SHAKESPEARE SURVEY
AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF
SHAKESPEARE STUDIES AND PRODUCTION

59
Editing Shakespeare

EDITED BY
PETER HOLLAND

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
WILL IN THE UNIVERSE:
SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS, PLATO’S
SYMPOSIUM, ALCHEMY AND
RENAISSANCE NEOPLATONISM
RONALD GRAY

Shakespeare’s debt to Plato is often seen as not
much more than an acquaintance with the mean-
ing of ‘substance’ and ‘shadow’, relating to ‘ideal’
and ‘real’. A few wider explorations have been
made, and more importantly W. H. Auden took
the view that ‘the primary experience – complicate-
ded as it became later – out of which the sonnets
to the friend spring was a mystical one’, of which
‘the classic descriptions . . . . are to be found in
Plato’s Symposium, Dante’s La Vita Nuova and some
of these sonnets’. G. Wilson Knight also referred
to the Symposium in The Mutual Flame. I return to
Auden’s view later.

Platonic allusions are not prominent in the
whole of the Sonnets, which are often the thoughts
and feelings of a lover like other lovers, who protests
his love, doubts his worthiness, denounces infi-
delity, is reconciled. There are, however, occa-
sionally surprising phrases: the friend is ‘the grave
where buried love doth live’ (31.9), he will ‘pace
forth’ against death (55.10), he is ‘a God in Love’
(110.12), the poet ‘hallows’ his name, as though
in the Lord’s Prayer (108.8). And there are close
resemblances to a passage in the Symposium which
speaks of a vision of universal love.

Shakespeare could have read the Symposium in
Ficino’s Latin translation, and have discussed it with
Ben Jonson, who owned a copy. It takes the form
of a banquet, in which each of the speakers hold
forth on the nature of Love, the most important
being the wise woman Diotima, as reported
by Socrates. Diotima denies that Love is merely
love between human beings: it ‘includes every kind
of longing for happiness and for the good’. It is
found not only in poetry, but in business, athletics,
philosophy.

But then comes a passage in which Diotima
asks why men are so deeply interested in prolong-
ing their own selves through intercourse, why ‘the
mortal does all it can to put on immortality’. It
can only do so, she says, by breeding ‘and thus
ensuring that there will always be a younger gen-
eration to take the place of the old’ (para. 207).
Here we come close to the concerns of the open-
ing sequence of Sonnets, in which begetting a child
is of such importance that the poet spends nearly
three hundred lines on it. As Diotima goes on, she
draws closer still to the profound meaning Shake-
speare is moving towards. Everyone, she says, ‘no
matter what he does, is longing for the endless
fame, the incomparable glory that is theirs, and the
nobler he is, the greater his ambition, because he
is in love with the eternal’ (207). Some will go on
to raise a family, but ‘those whose procreancy is of
the spirit, rather than of the flesh – and they are not

I cite the following editions of the Sonnets in the article: J. Kerri-
gan, ed., The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint (Harmondsworth,
1988); G. Blakemore Evans, ed., The Sonnets (Cambridge, 1999);
K. Duncan-Jones, ed., Shakespeare’s Sonnets (London, 1997); C.

E. G. C. and M. Martindale, Shakespeare and the Unit of Antiquity
(London and New York, 1997), p. 11, and Anne Baldwin
and Sarah Hatton, eds., Platonism and the English Imagination
(Cambridge, 1994).


I quote from the translation by Michael Joyce in Five Dialogues
of Plato (London, 1918).
This is close to the love spoken of in 11.6, as unal-
nerable and unchanging, 'an everlast-ing mark'. That
means, I think, a sort of label on something else,
not just the love itself, but the way we remember
love. It's a reminder of what love looks like, not just
what love is. In Sonnet 144, the poet defines his love in just
the same way. He describes it as having a 'mark', a 'label',
which will survive even the death of the lover,
'even though forever die, but bears
not out even to the edge of time' (144.1-2).

In Sonnet 43, the poet describes how his love for
the woman he loves has become so strong
that it has taken on a life of its own, separat-
ing him from the rest of the world. He says
that she is 'the fairest flower that ever love
sowed' (43.1). This is a metaphor for the power
of love to transform a person into something
more beautiful than they ever could be on
their own. It suggests that love has the
ability to make people better, to bring out
the best in them.

And in Sonnet 53, the poet describes how his love
for the woman he loves has brought him
close to the edge of madness. He says she
has 'brought me to the verge of danger' (53.1),
meaning that he is so deeply in love that he
is willing to do anything to keep her.

Sonnet 54, finally, describes how the poet's love for
the woman he loves has brought him to the
edge of death itself. He says that she is
'ready to die' (54.1), meaning that he is prepared
to die for her love. This suggests that
the poet's love is so strong that it has
become fatal for him.

Overall, these sonnets show the power of love
to transform and to bring out the best in
people, even at the cost of one's own
well-being.
In the first nineteen Sonnets the poet is concerned at the eventual and inevitable loss of the young man’s beauty, and in the first seventeen he urges him to beget a child who will preserve it. There are verbal resemblances to Erasmus’s De Conscribendis Epistolis here, in which a young nobleman is urged to marry, and this group may conceivably have begun with such a purpose. But in Sonnet 15 the poet is already hinting at a new development, when he writes

And all in war with Time for love of you,
As he takes from you I engraff you new.

In the sequence it is not yet clear what ‘I engraff you’ means: the horticultural verb relates to the Rose of Sonnet 1, but the significance of this does not appear till 17, where the poet reflects that in time to come nobody would believe that the youth had such beauty, and the poet’s verse would be scorned.

But were some childe of yours alive that time,
You should live twice, in it and in my time.

With this, the beauty of the young man, still present in his child, is seen to be equal with the beauty of the poet’s verse and both are the Rose (although, in a typical contradiction, found all the way through the Sonnets, he has just spoken of his verse as ‘my barren rime’, 16.4). More boldly then, in 18, one of the most beautiful of the Sonnets, the poet declares that Death will never brag of conquering the youth,

When in eternall lines to time thou growst.

Now for the first time, by means of a pun, the poet not only equates the beauty of his poem with that of the child yet to be born, but establishes his claim, so far as the poetry is concerned, by the incontrovertible beauty before our eyes, the Sonnet itself, which still lives today. Just as the genealogical links of descent will preserve that beauty in the child, so also will the lines of verse. The two kinds of beauty, human and poetic, are one, and as 19 continues, concluding the sequence of nineteen Sonnets:

My love shall in my verse ever live young

where ‘my love’, as always in the Sonnets, means both the love the poet has for the youth, but also the youth himself.

This goes beyond anything said by Erasmus or by any supposed request to Shakespeare from a mother to encourage a son of hers to foster the dynasty of some noble family. There is as yet nothing of the experience of which Auden speaks as the origin of the Sonnets. But a first step if we regard the Sonnets as in any degree sequential—has been made on the way to greater fulfilment. In the Symposium the love of two men is better than the love of a man and woman, for ‘it will produce something lovelier and less mortal than human seed’ (see p. 226 above). Similarly here the need for the young man to have a child by a woman is superseded, in Plato’s terms, by the poet producing beauty in his homosexual love.

Immediately after 1–19, Sonnet 20 strikes a new note. The man is praised here for his feminine looks and woman’s gentle heart, and yet is ‘the Master Mistris of my passion’. If there is a man whom Shakespeare had in mind here it could well be the Earl of Southampton. But his appearance is difficult to imagine: he has a ‘woman’s face’, and yet is ‘a man in hew [hue]’, and after being praised for his superiority to women, who are fickle and whose eyes are not so bright as his, he emerges in complete ambiguity in line 9: ‘and for a woman wert thou first created’. As Burrow argues, this means ‘(a) you were originally intended to be a woman, and (b) you were made to belong to a woman’, and, I would add, not merely to belong to but to please or satisfy a woman. This is one of many significant word-plays to which I will return. In the ensuing quotation, however, the man is said to have had a woman’s body, so beautiful that Nature fell in love with it, and so seductive, that Nature added to that body ‘one thing to my purpose nothing’, a penis that can only serve to give pleasure to women. He has been ‘prickt out’, chosen, and provided with a prick, and is to be enjoyed only by women, not by the poet.
RONALD GRAY

which did not attempt to show any way of reconciling one belief with another. Alchemists saw no difficulty in linking Christ with images of men and women in sexual intercourse, the two being illustrated as a copulation. (St. Epiphanion: "A great deal of the alchemical tradition was about to have it in a nutshell, although it was impossible to be sure which of the two was really the alchemical tradition.)

A more respectable source of such ideas was the neoplatonic tradition, beginning with Plotinus in the third century CE, and passing through Iamblichus, Ptolemy, and the supposed Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus. The Counter-Reformation, the Kabbalah, and the Renaissance were the principal features of the Lucifero-Hermes Trismegistus, to use the term that John Blake used to describe the alchemical tradition. The first alchemical text to use the term was the "Kabbalistic Alchemical Treatise," a work of the sixteenth century. The second alchemical text to use the term was the "Kabbalistic Alchemical Treatise," a work of the sixteenth century. All these alchemical texts, and Hermetic adepts, saw their own tradition as a synthesis of various traditions, including the Kabbalistic, the Rosicrucian, and the Platonic.

The most likely source of this symbol is alchemy, which produced visible equivalents for many of the concepts of neoplatonism. We have already mentioned the portrait of the griffin, which is a familiar symbol in alchemy. The Philosopher's Stone, which was invented by seven alchemists and by religious or philosophical means, is a griffin. The Philosopher's Stone is a symbol of the transmutation of metals, as is the Hermetic word for the transmutation of metals. The Philosopher's Stone was supposed to transform the gold of the metal into gold.

Jakob Boehme's influence on the development of alchemy was significant. He wrote a book, "Theatrum Philosophorum," which contained an account of his own work in alchemy. In this book, he described how he had discovered a new way of making gold. He claimed that he had discovered a key to the Philosopher's Stone, which could transform gold into gold.

however, have at least heard some details of the visit to Oxford of Giordano Bruno, in 1583 and 1584, when the Italian became associated with Sir Philip Sidney, Fulke Greville and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. It was because of his defence of the Copernican theory that Bruno aroused incredulity in Oxford, but his teaching in De gli enosi zioni, 1585, used neoplatonic imagery, and treated the attainment of union with the infinite One by the human soul. Like Nicholas of Cusa, Bruno rejected the dualism of Aristotelian, preferring a monistic conception of the world. For him too all substances were in a basic unity and opposites coincided in the infinite unity of Being.  

Shakespeare was twenty-one at the time this book appeared, and although he is unlikely to have read it, the stir it caused may very well have come to his attention. The frequency of coinciding opposites - a useful term in his work - certainly suggests that he may have known the neoplatonist tradition in Bruno, although it may have come from several sources, including alchemy.

In 53 the fulfilment spoken of by Diotima is treated, not as an achievement of the poet, but rather of the poet’s ability to see the universal figure of love in the friend. It begins, using Plato’s two concepts of real and ideal, shadow and substance, as in the myth of the cave, where mortals in the cave see only shadows of the real world beyond, with the awe-struck question:

What is your substance, whereof are you made,  
That millions of strange shadowes on you tend?  
Since every one, hath every one, one shade,  
And you but one, can every shadow lend?

The answer might well be the sun, with whom the young man is sometimes identified, as in 33 and 34 (to be treated later), and which casts shadows all about itself. Is there a suggestion too that the poet, who, as we have shown, is also the man he loves, his Will, is also intended? Is Shakespeare the dramatist musing on his own amazing ability to create not millions, but perhaps thousands of characters, born and unborn? In the next quatrains the male and female characteristics again point to the hermaphrodite of Sonnet 20, although once again a man of feminine beauty may be seen. It is in the third quatrains that the more than human friend emerges more clearly. Like the sun, he is the provider of ‘spring, and foyz, [harvest] of the yeare’. Taken literally, this is beyond the power of any human being. And more, he is ‘in every blessed shape we know’, and is part of ‘all externall grace’. Here is the vision of Diotima again: in the friend the lover perceives the ideal that is present in all beauty, and so far as he is identified with the friend, the poet may be claiming as much for himself.

The last line: ‘But you like none, none you, for constancy’, then brings us back to mundane reality. For although the friend is praised for his constancy, the words of praise are once again a significant pun. We know from Sonnets earlier than this that the man is not constant in his love, and it is after all otiose to say ‘you like none, none [like] you’ if ‘like’ is an adjective, for the one implies the other. There is some point, however, in understanding not only ‘you are incomparable for constancy’, but also ‘you like nobody, and nobody likes you for being constant’ (Duncan-Jones and Burrow make a similar point). In the traditions of Bruno and Nicholas of Cusa, such a coincidence of opposites ought to seem impossible. The ambiguity of gender in Adonis–Helen is reflected in the duality-in-unity in the language of the same Sonnet. This accords with the way the poet always praises his lover as perfect while showing up his defects.

Shakespeare does not follow Plato in every respect. Though the poet’s love is symbolically so illimitable, the man he loves is not only blemished, to say the least, but has stolen the poet’s mistress. It is as though Shakespeare intended to put to the test Diotima’s vaunted love, to confront it in human terms, in a common enough human situation. The theme of betrayal of love begins in a short sequence starting with 33, where Shakespeare writes of the obscuring of the sun’s glory by a passing cloud. The sun here is like a monarch presiding over his

court, flattering them with his 'sovereigne cie', though dis-graced by the cloud which hides him, but also like 'my Sunne', the lover, who was hidden in a comparable way from the poet. For this the poet forgives him in what seems an arbitrary way: 'Suns [suns] of the world may staine [grow dim, but with an implication of disgracing oneself, if not sinning] when heaven's sun staineth', as though the inattention (not the infidelity) of the lover could be excused on meteorological grounds. In the next Sonnet, however, there is a surprise, when the poet turns angrily on the lover for having promised such a beauteous day, making him travel forth without his cloak only to let him get drenched. It is not a man that he is blaming, but rather the sun – 'th th bruaty' (34.4) is the sun's – although this is said in such a matter-of-fact way as almost to escape attention. For the poet his love is the sun, not merely metaphorically, and the sun can be upbraided as though it were a human being. In a casual way, this reflects the theme of the cosmic lover.

In the next Sonnet the poet finds truly metaphorical excuses: the lover should not be grieved at what he has done (still not defined), since roses have thorns and silver fountains create mud, and clouds will 'stain' (make dim) both sun and moon, though the connection of this with whatever it is that the lover must not grieve over remains obscure, as the poet admits himself, when he confesses to making faults by 'Authorizing thy trespass with compare' (35.6). The comparisons with roses, fountains and clouds are really inadequate to any 'trespass' the lover may be guilty of, and seem to be made only so that the poet may take blame on himself also, for so much as making the comparisons – 'My selfe corrupting, salving thy amisse' (35.7). He is corrupt, making these lame excuses.

It is not until 40 that it becomes clear how the lover has betrayed the poet: he has taken his mistress, as becomes even clearer in 42 – 'That thou hast her it is not all my griefe.' It now also becomes clear why he has blamed himself for exonerating the young man. He is taking perfectly seriously the idea that he and his lover are one, that he speaks from the awareness of a fusion joining them both, and can thus launch into a cascade of double-meanings:

Then if for my love, thou my love receivest,
I cannot blame thee, for my love thou useth

(40.5-6)

– where 'my love' means not only 'the love I bear you', but also 'the woman I love', and the first line means not only 'if, out of love for me, you receive the gift of my love', but also 'if you accept my mistress as a sign of my love for you', while the second line means 'I cannot blame you for making love ['uses' has this sense often in the Sonnets] with my mistress' as well as 'I cannot blame you, since it is my own love for you that you are making use of.' Towards the end of the Sonnet the poet does confess to the pain this causes him. But the assumption of two-in-one-ness continues in the couplet:

Lascivious grace, in whom all il wel shows,
Kill me with spights yet we must not be foes

(40.13-14)

'In whom all il wel showses' encapsulates the unity of a meaning that embraces opposites: the lascivious grace – itself an oxymoron – shows (all too) well what ill it shows, and yet that ill 'shows well', is apparently good.

These double-meanings are not all playful, nor are they self-indulgent lapses. They may appear to us today as of no great consequence, but as Mahood observes, 'To Elizabethan ways of thinking, there was plenty of authority for these eloquent devices. It was to be found in Scripture (Thess Petrus . . . ) and in the whole line of rhetoricians, from Aristotle and Quintilian, through the neo-classical texts that Shakespeare read perforce at school, to the English writers such as Puttenham.' In the Sonnets they carry a serious point if we regard them as not simply about a lover in real life, but a superhuman or even a divine being, with whom the poet feels himself at one. A lover who consents to being deceived in such easy terms, using the stock phrase of lovers, that both are one, sounds hypocritical. If he is speaking in a religious or mystical sense, he sounds less so, or not

WILL IN THE UNIVERSE

at all. Seeing the good even in what appears evil is often said about a god rather than about a human being.

Yet more ambiguities follow, as in 42, when the poet acknowledges that his exoneration of his friend's disloyalty can be reinforced by the fact that they are both one and the same and thus the friend's mistress can only love the poet himself:

But here's the joy, my friend and I are one,
Sweete flattery, then she loves but me alone.

Coming out of the clouds, the poet sees what flattery is involved in claiming to be identical with his lover, and the naïveté of 'she loves but me alone' is obvious, unless we interpret that the lover is (sometimes) imagined, not real, and in this sense identical with the poet, a projected self. But this is yet another example of the ambitious combination of opposites that runs all through the Sonnets. Admittedly, that ambition can at times sound unconvincing. Yet the puns state in so many incontrovertible meanings what ambition is claiming. The poet may be open at other times to Johnson's charge, that punning was Shakespeare's will o' the wisp that led him into marshes of unnaturalness, but in these instances he uses them in full awareness for a serious purpose.

He can be faulted (even in an Elizabethan context, one would think) for 'as you were when first your eye I eyde' (104.2), which puns on 'eye' as 'I' and makes their identities. The intention is bold. The line can mean 'when first I looked at your eye', but also 'when first I made your 'I' ', that is, as a poet, if not as a god, as he appears to be later. The spelling 'Eyde' rather than 'Eyed', if not a misprint, invites a daring reading here, since the 'I' is also, thanks to the duality-in-unity, the poet's own 'I', which he has 'I'd' in the other. I confess, this interpretation may owe-William William.

Even more awkward are the lines:

What wretched errors hath my heart committed
Whilst it hath thought it selfe so blessed never?
How have mine eyes out of their spheres bene fitted
In the distraction of this madd'ning fever?

(119.9-13)

'Fitted' is known to the OED nowhere but in this instance, where it means perhaps that his eyes have been wrenched or taken out of their sockets. But the separation into two words 'bene fitted' suggests, although only visually, 'benefitted'. ('Benefit' appears two lines later.) This produces the desired paradoxical combination, but at some cost.

Another word-play relying on the look of the written or printed word is in a line criticising the lover even as it adores him. The poet has just said he corrupts himself by 'salving' the lover's wrongdoing:

For to thy sensual fault I bring in sence.
Thy adverse party is thy Advocate.

(35.9-10)

That is, he brings his rational faculty to bear on the 'sensual fault', and excuses it thereby. Almost all editors produce the first of these lines as here. But Burrow, who also prints 'in sense', notes without comment that in 1714 Gildon interpreted 'in sence', the curious Quarto spelling, as 'Incense'. The poet does not merely use reason here, he worships the fault. (The stress falls on the wrong syllable, as it does in 'bene fitted', if 'benefitted' is meant, but the 'c' for an 't' is surely deliberate, and the ambiguity is typical.) Even in saying that he and the lover are separate, the poet says they are one, as in

Let me confesse that we two must be twaine,
Although our undeived loves are one

(36.1-2)

which says both that they are separate, in the sense of 'twain' meaning 'two', 'asunder', 'separate', but also 'a group of two', a pair, a couple' (OED II.2). Thus even as the poet confesses separation he denies it, since, although 'a twain' would strictly be called for to make the second sense - 'we two must be a twain' - there is an intimation of the pun.

A similar pun is in the couplet of 39, where the poet, who has just lamented his absence from the lover, comforts himself with the thought that

... thou teachest how to make one twaine
By praising him here who doth hence remaine.

231
RONALD GRAY

The lover thus shows how to make ‘one’, a single individual, be ‘twain’, both a pair and a divided pair, and does so by praising the poet as though ‘here’, even though he remains ‘hence’, somewhere else. But ‘hence’ in the sense of ‘therefore’ provides the meaning ‘who, being praised here, therefore remains here’. As the poet has just said, ‘And what is’t but mine own when I praise thee?’ (39.4): the self that addresses itself is divided yet still the same self, and in one sense the lover is that imagined alter ego.

This ‘alter ego’ has striking reverberance when the poet writes:

So true a fool is love, that in your Will
(Though you doe anything) he thinkes no ill.

(55.13–14)

‘In your Will’ means not only ‘whatever is in your will to do’, but also ‘whatever your will does in Will Shakespeare’: the lover’s will activates the poet, is part of him. A religious or metaphysical significance, expanded later, begins to emerge here.

In 113 and 114 he questions whether he is not being led astray by his love, since it allows him to disregard the faults in the lover. Nothing that he sees now appears ugly or savage to his mind or eye:

For if it see the rudest or gentlest sight,
The most sweet-favor or deformed creature,
The mountain, or the sea, the day, or night:
The Crete, or Dove, it shapes them to your feature.

(113, 9–12)

Thus his ‘true’ mind, true because loyal in love, makes his mind ‘untrue’, and this he ascribes to a kind of alchemical transformation:

Or whether shall I say mine eie saith true,
And that your love taught it this Alazonia?
To make of monsters and things indigest,
Such cherubines as your sweet selfe resemble,
Creating every bad a perfect best.

(114, 2–7)

In alchemical terms, as I have said, base metals could be transformed into gold (and, in the higher sense, human error or sin transformed into loving perfection). But just as alchemy was suspect in its secular guise as a means of deceiving the gullible, so too was the capacity to transform in a godly way. It is just such a transformation, such a coincidence of opposites, that the poet has been guilty of in speaking of the man as ‘lascivious grace, in whom all ill wel showes’ (40.13) and of the mistress too, when he asks whence she has ‘this becomming of things ill... that in my mind thy worst all best exceeds’ (150.5 and 9). In effect, Shakespeare is questioning here the whole Platonist vision of love, the illimitable loveliness of which Diotima speaks, since it apparently disregards, in overcoming, the ugliness present in the world. Does it appeal, he asks, because it flatters him to think he is ‘crowned’ like a monarch with his love, or should he renounce the ‘poison’ it truly is? His answer, ironically aware of his continued self-interest, is that ‘my great minde most kingly drinks it up’ (114.10), and he tries to escape the full meaning of this in the couplet:

If it be poison’d, tis the lesser sinne,
That mine eie loves it and dodd first beginne.

(114.13–14)

The reasoning here is specious — what is the sin compared with which his own sin is lesser, and how does his eye, beginning first, make the deceptive vision any the less sinful? But the theme of poisoning is not exhausted in 114; it recurs in 118, where the poet admits he is simply poisoned (118.14), only to be dismissed in 119 — ‘now I find true/That better is, by evil still made better’ (119.9–10). The opposites coalesce and divide continually, just as Mercury did in alchemical laboratories. Not content with the Platonic vision, Shakespeare rejects and accepts duality-in-unity, passing on from the ‘ever-fixed mark’ of Love to explore the tempest with which Love has to contend, and never remaining absolutely with either of the opposites.

It may seem that the Dark Lady or, as she should rather be called, the black mistress, black not only in her hair and eyes, but sometimes black morally, can have no connection with any kind of Platonic love, which in the Symposium is entirely homosexual between men. But Platonism had undergone some transformation since the publication
WILL IN THE UNIVERSE

in 1557 of Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*. Shakespeare can scarcely not have known it, and the witty dialogue between Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado* may well have been inspired, as Peter Burke suggests, by the exchanges between Castiglione's lords and ladies.9 (The Balthasar who attends Don Pedro in the same play, the one in *The Comedy of Errors*, Romeo's servant, Portia's servant and Portia's adopted name, again Balthasar, reflect Shakespeare's awareness of Castiglione's first name.) Unlike Plato, who speaks only of the love between men leading by degrees to the universal vision of love, the *alter ego* of *The Courtier*, quoting the same words of Diotima's that Shakespeare echoes in Sonnet 124, inspires the question 'Whether women be not as meete for heavie love as men'. Since he also argues that kissing may be a bond between souls, which 'pourc them selves by turne the one into the other bodie, and bee so mingled together, that each of them hath two soules', 10 he comes close to suggesting a spiritual union of man and woman (each sharing in both sexes) with strong similarities to sensual love. This may help to explain how Shakespeare came to present the Dark Lady as in many ways, despite her sexual allure, akin to the male lover.

All the Sonnets addressed to or about a woman are numbered after 126. Those numbered early in the sequence say merely that she is black in mourning, or that her beauty is not the conventional one, or play with fanciful ideas, although 129 is a savage denunciation of lust (contradicted in later Sonnets). In 141 he denies contradicting 128, that he has any sensual desire for her. In 132, however, he announces a theme that has a large part to play in the Sonnets later in the sequence, the paradox that 'beauty her selfe is blakke' (132.13), and again 'Thy blakke is fairest in my judgments place', where the last four words can mean 'in the place where my judgment stands', as well as 'in place of', 'instead of' my judgment. The poet is both committed and not committed to his paradox.

The mistress also resembles in this paradoxical way the young man, whose infidelity is lamented and yet justified, with incense, in the same breath. (Some interpretations ignore this, presenting the love for the man as pure and for the woman as corrupt.) The theme becomes more important as it involves moral blackness as well as lack of beauty.

In 133 and 134 the 'woman is drawn into the plot': it is to her the young man turned in 40–2, and the poet confesses now that he has lost her (134.1). Yet in later Sonnets in the sequence he still woos her.

135 and 136 bring in, startlingly, a new development of the paradox. We have seen how Shakespeare puns on his own name, Will, confessing that Will in a broad sense of potency is at work in his own self. Will now becomes the Will of the woman (identical with that of the man, in a hermaphrodite sense?), and leads to a fantastic variety of meanings.

Commentators have regarded both 135 and 136 depressingly — 'Shakespeare quibbles compulsively' and 'two frankly bawdy and frenetically witty exercises' — and it is true that by the time the several meanings of 'will' have been explained the reader needs little to discourage himself from working out every possible combination of interpretations. Kerrigan, Evans agreeing, lists six meanings of 'Will' and 'will': what is wanted (thou hast thy Will); penis; vagina; carnal desire (hide my will in thine); shall (Will, will fulfil) and William, i.e. Shakespeare (but some say another man of the same first name). The ribaldry, once the multiple meanings are appreciated, may take over and produce astonished laughter.

There is no 'very woe' here (129.11), no despising (129.5) of sexual love, and in the light of so many other combinations of opposites we do best to allow each, 135 and 136, with 141, to stand in its own right, neither in this context invalidating the other, and this is easier to do if the often accepted view that the mistress is a prostitute is looked at closely. To her 'will in others seems[s] right gracious', which suggests a lover rather than a prostitute. There is no mention of payment; and the

9 Peter Burke in his *The Fortunes of the 'Courtier': The European Reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano* (Cambridge, 1999).

poet cares for her enjoyment — 'so it please thee hold...' ; he looks for 'faire acceptance', and wants her to love him 'still' (i.e. always), implying a personal rather than a commercial relationship. It is a 'loue-sute' (136.12) that he presents. The tone is one of a beseeching lover, not of a customer.

The couplet of 135

Let no unkinde, no faire beseechers kill,
Thynke all but one, and me in that one Will.

is usually emended by editors (as in 'Let "No"', unkind, no faire beseechers kill' or 'let no unkind [person] kill any faire beseechers') so as to mean in the first instance 'do not unkindly put off fair beseechers with a denial'. This is an understandable emendation, reducing the line to a more usual and easily acceptable sense. But if 'kill' means 'destroy your desire' the unemended sense reads 'Do not let either unfeeling or fair wooers keep you from accepting them.' The poet is asking her to accept them all, in a spirit of love like that in which he himself transforms the 'rudst or gentlest sight' (113.9) so as to make both good and evil. Both unkind and fair wooers are to be thought of as one, and he himself, whether as male organ or as his name suggests, is one also with them.

A serious part of this extravaganza arises from the similarity of the mistress to the male lover of the earlier Sonnets. Just as he has a more than human presence and has all the poet's lovers in himself, so has she her Will in super-abundance, suggesting a kind of goddess that is the epitome of loving unions. Vendler indeed asks 'Is she an idealized Petrarchan goddess, above good and evil? Is she a natural essence, like the ocean? Or is she a calculating accumulator of goods?'11 In another poem than this, she observes, lines 5–10 (in 135) 'could be addressed to God', while the whole Sonnet has 'echoes of liturgical prayer'.12

That the mistress's will is 'large and spacious' (135.5) is meant both physically and mentally, yet no woman's will is capable of accepting more than one will at a time. The impossibility of 'I fill it full with wils and my will one' (136.6) is no impossibility if it means that the mistress accepts lovers metaphorically in thousands or millions. She resembles the male lover in this, when he is urged by the poet to 'take all my loves' (40.4) and is asked what he would have thereby more than he already has; she resembles him again in that he contains in himself all the 'parts' of the poet's former lovers (11.11). 'And thou (all they) hast all the all of me' (11.14) is a tribute to an all-enveloping love that the mistress also enfolds in herself in her own way.

The mistress is asked to be like the sea, all accepting:

The sea all water, yet receives raine still,
And in abundance addeth to his store,
So thou being rich in Will add to thy Will,
One will of mine to make thy large Will more.

The parallel with Orsino's speech suggests itself:

O spirit of Love, how quicken and fresh art thou,
That notwithstanding thy capacitie
Receivest as the Sea...

(Twelfth Night 1.1.9–11)

And similarly Romeo says

My bounty [capacity for giving] is as boundless as
the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.

(Romeo and Juliet 2.2.133–5)

— again expressing the idea that both love and the sea do not grow greater or less by being added to or subtracted from. The mistress is being asked by the poet to accept his love, which will not increase her own.

The poet takes her part against himself ('I against my self with thee pertake' (149.2)), just as he does with the male lover ('Thy adverse party is thy Advocate, And against my selfe a lawfull plea commence' (35.10–11)). What this means is not spelled out,

---
12 Vendler, The Art, p. 574.
WILL IN THE UNIVERSE

although the male lover is, of course, not only celebrated by the poet as the true Rose (67.8) but is also guilty of gross betrayal of his friendship. But the way to understand is to remember the poet's insistence that he is blinded by love, at the same time insisting that love teaches him to see truly. It is this paradox that underlies the relation with both mistress and male lover. 136 differs, however, from 135, introducing more clearly something other than sexual love in the ordinary sense. We have seen that the male lover is spoken of in 53 as 'in every blessed shape we know', while the harvest is spoken of as his bounty, as though he were like Ceres. Since the poet thinks of himself as identical with his love, the same godlike attributes must be his also, and he is in the same way identical with the mistress, whose Will he is. Duncan-Jones interprets 135.6: 'fill [your sexual organ] full to the brim with male sexual organs', Burrow adds: 'the poet becomes one universal appetitive will'. The opening lines of 136 are easier to follow if this is borne in mind:

If thy soule check thee that I come so neere,
Swear to thy blind soule that I was thy Will,
And will thy soule knows is admitted there,
Thus farre for love, my love-sute sweet fulfill.

But the poet is speaking here of the soul, not the body: he is courting not merely for sexual pleasure, but for something spiritual. Saying 'I was thy Will' can mean 'I, Will Shakespeare, was yours.' Yet when he argues that Will is admitted 'there', he seems to mean in her soul. The soul knows that such a Will is certainly accepted, and a seventh, religious sense, in addition to the six already listed, becomes more apparent still. The Bible has many references to God's will directing the believer, who is encouraged always to act in accordance with it, and the relationship, as in Ezekiel 16, can be sexual. The verses thus say 'you know that this kind of will is proper for the soul to receive'. From the views just quoted this is a small step, and yet a hugely different one.

Shakespeare goes on to say

Will, will fulfill the treasure of thy love,

where the meaning is sexual (compare 20.13, 'women's treasure') but adds

I fill it full with wills, and my will one.

That is: 'I, Will, will fulfill'. One may prefer to emend, as editors naturally do, 'Aye, fill it'. But Shakespeare likes to play with this meaning too. We have seen how he plays on 'eye' and 'I' in 104.2, 'when first your eye I eyde' (p. 231 above), and he makes similar use of 'aye' and 'eye' elsewhere. So, 'I, Will will fulfill' is acceptable as it stands, even though he adds 'and my will one'. He is both microcosmically and macrocosmically present in the same line, both one of many wooers and the power that informs all their wooing. Shakespeare seems to go beyond both Plato and Neoplatonism here. For Plato, or rather for Diotima, the supreme vision is attained by renunciation of the love of women. In Castiglione both men and women may realise together, though chastely, in a version of Diotima's own words, 'the original of all other beautie which never encreaseth nor diminisheth, alwaies beautifull, and of it selfe.'

Diotima also, however, to Socrates's bewilderment, adds:

to love is to bring forth [also translated 'begetting in'] upon the beautiful, both in body and soul

(110.3)

which brings in a sexual meaning the earlier denied or avoided. This may help to account for the implied wish of the poet to join 'Will' in all three senses, including the divine or superhuman, in a single act. Such a combination is well known in accounts of mysticism and in alchemy. As Zaschner says, 'There is no point at all in blinking the fact that the raptures of the theistic

---

13 Castiglione, p. 130.
14 C. G. Jung reproduces one of many alchemical illustrations showing coition as the conjunction of 'male' and 'females' in the Philosophers' Stone. One in particular shows a naked, crowned king and queen, in sexual intercourse, both winged like angels. C. G. Jung, Psychologie und Alchemie (Zurich, 1944), p. 638.
RONALD GRAY

mystic are closely akin to the transports of the sexual union." Many instances of such a union, as described by St Teresa, however, show only one pair, of male and female. Shakespeare differs in imagining a large number sharing with his own Will. This is not Plotinus's 'flight of the Alone to the Alone', although the 'all alone' of 1.24.11 suggested something like that. It sounds rather egalitarian, and lusty, as though Rabelais had written Plato. It is a counterpart, if not a contradiction of Plato's vision, which appears, but for the strange intrusion in Plato, of 'begetting upon', to be without sexual participation, and yet has the same universal scope.

Two of the plays have scenes reminiscent of 1.36, but in a contradictory sense. Othello says he could be happy 'if the general Campe, Pynors and all' could have 'tasted' Desdemona's body, so long as he knew nothing of it, but is of course tormenting himself with the thought. When Cressida arrives in the Greek camp, the Greek captains, so many wills, one after another enact a similar tasting, so far as the public stage will allow. Troilus is not present at this communal wooing, but soon afterwards sees Cressida flirting with Diomed and loathes her (5.2.154–8). The Sonnet and the plays are poles apart on this theme. Is it a question of the Sonnet being macrocosmic while the plays are microcosmic, human rather than metaphysical?

Auden speaks of the origin of the Sonnets in a mystical experience. In the light of much that has gone before, 33 may be seen in that way. Here the sun appears like a sovereign flattering his subjects by the glory he lends them, 'gulding pale streams with heavenly alcumy' (33.4), but then disappearing behind clouds. The poet sees in this his own relationship with the young man:

Even so my Sunne one early morn did shine
With all triumphant splendor on my brow

(33.9–10)

This sun, as we have seen in 34, is one and the same as the young man: he sends heat to dry the poet's tears and rain to express his remorse. But 'all triumphant splendor on my brow', some might say, could (just?) be meant as gross flattery for someone like the Earl of Southampton, or any other lover, although the magnitude of the splendour suggests more. Was the sun shining on or even from a brow that itself shone, sending its ray back? The 'celestial face' is the face of the Sun, but the friend is also 'my Sunne': the confusion between the two in 34 continues, for the poet is now also 'turned into gold', like the streams, by heavenly alchemy. The Stone, or Elixir of Life, is his.

And 'but one hour mine'? Is that all? It is a brief meeting for ordinary lovers, but just the sort of momentary glimpse that mystics speak of. The vision is often connected with the sun. Boehme famously "gazed fixedly upon a burnished pewter dish which reflected the sunshine with great brilliance" and fell into an inward ecstasy. Underhill cites numerous examples, when 'a new sun rises above the horizon and transfigures their twilit world'. The preparation for such a moment comes later in the printed sequence of Sonnets. All mystics speak of the necessity for complete loss of selfhood, and so does 146, with its message to the poet's soul, that it is spending too much on making itself beautiful outwardly. 'Buy tearmes divine in selling hours of drose' leads to an unusually powerful couplet:

So shalt thou feed on death, that feeds on men,
And death once dead, there's no more dying then.

(146.13–14)

It does not follow that Shakespeare himself made such a self-denial. He counsels his soul in this way. But whether or not the vision in 33, one of the most telling and beautiful poems in the whole collection, is play-acting, or poetry, which, as Touchstone says, is 'feigning', it appears that he knew

---

16 Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism, 12th edn revised (London, 1930), p. 356: 'It is impossible for the soul to doubt that she has been in God and God in her.'
18 Underhill, Mysticism, p. 38.
19 Underhill, p. 249.
WILL IN THE UNIVERSE

what self-abnegation was needed for the vision to be engendered.

Parallel with 33, reflecting it as the scene of the Greek captains' greeting Cressida reflects the many Wills of 136, is the scene in which Bottom reflects on his own 'most rare vision', as he calls it. He relates his climactic erotic encounter with a queen named after a great god in terms of the 'hidden wisdom', which, St Paul wrote, 'God ordained before the world unto our glory' (1 Cor. 2:7): 'as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him'. Bottom garbles it, transposing the verbs to the wrong senses. But why does he speak not only of his 'dream' but of a 'vision', and why does he think of it in terms of a so well-known and surpassingly sublime biblical passage?

As in 136 there is here almost a goddess, and in her embrace there is a revelation comparable to the one in 33. This all looks very much like another parallel between the plays and the Sonnets, as though Shakespeare, being conscious of the conceivably overweening claim he made in the Sonnet, balanced it in another place with bathos. Alternatively, he may have seen the two visions as, once again, coinciding opposites.

If Shakespeare ever did feel himself capable like Hamlet of being king of infinite space, he no doubt was frustrated, as Hamlet was. He offers no clue about the way in which one Sonnet can be reconciled with another. Rather, he seems to have used his imagination to range over many aspects of love. He never confronts the troubling question of the ease with which contraries are declared identical, whether in the identity of two lovers, or of a human being and a deity, or, perhaps most troubling of all, of good and evil. It is easily said that the mistress's foulness is in the poet's judgement fair, or that love keeps him blind so that he cannot see her foul faults (148.14), that in his mind 'th' worst all best exceeds' (150.8). This is uncomfortably close to the Witches' chorus, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair', which no one ever takes to be anything but a downright expression of evil. Without some substantiation such as, I shall argue, some of the plays provide, the coincidence of opposites may be seen as mere philosophizing.

One other role of the lover remains. It is Christian rather than Platonic, and yet not irrelevant to the Platonic themes. This is natural enough, given Shakespeare's interest in duality-in-unity, bearing in mind this passage in the Gospel of St John:

Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me... At that day [of judgment] ye shall know that I am in the Father, and ye in me, and I in you.

(John 14:11 and 20)

The origin of this idea in Greek philosophy, found earlier in Plato and the pre-Socratics, is not disputed. In the Gospel, however, the words 'I am' have an unusual implication. They are the subject of Sonnet 121.

121 includes the self-defence by the poet ('Noo, I am that I am'), rejecting all criticism of himself and recalling Parolles 'simply the thing I am shall make me live' (All's Well That Ends Well, 4.3.369), but expressed in such terms as again give rise to debate on whether they have any biblical connection. 'I am that I am' are the words used by God in speaking to Moses (Exodus 3:14) and alluded to by Christ, asserting his divinity, in 'Before Abraham was, I am' (John 8:58).20 They can of course be used simply to affirm one's own identity, but it is remarkable that Shakespeare should have used them in this cluster of Sonnets with their similarly freighted senses. Burrow observes that 'This is not to claim divinity'. Duncan-Jones refers to the use of the same words by 'the demi-devil Richard III' (although this would make yet another coinciding opposite) and quotes Booth: 'the biblical echo makes "the speaker sound smug, pretentious and stupid"'. But the poet has, after all, in several Sonnets identified himself with the lover, who is sometimes the sun, sometimes 'a God in love'; he is 'Will', perhaps the substance of a million shadows, and although he at other times is

---

20 Iago's 'I am not that I am' may be taken as reflecting on the biblical 'I am', confessing his alienation.
conscious of his weakness as an individual, and of his separate identity, he is not thereby disqualified, given the paradoxical nature of his meditations, from asserting in his poetry even a sameness with God the Father such as Christ himself is represented as making. Mystics have always been accused of heresy in claiming to have God in them. But in the neoplatonist tradition the transcendent is also the immanent, and both coincide, like all opposites. It is still possible to read the Sonnet as an assertion of divinity, though contradicted by a self-criticism of huge proportions, for throughout the Sonnets there is, alongside the great pretensions to universality, the theme of being called to judgment. The beloved man is not only a dear friend, he is a fearsome critic, required by his love to condemn the poet, who even accepts the justice of this:

When as thy love hath cast his utmost summe,
Cauld to that audite by advis'd respects . . .
Against that time I do insnounce me here
Within the knowledge of mine own desert,
And this my hand, against my selfe unpreare . . .

(49.2-3, 9-11)

The ferocity imagined in the lover is astonishing. If a normal human relationship were involved, it would hardly survive such a plea as this:

Accuse me thus, that I have scent all,
Wherein I should your great deserts repay,
Forgot upon your dearest love to call . . .

(117.1-3)

Thus all the praises of the lover, which in part are praises of the poet himself, sharing in the universality, are at the same time a means of affirming the poet's subjection and unlawfulness, the opposite of the assertion in 'I am'. And in 90, with such fearful pleading as 'Then hate me when thou wilt, if ever, now', 'make me bow', 'Ah do not come in the renow'd of a conquered woe', 'in the onset come', although they are suited to a real man, we seem to hear Job suffering the blows of the Almighty.

How far do the combinations of contraries reach? How often are they to be found in the plays, in individual lines and scenes? Should we include the two long poems, one about a goddess trying to seduce a man, the other about a man trying to seduce, and raping, a woman? How about the hilarious tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe, so similar in outline to the real tragedy of Romeo and Juliet? And Hamlet's ability to speak of the world as 'this majestical roof fretted with golden fire', and at the same time as 'a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours?'

Do we not feel at certain points the need for some curb to be put on the contraries and their fusions found in the Sonnets? The witches' chorus, 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' - does that reflect on the poet's ability to see the mistress as 'black as hell' (147.14) and yet excuse himself as blinded by love (148.13)? Is it a requirement that he should take sides here against the witches? Is there any possibility of reconciling this with 'Love is not love that alters' (116.2-3)? We should rather, I submit, see that any alteration in love indicates the absence of love.