synonymously with the wild canker rose, or "dog rose," an inferior type of flower that

was understood by Shakespeare to suggest a counterfeit rose.[17] Regardless of how we

dissect the nuances of this word, however, its longstanding affiliation with satire and

blame remains one of its chief characteristics. Joined with the rose, the canker presents a

complete, yet disturbing, picture of Renaissance epideictic poetry. Their union may seem

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[16] "canker, n." Entry 3. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 February 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50032440>.
[17] Ibid., entry 8b.

entirely natural, but the canker's appearance in Shakespeare's sequence signals a marked

departure from Petrarchan praise.

Calling this departure *satire* establishes in generic terms what I explore in the

previous chapter: how praise is inevitably transformed into a poetics of appraisal. While

labels in general cannot tell us much, *satire* does. A renegade mode that was gaining

popularity in the 1590s, satire reinforces the fact that we are dealing with more than how

the poet reinterprets and performs praise, or how praise is inextricably linked to doubt.

We are also looking at how the very bedrock of the genre begins to change, or erode –

how the sequence as a whole reinvents itself as the poet moves from sonnet to sonnet. In

short, to notice the canker eating through the rose is to see the satiric mode impinging

upon – and so transforming – the poetics of praise.

The Canker, Satire, and Ethical Investigation

If satire is traditionally considered an unsophisticated literary mode, its

association with the canker produces at least one level of complexity. On the one hand,

the canker denotes the inherent infection that satire seeks and destroys with its "invective

against vice and vicious men."[18] On the other hand, the canker reinforces the

"destructive" potential of satire, which often succeeds not only in eradicating evil but also

in annihilating everything else along with it, including itself.[19] This is because most

satirists are complicit in the very sins that they denounce; seeking the canker, they

uncover it within themselves. Alvin Kernan supports this idea in his description of a

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[18] Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 120.
[19] "canker, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 February 2010 < http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50032440>.

"form distinguished for its viciousness of attack and spoken by rough satyrs."[20] A

satirist's cruel language bespeaks his own morally dubious character (58).

Of course, "rough" and "vicious" hardly apply to Shakespeare's Sonnets, with or

without the canker. And if one accepts Kernan's notion that the "viciousness" of "poetic

satire" "was the basis for nearly all Elizabethan theories of satire," then the case seems

rather closed (84). Modern scholars, however, have widened our understanding of satire

by insisting that it does more than moralize and condemn vice. Bryan Herek, for

example, observes that Puttenham's attempt to associate satire with "Christian moral

exempla" largely misses the mark when it comes to 1590s satirical writing.[21] Herek

maintains that because Elizabethan satirists were influenced by secular Roman satire,

their work posed a threat to the "Bishops in their roles as authorized arbiters of moral

behavior" (15). This motivated the church leaders to ban poetic satire in 1599. As Herek

notes, the Bishops were offended not simply by the "matter," but also by the "manner"

and the context (14). Herek relies on the fact that "satire was in its generic infancy in the

late sixteenth-century" to advance his argument that satire "explor[es] morality in a way

that is distinct from and resistant to moral exempla."[22] In rethinking the motives behind

the Bishops' Order of 1599, Herek is also suggesting that we need to rethink *satire* in

terms of a secular ethics.

Hence some scholars have considered John Donne – rather than Ben Jonson, John

Marston, and Thomas Dekker – to be the principle satirist of the 1590s. As Dustin

Griffin suggests, the ideal satire is much more equivocal, even exploratory, than Kernan

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[20] Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse*: *Satire of the English Renaissance* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1962), 55.
[21] Bryan Thomas Herek, "Early Modern Satire and the Bishops' Order of 1599: Manuscript, Print, and Stage" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2005), 30.
[22] Ibid., 22, 54-55.

would have it. Griffin remarks that the "effect of the best satire is likely not to reaffirm conventional moral wisdom but to conduct an open-ended moral inquiry."[23] Similarly, Charles K. Knight argues that satire is "independent of moral purpose," and that its *telos* is "perception rather than changed behavior," but he allows that the former can induce the latter.[24] Although Howard Weinbrot attempts to delimit a sub-genre, *Menippean satire*, he effectively broadens our conception of satire by suggesting that the Menippean variety can operate by "incursion," a "brief guerilla attack that emphasizes the danger to the text and then departs."[25] This notion of violent incursion leads us back to Shakespeare's canker, which surfaces intermittently throughout the sequence and reflects more than the infection within beauty and virtue; it also represents the skeptical, investigatory, even flexible nature of the satiric mode.

In many respects, then, the canker (and by extension satire) incorporates all of the features of Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism: the poet's anxiety about authority and willingness to chart new territory; his inclination to weigh universal truths against historical particulars, to confront the beloved's humanity in addition to his exemplarity; and, most significantly, the poet's ethical examination of the eternal rose of beauty and praise. Two tropes intimately related to the canker – usury and grafting – are introduced in the procreation poems (1-17) and define the nature of this inquiry. The graft is especially significant because it establishes a horticultural framework for understanding the origin of the canker and its relationship to the rose. As we will see, the poet imagines his poetry as the rootstock and the young man as the scion "engraft[ed]" "new" (15) into

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[23] Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 45.

[24] Charles K. Knight, *The Literature of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

[25] Howard D. Weinbrot, *Menippean Satire Reconsidered: From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 7.

the pages of his sequence. This intimacy leads the poet to explore a particular set of questions about inherent and contiguous infection and so come to a tragic recognition about the canker in the practice of praise. Thus, Shakespeare's engagement with the satiric mode (via the canker), I will argue, gives his sequence a tragic tone and structure.

Procreating the Canker of Satirical Inquiry

The so-called "procreation sonnets" are based in good part on Erasmus' *An Epistle to Persuade Young Gentlemen to Marriage*.[26] That said, the poems are unusual for at least two reasons: the beloved is male, and the poet urges him to preserve his ideal essence by literally breeding "another self" (10). Seeming to give his poetry a subsidiary role, the poet argues that begetting children offers a "mightier" and "more blessed" means of achieving immortality than his "barren rhyme" (16) and that poetry merely supports or reflects physical regeneration: "How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use / If thou couldst answer, 'This fair child of mine / Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse'" (2). In some poems, the poet even despairs, averring that "nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defence / Save breed to brave him, when he takes thee hence" (12). Only rarely does the poet confidently assert that his poetry is sufficient in itself: "And all in war with time for love of you / As he takes from you, I engraft you new" (15).

In offering an alternative to poetic immortality, the poet exhibits conventional self-abasement. But he implies (in sonnet 17, the last of the procreation poems) that audiences may no longer be interested in reading about disembodied exemplars in the

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[26] See Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetorique (1560)*, ed. Thomas J. Derrick (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1982), 95-140. Erasmus writes about many of the issues Shakespeare touches on in sonnets 1-17 – from the naturalness of marriage to the way progeny compensates for time and decay.

tradition of Laura and Beatrice; indeed, the sixteenth-century tradition of mocking

Petrarchan conventions suggests that modern readers expect something else:

> Who will believe my verse in time to come,
> If it were filled with your most high deserts?
> Though yet, heaven knows, it is but as a tomb,
> Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts:
> If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
> And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
> The age to come would say, 'This poet lies;
> Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces.'
> So should my papers (yellowed with their age)
> Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,
> And your true rights be termed a poet's rage,
> And stretched metre of an antique song;
> > But were some child of yours alive that time,
> > You should live twice: in it, and in my rhyme.

The poet ostensibly argues that his sonnets are disingenuous only insofar as the beloved's merit exceeds his ability to express it. However, while the beloved seems central to the poem, the poet is overwhelmingly focused on himself and concerned that future readers will doubt effusive praise and distrust his authority, calling him a liar. Although the poet suggests that his work can be ratified only by the beloved's offspring, the anemic way he makes that point evokes other possibilities, other ways of reading the poet's motivations.[27] It is clear by sonnet 17 that the young man will not in fact beget children and that the poet knows it. Keeping the beloved for himself, the poet has instead enclosed him within his poetry not as a disembodied ideal, but as an embodied man who refuses to act on his *potential* to breed.

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[27] Although Joseph Pequigney does not spend much time discussing this poem, and although he is more generous than I am in his assertions about the poet's self-confidence, he did select the opening line of this poem for the epigraph of his book, *Such is My Love*. Thus Pequigney may not have overtly suggested that Shakespeare is, in sonnet 17, anxious about a future readership – an anxiety that goes beyond what biological procreation may or may not help the poet achieve – but Pequigney implies it. Like Shakespeare and his poetic anxieties, Pequigney recognizes the endlessly evolving world of literary criticism. *What critic*, his epigraph suggests, *will believe my interpretation in times to come*? For his discussion of sonnet 17, see pp. 25-26.

In many ways, the beloved's refusal to breed allows the poet to explore a new version of an old story and so, like Petrarch, to put unrequited love to productive use. Just as Laura's aloofness and coy cruelty gave birth to an extraordinary collection of poems, so the young man's repudiation of natural reproduction ends up doing the unthinkable: impregnating the poet himself, inspiring him to write poetry centered on this refusal. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's method diverges from Petrarch not only because his beloved is male, but also because he is committed to writing praise poetry that no longer "hides" the beloved's "life," but "shows" perhaps the other "half" of his "parts."[28] The young man's "parts" may or may not be praiseworthy; indeed, as the first sonnet suggests, one of the hidden qualities that the poet already confronts is the beloved rose's decaying "content," which he will later identify as the canker.

Scholars and critics have noted that sonnet 1 serves as an umbrella for the sequence as a whole and so have used this poem to introduce their arguments about the Sonnets.[29] I will do the same, pointing out that sonnet 1's couplet, "Pity the world, or else this glutton be, / To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee," presages 99's canker, which maliciously eats up the proud rose in the last poem that refers explicitly to the canker. More immediately, though, the canker of sonnet 1 "infects" the next poem:

> When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
> And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,

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[28] Colin Burrow, *The Oxford Shakespeare: Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 414. Burrow is citing other, more varied and ambiguous, definitions of *parts* in the *OED*.

[29] Vendler remarks that the opening poem "brings into play…a plethora of conceptual material" and seems a "self-conscious groundwork laid for the rest of the sequence" (*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 47). Pequigney, too, argues that the first sonnet "does…serve an introductory function after all, at least for Part I [the procreation poems], and, if it does so unconventionally, it might on that very account be seen as a befitting way to begin the least conventional of Renaissance love-sonnet sequences" (*Such is My Love*, 9). See also Lisa Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*. Freinkel's entire argument, which I will explore later in this chapter, begins with the very first sonnet, which "links the collapse of ideals to a world in which flesh is no longer reconciled to spirit and time is no longer full" (165). It is important to Freinkel's argument that Shakespeare, who in the first sonnet introduces the need to reproduce the rose of beauty, is also suggesting that the rose has already passed away.

> Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
> Will be a tattered weed of small worth held:
> Then being asked, where all thy beauty lies,
> Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
> To say, within thine own deep-sunken eyes,
> Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.
> How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use
> If thou couldst answer, 'This fair child of mine
> Shall sum my count, and make my old excuse,'
> Proving his beauty by succession thine:
> > This were to be new make when thou are old,
> > And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.

Taking up the idea of eating and gluttony explored in the first poem, sonnet 2 turns the buried content into an "all-eating shame and thriftless praise." The poet's reference to the "treasure" of the beloved's "lusty days" couples the affirming words of praise and validation (treasure, content as child, repository of beauty) to the pejorative description of consuming humiliation and blame. Here again, the poet calls attention to the beloved's self-consumption, an idea best expressed, in terms of an assault on the poetics of praise, in the image of the canker in the rose.

For the poet to acknowledge the decaying content at all cuts against any promises of renewal. Emphasizing the consequences of time's scythe if the beloved chooses not to breed, the poet unequivocally marks time and inscribes words on a page that can never be wiped away. Thus, the poet willy-nilly prepares a landscape that accommodates the canker, which is then nurtured through the beloved's and young man's mutual dependency. The two reproductive tropes of usury and grafting reflect this dependency. The former was denigrated by religious and secular law even as it was slowly embraced as a necessary economic practice; and writers frequently employed the canker to emphasize usury's ill effects. As Jonathan Gil Harris observes, "the association of usury with 'canker' is so commonplace in early modern English writing that it can be found

even in defenses of usury" and is a "recurrent feature of mercantilist discourse."[30] In the

Sonnets, usury (and so the canker) can be construed in both a positive and negative way.

On the one hand, the beloved is a "[p]rofitless usurer" (4) whose decision to hoard his

treasure will (to follow the Geneva version of Matthew 6:19) leave him vulnerable to the

"moth" and the "canker."[31] On the other hand, this vulnerability is precisely what drives

the poet's satirical inquiry in which he becomes a usurer himself, one committed to

understanding and so writing about the canker.

      Critics have argued that the early sonnets mingle biological and economic

language in disturbing ways, but they do not often consider how such mingling helps the

poet manipulate – or at least interrogate – the praise genre. Peter C. Herman, for

instance, argues that "usury destabilizes the subject of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence

itself by introducing overtones of unauthorized sexualities." [32] Although he contends that

"Shakespeare's sequence include[s] elements defeating the generic expectations of

Petrarchan verse," and that "commodification infects the poetry of praise," Herman

mostly explores consequences, not generic possibilities.[33] For Herman, "the failures of

exchange and problematizations of economy" are thus an analogy for failed procreation

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[30] Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare's England* (Philadelphia: University of Penn Press, 2003), 83. Phillip Stubbes celebrates Aristotle, Plato, and Pythagoras because he claims they have "sharply inveighed against this devouring canker of usury" [*The Anatomy of the Abuses of England in Shakspere's Youth*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall (London: N. Trubner & Co.), 1:128.]. See also Theodore B. Leinwand, *Theatre, Finance, and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Leinward argues that "biting usury was a hot button topic in early modern London," adding that such a practice "victimizes," "suggests predation," and "has an ominous ethical tenor" – descriptions that evoke the canker (5-6).

[31] *The Geneva Bible*, 1562. The fact that the King James edition (1611) replaces *canker* with one of its synonyms, *rust*, emphasizes the canker's association with physical corrosion as well as with moral corruption.

[32] Peter C. Herman, "What's the Use? Or, the Problematic of Economy in Shakespeare's Procreation Sonnets," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland, 2000), 270.

[33] Ibid., 278-79.

and failed relationships in general.[34] Vendler, too, ignores how the Sonnets' economic

language actually serves the poet's purposes and observes of sonnet 4, for instance, that

"the speaker's innocent introduction of legal and banking language … suggests that he

can appeal to the young man only in the contaminated language the young man

understands – the language of social, not natural, exchange."[35]

One could argue, however, that the poet, rather than innocently appealing to the

weaknesses he perceives in the beloved, stakes a claim in this reproductive exercise.

Consider sonnet 6, in which the poet's attempt to distinguish between the "use" of sexual

regeneration and the non-regenerating (and self-abusing) "forbidden usury" leads him to

parody the procreative process:

> That use is not forbidden usury
> Which happies those that pay the willing loan;
> That's for thyself to breed another thee,
> Or ten times happier, be it ten for one:
> Ten times thyself were happier than thou art,
> If ten of thine ten times refigured thee;
> Then what could death do if thou shouldst depart,
> Leaving thee living in posterity?

The poem gains manic energy from its linguistic profusion. Each repetition of *ten* and

happier spurs the poet on to the next line, the sonnet mimicking the reproductive process

that the beloved ideally should have undertaken on his own. Even as the beloved engages

in "forbidden usury" by keeping his content buried within his own bud (1), the poet

involves himself in the same practice, cunningly exploiting the beloved to breed lines of

poetry (16).

Still, artistic usury does have its liabilities. Thomas M. Greene considers this

problem of exploitation and loss in his eloquent discussion of "rhetorical economics" in

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[34] Ibid., 278.
[35] Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 62.

the Sonnets.[36] Focused on the darker implications of the poems' economic tropes, Greene claims that the sequence demonstrates "very little by way of stable exchange systems" (231) between speaker and beloved (and between a poet's efforts and his creative output) until the penultimate poem to the young man; instead, the sonnets exhibit a poet's work at his own "expense" (244). In the process of clawing and plodding and fretting its way toward a final affirmation of "mutual render" in 125, Shakespeare's sequence, Greene argues, betrays a "terrible fear of cosmic destitution" that only intensifies after the procreation sonnets, whose "failed husbandry" simply calls attention to the poems' paucity of riches (231-32). For Greene, the imputed depletion of Petrarchan praise, the poet's own misgivings about his poetry, and the distance between speaker and beloved have transformed the poet's art. Instead of being "allowed to envision unambiguously the poet in the presence of his friend, as we are in love poems by Wyatt, Sidney, Spenser, and Donne," we see in Shakespeare's sequence a lonely poet at war with himself and his work, constantly negotiating the contrary forces of remuneration and reckless spending, restoration and failure, extravagant praise and necessary "deterioration" (235-36). At the "'poet's' expense and Shakespeare's expense," Greene contends, we have poems that keep exhibiting their "verbal enrichment" and artistic superfluity even as they "demonstrate instability" and "vulnerability" (236, 244). The more powerful and numerous the metaphors and the more hyperbolic the comparisons, he suggests, the larger the holes appear beneath them and the more fatigued and haggard the poet seems to us. Greene argues that the poet and his subject, "pitiful thrivers both" in sonnet 125, become mutually "devalued, the one by the vulgarity of his praise and the

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[36] Thomas M. Greene, "Pitiful Thrivers: Failed Husbandry in the Sonnets," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1985), 235.

other by the vulgarity of the pleasure he takes in" (237). In the world of Shakespeare's

Sonnets as Greene sees it, there is small compensation for energy and effort, slim

possibility of paying off one's ever-increasing debt, and only the faintest hope that the

poet will achieve "mutual render" (to quote again sonnet 125) with the young man and

with his art.

Essentially, Greene explores the "economics of copying" (238). He explains that

because "pure representation in language is not of this world" and because "precise

figural adequation is unattainable," a poet must embrace the "real failure" of "accepting

[often hyperbolic] addition" that will always miss the mark – "as all poetry does" (238).

"Poetry as representation," he continues, "will always be vulnerable, because in its

shifting mass of meanings it can never copy with absolute precision and because that

which is copied changes, gains, and loses value" (238).[37] Indeed, if we return to sonnet

6's ironic couplet, we see the poet contemplating not only the consequences of the

beloved's refusal but also the kind of poetry that is intended to compensate for that

refusal: "Be not self-willed, for thou art much too fair, / To be death's conquest and make

worms thine heir." By referring to worms, these lines make explicit what remains

implicit in sonnet 1's couplet. Not just the post-mortem larvae that consume the

deceased body, worms also signal a changing tradition of praise that has now made the

cankerworm – satire – its heir. The compound adjective, "self-willed," almost surely a

pun on Shakespeare's name, intensifies the irony. Even though the poet begs the speaker

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[37] Greene's argument about failed representation crosses paths with Fineman's contention that the dark-lady poems embrace praise paradox; however, Greene is not interested in the poet's subjectivity or even in emphasizing to any great extent what distinguishes Shakespeare's poems from other praise poems. Still, Greene flirts with what I have called *epideictic skepticism* when he suggests that the poems reflect a "pathology of praise" and that the friend and the poetry leave us with "two distinct sources of alleged value," "each the basis for a rudimentary economic system, each vulnerable to skepticism" (238, 234). For Greene, *value*, of course, has a double meaning. In contemplating the questionable value of the young man and the poetry, he avers that "the worth of the friend may reside…in the poet's own fancy" (233).

to "be not self-willed" (or not willed by Will), this is exactly what is happening in the sequence. The poet "wills" the beloved into existence as much as the beloved occasions the writing of the poems.[38] But as the couplet's mournful tone suggests, the poet recognizes that his power to use or manipulate the beloved (and thus the poetics of praise) – along with his satirical examination of the young man's inner, not-yet-released content – has come, or *will* come, at the expense of the young man's beauty and praise poetry's "beauty's rose."[39]

Another trope in the procreation sonnets – grafting – also reinforces this notion of mutual dependency as well as underlies the poet's exploration of the canker and the rose. Grafting, which involves inserting a scion, or stem, of one plant into the rootstock of another, at first glance describes a rather simple conception of artistic immortality: a beloved becomes immortal when a poet grafts him onto the pages of his poetry.[40] In the first seventeen poems, the poet's *first and only* reference to the unequivocal power of verse does not occur until sonnet 15 and is introduced in terms of grafting:

> When I consider everything that grows
> Holds in perfection but a little moment,

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[38] For a discussion of the *Will* poems (sonnets 135 and 136) and the way they embrace this curious power dynamic of surrender and victory, loss and gain, see chapter 4 of this dissertation.

[39] Theodore Leinwand offers an analogous reading of usury's double nature in his interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*. The first of his interpretations argues that Antonio enters into the bond with Shylock because of a "death-wish and a desire to secure after death a reputation (credit) that is commensurate with the resumptive self that has been overtaken" [*Theatre, Finance, and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14]. Leinwand suggests that Antonio's failed sacrifice is a metaphor for his failure to escape the economic exchange system that marks his whole outlook, and that characterizes, in particular, the way he expresses his love for Bassanio (23). On the other side of the interpretive coin, Leinwand shows, is a competing reading of Antonio that sets aside the merchant's "commitment to extricating himself" from his "generalized merchant function" (113) in favor of one whose "sadness may also be productive" (115). Rather than pursue death for the purposes of escaping the commercial world, Antonio uses his sadness, Leinwand argues, to manipulate Bassanio and create a "carefully scripted self-martyrdom" (115). To bring these two interpretations together: if the Antonio of this second reading wants to escape the world of exchange, he operates from a position not of loss and dismay but of power by imposing a debt that cannot be repaid. Again, one notices something of this dynamic within the Sonnets themselves, which the theme of usury helps to articulate.

[40] "grafting, vbl. n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 20 February 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/500975347>.

> That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows
> Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
> When I perceive that men as plants increase,
> Cheered and checked even by the self-same sky,
> Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
> And wear their brave state out of memory:
> Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
> Sets you, most rich in youth, before my sight,
> Where wasteful time debateth with decay
> To change your day of youth to sullied night:
>> And all in war with time for love of you
>> As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

In this poem, the poet does not simply promise to capture the young man in his poetry at the peak of his development, gathering into the work of his artist's quill the "little moment" marking the beloved's "perfection." The poet is actively creating that moment now, the moment he writes, and the moment that will forever repeat itself every time we read the final line: "I engraft you new," he says, and *I engraft you now*, he implies, as *time* and *decay* fight over a now empty coffin. The graft, so the poet expresses here, will destroy the canker of wasteful niggarding, of corrosion, of self-consumption. Sonnet 15's couplet offers one of those rare instances in the sonnets that turns on a strange pause, that isolates the point of conversion from an ebb to a flow. As the canker of *time* and *decay* work to deface the young man's beauty, the poet's utterance, "I engraft you new," supersedes the worm of time. Thus, the poet seems to have written out *Time* and *Decay* only to ensure that the graft destroy them.

But what happens if the root stock itself is rotting, or if the scion seeking life has already begun to decay? The graft implies shared disease as well as shared health. Competing perspectives on the sources of the nutrients and on the relationship between the scion and the rootstock abound in the Renaissance, from horticultural books, sermons, and the Bible to Shakespeare's plays and even within the sonnets themselves. In Romans

11, Paul argues that the Gentiles are like the branches of the wild olive tree who must through faith be grafted on to the natural, Jewish olive tree: "And though some of the branches be broken off, and thou being a wild Olive tree, wast graft in for them, and made partaker of the roote and the fatnesse of the Olive tree."[41] At one point, Paul even suggests that the branches do nothing for the root while the root does everything for the branches: "Boast not thy selfe against the branches," he says, "thou bearest not the roote, but the roote thee."[42]

The idea that the rootstock nourishes a dying or helpless scion is consistent with what Shakespeare writes in sonnet 15, but not with how he and other writers present the relationship elsewhere. Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale* makes a compelling case for another way of perceiving hybridization. Debating with Perdita the perennial question of nature and art, the uncertainties of hybridity, and the ethics of the graft, Polixenes contends, "we marry / A gentler scion to the wildest stock, / And make conceive a bark of baser kind / By bud of nobler race" (4.4.92-95).[43] "This," he continues, "is an art / Which does mend Nature – change it, rather; but / The art itself is Nature" (95-97). The art of grafting is virtuous and natural because "Nature makes that mean," he says tautologically (89). Here the source of sustenance lies in the "gentler scion," which is married to the "wildest stock." Similarly, the archbishop of York, Edwin Sandys, urges in one of his sermons that the word of God "would root out vice and ingraft virtue."[44] Sandys takes the relationship presented by Polixenes to an extreme when he suggests that the scion is "virtue" and the root, "vice."

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[41] *The Geneva Bible*, Romans 11:17, 1562.
[42] Ibid., Romans 11:18.
[43] These references to Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).
[44] Edwin Sandys, *Sermons* (London: Henry Middleton, 1585), sig. G.

Of course, from a horticultural standpoint, the body of the plant rejuvenates the scion and the grafted stem energizes the body of the plant to produce more buds of its own. One of the most popular and detailed treatises on grafting in the sixteenth century is Leonard Mascall's *A Booke of the Arte and maner how to Plant and Graffe*, which went through several editions around the time Shakespeare was writing his poems and plays. In his dedicatory epistle, Mascall praises "graffyng" in the conventionally excessive way, suggesting that such a practice allows us to "feele with our hands in the secrete woorkes of Nature" and even come close to discovering "unto us the greate and incomprehensible woorke of God."[45] Amid the dozens of descriptions of trees, the procedures for planting, the minute details about the placement of the scion and the techniques for digging holes and choosing branches, Mascall emphasizes the mutuality of the scion and the root stock. He warns against choosing small branches, noting that the "the bigge Cions are best to graffe" (16), but he also suggests that careful pruning and preparation will ensure that the weaker scions survive, nourished by a new and healthier root stock (32). Mascall also provides a technique for grafting a rose onto a holly: "For to graffe the Holly, that his leaves shall keepe all the yeare greene: Some doe take and cleave the Holly, and so graffes in a white or red Rose budde..." (70). Here we see an example of a scion, a rose, nourishing its holly stock.

Despite the many examples throughout his treatise of a mutually beneficial relationship between root and scion, Mascall also laces his discussion with references to worms and diseases, reminding us that the canker can emerge through and because of the graft. His treatise includes warnings against choosing weak branches, and against

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[45] Leonard Mascall, *A Booke of the Arte and maner how to Plant and Graffe, etc.* (London: John Wight, 1575), A.ii. Other editions appeared in 1569, 1572, 1582, and 1596.

grafting shoots onto unhealthy "wilde stockes." As Mascall explains, when a wild stock "hath not substaunce in himself," it has "much lesse to give unto the other graffes" (23). He seizes an opportunity at this point to moralize, writing that "when a man thinkes sometimes to forward hym self, he doeth hinder himself " (23). Comparing grafting and poetry, Mascall suggests that the graft does not merely carry metaphoric weight, but that working with shoots and scions provides the same sort of artistic satisfaction as writing poetry.[46] Indeed, one senses that Mascall has taken to heart the metaphorical implications of the graft, the way it can symbolize both a strengthened relationship with nature and God and a failed bond. Mascall recognizes that if either of the grafted parts is diseased – or truly beyond the aid offered by the horticultural process – then the whole plant can die. Paul makes a similar point when he argues, "For if the first fruits be holie, so is the whole lompe: and if the roote be holie, so are the branches."[47] Paul implies that the reverse is also true.

In Shakespeare's Sonnets, we also see that engrafting, like usury, is a process of "mutual render" in which the stem (young man) and the rootstock (the poet/poems) by turns nourish or injure one another. For despite the poet's insistence that his work will "engraft" the beloved "new" (15), his subsequent reference to his "barren rhyme" (16) suggests that the beloved has power to transform the Sonnets for better or for worse. In a broader perspective, the mutually sustaining and mutually undermining relationship between a beloved and his poetry opens up an ethical problem pulling in two directions. The model represented by sonnet 15, in which the poems rejuvenate the young man,

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[46] Responding to the humanist tradition that idealizes manual labor and practical endeavors, Mascall writes, "Wherefore the Poet saieth: Let us praise the true labouryng hower of the true labourer. Thereupon many great Lordes and noble personages, have left their Theaters, pleasant stages, goodly pastimes: forsaking and despising their pleasures, not much regardyng riche Diademes, and costly parfumes, but have given themselves to Plantyng and Graffyng, and suche like" (A.ii).
[47] *The Geneva Bible*, Romans 11:16, 1562.

raises ethical questions about accurate representation. To what extent does "I engraft you new" mean "I transform you utterly?" To what extent does the scion become more like the rootstock to which it binds than the plant from which it derives? The second model, which suggests that the poems are nourished by the young man, frames the problem differently. Does not the poet now have an ethical obligation to focus less on himself and more on the source of his inspiration? Can he help but look carefully at the scion – with all its beauty and all its flaws?

Satirical Inquiry in Shakespeare's Sonnets: Inherency or Contiguity?

The interdependence of the two parts of the graft helps to frame and in the end to resolve the questions that the poet keeps returning to every time he contemplates the canker, which enters beauty's rose in sonnet 1: Where does the infection come from? What is the relationship between the canker and the rose? To what extent is the canker intrinsic to the rose sitting on the stem of the scion, and to what extent is the canker extrinsic, having emerged from within the poems themselves and thus from within the root stock? Restating these questions rhetorically in terms of metonymy and synecdoche, we can reduce the issue down to this point: how we understand the *metaphor* of the canker and the rose, and thus how we interpret the poet's copy (his sonnets) of the young man, depends on whether the poet presents the canker synecdochically (which would make the canker inherent in the scion, the young man) or metonymically (which would make it contiguous, something the scion picks up from the rootstock – the poet's copies).[48]

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[48] I am treating my reading of the sonnets as an exercise in the *essay*, which means that I am using an inductive approach and following the problem as the poet follows it. Intending to investigate a question

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Metonymy, according to Puttenham, is the "misnamer," or the figure that takes the "name of the author for the thing itself, or the thing containing for that which is contained," or a practice that involves "wrong nam[ing] the person or the thing."[49] Metonymy defines relationships between objects that are contiguous, and often only loosely associated, with one another, objects that are sometimes linked merely by chance. Puttenham's use of the word *misnamer* emphasizes the degree to which metonymic connections depend not only on chance meetings between things (between, for example, a canker and a rose) but also on the observer or interpreter to articulate those connections, and to see relationships that may or may not exist. For my purposes, metonymy thus characterizes the ethical problem of poetic representation – of an author's nourishing and transforming the scion through speech and perhaps "misnaming" it. In this respect, the logic of metonymy is a bit like usury; the poet exploits its object of praise for artistic profit. One could therefore assess the extent to which the poet's discovery of the canker is accidental and the extent to which the poet actively seeks it out, even creating it himself. Indeed, the canker is on one level useful to the poet; however, on another level, it is dangerous and destructive, potentially undermining his efforts.

From the Latin word *subintellectio*, meaning "understanding a little," *synecdoche* is, by contrast, the "figure of quick conceit…by which we drive the hearer to conceive more, or less, or beyond, or otherwise than the letter expresseth."[50] Synecdoche thus goes beyond suggesting an observable relationship between part and whole. As

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that is not answered until the end of the sequence, I will avoid disclosing all my conclusions here. I will, though, say that the poet comes to understand that the canker inescapably inheres in the practice of praise. This means that the poet gradually sees a close connection between the logic of inherency and that of contiguity. While the distinctions between metonymy and synecdoche must of necessity break down, I will be focusing on the important distinctions between them for the better part of this chapter.

[49] George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 265.
[50] Puttenham, 270.

Puttenham describes it and as Shakespeare explores it, interpreting inherent value and understanding the essence of things involve taking inductive leaps, making imaginative connections, and testing hypotheses based on small details. In short, Puttenham's definition of the two rhetorical figures suggests a deep-seated connection between them: sometimes the drive to "conceive more" can lead to one's misunderstanding the part and misnaming the whole; sometimes the contained becomes an extricable part of its container. In the sonnets, the ambiguous relationship between the canker and the rose – reflected in the interplay of these rhetorical devices – in turn affects how we understand the *metaphor* of the canker and the *metaphor* of the rose.

At bottom (and as the canker/rose duality suggests), Shakespeare's poems scrutinize the underlying principles of a Petrarchan poetics steeped in the conventions of comparison: *My love is like a rose*; *my beloved's voice is music*; *my object of praise possesses hair like silk and eyes like sapphires. My love is like a canker?* Turning praise into a form of appraisal, Shakespeare's poetics directly or indirectly takes to heart Puttenham's assertion that *metaphor* is the "figure of transport" involving a "kind of wresting of a single word from its own right signification to another not so natural" (262-3). The problem begins, as Puttenham suggests and Shakespeare puts to the test, with the copy in the first place. Immortalizing the likeness of the young man in verse, the poems suggest, is an unnatural wresting, and the canker reflects this truth. Thus, we find that the canker leads to questions about authorization and authorship (35); it arises once the poet begins to wonder about the beloved's "substance" and his origin (53) and when the speaker explores the young man's "truth" (54). The canker also emerges in the poet's exploration of counterfeit copies (54) and in his philosophical musings about the nature

of knowledge and the ethics of character assessment (69-70). The canker also appears in

sonnet 95, soon after the poet renews his anxieties about "infection" (67), "festering

lilies," and "base" contagion (94).

Sonnet 35, the first poem explicitly to explore the "loathsome canker" in the

"sweetest bud," is ambiguous about the nature of that connection:

> No more be grieved at that which thou hast done,
> Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;
> Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
> And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.

While the proverbial quality of the quatrain seems to mitigate Shakespeare's personal

complaint about the beloved, the way he configures these pithy aphorisms makes his

poem altogether unique and the proverbs themselves anything but banal. John Kerrigan,

for example, encourages a nuanced reading of these so-called proverbs and especially of

the phrase, "roses have thorns," which he compares to a line from Lyly's *Euphues*: "The

sweetest rose hath his prickle."[51] This word *prickle* unites the pricked (thorny) satyr and

the canker-ulcer that needs pricking.

But how should we interpret this canker? At first glance, the metaphor-

metonymy dialectic introduced by Roman Jakobson and then elaborated on by Paul

Ricoeur is decisively at work. While Jakobson defines metonymy as a random

concurrence of two things or ideas (a chance meeting), Ricoeur explores the way in

which the interactive components of metonymy transform the way we perceive a

metaphor. [52] Metaphorically, then, the canker in the bud refers to the vice in the beloved;

metonymically, the chance meeting between the canker and rose (or the vice and the

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[51] Kerrigan, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, 218.
[52] See Roman Jakobson, *Fundamentals of Language* (N.P.: Mouton and Co., 1956), 81-82, and Paul Ricoeur, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 141-45.

beloved) leads the rose to appropriate the canker. However, this dialectic does not satisfy

the problem posed by the line, "And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud." For what

happens to the metaphor when the relationship between the canker and the rose is not

metonymic but rather synecdochal – dealing in parts and wholes and not simply container

and contained? Whether the canker is indeed part of the rose's essence (as in emerges

naturally from within it) or merely contiguous with the rose is not answered by the

sonnet. The canker "lives" in the rose, but the poet does not specify how it got there or

even why it appears.

This last point leads the poet to begin questioning his own responsibility for the

canker's appearance:

> All men make faults, and even I, in this,
> Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
> Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,
> Excusing these sins more than these sins are:
> For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense;
> Thy adverse party is thy advocate,
> And 'gainst myself a lawful plea commence:
> Such civil war is in my love and hate
>   That I an accessory needs must be
>   To that sweet thief which sourly robs from me.

The poet has moved from addressing the beloved's faults to considering all men's faults,

which include his own. He realizes that he is not just undertaking an objective

investigation of the beloved's vices; he has complicated the problem considerably by

"authorizing" the beloved's "trespass with compare" – using the canker in his description

of the young man, literally writing *canker* into his poetry. Thus, the poet acknowledges

his complicity in the beloved's faults because he has, in part, *author*ized them through the

rhetorical device of comparison. At the same time, he has potentially trivialized the

beloved's faults by "salving" (or unfairly palliating) the beloved's "amiss." The poet is

therefore doubly guilty, guilty because he mentions the canker in the first place and guilty because he minimizes the presence of that canker. Ultimately, the poet explores whether one can talk about corruption without saying more or less than what is really there. He explores whether a poet can mention a canker without considering the canker's effect on himself and his work.

If, then, the canker reflects the poet's drive to understand the young man's hidden interior – his "content" – its presence also reinforces how little he knows about the beloved and even about himself. This point is picked up again in sonnets 53 (which explores the beloved's substance) and 54 (which uses the canker rose to meditate on the young man's truth and its relation to his poetry). The opening of 53 can be read as an introduction to both of these sonnets: "What is your substance, whereof are you made, / That millions of strange shadows on you tend?" This query should be read in two different ways: What type of substance is yours that would attract so many shadows? How can I possibly know your substance if you are surrounded by shades? As a pair, the questions speak to the poet's desire for knowledge and reflect the fact that the visible world and its literary analogues might very well distract him from the truth. Even though the second half of the opening quatrain declares that the young man uniquely can be seen everywhere and in everything ("Since every one hath every one one shade, / And you, but one, can every shadow lend"), his substance remains obscure. The shadows, which range from figures in Greek mythology to the natural growth cycles, conceal even as they reveal:

> Describe Adonis, and the counterfeit
> Is poorly imitated after you;
> On Helen's cheek all art of beauty set
> And you in Grecian tires are painted new;

> Speak of the spring, and foison of the year:
> The one doth shadow of your beauty show,
> The other as your bounty doth appear,
> And you in every blessed shape we know.

When Vendler argues that the "poem is about the speaker more than about the beloved," perhaps she means to suggest that the speaker, as skeptic and observer, is watching himself watching the beloved in his multiple manifestations.[53] These manifestations crowd the poem and overshadow the beloved's substance; because they are inferior representations of the young man, the shadows do little to help the poet understand him. For every new example that he introduces as touchstone, he moves farther and farther from the beloved himself; indeed, most of the poem shows a poet essaying examples and then rejecting them as insufficient.

While the poet therefore seems intent on assessing the beloved's substance favorably, neither he nor his beloved can escape the shadows. Even in the sestet, the poet observes the beloved "in every blessed shape we know," thus emphasizing the shadows tending on the beloved rather than the beloved himself. In the final couplet, when the poet allows us at last to gaze upon the young man, all we see of him is at best a decoupage, at worst an image in a shattered mirror, each shard a shadow: "In all external grace you have some part, / But you like none, none you, for constant heart." While "every literary representation," according to Vendler, "has [in this poem] ended up, willy-nilly, representing the beloved," we cannot forget that this truth does not at all satisfy the poet's epistemological project and the question that began the sonnet: "What is your substance, whereof are you made…?"[54] The last line of the poem does not assure us, either. The poet tries quite literally to get to the heart of the matter, but the line is

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[53] Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 259.
[54] Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 259.

ambiguous. One interpretation suggests that no one is as constant as the beloved, while

another reading implies that no one esteems the beloved for his constancy.[55] And if we

are, as Stephen Booth suggests, to read "constant heart" as "constant art," then the poet is

saying that none esteems the beloved for (or because of) the poet's constant

representation of him.[56] We know that Shakespeare's poetics is anything but constant

and static.

 Indeed, it is precisely this sense of obliquity, obscurity, and inconstancy which the

poem is criticizing. From a philosophical point of view, the sonnet is condemning the

world of seeming, the shadow-land of Plato's cave that we are urged to escape; at the

same time, the poet cannot offer another way of taking in or conveying knowledge. The

poet's question about the beloved's substance sends him to a place where shadows breed

shadows, and where every attempt to leave the cave fails.[57] For the poet learns that if the

"millions of strange shadows" suggest the many angles from which to observe the

beloved, then the poet is one of those shadows himself – as is his poetry.[58] Thus,

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[55] Colin Burrow, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 486.

[56] Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 226.

[57] As discussed in my previous chapter, this dilemma is consistent with a period that felt that the world of shadows may be all that we can know. These multiple shadows, accordingly, conjure up not only the inferior visible world, but also the newly recognized subjective point of view undermining ontological certainty. For a psychoanalytic exploration of how "the fall from metaphysical ontology into critical epistemology" gave birth to a modern, divided subject, see Marshall Grossman, *The Story of All Things: Writing the Self in English Renaissance Narrative Poetry* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 266. For Grossman, the "shadows," or what he calls the "wan ghosts," refer to a "lost object" underlying the modern self. I have been emphasizing the development not of subjectivity but of skepticism and epideictic skepticism, how people began to reassess the way they comprehend the world, the way they evaluate character, and how they represent that character in literature.

[58] Shakespeare's plays also demonstrate the power of the shadow world in all its insubstantial emphemerality. Hamlet, conversing with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about his "ambition," argues that the "dream itself is but a shadow" and criticizes Rosencrantz's suggestion that "ambition…is but a shadow's shadow" (2.2.260-262). While Hamlet rejects the idea that shadows pervade the waking world, we can guess from Ophelia's famous speech in 3.1, along with other references to Hamlet's past, that he is but a shadow of his former self and knows it. If Hamlet sees mankind as "noble in reason," "infinite in faculties," "the paragon of animals," and the "beauty of the world" – if he can see the way out of Plato's shadowy cave charted by such Neoplatonists as Pico della Miradola and Marsilio Ficino – then he doubts (at least before the play-changing fifth act) that he can reach the exit himself. Haunted by the play's

alongside the counterfeit Adonis, the shadowy spring, and Helen's painted cheek, we might append the language of praise, for this, too, has traditionally catered to, even helped to create, the world of shades and counterfeits. In fact, this sonnet reminds us of the rhetorical dilemma that led the poet in sonnet 16 to prefer a biological copy to his own "barren rhyme" or "painted counterfeit" and then, in sonnet 21, to dismiss rhetorical comparison in order to let him "be true in love but truly write." But by sonnet 53, can the poet "truly write" in the way he professes in sonnet 21 when he has considered many perplexing features of his beloved?

These perplexities establish the context for sonnet 54, where the canker surfaces as a canker rose rather than a cankerworm (or ulcer) in the rose. Here we might say that the canker has led the poet to see how his own work may assume an identity contrary to the eternal rose of beauty:

> O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
> By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!
> The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
> For that sweet odor which doth in it live;
> The canker blooms have full as deep a dye
> As the perfumed tincture of the roses,
> Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly,
> When summer's breath their masked buds discloses;
> But for their virtue only is their show
> They live unwooed, and unrespected fade,
> Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so;
> Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odors made;
>   And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth;
>   When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth.

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ultimate shadow, the ghost of his father, Hamlet adds, "and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (2.2.304-308). The world of shadows is indeed threatening; it can, as Puck says, offend. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon, the "King the Shadows," presides over a fairy world that wreaks havoc with humans who are half shadowlike themselves. While the emotionally overwrought Mercutio, in *Romeo and Juliet*, completes a speech on Queen Mab that he claims is "[b]egot of nothing but vain fantasy," we are privy to the powerful hold that this fantasy has over Mercutio – how shadows can inspire, instigate, even destroy (1.4.98). Quotations are taken from Shakespeare's *Tragedies* and *Comedies*, 2 vols., ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson, Inc., 2007).

As with sonnets 17 and 53, truthful representation is paramount. What will the poet's copies look like? How does a poet depict truth? What is this truth? In addressing these questions, the poet is not simply examining differences in perception, but the relationship between the young man's truth and that which his poetic copy has distilled. On first reading, it appears that if the poet writes sonnets at all, they will contain nothing but the substance of a distilled rose. *Truth* refers to the virtues capable of being imprinted in a book of poems; the young man himself is like the true rose ("And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth") and therefore contains distillable truth. The poet accordingly begins his sonnet by ostensibly idealizing the relationship between the ornament (the copy) and the substance behind the sign: "O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem / By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!" Indeed, the way the poet juxtaposes the young man's truth and the poet's true copy suggests little difference between them. The distinction between the canker and the rose, too, seems as clear-cut as the beloved's pure truth. As the poet affirms, the young man is the true rose deemed "fairer… / For that sweet odor which doth in it live."

All of these distinctions and comparisons, however, break down in the final couplet when the poet builds a linguistic tie between the canker blooms that "unrespected fade" and the beloved, whose beauty and youth "shall vade." Thus, the poet gives voice to his implicit suspicions about the young man when he remarks on "beauty" that "seem[s]" and when he compares "truth" to a mere "ornament." Notice, too, that although the rose's depiction accords with epideictic excess and amplification, its *beauty* made *beauteous* by the *ornament* truth and its *fair* qualities made *fairer* by its lovely odor, no such poetic excess is used to describe the young man. However, before we

dismiss the beloved as irredeemably cankered, we should keep in mind that the young

man has no telltale odor which allows us positively to decide whether the rose or the

canker bloom is the apt comparison. As Vendler argues, "no such anterior scientific

knowledge or immediate sense-perception warns those who approach a beautiful (but

faithless) human being."[59]

　　If, then, the young man's personality, his virtues, his behavior, and his foibles can

all be recorded in the poet's verse – are already being recorded – the poem asks us to

redefine what we mean by the beloved's truth. For, in the beloved's case, *truth* may

signify a whole range of characteristics, good and bad, cankered and rosy. This

alternative reading of the word changes the way that we understand the couplet, for the

poet could be suggesting that he will distil the young man's content (his truth) no matter

what. Whether beauteous like the deep-dyed canker or sweet like the rose, the young

man has power to change the nature of the poet's verse. Ultimately, then, the poet

wonders whether the beloved's truth will expose the canker that will inevitably transform

a pure poetics into a counterfeit one (canker rose).

　　In considering how the beloved's distilled truth shapes the poems, sonnet 54

shows how a beloved stem can transform the poetry stock. Leading into the next

appearance of the canker in sonnet 70, 69 explores how a poet/observer can shape our

perception of the young man[60]:

> Those parts of thee that the world's eye doth view
> Want nothing that the thought of hearts can mend;
> All tongues, the voice of souls, give thee that due,
> Utt'ring bare truth, even so as foes commend:
> Thy outward thus with outward praise is crowned.

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[59] Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 263.
[60] Although I have already discussed this sonnet in the previous chapter, I quote it again here to show how it, too, debates the question of inherency and contiguity.

But those same tongues that give thee so thine own
In other accents do this praise confound,
By seeing further than the eye hath shown;
They look into the beauty of thy mind,
And that in guess they measure by thy deeds;
Then churls their thoughts (although eyes were kind)
To thy fair flower add the rank smell of weeds.
  But why thy odor matcheth not thy show,
  The soil is this, that thou dost common grow.

The poem – from the *world's eye* to the *thought of hearts* to the praising and condemning *tongues* – is filled with examples of synecdoche, which Puttenham, we remember, describes as the "figure of quick conceit…by which we drive the hearer to conceive more, or less, or beyond, or otherwise than the letter expresseth."[61] In this sonnet, the same people who praise the outward parts of the beloved also strive to see "further than the eye hath shown" and "drive…to conceive more…than the letter expresseth." They strive, in other words, to learn whole from part.

Although the word *farther* appears in the 1609 Quarto, Duncan-Jones prefers *further*, which suggests intellectual inquiry – the practice of making inferences – and not simply physical observation.[62] However, even as the sonnet reflects a form of inductive reasoning supported by scientific thinkers like Francis Bacon, it hesitates to endorse this process fully. The sonnet also draws on the writings of Montaigne, who emphasizes the need to doubt the things we see and to second-guess our inferences.[63] Writing just before

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[61] Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 158.

[62] For an example of the use of further to mean "going beyond what exists or has been dealt with," see "further, a." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 22 February 2010 < http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50091152>.

[63] See Barbara J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Shapiro explores the "changing conceptions of truth or knowledge," arguing that "natural philosophers and natural scientists" began emphasizing the merits of collecting empirical data and of "conceiving knowledge probabilistically" in order to defend themselves from continental skeptics who affirmed that nothing could be known (267). "Scientific instruments such as the telescope and the microscope," she explains, were found to "compensate for the frailty of human sense organs" (22). Shapiro shows how Bacon initiated a movement that made several revisions to his own practices; thus she emphasizes how, in the history of intellectual thought, developments came rather quickly in the seventeenth

the development of an empirical science founded on hypothesis and probability,

Montaigne insists that we must acknowledge differences in perspective and that nothing

can be known with certainty; in so many words, he suggests that it is the logic of

metonymy that underlies the way that we perceive the world. As he affirms in his

Apology for Raymond Sebond, "external objects surrender to our mercy; they dwell in us

as they please."[64] "All that is known," he adds, "is doubtless known through the faculty

of the knower."[65] Sir Walter Raleigh, too, argues for a similar epistemological outlook in

his essay, "The Sceptic," when he writes on the "confused controversy about the essence

of nature" due to the various ways people apprehend the attributes of things.[66] Fulke

Greville's poetic exploration of skepticism and knowledge is more comprehensive than

Raleigh's, although he writes of many of the same issues. In his *Treatie of Humane

Learning*, Greville begins by discussing the unreliability of the senses.[67] He subsequently

challenges not only the "faculties of apprehension," but also human "comprehension,"

the conclusions we draw from our observations. He suggests that the more we observe

the world, the less we understand: "our capacity / How much more sharpe, the more it

apprehends, / Still to distract, and less Truthe comprehends."[68] Greville thus stands on

the other side of the emerging science of probability, a mode of thinking that brings

Puttenham's description of synecdoche and metonymy into the arena of modern

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century. The 1609 Quarto stands at a pivotal place in intellectual history – at the beginning of a century
when things were about to explode scientifically.
[64] Montaigne, *Apology*, in *Essays*, trans. Donald Frame (New York: Everyman's Library, 2003), 513.
[65] Ibid., 539.
[66] Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Works of Sir Walter Raleigh*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1829),
8:556.
[67] Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke, *A Treatie of Humane Learning*, in *The Works in Verse and Prose
Complete*, Vol. 2, ed. Rev. Alexander B. Grosart, 4 vols. (Lancashire: C. Tiplady and son, 1870), 2:5-63.
[68] Ibid., 12-13.

science.[69]

Even, however, as Shakespeare's Sonnets cannot wholeheartedly embrace what Bacon and his followers could embrace, the sequence does not deny it, either. Like Montaigne and Raleigh and Greville, the poet continues to wonder whether knowledge can be anything other than a product of the individual observer and whether the observer indeed "an accessory needs must be," to quote again the crux of sonnet 35. However, in sonnet 69, Shakespeare doubts the practice of making inferences even as he employs it himself. Eager to continue searching but fearful of what he might find, the poet teeters between probing the rose further and holding it at arm's length. He simply cannot be sure whether a person's discoveries and inferences truly come from the object scrutinized or from her subjective interpretation of that object. As the poet finally laments, spectators "look into the beauty of thy mind, / And that in guess they measure by thy deeds." While the poet tries to extenuate the viewers' guesses, he fears that they are adding the "rank smell of weeds" (and "misnaming") rather than finding that odor within the beloved. The couplet continues this skeptical inquiry, showing that the poet still cannot decide why the beloved's odor does not match his show. Is it because the beloved flower possesses some ineradicable flaw which the poet elsewhere calls the canker (synecdoche)? Or is it because his soil is corrupted by those common eyes appraising him even as they praise him (metonymy)? Or, is it a combination of the two? Is the beloved inherently corrupt and so easily corrupted by others? Even worse, has the beloved grown common?

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[69] Ibid., 22, 42. A fideist, Greville believes that we are blinded by various idols – sin, physical deficiencies, vanity, public opinion. While Bacon argues that the idols blind us from all forms of truth, Greville dismisses earthly knowledge, claiming that such inquiry could threaten our relationship with God and, in short, our moral knowledge.

Sonnet 70 reiterates many of the themes and questions introduced in 69, but it places them explicitly in the context of the canker. While this time the poet investigates his rose in a more public space than in sonnet 35, he arrives at the same ambiguous conclusion as before:

> That thou art blamed shall not be thy defect,
> For slander's mark was ever yet the fair;
> The ornament of beauty is suspect,
> A crow that flies in heaven's sweetest air.
> So thou be good, slander doth but approve
> Thy worth the greater, being wooed of time;
> For canker vice the sweetest buds doth love,
> And thou present'st a pure unstained prime.

On one level, the poet implies that slander will only make the beloved look better if he is good ("So thou be good, slander doth but approve / Thy worth the greater"). The beloved's goodness, however, is not positively confirmed, for the line – "For canker vice the sweetest buds doth love" – could be read in two ways: the canker loves the buds and so will naturally attack them, or the buds love the canker and so will naturally let it invade.[70] If read the first way, the connection is poetically metonymic; if read the second way, the connection is synecdochic, since the sweetest buds are probably predisposed to succumb to the canker. Furthermore, just because the beloved "*present'st* a pure unstained prime" does not mean he is pure and unstained within.

The Reformation of Praise

Before showing how the poet resolves the debate over inherency and contiguity, I want to spend some time considering where Lisa Freinkel's full-length investigation of

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[70] See also *Coriolanus*: "Pray you, who does the wolf love?" (2.1.7). We are told that the wolf loves the lamb, but the line is ambiguous; the lamb could also love the wolf (*Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ed. David Bevington).

the Sonnets' canker and the rose stands in relation to my own study.[71] While she, too,

roots these tropes in post-Reformation culture, she interprets them in terms of catachresis,

the "abuse of figure" that she contends defines Luther's worldview. She argues that

whether or not Shakespeare read Luther or was a Lutheran, he was writing in a "Lutheran

universe."[72] By this she means that "the theological tradition" central to her study is not

that "creed to which individual authors subscribe so much as it is that doctrinal tradition

that makes the concept of authorship itself available to Western culture" (xx). What

Freinkel brings to the foreground is Luther's legacy of authorial ambivalence. For even

as Luther argued that individuals have power to interpret the Bible on their own and

become authorities of scriptural truth, he also suggested that people who assert such

authority and knowledge are susceptible to distortion, smear, and self-doubt.[73]

      For Freinkel, catachresis not only symbolizes Luther's authorial ambivalence but

also clarifies the relationship between the canker and the rose. Although Freinkel, too,

ties these tropes to engrafting, she thinks through the process in purely theological terms.

As she explains, the graft signifies the wild (Christian) olives tamed by the cultivated

(Jewish) olive tree, which Paul outlines in Romans 11. Tracing the changing perspective

on this olive tree from Paul to Augustine to Luther, Freinkel first demonstrates how

Paul's "hybrid logic" of the graft suggests Christian *figura*. As Paul stresses, the New

Testament fulfills the promises of the Old Testament, the spirit of the law transcends the

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[71] As I mentioned in a previous note, Freinkel (to my knowledge) is the only scholar to offer a full-length study of the canker.

[72] Lisa Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 164.

[73] Ibid., 126-31. Showing how Luther found his "words turned against him" and his "authority countermanded," Freinkel quotes the following passage from *Luther's Works*: "Under my name, this blasphemous, shameful teaching has been spread and disseminated more widely, perhaps, than by all your [the devil's?] books….The devil saw clearly that his book was being disseminated everywhere. Therefore he seized it, and loaded and smeared it with his dung. So I, an innocent man, must now be the wagon driver of the devil's manure, whether I will or not" (qtd. in *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 124).

letter of the law, and the spirit eventually supersedes the claims of the flesh (11-15).

Thus the olive tree – healthy, cultivated, reinforced by a Jewish root – becomes "an

image of Christian revisionism, of the retrospective 'insertion' of Christian ends into

Jewish beginnings" (13). Significantly, Freinkel describes this renewed tree using a

rhetorical term that I have already introduced: "Paul's figure…resembles nothing so

much as the *structure of synecdoche*, where the substitution of parts finds its rationale in

the spatial integrity of the whole" (22, my emphasis). This powerful, yet fixed, image of

the graft, Freinkel contends, shows how Paul "understands time *as* space" (33).

Several hundred years later, Augustine re-fashions Paul's figure of synecdochal

stillness into a dynamic entity. Freinkel argues that the key piece of evidence here

derives from a statement written in *De Catachizandis Rudibus*: "In the Old Testament the

New is concealed, and in the New the Old is revealed."[74] Freinkel sees Augustine's

emphasis on mutuality between the Old and New Testaments as evidence of a more

complex conception of temporality than Paul's ostensibly linear perspective, in which the

New simply replaces the Old. For Augustine, the grafted tree is "recursive" and

chiasmic: just as concealment sends us to revelation and revelation back to concealment,

so "the chiasmus keeps turning upon itself, unfixing reference and sending us from one

pole of the sentence to the next."[75] "Thus," she continues, "where Paul's image of the

hybrid transformed temporal difference into spatial unity [(synecdoche)], Augustine's

chiasmus turns temporal difference back upon itself. Repetition becomes inversion and

inversion takes us back to where we started" (22-23). To put it another way, a reader can

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[74] Augustine, *The First Catechetical Instruction (De Catachizandis Rudibus)*, ed. Johannes Quasten, trans.
Joseph P. Christopher (New York: The Newman Press, 1946), 23. See also Freinkel, *Reading
Shakespeare's Will*, 22.
[75] Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 22.

only interpret an allegory by keeping symbols and substance, signifiers and signifieds, and in this case flesh and the spirit, proximate to one another. Of course, much of this is fundamental to Joel Fineman's exploration of the dark lady's paradoxical identity. For Fineman, the differences *concealed* in the sonnets to the young man are *revealed* in the dark-lady poems; the relationship between the two parts of Shakespeare's sequence is thus represented poetically as the chiasmus. Indeed, Freinkel could have given his argument a religious tincture if she had stayed with the chiasmus. But she pushes on.

Freinkel shows how grafting became a major source of debate and contention in the hands of Luther, who "devastates the Christian notion of succession" and with it the chiastic structure in which "any loose ends are tucked up in the scheme's beginning while any stray beginnings are enfolded in its end."[76] "He devastates, that is to say, the 'hybrid' logic of inheritance and fulfillment according to which the spirit is heir to the flesh, and the flesh is prefiguration of the spirit."[77] For Luther, the "strife between flesh and spirit knows no end in this life. As long as there is flesh, there will be sin" (120).

For a graft that had formerly embodied the reconciliation of flesh and spirit, this means quite a lot. Indeed, Luther's writings about Paul's olive tree are the cornerstone of Freinkel's study. Two lines in particular are key to her discussion: "from the tame olive nothing is produced by nature except the wild olive"; and "the branch of the wild olive through grafting becomes the branch of the tame olive, which the tame could not have done by nature."[78] Freinkel does not mention this, but Luther's view that the "the tree of Romans 11 is split from the start" and that the art of "'ingrafting grace'" tames the plant recalls Polixenes' argument to Perdita: Grafting, to quote him again, "is an art / Which

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[76] Ibid., 22, 119.
[77] Ibid., 119.
[78] Qtd. in Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 122.

does mend nature – change it, rather – but / The art itself is nature (4.4.95-97).[79] In both

cases, the grafted branch tames the wild or splintered root; and in both examples, authors

yielding greater power to the horticultural method itself than to the original tree challenge

Paul's conception of the graft.[80]

Ultimately, then, Freinkel presents us with two Lutheran grafts – the abstract

image of the olive tree made perfect and tame by the art of "ingrafting faith," and the

imperfect graft that will always fail to reconcile the branches and the roots (spirit and

flesh), and will always imperfectly represent Christian conversion and redemption. If we

focus, however, not on Luther's idealized graft that seems irrevocably out of reach but

rather on the original graft severely weakened under his theological reforms, we also

confront what Freinkel calls "catachresis" – the ultimate rhetorical critique of Christian

figura particularly and figural reading generally.

The graft is, for Freinkel, one of the most powerful metaphors in Shakespeare's

Sonnets, both because he refers explicitly to engrafting at a key point in the sequence (in

sonnet 15) and because he is writing in the shadow of Luther. Considering Luther's

catachrestic worldview in terms of Shakespeare's poetry, Freinkel argues that just as "the

flesh is no figure of [the] spirit" and just as the relationship between flesh and spirit is

interminably "irreconcilable," so the "difference between the rose and canker, between a

true beauty and a dog [rose], is undecidable."[81] As Freinkel contends, Luther's insistence

that the flesh can only be superseded by the spirit after death explains the poet's

uncertainty about the rose and the canker; one simply cannot distinguish one from the

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[79] Ibid., 122-23.
[80] As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, Paul writes, "Boast not thy selfe against the branches, thou
bearest not the roote, but the roote thee" (*The Geneva Bible*, Romans 11:17, 1562).
[81] Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 160, 166.

other until the rose wilts and its essence is distilled.[82] Thus, poetry intending to idealize

the perfectly grafted olive tree in the name of a pure and changeless beauty will fail; and

those who knowingly promulgate beauty's immortality, Freinkel argues, cannot but

invoke catachresis, an empty figure: "there is no proper name for the young man's beauty

because, like all beauty," she contends, "it fails to remain like itself" (205). This

assertion is reminiscent of Thomas M. Greene's argument that we cannot keep ourselves

from writing insufficient metaphors and making waste. Committed to the notion of

catachresis, Freinkel takes the next step when she argues that Shakespeare's poems reveal

that "we cannot stop (re)producing figures – even if our reproductions only amount to

figures of abuse."[83] If, for Freinkel, the rose is a "figure of abuse," then the canker

emerges as a reminder of this reality – and a symbol of our own failure to conduct an

adequate figural interpretation of the Sonnets.

In many ways, then, Freinkel shares some of the same ideas about the Sonnets as

Joel Fineman: they both explore the way the poems keep pointing to what has been lost

(Fineman, we recall, makes much of the etymology of *epideixis*), and their arguments

depend to different degrees on the poems' belatedness.[84] However, Freinkel argues that

Shakespeare's sonnets cannot but undercut Fineman's logic of "necessary and consequent

conclusions" when they announce the end of literary succession and thus the end of pure

beauty. Instead of arguing that repetition eventually creates or reveals hitherto concealed

difference, Freinkel suggests that Shakespeare's poet fails to repeat and retain anything at

all. For Freinkel, belatedness describes the way Shakespeare's Sonnets "sum up an entire

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[82] Ibid., 210. This catachrestic worldview means accepting the fact that there is no way of experiencing spiritual fulfillment on earth.
[83] See again Thomas M. Greene, "Pitiful Thrivers," 237-238. Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 203.
[84] Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 164.

poetic tradition" and not with the way they continue what has passed (in the young-man poems), only to reveal an embedded truth (in the dark-lady poems).[85] Thus, in Freinkel's argument, the poet cannot idealize the young man without *immediately* articulating the impossibility of speaking the truth; for Freinkel, the "lie" emerges in the first seventeen poems of Shakespeare's Sonnets when the speaker recognizes that the young man will decline no matter what he writes but vows to immortalize him in verse anyway (201-03). Unlike Fineman, Freinkel argues that the poet of the young-man sequence is already working against time even as he watches the way time works his scythe over the beloved.

Thus, Freinkel's observation that the canker is the "cancerous shame that, hidden within, secretly corrupts essence" reflects a deep appreciation of the central conundrum in the Sonnets (211). Indeed, she confidently claims that "Shakespeare's response [to the ecclesiastical situation redefined by Luther] is more historically specific, more exacting in its terms, and more far-reaching in its consequences, than Fineman suggests" (208). Shakespeare, she says, "uncovers the very roots of idealism, exposing and questioning the temporal structure that sustains it" (208). True enough, but is catachresis the key to understanding the canker and the rose? Does catachresis go far enough? Doesn't the next step after saying that "beauty's name equivocates between rose and canker" require pinpointing the rhetorical figures underlying that equivocal relationship (211)?

Reading the canker/rose relationship in terms of metonymy and synecdoche allows us bring another theological figure back into the argument: Paul's synecdochic olive tree, which Freinkel imagines as an idealized correspondence of part and whole. Luther's criticism of this olive tree, as Freinkel presents it, has to do not only with the relationship between flesh and spirit, and Old Testament and New, but also with the

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[85] Ibid., 164.

difficulty of naming and evaluating the branches and roots. She does not mention this, but what Luther introduces into the problem when he questions part and whole is the underlying logic of metonymy. Luther's notion that Jews and Christians must be grafted onto the same olive branch also suggests a powerful awareness that the parts might easily be misnamed, misunderstood, misconstrued. One could also say that Luther, in challenging Augustinian allegory, draws attention – as we shuttle back and forth between the Jewish olive tree of the Old Testament and the Christian/Jewish tree of the New Testament – to the contiguous branches that were supposedly cut off. Freinkel suggests that, for Luther, those branches represent all of humanity; a postlapsarian world will never see the ideal graft fully realized, and we are all cut off.

But Lutheran theology takes us only so far. It takes Freinkel as far as the procreation poems, where she argues that the "difference between the canker and the rose…is undecidable" and demonstrates how the poet comes to this conclusion almost as early as sonnet 1 (166). We can, however, frame the problem differently if we insist that the question of undecidability is for the poet only the *beginning* of a quest that propels him to conduct a satirical inquiry of praise poetics itself. After all, why would an author bother to write a collection of sonnets whose answer to the problem (of Luther's graft, of the canker and the rose, of the ethics of praise) exists in the opening 17 poems? *Can* he even do so?

My interpretation of sonnet 54 illuminates the differences between Freinkel's study and my own. The poet, if we remember, begins by clearly distinguishing a rose from a canker rose, emphasizing that the beloved, like the rose, has "truth" that the poet can distil. I have suggested, however, that we attend to the ambiguous nature of *truth*,

watch where the distinctions between the beloved and the canker rose begin to break down (particularly through *vade*/*fade*), and so accept that the poet is anything but confident about his own poetry. The question remains whether his poems will resemble a rose or a canker rose and whether that resemblance is *true* to his object of praise. For Freinkel, however, the meaning of *truth* is not the problem because *truth* is only connected to the rose. As she argues, "truth" in sonnet 54 "is compromised" because the "difference between the rose and the canker…can only emerge after death" (211). The fact that the beloved "vades" at all reflects, for Freinkel, the poet's criticism of Christian *figura* – and not a sequence-long investigation of a central question about corruption or praise poetics generally.

The graft, too, can be interpreted in at least two different ways. While Freinkel is right to show how the graft is intimately tied to the canker and the rose, I argue that the graft allows the poet to move beyond the trappings of Lutheran theology and beyond merely affirming that he cannot help but falsify beauty and mark time (203). The graft initiates a poetic *essay* – vis-a-vis Montaigne – into praise poetics itself, which includes the beloved and its poet. In other words, the Sonnets take us beyond Luther's worldview to a skeptical one that in its own way is no less Protestant – and no less steeped in post-Reformation anxieties about knowledge – than Freinkel's catachresis. The canker and the rose of course sit at the center of this poetic essay.

The poet's most sustained exploration of the canker/rose problem transpires in sonnets 91-99, the very section that John Kerrigan cites as evidence that Shakespeare authorized the ordering of the 1609 Quarto.[86] Sonnet 91 begins by exaggerating the beloved's superior qualities only to reveal by the end that the beloved "has it in his power

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[86] John Kerrigan, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, 290.

utterly to deprive" the poet of the "happiness" he has just celebrated.[87] Although by

sonnet 92, the poet assures himself that he "need…not…fear the worst of wrongs, / When

in the least of them my life hath end," he is most concerned that the beloved is abusing or

will abuse the poet without his receiving the mercy-killing knowledge: "But what's so

blessed fair that fears no blot? / Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not." The

beloved's hidden canker haunts the poet through sonnet 93, where he vows to "live,

supposing thou art true, / Like a deceived husband." By the couplet, however, the poet's

anxieties return and we find him complaining, "How like Eve's apple doth thy beauty

grow, / If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show." As this cluster of poems reveals, the

poet moves through three phases: assuming that the beloved's corruption would be fatal

to him; seeking refuge in self-denial and self-deception; and, finally, fearing the

unknown. While the poet seems once again to worry whether he is authorizing the

beloved's trespass with rhetorical comparison (sonnet 35), these later poems suggest that

the poet's skepticism has by this point led him close to despair.

Sonnet 94 in many ways attempts to control this despair by calmly meditating on

the nature of power and the virtues of self-restraint. In other ways, the sonnet develops

the poet's epideictic inquiry and so prepares us for 95, one of the most skeptical poems in

the sequence:

> They that have power to hurt, and will do none,
> That do not do the thing they most do show,
> Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
> Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow:
> They rightly do inherit heaven's graces,
> And husband nature's riches from expense;
> They are the lords and owners of their faces,
> Others, but stewards of their excellence.
> The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,

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[87] Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 292.

> Though to itself it only live and die,
> But if that flower with base infection meet,
> The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
>> For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
>> Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

Typical of just about all of Shakespeare's works – including *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and the *Henriad* – this sonnet is acutely skeptical of power. Here the poet avers that those people who exercise self-restraint "rightly do inherit heaven's graces" and protect and preserve "nature's riches." Given the beloved's predilection for "niggarding" and "hoarding," however, the poet seems to promulgate an ideal that the beloved has not yet measured up to.

Still, this ideal is undercut by the poem's "imputation of hypocrisy" and the poet's genuine fear that power will burst the dam of self-restraint.[88] John Kerrigan's gloss on line 7 illuminates my point. One interpretation, he argues, "makes the *faces* seem a synecdoche for the lords and owners who bear them" (292). For the poet to insist that "they that have power to hurt" essentially "are…their faces" implies that those people may not only *do* but also *become* the thing they most do show. In an alternative reading of line 7, Kerrigan suggests that "they that have power to hurt" merely control their features and lord it over their countenance (292). Twisting their faces into submission, such people end up revealing a battle between will do and will not. From this perspective, the visible power to hurt somehow competes with an external demeanor set on stoically reining in the defects, inheriting heaven's graces, and husbanding nature's riches from expense. An "imputation of hypocrisy" or merely the reflection of an ongoing need to control what cannot be obliterated, this latter interpretation reflects the logic of metonymy; the container will contain the damage but not succumb to it.

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[88] Kerrigan, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, 291.

The identity of "they that have power to hurt" is also open to question. Although the poet is presumably trying to persuade the beloved to "husband nature's riches from expense," the poet in the previous sonnet had vowed to live like a "deceived husband" himself. This connection reminds us that the poet could also be writing about himself, who in his own way has power to hurt by writing the beloved's flaws into his verse. The fact that poet and beloved could both be husbanding "lords and owners," moreover, harkens back to the truth of the graft, the sequence's most limpid manifestation of their mutual complicity. In 94, if the poet is the "lord," then the beloved becomes a "steward" who merely inhabits the poet's excellent verse; if the young man is the "lord" or "owner," then the poet is the steward, copying the beloved's virtues into his poems.[89] This relationship remains intimately intertwined even if goodness and virtue were to succumb to vice, and even if they that have power to hurt find that they can no longer hold their controlled pose.

Even so, none of these ambiguities prepares us for the sestet, which focuses on the agricultural riches husbanded in the first eight lines: the "summer's flower" that is "to the summer sweet, / Though to itself it only live and die." For my purposes, the crux of this sonnet is the second half of its third quatrain: "But if that flower with base infection meet, / The basest weed outbraves his dignity." While these lines suggest the truism that the greater or more virtuous a person, the harder he falls, they also explore the same question about inherency and contiguity that the sequence has been revisiting since sonnet 35 (here the problem of the rose is identical to that of the lily). Philip Martin, tying "base infection" to "basest weed," suggests that the weed can corrupt the summer

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[89] For a discussion of the ambiguity of line 8, see Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 307; and Kerrigan, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, 292.

flower.[90] Of course, a weed can accomplish this any number of ways, from cross pollination to grafting. Perhaps, however, the weed exists merely to highlight the corruption already within the "summer flower" that lives and dies by itself like the canker rose of sonnet 54; perhaps the weed's baseness helps expose the base canker in that summer flower.

Helping to set these issues within the context of the most powerful association of all – that between the beloved and the poet's art – Kerrigan observes that *weed* also denotes "costume," which could signify the beloved's poetic costume: the poems themselves. Thus, the beloved's "shows" refer not only to that which is discovered or seen as true (the canker as corruption) but also that which is recorded and represented in the poet's verse (the canker rose as copy). Inextricably dependent on one another, the beloved and the poet are both potentially guilty weeds – one for turning an art form into something base and the other for converting a praise object into an image of base infection.

Shakespeare wrestles with these problems one last time in sonnet 95, the most classically satirical poem in the entire sequence. Appropriately, the poem also shows signs that the poet's inquiry has come to an end:

> How sweet and lovely dost thou make the shame
> Which, like a canker in the fragrant rose,
> Doth spot the beauty of thy budding name!
> O in what sweets doest thou thy sins inclose!
> That tongue that tells the story of thy days
> (Making lascivious comments on thy sport)
> Cannot dispraise but in a kind of praise;
> Naming thy name blesses an ill report.
> O what a mansion have those vices got
> Which for their habitation chose out thee,

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[90] Philip Martin, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Self, Love and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 32.

> Where beauty's veil doth cover every blot,
> And all things turns to fair that eyes can see!
> Take heed (dear heart) of this large privilege:
> The hardest knife ill used doth lose his edge.[91]

This sonnet makes two overarching, yet contradictory claims: first, the canker – the vice, or evil – that exists within the subject and is noticeable on the outside only as a spot, will eventually work its way to the surface, perhaps corrupting the beloved on the outside as he is already corrupted on the inside; second, because "beauty's veil doth cover every blot," beauty might not only be capable of concealing vice but also of making the vice *seem* beautiful and good, converting "all things…to fair."

These claims together challenge the integrity of praise by suggesting complicity between the subject's celebrated beauty and his internal moral corruption. Even here we see beauty mimicking the properties associated with infection (i.e., by a canker) when the poet describes "beauty's veil" covering "every blot" and effectively transforming foul into fair. Blame, however, feigns the qualities of admiration, for any attempt to "dispraise" the subject is rendered paradoxically into a "kind of praise," a predicament that makes it difficult to distinguish between merited and unmerited praise, or rose and canker, and that, the poet realizes, ultimately cheapens the panegyric form. We can read this confusion poetically through the logic of synecdoche and metonymy. From the standpoint of metonymy, the vice attacks the hapless and unsuspecting beloved, finding "habitation" in a beautiful "mansion." Synecdochically, the beloved's virtues comfortably assimilate the vices, perhaps because he has been susceptible to corruption all along but still able to make his "shame" and "sins" seem "sweet."

With such a complex expression of the satiric mode, it should come as no surprise

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[91] For the purposes of this particular analysis, I am using Vendler's edition. Duncan-Jones, along with several other editors, removes what I think is crucial to the poem: the parentheses in lines 6 and 13.

that this disruption is also reflected in structural and metrical oddities. Indeed, almost

every line in this poem contains an evil textually counterbalanced against some good:

sweet/lovely and *shame* in line 1, *canker* and *rose* in line 2, *spot* and *beauty* in line 3,

sweets and *sins* in line 4, a pattern that continues almost without exception to the very

end. This disturbing collusion between good and evil, and praise and blame, correlates

with a strain in the poem's form, a strain that threatens to rob the sonnet of its distinction

as a sonnet, as a poem of admiration and praise. Indeed, 95 is one of the few poems in

the sequence in which the speaker's first idea concludes by the third line of quatrain one

and disrupts the traditional, four-line thought pattern (although the poet usually breaks

quatrains into two, two-line thoughts, he typically retains each poem's symmetry).

What results is a disturbingly asymmetrical poem that reflects the poet's

conflicted emotions. The fourth line can offer only an abrupt conclusion to the first

quatrain, a disturbance repeated in the second quatrain, where the speaker's thought ends

with line 7. Thus, he is forced to tack on a shorter statement in line 8 that stands rather

awkwardly in the poem like an insecure, obtruding appendage: "Naming thy name

blesses an ill report." Adding to this structural awkwardness is the fact that sonnet 95 is

among the few sonnets in the sequence that contains an entire line in parentheses, a

rhetorical device that Puttenham calls the "inserter" since it destabilizes the ideas around

it. The parenthetical remark, "(Making lascivious comments on thy sport)," conjures an

image of a rude satirist making "comments" on the beloved's exploits. And the fact that

the line is nestled in parentheses only emphasizes further its subversiveness, indeed, the

subversiveness of satire in the poetics of praise, which works like a canker from within

the sonnet, eating its way through to the surface to unsettle it, even deform it. Perhaps it

is this threat of deformity that leads the poet to stop his inquiry and move to the

resolution of 99. Perhaps he discovers, in the process of uncovering the truth of the rose,

that he runs the risk of destroying the apparatus that got him there and even of losing

himself along the way.

The resolution offered by 99 is quite unexpected. Like sonnet 95, whose altered

form provokes speculation about why the poem defies the sonnet structure, 99 is unique

and "rebellious" in another way, for it is the only sonnet with fifteen lines, the first of

which serves as an introduction:

> The forward violet thus did I chide:
> 'Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,
> If not from my loves breath? The purple pride
> Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells
> In my love's veins thou hast too grossly dyed.'
> The lily I condemned for thy hand,
> And buds of marjoram had stolen thy hair;
> The roses fearfully on thorns did stand,
> Our blushing shame, another white despair;
> A third, nor red, nor white, had stol'n of both,
> And to his robb'ry had annexed thy breath;
> But for his theft, in pride of all his growth
> A vengeful canker ate him up to death.
>   More flowers I noted, yet I none could see,
>   But sweet, or colour, it had stol'n from thee.

Burrow considers 99 to be among the earliest-composed sonnets because it is structurally

ungainly (it contains two sentence fragments) and metrically awkward, particularly in

line 4, where the internal trochee on "cheek for" breaks up the line flow.[92] The meter,

nevertheless, seems appropriate to the poem's development, for the rougher rhythm

creates an aural discomfort that prepares the reader for the harsher satiric language that

builds with each quatrain and culminates with the canker in line 13. Thus, the first five

lines contain gentle reproofs and descriptions like "sweet thief," "forward," and "steal,"

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[92] Colin Burrow, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 578.

while the last phrase of the quatrain, "grossly dyed," reflects an aptly elevated level of blame. This subtle shift leads us into the second quatrain, where the poet vows to condemn the offending lily for the beloved's sake. The poet then proceeds to survey the abject roses, who "fearfully on thorns did stand, / One blushing shame, another white despair," as if they, too, have been condemned and are awaiting sentence. The poet's gentle tone in quatrain 1 becomes caustic by the second quatrain, where shame and despair lead directly to death in quatrain 3: the vengeful canker finally destroys the dishonorable and meretricious unnamed "third" flower as punishment for its theft. If, then, the poet has satirically projected his irritation and doubt about the young man's praiseworthiness onto the flowers, he also shows frustration with the poetics of praise, which offers nothing more than stolen, unmerited beauty. That is, once the poet writes about the beloved – establishing his identity within a system of comparison – the young man no longer looks beautiful and neither does the poetry.

Regardless of whether Shakespeare wrote sonnet 99 before he composed many of the others, this poem is remarkable for its ambiguous resolution to the problem of the canker. Presented here as a punitive force devouring what appears to be an overweening rose, the canker seems to have won, symbolically emptying the panegyric of its symbol of praise and thus of its very form and substance. But has the canker eaten the real rose? That third unnamed flower is arguably a canker rose, an imitation. It is, after all, neither red nor white (pink is a common color for the dog rose), and it sits proudly among the other roses as if it were a rose. Interpreted in this way, the poem reveals that the real threat in this sequence has not, in fact, been the cankerworm at all but rather the canker rose (the counterfeit). For even as the cankerworm suggests erosion and satire, vice and

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decay, it remains the sequence's most distinguishing feature, the figure that differentiates Shakespeare's poems from those of Petrarch, Dante, Sidney, and Spenser. The canker rose, in contrast, reflects the very counterfeit poetics that Shakespeare has studiously tried to avoid. In this respect, 99 shows the poet revising his perspective, revealing that it is not the cankerworm that has produced this false flower but rather the sequence's attempt to preserve (and so imitate) the real rose.

After this point, Shakespeare's sequence moves in two directions simultaneously: (1) the poet with renewed force acknowledges the liabilities of his epideictic inquiry and takes leave of his skeptical exercise, and (2) the poet finds it possible to celebrate his beloved rose from a new perspective. Helping to elaborate on this first point, Vendler argues that after sonnet 100, the poet commences "a narrative of self-blame rather than blame of the beloved."[93] While this reversal certainly describes the satirist – who typically grows as corrupt as that which he satirizes – it also defines the tragic hero, whose skepticism and destructive energies inevitably force him to look inward and to acknowledge what he sees there.[94] The poet, in his own protracted recognition scene,

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[93] Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 424.

[94] While I want to emphasize here the tragic dimension of the young-man sonnets, its satirical structure should also be noted. Kernan argues that a "darker side" exists in the satirist's "nature," for "as a result of his violent attacks on vice he acquires a number of unpleasant characteristics" of his own (*The Cankered Muse*, 22). Kernan remarks that the satirist "denounces" his victims for "being intemperate and unreasonable, and the very violence of his denunciations proclaims him equally unreasonable and intemperate" (25). Shakespeare's exploration of the dark satirist pervades his plays as well as his poems. Burrow dates the last twenty-three sonnets to the male beloved – 104-126 – to the turn of the seventeenth century, maintaining that the final poems in the young-man sequence were written approximately between 1598 and 1604, about the same years as the so-called Poets' War and thus around the time that Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It* and *Troilus and Cressida*. The key moments in the development of Thersites' and Jaques' characters happen at the end of the dramas. In the last scene of *Troilus and Cressida*, when the volatile satirist Thersites, who has railed against almost everyone in the play, finally meets a fellow bastard, he hesitates to denounce or engage in battle, instead telling him, "One bear will not bite another, and wherefore should one bastard?" (V.7.18-20). The morose Jaques goes further than refusing to ply his satirical art. When Duke Senior urges him to join the wedding festivities, he quietly declines and takes his leave, saying, "To see no pastime I. What you would have / I'll stay to know at your abandon'd cave" (V.4.195-6). These two characters cut a fitting image alongside Shakespeare's late sonnets, in which the poet's examination of the ethics of praise through his engagement with the satiric mode has forced him to

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accordingly admits to the same vices that the beloved hitherto possessed – willful

absence and a recognizable "stain" that can only be cleansed through repentance and

forgiveness (109). Significantly, this is the same poem in which the poet manages to

ignore the canker in the rose: "For nothing this wide universe I call / Save thou, my rose;

in it thou art my all." And by sonnet 110, a poem as much about infidelity to the genre as

about infidelity to the beloved, the poet suggests that he has finished essaying himself.

Confessing that he has "looked on truth / Askance and strangely," the poet reveals that

his "appetite" – personal, poetical, epistemological – he "never more will grind / On

newer proof." Having probed the purity of his poetics, the poet decides that his "worse

essays proved thee my best of love." These "worse essays" lead the poet to ask his

beloved to "chide" Fortune for his "harmful deeds" even as he admits that his sins are his

own: "Pity me, then, and wish I were renewed" (111).

Perhaps the most surprising reversal of all, however, occurs in sonnet 112 when

the poet declares, "For what care I who calls me well or ill / So you o'er-green my bad,

my good allow?" The word "o'er-greene" might suggest transform or perhaps "cover

over," the very conundrum with which the poet wrestles in 95. But he goes even further,

turning his back on the world and inviting his friend not only to praise him ("my good

allow"), but also to chide and rail against him: "You are my all-the-world, and I must

strive / To know my shames and praises from your tongue" (112).[95] If the praise poet as

gaze critically upon himself. Resulting from this altered *perception* (a word that Charles Knight uses to
define satire) is a satiric reversal, wherein the speaker can affirm like Thersites that he is a "bastard," and
then retreat like Jaques from his position as satirist. See James Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Poet's War*
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). See also Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare & Co.* (New York:
Pantheon, 2007).

[95] When Booth – the editor promulgating multiplicity in meaning and semantic ambiguity – throws up his
hands in confusion, remarking that because of so many textual incoherencies, 112 is probably "an
unfinished poem or one that Shakespeare abandoned in frustration," his surprising pronouncement better

we knew him has symbolically died, his "death" eventually leads to restoration, to a new order, in which he affirms in the last full sonnet that his "heart" now knows "no art, / But mutual render" (125).

"Reckoning Time": The Wound of the Graft

If we have ventured far beyond the purity of the Petrarchan rose, that is only because English Renaissance culture has in many respects made that shift in focus inevitable. And yet, Shakespeare's poet has acknowledged what every other sonnet sequence of his period probably also knows but does not articulate: that the cut which allows a poet to tie and bind his beloved scion – his rose – onto the poetry stock is also the wound that produces the canker. He learns that the drive to "know more than the letter expresseth" and the need to assess failures are inextricably and paradoxically tied to his discovery of vice within himself and his poetry as well as in the beloved. Affirming with Montaigne that "external objects surrender to our mercy," the sequence also expresses that we should we more cautious because of it, and because we just might surrender ourselves as well. Thus, the poet contends by sonnet 121 that "'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed, / When not to be, receives reproach of being, / And the just pleasure lost, which is so deemed / Not by our feeling, but by others' seeing." "No, I am that I am," the poet says, exalting only in an honesty of being, for "they that level / At my abuses, reckon up their own." As the poet comes to recognize, we see wounds in others only insofar as we see defects within ourselves, and we strive to know others in order to understand ourselves.

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reflects the decisive shift from blame to self-blame than it explains Shakespeare's authorial intent, which must ever remain a mystery (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 369).

If, then, the graft represents the postlapsarian predicament expressed in Paul's letter to the Romans, it is also an inevitable part of living; the graft is our only connection to the world and to each other. Because we have no choice but to be grafted and to graft in turn, we must knowingly participate in an artistic practice that is flawed. In our attempt to preserve life and bridge connections, we mark time, advance decay, and emphasize division. If in religion the graft is our only salvation, the graft of praise poetry is cankered and reinforces inherent defect, that original stain within the individual that praise will always discover and that blame will always exacerbate.

And so, the debate between inherency and contiguity – between the "drive" to "conceive more, or less, or beyond, or otherwise than the letter expresseth" and the tendency to misname or exaggerate virtues and vices – resolves itself in a truth that unites these competing camps: that the canker is inherent in the practice of praise. By no means, however, does this spell the end of praise, "for [if] the letter killeth, then the Spirit giveth life."[96] Shakespeare's tragic assessment of praise has deepened his poetics and allowed him to embrace, if not the mythical rose, then the spirit of that rose. For the poet, having "reckon[ed] up his own [abuses]," can cling to the beauty that remains *because* of the ordeal of the rose. And even with the canker, or "reckoning time, whose millioned accidents / Creep in 'twixt vows, and change decrees of kings," and even if such change should "[t]an sacred beauty" and "blunt the sharp'st intents," his "Love is a babe" that "still doth grow" (115).

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[96] *The Geneva Bible*, 2 Corinthians 3:6, 1562.

Chapter 3

The Wonder-Wounded Hearers in *Hamlet*

In this chapter, I explore in greater detail the tragic dimension of Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism by reading *Hamlet* in terms of the young-man sonnets. Unique among Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Hamlet possesses a metatheatrical awareness that Lear, Macbeth, Othello, and Romeo do not have. As we will see, Hamlet considers the same problems that the poet does in the Sonnets. Like the poet, Hamlet ponders the persistence and force of the canker, the dangers of slander and praise, the skeptical aspect of wonder, and the limitations and liabilities of representation. Thus, I aim to show that even as *Hamlet* illuminates the complexities of Shakespeare's poetics of appraisal, the young-man poems have something vital to offer in our quest to understand *Hamlet* in particular and the nature of tragedy in general.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Hamlet grapples with two conflicting perspectives on verbal and dramatic representation: the desire to be authentic (in Polonius' words, to himself "be true") and the need to "act." Within two dozen lines of his first appearance in the play, Hamlet expresses disdain for theater, insisting that representation of internal states is a paltry endeavor. Nonetheless, the prince later discovers that theater can work to his advantage, putting on an "antic" disposition, supposedly to deflect suspicion, and working with the players on *The Murder of Gonzago*. Thus, by the fifth act of the play, Hamlet has surrendered to more than just divine providence. He has capitulated to language itself –

to artifice – when he commissions Horatio, the orator, to "tell" his "story" in order to repair his "wounded name" (5.2.378-84).[1]

Hamlet's struggle over how to act (as mourner as well as avenger) produces dissonance between the words he speaks and the identity he conveys. This dissonance contributes to our sense of his depth. Indeed, his assertion that he has "that within which passes show" – and that nothing external, not his "inky cloak," his "forced breath," his mournful "river in the eye," or "dejected havior," can "denote" him "truly" (1.2.80-8) – has ensured ongoing interest in his subjectivity. Since the time of Coleridge, critics have been drawn to Hamlet's "great enormous intellectual activity" and, recently, Marvin Hunt boldly argues that "Shakespeare's greatest tragedy enacts a radical and unprecedented internalization of reality" and that Hamlet's "resulting sense of a palpable interiority has reflected and shaped the intellectual history of the West."[2] Katherine Eisaman Maus does not make so broad a claim, but she nonetheless finds in "Hamlet's conviction that truth is unspeakable" a model for a period that used drama as "a form of display which flaunts the limits of display."[3] Michael Schoenfeldt and Douglas Trevor also explore the prince's inwardness but associate it with the period's intense interest in the humors.[4] "While Hamlet," Trevor argues, "sees himself forever worked upon by forces beyond his control, he roots these forces inside of himself, where fluctuations he cannot control make and remake him as a tortured, Galenic subject" (72). Hamlet's wild struggle with

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[1] All references to *Hamlet* are taken from the Folger edition, which conflates the second quarto and folio versions. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (1992: rpt. New York: Washington Square Press, 2004).

[2] *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. R.A. Foakes (New York: Continuum, 1989), 72; Marvin W. Hunt, *Looking for Hamlet* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7.

[3] Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, 1, 210.

[4] Douglas Trevor, *The Poetics of Melancholy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

the "forces inside of himself" can be attributed, of course, to more than physiological causes. According to James Shapiro, the prince's "sense of inwardness" reflects an important, end-of-the-century "cultural moment marked by a high degree of skepticism and a deepening interest in how subjective experience could be expressed."[5] Probably for most scholars, and regardless of their critical perspective, Hamlet gives off what Joel Fineman calls the "subjectivity effect" or what Marjorie Garber describes as the "illusion of roundedness or interiority."[6] Is it any wonder? Hamlet spurns anyone who tries to pluck out the heart of his mystery. Skeptical of visual and verbal representation, Hamlet convinces us and the other members of the court that he is more than what he says and shows, that even his own language (much less that of others) cannot capture his character.

Without dismissing these claims about Hamlet's inwardness, I concentrate on how his doubtful attitude toward representation – in other words, his epideictic skepticism – underwrites the play's tragic shape and the prince's tragic identity. I begin with his reference to the "wonder-wounded hearers" in 5.1. Just before emerging from the shadows to utter this phrase, the prince hears his mother lament to Ophelia's corpse, "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (255), to which Laertes replies, "O treble woe / Fall ten time treble on that cursed head / Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense / Deprived thee of!" (259-261).[7] When Hamlet advances soon after

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[5] James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of Shakespeare*, 293.

[6] Joel Fineman, *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991); Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Anchor, 2009), 201. For a discussion of how interest in Hamlet's psychology (post-eighteenth century) led us to perceive the prince's interiority as modern, see Margeta de Grazia, *"Hamlet" without Hamlet* (rpt. 2008; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). As de Grazia observes, "for the first couple of centuries after its publication, Hamlet was modern not because of its intimation of things to come, but because of its problematic relation to what had gone before. Inwardness emerges on the literary scene as a defining trait of the modern that conclusively dissolves its ties to the past and puts it in touch with the future" (22).

[7] The second Quarto uses "double" rather than "treble," thus suggesting a need at some point to amplify Laertes' rhetoric even further.

Laertes leaps into Ophelia's grave and begs that the onlookers "pile…dust upon the quick and the dead, / Till of this flat a mountain" they "have made / T' o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus" (263-266), the prince is spurred on as much by Laertes' criticism of himself as he is by his violent anguish. "What is he whose grief / Bears such an emphasis," Hamlet retorts, "whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (267-271). Here Hamlet not only describes how Laertes' "phrase of sorrow" has power to conjure and arrest the planets; by personifying the stars as wounded hearers, he also implies that this sort of language can hurt any listener.

Examined from a broader perspective, then, Hamlet's speech should give us pause. What does it mean for wonder, which is so often associated with physical objects, to wound our ears? What sort of language has such power to assail and disturb? In condemning Laertes for his unseemly and violent turgidity, Hamlet is arguably criticizing Renaissance tragedy's chief vehicle for wonder: epideictic oratory. His criticism, uttered in tandem with his assertion that he is "Hamlet the Dane," reinforces the central tension in the play between identity and language. The prince, however, embraces that tension. He uncovers a way to assume the role of the tragic hero while remaining skeptical about the demonstrative language typically used to represent that hero.[8]

Insofar as *epideixis* denotes the amplified display of virtues and vices, tragedy represents demonstrative oratory in its most comprehensive form, depicting a world in which lofty speeches and the language of heroism clash with the rhetoric of abuse, suffering, and detraction. The fact that tragedy both lauds and loathes its hero provides a

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[8] For a discussion of how wonder since the time of Aristotle has always been an "effect proper" to tragedy, see J.V. Cunningham, *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespeareian Tragedy* (Cincinnati: Ohio University Press, 1969), 60.

fertile environment for wonder, the emotional and epistemological counterpart to

epideixis. Inherently ambivalent, wonder comprises on the one hand admiration,

amazement, and praise and, on the other hand, fear, surprise, even doubt.[9] This last

characteristic can be traced to Aristotle and Plato, who insist that wonder is a prelude to

knowledge and thus an indication of uncertainty as well as curiosity.[10] Hamlet's

skepticism, then, about the language of wonder – and, consequently, about the rhetoric of

tragic heroism – also reinforces the centuries-old connection between wonder and

doubt.[11]

   This connection is strengthened by Hamlet's reliance on the word *wound*, which

not only evokes an image of an audience member transfixed (or amazed) by wonder but

also represents the physical and epistemological violence wrought by a poet's amplified

language. Laertes' reference to the "skyish head / Of blue Olympus" and Hamlet's

retaliatory description of the wonder-struck "wand'ring stars" metaphorizes that

linguistic power – that rhetorically-induced wonder wound – but only Hamlet is aware of

the implications. Mocking his rival's attempt to verbalize his great grief, Hamlet

suggests that Laertes' exaggerated rhetoric disorients and confuses those who stand by to

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[9] See "wonder, v." 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 10 October 2009
<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50286808>. Entry 1 shows how *wonder* means "to be struck with
surprise or astonishment" and "to marvel," while entry 2 connects wonder with "doubt."
[10] In *Theatetus*, Socrates affirms that "wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in
wonder" (104). Almost the same definition of *wonder* reappears in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "It is from a
feeling of wonder that men start now, and did start in earliest times, to practice philosophy" (19).
[11] See Anita Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne*. Although Sherman does not
offer extensive commentary on *Hamlet*, she contrasts the "dignity and formidable intelligence of skeptics
like Montaigne and Hamlet" with the Pyrrhonist as a "figure of fun" (7). For other discussions of Hamlet's
skepticism, see James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of Shakespeare: 1599*; A.D. Nuttal, *Shakespeare the
Thinker*; Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*; Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*;
Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism*; and Millicent Bell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*.

listen.[12] To be wounded through wonder, Hamlet insinuates, is to lose one's sense of

reality.

Hamlet also implies, however, that to be a "wonder-wounded hearer" is to be

estranged from oneself; thus, the *wound* points to an ontological as well as

epistemological dilemma. This is made clear in Hamlet's description of "wand'ring

stars" stilled by human speech. Disparaging Laertes for turning these visual objects *of*

speculation and marvel into "wonder-wounded *hearers*," Hamlet emphasizes the power

of language to disturb the natural order of things, to prevent us from asserting our

identities, to disrupt a tragic hero's control over his play. Surely Hamlet must at this

point be less troubled by Laertes' emphatic grief than by his attempt to reduce the prince

to a "cursed head" committing a "wicked deed." For Hamlet, Laertes' "phrase of

sorrow" has disturbingly – but perhaps unsurprisingly – tried to conjure the audience, the

characters, even perhaps the prince himself not with his brotherly tears but with his

potentially destructive verbosity.

Through his criticism of Laertes, then, Hamlet exposes a wound at the heart of

epideixis: amplified language (whether celebratory or disapproving) impairs the

movement toward identity by creating a false representation at odds with the presumed

original. While this problem is articulated most concisely in the graveyard, it is

embedded in Hamlet's world from the beginning of the play. In other words, the wound

that he invokes in 5.1 is a manifestation of the wound inflicted upon Elsinore when

Claudius steals into the garden and introduces the poison into the "ear" of the state.

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[12] See Cornelius Verhoeven, *The Philosophy of Wonder*, trans. Mary Foran (New York: The Macmillan
Company, 1972). Verhoeven emphasizes the connection between "wand'ring" and "wondering,"
comparing the experience of wonder to "wandering in the wilderness" – or bewilderment in its most literal
sense (53).

And yet, this is a poison that Hamlet himself must willingly administer. Another look at 5.1 shows that while he is skeptical of epideictic display and critical of Laertes' histrionics, the prince deploys the same language that he decries. After all, "he" at 5.1.267 may also be "Hamlet the Dane" and the demonstrative pronoun "this" may point to Hamlet's own critical remarks as well as to himself: "What is he whose grief / Bears such an emphasis, whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers? This is I, / Hamlet the Dane." Read in this way, these lines show the prince identifying himself with – and participating willingly in – the act of wounding. At once cutting down Laertes' amplified wailings about Ophelia and aggressively flaunting his linguistic superiority, Hamlet parries with a deliberately self-conscious variation of the same affected rhetoric, wrestling the laurel out of his rival's hands and keeping it for himself. The play, after all, is not Laertes' revenge drama but Hamlet's, whose endeavor to inflict the wonder-wound merely begins what he later commands Horatio to finish, which is to repair his "wounded name."

Of course, the paradox that a tragic hero is both wounded and wounding is commonplace and so not unique to this particular play. Nonetheless, for Hamlet to demonstrate this paradox through speech distinguishes this play from other tragedies. Hamlet, in other words, shows a level of self-consciousness that surpasses a tragic hero's recognition and affirmation of his flaws. And through his speech, the prince even suggests that *rhetorical* wounding is a form of self-repair. Exploiting the epideictic language that he disdains, Hamlet is not merely embracing stoic surrender and letting be. The prince is also reinventing himself and his play, reinterpreting events, and thus

controlling how we perceive him as a tragic hero.[13] Hamlet suggests, for example, that

he was not speaking sincerely when he told Ophelia, "I loved you not" (3.1.129). Now,

he maintains, "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their

quantity of love / Make up my sum" (5.1.285-287). And when Hamlet narrates how he

substituted Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's names for his own and ordered their deaths,

he insists that "they did make love to their employment" and that "their defeat / Does by

their own insinuation grow" (5.2.64-66). Disowning responsibility for what he considers

collateral damage, the prince claims it was God's will. He positions himself as Claudius'

"mighty opposite," a divine surrogate at war with the devil's representative: "'Tis

dangerous," he adds, "when the baser nature comes / Between the pass and fell incensed

points / Of mighty opposites" (67-69).

Similarly, Hamlet refuses to be accountable for Polonius' death, informing

Laertes before the final contest that he was "punished" with a "sore distraction":

> What I have done
> That might your nature, honor, and exception
> Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.
> Was 't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it, then? His madness. If 't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged;
> His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (5.2.243-53)

Hamlet employs the third person as if to emphasize that this character was born in the

graveyard and not before.[14] He also represents himself as both a victim of his own

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[13] The only other public criticism of Hamlet occurs in the first act, when Claudius berates him for his womanish grief (1.2.90-121).

[14] And, indeed, Hamlet is right in more ways than one, for 5.1 is where we hear the gravedigger speak of Hamlet's birth, the same day that "King Hamlet overcame Fortinbras" (148-49) and, just as significantly, the same day that the gravedigger himself started making houses to last "till doomsday" (61).

madness and a tragic protagonist who has managed heroically to overcome it. This

reversal of perspective is consistent with the prince's altered attitude toward revenge.

While earlier in the play Hamlet is plagued by the idea that killing Claudius could

endanger his soul, the post-sea voyage Hamlet asks Horatio whether "he that hath killed

my king and whored my mother, / Popped in between th' election and my hopes, /

Thrown out his angle for my proper life / And with such cozenage – is it not perfect

conscience / To quit him with this arm?" (5.2.72-77). Hamlet then goes further to

consider both the moral rightness of the act and the mortal danger in refusing it: "And is

't not to be *damned* / To let this canker of nature come / In further evil?" (77-80, my

emphasis).[15] These questions, together with his revised sense of authority, suggest that in

the final act of the play, Hamlet does not merely commit himself to Horatio, asking that

he alone repair his "wounded name"; Hamlet now actively re-conceptualizes his

character and the very nature of his task.

While Hamlet's ostentatious assertion of his name in 5.1 crystallizes his

propensity for reinvention, I chart his evolution toward wonder-wounding speaker across

the entire play. Taking a broader look at how heard wonder annuls, limits, or interrupts

identity, as well as how Hamlet incorporates this wonder-wounding language into his

new role, I address Kenneth Gross' assertion that "[i]t is not a simple thing to say what

the poisoning of an ear amounts to in *Hamlet*, how ears are opened to their own damage,

what states of mind allow a certain poison to take hold, what its mode of infection is."[16]

In his study, Gross uses the play's references to the stunned, wounded, or damaged ear to

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[15] This passage is only in the 1623 Folio and (while we do not know whether the Folio version preceded or
succeeded Q2) could well represent an attempt on Shakespeare's part to build more coherence in the play;
thus, along with Hamlet's new perspective on divine providence, the prince reconfigures his task as a
Christian one: no longer do Roman ideals of honor conflict with Christian ethics.
[16] Kenneth Gross, *Shakespeare's Noise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 14.

illuminate the "wounding presence of the word."[17] But no one has yet considered how

this tragedy is structured according to this kind of language or how the prince finally

accepts the wound as a necessary component of tragic heroism.[18] Reminiscent of the way

the poet grows to appreciate the canker resting at the heart of praise, Hamlet's epideictic

skepticism teaches him how to give shape to the language that has long been shaping him

and thus to reclaim an identity that he reluctantly yields up to the ghost, the play's first

and most potent "wonder-wounding" speaker.[19]

The Ghost: The Wonder-Wounding Speaker

The idea that heard wonder threatens (or forestalls the progress toward) identity

derives from a rather simple premise: all meaning requires language. Visual wonder

means nothing until the viewer translates that experience into words. Even if we are

stunned and stupefied, visual marvels invite the opportunity to shape and interpret what

we see. This perspective is especially relevant to a period that still believed that seeing

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[17] Gross, 200. Playfully performing the linguistic excess that he writes about, Gross addresses the play's creative exploration of everything from slander and rumor to "defamation, detraction, derogation, denigration, delation, calumny, contumely, traducement, [and] backbiting" (17).

[18] See, for example, Mark Robson, "Looking with ears, seeing with eyes: Shakespeare and the ear of the early modern," in *Early Modern Literary Studies* 7.1 (2001), par. 1-23; Wolfgang Clemen, *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Peter Cummings, "Hearing in *Hamlet*: Poisoned Ears and the Psychopathology of Flawed Audition," in *The Shakespeare Yearbook* 1 (1990), 81-92. For a discussion of how Hamlet's "satiric relationship to language" reflects his attempt to distance himself "from that genealogy of fathers upon which a hereditary (in contrast to an elective) model of kingship depends," see Philippa Berry, "Hamlet's Ear," in *Shakespeare Survey* 50 (1997): 57, 64.

[19] Given the play's preoccupation with ears, it should not surprise us that Hamlet reduces visual theater, or physical representation, to "inexplicable dumb shows" (3.2.12-13). Claudius himself does not noticeably react to the dumb show during the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*; he calls for the lights only after Hamlet begins to narrate the play. Stanley Cavell seems persuaded by W.W. Greg's suggestion that Claudius does not react because he did not poison his brother through the ear (*Disowning Knowledge*, 180). Perhaps, however, we can interpret this moment in theoretical terms: this play is criticizing an art without words. See also W.W. Greg, "Hamlet's Hallucination," in *The Modern Language Review* 12 (1917), 393-421.

involved emitting beams from the eyes (rather than passively admitting images).[20] Aural, or heard, wonder, however, *imposes* meaning. It is at once more disruptive and more diffuse than a visual marvel because it freezes a hearer's natural thought process. Hans Jonas, contrasting the eye and the ear, defines sounds as "dynamic events" and "trespassers by nature," while Don Parry Norford argues that a word "penetrates to the soul and brings about a transformation of the entire being."[21]

Heard wonder is therefore sinister as well as seductive. Creeping around corners and arrases, its power can catch us unaware, mastering us before we are given the chance to master it. As Lucretius explains, "an utterance makes its way intact through the labyrinthine passages in objects impervious to visual films."[22] This is because the ear, observes Mark Robson, "unlike the eye, is always open, always ready to receive, and can only be 'closed' with difficulty….to decide whether or not to 'listen' to a speech, one must already have heard it."[23] Thus, while visual wonders (no matter how seductive and beguiling) lend interpretive power to a viewer who can freely gaze upon the marvel or studiously look away, heard wonder obstructs our authority to interpret. This means that it is only with great effort that the "spoken word," to quote Gross, can be "thrown back at

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[20] Stephen Booth discusses this "popular Renaissance theory of optics" in relation to Shakespeare's Sonnets (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 163).

[21] Don Parry Norford, "'Very Like a Whale': The Problem of Knowledge in *Hamlet*," in *ELH* 46.4 (1979), 564. Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 139 (qtd. in Norford 560-61).

[22] Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R.E. Latham (New York: Penguin, 1994), 110. Discussing the violence of sounds, Lucretius goes on to argue that "sounds are disseminated in all directions because each one, after its initial splintering into a great many parts, gives birth to others, just as a spark of fire often propagates itself by starting fires of its own. So places out of the direct path are filled with voices, and all around they boil and thrill with sound. But visual films all continue in straight lines along their initial paths" (110-111).

[23] Mark Robson, "Looking with ears, hearing with eyes," par. 3. Elsewhere in his essay, Robson argues that the "openness of the ear can be viewed as an asset to those who wish to persuade, but it can also be seen as a threat, since it may be penetrated for good or ill…" (par. 14).

speakers" with "force."[24] As we see in *Hamlet*, a wonder-wounded hearer who struggles

to speak is fighting for a chance to advance a competing interpretation of what he sees –

and often a competing representation of himself.[25]

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

While the ghost is the first "wonder-wounding" speaker of the play, the first

character to wound the "ear of Denmark" is of course Claudius, whose murderous act –

the literal corruption of his brother's body through the ear – is subsequently covered up

through "a forged process" of King Hamlet's death (1.5.43-44). It is easy to forget that

we, the audience, are also taken in by "a forged process" in 1.2. Before we even learn

that King Hamlet was murdered, his death is depicted as "common" and Hamlet is

encouraged merely "for some [short] term / To do obsequious sorrow" (1.2.74-96). Only

after we learn the ghost's version of old Hamlet's extraordinary demise do we recognize

this scene for what it really is: a performance on Claudius' part to convince the court that

the time is not out of joint – that Denmark is not in fact "disjoint and out of frame" (20) –

because by his side stands the "imperial jointress to this warlike state" (9). Examined

retrospectively, this scene explains why the ghost uses Hamlet not only to exact revenge

but also to restore an identity that his brother has usurped. To achieve this, the ghost

turns Hamlet into a wonder-wounded hearer.

Ultimately, then, the ghost's horrific story – and not his strange presence – has

greater power over Hamlet's imagination and the play generally. However, the

apparition dominates the opening scene as a visual wonder battling against Horatio and

the guards' appetite for interpretation. Here we are witness to a curious rivalry played

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[24] Gross, *Shakespeare's Noise*, 200.
[25] One could say that the practice of interpreting *Hamlet* profoundly manifests this problem.

out between the ghost – who says nothing and asserts nothing but the wonder of itself – and the guards, who attempt to impose meaning on what they see and to wring out the truth of the specter by charging it to speak.

Act 1 opens with men who, commissioned to watch for potential trouble from Norway, are "sick at heart" and living in fear (1.1.9). Why? Not because of a threat (as they see it) from anything alive, but rather a danger from the other-world: a ghost that looks exactly like Hamlet's father. The play's first line – "Who's there?" – stresses the extent to which the presence of "this thing" (26) has undermined characters' perspectives of one another and even, perhaps, their sense of themselves. Stephen Greenblatt describes *Hamlet* "as a play of contagious, almost universal self-estrangement."[26] From Horatio's response that only a "piece of him" has arrived to see the ghost (1.1.24) to his affirmation that the ghost is as "like the King" as Marcellus is to himself (57-58), the opening sequence explores the "possibility of a difference between oneself and oneself."[27]

The scene suggests, however, that the guards will gain some control over the horrid image, their fears, and even themselves by both speaking *about* the ghost and making Horatio speak directly *to* it. A source of visual wonder, the ghost encourages speech even as it is encouraged to speak. As Marcellus says, "I have entreated him [Horatio] along / With us to watch the minutes of this night, / That, if again this apparition come, / He may approve our eyes and speak to it" (31-34). And he seems to take comfort in that fact. Barnardo, meanwhile, finds solace in story, commencing a

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[26] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 212.

[27] Ibid., 211. As Greenblatt shows, the description of the characters at the beginning of the play anticipates the manner in which Hamlet characterizes his own madness at the end of the play – who "from himself be ta'en away" (5.2.248) – and the way that Claudius describes the sore distraction of Ophelia, who is, the King claims, "divided from herself and her fair judgment" (4.5.92). Hamlet's struggles with and against his identity, as we will see, deepen after his encounter with the ghost.

narrative to Horatio that he makes clear he has told him before: "Sit down awhile, / And let us *once again* assail your ears, / That are so fortified against our story, / What we have two nights seen" (36-39, my emphasis). As if the ghost has been conjured, he enters the scene just in time to interrupt Barnardo's narrative and prevent his being described. "Peace, break thee off! Look where he comes again," Marcellus yells after Barnardo has only had time to narrate the location of the North Star and the time of night (42-47). Barnardo's attempt, then, to "assail" Horatio's "ears" "once again" is foiled by the entrance of the ghost, who competes with the guards for authority. At this moment, the visual wonder momentarily trumps the wonder-filled story, forestalling Barnardo's effort to ascribe meaning to what he has seen and thus to assert a claim over the image.

Horatio, however, is prepared for the challenge. Addressing the ghost, he seems to drive it away:

> HORATIO
>
> What art thou that usurp'st this time of night,
> Together with that fair and warlike form
> In which the majesty of buried Denmark
> Did sometime march? By heaven, I charge thee,
>   speak.
>
> MARCELLUS
>   It is offended.
>
> BARNARDO
>   See it stalks away. (64-60)

Scholars have offered different reasons for the ghost's departure. Eleanor Prosser argues that the ghost is demonic and so leaves when Horatio appeals to heaven.[28] Greenblatt is more persuaded by G.R. Hibbard's suggestion that the ghost is offended when Horatio

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[28] See Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1973), esp. 118-142.

accuses him of usurping the night and the "warlike form" of the king than by Harold

Jenkins' claim that the ghost leaves because he does not see Hamlet standing there.[29]

Admittedly, no single answer will satisfy all readers, but it is possible to expand on

Hibbard's observation. Perhaps the ghost leaves not just because Horatio has accused

him of usurpation, but because Horatio has – through words – usurped the ghost by

speaking about it in its presence.

As becomes evident when the ghost reappears, Horatio's insistence that he

"speak" (61) seems to mask a deeper need to prevent his doing so. This time Horatio

draws a ring of speculations and conditionals around the specter, preempting his authority

to speak for himself:

> If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
> Speak to me.
> If there be any good thing to be done
> That may to thee do ease and grace to me,
> Speak to me.
> If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
> Which happily foreknowing may avoid,
> O, speak!
> Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
> Extorted treasure in thy womb of earth,
> For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death,
> Speak of it.   (140-151)

If Horatio has won this small battle, he does not emerge unscathed. As he himself has

already admitted, the ghost has "harrow[ed]" him "with fear and wonder" (51). This

phrase deserves more than a passing glance. The harrow reinforces the play's skeptical

attitude toward wonder and establishes a connection between "wonder" and "wound."

This phrase also shows that Horatio conceives of the specter as a painful stimulus, even

though modern readers are unlikely to experience that sense of pain. To many, a

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[29] Qtd. in Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 303n.12. See also Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 147.

"harrowing" tale is merely fearful and scary. Horatio, however, surely intended to conjure an image of the agricultural tool whose sharp teeth tear into the soil, breaking it open in preparation for planting. In the context of the play, the harrow carries a similar if symbolic function, wherein the iron rake drawn across Horatio and the audience during the opening scenes makes him and us vulnerable to the information about to be planted by the ghost.

Horatio's reaction to the ghost and his reference to the harrow also shed light on his function in the play, which is not to play the stoic or skeptic at all, but rather a storyteller with a wondrous narrative to unfold before an amazed audience – a storyteller who will harrow the ears of the next generation of listeners.[30] For what kind of stoic, we ask, would inform Hamlet to "season" his "admiration for a while / With an attent ear" until he "may deliver" a "marvel" (1.2.201-204)? Surely only one who is assured of a dark upsurge of evil brought on symbolically by the act of the harrow: "In what particular thought to work I know not," Horatio muses to the guards, "But in the gross and scope of mine opinion / This bodes some strange eruption in our state" (78-80). Horatio's use of the word *eruption*, together with his mention of the harrow, foreshadows the extent to which the ghost's harrowing tale will break open the play's "plot," allowing the seeds of information to be planted, seeds that will later burst into something dangerous and

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[30] Horatio's task at the end of the play, and the manner in which he presents this task to Fortinbras, can be compared to God's order to Moses to convert the laws into a song so as to facilitate his teaching them to the sons of Israel. At the end of *Deuteronomy*, God tells Moses that his "song shall answer them to their face as a witness: for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their posterity" (*Geneva Bible*, 31:21). Moses appropriately begins his song with an invocation: "Hearken, ye heavens, and I will speak: and let the earth hear the words of my mouth" (32:1). Horatio's final speech captures something of the intonation and cadence of this line.

strange.[31] These images also underline the epistemological conundrum explored by the play and suggested, in particular, by the compound adjective "wonder-wounded": To what extent does the external stimulus (the ghost) help create the internal eruption within Elsinore? What power is given in this play to words and can they really transform a landscape, or a character?

These questions about corruption are developed in 1.4, just before the ghost appears to Hamlet. This scene begins somewhat like the first, with the prince's acknowledging (as did Francisco in 1.1) that the "air bites shrewdly" and that "it is very cold," while Horatio adds that the "air" is "nipping" and "eager" (1.4.1-2). Unlike his acquaintances, however, Hamlet seems calm enough to expound upon the flourish of trumpets signaling the start of the evening's festivities. To Hamlet, these sounds, instead of "respeaking earthly thunder," as Claudius earlier boasts (1.2.132), "bray out," animal fashion, the "triumph of his [Claudius'] pledge" (1.4.12-13). What seems to bite and nip Hamlet shrewdly and eagerly, then, is not the cold air through which the ghost will eventually approach him but rather the celebratory noise coming from inside the castle, causing Hamlet to wonder whether his country's "wassail" will make it "traduced and taxed of other nations" (1.4.10-20).

These references to "nipping" and biting lead directly to Hamlet's discussion of the sort of *language* that has power to nip and bite: slanders, rumors, and enforced "attribute[s]" (reputation). Hamlet begins with a political criticism, explaining that the tendency of nations to traduce and tax "takes / From our achievements, though performed

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[31] Claudius echoes this fear later in the play when he rejects Polonius' idea that Hamlet is lovesick and posits instead, "There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood, / And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose will be some danger…" (3.1.178-81).

at height, / The pith and marrow of our attribute" (22-25).[32] In the second half of his

meditation, however, Hamlet considers "particular fault[s]" in "particular men":

> So oft it happens in particular men
> That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
> As in their birth (wherein they are not guilty,
> Since nature cannot choose his origin),
> By the o'ergrowth of some complexion –
> (Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason),
> The form of plausive manners – that these men,
> Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,
> Being nature's livery or fortune's star,
> His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
> As infinite as man may undergo,
> Shall in the general censure take corruption
> From that particular fault. The dram of evil
> Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
> To his own scandal. (1.4.26-41)

This may be the most syntactically tortuous passage in the play, and it is not entirely clear

how we should read it. Perhaps Hamlet is continuing to denigrate the political realm;

words like "scandal" and "general censure" are consistent with his discussion of

traducing and taxing in the first part, and "particular men" may certainly include someone

like Hamlet's father or Gertrude's own "vicious mole": her sexuality.

Equally as likely, however, Hamlet has also begun considering how the public

may distort his own flaws. Indeed, his reference to "general censure" reminds us of

Claudius' hypocritical speech in 1.2, in which the king argues publicly that Hamlet's

"unmanly grief" and his "obstinate condolement" are a "fault to heaven, / A fault against

the dead, a fault to nature," and "to reason most absurd" (97-107). Claudius cannot tell

what Hamlet "has within which passes show" (88); and yet, he can potentially turn

Hamlet's "unmanly grief" into an "o'ergrowth" of his mournful "complexion," thereby

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[32] This speech, which exists only in the second quarto, clarifies Hamlet's preoccupation elsewhere in the play and Shakespeare's preoccupation (in the Sonnets) with the canker in the rose.

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staining the "pith and marrow" of his being. We might say, then, that Hamlet fears

whether he can protect himself from slander and the "general censure." He wonders

whether he, too – like other "particular men" – may in the "general censure take

corruption" from a "particular fault."

Most significantly, this difficult passage focuses on three problems central to

Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism: how do we understand and interpret corruption?

How can one possibly talk about perceived evil without destroying a person's "virtues

else"? And how do we give blame without inviting blame ourselves? As Hamlet

suggests, the corruption caused internally by "the o'ergrowth of some complexion"

(1.4.27) also responds to the external "general censure."[33] Thus, we may never know

whether the censorious public eye merely notes what is actually present or adds to that

corruption by magnifying the "dram of evil," thereby misnaming it. Indeed, this passage

is a fine prelude to the ghost, who enters the scene as soon as Hamlet utters the word

"scandal" and who earns the title "old mole" by the end of Act 1 (1.5.183).

As if the specter has awoken him from a sleep or pulled him out of his

melancholic lethargy, Hamlet's language changes as soon as the ghost appears:

> Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!
> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee. I'll call thee "Hamlet,"
> "King," "Father," Royal Dane." (43-50)

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[33] Gross gives a very succinct explanation of this difficult passage: "The drift of this speech is curiously two-fold. Hamlet is anxious about the way a contingent habit of character can overturn 'the pales and forts of reason,' becoming a source of madness within an individual soul, like a miner working underground, buried from view. Yet he is also troubled by the fact that an elusive 'dram of evil,' a small but visible blot, provokes corruption through being taken up by the 'general censure.' Wounded names harm the living more than they harm the dead. Hamlet's words imply that a person's private character can in some essential, if uncanny, way be shaped by the scandalous rumors which the world perpetuates…" (*Shakespeare's Noise*, 14).

Like Horatio, Hamlet's first impulse is to ascribe an identity to the visual wonder, and he does so with energy and authority. Contrasting the long, syntactically awkward language in the previous speech, the language here is clipped and staccato, less ponderous, more assertive. Even as Hamlet desperately desires this ghost to speak, he insists on painting a picture of the ghost as a body risen from the dead. In other words, the image of his father, whose bones appear to the prince to have "burst their cerements," has forced open Hamlet's own mouth:

> O answer me!
> Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell
> Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,
> Have burst their cerements, why the sepulcher,
> Wherein we saw thee quietly interred,
> Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws. (50-55)

At the end of his manic speech, Hamlet is ready for the ghost. "What should we do?" he asks him, and the ghost beckons (62). Once alone, Hamlet beseeches the ghost to speak and with the exception of a few interjections and supplications, the prince is closed down for nearly one hundred lines.

Almost immediately, the ghost transforms Hamlet into a wonder-wounded hearer ready to "wipe away all trivial, fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past" (1.5.106-7). The ghost begins by informing the prince, "I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood" and "make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres, / Thy knotted and combined locks to part, / And each particular hair to stand an end, / Like quills upon the fearful porpentine" (20-26). Exploiting the harrow's figurative potential, the ghost expands upon its function using sensual detail: just as the agricultural tool creates grooves in the soil, so his story would cause a listener's "knotted and combined locks to part." Such a description unites the

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image of the harrow to the experience of wonder – not only because it harkens back to Horatio's comment that the ghost "harrows" him with "fear and wonder" but also because it foreshadows Hamlet's criticism in the graveyard. While the prince denigrates amplified language that "Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers," the ghost boasts that his story, which can make Hamlet's "two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres," is capable of inflicting the same sort of wonder-wound.

Of course, the ghost's decision not to describe his purgatorial tortures only means that he will endeavor to harrow Hamlet in other ways. Indeed, the spirit's mere reference to such tortures is enough to incite fear and wonder in the prince, and to compel his commitment to the task. Before even recounting any details of the murder, Hamlet beseeches, "Haste me to know 't, that I, with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love, / May sweep to my revenge" (1.5.35-37).[34] Satisfied that the rhetorical harrow has done its work, the ghost, in one of the most chilling comments in the scene, replies, "I find thee apt" (38); in other words, he finds Hamlet sufficiently raked and ready for planting. The ghost then sows into his conversation a circumlocutionary phrase that forces Hamlet to identify the murderer. To draw out those necessary words, he appeals to Hamlet's vitality and his social status, calling him a "noble youth" who has the right to know that the "serpent that did sting" his "father's life / Now wears his crown" (45-47). Completing his verbal picture of the biblical serpent by crowning its head, the spirit injures Hamlet's ear and exploits his imagination in a way that reinforces the very problem of corruption and abuse with which the prince wrestles in 1.4. Once Hamlet

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[34] Hamlet's readiness to turn sworn avenger suits G. Wilson Knight's observation that Hamlet becomes a cynic and "embassy of death." See *The Wheel of Fire* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 17-46.

finally does cry out, "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" the prince has invited the ghost

to broach the particulars of his story (48).

Most readers recognize the connection between Claudius, who pours poison into

his brother's vulnerable ear, and the ghost, who pours poison of a different, though

equally virulent kind, into the harrowed ear of Hamlet when he incites him to revenge.

For the ghost's account of the murder is so grotesque, so vivid, and so palpable that it is

easy to forget that they are words – they seem to course through the ear like a vile poison.

The first half of the ghost's narrative is pure invective, in which the specter rails at both

Claudius, "that incestuous" and "adulterate beast" (1.5.49-50), and Gertrude, the

depraved harpy-wife whom Claudius "won to his shameful lust" (52). We can conjecture

that the ghost would have gone even further in his abuse of Gertrude, expanding on his

description of a "lust" that had "sate[d] itself in a celestial bed" to "prey on garbage" (62-

64), if he had not "scent[ed] the morning air" (65). This sudden awareness does not stop

him, however, from commencing a painfully protracted account of his death. Describing

the poison as a "leprous distilment," the ghost explains how it curdled the king's blood

before working itself outward to the skin, where a "most instant tetter barked about," so

that the king appeared "most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust" over his formerly

"smooth body" (71-80).

By comparing his scabby skin to buboes on the bark of an infected tree, the ghost

also invokes a disease more commonly associated with plants, a disease cognate with

Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism – the canker. [35] The ghost's report of the poison's

fatal path mimics the effect of the canker: the distillation first infects the interior man, the

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[35] This image comes full circle in the gravedigger's reference to the "pocky corpses" in the graveyard
(5.1.170).

blood, before moving outward to the skin much as a canker would infect a plant. From another perspective, the canker works in the rose just as words and poison work through the ear, a body part that somewhat resembles a rose.[36] Implicit and explicit references to the canker pervade the play, and so it is not surprising to discover that the canker makes its way into the ghost's story – the transitional section of the drama. The word emerges earlier when Laertes, warning Ophelia to steer clear of Hamlet, says that the "canker galls the infants of the spring / Too oft before their buttons be disclosed, / And, in the morn and liquid dew of youth, / Contagious blastments are most imminent" (1.3.43-46). Similarly, the ghost tells Hamlet that like a cankered rose he was "cut off, even in the blossoms of my sin" (1.5.83). In this way, the ghost establishes a solid connection not only between the canker and the poison, but also between the murdered king and the blighted flower. As for Claudius, he is both the serpent in the garden and the "canker of our nature" (5.2.79).[37]

In the Sonnets, we saw how the canker – a figure of skepticism and satire –

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[36] I owe this idea to Kenneth Gross, who alerted me to the connection during an e-mail exchange. See also Joel Fineman, "Shakespeare's Ear," in *The Subjectivity Effect*. In this essay, Fineman looks at the iconography of the "vulva-like quality of the ear[s]" on Queen Elizabeth's dress in the famous Rainbow Portrait, which shows a queen covered in body parts, the most significant being the "salacious ear that both covers and discovers" her genitals (228-229). Taking up this idea of Fineman's, Mark Robson explores the synesthetic effect of ear and eye when discussing hearing in terms of an audience (readers, particularly) predisposed to visualize words. Hoping to enlarge our understanding of Renaissance orality, Robson uses Fineman to substantiate the connection between seeing and hearing, pointing out that "the pornographic fetishistic quality [Fineman describes] of the ear can only be seen, not heard" ("Looking with ears, hearing with eyes," par. 18). Interestingly, Robson also explores the way in which the *wounding* power of *sounds* needs to be seen or visualized in order to appreciate fully (par. 14). In the end, Robson wants readers to appreciate the "interpenetration of eye and ear" in Shakespeare, an interpenetration that in Fineman's and Robson's case is sexual as well as textual or rhetorical (par. 19). What makes both arguments persuasive is the fact that most people today spend more time reading Shakespeare than listening to the plays on tape or in the theater. The idea that Shakespeare was writing not only for posterity generally, but for a future readership particularly is important. For a discussion of this issue, see Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*.

[37] This quotation only appears in the 1623 Folio. When Hamlet meditates on Fortinbras's army in Q2, he treats the canker as an internal infection that does not rise to the surface: "Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats / Will not debate the question of this straw. / This is th' imposthume of much wealth and peace, / That inward breaks and shows no cause without / Why the man dies" (4.4.26-30).

symbolizes corruption and vice as well as the interrogatory process. Thus, the poet not

only learns to appreciate the vicious mole in himself but he also discovers that the canker

inheres in the practice of praise. In *Hamlet*, a similar complexity emerges regarding the

ghost's story and Hamlet's subsequent behavior. The key resides in the prince's

affirmation that Claudius is the "canker of *our* nature."[38] Not just a figure of original sin

(or, from a secular standpoint, of the original poison), the canker is the "wonder-

wounding" residue of epideixis, the thing that eats away at a listener's expression of

identity. The canker has already worked its way into King Hamlet's ear and thus his

story, making it impossible for the ghost not to pass it to Hamlet through speech.

But wounding words require an eager listener, for the canker is spread through

interaction. The story of the king's horrific death helps illustrate this complicity. Using

medicinal materials to convey the effects of the poison, the ghost begins by saying that

the distillation "holds…an enmity with blood of man" but also suggests that this

"enmity" exists mostly within the victim himself (1.5.72). As the ghost explains, the

pollutant moves as "swift as quicksilver" – or mercury, a toxic cure for syphilis and other

diseases – "through / The natural gates and alleys of the body" (73-74). In describing

how the poison then forces the blood to clot, the ghost employs yet another medicinal

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[38] Hamlet's description is filled with etymological and historical significance, making the "canker" an extremely important image in the play. In Saxo's and Belleforest's versions of Hamlet, Claudius is called *Feng*, which in one definition means the "venom-tooth of the serpent." See "fang, n." 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 1 December 2009 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50082151>. See Saxo Grammaticus, *Historiae Danicae*, trans. Oliver Elton (1894), in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), VII.60-79. When Kyd or Shakespeare chose to rename the usurping king Claudius, their selection was no less appropriate. "Claud-" suggests "claw" and thus acts as a synonym for "Feng" (See "claw, v." 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 1 December 2009 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50041090.). Moreover, Claudius, fourth Roman Emperor and successor to Caligula, was known for his physical deformity, and his name now means "club-foot." Sources that Renaissance writers would have been acquainted with on this subject are Suetonius' *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* and Seneca's Menippean satire *Apocolocyntosis*. Interestingly, Claudius' physical deformity places him in company with Oedipus, who inspired Freud's psychoanalytic interpretation of *Hamlet*, and Vulcan, the mythological blacksmith.

image, the posset, or curdled milk: "And with a sudden vigor it doth posset / And curd, like eager droppings into milk, / The thin and wholesome blood" (75-77).[39] Suggesting that the victim has partly killed himself, the ghost depicts the distillation in terms of established Renaissance cures which the body itself made poisonous.[40] However subtly, then, these lines help introduce one of the central problems of the play, a problem which is also explored in the Sonnets: to what extent is Hamlet susceptible to the ghost's poisonous words because he is already corrupt and to what extent does the ghost wound him entirely from without? To put it another way, can we distinguish Hamlet from tragic heroes like Macbeth, Lear, and Othello because the prince has no discernible tragic error, or is he as flawed as the rest of them?[41]

Regardless of how we answer these questions, Hamlet is utterly transformed after his meeting with the ghost. By the end of Act 1, the prince not only resolves to avenge his father's murder, but he also vows to yield up his entire value system, his former identity, and even ("shall I couple hell?") his harrowed soul: "Yea from the table of my memory," he says, "I'll wipe away all trivial, fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past, / That youth and observation copied there, / And thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain" (1.5.105-10). And who,

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[39] Hamlet, abusing and berating his mother in her bedroom, picks up this idea later when he describes Claudius as a "mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (3.4.74-75).

[40] From a religious standpoint, if the king is in purgatory, Claudius should not receive all of the blame; the king, resting lazily in his garden, does not prepare himself and so he dies "even in the blossoms of his sin" and with all his "imperfections" on his "head" (83-86). At the very least, this passage explores the extent to which one man can dictate the spiritual fate of another; it also explores the extent to which certain individuals may be more susceptible than others to the poison.

[41] For one discussion of this issue, see James Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in* Hamlet (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Calderwood argues that "Hamlet inherits a world already contaminated by the misdeeds of Claudius and his mother. To come to terms with evil, the heroes of *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* have largely to come to terms with themselves; an order of recovery must begin with self-knowledge. But Hamlet has not merely himself to come to terms with himself but also an outside world warped through no act of his – a world miasmal with mystery, disease, degeneration, death, betrayal, and false seeming" (20).

precisely, will feel the effects of such a commandment? On the one hand, the ghost

works hard to convince the prince of Claudius' evil and of the necessity of killing him:

"O horrible, O horrible, most horrible!" the ghost cries. "If thou hast nature in thee, bear

it not. / Let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damned incest" (87-

90). The ghost, on the other hand, works equally hard at implicating Gertrude: "Taint not

thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught," the ghost knowingly

implores Hamlet. "Leave her to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge /

To prick and sting her" (1.5.85-88). And so, if the ghost has taught Hamlet anything, he

has certainly shown him how to be that prickly thorn in the bosom (or that canker in the

rose) that spreads the infection around, to take the poison in one ear and use it to poison

the entire ear of Denmark. If Claudius begins it, then Hamlet – in his vow of revenge –

promises to lead the corruption to its fruition. "O most pernicious woman!" Hamlet

responds, as if assenting to this task. When Hamlet goes on to cry, "villain, villain,

smiling , damned villain!" he succeeds only in ambiguously assigning "villainy" to

Claudius, to Gertrude, and thence, we soon learn, to every inhabitant of Elsinore,

including himself (1.5.105-06).[42]

Hamlet, of course, is acutely aware that he has been verbally abused, uttering "O,

wonderful!" (128) when he returns to his friends. Here the prince is referring not to the

sublime, innocent wonder we typically associate with miracles and marvels but rather to

the kind of wonder evoked through terror and violence. As I have suggested, the most

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[42] For a discussion of the way in which Shakespeare unites the rhetorical and the judicial – and thus the way in which narrative delay works with accusation and rhetorical amplification – see Patricia Parker, "Shakespeare and Rhetoric: 'Dilation' and 'Delation' in *Othello*," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker (New York: Routledge, 1986). Although Parker does not discuss *Hamlet*, one can see how these issues come together in this scene with the ghost. The apparition delays, amplifies, accuses, employs vivid language; and Hamlet feeds into this by demanding a narrative ("Haste me to know 't") and revealing his desire that the truth be brought "to light" (69).

profound symbol of that violence is the iron-toothed harrow, which facilitates planting by breaking open a plot of land. This tool unites the epistemological and emotional dimensions of wonder (harrow suggesting "horror") with the agricultural metaphor of the canker. If the harrow, therefore, is a figure that enables change, then wonder is its accomplice and the canker – wonder's wound – the generic and rhetorical symbol of such change.

To Speak or Be Spoken: The Wonder-Wounded Hearers in *Hamlet*

Hamlet's encounter with the ghost directly affects the way that he employs language in the middle of the play and underlies our difficulty interpreting his character after the first act. Hamlet supposedly puts on the antic disposition to deflect attention from his true focus – plotting the murder of Claudius. And yet, by the second act of the play and several weeks after his meeting with the ghost, Hamlet has not acted and has instead drawn more attention to himself than he had perhaps intended, the other characters scrambling to figure out "the very cause of Hamlet's lunacy," to borrow Polonius' phrase (2.2.52). At the beginning of Act 2, even readers, separated from the prince for more than three hundred lines and encouraged to view him from the other characters' perspectives, begin asking similar, albeit more informed, questions about Hamlet's madness, his strange behavior, his plans for revenge, and his relationship with and courtship of Ophelia.

In entertaining such queries, we, like the characters, become wonder-wounded hearers and implicated in the process – listening in on soliloquies, spying on Hamlet, and eavesdropping on conversations. However, if we can wrestle with our perplexities from

the comfort of a desk or an armchair, characters cannot. As the play demonstrates, seeking out answers is exceedingly dangerous: Polonius is stabbed while spying behind the arras; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are said to "make love" to their "employment" as detectives for the king and so die (5.2.64); and even Ophelia becomes emotionally caught up in the claustrophobic world of the court when she reluctantly agrees to be her father's lure – to be the "bait of falsehood" that catches the "carp of truth" (2.1.70) – and so like bait she is pulled beneath the water. All the characters become, like Hamlet, wonder-wounded hearers one way or another.[43]

These same characters, however, also play wonder-wounding speakers, narrating off-stage events, crafting disparate accounts of one another, and so competing with one another to report what they have witnessed or been privy to – from Polonius' long-winded homilies about Hamlet's lovesickness and the players' performance of *The Mousetrap* to Ophelia's account of Hamlet in his antic disposition (2.1.87-112). Characters thus become writers, authors, and painters of identity. Ophelia, for example, also imposes an idealized view of Hamlet that alters how we perceive him; through her, we begin to understand what he may have been like prior to his father's death.[44] Her

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[43] Those who might still be objecting to this tendency in the play will probably point to the moment in *The Mousetrap* when Hamlet, narrating the murder, speaks the truth into Claudius' ear and gives an accurate portrayal of his identity. Nevertheless, Hamlet's narration is still disruptive, transporting Claudius out of his present experience with the players and back to that moment in the garden. The fact that Claudius moves from the theater to the chapel to pray suggests that he perceives his identity for a while as nothing beyond that of a killer. My concern in this chapter is not whether characters are speaking truths, but the way they fight for control over the speaking of "truths" and the subtle ways speech can indeed transform the way we see one another and the way we see ourselves. Hamlet would like nothing more than to transform Claudius into a vice-villain; his rhetorical reduction of Claudius to a "mildewed ear" corroborates that.

[44] In *Shakespeare in Performance*, eds. Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason (New York: Random House, 1995), Romana Beyenburg, mining phrases from Ophelia's speech and from other sections of the play, applies epigraphs to the list of contemporary actors that have played Hamlet – Laurence Olivier, for example, is "Hamlet the Dane"; Innokenti Smoktunovsky, "most sovereign reason"; David Warner, "a noble mind"; Alan Howard is "desperate with imagination"; Mark Rylance is "dangerous lunacy"; Daniel Day-Lewis is the rose of the fair state"; Mel Gibson is, of course, the "glass of fashion"; and Kenneth

references, moreover, to courtiers, scholars, and soldiers – and her description of Hamlet as the "glass of fashion" and "mold of form" (3.1.154-56) – explain Claudius' obsession with Hamlet's former and perhaps current popularity, the ease with which he can speak with old friends, his comfortable rapport with the tragedians, and thus what Gross calls the "loomings of a great, unfathomable generosity."[45] Indeed, Ophelia's description challenges the commonplace notion that Hamlet is merely a procrastinating, world-weary misogynist.[46]

    This vacillation between spying and verbal disclosure persists to the end of the play; indeed, the middle of *Hamlet* is built upon this duality. Gertrude, recounting Ophelia's *accidental* death (4.7.186-210), does so in a truly sympathetic way so as to forestall blame and keep the peace, for her second-hand narrative of Ophelia's death

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Branagh is called "the mold of form" (69). However whimsical and subjective this list, it does testify to the various ways Hamlet's character can be played, what speeches can be emphasized, and thus the extent to which the audience's reaction to the character depends on the performer.

[45] Gross, *Shakespeare's Noise*, 16.

[46] For an essay that discusses the correlation between the play's obsession with ears and hearing and the preponderance of narrative insets, see Robert R. Wilson's "Narratives, Narrators and Narratees in *Hamlet*," *Hamlet Studies* 6 (1984), 30-40. Wilson sees this play as the "richest in narrative materials" of any Shakespeare play (30). Taking as his point of departure Tzvetan Todorov's notion that "every new character signifies a new plot" (qtd. in Wilson 30), Wilson argues that Shakespeare's narratives reflect "authorial self-consciousness" – which implicitly connects Shakespeare himself as author with the character speaking those words (32). As Wilson observes, "old stories…can be transferred from perceived character to the voice of the narrator…and from there to the audience, the external narratees, the actual ears, that hear the narrative" (39). He goes on to say that "narratives thread ears, labyrinthinely, it seems, through many dimensions of reality" (39) and concludes his discussion contemplating the way Horatio's narrative will "command ears" and the way that the audience, with "greedy ears," will willingly be commanded (39-40). For a discussion that goes beyond the function of hearing and the nature of narrative conventions to consider the epistemological implications of narration, see James Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in* Hamlet. Calderwood argues that because the narratives are never dramatized, they operate almost like a "cause." "Hamlet's adventures at sea," for example, "all are 'caused' by the narrative Insets that tell them" because the "present" performance is all we have: the "world offstage resides only in the word onstage" and the action originates with the word (164-165). Calderwood's notion accords with my sense of the way characters' narratives are re-creating themselves, others, and events. For essays on other ways of interpreting the narrative insets of *Hamlet*, see for example, David Thatcher, "Horatio's 'Let me Speak': Narrative Summary and Summary Narrative in *Hamlet*," *English Studies* 74.3 (1993), 246-57. See also Barbara Hardy, "The Figure of Narration in *Hamlet*," in *A Center of Excellence: Essays Presented to Seymour Betsky*, ed. Robert Druce (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 1-14. Hardy looks at the soliloquies themselves as part of the narrative insets and sees narration as granting a small "freedom from the pressures of tragic necessity" (11).

hardly sounds like an unnatural suicide. Gertrude also presents a rather curious picture of

Hamlet. Earlier in the play, after Polonius' death, Gertrude tells her husband that Hamlet

has left "[t]o draw apart the body he hath killed, / O'er whom his very madness… /

Shows itself pure: he weeps for what is done" (4.1.25-29). While Hamlet's behavior in

the previous scene suggests that Gertrude is probably fabricating this story, our surmises

can never be confirmed and so we must hold in suspension two opposing views of

Hamlet – one of a prince who irreverently "lug[s]" Polonius' "guts" (3.4.235) out of his

mother's bedroom and another of a remorseful man crouched and crying over the body.

Laertes, too, takes part in this attempt to reinvent himself and the play. As

already discussed, he returns from France ready to take over the revenge drama and even

outdo Hamlet in his praise of Ophelia; through Laertes, we are invited to reassess the

nature of revenge and Hamlet's complicity in the evil of the court. And finally Claudius,

desperate to deflect blame, positions himself as the victim of accumulated incidents

rather than the primary cause. Attributing Ophelia's madness to the "poison of deep

grief" rather than to the poison that began in the king's "orchard" (1.5.66), Claudius

laments, "O Gertrude, Gertrude, / When sorrows come, they come not single spies, / But

in battalions; first, her father slain; / Next, your son gone, and he most violent author / Of

his own just remove…" (4.5.80-86). He goes on to describe the "whispers" surrounding

Polonius' "hugger-mugger" burial and "the buzzers" that "infect" Laertes' "ear / With

pestilent speeches of his father's death," before discussing the loudest noise of all, the

cacophony of a cannon blowing a hapless king apart: "O, my dear Gertrude," he

complains, "this [these troubles], / Like to a murd'ring piece, in many places / Gives me

superfluous death" (88-103). While Claudius insists that these events are harming him,

they are also helping him smother the cries of a dying brother, cries that begin to intensify even before *The Mousetrap*, when Polonius' remark that we "with devotion's visage / And pious action…do sugar o'er / The devil himself" leads Claudius to ponder, "How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience" (3.1.53-58).

Indeed, Claudius' awakened conscience, along with his superlative rhetorical skills, explains why audiences often shift the blame to Hamlet, seeing the prince as a villain rather than a victim. The play's references to aimless arrows and misdirected cannons serve as metaphors for the way that our allegiances can be manipulated through language. Well before Claudius' 4.5 speech, the cannon, or "murd'ring piece," emerges in conversation with Gertrude. Here again, the king, worried about the rumors surrounding Polonius' death, hopes to redirect such slanders against him so that this cannon's "poisoned shot, may miss our name / And hit the woundless air" (4.1.42-45). The fact that the cannon's danger lies not only in the force of the blow but in the poison within or around it makes this image consistent with all the other poisoned points in the play, from the envenomed sword in 5.2 to the verbal daggers and arrows. Indeed, the arrow that Hamlet tells Laertes has been "shot…o'er the house" and struck his brother (5.2.257-8) refers to his killing of Polonius, certainly, but also to the wounds brought upon the court through his abusive, poisonous speech. Then there are the arrows of deception (in their own way envenomed) that Claudius wishes could save him from the poisoned cannon and earn him undue pity. He would have punished Hamlet directly for Polonius' murder, but the king explains to Laertes that the public's affection for the prince is so strong that his punishing "arrows, / Too slightly timbered for so loud a wind, / Would have reverted to my bow again, / But not where I have aimed them" (4.7.23-26).

The play makes it clear that to avoid suffering the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" is to dodge the poisoned points that fly in from every direction and, perhaps more importantly, to use the (h)arrow to fend them off (3.1.66).[47] Such power extends to the way characters manipulate us, the audience.

In this respect, one might argue that no other Shakespeare play pursues so aggressively the way that words not only wound but also expose weaknesses within the speakers themselves – and the way in which speech opens one up for retaliation. Standing in the foreground of this problem is of course Hamlet himself, whose meeting with the ghost in 1.5 produces a struggle to understand the nature of the specter, to assess the ethics of revenge, to draw out Claudius' guilt, and, eventually, to reinvent himself. Hamlet's progress from wonder-wounded hearer to wonder-wounding speaker bears notable resemblance to the poet's development in the young-man sonnets. Both works show the poet/protagonist agonizing over a representation (whether the young man or the ghost) and weighing the differences between the portrayal and the putative original; both works use the canker to expose the damaging effects of praise; and both works center on the poet/protagonist's heroic struggle to come to terms with the canker in himself.

The Ghost, the Young Man, and the Rhetoric of Blame

The apparition that appears to Hamlet in 1.5 has been read as the ghost of European history, the specter of memory, and the legacy of the revenge genre – including perhaps the ghosts of Kyd, Marlowe, even Seneca.[48] Greenblatt argues that by

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[47] Of course, *Hamlet* is a tragedy and in the end, the points fly too fast and furiously to be avoided.
[48] See, for example, Alexander Welsh, *Hamlet in His Modern Guises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 39. See also Calderwood's *To Be and Not Be*, which emphasizes the relationship between Shakespeare and Kyd, and Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, passim.

participating in this tradition of staging ghosts, Shakespeare "suggests that the dead do

not simply rot and disappear, nor do they survive only in the dreams and fears of living

individuals: they are an ineradicable, embodied, objective power."[49] They also inhabit a

middle realm and so in their own way redefine purgatory. According to Greenblatt, "the

space of Purgatory" transcends Catholicism and "becomes the space of the stage where

old Hamlet's Ghost is doomed for a certain term to walk the night" (257).

But this "objective power," as Greenblatt puts it, also pertains to the ghost's

rhetoric and Hamlet's ensuing inquiry into his character. Although Hamlet intends to test

Claudius' guilt during *The Mousetrap* – to "catch," as he says, "the conscience of the

king" (2.2.634) – he also uses Claudius to test the veracity of the ghost: "The spirit that I

have seen / May be a devil," the prince declares, "and the devil hath power / T' assume a

pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps, / Out of my weakness and my melancholy, / As he is

very potent with such spirits, / Abuses me to damn me" (627-32). Hamlet's decision to

trap the king grows out of his desire to "have grounds / More relative than" his own

surmises about the spirit, grounds which he hopes will illuminate the truth of the ghost

who has wounded him (632-33).

Hamlet's skeptical assessment of the ghost is similar to the poet's ethical

investigation of the young man. In both works, the poet/protagonist struggles to remain

loyal to a deeply ambiguous, even manipulative, figure. In the Sonnets, the young man's

vices, or the poet's anxieties about the beloved's potential imperfections, erect an

aesthetic and emotional barrier between the poet and the young man. In *Hamlet*, the

ghost prompts the prince to doubt whether he is dealing with a father from purgatory or a

demonic spirit tempting Hamlet to commit a mortal sin. And just as the young man's

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[49] Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 179-80.

questionable character deflects the poet from his purpose – praise – so the ghost's equivocal character contributes to Hamlet's delay in killing Claudius.

Also under scrutiny in both *Hamlet* and the Sonnets is the very legitimacy of representation. In the poems to the young man, the poet is not just evaluating whether the male beloved's "sweet virtue answer not" his "show" (93) or whether he "do[th] common grow" (69); the poet also avers that "there lives more life" in the beloved himself than in any "praise" he can "devise" (83). In acknowledging the limitations to his individual perception and the likelihood that he can never portray the young man accurately, the poet suggests that the beloved may not only look better in poetry than he really is, but that he may also look worse. A comparable dilemma faces Hamlet, who is visited by a representation of his living father – a representation that chafes against his idealized image of this former king and so provokes debate about the king's real nature.

Indeed, if Prince Hamlet undertakes the task of discovering whether the "figure like" his "father" really *is* his father's ghost (1.2.209) or a demon in disguise, he is confronted with a problem. Some of the evidence pointing to the ghost's demonic nature – evidence that Prosser herself uses to make her case – can also be ascribed to old Hamlet, whose characterization in the play does not always reflect the Hyperion to which Hamlet repeatedly compares him. Emerging in menacing armor in 1.1, the ghost represents a belligerent king whose fearless militarism is ambiguous at best. Reinforcing this ambiguity is the fact that the ghost's appearance recalls two distinct acts of violence: the time when King Hamlet "combated" "ambitious Norway" and the day he "smote the sledded Polacks on the ice" (1.1.72-4). Against Norway, Hamlet is described as "valiant," proud, and, most importantly, self-controlled (96); their duel is "ratified by law

and heraldry" and entered into through a "sealed compact" (98-99). That the ghost

appears "frown[ing]" as well as armed, however, also prompts the memory of the Polacks

killed not in an organized duel – or an honorable combat – but in an "angry parle" (73).[50]

This precipitous slaughter is less like the planned killing of Norway than the "rash and

bloody deed" perpetrated by Hamlet in the closet scene (3.4.33), or the massacre of men

ordered by the "unimproved" (or unrestrained) young Fortinbras (1.1.108). "Cut off,"

significantly, "even in the blossoms" of his "sin" (1.5.83), King Hamlet's rightful

successor to the throne of Denmark is neither Claudius nor even Prince Hamlet, but

rather Fortinbras, who "find[s] quarrel in a straw" and exterminates opponents for an

"eggshell," a "trick or fantasy of fame," a useless "plot / Whereon the numbers cannot try

the cause" (4.4.56-66).[51] Thus, King Hamlet is from one perspective a true descendent of

Francois de Belleforest's Horvendile, the "most renouned pirate that in those dayes

scoured the seas and havens of the north parts."[52]

Is the ghost, then, really a demon or is he a representation of Hamlet's father that

the prince would rather not confront? In the Sonnets, the poet is often dismayed by his

own portrayal of the young man, painfully aware that the canker in his poetics could

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[50] See "parley, n. (and int.)." 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 3 March 2010
<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/501718089>. I am taking *parley* to mean negotiation or "truce," a
"meeting…for discussing the mutual arrangement of matters such as terms for an armistice" (2.a). In most
cases, parleys imply peace not slaughter.

[51] The complicated textual history of *Hamlet* reflects the tension in the play regarding the prince's (and the
play's) attitude toward old Hamlet. Shapiro prefers the Folio version, which omits Hamlet's seventh
soliloquy. He points out that the "image of Fortinbras marching through Denmark on his way to slaughter
Poles can't help but invite comparison to a scene enacted thirty years earlier when Hamlet's father had
taken the same route to the same end. Were his actions," Shapiro muses, "any less brutal than
Fortinbras's…?" (*A Year in the Life*, 311). Indeed, omitting a soliloquy that invites such a comparison also
reinforces the "Hyperion" image that Hamlet sustains of his father. Shapiro himself suggests that omitting
the seventh soliloquy gives Claudius' speech about his plans to have Hamlet executed greater emphasis and
turns the king "into a more formidable adversary…" (312). Again, to emphasize Claudius' "formidable"
character mitigates the questionable nature of old Hamlet.

[52] Belleforest, *The Hystorie of Hamblet* (1582), in *The Sources of Hamlet*, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz (London:
Oxford University Press, 1926), 181.

suggest a living blot within the beloved. However, even as praise discovers vice, vice

provokes more praise. As we see in the Sonnets, the poet repeatedly attempts to obscure

the canker with heightened celebrations of his rose; in *Hamlet*, the prince copes with the

ghost's unnatural demands by making idealized, encomiastic effusions about his father.

As a representation of Hamlet's father, the ghost also shares another quality with the

young man of the Sonnets: belatedness. In *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, Fineman argues

that because the young man appears so late in the history of sonnet writing, he cannot but

gesture toward the idealized beloveds who precede him and so signify his own

insufficiency. Born too late, the young man can never be purely ideal. The ghost, too, as

a wonder-wounding speaker and wielder of the harrow, represents a dying state; he is a

spectral figure of an epideictic mode that has always been corrupt and corrupting. And

so, instead of inheriting from the ghost a legacy of praise, idealism, and wholeness – all

of which old Hamlet seems to embody for his son – the prince inherits the revenge

drama, a compromised subjectivity (or cloven identity), and the canker in the rose.

The "beloveds'" presumed insufficiencies therefore incite the poet and

protagonist to investigate their own roles. Just as the speaker of the Sonnets deploys the

canker only to incur doubt about himself and his poetics, so Hamlet's skeptical musings

prior to the performance of *The Mousetrap* initiate moments of self-appraisal, self-

examination, even self-blame. The fact that the climax of Hamlet's self-abuse – his third

soliloquy (2.2.576-634) – coincides with his greatest skepticism about the ghost

reinforces the connection he shares with this apparition. As already discussed, Hamlet's

soliloquy at the end of Act 2 culminates with his decision to catch the king's conscience

and to test the ghost's veracity. However, Hamlet has presumably devised the plan

before this meditation begins, having asked a player only moments earlier whether he can

insert some lines into the play he has suggested – *The Murder of Gonzago* (2.2.566-69).

Oddly, Hamlet's lament, "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (577), seems to have

picked up at a place in his emotional development prior to his request to alter the script.

In this way, the soliloquy appears to backtrack so as to re-trace his development toward

his plan, and toward an appreciation for drama's capabilities.[53]

How Hamlet attempts to overcome his impulse to flagellate himself is important.

The first several lines of the soliloquy – his comparison of himself to the actor playing

Hecuba; his meditation on what an actor with his passion would do; his invitation to an

imagined audience to berate him; his violent outburst against Claudius, the real "slave"

whose "offal" should have "fatted all the region kites" (606-607) – develops gradually

into a moment of intense self-deprecation:

> Why, what an ass am I! This is most brave,
> That I, the son of a dear father murdered,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words
> And fall a-cursing like a very drab,
> A scullion! Fie upon 't! (611-616).

Paradoxically, Hamlet's spirited self-blaming begins finally to reach toward a cause: he is

a whore not only to himself, his scruples, his self-doubt, but also to the ghost from

"heaven and hell." Finally, in the last section of the soliloquy, Hamlet's equivocation

seems to have provoked a need to choose one over the other: "The spirit that I have seen /

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[53] G.R. Hibbard remarks in his edition of *Hamlet* that "the convention of the soliloquy is employed in an unusual and highly original fashion here" and that "what Hamlet does in this speech is to voice, in their right sequence, the ideas that have been going through his mind since he asked for the speech about Pyrrhus…." (233). See also J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* [(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951)], which argues that the third soliloquy is "in effect a dramatic reflection of what has already taken place" (qtd. In Hibbard 142).

May be a devil" (627-28). Here he implicitly identifies the cause of his deliberation and

a need to know the truth.

Looking at this soliloquy in isolation, one notices how Hamlet's skepticism about

the ghost seems to quell his self-doubt and curtail self-abasement: *I shouldn't hate myself*,

this meditation suggests. *I haven't acted because I doubt this ghost*. Nonetheless, setting

the soliloquy in the context of what comes before and after complicates this simple

reading. Hamlet in fact remains uneasy even after he seems to have purged his negative

emotions; and his decision to test the ghost does not curb the impulse to blame himself.

In the next scene and his most famous soliloquy in the play (3.1.64-96), he contemplates

death. The ensuing "get thee to a nunnery" speech shows him confessing madly to

Ophelia, "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I

have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in"

(3.1.134-138). Hamlet's conclusion to these revealing lines – "We are arrant knaves all;

believe none of us" (139-140) – explains why he continues to be uneasy. Rather than pin

the blame on Claudius, as he does in Act 1 ["There's never a villain dwelling in all

Denmark / But he's an arrant knave" (137-38)], Hamlet now widens the signifier to

include all men – himself and necessarily the ghost, who has called for an act of revenge

that Hamlet criticizes by 3.1. By yoking himself to all the arrant knaves of the world,

Hamlet demonstrates why his skepticism about the world – and about the ghost – only

deepens his self-doubt.

Consequently in *Hamlet*, as in the Sonnets, the poet/protagonist clings devotedly

to a representation that threatens to destroy him. In the poems, the speaker quickly

recognizes that the quality of his poetry depends on the nature of an ambiguous beloved;

in *Hamlet*, the protagonist seems initially to believe that the authenticity of the ghost determines the integrity of his own role and thus the play itself. In both cases, a person's doubt – however natural and necessary – challenges the legitimacy of the object on whom his work or his play depends. And so, Hamlet rebels. Self-blame, he discovers, does little to fix the problem; and his skepticism about the ghost proves merely to be an obstacle, for it provokes questions that the play never answers.[54] With the ghost having interrupted Hamlet's progress toward identity, and Claudius – as we shall see in the next section – having usurped the language of "praise and ceremony," the prince becomes a cruel jester, a Yorick who trades in his coxcomb for a whip.[55]

Claudius, the Canker, and the Problem of Praise

If Hamlet's ethical struggle with the ghost echoes the poet's fraught perspective on the young man, Claudius and Hamlet reflect the problem of the canker and the rose. As I will show in this section, these two characters – these "pass and fell incensed points / Of mighty opposites" – represent admixtures of a now skeptically-inflected epideixis and so both embody versions of the canker and the rose (5.2.68-69). Although Claudius' character remains half-shrouded beneath his public persona, we know that he is ambitious, lustful, and jealous. Nonetheless, he is also a persuasive, charismatic ruler, having garnered enough votes to legitimate his succession. In this respect, Claudius represents not only the canker – or the snake in the garden – but also the canker rose: the specious praise of the fallen world.

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[54] As Greenblatt affirms, Hamlet's test "notoriously leaves the question of the Ghost's origin unanswered" (*Hamlet in Purgatory*, 239). Harry Levin moves in this direction as well. See *The Question of Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951).
[55] Kenneth Gross, *Shakespeare's Noise*, 20.

To understand his rhetorical methodology, we need only look at what troubles him about Hamlet: his popularity. In conversation with Laertes, Claudius worries that the public "dipping all his [Hamlet's] faults in their affection," will "Work like the spring that turneth wood to stone, Convert[ing] his gyves into graces" (4.7.21-24). For Claudius, praise has power both to coat and to transform. Thus, the king's description transcends the notion that praise highlights virtues while blame enlarges vices; "affection" and admiration can turn "wood to stone" and vicious moles of nature into laudable distinctions. The poet explores this very tendency in sonnet 95, lamenting, "How sweet and lovely dost thou make the shame / Which like a canker in the fragrant rose / Doth spot the beauty of thy budding name: / O in what sweets dost thou thy sins enclose!" By the end of the poem, and after remarking that he cannot "dispraise but in a kind of praise" (turn gyves to graces), the poet says of the young man: "beauty's veil doth cover every blot, / And all things turn to fair that eyes can see!" Here the poet seems to blame the young man for transmuting "shame" into a kind of sweetness, even though he knows that he, too, is complicit in this deception.

Using praise in an unethically transformative way, the poet knows that manipulating his representation of the young man shields the canker from himself as well as from us. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, Claudius' public flattery and his manipulation of others are partly intended to quell his surging conscience and to "cure" the "hectic" in his "blood" (4.5.75-76) so that "all may be well" (3.3.76). This suggests that Claudius endeavors not only to conceal his crimes from others, but also perhaps to hide his sins from himself. One of the most complex villains in his corpus, Claudius seems at times to

be a sympathetic villain, a villain with a conscience and an interiority that he would, quite literally, *fain (and so feign to) deny*.

Self-deceived as well as deceiving, Claudius on one level seems to teeter between self-delusion and self-concealment such that the latter characteristic seems to create or enable the former. On another level, his manipulation of others – the way he molds them into loving wives who are quick to cast off their mourning gear, avengers who know no bounds, trusted subordinates who dutifully undertake to sift his nephew for the truth – allows a double ratification: the people will protect him (so he hopes), and they will help conceal a part of himself that he would rather not see. Of course, Claudius is smart enough to recognize that his mysterious nephew is exceedingly dangerous. Paradoxically, this could well explain his initial flippancy about Hamlet's behavior – an attempt temporarily to convince himself that Hamlet is nothing more than an excessively mournful, lovesick schoolboy. In an odd moment early in the play, the king says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "Something have you heard / Of Hamlet's transformation, so call it, / Sith nor th' exterior nor the inward man / Resembles what it was" (2.2.4-7). Perhaps "inward" refers merely to Hamlet's behavior, but it is strange how Claudius can presume to distinguish Hamlet's exterior from his interior. At the very least, Claudius' cavalier attitude toward a person's interiority reflects a kind of wishful belief in its malleability, or denial of its dangerous power to consume a person from the inside out.

Such an attitude also makes Claudius adept at manipulating people whom he knows can be seduced by wood if he coats it sufficiently in honey, people who have the same need to conceal truths from themselves as he does. Indeed, his rhetorical tactics work on most of the characters in the play, and Claudius mistakenly believes early on that

Hamlet will succumb to this sort of deception as well. During his meeting with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Claudius "entreat[s]" them to "draw" Hamlet "on to pleasures" in order to uncover the cause of his unusual behavior (2.2.10-18). The line's sensual inflection cannot help but indicate how Claudius may have wooed Gertrude, whose probable infidelity made her keen to hide her "black and grained spots" beneath a second marriage contract (3.4.101). In their shared intimacy, Gertrude and Claudius satisfy each other's need to conceal themselves from themselves.

Later in the play, Claudius employs a similar rhetorical strategy on Laertes when they concoct their competing revenge drama against Hamlet. Just before they devise the plan, Claudius reminds Laertes of the Norman who gave him "such a masterly report / For art and exercise," declaring that it "'twould be a sight indeed / If one could match" his ability (4.7.109-113). In praising Laertes indirectly through the Frenchman, the king slowly draws the vulnerable, would-be avenger toward his own purpose. To legitimize the tournament, Claudius describes how he will incite others to praise Laertes' ability, encouraging them to set up a wager. In Claudius' words, he will "set a double varnish on the fame / The Frenchman gave" Laertes (149-150). This comparison of praise to a kind of *varnish* reinforces Claudius' description of praise earlier in the same scene as well as illuminates the play's (and the Sonnets') fundamental skepticism of praise and flattery. The Folio takes this idea further when it shows Claudius working even harder to persuade Laertes to go along with the plan. In this edition, Laertes does not immediately consent; the line – "My lord, I will be ruled, / The rather if you could devise it so / That I might be the organ" (4.7.76-79) – has been omitted. Mitigating Laertes' eagerness to act, the Folio instead stresses the function of false praise in turning him into a willing participant.

Relatively minor, this textual modification nonetheless sharpens the contrast between Claudius and Hamlet's epideictic point of view. While Claudius gives admiration the ability to turn wood to stone, and gyves to graces, Hamlet pointedly distances himself from such a perspective by suggesting that the coating will only make the interior worse. In the closet scene, Hamlet tells his mother that a "flattering unction…/ will but skin and film the ulcerous place, / Whiles rank corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen" (166-170). He goes on to advise her not to "spread the compost on the weeds / To make them ranker," words that remind us of the rank garden invoked in the first soliloquy and then reiterated in the ghost's assertion that the ear of Denmark has been "rankly abused" (172-73).

Just as Hamlet's skepticism about the ghost incurs self-blame, so praise – whether sincerely meant or not – reinforces his own failings, or the wound within himself. Prior to his professed admiration of Yorick and Ophelia in 5.1, Hamlet praises only three other people in the play – the actor playing Hecuba, Horatio, and of course his father – and in each case, his verbalized admiration does not perform what ideal praise should perform, which is to bind together the speaker and the addressee, or narcissistically to commend in the other what one would like to recognize in himself.[56] Quite the opposite, praise confers a lack and does not stem from narcissism but envy. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet refers to his father as "so excellent a king" and "Hyperion" (1.3.143-144) before declaring that his uncle is "no more like my father / Than I to Hercules" (157-158). To

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[56] One could also add Fortinbras to this list, but I withhold his name for two reasons. First, the only time that Hamlet shows some admiration is in his seventh soliloquy, which is not in all versions of the play. And second, the admiration that Hamlet does express is equivocal. While Fortinbras' ability to "expos[e] what is mortal and unsure / To all that fortune, death, and danger dare" (4.4.54-55) reminds Hamlet of what he himself has failed to do, the prince also considers that Fortinbras is doing all this for an "eggshell" (56) and for a "fantasy and trick of fame" (64) – not for real honor. In this respect, Hamlet's mixed admiration for Fortinbras does not reinforce his own failings at all; instead, Hamlet's recognition of Fortinbras' problems makes himself look better.

Horatio's remark that old Hamlet was a "goodly king," the prince replies, "He was a man. Take him for all in all. / I shall not look upon his like again" (1.2.195-96) – especially, perhaps, when Hamlet looks into a mirror. Later, in one of his zany conversations with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet confesses that he cannot make them a "wholesome answer" because his "wit's diseased," a word that takes us back to the canker or the wound (3.2.349-350). Part antic, part truth, this confession seems to follow Hamlet into the closet scene, where he describes Claudius as a "mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (3.4.74-75). For the entire play, we watch Hamlet anxiously trying to measure up to his father and, as he perceives it, becoming instead a kind of mildewed ear blasting the world.

Hamlet's praise of the actor playing Hecuba, too, stems from a desire to be like that actor and thus from an acute recognition that he is not. "Is it not monstrous," Hamlet laments, "that this player here, / But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit / That from her working all his visage waned" (2.2.577-581). In his jealous admiration, Hamlet bemoans the fact that a mere player can produce the illusion of depth. Even Hamlet's private admiration for Horatio only emphasizes the distance between them. To Hamlet, Horatio "hast been / As one in suffering all that suffers nothing, / A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards / Hast ta'en with equal thanks" (3.2.69-72). Indeed, Horatio's "blood and judgment" are "so well commeddled" that Hamlet (in his "homily on the Mount") calls him "blessed" (72-4). And if the prince desires to "wear" this friend in his "heart's core" – in his "heart of heart" – it is because Horatio represents what Hamlet does not: a man who is not "passion's slave," a man who

can sit quietly through a performance of *The Mousetrap* without violently disrupting the play (77-8).

From Wonder-Wounded Hearer to Wonder-Wounding Speaker

So far I have explored the relationship between *Hamlet* and the Sonnets in terms of relatively static patterns. The ambiguity of the "beloved" other, the canker and the rose, and the problem of specious praise (symbolized in the Sonnets as the canker rose) are important features in both works. Now I turn to dynamic patterns, demonstrating how Hamlet's development into "scourge and minister" in 3.4 mirrors the poet's development across his lyric sequence. The poet and protagonist make compromises to maintain their identities; then they transgress the bounds of rhetorical decorum to save themselves and their work, discovering in the end that their own artistic identity has changed.

Hamlet's Rebellion Against Revenge

When one assesses a tragic hero, what ethical standards apply? At the beginning of *Hamlet*, the prince is told that his primary task is to kill Claudius, but would such an act ennoble him? Initially, it would seem so. The ghost makes it clear that King Hamlet's memory depends on Hamlet's plucking Claudius from the rose of the fair state. Likewise, in the Sonnets, the poet recognizes that his rose of praise – and the integrity of the young man and his work – is undermined by the canker. But in neither case is the canker avoidable. The poet comes to appreciate that the vicious mole of nature is part and parcel to the work of praise and that eliminating it would only be possible if he put down his pen, burned his manuscript, and never composed sonnets again. In *Hamlet*, the

relationship between the canker and the rose is more complex but analogous. For the prince to kill Claudius in cold-blooded revenge would hardly protect the rose, nor would it rid Elsinore of the canker. To play the avenger puts us in danger of becoming what we loathe. And so, like the poet of the Sonnets, Hamlet rebels against the expectations established at the beginning of the play: just as Shakespeare's poems are not about pure praise, so *Hamlet* is not a typical revenge drama. At stake in both works is the poet/protagonist's need to reassert an autonomous self, come what may.

Questions about Hamlet's identity should of course consider "the question" of the play – what it means "to be." The prince's deceptively straightforward soliloquy not only explores the nature of existence and the afterlife; it also marks an early turning point in Hamlet's development into "scourge and minister." Most readers, however, tend to interpret the soliloquy as *merely* a meditation on suicide, failing to recognize that it is also a rumination on the ethics of revenge, with Hamlet weighing earthly suffering and political justice against divine judgment and the suffering that may come after death, the "undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (3.1.87-88).

To illuminate this level of complexity, Harry Levin divides the soliloquy into a four-part, rather than two-part, medieval debate, persuasively showing how the first part of the question – "to be" – is further broken down and "entails two possibilities: 'to suffer,' and, if we flinch from that for the moment – 'to take arms…'".[57] According to Levin, the first five lines of the soliloquy fall under the "be" category, which means that Hamlet's war against a sea of troubles describes one way of living in this world – not necessarily an act of self-slaughter intended to propel a person into the next. Thus, the

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[57] Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet*, 69.

soliloquy seems to suggest that "how we end our troubles by opposing them is equivocal" and that "our opposition may do away with them *or* with ourselves."[58]

What, however, if we read the soliloquy as an exploration of the way in which "opposition" could "do away with them" *and* "with ourselves"? The enjambment in lines 4 and 5 corroborates this possibility when it forces the first part of the debate – action – into the same line as Hamlet's first reference to death:

> To be or not to be – that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep – (3.1.64-8)

The fact that the phrase, "opposing, end them," rests on the same line as "to die, to sleep" suggests that any kind of violent action – self-directed or outwardly directed – leads to death. For Hamlet to make Claudius' "quietus" with a "bare bodkin" is, so he believes, to make his own (83-4).

With all its faults, Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) neatly crystallizes my interpretation. Performing the meditation while looking in a mirror, Branagh points the dagger at Derek Jacobi (spying on the other side of the mirror) and himself. This cinematic adaptation aside, the language throughout the passage – from the "law's delay" (80) and the "insolence of office" (81) to "a sea of troubles" (67) and "enterprises of great pitch and moment" (94) – shows that Hamlet is not just focusing on inner turmoil, despair, and self-slaughter (which he rejects in his first soliloquy as something against

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[58] Ibid., 69 (my emphasis). See also Phoebe S. Spinrad, "The Fall of the Sparrow and the Map of Hamlet's Mind," *Modern Philology* 102.4 (2006), 453-77. In this essay, Spinrad argues that "we need not take his 'to be or not to be' question as personal suicide" since it is "rejected" in the first soliloquy (465). For other discussions on the possibility of a shift between self-slaughter and action against Claudius, see V.K. Whitaker, *The Mirror up to Nature* (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1965); and Walter N. King, *Hamlet's Search for Meaning* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1982).

which the Everlasting has fixed his canon), but also pitting himself against *external* problems.

The idea that Hamlet, in murdering Claudius, could also succeed (literally and figuratively) in killing himself describes the very essence of revenge. After all, heeding the ghost and becoming a typical avenger does more than immortalize his father; "locate," as Gross contends, "the image or memory of the father, however diminished, in the subjectivity of the son"; or, as Stanley Cavell argues, obviate his subjectivity altogether by "debar[ring] Hamlet from existence."[59] Such an act also tightens the unsettling bond between Hamlet and Claudius through an act of retribution that ideally mirrors, in order to set right, the first act of violence. Extracting an eye for an eye, an avenger runs into danger of becoming like the person who perpetrates the original crime. Though commonplace, this logic unites the century-old Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's Oedipal complex with the play's generic struggles. Both points of view are represented in a similar way in the play and define each other; thus we can look at the generic difficulties as a kind of generic incest, and the psychoanalytic complexities developed by Freud (and elaborated on by Ernest Jones) in terms of the logic of revenge.[60] During *The Mousetrap*, when Hamlet makes the killer and usurper the nephew Lucianus rather than the uncle/brother, he can dramatize the murder and fulfill the act of revenge (as well as bring to the surface repressed Oedipal desires) all in a single moment. This also, however, makes Hamlet more like Claudius.[61]

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[59] Gross, *Shakespeare's Noise*, 29; Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 188.
[60] Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1954).
[61] Indeed, Hamlet does not kill Claudius while in prayer because he intends to do to his uncle precisely what his uncle did to his father: "He took my father grossly, full of bread, / With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May…. / And am I then revenged / To take him in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and seasoned for this passage? / No. / Up sword," he concludes, deciding that he, too, will cut off

The connection between these characters reaches a critical point in the "to be or not to be" soliloquy. Poised in the dead center of the play, this meditation, Levin argues, is a "prelude to action" and a turning point in the way Hamlet confronts the world and himself in that world.[62] Thus, even as the soliloquy knits Hamlet to his enemy, it also shows him coming into his own as a character. It recapitulates only to reject the sort of premeditated vengeful action that would, as Maus points out, culminate in the avenger's immediate demise.[63] Of course, it would be a logical fallacy to claim that Hamlet does not act; he does kill Polonius. However, I want to suggest that Hamlet, by taking the path of rhetorical revenge in which he can publicly vent his anger on the court, allows him to oppose, rather than become another, Claudius. Attempting to distance himself from the public praise of which he is so suspicious, Hamlet commits himself as much to speaking daggers as flinging real ones, of using cankered language against an already cankered court. This commitment is made possible by Hamlet's abandonment of his original quest to understand the nature of the ghost.[64] Having minimized his skeptical explorations, Hamlet works instead to assert an interpretation, re-crafting his role and the events surrounding him, and thus shifting rather decisively from wonder-wounded hearer to

Claudius in the blossoms of his sin (3.3.85-93). One can read this moment, however, as an attempt by Hamlet to justify inaction and thus to ensure that he does not become another Claudius.

[62] As Levin affirms, Hamlet, "having taken this long look…will leap into a quick succession of adventures; he will make choices, right or wrong, thick and fast. The decisive event will be planned by others, and will play unexpectedly into his hands" (*The Question of Hamlet*, 73).

[63] Maus, *Inwardness and Theater*, 56.

[64] The ghost continues to evoke a sinister character – even after Hamlet is convinced of Claudius' guilt. See again Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 239. Also, the fifth soliloquy echoes in a rather disturbing way the horror evoked in the first scene: "'Tis now the very witching time of night, / When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out / Contagion to this world" (3.2.419-421). Here Hamlet seems to be modeling himself after the sinister apparition of 1.5, a point I will develop later in the chapter. Further evidence of the ghost's ambiguously sinister character can be found in the closet scene. When Hamlet sees the ghost, he immediately invokes heaven: "Save me and hover o'er me with your wings, / You heavenly guards!" (3.4.118-119).

wonder-wounding speaker. Indeed, his fifth soliloquy charts that transformation when it

shows Hamlet espousing a new role:

> Now could I drink hot blood
> And so such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother.
> O heart, lose not thy nature; let not ever
> The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom.
> Let me be cruel, not unnatural.
> I will speak daggers to her, but use none.
> My tongue and soul in this be hypocrites:
> How in my words somever she be shent,
> To give them seals never, my soul consent. (3.2.422-32)

The key word here is *hypocrite*, which has less to do with professions of false virtue than

with dramatic representation. Derived from the Greek, *hypocrite* suggests "actor on the

stage," "pretender," and "dissembler."[65] But if Hamlet indeed becomes a "hypocrite," he

does so on his terms. "Speak[ing] daggers" and "cleav[ing] the general ear with horrid

speech" (2.2.589), Hamlet decides to force his soul so to his own conceit, or his soul – as

he affirms here – to his tongue.

Hamlet as Scourge and Minister

Instead of *heeding* the ghost's request to the letter, therefore, Hamlet becomes *like*

the ghost, mimicking his language and behavior in a protracted battle for rhetorical

control. This battle begins with Hamlet's inexplicable dumbshow in 2.1. The first

character to report his bizarre behavior is Ophelia, who describes him as looking (with

his ridiculous accoutrements and frightful demeanor) "as if he had been loosed out of hell

/ To speak of horrors" (2.1.93-4). She goes on to say that after holding her at arm's

length and perusing her face for several seconds, Hamlet departs just as strangely: "with

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[65] See "hypocrite, n." 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 7 January 2010
<http://www.gettysburg.edu:2255/cgi/entry/50110531 >.

his head over his shoulders turned," Ophelia says, "He seemed to find his way without

his eyes, / For out o' doors he went without their helps…" (109-11). Other points of

contact between Hamlet and the ghost quickly emerge as well. As we know, Marcellus

tells Horatio that the specter "hath gone by our watch" "twice before" (1.1.76-77); and

Horatio reiterates this ominous behavior when he says to Hamlet, "Thrice" the ghost

"walked / By their oppressed and fear-surprised eyes / Within his truncheon's length"

(1.2.212-214). Considered in the context of these passages, Polonius' description of

Hamlet "walk[ing] four hours together / Here in this lobby" (2.2.173-174) suggests that

the play has already begun to repeat itself with Hamlet as the new ghost: first with the

appearance of the silent prince; then the perplexing description of his strangeness (by

Ophelia in this case); and, finally, the decision to draw out his truth and make him speak.

Much more than a mere shadow of the ghost, Hamlet effectively *becomes* the

ghost once he learns to imitate his rhetorical patterns. This imitation reaches its climax in

the closet scene (3.4), where Hamlet's encounter with Gertrude mirrors in structure and

content the ghost's encounter with Hamlet. We can begin sketching out the similarities

by first looking at Gertrude's reaction to *The Mousetrap*. Rosencrantz remarks to Hamlet

after the play that his "behavior hath struck her [Gertrude] into amazement and

admiration" (3.2.354-5), to which Hamlet knowingly replies, "O wonderful son that can

so 'stonish a mother!" (356-7). In keeping with Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism,

wonder here connotes a profoundly negative emotion, which Hamlet's sardonic remark

substantiates further. Gertrude is amazed and wonderstruck because she has just

witnessed Hamlet's misogynistic behavior toward Ophelia and, implicitly, toward

herself; and she has watched his passionate, disruptive outburst during the performance

of the play. The queen has also heard herself severely criticized for marrying Claudius. Despite her nonchalant objection that the "lady doth protest too much, methinks," Gertrude cannot but be disturbed by the players' theatrical mirror (3.2.254) – even if the reflection of herself is distorted.

The assault on Gertrude builds in 3.4. Once in his mother's room, Hamlet immediately insists that killing Polonius is not quite as bad as "kill a king and marry with his brother" (3.4.35). Such words – though astonishing in their directness – take us back to the player queen, who maintains that "none wed the second [husband] but who killed the first" and a "second time I kill my husband dead / When second husband kisses me in bed" (3.2.203-08). The answer to the question, then, of whether Hamlet truly accuses his mother of murder is ambiguously in the affirmative. By virtue of marriage, Gertrude is a murderess because she has become one flesh with a murderer, a Christian tenet that Hamlet refers to more than once in the play. While this accusation of murder never becomes literal – that is, the play does not support the notion that Gertrude knew about or was involved in her husband's death – Hamlet nonetheless disables his mother from the very beginning of the scene, turning her into a wonder-wounded hearer.

In this respect, Gertrude's experience parallels Hamlet's meeting with the ghost. True, she denies knowledge of the murder ["As kill a king?" (3.4.36)] while Hamlet claims to have foretold it ("O, my prophetic soul! My uncle!"), but the prince is just as broken up in 1.5 as his mother is in 3.4. As we know, the ghost does not have to say much to strike fear and wonder in Hamlet at the beginning of their encounter. Without, for example, disclosing the "secrets" of his "prison house," the specter harrows up Hamlet's soul, "freez[ing] his "young blood" and causing his "two eyes, like stars, [to]

start from their spheres" (1.5.21-23). In the closet scene, Hamlet takes up the same

rhetorical harrow, raking his mother with his violent rhetoric and planting his

condemnation of her second marriage.[66] Before disclosing the source of his complaint,

however, Hamlet tells her, "Leave wringing of your hands. Peace, sit you down, / And

let me wring your heart; for so I shall / If it be made of penetrable stuff, / If damned

custom have not brazed it so / That it be proof and bulwark against sense" (41-46). Such

a command reminds us of the ghost's admonition to Hamlet: "I find thee apt; / And duller

shouldst thou be than the fat weed / That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf, / Wouldst

thou not stir in this" (1.5.38-41). In both instances, the speaker captures the listener by

challenging his or her authority and power to listen and react appropriately; both orators

rein in their unwilling but captivated auditors by encouraging them to fight for their sense

of worth.

In each case, the speaker's rhetorical control depends on the listener's willingness

to contribute – to respond, to ask questions, to put himself within the compass of the

speaker's authority. Just as the ghost's story demands Hamlet's participation, so

Hamlet's own tirade plays heavily off of his mother's questions and objections –

Gertrude spurring her son on by twice imploring what she has done. Hamlet, much like

the ghost, responds to his mother by recounting the evil of the act before describing the

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[66] The oft-mentioned connection between *verse* and *furrow* offers another way of understanding the
relationship between the agricultural harrow and verbal harrowing. *Verse* suggests a "succession of
words…forming a complete metrical line" (see "verse, n." 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University
Press. 7 March 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50276636>). However, the Latin form of the
word *versus* suggests "literally a line or furrow drawn by turning the plough" [see *The Encyclopedia
Brittanica*, ed. Hugh Chisholm, 11.27 (1911), 1041.] The harrow can thus be read as a more violent
expression of this process, whereby words quite literally do succeed in wounding the hearer, "turning" him
upside down and inside out. Indeed, the verb form of *verse*, which means "overthrow, overturn, or upset,"
itself takes this violent "turn" (see "verse, v.2." 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 7
March 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50276639>.). And if one wants to elaborate further on
the connection among harrow/speaking, furrow/verse, and epideictic skepticism, I will also add that in this
same entry, *verse* also means "to turn over (a book) in study or investigation."

act itself. And so, to Gertrude's question, "what have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?" Hamlet replies (both completing her line and interrupting her), "Such an act / That blurs the grace and blush of modesty, / Calls virtue hypocrite, takes off the rose, / From the fair forehead of an innocent love / And sets a blister there" (3.4.49-53). In form and content, these lines echo the ghost's periphrastic response to Hamlet's inquisitorial demand, "Haste me to know 't" (1.5.35). Avoiding a direct answer to this question, the ghost instead describes the serpent in the garden and invokes an image of a cankerworm eating its way into the ear of Denmark. In his own effort to evade Gertrude's "What have I done?", Hamlet distills the ghost's complex picture down to a simple image of a rose being flung off and replaced with a canker (blister).

This picture, though, is incomplete. Similar to the ghost, Hamlet has only just begun his tirade, going on to insist that Gertrude's "deed" turns "sweet religion" into a "rhapsody of words" (54-57). Hamlet's use of the word *rhapsody*, or gallimaufry, says less about Gertrude's morality, however, than about the prince's rhetorical practice, which involves creating that "rhapsody of words" himself, and exploiting the potential for words to become (s)words (or "daggers"). The fact that Hamlet subsequently focuses on the "counterfeit presentiment[s]" of Claudius and old Hamlet also reveals something of his linguistic strategy (64). For *counterfeit* does not merely mean "imitation" and "forgery"; it also denotes "in opposition to" as well as "pattern." [67] From one angle, then, *counterfeit* precisely defines what Hamlet is doing when he forces his mother to examine the pictures side by side, and to detect points of "opposition." *Counterfeit*, from another

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[67] See "counterfeit, a. (pa. ppl.) and n." 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 24 January 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50051839>.

angle, offers a way of understanding Hamlet's relationship to the ghost, who has set in

motion a "pattern" that the prince can at once imitate as well as "oppose." Thus, Hamlet,

like the pictures, is also a *counterfeit*.

Is, then, Hamlet's use of the counterfeit presentiments truly problematic, as some

scholars insist? R. Clifton Spargo, responding to René Girard's observation that the

pictures of the two brothers could not be very different from one another, sees this as an

"aberrant moment in the play" and "atypical of Hamlet himself."[68] According to Spargo,

Hamlet's reliance on the pictures is inconsistent with Hamlet's skepticism about this form

of representation in particular; Spargo conjectures, finally, that the "rhetorical urgency

temporarily works its spell on his mother and that he becomes most persuasive precisely

when he confronts the limits of his own estimation of the father's merit."[69] But one could

also argue that the pictures enhance Hamlet's rhetorical strategy, allowing him to mirror

the ghost's visual imagery, to use language to underscore the portraits' inadequacy, to

call attention to his hyperbole, and thus to advance his attempt to turn his mother into a

wonder-wounded hearer. In the end, the true source of wonder lies not in the portraits

themselves but in Hamlet's description of them.[70]

In focusing on the "*counterfeit* presentiments" of his father and Claudius,

moreover, Hamlet moves across the rhetorical grooves patterned by the original harrow

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[68] René Girard, *A Theater of Envy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 275-276; R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 71.
[69] R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, 72.
[70] Patricia Parker argues that the "vivid description" often accompanying amplified, accusatory speeches "elides the distinction between false report and true, since it is capable of depicting fictional – or purely invented – events as if they were present before the eye" ("Shakespeare's Rhetoric," 65). The rhetoric of amplification reveals the fine line between true and false: of course Claudius is not a "mildewed ear" and of course old Hamlet is not a "Hyperion." At the same time, his words make these images vivid and present. Hamlet's language calls attention to the counterfeit quality of the counterfeit presentiments even as such portraits point to the counterfeit quality of the language itself – for words and images both miss the mark. Word and image work together to "wonder-wound" Gertrude.

in 1.5. The ghost, we remember, delays describing the murder in order to paint a visual

image of a virtuous king surrounded by two lusty vice villains. Similarly, in the closet

scene, when Gertrude asks Hamlet for the second time, "what act / That roars so loud and

thunders in the index?" (61-62), the prince deliberately shifts the medium from print to

picture, echoing the ghost's language. Focusing on the visual presentation of Gertrude's

two husbands, Hamlet avoids explaining the act itself. King Hamlet is accordingly

described as having "Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself, / An eye like Mars' to

threaten and command, / A station like the herald Mercury… / A combination and a form

indeed / Where every god did seem to set his seal / To give the world assurance of a

man" (66-72). Although textual evidence (as already discussed) suggests that the former

king was far from the humanist ideal, Hamlet's encomium tries to ensure that he be

received this way, for his description here also echoes an earlier part of the play, where

Hamlet refers to his father as the sort of man whose likeness he will never see again

(1.2.196). When Hamlet later laments to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "What a piece of

work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how

express and admirable; in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god," we

sense he is referring to the old king (2.2.327-330).

　　　　With these former descriptions of the king in our memory, we can appreciate how

Hamlet endeavors to contrast the integrity of his father with the decadence of his mother

and uncle, thus seeming to shift from celebrating wholesomeness to lamenting a

disintegrated world and its fragmented inhabitants. "Look you now what follows,"

Hamlet tells her. "Here is your husband, like a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome

brother" (73-75). While this passage describes an ear of corn poisoning a neighboring

crop, these lines also evoke a human ear. By reducing Claudius to the conduit through

which the poison is poured – the "mildewed ear" – Hamlet reverses the path of the

original toxin, infecting Claudius himself.

Hamlet's distinction between Claudius and the former king appears to advance

two opposing views of epideixis. King Hamlet seems to represent a time now past when

praise, an ideal form, made an object whole, while Claudius, the serpent in the garden, is

a false usurper and figure of a fractured modernity – a modernity that has destroyed

epideixis as a wholesome art. And yet, *wholesome* could also be a pun. We already

know that Hamlet's attitude toward the ghost is equivocal and, at times, hostile; and we

also know that King Hamlet, "cut off" in the "blossoms" of his "sin" (1.5.83), has handed

Hamlet a task that he feels could damn him, that perhaps already has. Hamlet's reference

to the "mildewed ear blasting his wholesome brother" ever so subtly registers these

anxieties and so reflects the fact that ideal praise is and always was an illusion. That is,

in harrowing Claudius' counterfeit presentiment by using the device of synecdoche,

Hamlet wounds his uncle even as he exposes that wound (that *hole*) at the heart of

w*hole*some praise.[71]

A wonder-wounded hearer herself, Gertrude, too, is broken apart like a harrowed

landscape when Hamlet contends that her "sense" must be "apoplexed; for madness

would not err, / Nor sense to ecstasy was ne'er so thralled, /But it reserved some quantity

of choice / To serve in such a difference" (83-86). Telling his mother that her senses

have been fragmented through a fit of dizziness and not through ecstasy or madness,

Hamlet creates in his mother what he would seem merely to be affirming (again, his

"rhapsody of words"); the portraits aid him in this effort, offering up pictures that do not

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[71] I owe the connection between *hole* and *wholesome* to Theodore Leinwand.

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resemble the words used to describe them. In so doing, Hamlet embraces the insufficient

language of representation that he had disdained, using that insufficiency to his

advantage. When Hamlet goes on to lament, "Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,

/ Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all…" (87-89), we hear Gertrude

disintegrating right before our ears, and she knows it. Struggling to keep herself whole,

she implores her son three times to "speak no more" (99). Instead, Hamlet, having

harrowed up the listener, eventually (by 5.1) becomes whole himself, his words gaining

in force and momentum, his language rising to such a pitch that Gertrude cannot bear it.

"Tear[ing] a passion to tatters" (3.2.10) with his harrowing language, Hamlet

concludes this long passage with another direct reference to the ghost's speech in 1.5.

His attack on his mother's sexual impropriety, his flippant remark about "virtue…as wax

/ Melt[ing] in her own fire" (3.4.94-95), his description of the "rank sweat of an

enseamed bed," and his allusion to his mother's and uncle's love-making "over the nasty

sty" (104-106), all underscore the connection between Hamlet's invective and the ghost's

portrayal of Gertrude's "lust… / sate[ing] itself in a celestial bed / And prey[ing] on

garbage" (1.5.62-64). This image, together with that of Claudius as an "adulterate beast"

contrasts with the ghost's picture of the deceased king as "radiant angel," "whose love

was of that dignity / That went hand in hand" with his marriage vows (1.5.55-62). In

both scenes, the speaker employs hyperbole to distinguish a prelapsarian marriage from a

postlapsarian one.[72] Thus, when Hamlet compares his father to a medley of gods, the

most prominent being the Hyperion, he is repeating the ghost's own representation in 1.5.

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[72] As the ghost implies, this "falling off" was precipitated not by Adam but by Eve and the serpent, who in the ghost's version of the story go on to marry one another. See Arthur Kirsch, "Hamlet's Grief," *ELH* 48.1 (1981), 17-36. In this essay, Kirsch notes that "Hamlet's memory of his father's true marriage with

Nonetheless, as powerful as the ghost's imagery is, and as pregnant as it is with biblical allusion, Hamlet's description of his father as a god and his uncle as a mildewed ear tops the ghost's extravagant narrative, thus suggesting that the prince is not only mimicking the apparition he calls "Hamlet," "King," "Father," "Royal Dane," but also competing with it to outdo an already amplified rhetoric. The ghost's depiction of the king's lazar-like body and congealed blood, and the vulgar words he uses to describe Gertrude's and Claudius' sexuality, is surpassed only by Hamlet's language in this closet scene. The audience (and of course Gertrude herself) is barraged with images of everything from mildewed ears, reechy kisses, and nasty pigsties to ulcerous and oozing infections, bloat kings, and broken necks. We cannot help but cringe at the mingling of pathos with bathos – and even perhaps stifle an uncomfortable laugh – when Hamlet declares to his mother that he will "lug the guts [of Polonius] into the neighbor room" (235).

In addition to the similarities in their language and in the way they organize their diatribes, both Hamlet and the ghost find that their rhetorical effusiveness is curbed by ostensibly external forces. This happens at the same structural point in each scene. As I have already mentioned, the ghost most likely would have continued vilifying Claudius and Gertrude if he had not "scent[ed] the morning air" (1.5.65). Only then does the ghost finally provide details of the fratricide, instructing Hamlet to avenge his murder and remember him and so perversely tying memory and mourning with violent retribution. Hamlet, similarly, commences a hysterical, manic diatribe against Claudius – calling him a "murderer and a villain," a "slave" (which recalls his third soliloquy in 2.2), "a vice of

his mother…has a pre-lapsarian resonance" (28). This is certainly true, but we should also observe the way the ghost reinforces this idea in 1.5.

kings," a "cutpurse of the empire," and a "king of shreds and pieces" (3.4.110-117) –

before the ghost's appearance prevents his shredding Claudius even further. Does the

ghost arrive *because of* Hamlet's hysteria or does the hysteria *produce* the ghost? The

fact that only Hamlet can see the apparition at this moment leaves us with a few ways of

interpreting its presence: one, the ghost can select whom he appears to and so can choose

to be seen by Horatio and the guards but not by Gertrude; two, Gertrude is incapable of

seeing specters (a less likely possibility given that Horatio, skeptic that he is, saw the

ghost); or three, Hamlet, having internalized the ghost at the end of 1.5, has – in his

madness perhaps – manufactured him here. This third possibility allows us to interpret

the ghost as a projection of Hamlet's "mind's eye." Appropriately, the apparition does

not appear to Hamlet armed, cap-a-pie, and with his beaver up, but rather "dressed in his

habit as he lived" (3.4.155).

Reading the ghost as a figment of Hamlet's wild imaginings, moreover, confers a

greater degree of agency on a protagonist who seems ready to insist on his independence.

Accordingly, this next point of contact between the two scenes – the scenting of the

morning air in 1.5 and the reappearance of the ghost in 3.4 – also signals the place at

which Hamlet comes into his own as a character in his play. Although the ghost counsels

Hamlet not to think too much on his mother and not to "let the bed of Denmark be / A

couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.89-90) and Hamlet – after the ghost appears –

tells his mother to live "purer" with her cleft heart and not to have further relations with

Claudius (3.4.179-204), this last resemblance is where the connection begins to loosen.

The ghost may know how verbally to manipulate Hamlet, but he still recognizes that he is

dependent on the prince to build or reestablish his name; in contrast, Hamlet's identity

depends on severing such ties, which is in part the reason that Hamlet's speech is more

powerful: it involves an act of rebellious autonomy. Unlike the ghost, the prince's

identity is not contingent on anything his mother commits to.[73]

While it might seem odd, even disempowering, for Shakespeare to write in the

ghost's appearance in order to curb Hamlet's tirade and berate him, it makes sense if we

interpret this moment as a kind of exorcism and the linguistic excess as a form of verbal

expulsion.[74] Hamlet has already killed Polonius, another father figure, and so he need

only take responsibility for this action ("I do repent") in order to turn it into a symbolic

repudiation of the ghost of his own father.[75] Before Hamlet does this, however, he

watches the specter disappear through a "portal" (156), a word that we could also apply

to the metaphorical space through which Hamlet himself enters at this moment in the

play. Even Hamlet's language changes after the ghost leaves: he is calmer, focused, and

more controlled. Has he listened to the ghost (arguably just a figure of his inner

conscience)? Perhaps a little, but now he does things his own way. He rejects his

mother's claims that he is mad, incredulously maintaining, "Ecstasy? / My pulse as yours

doth temperately keep time / And makes as healthful music" (160-162). After defending

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[73] Aside from trying to convince his mother to steer clear of Claudius, the only thing that Hamlet asks his mother to do is not to disclose that he is "mad in craft" (210). However, *The Mousetrap* scene – coupled with Hamlet's own violent behavior here in 3.4 – makes this request somewhat moot. Hamlet's actions are enough to incite Laertes' ire and provoke Claudius' next level of treachery; it hardly matters whether others think him mad or not.

[74] See Alexander Welsh, *Hamlet in His Modern Guises*, 65.

[75] In *Hamlet's Perfection*, William Kerrigan stresses the importance of Hamlet's admission here, arguing that he must indeed "answer for the murder of Polonius" and that the "bad dreams of damnation may just have come true. When he departs for England, his commanding stage presence temporarily deserting its kingdom, the play reveals the consequences on this earth in the death of Ophelia, the wrath of Laertes, and the alliance of Laertes and Claudius; the murder of Polonius comes back with deadly force" (115). See also Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *PMLA* 70.4 (1955), 740-49. Alexander Welsh, in contrast, sees the death as necessary to Hamlet's character development and the plot. Tacitly reminding us of Hamlet's position as a history play and setting it explicitly within the realm of literary history, Welsh argues that it is death that mobilizes – and is ratified through – the progression of history (*Hamlet in His Modern Guises*, 69).

his own sanity, he goes on to proselytize to her ("Confess yourself to heaven") and to challenge her not to use his madness as an excuse to ignore what is going on within herself ("Lay not the flattering unction to your soul / That not your trespass but my madness speaks").

In denying the fact that he is mad, Hamlet can repair what he lost in 1.5 when he becomes a wonder-wounded hearer and looks ahead to his assertion of himself as "Hamlet the Dane" in 5.1. In both cases, he names himself at other people's expense. Standing over Polonius' dead body in 3.4, Hamlet declares, "I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so / To punish me with this and this with me, / That I might be their scourge and minister" (194-196).[76] With the ghost gone, the embodiment of the wonder-wounded hearer dead at his feet, and his mother gaping in amazement at her son, Hamlet has taken one step closer to what he finally achieves in the graveyard. Expanding on the role of the traditional avenger when he becomes Heaven's minister a well as scourge, Hamlet assumes a function that, instead of compromising his individuality, underscores it. For even though the prince has not yet killed Claudius, he suggests that he has already earned the title of scourge (heaven's punisher and heaven's punished) and minister ("agent") – not only by killing Polonius but also by scourging all of Elsinore with his verbal daggers. Surely this role could not, then, satisfy the ghost, who comes back to "whet" Hamlet's "almost blunted purpose" (127). Indeed, the ghost's purpose is further blunted if we read the 1623 version of the play. Emphasizing Hamlet's liberation from a father who wants

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[76] This transitional line in 3.4 serves as an important bridge between this scene and the end of the play: on the one hand, Hamlet claims responsibility for the action ("I do repent"); on the other hand, he begins to shirk responsibility by attributing the cause to Heaven. This latter stance defines his attitude in the final scene of the play when he denies having killed Polonius, maintaining that his madness did it – "never Hamlet" (5.2.247).

bloody revenge, the Folio does not print his seventh soliloquy and so never shows him embracing "bloody" action (4.4.68-69).[77]

With Hamlet, therefore, as divine scourge instead of mere bloody avenger, the play also redefines the relationship between Hamlet and Claudius. From Claudius's perspective, of course, Hamlet (and not his evil deed) is the canker that gnaws incessantly on the king's conscience; thus he believes that ridding himself of Hamlet will eradicate his guilt. Without disclosing too much to Gertrude, Claudius compares himself to the "owner of a foul disease" who "to keep it [Hamlet] from divulging, let it feed / Even on the pith of life" (4.1.22-24). Later, in soliloquy, Claudius writes the mandate ordering the "present death of Hamlet" before declaring, "Do it England, / For like the hectic in my blood he rages, / And thou must cure me" (4.3.74-76). Like *Measure for Measure*'s Angelo, Claudius in prayer suffers a separation of words and thoughts: Heaven has his empty words while his thoughts remain below. Claudius, like the duke's deputy, will write good angel on the devil's horn while razing the inner sanctuary of his conscience.

And like *Measure for Measure*'s Vincentio (from Latin *vincere*, "to conquer"), who despises acting and theatrics but who decides that "craft against vice I must apply" (3.2.277), Hamlet capitulates to the sort of art that he disdains, attempting to expose (as scourge) what Claudius (the flatterer) tries to hide or destroy.[78] If Hamlet, then, differentiates himself from the usurping king, he does so not because he is free from vice but because, unlike Claudius, he acknowledges (to us and to his mother) the canker within himself. Thus, the prince recapitulates that altogether radical moment late in the young-man sonnets when the speaker, having confronted the canker again and again,

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[77] Welsh also makes this point (*Hamlet in His Modern Guises*, 65).
[78] Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000).

finally admits to his beloved, "I must / Strive to know my shames and praises from your tongue" (112). The word "must" is important; it is as compulsory as Hamlet's role as "scourge" is in 3.4. A powerful moment in the poem and the play, the speaker gains authority by admitting to his complicity in the problem.[79] Thus exploiting their vulnerability, the poet successfully elevates his poetics above the standard Petrarchan fare, while Hamlet insists that he is sanctified by heaven.

In some sense, then, Hamlet becomes an individuated tragic protagonist because he exorcises a good deal of the revenge drama along with the ghost. For Polonius' death, instead of inciting a murderous rampage on Hamlet's part, ignites a competing revenge plot that takes the pressure off of Hamlet himself. Indeed, the final moments of the play suggest that Hamlet kills Claudius more for himself and his mother than for his father. Perhaps this is the prince's way of taking revenge on revenge. In this respect, he espouses a post-humanist attitude. Maus observes that avengers are typically "conservative" rather than forward-thinking and that their primary goal is to reclaim a past that a usurper has temporarily obliterated; avengers will die, in other words, trying to reestablish a prior socio-political model.[80] Hamlet's outlook, in contrast, is "revolutionary," to borrow Maus' word.[81]

This "revolutionary" outlook can be understood in terms of Hamlet's changing attitude toward praise, in the way in which he learns to exploit its weaknesses. For if Hamlet extols his father in a way that makes Greenblatt and others see him as being unconvincing or insincere, it is because he discovers how to use praise as a weapon, to

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[79] This is quite different from the self-blame that pervades Hamlet's character in Act 2 and the beginning of 3.

[80] See Maus, *Inwardness and Theater*, 55-56, and her introduction to *Four Revenge Tragedies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xiii.

[81] Ibid., xiii.

create (and not simply reveal) that necessary distance between himself and his father.

Indeed, as an epideictic skeptic, Hamlet may be nostalgic for the past, but he recognizes

that it is just that – the past. Subtly dismissing his father towards the end of the play,

Hamlet insists that "Hercules…[may] do what he may" while he himself will "have his

[own] day" (5.1.310-11). Neither a Hyperion nor a Hercules like his father – nor a mere

killer like his uncle – Hamlet has achieved an identity apart from both, an identity that

sets him apart from that of the traditional avenger and that he hopes will elevate him as a

post-Reformation, post-humanist rose of the fair state. And so, even if the sort of praise

that Hamlet reclaims for himself in 5.1 is not an unqualified ideal but rather a wounded

wonder, it offers power once it is embraced.

Interlude: Polonius, the Wonder-Wounded Hearer

As a way of highlighting the major points in this chapter, I want to provide a short

character study of Polonius, who dies a "wonder-wounded hearer" in the same scene that

Hamlet reaches the height of his verbal power. Polonius is a kind of hollow man: the

play depends on him dramaturgically and thematically; and he embodies Shakespeare's

epideictic skepticism. His character thus is a touchstone for understanding the action

preceding and following his death.

The name *Polonius* brings to mind a series of literary antecedents and intra-

dramatic relationships established by way of its revealing etymology. Literally meaning

"of Poland," *Polonius* connects the main plot of Hamlet with the play's political frame –

which involves Fortinbras' quest to reclaim the land that he feels is ethically, if not

lawfully, his own and to expand his nation's territory, his march taking him past the

periphery of Denmark and into Poland. As far as we know, *Polonius* was entirely

Shakespeare's invention. In Belleforest's version of the story, the counselor who is

"killed, boiled, and fed to swine" is called Corambis, a name also appearing in the first

quarto of Hamlet and, most likely, in the *Ur-Hamlet* as well.[82] In many ways, of course,

Polonius, who claims he can "find / Where truth is hid, though it were hid, indeed, /

Within the center" (2.2.169-171) and who makes it his task to protect Ophelia from

Hamlet's ostensibly half-hearted "tenders of affection," does preserve, if ironically,

vestiges of the original counselor, whose name suggests "wandering heart."

The name *Polonius*, however, also evokes an image of the "sledded Polacks"

"smote" by King Hamlet "in an angry parle" (1.1.74-75). The connection is reinforced

later when Fortinbras, probably retracing the steps taken by Hamlet's father and thus

seeking direction by indirection, marches into Poland to "gain a little patch of ground /

That hath in it no profit but the name" (4.4.19-20). In relating this information to Hamlet,

the Captain's assertion that such a land will not "yield… / A ranker" or higher "rate"

reflects the fact that the territory is rotten as well as worthless, as evidenced by Hamlet's

use of *imposthume* in his reply: "Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats / Will

not debate the question of this straw. / This is th' imposthume of much wealth and peace,

/ That inward breaks and shows no cause without / Why the man dies" (26-30).

Remarkably, this worthless plot can somehow provoke a bloody debate for a mere "trick

of fame," Hamlet later points out in Q2's final soliloquy (4.4.64). How and why?

Hamlet suggests that a wealthy nation is always susceptible to war and to the

"imposthume" or canker, which attacks the body, killing it on the inside and revealing

"no cause without." Poland, then, represents not only the site of war and bloodshed for

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[82] Marvin Hunt, *Looking for Hamlet*, 19. See also Sir Israel Gollancz, *The Sources of Hamlet*.

some insignificant reason – in short, for a "name" or for "honor," a word that

Shakespeare had already taken pains to deflate in *1 Henry IV* and *Julius Caesar* – but also

the place that nurtures man's self-destruction.

In the main part of the play, we know that Polonius is not just the stock figure of

the fool and he is not just a bumbling idiot. Enterprising and opportunistic, domineering

and even mean, Polonius is the character around whom the main action of the play

revolves (much like the plot of land in Poland), his influence extending to the very end of

the drama when Laertes returns from France in a vengeful rage, impatient to kill in the

name of his father. Polonius even mirrors and foils many of the other characters in the

play. As Claudius' chief adviser, Polonius stands second (after Gertrude) in the King's

estimation: "What wouldst thou beg, Laertes, / That shall not be my offer, not thy asking?

/ The head is not more native to the heart, / The hand more instrumental to the mouth, /

Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father" (1.2.45-50). Although he certainly doubts

Polonius' naïve insistence that the "very cause of Hamlet's lunacy" is his love for

Ophelia, Claudius for a while follows his counselor in pursuing this possibility (2.2.52).

We can even argue that Polonius indirectly sets Claudius on the trail to "sift" Hamlet for

other causes of his altered behavior. The king, more than Gertrude, is also peculiarly

patient with Polonius' verbal meanderings, which shows the power he wields during the

first part of the play. Only Hamlet speaks more lines than Polonius prior to the

counselor's death in 3.4.

We notice the extent of Polonius' control by looking at his relationship with his

children. With Ophelia, Polonius is particularly cruel, attempting to control her passion

in order to avoid appearing as if he is orchestrating her marriage to a prince. In contrast

to Laertes' playfully sexual warnings to his sister about the dangers of being courted by a prince whose "will is not his own" (1.3.20), Polonius insults his daughter's character and intelligence, calling her a "green girl" (110) and a "baby" (114), and comparing her to the doltish "woodcock" easily trapped by a man's "springes" (114). That Ophelia seems without hesitation to obey her father, even going so far as to play the pawn in his spy game or the bait to catch the carp, evinces her dependence and explains her violent reaction to her father's death.

Polonius' manipulation of his son is even more significant because it mirrors the logic of blame and slander endorsed by Hamlet himself. Astonishingly officious to the point of being injurious, Polonius enlists his servant Reynaldo to "breathe" his son's "faults so / quaintly" so that, "laying these slight sullies," his gentle slanders will obtain information about his son's whereabouts and his exploits (2.1.34-45). Hamlet is right in calling Polonius a "fishmonger" and is likely listening when Polonius argues that slander – or what he calls "the bait of falsehood" – will catch the "carp of truth" (70). Hamlet surely picks up the fact that the counselor operates not only by using indirection to find direction out but also by exploiting libel and blame, which seem (as per Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism) capable of drawing the truth to the surface. Like the "imposthume of much wealth and peace," slander operates in Polonius' view the same way, insidiously and perniciously working its way into its hearers like a cankerworm, forcing them to convey information perhaps against their will, such that the confidants Reynaldo procures will know "no cause without" why they reveal what they do.

But it is Polonius himself who is a kind of dramatic canker. Although the climax of the play begins with *The Murder of Gonzago*, which Hamlet nearly foils in his

impetuosity and impatience to draw out the king's guilt, the climax peaks with Polonius'

death behind the arras. Most of the subsequent stage action spins out from the

counselor's dead body. Claudius, for example, finds in the body an expedient, a

convincing reason for sending Hamlet away. The play also makes it clear that Ophelia's

madness results directly from her father's death; and Laertes, of course, returns from

France as hot-blooded as young Fortinbras, vowing to "dare damnation" to avenge his

father (4.5.151) – a father who seems to have the same hold on him (especially in death)

that the ghost has on Hamlet.

With Laertes established in the last part of the play as Hamlet's foil and Claudius'

tragic instrument, the ironic parallels between Polonius and King Hamlet become far

more obvious. Twice in the play Hamlet refers to his father as the sun god: in his first

soliloquy, the prince laments that his father, "so excellent a King," was like a "Hyperion"

compared to Claudius, the "satyr" (1.2.143-144); in the closet scene, Hamlet compares

his father to "Hyperion" a second time (3.4.66). Not just a sun god but, quite literally, a

god in the eyes of his son, King Hamlet's characterization as this particular deity calls

attention to the etymological relationship Polonius shares with Apollonius and of course

the sun god Apollo.[83] Polonius, in a way, is almost a parody of the real thing. And, as a

caricature of a god, the counselor would hardly be condemned to walk the night all

menacing and powerful and armor-clad but rather must take his place among the "pocky

corpses" in the graveyard.

Preparing us, moreover, for Fortinbras' entrance and strengthening the connection

between the assault on Poland and the events circulating around Polonius' death, the

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[83] Perhaps it is fortunate that while Hamlet wishes his mother would continue indefinitely to cry "Like
Niobe, all tears" (1.2.153), she does not; in Greek mythology, Niobe's intense grief arises from the murder
of her sons and daughters by Artemis and Apollo. In *Hamlet*, "Niobe's" son kills "Apollo."

counselor's corpse also indirectly foments political instability in Denmark after Laertes returns from France, heated, violent and "in a riotous head" (4.5.111). A messenger describing this homecoming affirms how the "rabble" have taken to calling Laertes "'lord'" and "'king!'" (112-116). Despite Claudius' quick recovery when he convinces Laertes to forgive him for the "hugger-mugger" burial of his father and of the necessity of exacting his revenge on Hamlet, Denmark does not stabilize itself politically, leaving Elsinore ripe for picking when Fortinbras arrives with his army.

Surely a profitable name, *Polonius* also highlights key parallels between his corpse and the worthless plot of land over which thousands of men fight with their nation's "twenty thousand ducats" (4.4.26). And the play corroborates such a connection even more subtly. While we cannot be certain who Hamlet really thought was behind the arras when he ran over to it screaming "a rat," Shakespeare at least used Hamlet to reinforce the connection between Polonius' character and the Poland business when the manic prince adds, "Dead for a ducat, dead" (3.4.29). An ironic comment on the ostensible worthlessness of Polonius' body and a prologue to Hamlet's conversation with the Captain about the numerous ducats being poured into the conquest of the Polish territory, this line also underscores this corpse's ability to cultivate the play's eventual destruction and decline (much like the imposthume described in 4.4), even though Polonius' death appears to be worth but a "straw." Hamlet "lugs" Polonius' "guts into the neighbor room," but he effectively drags this body (and others) all the way into the final scene of the play. Polonius not only occasions, but enables, Hamlet's acceptance of the canker within himself – a perspective that will eventually bring him freedom from the canker.

Polonius' connection with Hamlet and the motif of the canker is reinforced in the fourth act of the play when his corpse, which Hamlet tells Claudius is being eaten by a "certain convocation of politic worms…and maggots," occasions the prince's mad meditation on "how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar" (4.3.23-35). Beyond highlighting the idea that death is the great equalizer – the substance of Hamlet's thanatopsis in the graveyard – this passage emphasizes the fact that all men are transformed into worms. Such an image, furthermore, pulls toward it the many other references to cankers and imposthumes in this play and unites the reality of evil, or the poison brought on by the canker, with the inescapability of death.

Eaten by the convocation of politic worms, Polonius transforms into the worm or imposthume; he becomes, one might say, the very figure of slander and blame and thus a symbol of Shakespeare's epideictic skepticism. In this respect, he is both the fishmonger who releases the bait and the bait used to catch the carp – and indeed to catch the play. Ironically, perhaps, we might then venture that Polonius' character acts as a kind of *portal* through which the remainder of the tragedy must move. Just as Fortinbras first leads his men into Poland before returning to Denmark to assume the throne, so Hamlet must literally go through Polonius to get to Claudius. Eventually in tragedy, all the major characters become food for worms.

And so, Polonius, who is killed because of his vulnerable ear, literalizes the idea of the "wonder-wounded hearer." He is also a parody of the identity problems caused by heard wonder, for he is stabbed not just because he eavesdrops but because Hamlet claims to have mistaken him for Claudius. Twice Hamlet hears Polonius cry out, first to protest what he thinks is imminent violence against Gertrude and the second time in his

death agony, to declare that he has been slain. Yet, Hamlet continues to doubt his identity. To Gertrude's lament, "O me, what has thou done?" Hamlet replies, "Nay, I know not. Is it the King?" (31-32). Readers often debate whether Hamlet knew he was killing Polonius; some have contended that because Hamlet just returned from watching Claudius praying in the chapel, he could not have thought it was the king. Understanding the symbolism of this scene circumvents this debate altogether. It does not matter who Hamlet *thought* was behind the arras, a debate that is impossible to settle; it matters merely that he misidentifies Polonius. This scene, in short, dramatizes in the symbolic death of Polonius the way in which heard wonder disrupts identity (such a disruption, in this case, is manifested in the wound of death). Pitting the vulnerability of the hearer against the great power offered Hamlet because of his death, this scene – indeed Polonius' wound – opens up a space for Hamlet to come terms with his own identity as a tragic protagonist.

Conclusion

An astute director may very well ask the actor playing Hamlet to hold the same pose over Polonius in 3.4 that he does over Ophelia in 5.1. In the first instance, Hamlet declares himself "scourge and minister"; in the latter, he labels himself "Hamlet the Dane." And in both cases Hamlet builds an identity at the expense of another character much as a Petrarchan poet finds aesthetic and artistic fulfillment in his beloved's absence or death. As I have already argued in the opening pages of this chapter, however, the prince (like the poet of the Sonnets) is aware of this seeming inequity and openly criticizes the method even as he deploys it. To be a praise poet and a tragic hero – to

become in the process a wonder-wounding speaker – is to stand on other people's

shoulders. What makes Hamlet, therefore, peculiar among Shakespeare's heroes is how

explicitly this truth is dramatized and how readily the play informs the "tragic nature" of

the young-man sonnets and the tragic character of the poet himself. Equally important in

binding together these works is the way the poet/protagonist learns how to turn a

weakness into a strength, to command authority by acknowledging inner vice while

insisting on the permanence of the rose. Just as the poet insists that the young man's

"rose" is his all in "all" (109), so Hamlet transforms himself by the fifth act of his play

back into a "rose of the fair state" whose "wounded name" awaits Horatio's final

rhetorical flourish.

Chapter 4

Playing Shakespeare's Will: Theater and Sexuality in the Dark-Lady Sonnets and *The Taming of the Shrew*

In previous chapters, I explore how the poet's examination of praise, his skepticism about the male friend, his suffering and self-doubt, and, finally, his acknowledgment of the canker within himself suggest that the young-man sequence contains evocations of tragedy. While the poet does not endure physical death like Hamlet, Macbeth, or King Lear, the poet experiences a metaphorical death, suffering through his quest for knowledge and identity, publicly confessing his vices, and achieving a victory of sorts when he affirms the primacy of the rose. But then he turns his back on the poetry that led him down his "tragic" path and on the epistemological investigation that inevitably accompanies praise. Shakespeare's comic epilogue to this sequence is the dark-lady poems. Rather than praise his mistress and subject her to ethical inquiry, the poet bargains and pleads as if they were characters in a story – or she an actress in his play. Indeed, *play* is the operative word, because what the poet crafts in the dark-lady sonnets are poetic mini-dramas, scenes of comic interplay instead of epideictic introspection.[1]

Most scholars, however, tend to read this second sequence as something other than comic recreation. Joel Fineman, for example, is only gamesome en route to his sobering affirmation that the dark lady's poet becomes divided forever from idealizing

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[1] Of course, to compare the dark-lady poems to comedy is, in some measure, to insist that they lack the depth, complexity, and skepticism of the young-man sonnets. Colin Burrow argues that the dark-lady poems are "far simpler than many of the poems before 126" (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 134). Robert Matz agrees with Burrow, adding that while the young-man poems are "really uncertain," the "sonnets to the black mistress only play at uncertainty" (*The World of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 147).

praise.[2] Some scholars take an even darker view of the mistress, comparing her to a

figure of racial difference that the poet laments and tries unsuccessfully to subjugate.

According to Kim Hall, Shakespeare's insistence (at least initially) on his black lady's

fairness is consistent with an imperialistic English society that wanted to "'enrich' the

language with new world matter" as well as to "control encroachments of cultural

otherness." Thus, the "whitening of the dark lady," Hall argues, "becomes a crucial

exercise of male poetic power."[3] Marvin Hunt also explores the semiotics of blackness,

contending that while we may never know the mistress' real identity (if she has one), her

"black value" suggests a "threat to racial and cultural purity."[4]

 Still other interpretations have shown how cultural and social contexts can be

used to articulate the relationship between the two subsequences. Margreta de Grazia, for

example, argues that the "black mistress" represents "anarchy," "miscegenation," and

"social peril," forces that undermine the fragile social hierarchies preserved in the first

126 poems.[5] Olga Valbuena, in contrast, looks at how the poems' references to writing

materials ("paper, leaves, pen, knife, and ink") expose the possibilities and liabilities of

artistic reproduction.[6] Distinguishing the dark lady (the inky blot) from the fair youth

(who is "fairly" copied), Valbuena argues that the mistress "has been made to blot up and

absorb the blunted desires and 'black lines' (63.13) of the poet's 'perjured' I (152.13)"

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[2] See Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*; for a longer discussion of his argument, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[3] Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 71 and 115. Hall sets her discussion of Shakespeare within a broader study of how white male writers enact poetic control.

[4] Marvin Hunt, "Be Dark but Not Too Dark: Shakespeare's Dark Lady as Sign of Color," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, 376.

[5] Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, 103-07.

[6] Olga L. Valbuena, "'The Dyer's Hand': The Reproduction of Coercion and Blot in Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, 327.

and so her "subsequence bears the welled-up desires, jealousies, and hostilities the poet-speaker has in store to 'convert' to black ink."[7] Robert Matz, who takes a similar approach, interprets the female addressee as a "scapegoat for anxieties about duplicity or sin in the relationships between fair young men."[8] For Matz, the mistress is a cultural symbol, not an actual person.[9] Indeed, few critics have shown as much interest in the dark lady's identity as A.L. Rowse, whose assertion that the mistress is Emilia Lanyer was famously rebuffed by Samuel Schoenbaum.[10]

This reluctance to explore biographical possibilities has also, David Schalkwyk observes, curbed our desire to see her as anything more than a troublesome "whore."[11] In saying this, Schalkwyk does not endorse Rowse's method but rather aims to enrich our understanding of the mistress by exploring her "embodiment" in a performative (rather than descriptive) art form. Reading the Sonnets as the "theatre in which individual subject and society engage" (28), Schalkwyk imagines a "context of address and reception in which the response of the beloved, though not recorded in the poem itself, would not only have been possible but likely" (55). This claim that Shakespeare's poet

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[7] Valbuena, "'The Dyer's Hand,'" 333-338.

[8] Robert Matz, *The World of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 147.

[9] Indeed, scholars have been significantly less tentative in positing the identities of the young man and the rival poet. For a longer discussion of this issue, see chapter 1 of this dissertation.

[10] A.L. Rowse, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1973). Rowse bases his knowledge of Lanyer on Simon Forman's astrological diary. See also Samuel Schoenbaum, "Shakespeare's Dark Lady: a question of identity," in *Shakespeare's Styles*, ed. Philip Edwards, Inga-Stina Ewbank, and G.K. Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 221-239. According to Schoenbaum, "External evidence alone – a reference in some contemporary diary or correspondence – can silence the sceptics, and that is the card some of us were hoping Dr Rowse had up his sleeve. Probably it was foolish to think such a card could ever have existed. Rowse and the others assume that the *Sonnets* comprise rhymed fourteen-line entries in a personal diary, and that their revelations represent the raw materials of experience. But poets wear masks. May not much of what is intimate about these poems be private and interior, and what is exterior – derived from the world of events – transmuted and ordered by the implacable necessities of art? The opposition between the Fair Youth and the Dark Lady is, after all, comprehensible in terms of poetic and moral symbolism; whether or not Shakespeare in his own life kept a mistress of that hue, he required her services for his poetry" (236).

[11] See David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 89. See also Rowse, xxvii-xliii.

"seeks reciprocity" (183) with his dark lady diverges from a critical tradition focused on how the poems "constitute the subjectivity of their creator" or how they "silence[]" the beloved (59).[12] By favoring a theatrical interpretation of the Sonnets, moreover, Schalkwyk in many ways rescues a woman who has long been doomed to suffer quietly while her poet and her readers judge her; inviting us to envisage her "palpable" "presence" (55) and to hear her voice, Schalkwyk reminds us that the dark lady is not just a symbol of blackness and ostensible depravity but also a person (however fictionalized).

My argument in this chapter crosses paths with Schalkwyk's interpretation. Like him, I highlight the dark-lady sonnets' dramatic potential and implicit "reciprocity," thus building on the premise that "Shakespeare's involvement with the theatre informs his writing of sonnets in decisive ways."[13] Unlike Schalkwyk, however, I will not focus on the theoretical, social, and cultural aspects of performance nor examine the poems' use of speech acts. Thus, I will not advance the notion that the "player-poet seeks less to persuade…through rhetoric than to bring about something *in* the saying of it" (33). Moreover, I differentiate the two sequences while Schalkwyk insists that "it is not fruitful to assume that" any part of Shakespeare's sonnets is "primarily epistemological" (29). Ultimately, Schalkwyk sees the poet of both sequences not as a character bound by story or a writer stunted by skepticism, but as an actor-artist with all language at his command.

If, therefore, Schalkwyk reads the poems within a public "context of address and reception," he seeks recourse in a public medium: the plays. Helping to bridge the dramas and the poems, however, is not described action (or narrative) but the

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[12] For the most famous exploration of poetic subjectivity, see Fineman's *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*. For a feminist reading of the dark-lady poems, see Nona Feinberg, "Erasing the Dark Lady: Sonnet 138 in the Sequence," in *Assays* 4 (1987), 97-108.

[13] Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 238.

performative utterance. For Schalkwyk, theater is partly a linguistic exercise in which the action (such as it is) takes places inside the poem as the poet reads lyrics to his mistress/audience. For me, theater manifests itself as a series of private transactions between a poet who no longer wants to praise and a mistress who doesn't seek it; thus, I look at performance at the other end of the lyric/narrative continuum in which the poems allow us to extrapolate a plot that bears resemblances to (but does not depend theoretically on) the plays. Indeed, I want to argue that in the dark-lady sonnets, the poet, by rejecting Petrarchan praise conceits as early as sonnet 127, by making physical contact with his beloved, and by bargaining with his mistress instead of praising her, learns that the only truth to be found lies not in language (performative or otherwise) but in dramatic action. In doing all this, the poet deliberately eschews what preoccupied him in the young-man poems: epistemological investigation.

Indeed, while the young-man sonnets present a quest to understand the canker and the rose, the poems devoted to the rebellious mistress trace the aftermath of that quest. In this second sequence, the double trope disappears. The poet may have seen flowers "damasked red and white" in the young man's face, but the dark lady shows "no such roses…in her cheeks" (130). One reason for this distinction is a pragmatic one; the poet has already confessed to the young man that "*nothing* this wide universe I call, / Save thou, my Rose" (109; my emphasis). For less pragmatic reasons, the poet abandons the rose of praise to avoid the canker of skepticism. This abandonment is clear enough in sonnet 127, which one could easily read as a dirge for "beauty's rose" and thus an attempt to find a language outside that of public praise (1):

> In the old age black was not counted fair,
> Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;

But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame:
For since each hand hath put on nature's power,
Fairing the foul with art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
Her brows so suited, and they mourners seem
At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
Sland'ring creation with a false esteem;
  Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,
  That every tongue says beauty should look so.

The poet has already lamented in sonnet 95 that "beauty's veil doth cover every blot" and turned "all things…to fair." By the second sequence's inaugural poem, the poet proclaims that "[s]weet beauty" has been invalidated by misdirected and ubiquitous praise, by those poets who are "[f]airing the foul with art's false borrowed face." No longer a meaningful word, *beauty* has become a floating signifier that one can no longer identify and describe, much less apprehend.

Symbolizing this failure of praise to sustain beauty is the dark lady herself, who not only recalls what poetry has lost, but who also mirrors and enacts a new standard. She is tied, in other words, to the image of blackness, beauty's bastard successor, as well as to the activity of mourning. 127's ambiguous treatment of *slander* and *mourn* emphasizes the dark lady's multifaceted character. Lines 10 and 13 show the mistress mourning the loss of beauty; in both instances, "they" could refer to the lady's grieving brows gazing on a changed world. However, "they" could also refer to other mourners contemplating either the mistress herself or women who have "slandered creation" with cosmetics. Regardless of how we read these lines, the poem suggests at least two views of the dark lady: a figure of loss who elicits mourning and a figure of slander who merits nothing but shame.

The sonnet's curious handling of the word *beauty* also adds to the mistress'

equivocal personality. Three distinct manifestations are present in the poem: false,

meretricious beauty reflected in conventional praise; the name *beauty* which now

conjures a picture of blackness; and the true, ineffable beauty that has lost its name. The

fact that the poet continues to use *beauty* in its tautological sense ("beauty") and *beauty*

in its "bastard" state ("black") precludes a straightforward interpretation. The sonnet also

obfuscates the poet's attitude toward his mistress. To what extent has she become an

emblem of a new beauty that transcends the other falsely-praised women? To what

extent is the beloved debased, scorned as merely an unfortunate byproduct of a

corruptible and corrupting beauty? In the end, the dark lady remains an ambiguous

representation of praise and blame, virtue and vice, beauty and homeliness. She provokes

a mix of emotions ranging from empathy to revulsion.

In one respect, then, the canker has not disappeared at all but has burst into full

view. With her "raven black" eyes (127), her black deeds (131), and her darkly

duplicitous nature (152), the mistress is a "false plague" (137) and "female evil," a figure

of "despair" ready to tempt the beloved rose from the speaker's side (144).[14] And she

succeeds. The poet, however, exploits this mistress' power, writing her into a temptation

drama whose structural rigidity is belied by the actors who manipulate it. As sonnet 144

reveals, the poet no longer imagines himself "authorizing" his beloveds' "trespass with

compare" (35); rather, he dramatizes how his creations can be neither controlled nor

contained by rhetorical or allegorical comparisons:

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[14] While Olga Valbuena does not explore the significance of the canker in-depth, she does argue that the "dark lady's 'art,' in that word's substantive and indicative senses, absorbs the poet's as well as her own and the young man's 'shame' (95.1), 'canker' (95.2), 'spot' (95.3), and 'sins' (95.4), represented in the ink 'blot' (95.11) that taints the dark lady subsequence even while giving it material presence" ("The Dyer's Hand," 326).

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair
Which, like two spirits, do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman colored ill.
To win me soon to hell my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride;
And whether that my angel be turned fiend
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
But being both from me both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell.
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

On the surface, this sonnet is just another rendering of the medieval "battle of souls," an allegory that has pre-Christian origins but literary provenance in the work of Prudentius, a fourth-century Roman Christian.[15] Having "transformed scriptural metaphor into allegory," Prudentius, long before Shakespeare, wrote of "man's two-sided nature…in an uproar of rebellion," and of "opposing spirits at war" in the "dark prison-house of the heart."[16] Prudentius called his work *Psychomachia*, which suggests the "battle" ("machia") both for the "soul" and for "life" itself ("psyche").[17] Prudentius' innovation achieved such popularity in the medieval and Renaissance periods that Bernard Spivack considers him the father of the "allegorical poem" generally, reminding us that the writer "created a new literary type" and an "independent literary genre" (78-81).

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[15] For a discussion of the relationship of this "battle of souls" to such ancient faiths as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, see Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 74.

[16] Macklin Smith, *Prudentius'* Psychomachia*: A Reexamination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 111. *Prudentius*, trans. H.J. Thompson, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1:343.

[17] "psychomachia, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 February 2010 < http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50191637>. See also "psyche, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 February 2010 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50191565 >.

For Shakespeare to invoke a major source for modern allegory at the culmination of his sonnet sequence (a sequence that was itself written at the end of a long period of sonneteering) is truly significant.[18] More remarkable still is how Shakespeare reinvents that allegory, thus highlighting the distinct characteristics of his beloveds. As numerous readers have noticed, while the poet seems to explore two "opposing spirits" – the young man (the good angel) and the dark lady (the bad angel) – the poem enacts a sort of bait and switch when the classic battle of souls gives way to a romantic saga of lost love: when naughty and nice, in other words, become more interested in wooing each other than in persuading the poet to join their side. Admittedly, the poem is compelling *because* the narrative of virtue and vice is thwarted. Still, we pity the poet, who may on some perverse level like to think that his mistress is trying to "win" him "soon to hell" but who remains hopelessly estranged from his beloveds – an isolation intensified by his self-doubt.

If the poem undermines the *psychomachia* on a most basic level, then it also encourages us to rethink the allegory's opposing components, for the sonnet is less a Christian or pre-Christian struggle between "good" and "evil" than a competition between an established source and the characters (the young man and dark lady) who star in it. For the subtle distinction in articles reveals that while "*the* worser spirit" and "*the* better angel" are grounded, accepted, and *definite*, "*a* man right fair" and "*a* woman colored ill" are intractable, protean, and *indefinite*. Although the young man and the dark lady are "like two [competing] spirits" from that centuries-old psychomachia, they can also manipulate those spirits, skirting the pre-conceived narrative structure, adding

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[18] Although Colin Burrow and others maintain that the dark-lady poems were composed first, the 1609 Quarto has placed sonnet 144 in the last 10 poems of the sequence.

flexibility to a dramatic – but inherently inflexible – form, and so transforming the nature
of the allegory. And so, inasmuch as *allegory* suggests "speaking otherwise," sonnet 144
shows how allegory can speak against itself.[19]

Indeed, the poem's indefinite articles not only underscore the beloveds' indefinite
relationship to the psychomachia; they cause the poem to equivocate between vehicle and
tenor. After all, are the young man and the dark lady playing the good spirit and the bad
angel, or is the poet inspired by the allegorical distinctions in the psychomachia and so
disposed to craft "*a* man right fair" and "*a* woman colored ill?" In other words, is the
poet trying to use allegory to explain his beloveds or his beloveds to highlight (and so
problematize) the allegory? The poet, significantly, leaves these questions open,
emphasizing at turns his beloveds as embodied fictions and his beloveds as allegorical
representations.

Paradoxically, the psychomachia, by failing on an allegorical level to capture the
beloveds' situation, evokes the rhetorical concerns that preoccupied the poet in the
young-man sequence. By exploring the sexual union of the "worser spirit" and the
"better angel," sonnet 144, that is, dramatizes the complex relationship of the rose and the
canker, or the confused blending of praise and blame within Shakespearean epideixis.
Thus, Shakespeare manipulates the components of the allegory, as well as the
relationship between the original source and its dramatic instruments (his beloveds).
Only seeming to differentiate between "the worser spirit" and "the better angel," the
poem ultimately unites them. In other words, even though the speaker seems to wonder

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[19] "allegory, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 16
February 2010 < http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50005920>.

whether the dark lady has corrupted the male *friend* (who is one letter away from turning

fiend), the poem acknowledges that she already has.

At the core of the interpretative uncertainties is the word *fire* (line 14), which can

refer equally to "ejection," "sexual expulsion," and "infection" (with venereal disease).[20]

The first two denotations are logically linked. Because the speaker assumes that "one

angel's in another's hell," the dark lady fires out the beloved when she (r)ejects him or

drives him out (sexually or otherwise). Only then can the poet tell if his "angel be turned

fiend." The logic unravels, however, when we consider that the third meaning of *fire* –

"infection" – helps eliminate the doubt embedded in the first two denotations,

undercutting the "whether" of line 9 and the "guess[ing]" of line 12. The poet suggests

that the young man's corruption is a foregone conclusion: the poet, that is, will wait in

doubt only *until* the fair youth begins to show signs of infection.

Thus, the sonnet narrates the fall of the poet's good angel, not only in the way that

the two main characters fail to accommodate themselves to the allegory, but also the way

in which the poet fails to suit the allegory to them. That is, the poet has arguably sought

out the ostensible source for his sonnet sequence or imported the allegory into the

problem only to *demonstrate how* the psychomachia does not fit – how he cannot

transform the lovers' sexual dalliance into a struggle about him after all. Hinting at the

mutual complicity of the young man and dark lady, the poet uses comparative adjectives

("better," "worser") to describe them, eliding their roles and undermining a simple

allegorical distinction. The fact that the young man is "better" and the dark lady

"worser" reveals that quality is relative; the poem does not allow us to perceive the young

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[20] See also Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 500. For his assertion that *fire* also suggests venereal disease, Booth cites Hyder Rollins' variorum.

man as purely "good" or the dark lady as entirely "bad." The embedded chiasmus, moreover, in which "angel" (3) migrates through "spirit" (4) and "fiend" (9) only to be transmuted, finally, into "bad angel" (14), points to the ambiguous crisscrossing of roles and reflects the poet's fear of their mutual infection. As the chiasmus suggests, a good angel will inevitably transform into a bad angel; Lucifer will be ousted from heaven; and, ultimately, mankind will fall as well.

Aside, then, from dramatizing the problem of the canker (blame) and the rose (praise), sonnet 144 also somewhat alters the principle aim of Prudentius' allegory, which is to illustrate the ongoing postlapsarian struggle between virtue and vice. As Macklin Smith points out, although the *Psychomachia* (and its successors) can be considered an "allegorical history of Christian conversion," the "conflict remains; the will must continually fight to affirm the aid offered by God" – almost as if conversion is never a permanent state and must happen daily.[21] Sonnet 144, however, places greater emphasis on the fall itself – the descent of the poet and his beloved into time, decay, and mutability – in order to cast a backward glance at what has been left behind. Instead of writing a poetry of eternity, of prelapsarian longings, Shakespeare is writing a poetry of the earth, of the fallen realm. Shakespeare, moreover, is empowering his characters at the expense of his theological source and giving them a life regardless of their origin. And if we read the psychomachia as a metaphor for Shakespeare's two sequences, then we see how this poem reinforces the way in which literary creations outlive – and frequently surpass – their creators.

This bold new perspective is hardly disempowering, however, for it prevents many of the anxieties we should expect to see in a sequence devoted to lost beauty,

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[21] Smith, *Prudentius'* Psychomachia*: A Reexamination*, 109 and 113.

temporality, and decay. Partly this is owing to the dark lady herself, who does not elicit

the same skepticism that the young man does. Even in sonnet 144, the poet doubts the

young man but not the dark lady. Despite the poet's frequent protestations that he has

been misled, or blinded by her duplicities, he never doubts her tendency to wander or her

penchant for making and breaking romantic bonds. So how, then, are we supposed to

regard her? She possesses a coy cruelty similar to other Petrarchan beloveds, but she

provokes little admiration or wonder to counterbalance those vices. The poet instead

vents his anger on several occasions, blaming the dark lady most of all for the "deep

wound" inflicted on both the poet and his friend – his beloved rose (133). A living

canker, the dark lady seems to have eaten a hole in that rose; she has undermined the

relationship between the poet and his beloved, deflecting his will to praise.

However, the mistress – as a symbol of blame and darkness and doubt – also

relieves the poet of the burden he carries during the entire young-man sequence, in which

he struggles to fortify the fair youth against the ravages of time and stumbles at every

pass. Thus, the dark lady in all her imperfections liberates the poet from the need to write

perfect verse and encourages him to find solace in dramatic performance. In this way,

her poems invert the canker/rose problem explored in the sonnets to the young man,

where the poet learns that epideictic representation inevitably discovers the canker of

doubt. In the second sequence, the poet learns that dramatic representation has potential

to recreate a new rose out of mutability and decay. This view hardly discredits the

argument that these sonnets are dark, misogynistic, and full of painful moments; as my

use of the word "potential" implies, even though the poet attempts in sonnets 128-138 to

reform his mistress, his achievement (if one can call it that) is only temporary and reflects more a change on his part than the dark lady's.

To chart the poet's progress from voyeur to negotiant to involved character, I want to read sonnets 128-138 as a theatrical prompt book. Doing so reinforces the notion that despite the poet's constant reminders that he has "sworn" the dark lady "fair," we only see proof of this in sonnets 130 and part of 131. For the rest of the sequence, the poet worries about writing praise poetry, but he never *shows* us such writing. Instead of swearing the dark lady fair, the poet invokes the present perfect ("I have sworn"), clearing the poems of praise by making them passé. Dramatic impulses, social interactions, and sexual compulsions rush into the interstices of a poetic genre already eaten away by the canker, closing the aesthetic distance between the artist and his beloved. The consequences are far-reaching. In no other sonnet sequence, except Spenser's (whose final poems in the *Amoretti* look forward to the marital love celebrated in his "Epithalamion"), do the poet and beloved consummate their love.

Indeed, the stark contrast between sonnets 128 and 129 invites us to imagine that some consummation has occurred.[22] 128 is a poem about foreplay. It tells the story of a lover-poet who watches his beloved run her fingers along the aptly-named virginal and longs to be played upon like that instrument: "How oft… / Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap / To kiss the tender inward of thy hand, / Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap, / At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand." The speaker must content himself, however, with the lover's lips and agree to share her: "Since saucy jacks so happy are in this, / Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss." The abundance of

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[22] See Gordon Braden, "Shakespeare's Petrarchism." According to Braden, Shakespeare's poet is "writing love poems to a woman with whom a physical affair appears underway almost from the start" (171). Braden's *almost* implies that the sonnets chart the beginning of that affair.

synecdoche in this poem is not as remarkable as the way that the poet juxtaposes himself with the musical instrument, closing the distance between the jacks that kiss the beloved's hands and the poet who kisses her lips. As silly as this sonnet might seem, it shows a poet cunningly forcing his way into the story by allowing the instrument to share some of the same qualities that he has.

On and off in the sequence as a whole, the poet imports himself into the narrative sequence by using various comparisons, from the slave who "tend[s] / Upon the hours and times" of the beloved's "desire" (57) to the monarch who drinks up the "plague" of flattery when his blinded eye "doth prepare the cup" of poison for the mind (114). In these poems to the young man, however, the poet still maintains control over his praise object, perhaps because he never gets as physically close to his male beloved as he arguably does to the dark lady in 128.[23] And, indeed, we learn the aesthetic consequences of this sort of intimacy when the poet describes the aftermath of the sexual experience: "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action; and, till action, lust is / Is perjured, murdered, bloody, full of blame / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust" (129). This opening quatrain is the first of several chiastic formulations in a sonnet that defines lust even as it enacts it. Booth observes that the above lines show the "perverse and self-defeating energy the poem describes" and identifies the chiasmus as the figure which establishes this perversity.[24]

Beyond reflecting the poet's "energy" and mood, though, the chiasmus is also a temporal trap, catching him in between the before and after and closing him inside an

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[23] Pequigney disagrees with me here, maintaining that the poet is also sexually involved with the young man (see *Such is My Love*). Fineman, however, suggests that because the young-man poems reenact traditional Petrarchism, they also show sexual desire that is unfulfilled (see *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*).
[24] Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 443.

endless cycle of desire and regret. Lisa Freinkel, meditating on the temporal logic of the

chiasmus, suggests that it "elides the present moment, plumping out the lyric *now* with a

pathos of loss and longing."[25] The fact that the speaker obsesses over the past and future

in 129 is clear enough. Is, however, the present "elided" or is it simply too elusive – too

prone to fluctuation – to be captured in words? Is there, in other words, another logic we

could construct out of the figure of the chiasmus? One could argue that sonnet 129, more

than any other poem in the sequence, effectively conveys the *now* of experience precisely

because it only obliquely articulates that *now* – the strength of that present moment

scattering the poet's words on either side of experience and leaving behind the illusion of

movement. In this respect, the poem not only suggests that the speaker cannot lift

himself out of the cycle of regret and desire; it also mimics the sexual act:

> Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight;
> Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
> Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
> On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
> Mad[e] in pursuit and in possession so:
> Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
> A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
> Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
> All this the world well knows, but none knows well,
> To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Through the chiasmus, the poet can convey the fantasy of eternity felt in a moment of

lust; he can describe how lovers repeatedly seek – over and over again – the heaven of

one another's arms in order to vanquish the hell of Time's passing.[26] Thus, sonnet 129

offers a dramatic counterpoint to 116, which uses the chiasmus ("Love alters not when it

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[25] Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 219.
[26] Although the poet uses other devices to describe his entrapment (notably the polyptoton in the line, "Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme," and parallelism in the line, "Before, a joy proposed; behind a dream"), the chiasmus best illustrates the poet's predicament.

alteration finds") to emphasize the eternal marriage of minds not through lustful action but through effusive love and praise.

Indeed, this contrast illustrates how far the poet has strayed from his original devotion to his beloved rose. For, as it turns out, the poet's sexual consummation spells the end of his ability to protect himself aesthetically, to create a poetics capable of acting outside or in spite of the pitfalls of human character. Having refused to cushion his mistress with Petrarchan praise conceits to soften the fall – and she does fall – the speaker makes it clear that she must play a part in this artistic enterprise. What follows are a series of transactions between the poet and the dark lady that dramatize their reciprocal dependency – their "mutual render." Unlike in the procreation sonnets, where the poet finally promises to immortalize the beloved in his verse, and unlike the conclusion of the young man sequence, where the poet vows to praise his beloved in spite of the canker, the poet for a while stipulates that his representation of his female beloved depends on the way she *represents* herself to the speaker, and not necessarily on the way she really is. While the speaker meditates obsessively about the young man's interiority (the recurring canker alerting us to this obsession), the speaker merely doubts what (and perhaps whom) the dark lady might *do*.

In fact, the opening sonnet of the dark lady sequence immediately establishes the conditional nature of the poet's verse and the mistress's praise: "Sweet beauty hath no name," so "Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black" (127). Surprisingly, perhaps, the poet for several sonnets seems content with this arrangement, and, despite the ensuing sexual event that brings about so much pain, he stays more or less optimistic about his

beloved, calling her as fair and "rare as any she belied with false compare" (130).

Neither a rose, nor a coral, nor a sun, the dark lady has nonetheless charmed her poet.

The fact that the mistress has been rhetorically stripped, however, means that this

fascination cannot last – nor can the praise. Thus by sonnet 131, the mistress stands fully

exposed to an audience, and the poet is beginning to grow anxious:

> Thou art as tyrannous, so as thou art,
> As those whose beauties proudly make them cruel;
> For well thou know'st to my dear doting heart
> Thou art the fairest and most precious jewel.
> Yet in good faith some say that thee behold
> Thy face hath not the power to make love groan;
> To say they err I dare not be so bold,
> Although I swear it to myself alone.
> And, to be sure that is not false I swear,
> A thousand groans, but thinking on thy face,
> One on another's neck do witness bear
> Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place.
>   In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds,
>   And thence this slander as I think proceeds.

How can a speaker who has obsessively pondered the young man's dark deeds possibly

dismiss the dark lady's? The word *tyrannous* in the opening line reflects a deeper motive

summed up in the poem's ironic conclusion. As Helen Vendler avers, the poet in the last

line "appeals" to the dark lady's "social self-interest" and tries to convince her to "behave

better toward him so that the world will forgive her and enroll her among those attractive

enough to provoke love."[27] Because the speaker's poetry depends on the dark lady's

behavior, he cannot extenuate her black deeds or couch her flaws in sardonic wit. The

fact, moreover, that he grows uncomfortable with his mistress suggests that he is

becoming increasingly wary of the audience's expectations and concerned whether the

dark lady can convince that audience – and himself – of her worth.

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[27] Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 560.

Thus the sonnet captures that inescapable tension between the world's judgment and a poet's private preference for an unconventional beloved. The mistresses' "black" may be "fairest" in the speaker's "judgment" now, but that judgment will be tested by society, and the poet cowers at the possibility (line 7). As he comes to recognize later, "Love's eye is not so true as all men's no" (148). Perhaps the poet is weak. But perhaps he is merely realistic, acknowledging that to discredit that power of "no" is to traverse the same impossible path carved by Romeo and Juliet, who die trying to write a private love story that miraculously transcends the public world. After sonnet 131, the speaker discovers that he must take refuge in the consolations of performance (his as well as hers).

Such a performance, though, must be persuasive. *Hamlet* provides an appropriate analogue for this idea. Just before the performance of the *Murder of Gonzago*, Hamlet warns his players to "speak the speech…as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue" (3.2.1-2).[28] He advises them to do no more or less than the play commands, to "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" so that they "o'erstep not the modesty of nature" (17-19). "For anything so overdone," he adds, "is from the purpose of playing" and fails to "hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image" (19-23). In the Sonnets, we can imagine a similar exchange between the poet and his dark lady – a female subject who refuses to play by the rules and stubbornly resists the poet-playwright's script by *doing* more or less than he devises.

For a while, however, the poet attempts assiduously to coach a beloved whose eyes, which "look[] with pretty ruth upon" his "pain," have failed to conceal her

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[28] All quotations derive from the edition published by The Folger Shakespeare Library. *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).

"torment[ing]" and "disdain[ing]" heart:

> Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me,
> Knowing thy heart torment me with disdain,
> Have put on black and loving mourners be.
> And truly not the morning sun of heaven
> Better becomes the gray cheeks of the east,
> Nor that full star that ushers in the even
> Doth half that glory to the sober west
> As those two mourning eyes become thy face.
> O, let then as well beseem thy heart,
> To mourn for me, since mourning doth thee grace,
> And suit thy pity like in every part.
>   Then will I swear beauty herself is black,
>   And all they foul that thy complexion lack. (132)

We can almost hear Hamlet's injunction to the players to "suit the action to the word, the word to the action" when we read the three lines preceding 132's couplet. The speaker does not just want his mistress's pitying eyes; he also wants her to show, and perhaps to feel, what she shows. The speaker wants her to suit, as it were, her words to her actions, and she can only do so if her heart is in it. For Hamlet as for the speaker, however, the key word here is *suit*, which has less to do with authenticity than with representation – like Hamlet's *suit* of sables or his reference to the "customary *suits* of solemn black" (1.2.81), or the speaker's use of *suit* in the very first sonnet to the dark lady, who is described as having eyes "suited" or dressed in black.

Sonnet 132, in fact, looks backward to sonnet 127 and beyond the Sonnets to *Hamlet*. *Represent yourself to me*, the speaker seems to say in 132, *as a woman whose pity runs so deeply that it has affected her heart. Suit your heart to your eyes, your eyes to your heart*. Echoing Hamlet's jealous admiration for the actor playing Hecuba, this poem shows a poet counseling his beloved to "force" her "soul" to her own "conceit," or, to put it another way, to *suit* her "whole function…/ With forms to [her] conceit"

(2.2.580-84). Interestingly, in the play and in the poem, the fact that the soul is forced

and the heart beseems (which sounds like "seeming") suggests that the dark lady's

interiority is also part of the act, that the heart, too, can play a role. In drama, the

interiority of any character is an illusion, as is the actor's attachment to that illusion.

Although the actor is nothing to Hecuba and Hecuba nothing to the actor, he can still

weep for her; he can still *force* his soul so to his own conceit. In this sonnet, the poet

promises the beloved that if she proves herself capable of *beseeming* her heart and

"suiting" her "pity *like* in every part," "Then will I swear beauty herself is black, / And

all they foul that thy complexion lack." Sonnet 132 thus contains the poet's first attempt

to bargain with his mistress, or to implore her to represent herself a certain way if she

wants her lover to write her well.

Because the poet, however, never again "swear[s] beauty herself is black," we can

presume that the beloved does not comply with his wishes any more than she is tempted

by his oath-taking and promises of fame. By sonnet 134, the poet confronts the young

man's waywardness (which he quickly palliates) and his mistress's infidelity. This time,

though, the dark lady has not only failed to "suit" her "pity like in every part," but, as the

poet sees it, she has wounded the young man as well (133) when the latter becomes the

poet's "surety" and "debtor":

> So, now I have confessed that he is thine
> And I myself am mortgaged to thy will,
> Myself I'll forfeit, so that other mine
> Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still:
> But thou wilt not, nor he will not be free,
> For thou are covetous, and he is kind;
> He learned but surety-like to write for me
> Under that bond that him as fast doth bind.
> The statute of thy beauty thou wilt take,
> Thou usurer that put'st forth all to use,

> And sue a friend came debtor for my sake;
> So him I lose through my unkind abuse.
>> Him have I lost, thou hast both him and me;
>> He pays the whole, and yet I am not free. (134)

This poem sounds a bit like something Bassanio would have written to Portia, asking that she abate the power she wields over Antonio in the final act of the play. One could also hear echoes of Antonio in this poem and imagine a scene in which the merchant begs Portia to give her husband back to him – Bassanio's first love. In either scenario (and in keeping with the poem and the end of *The Merchant of Venice*), Portia does not yield. In sonnet 134, the young man gladly "pays the whole" (with an obvious sexual pun) but cannot convince the mistress to free him – and thus to cling only to his poet.

So what, apart from the poet's unconvincing attempt to canonize the young man and demonize the dark lady for their mutual infidelity, is going on in these two poems? The financial language is overwhelming in sonnet 134, where words like *mortgaged*, *will*, *bond*, *usurer*, *debtor*, and *pays* lace themselves with the economically-inflected *covetous* and *kind*. If we read the financial language as a metaphor, the poet is wrestling with the realities of artistic ownership and originality, recognizing that despite his intense desire to control the beloved, she has a will of her own – as do the readers, who will peruse the poet's work and freely draw their own conclusions about its merit. In this sense, the young man is a *necessary* intrusion, prompting the poet to recognize that he can "confess" himself to the young man and yet be "mortgaged" to the dark lady's "will"; exploiting the young man as a surety who "pays the whole," the poet demonstrates that he can never be liberated. As we saw in sonnet 144, a poet can create, but he cannot

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necessarily contain, a character. At the same time, he is never free of his creations, or of

his creative impulses.

     This truth achieves its climactic expression in sonnets 135 and 136, the oft-

discussed *Will* poems. I quote them both in full:

> Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,
> And Will to boot, and Will in overplus.
> More than enough am I that vex thee still,
> To thy sweet will making addition thus.
> Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,
> Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?
> Shall will in others seem right gracious,
> And in my will no fair acceptance shine?
> The sea, all water, yet receives rain still
> And in abundance addeth to his store;
> So thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will
> One will of mine to make thy large Will more.
>   Let no unkind, no fair beseechers kill;
>   Think all but one, and me in that one Will.   (135)

> If thy soul check thee that I come so near,
> Swear to thy blind soul that I was thy Will,
> And will, thy soul knows, is admitted there:
> Thus far for love my love suit, sweet, fulfill.
> Will will fulfill the treasure of thy love
> Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one.
> In things of great receipt with ease we prove,
> Among a number one is reckoned none.
> Then in the number let me pass untold,
> Though in thy store's account I one must be;
> For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold
> That nothing me, a some-thing, sweet, to thee.
>   Make but my name thy love, and love that still,
>   And then thou lovest me, for my name is Will.   (136)

No other poems in the sequence so beg the readers, as these do, to consider the ontology

and significance of a single word. How does one interpret *Will*? According to Fineman,

the word not only names the poet but also "gives voice to a sexual union," which "is

purchased at a specific personal price" and comes "at the cost of the loss of unity of

himself."[29] The *Will* sonnets, for Fineman, reveal the paradox of subjectivity: the moment we first speak *about* ourselves is the moment we become strangers to ourselves, our personality rendered into a third-person character capable of being represented by others in our absence. For Freinkel, *Will* is the ultimate catachrestic "supplement" that exposes its own failure to represent anything in particular; that is, the word's proliferation in the poems only underscores its insufficiency.[30] As I have mentioned in chapter 2, Freinkel argues that catachresis dominates Shakespeare's Sonnets because he is writing in a post-Reformation "culture that has come to distrust figures" and a "Lutheran universe" that began to doubt Biblical hermeneutics (164-5).

Ultimately, however, Freinkel's and Fineman's theoretical interpretations of sonnets 135 and 136 are not altogether different. The idea that Shakespeare's poems march inevitably, relentlessly, towards *Will* unites their analyses, as does their notion that *Will* reflects some sort of loss – whether a loss of part of the self as it develops a new relationship with (or awareness of) language or a loss of faith in Christian figurality.[31] Their studies are equally bold, even a bit cheeky, for they force upon us a totalized reading of the poems. Both scholars make assertions that they claim responsible readers cannot help but find plausible, and they challenge readers to disagree. This is no wonder, for they both make use of the proper name *Will* – the author, the subject, or the catachrestic insertion – in order to ground their points. This enables them to claim preemptive critical authority.

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[29] Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, 293. As Fineman avers (following Lacan), "Will" is the "mark of homogenous sameness as well as the 'cut' (Elizabethan slang for "cunt") which is the mark of heterogeneous difference, joining these together in the verbal intercourse of heterosexual 'whole' and 'hole'" (26).

[30] Freinkel, *Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 232.

[31] While Fineman argues that the poet, with Will, "speaks the name and lets in difference," Freinkel argues for a variation on that idea – that Will "marks the endless reiteration of difference" (234). Her distinction could be clearer.

Although I, too, cannot help but be seduced by the presence of *Will*, I contend that sonnets 135 and 136 – in the way they acknowledge the powerful presence of character, sexuality, and drama – work against preemption. To see this, one need only consider what that "large and spacious" *Will*, capable of adding "abundance" to its store, lends to the poet's work. If language is the only real power a poet has, then what happens when the poet (paradoxically) uses language to give up this power? What happens when the poet – with all his authority, with the power of the pen at his fingers, with the ability to create his version of the dark lady and of the truth – affirms the madness of words and the truth in action? In recognizing the autonomy of his creation, the poet frees himself up as well, for he is free to chase after his lover, and he is free to let her go.

With this in mind, I shall start by saying that *Will* is in part the poet's bargaining chip for negotiating his way back into the mistress's favor, a favor he temporarily loses after the young man's reemergence (the youth may also have been called *Will*). Ultimately, the poet achieves this by reminding the mistress that to love her "will" – her freedom, her desire to act, her individuality, and, of course, her will to accommodate other wills (male parts) in her will (female genitalia) – is to love her *Will*, or the poet who has recreated her in this verse but who has also joined her as a character in more ways than one: "Make but my name thy love, and love that still, / And then thou lovest me, for my name is Will." *Will* cleverly imposes himself in a way that makes him impossible to ignore, even impossible not to love.

More importantly, perhaps, the poet's playful engagement with sexual innuendo ignites an exploration of his role as artist. As these poems suggest, the poet's assertion of his identity (his "one Will") and artistic power is tied to multiplicity; if we see the poet

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more clearly now that he has named himself and become a character, we can only watch him amid a crowd. For the poet recognizes that ceding his will to his mistress entails taking his place among countless other "wills": "So thou being rich in Will, add to thy Will / One will of mine to make thy large Will more" (135). "Think all but one," he concludes, "and me in that one will." In other words, a poet can never act entirely alone. The juxtaposition of the one and the many is given fuller expression in the next sonnet, in which the poet counts himself "one" in the beloved's "account," yielding to the mistress his willpower, his will (phallus), even his reduced being – a name – and capitulating further to the presence of other wills (136).

At the same time, the poet in 136 intends to turn his self-abnegating "nothing" into a "some-thing," in other words, to be number "one" in the beloved's estimation: "For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold / That nothing me, a some-thing, sweet, to thee." The implied sexual act that can turn two bawdy nothings (the poet's and the beloved's) into "some-thing sweet" illustrates a more significant paradox: that to yield power, or one's will, is actually to wield and maintain that power; that is, reducing oneself to nothing allows for a return of something. In giving up his place to others, *Will* puts his mark all over the page, his ostensibly sacrificial act enabling him to publicize himself with remarkable fervor. We notice this simply by looking at the structure of the sonnets. *Will* fills almost every grammatical position – subjects, predicates, auxiliary verbs – in addition to spreading itself semantically from desire to genitalia (male and female) to the self-referential name.

Schalkwyk sees these poems as an "obliteration of the proper name" and evidence for an "imaginative form of release from the social hierarchy and constraint that is central

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to both Petrarchan and the patriarchal modes of dealing in and with women."[32] Although

Schalkwyk also reads the *Will* poems optimistically, observing in them a "liberating

affront to particular, patriarchal expectations of female chastity," he focuses almost

exclusively on social identity and public interaction; he does not consider that these

sonnets, more than any other poems in the sequence, reveal the poet at work.[33] Although

my interpretation more closely approaches Fineman's, I want to suggest that *Will*

represents something even more substantial than the poetic self, something that strikes at

the heart of artistic creation. *Will* is the deliberate action of a poet who recognizes his

artistic powers and the potential barriers to artistic fulfillment; instead of limiting or

discrediting a figural interpretation, as Freinkel argues, *Will* does the opposite: it

legitimizes a reader's ownership of the text and gives the poet more power because he

must capitulate. After all, for any poet, there will always be *other wills* – the will of an

intractable character or beloved; the will of language that inevitably prevents us from

saying precisely what we mean to say; the will of the audience, who enforces its will on a

work of art; and the poet's own changing will. And all of these wills help reinvent the

picture, but as long as the poet can articulate that fact, he can safely count himself as

"one," and thereby turn his "nothing" into a "something sweet." Merely to name *Will*

gives him the authority to convert conflict and loss into a small victory.

　　　　Shakespeare could not but be keenly aware of the artistic possibilities that arise

from perceived barriers to creativity, or what W.B. Yeats has called the "masterful

images" grown out of "a mound of refuse… / Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving

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[32] Schalkwyk, 183-86.
[33] Ibid., 188.

slut / Who keeps the till."[34] The dark lady, too, is more like that "raving" woman at the "till," or *Erato*, the Greek muse of erotic verse, than *Euterpe* or *Thalia*, the muses of lyric song and bucolic poetry. To return, then, to the question I asked earlier – how should we regard the dark lady? – I propose that we consider her an artistic challenge, so challenging, perhaps, that Shakespeare had to go back and write more than a hundred sonnets (the young-man poems) in order to perceive how he came to create her and to help him understand the complexities of this second sequence. The dark lady, as we have seen, defies strict categorization: she is fair and foul, beautiful and homely, enticing and repulsive. An accomplished actress, she glides comfortably between the roles of lover and adversary, angel and fiend, and she manages successfully to pull the poet himself into this world as well. Having stepped into the dark lady's complex and contradictory world, the poet becomes a negotiant, offering praise if she represents herself as mourner and promising to "swear her fair" if she keeps her eyes straight on him. After the understanding, however, achieved during the *Will* poems and, earlier, upon the entrance of the young man, the poet no longer endeavors to swear anything fair because he now recognizes that any attempt will make him "swear against the truth" (152).

As early as sonnet 140, in fact, the speaker stops promising praise if the mistress shows love and briefly threatens slander if she does not: "Be wise as thou art cruel; do not press / My tongue-tied patience with too much disdain, / Lest sorrow lend me words, and words express / The manner of my pity-wanting pain." Such a threat is only temporary, however, for the speaker quickly discovers that praise and blame can both deteriorate into a form of slander: "And in my madness might speak ill of thee: / Now

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[34] "The Circus Animals' Desertion," in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, 2nd edition, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 356.

this ill-wresting world is grown so bad / Mad slanderers by mad ears believed be" (140). The poet concludes here that all words will eventually lead to madness, a point he addresses again later when he affirms that his "thoughts and my discourse are as madmen's are, / At random from the truth vainly expressed" (147).

The poet seems to have decided that it would be madness as well to try to make windows into women's hearts. This is pointedly different from his perspective earlier in the sequence, when the speaker begs the beloved to "let it then as well beseem thy heart / To mourn for me, since mourning doth thee grace, / And suit thy pity like in every part" (131). By 140, the speaker is content to let the heart alone ("Bear thine eyes straight, though thy heart go wide"), and at the end of this poem, he ignores the potential incongruity between words and their meanings, between surface and substance, between the dark lady's exterior and interior. This willful decision to overlook the problem of linguistic and representational ambiguity competes with the poet's fixation (in sonnet 152) on difference. Thus, even though Fineman is right to fuss over the poet as a "perjured eye" swearing "against the truth so foul a lie," the poems also narrate how the poet learns to use drama to defeat that difference.

In no sonnet is this idea so clearly expressed as in sonnet 138, in my view the key to the dark-lady poems. Appearing in two different forms – in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599 and then in the 1609 Quarto – sonnet 138 very likely commanded Shakespeare's attention well into the seventeenth century. Quoted below is a conflation of the two versions (in brackets are the lines that appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim*):

When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she might think me some untutored youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties. [Unskillful in the world's false forgeries.]

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Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best, [Although I know my years be past the best,]
Simply [Smiling] I credit her false-speaking tongue,
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed. [Outfacing faults in love with love's ill rest.]
But wherefore says she not she is unjust? [But wherefore says my love that she is young?]
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
O, love's best habit is in seeming trust, [is a soothing tongue,]
And age in love love's not to have years told.
   Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, [Therefore I'll lie with love, and love with me,]
   And in our faults by lies we flattered be. [Since in our faults in love thus smothered be.]

Edward A. Snow, maintaining that the sonnet that appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim*

was indeed written first, argues that the 1599 version reflects the central problem of

Othello while the 1609 version captures the romantic relationship between Antony and

Cleopatra.[35] By this he means that in the 1599 poem, sexuality aggravates the speaker's

sense of isolation and disillusionment; by 1609, the speaker's physical relationship with

his mistress strengthens their "mutuality" (474). As Snow suggests, the earlier sonnet

belongs to the cluster of plays that shows "disgust with sexuality" and "distrust of

women" (462). Despite the poet's assertions that his love is "made of truth," he remains

like the "subjectively isolated male protagonists" in *Hamlet* and *Othello* (462). Snow

bases his interpretation on the 1599 poet's reference to "love's ill rest" (line 8) and on the

way he retreats from this beloved in line 6, speculating only about himself. The climactic

moment of the 1599 sonnet is of course the closing couplet, which Snow rightly sees as

"repressive" and "claustrophobic" (463).

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[35] Edward A. Snow, "Loves of Comfort and Despair: A Reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 138," in *ELH* 47 (1980), 462-483.

In the revised version of the poem, "flattered" lends life and animation where "smothered" suggests murder. Appropriately, the abstract word "love" in 1599's line 13 becomes a concrete "she" by 1609. Snow argues that, similar to *Antony and Cleopatra*, the modified sonnet suggests a "chastened yet visionary reaffirmation of the romantic idealism of *Romeo and Juliet*" (462). Here the poet does not remain painfully "isolated" because "the mistress enters constitutively" into his "subjectivity: his consciousness of her perspective [(in line 6, for example)] on him mediates his own reflection on himself" (471). Thus the second version of the poem succeeds in capturing the dark lady's peculiar ability to help the poet find comfort in the uncertainty of dramatic art, of action, and thus comfort in his own flawed identity. Perhaps, then, the poet has, if temporarily, convinced his mistress to act, though not for the reasons he intended – not for praise, for fame, or for a larger audience, but rather for themselves.[36]

In a way, the 1609 poem fulfills one of the principle aims of Donne's "The Dream," in which the speaker wishes his mistress would help him turn fantasy into reality by "act[ing] the rest" – the remainder and the stillness – and finding the rest in action. In order for this kind of relationship to work, however, the poet and the beloved must accept each other's version of the truth. Consider again the opening lines of the poem, which suggest something more dynamic than the static Liar's Paradox that Fineman observes: "When my love swears that she is made of truth / I *do believe* her, though I *know* she lies." Snow interprets the phrase, "I do believe her," as a "pledge" and "an enactment"

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[36] Nona Feinberg, in "Erasing the Dark Lady," argues against Snow's interpretation by showing that while sonnet 138 "opens with the potential to make real the presence of the dark lady," this "emergence is illusory" (101). As Feinberg argues, the poet has ultimately "made" her "in his own image and out of his own language" (107); she also points out that reading sonnet 138 in the context of the sequence should "temper" much of the "optimism" (98). Schalkwyk attempts to get around Feinberg's argument by imagining an "original context of address and reception" (*Speech and Performance*, 55), while I focus not on the literal power given to the dark lady's words but on a philosophy of drama espoused in sonnet 138 – how it affirms, if temporarily, an ontological truth in performance.

(465). For Snow, the phrase is "self-consciously, challengingly paradoxical," even illogical, and reflects the poem's ability to transcend the "burden of experience" (465-72). I would like to go further and argue that *believing* reflects the ontological emphasis of all drama, while *knowing* suggests the fraught epistemology of rhetoric. In my view, *knowing* lies in the realm of language and *be<u>lie</u>f* (comprising within it the word *lie*), in the world of theater. How? *Believe* is actively self-conscious; it implies performance or animation, emphasized by the auxiliary verb *do* ("I do believe her"). *Know*, however, is implicitly static, defining merely a passive, cognitive state ("though I know she lies"). Thus, the poem subtly stresses that a person can believe something different from what he knows. The rest of the sonnet reflects this disjuncture when it reveals the poet and his dark lady actively living the lie as they lie in one another's arms, suppressing "simple truth" in favor of an existential one, and disregarding knowledge for belief. Thus sonnet 138 not only explores the joys of playing a role, but shows how players can turn that role into the only reality.

Built into this affirmation of drama is an essential dimension in theater – what Snow calls a "time-bound acceptance" in the 1609 version (468). To admit so readily to mutability is not something we see in the young-man sonnets, where the poet tries obsessively to compensate for decay and time's ravages only to *reveal* decay and to *mark* time. In the dark-lady poems, however, the poet accepts time's imminent destruction, acknowledging himself as "bound" within time and focusing exclusively on the present. Thus, he manages to amass power precisely because that power will not last. As Marvell famously writes, "though we cannot make our sun / Stand still, yet we will make him run" ("To His Coy Mistress"). Similar to Marvell's speaker, Shakespeare's poet invites

his mistress to stand in the sun's exposing light, embracing in spite (or because) of their faults, and pushing the sun rather than allowing the sun to push them. Thus the poet becomes a man of action, explicitly subordinating his poetry to a drama whose story can be creatively extracted from the lyric sequencing – a story that somehow surpasses the words that occasion its existence. In this respect, sonnet 138 precisely demonstrates the very tendency toward action that the dark-lady sequence exhibits as a whole.

And so, by showing two lovers who believe in the power of dramatic action, Shakespeare invites us to see poet and mistress not as characters subject to investigation and inquiry, to praise and blame, but as living, breathing bodies existing within time. If only briefly, the poet can ignore inscrutable problems; he can avoid obsessively reflecting on the nature of corruption and slander; and he can escape attempting futilely to capture in words an accurate representation of another. Representations are false anyway. As the poet affirms in sonnet 138, acting out a lie is perhaps the only *real* and true way of affirming anything, especially the only way to show love, for the poet discovers that to show is also to be.

The Dark Lady Sonnets and Shakespearean Comedy

To contemplate sonnet 138's complex perspective on mutability and knowledge is to meditate on Shakespearean comedy at its best. At its worst, however, comedy can be as tense and as bleak as tragedy. Focusing in this section on social attitudes, knowledge, time, sexuality, gender, reciprocity, and role-playing, I want to suggest that the second sequence is (despite its pervasive misogyny and blame) thematically comic. For just as the young-man sonnets explore tragedy's paradoxical blend of affirmation, pessimism, and triumph, the poems to the dark lady expose comedy's dark optimism.

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In the opening scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, Antonio and Bassanio both

convey frustration. Nevertheless, Bassanio's first remark, "Good signors both, when

shall we laugh?" (1.1.66), offers a striking contrast to Antonio's "In sooth I know not

why I am so sad" (1.1.1).[37] While Antonio's declaration initiates, so we think, a quest to

understand himself, Bassanio's query reflects a desire for comic resolution. By

wondering "when shall *we laugh*," Bassanio reminds us that laughter does not always

arise spontaneously from a humorous experience; laughter can facilitate camaraderie.[38]

Significantly, Bassanio does not direct his question to Antonio, but rather to Solarino and

Solanio. Antonio, we quickly sense, laughs very little, and his desire for companionship

extends only to Bassanio.

The contrast between Bassanio and Antonio, in fact, captures the central tension

in Shakespearean comedy between the individual and society, between self identity and

social identification.[39] The "Bassanio" characters will join a community of lovers, laugh,

and marry; the "Antonio" figures will linger on the edge of the festivities, neither

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[37] Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 2000).

[38] See Laurent Joubert, *Treatise on Laughter (1579)*, trans. Gregory David de Rocher (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980). Joubert argues that laughter is partly "voluntary because very often it stops at the command of reason" (121). If laughter is voluntary, then we can speculate that people choose to laugh more often in the company of others; Joubert, however, does not explore human relationships in any detail in his treatise. Neither, for that matter, does Quintilian, although he, too, allows us to speculate in a similar way about camaraderie when he claims that "laughter is not far from derision" (3:67). Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. Donald A. Russell, 5 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001). For a modern discussion of the psychological and sociological implications of laughter that support the claim that laughter promotes social unity, see Robert R. Provine, "The Science of Laughter," *Psychology Today* (November/December 2000), 58-61.

[39] For a discussion of the relationship between individual and society in Shakespeare's comedies, see G.K. Hunter, "Comedy, Farce, Romance," in *Comedy from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Newark: University Delaware Press, 1986), 27-52. In part what happens in comedy is characters join the new society through self-sacrifice, effectively by "insert[ing] themselves into the identity of another" [Stephen Greenblatt, "Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture," in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, eds. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 219.]. Greenblatt himself does not focus on comedy per se, but his exploration of theatrical "impersonators" and "mask[s]" (222) – and the tensions and ambiguities this creates in drama – helps illuminate how comedy calls attention to these social masks by including characters who *seem* to refuse them.

shunning nor partaking of the new social order. These comic outsiders and skeptical non-conformists remind us that behind comedy's promise of marriage, reliance on white magic or disguise, and celebration of renewal lurks something unsettling and dark, even (or perhaps especially) after the ousting or transformation of the comic vice villains. As C.L. Barber rightly argues, while Shakespearean comedy is partly rooted in sixteenth-century popular festival, this "saturnalian release" is a temporary state of which the characters themselves seem to be aware.[40] Similarly, Northrop Frye – although he explores the mythical, archetypal underpinnings of comic structure by which characters move from chaos to resolution, winter to spring, darkness to light, and old society to new – also stipulates that "anyone's attitude to the festivity may be that of Orlando *or* Jaques."[41]

In fact, plays like *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Winter's Tale* expose the fine line between comedy and tragedy. Susan Snyder, exploring the "comic matrix" of Shakespeare's tragedies and thus the tragic potential of comedy itself, argues that "comedy's force [in general and in Shakespeare in particular] is so centrifugal that in its welter of possibilities the potential fragmentation of all form and meaning is never far off."[42] "Chaos," she goes on to say, "is held in check only by comedy's arbitrary natural law, and perhaps those magicians and other manipulators were felt to be necessary as visible reassurance that things would finally not fall apart, that the center would hold" (55). Lisa Hopkins similarly argues that even though "[m]arriage is appropriate as a provider of closure for comedy because it focuses primarily on the

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[40] C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), 4-9.
[41] Northop Frye, *A Natural Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 46 (my emphasis).
[42] Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 55.

group, as opposed to the individualist, isolationist emphasis of tragedy," Shakespeare's

comedies do not always provide us with "happy marriage[s]."[43] Stephen Greenblatt, too,

observes that it is the "deep game of virtually all of Shakespeare's comedies…to contain,

just barely, the wild and destructive energies that they release, yoking them like

boisterous, unruly horses to the traces of the unconventional marriage plots."[44] Thus,

even within the marriages themselves, we notice individuals threatening to break loose

from the social group. Portia's manipulations in the final scene of *The Merchant of

Venice*, for example, slightly sever her bond with Bassanio, undermining her ostensibly

submissive speech in 3.2. And her disturbing meditation on a "good deed in a naughty

world" (5.1.91) illuminates a level of introspection and gloom emanating not only from

her character, but also from Antonio and certainly Jessica, who in Act 5 speaks nothing at

all to the heroine who helped destroy her father in order to "drop manna in the way / Of

starved people" (5.1.294-5). How much longer, we wonder, before Portia figures out that

the "naughty world" had long since darkened any chance in this play for a purely "good

deed"? How faithfully can we cling to the promise of renewal in this "comedy?"

Shakespeare's plays show that the characteristics that make tragedy tragic are also

what make comedy dark: the reluctance of, or inability for, individuals to celebrate life

and youth as one group. Francois Laroque, expanding on the holiday tradition described

by Barber, argues that tragedies often enact the fall of "those who believed in the festive

system" and who found no one ready to reciprocate.[45] The fact that "[f]estivity seems to

produce [in tragedy] the improvidence, prodigality, and blindness that propel individuals

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[43] Lisa Hopkins, *The Shakespearean Marriage: Merry Wives and Heavy Husbands* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 17, 54.

[44] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 164 (my emphasis).

[45] Francois Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 262.

toward their downfall" emphasizes how fragile comic resolution really is – how it depends on individuals willing to commit themselves to one another and to shine that light (however temporary or illusory) in the darkness of a naughty world.[46]

The tension in comedy between the individual and society, between comic closure and resistance to closure, corresponds with the equivocal conventionality of the dark-lady sonnets. David Schalkwyk and Gordon Braden contend that Shakespeare's dark mistress is classically Petrarchan in that she occasionally resists the speaker's romantic sallies.[47] Like Stella and Delia, Shakespeare's mistress evokes in the poet paradoxical emotions common to the sonnets tradition (love/hate, jubilation/despair, hope/agony); she also forces the poet into the same kind of isolation experienced by the dark figures of the comedies. However, Braden and Schalkwyk also observe that the dark lady occasionally does the unthinkable: she reciprocates.[48] Instead of coyly refusing the advances of her lover and preserving her virgin purity, she consummates her relationship with the poet, who then repudiates many of the praise conventions associated with Petrarchism, bestowing upon his mistress the power to create a version of herself. Thus, she possesses an artistic function that other Petrarchan beloveds do not have.

As I have already explored, the dark lady helps the poet recognize his limitations as artist and, at the same time, the great freedom in articulating those limitations. The same can be said for the comedies, in which Shakespeare breaks from the normative

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[46] Laroque, 263.

[47] According to David Schalkwyk, "commentators tend to overlook the fact that sonnets 127-152 remain deeply Petrarchan insofar as they systematically try to overcome a resisting object of desire" (*Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays*, 185). See also Gordon Braden, "Shakespeare's Petrarchism," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, 163-183. Braden suggests that "Shakespeare's sequence is in certain ways one of the most Petrarchan sequences of its age – that some of its most distinguishing marks are not mockeries or refutations of Petrarchism, but fulfillments of some of that movement's original potentialities" (171).

[48] See Braden, 171, and Schalkwyk, 55 and 83.

structures that Plautus or Terence would have used, and negotiates, so to speak, his way toward a deeper conception of comedy.[49] Undoubtedly, Shakespeare often goes far in his quest for ingenuity and authenticity of character, pushing his work seemingly beyond the limits of comedy. Similar to the dark-lady poems, some of Shakespeare's most sophisticated comedies expose the tension between an artist's will to create and his difficulty in controlling that creation. In a way, then, Greenblatt's assertion that Shakespeare's comedies "contain, just barely, the wild and destructive energies they release" also describes the dark-lady sonnets, whose poet tries to "contain, just barely," his beloved's "wild and destructive energies." Thus we might say that Shakespeare's dark-lady poems not only echo the creative dynamic of the comic genre; they also reflect the dramatic interactions within the plays themselves.

Shakespeare's wily mistress is arguably both a product of and inspiration for the richly textured heroines of his comedies – Kate, Portia, Beatrice. Although these and many other female characters forge romantic relationships built on the same sexual energy that permeates the dark-lady sonnets, I am tempted to call the nameless mistress Rosaline or Rosalind. This particular character undergoes a notable metamorphosis in Shakespeare's canon. Rosaline is the disembodied Petrarchan mistress in *Romeo and Juliet* responsible for turning the play's titular hero into an object of derision in the comic first act of the play.[50] The Rosaline of the nearly contemporaneous comedy, *Love's*

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[49] For a discussion of Shakespeare's employment of the same comic conventions used by Plautus and Terence, see Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Comedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). See also Leo Salingar, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy* (London: University of Cambridge Press, 1979). Salingar explores the distinctions between Old Comedy and New Comedy (Plautus and Terence), the latter of which Shakespeare used more often as he adapted and combined source material.

[50] I am following Susan Snyder's argument, in *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies*, that the first half of *Romeo and Juliet* follows the conventions of comedy. Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline, and his subsequent love-longing for Juliet, fits better with Shakespeare's comedies than his tragedies. Even the

Labor's Lost, wields significantly more power as the central female character. Reminiscent of the Petrarchan beloved of *Romeo and Juliet*, however, Rosaline refuses to consummate her relationship with Berowne until he has spent a year in a hospital, "enforce[ing] the pained impotent to smile" (5.2.844). When Shakespeare later creates Rosalind, the androgynous love skeptic of *As You Like It*, he allows his heroine to reciprocate Orlando's affections and marry. But the question remains whether she truly submits to her would-be Petrarchan poet, Orlando. The fact that she steps outside the festivities to speak the epilogue emphasizes that comic closure is tenuous. If at play's end, we delight in Rosalind's marital happiness, we must also celebrate her individuality – her willingness to "kiss as many" of the bearded audience that "pleased" her (Epi.17-18).[51]

Despite similarities among these three characters, "ebony"-faced Rosaline of *Love's Labor's Lost* is probably the most obvious evocation of the dark mistress.[52] The play contains several sonnets printed in *The Passionate Pilgrim*; and its three Petrarchists – Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine – all speak love poems echoing some of the dark-lady sonnets. Berowne's description of Rosaline, for example, matches sonnet 127 almost exactly:

> Oh, if in black my lady's brows be decked,
> It mourns that painting and usurping hair
> Should ravish doters with a false aspect;
> And therefore is she born to make black fair.
> Her favor turns the fashion of the days,
> For native blood is counted painting now;
> And therefore red, that would avoid dispraise,

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ending of the play, which dramatizes a "marriage" between the Montagues and the Capulets, could also be considered comic.
[51] Quotations from *As You Like It* and *Love's Labor's Lost* are taken from *Shakespeare's Comedies*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007).
[52] For one discussion of this connection, see Walter Cohen, "Introduction," in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* (1982; rpt. New York: Norton, 2005), xliv-xlv.

Paints itself black to imitate her brow. (4.3.254-261)

Berowne does not merely believe that his mistress is a new standard for beauty, one who "mourns" those women who "ravish doters with a false aspect." Nor does he simply argue that "black" is the new "fair" and thus beauty's successive heir. Berowne actively celebrates the succession, delighting in Rosaline's power to transform the "fashion of the days" and to inspire, paradoxically, the imitation painting he so disdains. While the speaker of sonnet 127 also indicates that his black beauty could have successors, he remains somber and brooding right through the closing couplet, never once unequivocally celebrating his mistress' distinctive character.

So what may we glean from these subtle differences between sonnet 127 and Berowne's speech? I believe that the lines I have cited from *Love's Labor's Lost* predate sonnet 127, perhaps by a number of years, and that Rosaline is an early draft of the dark lady. Berowne gives us something like a prologue to the dark-lady poems, a taste of what Shakespeare's poet means when he affirms that he has sworn the dark lady fair. As we know, Berowne and the poet of the Sonnets are objecting to conventional praise. Both works suggest that an internal flaw is exposed during any attempt to hold one's beloved against a standard of virtue and beauty. Thus Rosaline and the dark lady are both new standards, nonpareils. Unlike the dark mistress, however, Rosaline inspires unequivocal admiration, perhaps because Shakespeare had yet to complete his sonnet sequence, to explore in the young-man poems the way that invented standards and particularized praise bring with them all kinds of problems.

Appropriately, the etymology for *Rosaline/d* reflects the very conflict within Shakespearean epideixis between praise and blame, between the rose and the canker.

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While *Rosa-lind* can be broken down to its usual denotation, "beautiful rose" (the image of praise traceable to the Song of Solomon and Dante's *Paradiso*), *Ros* in the Germanic suggests "hros" or "horse," the animal that Greenblatt uses to describe the unruly characteristic of Shakespeare's comedies and thus the sort of animal that best captures the intractability of the dark lady as well.[53] And *lind*, although it comes from the Latin word for "beautiful," is also associated with the Scandinavian and Swedish word, *lindworm*, the serpent, dragon, or snake depicted in Germanic folklore and mythology.[54] The fact that *lindworm* seems on one level to be a grotesque incarnation of the lowly cankerworm casts a perplexing shadow over *Rosaline*. Like the rose of the Sonnets, which contains within it the canker of doubt; like Shakespearean epideixis, which unsteadily vacillates between praise and blame; and like the dark lady herself, *Rosaline* embodies its own contradiction.

This linguistic conflict within the name *Rosaline/d* is symbolic of the larger tension within the comedies, the dark-lady sonnets, and the black mistress herself. Both the poems and the plays attempt to carve out a drama of beauty and eternity inside a world of mutability and decay, to write a wedding dance over a dance of death. Both genres strive to transform *time*'s ravages into time's benefices not by altering or completely obscuring what is fundamentally destructive to existence, but by focusing almost exclusively on the temporality that destructive forces can never fully permeate – the present.

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[53] See "horse, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 February 2010 < http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50108178>. This word *horse* derives in part from the Old High German word, *ros*. See also Patrick Hanks et al., *Oxford Dictionary of First Names*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), in which *Rosalind* is shown to derive from the Germanic word *hros*, or horse (234).

[54] See "lindworm, n." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 4 February 2010 < http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50133571>.

To say, then, that the dark-lady sonnets are inherently comic is to see in these poems qualities germane to most of Shakespeare's comedies: sexuality and innuendo, underlying threats of violence (physical or emotional) that never materialize, acceptance of change, an overwhelming interest in histrionics and role-playing, and emphasis on wordplay. Perhaps most important of all is their similar epistemological stances. While Shakespeare's comedies certainly invite skeptical inquiry and ethical investigation, the happiest characters typically do not pursue knowledge. Philosophizing brings conflict; thinking too deeply into the mystery of things, in other words, is dangerous, divisive, lonely. At the end of *Twelfth Night*, we are not satisfied that Viola fully appreciates what her "estate is" (1.2.46) or that Olivia has developed a greater awareness of herself and the world. All the characters, especially Sebastian, submit to "wonder" (the mother of philosophy) but they stop there (4.3.3). Even Orsino finds it possible to maintain his bisexual equanimity at the end of the play, continuing to call Viola "boy" (5.1.279) and later "man" (409) instead of demanding that she procure her "maiden weeds" and assume her true identity (267). As Joseph Summers argues, "the inhabitants of Illyria discover that they are anything but free" and "most of them know neither themselves, nor others, nor their social world."[55] Arguably, the only genuinely self-aware character in the play is Feste, the "corrupter of words," whose half-hearted antics make it possible for the others to ignore the darkness that surrounds them and the dark house inside which they all (including Viola, to some extent) reside (3.1.38).

The poet of the Sonnets, too, has one foot in the dark house, standing alongside both Feste and Orsino and possessing a curious mixture of self-knowledge and willful

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[55] Joseph Summers, "The Masks of *Twelfth Night*," in *Shakespeare: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Leonard F. Dean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957; reprint, New York: New York University Press, 1975), 134-5.

naivete. Like Feste, the poet senses the weight of the world; like Orsino at the end of the play, the poet (in the second sequence) chooses not to plumb the depth of things. By imagining the dark lady in various interactive postures – fighting, bargaining, making love – the poet can avoid the darkness and skepticism that beset any person in seclusion and underlie any exercise in praise. Thus pleading rather than praising, thus negotiating instead of investigating, the poet crafts a character that he can "play" with. And so, even if the poet ultimately possesses a greater, more intense awareness than most of the characters in *Twelfth Night*, he participates like these characters in comic reciprocity.

Kate and Petruchio, or The Speaker and his Dark Lady: Creation and Containment in *The Taming of the Shrew*

In the previous section, I tried to show how the dark-lady sonnets are conventionally comic. The poetic language, the tension between individual and society, the poet's epistemological attitude, and the dark lady herself are defining characteristics of both the Sonnets and the comedies. *The Taming of the Shrew* is among a handful of plays that captures the spirit of this second sequence. Not only does the relationship between Kate and Petruchio reflect that between the speaker and mistress of the Sonnets, but the manner in which Petruchio sets out to reinvent and tame Kate – and, arguably, his combined failure and success in doing so – echoes the rhetorical games explored between the poet and his beloved: rhetorical games that come at the expense of epistemological investigation and praise.

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In *The Taming of the Shrew*, the madcap wedding occurs in Act 3 and is soon overshadowed by the play's real denouement and one of the most debated passages in all of Shakespeare: Kate's final address on wifely subservience. [56] This play may, in fact, be the only one in his corpus in which our interpretation of the entire work – from our study of the plot to an investigation of the play's source material to an exploration of the motives and personalities of the characters – hinges on a single speech. How should the speech be interpreted? Proponents of a literal approach might remind us that the final scene contains no asides, no theatrical indications of verbal irony, and thus no tangible evidence for anything other than a straightforward reading. Among the critics arguing for a literal interpretation is Marjorie Garber, who marshals support from the contemporaneous *Comedy of Errors*. According to Garber, the Abbess' serious treatment of some of the same gender issues covered in Kate's address indicates that we should take Kate seriously as well.[57] Jeanne Addison Roberts similarly argues that "[t]here can be no question that the view of the dominant male and the submissive female survives to the end of the play."[58] Like Garber, Roberts looks beyond *The Taming of the Shrew* for evidence of a literal reading; however, instead of finding support in the moralistic musings of another early comedy, Roberts draws connections to Shakespeare's romances.[59] From this perspective, Kate undergoes an Ovidian metamorphosis and "Petruchio himself is equally 'tamed.'"[60]

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[56] All quotations are taken from Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

[57] Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare: After All* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 69.

[58] Jeanne Addison Roberts, "Horses and Hermaphrodites: Metamorphoses in *The Taming of the Shrew*," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, ed. Dana E. Aspinall (New York: Routledge, 2002), 67.

[59] *The Taming of the Shrew*, Roberts explains, "is not the social celebration characteristic of festive comedy"; rather, it reflects "the kind of individual salvation typical of romance" (67).

[60] Ibid., 68.

Of course, not all critics agree that the play ends happily, especially those committed to studying the cultural context. Natasha Korda examines how the taming plot traces the evolution from "domestic use-value production to production for the market" in which Kate becomes an "educated consumer" whose final act of "obedience signals her readiness to assume an active managerial role in domestic affairs."[61] If Korda diminishes Kate's theatrical power with talk of commodities and "status objects," she does not, however, commit to a literal reading of Kate's final speech (131). Lynda E. Boose, also historicizing the *Shrew*, does commit to such a reading, arguing that an ironic interpretation revises social history, undermines the point of the play, and merely appeases our modern sensibilities.[62] Boose urges us to confront the hard truth: that the play reflects a culture invested in "suppressing women's speech" and "shaming" scolds.[63] Laurie E. Maguire and Emily Detmer implicitly side with Boose. Maguire maintains that the "play analyzes cultural control" in "Christian marriage," one of the "indices of man's progress."[64] Detmer, reading Petruchio's "civilized domination" as a form of "domestic violence," contends that in order to "enjoy the comedy of the play," the audience must assume the point of view of the "abuser."[65]

Robert B. Heilman and Burton Raffel also take Kate at her word, but they try to justify Petruchio's taming methods by rooting the play in Italian farce.[66] As Heilman

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[61] Natasha Korda, "Household Kates: Domesticating Commodities in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47.2 (1996), 110, 112, 128.

[62] Lynda E. Boose, "Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.2 (1991), 181.

[63] Boose, 184.

[64] Laurie E. Maguire, "Cultural Control in *The Taming of the Shrew*," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, 249.

[65] Emily Detmer, "Civilizing Subordination: Domestic Violence and *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.3 (1997), 274.

[66] Robert B. Heilman, "The *Taming* Untamed, or, The Return of the Shrew," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, 45-57; Burton Raffel, "Introduction," Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), xix-xxxiii.

suggests, "Farce offers a spectacle that resembles daily actuality but lets us participate without feeling the responsibilities and liabilities that the situation would normally evoke." [67] If, however, we interpret the *Shrew* merely as a farce, in which "the human personality is without depth," then we run the risk of relegating the play to mere spectacle, and taming the shrew would be no different from other Elizabethan entertainments: bear-baiting, jousting tournaments, even public punishments and executions. Refusing to empathize with Kate, we root for Petruchio and laugh at his antics; we take visceral pleasure in watching him break and subdue his shrew. While other, more sober-minded, critics argue that the play's ending reinforces cultural norms for the sake of comic resolution, or that it ultimately endorses "Protestant marriage ideology," many of them also imply (like the advocates of farce) that the play satisfies our desire for closure at any cost and that Shakespeare gives the people what they want – neither more nor less.[68]

One of the strongest proponents of an ironic reading of the speech is Harold Bloom, who asserts that the "*Shrew* is as much a romantic comedy as it is a farce."[69] Following in the footsteps of Harold Goddard, Bloom argues in his usually candid way that "one would have to be tone deaf (or ideologically crazed) not to hear in…[Kate's speech and Petruchio's response] a subtly exquisite music of marriage at its happiest."[70] For Bloom, the magic resides in Kate's declaration, "I am ashamed that women are so

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[67] Heilman, 49.

[68] Margaret Lael Mikesell, "'Love Wrought These Miracles': Marriage and Genre in *The Taming of the Shrew*," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, 112.

[69] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 29.

[70] Bloom, 33. See Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). According to Goddard, "Everything leads up to Kate's long lecture at the end on the duty of wives to their lords. What fun she has reading it to those two other women who do not know what every woman knows! How intolerable it would be if she and Shakespeare really meant it (as if Shakespeare could ever have meant it!), though there is a deeper sense in which they both do mean it…" (1:71).

simple" (5.2.161). He claims that this line refers not only to the shrewish practices

directly following the assertion, but also to the practice of interpreting speech and

detecting irony. Kate is too smart, Bloom indicates, to be literal, and she expects smart

audiences to catch her subtleties. The BBC adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*

(1980) takes the ironic interpretation to an extreme level, showing a quietly triumphant

Kate (Sarah Badel) performing before an astonishingly subdued Petruchio (John Cleese).

Reading the ending ironically certainly enriches the play, and Shakespeare is no stranger

to rhetorical nuance. Nor should we be surprised that Shakespeare would transform one

play's serious issue (*The Comedy of Errors*) into the next play's comical one. A text,

furthermore, inevitably eludes the historical or socio-political context as well; some of

the abovementioned attempts to examine the play through a cultural lens do more to

distort or obscure than enlighten our understanding of Kate and Petruchio.

Not surprisingly, some of the most persuasive criticism on *The Taming of the*

Shrew reflects neither the stubborn effusions of Bloom nor the militant historicism of

Boose. Insofar as both extremes involve little textual analysis, both extremes miss the

mark. Critics who have spent the most time considering the *whole play*, including the

role of the induction scenes, the function of theater, and the nature of the taming itself,

have found a way to read Kate's speech ironically without compromising Petruchio's role

in taming her. Margie Burns and David Daniell, for example, contend that the induction

scenes undermine a literal reading of Kate's speech and that the ending of the play

creates a sense of equality between the sexes.[71] Coppélia Kahn argues that the play

"satirizes…male attitudes toward women" and that Kate learns from Petruchio himself

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[71] Margie Burns, "The Ending of *The Shrew*," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, 84-105; David Daniell, "The Good Marriage of Katherine and Petruchio," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, 71-83.

how to "subvert[] her husband's power without attempting to challenge it…."[72]

According to Juliet Dusinberre, "Stage power appears here, even if the price of it is a

speech on social submission."[73] Holly A. Crocker, expanding on this perspective, insists

that "Katherine…must *enact passivity* in order to satisfy Petruchio's expectations of her

character," but also to show the "illusory nature of the power he would wield over her."[74]

Helga Ramsey-Kurz looks at the power dynamic from a slightly different angle, arguing

that Katherine "overcomes her antitheatricality" with Petruchio's help and that she

"learns to appreciate the kind of complicity in which actors are united as they engage in

such deception."[75] "Petruchio can afford to bet on Katherine's compliance, not as his

wife," Ramsey-Kurz contends, "but as his accomplice actress."[76] Despite some subtle

differences in approach, most of these scholars suggest that even though Petruchio

maintains a measurable amount of control at the end of the play, other features – from the

atypical comic structure and the sheer length and centripetal force of Kate's speech to the

strong rhetorical dimension of the taming plot itself and the general emphasis on

metadrama – all help to transform Kate's obedience speech into a powerfully ironic

performance of submission. Expanding on the work of these critics, I suggest that this

double reading is consistent with Shakespeare's approach in his sonnets and, in

particular, in sonnet 138. Showcasing the relationship between the dark lady and her poet

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[72] Coppélia Kahn, "*The Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage," *Modern Language Studies* 5.1 (1975), 88-89.

[73] Juliet Dusinberre, "*The Taming of the Shrew*: Women, Acting, and Power," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, 180.

[74] Holly A. Crocker, "Affective Resistance: Performing Passivity and Playing A-Part in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54.2 (2003), 153-156.

[75] Helga Ramsey-Kurz, "Rising above the Bait: Kate's Transformation from Bear to Falcon," *English Studies* 88.3 (2007), 271-279.

[76] Ibid., 279.

at its best, *The Taming of the Shrew* explores how an artist can create, but cannot necessarily contain, a character.

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A cursory survey of the plot reveals some incongruities in Kate's final speech. In terms of rhetoric and content, it echoes an earlier part of the play: Petruchio's notoriously misogynistic assertion that his wife is "my goods, my chattels…my house, / My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything" (3.2.222-4). Early in her bombastic oration, Kate, aping that speech, declares, "Thy husband is thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign – one that cares for thee, / And for thy maintenance commits his body / To painful labor both by sea and land…" (5.2.146-9). Kahn argues that it is "impossible that Shakespeare meant us to accept Petruchio's…shamelessly blunt statement of the relationship between men, women, and property" – especially after Kate's mockery of it.[77] It is equally difficult to see how Kate can be talking about Petruchio, who rides the tail wind of the other suitors and who seeks Kate's hand in the first place to avoid the labor she describes. Kate's follow-up assertion, moreover, about a wife who "liest warm at home, secure and safe" and a husband who "craves no other tribute… / But love, fair looks, and true obedience" (151-53), seems ironic when juxtaposed with the details of the taming in Act 4. Even if we read this passage, not as a narrative of what has passed, but as a verbal contract that speaks of the future, Kate is setting the terms. Is this the mark of a woman who has been broken by the taming?

What, though, does it mean for Petruchio to *tame* Kate? She is, after all, different at the end of the play. Does an ironic reading of the speech necessarily preclude her being tamed? The fact that the final speech invites such questions opens up a fruitful line

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[77] Coppélia Kahn, "*The Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage," 94-95.

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of inquiry built on the rhetorical dimension of the taming plot itself. Joel Fineman, working from the premise that speech is gendered, argues that this play is about language. He observes how the feminine language of rebellion and subversion is at odds with the masculine language of authority, which he claims is literal. Tracing the way Petruchio acts and speaks the part of the shrew to tame the shrew – and to hold a mirror up to Kate's own nature – Fineman explores whether it is "possible to voice a language, whether of man or of woman, that does not speak, sooner or later, self-consciously or unconsciously, for the order and authority of man?"[78]

Through a series of intricate arguments that I cannot summarize here, Fineman reminds us that rhetorical subversion in general (or *sub-version*, as he writes it) depends on one's perception of the literal meaning: irony, in other words, cannot be understood as such unless we are familiar with the situation alluded to or described. From this premise, Fineman maintains that the play dramatizes the development of language from subversive and female-centered to literal and male-centered. This occurs when Petruchio's (feminine) language of subversion – the language he uses to tame Kate – leads inevitably to an assertion of male authority: Kate's final speech. Because Fineman's entire discussion hinges on a literal (male) interpretation of Kate's address, analyzing it would undermine his point.[79] Two issues, though, allow us to challenge such a heady argument. First, Fineman admits that because Bianca turns (or is revealed to be a) shrew at the end of the play, the narrative recounting how male discourse triumphs over feminine

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[78] Joel Fineman, "The Turn of the Shrew," in *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991), 120.

[79] What Freinkel has called a "*refusal* to give a close reading" of the *Will* poems (*Reading Shakespeare's Will*, 225) is repeated again in Fineman's discussion of *The Taming of the Shrew*. That is, Fineman explicitly avoids interpreting the very passage which his entire argument leads up to and thus depends on in order to emphasize that passage's self-explanatory nature. To provide a close reading of such passages would either be redundant (in the *Will* poems) or undermine the thesis altogether (in the *Shrew*).

subversion keeps repeating itself and so must be retold: shrews beget shrews; subversion breeds subversion. Second and along these lines, Fineman avoids the most obvious problem with this argument: that Kate's final address is itself a form of subversion.

Admittedly, reading Kate's speech ironically would not only disrupt the "determinate patriarchal narrative" but also shake the foundations of so-called "conventional" comedy, which depends on men and women assuming their rightful place within a fixed social hierarchy. Kahn, however, finds a way around this problem by suggesting that Kate is "affirming her husband's superiority through outward conformity while questioning it ironically through words" and that "this rhetoric and the ironies it produces are Shakespeare's way out of the difficulties he encountered in writing a critique of marriage in the form of comedy which must, somehow, celebrate marriage."[80] Thus, rather than close the circle of language by suggesting that irony and subversion find their way back to literal discourse, Kahn sees the ending as a "mirror" in which "Kate is clever enough to use his [Petruchio's] verbal strategies against him."[81] Modifying Fineman's punchy questions, one could therefore ask if it is possible to speak for the language and authority of men without exposing subversion? One could argue that Petruchio's actions culminate in a moment of oratorical brilliance that takes the other characters by surprise. Petruchio, in short, teaches Kate how to catch him at his own game.

The game actually begins with the induction scenes, which revolve around the theme of being caught – prey caught by the scent of the Lord's and huntsmen's hounds, alcoholics intoxicated by drink, a hawk caught in the grips of its human predator,

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[80] Kahn, 97-98.
[81] Ibid., 97.

nightingales enclosed in a bird cage. When the Lord tells the baffled tinker, Christopher

Sly, that "thy horses shall be trapped, / Their harness studded all with gold and pearl," we

know that the word *trapped* conveys a double meaning: "adorned" and "caught"

(Ind.2.39-40). The idea that adornments themselves can "trap" reminds us of the way

clothing can help manufacture illusions and how theater confuses, disorients, and

enthralls. Sly, caught up in the histrionics concocted by the Lord, players, and servants,

seems half-convinced that he is royalty.

Sly, in fact, straddles at least five roles. Beyond the character of Christopher the

tinker and the wealthy lord, he is also playing us, the audience. As the Sly frame reminds

us, theater depends not only on our willingness to suspend disbelief but also to enter into

another world, to use our imaginations to forget ourselves, and sometimes even to

become the very characters we are watching on stage. This means that Sly does not

simply reflect the audience; he also represents Kate, who under Petruchio's disarmingly

persistent taming methods becomes disoriented, confused, and stuck between sleeping

and waking. The servant Curtis, describing the manic episodes within Petruchio's house,

says that Kate, "(poor soul) / Knows not which way to stand, to look, to speak, / And sits

as one new risen from a dream" (4.1.168-170). Similarly, the Lord tells one of the

huntsmen, "[p]ersuade him [Sly] that he hath been a lunatic, / And when he says he is,

say that he dreams," to which the huntsman replies, "He is no less than what we say he

is" (Ind.1.60-61,68). Like Sly, Kate would become under Petruchio's direction "no less"

than what he tells her she is. Like Sly, however, Kate willingly accepts that illusion. As

Daniell suggests, "Shakespeare makes Kate *move herself* further into, rather than out of, a play-world."[82]

And finally, Sly, who willingly yields to an obsequious page boy dressed as a dutiful wife, serves as prologue to Petruchio, who surrenders to Kate's dramatic performance at the end of the play.[83] In the induction, the Lord, coaching the page beforehand, tells him, "Such duty to the drunkard let him do, / With soft low tongue and lowly courtesy, / And say 'What's is't your honor will command, / Wherein your lady and your humble wife / May show her duty, and make known her love?" (Ind.1.110-114). The Lord might as well have been talking to Kate herself, whose speech spins out from the central points mentioned here. Just as Petruchio seems to applaud Kate's performance by commanding her to kiss and then dragging her off to bed, so Sly approves of the page's assertions, "I am your wife in all obedience" (Ind.2.105), by coaxing "her" to bed and affirming bawdily, "Ay, it stands so that I may hardly tarry so long" (123).

Thus, Christopher the tinker slides slyly between the characters of Kate and Petruchio, eliding the difference between the real and the illusory, male and female, desire and consummation, belief and incredulity, credibility and deceit. The induction sets us up to believe that the Kate/Petruchio romance merely elaborates on the Sly/page plot. Critics are divided over whether or not it does. Fineman sees the "absence of a final frame" and thus the "play's apparent omission of a formal conclusion to the Sly story" as "evidence enough that the audience for the entirety of the play is left at its

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[82] David Daniell, 81 (my emphasis).
[83] Harold Goddard, 1:73; Margie Burns, 93; Coppélia Kahn, 89.

conclusion with a desire for closure that the play calls for *in order* to postpone."[84]

Daniell, although drawing parallels between the induction scenes and the rest of the play, also suggests that Sly's disappearance "is surely right in view of the serious point about marriage which can be seen to be made at the end of the play."[85] Of course, on one level, the play gives us a final frame that complements the induction. As Burns observes, "one should posit not that half the frame is missing, but that the unity of the play is its frame. Thus Sly's loss can be discussed as the play's gain, because the discontinuation of Sly's story actually helps develop the Kate-Petruchio story."[86] If, therefore, the closing moments between Kate and Petruchio recapitulate the ending of the induction, these characters are at once more real due to Shakespeare's sustained treatment of them over five acts and less real, given the fact that they are introduced to us as characters *in* a play – the Lord's play and thus Shakespeare's play.

The induction scenes, then, do what *The Mousetrap* accomplishes in *Hamlet*. They force upon us a performance that reminds us of the theater at every turn – a performance that culminates in Kate's final address. This means that critics who read her performance *merely* literally would have to ignore the Sly frame altogether and see her words as somehow existing outside theater. One might say that the induction is Shakespeare's way of *creating* an illusion that he ensures cannot be *contained* by the literal words on the page (and, in Sly's case, by the literal identity of the page).

This last point takes us back to the taming plot man-handled by Petruchio, a plot that reflects the rhetorical maneuverings and sly theatricality of the induction scene. From the moment Petruchio steps on stage and commences a protracted debate over the

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[84] Joel Fineman, "The Turn of the Shrew," 139.
[85] Daniell, 71.
[86] Burns, 84.

meaning of *knock*, we know where the play is headed and who will head it. We watch

Petruchio at once apply the conventions associated with the page characters – comic farce

and callow wordplay – to his actions as the major male protagonist. In a sense, then,

Petruchio's farcical behavior should be taken seriously. As Fineman argues, the "very

triviality" of the puns on *knock* "suggests the troubling way in which the problematic

question raised by one word may eventually spread to, and be raised by, all."[87]

Petruchio's behavior is no clownish sideshow designed to lighten the main plot or, at

most, to underscore the moral issues raised by the play's central characters; Petruchio *is*

the central character. The rhetorical games he plays with his manservant Grumio become

the major focus of the taming story and his abuse of language the driving force of the

play. Later in the scene, Grumio articulates Petruchio's function as "tamer," saying,

> O' my word, an she [Kate] knew him as well as I do, she would think
> scolding would do little good upon him. She may perhaps call him half a
> score of knaves or so. Why, that's nothing; an he begin once, he'll rail in
> his rope tricks. I'll tell you what sir: an she stand him but a little, he will
> throw a figure in her face and so disfigure her with it that she shall have no
> more eyes to see withal than a cat. (1.2.105-111)

Grumio lays out in this short passage the impossible hurdle set in front of Kate, who has

little hope of playing the scold once confronted with Petruchio's rhetoric, his "rope

tricks." As Grumio suggests here, Kate will have to find another way to assert her power

or "she will have no more eyes to see." The words *rail* and *disfigure* emphasize the fine,

but distinct, line that the play draws between rhetorical violence and physical violence.

Petruchio does not beat Kate into submission, but he does violence to language and to

other established norms that visibly affect Kate. Biondello's minute description of

Petruchio's paradoxical wedding apparel, for example, from his "breeches thrice turned"

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[87] Fineman, 127.

and "old rusty sword" to his worn-out armor and an equally decrepit horse, reflects the great lengths he will go to subdue Katherine (3.2.43-61). Kate's silence upon Petruchio's arrival suggests that her "shame" at his delay quickly transforms into astonishment at his audacious histrionics (3.2.8).

Significantly, however, of all the trials Petruchio puts his new wife through, it is the ownership he claims of language that forces Kate to the breaking point – his willful abuse of her words during the exchange with the haberdasher (4.3.63-85), his dispute with Kate over the question of the time (4.3.182-90), and finally, his avowal that the sun is the moon and the moon is the sun (4.5.1-7). Petruchio attempts to *tame* Kate by refusing to take her at her word, and by accusing *her* of rope tricks even as he uses them himself. "Look what I speak, or do, or think to do," he declares, "[y]ou are still crossing it" (4.3.188-89). His taming methods reach their climax and resolution on the road to Padua. The scene begins with Petruchio's affirming that "it is the moon that shines so bright" and insisting that, whatever Kate says – whether she agrees or not – she lies (4.5.6). Kate halts and founders. An automaton doing her master's bidding, she seems thoroughly changed and subdued: "Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun. / But sun it is not, when you say it is not, / And the moon changes even as your mind. / What you will have it named, even that it is, / And so it shall be for Katherine" (4.5.19-23). Naming herself, Kate symbolically commits to Petruchio's play; she seems to become his character in a story where "male supremacy is ultimately based on such absurdities."[88]

Entering the theatrical world, however, is also empowering, and even though Petruchio seems to break Kate, the scene also marks a theatrical reversal and a transfer of power. While earlier in the play, Petruchio had the rhetorical upper-hand, now Kate

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[88] Kahn, 96.

equals or exceeds his abilities, for she too now subverts, verbally undermines, and plays the game of "saying-the-thing-which-is-not."[89] When Kate rallies and speaks to Vincentio as a "young, budding virgin, fair and fresh and sweet" (4.5.38), she not only challenges his identity but also authorizes her own. Petruchio's attempt to undermine Kate once again by informing his "mad" wife that Vincentio is in fact a "man, old, wrinkled, faded, withered, / And not a maiden" suggests that Petruchio has caught himself in his own trap – and that Kate has begun to move beyond his control (42-44). One wonders if he perceives at this moment how far Kate might take her new role.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

With the help of several critics, I have so far elaborated on an ironical interpretation of Kate's speech. I want now to focus the argument a bit, to tighten the rhetorical rope so that its loop encircles a hero and heroine who have more in common with the dark lady and the poet than previously recognized. For Petruchio comes on the stage not only a consummate rhetorical gamester, powermonger, and wealth-seeker. He does not merely (by punning on *knock* and subsequently strangling all of Kate's words with his rhetorical rope tricks) rebel against the status quo of language. Petruchio is also a poet. Critics have failed to point out that his name bears a striking resemblance to Petrarch and thus to the Latin word, *patricius*, or "nobleman," as well as to *pater*. Petruchio and Petrarch are both in their own way artists, creators, patriarchs. Although we do not know what sort of life Petruchio had before journeying to Padua, we are seduced by his mellifluous rehearsal of his past exploits and his fearless attitude toward the challenge that lies before him:

> Think you a little din can daunt mine ears?

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[89] Kahn, 99.

> Have I not in my time heard lions roar?
> Have I not heard the sea, puffed up with winds,
> Rage like an angry boar, chafed with sweat?
> …………………………………………
> Have I not in a pitched battle heard
> Loud 'larums, neighing steeds, and trumpets' clang?
> And do you tell me of a woman's tongue? (1.2.195-198, 201-03)

If we do not believe or love Petruchio for the dangers he has passed, we can admire the way speaks of them.

Petruchio therefore makes a striking contrast to those in the Minola household, whose heroine, we quickly sense, has been accustomed to either verbal abuse or apathetic silence. When we first meet Katherine, in fact, she abashedly asks her father if he "plans to make a stale" of her "amongst these mates?" (1.1.58). Significantly, Kate's first emotion in the play is not anger, but embarrassment and shame, and she becomes "wonderful froward" (69) only after Hortensio tells her, with feigned incredulity, "Mates, maid, how mean you that? No mates for you, / Unless you were of gentler, milder mold" (59-60). Kate's mood understandably worsens after Hortensio casts her among "devils" (66) and Gremio calls her a "fiend of hell" (88). Reaching her breaking point, Kate, by the opening of Act 2, has tied up the sister of "sobriety" (1.1.71), and "gentler, milder mold," and dragged her onto the stage. Charging Bianca to declare the identity of her suitor and ordering her to "dissemble not" (2.1.9), Kate is airing frustrations that stem from more than her treatment in the previous scene. One senses that Bianca has always been deceitful and cunning, and that she has used her silence to manipulate and control Kate. Corroborating this notion is the fact that Kate is subsequently ignored – not only by her sister, but also by her father. Kate exits the scene dejected, her closing remark holding some clue about her complexity: "Talk not to me," she tells her father, "I will go

sit and weep / Till I can find occasion of revenge" (35-36). On the one hand, Kate's "talk not to me" is an imperative, a mark of her shrewishness; she angrily rejects her father because he prefers Bianca. On the other hand, the opening clause could merely be a conditional phrase reflecting Kate's present circumstances: *If you do not speak to me*, she suggests, *I will weep until I find an opportunity to revenge*.

Although Petruchio is the man who brings in the noise, releasing Kate from the tyranny of silence and ignorance, his descent upon the Minola household does not initially look promising for Kate. Even before she re-enters the scene, Petruchio begins verbally to convert his dark mistress into a fair lady, calling her a woman of "beauty" and "wit," of "affability" and "bashful modesty" (2.1.47-48). Playing an ironical rendition of a Petrarchan poet, Petruchio is what Rosalie Colie and Joel Fineman have described as the poet of praise paradox. Rather than admit to Kate's intractability, roughness, and ill temper, her suitor celebrates her amiability and "mild behavior" (49). Instead of running from a woman whom everyone pronounces to be awful, Petruchio persists in his courtship, declaring himself awestruck. In the process of reinventing Kate, Petruchio reinvents himself as well. Swept up by the musicality of his own poetry and enveloped in his egoism, he assures Baptista that he is "as peremptory as she proud-minded," that "where two raging fires meet together, / They do consume the thing that feeds their fury," and that he, too, is "rough" and will "woo not like a babe" (2.1.129-135). To Baptista's suggestion that Petruchio be "armed for some unhappy words," Petruchio poetically responds, "Ay, to the proof, as mountains are for winds, / That shake not though they blow perpetually" (2.1.138-9). As much a lyricist as suitor, Petruchio crafts his courtship in terms of fires and furies, of "mountains" and "winds."

These are just a few passages in the play that suggest we are getting another version of the Sonnets' poet setting out to create and tame his dark mistress. In many ways, Kate and Petruchio dramatize the implied action in the dark lady poems – Petruchio, like the poet, swearing Kate fair and Kate, like the dark mistress, refusing at first to play her artist's game. Appropriately, Petruchio's first words to Kate have to do with her name, and he strews a mess of epithets before her as soon as she enters the room: "in faith, you are called plain Kate, / And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst. / But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom, / Kate of Kate Hall, my super dainty Kate… / Kate of my consolation" (2.1.183-188). By hurling multiple "Kates" in her wake, Petruchio challenges her identity, undermining her sense of self and attempting to mold her into a creature of his making.[90] Reminiscent of the implied action in the sonnets, however, Kate tramples that pile of epithets, forcing her boisterous suitor into a verbal battle of wit that yields no winner. Indeed, this is a fitting first meeting of two characters whose closing moments on stage are as delightfully ambiguous as this early conversation.

Despite the rhetorical warfare, the couple eventually enters into some sort of truce, or a relationship of "mutual render," when Petruchio (as poet, artist, and tamer) brings Kate to a kind of freedom in language. The more he plays *creator*, in other words, the larger his project becomes and the more he ensures that she not be *contained* by his handiwork. And the more Petruchio becomes consumed by his roles – playing at turns the doting husband, the ambivalent patriarch, the shrewish man-wife – the greater

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[90] For a discussion of the connection between Kate and "cates," or "commodities," see Korda, "Household Kates." Korda, however, reads Petruchio's repetition of Kate's name as a failed attempt to "domesticate" her, an attempt that must be accepted later on her own terms (118). According to Korda, "Petruchio's reference to Kate as 'super-dainty' refers to her not as a commodity or object of exchange but rather as a consumer of commodities" (118). My own reading of this scene somewhat complements Korda's.

flexibility he builds into the marriage and especially into the role of Kate, who has observed her "master's" play-acting and who quickly learns how to exploit the power of theater. However, drama, as we saw in the dark lady poems, involves tempering control with obedience. If Kate wants to woo others with her performance, then she must, as Kahn points out, "affirm[] her husband's superiority through outward conformity while questioning it ironically through words."[91] As for Petruchio, if he is intent on keeping his wife awake in order to break her, then he must stay awake himself. If he expects to live a free man, then he must allow his wife the same freedom.

When Petruchio tries to take from Kate her sense of identity, therefore, he also produces the drive in her to become something more than a shrew and eventually to gain more power than she has at the beginning of the play. Before Kate can achieve that Pauline transfiguration on the road to Padua, she articulates a desire not only to speak, but to be listened to and respected:

> Why sir, I trust I have leave to speak,
> And speak I will. I am no child, no babe.
> Your betters have endured me say my mind,
> And if you cannot, stop your ears.
> My tongue will tell the anger of my heart,
> Or else my heart concealing it will break,
> And rather than it shall, I will be free
> Even to the uttermost as I please in words. (4.3.73-80)

This marks the first phase of Kate's progression toward the artist that her husband has, perhaps unintentionally, taught her to be. As we know, however, Kate eventually moves beyond what she says here, for to be "free…/ in words" also involves speaking subversively: saying one thing while patently meaning another, speaking in such a way as to prevent her heart from breaking even as she assuages the crowd, and pleasing others as

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[91] Kahn, 97.

well as herself. Kate, in other words, gradually embraces theater, learning to make compromises in her new role as wife in order to achieve the rhetorical upper-hand. She sees possibilities for power that she can exploit, but the necessity of disguising, so as to preserve, that power.

Significantly, by Act 5, Kate does not simply learn to mimic Petruchio; she also becomes the Petrarchan poet, or rather the poet of praise paradox. By pronouncing Vincentio to be a "[y]oung budding virgin, fair and fresh and sweet," Kate does to the baffled old man what Petruchio does to her at the beginning of the play when he swears Kate fair. The next time we see Kate and Petruchio, in the romantic street scene outside Lucentio's house (5.1.121-130), we become privy to an entirely new relationship whose very dynamism is built on the subtle interchange of power. And, by the end of the play, Kate makes everyone "prisoners to her womanly persuasion" (5.2.120).

Everyone except, perhaps, the skeptics who still maintain that the play is merely a farce and that flat characters are flattened further when they star in a play within a play. Irony, some scholars have implied, depends on Kate's having that within which passes show, and that, as a character in the Lord's play, Kate must be taken at her word. Is Kate, however, really no different from the player queen in *Hamlet*? As I have tried to demonstrate, the fact that rhetorical subversion is the substance of the taming plot makes irony the centerpiece of the whole play. A farcical interpretation could arguably accommodate a subversive reading of Kate's speech if critics were to consider that she is tamed only after she learns like Petruchio to swear against the truth so foul a lie.

But many people want to see Kate as more than a character in the Lord's play and one who transcends farce, and Shakespeare's play allows for this flexibility, providing us

with a heroine who possesses the characteristics – and depth – for irony. Often ignored

are two brief lines in the *Shrew* that invite us to speculate that Kate's interiority is

perhaps more than, or different from, her public persona. Early in the play, Petruchio

assures his friends, "Be patient gentlemen, I choose her for myself, / If she and I be

pleased, what's that to you? / 'Tis bargained 'twixt us twain being alone, / That she shall

still be curst in company" (2.1.293-96). In private, Petruchio tells them, "She hung about

my neck, and kiss on kiss / She vied so fast, protesting oath on oath, / That in a twink she

won me to her love" (299-301). Shakespeare could not have meant for us to forget such

an affirmation and to wonder what would happen once Kate is obedient in company, once

she publicly hangs about Petruchio's neck, "protesting oath on oath." If Kate undergoes

a public transformation in character, then what does the reversal do to her private self?

If we acknowledge the play's persistent need to keep such a question unanswered,

then we might also accept the fact that Petruchio has indeed *created* a submissive wife

that he cannot *contain* in that role. Using precisely these terms to reflect on the ending of

the play, Crocker contends that "Petruchio's rhetorical agility can no longer manage

Katharine's body, because by adopting the model of feminine virtue that masculine

discourse constructs, she occupies the place of *creator* which Petruchio covets. By

stepping into the role of submission, Katharine evades the categories that her passivity

instates."[92] For Crocker, "performing passivity" not only allows Kate to rise above her

purported submissiveness, but also to equal Petruchio as artist and creator. "Exposing the

implications of female subservience," Crocker goes on to say, "reveals currents of

feminine agency that cannot be *contained* by masculine discourse, desire, or

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[92] Crocker, 156 (my emphasis).

representation."[93] As we saw in the sonnets and as this play demonstrates, the male artist

can only go so far in trying to represent his mistress before she forces the poet to put

down the pen, and, in this case, to take it up herself.

No sonnet more effectively captures the dramatic climax of *The Taming of the*

Shrew than 138. This poem not only reflects the triumph of theater at the end of the play

– in which Kate points to the "gap between what one is and what one says"[94] – but also

the divided perspective surrounding her speech. Even those who accept an ironical

reading cannot fully agree. Does Kate truly submit to Petruchio, finding freedom only in

rhetorical games and linguistic subversion? Or does Kate enter into a theatrical realm in

which she becomes Petruchio's mutual partner in deception and thus his equal? In other

words, does she submit to him only publicly? When Petruchio says, "Why there's a

wench! Come on, and kiss me Kate" (5.2.180), is he simply applauding her subversive

performance or is he also trying to stop her ironical mouth?

Although both versions of sonnet 138 were probably written after *The Taming of*

the Shrew, the poem's first appearance in the *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599) and then its

subsequent reemergence in the 1609 Quarto together encapsulate the ongoing debate

surrounding the end of the *Shrew*. In the first version of sonnet 138, the speaker's

celebration of action over knowledge culminates, paradoxically, in a stifling, choking

love: "Therefore I'll lie with Love and Love with me, / Since that our faults in Love thus

smothered be." The "repressive" and "claustrophobic" quality of 1599's closing couplet

almost undermines the opening lines of the poem, in which the poet favors believing

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[93] Ibid. (my emphasis).
[94] Snow, 463.

rather than knowing.[95] Similarly, one might be tempted to say that the irony of Kate's

final speech almost collapses under her performance of submission as Petruchio stands

back to admire the woman he has worked so hard to tame.[96]

In both the play and the poem, however, the smothering is mutual, and we could

also ask if Kate, in submitting, has suffocated – and thus outstaged – her husband? Has

Petruchio gotten more than he bargained for and does their competition for power divide

them? Are Kate and Petruchio, in other words, more like the speaker and beloved in the

1599 version of the poem because they mutually undermine one another? As Snow

points out, the sonnet in *The Passionate Pilgrim* shows the poet's "divided subjectivity

… stress[ing] the gulf between what she [the beloved] thinks and what he [the speaker]

knows, and between what he gives her to know of him and what he knows to be true of

himself."[97] Arguably, one could see how the ending of the *Shrew* emphasizes a similar

gulf between a subversive wife who has distanced herself from her husband and an artist-

poet who nervously watches his creation take center stage before silencing her at the first

opportunity.

Admittedly, the 1599 sonnet casts a dark shadow over the ending of the play. The

1609 version, however (especially the closing couplet), encourages a positive

interpretation of Kate's speech: "Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our

faults by lies we flattered be." According to Snow, this version of the "sonnet leaves us

with the impression of the two lovers no longer laboring under but resting upon, even

buoyed up by the deceptions they practice on each other…."[98] Here the poet is not

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[95] Snow, 463.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Snow, 471.
[98] Snow, 479.

resigning himself to a relationship with a less-than-ideal-beloved ("Therefore *I'll* lie with her"); the poet willingly recreates the moment with that beloved as he writes ("Therefore I lie with her") and in so doing makes it ideal. Read against the backdrop of the revised sonnet, Petruchio's "Come on, and kiss me Kate" registers admiration and approval rather than anxiety and discomfort. He is not smothered or smothering; he flatters his wife and is flattered in turn.

__Afterword__

Praise, I have suggested, is the "paradigmatic genre" of literary skepticism.[1] For not only does praise entail doubt, but an author's expressions of doubt are best revealed in his praise. If, however, this connection between skepticism and epideixis is natural and intrinsic, one could of course rejoin that Shakespeare – innovative genius that he is – could hardly have anything new to say about such a rudimentary rhetorical mode. But I have argued that Shakespeare *does* have something new to say, partly because he is writing at the end of a long sonneteering tradition and partly because he is a post-Reformation poet responding to, among other things, religious upheavals, the revival of skeptical texts, and the increased reliance on empirical inquiry. These historical events and social changes led to an early modern expression of praise that is at once richer and more problematic than the traditional exercises in lauding and loathing. The sixteenth century, that is, saw the poetics of praise transforming into a poetics of appraisal.

To illustrate this transformation in detail, my first chapter divides Shakespeare's *epideictic skepticism* into three interrelated features: his challenge and response to the Petrarchan tradition and to classical praise, his epistemological isolation, and his impulse to wonder and inquire. These features become the foundation for my study of the twin figures resting at the center of my project: the canker and the rose. Indeed, the canker distinguishes Shakespeare's Sonnets from the other major sequences of the period, for even if Donne, Spenser, and Sidney all in their own way exhibit aspects of what I have

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[1] For an elaboration on how this idea responds to Fineman's insistence that praise is the "paradigmatic genre of poetical or literary language," see my preface.

called *epideictic skepticism*, only Shakespeare discovers the canker of blame, doubt, and satire in the rose of beauty and praise.

In my exploration of Shakespeare's satirical inquiry into the practice of praise (in which I combine formalism, historicism, rhetorical theory, and genre studies), I have tried to emphasize how Shakespeare exploits the inherent flexibility of the sonnet sequence. Indeed, I believe that his sequence endures because it wrestles (paradoxically) with the figure of ostensible decay and examines the assumptions underlying Petrarchan praise. The result is a collection of poems that takes on the heft and breadth and depth of tragedy. In my comparative study of *Hamlet* and the young-man sonnets, I have shown how both poet and protagonist embark on a quest to understand the world around them – to make sense of a society that seems dangerously and vertiginously opaque – only to come to terms with their own vices, their own cankers, their own vicious moles of nature.

In the young-man sonnets, the poet's "tragic" recognition can be understood in terms of engrafting. As the poems reveal, even if the beloved scion can take life from the poetry stock and his poetry can give life to the young man, the abrasion necessary to join each to the other will always leave the plant (the poems themselves) vulnerable to the canker. For there is no such thing, the poet learns, as a perfectly mended plant and a perfectly unified poet and beloved; the cut that binds will never completely heal; and the poet is as much to blame as the beloved. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, the prince struggles with another kind of graft binding him to the revenge drama, to his promise to the ghost, and thus to his father. And yet, by meditating on the ethics of that connection – by making the most of his epideictic skepticism – Hamlet not only comes to terms with his own inherited evil, but he also manages heroically to separate himself from the "roots" that

enslave him. Thus, while the prince by Act 5 remains hopeful that his wounded name

may be repaired, and his status as "rose of the fair state" (perhaps) restored, the young-

man's poet learns to embrace a new rose and so appreciate the doubt that enriched his

poems.

Contrasting the poet's "tragic" investigation of the poetics of praise, and all the

rhetorical and philosophical problems attending it, are the sonnets to the dark lady. This

sequence takes on a comic dimension. Instead of the protracted struggles with the canker

and the rose, the poet negotiates anxiously, playfully, teasingly with a mistress who does

not seem to want anything to do with praise. And so, if the poet of the young-man

sonnets can finally – and tragically – affirm the necessity of "mutual render" in a

cankered world (125), the poet of the dark-lady sonnets dramatizes that mutual render,

showing how one might *live* with the reality of the canker.

In considering how the poet-mistress dynamic plays out in one of Shakespeare's

early comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew*, I have of course ignored two of the most

compelling dark ladies in his corpus: Lady Macbeth, who madly laments the "damned

spot" that will not go away, and Cleopatra, who finds "joy of the worm."[2] Indeed,

Cleopatra with remarkable sophistication presents in her final moments on stage a third

way of confronting the canker. Neither skeptically assessing the "worm" as a tragic

problem, nor comically ignoring it, Cleopatra exploits the figure of death and decay to

satisfy her "immortal longings" (5.2.281).[3] Thus, she offers a feminine repudiation of

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[2] *Macbeth*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 5.1.37;
Antony and Cleopatra, ed. A.R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 5.2.260.
[3] While Cleopatra actually kills herself with an asp, Shakespeare chooses to use the word *worm* instead –
and he does so repeatedly in the final scene.

what is perhaps male-centered epideictic skepticism.[4] That is, for her, the "worm"

becomes a necessary part of her epideictic display, her "noble act" which she claims

inspires Antony's "praise" (5.2.284). On the one hand, then, the play indeed reinforces

the notion that the canker (or worm) is inherent in the practice of lauding. Similar to the

poet of the Sonnets, Cleopatra's effusive, exaggerated blazon of Antony – whose "face

was as the heavens," whose "legs bestrid the ocean," whose "reared arm / Crested the

world" (5.2.80-84) – finally leads her to embrace the worm in her death. On the other

hand, the "worm" reflects a woman's certainty of reunion ["Husband, I come" (287)]

instead of a Petrarchan poet's isolating doubt. Thus Cleopatra – a woman of both "fire

and air" (289) and "marble-constan[cy]" (241) – reminds us that even if we read the dark-

lady sonnets as a "comic epilogue" to the young-man poems, we must also remember that

Shakespeare, as always, had more to say.

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[4] For one discussion of the relationship between skepticism and the male gender, see Anita Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne*, 85-86. Sherman explores the following "controversial comment" made by Stanley Cavell: "'*so far* as skepticism is representable as the doubt whether your children are yours, skepticism is not a feminine business'" (qtd. in Sherman 85-86).

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