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# "My False Eyes": The Dark Lady and Self-Knowledge

by M. L. Stapleton

qui sibi notus erit, solus sapienter amabit  
atque opus ad uires exiget omne suas.

(*Ars Amatoria* 2.501–2)

IN Ovid's comic vision, Apollo manifests himself to the *lasciui praeceptor Amoris*. The god's counsel, an allusion to the Socratic dictum inscribed upon his temple at Delphi, stresses the importance of self-knowledge for love affairs and poetic talent.<sup>1</sup> Yet the duplicitous speaker of the *Ars Amatoria* gleefully applies this sober aphorism to his peculiar poetics. For him, to love wisely and to find a decorous proportion between task and capability is to continue dribbling his elegiac couplets of falsehood. Self-knowledge of this sort does not trouble him. In fact, he revels in it: *ut fallas, ad mea sacra ueni* (AA 3.616: "so that you can deceive, attend to my mysteries").

Such smugness cannot be said to characterize "Will," the narrator of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*,<sup>2</sup> especially in the sub-sequence devoted to

<sup>1</sup> References to Ovid follow E. J. Kinney's edition of the erotic poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961). A rough translation: "Only he who knows himself will love wisely and suit each work to his strengths." All translations in this essay are my own.

<sup>2</sup> In keeping with current practice, the name "Will" and the terms *speaker*, *narrator*, and *sonneteer* will be used to distinguish such a being from Shakespeare himself, of whom nothing personal or biographical ought to be assumed by reading his poetry. This is the approach that David K. Weiser takes in his recent book, *Mind in Character: Shakespeare's Speaker in the Sonnets* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987). Or, in Joel Fineman's words: "'Will' [is] Shakespeare's name for the way his sonneteering poetic person works." See *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 27. Margreta de Grazia also uses "Will" to denote the speaker in "Babbling Will in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* 127 to 154," in *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual* 1 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980). For an interesting history of the term *persona* as it appears in criticism, see Clara Claiborne Park, "Talking Back to the Speaker," *Hudson Review* 42 (1989): 21–44.

the "dark lady" (127–54). In spite of his resemblance to the *praeceptor* created by "the most capricious poet, honest Ovid" (*AYL* 3.3.8),<sup>3</sup> Will's panic at the incompatibility of love, talent, and self-knowledge constitutes one of his most distinctive features. Shakespeare apparently knew that a text "simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode,"<sup>4</sup> because he uses his narrator to do both. Ultimately, all that we can know about Will is that he is a liar, especially concerning the dark lady.<sup>5</sup>

Formalist critics of the previous generation such as John Dover Wilson and Edward Hubler, vanguards of the old historicism and the New Criticism, created a fanciful dual identity for Shakespeare's "unromantic lady": a literary character and an historical figure, a paradoxical—and now unfashionable—conjunction of selves. They admonished us not to think of her as a "common courtesan" or "only a trollop."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> All references to the *Sonnets* and plays follow *The Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Paul de Man, "Semiotics and Rhetoric," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism. Modernism Through Poststructuralism*, ed. Robert Con Davis (New York: Longman, 1986), 477.

<sup>5</sup> Although criticism of the *Sonnets* is voluminous, relatively little of it discusses the dark lady, questions Will's reliability as narrator, or vivisects him as a *conscious purveyor of falsehoods*. John Klause calls Will "mendacious" and "a manipulator of lies" in "Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: Age in Love and the Goring of Thoughts," *SP* 80 (1983): 310, 312. In "Shakespeare's Undramatic Monologues," *SQ* 32 (1981), Heather Dubrow notes the importance of Will's couplets in his attempts at deluding himself (65). See also de Grazia, "Babbling Will"; Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*; and J. Bunselmeyer, "Appearances and Verbal Paradox: Sonnets 129 and 138," *SQ* 25 (1974): Will "lies to himself in order to love, and when his repulsion breaks through it is as much with his own deception as with the lady's" (107).

<sup>6</sup> Dover Wilson's summary of the dark lady is worth citing in full: "She was a married woman, and there is more than a hint that she had not only broken her 'bed-vow' for Shakespeare's sake (152.3) but was at times open to the charge of promiscuity (135.5; 137.6; 142.8). Yet she was certainly no common courtesan. If sonnet 128 be not mere flattery, she could play, as we saw, and probably sing charmingly. And her lover must have credited her with an appreciation of poetry or he could never have troubled to compose some two dozen sonnets for her, or, if about her, surely intended for her eyes." *An Introduction to the Sonnets of Shakespeare, for the Use of Historians and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 49–50. Hubler: "She is the embodiment of warm and tawdry humanity, and she is *also* a trollop. If in our love of categories we think of her as only a trollop and fail to distinguish her from her sisters, we shall reduce Shakespeare's sketch to a stereotype." *The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 47. Thus Hubler describes Doll Tearsheet of 2 *Henry IV*, but the description is meant to be analogous to the dark lady in his chapter "Shakespeare's Unromantic Lady." He decries the practice of stereotyping as he indulges in it himself. The master at creating an identity for the dark lady, the friend, Mr. W. H., et al., is the indefatigable A. L. Rowse. See *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved*, 2nd. ed., (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), xxvii–xxxviii. More recent and credible speculation on questions of identity: Donald Foster, "Master W. H., R. I. P.," *PMLA* 102 (1987):

Yet their need to use such phrases says more about their patriarchal morality than about a woman, imagined or real, with a sexual appetite whose ardor exceeded their sense of propriety, and who was therefore courtesan *and* trollop. This distasteful dual image depends upon the assumption that Will provides a consistent and accurate account of his subject, whereas Shakespeare shows us, in poem after poem, that this account is neither. Nonetheless, many readers still take the *persona* at his word in Sonnet 144: "The friend is angelic, the lady diabolical," or rife with "duplicity."<sup>7</sup>

Stephen Booth began a new trend by focusing upon Will's studied inconsistency,<sup>8</sup> as have other writers such as Margreta de Grazia:

Again and again Will's logic tautologically turns on itself. His attempts to find reasons or arguments in defense of his faults rebound, invariably pointing back to his own will as cause;<sup>9</sup>

and Joel Fineman:

As an image, the lady is the *simulacrum* of an incompatible similitude; she is like what is unlike what it is like.<sup>10</sup>

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42–54; Robert Crossman, "Making Love Out of Nothing At All: The Issue of Story in Shakespeare's Procreation Sonnets," *SQ* 41 (1990): 470–88.

<sup>7</sup> James Winny, *The Master-Mistress: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968), 117; and Fineman, 110. R. P. Blackmur: "with the dark lady there is a kind of unbuilding going on, the deliberate exchange of pounds of flesh for pounds of spirit. It is like drinking too much; every morning the rewards show as losses. . . . One's private degradation is the grandest Sodom." "A Poetics for Infatuation," in *The Riddle of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, eds. Hubler et al. (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 155. Leslie Fiedler characterizes the dark lady as a "gonnorheal whore" in "Some Contexts of Shakespeare's Sonnets" (in the same collection, 88). See also G. Wilson Knight, *The Mutual Flame: On Shakespeare's "Sonnets" and "The Phoenix and the Turtle"* (London: Methuen, 1955); Northrop Frye, "How True a Twain," in *Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963): "she is a projection of something self-destructive in the lover, a death as strong as love" (105); and Hubler, *Sense, passim*. Some critics even use the dark lady as a barometer to measure the propriety of female sexuality in the plays. See, for example, Paula S. Berggren's "The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays" in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, eds. Gayle Greene, Carolyn Lenz, and Carol Thomas Neely (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981). Goneril and Regan, it is said, manifest "the depraved and non-procreative lasciviousness" (24) of the dark lady.

<sup>8</sup> See *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1969), and his landmark edition of the poems themselves, *Edited, with Analytic Commentary* (1977–78). Both of these texts were published by Yale University Press.

<sup>9</sup> de Grazia, 128.

<sup>10</sup> Fineman, 175. He is most eminent in the movement to "deconstruct" Shakespeare's studied inconsistency in these poems. Dubrow questions the speaker's authority, as well: "if the nature of experience renders closure problematical, the character of this particular speaker renders it virtually impossible. Attracted though he may be to abso-

Whatever the character of his paramour, the speaker's perspective lacks reliability, and we have little reason to trust him completely. Confused and fickle, he gropes for certainty to stabilize himself and his surroundings, a victim of "sexual pride."<sup>11</sup> Will invites us to "deconstruct" him (long before that concept became part of the lexicon).

Granted, the very nature of the sonnet sequence itself makes it difficult to gain any other perspective besides the poet's on his subject. Like other sonnet ladies, the dark lady is a creation of Will's voice. No Rosalind or Cleopatra, she resists classification as a character in her own right who delivers speeches open to interpretation by other characters. Although she may seem to perform certain actions, we must remember who presents them for our inspection. Will, most unlike those who praise Laura, Marie, Stella, and the "Fair Youth" who precedes her in the *Sonnets*, confesses the terribly warped and seldom reliable nature of his perspective. His eyes are "corrupt by over-partial looks" (137.4), glazed over by his own ardor and his spectacular capacity for misrepresentation. Struggling gamely with his demons of lust and humiliation, he becomes a darkly comic character. As a result, the function of his mysterious subject begins to emerge from his contradictory rhetoric, especially in sonnets 137, 148, and 152. The dark lady's apparent refusal to be a conventional sonnet princess engenders Will's painful examination of women and himself: "a sad distempered guest" (153.12), and "my mistress' thrall" (154.12). He says much more about himself than about his lady.

Like Touchstone attempting to seduce Audrey in the Forest of Arden, Will is too aware that "the truest poetry is the most feigning" in his poetic pursuit of his own "foul slut" (who cannot, like Audrey, deny sluttishness and thank the gods for her foulness). For Will as for

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lutes, he is . . . involved to the point of obsession with doubts and fears about what is to come." See *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 224. Adena Rosemarin sees much confusion in the *persona*, as well: "The sonnets . . . argue differently from either the traditional or the deconstructive critic. . . . they both say and show that the opposition is at once essential and completely strategic: it serves neither *res* nor *verba*, but both." See "Hermeneutics versus Erotics: Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and Interpretive History" *PMLA* 100 (1985): 32.

<sup>11</sup> de Grazia, 128. Cf. S. C. Campbell: "The dark lady is reviled for not being faithful to the poet, yet in what sense is he faithful to her? . . . All he offers her is a second-best, or tenth-best, reluctant and insulting love. . . . There is a powerful sense of betrayal in these sonnets, but you cannot be betrayed by someone who owes you nothing." *Only Begotten Sonnets: A Reconstruction of the Sonnets of Shakespeare* (London: Bell and Hymans, 1978), 213-14.

Touchstone, *feigning* operates in all of its senses—deceptive, amorous, imaginative:<sup>12</sup>

lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in  
poetry may be said as lovers they do feign.

(AYL 3.3.18–19, 36, 20–21)

Thus Will is no typical sonneteer, nor is he a conventional woman-hater. To the antifeminist, women are changeable, fickle, false, and slanderous, whether we are discussing Juvenal,

faciunt graviora coactae  
imperio sexus minimumque libidine peccant,  
(*Satura* VI.134–35)<sup>13</sup>

[the power of unnatural sex makes (women) do graver things, and they sin lustfully on the slightest pretext,]

or these ravings of *le mari jaloux* in Jean de Meun's continuation of *Le Roman de la Rose*, which serve as an approving commentary upon Juvenal's aphorism:

Toutes serés, estes ou fustes  
De fait ou de volenté putes,  
Et qui bien vous encercheroit  
Toutes putains vous trouveroit;  
Et qui peüst le fait estaindre,  
Volenté ne puet nus contraindre.  
(9155–60)<sup>14</sup>

[All of you (women) were, are, or will be whores in deed or in wish, and who-

<sup>12</sup> The verb *to feign* has several meanings current in the sixteenth century. Agnes Latham glosses the word as "to lie or dissemble," and finds "to desire" (based upon an aural pun on *fain*) as a secondary meaning in the *Arden* edition of *As You Like It* (London: Methuen, 1975), 80–81. (Cf. Albert Gilman's note in the *Complete Signet* version, 862; he reaches a similar conclusion.) Latham relates this pun to Sidney's spirited attack on Plato and the poet-haters in the *Defence* (81). Sir Phillip also plays on the word: "of all writers under the sun the poet is the *least* liar," and "a *feigned* example hath as much force to teach as a *true* example"; here it means "imaginary" or "imaginative." See Katherine Duncan-Jones' *Sir Phillip Sidney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 235, 224 (my emphasis). All references to Sidney are from her edition. In *The Riverside Shakespeare*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), Anne Barton defines *feigning* as "based on imagination," but given the spirit of Touchstone's discourse, this meaning seems ancillary. In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia's rebuff of the Duke's missive, "It is the more like to be feigned; I pray you keep it in" (1.5.194), plays on all three meanings.

<sup>13</sup> The edition is S. G. Owen's (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1949).

<sup>14</sup> The edition is Daniel Poiron's (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1974).

ever may scrutinize you well should find you completely whorish; and (even she) who was able to refrain from the deed is unable to constrain her wish.]

Such invective redounds upon the antifeminist because it invariably describes him more accurately than it does his victims. Or, as the Wife of Bath's reasoning goes in her *Prologue*, what St. Paul says about sex and women says more about St. Paul than about women: "I nyl envy no virginitee."<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Will eventually admits his masculine frailty, as if he had read someone like Christine de Pisan, that formidable medieval feminist critic of the *Roman*:

Et quel prouffit vient d'ainsi diffamer  
A ceulx mesmes qui se deussent armer  
Pour les garder et leur honneur deffendre?  
(*Epistre au dieu d'Amours* 165–67)<sup>16</sup>

[And therefore what is the profit of slandering for those same (men) who should arm themselves in order to protect (women) and to defend their honor?]

Rail as he might, Will chastens himself. Aware of his own pure malice and his tendency to be in the wrong, he tellingly admits that his "vows are oaths but to misuse" (152.8) the dark lady, even as he embarks upon his final condemnation of her. One can hardly imagine such honesty (or invective) from Petrarch, Ronsard, Sidney, or even Donne.

Will's self-excoriation underlies virtually every sonnet in the subsequence. Even when he wanes into his darkest phase in sonnet 129, that diatribe which bristles with almost forty hissing sibilants, the poem clearly criticizes his ungovernable appetite:

Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme.  
(10)

Wedge between the musical sonnet 128 and the gentle parody of quasi-Petrarchan conventions,<sup>17</sup> sonnet 130, Will meditates upon his

<sup>15</sup> *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, line 142, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd. edition, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> *Poems of Cupid, God of Love. Christine de Pizan's "Epistre au dieu D'Amours" and "Dit de la Rose."* Thomas Hoccleve's "The Letter of Cupid," Thelma S. Fenster and Mary Catherine Erler, ed. and tr. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 42–43.

<sup>17</sup> I would argue that anti-Petrarchism has very little to do with Petrarch and his work, but instead parodies the effete and insipid imitations of the master. Hence the pejorative title of Joachim Du Bellay's poem, "Contre Les Petrarquistes," where he lashes "l'art de Petrarquier," not that of Petrarch. David Kalstone questions the efficacy of

ungovernable lust, but not the dark lady. The line above illustrates the nature of his sexual drive; lust serves as the subject of these verbs and those that precede them. It also reveals, through *tradio* (repeating a word in different forms), his conventional male psychology. The phrase "in quest to have" carries both the syntactic emphasis and the metrical weight of the line rather than the unstressed "Had," which implies that the chase ("Mad in pursuit" [9]) is naturally much more compelling than the post-coital experience. Although Will often blames the dark lady for awakening these forces in him, he also hints that he has granted her this power: "Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place" (131.12). Therefore, he knows that he has imprisoned himself, and that he will "do it all over again if the occasion arises, that desire is unteachable."<sup>18</sup>

Sonnet 148 serves as a particularly illuminating commentary on Will's angst and may be the best poem through which to read the entire sub-sequence. With questions of sonnet order and numbering aside,<sup>19</sup> the perspective that the narrator attempts to gain shifts so rapidly that it becomes difficult for us to ascertain what he thinks. Perhaps love causes this befuddlement, or the ardor that the beloved kindles in him, or his constantly changing mind:

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the term "anti-Petrarchism" in "Sir Phillip Sidney and 'Poor Petrarchs Long Deceased Woes,'" *JEGP* 63 (1964): 21–32. Winny's view of 130 is somewhat darker than is customary: "the speaker is openly contemptuous both of his infatuation and of the defects which sees with such pitiless clarity" (99). It is possible that giving the dark lady individualizing qualities is a means of diminishing her stature, since it was conventional to characterize a sonnet lady as "an emblem of the courtly class" by means of "the impersonality and repose that attend perfection." See Frederick Goldin's excellent *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 76.

<sup>18</sup> Helen M. Vendler, "Jakobson, Richards, and Shakespeare's Sonnet CXXIX," in *I.A. Richards: Essays in His Honor*, ed. Reuben Brower, Helen Vendler, and John Hollander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 193.

<sup>19</sup> I will take the traditional view that sonnets 127–52 concern themselves with the dark lady directly, 153–54 more marginally, and 40–42 quite indirectly. For interesting summaries of the controversy, see the *Variorum*, ed. Hyder Rollins (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1944), and Booth's edition of the *Sonnets*, 546. More specific studies are Brents Stirling, *The Shakespeare Sonnet Order: Poems and Groups* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), and Campbell's *Only Begotten Sonnets*, with its further subtitle: "which integrates the Dark Lady sonnets into an earlier position in the sequence and discerns a single tenor throughout and a single addressee." Michael J. B. Allen argues well, I think, that several "triads" of sonnets within the subsequence 127–54 function as striking exercises in psychological comparison and contrast. See "Shakespeare's Man Descending a Staircase: Sonnets 126 to 154," *ShS* 31, ed. Kenneth Muir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978): 127–38.



O me, what eyes hath Love put in my head,  
 Which have no correspondence with true sight;  
 Or, if they have, where is my judgment fled,  
 That censures falsely what they see aright?

(1-4)

Immediately, he tells "a twofold truth" (41.12), posing the conventional dichotomy between eyesight and psychological perception, particularly in the phrase "true sight." What does it mean for him to see and judge truly? His occasionally benevolent view of this peculiar lady contradicts current opinion that she lacks discretion and attractiveness. If his peers are correct, his own "judgment" would then be confounded because it "censures" her "falsely," or evaluates her incorrectly as beautiful. Or, worse still, "censures falsely" may imply that he criticizes her unfairly and that she really *is* beautiful. Therefore, the meaning of "true sight" remains obscure; Will cannot possibly elucidate such a global concept.

As Will raises the question of the dark lady's allegedly monstrous nature, it appears instead that she simply refuses to behave in the expected way. Certainly she is not as dreadful as the previous poem would have it, "as black as hell, as dark as night" (147.14). He continues:

If that be fair whereon my false eyes dote,  
 What means the world to say it is not so?  
 If it be not, then love doth well denote  
 Love's eye is not so true as all men's no.

(148.5-8)

The complexity in syntax bespeaks complexity and obscurity in thought. The twice-used "If" makes everything conditional in this quatrain. (Fittingly, the first two quatrains hinge upon this conjunction.) To Will, "fair" has a dozen associated meanings that lose their force through repetition: "beautiful," "chaste," and "true" are three. Yet he does not tell us explicitly whether the dark lady is "fair" or not. He hints at the negative by asking a question: why does "the world" deem her not fair? This presages the last couplet of the sonnets directly concerned with her:

I have sworn thee fair: more perjured eye,  
 To swear against the truth so foul a lie.

(152.13-14)

Yet earlier in the sequence, he assures us that "every tongue says beauty should look so" (127.14), or that "the world" views the dark lady as a paragon of beauty. Since Will contradicts himself here, his original inquiry concerning "true sight" resurfaces in the reader's consciousness. One wonders, in this instance, if it belongs to the speaker, Love, or "all men." Will allows for the possibility of the latter in the eighth line: "Love's eye is not so true as all men's no." However, even "Love's eye" is a confusing triple pun: Cupid's sight, affirmation ("aye"), or even a euphemism for the vulva.<sup>20</sup> True sight, then, is a matter of physiology as well as of aesthetics and epistemology, a concept that Will complicates as a strategy of evasion.

Will's epithet "my false eyes" (148.5) confirms his initial appraisal of himself as too blind to judge his mistress with any reliability. Since he explicitly tells us that his eyes "lie," he invites us to scrutinize his statements throughout the sonnets concerned with the dark lady. He openly admits his tendency to dissemble: indeed, twenty times as often as the woman he castigates (152.6-7). Since he habitually "misuse[s]" or misrepresents her, false-eyed Will seems to be the changeable one, not the lady.<sup>21</sup> He may love her:

O, how can Love's eye be true,  
That is so vexed with watching and with tears?  
No marvel then though I mistake my view:  
The sun itself sees not till heaven clears.  
O cunning Love, with tears thou keep'st me blind,  
Lest eyes well-seeing thy foul faults should find.  
(148.9-14)

Then again, he may not. He declines to clarify another obscurity, the identity of "Love." This could refer to his emotion or Cupid in both instances, as well as the dark lady herself in the second. Will blames another for his troubles, typical of a man with "false eyes" and the predilection "to misuse." The "foul faults" that he pinions in the cli-

<sup>20</sup> Booth discusses this sexual reading of "Love's eye" in his commentary on sonnet 148 in his edition, 521.

<sup>21</sup> G. Wilson Knight's observations on sonnet 148: "The reasoning is purely fanciful, and no depth can be found in it. But the two statements which it links up are valid enough in separation: the poet undoubtedly *is* confused by the fascination exerted by a person whose appearance he does not admire, and he *is* very sorry for himself in his sufferings. Moreover, he wants, and has every right, to say these things." *The Mutual Flame*, 46-47.

mactic line of sonnet 148 would seem to belong to Cupid or to the unrequited desire that afflicts him, not his subject. Again, confusion is the ostensible point, the surrender of reason in those whom love victimizes, and the bewitching tapestry of Elizabethan syntax woven with puns becomes quite mimetic of Will's delicate condition. Indeed, "what eyes hath love put in my head"?

In sonnet 137, as Will probes his judgment, he undercuts his reliability further. Lashing out at "Love," whatever that may be, signifies self-flagellation:

Thou blind fool, Love, what dost thou to mine eyes  
That they behold and see not what they see?  
They know what beauty is, see where it lies,  
Yet what the best is take the worst to be.

(137.1-4)

This recalls Sidney's "Thou blind man's mark, thou fool's *self-chosen snare*" (*Certain Sonnets* 31.1, emphasis mine), where that speaker, like Shakespeare's, laments his own lack of perception. Will's blindness is equally self-inflicted—much more debilitating than the lack of physical sight, as dramatized so memorably in *Lear*. Will does not truly "know" beauty, since he cannot distinguish between the "best" and "worst" visually or grammatically, or even identify them:

In things right true my heart and eyes have erred,  
And to this false plague are they now transferred.

(13-14)

Something has tainted his "heart," both akin to and at odds with the "judgment" of 148, and "this false plague" that also afflicts his eyes represents distorted perception and spiritual torment as much as the lady herself. Previously, his "dear dotting heart" revered her as "the fairest and most precious jewel" (131.3-4). But sarcasm has replaced tenderness:

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.

(141.1-4)

Will's anger has caused him to be patronizing toward the dark lady, reflected in the fleering "thousand errors," "despise," and "despite of view." His irrationality is adolescent in its pervasiveness, and erupts in his constant shifts in perspective:

For if I should despair, I should grow mad,  
 And in my madness might speak ill of thee:  
 Now this ill-wresting world is grown so bad  
 Mad slanderers by mad ears believed be.

(140.9–12)

Will admits that it is “madness” to “speak ill” of the lady. Since calumny is a favored rhetorical mode in these sonnets, this would certainly explain why the world is “ill-wresting” and allied against him in 148.6. “Mad slanderers” obliquely refers to himself and his own loquaciousness; Will speaks villainously of the dark lady since she fails to submit. He has reached the humbling conclusion that he has begun to believe his own nonsense: “love’s best habit is in seeming trust” (138.11).

In sonnets 137 and 148, Will’s fickle ambiguity constitutes a rather clear admission of his dubiety.<sup>22</sup> Several individual lines in several poems fulfill the same purpose in microcosm, especially the dozens of statements that cut two ways. I think especially of the fourth line of sonnet 137: although Will claims that his eyes know beauty, “what the best is take the worst to be.” Both superlative adjectives can refer to the concept of beauty *and* the lady, so that Will says at least two things: his eyes fool him into thinking her beautiful; she really *is* beautiful, but he knowingly slanders her as the “worst.” This odd principle operates in many of his accusations against her: e.g., her lips have “sealed false bonds of love as oft as mine” (142.7). Here, the possessive pronoun operates as the key word. If its grammatical referent is “bonds of love,” the dark lady has apparently been kissing someone else. If “lips” were to be connected to “mine,” then Will admits that he has been sealing as many false bonds as his verbal victim has been accused of sealing; he is a liar. He admits as much in sonnet 149, “I against myself with thee partake” (2), in the dual meaning of the verb. He enjoys the dark lady’s considerable physical charms against his better judgment; he also “takes her side” against himself. Dubiety operates in the most innocuous of lines. Consider “Two loves I have, of comfort and despair” (144.1). The poem’s context would connect “comfort” to the friend of sonnets 1–126, and “despair” to the much-maligned dark lady. However, a reading of all the sonnets suggests that one can, of

<sup>22</sup> Bunselmeyer: “In the last sonnets, there is no reality behind the appearances”; the poet’s rhetorical tricks “destroy the absolute meaning of words and capture a world of shifting appearances” (103), because the recurrent theme of these sonnets is the “falseness inherent in life and words” (107).

course, transpose these nouns quite easily: the dark lady is also the source of some comfort.<sup>23</sup>

How seriously, then, should we take the truly negative sonnets? When Will cannot smooth the dark lady with the plane of conventional idealization, he feels compelled to produce the axe:

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.

(131.5–8)

His mock politeness makes his statement more odious than if it were straightforward. Whom does he mean by “some”? The sixth line is an extended exercise in the same technique. In its pretense to mask something distasteful, *litotes* (understatement) can insidiously make pejorative what it intends to ameliorate. Furthermore, Will refuses to counter the insults of his mysterious peers about his paramour, and distastefully mentions all of this to her in direct address. So much for idealization.

Yet the sonnets in which Will insults the dark lady most brutally are also some of the most masochistic. In sonnet 135, the poem in which he first names himself, his moniker may be a sevenfold pun, and thus a supreme tool of ridicule. He assures us that the dark lady’s “will is large and spacious” (135.5), the noun having the primary meaning of “carnal desire or appetite” (*OED*). With this in mind, the third quatrain hardly requires comment:

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.

(9–12)

Here, this spiteful narrator gives “Will” (i.e., the human will, lust) residual sexual meanings,<sup>24</sup> as well as making it a name for himself and perhaps his fair friend and even the cuckolded husband. The dark lady’s sexual desire, acceptable to Will if she directs it towards him, be-

<sup>23</sup> Booth corroborates these double meanings in sonnets 142, 144, and 148 as indicative of the speaker’s admission of guilt (492, 497, 522).

<sup>24</sup> For another instance of this rather graphic use of “will” in Shakespeare, see *All’s Well*, where the Lords Dumaine comment on how Bertram “fleshes his will in the spoil of [Diana’s] honor” (4.3.15). Booth also discusses this extensively in *Sonnets*, 466–69.

comes a bludgeon that he beats her with because she does not always favor him with her attention. However, he pleads as much as he insults, and in piling up "evidence" against her, he indicts himself. He has made it quite impossible to take him at his word:

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.  
(136.7–10)

Or, as Demetrius says in *Titus Andronicus* of the raped and mutilated Lavinia, "easy it is / Of a cut loaf to steal a shive" (3.1.86–87). Ultimately, Will's verbal violation is unsuccessful, because his observations, in their volume and facetiousness, are "things of great receipt" that "pass untold," so that no "one" statement carries weight. He too is "reckoned none." Since so many other poems in the sub-sequence are self-critical, his insults should fool no one. We may wonder why, in the only words allowed the dark lady, she says "I hate . . . *not* you" (145.13–14, emphasis mine).<sup>25</sup> Unlike Audrey, she may know "what poetical is," and that it is "honest" in neither "deed" nor "word," and thus no "true thing" (AYL 3.3.16–17).

What, finally, constitutes the dark lady's crimes? The sheer vagueness of false-eyed, slandering Will on this matter is indicative. We learn a few sonnets into the sub-sequence that the dark lady is "black" in her "deeds" (131.13). Later, the speaker laments "the wrong / That thy unkindness lays upon my heart" (139.1), which becomes intensified, somewhat mysteriously, into a "just cause of hate" (150.10). Much of this whining seems to arise from the dark lady's lack of response to his overtures: "better it were, / Though not to love, yet love, to tell me so" (140.5–6); or, "Root pity in thy heart" (142.11).

Another complaint, remarkable from one who admits that he has "false eyes," is the dark lady's tendency to look at other men (mentioned as early as sonnet 128), whom her "eyes woo as mine impertune thee" (142.10). Hence the command, "forbear to glance thine eye aside" (139.6). Yet glance she does. Ultimately, the dark lady's only identifiable "crime" is that she conjoins with the friend of sonnets 1–126:

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Pequigney labels sonnet 145 "the most trivial and inane of all." I would disagree, for the very reason I state: the dark lady actually speaks. See *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 153.

He learned but surety-like to write for me  
Under that bond that him as fast doth bind.

(134.7-8)

Even this is obscure. The implication, however, is that Will introduced the pair to one another, or at least told the young man where to go "for a good time." In the preceding sonnet, the supposed bond is decidedly sexual:

Me from myself thy cruel eye hath taken,  
And my next self thou harder hast engrossed.

(133.5-6)

"Love's eye" (148.8) and her "cruel eye" are one and the same, referring to another part of the anatomy that attracts something "harder." However, is this conjunction imagined or real? In sonnet 143, jealous Will chides the dark lady thus: "run'st thou after that which flies from thee" (9). Her luck with the lovely boy may be no better than her frustrated admirer's, and he admits as much in the next sonnet: "Suspect I may, yet not directly tell" (144.10). We may wonder, then, if any sexual activity has actually occurred between any of the combatants, or if this, too, is an illusion. Will must "live in doubt, / Till my bad angel fire my good one out" (144.13-14). Shakespeare typically leaves the issue unresolved. Even the certainty of syphilis remains conditional.

Again, however, what remains certain is uncertainty itself and self-abuse.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of the "crimes" that the dark lady commits against Will, with or without his young friend, he usually affixes the blame to the same aging sonneteer:

But my five wits nor my five senses can  
Dissuade one foolish heart from serving thee.

(141.9-10)

He admits that he has overmastered himself. Granted, Will has had some aid, but aid that he desired with his heart's blood, well aware of the consequences: "my sin, grounded on sinful loving" (142.2). On occasion, he may still attempt to fool himself and his audience with invective:

<sup>26</sup> "The sonnets to the dark lady enact a poor, and consequently a naked and self-critical, economy of human value, in which reflection on the love exchange and on the needs from which it all too locally and directly arises promotes a deflationary perspective on idealization of all sorts." Lars Engle, "Afloat in Thick Deepes: Shakespeare's Sonnets on Certainty," *PMLA* 104 (1989): 832.

I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,  
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

(147.13-14)

Yet, given the two lines that precede this couplet, even the most credulous audience could not believe him:

My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,  
At random from the truth vainly expressed.

(11-12)

His knots unravel, and his velvet frets. He constantly reminds us that "I forgot / Am of myself" (149.2-3), but he rarely forgets to lie, or to admit his falsehoods. "At random from the truth" serves as a type of emblem for the dark lady sonnets as a group. Will blunders into the truth about himself, and a "vainly expressed" truth, at that.

What of the more genial sonnets, those in which Will does not vilify his subject? We would do well to remember that this man gives the same woman unique praise: "every tongue says beauty should look so" (127.4). Her raven black eyes are omnipresent, from sonnet 127 to 153. They

mourners seem

At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,  
Sland'ring creation with a false esteem.

(127.10-12)

As an icon of natural beauty, her appearance serves as criticism of those who "put on nature's power" with "art's false borrowed face" (5-6). Such distinctively powerful eye color recalls Sidney's conception of "Stella's eyes, / In colour black" as "beams so bright" (*Astrophil and Stella* 7.1-2), and Laura's "bel nero et . . . bianco" (*Rime Sparse* 29.23),<sup>27</sup> not to mention the dusky beauties, male and female, in the Song of Songs: "I am black but comely" (1:5). Will even idealizes the dark lady as "my music" (128.1—although later deflates this compliment in 130.9-10), and envies the keys of the virginal she seems to be playing "that nimble leap / To kiss the tender inward of thy hand" (128.5-6). The possibility of infidelity seems no serious matter here. She has lips "that love's own hand did make" (145.1), which frame a tongue "ever

<sup>27</sup> T. W. Baldwin makes this point about the relationship between Stella's eye color and that of the dark lady. *On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems & Sonnets* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), 324. The edition of Petrarch is Robert M. Durling's (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).



sweet" (6). Moreover, sonnet 130 humanizes this dark-eyed woman as no sonnet lady ever is:

I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
(11-12)

Granted, these lines respond to conventional statements such as Ronsard's encomium to Marie: "Par le peuple en honneur Déesse vous iriez" (*Amours de Marie* XLII.8).<sup>28</sup> They may also represent the initial self-delusion to which his later invective serves as response. Yet the tone is oddly complimentary. If the dark lady is "as rare / As any she belied with false compare" (130.13-14), what are we to believe? These twenty-six sonnets intersect with one another so that certain terms lose their meaning from sheer repetition: *beauty, will, truth/true, false, fair, foul, black, swear, sin, sight, blind, best, worst, just, eye, heart, lie, love, hate*. Will unwittingly challenges the notion of belief itself.

Although the order of the sub-sequence seems as protean as the diction that drives it, its kaliedoscopic nature is nonetheless mimetic of false-eyed Will. It is aesthetically fortuitous that the only begetter of these ensuing sonnets, be he author, editor, or procurer, jumbled them so. Indeed, the speaker offers us little time for repose or reflection. Sonnet 127 serves as a hatch into his maelstrom. Sonnets 153 and 154 seem intended as a joint *envoi* for the dark lady sonnets (cf. 126 as conclusion to the poems devoted to the fair youth/friend). I will venture, however, that sonnet 152 works as a "penultimate conclusion."

For here, Will exposes himself most blatantly. The first quatrain summarizes his relationship (and perceptions of it) to his subject. As usual, he addresses the dark lady directly, manifesting his doubtful certainty in thirty-four words:

In loving thee thou knowst I am forsworn,  
But thou art twice forsworn, to me love swearing;  
In act thy bed-vow broke, and new faith torn  
In vowing new hate after new love bearing.  
(152.1-4)

He accuses her of being "twice forsworn" because she does not really love him, and because she has broken her "bed-vow" of marital fidelity. Predictably, however, this accusation boomerangs. Will is also

<sup>28</sup> F. Joukovsky's edition of *Les Amours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) provided the line from Ronsard. A. W. Trueman suggests a further parallel between authors when he suggests Virgil's *et vera incessu patuit dea* (*Aeneid* 1.405) as a possible antecedent. "Sonnet 130 and *The Aeneid*," *SQ* 25 (1974): 129-30.

a philandering Machiavel in love, a Horner (or worse, a Fainall). He has broken his own bed-vow to both his wife and the dark lady; he loves neither of them. Other charges bounce back at him. If anyone is full of "hate," it is he. This dubiety nakedly anatomizes the affair, as does his anguished howling and the lady's silence. The structure of this quatrain is mimetic of such turbulence, as Stephen Booth observes. In spite of the consistency implied by the repetition of "In" and "new" and the four present participles, the action within fluctuates wildly—the movement is furious.<sup>29</sup> The second quatrain exposes the speaker at his worst. Here, Will knows what he is and admits it:

But why of two oaths' breach do I accuse thee,  
When I break twenty? I am perjured most,  
For all my vows are oaths but to misuse thee,  
And all my honest faith in thee is lost.

(5–8)

In truth, "twenty" seems a conservative estimate, albeit a heartfelt admission: "all my vows are oaths but to misuse thee." The word *misuse* is operative here. Will has not only lied *about* the dark lady, but *to* her, and may have misused her sexually, as well. A definitive statement? Hardly. The eighth line presages the sestet, where he works another change. He winds a goodly clew in claiming that he has lost his "honest faith" because of his misuse:

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.

(9–14)

The causative "For" deliberately (and typically) reduces quatrain and couplet to illogical mush: "I have misused and lost faith in you because I have falsely idealized you with lying eyes deliberately blind to the truth." Will is never more honest with himself than this. Even the phrase "swear against" doubles itself up, figuratively as well as literally (12, 14). He negatively misrepresents the dark lady as much as he idealizes her, and admits it. Therefore, it is appropriate that the last word of the sonnet concluding Will's pratfall into self-knowledge should be *lie*: he is a liar. Although he claims earlier, "On both sides

<sup>29</sup> *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 530.

thus is simple truth suppressed" (138.8), and assures us that both lovers "by lies . . . flattered be" (14), truth is suppressed on both sides of Will's dual, dubious nature as well. As Will deconstructs himself, he self-destructs. The lie to be unraveled is that the dark lady is evil and that Will is a reliable narrator; we might conclude from these sonnets that neither premise is true, and that Will knows it.<sup>30</sup>

This Renaissance Gothic narrative of two men and a woman, a narrative that satirizes the very notion of a sonnet sequence, invites us to become tangled up in it. If not an historical person, the dark lady is a type of literary character as well as a construct of Will's narrative voice. Indeed, a woman character emerges from the *Sonnets*, as does a speaker *in propria persona*. Unreliable Will is a creature of fiendish ambiguity who distinguishes himself as a teller of lies. Thus his "farewell to love" or *remedia Amoris*, sonnets 153 and 154, seems anything but a farewell:

Although Will himself cannot cease to lust, the second hot mineral bath cures him of his servitude to the body and changes the object of his love to that virtue, which can lead him . . . to the stars on high.<sup>31</sup>

We do not know if such a stellar apotheosis will occur, nor if an Apollo will appear with a revelation to be interpreted. Yet Will can never "cease to lust," as the last line of the *Sonnets*, in all of its profane allusiveness to the singer of the Song of Songs (8:7), makes clear: "water cools not love" (153.14).<sup>32</sup> There is no remedy. Moreover, it is not "because vision is translated into language that the poet ceases to admire his lady or himself,"<sup>33</sup> but something less ethereal and more primal than this. Discontented Will remains aware of himself as someone without true sight, doomed to wander at random from a truth vainly expressed.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Klause: "There is no sign in the second group of sonnets that the Poet simply moves from rhetorical assault to introspective meditation. He is never unaware of the moral and psychological truths in his case, and he adverts to them as he will. Having spun no great lies to be unraveled, these poems come to no conclusion" (323).

<sup>31</sup> Peggy Munoz Simonds, "Eros and Anteros in Shakespeare's Sonnets 153 and 154: An Iconographical Study," *Spenser Studies: A Renaissance Poetry Annual* VII (New York: HMS Press, 1987), 282. See also Michael J. B. Allen on 153 and 154: "their unsatisfactoriness, their failure is itself an ending, since it points to other endings and other beginnings" (137).

<sup>32</sup> Ronald Jaeger, "A Biblical Allusion in Shakespeare's Sonnet 154," *NQ*, new series, 19 (1981): 125.

<sup>33</sup> Fineman, 171.