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Shakespeare's Creation: magical language (excerpt)

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Shakespeare's Creation: the Language of Magic and Play

Kirby Farrell

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Contents

Preface ix

Part One Introduction 3

I Which Wondrous Scope: Creation as Praise 6

II Incense in Sense: Magical and Dramatic Creation in the Sonnets 20

A III To Beguile Nature of Her Custom: Drama as a
Magical Action 35

Part Two Introduction 67

IV The Fierce Endeavor of Your Wit: Living Art in *Love's Labour's Lost* 71

V A Rite to Bay the Bear: Creation and Community in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
97

VI Till Strange Love Grow Bold: Playing Dead and the Creation of the World in
Romeo and Juliet 117

VII Fortune Shows Herself More Kind: Making Fortunes by Play in *The Merchant of Venice* 141

VIII This Bodiless Creation Ecstasy: Manipulation and Play in *Hamlet* 163

IX And Give Them Repetition to the Life: Parodic Waste and Wonder in *Pericles* 192

X This Is Some Changeling: The Seacoast of Bohemia Revisited 213

Preface

This is a book about Shakespeare's conception of creation. More exactly, it explores a conflict between visionary and more rational uses of imagination. Early commentators such as Nicholas Rowe associated the visionary in Shakespeare with "Magick." In his essay on Falstaff, Maurice Morgann identifies poetry itself with magic:

True *Poesy* is *magic*, not nature; an effect from causes hidden or unknown. To the Magician I prescribed no laws ... his power is his law. Him, who neither imitates, nor is withirf reach of imitation, no precedent can or ought to bind, no limits to contain. . . . —But whither am I going! This copious and delightful topic has drawn me far beyond my design. . . .

My own argument uses the concepts of magical thinking and play. As Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* demonstrates, "magic" and "play" have far more precise meanings—and more in common—than we popularly suppose. Lest they be thought phantoms of the critic's heat-oppressed brain, I will venture no quick definitions of these terms here. Let me say, however, that the secret of Shakespeare's creative genius does not lurk between these covers. Nor is this a study of the Renaissance beliefs in ghosts, witches, and the occult arts surveyed in R. H. West's *The Invisible World*.

Part One of this book examines magic and play in the structure of Shakespeare's sonnets and drama. It begins with an analysis of certain sonnets as acts of "magical" praise, and means of evoking wonder from the audience. In Part Two the emphasis shifts to Shakespeare's exploration of his characters' creative faculties and the complex moral consequences of their imaginative behavior.

Part One

Word is a shadow of deed. —*Democritus*

This is the monstrosity in love, lady, that the will is infinite and the execution confin'd, that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit. —*Troilus and Cressida*

. . . but you are the music
While the music lasts. - T. S. Eliot

Introduction

It is customary to introduce a new study of Shakespeare by apologizing for its inadequacy—partly to propitiate nemesis. For even more than most art, Shakespeare's seems always to exceed the grasp of each critical apparatus brought to it. Nor will the chapters that follow prove the ultimate exception. But I mean these opening remarks to be more than a flourish of modesty.

Shakespeare's art and the vast commentary upon it present an awesome sum of meanings. Certain plays—*Hamlet* is one—are famous for the diverse and irreconcilable interpretations ^kthey continue to generate year after year. Of late a single critic has given us a frankly pluralistic study of Iago which offers "some approaches to the illusion of his motivation." The book deploys no less than five different, equally sensible critical vocabularies to "approach" what is, after all, only one of many problems in but a single play. Moreover, these five methods are "merely the ones most obviously invited by the text."¹ Theoretically, it would seem, Shakespeare could sustain infinite investigation. I deliberately put the matter in a strong form because for my purposes here the important question is not which partisan or partial interpretations have merit, but rather how do we respond to the larger prospect of indeterminacy?

Basically the answer is twofold. On the one hand, we may believe that Shakespeare's mysteriousness is finally unimportant or even illusory. We may militantly conclude that certain viewpoints are true and sufficient. Or if skeptical, we might reason that ideally, given unlimited "time and new historical data, for example, the properly uncanny critic could arrive at truth: an answer to the question of *Hamlet* or, to be more boldly wishful, a resolution to the mystery of Shakespeare's disposition toward politics or sex or religion.

Alternately we might argue that no absolute resolution is possible. In this view Shakespeare deliberately made his art insoluble, striving to fashion an imaginary world as awesomely irreducible as the real one. However lucid in its particulars, such a world requires a continuing act of interpretation from us. *King Lear* resists the satisfying summaries which we can make (and feel) at the close of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded. We may comprehend individual actions in *Hamlet* yet be unable to articulate any definitive meaning for the destiny the play as a whole depicts. Because we cannot exhaust it, we say the play "lives." Taking this standpoint, we would sympathize with Caroline Spurgeon's impulse to preface her famous study of Shakespeare's imagery by applauding "the richest experience and the most profound and soaring imagination known to man." Such art, rather like a

cockatrice, the spectator cannot contemplate for long "without being reduced to a condition of complete humility."² To put it more positively, such art stirs us to wonder.

It will be seen that the alternatives I have sketched above imply two different attitudes toward the artist's role. The first and more common of these envisions art as rationally clarifying an intelligible world, or imparting God's truth to men. In its most openly didactic form this model of the artist's role escapes Platonic and Christian hostility toward art as irrational and a peril to men's souls. Renaissance literary criticism advanced such a model in a variety of guises, and I suspect that most medieval and Renaissance dramatists would have considered their work included (and justified) under one or another of its rubrics.³ The second, more complex view of art is not so easily described. Nevertheless I believe it is closer to Shakespeare's own.

Shakespeare gave a lifetime to creation, and we have come to perceive that the joys and stresses of the artist's role are everywhere replicated in his art. When Coleridge identified Prospero as a figure of the playwright ("the very Shakespeare himself, as it were, of the tempest") he was innocently venturing toward a critical perspective which in recent years has begun to find direct formulation.⁴ In no other dramatist of the period do we encounter anything like Shakespeare's ongoing exploration of the relation between art and life. In the old *King Lear* characters may speak ambiguously of life in theatrical terms:

When will this Scene of sadness haue an end, And
pleasant acts insue, to move delight?⁵

The effect, however, is limited—almost incidental. By contrast, Shakespeare's art again and again calls attention to itself *as art*, questioning its own nature and meaning. At the close of *Love's Labour's Lost*, for example, Berowne observes that

Our wooing doth not end like an old play: Jack hath not Jill.
These ladies' courtesy Might well have made our sport a
comedy.

[5.2.862-64]

If the play "doth not end like an old play," we are left to wonder how does it end? In a sense Berowne is disowning the literally "art-ful" behavior of the characters up to this point, welcoming uncomfortably spontaneous life into the play. What follows, he implies, will be more authentic—indeed more real—than what is past. At the same time on another level Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that his play itself is closer to life than conventional, pat comedy can be.

Hamlet admires the art of the "mousetrap" play as "an honest method," and desperately searches for an analogous method by which to shape his own life and recreate corrupted Denmark. His tragedy is his failure to achieve an adequate "art":

Being thus benetted round with villainies— Ere I could
make a prologue to my brains, They had begun the play.

[5.2.29]

Hamlet's concern with the uses and "honesty" of art almost

inevitably stirs us to consider the nature of the art we behold on the stage before us, the play *Hamlet*. From one perspective, against the backdrop of the play of life, the Prince dramatizes a question which must have been significant to Shakespeare himself: What does it mean to create?

While *Hamlet* is especially self-conscious and complex, it is by no means freakish in its concern with art and creation. It will be useful therefore to begin by considering some Sonnets, whose smaller proportions will enable me to make plain some of the more elusive and complex features of Shakespeare's creation.

I. Which Wondrous Scope: Creation as Praise

Conventions and Wonder

By Shakespeare's time the sonnet had become an extravagantly conventionalized form, bristling with artifice and witty permutations of traditional themes. Wyatt's unoriginal image of the poet as a galley "charged with forgetfulness" and "despairing of port" was still in service half a century later, when in one of his *Tears of Fancy* sonnets (1593) Thomas Watson lamented

That like a mastless ship at seas I wander,
For want of her to guide my heart that pineth. . . .

In the *Emarcidulf* sequence of "E. C." (1595) the lover's heart is at one point "like a ship on Neptune's back," "Long tossed betwixt fair hope and foul despair." In Richard Lynche's *Delia* (1596) the ship is the poet's mind,

But beauty was the rock that my ship split, Which since hath
made a shipwreck of my joy. . .

The most mediocre sonneteers appear merely to shuffle emblematic Cupids and forsaken shepherds from one poem to another. When Richard Lynche invokes the beloved's "hard heart" or the hope of "sweet reward," we scarcely register such lifeless phrases at all. Significantly, the inadequacy of poetry to express love—an old theme—itself became a perfunctory device in casual references to "these rude unpolished rhymes."

It is this highly conventionalized art which of course provoked the negative strategy of many Shakespeare sonnets. In Sonnet 130, for example, the poet challenges the adequacy of such art. He vows that "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," and goes on to negate, one after another, a host of lifeless tropes. Despite the amusing satire ("If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head"), the poem argues a serious point also: conventional poetry breeds "false compare"—in effect, lies.

Sonnet 130 turns on a witty paradox. By denying conventional praises to his beloved the poet might appear to belittle her.

Whereas the final couplet confounds any such expectations by vowing

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare As any she
belied with false compare.

Whether the "love" referred to is the poet's affection or the beloved herself, "rare" here means uncommonly valuable. But as the rhyme words emphasize, the couplet also implies that the beloved is incomparable—presumably beyond all such conventional comparisons. While there is no denying the poem's humorous qualities, we may also appreciate the poet's wish to make us wonder at his beloved. We may understand "rare" in the sense of wonderful.

Sonnet 130 praises the beloved by forcing us to recognize the inadequacy of our customary means of conceiving her. It invokes the beloved only by means of negation; it identifies what is *not* true. The poet seeks to dramatize her extra-ordinary worth. She is beyond us, "inconceivable." As in the Renaissance use of the term *admiratio*, "rare" suggest the miraculous and transcendent. Apart from its negative strategy, the sonnet also arouses wonder in us through its paradoxes. Its ridicule of "false compare" is actually a vow of love as well. Our response is meant to be at once amusement and "serious" admiration.

But there is a further—and crucial—paradox in the sonnet's theme. For the poem maintains that the beloved is most individual and most real when she is not directly conceived, but wondered at. As in all paradoxes, the contradiction here is only apparent. The poet allows only two possibilities for awareness. Either the mind is rigidly conventional and hence false to reality, or it is in a state of awe, open to reality but beyond words. Wonder need not preclude meaning absolutely—after all, the sonnet does express the poet's love and the beloved's worth. We *feel* we know what the poem means. But We cannot reduce that meaning to any glib verbal formula. In Sonnet 130 this paradox—that we know most truly by not knowing—is lighthearted and relatively simple: a stroke of wit. Nevertheless, the notion has profound implications everywhere in Shakespeare's art.

The Problem of Praise

In the vow which concludes Sonnet 18 the poet-lover swears that

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives
this, and this gives life to thee.

By "this" we understand the poet to mean his art, the poem our "eyes can see" before us on the page. To come to terms with the couplet's literally incredible claims, we try to regard them as metaphors. For the verb "lives" we substitute "exists." As long as

an audience can experience whatever the sonnet signifies, then it will exist not only as an artifact, but also "as if" it lives. Specifically we say that the sonnet "lives" by meaning. Logically and almost as effortlessly we take "this gives life to thee" to mean something like "this sonnet, my art, will represent you to hearers forever."

Such a response accords poetry an honorific, metaphorical immortality. Presumably the sonnet "gives life" by memorializing the beloved, or at least the poet's affection for the beloved, representing one or both in verse by some mimetic technique. The problem is that even if the sonnet did make an attempt to describe the poet's specific emotion or beloved, we would still have to concede that they "lived" only in a manner of speaking. We would still be making the poet's vow metaphorical in order to placate or hoodwink our common sense.

We respond to the vow's fantastic hyperbole by trying to make "sense" of it so that we may believe. We recreate the vow as a noble figurative statement which we can define in terms of familiar notions about the immortality of art, although such notions were even in Shakespeare's day genteel and sentimental conventions. And we do recreate the vow. Insofar as we produce metaphors to force the couplet to match our expectations of what sense is, we are making our own art of it. And to the extent that our manipulations falsify the sonnet and leave us either ruefully unconvinced or patronizing toward its "immortality," we are making bad art.⁷

Confronted by the couplet we try to comprehend it, to "grasp" and thereby possess it as a meaning. The sonnet itself we conceive as a problem for which we can and should manufacture a solution. By no accident, our problem corresponds to the one the poet poses for himself at the outset. As in Sonnet 130, he questions how to create "honest" art. Contemplating the act of praise, he asks:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

In the strictest sense of "compare" his question poses an equation, a metaphor in fact: "Shall I make a poem saying you are [like] a summer's day?" -In his answer, the poem itself, he not only repudiates the proposed metaphor, but also denies the integrity of any "made-up" identity:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair some time declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st. So long as men
can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this
gives life to thee.

Enacting the summer's day, the poet aggressively conventionalizes it. Whether witty literary devices such as "the eye of heaven" and "his gold complexion," or such forthright epithets as "lovely" and "darling," the conventions represent a summer's day and in turn the beloved in a manner so approximate and stylized that it calls attention to itself as a crude poetical apparatus. Rightly we recognize the "summer's day" to be a sequence of polite clichés.

Considered as a meaning, then, the metaphor "you are [like] a summer's day" could only be a decorous fib or distortion. Nor does it help matters that the poet vehemently repudiates the clichés. It is as if he has offered us a flagrantly untrustworthy likeness of his beloved, then made a show of denying its adequacy. Such a tactic would be rhetorical and, however gallant, flattery of the sort scorned elsewhere in the Sonnets. How then are we to respond?

Magical Language

The answer I propose requires that we let the sonnet be exactly what the couplet says: not an artifact to be transformed into "sense," but an *action*, the willful gesture "this," which "so long as men *can* breathe or eyes *can* see" does literally "live" in the present tense as a vow we ourselves are making. Like the poet, that is, we must accomplish the sonnet as enacted praise. In uttering the sonnet our voice and the poet's merge into one, simultaneous and out of time. The poem comes to be an incantation, an action of the will. The beloved, the poet-lover, and we ourselves momentarily become the palpable words on our tongues which do, as the vow stipulates, have life.

As praise, the sonnet conjures. It "names" the poet's love and beloved into existence. For such praise celebrates the poet's love-making as, literally, love-creating or *poiesis*. To appreciate how "in eternal lines" the beloved "grow'st to time" or comes into being, we must understand *poiesis* to mean more than a mere signification of things—*mimesis* in our sophisticated sense. Shakespeare, I think, recognized in the creative act the drastic ambiguities contained in the word "conceive." *Poiesis* not only represents reality, but somehow forms or imagines it into being.

As a vow the sonnet owes its force not to logic, but to strong emotion. It enacts love. Saying its' words, we come to feel love or, more precisely, to *wish* love into being. Our passionate action is the sonnet's life. That is, the poem facilitates magical thinking.

Formally, magic is a medium for obtaining or controlling supernatural power. In a primitive society, for example, it may express itself as a belief in the ability of charmed objects or words to bring about wished-for events, or to avert danger. However, magical attitudes are far more subtly pervasive than formal examples—or even the complacent label "superstition"—might suggest. Fundamentally magical thinking presupposes

that inner experience such as wishes, fears, ideas and visions may be as real as external phenomena, and be able to influence them. A wish, say, may seem to influence events in the objective world. Ordinary wishful thinking is magical to the extent it is purposive or believed able to influence real circumstances. In childhood magical thinking is usually as forthright as it is egocentric, as in the fairy-tale theme that the will to believe by itself can make dreams "come true" or supersede reality. In adult behavior such attitudes take subtler forms. When people speak of sheer spiritual or mental force overcoming natural limits—in sickness, for instance, or in gamblers' convictions about feeling or thinking lucky—we may look for an underlying magical assumption. On a more exalted plane, such thinking may contemplate a universe created by the spiritual force of God's love, which in turn the spirit of prayer may sway, with concrete earthly results.²

It will be useful to return to Sonnet 18 by way of some lines in Sonnet 136 which offer a relatively forthright example of magical creation in Shakespeare. The poet-lover urges his beloved to swear an oath:

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.

As a pun, the name "Will" is at the same time "will," the beloved's volition and sexual appetite. Clever as it promises to be as an assertion of the unity of lover and beloved, the pun nevertheless becomes a linguistic act not merely beguiling in its effects, but magical. For the poet subsequently vows that

Will will fulfill the treasure of thy love, Ay, fill it full with wills,
and my will one.

The statement enacts an oath. Given the pun, however, the statement simultaneously *enacts* what it *means*: it is a vow pledging the efficacy of will or a vow. *Will* will fulfill thy love.

On the one hand, the simultaneity of the pun's meanings creates an evanescent identity for the poet by making "Will" mean more than we can comprehend. By the end of the second line "will" has come to "be" each of the other three words in these lines with the same sound—and each of those three itself has multiple meanings that, all told, sail off into indeterminacy. On the other hand, that simultaneity suspends time as well as logic. For when we respond, laboring rationally to grasp the pun's manifold identities, we must make out each sense sequentially, even as we experience a vivid sense of the word's latent unity. What's more, no gift of time would ever enable us to discover a final meaning for each "will." We would have to put an arbitrary limit on its implications. Nor is "will" the only ambiguous word. Among others, we would have to contend with "ay," at once signifying immediate assent, the pronoun "I," and "forever."

The effect, then, is to force us to relinquish our grasp on the sonnet, to open us to wonder. Exactly what the final "will" is we can only intuit. In a closing vow the poet bids and implores the

beloved to

Make but my name thy love, and love that still, And then
thou lov'st me, for my name is Will.

However much a rational joke, by now "will" fairly dazzles in our minds, full of meaning yet mysterious.³ The name of the poet has somehow become the poet himself and the beloved's love as well. The couplet vows, finally, that the beloved's "naming" vow will, in the act, create.

Art as Magical Creation

As praise, we noted, Sonnet 18 conjures. The poet "names" his beloved as an identity akin to "Will," suspended beyond our grasp. Such praise is no conventional hyperbole.⁴ For the sonnet vehemently denies all fixed identities as mutable and magically impotent. The poet refuses to answer his initial question by reducing his beloved to the witty designation "incomparable." If we are to *enact* the poem's praise, we must experience wonder. Hence the sonnet must make us feel the inadequacy of all designation. Calling the beloved "incomparable," as the cliché has it, we specify a value we can grasp. We become a bad artist like the poet's rival, death, who captures love and shamelessly "brags" of his possession.

Strictly speaking, a comparison asserts an identity. We might ordinarily expect "a summer's day" to be a conventional enough "name" for the beloved, which all hearers would corroborate. In the octet, however, the poet denies the truth of the identity "thou

= a summer's day." Furthermore, the mutable nature of a summer's day *itself* dramatizes the mutable nature of its own designation "a summer's day." Linguistically, the situation is akin to "Will will. . ."—a vow vowing that a vow will work. The poet's very elaboration of what a summer's day *is* denies identity. For "a summer's day" turns out to entail a list of clarifying names strung together by "ands," a list of conventions at once arbitrary and theoretically endless. Nor can we fasten upon an opposite of the repudiated qualities. The poet copes with the inadequacy of the named qualities by assertions such as "thou art *more* lovely and *more* temperate." How short is "all too short"? and how often is "sometime"?

At the close of the octet the upshot of all this comes with the assertion that

every fair from fair some time declines, By chance, or
nature's changing course, untrimm'd.

Not only does every "fair" in the actual world change, but further—and as we shall see, no less important—its conventional identity, the name or sign "fair" treacherously varies from an absolute "fair." I am taking the second "fair" to be the word, the standard of identity by which things exist for us as themselves. "Every beauty and designation of beauty," the poet avows, "comes sometimes to corruption." Every identity is vulnerable to distortions because of the inherently unstable nature of meanings. Names are conventions—agreed upon—and hence they depend on points of *view* doomed by time to change and aberrancy. Words become trite and lose their literalness, their magical efficacy. The declining "fair" becomes "untrimm'd"—not only divested of its superficial beauty, but also "untrimm'd" in the sense of "unstable in its identity." And "untrimm'd" now "by nature's changing course," "every fair" is susceptible to death and "wand'rest in his shade."

Naming, then, is a treacherous endeavor. That the poet forces words to reveal their ambiguity, as in "fair," itself warns us about the fickleness of conventional identity. Life changes and undergoes death when named "life" and distinguished from "not-life." Such discrete naming not only falsifies, but is the effectual "cause" of change and destruction. Time exists because we name "now" distinct from "then," and both distinct from "always," so that the issue in the sonnet is not simply that conventional names cannot apprehend the beloved's being, but that they *must* not.⁵ Therefore the poet creates magical names, and we must share his vows, realizing his words as living praise. Otherwise, if we make the negations such as "more" and "all too short" and "sometime" into hyperbole—into *something* we can seize upon—we reduce the sonnet to a critical problem, an ingenious compliment, lifeless and false.

Relinquishing conventional perceptions we might be expected to feel confusion or even anxiety. After all, we do seek meanings, only to have the poet's verbal strategy intervene. What enables us to experience wonder is the poet's art.⁶ To be sure, the sonnet's formal structure dictates a physically coherent act. Whatever our motives, we are apt to delight in simply saying the verse over. But

out of that inarticulate feel for the sonnet as a verbal shape emerges our sense of its praise.

Addressing the beloved as "thou," the poet puts himself and us into a ceremonial act. At the same time, by denying that "thou = a summer's day," our praise effects an extra-logical identity: all the irreducible meanings we experience by naming the beloved as "eternal summer" in "eternal lines." The identity disrupted in the octet comes to be ineffable in the sestet's affirmation. The beloved *becomes* the sonnet's "eternal lines," and in uttering them we ourselves do also. For a moment we may forget ourselves. "Who" the beloved or poet is comes to seem a mental quibble. The uncertain "I" of the opening problem resolves itself into a conviction of love. With the bonds of identity loosened, the poet, beloved, and we ourselves momentarily fuse in what Sonnet 116 would call a marriage of true minds. Our self-conscious will to manipulate the world through words dissolves in the action of love-making, even as the tentative "shall" of the opening question becomes the uncompromising vow "shall" in the sestet, and the "fair" which time threatens to corrupt becomes the enacted, timeless "fair thou ow'st," an identity which is liberating and seemingly inviolate.⁷

Wonder and Madness

Wonder depends on a verbal strategy. Emphasizing conceptual conventions as the basis of reality, the poet sets about confounding conventions.⁸ By redefining or contextualizing meanings—exposing the inadequacy of a concept by suddenly placing it in a wider context—the poet induces wonder in us. It is worth observing that the contextualizing process has a vivid analogue in illustrations of infinite regression. Witness a child's awe at a picture-book on whose cover a child sits reading a picture-book on whose cover a child sits reading, and so forth: a world within a world, *ad infinitum*.

As I noted earlier, any frustration of customary awareness potentially jeopardizes the integrity of the world and the self. By changing the world into words pressed beyond their simple meanings, the poet risks chaos. Without rational, public reality for corroboration, he must conceive his beloved as the crucial locus of all order. In the experience of wonder the beloved ultimately displaces the world itself. As Sonnet 112 describes it,

You are so strongly in my purpose bred That all the world
besides methinks are dead.

The couplet celebrates that venerable refrain, the world well lost. Yet however nice a compliment it appears, it locates a fearful hazard latent in all magical thinking. For at the extreme the poet commits himself to isolation, his "purpose" or will so wholly given over to his beloved that his self virtually becomes "you," tran-

scended yet lost, at once all and nothing. Like "grow'st" in Sonnet 18, "bred" claims life for the beloved, life conceived and ongoing in the poet's will, but forcibly maneuvered by the rhyme "bred-dead" into opposition and intimate connection with death. The poet has abandoned to death "all the world" which "are" (the plural insists) other selves: all the voices and relations? which ordinarily safeguard the personality.

Not surprisingly, then, in a sonnet such as 105 the poet-lover endeavors to "name" his art itself magically in an effort to secure the certain existence of the beloved and self.

Let not my love be called idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be
To one, of one, still such, and ever so.
Kind is my love to-day, to-morrow kind,
Still constant in a wondrous excellence,
Therefore my verse to constancy confined,
One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
Fair, kind, and true, is all my argument,
Fair, kind, and true, varying to other words,
And in this change is my invention spent,
Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
Fair, kind, and true, have often lived alone.
Which three till now, never kept seat in one.

(I have used the punctuation of the 1609 quarto.) Given the imperious negation,

Let not my love be called idolatry,

and the feint at paradox in "since," which we can grasp only in the unlikely sense of "just because" or "although," the sonnet directs us at the outset toward indefinable meanings. In a line such as

To one, of one, still such, and ever so,

"still such, and ever so" means something like "always one" and negates time and difference—just as the repetition of "one," culminating in "one thing expressing," does. In the enactment, the riddling repetitions and the unspecific demonstratives "such" and "so" generate more meanings than we can at once cope with. And so we relinquish such discriminate meanings, feeling their ineffable sense—love—even as the sonnet itself,

One thing expressing, leaves out difference.

Saying the verse, we simultaneously enact what it means. Now if, as the poet maintains,

Fair, kind, and true, is all my argument,

the concluding couplet and the sonnet as a whole pose a dilemma. For "fair, kind, and true" to express "one thing" and "keep seat in one," we would have to take them in a trite sentimental sense signifying a sort of reflex approval. By repeating the formula "fair, kind, and true" throughout the sestet, however, we may find that the words begin to seem strange, as if we have never noticed them before and they have only begun to exist for us. Once stripped of their merely honorific sense, "fair, kind, and true" become complicated words. Their permutable connotations defy immediate summary. Now the whole verbal structure of the poem seems to resonate. In the vow that

Fair, kind, and true, is all my argument,

the comfortable promise of limits and "mere" sense vanishes from the word "all," and it may startle us.

Presumably by disrupting the ordinary sense of "fair, kind, and true," the sonnet could engender consternation as readily as "wondrous excellence." What accounts for the poet's buoyant tone is a reassuring paradox. For all their threatening multiplicity, "fair, kind, and true" do in fact share a common "seat"—an ineffable root meaning akin to "rightful" or "just." Even signifying one love, one beloved, the three words "have often lived alone" as conventional terms with discrete meanings, torn by "difference" and so exposed to change and death. But "now," the couplet vows, in this present celebration of love, those fickle identities "keep seat" in an incorruptible one, "rightful love," beyond thoughtless public use.

In another sense "fair, kind, and true have often lived alone" as the three persons of the poet's problematical love situation, now brought together in his words at least. This meaning, of course, adds a wily joke to the sum of the couplet's significance.

As a whole, the enacted sonnet conceives a mysterious root integrity beyond the lifeless or promiscuous meanings words have in ordinary use. Experienced through praise alone, such a root meaning confutes the world of apparent change, the rational world under the sway of death. For all the verbal sophistication of the poet's argument, the notion of an immutable unity behind words leads toward historically religious conceptions of sacramental language. As Saint John vows, "In the beginning was the Word." Christianity, however, expressly controls sacramental language through a priesthood and publicly sanctioned ritual. Moreover, the Church has discouraged and often enough punished private meddling in the realm of the ineffable."

The point is that Sonnet 105 cheerfully celebrates a world of "wondrous excellence" and "wondrous scope," which, as the word "excellence" itself bears out (from the Latin *excellere*, to raise [oneself] out of, to surpass), opposes the rational world of limits. Just this, potential abandonment of the regulated, lawful reality of man's public compact with God, generates the poet's concern with "idolatry."

From the willful negation "let not my love," which communicates with no specific agency, to the final "one," which the poet "confines" in drastic singularity by refusing even to rhyme it, the sonnet maintains the concept of identity in strenuous paradoxes. Despite its incantatory conviction, the poem creates disturbingly unmanageable identities for the lovers. That the poet's confidence derives partly from verbal manipulation itself proves troubling. But beyond that, as mystics have traditionally warned, the ineffable holds its own perils. For as a disposition of the self away from the rational world, love risks self-obsession or dissolution in the infinite. Consequently the sonnet seeks not only to justify praise against charges of idolatry by "naming" itself an expression of lawful wonder, but also to reassure us of the sure integrity as well as isolation in love's "one-ness." Both functions of "naming" figure in the couplet. For the "seat" which "fair, kind, and true" keep is not simply a common base of meaning, but in another sense of the word "seat" a source of authority as well. Specifically "seat" may designate a throne, as in *Richard II*. As metonymy for kingship it betokens the basis of God's law on earth.

As an obsessive infatuation with forms, "lust" in Sonnet 129 stands in the same relation to "idolatry" as love does to praise in Sonnet 105. Defining "lust" the poet defines idolatry, enacting the corruption of the word "love." For whereas "love" unifies fragments of meaning which "till now never kept seat in one," "lust in action" literally "wastes" itself in a chaos of brawling synonyms and clichés that plunges furiously from line to line in a rhetorical act of madness:

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
 Is lust in action, and till action, lust
 Is perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody full of blame,
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
 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.
 Made 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 yet none knows well To
 shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Unlike true praise, language which orients the self toward "wondrous" love, the idolatrous language of love disperses the self in a frantic profusion of names for lust. None of the names can be more than arbitrary, for in that twelve-line opening sentence no hierarchy governs the syntax. Grasping at forms of the verb of possession,

Had, having, and in quest, to have extreme,
 the poet makes words act out the monotonous, insatiable craving that they simultaneously mean. And the structure of the definition similarly dramatizes such a fruitless "quest" in its string of static appositives without verbs or development. The

language mimics lust.

In its shifting and collapsing identities,

A bliss in proof and proved a very woe, Before a joy
proposed behind a dream,

lust is hellish, sound and fury exhausting "spirit" to no end.? Reminding us that words and syntax stand between us and the things they designate, the definition of lust makes us feel how close to madness the self is when "past reason" and bereft of inexpressible "constancy" (Sonnet 105) and even the imperfect corroboration which other voices ordinarily provide in speech. Significantly, the first twelve lines point to no beloved. In fact, no personal identities appear at all: no "I" or "thee." Instead we have only the reposeless nightmare of lust to experience.

Didactic as the couplet sounds, we should resist the impulse to make sense of it as a self-congratulating homily. In the context of the other sonnets we should hear in the couplet a vow:

All this the world well knows yet none knows well To shun
the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Indirectly, by negating lust, the "world's" false love, the couplet affirms the sonnet as an act of praise. By treating "lust" as a conventional name for all the world's love, then "shunning" it, the poet points toward his own beloved and singular love. In a sense the couplet acknowledges "the world well lost" (as in Sonnet 112) to be a trite vow, and now redefines it, pressing it to an illimitable extreme, where all the world's love stands revealed as lust, and the poet's love can be absolute anew.¹⁰

II. Incense in Sense: Magical and Dramatic Creation in the Sonnets

Critics have tended to approach the Sonnets as exercises of wit or, more commonly, as parts of a more or less autobiographical drama. In the latter view the poems *represent* experiences of love: "The interplay of mixed feelings in the sonnets on the woman, on time and poetry, and on the rival poet, are conflicts understood and expressed with a confident wit." The same critic detects a failure to understand mixed feelings in the poems to the youth, so that "when Shakespeare thus unlocks his heart, it is to reveal its stores in disarray. In only a few of the poems to the youth are these stored experiences ordered into a work of art." From this standpoint the Sonnets present characters and, latently at least, a plot. As in drama there are emotions and motives to explore, and relationships to fathom.¹

At first glance this view of the Sonnets in no way accords with the account of them I have offered so far. Where I have shown the poet striving to create an incantatory transcendence, this view

perceives the poet unlocking his heart "to reveal its stores in disarray." Where we have felt it necessary to regard certain sonnets as creative *acts*, this view takes them to be aesthetic artifacts, accounts of passionate experience, an order of information. In what follows I wish to demonstrate that both of these viewpoints are appropriate to the Sonnets.

The Power of Negative Creation

The poet's magic, I have been saying, depends on a verbal strategy. He sets about rationally confounding rationality by emphasizing, then negating, conventional perceptions. The resulting dissociation we experience as wonder, a moment of transcendence. Magic, then, proceeds by negation. Because the poet *is* manifestly invoking a meaning, however indefinable, it is useful to think of this process as "negative creation."² In Sonnet 106, for example, the poet "names" his beloved obliquely, through the agency of all the tributes paid to love in ages past:

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 beauty's best, Of hand, of foot, of lip, of
eye, of brow, I see their antique pen would have
express'd Even such beauty as you master now.

The octet protects its meaning from reduction by deflecting us toward the past, specifically to the province of the late medieval Romance. In the sestet Romance conventions promise (or threaten) to capture the reality of the beloved:

So all their praises are but prophecies

Of this our time, all you prefiguring.

So a delicate negation intercedes to make past praises an
illimit-
able name:

v

And for they looked but with divining eyes,

They had skill enough your worth to sing. The couplet's

sudden paradox clinches our astonishment:

For we, which now behold these present days,

Have eyes to wonder, but lack tongues to praise. In the immediate enactment of the sonnet we ourselves become its voice. And we do have "eyes to wonder," but also "tongues to praise," so that the poem does celebrate the beloved, seeming to speak in spite of itself.

Wonder is a paradoxical condition. In Sonnet 106, for example, the truest praise seems to negate praise. The poet-lover appears to speak with uncanny efficacy because he speaks in spite of himself. Considered as praise of the paradoxical *condition* of wonder^ one of the most enigmatic sonnets, 94, becomes clearer:

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 flow'r is to the summer sweet
 Though to itself it only live and die;
 But if that flow'r 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.

The octet celebrates both lover and beloved. For sacramental language gives "power" to those who praise, though they may be "unmoved" or absolute in their love. Like the poet specifically, they "do show" what visionary love exempts them from having to "do" in the mutable world. They conserve mortality "from expense," as Sonnet 18 swears the poet-lover does, and as 129 warns that lust (an "expense of spirit in a waste of shame") does not. Open to awe, granted access to feelings and will which are ordinarily repressed, lover and beloved "are the lords and owners of their faces."

The sestet, by contrast, describes existence untouched by wonder. However praiseworthy in the context of youth ("summer's flow'r is to the summer sweet"), youthful beauty is nonetheless particularly vulnerable to "base infection" when confined in a conventional identity ("to itself it only live and die"). Not disposed toward visionary love, that is, such a youth knows no true intimacy. Rather, he is oriented toward the "summer" world of "deeds," the world of selfish, ephemeral acts (and forms) which Sonnet 129 calls lust. Arousing love but to no end, such a beloved offends "far worse" than mere "weeds," whose overtly meretricious natures neither invite nor betray praise.

Some lilies "do" fester. "They that have power," those conceived in praise, they "will do none." Unlike "summer's flow'r," a pretty *thing*, they have an existence beyond comparisons (as opposed to lilies / weeds), in paradox, and immutable.

They rightly do inherit heaven's graces,

for after all, to signify them the octet calls upon the concept of the "unmoved mover," an ancient notion which has long served to point the baffled mind toward God. The concept could as well

apply to the poet's own negative creation which, "moving others," remains static and "unmoved." In quite a specific way, then, the poet establishes "they that have power" not simply beyond corruption, but in the human state closest to God's.

The Sacramental Context

Original sin describes in a manageable scheme how our first parents arrived at self-consciousness. For Genesis is a tale of man's seduction out of a natural state of wonder or praise. "Ye shall be as gods," vows the serpent, "knowing good and evil." He coaxes the pair to digest not just an apple, but the notion of a conscious identity also. He urges a role upon them: they shall be *as* gods. The actual sin, alas, creates nothing very godly. The promised wisdom turns out to be a pitiful awareness of nakedness and weakness and a need to hide. "And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden. ..."

Surely the authors betray some complicated sympathy, however much doctrine denies it, when Adam answers that disembodied, accusing voice without a moment's quibbling, and nevertheless suffers his curse. Be that as it may, God's curse fatefully defines man, and not as a god at all: "For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." Death happens, that is, because God vows man was and will be "dust." The divine word binds the world. Only now does Adam name the woman, his helpmate, "Eve." The sequence of events dramatizes the awful connection Shakespeare himself espied between names and dust, identity and death.

Time and theological sophistication have obscured the Indo-European root sense of the word "grace"—to praise aloud. Yet Adam's fall from grace *is* a loss of his state of praise. Before the Fall man communicated directly with God. In the aftermath, by contrast, praise became prayer. By means of *poiesis*, his love-making, the poet seeks to undo cursed self-consciousness and thereby recreate that lost condition.³ He enters into a sacramental role such as the archaic poet or *vates* embraced. It is a bold step. Hence the peculiarly nervous confidence in the tone Sidney takes in his *Defence of Poesy* when justifying the artist as a literal "lord of creation."

Himself an initiate, at pains to sound judicious and even pious, Sidney touches upon Genesis as the source of that self-consciousness which has tormented men since Adam, the artist in particular:

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather give right honor to the heavenly Maker of that maker [the poet], who, having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature. Which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force

of a divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam,—since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it. But these arguments will by few be understood, and by fewer granted; thus much I hope will be given me, that the Greeks with some probability of reason gave him the name ['poet'] above all names of learning.⁴

At this distance we can only guess how artful or genuinely defensive Sidney means to be in his disclaimer that "these arguments will by few be understood." In the nice parallel between "erected" wit and "infected" will we do observe the artist at work. But for all that, the passage recognizes the supra-mundane powers of language ("the force of a divine breath") and the problematical relation of wit and will which threatens those powers.

Self-consciousness, Sidney sees, is a disconnection between "erected wit," which forcefully "maketh us know what perfection is," and our "infected will which keepeth us from reaching unto it." (We might recall the "base infection" menacing the summer's flower in Sonnet 94.) As the metaphors "erected" and "infected" themselves suggest, wit comes to judge us in all our flawed mortality. As "what I should be" becomes an identity constant and apart from "what I am," we begin to exist (at root, as Heidegger points out, to "ex-ist" or be outside of oneself). Conscious of our selves, apart from our selves, we become aware of volition as a series of acts, and eventually the word "act" acquires the duplicity it has, say, in theatrical vocabulary. Identity loses its absoluteness, and we become conscious of roles. A disconnection between wit and feeling may haunt us, and a sense of estrangement from others.

Wonder promises to make us coherent once more. All will come whole, Sonnet 108 assures us, because words have an intrinsic ritual efficacy:

What's in the brain that ink may character
Which hath not figur'd to thee my true spirit?
What's new to speak, what new to register,
That may express my love or thy dear merit?
Nothing, sweet boy; but yet, like prayers divine,
I must each day say o'er the very same;
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,
Even as when first I hallowed thy fair name.
So that eternal love in love's fresh case
Weighs not the dust and injury of age,
Nor gives to necessary wrinkles place,
But makes antiquity for aye his page;
Finding the first conceit of love there bred, Where time
and outward form would show it dead.

Saying is believing, so the argument goes. The word controls the world, and gives no "place" to signs of necessity. The poet says his verse, "the very same," again and again, "like prayers divine," hallowing the beloved's "fair name" with his priestly litany. His sacramental words, "love's fresh case," sustain "eternal *love*." Nevertheless, the word's power depends upon

magical belief or a facsimile of magic, and that presents a serious liability.

The Limits of Wonder

The trouble with magic is that men die. We change, become corrupt, and do cease to be. And awareness impinges on the poet.⁵ Though few of the Sonnets so nearly concede the triumph of mutability as does the elegaic 73 ("That time of year thou may'st in me behold"), no art can ever fully secure wonder against its menace. For one thing, the creation of wonder is an action 'existing in time, not an artifact. After many a vow the act itself may well come to be perfunctory. For in our fallen state the "infected" will is forever reducing life to habit and manageable stereotypes. The truest poetry cannot endlessly satisfy our "erected" awareness of perfection, especially given the contingencies of ominously

reckoning Time, whose millioned accidents Creep
in 'twixt vows and change decrees of kings could not
consist, and on which they so depend as they become
actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set
forth. . . . Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such
subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth
grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either
better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such
as never were in nature ... so as he goeth hand in hand with
nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts,
but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit.⁷

It is a charmed vision, buoyed up by the vigor of its own invention, innocent of any tragic sense of human limits. As such, it is a young man's vision, heedless of the tyranny of time and convention. Without contradiction the poet can go "hand in hand" with the same nature he disdains to be tied to. Without penalty he may usurp nature's authority as playwright, and as "another nature" himself dictate roles for art to act.

Sidney's theatrical metaphor echoes in Sonnet 53:

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.
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. In all external
grace you have some part, But you like none, none you,

for constant heart.

The poem's essential vocabulary ("shadows" and "counterfeit," for example) consists of synonyms for "actor."⁸ Self-consciously the poet envisions as actors all the customary concepts by which we are able to conceive the beloved. "What is your actual nature," the poet asks, "if all conceptions of you are merely poor models of an ideal [like] you?"⁹ The answer, of course, is that the beloved's "substance" must be indefinable. And therefore wonder becomes the sole means of creating relations between true natures. Knowing by any other means is mere art. As the couplet vows:

In all external grace you have some part,
But you like none, none you, for constant heart.

In all conventional beauty or praise ("grace") the beloved has a "part" or role. What we know, illimitable nature, reciprocally figures in the "shape" (art) by which we know it. But for a "constant" heart disposed absolutely in love—for the poet, who can create an ungraspable relation—the beloved never becomes merely identical with the superficial "part" he or she acts. For "the counterfeit is poorly imitated after you." For the poet, who alone among artisans rivals nature, the beloved exists at one remove from "external" conceptions, just as an actor exists within and yet behind his role: "like none," beyond art or "compare."

Latent in this sonnet, as in Sidney's sanguine argument, is a troubling idea: that we conceive the world by means of artifices ordinarily "tied to" nature, but in the poet's use potentially dissociated from and substantial as, nature. The word rivals the world, so to speak. As in Sonnet 129, the disproportion between the poet's argument and his final affirmation shows how radical his love is. In order to effect absoluteness the last line must reject all that precedes it: all the known world. So long as praise orients the poet's constant heart, loving wonder ensues. Should praise fail, however, and those "millions of strange shadows" cease to "tend on" or serve an ideal beloved, that disconnection of art and nature would assume the aspect of madness. In the language of the plays, life becomes a pageant of dreams, full of comic miracles or tragic horror.

In this perspective the Sonnets are a sort of tragicomedy. However wretched, the poet clings to the beloved by labors of will and syntax. He does not actually suffer a catastrophic loss. Yet fear of a fall from grace or praise underlies his dependence on the beloved and the mistrust of art which sounds throughout the sequence. "Thou art all my art," the poet vows in Sonnet 78, as if to deny altogether his reliance on the fickle medium of language. He fears that "every alien pen hath got my use" (78), implicitly lamenting that even indefinable love has a corporeal "use" which can be grasped and thereby deadened. Elsewhere, as in Sonnet 82, art appears as "gross painting" and "strained touches" of rhetoric.

The danger posed by "every alien pen" is selfish mimicry. Loveless imitations of the poet's art debase it, reducing its praise to flattery, its meanings to ornamental clichés. Such mimicry can only be sterile. Where in Sonnet 53 the poet decisively repudiates the adequacy even of his own art, imitators would vainly admire

the forms they contrive. As we have seen, the poet's defense is to repudiate art. What remains to be pointed out is that when his magic loses its efficacy, the poet turns to another mode of negative creation: parody. In some ways the transition is almost inevitable. For parody implicitly presents what is *not* true, what is *not* sufficient. Only indirectly, if at all, does it name what *is* true. It tends to expose the limitations of things without specifying the ideal which motivates it.

In Sonnet 130, for example, the poet adopts the posture or mask of a Petrarchan hack. At first he appears to "paint" his beloved by mocking the clichés of others. Once we become aware of the parodic spirit, however, we are no longer apt to trust *any* effort to grasp the beloved. Implicitly, that is, the poet demonstrates that all conventional art is "false compare." His own art, the poem itself, is presumably exceptional: but of course it refuses to capture his beloved. Nowhere does he offer to show us "true compare," no matter that it is his own goal.

Far more subtle than Sonnet 130 is Sonnet 94, which we have glanced at earlier. While I believe the poem does praise the condition of wonder, as we noted, it is difficult not to feel irony and parody in its ambiguities. (Like parody, irony is inherently negative inasmuch as it points to other, deeper meanings latent in the obvious one, but leaves them unspecified.) To put the case strongly: if Sonnet 94 "is praise, it is the most back-handed of compliments, for there is doubtful merit in being cold like a stone and in the narcissistic self-enjoyment of living and dying to oneself."¹⁰ As William Empson has shown, such ambiguities lead to consideration of roles and the relationship between the poet and his formidable patron.¹¹

Because they resist reduction, irony and parody give life to the preternaturally stylized vision of the Sonnets. In effect, they allow the poet to take the world seriously—to bring it into his art—while permitting him to maintain his detachment from it. In Sonnet 138, for instance, the accommodation with the world generates not selfless vows, but drama and a revealing model of Shakespeare's dramatic process:

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 untutor'd youth, Unlearned in the world's
false subtleties. Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me
young,

Although she knows my days are past the best, Simply I
credit her false-speaking tongue; On both sides thus is
simple truth suppress'd. But wherefore says she not she is
unjust? And wherefore say not I that I am old? O, love's
best habit is in seeming trust, And age in love loves not to
have years told.

Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

The lovers' sole relation is in the grossly mutable act of "lying together." Tacitly they cast one another in fictitious roles which permit them to play out their hearts' desires. The beloved vows she is the constant, ideal love which truth has "made," as if the identity fabricated by the word play ("maid of truth") can yet prove to be absolute. The poet responds with a vow full of stress: I do believe her, though I know she lies.

This is tantamount to saying, "Despite the threat presented by my beloved's deceptions (her lies = faithless words and sexuality), I willfully believe in her ineffable worth (made of truth)." Belief enables him to be an "untutor'd youth" again, innocent of "the

world's false subtleties" and presumably able to feel the magical potency of wonder. In the complex sense of the word "credits" the poet *praises* her lies. For lies paradoxically free the lovers from the corrupt conventional "reality" of the world. Fictions, the sonnet seems to proclaim, may preempt mundane reality. "Lies" may become a superior truth.

Life in this view is properly play. The lovers act as four personae "simply" yet obscurely related, in two incommensurate worlds. Lying together keeps "simple truth suppressed," just as in the sonnets of wondrous love-making verbal intercession suspends "simple" truth. Play liberates the lovers from an unbearable, fickle reality. Insofar as the poet recognizes the limits of the lovers' "lying," we might say he parodies a lover. For he repudiates the fraud and frailties of his love even as he affirms values beyond them. Insofar as he can accept the peculiar virtues of this sort of lying, we may justly regard his parody as a celebration of the imperfect world.

Like the lovers, we are left to sustain in the subtle equilibrium of playing all the conflicts which the act of lying implies. The multiple viewpoints play makes available, and their evident accommodation in the sly, tolerant voice of the sestet, act to forestall our judgment of the lovers. And so for us as well, praise has come to accept love's compromise with mortality. It is not an ideal solution, yet it releases the poet from the magic circle of his art. "Lying" enables him to *act* in the world (sexually and emotionally) even as it permits him to create the poem before us. With its embrace of masks and play, the ironic spirit of the poem allows the poet both to be and not to be "in" an insoluble reality: to engage the world and yet look beyond it.

Sonnet 138 brings magical creation as close to objective reality as sonnet form permits.¹² Beyond lies drama, where incantation may develop into, or give way before, the interplay of personal voices. It remained for the plays, with their greater resources, to realize more fully the expanding meanings of love and creation itself.