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Jessica Noel Gilles

University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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Annihilation of the Self in the Sonnet:
Shakespeare's Mastery of the Relationship between
Love and Death

Jessica Gilles

April 20, 2009

Chancellor's Honors Program: Senior Project

Undergraduate English Honors Thesis

I

Introduction

By the Lord, this love is as mad as Ajax, it kills sheep, it kills me, I a sheep—
 well proved again o' my side.
 I will not love. If I do, hang me; I' faith, I will not.
 O, but her eye! By this light, but for her eye I would not love her. Yes, for her two eyes.
 Well, I do nothing in the world but lie, and lie in my throat.
 By heaven, I do love, and it hath taught me to rhyme and to be melancholy,
 and here [showing a paper] is part of my rhyme,
 and here [touching his breast] my melancholy.
 Biron
Love's Labour's Lost (4.3.5-13).

The English love sonnet experienced a surge in popularity among Renaissance poets around the end of the sixteenth century with the publication of Phillip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, and it was not long before the great playwright William Shakespeare began his own sonnet sequence (Norton 768). According to Marcus Evans, the sonnet sequences written by such poets as Sidney and Shakespeare were inheritors of a very particular set of traditions passed down and modified over hundreds of years to create the existing literature of love (Evans viii). Just as the lament by Biron in the epigraph addresses love's seemingly mandatory mixture of "rhyme" with "melancholy," the Petrarchan sonnet drama about an adoring lover and an unresponsive mistress was practically required to include such topics as bouts with illness, "tempestuous... passions of love," insomnia, erotic dreams, itemization of the beloved's "beauties," and the insistence on poetry's power to perpetuate beauty despite the "ravages of time" (Evans viii). Although the specificity of these sonnet stereotypes would seem to offer clear direction to the poet writing such lyrics, not all sonneteers seem capable of mastering the conventions they adopt. In those sonnets in which the poet possess only an

amateur grasp of his subject matter, the problem of sonnet conventionality and the sonneteer's misunderstanding of the literary function of that conventionality can create a discrepancy between the intended message and the actual content of the sonnet. For example, although the Petrarchan sonnet's professed purpose involves the admiration of a beloved, this admiration often either results in or is motivated by a self-interested obsession by the sonneteer. This tendency, if not understood or discerned by the sonneteer, can deprive his sonnet of sincerity and genius.

In her book *Tears of Narcissus*, Lynn Enterline asks, "Why did a poetic form dedicated to praise of a beloved object so consistently generate melancholic self-reflection? And why did so many poets shape their own voices by taking up the seemingly endless, lachrymose cycle of Petrarch's woes?... Generally speaking, these texts either make the cause of internal misery enigmatic or, which is perhaps to say the same thing, make the intensity of affect seem in excess of its occasion" (Enterline 3). Enterline queries why the despair and obsession the Petrarchan tradition requires of its sonnets is so necessarily intense, and she even suggests that the depth of the lamentation does not fit the cause. In response to Enterline's question, I adopt Robert Watson's argument that literature during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods functioned as a buffer for an intensely self-centered fear of death. In his book, *The Rest is Silence*, Watson suggests, "By placing the brutalities and banalities of death within heroic stories and artistic forms, literature helps to disguise the conflict between the psychological necessity known as narcissism and the physical necessity known as mortality" (Watson 1). According to Watson, this "conflict" between obsession with the self and the inevitability of death which terminates that self seeped into the makeup of the culture in which Shakespeare lived, and for all the poets,

artists and audiences of this time there existed a constant struggle “with the suspicion that death was a complete and permanent annihilation of the self, not merely some latency of the body awaiting Last Judgment...” (Watson 3).

In its simplest form, the definition of death is the termination of life, but it is not so easy to explain the acceptance of death, the interpretation of death, and the coping methods employed to handle death’s consequences. All of these aspects are manufactured via the cultural lens with which an individual perceives death, and in *Issues of Death*, Michael Neill refers to this idea that the significance and emotion that accompany death are created by the cultural scope through which death is interpreted: “For ‘death’ is not something that can be imagined once and for all, but an idea that has to be constantly reimagined across cultures and through time; which is to say that, like most human experiences that we think of as ‘natural’, it is culturally defined (Neill 2).” Death has the same end effect on every person of every culture (termination of life), but each culture interprets this termination in different ways. According to Neill, Shakespeare’s culture developed an interpretation so poignant and personal that its presentation became literal, and the idea of death reached a level of personification so intensely threatening because of the danger it posed to the idea of the “self”:

In late medieval and Renaissance art Death is not merely imagined, but in the most literal sense envisaged, given a face.... This transformation in ways of representing death corresponds, as historians have recognized, to an important transformation in social attitudes: death is represented differently because it is coming to be experienced differently; in particular, new images of destruction correspond to the new idea of ‘the pathetic and personal death’.... Through a process that is only superficially paradoxical, Death comes to be credited with a personality precisely as dying comes to be felt, more acutely than ever before, as a cancellation of personal identity” (Neill 5).

Neil argues that death in art and literature is personified because its threat is personal. Death does not simply end a life, it negates an identity, and I argue that the Petrarchan sonnet, which Enterline accuses of functioning more as a form of “melancholic self-reflection” than “praise of a beloved,” was so often adopted by poets because its true function was that of a combatant against and disguise for the threat of annihilation of the identity of the self which both Watson and Neill reference. I use Watson’s observation that literature has a rooted connection with death via its function as a disguise for the fear of personalized death, but this observation requires elaboration with regards to the sonnet and its intrinsic focus on love. It is the combination of love and death within the sonnet which produces the confusion between such conventions as praise of a beloved and the seemingly inescapable presence of self-interest. In his book *Eros in Mourning*, Henry Staten suggests that the “pouring-out or gashing-open of the self that is caught in the rapture of the beloved’s allure” (exactly what Enterline suggests is overly-extreme in the sonnet form), is not truly caused by the lover’s insistence that his love is unrequited, as sonnet convention implies. Instead, the misery is motivated “at the deepest level... [by] the fear not of loss of object but of loss of self” (Staten xii).

Staten proposes a theory of transcendence in which the lover “pushes to transcend all merely mortal loves, loves that can be lost,” by imagining his beloved is something immortal (Staten 1). While this approach to love is impossible, and no lover in history can attest to having loved that which is immortal except in the name of religion, Staten argues that the same frustrating factor of transcendent love is present in all other forms of love. The transcendent lover that exists throughout literary history is foiled by the fact of mortality, and Staten observes

that this transcendent outlook on love, what he offers as the foundation of later literary love styles, has its origins in the theories of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato:

It seems that desire must aim at the continued possession of or proximity to what is desired, such that the loss of the loved thing, or even the anticipation of its loss, is necessarily the destruction of the happiness of the desiring subject. Conceived in this way, eros is the origin of idealism. Nothing short of perfect possession can satisfy its craving, for the desired good is either all there or it isn't; any flaw in the absoluteness of its presence is a wound in the substance of the lover. And what flaw could be more decisive than that of mortality? The lover knows that his possession of a mortal object is temporary, that it is slipping away from him at this very moment. (Staten 2)

By tracing the history of literary love, Staten argues that even the lover who insists he does not seek the perfection to which a transcendent lover aspires is inevitably motivated by the same factors. Staten states, "Much of what appears on the surface to be exterior to this idealizing-transcendentalizing tradition turns out on examination to be seeking other routes to the same end—the end of avoiding a certain terminal conflagration of flesh" (Staten 1). Essentially, all types of literary love seek a remedy for mortality.

Staten cites Petrarchism as an example of that which is "exterior" to the transcendentalization of the beloved, and despite "the propagation of the erotic problematic associated with Petrarchism, a problematic the characteristic features of which are: the idealization of a woman, the maintenance of distance that preserves desire, the tendency for idealization of the woman to become denigration (because she is cold or unfaithful), and the detailed elaboration of the lover's own emotions of desire, resentment, self-pity, and joy," Petrarchanism, at its core, is an obsession with mortality, and not only that of the beloved (Staten 12).

The conflict between Petrarchism's core obsession with mortality and the sonneteer who adopts the conventions meant to lyricize this core obsession is a subject that I find constantly

present in three of Shakespeare's works: *Venus and Adonis*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and the sonnet sequence. Evans states that one context within which these three, and in fact all, of Shakespeare's works should be read involves a common concern that is present among the majority of works by poets. Evans observes that the presence of common underlying "framework[s]" and "style[s]" in all of the major sonnet sequences suggests that the "large part of [the sonnet's] appeal to the Renaissance writer lay in the challenge it offered to emulate what others had done before" (Evans viii). The "challenge" of this concern thus existed in the poet's ability to use Petrarchan convention without compromising the emotions which such conventions were meant to reflect, and each poet had his own way of addressing the issue. For example, in his treatise "The Defence of Poesy," Elizabethan poet Phillip Sidney overtly criticizes those poets who do not meld sincere emotion with conventional sonnet conceits: "But truly many of such writings as come under the banner of irresistible love, if I were a mistress, would never persuade me they were in love; so coldly they apply fiery speeches, as men that had rather read lovers' writings...than that in truth they feel those passions" (Sidney 137-8 qtd. in Evans xv).

Evans suggests that Sidney's opposition to the use of emotionless conventions is an important context for understanding Shakespeare's works: "Sidney's attack on the sonnet of his own times from the start set the precedent for further appeals for a return to nature, and Shakespeare's sonnet against sonnet hyperbole, 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun' (130), is in the Sidneyan tradition, not to mention ... the whole of *Love's Labour's Lost*" (xxx). Take for example Holofernes' criticism of Biron's sonnet to Rosaline in *Love's Labour's Lost*: "Here are only numbers ratified [correct meters], but for the elegancy, facility, and golden cadence of poesy—*caret* [it is lacking]. ...*Imitari* [to imitate] is nothing" (4.2.113-5).

Using Evans' analysis of Elizabethan poets and their struggles, I suggest that the problem of combining sincerity and convention is perhaps linked to a misinterpretation of the source of sonnet emotion and the conventions meant to express such emotions. How can a sonneteer truly capture the emotional intensity of love if he does not understand that the conventions he has adopted are prompted not only on account of love of the beloved, but also from a desperate fear of personal mortality? I do not question if the sonneteer who does not successfully convey sincere emotion is unaware that he fears death; rather, I question whether the sonneteers that Shakespeare mocks are aware of literature's function as a vehicle for deflecting that fear of death. Such a scenario would explain Enterline's observation that the "melancholic self-reflection" of the sonnets seems so inappropriate: if the sonneteer is unaware that the sonnet tradition of lamentation is motivated by a self-interested fear of death, then the sonneteer's work will most-likely—and Enterline says it does—attribute the lamentation to inappropriate causes. Shakespeare addresses this question in his poem *Venus and Adonis*, his play *Love's Labour's Lost* and his sonnet sequence by masterfully articulating the pain of love and the fear of death while subtly acknowledging that particular kind of self-interest which suggests that both the fear and the pain originate from a desperate desire to prevent the annihilation of the self. He does all of this while commenting on the sonneteer who obliviously plays with these issues.

I have argued that the literary function of sonnet conventionality, as the disguise for fear of personal annihilation via death, is rooted in the relationship of love and death in the sonnet. I further the argument by suggesting that, according to the three Shakespearian works I have chosen, there are various levels of mastery of this literary function. The better a poet understands the relationship of love and death, the more mastery he exhibits over the sonnet. In

the play *Love's Labour's Lost*, the sonneteers assume they can manipulate the sonnet's purpose for their own concerns with identity and immortality, but the mockery Shakespeare creates of the sonneteers' escapades and sincerity depicts their misunderstanding of the relationship between love and death. The ineptitude of the sonneteers in *Love's Labour's Lost* thus presents the most incompetent level of mastery over sonnet convention. In the poem *Venus and Adonis*, the representative sonneteer, Venus, also mixes her concerns with identity with the proposed purposes of sonnet conventions, yet Venus's eventual grasp of the relationship between love and death, which is indeed inherently mixed with her own concerns of identity, presents a comparatively more astute level of understanding of the sonnet. It is Shakespeare's sonnet sequence which, due to its sincere understanding of the relationship of love and death within sonnet convention, best shows the optimal mastery of the sonnet's literary form and origins.

II

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST

Just as Enterline and Staten propose the existence of a very self-interested concern in the love poetry of the sonnet, Shakespeare's play *Love's Labour's Lost* depicts an extremely self-invested group of sonneteers who attempt to manipulate the persona of the sonneteer to meet their conscious and subconscious, self-interested aims. The premise of this play concerns the King of Navarre and his courtiers' insistence that they have fallen hopelessly in love with the Princess of France and her ladies, but the fact of the men's self-absorption plays just as significant a role in their poetic inspiration as do the traditional sonnet motivators of erotic frustration and physical beauty. The men of *Love's Labour's Lost* declare that their poetic motivation derives from the beauty of the women they admire, but their actions and verbal self-contradictions prove that the majority of this poetic gift is inspired by the intense internal struggle the men face in reconciling their breaking of a very lofty and unnatural oath, which not coincidentally, is taken to prevent the annihilation of their selves.

The courtiers of *Love's Labour's Lost* use the rhetoric of the sonnet as a means of supporting their positions and logically arguing for breaking their oath. This infamous oath compels the four men "not to see ladies, study, fast, not sleep" (1.1.47-8). Essentially, the King has decided he will forswear women during a three year period in which he will sleep less, study more and fast often in order to immortalize his kingdom as an academic example to the world. Within the first lines of the play, the King declares that the motivation behind this academic immortalization is to create a safeguard against the anonymity which death bestows:

Let fame, that all hunt after in their lives,
Live registered upon our brazen tombs,

And then grace us in the disgrace of death
 When, spite of cormorant devouring time,
 Th'endeavour of this present breath may buy
 That honour which shall bate his scythe's keen edge
 And make us heirs of all eternity. (1.1.1-7)

The King believes that he and his courtiers can outsmart (literally) the equalizing nature of death by earning a “grace” which only those touched by “fame” can claim. This “fame” will “bate” or blunt, death’s threat of anonymity. Thus a standard is set: if this “grace” is not achieved by one of the men, it is his own fault for failing to keep his oath. The King warns his courtiers:

Your oaths are passed; and now subscribe your names,
 That his own hand may strike his honour down
 That violates the smallest branch herein.
 If you are armed to do as sworn to do,
 Subscribe to your deep oaths, and keep it, too (1.1.15-23).

Within minutes of swearing the men begin the process of manipulating language to support their incapacity to keep the oath. After realizing that the Princess of France will soon arrive in Navarre to discuss political issues, the King declares, “We must of force dispense with this decree. / She must lie here, on mere necessity.” Biron ironically responds that the “grace” which the men seek in their combat against the anonymity of death can only be achieved by another type of “special grace,” which they do not seem to possess either:

Necessity will make us all forsworn
 Three thousand times within this three years' space;
 For every man with his affects is born,
 Not by might mastered, but by special grace.
 If I break faith, this word shall speak for me:
 I am forsworn on mere necessity. (1.1. 145-52).

Essentially, Biron argues two things: 1) it is unnatural to commit to an oath that prohibits natural passions, and 2) if he cannot control his desires and does break the oath, it will not be of his own will, but out of “necessity”—out of his control. Because the ability to keep the oath is only made

possible by the bestowal of a “special grace,” Biron’s argument allows him to forswear, if need be, without any fault of his own.

This pre-made excuse foreshadows the King, Biron, Dumaine and Longueville’s immediate infatuation with, respectively, the Princess, Rosaline, Katherine and Maria. Each man falls in love with one of the women, and each attributes his consequent lyrical attempts to the nature of love. Biron laments, “By heaven, I do love, and it hath taught me to rhyme and to be melancholy, and here [*showing a paper*] is part of my rhyme, and here [*touching his breast*] my melancholy” (4.3.10-3). The King, Biron, Dumaine and Longueville all insist that their attempts at sonneteering are inspired by their love for their women, and the goddess-like beauty of these women is declared an unavoidable reason to break the oath. Unfortunately for the men, their transition from “academics” to “lovers” is so sudden that it seems insincere, and the men’s inability to convey depth in their love is in part a result of their amateurish use of the sonnet and love poetry.

Before their first meeting with the King and his courtiers, the Princess sets a standard for the women’s judgment on wit. She reprimands her Lord:

Good Lord Boyet, my beauty, though but mean,
Needs not the painted flourish of your praise.
Beauty is bought by judgment of the eye,
Not uttered by base sale of chapmen’s tongues.
I am less proud to hear you tell my worth
Than you much willing to be counted wise
In spending your wit in the praise of mine (2.1.13-19).

The Princess emphasizes her belief that beauty should not be cheapened by the desperate attempts of wit to elevate it, thus implying that she will be suspicious of any man who puts too much emphasis on language to complement her beauty. Such suspicions foreshadow the

absolute failure the King and his courtiers will experience when they attempt to “woo” their respective beloveds with amateur poetry.

The women’s sarcastic responses to the favors and love poetry they receive from their admirers suggest that the men’s melodramatic efforts to fully adopt the personas of love-struck poets is more than slightly exaggerated. Referring to the poem she received from the King, the Princess asserts that she has received “as much love in rhyme / As would be cramm’d up in a sheet of paper, / Writ o’ both sides the leaf, margent and all” (5. 2. 6-8). Rosaline mocks the poem she received from Biron by insisting that the color of the ink is more true to her than the content of the poem, and she says, “Nay, I have verses too, I thank Biron: / The numbers true; and, were the numbering too, / I were the fairest goddess on the ground: / ... / O! he hath drawn my picture in this letter” (5.2.34-8). The Princess asks Rosaline if the poem has come even close to capturing the character and the figure of its subject, but Rosaline responds that the poem is only like her “[m]uch in the letters, nothing in the praise” (5.2.40). The Princess teases Rosaline that her lover think she is “[b]eauteous as ink; a good conclusion” (5.2.41). Much like the Princess’ and Rosaline’s complaints, Katherine criticizes her poem from Dumain as “some thousand verses of a faithful lover; / A huge translation of hypocrisy, / Viley compil’d, profound simplicity,” and Maria agrees that even her poem from Longueville “is too long by half a mile” (5.2.50-52, 54).

Unbeknownst to the men, the women’s sarcastic acceptance of amateur attempts at love poetry derives from their awareness of the men’s motivations. Maria observes that when a wise man adopts a ridiculous passion, he will devote all his cleverness to prove that that which is ridiculous is really more valuable than something reasonable: “Folly in fools bears not so strong

a note / As foolery in the wise, when wit doth note; / Since all the power thereof it doth apply / To prove, by wit, worth in simplicity (5.2.75-78). This happens to be exactly what the men attempt. In a quick move to defend their fickleness for breaking an oath, Biron is petitioned to rhetorically justify why the identity of a lover is equal to, if not better than, the identity of an academic, and thus more suited to their designs:

O, we have made a vow to study, lords,
 And in that vow we have forsworn our books;
 For when would you, my liege, or you, or you
 In leaden contemplation have found out
 Such fiery numbers as the prompting eyes
 Of beauty's tutors have enriched you with ?
 ...
 But love, first learned in a lady's eyes,
 ...
 Courses as swift as thought in every power,
 And gives to every power a double power
 Above their functions and their offices. (4.3.292-6, 301, 304-6)

Biron argues that not only will the inspiration of the women serve as a source of knowledge, but the motivation will invoke a “double power” that is superior to knowledge achieved in the absence of a woman.

In fact, love and beauty are given immortal qualities, thus addressing the desire to prevent the anonymity of death, and I would argue that the immortal potential of love is each man's true focus and inspiration. For example, Longueville insists in his sonnet to Maria, “My vow was earthly, thou a heavenly love. / Thy grace being gained cures all disgrace in me” (4.3.61-2), yet again invoking the idea that the men seek a certain “grace” that cannot be accessed via that which is mortal. In a poem subtly invoking a comparison between himself and the goddess of love in *Venus and Adonis*¹, Dumaine writes to Katherine:

¹ “Being so enraged, desire doth lend her [Venus] force / Courageously to pluck him [Adonis] from his horse” (*Venus and Adonis* 29-30).

But, alack, my hand is sworn
 Ne'er to pluck thee from thy thorn—
 Vow, alack, for youth unmeet,
 Youth so apt to pluck a sweet
 Do not call it sin in me
 That I am forsworn for thee, (4.3.170-12)

Dumaine's argument implies that the oath to swear off women actually prevents him from his potential to be immortal: just as Venus plucks Adonis off his horse and later out of the ground (when he transforms into a flower), the only thing preventing Dumaine from "plucking" Katherine is the oath. Thus, to forswear the oath is to act as an immortal being.

In a final rallying cry, Biron declares, "Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves, / Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths" (4.3.335-6). He rationalizes that commitment to a new identity ("find ourselves") is necessary, because if the current oath is upheld, the men will "lose [them]selves," which can be literally interpreted as losing their identities—their selves—to the ultimate self-annihilator: death.

After hearing Biron's justification for forswearing, the men are imbued with a new sense of purpose. They enthusiastically pledge to "woo" and "win" their beloveds by changing their course of attack: rather than passively write sonnets, they choose to actively pursue the women through entertainment and flirtation. Longueville somewhat ironically asserts, "Now to plain dealing, Lay these glozes [verbal sophistries] by" (4.3.344), as if the failure of the sonnets suggests a problem with the sonnet and not the men's poetic abilities. Not only do the King and his courtiers change their identity from academics to lovers, but they also change their nationality to accomplish this identity change. This is clearly not the "plain dealing" the men promised. In his essay "*Love's Labour's Lost* and the Nature of Comedy," Cyrus Hoy best

"By this, the boy [Adonis] that by her [Venus'] side lay killed / Was melted like a vapour from her sight, / And in his blood that on the ground lay spilled / A purple flower sprung up, chequered with white, / ... // ... / Since he himself is reft from her by death. / She crops the stalk..." (Venus and Adonis 1165-68, 1174-75).

states the predicament of the men in *Love's Labour's Lost*: "They have played at being scholars; now in the concluding act of the comedy, they play at being lovers, and with hardly more success" (Hoy 35).

I would suggest that the sudden, rational and "unavoidable" change in identity from academic to lover is not so much forced by love or beauty, as the men insist, as it is motivated by fear. By virtue of the fact that the King's motivation for creating "a little academe" lies in the challenge to "bate [death's] scythe's keen edge," failure of the oath will inevitably translate as failure to outwit death. In essence, the onslaught of love, which all the men declare is unwanted, proves that their academic identities are not indestructible. In his sonnet to Rosaline, Biron insists, "Those thoughts [of upholding the oath] to me were oaks, to thee like osiers bowed" (4.2.101), proving the realization that if "a little academe" cannot stand up to the influence of love, then perhaps it would be better to create an identity that is sturdier, and potentially everlasting.

By the fifth act of the play, the confusion of identity and the presence of contradiction is so severe that the men have no chance of controlling their futures, much less their mortality. The Russian stint backfires and results in the women's mockery of the men, and despite their insistence to "[l]ay these glozes by," the men cannot stop rationalizing their actions through verbal manipulation. In his declaration against the rhetoric of the sonnet, Biron actually speaks in sonnet form² (5.2.402-15). In a dramatic twist, the control over their lives and their identities

² O, never will I trust to speeches penned,
Nor to the motion of a schoolboy's tongue,
Nor never come in visor to my friend,
Nor woo in rhyme, like a blind harper's song.
Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,
Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation,

which the men had worked so hard to maintain is stolen from them by death. The Princess' father dies, and the women prepare to leave Navarre immediately, ruining any hope the men have of becoming lovers. In a rhetorical plea meant to persuade the women to stay, Biron insists that the "grace" for which the men have been searching only exists in the power of the women:

...Therefore, ladies,
 Our love being yours, the error that love makes
 Is likewise yours. We to ourselves prove false
 By being once false for ever to be true
 To those that make us both—fair ladies, you.
 And even that falsehood, in itself a sin,
 Thus purifies itself and turns to grace (5.2.752-58)

Yet again, the men cannot maintain an identity. They are not scholars, and the women prove that, as of right now, they are not lovers. It is fitting that this play, categorized as a comedy and stereotyped to end in marriage, does not fit its supposed identity. Biron tells the women, "Our wooing doth not end like an old play. / Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesy / Might well have made our sport a comedy" (5.2.51-3). What Biron and the other "lovers" fail to realize is that the "Jack" of the sonnet can never have his "Jill," and it is not the women's fault that the play ends without marriages. The Petrarchan sonnet tradition virtually guarantees that a sonneteer will only experience unrequited love, and sonnet conventions motivate the plot of *Love's Labour's Lost*. The men consciously adopt the use of sonnets because they mistakenly assume that the sonnet's purpose is to elicit and obtain love from a beloved; unconsciously, the

Figures pedantical—these summer flies
 Have blown me full of maggot ostentation.
 I do forswear them, and I here protest,
 By this white glove—how white the hand, God knows!—
 Henceforth my wooing mind shall be expressed
 In russet yeas, and honest kersey noes.
 And to begin, wench, so God help me, law!
 My love to thee is sound, sans crack or flaw.

men have a real desire to obtain immortality, and the interference of their search for a death-proof identity impedes their ability to understand and master the sonnet.

III

VENUS & ADONIS

It is Ovid's *Metamorphosis* which functions as the bulk of inspiration for Shakespeare's epyllion *Venus and Adonis*. Geoffrey Bullough catalogs Ovid's stories of Adonis, a young hunter and lover of Venus; Hermaphroditus, a water nymph who becomes androgynous after capturing her love-interest in a stream; and Narcissus, who is obsessed with his own reflection, as the inspiring materials for Shakespeare's first narrative style poem (Bullough 162-3). It was very common from the late 1580s to the 1590s for poets to adopt a classical tale and retell it in the medieval and Renaissance tradition of erotic poetry, which often derived its subject matter from Petrarchan conventions, and Shakespeare recreates the protagonists of Ovid's tales in such a way that they closely resemble the protagonists of Petrarchan sonnets (Norton 629-30). In Shakespeare's version of the Venus and Adonis story, the unwilling "beloved" is a young boy, and the shunned and desperate "sonneteer" is in fact the goddess of love, but the influence of Ovid's tales of Hermaphroditus and Narcissus adds a certain irony to the poem:

"The bringing together of the major Ovidian elements throws light on Shakespeare's purpose. Both Hermaphroditus and Narcissus are hostile to female blandishments, the one from youthful unreadiness, the other from self-engrossment. Shakespeare used these attributes in discussing Adonis because his poem was conceived as a study in the coyness of masculine adolescence, the frenzy of female longing, with a debate on physical love and procreation" (Bullough 163).

As Bullough observes, *Venus and Adonis* addresses many issues ranging from gender roles to procreation, but the presence of the sonnet in this poem cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it is this ironic and unexpected mixture of subject matters which allows the poem to present confusions of identity and statements on the literary function of the sonnet.

The poem begins with the Greek goddess Venus's sexually frustrated use of sonnet-like persuasive language to coerce Adonis, a young and sexually naïve hunter, to acquiesce to her desires. In a humorous and ironic twist, the female Venus is forced to blazon herself in an effort to convince Adonis of her sexual desirability. Venus desperately asks Adonis, "But having no defects, why dost abhor me?" (138), then proceeds to describe her own beauty:

'Thou canst not see one wrinkle in my brow.
 Mine eyes are grey, and bright, and quick in turning.
 My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow.
 My flesh is soft and plump, my marrow burning. (139-42)

...

'Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear;
 Or like a fairy, trip upon the green;
 Or like a nymph, with long, disheveled hair,
 Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen. (145-48)

According to sonnet conventions, Venus should either, as the representation of a sonneteer, blazon her beloved, or, as the female figure in this tale, be blazoned by a man. The fact of Venus's self-blazoning mocks the sonnet convention of blazoning and its source of inspiration, and it introduces the first of Venus' two identities: that of the sonneteer (her identity as Love is realized later in the poem). One could argue that Venus has no other option but to lyricize her own beauty because Adonis steadfastly refuses to see any perspective other than his own, but whether or not she is forced does not detract from the fact that some sort of self-confidence which borders on self-obsession can be interpreted from Venus' poetic self-blazoning. Thus, it is implied that the true motivation of the blazon, a sonnet staple, does not necessarily stem from the inspiration of the beloved's beauty, but rather from the sonneteer him/herself.

I suggest that it is not sexual frustration or the sonnet convention requirement of blazoning that functions as the main source of Venus' lyrical tendencies; rather, it is the threat to her identity which forces Venus to such lengths as self-blazoning. The conflict of the poem lies

in Venus' identity as the goddess of love, but this identity is counteracted by her identity as a sonneteer: "She's Love; she loves; and yet she is not loved" (610). Venus is Love, and should be irresistible, but she is a sonneteer, and thus is doomed to unrequited love relationships.

Throughout the poem, Venus proves that she has a very clear understanding of her role as a sexual seductress, and before her encounter with Adonis, this identity has presumably never been challenged. Venus cites her conquest of Mars, the god of war, as an example of both her irresistible sexuality and the power that such sexuality affords her:

'I have been wooed as I entreat thee now
Even by the stern and direful god of war,
Whose sinewy neck in battle ne'er did bow,
Who conquers where he comes in every jar.
Yet hath he been my captive and my slave,
And begged for that which thou unasked shalt have.

'Over my altars hath he hung his lance,
His battered shield, his uncontrolled crest,
And for my sake hath learned to sport and dance,
To toy, to wanton, dally, smile, and jest,
Scorning his churlish drum and ensign red,
Making my arms his field, his tent my bed.

'Thus he that over-ruled I overswayed,
Leading him prisoner in a red-rose chain.
Strong-tempered steel his stronger strength obeyed,
Yet was he servile to my coy disdain.

O, be not proud, not brag not of thy might,
For mast'ring her that foiled the god of fight. (97-114)

Venus' desperate self-blazons are an attempt to woo Adonis, and her frustration with Adonis' ability to refuse her sexual advances is more than erotically motivated. If she can control that which is her opposite, the god of war, how is it possible that she cannot control a young boy? Venus questions Adonis: "What am I, that thou shouldst contemn me this?" (205), and later in the poem, Adonis asserts that his only association with love involves discrediting it:

'I know not love,' quoth he, 'nor will not know it,
 Unless it be a boar, and then I chase it.
 Tis much to borrow, and I will not owe it.
 My love to love is love but to disgrace it;
 For I have heard it is a life in death
 That laughs and weeps, and all but with a breath.'" (409-14)

This poem is about more than sexual desirability and denial, it is about Venus'—the sonneteer—identity and those forces that are determined to “disgrace” it: “What am I” becomes the key issue and inspiration of this poem.

This question of identity is apparent in Venus' constant confusions between herself and death. It is not coincidental that the relationship between Venus as Love and Venus as Death exists in the framework of a sonneteer's frustration, as I have argued that the sonnet's unique literary function as protection from annihilation of the self is connected to its relationship with love and death. Venus' actions and descriptions are often death-related: Venus “murders [Adonis' protestations] with a kiss” (53), “glutton-like she feeds” on his lips (548), and “[w]ith blindfold fury she begins to forage” his body (554). Indeed, by the time Venus realizes Adonis has been killed by a boar, she is able to relate with the source of his death:

'But this foul, grim, and urchin-snouted boar,
 Whose downward eye still looketh for a grave,
 Ne'er saw the beauteous livery that he wore:
 Witness the entertainment that he gave.
 If he did see his face, why then, I know
 He thought to kiss him, and hath killed him so.

''Tis true, 'tis true; thus was Adonis slain;
 He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,
 Who did not whet his teeth at him again,
 But by a kiss thought to persuade him there,
 And, nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine
 Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin.

Had I been toothed like him, I must confess
 With kissing him I should have killed him first (1105-18)

On a figurative level, Shakespeare addresses the sonnet conceit that the experience of unrequited love is equivalent to death by allowing Love herself to unconsciously identify with death, but Venus' eventual personification of death suggests that her identity as a sonneteer has reached a greater level of awareness of the sonnet's relationship of love and death.

When she realizes Adonis has finally begun his hunt of the boar, which Venus describes as “[l]ike to a mortal butcher, bent to kill” (618), Venus personifies, then scolds, death for its inevitable role in Adonis' life:

‘Hard-favoured tyrant, ugly, meager, lean,
 Hateful divorce of love’—thus chides she death;
 ‘Grim-ginning ghost, earth’s worm: who dost thou mean
 To stifle beauty, and to steal his breath” (931-34)
 ...
 ‘Dost thou drink tears, that thou provok’st such weeping?
 What may a heavy groan advantage thee?
 Why hast thou cast into eternal sleeping
 Those eyes that taught all other eyes to see?
 Now nature cares not for thy mortal vigour,
 Since her best work is ruined with thy rigour. (951-56)

Just as Staten states:

Nothing short of perfect possession can satisfy its [eros, desire] craving, for the desired good is either all there or it isn't; any flaw in the absoluteness of its presence is a wound in the substance of the lover. And what flaw could be more decisive than that of mortality? The lover knows that his possession of a mortal object is temporary, that it is slipping away from him at this very moment” (Staten 2),

Venus acknowledges “That sometime true news, sometime false doth bring, / Knocks at my heart, and whispers in mine ear / That if I love thee, I thy death should fear” (658-60).

In the introduction, I referenced Neill's assertions that the termination of the self and its perceived implications was culturally interpreted during Shakespeare's time in very literally descriptive ways. According to Neill, the personal threat of death was so poignant that the

presentation of death in literature and art became literal, and the personification of a personality for “Death” was an ironic result of the recognition that “Death” was the “cancellation of personal identity” (Neill 5). It is thus fitting that just as Venus realizes Adonis has begun his chase for the boar, death is personified. Venus, being immortal, does not fear her own death, and she does not fear the death of Adonis because it means the end of his presence on Earth. Venus fears the repercussions of Adonis’ death on her own identity as Love.

In only the second stanza of the poem Venus admits that the death of Adonis would terminate life as the world knows it: “Nature that made thee [Adonis] with herself at strife / Saith that the world hath ending with thy life” (11-2). The irony is that the “ending” of the world does occur, but the “ending” is actually a change in the nature of Love. In keeping with the prophecy of the second stanza, Venus retracts her scolding of Death as she convinces herself:

‘O Jove,’ quoth she, ‘how much a fool was I
To be of such a weak and silly mind
To wail his death who lives, and must not die
Till mutual overthrow of mortal kind!
For he being dead, with him is beauty slain,
And beauty dead, black chaos comes again. (1015-20).

These lines foreshadow the momentous way in which Venus and the nature of love will change by the end of the poem with Adonis’ death. When she finally discovers that Adonis has indeed died, Venus rails about the new nature of Love, which not surprisingly encompasses the majority of complaints against love in sonnet conventions:

Since thou art dead, lo, here I prophesy
Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend.
It shall be waited on with jealousy,
Find sweet beginning, but unsavoury end;
Ne’er settled equally, but high or low,
That all love’s pleasure shall not match his woe.

‘It shall be fickle, false, and full of fraud,

Bud, and be blasted, in a breathing-while:
 The bottom poison, and the top o'erstrawed
 With sweets that shall the truest sight beguile.
 The strongest body shall it make most weak,
 Strike the wise dumb, and teach the fool to speak.

'It shall be sparing, and too full of riot,
 Teaching decrepit age to tread the measures.
 The staring ruffian shall it keep in quiet,
 Pluck down the rich, enrich the poor with treasures;
 It shall be raging-mad, and silly-mild;
 Make the young old, the old become a child.

'It shall suspect where is no case of fear;
 It shall not fear where it should most mistrust.
 It shall be merciful, and too severe,
 And most deceiving when it seems most just.
 Perverse it shall be where it shows most toward,
 Put fear to valour, courage to the coward.

'It shall be cause of war and dire events,
 And set dissention 'twixt the son and sire;
 Subject and servile to all discontents,
 As dry combustious matter is to fire.
 Sith in his prime death doth my love destroy,
 They that love best their loves shall not enjoy.' (1135-64)

I suggest that it is Venus' ultimate realization that her love for Adonis will always be unrequited that allows her to finally address the true nature of sonnet love. This is representative of a mastery of sonnet form and convention; a sonneteer who does not comprehend the true nature of sonnet love and its relationship with death cannot master the sonnet conventions meant to express such situations, and vice versa.

Venus falls in love with Adonis, then she both brazenly and subtly acknowledges that complete possession and control of him is the only way to prevent the loss of her reputation and identity as the symbol of irresistible love. What began as an ordinary practice in the assertion of this identity ends with the loss of this identity, and Venus's battle with Adonis and Death results

in the transformation of love into a bundle of contradictions and ironies. This playful creation myth about the miserable qualities of sonnet love subtly highlights the sonneteer's concern and obsession with protecting his identity from death, or more appropriately, annihilation. Watson's assertion that "literature helps to disguise the conflict between the psychological necessity known as narcissism and the physical necessity known as mortality" is thus supported by this sonnet satire which suggests that the root of all sonnet misery and "melancholic self-reflection" exists in a very specific fear of the uncontrollable annihilation of personal identity (Watson 1, Enterline 3).

IV

The Sonnet Sequence

In his introduction to G. Blakemore Evans' anthology of Shakespeare's sonnets, Stephen Orgel comments on the interpretive ambiguity of the sequence. Due to discrepancies concerning individual sonnet placement within the sequence, as well as the relatively insufficient amount of information that exists about Shakespeare's life, it can be difficult to assume a narrative reading of Shakespeare's sonnets. Nevertheless, Orgel summarizes the recognizably indefinite plot of the sonnets as such:

A narcissistic young man is urged to marry and produce heirs; the poet is captivated by a beautiful, aristocratic youth—perhaps the same young man, perhaps not—who reciprocates his love for a time, but then treats him with coldness, prefers another writer, has an affair with the poet's mistress; the poet falls in love with a beautiful, dark, married woman—perhaps the mistress of the previous narrative, perhaps not—who betrays him with his dearest friend—perhaps the friend of the previous narrative, perhaps not (Orgel 16).

As is evident by Orgel's "perhaps" and "perhaps not," it is risky to assume complete comprehension of the identities of the sequence's protagonists, but I base my reading of the sequence on the idea that the beginning sonnets are addressed to a young man and the final 25 sonnets are directed to a "Dark Lady." Orgel insists that "[t]he love for the young man is initially both idealized and unproblematic; this changes radically during the course of the relationship, but the young man remains an ideal, even as he falls short of it. It is the love of women that turns out to be the disruptive force in the sequence..." (Orgel 20). The two subjects of the sequence's love interests (male beloved and female beloved), and the tone of their respective sonnets (idealizing and disruptive), correspond closely with Staten's theory of love-literature. On the one hand, the poet's idealization of the young male beloved and his obsession with ensuring that beloved's immortality via procreation corresponds with Staten's argument that

the idealized love which seeks perfect possession is obsessed with and foiled by mortality (Staten 1). On the other hand, the poet's clear disillusion with his female beloved reflects that Petrarchan deviation away from transcendentalization, which Staten argues is also ultimately concerned with "the end of avoiding a certain terminal conflagration of flesh" (Staten 1).

In *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, Joel Fineman argues that the presence of these two beloveds, as well as the emotions and language they elicit, causes a conflict in the identity of Shakespeare's sonnet-poet. Fineman argues that the traditional Renaissance sonneteer's "goal is a kind of narcissistic identification or unification of subject with object," and it is understood that, because desire has the potential to become "bliss," via the eventual unification of the beloved and the poet, the sonneteer has an idealized identity bestowed upon himself:

For this reason, because it can be satisfied, such desire can cease to be desire: it can become a state of bliss. ...[T]he end of desire conceived as the joining of erotic subject to erotic object; the end of self deriving from a perfect identification of ego with ego ideal. With regard to desire or with regard to the self, this describes a consummation that, necessarily, is devoutly to be wished; for this perfect, ideal, selfless, satisfying identity of the self to itself depends for its identity on the attractive, identificatory power of a deified ideal that is at once the origin, the energy, and the object of the very desire it provokes. The self that is subject to such desire depends therefore on the ideality of its desire.
(Fineman 18-9)

It is such idealized desire which Shakespeare's sonnet-poet exhibits for his young man beloved, but it is his desire for an un-idealized "Dark Lady" which gives Shakespeare's sonnets the unique quality of "personal interiority" in which "Shakespearean desire thinks itself through, presents itself as, its difference from [the] erotic orthodoxy" of traditional Renaissance sonnets (Fineman 18). Concerning the Dark Lady sonnets, Fineman argues that the sonnet-poet's desire for the Dark Lady is specifically conflicted because she "is not ideal," "[m]oreover, so forceful is the novel and untraditional desire, so peculiar in its object and so summary in its effect...that it

leads the poet-lover of the lady” to question his desire for her (Fineman 20). Essentially, the “experience of a divisive lust” for the Dark Lady forces the sonnet-poet to question his own identity (Fineman 21). If a sonneteer finds his identity in the potential union with an idealized beloved, as Fineman suggests is true for traditional Renaissance sonneteers, then the Shakespearean sonnet-poet experiences an identity conflict due to his desire for an un-ideal beloved with whom he simultaneously longs for and despises unity:

For in committing his heart to the ‘unkind’ lady the poet already identifies himself, not with that which is a unity, but with that which is duplicitous. Instead of identifying himself with what is like himself, the poet instead identifies himself, not only with what is unlike himself, but with what is unlike itself. ...The poet-lover of the dark lady in this way identifies himself with difference. He identifies himself—but how can this be?—with that which resists, with that which breaks, identification, which is why as lover of the lady the poet experiences a twofold...desire. To love the lady is to be alienated from affection *by* affection, to be the subject of a heterogeneous desire constituted by its own division, an ‘unkind’ desire double in the poet’s self because double in itself. (Fineman 22).

Because his sonnets must address the issue of a split identity (a consequence of his love for both an idealized and an unidealized beloved), the Shakespearean sonnet-poet is clearly aware of the threat to identity and its relationship to issues of love and death, which the sonneteers of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Venus and Adonis* seem to miss. Unlike *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, in which the sonneteers are oblivious to the sonnet’s rocky relationship with love and death, and unlike *Venus and Adonis*, in which the “sonneteer” only catches a brief glimpse of that relationship in the end of the poem, the sonnet sequence presents an unmitigated discussion of the connection between love, death, mortality and identity in the sonnet. The blatant presence of these issues corresponds as mastery over the sonnet, because the sonnet-poet’s conflict of

identity provides him the fuel to thoroughly and sincerely address the contradictions of the sonnet conventions he adopts.

Take for example the sonnet-poet's insistence in the first seventeen sonnets for his beloved to procreate, despite the beloved's obstinate refusals. The poet laments his beloved's choice, and argues that procreation is the only way for the beloved to ensure his immortality. In sonnet 10, the poet manipulates his argument for procreation to correspond with the idea that refusal to create a life is the equivalent of taking a life, and the poet accuses the beloved of being "possessed with murd'rous hate" for both himself and the poet. Bullough acknowledges the connection between these pro-procreation sentiments of the first 17 sonnets and the rhetorical arguments made by Venus in *Venus and Adonis*, and he refers to Venus' accusation of Adonis for "bury[ing] that posterity / Which by the rights of time, thou needs must have" (Bullough 164, V&A 658-59):

‘So in thyself thyself art made away.
A mischief worse than civil, home-bred strife,
Or theirs whose desperate hands themselves do slay,
Or butcher sire that reaves his son of life,
Foul cank’ring rust the hidden treasure frets,
But gold that’s put to use more gold begets.’” (763-68)

The idea of procreation as a means of perpetuating the beauty of a beloved is a common trope in Petrarchan sonnets, but it is interesting that Shakespeare makes this same argument in two very different contexts. Venus's argument for procreation is arguably motivated by its potential to make her love no longer unrequited. Venus tells Adonis to forget the "fruitless chastity" that only belongs to "[l]ove-lacking vestals and self-loving nuns," and she encourages him to "[b]e prodigal" (751, 752, 755). If Venus can convince Adonis to procreate with her, then she can achieve the sexual satisfaction the entire poem seeks. Conversely, the poet of

Shakespeare's sonnet sequence can have no part in procreation with his beloved. The success of the sonnet-poet's argument for procreation has no satisfaction for the sonnet-poet other than honest appreciation of the continuation of the beauty of his beloved.

Just as Fineman notes that Renaissance sonneteers experience their identity via the potential for perfect union with their beloveds, "bliss," Venus can foresee her identity as Love in the terms of convincing Adonis to procreate with her. Unlike the Renaissance sonneteers and unlike Venus, the sonnet-poet does not have this opportunity, because as a man in love with a man, the act of procreation is impossible between the sonnet-poet and his beloved. But why does the sonnet-poet adopt the pro-procreation convention if he has no hope of participating in the "bliss" to which such a convention is aimed? It is the employment of what seems to be such a contradiction which gives Shakespeare's sonnet sequence a much more controlled sense of mastery over sonnet conventions, as compared to the sonneteers of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Venus and Adonis*. Fineman suggests that the "the personal interiority that, as many critics have remarked, is the most conspicuous and distinctive feature of Shakespeare's sonneting mode" lies in Shakespeare's ability to adopt a sonnet trope that seems contradictory to his purposes, then use it to both comment on the nature of the sonnet as well as the nature of his sonnet-poet's emotions and position:

Again, I want to show that the qualitative phenomenology, the 'feel,' spatial and temporal, of this interior and psychologized 'withinness,' is specifically determined by, and gains its literary force from, the way it materially redoubles, with a difference, master images of sameness that traditionally objectify the poetics of the poetry of praise. (Fineman 25)

Fineman's argument originates from the idea that Shakespeare can best articulate the conflicts of emotion that belong to sonnet convention because his sonnet-poet experiences a conflict of

identity. Fineman states, “Shakespeare shows first, how a literary tradition...exhausts a poetics centered on the visionary fullness of subject and object; second, Shakespeare shows how this tired tradition will subsequently be revived when it turns into a poetics centered instead on the resonant hollowness of a fractured verbal self” (Fineman 26). Essentially, the paradox of Shakespeare’s sonnet situation rests in the role of sonnet conventions to threaten the sonnet-poet’s identity while simultaneously functioning as a vehicle for expression of the pain and confusion which comes from adopting those sonnet conventions.

The superiority of the sonnet-poet, in comparison to the sonneteers mocked in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Venus and Adonis*, lies in the sonnet-poet’s awareness of his conflicted situation. All these sonneteers employ the same conventions, but only the sonnet-poet can address his use of convention with an ironic appreciation of his self-contradiction. For example, much as the men in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* seek immortality in their identity as lovers/sonneteers, the poet of the sequence also seeks immortality via his love for his beloved. In sonnet 22 the poet suggests that the youth and life of both him and his beloved are interchangeable:

My glass shall not persuade me I am old
 So long as youth and thou are of one date,
 But when in thee time’s furrows I behold,
 Then look I death my days should expiate. (1-4)

Again, in sonnet 62, the poet admits that loving his beloved is the equivalent of loving himself, and vice versa:

Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,
 And all my soul, and all my every part;
 ...
 ‘Tis thee (my self) that for myself I praise,
 Painting my age with beauty of thy days. (1-2, 13-14)

Because the poet admits that he seeks, and finds, his identity in his beloved, love gives him the power to guarantee immortality for himself. In sonnet 55, the poet declares his confidence in this

ability to create a “pow’rful rhyme” that will outlive even the “monuments” of the most famous princes:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
 Of princes shall outlive this pow’rful rhyme,
 But you shall shine more bright in these contents
 Than unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.
 When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
 And broils root out the work of masonry,
 Nor Mars his sword nor war’s quick fire shall burn
 The living record of your memory.
 ‘Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
 Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
 Even in the eyes of all posterity
 That wear this world out to the ending doom.
 So, till the Judgement that yourself arise,
 You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.

Like the men of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, the sonnet-poet has a desire for immortality and seems self-assured in his ability to bestow such immortality, yet the sonnet-poet’s self-confidence is accompanied by an acute sense of inability, whereas the *Love’s Labour’s Lost* men do not realize they are unsuccessful until their beloved’s blatantly tell them they have failed.

Orgel observes:

The poet of the Sonnets is... megalomaniacal about the power of his verse, but given all the boasting about the defeat of Time and the conferral of immortality, it is the abjectness of this poet that is striking.... [The sonnets recognize the mental power of the imagination in such circumstances and comment on] the absolute control the poet can only dream of exercising over his subject through his poetry. (Orgel 21)

The “abjectness” which Orgel suggests is a result of a poet’s unrealized dream of obtaining “absolute control” over his beloved is directly related to that “melancholic self-reflection” which Enterline criticizes; but, unlike the sonneteers of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Venus & Adonis*, the poet of the sequence is very aware of the reasons for this “melancholy.” While the men of

Love's Labour's Lost are upset and confused about the failure of their sonnets to woo their beloveds, and while Venus must actually experience the death of her beloved to understand the pain of the relationship of love and death in the sonnet, the poet of the sonnet sequence is aware of his internal conflict of identity: that he is ideal in his love for the young man and imperfect in his love for the Dark Lady infuses the sonnet sequence with the confusion of “abjectness” and “boasting.” Sonnet 147 to the Dark Lady is an example of the sonnet-poet’s eventual understanding of his melancholic voice:

My love is as a fever, longing still
 For that which longer nurseth the disease,
 Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
 The uncertain sickly appetite to please.
 My reason, the physician to my love,
 Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
 Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
 Desire is death, which physic did except.
 Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
 And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
 My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
 At random from the truth vainly express'd;
 For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,
 Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

The idealization of the young man sonnets gives the sonnet-poet a “mirror” with which to view his ideal identity, but his love for the unideal Dark Lady is so disruptive in its contradiction of sonnet logic (“For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night” [147]) that the sonnet-poet can no longer rationalize the consequences of this love on his identity. Unfortunately for the sonnet-poet, love for his idealized beloved is intertwined with his fear of the beloved’s death, and—because their identities are also intertwined—the fear of his own death:

Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate:
 That Time will come and take my love away.

This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
But weep to have that which it fears to lose (64. 11-14).

While the desire for perfect union with the idealized beloved can only result in death of the sonnet-poet, the sonnet-poet's illogical desire for the Dark Lady results in the same conclusion: "[d]esire is death" (147). In either case, death is inescapable and the sonnet-poet accepts the pain of that inevitability.

V

CONCLUSION

Fineman suggests that the identity of the sonnet-poet of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence "is an identity of ruptured identification, a broken identity that carves out in the poet's self a syncopated hollowness that accounts for the deep personal interiority of the sonnets' poetic persona. This 'hole' within the 'whole' of the poet—and also without...circumscribed by the heartbreak of a 'perjur'd eye'...accounts for the personal interiority" which characterizes Shakespeare's sonnets (Fineman 25). I use this observation to assert that it is exactly that "personal interiority of the sonnets' poetic persona" which articulates the origin of Shakespeare's mastery of the sonnets: because his poetic style proves that he is so aware of the conflict which accompanies the identity issues of his sonnet-poet, Shakespeare exhibits an acute awareness of the literary function of sonnet literature. Watson argues that "literature helps disguise the conflict between the psychological necessity known as narcissism and the physical necessity known as mortality," and further suggests that this is a result of the personalized fear of death as "annihilation of the self" (Watson 1, 3). I combine this definition of literature with the "personal interiority" of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence to suggest that Shakespeare's works reveal an appreciation for the connection Watson asserts that is perhaps missed by the unidentified mass to which Watson refers. The basis of Watson, Neill and Staten's arguments rely on the assumption that the fear of death and the selfish concern with identity, inherent in love for a beloved, is an unconscious one—the sonnet's purpose is to "disguise" fear, and thus it is not acknowledged. In contrast, Shakespeare's sonnet sequence proves that he is very conscious of these issues: the sonnet-poet exhibits an awareness of sonnet convention's role as an identity creator via love of

an idealized beloved; he is aware of the conflict such an identity creates when a lover is no longer idealized; and he is aware that the connection between love for a beloved and fear of death is inherently intertwined with those concerns about identity.

The sonneteers of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Venus and Adonis* do not possess such an awareness, so they adhere to the theories to which I have referred. The humorous mockery of sonneteer mishaps which ensues in these works is thus a result of Shakespeare's manipulation and understanding of those subconscious fears concerning identity, love and death. I have questioned whether the sonneteers Shakespeare mocks are aware of literature's function as a vehicle for deflecting and disguising the fear of death, and I now propose that it is exactly this lack of awareness which Shakespeare mocks. By acknowledging Shakespeare's mastery of sonnet convention in his sonnet sequence, it can be assumed that the difference between the sonnet-poet and the sonneteers of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Venus and Adonis* lies in each sonneteer's understanding of the relationship of love and death to the literary function of the sonnet.

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