

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



The Mirror and the Lover's 'I' in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*: A Poet's Process of Individuation

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Mirrors can be traced back to the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans, but these were thin discs of either metal, usually brass, or of a greenish dark glass, both producing only an imperfect, shadowy reflection. In 1507, the Venetian discovery of a method for making crystal glass mirrors was, in the words of Herbert Grabes, 'the technological marvel of the age'.¹ Venetian glass spread throughout Europe and by the early Tudor period mirrors had become commonplace in England. Largely imported from Venice and Antwerp, glass mirrors were a sign of fashionable men and women, who carried them in their pockets, at their sides or inserted them into their fans. Charles Fitzgeffrey (1576-1638) tells us the story of a 'spruse coxcomb' who 'never walkes without his looking-glasse / In a tobacco-box or dial set / That he may privately conferre with it'.² We may tend to take mirrors for granted as they surround us in our lives from the first bathroom stumbles of the morning. But the early modern mirror was of considerable expense and the subject of optical theorizing, magic beliefs and moralizing discourses. This renewed and pervasive fascination with mirroring, triggered by the projection of a physically true image of the self, may appear to suggest that this novel artefact contributed towards the establishment of a new awareness of individual identity, a new reflexive self-consciousness and a subjectivity where the perceiving I separates from and beholds an objectified me. Among critics, however, there is no consensus as to whether the early modern individual was able to elicit from the mirror an individuated sense of the self.

¹ Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle-Ages and English Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 4.

² Henry Fitzgeffrey, *Satyres: and satyricall epigrams with certaine obseruations at Black-Fryers (The Third Book of Humours)* (London, 1617), F5v-r.

Herbert Grabes has argued that between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries the mirror shifted from a figure of divine idealism to a metaphor for human consciousness and originality.³ Arthur Kinney has likewise suggested that ‘both Tudors and Stuarts relied on mirrors as fundamental (and trustworthy) means of self-knowledge, following the dictate, as old as Socrates, to know thy self’.⁴ Ulrike Tancke, too, has supported the view that for the early modern individual, the ‘mirror is a means of constituting the self, not merely interpreting or judging it according to an outward, predetermined standard’, going on to conclude that there are elements in early modern women’s strategies of self-mastery ‘that foreshadow the modern hermeneutics of the self and therefore make any neat chronological categorization appear simplistic’.⁵ Shadi Bartsch has even claimed that the mirror functioned as a path towards philosophical self-knowledge as early as in the early Roman period.⁶ At the other end of the spectrum, Deborah Shuger resisted the link between the invention of the glass mirror and the emergence of modern subjectivity. Although she admits that she set out to establish that very connection, Shuger concluded that the presumption is false, turning on their heads particular examples put forth by critics in defence of the mirror’s self-reflexive function. As she characteristically wrote, ‘the preponderance of evidence suggests that the Renaissance self lacks reflexivity, self-consciousness, and individuation, and hence differs fundamentally from what we usually think of as the modern self’.⁷ In order to avoid confusion here, it should be noted that Shuger’s thesis does not entail a denial of the early modern beholder’s ability to elicit from the mirror a preoccupation with the self. Rather, this self-preoccupation concerned a highly social sense of the self, which reflected social exempla. The emergence of the self from this kind of mirroring, according to Shuger, differs radically from a process of self-introspection whereby the beholder is individuated through his or her own personal experiences and subjective point of view towards the socially constructed moral/ethical exempla. Rayna Kalas added that Shuger ‘quite rightly observes that the Renaissance mirror was more transitive than reflexive: the mirror was meant to direct the viewer’s gaze toward a moral or spiritual lesson rather than back upon the viewer’s self’.⁸ And Philippa Kelly has embraced Shuger’s insistence on the early modern mirror’s social self-production,

³ Grabes, p. 15.

⁴ Arthur Kinney, *Shakespeare’s Webs* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 5.

⁵ Ulrike Tancke, ‘*Bethinke Thy Selfe*’ in *Early Modern England: Writing Women’s Identities* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 64, 62.

⁶ Shadi Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006).

⁷ Deborah Shuger, ‘The “I” of the Beholder’, in *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday*, ed. by Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 35.

⁸ Rayna Kalas, ‘The Technology of Reflection: Renaissance Mirrors of Steel and Glass’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32.3 (2002), 519-42 (p. 522).

questioning the idea of a Burckhardtian pre-modern consciousness, but she cautioned that ‘the issues of what such self-production involved, and what it aimed for, remain contentious’.⁹ Indeed, according to a number of critics, as we have seen, the glass mirror generated what David Aers termed an ‘introspective search for self-knowledge’,¹⁰ and therefore a new epistemic or psychological construct.¹¹

The dilemma remains much alive whether the process of individuation through the mirror was a familiar or an alien experience for the Renaissance individual. This interpretive crux occupies central stage in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, providing a window into criticism through which to re-view the function of the mirror in the formation of selfhood in these most problematic of poems. Grabes has ferreted out, ‘not counting doubtful instances, at least seventy “mirror” passages in Shakespeare’,¹² while the word ‘mirror/glass’ occurs ten times in the *Sonnets* alone. It therefore comes as a surprise that only very few studies have been produced in order to explain the mirror’s function in these poems. To sum up the logical development of this paper, ‘Look in thy glass’, the poet urges his fair friend as early as in the third sonnet, ‘and tell the face thou viewest / Now is the time that face should form another’.¹³ The speaker is asking of the Youth to look into his mirror and treat his self-image as an objectified me, to converse with and convince it that the time has come to procreate in order to preserve his image in his offspring. The poet, nevertheless, soon realised that the image in the fair youth’s crystal mirror does not encourage its beholder to break free of his narcissism and love anyone else apart from his self-image. The poet then found recourse in other forms of mirroring in order to lead him to self-knowledge as a means to mend his flaws. He projected the Youth’s image onto his own eye-mirror, which turns into a window that allows the beholder to view his own image as it is formed in his lover’s heart. By recognising that

⁹ Philippa Kelly, ‘Dialogues of Self-Reflection: Early Modern Mirrors’, in *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices*, ed. by Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis and Philippa Kelly (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 62-84 (p. 62).

¹⁰ David Aers, ‘A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the “History of the Subject”’ in *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. by David Aers (Detroit: Wayne University State Press, 1992), pp. 177-202 (p. 183).

¹¹ For a concise account of the various uses of the mirror during the early modern period, including examples from both primary and secondary literature that showcase the transitive and/or self-reflexive function of mirrors, see Faye Tudor, ‘“All in him selfe as in a glass he sees”: Mirrors and Vision in the Renaissance’, in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, ed. by John Shannon Hendrix and Charles H. Carman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 171-86.

¹² Grabes, p. 204.

¹³ William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1997), 3.1-2. Subsequent references to Shakespeare’s sonnets are to this edition and will be parenthetically cited within the text by sonnet and line numbers.

this confrontation provides, once again, only a sterile image of his beloved that fails to incite in him any form of reflexive self-awareness, the poet turned to the metaphor of the book as a mirror within which the young man is encouraged to witness his true image. This image took the form of the figure that came to be known as the dark Lady. From the dark Lady's function as the fair young man's mirror-image (and *vice versa*), a complicated dialectics emerges concerning the influence the one exerts upon the other and both of them together on the speaker. The poet fused the transitive and self-reflexive functions of the mirror into the single image of the dark Lady, which although ultimately failed to incite individuated self-awareness in the fair young man, it nevertheless incited individuated self-knowledge in the speaker himself. In Shakespeare's sonnets, the mirror operates as a lasting metaphor not merely for the process of individuation through the mirror, but also for the emergence of a radically modern selfhood in which the self is an essentially bi-subjective being. Individuation in these poems is not achieved solely through a process where the beholder recognises a self in the mirror who has an individual, subjective point of view towards socially constructed moral/ethical exempla, but most tantalizingly through a process whereby this individuated self is recognised by the beholder to be bisected and perjured. As Joel Fineman would have it, the poet's I is indeed perjured, but the poet knows this, just as he knows that perjury is inevitable, arriving at this rather tormenting self-knowledge through a mirror that reflects neither a positive nor a negative exemplar, but an individuated albeit bisected and bi-subjective self.

From the very start of the sequence, the reader is introduced to the poet's indignation at the fair young man's tainted interiority. He complains, for instance, about the hatred that the Youth harbours: 'That thou none lov'st is most evident; / For thou art so possessed with murd'rous hate' (10.4-5). The speaker continues to set a contrast between the young man's outward appearance and inward state of being: 'Be as thy presence is, gracious and kind, / Or to thy self at least kind-hearted prove' (10.11-12). Rather than 'gentle love', in the Youth's bosom 'hate is fairer lodged' (10.10). The sterility of the young man's inwardness, his inability to love anyone apart from his own self-image, makes him the 'grave where buried love doth live' (31.9). Sonnet 53 closes with the lover's complaint that his beloved's heart can neither love inward/spiritual beauty nor be loved in such a way, even as his appearance is gracious: 'In all external grace you have some part, / But you like none, none you, for constant heart' (53.13-14). What is worse, as the sequence unfolds the speaker links the Youth's beauty with an attractive construct in which vices of all sorts nestle: 'O what a mansion have those vices got / Which for their habitation chose out thee, / Where beauty's veil doth cover every blot' (95.9-11). Such instances draw attention to the poet's thesis and antithesis: the Youth's fair outward appearance and his dark interiority. The young man

‘[a]pparels’, to use Luciana’s words in *The Comedy of Errors*, ‘vice like virtue’s harbinger’, for he ‘[b]ears a fair presence’ though his ‘heart be tainted’.¹⁴ The poet is like the painter in Jan David’s emblem, who set out to paint a fair model that we, as spectators alongside the painter, can admire. However, on the artist’s canvas the portrait of the fair model is deformed, and just as the angel’s wings are turned into the devil’s horns, the Youth’s gracious appearance is the very quality that has turned him into a self-absorbed and inwardly foul being (fig. 1).



Figure 1: Jan David, *Speculum exemplare*, from *Duodecim specula*, 1610. Courtesy of the Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, ed. by T.S. Dorsch (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.2.12-13. Subsequent references to the play are to this edition and will be parenthetically cited within the text by Act, Scene and line numbers.

The poet-lover's ability to look beneath surface realities is a quality that his beloved lacks and proves incapable of introspective self-scrutiny. Access to the lover's heart can be given to the beloved through the metaphor of the mirror that turns into a window opening into the soul of the lover. As Shuger has observed, 'in some contexts, mirrors seem closer to windows than to pictures: one looks through them rather than at them, an association strengthened by the etymological link between "mirror" (*speculum*) and "window" (*specularia*)'.¹⁵ In love poetry, Grabes noted, 'the eye of the beloved can be seen as a mirror, or it can equally well be seen as emitting fiery rays which are received and reflected by the eye of the lover, piercing and inflaming his heart'.¹⁶ The idea of the mirroring eye is, of course, as old as Plato: 'I'm sure you've noticed', says Socrates to Alcibiades, 'that when a man looks into an eye his face appears in it, like in a mirror. We call this the "pupil", for it's a sort of miniature of the man who's looking'.¹⁷ The octet of sonnet 24 presents this relation between the eye-mirror and the window:

Mine eye hath played the painter and hath stelled
 Thy beauty's form in table of my heart.
 My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
 And perspective it is best painter's art,
 For through the painter must you see his skill
 To find where your true image pictured lies,
 Which in my bosom's shop is hanging still,
 That hath his windows glazèd with thine eyes. (24.1-8)

The Petrarchan lover's eye is playing the role of the painter who draws his loved one's beauty on his heart, so that 'Through the painter' the loved one can see his own image painted. As Krieger explained, 'the mirror has become a window; the reflection which seems to return one upon oneself suddenly is transformed to transparency which opens outward into the soul of the lover'.¹⁸ In this way, the Youth is being called away from the merely reflective vanity of the looking-glass to view in the poet's heart his 'true image', that is, an image that is meant to show how the poet truly sees him: physically fair and esoterically dark. From the beloved's confrontation with his 'true image' in the lover's soul, a recipe for self-knowledge seems to emerge, because in becoming windows, the lover's eyes are supposed to allow the beloved to go beyond mere

¹⁵ Shuger, 30-1.

¹⁶ Grabes, p. 85.

¹⁷ Plato, *Alcibiades*, ed. by Nicholas Denyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 133a.

¹⁸ Murray Krieger, *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 81.

appearance and self-containment. They are meant to lead him outward to the heart and the spiritual truth found there. The digression of Shakespeare's sonnet from the traditional metaphor that it seems to profess lies in the fact that the lover's 'windows [are] glazed' with his beloved's eyes, and therefore with his beloved's point of view: 'with thine eyes'. This suggests a replicating symmetry between the poet's I and thou, between the eye and the eyed. The conflation of the two subjectivities into the single perspective of the Youth encourages the reader to rethink the large visual conceit to which this line, in conjunction with the rest of the poem, puts an end:

Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done.
 Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
 Are windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun
 Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee.
 Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art;
 They draw but what they see, know not the heart. (24.9-14)

This type of reflection, just as the one presented to the Youth in his crystal mirror, fails to carry with it any promise of introspection and self-knowledge. It is this sterile image that abides in the poet's 'bosom' because of his emulation of the Youth's passive gaze. As Amanda Ogden Kellogg has concluded here, via another route, the final couplet

provides an entirely different frame of reference for the poem, one that urges readers to rethink the perspective they have held up to this point. If the poem is a painting that represents the heart, but paintings are insufficient media through which to draw the heart, then the image of the speaker's heart, invoked by the poem, is not reliable.¹⁹

The poem reacts thus back upon itself, with the result that as we conclude the sonnet, we cease to overlook the way the visual conceit has all along resisted the familiar pictorial imagination it professes. Performing the rereading the sonnet requires, we come to emphasise the poet's 'perspective it is best painter's art', not some fixed point of view that will reproduce a 'true image'.²⁰ To adapt William F. Zak's words, the poet becomes the literary descendant of Petrarch's persona in the *Canzoniere* (c.1327-

¹⁹ Amanda Ogden Kellogg, 'Pyrrhonist Uncertainty in Shakespeare's Sonnets', *Shakespeare*, 11.4 (2015), 408-24 (p. 416).

²⁰ For more information, see Stephen X. Mead, 'Shakespeare's Play with Perspective: Sonnet 24, "Hamlet," "Lear"' *Studies in Philology* 109.3 (2012), 225-57.

c.1368), whom Zak calls 'Petr-arca', 'the stony casket or tomb', one who confines the beloved to his hollow, self-absorbed fantasy.²¹

The conflation of the two subjectivities into the single perspective of the Youth had already emerged in sonnet 22: 'For all that beauty that doth cover thee / Is but the seemly raiment of my heart, / Which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me' (22.5-7). The Youth's attractive physical appearance has cloaked the poet's heart, restricting his gaze to 'seemly' notions of beauty. Just like the poet's cloaked heart abides in his beloved's bosom, so does the beloved's heart abide in the poet's bosom. Yet, unlike the Youth, the poet has come to recognise that such a perspective can yield no true love. By eulogising the young man's fair complexion as if surface realities could fulfil his desires, the poet becomes a pretender. In the next sonnet, the artist is led to confesses that he has been demoted to such 'an unperfect actor' with a weakened heart, which 'forget[s] / To say the perfect ceremony of love's rite' (23.1, 4, 5-6). But the poet sways once again, and now proclaims that the holy service of love can be heard only in his poems, which speak the true voice of his heart: 'O let my books be then the eloquence / And dumb presagers of my speaking breast / Who plead for love and look for recompense' (23.9-11). The poet is urging his friend to shatter the friction between sight and insight and to reflect upon his reflection as it is reproduced in his mirror-sonnets. The speaker is appealing here to the conventional metaphor of the book as a mirror. When the speaking subject represents itself through language, it simultaneously experiences itself as different from the self of the visual representation. Representation thus splits image from identity, it severs eye from I. The poetic persona has therefore objectified the visual image of himself, since the perceiving I is separate from and beholds, just as in a mirror, an objectified me, facilitating introspective self-consciousness, one that is not based on any transitive function of the mirror towards negative or positive exempla. We will return to the poet's process of individuation below, but for our current purposes it is important to note that, as far as the Youth is concerned, it is in the objectified poet-subject's heart that the Youth's deceptive image abides. His true image lies between the lines of the sonnets, which provide access to the poet's naked heart. The dark Lady, I argue in what follows, bodies forth this image, thereby becoming the fair young man's mirror image.

Looking into the darkness, the speaker of sonnet 27 calls on the powers of the imagination to summon his beloved's shadow:

²¹ William F. Zak, *A Mirror for Lovers: Shake-speare's Sonnets as Curious Perspective* (Lanham: Lexington, 2013), p. x.

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
 The dear repose for limbs with travail tired;
 But then begins a journey in my head
 To work my mind, when body's work's expired:
 For then my thoughts, from far where I abide,
 Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,
 And keep my drooping eyelids open wide,
 Looking on darkness which the blind do see;
 Save that my soul's imaginary sight
 Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,
 Which like a jewel hung in ghastly night
 Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new:
 Lo, thus by day my limbs, by night my mind,
 For thee, and for myself, no quiet find.

The poem traces a movement of progressive interiority. The speaker retires to bed and the rhyme accentuates the further retreat to the 'head' and then to its inside, the mind, where he is presented with his beloved's shadow. Now that the body's work has 'expired', carnal desires have been superseded by his soul's esoteric needs, allowing him to enjoy the pleasures of an interior kind of fairness, the kind of which he could not enjoy in the physical presence of the Youth. Accordingly, the poet beholds a figure that is meant to compensate for his beloved's absence not only in sense that he sees the Youth's apparition, but also in the sense that he can now witness, in a substantive, externalised form, a quality that is absent from his beloved: interior beauty. It is his beloved come again or replicated in another form. Here we may observe a tectonic shift in the poet's psycho-synthesis, because his complaint, uttered just three sonnets earlier, that his eyes 'draw but what they see, know not the heart' (24.9-14) gives way to a type of beauty 'which the blind do see'. The poet projected out of the Youth an image that reverses, as in a mirror, that which it reflects, because it presents the speaker with an image that turns his beloved from physically fair and inwardly dark to physically dark and inwardly fair. This image is not associated with the young man alone, but with the dark Lady too. According to Elizabeth Harvey, 'the interiority of sonnet 27 aligns it much more closely with the dark Lady sonnets, bound together as they are through their common representation of sightlessness and blackness'.²² More specifically, the distinctive feature of sonnet 27 that links it to the dark Lady is the poet's capacity to see black night's 'beauteous' rather than 'ghastly' aspect. This is a characteristic of the

²² Elizabeth D. Harvey, 'Flesh Colors and Shakespeare's Sonnets', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Michael Schoenfeldt (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 314-28 (p. 326).

poet's attitude when it comes to the dark Lady sonnet sequence: 'In the old age black was not counted fair, / Or if it were it bore not beauty's name; / Bur now is black beauty's successive heir' (127.1-3). Often thought to be the first of the poems addressed to the dark Lady, poem 127 argues in favour of unadorned black beauty because it is the only guarantee of honesty in a cosmetic age where 'each hand hath put on nature's power, / Fairing the foul with art's false borrow'd face' (127.5-6). By making 'black night beauteous, and her old face new', the dark figure of poem 27 evokes the presence of the dark Lady, establishing a homology between the reflection that the poet is urging his fair friend to confront in his mirror-sonnets and the figure of the dark Lady.

Just as the Youth is being called away from his self-absorption to behold his true and tainted image in the poems, so the dark Lady's physical appearance externalises the sham of his appearance by bringing his concealed and abhorrent interiority to light. At the same time, she represents the very quality that the Youth lacks and which he is being called to witness, emulate and reproduce: interior fairness. The musical sonnets (8 and 128) are representative of this logic of mirroring and reversal between the dark Lady and the fair Youth. In sonnet 128, the mistress is portrayed as a perfectly musical being:

How oft, when thou my music music play'st
Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds
With thy sweet fingers when thou gently sway'st
The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,
Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap
To kiss the tender inward of thy hand. (128.1-6)

In sharp contrast, the poet complains to the fair Youth:

Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?
Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy.
Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly,
Or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy? (8.1-4)

On one level, the poet is urging the young man to marry in order to procreate, but the Youth maintains his obstinate and discordant singularity, just as he does throughout the procreation series. On another level, this marriage turns out to be another plea to the fair young man to bring essence and form, inward fairness and bodily beauty, to a harmonious symphony. The Youth's aversion to music bespeaks his inward deformity. Francis Pilkington (*d.*1638) opened his *First booke of songs or ayres* (1605) with the

link between music and the soul: ‘Aristoxenus (thrice noble Lord) held that the Soule of man was Musicke’.²³ Thus, in *An howres recreation in musicke* (1606), Richard Alison (fl.1588-1606) found those who are annoyed by music to be hateful and evil: ‘Musicke, saith he [Martin Luther], to Diuels we know is hateful and intolerable’.²⁴ Music, moreover, was considered to bear medicinal effects upon the hearer’s inward state of being. Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), for instance, encouraged his readers to internalize music’s harmonics in order to tender their spirit: ‘while therefore you temper the strings and the sounds in the lyre and the notes in your voice, consider your spirit to be tempered similarly within’.²⁵ The young man, who lodges hatred in his heart, finds music to be annoying. ‘Sweets with sweets war not’, says the poet to the young man, drawing attention to the contrast between his inward state and ‘sweet’ melody, which represents spiritual beauty. The poet’s call for the young man to free himself from his discordant singularity is therefore not only a call for a matrimonial marriage in order to procreate, but also a call for a marriage between fair physical appearance and psychic essence. The maestro who can tutor the young man to produce this symphony is the dark Lady, who ‘gently sway’st / The wiry concord that mine ear confounds’. The mistress does not merely enjoy music, she produces it. She is the producer of the music whose spiritual beauty the Youth asked to reproduce.

The poet is writing with his black ink the deformities of the young man’s inwardness upon the Lady’s outward appearance. This homology between the dark Lady’s complexion and the black ink of writing has encouraged Howard Felperin to speak of a ‘writerly dark Lady’ as a ‘visual and moral negative to the countless colourless fairs of sonnet convention’. Felperin teasingly plays here with the idea that the dark Lady is a creation born of the poet’s difficulty in representing ‘an object [the young man] conventionally or actually fair’ in so unlikely, estranged, and unversimilar a medium as the ‘black ink of writing’.²⁶ In this reading, the black ink of writing may indeed seem to be an unversimilar medium through which to represent physical beauty, but there is a more unsettling truth in Felperin’s analogy: the ‘writerly’ darkness of the poems themselves contains musicality and beauty, a type of esoteric fairness that the young man lacks and the dark Lady embodies. The darkness of the Lady is a reminiscent and memorializing mask, a masquerading blackness that explicitly recalls the fairness it hides, just like the black ink with which the sonnets have been penned. To use Romeo’s

²³ Francis Pilkington, *The first booke of songs or ayres* (London, 1605), Aii.

²⁴ Richard Alison, *An howres recreation in musicke* (London, 1606), A2v.

²⁵ Marsilio Ficino, *De Triplici Vita*, ed. by Carol Kaske and John Clark (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies in conjunction with the Renaissance Society of America, 1989), p. 215.

²⁶ Howard Felperin, *The Uses of the Canon: Elizabethan Literature and Contemporary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 74-8.

words, 'These happy masks that kiss fair ladies' brows, / Being black, puts us in mind they hide the fair'.²⁷ The Lady's hidden fairness and dark outward appearance are there to remind the poet of the young man's hidden black interior. There is a replicating symmetry between the dark Lady and the dark image that the poet is urging his friend to discover in the sonnets.

Given that the Lady of the sonnets is traditionally considered to be the paragon of immorality and corruption, this analysis is bound to cause unease. Her subjugation in an economy of erotic energy has been the subject of a number of studies for many years. E.K. Sedgwick, for example, argued that the sonnets 'record and thematize misogyny and gynophobia [...] women are merely the vehicle by which men breed more men, for the gratification of other men'.²⁸ In *The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Margreta de Grazia remarked that the real scandal of these poems

is not Shakespeare's desire for a boy; for in upholding social distinctions, that desire proves quite conservative and safe. It is Shakespeare's gynerastic longings for a black mistress that are perverse and menacing, precisely because they threaten to raze the very distinctions his poems to the fair boy strain to preserve.²⁹

Marvin Hunt answered de Grazia's call for critics to entertain the possibility that these poems express the poet's scandalous desire for a promiscuous black woman rather than his desire for a boy,³⁰ while Robert Matz has argued that 'the sonnets have never created a single sexual scandal – concerning either the man or the woman – but rather a number of potential scandals'.³¹ John Kerrigan asserted that the 'fair friend is found to be less than fair, though forgivable', but he concludes that the Lady is 'decidedly dark in the conduct of her love-life [...] morally she inhabits, as she enshrines, a hell'.³² And Stephen Greenblatt wrote that she is 'everything that should arouse revulsion [...] Dishonest, unchaste, and faithless', she 'has infected [Shakespeare] with venereal

²⁷ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Jill L. Levenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.1.230-1.

²⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 33.

²⁹ Margreta de Grazia, 'The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets', in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. by James Schiffer (London: Garland, 1999), pp. 89–112 (esp. p. 106).

³⁰ Marvin Hunt, 'Be Dark but not too Dark', in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, pp. 369–90.

³¹ Robert Matz, 'The Scandals of Shakespeare's Sonnets', *English Literary History* 77.2 (2010), 477–508, (p. 478).

³² William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. by John Kerrigan (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 59 and 61.

disease'.³³ The critical consensus wants, to use Fineman's phrase, a 'corrupt and corrupting dark Lady'.³⁴ The Lady's inward fairness, then, requires justification particularly in the poems to which critics normally turn in order to expose her immoral voluptuousness.

'About her sexual appetite and promiscuity', Samuel Schoenbaum wrote, 'there is no question; she is "the bay where all men ride"'.³⁵ John Kerrigan added that 'if the Youth continues in some moods to be "all" to the poet, the Lady is reduced to the all-open promiscuity of her vagina – what Sonnet 137 calls "the bay where all men ride [...] the wide word's common place"'.³⁶ This phrase from sonnet 137 is often cited as evidence for the Lady's promiscuity.³⁷ However, the poet specified from the very first line of the poem that his addressee is not the dark Lady, but Love, which was traditionally portrayed as a blind fool: 'Thou blind fool love'. This is not the only instance where Love is personified. In sonnet 57, Love is pictured as a 'fool' capable of performing mental processes (57.13-14). Later on, Love is depicted as a 'babe' (115.13), while in sonnet 116 it takes on various forms: in the beginning, it is 'an ever fixed mark', then 'It is the star to every wand'ring bark', and finally it is personified into a figure that is 'not time's fool' (116.5, 7, 9). In sonnet 145, she moulds with her hands the shape of the fair Youth's lips (145.1-2). Three sonnets later, Love is a 'cunning' creature in which the speaker 'foul faults should find' (148.13-14). And in sonnet 151, it is an untutored Youth 'too young to know what conscience is' (151.1). Accordingly, the reader of sonnet 137 is supposed to take literally the poet's otherwise exaggerated parallelism of his addressee with a 'bay where all men ride', for Love is, indeed, both the bay in which all wandering ships cast anchor and the universal 'horse' which all men 'ride'. It was, moreover, a common practice for early modern writers to personify Love as a woman and describe her as a whore in order to underline her powerful sway over the lover and her corrupting influence. In Richard Ames's (c.1664-1692) *The Folly of Love* (1691), for instance, Love is the '*Common Whore*' who tempts young men and women to sin:

³³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Jonathan Cape, 2004), p. 205.

³⁴ Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: the Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 132.

³⁵ Samuel Schoenbaum, 'Shakespeare's Dark Lady: A Question of Identity', in *Shakespeare's Styles: Essays in Honour of Kenneth Muir*, ed. by Philip Edwards, Inga-Stina Ewbank, and G. K. Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 221-40 (esp. p. 224).

³⁶ John Kerrigan, 'Shakespeare's Poems', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 65-82 (esp. p. 75).

³⁷ For an exception to this tradition, see Ilona Bell, 'Rethinking Shakespeare's Dark Lady', in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Michael Schoenfeldt (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 293-313 (p. 299).

Who without horroure, or amazement, can
Survey that hideous *Precipice* of *Man*?
Or with his Pen sufficiently deplore,
That fatal Gulph we call a *Common Whore*?
Who can express her Arts of drawing in
Unwary Youths, to the beloved sin?³⁸

Likewise, in Shakespeare's sonnet 137, it is Love who has the poet's heart tied to see through the 'eyes of falsehood', thereby distorting his judgement, for it is precisely Love who is the 'blind fool', not the dark Lady (137.7, 1). As French physician Jacques Ferrand (*b.c.*1575) explained,

Those that are in Love have their judgement corrupted; the judgement I meane which follows Election, but not alwaies that which goes before it. For we see, that a Lover cannot make a right judgement of the thing he loves, and which is the object of his affections; and for this cause Love is alwaies painted blind.³⁹

In sonnet 137, Love makes the poet's eyes 'behold and see not what they see' (137.2). It is thus no surprise that, in the next sonnet, 'seeming trust' is 'love's best habit' (138.11), not the Lady's, and rather than lying with the Lady, it is with Love that the poet lies: 'Therefore I lie with her [Love], and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be' (138.13-14). The first poem of *The Passionate Pilgrim*, which is often cited as an alternative version of sonnet 138, substitutes the gendered pronouns 'her' and 'she' with 'love', thereby reinforcing the notion that it is Love who is the poem's addressee: 'Therefore, I'll lie with love, and love with me, / Since that our faults in love thus smother'd be'.⁴⁰

Sonnet 142 suggests that the addressee is a dishonest person who has betrayed his or her 'bonds of love' by distributing 'rents' or 'revenues' – the debt or conjugal rights due his/her beloved – to various sexual partners. The addressee is usually thought to be the dark Lady. However, the poem's language resists such readings: 'not from those lips of thine, / That have profaned their scarlet ornaments' (142.5-6). These lines treat promiscuity as a form of sacrilege in which the addressee has dishonoured the holy redness of his/her lips by kissing too freely. Stephen Booth suggested an allusion to

³⁸ Richard Ames, *The Folly of Love* (London, 1691), pp. 12-13.

³⁹ Jacques Ferrand, *EPOTOMANIA*, trans. by Edmund Chilmead (Oxford, 1640), p. 31.

⁴⁰ William Shakespeare, 'The Passionate Pilgrim', in *The Yale Shakespeare: Venus and Adonis, Lucrece and the Minor Poems*, ed. by Albert Feuillerat (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927), 1.13-14.

‘scarlet vestments’, and so, by association with cardinals, to the ‘cardinal virtues’.⁴¹ Katherine Duncan-Jones noted that the following line (line 7) registers ‘an association with red wax seals on legal documents, which might bear the impress of ecclesiastical or civic authority’, going on to add that ‘there may be an ironical inversion of the biblical associations of *scarlet* with sin in general and sinful women in particular’.⁴² The theological undertones of these lines notwithstanding, the description of the addressee’s lips as ‘scarlet ornaments’ encourages the reader to recall the fair young man rather than the dark Lady, because ‘scarlet lips’ was an attribute of physical fairness that points at the physically attractive young man rather than the physically repellent dark Lady. The ‘deep vermilion in the rose’, for example, is a figure of delight ‘Drawn after you [Youth]’ (98.10-12). In the case of the dark Lady, nevertheless, ‘Coral is far more red than her lips’ (130.2). The poet, then, invites the reader to summon the image of the young man, and it would thus be inaccurate to assert that the poet is complaining here about the Lady’s moral conduct. Concomitantly, however, the speaker’s language makes it difficult to read this sonnet independently of the dark Lady. The opening and closing couplets suggest that such a tendency is resisted:

Love is my sin, and thy dear virtue hate,
 Hate of my sin, grounded on sinful loving;
 [...]
 If thou dost seek to have what thou dost hide,
 By self-example mayst thou be denied.

Love in general and not the poet’s love for the Youth (or the dark Lady) in particular is the poet’s sin, because no matter to whom he turns (the Youth or the dark Lady), he will inevitably commit a sin against the virtue that the one who has been pushed aside represents. His beloved’s ‘virtue’ is ‘hate of my sin, grounded on sinful loving’ because in the eyes of either one of his two beloved ones, to love what the other represents is seen as ‘sinful loving’, a kind of perspective rooted in their own respective virtue that gives rise to their own ‘sinful loving’. Since ‘Love’ refers to both of the poet’s loves, the closing couplet’s ‘thou’ is addressed to the Youth and the dark Lady,⁴³ a reading

⁴¹ Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1977), pp. 491-2.

⁴² Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997), p. 398.

⁴³ As Bruce R. Smith has observed, the transactions among the pronouns ‘I, You, He, She, and We’ in Shakespeare’s sonnets do not allow for unambiguous gender identifications. See Bruce R. Smith, ‘I, You, He, She, and We: On the Sexual Politics of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’, in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. by James Schiffer (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 411-29. And as Kellogg has argued more recently, gender in the sonnets is ‘unstable and not the only similarity from which

that does justice to the poet's complaint that neither one of his beloved ones can synthesize inward and outward fairness. The Youth hides his tainted interiority beneath his physical fairness, and if he seeks to be loved in both soul and complexity, he is warned that he will be denied such kind of love precisely because the poet will follow the Youth's example and he will be unable to love him for his heart. Thus, if the poet seeks to have what the Youth hides (inward fairness), he will be driven away from him (and into the arms of the dark Lady). Conversely, the beauty of the dark Lady's heart masks her foul complexity, and if she desires to be loved for what she hides (her physical appearance), she is also warned that she will be denied such kind of love by the poet.

Sonnet 144 has also been regularly quoted in order to expose the Lady as the paragon of evil:

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,
Which, like two spirits, do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride;
And whether that my angel be turned fiend
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
But being both from me both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell.
Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

The verb 'fire', suggesting both coitus and inflammation, is combined with the image of 'one angel in another's hell' (144.14, 12), 'hell' being considered an idiomatic expression for the vagina. These conjunctions have led scholars to infer that the Lady gave both the young man and the poet venereal disease. As Joseph Pequigney quite characteristically argued, '[t]he jealous soul in sonnet 144, as is his wont, exonerates and idealizes the friend and focuses his wrath and hostility upon the female. She has

identification can spring; the similarities and differences present across the young man and dark Lady sonnets facilitate opportunities for both identification and uncertainty'. See Kellog, 413.

demonic designs on both males'.⁴⁴ However, evidence suggests that the young man may very well be the bad angel who fires the good one (the Lady) out. Assume that the Lady is 'wooing his [Youth's] purity with her foul pride' (144.8). The question that grows naturally out of this line is what exactly her 'foul pride' and his 'purity' are. In sonnets 140 and 141, we were told that the Lady has a proud heart, which is the very attribute that, at times, keeps the poet attached to her and away from the Youth: 'Bear thine eyes straight, though thy proud heart go wide' (140.14); 'Thy proud heart's slave and vassal wretch to be' (141.12). Provided that it is her heart that keeps the poet attached to her, it is no surprise that in an alternative version of sonnet 144 'foul' is replaced with 'fair': 'Wooing his purity with her fair pride' (803). 'Foul' and 'fair' can be treated as interchangeable because in one sense her pride is foul indeed, but in another it is fair. Her pride is both fair and foul because it represents a type of fairness that charms the poet away from his beloved Youth, for it has the power to 'corrupt my saint to be a devil' by tainting his purity. At first sight, 'purity' may be taken to signify moral chastity. But throughout the sequence as a whole, we have been well tutored in the idea that the young man's purity is his youthful physical beauty. In sonnet 70, for example, the poet pronounced that the Youth 'present'st a pure unstained prime' (70.8). It would thus be rather inaccurate to reduce the sonnet's complexity to a simple statement of a promiscuous mistress corrupting the young man's chastity, not the least because an 'ill-coloured' Lady does not appear to be a viable candidate for a narcissist's affections who values only external beauty. Rather, it is her foul or fair pride (heart) that threatens to stain the Youth's purity (beauty), because her purity operates as reminder of the young man's inward ugliness.

The operative idea in this poem is signalled by the double negation 'But being both from me, both to each friend, / I guess one angel in another's hell' (70.11-12). Fineman argued here that

we might want to say that this sordid cuckoldry story, which shows us 'one angel in another's hell,' a story that is considerably different in tone or consequence from similar stories we hear about in the young man subsequence (e.g. sonnets 40-3, 92-3), is the way that the misogynist poet 'realizes' his masculine ideal.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Joseph Pequigney, *Such is my Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), p. 152.

⁴⁵ Fineman, pp. 57-8.

For Pequigney, the couplet 'is meant for the celestial Youth, and it is not psychological but anatomical, consisting of the Lady's vagina'. Thus, Pequigney continues, 'the "female evil" corrupts not only morally, by seduction, but also organically'.⁴⁶ The poet's language, nevertheless, resists readings of this kind. Here, the poet regards both the Youth and the Lady as angels and devils, the 'one-another' formulation of lines 13-14 suggesting that they are interchangeable. In being physically fair and psychically dark, the young man is, on the one hand, an angel, but on the other, a devil. Respectively, in being physically dark and psychically fair, the Lady, like the Youth, is in one respect a devil, but in another an angel. Thus, the poet 'guess[es] one angel in another's hell', because the virtuous aspect the one has as a fair attribute the other renders a vice and *vice versa*. Each of the poet's '[t]wo loves' is therefore an 'evil angel', and all the while the one is trying to fire the other out of the poet's affections.

Love, as we have seen, has disrupted the speaker's capacity to see, to view and understand the world around him accurately. 'Most true it is, that I have looked on truth / Askance and strangely' (110.5-6), the speaker admits, and goes on to explain how this process of self-corruption has occurred:

Since I left you, mine eye is in my mind,
And that which governs me to go about
Doth part his function, and is partly blind,
Seeming seeing, but effectually is out
(113.1-4)

The poet questions the truthfulness of his own vision by recognizing that when he perceives foul characteristics in his fair friend, he translates them into the features of his complexion and therefore into fair ones (113.8-12). He is 'creating every bad a perfect best [...] My most true mind thus mak'th mine eye untrue' (114.7, 113.14). The poet knows that his vision is corrupted, but his refusal to accept and acknowledge the truth leads him in sonnets 115-116 to an endeavour of integrating inward beauty with the fairness of complexion. Having realized but not accepted that he is poisoned in both eyes and heart (114.13-14), the poet now declares that 'Those lines that I before writ do lie' (115.1), and blames Time for 'Diverting strong minds to the course of altering things' (115.5-8). He explains that the young man has been maltreated, that his love was wrongly contested only to 'prove the constancy and virtue of your love' (117.14). However, in sonnet 126, the poet sways the other way and disrupts the idyll celebrated in the joyous sonnets, marking the conclusion of this memorable affair. Here, the poet

⁴⁶ Pequigney, p. 93.

warns his friend that Nature ‘may detain, but not still keep her treasure’ (126.10), for the Youth ‘hast by waning grown, and therein show’st / Thy lover’s withering, as thy sweet self grow’st’ (126.3-4). The medicine for the poet’s disquietude now lies with the Lady, leading him in the next sonnet (127) to compose a hymn dedicated to her black beauty. The temporary reversal of roles, whereby the speaker-lover occupies the poet who praises inward beauty and heterosexualizes the dynamics of desire, and then returns to the idolatrous and homosexual poetic figure of the initiatory transformation, suggests the inextricability in this poetics of desire and identification. If in Renaissance lyric poetry classical narrative can be thought of as allusively figuring an inter-subjective relation,⁴⁷ then Shakespeare’s sonnets serve as a figural paradigm for the transformations of poetic subjectivity and the instability of the boundaries between identification and desire.

Sonnet 27, in which the Lady emerged for the first time as the Youth’s mirror image or shadow, signals a beginning, carefully making a distinction between old and new beauty, an old and new age, and therefore old and new concerns for the poet. In the sonnets preceding 27, the poet’s main concern was to keep back the hand of time, to store for posterity an image too precious to be lost. Sonnet 27 performs service as an envoy in two ways: it acts as a conclusion for a group of poems that were concerned solely with an ‘old age’ in which preserving beauty through an offspring was the primary concern, and dispatches the reader into a new group of poems in which self-awareness and self-correction are vital factors in the consummation of beauty and love. In this new age, psychic beauty matters as much as physical fairness. As a desiring subject, the poet-lover finds in the one what the other lacks, and this is the beauty he eulogizes. By metaphorically inhabiting the subjectivity of both main figures, the speaking subject is dissected between the poet who praises the beauty of the heart and the poet who lauds complexion’s fairness. ‘Mine eye and heart are at a mortal war’, the poet declared,

How to divide the conquest of thy sight;
 Mine eye, my heart thy picture’s sight would bar;
 My heart, mine eye the freedom of that right;
 [...]
 As thus, mine eyes’ due is thy outward part,
 And my heart’s right, thy inward love of heart.
 (46.1-4, 13-14)

⁴⁷ Leonard Barkan, *Transuming Passion: Ganymede and the Erotics of Humanism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 21-22, 49.

As so often in Shakespeare's sonnets, these lines are addressed to both the Youth and the dark Lady.⁴⁸ 'Mine eye' is addressed to the Youth, who is associated throughout the sonnets with the 'outward part' and the pleasures that the outward sense of sight can afford to the lover, letting him know that his heart (the dark Lady) would not allow him to see and appreciate his physical fairness, because she reminds him of his tainted interiority. 'My heart' is addressed to the dark Lady, who is associated throughout the sonnets with in-sight and the esoteric pleasures that such form of perception can afford to the lover, letting her know that his 'eye' (the Youth) would deny him his right to turn a blind eye on physical fairness. This is a 'mortal war' indeed, because neither of the poet's two loves can synthesize both forms of fairness, the one excluding the other as the one evil angel attempts to fire the other out of the poet's affections. Unable to occupy either position permanently and fix his ever-shifting subjectivity, the poet remains the victim of his warring loves. Love fulfilment in the sonnets is always deferred, leaving the reader with the sense that the poet has become the perpetual martyr of the mortal war between his eye and heart.

At first sight, the sonnets may appear to resist the function of the mirror as a plane for self-knowledge and individuation. Like Shuger, who set out to establish the very connection between the invention of the glass mirror and the emergence of individuated modern subjectivity, but concluded instead that the presumption is false, so the poet seems to have embarked on an experiment to incite self-knowledge in the young man through mirroring, only to arrive at the disappointing conclusion that such an enterprise was bound to fail because the disease of narcissistic self-love is incurable. Yet, although the young man may remain self-absorbed, the poet went through a journey of self-discovery and learning via mirroring, for what these mirror-sonnets ultimately reflect is the speaker's own self. The outcome of this encounter is not any form of improvement, whether moral, ethical or psychological. Rather, the result of this process is self-knowledge and individuation. In Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, the speaker's experiences are the products of his own desires and psycho-synthesis, the unfolding of what Leibniz would later call an 'internal principle'.⁴⁹ When the poet gazes at himself in his mirror, when he looks into his own eyes that like windows open into his heart, the whole

⁴⁸ On this point, see also Brian Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last: Evolution, Cognition, and Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 105, 109, 111-12, 115, who has argued for a 'doubleness' as regards the gender-dynamic of a number of Shakespeare's sonnets and so for different possible understandings of love.

⁴⁹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadology*, ed. by Nicholas Rescher (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), pp. 68, 97.

universe of the sonnets and the image of himself as it is reflected therein unfold before him:

Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,
And all my soul, and all my every part;
And for this sin there is no remedy,
It is so grounded inward in my heart.
Methinks no face so gracious is as mine,
No shape so true, no truth of such account,
And for myself mine own worth do define
As I all other in all worths surmount.
But when my glass shows me myself indeed,
Beated and chopped with tanned antiquity,
Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;
Self, so self-loving, were iniquity;
'Tis thee (myself) that for myself I praise,
Painting my age with beauty of thy days. (62.1-14)

Looking into his mirror, the poet comes to the realisation that his own self is a living mirror of the entire universe of the sonnets, which it reflects from its particular point of view, defining selfhood in terms of subject-position, of subjectivity. Ultimately, as far as the speaker is concerned, the function of his mirror is neither social nor instructive, but distinctly modern. Each of the poet's selves, the one that desires the fair young man (physical beauty) and the one that desires the dark Lady (spiritual fairness), reflects this universe from a particular angle, and because no two selves can occupy the same point of view, each subjectivity, each gaze, is understood as radically individual, giving expression to the poet's bisected subjectivity. Within this context, the poet cannot occupy either one of these selves or subjectivities without committing perjury. The poet of the sonnets is what we may call a 'tragic lover'. For him, there is no correct choice, but a choice he must make. In fact, because he cannot escape his own individuality, he is in a situation whereby he has always already chosen and always already suffering the consequences of his inescapable choice. But there is also gain to be enjoyed in this suffering, a narcissistic sort of gain, because the beauty of which he sings (physical and/or interior) is reflected in his verse and, as a result, back on him.